

OPUS

...beautiful wasn't enough. The words didn't, couldn't exist. I stared openly, unabashed and totally unaware of any world that existed beyond that which was her. That the world existed after her passage was incomprehensible. That which wasn't her, wasn't. I rose from the stiff backed choir bench and made my way through the crowd of mannequins so cunningly disguised as students, stepped into lilac scented night, moon shimmered hair, warm arms, soft lips...

...blasted heat from the twin suns was baking my brain pan. I shrugged the strap of my duffel clear of a wrinkle in my duster. My skin crawled for a 'fresher, my stomach for real food and my hand for the reassuring coolness of the pistol grip of the Mark 7 Sterling riding my hip as I walked through the autodoor of the terminal. A tall blond was being escorted through the crowded concourse by a handful of security types while the rest of the press of sapients appeared normal for a two-bit spaceport on a jerkwater planet. I don't know why I flipped the Sterling clear, thumbing it to track, as the doors irised shut behind me. When the first crazy began to yell, his cheap laser aimed at the blond, my first shot took him in the face. In seconds the room was filled with electric screams choreographed to a wild light show. The guards pushed her into the dubious shelter of a support column while they tried to take out the maniacs who appeared to be coming out of the walls. My Sterling auto tracked from energy source to source, sending violet bolts of corruscant death on their way, while I looked at the woman. Our eyes met over the crowd, gray eyed elf to wild assed Celt. I couldn't break the link. Rogue lasers sizzled the air around me while I...

...wanted to know what it took to get an outside line. I hit the cutoff bar with blunt fingers and tried the number again. The receiver burred and clacked in my ear, a tinny voice repeating something about first adjusting the verneirs. I looked at the standard issue Ma Bell and cursed softly at brain dead recordings. Reached for the cutoff bar again as the line cleared and rang...

...the biggest fish I ever hooked. I leaned back into the harness, electric wires of pain lacing through the web of shoulder muscles. Lunged forward, hand cranking furiously. A pair of tanned hands poured tepid seawater over the reel and me. Again I pulled, lurched, reeled. Beneath me the boat's engines thrummed and the ticker clattered and beeped. Behind me Mart was yelling at the bait boy to get the thing in synch. I wished he would. My eyes burned from watching the sun burnished sea, waiting for the monster to breach. Every bone and muscle in my body ached as I looked up at the sky through the tangled canopy of jungle. We had about an hour of daylight left. I looked around at the battered remains of our group, not relishing the thought of spending the night in a jungle filled with angry Hovitos.

Doctor Emmett Carstairs looked like he should have stayed in his office in Massachusetts. The Indians had no respect for his standing as an archaeologist and even less for the long list of initials that trailed after the name. All they saw was somebody was mucking about in their holy places and a dart will find a famous professor's hide just as easily as any one else's. Maybe easier when the good doctor had to be pushing seventy while the temperature pushed one hundred.

Emily Carstairs dabbed at her grandfather's forehead with a piece of my shirttail she had soaked in our diminishing water supply. Her usually perfect hair hung in wet strands around her face, framing a pale determined face and dark angry eyes. Her khakis were as stained and dirty as mine and the darkness on her hands was powder from the old Webley she had taken from her grandfather at the beginning of the fight earlier in the day. It was a close thing as to who had been more surprised by her calm, accurate shooting. I think me. The Hovitos had been too busy ducking.

Beyond the Carstairs were the last two assistants from the dig site. Chet Walders wiped at the action of the Kraig with the damp remains of his ascot. He looked up when he felt my eyes on him, his eyes blurred behind the sweaty lens of his glasses. His hours in a

racing scull had given him better endurance than the other assistants. Next to him Dave Rollins lifted a lazy eyelid and gave me a nod. His Winchester was resting across his chest. I could almost see him lounging under a chestnut somewhere in the Ozarks, waiting for a squirrel; or a nap, more than on some obscure dig site. He was the oldest and most experienced of Carstairs people and I felt some better knowing there was one other member of the party I didn't have to baby-sit. Suddenly there was a soft, wet rustling out beyond our position. I raised my Colt slowly, watching the brush part silently.

He's some five inches taller and forty pounds heavier but my brother can move quiet as a nun through vespers when he puts his mind to it. Oly was as sweaty and grimy as the rest of us with the four-day stubble darkening his jowls. The stub of his pet stogie was clamped firmly in the corner of what was too grim a mouth. I didn't think I was going to like the results of his recce.

"As near as I can figure, Stosh, we're about three clicks south east of the pick up point. The first one is a really mother humper."

"The last two?"

He rolled his cigar across his mouth and spat it into his hand.

"A cake walk."

I nodded at the grim look in his eyes. Easy, if we could cover the first.

Oly rolled his cigar across his mouth before he took it out in one thick fingered hand and looked at the well-chewed end.

"What's your read on this?"

"Circa 1920's, modern Earth period. Terrain could be Central American but I'm leaning to the Amazon headwaters region."

He nodded in agreement.

"New Thompson subs and WW I khakis, too. I heard Chet talking with Dave before the fun broke out. They were talking about

bathtub gin and speaks."

"OK, so we can pretty well figure we're supposed to get them out of here to the rendezvous point on the river. The Hovitos are tough but we've got firepower on our side. Have you hit anything yet that reads magic?"

Oly looked over at the others then shrugged and stuck his cigar back in his mouth.

" 'bout half a klick ahead is a pyramid. Its got a weird but..." he shook himself and levered himself to his feet. "Its probably nothing so we'd better roll. We're losing light."

We were almost to the pyramid when they hit. Things had been quiet when Rollins snapped a shot off to his right. Oly's Thompson cut a short burst and all hell broke loose. The jungle came alive with Hovitos arrows, spears and battle cries. I bunched the group up and headed them for the base of the pyramid forty yards away while my brother's chopper kept up a steady hail of lead that chopped down brush and Indians in an arc behind us. Once Rollins and Walders had the Prof and Emily well in hand, I swung my gun back just in time to blow a befeathered maniac back as he tried to add my head to his collection with his stone machete. The others ran through a diminishing storm of arrows as Oly and I kept the pressure on the advancing savages. The Thompsons wouldn't be able to keep up the heavy fire much longer but the Hovitos were getting the idea. I couldn't understand why they were pushing so hard against such deadly fire. These choppers had to be something new to them. Not that I minded, the more we whittled the odds now, the better our chances were.

I slammed a fresh drum onto my machine gun and waited, eyes scanning the brush. Off to my right, Oly was doing the same. I could see where a Hovito arrow had hit him in the thigh and I could feel the fresh fire where the stone edge of a spear had kissed my shoulder muscle. Oly snapped off the shaft of the arrow and gave me a wolf grin. I nodded towards the pyramid. As we left the jungle and ran across the barren ground surrounding the edifice, I felt what

Oly had described as the pyramid's weird. It felt like a storm, waiting to unleash its blind fury, a low slumberous power barely held in check. We scrambled up the narrow stone steps under the cover of the machine guns but the effort proved unnecessary. The natives seemed to have pulled back. I topped the pyramid and sprawled on the sun-heated stone, followed quickly by my brother. The others gathered around as we worked to catch our breath. Professor Carstairs lay in the small shade cast by the low parapets built at each of the corners. His head was cushioned on one of our packs as he tried to slow his ragged breathing. I didn't like his color nor what it might mean so I rolled to my knees and looked over the edge.

Far below the jungle was quiet. No sounds of angry Hovitos, no screeching monkeys, no raucous bird calls. It was as if we had stepped into another world and were looking back through a closed window.

"Eerie, isn't it, Mr. Kiedrowski."

I glanced at the Professor. He hadn't moved but he was breathing better and seemed to be recovering.

"It's all of that, Professor. Any idea why?"

"You see the dead zone? We both know what a merciless predator the jungle is, Mr. Kiedrowski. I have only seen this phenomenon once before in Peru. I looked over the glyphs carved into the steps. They are remarkably similar to those I found in that temple in Peru. They predate the Mayans by several centuries."

"Can you read them?"

"I'm afraid not. No one has ever been able to gather enough to study them nor does any kind of Rosetta Stone key exist. I brought back a few samples last year but ancient languages of this type are beyond my expertise."

The sun was setting quickly, the jungle floor disappearing into the inky murk below. On top we might have a half hour of light..

“Oly, get things organized up here. I’m going down below for a few minutes.”

Emily stiffened. “But the natives...”

“Are probably the least of our worries.”

We sat huddled around the small fire on the center slab of the pyramid top. I had scavenged enough wood on my reconnaissance mission to last us through the night if we were careful. I figured it would be good for our morale as well as our health. Emily had done a good job of cleaning and binding our wounds. She also had made a small but filling stew out of the last of our supplies. She has wanted to save some but from what the Professor and Oly had figured on our position, if we weren’t safe at the boat by suppertime tomorrow, we wouldn’t have to worry about eating. We were finishing the stew and coffee as I laid out the plan. Emily and Chet stared at me in disbelief. Dave and the Prof had been at the temple in Peru. They nodded, their eyes taking on hope as my plan unfolded. I could see the professor wanted to know how I could read the glyphs on the steps but he sat quietly, if impatiently, while I talked. When I finished, everyone moved to their assigned tasks. I went to Emily and drew her to the side.

“Emily, are you a virgin?”

She moved to slap my face but I caught her wrist in a rough grip.

“It’s important! Are you?”

“Of course.”

“Do you have any open sores or wounds?”

“No.”

“Is it your time?”

She gave me a questioning look that darkened into anger and embarrassment as she realized what I was asking. “I don’t see...”

“No, you don’t see. Blood is a powerful ingredient in any conjuring. Virgin’s blood is exceptionally powerful, particularly on the dark side. It’s also a very potent lure. Now, answer me.”

She stared at me in utter disbelief.

“Conjuring? Are you saying you believe in magic?”

I gave her a wicked smile.

“Believe and practice.”

“That is preposterous. There is no such thing as magic.”

“And what if the rest of the world doesn’t agree with you? You willing to bet all our lives on you not believing in magic?”

Something in my tone began to communicate to her that I was dead serious. Her rosy complexion paled and her eyes widened. I didn’t like the fear that rose there but I was fighting for more than her opinion of me. Finally she looked at her feet and shook her head. It made things easier but we still had a long way to go. I turned to begin my work. Behind me I heard her call my name softly. I was tempted to ignore it but I turned.

“Are we doomed?”

As she asked, my brother limped over to pick up a pack. He sensed the intensity of our exchange and gave Emily a consoling pat on the shoulder.

“Don’t pay any mind to my gloomy brother. We still have a chance. Just remember, the opera ain’t over til the fat lady sings.”

Emily and the Professor were hunched down behind the wall of our packs in the north corner of the pyramid. Outside the makeshift wall I had inscribed most of the first Ward of Protection, leaving one small opening. Walders and Rollins were outside the ward. They were the second line of defense in case Oly and I failed. If they got into trouble, they just had to step through the opening and utter the final word to seal the ward. That ward was as powerful as I could

make it in so short a time. Powerful enough to turn our foe if Oly and I could hurt it enough. And providing Emily hadn't lied.

Oly and I were counting on cold steel and speed because of what I had read about the thing below. If I was wrong, we would probably be dead. Our machetes were freshly honed but of such low quality that I didn't think the edges would hold. We also had our personal blades. Oly's was an Arkansas Toothpick, twelve inches of razor sharp stainless steel resting in a Gortex sheath on his thigh. Mine was a 12th century damascene steel kindjhal I had liberated from a true believer near Acre.

As the full moon rose over the jungle canopy the sound of stone grating on stone rumbled through the still air. We watched as the center slab of the altar sank into the pyramid. Slowly it disappeared into the rough stone until a black mouth yawned wide. The nauseating smell of centuries of death and corruption crept from the opening and roiled slowly past us. I barely heard the simultaneous rush of drawn breath behind us as a form emerged from the pit.

I could make out the huge hump of shoulders. A misshapen head rose from between those gnarled slabs and long withered arms extended out to the sides of the opening. Some one behind us retched as a second wave of stench, more putrid than the last, swept past us like a breath from the crypt. A hideously deformed leg lifted a splayed foot and planted it on the edge. The grotesque arms pushed and the creature loomed over us into the night. Its voice grated through the preternatural silence. It hung in the air, a primordial challenge that echoed through the jungle where none would take up the gauntlet.

"NOW!" I yelled, closing my eyes.

I heard the scrape and hiss as the first of our flares were lit. As more joined it, the creature let out a shriek that enveloped us in a gagging cloud of decay. It was a liche. A creature of darkness and the flares were quickly turning the top of the pyramid into day. As a creature of re-animated flesh, damned by the nameless gods of pre-

Columbian times to guard this place, it had ruled the night jungle surrounding the pyramid. Without a direct threat it would be trapped in the stone tomb but if some fool of an Indian were to disturb its rest the thing's prowess would be unnerving to the simple Hovitos. Arrows and spears would be all but useless. Being undead, it had no vital organs, no real points of vulnerability. It would absorb an extraordinary number of Hovito weapons without being deterred from its mission. The same could be said of modern weapons. Random hits might break bones but there was no guarantee. That was why we had our machetes.

But even the undead are forced to obey the laws of physics. If they exist in this world, they can't defy gravity, they can't negate inertia and most importantly, they can't use a lever without a fulcrum. If we could remove such things as arms and legs, we could neutralize the liche. The major drawback was that the thing could feel no pain. Wounds meant nothing to it. A normal man will stop when pain overcomes desire. With the undead, it is necessary to remove their means of implementing their unholy desires. They are machines that must be disassembled in order to stop them.

I opened my eyes. My brother and I moved in unison, he from the left, me from the right. The liche had raised its arms to shield its eyes from the hated light, exposing its stomach in a twisting dance as it tried to find relief. My machete bit into the creature's side in the short ribs, hewing through the dead mummified flesh with ease. It twisted, more in defense than pain, and wedged my blade between the iron hard ribs. My blade was torn from my grasp as I was thrown past. The liche was fast and strong. We had to incapacitate it quickly before its supernatural vitality gave it the upper hand. I drew my kindjhal as Oly repeated my attack on the monster's exposed side, trying to sever the creature through the middle. It moved to block the blow and Oly's machete sliced through the desiccated flesh of its forearm below the elbow. It didn't slow the beast. It struck with uncanny speed, almost disemboweling my brother with its remaining hand. I lunged at the back of its legs. My kindjhal slashed through the dried meat at the back of one of its ankles. The fine Damascus

steel scored the bone and severed the joint on the left foot. I continued my movement, allowing my momentum to carry me past the monster. I had misjudged the things agility. Fingernails, grown and hardened into talons over the centuries, sank into the muscles of my back. I wrenched frantically at the pressure and slashed at the other leg with my blade. The claws sank deeper, grating on bone as they sought purchase. I heard the bull bellow of my brother's battle cry as I made one final effort. With a blind cry of pain and anger I pulled and the claws tore through my flesh. I rolled free.

There would be little time left before shock and loss of blood took me out of the fight. I rose to my feet. A berserker rage flooded my body with strength as the creature's hand clenched on my brother's shoulder and drew him towards its gaping jaws. Oly slashed at the liche's shoulder but his angle was bad. His blade clove into the shoulder and snapped against the scapula. I launched myself across the ten feet that separated us. I landed on its back, screaming in rage as its yellowed tusks sank into my brother's neck. My kindjhal hewed through the dormant veins, dried discs and withered muscle and emerged. Oly fell to the stone, the liche's head still clamped to his throat. I cut the hideous thing free and threw it over the parapet as the body staggered about. It lurched heavily on its all but severed ankle until it toppled silently into the open pit from which it had emerged.

I cradled my brother's head in my lap. The creature had mangled the entire right side of his neck, including the jugular and carotid. His blood stained my legs as he fought to breath.

"Good run." He whispered weakly.

I nodded. His life streamed through my fingers and onto the cold stone.

"You smell pastrami?"

The series of events following my brother's death are hard to describe. My back was in gory ribbons and I lost way too much blood. Emily bound my back with Oly's shirt as the others gathered

our packs and we headed out. What little clarity remained in my thinking told me the Hovitos wouldn't attack. They were close enough to have heard the sounds of the battle and they would think the liche had avenged our sacrilege for them. Dawn found us on a small promontory overlooking the river landing. I sank to the ground and fell back against a tree. Emily came and knelt beside me. I tried to give her a rakish grin but my life flowed out of me.

I came to as the punishing effects of 5g deceleration faded. Out of reflex, my eyes scanned the battle board, checking the status of all the systems of our two man Skylance XVI raider. All the automatic battle sensors read clear so I glanced at my brother. He had been awake during the decel maneuver and was monitoring our transition into normal space.

"How goes it?"

He looked over at me, a grin wrapped around his lit cigar.

"Pretty damn good."

"What have we got?"

"Circa 2430, Terran Galactic Confederation. According to the 'puter we just subbed into the Omicron sector, Delta quadrant. We've got a quality boat under us with all systems go."

He saw the surprised look on my face and laughed.

"Congrats, bro. It seems we weren't supposed to get those clowns off that pyramid. According to the odds the dream machine genned, if we chose the pyramid, we all died. When you got them to the boat we totally glitzed the profiles. And we both made the transition to round two. They pulled me out of the net long enough to tell me. You know, the second synch wasn't near as bad as the first."

He rolled his cigar and gave me a fatuous grin.

"Doc Kissler brought in some dynamite deli tonight. All we have to do is finish these two runs before it gets gone."

“Great. Just make sure you stick around for the fat lady on the last run. I want an even crack at that pastrami.”