

**DRACULA OF THE APES**

**Book Three: The Curse**

G. Wells Taylor

(eBook Sample)

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A special thanks to the irreplaceable **Katherine Tomlinson** who edited these books.

This trilogy is dedicated to the authors of the classic novels that inspired its creation.

**Bram Stoker**

*Dracula*

&

**Edgar Rice Burroughs**

*Tarzan of the Apes*

**African Coast  
1912**

## CHAPTER 1 – *The Castaways*

A savage roar rose out of the dense jungle and charged toward the beach like a hungry carnivore after blood. Too terrified to do more than shudder, the seven castaways remained in place in the shadow of their stranded lifeboat, paralyzed by their fear.

As the last echo died, they returned to the task of unloading cargo and as a group stared wide-eyed into the dense foliage that edged the pale sand and gradually climbed east into the highlands. They had seen the distant mountains before they'd been put ashore.

A heartbeat later, another feral call sounded from a point much farther south, and all eyes turned to a member of their group, a man of some 50 years of age who was silently studying the treetops with keen scientific interest.

“What the devil was that?” someone asked in a high-pitched voice.

The scientist remained silent, his gaze focused on the high branches.

Beside him young Phillip Holmes hissed in frustration, his pale blue eyes desperately whipping back and forth as he searched the heavy jungle's leading edge for whatever so captivated his older companion.

The clean-shaven Holmes was dressed in fashionable tweed Norfolk jacket, matching breeches and knee-high leather boots. A brown derby hat covered short hair of the same color.

An Englishman in his mid-20s, he had been aboard the *S.S. Dunwich* which was steaming from London to Cape Town and the captain of that ship had invited him to join him and the Quarrie family for dinner. Young Lilly Quarrie's charms had kept Holmes near her ever since.

“It is an ape,” answered Dr. Joseph Van Resen finally, adding a curt nod that caused the thick iron gray curls atop his head to quiver. His rumpled green sack suit had tears in the left shoulder and along the seam of one arm. “Though, I have never heard such a variety of call—which was very strange, I'm sure you will agree. By the volume and power, I suspect it was a large animal—a gorilla most likely.” He spoke with a German accent.

“Sounded more like a madman. What an awful racket to make!” cried Abigail Quarrie, and her husband, Clive, quickly agreed. The pair were in their mid-60s and barely managing to contain their fright where they clung to each other upon the savage shore.

Like the other women in the group, Mrs. Quarrie had chosen a tailored suit for travel. Hers consisted of matching blue jacket and skirt set off by a silk scarf and broad-brimmed hat. Her husband wore a black sack coat and embroidered gray vest with brown trousers and shoes.

He had lost his hat in all the commotion, but would never mourn it. The narrow-brimmed Homburg was a weak imitation of the ten-gallon Stetson he wore back home, and it had only been at his wife's insistence that he wore the ridiculous thing at all.

The Quarries hailed from a very dry part of Texas, so the vast Atlantic at their backs did nothing to sooth their nerves.

“*That* was an animal?” Virginia James, the Quarrie's governess, offered with a well-polished drawl. “It sounded human enough to give me goose bumps!”

Miss James had the formidable task of turning the rambunctious and headstrong teenaged Lilly Quarrie into a lady. It was a full-time position that Virginia had held since the girl was a mere child, and was expected to continue for years to come, especially now that she'd reached her mid-30s and had no reasonable prospects for marriage.

Her companions thought it a shame for there were no external indications as to why she was headed for the spinster life. Virginia was beautiful, with milk-white skin and long brown hair



that she kept tied up under her gray hat, the headgear held in place by a pale scarf that swept over it and was tied under her chin. From boots to collar, her suit was of modest earth tones.

“Gorillas, like the other apes, share many similarities with men—be they mad or simply English, Miss James,” the scientist said reassuringly. “Of course, it is unlikely that we need to worry. Research on captive specimens suggests they are herbivores—excuse me, *plant eaters*. However, the science is in its infancy, and few of the creatures have been studied in the wild. Hunters given the task of collecting specimens report that the beasts are capable of great violence when defending their young.” He smiled and then stroked the moustache and goatee that jutted out from his narrow face. “Do not be concerned, my good friends. Apes may be terrifying to behold...” He looked toward Holmes. “But the evidence suggests they would prefer eating apples to a gentleman’s leg.”

“Suggests?” Holmes blurted, completely unnerved.

“Africa is a vast continent,” the scientist explained. “It would be profoundly arrogant for us to presume that Victorian biologists have identified all classes and varieties of anthropoid ape which means the greater mystery will have to be solved by 20th century minds.” He frowned. “We may find a carnivore among them yet...” Then he smiled. “Similar to a species, perhaps, from which our own fine families may have sprung...”

“Oh, doctor, you’re not starting up on Darwin again,” Mrs. Quarrie interjected weakly. She remembered their conversations aboard the ship and had detested his views.

“Come dear, we need to find safety,” her husband interrupted, nudging her elbow from behind as he sought the scientist’s eye and his agreement. “Surely this conversation can wait...”

He was anxious to keep a sense of calm about the proceedings. On this desolate stretch of beach, with such a noise still echoing in their ears, these musings were ridiculous and provocative—but he knew fear goaded his wife on.

She insisted, “I refuse to believe that we are related to the beasts...whether they bear some comic resemblance to us or not. Christianity tells us...”

“...much that remains to be seen, Mrs. Quarrie,” the scientist finished her sentence, taking a step toward the thick vegetation that crowded the edge of the beach. “And indeed you might very well see it, for here stands a veritable laboratory for the biological sciences.”

He bowed toward the forest, sweeping his hands apart, before returning his gaze to his companions. “In this place, we can study the plants and those creatures that consume them such as giraffe and hippopotamus and monkeys, yes, even the ape. As we can also observe the beasts that prey upon *those* life forms in turn: the lion, the jackal and yes as I have mentioned, perhaps the ape again.”

“Damn it, doctor!” Clive Quarrie grumbled. With his frustration came a pronounced Texas twang. Additionally, his fleshy face grew red and caused his thick sideburns to gleam the whiter. He could see that his wife was growing more terrified despite her calm demeanor, and her part of the conversation was born of her nervous disposition. “We must find some shelter. The women...”

“Mr. Quarrie forgive my practical nature, but neither you, I, nor the women will have time for *superstition* if we are to survive...” Dr. Van Resen took a step toward the others to emphasize his point. “In lieu of *fact*, *doubt* is a more welcome replacement for *ignorance*, and religious *certainty* has no place here at all.”

On the water behind them, thick black smoke rose from the steamer’s funnel. The mutineers had killed the officers and honest crewmen of the *Lancet*, thrown their bodies overboard in the night and commandeered the vessel before sunrise.

“We must embrace *this*—our reality—to understand its nature and identify its threats,” Van Resen snapped, crossing the sand to the group as his face darkened and a sad look came over him. He reached out and caught up Mrs. Quarrie’s soft hands.

“Forgive me, my lady,” he said, and then begged the same of the others. “I am a pragmatic man who is inclined to empirical evidence—a student of Descartes—and so I can seem painfully blunt when my heart is broken. I believe that is why I so miss Captain Seward’s company.”

Van Resen hung his head. “He did not allow for hopelessness.”

Captain Theodore Seward had been hired a decade past to guard the Quarries and their small entourage back home in Texas and he had steadfastly fulfilled that duty on their many trips abroad. His companions had joked on their most recent that the retired ranger stood out in the streets of London as though Buffalo Bill himself had ridden into town.

With his sweeping gray moustache, tall “Stetson” and folksy ways right down to bolo tie, piping on his frontier lapels and the seams of his riding britches, the man drew a crowd whenever he performed his duties in the public eye.

The captain had suffered the exposure with a dignity that belied his extreme discomfort, so he had been tickled pink to learn that his employer Archibald “Gusher” Quarrie wanted him to accompany his parents Clive and Abigail, daughter Lilly and retinue on a journey that would take them from foggy England to South Africa where Gusher had been engaged with an expedition to discover and secure oil supplies.

Apparently things had gone well, and the Quarrie patriarch was in the midst of signing contracts with the ruling government that would engage him and his company for several more years in the development of those resources.

So Gusher wanted his family near.

And Captain Seward had been only too happy to oblige. The idea of traveling to the Dark Continent and going cheek and jowl against dusky warriors and savage beasts appealed more to him than the “polite” society he had been plunged into while wrangling the Quarries.

“I like looking my enemies in the eye,” he had said to Dr. Van Resen during their first meeting on the *S.S. Dunwich*. “Some of these dinners the Quarries go to, hell, it’s gotta be something like Custer felt in the long grass at Little Big Horn.”

Van Resen had quickly warmed to the big fellow, something he’d soon attributed to their mutual preference for honesty and the truth—painful or not.

“I like it plain, Doc—same as I enjoy my liquor,” the Texan had said in the salon aboard the *Dunwich* after his charges had retired for the evening. He and Van Resen had made a habit of meeting late for a nightcap of one sort or another. Captain Seward had brought along several bottles of his favorite, tequila, which Van Resen had immediately regretted sampling.

They took up this tradition each night aboard the *S.S. Dunwich*, and continued it when they later changed vessels.

Captain Seward had originally booked passage to South Africa on the large British steamship, but a wireless message from Gusher was relayed en route that they should transfer from the *S.S. Dunwich* to another ship at Freetown.

The plan was for a South African business associate’s private steam yacht the *Lancet* to meet them there at the end of its long northern journey, and would then be available for their use on the return trip.

Seward was not one to like surprises, but as he said, “I know who waters my horse,” so with his employer’s permission he had asked his new acquaintance Dr. Van Resen to join them on the

faster ship, along with the pasty Holmes fellow who had somehow talked young Lilly into inviting him aboard.

Neither Seward nor Gusher, his employer, had come up with an effective defense to the cherished youngster's requests, so she had a habit of getting her way.

The only other souls on the sleek new ship were the 25 or so that made up the command and crew, and Seward had judged the owner negligent in his hiring practices. He told Van Resen none too quietly that he had deep reservations about the sailors he had seen.

"They put me in mind of the bandits and riverboat gamblers that I run across in my travels," he had said. "Who knows what company they keep between jobs, and a rich man's ship like this *Lancet* draws the wrong kind of attention, if you ask me. Hell, I done my reading. It wasn't that long ago that pirate corsairs sailed up and down this here coast."

Van Resen had worked to dismiss the big man's concerns by speaking of the steam yacht's virtues. Small and powerful, the *Lancet* had been chosen for her speed, and maneuverability. She could sail much shallower waters than the *Dunwich*, and if the Texan was concerned about pirates; well, few ships could catch the one they were on.

Seward was never convinced, and sadly Van Resen was soon to share his new friend's reservations. Neither of the men was wholly surprised when the "pirates" were exposed to be among the crew.

"Oh, Theodore..." Van Resen whispered the words huskily, turning to look south along the beach as his companions struggled with their fears.

Memory of their nightly tradition caused Van Resen's eyes to water and throat to close like they had when he'd tried the Texan's favorite drink.

Captain Seward would have been a great help to them there on the edge of a wild continent. He was resourceful: a marksman, accomplished Indian fighter and totally fearless. In the end, that last quality had proven the castaways' greatest blessing and had sealed the big Texan's doom.

## CHAPTER 2 – *The Mutiny*

Captain Theodore Seward had appeared to be unconscious or dead at the feet of the mutineers when the scoundrels forced Van Resen, Holmes and the black butler Jacob Raines along with his charges, the elder Quarries, into the lifeboat.

All of the men looked worse for wear sporting bruises, bloodied noses and torn clothing after losing their recent battle for freedom. Around and under them on the lifeboat were piled bags and wooden crates along with most of their belongings—any of those things that were not made of precious metal or had been judged by their captors to be of little value.

Distantly, the breakers had roared against the African coast as the mutineers glared down from the deck of the *Lancet*.

Those nefarious men were led by a pig-faced little sailor of indeterminate heritage named Mr. Manteau. For reasons Van Resen had not immediately understood, Manteau had said that instead of killing the passengers as they had the officers and loyal crewmen; he would maroon them on the African coast.

The scientist later suspected the arrangement would allow the wealthy Texans to be used as hostages, either for Manteau to claim a reward for information leading to their recovery or as insurance to buy the mutineers a pardon from the hangman's noose should they be captured.

But Manteau had said nothing about keeping the younger women: Lilly Quarrie the blonde-haired beauty of 17, and as fair as any princess, and her governess, the lovely Miss James.

When that came to light, Manteau had spoken of them as hostages, but when one of the mutineers leered at Lilly, Van Resen and his companions had read the situation as more dire, and they stormed out of the lifeboat to attack the criminals.

The mutiny had begun the night before when the sound of gunfire in the wheelhouse set Seward going room to room, gathering up his companions and taking them to the elder Quarries' cabin.

The big Texan feared mutiny or worse, but managed to calm his friends with his courageous demeanor, telling them to stick together come what may, and to follow his direction when the trouble came—because he knew it would come.

After a sleepless night, they'd watched through portholes as crewmen lowered a large lifeboat and commenced loading it with their possessions: bags, wooden crates and supplies, while distantly the African shore grew dark with the sun rising behind its greenery.

Soon after that, Mr. Manteau and four armed henchmen had ordered them out onto the deck where the other mutineers assembled near the *Lancet's* portside railing. Seward had glared around the gathering of rogues before he growled a question about their skipper's whereabouts.

A sneering mutineer had stepped toward the big Texan with a pistol raised and Seward felled him with a blow that would have stunned an ox. The ranger bellowed and charged at three of the closest seamen before they could react, sending two hurtling to the deck beneath the weight of his fists.

Van Resen and the others had leapt howling to his defense, but quickly found themselves overwhelmed. None of them had lived as rough and tumble a life as the good captain, who brawled on for some minutes after, giving a good account of himself against 15 brawny mutineers until some quick-thinking ruffian brought a hard belaying pin down on the Texan's bull neck.

That staggered Seward enough for the tide to turn, and the poor ranger went down beneath a hail of bludgeons and sturdy rifle stocks.

There he had lain bleeding on the deck as Manteau ordered Van Resen and the others into the lifeboat.

“You got food, your gear, and a fighting chance,” Mr. Manteau had said. “I want your stuff off the ship in case we run afoul of the law.” He had young Lilly clamped tight in the pit of his filthy arm. “We’ll keep good care of your girls.”

Then had come the “leer” that provoked Van Resen and the others to muster for a final fight, but a stiff wall of thrashing rifle stocks met them at the *Lancet’s* rail and pushed them back into the lifeboat.

“Now, off with you!” Manteau released the girl to draw a knife, stepping forward to cut the line that tethered the launch to the steamship.

At that moment, Captain Seward leapt up to make his stand. Indeed, he was a terrible thing to see for he was covered with blood from head to toe, and in each fist he held a captured belaying pin that he used to batter any mutineer within reach.

Down went the devils who were closest to Lilly and Virginia, and a startled silence fell as the old ranger threw one woman after another over the *Lancet’s* rail and into the lifeboat. Lilly landed square in it, and Virginia struck the side with a splash as Van Resen and the others heaved her in.

The scientist had quickly grabbed up a paddle and encouraged Jacob to do the same on the side opposite so together they could start pulling feverishly for shore. As they advanced their breaths caught when sharp rocks scraped along the lifeboat’s keel, and submerged stones fouled their oars. But there was no time for worry.

Tears ran over all their faces as Seward fought the mutineers in the early morning light. On their own, the men would never have left him to this fate, but charged by the captain himself with the good ladies’ virtue, they had no choice but to push for the escape he had arranged.

The ranger fought to buy this freedom—and such a fight had none of the witnesses ever seen before. Impossibly, each time a mutinous gun was raised to fire at the lifeboat; the man holding it went down beneath a savage assault by the Texan.

Those within the lifeboat could not help but offer encouraging words. Saluting, they shouted their friendship across the waves, cheering the marvelous ranger on as he threw man after bloody man into the sea.

A drowned rock had *thumped* and the launch shuddered in the trough between waves. Then, just as the boat was lifted by the first swell of the surf, Seward assaulted the main group of mutineers gathered around Manteau. From within that living rampart the pig-faced man lifted a gun that belched a plume of smoke and a sharp report echoed across the waves.

Van Resen and the others cried out as Captain Seward staggered back. Then turning slightly to see that he’d bought his friends’ escape, he fell from the *Lancet* and sank beneath the waves with his tanned hands clasped over his mighty heart.

The scientist had shouted at his comrade then to pull with all his strength. “For we must not waste the efforts of our good friend!”

The lifeboat was caught up in the waves and driven through the surf toward shore.

At any moment, Van Resen had expected a hail of bullets, but none came—and then he thought a group of mutineers would follow to avenge their comrades or retrieve the women; but

as the hull of the lifeboat ground against the sandy shore, Van Resen was free to clamber out with the other men and heave the boat up onto the beach.

While evacuating the women and Mr. Quarrie from the lifeboat, the scientist had been shocked to see the *Lancet's* bow heaving west into the waves beneath a cloud of thick black smoke that churned desperately from its funnel.

The scientist had wondered then why Manteau had not followed, and thought to lay that marvel upon Seward's efforts, too. Had the big Texan's attack been so severe that Manteau lacked crew in sufficient health to attempt such risky things as reclaiming hostages—even pretty ones?

Van Resen had watched the ship steam away as he briefly considered an attempt to redeem the ranger's body from the sea, but the reality of their situation was too severe.

There was no time for such luxuries as funerals.

And so with heavy hearts the castaways had started unloading the lifeboat, each thinking of the ranger, and wondering at the perilous future that he had purchased for them.

Then had come the ape's screams.

"What shall we do, doctor?" Mr. Quarrie asked, limping over the sand toward him. The older man looked forlorn, glancing nervously between the jungle and the sea.

"*Survive*, sir," Van Resen answered, rubbing his eyes as he shifted back from reverie. "As we must."

Dr. Joseph Van Resen was an eminent biologist and scientist who had studied in his native Germany before taking research positions in Amsterdam and England. He had been lecturing at institutions in London when he was invited by the South African College in Cape Town to lecture on Charles Darwin's work *The Origin of Species*.

"But how do we—survive?" Mr. Quarrie moaned, returning to his wife to dab at her cheeks with a damp handkerchief. She'd been growing paler since the last savage call had echoed from the jungle depths.

"Start with optimism. At least you weren't traveling with White Star Lines," Van Resen cracked. "Mind you, their crew is honest, and the luxury afforded you would make up for the dampness later experienced on the main deck."

"You would joke about *Titanic*?" Miss James said harshly from where she had moved to fan Mrs. Quarrie's face with her hands.

"Merely some levity intended to illustrate how lucky we are in comparison, Miss James," Van Resen said, removing his eyeglasses to clean the lenses with his blood-stained and salt-encrusted shirt cuff.

He glanced up at tall, tufted trees that grew along the beach, and wondered which task would be more difficult: climbing them or opening the coconuts once they'd been retrieved.

"Marooned we may be," he said, "but I see ample evidence of edible plant life which suggests potable water and animals that will suit our dietary requirements once we make some necessary adjustments."

"*Adjustments!*" Miss James blurted, storming over to him. "We stand at the edge of a savage wilderness, and you speak of adjustments as though it is as simple as choosing coffee or tea."

"Please remember, Miss James..." Van Resen slid his glasses back over his nose. "Our ancestors lived in places like this during prehistoric times and did quite well. If you can imagine them climbing up from this savage wilderness to sit eventually in a London tea room and make that choice between beverages... It's quite encouraging don't you think?"

He grinned without humor, catching her elbow and drawing her close to whisper, “My dear, I doubt we can expect rescue from a *Carpathia* of our own, and so we must make the best of what we have. Take a better attitude. *Reality* we must embrace, but your charges the dear Miss Lilly and her grandparents require your *optimism* if they are to make the ‘adjustments’ to which I have referred.” He gestured to the young girl who stood by the lifeboat with her arms crossed over her chest; her eyes were focused inward and her lips were quivering hopelessly.

“Oh, Lilly!” Miss James cried, and hurried over to the girl. The prospect of entering the jungle was priming the teenager’s every fear so her governess scolded herself for being drawn into Mrs. Quarrie’s histrionics—and the doctor’s philosophy.

Van Resen was correct: she had her duty and there was no room for pessimism if they wished to survive on this bleak shore.

She slipped her arms around Lilly’s shoulders and the sobbing girl buried her face against her breast.

“There, there, Ginny’s here,” Virginia cooed. “Let it out, my girl. You let it out.”

Van Resen looked at his companions and felt his own spirits flag momentarily as he thought again of the Texan. Captain Seward would have been very useful, indeed. Retired or not, his strength had still be in evidence as he’d fought the mutineers singlehandedly.

The big man had not even bothered to draw his gun.

Now gone and his body lost at sea. Such a shame. Van Resen resisted the urge to look back out over the waves.

That was the *past*, and the *present* would require his full attention if he and his companions hoped to enjoy any *future*.

Van Resen still fancied himself fit for vigorous exercise and the natural physicality that might lie ahead, but their party was sorely lacking in vigorous youth.

The Quarries’ butler Jacob Raines would be of use, and while the tall black man was old, he still exhibited a strong presence and upright frame in his black sack suit, bright waistcoat and starched collar. He was intelligent also, and had made good use of the associations and opportunities given a man in such employ.

According to Captain Seward, the gray-haired manservant had been born a slave 60 years before, and had started his life in service to his former masters when they were ranchers and now continued on after their becoming an *oil* family where he remained in his liberty with hopes of some security into his dotage.

Raines was hale and hearty nonetheless, though he had complained about the cold, damp weather of London.

Van Resen had no idea what to make of the man’s feelings about a trip to Africa, since he called America his home. The manservant would have to adapt like the rest of them. One look at the anxious expression on his lined and careworn face told the scientist that Raines had not imagined this turn of events.

Phillip Holmes was traveling alone and was young enough, if a trifle delicate looking in his fashionable garments. He’d been easily mastered by the mutineers, though he had had the pluck to raise a fist. One look at the pale flesh on his hands and Van Resen knew it would soon be flayed to the bone by the rigors of jungle living.

But adaptations could be made. That was how life worked.

“Look!” Lilly’s summery voice suddenly chimed, followed by a trilling giggle that brought the other castaways around to see the girl and her governess.

There in Lilly's hands was Captain Seward's broad-brimmed hat looking somewhat rumpled from rough usage—she had been hugging it to the breast of her scarlet jacket.

Van Resen smiled, knowing the hat must have been knocked into the lifeboat during the melee, and the girl had picked it up unconsciously for comfort, as a child might clutch a doll.

Lilly's eyes passed over her companions and came to rest upon the hat in her hands. Fresh tears fell over her soft cheeks as she thought of the captain.



### CHAPTER 3 – *Dark Moringa*

Van Resen held a butcher knife and Jacob Raines hefted an axe as the pair left the shore in search of shelter. They moved inland along a natural sand and dirt path until the trees fell away on either side to form a roughly ovoid clearing about 100 yards across that swept east to a rise 150 yards from them.

The scientist had noted bird song and animal calls echoing through the high branches that started as individual voices and were soon joined by others to form a pleasant chorus that grew more riotous with each step the men took along the path.

Van Resen judged the somewhat distracting sounds to be a good sign, since it was unlikely to be business as usual for the avian life and smaller herbivorous animals if a large predator were near. That assumption then caused him to worry, since a link could be made between their previous silence and the roar of the ape that had earlier harried the beach.

Had it been a carnivorous anthropoid after all?

He was drawn from this distressing contemplation when Jacob gasped, brushed his arm and pointed. There almost center to the clearing and held aloft in a tight group of stunted trees, they could just make out the rough lines of what had to be a man-made structure.

“Remarkable,” Van Resen whispered.

It was covered and choked with creepers and parasitic ivy, and the wooden planks were weathered and green with moss in many places, but it looked very much like a hut had been built in the trees.

By its state and the overgrown surroundings, there could be little doubt that it had been abandoned.

“What luck, Jacob...” Van Resen said, turning to the Quarries’ man, but he saw that Raines was facing south, his interest set upon...

“Those trees, doctor. They aren’t right,” Jacob muttered, canting his head as he gestured with the axe. About 20 paces to the south where the land started to rise; the slope was overrun by tall dark-leaved trees of a species unknown to Van Resen.

“I know the leaf and the pattern on the bark, but the color...” He would need a sample for study so he hoped that the mutineers had included all of his possessions when they’d loaded the lifeboat. His was a journey of science and exploration, after all, and he had packed several books on African flora and fauna. He would search through the cargo at the first free moment and collect specimens later.

The grove hardly looked inviting, anyway.

“Could *you* go in among those trees?” Van Resen said, certain that he’d seen an amorphous black mist drifting by the tangled roots.

“In there?” Jacob scowled, pointing at the shadowed trunks. “Not likely—if it was a choice.” Then the black man frowned and turned to him. “Unless you’re ordering me, sir, and if that’s the case, I’d best point out that I’m a free man employed by Mr. Quarrie to look after his kin.” His eyes darted toward the dark grove, and his fingers crept nervously along the haft of the axe. “Being lost with you all upon these shores, I am but one of the group so I must be asked if I’m to render any service.”

“Oh, I was speaking rhetorically, my good man, and meant no offense,” Van Resen blurted, moving close to take Jacob’s hand. “Forgive me.”

“Sure. I’m just saying...and to remind, I guess...” Jacob chewed his bottom lip before smiling. “Seems I have to do that every day back home in Texas, and here with the wild growing every which way, I don’t want anything to slip.”

Van Resen nodded respectfully as Jacob stepped away with the axe hugged tight to his chest, shivering as he leaned toward the dark trees.

“There’s fog or something in there, and a draft coming out—can you feel it?” The black man shook his head. “...and here in the heat!” He wrinkled his nose as Van Resen started forward. “*Pah!* They smell bad, too...”

“I’m almost certain of the genus and species of this plant,” Van Resen muttered, sliding his knife into his coat pocket as he moved past his companion and toward the dark wood. His hand came up and the fingertips traced the outer edge of the left lens of his eyeglasses.

The scientist scrutinized the blue-black leaves on the dark branches swaying over him and then he looked along the limbs and trunk that were fleshy and marred with knobby protuberances over their purple, red-veined length.

At that range the cadaverous smell coming from between the tightly packed tree trunks was overpowering

“It’s unmistakable!” the scientist hissed. “Originally classified in India, it is a hardy vagabond capable of living everywhere by all accounts.” He reached up to grasp one of the large, greasy seedpods that hung from overhead but withdrew his hand suddenly. “How they came to be growing on the West African coast, I cannot say.” Van Resen half-turned to his companion and started speaking sharply as though he were reading from a book:

“Moringa, of the flowering plant family *Moringaceae*. This particular specimen undoubtedly has roots in the *Moringa stenopetala* variety known to Africa, affectionately called the ‘cabbage tree.’ I had no idea any grew this far west of Kenya—or that it grew this large. Of course, that could account for this grove’s unnatural and unhealthy appearance, which may be too subjective an observation since its appearance could be ‘normal’ if indeed we are looking at a new species or hybrid.” He sniffed the air. “Ordinarily moringa is prized as a plant of many healthy and nutritional qualities which makes me somewhat uncertain about *this*...perhaps it is diseased.” He rose on tiptoe to smell one of the large, dark-veined leaves. “Decay, certainly...”

“Are they dying?” Jacob said, stepping back.

“Ah—no!” Van Resen laughed, tapping the side of his nose. “I am reminded of the *Amorphophallus titanum*—the ‘carrion’ or ‘corpse flower’ that grows in the Sumatran rainforest. A flower known for its incredible size and stench, but prized by collectors. The blooms smell like rotten flesh, and yet, the purpose for their aroma could not be less sinister, for they emit this smell to attract scavenging insects that pollinate the flowers and ensure the future of the species.” He clapped his hands together. “This is splendid!”

“Don’t know about *splendid*...” Jacob drawled, running his hand under his nostrils.

Van Resen reached into his pocket to draw out a scrap of paper and pencil. “While our survival stands paramount, I still must not forget to keep some record where time allows, especially... Jacob, we could be looking at a new breed of *Moringa stenopetala* that employs methods similar to the corpse flower’s mode of reproduction.”

“I don’t like them,” Jacob said with a shrug, stepping back and turning with axe in hand to look across the clearing at the distant overgrown structure. “They don’t belong in all this green.”

Van Resen lingered by the strange trees to jot something on the paper, peering between the trunks but never entering the wood saying, “To finish my thought on a personal note, if we were

beetles you and I, this scent might very well surpass a rose.” The scientist laughed and wrinkled his nose. “I’m not fond of the color.”

“Come away from there, doctor,” Jacob warned over his shoulder, his trepidation growing. “Could be something dead in the trees. Could be what happened to whoever built that hut.”

“Ah, I see your train of thought. They may have ingested some part of these sickly moringa and died beneath their branches.” He moved to the black man and shook his big hand again. “Morbid, but excellent thinking, Mr. Raines. Perhaps we will have time to solve this riddle.”

“I hope not,” Jacob said, shoulders slumping.

“Now, we best pick up our pace, the others will be growing impatient,” Van Resen said, moving with Jacob through the long grass toward the vine-covered building, struggling when prickly vines growing among the blades caught at their pants.

Halfway there the scientist began muttering to himself and then nodding he smiled and said, “I’m sure I’ve seen illustrations of such things as this in Eastern Europe—now that I’m looking at it.”

“At what,” Jacob offered, “the hut?”

“A hut, exactly, but it has definite congruencies of design—similarities—with the *yurt*’s used by indigenous peoples on the central plains of Mongolia. There are variations on the design found throughout Eastern Europe.” The scientist laughed, and clapped his hands.

“Mongolia?” Jacob came to a halt ten feet from the structure and stared.

“Of course, those were built to be easily carried...mobile, if you will. I have seen drawings of these dwellings that were circular in construction, while this is clearly rectangular—or is it?” Van Resen paced left and right, craning his neck at the vine-shrouded construction. “Do I see evidence of an *octagonal* shape beneath the verdure? So the basic ‘circular’ design I recognize is in place with modifications forced upon the builder by climate and need. This is a ‘fortified’ version of a yurt.”

“Yurt?” Jacob repeated.

“Yes.” The scientist turned in place to view the jungle that encroached upon all sides. “Traditional yurts are practically tents, you see, and you wouldn’t last long in a tent in this vicinity. Which is undoubtedly also the reason that it was built in the trees.” He started forward. “I wonder if the walls within are of reinforced lattice...”

Jacob followed Van Resen to where grass grew plentifully around the base of aged trees with tangled branches and crowded trunks that had been used as pillars to support an elevated platform on which the yurt was constructed. From below, they could see the planed boards comprising the trusses.

“Now look around us, Jacob,” Van Resen said, stretching up to touch the lowest plank. “Do you see a lumber mill?”

“No, sir,” Jacob said, before scanning the edge of the clearing where the thick jungle grew like a wall. “Unless, there’s a town...”

“Also an excellent notion,” Van Resen said, orienting himself by the lowest of a series of rough wooden rungs nailed up the side of a supporting tree trunk. “We will learn much more by going inside.”

Once they had climbed the ten feet to gain the high platform, Van Resen quickly discerned the shape and location of the yurt’s only door. After pressing upon it, and inspecting the frame, he found a leather string leading out through a hole in the wall near the roof.

“Should we knock?” Jacob asked, gripping the axe.

“Most certainly!” Van Resen stepped aside to knock three times upon the door, and then with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, he pulled the string and was answered by a hollow scraping sound as the door swung inward.

“Wait for them to answer!” Jacob warned, holding the axe across his chest and sliding back a pace.

“The yurt is abandoned.” Van Resen stood by the open doorway.

“How do you know?” Jacob peered in but the darkness was complete.

“Thick grass at the base of the trees. Moss and fungi growing unmolested on the ladder rungs. There was no path worn in the approach to the structure,” Van Resen said matter-of-factly. “And the smell that I detect issuing from within.”

Jacob sniffed at the air wafting from the open door, and he quickly glanced back at the moringa grove. “It smells like those trees!”

“*Similar*,” Van Resen answered, leaning in to sniff the dark interior. “But quite different. This aroma is of mildew and dust, decay of wood, rotting cloth—and some *flesh*, I’m afraid...”

“Some flesh?” Jacob stuttered, looking into the shadows.

“But primarily it is *neglect* that we smell,” Van Resen said and holding the butcher knife before him, he walked under the lintel, and stopped. “Ah, the master of the house!”

“Where?” Jacob groaned, peering over the scientist’s shoulder before he gagged.

Just across from them a human skeleton sat propped up in a chair, the remains of its clothing nothing but rotten rags draped over bone.

“God save us!” the black man cried, and grabbed at his companion with a free hand.

“Careful, Jacob.” Van Resen half-turned, pushing the man back and rubbing at a tender place between his shoulder blades where the axe-head had made contact.

“No need to worry... He is quite dead.” The scientist gestured to his own facial hair and to that which straggled over the dried skin clinging to the skeleton’s jaws. “And he is also old enough that he cannot be the cause of the smell that is so apparent.” Van Resen took a step into the room and looked around in the dim.

There was a table beside the skeleton’s chair and to the right of that was a narrow bed. Animal skins had been piled at its foot.

“Think *he* skinned those animals?” Jacob blurted, eyes casting about the place.

“No, he is in a more advanced state of decomposition than the hides.” Van Resen peered around and took another step, and a distinctive cracking sound came from underfoot. “Oh dear!”

The scientist dropped to a knee and then nudged Jacob aside so the light from the open door could enter.

Jacob gasped, “Oh, they’re baby bones!”

“Drat it! And I have stepped on them.” Van Resen studied the specimens. “Tiny bones of a baby—human? But the skull. Wait! More breaks and fractures there, evidence for the cause of death, and that the bones have been disturbed before.” He glanced up at the skeleton in the chair and hummed worriedly. “So sad—or is it?”

“Dr. Van Resen...” Jacob was shocked. “Of course it’s sad.”

“Of course, and yet,” the scientist said indicating the small bones by running a fingertip over the protruding jaws on the little skull. “There is much to be considered before assigning any judgment.”

“Wait now!” Jacob said. As his eyes had continued to adjust, the wall to his right had taken shape. “A fireplace, and a grand one at that.” He pointed. “And a big armchair.”

Van Resen looked over.

“*And* hunting trophies, I see.” The scientist gestured to the colorful fur pelts, sets of horns, antlers and skulls adorning the wall. “Most curious.”

“Is this *his* place?” Jacob jerked his thumb at the skeleton in the chair. “So...he’s dead and... We can stay!”

“I should think so,” Van Resen answered, moving across the room to the pile of smelly skins. “However, someone else has been here.” He knelt to peel up the top few hides and larval bugs tumbled out of the poorly tanned skins. “These are of various ages indicated by their different states of decomposition.”

Jacob nodded.

Van Resen rose and stood by the rough bed and mattress beneath the hunting trophies where he bent to lift a coarse woolen shirt from the floor.

“There is dust upon *and* beneath this sailor’s tunic. So it has been moved over time, perhaps recently—and from this angle, the light from the door shows that the open floor space is relatively clean, though cobwebs, dust and dirt there is aplenty in the corners of the room. Someone was living here at a time after our skeletal doorman came to his end. Could he be a castaway like ourselves—or a victim of a shipwreck?” He looked at the tunic in his hands, and then his eyebrows shot upward as something beside the bed caught his eye.

“Wait now...” He dropped the garment and leaned over the mattress to reach down between it and the wall. There was a hard *knocking* and *scrabbling* sound, and then he lifted a large wooden mask into view. It had been skillfully shaped to resemble an oversized human skull with a pair of long bones crossed tight beneath its chin.

“Most interesting,” Van Resen said, frowning at the mask. Then he bent to reach into the space again and lift out a wooden, leaf-shaped shield. Upon its polished surface were still more skulls.

“Savages!” Jacob hissed, stepping back. “We should leave.”

“And go where, my friend?” Van Resen said, rising with a glance toward the open door. “We have no choice but to collect the others and our possessions and stay here. We would not long survive unprotected in this jungle.”

“But the mask and shield!” The butler’s face was desperate.

“The evidence is provocative,” Van Resen agreed. “But there is still enough here to suggest that it might not be a savage who calls this home.”

Jacob moved cautiously across the yurt before halting by the door to peer out. “And if he comes...”

“Then, we will avail ourselves of his Christian kindness,” Van Resen said, coming forward to set a comforting hand upon the man’s shoulder. “And failing that—consider joining his religion.”

Jacob looked anxiously at the mask in the scientist’s hand.

“Come now, we have shelter—I know it will lift our friends’ spirits,” Van Resen said reassuringly. “Certainly Mrs. Quarrie will consider this the work of providence. Whoever lives here has already offered us sanctuary and hope—though I admit he is unaware of his charity. Savage or not, he knows how to hunt, so if our meager rations run out; he might be convinced to extend his generosity to feeding us.”

They left the yurt and hurried back toward the beach. The sun was rising higher still but the day would go quickly, and then come the night.

## CHAPTER 4 – *Better than Steerage*

Clive Quarrie looked around the unusual cabin and nodded his head at the animal skulls, horns and colorful pelts that had been hung on the wall. Then with a sidelong glance at his wife, he clenched his hands behind his back and moved over to the fireplace.

“Damned fine, Abby!” he said, smiling at her and gesturing broadly. “If it wasn’t for the shape and rustic character of this place I’d say it was a Texan who built it. Look there are his hunting trophies, and he’d stand here by the mantel with a glass of bourbon and a cigar.” He pantomimed holding both. “Yurt sweet yurt!”

“Clive, please,” his wife scolded. “Hush your foolishness.”

“It isn’t foolish, it’s *hopeful*, my dear,” he said, walking toward her and taking her hands. “I cast about and see the work of a civilized man in all this jungle, and I’m encouraged.”

“Indeed, Mr. Quarrie,” Dr. Van Resen said, carrying in one side of a crate opposite Phillip Holmes. “Your theory is admirable and your attitude most conducive to survival.”

Van Resen knew that optimism was the key to success. If it did not see them home, then it would see their dignity remained intact until the end, whatever form that took.

The scientist had also pondered the decoration inside the yurt wondering if it was the work of a man who intended to return to the culture he had copied, or if he had lost hope altogether and only clung to its memory until he died. The skeleton in the chair had been a difficult thing to deny—but there had been no explanations forthcoming.

And the skins piled by the bed. Who had collected those?

After telling the group about their find, Van Resen and Jacob had returned to the yurt ahead of the others where the scientist quickly convinced the manservant to assist him in rolling both skeletons up in an old blanket so they could be carried outside for a proper burial later.

They hid the grisly objects where thick vines covered the ground beneath the platform. Van Resen insisted they do the same with the skull-mask and shield so the women would not be exposed to the gruesome artifacts. The rotting skins were set in a shallow depression there and earth was heaped over them to keep the smell down.

They’d cleared the vines and leaves away from the structure’s two windows, and left the door open to air the place out while they joined their friends at the beach.

The castaways spent the rest of the afternoon bringing everything they could to the yurt, before dragging the lifeboat well away from the shore and tipping it over so it could act as a temporary shelter for those things they’d run out of time or space to move.

Van Resen still chuckled at the memory of the sweat-streaked Holmes dragging a good-sized crate over to the yurt where its lid was pried off to reveal...

“A phonograph!” the Englishman had snapped, as he caught his wind. “I nearly broke my back dragging that here!”

“The music settles Granby’s nerves,” Lilly sang from where she stood upon the raised platform, her lilting tones causing Holmes’ fury to cool. “Please don’t disappoint her.”

“I don’t want to disappoint *you*,” he chortled, smitten by her eyes, though when she disappeared inside the hut he had muttered, “Firewood or food might have been more worth the effort.”

“Had we known such a detour would be part of our trip, we could have packed a brawny set of teamsters,” Lilly’s governess Miss James had said, overhearing him and winking at Van Resen who was helping her sort tins of food.

“Yes! Yes, Mr. Holmes do not despair. Music might just make the difference and...” Van Resen’s voice had trailed off as he gauged talk of soothing “savage breasts” inappropriate to the situation and company.

“Come now,” Miss James had encouraged, eyes roving over a clutter of bags and boxes set in the grass. “We are not in London, and will have to do for ourselves.”

“I will help you lift your burden into the yurt, Mr. Holmes,” Van Resen had said rolling up his sleeves and moving forward. “There your efforts will be well-received.”

Dr. Van Resen had already marked the presence of a pair of glass lamps. One would have looked at home in a gentleman’s drawing room, while the other had a distinctly rugged appearance with its sturdy glass chimney protected behind a fitted steel covering. The scientist was cheered by the find and when he set about searching the place for fuel, he was quickly rewarded.

A partial tin of lamp oil was hidden amongst boxes that contained various useful items: carpenter’s chisel and hammer, nails, string and rope. These supplies were piled with others against the wall by yet another chair behind a well-stained butcher’s block that stood to the right of the entrance.

Also in the pile were a few unopened bottles of wine in a wooden case upon which other items had been stacked; but none of the castaways wanted to attempt the grape, thinking that with the heat it had surely spoiled.

The scientist used his own matches to light both lamps.

Mrs. Quarrie did what she could to help move the castaways in, as did her husband, but their age and the excitement of their situation had fatigued them; so she had taken up the rough chair across from the door, complained about its awful smell and then set to thumbing through a handwritten journal that had been in place on the table beside it. There the dried-up inkwell, pen and remnants of exhausted candles suggested it was a diary of some sort.

“I cannot make sense of this writing,” she said to her husband who shifted his eyeglasses onto his nose after pulling the large armchair up beside her.

“Not even with your studies? That’s a shame,” Clive Quarrie cleared his throat to get Van Resen’s attention.

“French and Latin,” he said. “Abby is schooled in both.” Then he laughed and pointed at the journal in her hands. “*I* can’t make head or tail of this gibberish!” The old fellow suddenly looked around the shadowed room while pulling at his shirt collar. “A little cramped in here, isn’t it?”

Both of the elder Quarries were more used to their sprawling mansion back home, but their spirits had lifted once they’d got the yurt’s roof over their heads.

“In our current situation any yurt is a home, dear,” his wife reminded him. “See, I listen whether you’re a fool or not.”

“Yes, yes...” Mr. Quarrie managed a weak smile. “Doctor, other than a former occupant’s ‘remains’ as you described them, you said that there was evidence someone might still live here. Perhaps he’ll tell us what the writing says.”

Van Resen glanced over Mrs. Quarrie’s shoulder. “The letters are of Eastern European origin—*runic* in design—and I would hazard a guess at an old Hungarian form.” He sighed wistfully. “If only I had studied languages.”

“To hold an explanation right here in my hands, but find it unreadable,” Mrs. Quarrie said, turning a yellowed page. “It is frustrating.”

“Undeniably,” Van Resen agreed, moving to take up one end of the bed, while Jacob lifted the other. “But we will find our answers.”

“Before they find us,” the black man added cryptically, regarding him over the bed.

They moved the table and chairs to sit opposite the fireplace and set the bed to run along the wall across from the door. Then, they used several of Mrs. Quarrie’s linen sheets and a large tablecloth to form a partition that divided the space in two so the women could sleep separately from the men. Mrs. Quarrie would use the bed, and the younger women made up a pallet of their own blankets where their pillows would butt up against its side.

The men would make their beds with folded tarps and blankets arranged on the floor by the fireplace.

After sweeping out years of dust and debris, Virginia James took charge of setting up the women’s area and working with Lilly to pile the blankets that would make a suitable if somewhat lumpy mattress for them. She was pleased to have something to do to distract her worried mind while releasing some of the nervous energy that afflicted her.

Life with the Quarries had left her unaccustomed to hardship.

Everyone in the family called her Ginny and had since she’d first come into their employ—many, many years before—and she often thought back on the arrangement with a mixture of pride and sadness.

It had never been her intention to stay in perpetuity, but life had thrown a cruel twist at her that had watched her slowly move from a short-term position as maid to a live-in governess tasked with caring for the young Lilly.

Virginia remembered the first days of working for Archibald “Gusher” Quarrie very well because not long after accepting a position in his house, she had lost the love of her life.

A handsome Texan had visited one evening, a dashing and daring fellow with whom she had quickly been smitten.

She still kept the note he had given her that first night that they’d walked and laughed and finally come together as lovers beneath a tall ash tree.

“Wait for me. Love always, Q.M.” the note said as straightforward and honest as that. Q.M. her darling cattleman who’d gone away. She’d been 17 years old the night they’d met at the Quarrie mansion, and her but a maid to this beautiful, wealthy gentleman who spoke of marriage and children, and of settling at his family ranch.

There had been no official betrothal, only his proposal on bended knee there by the ash before they kissed and...

He was off to see a friend in England the following day, leaving his promise to return for a spring wedding, and the note.

“Wait for me...” it said, and she had waited for a year dreaming of the brief moment they’d had together, unaware of the eternal thing she’d lost.

Then the devastating news of his untimely death had reached her.

Virginia was never told the cause only that her lover had come to an unfortunate end while adventuring in the east, and so would never return; and as a mere maid for the Quarries with a verbal promise and a simple note, to whom could she have brought her suit?

If she even had one.

But Virginia would not be party to something silly or sordid, and so she hid her grief at the terrible news by burying her lost hopes in the years that followed as a maid-cum-governess.



Virginia continued on at the Quarrie place and was there when Gusher lost his wife Lizzy-belle in childbirth. The dear man had soldiered through that tragedy exhibiting a strength of character that his maid later came to emulate with a vigil of her own, for indeed, as time passed Mr. Quarrie foreswore the taking of another wife to honor his dead love.

Nurses had cared for baby Lilly at first as Gusher quietly educated Virginia to be her governess. She had always been good in school, and was able to guide some of Lilly's education in letters with that. However, Mr. Quarrie added tutors to extend Virginia's knowledge that she might be ready for the task of shepherding his daughter into womanhood.

Looking back, it seemed that time had flown ever since.

Now at 36 years of age, Miss Virginia James had abandoned all thought of love and marriage.

Such a fate had never been expected, but years into her employment—years in which she had prayed each night for her dead lover's eternal rest—word had reached the young governess through Gusher's associates that Q.M. had made a similar declaration of love and proposal to an English girl when he was visiting her country.

A month after receiving Virginia's innocence in exchange for his promise, he had made a similar offer to another.

Virginia lost her faith in love at that, but she did not harden her heart against the man who had betrayed her. Instead, the truth simply strengthened her resolve to hold onto the spirit of what he had declared to her, and what she had given him in return.

Since she could not bear to think that she had wasted the time between her loss and this revelation, Virginia ignored the fleeting nature of human love and honor by seeking enduring satisfaction in her own loyalty, integrity and unshakeable resolve.

Virginia James kept her broken heart and her monumental embarrassment to herself, and like the heroines in romance novels, she chose to live in spiritual isolation, the mistress to a vaunted yet imaginary love, and keeper of a false flame.

There was a point many years into their individual sojourns of honor that Virginia suspected Gusher might have been developing some affection for *her*, but then his business speculation had taken him away on trip after trip, and their resolve was never tested or questioned again.

Virginia, her ward and family soon began a nomadic existence in which they were constantly following Gusher to some new and exotic location or awaiting him in some equally alien geography or conveniently positioned cosmopolitan center better suited to their amenities.

While Gusher labored under a desert sun, or upon an icy wasteland, his daughter Lilly awaited him while dancing in ballrooms.

Virginia was proud that she had kept her own youthful beauty, and credited it in part to the luxurious life she shared with her young pupil. Many years exposure to the world's finest salons, cosmetics and beauticians had had the desired effect—and she would never have discredited it to Lilly as vanity.

After all, was not the best lesson taught by example? And Virginia had shown Lilly much.

The girl had grown into a bird of paradise, and looked the very part of a Greek goddess whether she was draped in the finest Parisian styles and fabrics, or dressed down in a simple riding jacket, breeches and boots for long days with her horses at the ranch.

From there it was simple. Virginia being but the second fiddle to the younger first and finer instrument knew it was her duty to accent Lilly's music without ever distracting from it or offering a sour note.

There would be time enough when age would spoil the harmony.

Some years before, Lilly had been sent to England to stay with her maternal grandparents so she could be tutored in the gentle arts of a refined young lady and where she might meet some suitors of superior breeding.

Virginia remembered Gusher's outbursts then, though she never saw his hypocrisy as anything more than a charming quirk of the oilman's character for like many wealthy Americans, Quarrie would loudly denounce the British "prigs" and "lords," while secretly coveting their "class" and "social status."

A typically silly young teenager having experienced her first few kisses and semi-serious proposals, Lilly was less admiring of her father's matrimonial sentiments or Virginia's, who cast a similar solitary shadow in keeping with her own romantic tragedy.

Lilly claimed that she wished to marry, and make a grand union of it, having had several suitors from neighboring ranches and oil families back in Texas saying, "I will likely gravitate toward oil because it reminds me of cities and civilization. It is a refined substance far surpassing horse sweat, which is all I can smell on the vigorous men who work with the animals."

Virginia had noticed that Lilly seemed to have picked up at least a "touch" of the class her father found so dubious, for prior to their notice of relocation to South Africa, the girl had grown petulant with her servants while exhibiting an "ill-natured" temper.

Back at the ranch, the oil money had been something to buy pretty horses with, but her time in high society had acquainted her with some of the favors it could purchase.

Lilly had been angered when instead of hiring a private ship to take her and the elder Quarries to South Africa, her father had ordered grouchy old Captain Seward to book them passage on a steamer. His selection the *S.S. Dunwich* had been common compared to the great luxury liners in which the European aristocracy were known to sail.

Later, she got part of her wish aboard the sleek *Lancet* though its small size forced her to share some amenities with other travelers.

"Little better than *steerage*..." she had complained over tea the first night after their departure from Freetown. "Why old Jacob might as well share a cabin as our gentlemen escort, it's *that* bad!"

"Now Lilly!" Virginia scolded. "You know Jacob Raines is a valued employee to this family, and most especially to your grandparents both of whom would have been heartily put out if their manservant was forced to share the deck below with the engine and crew. You know your grandmother's arthritis has begun acting up with the humidity over the water. Who would pour her hot baths?"

"Oh, *Granby* will always find something to complain about," Lilly had complained herself. "And it's Jacob's constant attention that has made her and Grampy unable to look after themselves." Her top lip curled. "What's the use of being—uh, *special*—if I'm forced to travel with such *regular* company, especially a n—"

"*Lilly!* I needn't remind you how valuable Jacob is to this family, or how outrageous it is for a young lady to put on an air of superiority while using vulgarities," Virginia cautioned, but quickly relented with a smile. "Whether such an air is deserving or not."

"I'm sorry Ginny," Lilly had said, pouting. "It's just I don't understand why daddy's dragging us to this godforsaken country. What am I to find for a husband—a monkey?"

Her soft white hands fluttered over her bosom.

"England fairly teemed with prospects, don't you know." She had smiled. "Oh Ginny, two of the gentlemen who were poised to promise me *something* claimed *royal* lineage."

“*Royal* lineage? Be sure to settle for *honest*,” Virginia had said, frowning. “Get more than a promise from a man be his blood red or *blue*.”

But of course, Virginia knew the value of a man’s promise that had doomed her to a life without love, wedding or children.

No. Hers had been a real love and a true—regardless of how it had been squandered—and true love could always be assailed by fate. The love that she had felt need not diminish, and while it might be missing from the world for her, for Lilly it might be out there.

Virginia paused a moment in the jungle cabin, leaning over the newly made bed and wondering if she’d gone mad. How could she think of these silly things while in such dire straits? Surely, it was the effect of Van Resen’s goading optimism. She had already agreed to Lilly’s insistence that they *dress for dinner!*

The governess was surrounded by danger and the scientist wanted her to keep a stiff upper lip.

“And neither of us is even English!” She chuckled to herself as her mind shifted back to her previous train of thought.

There were *princesses* in the world, she knew that much. She’d met some during their stay in London, and a single glance at young Lilly was proof that *they* existed.

Surely there might be a *prince* out there somewhere, too?

## CHAPTER 5 – *Gazda*

Gazda squatted over the carcass and used the large knuckles of his right hand to wipe at the scarlet that stained his puckered lips. He had just sucked down the last of the panther's hot blood, and was now deciding whether he should skin the beast.

The night ape had almost perfected the process of preparing the hides: scraping the flesh off with his sharp nails or the edge of his long knife, stretching and drying the skins on Fur-nose's racks, and then working the drying pelts between his strong fingers to soften them.

A *chirping* sound from overhead brought his piercing eyes up to regard the green canopy and the darkening sky behind it. The sun was setting.

He looked back down at his prey and grunted.

Gazda had inherited the pragmatic nature of his adoptive tribe of apes, and so he shifted his gaze to gauge the condition of the black panther skin loincloth that hung from his taut waist. He had worn the garment for many months already, but it was still comfortable.

The night ape shrugged.

He had hides aplenty at his lair, so had no need to skin the corpse at his feet.

Gazda would replace his loincloth when it lost its luster, well before the jungle damp had rotted it. His super-charged olfactory powers would demand the exchange.

Black panther fur was still best for obscuring his work as a nocturnal hunter, though the beasts had grown more rare than their spotted cousins. Under the full moon, Gazda wore capes made from the ebon hides, but at most other times he restricted his camouflage to mud-skin spread over his muscular limbs. He found the capes confined his movements while on the hunt and the slick covering was enough to keep his white body from shining.

He still had hidden caches of the capes at the Grooming Rock, Two Trees and Fur-nose's lair, but they tended to rot before he could use them. The garments were striking but impractical.

Still, he preferred the black panther for that use, and to honor the first lessons taught him by the dangerous beasts. Patterning his hunting techniques after theirs had made him the most lethal predator in the jungle.

So panthers were often in his thoughts when he beat upon his chest and sounded the victory cry of a bull ape over the bodies of prey and enemies alike.

Yet, he had resisted giving that call over *this* kill even though the panther had eluded him for several nights and deserved the dedication. Gazda smiled fiercely, remembering the hunt.

The beast had taken him on a long, meandering chase that had led north and south again over three days until its climax in the dense forest near the night ape's lair.

He had surprised the panther by lying in wait before the sun had set.

The predator had earned the night ape's admiration, but Gazda could only honor him in his thoughts for he knew his victory call traveled many miles, and the sound would alert Sip-sip to his presence.

Of late, the night ape had grown hungry for his enemy's blood.

Five months had passed since Gazda's becoming the silverback, and despite his new responsibilities he had tracked the crippled ape many times.

If he came across old trails, or caught wind of the fugitive's running sores, he would charge recklessly in pursuit. Always, the trail had faded, or would lead him to another predator's rotting kill or a noisome fungus that only smelled like Omag.

Once a promising trail led Gazda far to the east of his tribe and to the very border of his lands, where a lifetime of respecting Goro's edicts had left the night ape hesitating.

He was far from home, memory of Goro's death was fresh and the tribe was traumatized, but his hate for Omag was such that he had cast all other considerations aside. Gazda was into the trees and across the border in a heartbeat, where upon an eastern course Sip-sip's spoor followed a river and the tracks of many Bakwaniri.

Gazda had known that he was close to the bone-faces' territory for their trail had been clear where he had followed Omag's into the border lands.

But, the night ape did not fear the Bakwaniri, and had long been curious about their distant lair; yet he had passed over his hatred for them in his pursuit of Omag.

The crippled ape's treachery had always been upon his mind, and now his absence was explained. Sip-sip had passed over the border.

Goaded by his need for vengeance, Gazda had moved swiftly on Sip-sip's trail, and was spurred to greater speeds when he saw the tracks grew younger the farther east he flew.

And there by the rippling water he found them to be a half day old and no more.

*Akaki had told Gazda of Omag's cave by the river near the bone-faces!*

So the night ape had sprinted after the traitor until his trail disappeared at the water's edge.

Casting farther north and east, Gazda found a jagged cliff of granite over which jungle grew like hair, and there, old marks in the dirt had led him to a cave high in a sheer gray wall that he scaled with thorny vines.

He did not find Omag within, but the crippled ape's hideous tale was told by the grisly contents of the damp and dripping cleft.

Scarlet trails were marked upon the floor in places, as though many bleeding things had been dragged—or had dragged themselves.

There were places on the angled walls where marks had been scratched by broken fingers, and sometimes by splintered bones.

Shapes and images had been set there in blood and gore that looked like birds, trees and the moon and other symbols resembling those that Gazda had seen in Fur-nose's skin-stones.

Reeking of rot and dung the recess slanted up toward the back where a flat space held the crippled ape's bed of stinking leaves; and in all corners lay the cracked and gnawed bones of Bakwaniri females.

It had seemed to Gazda's acute perception that the shadows still rang with screams of pain and torment; and though the stench of death lay heavy in the place, he delayed in the dark to look and see.

Flesh still hung on partial skeletons that littered the stained stone floor. Shriveled and dead Bakwaniri faces clung to broken skulls; the females' mouths hung open and pleading, their gaping eye sockets were shaped by sorrow.

In other places on the many corpses the skin had been flayed and muscle torn away so the narrow bones could be split in place and drained of marrow.

So the victims might live to be fed upon another day.

The track and trail of the crippled ape had led nowhere farther, only telling Gazda that Omag had not been to his cave for weeks.

After one last look around Sip-sip's butcher house, Gazda had smiled, hoping that his next visit would coincide with the crippled ape's.

He swore to bring vengeance against Omag—delayed or not—and it would come, as he would punish Magnuh should the jungle giant return. Still, the bull elephant had not been seen

within Gazda's lands, and any of his tracks had been long lost to rain or trampled over by other beasts.

Death might have caught both his enemies in its jaws, for such was the way of the jungle, and yet if both lived, then they would feel the King of the Apes' wrath!

With this rage boiling in his mighty chest, Gazda bared his fangs and snapped them at the branches overhead for he could not utter the challenge that gathered in his mouth.

Gazda struggled at such times for he was the greatest hunter and fighter that the jungle had ever known. His roar could set the world to trembling, and none in all his land dared to challenge him.

He was King of the Apes, and master of beasts, and he would master Omag and Magnuh if only he were patient.

Patient! How could he be patient?

Such annoying delays left him prey to boredom, and in that lull his spirited mind would shift to the questions of his life, and without answers he would be left conflicted yet again.

And the discord that gathered in his breast strained for release.

Even his hate for the Bawaniri brought nothing but more frustration as his desire for vengeance was denied.

His interaction with the bone-faces had always been terrible and cruel, and yet, part of him pined for enemies that were as strong and fast as he. And had the Bakwaniri been more challenging prey, then more easily could he believe that they shared blood and ancestry with him.

But when Gazda would have bared his teeth and fought to the death, the bone-faces jabbered and squeaked like infants in a thunderstorm. He had no stomach for their weakness, so as they keened he tore their throats and drank their blood.

A wry grin tugged at his handsome features as he remembered leaving the dead creatures on the trail, jokes for Harkon the huntress.

Gazda liked the black female because she did not fear him, and had a mind that worked much like his own. He had learned this at the same time he discovered a strange new ability.

Once he had approached Harkon as she slept in her hiding place, and as he crouched over her in the shadows to study the fluttering eyelids, he'd been shocked to feel his crimson gaze burn past her dark lashes to see what shapes moved inside her dreams.

Those came to him as feelings, sights and sounds experienced much as his own thoughts and memories were. There he saw other night apes like Harkon carrying weapons like Gazda's long knife and her spear. They were gathered around a central fire by huts like his tree-nest.

And as the night apes shared a bowl of liquid, bone-faces had come into Harkon's dream, and they screamed as she killed them.

Gazda had been shocked that these things came unbidden to his mind as pictures, and he wondered if Harkon also shared the ability to see beneath the skin. He decided it might be another difference separating them from his tribe of apes.

So, Gazda had gone from there to look at the dreams of old Baho only to find them either disorganized tangles of sensation and distorted recollections of bloodthirsty predators or calm and happy shapes and warmth mixed with desires for mother's milk, fruit or mating.

It was very different to what Gazda had seen in Harkon, for in her, the night apes were tall and graceful in bearing, and their actions were...*majestic*.

Gazda had no interest in seeing the dreams of Bakwaniri, though studying the bone-faces had convinced him they were different from the apes in the same ways he was.

However the differences were more about appearance in the bone-faces. They were marred by sickness and decay, but their limbs and hairless skins were shaped like his own, though unlike Gazda, they were much weaker than the apes and so, he had decided they were a different tribe again.

He had yet to test his strength against Harkon the huntress, but with her black skin, he had already reasoned that she also was of a different tribe of night apes.

So Gazda decided that while he, Harkon and the bone-faces were like apes, they were much more.

All three used physical adornments and garments—a desire that the tribe of apes did not share. Nor did the apes use tools or weapons other than Omag's murderous axe-head cane.

Gazda had never seen an ape fight with more than fang and claw.

Which meant that Gazda and Harkon were different from the Bakwaniri that they killed—and all of them were night apes *similar* but different to Gazda's adoptive tribe.

But knowing this had only increased his frustration.

He supposed that was why he enjoyed his time away from the apes. While they all did many of the same things, as life slowed down for them, Gazda's mind seemed to speed up.

He was king but he was discontented.

Since Ooso, Kagoon and his mother had gone in death, he had recognized a distance growing between himself and his tribe. He still loved them, and would do his uttermost to care for them; but he was away often, and remained distracted whenever he returned.

The king always checked on tiny Yulu's progress in her grandmother's care, and found her as smart as Ooso, and she liked to tease—even the new king; but he had been too pleased by the sound of her bird calls to take offense.

Such visits left Gazda torn because they made him long for the tribe when he was away, yet their plodding lives always drove him back into isolation.

He remained a member of his adoptive tribe and would forever hold to that group, but he was a night ape, too—and without others of his kind, he was alone.

Gazda had continued to use the tree-nest as his lair and there he displayed his hunting trophies as Fur-nose had hanging skulls, horns and furs upon the wall. There he also kept oddities from his travels like the Bakwaniri bone-face, and there he had still more souvenirs that were a mystery to him: objects of transparent stone and other flotsam from the beach.

Still other treasures he had buried in graves behind the tree-nest at the jungle's edge.

Gazda had surprised himself when on that awful night of his coronation, he'd been unable to leave little Ooso's body to the flies, and instead had carried it back to bury alongside Kagoon.

They had been important apes in his life, and with the loss of his mother, then Goro, his great loneliness was sometimes soothed by the mere proximity of dead friends.

In good weather, Gazda slept in the shadows near them.

## CHAPTER 6 – *Weight of the Crown*

The night ape had continued to develop and mature in the months following Goro's death, with the weight of new responsibilities seemingly exercising his muscular and mental abilities.

Gazda's long, strong limbs swelled with layers of knotted muscle and sinew, just as the flexible pillar formed of his torso, chest and neck had thickened into a solid, near impenetrable mass.

Despite his many frustrations, he had embraced his role of king if he did not love his duties. Gazda reveled in his stature among the other apes, and at the strength that surged through his body, and made him master of all he looked upon.

And there was no lack of respect and admiration from the tribe.

Gazda was King of the Apes and none would dare challenge his power, nor would they choose to for he had brought peace and harmony after the usurpation of Goro and Ulok.

The surviving blackbacks had healed from their injuries, and many were returning to their competitive and boastful ways. These were able creatures to support old Baho, who had been charged with leading the tribe during Gazda's absences.

Gazda found his basic silverback responsibilities rather simple. He was to protect the tribe from predators and danger, lead them to feeding grounds and water, and select safe sleeping trees.

Being a creature of the night, Gazda traveled ahead of the tribe while they slept using his enhanced senses and speed to locate the best fruits and plants, and to select the simplest routes to them. He would then give these directions to Baho at dawn, before finding a secluded place to sleep.

On occasion, he would give this information along with a gift of flesh, the remains of any beast that had fallen to the night ape's fangs, and was of a size large enough to feed the tribe.

This extra protein had been pivotal to the injured blackbacks' rapid healing, and the other apes' gradual return to their daily lives.

Which remained, for the most part, boring to their sovereign's active mind.

Chief among his responsibilities was to act as the judge and advisor in all disputes within the tribe of apes. Gazda would sit at Two Trees or other place along the trail and administer tribal law, applying it to one case after another...and another.

In one instance, the blackback Kulo wished to mate with Eecha but she had refused him because she cared for another younger blackback Taba who all within the tribe understood to favor other males.

Gazda had pointed out that it was Eecha's choice, though it would be wise for her to understand Taba's nature if she wished to mate with him, reminding the she-ape of her duty as a female to bring strong infants into the tribe.

Kulo had departed the court bristling and quite angry, but Gazda did not worry that this would grow into violence for he knew there were other beautiful females, and if Taba continued to favor males, Eecha might come around to Kulo's way of thinking given time.

There were many such domestic conflicts. In fact, they crowded the docket.

In one dispute a female had complained about another she-ape's carelessness with her offspring and other infants. She fed them well enough but was neglectful of their health in other ways: sleeping when they played, and allowing them to roam the high branches unattended.

Already, she'd lost a little babe to a hungry male chimpanzee.



Gazda remembered the incident, and how he had turned it into an adventure by personally stalking the big chimp that slew the infant. After killing the beast, the night ape had indulged himself, and left the bloodless body hanging in a tree for the other chimpanzees to see.

With that neglectful she-ape standing before him again, the king had had no choice but to scold her roundly, reminding her that “mothers make the tribe. Their vigilance and care protected more than did the strength of blackbacks.”

Like Goro, Gazda was loath to bite or beat the she-apes, knowing that violence within the tribe only begat more violence.

While those cases occasionally provided some distraction from the day to day, Gazda’s administrative duties involved little more than ironing out simple squabbles between apes and resolving basic issues of tribal law.

So to avoid resenting those duties, Gazda made sure he spent the same amount of time or longer away fulfilling his obligation to protect the tribe by hunting leopards, hyenas, and anything that preyed upon apes—or by seeking the peace and quiet of his lair.

After all, the King of the Apes was himself one of the many mysteries in the land. He used the lair for turning the puzzle of his origins over in his mind for purely philosophical reasons, and to ponder other important issues that would inevitably require solutions.

Gazda wanted more than revenge from Omag—though revenge would be sweet. The night ape could not be king in his own mind while the crippled ape still lived. None in the tribe would question Gazda’s authority, but a voice inside his own head spoke constantly of the rights of succession.

So long as Sip-sip lived and breathed, he could offer a legitimate challenge to Gazda’s leadership.

True, the crippled ape had by guile and treachery stolen the crown from Goro and Ulok, but Omag had stood in their hot blood at Two Trees and taken the throne to be his own.

Baho’s loyalists had forced the usurper out, and the tribe declared Gazda king, but that was not tribal law. So Gazda was hounded by a doubt that fed his thirst for Omag’s blood.

But only after order had returned to his beleaguered tribe had he begun to obsess about it.

Mourning for the fallen had been addressed, and the new hierarchy established with the old silverback Baho taking up the position of Gazda’s most trusted lieutenant.

Under him came other lesser blackbacks who sorted out their pecking order as their wounds had healed and strength returned.

Seeing that restored, the she-apes and their offspring quickly sank back into their own competitive hierarchy. The aged queens Oluza and Akaki had ruled the other females mercilessly so their deaths had brought a new era of freedom for them all.

The she-apes had their say in the greater tribal issues through their blackback mates, and would undoubtedly be jockeying for position as they whispered over nursing infants and quarreling young.

Other bands of apes far to the south had their own rituals to establish dominance and order that involved eating the flesh of dead enemies, cavorting to the beat of earthen drums and performing re-enactments of glorious hunts; but because of its particular makeup and evolution, outside of social grooming and sharing food, Gazda’s tribe was caught up in the interactions of its powerful members male and female, the gaining and retaining of individual power and status, and the political intrigue that was forever working in the background.

All of it was governed by tribal law, so rather than savage revels, Gazda's apes schemed and grew more adept in the ways of communication.

Other things had delayed Gazda pursuing his obsession for Omag's blood, for Baho had reminded him that it was not for the king to seek revenge when his strength was needed at home. Going after Omag or Magnuh would rob the tribe of a leader who could bring them food and comfort...and stability.

Which led to the boredom that grated on Gazda, and would eventually wear him down, or incite him to impulsive acts, for as time went on, "revenge" became the most exciting prospect for him.

None of the other apes knew how to assist him with this dilemma except old Baho, who had suggested the king's pent up feelings were caused by isolation and the weight of the crown, and that these things could be remedied if he took a lovely she-ape as a mate.

He suggested any of Goro's young widows.

But, that prospect was impossible for Gazda now that he had acknowledged the fundamental differences between himself and his tribe. He was a night ape, and Goro's widows were not.

Few understood his dilemma for the apes had long ago accepted him as one of their own.

So rather than let the apes think he'd lost the will to lead or had grown introspective or aloof with power; he often put Baho in charge while announcing to the others that he would range ahead in search of new food sources.

Then he'd travel to his lair and spend days at a time alone, doing things that Fur-nose or other night apes might have done.

Which was to say, he hunted frequently, and took advantage of the tree-nest to stay out of the rains when they came, and he used the shelter for perfecting his skills at curing animal skins.

Away from the tribal distractions, Gazda knew how to keep himself busy as he had done for most of his life. Few of his peers had ever been able to offer more than curiosity about the thoughts that whirled around in the night ape's head.

For that reason, Gazda missed Ooso the most for she had had the quickest mind and cheekiest disposition, and would fearlessly ponder the deepest and finest points of life.

But the other apes of his tribe? It wasn't fair to blame them for his boredom. They were what they were, and Gazda was...something else. His dreams often spun and dazzled beyond his own ability to comprehend—how could he expect anyone else to understand?

Which always brought him back to the differences he had with the tribe, and the similarities he shared with Harkon the huntress.

He had seen that she also dreamed strange dreams.

So at the tree-nest Gazda was left to dwell upon his differences, enjoying the time alone to puzzle over Fur-nose's artifacts, trying on what clothing remained and sleeping on the soft bed.

He gleaned the skin-stones for any proof that he was different, scouring the flimsy picture-skins for white upright creatures like himself. The squiggly black lines and dots depicted night apes wearing capes, and leather coverings reminiscent but unlike his or Harkon's. In other depictions, grotesque adornments covered the creatures altogether, and in such cases it was only through their pale faces that Gazda could see that they were night apes too!

In this isolation Gazda's mind had come alive to possibilities. Distracted and seething with curiosity and energy but starved of knowledge, companionship and engagement, the night ape grew more irritated by the day.

So as life had returned to normal for the apes, he cultivated his loneliness with a concentration that often bordered on fury. Then, the tribe's heavy footfall could drive him screaming into the trees to hunt or seek out some wild and dangerous adventure.

Gazda would stalk the creatures of the jungle night until they feared the very sight of his burning eyes for upon them he visited his wrath—while at other times he might haunt Harkon's footsteps wishing she would speak to him again, or failing that he bathed the trails in Bakwaniri blood.

At the thought of bone-faces, a thrill of anxiety ran through him and Gazda rose to his full height, standing over the dead panther to sniff the early evening air.

His beloved tree-nest was unprotected and vulnerable, and the Bakwaniri could be anywhere.

*The tree-nest.* He had nothing else that so clearly defined his connection to things outside the tribe of apes. Nothing else to relieve the keen alienation he often felt.

Could the bone-faces take the tree-nest for their own?

And what of Omag? It was not that long ago that the night ape had been to Sip-sip's cave. Had the traitor abandoned it to return to Gazda's land—and as an exile from the tribe would he not be looking for a secluded lair of his own?

The other apes remembered Fur-nose's lair and they avoided it, but might that isolation appeal to a fugitive?

Gazda glared up into the canopy and a sharp intake of breath answered its soaring, green immensity. The jungle was too great a thing for him to guard alone. A bone-face hunting party could have easily slipped by him with designs upon the tree-nest.

As could Omag.

It was not the first time the night ape had struggled with this thought for pondering such small fixations filled his lonely hours. Gazda had only to feed but once a night and his capacity for the rapid satisfaction of those needs left him time aplenty for worry.

His tree-nest had come to mind—but why?

Gazda's crimson eyes burned inward and he shuddered at a mental picture of his lair. The jungle night was falling about the structure and the door stood open!

Had he not closed it? Of course he had closed it, he always did—*always*.

Then why the thought?

Panting worriedly, Gazda scaled the nearest tree where at a height he cast about, nosing the west wind for any sign.

Something foul had passed him. A stink! But was it Omag's cadaverous stench—or the sickly smell of Bakwaniri?

Gazda snarled into the breeze, snapping his fangs as a heavy scent grew stronger. Something pungent there—most definitely—both familiar and rare it was, and yet...

The night ape leapt from the tree and caught the closest vine from which he swung to the next branch. One after the other after the next, a leap and swing and jump—ever picking up speed, Gazda raced through the high canopy as a blur.

And when a space opened in the jungle before him, he did not pause. Gazda combined the upward flexing of the branch from which he leapt with the explosive power of his thighs to launch himself in a 70-foot arc that dropped him in the swaying trees on the opposite side.

Thunder rumbled over the dense canopy. The dark sky flickered and rain crashed down against a million leaves. The deafening deluge obscured the jungle behind a wall of falling raindrops, and hid what was ahead and below from even Gazda's remarkable eyes.

So guided by the muted scents and instincts he charged into the gray...  
...until he halted on a high branch at the northeast ridge that overlooked *his* clearing.  
Somewhere in the murk the tree-nest stood well-wrapped in leaves. From the tangled forest wall he glared into the open space, fury smoldering in eyes that strove to penetrate the deluge.

To see his lair...

Sniffing at the damp, a scent struck Gazda motionless. His rigid form hung paralyzed from the wet bark, but his full lips parted to pant his word for “smoke.” He could smell the black mist that followed the untamable flame of lightning strikes.

The night ape growled and sought some sign of the hungry orange creatures, for surely their flickering forms would show through the gloom.

Thunder crashed again, the rain slowed, and an eerie twilight haze fell glowing over the open grasses.

Gazda gasped, for here he had worried that Omag or bone-faces might come to steal his lair, not thinking that flame could take it too!

End of this eBook sample.

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G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to complete Canadore College's Journalism program before receiving a degree in English from Nipissing University. Taylor worked as a freelance writer for small market newspapers and later wrote, designed and edited for several Canadian niche magazines.

He joined the digital publishing revolution early with an eBook version of his first novel *When Graveyards Yawn* that has been available online since 2000. Taylor published and edited the *Wildclown Chronicle* e-zine from 2001-2003 that showcased his novels, book trailer animations and illustrations, short story writing and book reviews alongside titles from other up-and-coming horror, fantasy and science fiction writers.

Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include additions to the Wildclown Mysteries and sequels to the popular Variant Effect series.