

The Engines of Sacrifice

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...those first men formed the cult around tall idols which the Great Ones showed them; idols brought in dim eras from dark stars. That cult would never die till the stars came right again, and the secret priests would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft,
"The Call of Cthulhu"

The Hidden Room

To a season of political and social upheaval was added a strange and brooding apprehension of hideous physical danger; a danger widespread and all embracing...

Howard Phillips Lovecraft,
“Nyarlathotep”

1. January 1986: The Logos and the Shadow in the Glass

When the search team brought Doctor Calvin Lenox to the shabby house in Knicksport, Calloway had been missing for five days. They found him in the cellar, vomit spattered, incoherent, and tucked between an empty heating oil tank and an ice-cold furnace. He was too far gone to save. Lenox treated him in the back of one of the hazard response trucks, injecting him with morphine for his pain and stimulants to carry him through his final debriefing. The medicine helped very little. Calloway was in agony and his mind was a snake-pit of ideas and impressions, from which he could muster nothing but confusion. Only terror still lived with any clarity in Calloway’s expression; only his radiation-ravaged body hinted at his unknown killer. That did not stop Daniker from questioning him and jotting down his cryptic responses in the pages of a slim, black notebook. Although he did not know what sense, if any, Daniker made of Calloway’s obscure ramblings, there was a rhythm and tone to them that made Lenox shudder. When Calloway lost consciousness for the third time, he was secretly relieved.

“Will he come around again?” Daniker asked.

Lenox took Calloway’s vitals then shrugged.

Daniker nodded. “Then I guess I’ll see what’s doing at the house.”

He tucked his notebook into a pocket inside his coat and left Lenox alone with the dying man. Alone with one more life Lenox had failed to save, one more body he could not heal. At that moment, the threat of annihilation felt very genuine to Lenox. He saw a premonition of the probable end of millions drawn in Calloway’s confusion, in the clumps of hair shedding from his scalp, and the blistered, red skin peeling from his

face. The world had lived for decades with the threat of a nuclear war seeming to grow daily, but seeing Calloway this way made the prospect distressingly tangible. It stirred Lenox's deepest fear: that all his efforts and everything his special unit of the Nuclear Emergency Search Team did were futile, that they could do no more to save anyone else than he had been able to do for Allison.

"Did you have any chance at all?" Lenox whispered. "Do we?"

Calloway snapped back to consciousness then and clutched Lenox's arm with raw, rigid fingers.

"The chaos king," he said. His voice was thin and low, the voice of a phantom. "Hope. Nyah. Ur. Hope. The prince travels in a black skin like a thousand night skies. Eeyah. Yog. Eeyah. Cattle. Ooh. Photo. Gun. Arrl. Eye."

More gibberish, meaningless to Lenox. "Who's the chaos king?" he said. "Did he do this to you?"

Calloway rambled on, his mouth a gun spitting bullets of sound.

"What are you saying?" Lenox asked.

"The man from Leng, the chaos king, in Irem did they dwell. And from king's crown, the flutes wound down, and cast us all to hell." Calloway gasped and shuddered. "The Faceless God awaits. Nyah. Ur. Hope. Look not into his dark eyes. Eeyah. Nyah. Ur. Hope. Look not down his black throat. Let the music play. Let the king sleep."

"What king?" Lenox said.

"As. Toss. Eeyah. Cattle. Ooh. Arrl. Eye. He dreams, and he shall awaken." Calloway's face brightened with awareness and he met Lenox's gaze. His fingers dug deeper into Lenox's skin. "Oh, god, Cal, it's you. Why does it have to be you? You've suffered so much already."

"Take it easy, Ethan. You're very sick. There's not much I can do for you," Lenox said. "I'm sorry. We didn't find you soon enough."

"I know I'm going to die," Calloway said. "I made my choice."

"What happened to you?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Don't worry about that. Just tell me," Lenox said. "But let me get Daniker so he can hear too."

"No. I've already told that bastard everything he needs to know."

"What do you mean?" Lenox said.

"Shit, it's been—what?—almost two years since I've seen you," Calloway said. "I'm sorry I wasn't around when you lost Allison. I heard the news. I wanted to come, but..."

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“I--,” Lenox said, but then stopped, caught off guard by a dying man’s sympathy. After a moment, he said, “It’s okay. You were out of the country then. Listen, let me get Daniker. We can’t count on you keeping it together for very long. He’ll want to talk to you while you’re coherent.”

“No!” Calloway squeezed Lenox’s arm to keep him from standing. “Forget Daniker. I can’t help him, but maybe I can help you. Promise me, Cal, after today, you’ll trust no one and nothing you think you know anymore. They’re lying, hiding everything. You think you know what’s real. *So did I.* But I *didn’t* know.” A painful sob cracked Calloway’s trembling voice. “You don’t, either, and by the time you find out, it’ll be too late. Too goddamn late by far.”

“What is it? What’s being hidden?”

Calloway shook his head. “Have to see for yourself. Take the keys around my neck. I kept a file. The keys will lead you to it. Don’t let Daniker have it. Read it. Then quit this life. Go back to being a doctor. And for god’s sake, if you can, *stay out of that goddamn house.*”

“Why? What’s in the house? Calloway? What happened to you in there?” Lenox took two keys from the chain around Calloway’s neck; they hung together on a thin wire ring, one of them stamped with a number and the logo of a popular chain of fitness clubs, the other small, like a toy. “Who’s the chaos king? Calloway?”

Lenox spoke the name once more, but Calloway never uttered another word. The light flashed out of his eyes, as if his soul was fleeing his body before the inevitable, and then he sank into a silent delirium. A few minutes later he died, his last moments passed with only Lenox at his side in the unmarked hazard response truck, parked outside that god-awful house with its cracked windows and its blood-stained walls and its cellar flooded with the taint of death. Lenox stared at the keys in his hand, hoping that all the answers he wanted had not died with Calloway.

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It was not quite four a.m. when they prepared for a second search of the house, and Lenox said, “Nothing I could’ve done.”

“I know,” Daniker said.

Lenox zipped up his white hazard suit and reached for his face mask and hood. “The best hospital with the best equipment couldn’t have done anymore. He was exposed to too much ionizing radiation. The cellular deterioration was insurmountable.”

“I know,” Daniker said. “No one blames you. Everyone has to go sometime.”

“He was dehydrated from lying in that cellar for so long. It worsened his delirium,” Lenox said.

“At least he came around again at the end.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you in. It happened so fast, and then he was gone,” Lenox said. He had not told Daniker about Calloway’s keys. He had known Calloway a long time and he trusted him, while Daniker had always been too much of a glory-seeker for Lenox’s comfort. Unlike the civilian scientists who comprised most of his special NEST team, Daniker, an Army biologist, came from a top secret, bio-research unit, and Lenox suspected he always knew much more than he shared. He was afraid if he told him about the keys then he would confiscate them and cut him out of the loop.

“I wish we’d found him sooner,” Lenox said.

Daniker paused with his face mask perched atop his head. “Quit beating yourself up. He’s not the first patient you ever lost in the field.”

“No, I know,” Lenox said.

“He won’t be the last,” Daniker said. “Anyway, you can’t do anything for him now, so think of all the lives at risk if we don’t find the radiation source that killed him. No one’s shooting, I know, but we still have to think of ourselves as being at war, and in war, there are always casualties. Besides, even if it would have saved his life, we couldn’t have taken Ethan to a hospital, not in that condition, not knowing what he knew.”

“What did he know?” Lenox asked.

Daniker smiled, cigarette-yellowed teeth gleaming behind the thin lines of his chapped lips. He tugged his gear into place, hiding his face behind a black mask fitted with smoky glass lenses. The resonator that let him speak through the filter made his voice crisp and plastic.

“Nothing you need to know,” he said.

“No, of course not,” Lenox said.

“At least, not yet, anyway.”

Lenox said no more about Calloway’s death, even though it felt somehow more significant than the other field casualties he had witnessed. He could not pinpoint why, though, and he did not want to seem like a sentimental fool. It was not only that the others had died from gunshots or car crashes or accidents, or that in four years with NEST, Calloway was the first victim of radiation exposure Lenox had treated. That was disturbing enough, but Calloway’s last words haunted Lenox’s thoughts,

and he feared going back into the shabby house.

The initial search had turned up nothing. Radiation sensors indicated the location was cold, but they were using custom equipment Lenox did not recognize, modified Geiger counters and an unfamiliar green van rigged with a new model of sensor. They were searching for something unusual, and Daniker would not say what, one more secret Lenox did not like being kept from him. Another was why Daniker had ordered no one to disturb the second floor of the house, which was boarded up and inaccessible. Daniker's ego chafed Lenox so sharply that he assumed the order was simply so no one found anything important in Daniker's absence, but now he thought maybe Daniker knew what was there. If Daniker knew then Lenox wanted to know. If not for that, he might have refused to return to the house.

Resigned, Lenox clasped his face mask to his hood, checked the seal, and then fell in line behind Daniker and another man, Foley, a chemical engineer. Others were staying back to keep anyone from interfering, as unlikely as that was. The entrance to the street was barricaded and monitored by the rest of the search team, and they had seen no one in the area since they arrived. The old house sat on a desolate chip of road that dead-ended against a beachfront park, closed for years by industrial pollution from a power plant only a quarter of a mile away. The street was abandoned, and most of the houses looked in worse shape than the one where they had found Calloway.

Lenox mounted the creaking steps to the front door and probed the house's gloom with his flashlight beam. Despite the place's decrepit state, the atmosphere inside reminded Lenox of an operating room—a place cleansed and prepared for a special purpose. Or consecrated like a church, he thought, though he had not been inside one since the last time Allison had felt strong enough to go to mass. He could not imagine what was intended to take place here, but everything around him felt charged with uncomfortable energy. Opposite the front door, the stairway to the second floor was boarded shut with plywood and planks, coated in thick scabs of old dust. There was nothing in the foyer, nothing in the living room, nothing in most of the house. There were not even signs of squatters or vandals, except for a few windowpanes shattered by thrown rocks.

The first evidence of violence was in the dining room: three long streaks of blood high on one wall, dry, but once viscous enough to have sent tendrils, now hardened in place, dripping toward the chair rail. Daniker measured their height from the floor and wrote the number in his

notebook. Foley recorded everything with a camera. Lenox scraped flecks of the dried blood into a glass tube and closed it with a rubber seal. Hampered by their hazard suits and gloves, they had to go slow. Next, they checked a small bathroom between the dining room and the kitchen. It offered only a puddle of murky water on the chipped tile floor and a grimy, cracked window beside the sink.

There were more bloodstains in the kitchen.

Brownish-red streaks on the floor.

Rust-colored spots on the window above the sink.

Handprints were preserved in dry, red-black ridges on the wall by the entrance to the cellar; down there they had found Calloway. Flies buzzed by the door, and the wood above it was carved with a crude depiction of a human face with its features scratched away.

Read more in *The Engines of Sacrifice* by James Chambers, published by Dark Regions Press, Copyright 2011 by James Chambers.