

**Jimland
Reports
Volume 6**

By Jim Wright
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Report 251 - In Their Own Words, Pudding Expedition Report 1.

Date: 2004-11-15

In Their Own Words, Pudding Expedition Report 1.

Miss Pudding began her life as daughter and heir to the famous Pudding fortune. Born in Boston and going to the most prestigious schools, she graduated Harvard with a Master's Degree in Botany. A life long dream was to go to the coasts of Jimland and study the most unique plant forms before presenting her thesis and achieving her Doctorate. Due to her wealth and standing there would certainly be no danger involved as she would fund the parties that would beat the brush for her rare daisies. She would stay, of course, as guest to the Sultan of Jimland, filling her day with parties, light study, and the occasional social picnic.

Luck did not shine on Miss Pudding however, for her evil nephew Asmodeus Pudding gained control of the family fortune. As Miss Pudding dallied away the summer her nephew blew the fortune and left her penniless in Jimland.

Selling her jewelry and other luxuries she gathered enough cash to fund an Expedition into the Wilds of Jimland where she vowed to recover the family fortune through her exciting finds or perish in the attempt. Yankee silver overcame many of the prejudices of her being a woman and before long an Expedition was kitted out.

The Explorers were:

Miss Pudding	save 18	shoot 7	melee 3	Interpret 5
Mr. Winston	save 10	shoot 8	melee 5	Scout 10
Lt. Quimby	save 10	shoot 8	melee 5	Hunter 10

Other members of the Expedition include 3 soldiers, 6 food bearers, and 3 trade bearers. Remaining cash on hand of \$4.

Mr. Winston is a scout from the Deep South who smokes and drinks a lot.

Lieutenant Quimby is an English officer sent to see the Sultan of Jimland on military matters. Falling in love with Miss Pudding, he could do nothing but escort her after he failed to convince her not to go.

Miss Pudding's Diary

Day One

The day started quite cool and overcast for this wretched land and before long a sinister fog rolled in. The porters seemed quite agitated and Mr. Winston advised us to stay put. Mr. Quimby tried for the last time to get me to call off this foolishness, yet I held fast. I guess we shall wait for tomorrow. We ate some precious rations.

Day Two

The next day was indeed better as we traveled through lush jungle, but found nothing of note. About midday as we pressed on, a delightful young porter named Nabobo stopped to take care of business assuring all he would catch up. He was never seen again. We however toasted Nabobo that night and wished him well as we ate our second ration.

Day Three

The next day was still this horrid humid jungle. We had somehow stumbled upon this ancient native graveyard where the corpses were buried in small crude mounds of clay stone. A glint of Gold sobered Mr. Winston immediately and he pulled from the soil a fantastic burial mask. When I brought up the idea that it might be taboo to remove such a thing, Mr. Winston assured me that well paying museums are both taboo and tax-free.

After lunch we met our first band of natives, eight in all and variously armed. Lt. Quimby offered them a delightful array of beads, while I tried to communicate our good intentions. The natives looked confused and left with our gifts. Lt. Quimby later, and with some reserve, asked why I chose French. "It was obvious indeed they did not know English," I replied, which put him to some thought.

Day Four

Today started on a most trying note, as Mr. Winston took to his medicine early, as we trekked through even more jungle. He took up the most frightful argument with Lt. Quimby about spirits and their consumption and as he turned away literally disappeared from sight with a yelp! It seems Mr. Winston had fallen down an old well! This well not only was the first of many signs of an ancient city, but did a delightful job sobering up grumpy old Winston as well. As we explored these old ruins we encountered seven variously armed natives, handsome men one and all. When against Lt. Quimby's protests I insisted on conversing with these jungle gentlemen, he quickly gave them a delightful array of beads. They grew puzzled with my attempts to communicate and finally wandered off with their gifts. I must be gaining Lt. Quimby's confidence for though tired he did not question my use of Spanish.

Day Five

Today was indeed exciting in many ways. First, even as we finished waving good-bye to our fantastic discovery of an ancient city we walked right through the jungle and into another one!

This magnificent Ancient City had once straddled a great river and here its remnant still flowed. As we marveled at our luck I sat in the shade to do some quick sketches when suddenly some jungle natives approached. As Lt. Quimby was off exploring, I forgo the usual bead gift and welcomed them in the local language as Lt. Quimby had earlier insisted.

The natives took to a foul mood and began chattering frightfully when Mr. Winston, roused from his slumber in the near by shade, fired a shot over their heads scattering them into the brush demanding they be quiet. In later years he still insists he fired at our tongue-wagging porters.

Later, as we left the city, we came under sudden attack by these natives who ambushed our party. Amazingly, as they charged spouting their pagan war cry's, our party fired and all four of us, including an very stern soldier named Mamba, dispatched four with exceptional marksmanship. This left three of their companions to flee into the brush. Mr. Winston remarked that it was the best High Caliber counseling session he has seen in a while.

Day Six

Today was a ghastly day for some, for two porters woke up with the most horrid sores. Before much more could be done both expired, our porter carrying our last trade and one with nothing. As these were the first losses since Nobobo disappeared day one, I was quite unnerved. To make matters worse, as we buried these poor souls, we were surprised by six natives who meant us harm.

These natives took a different approach with several riflemen taking cover in a dense patch of jungle. Several volleys sent these buggers off, while one exceptionally enterprising native was dispatched by a soldier's bayonet. We still follow the river we found in the ancient city through the jungle. We have eaten the last of our food, but since we have doubled back we should only hunger for a small while before we arrive home.

Day Seven, the Final Day

We have come in full circle to where we started. The day was, of course, all jungle as we gave up the river for good. Mookie, a soldier, ate some odd berries out of hunger and suddenly expired where he stood.

Later that day, Mr. Winston headed off with some porters to bag some game since we had no rations. They came back with an animal that looked just like a cow. Mr. Winston called it "Jungle Cow" and insisted it was a new species. As we lavished him with praise for the first time and enjoyed our meal some Natives came by claiming Mr. Winston had, well, shot their milking cow. Push came to shove and in the end the soldiers chased the villagers off in a stiff fight. Several holes ended up in my dress from enemy riflemen. In the middle of this skirmish a dinosaur burst from the brush and bit Mr. Winston several times yet amazingly he is still with us. The Lord works in mysterious ways. I will go to Church since today is the seventh day and I had a hunch it was someone's cow too.

Thus ends the Diary entries for the First Expedition of Miss Sarah Pudding, World Class Botanist.

Report 252 - In Their Own Words, Pudding Expedition Report 2.

Date: 2004-11-15

In Their Own Words, Pudding Expedition Report 2.

Miss Pudding could not help but feel confident after her last Expedition into the heart of Jimland. Everyone who went out with the party came back except for one soldier and a sprinkling of porters. Her finds had already made a splash in the papers back home and the money began to roll in. Surviving a minor scandal in the Jimville press she and her colleagues began to assemble an Expedition that would go to the ends of Jimland and back.

Already having three explorers, herself, Mr. Winston the Scout, and Lt. Quimby a fine hunter, Sarah decided to hire two. Against Lt. Quimby's advice she hired an Arab called Ali Kazar, Friend of the Bizarre, and his somewhat tamed Baboon, Mr. Frisky. Completing this Party were five soldiers, five trade bearers and ten food bearers. As they assembled the next morning to tramp off into the bush she knew in her heart this would be one expedition she would remember for a long time.

The Explorers were:

Miss Pudding	save 18	shoot 7	melee 3	Interpreter 6
Mr. Winston	save 10	shoot 8	melee 5	Scout 10
Lt. Quimby	save 10	shoot 8	melee 5	Hunter 11
Ali Kazar	save 10	shoot 8	melee 5	
Mr. Frisky	save 13	shoot 0	melee 10	

Other members of the Expedition include 5 soldiers, 10 food bearers, and 5 trade bearers. Remaining cash on hand of \$12.

Pudding had increased her Interpreter Skill by one and Quimby his Hunter Skill by one. Explorers seem the best value because you only pay for them once. Thus I bought one stock rifleman (Ali) and one melee guy (Mr. Frisky the Baboon). Soldiers are the easy choice being so much more effective than Askari thus I bought the max of five. I bought ten food bearers and five trade Bearers to compensate for my leaders poor Interpreter roll. I had \$12 left over and felt damn cocky based on my last adventure.

Day One

Our first day started on a dark note as five natives ambushed us almost within site of the city. Mr. Winston detected this sad little affair from the outset and as these bush bandits rose screaming both Quimby and Winston potted one each. Three others appeared on our right flank and before we knew it Mr. Frisky rushed out and gave one a horrible bite. The other two made the right choice and fled back to where they came.

As we tramped further through the jungle we were in for a horrid surprise. Just after we had crossed a stream the party was attacked by these huge lizard type men with bronze hand weapons and the most scaly of hides. Five of these creatures attacked the rear of our column through the brush and four more assaulted the front. Our fire was most hurried and inaccurate and in an

instant both ends of the column were engaged in a bloody melee. In the front Ali Kizar and a soldier were the first to go down in this swirling scuffle though Mr. Frisky leapt savagely on one of these beasts dispatching it. Lt. Quimby dispatched another with bayonet and at the other end two soldiers killed two in melee only to be themselves slain. As things looked their worst a monstrous scarab beetle showed up and deftly snipped the head of one of these monstrosities causing the last to flee. After burying Ali and the soldiers we all agreed to never step on a beetle again, except, of course, Mr. Frisky who finds them quite tasty as a baboon is wont to do.

Day Two

Today started quietly as we still reflected on our comrades left behind. As we followed the river through even more of this horrid jungle we came upon an amazing site. On the riverbank ahead was the smallest of Dinosaurs basking in the morning sun. As I quietly attempted to sketch this small fellow Mr. Frisky suddenly burst through the surrounding canopy screeching and, er, well began to "Honeymoon" with the startled reptile. A well-placed rock by Mr. Winston knocked the baboon out and the small creature fled terrified into the brush. The porters revived Mr. Frisky. I have decided to name the small creature Alisaurus after our friend we left behind.

As we pushed on we encountered a fine group of natives, nine in all with a mixture of arms. As I cleared my throat Mr. Winston stated that "If I was plannin' to start jawing with these folks, he'd might need a second pocket full of shells". Ignoring Mr. Winston I quietly pulled out the Sears catalogue and opened it.

Lt. Quimby became alarmed at my actions and as the Natives looked on apprehensively I quietly explained. "I have divided the catalogue, page by page, into the various native clans in the area. For example these are the Jinkowzi and I have assigned them the bonnet section. In the margins I have written the few words I feel these gentleman understand."

I have to admit that after the first expedition I had no idea what any native was saying to include Mr. Winston. Thus after my hello, they began chattering with their grunts, squeals and burps or whatever they do and my eyes drifted to the bonnets and I caught up on fall fashions. The key is it seems to them I am actually trying to figure out what they are saying! After they stop chattering I say "Indeed". We then tossed them a bucket of beads and we are "in like flint".

Before the stunned Mr. Quimby could form his objections into words I strode forward and yelled "Shabambo!" Needless to say it was the first friendly reaction we have ever received, and I know what Bonnet I will be getting in the fall.

Day Three

The day started well enough with us following the right bend of the river through the jungle. A young bearer "Bashuboo" stopped for some privacy and in the process fell prey to some Quicksand. When we arrived all we found was a small pile of leaves.

Day Four

When the day started we tramped along the side of the river. We came across some swamp and had to move inland around it losing sight of the river itself. By the time we found it again the day was almost over and everyone was quite out of sorts. We made camp.

Day Five

The day started well enough with us following this river once again. Mr. Winston claims that if the river continues this way it would have made a complete circle. Weird huh? [Not in Jimland. - Ed.] When we stopped for some calculations a huge throng of angry natives suddenly set us upon. There were ten of these bushwhackers, five with rifles I believe and five with spears. The five riflemen opened fire on the front of the column while the other five with spears attacked the rear.

Lt. Quimby ordered us to break through the rifleman at all cost, but things quickly fell apart. The first native volley cut down a soldier. The second turn was worse when Mr. Frisky charged the rifleman to be suddenly cut down along with the other soldier. Mr. Winston dropped a native rifleman and I coldly aimed and fired at one dropping the one besides him. Lt. Quimby missed and suddenly found himself engaged with three natives who quickly cut him down at the rear of the column. The next turn had five spearmen upon my self and Mr. Winston. As I struggled with my pistol I was stabbed several times. Mr. Winston turned to fight several adversaries and was shot in the back by a rifleman.

I dare say at that point things looked grim when suddenly the leader of these rascals reared back and hurled his spear hitting me squarely in the back staggering me to my knees. Transfixed by the spear I slowly gained my feet and, to the stunned natives' surprise, turned and shot the plume off the head of their cowardly leader. The natives fled. The porters slowly approached afterward and with some reserve asked how I could survive such a blow, I then took of my backpack to see that the spear had penetrated completely only to be stopped by the Sears catalogue. It was with great sorrow afterwards that we buried Mr. Winston, Lt. Quimby, Mr. Frisky, and the other brave men. I shall keep these feelings for them in my heart forever.

As we trudged on we encountered a small group of Pigmies. As I looked back on the expedition I realized I had all the original porters minus one due to the quicksand. As my catalogue along with my spirit was out of action, I mumbled the obligatory words and offered some beads to soften their little hearts. When they began to fuss I simply lost it. Drawing my revolver I pointed it in the face of the leader flattening his little nose even further. "The drums speak of the white witch of Jimland and I am she," I said coldly in perfect Native. "I am immune to a warrior's spear and a small man's poison. If you will not barter with beads, we shall barter with your little souls." As I cocked the revolver and stared into his eyes he made the right decision and the Pigmies disappeared.

Day Six

Today we find the river has indeed made a circle in the jungle. I can only wonder what the proper term was for it. [Let's go with circle. - Ed.] I feel we are hours from our starting point and soon a hot bath in the Empress of Jimville will be mine. I was foolish to believe, however, that the jungle was ready to release me from its savage embrace.

As I walked at the end of the column offering encouragement to the stragglers, they struck. Five slavers opened up from ambush at the front of the column while another five opened up at the rear where I stood. As the foliage around me erupted with errant gunfire from the scoundrels, I ordered the Porters to save them selves and vowed never to allow mere slavers see a Pudding Flee. The next volley shattered the stock of my rifle, put several holes in my dress, and cleanly knocked the Pith helmet off my head. I retired in exceptional haste.

Eventually I lost sight of the Slavers and everyone else for that matter, but at the river's ford the survivors met up again. Three porters had been claimed by rifle fire, while another four were lost in the jungle forever in our retreat. In my exhaustion I picked some berries with two of the bearers and suddenly realized my mistake. I spat out my fruit yet the other two were not so lucky. I could only imagine the embarrassment of claiming to be a "World Class Botanist" and expiring over poisoned berries. Two porters had perished from bad berries making nine for the day. I felt very, very tired. To my amazement with all the porters disappearing we still had a bit of food left. That evening we arrived back at Jimville.

Thus ends the Diary entries for the Second Expedition of Miss Sarah Pudding, World Class Botanist.

Report 253 - 11.X - FATE.

Date: 2004-11-15

11.X - FATE.

Julius Flagstone sat on the veranda of the Empress Hotel in Jimville. He was letting his breakfast digest in the cool morning air. The fall weather was beautiful. The air was sharp and the skies clear. He folded his copy of the Herald and laid it aside. A raucous noise coming up the street held his full attention.

The fetching Olivia Fate stepped up to his side. They stood on the veranda edge, leaning on the railing. "What's going on? I heard the racket upstairs," she said.

"Don't know," said Flagstone idly.

Up the dirt street that was the Main Street of Jimville marched a large crowd. First came the Sultan's Guard Band playing some marching tune with more enthusiasm than skill. Olivia giggled. Next came a company of the Guard with bayonets fixed. They were roughly pushing members of the accompanying crowd out of the way. A second company followed and appeared to be in an even worse mood.

Olivia gasped. Flagstone stopped leaning and stood up straight for a better view. Olivia's hand grabbed his. Two more companies of Guards surrounded a flatbed wagon drawn by the ubiquitous Jimland Wild Mule. They were followed by a fifth and sixth company of Guards. On the wagon platform stood Professor Fate bound in chains. Next to him sat his assistant, Max, also securely covered in chains. Neither man spoke. They just looked at their feet.

The crowd jeered and yelled. The Guards pushed the crowd out of the way as the procession headed for the Sultan's Palace. An occasional small stone or pieces of fruits and vegetables came sailing out of crowd. Most missed. Some hit and the crowd roared with delight. The Sultan's Guard roughly pushed on through the growing crowd.

Flagstone watched the wagon pass by. He tried to catch Fate's eye, but didn't. Fate and Max didn't look very good. Flagstone had the unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach that they would shortly look a lot worse. He turned to Olivia. Her face was white. Her hand still gripped his. She turned to him.

"Olivia," Flagstone started.

"I'm ok, Jules," she quickly replied.

"If I can," he started again.

"I'm ok, really. I just wasn't expecting to see that scene, here, today."

"We can try to get an audience with the Sultan. He owes us."

"No, Jules. Let's see what going on first."

"Things may happen fast. You know the Sultan, all speed and no control, especially when he gets one of his enemies in his hands."

Olivia shivered. "It's ok. It was a long time ago. I was young and silly. It was over long before I met you."

"And now?" asked Flagstone.

"Now, I'm older and silly. And I have you." She smiled weakly at him, her face regaining its beauty.

"Well, I'm going to find out what's happening. I'll let you know immediately."

Olivia stood on tiptoe, putting a hand on each of Flagstone's big shoulders. She gave him a solid kiss. "I'm sure the scoundrel deserves whatever he gets."

Flagstone left her side, heading for the British Consulate. Olivia stood watching him. A bright tear ran slowly down her cheek. "Oh, Jules," she whispered to herself.

An hour later Flagstone entered his suite at the Empress. Olivia was sitting on the balcony. She raised her lemonade to him as he walked over. He sat beside her. Olivia looked at his face. She sat the lemonade down and sat forward on the edge of her chair. Flagstone took her hands in his.

"What?" she asked.

"The Sultan has decreed that Fate and Max will be executed at dawn tomorrow for crimes against the state."

Olivia didn't say anything for a long moment. Flagstone watched mixed emotions play across her face. Her hands were warm, her grip was firm.

"I couldn't get in to see the Sultan or Fate." Flagstone waited.

Olivia sat back in her chair, exhaling a great sigh. "If only I could do things over again," she said. Flagstone rose and paced two steps back and forth. He stopped in front of Olivia.

"Olivia, it's not your fault the man is evil," he said firmly.

"I know. It's just that if I could do things over again, I'd."

Flagstone interrupted. "You couldn't change the man, Olivia, no matter how hard you tried."

"I know," she continued, "the thing I would change is that I would have ignored Fate and come to you sooner."

Flagstone stood still, an unaccustomed lump in his throat. Olivia sat looking up at him tears running down her cheeks. Flagstone felt weak-kneed and helpless. He knelt down and put his big arms gently around her. She hugged him closely. She sobbed quietly, shaking them both. Flagstone held her tightly whispering nothings into her hair.

Dusk came to Jimville. Flagstone and the fetching Olivia Fate entered the dining room of the Empress at their usual time. The headwaiter bowed slightly to them and began leading them to their favorite table. Suddenly he veered away and led them to a small private dining room off to the side of the main area. Flagstone turned a surprised look at Olivia. She shrugged. The waiter opened the door and ushered them in. The door closed quietly behind them. Flagstone felt stuffy immediately. He liked the table by the windows. He liked the fresh air. A voice brought him out of his thoughts.

Norton Dullcote was speaking. "And I took the liberty of making sure you were diverted in here." Norton was not alone. Constance Dullcote already had a comforting arm around Olivia's shoulders. Flagstone shook the hands being offered. Norton's first, then to his surprise the British Consul's. Blind Bob and Millie stood at the rear of the room. Blind Bob was wearing a large pistol. Millie was looking a little unsure of things. Blind Bob nodded. He guided Millie up to the table, peeled her off his arm and seated her next to Olivia.

With Millie on one side and Constance on the other, Olivia was being well looked after. Flagstone motioned to the table. The men casually arranged themselves. All except Blind Bob who pushed a chair against the door and sat there. Somehow without Flagstone noticing it Bob had produced a large caliber shotgun and had it across his lap.

"Sorry to change your dinner plans, Julius, but we thought it for the best this once. We feel some explanations are due you and Olivia at the least," said Dullcote. "It's my treat, so let's all enjoy the meal." The Consul nodded and smoothed his tie. Flagstone smiled.

There was a soft knock on the door. In a flash Blind Bob had the shotgun at the ready. He inched the door open, then opened it fully to allow the waiter in. The waiter spoke to Dullcote in low tones and quickly left. Quickly drinks were brought in. Then courses of food made their way to the table. Blind Bob wasn't eating. Dullcote caught his eye. "I've had some saved for you, Bob." Blind Bob nodded and leaned against the doorframe.

The men ate in silence for a few minutes. The women chattered away. Flagstone wasn't paying much attention. Constance was trying to cheer up Olivia who was trying to get Millie to relax who was trying cheer up Olivia. If he hadn't been thinking so hard, it might have been amusing.

A phrase from Constance caught Flagstone's ear. "Norton has talked to the Sultan about it."

Flagstone finished chewing his mouthful of food before he spoke. "Constance, I assume you mean Professor Fate?" he asked.

"Why, of course. What else have we been talking about?"

Flagstone flushed. I better wake up and pay attention he chided himself. He cleared his throat. "Of course." He looked at Norton. "Who wants to go first?"

Norton took a sip of his drink. "I'll sum up if you don't mind." Flagstone nodded agreement. The women had stopped talking. Everyone was looking at Dullcote.

"It seems that Professor Fate has been double-crossed by Tastimin the Despicable." The women murmured, Constance more loudly than the others, saying clearly "the scumbag." The Consul smoothed his tie. To Flagstone everyone seemed frozen in place.

"How so?" Flagstone asked.

"Several weeks ago word reached various parties in Jimville," the Consul nodded ever so slightly, "that Professor Fate was being handed over to the Sultan by Tastimin, well, one of his lieutenants at least, with the best wishes of Tastimin himself. Upon receiving this news, I hired Blind Bob to verify the news and gather what information he could on the transfer. Blind Bob did an excellent job being able to find out when and where the exchange would take place. This information was duly passed on to the appropriate authorities."

The British Consul shifted in his chair and took up the narrative. "I visited the Sultan and during the course of conversation the subject of Professor Fate was raised. The Sultan made it exceedingly clear that he would not tolerate interference in his handling of the matter. The fact that Fate is an American did not strengthen my case for extradition."

Flagstone smiled. "Why would Her Majesty's government want to extradite Fate anyway?"

"To put the man in jail, of course," snorted the Consul smoothing his tie.

"Of course," smiled Flagstone.

"As I was saying, the Sultan made it very clear this was not possible."

Norton leaned his elbows on the table. "I talked to the Sultan next."

"Why?" asked Olivia.

"Good question. I really don't know. I guess I just didn't want to see Fate or Max killed by the Sultan and his kind," answered Norton gesturing vaguely into the air. In the silence that followed Constance patted Olivia's hand gently.

Dullcote continued. "I found out nothing new. Fate and Max had been delivered bound and gagged to the Sultan's Guard as promised. The pirate scum left with a very heavy crate as their reward. Isn't that so, Bob?"

Blind Bob shuffled forward. "Yep. The pirates were Tastimin's crew. They even came in his ship. I was hidden away watching the whole thing. I think I even saw Tastimin, the old bastard himself, watching from the ship through

a telescope." He shrugged. "Anyway, they hauled Fate up and dumped him on the beach. The Sultan's Guard snapped him up and handed over the chest, all polite as could be by both sides."

Blind Bob took a drink then continued. "The Sultan's men kept Fate at a secluded farm. They questioned him for two days. The Sultan even came out to inspect his prize."

Olivia spoke up, "So the whole parade thing was a sham? They hadn't just captured him?"

Dullcote broke in. "The parade was just the Sultan showing off. He had had Fate for nearly a week before he let it be known to the public. He made it sound like his men had tracked down and captured Fate on their own. He got whatever he wanted out of Fate. Now the man is of no use to the Sultan any longer. Tomorrow morning he will be hanged. The Sultan will get his revenge. There is nothing we can do."

"There is nothing we should do, begging your pardon, Ms. Fate. But the man is an evil menace to us all." The Consul bowed slightly to Olivia.

Norton coughed lightly. "I'm afraid I must agree with the Consul on this, Olivia. Please understand."

Olivia flushed. "I understand entirely. I even agree with you. Please, all of you, understand that Fate and I went our separate way many years ago exactly because of what he became. I may be a little sad tomorrow, but I harbor no regrets." She looked each person in the eyes. "Good, now let us move on. This is not a wake."

The mood in the room cheered up immediately. The rest of the evening was upbeat even if slightly forced. Only Blind Bob remained silent and ever watchful.

The next morning in the courtyard of the Sultan's Palace when the sun peeked over the Palace dome, Fate and Max, black hoods over their heads, were marched out and hanged until dead. The bodies were buried at an undisclosed location. Some say they were dumped unceremoniously into the sea.

A party was thrown at the Jimville House of Girls and Casino. Everyone attended. Everyone, but Julius Flagstone and the fetching Olivia Fate.

Report 254 - Fate Meets His Fate!

Date: 2004-11-15

FATE MEETS HIS FATE!

Today, at dawn, the Evil Professor Fate and his heinous henchman Max were executed by decree of the Sultan for crimes against the state. Dear Reader, all we at the Herald can say is "one evil villain down, on to the next." All of Jimland will rest easier tonight knowing there is one less threat to the peace of the land.

As is well know by now, the capture of the villainous Fate was efficiently performed by the Sultan's Guard. Our compliments to the Sutlan's Court Advisor for gathering the intelligence and to the Sultan's Military Advisor for planning and performing the capture. The Sultan wishes us to remind one and all that this again shows that Jimland can take of itself, foreign intervention is unnecessary though foreign investment is welcomed.

Let us all rejoice, Gentle Readers. The enlightened rule of the Sultan is bearing the fruit of victory over the lawless rogues that threaten Jimland.

FLAGSTONE REFUSES COMMENT

Fearless and Famous Explorer Julius Flagstone still refuses comment on his whereabouts for several weeks several weeks ago. Got that? Our reporters have repeatedly asked for answers about his mysterious disappearance and reappearance. Flagstone's only comment is "no comment." Flagstone's constant companion Olivia Fate was more forthcoming, at least emotionally, when she chucked one reporter over the veranda rail at the Empress. Her action was given a round of applause by her fellow guests at the Empress. We are pleased to say our reporter suffered no injuries from the incident. The Herald lodged a complaint with the British Consulate who said he had no jurisdiction over American citizens. The Herald then lodged a complaint with the Sultan's Court Advisor who strongly suggested we leave before something bad happened to us.

Dear Reader, it is obvious to us that the working reporter is a target of abuse and mistreatment from those who should know better. Hey, they are just doing their jobs. We rededicate ourselves to sending our reporters out to get the truth for you, our Cherished Readers. A subscription increase takes place immediately to cover absurdly rising medical costs.

TEXICAN EXPEDITION FINED

The Expedition led by one Texas Bob Bodine was again fined by the Sultan. Bodine was hauled before the Sutlan to received a severe tongue-lashing and a heavy fine. The Sultan warned the hapless Bodine that the next time he placed his shooting targets between his party and Jimville the Sultan's Guard and any interested citizens would return fire without warning.

Several small buildings near Bodine's camp have been cleared and loopholes have been cut into the walls. A half-company of Guards now permanently garrisons the buildings.

Bodine paid the fine grumbling all the way. It is rumored he had to sell his prize pistols to raise the cash. The Herald investigated this claim and to our reporter's near fatal injury found Bodine still had his firearms and even in his bleary-eyed state attempted to use them on our brave reporter. We are relieved to report our reporter reported receiving only minor powder burns and a few scratches from the close encounter with Bodine's six-shooters.

FIRE AT VISTULA VILLA

The Jimville Volunteer Fire Department put out a blaze at the Vistula Villa last night. At first it was thought the entire Villa was up in flames. The actual fire was found to be a bonfire prematurely set ablaze by old festival rockets. The rockets were being fired off to celebrate the demise of the Evil Professor Fate.

When our reporter questioned the wisdom of launching old unreliable rockets in such close proximity to Jimville, Casimir calmly replied the Villa and its land was his and he'd do what he wanted to on it. To illustrate his independence on the Villa lands, Ponatowski had our brave reporter lashed to a tree and commenced placing watermelons on the poor man's head and shooting them to pieces. While we deplore such actions we must admit we were surprised that the Lovely Marie outshot all the men. Of course, she had not drank nearly as much as the men so perhaps this was not a fair test of shooting skills.

We are pleased to report our reporter was rescued by our copyboys several hours later after the party had died down. Our brave reported suffered minor rope-burns and many insect bites and scratches from an overzealous monkey scraping the watermelon remains off our intrepid reporter's head and shoulders.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club says that since its call for suggestions for this year's theme has gone unanswered and they can't think of one themselves they are going with "Science, Fun for the Whole Family." The Herald thinks the theme is a great one as long as none of our families are involved. Memberships are still available. Join up. Join in the fun.

CONSUL'S REQUEST

The British Consul requests those who kidnapped his Deputy-Junior-Under-Assistant Consul to please return him unharmed, or at least return his clothes. They are government property and the Consul is financially responsible for them. Thank you.

Report 255 - Texan Expedition Back In The Field.

Date: 2004-11-15

TEXAN EXPEDITION BACK IN THE FIELD.

Led by Texas Bob Bodine, the Texas Terrors, locally known as the Texicans and other less printable names, headed back into the Wilds of Jimland. It is reliably reported that Bodine had a clandestine meeting with Norton Dullcote. The reason for the meeting and its outcome is unknown. So Far. We are investigating to uncover the Truth.

To make sure that you, Dear Reader, get all the news you need, we embedded numerous reporters in the Expedition. Few of them returned. Here is their report pieced together from the fragments that reached our office.

Day 1

The Texicans marched proudly out of Jimville and onto a steamer chartered by none other than Norton Dullcote, the disgustingly wealthy industrialist. Why would he charter a steamer for Bodine? The steamer dropped the Expedition on a remote shore of Jimland. The shore for miles around was steep mountains right down to the black sand beaches. The Expedition unloading point was the mouth of the Jimbogo River, a typical unexplored Jimland river. [Aren't they all? - Ed.]

Moving off the beach and up the mouth of the Jimbogo, the Expedition marched inland. They found a village. Immediately two very huge half-man half-animal things charge the Expedition's column. One charged the head of the column bellowing loudly. The second charged the rear of the column braying in a terrifying manner. The second was gunned down by the soldiers at the rear. The one at the head of the column closed in and was finally dispatched in a furious fight.

Undaunted, Texas Bob pointed up the river and ordered, "That a way."

Day 2

They followed the river through the jungle. They marched on. They discovered a new species of Large Bird. They marched on. They found a village. A horde of hostile Lizardmen attacked. A strange monster waddled out of the rocks in the rough ground. After a hard fight, the Lizardmen fled. On the field lay a very dead Buckskin Bob. A brief moment of silence was observed, then they marched on.

Day 3

The day was quiet. They marched on.

Day 4

Food went bad. Lots of food went bad. No one was smiling. They followed the river through the jungle. Friendly natives sold them some food. The village Elders were consulted but revealed nothing of value. The Expedition marched on.

Day 5

Drums in the night caused three bearers to desert. The Expedition followed the river deeper into the jungle. Neutral tribals were encountered.

Day 6

The Expedition woke up to find their trade goods had been stolen. Shrugging, they marched on following some river into the Savanna. Hostile natives and hostile animals conspired to attack the Expedition. It wasn't pretty.

Day 7

A much depleted Expedition quietly tiptoed down-river and into the jungle. Hordes of Hostiles attacked again. More men fell. When the firing had quieted down and the attackers had fled, the stunned Expedition found Texas Bob Bodine, his own charming self, lying mortally wounded on the field of battle. Bob's limp body was thrown over the shoulder of a huge bearer and the Expedition continued to head down-river. Thoughts of Jimville were on many minds.

Day 8

Which might explain the Expedition being ambushed again. That and the fact that their scout had been killed on Day 1. Spilt milk. The last food bearers were lost in a ravine. They marched on.

Day 9

Two men at the end of the column disappeared. One of the men was the huge bearer who had been carrying Texas Bob's body. Things couldn't get worse they decided. They marched on.

Day 10.

Extreme heat stopped them from marching. Their food was gone. Their Hunter brought in the day's meal.

Day 11

They were lost. Their food was gone. Their Hunter again brought in the chow and made noises about deserving a big pay raise.

Day 12

The beach was near. The men grew slack. Two bearers were lost in quicksand. The Hunter fell in, but managed to pull himself out with the aid of the red-haired woman in the Expedition. We are not sure of her name, but would recognize her blazing red hair anywhere. A huge force of Dogmen attacked them. More men fell. Very few marched on.

Day 13

The beach was in sight. Crossing the last ravine the only Explorer left, the red-haired woman, slipped and fell. At the last moment she gripped a tree root and saved herself. One of the two remaining soldiers fell to his death. Unbelievably, the woman nearly fell to her death again. She was saved again by a desperate grab for an exposed tree root. [Her roots were showing? Bad, I know, but it begged to be said. - Ed.]

Only the red-haired woman, a single soldier, and a single bearer stood on the beach as the longboat from the steamer beached to retrieve the Expedition.

Our report ends here. Reliable sources report that no one knows what happened to the huge bearer and Bodine's body. Only time will tell. We have instigated an immediate search, as we can't wait for time to tell. It is notoriously close-mouthed.

Report 256 - New Texan Expedition Heads Into The Wilds Of Jimland.

Date: 2004-11-15

NEW TEXAN EXPEDITION HEADS INTO THE WILDS OF JIMLAND.

Led by a new and inexperienced leader, Peter Pureheart, the Texans headed back into the Wilds of Jimland. To make sure that you, Dear Reader, get all the news you need, we embedded numerous reporters in the Expedition. Few of them returned. Here is their report pieced together from the fragments that reached our office.

Day 1

In a less than auspicious start, three soldiers drowned crossing a rain swollen stream on the edge of town. They marched on. They met friendly natives.

Day 2

The second day started no better than the first. A lightning strike from a passing thunderstorm killed three bearers. Hostile natives swarmed to attack the Expedition. Unbelievable monsters from bedtime stories rose from the ground to attack the Expedition. Men fell left and right. When the smoke had cleared and the attackers had fled, Peter Pureheart was found shot very dead on the field.

Day 3

The Expedition marched on. Right into mountains. And they knew they were there. And they left the river to go into the mountains. And this is a smart Expedition? To their credit they found a great haul of diamonds. But would they get back to Jimville to enjoy their new found wealth? They headed for home.

Day 4

All was quiet. [Which is weird all by itself. - Ed] They marched on.

Day 5

They marched on. The end was near. An askari appeared out of the jungle and was gladly welcomed into the Expedition. Friendly natives were encountered. [Friendly, you bet, after giving them 3 trade goods as a bribe. - Ed.]

Day 6

Once again the black beach was tantalizingly near. A huge force of Beastmen attacked in one gigantic wave. The Soldiers and Explorers formed a hasty skirmish line. The Beastmen crashed into the line. And through it. And over it. Does meatgrinder sufficiently paint the picture? The Soldiers and Explorers lay dead in the tidy line they had formed. All save the red-haired woman who was leading the bearers toward the beach in a frantic attempt to escape. They made the surf, boarded the longboat, and rowed to safety. No one else from the Expedition lived.

Only the red-haired woman and handful bearers survived to tell the tale.

Our unusually short report ends here. Reliable sources report that no one knows why only the red-haired woman seems to survive these tough luck Expeditions. What is it they are looking for? Why are their fates so bloody? Who is this red-haired woman anyway?

We have started an investigation of this "Texican" Expedition. Rumors of ties to the Spanish Expedition led by the notorious Don Alvarez and Don Pedro are beginning to surface. The multitude of questions demands a multitude of answers. We will get them for you, Dear Reader. Our investigators will scour the far reaches of Jimland to find the answers. Watch these pages for the Revelation of the Truth.

Report 257 - Texas Bob Bodine Found.

Date: 2004-11-20

TEXAS BOB BODINE FOUND.

Great news for one and all in Jimland! Texas Bob Bodine was found lying on the bank of the River Jim not six miles upstream from Jimville. The Naval Brigade Patrol that found him reported he was alive though "one hell of a mess." Bodine was returned to the open arms of Empress Staff. Lieutenant Klaxton of the Naval Brigade asked for Ms. Scarlett O'Blabber, but was told she had gone off into the Wilds looking for Texas Bob a second time.

Several Ladies from the Jimland House of Girls and Casino rallied to Texas Bob's side to render aid and comfort to the obviously stricken Explorer. The spokeslady of the group said a statement would be forthcoming from Bob when he was strong enough to issue one. The Herald's most respectable reporters were then told to go away as the Ladies brandished several six-shooters. We assume these must be from Texas Bob's spare sets as he was returned to Jimville wearing only his skin.

We await with great anticipation Texas Bob's harrowing story from his own lips.

STRANGE LIGHTS IN THE WESTERN SKY.

Many residents in the far western side of Jimland have reported strange lights and dark shapes in the night skies over Jimland. The Herald has, of course, sent for information from our reliable source in that area. Trust the Herald to bring You the facts as soon as we have them.

FLAGSTONE GONE MISSING?

Julius Flagstone and his trusty Head Scout, Blind Bob, have gone missing, folks. No one in Jimville seems to know where they are. We sent a cable to Ms. Fate currently touring Europe with Constance Dullcote. As yet, no reply has been received. Norton Dullcote refuses to comment on Flagstone's whereabouts.

DULLCOTE, MYSTERIOUS MONEYMAN!

We at the Herald are becoming a little suspicious of Mr. Dullcote. To wit, first Texas Bob Bodine has a secret meeting with Dullcote, then Bodine disappears into the Wilds of Jimland. Second, Flagstone was last seen by our sources meeting with Dullcote, and then Flagstone disappears into the Wilds of Jimland. Seeing a pattern here, Gentle Readers.

So we must ask the obvious Questions. Is Norton Dullcote who he appears to be? Why are Fearless and Famous Explorers talking to Dullcote then disappearing into the dangerous Wilds of Jimland? Why did Constance Dullcote suddenly decide on a "tour of Europe" and leave her Dear Husband of forty-plus years behind? Why did she take Olivia Fate? Why have we heard nothing from the crazy GPE? Why has Tastimin the Despicable been unusually quiet lately? How did the Sultan become involved in this whole sordid affair? We will get to the bottom of this obviously hushed-up scandal no matter the cost. As always the Herald strives to bring you "All the News You Need."

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club is preparing for this year's theme opener. The theme this year is "Science, Fun for the Whole Family." This year's demonstration assistants and volunteers will have to sign a waiver for death, bodily damage, and property damage. Our Insurance Company demands this for all Club sponsored events. To quote our Insurance Agent, "if you don't sign, you can't play, and we won't pay." So be sure to sign the requisite paperwork, which will be available at the greeting table at all Science Club Events. Memberships are still available. Join up. Join in the fun.

CONSUL'S REQUEST

The British Consul requests those who kidnapped his Deputy-Junior-Under-Assistant Consul to please not test his patience. The bones returned in the bag thrown through the Consulate window cannot be those of the Deputy-Junior-Under-Assistant Consul. The bones are a woman's. The Consul says he is growing weary of this whole episode and if his reward of \$5 is not enough, then the kidnapers can just keep the Deputy-Junior-Under-Assistant Consul. The Consul says he will get a new one.

Report 258 - In Their Own words, Bodine Expedition Report 3

Date: 2004-11-20

This just found lying in the weeds by the water-barrel next to the woodshed back of the Main Office, under a rock.

In Their Own words, Bodine Expedition Report 3

Her big blue eyes looked out from under her flaming red hair, which framed the loveliness of her pale, scratched and bruised face as she laid on the crisp, white hospital sheets up to her chin; a riot of color in a colorless room devoted to healing.

Scarlett O'Blabber, the one of three survivors of the Texas Terrors began her story of the first of her two latest ill-fated expeditions here in Jimland. As the legal representative, locally that is, of the Bodine family I nodded to my secretary, to start jotting down, in shorthand, the statement.

"Texas Bob," she started, "was so excited. He told us he had a wonderful opportunity to explore some of the vast reaches of Jimland never before seen by white men. He was a virtual dynamo of activity; planning, gathering what maps there are and organizing. Soon we were ready to set forth."

A nurse entered at this point glaring, rather hatefully I thought, at my secretary and me and administered a pill accompanied by a glass of water to the lovely Ms. O'Blabber.

After her pill and water the exquisite young woman continued.

"Mr. Dullcote had arranged transportation to a then unknown, at least to us, destination. It turned out to be the mouth of the Jimbogo River located amongst towering mountains, on a black pebbled beach. It was quite lovely and our unloading proceeded without delay. Texas Bob even had time to discover a new species of large cat. It was a exquisite creature but quite deadly I'm sure."

Ms. O'Blabber's vision seemed to wander for a second. "Things went badly almost directly after that," she continued. "The first day we found a small abandoned village. We soon discovered why it was abandoned."

"They were huge half man-half bull like beasts. Although I'm not sure beasts is a good description, for their ambush was almost perfect. But thanks to a warning give us by our scout, Buckskin Sledge, we were able to deploy to receive them before they were able to charge home. These creatures were about ten feet tall you see and at first our firearms seemed useless against them. Then, the beast charging the rear of our party finally dropped in its tracks gunned down by our trusty Marine guard."

"Texas Bob, Buckskin, Harry Hunter and I were horrified to find the other monster on top of us in a twinkling, they moved so quickly for such large creatures. It was attempting to grapple with us, I imagine to carry one of

us off - I don't know. At the very last moment Texas Bob put a bullet in its brain and the great unclean beast fell dead at our feet."

Here the beautiful young Texican paused and took a dainty sip of water.

"It appears", she breathed in disgust, "from our search of the village that these creatures devour human flesh, much like the Minotaur of ancient myth. We found no survivors, only gnawed human bones and the hoof-like prints of these terrible creatures."

A young doctor came in and took Ms. O'Blabber's pulse and looked daggers at Betty, my secretary, and I. He exited without a word, but a longing look at the beautiful heroine.

I urged the young woman to continue her tale.

"The next day," she continued, "started out really well. We discovered a new and exotic species of bird, a very large and probably flightless bird. It was all, reds and yellows with blue tail feathers and heavy yellow-green legs."

"Then, just after sighting another native village things fell in the pot again. These creatures, half man half lizard it seemed charged us out of the trees. Somehow Buckskin had not seen them. The poor man must have felt horrible, he met them before they could get to us and was struck down by the charging lizard-men."

A lone tear fled down Ms. O'Blabber's cheek.

"Then," she said. "Things got worse. While we were busy with the lizard-men a strange creature, obviously left over from an ancient and bygone era sprang from the rocks."

The young woman looked at me, seeming to plead for understanding.

"This creature had skin like rock, lengthy black-striped yellow antennae and a long tail with a propeller on the end of it!"

She looked at Betty and I almost in panic and said simply, "It's true."

There was a light tap on the door and a large man in a short red jacket and baggy white pants entered the room almost invisible under the huge flower arrangement he carried. He set the gorgeous composition on a nearby stand and bowed to Ms. O'Blabber then left without a word. Betty walked to the rainbow of flowers and extracted a small card, which she handed to the beautiful patient.

I cocked an eyebrow.

After reading the card and seeing my look the intrepid explorer simply said. "The sultan wishes me a full and speedy recovery."

The break had allowed her to regain her composure.

"Well," she continued, "We watched as the lizard-men surrounded Buckskin, then we saw him go down, rifle empty and being used as a club. Our Marines

dispatched the propeller thing and the rest of us fought and finished the lizard-men."

Her voice hushed and she stared at the flowers as she continued. "We were too late. Buckskin was dead, killed by one of those lizard-men. We found him among their dead, his beloved rifle broken and the blade of his Bowie knife buried on one of the filthy creatures' chest. We buried him where he fell."

Betty and I waited in respectful silence.

After a couple of minutes she continued here tale.

"The next day was uneventful, but the following day we discovered about a third of our food had gone bad. It looked like half rations for us when we stumbled on another village. Texas Bob and I talked to the village elders but Bob was unable to get answers that satisfied him - so it appeared. We bought some food from those gentle folk and continued on. The next day we found more villagers but they were very standoffish so we proceeded on without stopping."

Here, another tap at the door revealed a young man bearing another large floral arrangement. Betty once again took the card to Ms. O'Blabber.

"Constance and Norton Dullcote," the Beautiful young woman answered my unasked question. Setting the card next to the one already on her bedside stand she took another dainty sip of water.

"The next afternoon we began to hear the drums. One could not tell in which direction they were. Since we were still following the river we deemed them to be from another close-by village, one yet unencountered. The drums continued into the night. The next morning there were no drums but we were missing three of our bearers."

"On the sixth day we were again attacked, this time by natives and terrible beasts. We lost two good Marines and all of our trade goods. But most dreadful of all was Texas Bob. He was terribly wounded and lay unconscious on the ground, barely breathing and bleeding! It was enough, we had Conbudu, our largest and most fearless bearer put Texas Bob on a travois type litter and we turned back for Jimville.

"That night we were again troubled by the drums, and two more bearers went missing. Early the next morning more natives attacked us. The spirit of the expedition was broken and the defense poor without Texas Bob's leadership. Freddy Phynnder was killed leaving just a couple of Marines, Harry and I and a few bearers, but most of them fled and Conbudu I last saw fleeing into the jungle with the wounded or perhaps dead Texas Bob over his broad black shoulders, running like a gazelle."

"The next four days were a blur of horror. The heat intensified so that we could not travel, we became lost, then the storm broke and it hailed so hard one of the Marines died from injuries. We were out of food but Harry was able to hunt and keep us from starving. Then on the penultimate day, while he was hunting he fell into quicksand. I tried to save him but I too fell into deathtrap. Thankfully I grabbed a low branch and was able to pull

myself then Harry out of that terrible trap. We lost one of the remaining Marines though."

"One last desperate struggle remained to us. A huge ravine balked our return to the black beaches where the Dullcote's steamer awaited our return. While we were crossing that the Dog-men attacked. Harry held them off while I crossed the last obstacle. Then, when I turned I saw him fall. The dog-men buried him under their assault. The last Marine grabbed my arm and pulled me away from there or I would have died too.

Silence stretched for a time and again there was a polite tap at the door. More flowers I thought. And indeed there were more flowers delivered by none other than Julius Flagstone himself.

One glance at the beautiful young woman's pale form and he turned to Betty and me with the flowers still in his hand. "Get out," he said quietly.

I started to ask him who he thought he was. I stood up and looked him in the face to ask him that question and stopped. Mrs. Fate had just entered the room I saw with a detached glance, but mostly I saw Julius Flagstone's eyes. No, I thought to myself, no, I would not ask him who he thought he was.

Betty and I left - quickly.

Report 259 - In Their Own words, Bodine Expedition Report 4
Date: 2004-11-20

In Their Own words, Bodine Expedition Report 4

The room was the same as the previous week, but its contents were an explosion of color. Ms. O'Blabber's black and blue spots had faded and most of her injuries were down to the "healed" phase. The room was radiant in flowers of every color and description, green plants, baskets of fruit, and boxes of chocolates. Among the riot of color Ms. O'Blabber's stark and simple beauty stood out. The American beauty sat in a comfortable chair dressed in a white antiseptic gown from neck to ankle.

"Hello," she greeted us with a radiant smile. She pointed to chairs obviously brought to her room for this meeting. "Please have a seat. I know your time is valuable and I'm to be discharged this afternoon, so I'll get right to the point."

"As you know after my return from Texas Bob Bodine's last ill-fated expedition I immediately set out organizing another. I was and still am sure Texas Bob is alive. He's out there somewhere badly hurt and I intend to find him."

Betty and I both nodded, Betty's fingers flying as she copied the story down.

"After I had a few days to recover from the last expedition with Texas Bob, I began to recruit another expedition to find him and bring him out of the wilds. Norton Dullcote agreed to provide transportation for me and any others I might be able to enlist to a previous destination I'm not at liberty to disclose."

"I was fortunate to enlist the services of Captain Paul Pureheart, late of the United State's Army Air Corps, to lead the expedition. He further recruited Mr. Wild Bill Watknot, a local hunter and Mr. "Buckshot" Norton another local to scout for us. The Embassy of the United States allowed six of its Marines a temporary leave of absence to accompany us. That with another fourteen bearers made up our expedition. We boarded Mr. Dullcote's steam launch and set off."

Ms. O'Blabber paused and looked at us through her beautiful blue eyes. Tears were brimming but bravely she held them back. "It was a disaster from the start," she murmured. "The only good thing that happened was meeting some friendly natives who helped us gather our gear and treated us very benevolently.

Taking a sip of water the young woman continued. "We lost a Marine and two bearers almost immediately when a canoe capsized in a river we were navigating. Then on the second day while taking refuge from one of Jimland's tropical thunderstorms three bearers were killed by a lightning strike. It was, as I'm sure you can imagine, a very cruel blow to the expedition. Unfortunately, even worse followed. Hostile natives had advanced under the cover of the storm and attacked without warning. Then in the middle of that attack horrendous monsters attacked. Captain Pureheart was killed almost

instantly. More of the Marines were killed and bearers too. I can also report these were not native Jimland folk that attacked us, but slavers from who knows where equipped with modern firearms. It bodes further evil if slavers have decided to use Jimland's native peoples for their new prey."

"I would think," the beauty almost snarled; blue eyes snapping, "that something must be done ensure this abomination does not take root in Jimland!"

"But to continue. We left the river thinking to strike inland. During our search for Texas Bob we came across some rather unusual and very interesting rock formations and brought some samples back. With our provisions beginning to run low because we had lost so many bearers, Mr. Norton began to feel uneasy and so following his advice I decided we should return to Mr. Dullcote's launch and go back to Jimville. We were joined by a lone Askari, one of the famed adventuring soldiers native to Jimland. I was also able to entice some local villagers to give us food and shelter for the night."

Here the beautiful young woman hung her head and took a moment to gather herself.

Looking up she continued. "We were in fact all the way back with the black pebbled beach in sight when disaster struck! Waves of horrid beastmen attacked our depleted column. They were just too many. Our Marines fell. Mr. Watknot fell. Mr. Norton fell. I was able, with the help of Rudi, the Askari, to rally the few remaining bearers and thanks to our gallant Marines and party members buying time with their lives, make it across the beach and onto the steam launch."

Here Scarlett O'Blabber paused for a moment.

"I know Texas Bob is alive. I'll mount another expedition, though where I'll find the money and equipment I don't yet know. But get it I will. Then I'll be going out again. Mr. Dullcote has already said he will provide transportation. We're not done yet.

"As long as one of us still lives the Texas Terrors still exist!"

Report 260 - 12.1 - A SURE THING.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.1 - A SURE THING.

Julius Flagstone walked into the dim interior of the bar in the Empress Hotel. He looked around in the half-light and saw Norton Dullcote waving at him from a corner booth. He waved and walked over. By the time he got to the booth and slid into the seat a waiter was placing cold lemonade in front of him. He smiled at Dullcote as the waiter disappeared to wherever it was he lurked unseen but always ready.

"Don't you want something stronger, Jules?" asked Dullcote raising his drink.

"Not this early in the afternoon, Norton. What's up?"

"No chit-chat today?"

"Not today. Olivia and I have been busy. Got your message just an hour ago. What are you all fired up about?"

Dullcote sipped his drink and winced. "A little strong, I think," he said quietly. He sipped the drink again and did not wince. Flagstone drank from his lemonade. It was refreshing.

"Ever heard of the West Tunnel?" asked Norton.

"Yes. It was supposed to go through the mountains near the ocean on the western side of Jimland. It was going to open trade routes to the rest of the world. The company building it was sure they would end Jimland's physical isolation by connecting it overland with the rest of the world. They worked on it for several years, I think, then went bust. Of the twenty or thirty miles they intended to dig they got through five or six." Flagstone took a drink of his lemonade.

Norton nodded. "Not quite five miles into the mountain or under it as it may be. Still sounds like a grand idea even today, don't you think?"

Flagstone smiled. "What are you thinking Norton?"

"You aren't doing anything really important at the moment are you?"

Flagstone laughed. "I'm not an engineer, Norton. And it's a harebrained scheme. Trying to tunnel through that much rock and dirt. It's impossible. The weather is miserable over there half the year. Monsoons that close to the ocean in the summer, and in the winter snowstorms close the high mountain passes which are barely passable even in good weather."

"But," started Norton. Flagstone went on warming to his subject.

"If the weather doesn't drive you off, the natives will try to kill you off. The tribals in that area are strictly shoot first and talk second types. There's not even a decent road within striking distance of the mountains."

Norton nodded in agreement. "Yes, yes. That's why everything, supplies, men, and equipment, must be shipped to the coast and hauled to the tunnel site. Water transportation is cheaper and much faster. It would take many months, if not a year or two, to build a serviceable road to the tunnel site."

Flagstone raised his empty lemonade glass and saw a flurry of activity behind the bar. A fresh lemonade soon made its appearance. Norton sipped at his drink and watched Flagstone.

"But the road must be built to make the tunnel worth building. You can't have one without the other," continued Flagstone. "If there is no road, the tunnel is useless, just a hole in the mountain."

"Yes," sighed Dullcote.

"And you know the natives have all kinds of tales about those very mountains being sacred, or cursed, or both. They tell tall tales of all manner of evil things and great monsters living in, on, over, and under the mountains."

"Yes," Dullcote said.

"Why, Norton, there's even tales of the mountains being hollow and a hidden city of gold being tucked away inside."

"I've heard that one," smiled Dullcote. "One of my favorites."

"Well, how about the legend of the secret tunnel that leads to the underwater civilization off the coast. Great underwater cities. A whole empire. But you can only get there through a secret tunnel that is full of molten lava put there by the mountain god to protect the underwater city." Flagstone laughed quietly in the booth.

"Except?" asked Dullcote.

"Except what?"

"These tales always have an exception in them so the hero can get around the problem. Always an exception," said Dullcote. Flagstone laughed again and shook his head.

"You're right. The tunnel is always full of molten lava except on the first night of the full moon each month. Then the mountain god miraculously empties the tunnel so men can pass back and forth to the underwater city bringing him offerings and sacrifices."

"I told you. There's always an exception."

"Rather handy don't you think?" Flagstone's eyes sparkled as he laughed. "I wonder if the people bring brought to the mountain god as human sacrifices find it amusing?" Flagstone stopped laughing and turned reflective.

Dullcote waved his hand in the air. "You don't believe all that nonsense do you. This is the age of science and industry, not legend and superstition."

"To some perhaps, Norton. But out in the Wilds, it's still the time of legends and the home of superstitions." Flagstone sat silently playing with his half-full lemonade glass lost in past memories. Norton seemed to drift into lost thought along with Flagstone. The men sat in silence, each sifting their own thoughts and experiences. Finally Flagstone looked up at Dullcote.

"What's on your mind, Norton."

"The tunnel."

"I'm no engineer, Norton," Flagstone said again.

"No, you're not. I am, of sorts anyway."

"So what are you going to ask me to do?"

"I would like you to go to the tunnel site. Take an engineer in my employ with you. I want a survey of the site performed. Find out what shape it is in. Discover if there is a possibility of trying to dig the thing again. That's all."

"That's enough. I've known a half-dozen men who went into that area and none of them returned. You ever heard of the Legend of the Missing Shope Expedition?"

"My dear Flagstone, you're the best. Better than any of those men surely?"

"I don't know. Some of them were pretty tough men."

"All you have to do is lead a small expedition there. Let the engineer gather the information and bring the engineer back. You can land on the coast not ten miles from the tunnel site." Norton seemed excited by the prospect. Flagstone let out a big sigh.

"It's twelve miles as the crow flies, but the crow will either get caught by a hungry pterodon or shot by a poison arrow from some angry tribal native. In either case it gets eaten."

Norton laughed. "Ok, let's say its twenty miles to get to the site. Still, a small, discrete, properly-led expedition might slip in and out without offending the mountain gods, natives, or hungry wildlife."

"Maybe." Flagstone began sucking on an ice cube.

"I'll pay all expenses plus a hefty fee," Dullcote coaxed.

"It's not the money, Norton."

"I'll provide the everything including the steamer to get you there and back."

"It's not that either," sighed Flagstone.

"You can pick your men. No expense will be spared. You can offer them whatever wages you think you need to get them."

"That might help," muttered Flagstone around his ice cube.

"And a sizable bonus for everyone when you return."

Flagstone sat silently staring over Dullcote's shoulder. Dullcote could see him weighing up things. He pushed on.

"No one has successfully explored that area have they?" asked Norton.

"No."

"You could be the first. Think of the fuss the papers would make." Dullcote was beaming across the table.

"Maybe," mumble Flagstone.

"Olivia would be proud of you."

"She's proud of me now, Norton. And now that you bring up Olivia, I must tell you she wants to go on holiday to England."

"This time of year?" asked Norton shaking his head.

"She's never been there before. She says it's something she's always wanted to do. I said I'd take her."

Norton sucked on his drink. "Now that is a problem."

"Yes," Flagstone said glumly.

"You like England, Jules?"

"If I really liked England or any other place better than Jimland would I still be here?"

Norton laughed. "I guess not. She's set on it?"

"Yes. I'd rather go upriver and look for Sheik Fizzle." Flagstone smiled and rolled his eyes. Norton chuckled. They sat silently for several minutes. Then Norton leaned conspiratorially over the table toward Flagstone. He spoke in a low voice.

"Constance hasn't been back to England in a year or so."

"Yes," said Flagstone regretting that single word entirely.

"I'm sure she would be happy to go relative hopping without me. I'm sure that she would love to have Olivia along with her. I'm sure that you can't accompany the ladies this time because I desperately need you here for a business venture that only you can help me succeed in. I'm sure Constance will go along with the story even if she doesn't believe it. I'm sure she will convince Olivia that it's for the best if they just go off to England without us, the silly boys be damned. I'm sure Olivia will back her up. I'm sure you will have some free time on your hands. I'm sure I can find something exhilarating to keep you occupied."

"Norton, you're a dangerous man."

"I'm sure of it," beamed Dullcote.

Report 261 - 12.2 - A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.2 - A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

Julius Flagstone stood on the main pier of Jimville hugging the fetching Olivia Fate. She looked radiant. He was having guilty thoughts about the next few months. A few feet away Norton Dullcote was hugging his wife Constance even as she gave him an earful about not getting into too much trouble while she was gone.

"And whatever you and Jules are planning, it better be over by the time Olivia and I return. The two of you better be standing on this pier when our ship pulls in, Norton."

Yes, dear," Norton said dutifully. "No trouble. Be on the pier when you return. Anything else?"

Constance gave him a stern look and shook her head in resignation. Then she hugged him one more time and planted a loving kiss on him. Olivia slowly let herself be pulled away from Flagstone and up the boarding gangway by Constance. The two women found their way to the deck railing and waved to their men on the pier. Minutes later the steamer was pulling away from the dock. Constance and Olivia waved until they couldn't see the two men any longer.

Bright eyed and rosy-cheeked Constance turned to Olivia. "My dear, we owe ourselves an adventure. So let's have one."

Olivia nodded agreement. "Absolutely."

Giggling together they made their way to their stateroom, the very best the steamer had to offer. "It is our adventure," Constance said, "and it will be a very comfortable, well staffed, first class, blue ribbon, no expense spared adventure."

Olivia nodded agreement. "Absolutely."

Norton Dullcote immediately opened the door of his suite when Flagstone knocked. Flagstone laughed.

"Been standing there long?" he asked.

"No, no, not at all," answered Dullcote looking over his shoulder into the room.

Flagstone looked over Dullcote's shoulder also. Sitting calmly in the suite was a petite young woman with short black hair. She was wearing gray camp pants stuffed into scuffed boots and a light green shirt with the sleeves rolled up. A broad brimmed hat perched on the short-barreled rifle leaning against the well-used pack. The woman's clear hazel eyes watched the two men

patiently. A small smile played at the corners of her mouth. Flagstone decided the woman was pretty and that she scared the bejeezes out of him for some unknown reason. The men recovered their composure and closed the suite's door.

"Susan Bolt, Julius Flagstone. Jules, Ms. Bolt." Dullcote stood as if waiting for an explosion.

Flagstone shook the offered hand. The grip was warm and firm. The woman smiled and Flagstone liked her all the more. This will be interesting he thought to himself.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Flagstone. Mr. Dullcote has spoken very highly of you. Daddy sends his regards." She flashed a pearly white smile again. Flagstone had trouble trying to remember who Daddy was.

"Lexus Bolt? Professor Bolt? The most feared Professor in the Engineering Department of Oxford?" Flagstone reached back in his memories.

"That would be my grandfather actually." Dullcote tried to smother a fit of laughter.

"Daddy is Arthur Bolt, the second Professor Bolt, and now the second-most feared Professor in the Engineering Department of Oxford. I'm the son he always wanted," she said calmly and smiled. The smile blinded Flagstone again.

"Arthur Bolt. Well I'll be damned. I didn't know what became of the rascal." He laughed aloud. "Arthur and I. Norton, there are a few stories about us I could tell," he laughed heartily. "You're Arthur's daughter? Amazing. I'm mean I'm delighted to make your acquaintance. So is your father coming with us," Flagstone said looking around the suite.

The dazzling smile disappeared. A cloud loomed on the furrowed brow of the lovely young woman. "No, Mr. Flagstone, I am coming with you."

Dullcote waved everyone into a seat. "Ms. Bolt is my engineer, Jules. Very qualified for the job."

Flagstone looked at the woman more critically. She returned a steady look. Dullcote pattered at the bar and returned with drinks. He handed everyone a lemonade with ice cubes tinkling in the glasses. He raised his glass in a toast.

"To a successful survey and safe return." Dullcote took a drink. Bolt sipped the drink carefully. Flagstone sat still, looking at Bolt. She returned the look, then shifted to Dullcote.

"Is there a problem I should know about, Mr. Dullcote?" she asked.

Flagstone interrupted. "No. Norton, this won't work. I'm not baby-sitting."

The woman remained seated. She leaned back. "I didn't know any babies were coming with us, Mr. Flagstone."

Dullcote fidgeted. "Now, Jules, don't get worked up."

"Norton, this is not a game. This is dangerous work at best. We might all get killed."

"Jules, we been all through this before," fussed Dullcote.

"You never mentioned a woman before," fumed Flagstone rising to his feet to start pacing the room. Bolt rose and stood in the balcony doorway. Flagstone noted the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. The smile played at her mouth again. She forced it back inside.

"No women, Norton. I won't have it. It's too dangerous. No." He continued pacing. "Constance would skin you alive if something happened to Ms. Bolt. I can't even imagine what Olivia would do to me! No."

Flagstone stopped pacing only because Susan Bolt was standing directly in his path, hands on her hips. Flagstone could have put his chin on the top of her head. He resisted the temptation.

"Let's talk about Ms. Fate for a moment, if we may, Mr. Flagstone." Bolt wasn't smiling. Flagstone nodded and stepped out onto the balcony. Bolt and Dullcote followed him. Bolt continued.

"Ms. Fate has accompanied you on numerous occasions, on many of your expeditions into the fabled Wilds of Jimland?"

"Yes," answered Flagstone slowly. He already knew he was beaten.

"She handles the Wilds and what happens there very well from all that I hear."

"Yes," Flagstone said flatly.

"She is a woman."

"Oh yes." Flagstone smiled. Dullcote muffled another laugh.

"So why do you object to me going on this survey expedition? Because I'm a woman?"

"Yes," said Flagstone helplessly. He looked to Dullcote for help. Dullcote had become very interested in the toes of his shoes.

"Because I'm a young, helpless, clueless burden of a woman, even worse, a woman engineer in a man's world?" Bolt had a little color in her face now.

"Exactly." Flagstone wanted to hide somewhere.

"Well, as Daddy would say, stuff it, Flagstone. I'm going. Get used to it." She stood defiantly next to Flagstone. She looked like she was ready for a fistfight. Flagstone nodded and burst out laughing. Bolt relaxed and smiled.

"Ok, fine. But don't expect any special treatment. There is none where we are going." He watched Bolt. She nodded affirmative.

"And we don't quit except when I say so. And if I say run, you run like all hell itself was after you." She nodded again. "And you pick your own leeches off." She nodded and began laughing. Flagstone let out a big sigh. "Olivia will kill me when she hears about this."

Susan Bolt stifled a laugh. Dullcote laughed and nodded yes. "It won't be pretty. I'll help if I can."

"Right." Flagstone shook his head. "Everything ready to go?"

"Everything is on the steam launch. My personal Captain is aboard also. Bob has checked the supplies at least three times. He's not too thrilled about the whole thing. Just the three of you. You've got to carry your gear plus the survey gear. He's worried about that."

"Good, that'll keep his mind on the job." Flagstone tugged his hat firmly down. "See you on the pier in thirty minutes." He nodded to them and left the suite.

Norton flopped in a chair. "I thought that went rather well."

Susan Bolt's laughter filled the suite.

Flagstone walked down the pier. Ahead he saw Norton Dullcote standing with Blind Bob who was shaking his head. Flagstone walked up to the two men. He slipped off his big field pack and tossed it into the steam launch. He slung his rifle. Norton was rocking back and forth, smiling. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob. He was wearing two bandoleers of rifle cartridges, his largest caliber pistol, and his big hunting knife. Another knife was strapped to his leg. He was decked out in brown pants and a faded dark green shirt. His hat was pulled down low. He didn't look very happy. Flagstone laughed. Blind Bob smiled.

"Expecting trouble?" asked Flagstone.

"Always," answered Blind Bob rubbing his jaw. He nodded toward two women standing to one side. Millie, Blind Bob's girlfriend, was quietly talking to Susan Bolt. Flagstone strained, but could not hear the conversation. Apparently the conversation was over. Millie walked up to Blind Bob. She reached up and pulled Bob's head down to hers. She looked into his eyes.

"Anything happens to her, don't come back," she said sweetly. Blind Bob swallowed hard. Millie giggled. "Just kidding. You better come back." She gave him a big kiss. She gave Susan Bolt a warm hug. Then she turned to Flagstone. She looked him up and down.

"Be careful and bring everyone home," she said. Flagstone nodded. "Olivia wouldn't like it any other way." Flagstone nodded again. Millie stood on tiptoes and pecked Flagstone on the cheek. "Come home safely," she whispered. Then she was walking away down the pier waving good-bye.

"Lovely lass," said Dullcote brightly. Blind Bob and Flagstone laughed.

With a sweeping gesture Flagstone barked, "All aboard. Shove off, Captain."

Blind Bob hopped into the steam launch. Susan Bolt jumped in after him. Flagstone shook Dullcote's hand and jumped the widening gap between the launch and the pier. He turned to Dullcote on the edge of the pier and shouted, "See you when we get back." Norton waved his hat. The steam launch's whistle gave out three loud blasts. Flagstone stepped over the pile of supplies to stand next to Blind Bob at the stern of the launch. They silently watched Jimville disappear into the morning mist.

"I love this job," he muttered.

Report 262 - 12.3 - THE MOLE.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.3 - THE MOLE.

Julius Flagstone watched the coast drift by. The morning mist was still low on the water. Three uneventful days of steaming up the Jimland coast were behind them. The shore ahead had a rickety pier standing out from it. Fourth day landfall, right on schedule, he thought. Four's my lucky number. Then he looked at Blind Bob and Susan Bolt. Maybe three will be lucky too. Flagstone looked at the small pile of bags Bolt had assembled at his feet. He looked at Bolt.

"Which of this stuff can we leave behind?" asked Flagstone.

"None of it. I need it to survey the site, to run tests, to," she started.

"We take only the minimum for the job," interrupted Flagstone firmly. "We must move quietly and quickly."

"But, Mr. Dullcote expects a thorough job done at the site. I need all these supplies."

"Mr. Dullcote will understand, I'm sure." He kicked the small pile of supplies. "What is the absolute minimum, Ms. Bolt?"

Bolt looked sad. "My surveying equipment at least, and my journals."

Flagstone pushed most of the bags into a separate pile. He looked at Bolt again.

"And if your life depended on something in one of these bags which bag would that be?"

Bolt nudged a small beat up bag by her foot. "My survival bag. I never leave home without it," she said expecting a reassuring comment from Flagstone. Blind Bob cleared his throat.

The steam launch Captain tapped Flagstone on the shoulder and pointed. Ahead the mist parted. The pier was closer. It looked unused and uncared for. Flagstone nodded. The steam launch slowed and coasted up to the wooden structure. No one jumped over to tie the steam launch to the pier. The Captain held the steam launch against the pier with the engine's power. Flagstone looked around. The mist still covered them. He nodded to Blind Bob who immediately jumped onto the old pier and briskly headed for its landward end.

Flagstone helped Bolt onto the pier and handed up her pack and rifle. He tossed his own large field pack on the pier. Next he tossed the survival bag on the pier, next can Bolt's journal bag. Quickly the survey transit and sighting pole joined the small pile. Flagstone leaped lightly onto the pier.

"Ok. Let's go." Bolt looked from Flagstone to the tiny pile on the pier to the small pile still lying in the steamer. Flagstone pulled on his pack. He picked up the transit and sighting poles in one hand and his rifle in the other. "We'll carry this. You carry anything else you think you'll need."

He began walking up the pier. Susan glared after him for a moment then hurriedly pulled on her pack and slung her rifle. She stared at the remaining two bags. With a grunt she picked them up and slung them over her shoulder. She kicked at the beat-up old pier in frustration. Before they reached the head of the pier the steam launch was fading into the mist. It was gone.

Flagstone stood at the ready at the head of the pier. Blind Bob was gliding silently toward the half-dozen rough huts that made up the deserted village.

"Expecting trouble already?" she asked.

"Just trying to be careful, Ms. Bolt," answered Flagstone quietly as Blind Bob returned shaking his head in the negative.

Bolt glared at Flagstone. Flagstone merely handed Blind Bob the survey sighting-pole and began walking toward an overgrown trail that barely poked its head out of the edge of the jungle. Blind Bob looked at Bolt, shrugged, and followed Flagstone. Bolt growled something to herself and followed the two men.

Two and half days later Flagstone stood behind a thicket of underbrush looking at the abandoned tunnel excavation camp before him. Blind Bob was off to his right getting a different perspective on the place. Susan Bolt stood impatiently behind Flagstone. She started to walk around Flagstone and into the camp. Flagstone's strong hand grabbed her arm above the elbow. She stopped in mid-stride and gave him a leave-me-alone look. Flagstone knelt, pulling Bolt down with him into the brush.

"Ms. Bolt, you will do as I say or I will tie you up and leave lying in the dirt like a bundle of firewood. Understood?" His voice was low and quiet.

Bolt glared at him and said nothing. She pulled her arm free, but did not move. Blind Bob came silently out of the brush to kneel beside them. He smiled at Bolt. Then pointed over at the camp as he spoke.

"Empty, Boss. Thought I saw something, but it was only a wild mule. It's clear, I think."

Flagstone rose and watched the camp for another full two minutes. Then he bowed slightly to Ms. Bolt and made a sweeping gesture to her. "After you Ms. Bolt. Remain in sight of one of us at all times. Ok?"

"I guess so. Better than being tied up," she said hotly and pushed past Flagstone and out into the camp.

Blind Bob smiled at Flagstone. "This is sure going to be fun." He shook his head and followed Bolt into the camp. Flagstone laughed loudly and followed.

The abandoned tunneling camp was smaller than Flagstone had expected. It was pushed up against the steep mountainside. The whole camp had some twenty rough-made buildings. Some were falling apart; several were just a pile of debris. The rest were in sad need of serious repair. The jungle had clearly started to reclaim lost territory. Two structures were large work sheds that contained an assortment of equipment for boring into the mountain, which were unfamiliar to Flagstone. A third was obviously an equipment repair shop. Another building was simply a canvas tarp, now in shreds, over a wood frame. The open interior was filled with roughly made tables, benches, and stools. Mess hall thought Flagstone as he walked slowly down the overgrown road in the center of the camp. More buildings like the mess hall with rotted cots lined the street.

A gentle breeze made the whole place creak. Somewhere a loose door flapped and banged noisily. The few remaining pieces of canvas that once made the roofs the open sided buildings waved in the breeze. Flagstone stopped in front of the most preserved building. He walked to the door and tried it. It was locked. He stepped back, then violently kicked the door in.

The whole back side of the building had fallen in. Susan Bolt laughed slightly stepping into the building, as Flagstone stood silhouetted in the door. Flagstone looked around. This must have been the camp headquarters. It was of much better construction though something had torn the rear wall down. The place was a shambles as if it had been looted. Flagstone walked around on the squeaking floorboards. He found a safe in a side office. It was open and contained only dirt and a few sprouting weeds.

Flagstone stepped back out into the overgrown dirt road. He walked slowly past the last of the dilapidated canvas and wood buildings toward a huge machine. It sat there large, squat, rusting, and silent. Its great iron wheels towered over Flagstone's head. He stopped and stared. He'd never seen anything like it. Susan Bolt walked up to stand next to Flagstone. She smiled.

"It's beautiful," she said quietly. Flagstone looked at her, then back at the big inert hunk of machinery slowly rusting into oblivion.

"If you say so, Ms. Bolt."

"I do. It's one of a handful ever built. A tunnel boring machine, self-contained. Capable of traveling underground much like a submersible might travel underwater. Hugely expensive to build and dangerous to operate. They are no longer built. It's commonly called a Mole." She beamed at the machine in its discarded grandeur.

"It is?" said Flagstone flatly.

"It is. The Italian government had one, but it was destroyed while tunneling under the Alps. The French government had one, but it was destroyed while tunneling under the Alps trying to show up the Italians. The British government had one, but it was destroyed while trying to tunnel under the English Channel. The German and the Russian governments are supposed to have one each, but no one has ever seen them. This is one of only two privately

owned Moles. Both are owned and operated by Dullcote Industries, my employer."

"I'm suitably impressed."

"You should be. Granddaddy and Marcello Viggio designed it. Daddy was in charge of building them. Dullcote Industries built them all. It leased this one out to the tunneling company. It's beautiful." Susan Bolt stood in rapt awe of the huge machine. The machine just ignored her. It was not impressed.

"I guess, in a rusty, squat, ugly, monstrously huge sort of way," said Flagstone.

"You have no vision, Mr. Flagstone," said Bolt huffily turning on her heel to look down the dirt road through the center of the crumbling camp.

"I don't know, Ms. Bolt. If this thing is so wonderful why did Dullcote leave it sitting here after the tunnel company went broke? I would have thought he would have reclaimed this very valuable piece of equipment," said Flagstone.

"I don't really know, but now that you mention it, it is kind of odd. Maybe there wasn't any X-Rock for the engine," she said matter of factly.

Flagstone jerked his head around. He watched Susan Bolt carefully. She was looking at the machine. He said nothing, but noted to himself that he needed a private chat with Norton Dullcote when they returned to Jimville. Maybe all was not as it seemed. Bolt began to walk around the mammoth machine. Flagstone tagged along. Bolt was studying the Mole more intently. Flagstone was thinking about an X-Rock powered engine designed by Bolt's Grandfather and build by her father for Dullcote Industries for whom she worked. Too many coincidences there he decided. Yes, a little talk with Norton would definitely be in order when they got back to Jimville.

"It's actually in very good shape considering it has been sitting out here in the weather for a couple of years or so," said Bolt. Flagstone only grunted in reply.

They had reached the middle of the great metal beast. Bolt grabbed a handrail and hoisted herself lightly up onto a ladder. She grabbed the dirty door handle and pulled. The door slide to the side with a screech. She entered the cabin. Flagstone followed.

The room he found himself in reminded Flagstone of his brief stay on Nemo's Nautilus. It was full of dials and levers and a couple of voice tubes covered in dust. Other than the dust the room was in good shape. Flagstone smiled to himself. It had to be in good shape. It was made of metal with no windows and a heavy, self-sealing metal door. No stray squall was going to get in here without an invitation. Bolt was examining the array of gauges, dials, levers, and valves. She stepped over to a table that reminded Flagstone of the chart table on his lost steam launch. He stood beside her and looked at the papers scattered about on the tabletop. One he recognized instantly as a map of western Jimland, but it was more detailed than most he had seen. Another paper looked like a time and distance log. The rest he did not recognize. Bolt shuffled silently through them.

"Hmmm," she muttered.

"What?" asked Flagstone.

"If the rest of this machine is in as good a condition as this room, I will report that the Mole is one hundred percent salvageable. Probably we could start it up and drive it away after a little clean up and lubricating."

"Lubricating?" asked Flagstone.

"Oiling, greasing, and the like. Makes things run smoothly." She smiled.

"I understand oiling and greasing. Lubricating. Sounds like something you don't do in polite company. Sounds French."

Susan Bolt laughed aloud and flashed her dazzling smile at Flagstone. "Mr. Flagstone, where do you get these ideas?"

Bolt dismounted from the control room. Flagstone slid the complaining door firmly shut. Bolt continued walking toward the front of the huge machine. The huge metal wheels loomed over them. Must be twenty feet tall thought Flagstone trying to estimate the height, then trying to pace off the wheel's diameter. Bolt stopped at the front of the machine.

The huge drill sat facing the mountainside. Again Flagstone was taken by surprise at the size of the thing. It was slightly wider than the whole machine; twenty-five feet judged Flagstone carefully. It was a gigantic revolving drill-like thing. Its face was pitted and scratched. Its cutting edge spiraled around it from the leading tip to the very outer-most edge. The cutting edge was two feet high and had gouges and dents in it. Flagstone tried to imagine the great drill spinning round and being thrust into the mountain by the great powerful machine behind it. And it was all X-Rock powered. Flagstone was lost in thought.

Bolt was inspecting the drill. She looked at it, tried to clamber up onto it, but slipped off to land with a little thud in the dirt. Flagstone didn't offer a hand to help her up. She got to her feet quickly and dusted herself off, her concentration on the machine never wavering.

Slowly they walked down the opposite side of the Mole. This time there was a door much nearer the front. Bolt again climbed up and into the compartment behind the door. Flagstone was right behind her. He came to a halt just inside the door, right beside Susan Bolt.

The room was immaculate. It was painted a dazzling white. The only dirt in the compartment was that which Flagstone and Bolt had just tracked in. Neither advanced any farther into the room. It was nearly full of a very complicated and at the same time very delicate looking device. More dials, gauges, levers and valves littered the walls and hung off the device. A walkway just large enough for one man ran completely around the device.

"What's it made out of?" asked Flagstone leaning forward to examine the big device filling the room. "Looks like bronze or something similar."

Bolt leaned forward and stretched out a tentative hand. She touched the machine. A loud yell filled the compartment. Flagstone nearly jumped out of his skin. Bolt burst out laughing. Flagstone reddened.

"Just a little joke, Mr. Flagstone," she laughed.

"This is an X-Rock powered engine?" he asked to regain his composure.

"Yes, if I can believe my Father and Grandfather. I've never actually seen one before. It was all very hush-hush at the time and I was just a child." She ran her hand over the smooth dull metal of the device. The touch was like a caress. "Daddy, what have you built?" she said softly to herself.

Suddenly the door behind them clanged shut.

Report 263 - 12.4 - TRAPPED.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.4 - TRAPPED.

Julius Flagstone was knocked into Susan Bolt when the metal door slid shut with a clang. He whirled around grabbing for the handle in the pitch dark of the compartment. A hard yank told him the door had been secured from the outside. He stood still in the dark letting his breath return to normal.

"Ah, ...phooey," he yelled at the door remembering just in time Ms. Bolt's presence.

"Phooey?" she laughed in the dark. She groped on the wall to her right. A click followed. The ceiling was lit with a dim white light. Flagstone found himself nose to nose with the big metal door. He tried it again very forcefully. He strained. The door was solidly closed. He banged his big fist against it. The door dully echoed the blow. Bolt dropped to her hands and knees and began crawling along the floor away from Flagstone.

"What the hell are you doing, Bolt?" Flagstone asked loudly.

"I'm an engineer, mind you a very, very good engineer, who is the daughter and granddaughter of two very, very good engineers," she muttered as she moved slowly along the clear walk-space that encircled the motor device.

"Congratulations," said Flagstone sarcastically.

Bolt continued crawling. "And a good engineer, a very, very good engineer, always believes in redundancy of systems. Looking at this beautiful machine and knowing its function." She stopped for a moment as she squirmed around the tight corner. "Knowing its function I am sure there are other ways in and out of this compartment. Ah. Engineering at its best."

A left hand beckoned from around the corner of the strange device. Flagstone edged his way to where Bolt sat on the floor. Under her right hand was a large plate with eight big bolts sealing it firmly to the floor. Without a word Flagstone went back to the door. Next to it hung an assortment of tool in a metal rack. He selected a big wrench and pulled it up out of its securing hole in the rack.

Twenty minutes later he spoke to Susan Bolt. "Lights, please."

She walked back to the switch by the door. Click. The room was black again with the day's fading light coming up the hatchway. Bolt rejoined Flagstone with her rifle in her hand. He slowly pushed the metal plate aside. Together Flagstone and Bolt looked through the opening. Six feet below them was bare earth. Flagstone put his finger to his lips. Bolt nodded. Flagstone stuck his head down and out of the opening. He looked around.

"No one about that I can see," he said after pulling himself back up. He picked up his rifle. "Stay here till I tell you to come down," he whispered. She nodded again. Flagstone lowered himself out of the opening. His feet were firmly on the ground while the top of his head was above the hatch rim. He ducked and disappeared from Bolt's view. She sat for a several minutes in restless silence, then quickly lowered herself to the ground below.

Flagstone was nowhere to be seen in the evening's fading light. Susan Bolt edged toward the front of the huge machine. She nervously looked around. Subconsciously she inspected the underside of the Mole. A noise ahead and to the right jerked her head around. She crept toward its source. Bolt peered out from under the big drilling machine. She didn't see anything. She leaned a little further out from under the covering machine.

A big strong brown hand clapped over her mouth from behind. A strong brown arm encircled her and lifted her off the ground. She struggled and kicked. She was thrown upward by the force the effort. Her head thunked into the bottom of the machine. She slumped limply over, held securely by two brown arms.

Blind Bob returned to where Julius Flagstone stood in the abandoned tunneling camp. He shook his head in the negative.

"No sign of her," Blind Bob reported.

Flagstone squatted by the little cooking fire and prodded it with a loose branch. Blind Bob squatted across the fire from him, his rifle butt propping him up. He spit into the fire.

"The just keeps getting better," he said flatly. Flagstone nodded. He played with the glowing wood in the fire. Blind Bob poured himself a tin cup of coffee. He did the same for Flagstone.

Their camp was their blankets thrown under the rear of the great tunneling Mole. They sat silently each lost in their thoughts. Flagstone was puzzled. He had not seen anyone when he had stealthily circled the big machine. When he had returned he found Bolt was gone. He had followed her boot-prints to the edge of the machine, then nothing. He was sure she had been captured. He sipped the coffee and shoved some of the cold food off the camp plate into his mouth.

"Taken captive," he muttered between chews.

"Yes," answered Blind Bob between his own mouthfuls.

"Tribals?"

"Yeah, probably. A pity for her." Blind Bob spit into the fire again. "We going home now?"

Flagstone finished his plate of cold food. He stretched in the cool night air. "No. We go looking for her of course," he said with a smile. "First

watch is yours." He smiled at Bob and curled up in his blanket, his big hand resting lightly on his rifle.

Blind Bob spit in the fire again. "Women," he muttered quietly.

"Absolutely," came a muted reply from Flagstone's blanket.

Dawn came with a chill. Dew covered everything. Flagstone and Blind Bob made a hearty hot breakfast knowing they may not eat again for a while. On an impulse Flagstone rummaged around in the equipment repair building and returned with a padlock and keys. He locked their gear in the Mole's control room and handed Blind Bob one of the keys.

"Better safe than sorry," he said. The men returned to the last boot-prints of Susan Bolt beside the huge mute machine. "Which way do you think?" asked Flagstone. Blind Bob knelt by the prints. He studied the ground. He moved off and back in several directions.

"Probably that way," he said pointing directly at the mountain and tunnel entrance.

"Of course."

Flagstone looked at the sheer mountain wall a short walk from him. He knew the mountains that formed the border of Jimland were some of the highest in the world. Several teams had tried to scale various summits, none had ever returned. The mountains came up out of the sea on the west, rose to ice covered peaks for hundreds of miles inland, then circled back to march back into the sea at the eastern end of Jimland. They were very sheer for their size. Geologist could not agree on their make up. They had elements of volcanism and sedimentism. Like everything else in Jimland, they were a conundrum.

The mountainside before Flagstone was only fifteen or twenty miles from the ocean. It might as well have been thousand. The steep rocky slope burst barren out of the lush jungle. A wide area had been cleared for the tunnel at the slope's base. Here the great tunnel opened to them, a great black hole in the mountain. Rockslides had dump scree around the opening, but it was still free and clear. It beckoned to Flagstone. The jungle was quiet. Blind Bob stood with his rifle resting casually on his shoulder. He was studying the mountain slope.

Flagstone walked the short distance the to the tunnel entrance. It was still in good shape. Scree had fallen around the big circular hole, but in no way did it block the passage. Blind Bob inspected the entrance. As Flagstone watched him, he sensed that Bob less than thrilled with the prospect of going into the cave. Flagstone wasn't very happy about the idea either. He reveled in the outdoors. A dark, cold, and probably wet cave did not excite him.

Flagstone walked further into the tunnel. Large pieces of equipment stood silently in the dim light. A small cave-in had littered the tunnel floor with debris. Flagstone stopped at the edge of the light from the entrance.

He stooped and picked up a piece of cloth. He peered into the darkness ahead then returned to entrance to find Blind Bob standing hesitantly outside.

Flagstone held up the piece of cloth. There was no doubt. It was a piece of Susan Bolt's shirt. Blind Bob didn't say anything. Flagstone looked up at the cloudy sky. Occasional drops of rain fell.

"Let's get out of the rain," Flagstone said trying to sound jaunty.

"Ok," Bob said dully. He didn't move.

"I'm not happy about going there either, but we have to. Go in as far as you can, then if you must, you can return and wait for me here," offered Flagstone gently. He had seen Blind Bob do many fearless things. He could feel the other man's fear of the cave in himself. He pushed it down with an effort. Flagstone smiled at Blind Bob. "Let's at least try."

"Ok," said Bob.

They walked into the cave. Blind Bob took a long abandoned torch from a pile on a collapsed table. The light seemed to reassure him. In five minutes they had left the light of the sun behind. The cave walls were pretty smooth here thought Flagstone. No cave-ins. A little fallen rock from the overhead. No problem he kept telling himself as they walked deeper into the tunnel. Blind Bob suddenly stopped and squatted. Flagstone joined him. Clearly visible in the dirt were footprints and marks of a scuffle.

"They came this way for sure," said Blind Bob sounding a little more like his old self. "Tribals too, no shoes, big feet. Say four to six of them. Scouting party maybe." He sniffed the air.

Flagstone sniffed too. A strange aroma was just detectable. He couldn't identify it. The two men rose and continued walking down the center of the tunnel. A gentle breeze sighed along the tunnel. It carried the smell of rain. The other scent disappeared.

The two men walked silently through the tunnel, which became rougher as they went. Flagstone could see they were coming to the area of the last drilling efforts. Blind Bob was still finding piles of torches at regular interval along the tunnel. The footprints they were following never faltered. This was easy tracking thought Flagstone, maybe too easy.

Finally they came to the end of the tunnel. Flagstone estimated it must be early afternoon, but had no way telling. The footprints finally became lost in the rock and rubble at the end of the tunnel. The men sat on the rocks and sipped from their canteens. The tunnel was absolutely still. Flagstone could hear the slow drip, drip, drip of water somewhere in the tunnel. Blind Bob stirred. He slung his rifle over his head. He walked back in the tunnel nearly leaving Flagstone alone in the total darkness. Flagstone pushed his fear down. He swallowed hard. Blind Bob returned with an armload of torches.

"These are the only good ones. The rest aren't usable. I say we go on till half of these are used. If we don't find Bolt by then, I head back. Ok?" asked Blind Bob quietly.

Flagstone stuffed half the torches in his belt and slung his rifle. He pulled out his pistol and checked it. Flagstone nodded to Blind Bob. "Ok?"

"No problem, Boss," said Blind Bob.

"Ever forward?" grinned Flagstone holding up a torch to light it off Bob's.

"Ever forward," grinned Blind Bob. "Damn stupid."

"Damn stupid," agreed Flagstone strongly.

The men began climbing the rubble at the tunnel end. Following the intermittent footprints was difficult work. They made slow progress up the face of debris at the end of the tunnel. Flagstone stopped and grabbed Blind Bob's arm.

"Feel it?" he asked. The two men stood very still.

"Maybe," whispered Bob.

"A breeze, coming from the top. Coming from that behind that big rock at the top. Another tunnel I'll wager. And not built by the tunnel crew either."

"Could be," answered Blind Bob.

The men scrambled on up the loose slope. At the top, they halted. A slight breeze was coming from behind a large rock. The strange scent was there too. Flagstone knew without looking the footprints would lead them around the rock. He looked at Blind Bob who smiled weakly back. Each man pulled his pistol out. They edged around the rock.

Report 264 - 12.5 - In the Tunnel.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.5 - In the Tunnel.

Julius Flagstone edged around the huge rock, his big pistol at the ready. Blind Bob was close behind. By their flicking torches they saw a rough tunnel entrance. Flagstone sniffed. The strange scent was in the air again. It seemed to beckon him on. He looked back over the darkness they had just climbed. He shrugged. Blind Bob gripped his torch a little tighter. Flagstone led the way into the smaller tunnel.

Flagstone was surprised. Though the tunnel was much smaller than the big aborted West Tunnel under the mountains, it was more than big enough for him to stand upright and for Blind Bob to walk next to him. It was roughly hewn from the living mountain. No big boring machines here; picks and shovels and sweat made this tunnel. Both Flagstone and Blind Bob looked for footprints on the tunnel floor. It was too rocky to show a print, but Flagstone was comfortable Bolt's captors had come this way. Where else could they have gone, he asked himself?

The two men followed the tunnel for twenty minutes. They stopped to light a single torch, only one, to preserve the rest. In the darkness they took a small sip of water. The breeze still passed gently through the tunnel.

"Notice that breeze?" asked Flagstone leaning against the tunnel wall.

"Refreshing. Helps," was all Blind Bob said.

"Yes. And it is growing cooler," said Flagstone.

"So," asked a tired Blind Bob.

"I think we are going up inside the mountain, not down," replied Flagstone. "Strange, don't you think?"

"This whole damn thing is strange. Let's get going before I have to leave."

Flagstone smiled and patted Blind Bob's shoulder. "You don't have to go any further if you don't want to."

"I don't want to, but I will."

"You're a good man, Bob," said Flagstone warmly.

"Let's get going before I reach sainthood," muttered Blind Bob embarrassed by Flagstone's words.

The two men began walking up the tunnel again, Flagstone leading, Blind Bob close behind with the torch held high.

It soon became plainly evident they were going uphill. The tunnel narrowed and rose at a steeper angle. The men still walked, but were now in single file and bent forward to climb the slope of the tunnel floor.

A sudden cold draft flowed over the men. Flagstone gestured. The two men flattened themselves against the tunnel's rough wall. Flagstone peered ahead. A stronger breeze was coming from ahead. He shuffled forward as quickly as he could, motioning Blind Bob to stay where he was.

Blind Bob watched Flagstone disappear into the darkness ahead. He wasn't happy about being left alone in the dark tunnel. He tried to take a deep breath. It didn't come. He tried to calm himself. It wasn't working. A scraping came from ahead. He crouched, pistol at the ready. Blind Bob only relaxed when Flagstone came crawling back on hands and knees, thirty minutes later, into the failing torchlight.

"You ok, Boss?" Bob asked.

Flagstone wiped blood off his forehead with his handkerchief. "Whacked my head on a low overhang up there. I'm ok."

Flagstone sat for a minute and took a sip of water. Blind Bob's torch sputtered and went out. He started to fumble around for another on. Flagstone stopped him. "Don't bother. Wait till you see what I've found."

Flagstone turned and squatting low began slowly moving up the tunnel. "Oh, stay low, ok?" Blind Bob chuckled in spite of the fear slowly rising in his stomach. "Wait I have a idea," Flagstone said. He slipped off his pack and rummaged around. He pulled out a length of thin cord. He groped about to find Blind Bob's hand. "Hold on to that end. At least we will stay together in the dark," whispered. Blind Bob grunted back. Pack back on, Flagstone slowly made his way up the tunnel. Blind Bob carefully followed, keeping a slight tension on the cord so each knew the other was there.

After five minutes, it didn't seem as dark to Blind Bob. He blinked. It was definitely dark, but not as dark. He felt the cord bend around a corner. He followed keeping low. Cold air blew over him. He shivered. A round spot, not completely dark showed ahead. It grew larger. It grew still larger. Suddenly Blind Bob found himself sticking his head, then his whole body, out of a hole high on the flank of the mountain. He was outside. He sucked in great cold gulps of air. He sat down hard and didn't want to move. He was outside.

Flagstone sat beside him breathing deeply. "I hate that tunnel."

"Me too," Blind Bob agreed. "Give me the nasty old jungle any day."

"Yep," was all Flagstone said.

Ten minutes later Flagstone grunted and rose to his feet. He stretched. "Ready?"

"I guess," answered Blind Bob without much enthusiasm.

"I found something I think you will like," said Flagstone cheerfully.

"A bottle of strong liquor?" joked Blind Bob.

Flagstone laughed. "No, but I think you will feel better after you see it. Let's go."

The two men crawled on their hands and knees back down the little tunnel. It seemed very dark to Blind Bob as he held the thin cord and followed the unseen Flagstone through the darkness.

"I hate this place," muttered Blind Bob to himself.

"Me too," came Flagstone reply. Blind Bob shook his head and smiled to himself.

Minutes later it seemed lighter again. Blind Bob suddenly realized he could make out the dim shape of Flagstone, crouched low ahead, leading him through the darkness. Flagstone stopped. He pulled on the cord. Blind Bob crept forward till he was at Flagstone's side. Flagstone pointed. Blind Bob was surprised he could see Flagstone gesture. His eyes followed Flagstone's outstretched finger.

Ahead the tunnel had spots of a moss-like thing scattered about. That wasn't strange, thought Blind Bob. Then he suddenly realized what he was looking at and not seeing. The moss was glowing slightly. There was enough moss around to dimly light the tunnel. He patted Flagstone on the shoulder.

"Feel better?" asked Flagstone with an almost-visible grin.

"Much better," replied Blind Bob. He handed Flagstone his end of the cord. Flagstone made a small coil of the cord and stuffed it under his belt ready for use.

Flagstone crouched and moved forward in the tunnel. As their eyes became accustomed to the dim light they moved more quickly. The moss grew thicker and thinned out at random. The light grew and faded with the density of the moss. The air in the tunnel grew colder as the men steadily climbed higher inside the mountain.

Flagstone signaled a halt. He sat awkwardly on a rock with no smooth surfaces. "Lunch," he whispered. Off came their packs. Each dug around for whatever food they had thought to bring. Soon they were silently chewing on dried meats and washing it down with water from their big canteens.

"How long do you think we've being going up these tunnels," asked Flagstone.

Blind Bob chewed for a moment before answering. "Eight hours, maybe more."

"Agreed. We must be pretty far up the mountain."

"Yep."

"I get the feeling this tunnel is not fifty feet below the surface of the mountainside."

"Still enough dirt to kill us both," said Blind Bob not wanting to think about it.

"I think," started Flagstone. Blind Bob put a big hand over his mouth and whispered close to his ear, "Up there."

Flagstone stared farther up the tunnel. A huge shape filled it. Metal clinked rhythmically. The clinking stopped. He heard a sniffing sound. Silence. Flagstone thought the noise of his own heart thumping in his chest must surely be heard by whatever was ahead in the tunnel. He tried not to breathe. Neither man moved. Blind Bob didn't even remove his hand from Flagstone's mouth. Flagstone didn't try to remove it. They sat like statues. Silence. A sniff. More silence. A sniff. Then the huge shape moved off clinking.

After an eternity Flagstone exhaled slowly. Blind Bob leaned back against the tunnel wall. "What was that?"

"I have no idea. I got the feeling it was too big to be friendly whatever it was," answered Flagstone.

"And the clinking noises?"

"I have no idea, but it reminded me of bracelets or small pieces of metal swinging and hitting one another."

"Like Tribal necklaces or charms?" asked Bob.

"Yes," said Flagstone.

"Could be. But that thing was huge. It seemed to fill the whole tunnel."

"Maybe our eyes are playing tricks on us in the darkness," said Flagstone trying to get the vision out of his head.

"Maybe, maybe not," answered Blind Bob dryly.

They sat for several minutes listening intently in the dimness of the tunnel. Finally Flagstone decided whatever it was, it was gone. He nudged Blind Bob. They crept up the tunnel. Twenty yards ahead the small tunnel intersected with another small tunnel. Which tunnel was the main line Flagstone could not tell? The two men crept on as quietly as they could. Light grew bright ahead. Their little tunnel suddenly opened into a much larger tunnel. Flagstone whistled under his breath. Blind Bob just stared.

"Somebody save us," mumbled Blind Bob.

"Let's hope," agreed Flagstone. They shrank back in their tunnel.

The tunnel they were looking at was twenty feet wide and at least as high. Its sides and top were smoothly worked rock. Its floor was polished rock, as smooth as any floor Flagstone had ever seen. Hung at regular intervals overhead were lights of a sort completely unfamiliar to Flagstone. The tunnel was empty at the moment, but Flagstone had a gut feeling it wouldn't be that way long. He pondered moving into a well-lit open space devoid of cover. For some unknown reason he felt much safer in the little dirty moss lit tunnel they were in. He hung back in the opening and watched, hoping he was out of site from all but a determined search.

A noise came up the tunnel. Flagstone and Blind Bob retreated a few steps back into the darkness. They flattened themselves to the tunnel floor and peered out into the large well-lit tunnel. The noise grew louder.

Report 265 - 12.6 - Mountain Cavern.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.6 - Mountain Cavern.

Julius Flagstone flattened himself against the tunnel floor and peered out into the large well-lit tunnel. The noise grew louder. A babble of voices came up the tunnel. Shadows flitted across the entrance of their little side tunnel. Flagstone found himself gripping his pistol butt with white knuckles. He slowly sucked in a deep breath trying to relax. The noise in the tunnel was almost upon them. Flagstone heard Blind Bob gasp. His own breath caught in his throat.

A great eight-legged beast was passing in front of their small tunnel entrance. The beast was huge. It was ten feet tall at the shoulder if it was an inch thought Flagstone. Its hide was a dark gray color not unlike a hippo, but it was smooth and shiny. The animal's belly was white. The beast's legs were the same gray as its body, but its feet were of a yellowish color. The thing was massive. Flagstone involuntarily edged farther back into the tunnel. The thing turned its big head from side to side. Its great thick neck bulged with heavy muscles. Flagstone saw a big mouth full of sharp teeth. The beast barely made a noise as it walked on its eight heavily padded feet. As the thing passed Flagstone saw its large tail growing broader from root to tip. The animal carried it effortlessly several feet off the tunnel floor.

Flagstone had to look twice to believe what was riding on the beast's broad back. A gigantic man sat comfortably, riding the beast bareback. But he wasn't like any man Flagstone has ever seen before. He was dark green. He was over twelve feet tall. He had four powerful arms. His head was deformed. The ears were small and almost tube-like growing out of the side of the head level with the top of the eyes. The eyes were large and slightly protuberant. The nose was a mere tiny lump over two orifices. Huge tusk-like teeth grew from the lower jaw and curved gracefully up toward the sides of the head. The man-thing wore a harness not unlike a typical soldier's rig. It carried a strange looking rifle in one of its left hands, the butt resting on its heavy thigh. A great sword slapped lazily against the other thigh. Flagstone was dumbfounded. All he could do was stare.

The green rider moved on. Several more followed. The last green man-thing held a heavy rope in two of its hands. Following dejectedly in its wake was long line of native men and women tied securely to the main rope. They walked with a head-down, tired, shuffling gait. The first word that came to Flagstone's mind was slaves. He had no doubt. The natives were a mixture of all the peoples living in Jimland. Natives from villages and towns, the Wilds, Pirates from the coast, and Tribals. All looked thoroughly defeated. The slave line passed by the tunnel entrance for five minutes at least by Flagstone's reckoning.

Finally the slave line ended and four more huge green riders followed quietly in the rear, the soft sound of bits of metal clinking together the only noise they made.

Flagstone crawled backwards farther into the tunnel. He bumped into Blind Bob. Flagstone could barely see his face in the dim tunnel light. Blind Bob looked scared. Flagstone imagined he surely looked the same.

"What the hell?" was all Blind Bob could say.

Flagstone nodded. "My thoughts exactly."

"What are we going to do, boss?" asked Blind Bob in an awed soft whisper.

"What do we normally do in these kinds of situations? We either sneak in and out, or burst in guns blazing and hope for the best, or we run away to fight another day," answered Flagstone half in jest.

"I vote for option number three," whispered Blind Bob sincerely.

"I want to see more," said Flagstone surprising even himself.

"Jesus, Boss, wasn't that enough?"

"No. I want to know who they are, where they came from, and what they are doing here?" Flagstone was regaining his composure. "And we are still looking for Ms. Bolt, remember?"

Blind Bob cleared his throat. "With all due respect to Ms. Bolt, I think she is on her own, if you get my drift."

Flagstone clapped a big hand on Blind Bob's shoulder. "What would Millie say?"

"She'd say she was glad to see me alive, in one piece, and not bleeding too much," answered Blind Bob grinning.

"Right. So let's go do what we do, explore. Think about it. This is fantastic."

It was Blind Bob's turn to be sarcastic. "Right."

"Ever forward," said Flagstone slapping Bob's shoulder.

"Right. Ever Forward." Blind Bob shook his head in disbelief, but he unslung his rifle and inspected it very carefully.

"Ever forward," whispered Flagstone again leading the way toward the tunnel entrance, rifle at the ready.

"Damn stupid," whispered Blind Bob at Flagstone's broad back.

"Dams stupid," echoed Flagstone creeping forward.

Blind Bob shook his head again and spit on the tunnel floor. "I don't get paid enough for this shit."

"Me either."

The two men carefully peeked out into the well-lit tunnel. It was empty. It was quiet. Flagstone gripped his rifle more firmly and looked at Blind Bob.

"No time like the present."

"Let's get this over with," was Blind Bob's whispered reply.

They scrambled down the short embankment from their small tunnel entrance and stepped out onto the smooth floor of the large tunnel. The silence was deafening. They looked up and down the tunnel. No alarms. No charging monsters. They could hear their hearts beating wildly.

"This way," whispered Flagstone pointing the direction the slave line had gone. Blind Bob nodded. Flagstone led the way, keeping next to the tunnel wall and being as quiet as he knew how to be. They crept up the tunnel. The overhead lights made Flagstone feel very naked. They walked for ten minutes in silence. Ahead the tunnel clung to the side of the wall as gigantic cavern opened up before the two men. Flagstone tugged on Blind Bob's sleeve and the two men slithered into a pile rocks on the edge of the cavern. They peeked over the rocks.

The cavern before them was larger than any they had seen before. It stretched a half a mile before them. Lights were space around its perimeter to illuminate the entire space. Springs splashed happily down the cavern walls to form several ponds on the cavern floor. Flagstone was surprised again. The floor was polished just like the tunnel floor.

"They built or at least enlarged this cavern," he whispered to Blind Bob. He pointed to stairways and ladders that climbed the walls throughout the cavern. Blind Bob didn't answer; he was too busy looking.

The cavern floor was a jumble of crates, boxes, cylinders, and strange things for which the two men had no words. Towering over all were ships. Flagstone decided they were ships, what else could he call them? They were like two rowboats; one tuned upside-down and placed on the first, with a wooden floor between the boat-like structures and extending some six feet out all around the boat-structures. And they were big. Flagstone guessed one hundred feet long and forty feet high. The width he couldn't see too well from their rocky perch but he judged it forty feet or so also.

The cavern floor was full of the movement of hundreds of slaves. Flagstone tried counting the green-things, green-men as he decided to call them. He gave up. They were all over the place. Flagstone also noted several other men on the cavern floor. These were not natives of Jimland by anybody's guess. They were tall; probably over six feet estimated Flagstone. Their skin was a red color, their hair was coal black. There was also a pale almost yellow skinned group of the same size as the red-skinned men. It was readily apparent that everyone was a slave of lesser or greater degrees to the huge green-men. More than once Flagstone saw the green-men lash out at the slaves, sending them flying. A raucous noise filled the cavern, the noise of slaves, work being done, the green-men barking orders, the great gray beasts snorting and rooting about.

All the work was centered about the three great ships. Flagstone was amazed. The ships silently, steadily hovered about twenty feet off the ground. They

were as still as the rock of the mountain around them. He wondered how they got such big vessels into the cavern? A hatch or two was open in the bottom of each ship. From the hatched fell rope ladders or heavy cables with pulleys and hooks attached. As Flagstone and Blind Bob watch equipment was being unloaded from the ships via the pulley systems. Green-men and occasionally red or yellow-skinned men would climb up or down the rope ladders. The Jimland slaves never climbed the ladders. They don't trust the local labor thought Flagstone.

Blind Bob pulled on Flagstone's sleeve and pointed. Coming down the center of the cavern was a small group. Everyone made way for them including the other green-men. The little party was made of a circle of a half a dozen larger green-men armed to the teeth, their harness glittering in the cavern light. A great green-man strolled at the center of the circle of his guards. His harness was dazzling to see. He walked with the air of one who commands obedience. And instills fear. One of his four huge green hands rested lightly on an ornate sword handle, another on a pistol of some strange sort. Flagstone doubted he could even swing the big blade. A third green hand held two thin leashes that led to jewel-encrusted collars about the necks of two women dressed in colorful silks with jewels in their hair. One woman was of average size and brunette. The other was small with short black hair. She tugged on the leash. The big green leader yanked strongly back. The little woman sprawled at his feet. The green leader let out a loud harsh laughter of sorts. The woman got unsteadily to her feet. Flagstone was startled. It was Susan Bolt.

Report 266 - 12.7 - The Discovery.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.7 - The Discovery.

Julius Flagstone watched Susan Bolt as the green leader walked about the gigantic cavern. It was clear that the creature was inspecting the progress of the unloading of the three silently hovering vessels. Completing his inspection the green leader, his two women hostages, and his guards climbed a stairway at the far end of the cavern and disappeared into a dark hole there.

Flagstone leaned against a rock and sipped from his canteen. Blind Bob continued to watch the activity on the cavern floor. Flagstone tried to think, but nothing came to mind. He reviewed what he had found so far. One, obviously alien ships were silently hovering twenty above the ground in a giant cavern under a mountain with no clear way in or out. Two, fifteen-foot tall four-armed green monsters were riding about on eight-legged massive brutes. Three, the green-men were making hundreds if not thousands of captives work as their slave labor on some as yet unknown project. Yes, that about summed it up, thought Flagstone laughing quietly to himself.

"What's so funny?" whispered Blind Bob.

"I was thinking what I would tell someone if they asked what I'd found here," replied Flagstone with a smile.

Blind Bob thought for a moment. "Don't bring my name up, ok?" he said.

"No problem," laughed Flagstone. He squirmed into a position next to Blind Bob. "Any ideas about what is going on down there?"

Blind Bob silently shook his head. "One this for sure, they are building something over there. Looks like a weapon to me." Blind Bob pointed. Flagstone looked.

Directly under the most distance vessel a very weapon-like thing was being assembled by a crew of a half dozen red-skinned men. A tall cylinder was held up. A circular plate was attached to the upper end. The whole assembly was turned upside-down with the plate now on the cavern floor. A strange Y shaped assemble was bolted onto the top of the cylinder. An oval plate with a slot it was attached vertically to the Y assembly. Flagstone had no doubts now. "It's a deck-gun I'll wager," muttered Flagstone as a long thin tube was slid through the slot in the oval plate to rest comfortably in the saddle of the Y assembly. A few minutes later the assembly crew stepped back as if to admire their handiwork. A big green-man walked up to the device, a gun of some sort Flagstone was now sure. The green-man put his shoulder into an extending brace and swiveled the gun left and right, then up and down. He barked a few words in his rough tongue. The red-skinned men stepped forward to the gun and worked on it a few minutes. They stepped away again. The big green-man examined the weapon again. Then with an upward gesture he gave a short command.

A hook came quickly down from the vessel overhead. The weapon was carefully attached to the hook. Slowly the weapon was drawn up and into the vessel. The green-man growled out orders again. The red-skinned crew formed a single file and marched to the rope ladder hanging from the ship. They climbed the ladder at a steady pace and were soon lost to the interior of the vessel. Flagstone wiped the sweat from his face. It was warm in the cavern. He glanced at Blind Bob. Bob was sipping from his canteen while trying to relax in a half-crouch against a sharp rock.

When Flagstone looked back at the vessel, the red-skinned crew was on the forward part of the deck plate that was sandwiched between the two halves of the hull. A small crane-like apparatus was placed in a fitting on the deck. The crane was swiveled around and its hook was lowered into the vessel. Minutes later the weapon was hoisted above the deck and the crane and weapon were swung around to point forward. The weapon was carefully lowered on to the forward deck area. It was securely bolted to the deck. The big green-man again inspected the crew's work. Apparently he found it satisfactory, as there was no yelling. The red-skin crew went into the upper hull and soon was seen coming back down the rope ladder. As Flagstone watched in fascination, the crew performed the same activity until there were four weapons mounted on the vessel, two forward and two aft.

Blind Bob poked Flagstone and wordlessly pointed across the cavern. A small caravan was winding its way down the roadway that spiraled from top to bottom of the cavern. If they continued past the cavern they would surely pass the spot where he and Blind Bob lay hidden in the rocks. Flagstone considered his options. They could try to sneak back down the tunnel and regain their hiding place in the small tunnel. They could stay where they were and take their chances at being seen. Or they could move somewhere else. He looked around. Green-men were saddling up some of the gray brutes they used as mounts. Must be patrol time thought Flagstone. Sneaking back to the little tunnel was out. He looked for another place to hide. His glance fell on two large tents below and to their left. There were many large crates piled around the tents and several piles of boulders from small rockslides on the cavern wall. The green-men had mounted and were moving slowly up the roadway. The party descending was still a good distance away and nearly a quarter way around the cavern.

Flagstone grabbed Blind Bob's arm and pointed to the rock pile near the tents. Bob nodded. The men waited a moment then scrambled pell-mell down the cavern wall slope. They came to a breathless halt in the boulders behind the nearest tent. Flagstone heard voices. He signaled for silence. Feminine voices came closer and entered the tent. Flagstone waited. The voices left a few minutes later. He grinned at Blind Bob and silently mouthed two words, "Ladies Latrine." Blind Bob nodded but didn't grin. He pointed. A green-man was striding purposefully toward the tent. Flagstone ducked. The green-man walked slowly around the tent looking at the ground. He circled the tent once. He circled the tent a second time carefully dragging a rake-like device that smoothed the dirt around the tent for the space of six feet. Then he was gone.

Flagstone grinned to himself. A simple way to tell if the hired help had wandered off. He crawled back to where Blind Bob was squatting.

"How you doing?" asked Flagstone.

Blind Bob massaged his thigh where Flagstone had once removed a wooden splinter the size of his thumb. "OK, but I'd sure like to either stand up or lay down."

"I'm working on it. That's the ladies room. The other tent must be the men's room judging from the traffic. There's a smooth area of sand around both tents. Don't step in it. The guards inspect it and keep it smooth. It's a dead give-away if you walk on it."

"Right," said Blind Bob gently doing knee bends.

"Go lay down behind those two big rocks over there. You should be out of sight and safe to stretch that leg out for a while. Take a nap too. I'll wake you in two hours or if you start snoring."

Blind Bob nodded and chuckled. "Ok, see you in five minutes."

Flagstone watched Blind Bob crawl behind the rocks. When he was satisfied Bob was safely out of sight, Flagstone turned to watch the green-riders enter the large tunnel several hundred feet above his head. He tried to get comfortable, but decided that was impossible and probably not a good idea. Let the pain keep me awake he told himself.

By the time Flagstone had his two-hour nap, the green-men had mounted weapons on two of their ships and were working on the third. Flagstone squatted beside Blind Bob and chewed some dry meat. The cavern was continually bathed in light. The two men watched as the work crews were changed. The green-men roughly lined up their charges, took inventory, reported it to the green leader. The second shift was put to work. The first shift was marched herd-like up a ramp, halfway around the cavern then shepherded into a cave. Twice more this happened. Flagstone was getting restless. Blind Bob was tired and so was he. The longer they stayed here the more likely they were to be found.

But they couldn't climb out the way they had come. They would surely be spotted as they slowly climbed the loose slope to regain the road that lead into the large tunnel. Flagstone mulled over their options. It was a short list. Even as Flagstone considered their position, a man slid under the tent to his left and began climbing the slope of the cavern wall. There was a slight commotion in the camp. A green-man calmly walked out into a clear space near the center of the cavern. The runaway continued to frantically climb the cavern slope heading for the tunnel. Flagstone hid himself more carefully. Blind Bob was trying to disappear between two rocks.

The big green-man calmly walked to the clear space. He watched the native trying to climb the loose scree. The green-man raised his strange looking rifle to his upper most shoulder and took aim. It seemed to Flagstone the green-man was toying with the escaping native. The green-man took his time. The native kept climbing the slope. There was a whooshing pop and strange whistling sound. The native trying to escape suddenly yelled and stood up. Then he seemed to explode. The upper body blew into bloody bits and the hips and legs tumbled down the slope. The big green-man gave a satisfied grunt and returned to his station. Workers who had stopped to witness the affair were yelled at and whips appeared in big green hands to get the workers'

attention focused on the tasks at hand. The subdued murmuring in the camp regained its usual intensity. The incident was already forgotten. No one went to bury the remains. They lay where they fell till a green-man casually led his brutish mount to the carcass and let it noisily gulp down the mess.

Flagstone and Blind Bob knelt together behind the rocks. Time was running out. They had to get food and water or better still get out of the cavern and back outside the mountain. They discussed their options in low whispers.

"Ok, it's settled. We'll try to slip into the workers at shift change and make our way into their cave. Maybe one of them knows a way out," repeated Flagstone in a whisper.

"Ok," said Blind Bob tiredly.

"It's a dumb plan, but I like it," grinned Flagstone.

"Dumb," agreed Blind Bob.

The two men hunkered down behind the rocks and waited.

Report 267 - 12.8 - Escape Attempt.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.8 - Escape Attempt.

Julius Flagstone wanted to stand up and massage his aching legs, but he couldn't. He was worried because in a few minutes his cramping legs would have to carry him quickly from cover to the middle of a crowd of possibly unfriendly captive laborers. He tried to flex his knees a little. Blind Bob simply knelt and rubbed life into his legs. Flagstone followed suit. It felt better. He peeked around the rock they were using as cover.

The workers of the shift, first, second, or third Flagstone had long ago lost count, had been herded together. The big green-men were busy counting and logging totals on their log boards. The next shift stood dejectedly waiting to be told to go to work. The tired off-going workers mostly just looked vacantly at the ground or into the heights of the huge cavern. The big green-men conferred. They turned and barked commands in their rough approximation of the local dialect. The workers understood just enough to know what to do. The off-going shift began their slow ascent to their holding cave. The on-going shift began their shuffle to their different jobs, some being intercepted and sent to new tasks by the green-men controlling the new shift.

Flagstone watched and waited. The off-going workers bunched up at the foot of the ascending ramp waiting for the on-coming workers to trudge clear. He tapped Blind Bob on the shoulder and whispered "Now".

The two men crouched low and painfully darted from cover to cover till they reached the edge of the crowd. Flagstone pulled off his hat and dumped his pack behind a pile of crates. He hid his hat and rifle as best he could under each arm. Blind Bob followed his actions. Flagstone took a deep breath and left the cover of the crates. He quickly pushed his way into the crowd and slouched a little. Blind Bob was right behind him. Flagstone quickly looked over the heads of the shuffling crowd of tired workers. He slouched some more and pretended to stare at the ground.

He held his breath. It only took one worker to give them away. No one spoke. No one looked at them. One man stated to say something to him, but another elbowed him sharply in the ribs. The herd of workers moved slowly up the ramp. Flagstone and Blind Bob stayed in the thickest part of the crowd. No one was saying much. Dust rose up from the many shuffling feet and hung thick in the air. For this Flagstone was grateful. Any cover was better than no cover.

The crowd moved up the ramp and slowly around the edge of the cavern. Flagstone slouched and looked at his feet, occasionally stealing a look around over the heads of the dirty workers.

"Who the hell are you guys," someone whispered hoarsely?

"Nobody special," answered Flagstone to no one in particular.

"Gonna get us out?" asked a different voice.

"I'm working on it," said Flagstone.

"Bunch up. Bunch up. Inspector ahead," someone muttered to the crowd. It slowed and gathered more closely around Flagstone and Blind Bob. Flagstone put his hand on his pistol butt.

"Don't be using that here. You won't get far," said a voice.

"Relax. Slouch a little more. Stare at the ground," piped in another voice.

"Never look 'em in the eye," offered another voice.

"Quiet. Quiet," whispered another voice.

The crowd slowed and became denser. Some feet were being dragged to kick of the dust. Flagstone slouched even more. His back hurt. He stared at the ground and tried to blend in. He caught a glimpse of big green-man standing by the side of the ramp watching the crowd stumble by. It seemed the green-man was as bored by the whole affair as the tired horde of workers. No one spoke for a minute. They trudged on, past the gaze of the green-man.

"Just a few more minutes," someone said in a low voice.

"Just a few more minutes," someone echoed and coughed a rough laugh.

The herd of workers slowly made their way up the ramp. The dust rose and hung in the air. Flagstone was counting entrances as they moved up the ramp. It might come in handy. At the eighth entrance almost half way around the cavern, the worker started entering a dimly lit cave. It had been recently and roughly carved from the rock of the mountain. It was larger than Flagstone imagined, though as he thought about it he realized he didn't know what it expect. The crowd of workers began thinning out as it went farther into the cave. Men lay on dirt blankets and tried to sleep. Others just sat and stared blankly at the opposite wall. Some whispered quietly together. Flagstone followed a native to the rear of the cave and sat beside him trying to use him as cover from prying eyes. Blind Bob sat across from Flagstone.

The cave quieted down. A steady low drone of noise filled the cave. Flagstone heard a metal gate clang shut. A young native by Flagstone laughed.

"Welcome home," he said looking at Flagstone. Flagstone nodded. Several more native men sat down around Flagstone and Blind Bob.

"I'm Noona, self-appointed foreman for this lot. Who are you?" asked a middle-aged man across from Flagstone.

"I'm Flagstone and that's Bob," replied Flagstone casually.

"What are you doing here?" asked the man again.

"Trying to find a way out," answered Flagstone carefully. He saw Blind Bob ease his pistol in his holster.

"Ain't no way out," muttered the self-appointed foreman. "'Cept dieing." Several men chuckled softly at this.

"Still, I'd like to try," continued Flagstone. "Are you sure there's no way out?"

"I'm sure or I would have tried it by now."

"How long have you been here," asked Blind Bob.

"One year." "Two years" "Three months, I think." "Five years." The answers came from all around. "Forever." "Seems that long." "Too long." "Amen."

"There ain't no way out," repeated the foreman.

"Ok, there's no way out. So we have time to chat for a while," said Flagstone flatly.

"We have all the time in the world," said the foreman.

"Who are these green men?" asked Flagstone in a whisper.

"They's the devil himself," someone said not very softly.

"They are from Mars as best we can tell," said a calm voice several people down the cave wall.

"How do you know that?" asked Flagstone straining to see the man with the calm voice.

"Oh, he's special," laughed the foreman and several men around him. "Oh, he's special."

"How do you know that," repeated Flagstone eyeing the foreman.

"I saw their map room. They're from Mars alright."

"Saw the map room, he did," laughed the foreman. "Saw the map room."

"What are they doing here?" asked Flagstone leaning out to look down the row of tired, vacant faces.

"Getting ready to take over," muttered the voice.

"They've taken over if you ask me," the foreman blurted out. A couple of men nodded agreement.

"Take over what," asked Flagstone persistently.

The foreman laughed aloud. "The world, you fool, the world."

"Right," said Blind Bob quietly.

"See, he understands and he just got here," said the foreman pointing a crooked finger at Blind Bob.

"They're from Mars and they here to take over the world," repeated Flagstone dumbly.

"Right. Now you've got it," wheezed the foreman. "And there ain't no way to escape neither." Several men muttered their agreement.

Flagstone leaned back and felt his rifle press against his back. He shifted it to under his legs.

"Mister, I'll show you a way out if you take me with you," said a soft voice down the tunnel.

"There ain't no way out," repeated the foreman. "Now don't go causing us all a lot of trouble."

"Mister, I'll show you a way out if you take me with you," repeated the soft voice down the tunnel.

"Ok," answered Flagstone ignoring the foremen. "Come here and tell me about it."

A shape rose from the tunnel floor and made its way to where Flagstone sat. Flagstone looked up and his mouth fell open. Standing before Flagstone was a very skinny Big Jake Frere.

"Mister, I'll show you a way out if you take me with you," said Big Jake as he held out his hand. The hand shook as it hung in the air.

Flagstone reached out and firmly shook the offered hand. Big Jake sat next to Flagstone. Flagstone realized Big Jake hadn't recognized him. "Jake, it's me, Julius Flagstone." Big Jake stared at the ground between his feet like he was thinking real hard.

"I'll show you a way out if you take me with you," he repeated slowly.

Flagstone sat in silence. He pointed at Blind Bob. "Blind Bob's here too, Jake. Right there." Big Jake looked at Blind Bob.

"No, my name's Jake, not Blind Bob," muttered Big Jake softly.

"There ain't no way out like I said," said the foreman rising and walking off down the dim cave.

Flagstone looked at Big Jake and felt a lump form in his throat. Big Jake just stared at the dirt between his feet. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob who was watching Big Jake. Flagstone shrugged. Blind Bob shook his head in the negative. Flagstone patted Big Jake on the shoulder.

"How do we get out, Jake?" he asked.

Big Jake smiled at the dirt. "The nice lady will take us out."

Flagstone looked at Blind Bob who shook his head again.

"Ok," answered Flagstone slowly. "How does she do that?"

"Wait," answered Big Jake softly.

Big Jake curled up in the dirt and fell asleep. Flagstone moved to sit beside Blind Bob. Both men looked at Big Jake snoring in the dirt of the cave floor. Flagstone tried to smile. "Still snores," he said with a forced smile. Blind Bob didn't say anything.

"I'm open for ideas here," whispered Flagstone.

Blind Bob chuckled. "Hey, I'm just following your lead. I didn't want to come in here in the first place. Remember ever forward and all that crap?"

"Yeah, yeah. So work with me a little," said Flagstone feeling vaguely stupid.

"Well, for lack of any plan at all, I say we go with the crazy man there," Bob said calmly pointing at Big Jake.

"Point taken," replied Flagstone lapsing into silence.

The hours dragged by. Flagstone was feeling very thirsty, but denied himself the water in his canteen. Not yet he kept telling himself. Handing Blind Bob his rifle and canteen, Flagstone walked unsteadily along the cave. He found a dirty trough of water at the metal gate across the cave entrance. He found the tin cup tied to the trough with a light chain. He pulled on it. No, he wasn't going to break it. He dipped himself a drink. The next cup full he poured over his head. He wandered back to Blind Bob and told him to go get a drink. Blind Bob came back in a few minutes. He sat down heavily next to Flagstone leaned over to Flagstone.

"You won't believe this," he whispered.

There was noise at the entrance to the cave. The gate creaked opened. Voice and other noises started up. A cart was being pushed through the cave. Its wheels squeaked at every move it made. A feminine voice spoke through the dimness of the cave.

"Food, boys, hot food. Come and get it."

The men in the cave held up their hands as the cart approached. Flagstone pulled his hat down low and waited as the cart slowly approached. Big Jake stirred and sat up. He looked dumbly around the tunnel. Then he heard the food cart down the tunnel. "Oh, yeah," he mumbled to himself.

Flagstone hissed at Big Jake. "Jake, is this the nice lady?"

Big Jake looked about in the dimness. Flagstone repeated the question. Big Jake looked in the direction of the cart. He smiled. "Yes. The nice lady."

"Jake, can she help us escape?" asked Flagstone in a low voice.

Big Jake made some strange gesture in the dusty air. "I'll show you a way out for if you take me with you," he said softly.

Blind Bob grunted. Flagstone looked at Big Jake who had become absorbed by the dirt between his bare feet. The cart creaked closer to them.

"Hot food, boys. Come and get it."

The cart was almost up to them. As it approached the men held up their hands. Flagstone could see the woman hand each man a plate of steaming food. The cart moved forward in the dim light. Flagstone averted his eyes and held up his hands. The woman put a thin paper plate in his hands. He could feel the warmth of the food through it. He began eating the food with his fingers. The cart moved two steps forward. Flagstone raised his head to look at the woman.

"Susan," he blurted out.

The woman jerked around. She peered through the dimness. "Who knows my name? Tell me now and you get a second helping." She held up a plate dripping grease.

"Susan it's me, Flagstone," he whispered hoarsely as the hot food burned his mouth. She stood looking at him for a moment, then stifled a sob with the back of her hand. She backed the squeaking cart up two steps. Stared at Flagstone and Blind Bob. They grinned at her. Flagstone pointed to his rifle lying by his feet.

"Hey, lady, you fall in love or something," called a voice further down the cave. Susan Bolt giggled. Flagstone rose.

"Let me help you and we can talk." He pushed the cart forward. Susan handed out soggy paper plates of some unidentifiable stew-like concoction. She didn't look at Flagstone.

"What, what, are you doing here?" she asked quietly. She handed out more soggy plates, ladling the food from a big pot on top of the cart.

"Trying to escape. Can you help? All three of us can get out of here." He stopped pushing the cart for a moment. "Actually, four of us. We're taking Big Jake too." He continued pushing the cart. Susan Bolt continued handing out plates of food.

"Maybe. No one had made good on an escape yet," she said timidly.

"Well, it time some one does. How can we get out of here?" asked Flagstone nearing the end of the cave. Susan Bolt handed out the last of the food and stood looking at Flagstone. "Susan. We need some help here. How can we get out?" asked Flagstone more urgently.

"Give me a minute," she answered testily. "I'm thinking."

Flagstone laughed. "Good. I thought that was forbidden here."

"Ok, here's the only plan I can come up with. I talked this over with one crazy old guy, but he's not too clear-headed so it may not work," she said in a rush.

"Be quick about it," said Flagstone as he turned the cart around. "We don't have but a minute or two."

"You and Blind Bob try to fit in the cart under the food pots. There's a gas warmer under there. The guards never check it. It may be warm. It'll be a tight squeeze for two you. I'll have a hard time pushing the damn thing, but I'll manage. We go out the gate and down to the garbage dump. You get out there and we swim out the drainage pipe and away we go. Wherever it goes. I don't really know. Actually." She giggled nervously to herself.

"Well, that's a plan," said Flagstone doubtfully as he slowly pushed the squeaking cart along. "Got any others?"

"Nope. Fresh out," she replied cheerily. "I've been saving that one for a special occasion."

"Ok, I say we go with it, but we need to get three men out," muttered Flagstone. He stopped the cart, kneeling behind it. He opened the doors at the rear. Flagstone motioned to Blind Bob and pointed into the cart. Blind Bob handed his rifle to a man sitting next to him and gave him his hat.

Patting the man on the shoulder he turned and squirmed into the cart. His head reappeared. "Don't shoot anyone till we're gone. Make sure they're green too." The man laughed and nodded. Blind Bob disappeared into the cart. Flagstone handed his rifle to a man sitting next to Big Jake. The man shook his head. Flagstone looked around. A hand tapped him on the shoulder. The foreman held out his hand. Flagstone gave him the rifle.

"Ain't no way out," mutter the self-appointed foreman. "'Cept maybe now." Several men chuckled softly at this. "Good luck."

Flagstone nodded and squeezed into the cart. He bit his lip when he burned himself on the gas warmer. It was hotter than Jimland on a summer's day at noon in the sun. He immediately felt stifled. He swallowed hard. Susan Bolt closed the doors with a shove of her foot. Blind Bob groaned and Flagstone grunted.

Bolt tried to push the cart. It wouldn't budge. She tried again. She swore a little oath. The men around her in the tunnel laughed. She looked at Big Jake gazing blankly at the floor. "Help me," she said softly to him. He looked up at her with tears running down his face. "Help me," she repeated softly.

Big Jake got to his feet. Together they pushed the over-burdened cart. It squeaked loudly. One wheel refused to turn at all. Still they pushed the cart and struggled to the gate. The two big green guards watched them approach. Susan and Big Jake shoved the squeaking cart against the gate. She pointed at the wheel and the groove it had left in the dirt floor.

"It's broken," she said loudly. The guards looked at here. With Big Jake helping they moved the cart back and forth finally shoving it against the gate again. "It's broken, damn it," Bolt said loudly kicking the wheel. The guards nodded and unlocked the gate opening it wide for her. Big Jake and Bolt shoved the creaking cart through and onto the ramp.

One guard grabbed Big Jake by the collar of his filthy shirt. He started to push him back into the cave. Susan Bolt grabbed the green-man's wrist. The other guard brought his rifle up in a flash. Susan smiled at them both. She gestured to the cart and herself, then shook her head no. She gestured to Big Jake and herself then the cart. The guards looked at one another. The one with Big Jake's shirt in his big fist grunted something and pushed Big Jake toward the cart.

Susan exhaled loudly. She and Big Jake began pushing the overloaded cart down the ramp. It squeaked at every step. The wheel that won't turn dug a trail in the dirt surface of the ramp. Susan glanced over her shoulder. The gate was shut and locked again. And to her dismay one guard was walking slowly behind them.

"One guard is with us," she muttered into the stew pot as she pushed the resisting cart down the ramp. She thought she heard an answering grunt from under the stew pot. The noise of the cart turned several green heads in their direction. But after five minutes the racket had been identified and the guard noted. The cart was ignored for the rest of its slow noisy trip down the ramp.

Reaching the polished cavern floor was a relief for Susan and Big Jake. The cart slid more easily over the surface and squealed much less causing fewer heads to turn. The guard still idled along behind enjoying the chance to get away from the stinking cave-full of slaves. The cart made its slow progress toward the dump at the edge of the cavern by a stagnant pool. Susan gasped loudly as they finally reached the dump.

Report 268 - 12.9 - The Fissure.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.9 - The Fissure.

Julius Flagstone knew something was wrong when the door at the rear of the old food cart flew open. He heard the green-man growl. He heard a loud dull clang, and another. Something large and heavy thudded onto the ground. Bolt dropped the big stew pot beside the unconscious green-man.

"Out. Out. Get out," cried Susan Bolt tugging at Flagstone's boots. He tried to move but couldn't. Bolt pulled on his feet. He slid an inch toward the door. Blind Bob was wedged against him and appeared unconscious. Flagstone strained and squirmed.

Susan Bolt pulled on Flagstone's boot again to no avail. She looked around. Big Jake Frere stood dumbly by looking blankly at the dirty pool of water next to the dump. Bolt reached up and gently took his hand.

"Help me, Jake. Please?" She pulled him down and put his big hand on Flagstone's boots. "Pull when I pull. Ok?"

Big Jake nodded and gripped the boots.

"Pull," grunted Bolt. Flagstone slid out of the cart leaving some skin behind. He didn't care. He gasped for a breath of fresh air. As he sat wheezing, an unconscious Blind Bob was pulled from the cart. Bolt dashed to the pool and dipped out a big pot of water. She dumped it on Blind Bob who began sputtering and trying to setup immediately. Susan Bolt helped him to his unsteady feet.

"What's going on," coughed Blind Bob.

"We are escaping, remember?" asked Bolt as she looked back at the rest of the cavern.

Before Blind Bob could draw his second breath they heard gunfire from above in the cavern. Bolt looked quickly at Flagstone and Blind Bob. Big Jake wiggled around like a schoolboy waiting for the recess bell. More gunfire. They could see green-men running for all over the cavern, heading up the ramp toward the prisoners caves.

"Come on," grunted Flagstone hoisting himself up. Three of them headed for the pool at a shambling gate. Big Jake stood rocking bad and forth. Stopping at the water's greasy edge they looked back at Big Jake. Bolt rushed back to his side and grabbed him by his hand. She pulled him to the pool.

Flagstone began wading toward the far end of the pool. He was heading toward a barely visible arc inches above the water. Blind Bob helped Bolt get Big Jake in the water. Flagstone was now swimming. The gunfire had stopped. Everyone was swimming. Flagstone reached the hidden arch, took a deep breath and dived under the water.

He felt along the darkness with his hand. He found the outlet and felt a small current passing through. He felt excitement surge through his body. The current was flowing out. Bolt had done well. He surfaced in a splash. The other three were clinging to the rock wall.

"There's an outlet," gasped Flagstone. "Deep breathe and follow me." He took a big gasp of air and dived under again. He felt the others piling in after him. Flagstone forced himself down and into the small outlet tunnel. It wasn't very big. He pulled himself along. He got stuck, but big hands from behind pushed him through the narrow opening into a larger tunnel. His lungs felt like they were on fire. He let out some air and followed the bubbles. Upwards he hoped.

Flagstone broke the surface and sucked in a big breath of air. He was in a small cave with about an arm's length of precious air above his head. The other splashed to the surface and breathed deeply. Blind Bob tried to look around, but it was too dark. They all groped for one another. Flagstone counted. All four present. They bobbed in the darkness and gratefully breathed the air.

"What's next?" asked Bolt spitting out a mouthful of foul water.

"I don't know. I'm making this up as I go," answered Flagstone.

Blind Bob was feeling his way around the little cave. He swam two strokes back to the other three. He smiled in the dark. "Two openings, one with water coming in, one with water going out. I think."

"Lead the way," wheezed Flagstone feeling the cold warm starting to drain the warmth out of his body. "We've got to get out of here and out of the water." Everyone but Big Jake nodded. He just looked around with a vaguely happy expression on his face.

Blind Bob took a breath and slipped under the water. The others followed. Bob swam down to the opening and forced himself into it. The water was flowing with him and helped to push him along. He pulled himself along the waterway. He couldn't swim it was too narrow. He head was pounding. He kept going. He found he could stand up and walk. He raised a hand desperately hoping for an air pocket. He hit the tunnel ceiling without finding one. He struggled on. The cold was starting to numb his feet and hands. The tunnel widened to where he couldn't touch both sides at once. The water current strengthened. Blind Bob reached for the ceiling again. His hand broke through the water's surface. He raced for the air.

He clung to the rock walls and tried to breathe. Flagstone's head appeared. He reached for Blind Bob. Big Jake Frere appeared. Blind Bob started to ask a question. Flagstone and Big Jake grunted together and Susan Bolt's head appeared above the water and rolled limply to one side. Blind Bob grabbed her and pulled the cold figure close to him.

"No you don't, little lady," he said taking a big breath. He blew it into Bolt's mouth. Again. And again. With a groan her eyes fluttered open. A faint smile crossed her face.

"We there yet?" she panted, coughing up water.

Blind Bob laughed. Flagstone ducked under the water. A minute later he surfaced gulping in fresh air. There's a bigger cave just a little way ahead. Ready, Ms. Bolt?"

She nodded. Everyone took a deep breath and followed Flagstone under the water. It was only about thirty feet down the tunnel when Flagstone surfaced. The cave was big enough for them to haul themselves out of the water and onto a small ledge. They huddled together teeth chattering, hand and feet blue with the cold.

Flagstone felt around in the darkness. The narrow ledge they were on led off to the right. He untangled himself from the others and crawled on his hands and knees along the ledge. A long few minutes later he returned shivering badly.

"Follow me, carefully now." He crawled back along the ledge. Susan Bolt was right behind him followed by a docile Big Jake and then Blind Bob. Flagstone crawled along for several minutes. He slid under a low arch. Groping in the dark he found Bolt's hand and helped her through. Big Jake and Blind Bob grunted their way under the low rock arch. Flagstone passed Bolt to take the lead again. He crawled on without a word, his teeth clattering uncontrollably.

He almost yelled. The narrow fissure in the rocks he was following started inclining up. He hastened his pace, then remembered the others and forced himself to slow. He stopped. Bolt bumped her head into Flagstone butt. "Sorry," she muttered as she shook with the cold. Flagstone resumed crawling. The incline became pronounced. Everyone was wheezing and panting and shivering. Flagstone halted. The others bumped into one another. They huddled together, shaking. Flagstone leaned his head against the cold rock. He jerked it back up. Don't fall asleep he warned himself. It will be death. "Move," he grunted weakly at the others. "Move." He began crawling slowly along the fissure.

Soon he was climbing up a steep hole. He blinked. Spots floated before his eyes. He could hear the other breathing heavily and shaking behind him the fissure. He pulled himself forward. He found he was talking softly to himself. What did I just say, he asked himself. I'm not going to die here. No, I'm not, damn it. Not in the dark. He pulled himself up. He blinked again. The spot stayed where it was. He struggled to pull himself up again.

He laughed. A tiny pinhole of yellow light stood still in the darkness ahead. He crawled forward. He giggled to himself. He heard the others climbing and sliding and cursing and gasping behind him in the darkness. He pulled himself forward. The yellow dot beckoning him. His shivering was terrible. His whole body vibrated. He numbly crawled ahead like mindless animal. He kept climbing up the fissure.

The yellow dot was bigger, yes? He shook his head banging it on a rock. Bright flashes bounced on his view. He blinked. The yellow dot was still there. He giggled. He had stopped and so had the others. "Something up here," he wheezed.

"What?" came Bolt's rasping question.

"Don't know. Something." Flagstone pushed with his tired unsteady legs and crawled slowly ahead. The fissure was narrowing. He slid along it. He held out his hand. The yellow dot played on his hand. He laughed a silly slightly mad laugh. He pushed himself forward. The fissure narrowed in upon him. The yellow light beckoned. He could only use his hands to pull himself along. Finally he stopped. The yellow light beckoned. He could go no farther.

Report 269 - 12.10 - Over Hill and Dale.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.10 - Over Hill and Dale.

Julius Flagstone lay wedged into the fissure. He couldn't go forward. He tried to slide backward. He couldn't. Someone was in the way.

"Back up," he said weakly. Someone slapped his foot several times. He wriggled backwards. "More," he said. Finally they backed up enough for everyone to sit upright though they all slumped over in the narrow confines of the fissure.

Flagstone knew they must have been looking at him in the dark. He took a deep breath. "I can't go forward. The fissure narrowed down. I'm too big."

Susan stifled a cold sob. Blind Bob said nothing. Big Jake could have been a rock the breathed. Susan rustled around in the darkness, her teeth chattering madly. "I'll go. I'm much smaller."

Flagstone said nothing. Bolt climbed roughly over him and into the narrowing fissure. Long minutes passed before she slithered backward out of the fissure. She was panting heavily. "Anyone got a shovel?"

Flagstone had to laugh though it was weak. He fumbled around with numb hands. He handed his big knife to Bolt. She nearly dropped it in the dark. Wordlessly she crawled back up the fissure. She called back. "Pass this back."

A small rock landed with a clatter next to Flagstone. He handed it to Big Jake who handed it to Blind Bob who tossed it down the fissure at his feet. Flagstone slid further up into the fissure so Bolt won't have to throw rocks at him. Soon they had a little rock passing line in motion. Flagstone couldn't tell if Bolt was making any real progress, but no one complained. And the activity almost warmed them up. She kept passing small rocks and handfuls of dirt and gravel back.

Flagstone blinked. He could see the rock he was just handed. He heard Bolt's labored breathing ahead in the fissure. He turned to hand Big Jake the rock. He could see Big Jake. And Blind Bob who was staring back at him. A silly grin passed over Blind Bob's filthy face.

"Ever forward," whispered Blind Bob dropping the latest rock down the fissure.

"Ever forward," whispered Flagstone. Big Jake was humming to himself.

Another rock came down the fissure. It whacked Flagstone on the thigh. He passed it on and looked up the fissure. Susan Bolt's voice came weakly down the rocky tube. "It's nice up here if you like to come up." She laughed almost out of control.

Flagstone wiggled his way up the fissure. Minutes later all four lay on the side of the mountain breathing deeply. The sun shone brightly overhead. Its warmth never felt so good. Flagstone rose on one elbow and looked at Susan Bolt. She lay in a heap. She was covered in dirt from head to foot. Her fingers were covered in blood and it was smeared over her face and clothes. She wearily opened an eye.

"Thanks," whispered Flagstone.

"You're welcome," she answered then lay back and closed her eyes.

Flagstone didn't know how long they lay on the mountainside. When he finally awoke it was night. The stars twinkled overhead. Tree stood as black shapes all over the mountain. He pushed himself to his feet. He walked over to Susan Bolt and nudged her with the toe of his boot. She murmured in her sleep then woke up. She painfully sat up, obviously trying not to use her hands.

Flagstone roused Blind Bob and Big Jake. Everyone stood unsteadily on the slope of the mountainside. They looked at each other for a moment. Finally Flagstone broke the silence.

"We better get going. They might be looking for us. Anyway, we better get going."

The little party began picking its way down the mountainside. Blind Bob led. Flagstone helped Bolt. Big Jake stumbled along last. Flagstone felt a soft nudge in his side. He looked down. Bolt offered him his knife, the tip broken off, the blade chipped and cracked, the whole thing bloody.

"Nice knife," she said.

"I always thought so." He slipped the knife back in its sheath.

They carefully made their way down the mountain for several hours in the dark. The pale predawn started to creep over the hillside. Soon the sun peeked over the far gray horizon and bathed them in warm light. Blind Bob picked up the pace. The trees grew thicker now. Bushes dotted the hillside. Blind Bob called a halt in a thicket of nettles. Bolt plopped down in a heap. Big Jake sat quietly humming. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob.

"Breakfast?" Blind bob nodded yes in reply. "You two stay here," said Flagstone looking from Bolt to Big Jake. She nodded. Big Jake hummed.

Twenty minute later the two men returned with wild berries and edible plants. The little party sat in silence and ate the foodstuffs. Flagstone's stomach growled and he licked his lips. Water was what they need now. He rose and began walking down the mountain. The others silently followed.

Bird sang in the trees. Small animals scurried about in the underbrush. The warm sun beamed down from a cobalt blue sky. Flagstone stopped and held up a

hand. The others stopped. Flagstone strained to hear. He looked at Blind Bob. Bob gestured and nodded. Flagstone followed Blind Bob. Soon they were face down in a gurgling mountain brook. They washed their faces as best they could. Flagstone forced Bolt's hands under the cold water over her groans of protest. He washed them as clean as he could. Tearing a piece off his shirt he rinsed it in the water. Then he torn strips of it off and wrapped Bolts bloody fingers. She said nothing through the whole effort only grimacing occasionally. Finally Flagstone stopped his clumsy first aid and sat back.

"They'll heal up fine," he lied.

"Yes. Thanks," she lied back.

Blind Bob came scurrying over. He signaled to Flagstone and pointed. Flagstone was on his feet in an instant. "Everyone into the brush. Some one is coming."

A minute later a dozen big tribal warriors trotted into the clearing by the stream. They stopped for a drink. Two of the warriors was discussing something in a heated manner. One pointed north, the other pointed south. The rest of the warriors stood listening. After a few minutes of talk, one of the two arguing warriors yelled an order. The warriors split up. Half went south, half north at the trot. Flagstone waited for ten minutes after they were gone before emerging from the thicket that had hidden them.

"Not a good sign," he said.

"Nope," muttered Blind Bob. Bolt kept looking left and right. Big Jake stood staring blankly at the ground his hands in the pockets of his tattered pants.

Flagstone looked north then south. Then he pointed downhill. "Let's go."

They began moving down the hillside as quietly as possible and as quickly as possible. The vegetation increased. The slope lessened. Soon they were trotting slowly down a gentle slope, gently weaving between the trees. Signs of the jungle were beginning to appear. The plants and animals were giving over to their jungle brethren.

Abruptly Flagstone halted. Susan Bolt nearly ran into Flagstone. He slapped his hand across her mouth as she started to open it. The others were frozen on the slope. Flagstone pointed with his free hand. Bolt started, then shook her head very slowly.

Ahead in a forest clearing stood a large bipedal dinosaur, its head rooting around in the fresh carcass of another dead dinosaur. It snorted and grunted as it ripped large pieces of meat off the carcass and swallowed them whole. The jungle was terribly still.

Flagstone backed slowly up the hill. He crept as quietly as he could off to the right and into a stand of trees. The other joined him barely breathing. They kept moving staying in the trees and heading away from the feeding brute. After ten minutes more, Flagstone finally exhaled.

"Did you see that," said an excited Bolt. "Did you see that! I've heard about them. I read about them, but I didn't believe it was true. Did you see that!" She was fairly hopping up and down with excitement.

"Yes, we saw it," answered Flagstone when he could a word in. "Let's hope it didn't see us."

Susan Bolt stopped in mid-hop. "Oh."

"Oh, yes. We are simply food out here. Please try to keep that in mind."

"Right." Susan Bolt tried not to giggle, but did anyway. Blind Bob shrugged. Flagstone grinned and pointed downhill. The blue of the ocean lay before them. Bolt clapped her hands together. "Yes, yes, yes."

She headed downhill. "Well, come on. What are you waiting on?" She picked up speed going down the mountainside. Flagstone laughed. The three men trotted after her.

They rested that evening high up in a tree in a nest built by Blind Bob. Susan Bolt was quite impressed with the whole thing. They picked some fruit and dug up several edible tubers for their supper, all washed down with water in a leaf pouch. They felt much relieved. Big Jake soon fell asleep. Blind Bob volunteered for the first watch. Flagstone wedged himself into a fork in a branch and fell asleep. Bolt lay in the nest and watched the stars. Blind Bob watched the surrounding trees and the ground below them.

Suddenly Bolt let out a hiss. Blind Bob looked over at her. She was pointing up. Her bandaged hand was shaking badly. Flagstone was awake now. Big Jake set up sleepily and yawned. Flagstone looked where Bolt's trembling finger was pointing.

A large dark shape was silently moving across the treetops. Very slowly it glided over the jungle's edge. The dark shape made no noise. It reflected no light. The four sat in their nest and watched unsure of what they were seeing. Instinctively Blind Bob pulled some loose branches and fronds over himself and the others. They lay still, peeking through the leaves as the large, dark, silent shape swept over them. No one moved for several minutes after it was gone.

Flagstone snorted his disgust. "I guess we have been missed," he said. No one answered except for Big Jake. He snored loudly. He had fallen soundly asleep. Susan Bolt laughed aloud. Flagstone didn't go to sleep for a long time.

Dawn found the foursome on the ground making good speed toward the coast. High noon found them paused on the edge of the black sand beach. They covered their eyes and peered up and down the empty beach. When Flagstone and Blind Bob were satisfied they were alone they tried to work out where they were.

"I'd say we are west of the landing where we were dropped off," said Flagstone.

"Probably," answered Blind Bob squinting down the black beach.

"That's not too reassuring," said Bolt joining the men on the edge of the beach.

"That's pretty good considering," laughed Flagstone. "Let's go find that pier and get out of here."

They began walking down the beach carefully staying on the edge of the jungle and in its shadows. They walked all day not seeing another living thing. They picked fruit and drank milk from the odd coconut they found on the ground. Bolt soon discovered that coconut milk was a mild laxative, much to the amusement of Flagstone and Blind Bob. Big Jake's mind was elsewhere. Flagstone began to wonder where it was.

That evening Blind Bob managed to spear an unwary fish. Flagstone built a small fire on the beach. They ate their first hot meal in days. Flagstone washed Bolts swollen fingers in hot water held in a coconut husk. They were turning ugly colors of blue and green. She squirmed uncomfortably every time Flagstone touch a finger. He said nothing. She only made subdued groans as he gently bathed them in the warm water.

Dawn the next day saw them briskly moving in the jungle shadows along the edge of the long thin black beach. It was a day like the one before. They saw nothing alive but themselves. The birds, monkeys, and other animals made noises in the jungle. The sun beamed down. Bolts fingers seemed less swollen as Flagstone wash them again in warm water.

Just as Flagstone was finishing with Bolt, Blind Bob walked in from the night darkness. The ocean swirled with florescence. The stars sparkled in clear night sky. The fire had burned low. Big Jake snored on the sand. Bolt lay back and tried not to think of her throbbing hands. Bob gestured to Flagstone who stepped into the shadows with him.

"The abandoned village and pier are just ahead. We can reach it easily in the morning. 30 minutes at the most."

Flagstone rubbed his stubbled chin. "See anyone in the village?"

"Not a soul."

"Safe then?"

"A safe as this beach, I'd say. Where else are we going to go?" asked Blind Bob quietly.

"You're right. In the morning we make for the village and set up housekeeping till the steamer comes by. I'm guessing three of four days. I really lost count of time while we were in the mountain," admitted Flagstone.

"Yeah. We both did. So it came a shock to me to find the steamer is tied to the dock right now," said Blind Bob calmly. "Looks like it just arrived."

Flagstone's heart raced a little. "Thanks for being so candid," he laughed. "We could go in tonight."

"And maybe get shot by jumpy sentries on the pier. No thanks. I say wait till dawn. They can see our smiling faces in the light." He grinned.

Flagstone nodded agreement. "Get some sleep. I'll take the first watch."

Dawn found the foursome peering carefully through some fronds at the pier. The steam launch was still tied there. Two men stood at the head of the pier chatting idly, rifles in their hands. Other men worked aboard the launch. Flagstone rose.

"Ok, let's go. Slowly, let's not spook them."

He stepped out into view. Blind Bob followed. Susan Bolt was third. She helped Big Jake stand up. Flagstone walked slowly toward the pier. The sentries saw them and hollered at the steam launch. Six more armed men climbed on the pier. Flagstone walked slowly toward them. He heard his name being passed to the steam launch.

In a few moments the steam launch crew surrounded the little party, all eager to help. The launch Captain pushed his way through the little crowd. Flagstone pointed at Susan Bolt's hands. The Captain immediately sent for his corpsman who quickly hustled Bolt to the launch for medical attention.

Flagstone shook the Captains hand. "Thanks from all four of us," he said warmly, finally relaxing.

The Captain looked over Flagstone's shoulder. "Four? I count three."

Flagstone spun around. Only Blind Bob and sailors met his glance. Big Jake was not there. He looked meaningfully at Blind Bob, but spoke to the Captain. "Only three, my mistake, Captain. I'm pretty tired."

The Captain led Flagstone to the launch and helped him into the boat. Soon the steam launch was leaving the shore behind. Flagstone stared at the shore until it disappeared from sight. Blind Bob didn't say a word. Susan Bolt came on deck and into the sunlight. She looked around.

"Where's," she started. Flagstone quickly interrupted giving her a hard look.

"Here's a place to sit, Ms. Bolt. The three of us have had a long and tiring trip. But we three can rest now. The Captain will have us safely in Jimville in a couple of days." He gestured at the empty place on the bench beside himself. She smiled and gracefully sat down.

"The three of us?" she whispered through her smile.

"The three of us," answer Flagstone.

"This was meant for you then," Bolt said flashing the seldom seen dazzling smile. "Jake gave it to me when I last helped him up." She handed Flagstone

a small coin-size token. It was smooth with a worn symbol on one side. "Jake said 'goes to church.'," she said in a low voice.

"Goes to church?" repeated Flagstone.

"Yes. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No," answered a thoughtful Flagstone.

Blind Bob walked up. "Cheer up you two. You look like you've seen a ghost." He slapped Flagstone on the shoulder and handed him a small sliver flask. "Compliments of the Captain."

Flagstone hoisted the flask in a salute to the distant shore of Jimland. "Ever Forward." He took a long pull on the flask. It burned going down. It felt good.

Report 270 - 12.11 - HARD TO BELIEVE.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.11 - HARD TO BELIEVE.

Julius Flagstone stepped out of the British Consulate. He looked up and down the Main Street of Jimland. The usual crowd was out and about. He pulled his wide brimmed hat firmly down and headed for the Jimland House of Girls and Casino. He walked with his hands deep in his pockets, his chin on his chest, not noticing anything around himself. He entered the bar of the House of Girls. The crowd was still pretty thin. He started to leave but halted. He saw Blind Bob and Millie in a booth. He invited himself over. Lemonade in hand, he slid into the booth. He pinned little Millie in the corner. She gave him a jab in the ribs, then a big hug.

"We were just talking about you," she said brightly.

"Well, I better leave, there are so many good things to say," grinned Flagstone.

"We were just talking about you," Blind Bob repeated. "How did the meeting with the Consul go?"

"Same as with the Sultan's Court Advisor and Military Advisor. Everyone thinks I've finally lost it. Been in the sun too long you know."

"Have you tried Reggie Toadburt? He'll print anything, and does, in that gossip column of his," snorted Millie.

Flagstone had to laugh. "Reggie said it was too far-fetched even for his column. But it had the makings of a good dime novel though."

"That proves it. You are as crazy as a loon," giggled Millie putting an arm around Flagstone and giving him a little squeeze.

"Well, it is a pretty tall story, even for me," said Blind Bob. "And I was there."

"Yes. But it's a simple story. It's all about Martian invaders who are fifteen feet tall, green with four arms, and live in a city hidden under a mountain. They use the local population for slave labor. And, incidentally, these same Martians are planning on invading Earth. What's not to believe." Flagstone emptied his lemonade in one swallow. He waved the empty glass in the air and the barmaid nodded back.

The fresh lemonade was delivered quickly. Flagstone looked up from the drink and found Blind Bob staring at him.

"What? Did I leave something out?" he chuckled.

"I'm retiring, boss," said Blind Bob bluntly.

"What?"

"I'm retiring. I've got a pretty pile saved up and Millie and I are leaving Jimland." Blind Bob fidgeted. Millie hugged Flagstone because she couldn't reach Blind Bob across the table.

"You're serious?" asked Flagstone trying to organize his thoughts.

"Yep," was Blind Bob's simple answer.

"Things were just starting to get interesting," laughed Flagstone. He eyes didn't laugh.

To his complete surprise Millie suddenly ducked under the table, shuffled around underneath it and quickly reappeared next to Blind Bob. "We're getting married too," she beamed. A stunned Flagstone shook both their hands and leaned over to give Millie big noisy kiss on the cheek. She turned seven shades of red and giggled like a schoolgirl. Blind Bob had a stupid looking grin on his face.

"You're quitting," repeated Flagstone completely at a loss. "And getting married.

Blind Bob laughed and settled back. He put a big arm around Millie and she snuggled up. "Not quitting, I never quit. I'm retiring while I can still enjoy what I've earned." He gave Millie a kiss on the forehead that set her to giggling again. Flagstone laughed aloud. He was happy for them both. He liked them both. He owed Blind Bob his life more than once. He shook his head.

"It won't be near as much fun without you, Bob," muttered Flagstone.

"Millie and I think you ought to be thinking about it too, retiring, that is," said Blind Bob with a slight reddening.

"Olivia would like that a lot, especially you not getting shot or beat up and all," Millie added bravely.

"She would?" replied Flagstone. Millie nodded yes vigorously.

"I'll have to think on that," he said finishing his lemonade. He wished them all the best and hugged them both, much to Blind Bob's embarrassment. Then waving goodbye Flagstone left the Jimland House of Girls and Casino and headed for Norton Dullcote's office, his final stop before he settled in with a short bottle and an expensive cigar, something he rarely did, but he felt the urge this evening.

Norton Dullcote was alone in his office when Flagstone arrived. He waved Flagstone in and cleared some papers off his desk. Dullcote's eyes twinkled as he sat in the swivel chair behind the polished desk. He waved Flagstone into a comfortable chair and offered a drink. Flagstone gestured his no thanks. Dullcote raised a hand before Flagstone could start talking.

"I've heard all about your meeting with the Sultan's Advisors. And the British Consul." There was a pause, Flagstone opened his mouth, but Dullcote

continued. "I believe your story completely. I've talked to Ms. Bolt, and she correlates everything you say. And adds a few details of her own."

"How is Ms. Bolt? I haven't hardly seen her since we returned," asked Flagstone earnestly.

"She's returning to England on the next steamer. We hope the doctors there can save her fingers." Dullcote stared at his desktop for a moment.

"Sorry to hear that," was all Flagstone could think of to say.

Dullcote cleared his throat, waving a hand in the air. "As I was saying, people have a hard time believing things that change their worlds. Especially something as wild as this. It is wild, is it not?"

Flagstone shifted in his chair. "Yes, it's wild. But it's also true."

"I don't doubt you, my boy. Not one word of it do I doubt. I have even gone so far as contact several highly placed men of influence. And power. We shall see what they have to say about all this."

Dullcote sat back and watched Flagstone for several moments. "What's on your mind, Jules?"

"Blind Bob is calling it quits. He and Millie are getting married and leaving Jimland." He said it in a rush. Flagstone set in the chair and stared out the window at the jungle, which, it seemed, was never far away. His thoughts drifted.

"Constance said Olivia had mentioned this might happen before they left for Europe," said Dullcote.

Flagstone looked up in surprise to find Norton smiling largely at him. "How the hell did she know that?" he muttered.

Dullcote burst into laughter. "She's a woman. She sensed it through the soles of her feet. She tasted it on the wind. The sunrise whispered it to her everyday." Dullcote laughed again at the look of astonishment on Flagstone's face. "She's a woman, Jules. As alien a thing as you'll ever find on this planet, your four-armed green-men included. They're witches, sorceresses, pixies, fairies, whatever. We, mere mortal men, will never understand them. They will always mystify us, confound us, and, in the end, control us. There is nothing we can do. They even let us fall in love with them sometimes."

Flagstone rose and paced back and forth. Dullcote laughed again.

"What?" asked a confused Flagstone.

"They'll be home soon. And we, you and I, can get our lives back in order then, not before. It's part of their spell over us you know." Dullcote was still laughing. "Go have a stiff drink, Jules."

"I think I will," said Flagstone with a sheepish grin.

"And think about retiring while you can," added Dullcote with a wave as Flagstone left.

"I think I will," Flagstone said to himself as he walked down the dirt Main Street of Jimville toward his lonely suite in the Empress. At the veranda's edge he stopped and stared for a long time into the night sky.

"Damn stupid," he muttered softly and shaking his head entered the hotel.

Flagstone waved good-bye one last time as the steamer pulled away from the Main Pier on Jimville's waterfront. He couldn't believe it. Blind Bob was gone. He and Millie, his beaming new bride, has sold off all Bob's gear, closed his account at the Banque de Jimville, and, after a rather raucous party by the Fearless and Famous Explorers Club at the Jimville House of Girls and Casino, had boarded a steamer for America, leaving Jimland behind.

Flagstone glumly kicked a pebble across the Main Street of Jimville. He wished it would rain. The fall morning was cool, crisp, and bright. A perfect day to do some exploring. But he did feel like it. He was lonely. He missed Olivia. Vaguely he heard his name being called. He slowly swiveled his head around.

Norton Dullcote was puffing up the street behind him. Dullcote was waving a newspaper in the air with some enthusiasm. Flagstone waited, amused by Dullcote's antics. Norton huffed to a stop in front of Flagstone, the rolled newspaper extended like a rapier. Flagstone laughed.

"Read it, Jules, read it," panted Dullcote. Flagstone unrolled the latest issue of the Herald and looked at the headlines.

"Volcano Erupts in the Western Mountains of Jimland." He continued, finding himself much more interested. "An unprecedented volcanic eruption occurred two days ago in the Western Mountains on the border of Jimland. The eruption was reported as being very strange by members of the Science Club who are going to investigate the event. First, the Western Mountains have been long considered dormant. The Eastern Mountains had been considered still active with occasion rumblings and the occasional opening of new steam vents. The same is said for the isolated ice-capped peak of Mount Jim, which climbs skyward in majestic splendor alone on the eastern savannas of Jimland. Second, the eruption was a series of titanic explosions that threw rock and dirt high into the sky. Most strange of all however was the complete lack of steam venting, "lava bombs", or magma flowing to the surface. The total absence of an ash cloud of any sort has experts baffled.

"The eruption redefined the skyline along a two mile section of the Western Mountains near the coast. As this region is largely uninhabited no reports of the loss of life have reached the Herald.

"A great area of the mountainside has caved in creating a gigantic new crater on the eastern slope of the mountains. The crater immediately began filling with water from a number of mountain springs and streams. Reliable sources report that Dullcote Industries is already planning to build world class resort on the slope above the newly formed lake. A spokesman claims the explosion was a fluke, and the view of Jimland spreading out before the lodge

over the cold clear mountain lake will be spectacular. It is also said the lake will be stocked with game fish and other things to provide the sportsmen among the guests a fishing experience to be remembered. A personal death, dismemberment, and disability waiver will have to be signed before a guest can venture near the new lake.

The Science Club Investigative Team has given the Herald the exclusive rights to their findings, at considerable expense to the Herald we might note. We await the results of their work with anticipation."

Flagstone laughed aloud. "A lodge overlooking the lake, Norton? A bit premature, don't you think?"

"It never hurts to have a plan. And this will stop any legal wrangling that may occur from johnny-come-latelies. I have simply set a precedence by stating my possible, possible mind you, course of development in the region." Dullcote smiled at Flagstone.

"That and the fact that the Western Tunnel may be more viable now. And it will have a convenient place to rest for the well-heeled traveler."

"Flagstone, I love it when another person sees my vision so clearly." The two men laughed heartily. "Keep reading there is more of interest." Flagstone returned to the Herald.

"Joint Maneuvers Held Off Jimland Coast" the article heading read. "The Navies of Great Britain and the United States are holding joint exercises with the Sultan's Navy. The exercises will be held for approximately one month off the western coast of Jimland. All commercial and private vessels are warned to stay well clear of the area as live fire exercises will be held both afloat and ashore. Marine and Naval Brigade forces will practice amphibious landings. Naval gunnery teams will practice shore bombardment to aid the landings. The Sultan says this is another indication of the warm relations enjoyed by Jimland in the world community of nations. The British Consul could not be reached for comment."

Flagstone eyed Dullcote over the top of the paper. "An interesting coincidence, eh, Norton."

"If you believe in coincidences. I believe more in cables to people in high places who understand a threat when they hear one." Norton beamed and rocked on his heels thoroughly pleased with himself. Flagstone laughed and shook his head.

"You never cease to amaze me, Norton. You have some very powerful friends."

Norton stopped rocking and frowned, then smiled. "Well, they aren't all friends, let's just say we have complimenting concerns and objectives. But, powerful, oh my yes, they are. Powerful and discrete, very discrete."

"Discrete as in blowing up a secret Martian base under a mountain and concocting a volcanic eruption to cover it up?"

"Yes. And the Science Club report will back up the whole thing, or so I am very reliably informed." Norton laughed.

"Remind me never to piss you off, Norton."

Report 271 - 12.X - ALWAYS EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED.

Date: 2004-11-25

12.X - ALWAYS EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED.

Julius Flagstone and Norton Dullcote stood on the Main Pier of Jimville. The big steamer was securely tied to the pier and passengers were beginning to disembark. A shipboard crane was offloading cargo near the stern. Flagstone shaded his eyes and looked for Olivia Fate. There was a flurry of waving on the gangplank. In a minute Flagstone was giving Olivia a great hug and kiss welcoming her back, while Norton Dullcote similarly welcomed Constance.

The women chattered on about their trip while the foursome walked slowly back toward the Empress. Flagstone didn't listen too carefully; just the sound of Olivia's voice was good enough for him. He could feel himself relaxing as they walked arm in arm into the Empress.

Once inside their suite, Olivia threw her big hat on the sofa and wrapped herself around Flagstone. He felt his "town" holster sliding to the floor. He made no attempt to stop it.

Flagstone and Olivia ate dinner alone that evening at Flagstone's favorite table by the big windows looking out over the little garden to the jungle not far away. The Dullcotes had politely declined an invitation. That puzzled Flagstone a little, but he shrugged it off. The entire dining room was empty except for the Flagstone and Olivia; it held just the two of them. Flagstone had rented the entire room for the evening. The roll of bills he laid on the manager's desk had stopped all disagreements stillborn.

"You look beautiful tonight, Olivia," said Flagstone.

Olivia laughed. "I should go away more often."

"I'm trying to be serious," he muttered. "You look radiant."

"Thank you." She blushed slightly.

"I missed you more than you can imagine," he said losing himself in her eyes.

"I missed you to," Olivia said hesitantly.

"But." Flagstone could read the unsaid word in her face.

Olivia cleared her throat. "Jules, I love you. I think you know that." Flagstone could only nod. He felt uneasiness in the pit of his stomach.

"But," Flagstone said softly.

"But I don't love Jimland anymore. After seeing Europe, particularly France and Italy, I don't want to live here any longer. I don't like being attacked by natives. Occasional shellings by Pirates, while exhilarating, grow

wearisome. Let's move to the continent. We have more than enough money to live comfortably wherever we chose."

Flagstone reached out and held Olivia's hand in his. He was thinking. "What would we do?" he asked.

"We could travel, see the sights."

"I can do that here," he muttered.

"We could see the sights and not get shot, stabbed, trampled, bitten, or have to make our bed in the dirt or our privy in the weeds."

"True enough," laughed Flagstone. "I'm not sure about this, Olivia," he said more seriously. "Let's think this over for a few months and see if the idea still appeals to you." He smiled at her. She cleared her throat again.

"I've already bought a small villa in northern Italy near the coast. It's beautiful, Jules. Just the right size for the two of us."

Flagstone sat still. He didn't know what to say. Actually he knew the next question, but didn't want to ask it. Olivia was strong enough to say it for him.

"I am going back in two weeks."

"Two weeks," Flagstone said. He was thunderstruck. "You just got back."

"Yes." She said very softly.

"This is rash, Olivia. We haven't even talked this over."

"I know your mind better than you do, Jules. There is no point of talking it over. You love it here. You love the danger, the excitement, the thrill of going on an Expedition not knowing what may jump out of the bushes at you. You do. I don't."

"I always expect the unexpected." Flagstone tried to lighten the mood.

Olivia let a small smile come and go.

Flagstone reached for her withdrawn hand. "But you have gone with me without a word time and again. You have showed over and over you have the backbone for it."

"Backbone maybe, but the heart for it, no. I went because you were there. Not because I longed for the thrill of dangerous adventure. I went to be with you."

"Olivia, this is awfully sudden," said Flagstone quietly.

"No. It's not really. Come with me, Jules. You don't need to prove yourself here anymore. To me or anyone. You're rich. You're famous. You're a Fearless and Famous Explorer beyond any doubt. Come with me." A tiny tear edged down her cheek.

"I don't know. Can I think this over? Please, Olivia. Give me a day or two."

"I'll give you two weeks." She dabbed her eyes with her napkin, then rose and giving Flagstone a warm kiss, left the dining room. Flagstone sat for a long time staring out the big windows through evening twilight at the jungle.

Julius Flagstone stood on the Main Pier of Jimville for the third time in a month. The steamer was far out of the shallow bay. Flagstone stood with his big hands hanging limply at his sides. His chin rested on his chest. The hustle and bustle of the pier washed around him unnoticed. He stood there a long time. He felt more alone on the busy pier than he had ever felt lost in the Wilds of Jimland. The sun, as it slowly sat, watched Flagstone still standing unmoving on the pier.

He stood there a very long time.

Report 272 - In Their Own Words, Pudding Expedition Report 3.
Date: 2004-11-25

In Their Own Words, Pudding Expedition Report 3.

The Further Adventures of Sarah Pudding, "World Class Botanist"

Sarah sat quietly at the writing desk inside her plush room at the "Empress of Jimville". Try as she might she simply could not make the figures work, it was impossible to fund another Expedition into the wilds of Jimville. She finally gave up and closed the ledger, leaning back for a moment to reflect on what had happened in the past days.

The party had simply been wiped out. It went in like a lion and came out like a lamb. She thought of her friends that would never leave the jungle and wished she had never indeed found this place. In time the memories would fade and leaving was probably the best course anyway. But then her mind wandered to the so called "Fearless and Famous Explorers Club".

She could just imagine the delight those overfed armchair explorers would feel knowing the Jungle had beaten her. There would be a lot of "I told you so's" and hurumphing all about. She was sure that if any of their bottoms were ever dragged from the comfort of the club kicking and screaming they would pass out when they saw the wilds. They could probably not even pronounce the names correctly on the maps their pudgy little fingers danced across! She would most likely refuse their club anyway if they asked. Sarah stuck her nose up and gave a tiny hurumpf herself. I shall not be known as the First female explorer to leave Jimland I tell you that!

Sarah took the bag of painfully small coin she had and headed to the bazaar. She would spend to the last dollar forming a party and plow once again into the Jungle. By Bead or Buckshot she will make those velvet-clad windbags understand once and for all who has the true pluck around here.

After my last shellacking I was left with one explorer and 204 dollars. After the shock wore off I thought that as long as I planned a small expedition of a short duration that didn't again kill off all but one of the explorers I might be OK and make enough profit to get on my feet again.

I quickly bought another hunter and scout, four food porters and three trade porters. This left me 8\$ left. The only good thing is I didn't have to by my head explorer again.

Miss Pudding	save 18	shoot 7	fight 3	Interpreter 7
Zambooboo	save 10	shoot 8	fight 5	Scout 10
Benghazi	save 10	shoot 8	fight 5	Hunter 10

1 soldier 1 Askari 4 food bearers 3 trade bearers. 8 \$ in cash.

DAY ONE

Today we start boldly into the jungle with our quaint little band. I have managed to hire a native scout named Zambooboo who seems to hail from the Belgian Force republic. Any attempts to learn of his reason for discharge has ended with an awkward silence, I could afford him though. I have also procured an Arab hunter named Benghazi. His hunting skills could be suspect, but his willingness to shoot at anything with abandon I will assume is a positive note.

Having left at early morning to avoid the scandal of a European woman in the bush with no proper gentleman to escort her, I stumbled into a bit of quicksand with several trade porters. Though I am pulled out in a nick of time these poor bearers do perish. The amount of sand left in my undergarments does make the rest of the day most challenging.

Later in the day we came across an abandoned village. As we poked about I was startled to see a little horde of javelin armed lizard creatures lying sprawled on a large rock sunning on their backs or bellies. When I tried to speak with them they simply ignored me, occasionally opening the odd eye to give me an annoyed look. Not to suffer the rudeness of indifference I recovered a stick and continuously poked the chubbiest one to the alarm of my companions.

To my demand for attention the bloated little creature made a raspberry like noise and all the others joined in intermittently. I realized then I was being laughed at in their own little way. Resisting the urge to give the offending creature a fierce jab in the nether region I secured my branch as one would a swagger stick and marched on with my troop following.

Event card : Quicksand, Loose two trade porters. Terrain: jungle, No river, Village: yes, natives: yes, eight lizardmen with javelins. Did not offer trade and failed interpreter skill -5 mod to reaction, Natives still neutral. Used one food.

DAY TWO

The morning started with the most horrible noise. At dawn two lions with a deafening roar sprang upon our camp. One seized our Askari sentry Jubuti in his horrible jaws and with a vicious shake of the head killed him instantly. Another snatched a fleeing bearer and after the most awkward of crunchy noises fled with him too. The only silver lining on this cloud of madness is through all the commotion our small camp grill stood proudly, its pot of tea hissing its protests. It would certainly be an awkward moment if I must decide between my servants or my tea.

Later in the day we yet again encountered nine of those horrid little lizard men. Their demeanor was not indeed kind and when suddenly the largest made that most awkward of raspberry noises with its tongue. I simply made it back, spraying Mr. Benghazi with a bit of spittle. Somewhat surprised the creatures shrugged their little shoulders and headed off into the bush. I believe that is the first time I ever effectively communicated with anything in Jimland.

Event card : Animal attack, Loose one trade porter, one Askari. Terrain: jungle, No river, Village: no, natives: yes, nine lizardmen with javelins. Had no trade to offer yet made my interpreter roll +5 , Natives neutral. Used one food.

DAY THREE

Today for the first time in Jimland we have broken through to the Savannah. The feel of the wind in the open plains was most rewarding after such a trek. As we stopped to gather our selves we realize we are indeed short yet another bearer. Today's meal with his loss will mean the last of our food and I begin to wonder my folly.

Event card : wrong turn lose food porter, Terrain: Savannah, No river, Village: no, natives: no Used one food. I have no food or trade now.

DAY FOUR

It's seems our trek has brought us into the jungle again with it's usual bad luck. We were ambushed as we entered by seven natives with an assortment of weapons. Our lone soldier was instantly killed, but we recovered nicely with me myself actually bagging one! Later in the day we found a stream which in fact shortly led us to a riverbank. We encountered no natives through out the day and my thoughts were filled by heading back. Mr. Benghazi managed to pot a small pig at dusk.

Event card : Native Ambush(seven natives) lost one soldier, Terrain: Jungle, river yes, Village: no, natives: no. Hunter makes hunting roll.

DAY FIVE

Today started us again in wretched jungle and before long we came across a forbidding ravine. The small native Rope Bridge looked most frail swinging lazily in the wind across it. I had Mr. Zambooboo lead the way following up with Mr. Benghazi and myself. As I cleared the Bridge I noticed a village in the distance and mentioned this to Mr. Zambooboo. The porters who had overheard our conversation and were by now quite hungry rushed across. With an eerie snap a rope gave way and all three tumbled to their doom.

As we stood there in a moment of silence for these three gentlemen, Mr. Benghazi noticed a little goat with a small bronze bell as its ornament, which tinkled merrily away as it ate. As I smiled at this most innocent of little fellows, Mr. Benghazi put a round right between the horns dropping the little guy in mid-chew. The Arab then strode up and tucked the critter under his arm and suggested we skirt the village. Between bites later that day I felt most guilty while, of course, Mr. Zambooboo has taken to wearing the little bell as a charm.

Event card : Ravine (lose last three porters) Terrain: Jungle, river yes, Village: Yes, natives: no. Hunter makes hunting roll.

DAY SIX

Today is our last day in this horrid jungle and we must break off from our river to head back to civilization. I dare think that perhaps we might make it back after all and I will be soaking victoriously in my warm tub at the Empress Hotel.

Mr. Zambooboo and Mr. Benghazi got into a most frightful argument on who was going to wear the bell that day when Mr. Benghazi picked up a stone and hurled it at the most selfish scout. As the stone landed but a few feet from me I stared at its peculiar shape and I suddenly realized it was a roof tile. As a rather large Zambooboo chased our hunter into the brush, I saw now we were in an ancient ruin of some sort. This was the type of luck that could get a Pudding back on their feet! I sat quietly amongst the ruins sketching this rare find as occasional rifle fire and the tinkling of a small bell could be heard in the distant scrub. The gentlemen sorted out their differences when Mr. Zambooboo potted a small monkey that had taken Mr. Benghazi's side and began to hurl fruit and other things as a monkey is wont to do. They quickly cooked up the unfortunate and when I was drawn to the silence and smell they said it was Jungle Chicken. I have realized that in the bush it is better to ask little and to eat than to ask a lot and lose your appetite. Later on indeed we safely arrived in Jimville with not a porter, Askari, or soldier to the expedition.

Event card : Discover Ancient city. Terrain: Jungle, No river, Village: no, natives: no. Hunter made hunting roll.

This was a great game and very exciting. I ended up with \$198 and all three explorers intact. I know have funds to make a proper party and take another stab at Jimville.

Report 273 - 13.1 - Got What It Takes?

Date: 2004-12-10

13.1 - Got What It Takes?

Julius Flagstone sat on the veranda of the Empress Hotel. The brisk morning weather went well with his cup of coffee. He felt alone on the veranda even though half the tables were occupied. Word had spread through Jimville with astonishing speed that Olivia Fate had reluctantly left her beau and headed for a more civilized land, namely Northern Italy. Everyone knew Flagstone was in a less than cheery mood. They left him alone.

Flagstone was happy alone. Well, that was what he kept telling himself. It must be true. He had only threatened to shoot two people so far. They probably deserved it in any case. He sipped his coffee. A nervous waiter appeared in the corner of his eye.

"It's ok. I'm not shooting anyone till after lunch," Flagstone said cheerily.

The waiter didn't laugh much. He laid a small tray on the table. It contained two things, an envelope bearing the Dullcote Industries logo and a mirror. The waiter quickly left. Flagstone picked up the mirror and studied his reflection. He laughed and picked up the envelope. He slid his callused finger along the flap and opened the envelope. The note was in Norton's own hand.

"My office, 2 p.m. today. Business offer you can't refuse. And the money will be very good, I guarantee it. Norton.

P.S. The mirror was Constance's idea. She says you should just look at yourself."

Flagstone laughed to himself. He looked at the sun. He had lots of time. Rising, he tossed a bill on the table and headed for Texas Bob's firing range on the edge of town. Flagstone found he had become a regular visitor there. Now that Bodine had moved the targets to the edge of the jungle it was safe to go fire a few hundred rounds into the paper targets. The solid thump of the large caliber bullets ploughing into the backstop mounds of dirt was very satisfying. He strolled casually down the dirt road that was Jimville's Main Street, his big hunting rifle resting easily on his broad shoulder.

Flagstone was nearly at the firing range when a familiar figure came toward him. Lord Angus MacFraser had a spring in his step this morning and a huge rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Good morning, Mac," said Flagstone amicably.

"Aye, Flagstone. It certainly is. Killed everything I shot at this morning," replied Lord MacFraser as he sauntered by. They both laughed.

Flagstone walked to the farthest table on the range. It wasn't very far considering there were only four tables and targets in Bodine's private

homemade shooting range. Flagstone carefully laid the rifle down. He dumped two boxes of big cartridges on the table. He put in his earplugs. For the next two hours he completely forgot the world.

Load a big cartridge. Bolt it home with a satisfying snick-snack. Pull the gun into your shoulder. Take a breath. Let it out. Relax. Aim. Squeeze. Feel the trigger engage. Aim. Steady. Squeeze a hair's breath more. The kick of the big gun drove it back into his brawny shoulder. It felt good. Flagstone sniffed the air. It smelled good. Do it all again until there were no more cartridges on the table.

Flagstone took a small cotton bag out of his jacket pocket and dumped all his empty brass into it. Waste not, want not, he hummed to himself. It was then that he noted two gentlemen standing at the edge of the firing range. They had field glasses and had been watching his shooting apparently. When they noted that he was done, they quickly left, heading back into town. Flagstone shrugged. He was a good shot and knew it. He laughed. It was a job requirement.

A quiet lunch of cold cuts and fresh bread washed down with biting lemonade was enjoyed on his suite balcony. Flagstone sat, leisurely eating the food. He stared blankly into the jungle, the famed Wilds of Jimland, not a quarter mile away. His mind was elsewhere, sifting through the many journeys he had made into that and other wild places. He let it wander about. The lemonade was good, the weather was fine, and the sun warmed him into a near-stupor.

Suddenly he focused his eyes. He let the tilted chair slowly down to rest on all four legs. The sounds of the jungle had grown still. Flagstone became alert. Silence was as good as a yell. It was a warning. The jungle was moving. Flagstone couldn't believe his eyes. A huge bipedal dinosaur edged out of the jungle canopy and stood still in the noon sunlight. It was big. What are you doing here, Flagstone wondered to himself? Flagstone tried to put a name on the beast, but failed. He chided himself for not studying the creatures more thoroughly. Then he chuckled silently. Long ago he had declared loudly in a Fearless and Famous Explorers Club meeting there are two kinds of dinosaurs in Jimland, those that eat you and those that don't, yet. The big beast stood silent, watching the town. The jungle was still. The noises of Jimville became louder in the silence.

Flagstone slowly rose and edged into his suite. In a flash he had his big hunting rifle. A shiny cartridge was quickly loaded. He put four more in his pocket. If it took more than five, it was too big to kill at any rate. He smiled to himself. Let see if I still have what it takes.

He walked calmly out of his suite, down the stairs, and around to the back of the Empress. The big beast was gone. Flagstone felt the breeze on his face. He could smell the bazaar odors drifting on the breeze as the vendors hawked their wares for the lunchtime crowd. He moved toward the jungle's edge. The farther he got from the hotel the stronger the odors became. He stopped at the edge of the canopy. The heavy prints showed the beast moving to the right. Flagstone smiled. He was downwind now. He began quietly following the prints.

Several minutes elapsed. Flagstone noted to his surprise he was sweating. He grinned. Been away from the hunt to long, Jules, he thought. A terrible roar broke the jungle stillness. Every animal began crying, squawking,

barking, howling, grunting, growling, and screeching in reply. The roar came again from ahead and slightly to the right. The jungle shut up. Flagstone almost casually crept forward.

He heard a heavy body moving through the jungle. Screams came to Flagstone's ears. He heard the sounds of panic ahead. Flagstone crept very cautiously now, the big gun ready at his shoulder. He stepped out of the jungle's edge. Ahead the big dinosaur was quickly moving toward the bazaar area. People were screaming and running in all directions. Two of the Sultan's Guard who were patrolling the town ran to the scene. They each fired a quick shot at the approaching beast and ran with the crowd. Flagstone shook his head in disgust.

He walked steadily toward the back of the beast as it moved forward. The hulking thing halted unsure of what to eat first, the things that smelled good or the things that ran around making all the racket. It darted its huge head forward with blinding speed. It tilted its head back. A pair of legs disappeared down its throat. It bellowed again. The bazaar was nearly empty now. The beast moved into it. It smashed several stalls gulping down their wares. Its thrashing tail smashed another. Flagstone stopped. He was a hundred yards away. Close enough he told himself.

He aimed. No good he thought. The back of the head is no good. Need to see the eyes. Have to shoot it in the eyes to kill it first shot. The beast was rampaging along the bazaar. Flagstone followed. Fifty yards now. The creature didn't know he was there, or didn't care.

A vendor was hiding under his stall. Flagstone walked over to him, never taking his eyes off the great beast striding around the bazaar eating and smashing things. He grabbed the man and pulled him to his feet. The man started to run. Flagstone held on to him. The man turned a frightened face to Flagstone. Flagstone pulled the resisting man into the middle of the side street with him.

"Pick up something you can throw and throw it at that thing," ordered Flagstone harshly. The man picked up a small pot and threw it in the general direction of the great monster. It fell short by ten feet.

"Again, and hit it or I'll shoot you instead," barked Flagstone. The man picked up another pot and flung it at the beast. The pot shattered on the creature's back. It snarled and turned around. It stared right at Flagstone.

"Run," yelled Flagstone. The man needed no encouragement. He was already rounding the corner of the building. Flagstone stared back at the monster over his rifle sight. The huge beast seemed befuddled by the little thing that stood before him. It bellowed at Flagstone and took a step forward.

Flagstone involuntarily took a step back. Steady, he yelled in his mind. The great dinosaur roared again. It took three steps forward. Flagstone stood his ground and sucked in a breath through clinched teeth. He almost chanted aloud. Pull the gun into your shoulder. Take a breath. Let it out. Relax. Aim. Squeeze. Feel the trigger engage. Aim. Steady. Squeeze a hair's breath more. The kick of the big gun drove it back into his brawny shoulder.

The big monster roared. Flagstone instantly reloaded. The beast was bellowing in anger and pain. It came forward toward Flagstone smashing stalls all the way. It raised its head roaring. Then it lowered its head and charged the little thing standing boldly before it.

Pull the gun into your shoulder chanted Flagstone in his mind. Take a breath. Let it out. Relax. Aim. Squeeze. Feel the trigger engage. Aim. Steady. Squeeze a hair's breath more. The kick of the big gun drove it back into his brawny shoulder. The beast roared. It reared up to its full height and staggered over to fall on several as yet undamaged stalls. It thrashed about punching a hole in the wall of the closest adobe and wood building. The creature's spasm passed.

Flagstone reloaded. He walked in a wide circle around the monster. Its sides still heaved up and down. Flagstone stood twenty feet from its head. The great mouth was open; the huge teeth glittered white like pearls in the sun. Flagstone looked it in the eye. There was death there. There was pride there. He saw no hate, surprise maybe. He raised the big rifle and took careful aim. The gun's blast sounded awfully loud. The beast's sides stopped heaving. The eye was clouded and dull. Flagstone turned away suddenly ashamed of himself.

A huge crowd appeared from nowhere and surrounded the dead monster. Everyone was trying to clap Flagstone on the back. A half dozen of the Sultan's Guard appeared and forced the crowd back from the dead creature. Flagstone pushed his way through the triumphant crowd. He was quickly forgotten as the crowd closed in to view the dead animal and the destruction it had caused. Flagstone walked toward the Empress avoiding the people running toward the bazaar.

He was passing Dullcote's office when Norton caught his eye. Norton waved him across the street. Flagstone felt a little lightheaded. "Got a drink?" he asked bluntly. Norton led him inside.

The office was not empty.

Report 274 - In Their Own Words, Bodine Expedition Report 5.

Date: 2004-12-11

In Their Own Words, Bodine Expedition Report 5.

Texas Bob Bodine sat in the overstuffed chair watching the doctor remove his bandages. As the white material was unwound the black and blue skin surrounding the actual wound first became visible. Two of the girls hissed their breath in as the purple and yellow skin surrounding the immediate area of the wound came into view as the bandage was unwound further.

Then there was the wound itself. After a week in the bush and three weeks in the care of the ladies from the Jimland House of Girls and Casino it was still draining into the bandages. The hole went in the outside of his left thigh and out the inside of the left thigh four inches below his wedding tackle. It was nasty. Katie, one of the House of Girls ladies, ran from the room hand clasped over her mouth. Each of the remaining three girls looked at the wound, the doctor and Texas Bob.

"Annie, dear, may I trouble you?"

Nodding the pretty young girl selected Texas Bob a cigar from the near-by humidor. She rolled it between her small, delicate hands ever so slightly crushing the rolled leaf, releasing the aroma, then using a silver tool she snipped the end off and placed the cigar between Texas Bob's lips. Sweet Nell immediately struck a match, holding the flame a few inches below the cigar, never letting the fire actually touch the dark brown almost black tobacco, and lit the dark twisted cigar for the blonde Texican. The cigar smoke smelled strong and bitter. Puffing the cigar alight Texas Bob removed it from his mouth, looked at the glowing end and then placing the cigar back in his mouth took a pull and inhaled the tobacco deep into his lungs. He exhaled the smoke, bluish and vitriolic smelling. He sighed.

The doctor bent close to the wound sniffing audibly. His face was expressionless as he raised his head and nodded to another of the wonderful creatures of the House of Girls, Sweet Sue. The lovely young woman began ever so tenderly to apply a salve to the wound and surrounding area.

The cigar glowed very bright for a second.

"Well?" asked Texas Bob through the cloud of cigar smoke.

The doctor, a youngish man, motioned for the girls to leave the wound open to the air after the ointment was applied. It was never easy the young doctor thought to himself as he pondered how to answer. He had been trying to decide how to couch his answer for the three weeks he had been attending daily, first at the Texican's bedside, then as he recovered as he made his continued morning and afternoon visits.

Texas Bob saw the hesitation. "Just tell it like it is William."

"Alright, Bob", said Doctor William Carver. "You'll have a limp the rest of your life. You'll be able to walk, even run after a fashion. But you won't

be getting anywhere gracefully or with the speed you once had. The wound will heal eventually, but the poison was in your flesh too long. You've lost too much tissue and some of that tissue was muscle. It was poisoned and will never grow back - it's dead and gone from you forever."

It was very quiet, the wall clock ticking the only sound.

The cigar glowed brightly.

Smoke drifted about the doctor, the girls, and Texas Bob.

"You heard about Scarlet?" asked Texas Bob?

The doctor nodded.

"I'm going back."

"Yes, I know.

"I will leave in two weeks."

"Good luck."

"You don't believe me?"

The young doctor looked into the Texican's eyes. "It's not you I don't believe. It's your leg I don't believe."

Katie returned to sit next to Texas Bob, her breath smelling of tooth powder and mint mouth wash.

"Are you a betting man?"

"With Texicans! Are you kidding everyone knows you Texicans cheat!"

The girls giggled.

"True." Texas Bob smiled.

The torture began the next day at dawn.

Texas Bob Bodine in the company of a huge black man limped to the edge of Jimville. He didn't make it back on his own. The huge black man helped him. He made it back the next day by himself. The next day he made it completely around Jimville; the towering black man walking beside him always ready in case of accident.

Now, whenever Texas Bob was out and about, the massive black man accompanied him. His name was Editck' dar Michcht, in his native tongue, Texas Bob called him Tower. It was Tower who had carried Texas Bob for a week on his back constantly running and hiding. It was Tower who had kept Texas Bob alive and one step ahead of the native death, which awaited him if captured. It was Tower who had tended his wounds and removed the deadly poison so Texas Bob could live another day. It was Tower who brought Texas Bob back to

Jimville. And it was Tower who Texas Bob trusted with his life now that his fellow Texicans had passed.

Why Tower one might ask? Perhaps because he was six feet six inches tall, a towering height. Perhaps it was his height, but probably it was his towering courage, or perhaps his towering strength. Or was it his towering devotion? Texas Bob never said, and no one asked.

Tower was very black. His face bore many scars, both ritual tribal scars and others. He was an ugly man; nature had been unkind to him except in one area. His teeth were perfect; strong, dazzling white and even, the teeth theatre stars in New York would pay thousands of dollars to have. Tower's arms, legs, chest, and stomach were banded by iron rings of muscle, not hugely bulging and grotesque, but sinewy, smooth, and elastic. He never spoke that anyone heard.

Tower watched his friend, the one all the whites called Texas Bob as he sat smoking with the one called Norton Dullcote. The Dullcote man was not a frequent visitor; he always came in the dark of the night, quietly up the back stairs and through friend Bob's private door. Friend Bob welcomed him and they talked in the white man's tongue, which Tower understood very well, of valleys and mountains, and things to see and find. But tonight was different. Tonight they began to talk of the time when friend Bob had been chased by the dark ones and Tower had kept them at bay.

Tower stood silent behind Texas Bob's chair and listened. The white men had snifters of brandy, warm and aromatic on the low table between them and large black cigars smoking in soft gray, wavering lines to the ceiling where the smoke billowed and spread then clouded the room with its soft haze and acerbic smell. None of the girls were here. The girls were afraid of Tower he knew; he could smell their fear.

"I saw you limping around town again today Bob." Norton watched closely, but Texas Bob seemed to take the comment without noticing.

"Yes." Texas Bob drew deep on the cigar, taking the acrid smoke deep into his lungs and holding it. Most people, he knew, including Norton Dullcote did not inhale cigars. It was a shame really; he slowly exhaled the smoke tasting it, relishing the bite and the simple pleasure of being able to smoke.

"Constance is worried about you." Norton didn't mention he was worried about Texas Bob too. The Texican seemed all too calm considering his galvanic temper and explosive disposition.

"Yes." The brandy was very good. He swirled the amber liquid in the bell of the snifter inhaling the alcohol fumes as they wafted from the glass in aromatic zephyrs. It was good to be able to drink brandy.

"Umm, Bob, can you tell me what happened?"

"No, not much, I was out of it most of the time, some perhaps."

"Well, what about your man, what do you call him? Tower?"

"No, Norton, he can't tell you."

Norton Dullcote bristled visibly, and then relaxed. "Ah, can't speak English."

"That's right," said Texas Bob sipping delicately from the snifter.

"Doesn't understand a word hey?"

"No, Norton, that's not it. Actually he understands English very well." Bob's eyes were sad as he gazed at the glowing end of his cigar.

"Alright Bob, I'm not going to push if you and Tower don't want to discuss it."

Norton Dullcote watched the eyes change. They went from sad to hard, then to almost demonic. "You see Norton, slavers cut his tongue out years ago." Texas Bob's eyes burned into Norton Dullcote's.

"Oh, Damnation", Norton looked up at Tower. "I'm sorry Tower," he said. "I didn't know."

For a moment there was no acknowledgement at all from the tall black man, and then he nodded to Norton Dullcote.

There was a moment's silence in the warm smoke shrouded room.

"After I was hit," Texas Bob began, "I went down hard. I think I must have blacked out because I don't remember anything until I woke up draped across Tower's shoulder as he was running through the jungle bullets whizzing all about us. How long he carried me that first day I don't know. I was in and out and even when I was awake things were rather fuzzy."

Texas Bob glanced behind him at the big black man and smiled a small grim smile.

"It wasn't much fun. Tower carried me, fed me, and treated my wounds. To say he saved my life is a large understatement." It was raw snakes, lizards and birds most of the time with little water except the daily rains. For my wounds he used poultices, leaves, berries and I don't know what all, maybe even magic as far as I can tell. Those wild things he used stopped the poison, Norton, something our modern medicines and science cannot do. I should have been dead twice."

Texas Bob reached to the table and took the brandy snifter; he put it to his mouth and drained the contents. "I'm alive, thanks to Tower, Norton, but I have paid a price. Sometimes you have to pay the piper you know. It has been a hard tough spell; it was agony and heroism - my agony and Tower's heroism. That part of my life, and Tower's, is over. It's time to move on. Tower and I have sworn an oath to each other. We've shared things most men never come to know. Our oath is ours and ours alone a private and personal dedication if you will, so please don't ask."

Norton Dullcote nodded saying nothing.

"But Norton, that's not the worst of it."

"What do you mean," asked Norton Dullcote.

"I'm not sure." Texas Bob rose from the chair and limped over to the sideboard with his and Norton's brandy snifters. He poured two inches worth into each of the crystal goblets and returned limping to his chair.

The room was smoky and quiet.

"There are white men out there Norton. They are evil white men and they have allies in some of the tribesmen or at least some natives. I saw them. I was still very sick from the poison and we were hiding in the bush next to a wide river, when they walked by us on the other side of the river, not one hundred feet distant. Some of the white men were wearing uniforms, some were not. The tribesmen or natives or whatever were of two types. There were the black tribesmen we normally associate with jungles and rain forests. And then there were the others. Some of the others were dressed in animal skins and some in feathers as if they had skinned animals and birds alive and then crawled into the skins. The black natives were terrified of the 'Skin Men', as I've come to call them. They stopped for a time about hundred and fifty or so feet from us. They had a meal. The skin men were waited on hand and foot by the black men. Even the white men, when they addressed the skin men did so with respect - and I believe fear. But the natives, Norton, you could see it in their eyes; they were terrified of the skin men."

"My God! White men and natives and these 'Skin Men' all working together. This is ill news indeed."

Reaching for his snifter Texas Bob said, "That's not all Norton. There's more and it's worse."

"Hah! What could be worse than white renegades teamed with natives and another mysterious people?"

"Well," Texas Bob drawled taking a sip of the brandy. "Whites and natives and mysterious skin men teamed up and supported by armored behemoths and ships would be worse I think", the scarred Texican said calmly.

"What!" The word exploded from Norton Dullcote.

Texas Bob took another drink, joined by Norton Dullcote who quaffed a large gulp and then began to sputter and cough.

"I saw them. Well, first I heard them, after the mob across the river stopped for their meal. About five minutes after they stopped I began to hear something crashing slowly through the jungle along the riverside path across the river. A heavy muffled chuffing sound, it got louder until it came into sight. It was huge - ten feet tall thirty feet long and I don't know how wide, moving on heavy slotted wheels in the back, and a great spiked roller in the front. Heavy black smoke poured from a smokestack, steam escaped in hissing clouds of vapor from actuators and pistons. The great spiked roller on the front was crushing vegetation and pushing over trees, it had two turrets. One I couldn't see the purpose for except that since the smokestack was there perhaps it was an engine room. But the other one Norton, the other one had the biggest cannon barrel I've ever seen protruding from it. When it stopped in a cloud of smoke and vapor a door or doors opened and a dozen or more white men got out of the wheezing, smoking

behemoth, all in white uniforms and heavily armed. It looked like they had modern firearms of the latest models, but I couldn't be sure because of the distance."

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed Norton.

Texas Bob nodded and drew deeply on his cigar. "That's when the steamship appeared."

"Steamship!"

"Yes, back home we would call it a river boat. And to my limited knowledge that is what it was - a river boat, all smokestacks and side paddle wheels, lots of steam, and smoke all in one big noisy package. It had artillery too. A large gun of some kind mounted forward and another aft, I couldn't tell what kind of guns they were because they were covered in tarpaulins. There were also boxes in every nook and cranny where they would not block the guns."

"All here in Jimland?" asked Norton Dullcote incredibly.

"Yeah, Norton, all here. But whatever it is they are doing they aren't ready to do it yet. They're still marching that stuff up river and across trails, they're still moving. They're still getting ready."

Tower moved for the first time in long minutes. He stepped up beside Texas Bob to get Norton Dullcote's attention. When he saw Norton looking at him he pointed at Texas Bob, made a talking mouth motion with his hand and pointed again and Bob and nodded.

"Yes", Tower. I understand. Texas Bob speaks the truth because you saw it too."

Again the huge black man nodded. He took a step back and returned to stand behind and towering above Texas Bob's chair.

There was again silence in the room while each man pondered in his own way. Then Texas Bob sighed and sat upright from the slouch he had been maintaining in his chair.

"I don't mean to be rude, Norton," said Texas Bob crushing out his cigar, "but I need to get to bed, my morning constitutional comes early and Tower is a demanding task master."

"We," Texas Bob motioned with his brandy snifter to Tower and himself, "haven't told this to anyone, not a soul but you. You handle it the way you want. I've got something to do first, so I don't have time for it now. But once I've finished my task I'm going to be ready to help in any way I can. I have a few dollars, some rather distinctive friends with unique abilities. But that is all for later - after."

Texas Bob drained his goblet. "After I find out what happened to Scarlet."

The scarred Texican levered himself out of his chair and escorted Norton Dullcote to his suite's door.

After Norton left he closed and locked the door. Texas Bob limped to his bedroom and began to undress slowly and methodically the way a man with limited motion undressed. As he stripped off his shirt and undershirt and his chest was bared his real wound revealed itself, the wounds the doctor had never seen, the girls had never seen, only Tower had seen and treated - a deep cratered wound, raw, pink and still glossy with it's new skin directly over his heart. When he turned around, Tower who was lying down across the door to Texas Bob's room, where he always slept, could see the exit wound's puckered pink skin on his back directly opposite Texas Bob's heart.

Texas Bob, pulled his nightshirt over his head, crawled beneath the crisp white sheet and pulled them up to his chin.

As he turned off the lamp and darkness bloomed he laid back, lightly touching the small crater wound in his chest and muttered, "I did mention magic."

Report 275 - BODINE TO SEARCH FOR SCARLET O'BLABBER.

Date: 2004-12-11

BODINE TO SEARCH FOR SCARLET O'BLABBER.

Texas Bob Bodine has vowed to find Scarlet O'Blabber, fellow Texan and the woman lost in the Wilds of Jimland while looking for Texas Bob. In a strange twist of fate, the lost becomes the searcher; the searcher becomes the victim of unknown terrors in the Wilds.

As is well known in Jimville, Texas Bob was lost while leading his Expedition many weeks ago. Scarlet managed to lead the very few surviving members back to Jimville. She immediately organized an Expedition to search for Texas Bob. Many thought her efforts were in vain. Texas Bob was presumed dead from wounds received in a dreadful skirmish. The Wilds of Jimland does not easily give up its dead.

Miss O'Blabber's First Attempt was nearly wiped out. Her Second Attempt was also nearly wiped out, losing all the remaining fellow Texicans. Her Third Attempt, with a party of newly hired strangers, was again nearly wiped out. Few of its members returned to Jimville. Those who did told tales of epic battle with all sorts of fell creatures. They mourned the loss of Miss O'Blabber, who fell gallantly defending the Expedition from attack by hostile Tribals.

To make matters even more dramatic, a huge black man carried the limp form of Texas Bob Bodine into Jimville one foggy evening even as we were reeling from the news of the loss of Miss O'Blabber. Stopping by chance in front of the Empress, the huge man and his sad cargo were immediately taken into the care of the Empress Staff. Texas Bob was laid tenderly in his own bed in his suite. The finest Doctors in Jimville were summoned. The Ladies of the Jimville House of Girls and Casino volunteered their help in nursing the stricken Bodine back to health. Through all this activity the silent black man never left Bodine's side. The Ladies of the House said his never-speaking presence gave them the willies.

The staff of the Empress spared no expense in ensuring the recovery of Bodine. The Owner of the Empress has made it clear that he has kept a detailed list of expenses during Bodine's recovery to account for the charges against Texas Bob's account at the Banque de Jimville. [His concern is most touching. - Ed.]

Texas Bob's recovery proceeded at a slow, but reassuring pace. Word of the fate of Miss O'Blabber was discouraging if it came at all. The citizens of Jimville lost all hope for her safe return.

Now it appears that Texas Bob Bodine, hobbled by his terrible wounds though he may be, is determined to find his lost sweetheart. "It's the least I can do. She was lost doing the very same for me. As long as one of us Texans is alive, we never give up hope for the rest," Bodine has said. Bodine's latest Expedition is nearly ready to leave Jimville. We are not sure of Bodine's chances of finding the dear lost Scarlet O'Blabber at this late date. We are

sure the huge black man called Tower will be at Flagstone side through thick and thin.

NAVAL ACTIVITY.

The Sultan's tiny Navy with assistance from the behemoth Royal Navy has shifted their attention from their joint maneuvers off the western coast to patrolling the many river mouths that empty into the sea along all the ragged coasts of Jimland. Strange tales of steam monsters in the Wilds and unidentified armed coastal craft have filtered into the offices of the Herald. Has Tastimin found a new weapon of terror? We, like you, Gentle Reader, are concerned by these events. Rest assured we will report the facts as soon as they are available.

PIRATE ATTACKS START AGAIN.

Pirate attacks along the Jimland coast have resumed. Several small villages along the coast have been attacked and one was reported burned to the ground. It is reliably reported that Tastimin the Despicable was behind the attacks. [There's a scoop. - Ed.] The Sultan has instituted a Jimland-wide curfew stating that anyone on the street after 7 p.m. will be considered aiding and abetting the Pirate Menace and will be duly arrested. Subsequent questioning will be held at an undisclosed location.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS.

Many national governments have announced strict new interplanetary regulations on all travel, commercial, private, and military, between Earth and any other space body, Earth's Moon excepted. Random stop and search patrols and strict quarantine at all Earth-side landing facilities have already been implemented. The International Interplanetary and Astroidial Governance Board and Guidance Council say all the member nations stand firmly shoulder to shoulder in addressing the possibility of off-world threats to the safety and security of Mother Earth. The Herald roundly applauds any action to keep our Fair Earth safe from interstellar harm.

Editor's Note: The International Interplanetary and Astroidial Governance Board and Guidance Council, the IIAGBGC, will henceforth be referred to as the Space Council to save paper, ink, and unmerited increases in subscription rates.

SCIENCE CLUB.

The Science Club has generously offered to reopen its "Rockets to the Moon" program if any illegal parties are found that must be sent back into space. The launching of said illegal aliens will be conducted for a modest fee by Science Club members. Any launchings will be announced well beforehand so that Club Members, their families, and interested non-members may purchase tickets to observe the event from a relatively save distance.

The Science Club wishes the Herald to stress that all rocket launches will be to seaward from the crater in the field near the head of the remains of the Old Pier, weather permitting.

ARRIVAL NOTICE.

The SS Baskerville will be arriving in two weeks at Jimville. Docking, as usual, will be alongside the Main Pier. Please arrive early if you are meeting disembarking passengers due to the Sultan's decree that all parties will be searched before they are allowed on the pier itself.

Report 276 - Things That Cross Our Desk.

Date: 2004-12-14

Things That Cross Our Desk.

Interesting things cross the Editorial Desk everyday in Jimville. Some are better than others. Here is one.

Miss Pudding burst into her room at the Empress Hotel. Even as the door swung closed she sat at her desk fumbling in her urgency to open the locked desk drawer. Removing a sheet of paper she laid it on the desk. A pen quickly jabbed in a small jar of ink. Sarah, member of the famous Puddings of Boston, Harvard Graduate, and World Class Yankee began to write.

Most Wise Sultan,

As a visitor to your fair land I feel it my obligation to warn your Sultanship of certain perils. One of these calamities is at the door of very Jimland itself. Southerners! I speak not of the delightful southern aristocrat, filled with charm and good breeding, able to turn a young lady's bottom crimson for the naughtiest of remarks. Sarah stopped briefly smiling to her self "Atlanta, Atlanta, how I miss you." she then scowled and began to write again. I warn of the dreadful common folks.

My sources tell me that this S.E.R.F. is just riddled with old Confederates and their like. If you but allow one of these characters in then before you know it there will be things like little stills and corncribs dotting the land. Possum will become the meal of choice and even your closest advisor will start using words like dang, dawg, and Y'all, singular and plural. One day you will awake to find your lands awash with gray, with "Good Ole Boys" hootin' and pootin' everywhere.

As New Englanders the Puddings have wrestled with this scourge in the Union's darkest hours. I beg you to find your best men, give them drink for courage, and seize this so-called chartered steamer. Lay hands on all and give them a fierce scrubbing, then send them back whence they came with a "No thank you, Mr. Butternut".

If you do not heed my advise then you have no one to blame when choking down your vittles and fixin's with the accompanying horrid fiddle music.

Most humbly yours,

Sarah Pudding

An Editorial Note

Of course, the Herald will grant equal space for the Southern Gentlemen to reply. The unasked question, sure to be upon the trembling lips of our Dear Readers, is what the heck happened in Atlanta, and what will it cost us to find out? We wait in anticipation for Miss Pudding to fess up or for answers

to our cables to Boston and Atlanta. Our reliable sources have been set loose to find the Truth.

Perhaps we should gather Miss Pudding's thoughts about the Glorious Peoples Expedition and their pamphlet pushing patsies. We feel certain that she would draw the GPE out of its hidey-hole "secret bases" in the Wilds. Perhaps even a letter of rebuttal from the GPE would appear. Perhaps. We might even print it. If such a letter were to appear in response to Miss Pudding making a statement about the GPE scoundrels. We can only hope she puts quill to paper soon on this topic most dear to all of Jimland. We would print them both just to bring you, Gentle Reader, all the news you need. We would.

Be still our beating hearts.

Report 277 - 13.2 - An Offer You Can't Refuse.

Date: 2004-12-18

13.2 - An Offer You Can't Refuse.

Julius Flagstone walked into Dullcote's office. He followed Norton through the outer public office, past the employees returning to their work whispering and looking at Flagstone, and into Norton's private office. He stopped in the doorway. Two men stood to one side of the office.

"Sorry, Norton, didn't know you had company. I'll get that drink later," said Flagstone just as he recognized the men were the same two he had seen watching him at Bodine's shooting range. He wanted to stay now.

"Come in. Come in," smiled Dullcote. He waved vaguely at the chairs in the office. "Gentlemen, please, have a seat." No one moved. The two men were watching Flagstone. Their eyes moving from man to gun and back again.

"Julius Flagstone, Mr. Brown and Mr. Green," said Dullcote indicating the two men. Brown was taller and heavier. Green looked smarter and more alert. Brown and brains wondered Flagstone as he firmly shook hands? Brown and Green sat comfortably in the chairs Dullcote offered. They continued to watch Flagstone's every move.

"Molly," Dullcote said loudly. He smiled at everyone. A moment later an older woman came bustling into the room with drinks on a tray. Placing the tray on Dullcote's desk she left the room, but not before she spoke to Flagstone as she passed.

"Nice job, Julius."

"Thanks, Mol. I try."

Molly smiled and left the men alone. Norton handed out the drinks. Flagstone was pleased to see his was a fresh lemonade. He reminded himself to send Molly some flowers just because. Dullcote cleared his throat.

"Jules, I'm impressed. Standing up to that monster took guts," nodded Dullcote. Brown and Green said nothing. They ignored the drinks in their hands.

"Thank, Norton. It was just luck," said an embarrassed Flagstone.

"Nonsense. You saw the brute and took action. The only others I saw taking any action were the Sultan's Guard presumably hurrying down the street to warn their master." Dullcote, Brown, and Green chuckled. Flagstone actually blushed.

"You are a man of action and nerve, Flagstone. I think we can all agree on that." Dullcote was laying it on a little thickly thought Flagstone. Brown and Green sipped their drinks. Dullcote walked around his desk and sat in the overstuffed swivel chair behind it. He smiled at Flagstone who sat on

the edge of a table. Flagstone leaned the big rifle against the table. Brown and Green eyed the dully gleaming rifle.

"Gentlemen, if you don't mind, I know Mr. Flagstone's mind. So let us get directly to business." Now we get to it, thought Flagstone trying to remain relaxed.

"Mr. Brown and Mr. Green have a business proposition for you, Jules. And if the events of the past few minutes are any indication, you are definitely the man they are looking for." Flagstone shifted uneasily on the table's edge.

Dullcote went smoothly on. "I have warned them you do not come cheaply, and in the field your word is the law. They have agreed to follow your lead in the Wilds, which marks them as men of wisdom."

Flagstone had to admire Dullcote. He was setting Flagstone up and at the same time stroking the two men. It was also obvious to Flagstone that Brown and Green were not these men's real names. He didn't care. He decided not to mention the firing range. He sipped his lemonade. He was already interested. Dullcote leaned back in his chair and paused. Brown and Green actually leaned forward as if drawn by Dullcote. Flagstone edged off the table to lean lightly against its sharp edge.

"Flagstone, Mr. Brown and Mr. Green would like you to take them on safari. I have told them you are the best, and happen to be available at the moment," said Dullcote calmly. Brown and Green's heads turned to watch Flagstone. Flagstone gave what he hoped was a warm and sincere smile.

"I am available. Tell me what you mean by safari, gentlemen."

Brown leaned back in his chair. Green spoke up. "We'd like you to take us out into the Wilds of Jimland. We want to hunt dinosaurs. The goal is for each of us to bag one and bring back a trophy. We will cover your expenses and usual fees." Green finished speaking and sat back. Both men watched Flagstone.

"My fee for this type of work is one hundred dollars a day plus expenses."

"Agreed," nodded Dullcote without even looking at Brown and Green. They nodded agreement also. Flagstone could smell money as its odor filled the room. He smiled to himself.

"In addition, you must understand I cannot promise to find you a trophy dinosaur. What happened today was a fluke. The beasts seldom come near a town of any size. They smell men and they disappear. I can make no guarantees that you will even see a dinosaur much less bag one. Understood."

Brown and Green nodded affirmative. Green spoke up. "We have great faith in your abilities, Mr. Flagstone. We have read a great deal about you and about the Wilds of Jimland. Indeed, it is a place where anything can happen."

Flagstone laughed. "And usually does, mostly to your dismay."

Brown spoke. His voice was a deep rich baritone. "What would you say our chances were of finding a trophy dinosaur, Mr. Flagstone?"

"Oh, about zero," grinned Flagstone. He stood and picked up his big rifle. "But with me leading and you doing as you're told, I'd say fifty-fifty."

Green nodded several times and smiled. Brown looked at Flagstone for a long moment. The rich baritone came again, "Capitol. How soon can we be off?"

Flagstone thought for a moment. "Two weeks. I will need to assemble an Expedition, get supplies, and such. We can leave in two weeks, at dawn from in front of the Empress. You're staying there, of course?"

"Yes," said Mr. Green. He glanced at Mr. Brown. "Two weeks would be fine." Mr. Brown nodded agreement.

"Then, gentlemen, I suggest you practice your marksmanship daily at Texas Bob Bodine's target range. I will tell the old rascal to expect you. If he tries to charge you, tell him I already paid." Flagstone rose and shook each man's hand.

Green looked at Dullcote then at Flagstone. "No paperwork?"

"Only if one of us dies. I will give a complete list of my expenses before we leave. If there are no more questions, gentlemen, I need to have some flowers delivered?" Flagstone stopped in the doorway. He turned to Dullcote. "Thanks for the drink, Norton."

"Have a good time," said Dullcote with a wave of his newly lit cigar. Flagstone smiled and left the inner office. Later that day a street urchin delivered a large bouquet of beautiful freshly cut flowers to a much surprised Molly. The chatter in the outer room of Dullcote's office didn't stop for the rest of the afternoon.

Report 278 - 13.3 - Into the Wilds of Jimland.

Date: 2004-12-20

13.3 - Into the Wilds of Jimland.

Julius Flagstone stood in the morning sea fog and listened more than looked at his Expedition in the dirt Main Street of Jimland. It felt odd that Blind Bob wasn't there grumbling about bearer wages and how useless askari would prove to be. It felt worse that Olivia was not there by his side to see him off. Get used to it, he roughly told himself. You did before; you can do it again. The steps at the Empress front squeaked.

Flagstone's two customers walked over in the fog. Flagstone looked them over. Fancy boots. Fancy clothes. Cheap local hats. Expensive guns. It would have to do. They would find out soon enough what they would throw away or wish they had remembered to bring along. He shook hands.

"Ready, gentlemen?" asked Flagstone.

The two men were looking at the small party of men standing easily with their loads in the dirt street. There weren't very many of them. Brown and Green exchanged a look.

"That's not very many men?" said Green quietly.

Flagstone nodded yes. "True, but we aren't going to war. We are going hunting. We will run away from anything we can't fight. These are good men. They have all worked for me before. They understand what we are getting into. They'll do just fine."

"No askari or soldiers?" questioned Green again.

"Nope. Like I said we are hunting. We run if we meet big trouble."

Green muttered something under his breath. Brown looked at the bearers. He smiled at Flagstone. "Very good. Let's be off. Ignore Mr. Green. He is a bit cranky in the mornings."

Flagstone gave a hand signal. The small party moved quietly down the street, Flagstone leading, Brown and Green next with the small group of bearers striding comfortably along behind. Few in Jimville noticed their departure. The town wasn't up and about yet. Flagstone hummed to himself as they left the edge of town behind. It felt good to walking into the Wilds again. He'd been away too long.

Flagstone stopped in the river fog. Green nearly bumped into him. Flagstone smiled. He pointed to the riverbank now almost at their feet. Five canoes lay on the sand and more men stood by them. He motioned the bearers aboard.

"Our ride, gentlemen," Flagstone said. "One guest per canoe please. Sit in the middle and let the men row. Enjoy the ride."

Green looked uneasily at the canoes, the bearers piling their gear aboard, and then back to Flagstone. "We aren't walking?"

"Not when we can ride," answered Flagstone putting his pack and rifle in a big canoe. "We are going far upstream on a tributary of the River Jim into an area I am familiar with. It is a dinosaur rich area. These big canoes and strong-armed men will get us there quickly."

"And safely?" asked Green still nervously eyeing the canoe.

"Safety is a relative thing, Mr. Green. I am doing what I think best for your comfort and safety. And my own. Trust me, I'm not going to take an unnecessary risk. But also trust me when I say we will be taking risks. You want dinosaurs to shoot at? Well then, you get all the risks that come with that. Now get aboard, or we can call this safari off." Flagstone stood feet apart, hands on his hips.

Green stood undecided on the bank. Flagstone pointed to the third canoe. The men in it smiled at him. "I suggest that canoe for you, Mr. Green." The men in the canoe smiled even more.

"Why that one?"

"It tips over more than the rest. I want to see if you can swim."

Brown laughed aloud and climbed aboard the second canoe. Green didn't smile, but climbed gingerly aboard the third canoe.

All the canoes shoved off from the bank. Flagstone turned to one without Brown or Green. He pointed upstream. The canoe took the lead with an easy stroke. The rest fell into line. Flagstone pointed at the lead canoe and spoke loud enough for Brown and Green to hear.

"That's Munashe, means 'with God'. He's our scout for this trip." The native in the bow waved back. Flagstone pointed at the last canoe. "That's Sefu. His name means 'sword'. He's our hunter." Sefu also waved. The canoes strung out single file, Munashe, Flagstone, Brown, Green and Sefu. They began making good progress up the stream. Flagstone laid his rifle across his lap and relaxed.

The sun rose and burned the fog off the river. The River Jim flowed by. The riverbanks passed easily along. Animals looked up from getting their morning drink. A couple of crocodiles slid into water. Birds chirped and squawked from the treetops. Monkeys chattered as they woke up.

The day passed peacefully. The crews of the canoes moved the wooden canoes easily against the slow current. Flagstone looked up at the beautiful blue sky overhead. Thank you, he said softly to no one in particular. Then he tipped his hat over his face and dozed in the noonday sun. They rowed on, Green pointing out wildlife to Brown as they headed upriver.

Five uneventful days passed. Row all day, camp along the river in the evening. Hunt for supper. Sleep. Get up and do it again. Flagstone felt himself unwind. The tension of Jimville left. The sadness of Olivia's absence dulled just a little. He sunned in the canoe like a lizard on a warm rock. Each day he felt better. He breathed deeply of the fresh air, enjoying the smells, sounds, and sights of the Wilds of Jimland.

He had been away from this for too long he decided. He stretched luxuriously. The whole party was enjoying itself. The men were rowing well and were happy to be busy. Munashe was pleased with their progress. Everyone was pleased with Sefu's hunting each evening. Brown spoke little. To Flagstone he seemed to be soaking up the Wilds like a sponge. Green's nervousness lessened. His confidence seemed to be growing. He even took a turn at rowing. The bearers got quite a kick out of this. That evening he had his blisters attended to without a whimper.

They were twelve days up the river when Flagstone directed the canoes to the eastern bank before noon. This got Brown and Green's attention as they usually didn't stop till early afternoon. Everyone got out and stretched. Munashe appeared out of nowhere in front of Flagstone. Sefu waked over from his canoe. Brown and Green stood nearby.

Looking at Brown and Green, Flagstone gave orders everyone could hear. "Sefu, you are in charge till I get back. If I'm not back by sundown, you go back to Jimville tomorrow?" Sefu nodded. Flagstone looked at Brown and Green again. "Anyone have any questions?" No one spoke. "Good. We should only be gone a few hours."

"Where are you going?" asked Green.

"To find the mouth of the tributary I want to follow," answered Flagstone.

"Can we come along?"

"Nope. This will be a lot of sloshing along the riverbank, wading through swampy land and the like. I'd like to keep you fresh for the hunt." Green seemed disappointed. Brown only nodded yes.

"Don't worry, Mr. Green, you will get your exercise soon enough." Green smiled. Flagstone slung his rifle. "Munashe!" Flagstone pointed upriver. The scout ambled forward along the riverbank. Soon the two men were lost from sight in the jungle that edged down to the river.

Sefu smiled at Brown and Green. "Let's eat," he said eagerly, rubbing his hands together.

Flagstone and Munashe walked along the riverbank. They climbed over fallen trees and serpentine roots. Soon the riverbank began to disappear. The two men were quickly wading waist deep through dirty water. They clamber over the huge gnarly tree roots that tried at every step to trip them. Occasionally one or the other would disappear under the brackish water when they stepped in a hole, to reappear sputtering and wiping plants and slime off their faces.

After an hour Flagstone called a halt. They climbed up into a tree and sipped on their canteens. Flagstone stood and tried to look through the dense growth surrounding them. He sat back down and wiped at his rifle with his neckerchief.

"Close," said Munashe. Statement or question, Flagstone couldn't decide.

"Yes, if memory serves me right."

They rose and pushed on in the noon heat. They were nearly swimming when Flagstone stopped. They climbed up on the nearest finger-like roots. Flagstone shaded his eyes and looked around. The water was clearer, the trees less dense if he could believe his eyes. Yes, this was it. Flagstone pointed inland.

"Let's make sure," he said. Munashe nodded. They lowered themselves into the water and began half-swimming, half wading, away from the river. The dense growth of tree thinned out. The vague channel they were following suddenly opened out into a wide stream. The two men gladly pulled themselves out of the water and rested on the stream bank. Flagstone let them rest for ten minutes. Then he rose, Munashe following, and walked along the stream bank for another twenty minutes. Satisfied he had found what he was looking for; they turned and retraced their journey as the sun began to dip to the west.

Munashe was ten paces behind Flagstone as they worked their way through the last of the swampy area. A sudden yelp and heavy thrashing caused Flagstone to whirl around. A huge anaconda had Munashe in its coils. The man struggle furiously with the snake, biting at it as he strove to loosen the tightening coils.

Flagstone tossed his rifle onto some tree roots and drew his big camp knife. He waded toward the swirling struggle. Flagstone watched for a second then dived on the writhing pile of man and snake. He got an arm around the snake just below its big head. The snake thrashed wildly, but never loosed its coils. Flagstone pulled the head back. The snake dragged them underwater. The coils tightened. Munashe's fight was lessening. Flagstone plunged his big knife into the snake. He pulled the big blade around. He pulled the blade out with a mighty jerk. Blood filled the water. The coils around Munashe loosened. The scout struggled away, gasping for breath. Flagstone hung grimly on to the snake as it thrashed and squirmed violently. He plunged the knife into the snake again and yanked it around.

Suddenly he was holding the snake's broad head. The body was wildly flailing in the water. Blood was spattered everywhere. Flagstone pulled himself out of the way. Munashe wheezed and nodded, half lying across some tree roots. Flagstone clapped him on the shoulder and nodded back. They two men lay in the roots for several minutes as they recovered. The snake soon quit writhing and floated half submerged nearby.

Finally Flagstone waded over and pulled the dead snake to the foot the tree root on which they lay exhausted. "Supper," he said weakly. Munashe gave a weak grin and nodded affirmative. They climbed tiredly back into the water dragging the headless snake along behind them.

It was just before sundown when Flagstone and Munashe walked tiredly back into camp dragging the snake between them. Their muddy, blood spattered appearance cause quite a stir. Brown watched them quietly while Green swallowed nervously several times, his face turning pale. The men gathered round and stared at the great snake. Their chatter died suddenly when Flagstone produced the head and laid it on a log. Brown and Green looked at it, amazed by its size.

"Don't worry, there are more of them out there. And that's not a big one." He grinned at Munashe. Green swallowed nervously. "Sefu," barked Flagstone. The hunter stepped forward with a grin of his own.

"Have you started supper yet?"

"No, boss," Sefu grinned.

"Good. Here it is," said Flagstone pointing at the snake.

"Yes, boss," Sefu said. He gave orders to the bearers. They carried the snake away.

Flagstone looked at Brown and Green. "I love a man who follows orders." Everyone laughed. "Keep the head if you'd like. Or you can get one of your own later." He walked off to the river to wash himself and his clothes, leaving Brown and Green looking at the broad head of the snake and each other.

Report 279 - In Their Own Words, Pudding Expedition Report 4.
Date: 2004-12-22

In Their Own Words, Pudding Expedition Report 4.

The Further Adventures of Sarah Pudding

Sarah stood quietly on the beach of Jimville, her brush slowly working on the canvas before her. At times she felt it was good to get away from the noise and stench of the Sultan's city. She paused smiling for a moment to feel the breeze of the ocean slip through her auburn hair, imagining herself being on any of the small steamers puffing away from this godforsaken hellhole. As she began to dab her brush again she heard the faint shifting of the warm sand behind her. Laying her brush on the easel Sarah turned to look at the young officer approaching.

"They are magnificent" the young German spoke in perfect English, stopping several yards away. "How do you ever get them to stand out like that?"

Sarah blushed turning her head slightly to clear her throat "Its really in how you arch you back," she said proudly looking up to see him staring at the two seagulls she had painted on the canvas.

She suddenly scowled at this tall, handsome, and vaguely annoying intruder. The officer moved forward several more steps and introduced himself with a slight bow.

"I am Hauptman Hans Stahler, of the German Mission to Jimland. We have heard you are quite the translator, Miss Pudding, and would like to acquire your services."

"Services?" she said still somewhat annoyed, her large green eyes staring into his. "I imagined German to be an awkward language, but I assumed you knew what each other said."

The Germans forehead furrowed as he mentally went over in his mind what she had said. Assuming he misunderstood he simply smiled and continued.

"We are heading into the Jungle and have had no real ability to converse with the local inhabitants. We were hoping you might hire on as translator and perhaps ease the way. This will be a strict military affair with mules and soldiers. I assure you the Kaiser is most generous, if, of course, your schedule is permitting."

"Well, I certainly do have demands on my time, Hauptman Stahler," Sarah said.

She suddenly thought what her schedule was: A) finish off that magnificent bottle of port in the picnic basket, B) take pot shots at seagulls with the Colt revolver she had concealed under her apron, and C) slip into a delightfully cool bath at the Empress of Jimville, sipping a chilled white wine and thinking naughty thoughts about Hauptman Stahler.

"I am afraid my present schedule is full as far as I can recall. How much is generous for a Kaiser?"

"Fifty dollars a day plus expenses," Hans said as he stared down at this magnificent women.

Everyone at Jimville had advised Stahler against hiring her. She was considered arrogant, intolerant, and indeed a fair translator at best, but she was beautiful, fearless, and had the grit to tell a native he was speaking his own language wrong. If fifty dollars a day allowed the Hauptman to meet her properly it was worth it.

Sarah nodded in agreement, "That is generous especially with two hundred in advance. If we are in agreement, it is a deal."

They both smiled mutually and she took up her brush again telling him to send word when they were about to leave.

Several days later the Party stood patiently waiting, ready to leave Jimville. Miss Pudding wandered up late, yawning as she went over some last minute details in her head. There were two natives she saw that she didn't know one presumably the hunter and another a scout. Several more porters were along carrying food, but the big surprise was the two laden mules chewing peacefully. Herr Hauptman was checking equipment and speaking to some armed German sailors when he turned and caught site of her. He smiled and blew a whistle causing everyone to rise and start collecting their gear.

"Miss Pudding," he said sternly as he approached "It seems there is something wrong with your clock."

"Most assuredly," she answered back as she broke open her shotgun, checked the loads, and snapped it shut again. "No matter how hard I try I cannot see it when I'm sleeping."

For a brief awkward moment they both stared at each other and to her relief he laughed. She would hate to have to tell him what is really wrong with Germans.

The Party

Sarah Pudding	Shoot 7	Melee 3	Save 18	Interpreter 8
Hauptman	Shoot 8	Melee 5	Save 10	
Shamba	Shoot 8	Melee 5	Save 10	Scout 10
Timba	Shoot 8	Melee 5	Save 10	Hunter 10

Five soldiers, two food bearers, two mule handlers and two mules each having two food and two trade.

Day One

The day started in fine fashion as I plowed into the Jungles once again. Its hard to explain the tingle one might feel entering this dark canopy

especially when one might have fled from it starving and wounded weeks before. As we entered a clearing five natives with the traditional spear and shield attacked us. The soldiers responded with proficiency I have not seen in the jungle and their sharp volley shattered the attack before it even came close.

Chatting later that day with the Hauptman I startled him by asking why in fact we are heading into the Jungle. I didn't really know? He responded by showing me the cargo on the mules. I have never seen such a dazzling array of beads in my life. The beads themselves were quite striking and not the normal fare you would throw the bush mans way. He explained that the Sultan and his consulate had agreed that the best way to get along with the troublesome natives up north was to bribe them with gifts and try to open a dialogue with them. I asked for a handful myself and made a dandy little necklace in no time.

Basically we were to trot around the jungle giving gifts to people. This trip looked better every step. I should have known better. The day ended quietly enough with no sight of any more natives. That night as the fire flicked I invited the Hauptman to my cramped little tent and surprised him with a meal packed from the Kitchens of Empress of Jimville itself. As we nibbled on French bread and cheese I must say I flirted horribly and finally got him to share a glass of wine. His charm and manners made the time race by. An hour or so later he finally excused himself for duties elsewhere. I was left to myself with the slight smell of his magnificent cologne and this delightful feeling I had only felt once before. I resolved quite suddenly that he was indeed slated for the Monkey dance.

Event card: Ambush 5 natives with HW.

Terrain: Jungle, River: no, Village: no, Natives: No

Consumed one ration.

Day 2

The patter of rain all night made for a sound rest and as I aroused and peered out I noticed my tent was indeed the last standing. Damn Germans. As I splashed some water on my face and hopped about struggling with my boots, several sailors set upon my tent breaking it down in record time. As I approached the mules looking for the Hauptman, I noticed quite a commotion. It seems overnight our entire food ration had gone bad. I sniffed the dried meats and brown bread packed for the journey and noticed a very odd odor I had not smelled before. A light touch of my tongue also made for the most unique unpleasant aftertaste. The Hauptman ordered the rations dumped and thought we should press on for a nearby village. I should have advised against this, but for some reason said nothing. I just couldn't disappoint him.

As we crossed a streambed, we were suddenly attack by six vicious beast men. A murderous fire from the sailors cut down several, but four crashed into the party hacking and stabbing wildly. In the middle of this wild melee a Sabertooth tiger burst from the brush and seizing a startled sailor made off with the screaming unfortunate. The sailors finally drove off the creatures with bayonet, but not before our scout lay dying upon the ground. After burying the dead I told the quiet Hauptman we must head back and after some thought he agreed. I tried to buoy his spirits by telling him that at least

we have plenty of beads to eat. I playfully drew my bead necklace to my lips and I tasted the same unique foul taste that tainted the bad food. It hit me like a thunderbolt and I told Hans that these beads were covered with something very odd. When it poured the night before rainwater washed some substance off the beads to the foodstuffs stacked below.

The young German had looked at me in disbelief. He had claimed it had made no sense. I said it made perfect sense. As we know a native is prone to run the bush as a new borne babe, his secrets frightfully bare. If somehow the Sultan had managed to poison these beads than anyone wearing them next to skin could become frightfully sick, possibly die. After a stunned silence Hans stated the Sultan would hear of this and no German officer would be pawn to the whims of the murderous Sultan. I agreed and though slightly woozy from the bead poison I had just licked, began to compose in my mind a stern letter to the Herald. By the end of that day everyone grew quite hungry. A handler perished from starvation and his mule wandered off. Later that night, a soldier being roused for his watch was found to be dead.

Event card: Food spoils roll d6 came up 5. Marked off all rations Terrain: Jungle, River: no, Village: no, Natives: yes (6 dogmen) Rolled for hunting skill and failed to avoid starvation. Bearer and soldier failed rolls. Rolled six, meaning mule perished too.

Day Three

I awoke in the morning to a thick fog. Hans seemed quite preoccupied as he should and we decide it too dangerous to move off. I haven't even the strength to properly flirt. Our Hunter bags some luckless beast and we at least eat tonight. I am loath to be even an unwitting part of the Sultans Schemes and hope someone believes us.

Event card: Fog, no move.

Terrain: Jungle, River: no, Village: no, Natives No.
Rolled for hunting skill and succeeded avoiding starvation.

Day Four

I awoke the next day to see dark clouds and the promise of rain above us. We broke camp and as we gather about the remaining mule a lightning bolt arced from the sky cracking amongst us. The luckless handler and his charge are killed instantly, the mule's portage exploding to spray us all with those damn beads. I staggered through the remainder morning in the most foul of moods with Herr Hauptman on occasion picking a bead from my hair as a monkey is wont to do.

Finding a river added nothing to our spirits and as we crested a hill we encountered an exceptionally large band of pigmies. The leader seemed considerably unimpressed with my attempt to speak his horrid little language. He then quite agitatedly demanded gifts and to that I shook my head vigorously and then pointed to several newfound beads on the ground. As the little man screwed his face with rage I drew my Colt pistol from my belt and emptied the weapon in his surprised little face. I could hardly admire his misshapen little body rolling down the hill when several poison darts struck me. Stunned, I lost my balance and tumbled down the opposite side as Germans

swarmed past me and charged the irritable pygmies. What happened next I would never know for I never saw my German friends again.

Coming to a stop I sat up and started quickly to pull several darts from myself when I locked eyes with the biggest ant I have ever seen in my life. The ant lunged at me as I raised my pistol to fire only to hear the click of an empty cylinder. Already sitting I had no chance and could only wrestle with the hideous creature's head. Jaws snapped at my face and neck in an attempt to decapitate me. As the ant bore me to the ground I screamed, but it mattered little. I knew as a botanist some ants had stingers and as I grappled with my new friend I found him to be no exception. He curled his abdomen and pounded me like some obscene lover from my worst nightmare. At first it could only jab at my legs and thighs as I frantically twisted, but as I tired he drove it into my soft stomach. I gasped as I lost control of my body, the insect's venom coursing through my small frame with a burning rush. Twice more as I stared into its alien eyes it slid its stinger slowly into my guts making sure I was more than paralyzed. We both knew who had won

As sporadic gunfire crackled on the hill, the ant grabbed me by my boot and with great strength started to drag me away from the fighting. I stared up in the sky as my head bobbed awkwardly over the occasional stone. Several times the creature stopped and worked over me nervously with his antenna. I was convinced he was deciding which part to snip to make me easier to handle. I had prepared myself to go to my God when a gunshot suddenly cracked in the Jungle. The ant squealed, but even as he pulled me more frantically another shot rang out. My new friend squeaked and shuddered, curling up beside me twitching.

Event card Lightning bolt (rolled one porter dead and a six killing the last mule also)

Terrain: Jungle, River: yes, Village: no, Natives: Yes - nine pigmies- had no trade to offer and failed translator roll for +5 reaction. Pigmies attacked and in the worst die rolling of my life all but one member killed in hand to hand no less. A giant ant appeared turn one and fought the Expedition leader for three rounds. The Expedition leader fled into jungle and rolled a fifteen to survive. Had no food but made starvation roll.

Day Five, the Last Day.

I stared from the ground quietly sensing people moving all around me. I recognized the chattering of the northern natives, but suddenly realized a strong Irish brogue as well. An exceptionally large Irishman suddenly leaned over me, his rough fingers checking for a pulse on my neck.

"If I wasn't a man of God," the robbed priest whispered, "I'd of let that critter drag you to their hole."

He threw me over his shoulder, as I grew red with embarrassment. To be rescued is awkward enough, but to be saved by an Irishman is quite unbearable. I began to have my limbs grow feeling again. Before this made any difference I found myself rudely deposited in the ruins of a small church. The armed natives and the priest argued heatedly as I weakly wobbled to my feet. The priest suddenly glared at me and as they all turned I backed frightened to the wall behind me.

"You smell of Germans, Missy," he stated "and the Sultan as well. What do you think we will be doing to you if you don't answer smartly."

I answered meekly that they would ply me with a thrifty yet full-bodied Chardonnay and a delightfully rustic stew. They would then pinch me and have their most handsome men use me till I broke and wept my tale. I assure them I would resist them to my last breath as I kicked off my boots and began to unbutton my dress. The rebels looked suddenly uncomfortable and the priest covered his eyes.

"Ok you win," the priest said hurriedly peeking through his fingers. He told me they were Christians and, if I promised to stop my unbuttoning, they would give me a bit of stew.

I laughed nervously, "Of course, I knew they were kidding." I awkwardly buttoned my blouse. They then sat me down and between bites I told them of the evil Sultans plans and how I was the most ignorant pawn. I then showed them my necklace and assured them that if they let me go I would be their ally against the evil despot. The Sultan was responsible for Han's death with his evil schemes and he would pay. The priest stared into my eyes and decided it best to keep me at my word. I was fed and showed hospitality I never deserved from these people. Later, I was escorted back and slipped back into Jimville.

Event card: Quiet no event

Terrain: Jungle, River: no, Village: yes, Natives: yes, encountered 5 natives (3 HW, 2 R24) rolled friendly reaction and bought one food for four dollars. Marked off one food and entered Jimville the next day.

Report 280 - 13.4 - Rancho Jimbo.

Date: 2004-12-23

13.4 - Rancho Jimbo.

Julius Flagstone sat in the middle of the lead canoe and watched the riverbank as his Expedition rounded the bend in the river. Rancho Jimbo hove into view. Rather the charred and long forgotten remains of Rancho Jimbo hove into view. A large plant-eating dinosaur raised its head from the river's edge, then turned and ran into the undergrowth. Flagstone could hear the excited voice of Green yammering to the more taciturn Brown upon seeing the dinosaur.

Flagstone had the canoes beached near the stumps that were once the little pier of Rancho Jimbo. He hopped out of the canoe his gun at the ready. Sefu and Munashe were quickly beside him, their guns also at the ready, their eyes on the nearby thick growths of jungle. Brown slapped Green on the arm and pointed at the three men. The pair unslung their rifles and tried to look prepared. Flagstone smiled to himself. He muttered a couple of sentences to Munashe and Sefu. The men nodded and disappeared together into the thick jungle.

Flagstone turned his attention to organizing the camp. He had the tents pitched in what was once the town square of Rancho Jimbo. The surrounding ruins would offer some protection he judged. Most of the wooden buildings were gone, but the few adobe buildings still had walls standing. The tents hugged the square near the three remaining buildings. A cooking fire was soon ablaze. Flagstone posted a watch. The rest of the men he put to work repairing gear, cutting firewood, preparing supper, and to the myriad of other tasks that kept an Expedition functioning in the Wilds. After the last orders were given Flagstone walked over to the charred remains of the building that was once the "hotel" in Rancho Jimbo. He smiled to himself as memories rolled by. A polite coughing brought him back to the present.

Green and Brown were standing nearby, their rifles in the crooks of their arms. Seeing that Flagstone had noted their presence Green stepped forward.

"Anything we can be doing? Hunting for supper?" asked Green.

"Nothing at the moment. Enjoy the scenery," replied Flagstone.

"I'd be happy to go looking for some meat for the evening meal," persisted Green.

"Mr. Green, if you think you are going after a dinosaur this late in the day, think again."

"But why not. There are still two hours of light left, at least."

"You two want to go off by yourself and see what you can see?" asked Flagstone.

"I don't see why not," answered Green eagerly. Brown merely shifted his rifle from one arm to the other.

"Did you see that big plant-eater when we came ashore?" asked Flagstone knowing the answer full well.

"Yes, indeed," said Green. Brown nodded affirmative.

"Did you see the big meat-eater watching it through the jungle from over there?" asked Flagstone pointing to where Sefu and Munashe had entered the jungle.

Green swung around. "Really? Where?"

"No," answered a quiet Brown, his rifle now in both hands.

Flagstone waved the men to follow him. He led them about fifty yards out of the ruins of the little town. He stopped just inside the jungle's heavy cover. Green and Brown looked around. Flagstone pointed at the ground ten feet in front of them. Huge three toed prints sat heavily in the moist ground. A couple of huge piles of dung lay nearby attracting a swarm of flies. Green started forward. Flagstone reached out a big arm and halted him in mid-stride.

"All in good time, Mr. Green. All in good time."

Brown walked to the dung and poked carefully at it with the toe of his boot. It was still soft. He walked over the looked at the big prints, then turned his gaze to follow them into the jungle.

"Gentlemen, let's return to camp. Tomorrow we will take our chances, but not today. And Mr. Brown, I strongly suggest you wash that crap off your boot. You'll scare away most of the game out there," Flagstone said gesturing at the jungle, "and attract that which we are not ready to invite to dinner."

Brown gave a short laugh and walked toward the riverbank. Green walked beside Flagstone. Flagstone suddenly stopped. He brought his rifle up.

"Mr. Green, you still in the mood to shoot at something that can eat you for supper?"

"Sure, I guess, why?" asked a puzzled Green.

"Get ready. Wait for me to shoot first, then fire away."

Green hastily brought his rifle but saw no targets other than Brown walking toward the river. Brown reached the bank. He fussed with his boot for a moment, then pulled it off. Just as he leaned over to dip it in the water, a huge pair of long jaws snapped in the air where his head had been. Brown leapt aside. Flagstone fired. A second later Green fired. Flagstone bolted home another round.

The big stream was in a lather. Something very big had splashed back into the river and disappeared. Brown stood, boot in one hand and rifle in the other. His face was a mask of shock. Flagstone walked up to stand beside

him. The river was calming down. Waves washed against the pebble-strewn shoreline. Flagstone looked Brown over carefully.

"I think dropping the boot would have been my first choice, right after jumping aside. Easier to shoot that way." Brown just stared at the river. Green gave a laugh, cut short by a sharp look from Brown.

"What the hell was that?" asked Brown hurriedly wiping off his boot and scrambling to put it back on.

"Giant croc, I'd say. Very patient hunters. Very big. Very deadly," replied Flagstone walking back to camp and waving the men back as they came running all manner of weapons in their hands. Seeing no one was harmed, the men laughed among themselves and returned to their duties. Not a few kept turning to watch the river and the jungle.

"The damn thing nearly had my head off," sputtered Brown.

Green slapped him on the shoulder. "Nearly is the important word I think."

Flagstone smiled at the two men. "A valuable first lesson. In the Wilds of Jimland, anything can happen. So stay alert and stay alive."

"Most instructive. I say, I must have killed the beast, whatever it was," said Green with a smile.

"A valuable second lesson is never to count anything dead until you've eaten it. A third lesson and we'll call it quits for the evening. Tomorrow when we go out, you both keep your mouths shut."

Flagstone sauntered off to see what was for supper and talk to the returning Munashe and Sefu, leaving Brown and Green talking quietly to each other.

Dawn hadn't arrived yet when Flagstone rolled Green and Brown out of their blankets. The camp was quietly abuzz with activity. "Good morning, gentlemen. Breakfast will be served shortly in the dining hall."

Flagstone squatted beside the big cooking fire with Sefu and Munashe. Green and Brown joined the group. Everyone was eating biscuits, gravy, potatoes, and spicy sausage. Flagstone sipped coffee, Sefu and Munashe water, Brown and Green tea. They ate in silence for a few minutes. Finally Flagstone spoke.

"Were there many tracks?" he asked looking at Sefu and Munashe.

Sefu answered. "Yes. Many and different kinds, many three or four." Munashe nodded agreement.

"Feeders or hunters?" asked Flagstone.

"Feeders. One hunter set only. One big one, one smaller one."

Flagstone sipped his coffee and thought. Sefu and Munashe finished their meals. They stood to leave. Flagstone issued orders. "Tell Able he is in charge while we are away. If we do not return in four days he is to return to Jimville and contact Norton Dullcote. He can assign camp tasks as he sees fit."

The two men nodded and left the fireside. Flagstone poured himself another cup of coffee. Green cleared his throat. Brown ate in silence.

"What kind of tracks did they find?" asked Green his eye lighting up.

"Seems we just missed a herd of plant-eaters, herbivores I think you'd call them," answered Flagstone leaning back against a big rock.

"Excellent," said Green through a mouthful of food. "And the hunters?"

"Bipedal dinosaurs is all I know. Carnivores."

"Really excellent, Flagstone. We going after them?" Green was looking at him with excitement all over his face. Brown was watching Flagstone with a more studied look.

"We will go after them as I see fit. Let me explain this area to you." He sipped his coffee forming his thoughts.

"As you have already seen the land along the river is heavily overgrown. Its groundcover is dense right down to the river, which holds its own dangers." Flagstone smiled at Brown who smiled weakly back. Green laughed.

Flagstone continued. "The jungle stays pretty dense for a mile or two away from the river, then it thins out. Still lots of tree, but much less low cover. It's that way for many miles inland until it turns to savanna.

"That's why this is good dinosaur country. The open forest lets the big beasts move through it easily enough while providing cover. It is surprising how well these brutes can conceal themselves, how quietly they can come upon you. So stay alert.

"Out on the savanna, their height gives them an advantage of seeing or smelling us before we see or smell them."

"Smell them?" interrupted Green fork poised before his mouth.

"Yes. You can smell them. When you are up close. By then it's usually too late. Our noses have let us down. Theirs still work fine. Remember that. We will have to approach from downwind if we expect to catch them unawares. And we must be as quiet as possible. You will only get one or two shots in any event as the beasts will either run away at a speed that will shock you or charge right at you so quickly you won't believe it."

Brown now joined in. "They are that fast? I thought they were slow, lethargic creatures."

"Wishful thinking. They are big, fast, deadly, and fearless. Do not doubt this at all. The meat-eaters will just as soon eat you as look at you. The

plant-eaters will do the same in self-defense or in a blind panic they will trample you underfoot and not notice you were there. Stay alert."

"What kinds will we see? I mean, I was hoping for a Triceratops or a Stegosaurus," said Brown.

"Triceratops I am familiar with. We might see one if we are lucky. A Stegawhatever I don't know," said Flagstone honestly.

Brown smiled. "Big fins on the back, spikes on the tail, small head, plant-eater, but big. One of my childhood favorites."

"Ok, I know what you mean. Maybe to them also. As I said before, I can't promise anything. We have to take what is served up and deal with it. We may not see anything at all."

Brown nodded.

"But our chances here are as good as anywhere else. This is good dinosaur land. Always has been. That's why it's not settled. I'm feeling comfortable we'll at least see something. Whether you want to bag it is another thing."

Green spoke up. "I want a Tyrannosaurus. You know the really big two legged meat-eaters. Supposed to be the king of the dinosaurs."

Flagstone laughed. "Well, there are some big nasty hunters out there. Just a few. They usually follow the herds of grazers. So lets find the herd and see how lucky you are."

Flagstone rose and dumped his cold coffee into the fire. "Get your gear. We will be gone probably four days, maybe less. Sefu will give you your food." Green looked up in surprise. "Yes, everyone carries their own supplies in case we get separated. Besides, there will only be the five of us going out. We three will hunt. Sefu and Munashe will scout other areas in case we don't find what we are looking for."

"Just the three of us?" muttered Green.

"Flagstone smiled. "Yup. A small party. Three heavily armed men very quietly hunting animals that can swallow them whole in one gulp. Three very alert men looking and listening and trying not to breath too loud. Three men feeling very alive. Three men who I hope all return to camp with tales to tell and all their body parts."

Brown and Green laughed. They went off to get their gear. Flagstone walked over and talked quietly with Sefu and Munashe. Shaking their hands, Flagstone watched them disappear into the jungle. Able appeared. Flagstone repeated his orders. He trusted Able. He was an experienced Head Bearer and Camp Captain. Able nodded at each order. He told Flagstone what he intended to have done for camp chores and his watch plans. Flagstone agreed with all Able said. They shook hands.

"Good luck, boss. Be careful," said Able as Flagstone walked toward Green and Brown.

"Thanks. See you in four days or less." Flagstone waved goodbye.

The sun was just peeking over the treetops. Flagstone inspected Green and Brown. Nothing seriously out of place. He inspected their rifles and pistols. He slapped his own holster.

"Remember this. We hunt the big game with the big rifle. If natives or tribals attack us, your pistol is your best friend. They won't stand around and exchange long range fire. They will close and try to overwhelm us with numbers and big sharp sticks. If I say run, you run like hell itself was after you. You can throw your rifle away. Hang on to your pistol as if your life depended on it. It probably will."

Brown and Green nodded, nervously looking quickly at one another. "Now don't go worrying about it," continued Flagstone. "Just keep it in mind."

Brown and Green nodded. Flagstone pulled his hat firmly down. He checked his own weapons. He wiggled around under his daypack. He felt his heavy full canteen. His rifle was warm in his big hands.

"Let's go hunting."

Report 281 - 13.5 - A Hunting We Will Go.

Date: 2004-12-25

13.5 - A Hunting We Will Go.

Julius Flagstone walked quietly through the thinning jungle. Shafts of dusty light poked down through the green canopy overhead. Things flew in rushes through the high branches of the old trees that made up the jungle. Flagstone's eyes moved constantly. He carried his big rifle easily. The jungle was nearly silent as if watching Flagstone and the men with him, but whispering behind their back as they stole silently by.

Flagstone halted. He peered ahead for a moment then resumed his march. Brown and Green were behind him and a few paces to either side. He could hear them breathing. He could hear himself breathing. That was not a good sign. It was too quiet. Flagstone paused again, kneeling beside a huge tree. He slowly scanned his surroundings. Something was out there. He was sure of it. He kept looking. The jungle remained quiet. Nothing moved.

Flagstone pulled out his canteen and took a tiny drink. He swished the water around in his mouth before swallowing. Brown and Green crouched beside the same tree. No one said a word. They all felt like something was watching them.

Flagstone scanned the jungle again. He was glad it had thinned considerably. The undergrowth was nearly gone. The huge rough barked trees towered up to sweep the clouds from the sky. Branches, real branches, didn't start till twenty feet above the jungle floor. Flagstone wondered to himself, jungle or forest. He couldn't decide. The ground was covered in dead leaves, twigs, and small branches. Large ferns grew singularly or in clumps. Moss grew on the north sides of the big trees. A few brave flowering plants tried to attract insects with pastel shades of bright colors.

There was a distant hoot. Flagstone's head whipped around toward the sound. Nothing moved in his field of vision. Am I getting too old for this, he wondered? He rose to his feet and looked slowly around again. Satisfied, he began walking across the carpet of decaying tree droppings. Brown and Green padded along behind.

Several hours later, Flagstone breathed a small sigh of relief as the edge of the savanna came into view. He hadn't realized it was this close. The three men stood in the last shadows of the jungle forest and surveyed the open land that spread out before them. Far-spaced copses of trees, rolling ground with gentle hills, stream-cut gullies lined with bushes and patches of trees made up the landscape as far as they could see. A dirty yellow tint over all, which was strangely uncomfortable after a day in the greens and browns of the jungle forest. A few birds wheeled overhead. Flagstone squinted in the sunlight. He pointed. Green and Brown's heads turned to follow the line of Flagstone finger.

Far off, circling lazily high in the air were large flying creatures. Green made a little gasp. Brown softly cleared his throat.

"Some kind of pterodactyls," Flagstone said softly. The great flying things circled slowly, rising and falling as they desired, high above the savanna's tough grasses. They coasted effortlessly on the thermals rising from the savanna in the afternoon heat.

"Looks like vultures circling a kill," said Brown.

"I was thinking the same thing. Most of those things are along the coast because they eat fish and flotsam they find adrift and ashore. Some, smaller ones, live inland and are big scavengers. But they have been known to attack smaller animals including men. Stay alert."

"Those are smaller ones?" asked a surprised Green.

"Yeah," answered Flagstone.

Green gulped and followed Flagstone as he led them out into the full sunlight. Flagstone walked at a steady distance-eating pace. His head swiveled constantly left, right, back left. Flagstone climbed the gentle slope of the tallest of the rolling hills directly to his front. At the top he halted and knelt down. Out came his treasured binoculars. He turned to scan the direction from which they had just come. Nothing moved. He waited patiently.

Brown and Green sat on their backsides, their rifles across their laps. They sipped from their canteens. All three men had dark sweat stains on their shirts. They had been walking with barely a pause for nearly eight hours. Flagstone slid off his pack. He pulled a piece of jerky out, cut off a three pieces and handed one to each man. He bit of a chunk and absently chewed as he scanned the savanna ahead with his binoculars.

A tawny patch of color moved. It was far away to the left. Flagstone watched carefully. The patch of color moved again. Flagstone swallowed.

"A big cat is tracking us," he said flatly.

Green and Brown stirred.

"Sit still and stay low," ordered Flagstone. The two men knelt down straining to see what Flagstone was apparently watching. Minutes passed. The gently rising hilltop gave Flagstone a good field of view. He waited. He could be as patient as time itself when the need arose.

"Ah," he said softly, more to himself than the others. "A smilodon. Saber-tooth tiger to you. A middle sized one I should say, maybe a male out on his own for the first time."

The patch of color faded into the background. It was still very far away. Flagstone turned to the two men kneeling beside him. They were both squinting into the distance. He slid his pack on. "Well, we know he's there. Advantage to us. Let's move on."

"That's it! Let's move on?" sputtered Green rising when Flagstone did.

"Yes, that's it. What did you expect?" asked Flagstone.

"But a bloody great hungry cat is following us," said Green pointing in the general direction of the smilodon.

"Yes. That happens out here. Did you think we would be the only hunters out on the job today?" laughed Flagstone.

Green shook his head. "I didn't expect to on somebody's lunch menu this quickly," replied Green.

"A bit of bad luck. But still, we move on. The cat may find easier pickings," said Flagstone beginning to move down the slope and further out into the savanna's rolling landscape.

Green hurried up to walk beside Flagstone. "A bit of bad luck! Isn't there anything we can do?"

"If I can get a fair shot at him, I'll give it a go. It will tell him we know he's there. Maybe change his mind about following us. But if he's real hungry he'll keep following, slowly closing the distance, waiting for his chance. He'll probably rush us at night." Flagstone lengthened his pace and drew away from Green who fell into step with Brown.

"God save us from hungry beasts and crazy hunters," muttered Green.

"Praying won't help out here, but feel free to give it a try," said Flagstone waving his hand and not even looking back. Brown let out a laugh and slapped Green on the shoulder.

"Spread out," ordered Flagstone.

The little party moved briskly across the savanna. The land rolled gently, hills rising and falling occasionally like waves of a dirt ocean frozen in place. Flagstone called infrequent halts to watch for the smilodon or to check prints in the dirt. The track of the herd of plant-eaters was easy enough to follow. It was a hundred yards wide.

Much to Flagstone's relief the day passed quietly. The three men easily followed the herd's trail. The big cat did not reappear. The sun was going down, casting long shadows all about the men as they walked across the savanna. Flagstone headed off the herd's trail toward a stand of large trees. Green and Brown quietly followed. Neither said a word. Flagstone knew they were tired from walking all day.

Flagstone stood in the center of the trees and looked up and around. He pointed to three large tree growing closely together. "Tonight we sleep up there, off the ground."

Slipping off his pack, Flagstone untied a coil of light rope tied to its back. He searched the ground at his feet. With a couple of steps and a

stoop, he had acquired a broken branch. He pulled out his big camp knife and shaved the leaves and twigs off the twisted branch. Next he tied one end of the rope to the branch. Brown and Green were watching with interest. Flagstone motioned them back. He began twirling the rope and branch around his head. With a quick flick of his arm the branch went soaring up into the tree canopy over head. Flagstone looked up at the rope hanging from the trees. He yanked on it. It came quickly down to land several feet away.

Two more times Flagstone sent the branch up into the tree canopy. The third time it stayed firmly put when he pulled on the rope. Flagstone slipped his pack back on. "You two go stand with your backs to that tree over there," he pointed. "Keep a watch for anything that may want to eat us. I'll be right up there," he pointed again, this time up into the tree limbs overhead, "getting our camp started."

Green and Brown looked nervously around in the dimming light. Flagstone pulled the rope one more time then climbed up like a giant snail inching up the wall. He quickly disappeared. Brown and Green stood with their backs to the great tree trunk Flagstone had pointed to. Overhead they could hear Flagstone rustling about in the trees. Occasionally they heard his big knife being used to chop away at the tree. Finally, after thirty noisy minutes a big creeper vine fell to earth not five feet from the men. They both jumped in surprise.

"Come on up," said Flagstone disembodied voice. "Bring an arm-load of kindling each."

Green's head poke up through the thick tree branches. He smiled in surprise. Flagstone was sitting comfortably on a tree-house floor. The floor was made of smaller branches lashed to the several larger tree limbs, which in turn were lashed to the great tree trunks. Everything was tied together with the strong creeper vines. Brown poked at Green's backside.

"Move on, can't hang about all day," muttered Brown. Green laughed and climbed up onto the impromptu platform. Brown shortly followed. The men piled their small loads of branches where Flagstone silently pointed. Then they lay carefully down with a sigh of relief.

Green looked around with a wide-eyed child's look. "What the heck is this?"

"Our home for tonight, maybe tomorrow," replied Flagstone waving a tired arm around the little platform. "A trick I learned from the Tribals. Comfy and safe."

"How's that," asked Brown sitting up and massaging each arm in turn.

"Well, we don't want to sleep on the ground. Too few of us to mount an effective watch or put up a fight if we were attacked by a big hungry animal in the middle of the night."

Brown nodded. Green peered over the edge to the darkening ground thirty feet below. Flagstone pulled a beat up old pot out of his pack. He took its contents out and laid them carefully aside. He jammed the pot firmly into the crotch of a Y-shaped branch, thick and strong. He grunted as he bent the

two arms of the Y together and bound them with creeper vine. Next he broke up the twigs and small branches lying at his feet. He places a large handful in the pot and hung the limb, pot and all, over the edge of the platform, securing it with more creeper vine. A match later and a cheery little fire was glowing in the beat-up old pot. Flagstone slid a small cross-shaped piece of metal over the pot mouth. He fed in some more wood shavings. Soon water was warming in a second smaller pot over the little fire.

Green and Brown watched the whole process with rapt attention. When they saw Flagstone add some dried meat and raw plant cuttings to the water, they chuckled. Flagstone smiled. "Yes, gentlemen, a warm meal at day's end is a good thing. One of you is even carrying coffee for us to enjoy."

This statement sent Green and Brown rummaging through their packs. A short fifteen minutes later Flagstone ladled a warm stew-like concoction into the men's camp pots. Then he scraped the pot clean and wiped it out with leaves. The aroma of coffee soon drifted over the platform as it rested between the three trees high off the jungle forest floor.

Flagstone leaned against a convenient thick branch and ate in silence. He occasionally leaned over to feed the tiny fire in the big pot or to stir the coffee in the smaller pot. Green and Brown ate tentatively at first, but finding the stew was actually good, they dug in. After a long, long day of walking across the savanna they were famished. Finally the coffee was poured into each mans cleaned camp pot. The three men settled back and looked up through the tree canopy overhead at the spectacular view of the night sky.

Green broke the long quiet of the meal. "How are we doing? Think we'll get anything tomorrow?"

Flagstone sipped his coffee from his camp pot. "We did well today. We came twenty miles at least. So we are well away from anything man-made." He sipped again. "The trail is fresh. Tomorrow we should see the herd, providing nothing spooks it in the night."

Right on cue a far off roar came through the chill night air. Green looked carefully over the side of the platform. "Are we really safe up here?"

"Better than on the ground. The big meat-eaters, two legged and four legged, can't get up here. They are too heavy. The things that can climb up here probably won't bother us. We are too big."

Green peeked over the edge again and then up into the dark trees all around. "Probably?"

"Well, one never knows. Animals follow their own rules. But I've never been attacked in one of these nests. Anyway we'll take turns watching through the night, just in case."

Brown finally joined the conversation. "Where did you learn about this tree-house-platform-nest-thing?"

Flagstone poured more coffee all around. Neither Brown nor Green were more than an arm's length away. He settled back.

"I was rescued many, many years ago by some Tribal warriors. They built one of these. That's where I first learned about them."

"You were rescued?" asked an astonished Green.

"By Tribals?" added a surprised Brown.

Flagstone grinned in the dark. "Well, rescued might not be the right word. Captured might be better. It was just after I first came to Jimland. I was pretty raw in those days. I thought I knew everything." He thought to himself for a minute. "I'm a little wiser now," he grinned in the dark.

Brown laughed softly. Green waved his coffee around. "Captured. How did you escape? I've heard the Tribals are cannibals."

It was Flagstone's turn to laugh. "Only some of them. Very few actually. I've only seen human stew bones once."

"Really," interrupted Green his eyes wide and bright in the light of the little fire in the pot. Flagstone pushed in a few more wood shavings. The fire grew a brighter. He saw that Green and Brown were both watching him intently.

"It was a long time ago," began Flagstone.

Report 282 - 13.6 - Bedtime Stories.

Date: 2004-12-27

13.6 - Bedtime Stories.

Julius Flagstone leaned back in the rough nest high in the tree branches. Green and Brown watched him quietly. The little fire in the pot flickered warmly. Flagstone thought for a moment and sipped his coffee.

"It seems like a lifetime ago. I was on one of my first Expeditions. Out banging around in the Wilds of Jimland like I owned it. I had very little idea of what I was trying to do. I had a big rifle and big plans and very little else, especially jungle smarts."

Flagstone sucked on his teeth. "Yes, I had big plans." He went quiet. Green rustled around on their rough perch in the trees. Flagstone looked up to find Green and Brown still watching him with expectant looks on their faces.

"Oh, alright." Flagstone sat up. "I was on an Expedition to get ivory for a particular customer of mine."

"Isn't that illegal?" asked Green.

"Now it is, without the Sultan's permission and a hefty fee, of course. Back then it was a sort of gray area, you know," answered Flagstone. Brown chuckled. Flagstone continued.

"I was out hunting for ivory. We were tracking an elephant herd, a big one. I was feeling pretty cocky about making a pile of money. I wasn't paying attention. I lead my men right into an ambush."

"Tribals ambushed you out here?" asked Green.

"Yes. Out here. They came at us from all sides. We fought as best we could, but it wasn't a very good fight. It was over in a couple of minutes. All my bearers and askaris were either dead or run off into the jungle. I was spared. I think I was the first white-man they had ever seen. They were constantly poking at me and rubbing at my skin and laughing and carrying on.

"They bound my hands and arms to a stout piece of wood behind my back. Then they put a noose around my neck and off we went."

Green sat up a little. The excitement plain in his eyes. "Where were they taking you? To their Chief for some sacrifice or something?"

Flagstone smiled. "We took off after a some animals. Not the elephants I been following. They were after a pack of cats, about cheetah size and colored similarly. It was an initiation to manhood ritual of theirs. I was an added bonus. Once the group got back on the trail of the cat pack I was mostly a forgotten, but valuable piece of baggage.

"For two more days we tracked the pack. The third day we sighted it. The fourth day at dusk the cats attacked us."

"Attacked you! I though you were tracking them?" sputtered Green.

"Who's the hunter and who's the hunted is always in question in the Wilds, Mr. Green. Don't ever imagine that just because you are hunting something, that it or something else you haven't seen yet isn't hunting you. It's a sure way to a short life."

"What happened when the cats attacked?" asked Brown quietly.

"The young Tribal warriors were surprised to say to say the least. They fought back bravely. Two of their number were killed, one was injured. They killed one cat. That night as we sat around the fire and tended our injuries, a single medicine man or shaman, whatever, appeared out of the darkness around us. The young warriors were alarmed. They called for their sentries. The sentries reported back. The shaman merely smiled. He wordlessly examined the injured warrior. He addressed the whole group of young men. He spoke quietly and gestured at the trees, the injured man, and me. Then laying a small hide bag on the injured man's chest, the shaman walked off and disappeared into the darkness."

Brown and Green's eyes sparkled in the darkness. Flagstone fed more shavings into the fire in the pot. It glowed into life.

"That night the only people to sleep were the injured man and myself. The next day the contents of the hide bag were made into a poultice and applied to the injured man's wounds. I was untied and made to carry one end of a stretcher like arrangement bearing the injured man.

"I did my job conscientiously, trying to earn the favor the young warriors. I tended the injured man and waited. That evening we camped in a grove of trees not unlike this one. Several tree-nests were built. We slept off the ground. The next morning we found all manner of cat tracks around the bases of the trees. After that we always slept in the trees while on the savanna."

"Did the Tribals return to camp after being attacked and losing their friends?" asked Green.

"Not a chance. Tribals are very brave and very stubborn. This was their initiation into full manhood with their tribe. They weren't turning back come hell or high water. They kept tracking the pack of cats. They wanted their skins for their shields. Killing the cats and taking their pelts would prove their bravery to their tribe. They pushed on.

"For three more days we struggled to track the pack. The injured warrior got worse despite the poultice's healing effect. He died on the stretcher at noon the third day. We stopped and buried him. I can definitely say that now the young warriors were angry.

"The fifth day we spied the cat pack lounging about on a bump of a hill. The warriors waited till dawn of the sixth day. Then quiet as death they surrounded the little hill. Then at a signal they silently charged the hill at the run. The cats were taken by surprise if you can believe it. All but a couple were killed. Those that escaped ran like the wind and disappeared.

"The warriors suffered a few wounds, but nothing too serious, though several had to be helped as they limped happily home. Eventually everyone recovered. I was still being led around with a noose, but they left my hands unbound as I provided a useful service as their camp-slave and I had not tried to escape."

Green shifted in the nest, rustling the leaves and branched. "But you are here. You must have escaped or this is all a figment of our imaginations," laughed Green. Brown smiled and nodded his agreement.

"What makes you think this isn't all in you mind? What is perception, but what you mind conjures up. You might be at home asleep in your beds. I might be back in England drunk in a pub. This could all be a bad dream." Flagstone laughed aloud. "But I wax philosophical. This isn't a dream, believe me."

"Well, then, how did you escape?" asked Green finishing his coffee and holding out his empty camp pot for more. Flagstone turned the cooking pot upside down to show there was no more. Green shrugged.

Flagstone emptied his camp pot of it remaining coffee. "To tell the truth I didn't really escape."

"Oh, really," said Green rolling his eyes. "They just let you go."

"After a fashion," replied Flagstone.

"Why?" asked Brown from the shadows.

"On the way back to their village I played the good captive, waiting and watching for my chance to make my escape. They must have realized this as they put two guards on me at all times. I knew my time was running out, but decided to wait till the last moment to try to run. I knew I wouldn't get far if I botched it. The young warriors outnumbered me twenty to one, they were armed and I wasn't, and most of them could outrun me. I bided my time.

"One day as the sun was setting we were crossing a log across a stream. It had been raining for two days. The stream was really roaring along. My two guards and I were at the end of the column. We were about in the middle of the log when a tree came rushing along on the stream and rammed into the log bridging the stream. One of my guards was thrown into the stream with a yell. The other managed to hang on to the log. I fell into the water, but managed to grasp a branch of the tree trunk that had slammed into the bridging log. I was swept away with the flotsam in a rush. I didn't look back, but I could hear the warriors running down the stream bank calling for their lost friend.

"I found him first. As I was trying maintain my hold on the log and keep my head above water I saw a hand then a head then a foot as the poor warrior was swept along in the raging stream. I don't know why, but I let the log go, and struck out for the warrior struggling in the foaming water. I grabbed him by a wrist and pulled him up and we thrashed our way to the bank.

"We crawled up the muddy bank and lay there, just glad to be alive, as the rain pounded down on us. Lightning cracked overhead and thunder rumbled on forever. The warrior's mates ran past us on the opposite bank and

disappeared into the ever-increasing rain. We just lay there and looked at one another.

"I knew this was my chance, but I couldn't bring my self to kill the man I had just saved. I simply stood up and held out my hand. He stood up and shook it. Then he smiled and nodded. I turned and walked into the jungle forest. I never looked back. I don't know if he ever made it home, but I like to imagine he did. I'm sure I was reported as lost in the flooding stream. It would be no loss to the warriors.

"I eventually made the coast by following the stream, always going downstream. I walked into Jimville several weeks later, much thinner, but much wiser." Flagstone looked up at the stars peeking through the tree canopy. "Much wiser," he repeated.

"Damn good story," exclaimed Green. "Jolly good."

"It's no story," said Flagstone quietly.

"Well, yes, that's what I mean. Not that you'd, well, I, uh. It's jolly good story anyway you look at it," muttered Green.

"Shut up and get some sleep," growled Brown from the dark corner he was lying in. "I'll take the first watch, eh, Flagstone. Say two or three hours?"

"That'd do just fine. Tie a vine to yourself just in case. Both of you," answered Flagstone. Green knotted a vine around his waist and curled up in his blanket. In five minutes he was asleep. Flagstone lay back and silently watched the little fire in the beat-up old pot die out. The stars twinkled overhead. A gentle snore began to come from Green.

Brown rustled around a little. Flagstone looked over at him. Brown might have been smiling, Flagstone couldn't tell for sure.

"You're a very lucky man, Flagstone," Brown said almost in a whisper.

"Many times, in many ways," answered Flagstone softly in the dim moonlight. "And I never forget it." He pushed his hat over his eyes and laid back in the nest high above the jungle forest floor. The night noises sang him to sleep like a mother's sweet lullaby.

Report 283 - 13.7 - Hunting the Herd.

Date: 2004-12-29

13.7 - Hunting the Herd.

Julius Flagstone peered through the pre-dawn twilight. He was in a large clump of brush. A hundred yards ahead a large herd of dinosaurs milled about as they warmed to the coming day. Green and Brown crouched beside Flagstone. No one dared to breathe. The big animals snorted and a grunted as if they were giving morning greetings to one another. Maybe they were thought Flagstone.

The animals were parasaurolophus as Green excitedly and repeatedly told them as soon as he spotted them. He said they were a type of duck-billed dinosaur. Flagstone couldn't pronounce the name nor see a duck's bill anywhere on the big creatures. They did have a strange growth the extended the back of their heads out for several feet. It was weird looking. Whatever, he thought. Green seemed happy just to get this close. Brown, as usual, said little, but he eyes were bright with excitement.

Flagstone looked at the herd. Must be forty or fifty all told he thought. He scanned the savanna around the herd. The sun peeked over the treetops. Flagstone raised his binoculars and scanned the area. He smiled to himself. This might be his lucky day. He could see a pair of bright eyes in a group of trees on the other side of the herd, maybe a half a mile away.

Flagstone crouched down in the fronds and whispered very softly. "There is a medium-sized meat-eater on the other side of the herd. It is watching herd, and, well, hopefully not us."

Green squirmed a little. Flagstone laid a big hand on his shoulder. "Now is the time for great patience, Mr. Green. We may not get this chance again. Be still no matter what till I give the word."

Green nodded nervously. Brown craned his head forward peeking through the brush. Flagstone continued. "Remember, the para-whatevers don't consider us a threat yet, so no sudden movement. It would spook them. The meat-eater is another matter. It bites first and ask questions second in my experience."

"How many times have you come across those things?" asked Brown in a low voice.

"Counting the one in Jimville and this one, that makes four times," replied Flagstone.

"How did they go," asked Brown.

"Three times someone got eaten. We're doing great so far," said Flagstone.

"Bloody great," said Brown. Green squirmed around to get a better view.

The parasaurolophus herd was stirring. Clouds of dust rose as the herd moved out searching for a new grazing area for the day. Flagstone, Green, and

Brown sat in the clump of fronds and waited. Finally the last dinosaur had disappeared into the rolling land.

"Now, gentlemen. Let's move. Stay low. Stay alert. There's more than just us out here hunting these things." Flagstone pulled his hat firmly down and crept out into the open. Brown and Green quickly followed.

They circled a small hill, keeping it between themselves and the herd. Flagstone's head was on a swivel. He was pleased to see Brown was looking around too. Green, on the other hand, was focused on the herd. The din it was making marked its progress very clearly for everyone, everything.

For thirty minutes they trotted along staying out of sight of the herd. When Flagstone thought they were slightly ahead of the dinosaurs, they crept on hands and knees to the top of a low rise. The parasaurolophus herd stretched out before them. Flagstone's binoculars swept the area for the meat-eater. He smiled when he found it. It was still standing quietly in the small group of trees. The herd was passing it by, maybe three hundred yards away from its big jaws.

The three men slid back off the top of the little hill. Flagstone spoke as the others took a quick sip from their canteens.

"No stego-thing for you today, Brown. Will one of these do?"

"I suppose it will," answered Brown with a smile.

Flagstone nodded. "Mr. Green, that hunter is still waiting over there in the trees. If Brown, here, can bring down a beast, it may draw the hunter out. He may attack before we can get in a shot. In any case, he's your target. I'll back you up. Better safe than sorry."

Green swallowed nervously and nodded. Flagstone sipped some water. He was very glad he had decided to leave the heavy gear in their platform in the trees. It might be a long, tiring day. He motioned up and they crept to the little hilltop.

The herd was grazing peaceably, snorting, grunting, and making their strange calls. Flagstone watched the meat-eater across the herd and now slightly behind it. Flagstone tapped Green on the arm. Green twitched.

"Try to relax. That big boy over there is getting ready I think."

Green nodded, double-checking his big rifle. Flagstone looked around one more time.

"Brown, we'll wait a few more minutes. If that ugly fellow doesn't attack we'll move over one more hill and set up for your shot. Green, if he attacks first, let him make his attack. We can shoot him while he's eating his kill if he gets one, or wait till he tires chasing them."

The two men exchanged nervous, but excited glances. Flagstone made sure his pistol was firmly holstered and his big camp knife was securely in its sheath.

"Be ready to run if I say so. Those things can scatter in any direction, so stay alert. Listen for my orders. Most importantly, no one shoots till I say so. This may be our only chance. Ready?" he whispered.

Green and Brown each took a deep breath and nodded.

The herd was moving slowly along the shallow valley between low rolling hills. Tree sprouted in extravagant flourishes of greens, yellows and browns across the plains. The savanna's tough grass waved in green-yellow waves across the valley. The dinosaurs snorted, bobbing their heads as they ate and walked.

Suddenly one big plant-eater reared. It squawked loudly. The herd stopped, many standing taller to look around. The meat-eater burst out of the trees at the run. Flagstone heard Green and Brown gasp at the size and the speed of the creature. The herd was signaling its danger call. They bunched up and began to gather speed away from the threat. Flagstone tapped both men on the shoulder.

"Green, ready." Green rose, rifle at his shoulder following the charging meat-eater over his sights.

"Brown, ready. The big one sort of heading this way will do nicely.

"Right," answered Brown crouching low to clear the bushes to his front.

The meat-eater was almost upon the scattering herd. The ground shook a little with its running steps. Flagstone swallowed hard. The noise was deafening from the terrified animals. The meat-eater roared in its attack run. Dust rose from the shallow valley. Big animals were running every which way. The meat-eater charged into the herd. He bowled several animals over in his frenzied rush, but didn't stop. He had his eyes on some particular beast.

"Ready," said Flagstone loud enough to be heard over the tumult before them. He was following the meat-eater over his sights.

"Fire!" bellowed Flagstone like a parade-ground sergeant.

Two big rifles barked almost as one.

"Fire at will, keep your targets," Flagstone said over the noise. The rifle noise was almost lost in the thunder of the herd and the roar of the hunters. Brown's beast fell with a crash and tumbled over. The meat-eater had singled out his prey. Green fired again. The great slavering jaws reached toward their victim. The herd was making all sorts of noise. The roars of the hunters were distinct. Green fired again.

Flagstone jerked around. The big cat was nearly upon them. Flagstone brought his big rifle up and around. "Down," he yelled at the top of his voice. He fired at point blank range.

The big muscular shape flew over Brown and Flagstone's prostrate forms. It knocked Green down the forward slope. Flagstone swore an oath. He reloaded and stood up. The big smilodon slid to a halt and turned. It charged back up the hill at the confused Green lying on his back, his rifle ten feet to his right. It roared as it charged, the noise coming clearly over the cacophony of confusion and death behind it.

Flagstone pulled the big rifle in tight. The big tawny cat was heading straight at Green at an unbelievable speed. Flagstone fired. The big gun kicked hard. Flagstone drew his pistol. Five more shots rang out. The Cat sprang. Another big rifle cracked out like lightning. The big cat landed right where Green had been lying. Green was crawling frantically toward his rifle. The smilodon twitched and growled. It staggered to its feet. Flagstone reloaded his rifle. His shot blew off a part of the animal's head. It dropped where it stood.

Green regained his rifle. He walked unsteadily up the hill to join Flagstone and Brown. All of them were breathing hard. Sweat rolled down their backs. Green sat down hard. Brown knelt, his hands trembling. Flagstone knelt beside them; his own hands none too steady.

"Everyone ok?" he asked in a hoarse voice. Green nodded. Brown made a weak wave.

"Reload all your weapons. Now." He bolted another big shell into his rifle. He emptied his revolver and put five more big cartridges in it. He snapped it shut. Brown and Green stood with Flagstone. Everyone was looking everywhere. Flagstone's pulse was racing. He felt his heart must surely burst. He gasped for air. They stood on the little hill's crest and sucked in great gulps of air. No one spoke. No one moved. Everyone looked around.

Flagstone came to his senses from some great depth that had engulfed him. He looked at the shallow valley at their feet. Two plant-eaters lay there. The meat-eater lay in a heap near one of the plant-eaters. The big cat lay still not twenty feet away. Flagstone walked over to it. It was already drawing flies. Brains were scattered over the ground behind it. Flagstone turned to Brown.

"Nice shot."

Brown looked at him not seeming to understand.

"Nice shot," repeated Flagstone pointing at the smilodon.

Brown seemed to wake up. "Oh. Thanks," he replied weakly.

Flagstone pointed at the herd still moving rapidly away. The men nodded. Flagstone started walking slowly down the hill. He looked back. Green and Brown were staring at the smilodon lying in the grass. Flagstone stopped and took a sip from his canteen. His hand still shook a little. He took several deep breaths. He calmed himself. Brown was walking slowly toward Flagstone, a tired look on his face.

"Mr. Green," yelled Flagstone. "If you please. Let's stay together."

Green stumbled down to join Flagstone and Brown. They walked warily toward the meat-eater. Flagstones halted. He brought his rifle up. Brown and Green did likewise.

"Stay here," ordered Flagstone. He circled wide of the beast to reach its head. The thing was dead. Lifeless eyes looked at him. Big serrated teeth gleamed in the morning sunlight. He walked over to the plant-eater near the meat-eater. It had huge wounds on its neck, the head twisted at a very unnatural angle. Flagstone walked to the third animal. It, too, had a broken neck. He lowered his gun and returned to Brown and Green.

"Mr. Green, you got your big mean meat-eater. Don't know if is exactly what you had in mind," Flagstone said with a big smile. He shook Green's hand. Green blushed.

"It will do just fine," said Green in a croak.

"Mr. Brown, sorry to say you missed."

"Shit," was all Brown said.

"You missed the plant-eating dinosaur. But you hit the smilodon and saved our lives without a doubt." He shook Brown's hand. "Thank you very much," said Flagstone earnestly.

"I second that and more. Thank you," said Green shaking Brown's hand. Then Brown and Green let out a terrific whoop. Flagstone joined them. They yelled aloud. Green did a little jig. They all laughed and shook hands again.

The herd was long gone. Their dust was disappearing over low hills in the distance. The only dinosaurs left in the shallow valley lay very still as flies buzzed merrily around.

Report 284 - BODINE FINDS O'BLABBER.

Date: 2004-12-31

BODINE FINDS O'BLABBER.

The Herald has learned from reliable sources that Texas Bob Bodine has found Miss Scarlet O'Blabber who was lost looking for Bodine who was lost just looking. Uh-huh. Our sources refused to give us any further information saying Bodine was paying more than we were, so they took the hush money to remain quiet. [We call these guys reliable sources? - Ed]

The whole of Jimville waits for the story directly from Bodine's and O'Blabber's own lips once they return to Jimville. We hope Miss O'Blabber did not suffer any harm during her troubled time in the Wilds of Jimland.

CONSULATES REFUSED.

The Sultan's Court Advisor and Military Advisor stood shoulder to shoulder on the steps of the Sultan's Palace today and confirmed the Sultan's Policy statement. There will only be one foreign Consulate in Jimland at a time. The British Consulate is currently in place. Other nations wanting a piece of the Jimland pie must wait for the British to void their Favored Nation status. When asked what the Favored Nation status was, and how a nation could go about obtaining this status, the two Advisors ended the press conference saying that the Sultan would make this clear in good time.

When asked for a comment, the British Consul smoothed his tie, smiled, and said "No comment." When our report pressed the issue and asked how much it cost the British Government to keep its Consulate open, the British Consul smoothed his tie, smiled and said "No more than it is worth." The Consul then had our report ejected from the Consulate grounds. We are pleased to report our Reporter was not injured.

EXPEDITION RUMORS.

It is reported by our usually-reliable-if-we-pay-them-enough-money-sources that one Mr. George Challenger has succeeded in going out into the Wilds of Jimland on his first Expedition. It is also reported that he succeeded in actually returning alive to Jimville. The Herald will approach Mr. Challenger and attempt to get the details from his own, no doubt, trembling with excitement lips.

EXPEDITION HIRING.

A new Fearless and Famous Explorer wanna-be is now hiring all positions for his first Expedition. Jack Black, nationality unknown, arrived on the SS Baskerville Tuesday last. Mr. Black is looking to hire a full Expedition to begin his career as Jimland's newest Fearless and Famous Explorer.

He prudently discussed the matter with the experienced staff of the Herald. Our staff decided that with the limited funds at Mr. Black's disposal, his complete lack of experience in running an Expedition, his total naivete concerning the Wilds of Jimland, and the absence of any visible heavy armament, Mr. Black is not long for this world. We wish him well, but strongly suggest he take out a sizable life insurance policy so as to leave

his loved ones, wherever in the world they may be, something to remember him by.

Mr. Black is staying at the Empress and will be available on the Empress veranda from 10 a.m. through 2 p.m. for those who wish to sign on for his first Expedition. The Herald wishes one and all the best of luck.

SCIENCE CLUB.

The Science Club reports it is not responsible for any injuries sustained as a result of the last Club meeting. If ticket holders will examine the back of their tickets they will see that it is clearly stated that possession and use of said ticket is equivalent as signing a death, personal injury, and property damage waiver relieving the Science Club of any legal or moral responsibility should a demonstration go awry. The Science Club deems the explosion as constituting a demonstration gone awry. While they sympathize with the guests, the Science Club refuses to accept responsibility. They also would like to assure the affected parties that the green spots and foaming at the mouth will stop in a week or two, usually.

Science Club memberships are still available. Join up. Join in the Fun.

FROM THE WILDS.

From the Wilds of Jimland direct to you, Dear Reader, more news from what-we-used-to-call-reliable-sources-but-have-changed-to-by-the-word-copy-floggers.

New reports of Imperial Russian activity have come to light. What the size of the effort is and its ultimate goal remain shrouded in mystery as only half the reporter and half his report were located. Is another palace coup in the making? Does this explain the Sultan's foul mood of late?

In a strange twist of fate [Or not - Ed] the Glorious Peoples Expedition, or more fondly to one and all, the GPE, has stepped up its activities. Coming out of their secret bases scattered throughout Jimland, the GPE has ambushed several of the Sultan's Tax Collectors. At each ambush site graffiti claimed the GPE was under new management, now being led by the resurgent Trotsky fellow. Are the GPE on league with their heretofore sworn enemies of Imperial Russia? Strange bedfellows this Trotsky and the Tsar.

Is it true that Dullcote Industries has reclaimed its huge boring machine and is preparing to use it to test several Hollow Earth theories? We find this hard to believe, seeing no profit in the venture for Mr. Dullcote. When asked about this affair, Dullcote only thumped two of our now-bruised-and-bloodied-you-deserve-it-reliable-sources with his stout oak cane.

Are there riches to be had in the middle of the Earth? Is the Earth hollow? We followed this question to the door of our own Science Club. Their response was, "Of course the Earth is hollow. How else can you explain earthquakes and the like. The Earth is slowly collapsing in on itself. And where does all the water from all the rivers of the world go? If it all went into the oceans, they would surely fill up and flood the landmasses.

"We theorize that this is how all the "Great Flood" legends all over the world got started. The ocean drainage was blocked by some event, probably a massive earthquake caused by a meteor or comet impact, say around the time all the dinosaurs inexplicably perished save the few lucky one protected by

the mountains that ringed Jimland at the time. The oceans could not drain off the excess water, and, voila, the entire earth was flooded.

The Science Club refused to discuss the matter further without the Herald contracting with them for further Scientific and Technological Consultation. The Herald Management had to respectfully decline the opportunity saying they had formed a couple of Theories themselves. [Darn right. - Ed]

ANNUAL DANCE.

The Ladies of the Jimland House of Girls and Casino would like to invite everyone to their annual "Its Winter Somewhere, But Not Here" dance. A potluck buffet will be held also, so please bring a dish to share with your friends. Music will be provided by Ali Babba and His Forty Musical Thieves. All weapons must be checked at the door. Come on, come all, for a festive good time.

AN EDITORIAL NOTE.

Ali Babba does not really have Forty Musical Thieves. Just like everything else from the historical not-so Near East, the number forty is seriously misunderstood. In ancient times forty simply meant "a lot, many, a bunch, more than I can count on my fingers and toes". Reference the alleged forty thieves of the Arabian Tales, forty days and nights of rain of Biblical fame, and forty virgins awaiting martyrs at the Gates of Heaven. These references simply mean lots of something not an actual number. If actual numbers had been used, we are confident they would have been exaggerated to much loftier numbers, as is usually the case with ancient reports. After all it was simply propaganda of the times.

The Herald never resorts to mere propaganda. You, Gentle Reader, can always rely on getting only the Unvarnished Truth and, of course, All the News You Need to Know. Our forty semi-reliable source say this is so.

Report 285 - The Price Of Ink.

Date: 2005-01-01

The Price Of Ink.

Miss Pudding quietly soaked in her bath at the Empress of Jimville. She closed her eyes as the warmth of the rose scented water massaged her, her thoughts happily drifting to the time she would leave this most wretched, primitive of places. Realizing it was in fact Monday she sat up with a start and snapped her fingers sharply. As if on cue, her young Indian maid entered, bearing a silver tray with the newest Herald and a cup of warm tea on it. Sarah first took the cup and sipped, English tea of course, with just the right amount of spirits to ward off jungle fevers. "God bless the Baskerville," she thought. Nodding approval, she slipped back down into her sanctuary, her maid's soft voice drifting through the many articles of the paper.

During the next half-hour, between adding several kettles of hot water to the bath, and preparing a medicinal tea or two more for Sarah, the Maid completed reading the paper to Sarah. Sarah looked up quizzically.

"Have you read the entire paper?"

"Yes, my lady," the Indian girl stated quietly.

"And you have not lost a page?"

The Maid checked the page numbers. "No, Miss. The paper is complete."

Miss Pudding leapt up from the bath astonished. The suds dripped unnoticed from her nude body as she snatched the paper from the startled maid. Sarah stood puddling the floor, frantically scanning each page. Finally, in disgust, she threw the Herald on the table and began to dress.

An hour later Miss Pudding stood before a disreputable Jimville teahouse called "The Screaming Monkey". She had dressed in an elegant manner, a full length Ladies European dress of white Egyptian linen with the appropriate umbrella, hat, and light shawl to match. Ignoring the glances of passers-by, she made eye contact with a certain local gentleman and held up five fingers. As she turned and walked away five somber Askari fell in behind Sarah and a smallish Hyena she had on a short lease. The leader fell into step with Sarah and as they chatted she pointed several times to the Hyena. Eventually the party made its way to the docks where Sarah knew another certain gentleman would be waiting.

Motioning for her party to stay and scowling at the Hyena she walked up the docks to where a middle aged man stood.

"Mr. Quibbles," Sarah said, distracting the man from his staring at the harbor. "There seems to be some mistake with the Herald."

Mr. Quibbles turned and smiled at the young women. She handed him the paper. The dock was always a good place for a story and as a most reliable source

for the Herald it was his job to make sure the Herald stayed interesting. And for this he was well paid, of course.

"Mistake?" he said somewhat condescendingly as he took the paper. "Of what nature?"

"I am a Pudding and a Pudding is always in the Paper," Sarah said matter of factly, gently pulling the top of the paper down to peer at him.

The reporter rolled his eyes, "Miss Pudding you are not in Boston. In Jimland you get Ink only when you make News."

Miss Pudding sighed as the reporter began to babble. Turning slightly she snapped her fingers at the Hyena which had wandered up. The animal lunged with a speed found only in the Jungle and bit the startled reporter in the crotch. Mr. Quibble collapsed groaning on the ground as he clutched his nethers. The beast scurried off with its unmistakable laugh.

Sarah motioned the Askari forward. She bent over the reporter, poking him with her umbrella. "I want ink, Mr. Quibble, and there will be hell to pay if I don't get it. I want to read about the dress I bought or the play I saw or the interesting folks I talk to. I want to read about what a tart Nellie Bly looks like wearing her Khaki Nickers, and how utterly wretched Scarlett O'Blabber looks crawling in from the Jungle.

The reporter looked up wincing as several pairs of hands grabbed him and as a final insult heaved him into the bay.

Sarah's words rang slightly in his ears "That is all the news we need to know."

Report 286 - 13.X - Home.

Date: 2005-01-02

13.X - Home.

Julius Flagstone was pleased to be heading home. It had taken him four days to get the entire team and equipment on the site of their hunting success. The bodies of the animals had been ravaged by scavengers by the time they returned. To Green and Brown's great pleasure the heads were very salvageable. It had taken the Expedition another week to haul the trophies back to their camp by the river.

Now they were floating lazily down the tributary heading for the River Jim. The trophies were being towed on rafts constructed to carry them. The entire Expedition was in good humor. Green and Brown could hardly wait to get their prizes and stories back to England. Flagstone bask in the sun. He felt good. He still had it. He could still face the challenges of the Wilds of Jimland. He would give a good bonus to the men when they got back.

The days drifted by with the riverbank. Cool, crisp mornings and warm, pleasant afternoons. They tried their hand at fishing in the tributary. The bearers caught several great ugly fish no one could name and no one dared eat. Brown netted a gaudily colored bird one evening, declaring it would make a smashing surprise gift for his wife.

Just as they made the River Jim proper another rare treat was presented to the Expedition. As they floated silently down the river, Flagstone was signaled by Munashe in the lead canoe. He brought up his binoculars by reflex.

"Gentlemen, ahead is a sight you'll never see again. Have your guns ready, but stay still unless I order otherwise. Everyone, quiet!"

The canoes drifted on the current. The men had their oars on their laps. Flagstone sat and watched in fascination. He pointed ahead to where three canoes were drawn up on the far bank. To Flagstone's amazement, a dozen fierce tribal warriors were skinning and cutting up a pterodactyl they had apparently brought down with their bows. The warriors stopped working when they realized the canoes were silently passing by.

Both parties watched one another without either making a move. Flagstone grinned. He had never been this close to tribal warrior without shooting or stabbing at them. They stood like statues on the shore intently watching the canoes float by. Flagstone raised his hand part wave, part universal greeting. A grizzled old warrior slowly made a similar gesture.

Then they were gone around the bend of the river. Flagstone laughed aloud. He had never felt so good. He wanted to jump up and down. The bearers

talked excitedly among themselves. He turned to the canoes carrying Green and Brown.

"Gentlemen, you will never see that again. Tribal warriors that close and not a shot fired, not a man stabbed. A remarkable event, even for me and my men." He let out a whoop of joy. The bearers laughed and chattered.

Jimville was buzzing with the return of Flagstone, Green, and Brown. Their trophies became required viewing for all of Jimville. To Flagstone's surprise even the Sultan came down to the grimy taxidermist shanty to look at the great dinosaur and the terrible smilodon. The Sultan invited the trio to dine with him and tell him of their adventure. Flagstone could almost see Green and Brown swell up with imagined importance at the offer. Well, he consoled himself, the evening may be long, the tales ever wilder, but the Sultan laid out a good table.

Norton Dullcote had greeted them with hardly repressed relief. He hustled Green and Brown off to his office after a handshake with Flagstone. Flagstone didn't mind that at all. It gave him the time to tie up the loose ends of the Expedition. He paid off the men giving them a sizable bonus. Always grease the wheel, he told himself as he called each man's name, verified their duties with Munashe and Sefu, then paid the man in hard cash. He always enjoyed paying the men. They earned it. He respected them and their hard lives.

A week of pleasantries came and went. The novelty of the Expeditions trophies began to fade. Dinner with the Sultan marked the highlight of the celebration. Flagstone was kept busy with details, finally presenting his list of expenses to Green and Brown in Dullcote's private office. The setting reminded him forcibly of the first day they had met. Flagstone found it interesting that neither man reviewed the detailed list of expenditures. Norton Dullcote intercepted it, scanned it over quickly, pronouncing it a very fair price. Green and Brown wrote drafts on the spot. Norton intercepted the exchange of these also. He looked at Flagstone over the rims of his glasses.

"I shall have the funds deposited into your account this afternoon Flagstone," smiled Dullcote. "Molly!"

Molly's head poked through the half-opened door. Dullcote waved papers at her. She hustled in and gathered them in. Dullcote waved her out the door with, "Have that money in Flagstone's account within the hour."

"Yes, sir," was the reply through the closing door.

"Gentlemen, I hope you are well satisfied with you Safari, or as we say here, your Adventure in Jimland," said Dullcote raising his glass in a toast. A few minutes later, Flagstone was shaking hands all around and being ushered out of Dullcote's office by Norton himself. Norton stopped on the front porch of his office. He shook Flagstone's hand one more time.

"Thank you, Jules. You have made two very powerful men very happy. That's a good thing. Remember that. They will. I will."

"Glad everything worked out," answered Flagstone mildly confused by what Dullcote was saying.

Norton turned to leave stopping by the unopened door. "By the way, Molly is off early today. I don't think she has any plans."

Flagstone laughed. "Norton, you're a rascal to the end."

Norton didn't quite laugh as he answered, "Not always." The closing door ended the conversation, leaving Flagstone figuratively scratching his head. He laughed and headed for the Empress. Seemed he needed some more flowers delivered.

That evening Flagstone dined well. Molly proved very good company. Later as she washed his broad scarred back in the big tub in Flagstone's suite, she ran her finger over each scar and asked about them. To Flagstone surprise he could not recall how he came by some of them.

Flagstone lay back in Molly's arms. The hot water felt heavenly. The wine was chilled to perfection. Molly's company was excellent, making Flagstone forget the Wilds of Jimland for an evening. Flagstone felt himself relax. He was adrift, no thinking, no problems, no animals trying to eat him, no dysentery, no shakes at night, no filthy water to drink, no spoiled meat to choke down. The cool evening breeze played gently with the curtains by the open door to the balcony. Molly massaged his shoulders. He dissolved under her fingers.

"Feeling better?" Molly whispered.

"Absolutely," he answered softly.

A cable danced before his eyes, held in Molly's slightly trembling hand. He slowly took it. It had been opened. It was three weeks old. He read it as Molly held him close.

"Miss Olivia Fate was killed in a ballooning accident in Italy. The balloon she was piloting crashed into the side of a mountain in the western Alps during its flight. Also aboard the balloon were the son and grandson of Marcello Viggio. There were no survivors."

Molly pulled him close. He felt her tears on his shoulder. He felt his own trickle down his cheek.

"I'm so sorry, Jules," began Molly.

Flagstone put his finger on her lips. He laid the cable on the floor. The breeze ruffled the curtains. Molly held Flagstone for a long time, very closely.

It could not be long enough or close enough.

Report 287 - 14.1 - The Sultan

Date: 2005-01-07

14.1 - The Sultan

Julius Flagstone sat in the warm waiting chamber in the Sultan's Palace. He had been summoned by the Sultan's Court Advisor, not the Sultan. No matter, thought Flagstone, something's up. Since he wasn't seeing the Sultan himself over the matter, he decided it was something the Sultan wanted to distance himself from. It was thirty minutes since he had arrived, very much on time. He stretched and yawned in the warmth of the room. A big fire was needlessly heating the room. Winter in Jimland was brisk along the coast, but never really cold. Flagstone walked over to a divan and lay down. He was asleep in a flash.

The Sultan's Court Advisor's face came into fuzzy focus, then snapped into clear view. Flagstone sat up embarrassed.

"My apologies, Your Excellency," muttered Flagstone rising to his feet at once.

"No offense taken, Mr. Flagstone. I have wanted to do that very thing when the Sultan calls for me then gets distracted and forgets I am patiently waiting. You did the wise thing. In Jimland, a man never knows when he will get his next chance at a good sound sleep." The Sultan's Court Advisor gestured graciously at the door to his office. Flagstone followed the man in the beautiful flowing robes. He felt scruffy.

The Sultan's Court Advisor's office was not a cubbyhole. It stretched out on either hand and beyond the back of the Advisor's gilded chair-back were two doors in the shadows. Red folding screens inlaid with semi-precious stones were arranged to the left and right to give a little sense of intimacy in the large room. The Advisor waved Flagstone into a comfortable chair. The desk was clearly a copy of a Louis XV piece, Flagstone noted, a very well done copy. Probably very expensive as well. The whole room and its elegant furnishings reminded Flagstone that as well off as he was, there were others who riches shamed his. He sighed.

The Court Advisor sat calmly, his elbows on the table, his chin on his interlocked hands, and looked Flagstone over. A woman servant padded softly in with a tray of finger food. She was stunning. Flagstone followed her involuntarily with his eyes. The Court Advisor smiled to himself. She returned a moment later with a silver inlaid pot. Flagstone smelled the strong coffee. He smiled at the Court Advisor. The Advisor rose and deftly poured two small cups. Flagstone nodded his thanks as he accepted the cup. He sipped. He knew better than to take a big drink. The Sultan liked his coffee very strong and very hot. Flagstone agreed. It hit the spot. He settled back into his chair, waiting.

The Court Advisor nibbled on a pastry. Flagstone watched him. This man should be Sultan he thought to himself. He was more educated than the Sultan

was. He was much smoother handling people. He was also just as ruthless, able to order a man's death without a twinge of conscious. Clever, smooth, and ruthless all added up to a very dangerous man. Flagstone sat up and paid attention.

The Court Advisor put his coffee down. "How are you doing, Mr. Flagstone?" he asked the surprised Flagstone.

"I am doing fine, Your Excellency," replied Flagstone.

"How are you feeling?"

"I am feeling fine, Excellency," answered Flagstone wondering where the Court Advisor was getting ready to go.

"The death of Miss Fate has troubled you?"

"Yes."

"It has passed?"

"As well as it can."

"For now," smiled the Court Advisor.

"For now. Time heals all wounds, or so I have been told," said Flagstone wanting to change the subject, but waiting for the Advisor to lead.

"Yes. I have heard the same. Time heals all. Sometimes we mortal men do not have enough time," purred the Court Advisor.

"We shall see, Excellency," said Flagstone flatly.

The Court Advisor rearranged his beautiful silk robe. His jewelry flashed in the sunlight coming in the high windows along the wall. Flagstone felt scruffy again.

"The Sultan would like to express his sympathies for your loss," said the Court Advisor.

"Many thanks to the Sultan for his concern. Please assure the Sultan that I will recover from this loss, as we all must," answered Flagstone.

"Some wise men say work helps to dull the pain and speed the recovery," smiled the Court Advisor.

Flagstone smiled. "Some wise men also say a beautiful woman speeds the process considerably," chuckled Flagstone as the lovely woman servant removed the pastry tray.

The Court Advisor laughed and followed the woman out of the room with his eyes. Sharp, hard eyes. He laughed again. "Perhaps. You like?" he asked his eyes glittering.

"What's not to like," smiled Flagstone.

"Hmmm," purred the Court Advisor. He swept his hands over his desk as if physically changing the topic. "The Sultan thinks you need something to clear your mind, to help you forget your troubles, to give you focus."

"That is very kind of the Sultan," answered Flagstone patiently.

"The Sultan would like to offer you a small job. A small job to focus your mind. A small job that will pay very well," said the Court Advisor studying Flagstone closely.

"I am honored," replied Flagstone still trying to be patient.

"This small job must be done quietly and quickly. The Sultan thinks only you need be involved. And, of course, the Sultan values a discrete man much more than a man with a loose tongue."

"Of course," said Flagstone swallowing and wondering what it was like to live without a tongue at all.

"The Sultan has received alarming news of dangerous cult rising in the desert. This cult is fomenting rebellion and performing terrible deeds. Sheik Fizzle has tried to stamp it out, but unfortunately, he failed."

Flagstone sat bolt upright. "Sheik Fizzle!"

The Court Advisor sat comfortably, calmly, in his big gilded chair. "Why, yes. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Surely you have heard this. The Sultan thinks the Sheik is misunderstood by many men," he said evenly.

"I'll try to remember that, Excellency," muttered Flagstone.

"Excellent, Mr. Flagstone. Even in your time of loss you grow. That is encouraging."

Flagstone tried to feel encouraged. "This small job. What might it be?" he asked carefully.

"It is a simple task. Find the leader of the cult and dispose of him. Very simple," smiled the Court Advisor sipping his coffee.

Flagstone's mind raced. Find a man and kill him. Be an assassin for the Sultan. He thought about it. The Sultan's Court Advisor saw the play of emotions on Flagstone's face. He calmly sipped his coffee waiting for Flagstone to work it through.

Flagstone needed some time to think. He rose and sipped his coffee. He put the empty cup down. He began to pace unconsciously behind his chair. Six steps left, then back to the right. He big hands were on his hips, one moving to rest on the shiny butt of his "town" revolver. Kill a man for the Sultan. Well, he had killed men before, he admitted to himself. He had worked for the Sultan on occasion before too. But being the Sultan's assassin kind of stuck in his throat. He stopped pacing and faced the Court Advisor.

"This is a one time job. Not a new occupation. My fee will be much higher than usual, Excellency. This is a delicate affair and must be done most

carefully to be sure the Sultan is not implicated in any way." Flagstone tried to read the Court Advisor.

The Court Advisor formed a pyramid with his hands. He rested his fingertips against his chin. "Of course." He waited.

Flagstone paced again. He was becoming intrigued. It sent a perverse thrill through him. "Where is this cult?"

"In the desert not far off the River Jim to the north. It is country I believe you have traveled once or twice before."

"Yes. Sheik Fizzle and I seem to have, ah, disagreements about my business there." Flagstone chuckled.

"Sheik Fizzle will not interfere with you in this small job."

Flagstone looked at the Court Advisor. What the hell was going on here he wondered? The Court Advisor smiled shrewdly back. He nibbled on his pastry. Flagstone paced again.

"Who is the man, Excellency?"

"His name is Skull, yes, like a man's skull. He seems to have come from nowhere. He is now terrorizing a growing area of Jimland in the area I mentioned before. The Sultan waited for Fizzle to end the terror and disperse the man's growing cult, but to no avail. The Sultan, always the man of action, has decided now is the time to act. You, being who you are, are the perfect tool for the job. Consider it a hunt. Consider you will be doing all Jimland a service."

"Why is this one man a danger?"

"He is raising an old cult from Jimland's dark past back into the light. It can not be allowed to continue. Not at all." The Court Advisor's face flushed ever so slightly.

"Why is he dangerous, Excellency?"

"He raises the Cult of the Dead. He is said to have even raised the dead and they now do his bidding. Fear is starting to spread. Evil men are joining his cult. Good men are joining rather face his wrath and his horrible rabble."

Flagstone stopped in mid-stride and faced the Court Advisor. "You're serious, right?"

"Most serious, I assure you, Mr. Flagstone," said the Court Advisor earnestly.

"No joke?"

"None whatsoever." The Court Advisor didn't look like a man who was prone to joking about anything.

Flagstone ran his hand through his hair. He paced again. "Some crazy out in the god-forsaken desert is raising the dead and forming a cult. You want this crazy dead. Fizzle has failed. Now you want me to do it?"

"That sums it up very nicely, if needlessly, Mr. Flagstone. The man is not crazy, as you seem to think. He is very, very deadly serious about his business. Very. As you should be."

Flagstone stared back at the Court advisor for several long moments gathering his thoughts. "Just me."

"Yes."

"No Expedition. No fellow assassins? Just me," asked Flagstone.

"We thought it more discrete and more likely to be successful," said the Court Advisor smoothly.

Flagstone sat in his chair, elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. "Why me, and, please, skip the kid glove stuff."

"If you wish. You are an experienced hunter of proven reliability. You have no one that could be used against you. You have a price. You are a practical man, Mr. Flagstone."

Flagstone leaned back in his chair and smiled. "You forgot to mention I'm expendable and easily deniable, Excellency."

"Exactly, Mr. Flagstone. You see things clearly."

Flagstone stretched his legs out and slumped in the chair. His eyes were unfocused. He wondered to himself. Why not, he thought. Other than being an assassin is pretty much against the law of every country on Earth. And an assassin for money, not passion, not religious zeal, not political fervor. An assassin for money, pure, simple, cold.

"I know I will be sorry if I do this, Excellency."

"You will be more sorry, maybe not tomorrow, or in six months, but if this man is not stopped, you will be sorry. You will know you could have stopped this terrible thing before it grew too large, before it terrorized all the Jimland and spread its horror outside of Jimland."

"You make this sound like a public service to Jimland and the whole damn world," grunted Flagstone.

"It is in its own way, Mr. Flagstone."

"Just me. One alleged evil man. No restrictions. No interruptions by Fizzle. At an indecently high price," Flagstone counted off his rapid thoughts.

"Yes, to all you have said but one," replied the Court Advisor.

"That exception is?" asked Flagstone.

"He is not alleged to be evil. He is evil." The Court Advisor's eyes were as hard as diamonds, as cold as ice. Not sentiment other than hatred was on his face. It radiated almost physically from the man.

Flagstone stood and looked at the Sultan's Court Advisor. Neither blinked for a long moment. Flagstone suddenly thrust his hand forward.

"I'll take the small job. I will make my preparations to leave next week," he said firmly.

"I will send you further details on the man's last location this evening. And you must leave tomorrow. Time is of the essence." The Court Advisor stood and firmly shook Flagstone's outstretched hand.

"This will be expensive, Excellency."

"As it must be," said the Court Advisor with a vague wave of his hand.

Flagstone knew he was dismissed. He bowed slightly, turned, and walked out of the Sultan's Court Advisor's office. Flagstone was shocked at what he had just agreed to do. He was also feeling a rush like he hadn't felt in a long time. He knew what he had just made of himself, but somehow he couldn't feel bad about it. Tomorrow, he thought to himself. I better get cracking.

The door to the Sultan's Court Advisor's office swung noiselessly shut. The Court Advisor sat in silence for a moment. A voice came from behind the left-hand screen.

"That went well. I didn't think he'd do it."

The Sultan sauntered casually over to the chair in front of the desk of the Sultan's Court Advisor. The Court Advisor rose to his feet. The Sultan waved him back into his chair.

"Yes, my Sultan, it went well. But I still don't trust the man. He has a few morals remaining," said the Court Advisor.

The Sultan laughed. "Mr. Flagstone is an interesting bird. He knows the difference between good and evil, yet can do evil when he thinks it will help the good. A interesting man. I shall miss him if he is killed. But that is not our worry, is it?"

"No, my Sultan, it not our worry. We will just find another man and try again."

"Yes. Try again." The Sultan paused and looked lost in thought for a moment. "Any word from Fizzle?"

"Yes, my Sultan, a message arrived just before Flagstone arrived." He handed a small note to the Sultan.

"The murdering thief tells us where this Skull is. Pass it along to Flagstone with any other information you think he may need." The Sultan headed for one for the rear doors in the Court Advisor's office.

"Yes, my Sultan."

"And make sure Flagstone starts tomorrow. We must stop this sickness before it spreads." The door closed silently behind the Sultan. The Court Advisor immediately sat at his desk. He drew out a common writing paper, something that could not be traced to the Palace. He dipped his pen and began writing. He didn't smile until he was finished and handed the sealed note to his chosen messenger.

The Sultan's Court Advisor sat at his desk for a long time thinking about the afternoon's meeting. He hoped he had chosen the right man for both their sakes.

Report 288 - 14.2 - The Messenger

Date: 2005-01-15

14.2 - The Messenger

Julius Flagstone's hunting gear lay scattered about the main room of his suite. The doors to the balcony were open letting the last breeze of the evening in. The sun was just about to dip below the distant treetops. Flagstone was walking back and forth from the huge bedroom closet to the pile of gear on the table in the main room. He carried items back and forth, slowly adjusting the pile as he adjusted his ideas on his accepted task.

A gentle knock sounded on his door. Flagstone stepped over to it and opened it expecting to see a messenger from the Sultan's Court Advisor with his last minute information. Instead, Molly stood smiling at him. He sniffed. She smelled good. She smiled.

Flagstone stood for a moment with his mouth open. Molly laughed. "Not what you were expecting, Jules?"

"Actually, no. I thought you were a messenger from the Palace," he said blushing.

Molly wiggled her head from side to side. "Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Ambassador," she laughed.

Remembering his manners Flagstone stepped aside. "Please, come in. Didn't mean to be rude. I really am very glad to see you."

"That's better. I thought you needed some personal care this evening and I was just the one to care for you." She smiled at him. A good idea he thought to himself. Flagstone started to open his mouth, but another soft knock sounded on his door. Flagstone turned and opened the door.

His mouth fell open. He felt Molly come up behind him. She put a hand on each of his hips and looked around his shoulder. A small sigh left her lips. Standing in the doorway was the stunning servant girl from the Court Advisor's Office. Behind her were two huge member of the Sultan's Guard. The girl removed her long silk robe and handed it to the nearest huge guard. She was wearing a sheer silk gown that hid nothing. She blushed as Flagstone's gaze went from head to foot and back again.

Flagstone finally found his tongue. "Yes?"

"My name is Fatima. I have a message for you from the Sultan's Court Advisor," she said in pleasant voice. She stood waiting.

Molly cleared her throat from behind Flagstone. He turned, shifting his look between the two women as they sized each other up. The two huge guards stood like statues, arms crossed. The hall seemed to Flagstone to have grown sizably smaller.

"I'd best be running along now, Jules." Molly moved toward the door. Fatima stepped into the suite. The two guards only moved enough to allow Molly to pass. She stopped at the doorway and sighed. "Youth," she said softly. Then to Flagstone she said more firmly, "Jules, if you need anything, just let me know. I'll be around, dear."

"Thanks, Mol, but I'm ok at the moment," sputtered Flagstone.

"I'll bet you are," she laughed as she walked down the hallway. "I'll be waiting to hear from you anyway." She disappeared down the stairs.

Flagstone looked at Fatima. She was stunning even up close. It wasn't fair. Fatima only smiled, blushed slightly, then turned and closed the door. Flagstone heard the guards redistribute themselves, but not leave. He looked at Fatima with a question on his face.

Fatima tossed her head; her long jet-black hair shimmered in the light of the gas lamps in the room. From somewhere Flagstone could not fathom she produced a small envelope and handed it to Flagstone. He took the envelope and waited for her to leave. She stood firmly in front of him, unmoving.

"Yes?" he asked politely.

"I am Fatima," she began.

"I got that part. Are you supposed to wait for a response for the Court Advisor?" he asked.

Fatima's smile was dazzling. Her laugh was like music. Flagstone suddenly felt very stupid. Fatima placed her two small hands on Flagstone's broad shoulders. He didn't know whether to run or stand his ground.

"I am Fatima." She placed a little finger across his lips. "I am Fatima. I am given to you by the Sultan. I am your woman."

Flagstone took a step back. His head was spinning. "I don't need a servant, Fatima. That's not how I operate." He was at a loss for words. Fatima's beautiful face became screwed up as if to cry.

"You are not pleased?"

"No. Yes. It's just," began Flagstone.

"Please don't send me back. I will be beaten or worse for failing to please you. I am your woman now. I will do what ever you ask. Please don't send me back. I wished so hard to leave that horrible place. Then I saw you, and I knew in my heart that you would take me away from there. And you did. Please don't send me back. I am your woman. I will do anything you ask. I am yours." It all came out in a rush so fast Flagstone could barely keep up. He stood open-mouthed looking at one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. A tiny tear streaked her cheek. Her golden skin was slightly flushed. Her jet-black hair reflected the light like black gold. Her gray eyes were jewels. Her tiny hands were clutched to her chest. The top of her head didn't reach to Flagstone's brawny shoulder. She was so small he thought. She was so perfect.

She was so likely to catch a cold in that nothing of a gown standing in the cool night breeze, he suddenly thought. Flagstone snapped back into the world. He had been lost in her eyes. He stepped over and closed the balcony doors. Then, with a gesture to Fatima to stay where she was, he went into the bedroom and returned quickly with an old shirt. He draped it around her shoulders. She smelled good, very good. He inhaled more deeply. She put her arms around his broad chest. He looked down at her.

"Please don't send me back. I am your woman."

"I'm not going to send you back just yet, so relax, ok."

Fatima's smile lit up the room. She hugged him close. Flagstone gently untangled her and sat her in a chair. Her eyes never left him. He sat in a chair opposite hers.

"Fatima, I think there has been an misunderstanding. Do you understand what I'm saying?" She nodded yes. "Good. Because I'm not sure I do." Flagstone was at a loss for words. Fatima stood and picked the note off the table, handing it to Flagstone. He smiled. He opened the note and read.

Fatima walked about the suite. She went into the bedroom. A few minutes later she returned. She began picking up items from the floor. She stepped into the little kitchen area and examined the contents of the all the shelves. She clucked softly to herself. She quietly returned to stand directly in front of Flagstone who was lost in thought. He focused. He smiled at Fatima, it was hard not to.

"Paper and pen?" she asked. He pointed to the drawer in the table. She pulled them out and began writing. Flagstone sat thinking. He forgot she was in the room. Fatima moved about the suite examining everything, coming back to the table to jot notes occasionally. Finally Flagstone came out of his thoughts to find her sitting quietly across from him watching him carefully.

"What?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "I will like it here. I am glad to be here. You are very handsome. I know all about the famous Flagstone. You steal all the girls' hearts. I give you mine." She beamed the dazzling smile at him. He felt very stupid.

"That's nice," he said hesitantly. He noticed Fatima had changed into one of Olivia's gowns. A lump came to his throat. He rose and gently took Fatima by the hand. He led her into the bedroom and opened the huge closet doors. He sighed. Just do it, he told himself firmly. He began taking the clothes that were Olivia's down from their hangers and throwing them into a pile in the middle of the big bed. Fatima sat on the edge of the bed and watched in silence.

When the closet and the bureau drawers had been emptied of Olivia's belongings, Flagstone stood in front of Fatima. He reached out his hand. She unhesitatingly took it. He stood her up. He pulled the old gown over her head. She stood naked before him, not ashamed at all. She was so tiny and so perfect. He reached out and put his old shirt back over her little frame. She looked up with a confused expression.

"Tomorrow you will buy your own clothes. I will give you money and you will go shopping. Understand?" he said softly. "Of course, you understand," he sputtered turning red.

"I understand," she said sadly. "Old clothes bring back memories of Olivia. I understand. I am not Olivia. Do you understand? I am yours, but I am not Olivia. I am Fatima. Understand?"

Flagstone smiled his first real smile in several weeks. "I understand. Good. I want you to be you. Excellent. Damn!"

"What?" asked a nervous Fatima.

"I won't be here tomorrow, or for a while after tomorrow," he said quietly.

"I will be here when you return."

"I'm sure you will be," he said kissing her on the forehead. She looked disappointed. Flagstone didn't notice. He went into the main room. Sitting at the table he began to write a note to Molly. He smiled to himself as he wrote it. This will be interesting he thought.

Finishing his note, he noticed the one written by Fatima. It listed many food items, cleaning items, and household things definitely missing from the suite. He crossed off some of the items. Fatima came into the room and dropped a bundle by the door. It was a sheet filled with Olivia's old clothes. The corners were securely knotted together.

"I'll take this to the mission tomorrow if it is alright with you," she said.

"Fine." Flagstone had never thought about what to do with Olivia's things. "After that you will go to Norton Dullcote's office. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes."

"You will go there and ask for Molly. She was the lady who was here when you arrived."

"The lady who was not happy to see me?" asked Fatima.

"Yes, that's the one. It was nothing personal. She was just surprised. So was I," said Flagstone truthfully. Fatima smiled. "Give this note to Molly. She will get you money from my account and go shopping with you. Ok?" Fatima nodded yes. Flagstone looked at the beautiful young woman as she stood in the middle of the suite, his big shirt almost hiding her shapely legs.

"How old are you, Fatima?" Flagstone asked.

"Old. Twenty-two. How old are you, Mr. Flagstone?"

Flagstone winced. "Please call me Julius or Jules."

Fatima smiled and outshone the lights in the suite. "Ok, Jules."

Flagstone smiled. That sounded pretty good. Get a grip, he firmly told himself. He smiled back. He couldn't help it.

"How old are you, Jules?" she asked politely.

"Old enough to be your father, Fatima," said Flagstone surprised that he felt disappointed by that little fact.

"Please, call me Tiny. Fatima is my public name. Tiny is my private name. Ok?"

Flagstone looked at the beautiful little woman and smiled. "Ok, Tiny it is." She giggled. Flagstone felt better than he had felt in weeks. Maybe she could stay for a while he thought. Fatima looked around at the mess in the room.

"Time to pack," she said firmly. Flagstone nodded. That brought him back to reality. He began by folding the note from the Sultan's Court Advisor and putting it deep in his trouser pocket. Together they began sorting out his gear as he carefully packed his big field pack.

By midnight he was happy with his pack contents, supplies, and weapons. Everything was set in the floor in preparation for an early departure. Gently Flagstone led Fatima into the bedroom. He sat her on the bed. She slid under the sheets in an instant. A blink of the eye later the big shirt floated to the ground. Fatima smiled up from the big pillows. Flagstone took in a deep breath and picked up a pillow. Pulling a spare blanket from the closet he headed for the main room. He stopped at the door of the bedroom. Fatima had a puzzled look on her face.

"Not tonight, Tiny. Ok? Let's sort things out a little first," he said softly.

Fatima nodded. Flagstone gently closed the door.

Fatima stepped into the main room of the suite as soon as she awoke. Flagstone was gone. She held the old shirt up to her nose and inhaled. She smiled. I will be here when you return, Julius Flagstone. You need me. You just don't know it yet. Olivia will fade away and I will be here. She opened the balcony doors.

Sunlight flooded into the darkened suite.

Report 289 - 14.3 - Mule Ride

Date: 2005-01-22

14.3 - Mule Ride

Julius Flagstone's butt was sore. He had been riding the mule since long before sunrise with hardly a stop. He wasn't used to riding. The saddle he had purchased with the mule was long on practicality and short on comfort. He pulled the animal to a halt. The mule was a domesticated Jimland Wild Mule. Its grey hide varying from dark at the shoulders to a light almost mottled gray at the feet. It was typical of the sturdy, tough beast. Flagstone did a couple of knee bends and trunk twist to loosen up. The mule looked at him as if saying let's get going, time's wasting.

He smiled to himself and paced a little bit. Riding a mule was not his style. But this was certainly faster than walking, though he wasn't sure if he could walk if he rode for very long. He was certain he had left town without being followed. He had stopped several times to watch the land he had passed through. So far so good.

Flagstone thought again about what he had volunteered to do. He shook his head. Have I fallen this low he wondered? Paid assassin for the Sultan. What will people say? He absently touched his shirt pocket that held the note from the Sultan's Court Advisor. If it was true, and that was a big if, then he wouldn't hesitate to shoot this Skull character whoever he was.

He took a drink from his canteen, then remounted with a pained sigh. The mule turned its big head around. One big brown eye looked balefully at him. The mule made a snorting noise. "Shut up," laughed Flagstone. A prod of his heel and off the mule went at its steady pace. Flagstone winced a little. Tonight, he promised himself, we camp next to a deep, cold stream.

Four days later Flagstone pulled the reins in and the mule halted. A native village had appeared on the riverbank where there shouldn't be one. That or Flagstone had misjudged the distance he had covered. He dismounted with a grunt. The mule turned a big brown eye on him. He led the mule through the edge of the jungle and past the village.

"Let's just get to the bridge and get across. Then I promise I won't ride you anymore," he muttered to the mule as they walked through the jungle trees.

A giggle brought Flagstone's head around. A native child stood to his right. The child was giggling with her hand over her mouth. "You talk to your mule," laughed the child.

Flagstone smiled. "Yes, I do. Sometimes he answers back, but not very often."

The child laughed again and ran off toward the village. Flagstone continued through the forest hoping he hadn't just made a fatal mistake. The mule refused to comment on the incident.

"Shut up," muttered Flagstone.

It was a dark and moonless night. Flagstone was one hundred and fifty hard miles north of Jimville. He stood in the darkness rubbing the mule's muzzle. The last two days had been spent moving upstream along the riverbank. He had reached his first objective. The old bridge spanning the river looked like it had been there forever. It had been there a long time to be sure, thought Flagstone. It had been there when the first natives came to Jimland. It had been in their legends ever since. The massive stones that made up the bridge looked like there were carved out of one giant piece of rock that just happened to be in the right spot.

It was dark gray in the night. It stretched across the river straight as one could make something straight. It was covered in blown dirt and sand. It looked like it was watching him. It was time to cross.

Flagstone led the mule out from the copse of trees they were standing in. They walked toward the bridge. The waterbags slung on the mule sloshed gently in night. Up off the desert floor onto the remaining fragment of road that led to the bridge. The mule's iron shod hooves clattered noisily on the rock surface. Flagstone gritted his teeth and kept walking.

They walked between the smooth shoulder-high columns that marked the end of the bridge proper. Up the gently incline of the arch of the bridge. Flagstone paused at the top and looked up and down the river. It was a black road, flecked with occasional specks of white where the river splashed against its rocks. Down the bridge's other side they went. Past the columns and off the road. The mule's hooves made a quiet thumping as they walked away from the river.

It was a dark and moonless night. Flagstone was glad.

Flagstone followed the riverbank for two more days, carefully staying out of sight of anything he heard coming. The walking eased the pain in his legs and back. It also eased his conscience as if it was penance for some sin.

The third day found Flagstone walking quietly up the riverbank as far from the river as possible and as near to the bordering brush as possible. He stopped and cocked his head listening. The mule swished its tail in the still air. Flies were buzzing around. The river gurgled twenty yards away. Flagstone listened harder. Something was coming his way. He thought he could make out voices. Instantly he led the mule into the thickest brush he could find. Flagstone squatted down and drew out his big revolver.

The noise coming down the riverbank grew louder. A party of three men came into view. Flagstone gasped. Two of the men were huge. They held long sturdy poles that led to thick rope looped around the neck of the third man. The man in the middle growled and grunted trying to reach first one, then the

other of his captors. The captors strained to the control the man in the middle. The little party came nearer.

Flagstone gasped again. The two captors were big men who did not get a second glance from Flagstone. The third man, the man in the middle with the heavy ropes around his neck, held Flagstone spellbound. The man was horribly wounded. His skin had several gaping wounds and was laid open to the bone. Yet, no blood came from the wounds. The man's head was tilted at an unnatural angle. He didn't tear at the ropes binding his neck, but unceasingly tried to grab one of the handlers who were safely out of reach. The wounded thing, for Flagstone had immediately stopped thinking of it as a man, stumbled along at a clumsy pace, frequently trying to lunge at one of its captors or the other. Flagstone could only stare dumbfounded. The Sultan's Court Advisor hadn't lied after all. Someone was raising the dead.

Flagstone never heard the men come up behind him. He only realized they were there when the hard muzzle of a gun was pressed firmly against his back. He raised his hands very slowly. His revolver was roughly taken from his hand. The reins to his mule were snatched away. Flagstone started to rise. A second gun tapped his shoulder and pressed it down. Flagstone sank back into his crouching position.

The strange trio slowly disappeared out of sight. A sigh seemed to leave the men behind Flagstone. The men with Flagstone remained still in the brush another full five minutes. Then the muzzle in his back pushed on him. Flagstone stumbled into the clear area in front of him. He heard a laugh.

"Flagstone, the mighty hunter," said a harsh voice.

Flagstone smiled to himself grimly and very slowly turned. The muzzle in his back turned with him, staying firmly in place.

"Sheik Fizzle, what a pleasant surprise," said Flagstone trying to force a smile.

Fizzle's hand flashed out. A glittering blade pressed against Flagstone's throat. Fizzle growled like an animal, "Tell me why I should not kill you right now?"

"I'm more valuable alive than dead," was the first thing that came to Flagstone's mind.

Sheik Fizzle grunted and sheathed his knife with a snap. "Perhaps!"

The little group stood for a moment while a scout followed the trail of the strange men and their captive. The scout soon returned and reported all was clear. The whole time this went on the muzzle in his back never eased its pressure. Fizzle turned and walked away from the desert. The party quickly followed.

More men surrounded Fizzle and Flagstone. Flagstone tried to count them, but gave up with an estimate thirty desert raiders in the party. Away from the river they walked, up and over several low hills. They topped a third hill

and Flagstone saw more men and many horses in the shallow depression at the hill bottom. The men moved silently down the hill.

Flagstone's hands were tied in front of him. Then he was roughly mounted. His bound hands were tied to a rope that led to the callused hands of tough looking raider. The man stared into Flagstone's eyes and slowly wrapped several loops of the rope around the pommel of his saddle. He yanked on the rope. Flagstone was nearly pulled out of his saddle. The desert raiders laughed. Flagstone struggled to get upright in his saddle.

Sheik Fizzle bellowed an order. The desert raider mounted. Fizzle spurred his horse and led the men up and out of the depression. They rode away from the river into the trackless desert. Flagstone looked back trying to get a final bearing. It was no use. The silent desert quickly swallowed them.

Report 290 - 14.4 - Camp.

Date: 2005-03-05

14.4 - Camp.

Julius Flagstone rode in the middle of the desert raiders. The dust kicked up by their horses made him cough. The men around him only laughed behind the veils pulled across their faces. Fizzle led them further into the desert. The sun sank below the horizon. The moon lit their way. They rode on in the night. The trees of an oasis rose ahead in the moonlit darkness. Tiny flickerings of firelight grew as they approached. A voice called a challenge from the darkness. Fizzle answered. The party entered the oasis camp. Flagstone was toppled off his horse. He was led, by the rope still attached to his hands, into a tent. The rope was run up and over a pole. Flagstone found himself with his feet barely touching the ground while his arms bore most of his body weight as they were stretched toward the top of the pole. The guards emptied his pockets and removed his boots. After a final check of his bindings, the guards left.

Soon after the guards left an old man came quietly into the tent with a small oil lamp and a shotgun. The man sat the small lamp on the dirt floor of the tent safely out of Flagstone's reach. He rummaged in the dark shadows of the tent returning with a couple of large pillows and a blanket. The old man arranged himself on the opposite side of the dull lamp from Flagstone. He pulled the blanket up around his shoulders and laid the shotgun across his lap. Finally he looked at Flagstone. There was not a hint of compassion in the old man's eyes.

Flagstone awoke with a jerk as loud voices came from outside the tent. The first thing he saw was the old man still watching him. The old man rose to his feet and bowed. Sheik Fizzle came into Flagstone's field of vision. Fizzle did not smile. He gestured and the old man quickly left the tent. Fizzle stood beside the low burning oil lamp looking at Flagstone. Indecision flickered across his face.

"How is the mighty hunter today?" sneered Fizzle.

Flagstone shifted about. "Fine," he answered.

"You present me with a problem, Flagstone," said Fizzle darkly.

"Sorry about that," replied Flagstone. "Cut my ropes, return my belongings, and I'll be on my way."

Fizzle let out a hard laugh. He shook his head in the negative. "That's the problem. I would like to kill you here and now. My men would like to kill you here and now. But the Sultan needs your help."

"The Sultan is a wise man," said Flagstone carefully.

Another hard laugh left the Sheik. "He is weak. He is a servant of the British. I rule the desert and the Sultan knows it."

"But the mission I perform for the Sultan affects us all," said Flagstone.

"Mission? Ha! The errand! The errand you run for the Sultan? You, the servant of the servant? Yes. It might be important. Or it may not. I am ordered to help you complete your errand." The Sheik flung his hands wide. "I am ordered," he growled. "I am ordered," he repeated barely audibly, shaking his head gently.

The Sheik paced about the tent. "I am ordered," he said more strongly a third time. "The Sultan orders me to help you on your assassin's errand."

Flagstone's head jerked up. He looked hard at the Sheik. The Sheik laughed softly. "The Sultan and I share many confidences." Fizzle paced two steps more. "Yet, I am ordered." He looked hard at Flagstone.

Sheik Fizzle began pacing again. "The Sultan, may the gods bless him, says to Sheik Fizzle, help this poor Flagstone on his errand for me. I ask why. He tells me nothing I don't already know. He tells me nothing."

Flagstone's arms hurt from bearing his weight all night. He shifted uneasily. Fizzle continued to pace.

"The Sultan tells me to help Flagstone or he will punish me. He will send the British after me with their many wondrous weapons of destruction. I tell him the British are already beaten. They are just too stubborn to realize it yet. The Sultan agrees, but says many of my followers will be killed anyway."

Fizzle stopped pacing directly in front of Flagstone, an arm's length away. "So we come to my problem."

Flagstone tried to smile. "In this case, I think the Sultan is right."

Fizzle made a gesture of dismal. "There are many solutions to my problem."

Flagstone shifted painfully on his rope.

Sheik Fizzle fingered the large curved knife in his gold threaded waist-sash. "I can do as the Sultan requests, and win some favor with the dog. I can kill you now and rid my self of an insufferable pest. I can give you to the Skull." The Sheik smiled a strange smile.

Flagstone felt shiver run through himself. "I don't think that is wise, Sheik," he said quietly.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," said the Sheik calmly.

"I think in this case the enemy of your enemy is your death," Flagstone said trying to put conviction in his voice.

The Sheik looked at him for a long moment. "It is as you say. Against my better judgement I have promised to help you. I do not break my word, no

matter to whom it is given." The Sheik gave a grunt. "Not even to the Sultan."

The Sheik turned toward the door. "I will help you find the Skull. That is what I promised the Sultan. I will not kill you until after you do your assassin's errand."

The Sheik spun around suddenly and hit Flagstone across the face. Flagstone could taste the blood in his mouth and felt his nose bleeding. The Sheik thrust his face close to Flagstone's. Fizzle's hot breath washed over Flagstone face.

"But I will kill you, Flagstone, sooner or later. I will kill you. That is my word to you."

The Sheik spun around and left the tent bellowing orders. Flagstone sagged under his rope trying to decide if he was lucky or not.

Four days later, hands still bound, Flagstone was pulled off his horse. His four guards led him to where Sheik Fizzle sat in the shade of a palm tree. The small party, twelve in all by Flagstone's count, had stopped in the noonday sun in the shelter of a little oasis. Fizzle was eating dates. All the men, except the four guarding Flagstone, were unsaddling their horses and making a spartan camp. The Sheik took no notice of Flagstone standing in the hot sun.

Several men reported to the Sheik as various tasks were accomplished. When the camp was settled, the Sheik's called two of the toughest, roughest looking men that Flagstone had ever seen to his side. They knelt easily before their Sheik. The Sheik gave them stern orders in a low voice. Flagstone could not make out what was being said. The men blinked at the Sultan several times and one seemed to shiver, but both nodded their understanding of their orders and silently left the camp, galloping away at speed.

The rest of the men settled down in the shade. Flagstone was tethered to a palm tree and surrounded by his ever-present guard. Sheik Fizzle took no visible notice of Flagstone's presence. The day passed in silence.

Just before sunset the two hard men returned to camp. They immediately reported to Sheik Fizzle who listened to their report without interruption. At the conclusion of the report he surprisingly poured each man goblet of wine from his own hide flagon with his own hands. He gave them the plate of dates he had been nibbling on and send the two men away to rest.

Sheik Fizzle surveyed the tiny camp in the failing light. His eyes rested on Flagstone. The Sheik smiled for the first time that day. Flagstone did not like the smile at all.

Flagstone waited tensely through the night for some action but nothing happened. When nothing appeared to be happening soon, Flagstone fell asleep in the early morning light. He awoke several times during the day. The men in the camp were lying about in sleepy disarray while their sentries watched and waited. Flagstone fell back into an uneasy sleep.

Sheik Fizzle's boot woke Flagstone up. "Get up," ordered Fizzle. "Time to do you errand for the Sultan."

Flagstone's guard jerked him roughly to his feet. The camp was gone much to Flagstone's surprised. Everything was packed and everyone was mounted except for Flagstone and his guard. They quickly hustled the bound Flagstone over and onto his horse. Then, with a curt order for absolute silence, the Sheik led the little party out of the oasis. Flagstone noted one of the two scouts of yesterday stayed with Fizzle while the other went on ahead. Flagstone's pulse picked up. Something was about to happen.

The little party rode silently through the near moonless night. After two hours the scout that had been sent ahead was met standing in the desert. Fizzle had the party dismount, then talked in whispers to the two men. Fizzle gestured to the guards around Flagstone. They grabbed him by the arms and hustled him to stand before Fizzle.

Flagstone thought Fizzle was smiling in the darkness. The rope around Flagstone's wrists was cut. He massaged life back into his hands. He looked inquiringly at Sheik Fizzle. Fizzle pointed in the darkness toward the river.

"The Skull's camp is over there. My men will escort you as close as they dare, then you are on your own. I will report to the Sultan that I have done as he asked. I will have fulfilled my part of the bargain. Now you must complete your little errand." He smiled at Flagstone. "Good bye." At that the Sultan turned and left. Flagstone's four guards grabbed him. After a short nearly soundless fight, Flagstone found himself bound at the wrists and ankles. The guards were laughing to themselves while tending their various bumps and bruises, all of them except the one still unconscious on the ground. His mates picked him up and departed. Flagstone was left with the two hard men who the Sultan had selected as scouts the day before. In the darkness Flagstone could not read their faces. One man grabbed his bound wrists, the other his bound feet, and with a grunt they began carrying Flagstone toward a darkness near the river.

It took the two men thirty tiring minutes to lug Flagstone nearer the dark camp. There were no lights or other signs of life in the camp. Flagstone could hear some strange growling and grunting. Something sounded like it was scratching at a wooden wall. The two men waited in the shadows. The river could be heard if not seen. Flagstone could see a rough jumble of huts and small buildings ahead in the darkness. There seemed to be a log stockade built beside the cluster of buildings. A stomach-wrenching stench came from the stockade along with the weird growling and grunting. One the two men with Flagstone pulled a small torch from his belt and let out a short laugh. The other man hissed at him to be quiet.

"Ready?"

"I guess."

"We drag him out there, light the torch, and run for it. Ok?"

"Ok, just don't slow me down."

"Same to you."

"One, two, three, lift."

The two men lifted Flagstone's squirming body off the ground and waddled as fast as they could out into the open. Fifty, a hundred yards out in the open, they half carried, half-dragged Flagstone. The river came into view. With a relieved grunt they dropped Flagstone. One man drew a pistol. The other lit the torch and jammed it into the ground. Both men then ran for the brush without a glance over their shoulder.

A terrible howling rose from the log stockade. Flagstone could hear loud voices coming from the cluster of buildings. Torches appeared. Men approached, men with guns, and torches, and angry faces. They surrounded Flagstone who was still trying to squirm out of his ropes. Several of them kicked Flagstone who decided it was best to lie still at the moment.

Suddenly the crowd parted. A man approached. A man with a head that looked like a white skull in the moonless night. A command was given. Flagstone's mouth was forced open and a tasteless liquid was poured in. He struggled, but was forced to swallow. Darkness descended.

Report 291 - 14.5 - Dreamland.

Date: 2005-03-06

14.5 - Dreamland.

Julius Flagstone awoke in a familiar position. His arms were tied to a rope pulled over the top of a pole until his feet would only touch the floor when he stood on his toes. His shoulders, elbows, and wrist hurt like hell. The rest of him didn't feel much better. He tried to spit to get the awful taste out of his mouth. He couldn't gather any saliva. He tried to stand on tiptoe. The pressure eased on his shoulders for a moment. He tried to focus his eyes, but everything was blurry. He shook his head to clear it. Nothing helped.

"It will go away slowly. The drug wears off in two or three days," said a voice from somewhere.

"Great," muttered Flagstone.

"It was a necessary precaution. Someone said you were here to kill the Skull," said the voice.

Flagstone smiled feebly. "If so, then I really screwed that up."

"It appears that you did," said the voice.

"So what's next?" asked Flagstone not really caring what the answer was.

"Death, dismemberment, or something equally appalling and painful," said the voice.

"Great," whispered Flagstone slipping into unconsciousness again.

The pain in his shoulders woke Flagstone up. Automatically he extended his toes. He found the floor and tried to raise himself up on his toes. It helped for a moment.

"Feeling better?" asked a voice.

"Not really," slurred Flagstone.

"The dose of drugs was much too strong I suspect," said the voice.

"Yeah," muttered Flagstone through numb lips.

"It is taking a long time to wear off. Good thing you are strong and healthy."

"Yeah," answered Flagstone trying to lick his raw lips. His tongue didn't seem to work right. He gave up the effort. Darkness washed over him.

Someone was walking around him. Flagstone didn't move though the fire in his arms and shoulders made him want to cry.

"This is taking too long," said a voice.

"It cannot be helped. The amount of drug administered was not measured. It was just poured into him. We must wait," said a second voice.

"Yes. But time grows short."

"Yes. However, the results of this mistake is interesting to study nevertheless."

"It is. Let me know if his condition changes," said the second voice.

"I will."

Flagstone tried to open his eyes. Then he realizes they were open. It was as dark as the bottom of a mine. He shut his eyes again. His shoulders didn't hurt anymore. He couldn't feel them. He couldn't feel anything. He didn't care. He tried to laugh. Nothing happened.

A voice drifted into Flagstone mind. He tried to grab it. It was like trying to catch a butterfly with rocks tied to your hands. The voice was somehow familiar.

"Will he live?" asked the first small voice.

"Perhaps," answered the second, stronger voice.

"Perhaps?" repeated the small voice.

"If he survives the drugs, then I will have no choice but to kill him after I question him," said the strong voice.

"But that is sad. You know why he is here and who sent him. Surely he is more useful working for you than dead," said the small voice.

"Perhaps," said the strong voice.

It sounded like rain to Flagstone's ears. He listened closely. Then he realized he was peeing uncontrollably onto the floor.

Water hit Flagstone in the face thumping his head against the pole. He gritted his teeth and moaned as the pain ran in waves up and down his body. More water cascaded over him. He cried. He moaned. No one heard.

It was still. No noise. No pain. Nothing.

Flagstone seemed to float above the floor. It was dark, total darkness. Something coiled around his throat and began choking him. Flagstone coughed. He flexed the muscles in his neck. He dug at the choking thing with his chin. He sucked in a breath through teeth clinched tight by bulging jaw muscles.

"No bloody way," he yelled.

It was still. No noise. No pain. Nothing.

The light nearly blinded Flagstone. He blinked. Light! He could see light. His shoulders felt like they were on fire. He couldn't feel his hands. His feet felt as big as his head. He body screamed in pain.

Flagstone smiled to himself amid the searing pain. To feel pain, I must be alive he told himself. To feel pain, I must be alive he told himself. To feel pain, I must be alive he told himself. Somewhere, in a corner of his mind, he smiled. I must be alive.

Someone was trying to force a liquid into his mouth. He clamped his mouth shut. He shook his head away. A hand grabbed his chin and steadied his head.

"It's only water," said a voice.

Flagstone let the hand pour the liquid into his mouth. He swallowed. Whatever it was is was cool and wonderful. He stopped fighting immediately. The hand poured more of the liquid into his mouth. It was delightful.

Flagstone licked his swollen lips. The realization of the simple act brought him up from the depths. He opened his eyes. The room was very dim. Light filtered in through cracks in the door directly in front of Flagstone. He tried to turn his head. He groaned in pain. He tried to find the floor with his toes. It hurt too much.

Flagstone hung limply against the pole. He breathed deeply. Sickly odors filled his nostrils. He smiled to himself. I am alive he told himself several times. He tried to spit. It merely dribbled out and down his chin. I am alive he told himself.

Flagstone woke slowly hearing distant voices. He tried not to move. It wasn't hard to do. He listened. The voices were coming closer. He heard the door creak open.

"He is getting stronger. I was able to feed him some broth yesterday," said a voice.

"Is he strong enough to question yet?" asked an impatient second voice.

"Soon. Soon, I think," said the first voice.

"Not soon enough," said the second voice.

The door creaked again.

"Is he conscious?" asked a small third voice.

"He fades in and out," said the first voice.

"You must be getting back. You have been gone too long as it is," said the angry second voice.

"Relax," said the small third voice. "Who will miss me? Flagstone?"

There was something like laughter and the door creaked again. The room was quiet. Flagstone tried to think. Nothing was clear. He fell asleep trying to place the voices.

The voices were back. Flagstone kept his eyes closed. He wasn't sure he could open them anyway. The voices were not happy.

"I'll don't care what his condition is. If he is not ready for questioning in two days into the pit he goes. Our plan is moving forward. Already villages for miles around bow to my dominion or face the my horrible wrath."

"I can't guarantee he'll be conscious in two day or two weeks. The amount of drug he was given was unheard of. The fact he is still alive is amazing. You have said so yourself."

"I have, but that is not the point. The point is we must move onto the next phase. The horde must be released against Jimville. Then we shall see who rules Jimland. Two days. In two days he talks or goes in the pit."

"Very well."

Flagstone idly wondered how far away two days was.

Flagstone woke with a start. The room was filled with light streaming in the open door. A figure was moving in the dark shadows of the corners of the room. The figure came forward carrying a bucket of water. It was a small woman. She passed behind Flagstone. He felt a sponge be applied to his naked skin. It felt wonderful. Then his arms screamed out in pain. He grunted. The woman gasped. She immediately left the room leaving the door standing wide open.

A woman was there with a man. The woman was small, familiar. The man was taller, darker, and unfamiliar. The woman wiped flagstone down with the sponge while the man fed Flagstone a warm gruel.

"Can we take him down from the pole?" asked the woman.

"I don't think that is wise," answered the man.

"He isn't going to hop up and run away. I don't think he can even stand up with out help," said the woman.

"The boss said to leave him like this," insisted the man.

"I'll deal with the boss. Help me get him down. There is only one day left," said woman firmly.

Flagstone felt them grab his body. His arms seared him with pain. Then darkness came.

Flagstone wasn't sure where he was. He floated in some strange position. He opened his eyes. The ceiling moved slightly overhead. He blinked. The ceiling steadied. He was lying on his back on a dirt floor. He tried to sit up. His arms felt like useless lengths of wood. He gritted his teeth and pushed himself up. The room swayed then steadied. A water bucket sat beckoning two feet away. He forced an arm to moved in the general direction of the bucket. He clumsily dragged the bucket toward himself spilling most of its contents. He lifted it haltingly to his lips and poured it over his face, even managing to swallow several mouthfuls. He laid back.

I am alive he repeatedly told himself. He went to sleep.

He sat up when the man touched him. The white-haired man jumped back. "You're awake!"

Flagstone moved his arms and tried to flex his shoulder. It hurt like hell. He did it again. "I guess so," he answered.

The white-haired man rushed from the room, but not so quickly as to forget to put a heavy bolt of wood across the outside of the door. Flagstone mentally shrugged. He spent a few minutes remembering how to move his fingers, hands, and arms. They all hurt. He tried bending his knees. That brought a groan of pain from his lips. He sat back.

Flagstone heard footsteps hurrying toward the door. The bolt was thrown off and the white-haired man entered. He sat a steaming bowl of stew on the floor. He plunked a big spoon in the stew. Stepping back the man looked at Flagstone. "There is it. Get it if you want to eat."

Flagstone looked at the steaming food for a moment. Then painfully and most clumsily he struggled to his knees. He moaned in pain, but continued. He crawled on his hands and knees toward the food. He was almost there.

The white-haired man deftly reached out a foot and moved the food farther away. Flagstone didn't even look at the man. He sucked in a ragged breath and continued crawling unsteadily after the bowl. Twice more the white-haired man moved the bowl. Flagstone continued silently crawling after it. His whole mind was focused on the steaming contents of the bowl. He ignored the man. He didn't get mad when the bowl was moved. He just kept crawling.

Finally he reached it. With unsure hands he grasped the bowl, removed the spoon, and began feeding himself. It was heavenly. The white-haired man nodded approval. After Flagstone had scraped the bowl empty the white-haired man took the bowl and spoon away from him. Flagstone didn't resist. The man left, carefully bolting the door shut. Flagstone leaned happily against the wall and licked the stew off his fingers. He went to sleep with a smile on his face.

Report 292 - 14.6 - End of a Dream.

Date: 2005-06-19

14.6 - End of a Dream.

Julius Flagstone was roughly kicked awake. He hurt all over. A small groan escaped his tight lips. Hands pulled him to his unsteady feet. His stomach growled loudly. Someone laughed. Flagstone cautiously opened his eyes.

It was near noon he guessed by the shadow outside the hut. The solid wooden door of hut he was being held in was standing open. Four shabby, but armed, men stood close by him, two firmly gripping his arms. They smelled bad. Flagstone sniffed. He smelled worse. He chuckled to himself. A fifth man gave an indistinct order. The four men began pushing Flagstone out of the hut. He jerked his arms free and stood unsupported. It hurt. It felt good. He walked carefully in the midst of the shabby men.

The glare of the sunlight made Flagstone wince. He squinted, trying to focus. Everything was blurred. He tried again. Better. Figures came into focus. He was walking on a platform. It was a raised earthen wall between stout wooden walls of a stockade of some sort. Flagstone peered around taking in the scene.

The thing he was stumbling along was a rammed-earth filled wall that stood like a jetty in an empty dirt lake. At the end of the platform was the hut that had held him for days. He tried to remember how many, but gave up. The platform six feet wide and twenty feet above ground level he estimated. It was thirty feet from the hut at one end to the other end, which intersected a simple circular enclosure, made of more round posts. A stairway descended from the platform to the ground on Flagstone's left at the meeting of the wide earth platform and the circular stockade. Flagstone noted a horrible stench coming from the stockade. Two men and a woman stood with their backs to Flagstone as his guard pushed him slowly on.

The stench grew worse. A low animal-like growling came from the stockade. Flagstone wondered what was down in the stockade making such a noise and smelling so obscene. He shuffled along feeling a better with each step. Whatever had happened to him was quickly wearing off. He decided that if he didn't hurt from head to foot he would actually feel good. He watched the trio ahead of him. They turned to face him. Flagstone stopped abruptly.

Fatima stood facing him. Her nose and lower face covered with a veil, but Flagstone had no doubt it was her. Flagstone felt uncomfortable. Fatima's eyes were cold, hard as ice. She said nothing. Flagstone's gaze shifted to the large man in the center. He blinked and looked again. The man's head was completely hairless and painted white. His eyes peered menacingly out of black circles. He stood feet apart with his hands on his hips. The third man wore black robes and turban, his face hidden in the shadows of a black veil. No one spoke.

Flagstone shuffled to a halt before the party. Growls and snarls came up from the stockade depths. A strange scratching caught Flagstone's attention. He tried to see what was making the noise. He could only see straw or hay, a

few tree branches and many dried tree fronds covering the stockade floor. Whatever was making the noise and giving off the stench was close to the walls where he couldn't see. He sniffed again. Maybe it was good he couldn't see whatever it was.

"How are you feeling, Jules?" asked Fatima. Flagstone locked eyes with her. He tried to speak but nothing came out. He tried to swallow to clear his throat.

"Ok," he finally croaked.

"I am pleased to hear that," she said as she took a step toward him. A strong whiff of perfume came to Flagstone. He smiled. The veil was doing more than demurely covering her face. It was perfumed to mask the disgusting odor coming from the stockade. Flagstone inhaled deeply. He tried to smile. Fatima's eyes twinkled back. She put a tiny, perfect, hand on his arm. It was cool. Flagstone stared into her eyes. "I am really pleased to hear that," she said softly.

"Enough!" The shout came from the man with the white head. The Skull, no doubt, thought Flagstone. He vaguely remembered he was here to kill this man for the Sultan. That thought didn't interest him nearly as much as the big man in front of him. Fatima laughed softly and stepped back. The Skull looked him up and down. "The Fearless and Famous Julius Flagstone!" Skull barked the words. He laughed loudly.

The Skull reached out a big hand and grabbed Flagstone's arm. Flagstone was pulled toward the leering face. They stood nose to nose. Flagstone simply returned the look and tried not to fall down. The Skull seemed to be searching Flagstone eyes for something. He didn't find it. Skull shoved Flagstone back to his guards. "He is weak, Fatima. Weak and pitiful."

Fatima didn't look at the Skull. "Now, yes. Before, no."

Skull laughed a loud mean laugh. "I am going to kill you, Flagstone. Assassin come to kill me. Lackey of the Sultan. Great Explorer." Skull spat out the last two words in disgust.

"I do not think that is a good idea," said Fatima.

"I did not ask your opinion or your permission," said the Skull.

Skull turned toward the stockade and peered over the edge. Whatever was in there redoubled its noise. The scratching increased. Skull motioned at the shabby guards. Two of the men grabbed Flagstone's arms pushing him forward to the edge of the circular stockade. Flagstone peered over the edge. He gasped. The guards laughed.

Below in the stockade horrible things lurched at the wall. They lifted hands with bone fingers and scratched at the posts. They growled. Flagstone was stunned. Lifeless eye stared into his. The things sniffed at him and growled. Flagstone tried to back away. His captors held him firmly in place.

The Skulls strong voice washed over Flagstone. "The dead walk again. I gave them life. Me! The greatest of men! I gave them life."

Flagstone struggled back a step. He turned to face the Skull. "That's not life."

The Skull laughed a deep booming laugh. "Ah, but it is. Were they not dead once? Do they not walk and talk now?"

"That is not life," repeated Flagstone. He quit struggling and stood still facing the Skull.

"But it is, Flagstone," said the Skull moving to stand before Flagstone. "They are given new life by me using the way of ancient priests. I have rediscovered those ways and studied them. I know secrets men only dream of."

"And how do you intend to use these secrets," asked Flagstone carefully looking around.

"Why, it is simple. I intend to release these living dead upon the Sultan and his minions. One bite from them and the Sultan becomes one himself. A fitting end. I will drive the foreigners from this land. I will drive out their religions. I will reestablish the ancient empire of our lost past. I will rule for all eternity. Nothing will stop me. Not even you, assassin."

The Skull was standing almost nose to nose with Flagstone. His breath was coming in gasps, his eye were wide and wild. A crazy smile crossed the Skulls face.

Flagstone threw himself into the left-hand guard pitching him into the stockade. The man fell with a terrible scream. The stockade came alive with growling and screaming. Flagstone grabbed his right hand guard and threw him into the Skull who staggered back a step. Flagstone dodged right and into the third guard bringing his knee up hard into the surprised man's groin. He collapsed with a groan. Flagstone pulled out the man's long knife as he fell. The fourth guard fell with the knife in his chest. The dead man crashed onto to a table and smashed it in his lifeless fall.

The Skull yelled orders. Flagstone could see more men coming toward the stockade. Two were already on the steps, coming up, bright swords in their hands. The Skull swept out his own sword and pushed Fatima and the other man behind himself. He smiled at Flagstone. "You go in the pit next, assassin."

Flagstone groped blindly and picked up a length of wood from the broken table. He feigned at the Skull who stepped back. Fatima screamed. The pit was a mere step away. A fearful noise was coming from it. Flagstone swung again at he Skull who merely dogged and laughed. Flagstone desperately turned and swung the wooden beam at the first man up the step. With a solid crack he caught the man in the face and sent him plummeting off the steps. The second man came on more cautiously, sword at the ready.

The Skull began trying to circle to Flagstone's right to get behind him. Fatima and the man in black stood paralyzed in fear. Flagstone jabbed at the Skull who parried with his sword and smiled. Another jab at the Skull while the man on the steps reached the top of the wall.

Suddenly Flagstone threw wooden beam at the Skull forcing him back, then leaped at the swordsman to his left. Flagstone was inside the guard of the

sword. He slammed a fist into the man's throat and a second into his stomach. The man gurgled, gasped, and dropped his sword. Flagstone threw the man with all his might. The Skull stepped out of the way. The man hit Fatima and instantly both disappeared over the side of the stockade. Screams and howls rose from the stockade floor. Fatima's voice rose above the noise, pleading for help.

The Skull looked at Flagstone for an instant then ran to the edge of the stockade. Fatima's voice called for help. The Skull yelled at the shambling creatures below. They never took their sightless eyes off Fatima who darted one way then another trying to avoid their clumsy grasping hands. The man in black grabbed the dropped sword. With a yell he charged at Flagstone.

Flagstone turned aside to avoid the sword's blade. He grabbed the man's outstretched arm at the wrist and used his own momentum to whirl him around and send the surprised man flying into the back of the Skull who was trying to reach down into the stockade. The man slammed into the Skull. Both men teetered on the edge for a moment, then fell into the stockade.

Another guard appeared. Flagstone snatched up the sword and hacked him in the neck. The next one up was slashed across the chest and stomach. He rolled back down the stairs, his intestines trailing behind him. The remaining men at the foot of the stairs hesitated.

"The Skull is dead. He fell into the stockade. He is one of them now," yelled Flagstone gesturing with the bloody sword. Several men cast glances at the stockade wall and the snarling frenzied things inside it. "Look," yelled Flagstone, "Look!"

Several men peered through the cracks between the stockade posts. They dropped their weapons and ran off. In a moment all the people in the little village were running away. Two minutes later Flagstone found himself alone on the wall. The snarling in the stockade had reached a feverish pitch. Flagstone leaned against the stockade top, but couldn't bring himself to look in the pit. He wearily walked back to the little hut.

He brought the two oil lamps from the hut to the edge of the stockade. He lit them both. Then with a sad sigh, he threw them into the stockade. In a flash the flames ignited the dried fronds and trash in the stockade floor. The howling grew louder. Flagstone began throwing everything flammable he could carry into the stockade. The flames roared higher. The stench made Flagstone throw up. He wiped his mouth on the back of his arm and continued adding fuel to the great inferno at his feet.

The howling had stopped. Only the roaring and crackling of the fire remained. Flagstone sagged down onto the top step of the stairs. Nothing moved in the little village. He was alone. He pulled himself up and walked carefully down the stairs. The fire snapped and hissed. He didn't look at it. He trudged from little hut to little hut. When he reached the riverbank he had a cloth bag of food, two waterskins, and a big wide brimmed straw hat. He selected the smallest log canoe lying at the water's edge. In a smooth push he was off, padding slowly out into the river.

He didn't look back.

Report 293 - 14.X - What Next?

Date: 2005-06-19

14.X - What Next?

Julius Flagstone sat in his suite in the Empress. He was alone. The doors to the balcony were open. A gentle cool evening breeze that smelled like rain rustled through the suite. Flagstone looked at the pile of money sitting on the table in front of him. It was his blood money or so the Sultan had called it. It was a lot of money. Flagstone pushed it off the table and into a bag. He threw the bag onto a chair and stepped onto the balcony.

Flagstone stared at the dark evening jungle slowly encroaching on the perimeter of Jimville. He leaned on the balcony rail and hung his head. What have I become he wondered? I have killed a man for money. He shook his head trying to get the thought out. It didn't leave. What have I become?

A light rain began to sprinkle down. Flagstone raised his face to the rain and let it run over him. Fatima's face appeared before his own. He mentally pushed it away. Olivia's face appeared next. A stifled moan came from deep in Flagstone. The rain splattered down. Flagstone sobbed.

What have I become? Flagstone was soaked to the skin. He pulled off his shirt and let the cool rain wash over his big frame. The breeze ruffled the vegetation. Hoots, howls, and growls sounded in the jungle, some close, some deep in the darkness. Overhead the storm clouds scudded quickly away. The night sky, washed clean by the brief squall, came out in its sparkling finest.

The first hint of dawn found Flagstone packing his big pack with gear. He carefully considered every item he put in the pack, testing the weight with his big arm. Finally he was satisfied. He stood in the middle of the room and looked around. Nodding to himself he shouldered his pack and slung two canteens over his shoulder. He firmly pulled his big trekking hat on. Picking up his large caliber hunting rifle he passed one final look around the suite. He nodded to the empty room. "See ya," he whispered.

Norton Dullcote was waiting in his office, the only building with a light shining the whole of Jimville's dusty Main Street. Norton didn't look like he had gotten out of bed in the middle of the night. Flagstone didn't say anything. He handed the bag of money to Dullcote and followed it with several pages of notes. Dullcote motioned to a chair. Flagstone shook his head no. He paced slowly and quietly while Norton sat behind his desk and read the notes. Several times he glanced up at Flagstone, but said nothing and continued to read.

Finally Norton lay the papers on the desk. He looked at Flagstone who was staring out the window into the slowly fading dark. "I can take care of all that for you, Jules."

Flagstone turned to face Dullcote as he came around his big desk. Norton looked at Flagstone in the dull light of the office. "Anything you need?"

Flagstone smiled. "Nope, that'll do it for now. Oh. I almost forgot." Flagstone pulled a gleaming gold coin from his pocket. He looked at it a moment, then handed it to Dullcote. "A little souvenir for you, Norton."

"What is it?" asked Norton studying the coin.

"I don't know. I'll let you know if I find out."

Flagstone pulled on his pack. He slung his rifle. "Thank you, Norton. For everything. Give my best to Constance. And Molly."

Norton smiled and firmly shook the big hand Flagstone offered. "Good luck, Jules. I'll be here if you need anything."

Flagstone pulled his hat down. The two men walked the few steps to the front of the building and out into the first streaks of dawn. Flagstone sucked in a big breath of fresh air. "I'll be seeing you, Norton."

Flagstone walked alone down the dim outline of Main Street. Norton Dullcote stood on the steps of his office watching Flagstone disappear. "Take care", he whispered to himself. Norton looked at the gold coin in the pale light. He gently rubbed his thumb over it. He looked up.

Flagstone was gone.

Report 294 -

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