

The Serpent Rises  
By Matthew Baugh

*"Do not raise up that which ye cannot put down"* H. P. Lovecraft

"Dr. Zarnak, do you believe that the dead can be raised?"

Anton Zarnak smiled, something that lent a faintly diabolic air to his appearance. He was a dark complexioned man with intense coal-black eyes and black hair broken by a pronounced streak of white zigzagging across his temple.

"The resurrection of the dead is a matter of faith for Christians, Jews and Moslems," he said, "While reincarnation is a tenet of Hinduism and many other faiths. Virtually all religions teach of life which transcends death and we would be blind cynics to discount them blithely."

"Yes." said the young man who had asked the question, "But I don't mean in religious or philosophical terms! I mean a real, tangible resurrection in which a dead body is physically brought back to life, as Mr. Barton has suggested."

"Yes Zarnak!" came Barton's booming voice. He was a big Englishman with a forceful personality and enough charisma to have filled the auditorium by himself. He was the only amateur represented on the panel, and his ideas were unorthodox, but his place in the development of modern archaeology could not be denied.

"What d'you think?" Barton continued, "Surely a man of your learning must agree that the ancient Egyptians had the power of resurrecting the dead! They learned it from the priests of Atlantis before them, but they died out before they could pass it on to modern man!"

Jones, the young representative of Princeton University rolled his eyes in disdain.

"Do you have an opinion on the matter?" Barton asked the young man pointedly.

"Magical powers, occult secrets, it's all a bunch of hocus pocus!" Jones returned and the two men locked eyes.

"Gentlemen please," the moderator spoke up, "Let's remember that we're colleagues here, no matter how much our opinions may differ."

Jones was the first to drop his gaze. He nodded sheepishly to the moderator and Zarnak saw that he was regretful. Professor Gray was an old friend of Jones, and the younger man didn't want to cause his friend trouble by offending a donor as generous as Barton could be.

"The contingency of cadaverous revivification has occupied the cerebrations a felicitous collaborator of mine of late." Said Professor Littlejohn of Miskatonic University. He was an incredibly tall, thin man whose obfuscation-filled vocabulary masked what was arguably the finest mind in the field.

"Really?" Barton sounded pleasantly surprised, "Well, if anyone can discover the secret of resurrection, your associate is the man. That is, if you mean who I think you do?"

A certitudinous affirmation." Littlejohn agreed.

"Gentlemen," cut in Professor Whemple, "This all sounds well and good but shouldn't matters of life and death be left to God? There are some secrets we are just not meant to know." He shot Zarnak a desperate glance for support. Whemple was a mild-mannered man in his mid-thirties from the British Museum. He seemed kind and affable but, as Zarnak had reason to know, his reservations had a very real basis.

Sometimes the ancient dead do return as each had learned at great cost. For Whemple it had been his father's life and, very nearly, his fiancée's soul. For Zarnak the price had been even higher.

"Dr. Littlejohn," Zarnak said, "I do know something of the Egyptian practices and counsel caution for you and your colleague. I have no reservations about either of you in terms of integrity or ability, but this is a matter where little is known and much is dangerous."

After a gentle reminder from Professor Gray that the topic for the seminar was "Developing Methods in Modern Egyptology" and not A "Resurrection of the Dead" the remaining hour of the seminar stayed focused on more traditional subjects. This delighted Whemple and Littlejohn even as it frustrated

Barton. Jones displayed a fine mind and a broader grasp of the subject than Zarnak would have imagined in one so youthful, but he seemed bored and ill at ease in the formal setting.

Finally the discussion ended and the lecturers mingled with students on the stage, shaking hands and answering questions. Zarnak heard his name called, looking up he saw Professor Gray's daughter leading another young woman through the crowd toward him. The two made a striking contrast. Miss Gray, Zarnak couldn't recall her first name, was a vivacious girl of about thirteen, with rosy skin, grey eyes and bright blonde hair. The other girl was older, perhaps twenty. She was also taller, much darker and more serious. She dressed in the style of the college coeds, but there was an exotic air about her. She would have made a better fit in the court of Cleopatra than the campus of Columbia University.

Suddenly Zarnak saw movement behind the two girls. There was a tall man with something in his hand, raising it as if to strike at them!

He shouted a warning and lunged forward, but the crowd was too thick. He saw the man's hand more clearly now, enough to see the knife he held. The girls were turning, and several of the others had now realized what was happening. He heard Barton bellow something, and saw Littlejohn and Jones leaping forward. Good! Despite their professorial titles, Zarnak knew, they were both men of action. Either of them could be counted on to overcome the knife-wielder, or Zarnak could paralyze him with an adhi nerve strike, if only they could reach him in time.

But they couldn't. The knife flashed down, cutting a line through the fabric of the dark girl's jacket, through her blouse, and into the soft flesh beneath. She cried out in pain and sank to her knees as the man raised his arm for another strike.

As the second blow came down Zarnak saw that Miss Gray had slipped between the knife- man and his intended victim. He towered over her slight form by at least a foot but she never flinched. As the knife descended she caught his wrist and shifted her weight to the side. Suddenly the man was flying through the air in one direction as the knife spun away in the other. He landed hard and before he could even try to rise Jones and Littlejohn dog-piled on top of him.

Zarnak moved to the fallen girl. The cut started at her shoulder blade and came diagonally down her side about nine inches. The wound was bleeding, but not heavily. Despite the girl's ragged breathing he thought it was too shallow to have done any real harm.

"The contusive demarcation has a distinctly abhorrent similitude." Littlejohn said moving alongside him, "We should endeavor to acquire some aesclepiian assistance."

"The wound is ugly, but it is not serious," Zarnak said, "And I am, among other things, a medical doctor."

"I am apprehensive of her respiratory aberrance." Littlejohn said. The young woman was breathing in quick gasps now. Her eyes were tightly closed, and she seemed in a daze, unable to respond to anything around her.

"I don't understand." Zarnak said. "Nothing about the wound should be giving her this kind of distress, unless . . ."

He broke off abruptly and rose to his feet, "Look after her," he said to Littlejohn, "I need to look at that knife."

As he moved away Littlejohn made a dubious attempt at making the girl more comfortable by resting her head on his impossibly bony knee.

Jones had also gone to where the knife had fallen and was bending over it, examining it without touching. It was a double-edged blade about nine inches long but otherwise undistinguished. He looked up as Zarnak knelt beside him.

"I dunno what I thought I'd find," he said, "It's not unusual at all. Just an garden variety knife waiting for some garden variety lunatic to come along and stab somebody with it."

"What is that on the tip?" asked Zarnak.

"Just blood," Jones started then, he stopped and peered more closely. "Wait a minute! There is something else here, some kind of sticky residue. Is it poison?"

Without answering Zarnak reached down, grasped the knife, raised it knife to his nose and sniffed. It had no odor he could discern. Taking out a pocket handkerchief he dabbed away the girl's blood, then touched the tip of his tongue to the residue.

"Doc!" Jones cried, "That's poison!"

"Don't worry," Zarnak said calmly, "Most blade poisons need to enter the bloodstream directly to take effect. One can eat sizable amounts of curare with no effect at all, provided one doesn't have a cut or ulcer in his mouth or stomach. This should be the same."

Zarnak was silent a moment, then shook his head in disgust. "If I could recognize it that I might know the antidote," He said, "But this poison is unknown to me."

"I've got a better idea!" Jones snarled. Snatching the dagger he strode to where Barton was attending to the girl's attacker. The big Englishman held him with a powerful hammerlock on his left arm. His right had obviously been injured by Miss Gray's jiu-jitsu throw and hung limp at his side.

Jones thrust the dagger below the man's nose.

"I don't know who you are, or what your game is," he growled, "But you're going to tell us all we need to know about this poison and it's antidote, or else you're going to get a taste of it yourself!"

"Foo!" the young man practically spat the response at him, "These are matters beyond your weak minds! The girl's life is unimportant! My life is unimportant!"

"All that matters is the success of the Thule society." said Zarnak's calm voice.

"What?" The man gasped, "How did you . . . ?"

"Did I read your mind?" Zarnak said, "That would be distasteful in the extreme I think. Unnecessary also since you insist on wearing that to the scene of your outrage."

Jones' eyes followed Zarnak's gesture to the man's watch-chain where there hung a small charm depicting a German-style cross encircled by a long dragon or serpent holding its tail in its mouth.

"Thule huh?" Jones said, "I've heard of you. You're that bunch of occultists and pseudo-historians the German National Socialists are mixed up with." He moved his face an inch closer to the other man's. "I really hate those guys!"

Whatever response the man might have made was lost as a cry came from Littlejohn. "Zarnak!" he said, "I need your help!"

Zarnak hurried to the girl's side and laid his ear close to her mouth. There was no stir of breath, and her skin was cool to the touch. He felt her wrist for a pulse and found none. Then his eyes narrowed. On the girl's right ring finger was a copper band in the form of a serpent coiled three times round her finger with two yellow gems for eyes. He touched the ring and found that it was warmer than the girl's cooling flesh. Then he wiggled it and found that it fit her finger so tightly that it could not be easily moved.

Placing her hand gently in her lap he shook his head.

Littlejohn showed surprising strength by rising to his feet effortlessly with the girl's body still in his arms. He was a tall man, six and a half feet or more, and the slender form he held made him seem a giant. He strode toward the captive slowly, and when he spoke he used only small words. The change in him was frightening.

"You did this to her!"

The captive panicked. His right arm, the one everyone had thought broken, flashed to his inner suitcoat pocket. It came back out with a flinging gesture, and then he was gone.

It happened just that quickly. One moment he was sitting on the floor surrounded by his captors, the next he simply wasn't there!

Zarnak glanced around the room. Barton and Jones were where they had been, Jones still holding the dagger and Barton staring dumbly at the now empty hand he had used to hold the prisoner. Professor Gray was nearby with a protective arm around his daughter's shoulders. She was crying and seemed almost fragile now. Littlejohn, still holding the girl in his arms, was the first to speak.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" he said softly.

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There is a saying among doctors and nurses that 3:00 A.M. is the time of death. More patients die quietly in that still, cold hour than at any other time of the day.

The thought made Martin West shiver slightly. Being assistant coroner should make a man immune to the macabre, Martin thought, but that had never worked with him. He hated the graveyard shift in this place, surrounded by bodies of the newly dead. It made him think of the stories from Poe that he had read during his college days. Worse still, there was the family story that his uncles insisted was true. A distant cousin who had conducted terrible experiments on corpses and the frightful end that he had come to.

Martin shook his head. That was not the story for him to dwell on. It always frightened him, but never more than in this dimly lit room where every noise seemed to be the sound of some restless corpse not yet ready for burial. Such stories belonged on the pages of *Weird Tales*, or one of the other lurid magazines he glimpsed at the newsstand. They were not a part of the real world and he shouldn't let them affect his nerves the way they did.

A small noise made Martin West jump! A scuffing sound as a shoe might make on the cement floor, or perhaps, as a bare foot might!

The sound seemed to have come from Martin's right, but as he turned in that direction he saw nothing moving there now. It could have come from inside the chemical supply closet. The light was off but the door was slightly ajar. That was unusual. Dr. Kitterige would have been the last to use the closet and he was usually fastidious about locking up behind himself. Still, the only other thing at that end of the room was the body.

There has been only two bodies in this evening, a derelict whose autopsy he and Kitterige had completed earlier that evening, and the young woman. The man's autopsy had been routine. He was

one of the many West had seen who drank themselves to sleep in the gutter only to freeze to death in the chill October night.

The woman was something else. Kitterige said that she had been killed with a poisoned knife. Unusual, the older coroner had commented, but not as unusual as might be expected in modern day New York. What was more unusual were the orders that no autopsy should be performed until police headquarters had given the authorization.

West moved to the table and raised the sheet. The young woman had been pretty in life, he thought, albeit in an exotic way. The darkness of her skin, now tinged with blue, the shape of her features all spoke to him of Africa.

"Humph!" he muttered, "I wonder who she was. I never heard of a Negress getting special treatment from the police before.

His eyes caught a gleam of light from her right hand. There was a copper ring in the form of a coiled serpent there.

That shouldn't be. All her jewelry should have been removed and placed with her possessions when she came in. He caught her wrist in one hand and tried to work the ring loose with the other, but found that it would not come off.

That must be why the ring was still on, West decided. Perhaps the hand had swollen as a reaction to the poison that killed her. It seemed odd to him though that there was no visible sign of swelling. Even odder, the girl's flesh, though cold, was soft to his touch, and her limp arm moved easily with no trace of the rigor mortis that should have set in hours ago.

There was another noise, this one from directly behind him! It was the "ssst" made when a person blows air through his teeth. Martin West dropped the girl's hand with a loud cry and spun around.

He had a momentary impression of three figures in white, then one of the three raised it's hand in front of Martin's face. The figure blew into its palm, raising a cloud of a fine colorless powder, then stepped back.



Martin West stayed where he was. He did not move a muscle of his outstretched hands or his crooked fingers, the look of shock did not leave his face, he did not even blink. In fact, Martin West did such a remarkable job of playing a human statue that he made the three men chuckle.

"How long will he be like that?" one of the men asked. Like his companions he was an athletic man in his twenties. Also like them he was wearing a white labcoat and stethoscope and dressed the part of a doctor, except for the crepe-soled shoes which allowed him to walk without noise.

"Only about fifteen minutes." Said the man who had blown the powder into Martin's face, "Plenty of time if we don't dawdle."

The man brushed his hand against his trousers leg, then fished out a phial of pinkish liquid which he tossed to the man who had spoken. He did this all with his left hand. His right arm was in a sling, having been badly dislocated earlier that day.

The third man chuckled again, "I'd like to see him try and explain this to the cops!" he said, "One minute the body's right in front of him, the next thing he knows, she's gone!"

"It may not go as badly for him as you think." said a quiet voice.

The three men all turned to the voice. Two newcomers had stepped from the chemical supply closet where they had been concealed. The shorter was Anton Zarnak, dressed all in dark clothes, the taller a powerfully muscled Sikh whose eyes shone fiercely beneath his turban.

"Zarnak!" the injured man hissed! As quickly as a striking snake his good hand flashed into his pocket and emerged an instant later to make a scattering motion in the direction of Zarnak and his companion. For a moment no one moved, then Zarnak smiled thinly.

"An admirable stratagem gentlemen," he said, "At least it was the first time you used it. "Now I suggest you stand still and hold your arms out at your sides."

"Aye," the Sikh growled as he raised a large revolver to cover the men, "'Tis not the weapon of my choice, but it will send you dogs to Hell no less swiftly for that, unless you do as the sahib asks."

At the sight of the pistol the three complied meekly. Zarnak crossed to the one who still held the phial in his outstretched hand. Taking it, he unstoppered its top and smelled the contents.

"Excellent!" he murmured, "Gentlemen, you have been of great service and I thank you! Now I think it is time we part company."

At Zarnak's signal Ram Singh, the giant Sikh produced a police whistle and blew three loud blasts on it. Within seconds half-a-dozen uniformed officers had entered the room and were busily searching and handcuffing the three prisoners.

"Be very careful Inspector Cardona," Zarnak said to the plainclothes officer in charge, "They've already shown us one unexpected surprise. I'd hate for your men to fall victim to another."

"Don't worry Doc," Cardona replied. "We're giving these mugs full honors." He was a short man with a dark complexion and a powerful build. He had a sure manner about him that spoke of ability born from many years' experience.

"I appreciate your cooperation Inspector." Zarnak said, "I know how irregular this must be for you."

Cardona dismissed this with a wave of his hand, "If the Commissioner wants me to cooperate with someone I do it." he said, "I'm a by-the-book man myself, but if someone comes along with a plan that'll work, that's alright with me. I'm a firm believer in what works."

"Hey inspector!" One of the uniformed officers called out, "We've got 'em cuffed."

"Take 'em to the precinct O'Malley," Cardona responded, "But have two men cover them with revolvers until we can do a strip-search. You heard what the Doc said about surprises!"

"These babies won't be pullin' no surprises!" O'Malley shot back, "We'll make sure of that!"

"See that you do!" Cardona said, then turned back to Zarnak. "Say Doc, what was that trick they pulled anyway?"

"Something they learned from the Yezidees of the Caucasus mountains," Zarnak said, "The Yezidees grind the roots of certain plants into a fine powder. When the powder is inhaled it causes a

trance accompanied by muscular paralysis similar to a petit-mal seizure. The affected person is immobilized for several moments and awakens with no memory of ever having been affected."

"So that's how the mug got away from you earlier!" Cardona said, "He just throws out a handful of magic powder, then walks away while you're all in a trance. A few minutes later you wake up and it's like he vanished in a cloud of smoke!"

Zarnak nodded. "Fortunately Ram Singh and I knew enough hold our breath for the second encounter.

"These men belong to a group called the Thule Society. he continued, Alt is interested in the occult sciences, especially those rites considered 'black magic' in the West. The Yezidees have the reputation of being diabolists, which must have attracted the attention of the Thule. Their agents could easily have infiltrated the sect and learned this secret."

"So these Yezi. . . Yegi . . . these guys are Satan worshipers of some kind?"

"No," Zarnak said, "Their mythology has been interpreted in that way by de Grandin and other experts because they hold that there is no such thing as evil, and that Satan was forgiven his sins and returned to his place in the heavenly court. Actually, the Yezidees are a harmless syncretic sect which blends elements of Zoroastrianism, the Moslem and Jewish faiths, and Nestorian Christianity."

Cardona looked blank for a moment.

"But these Thule guys?" he said, "You say they're some kind of Satan worshipers? Does that explain why they were after the poor girl's body?"

"I think the Thule ultimately worship power," Zarnak said, "Which may amount to the same thing as devil worship in the long run. As for the charge, I think 'attempted kidnapping' will be more appropriate than 'attempted desecration.

"Huh?" Cardona grunted, "What do you mean?"

"Allow me to demonstrate." Zarnak said. Moving over to the end of the autopsy table he gently tilted the girl's head up, then poured the contents of the phial down her throat. For several moments

nothing happened, then her body convulsed with a series of coughs, followed by a ragged breath, and the color began to come back to her skin.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Cardona whispered fervently, "Doc, what did you do?"

"I recognized the scent of the poison on the dagger earlier," Zarnak replied calmly, "It is a variant of the tetrodotoxin which the voodooists of Haiti use to create their zombies."

"Right!" Cardona smiled broadly, "That's the stuff they use to make it look like someone's dead. Then they go and dig up the body later, and give the person the antidote."

"You seem to know a surprising amount about voodoo Inspector." Zarnak said, "Yes, and that was their plan here tonight. They would revive the young woman and take her from the hospital, probably in a wheelchair."

"Yeah!" Cardona said, "No one would ever connect a doctor taking a live woman out of the hospital to the disappearance of a body from the morgue! These are some pretty smooth operators."

"They are only agents I'm afraid," Zarnak said, "The real players in this game have yet to show themselves."

"Yeah?" Cardona said, "Well, we'll find out who these yeggs are working for before long, I guarantee it!"

"I may be of some assistance to you there Inspector," Zarnak said, "I would like to come to the station tomorrow. For the moment though, I have a patient to attend to who can be better cared for in my home than in this hospital."

He gestured to the giant Ram Singh who lifted the girl in his arms with surprising gentleness. Making their farewells to Cardona, the two men strode out into the night.

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She awoke in a strange room, with the sensation that she was being watched.

Raising her head slightly, she peered around the dim room whose only light was the sunshine coming through the gaps in the curtains of the solitary window. She was in a large, old-fashioned bed in a spacious chamber, and she was alone.

She sat up and scanned the room to make certain of the last. The room was furnished in an eclectic style with thickly hung walls, oriental carpets piled deep on the floors, and arcane bric-a-brac everywhere. It gave the sense of being exotic without calling to mind any specific place she had ever seen or heard about.

The room was also quite empty, she was certain of that now, though the feeling of being watched didn't completely go away, even with this realization.

She remembered many things, though in a jumbled way, as if the memories were dreams. She remembered attending the symposium, how urgent it had been to see Dr. Zarnak and how close she had come. Then, there had been the pain in her back, overshadowed by the pain of her failure. She thought of her father lying dead on the London docks and tears welled up in her eyes.

The knock at the door brought her back to the present. It opened slowly and a huge turbaned man with a full black beard entered. He had a fierce face, but she remembered him from the night before. He and Dr. Zarnak had brought her here. Zarnak had placed a salve on the wound on her back, promising there would be no scar, and this man had brought her a bowl of an aromatic broth that had warmed her and helped her to sleep.

"Are you well this morning, Miss?" The deep voice inquired.

"Yes, thank you," she replied, "But I don't remember where I am."

"This is number 13 China Alley," he said, "Doctor Zarnak's residence."

"Thank God!" she breathed, "Is Dr. Zarnak here? I must speak to him right away!"

"The Doctor has gone to the police station to aid in the interrogation of thy abductors. I know not when he shall return." He paused a moment, "I have prepared a late breakfast for thee in the sala, unless thee are still unwell and would prefer to have it here."

"Thank you for your kindness," she said, with a warm smile. "I think I will come down."

He nodded and, though his fierce expression did not soften, she thought she saw approval in his eyes.

The breakfast was simply, but deliciously prepared. She had hoped that Ram Singh would join her, but he seemed to prefer a position of vigil near the table. He also frustrated all of her attempts at conversation, giving polite, but terse answers to her questions.

Zarnak did not appear until nearly noon when he came in with a weary and unshaven Inspector Cardona.

"Has anyone called?" He asked Ram Singh as the giant took their coats.

"Professor Littlejohn and Doctor Jones have both telephoned sahib," he responded, "They wondered if you had any more news on the young lady's 'murderer.' Of course, I did nothing to disabuse them of the notion that she is dead."

"Excellent!" Zarnak said, "And how is our guest?"

"Wait a minute Zarnak!" Cardona cut in, "You mean you're going to let your friends go on thinking the girl's murdered? That sounds like a pretty dirty trick to me!"

"Inspector," Zarnak replied sternly, "If I were to tell my colleagues the truth there is nothing that could prevent them from getting involved. The young woman is already enmeshed in this, and your official status makes your presence unavoidable, but there is a limit to the number of people I can place under my protection!"

"Wait a minute!" Cardona snapped, "I don't know whether those guys need your protection or not, but I sure don't! It'll be a fine day when New York's finest need protecting!"

"I mean no disrespect Inspector," Zarnak said, "But this is something you and your men are not prepared to deal with. I would think that you would realize that after what we have seen this morning."

Cardona swallowed, the unpleasant memory of the three men made his mouth feel suddenly dry. He had gone down with Zarnak to the cell where the three would-be abductors were being held only to

find them inexplicably dead! Their bodies were twisted, their hands contorted as some they had tried to grapple with something invisible, and their faces frozen in masks of horror.

The coroner had been summoned, and had assisted Zarnak in the examination. He had been unable to find any apparent cause for the deaths, and Zarnak had kept whatever opinions he had to himself.

"I'll take my chances!" Cardona muttered fiercely, "There's bound to be a rational explanation for all this, and that girl is our best clue!"

They found her in the study where she sat reading an English translation of Virgil which Ram Singh had lent her. Zarnak kept many books in his home that were neither pleasant nor safe to read and the Sikh did his best to dissuade curious visitors from opening them.

The girl gave an excited cry when they entered the room.

"Dr. Zarnak!" she said, "Thank heaven! I can't believe I've really made it to you!"

"Well, now that you have, there are some questions that we need answers to!" Cardona interjected. The girl looked at him in mute surprise.

"This is Inspector Cardona of the police." Zarnak said.

"Oh!" She said meekly, "Of course, Inspector! I'll be happy to answer your questions."

"To begin with," said Cardona, producing a pencil and notepad, "What is your name?"

"My name is Vashti," she said, "Vashti Sinclair."

"And, Miss Vashti Sinclair, just what can you tell me about the murder of the three men who tried to take you from the hospital morgue last night?"

"Murder?" she was shocked, and grasped the back of a chair with both hands to steady herself.

"I'm afraid so Miss Sinclair," Zarnak said, "Please have a seat, I think that you have a story we need to hear."

"I was born and raised in Africa," she began, "In the Belgian Congo far from civilization. My mother was N'komani, a woman of the Songa tribe. My father was the Rev. Malachi Sinclair, an American missionary.

"It was a hard place to grow up, but my mother's people accepted us in that place where white men and missionaries are usually hated. My father always said that he went only to preach the Gospel but, when he saw the suffering of the people under the Belgian authorities, he knew that he had to help them in any way he could. He told me that, bad as they are now, conditions for the tribes were even worse under King Leopold, during the days of the Free State. That may be so, but it is difficult for me to imagine them being worse.

"In any case, for all my life I have seen my father try to defend the rights of the Songa and the other tribes, even when it earned him beatings from the soldiers."

"His church offered him no protection?" Zarnak asked.

"A little, at first." Vashti said, "But his hated having to intercede for him. He wrote my father angry letters, telling him that he was there to win converts, not to stir up problems with the authorities. When he married my mother, the Bishop cut off all ties with him. Even though she was a convert, the Bishop viewed the marriage as ungodly and unnatural."

"That's a sad story Miss," said Cardona, not unkindly, "But what does that have to do with what's going on now?"

She took a deep breath and nodded, "My father was loved by the Songa" she continued, "Even those who kept to their ancient ways respected him for his kindness and his courage. When the fetish man, old N'shanga, lay dying he called my father to him and gave him a sacred charge. N'shanga was to have been succeeded by his son Bolku but when Bolku died he was left without a successor. There was a relic that had been entrusted to N'shanga's family many generations ago. An object with great power that they were to safeguard, lest it fall into the hands of evil men."

"The ring that you wear." said Zarnak.



"Yes!" she held up her hand the yellow eyes of the serpent-ring seemed to glitter evilly, "The Ring of Set! My father had read of the ring, and knew that it was a talisman of dark power dating back to Egyptian times, and even before. He told me it was a link to dark gods who were worshiped in ancient times."

"Your father seems to have been well informed." Zarnak said.

"He had your book Dr. Zarnak," she replied, "Your *Antiquities of Lost Races*. He was always interested in lost worlds and ancient cultures. It was that perhaps as much as his zeal for the Gospel that brought him to Africa.

"Even though they were of different faiths, N'Shanga saw in my father a good man who would rather die than unleash the ring's evil on the world. He passed on the ring's guardianship to my father and my family for all time.

"My father was deeply honored, of course, but he took all mention of the ring's powers as foolish superstition. He told the story to his friends in Leopoldville, and often showed off the ring, for which he developed a great fascination.

"After some time, outsiders came who had heard about the ring and who wanted to buy it. They belonged to the Thule Society, and claimed that they were collecting relics of the ancient Aryan civilization.

My father refused to sell, even when they offered fabulous sums of money for it. He told them that he knew of their order, and considered it a cancer, spreading it's hateful growth into men's hearts and souls. He told them that he would never sell the ring to them.

"They left, but then terrible things began to happen. Our pet dog was butchered, the village grain store burned down, the mission church was desecrated. When the Songa woman who cleaned our home was killed my father knew that the ring needed a stronger guardian than he could ever be. He had been deeply impressed by your book Dr. Zarnak, and he reasoned that, of all people living, you could tell us what to do. He hoped that he might even be able to pass the guardianship of the ring on to you."

"So," said Cardona, "You think it's these Thule guys making all the trouble. That makes sense. The Doc here said that at least one of the men who tried to snatch you was a Thule."

"Miss Sinclair," Zarnak said gently, "Where is your father now?"

"He. . ." She seemed on the verge of tears, but managed to compose herself enough to continue, "We took a ship to London. He had taken to wearing the ring on his finger to keep it safe at all times and soon found that he could not remove it.

I had been sick on the voyage. We had thought it only *mal-de-mer* but, by the time we had reached port, it had become a deadly fever. My father took me to a hospital, but the doctors could find no cause. It was at my bedside that he received a telegram which read, "Rev. Mr. Sinclair,

The ring protects you

Nothing protects your daughter

We wish to make a trade"

"It was unsigned, but he knew that it must be the Thule Society. Somehow they had followed us. The idea that they could make me sick frightened my father and he told me that he spent the night in the hospital chapel prying for the wisdom to know what to do. He said he very nearly gave them the ring, but in the end he found another way.

"I woke in the morning to find that the fever had completely gone, and that I was now wearing the ring. My father sat by my bed with a heavy bandage on his hand. Unable to remove the ring any other way, he had struck off his finger in the night and placed the ring on my hand.

"The doctors wanted to keep him there, but he refused all treatment. He had purchased tickets for a trans-Atlantic ship and insisted we make the voyage. As we went to the docks I touched his face and felt that he was burning up. It was as if the fever had passed from me to him!

"I tried to make him go back to the hospital, but he refused. As we were arguing he suddenly cried out and collapsed. When I knelt beside him he told me to run! He said that there was nothing I

could do for him and that our enemies were coming. I tried to quiet him but he only became more frantic. Then I felt it too! Something moving through the crowds toward us! I couldn't see or hear anything except the people around us, but I knew that it was coming!"

"I ran then! I pushed through the people and ran to the ship. I locked myself in the cabin and didn't come out for the whole crossing. Then I was in New York, and I knew I had to find you. . ." She trailed off. When she spoke again it was in a tearful voice that could barely be heard.

"I ran. God forgive me, I shouldn't have! I should have stayed there with him but I ran away and he died alone."

Zarnak moved to the crying girl's side and placed a hand on her shoulder. "If you had stayed, you certainly would have died as well, and the ring would be in their hands. You did what your father wanted you to do, and it was the right thing."

She continued sobbing quietly. After a moment Zarnak left her and went with Cardona into the hall.

"Poor kid," the detective murmured, "I'd really like to get my hooks on these Thules! I'd like to see them try some of this spooky stuff staring down the barrel of a service revolver!"

"Their involvement in any crime will be difficult to prove." Zarnak said.

"Yeah!" Cardona admitted. "Maybe I can get a line on her father through Scotland Yard though. If he was poisoned, that's a starting point. We haven't been able to turn up anything on the three at the morgue yet, but I'll keep at it. In the meanwhile, I think I'd better take the girl into protective custody."

"A good idea inspector," Zarnak said, "But, in this circumstance, my home will offer her better protection than the Precinct house."

"Well," Cardona stroked the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. "I don't buy into the whole magic thing mind you, but she does seem to feel safe here. I suppose it would be good for her peace of mind to stay, as long as I post a couple of guards for extra protection."

"Of course Inspector," Zarnak agreed, "And I will be carrying on my own investigations as well. I have several colleagues who may be able to offer helpful information on the ring."

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"Can you repeat that Judge," Zarnak shouted into the telephone. "I can barely make out what you're saying!"

". . . ring is controlled by . . . only be released . . ." Came back a resonant voice which struggled to be heard over the noise on the line. ". . . Set was thought . . . form of Nyar . . ."

"Judge? Judge?" Zarnak shouted, but the line had gone dead.

Zarnak cradled the earpiece of the phone and returned it to his desk. Outside the wind lashed the icy rain around with frightening intensity.

"I seem to have underestimated you," he said quietly, "I would never have thought you could have gathered enough adepts to do this."

Unable to use the telephone he withdrew a pad of paper from his desk and wrote down a message requesting information on the ring and any other possible assistance. Then he picked up a small silver bell on his desk and rang it. Almost instantly Ram Singh entered the room.

"Ram Singh," Zarnak said, "Please take this message to the telegraph office and have it sent to my friends in sent to Harrisonville and Pursuivant's Landing. Mr. Thunstone is traveling but a copy sent to the Wanderer's Club in Boston may reach him."

"As you wish Sahib." Ram Singh said, and pocketed the message.

"I will be going out as well." Zarnak said, "Our enemies have cut off our communications, but I have allies closer at hand."

"What of the girl Sahib?"

"Miss Sinclair will have to come with me," Zarnak said, "I had hoped to leave her in the protection of the house, but this will require that I have the ring with me and she must go where the ring goes."

"If thee could but wait for my return . . ."

"I would prefer that as well," Zarnak said, "But events are moving much too quickly. Our enemies are rallying powerful forces against us and I fear that any delay will cost us dearly. I will have to protect the young lady without you this time."

"Very good Sahib." The tall Sikh turned and left on his errand without a trace of hesitation. Probably no one in the world except Zarnak would have caught the glimmer of concern in his eyes.

"Protection." Zarnak mused as he looked across his desk absently. His eye settled on the bell he had rung and the ghost of a smile touched his face. He crossed the room to a glass cabinet, opened it, and removed a small box of teakwood. He placed the box on the desk and opened it to reveal a thimble-sized silver bell. It was primitively made, carved from a block of silver rather than hammered, and hanging from a thin silver chain. Etched around the bell's rim in letters almost too fine to read was an inscription in Latin.

With a nod of satisfaction he palmed the bell and replaced the box in the cabinet. He went up to the guest room where he found Vashti sitting at the window and watching the storm. She turned at the slight noise of his entry and he saw that she had been crying.

"Dr. Zarnak," she said brushing away her tears, "I was just . . ."

"Thinking of your father?" he finished.

"Yes," she said, "I understand what you said before, about not letting those people have the ring. That's not why I ran though."

Zarnak nodded but said nothing.

"I ran because I was afraid!" Vashti said, "I ran because I didn't want what had happened to him to happen to me! I shouldn't have run."

"I think there were many reasons you did what you did," he said, "Not the least was that it was what your father asked you to."

"No!" Vashti shook her head fiercely, "That's just an excuse! I shouldn't have left him to die alone?"

"What do you think he would say to that?" Zarnak asked gently.

"He would . . . He would probably forgive me." she said, "But that doesn't make it right! Nothing you, or he, or anyone can say can make what I did right!"

"Yes," Zarnak said, "What happened was terrible, and it was a terrible decision you made. Often, it seems, we cannot choose between the right and the wrong, but between one terrible thing and another.

"You ran, and your father died without you. If you had chosen differently and you had died together, then the Thule Society would have the ring now. Would you feel any less guilty knowing the suffering they could bring to the world with its power?"

"No," she said, "But does that justify what I did?"

"I would not use that word," he said, "There are many people in the world who claim that the rightness of whatever cause they serve justifies any atrocity they commit. Often such people revel in the atrocities they commit, claiming that they serve a greater good and are thus praiseworthy. I don't doubt that our enemies have some high sounding purpose that they would claim justifies what they have done to you.

"I believe that it is better to admit the wrong in what you have done, no matter how necessary. It is better to hold yourself as accountable for your decisions own as you hold others for theirs."

"Then what should I do?" she asked.

"Do what you must," he said, "Then try to heal any pain your actions have caused. Work to be reconciled with those you may have harmed. And, if you are offered forgiveness, accept it as a the gift it is."

"I don't know if I can." Vashti said.

"Do you have the courage to try?"

She nodded her head.

"Good!" Zarnak said, "Because I still need your help. We have to go out, to a colleague of mine who can give us more information about the ring. It isn't as safe as I would like, but this will help protect you."

He handed the bell to her.

"*Est mea cunctorum terror vox daemoniorum*" she read, "That's Latin, isn't it? What does it mean?"

"My voice is the terror of all demons." Zarnak translated, "It was forged by Saint Dunstan many years ago. In addition to being the patron saint of silversmiths he is said to have been a great enemy of the Devil. This virtue has passed on to many of the objects he created, including this bell. It is one of a set of three. The second has been lost, and the third is in the keeping of a friend of mine."

"What do I do with it?" She asked.

"Wear it around your neck," Zarnak said, "Conceal it from our foes, but always have it ready. If you are attacked, or if you feel any powerful force trying to overcome you, pull it out and ring it as loudly as you can. Don't stop until you know you are safe."

"That's all?" Vasti said, "It doesn't seem like much of a defense."

"The best protections against dark powers are usually simple things," Zarnak said, "Will you trust me?"

"Yes!" she said emphatically.

"Good," he said, "Then it's time for us to go."

Chinatown was only a short walk from Zarnak's home, though the storm kept it from being an easy one. The two plainclothes officers Cardona had assigned as protection grumbled as they followed through the pouring rain. Zarnak didn't like having them along, they seemed overconfident, and that could easily place them in a situation where he would have to protect them. Watching over Vashti made him vulnerable enough. Watching over them as well could easily overextend his abilities.

"Look!" Vashti cried suddenly and pointed to the sidewalk. Across the concrete tiny shapes were flopping and splashing.

"Tadpoles," Zarnak said, "Not unusual for a storm of this nature."

She thought about asking what kind of nature he meant, but didn't. Instead she spent a good deal of her concentration avoiding stepping on any of the struggling creatures. The curses and sounds of stamping feet behind them suggested that the plainclothesmen weren't so careful.

The shop they wanted was off the main streets and the only sign in the window was in Chinese characters. It looked little different than any of a hundred other shops in the district. The windows and shelves were filled with all manner of curios and books laid out with no discernable pattern. They stepped into the shelter of the awning and Zarnak turned to the taller of the policemen."

"Detective," he said, "Miss Sinclair and I must speak to the proprietor. Will you please wait here for us?"

"Nothing doing brother!" the plainclothesman answered, "Inspector Cardona said to stick to you and the girl and that's just what we're going to do."

"I'm afraid you don't understand," Zarnak said. His dark eyes locked with the detective's hazel ones. "We will be perfectly safe. It will take only a few moments. You can wait out here until we return."

The detective's scowl left his face. He looked over the shop a second time. "It looks safe enough." He growled, "But you make sure this only takes a few minutes! We'll wait out here until you come back!"

As they entered the shop the proprietor hurried over to meet them. He was a heavy-set Chinese of about sixty with unkempt hair and clothes and an odd cast to one eye. He greeted Zarnak in Chinese and Vashti was surprised when her companion responded effortlessly in that language. They spoke for several minutes, then the man went into the back.



Vashti busied herself looking through the shelves. There were beautiful things here, bits of statuary, pieces of jewelry, but hidden among the cheap and gaudy. Normally she would have found this a fascinating place to browse, but she found herself thinking of her father.

The shop owner has reemerged with a massive book bound in some sort of hide that was still shaggy. He laid it open on the counter and he and Zarnak studied its pages closely for several minutes. Vashti could not see it clearly from where she stood, but thought the letters might be Arabic. Finally Zarnak gave a triumphant cry and pointed to the page. The owner seemed dubious, but Zarnak pulled out a notebook and carefully copied a passage in his small, precise hand. Shutting the notebook, he thanked the man then crossed to where Vashti stood.

"What was that book?" She asked.

"It is called ***The Lesser Book of Suleyman.***" Zarnak responded. Suleyman is the Moslem name for King Solomon. The book is an account of the spells the wise king is said to have used to bind and unbind the djinn."

"Like the story of the genii in the lamp?" she asked.

"Yes." he said, "When Suleyman overcame these powerful spirits he bound them by forcing them to inhabit inanimate objects like lamps and bottles and rings."

Vashti caught her breath and raised her hand, the yellow eyes of the serpent shone evilly in the dim room. "That has something to do with my ring!" She said.

"Yes," he agreed, "But I don't want to try my idea here. We need to return to my home where we shall see if my idea is right."

They stepped outside to find the rain slackening and their police escort missing. Zarnak looked frantically up and down the street, but there was no sign of them.

Vashti cried out as a man came barreling out of an alleyway and collided with her. They both went down. Zarnak was at her side in an instant. She hadn't been hurt, in fact the collision looked like an innocent accident. Zarnak helped her to her feet as the man struggled to his."

"I'm so frightfully sorry!" the man said, "I'm afraid I'm running late for an engagement and I was hurrying along without paying attention. I'm so sorry Miss, you aren't hurt, are you?"

Vashti smiled and shook her head but Zarnak scrutinized the man carefully. He was a small man short, plump, and well dressed. He had a British accent and a harmless, engaging manner. His head was shaved and he wore a neat goatee beard, giving him the appearance of a harmless little comical troll.

"Please allow me," he said, scooping up her purse from where it had fallen and handing it to her. Vashti moved to accept it but Zarnak caught her wrist.

"That's awfully rude of you," the little man said, "I was just trying to return the young lady's purse." He reached toward Vashti again but Zarnak stepped between them.

"Well then," the man said in apparent confusion, "If you'd rather take it I suppose that's well and good."

"I'm afraid it's not!" said Zarnak and struck the man's arm away so the purse fell onto the sidewalk spilling its contents. Then he grasped the man by the lapels and pulled him onto his toes so their faces were inches apart. "Do you think that I would accept anything from your hand? Or allow her to?"

He thrust the man away from him with enough force to send him sprawling in the street.

"You're a madman!" the little man cried, "You can't treat me like this! I have half a mind to call the police!"

"The police?" Zarnak echoed mockingly, "Well, I wouldn't want that sort of trouble. Perhaps I should just return this." With a flourish of his hand he produced a billfold. The little man's shocked expression as he groped at his pockets showed that it was his.

"Here you are," Zarnak said, and tossed the billfold in an easy underhanded pitch.

The little man reached out to catch the wallet, then a sudden look of terror crossed his face. He lunged to the side and let the billfold fly past to land on the street behind him.

"You fool!" he cried as he clambered to his feet. "You don't understand what forces you are dealing with! Give us the girl, or . . ."

"It's not I who is having difficulty understanding." Zarnak cut in, "Take your parlor tricks and scurry off to your den!"

The little man fumed angrily, but seemed to have no reply. After a moment he turned and, ignoring the fallen billfold, stalked away.

"What happened?" Vashti asked, a look of confusion on her face.

"I'll show you," Zarnak strode over to the spilled contents of her purse and pointed down at a rain-soaked piece of paper on the sidewalk.

"Do you recognize this?" he asked, "Don't touch it, just take a look."

She peered at it closely. It was about three inches long and less than an inch wide. The paper looked ordinary enough, but there was writing on it in a script she didn't recognize.

"I've never seen it before," she said, "What is it?"

"Something very dangerous!" Zarnak said, "Something I need to deal with. Please hand me the bell."

Zarnak accepted the bell, chanted something in Latin, then rang it three times directly over the paper. The bell's call was impossibly loud for something so small. It was almost painfully loud, though its tone was beautiful. At the last peal, the paper seemed to shrivel, then, despite the rain, it burst into flame and was ash in seconds.

"What was that?"

"That was something more dangerous than any weapon of war." Zarnak said. "He slipped it into your purse so that you would willingly accept it from his hand. If you had, it would have summoned a demon to come for you, a being so powerful that I doubt I could have protected you."

"A demon?" Vashti's voice was shocked, "Do such things really exist?"

"Evil exists in many forms." He answered. He strode to where the little man's wallet still lay on the pavement, picked it up and opened it.

There was a British passport inside which identified the man as a Mr. Karshell, there was also a substantial wad of American money in fifty and hundred dollar bills. Zarnak took the money out and dropped it in the street, then he closed the billfold and dropped it in his coat pocket.

"What are you doing?" Vashti asked.

"I discarded the money because there is a karmic balance to maintain, and because I am not a thief. I keep the wallet because an enemy's personal possessions can be potent, both as a weapon or as a defense. He gave the wallet to me freely, after a fashion. If the opportunity ever presents itself I will gladly return it to him. As you saw though, I doubt he will ever willingly accept it back from me."

"He. . ." She spoke slowly, fitting her thoughts together with care, "He thought that you had put something in it, like he did with my purse."

Zarnak allowed himself a tight smile, "Yes," he said, "In fact he thought that I might have taken the paper out of your purse, then slipped it into his wallet when I picked his pocket."

"And if he had been right, and had caught the wallet?"

"Then his own demon would have sought him out." Zarnak said, "But come, we have to get back to the safety of my home. We can discuss this as we walk."

Zarnak took her arm and started to guide her down the street, but Vashti held back.

"The policemen!" she said, "We have to find them!"

"There is nothing we can do for now." Zarnak said with a touch of impatience, "I agreed to protect you, not them. Staying here and searching would only jeopardize you and I cannot allow that!"

"I don't care!" she cried, "They could be hurt! We have to help them!"

"We can't!" He said fiercely. Then in a quieter voice, "I appreciate your compassion, and I appreciate your courage. But there is nothing we can accomplish here except to leave ourselves

vulnerable. I promise that I will call Inspector Cardona as soon as we are in my home. The police can find them much more surely than we can."

She nodded her head but he saw that there were tears in her eyes. He knew that she felt she was abandoning someone who needed her again.

They walked in silence for a few moments before she spoke.

"It doesn't make sense to me." she said, "How could taking that piece of paper make a difference?"

"That is the nature of the forces Karswell and his allies deal in." Zarnak said, "What we call evil can attack us, can seem to overwhelm us by sheer force, but it can never truly conquer us unless we willingly allow it in."

"Like the legend of the vampire?" she asked, "He cannot enter your home unless invited?"

"That legend is true on a number of levels." he said, "Yes, that is a good parallel. No force of evil, nor servitor of evil can conquer you without your allowing it. They may destroy you physically, but what they really desire will not be theirs unless you give it to them."

"The body they may kill . . ." she quoted.

"The words of that old hymn are true." Zarnak said, "It is a truth embodied in the teachings of many of the great religions. As powerful as these men seem their power is limited so long as you do not assent to it."

As they walked down China Alley, a long sedan turned behind them.

"Run!" Zarnak clipped!

They were up the steps and into the door as the car pulled up behind them.

"Stay inside!" Zarnak said, "They can't do much while you're protected by the house!" Then he turned to stand on the threshold.

The car disgorged two men, the first was a massive man over six feet tall with a completely bald head and an eagle-like beak of a nose. The other was shorter and slender, also with a shaven head and sporting a blond goatee beard.

"Stop!" Zarnak's commanding tone halted both men in their tracks.

"Doctor Zarnak" the slender man said pleasantly, "It is an honor to meet such a distinguished practitioner. My name is Conrad Faustus. My colleague's name is Thorne."

"Faustus?" Zarnak said, "That's not especially original."

Both men smiled at this, as if they were exchanging witticisms at a cocktail party.

"I readily admit it!" the man calling himself Faustus said, "I have discarded my mundane name in favor of one which suits me better."

"The name of a deluded fool who sold his soul in return for the illusion of power." Zarnak returned dryly.

"The name of a hero!" Faustus shot back, "An Aryan hero who saw his destiny and did what was necessary to seize it!"

"And you Thorne?" Zarnak said, "Just Thorne? Not Odin or Demogorgon?"

"There will come a day, when the world will know me by a name of power." the big man said. His deep voice held a resonance that would have done an orator proud."

"We want the girl, Zarnak." Faustus said pleasantly.

Zarnak remained silent.

"You cannot resist the assembled power we represent." Thorne said, "You must know that. Individually I concede that you may well be more powerful than any of us but together, no individual can hope to resist."

"Nor need you." Faustus said, "We would be privileged to have you join us. We are destined to be the rulers of this world, and you could be one of us."

"I am not one of your Aryans." Zarnak said.

"Not by birth perhaps," Faustus said, "But no man can journey so far down the secret paths unless he is the reincarnation of one of the Great White Brotherhood. Your power cries out that you are one of us!"

"Join us and be glorified," said Thorne, "Or oppose us and be destroyed. You must know that there is no third choice."

"Gentlemen," Zarnak said, "You are embarrassingly predictable in your offers. I am afraid I must be just as predictable in my refusal."

Both men chuckled, as at a good joke.

"Don't worry Doctor," Faustus said, "We're actually not as predictable as all that."

Zarnak's head exploded with pain! He collapsed to the stoop, his ears roaring and his vision dimming. The last thing he saw before darkness overcame him was Vashti standing over him, a small but heavy piece of brass statuary in her hand.

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He awoke in a large, dim room with a high ceiling. He was lying on his back on a narrow stone table as hooded shapes moved back and forth around him. His head ached where he had been struck. He tried to raise his hands to touch it but found that they were chained down. He revised his assessment of 'table' to 'altar.' He focused his mind on a yoga technique that reduced the pain to a dull ache, then looked around.

The hooded figures were going through preparatory rituals. One, a pot-bellied man of about sixty with the requisite bald head and goatee was pouring a circle of sand around the altar when a voice stopped him.

"Mocata!" It was Faust's voice, "Don't close the circle yet, I want to have a few words with our honored guest first."

"The casting of the circle must be continuous," said Mocata, "If there is an interruption it is not as efficacious."

"It will be enough!" said Faust, "Do not seek to question me!"

"As you say, Magister." said Mocata in scornful tone. He placed the jar of sand carefully on the ground and walked away.

Faustus stepped into view. He was wearing a rich satin robe with a jeweled swastika pendant depending from his neck on a heavy golden chain. With him was a handsome young man, taller than Faustus but robed in the humbler black of the attendants in the room. Unlike the others he was clean shaven and had a full head of hair. His dark good looks and indolent air made him seem more a wealthy young idler than a diabolist or sorcerer.

"I'm glad to see you awakened before our little ceremony Herr Doctor." Faust said pleasantly. "I think you will appreciate what you have planned."

"It doesn't seem particularly inspired." Zarnak. "I am your prisoner and I suppose I am to be sacrificed to the powers you serve."

"Ah, but you don't understand the irony of the sacrifice," the young exquisite said, "You are to be sacrificed . . ."

"Roelocke!" Faustus snapped angrily. The younger man flushed, then bowed his head in contrition.

"I brought this one here to show you who defeated you!" Faustus said, "It was Roelocke who discovered the spell that let us strike at you." The young man looked a question at him. When Faustus nodded he began to speak.

"We knew that your defenses would be strong," Roelocke said, "And we knew that the ring protected the girl from our influence as long as she wore it. But I found a way to strike at her through the ring itself. I invoked the dark forces that haunt the ring to take control of her body and strike you down. The effect was only temporary, but it was more than enough!"



"You see Zarnak," Faustus said, "Roelocke is one of the least of my followers. He is not even an Aryan, his blood is tainted by the Slav and the Serb. If such as this was able to overcome you, then you never stood a chance against our combined power." He dismissed the humiliated young man with a wave of his hand.

"Such children, all of them." he said, "Without me to guide them they would never overcome their petty bickering to accomplish anything!"

"I'm not certain what you think they can accomplish with your leadership." Zarnak said.

"Then you are a fool!" Faust said, "Once the Orouborous is in my hands I will use its power to unite the white races. We will purge the world of the black filth who have tainted our bloodlines for so long and be restored to the god-like supremacy our ancestors held over the earth in the days of Thule!"

"The Orouborous?" Zarnak said. "Do you mean the Serpent Ring of Set?"

"Set!" the Wizard spit on the floor as a gesture of disgust. "Any fool can see that the ring is an ancient Aryan symbol of power! It represents the Jormangandr, the great serpent which holds the world in its coils until the day of Ragnarok. And, with its power I shall hold the world as well!"

"And this ritual?"

"This ritual serves two purposes." Faustus said with a nasty smile, "First, it will awaken the powers of the ring fully through the sacrifice of a powerful magician in the service of our enemies. Second, the hand that wields the knife will be that of the *schwartz*e bitch you have been so zealous to protect. By killing you of her own will, she will give herself over to the dark powers and they will consume her. The ring will be free of her polluting touch and ready for me to take up!"

"All very logical," Zarnak said dryly, "Though I do not believe you can make the girl kill me willingly."

"I disagree," Faust said, "But we shall see, and very soon. Now I must leave you I'm afraid. The time is short and I have to prepare."

When Faustus had gone two attendants ripped open Zarnak's shirt and painted arcane symbols on his chest with what smelled like chicken blood. Then they gagged him with a knotted handkerchief.

When they left he focused his attention on his right hand. The manacle cuff that held him was tight, but he had learned the mastery of the body during his studies in Tibet many years before. With the proper focus he might be able to contract the bones and muscles of his hand enough to slip free.

He was still working on it when the ceremony began. Faust led the robed procession in and took a position at the foot of the altar. Thorne and Karswell stood to his left and Mocata and Roelocke on his right. Eight other sorcerers completed the circle, though Zarnak noticed that they all stood about five feet back, well behind the circle Mocata had poured.

A number of the hooded attendants also entered and stood in a loose circle behind the sorcerers, Zarnak guessed there were at least thirty. The last two entered dragging a robed Vashti by the arms, her face and arms were bruised and scratched. Apparently she had fought with them all the way out.

The assembly began to chant in what sounded like a garbled version of Old High German. After a while they switched to Latin then Enochian, the language John Dee first recorded which he claimed to be the tongue of demons and spirits. Zarnak only half followed the words, these were merely the ritual and liturgy of these people, an odd mix of Western occult formulae, and reconstructed Germanic Paganism with elements of the Black Mass thrown in. No real words of power had yet been spoken and he continued to focus his energies on his hand.

He had made some progress, but not as much as he hoped when the chanting stopped. Vashti was lifted across the circle and placed next to the altar and a knife with a wavy blade like that of a Malay krese was pressed into her hand. She backed against the table and held the blade out at arm's length in an awkward defensive stance.

"Child," said Faustus, "Do you wish to be free of the ring, and of us?"

She cast her wary eyes in his direction but said nothing.

"This ritual will free you of the power of the ring." Faustus went on. His voice had become soothing, almost hypnotic. "Once it has fallen from your finger, our interest in you will have ended. You will be free to leave this place and, unless you try to tell anyone about us, you will never hear from us again."

"What about Dr. Zarnak?" She asked. Her voice was steady, but Zarnak could hear the effort that cost her.

"His life is the price you must pay to go free." said Faustus, "You must plunge the knife into his heart to complete the ritual. Once you do that, the ring will come loose and your obligations to us will have ended. You will be free to go."

"No!" her voice was so soft it could barely be heard.

"Perhaps you do not know who this man really is." Faustus said, "He is a sorcerer, just as we are. You think of him as your champion and protector but everything we have done, he has also done. Much more than any of us ever has. If you knew only a tenth of the things he has done in his dark quest for knowledge and power you would kill him with hesitation. Your father would want you to! Your church would want it!"

"No!" Vashti's voice shook, but was a little louder.

"You will be doing him a mercy." Faustus said, "The knife will kill him in a moment. If you leave the job to us it will take days. We will strip the flesh from his bones bit by bit. Our arts can keep him alive and awake through every moment of it. We will let you watch of course, his fate will be your fault after all!"

This time her voice failed her, but she still shook her head "no."

"Stupid girl!" Faustus said, his tone was that of an angry parent. "Very well, if you don't care anything about him, think of yourself. If you kill him you will go free. If you refuse then I will not be able to protect you from these men. They will take pleasure in hurting you, and violating you! They will do things

to you that you cannot even imagine! Zarnak's suffering may last days, but yours can be stretched out for years!"

"No!" her voice was still soft, but it had taken on a strength and firmness that surprised even Zarnak.

"No!" She repeated, "Do whatever you want, but I will never do anything you want me to."

"Stupid fool," Faustus said scathingly, "Can't you see that what I am asking is only what is in your . . ."

"No!" she cut him off with a cry, "Not a single thing you want!" She threw the knife away from her, not aiming at anyone, just trying to get rid of it. The sorcerers scrambled away from the spinning weapon. It missed them all and clattered harmlessly to the floor. Next she tore off the satin robe. Zarnak's heart leaped when he saw that she still wore her own dress beneath it and his mind began to form a desperate plan.

One of the cultists moved to seize Vashti, but Thorne's massive hand stopped him, "Don't cross the circle you fool!" he snarled.

"Stupid, stupid girl!" Faustus said angrily, "It really would have been better if you had only obeyed. Small matter though, what you will not do of your own free will we can simply force you to do!"

At his signal the knife was tossed back in to land at Vashti's feet and a new chant began. This one was different, it was in a language that had been ancient before any other used in the room had ever been spoken. As soon as the words began, Vashti staggered and put her hands to her head. She was resisting, but her battle of wills with Faustus had already weakened her, and this kind of spell could overpower even the strongest will, albeit only temporarily.

Zarnak's hand came free with a final wrench. He tore away the gag and began his own chant in the same ancient language, though not before he whispered, "Forgive me."

Thorne growled and took a step toward him. He paused before crossing the circle, remembering his own words.

"Stay where you are!" Faustus commanded, "Don't break the circle! Zarnak is only one man! No counterspell he can raise can stand against our combined might."

Zarnak knew that this was true. The force the cult represented was overpowering and he had less chance of beating them directly than he would have of stopping a charging bull bare-handed. He hoped that, where raw power would fail, skill might still prevail. Their chant was a general one, designed to raise any of the powers that animated the ring. Like a ju-jitsu expert he worked to redirect their force in a different direction. He couldn't stop them from raising something to possess Vashti's body, but he just might be able to influence *what* that something was.

The chanting had reached a peak of intensity. Vashti threw back her head and screamed as a chill wind rushed through the room extinguishing the candles which provided most of the illumination.

As his eyes adjusted Zarnak was able to make out Vashti's facing Faustus. Physically she was unchanged, but there was something different about her, as if she had gained height and substance. When she spoke in that same ancient tongue her voice had become powerful, and distinctly masculine.

"Who summons Thoth-Amon?"

"Great spirit of the ring," said Faustus in the same language, "I conjure you to do my bidding in the names of Wotan and Donar and all the gods of ancient Thule!"

"Thule?" rumbled the voice from the girl's mouth, "Wotan? What foolishness is this? Those names mean nothing to me! What have the crude gods of the Aesir to do with the greatest of all the wizards of Stygia?"

"I... I have summoned you to serve the cause of the mighty Aryan race!" Faustus stammered, "By the power of the Orouborous, the ring, you must obey!"

The thing that wore Vashti's body threw back its head and let loose a mighty peal of laughter. "I see it all now in the mind of this vessel, this distant daughter of my ancient race! You think this ring was forged by your ancestors? Fools! My race was a mighty civilization practicing deep sorceries when your ancestors were still shaping flint into spear heads!

"You think to use the ring to unite your race and sweep across the face of the world? You think to purge the blood of the descendants of the Shemites and the Kushites and the Stygians and all the dark races? It is a mighty plan, but Thoth-Amon will never allow dogs like you to conquer the remnants of my people!"

She raised her arms above her head and shadows flowed from the ring, forming hideous half-solid shapes too terrible to describe. The gathered sorcerers recoiled, and several started toward the door.

"Stand your ground!" Faustus hissed, "We are safe as long as the circle remains unbroken."

"Then run!" cried Zarnak, "For the circle is broken!" He threw the handkerchief that had been his gag so that it landed on the circle. It fell so that it crossed the sand, forming a bridge to the room outside. The shadowy things seemed to sense the breach at once. They swarmed and flopped and writhed through the breach and fell upon the hooded forms outside.

What happened next was chaos. While Thoth-Amon/Vashti stood there laughing the Thule cultists fled in panic. Some reached the doors, among them Karswell and Thorne, others fell prey to the shadow-beasts and their screams filled the room. Faustus tried to fight. He raised his arms in a conjuring gesture, but a dark form coiled around him like a serpent and dragged him down. Behind him Roelocke had backed against the wall and was sobbing with terror.

Taking advantage of the carnage, Zarnak struck again. He had unleashed this chaos, now he had to stop it! His free hand caught at the collar of Vashti's dress and tore at it.

One slender hand caught his wrist in a vice-like grip and the other struck him a powerful backhand blow across the face. His hand was jerked away from her throat but as it went his fingers caught the thin silver chain and came away with it.

Vashti's free hand rose for another blow but Zarnak was quicker. He had enough movement in his pinioned wrist to shake the chain and he did with all his strength. The tiny silver bell began to peal and at its bright sound Thoth-Amon/Vashti clutched her ears and howled with pain. The shadows reacted

too. Their writhing and flopping became more frenzied and they fled to the corners of the room and faded from sight.

Zarnak continued ringing the bell until he was certain that the things had all fled back to their darksome home. Then he spoke the words of the formula he had written down at the curio shop. As he spoke, the ring began to glow red with heat. With a bellow of pain Thoth-Amon/Vashti shook her hand frantically, trying to shake it loose. The serpent ring must have loosened its grasp for it flew from her hand to go bouncing across the room and Vashti swooned.

Zarnak raised himself as far as possible to survey the scene. The last of the survivors was scurrying from the room. The man, it might have been Roelocke, clutched something small to his chest as he ran. Then he was gone and there were only the robed bodies of the dead and the dying.

"Vashti!" he called, "Are you awake? Can you hear me?"

"I. . . I'm here." Her voice answered, "I feel strange, but I think I'm alright." Slowly she stood, then moved to his side.

"What happened?" she said.

"It's over," Zarnak replied, "At least for the most part. I'll tell you all about it when we're away from here. For the moment though, I need you to find the keys, or something we can use to break these manacles."

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An hour later the room was filled with police detectives and ambulance attendants. Seventeen of the cultists had died, another half dozen still lived but the experience had left them with shattered minds. Zarnak and Vashti had cared for them as best they could until help had come, but Zarnak doubted that any of them would ever be whole again.

"Not a mark on 'em." Cardona muttered angrily, "I can just hear what D.A. Quinn will have to say about trying to prosecute this!"

"So many dead!" Vashti said sadly.

"Yeah? Well, I'm not gonna waste any tears over the likes of these!" Cardona paused, "Are you okay Miss Sinclair?" He gestured to her right hand, which was wrapped in a handkerchief.

"Let me see." Said Zarnak, and gently unwrapped the crude bandage. Beneath it her hand was burned, especially the ring finger, which bore an ugly red weal in the shape of a coiled serpent.

"It will heal," he said, "But I'm afraid it will leave a scar. I'm sorry that I could not have found a better way to remove it."

"I don't mind." She said, "I was frightened before, of the ring, those men, all of it. Now I'm not afraid." She looked at her hand, "I don't feel as if I'll ever be afraid of anything like this again."

"I'm glad for that." Cardona said, "But I'm still worried. We've put out a dragnet for the men you could identify, the ones who got away. The problem is there are a lot more that we don't know who they are, and that creepy ring is missing. If one of them has it, this thing may not be over yet."

"For now, I think it is." Zarnak said, "These men live dark and secretive lives. They cannot abide the attention this debacle will bring on them, especially not the attention of the authorities. You may find them hard to catch and even harder to prosecute, but I do not believe they will ever dare come together again. It was only the promise of the ring's power that allowed them to overcome their mutual hatred and work together. Whoever has the ring now will not willingly share it."

"What about the ring?" Vashti asked.

"It's power will be too much for any of them to master alone." Zarnak said, "It will consume anyone who tries to use it."

"It sounds like, for the time at least, you've beaten them Doc." said Cardona.

"They are beaten," Zarnak agreed, "Although I think Miss Sinclair deserves more of the credit than I do."

"Me?" she was incredulous, "But I didn't do anything!"



"You refused to surrender." he said, "You refused to cooperate with them in any way and that limited their power over you. If you hadn't, their control would have been complete and my poor skills could never have overcome Thoth-Amon.

"Evil is limited by the degree of power we let it have over us. You chose not to give it power." He caught her injured hand carefully in his, "You are marked, but it is the mark of something that you have overcome. Never forget that!"

Zarnak turned back to Cardona, "Do you need us any longer Inspector?"

"I suppose not.," Cardona said, I can come by your home to get your statement in the morning."

"Thank you inspector," Zarnak said, "And good night!"

The two turned and walked out to where Ram Singh waited with the car. As they walked Vashti began humming a tune, an old hymn which Zarnak recognized.

***"And then the bells tolled yet more deep;***

***God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;***

***The wrong shall fail, the right prevail;***

***With peace on earth, goodwill to men."***

And Zarnak smiled.