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Hour of the Cyclops
by Laird Barron

I quickly opened the door scruven with a ghastly orange symbol, and stepped through. Everyone in the cell was frozen at my unwelcome appearance. I shot the man to the left of the Ancient Apothecary. I shot the man to the right of the Ancient Apothecary. The Ancient Apothecary motioned with his unclean hand – a motion suspiciously akin to the loathsome symbol splattered against the door. I fell down. A curtain settled over my eyes.

Well, next time I'd shoot the Ancient Apothecary first.

They made me talk.

"Here to rescue the virgin, hmm?" The Ancient Apothecary petted his sinister imperial.

"Or deflower her trying." I saw they had confiscated my array of devices lethal and malign. A wild-looking man was playing with them. He hunched, raptor-like, chuckling. I dangled from rusty chains wrapped around the meaty portion of my forearms. It was cold, and water gurgled against rough stone. No virgins anywhere.

The Ancient Apothecary was neither withered nor desiccated. Thick and supple as a mature bull walrus, his eyes gleamed friendly spite. "Mr. Rembrandt?" He certainly did not talk like any heathen cultist I knew – more through the nose like a snobby English professor.

"Sure." I kind of shrugged. The chains creaked.

The Ancient Apothecary – whom I was amply warned to beware – smiled an evil smile. My phony identification shined betwixt his spicate fingernails. "So, Mr. Rembrandt, what is the deal with your blood?" He was a scientist, and any scientist in the world would have been smitten with that riddle.

I laughed. Our doctors were sensitive to the manifold hazards of this little assignment. Among other precautions, they siphoned the blood from my body, replacing the tired stuff with Yellow Ichor No. Five. It was experimental, but that didn't bother me. Drs. Chimera and Sprague had done all the usual tests on primates and captured operatives. I was the first agent to use it in the field, and so far so good.

The Ancient Apothecary laughed also. He ceased laughing and spoke rapidly in a language offensive to my ears. A pair of spindly surgeons emerged from the shadows; ivory cloaks shuttering – death-white carapaces of hunting beetles. They reeked of charnel; their nails were crusty. One stabbed my neck; the second stabbed the vein in my groin. Their horse syringes soon brimmed with ocher gel. The vile surgeons scuttled from whence they came. I gasped and panted, at a loss for proper curses.

The Ancient Apothecary petted the oily crescent of his mustache. He trundled a circuit around my hanging body. "Whatever the secret of your wonderful elixir, my minions shall soon know it. Ho! And what is this scar at L-five, progressing in a cruel groove to vanish under thy cranial canopy?"

"Cosmetic surgery."

"Most suspicious, most alarming."

"Indeed. But enough about me. Don't you have a virgin to sacrifice?"

"Heh, heh!" The Ancient Apothecary bobbed his anvil head. He had been sneaking glances at his watch. "True, my dear child, very true. Are you a believer then?"

"No. I just do what I'm told."

"Ah. What are your instructions?"

"Rescue the girl. Kill you."

"I am sorry to thwart your plans. Much as I sympathize with your predicament, I cannot relinquish the Virgin Offering. When the stars fall into their proper design I shall render the Virgin, and Lord Cyclops will rear above the gelid sheets of His living tomb. We who revere the Lord of Shadow shall caper upon the squirming mound of our enemies; we shall light the great fires to welcome the Father of Decay as he lumbers forth to bellow cataclysm and ravish the earth!"

"Super," I replied.

"But I must appease the worms of curiosity – did the Church send you? Officious catamites! They meddle in my affairs with egregious determination."

"If you must know, then you must know. However, also know that I will happily die rather than divulge that information."

"Well, there will be nothing happy about it, Mr. Rembrandt! I will give you pain and suffering of legendary measure!"

Again I laughed. "Pain means nothing to me. Do your worst."

"So be it." The Ancient Apothecary clapped twice like an imperious rajah in a bad old film.

"Mr. Spot! Please visit our guest with the best torments your febrile brain can devise!"

Which is exactly what he did.

As I expected, the Ancient Apothecary grew bored and left to check on his project. I thanked the stars – it was unlikely that my trick would affect him.

After he had gone, I stopped screaming and regarded the one called Mr. Spot. Yes, I remembered him from the file picture. Not very charming in the flesh, either. "Mr. Spot," I said to gather his attention. "Mr. Spot, would you look at me for a moment?"

The ugly man paused in his ministrations. "Why did you stop screaming?"

"Because I need to tell you something. Listen." I began the vocalization of a particularly nasty and profane string of syllables. This triggered Dr. Sprague's autohypnotic suggestion; my head lolled, my bowls heaved and expelled concomitant with glottal constriction. A membranous capsule came into contact with my teeth. I chewed; I egurgitated a cloud of virulent green gas.

Mr. Spot was pretty much dead by the time I shuddered awake. I half expected the horrible little surgeons to appear. They didn't. It only required a few seconds to be free of the chains and when I was, I dropped heavily to the floor. There was a price to pay for this good fortune. The skin of my arms was already whitening; dark purple welts encircled them like rings in deadwood. Thank goodness I could not see my face bloating.

Not my face, not my life. The distinction was actually a trifle confusing – this body was already very comfortable; like an old boot. Dr. Chimera guessed the Yellow Ichor No. Five transfusion would not be sufficient for the task at hand. This was the Ancient Apothecary, after all! Brain transplants are not so risky as the Ichor infusion, believe it or don't. Hell, the government had been doing them with chimpanzees for decades. It wasn't like we were that valuable. Best part was, due to the Yellow Ichor I had a superior degree of control over my anatomical functions. Breathing, pulse, I could slow them to a crawl. Pain? There was only the pain I could not help but imagine. Everything else was subject to interpretation.

Luckily for me, despite popular opinion, the brain is the last thing to go. There was a chance I could still find the girl and get back to Central before the creeping ague reached my precious gray matter. It was sort of a shame. This body had belonged to an Olympic athlete in the prime of his life – a hammer thrower. I really wasn't enthused about looking down and seeing the old potbelly again. Of course, unless I did something to stop the insane machinations of the Ancient Apothecary it was a moot point. My superiors would be so displeased if I allowed him to succeed!

I found my clothes and my toys, and appropriated some of Mr. Spot's unorthodox medical tools. I got out of there.

Alaska is a vast frontier; the majority of that epic vastness is most charitably classified as wasteland. What better place to trifle with things Not Meant For the Eyes of Man? The Ancient Apothecary had chosen his lair fortuitously – an abandoned radar site near White Mountain, a tiny native village eighty miles southeast of Nome. Too bad for the world at large that the radar site had been a little more sinister than advertised; deep shafts scored the permafrost into a complex of bunkers and vaults where certain, shall we say arcane, experiments were pursued during the Second World War. Things ended badly for the researchers; the site was boarded up and strung with now rust-twisted barbed wire. Somebody important buried it in paperwork. Probably no one even knew about it any more – the frigid Alaskan tundra is liberally pocked with the skeletons of abandoned military stations.

Ah, but the Ancient Apothecary knew, and what he knew, we knew, or close enough. The people I work for were unhappy about this development in the travels of our old nemesis. So long as the Ancient Apothecary confined himself to Asia, we didn't mind. There is nothing happening worth mentioning in Asia these days. Then the unthinkable – he appeared in Western Europe last year, moving on to Cairo where certain artifacts went missing from the home of an extremely private collector. Next, Brazil, where he visited several unmapped

temples; and in Brazil three of our agents followed him into the rain forest. The Ancient Apothecary emerged without them and continued on to North America; swallowed up by the Alaskan wilderness. Along about here occurred the mysterious disappearance of a world famous celebrity; couple that disappearance with an inauspicious alignment of constellations, and chaos tugged at the leash in H.Q. It seemed perfectly clear that something had to be done about the Ancient Apothecary. Central took off the gloves; they sent me in to rectify the situation.

Time was increasingly of the essence. For reasons unavoidable and too convoluted to suffer explanation, we had cut this operation close to the quick. Some might question why Central didn't just bomb the place, or at the very least send in a team to safely extinguish the threat. Ever try bombing an anthill? As for the latter, well, the sad truth was that if I couldn't slip in and terminate the Ancient Apothecary, more troops were academic.

Honestly, his operation was dreary. Everything was gray metal or smooth dark rock and dripping water. The lighting was bad; shadows pooled in wavy patterns. I moved along quickly, not overly worried about running afoul of guards. I had already killed the best ones and the Ancient Apothecary could scarcely support a private army after squandering his resources on arcana over the past few years. Nonetheless, I kept an eye peeled; there were other things to worry about when you dealt with opposition like this. Lets just say I watched where I stepped and made sure shadows were shadows before I moved into them.

A prescient man would have disabled the elevator. Then again, a prescient man would not have risked his advantage to torture me at all. He would have put a bullet in the soft part of my brain, had a nice chuckle and gotten on with his nefarious schemes. Yet there the elevator was; rickety mesh and exposed gears and all that sort of thing. To accomplish what the Ancient Apothecary intended, he would need a deep dark cavern and the infinite seep of subterranean water. The elevator was ancient as my enemy. It clattered all the way down.

At the bottom there was a low chamber and a sturdy metal door. The door was locked and barred from the opposite side. Not a problem thanks to the white coats back at Central. Among the lethal appliances in my possession was a knife compartment oozing with a gelatinous compound and an electronic timing switch. I went into the elevator, crouched behind the frame and covered my ears.

A big hole materialized where the door had stood; the lights went dead in the room. Smoke formed acrid columns, not that it bothered me. Beyond the wreckage was a platform overlooking a narrow tunnel sloping down into utter blackness. I climbed down a ladder, touched on a penlight, and examined the rails. There weren't any carts. Damn. I started walking; shambling, actually. My knee joints were stiff as dried leather; a distinct numbness emanated from both hands, forcing me to consciously squeeze the penlight. Oh, I truly hoped it wasn't far.

I distracted myself by thinking about the victim in this affair. Call her Ms. Smyth. I wasn't exaggerating when I referred to her as a celebrity. The Ancient Apothecary was up to big things; no ordinary woman would do. I had to hand it to him; Ms. Smyth was everything an insane cultist mastermind dreamed of in a ritual sacrifice. Her parents were some kind of genetic scientists; they grew her in a tube, and when she was a toddler they subjected her to a battery of tests – turns out the kid was a genius. They sent the genius to private schools – she graduated college with a double Ph.D. in astrophysics and theology by the tender age of seventeen. Still not good enough for the

Ancient Apothecary. The girl decided to take up a sport, full contact karate, no less. She tried out for the Olympic team, went to Melbourne, took the gold. Not good enough. She traveled around a bit, visited some mosques, gawked at the Pyramids and so forth. Then she wrote a paper speculating about the true nature of the universe. They decided to nominate her for a Nobel. While she was waiting to see how that turned out, just for amusement because one of her myriad close friends was an international recording artist, she took up the cello and discovered that playing it was about as difficult as holding her breath underwater. She became an overnight sensation and accepted a lucrative recording contract.

Good enough for the Ancient Apothecary? Not quite, not quite. Consider one final thing – Ms. Smyth was thirty-one years of age, brilliant, beautiful, and fabulously rich. Also, she was an avowed virgin.

Yes, she dated a handsome Olympic hammer thrower, but the flower of her womanhood would not be plucked save on the marriage bed. Now the Ancient Apothecary was happy.

I could only wish to be so pleased. This was like slogging in sand. A trick of the mind in perilous times; it seizes upon a pleasant juncture and capsizes there. I spilled with the recollection of a beach, an autumn beach, crescent curved and floating on the rim of God's Drinking Horn – red, gold, amber; the trees, the beach, the water. Lovers walked along the beach, not quite touching, there was no need, they already knew everything the press of flesh can spoil with its indelicacy. A tall, serious boy, pallid as chalk, though his eyes mirrored the changeable sea and were not unkind; and a girl of ivory and jet who smiled at things unspoken and looked at him often. A big dog trailed after; barrel chest dragging the sugar sand, foam-bearded upon his laughing snout. The girl hurled shells for the dog, some she kept for herself, and one she handed to the tall, serious boy. The boy took the shell and put it in his coat and the sky grew dark, darker, darkest. The boy and the girl disappeared into the drifting haze, then the dog, then they were gone.

That was long, long ago. The tall serious boy didn't exist anymore – if he ever had. Doors opened, he stepped through and discovered they wouldn't work from the other side. Some of those doors were peculiar; they removed him from the ordinary world. The girl was gone; something about a crash with no survivors, all hands lost. What did lost mean? Did she think of him in those final moments? When was that? I don't know.

Where was that shell now? I don't remember. It was only a trick, a game that my mind played every now and then, a game to occupy my conscious in agonies past rather than agonies present.

After a while the penlight went dim and fizzled into extinction. I kept moving, groping with my arms, worried about the possibility of an unannounced shaft, or worse. I realized I could see my hands. God, they were getting hideous, floating before my eyes, glowing like noctilucent moths. Ahead there was a fuzzy light source. A dank odor came into my nose, plastered my hair into a mold. I was weaving drunkenly; my face felt too tight, pulling my mouth into an involuntary grin. Ha, ha. I focused on the gathering illumination and tried to stay in a proper line.

The tunnel let into a weird grotto; thick stalactites oozed above a broad shelf of polished rock; to the left of the rock was a lagoon. It was impossible to discern the scope of the lagoon as it extended into absolute pitch. Big, was my feeling.

Tall posts were arranged at either end of the rock shelf; these supported

floodlights. A mess of coax and dangling wire; a generator whupped in the background, but I didn't see it for the glare. A mechanized rail cart awaited its busy occupants. Two men guarded the entrance, though how you are supposed to guard anything with your back turned is beyond me. I got my hands on them and dragged their bodies into the shadows before they could raise an alarm.

The Ancient Apothecary had started already. An altar was erected near the water's edge; obsidian plinths bracketed a raised bench of malachite and serpentine, the whole of it scriben with elaborate glyphs and runes. Blood grooves funneled down into the water. Ms. Smyth made a striking contrast draped naked and pale across the stone. So too the Ancient Apothecary swathed in crimson robes and wearing the unspeakable horned mask he had stolen from Brazil. His transformation was nothing short of diabolical. He chanted a dirge in his vile tongue; a piece of sharp metal flared in his hand when he gesticulated.

I was right on time.

It occurred to me that I resembled something out of a cut-rate horror show as I lurched into the light and came for him. Indeed, the Ancient Apothecary seemed completely surprised by my rematerialization. That didn't stop him from trying to stab me with his wicked dagger. Rigor encumbered or not, the Hammer Thrower's body had excellent reflexes. I caught the Ancient Apothecary's wrist and twisted hard. He dropped the knife and tried to form a symbol with his left hand. No real chance with that tactic, a sheen of sweat glimmered through the openings in his mask – rituals were grinding, thankless work! Besides, most pain signals were stalling out before they penetrated my dying flesh; I was maneuvering the hulk by memory.

The Ancient Apothecary was very strong. He twisted, he struggled, he gnashed his teeth and kicked at my shins. I switched off the circuits governing bodily safety tolerances, callous to my own tearing muscle and flexing tendons and bent the Ancient Apothecary into a horseshoe. He began to scream and his screams reverberated from the pitiless walls.

Those horrible cries were answered.

Distant at first, then rapidly drawing closer was an ominous splashing sound. Invisible to the eye, but not my prickling skin, a presence entered the lagoon. Sinuous coils of mist undulated across the water, mounted in stages, and caressed the altar. Bubbles foamed and frothed at the edge of the abruptly chattering lights. I sensed great displeasure aimed in my direction.

So I hurled the Ancient Apothecary into the chilly lagoon. A tremendous roiling commenced to stir the water; waves came at the shelf with some violence and splashed all around me. Ms. Smyth lent her own screams to the general cacophony.

"George!" She cried. "Oh my god! What is that?" Her eye bulged to regard something happening in the lagoon. I knew far better than to look.

"Come, my dear. Best that we depart at once." I grabbed her and bundled her into the trolley, pushed the lever until it refused to budge. The poor little cart was doubtless whisking along at top speed. It still felt like we were creeping into the tunnel.

Back in the cavern all the lights went out.

If the ride in the trolley was frightful, the elevator trip was like riding an updraft out of hell. Ms. Smyth clung to me sobbing as the lift jerked and jolted. The light bulb rattled in its dish and flickered crazily. Grinding noises started somewhere beneath our feet.

We made it to the bunker where all was quiet – for the moment at least. I found Ms. Smyth a jumpsuit and a parka and got her to put them on.

She babbled, gripped by an understandable level of hysteria. "Oh, George, what did they do to your face? Are you sick? What the hell is going on? Who is the Cyclops?"

"Really, dear, I'm in something of a hurry." My tongue was cold and I had to speak slowly so she could understand. The floor vibrated now and again, heightening my anxiety. "Everything... is going to be fine. Please... on with your shoes, okay?"

"How did you find me, sweetheart? Look at your face! Stupid me, you can't very well do that can you? Did that crazy awful man beat you? He was in my hotel room when I came back from the lecture. I was going to call you, but he was there with this other horrible man that looked like a crow and they grabbed me and put a rag over my mouth – "

"Put on your coat, honey." The floor was trembling. Could a disembodied brain shriek with terror? Could you tell? It was an effort to lift my hands. My eyelids were not unlike cast iron shutters ready to drop. I cinched her hood and pushed her toward the stairs.

" – chloroform, I think. I woke up in a room with no windows, but I don't know where I am. Where am I, George?"

"Safe now," I said. We were on the stairs, climbing. I led the way, holding onto the handrail and yarding my dead weight forward one step at a time. I had a nightmare like that once – the kind where you run and run, but your legs won't move and the monster is right there, right behind you –

Ms. Smyth snapped free of her unhinged state with remarkable alacrity. Prompted, no doubt, by her affection for this George fellow. She took my arm and pulled me along as best she could. The noises grew louder below and behind. I tried not to think about them. Better to ponder climbing these interminable stairs, to contemplate the mystical act of swinging one leg after the other, again, again, again –

We got away.

I imagine it was cold; October in Northern Alaska can't be described as anything else. Stars drilled bright holes in the sky. Dawn was a fingernail streak against the rim of the eastern horizon. To the west, downsloping drumlin hills merged with a bank of crystalline fog and the rough hide of the Bering Sea. The ground was patched with diamond-edged snow, tufts of grass, and rocks. I saw tracks; it seemed the friendly surgeons had escaped when they heard trouble. I wasn't worried – the tracks led off and suggested rapid steps.

I felt better in the open air; an illusion perhaps. It gave me the strength to steer her through a cluster of crumbling Quonset huts and jagged sections of tangled wire. Wind whistled through the spokes of the signal tower, sucked the breath from our mouths. We were out, yes. However, the radar site was too close for comfort and the sun was on its way and time was of the essence.

It wasn't far. I took her around the swell of a hill to the shelter of a jumble of shale and larger stones; a place where we could watch the sunrise. I sat her down in the lee of the rocks and moved to regard the heavens in their dispassionate glory. I tracked the constellations, as the Ancient Apothecary must have done. There, there, and there; oh, indeed the angles were unmistakable, yet the Ancient Apothecary had drawn the wrong conclusion from their spectral dance. I could no longer feel any part of my body, but I flushed with pleasure to witness feral Aldebaran shimmer in the lower firmament.

How could the Ancient Apothecary have been so careless? So deluded? Any fool could tell that it was not the Hour of the Cyclops. Rather it was the time of my master, He Who is Not to Be Named, to flow down from the crevices between the stars in icy space and lay claim to this wretched ball of dirt.

Who are you?" Ms. Smyth asked.

Slowly, I turned, extending my deathly smile in comfort and reassurance. "G - George... George." Speaking was all but impossible now.

Ms. Smyth was neither comforted nor reassured. Her eyes were very bright. Madness or hysteria or both. "I don't think so." She was casting about; a wild animal scenting for unseen predators. It is possible she recognized the bare bones of my humble altar to the Slitherer of the Stars.

Maybe it was a lucky guess.

The Ancient Apothecary's god might have been satisfied with a single virgin offering. Not so, my master! For Him, nothing short of a double sacrifice was acceptable. I thought of the Hammer Thrower's brain - his virgin brain - nestled in its briny tank and my fellows in their gallant costumes, ritual knives at hand, awaiting the exact instant when the stars would fall right...

I pulled a curved and scalloped knife from the folds of my parka, held it pressed against my side as I staggered toward the cowering Ms. Smyth. "It's alright... dear. Let me... warm you... "

Ms. Smyth shot me I don't know how many times. spurts of flame jumped from her coat pocket and into my chest. I think I heard the cracking report... or that might have been the ice floes rubbing together. Might have been my teeth clacking with rictus imperative. I really couldn't say how she got her hands on the weapon. When we fumbled on the stairs? Perhaps, perhaps...

No matter. She threw my revolver down, sobbing and cursing. There was no hesitation in her; she didn't waste a moment questioning this violence against the beloved form twisting at her feet.

I watched her run away down the hill and out of sight. I had to admit the girl was fast. Nothing I could do about it. Yellow Ichor No. Five was a miracle. Sadly, most of it was leaking into the snow. My arms were dead, my legs twitched and stilled. If a brain can scream, mine was surely doing that. Nobody was listening.

The sun bubbled up over the rim of the world. I couldn't even close my eyes to make it stop.

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