

THE ONLY COURAGE

By:

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“At bottom, this is the only courage we are called upon to have: the courage to face the strangest, the most mysterious and the most incomprehensible we may encounter.”

Rainer Maria Rilke

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“Now let me get this straight,” snapped the bigger man, his tone made up from equal parts of anger and confusion, “you’re telling me someone is hunting walrus in this day and age?”

“No,” answered the smaller of the two, “not at all.”

The larger of the pair threw himself into the nearest chair, his frustration with the other making him seeth. A tall, lean man with dark eyes and a heavy jaw, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead. It was July in North Carolina and the humidity steaming in from the coast was draining him of all extraneous moisture.

“Really, Blakley,” said the smaller man, carefully hiding his amusement, “I really can’t understand how a person who spends most of his time thrashing about in deserts and jungles can be so adversely affected by the heat.”

Hugh Blakley gave his handkerchief a snap, flinging its extra moisture into the pot of one of the plants near his chair. Having done so, he spread his hands out before him, palms upward, to indicate that he had no explanation for his dislike of warmer temperatures.

“What can I tell you, Boles, my man; I just like it better when its cool.”

“Odd then you would pick a university below the Mason/Dixon with such an aversion to a touch of warmer weather.” Dr. William Boles, a fragile man with a slender frame and light blue eyes, sat comfortably in a dark suit, his tie and button down collar still crisp and magazine perfect. Enjoying Blakely’s discomfort, he was about to throw another jibe at the Crypto-Zoologist when the door was flung open and Mr. Gordon S. Pimms, school chancellor for Duke University, entered the room at as great a run as his over-stuffed frame would allow. Pushing a wheeled metal cart, one with both a television set and a VCR nestled on two of its shelves, he asked;

“Have you told him?”

Pimms’ question had been directed at Boles who answered with a perfunctory nod. Smiling, the chancellor sat back in his seat and pulled a palm-leaf fan the size of a dinner plate from his desk top. Sweating profusely despite the air-conditioning, he fanned himself vigorously. Apologizing for the action, he explained that he had been forced to run from his last appointment to his office to make it on time.

“But, Mr. Pimms,” answered Blakely through a small grin, “you shouldn’t have worried. After all, you were no where near on time.”

“Haha, some of the dependable Blakely wit,” responded the chancellor with a degree of pleasantness which instantly triggered both his professors’ defensive systems. “So, what do you think of our little idea, eh?”

“Don’t know about an idea,” answered Blakely honestly. “Boles was just telling me about this walrus thing. But, well, details ... I mean ...”

“Yes, yes, Dr. Boles,” the smaller man turned his attention toward Pimms, “give Dr. Blakely the full story, what I told you before, will you? Let’s get this thing moving.”

Dr. William Boles was a leader in the field of Para-Psychology, as recognized an expert throughout the world as his contemporary, Dr. Hugh Blakley, was in his field, that of Crypto-Zoology. The two men respected each other as professionals, but did not

greatly care for one another beyond that. Indeed, they had only begun working together when the venerable Kirowan Foundation had endowed their university with a staggering one hundred million dollars, with the stipulation that the pair work together to bring news of the bizarre and the strange to the public's attention.

Duke had been happy to accept such a generous grant, of course, and had promised the two would become an inseparable team from that day forward. The only problem with such a sentiment was that neither man cared very much for the other, or his entire field, for that matter, and had spent years saying so. There was no love lost between the two before their current working arrangement had been thrust upon them. Now that they had gone out on several research expeditions together, the pair were as tired of each other's company as possible.

"It seems," began Boles with a sigh, "that the Kirowan Foundation has decided to start directing some of our little forays out into the world. They have come across some materials which they have forwarded to the university with the expressed idea that we will, of course, stop everything we are doing and scamper off to investigate their claims post haste."

"They want us to go after walrus hunters?" responded Blakley, still more than a little confused.

"Not walrus hunters," interjected Pimms, his eyes gleaming-- greed mounting. "Ivory hunters." The chancellor beamed with dollar-laden excitement as he explained what had been sent to his office.

"You're going to uncover the Walrus graveyard." Pimms spoke with such obvious sincerity that for once Blakely's usual sarcasm was held in check. Instead of immediately dismissing the idea, he asked instead;

"Ummmm-hummmm. So, would anyone like to explain?"

In short order the chancellor furnished the required details. As Blakely listened his hand unconsciously went to his collar, searching for a tie to loosen. The professor

had not worn such an article on campus since the day he received tenure, but old habits died hard and the humidity coming in off the swamps along the Atlantic coast was making the large man more irritable than usual.

It turned out that the materials the Kirawon Foundation had forwarded were comprised mainly of a diary and a map, or more specifically, photocopies of each. These major items were accompanied by a number of news clippings, the dates of which spanned a period of roughly two centuries, and a video tape. At Pimms' direction, Boles outlined all the information they had while the chancellor busied himself with the VCR and television he had wheeled in earlier.

"I'm certain you're familiar with the idea of the elephant's graveyard, yes? The supposed spot where all elephants go to die, thousands of years of ivory just piled up ..."

"I may have heard rumors of such a place, possibly." Blakely's tone was sour. His contemporary took no outward pleasure in needling him, but merely nodded and continued.

"Well, as you have certainly put together, now it seems there are rumors of a walrus graveyard as well. To keep things brief, we have a location that conforms to a number of reports. Two mention an island in an area where no map shows any land masses. And then, of course, we have the tape."

"All ready," Pimms assured the two. "Shall I start it?" When the two professors both gave a nod, the chancellor pushed several buttons on both the VCR and the television he had wheeled into the room. As the static on the tube disappeared, it was replaced by a shot of ocean looking as if it were part of a documentary film.

"What're we looking at," asked Blakley, following the question immediately with, "And don't say 'the ocean.'"

"Look more closely," instructed Boles. "In the water. Moving. Notice anything?"

“Oh, yeah ... I see what you mean.” Blakley pointed toward the screen, more specifically toward a series of black shapes as he asked, “I take it those are walruses moving there?”

“Yes,” Boles responded. “Apparently more than have ever been sighted moving together in one mass in modern times. These were spotted heading for the same spot mentioned in the old reports. And, one other thing, they were extremely easy for the cameraman filming them to keep up with ... mainly because they were all so old.”

* *** *

“You sure you want me along on this?”

The speaker was Ms. Donna Fargo, up until several weeks earlier, sheriff for the town of Waycross, GA. She had been the chief law enforcement officer for the town for only six weeks when she had first met messieurs Blakely and Boles.

“We talked about it before.”

They had come into her town to investigate something they had heard about, an assault made in the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge. An assault perpetrated by a Hell thing, a beast of fangs and talons and raw hate.

“Yeah,” the woman said quietly, taking a drag on her cigarette. “That we did.”

A thing controlled by a witch, an actual witch--in this day and age ... such power ... unbelievable ...

She saw the moment in her mind once more, bullets flying, laughter, shrieking--and then, the moment when the hospital lights dimmed ...

Blakely threw the door to the small house open, draining the color from the darkened room as he slammed it with sunlight. The thick air rolled in behind it, wet and sticky, its honesty tearing away at the room’s climate-controlled sterility.

The woman stabbed by the blinding heat merely took another long drag, tossing her head back across the crown of her recliner as she spewed a thin line of gray smoke upward. She watched its languid coils making patterns unique to the moment,

remembering again the numbness in her mind as she stood helpless in the dark, air-conditioners shutting down, heart machines stopping, elevators jammed. That frightening smell of sulfur--

"This is not good for your health, you know," the Crypto-Zoologist moved into the room, folding his arms across his chest.

"Neither is being around you." Blakely made to speak, but Fargo snarled, cutting him off.

"Do you remember it?" Her question was specific and demanding. He remembered it; he remember it well. Suddenly the room tiles buckling, cracking. The thick, red-black ooze bubbling up through the floor, running down the walls, steaming as it flowed, burning all it touched. "Do you remember my deputies? Screaming? Dissolving? Do you fucking remember that?!"

Fargo flicked her cigarette angrily at Blakely, the butt grazing his arm, singeing its wiry mat. She was a woman of only average height and build, but she possessed a reasonably attractive face framed by thick auburn hair, both assets accentuated by her large, green eyes. Despite her long ago decision to forgo make-up, she had at one time been considered quite attractive. That was also a time before she had met the professors from Duke.

"Yes," he told her in a hushed voice. Closing the door, folding himself into her darkness, he nodded his head in a jerking fashion. "I remember."

"I know I quit my job," she answered, hand unconsciously reaching for the drink she had set on the floor near her chair. "I know I said I wanted to work with you and the doctor. Find out what's out there--be a part of it all ... but ..."

Blakely pursed his lips, then suggested, "But, you've changed your mind."

Fargo did not respond. Hitting her cigarette again, she took a long swallow from her rum and Coke, swished it around in her mouth to clean the smoke taste from her mouth, then exhaled, chasing the waning humidity with fog of her own.

“Or, more to the point, you’ve given up.”

The woman moved her head slowly, as if it ached to do so. Head at an angle, green eyes unblinking, she snarled, “Yeah, I’ve given up. Call the embalmers; I’m ready to be buried.”

Blakely sat down next to the woman, setting his leather carry-all on the floor between his legs. Speaking softly, understanding her terror all too well, he told her;

“It’s all right. I know. Think I ever saw anything like that before, either? It was all new to me, too.”

“Not Boles--not that cold-blooded, that ...”

“Don’t go there,” said the man wearily. “He is what he is, and if he wasn’t we would have all been dead. We got into another mess recently, and it was bad, but it was nothing like that first time. I don’t know, I ...”

Blakely let his voice trail off, not knowing what he wanted to say. He had been out of his depth, really, since fate had forced him and Boles together. Like most people, he had thought the supernatural to be so much eyewash. But now, every time he turned around, it seemed that there was something happening around him that should only happen in a movie.

But he had stood in the same corridor as Fargo, and he had watched the flesh stripped from men’s bones, and he knew how she felt. With the sympathy of an alcoholic for the drunk on the floor, he whispered;

“All the bad cases, though, we knew they were bad going in. You were investigating an assault. The last two things that happen to me and Boles, we knew we were going into the damn Twilight Zone. All I’ll say is, this one is different. This one is ... straightforward.”

Quietly, he slid the tape of the migrating walrus into the fragile woman’s VCR. Fumbling with her various remotes, he muted her television and started the tape.

“Will it be cold?”

He nodded.

“Good,” she said, quietly, her words slurring. “I want it to be cold.”

THE NORTH ATLANTIC; 32 BY 10

Boles was freezing, and furious. He had made the assumption that wherever 32 by 10 was, it would be warm because the Elephant’s Graveyard was always somewhere in Africa, and Africa is always warm. He had been wrong. Disastrously so.

“What’s the matter, Boles? Too much weather for you?”

The thin professor of para-psychology cursed under his breath, pulling his jacket more tightly about himself. The weather of the high North Atlantic, even in July, was too crisp for him to bear unaided. Boles liked his heat and he liked it on land. So far, all of his investigations alongside professor Blakely had taken them to locales that at the least had been warm even in the evenings. Now Boles found himself suffering, both from the climate and his partner’s insufferable humor.

Blakely, on the other hand, was enjoying himself immensely. He loved the temperature, but moreover, he loved the sea. The smell of the waves, the sting of the cold brine drying on his skin, the itch of it, the roll of the boat under his legs. True, the DiVinci, the vessel hired for their expedition, was such a large and sturdy seabeast that the roll anyone aboard her experienced was minimal at best, but Blakely could feel enough to enjoy every moment. It also pleased him to have such a ready device with which to torment Boles. Fate had delivered far too many opportunities into the Para-Psychologist’s hands for him to needle Blakely. Having the tables turned thusly pleased the Crypto-Zoologist to no end.

“You just need a thicker skin, Boles,” jibed the professor to his contemporary, “like our friends out there.”

Both men’s eyes went out over the waves, looking once more to the great herd of walruses they were following. The massive beasts dotted the waters to both sides of the

DiVinci. The animals steered cleared the vessel's bow and stern, but were quite comfortable having it within their midst.

They were large beasts, to say the least--ten to fifteen feet in length each, each of them weighing more than a ton, many close to two. All of them, males and females alike, were cut much from the same cloth. Brown they were, as dark as the color could get. Darkly brown with nary a hint of any other color save in their long, bristly whiskers and their foot-long canines.

All of them looked old, but then, even walrus babies possessed the clusters of unkempt whiskers that made all walruses look like elderly Victorian gentlemen. These creatures did not merely appear old, however, they were old. Vastly old. They moved through the water with an exaggerated slowness if at all, as if all their remaining energy was caught up in merely keeping them afloat. Their wrinkled, near-hairless bodies bobbed like bloated corks while their forlorn eyes stared dumbly ahead.

For social animals, thought Blakely, staring out at the vast herd before him, I have to admit that this bunch is fairly stand-offish.

The professor wondered about that. He was well aware that walrus were known to follow boats for incredible distances, swimming alongside and raising themselves out of the water in order to investigate the intruders in their neighborhood. But the ancient specimens to both sides of the DiVinci made no attempt to discover any facts about those aboard the vessel. Indeed, if it were not for the studious way in which they avoided the front and rear of the boat, one might be forced to question as to whether or not they were aware of the DiVinci at all.

Ah well, Blakely thought, just makes them that much easier to follow.

Folding his forearms across the deck railing, the professor settled in to watching the walrus herd as Boles stomped off complaining about the cold. Blakely smiled to himself, enjoying the para-psychologist's discomfort to no end. As he fixed his gaze on one enormous specimen, the professor thought for a moment of Ms. Fargo, wondering

where she was at that moment. He had been greatly pleased when he learned that she had decided to accompany them. He did not seriously think the former sheriff would actually be of much actual use to them on their expedition. Indeed, for that matter he did not see where Boles would be that much help, either. This was his kind of job, at best, and the others would simply be taking up space.

Yeah, thought Blakely, but we owe her that space. She helped keep us alive and she lost a lot of good men, not to mention her job, doing so. We owe her.

A different voice in the back of his head reminded Blakely that the woman had lost a great deal more than those things he had tabulated. It flashed images in his mind in before and after fashion of the woman, punishing him with the chip by chip disintegration of her features, strength and courage.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

Blakely turned to find Fargo at his arm, leaning over the deck railing, looking out over the water as he was.

“Just thinking of you, gorgeous.”

The woman did not answer, except to smile slightly. A redhead, Fargo’s skin was pale to begin with. After her weeks of solitude, however, her usual alabaster gleam had dulled, turned chalky--pallorous. He ignored it, though, concentrating his returned gaze instead on the woman’s smile, and the still sharp green eyes above it.

“What brings you sneaking about the deck so quietly? Looking for someone to push overboard?”

“Seen Boles?”

“Oh, leave him alone,” answered Blakely with mock seriousness. “Be magnanimous; do what I do. Enjoy his terrible suffering of the cold and don’t even think about putting him out of his misery.”

“Well, when you put it that way ...” Fargo made a small laugh, and Blakely smiled in response. The woman blushed, understanding passing between the two of them

which could only be answered with words or passion. Still far too brittle, Fargo chose words.

“I have to thank you for making me come.”

“Hey, no thanks necessary,” he answered jovially. “Just making sure I’ve got your good steady hand at my back for when the crazy crap starts oozing out of the sky. You do have your gun, don’t you?”

“Hey,” she exclaimed playfully, “I thought you said this one was going to be monster-free.”

“It’s supposed to be,” he replied honestly. “But ever since we caught sight of the Bitter Leaf; God only knows what can happen, now that we have Matuba slimin’ his way around here.”

“Okay,” responded Fargo, “out with it. What’s with this Matuba character?”

In starts and fits, with language strong and biased, Blakely told Ms. Fargo of Stephen Matuba. A graduate of the same class as the Crypto-Zoologist, Matuba, then known as Stephen Wilson, changed his name and threw himself into actively pursuing a career in front of the camera. His name changed, head shaved, and morals thrown to the winds, he embraced television as his goddess, making no moves forward which did not include a chance to either end up on video tape or to write a book. And, even the books were only written to bring the cameras searching for his smooth, much-worked-on features once more.

Matuba had appeared as an expert so often on the Discovery and History channels, he was presently sitting on offers from both to be the host of his own show. And that, Blakely knew, was why the Bitter Leaf was tacking the same course as the DiVinci. Matuba was after the same discovery they were.

And with the Bitter Leaf under him, thought the professor, he’s got every chance in the world of getting it.

Matuba's vessel was a massive thing. Large as the DiVinci was, it was dwarfed by its rival. The DiVinci was well outfitted, ready to tackle everything foreseeable with a variety of well-selected supplies. The Bitter Leaf, however, was not simply a ship that had been carefully stocked for what its passengers could imagine waited for them, it was a floating stockyard of provisions and equipment capable of almost anything its masters could imagine. It carried not one eight-person shark cage, but four. It also possessed its own bathysphere and two personal submersibles. It could drill into the ocean bottom to a depth of seven miles, raise a sunken vessel of up to ten thousand tons, illuminate a work area with a diameter of nine hundred yards, and hook up to any satellite relay system in the world.

It also had its own heli-pad, which for some reason was the fact about it which annoyed Blakely the most.

"Wow, you really don't like this guy."

"I like him," responded Blakely honestly. "It's not very Christian to not like someone. I just don't like what he's become."

"Well," answered Fargo, more tone in her voice than he had heard in ages, "looks like he's becomin' over here."

As Blakely turned his gaze back toward the Bitter Leaf, he saw that a fair-sized powerboat had just been launched from a recessed bay in the massive vessel's side. The boat made its way delicately through the loose herd, careful not to either injure or even upset any of the massive creatures. The presence of a cameraman in the process of filming allowed Blakely a cynical moment in which he decided it was only the rolling tape which kept Matuba from running down the docile creatures all about them.

Resigned to talking to his one-time classmate, Blakely waited as the launch came alongside the DiVinci. The pilot asked for a docking line, and after one was secured the cameraman and Matuba went aboard while the pilot remained behind.

“Hahahaaaa,” the laughter boomed out of Matuba, deep and rich and filled with an at-ease-putting charm. His hand reaching out easily to Blakely, he said, “look where we meet once more. Do you think we are on the same trail?”

“Probably not,” answered Blakely, his tone dry. “I’m doing research into a as-yet-unexplained phenomenon. You, unless you’ve changed greatly, are trailing the cash you need to buy a new sports car.”

“Ohhhhhh,” Matuba cooed the sound, aiming it at Fargo. “How does a young handsome white man become so cynical at such an early age? I hope the darkness of his poisoned soul hasn’t caused yours to fester as well.” Taking her gloved hand, he held it briefly, adding;

“That would be a terrible shame.”

“Yeah, well,” she told him, “it’s pretty festered all right, but I don’t think we can blame Hugh.”

“Oh, now, Hugh is it? So friendly, so personal. Exactly what is it you are out here researching, my old friend?”

“Ms. Donna Fargo,” said Blakely with a sigh, “Mr. Stephen Wilson, of New Jersey. Or are we still pretending that Matuba of the University of Nairobi is something more than a polite fiction for easing pens across liberal checkbooks?”

Matuba smiled widely, nodding in Blakely’s direction as he told Fargo, “I would call him a shameful racist if it were not for the fact he is so very right on all counts.”

“Oh, an honest crook,” answered the former-sheriff, shaking Matuba’s hand. “The worst kind.”

The small gathering bantered back and forth for a few more moments, but then an electronic voice crackled along Matuba’s waist. Pulling free a small radio phone, he spoke with someone back aboard the Bitter Leaf. After he finished, he turned once more to the others and said;

"I am told faxes are coming in I am supposed to review and answer A.S.A.P. Such is my life. Well, let me say what I came to say quickly. Our radar has picked up another ship closing on our position. A brief investigation makes it almost certain it is Masterson." Fargo stared blankly. A glint in Blakely's eyes coupled with a slightly mischievous turning of the corners of his mouth told her volumes.

"He should catch up to us in several hours. Which would make his timing perfect. I have a proposition for both him and yourselves. I'd like to get us all together on my ship for a conference tonight. Dinner, of course, will be provided, as well as an amply supplied bar. Tell Professor Boles we have a fine selection of fresh produce and a chef who is second to none on the North Atlantic at this present time."

Blakely knew that whatever was on his former classmate's mind, that it was something which favored no one but Stephen Matuba. He also knew that to not listen to whatever the showman had to say was simply foolish. Running his tongue over his upper teeth, he said;

"I'd been thinking of just hitting Pizza Hut, but hell, as long as you went to all the trouble to paddle on over here and all ..."

Matuba smiled, promising a festive time to come even as he clambered back down into the launch. The cameraman followed, still filming the entire time. As the pilot cast off the DiVinci's line Blakely called out to the launch.

"Hey, Matuba--what'd you mean when you said Masterson's timing was perfect?"

"Oh, Hugh, now don't tell me you haven't noticed it yet?"

"Noticed what?" The black man laughed just enough to let the Crypto-Zoologist know that he was ahead of him once again, then pointed to the ocean, shouting;

"The walruses, my old friend, they've stopped swimming."

Blakely looked out over the waves. Matuba was right. Everywhere around them, all of the walruses were merely treading water with their massive flippers, hanging in place.

“Wherever we were going,” came Matuba’s voice over the launch’s outboard, “here we there.”

* *** *

Matuba’s information had been correct. The ship, an overly large powerboat registered as the Diana, caught up to them some two hours and thirty-five minutes later and was indeed under the charter of Professor Byron Masterson. He had left from the Norwegian island of Jan Mayen two days earlier, and had accomplished his final interception of them at a point far to the north and west of the Duke University party’s original goal of 32 by 10 . A similar invitation was extended Masterson as had been those in the DiVinci party, and at 9:00 that evening representatives from both of the smaller vessels had gathered to be wined and dined aboard the Bitter Leaf.

“Christ,” said Masterson, taking an hors d’oeuvre from a passing tray, “I thought this barge would be ostentatious, but there’s not a marble column in sight.”

“Well, you know Matuba,” answered Blakely, frosted beer mug in hand, “he believes in roughing it.”

Both men smiled, their eyes twinkling with merriment. Masterson and Blakely were old-time colleagues. For Matuba to have invited them both to his vessel to be feted so lavishly only meant that the showman had something substantial up his sleeve. The two professors were quite familiar with Matuba’s ways, but Blakely wondered if Boles could be counted on to watch himself around him. Boles was no idiot, of course, or naif to be taken severe advantage of easily. But, he did enjoy upsetting Blakely. The Crypto-Zoologist wondered if his compatriot might not throw some kind of wrench into things simply to watch him squirm.

The notion worried him for Blakely had begun to wonder about the Bitter Leaf and its captain of the moment. The vessel was far to large and well-equipped for such an expedition, he thought. Its crew also struck him as a bit too spit-and-polish, too precise and perhaps too gung ho for the typical research vessel.

Then again, he mused, nobody said Matuba was being financed by a university. Once you've got Hollywood money to do your hiring with, maybe things get a bit easier.

All thoughts of Boles, Matuba, the walruses all about them and most of everything else under the sun went out of Blakely's head, however, when Donna Fargo made her entrance. Unlike everyone else, she was not dressed in attire suited for shipboard life in the frigid North Atlantic. Instead she wore a sleeveless silk dress, a cognac-colored piece which fit her so well it had to be assumed the darting at the waist had been done specifically for her. Gold earring, concentric circles of wire falling inward on themselves, her gold wrist watch and a series of thin, gold plate bracelets set off the color of the silk, picking up the color of her hair as well.

"Do join the party, Ms. Fargo," said Blakely with enthusiasm, one step away from whistling. "And tell me what time your sister Donna will be arriving."

Fargo smiled. Batting her newly mascara-enhanced lashes, she purred, "Ohhhh, you silly man, you'll turn my head." Taking her arm, the Crypto-Zoologist lead her in amongst the assembly. Leaning in toward her, he whispered;

"Quite a transformation. Mind telling me what changed before Matuba and the rest of the goons swoop in to steal you for the evening?"

"Just an attitude adjustment." When Blakely merely moved his eyebrows in an upward manner, imploring for more information, she continued. "I knew I was going to a party--okay? I saw myself in the mirror and I was tired of looking, well ... like ..."

"Like someone who saw the face of Hell and had their world turned upside down?" The woman nodded, adding;

"My mama told me never to go anywhere without one good outfit. So, I rinsed, lathered and repeated, did my nails, broke out the war paint and here I am."

"In nothing but unwrinkled silk, no less." As Matuba and a number of the others neared, her eyes sparkled as she whispered;

“I left my coat at the door. As for the dress, you just roll things you don’t want wrinkled in a towel. Weren’t you ever in the Girl Scouts?”

“Ms. Fargo,” Matuba interrupted, letting his adopted African accent boom, filling it with a tone of surprised pleasure. “It is my extreme pleasure to welcome you to the Bitter Leaf and all she has to offer.”

The former sheriff, rather than switching partners by taking Matuba’s arm, merely turned his fingers instead as if she thought he was offering her a clumsy handshake. Dropping her Southern accent for a moment, she affected the nasal sound associated with a Californian girl, saying to Blakely;

“Look, it’s that nice Mr. Wilson who like invited us to the party. Like, say--is this whole boat totally yours?”

“Ahhhh, me,” responded Matuba, only the slightest trace of sourness dripping through his words, “and here I had so hoped some of professor Boles’ better upbringing might have rubbed off on you.”

Matuba turned from the former sheriff, carefully giving his cameraman the cut-off sign. Blakely and Fargo smiled at one another while Masterson raised his glass toward them and gave a short bow. This almost threw the two into hysterics, but they made it through without laughing--Blakely by grinding his teeth while turning away from the others, Fargo by looking at the floor while she squeezed her eyes and mouth shut as tightly as possible.

“That was pretty funny,” the Crypto-Zoologist said after a moment. “And I’m not even sure why.” Taking a gulp of Blakely’s drink, his companion answered;

“Thank you, kind sir.”

“If I can, I’d like to say that you seem to be doing a bit better.” Looking Fargo in the eye, Blakely asked, “Are you as together as you seem, or are there some loose threads no one had better pull on?”

"I'm still a little wobbly, I'll admit it," she said, her gaze level with his. "But all right, fine. I saw a witch, a goddamned honest-to-God Almighty real live witch, with devil-granted supernatural powers. And I saw a monster, and I saw men die for no good reason and I'll be damned if I'll end up in some nuthouse because of it."

"They don't call them 'nuthouses' anymore." Fargo took Blakley's drink away from him. Downing the rest of it, she stared at him unblinking and asked;

"Did I see what I thought I saw or not?"

"You saw it," he assured her. Shoving his glass back into his hand, she told him;

"Then I think I have the right to say whatever I want. So, why don't you go get yourself a new drink. Something I'd like." Blakley smiled again, wider than before.

"Maybe I'll just get you your own."

"There's an idea. I don't know why professor Boles says you're so stupid."

Blakley laughed and headed back to the bar. As he did so, Masterson approached Fargo. Giving her a tiny nod of respect as he stopped before her, he toasted her once more with his own glass, saying;

"I am correct, am I not, in assuming that you are Miss Donna Fargo, recently a sheriff in the American South--yes? The woman who braves monsters to protect the public?" When Fargo went wide-eyed, her lips moving, but incapable of throwing any words out between them, he held up his hand to calm her.

"My apologizes. It is not easy, the first time--no?" Understanding what the rotund man meant, she shook her head back and forth, telling him;

"No. No, it's not."

"No. No, indeed. There are so many strange and terrible things in this world. Every day we hear stories, tales of persons abducted by aliens, meeting Bigfoot in the heart of a forest, combusting spontaneously, hearing noises in their attic, seeing spectral visions, talking to the voices in their heads ..."

"I get your point," Fargo snapped her words a little too quickly, a touch too bitterly.

"Maybe, maybe not," responded Masterson coolly, as if he had not noted her annoyance. "I am merely trying to tell you that you are not alone. The posers, like Matuba, or those idiots from the television, the Challenge of the Unknown bunch--they know nothing. Less than nothing. But you, you know different. You have seen beyond the flickering lamplights. You have touched the skin of evil. You know."

Fargo nodded. As she spotted Blakely crossing the room, drinks in hand, Masterson said, "For me it was the sight of a creature almost impossible to describe--distorted it was, not quite bird or insect--it shouldn't have flown at all, but it did so, a misshapen lump of ungodly flesh, moving on massive leathery wings with the ease of soap bubbles on the wind."

Masterson's eyes looked glazed over, as if he were seeing into some other world. Fargo shuddered, knowing he had seen exactly that which he had described, and that the sight of it had changed him as greatly as what she had seen had changed her.

"Byakhees," he said in a quiet voice. "That's supposedly what these things are called. It's said they can fly into outer space and back. That one can ride them as one would a horse. I saw them while in the company of an old man who claimed his family was torn apart by a werewolf. Imagine, a werewolf."

"Know anyone who's seen a vampire," she joked weakly.

"You'd be surprised."

Fargo's heart jumped a beat, her pulse flinging out of control for a terrifying second. She felt a terrible dread down the length of her spine for the entire fragment of time, and then it passed. Yes, she thought, she had seen terrible things. But so had other people. People in the very room with her. And she had survived as they had survived.

And, she told herself, I'm going to goddamned well keep on surviving, too.

As Blakley handed her the drink he had chosen for her, the former sheriff took it and knocked back half of it in a gulp. Pursing her lips, she made a smacking noise with them, then licked them quickly, saying;

“How very refreshing; I do believe if you hadn’t come along just then Colonel Blakely, I might positively have given in to the vapors. I do declare.”

“You do, do you?”

Fargo was about to continue her teasing, when across the room Matuba clanged a captain’s bell bolted to the table behind which he was standing. As the assembly turned in his direction, the showman leaned forward, pressing both his palms against the tabletop as he spoke.

“Fellow explorers, the time has come for us to put our cards on the table. Let me make it easy for everyone. We are all here to investigate the truth behind this idea of a walrus graveyard. I want to make a documentary about the concept--true or untrue. The crew of the DiVinci, my guess is you are here on one of your usual catalogue expeditions--take some photos, write an article or two, move on to the next strange occurrence. And our friend Masterson, I can only imagine you are hoping to flood the world ivory market with legal merchandise.”

“Hey,” said Masterson, his tone taking mock offense, “there are gentlemen all over Asia with flaccid penises, and nowhere to turn except humanitarians such as myself.”

“Indeed,” agreed Matuba. “Which makes my proposition simple. Let us work together. My old friend, Hugh, you and your partner, you have nothing to lose. If information is all you are after, I give you free access to all we learn--I simply reserve the right to discuss these findings with you ...”

“On film, I imagine,” interjected Boles in a weary voice.

“But of course,” Matuba agreed with a smile. Turning to Masterson, he added, “And, even though the walrus became an internationally protected species back in 1972, we are not talking of killing the poor creatures, merely a little harvesting.”

Masterson was just about to make a comment when suddenly the entire room pitched violently. Men shouted; the lights flickered. Most everyone on the Bitter Leaf found themselves suddenly on the floor. Several noses were bloodied, a wrist was turned.

“What the hell was that?” cried a random voice.

“We couldn’t have hit anything,” said Masterson. “We’re not moving.”

“Quite true,” agreed Boles. “But then, something could have hit us.”

Then, at that moment, one of the massive vessel’s crew came into the room at a run, alerting everyone that there was something outside they needed to see.

* *** *

At first it looked as if they had struck an island, for there off to starboard of the Bitter Leaf was a crag-covered reef, tearing through the wall of the vessel. But, as Matuba had the ship’s massive work lights turned on, those on board discovered they were somehow suddenly several hundred yards from the ocean. Outlandish as the idea was, it was soon accepted by all that the floating platform could never have run so far aground under its own power, even at its top speed.

“I’m tellin’ ya,” the Bitter Leaf’s captain squawked, “there’s no other explanation. The damn thing just rose up outta the sea under us.”

“I’m inclined to believe him,” said Masterson. “Look at that steam coming off the island--the vapor rising all around its perimeter. The land is burning hot. Looks like volcanic activity maybe has shoved it up to us.”

Outside the relative calm of the wheelhouse, men ran in every direction. Some worked to get access ladders strung from the damaged vessel down to the island. Others labored to assess the damage, looking to see if the Bitter Leaf had been

rendered unseaworthy, and if so, how long it would take to repair her sufficiently. Still others began studying the problem of relaunching the massive craft. In only a matter of minutes, some of the crew had established that the island's surface was cool enough to move about upon. This had been assumed a possibility when it had been noted that from every corner the walrus had begun to advance onto the island.

"This is unbelievable."

Fargo merely stared, her head nodding dumbly in response to Blakely's exclamation. Her dress now hidden from sight by her heavy parka, the woman watched in fascination as hundreds of walruses began pulling themselves up onto the newly-risen land mass. Coming up behind the trio, Boles asked;

"Has anyone noticed anything about our walruses?"

"Such as...?"

"Unless I'm wrong, they don't seem to simply be heading inland, not randomly, I mean. As in the nature films one sees, this doesn't seem like a mating landing or--"

"He's right," exclaimed Fargo. "They're coming up all over, but look, further on inland--they're falling into lines, like they're marching forward."

"As if," Masterson cried, rising greed cancelling the fear of a moment earlier, "they had a specific destination."

Excitement blazed across the decks as the truth began to dawn on more of the assembly. In only a matter of minutes, it was established that the other two ships were undamaged, that repairs to the Bitter Leaf could be easily accomplished, and that even if they were not, the vessel was still sea-worthy, although hopelessly land-locked for the moment. And lastly, a redirecting of the lights proved that the walruses were indeed moving off to some central location on the island in a most determined fashion.

A sense of wonder spread itself through the observers. Maybe there was an actual walrus graveyard after all. And, maybe the reason no one had been able to find it before was that it disappeared and reappeared according to the laws of some

previously unknown geometry. While Matuba snapped off orders to begin repairs immediately, he also summoned both his cameramen and told his second-in-command to make certain that all aboard armed themselves. Those who would be accompanying him to the surface were to arm themselves heavily. When the others looked at him, he said;

“Below are hundreds upon hundreds of bad tempered, three thousand pound creatures possessed of sharp tusks and an inability to tell us from the people who hunt them so as to turn their intestines into waterproof clothing. I am going ashore to follow them inland, but I am not going without twenty men armed with shotguns and rifles. Call me a worrywart.”

Blakely smiled, answering; “I could think of worse things to call you, but I can’t argue with your logic. Mind a little company?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

* *** *

Nearly two hours later found Blakely, Boles and Fargo along with Masterson and Matuba and a score of those working for him making their way carefully across the broken, misting ground of the newly raised island. Steam continued to pour up out of the still-warm ground, but the surface temperature was merely uncomfortable, not unbearable. A quick check showed it to be only slightly above a hundred and twenty degrees, and cooling.

The party had no trouble keeping the walruses in sight. The great beasts lumbered across the steaming landscape even more slowly than they had swam to its shores. They seemed to take no note whatsoever of their human companions, however, for which all found themselves grateful. After another few minutes, though, Boles asked;

“What’s that light?”

Most stopped as they paused to focus their attention in the direction the Para-Psychologist was pointing. From a position roughly three-quarters of a mile ahead, a

green shimmer, shot through with odd bursts of purple, could be seen pulsating along the surface. It did not leap into the sky, as would be the case with a light fashioned by some intelligence, nor did it flicker as would a fire.

“Hard to say,” answered Masterson, his mind overloading with the possibilities of the profits the journey might bring. “Why don’t we simply start moving a touch faster and find out.”

In a little under twenty minutes, the party was standing on a ledge looking down on the source of the illumination. There was not a one of them comfortable with what they had discovered. In the middle of the island they had come across a massive building, the design of which startled them all. Large it was, exaggeratedly so--monstrously so. Built of monumental blocks of stone, it was too huge for any present to make sense of in the darkness--too huge, and too alien. The light which had attracted them poured down over an incredible rampart, one shaped like a star some three hundred feet from point to point. There was a row of arched openings some four feet by five feet, spaced symmetrically along the points of the star and at its inner angles. All glowed with the same light which seemed to have no source.

“What the Hell is goin’ on here?” asked one of the Bitter Leaf’s roustabouts.

“Don’t know what to tell you,” answered Blakely absently. “But you may have narrowed down the neighborhood.”

“You might all be blessed with the curiosity of May flies,” snapped Boles, “but since the walruses are pouring into this thing, and nothing seems to be happening to them, would it not seem that our next move is to follow them?”

“Dr. Boles,” said Matuba, “doesn’t it give you even the slightest pause that this building--intact, unbroken--was on the bottom of the sea only a short time ago?”

“Very little gives me pause, sir,” answered the Para-Psychologist, “outside of the insanity of twenty-first century life. If I can survive the vomitus spew resulting from any foray into basic cable, I think I can handle whatever is summoning our wrinkled friends.”

“Summoning?” Donna Fargo’s voice was small and frightened.

“The historical records for these migrations show them coming hundreds of years apart. Nature doesn’t program such instincts. Nor does it throw islands up from the bottom of the ocean at scheduled intervals as it does hot water from geysers.”

“What is it you suspect, doctor?”

“The same thing you do, Matuba,” answered the Para-Psychologist, “That what we have here is another installation akin to the one found by Dyer and Danforth in the Antarctic ninety years ago.”

Matuba’s face went pale as all eyes turned away from Boles to stare at the showman. He recovered himself quickly, however, his expression showing that he was greatly impressed with the Para-Psychologist’s retort. A momentary hesitation made it seem obvious he wished to refute Boles’ guess, but finally, he answered weakly;

“I see you do your homework, doctor.”

“I had no idea that anything like this was waiting for us,” Boles responded, “I merely remember what I read, and I read quite voraciously. But, given the climate of the location of this structure, its incongruous design, the five-pointed motif, I’d say it is most likely connected. And, I would point out something else.” All eyes stayed glued on Boles.

“I would postulate that if this area has surfaced for the gathering of walruses, for whatever reason, that when it is finished it is most likely to resubmerge. If we are to investigate it at all, we had better be quick about it.”

* *** *

The climb up the rampart and then downward into the bowels of the considerable structure greatly impeded the advance of the slow-moving walruses. Since radio reports assured them that scores of the creatures were still coming up onto shore, all of the various researchers deemed it safe enough to venture inside. Several of Matuba’s men were left at the opening with orders to stay in radio communication with

both the Bitter Leaf and those going inside the alien compound. They were to report on the flow of walruses, and also to watch the water level around the island itself. Whether it were to rise further, or begin to sink, any fluctuation, no matter how minor, was to be radioed to them immediately.

That portion of the party which entered the building--Blakely, Boles, Fargo, Masterson, Matuba, one of his cameramen and ten of his roustabouts--made their way as quickly and carefully as possible. As they worked their way down the steep inner grade, Boles and Matuba filled in the others with what they knew. The Parapsychologist's earlier reference had been to an Antarctic expedition made in the twenties of the previous century. It had uncovered a massive underground complex, one abandoned for millennia, but surprisingly intact for a place unused since before the time of the dinosaurs.

It should have been the major archeological find of all time, but the discovery had been hushed up. Although some of the facts uncovered and reports made about them found their way out into the world, they were accompanied by carefully orchestrated scorn and rumors designed to discredit the men responsible. The fact that one of the two explorers who managed to return ended his days in a madhouse made the task relatively simple. The government had begun a careful study of that which was found there and wanted neither any interference or competition as it did so.

"Even after twenty years of study, though," said Matuba, "they had barely learned anything. Many of those involved with the research suffered breakdowns much like poor Danforth. It was very hard for many of them to get behind the concept that white males were not the center of the universe."

"Bite me, Buckwheat," snarled Masterson. His nerves jumping, his head swung from side to side, eyes darting to every corner and shadow as they continued downward. Everywhere about the party were walls covered with carvings following no pattern nor written language structure with which any were even vaguely familiar.

Towering statues dotted the oddly angled walls, lumps of stone shaped so bizarrely that most were not certain what any of them were meant to represent. Shuddering at the sight of yet another horror in sandstone, Masterson finished, "You seem awfully calm about all this. You were expecting this, weren't you?"

"'Expecting' is much too strong a word. 'Hoping for' might be better. The government has been searching for another of these alien bases ever since the end of World War II. It seems the first rendered unto them several of the key, basic concepts they needed to create their atomic bombs. There is no knowing how much more they could have learned, however."

As the party continued to move forward through the slow-descending hordes of walruses, Matuba informed the others that something had gone terribly wrong in the Antarctic base. What, no one knew, but during the opening of a previously undiscovered wing of the vast underground complex the investigators had apparently made some false move for the entire place had suddenly shuddered, and then collapsed in upon itself without warning. Not only had the ceilings fallen in, but the floors had given way, level after level, until the entire complex had fallen through the Earth's protective mantle.

"The loss was incalculable," Matuba said quietly. "Thus, ever since then the search has been on to find another base."

"What made them think they'd find another," asked Fargo.

"Once deciphered, the carvings set in the walls of the first base told the story of a great, intergalactic war fought here on Earth between two star-spanning races. And that's odd, because you see ..."

Matuba's voice trailed off as the group passed through a oddly curved doorway. Entering the new chamber, his head darted in every direction as he tried to take in his new surroundings. That he had stopped speaking in mid-sentence did not matter. None of the others noticed as they too were captivated by the horrid emptiness of the new

chamber. It was a vast space--impossibly so--another star-shaped area carved out of volcanic rock, one the size of perhaps ten or twelve football stadiums. All down its length and across its breadth walruses lumbered forward ponderously. Stopping for a moment, Matuba checked to make certain he was still in radio communication with the surface, then added;

“So much about this place is the same as the first complex, it is somewhat perplexing that ...”

Then Matuba’s voice went silent once more as a sinister, singular piping flooded through the chamber.

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!

The showman’s eyes went wide with horror.

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!

When the weirdly disturbing trio of notes sounded again and then again, Matuba’s jaw worked quickly, his lips slapping together without releasing any words. Noting his discomfort, Blakely snapped;

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“N-Nothing,” stuttered the showman. “I mean ... it can’t, they said ...”

“Nothing don’t cut it, Steve,” snapped the Crypto-Zoologist. “Talk--what the Hell is that?!”

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!

All about the room the walruses halted their advance save to move out of the way of those still entering. His head craning about, searching for something that might resemble speakers, Masterson shouted;

“Where’s it coming from? And why? What’s going on?”

Without any orders, Matuba’s men began cocking their weapons. Several of them slipped out of the bulky backpacks they had been wearing. Unsnapping their cover

flaps, they revealed arsenals of surprising firepower. As the men began outfitting themselves, Masterson bellowed;

“That’s it! There’s no ivory; there’s no documentary; there’s nothing here but enough shit to choke us all to death! I’m out of here!” Turning on his heel, the rotund man began to make his way through the crowding walruses as quickly as he could. As he did so, Boles added;

“The way these creatures are packing into this chamber, I think it best we all decide what we are going to do, and quickly, before the ability to choose is taken away from us.”

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!

Again the unnerving noise piped its way through the chamber, affecting everyone present. Heads turned wildly; unblinking eyes darted from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling, desperate for a clue as to where the horrid notes were coming from, and what was making it.

“What are you talking about?” Matuba screamed the words into his hand radio. “That’s impossible! They should already be here!”

As the showman continued to scream, both into his radio and at his cameraman to keep filming, the walruses in every direction around the party became increasingly agitated. Piling one atop another, forcing themselves further and further into the chamber, they could not comprehend the humans’ aversion to do the same. As the research party worked desperately to stay out of the way of the ponderous beasts, the creatures continued to flow into those spaces their human counterparts were striving frantically to maintain for themselves alone. Finally, free space closing--feet turning into inches--a great ancient bull threw open its maw, bore its tusks, and two heavy gauge shotguns erupted at the same moment, tearing the beast’s wrinkled head away from its body.

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!

"Donna," shouted Blakely, "com'on--enough's enough. Let's get out of here!"

Fargo nodded absently. She had been gritting her teeth and holding her ground, determined not to buckle, to not give into the commands frothing through her brain--to run, to scream, to throw her head back and wail, to simply fall to the floor and roll in a ball. Part of her, one as insane as that which wished to surrender, wanted her to stay, to maintain her position no matter what, to discover whatever was creating the hellish piping and do her best to send it roughly into eternity.

"They're not coming."

"Who?" cried Boles, grabbing hold of Matuba's coat. "Who isn't coming?"

"We had back-up; this entire operation was sponsored by the military. My men are all marines. Navy cruisers were keeping fifty miles behind our position. They should have moved in when we first landed. But ... they couldn't ... didn't know ..."

"Didn't know what?!" Boles demanded. "What didn't you know?" As Matuba began to whimper, one of his men answered for him.

"Storm front, sir. Moved in impossibly fast. Cut off the cruisers and their escort aircraft. Dr. Matuba was counting on a few hundred more of us to face whatever it is that's coming." The man shoved a shell as fat as a hen's egg into the breach of his weapon. "If you were thinking of heading to the surface, I'd add that I think that might not be a bad idea--"

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!

"You might want to do that now."

And then, the first of the impossible horrors moved into view from an opening in the wall of the star-shaped room furthest from the remaining members of the research party. At first, most were not even aware they were observing the entrance of a living being. Plastic it seemed, a shapeless congerie of protoplasmic bubbles which in many ways appeared to only be some sort of fetid backwash. Until the green and purple glow found it, and the thing opened its multiple eyes.

Fargo screamed. Many of the others gasped in a shock which staggered most into immobility. As the misshapen column of roiling black iridescence oozed tightly forward, its myriad temporary eyes forming and unforming, it suddenly revealed a hideous, thin-lipped mouth. Stretching it to its most obscene length, the thing's sides shuddered and the terrible piping sounded once more.

Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!

And, to the horror of the assembly, from a dozen points around the massive room, the noxious chorus of notes was repeated. As the research party watched, the first of the creatures approached one of the walruses. Lengthy tendrils of its being roped off from its sides, caught hold of the creature, then started to pull. Powerful it was, but its victim's incredible bulk resisted the drag until the monstrosity was half-pulling the walrus to it, half-pulling itself to the walrus. Then, when finally contact between the two was made, the depth of the nightmare surrounding the assembly was finally made clear.

The walrus let loose a terrified, pain-filled bellow. As the humans watched, the bubbling thing absorbed the sea beast into its being. It was a rapid process, hide sizzling, flesh melting, bones atomized. All watching stood transfixed as the walrus turned its massive head toward the human party. Its great dark eyes stared out forlornly, and then suddenly, the skin of its brow boiled at a tendril touch and rolled off the exposed skull like a light rain off of stone. Like a wax globe, the naked bone collapsed inward, the brains inside boiling, tusks falling from the mouth--useless.

"Die, Goddamnit!"

Legs planted firmly, left hand gripping right wrist for support, Donna Fargo fired round after round into the terrible creature. The bullets had little effect, but the former sheriff did not care. Spilling her spent chambers across the tile floor, she calmly began reloading.

"Donna," screamed Blakely, "we've got to get out of here!"

“Why?” demanded the redhead. Snapping the cylinder of her .38 Special home, she shouted over the cacophony all about them. “So these alien bastards can keep harvesting whatever they wants to, until their damn plans are ready? So it, it ...”

The woman faltered, tears in her eyes.

“What plans?” asked Blakely. “We don’t know anything about it. We’ve got to--”

“NO!” Fargo screamed the word as she emptied her revolver once more. Again her shells left scant results, but moreso than the first, causing Boles to note;

“I don’t think your bullets are having any great effect; the creature’s ability to dissolve solids seems to extend to metals. But, I believe their velocity is another matter.” Turning to one of Matuba’s men, he asked;

“You there, can I imagine your weapon holds more firepower than hers?” When the marine replied that it did, Boles told him, “then what are you waiting for?”

Understanding, the soldier shouldered his rifle and fired. Flame belched from the mouth of his hand-held cannon. The goose egg grenade struck the monstrosity, exploding on contact. Chunks of grotesque flesh were thrown in all directions. A brain-numbing screech radiated from the thing’s impossible mouth, triggering a direct response from the rest of the marines.

Without waiting for orders, the other regulars aimed and fired, blasting the grotesquity with machine gun and shot gun fire. Although the slugs and pellets themselves could not harm the creature greatly, their arrival force was shattering something deep within the monster.

“Jesus Christ,” shouted an obvious officer, “we’re dentin’ it. Pour it on, you ugly bastards!”

Smoke filled the air as hundreds of rounds slammed against the nightmare. The thing had turned to attack, but the violence it met from the concentration of guns was so intense that before it could even consider turning away once more its bodily mass had been reduced by some twenty percent.

While the marines continued to hammer away at the horror, and Matuba shouted at his cameraman to move in for a better angle, Boles caught hold of Fargo's arm, turning her around roughly.

"I applaud your enthusiasm, madame," he conceded. "If not for you the trained apes might never have sprung to action. But, there is nothing further any of the three of us can do here. I for one am going to follow in Masterson's footsteps. I advise you both to do the same."

With that the Para-Psychologist sprinted for the exit. Weaving his way around the still incoming walruses, he did not hesitate nor turn to see if his companions were following suit. Fargo stared into Blakely's eyes, unable to make her own decision. One step from madness, the smell of gunpowder and the screaming piping filling her ears, she shouted;

"I don't want to run away! It's all crazy--the whole damn world is crazy. Why not just end it here? Why not?!"

"Because," gasped Blakely, grabbing her arms, shaking her, "I don't want it to end. I want to tear that dress off you; I want to feel your body against mine. I want to feel my body inside of you, and I don't want you dead when I do!"

Noise billowed through the room--the screams of the walruses, the hideous piping, the non-stop firing of the marines--the echoes of it ringing all the way to the surface. Fargo grabbed onto Blakely, eyes filled with tears, trails of mucus hanging from both nostrils. She clung to him, feeling his terror, releasing her own, then watched in horror as a tendril snaked forth from one of the advancing aliens and wrapped around the neck of one of the marines. Much lighter than the walrus she had previously seen ensnared, the soldier was jerked across the room in one fluid motion and pulled to the waist into the body of the amorphous thing. She closed her eyes against the sight of his jerking legs and screamed;

"Get me out of here!"

The pair ran for the rampart. As they made their way upward, they heard a multitude of voices cheering. They could tell that three of the creatures had been slain. It took a tremendous amount of firepower--a combination of both projectiles and explosives--to break the things down into component parts too small to be reassembled, but it could be done. Not caring, the two continued on toward the surface.

Blakely coughed as he and Fargo started up the rampart. He had swallowed so much gunpowder smoke that the fresh sea air pouring down into the compound made him gag. Fargo wiped the sweat from her brow, shivering at the same time. The cries and curses and gunfire behind the pair kept them moving forward. All about them, walruses were still flowing down the rampart, but their numbers had dropped considerably. Some three-quarters of the way to the surface, Blakely found Boles stopped near one of Matuba's radio relay men. When the two approached, the Para-Psychologist told them;

"Good to see you. This officer tells me the walruses have stopped coming up onto shore." As the man nodded, Blakely asked;

"Have you told Matuba?" The marine held out his radio. Alien screeches, walrus honking and the din of non-stop gunfire boomed forth from the device. Then suddenly, a light flash and a beep signalled an incoming call. The officer gave his designation, then asked the other party to come back. A moment later, he began screaming into the radio, trying to reach those below.

"Repeat--the island is submerging. Repeat--the island is submerging! For the love of God, somebody key in down there. I repeat--the island is fucking sinking!"

Not willing to abandon his companions, the marine charged toward the lower levels, screaming into his radio over and over. Blakely, Boles and Fargo watched him for only a moment, then turned and started on toward the surface once more. The sounds of warfare coming at them from below had just begun to fade when the first trickles of water began to roll over the uppermost lip of the rampart.

DECK OF THE DIANA, SOMEWHERE AT SEA

Dawn broke over the horizon slowly, as if it were as tired as those watching it rise. Blakely and Fargo sat atop the Diana's tuna tower, thick blankets wrapped about them. They had not wanted to go down even the few steps into the interior. Although Boles gratefully took a cabin without hesitation, the two preferred to climb the ladder to the tower, elevating themselves as far as possible from the ocean below.

The Bitter Leaf and the DiVinci had disappeared when the island submerged. No sign of either vessel was to be found, nor any of their crews. Masterson had called his captain as he emerged from the rampart on his radio phone and had managed to make the shore just as the island began to submerge. Showing great courage, the entrepreneur had urged the crew to bring the powerboat in over the disappearing island, heading for the glowing rampart. Their arrival there coincided almost to the second with the escape of Fargo and the professors.

No others made it out from the depths.

Boles, who spent a great deal of time on the Diana's radio through much of the night, slept soundly once he finally retired. Blakely and Fargo, who did nothing more than hold each other through the stormy night, found sleep impossible. Soaked to the skin, shivering despite their shared body heat, the pair felt not only safer in the burgeoning sunlight, but somewhat foolish as well. Making their way down to the deck, they threw off their soggy blankets and stretched, trying to loosen their stiffening muscles.

"Guess I let you down."

"What do you mean, Hugh?" Blakely turned, stared at Fargo. Tilting his head sheepishly to one side, he answered;

"I told you this one wasn't going to be bad. Told you there weren't going to be any monsters. Told ..."

She closed the distance between them with a step, putting two fingers to his lips. Instinctively, he kissed them. Without changing her expression, she withdrew the fingers slowly, bringing them to her own mouth. Carefully, her eyes never breaking contact with his, she slid the fingers across her tongue.

The two faced each other for a long moment, eyes still locked, mouths open, hearts beating at the same pace. One of them took a step closer to the other. Both of them smiled.

Above them, the sun shone steadily, warming the air and granting the sea an illusion of calm beauty.