

And Again.

*by Lander Solon*

The mercury sky hung from the mountains. Libraries of calciferous strata five hundred thousand thousand years in the making stood indifferently under arrhythmic spattering of rain. Before tousled emerald carpets would drink of such moisture but now few stems reached skyward from the rotting gray slopes.

Cacophonous wooden spokes walked along muddy ruts. The slack-mouthed driver boy watched the way ahead, myopic eyes bobbing under effect of autokinesis or perhaps potholes. Carried along nonetheless, five other shining eyes surveyed their surroundings.

A mat of white hair and white beard grew down from a rough woolen cap. Two impenetrably deep hollows of his skull hid behind that tangle. Knobby fingers protruded from frayed gloves and clutched a leather briefcase.

Her pen scratched incessantly. Her stare snapped from subject to subject to notebook to subject while her translucent skin threatened rupture on her bony frame. She pointed the lens of her camera outward but exposed no film.

His body was a tree once crushed by lightning now regrown over its own corpse. A lawn of stubble adorned the top and bottom of both the human hemisphere and the other hemisphere of his head. His human hand held a rifle and fingered a crucifix tied to the weapon's stock. His other hand supported a crutch while resting on a wrapped protrusion that was once a leg.

"This is one hell of a throwback," grunted the monster. He tapped a forepaw on the windowpane.

"The automobile?" asked the young driver.

"Yeah."

"What's a throwback?"

"Something old."

"Is this automobile old?"

"Almost as old as Charles Darwin back here," said the woman. She giggled and her twisted lips framed a tangle of silver teeth. She looked to the old man hungry for some reaction yet he afforded her none.

"Who's Charles Darwin?" asked the boy.

Her smile waned, and she brought her camera eyeward rather than supply an answer.

The sputtering wagon climbed and climbed up but never above the fog. Then out of that suffusive abysm loomed two menhirs, joined in afterthought by wrought-iron lettering: Munro University. The monster's one eye considered the metal fence that stretched into the outer gray on both sides of the gate. "Why no guards, no locks?"

"Nobody comes out here."

The engine coughed. The woman dropped her camera and scratched in her notebook.

Beyond the ingress buildings squatted on both sides of the road. Arrays of windows pocked by apertures of vandals' stones glared out of spalled brick facades. The rotting hip roofs slouched as if in aspiration to that eastern tradition of curvature intended to discourage invasion by evil spirits.

A fit of coughs seized the motor. The driver disengaged the gearbox and coasted to the roadside. Gibbering mechanical gurgles issued forth. He fought the decline with fitful bursts of throttle until the engine died. The boy clicked the starter while fat raindrops tittered on the metallic roof. In a moment of stillness

that cosmoclastic daemon who ever revels at extinction  
ensconced within the carriage.

The old man unlatched his door and walked to the hood,  
one hand gripping his briefcase. The monster opened his  
door and struggled upright. After a rest he hobbled and  
hobbled fore, one hand popping roof sheetmetal for balance.  
The old man rapped his naked knuckles against the  
rainspattered hood.

The monster peered into the treed roadside courtyard  
where a cast statue stands. Where once arms were attached,  
now two orifices to the hollow chest cavity gape.

The old man rapped again on the hood. The boy started  
and unlocked the engine box. The monster wordless shuffled  
again to his door. The driver sauntered fore, and let his  
viscous gaze drip over the engine. ``Do you know what's  
gone wrong?''

The old man did not answer. Instead he reached down to  
a dreadlock of wires, but pushed this aside to reveal a  
vinyl-tape head gasket, begrimed speleothemic. He shook his  
head, not in answer to the driver.

Unannounced monster produced, shouldered, and fired his rifle. The boy and old man fell prostate. The wrinkled neck craned to trace the weapon's barrel: to the courtyard.

"You said no one comes out here." Gnarred the monster.

"What what did you see?" stammered the boy.

"Some people. Ragpicker-looking."

The woman opened her door and stepped into the spit.

"I saw them too. They were children."

"Oh god, those are the students. Did you hit any of them?"

The monster pawed his crutch and galloped onto the roadside grove. Before he passed the first tree, the others fanned through the courtyard. Limbs littered with plastic bits, sodden paper, and spent condoms cracked underfoot.

"There's nobody here."

"Their energies protected them," said the woman.

"Energies?"

"Don't you know anything, old man? This is a school for sorcerers."

"Oh. I see."

The woman considered him from behind a tree. "Did Rutherford give you a note too?" she pulled a small paper halfway from a pocket.

"He did. It bore no explanation for the invitation."

She leveled her lens at him. The boy took a step back and witlessly watched the camera's field of view to discern some ill-defined profundity.

"It's been a long time since you and Rutherford have spoken," said the woman after a long pause through which the old man frowned into her camera.

"Yes. Years. No, decades."

"And it's been a long time since you've considered him a friend."

"Yes. But we were once as brothers."

"Hmmm. I can feel the energy of this place pulsating with excitement that you're back. And with anxiety."

A crash and hoglike grunts came from the other side of the courtyard. The monster had fallen. The driver made a start toward him, but the thing gave a mucous growl that stopped the boy short. All three watched him wrest himself upright.

“Enough gawking.” he spat something brown. “Well, they didn’t leave any tracks.”

“So you didn’t shoot one of them, did you?”

“I couldn’t see well. It was a bad shot.”

“We’d see blood,” said the old man. “They’re all right.”

“And a sorcerer wouldn’t let himself be shot I guess, would he?”

“No, he wouldn’t,” answered the woman, “Material dangers like bullets are nothing to these children.” She made another pass around the courtyard. Windows paneless hinted dim ruin within the surrounding buildings. Neoclassical doors hung ajar, reliefs almost amorphous under peeling strata of paint. The old man squinted into these dim portals. “I suppose the students are watching us even now.”

“Should we try to bring them along? I’d like to at least make an apology.”

“I doubt they’d accept it from you,” said the boy.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Slobber dripped from the illshapen half of his mouth.

“I I didn’t...” His boots suddenly became interesting.

The monster lurched a step forward.

“You care what some slave says?” barked the old man.

“No. But he needs to learn his place.”

“We still need him to take us to Rutherford.”

The monster spat. “Well let’s get on our way.”

Despite frequent pauses in which the woman inspected through camera the empty ways and tenantless buildings, the monster was left hobbling breathless far behind the others. The three sat on wet stairs to a hall labeled: dormitorium.

“What is your name, old man?” asked the woman.

“Doctor Chambers.”

“The Doctor Chambers?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” she did not extend her hand. “My name is Addison Howard.”

“I’ve read your work.”

She raised a thin eyebrow. “Which of my writings are you familiar with?”

“*Thanatological Reconsideration of the Theory of Vital Energy.*”

“Compelling, isn’t it?”

The monster shouted something unintelligible down the street.

``What?''

``I said:'' he stopped to pant, ``Go on without me. I'll catch up on my own.''

``Can you find the manor?'' asked the guide.

``I was a ranger in Drakensberg. I can handle roads.''

The youth squinted at the sky. ``There is only a few hours before dark.''

``What - Do you think I'll scare the door slave if I knock after sunset?''

``Uh. You can't stay out after dark here.''

``Nobody comes out here.'''

``There's a reason they don't.''

Somewhere distant a bell dissonant tolled.

``He'll be all right,'' said Doctor Chambers, ``let him walk his own pace. Let's get out of the rain.''

Addison rose and walked back to the monster. She stopped an arm's length away. ``Be careful, Michael. Malevolent beings are all around. Don't let them catch you after sunset.'' She reached and brushed her bony fingers against his loathsome cheek, then turned and strode away.

Motionless, the monster watched her go until fog veiled the walking figures. ``How do you know my name?''

No answer.

At the manor, rows of unlit sash windows stood in formation, some with muntins of tape, others bandaged with pallet wood. A hole in the central pediment vomited wires to its hip roof where an array of radio dishes stood. From one corner rose a windowless tower, scaled with viridian alloy plates. This pillar of the sky stood to heights rendered invisible by evening fog.

A woman-slave cadaverous answered the door. Almost mechanically she muttered: ``Professor Rutherford went away today. Said you're to wait for his return. We've your rooms prepared.'' Within the dim atrium a slave gaggle scrubbed rabidly the floor before the tower's portal. The doorkeeper shuffled inward past these clutching a candle. Its pool of light ran across an expansive triptych in oil:

A whiteclad company sits on flowered pastures at the edge of an azure lake fed by cascading forest waterways beneath rises and rises of sky-mountains that glow in directionless and pervasive luminescence.

Beneath a cloudset court of kings, sit a solemn and elevated people on the plateau of their august acropolis, spectators to hordes of red-clad decadents, naked-breasted courtesans, and cimmerician armies slipping into an inky precipice.

Great plutons hang overturned in the sky, falling with a fiery rain of talus and smashed city-sprawls onto a caliginous pandemonium of human flesh, all food for the abysmal maw of some netherworld opening beneath.

“And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together and every mountain and island were moved out of their places,” mumbled Doctor Chambers.

“Master I am nearly deaf, what was that?”

“I I would like some explanation as to the whereabouts of Professor Rutherford. I should like to know when he will return, that we may begin our work.”

“I don't know. But your friend, the big man, talked to Professor Rutherford last night.”

He turned and wrinkled his brow to Addison. She shook her head and shrugged.

“And where is our colleague now?”

``I guess he's in one of the rooms. Here they are.`` An oil lamp roughly centered hinted the existence of ornate crown molding but did not light the ceiling from which for an autumnal century had fallen paint leaves onto the plastic-wrapped furniture of this commons. ``Please wait here for the professor to get back. We'll bring your meal in the morning.`` Thus she left them.

The old man opened one to see a bedroom with a boarded window.

``This will be mine.`` He laid his briefcase, jacket, and cap on the bed. ``I'll inquire to our colleague.`` He sauntered into the common and opened a neighbor door. Much the same lurked within. Addison lifted her camera to eye. ``He's not here. But did you notice the slaves at the entrance?``

``The cleaners?``

``Yes.``

``What about them?``

``Their tattoos.``

``Their brands?`` He opened another creaking door to an unlit sleeping cell.

“They weren’t slave brands. That was a ritual marking.” She whispered: “Yskethoth.”

“Yskethoth?”

“Yes. Did you notice what they were cleaning?”

“What is Yskethoth?” He swung another door against its plaster wall.

“They were cleaning blood.”

“Really now?” He moved to the final portal.

“Don’t open that door,” she said behind her eyepiece.

“Why not?” He turned to face Addison. “Something inside I can’t bear to see?”

“Something you won’t want to disturb.”

He grabbed the handle.

Alone Michael toppled on the dormitorium steps and wheezed. He yanked at his scarf and loosed tendrils of steam from his coat. For a while he sat abject.

A chain in the viscera of the building at his back rattled. He rose.

Inside a desk molting its veneer waited patiently for guests.

“You don’t need to be afraid. I’m here to protect you.” He waited in the weird quiet but the sorcerer children did not appear.

A gravelly slither came again from behind a fire door. He limped there, every odd step marked by a crutch’s clack. The hall beyond stretched long and dim, lined with numbered doors, some unhinged.

“Professor Rutherford sent me. You can trust me.” He began to hobble down the wing. Michael reached for his summons letter. “The professor told me to tell you I’ll keep you safe from all dangers, even-” His hand groped an empty pocket. “I’m to keep you safe from even-” He stopped before a door lying across the hall, broken at the hinges. Brown splashes marked the masonry above a dismembered corpse that lied in a long dried stain across the floor. “Even...”

The fire door giggled behind him. The hall long and terrible in its perspective loomed starkly empty. During the war he saw a child lead a gaggle of foreign refugees to a sanctuary that was supposed to have the cure for the scourge. The path there was a minefield. The first blast scattered them like startled deer. Once they all fell that

tiny girl their leader slinked to each corpse and collected its food or ammo. Michael had sat watching from a rock a little way off. Now he readied his rifle and started for the lobby. How he wished to see such a child eclipsed by his sight. He pushed the fire door heavy with a leg stump.

Empty and silent, the lobby tolerated his crashing intrusion. Now the elevator's door gaped a black rectangle. Chains hung from some unlit and grimy height, past level, past basement, and down farther into a yellow light. He removed from his vest a foot of explosive-packed piping. He lit the fuse and dropped it down and down. He waited for the report then grabbed one of the chains.

Doctor Chambers twisted the handle. "Locked." He walked to a plastic-wrapped settee and planted himself. Addison held the door under her grim watch.

"Now, will you tell me: what is Yskethoth?"

"Will you keep your damn voice down?"

"Is our colleague unpleasant when woken from his evening naps?"

“You really are as skeptical as in your academic papers, Doctor Chambers. Please, do not speak aloud that name any more.”

“So Yskethoth is a name? A deity? Or perhaps a devil?”

“Both are different characters of the same phenomenon.”

“Phenomenon?”

“You know very well the universe has its basic premises. You secularists accept these as primary laws of nature. If you looked a little closer you’d recognize that these premises are the products of the underlying spiritual structure of this world. The gods and devils are the columns and girders. And... it... is the foundation. The war destroyed even the spiritual world. That washing away has almost brought... it... completely to the surface.”

Down Michael slid too eagerly and collapsed amid smashed bricks, wood splinters and shattered glass. His lighter revealed a stunted chamber littered with debris and a few tools, yet no corpses. From the masonry walls seeped

some unnamed and reeking fluid. He rose and eyed suspiciously three black portals to passages unknown.

Somewhere deep a soporific pipe gasped atonal. Vaporous tendrils beckoned him follow at the edge of his light, and the monster stumbled into an unlit tunnel. Unseen metal clicked metal in an idiot ostinato all about but always beyond reach. His footsteps splashed where podgy drops fell in some black chamber. A muffled horn maniacal blared a floundering tone somewhere nearby. His broken gait thundered accelerando for this unseen player whom ought not be called a musician. Cacophonous bells chimed alarm somewhere beyond miasmic curtains at the fringe of view. The halls inconceivable diverged to hunched cloisters and twisted corridors and demented atria with columns stalactitic. Though having never felt himself topple the monster dragged his prostrate body across nameless remains in the cave mire. Malformed and smutty voices hoot and blaspheme over the clattering of accursed dinnerware at the periphery of some gut-strewn table held up by legs skinless and oozing that amble to and fro at the whim of a withy-haloed master whose neck terminates not as a head but rather a languorous proboscis that ever fumbles with the

rotting meat strewn across its blighted throne of toothed and writhing roots. And the horns bawl and the pipes blare on in his hall while naked misfigures chained in dim recesses scramble for scraps they shove into their gibbering and crooked masticators.

A light shone ahead, blinding though dim and gray.

Michael crawled and crawled and the din was cleaned by the sough of cool air and the lapping of calm waters. His face pressed against cold chicken wire that spanned a cave's mouth. An electric lamp flickering hung high above docks that dared onto the fogged loch. At the apex of one such projection stood a man, hands in coat pockets and stance wide. The margins of the silhouette's head would bloom persimmon and saffron then a wraithy cloud would tumble from his breath until it knitted into the mist. And again. And again.

Doctor Chambers opened his briefcase and withdrew a revolver. "Let us examine the bloodstain you mentioned."

"The woman told us to wait here."

"You'll take orders from a slave?"

``No... but I won't be comfortable leaving unless I know this door remains closed.``

``What's behind it?``

``Something neither of us wants to tangle with.``

``Something this won't stop?`` He lifted slightly his weapon.

``No. That is useless here.``

``Do you have anything more helpful?``

``I can seal the door if given an hour.``

``Go ahead.`` The doctor sat again and watched as Miss Howard withdrew an electronic wand and waved it about the door. It whistled a gibbering whale's tune, and at each crescendo she halted to apply a drop from a bottle of sagy oil. The doctor unpocketed his invitation and read again:

To my esteemed friend and scholastic colleague Doctor Augustus Chambers: How long it has been since you last visited Munro University! I daresay things have changed much here; most of the staff you knew has retired. All our resources are now being put to good use in the Dark Energy Inductance Observatory. Though Post-Particulate Physics is not your field, there is

other work to be done here you would take interest in:  
work your stubborn objectivity qualifies you well for.  
Please respond by telegraph to my office in Burlington  
Commune, and-

He folded away the note and watched Miss Howard. She held high a book marked with golden points that gave the impression of stellar constellations foreign to human skies. She read from this: ``un yugltosspha yp lnim arkhlangherla iggru nakthur ur gog tshoubr ulg...'' And she continued until the terminus of some unknowable linguistic organ when she stopped to inscribe in air one nether star inverted within another. And she read on, voice sonorous and disembodied. Doctor Chambers shivered at the sound of it. The walls creaked and structural joints popped somewhere. Addison stopped and snapped closed the book. ``The room is sealed against any spiritual trespass.''

Beneath his beard the doctor pouted his lip for a moment and wrinkled his eyebrow. He tossed his head as if to shoo flies then stood. ``It must now be well after dark. I believe the slaves will be to their quarters. Let us investigate that bloodstain.''

She eyed his weapon. "Do you have to bring the gun? I told you it won't hurt anything we'll come against."

"If nothing else, it's an effective placebo for me."

The hall was black and drafty. Miscarpened cracks moaned somewhere.

"Should I grab the lamp?"

"No light." answered the doctor. And he crept forward. Addison followed and snatched his wrist in cold hands. He shook her off and continued. Ahead a flimsy pool of light showed vaguely three oil paintings. Beyond these the atrium reposed dimly malevolent in the light of a lone candle. Doctor Chambers squinted into the hall. He would appear a grotesque cranium floating murderously at the light's fringe to any observer therein. An inky figure slouched unconscious in a chair by the candle. Rodential, Chambers sidled along the walls. He eyed the floor before the tower door. The tiles lay fossilized in strata of misapplied grout and silts from the ambulation of this epoch. There is no telling what blood may have fallen there.

"Shall we investigate further?" asked the doctor. He pointed to the pneumatic tower door that waited under the

glow of crimson diodes set in its exedra. Addison slinked to the console and prodded the screen. "I have a feeling this is going to be very loud."

"I don't think the slaves will harm any guests of their master, even if we break their rules. Open it."

The door shrieked. And it continued. The watchlump beside the candle rose and stumbled toward them. A face disfigured by scourge resolved under a black cap. Addison continued to punch the controls. A deep rumbling shook the ground and the pistons hissed. The monster waited for a pause in the alarm. "Get away from there. No-" His words were lost when the siren wailed again. Doctor Chambers waved him away. The door slid open, and Addison stepped inside. "I said: get away from-!" The siren shrieked.

A murder of blackclad shapes had assembled at the portals of the atrium. Addison slinked into the dark tower and pressed the inner controls. The pneumatics began their slow return and Chambers ducked into the tower. A gun reported and the slave mob charged. Another bullet sparked and rang bell-like somewhere in the unlit tower. The doctor leveled his revolver and returned fire through the waning portal. Holes wide opened up in the mob's leader and the

attackers stumbled slapstick into him. A pale and varicose-veined forearm broke its owner's fall partway within the closing vault and its owner scrambled madly out of the arc of the indifferently closing door.

Fists pounded dully the other side of the vault. Doctor Chambers removed the inner control panel and pulled at select components therein. The siren stilled.

"What are you doing?"

"This will seal them out for a few hours if they are clever, longer if not. I'm inclined to predict the latter."

Addison stepped into the ring of will-o'-the-wisps that guarded the door. "Ordinary slaves wouldn't have attacked us like that. Don't you see there is something more than the mundane going on here?"

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"Ha. I hope we don't see it. And what are we supposed to do now? Do you think those cultists will be very forgiving when they get through?"

"No."

She sighed. "Well what do we do?"

"Start with lights, I suppose."

The doctor withdrew a hand torch and projected a yellow moon orbited by addled rings. Shadows dashed behind shelves crowded by crystals and small pickled dead things. A streak where something bloody had been dragged remained on the white floor. This Chambers tracked slowly stepping over halfboxed alchemical devices and a few overdried deer hides. A column of books rested atop one desk: *Gauge Boson Vortices and Cognitive Control*, *Non-Causality in Supersymmetric Dark Matter Lattices*, *Anti-Human Analysis of Logocentricity in Epistemology and Metaphysics*, and at the top a grimoire fist-thick spattered with stars foreign to human skies: *The Laws of the Unscient*.

“Here are power cables leading to a cellar.” Addison stood over a grated and locked mouth in the floor. Chambers’ light showed a rusted ladder vined with wires descending to some phreatic oubliette beneath. Drips unnumbered fell and fall and fall so blind as to be unconscionable. Somewhere deep a soporific pipe gasped atonal. Chambers stood rigid. “Let’s continue our investigation. We don’t need electricity to follow the trail of blood.”

The vault door was struck like a gong. Chambers lifted slightly his revolver and another impact rang. "That door will hold for a long while. Let's go."

The rusty smear led to a tight stairwell built in afterthought in the elevator shaft. Up this unlit column they climbed until that door beleaguered by hammers or shovels or picks thundered remote. Each gated landing gave view into a grotto of mechatronic creatures or perhaps the organs of some greater creature. And the smear continued up. At each landing passed, the resident shadows smirking emerged to unlatch their gates and creep at the interlopers' heels. Chambers gasping rounded another corner and stopped to breath, eyes downcast on that trail. In some places the smear resolved to discrete drips and in others it was footprinted and in others it puddled. Was the bleeding thing that laid it heading up or down? Did it walk or was it carried of its own accord or was it unwilling? Did it wait somewhere yet?

"Do you have another light?"

"No."

"We need to push the darkness farther from us."

``We can't.''

Addison fidgeted. ``Can I please hold the light?''

``If you wish.''

Chambers felt her clammy hand in the exchange and followed her silhouette up the shaft. They wheezed and climbed. Chambers heard between his gasps and hers a third, patiently stalking his back. Witless appendages tentacular stretched from a stigma-spotted nucleus that fumbled so quietly over the concrete and conduits seeking something like an ankle or wrist to grasp. Chambers turned and pointed his gun into the black. Addison rounded a corner. Alone he trembled.

``The blood leads- doctor?''

``I'm here.''

He ascended in reverse into her light but did not look away from that dark.

``The blood leads to this floor.''

``Then open the damn gate.''

She did so, and Chambers followed her through the portal stenciled 32. He closed noisily the gate behind them and looked hopelessly for some sort of lock but found none. A few sofas and a bloodstained armchair huddled about a table with a few old magazines. Bookshelves monumental

stood about the periphery keeping a wordless and hostile vigil. Addison stood with her light fixed on the bloodied chair. A dried puddle sat about its legs.

“What do you think happened in this study?” Doctor Chambers asked.

“I don’t feel any struggle. It happened fast.”

“Whose blood is that?”

“Rutherford.”

Chambers’ eyes fixed on a small gelatinous sac on the upholstery. It stared deflated into an unlit corner.

“Let’s find what happened.”

Her light did not move. “Do you feel that?”

“Yes. Now help me investigate.”

She stood static until Chambers snatched the light from her limp hand. She turned suddenly: “Please don’t look. We need to leave.”

He already spotted a scribbled note and handheld recorder among a few half-full mugs on a coffee table.

“Where ought I not look?” He read silently the paper:

Each law of physics is a chain that imprisons us in this Cave of Becoming. Yskethoth is the one who can

free us from both light and darkness and deliver us to  
purity of Being.

He grabbed the device and tried its activator.

“Anywhere. This place holds things no one should  
see.”

The device’s battery was dead. Chambers pocketed it  
and shone his light about the room. “I’m uneasy too, but I  
have a duty to find out what happened to the Professor.  
Please, stay-” Between tall bookshelves hung a white  
curtain. This he approached. “What do you think is in  
there?” Addison remained immobile. He reached for the  
veil.

“Don’t!”

He turned the light to her: half feral she held  
herself sickly oblique. He pulled at the fabric. Addison  
screamed and crumpled. Chambers’ muscles seized and he  
tottered back still clutching the curtain. He dropped his  
light and the poor mechanism stared witless into some  
corner and Chambers reeled and pulled down the curtain as  
he fell.

There it stood tenebrous. Untouched by such puerile anthropomorphisms as phallic or femoral, the eldritch lith loomed gibbous, pocked by yawning oscula amorphous from which drip timeless flowstone tributaries to speleochemic draperies and malformed stalactites that hold petrified and nameless ooids. The thing did not rend but rather unrendered all feebly ideomantic conceptions of category or creation or meaning. And it stood a blight to any poor consciousness that beheld its apostatic madness. And it stood. Chambers' lips quivering fought to form the words of its name as if his infantile taxonomy could dispel its being while a weight incalculable set itself on his chest. Behind him Addison quaked and bubbled lasciviously. Their throes were paltry embarrassments before its unbounded inhumanity.

The stairwell gate clicked open and some sodden miscreation entered. Ungues clicked vaguely as the form idiot dragged itself on members lank and popping to ensconce in some dim corner. Its dribbling eyespots considered lazily the apes as it extended a probe unnamed that fumbled across the ground for the woman. Her tongue lolled as the thing palpated her thigh, then upward.

Bungling the thing penetrated her anus and explored her guts.

Michael cried silently and pawed the wire fence. The monster was borne to a time before he was called such; he was borne to a time when he was man.

He had stood a soaring apotheosis for a basaltic mountain as the antitwilight arch rose before him. Under the world's lucid dome he watched the watersheds and mountain pastures below be swallowed by fog formless, gentle, inhuman. Other heavysset castles stood afar in memory not of wars but of impassive orogeny so ancient and great nigh unspeakable. Somewhere befogged between the colossi an automobile's headlights traced slowly a road and the sky faded to leave all naked in sight of the stars myriad and terrible and awesome.

Behind him clattered the machinery of the excavators but he heard only the music of an instrument. Once popular, now forgotten, the accordion was always misused. Yet here its bellows breathed long and deep as quivering cascades danced and marched and laughed. Tonal architecture sagacious and asymmetric waxed and waned unrepeatably. And

Again. The player shook and fought and gasped to herald this unnamed theme of life.

Now the man empyrean dropped his cigar into the loch. He turned, adjusted his weapon, walked to land, and retrieved a man-sized pack from its repose against the lightpole. Michael frenzied stood and ripped down the wire fence. ``Hey.``

The man shouldered his weapon and loosed burning metal. The monster screamed and toppled back and clawed at the sizzling holes in his knotted chest.

The man fired again and a constellation of sparks erupted against the jagged limestone roof. Michael scrambled for his rifle in the muck. Another shot and the monster's stump exploded and burned. Michael howled and writhed. The man punched a torch on his weapon and trotted to the cave mouth.

Blinding his light fell on the paltry wretch through a veil of flesh smoke. The monster groped for his muddy rifle. The man blasted it in two. His voice was rigid and deep. ``Who are you.``

Through bared teeth: ``Michael Reeves, soldier of fortune.``

``Why are you here.``

``I have a job for Rutherford. I was trying to find the kids, the sorcerers. I'm supposed to protect them.``

The man produced a cloth and tossed it in Michael's face. ``I know you don't have many nerves left. Get a tourniquet on and get up.``

``Get that fucking light out of my face.``

The man did not. ``Did you see them underground?``

``Them?``

``The kids.``

Michael struggled to hold the cloth tight enough for tying. ``Yes. No, I only heard something. Something.``

``Their places of ritual are hidden underground.`` He knelt and tied the bandage on the monster's stump.

``What the hell are you?``

``A human. What do you mean?``

``You tried to kill me, now you give me a bandage and a hand.``

``Which baffles you?``

``Will you get that light out of my face?``

``Pick yourself up.``

Michael rolled to his side and grabbed the stock of his rifle. He snapped his crucifix from its strap and pocketed it and dropped the broken weapon. He muttered: "No atheists in foxholes."

The man looked at him but could not be seen behind that light. "You may find much lead, but you are so poor only because your spirit itself is no alchemist." The man turned and trotted from the cave entrance.

"What? Where the hell are you going?"

No answer.

Michael righted himself with the wall and limped forward. "Hey!"

The man visible only by his spotlight turned. "Your wretchedness is no concern of mine."

"I'm fine god damn you! No God dammit. No. Please, what is your name?"

"Smith." Somewhere near a bell dissonant tolled. Smith jogged into the night fog and Reeves stood alone and picked up his crutch.

Michael's bullet wounds hardly bled. The scourge was almost finished with him. He had only a few weeks to live. Could the investment of digging out the shot make returns

in a fortnight? No. He stood nauseous considering that finity beyond which did not loom or approach or beckon that unplumbed nothing outside nothing which minds may occasionally palpate obscurely and return numb.

That poor kid in Johannesburg...

We couldn't help it. When we pulled that thing out of the ground, everyone got sick in the head. One guy who tried to kill himself was too shaky to aim right and he had to lay next to the thing under the canvas in the truckbed bouncing and bleeding from his jawhole the whole ride back. Somebody saw it in the streets and started a riot. We holed up in Rutherford's hangar and mowed those kaffirs down. But we were sick. Everybody in South Africa was already sick. All from that fucking rock. Not enough room on the plane? Kill a kid. That'll matter in the end you filthy sack of meat. You'll make it home so you can become a useless cripple who gets to watch the scourge destroy everything you love and then take jobs quartering farmers and stealing their rotten grain to feed some warlord and his tweaked thugs until the world is so dead and cold you wish it would burn and forget itself.

He didn't know where he was walking. Somewhere. Never could he walk far enough to leave behind himself. Decayed buildings squatted invisible to a human eye but malevolent to a mind that might conceive of them in that dark. Far ahead hung a point of light wobbling.

``Smith?''

The light drunken continued its incorporeal dance. Michael approached long and shy the light slowed and stood still. Behind the hanging lantern resolved a church with stained glass fenestrae that bloodied or putrefied or congealed faint candlelight within. Two icons above the ironbound plank door stared at a vinyl board pasted between them, engraved: come on in.

Michael knocked. Something wooden toppled within and frenzied footsteps crossed and recrossed the floor. Twin shotgun barrels peeked between the doors. ``Oh Jesus I thought you were him.'' The doors swung open before a heavy-coated slave. ``Who are you?'' He shrank back but his arm hung near the latch as if imploring the door to close out the monster.

Michael stepped inside. ``I work for Rutherford. Where is your master?''

The doorman lowered the shotgun and looked restlessly about the wretched interior, lit only by a candle on a table with half drunk gallon of something like whiskey.

``How did you know he is here?''

``I didn't.''

``Oh.'' The slave stared dumbly. ``He he was brought here after after that man got to him.''

``What?''

``After the evil man got to him.''

``Who?''

``The man with the dragon's gun.''

Michael took a step forward and looked at a curtain strung where an altar should stand. The slave backed into his table and the candle drooled a small pool of wax.

Michael gave the door an idle pull closed.

``Where is the professor?''

``He must not be disturbed.''

The front door creaked and three boys entered. One of them supported a stick that held a small coronet of tern feathers. Another removed his cap and pierced Michael with pale green eyes. The third tiny and partly wrapped in a

long scarf leaned nonchalantly against the doorway, "So here's the deadeye."

Michael took a step back.

"Not so aggressive now?"

"I never meant it until you asked for it."

The green-eyed: "You only meant it as much as was necessary to provoke us to kill you."

"I-" Michael choked. "How the hell would you know?"

The green-eyed smiled.

Michael collapsed into the chair and helped himself to the whiskey. "The professor told me to tell you I'll keep you safe from all dangers, even Yskethoth." The slave quailed in some dark corner.

The ragpicker boy laughed. "How do you intend to keep us safe when you couldn't save yourself?" He pointed at the malformed growth on Michael's once-human skull.

"The scourge? No one can protect you from that. You're immune or you're not."

"Immune? You're sounding very twentieth century. Can one be immune to the will of another being?"

"What?"

"The scourge is the will of Yskethoth."

Some whimpers came from that dim corner. "Please. Don't draw his ear. Don't bring him here."

"Still yourself slave!" Barked the boy with the staff. "In a few hours, he may very well be loosed, and such petty trespasses as speaking aloud his name will be of no consequence."

Michael pushed the whiskey off the table's edge. "What the fuck is going on here?"

A deep silence fell and the sorcerers considered him. "Do you wish to speak with Rutherford?" Asked the green-eyed.

Behind the gauzy curtain lay a man wrapped loosely in the white sheets of a small bed. His bald head rested on a pillow stained red from the discharge of two eyeholes bored into meaty spaces within his skull.

"God, what happened?" Michael knelt at the bedside.

"The evil man got to him," said the slave outside the curtain.

The monster leaned heavily forward and reached for the professor's wrist only to feel some pitiful beat nigh arrhythmic. "Where the hell is your doctor?"

``We don't need medicine. We can heal any wound that needs healing.`` said the one with the staff.

``Are those healed?`` Michael pawed vaguely toward the professor's face.

``Don't drop the second clause. They don't need healing; the professor is needed on the other side. We need to appeal the spirit world, and energies there may choose to heal him.``

``Well why aren't you trying?``

``We have.``

``He's still alive goddammit. Try again.``

The green eyed and the little one looked to the staff bearer. He nodded and they dispersed around the bed. Nobody noticed the meek slave peering through the loosely woven curtain.

The staff bearer muttered tongues outlandish and unknowable as his acolytes laid their hands each on a hand and a foot of the professor. The monster driftwood in those mad liturgies found himself washed up against a wall and there he leaned. The words bore some vaguely discernible familiarity to the chatter in that unseen subterranean dining hall. Perhaps they were of a common language

ancestral to Enochian. Michael needed to run. Instead he diverted slightly his eye from the sorcerer whose eyes quivering inverted to stare into some unknown sphere within his skull and beads of sweat collected on his brow and dripped onto the bed. His chanting marched or perhaps stumbled into the charnel vaults and despair-chambers of some netherworld and on his forehead materialized a bloody pentacle that dripped into his eyes.

Rutherford gasped and the incantation stopped.

``Doctor!'' Michael fell again to a knee.

``Smith?'' The professor trembled.

``No, sir. This is Michael Reeves. Your guide from Drakensberg.''

Slowly he bubbled: ``Ah, Drakensberg: lesson in humility. Things such as my Scourge Icon ought never have been seen by eyes nor imagined nor...''

Michael looked down, then after a silence: ``Sir, it's Reeves. You called me here. What do you need from me?''

``Smith?''

``No, this is Reeves.''

The professor died.

Michael rose and yanked the bedsheet over the face but revealed two age-knotted feet. "Tell me about Smith." He said in a scowl all the more hideous for his scourge.

"The evil man."

"Still your tongue, slave." Barked the green-eyed.

"Smith, the traitor, was called here as a mercenary." said the staff-bearer as he wiped the bloody mark from his forehead. "He worships the daemon Yskethoth and would summon it here before dawn."

"Can we stop him?"

Dr. Chambers frozen had watched exclusively the Scourge Icon through hours of Addison's gurgling until the batteries lit the torch no more. Then he sat in the long but timeless dark and pondered if the flame of a lighter would force him to again behold the thing. Yes. He would have to look away before lighting the room. Which way did it stand? He turned or rolled witlessly for some minutes then lighted his lighter. He had turned his back on the thing and now saw Addison sprawled near that dried blood in a more fresh pool of urine and offal. He crawled to her.

"Hush Miss Howard."

Yet she continued her soft gibbering.

“Miss Howard, please. We are safe. The Scourge Icon is notorious for its unsettling effect on the psyche. This is to be expected. It would happen to anyone.” When her mutterings did not abate he wrestled his limbs prone, then readied himself to stand. He rose slow and stood looking down at her.

“Did you see it?” She asked wide-eyed.

“I saw it.”

“You still disbelieve. How can you still disbelieve? Did you see *it*?”

“It was just a rock, Addison. It was Rutherford’s Scourge Icon, the famous rock whose discovery coincided with the pandemic of scourge. Do you remember, Addison? It’s a rock. The human fear before the inhumanity of that thing is no mystery. ‘The sight of a tangible object with measurable dimensions can so shake and change a man; there is about certain outlines and entities a power of symbolism and suggestion which acts frightfully on a sensitive thinker’s perceptive and whispers terrible hints of obscure cosmic relationships and unnamable realities behind the protective illusions of common vision.’”

She gurgled and rolled in her shit.

“No. Don’t look over there.”

She arrested herself to face the panels of the ceiling. “Did you see it?”

“Yes I saw it. Now please get up, Miss Howard.”

Slowly she complied and long stood swaying and felt obscene internal rumblings perhaps indicative of some new and unwelcome gravidity. Regardless they left that place wordless and stumbling.

When Michael left them, the boys had smiled at their magic.

He hobbled on that humanless road with only a borrowed shotgun until the heavens glowed colorless and began to drip listlessly on the earth. Ahead the outer gray offered sparse gunfire of inconsistent caliber and cries of agony and of despair. Michael found the manor a ruined home to only the mutilated dying and dead. A fire burned in the atrium around the blast-twisted portal to the tower. Half alight a flame-disrobed slave dragged himself toward a slower death.

Michael grabbed the figure's cuff and yanked him out of that dying fire. "What happened here?"

The eyes baleful wreathed in a tattoo barely discernible on skin charred and oozing considered this monster while the mouth wordless moved as if to remember its former lessons. A gunshot in some remote wing of the place reached their ears and Michael stood and left the slave to die.

Michael started up the stairs of atrium when a raspy voice called his name from behind. There in the flame-tongued orifice stood Doctor Chambers supporting Addison Howard.

"What happened here?" asked the monster.

The doctor stood silent.

"We let something loose." said Addison.

"We need to get out of here." said the doctor.

"No. We need to stop him."

"Who?"

"Smith."

"Who is Smith? Dammit we have no time for this. Mind her, will you?" He left Addison swaying. "I'm leaving."

Past three paintings he stalked into an unlit hall and over

halves of people. Somewhere ahead gunshots were exchanged. The doctor spied into the guest commons or perhaps butchery where stood a wild-eyed beast watching him. "Don't." said the beast before Chambers reached for his revolver. The beast smiled. "The incontrovertibility of violence is fascinating, perhaps most fascinating to minds most accustomed to reason."

Chambers scowled. "You caught me. What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. You don't look like one of them."

The doctor trapped by those mad eyes stood helplessly for a long moment. "May I pass and retrieve my things?"

"You may." Carnage near his feet moaned and he shot it. "I can't bear to hear suffering," said the beast.

Chambers quivering could not walk but slowly his head began to shake left and right. "So you kill for mercy?"

"No."

Rooted Chambers shrugged slightly. "Yes, I suppose man has to be either an anvil or a hammer."

"You think so? Man is not man if he is a tool. He must be the blacksmith." The beast looked into the dark

passage from which the doctor had emerged. ``I must be on my way.'' He trotted down another unlit hall.

Chambers stood through a few mute minutes then retrieved his briefcase and from it a small power supply. He unpocketed the recorder and set to reviving it. But his eyes fell on that door magically sealed the evening before. He rose and threw his weight into it. He rattled as much as did the door and stood panting. From a corpse he took an axe and cut away the knob and bolt and looked into the unlit and empty space beyond. A few palates leaned against the peeling walls.

He collapsed gray and continued his tinkering amid the gore.

Michael crouched animal beside the incoherent Addison and they watched the petty fires die. She drew forth a note and read:

``Dear Michael Reeves:

You distinguished yourself in my service in the expedition to Drakensberg, and I wish once more to hire-``

``How do you have my summon?''

She giggled dully and returned the thing to her pocket then withdrew another.

“Dear Addison Howard:

I have recently studied your paranormal works, and am quite impressed at the rigorousness of your investigations. I ask your aid and offer you the case study of a lifetime; my experiments, though devised to be completely secular, have touched on something unexpected: something beyond the mundane. There is some higher power at work here, and you would be the one to find it and you would be the one to be our mediator. I trust you are familiar with the mythos of Yskethoth and the legendary *Laws of the Unscient*. This matter is-“

A band of crazed cultists entered the atrium. Addison’s cold hand halted Michael when he made to rise. She shook her head frightfully and they crouched in the dark of the tower.

“He went in here last I saw.” said one of them. And dumbly they filed into the hall past three paintings.

Now alone Michael asked: “Is that the way underground?”

“No.”

“Do you know the way?”

“I know one way.”

“Will you show me?”

“You don’t want to go down there.”

One of the slaves tattooed weird with outlandish symbols shot the doctor on sight. The old man fell on the bloodspattered plastic wrap of a settee and watched them search the rooms and leave without word.

“He’s got to be down here somewhere. He’s got to be in the ritual chamber.” Michael’s voice sonorous among the watery spaces and grotesque stalactites traveled far and mixed with those splashing footsteps from somewhere deep. Addison descended slowly to stand footsoaked and trembling in the reddish lighterflame.

Again Michael charged into that formless and noisome labyrinth. Addison trailed him clutching her despoiled innards and crying for something else she could not name. Inchoate laughter goaded them on through the darkness and then began those headless tunes that could never be called melody. Michael ran and fell into a speleothemic arcade and

reeled nauseous before the unlit cloister where gibbered something sightless and unseeable. He wheezed and looked into that black beyond the dripping columns as the thing's witless mouthings grew and grew to an outworldly yowling that spoke of those watery deeps where rains forever the detritus of higher world. Reeves wretched and turned for the first portal to escape from that place.

Addison fell into the brackish water there and gulped and wrestled something perhaps an alp that fell upon her. The thing bounced her like a toy in the water and she crawled and grinded her face against submerged rocks. Then alone she rose and watched the black until she beheld the vague figure impish shyly returning her gaze. She meant to recite an incantation of warding but her torn lips bubbled warm and coppery syrup and could not speak. She screamed witlessly and chased the giggling thing through the black.

Doctor Chambers fumbled madly with his gadgetry as his panicked heart pushed blood from his neck at least thrice per second and he cried and cackled and started the recorder's projection and died.

Pursued by cadences of the mad and that yowl Michael bowled through caverns unlit save his sputtering flame. And those years silent and crushingly finite proceeded around him measured perhaps forever by indifferent drips and drips into the muddy and foul pools and onto the inchoate speleothemic growths that would laugh at those ephemeral and trivial forms they could never know or name as life. And the unseen voices infinite, not many but without number, malformed and smutty hooted and blasphemed beyond a portal's shape projected by some firelight within and Michael knew this was the site of their dinner or orgy and shaking madly he shouldered his shotgun and staggered fore.

But Addison's alp or imp never was and left alone by her dark imaginings she collapsed there in the interstices of the earth and did cry and bubble to no ears and if not bled, starved to obscurity.

A gunshot sounded ahead and Michael's eye grew wide in the silence as he approached that portal. Sparse crashes and grunts and moans met his ears and he rounded the corner. Among a few crates and unused timbers Smith

decapitated the last murderous slave with a machete slash and he turned his back to his growing arson and faced the monster and dropped his blade. They stood long with Michael's barrels trained on Smith as the flames blackened and consumed the structure around and above.

"What are you doing?" Michael trembled.

"I'm burning them. They didn't deserve any of it. They rode in on the backs of great men past and they stole and ate until it all wilted away."

Michael dropped his weapon and hobbled forward one step.

"Now these mountains are clean." Smith turned as if to go.

"Wait, Smith."

The man looked over his shoulder.

"Where are you going?"

"Up and out. Come with."

"I can't." And Michael toppled and wept and removed his crucifix from his pocket and threw it into the spreading flames. He lost sight of it in the embers and the timbers began to creak and part of the ceiling fell across

the corpse of one of the sorcerers. When Michael later looked up Smith was gone.

The recording played without audience.

“For at least ten thousand thousand thousand years the world had spun dead. Each second or hour was and is as real and as full as the previous and the following. Then for three thousand thousand thousand years dumb our ancestors bubbled. Beneath shallow waters here once wriggled fauna betentacled and jawless among poriferae and cnidaria and others. As days then uncounted passed they danced for power through unnumbered forms. Some were reapers, others reaped. Those victorious had no assurance to remain so. Each destruction was and is triumph and each extinction was and is space luminous for those that live by love of existence their entire being through. The worldly master the world.”

The recording's ghost of the professor sat silent for a moment. “You you have no need to lecture me on this; I am a scientist after all. Your claims may apply to those small and mindless forms of the past but we have transcended that brutal life. It is unconscionable.”

Smith turned easily. "You say brutality is unconscionable?"

"Yes. Now we have more enlightened ways of ensuring our survival. Brutality does nothing but upset order."

"You called me to save you from your order."

"My system merely got out of hand! Once the others arrive we'll be able to reign in the slaves again."

The man watched him long. "Your dominion will forever be unsound. You are father to a cult of death-worshippers trapped with and by your slaves under the whim of a few charismatic children. At the wave of a hand they could have you killed and your observatory sacked. Even if we break them, you will forever be at the mercy of any magician who may come to this mob. Your life is forfeit."

"Have you seen the world out there? I have to hold this together. There is nothing else left. In times like this, no one owns himself."

"That is unconscionable." And the man turned and left the view of the recorder. Rutherford stared sullenly at that thing in the corner then rose and curtained it. He returned quivering to his chair for minutes clutching spasmodically his armrests. A sob erupted and Rutherford

crumpled forward and snatched a pen from the table. This he jabbed into his eyesocket. Then the other. His mouth hung agape and issued a ghastly moan under the red drips. He stabbed his own throat and the pen slipped from his bloody fingers. He fell to the floor and began accumulating a puddle.

The mercury sky departed as a scroll when it is rolled together and the sun touched those ancient peaks and the curling columns of smoke rising about Munro University. Smith walked in solitude a mountain path until he felt the radiant evening light on his face and he sat against a vaguely warm rock and felt the shy winds play with his hair and sing indifferently in the limbs of a long dead oak near. There he brought out his bedroll and sat until and through the night.

There is said to be a place where a man can walk up a hill that grows ever steeper until he stands inverted and may walk and sing or talk and drink around those small campfires on the sky. Smith laughed slightly at this thought then cried.

The next morning he rose stiffly and looked over the foggy mountains. He traveled on to walk paths halcyon.

The wretched wish and beg and babble and lie for a world like them, malevolent or kind or petty or anything but that terrible inhumanity so awesome as a cold sea seen from beaches of an island alone. But the great listen forever in awe to that sea and are brave enough to never imagine having heard a word.