

The Devil's Betelnut Box

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“Our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.”
—Vladimir Nabokov

It was our group's last two days of a week long “Secret Caves of the South-East Meridian” travel adventure trip, billed to be the wildest barbaric hiking experience of a lifetime. We had flown thousands of miles to arrive deep within the rainforest jungles of Javan Borneo, where few humans have tread. The solitude we experienced was driving us to the edge, but our optimism was high. It was an exotic location by all accounts. What had drawn us to this lush green hidden paradise rising steamily out of the vapor mists, was less the giant baboons and chattering orangutans that we daily saw, than it was for the enthralling species of unusual flora and fauna, we were still hoping to find, in the land of the myth. And of course the deadly, psychotic kerubut devil's betelnut box.

Too good to be true? Perhaps. I do not propose to describe any more than I have to, since my tale is horrible and long, although we had done our homework well. But I must state at the outset, that all we had done daily, was walk. We had traipsed so hard and at such length, that it seemed to me we had crossed and re-crossed hundreds of miles of soaked and sodden jungle terrain, wading through knee- high animal scat and tangled liana vines, I had lost count. Each evening we had rested, too exhausted to care whether we woke up the next day or not. There were days I was famished, starved, drifting in and out of sleep, for lack of energy.

It was his way of softening us up, I should have known, blood sucked to the last painful drop, by a species of flying mosquito-bats, as large as drones. They could have been vampire bats. Or flying lizards. But I had not known. We had missed our clues, and cues, waiting for what, I no longer knew or cared.

Strange as it may seem to the uninitiated and unscientific explorer, we had yet to uncover that rare cache of yoths, we had been promised in the travel brochures. And we were out of time.

Our dabuyaki guide, a cheerful naturalist named Awatan, attached to the local university, seemed unperturbed. He went about his daily routine unconcerned. He was descended from some colonial White Rajahs of the region, in the days when Javan Borneo was a British colony, which was the only reason we had trusted him. His insights although impish and carefully crafted, seemed an inherited trait. He agreed with impunity that he had promised us a rare treat, one that he had every intention of fulfilling. If only we had known then what form this macabre intention, born out of psionics, would take. But without Awatan we were stranded.

A dabuyaki rarely fails on his word. Or so we were led to believe, on the basis of a tattered old journal documenting the secret valley, and its well hidden entrance, leading to the vast underground cave chambers of Baqqara, which copy only Awatan possessed. Both, the eminent

scientist who claimed authorship of this rare manuscript, based on his own first hand experiences, through the dark descent into the underworld below, and the actual prophetic journal itself, had miraculously survived the former destruction of the infamous valley. But with the beast men fled ages ago, claims of the existence of the Not-to-be-Named-One, was no longer feasible, and could not be verified. So we relied on Awatan.

“He’s sure working himself up to a mighty big tip,” said burly Dan unabashedly to the group, winking at Sally. She looked away with embarrassment. Both doctoral students in botany, their interest was less the wild animals, as much as the plants and insects, swarming in droves. They had picked Awatan for guide to study the sticky medicinal sap he consumed, of certain trees, as protection against malaria.

Bruce and I were on the lookout for unadulterated adventure. On the side, we were recreational spelunkers, canyoneering down cave mountains with flowing water, for the joy of the extreme sport, which was our specialty. We had rappelled through the lava formations of Hawaii, and the wind caves of Tenerife. What had drawn us to Borneo, was its cave complex, known to be untested—the largest of its kind, hidden deep into bedrock. Secretly the pursuit of a valley of lost souls, akin to beast-like folk, was a preponderance too grotesque to miss.

Tara, the last member of our group, was a horticulturist. A Naga worshipper by practice, her delight was exotic plant species, which imbued her with strange powers. For the past ten years her conservatory had been trying in vain, to grow a noxious corpse-flower, the plant that reeked of rotting flesh, in the stinky cheese-and-wet-garbage stage of decomposition, which maggots typically marched through. One day the local Varsity of Borneo published in their science journal, that a gigantic maroon rafflesia, the only corpse flower known to the botanic world, was in bloom-ready for sighting. A rare one-of-a-kind occurrence. Tara was exhorted with the gruesome task of bringing home the carrion plant. In an instant she departed, ready to take on the kerubut.

“Very well. We’re all set then. Time to open the devil’s betelnut box,” said Awatan, a merry twinkle in his bamboo green eyes.

“It’s what we’ve been waiting for,” I smiled, relieved that our big moment was finally near.

“Abracadabra, more hocus-pocus,” whispered Dan to Sally, with another wink. Bruce rolled his eyes in exasperation, as Tara held her breath, an expression of unfathomable wonder lighting up her face.

Awatan produced an antique red wood betelnut box. He slid open the cover to reveal several partitions within.

“Healthy practice long ago,” he explained, relishing the effect the box and his simple explanation was causing, “When people chewing betelnut in good old days, they grow so strong. Not change to devils. Ha-Ha! More Great Old One?”

He looked around, laughing heartily at the incredulous looks on our faces. We had to allow Awatan his maniacal jokes. If this was the new science model he was spinning, it was mind-boggling. Occult junkie that he was!

“My great-great-great grandfather’s box. Very ancient. Box full of wisdom. Original from Burma. He brilliant orangtahu, clever wise man. Awarded for brave magic by White Rajah. You know White Rajah? White Rajah no believe in Stone God. So he change to yoath. Today we chew arecanutbetel seed from this magic box. You chew. Is auspicious ceremonial practice. Now all sleep. Tomorrow we go,” he said handing each of us what looked like dried finger stumps, with the flesh removed. Intimidating.

Bemused by his show of quaint mannerisms, we had fallen into a routine of humoring our guide, for his entertaining efforts, if we hoped to make it back, out of this remote location. So, grimacing at the blackened lumps, thrust into our hands, we each bravely chewed. It tasted of seaweed. Nothing like dinner—an appetizing affair of fried fish, anchovies, chili sambal and rice wrapped in banana leaves, which had rendered us more amenable. We were at our most willing, to oblige. But this dessert was not of our expectation—excessively rank in odor and taste, and equally odious. The chewing lasted over an hour. Before long our exhausted group of dysfunctional travel explorers, had crashed out, like a bunch of worn out frat daddies.

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When I awoke the next morning it was to a faint memory of a wretched hangover. I felt disoriented. It was dark. It was also cold. It took me several moments to configure, that I was lying on a rock, in a subterranean tunnel, down which no sunlight entered. The reason I say this, is because the intense darkness on all sides, was un-bounding and endless. We seemed to be in a cavernous under-ground. How had we reached here? The perfidy of Awatan tore up my insides, and I burned with a cold fury at the treachery.

“Where are we?” I heard Sally stir from not two feet away. Gingerly feeling my surroundings, I gravitated towards her. The solid rock was wet, with some sort of ice cold water flow.

“Where is our equipment?” “Damn! How did we get here?”

“Awatan! Quit playing, will you? You dirty slimeball!”

“Why are we whispering?”

Once our eyes adjusted to the gloom, I faintly saw two passages diverge, one plunging downwards, to a stone ledge below, the other in a gradient curving upwards. It wound narrowly, disappearing from view. Both passages did not look good options to explore, and for some nasty moments I was nonplussed.

The torches attached to our headgears, could not do more, illuminating in dim arcs, endless stretches of more darkness. We took a vote, then decided on the downwards descent. I guess it was the easier choice, in the limited lighting. Besides, we thought we could hear a series of gurgling sounds, which although strange, drew us. It could be a river. Maybe our way out, maybe closer than we thought. Encouraging.

“Come on you two cave explorers. Lead the way!” called out the group comedian, Dan, in sarcastic mock heartiness, putting on a show of bravado, indicating he was the first to recover, from our predicament. I could tell that the two women, were too scared to move. Without our rappelling equipment Bruce and I were sorely compromised. I hurriedly took inventory. Just ropes and torches. Not much. But it would have to do.

“Let’s go! Buried cave chambers here we come! Woo-hoo! Give us our sap and resin!” yelled Dan eagerly, filled with asinine bluster, which sounded idiotic.

The ledge below led us through a precipitous narrow ridge of broken and loose stones, which fell in a shower of rocks, into the black abyss below. The horror of the darkness, and the accompanying solitude, out of all human reach, prolonged our agony. We crept along, in single file, desperately hugging the rock face, in silence. One misstep, and we would plunge to certain death below. I led the way, uncertain of where I was treading. Besides me was Dan, whom I had every reason to believe was already deranged, fired up as he seemed to be, at every step. Sally, then Tara followed, with Bruce bringing up the rear. For what seemed an interminable age, but must have only been minutes, I carefully picked my steps, onto stratum, that seemed solid enough to bear our combined weight. I issued directions.

After what seemed like an hour, we had made progress, because now we had reached a wide overhang, and parts of the rock surface seemed to be covered by green limestone formations. High above us, rows of stalactites, like shining swords, hung, downwards pointing, straight at us. It did not bear contemplating about. We were doomed if we did. The strange gurgling sounds had gotten louder. A curious distant flapping, and a trickle, joined the pitch. Our torches were not bright enough to penetrate the vastness, and we failed to distinguish the noise.

Soon I felt a breeze picking up, getting stronger. I had not felt this sensation before. The beating of wings had gotten much louder. Black wings. A loud skree! skree! skree! rent the air, so confusing us, we huddled low, clutching at every little crevice our slipping fingers could find.

“Look out!” I yelled a warning. Too late.

From out of nowhere a flying beast emerged, taking aim at us. It resembled a strange giant serpent in flight. From the Cambrian Age I surmised. It was all of two hundred feet in length, with a wingspan of easily over fifty feet. A pterodactyloid looking ten times the size of a pterosaur. Prehistoric creatures?! I gasped in confusion and horror. Within seconds the fearsome creature was upon us, its elongated jaw thrust open, gnashing. Before we could recover, it had swooped, plucking Tara from off the foothold, she had been precariously balancing on. With two quick flaps it disappeared from view, as suddenly as it had emerged. All that remained was Tara's dying scream.

Those seconds had been enough for me. I saw in that monstrous winged beast, a look so extraordinary, as I had never before envisioned, or hope to. What dark realm had I entered? What hidden, dangerous secret did I hope to unravel, in this forbidden world? The winged reptile had the saddest of human eyes, glowing red, and from its wings grew slimy tentacles, indicating to me, that dissections, and other unnatural experiments, were possibly afoot, in this depraved buried cave chambers of Baqqara. What else could it be?

My companions must have seen what I had, for Sally emitted a piercing frightened scream, that bounced hollowly, through several echo chambers, before fading to nothingness, in the far distance. Before I could react, she had lost her grip, and plummeted into the void, dislodging Dan, in her frenzy. There are those who will say, that Dan was never a part of this group excursion, and had always been a figment of our imagination. I can only swear that this is not so. Dan disappeared that day, in an instant.

Bruce and I recovered, as quickly as we dared, our initial shock wearing, as we scrambled downwards, using our bare hands, and every rock-climbing expertise, to find the unlikeliest of footholds, as we slipped and slid, past the peaks and pinnacles, in the rock structure, suffering many a scrape and twinge, in our hasty progress. The loud roar of flowing waters turned more distinct, to our unfamiliar ears, the further we descended. Just when I thought we had arrived, at the bottom, the more there was to descend. There were stages, when I gazed perpendicularly straight down, thousands of feet, where the mountain fell sheer. Our muscles were tiring, if we kept this up.

At the earliest practical point, I decided to abandon the rock climb, taking the risk instead, to dive into the violent waves, churning in a whirlpool below. I felt the shock of freezing waters close over my head, as I dived, recovering, to kick free, and surface. Bruce was as strong a swimmer, but these choppy waters of a fast-flowing underground river, with strong currents, was nothing we had ever remotely encountered, not even white-water rafting, on the Colorado.

Swept inexorably along, we were pummeled and tossed, as jets of white, frothed and seethed turbulently over us. When we could not hold out much longer, we were over the cliffs, free-falling, in a Niagara rush, under pressure of thousands of pounds of foaming spray, gushing us over monstrous falls. It was the last I remembered. When we came to, I was lying spread-eagled, on an embankment, of a green lagoon. I could not move. Bruce was wrapped around the

outstretched limb, of a low overhang- ing tree, coughing and spluttering. Both of us were bound, by the very climbing ropes, we had each secured, anchored firmly to our waistbands.

Surrounding us was an army of grim looking yelling tribes men. Boyaks! The dreaded lost tribe of pigmy head hunters. I knew them from archaeological studies I had perused, while time traveling once, in the company of a certain Captain of a submarine. Known for their piracy and nefarious misdeeds, on sea and land, they were the favored bodyguards, of the former White Rajahs, their heads wrapped in snakeskin, their arms extending into feathers, and lending them unusual height—Anubis skulls, while their bare mutilated torsos, bore tattoos of strange markings. The mark of the headhunter. Their teeth were serrated, and protruded alarmingly. This lost tribe was feral, as we would soon learn.

The lagoon appeared to be their village. On its stone banks were piled boulders, of different shapes and sizes, intended as dwellings. And strung in rows on each, hung grotesque beast like heads. Of Dog-Boar and Tiger-Man. Could this be a lost advanced civilization? I wondered. They did not look like any recognizable scientific classification, to me. Most heads were blackened with age. Only some looked fresh, with human-like blood, dripping in pools. One being, reanimated, walked away, before my very eyes. Headless! Dead springing to life? What manner of dark, strange and creepy world was it?

But the freshest head of all. Dan's! Eyes protruding. Caught in the look of horror he bore, when he had plunged off the rock face. Pilloried. Dripping with fresh blood. These Boyaks thrilled to have visitors from the outer world, I would soon learn. I looked around worriedly for Sally, the ropes severely restricting any movement.

A loud booming and a keening filled the air. The booming came from the beat of multiple drums and gongs, the keening from the throats of all gathered, at the lagoon. Arrows strung from multiple bows took to the air, and transformed into small planes, as the crowd of tribesmen danced rhythmically, to the beat, while the womenfolk swayed and chanted:

“In his house at Baqqara dead Stone God waits dreaming!”

This was how I learnt of the origin of The Ancient Ones. Of Surya and Raghu. Of cosmic good and cosmic evil. I learnt that the tattoos on their chests, bore the message“Seized by the will of Baqqara, In the headless body of Kerubut.” Early explorers had treated Kerubut as a threatening mythological death-deity, who had lost her benign femininity. I could see why. We were up against severe extra-planar magical practices.

Bruce was, like me, cautiously casting an uneasy glance around, taking stock of his new situation. It did not look good. What was he up to? Psst! Psst! He spat like a cobra, as loudly as he dared, without drawing attention to himself. Couldn't he tell I was deliberately playing dead for my safety? Be still! I hissed back in warning.

Suddenly the caterwauling and noise ceased. Thick yellow fumes filled the air. Through the blinding smoke a tall slim apparition appeared, from within the stone shelters, high up on the limestone hillock. The shape was dressed ceremoniously, in a yellow sarong that clung to the curvature of her outline. She was bedecked with strings of glistening stone and ivory that weighed down her slender neck and arms.

On her luscious head of dark hair, piled high, a crown of green vines, was decoratively placed. And upon the hairy spadix and spathe, I spied what looked like a gigantic crimson cabbage, sitting like an alien egg, about to hatch. The carcass effect. Kerubut. She looked like some sort of powerful Goddess. And the Boyaks and headless yoths bent over low, in menial bow, their foreheads touching the ground.

Following behind her, was none other than our genial guide—Awatan! In charge. Like some sort of Grand Vizier of Baqqara.

Wait a minute! Tara? And that scamp? Travel guide indeed! I could contain myself no longer.

A small clutch of yoths rushed up to me, pulling me roughly to my feet, for the obeisance. Bruce was already prostrate in a deep bow. He did not believe in mucking around. When in doubt, obey, was his simple philosophy.

Wait till I get my hands on that two-timing—

“Awatan! You dirty toad! Unfasten us!” I yelled, tired of the tomfoolery. “What is this place? It was never our deal!”

“Come my friends. This is a great day of celebration for our people. Zoya, Our Ancient One, has returned—Queen of our Buried Baqqara. She has learned much, wandering in the outer worlds of Un-Myth. Bow to Zoya our Queen!”

“Bow to Zoya! Our Queen!” chanted the crowd of pigmies, and their headless slaves, their voices raised.

My ropes were undone, and I was unceremoniously frog-marched up the hill, by ten of their fiercest yoths. I staggered and fell, bruising my shins, on the limestone. I felt sharp teeth pierce my flesh, as the yoths attacked, like rabid dogs. And then I heard Sally.

Driven to hysterics she had run towards me, with a fitful cry of anguish, blabbering in a tirade, of pre-historic life forms, and hybrid creatures. Of mutilations, and dissection experiments. Of strange temples of worship, and the old Not-to-be-Named-One. Of Beast Men and Dan. What she was outlining, I was unable to gather, except to note, that she was making every effort, to recount something so dark, it had all but driven her, completely insane.

Kingdom of Baqqara. These people were immortal! I cannot say more, too sickened by what had been revealed. Sally was sobbing, too distraught and incoherent, to be trusted with further speech, hanging grimly onto my neck, as if her life depended on it.

“If you will control your little lady and be so kind as to follow me. Our grand sight-seeing tour of our brave little kingdom begins. Come friends, choose your ride.”

“NO!” Sally screamed, looking as if she would swoon. “Don’t follow! It’s our death sentence!”

Two giant woolly six-headed mammoths appeared, as high as twin hills. The first bore a palanquin, for Tara/Zoya. The second, Awatan clambered onto, as spritely as a mountain squirrel, barking out orders, from his perch atop. The animals appeared untamed, subdued by feral teeth, at the slightest infraction.

A hippotamus-ox hunk approached next. The ground rumbled with each heavy stride. It was the creature provided me. I mounted unaided, without protest.

“A wise choice my friend. But make sure. Our hippos love the water,” Awatan burst into loud laughter, which greatly agitated the beasts.

“What did you do to Dan?!” I yelled back.

“An unwise move. Most unfortunate. He refused to cooperate. He paid the price!”

Sally was next. But in her severely distressed state, she could not mount the long-necked dinobarra, standing quietly by her side, as calm as a desert camel of the Sahara. She continued to scream hysterically, in a manner I had least expected.

“Tara’s poisoned. On the corpse-flower. They chopped Dan up. Don’t you understand? Into a boar. Murderers! Savages! Ross, we’re next! I—” She received a nasty bite for her efforts, and fell to the ground, clutching her bleeding thigh in agony, where a dematerialized yothe, re-materializing at will, was attaching its sharp, pointed teeth, in a juicy morsel.

I jumped off my hippotamus-ox, and rushed at Awatan, scrambling past the milling yothes, fangs extended.

“You’d best leave her here. You can see she’s in no state to take your guided tour,” I reasoned, futilely. This turn of events should have been expected.

“Most unwise. Women bring nothing but trouble,” Awatan had recovered equilibrium. The yothes fell back, reanimated, turning headless once again, as they slunk away, in a black liquefied tide.

“Then allow her to accompany me,” I persuaded. “My transport vehicle looks wide enough to accommodate an army. See for yourself. There’s room for two.”

“It is not the way of our land,” Awatan replied, obstinate as a Boyak mule.

After much persuasion, in which time I calmed Sally down considerably, she was coaxed into mounting a brontostaligops instead, which in the time it took to calm her frayed nerves, had developed a fascination for her hair, and what grew there. The crown of green foliage. Vines. The creature nibbled mindlessly, at the assortment of fresh vegetation it had discovered, within easy reach.

Bruce in the meantime, was in a daze. Not having recovered from his wild swim, he looked decidedly ill. I could not think why. And then I saw. It made me ill too, that my head spun.

He was being helped up a parked komopoda, an amoeba like shape-changing creature, covered in black slime. Could this be another mutated yoth? I hoped not. Bruce was white as a sheet, hanging deliriously onto pustules, as large as dinner plates, which seemed to be the creature’s multiple eyes, out of which, sticky green plasma, spewed, long as bungee cords, while the creature growled aggressively.

Awatan laughed, with ill-concealed pleasure. He had plunged us in the midst of unnamed evil—the aim of this venture. It was succeeding. I worried for Sally. Bruce looked far gone. Tara, I could not determine. She seemed meekly passive, obeying Awatan’s every command, in doe-eyed somnambulism.

Soon we were on our way. The mighty river seemed to follow us, as we explored. We passed valleys and stone cities, brimming with Beast Men. We crossed grotesque temples, and hidden tunnels, dangerously concealed, within these mountains of madness. The dark realm bespoke of advanced civilizations, and creatures with powers, far beyond our knowledge, unknown to our world. Remains of pre-historic life amply dotted the landscape, and everywhere I looked, I saw trees and overhanging fruits, unknown to our botanical world, or to science. The eldritch weirdness was nightmarish.

Strange howls and cries rent the air. Some muffled. Others of creatures, crying out in pain. I shuddered in horror at the sounds, as they increased, trembling to my core. Persistent voices hammered hollowly, as bolts of loud thunder, in the confusion of my mind. Was the Not-to-be-Named-One up to more fiendish activities, in this unsettling darkness. Where was the mad scientist’s lair? Was there to be no end to the pain? To torture? I could not bear to dwell any longer, on my misshapen thoughts, crowding my stripped down judgement.

I could see now that Awatan’s travel brochures were far from a hoax after all. Was I too going insane? How had the evil genius attained eternal life? The state of the undying? My wayward thoughts immediately transferred, with all possible speed, to faraway Transylvania, and the castle

of a certain elusive Count, whom I had just once, had the misfortune to meet, on my time travels. That too, in the shape of a large nocturnal bat. He too was immortal. Could the mad scientist's transgenic experimentations have indeed succeeded?

I thought I saw a diabolic satyroat scamper past, in a tearing hurry. It looked satanic. It snarled viciously at us, disturbed in its hot pursuit, of a pumayoth, which it out-distanced, with ease. I thought I heard Bruce's komopoda cry out in deathly agony. I could not be certain. The noise of pain was filling the cave chambers, deafeningly. And a cold fear gripped me, anew. Would we make it out alive? Thoughts of escape loomed uppermost. Where were we headed? My question was soon answered.

"Look there, where evil lies! The kingdom of madness. Untouched. The death valley of the Not-to-be-Named- One, which only our Stone God, having the magical powers of the Great Old One, can access. Beyond that boundary, we do not cross," said Awatan sepulchrally, pointing at the nearby mountains beyond. Our little procession had come to a dead stop, on a dark trail. "It is not our world," our enigmatic Goth guide was concluding. What could he possibly be envisioning? What could be lurking behind that vanishing trail?

Awatan did not elaborate. It was the first time I had heard him speak in such a manner. Exhibiting fear. It sent shivers up my spine, to see even Awatan afraid. I stared in the direction he pointed. We were far from the green lagoon. A strange green darkness impossible to describe, was engulfing us. It had descended unnoticed. I had the uneasy sensation that we were being closely watched. I felt a rage brewing, at our mounting helplessness, at not knowing more, at Awatan for the uncertainty of the situation, he had placed us in.

The poison dart, when it struck my bull hippotamus-ox's right flank, was soundless. Thwack! I was unprepared for what was to follow. The poor creature reared, roaring in pain. With a heavy snort, that shook its haunches mightily, and before I had time to react, it charged into the swirling river, tossing me into the turgid waters, where I was borne inexorably along, into the very kingdom of madness, which Awatan just a few seconds earlier, had cautioned against entering. But these thoughts were the least of my worries, as water filled my lungs, and I drowned once again, blacking out.

Thundering hoofs approaching were the first sounds I heard, as I came to, in the tepid twilight, after my marathon swim. I was on firm ground and could not understand how this was possible. Someone or something had saved me, out of the raging river. After what seemed an age, while I thrashed about, imagining the rushing waters still upon me, I opened my eyes at last, forced to take stock of my new situation. The earth was shuddering, with a peculiar sound of stampede, of giant beasts, in an expeditious approach. And I was in their way.

In a flash, stumbling blindly for cover, with less time to think of choices, than I could count on, I fell headlong, in a clumsy dive, into what turned out to be the soggiest, most stinking patch of vegetation, I had ever come across, even in a wet fish market in Kuala Lumpur. I nearly passed

out, at the decaying fumes of raw sewage. But with just seconds to spare, I pulled out of harm's way, as an army of protoplasmic youths, their black shapes bubbling over with myriads of pustule eyes, glowing lemon green, chased a pod of giant ten-headed tyrannorex, shredding into their flesh, with mottled tentacles.

I staggered out of my stink hole, as swiftly as I could. I was soaked in putrescence, my skin crawling with swollen maggots as large as earthworms. Frantically, I dusted the wet vegetable matter off. The overpowering stench was causing my lungs to burn. I gagged.

And then I gasped. A rare sight caught my gaze. Standing before me, at such close quarters, was the largest *Rafflesia Arnoldii* I had ever seen. The death flower—in full bloom! And I had fallen into its carrion maw, reeking of decomposing cabbage and cheese, this priceless, parasitic plant, the color of drying blood.

Intoxicated with stygian fumes, I now understood how I was saved, and stood rooted to the spot in impenetrable prayer, unable to move. The kerubut!

“You’ve found it. The devil’s betelnut box! The powerful lure of mystery. The blessings of the Ancient One be upon you! I see you are attracted to our kerubut. Now we must celebrate. The rituals call. But hurry. We must leave at once!” Awatan’s hoarse voice, announcing excitedly, broke the spell. I should have felt consoled. But didn’t. I swung around in sudden anger and discomfiture, at being rudely aroused, from the semi-helium world where I had trod, riled at his taunts, heaped upon me. Leaping at Awatan, I took a swing, with both fists. But he must have been prepared for such a move.

“What was in that betelnut? The devil take you if you had us poisoned!”

“But you must not say such words my friend. Of venom. How like a komodo dragon you spit. Let us save it for the feast. We are in danger here. Inferno Baqqara is not our itinerary.”

A series of rapid fire clicks and snaps sounded. It felt like the breaking of millions of twigs and branches all at once. It approached us from a variety of directions. A strange green darkness started to glow. I saw a fear in Awatan that was not there before.

“HURRY!”

Tara, still in a trancelike state, had started to mumble weirdly, “Seized by the will of Baqqara, Is the headless body of Kerubut.”

“RUN!” yelled Awatan. His terror exploding. A humongous cyclopean shape filled the horizon, blocking our vision, its monstrous scaly body rubbery and blistered. In the green twilight I saw multiple octopus tentacles outstretch, as they snaked out, plucking Tara, from our midst, into prodigious claws.

We did not wait. We ran, riding hard at an impossible gallop, of jolts and bounces. The creature's lizard like tail twitching violently would be the last image I would carry, of the real nature of evil lurking within those valleys and mountains, as it thrashed the trees and plants in clicks and snaps.

Awatan made full haste to put maximum distance, from this forbidden land. Sharing the ride with Sally was my only choice. She held on grimly, struggling to hold herself together, and clutching at my waist, her only comfort.

We made it back, panting and disheveled. Our return was marked by much festivity, and rejoicing. Drums beat wildly, and songs and gongs rent the air, as Boyaks and yoths danced wildly. Soon a cookout was in progress, smoke from the fires enticing a couple of gigantic pterodactyloid, which hovered like vampire bats, ready to swoop! Skree! Skree! Skree!

In an instant I recognized the serpent like winged abductors of Tara/Zoya. How would we ever rescue her? I wondered. Momentarily recovered, I shoved Sally into the shelter of the rocks, between the crevices, bidding her silence, and grabbing a spear for self-defense.

“Doubtless you have made your acquaintance my friends, with our kryptodrakon progenitor. They do us no harm. Have no fear. Our flying serpents. They are but friends.”

“What is the grand plan Awatan? How do we return to the outer world?”

“What? So soon?! It is discourteous of you Ross. Are you not enjoying? Come. We will feast. But first we must prepare. Hold onto your spear my friend. You will need it.”

Nothing escaped our guide's basilisk eyes it appeared.

Awatan went inside one of the stone dwellings. When he emerged he looked vastly different. Gone was the Swashbuckler, replaced by a self-appointed Judge. He had donned a black robe. He wore the animal face mask of the white tiger. His glassy eyes were shining an intense neon green. I had not seen such a look. In his hands he carried a ceremonial gong. He appeared ready to preside over a hastily assembled court session.

Legal proceedings? Whatever next? I started to feel unstrung, tired of the antics. “But first we place bets. On the fate of those on trial. Wager is the victim's skull.” Whose skull? Was it Sally's? Mine?

“You must be mad. You are mad!” I rushed at Awatan, without thinking for my safety, the spear pointed at his throat. I was quickly subdued. This time it came from an outstretched thumb, that acted as an unseen poison dart, bearing the very same properties. It paralyzed me instantaneously. Awatan was an astute practitioner of the black arts. I fell, writhing in pain. The tribesmen broke into laughter, followed by loud cheers.

“Let us begin. Please be seated. Kingdom of Baqqara vs. Creature of our Green Lagoon.”

“The creature stands accused of murder by slyness. He swallowed up our medicine-man, who toppled into our lagoon, seven moon-suns ago. We have heard all arguments for and against, from our Old Sayer of the Law. After weighing much evidence, this Court can solemnly only decree the verdict of ‘Guilty by Killing.’ Judgment to be instantaneous. Head to be severed from trunk. Body to be skinned alive. Flesh to be cooked. Carcass to be left as warning to other perps, lurking in these waters for similar treats. All rotting meats, of dread nature, to be offered to our Stone God, the Ancient One, at Kerubut, the Devil’s Betelnut Box. Our friends the flying serpents to do the rest.”

This was surreal. Bizarre. It could not be happening. Puerile execution of an extinct pre-historic crocodylomorph?!

The spectacle of strangulation and beheading of a giant beast that we were forced to witness made us scream in horror. The green lagoon turned red, belching with spurting blood. The swarm of yoths knew the art of decapitation well.

Bruce who had been feeling queerly for a long time, barfed into the undergrowth. He looked relieved after that. Sally shrieked for all she was worth, dropping into a dead faint. I picked her up, signaling Bruce urgently, to move. We would have to take our chances, for the getaway. The time had arrived. And that time was now.

The Boyaks were riotously yelling, running wild in circles, with the dripping crocodile head, held aloft. They were joined by children Boyaks. Awatan led the insane victory lap. He looked crazed in his judgeship attire. Drums and gongs beat chaotically, as the older tribesmen skinned the great beast, with much fanfare and flourish. The women-folk stayed busy, tearing at the flesh, and cooking its succulent white meat, in crude earthen pots, over makeshift fires. The yoths were everywhere, sinking their sharp feral teeth into all that flesh, voluptuously stewing. High above, in the far distance, the flying serpents hovered—carrion vultures. Skree! Skree! Skree!

None noticed us leave, which was just as well.

We made our way crouching low behind the stone dwellings, descending through the verdant underbrush, on the other side, onto the mountain pass. A rickety plank and rope bridge was our only link to the rocky outcrop, across the raging river, where the timber rafts were tethered. We tested our joint weight on the weak bridge, and decided it would not hold us combined.

After what seemed an eternity, Bruce was across. Sally was midway, creeping haltingly, as she clung desperately to the ropes, fearful of its irregularity and wobbly motion. “Don’t look at the river!” Bruce helpfully encouraged.

The swoosh of the spear landing at my foot was the only signal I had that Awatan had arrived. He had detected our escape. I turned, overbalancing, just as Awatan's fist connected with my jaw. Grabbing at him, I fell. We rolled and slid, arms flailing in a messy tangle of twisting limbs, down the steep precipice. A family of giant tupaia squirrels took to the trees in alarm. We ended our fall on the embankment, torn by multiple scrapes and bruises.

“Go! Now!” Awatan was saying with his usual infectious merry twinkle. “You have not a moment to lose, if you value your lives. I beseech you! Each of your heads is for the taking.”

“Much do you care. You just tried to kill us,” I reminded wincing, feeling my arm gingerly, where the fracture showed.

“If I had wanted to, I could. It is not a vain boast. But now there is no time to be lost. Hurry! Another day perhaps for the chatter.”

I noticed Bruce and Sally in the raft on the other side. They had made it. Bruce was signaling, that he was punting across, to get me.

“What sort of operation do you run? And where is Tara?” I yelled, my anger at Awatan not satiated.

“You are being watched my friend, and in as great a danger as you and your friends can possibly imagine, even as we speak. Take the longboat. It is on the other side. Follow the river. Go! Now!”

I rose with a painful hobble. In one fluid movement I landed a solid punch squarely in Awatan's face. I felt his nose crack, sensing a quiet satisfaction, when my fist connected.

“Glad you enjoyed our little adventure my friend. My apologies it did not last longer. You will pardon my manners, but I cannot wait to bid farewell. Visit us again,” was all he said. And as quietly as he had appeared, he vanished into the undergrowth.

We had been punting and rowing for hours and hours, taking turns. A nightmare of a boating expedition. The muddy river became a trickle, where the cave walls narrowed. The rows of limestone karst formations confused us greatly. In the semi-light where the cave chambers turned gloomiest, we disturbed millions of bats, screeching into the vast depths. Too exhausted to continue, we finally lost all sense of time and bearing, as we fitfully slept.

When we awoke, we were in our resort at Javan Borneo, ready for our long flight home.

Upon our return to New York we were disbelieved by the scientific world and the public. People laughed at our tale, mocking us, shunning us, calling us liars. The more publicity the media ensured, offering the first real glimpse to an unexplored forbidden world, the worse off we were.

Bruce retired from cave climbing. His plan was to organize the Baqqara Freak Show, starting with the crocodylomorph's large tooth, and other fossil remnants, that he had somehow finagled, from the beast's decapitated head. Tara, whose beneficence and immortality was well provided for, by the Naga's life-giving ancient other-worldly emanations, resurrected herself, like the corpse flower. Her inexplicable alteration could not be explained. Her plan was to open a Kerubut museum, with all the beads and stones and hairy structures she wore, as Zoya, and to teach practitioners the art of yoth-yoga.

My plan was to return to the Kingdom of Baqqara. Unsatiated with my eerie experiences, I still harbored a yearning to explore the forbidden underworld. But Sally, would have none of it. So we were wed, and opened a conservatory growing Borneo orchids, and the occasional stinking flowers, which we did not refer to by name.

The headless Dan incredulously mutated into a yoth, or so it was strongly rumored. Painful transformation of zygomite destruction and re-growth, according to four scientists who had some specific, although explosively powerful knowledge of this strange anomaly to infect some. In situations like this, I refuse to enter the argument. Together with Awatan, the two Kerubut junkies continued to viably run the travel adventure tours, to the buried caves of the devil's betelnut box.