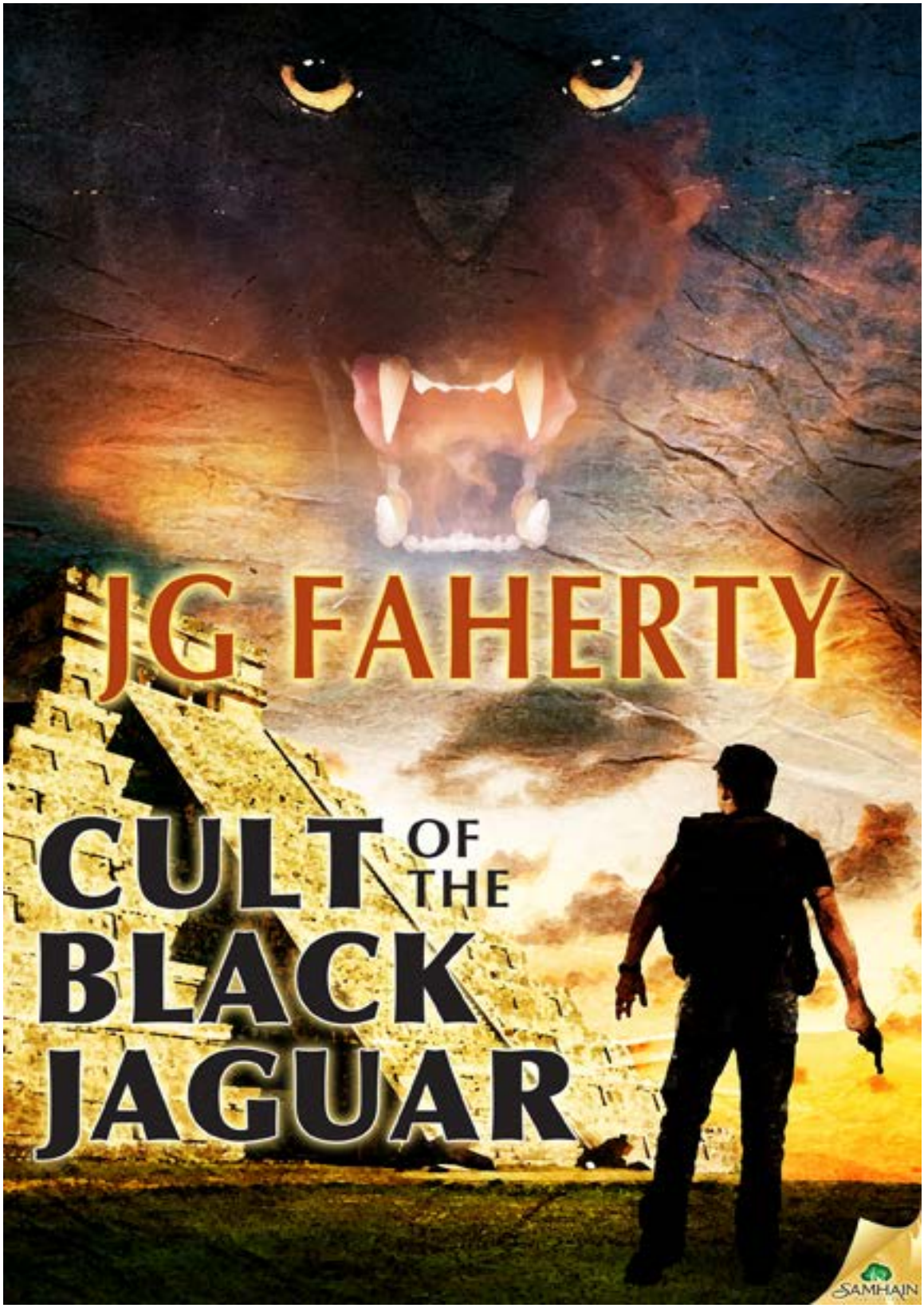

JG FAHERTY
CULT OF THE BLACK JAGUAR
SAMHAIN

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In the depths of the jungle lie mysteries drenched in blood.

Ethan Foster has spent a lifetime as a guide and bodyguard for archeologist Heathcliff Pascal. They've survived more adventures than they can count, but now, deep in the jungles of Central America, they discover a secret hidden from the world for centuries: the Cult of the Black Jaguar, presided over by an immortal goddess whose beauty is matched by her cruelty. She needs the blood of a virgin to bring her army back to life, and she's found one in Heathcliff's daughter, Jenny. It's up to Ethan to stop her. It might seem an impossible task, but Ethan has secrets of his own. Dark secrets.

Before the night is over, blood will be shed, and only one man—or monster—will survive.

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Cult of the Black Jaguar

JG Faherty

Dedication

To my wife, Andrea, and to my parents and friends for all their continued support...

To my sharp-eyed beta readers, new and old: Rena Mason, Patrick Freivald, Erinn Kemper, Peter Salomon, Stephen Owen, and Chantal Noordeloos...

To the staff at Samhain, especially Don D'Auria, for believing in my stories and making them better through their suggestions and covers...

And to all the people who support me and other writers by buying our books...

Thank you!

Cult of the Black Jaguar

Ethan Foster smiled as a tortured, undulating wail shattered the relative stillness of the sultry jungle night. On the other side of the fire, Elton Harrison's cup fell from his hands, spilling hot coffee onto his boots.

"Bloody hell! What was that?" Harrison stared into the darkness, his eyes wide.

"Jaguar." Hector Veracruz nonchalantly tossed another branch into the crackling campfire.

"Jaguar? It sounded like someone being murdered." Harrison mopped a thin, shaking hand ineffectively at his pant cuffs.

"*Balam*," whispered Popi from the smaller fire he and his brother, Luz, had made for themselves off to one side of the main group. Ethan wasn't used to having porters sit separately on his expeditions, but he figured it was their choice if they wanted to be anti-social.

"Eh? What?" asked Harrison.

Ethan, who'd been humming the latest song by Glenn Miller, put down the long-barreled, pearl-handled Colt .45 he'd been cleaning and wiped his long fingers on the front of his pants, leaving streaks of oil that quickly blended into the myriad stains on the fabric.

"*Balam* is Mayan for jaguar," he informed the expedition's diminutive physician. Lighting one of the foul-smelling black cheroots he preferred to cigarettes, Ethan continued his explanation, the cigar bobbing between his lips as he spoke.

"The Mayans revered the jaguar the way the Egyptians worshipped the sun, or that big dog-headed thing that guarded their temples."

"Anubis."

At the sound of Dr. Jennifer Pascal's voice, Ethan paused so he could watch her emerge from the tent she was sharing with her father. His body instantly responded to her presence, the same way it always did when she was near.

As the only woman in a months-long expedition comprised of eight people, it was inevitable that all eyes would follow her every move in camp, but even if they'd been in the middle of Manhattan, Jenny Pascal would command the interest of every man around her. Like a glowing light calling to love-starved moths, she couldn't help drawing attention to herself.

Completely unaware of the effect her presence had on the rest of the party, she reached back with both hands and untied her hair from its usual ponytail. Long, curling waves of flaming red cascaded around her thin shoulders like molten lava flowing down a hillside. In the fire's light, each strand glowed as bright as the embers themselves.

Ethan felt his heart come to life, his pulse speeding up and thumping like war drums in his veins. During the day, her field vest and pack had done an adequate job of hiding her womanly assets, but now her plain t-shirt and hiking shorts accentuated her pinup-girl figure to its fullest.

The tall, sandy-haired guide smiled to himself as he noticed the way the other men, even the native help, stared at her. Most guides believed bringing a woman on an expedition was bad luck. And he had seen instances where that was the case; a woman could be a dangerous distraction in the field. As far as Ethan was concerned, though, if you had to have a woman in your camp, you could do a lot worse than Jenny Pascal, with her long, toned legs and innocent, Midwestern girl-next-door looks.

Of course, if the girl next door happened to be a double-Ph.D. and an expert on ancient Central American civilizations, like Jenny, then you were doubly lucky.

Taking a seat by the fire, Jenny continued her impromptu lecture. "The Mayans held great reverence for the jaguar. Jaguar spirits, called *balamobs*, guarded the people from harm."

The tent flaps opened again and Dr. Heathcliff Pascal, senior archeologist of the expedition and one of the world's greatest authorities on paleo-Indian civilizations, emerged to join his daughter. The gray-haired historian might as well have been invisible for all the notice anyone paid him. Jenny Pascal's beauty held peoples' attention with its own mystical gravitational field, allowing nothing to escape. Only Jenny paid him any mind, scooting over so he could take a seat next to her.

The two-week hike through the jungles of Guatemala had left Heathcliff tired and weak. But Jenny had a way of energizing him. She always had. His eyes took on a hint of their old energy as he sat down.

"The jaguar played a very important role in the city we're searching for." Jenny's normally soft voice became stronger, more animated, whenever she spoke about the subject most dear to her heart. Her eyes, green as summer grass, reflected the red flames as if they were windows to the burning passion inside her.

Unfortunately, Ethan reminded himself, that passion was for history.

"The cult of the Black Jaguar began in this area around five hundred A.D., and *Ah Puch*,

the City of the Dead, remained as its capital throughout its entire reign."

"Quite right, my dear," said the elder Pascal. He removed the battered straw hat he habitually wore in the field, a gift from Ethan many years and many expeditions ago, and fanned himself. Sweat stains created dark swaths under his arms and across his back, but he gave no indication of discomfort.

"And this Ah Puch is where we're supposed to find the Temple of Blood?" Harrison asked.

"Yes. For the Cult of the Black Jaguar, the *Temple de Sangre* was the focal point for their most sacred religious ceremonies. Including," Heathcliff added, "their blood sacrifices, which continued until the Spaniards wiped them out four hundred-odd years ago."

"Ah, yes. Cutting out the hearts and whatnot. Good thing that's done with."

Hector directed an angry glare at the doctor.

"Do not be so sure, Señor Harrison. The people of my village still fear the Temple de Sangre."

"Surely you don't believe that superstitious muck?" Harrison shook his head, a condescending smile spreading under his pencil-thin mustache.

"I do not disbelieve, Dr. Harrison. There are many tales of the *Balamob*, the Jaguar God. Tales of great cities hidden in the jungle, where the priests and priestesses are able to turn into jaguars. Places," he said, his dark eyes matching his serious tone, "where curious men and women disappear forever."

"Hmph." Harrison sipped at his cup, which Ethan suspected held more than just coffee. Not that it mattered. As long as the doctor could shoulder his pack in the morning and keep up, he could drink whatever he wanted. "Well, I for one…"

Another ululating scream sounded from the depths of the jungle, cutting short the latest in Harrison's unending string of pompous remarks. In the humid, dense air and near-impenetrable tropical forest, it was impossible to tell which direction the wail originated from.

"*Balamob!*" Luz, a short, thin local with coal-black hair and eyes, crossed himself in Christian fashion. Popi, who looked so much like his brother they could have passed for twins, swiftly repeated the gesture.

Ethan rose to his feet, gun in hand, as a third high-pitched cry, this one much closer, filled the air. Veracruz stood up also.

"What's wrong, Ethan? I didn't think jaguars would attack the camp." Heathcliff Pascal closed the notebook he'd been writing in.

"That wasn't a jaguar," Ethan said in a curt voice. He peered into darkness, wishing the presence of the others didn't limit his options for ensuring their safety. If it was just him and Heathcliff…

"Then what…oh!" Jenny Pascal's hand flew to her mouth. "Mr. Amos is still out there!"

Ethan nodded. "Hector, come with me. The rest of you stay here."

Veracruz was still reaching for his rifle when they heard a loud noise, as if something heavy moved within the ropey tangle of vines and trees surrounding the camp, just past the light thrown by the fires.

Ethan swung around, pistol out and aimed towards the sound, finger ready on the trigger, just in time to see Rory Amos, clothes torn and sweat-soaked blond hair plastered wildly across his head, burst from the trees.

"It's coming! Right behind me!"

Ethan Foster grabbed Rory Amos's arm just before the other man collapsed to the ground.

"Rory! What's going on? Who's coming?" Ethan held tight to his assistant, nearly pulling him into an embrace to keep the shaking man on his feet.

Sweat and spittle flew from Amos's lips as he gasped out his words. "I don't know. Something's out there. Something big. I couldn't see it clearly, but it's fast. Some kind of animal. Pacing me." He bent over, fighting to draw air into his oxygen-starved lungs.

A deep, gut-wrenching howl shook the night and scattered birds from their roosts. The clatter of wings and the raucous cries of startled jungle denizens added to the confusion.

"*Balamob!*" Popi pointed into the blackness.

For one brief moment, firelight reflected on ghostly yellow-green eyes. Then they were gone.

"Not a god, but a jaguar for sure," Ethan said.

Gun raised and ready, he advanced towards the place where they'd seen the animal, only to find his way blocked by Jenny Pascal, her fists on her hips and her cheeks flushed with anger. She stared up at him with a defiant glare.

"Ethan Foster! You can't possibly be thinking about shooting some poor animal?"

Ethan raised an eyebrow at the woman he'd known since the day she was born.

"*Doctor* Pascal, you better believe I'm thinking about it. Your father hired me to get you through the jungle safely, and I'm—"

He stopped speaking and threw himself onto her, knocking the young professor to the ground a split-second before a giant black form speared through the space where they'd

been standing.

Ethan rolled halfway off her and fired his Colt just as the jungle cat landed. His first shot caught the animal in the meaty part of one back leg. With an ear-piercing shriek, the ferocious beast tumbled awkwardly onto its side, rolled over, and then got to its feet. A low, raspy snarl came from its throat as it prepared to leap once more.

Ethan rose to one knee and took careful aim. His pistol roared again and the enormous feline crumpled to the ground, a gaping hole at the base of its neck. It shuddered once before exhaling a final, long breath.

The smell of hot, fresh blood teased Ethan's nose in waves of copper and death. His belly growled in reaction.

Hands clutched his arm and two soft mounds of womanly flesh pressed against his back, distracting him from a dangerous path. Jenny's scent, a combination of sweat, woman and shampoo, wafted over his shoulder and pushed aside the odors of the dead beast.

"You saved my life," she whispered into his ear. Her breath caressed the flesh of his neck and made the tiny hairs there stand on end.

Ethan turned his head and found himself staring directly into large, emerald eyes that were partly closed. The barest hint of a smile tilted up the corners of her full, pink lips.

He leaned in for the kiss that was due him, a kiss years in the making, his body already responding to hers.

"Jenny, come see this. Ethan has shot a melanistic jaguar. A magnificent beast, well over one hundred kilograms."

"Oh! We must get pictures!" The gentle pressure of Jenny's hand on Ethan's broad chest grew firmer and then disappeared as she pushed away from him and hurried to her father's side.

Damn Heathcliff Pascal for bringing his daughter!

Ethan clenched his jaw and stayed on his knees for moment, getting control of his emotions, before rising to his feet.

This is why you don't have women on expeditions.

Jenny caught the movement, gave him a distracted smile before returning to her inspection of the carcass.

"No doubt this is where the legends of the jaguar cult originated."

"Quite so," Heathcliff replied.

With a sigh, Ethan removed two bullets from his vest pocket. He was chambering them into the revolver when Hector Veracruz sidled up to him.

"We should leave now. Before something else attacks." The guide's coal-black eyes darted back and forth, scanning the jungle.

Ethan shook his head. "It's too late. We can't travel in the dark. We'll post guards and break camp at first light. Besides, a jaguar attack is a rare occurrence."

"The legends say different," Veracruz said.

"Yes, I've heard the stories of the *Gente de Jaguar,* the people of the jaguar who live deep in the jungle." Ethan checked the gun once more and then flipped the cylinder closed.

"Do not forget what else the legends say, Mr. Foster. About the high priests and priestesses who turn themselves into jaguars and protect Ah Puch."

"We've got similar tales back home." Ethan pointed his gun's seven-inch barrel at the cat and gave a short laugh. "I guess a high priest is no match for a forty-five."

"Do not be so sure." Veracruz moved off, still restless and alert.

"What was that about?" Rory Amos asked as he joined Foster.

"Hector's superstitions are showing." Ethan's steel-blue eyes stared past the shorter man, watching for the slightest movement in the darkness. "But we should still be on guard. I'll take first watch with Popi and Luz. You and Hector will have second watch."

"What about Harrison? We could split the watch three ways if we include him."

"Harrison?" Ethan let loose a derisive snort. "I'd sooner trust the Pascals with guns than that pompous ass."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Jenny could probably hold her own, but her father? He'd be lucky if he didn't shoot off his own foot."

Ethan tilted his head towards the bearded professor, busy taking notes as he examined the dead jaguar. "Don't be too sure, Rory. I've been on a lot of expeditions with Heathcliff. We've had some hair-raising times together over the years."

"Really? I can't see him as the adventurous type."

Ethan smiled, a small, wistful grin. "He wasn't always an old man like this. I remember once, back in twenty-three, we ran into some trouble in Egypt while we were excavating an unknown pyramid. Ended up surrounded by a group of desert bandits who wanted our supplies and our lives, and not necessarily in that order. Heathcliff took out three of them with his rifle and then started a stampede of camels to hide our escape."

Amos frowned in confusion. "Twenty-three? That would have made you, what, thirteen?"

"What? No. I meant I was twenty-three when it happened. Thirty-three was the year." Ethan slid his Colt back into the worn leather holster under his left arm, cursing himself for

his slip of the tongue. Sometimes keeping secrets was harder than the most grueling hike.

"C'mon, let's get everyone into their tents for the night."

Ethan had the team up and the camp broken before the first hint of dawn lightened the sky.

"How much farther to Ah Puch?" he asked Veracruz, as everyone shouldered their packs.

The wiry native, who'd been sullen and uncommunicative since the jaguar attack, squinted in concentration. "We are very close. Before nightfall for sure."

"Hear that, folks? Tonight we dine in the lost city."

"After what happened last night I thought you would want to go back."

"Go back? Not a chance. Get your men ready. I want to be on the trail in ten."

Veracruz gave him a curt nod and pulled Popi and Luz aside. He spoke to them sternly in their native tongue, a rapid mixture of Spanish and Mayan of which Ethan only caught a few words. The two porters grabbed rifles and machetes and made their way swiftly into the jungle.

"Where are they going?"

"I have sent them ahead to clear the path for us and look for signs of jaguars," Veracruz said. "They will meet us at Ah Puch."

"Sounds like an excellent idea." Harrison let his pack slide from his narrow shoulders and lit up a cigarette. "Let's give them a chance to cut some of the bloody plant life away. We'll make much better time."

Ethan started to object, until he noticed the way Heathcliff Pascal's face was already turning an alarming shade of red just from lifting his backpack.

"All right, we'll wait an hour before bugging out." He set his own pack down and pulled a cheroot from his breast pocket. Trailing ghostly streams of odiferous smoke behind him, he casually made his way over to Heathcliff's side.

"How are you feeling, old man?" Ethan gave him a smile to take the sting out of his comment.

"I've been better." Pascal mopped at his face with a handkerchief already soaking wet with perspiration and stained the same black as the jungle soil.

The professor's statement caught Ethan by surprise.

"I've never heard you admit to not feeling well. Not even that time you came down with malaria in the Congo."

Pascal sighed. "It's the heat," he said, shifting the handkerchief to his neck.

Ethan shook his head. "Don't give me that. You've spent more than half your life in jungles and deserts. Trekked for days in conditions a lot worse than this."

Heathcliff looked across camp, where Jenny was busy writing in her field notebook, her eyes squinted comically as she concentrated on her work, oblivious to the cloud of bloodsucking insects surrounding her.

"Don't say anything to her, Ethan. But it's my heart. The medicine's not working as well as it used to. I'm afraid this is my final journey. When we get home, I'll be relegated to a teaching position."

"What?" The professor's words stabbed Ethan's heart. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Heathcliff grinned at him, and for a moment he looked like a jolly caricature of Saint Nick, with his red face and white beard. All he needed to complete the image were the round glasses, which Ethan knew were tucked into one of his many pockets.

"And have you talk me out of my last big adventure? Not a chance."

"There are alternatives to the medicine."

Ethan's words, and the unspoken request behind them, drew the same response they always did, a shake of the professor's head and a rueful smile.

"No, my old friend. I won't be taking that road. One life is enough. But I thank you for the offer."

Ethan forced a smile in return, even though his heart felt gripped by steel-cold grief.

"Stubborn to the end. Okay, I'll keep my mouth shut. On one condition," he added, holding up a finger. "You let me carry some of you gear in my pack."

"Agreed."

Ethan watched as the old man got up and joined his daughter. Jenny's face beamed with happiness, the way it always did whenever she and her father got to work together.

Ethan let out a slow breath. He wondered if she brought the same fervor to the bedroom as she did to her work.

Stop dreaming, he told himself. *To her you'll always just be an uncle, or a friend. And that's the way it should be.*

He stubbed out his cigar, grinding it into the ground with his boot until only shreds remained.

Much like his heart felt.

Heathcliff Pascal stumbled again on the rough trail. He barely managed to keep his balance by grabbing Ethan's shoulder with a shaky, liver-spotted hand.

"Thank you," he gasped, as Ethan steadied him. His face was red and blotchy. Rivulets of sweat gouged deep tracks as they carved their way through the accumulation of dirt and dead insects on his neck.

With the revelation of the professor's health condition still fresh in his mind, Ethan decided to call a rest stop, even though they'd only been walking for two hours since lunch.

"Okay, everyone, ten-minute break before we finish the last leg to the city."

Even with a trail cut for them by Popi and Luz, the expedition team had found the going tough. Hidden roots waited to trip the unwary foot, and hanging vegetation clutched at faces and arms. Thorns and razor-sharp leaves nicked and cut, drawing drops of blood that in turn attracted even more flies and mosquitoes than usual. Veracruz fared a little better than the others thanks to his smaller stature, and Ethan's years of experience helped him avoid the majority of botanical obstacles. But Heathcliff, Harrison and Jenny were gasping for air as they slid out of their packs and sat down.

"Christ, how much further is this lost city?" Rory Amos took a long drink from his canteen and then splashed some water on his handkerchief and placed it over his head to cool himself. He'd been chaperoning Elton Harrison, who'd kept up a running litany of complaints about the hike, the country and the Mayans in general for not living closer to civilization.

"The Mayans typically maintained large territories," Jenny said, wiping her face and neck with a blue bandana. Sweat soaked her tan shirt, molding it to her body in a manner that left nothing to the imagination. Her flushed cheeks, together with the damp locks of flaming copper hair that hung down across her forehead, provided Ethan with a vivid picture of how she would look under more pleasant—but no less exhausting—circumstances.

He forced himself to glance away as his lust rose again. Even then, the image stayed with him. He remembered the feel of her chest against him the previous night, with only two thin layers of cotton separating their flesh.

A hacking cough brought his attention back from his unwanted carnal thoughts.

"Are you all right, Father?" Jenny patted Heathcliff's back.

"Just tired and hot. I'll be better once we reach Ah Puch."

"Well, then, let's not sit here on our bums wasting time. The sooner we reach this fabled city of yours the sooner we can set up a proper camp and rest our feet." Harrison's legs bowed a little as he shouldered his pack, but he managed to stay upright.

"It is not much farther," Veracruz said. He pointed down the trail and started walking, not bothering to see if anyone followed. His surly, brooding mood had not improved during the long trek, and Ethan found himself wondering why the man would work as a guide if he hated the jungle so much.

With a shrug, Ethan slid his pack onto his shoulders before helping the Jenny and Heathcliff don theirs.

"Onward, ho."

The smile Jenny flashed at him kept him from thinking about the oppressive tropical heat for a good ten minutes.

Half an hour later, Veracruz pushed back a final curtain of hanging branches and stepped aside.

"Ah Puch."

"Good Lord," whispered Heathcliff.

The City of the Dead lived up to its name.

Two stone pillars, carved with intricate reliefs of animal figures, human skulls and demonic faces, marked the entrance to Ah Puch. A snarling jaguar head, fashioned from solid obsidian, sat atop each pillar. Red-jeweled eyes sparkled ferociously in the rising sun.

A broad road, its ancient stone paving blocks overgrown with grasses and vines, stretched forward in front of the expedition team, extending the entire length of the long-lost city. Temples and other buildings rose into the air on both sides of the primitive avenue, some of the massive structures surprisingly intact, others nothing but mossy remains.

Centuries of weather and abandonment had taken their toll on the miracles of prehistoric construction. Crumbling walls spilled stones into the semi-clear areas between the buildings, and the jungle vegetation had re-assumed control of the city, encroaching from all sides and overgrowing what had once been grassy campuses and open fields. Creeping vines and roots crawled across everything, doing their best to obscure the ornate pictographs of birds, serpents, humans and jaguars that decorated all the walls and pillars.

Smaller buildings, little more than rectangular mounds of green after centuries of abandonment, were visible to the left and right, set back from the myriad narrow pathways and side streets.

At the far end of a wide central plaza, a massive pyramid towered over the ancient city. Easily a hundred feet high, it dwarfed the other structures, which in their eroded, broken state appeared to be bowing in worship. Each side of the triangular-shaped edifice was a tall,

narrow staircase. Three hundred sixty-five steps per side, one for each day of the year. The encroaching vines and undergrowth only reached halfway up the sides, giving the edifice the look of a snow-capped mountain. Unlike the ruins around it, the pyramid showed no signs of deterioration.

"Unbelievable," Jenny Pascal said in an awed voice, as they passed between the pillars and entered the long-lost, mythical city. "That pyramid has to be the Temple de Sangre. Father, you've found it!"

"*We've* found it, my dear. I couldn't have done this without you. Without any of you," he added, extending his arms to acknowledge the entire party.

"Congratulations, Heathcliff. Once again you've proved the world wrong. Ah Puch really does exist." Ethan clapped a hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"How come nobody's ever found this place before?" Rory Amos asked as the two anthropologists began photographing the carvings on a nearby wall. He and Ethan helped them by clearing away some of the clinging vegetation. "I mean, a city this size ought to be visible from the air."

"Not many planes fly over this part of the world," Ethan replied. "Besides, it would just blend in with the rest of the jungle. You'd have to be flying low and looking hard in order to make out the buildings."

"Still, that temple sticks out like a sore thumb."

Ethan shrugged. "Maybe no one else had the courage or determination to try to find it."

"Or perhaps those foolish enough to venture into the jungles of the Ah Puch before you ended their lives as sacrifices for the Gods," Veracruz said from nearby. He stood next to a square, single-story building that Jenny theorized was the Ossuary. Detailed reliefs of human skulls covered the outside walls.

"It's where the Mayans housed the bones of their dead."

"Bloody morbid thinking," Harrison commented, taking off his glasses and polishing them with his shirt. "Let's hope the local gods don't like to eat foreigners."

"Oh, but they do, Señor Harrison."

Before anyone could comment on his remark, Veracruz pulled out a large pistol and aimed it at them. "Drop your weapons, please."

Ethan took two quick steps forward, but stopped when the muzzle of the gun swung towards him.

"Mr. Veracruz! What is the meaning of this?" Heathcliff Pascal stood up and glared at the native guide. If the sight of the gun frightened him, he didn't show it.

"My people are the last guardians of Ah Puch. Your blood will feed our Priestess and bring our city back to life."

He fired a shot into the ground near Ethan's feet. The report echoed from building to building before the jungle swallowed it. "Now, drop your weapons or I will be forced to kill one of you."

Ethan clenched his teeth until his jaw ached but he did as the man asked, tossing his custom Colt and military knife to the ground. Rory Amos, eyes flashing with the same anger Ethan was feeling, complied as well. He placed his short-barreled shotgun on the ground and kicked it towards Veracruz. His blade went next to Ethan's.

Veracruz smiled, his narrow eyes and thin mustache turning the gesture into a sardonic grimace.

"Into the Ossuary, please. You will remain there until it is time to feed your bodies to the Jaguar gods."

"I don't think so!" Ethan dove forward and seized Veracruz's wrist, aiming the gun up in the air at the same time. He brought his free hand around in hard haymaker, his fist connecting hard with the point of the traitor's chin.

Veracruz stumbled backwards, dragging the larger man with him. Ethan had a moment to curse his bad luck to be fighting in the daylight, and then the two of them were rolling on the hard, dusty ground, fighting for control of the pistol.

Ethan landed another punch, this time to the midsection. Hector's breath sailed out in a large gasp and Ethan was able to wrest the gun away. He placed the barrel against Veracruz's head.

"I don't know what your game is, Hector, but it's over."

Veracruz coughed as he attempted to fill his lungs with air. "Yes, it is, Señor Foster. You and your people will not leave here alive, no matter what you do to me. Your blood will give the Priestess the strength to bring the Gente de Jaguar back to life."

Ethan hesitated, torn between pulling the trigger or just tying the man up, but before he could decide, the opportunity slipped from his hands.

A sharp pain in his shoulder made him turn around. Popi stood just inside the entrance to the Ossuary, a long blowgun in his hands. Ethan's suddenly numb fingers relinquished their hold on the gun. His legs collapsed under him.

Ambush, he had time to think, as the bright Guatemalan daylight turned gray. *Stupid! I forgot about Popi and Luz.* He tried to stand but his muscles refused to obey. Distant sounds of fighting and shouting registered on his fading consciousness.

Then everything went black and silent.

Ethan. Ethan.

Someone was calling for him in the darkness. Where are you? he shouted, but there was no sound to the words.

Ethan!

He turned, but didn't, because he had no body. The thing he kept caged up inside him, the animal part of him, howled and shrieked, begging to be set free. Ethan told it to go, but it remained trapped, as lost and immobile as he was.

This isn't right. It's dark. Dark means night. Only daylight could—

Ethan!

Closer now, that voice. I know it. I—

"Ethan, wake up. Can you hear me?"

Cool wetness on his forehead accompanied the familiar voice. Ethan Foster opened his eyes. Rory Amos's round face hovered above him, its high forehead creased with worry. Behind him, tiny windows let in just enough light to turn darkness to dusk within the tomblike oven of the Ossuary.

Still daylight. That explains it.

Ethan attempted to raise his head but the movement sent everything spinning in rapid circles. He closed his eyes and groaned as nausea gripped his stomach.

"He's coming out of it," Rory's voice moved away. Another took its place.

"Mr. Foster. Drink some of this juice. It will help you feel better." He knew those nasal tones.

"Harrison?" Even to his own ears, his voice was barely more than a croaking whisper.

"Right the first time, old sport. Now drink. Doctor's orders."

A shadow fell across him and warm liquid dribbled into his mouth. Sour-sweet fruit juice of some kind. Not what he needed. His already churning stomach protested the insult. He doubled over, spitting the nectar onto the ground. Dry heaves and cramps racked his body for several minutes afterwards.

After the episode passed, taking with it the worst of his symptoms, he was able to sit up and open his eyes. His hand moved to his shoulder.

"If you're looking for the dart that did you in, don't bother, I already removed it,"

Harrison said.

Ethan held up a shaky arm and Amos grabbed it, helping him to his feet. "Good to have you back, boss. You've been out cold for a while."

"It feels like I just came off a two-week bender." Ethan rubbed his forehead while he waited for the world to stop doing lazy circles around him. "Jesus, what the hell did they shoot me with?"

Harrison thrust the wooden cup of juice at him again, but Ethan pushed it away. Even the smell was nauseating.

"Some kind of local toxin, probably a curare derivative," the English doctor said. "Lucky for you they want us alive. Some of those Indian poisons can kill a man in under a minute. Veracruz left the juice, said it would wash out the poison. He also left our canteens."

"Is everyone else all right?" Ethan glanced around the stone-walled room and took a quick headcount. Their party was all there.

Most importantly, Jenny was there, sitting beside her father. Both of them looked exhausted. Jenny started to rise, but Ethan motioned for her to stay with Heathcliff.

"Bruised and sore, but no broken bones." Amos shrugged. "There was a bit of a tussle after you went down. Luz and Popi were hiding in buildings to either side of us. A classic trap. We put up a good fight, but in the end the professor told us to surrender."

The younger man's tones indicated his distaste with the decision.

"Better to be prisoners than dead." Heathcliff reclined against one ancient wall. Jenny patted his hand and held a canteen at the ready.

"You made the right decision," Ethan agreed. He looked down at his wrist, but his watch was gone. Peering out of the small, square windows lining the walls he saw the sun still had a ways to go before it set. "It looks like late afternoon, maybe four or five o'clock. What've you been up to while I was out?"

"Cooling our heels and conserving our strength, mostly." Amos waved his hand at the room. "They took everything we had; belts, watches, pocket knives. And our packs, of course."

"What about the door?"

"It won't budge. They've got it braced from the outside. And the windows are too small for even Jenny or Harrison to fit through."

Amos scuffed his boot against the dry earth. "Sorry, boss. I wish I had better news."

"Not your fault, Rory. There was no way to know Hector and his men were crazy. We'll just have to be ready for any opportunity to escape."

He turned and faced the others, cleared his throat to get their attention. "I don't intend for—" He stopped at the sound of voices from outside. A moment later the door opened, filling the dim quarters with golden, late afternoon sunlight.

Ethan's long-barreled Colt held out in front of him, Veracruz entered the prison. Popi and Luz followed close behind, rifles at the ready.

Veracruz pointed at Jenny. "It is time to prepare for the ceremony. You will accompany us to the temple, where you will be cleansed before the sacrifice. The rest of you will stay here until your blood is needed."

"No!" Ethan lunged at Popi. Two punches to the stomach doubled the man over and knocked the gun from his hands, but the guide surprised Ethan by drawing a thin, obsidian-bladed knife and slashing across Ethan's midsection. The stone blade, sharp as German steel, sliced through Ethan's field vest and flayed open the flesh along his ribs.

Ethan cried out in agony and fell backwards, hands over the bloody gash. He tried to get up, but a heavy boot caught him in the chest, knocking the wind from him. Arrows of pain shot outwards from the knife wound.

Ethan caught glimpses of feet and fists as the expedition team once more exchanged blows with the natives. Even Harrison seemed to be putting up a fight.

"Father!" Jenny's voice rose above the general din. Veracruz had her by one arm and was dragging her away from Heathcliff's side. The white-haired historian lay on the ground, gasping for air.

"Enough! Stop or the girl dies!" Hector had his gun to her head.

"You're going to kill us anyway." Ethan spat out the words through clenched teeth.

"Then perhaps I will merely wound her." He moved the gun down to her stomach. "She can spend her last hours in agony, because of you."

"No." Ethan couldn't risk something happening to Jenny. They'd have to find another way to stop whatever madness Hector had planned. He held up a hand.

"All right. Everybody stop."

Popi and Luz pushed Amos against the far wall next to Elton Harrison, who sported a bloody nose.

Hector passed Jenny over to his men and then trained his gun on the other expedition members. Jenny struggled violently to free herself until Luz slapped her across the face. Ethan wanted to shout as her eyes went glassy and she slumped forward in their grasp, but the pain in his midsection prevented him from taking a deep enough breath. A laughing Popi tore her khaki shirt open, exposing her bra and bare midriff. He pulled the shirt down

to her wrists and bound them behind her back with it.

Ethan felt the blood rush to his face as the two men hauled Jenny towards the door. Her copper hair was mussed and dirty, and streaks of gritty soil showed on her chest and back. The delicate material of her bra did little to hide her bare flesh, and Popi made sure his hands groped her as he pulled her along. Ethan dug his fingers into the hard-packed earth. Despite her condition—or perhaps because of it—Jenny had a wild beauty about her, and he feared what would happen to her once Hector's men got her alone somewhere.

"Enjoy your last hours, my friends." Veracruz smiled at them. "Soon the setting sun will call our Priestess from her slumber."

The door slammed shut, and the heavy sound of wood-on-wood indicated the brace had been set as well.

"Damn you, Veracruz!" Ethan pounded a fist against the ground, ignoring the throbbing across his ribcage. His body craved one of his cheroots, and darker things as well. His hands wanted only to be around Hector's neck.

"Boss, you okay?" Amos knelt down beside him, tried to pull Foster's hand from his wound.

"I'm fine," Ethan said, turning away and forcing his body to sit up. It took a greater effort than he expected, but he didn't stop. He knew he only had to deal with the pain until nightfall.

"Then you better take a look at Professor Pascal. He's in pretty bad shape."

Concern for Heathcliff spurred Ethan to push himself to his feet and stagger across the chamber.

"He's not breathing well," Harrison said.

Ethan lowered himself down next to his old friend. The professor's bearded face seemed to have aged years over the past few hours. His normally ruddy complexion had gone pale. Sickly dark smudges stained the flesh under his eyes, and his lips had a bluish tint to them. It alarmed Ethan that despite the intense heat in the Ossuary, the professor was no longer sweating.

The sound of Pascal's breathing reminded Ethan of a fat man trying to climb a long set of stairs. It wasn't a sound he'd ever heard Heathcliff Pascal make, not even after the longest of grueling jungle hikes.

"Heathcliff, can you hear me?" Ethan patted one of the professor's cheeks.

Blue eyes, uncharacteristically dull and faded, opened. "Ethan, my boy. They have Jenny. I tried to stop them…" Pascal paused to draw in a shaky breath. A tear rolled down

his ashen cheek. "I tried…but I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Don't worry. We'll get her back. In the meantime, you rest. You'll need your strength later. Can you tell me where you're hurt?"

Ashen lips turned up at the corners, a ghost of the historian's normally ebullient smile. "Not my bones, Ethan. It's my heart. They took my pack with my medicine. All this excitement…" He paused again. Ethan interrupted him before he could continue.

"I understand. Sit still. I'll get you something to drink. It will make you feel better."

Ethan patted the man on the arm. Holding back a groan, he stood up and motioned for Harrison to give the professor a cup of juice. Grim thoughts circled like buzzards in his head as he watched the professor sip carefully at the sweet liquid.

My only friend in the world is dying. And I'm helpless to stop it.

He'd served as mission planner, senior guide and security guard for more of Heathcliff Pascal's excursions than he could count. Ever since the professor had found him in Italy, locked in an underground tomb and facing an eternity-long slide into insanity. From that moment on, they'd been inseparable.

South America, Mexico, Egypt. Even Mongolia, where they'd run across one of Roy Chapman Andrews' fossil-hunting expeditions. They'd spent a wild three days excavating the bones of prehistoric animals, all the while keeping a wary eye out for the bands of marauders rumored to be roaming the area.

Now, after more than thirty years together, the great explorer was in danger of losing his life because the crazy last members of an ancient cult had stolen his medicine. Ethan silently cursed the Gods who thought it entertaining to bring people together only to tear them apart again.

"We have to get his pack," he told Amos. "He won't last long without his pills."

"Forget about me. Save Jenny." The professor's voice was little more than a choking whisper.

Jenny. If you don't get out of this, you'll lose them both.

"We will. Nobody's dying, not today."

Ethan stared out one of the tiny windows. The Temple de Sangre rose above the other buildings, a monument to blood and death.

Ethan refused to picture Jenny laid out on the altar at the top, her life draining out onto the stones.

"I'll save you. I promise," he whispered.

Ethan did his best to use the time until sunset to their advantage. He moved from window to window, memorizing as much of the city's layout as he could. He went over different escape options with Rory Amos and Elton Harrison. And he made periodic checks on Heathcliff Pascal's condition.

The native remedy seemed to have revived the old man somewhat. His breathing was no longer as labored, and he'd even managed to sit up on his own. But his face still remained drained of color, and his skin had gone cold and clammy. By unspoken agreement, all three men were letting Pascal have their shares of water and juice.

The minutes dragged on in the oven-like temperature of their prison. Eventually, however, the light reaching them through the windows began to change. First darker yellow, then orange, then blood-red. Tropical sunsets passed quickly, and as soon as he noticed the lengthening shadows, Ethan roused the others.

When the three natives came for them, Ethan had everyone on their feet and waiting. His plan was to rush their enemy at the door. His wound wasn't healed yet, but it had stopped bleeding, which was the best he could hope for under the circumstances.

The long, cold barrel of a shotgun stopped Ethan before he could take a single step. Veracruz sneered at them.

"You think I am stupid, Señor Foster?" He motioned with the gun. "Please come outside. One of you at a time. No tricks. You can meet the Priestess on your own two feet," he smiled, "or we can drag you to her on bloody stumps."

Ethan glanced back at Amos. "Do as he says." He stepped through the door, arms raised. Luz and Popi stood outside, both armed with pistols. Ethan's hopes sank further. Attempting an escape at that point would be pointless; they'd all end up dead. Their only hope now would be if one or more of the guards got distracted on the march towards the temple.

With the coming of night, Ah Puch took on an entirely different atmosphere, no longer an abandoned city but a supernatural metropolis filled with the ghosts of dead priests and their rabid cult of followers. Pots of flaming oil lined the wide main avenue, creating shadows that danced and threatened the procession of outsiders. In the jungle, jaguars howled and wailed as the men marched towards their appointment with death.

Towering above everything, the Temple de Sangre stood sentinel over its evil domain. Torches blazed around the base of the temple and up the stairs. More flickered at the top of the pyramid, where a square stone chamber with wide windows held the sacrificial altar. Incenses of various types filled the air with pungent odors that masked the smells of rotting

plant life and wet soil emanating from the jungle.

The dark, starry skies and sputtering torchlight brought the ruins to life. Ethan had no trouble picturing how it must have looked hundreds of years in the past, when thousands of men and women would have stood around their foul temple, praying to the Priests and Priestesses as innocent lives were cut short just to appease their abominable gods.

As they walked, Heathcliff Pascal stumbled and Elton Harrison put an arm around him to help keep him upright. Seeing the movement, Popi rush forward and separated them.

"The man is bloody sick, you ignorant savage!" Harrison spat.

Veracruz spoke something in the Mayan tongue and Popi backed away. "He is ill?" Veracruz asked Ethan.

"His heart. He needs his medicine. In his pack. Just one pill—"

"No." Veracruz cut him off. "You are all going to die tonight. What is the point in taking medicine first?"

"You're a real bastard, Hector. I'm going to enjoy killing you." Ethan wished he could be as sure as he sounded. It would be difficult—no, impossible—to do what needed doing without revealing the secret he and Heathcliff had kept for so long.

"Shut up and keep walking!" Veracruz shoved Ethan forward.

Ethan had expected Veracruz to lead them to the top of the pyramid. Instead, the procession halted at the base of the temple. A chorus of yowling jaguar cries rose up from thick tropical forest surrounding Ah Puch.

"Behold, the High Priestess comes."

Hector pointed to the top of the temple and his men raised their gazes to the pyramid's peak. Ethan followed suit, stunned by the revelation that the natives weren't crazy, that someone still occupied the temple and was leading them in the ancient ways.

A figure emerged from the altar chamber and began to descend the stairs. As it drew closer, details became visible to Ethan. A woman, cloaked in a long, flowing cape made from black jaguar hide. The beast's head was intact and sat atop the Priestess's own like a crown.

She took each step with regal precision, her lithe legs never slowing or faltering, her bare feet never slipping or missing a step. Ethan had climbed other temples, knew how the steep, narrow stairs could cramp even the strongest of calf muscles. Clearly the Priestess kept herself strong.

But for who?

The Priestess stopped at the bottom of the pyramid, twenty feet from the prisoners. Long, slender arms emerged from under the cape and lifted the animal-head hood back

and away.

Revealing one of the most beautiful women Ethan had ever seen in his life.

The Priestess, who looked no more than eighteen, curled one finger in a slow, languid gesture. Immediately, Popi sprang forward to slide the ebony fur from her shoulders. He bowed and stepped to the side.

Ethan's breath caught in his lungs as he realized she wore almost nothing under the robe.

Long, raven-black hair fell in a straight line down to her waist. It flowed in a midnight waterfall over her naked shoulders, chest, and waist. The effect was at once exciting and chaste, as it covered her while at the same time offering tantalizing glimpses of forbidden flesh.

An ornate skirt-like garment, fashioned from spun gold and decorated with precious stones, went from her waist to just above her knees. The honey-yellow color of the jewels matched the woman's eyes exactly.

The haughty expression on her full lips bespoke of generations of aristocratic lineage, as did her perfect posture and icy demeanor. Seeing her, Ethan knew it wouldn't matter if she stood in front of an ancient temple or a modern skyscraper. In any time, in any place, there could be no mistaking her for anything but royalty.

The dark angel's slender, scantily clad body would normally have been the focus of Ethan's thoughts, but it was her eyes that drew his attention.

Elliptical pupils sat within the almond-shaped, amber orbs. As alien as they were in her human face, they were somehow familiar to him. Then he remembered where he'd seen eyes like that before.

On the jaguar he'd killed the previous night.

The Priestess cast her disdainful gaze towards the prisoners. With a slight motion of one hand, she motioned them forward. Hector and Luz gave them no chance to object, prodding the captives with their rifles.

"I am Ix Chel, Moon Priestess and living body of the Balamob. You have intruded on our lands and angered the Gods." Her surprisingly powerful voice echoed from the surrounding buildings. In contrast to her graceful beauty, her words came out harsh and low, almost a growl.

Ethan cleared his throat, momentarily at a loss for something to say. When no one else spoke, he said the first thing that came to him. "You speak our language well."

"I speak many tongues, as befits a Priestess. For one hundred years I have ruled Ah

Puch. I have learned much in that time."

"You rule an empty city?" Ethan allowed himself a trace of mockery. If he could anger her enough to make her approach him…

The Priestess raised one regal eyebrow, as if she knew exactly what game he was trying to play.

"My duty is to the Gente de Jaguar. Since the night I became queen, I have gathered my strength so that one day I can return them to their glory, to rule this land as my people once did. Now that power is within my grasp. With one last sacrifice, I will bring forth my priests and priestesses, and Ah Puch will live again!"

Heathcliff called out in a thin voice. "What about my daughter?"

Ix Chel stared at Pascal for a long moment before speaking. "You are the historian. I can see you possess a great mind, housed in a weak body. Death already summons you."

She smiled, a wide grin that exposed long, pointed teeth at the corners of her mouth.

"Your bodies will feed the *balamobs*, the jaguar spirits, who will smile on us and bring good fortune. As for your daughter…" Ix Chel turned her head upwards, towards the top of the great pyramid behind her. "See for yourselves. The virgin awaits my blade even now."

The powerful voice grew even louder, the rumbling tones deepening to a feral snarl. She raised her hands upwards in supplication. "Tonight I shall dine on her living heart and her blood will give me strength to free my priests!"

Ethan looked up at the top of the pyramid. Distracted earlier by Ix Chel's lissome descent, he hadn't noticed the second figure in the chamber.

The figure that stood bound and gagged at the wide opening.

Even from a distance, there was no mistaking her identity. Jenny wore only a thin, white robe. The gossamer-sheer material spread out behind her in the evening breeze, held closed by a thin rope around her waist. Her copper hair shimmered like liquid metal pouring over her shoulders. Her eyes were wide and frantic as she looked down at the people below.

"Take them away!" the High Priestess said.

"No! Not my daughter!" Heathcliff pushed past the others and lunged forward.

Hector brought up his gun.

"Professor, no!" Ethan threw his body into the professor without thinking. The roar of the gun and the sledgehammer blow to his chest seemed to happen simultaneously.

Ethan collapsed on the ground. Fire filled his chest. Ix Chel spoke, but he couldn't understand her words. Dark brown arms entered his field of vision. Arms appeared to one side, dragging something into the night. The professor? Was he dead as well? Ethan looked

up, saw the feline eyes of Ix Chel hovering over him.

In the erratic light of the torches, her face seemed to grow longer, her eyes more golden. As if she was becoming something else.

Something not quite human.

Then his strength failed him and his head fell to the side.

More words reached him, as if from a great distance. Heathcliff, his old friend, shouting. "You can stop this, Ethan. It's not too late."

His head filled with a buzzing, as if a thousand bees filled his skull. Thoughts misfired, struggled for coherence.

Heathcliff? No, you're dead.

Stop it? Stop what?

They have Jenny.

There was nothing he could do. No more miracles. He'd looked inside himself for the courage to face his fear of revealing his true self, but it wasn't there. Where once had beaten the heart of a warrior now only indecision remained, pushing weak, timid blood through his veins.

"She loves you, Ethan. She told me. She always has."

Heathcliff's voice again. Or was he dreaming?

Dimly, he was aware of his body moving across sharp stones.

It didn't matter. It was over. He was dying, and it was too late to change that. Soon he'd join the professor, together in death as in life.

Images came to life inside his brain. Jenny sitting by the fire, her voluptuous body outlined against the tents. Jenny atop the pyramid, flashes of pale flesh and forbidden treasure showing when the wind tossed back her white garment.

Jenny, lying underneath him, clothes and flesh torn to pieces, her beautiful face covered in her own blood.

No! That could never happen. He wouldn't allow it. That's why he'd never let himself… let the beast…

More rocks scraped against his back. He forced his eyes open. Popi and Luz stood in front of him, hands gripping is arms, preparing to lift his body. He turned his head, and through a haze of pain recognized the black hole behind him.

A *cenote*, an ancient Mayan well.

"Do it." Hector Veracruz's voice.

The hands pulled and pushed. His body teetered at the edge of the *cenote*. Ethan closed

his eyes again. A final push, then peaceful oblivion. All his pain and sorrow would be gone.

There's still time to make the right decision. This time he knew the thought was his own, even if it sounded like the professor's voice. As always, the professor served as his conscience, his moral compass.

Damn you, Heathcliff!

With his last ounces of strength, he clutched at Popi's shirt just as the two guards let him go, and together they toppled into the blackness.

Free…

Rory Amos watched in horror as the two men disappeared into the *cenote*'s opening. Popi's wordless scream echoed up from of the ancient tunnel and then stopped, cut off by death or distance. Not that it mattered. *Cenotes* could be hundreds of feet deep, and usually led to underground lakes or rivers that eventually fed into the ocean. There was no surviving a drop like that.

"Watch the others!" Veracruz shouted to Luz. He ran to the edge of the *cenote* and peered into the Stygian darkness.

"That's the way, Ethan," Rory said, anger and sorrow filling his voice. "At least you took one of the bastards with you."

Despair washed over him in a black wave. Ethan was gone. The professor was somewhere inside the temple, dragged there by Ix Chel herself, most likely for some sadistic ritual.

That left him and Elton Harrison, and it didn't look good for them, waiting their turn to be thrown into the bottomless well.

Veracruz let out a short exclamation of fear and stepped back from the opening. Dark spatters of liquid ran down the man's face, and a larger stain stood out on his green shirt. Something flew out of the hole and bounced off the stone wall surrounding the *cenote*. It took Rory a moment to recognize the object, and even then he couldn't believe it.

Popi's head?

A bellow of pure rage sounded within the *cenote*. The insensate anger in the long, drawn-out cry brought terrified howls from the jaguars in the jungle.

A figure emerged from the pit, flying upwards into the night sky. Wide, leathery wings blotted the stars as the creature banked and turned back towards the gathered humans.

"Good Lord!" Harrison fell down and threw his arms over his head.

Hector Veracruz's shotgun roared once, twice. The smaller, sharper reports of Luz's pistol followed, both men trying futilely to aim at the swooping, soaring figure overhead.

There was a pause while the two men reloaded. In that instant, the dark figure landed in front of Luz. Muscular arms, covered in lizard-like scales, shot out and long, curved talons stabbed into the man's neck and chest. The snarling beast pulled him forward to where a gaping mouth full of triangular teeth waited.

Luz had time to utter a single bleat of terror before monstrous jaws closed on his neck and tore it away. Blood spurted in all directions. It splashed across Hector Veracruz's face, and he dropped the shotgun to wipe frantically at his eyes with both hands.

The creature tossed Luz's corpse to the side, and Amos was finally able to get a good look at it.

It stood well over six feet tall, on powerfully built legs. Under the tattered remnants of a tan safari shirt and pants, its chest was broad and hairless. A fine patina of scales covered the entire body, reflecting the torchlight in a myriad of tiny starbursts.

On top of the thick neck sat a head with a massive, broad snout like a bear's. Tall, pointed ears rose up on either side of its head. Its eyes burned red as coals, aflame with a malevolent hate that turned Rory's legs to rubber.

Veracruz fell to his hands and knees. He scuttled backwards, shouting "Diablo! Diablo!"

The demonic presence looked past the jaguar cultist and spoke, its rough voice thick and clotted with Luz's blood, its words bent into strange shapes from being forced out of an inhuman mouth.

"Rory, go back to the temple. Find the professor and Jenny. I'll take care of Ix Chel."

The creature grabbed Veracruz with one clawed hand, unfurled its wings, and rose swiftly into the air.

"Did you hear…those clothes…it's not possible." Harrison grabbed at the wall of the *cenote* to support himself, still staring in the direction where the monster had disappeared.

"We've seen a lot tonight that isn't possible. Whatever, *whoever*, that thing was, it had the right idea. We've got to save Jenny and the professor."

"The professor's dead! And so is Jenny." Harrison's voice trembled with a note of hysteria. "What we've got to do is get the hell out of here before…that thing comes back for us."

Rory wrapped two fists in the scientist's shirt and hauled him forward. "You can either come with me or stay here. But I'm not giving up yet."

He let go of Harrison. Although the *cenote* lay at the far edge of the city, he could still see the Temple de Sangre rising above the other ruins. Fires burned at the top, a deadly beacon in the darkness.

As he ran through the ancient streets, he prayed he wouldn't have to be the one to tell

the winged demon the professor was dead.

At the temple's peak, Ethan found himself in a scene from Guatemala's barbaric past. Jenny lay unconscious on a stone altar, her hands and feet tied to iron spikes set into the solid rock.

Signs of a struggle were evident. Scratches marred her porcelain skin and her robe was in tatters. Her hair, its fiery color enhanced by the blazing torches, spread out beneath her head like a fan of spun bronze.

Ix Chel stood with her back to Ethan, chanting a prayer to her foul gods. Her raised hands clutched an obsidian blade that appeared blood-red as it reflected the light of the fires.

Ethan leaped from the window ledge onto the Priestess's back, knocking her away from the altar. He'd expected his attack to stun the woman, but she twisted underneath him and brought the blade up and into his stomach.

It wasn't a disabling blow, but the pain was enough to wring a cry from him as he rolled away from her.

He quickly rose to his feet, the wound already closing, only to find himself facing a different enemy.

The diminutive teenager with the beautiful face was gone. In her place was a beast half jaguar and half human, with a flattened muzzle where her nose and mouth once were.

Ebony fur covered her entire body. Although she stood on her hind legs, her knees and ankles held a feline, not human, shape, lending a pronounced crouch to her posture. Her hands and feet were now tremendous paws, each digit longer than a man's finger and tipped with a wicked-looking claw as sharp as any blade.

Her chest still bore the rounded outline of a woman's figure, but now twin lines of teats poked through the fur of her belly. A long, twitching tail extended behind her.

In the cat-like visage of her metamorphosed face, her wild, amber eyes finally seemed at home.

"So the legends are true," Ethan growled. He held his hands outwards, ready for the were-jaguar's attack.

Ix Chel's response was a wall-shaking howl as she sprang.

Ethan met her attack, gripping her shoulders with his claws even as her own dagger-like nails gouged his scaly flesh. Her momentum carried them backwards into the altar, and Ethan leaned back, using his leverage to kick out with his legs and send the she-beast across

the chamber. She hit the far wall with a grunt and regained her balance with lightning speed.

A wicked grin spread across her short snout, white fangs standing out against black fur.

As if by some secret signal, the two mythical creatures leaped at each other once more, claws and teeth fighting to inflict damage. Blood flew and animal voices roared.

Behind them, Jenny moaned as consciousness slowly returned.

More than a hundred feet below, Rory Amos and Elton Harrison stared up at the epic battle going on in the altar chamber.

"Jenny's up there. She's still alive." Rory pointed.

"It will take us forever to reach her. I don't think my legs can make it up those stairs."

"Maybe there's another way. Don't these pyramids always have a secret entrance?"

"How should I bloody know? I'm a doctor, not an archeologist." Nevertheless, the two of them circled the temple, looking for any sign of a hidden doorway.

What they found instead was a wide-open entrance set into the rear wall.

"That must be how they got Jenny up there. C'mon!" Rory grabbed a torch and led the way inside.

"Mr. Amos, let's not be hasty. That Veracruz fellow might be somewhere around here…"

"He is." Amos motioned with the torch.

On the floor just past the entrance lay Hector's body. Blood ran from ragged bite marks in his neck and deep furrows carved into his chest, and one arm sat at an unnatural angle.

Harrison brought his own torch down for a closer look, then jumped back when the body opened its eyes.

"Diablo," Veracruz whispered, before falling back into unconsciousness.

"Leave him," Rory said. "We need to get to the top before it's too late."

They moved across the wide chamber, their torches revealing pictographs depicting violent, bloody scenes of battle, jaguars and humans fighting side-by-side against other tribes. The flickering firelight gave the impression of movement and made the brutal carvings come to life. Always in the background of each scene, looming over everything, was the Temple de Sangre.

The two men ducked through an archway and emerged into a smaller chamber. Dark shapes lay strewn about the floor.

"Now what the hell?" Harrison muttered. He bent for a closer look. "Jesus! They're dead bodies. Mummies."

"Forget them, I found the way up," Rory said, motioning towards a staircase carved into

the inside walls of the pyramid.

Unlike the exterior stairs with their narrow, high steps, the interior stairs were of normal dimensions.

The spiraling ascent left them winded and with shaking legs. Rory was the first to emerge into the sacrificial chamber, and then had to duck as two monstrous shapes rolled past him, locked in combat.

"Hurry!" He reached down and helped Harrison from the stairs. They hid behind the altar.

"Now what?" Harrison asked.

Before Amos could answer, the jaguar creature rose up on its hind legs and dove forward, driving the demon into the staircase opening.

Together they fell through, their furious cries diminishing as they tumbled into space.

"Now we untie Jenny and get the hell out of here."

Ix Chel's grip prevented Ethan from unfurling his wings as they plummeted down through the pyramid. With the ground coming up fast, he managed to twist their bodies so he landed to one side instead of beneath her.

Even so, the impact knocked him senseless. He fought the blackness, knowing that if Ix Chel recovered before him, he was finished.

He pulled himself to his knees and fought for breath. Around him lay the mummified bodies of ancient Mayans. He also smelled fresh blood. Hector's.

"Don't kill her."

The hoarse whisper startled Ethan. He looked around the room until he saw Heathcliff Pascal leaning against a wall.

"Professor?" Ethan wasn't sure he could believe his eyes. The smell of the man was different.

Feline.

"Ethan, listen to me. I was wrong. She is the last of her kind. Leave her. Take Jenny and others, and just go."

"Professor, what did she do to you?" Ethan let his body return to his human form as he moved across the room.

"The one thing I'd never allowed you to do." Pascal shook his head. "Hurry. I can feel the changes taking place inside me. Soon I won't be…I won't be my own man."

Heathcliff held out something. "Here." It was Ethan's long-barrel Colt. "Do it, before

she awakens."

"No. If I kill her now…"

"You care for the historian."

Ix Chel's voice turned Ethan around. She stood near the stone staircase. Human again, she'd pulled her long hair forward over her shoulders to cover her nakedness.

"Yes."

"He was dying." She walked slowly around the staircase, keeping her distance. Each step revealed, and then hid, portions of her body.

Ethan knew it for the truth. He said nothing.

"I saved him."

"You made him a slave." Ethan's hand tightened on the gun. Every gift came with a price; Ethan's was the beast within him, the demon that craved hot, fresh blood. The granting of immortality was a long and painful process for both parties, one he'd have gladly endured to keep his old friend around forever. Except the professor had never craved it, had never wanted to be anything other than mortal.

Ix Chel's gift was different, but no less monstrous. The professor would be bound to her forever.

"No." The Priestess shook her head. "He is not yet mine. I have the power to bring life from death. All I need is blood. One more sacrifice, and anyone who shares my blood"—she spread her arms at the mummified corpses around them—"will rise again. When they do, your friend will be young and healthy once more, as I have already given him some of myself."

A musky scent filled the air, full of dark promises. Ethan struggled against the primeval lust it raised in him.

"So to save the father you must kill the daughter? I can't allow that."

"I can." Hearing Jenny's voice cleared his head. She descended the last few steps into the chamber, Amos and Harrison behind her.

"No, my child," Heathcliff gasped. "I couldn't live with myself knowing it was your death that gave me life."

"And I couldn't go on, knowing you died because of me," she said.

Ethan watched as she went to her father. Even Ix Chel's animal magnetism was no match for Jenny's beauty. She'd tied one remnant of her robe around her waist in a makeshift skirt, while another draped over her chest, a reverse cape that did little to hide any of her secrets.

He fought to turn his attention away from her.

"There must be another way. If it's blood you need, why not take mine?" He held out his arm to the Mayan Priestess.

She shook her head, and he could almost believe true sadness shone in her eyes. "It is not just the blood. It is the life energy. Only a virgin will do, for theirs is the most powerful life force."

"What happens if you can't make your sacrifice?"

"Your friend will die. My people will die. There are limits to what even I can do. Until you came to me, I feared I would live out the rest of my life in solitude."

"No, Priestess, I will not fail you!" Hector Veracruz stumbled forward, an obsidian blade in his hand, blood running from his chest. "Her blood shall be yours!"

Ethan moved as fast as he could, but the distance was too far. Hector lunged. Someone screamed.

Ethan reached out and twisted Hector's head back and to the side. There was a wet snap, and the man fell to the floor.

Next to the body of Elton Harrison.

The obsidian knife stuck out of Harrison's chest. Bright blood pumped out, spilling across his shirt.

Ethan knelt down by the body, touched his fingers to the neck. "No pulse. He was braver than we gave him credit for."

"Oh, shit." Amos's curse made Ethan look up.

All around them, the mummies were rising to their feet. Like a film played at twice-normal speed, their dried, wrinkled flesh filled out and grew smooth. Brittle hair regained its youthful luster, and skeletal faces turned into human visages.

Two dozen sets of amber-colored eyes stared at them, and then the reborn priests and soldiers knelt and bowed to their priestess.

Ethan turned to Ix Chel. "You said it had to be Jenny."

The priestess appeared as surprised as anyone. "No. I said the sacrifice needed to be a virgin. Your friend…" She stopped speaking, waved a hand at Harrison's body. "I did not know."

"Ethan." Heathcliff Pascal's voice, strong and full of vigor, drew everyone's attention.

"Professor?"

"Father!"

The man Jenny Pascal threw herself against looked much as he had when Ethan first

met him, more than thirty-five years earlier. With one small difference.

His previously sky-blue eyes were now a rich honey-golden color, with tall, narrow pupils.

The eyes of a jaguar.

Heathcliff pulled himself away from Jenny's enthusiastic embrace. "Ethan, we must speak. Alone."

Ethan's stomach dropped. There could be only one reason they needed to talk.

They walked past Ix Chel's revived priests and priestesses, already gathering around their goddess and chanting prayers. Outside the temple, Ethan could feel the night nearing its end.

"Ethan, I'm a young man again, but the future still belongs to you and Jenny."

He kept speaking, not waiting for Ethan to respond.

"I know she'll be happy with you. You're the reason she's never let herself be with another man. But now she's going to need you as well, need you to do what needs to be done. She's going to want to come back here, and you can never let that happen."

Ethan nodded. Jenny was a strong-willed woman with a volatile temper. Those qualities, together with his desire to please her, could make him susceptible to any demand she might make.

Centuries of being a man couldn't change the fact that the love of a beautiful woman could be overpowering.

"You can't leave here." It wasn't a question.

"No, not alone," replied the professor. "My soul is bound to Ix Chel now. This is my home. These are my people."

Unlike earlier, the professor's voice held no regret or anger over what had been done to him. Ethan couldn't help feeling resentful over that. He'd offered his friend immortality—or something very close to it—on many occasions over the years, and been rebuked each time. And now the old man was happy to achieve it against his will? It took all of Ethan's willpower not to release his Beast and challenge his friend right there.

He's already changed, Ethan realized. *The thing inside me senses it, knows him for an enemy now, not a friend.*

"What of their mission to build a new Mayan empire?"

Pascal nodded. "An empire of were-jaguars. A formidable enemy of mankind someday."

"Someday?"

Heathcliff smiled. Already his eye teeth seemed longer, sharper. "Right now the Gente

de Jaguar number less than fifty. We have much work to do, rebuilding our city and guarding it from discovery. We live long lives, but it will still take several generations before we can lead our people out into the world."

"Your people?"

"Ix Chel wants me as her consort. That's why she forced the change on me. It's not the life I would have chosen, but now that the change is made…I don't regret it. I will advise her on the ways of the world, teach her the history of mankind." He smiled again. "Father her heirs."

Ethan thought about the exotic woman who served as the Moon Goddess's earthly servant. Her proud beauty, combining the human ideals of feminine splendor with the animal attraction of a wild jungle cat. Under her long, silky hair would be a body that only aged one year for every ten. Or perhaps twenty. Firm. Young. Ripe. A body built for pleasure, housing a mind and soul meant to rule an empire.

She would be a Cleopatra for the twentieth century.

"We'll see each other again, someday." Ethan knew his words were as much threat as farewell.

"I fear we will. On the battlefield. But not before my grandchildren's children have grown and died. Be good to her, Ethan. I have enjoyed your friendship most of all."

"And I yours. Rule well, old man." Ethan clasped hands with his oldest friend one last time. Inside him, the Beast roared to be let out and finish what it had started.

"No!" Jenny's shout startled them from their goodbyes. "I won't leave you."

Heathcliff didn't ask if she'd heard. "You must, my dear. The time has come for you and Ethan to start your lives together. Just as I will start a new life here."

She turned towards Ethan. Something new burned in her eyes. A promise of love. Passion.

Desire.

Then sadness took over as she looked back at her father and nodded. Ethan shook his head, knowing she'd accepted the situation much too quickly. Jenny was far too stubborn to give up like that; he knew that in the coming years it would take all his powers—physical and mental—to keep her from returning.

Ethan left them alone to their goodbyes. Inside the temple, he gathered his and Jenny's packs. Rory Amos was placing a blanket over Harrison's body.

"C'mon, Rory. It's time to go."

A gentle hand touched his shoulder, stopping him. Something flowed between them as

Ix Chel came close. An electric charge carrying a promise of untold wanton pleasures and deadly violence. Standing next to him in human form, her musky fragrance sent his senses reeling. She pressed herself against him, her hair a thin and ineffective barrier between their flesh.

She leaned forward, bringing her lips near his neck.

And licked him.

Her raspy tongue caressed him for a brief moment. She drew back even as he felt his body respond against his will.

"What was that for?" Ethan asked, once his voice was his own again.

"Earlier I gave you much pain. Now I give you a small pleasure, for you have given me a worthy mate. For that I am grateful. I will assure his happiness here."

Ethan had no doubt she would.

"Enjoy your life together, Ix Chel. I hope we never meet again."

She smiled, purposely showing her sharp teeth. A challenge in the animal kingdom.

"And I cannot wait until we do." She strode away.

Ethan left her to her people. Outside, Jenny came to him and took his hand. The new look in her eyes went well with her nearly naked body. The thin material couldn't hide the signs of her excitement.

Ethan realized that from now on, there'd be a woman on every expedition.

For once, the idea didn't upset him.

He wondered what kind of adventures they would have together.

With a smile, he pulled a cheroot from his pack.

Starting with tonight.

About the Author

A life-long resident of New York's Hudson Valley, JG Faherty is a Bram Stoker Award® and ITW Thriller Award nominee and the author of four novels, seven novellas, and more than 50 short stories. He writes adult and YA horror/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet, dark suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He enjoys urban exploring, photography, classic B-movies, good wine, and pumpkin beer. As a child, his favorite playground was a 17th-century cemetery, which many people feel explains a lot. You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, http://about.me/jgfaherty, and www.jgfaherty.com.

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Legacy

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Some gods demand blood!

Legacy

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Sean Black, a teenage science whiz in a small New England town, leads a pretty normal life...until the night of the storm. After that, nothing is the same. He experiences strange nightmares. He hallucinates about alien creatures and begins to notice weird physical changes in his body, things no one else seems to see. The girl he's had a crush on for years is acting strange as well, delivering cryptic messages to him that things are not what they seem. When he discovers a secret room in the library, Sean finds himself faced with a life-changing decision, one that could either save the world or plunge it into centuries of death and destruction—with Sean ruling over all.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Legacy:

It began with the storm, and the nightmare. Afterwards, nothing was ever the same.

I've never been the same.

The nightmare came first, at least for me.

I walked across a bleak landscape. The black dome of the sky extended forever in all directions, unmarred by stars or planets, yet somehow there was light enough for me to see by. Gray, featureless land stretched out to all sides. No hills or mountains interrupted the desolate plain; in fact, the only evidence of geologic activity was the presence of large stones, boulders really, that lay half-buried in the grassless, monochrome soil.

Not that life didn't exist in that dreary place. A double handful of trees, each one spaced hundreds of feet from its nearest kin, dotted the monotonous topography. Their distance from each other suggested a repulsion for their own kind, either environmental or emotional. Drawing close to one, I understood their aversion to proximity; in fact, I felt it myself. Festering wounds gaped in the drab bark, weeping fluids colored mold green and pus yellow. An atrocious odor like nothing I'd ever smelled before emanated from the oozing sores.

I backed away from the abominable stench just in time to avoid capture by grasping tentacles masquerading as branches. The entire alien growth leaned towards me, appendages extended and waving in my direction. I took myself further away, fearful the creature might uproot itself and follow.

After my encounter with the botanical nightmare, I chose my path, such as it was, with more care.

I'd gone perhaps another hundred yards, certainly no more than that, when a violent bolt of red lightning ruptured the ebon sky.

I froze as the afterimage left blinding jagged lines of color across my vision. The empty plain offered no protection, and I grew nervous about being exposed. I had no desire to serve as a human lightning rod. More angry flashes fractured the all-encompassing blackness. I held my breath, anticipating the tumultuous thunder I felt sure would come with such a spectacle.

Instead, a sepulchral voice spoke to me.

"Open your mind to me, open yourself to me. I am the gateway; through me they speak. I am your legacy, your history and your future. You and I will be as one. The past and present shall reunite. I will fill you, and you shall rise above those of lesser status.

"Together we shall speak the unspoken and call those whose names are not known.

"The spirits of the great places beyond space prepare themselves for battle once again, waiting only for you to guide them forth. Before you stands the gate to the othersphere. Only speak the words and those of the realms will enter three wide and seven strong.

"Those who hold the stars in their power and live in the spaces in between shall awaken!

"Azathoth! Tulzsha! Cthulhu! Yog Sothoth! Shub-Niggurath!

"Nine hundred ninety-nine times I shall call their names! Listen to my words. For I am—Nyarlathotep!"

I burst from the covers, nearly falling from my bed in the process.

For a moment I just sat there, chest heaving, heart jack-hammering, my back as straight and stiff as an iron rod. My hands clenched the sheets so hard my fingers ached. The echo of the strange word I'd shouted still reverberated in my brain, each repetition evoking dread.

Gradually, I eased from my rigid state as I grew fully aware that I was back in the familiar surroundings of my room, rather than the dreadful landscape of my dreams. Just as I was about to lay back on my pillow, thunder crashed outside my window, the unexpected aural explosion causing me to release a tiny squirt of piss into my underwear. It took me a moment to realize it was only an ordinary thunderstorm, that the dire crimson bolts and virulent landscapes I'd so recently wandered through hadn't followed me back to the real world.

Lightning, wonderfully ordinary and white, flashed across the sky. Before the first jagged bolt faded away, three more bursts followed in rapid succession, accompanied by

cannon shots of thunder that shook the walls of the house. The lightning erased the night's darkness like celestial flash pots, as if God himself was taking the stage for the universe's greatest rock concert.

Two more hellish claps of thunder accompanied more lightning, and I revised my initial evaluation of the storm's normalcy.

My bedroom door banged open, delivering my third fright in as many minutes.

"Holy crap!" my brother shouted, his eyes wide and his face corpse-white in the glare of more strobing lightning. I feared that if it grew any brighter outside, I'd actually be able to see right through him. "Sean, you gotta come see this. It's like the end of the world out there!"

Normally I'd have cursed Owen for barging into my room without knocking, but the truth was, I felt a large measure of relief at seeing another human, even if it was my obnoxious little brother. So, rather than yell at him like I normally would have, I told him I'd be down in a minute. A manic grin on his face, he turned and ran from the room to the accompaniment of further extraterrestrial drumming.

I pulled on fresh underwear, sweatpants, and a t-shirt, and went downstairs to join Owen, my mom, and my dad on the front porch, where they stood watching the incredible pyrotechnics.

Our house was a large New England-style Victorian with a wide wraparound porch. The porch had always been our favorite gathering place as a family, more popular even than the kitchen. In the summer, we'd sit in oversized rocking chairs and drink the lemonade or ice tea my mother made, listening to the gently comforting sounds of growling lawn mowers, chirping insects, and calling night birds. In the fall, before the frigid New England winter made it too uncomfortable to be outside, we'd cradle mugs of hot chocolate in our chilly hands as the winds brought us the smells of burning leaves and homemade soup on its weightless waves.

One of our favorite things to do was sit under the protection of the overhanging roof and watch the summer storms roll across the island. You could sway back and forth on the old-fashioned swinging couch my dad had rescued from a yard sale, sipping cold, tart lemonade - or in my parents' case, beer - and ooh and ahh at the lightning over the ocean only two blocks away. In spite of the awesome violence of the storms, watching them from the safety of the porch was a peaceful, reflective pastime, almost meditative in nature. The wind would bring a welcome coolness to the hot, muggy air that always preceded a summer thunderstorm, and the hiss of falling rain would act like white noise, creating a hushed

silence, as if the rest of the world no longer existed.

I'd always enjoyed those evenings most of all.

This storm engendered no such feelings.

Rather than sitting, we gathered just outside the front door, as if responding to a primitive need for protection, a genetic instinct to huddle in a group for survival. No breeze jostled my hair or cooled the sweat on my brow; instead, the air grew heavier with each passing moment, a physical weight that made itself known every time I tried to draw a breath.

Already a jangle of nerves from my dream, seeing my parents standing there without cans of beer in their hands made the whole scene even scarier. Not that either of them were alcoholics; as far back as I could remember, I'd never seen them get drunk, not even at barbeques or clambakes. But more often than not they'd grab a Narragansett or Harpoon Ale from the 'fridge the same way a kid will reach for a soda. Especially on the hot days of midsummer. One before dinner, maybe a couple while watching the game, mowing the lawn, or jawing with the neighbors. Not every day, but frequently enough for me to consider it commonplace around the house or when visiting the neighbors.

On the porch, it was tradition.

The last time I'd seen them sans beer at home was when we'd been sitting in front of the television watching the events of September 11 unfold. The schools had closed early that day and my mother had to pick me up from kindergarten. Not long after we walked in the door, my father pulled into the driveway. Mom had cried while she watched television; Dad had poured himself a glass of the twenty-year-old single malt scotch he only brought out for weddings and funerals. It was years before I really understood what had happened that day, but even as a small child their reactions had made a lasting impression on me.

This was the first time a storm had ever engendered the same type of anxiety in our household. Not even hurricanes or Nor'easters, which we'd dealt with more than once, had produced such a profound disquiet.

"Norm, I've never seen lightning like this." Another flash escorted Mom's words, the crazed bolt arcing wildly across the sky before arrowing down to the not-so-distant waters of the Atlantic.

Dad's reply was partially lost in the rolling boom of thunder that followed.

"—don't know where it came from. The Weather Channel said the storm was supposed stay out over the water and skirt past us, not stop and settle in like a poor relative."

"Thunderstorms are one thing," Mom replied, twisting a lock of sandy-brown hair

between two fingers. “But there’s no wind and no rain. This reminds me of the weather we’d get back home right before a tornado.”

Mom didn’t come right out and say she was scared, but I could see from her face that the storm was really affecting her. Unlike my dad and his side of the family, Mom wasn’t a native New Englander. She’d grown up in Oklahoma, where the closest she’d ever come to an ocean was spending the day at Summit Lake. Her family had moved to Massachusetts when she was eleven, after they’d lost the roof of their house to a twister for the second year in a row.

“Don’t worry, hon.” Dad put a beefy arm around her, pulled her against his chest. “We’re on an island. It’s not like this is a hurricane. The closest thing to a tornado we ever get around here is water spouts. And they’re only dangerous if you’re out in a boat. This is nothing but a freak summer storm that’ll blow over before you know it.”

Mom didn’t look convinced. She leaned against him, her lips tight and one hand still tugging at her hair as she watched the lightning bolts chase each other across the sky.

“Daddy, what’s wrong with the clouds?” Owen was leaning over the railing, his face turned upwards.

My parents joined him. I didn’t want to; I was afraid I’d find myself starting at the alien skyscape of my dream. What I really wanted to do was run back upstairs and hide under the covers with a flashlight, the way my nine year-old brother sometimes did after a scary movie.

Somehow my feet ended up carrying me forward instead.

“It’s just a different type of storm cloud,” Dad told him. But he was lying; I could hear it in his voice. More importantly, I could see the evidence with my own eyes.

Nights in the modern world are no longer dark places where you can’t see to get around. Lights from cities, and towns, and highways cast a glow we’re usually not even aware of, a glow that allows us to find our way around outside when we’re taking out the garbage or putting something in the car. If the sky happens to be cloudy, a lot of that light reflects back down to us, making the night world even more visible.

That’s why I had no trouble seeing the bilious green and ochre streaks in the purple-black masses hovering over Tall Pine Island. They looked like ordinary storm clouds infected with some type of horrible disease, their gaseous flesh gone gangrenous. The sickly lines of putrid color were like tracks of poison running through healthy tissue. Rather than forming random patterns, the ghastly hues radiated outwards from a central point, a spiral design of meteorological cancer. As I watched, more lightning flared from the core of the spiral. It felt

like I was inside one of those glass balls you see at museums, the ones where if you place a finger on the surface, tiny bolts of electricity dart back and forth.

I lowered my gaze slightly, hoping to squelch the sudden gurgle of nausea rumbling in my guts, and caught sight of the clock tower sticking up over the other buildings in the center of town. A sickening realization came over me.

The atmospheric tumor sat directly over the town of New Hope.

My town.

Although nothing about the situation resembled the events of my dream, I couldn't shake the feeling that the two were related in some way. Bits and pieces of that nightmare, nonsensical names and chants, attempted to come forward. I didn't want to remember, but the mysterious words beat a determined path towards me. I placed a hand over my mouth, afraid some of those evil words might burst free before I could stop them. I didn't know why, but I felt it would be very bad to speak any of those words out loud.


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