

HEATWAVE

A Tale of the Brute

By Atom
Mudman
Bezecny



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HEATWAVE: A TALE OF THE BRUTE

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Published by Odd Tales Productions
www.oddtalesof wonder.com

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**Heatwave:
A Tale of the Brute
By Atom Mudman Bezecny**

The pain of childbirth is never easy to bear. Especially when one has never had a child before. There are no proper words to describe the sensation—there is trauma in the pain, and in the trauma, a test of faith. Not faith in God, or even faith in love, but faith in something to make life worth living. Faith in the future.

The bond between parent and child is tested supremely during the first moments of the child's life. People are conditioned to hate that which brings them pain, and so while this is not spoken of, it is not uncommon for a parent to hate their own child, in the moment of their birth. But love endures—there is misfortune, grief, plight, and poverty—but so often, love endures—

June Parker had barely gasped out the name of her daughter before she slipped away into a deep sleep. Her husband—who had had a name once, but was now known only as the Brute—was at a loss of what to do. He held his newborn daughter in his arms, with indescribable pride and love welling up within him. But equal in strength to that love was his terror at the thought of losing his wife.

“June?” he asked. She sucked in a short breath. She was alive, though she remained asleep. The Brute wondered if he should risk the long trek to the place he called the Medicine Jungle, to employ one of the many potions he'd learned to use during life in the jungle. It was too risky, he decided. He would stay with her and give her what medicine he could.

But the pain of childbirth runs deeper than most can imagine. As June slept, her body was flooded with hormones to quell the pain inside her, to begin the healing process, in a desperate attempt to stay alive. For it had not been an easy birth. None are—but both mother and child were nearly lost—

The Brute had been beaten about the head many times, and his brain was scarred by a thundering, nameless force. He often entered fugue states where the trees swept over him and the breeze was with him, and he felt no human ego, but only animal id. Now the chemicals pumping through his wife's brain were inflicting the same sort of trauma on her. She was entering the same form of

trance.

As the Brute slept, having calmed their newborn child, June's eyes snapped open. She did not recognize the home around her, the house suspended up in the trees. The hot summer night felt strange around her. She knew she was wounded, but she did not cry out, for fear of waking the muscular giant who slept near to her. She would have to proceed gently, not only to get away but to accommodate her own injuries. Her instinct remained with her. She slid down the vine with the silence of a snake. Her bare feet touched the jungle floor, and she began to run. She did not stop running until it was morning, and the treehouse was far behind her. Soon she left the escarpment itself, and sought the forests below...

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Months later, an enormous caravan was making its way through the jungles. They had been trekking for many days, in the pursuit of animals. They weren't hunters, or at least those of them who were weren't hunting now. Some of them were filmmakers, seeking to bring exotic documentaries to a demanding motion-picture audience; the others were here to take animals alive, to bring them back to America to perform in the circus. Neither group was objectively equipped to enter the jungle. But they went anyway, believing the whiteness of their skin to be an unlimited passport; that it was a brand of superiority, when it was not.

There were the two celebrities of the group, the seasoned explorers: Clyde Beatty, animal tamer and circus personality, and Osa Johnson, famous adventurer, wife of the equally-famous Martin Johnson. Beatty had with him cohorts from his circus, including his ringmaster and general right-hand, Michael "Dublin" O'Malley. O'Malley was a proud sailor as well as an excellent director and showman, and he was in turn joined by another sailor-turned-ringmaster, Captain Arbuckle. It was O'Malley and Arbuckle who had sailed the party to Africa, near this mountain known as Mutia. Two of the other men were also performers, vaudevillians by the names of Wilbur Roulette and Alexander Woolpit. But they weren't employed with the Clyde Beatty Circus—they had actually come here to serve as crew for Mrs. Johnson's newest movie, *Wonders of the Congo*. But they also needed to capture lions for their own

performance act back home. They looked out of place next to the tanned, sturdy figures of Beatty and Johnson—Woolpit seemed liable to lose his thick glasses at any moment, and Roulette's curly hair was warped by the jungle heat.

Then there were the protectors. The Brotherhood of Lost Fathers, they called themselves. They were all men who had lost children to the wilds of the Dark Continent: decrepit Bertram Castleton, sly John Lawrence, hardhearted Thomas Stockwell, and craven Gordon Vanderhorn. They were joined by their newest member, Dr. Robert Hart, who had also served as a Captain in the French Foreign Legion through the last decade. His experience in Africa had earned him the title “Junga,” an obscure nickname in the Kongo language.

The group was well-supplied, having checked in at the supply depot owned two of Dr. Hart's friends, Americans named Autry and Barclay. While at the depot the party gained the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, a pair of missionaries who traveled with them a short time before conditions got too rough. This was something of a relief, as the team agreed they needed all the time they could get, and keeping the Reynoldses around was a drain on supplies. Still, Mrs. Reynolds was pregnant, and she grew fond enough of Thomas Stockwell to consider naming her son after him.

Despite the balanced supplies and the general ease with which the group lived in the forest, there was a sense of growing anxiety among the members. There were rumors that several dangerous lost cities were located in this area, including two said to be built by King Solomon himself. These towns of Opar and Joba were said to be located north of the Mountains of Despair, beyond the Valley of Suspicion—these mountains terminated before the Mutia escarpment, leaving the peak to stand by itself. They didn't intend to journey that far north, but they would if it meant avoiding the aggressive inhabitants of Opar and Joba, as well as those of the infamous City of the Dead. While the existence of Opar remained an uncertainty, Clyde Beatty had previously encountered the Bat-Men of Joba, who worshipped the Golden Bat, an ancient alchemical symbol prized by Solomon. He had rescued a young white girl from the city, Valerie Tremaine, who was now set to be

Dublin O'Malley's wife when they returned home. Dr. Hart, meanwhile, had had some experience with the City of the Dead, having recovered some of its ceremonial art to bring back to museums.

Near the back of the group, Roulette and Woolpit were chatting. Woolpit was smoking one of the long cigars of which he was so fond—Roulette had never seen him without one, upon thinking about it. While he puffed away, Woolpit said, “Say, Roulette, how can you tell when a man is lyin’?”

“I dunno,” Roulette replied. “When he ain't got a mane?”

“A man without a mane is one thing, but a mane without a man is just 'e.” There was a reason this pair was far behind the others. Woolpit went on: “Y'know, I don't trust these Brotherhood of Lost Fathers types. If they're so lost, why don't they find themselves a map?”

“The price of maps is going up these days. Especially internationally,” Roulette replied.

Woolpit rolled his eyes and said, “That's just what we need, uncharted tariff-tories.” He looked around, with a scholar's studiousness plain on his face. “But that's just another reminder that life's about stopping to smell the roses. I tell you, you can't go around missing the forest for the trees.”

“Well, that's what I figured, what with the trees being all around us. This *is* a forest, Alexander.”

“See, you're already doing it. You're getting lost in semantics!”

“Whose antics?”

“Oh, you cheap jackanape,” proclaimed Woolpit. Throughout this whole trip, Roulette had been getting under his skin, and not in any sort of fun way. “I won't let you make a monkey out of me!”

But then his hair got up on end. He'd spoken too soon—for the brush was parting and a large shaggy form emerged from between the trees. There was no mistaking that it was a gorilla, and a rather big one too. Woolpit puffed his cigar anxiously. It wasn't long before Roulette caught his look.

“Alexander, you'd tell me if there was a jungle spider on me, right?”

“Sure, Wilbur, sure, sure...”

“Then tell me: is there a jungle spider on me?”

“I can promise you,” Woolpit said (the gorilla was almost upon him now), “that there is no trace of a spider anywhere on you.”

The gorilla hooked its arm around Wilbur Roulette's neck, jerking him off his feet. Wilbur screamed, but Woolpit knew there was nothing he could do. They had stopped for a moment and the expedition had gone on without them, and those Brotherhood of Lost Father nuts and their guns were too far away. Alexander watched helplessly as the ape hauled his friend into the depths of the jungle.

But the expedition did hear the screams, and they were on their way back now. Mrs. Johnson reached Woolpit first and, finding him lusciously handsome, put her arms around his neck. “What happened, Mr. Woolpit?”

He hardly noticed her, he was too shocked. Under his breath, he muttered, “I'll be a monkey's uncle. Or he will, at least by marriage...”

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When Wilbur awoke, the gorilla was gone. He was high in a tree, and a quick glance to the right revealed an expansive city nearby, with great stone walls looping around it. It was a stunning sight. Wilbur knew better than to look down, but he did anyway. It was a stiff drop, and he nearly fainted upon gazing into it. For a flickering

moment, he foresaw himself starving to death up here, with no one finding the faintest clue of his fate.

But then, he wasn't alone. There was a figure climbing up the tree towards him, shaking the entire trunk with its weight. Wilbur closed his eyes and got to praying, and he hadn't seen the inside of a church since there was a war on. It had to be that gorilla, right? Come to finish him off?

Then the figure reached the top of the tree, where he was cradled—it wasn't the gorilla. Instead it appeared to be a woman, a white woman. She grinned upon seeing him, and immediately crawled up to close proximity with him.

“Who—who are you?” Wilbur demanded at once.

“I June,” said the woman. “You?”

“I-I'm Wilbur. Wilbur Roulette,” he said. He offered a hand to shake; she took it up and kissed it instead. At once his cheeks flushed red. She *was* very pretty—but he felt it improper to look at her for too long. She was hardly dressed. “C-can I ask what you want with me?” he asked.

“Wilbur handsome,” she said, leaning in closer to him.

“I'm—not conventionally considered so.” He looked aside. “Can I ask what that place is?”

“Palmyra. City of Amazons. June live there now. Not important.”

Wilbur raised an eyebrow, realizing for the first time that this woman was speaking rather strangely—like someone in some silly jungle movie. But he knew that broken English of the sort the movies promoted wasn't accurate to how real-life people talked. It was true that this woman was white, and spoke with a Western accent, and so this might be some ridiculous show she was putting on for him. He couldn't believe that, though.

Maybe she had something going on with her brain. Some sort of damage to the tissue. Wilbur wasn't always as dumb as he looked: he read medical journals sometimes, and occasionally understood them.

The woman called June leaned in and kissed him. He pulled away, not because he didn't want the kiss, but because she was so pretty. His eyes shot to her finger, and at once he saw that she wore a wedding band. It was a crude-looking thing—wrought by simple blacksmithing—but she wore it on the correct finger.

“Lady, am I to believe you have a husband?”

June rolled her eyes. “Husband Brute. Brute have at least one wife before June. June deserve chance to sneak out sometimes, too...”

“You—you want me for your husband?!”

“I want you for what husbands *do*...”

Wilbur couldn't help the fact that the prospect intrigued him. But then his socialization kicked in, and he said, “I can't just sleep with a woman I've just met. Especially a married one. It's—it's dishonorable.”

She nodded, seeming to understand. She looked out at the city. “Look. We go Palmyra. Come on! *Ongaua!*”

“*Ongaua?* What the heck is an *ongaua?*”

She grabbed his hand by the wrist, and with her free hand seized a nearby vine. “*Ongaua!?*” she cried sharply. And then she pulled him up onto herself, and pushed off from the tree. Holding the vine firmly they swung out into the open air, and June released an echoing jungle cry.

Wilbur screamed.

But the swooping arc they made through the air was clean and smooth, and she was not burdened by his weight. Upon completing

the pendulum motion, June's fingers took hold of another vine, and slid down with great ease to the ground. The gates of the city were closed, but June's confidence was obvious—she had to have some way of getting inside.

As June set Wilbur down, however, she sniffed the air. Wilbur didn't know it, but her sense of smell had grown stronger with the trauma now affecting her brain. There was a strange fishy scent in the air, the smell of a deep lake. She scanned the nearby jungle, looking for any sign of movement. When there was a rustling in the bushes her eyes hooked onto it, and she approached cautiously.

The brush split open and suddenly, a creature appeared before the pair. June's eyes widened—she had never seen anything like this, not even in the legends of the Amazons she'd learned over the last few months. It was an enormous lobster, rearing back and displaying its claws like ceremonial swords. And though she knew lobsters were normally silent, this one emitted a high-pitch shriek upon seeing its prey.

She turned back to Wilbur and gestured for him to run, calling again “*Ongaua!*” She didn't need to *ongaua* twice. He made a beeline for Palmyra.

The lobster monster was right on their tail. June had no idea if her adopted people could get the gates open in time.

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Only a few miles from the walls of Palmyra, the Beatty-Johnson expedition was catching their breath. They had tried to track down Wilbur Roulette, to no avail. There was no indication that the Brotherhood of Lost Fathers had any interest in saving him, which deeply irritated Alexander Woolpit. But he knew he stood no chance against these brutes, so he didn't protest. All the Brotherhood ever did at camp was clean their guns. They stared suspiciously at Beatty and his crew, and Osa Johnson. Woolpit observed they extended that suspicion to Dr. Hart, who had only joined them a few weeks prior.

“So, Hart,” began John Lawrence, “I know that you've picked up the name 'Junga,' but—what is your Africa experience?”

“I could tell you that,” said Bert Castleton, before Hart could answer. “*I* was present at his Brotherhood entrance exam.”

Lawrence looked away from Hart, as if he was going to continue the conversation with just Castleton. But then he looked back at Hart and awaited his answer.

Dr. Hart, who had grown a strong poker face during his time in the Foreign Legion, seemed unshaken by his comrades' passive-aggressive gestures. “I mentioned once that I had been to the City of the Dead, which is not far from here. I explored those ruins around the same time I cured the region of the deadly malaga fever.”

Gordon Vanderhorn whistled then. “A bleeding heart! Saving natives from a fever. You'll go to Heaven for sure.” And then he laughed in a nasty cadence.

Hart was unperturbed by the show of sarcasm. “Following my adventure in the Dead City, I interfered with a bunch of German nationalists loyal to that Hitler miscreant. They'd been exploiting one of the Congolese tribes.”

“So you just go around helping natives, is that it?” Vanderhorn said. “Do you even remember your own daught—”

“Gordon, enough,” barked John Lawrence then. “I'm sure that Dr. Hart—Captain Hart—is aware of what sort of horrors await those trapped on this continent. Including our children.”

“I'm aware that the people here suffer from disease and hunger, but there is the same back in the countries we come from,” Hart said. “I'm aware that there is war, but there is war in Europe and America. I'm aware that white men often come to this continent in search of riches they can never possess. I'm aware that these lands

have been devastated by white greed.”

Lawrence raised an eyebrow, while Vanderhorn fumed. Castleton stared at the doctor with a stony expression on his face. Thomas Stockwell had not been paying attention, but now he looked up from his book.

Then the group collectively grumbled, and turned away from Hart. He could still hear their words, however—and the word “savages” kept recurring. Hart looked over at Beatty, who had been chatting with Dublin O'Malley. It was Hart's acquaintance with Beatty that had brought the animal-tamer to the Brotherhood to hire them for protection. Neither Hart nor Beatty had anticipated that the Brotherhood would prove to be this secretive. They were trigger-happy, too—already they had used up considerably more ammo than was expected. Often attacking animals; but sometimes, in firing on nonspecific “threats.” It was starting to become clear what sort of threats they were imagining.

Osa Johnson said, “I have been talking with one of the bearers. He says that there is a community about five miles north of here. I want to get some footage of that area—even if I have lost an assistant.”

Suddenly, Tom Stockwell spoke up. “We can't go near any communities from here on out. This is officially an animal expedition only.”

“Mr. Stockwell,” said Mrs. Johnson, with an impatient tone, “the moviegoing public back home wishes to see Africa's natives as well as its animals. I intend to indulge them that taste.”

“Mrs. Johnson, I'm afraid there isn't much of a difference between Africa's animals and its natives,” Stockwell replied.

“Hold it right there,” Robert Hart said. “There are some lines I have to draw. I owe my life to the people of this land many times over. I've employed them as my servants, but I see them as much more.”

“We're not so different, Hart,” said Gordon Vanderhorn. “You have

just expressed the limits of your own beliefs. You still use them as servants.” The gray-haired man rose and strode towards Hart. He tried to set his hand on Hart's shoulder but Hart would not allow it. “You wouldn't go to any of the bearers of this expedition and ask him how his day was. You never have. We are all in the same camp here. We're all white, and joined by that in brotherhood...”

“Oh, so that's what you've got going on!” Hart cried then. “Did you pack your white hoods with you? I thought your kind was too cowardly to come out and live like real men.”

At once, John Lawrence lost his cool, and went in to attack Hart. But Vanderhorn stopped him. “Johnny boy, come on now. Let us not attack our fellow man.”

“I just don't like being compared to those anti-Catholics,” Lawrence said at once.

“You're generalizing, Captain Hart,” said Vanderhorn with a grin. “We're not like the Klan. We're not like Hitler's goosesteppers. There's a lot of different ways to call a savage a savage, Hart.”

“Then maybe we shouldn't believe in savages,” Hart replied.

“You don't know savage. You don't know it till you've thought for yourself what must have happened to your daughter once those black mongrels got their hands on her!” cried Bertram Castleton then. He caught himself. “I'm sorry to be so crass, it's just that...well, you know what they do to white women. Your daughter was a blonde, right?”

“Yes.”

“Mine too. They prize blondes above all others.”

“I doubt that,” said Hart.

“They smell their superior blood,” said Lawrence, playing at Hart's temper. “There's a reason only whites get hair the color of the

king's metal.”

Hart looked up, and saw that the people they'd hired as bearers stared with contempt from the outer edge of their camp. They had weapons, and greatly outnumbered the Brotherhood—he wondered why they didn't strike. But he realized: if they struck, it was only a matter of time before some white authority caught them and punished them and probably many others. Even if they succeeded in wiping out the Brotherhood, they couldn't risk it.

Their restraint was admirable; Hart barely managed it himself. But then he realized the externality of his thoughts—and remembered that the Brotherhood rightfully accused him of the same guilt they bore. He could not scrub clean the fact that he benefited from the systems of domination which white nations had imposed on Africa.

Tellingly, neither Clyde Beatty nor Osa Johnson stepped in on this matter. But Dublin O'Malley did.

“I won't have you pitting yourselves against each other,” he uttered. “We need to work together to fulfill Mr. Beatty and Mrs. Johnson's contracts—we've thrown in all together. And that's saying nothing of Mr. Woolpit and poor Mr. Roulette.”

“Finally, someone recalls the fact of my existence!” pronounced Woolpit, lighting another cigar.

“There's no fight here,” laughed Thomas Stockwell with a sneer. “Hart's been a little...uppity, I guess, but hopefully that'll all pass.”

Hart did not answer, refusing to dignify the man's words.

O'Malley sighed—it seemed there was little he could do to prevent a fight. He'd probably throw in with Hart, if he had to, just because he was a much better fighter than the other four. But then there was a loud cry, and the atmosphere shifted.

It was Captain Arbuckle, running out of the jungle. He looked elated. “The city! The city! It is—it is full of beautiful women!”

Hart rolled his eyes at the pleased grumblings of the men of the Brotherhood. It wasn't just that he enjoyed tenderness with men as well as women—it was the whole principle of the thing. Did these people have nothing to them but their base instincts?

Hart surveyed the camp. The only kindred souls he had near him, he realized, were O'Malley, who he didn't trust, and also Woolpit, who was only good in one of his more amiable moods. He remembered his training and kept a stiff upper lip. The group started packing up to follow Arbuckle's new trail, and Hart joined them in this effort.

They began to hike north, hoping that Arbuckle had spoken from a position of sobriety. But soon, the jungle began to thin out, and within a few miles, they stood at the edge of an enormous walled fortress-city.

At once, the bearers grew uneasy. One of them, a man named Balenge, said to Hart: “That's Palmyra, city of the Warrior Women. It's not a place one just trounces into.”

“Warrior Women?” Hart asked.

“Men are not allowed to set foot there. There are rumors that these women come from another world,” said Balenge. “I doubt the legends myself, but it *is* known for certain that these women are not only capable of great feats, but that they forbid men from entering their city.”

Unfortunately, the Brotherhood of Lost Fathers overheard this, and began laughing.

“Native superstition!” John Lawrence proclaimed. “I'm not worried about any Warrior Women. It'd take a hundred women with a lifetime of training to even make me break a sweat!”

The others agreed, and raised their weapons high. Suddenly, neither Johnson nor Beatty seemed to know what to do. “L-listen, gentlemen,” said Osa Johnson cautiously. “Maybe we shouldn't be

too hasty. Martin and I have had quite a few run-ins with hostile tribes, and it really is best to avoid provoking them...”

“But you earned legendary footage by putting your life on the line,” said Gordon Vanderhorn.

“You *don't* need to remind *me* of that,” said Mrs. Johnson immediately. “If you wish to go into that place, you can do so at your own risk. I will stay here with Mr. Woolpit and Mr. Beatty's crew, and we will stay safe. You've been a fine set of protectors! Shooting at every shadow that moves like you're living in a nightmare!”

They didn't dare retaliate against her—not the famous Osa Johnson. But soon, as it had been before, the debate was settled. Woolpit observed a shift in the Palmyran wall, and his unusual silence was broken. “Hey, I don't want to alarm anyone, but it looks like someone's found a point of egress.”

There was a door, a small one, opening in the wall. Out of it climbed two men, who approached the group eagerly. One was a cruel-looking white man, his hair slick, his face rough but shaven. The other was a well-dressed black man with a satisfied expression on his face. “Salutations,” said the white man. “Welcome to Palmyra, travelers. I am Dr. Art Morgan. This is my valued comrade, the eminent Dr. Whackingham Creeps.”

“Greetings,” said Dr. Creeps.

“Whackingham Creeps?” said Woolpit then, from the back of the group. “Did *I* write this scene...?”

“Be quiet,” urged Osa Johnson. She had a bad feeling about this.

“The good doctor and I have negotiated our way into commanding the facilities of Palmyra,” Morgan said then. “We have need of their technology. The people who live in this city are very advanced. However, they are also very rebellious. Their ancient lore speaks of a mythic period of captivity, which has left them extremely disinclined

towards obedience.”

“To summarize the point, we need mercenaries,” said Creeps with a grin. “Protectors. The rebellion will come soon—we could use your guns.”

“We’re all about suppressing violent savages,” said Tom Stockwell, and the rest of the Brotherhood—save for Hart—nodded with him. At once, the indigenous guides and bearers they’d hired cried out in anger. But now, the four white turned their guns on them. They were outmanned and outgunned, but they were crazy enough to try anything. The others of the party were not so brave. Clyde Beatty stepped forward, hoping perhaps to use his reputation as leverage to stop all of this.

“Gentlemen, in all of my years exploring Africa and other wild lands, I have found that—”

“Shut your mouth, Beatty,” said Gordon Vanderhorn. “We’re going into that city. You and the others can stay out here if you like.”

“This is ridiculous!” cried Beatty, unused to interruptions. “I’m the head of this expedition, and if you want to get paid, you’ll do what *I* tell you to do!”

But Dr. Morgan said simply, “I’ll pay you double what he’s getting you,” and that was more than enough for the quartet.

“Coming with us, Captain?” asked John Lawrence mockingly. Robert Hart remembered his oaths to the people of this region. He remembered how he earned the name Junga. But he also remembered other oaths he’d sworn. He went with them.

“Wait, Hart,” said O’Malley, “I’m going too. As a representative of Mr. Beatty.” There was a strange menace in his voice.

That menace was entirely lacking when Alexander Woolpit spoke: “I wish to join you as well. I could get some footage for Mrs. Johnson.”

“Don't put your neck on the line with these idiots, Alexander,” urged Osa Johnson. “I-I've grown fond of you...”

A woman's love was enough to alter Woolpit's demeanor. “Never fear, my dear,” he said confidently. “I'll be back before you can say Jack Robinson. Even if you have to say it slowly.” As he approached the group, O'Malley raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Dr. Morgan and Dr. Creeps cackling chillingly as they led their new fighting force into the city.

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Wilbur had been introduced to his new girlfriend's new neighbors. June had come to Palmyra only a few months ago, and stayed not only because she was invited, but because her husband would be barred from the city grounds. But she had been gone on an extended trip the last few weeks, and did not know that Morgan and Creeps had taken over the city.

Now June was in conference in one of the meeting places with Kuhlaya, Velda, and Meelah, members of the ancient Amazon people. Their ancestors were said to be the daughters of Ares and Harmonia; once their empire had spanned territories from Libya to Lycia. But now they lived only in this city of Palmyra—though they came from elsewhere. June's friends had promised that she would see their Island of Paradise when she had completed the joining-tests, and received her Bracelets of Remembrance.

“The intruders tricked us,” Kuhlaya was explaining. “They claimed to have a bomb big enough to destroy the entire city. But now we know they don't. They have a few pistols and that's about it.”

“They are no match for us—it's just a matter of rallying the people,” said Meelah. “June, this Morgan person said he'd blow up Palmyra if we were seen talking on the streets.”

“Fear is powerful weapon,” said June, in her now-usual clipped

fashion. "Don't blame Amazons for it."

"We have access to one of our lariats. We'd like you to use it."

"You not mad at June for bringing man to city?"

"Y'know, I used to be a horse-tamer back home," interrupted Wilbur Roulette. "Maybe *I* could use the lariat..."

"It's one thing letting you set foot in our city, male," said Velda sharply, "but let you wield one of the Golden Ropes of the Goddesses? Never!"

"June use lariat," said June then. "You quicker with bracelets."

"Yes, it's seems an age since we've faced 'the Trial of Flashing Thunder,'" said Meelah. "Stay behind us, June, and cover from the rear. Male, you stay here, in the conference place. Do not touch what is not yours."

"Y-y'know," said Wilbur then, "I don't *always* feel like a man." There was great honesty in his voice. And an urgency.

"You don't?" asked Kuhlaya. She looked at her fellow Amazons. "Sisters, if they speak the truth, then we cannot bar them. We must accept them as long as they are not male and possessed of a phallus."

"Perhaps they are a man our organs like ours," said Velda. "We accept him in that form, too."

"Aye, and we must accept them if their body or spirit speaks to the many-headed rainbow! The beautiful hydra of living identities!" announced Meelah.

Wilbur shrugged. "I don't always know what I am. I-I know that sounds *weird*, but..."

"Not weird," said June. "Not here."

Roulette thought of Woolpit, and the feelings he felt.

“Prepare to strike,” said Velda then. “We'll proceed at once to the scientists' lab, and we'll soon end this mad invasion.”

All of them save for Wilbur let out the Amazon war-cry—and once he knew it, Wilbur shouted it out too. They left the small house and rushed out in the direction of the lab of the mysterious Drs. Morgan and Creeps.

It wasn't long at all before they encountered resistance. The renegade scientists had been lying about carrying a deadly bomb, but they were not defenseless—they had already starting using Amazon technology to commence their experiments. In the Amazons' path stood three of the colossal lobsters which had driven June and Wilbur into the city.

“Our hand-to-hand skills are nearly useless here!” cried Kuhlaya. “June! Use the lasso!”

“The lariat gives its wielder over all life. Whoever is caught in the lasso must obey the user's commands,” said Meelah to Wilbur.

Suddenly, June growled at Meelah. “Don't touch June's man,” she warned.

“I'm not interested in him, I promise,” said Meelah. “He's all yours.” All she cared about in the moment was stopping those things.

The chittering things reared up at them, clacking their claws together. But June was undeterred. She had grown quite talented with the lariat in a short time, and so she tossed the rope with great confidence. It wasn't challenging to hit these giants anyway. The thing struggled against its bindings, trying to slice the golden rope with its claws, but there was no force on Earth or beyond that could cut that cord. June knew she had to focus her will through the rope; but she'd always had difficulty with that aspect, since learning of these ropes months prior. She could feel herself skipping words in

her sentences but she didn't remember how to stop doing that. She couldn't remember much at all. But even with all of those holds on her, her will was still strong.

The lobster immediately obeyed her mental commands, and began attacking the other two lobsters. When the affected specimen's own will returned upon June's retraction of the rope, it flailed away from its attackers, confused as to why they were striking it. But then it fought back and soon all three were battling to the death.

“*Ongana!*” cried June, and the group rallied behind her. Wilbur Roulette was amazed. He thought deeply about her attraction to him.

But it wasn't long before they were turned back by the sound of gunfire. Impossible—guns were forbidden in Palmyra. But these were times of great chaos.

Oh—a cadre of white men, causing havoc. None of the Amazons were surprised at that development.

At once, the Brotherhood of Lost Fathers turned their guns on the charging Amazons. “Let's show these rampaging dykes what for!” cried one of them, and a barrage of bullets shot out towards the women. But the Amazons were prepared. With lightning speed, they used the metal bands around their wrists to block the streams of projectiles. They moved faster than the eye could catch, and not a single shot went past them. In moments, the ground was piled high with flattened silver disks. The Brotherhood stared, confused, but they refused to stop firing—they found solace in their guns.

June lashed out again with the golden rope, and managed to catch one of them—an old man who she didn't know had the name Bert Castleton. He struggled, but there was nothing he could do to break or escape the rope. Soon his sounds of struggle died down; her will commanded him to relax. She pulled him in close to herself and Wilbur. They backed away from the fighting as Kuhlaya, Velda, and Meelah closed in on the shooters.

“Why men here?” demanded June at once. The lasso prevented those it bound from lying.

“We're here to make money helping Morgan and Creeps in taking over the Amazon city of Palmyra,” the old man explained. His face showed confusion at being so loose with his tongue, but he couldn't stop himself from continuing. “Morgan told us a lot of things, ranted at us really: he says the city has a doorway to another world in it. Morgan looked into that door and contacted some strange folk he calls the Great Old Ones, through their servants, which he calls the Supreme Race. To win favor with the Old Ones, Morgan is making monsters for the Supreme Race, these monsters being those lobster-things—they're called Gargans. He's using these Gargans to conquer this city—he said the women here are part of an ancient Order of women which is an enemy of the Old Ones. None of us believe half of it, save for the giant lobsters—pretty obvious *those* are real.”

“*Too bad* they're real,” June considered. “Who are Morgan and Creeps?”

“Dr. Morgan is using an alias. Creeps let slip his real name by accident—they used to work together and he's used to calling his boss by his real name. And that real name's Moreau—he used to have an island somewhere until he was kicked off by an Englishman name of Edward Parker...”

“Parker?” That name meant something to June, but she didn't know what. She shook her head. “Tell me more.”

“I don't know anything else.”

“Then sleep,” commanded June, and he passed out. She removed the lasso from him, and saw that the Amazons were now beating back the male attackers with their fists. There were three other men with them, but they weren't fighting. Wilbur's eyes fixed onto one of them, a detail which did not elude June.

“Alexander!” Wilbur cried. “Alexander, I'm here!”

The man with glasses and the cigar waved to Wilbur. "Greetings, old pal! I'll be over there as soon as the armistice is signed!"

"No, you come over here right now! You have to meet June!"

"I'm more of a May sort of fellow, honestly!"

The initial trio of Gargans had all killed each other—or so it seemed. Now, a straggler stirred, pulling itself out from under its dead brethren. With incredible speed it lurched over to the brawling crowd. At once, the Amazons and the Brotherhood alike had to decide if they were going to fight each other or the Gargan. The Amazons saw that the one called Alexander and his two comrades were not attacking them, and for their sake, they tried to fight off the Gargan.

But they were caught in the middle. As they turned their attentions to combating the gigantic crustacean, it was clear the mercenaries were just going to shoot them in the back.

That was when the air split with a familiar cry. The war-cry of the bull-ape: the cry of the Brute.

"It's my husband!" said June at once. "He must have tracked me here!"

"Is that a problem?" asked Wilbur, suddenly concerned. "Say—he's not any sort of a muscle-man, is he...?"

"Is he ever," said June fondly.

"He might get the wrong idea about you and me—"

"Yes, that's what I'm worried about."

"Hey June!" exclaimed Wilbur. "You're speaking in full sentence now!"

"Yes—yes, I am." But June's head was still swirling. She still had that

wildness in her, that impulse to run away with any man she pleased. She could remember now that she and the Brute had discussed it. She learned that she was not his first wife, or even the only woman who he loved.

“Heart still carries feelings for Linasi—and others,” said the Brute. “Met woman named Luah, once upon a time. Instinct took over.” He looked over his shoulder but there was no guilt in his eyes. “Recent time.”

“Brute, how could you?” she'd exclaimed. She wanted to slap him. But then she realized that this was exactly what she had expected of him, before she'd committed herself to staying here with him on the escarpment. She'd feverishly imagined his “savage” nature, before realizing later that there were no savages. That “savagery” she'd envisioned was a mere inversion of what she'd previously taken for granted. In the Western world, monogamy was prized, and so she imagined him freely cavorting with any woman who took his fancy. He had proven himself to be more “civilized” than she expected, but it was clear now that he had never had a reason to take only one partner. It was true that a wide variety African cultures practiced monogamy, but the Brute had always stayed away from all people. These were his own values, which he learned from animals, and perhaps from something unspeakable in his own nature.

She wondered if she'd been bitter at him, all this time. Maybe that was what drew her to this new man. But her attraction to Wilbur was real. And she had not lost love for the Brute. Not one ounce, not for a second.

In fact, seeing the Brute once more made her love for him grow. He was fully visible now, standing strong and tall. He already attacking the invaders of Palmyra, having seen June's friends struggle to fight the rampaging Gargan. At once, he drew his long knife and stabbed one of the men deeply. Then he twirled around, ripping out the blade from the dying man's flesh, before sticking it cleanly between a second man's ribs. The third man broke into a run, to escape the Jungle Lord. The fourth member of the group was left where June had dragged him.

June realized that this would be her only chance to get away with Wilbur. Had she stayed, she could've known that the Brute would allow her to go with her new paramour. But she chose the jungle instead. She knew her husband could kill this monster. She took off sprinting, with Wilbur's hand firmly in hers.

Behind her, the Brute attacked the great Gargan. It was now badly wounded, and his knife, sneaking below its hard chitinous shell, added to its injuries. Dark blood spat from its wounds; the monster howled at the Brute, who roared back.

Two men emerged—Morgan and Creeps. They shouted angrily at the Brute, trying in vain to make him call off his attack. But he would not be dissuaded. He struck again at an opening he opened. The creature writhed in pain, flailing its claws outward. One of these claws smashed hard into Dr. Morgan, who went flying away—and almost inconsequentially, he was dead. Dr. Creeps at once let out a yell, and ran to Morgan's corpse. The Brute did not see him after that, though as he fought on he heard the sound of weeping.

One last strike with the blade, and the Gargan was dead. It made an inhuman cry at it collapsed; sweat poured down the Brute's forehead in the heat of battle and the summer.

This deed would earn him favor with the Amazon women. But he did not stay long in Palmyra after the battle. He needed to find his wife. He cared not for the surviving men who had attacked Palmyra—the Amazons had volunteered to track them down, and inflict their own vengeance.

June had been so close—he'd smelled her. Where had she gone?

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June and Wilbur were now as they were when they first met—in a tree. They were far from Palmyra, and the sun was setting.

“So what do we do now?” asked Wilbur. He already knew the

answer to that question, and he strained to hold back his excitement.

“For now, you can hold June—er, hold me,” June replied. With only a little hesitation he took her in his arms. “You know, we’re both getting used to life in the jungle. I’m still fairly new to it, in all honesty.”

“Oh? Do you have a permanent home?” He glanced aside. “With the strong-looking gentleman?”

“I do,” she said. “My mind...is still blurry about it. But I know now...that I’d like to try living with you. For a while. If it makes sense to live with someone for just a short time.”

“I figured,” he said. “And it does make sense, to me anyway.”

June thought of the bespectacled man from earlier. “That man with the cigar...do you want to go back to him?”

“Yes...eventually,” Wilbur answered. “I’m sure he’ll find *me*, though. He finds a way of making it happen.”

June looked out into the expanse of the jungle. “Wilbur...do you think we could make use of the time we have?”

“How long do you think it’ll be?”

“Who knows?” June grinned. “It may only be a half-hour or two.”

She leaned in and kissed him, and he eagerly kissed her back.

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“Alright, who wants to try that again?”

Balenge held a smoking rifle in his hand. Bert Castleton, who had escaped the fate that claimed John Lawrence and Gordon Vanderhorn, was now dead—he’d paid the price for trying to take command of the expedition.

In the jungle on the other side of Palmyra, the Beatty-Johnson expedition, or what was left of it, had reunited. Clyde Beatty, Dublin O'Malley, Captain Arbuckle, Osa Johnson, Alexander Woolpit, Robert Hart, Thomas Stockwell, and the bearers and guides were all who remained. Many of the hired hands had departed, to begin the long trek home. But Balenge remained, and he held Stockwell at gunpoint.

"You insult us, and you come to despoil our lands," Balenge accused. "We're tired of people like you. We've been tired a long time."

At once, Robert Hart stepped forward. It was time.

"Balenge, if I may—I'd like to deal the final blow. I want this man to know why I've been following him. I'm glad he's the last to live."

Balenge looked at him. "Hart, what do you mean?"

"I mean that this man—Thomas F. Stockwell—is responsible for my father's death. He embezzled a small fortune from the company where he and my father worked together, and framed my father for the crime. To escape a brutal jail sentence, my father killed himself. My brother, Jack, became disillusioned with society and turned to crime. You, Mr. Beatty, were the one to bring him to justice."

"I don't remember meeting a Jack Hart," said Beatty.

"My name is false," Hart replied.

"I remember the man who took my fall," said Stockwell. "Y-you must be his son Ray—Ray Gorman!"

Michael O'Malley's eyes lit up on hearing that name. "Ray Gorman!" he whispered.

Hart, or Gorman, drew his gun and fired into Stockwell, who cried out and collapsed. He was dead.

Then a second shot rang out, and Gorman dropped to the ground. He, too, had perished.

With tears in his eyes, O'Malley threw his gun down. Gorman's face stared forward, lifelessly asking why.

"That's for letting my brother get killed," he said quietly.

"But he was a decent kinda guy, I thought!" proclaimed Alexander Woolpit.

"He turned his back on my brother, Timothy, during an animal-handling session. He knew that Tim had become a drunkard. And he knew those cats would get him if he wasn't careful. At least it was quick, the doctor said—dead in an instant." O'Malley looked at Clyde Beatty now. "Clyde, he died at your circus, Tim did. Now I'll confess: I used a fake name too. My real name is Michael O'Hara. I didn't use that name when I worked with you, Clyde, because I'm an ex-con."

"Timothy O'Hara..." Beatty tried to think back. Then his face slackened with disappointed. He sighed and looked hard at his business partner.

"I was confused, Dublin, because I couldn't remember if I had worked with anyone named Gorman when your brother was killed. But I remember now. *I* was Tim's supervisor that night."

Dublin's face went pale. "You...?"

"Yes, me, Dublin. Ray Gorman never worked for me. You must have heard of my tussle with Jack Gorman, and somehow got the story twisted where you thought Gorman was Tim's supervisor."

"So Tim would have lived...if *you*, Clyde, had been more attentive." O'Malley's voice came out cold.

"Yes, Michael. I'm sorry I never told you—but how could I have

known he was your brother, when you hid your real name from me?"

O'Malley stared at the ground.

"Can you ever forgive me, Dublin?" asked Beatty.

It took a long time for him to answer. "Aye, I can forgive you. I suppose I wouldn't be too great a man if I failed to forgive you for an accident," he said. There was a warmth in his voice, but it was noticeably shallow.

Beatty liked to avoid professional conflict when he could avoid it. "We'll discuss it more on the plane back to America," he said, hoping to clear the air. His right-hand man only nodded.

O'Malley, or O'Hara, wished dearly now that Beatty would go under and be bought out by some trash-racket, like Ralph Sargent's outfit. But he couldn't strike at Beatty just yet. Not as long as Valerie Tremaine was under contract to him. But soon Val would be his wife. He would spirit her away. Once Valerie was his, he would turn on his boss, and show Mr. Clyde Beatty what vengeance really looked like.

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Nine months passed. June and Wilbur were still living together.

But that which began June's adventure was now what ended it.

June Parker was flat in bed, holding her infant son in her arms. He was still covered in crimson ribbons of her blood. She wasn't even strong enough to tremble; she was beyond exhausted. Wilbur sat near to her—he had apologized about a million times as he helped deliver the child, and she didn't understand. He was doing an excellent job. Was he sorry he made her pregnant? She did not regret that.

He was calm, and there was a warm glow in his face. "What's his

name?” he asked.

June's voice was weak, and crackled like paper. “What do you want to call him?”

“I-I wanted to name them after you, if they were a girl...but there's not really any boy names that have 'June' in them.”

“I think you can call boys 'Juniper,’” she said. “Not like it really matters, right?”

“Exactly, names are just names. Name a boy Eve, a girl Adam.”

“Other months...” She thought about it, then grinned. “Octavius?” she said. “Augustus? Janus”

“Janus is fine! Quite fine!” Wilbur said suddenly. “I had an uncle Janus once, I'm sure.” He looked aside. “It's an ancient name. Like Alexander is.”

Throughout these last months, Wilbur had missed his longtime companion. He had no idea that Alexander had been searching for him all this time.

But this was not a day he could focus on himself. He held his infant son, and heard him cry. “Janus Roulette,” he said, his voice a shaky whisper. And he held the child close.

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For a year, the Brute had traveled the jungle. He journeyed far from the escarpment, keeping his infant daughter strapped to his back. She survived every peril they faced together. He knew that little Joanna was under his protection, but if she had lived through the jungle, then June could survive it alone. He still found traces of her scent in the jungle. At least he thought he did.

He wondered if it was worth it to go this far for so long. It was as they discussed—he had other women in his life, from time to time.

But he knew they had felt a common magnetism—he knew they were of a kind. There was much he did not understand about the world, but he knew deep love when he felt it with someone. He refused to give her up. Besides, the jungle was dangerous, and he had no idea what would happen to her if he didn't intervene. He was responsible for her safety.

Of course, it was probably too late. He knew in his heart it was too late.

And so it was that the Brute began the trek back home. He had built his treehouse to last—because it was not just his home. It was meant to stand against storms and beasts and all other things which threatened his happiness with his wife. But he would not be alone now in that house, even without June. He would cherish their daughter, who had her mother's eyes.

The Brute did not weep. He followed his own law, the law of the jungle, and in that law there was no room for weeping.

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Wilbur and June stood outside their home. The sun was setting, and Wilbur held baby Janus close to him. June was standing a short distance ahead of them, with her hands folded neatly in front of her. Her mind was perfectly clear.

“I have to go, Wilbur.”

He blinked. He'd been expecting this. “Why?” he asked, without need.

“I have to go back to my husband. I'm sorry. I have missed him every day since I've left him. And...” She looked back at him. “I love you. I will always love you, Wilbur. And our son.”

“You can't leave me here with him, all alone!” he cried. “I can't go on without you!”

“Oh, Wilbur,” she sighed. “We both now that we've seen Alexander looking around in the woods nearby. He's encircling our encampment. How he hasn't seen our night fires, I've no idea. But you two will be reunited soon.” She turned fully now, to gaze at him directly. “I know you've stayed away from him on purpose. You've wanted to avoid breaking my heart. So I've decided to break it for you.”

“June, you can stay with he and I!” he said. “We can raise Janus together—”

But he looked her deeply in the eye, and saw the need within her. She could not be parted from her husband, just as he could not be parted from Alexander. They loved each other, but it was not the same as it was with their men. They could return to their romance, perhaps, someday. Until then, they always had their memories.

They talked for many hours, until it was night. Then it was time for her to leave.

It wasn't as simple as that, of course. Her journey was long and hard, and only moreso due to all the time spent crying.

Wilbur wandered in the area where he'd last seen Alexander. When he saw his face coming through the darkness, his apprehension faded away.

“Woolpit!” shouted Wilbur.

“Roulette!” cried Alexander.

They ran towards each other, and held each other close. When they parted, Woolpit took his glasses off to clean the fog that spread across the lenses. Before he could put them back on, Wilbur pulled the cigar out of his mouth and kissed him.

Across the jungle, another reunion of similar joyousness was transpiring. The Brute welcomed his wife home.

And just like that, he could not remember his own laws, his rules
about room for weeping.

Postscript

Almost four decades passed.

In the year 1967, the Brute—now mostly called by the name Johnny Bradford—was meditating in the city of Sun Mai, in the heart of Thailand. He was awaiting the arrival of his comrades, Mr. Cranston and Dr. Ardan. The trio made a habit of discussing philosophy over tea at the end of each week. A young monk entered his quarters.

“A guest has come for you, Johnny.”

“Only one? I was expecting my usual company,” the Brute replied.

“This man is an outsider, Johnny. He was granted access by Kashi Khan because he claims to be your son.”

“I have two sons, my friend. Which of them is it?”

“I am unsure.”

“Very well—send him in.”

The Brute was pleased to hear from his sons. Either of them would be fully welcome in this city.

But the strong young man who entered was a stranger to him. The Brute noted that he had a familiarity to his face, but couldn't place him. He was dressed in robes befitting the customs of the city, but it was clear he was no simple monk—a strong, muscular physique was apparent below his clothes.

“Mr. Bradford, my name is Janus Roulette,” he said. “I believe I'm your stepson.”

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “You're Nita's son?” he asked.

“I don't know who Nita is, I'm afraid,” Roulette replied. “My mother was June Parker.”

Suddenly, it all came back to him. Johnny thought often of June since her death during the Second World War. He remembered that long year early in their marriage where she went missing, when Joanna—when Shalimar—was just a baby. June had returned to him deeply weary. He'd sensed something unusual in the moment of her return, and circumstances only grew stranger when she had asked to meet Luah. He always thought she hated Luah, but now she was strangely eager to meet her.

They had shared many nights of passion, the three of them, in Luah's secret abode. But that was a long, long time ago now.

“My father was Wilbur Roulette,” Janus explained, “who your wife fell in love with for a short period.”

“I always suspected that was what happened—that she'd found another. I had no idea she'd had a son, though, and that he'd lived.”

“My fathers kept me safe throughout my youth. Good men, the both of them. But the adventurous spirit I grew up with was my mother's. My dads theorized that she had learned much from you.”

“Yes, she took to the jungle...in many ways.” He smiled, proud that she had followed her heart, even when it led her away from him.

“When I learned you were my stepfather, I wanted to find you. Even in the late '50s, there were rumors the Brute still lived on the Mutia escarpment.”

“I had resigned from the role, but my son Bomba took over the escarpment. He is the second Brute. I take it you never met him—he's never mentioned you.”

“I've never met your son, no. It took me a long time to reach your family's territory, and even then, I didn't meet him.”

“Where does your journey begin?” the Brute asked with a grin. “It started when I traced the rumors of mysteries on Mutia to a private detective named Shane. But I ended up at the wrong office—instead I was informed I was in the office of a Mr. Hammer, also a detective. I guess my mistake is a common one as Shane and Hammer are both named Mike.

“It turned out Mike Hammer had a lead of his own separate from Shane's. He was an associate of Clyde Beatty, the circus animal tamer, who traveled with my fathers once upon a time. He had just completed a job for Beatty to track down the other members of my fathers' safari, those of them who remained. I remember him telling a sob story about the explorer Osa Johnson having ended up in a mental hospital, alongside Elaine Dodge and a lady who thought she was Amelia Earhart. Through Beatty, Mike Hammer knew the general location of the Mutia escarpment, but refused to set me off without first training me properly. I became his apprentice of sorts for a few years, learning detective work and building muscle and fighting skills.”

“I'm not any sort of expert on such things, but I think that 'Janus Roulette' makes a great PI name,” the Brute said.

“Thank you. I made a great PI,” Janus replied. “Hammer and I had one last case together, where we helped a sailor named Braddock defeat a lunatic named Moreau, who had died once before and was resurrected in a clone body. Some creep named Creeps was responsible. Defeating these two was considered my final training. Hammer sent me off to Africa, and I searched for years to find the escarpment. During this time, I decided to imitate you. I was far west of the escarpment—deeper inland—but I made a convincing Brute.”

“Oh? People thought you were me?” asked Johnny. He was deeply amused—now he had two sons who had succeeded him.

“I think I have a right to say that,” said Janus, equally amused. “I had many adventures. In my first, I rescued a young woman named Irula from sacrifice in the remote village of Opar. I knew from

Hammer's correspondence with Beatty that Opar was one of two mining cities built by King Solomon, along with Joba, City of the Golden Bat. Irula had been offered up to the Oparians by a group of white hunters in punishment for her refusal to reveal her people's cache of gold. Irula and I traveled a long distance after I saved her. We—fell in love.

“It transpired that Irula was the Queen of Palmyra, the city of the Amazons. My mother lived there for a time as one of their people.”

“I know. I pursued her there, though it took me some time to finally reach it,” the Brute replied.

“I hate to inform you that the gold-thieves sacked the city, killing many of its inhabitants,” Janus said. The Brute was taken aback. “But not all of the women died. They are rebuilding their culture. In the moment, however, Irula was heartbroken. Even after we dispatched the dirty bastards who attacked the city.” He looked away, and the Brute recognized the lovelorn look in his eye. “Irula was—so much. She wasn't just a beautiful woman with long white hair. She wasn't just Queen of the Amazons. She was hailed by the cultists of the Leopard Society as Gungala, the Panther Woman, an avatar of the great goddess Tambura. And her most precious and sacred name was Luah.”

“Luah?!” the Brute exclaimed at once. “I haven't heard from her in decades! You—you were Luah's lover?!” He remembered Luah's shock-white hair—and her claims of immortality.

“Actually, I still consider myself to be—it's just that she has become...lost.”

The Brute nodded. Luah was eternally elusive—she seemed to never want to be found, even by her lovers. True, she would live with someone for a month or two, but then she would disappear. Janus spoke as if they had been together for years.

Janus continued. “After directing her people to rebuild, Luah and I traveled to the village of Nkongolo. Here, the young prince Nasu

required protection from those who sought to murder him to prevent his ascent to the throne. Nasu had to complete three trials in order to prove his worthiness, and we helped him attain this goal.”

Once again, Johnny Bradford was shocked. “There is a nearly identical ritual here in Sun Mai. My son aided Kashi Khan in ascending to the throne when his sinister uncle tried to kill him. And among the Zagunda people, there is a similar ritual.”

“I discussed this with Kashi before I came down here. I suspect that the traditions of Nkongolo and the Zagunda represent the legacy of a bond between their communities and Sun Mai, whose ancient rulers were great explorers.”

Janus cleared his throat before continuing. “What happened next will shock you deeper than anything else I’ve said, Mr. Bradford.”

“My nerves recover quickly, I like to think,” the Brute replied.

“Prince Nasu told Luah and I that he knew the secret location of the mines of King Solomon. His people had once communed with the Order of the Skull created by the ancient king.”

“I’ve been to those mines. Many times, in fact.”

“They were built by the same architects who constructed the communities of Opar and Joba. All of them were built to bring great treasures to the palaces of King Solomon. The Bible maintains that Solomon was turned from worshipping Yahweh by the influence of his foreign wives. There is also the tale of the Queen of Sheba, a foreign ruler who riddled with the King and brought him many treasures, and may have been his wife.

“Luah explained to me that all of these stories had either been smudged together or parsed apart by those who wrote the books of the Bible. In truth, Solomon was tempted by darkness before he met his final wife, the Queen of Sheba, and that temptation was what caused him to summon her. She was renowned as a mysterious

woman of indeterminate age, and she told him of the great riches of the lands that would someday be Opar and Joba. By building mines as she commanded, Solomon became fabulously wealthy. His trust of the powerful Queen was seen by many as a sign of wisdom, which was later considered the King's primary attribute. The darkness he sought was not the worship of foreign gods or even the wealth granted to him. He wished to know the secret of eternal life.

“The Queen, who had been born centuries ago under the name Makeda, told Solomon she could not grant him that secret, for it had vanished long ago when she vanquished the mistress of its source, the witch Hasha-Mo-Tep of Kuma—She-Who-Must-Be-Obed—sister of Oma, of Antinea. I know you defeated the vampire Oma, while several years ago I ended the menace of the immortal Antinea with an A-bomb, in the company of a mining engineer, Pierre Morhange. Makeda was a yet more ancient presence—she was one of the women who may have been the legendary Lilith. She was an old, old woman when she killed the Queen of Kuma and stole her magic fountain. She had lived through the ages to stand here at the side of the King.

“When he knew that he could never become immortal, Solomon chose to preserve himself in another way. He asked Makeda to impersonate him and live the rest of his life, while he learned humility as a common man. She agreed to take his throne, and in his guise, she founded a secret cult, the Order of the Skull, to defend his mines near Opar. She ruled as wisely as Solomon had, so greatly so that no one even knew the difference. She became the mother of Rehoboam, who was a direct ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth.

“Of course, Luah's final revelation was that Makeda and Luah were one and the same. She had known the days of Atlantis, when Tsuu-Aas and Kathulos and other mad kings reigned. And now, she is my wife.”

Johnny had no idea what to say. Luah was now his stepdaughter—when she had once been his lover. His and June's. But then, how many husbands and wives had she had throughout her long life...? By the account of Solomon alone, at least 700.

This was so much to take in. Nita, his wife, had only recently had a daughter, whom she had named Tenebrae. They were proud parents—he'd always been a proud father. With Bomba—with Shalimar—with Skipper—

Now his lost wife had had a son with someone else, who had followed in his tracks. There was a third Brute, after he and Bomba.

“You are an orphan?” Johnny asked.

“Yes, and I have been for some time,” Janus replied.

“Well, you won't be alone. Not ever, as long as my family and I are around.” He reflected on how that he was also immortal, like Luah. “That'll be for at least the rest of your life.”

“You have great kindness in your heart. I can see why you have earned the title of hero.” The two men felt suddenly as if they had known each other their whole lives. “Perhaps as I study here in Sun Mai we can discuss this further.”

“Yes...then you've already made those arrangements with Kashi?”

“Of course, Johnny, I—” Janus stopped then, his strong face frowning.

“What's wrong?” the Brute asked.

“There's a strange light around you!”

Johnny looked down, and saw indeed that his arms and hands were bathed in a golden light. Then, slowly but surely, that same light began to envelope Janus.

“What's happening to us?” Janus demanded.

“I can feel it—we're being pulled away somewhere—to—someplace else—”

There was no use trying to fight it. Already the room around them was fading away. It was being replaced with another chamber, one of considerably more ornate styling than the Brute's quarters in the monastery. But they only caught a glimpse of it before a short, sharp pain stuck into them.

Then only blackness awaited them. Blackness and pain...

THE END

*To be continued in Captain Lilin: The Enemy Without and
Flint Golden & The Brute: The Unknown Earth!*