

Miranda Bingle's Field Journal.

*We searched the camp first, and then around it with no result. Herr Mueller was gone. Mr. Sheridan kneeled by the empty bedroll and announced that the Prussian researcher had left on his own accord. When prompted by a dubious Mr Champignac, he explained his reasoning.*

*There were no signs of struggle, and the man had taken his glasses and his hat, but had he left his pack behind. His bedroll had been closed properly. Additionally, one of the helpers, who had been on guard, had noticed nothing suspicious.*

*Herr Mueller had snuck out during the night. This was the only reasonable explanation.*

*The well-structured argument convinced us all. I was suitably impressed by the Texan's deductions. I never expected that his law-enforcement background would be so useful in the middle of the forest, and I found myself sincerely hoping that we would have no further need for it.*

*Mr Champignac grudgingly admitted that the American's arguments made sense. The burgeoning rivalry between them gave me a feeling of unease as this expedition met difficulty after difficulty.*

*Mr Sheridan inspected the vicinity of the camp with the focus and single-mindedness of a bloodhound. He found no trace of steps outside of the clearing, which led us to only two options. Either Herr Mueller had strolled back to the base camp during the middle of the night, or he had climbed up towards the base of the cliff.*

*It was decided that we would climb as well. The elevation would provide us with a commanding view of the valley below. We packed up and left with six of the helpers, leaving two in the second camp. Those who had carried Mr Stefano's body back to the ship had not yet returned.*

*The ascent proved extremely difficult, loaded as we were. I stubbornly gritted my teeth and endured the difficulty with all the phlegm and grace expected of a well-bred Englishwoman. I would not allow a complaint to cross my lips, the upper one staying resolutely stiff. I carried within myself the hopes and dreams of all the proper ladies whose ambitions were thwarted by ridiculous notions on the fairer sex. Every step forward (and upward) was a clear victory, and a proof that I was a fully capable member of this expedition. The fire of my determination could not be quenched!*

*The cliffs started a dull grey, but soon they turned the stained white of old bones as the sun of the Cretan Sea illuminated their pallid flanks. The slope was gentle, but the terrain was quite irregular, and we were forced to amble back a few times. Our progress was slow and measured, and somehow monotonous, until a cry from Mr Champignac awoke our curiosity.*

*He pointed at something red, and for a moment the sight of Mr Stefano falling to his gruesome fate conjured images of blood. I soon had to chide my overeager imagination. The radiant crimson came from a piece of fabric left hanging on a promontory.*

*Professor Ferguson exclaimed that he recognized Herr Mueller's scarf and I remembered that the poor scholar had used it abundantly over the past few days. We were on the right track. And yet, I could not quite dispel the sense of dread that this curious omen brought to my mind. On the first day, one of us had lost his life, and now on the second day another one had lost his mind? What could have prompted the timid researcher to dare such a hazardous climb in the dead of night? What curious mania had dominated his psyche?*

*The mystery only thickened.*

*Eventually, we reached the promontory and turned around. We were rewarded with a view like no other.*

*Behind us, and to our left and right, the cliffs reached out towards the azure sky and its distant clouds. There were gaps between the colossal slabs that separated them in five separate mounts grasping the heavens, and below came a rich and fertile plain bursting with nature green and fecund. It was like being in the palm of god as he bestowed life upon the world, and the sea expanded into the distance to the horizon.*

*The strong emotion I felt could explain the embarrassing moment that followed. As we were staring with awe at this primeval wonder, I leaned back against the wall and my hand found a pole. I turned around with surprise and ended up face to face with a grinning, yellowed skull.*

*I admit to letting out a horrified shriek. Perhaps I scrambled back most disgracefully on my behind. Oh, the shame, but could I really be blamed for my natural reaction when facing such a grisly trophy?*

*The rest of the team gathered in surprise and Mr. Champignac did his best to comfort me, but I was inconsolable. Only when I realized that the skull was quite old did I finally calm down. Indeed, its brittle and faded color could only prove that it belonged more in an anatomy class than at a funeral. The morbid spectacle still cast yet another dampener on our mood.*

*We had found yet one more proof of the existence of local inhabitants, and their choice of welcome did not bode well for Herr Mueller's, or indeed our continued well-being.*

*The mortal remains stood on a pole adorned with skulls and bright feathers at the edge of a natural, man-sized cavern entrance. The gap had been hidden during the climb behind the promontory we were now standing on.*

*For the first time, my apprehension turned to genuine fear at the thought of entering into the bowels of the earth after seeing such an ominous warning.*

*Both Mr Ferguson and Champignac agreed that it was a safe bet that Herr Mueller had entered the cave, on account of the scarf. I was less certain, but even I had to agree that there was no obvious path but down.*

*Mr Sheridan then proved to be the voice of reason. He extolled the dangers of blind explorations, and the risk that we were running for everyone. He mentioned the possibility that the local inhabitants were hostile and that we should return prepared and armed.*

*Mr Champignac scoffed and questioned the validity of such claims. He argued that the locals had to be savages, and that savages would naturally fear the white man, doubly so if the Texan would but unholster one of his firearms and give them 'what for'. Finally, he questioned the honor and morality of leaving the Prussian to his fate without knowing what had occurred to him.*

*Fergusson half-heartedly sided with the Frenchman. He, too, would not leave one of our companions to a cruel fate. I believed that the Texan had grown so jaded to the loss of life that he had no qualms sacrificing the one to save the many. I understood his position as the one responsible for our safety, but we could not give up without a gallant attempt!*

*To my surprise and to his credit, Mr Sheridan asked me my opinion! I was so taken off-guard by the unusual question that I became flustered. No one asked me for my thoughts, not least when there were two eminent Professors who had already spoken their mind!*

*"I... I think that if we leave now without looking for Herr Mueller, I will never forgive myself," I stammered.*

*The whole conversation made me feel terrible. Here was Mr Sheridan, who had been nothing but polite and helpful for the entire trip, and I was forced to side with the brazen Frenchman instead. How I hated my decision as soon as I had taken it. How foolish we were, jumping into unknown danger with more courage than sense and more temerity than courage!*

*"Very well then, let's go."*

*"Indeed, let's go!" Mr Champignac stammered with barely contained outrage. To have one's opinion overlooked in favor of that of a young woman! His anger was understandable, and so he took the lead with great strides which stopped about twenty feet into the open tunnel when he realized that visibility had fallen drastically.*

*Meanwhile, the veteran ranger had removed a piece of wood and some fabric from various pockets, and he was using twine to bind them together. He emptied a flask of oil on the newly made torch, lit it, and handed it to the flustered Frenchman without a word.*

*I do not believe that I had ever witnessed so much condescension without a word being uttered.*

*With Mr Champignac in front and the helpers closing the procession with another torch, we descended into the darkness.*

*The mountain closed in around us.*

*Soon, the sounds of the forest disappeared until only our breaths broke the silence, and the scent of sap and soil was replaced by that of damp rock. I felt that the walls were growing more narrow and that I would soon have to bend my head. The flame of the torch bobbed hypnotically in the distance and, when it disappeared around a bend, darkness returned.*

*Time grew surprisingly hard to judge in that underworld, and yet it could not have been too long before we came across a juncture in the tunnel and the room beyond.*

*We entered a cave of respectable size and all stopped, made mute by the curious sight of bioluminescent mushrooms stuck to the ceiling in a spiral pattern. Professor Fergusson remarked that this was a natural treasure, however, Mr Sheridan showed the keen insight of his peasant roots by pointing out the stuck earth out of which the growth emerged, and which had been placed there on purpose. We had found evidence of artistic creation in the local people, and by clever use of horticulture!*

*It was at this moment that we heard the chant for the first time.*

*It started low, and we could only hear it after shushing each other to silence. It went up in a 'o' sound, then back down again in another. It was repeated slowly and ponderously by many throats. I would have taken back my choice to investigate the tunnel then, if I had had the courage.*

*Mr Fergusson determined that the noise came from a tunnel that went left. Mr. Champignac marked the tunnel we had come from with a piece of charcoal in case we got lost, and we continued towards the source of this strange invocation. To my surprise, it sounded like Herr Mueller's first name, Otto, repeated ad nauseam by a strange chorus. The intensity only grew as we moved further into the depths of the world. After only a minute or so, I was able to spot an orange light growing in the distance.*

*We passed ancient bronze braziers burning scented herbs to emerge into a tomb. Despite our terrible circumstances, I could not help but feel genuine excitement at the sight of a finding that I had only read about in books. Me, Miranda Bingle, uncovering lost tombs! Alas, my joy was short-lived, for we were not alone.*

*We fanned out on a circular cavern with four entrances on each corner. The center was occupied by a platform upon which treasures had been placed as offerings. I recognized a small shield tarnished by the years, throwing spears, a bow with its string snapped. Behind them sat a mummy wearing a mortuary mask of gold. It was holding a sword in its decrepit hands, the likes of which I had never seen before.*

*Contrary to the rest of the treasure, the ancient weapon appeared as if it had only yesterday been assembled by the skilled hands of a legendary smith. Its blade was not made out of metal, but out of a chitinous, black material polished to a sheen. The guard was gold and the pommel was a gem. No king could lay their eyes on that blade and deem it unworthy.*

*The other occupants of the cavern were Herr Otto Mueller, and the long-devined natives of this island.*

*How I wish they had been noble savages awaiting only enlightenment and Protestant faith, which we would generously provide. Alas, those appeared to be of a less friendly sort. They were masked with strange clay disks that gave them monstrous traits, while their bodies were pallid and naked with the exception of a loincloth. They seemed agitated, and waved around spears with metal tips that looked like harpoons. I could hardly blame them, because our Prussian teammate was currently wrestling the sword from the mummies' dessicated hands.*

*We cried an alarm and tried to stop him. The poor man's face was red and quite burnt by the sun, and I feared that a stroke had robbed him of his wits. He turned to us, his eyes manic and feverish.*

*'They are crying my name!' he said, 'Seht ihr nicht? They were waiting for me!' Indeed, the gravelly voices of the savage mangled the name Otto, or something close enough that our companion's addled brain could not tell the difference.*

*The professor and Mr Champignac urged him to caution, pleaded and begged for him to return to our lines as more of the denizens of the cavern were pouring in, their chant ever louder. It was all in vain. With a triumphant shout, the Prussian tore off the ancient mummy's fingers and brandished the now detached blade triumphantly above his head. He yelled in triumph, then in ignominious plain.*

*I must have screamed then, for one of the masked guardians had pierced the poor man's chest from behind! Cruel fate! No sooner had the implement reached his heart that he toppled, dead.*

*All hell broke loose.*

*I remember little of the following confusion. We were beset on all sides by spear-wielding natives. I have a distinct memory of Mr Sheridan shooting one in the mask as he was grabbing me. The assailant fell dead just as I caught a glimpse of his traits, and what I saw froze my heart even further, for the man was barely human! He had pointed ears and sallow, pallid skin like the belly of a frog. Sharpened fangs glinted ominously in the flickering torches. Just as he died, he gave me one last bloodshot glare and the hatred I felt there was a thing so absolute and so deep, that I realized that we would never have left in peace.*

*In the following chaos, Mr Sheridan pushed me into the arms of Professor Ferguson, who had grabbed a torch at some point. We fled through one of the side corridors as fast as our feet could carry us. We ran with desperate energy, needled by terror. Terrible explosions from Mr*

*Sheridan's gun rang in tune with my heartbeats behind us, and I could only guess from their urgency that Mr Champignac's belief was unfounded. Our foes had not scattered. Instead, they hounded us with frenetic rage.*

*We passed side passages and openings. We only stopped when our feet could carry us no further. Mr Fergusson had led us, but it appears that Mr Champignac and three of the helpers had managed to follow us as well. The darkness and wall conspired to assail my mind, and make me see eyes shining at the corners of my eyes. They suggested the most horrible fates for those of us who had not managed to flee. Visions of torture, which I will not write on this page for fear of conjuring them again, harried my spirit. The only small solace I received was when Mr Sheridan burst in after us with the calm strut of a general. He was pushing cartridges in the chamber of an engraved revolver of excellent facture, and it appeared that his caution, which I had taken as overblown, had been justified in every respect. His eyes swept the cave and landed on Mr. Champignac.*

*Oh, what open scorn there was now, as Mr Champignac had indeed taken the sword as it fell from the hand of our deceased colleague. I was glad that we could recover such priceless artefact, but a part of me wondered at the cold-blooded mind that allowed one to look after a prize while the blood of friends was shed so freely.*

*Mr Sheridan made a curt comment, and Mr Fergusson agreed that they might take the loss of their artefact with renewed anger, but it was far too late to return the blade and so we carried on after catching our breaths.*

*Our path ran up. We were searching for a way out, and only now realizing the full extent to which this place had been mined and turned into a warren. It must have taken centuries of efforts for the ghastly creatures we had seen to worm their ways into the mountain's flesh. We came across only a few crossings, and attempted as best we could to stick to the flank of the mountain in hopes of finding an exit.*

*I almost yelped in joy when light came from an opening to the left, but the others were less pleased.*

*Mr Fergusson remarked that it was on the wrong side of the wall.*

*We all approached and peered in, and the sight shook us to our very souls.*

*The mountain was hollow, and in it stood an unholy city, sprawling over like an infestation. Light fell from a large hole at the top to let us witness the grotesque spectacle of thousands of male and female creatures writhing in the decrepit remains of looted civilization like fleas on the hide of a mongrel. We found the missing boats whose prows now adorned the jungle like so many grisly trophies. They had been dragged in from the back of the cave where a low opening to the sea lay, then cobbled together to form a shanty town of rotten planks held together by frayed*

ropes. That was not the worst. Where the sea met the land, pens and cages contained those of them who had lost their humanity.

*This is when, I think, Miranda Bingle died and was reborn. I could have blamed the savage appearance of the bipedal creatures to a freak accident of nature born from remoteness and centuries of inbreeding. I could have claimed that they were still human, albeit barely so. Nothing could explain the monstrous hybrids dwelling in that sinful den, half-fish and half human, wallowing in filth and refuse.*

*And at the back of that pustule on the face of the earth was an autel. It was an edifice of bones upon which sat an unmoving armored figure of inhuman size. It was the statue of a god, and it ruled over its land like a demonic, primal despot.*

*I know not how long we stayed there, frozen in disgust and surprise both. I think I lost my mind and regained it in the space of moments, only to lose it again. One of the helpers failed then. He clawed his visage and left running back from whence we came before we could gather enough wit to save him.*

*And then, a procession entered the city. We saw a column of warriors emerge from a side opening, and between them, strung like boars, were the lost helpers and the corpse of Otto Mueller. The song returned then, higher than ever. The wild warriors still sung the deformed name of the Prussian researcher in a vile mockery of a dirge. The body of the researcher was sent to a large building from which carcasses of fish hung, while the others were brought to the devil statue. The first helper was then laid on an altar in front of it.*

*I can easily guess what happened, but I was mercifully spared that dreadful spectacle as Mr Sheridan dragged me away from the opening.*

*He gathered all the survivors away from the gap, and I realize that without him, I would have kept watching until the last victim had bled out.*

*We recovered what we could of our tired spirits and departed with Mr Champignac at the helm, pushed on by the strength of numb desperation. Horror had robbed us of speech.*

*Mr Sheridan came by my side as we were resting again. He took my hand in his own burly mitts, and placed it on the grip of a smaller revolver.*

*I was quite surprised by his gesture, and so was Professor Fergusson by my side although he was, as always, supportive. The weapon was strangely elegant with a nacreous finish. The barrel and cylinder were made of a soft silvery material engraved with beautiful inscriptions, and it held in my hand as if it had been designed for it. When prompted, Mr Sheridan informed me that I should keep it just in case, and he even showed me the basic operation. It could have been summarized as pointing it to the 'bad guys' and keeping my eyes opened when I pulled the trigger.*

*For some reason, after discovering all those horrors and witnessing the cruel end of our companions, the weight of the gun in my hand acted as a reminder of the existence of reason and of the industry that had made this pinnacle of technology possible. It grounded me at a time of intense distress.*

*To the professor, Mr Sheridan gave his knife, and thus armed we departed.*

*Hope soon returned when we found light, and not the bastardized radiance of the city, but genuine, creator-blessed sunlight. One last cavern and we would be out!*

*It was at this critical junction that we were ambushed. The savages, made daring by our imminent escape, descended upon us! They jumped down from stalactites and emerged from behind stalagmites, swarming us like a pack of wolves. We had to fight! I did not know what to do in the dreadful confusion, and huddled behind the form of the Professor. The wizened man showed the unwavering courage that had been the hallmark of his character from his earlier days! He dodged a spear and stabbed his foe mightily. But then, disaster struck! Another creature stabbed him in the arm and he was forced to drop his blade and wrestle on the ground. I was backed into a corner and realized, then, that I had looked down on my father's advice unfairly.*

*That was right, I was the youngest child of the great adventurer Cecil Rutherford Bingle, and I would be damned if I allowed the vile creature to deprive the world of such a great man! I kneeled and pointed at the beast's chest, two hands holding the grip. I did as Mr Sheridan had ordered and kept my eyes open.*

*To my dismay, the gun report made me yelp and fall backward. My disgraceful landing was redeemed when the creature's head snapped back and it fell dead on the floor. I looked up to see the fight end as the last of our foes ran and fell, shot down like the curs they were. Mr Sheridan had once more carried the day, spreading death and destruction wherever he stepped. Mr Fergusson congratulated me on my aim. To my shame, I did not admit that I had aimed for the heart.*

*The exit of the cavern beckoned. We only stopped long enough to bandage Professor Fergusson's arms, and then we reached the surface and our salvation beyond.*

*We were on a promontory looking over the sea. To our right, steps dug into the very cliff descended to a rift between the finger-like mounds and the forest beyond. To our left, a dread chasm led back into the heart of the hollowed mountain.*

*Mr Sheridan went to inspect it, when Mr Champignac turned to us. 'Do we have an agreement, gentlemen?' he asked, and we did not understand, until the two remaining helpers nodded in unison.*



*"I apologize, my dear, but I received an excellent offer for an artefact such as this one, and I cannot allow witnesses to report my lucky find," he said with a smirk.*

*I could not react to my surprise and watched, hypnotized and horrified, as the Frenchman removed a concealed pistol from his coat pocket, lined it with Mr Sheridan and shot him in the back.*

*The poor Texan, the same who had saved all of us, fell into the darkness below! I let out a mighty scream, only interrupted by another when Mr Champignac walked towards me with his stolen sword!*

*Mr Fergusson saved me then. He launched himself on the traitor without a second of hesitation. Just as the blade pierced his chest, he screamed for me to run, and in my cowardice, I did. I left him behind, forgetting about the pistol still held in my hand. I pushed by the surprised helpers and sprinted towards the forest below even as the backstabbing miscreant urged them after me. I ran, and did not look back.*