

Jimland Reports Volume 5

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Report 201 - 5.5 - A BUSINESS ACQUAINTANCE.

Date: 2004-04-02

5.5 - A BUSINESS ACQUAINTANCE

Julius Flagstone's return to Jimville caused a sensation. Huge crowds filled the pier to gape at his battered and bullet torn steam launch. The launch had to be dragged up on the beach near the pier when it was discovered it was slowly sinking from damage sustained in the numerous collisions with the sloops.

Ever more awe-inspiring was the site of Blind Bob being carted to the Empress Hotel on a stretcher looking like death warmed over. The Sultan's Personal Physician accompanied him. Flagstone and Dullcote made sure the Doctor understood that anything he needed for Blind Bob's recovery was his for the asking. The Doctor examined Blind Bob's wound right on the pier in front of the crowd several of whom fainted away. He assured everyone the wound was not life threatening and had been well bandaged in its own blood, a good job. Blind Bob was a strong man in his prime and would recover in time. Blind Bob slept through the whole thing.

Norton and Constance Dullcote looked every part the happily rescued pair as she helped Norton walk slowly back to the Empress amid a crowd of well wishers. Norton's arm was examined by the Doctor and pronounced a minor wound. Norton looked a little disappointed by that. Constance soon cheered him up with her attentions.

Flagstone didn't have to push his way through the crowd. They backed away from the big blood and grime covered man. He walked determinedly toward the cable office. A figure came running up the street and flew into his arms.

Olivia hugged Julius tightly. She kissed him long and passionately. Then she held his filthy form at arm's length. She looked him in the eye. "Don't ever do that again."

"Yes ma'am," said Julius.

Olivia burst into tears and hung on him for several long minutes. He gently stroked her hair. They didn't say a word. Finally they walked, arms around one another, to the cable office.

Later that evening after the crowds had dispersed, Flagstone and Olivia visited the Dullcotes. Norton's arm was in a silk sling. He looked much better. Constance looked like a different person now that she was cleaned up and back in happy surroundings. After a few moments of well wishing and happy thanks, Flagstone got to the point.

"Constance, I need to ask you some very pointed questions," he said bluntly.

Constance arranged herself on the sofa next to Norton. She placed her hand over his.

"We have been waiting, Julius. Please ask."

"First, who kidnapped you?" asked Flagstone.

"Brigands, actually," replied Constance fairly calmly.

"Why?"

"The oldest reason in the world," she said.

"Love," interrupted Olivia? Constance laughed and played with Norton fingers.

"No, dear, money. Greed, plain and simple." She seemed disappointed. "They were going to hold me ransom. They had found out about Norton's first Expedition and made their move. They apparently had several of their men hired as bearers to keep tabs on things."

"But no ransom demand was ever made," said Flagstone.

"True enough. The brigands made their money by selling me to a woman like I've never seen before. If ever I wish a person harm...", Constance seemed lost in reflection. "I wasn't harmed, but I was threatened daily and beaten a couple of times. It was terrible." Constance shivered

"But again no ransom demand was ever made," said Flagstone.

"Yes. Something very strange happened. After several weeks on a ship out in the Secret Islands, I think, we met another pirate. A true scoundrel of the lowest order, even worse."

"Who," asked Olivia from the edge of her seat.

"Tastimin."

"But what did Tastimin want with you?" asked Flagstone.

"Information which I am sorry to say he got. Sorry, dear," she said squeezing Norton's hand.

"Tut, tut, my dear. Don't fret yourself about it," responded Norton. Constance smiled and continued.

"Tastimin wanted to know all about Norton's mines in Jimland. I didn't think it would hurt to tell him what he wanted to know. I was trying to stall for time. I kept thinking I'd be rescued each day." Her smile left her face for a moment.

"You told him about Norton's X-Rock deposit?" asked Flagstone.

"Yes. After that he got all excited. Then he and the woman stood right in front of me and made plans. She would get the X-Rock map and Tastimin would pay her a lot of gold for it"

"And then?" coaxed Flagstone.

"You won't believe this. The next day the woman came out of her tent and I thought I was looking in a mirror. She looked just like me, she walked like me, she talked like me. It took my breath away. I'm afraid I fainted at the sight. It was all so very strange.

"Next thing I knew she had kidnapped Norton. She never let him know I was there. Kept me locked up, bound and gagged. She must have questioned Norton about the X-Rock too. I overheard the woman telling her crew about how they would make their fortunes and teach the world a lesson as well. I thought it all a crock, but there was little I could do about it."

"Anyway, the woman set off to trade the X-Rock map and deed to Tastimin for the promised gold. What he was going to do with the X-Rock I have no idea."

"I am afraid I do," muttered Flagstone to himself. Then suddenly remembering where he was he continued quickly, "What happened next, Constance?"

"Well, you and my dear Norton rescued me, of course." She smile liked it was the end of a fairy tale where everyone lived happily ever after.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough as talked turned to happier topics as everyone tried to put the whole affair behind them. When he thought it tactful, Flagstone made their good-byes and headed back their room, his mind whirling. Olivia walked silently beside him holding his arm.

"How long have they been married," she asked.

"Oh, forty plus years or so," said Flagstone still lost in thought.

"That would be nice," Olivia said in a small voice.

"Uh, huh," murmured Flagstone absently.

Olivia was humming as she puttered around Blind Bob's room at the Empress. Blind Bob seemed embarrassed by the attention. Big Jake Frere was standing beside Julius watching Blind Bob's red face. Both men were smiling broadly.

"Get used to it," said Big Jake. Blind Bob flushed even more.

There was a polite knock on the door. The British Consul let himself in. Flagstone walked over to greet him. They talked discreetly. Big Jake walked out onto the open balcony out of earshot.

"Well," asked Julius impatiently.

The Consul smoothed his tie. "The Naval Brigade has been dispatched to the location you gave me. They will capture Tastimin and his cargo. Relax, Flagstone. We are dealing with things very well."

Flagstone didn't say anything. He watched Blind Bob trying to fend off Olivia's attention. He looked back at the Consul. "You get Tastimin. I get the cargo. No questions asked."

"Yes, yes, as we agreed. It will cause less of a stir that way surely." The Consul smoothed his tie again. Flagstone felt the urge to yank it off the man. He smiled to himself.

"I see you are finally pleased, Flagstone, that is good. Now if you will excuse me I have duties to attend to." The Consul walked over to Blind Bob, shook his hand saying a few kind words, then excused himself from the room. Olivia said she was going to Empress kitchen to make sure Blind Bob's lunch was suitably prepared. She left a pleasing soft fragrance in the room.

Blind Bob looked at Flagstone. "I hope they are ready for her." He laughed. Flagstone smiled. "Thanks," said Blind Bob patting his leg. "It's feeling a lot better. Sure I can't go with you?"

Flagstone stood by the open balcony doors. Big Jake Frere leaned on the balcony rail. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob. "Not this time, Bob. Rest the leg and get well. We still have lots of Jimland yet to explore. But time is of the essence now. Big Jake will fill in for you till you're a hundred percent again."

Big Jake turned. "Besides we'll probably just get shot anyway," he said with a big grin. Blind Bob let out a big laugh. Flagstone walked up to stand close to Blind Bob. He reached in his pocket. He handed Blind Bob a flask. "An after dinner aperitif," he said winking. Blind Bob slipped the flask under his sheets.

Olivia entered leading a small convoy of food trays, cooks, and maids. "Gentlemen, lunch is served."

Flagstone read the cable carefully. He had asked for help. He was going to get it. It would prove interesting he decided. He ignored the knock at his door. He slid the little notebook back into the safe and closed the heavy door, spinning the dial. The knock on the door became louder.

"Flagstone!"

"One moment, Consul," answered Flagstone.

Flagstone let the British Consul into his suite. The Consul was sweating even in the cool evening breeze.

"Good news, Consul?" asked Flagstone.

"Hardly," replied the Consul mopping his brow.

"Drink, Consul?" asked Flagstone pouring two cool lemonades. He plopped the ice cubes into the liquid. I'm going to get an ice machine for my very own he thought. Maybe I'll buy the company or get old Dullcote to buy it for me. He smiled to himself and caught the Consul watching him. He handed him the drink.

"Bad News, Consul?" he asked flatly.

"Tastimin avoided our trap. Well, not actually avoided, he fought his way through it and is at sea with his cargo intact."

"Ah," said Flagstone sipping the lemonade.

"Ah, indeed," said the Consul disgustedly. "The Navy has lost him."

"Ah," said Flagstone.

"Ah, my ass," said the Consul.

"Ah, your ass, Consul," Flagstone said.

"Flagstone, don't play with me."

"Never entered my mind, Consul."

"Well?"

"Well what, Consul?" asked Flagstone swirling the ice around in his glass.

"Well what are you going to do about Tastimin?"

"I was just going to ask you that very same question, Consul."

The British Consul flushed and took a gulp of lemonade. He coughed on it. Flagstone walked out onto the balcony to enjoy the cool night.

"Consul, I will deal with Tastimin and his cargo. But," said Flagstone.

The Consul joined him on the balcony. "There's always a but," he said.

"Always," said Flagstone.

The Consul sighed. "What is it this time?"

"Just call the Navy off and bring them into port. That's it. Simple. Give them all shore leave or something."

"For how long?" asked the Consul without flinching.

"Till I tell you otherwise, Consul."

"Flagstone, this is the Queen's Royal Navy you're ordering about," said the Consul loudly.

"Yes, I know, Consul. The same Queen's Royal Navy the recently lost Tastimin and his cargo," Flagstone said coolly.

"Very well," said the Consul.

"Thank you, Consul. Tell the Admiral it shouldn't be long. Good Evening, Consul."

The British Consul opened his mouth, shut it, and opened it again. He smoothed his tie. "Good Evening, Mr. Flagstone." The Consul walked to the door and paused, framed in it. "Good luck to you."

"Thank you, Consul, I will surely need it."

A strange man stood in the middle of Flagstone's Suite. Olivia's eyes never left him. Flagstone handed him a lemonade. The man sipped it and smiled. "Wonderful," he said.

He was of tall height, pale skinned, and slim. His beard was full and well trimmed. His dark green jacket seemed iridescent, softly reflecting the lights in the room. He moved gracefully and seemed always alert like a tiger on the prowl. His eyes, dark and clear, held you when you looked into them.

Flagstone let him enjoy another sip of his drink. The man stood confidently. He did not go out on the balcony. Flagstone walked over and stood behind Olivia. He gently rested his hand on her shoulder.

"Can it be done, Captain?" Flagstone asked.

"Yes. You say the Royal Navy will stay in port till we are finished?"

"Yes. Until I give the all clear as it were," replied Flagstone watching the Captain pace slowly around the room.

"It is probably best that way." The Captain sounded sad somehow.

"When can you be ready to proceed?" asked Flagstone bluntly.

"A man of action, eh, Flagstone?"

"I like to think so, but time presses us all."

The Captain stopped pacing. He faced Flagstone. "Yes, it does indeed. Be at the Old Native pier, tomorrow night at midnight. I shall send a small boat to pick you up. Do not bring any weapons, I will provide everything." The Captain smiled at Olivia. "Only you, Mr. Flagstone. Good Evening, sir, Ms. Fate." The Captain bowed and quietly left the suite.

Olivia turned to look at Flagstone who was looking at her. "You have interesting friends, Jules. Who was that man?" Flagstone led her out on to the balcony. The cool breeze refreshed him.

"A business acquaintance. Not a friend. I don't think the man has any friends. Or wants any. But he is here to help me, that is all. He, um, shares business contacts with me.

"The way you say that scares me, Jules."

"It probably should scare me too," he laughed softly.

"Don't make light of this, Jules. That man is undeniably dangerous."

"Yes, thank goodness. I can tell you this, Olivia. Tomorrow night I will go chasing Tastimin and his cargo. That's all I can tell you. You must trust me in this matter. You cannot come along. You cannot sneak yourself aboard. If all goes well in a week or two I'll be back and we can take a holiday anywhere in the world you'd like to go."

"And if all does not go well?" Olivia said arching an eyebrow.

"Well, you can take Blind Bob on a holiday anywhere in the world he'd like to go."

"Olivia laughed. "We wouldn't get past the House of Girls."

Flagstone gave her a little kiss. "Thanks for being a big girl."

"Thanks for nothing. You get the sofa tonight, bucko." She turned and waltzed to the big bedroom doors and closed them behind her. Flagstone shrugged and bedded down on the sofa for the night.

Dawn found the sofa cold and empty. The Flagstone party of two was late for breakfast that morning.

Report 202 - 5.X - RAMMING SPEED.

Date: 2004-03-04

5.6 - RAMMING SPEED

Julius Flagstone stood on the remains of the Old Native Pier. The night was dark and moonless. Flagstone smelled rain in the air. He tried not to pace, but found he had to move around. Somehow he felt a little naked with only his big hunting knife on his belt. He checked his watch. It was nearly midnight.

A soft splash turned Flagstone around. A small boat was just coasting up to the remains of the pier. Four men manned the oars. They shipped oars upright neatly. "Flagstone," one asked with a strange accent. Flagstone nodded and climbed carefully into the boat. There was barely room for him to sit in the stern. The boat crew immediately pushed off. They rowed in silence.

Flagstone began to wonder where he was being taken. The little boat was being rowed out into the middle of the sea. He held his tongue. The crewmen said nothing. Finally they stopped and laid their oars across the little boat and rested. The little boat bobbed on the gentle swells. Flagstone tried to appear at ease. It began to rain. No one spoke. The rain dripped off the men like rain off four statues.

Suddenly a great yellow light appeared beneath the water. Flagstone was surprised. One of the crewmen gave an order in a language unfamiliar to Flagstone. The crewmen ran their oars out and maneuvered slightly around the light. The light continued to rise from the ocean's depth, growing larger.

The light blinked out. Not twenty yards from the little boat the sea began to swirl and foam. A great monster rose to the surface, black and glistening. The crewmen began rowing for the monster. Flagstone found it hard to hold his surprise.

The sea monster lay low in the water showing maybe thirty feet long above the water's surface. Flagstone heard metal clanging on metal. To Flagstone continued surprise a man stood up in the middle of the beast, visible from the waist up. He yelled to the men in the boat in the unfamiliar language. They answered.

A rope sailed into the boat. Another quickly followed. The ropes were attached to rings at each end of the little boat. It was only then that Flagstone realized the boat was made from metal. Tonight, he thought to himself, is a night of surprises. The little boat was hauled up the low free board of the ship, for such Flagstone had realized it must be. He smiled. He should have known. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

There was no one on the rounded deck. The ropes led into an opening in the deck. As Flagstone watched, the crewmen turned the little boat upside down and fitted it neatly into the cavity and clamped it firmly down. There was some muted clanking and piece of metal, a lid Flagstone guessed, slid out and

over the cavity. The hull was smoothly round again. A crewman motioned Flagstone on with the others.

They walked carefully to the other man. He was standing in circular hatchway descending vertically into the vessel. The crewmen began descending the ladder attached to the side of the vertical shaft. Flagstone followed.

As Flagstone reached the bottom rung of the ladder a voice spoke.

"Welcome aboard the Nautilus, Mr. Flagstone."

Flagstone turned to find the Captain standing in front of him smiling slightly. "Thank you, Captain Nemo. I am excited to be aboard such a magnificent vessel."

Nemo bowed slightly and gestured to the open hatch at his feet. Flagstone descended further into the belly of the beast. Nemo nimbly followed. When they had reached the bottom of this short ladder Nemo stepped to a copper speaking tube. He gave an order into the tube. Flagstone felt the deck tremble slightly.

Flagstone was now in a well-lit corridor. He could see forward and aft. He saw doorways in each direction. He noted with lessening surprise that everything was made of metal. Nemo talked quietly with one of the crewmen.

"Mr. Flagstone, please follow this man to your room. I have work to do and will collect you when we are near our quarry. Until then I must ask you to remain in your cabin except when I send an escort for you. Agreed?"

Flagstone looked at the four crewmen and then at Nemo. He knew the man's reputation. No point in arguing, what would I gain? I'm a captive by my own free will, he thought. He felt a stinging memo to the NAGS Society coming on. He smiled at Nemo. "Most kind of you, Captain."

A crewman then led Flagstone down the corridor past several rooms whose use was unknown to Flagstone. He guessed they were walking aft, toward the stern. The crewman opened a metal door and gestured into the cabin. Flagstone entered and the door was closed behind him. He heard a lock click. He shrugged.

Flagstone began to lose track of time. He counted days by meals. The same crewman came three times a day bringing Flagstone a meal. Flagstone enjoyed the meals. He could not identify many of the things he ate, but they were good, some exquisite. He did find crab, lobster, shrimp, and what he thought was sea turtle. Several fish dishes had him guessing. His "personal" crewmen named them when Flagstone asked. They were local fish found along the coast of Jimland. The fruits and vegetables completely mystified Flagstone. He questioned the crewman who named each thing for him. The names were foreign to Flagstone.

The Nautilus was apparently searching along the Jimland coast. Flagstone felt the slight tremble when she was moving. No trembling when she was stopped. Sometimes the deck would tilt down or up. The first time this happened Flagstone became rather excited. Sometimes the lights would go out

for hours. He would hear men in the corridor outside his cabin-cell. He never knew how many there were. He only saw the one crewman at mealtime and after to clear away the dishes. Flagstone had no idea what was going on. He tried to remain unruffled by these entirely bizarre happenings.

Finally he asked the crewman a question while he delivered another good meal. "Is the search going well?"

The man eyed him for a moment. "Yes." The crewman left. Flagstone dropped his hands into his lap. Well that was great, he thought, very informative.

After what Flagstone thought was four days Captain Nemo stepped into his Flagstone's cabin as his meal was being laid out. Flagstone rose and greeted Nemo. Nemo waved him back into the bench fixed to the deck by the little table.

"We are making good progress in the search for Tastimin. I believe I know where he is now. We are going there today to verify his position. After you have eaten you may join me in the main salon. I am sure you will enjoy stretching your legs and more possibly the view. Bo-tak will bring you forward when you are ready."

Flagstone thanked Nemo for the opportunity move around a little. Nemo eyed him carefully.

"You have be a model guest, Mr. Flagstone. Continue to be so. We will soon conclude this little exercise and you will be returned to your Olivia safe and sound. Enjoy your meal."

Nemo bowed and left Flagstone to eat in solitude. As he ate Flagstone tried to figure out how to take Nemo's comments.

The main salon stunned Flagstone. It made many homes of the rich look shabby. The walls were paneled with a rich cherry colored wood. The carpet was deep and luxurious. Bookshelves and an aquarium tank were set against the forward wall. On each side of the room were viewports nearly as wide as Flagstone was tall. One had its external cover retracted. Nemo was sitting in a plush chair silently watching the fish outside the thick glass.

Flagstone quietly took a chair next to Nemo's. Together they saw the ocean slide by. Curious fish drawn by the light of the room approached the window. Several ran into the glass and drew back perplexed. The two men sat in silence for some time. Finally Nemo turned and looked at Flagstone.

"We have found Tastimin's ship. It is lying at anchor not a mile from our current location. Whether he is aboard or his cargo is aboard is not known. Do you have any suggestions?"

Flagstone was caught off guard by this first and most direct question. He held his silence and thought. Then he had an idea. "Set me ashore and I will swim to the ship, enter it and find the answers to your question or not return alive."

Nemo looked at Flagstone for a long minute. He was plainly thinking about the offer, weighing the risks. "No, I cannot do that. However you have given me an idea. Please remain here, Mr. Flagstone, until I return. Enjoy the view. If need be, your evening meal will be served here."

Nemo rose and walked silently across the carpet. The wood paneled metal door shut behind him. Flagstone did not hear the click of a lock. Are you starting trust to me, he wondered? He laughed to himself and stretched out, slumping in the chair to watch the creatures of the sea. The Nautilus remained stationary not fifty feet above the shallow ocean floor.

Flagstone admired the coral growth and watched it stretch skyward. A multitude of colorful fish played in and out of the coral. Kelp waved its long leaves in the gentle rocking of the sea. A manta ray glided past, then suddenly darted away.

A burst of bubbles clouded the view port. What next met Flagstone's eyes caused him to leave his chair and kneel in front of the glass. On the ocean floor four figures were slowly walking along as if in slow motion. They wore bulbous bronze contraptions over their heads with round viewports, miniatures of that through which Flagstone's astonished glaze passed. On the back of each man was tank of some arrangement. Each carried a spear ten feet in length. Bubbles rose rhythmically from the men as they walked on the ocean floor. Flagstone stared in amazement. He wanted to know how and why. He wanted to do it himself.

The four figures passed out of his sight. Flagstone now became restless. He paced the room. Nemo was doing something and he wanted to know what. He tried to read a random book off the bookshelf. Poetry. Author unknown to Flagstone. He quickly replaced the book. The viewport drew him back. Soon he was lost in thought not really seeing what was outside.

Several hours later Flagstone felt a single tremor run through the Nautilus. Minutes after that Nemo walked in to the salon followed by a valet bearing dinner on a silver tray. Flagstone kept silent while the valet served the two men and retired. Nemo began eating daintily. Flagstone ate slowly. The food, whatever it was, was delicious. Finally he could wait no longer.

"Captain Nemo, how did your little excursion go?"

Nemo smiled at him. "Saw us through the viewport, did you?"

Flagstone nodded yes.

"You gave me an idea. I followed it to its conclusion. Sometimes I get lost in where I am. You reminded me there are other lands out there."

"All of which means what?" asked a puzzled Flagstone.

"Meaning simply you reminded me that there were men on that ship and they probably went ashore for provisions and water regularly. I took three men ashore as you saw. We captured a crewman from the ship and got the answers I needed. Then we returned. A very successful excursions as you called it."

"Did you bring your captive back with you, Captain. I would like to question him myself," said Flagstone.

"I am afraid the man will be sadly missed by his shipmates," said Nemo calmly. Somehow Flagstone was not surprised, nor bothered.

"Is Tastimin aboard the ship, Captain," asked Flagstone with his fork half way to his mouth.

"Yes."

"Is the cargo still aboard?"

"Yes."

The rest of the meal was little interrupted by talking except for Flagstone's questions about the food to which Nemo politely replied. The valet returned and cleared the dishes. He pored each man a dark liquor. Flagstone sniffed the glass. An interesting fragrance greeted him. Nemo smiled.

"A wine-like liquor I create. I think you will like it."

Flagstone did. Nemo sat for a while watching the sea. A crewman came in and whispered to Nemo who answered with a few curt words. Twenty minutes later the crewman returned. Before he could say anything, Nemo rose and turned to Flagstone. "The ship is at sea. Let us complete our mission."

Nemo pulled a lever closing the viewport with a heavy thunk. The Nautilus vibrated as it started to move. Flagstone started to walk down the corridor to his room, but Nemo brought him to a halt.

"Care to join me as we attack?" Nemo said.

Flagstone turned and smiled. "Most surely, Captain."

Nemo led the way to a ladder set back in the corridor wall. A quick climb up and they were in a control room of some sort. Flagstone looked about thoroughly lost. Pipes ran along the walls. Gauges of all sorts were hung about. A man stood at a big spoked steering wheel much like that found on any sailing ship. Another man was monitoring the gauges and turning valves or adjusting some kind of dial or pulling at levers. Nemo turned to Flagstone with a smile. "Please don't touch anything."

Flagstone laughed. "Certainly not."

Nemo leaned over a nautical chart on a small table to one side of the room. He took out a pair of dividers and measured and marked on the chart several times. Flagstone stood swiveling his head mouth agape. He saw three viewports ended the room at the front and to either side. None were open. The Nautilus was speeding through the water. Flagstone felt it sway a little as they changed course when Nemo gave an order. A fourth man entered the small room and talked to the Captain in low tones. Nemo seemed pleased. The man began adjusting dials. It was crowded in the room. Flagstone found a vacant place among the pipes and gadget and slipped out of the way. Nemo looked at him and nodded.

He turned a dial. A moment later a bell dinged and an arrow moved on the dial. The Nautilus trembled a little more like a horse being given its head in a race. Nemo spoke into a copper speaking tube. A heavy clanking sound filled the room.

"Raising the ram," was all Nemo said. Flagstone nodded.

"It will be another ten to fifteen minutes. We must let them get into deep water." Flagstone nodded again.

Time passed in a flash for Flagstone. He noted Nemo marking on his chart. More orders into the speaking tube. More adjustments to dials and levers. Nautilus picked up more speed. Nemo pulled a lever. The forward viewport slid open. Nautilus tilted upward. Water cascaded over the viewport. Flagstone could clearly see the ship ahead. Nautilus was directly behind it at about a half mile. Nemo barked orders.

The Nautilus gained even more speed. The ship grew large at an amazing rate. Nemo adjusted his course slightly. The Nautilus seemed to keep increasing speed. The ship was two hundred yards head. Nemo closed the viewport. He turned the speed dial all the way to the right. Nautilus surged forward. Nemo sounded an alarm signal. All the men in the control braced themselves. Flagstone gripped a stanchion with white knuckles.

The impact was staggering. Flagstone was thrown on the deck. A crewman ended up on top of him. Everyone jumped back to their positions. Nemo was talking into the speaking tube. He dialed the speed indicator back to the left. Nautilus shuddered. It backed away from the ship.

Nemo gave an order into the speaking tube. He seemed to be waiting. He smiled at Flagstone. "Damage check. It is routine. Everything is fine."

Flagstone wasn't so sure. Finally Nemo got several answers from the speaking tube. He opened the front viewport. The ship was drifting in the wind, its stern caved in and its rudder gone. Men were frantically running about. Several pointed in the direction of the Nautilus. One man stood, arms folded across his chest, and stared at the Nautilus.

"Tastimin?" asked Nemo.

"Yes," replied Flagstone although he couldn't really tell.

Nemo gave more orders. The Nautilus sank below the waves. She traveled in a great circle around the crippled ship. Nemo lined the Nautilus up perpendicular to the ship. He spoke to Flagstone, "The killing blow."

Again the Nautilus leapt forward, even faster than before thought Flagstone. Nemo close the viewport. A minute later another jarring crash shook the Nautilus. Again Nemo backed Nautilus up. A third attack and bone-wrenching collision. Nemo seemed satisfied. He backed the Nautilus off and submerged completely. Nemo had the Nautilus circle the stricken ship.

Flagstone was fascinated as he watched through the viewports, all of which were now open. Crates, boxes, barrels and sundry thing were raining down out

of the holed ship. Soon the ship itself came gliding down through the water to land in the ocean floor. Nemo circle the Nautilus around it several times. He noted the reading on some gauges and dials that he wrote directly on the sea chart.

"Now, Mr. Flagstone I think we can take you home." Nemo wasn't really smiling. Flagstone said nothing. Flagstone's "private" crewman, Bo-tak, appeared. Flagstone realized he was being dismissed. The show was over. Back to the mundane. He followed Bo-tak back to his room and heard the lock click in place. He lay on the bed and fell asleep.

The little rowboat disappeared into the dark night's mist. Flagstone was standing on the Old Native pier again. He felt glad to be on land again. He felt glad that the ship was sunk. Tastimin's fate was unknown, but Flagstone doubted the old Pirate was that easily killed. He felt something else. He felt disappointed he couldn't stay on the Nautilus longer and learn its secrets. That feeling confused him a little.

Flagstone walked back to the Empress Hotel lost in thought composing his cable to NAGS Society HQ. Mission a success. Dullcotes safe. X-Rock at bottom of the ocean unrecoverable. Flagstone stopped in mid stride. Was it, he wondered?

Olivia greeted him with worried affection when he entered their suite. She fixed Flagstone a drink and sat cozily next to him. Her eyes sparkled.

"All done?" she asked.

"Yes. All done." He gave her a big kiss. For now, he thought.

Report 203 - SPECIAL FEATURE. THINGS THAT CROSS OUR DESK.

Date: 2004-03-06

SPECIAL FEATURE. THINGS THAT CROSS OUR DESK.

The Editor thought you, Gentle Reader, might be interested in some of the myriad things that cross our desks here at the World Herald. As a sporadic feature of the Herald we will bring these things to light for the edification of all.

For example, the Science Club recently received this letter. Their response follows the letter.

Dear Science Club,

My name is Etienne Dumask. I live in Paris. I want to know why the animals in Jimland do not get loose and come to Paris.

Thank you.

The Science Club responses:

Dear Etienne,

Thank you for your question about Jimland animals getting loose. Fear not, the animals in Jimland will have a hard time getting to Paris for several reasons.

First, Jimland is surrounded on all sides. The Great Mountains of Jimland run from out of the ocean on Jimland's west coast across the farthest, and completely unexplored we might add, northern area, and finally down to the east coast and out into sea again. It is believed the mountains form many of the Secret Islands found off the coast of Jimland.

Second, when Jimland animals fly or run away, they always, and without exception, die days or weeks later. We at the Science Club think this is because of nutrients that have become required by the animals for a healthy lifestyle and are found only in the soils of Jimland.

Several of our more forward thinking members have theorized that the mountains of Jimland and those in the sea forming the Secret Islands are part of a gigantic crater. They think an asteroid, that is a great rock from the cosmos around us, composed mainly of X-Rock once hit the earth where Jimland is. The explosion and subsequent volcanic activity caused by this impact pushed up the Great Mountains and Secret Islands. Most of the asteroid was pulverized into a very fine dust. This dust was laid down across the whole of Jimland and nowhere else. The plants absorb the X-Rock mineral and the animals eat the plants. After a few thousand years of this the animals in Jimland cannot live without the X-Rock mineral.

This theory also explains why some animals are found only in Jimland and nowhere else on Earth. During the past ice ages and other geological upheavals the Mountains around Jimland protected the animals and their environment. Even after part of Jimland sank into the sea, the special world of Jimland survived.

This theory explains the several unique qualities of X-Rock. First it is only found in "deposits" or "lumps" not in veins such as gold or silver. The desposits are randomly found in Jimland with a higher deposit rate in the mountains just as one would expect from an impact, explosion, and rain of debris after the explosion. X-Rock's physical characteristics are unique also. The mineral is lightweight. It can be crumbled in the hand much like very soft sandstone. It is thought most of the X-Rock deposits in Jimland have been dissolved and destroyed by the action of weather alone. This is why X-Rock is hard to fine and extract.

Third, the Great Mountains surrounding Jimland are unmeasured. We think them to be as tall as the Himalayas at least. There are no known passes through them. Several attempts have been made to tunnel through the mountains, but all have failed. The precipitous rise of the Great Mountains and their sheer sides keep animals that cannot fly from climbing over the mountains. Only hardly mountain goats, a few mountain lions, and the usual assortment of squirrels, chipmunks, minks, etc, birds of all sizes, and several varieties of Pterodons live in the Great Mountains. There are native legends of a thing called a Dread Snapper that lives in the Great Mountains, but like the Abominable Snowman one has yet to be captured or shot.

Fourth, the sea life teeming in the ocean around the coasts of Jimland is much as it is the world over. There are fish of every description. Plankton abounds in immense quantities, supporting the food chain from the small crustaceans to the largest whales. Giant squid sometimes called Kraken exist off the coast of Jimland. Only in Jimland have specimens been brought ashore although we must admit they were only partial specimens measuring sixty feet long. We hope some day to capture a fully-grown adult.

It is quite possible for the exotic sea life off the coast of Jimland to turn up anywhere on earth. Maybe a giant Kraken is in the Seine River right now.

Etienne, it has been our pleasure to answer your question. We hope your interest in Jimland and its exotic animal life will continue. Perhaps you will visit us in Jimville some day.

Sincerely yours,

The Science Club.

[Well done Science Club. - Ed.]

Report 204 - TEXICAN EXPEDITION STIRS INTO ACTIVITY.

Date: 2004-03-08

TEXICAN EXPEDITION STIRS INTO ACTIVITY

The World Herald received this preliminary report from the Texcian Expedition led by one Texas Bob Bodine. [Who is inordinately fond of his six shooters, take that as you will. - Ed.]

Your fine paper may rely on an account of the Terror's latest expedition being forwarded as soon as one of the survivors is capable of putting pen to paper.

A few days ago...

This tabloid has recently received word that the American Expedition; know as the Texas Terrors were recently hired by the New Whoppington and Thedford River Museum to procure some trophy animals for their establishment. With that document in hand Texas Bob Bodine is known to have approached the Sultan for a special permit to procure said trophies from the interior of Jimland

Texas Bob Bodine looked up into the eyes of the Sultan's Officer of the Watch. Texas Bob was a big man; he wasn't used to looking up into people's eyes. It made him nervous. Glancing over his shoulder he looked at his old sidekick and trusty scout, Buckskin Sledge. The grizzled old Indian fighter shrugged his shoulders and leaned back against the outer walls of the Sultan's palace as if to say; 'Whaddya expect from a bunch of heathens?'

Still and all, when one was in a foreign country amid folks not from Texas, one had to adapt, rude or silly as it may be. Imagine asking a man to turn over his six-shooters! His esteemed father would be rolling in his grave, if he'd had one. [A grave or a father. Inquiring minds want to know. - Ed.]

Shrugging and looking into the unflinching eyes of the big officer, Texas Bob sighed, unbuckled his gun belt, and handed his nickel-plated, ivory-handled Colt .45's to the immaculately dressed officers whose white pants hurt the eye and whose smart red jacket with gold lace from cuff to elbow dazzled in the sunlight.

After endless court flunkies and two hours Texas Bob finally was outside the Sultan's library door. Clutched tightly in Texas Bob's hand was the beribboned and ornately sealed letter from the New Whoppington and Thedford River Museum to him. There was also another plush and ornate unopened letter from the Museum to his Royal Highness. It was inside a thick money-sized envelope. Texas Bob was ushered into the Sultan's august presence.

Texas Bob performed a slight and awkward bow, and presented both letters to his Royal Highness. His Highness read the letter from the Museum and it's bonifides from the New Whoppington and Thedford River Museum to Texas Bob. The Sultan read the Museum's letter to him, not without some shuffling of many large bill sized pieces of paper Texas Bob couldn't quite see in the sunlight's glare. The Sultan was less than enthused.

The Sultan reread the letter from the Museum to Texas Bob. The Sultan was still less than enthused. Texas Bob of course mentioned that he was hoping to be permitted a contribution to the Sultan's favorite charity, a rather large contribution. The Sultan mellowed somewhat.

The Sultan, after depositing said contribution into the charity's coffers and the Museum's letter, strangely, into the same coffer, offered a seat to Texas Bob. The chair was hard, uncomfortable and in a distant corner. Texas Bob made a polite gesture to one of the Sultan's servants and that worthy brought forward a large cherry-wood case, gleaming in the light, the deep red, beautifully grained wood, lustrous, rich and enchanting.

Bowing and bumping his head repeatedly, not looking at the Sultan; the servant, slowly advancing on his knees, held the case forward and above his head, presenting the beautiful, but plain wooden case to his master. At a nod of the Sultan's head another servant came forward and bowing low took the case from the first servant and offered it to his master. The Sultan made an impatient gesture, his eyes glowing, toward the second servant and that ornately dressed lackey opened the golden clasps of the case, carefully drew back the lid and presented the interior for the Sultan's perusal.

A quiet happy sigh escaped the Sultan. A small boy's grin came over his face. There, resting in royal purple velvet, gleaming in the light was a Purdy and Purdy, 12 bore, Pigeon grade, side-by-side shotgun. The firearm was perfect. What else would one expect from Purdy and Purdy? The bluing was so flawless it appeared to be a foot deep. The wood was burlled and grained with such beauty and perfection; it was unmatched anywhere in the world. The golden walnut from which the stock and forearm were made was no longer available anywhere on the face of the planet. The receiver's gold engraving of wood nymphs and flying doves were works of art comparable to the Mona Lisa or perhaps the statuary of the ancient Greeks. The firearm was priceless.

"Extractors or ejectors?" asked the Sultan.

"Extractors of course, Sir." Texas Bob answered.

An even larger smile warmed the Sultan's face as he lay the fowling piece in his lap running his hands lovingly along its smooth and polished beauty.

The Sultan looked into Texas Bob's eyes. "Why Mr. Bodine," the Sultan purred in a rich and warm voice. "Whatever in the world are you doing in that most uncomfortable of chairs over there in the corner?"

"Come Sir," rumbled the Sultan's deep basso. "Sit here in front of me by the window," said the Sultan pointing to a large comfortable armchair across the desk from which he worked and sat. Texas Bob obediently moved to the armchair, sat and relaxed slightly for the first time.

The Sultan clapped and declared. "What are we charlatans, slackers of wit, the most thoughtless of peoples, where are my guest's refreshments, am I to be shamed in front of an honored guest!"

Immediately servants rushed from the room and within seconds dainty pastries, cold cuts of rich meats, fresh breads, chilled juices and sweet cakes appeared and were laid out in golden serving dishes, platters and goblets,

served on golden jeweled trays before the Sultan and his guest. Glancing up at his Court Advisor the Sultan sulked.

"Punish the imbeciles who allowed my honored guest to be treated in such ill fashion. I think one dozen lashes each will do." Texas Bob gulped and almost choked on a pastry.

"Escort my secretary in here instantly." the Sultan added. The Sultan's Court Advisor left in a swish of robes and soon a bobbing and bowing ornately dressed old man entered with a portable desk, colored inks and ornate parchments. Bowing his head slightly in Texas Bob's direction, the Sultan excused himself and his secretary as the Sultan dictated and the secretary wrote in large ornate letters on beautiful parchment.

As the Sultan dictated he helped himself to the rich food and drink often motioning Texas Bob to help himself to more. After half an hour or so a one time only permit was produced allowing one Texas Bob Bodine and such worthies and attachments as he deemed necessary to proceed at his pleasure into the interior of Jimland for the express purpose of the cultural advancement of the peoples of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales.

The document was placed in front of the Sultan who dashed off his signature. The secretary quickly poured a small dollop of royal purple wax just below the royal signature and the Sultan immediately pressed the large signet ring on his right hand into the soft rich wax producing the royal seal of authority and approval. Ensuring the document was dry the secretary rolled the parchment around a birch wood dowel and placed it carefully into an ebony and ivory scroll case. Then bowing he presented the case to Texas Bob. Texas Bob rose from his chair and bowed to the Sultan.

The interview was over, the "One-Time" permit and Texas Bob were escorted with much dignity and ceremony to the main gate where Buckskin Sledge had been joined by Harry Hunter, Freddy Phynnder and Scarlet Blabber.

"Well?" Scarlet asked.

Smiling a huge smile and buckling on his six-shooters Texas Bob looked into the beautiful redhead's green eyes and smiled.

"Pack your bags!"

Report 205 - IN HIS OWN WORDS: THE BODINE EXPEDITION REPORT 2.

Date: 2004-03-10

IN HIS OWN WORDS: THE BODINE EXPEDITION REPORT 2

It was hot. It was humid. It was Jimland.

Pulling off, his dove gray, Aussie styled Stetson hat and wiping the sweat from his forehead and long, wavy blonde hair, Texas Bob Bodine walked round his party checking bearers, the general packing, ammunition, food and the general appearance of his latest expeditionary forces. After his parlay with the Sultan he wanted to make sure no oversight on his part would cause any problems for his team.

"Okay people," he called out. "Make sure your weapons are loaded but on safe, we don't want any accidents while we're here in Jimville. Everyone is watching us. No doubt because we're Texicans after all, but also because we are the first expedition to venture forth for a while." Setting an example Bob withdrew first one then the other of his beautifully inlaid custom .45 colts, checking each meticulously.

Everyone nodded and he watched, holding one of his precious .45's, as his folks and the hired Indian soldiers checked their weapons. Satisfied with the party's safety standards and appearance, Bob holstered his revolver and thought of the absent the Royal Marines.

Bob was still a little miffed by the British Consul forbidding the Royal Marine Light Infantry Barracks commander at the consulate from Okaying the use of Royal Marines in this expedition. I mean it wasn't as if they were Americans or Texicans and they were sitting around on their backsides to boot, he thought. [Perhaps someday the British will allow other countries to reopen their Consulates, but it seems unlikely at present. - Ed.]

Well, he mused. These Indian fellows may not be as good as Royal Marines but they sure looked like they knew their stuff, their weapon handling, marksmanship and discipline seemed to as good as any soldiers he'd ever seen, perhaps not up to Marine standards - but then who was?

"So," he asked looking over the group. "Are we all ready?"

Buckskin Sledge, Bob's old teacher and mentor just shrugged, spit tobacco from the corner of his mouth plastering an ant into the damp ground. "Nuff' talk, we need to mosey." With that the old Indian scout and woodsman led off down the too short road east out of Jimville.

Harry Hunter slung his elephant gun and began chivvying the native bearers into a semblance of order. "Lead on Boss," he quipped. "Ready, willing and able, lets go!"

Bob's latest hire, his interpreter, the ever-beautiful Scarlet O'Blabber nodded also, her red hair shining where it cascaded out from under her large Panama hat. Her green eyes sparkled with excitement as her ample bosom

heaved. "By all means Mr. Bodine, I'm ever so anxious to talk to the tribes and put my years of study to work."

Freddy Physter, the ageless prospector, a friend of Buckskin Sledges, also a new-hire checked his bags one last time made sure his shovel, pickaxe and ore bags were in order, nodded and stepped into line behind the beautiful Scarlet O'Blabber. Freddy wasn't much for words. He'd gotten mostly out of the habit after all his years prospecting alone in various wildernesses.

As the party followed Texas Bob after the already invisible Buckskin a light rain began. It was just passing ten in the morning and the rain was almost exactly on time. Every day this time of the year between ten and eleven in the morning it rained. Sometimes a mist or drizzle, sometimes a downpour, but it rained one way or another.

A few shiftless types with nothing better to do watched as the last Indian soldier, his turban shining in the rain disappeared into around the bend of the road and out of sight.

One of the barflies, scratched his beard, looked at the other and said. "You know Charlie; it may be worth a drink to let our friend at the hotel know them silly Texas Rubes is off."

The other man straightened his wrinkled shirt as best he could. "Cain't hurt, Burl, cain't hurt. Besides it's mighty thirsty out. And them Texans is a strange bunch, 'specially that there leader fella. Man oh man what a dandy that boy is. If his clothes was any louder they'd hire him as a band!"

The two old cronies wandered off towards the hotel laughing, coughing and laughing some more at Charlie's joke. They were in good humor; it looked as if they'd be able to bum a drink or two just for letting Mr. F know the Texans were on their way. Mr. F always bought them a drink or two when they had news for him.

"Boss!"

Texas Bob almost leaped out of his baby blue, yellow trimmed shirt! "Dang it Buckskin, don't sneak up on me like that."

Buckskin Sledge looked around. "But Bob, there ain't a bush in twenty feet of us."

"Well never mind," blushed Texas Bob. "What's up?"

"I found an empty village up the trail here 'bout quarter mile. I done been around it twice, but there ain't no one there. Don't 'pear there been anyone there for a while. No cook fire, no beddin' in the huts nothing around a'tall.

"Hmm," mused Texas Bob.

"There's a place where they burnt some stuff, I ain't sure just what. Mebby straw or corn shucks I don't know just what. But there have been some people burnt too. I don't like that Boss; it feels bad to me. Like a disease or

sumpthin' run through there and they burnt the beddin' and the dead then lit out to make sure the rest didn't get it too!"

Well it's almost dark, we'll make camp this side of the village and I'll check it out."

Buckskin said. "Boss, I think the other side of the village is a better idea, it'll be up wind o' the place so we won't be bothered by no vapors or nuthin."

"Ah," scoffed Texas Bob. "Don't worry about it just do like I tell you. I'll bet you those natives were torturing people for their gold or other valuables, maybe even weapons. Shoot, that means we won't be able to sell them any ourselves, dang it all."

"But Boss, look at the facts..."

"Awa, Buckskin, don't be jumping to conclusions, you'll scare our bearers. You know what a flighty bunch those fellows are."

Buckskin spat. "You're the boss."

As everyone else made camp, 'Nasty work, that', thought Texas Bob, the tall elegantly dressed Texan prodded through the deserted village. After twenty minutes Bob had found nothing that Buckskin hadn't told him about. 'The burnt bodies were a puzzle,' he thought. But who could understand natives. It was probably just as he had told Buckskin no doubt, burning rivals or torturing, just for the fun of it, crazy natives.

Texas Bob returned to the camp.

"Ah, Miss O'Blabber, a drink?" asked Texas Bob as the last of the bearers were sitting down to eat their evening meal.

"No thank you Mr. Bodine I don't drink. But help yourself; I know Texas gentlemen do so enjoy a tonic."

"Tonic?"

"Huh, oh yeah," said Texas Bob. "A tonic will keep you in good fiddle my Daddy always told me."

"And how is your father Mr. Bodine?"

"Dead." Texas Bob mused. "Got drunk on a river boat down in New Orleans, fell off and drowned I reckon, never did find the body."

"Oh my!" Scarlet O'Blabber almost sobbed. "Please forgive me I didn't know."

"Ah, don't worry about it." Texas Bob said pouring another double into his glass. "The old boy left all his dough to me and here I am a famous explorer now. And when I return with some fine animal pelts or even better a few live new species for the museum's collection I'll be famous as the great Mr. Flagstone."

Scarlett started to say perhaps he was rushing things, but was saved possible embarrassment as Texas Bob passed out and his head lolled back, the empty glass falling from his unconscious and unfeeling hands.

Buckskin Sledge came out of the dark. "Don't you worry, Missy," he said. "He's a chip of the old block. I'll just put him to bed." The old man winked at Scarlet, kicked the slat out from the folding chair and Texas Bob collapsed backwards as the chair folded into a lounge keeping the inebriated young Texan off the ground by a few inches.

"Harry," he called. "Bring me that 'skeeter net!"

Switching sides with his chew as Harry came up they worked together and wrapped the limp body of Texas Bob Bodine in the netting and as they were walking away Harry said over his shoulder. "I'd go to bed were I you, Miss O'Blabber, dawn will come early and our hero here will be ready to go. I'll tell you it is infuriating - the idiot never, and I mean never, has a hangover. It just isn't fair."

Scarlet O'Blabber returned to her small tent, pulled off her boots and hat, lay back on her cot, pulled the mosquito netting over her and was almost instantly asleep.

"Earthquake!"

"Earthquake!" Yelled Texas Bob again as the shaking continued, fighting his way out of the mosquito netting and sitting up in the lounge chair he'd been forced to use for a bed.

"Boss, boss, get aholt of yerself, it ain't no earthquake, it's me," yelled Buckskin still shaking the frightened and befuddled Texas Bob.

Calming himself Texas Bob looked blearily up at his old mentor. "What is it?" he asked.

"We got two soljers and a bearer down with high fevers, bad fevers boss. We need to get some medicine outta the packs right now. We gotta git it in 'em in a hurry, they're in bad shape."

"Soldiers, bearers, fevers, medicine. Murmured Texas Bob, stuttering.

"Yeah." Buckskin Sledge said disgusted.

"Medicine. Hmm, medicine," repeated Texas Bob.

"Oh rat spit!" Texas Bob yelped. "Shoot and darn I knew there was something I forgot. Dang it I forgot to pack any medicine... Dang, dang, dang and Heck!

Buckskin's eyes rolled up to the heavens and his hand jerked, seemingly of their own accord, toward Texas Bob's throat. "Give me strength oh Lord," he murmured looking heavenwards.

"Didjou say you didn't bring no medicine," asked Buckskin Sledge, his voice low, whispering, menacing, deadly?

"Umm, no, I forgot to pack it." Whispered Texas Bob scrabbling backwards away from the old frontiersman's grasping hands. "I was so busy making sure everything else was ready, you know my wardrobe, polishing my guns and all my bullets, getting the crease right in my hat. Dang it Buckskin, I was so busy I completely forgot the medicine!"

"Here!" Texas Bob Bodine yelped his hand finding a half empty bottle of 'Ol Gutwrencher', whiskey that he had dropped as he passed out earlier that evening. "This'll fix them up; it's just what they need."

As the old man lunged for him hands outstretched Texas Bob leaped to his feet and handed Buckskin the bottle.

Taking deep breaths the old scout looked at Bob and whirled plunging off into the dark headed for one of the hired help's tents.

It was gloomy around the breakfast fire. The two soldiers and one of the bearers had died just before midnight. The fever had killed them. Texas Bob had too late taken Buckskin Sledges advice and they had burned the bodies, broken camp and moved on to the other side of the village. After moving Bob had read to the group from the Bible for the dead. No tents had been erected; they had slept on their cots under mosquito nets. Buckskin had already left to scout ahead. Texas Bob was just as glad. The old man looked really upset. If Texas Bob hadn't known better he would have thought the old man blamed him.

As the soldiers were dousing the fire and everyone was preparing to start the day's march Texas Bob noticed no one would look him in the eye. They were all ashamed, he thought. Yes, that was probably it. They were ashamed for Buckskin Sledge wrongfully blaming him. Well, Bob would forgive him, he was after all, an old man somewhat set in his ways.

Work would be the best medicine; Bob flinched as he thought that.

"Let's move out." The second day had started.

The day brought more jungle, nothing but trees and bushes. The rains were on time again, heavy but not lasting more than 15 minutes. Lunch was damp. Bob hated it when his steak was undercooked. What was worse, of course, was his drink was warm. Bob made do by doubling its strength, which helped. It was the wilderness, what could one expect.

There was a crashing in the jungle ahead of them! What, thought Bob!

"Ambush!" Screamed Buckskin Sledge running for all he was worth!

Instantly, while Bob was yelping "What, what, what did you say?" The Indian soldiers yelled at the bearers, forcing them into a small square.

He heard one of them say loudly, but calmly to his fellow Indians. "Form a line between the bearers and the attackers!"

Then Buckskin skidded to a halt and the others with the soldiers formed a line.

An instant later seven screaming, sword swinging savages burst from the jungle. They had time for only one volley before the screeching tribals would be upon them, it had to count!

Texas Bob snatched out his colts and blazed away shooting in the ambushers' direction. The bearers skittered back from the firing line bravely carrying their loads towards safety - or so it seemed.

Calmly the Indian soldiers, Buckskin, Harry, Freddy, and Scarlet brought their firearms to bear and loosed a volley almost as one shot. There was a solid BAMMMMM, among Bobs hasty banging away!

Smoke and fire belched from the massed shooting of Bob's companions. Screams even louder, then moaning and then the crashing of brush receding into the distance as the smoke cleared.

The ambush was over almost before it began. On the ground mere feet in front of them were the dead bodies of four of the seven ambushers, of the others there was no sign.

Then there was only the sound of Texas Bob's teeth chattering and the Indians' steady movements as they reloaded their rifles.

"T-That wasn't so bad." Texas Bob stuttered looking over the drifting gun smoke at the dead ambushers. "I know I certainly appreciate the help you gave me taking them down."

Turning to the blank-faced soldiers Texas Bob ordered, "Go over the bodies, see if they have any useful information or anything we might be able to use."

"Like medicine." Added Buckskin Sledge.

Texas Bob pretended not to hear.

Camp that night was a bit cheerier. The bearers and the soldiers were at their fire reliving the day's events just as the Americans did at theirs. Texas Bob even remembered going into his tent and falling asleep.

The next day found the expedition still in the jungle. It rained just before eleven; a heavy and cooling shower that unfortunately hid the pit of vipers the lead bearer fell into. The man's screams as the multitude of snakes bit him could be heard by the entire party. Buckskin even heard him from his scouting position and hurried back to see what was happening.

There was nothing that could be done. The man was dead in minutes. The soldiers lowered a rope and recovered the body. Then, over the protestations of Texas Bob, pouring an entire bottle of 'Ol' Gutwrencher' into the pit of snakes the soldiers burned them all to death.

It was an early end to another bad day. Again Texas Bob did the burial ceremonies as the other bearers filled the unlucky man's grave.

The next morning found the expedition rising above the jungle floor and entering the mountains.

Just before the break for lunch Buckskin led the way to a beautiful river not on the maps of the area, not that there was much on the map anyway, but everyone knew they had discovered a new river. Texas Bob named it the Alamo River.

Soon after the noon day break Buckskin Sledge found a village and it became very apparent they had found the mountain hide-out of a nest of slavers.

Scarlet O'Blabber soon had convinced the slavers the expedition had many more men following behind and they were allowed to continue unmolested even though the party could see the slaver's desire to kill or capture them - especially Scarlet. It wasn't the friendliest of villages, but at least they were let go without bloodshed.

They traveled in the mountains until nightfall then in the dark set their camp by torchlight.

At breakfast the next morning Freddy Phynnder approached Texas Bob.

"Bob." He said. "These mountains are strange I admit, but I've been in areas similar to this in the States. I think I can find us something useful if you'll let us rest here a day and let me look around."

"You mean like loot or treasure!" exclaimed Texas Bob aflame with greed.

"Umm, sort of, yes," answered Freddy.

Texas Bob told Freddy, "Okay, you go ahead I'll let the party know we're staying here today."

As Freddy hurried off Texas Bob informed the party they would take a day off and rest.

Bob was antsy all day. He kept watching for Harry in the direction he had gone early that morning. The day passed and just before nightfall Freddy came striding back into the camp a heavy bag over one shoulder.

Texas Bob rushed over and helped Freddy with the heavy bag. "What did you find," he asked the tired prospector as he filled a glass with 'Ol' Gutwrencher' for the weary rock hound.

"Silver," answered Freddy. "Not a lot but enough to make this trip worthwhile if we don't find anything else. I've already separated most of it and it's in the bag."

"Excellent," Bob beamed. "Have another drink."

Just as night fell Buckskin approached the two men still drinking by the fire his face glum, unhappiness written all over it.

Uh oh, though Texas Bob. Doom!

"Bob," said the old man. "We've lost two more men."

"Well foot!" Exclaimed Bob.

"Yep, the boys and I, " Buckskin's head nodded in the direction of the soldiers and bearers, "got to missin' Mustaf and Gobdin. I went lookin' around and sure 'nuff found their trail. It led to a stream, that one behind them boulders that's way over its banks."

The other Americans had gathered by the fire listening to Buckskin. Bob passed the bottle around and noticed with some surprise even Scarlet poured a little into her glass of water.

"Go on Buckskin," he prompted.

"Well, long story short Boss, they got too close to the bank, it gave way with all the water rushin' and that was that. Tracks don't lie, lessen someone plants them and these weren't. Them boys was washed away and the way that stream is runnin' there ain't no way they survived. Not no way."

Texas Bob sat down heavily obviously crestfallen and looked around the gathered Americans. "Well, another soldier and another bearer gone. Jimland is certainly living up to its reputation. We've just got to be more careful and try to watch over each other better."

"I mean it," said Texas Bob.

He looked up at the others, put the cork back in his bottle of whiskey and put it in his backpack, then, carrying the backpack, for the first time he went to the fire where the bearers and soldiers were, their heads hung in misery and sorrow. He began to speak to them softly, reached into the backpack and took out the bottle. With obvious humility he offered it to the first of the soldiers. The man looked into Texas Bob's eyes and saw the genuine sorrow and caring. He took the bottle, pulled the cork, took a drink and passed it on.

Harry looked over at Buckskin his eyes going wide.

"Damn," said Buckskin, his eyes watering. "There may be hope for that boy after all."

The next morning Texas Bob had the men move some large stones and stack them next to the quieting stream as a small monument to the lost men's memories. He read from the Good Book. But this time it was different. This time he meant it.

It was a different, more somber, and alert Texas Bob that started the expedition off later that morning. He had all the members gather round. He explained in detail what he wanted each member of the party to do and how they were to do it.

He asked for questions, he'd never done that. The briefing had been so well thought out and delivered, so obviously carefully planned there were no questions.

Then he asked for advice, he'd certainly never done that. There was lots of advice. He listened to it all carefully. He considered a few minutes. Then he revised the day's plan using some of the advice he'd been given.

As the meeting broke up and everyone went to their assigned duties and place Texas Bob passed close to Buckskin Sledge. Buckskin put his hand on the tall blonde man's shoulder and said loud enough for just the two of them to hear. "Well done, son, that was right well done."

Texas Bob looked into Buckskin's eyes seeing the sincerity and nodded. "You can count on me now Buckskin."

The old man sighed and smiled and simply said, "Okay."

Then they started off. They left the mountains and re-entered the jungles.

Texas Bob Bodine held up his hand silently signaling the party to stop as he saw Buckskin rushing back towards him in that strange lope of his.

"What?" Asked Texas Bob his voice pitched low.

"Oh Boss, we done found one. We did it!"

"What Buckskin, what?"

"I seen one o' them dinersours. C'mon it's just up here aways."

Bob's heart leapt in his chest.

"Harry," he called quietly. "Come with us, Bob has seen a dinosaur."

"Domani," Bob directed the lead soldier. "Keep watch, Freddy, you and Scarlet help Domani, get off the trail and hide until we come back or send for you. We should not be gone longer than fifteen or twenty minutes."

Texas Bob and Harry followed Buckskin quickly up the trail then off the trail they could hear a soft thrashing.

Pointing at the thrashing sound excitedly Buckskin said, "There!"

Texas Bob parted the bushes and his heart caught in his throat. It really was there! Obviously a herbivore, the dinosaur was about three feet long with a deep green hide going to an almost yellow green belly. It was calmly eating leaves from the lower branches of one of the succulent plants that grew so abundantly here.

"Lasso." Texas Bob whispered.

Quickly but quietly Harry handed him his 25 foot lasso.

Without even swinging a loop Texas Bob flipped the rope over the dinosaur's head. And then he started out on a dino-drag. The little beast whipped its

head up and started to charge off. Luckily Harry and Buckskin jumped on the rope and with a couple of minutes thrashing, wrestling and ducking and dodging soon had the creature tied and its mouth roped closed.

"Gents, it's our lucky day," sighed a happy Texas Bob.

They took the little creature back to the others. After all the excitement died down they found the dinosaur would follow them on a lead rope, well at least it would follow Freddy. The little creature seemed to dote on old Freddy and followed him happily. And of course Freddy now had the companion he missed in his burro friend he'd left behind. And talk, Freddy talked without pause to the happy little creature calling it 'Bucktooth', for its large and protruding teeth.

"It's past time to head back to Jimville." Texas Bob announced.

Later in the afternoon Buckskin found a friendly tribal village. They were able to trade some and spent the night in the village showing off Bucktooth to the pride of Freddy and delight of the village children.

The next day they continued their return journey to Jimville, winding through the jungle and keeping a close watch. It was just after the daily rain when Harry called Texas Bob.

"Look there," he said pointing to the base of one of the large trees.

It was a lizard. A lizard a full two feet long but only snake sized around. But it had four legs and feet. No one had ever seen a lizard like this before. A cage was quickly constructed and the lizard lodged within.

A couple of hours later Texas Bob approached a squatting tobacco-chewing Buckskin.

"What is it Buckskin?" he asked.

"Another river, whatcha gonna call this one?"

Texas Bob smiled, "Why that's easy Buckskin, it's the Buckskin River."

The old man shot to his feet, "What!"

"The Buckskin River, mark it so on the map."

The old man was smiling as he updated his map. That felt good thought Texas Bob.

It was raining the next morning. It was ugly. Raining was not the right word; pouring was not the right word. Flooding was even better. Nobody moved that day. Well no one but Bucktooth. He loved it.

The next day it really got ugly. It happened so fast it was over before anyone could do anything. It was raining then suddenly it was hailing, huge baseball sized hail! Everyone but one of the bearers was able to quickly get under the cover of the jungle's trees. Abual was just too far out in a small clearing along the trail. The baseball sized hail beat him to death before he could make it to cover.

They buried him that afternoon. They all had to pitch in to help, they had all been hurt by the sudden hail storm, and there were two broken arms, one of the belonged to Texas Bob.

Texas Bob, arm splinted and in a sling read over their fallen comrade, even Bucktooth seemed sad.

Two days later a splinted and bruised expedition returned to Jimville.

As the limping expedition made its way down Jimville's main road a crowd gathered around Freddy and Bucktooth, and around the bearers carrying the lizard's cage too. People were asking questions. Everyone knew the snotty Texan leader was a braggart and a blowhard so they approached him first, he'd tell all, and they'd just have to pull what was really the truth from the blonde Texan's boasts.

But the man had nothing to say. Finally one of the journalists asked for just a short statement.

As the Texas expedition began "cashing in" and disbursing bonuses to their soldiers and bearers Texas Bob Bodine told the reporter, "There are the heroes," he said pointing, with his good arm, to the Indian soldiers and the native bearers. "Ask them to tell the story. That's the only reason the rest of us are here, because of their courage. That's all I have to say."

Most of the reporters rushed off after the soldiers and bearers.

One of the remaining reporters turned to another. "I say Reginald, why do you suppose that buckskin clad chappie is smiling so big?"

Report 206 - HERALD REPORTS EXPLODE!

Date: 2004-03-12

HERALD REPORTS EXPLODE!

What we mean is that we have had an explosion in the number of reports submitted for publication in our august journal. Both reports at least doubled our previous number of recently received correspondence. Though we question the veracity of some of the information reported we never the less will publish these reports. Gentle Reader, your rights To Know override our quest for the unvarnished truth.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club will vote at their regularly scheduled meeting whether to continue with the current theme of "Mining and Excavation, the Way to Mineral Riches" or adopt a new theme. They solicit your suggestions; about new club themes anyway.

SULTAN HOLDS PARADE

The Sultan held a parade down the Main Street of Jimville. The fact that the parade was held at 4 am alarmed some folks in Jimville. Although several dozen "shiftless drifters" were swept up in their enthusiasm for the parade and subsequently carried away never to be seen again, the local populace was left undisturbed. Undisturbed except for the rifle demonstrations put on the Guard as they march smartly down street driving anyone found in the street before them. We at the Herald do suggest to the Sultan that however exciting his early morning parades might be, they should be held at a more civilized hour. We might even take pictures.

TASTIMIN, THE DESPICABLE

Yes, Dear Reader, that was Tastimin the Despicable, the Scourge of Jimland, who sailed a small sloop close to the main pier and mooned the entire metropolis of Jimville. The man has no taste. It is reported that several ladies had to be revived by local medical staff. Children have been behaving badly ever since this deplorable event. Once again we call for the Sultan to rid Jimland of this menace once and for all.

JIMVILLE HOUSE OF GIRLS AND CASINO BAKE SALE

The Ladies of the Jimville House of Girls and Casino announce they will hold a bake sale next weekend. The proceeds will be donated to the Mooned Children Recovery Fund. Additionally there will be a sale on all other services offered and unoffered by the Jimville House of Girls and Casino. Special Prizes won in the Casino may be redeemed in the House of Girls. [Redeemed might be poor choice of words in this context. - Ed.]

ATTACK ON JIMVILLE

The attack on Jimville widely reported and clearly heard by the entire population of Jimville has been investigated by your heroic Herald staff. We found that it was merely the Texicans under the leadership of Texas Bob Bodine practicing their marksmanship.

The Sultan has quietly informed them that their fire will be returned if they insist on firing at targets between themselves and Jimville. To emphasis his

point the Sultan had a gatling gun and two small artillery pieces placed in sand-bagged revetments facing the Texicans' target range. It might be noted that a sizable mob of concerned citizens, armed to the teeth, also arrived to dig firing pits near Bodine's practice area. No further Texican high jinks have occurred, much to the disappointment of the Sultan's Guard.

DULLCOTES VACATION IN MERRY OLD ENGLAND

Norton Dullcote, the fabulously wealthy industrialist, and his Dear Wife Constance have returned to England to visit relatives and friends while Norton "ties up some loose ends" adrift in his industrial conglomerate. The couple left aboard the steamer "The Baskerville", often used as an impromptu troop transport by the British Army. We hope they will have a pleasant stay and a speedy return to Jimville.

Report 207 - POTTLESWORTH REPORTS: THE RAID ON SKULL ISLAND.

Date: 2004-03-14

POTTLESWORTH REPORTS: THE RAID ON SKULL ISLAND

Rumors abound in Jimland about the mysterious inventor know only as Herr Doktor. For the past few months' supplies have left Jimland's main port and headed south at an extraordinary rate. Several expeditions in Southern Jimland, Lord MacFraser amongst them, have reported that strange lights can be seen at night and natives, when MacFraser actually talks to them, speak of smoke and iron in a remote village on one of the uncharted Secret Islands off the southernmost coast. There is talk of a Doomsday device so great that it could conquer all of Jimland with a single shot. Lord MacFraser returned immediately with this news but Lady Sarah appeared to stay behind with some of her closest companions to keep an eye on the situation. This island is known as Skull Island but nobody remembers why. Long ago the famous X-Rock was mined out and legend had it that the local native tribe was sacrificed to appease the gods and that their skulls reached higher than the tallest peak on the island.

This intrepid reporter decided to investigate these reports and, on landing at the small Secret Island off the Jimland coast, discovered much activity. The dominant powers in Southern Jimland are the Germans and Russians both fighting over the scarce X-Rock still available in this part of the region. Word reached Her Majesty's (God Bless Her) Government of these strange happens, but before she could launch an advance expedition to investigate, the Germans and Russians both sent a Battalion of soldiers to investigate. Boats, steam launches, and any other floatable devices were confiscated in the remote southern port to set sail for the Island. For two days troops embarked upon vessels and set sail amidst the driving rain that plagues this part of Jimland frequently. Small steam tanks of very similar designs built by the famous Scottish inventor Hamish McLeod were dispatched along with the troops of either side.

All over the Jimland port mercenaries pleaded with any paymaster who would take them on this adventure. The Germans hired the Americans and the Russians responded by hiring the British. Then along came the French who having no love for the Germans joined the Russians only to find the Sultan Guard marching with the Germans. Many adventurers were seen scuttling aboard the vessels, but alas none of notoriety enough to have them names published in this journal, today anyway.

The journey was short and the Germans landed on the east of the island with the Russians taking the western approach. Within one hour everyone was on the island and moving cautiously south towards the only reported populated village. It did not take long before shots rang out and cries of "They shot first!" were heard among the Germans as bolt action rifles returned fire towards the advancing Russians. The small steam tanks on the Russian side struggled to find enough steam to get them going while the steady German tanks advanced unleashing shell after shell at the Russians, doing very little damage I may add. One German tank narrowly missed dumping itself in the river.

Suddenly, while both small armies approached the only bridge over the Lazy Sue River, a convoy of vehicles was seen approaching from the direction of the village. The Russians and Germans never stopping to shoot at each other now started shooting at the convoy that appeared to magically explode without damage at any hit on target.

The woods around this area abound with wildlife and by the gracious blessing of God we were able to see every type come forth to feast. At one point in the battle a giant dinosaur had one the German tanks by the jaws and was shaking it. I am glad to say that the crew survived, only to be shot by the Americans mistaking them and everyone else on the table as enemy. It was discovered later that Dr. Philbus Grant had given this company of Marines his new telescopic sight for their rifles. However, due to a production error the gun would always lock onto anyone wearing a large black moustache. I can confirm that upon examining the bodies that these unfortunate troops had large black moustaches. The defective sighting device disappeared after the battle and is believed left behind on the island. This reporter is extremely grateful for this having just trimmed my large bushy black moustache.

With the skirmish around three hours old a tremendous roar was heard in the distance and a large cloud of black smoke appeared from the village. On the bridge the forces from the village were using a large saw mounted on the rear of a truck to attempt to chop up the brave French soldiers who found themselves attacked from the front by the Germans and menaced by this saw on the flank. Finally the French broke after sustaining heavy losses from melee, saw torture, and being run over by one of the two German tanks. Things were looking bleak for the Russians at this time after heavy losses near the forest caused one company to run away. It is rumored that one of the adventurers was shot by a whole squad of the Sultan's Guard and still managed to get up and walk away. His body was never recovered so legend remains as to this mysterious person.

Reports reached my ears of a mysterious flying man who single handedly attacked one of the Russian tanks only later to be seen flying through the air with a Russian soldier hanging on to him for dear life. Using my Throckmorton Everseeing eyeglasses I could confirm that this figure in the distance was struggling to free himself of his passenger. First the Germans shot at them causing both of them to cartwheel through the air and then the Russians shot at them causing them to dive below the treetops. In the ensuing carnage with both sides giving everything they've got to it, a great Leviathan of a steam beast appeared before the bridge causing the ground to shake and bridge to buckle under its weight. Both sides were relieved to see that the beast could not cross the river and all guns turned to launch a major assault on the beast. This had no effect whatsoever and it appeared that the gun on the Leviathan was struggling to find its range.

As darkness fell many wounded soldiers retreated to safety as far as possible from this place. Herr Doktor was never seen at any time in this battle and apart from a punitive party of Russians making it across the river nobody came close to the village. The Doomsday device appears to still be in the possession of the evil genius known only as Herr Doktor. On board the steam ship home I stumbled across Lady Sarah MacFraser and asking her how she came to be with this party she merely replied that she had places to go and people to see. Her companions were all ladies who, I might add, appeared to be rather well armed for such dainty creatures.

I will endeavor to continue to report the news of Herr Doktor and keep the public up to date with the latest news.

Your Loyal Servant
Henry Winfred Pottlesworth III

[It seems Jimland has a life of its own. Ever Forward. - Ed.]

Report 208 - 6.1 - LADIES ONLY.

Date: 2004-03-16

6.1 - LADIES ONLY

Julius Flagstone was not pleased. Olivia Fate stood before him, hands on her hips, a stubborn look on her pretty face.

"Olivia, I don't like the idea of you flying that old balloon all over Jimland alone."

"It isn't old. You know it's the original scaled back, rebuilt, and now ready for testing. It's not as big as it was. Only one cabin. It still has dual balloon bags for safety. You have examined it top to bottom yourself."

"But, "

"And I won't be alone. As you well know, I received a request from the Sultan himself to take Cassandra and Jasmine, the two leading members of the Sultan's Harem for a ride. How can we refuse? How will you explain this to the Sultan? He is still a little more than miffed about the landing incident, you know."

"But, "

"Blind Bob has reworked my pair of pistols. We will stock up as if you were leading us off to places unknown. I will be very careful. No daredevil stunts." Olivia's face was flushed.

"But, "

"But what? Are you saying women can't handle themselves in Jimland?" Her color grew more vivid.

"But, I'll miss you," Flagstone said softly.

Olivia threw her arms around his thick neck and kissed him passionately. "I'll be extra special careful, Jules. Just for you," she whispered.

"Have a great time," he whispered back.

Two days later Olivia surveyed the balloon. Consulting with Marcello Viggio by cable and trying to meet Flagstone's demands, Olivia had spent several months rebuilding their "Exploring" Balloon. It was smaller now with only one cabin that could sleep six. The balloon still had two air bags though they were smaller. The dual control stations had been reduced to one. The propeller that Marcello was so proud of was still attached and still the same size. Olivia and Marcello had convinced Flagstone that the propeller would be more efficient on the smaller gondola. Flagstone agreed to keep it, but remained skeptical.

Olivia checked a last item off her long list. The balloon was fully provisioned. The fuel oil for the two burners was topped off. Food was piled high in the lockers. She even had her pistols strapped around her slim waist. She was ready. All she lacked now was her two passengers. She looked around. No sign of them yet.

She was anxious to be off. Flagstone stood to one side of the field letting Olivia run the show, but watching everything closely. Olivia was surprised to find she felt uncomfortable with him watching her every move. I can do this, she thought. Just you watch. Women can and should be equals in Jimland. We deserve it, she thought. She found she was flushed. Damn it, Jules, she thought as she watched him some twenty yards away talking quietly with Blind Bob.

A mounted party appeared at the edge of the big field. Then an over-decorated coach approached. Olivia smiled to herself. Very discrete, she thought. The coach stop by Olivia. A gaudy coachman bounded down. He folded out a small step. Opening the door, the coachman bowed low. Cassandra, Sweet Cassandra of the Sultan's Own Harem, stepped lightly down out of the coach. She was followed by Jasmine the Honey-Lipped also of the Sultan's Own Harem. The most influential women in Jimland stood before her. Olivia looked the women over as they stopped and gazed at the balloon tugging at its mooring lines.

Cassandra was dressed in a red jacket and white pants. A soft black felt hat sat squarely on her head. Sturdy boots finished her outfit. Jasmine wore a light off-white jacket and red pants. A bright green woven straw hat topped her head. Again sturdy boots completed the attire. Olivia relaxed a little. At least they had enough sense to follow her recommendations for their outfitting for this little adventure. She wondered what the fragrance was they were wearing? I'll have to get some of that, she thought. Coming out of her thoughts Olivia realized the two young women were watching her expectantly.

"Welcome, Ladies. Thank you for being prompt." Olivia suddenly noticed the small crowd of men that had assembled. She felt on display as the men openly stared. Olivia noticed the other two women did not even notice the men. Maybe we'll all learn something this trip, she thought.

"Come Ladies. I must give you a short tour and finish your outfitting. Then we shall be off." Olivia gestured toward the balloon. The two young women did not hesitate. Confidently, they walked with Olivia as she led them around the tall balloon. Olivia explained the mooring rope system and that the women would be expected to help in this activity. She explained their roles. They exchanged looks, but said nothing. Olivia noted that Cassandra's face was slightly pale. Jasmine's was radiant and slightly flushed.

Next they climbed aboard by the rope ladder hanging down from the gondola. For the next hour Olivia took the young women through every nook and cranny of the gondola showing them everything. She explained how the balloon was controlled. Both women asked occasional questions, none were silly. Olivia was pleased. The women were paying attention. Finally they descended to the ground.

Olivia led them to a table next to which stood Julius Flagstone. Flagstone bowed to the women as they came to the table. Olivia started to introduce Cassandra, but Flagstone interrupted. "But of course, Olivia. Cassandra and I are acquainted." He kissed her offered hand. Cassandra looked embarrassed. Olivia gave Flagstone a look. He smiled. Olivia introduced Jasmine. Flagstone touched his lips to the proffered hand and welcomed Jasmine to the sport of ballooning where what goes up must come down. She giggled. Olivia found herself fuming.

Olivia turned to the table. From it she handed each woman a belt to which she attached a small holster holding a pistol. Jasmine looked at the pistol and then eyed Olivia. "Can't we have one like yours," she asked. Flagstone laughed. Jasmine giggled. Olivia blushed. "Maybe later," she said.

Next Olivia handed each woman a small day pack and canteen. Olivia slipped a small knife and scabbard onto their belts. She explained that they should have what they had just been given with them at all times in case of emergencies. At this both women's faces became less gay. Olivia turned to Flagstone.

Flagstone was looking over her shoulder surprised. Olivia turned. The Sultan was stepping out of the same coach the women had arrived in. Flagstone smiled. Crafty bugger, he thought. Olivia cleared her throat. Cassandra smiled. Jasmine giggled. Everyone bowed as the Sultan strolled up to the table.

"Your Highness, thank you for attending the launching," said Flagstone. Olivia gave Flagstone a cloudy look. The Sultan made a small gesture. Flagstone continued, "As you can see Ms. Fate had briefed her passengers and ensured they are properly prepared for their adventure in the skies of Jimland."

At this Olivia brightened up. She smiled at the Sultan. The Sultan looked at the balloon and then up into the clear blue sky. "Adventures in the skies," he said. "Yes, that is what these two silly women ask for." He shook his head and kicked the ground. "This is where we all belong." Cassandra laughed. Jasmine giggled. "The sooner you are off, the sooner you are back. Right, Ms. Fate," said the Sultan.

"Absolutely, Your Highness," said Olivia. "Let' go Ladies." Each of the young ladies gave the Sultan a peck on the cheek and followed Olivia toward the balloon. "Crew, prepare to launch," yelled Olivia. The two crewmen accompanying them scrambled up the rope ladder. Other men assembled by the mooring lines. Jasmine quickly climbed the rope ladder. Cassandra climbed up at a more deliberate pace. Olivia turned around and found herself followed by the Sultan and Flagstone.

The Sultan stepped close to Olivia. "Let no harm come to them, Ms Fate."

"I will take good care of them, Your Highness."

The Sultan turned and walked off to be quickly surrounded by his Guard. He climbed into the coach. Quickly the coach withdrew to the edge of the field and halted. The coach window framed the Sultan's head and shoulders as he looked out.

Olivia let out a big breath. "Well, that was interesting," she said. Flagstone now stepped up to her.

"No stunts. No chances. No guesses. Just a peaceful four day trip. Out and back, no detours. Big Jake is already at your destination. Ready?"

Olivia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yes."

Flagstone gave her a warm kiss. "Have fun," he said as he patted her butt.

He turned and walked back to the table. Olivia grinned and climbed the ladder. It was pulled up and stowed. Olivia looked around at the clear skies. She cheered up. She opened the burners to full. Their roar filled the gondola. Olivia leaned over the side and yelled, "Cast off."

She fired the burners on full. The balloon began to rise into the sky. Excited squeals came from Cassandra and Jasmine. Olivia laughed. The crewmen grinned. Olivia fired the burners again.

The balloon rose and slowly began drifting over the Wilds of Jimland.

Report 209 - 6.2 - UNEXPECTED LAUNCHING.

Date: 2004-03-18

6.2 - UNEXPECTED LAUNCHING

Olivia Fate reached out a hand and fired the dual burners. They roared briefly. The "exploring balloon" rose slowly. Olivia returned to watching the animals on the savanna below. Her companions from the Sultan's Own Harem, the Sweet Cassandra and Jasmine the Honey-Lipped, were lost in the vista that stretched out below them. Olivia was happy. The trip was going very well. The weather was cooperating with pleasant days and clear nights.

The balloon had been landed each night with little trouble. It seemed that even the animals were cooperating. On the savanna below Olivia could see a herd of wild mules, a small group of elephants, and a large herd of gazelles, all gathered near a water hole. Visible from the balloon was a small pride of lions lying asleep in the noonday sun. It was picturesque. Olivia only wished Julius Flagstone was beside her to share the tranquil beauty.

The balloon slowly drifted across the Wilds of Jimland. Olivia watched her two passengers. She had come to the conclusion that two women were not the best of friends, more like friendly adversaries. Cassandra was number one in the Sultan's eyes, Jasmine was number two and trying hard to become number one. Both had admitted privately to Olivia that they were there for only two reasons, to fly in the "great balloon" and because the other one was there. Neither could allow the other to show them up. Olivia laughed to herself. I'll bet the Sultan's Harem, disregarding the Sultan completely, is never dull, she thought. She also thought it would not be for the weak at heart.

Cassandra was on the same side of the gondola as Olivia. Cassandra watched the Wilds of Jimland silently glide by with a radiant smile on her beautiful face. She was truly beautiful thought Olivia. She realized she was a little jealous. And how do you know my Julius she wondered studying the woman? Cassandra seemed to feel Olivia's look. She turned and smiled at Olivia. Olivia smiled back.

As night slowly fell Olivia found they had been blown slightly off course. She worked carefully at the map Flagstone had provided her. Yes, they were a half-day off course, no problem, she thought. Below the balloon the savanna was turning to scruffy desert. The great desert could be seen stretching to the horizon. Olivia called out to everyone, "Landing positions, please. We are going to land now."

What she didn't say was that she didn't want to drift further off course. The two crewmen stood ready, one on each side with their big hammers and huge metal stakes. Cassandra and Jasmine had put on their gloves and were standing by the mooring lines. Olivia opened the vent ever so slowly. The balloon descended in the twilight.

Five feet, four, three. "Lines away," called Olivia. The two crewmen vaulted over the side and landed easily on the ground. Immediately they each

began pounding in a huge metal stake. The two women hoisted the mooring lines up and over the side. The crewmen secured one then the other to the stakes. Olivia let the balloon land with a thump. It snubbed itself against the two lines. Olivia quickly opened the vent wider. The air bags deflated to half full. "On the ground," yelled Olivia. More stakes were driven into the ground. The two women now jumped out of the gondola and helped the men tied more lines to the new stakes. Finally eight stakes held the balloon in position snugly. Olivia let more air out of the balloon's bags. The two men and two women grabbed at the deflating bags' covering net and wrestled it into an orderly pile. Olivia shut off the burners and closed the fuel values. She quickly cleaned the burner nozzles.

Olivia climbed out of the gondola to find her crewmen and passengers standing, breathing hard, smiling at one another for the successful landing. Olivia was pleased. She worried at first that the women would prove helpless and landing would become a rough affair with only two crewmen. But Cassandra and Jasmine had entered into a healthy competition to be the first in everything including getting their mooring lines set. They proved hardy workers who could cuss along with the regular crewmen when they wanted to. The men laughed loudly at this whenever it occurred.

"Ok, Cassandra, your turn to unload tonight," said Olivia. Cassandra nodded and headed toward the balloon. Suddenly Jasmine cried out and pulled her gun. Aiming at Cassandra she fired. Cassandra jumped aside. A Jimland Spitting Cobra thrashed about in its death throws. Olivia cursed.

"Th-thanks," stuttered Cassandra stepping around the snake.

"Suppose to be good eating," said Jasmine calmly. "Can we try it, Ms. Fate," she asked meekly. Olivia could not get the two women to quit calling her Ms. Fate. She hated it. She was no where old enough to be their mother, more like an not so much older sister. She smiled to herself and sighed, trying to appear calm.

"Sure. I have never eaten it myself."

"Really," asked a surprised Jasmine? "I thought you ate all kinds of animals on your Expeditions?"

"We do, but we don't go hunting these things. They are very dangerous. One bit can kill a man. There is no known antidote."

Cassandra was lugging gear back to where the other were making a fire. "One bit is fatal?"

"Oh, yes. One bite can kill a man. It takes two to kill a woman," answered Olivia sternly. "So make sure your sleeping covers are empty before you get in." She winked at the two crewmen who turned away smiling. Cassandra and Jasmine exchanged looks.

The night sky was crystal clear. The stars shone down like iridescent foam on a black sea. The snake was passably good. Olivia reminded herself to tell Julius about it. The fire burned down to embers. The small party boarded the gondola. The crewman bedded down on the deck; the three women took the small cabin. The night passed quietly.

As breakfast was being scraped out of the pot, Olivia studied her map. She marked their position and was not as pleased as she had been the night before. They were probably a full day off course. There was no way to make it up. She stood up. She jumped. Jasmine jumped. She hadn't heard Jasmine come up to stand beside her. "Sorry," said Olivia. "Didn't hear you come up." Jasmine giggled.

Olivia looked up at the air bags. They towered overhead. She was ready to go as soon as the last of the cooking gear was back aboard. The two crewmen were walking back to the balloon with the last things to be loaded. Two mooring lines held the balloon to the ground.

Suddenly, Olivia felt a gun muzzle in the small of her back. "No sudden moves, please," Jasmine said in a low voice. Olivia nodded. "Into the cabin. No noise or I will use this." Jasmine pushed Olivia into the cabin with the gun barrel. The door locked as Olivia spun around. She heard yelling from the two crewmen as the balloon suddenly leapt into the air.

Jasmine reached for the burner control as she dropped the small axe she had used to cut the two mooring lines. She fired the burners. The balloon rose quickly into the air. Cassandra came running around the cabin.

"You left the crew," she yelled. "You left," her mouth hung open as Jasmine pointed a pistol at her.

"Yes, I did," she said calmly, firing the burners again, sending the balloon even higher. Cassandra stomped her foot in anger. Jasmine giggled. The pistol stayed rock steady, aimed at Cassandra.

"What do you think you are doing," demanded Cassandra.

"Taking charge," Jasmine said.

"What! What are you doing, Jasmine?" Cassandra asked angrily.

"As I said, I'm taking charge," Jasmine said calmly. She held out a piece of rope with a loop on the end. "Your hand, please."

Cassandra reluctantly stuck out her arm. Jasmine put the loop over Cassandra's wrist and pulled it tight. She motioned for Cassandra to turn around. "Your other hand." Cassandra's hands were quickly bound behind her. Jasmine put a heavy rope around her waist and tied it securely to the gondola side. Cassandra tried to turn her head away as Jasmine pushed a gag in her mouth. Jasmine could hear Olivia pounding on the cabin door. She giggled.

Jasmine walked to the cabin door and tested the lock. It was secure. She rummaged through the supplies outside the cabin. She found what she was looking for. Jasmine picked up the hammer and nailed boards across the cabin door. Hurrying to the control station she fired the burners and the balloon rose, skimming the treetops. Jasmine let out whoop. Olivia's pounding and shouting had stopped. Jasmine smiled and fired the burners again. The

balloon rose higher and higher. Cassandra made noises through the gag. Jasmine giggled.

"Shut up," she said to Cassandra and gave her a kick. Cassandra fell to the deck. A moment later she struggled to a sitting position. Tears ran down her cheeks. Jasmine looked at her, disgusted.

"Crying, Cassandra? I thought you were tougher than that," Jasmine said. She gave the burner control a vicious turn. The burners roared. The balloon rose still higher.

Jasmine giggled.

Report 210 - 6.3 - UNEXPECTED LANDING.

Date: 2004-03-20

6.3 - UNEXPECTED LANDING

Olivia Fate raged like a trapped tiger in the cabin of her balloon gondola. Her balloon, she chided herself. Jasmine the Honey-Lipped had locked her in the cabin and hijacked the balloon to who knows where. Olivia was furious. She tried to calm herself down. Olivia paced the small cabin. She flopped onto a cot and stared around the little room.

I am escaping she decided. It would be better to take her chances than await her fate. That's what Julius would do, she told herself. She pulled her daypack off. She emptied it on the cot. She removed her pistols. Olivia stared at them. No, she decided, I can't shoot my way out of here. She wrapped each big pistol in a piece of cloth and put them in the bottom of the pack. Extra socks and a spare shirt went in next hiding the guns. Then she placed a small medical kit in the pack. A small mirror. A big box of waterproof matches. Two small candles. Then she filled an extra canteen and put it in the pack. The rest of the pack's small interior she filled with dried foodstuffs. She filled her big "thirsty" canteen as she called it. It felt reassuring hanging across her shoulders.

Ok, she thought. Now how do I get out of here? She looked at the heavy door. Not that way. Jasmine could be standing outside with her pistol. And I know she can shoot grimaced Olivia. She crawled down into the supply space under the cabin. It was chock full. She wormed her way to the rear of the compartment. Here was the off-loading hatch. It was secured by a lock bolted to the thick frames of the gondola.

Olivia squirmed around and crawled back to the cabin. She sat on the cot and caught her breath. The she had an idea. She dived into the supply space. She made her way to the center, then carefully started moving boxes and bags around until she found what she was looking for.

Piled at the lowest point of the gondola to serve as ballast were the spare metal mooring stakes. She grunted and strained. Finally, covered in sweat in the hot crawl space, she tugged one of the big stakes free. She was gasping for breath. It was too hot in here she thought. She crawled back to the main cabin. After resting for several minutes she crawled back to the off-loading hatch pulling the heavy stake with her.

Olivia jammed the pointed end of the four-foot long stake under the clasp that the lock was securing. She pulled with all her might. The clasp bent upwards. She wiped the sweat out of her eyes. She pulled again. The clasp held firm. She was soaking wet. Panting in the dusty crawl space she wedged herself around and used her legs to push on the stake. She cursed the sturdy workmanship that Julius demanded for the balloon. She yelled at herself and pushed harder.

The clasp broke free. Olivia lay back exhausted. Several moments passed by unheeded. Then she crawled around to open the hatch. It swung noisily opened and hung down, rocking in the breeze. The cool air filled the crawl

space. Olivia suddenly shivered. She squirmed around to crawl back to the cabin and gathered her escape gear.

Olivia crawled slowly to the front of the supply space. She grabbed a big coil of rope. It exhausted her to drag the heavy coil of rope back to the hatch. She lay for a several minutes with her head in the hatchway deeply breathing the cool air. Feeling better she tied one end of the rope to a solid stanchion. She began loosely coiling rope till she guessed she had more than a hundred feet piled next to her. She crawled back to the cabin.

Olivia lay on the cot feeling drained. She dozed off. Olivia woke with a start. She was lying soaking wet and cold in the cot. She pulled off her filthy wet blouse and put on a fresh one. She felt better just for that. She tugged her big "walking around" hat firmly down on her head. Topping off her big canteen she sat on the deck with her feet in the crawl space. She looked around nothing else she wanted in here. She slid into the crawl space.

Olivia could hear yelling coming from outside. She smelled smoke. She crawled quickly to the off-loading hatch. The treetops weren't very far below. An arrow whizzed by her head sticking out of the hatch. Another thunked into the gondola bottom. A flaming arrow went flashing by. Then another. Olivia was suddenly terrified. She could hear the burner roaring at full power. She heard to slow shots. It had to be Jasmine's pistol. What going on she yelled to herself? She crawled back to the cabin.

The smoke was growing thicker. Olivia heard the Jasmine's pistol fire again. Someone was banging on the cabin door. Olivia tired the door. It didn't seem locked just jammed. She gave it a yank. The door creaked open.

Cassandra lay on the gondola deck with a bucket in her hands. She was covered in grime. Heavy smoke began to fill the cabin. Cassandra's eyes were wide. She pulled at the lower board across the doorway. It didn't move.

"We're on fire," Cassandra yelled.

Olivia lay on her back and kicked at the board. It was firmly nailed across the doorway. Olivia watched in amazement as several arrows went zipping past. Cassandra hugged the deck. Olivia heard Jasmine's pistol firing from the control station.

"What is going on," Olivia asked loudly.

"I don't know. Some one is shooting arrows at us," answered Cassandra. She shrugged. Olivia almost laughed. This was getting better all the time.

The balloon jerked as it hit a treetop. Olivia heard Jasmine curse and the burner roared long and loud. Jasmine yelled through the smoke, "Cassandra, get your ass up here and put these fires out. Now!" She didn't sound happy. Her pistol fired again.

Cassandra looked at Olivia, a brief look of fear passed across her face. "The balloon and the gondola are on fire. I can't put them out."

The balloon hopped across the treetops. Jasmine let the burner go on at full power. The balloon skidded across the treetops and slowly began to rise. Jasmine yelled, "Cassandra, get up here, we are going to land in a river. Get ready."

Cassandra shook her head. Olivia reached out and grabbed Cassandra's arm. Together they squeezed Cassandra under the lower board. Olivia shoved a canteen at her. Cassandra started to open it, but Olivia grabbed it and put it over her head and shoulder. "We are leaving," she yelled at Cassandra over the now loud crackling of the fire.

"Cassandra," yelled Jasmine loudly from the control station. "I can't do this alone."

"Let's go," Cassandra said to Olivia.

Olivia slipped into the crawl space. Cassandra grabbed her daypack and hat and followed. They slithered to the off-loading hatch at the rear of the gondola. The smoke was heavy. Olivia threw the rope coil out into the wind. She could see the river by hanging out the hatch. She heard the fire raging above. The balloon was losing height quickly. Olivia looked at Cassandra.

"Follow me," Olivia said dangling her legs out the hatch. She struggled down the rope. Cassandra's feet hit her in the face. Olivia let herself down the rope. She kept going as the river showed itself through the patchy smoke. An arrow whizzed by. Olivia went down the rope with a rush.

The river was on the right. The gondola bucked around. The river was on the left. Olivia went further down the rope. The river was fifty feet below. She slid further down the rope. The river jumped to the left, to the right, to the left. Cassandra's feet hit the top of Olivia head. The river was thirty feet below. "Now," yelled Olivia letting go of the rope. Cassandra shrieked as she let go.

The two women plunged into the river. Olivia thought there was no bottom. She swam toward what she thought was up. Finally she broke the surface coughing and sputtering. Cassandra came up ten yards away. Olivia looked at both banks quickly. She yelled at Cassandra and pointed to a bank. They swam for it. After minutes of struggling to swim with their light daypacks on the two women lay on the muddy bank sucking great gulps of air. Cassandra tugged at Olivia's sleeve. Olivia turned to look where Cassandra pointed.

The balloon was a ball of flame slowly falling into the jungle some distance away on the other side of the river. Just as it reached the treetops the balloon exploded in a huge orange ball of fire. The explosion rocked the two women. The river splashed up on them. The flaming remnants of the balloon and gondola arced across the sky like a fireworks display and fell into the jungle. Olivia bit back a tear.

Report 211 - 6.4 - SHORT COMINGS.

Date: 2004-03-22

6.4 - SHORT COMINGS

The Fetching Olivia Fate and Sweet Cassandra of the Sultan's Own Harem lay on the riverbank. They were covered in mud and soaking wet. They gulped the fresh air. Wisps of smoke rose out of the jungle in several places where the flaming pieces of their balloon had crashed down. Cassandra was lying on her side facing Olivia with her eyes closed. Olivia suddenly sat up alert as a watchdog.

"Cassandra," she whispered. Cassandra started to reply. Olivia held her finger across her lips. Cassandra's mouth snapped shut. The two women scuttled into the brush. Seconds later natives appeared out of the jungle and stood on the riverbank. Ten feet from Olivia they jabbered in a language she did not understand. There were many gestures to the far bank and the wisps of smoke. Finally one warrior gave a command. The group turned and trotted back into the jungle heading upstream.

Olivia's pulse was racing. Pygmies! She had never been this close before except when shooting at them as they tried to ambush one of Julius Flagstone's Expeditions. She felt a thrill run through her body. Wait till Jules heard about this. Olivia felt Cassandra shivering beside her. Gesturing for silence Olivia led the way to the riverbank keeping under cover the whole way.

Cautiously creeping from log to log scattered along the riverbank the pair made their way downstream for ten minutes before Olivia signaled a halt. The women nestled themselves into a pile of broken logs and flotsam on the bank. The river nipped at their feet. They were exhausted.

Olivia pulled off her pack. Rummaging quickly in it she pulled out the two huge pistols. She double-checked their loads. She looked at Cassandra.

"Can you shoot a pistol?" asked Olivia.

"Of course," Cassandra answered. Olivia handed her the oversized pistol and a handful of shells.

"This is the most powerful pistol I know of in the world. It is a specially made big-game hunting pistol. Brace yourself firmly and bend your elbows slightly when shooting. Keep your elbows locked when you shoot this sucker and it will break them. Understand?"

Cassandra nodded. She flipped open the cylinder, spun it around and slapped it closed. "Ok, firm stance, bent elbows, and knock down trees," she said.

Olivia laughed softly. "Exactly. Now let's find a nice comfortable log."

Cassandra looked puzzled for a second then brightened. "We are floating down the river?" she asked in a whisper. Olivia nodded yes.

Twenty minutes later, with huge pistols stuck in their belts, hats tugged firmly down over pretty heads, the two women were grunting a "comfortable" tree trunk into the river. Soon they were floating downstream with one arm draped over the tree trunk. They drifted for hours. The sun began to disappear in a ball of fire surpassing the balloon explosion. The women paddled the trunk to a tiny sandbar with a few low bushes clinging to it. They pushed the log up onto the sand bar. Then they lay in the bushes. Olivia pulled a piece of semi-dry jerky from her pack. She gave half to Cassandra. They ate in total silence. Ever the jungle on both banks was quiet.

Olivia looked at Cassandra. "What?" she asked quietly.

Cassandra shuddered. "I was thinking about Jasmine."

"We don't know she was on the balloon when it exploded."

"But chances are," began Cassandra.

"But chances are we will never see Jasmine again in any case," said Olivia firmly.

"In any case?" asked Cassandra.

"Those were pygmies back there," said Olivia making a tired gesture upstream.

Cassandra nodded. "I know. I have heard of them before from Big Jake Frere, but I have never seen them before."

Olivia opened her mouth and shut it. Big Jake Frere she thought. I have much to learn I think. She grinned at Cassandra. "What did Big Jake tell you. About the pygmies, I mean," she said.

Cassandra made little laugh and blushed. Olivia was struck with how beautiful Cassandra was even while filthy with mud and soaking wet. Her smile transformed her in an instant. Olivia knew she was jealous, but she didn't care. She liked Cassandra. She was the little sister she had never had. Olivia smiled a big smile. Cassandra bit off a chunk of jerky and talked in low tones while chewing.

"Big Jake said they are occasionally seen by native hunters and scouts, rarely seen by white explorers and never by anyone else. He said they have blowguns that can silently shoot poison darts. He said if you get hit by a poison dart you don't know you are dead until you wake up in heaven."

"Or hell," said Olivia with a grin.

"That's what I told him too." The two women laughed. Cassandra continued.

"Some think the pygmies are the original people of Jimland. No one knows for sure. Some say they do human sacrifices with people they capture. Some even say they are cannibals." Cassandra shivered a little.

"Well, I don't know about human sacrifice or cannibalism, but the poison darts are real enough."

"You have seen them?" asked a wide-eyed Cassandra rising on her elbows.

"Yes, just once. They attacked one of Julius' Expeditions. I was there. I was one of the lucky ones." Olivia was lost in a memory. She came back and found Cassandra watching her.

"We'll be alright," Olivia said with a smile.

"Of course," answered Cassandra adjusting her pistol. Olivia smiled to herself. She liked this young woman. Yes, we will be fine she found herself thinking as they fell asleep in the brush next to the old tree trunk. The river lapped at their sandbar bed and sang them to sleep.

Report 212 - 6.5 - JUNGLE DRUMS.

Date: 2004-03-24

6.5 - JUNGLE DRUMS

Olivia Fate awoke before the dawn stiff, sore, and hungry. She nudged Sweet Cassandra of the Sultan's Own Harem. Cassandra yawned and stretched letting out a little groan as she did. Olivia doled out another piece of jerky.

"Thanks," said Cassandra.

Olivia smiled. "Breakfast is served. Bet you never ate this well back in the Sultan's Harem," she said. A sad look passed over Cassandra face. "I'm sorry," said Olivia said. "Did I say something wrong?"

Cassandra smiled and shook her head. "No."

Olivia wondered what was behind the look. She tried to loosen up her stiff muscles. After several minutes of quiet chewing Olivia got up and began to push the trunk back into the water. Cassandra quickly joined to help. They checked that their big pistols were safely tucked into their belts and waded the log out into the gentle river current. They began drifting down the river.

Olivia tried to picture the map Julius had given her. She could not remember this river on it. But then, as Julius had told her many times, most of the rivers were unknown or unmapped at best. She glanced over to Cassandra who was clinging to the log with one arm and still chewing her jerky. Cassandra nodded and kept chewing.

Olivia laughed. "Very, um, tasty." Cassandra nodded again ever chewing.

When Olivia reckoned it was noon the women paddled their log to the shore. They emptied their packs and spread their things out to dry in the afternoon heat. They striped off their clothes and, with one on guard, they took turns bathing at the rivers edge.

Olivia felt much better getting the mud washed off. She fluffed her hair to help it dry. Cassandra lay dozing in the sun. Olivia checked her things. An afternoon drying in the Jimland heat was just what she needed. Olivia repacked. She woke Cassandra who did the same. The afternoon was fading. Olivia made a decision.

"We'll camp here this evening. Let's be dry and warm tonight."

"I was hoping you'd say that," said Cassandra.

Olivia even went so far as to build a very small fire. They heated water in half a gourd after they scooped out and ate its juicy insides. They drank a warm tea made of locally pulled plants. Cassandra asked many questions as

Olivia harvested supper from the plants around them. Olivia answered most of them. They slept warm and dry and not quiet so hungry.

After warm gourd of "morning tea" they pushed their log back into the river. The sun shone happily down on them. Olivia was pleased with their progress. It would take a while, but they would reach the coast and from there she knew they would find their way back to Jimville. She found herself thinking about Jules. He must be worried half crazy by now. She would have a hard time getting another balloon built. She frowned to herself at the thought.

"You smell it too?" asked Cassandra in a low voice.

Olivia jerked herself back to the present. She sniffed the air. Smoke. Olivia pointed to the far bank. They began paddling their log toward the riverbank. Olivia noticed immediately that the current was picking up. They were not going their usual leisurely pace. They paddle harder. Olivia grunted at Cassandra.

"Stop. It's no use. Let's just ride it out. Stay alert."

The river increased speed. Olivia could hear a low rumbling ahead. She didn't like the sound. She looked over at Cassandra.

"Rapids or falls ahead. We'll have to chance it. When we get there let go of the log and hold on to me. We can always get another log, but we must not get separated."

Cassandra nodded and looked pale in the sunlight. She pointed at the riverbank. There stood a small village of a dozen circular huts so typical of Jimland natives. But the natives were very short. Pygmies! The word raced through Olivia's mind. The roaring became louder. Several pygmy women washing clothes on the riverbank yelled and pointed at the women as their log raced by. Men came running with bows, arrows, and long tubes in their hands. Three canoes were quickly launched and headed after the log.

A man stood in the lead canoe and raised his bow. The arrow narrowly missed the tree trunk, which was picking up speed in the narrowing river. Another arrow stuck quivering in the log. Cassandra looked wild-eyed at Olivia. Olivia pulled her pistol out of her belt.

"Watch for the rapids," she said as she leaned across the log and aimed at the lead canoe. The pistol blast nearly knocked her off the log. Two men in the lead canoe tumbled into the water. Olivia let out a yell of defiance. The third man stopped paddling. The other two canoes raised a shout and increased speed. Cassandra yelled something Olivia didn't hear. Olivia aimed again and fired. No effect. She aimed again. She waited. The log bobbed as the river increased speed. She fired. A man fell over in the last canoe. Two arrows thunked into the log. Something that sounded soft flitted by. Olivia saw a man slide something into the long tube and raise it to his mouth. She aimed and fired. She fired again. The man yelped and spun out off the canoe. All the canoes headed for shore.

Cassandra yelled something at Olivia. Olivia yelled back. "What?"

"Waterfall," yelled Cassandra over the roar pointing ahead.

"Great," yelled Olivia. The log swept toward the foaming crest. "Let go," yelled Olivia. She grabbed at Cassandra and missed. They were thrown over the waterfall crest.

Darkness followed. Olivia didn't think she would ever breathe again. She came up gasping; her pistol still gripped in her hand. She looked about for Cassandra. She could not see her. The river was pushing her downstream. She called Cassandra's name. No answer. Olivia stuck the heavy pistol in her belt and swam for the nearest bank. She climbed awkwardly out of the water. She could not see Cassandra. Her heart was racing.

There, on the opposite bank! Something moved at the water's edge. Olivia shaded her eyes and stared. Yes, it was Cassandra. Cassandra pulled herself onto a bit of mud between two large rocks. Olivia called her name and waved. Cassandra sat up and waved weakly back.

Suddenly Cassandra ducked. Olivia could see several pygmies closing in on her position. She watched as Cassandra drew her pistol. Olivia drew her own and aimed very carefully. Take a breath. Hold it. Squeeze to cocked. Be sure. Squeeze it. The big pistol roared out. A pygmy warrior tumbled over. Olivia aimed again. Again she squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. Oh, damn, she thought. She dug in her pocket to reload the pistol.

Cassandra held her pistol in both hands. She leaned back against the rock. In a flash she leaned out and fired. The pygmies shouted and dived for cover. Cassandra leaned back against the rock. The pygmies advanced. She leaned out. The pygmies hit the ground. She waited. The pygmies rose up. She fired. One jerked backwards. She fired again. A pygmy grabbed his leg and fell over. The others rushed Cassandra. She fired again. She fired once more. They were almost upon her. She fired into the face of the closest. His head exploded. She clubbed the next with the huge pistol.

Then Cassandra was overwhelmed.

Olivia finished reloading and snapped the cylinder shut. She raised the huge pistol. The pygmies were carrying a struggling Cassandra off. Up the riverbank and into the jungle edge they went. Olivia lowered her pistol. She looked around. An arrow came flying across the river and cracked against a nearby rock. Olivia turned and ran into the jungle. She ran for ten minutes through the ever-thickening jungle. Finally she stopped. She leapt to the left and headed quietly in an up stream direction.

Periodically she stopped and waited and listened. She didn't think she was being followed. Dusk found her above the falls and up a tree.

Olivia scanned the pygmy village. It seemed quiet. She couldn't see Cassandra anywhere. She desperately wanted to see her. Olivia had a hard time staying still in the tree. Finally she climbed down. It was dark. She tried to quietly move to the river edge. She followed it upstream a till the current seemed slower. Then like a ghost she swam strongly across the river.

Olivia's pulse was still racing. She was afraid. She hurried along the riverbank. She smelled the village before she could see it. Olivia forced herself to slow down and move into the jungle along riverbank. She crept through the undergrowth. She watched the village. It seemed deserted. Drums sounded deeper in the jungle. What's this she wondered? Olivia headed toward the sound through the village, haste overriding caution. She saw something familiar lying on a grass mat in front of the largest hut. She scurried over to the mat. She picked up Cassandra's pistol. She grabbed the handful of shell lying beside it. As fast as she could Olivia reloaded and stuffed the big gun in her belt. Waste not, want not, she thought. Ever so softly she sneaked through the deserted village, her big pistol drawn and ready. Her eyes flashed in the moonlight.

The drums grew louder.

Report 213 - 6.6 - DRUMS IS THE NIGHT.

Date: 2004-03-26

6.6 - DRUMS IS THE NIGHT

Olivia Fate slipped like a shadow through the pygmy village. It was deserted. She tiptoed between huts. She rounded a corner. Olivia's breath caught in her throat.

Sitting directly in front of Olivia was a wrinkled old woman wearing only a reed skirt. The woman was tending a small cook fire, gently stirring a pot of stew with a wooden spoon. The old woman looked at Olivia and smiled. Olivia unconsciously smiled back. The food smelled good. Her stomach growled loudly. The little woman laughed softly and patted her stomach. Olivia patted hers and smiled. The woman picked up a leaf from a handy pile and ladled some stew onto it. She held the leaf out toward Olivia. Olivia took a hesitant step toward the woman who gestured again with the food. Olivia gently reached out and took the leaf of food from the woman's hard hand. With her fingers Olivia took a mouthful. It was hot. It was full of unnamed spices. It was wonderful. A tear ran down Olivia's cheek. She made a little bow toward the wrinkle old woman. The old woman smiled back and returned to stirring her pot. Olivia melted into the night.

The jungle drums filled the night. Olivia crept closer. Torches lit up a clearing ahead. Olivia crawled on her hands and knees. She slowly pushed a frond aside. He eyes widened.

In front of Olivia, in a shallow depression with the pygmy tribe gathered all round was a small rock slab. A thick post was planted deep in the ground at each end of the slab. Standing on the slab with a wrist tied to each post stood Cassandra. She was facing away from Olivia toward a heavy wooden gate set the rock face of a cliff. Olivia watch fascinated.

The drums throbbed with their rhythm. The pygmies chanted in time to the drums, a low sorrowful chant. They swayed from side to side. It was hypnotizing. Olivia found herself swaying with the pygmies. She shook her head to clear it. The chanting was intoxicating. Olivia watched Cassandra. She did not seem affected by the music. She stood upright, braced on wide spread feet.

A rumble came through the gate. The chanting volume went up a notch. A pygmy festooned in feathers jumped out of the crowd to land in front of the gate. He danced around to the music making strange gestures and shaking his gourd rattle at the gate then at Cassandra. His eyes were rolled back; only the whites showed.

A growl came from the gate. The drums continued to pound away. The chanting grew louder. The little shaman danced with wild abandon. Cassandra shook back her hair. It sparkled in the torchlight. Beautiful to the end thought Olivia pulling out her second pistol and cocking it.

Suddenly the shaman let out a yell. The chanting abruptly stopped. The drums became louder. The beat could be felt in the ground. The pygmies kept swaying to the beat. The shaman dance all the harder.

Two pair of eyes glittered behind the gate. Olivia sucked in a breath. The eyes were about twelve feet off the ground. Whatever it is they are summoning, they're big, she thought. She crouched ready to spring. The eyes moved around behind the gate.

The shaman let out a second yell. The drumming instantly ceased. The pygmies kept swaying to the beat and began humming a low melody. The shaman faced the gate. He shook his rattle at the gate. The eyes disappeared. The shaman pushed a big bolt back from the gate. He shook his rattle again. The eyes reappeared.

A snarl came loudly from behind the gate. The shaman bounded up to Cassandra. He stood in front of her, swaying with the tribe and rattling his gourd. The gate was pushed open hard and slammed against the cliff side. Cassandra stiffened. Olivia got ready to jump. The torches flickered.

Out of the cave mouth came two misplaced legends. Olivia swallowed hard. Cassandra was shaking. The pygmies were swaying and singing the low tune over and over. The shaman shook his rattle. The two creatures followed its motion with their eyes. The shaman ran the rattle up and down Cassandra. She shivered and tried to back away.

The two creatures came fully into the light and stopped looking around as if listening to the low pygmy melody. Olivia had heard the stories about these things, but never believed them. They were about twelve feet tall. Gorilla like, but more man-like. Tall, thick, looking incredibly strong. And hungry thought Olivia. Meti in the Gobi. Sasquatch of North America. The Abominable Snowmen of the far off Himalayas. Yowee of the Aborigines. Many names, many places. In Jimland they were mundanely labeled Tropical Yeti by some less than inspired European. The Jimland legends called them BooHoom, the man-monsters.

The two creatures walked out into the torchlight. The pygmies kept swaying and singing low. The shaman ran the rattle over Cassandra. Then he shook it at the creatures and ran it over Cassandra again. Cassandra was fairly vibrating in fear.

The creatures stepped toward Cassandra. Olivia jumped out of the undergrowth. She ran toward Cassandra. The pygmies hardly noticed. They were mesmerized, swaying and singing the low tune. The shaman jumped off the slab and faced Olivia's approach. He yelled and shook his rattle pointing at the fast closing Olivia. The creatures looked first at Cassandra, then at the running Olivia, then back to Cassandra. They snarled and stepped toward Cassandra.

Olivia fired her big pistol in the air. The noise stopped the creatures. They cowed back a step. The shaman howled and shook his rattle. The pygmies swayed and sang. Olivia fired again. The creatures snarled and snapped their big jaws at her. The larger one stepped toward Cassandra. The shaman danced about like a man possessed.

The drums began playing again. The pygmies swayed and sang lower than the drumbeats. Olivia felt the rhythm flood through her. She kept running thinking how surreal this whole thing was. The lesser of the two creatures turned toward Olivia. Olivia noticed that it had breasts on its hairy chest. Male and female she noted to herself in a calmly detached way. She was twenty feet from Cassandra. Only the shaman was between them.

The male creature stepped forward and reached for Cassandra. Its big jaws opened to reveal sharp yellow fangs. It bellowed. Olivia fired into the dirt in front of it. The creature jumped back roaring. The shaman yelled, writhing in some grotesque dance and shook his rattle. Both creatures bellowed, raising their arms and shaking their big fists. Olivia ran on, counting three to herself.

The shaman jumped in front of Olivia. She hit him in the face with her pistol as hard as she could. He went down in a heap. She leapt onto the slab with Cassandra. Cassandra was sobbing, shaking violently. In a flash Olivia stuffed a pistol in her belt and drew her knife. A slash freed one wrist. Another slash and Cassandra nearly fell off the slab.

"Cassandra," yelled Olivia. She shook her violently. The two creatures bellowed in confusion. The drums pounded out their rhythm. The pygmies sang and swayed. "Cassandra," Olivia yelled again. She shook Cassandra again. Cassandra seemed to suddenly wake up.

"Run for the river," was all Olivia could think to say. They jumped off the slab. Cassandra fell to her knees. The creatures roared and ambled forward arms outstretched. Olivia jerked Cassandra to her feet. "Run," she screamed. Cassandra stumbled toward the trail leading to the village and the river.

Olivia spun around to face the two huge creatures. They were lumbering after the women with long strides. Olivia fired at the slab sending fragments flying all directions. Four, she counted. The shaman was moaning and stirring in the dirt. Olivia backed up to him. She reached for the gourd rattle. She shook it. The creatures snapped their heads around at the sound. They followed its motion with their eyes. Olivia kept shaking the rattle. The creatures kept coming slowly toward her.

The shaman moaned. The drums throbbed in the night. The pygmies swayed and sang their hypnotic tune. In the flickering torchlight the two creatures came on. They were ten feet away. Olivia kept shaking the rattle or was the rattle shaking her? She wasn't sure. The shaman start to get up. Olivia whacked him hard with her pistol. He collapsed again. The creatures approached. Olivia kept shaking the rattle.

The drums seemed to get louder. The singing got louder. The smell of the creatures got louder. Olivia was confused. She shook the rattle. The creatures followed it with their eyes. They bellowed. Five feet. Close enough Olivia thought. She shook the rattle and laid it slowly on the shaman's limp form. The creature's eyes never left it. Olivia slowly backed away.

The drums and singing seemed to fill the world. Olivia's head whirled. The creatures reached out and grabbed the limp shaman. They began ambling back

toward the cave mouth. Olivia turned and fled along the trail. She could see Cassandra stumbling along ahead.

Olivia reached Cassandra and put an arm around her. "Run," she cried! They awkwardly ran toward the village. The drums filled the jungle with their incessant beat. Into the village the women ran. Down to the river where Olivia pulled them to a halt. Cassandra was sobbing, gasping for breath. Olivia looked left, then right. She yanked Cassandra to the right. Olivia dumped Cassandra in a small canoe. She grabbed a reed line attached to the canoe and began running along the riverbank dragging the canoe along. Time after time it snagged. Olivia would kick it free and resume running again. The drums never stopped.

Olivia heard the falls ahead. She dragged the canoe to the bank and pulled Cassandra to her feet. "Run," she yelled at Cassandra. Grunting Olivia lifted the bow of the little canoe onto her shoulders and stumbled after Cassandra along the riverbank. She fell several times, but rose each time cursing and following Cassandra.

They struggled past the falls. Twenty yards below the falls Olivia cast the little canoe to the ground and wearily shoved it into the river. Holding the canoe rope in one hand and grabbing Cassandra with the other she waded hip deep into the river. She roughly picked up Cassandra and threw her into the canoe and climbed in after her. Olivia lay back in the canoe, spent.

The river carried them away into the night.

Report 214 - 6.X - THE JIMLAND BITCH.

Date: 2004-03-28

6.X - THE JIMLAND BITCH

Olivia Fate was awakened in the little canoe by her own snoring. She struggled and sat up. She felt like she was in someone else's body. It didn't seem to fit or work quite right. The canoe was drifting lazily down the river as the current took it. Olivia shook Cassandra's foot. Cassandra woke up like a person rising from a great depth in the ocean.

The two women lay in the canoe. One of Cassandra's feet was in the water. With a low moan she pulled it into the canoe. Neither spoke. Five minutes later they were both upright. Cassandra rubbed her head. Olivia tried to stretch the terrible soreness out of her back. They both fell asleep sitting slumped in the canoe.

Olivia awoke with a start. The stars twinkled overhead. The river babbled merrily along the riverbank. Olivia's stomach growled. She sat up and groaned. This is great she thought. Olivia pushed Cassandra's leg off a paddle and began moving the canoe toward the middle of the river. Then she lay back in the canoe and went to sleep.

The rising sun woke Olivia. She felt much better. She sat up and roused Cassandra. "How are you?" she asked.

"Ok, I think," answered Cassandra rubbing her eyes. They sat looking at each other silently. "What happened," asked Cassandra looking about.

"You don't know?" asked Olivia shaking her head.

"No, not after the pygmies forced some awful liquid down my throat. It's all a fuzzy dream. I feel like I slept forever."

"Me too," replied Olivia. She looked at the passing riverbanks. "I have no idea where we are, except we are past the falls somewhere."

Cassandra looked around in the canoe. "Is there anything to eat?"

"Grab a paddle and we'll get some fruit at least," Olivia said beginning to paddle toward the nearest riverbank. They beached the little canoe and walked wearily along the bank looking for something edible. Olivia finally found something for them. The two women sat in the canoe, drifting downstream, and ate juicy orange-like fruit. Cassandra wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

"So what happened, Olivia." Olivia turned to look at Cassandra. It was the first time she had used her first name. Olivia smiled and spit out a seed.

"Nothing much. We got away from the pygmies by stealing a canoe. Here we are. I guess you are recovered from whatever they gave you."

"Yes, I am feeling much better." Cassandra started eating her fourth fruit. Olivia followed suit. They drifted silently along. The sun warmed them up. They dozed. They paddled ashore for more fruit. From the middle of the river Olivia shot a small gazelle watering at the river's edge. They had roasted meat for their evening meal. They put the leftovers in the canoe and continued drifting, not wanting to stay on the riverbank.

The women were much revived at dawn the second day of floating aimlessly down the river. Olivia sat up and looked around. "Let's eat," she said pointing to the nearest riverbank. Paddling strongly across the river they beached the canoe. Olivia checked the load of one of the pistols and handed it to Cassandra. "I think you are ready to have this back," she said.

Cassandra took the offered pistol. After checking the cylinder, she stuck it in her belt. The women stood together and surveyed the riverbank. Olivia pointed and said, "That way looks promising." They walked off in the direction Olivia had indicated. They eventually found some edible fruit.

Cassandra found some tracks in the dirt. They started tracking the animal, but Olivia called a halt to their impromptu hunt when the tracks headed into the dense underbrush and away from the river. She turned to Cassandra's disappointed look. "The river's the way home. That's where we are heading." Cassandra nodded. They returned to their canoe.

A few strong strokes with the paddles and the canoe was again drifting silently down the river. Suddenly something flew by. Cassandra swatted at it like it was big fly. Another thing flitted by. Olivia grabbed Cassandra's hand and jerked the surprised woman to the canoe bottom.

"Blowgun darts," she hissed between clenched teeth!

"The pygmies! They must have followed us," said Cassandra rolling over and pulling out her pistol. Olivia laid a restraining hand on Cassandra's.

"Probably not the same tribe. The little buggers can turn up anywhere. Can you see any on the bank?"

The women peered over the top of the canoe side. They could see nothing but empty riverbank and the jungle of Jimland looming behind it. Another dart whizzed quietly by. The women ducked into the canoe bottom.

"Can't see anything," said Cassandra disgustedly.

"Me either, so save your fire for when we can." A dart struck the canoe side and bounced away. "Just lie low."

For an hour the two women lay in the canoe as darts periodically whizzed by. Occasionally they would rise up and paddle rapidly to remain in the center of the river, then fall to the canoe bottom as a dart or two would come flying at them. The sky clouded up. It began to rain. The women bailed a little water out of the canoe. The darts stopped. The rain increased. Soon they

were drenched. The wind picked up. Olivia felt cold. Cassandra's teeth were chattering as she lay the canoe bottom with the rainwater sloshing about.

Olivia suddenly yelled and ducked. Arrows struck the canoe and stood quivering in its side. "Pistols," yelled Olivia. Cassandra drew her pistol and peered over the side. Four canoes each filled with pygmy warriors were standing out from the shore as the river rounded a corner. The bend in the river would push the canoe toward the pygmies. Olivia looked at Cassandra. "Give me your gun. You paddle, I'll shoot." Cassandra handed over the pistol and started paddling toward the opposite bank.

"Duck," yelled Olivia. More arrows flitted by. One thunked into the canoe. Olivia fired once. She aimed with both hands and fired again. A pygmy toppled out of a canoe. More arrows. "Down."

Cassandra popped back up and paddled furiously. It was obvious the pygmies were gaining on them. "Here." Olivia handed Cassandra's pistol back to her. Both women paddled. "Arrow," yelled Cassandra. They fell to the canoe floor. The arrows flew by. They got back to paddling as strongly as they could. The pygmy canoes were closing the distance. The little warriors were yelling and brandishing their weapons. Cassandra raised her pistol and fired. Olivia fired. Cassandra fired again. A pygmy fell out of the leading canoe. Olivia fired again to no effect. They lay in the canoe bottom and reloaded empty cylinder chambers. They popped back up and began firing rapidly. Several warriors fell out of the canoes and the canoes lost some headway.

"Paddle," yelled Olivia. The two women paddled for their lives. They opened the distance between themselves and the pygmies. But soon the little warriors were closing the distance again. Lying in the canoe bottom, the women shared out the last of their bullets. "Save these till we can see the whites of their eyes," said Olivia trying to make a joke. It passed Cassandra by, just like the two arrows that went low overhead. "Ok."

"Paddle," said Olivia. The women paddled harder. It was no use. The pygmies were closing in. The rain came down harder. Olivia thought her arms were going to fall off. She paddled. Cassandra's breath was coming in ragged gulps. An arrow whacked into the canoe. Cassandra yelled out. Olivia turned around.

Cassandra was lying in the canoe bottom with an arrow in her upper left arm. Blood trickled into the rainwater. "Ok," yelled Olivia over the yelling pygmy warrior's shouts?

"Ok," answered Cassandra through her teeth. She pulled out her pistol. Olivia pulled out hers. "I'm going to turn broadside to them. They will be coming fast. Make every shot count. This is it." Cassandra nodded and grimaced. Olivia suddenly sat up and brought the canoe broadside to the oncoming pygmies. The warriors yelled and paddled madly toward them.

Lying in the canoe bottom the women aimed carefully. "Wait," said Olivia. "Wait." She picked out the lead boat. "Get the second canoe. I'll take the first." Cassandra nodded. "Wait," said Olivia calmly. The pygmy canoes closed rapidly.

"Now!" Olivia fired. A warrior was tossed out of the lead canoe. She fired again. Another warrior fell overboard. Cassandra was firing slowly. Olivia fired. She fired again. Another man toppled over. She fired. She took careful aim. She ducked as an arrow smacked into the canoe. Cassandra was firing. Olivia fired again. The last man in the lead canoe slumped over. The second canoe had only two men left in it. The third and fourth canoes pushed ahead. They were full of angry pygmy warriors. Cassandra was lying down reloading. She looked at Olivia. "Three shots," was all she said. Olivia reloaded. "Three here, make them count. Then paddle for your life."

Olivia peered over the canoe side. The rain had stopped. The last two canoes were twenty yards away and coming fast. She rested her pistol on the canoe's side. I love you, Jules, she thought. "Take the right canoe. I'll go left," she yelled at Cassandra.

A great heavy staccato rattle filled the air. Angry bees buzzed overhead. The water around the pygmy canoes was boiling. The warriors were thrown every which way. The canoes were turned to floating junk. A great steam horn sound split the air. Rifle fire splattered into the last canoes. Not a living pygmy was to be seen. Only one canoe remained afloat. It was slowly sinking.

Olivia looked over her shoulder. There was the Jimland Bitch slowly coming upstream around the river bend, black smoke pouring from her smokestack. She could see a sandbagged Gatling gun on the bow. Sailors were yelling and waving their hats. Olivia let out a cry. "The Naval Brigade!"

Cassandra was sobbing as the sailors gently lifted her onto the deck of the Jimland Bitch where Cap'n Jack stood smiling. Olivia climbed aboard. "May we come aboard, Captain?" she cheerily asked.

Cap'n Jack frowned. "Full fare back to Jimville," he said.

"Gladly," said Olivia. "But first I must see to Cassandra." Olivia looked around for a Naval Officer. Cap'n Jack seemed to read her look.

"I'm still in charge here," he said flatly. "Temporary Lieutenant, most junior grade."

"A corpsman for Cassandra. We must get the arrow out. The Sultan's doesn't want any harm to come to her."

Mention of the Sultan seemed to move Cap'n Jack. A medical corpsman quickly appeared. Cassandra was carried to the main salon of the Bitch. An hour later Cassandra was sitting on the Bitch's raised bridge sipping a strong drink as sailors stood gaping at the most famous member of the Sultan's Own Harem. Anything she asked for they tumbled over themselves getting. Olivia had to laugh. Cassandra pretended not to notice their enthusiasm. She winked at Olivia.

The Jimland Bitch steamed a little further upstream to find wider place to turn around in. With the sailors standing at battle stations, Cap'n Jack

maneuvered the rusty steamer around and headed back downstream. No pygmies were sighted. The sailors stood down. They flocked around Cassandra like moths to a flame.

Olivia sat in the dingy cabin Cap'n Jack had given her. She didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Olivia had never felt so exhausted. She lay her head on her arm on the dirty table of the cabin and fell asleep.

Hours later it seemed, Cassandra with her arm in bright white sling, burst into the little cabin. Behind her was a detail of smiling sailors. Cassandra gently got the sleepy Olivia out of her chair. She led Olivia out onto the side deck. Looking back into the room, she gave a simple order, "Make it sparkle for me, boys." Then she walked Olivia to the stern area and seated her in an old deck chair. Shortly a hot meal and a cold drink appeared. Olivia said nothing as she ate. She noticed Cassandra wasn't eating.

"Not hungry?"

"Already had my fill, thank you," said Cassandra. She adjusted the sling a little and winced.

"Sorry about the arrow," said Olivia.

"It wasn't your fault, Ms. Fate," she said as a sailor removed Olivia's empty plate.

Olivia waved off seconds. She felt the wall going back up between them. She sighed. "Its Olivia, please."

Cassandra smiled. "I know, but." She didn't get to finish her sentence. Cap'n Jack strolled up.

"Miss Cassandra, I know you are a treasured member of the Sultan's Own Harem and all, but I give the orders to the sailors on this steamer. It looks bad if you are ordering them around without my ok."

"I apologize, Captain," Cassandra said sweetly and smiled a truly radiant smile. "I'm sure the Sultan will be willing to pay for any extra charges you wish to assess me for use of the sailors. Thank you for being so sweet about it. I promise I won't do it again. Come along Ms. Fate, its time for bed. It has been a tiring day."

The two women walked off arm in arm, leaving Cap'n Jack with unsaid words in his mouth. But he had heard what he wanted. He was merely totally up the assessment of fees. He decided that being a "Temporary Lieutenant, most junior grade" could still be rewarding.

Olivia barely recognized the cabin when she and Cassandra returned to it. It was spic and span. Fresh sheets were turned back on the two single beds. Everything was scrubbed and polished. It even smelled better. Cassandra opened the windows. A fresh evening breeze passed through the room.

Olivia found that one benefit of a steamer was the availability of hot water on demand. She threw her filthy clothes in a heap and sank into a small tub of hot water. She sighed and closed her eyes. She didn't see Cassandra hand her clothes out the window. Half an hour later Olivia slid between the clean sheets. Looking at Cassandra already in her little bed she said goodnight and turned off the gaslight.

The Jimland Bitch chugged down the river. Cap'n Jack leaned on the open window frame and considered his return to Jimville. Shortest command in naval history he laughed to himself. And the most profitable.

Olivia slipped on her freshly washed and ironed clothes. She felt like a new woman. Cassandra looked the picture of good health except for the sling and a very sore left arm. Jimville was in sight ahead. Olivia slipped her few remaining possessions into her banged up daypack. The two big pistols seemed heavy. The Jimland Bitch's steam horn sounded a series of blasts. Olivia swore she heard band music.

On deck Olivia stood behind Cassandra and Cap'n Jack as the Jimland Bitch was tied to the main pier. On the pier the Sultan's Guard band was playing jaunty tunes. Guard soldiers lined the pier. Olivia could see the Sultan himself standing on the pier. Her heart raced. Julius Flagstone was standing beside the Sultan. She smiled and tried to hold back the tears that slipped down her cheek.

The speeches were over. The Sultan was ready to return to his palace. The crowd was dispersing. Julius Flagstone stood with his big arm firmly around Olivia's shoulders. She smiled to herself. He hadn't let go of her since she had returned. Olivia looked for Cassandra. Cassandra waved from the Sultan's coach. Olivia gently detached herself from Julius.

"A moment," she said softly. He nodded. Olivia walked up to the coach window. Cassandra reached out and they held hands. They did not speak. Olivia let go and reached in her daypack. She quickly handed Cassandra a bundle. "Keep it as a reminder of our adventure together," she said softly. "And come see me when you can."

Cassandra had tears running down her cheek to match Olivia's. She started to speak. But the gaudy coachman cracked his whip and the coach pulled away. Cassandra waved.

Olivia walked back to Julius Flagstone. She slipped her hand into his big hand. Looking up into his eyes she said, "Let's go home. I need a lemonade." Flagstone squeezed her hand. They laughed together as they walked slowly down the pier talking.

Report 215 - TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH IN THE WILDS OF JIMLAND.

Date: 2004-03-30

TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH IN THE WILDS OF JIMLAND.

A simple pleasure trip aboard Julius Flagstone's "exploring" balloon turned to tragedy and ultimately triumph for Sweet Cassandra and Jasmine the Honey-Lipped of the Sultan's Own Harem and the Fetching Olivia Fate, companion of the Fearless and Famous Explorer Julius Flagstone.

With Ms. Fate ably piloting the balloon, the party lifted off even as the Sultan himself watched. The planned flight was to last only four days out and four days back. However disaster is never far away when one uses cutting edge technology. The Wilds of Jimland are not forgiving of the slightest misstep. Nature conspires to test men's, or in this case, women's will to survive.

Several days into the trip a disastrous explosion destroyed the balloon. Ms Fate and Sweet Cassandra were thrown clear, luckily landing in a river. Jasmine the Honey-Lipped was never seen again. She has sadly been presumed killed by the accidental explosion.

Surviving the plunge into the river, the two brave Ladies made their way back to Jimville down an uncharted river that eventually led to the River Jim. At this point an unexpected Hero in the form of Cap'n Jack, Owner, and Operator of the Jimland Bitch, the well-known local steamer, rescued the Ladies from an attack by a rogue band of Pygmies. Cap'n Jack had been commission by the British Consul to look along the banks of the River Jim for the missing Lady Travelers. With a detachment of the Naval Brigade aboard and under Cap'n Jack's able command, he successfully completed his mission.

Sweet Cassandra suffered a wound to her left arm from pygmy arrows. The Sultan's Physician examined Cassandra and reported he expected a complete recovery and a long and happy life for Cassandra. Ms. Fate was lucky enough not to suffer any injuries during their adventure on the river.

Neither Sweet Cassandra of the Sultan's Own Harem nor the Fetching Olivia Fate would make any public statements about their recent adventures. The few facts released have come from prepared statements released by the Sultan's Court Advisor. When ask about these statement Ms. Fate and Mr. Flagstone simply say they agree completely with the Sultan's statements. There must more be to the adventure than the simple story presented, Dear Reader. The Herald will continue to investigate the matter fully.

We are sure, Gentle Reader, that all of Jimland is relieved upon hearing of the safe return of Sweet Cassandra and the Fetching Ms. Fate. Together, we mourn the loss of Jasmine the Honey-Lipped. The Sultan has declare a one week period of mourning for Jasmine. We send him our heartfelt sympathies.

STEAMER FOR RENT

The Jimland Bitch, under the able command of Cap'n Jack, is available for rent. Cap'n Jack reminds prospective customers to please disregard the seedy and run-down appearance of the Jimland Bitch. She is a solid and sturdy

craft up to any task, so says her seedy and run-down Captain. Cap'n Jack can be contacted from sundown to closing in the bar of the Jimland House of Girls and Casino. Cash only. No refunds. [Approach more cautiously as the night goes on. - Ed.]

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club is pleased to announce that the First Woman Member of the Science Club, Ms. Olivia Fate, will be giving a talk on her recent adventure. Topics covered will include "Pygmy Foods, Whoa Mama", "Tropical Yetis, Myth or Fact", "Mudpacks for a Clearer Complexion", and "Large Caliber Pistols for Your Evening Bag". Come early to get a good seat. We are sure the talk will be standing room only.

Report 216 - THE FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS CLUB.

Date: 2004-04-02

THE FEARLESS AND FAMOUS EXPLORERS CLUB

The Herald received the following letter.

Editor
The World Herald
Jimville, Jimland

Dear Mr. Editor,

I am writing a report for school on Famous Explorers of the world. Please send me anything you can about the Fearless and Famous Explorer Club of Jimland. Thank you for helping me.

Tommie Gordon
York

Dear Tommie,

I have forwarded your letter directly to the Fearless and Famous Explorer Club. Who better to answer your question than the Club itself?

Editor
The World Herald
Jimville, Jimland

Mr. Tommie Gordon
York

Dear Tommie,

As the Secretary for the Fearless and Famous Explorer Club I am most pleased to answer your query.

When was the Fearless and Famous Explorer Club formed?

The date the Fearless and Famous Explorer Club was formed is rather hazy. The lads had been drinking heavily for several days. Let's just say it was some years ago.

Where was the Fearless and Famous Explorer Club first meeting held?

The first impromptu meeting was held in the Bar of the Jimland House of Girls and Casino. Meetings are still held there except under unusual circumstances, such as fire on the premises, native attack, hurricanes, and

other things as may be noted by the Members in Good Standing Present as being worthy of relocating the meeting.

The Jimland House of Girls and Casino is where most of the members end up after being in the Wilds of Jimland, and after a hot shower of course. It is a natural meeting location.

Ladies of the House, as it is affectionately known locally, have been made Honorary Maidens of the Club. A high honor to be sure. They provide comfort and companionship, and often, needed medical attention, to the weary Explorers upon their return to Jimville. More than one Maiden of the Club has married a Fearless and Famous Explorer over the years.

What are the Fearless and Famous Explorer Club mottoes?

The Club has several mottoes. Voting on mottoes occurs once a year in the annual Motto Meeting. Mottoes are put forward by a member in good standing literally standing on a stool and yelling it at the top of their lungs. The motto is approved by a raucous vocal yea or nay vote. Only five mottoes have been accepted out of the hundreds put forth. The current mottoes are:

Fearless and Famous Explorer Club motto # 1 - Ever Forward.

Fearless and Famous Explorer Club motto # 2 - Run Away.

Fearless and Famous Explorer Club motto # 3 - There's always tomorrow.

Fearless and Famous Explorer Club motto # 4 - We shall miss him.

Fearless and Famous Explorer Club motto # 5 - Aw crap.

Variations on # 5 abound, but I have listed the "official" variant.

How does one become a Fearless and Famous Explorer?

Mainly by repeatedly going on Expeditions into the Wilds of Jimland and performing deeds of daring-do and returning alive to talk about them. Witnesses are preferred, but not necessarily required. New members are put forward by a member in good standing literally standing on a stool and yelling their candidate's name at the top of their lungs.

Being a candidate brings on various tests such as "shooting", "wrasseling", "knife throwing and/or catching", "scratching", sometimes "spitting", always "drinking", once in a while "skinning" animals, alive or dead, whatever is at hand. The tests all depend on what Members in Good Standing are present in Jimville for the annual FNG Meeting. FNG, I'm told stands for "funny new guy" or something like that.

How does a Fearless and Famous Explorer remain in Good Standing?

Simply by repeatedly exploring the Wilds Of Jimland and pushing on in the face of any challenge and returning alive to talk about them. Witnesses are preferred, but not necessarily required.

Can Women Join the Club?

They can though none have tried to date. I personally think the "scratching" and the seldom used "pissing up a rope" tests turn off women candidates.

Member Summary

Members of the Club are Fearless. A few become Famous. Many more become dead. But that's the way things go in Jimland.

Some of the Most Well Known Members, Past and Present.

Crazy Bob Roberts, The Founder of the Club.
Otto "One Leg" Schistmocher, The second member of the Club.
Denny Lee, The most Renowned Member, thought crazy by many.
Marco Polo, Honorary member.
Big Jake Frere, Denny Lee's protege, but darn good enough on his own.
Julius Flagstone, Brave, fearless, handsome, rich, the total package.
Casimir Ponatowski, Brave, fearless, sort of handsome, not so rich, the almost total package.

I hope this helps. If you have any further questions, please keep them to yourself. The Fearless and Famous Explorers don't like folks nosing around their business.

All the best,

"Ugly" Ellen Smith
Secretary (Lifetime)
The Fearless and Famous Explorer Club
Jimville, Jimland.

[Thanks, Ug. Good luck, Tommie. - Ed.]

Report 217 - 7.1 - CHOICES.

Date: 2004-04-06

7.1 - CHOICES

Julius Flagstone sat in the Empress dining room enjoying his breakfast. The Fetching Olivia Fate sat at his right hand, radiant as ever. The third party was a most unexpected person. Reginald Toadburt, The Gossip Columnist of the Times sat across from Flagstone.

As Toadburt enthusiastically dealt with his food Flagstone was thinking to himself about the man. Toadburt was famous for his reporting. Much of it was blatantly false, but the public clamored for more. Everyone loves a good piece of dirt on the rich and famous whether it was true or not. Flagstone was sure his name would be found in Toadburt's next column. He hoped Olivia could deal with it, as she would surely figure prominently in the story. Toadburt's appearances were usually with his next victim. It was his way of making the subject of his next piece nervous and stirring things up. He might even gather some background material and not have to fabricate the entire story. Flagstone smiled, stir away Reggie.

Toadburt looked up from a fork full of sausage and repeated his question. Flagstone came out of his reverie.

"I still say anyone can walk out the door of this place and be embroiled in an adventure in one hour. For you, Mr. Flagstone, Fearless and Famous Explorer that you are, I'd say ten minutes."

Flagstone laughed. "Maybe, Reggie, but you can do that by just punching a member of the Sultan's Guard. You'd get an adventure to be sure."

Toadburt waved his fork around. "Not what I mean, Flagstone." He stuffed the sausage into his mouth. A quick couple of chews, a swallow, and the sausage were gone. The fork continued to wave as Toadburt spoke. "I mean a complete stranger can walk out the door unsuspecting and, without soliciting at all, have an adventure run right over them. This place is just full of things waiting to happen."

"Maybe," said Flagstone between bites of food. Olivia was quiet, sipping her morning coffee.

"No maybe. Even I could do it."

"Perhaps," said Flagstone beginning to weary of the reporter's ability to only follow a single topic at a time. Maybe its focus thought Flagstone. He gets focused on one thing and can't let go.

"I've got fifty English pounds that says it's true." Toadburt attacked his eggs with his toast with support from his fork. The eggs followed the sausage. "Fifty pounds says you can't walk from one end of the Jimville Main Street to the other and back without an adventure being thrust at you. Something that will have you heading into the Wilds of Jimland as fast as you can."

Flagstone found Toadburt staring over a fork full of sausage again. Even Olivia was watching him. Flagstone blushed. "Fifty pounds?" Toadburt nodded. "Not worth it. Wouldn't even pay my scout's expenses." Flagstone laughed and tried to sound genuine. Toadburt had him thinking. Was it really that simple?

Toadburt smiled like a man reeling in a catch. "Ok, I'll up the ante then." He finished off the sausage staring absently into the distance. He wiped his mouth with his napkin.

"You walk from one end of Main Street to the other. If an adventure comes your way you take it. If several come your way, take your pick. I'll pay all expenses involved. And,"

Here it comes, thought Flagstone, the reason we are all here together.

"And I come with you and report on the whole thing. Exclusively." Toadburt smiled at Flagstone. "Deal?" Toadburt's hand hung over the middle of the table. Flagstone thought for a moment. He reached out and shook the offered hand. "Deal. But I want to finish breakfast first."

Toadburt nodded and went after his second plate of sausage, potatoes, and eggs. Flagstone played with his food. Olivia frowned at him when Toadburt wasn't looking. Flagstone winced. That will leave a bruise he thought as Olivia kicked him under the table.

Flagstone rose from his breakfast feeling neither full nor satisfied, but decidedly uncomfortable. Olivia rose and disgustedly shook her head. They started to bid Toadburt goodbye when he broke in.

"I daresay you may not even have to walk Main Street, Flagstone."

The Sultan's Court Advisor escorted by a swarm of swarthy Guards entered the Empress. The manager bowed, answered a question from the Court Advisor, and pointed at Flagstone as he ushered Olivia toward the front door of the Empress. The Sultan's Court Advisor cut him off.

"Mr. Flagstone, the Sultan has a proposition for you."

"Please accompany us on our stroll and fill us in," said Flagstone gesturing outside. Olivia led the way, followed by the Court Advisor. Flagstone turned back to Toadburt. "One hour, my choice," he said loud enough to Toadburt to hear. The man nodded and stuffed another forkful of sausage in his mouth. Flagstone smiled and followed the Sultan's Court Advisor out into the morning light.

The three walked casually down the dirt street that was Jimville's Main Street. The morning fog had burned off. The day was not yet hot. Olivia slipped her arm around Flagstone's right arm. Surprisingly the Sultan's Court Advisor did the same on the left. Flagstone felt like he was ready to be pulled apart. He laughed a soft chuckle. Olivia held his arm close.

"Your Excellency, what would His Highness want of me so early in the morning?" asked Flagstone.

"His Highness, the Sultan of All Jimland, would like to you to find and bring back Jasmine the Honey-Lipped of the Sultan's Own Harem," answered the Court Advisor with a straight face. "He would be mightily pleased and reward you greatly."

"The woman is in all probability very dead, Your Excellency. Even the Sultan has said this."

"Yes, it is true. But he can not rest without knowing for sure one way or the other. Surely you understand?"

"I do. May I think about it and give you answer this afternoon," asked Flagstone.

"You may. That would be very good if you cannot answer right now?"

"I cannot. I have another engagement pending and I must think them over. Surely, you understand, Your Excellency," Flagstone said flashing his best smile. Olivia smiled and nodded also.

"Very well, I shall expect answer by four o'clock this afternoon. I trust the Sultan will not be disappointed."

"We shall see," answered Flagstone. He disentangled himself from the Court Advisor and continued his stroll with Olivia.

"Well, that's one," she said in a low voice. "Don't do it."

"Only one and I must do it, more than one and I get my choice," repeated Flagstone.

"Ok, I offer an Adventure wherein you will never have to leave your suite and I guarantee you will be exhausted by its end." She squeezed his arm against her body.

"Very tempting, but not fair, Olivia."

"I didn't hear fair mentioned anywhere in the bargain," she said sharply.

"True," answered Flagstone. "True."

They laughed and continued their stroll.

The market stalls were just opening. The vendors hefted their wares and called out to the pair. Cottons, silk, and lace were displayed, all sure to make the lovely lady even lovelier. Olivia laughed merrily, making her hair swish back and forth. Flagstone wasn't sure who was having more fun, Olivia or the vendors.

Valuable animal pelts. Authentic macaw lips. A spotless leopard cub. The animal vendors began their singsong pitch. A long thought extinct dodo bird

chick raised secretly in captivity right here in Jimville. Flagstone, Olivia and the vendor all laughed together. The man shrugged, smiled, and continued his calling as the market began to fill with morning visitors. Flagstone and Olivia moved on.

Authentic treasure maps and precious documents from the Courts of Europe, sure grace any brave Explorers home. Flagstone slowed down. Olivia pulled lightly on his arm. "Tut, tut," he said. "One lady's lace is another man's treasure map." They stopped. Flagstone began rummaging through the pile of papers.

"I'll bet I look better in my lace than you in your treasure map," she said.

"Be careful," he said smiling, "you've never seen me a treasure map. And an X does mark the spot." They both laughed heartily.

Flagstone suddenly stopped and raised a grubby map fragment for closer inspection. It was only part of a map, but it interested him. It had a vague outline of Jimland but it wasn't quite right. It had more of Jimland where now there was only the ocean and the Secret Islands. He held it up to the light. Faded colored lines ran from faded colored dots. Some strange symbols lined one half frayed edge. Flagstone was intrigued. I held up the map. The stall owner looked at Flagstone not the map. He held up five fingers. Flagstone tossed him four dollars. The man nodded. Flagstone carefully rolled up the map and put it under his free arm.

Flagstone and Olivia turned and began the return walk down the other side of Jimville's Main Street. The morning sun was up now and beaming it warmth on the town. A patrol of bored looking Royal Marines filed in from the Wilds. Their dirty and streaked uniforms contrasting markedly with the gaudy uniform of the Sultan's Guard walking in pairs, policing Jimville. Flagstone and Olivia walked slowly along. An hour, Flagstone decided, was much more time than required to walked up and down the Main Street of Jimville unless one fell down a lot and had a hard time getting up.

Flagstone and Olivia neared the British Consulate. Flagstone saw the recently returned Norton Dullcote come briskly out of the Consulate. Dullcote looked away and then toward Flagstone. He seemed to brighten up. Dullcote headed determinedly in their direction.

"Flagstone, Ms. Fate, how good to see you," said Dullcote.

"Norton, our pleasure," said Flagstone.

Olivia gave the old man a hug and little kiss on his cheek. "How's Constance?" she asked.

"Fine, fine. She up in our room puttering around."

"I really must go see her. There are some lovely fabrics she might like. Do you mind, Jules?" she asked.

"Not at all," answered Julius. Olivia gave him a quick kiss and start toward the Empress. Two paces away she stopped and turned to Flagstone. "No decisions without me. Do you hear?"

"Yes. Don't worry, Olivia." Flagstone waved her on. He turned back to Dullcote who was waiting patiently, obviously eager to talk. "What's up, Norton?"

Dullcote began walking beside Flagstone, flicking the larger clods and droppings out of his path with his cane. He was humming to himself.

"Norton?"

"Ah, excuse me, Julius. I was just thinking."

"About?"

"About what you would charge me to find the source of the River Jim so I could open a trading post there. Make another fortune off the place. Have an exclusive contract with the British Consul right here in one pocket. In the other I have an agreement from the Sultan, signed only this morning, to split the profits fifty-fifty for certain unnamed rights." He cleared his throat.

"My, you have had a busy morning," said Flagstone hardly concealing a grin.

"My boy, think about it. Finding the headwaters of the River Jim. Never been done. You'd be famous. I'll foot the bill. Take as long as you need. Hire the whole bloody town to go with you. Whatever!" Dullcote waved his arms at Jimville at large. A dog slept on a bare patch of dirt in the growing heat. A native woman brush at an earthen floor with a reed broom.

"Yeah, that'll break the bank." laughed Flagstone. Dullcote continued unruffled.

"Think about it, my boy. Just get on the river and keep going north. The beginning of that great water highway is up there somewhere. Just calling your name."

"For Expedition costs plus ten percent, and ten of the profits if the trading post ever gets started and for as long as it lasts," said Flagstone matter-of-factly.

"Three percent of the profits and its a deal," answered Dullcote equally matter-of-factly.

"Let me think on it. I'll give you an answer by four this afternoon."

"Capital," replied Dullcote. "Well, I must leave you here, Julius. That old bobcat Texas Bob Bodine is going to give me a shooting lesson." Dullcote began to walk off.

"Be sure to stay behind him," Flagstone said loudly to Dullcote's retiring back. Dullcote waved an arm and kept walking.

Flagstone headed toward the Empress. He had barely taken four steps when Big Jake Frere came running up Main Street calling his name. Flagstone stopped. Big Jake came to a dusty halt in front of Flagstone.

"You got the map?" he blurted out.

"What map," said Flagstone as the map stuck out from under his arm? Big Jake didn't seem to notice.

"The map guy said you bought a certain map from him that he was suppose to be selling to me today. That it? I'll pay you double whatever you paid the little son of a gun."

"What's so special about this piece of a map," asked Flagstone. He suddenly valued the map a great deal. "Come on, out with it."

Big Jake looked up and down the dusty street. "Well, I think it's a map of the Walking Stones that Denny Lee was always looking for. Well, a part of the map anyway." Big Jake clamped his mouth shut like he'd said too much already. He looked at the map then at Flagstone sorrowfully.

A big voice boomed behind Flagstone. "How's it going, Flagstone? Had any offers yet?"

Flagstone turned to find Toadburt striding toward him. The man's big bulk didn't seem to slow him down. He came up and slapped Flagstone on the shoulder. "Well, do I win or what?" he asked.

Flagstone looked from Toadburt to Big Jake and back. "I don't know yet. I'll let you know at four o'clock this afternoon." Flagstone headed for the Empress thinking how strange this morning was. Behind him he heard two voice say together, "Ok, see you then."

Julius Flagstone sat in his suite and sipped his first cold lemonade of the day. He swirled the ice cubes in the glass and thought for the hundredth time he needed to buy his very own ice machine. How marvelous they were.

Olivia sat on the sofa watching him, her lemonade glass sweating on the table next to her. Flagstone sat at the table and pulled a piece of paper and pencil to him. He wrote in his careful strong hand.

1. Find Jasmine the Honey Lipped. Sultan.
2. Source of the River Jim. Dullcote.
3. Walking Stones. Big Jake.

He stared at the paper a moment. He looked up at Olivia. She was watching him. The light came in from the open balcony door. Her hair was piled on her head and formed a soft halo around it. She looked great. He smiled.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know. Nothing really strikes me as worth getting excited over."

"Hmmm." The ticking of the clock on the faux mantle seemed louder than usual.

Dear Reader, now is your chance to help Julius Flagstone, Fearless and Famous Explorer, on to his next Adventure. Simply email the Editor with your choice of one of the three adventures from Flagstone's list. The adventure with the highest total after one week of voting will be Flagstone's next Great Adventure.

Like they say in Chicago, vote early, vote often.

Report 218 - 7.2 - CHOICES MADE.

Date: 2004-04-12

7.2 - CHOICES MADE.

Julius Flagstone sat in the Empress dining room enjoying an early after dinner drink before dinner. The Fetching Olivia Fate sat at his right hand, radiant as ever. The third party was a most expected person. Reginald Toadburt, The Gossip Columnist of the Times sat across from Flagstone. Norton Dullcote inspected the silverware with one eye and kept his other eye warily on Toadburt. Big Jake Frere sat slouching next to Olivia and as far as possible from Toadburt.

As Toadburt enthusiastically tried to get Dullcote to talk, Flagstone was thinking to himself about his choice of adventures. Flagstone smiled and rose from his chair. The Sultan's Court Advisor arrived with the usual escort of burly Guards. He sat in the only remaining chair, next to Dullcote and edged away from Toadburt. Flagstone ordered a round of drinks. The waiter left to get the drinks and tell anyone who would listen of the persons assembled at his table.

Flagstone cleared his throat. Everyone at the table looked at him. "Lady and Gentlemen," he said smiling at Olivia. Everyone leaned in a little. "Today has been a most interesting day. I have received four offers of different sorts."

The men at the table looked quickly at each other and all at Olivia who showed a tiny smile. Flagstone leaned back in his chair. He felt Olivia's leg press against his under the table. "I have received promises of fame, fortune, even the goodwill of the Sultan himself. It is all very flattering. But this morning I was given the opportunity to pick whatever came my way with all expenses being paid."

"I have chosen, therefore, based only on my own self-serving interest." Everyone chuckled, but no one looked pleased. "My next adventure will be to look for the legendary Walking Stones so sought after by the equally legendary Denny Lee. Big Jake here will be part of the Expedition as he has much knowledge of the topic."

There was a hubbub of talk and creaking chairs. Flagstone addressed each man in turn. He looked at the Sultan's Court Advisor. "Your Excellency, please inform the Sultan that I cannot take his generous offer at this time. However, I will be alert for signs of Jasmine. If I happen to find an answer for him, he will get the answer from my lips personally for the miserly sum of my Expedition expenses plus ten percent. Agreed?"

The Court Advisor was turning a strange shade of white tinted with red. Flagstone thought it an interesting color. How would the Court Advisor tell the Sultan that his offer was rejected, but if Flagstone stumbled across the answer he would be expecting full payment for it? Flagstone didn't care about the tirade the Sultan would doubtless explode into. He smiled at the Court Advisor. The man wiped his brow with a scented handkerchief.

"Agreed, Mr. Flagstone. Please excuse me, I must inform the Sultan immediately as he may want to seek an alternate solution." The court Advisor began to rise. Flagstone spoke quietly.

"If I get him an answer I expect full payment, Excellency. Nothing less."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Flagstone," said the Court Advisor calmly?

"No, just a restatement of what you have just agreed to in front of all these witnesses," Flagstone said.

"As agreed, only if you are the first with news."

"Equally agreed, Your Excellency," said Flagstone with a little bow as he rose. The Sultan's Court Advisor quickly left the Empress amid his swarm of Guards.

"Pain in the ass," grunted Big Jake Frere half out loud. Olivia laughed.

Flagstone turned to Norton Dullcote. "Norton, your offer is very appealing. However I must pass on it for the moment. Perhaps after this next little trek through the Wilds? Would that be acceptable?"

Norton sipped his drink and smiled at Flagstone. "No problem, Julius, the river is not going anywhere. I'll run it past Ponatowski, if you don't mind. He's out in the Wilds so it will be a while before I see him."

"Very kind of you, Norton. Thank you," said Flagstone.

Dullcote looked at Big Jake, but spoke to Flagstone. "Now tell me all about these Walking Stone things, there may be something to interest me too. Every business proposal is worth listening to." Dullcote rested his chin on one up-turned hand and waited.

Big Jake stirred restlessly in his chair. Olivia patted his big suntanned hand. Flagstone looked at Toadbert who was writing furiously in a notebook. Toadbert glanced up noticing everyone was watching him. "Notes, must be accurate, you know."

Olivia laughed sweetly. "Please be," she said with no small hint of steel in her voice.

Flagstone spoke quietly. "The Walking Stones are an ancient Jimland legend. Denny Lee, the First and Most Fearless and Famous Explorer of Jimland was very interested if not obsessed with them. Big Jake has taken up the search where Denny Lee left off. I am also interested in the possibility of these things actually existing, as is Olivia."

Flagstone felt a little nudge under the table from Olivia. He flashed back to the incident during the rescues. [See our Reports 54, 59, 165, 170, 176. - Ed.] "I have decided, Reggie, that this is an adventure worthy of your best reporting skills. You may report the greatest discovery in the History of Archeology. What do you think?"

Reginald Toadbert was again writing furiously in his notebook. "Fabulous! Excellent choice! Couldn't have done better myself." He kept scribbling.

Flagstone continued. "As Toadbert here will be paying all expenses, we will spare no expense outfitting this Expedition." Toadbert's pencil barely slowed down. "Olivia will be coming along of course, as will Big Jake Frere. Blind Bob will help with the outfitting, but his leg is not ready for extended time in the bush. And, Reggie will be accompanying us with exclusive rights to the story."

Toadbert nodded in agreement. Flagstone continued. "Should we survive to return to Jimville."

Toadbert's pencil stopped cold. "Should," he asked meekly? Flagstone nodded.

"The Wilds of Jimland play no favorites, offer no deals, and take no prisoners, Reggie," said Flagstone flatly. Olivia nodded. Big Jake seemed lost in a memory. Dullcote seemed to shiver ever so slightly. Toadbert nodded again more firmly. His pencil started up and regained its speed.

"This will be done the old fashioned way, Olivia. We don't have time to build more balloons. And they probably wouldn't get us where we are going anyway. The jungle's too thick. So, Jake, gather the standard footsore herd of bearers and some askaris. Plan on a two month journey, and then half the number of men."

Big Jake looked up from the scrap of paper he was marking numbers on. "I want to move faster than normal on this, Jake. Now and while we are in the Wilds. I am learning the value of speed over numbers." Big Jake nodded. "We'll keep an ear open for news of Jasmine, just in case. And, Reggie, if we do find out about her you are still paying cost plus ten percent. So is the Sultan. Understood?"

Toadbert nodded and scribbled as fast as he could, his eyes sparkling.

"Norton, if I find the source of the River Jim during this whole thing, you pay the same. Agreed?"

Dullcote smiled and nodded agreement. "Could prove interesting to a lot of us," he said.

"It could, but don't get your hopes up." Dullcote nodded again. "Now it will take about two weeks to get everything together. Only the best men, Jake. Offer premium wages." Jake nodded. "Reggie, start losing some weight. I want to see you hiking every day, morning and afternoon. If you get left behind, I'm not stopping for you." Toadbert's pen slowed, he nodded, and resumed scribbling.

"And you, Olivia," said Flagstone warmly. She faced him. "I believe I owe you a moonlit walk on the beach."

Good-byes were brief and the table emptied. Flagstone and Fate moved to a smaller, more secluded table. They had a small meal with wine and soft talk, sprinkled with laughter. Soon they were walking arm in arm along the beach. Flagstone carried his shoes, and hers. His pant legs were rolled up. Olivia held up the hem of her light skirt. The cool ocean water felt delicious.

The Wilds of Jimland waited.

Report 219 - 7.3 - UPRIVER.

Date: 2004-04-14

7.3 - UPRIVER.

Julius Flagstone stood on the bridge of the Jimland Bitch watching Cap'n Jack on the deck below. The good Cap'n was directing the loading of Flagstone's supplies. Olivia Fate stood beside Flagstone laughing softly at the Captain's inventive use of various parts of several languages. Reginald Toadburt stood nearby scribbling furiously in his notebook and giggling all the while. Flagstone smiled himself. This Cap'n Jack guy was something else. He laughed out loud.

Minutes later, Cap'n Jack stomped into the little bridge sweating and cursing. He doffed his hat to Olivia. She opened her mouth and shut it as Cap'n Jack leaned out the open window and bellowed at his crew to bring aboard the bloody gangway. Figures scurried about on the open flat deck. Cap'n Jack tapped a pressure gauge. He yelled orders into a copper speaking tube and out every window in the little bridge. The Jimland bitch nudged away from the pier. She picked up some speed.

Flagstone grinned to himself as boy on a pony trotted past the Jimland Bitch as she belched gray smoke from her stack. Cap'n Jack yanked the dirty lanyard above the worn wheel. The Bitch's steam-horn sounded loud and long. The pony bolted leaving the boy lying in the dirt rubbing his head and smiling.

Cap'n Jack looked at Flagstone and Olivia. "Little game that kid and I play," he said without a trace of a smile. He spat out the window. Olivia reminded herself to keep up with wind changes. Toadburt wiped his face with a big handkerchief and shrugged. All the while the Jimland Bitch huffed and puffer her way slowly against the current heading north.

Two weeks into the trip and still the Jimland Bitch slowly ate up the miles. Cap'n Jack stopped daily now for firewood, swearing to anyone who would listen that he wouldn't use his reserve coal this early on. Cap'n Jack's crew cut wood into the night using torches to light their work. Even the Cap'n pulled off his jacket and had a turn with the axe. "Keeps the juices flowing," he said as he took a pull on his flask and leaned on the upper deck's flimsy railing. Flagstone had dispatched his bearers to help with the firewood. He might as well get his money's worth was his reasoning. besides it "keeps the juices flowing."

Olivia somehow found herself helping two gray-haired bent-over little native men cook for the crew. She didn't even remember how it started, but soon she was in charge of the dirty little kitchen. One and all agreed the food instantly got better, probably with no thanks to the new addition of actually washing the pots and pans between meals.

Cap'n Jack was lazily steering the slow-moving Bitch. Flagstone was leaning on the windowsill enjoying the view, but not the incessant wheezing and smoke of the rusty steamer. Cap'n Jack poked Flagstone in the shoulder with a stubby finger. Flagstone turned.

"We will have to haul a cataract if we go much further up this way."

Flagstone stood not saying anything, absorbing the idea. Cap'n Jack continued.

"No other way. Tried it once before. Damn near made it." He pointed with his stubby finger at a pile of timber and flotsam washed across the far riverbanks. "That's the second Bitch over there. Damn near got past the rapids. Damn near," he trailed off. Flagstone was surprised to know that there was more than one Jimland Bitch. He was twice surprised to think Cap'n Jack had only been "damn near" doing anything.

"But," asked Flagstone quietly.

"But, damn near don't make it on the river, Flagstone. There's the result. Lost the second Bitch that day. But we'll make it this time I reckon."

"How's that," asked Flagstone curious about the passing of a cataract in a tired, rusted out old steamer, one rock away from the bottom of the river?

"Got your boys to haul us over," said Cap'n Jack with a wide grin. "That ought to do it. Then we got free steaming till we have to do it again. I hear the river's got a couple these cataracts on its way north. Don't really know, but we'll find out alright." Cap'n Jack bit down on his dirty pipe stem. "We'll find out."

Flagstone strolled out onto the small upper deck. Olivia was sitting in the one decent deck chair. Several of the askaris were leaning on the rails. Flagstone walked slowly to her side. She smiled up at him.

"Tomorrow when we go to pass a cataract, you will be fully kitted out and ready for the Wilds," Flagstone said. "And make sure Reggie is with you and ready." Then he slowly walked aft. Olivia watched him wide-eyed.

The cataract roared and foamed head. Cap'n Jack fought the Jimland Bitch to the shore and there she was tied off. Jack assembled his crew and all of Flagstone's Expedition including Big Jake Frere. Only Flagstone, Olivia, Toadbutt were not called. Flagstone went anyway after making sure Olivia was getting ready for the worst.

A full day passed in unloading the Jimland Bitch onto the edge of the Wilds. Everything not nailed down was carried ashore, past the cataracts, and piled carefully for reloading once the steamer was hauled over the rapids. Only fuel for the steam engines was left aboard and that was carefully looked over by Cap'n Jack. Every pound off the steamer was one less pound to drag against the river current. Every pound was an easier pull over the foaming rocks ahead. Finally it was done.

Cap'n Jack looked at the up-turned faces as he stood on a barrel on the riverbank. "We will play out four lines, two forward and to aft," he said pointing rather loosely at the Jimland Bitch. Several men nodded knowingly. One quarter of the men on each rope. Big Jake, if you don't mind, take the most forward line. It must never stop moving forward."

Big Jake nodded. Cap'n Jack held up a battered old speaking trumpet. "I'll be giving the orders. Line 1, line 2, line 3, line 4. Pay attention and keep your mouths shut. You'll be breathing too hard to talk anyway, so don't even try."

Several men looked about with big eyes. Others nodded.

"Engine crew only five. Four stokers and the engineer. Flagstone was surprised once again. He couldn't identify who the engineer of the Jimland Bitch might be in the crowd of grimy natives. "Bridge crew, two, me and a helmsman," said Cap'n Jack.

Flagstone was looking at the assembled men. Cap'n Jack looked at him. "Flagstone, Toadbutt, you, and your Lady can chose your own place, just don't get in the way."

Flagstone nodded and smiled. "It's Toadbutt. He and Ms Fate choose to be ashore. She will head the supply guard. He will assist. I'll be on the second line, if you don't mind."

"Fine by me," answered Jack. "We can always use another hand on the lines." He picked up the speaking trumpet. He voice leapt out at the men. "Stand by to play out the lines. Take your positions!"

The men lined up like ants along the thick ropes tied to the Jimland Bitch. Grey smoke billowed from the smokestack. The Bitch bobbed nervously on the water showing more streaked and scratched bottom than usual. She seemed restless, eager to try the cataracts. Cap'n Jack paced bridge, stopping frequently to tap the pressure gauges and yell the line handlers into position where he wanted them.

Flagstone was three men back on the second like. He was in his "working" clothes. He wiped his hands on his pants legs and pulled on his heavy leather gloves. He looked at the Jimland Bitch. He turned and looked at line one. Big Jake stood aside, hands on his hips, facing the men with his back to the water.

"This line does not stop. Ever. It must move forward or the whole show is lost. Understand?" Big Jake looked the men over. They were nodding in understanding. Some were rubbing dirt into their hands. Everyone knew this was going to be rough.

Cap'n Jack's voice boomed out. "Take up the slack."

The men put tension on the lines. The Jimland Bitch nudged up closer to the shoreline. "Ready to cast off." There was a long pause.

"Cast off forward." The one line forward holding the Bitch to the shore was pulled quickly aboard by a man on the deck. He instantly ran to the stern.

"Cast off aft." The line snaked aboard the Bitch. Water foamed at the rear of the steamer as it old propeller bit into the water.

"Ease off all lines." The steamer edged away from the shore. The Jimland Bitch's steam horn sounded off. The lines trembled in the men's hands. The steamer sagged downstream dragging the line handlers along, but more power was applied and the old steamer started crawling toward the cataract.

"All lines forward in order. Line 1. Line 2. Line 3. Line 4."

Big Jake was ahead of his line watching the terrain and the men as they hauled on the line. Flagstone felt the weight of the steamer through the line. He felt the river pushing mightily against it. He heaved with the men. A rhythmic chant was taken up. The men hauled on the lines. The smokestack spouted black smoke. The Jimland Bitch's wake foamed.

Slowly the steamer approached the rocky cataract. Cap'n Jack brought the old steamer closer to shore, twenty yards off. The men were grunting now. The river was channeled and running faster here, but here the rocks were the fewest. The steam horn sounded again. Cap'n Jack's voice roared out.

"Now, lads. It time to pull me through."

Everyone was leaning back. Flagstone felt the sweat being pull out of him. Step by step they pulled the bouncing steamer along. Flagstone could hear Big Jake yelling for his two cutters to get up there and cut down some brush. Men were swearing in several languages.

Step by step the lines moved forward. A man fell, rising quickly to regain his place. The chanting became a hoarse chorus. The smokestack seemed to shoot smoke into the sky. Flagstone slipped and fell. Quickly he was up and pulling again.

The steam horn sounded several times. "Jake, keep that damn line moving," roared Cap'n Jack. Big Jake was cussing a storm. Step by step they pulled the steamer up and over a long flat rock. The water jumped out of the ropes as the strain squeezed and squeezed them.

Flagstone was gasping now like everyone else. He took a quick glance over his shoulder. Halfway, maybe, he thought. Suddenly line 3 was in disarray. The steamer halted. The steam horn sounded. The Jimland Bitch's wake erupted into foam.

"Line three get going or I'll roast everyone of you," bellowed Cap'n Jack.

Flagstone felt like his arms were being pulled out of his shoulders. All the lines had come to a halt. They barely held the Bitch in place. The men had stopped swearing. There was no breath for that. Ragged gasps came all around.

"Move it, Line One. Jake, get that line moving. Damn it. Now!"

One step at a time the lines began to move. The engine of the Bitch rattled and shook. The old steamer climbed over the low rocks. The man closest to the river on Line Two disappeared in a jerk into the river. No one moved to look for the man.

A step. Another. Flagstone decided he enjoyed mad stampeding water buffalo to this pain any day. Another ten yards. Men were loosing their grip now as they tore the palms of their hands. A few more steps upriver.

The Jimland Bitch balanced see-say like on a big flat-topped rock. Cap'n Jack was cursing like nobody could believe. By a concerted heave the steamer was pulled back into the water. The river angrily pushed on the steamer. Half the men on shore were yanked off their feet.

The Bitch's steam horn sound frantically. Big Jake was yelling angrily. The steamer started sliding back toward the big rock. The steam horn sounded over and over. The men laid over on the lines. They were at unnatural angles to the ground. Some cried in pain. All were sucking for air.

The steamer stopped sliding down river. The steamer's wake was being thrashed by an angry water god. The whole vessel shook. One step upriver. Another. Two more. It was moving again.

Over one last partially submerged rock. More steps upriver. The strain was lessening. The men were turning to put the big ropes over their shoulders. Bloody handprints were all over the ropes. Men pulled with their eyes closed, grimaces on their faces. Flagstone felt like he had been drawn and quartered. Everything hurt. He pulled. Maybe it hurt badly enough he wouldn't feel it.

More slow steps upriver. Flagstone was soaked from head to foot and covered with mud. He didn't remember falling down. In fact he couldn't remember passing the cataract at all. The steam horn on the Bitch sounded a series of blasts.

"Ease your lines." Cap'n Jack's voice came out of the sky like God's. The men collapsed as one on the muddy bank. Cap'n Jack held the steamer in place with its own power now.

"Line handlers forward." A guide rope arched over ship to shore from the single man on the steamer's deck. The exhausted line handlers pulled it over and grabbed the heavier line attached to it. They tied it off under Cap'n Jack's bellowed instructions. The same thing was done at the stern.

The Jimland Bitch was moored securely to the shore. The men lay in long lines on the shore. Flagstone wondered if his arms were longer than his legs. He laughed hoarsely picturing himself dragging his knuckles around Jimland.

The Jimland Bitch's smokestack seemed empty. A lazy little curl of smoke climbed skyward. The steamer, scratched and dented, bobbed quietly by the shore. The men lay about. Cap'n Jack walked up to Flagstone who was lying in the dirt like the rest, totally exhausted and thinking the mud felt

unusually comfortable. Cap'n Jack looked at him, shook his head, and smiled. Flagstone just lay in the mud, not wanting to move even to smile.

Cap'n Jack looked over the men. He bellowed out. "Double beers tonight. No work tomorrow. We reload in two days. Well done. Now make camp as best you can." He walked back aboard the steamer. From the open bridge window he raised his flask to the muddy men piled like tree trunks along the river bank.

Most of the camp as asleep at sundown. Only the supply guard, now turned sentries, were moving. Graveyards had more activity.

At dawn the slavers attacked.

Report 220 - 7.4 - CARRY ON.

Date: 2004-04-16

7.4 - CARRY ON.

Julius Flagstone woke at the first gunshots. He struggled wearily to his feet. His arms felt like two logs. He fumbled in his pack and pulled out his big hunting pistol and holster. Buckling it on, he tugged his hat down and began yelling orders.

Rifle bullet whizzed into the Expedition's Camp. Several men were already down. Flagstone called for his askaris. The Expedition members rushed to cover behind the pile of bags and boxes of supplies. With a sigh of relief Flagstone saw Olivia Fate sheltered in among the boxes, four armed askaris with her. More gunfire from the brush.

Cap'n Jack appeared on the Jimland Bitch's bridge. He raised his speaking trumpet. "What's going on, Flagstone?" he bellowed.

"Slavers, I think," yelled Flagstone. Cap'n Jack nodded. Flagstone yelled again over the firing, "Get your crew aboard!"

"I can do better than that," came Cap'n Jack's gruff reply. Flagstone ducked behind a pile of bags and boxes. Bullets thumped into the pile. Cap'n Jack bellowed again. "Gun crew to the bridge. Gun crew to the bridge."

Gun crew! Flagstone shook his head as he reloaded his big hunting pistol. What next he thought to himself. Olivia crawled up on her hands and knees.

"Good morning," she said brightly.

"Good morning. How was your walk," asked Flagstone as he fired into the jungle around the camp?

"Very pleasant until these scoundrels chased us back to camp. Slavers to be sure, Jules, very bad men."

"Uh huh," Flagstone muttered as he fired at a speck of cloth in the jungle. Flagstone's men were now gathered in the piles of supplies and armed to the teeth. The bearers were surrounded by the askaris who were not wasting their shots. Things seemed to be under control. It appeared the slavers were not about to rush a well-armed and sheltered party.

Suddenly firing erupted from the river. Flagstone spun around. Coming down the river were ten or twelve large canoes full of firing, shouting slavers. Flagstone calmly directed fire against them. Men fell out of the canoes and floated limply down-river.

A new noise filled the air. It silenced the firing from the jungle and the supply crates. Its rhythmic beat sent heavy buzzings into the air. The water around the lead canoe erupted. The canoe splintered apart.

Flagstone sat with his mouth open. "Well I'll be," he said to no one in particular.

Up on the bridge of the Jimland Bitch, Cap'n Jack's gun crew slowly and carefully fired their shiny Gatling gun at the canoes. The second canoe came apart quickly. The third sank a moment later. The heavy beat of the Gatling filled the air. The river boiled. A fourth canoe was sawed in half as it tried to turn about. A crewman fell silently off the bridge. Another man calmly stepped up to replace him. The steady hammering of the Gatling continued. The pirates turned and fled upriver as fast as they could paddle. The Gatling sank two more canoes. Bodies were floating all around the Jimland Bitch.

Finally the Gatling stopped. Cap'n Jack stepped out from behind the gun. He waved his speaking trumpet at Flagstone. "That'll teach the miserable bastards," he yelled. Flagstone waved back. A single rifle shot cracked out.

Cap'n Jack staggered back and over the outboard windowsill. In slow motion he fell into the river and instantly disappeared from view. The gun crew was stunned. They stood like statues. Flagstone was running before Cap'n Jack hit the water. He cast aside his hat and pistol. Flagstone dashed up and across the Bitch's empty deck. He flew off the other side hitting the foaming spot where Cap'n Jack had fallen. Olivia was yelling orders. Men scrambled.

Minutes later a gasping Flagstone was hauled back aboard the Jimland Bitch. Flagstone stood for several minutes catching his breath. He looked at Olivia. He shook his head in the negative. Olivia spoke to an old crewman. He nodded sadly. Cap'n Jack was gone.

Big Jake Frere walked slowly aboard the Jimland Bitch. He stopped in front of a now dry Flagstone. "They are all gone. We counted six bodies in the brush. Don't know how many the Gatling dumped in the river, but it sure as hell sent them packing."

Flagstone nodded. He looked at the old crewman who had reported that he was the first mate and engineer of the Jimland Bitch. His name was Mercy.

"Mercy, we'll load up the supplies today and head on up river," said Flagstone gently.

Mercy stood for a moment then shuffled a little. He shook his grey head no. "We go home now. No Cap'n Jack, no deal. We go home."

Flagstone stood up and looked at the man. Mercy didn't flinch. The other crewmen were gathered behind Mercy. Flagstone looked them over. Olivia caught his eye and slowly shook her head no.

"Ok, Mercy. We'll keep the supplies here and make this base camp. You won't leave until I write a letter for you to deliver to the British Consul. Right?"

"Ok, Mr. Flagstone. We get up steam and wait for letter. Then we go home. You keep supplies." Mercy turned and started giving order to the little crew.

The Gatling was left mounted and a man stood by it attentively. Men were sent below to get up steam pressure. Others singled up the lines from the Jimland Bitch to the shore. Flagstone sat on the foredeck carefully composing his report to the British Consul and short separate letters to Norton Dullcote and Casimir Ponatowski. He handed them to Mercy who stuck them inside his shirt without a glance.

Flagstone stood on the shore and watched the Jimland Bitch build up speed and shoot swiftly through the cataract that had taken them so long to haul the awkward ship over. Minutes later the Bitch slipped out of view as she rounded a shallow bend in the river. Only her smoke marked her position. Flagstone turned around to look at his Expedition. Questions were on every face.

"Big Jake take a half the men and start making us some canoes and rafts. I'll take the other half and organize us a base camp." Big Jake nodded and called out some names. Quickly his party armed itself and headed into the jungle. Olivia and Toadburt stood nearby.

"Olivia inventory our supplies. This is all we going to have for a while it seems. It needs to last us a while." She nodded and called a couple names. The men were soon moving boxes around and a list was forming in Olivia's hand.

Toadburt looked at Flagstone. Flagstone looked at Toadburt. "Write something nice about the man who saved our lives." Flagstone strode off giving orders about the reorganization of the camp. Guards were posted and work begun in earnest. The sound of axes and saws filled the air, only darkness quieting the noise.

Dawn found the camp returning to normal. A wonderful smell spread as the cooks prepared the morning meal. Four large canoes and a slim raft lay on the riverbank. The men smiled a bit more.

Olivia Fate sat next to Julius Flagstone. He smiled at her. Her radiant smile gave him a thrill. "You look great," he said quietly. Olivia tossed her head a little.

"Thanks." She nodded her head at the approaching Toadburt. Flagstone continued eating as Toadburt came up and sat down next to Big Jake Frere. The scout nodded his greetings. Toadburt looked about at the camp activity.

"You don't need to go on, Flagstone," he said. "I'll understand. After all." Flagstone interrupted through a mouthful of food.

"After all what," he muttered through his chewing.

"After what happened yesterday. I mean Cap'n Jack and all." Toadburt looked around.

"That was yesterday. This is today," Flagstone said washing the words down with hot coffee.

"But the steamer left us. We are abandoned," said Toadburt. Olivia smiled. Big Jake hide is big grin in a mouthful of sausage.

"Let me explain something to you. They would have to unload us eventually. It just came sooner than expected. So we paddle or walk a little farther. It matters not," said Flagstone.

"But, "

"We are looking for the Legendary Walking Stones. We have supplies. We have lost very few men. We have just begun. We have all the time in the world."

"But, the slavers," began Toadburt.

"They may be back, they may not. What happened yesterday could happened any day of the week. This is the Wilds of Jimland where anything can happen, Reggie. Remember?"

"But, "

"This is no different from any other expedition. Risk brings reward. And besides, I want to find the Stones just so Big Jake can say he told me so."

Big Jake and Olivia laughed aloud. Toadburt smiled. Flagstone finished his coffee. Men were forming up in their work details.

"Reggie, you won't win any awards giving up so easily. I thought better of you."

Toadburt turned a deep crimson. "I'm not scared, Flagstone," Toadburt began again. Flagstone waved him quiet.

"I know you're not. It's your first expedition that's all. Just remember the Jimland Fearless and Famous Explorer Club motto."

"Which is?"

"Ever forward," said Flagstone smiling and rising to his feet.

"Ever forward," said Olivia and Big Jake together rising to their feet also.

Toadburt looked at the three and shook his head. He stood up grinning a silly grin. "Ever forward."

"That's the spirit, Reggie," Flagstone said slapping the reporter on the back. "Now, we have work to do."

Report 221 - 7.5 - INTO THE JUNGLE.

Date: 2004-04-18

7.5 - INTO THE JUNGLE.

Julius Flagstone sat in the rough canoe and watched their hastily-made camp disappear. Olivia Fate smiled at him. Beautiful day he thought. His Expedition strung out behind him in a flotilla of rough-hewn canoes. He looked at the canoes. Won't last long, he thought, but better than walking just yet. Flagstone waved at Toadburt sitting in the second canoe. Toadburt waved back and continued writing furiously in his ever-present notebook.

For six days the Expedition pushed on up the river. The thrown together canoes held up better than Flagstone had expected. No major mishaps occurred. Evening of the sixth day found Julius Flagstone, the Fetching Olivia Fate, Reginald Toadburt, and Big Jake Frere gathered around a fire, eating their evening meal and swatting at the gnats flitting about.

Reginald Toadburt slapped at one. "Damn nuisance."

"They will go away in another day, after we leave the river," said Big Jake.

"Time to head inland, you think?" asked Flagstone.

Big Jake chewed for a moment. "Yeah, its time to head inland. We are close enough now to hike to the only site of the Walking Stones I'm sure of." He shooed gnats away from his food and kept eating.

Olivia Fate laid her empty plate aside. She looked at Big Jake. "What exactly are these Walking Stones, Jake? What did Denny Lee think he had found out there?"

"Well, Denny Lee thought they were some kind of way to travel great distance across Jimland. Just step onto one and then step off and you were some where else." Jake chewed another mouthful of food and grunted. "I think they do that and more."

Flagstone stretched out his long legs. "More? Like what, Jake?"

"Well, I think they go farther than just Jimland."

"Interesting," said Flagstone.

"How do they work, Jake? You just step on them and, poof, you're somewhere else. Sounds a little scary," said Olivia. Toadburt was scribbling furiously in his notebook all thoughts of food gone, and the gnats forgotten.

"Well, you got to have these," Jake said as he reached in his pocket and pulled out a half dozen round metal discs that resembled silver coins. Each had a strange symbol etched on both sides. "And maybe this. He held out a

smooth metal sphere. The discs and the sphere were all about one inch in diameter.

"What's that for," asked Olivia? Jake handed her the discs and the sphere. She looked them over and passed them to Flagstone. Toadburt took his turn looking at the little things and handed them back to Big Jake.

"What do you think they are, Jake?" asked Flagstone.

"Denny Lee thought, and I agree, that the discs are like destination tokens. You step on the Walking Stone with the token and, whoosh, you are at the destination."

"Really," blurted out Toadburt scribbling furiously.

"Really," answered Big Jake.

"Where do those tokens take you?" asked Olivia wide-eyed.

"I have no clue," Jake replied flatly. "Never been able to get them to work."

Flagstone laughed. "I love a mystery. Jake, this is going to be fun."

Olivia shook her head. "Right." Everyone was grinning. "We make Reggie go first."

Reggie's mouth fell open. "What!" He had stopped scribbling. Everyone but Toadburt broke into long laughter. He blushed in the campfire light.

Big Jake led the way into the jungle. By noon he was bathed in sweat from clearing a path through the dense undergrowth. The heat was sapping everyone's strength. Toadburt looked a red in the face like his head was on fire. Everyone was sopping wet. Ever forward, thought Big Jake. They pressed on.

Afternoon brought the usual downpour. It cooled them off. Flagstone had taken the lead now. The Expedition wound its way through the jungle like a giant centipede. The going was slow, but not too difficult. By evening the undergrowth was less dense.

Two more days passed. One man was lost to a bite from an unknown insect. He died surprisingly quickly. Flagstone guessed it was some unknown poisonous spider. Toadburt took to wearing his shirts with the sleeves rolled down and both the sleeves and collar buttoned tight.

Olivia slapped Toadburt on the back. Toadburt jumped. "Got it, Reggie. Did it bit you?" She winked at Big Jake. Toadburt was all aquiver trying to turn around inside his skin.

"What! What," he yelped!

"Oops, sorry. It was nothing," said Olivia with a straight face. Big Jake hid his smile. Toadburt stumbled on swatting at the air.

Flagstone and Big Jake stood on a small hill and looked across the treetops. The Wilds of Jimland was thick about them. The Expedition was halted at the base of the hill. Olivia and Reggie were climbing up the overgrown slope. When they arrived at the top Olivia gasped. Toadburt began scribbling furiously in his notebook.

Before them the treetops spread out like grass in every direction. To the north, out of the tree canopy, rose a small pyramid structure. The pyramid top was truncated and a small squat building sat on the pyramid summit. Flagstone wiped the brim of his hat with his big handkerchief. Big Jake passed his canteen around.

"Almost there, Jake," said Flagstone.

"Yeah, another two days or so," Big Jake said shading his eyes and peering at the pyramid top.

Olivia stood quietly staring at the stone structure. Toadburt scribbled. Flagstone carefully took bearings and noted them in his journal. Five minutes later they were at the bottom of the hill and making their way through the jungle.

Olivia walked beside Flagstone. They were some yards behind Big Jake and ahead of the Expedition body.

"What do you think, Jules," asked Olivia in a low voice.

"Don't know yet."

"Oh, come on. We've seen these things work when we rescued Big Jake."

"We saw something happen, yes," said Flagstone holding a frond back for Olivia's passage.

"Do you think these thing work like Big Jake thinks?"

"Don't know."

Olivia snorted. "You're holding you cards close to your vest today!"

Flagstone chuckled. "This could be important, Olivia. I mean not just sensational and make lots of money, but really important. It different this time. Don't know what it is, but it's just different."

"So you believe Big Jake."

"Yes, I do. Don't ask for reasons why. It's just a feeling."

"Me too." Olivia shivered in the heat.

"Olivia?"

"Yes, Jules?" She laid her hand on his strong arm.

"I think they go someplace other than Jimland."

Olivia was silent for a long time as the Expedition trudged through the heat of the day. Showers came and went. Dusk fell. The Expedition made camp in a small clearing. Cooking fires sent delicious odors through the air. Animals growled in the brush. Eyes glittered in the gathering dark.

Shadows flitted overhead. Toadburt instinctively ducked. "What is flying around up there?" he asked pointing to the treetops.

Flagstone looked up from his blanket. "Night birds, bats, sometimes bigger things."

Toadburt looked uneasily up toward the evening sky over the clearing. Dark shapes darted and swooped about silently. "Bigger things?"

"Sometime Pterodons, or maybe even a really hungry Pterodactyl. But usually just night birds and bats."

Reggie kept looking at the dark shapes flying around high above.

Big Jake Frere looked up from the discs in his hand. "Ever hear of the North American Thunderbird, Reggie?" he asked.

"No."

"Big bird. A giant bird like an eagle or something that carries off bison and people. Always comes on the front of big storms. That's how it got its name."

"Ok."

"Well, we have our own Jimland version. Carnivorous. A man-eater to be sure. Shot one once. Wing span was over twenty feet. Big old talons that could hold me easily. Wicked beak. They love the night."

"You're pulling my leg," said Reggie now suspicious of the whole conversation. Flagstone sat up.

"Its true, Reggie. They're very rare, almost legendary here, but they exist. Mainly up in the savannas and in the mountains. Don't ever see them in the jungle. Down here we get,"

Flagstone suddenly did a rolling dive for his rifle. Big Jake jumped flat on his face in the dirt. Olivia fell over backwards. Shouts and shots rose from the Expedition.

A great dark shadow swept incredibly swiftly through the camp. Reggie was standing by the fire. Then he wasn't. A muffled scream came from the treetops. Then all was silent.

Flagstone was standing with his rifle. He was breathing hard. The night sky was terribly clear. "I don't believe it."

Big Jake helped Olivia up. They looked up into the stars above the clearing.

"Pterodactyl?" asked Big Jake.

"Did you see what I saw?" asked Flagstone quietly.

"Yes, but I don't believe it either," answered Olivia dusting herself off.

Flagstone turned to Big Jake. "Double the watch until further notice. Everyone sleeps under the trees tonight."

Big Jake nodded. "What was it," he asked. "I just saw a big black shape."

"A Pterodactyl," said Olivia. "It got Reggie."

"I thought so," said Big Jake quietly.

"It had a rider," said Flagstone.

Big Jake's eyes widened. "Well, that's new!"

"Yes," said Flagstone and Olivia together.

"I'll double the watch," said Big Jake moving off and yelling orders.

Flagstone spent the night with his back to a tree and his rifle across his lap. Olivia lay snuggled up next to him with her big hunting pistol strapped on. She slept restlessly. He didn't sleep at all.

Report 222 - 7.6 - LOST CITIES.

Date: 2004-04-20

7.6 - LOST CITIES.

Julius Flagstone drowsed against the tree. He was neither sleep nor awake. The first rays of the morning sun drew him to his feet. After the pterodactyl attack on Reginald Toadburt the night had passed quietly. Still the men of the Expedition were nervous.

Word had quickly spread about the strange affair. Great leathery pterodactyls swooping silently out of the sky was not uncommon, though less heard of in the jungle. Having a rider on the great beast's back caused a sensation. Flagstone had questioned every Expedition member about what they had seen. A composite picture emerged.

It was a great pterodactyl that of was of no doubt. There was a rider that too, became a clear fact. That the rider was probably a pygmy became the consensus. Flagstone mulled that over in his half-dreams through the night. He had no answers when the sun bid him rise.

Big Jake Frere and Olivia Fate stood before Flagstone along with the various lead men of the Expedition. He had a decision to make. However, he had long ago made up his mind.

"We will continue toward the ruins. Looking for Toadburt will be along that line. We cannot go chasing who knows where off into the jungle. We have no idea where he was taken. We must push on." Flagstone looked at the people before him. They were nodding in agreement. There was an inherent risk in an Expedition. Everyone knew it. Everyone had to accept it.

Flagstone looked at Big Jake Frere and Olivia Fate. "Ever forward," he said.

"Ever forward," they answered.

Big Jake turned to the assembled lead men. "Prepare to move out," he ordered.

From dawn till dusk the Expedition wormed its way toward the ruins Flagstone had seen from the hill the day before. A direct path was, of course, impossible. But Big Jake Frere, spurred by his own obsessive interest, found the best route. He tirelessly scouted ahead of the main party and left signs for Flagstone on the way toward their objective.

Just after sundown Big Jake returned to camp dirty and tired. He beckoned Flagstone away from the main camp.

"What's up, Jake," asked Flagstone.

"The ruins are only two hours march away."

"Very good. A short walk tomorrow," said Flagstone pleased with the thought.

"It wasn't a pygmy on the beast's back." Big Jake looked troubled.

"What then," asked Flagstone directly.

"Well, they look like walking lizards," said Big Jake holding his hand about four feet off the ground. "This tall maybe, just big lizards that can walk and talk."

"Seriously?" asked Flagstone amazed.

"Seriously," said Big Jake. "And Reggie is in the city. I saw him."

"Let me guess. At the top of the pyramid."

"Yep. He's being held up there. Must be several thousand of the creatures in the ruins, if it is ruins. Maybe it's not a ruined city after all. Maybe."

"Maybe," Flagstone's mind was racing with the prospects.

"All we saw was the pyramid above the trees. It doesn't look like a ruined city up close. It looks very lived in and,"

"And," asked Flagstone.

"New."

"Seriously?" asked Flagstone amazed.

"Seriously," said Big Jake. "And Reggie is in the city. I saw him."

"I heard you the first time," interrupted Flagstone. "Amazing."

"Or something," said Big Jake with less than good humor.

"Get yourself some food." Big Jake started to walk into the camp. Flagstone caught his elbow. "Keep your mouth shut about this, Jake. You know the bearers' superstitions."

"Yeah. I saw them walking around over there," said Big Jake with a casual wave to the north. He smiled and headed for the big cook fire. Passing Olivia, Big Jake said something. She looked at him then at Flagstone. Big Jake continued on to the cook fire.

Olivia walked up to stand beside Flagstone. "Big Jake said you might want to be talking to me."

"Uh, huh."

"Well, talk to me." She crossed her arms and waited.

Flagstone quickly related Big Jake's find to Olivia. She stood without moving and asked no questions. Flagstone finished and looked at her.

"Hmm," said Olivia.

"Indeed," said Flagstone.

"Rescue?" asked Olivia.

"Possibly," said Flagstone.

"Attack?"

"Out of the question."

"Withdrawal?"

"Probably," said Flagstone quietly.

"Acceptable, considering the bearers," said Olivia furrowing her brow. "Send them back. We stay. You, me, Big Jake. We get Reggie and run for the river."

"I was thinking the same thing except," began Flagstone.

"Except what?" asked Olivia already knowing the answer.

"Except that you lead the bearers and askaris back. Just in case," said Flagstone warily.

"Dog doo, Jules," said Olivia firmly.

Flagstone put a big hand on each of her shoulders. "Dog doo, or not, you will do it." He paused. "For me. Just in case."

Olivia smiled a beaming smile at him in the moonlight. "You are a pain in the ass, Julius Flagstone."

"Yes. I am. And you are leading the bearers back to the river and further if necessary. Dog doo and all." He kissed her forehead and walked back into the camp.

"Dog doo and all," she said to herself smiling. Then she stamped her foot angrily.

Before dawn the next morning Flagstone had Big Jake assemble the bearers and askaris. With Olivia standing by his side, Flagstone told the men that there was trouble ahead and he was going to avoid it by trying another route to the ruins. They would have to march back to the river and try from there. The men didn't react one way or another. Flagstone said Olivia was in charge of the march back to the river while he and Big Jake scouted for a new route. Again the men made no reaction. This had happened before. They trusted Flagstone. They trusted Olivia. It was nothing out of the ordinary.

Half an hour later Flagstone and Big Jake watched the last bearer disappear into the jungle. Flagstone was glum. He knew he was going to catch hell from Olivia when he got back. She had smiled all morning but had said very

little. A bad sign. He looked at Big Jake. Big Jake shrugged. The two men hoisted their heavy packs on to their broad shoulders. Flagstone felt tired and elated at the same time. He gestured to Big Jake. The scout unslung his rifle and stepped into the jungle.

Two hours to the ruins was Big Jake's estimate. That was two hours if you just hiked there. Not if you crept through the jungle. Not if you stopped at every noise. Not if you waited to see if you were followed. Not if you watched every tree for signs of the unknown.

It was noon when the two men eased their packs off sore shoulders and slithered up to the edge of the city. Flagstone decided city might be the right term. There were hundreds of the lizardmen, what else could he call them; he wasn't sure. They were going about the everyday activities of a settlement. There were cooking fires, washing, little lizardmen children running about and hissing. This struck Flagstone as very weird, but after an hour of watching it all seemed like a normal if strange little city.

Flagstone decided Big Jake's estimate of several thousand was close enough. He studied the pyramid with the squat building on the top. He didn't see Toadbutt. He might be there, he might not.

Big Jake nudged Flagstone pointed. There in the plaza in the center of the huts was a large platform, thirty feet square. As flagstone watched the surface glowed in red in one area. Out of thin air stepped several lizardmen. Two had great plumed headdresses. Others made way for them and their escort. The two creatures made directly for the pyramid and climbed to the top. They went into the squat building.

Big Jake and Flagstone exchanged looks and a shrug. They continued to watch. Several great pterodactyls were tethered in a pen. Little lizard kids got great amusement from throwing pieces of meat to the beasts until an adult came and chased them off. Well, that part of life is universal mused Flagstone with a little grin.

Flagstone and Big Jake crawled back into a dark recess of the jungle. They ate some cold food. The sun was starting to go down.

"What do you think," asked Big Jake. "I didn't see Reggie."

"Neither did I," said Flagstone. "Kind of risky if we don't know where he is."

"Yep," was all Big Jake said. Flagstone was lost in thought. He pulled the map fragment he had purchased in Jimville out of his pack. He spread it on the ground. Big Jake knelt beside Flagstone and studied it.

The map showed faint colored circles and squares with even fainter colored lines connecting the circle and squares. Many lines ran off the edges of the map fragment. They turned the map several times trying to orient it and themselves. Nothing worked. Flagstone leaned back and sighed.

He sat bolt upright. Big Jake looked at him. Flagstone leaned back slowly again. Then he sat upright again. He grinned. Flagstone picked up the map and slowly lowered it until it was parallel to the ground. Big Jake grinned too. Markings became visible on the map. Both men stared for a moment.

"Get your discs out," Flagstone whispered. Big Jake dug a hand into his pocket. He didn't remove it. Flagstone waited a minute. Big Jake was frozen. Flagstone peered over the map.

In the jungle not thirty feet from them a half dozen lizardmen moved along. They hissed and huffed and clicked among themselves. Flagstone was as still as a rock. The lizardmen were carrying bows, spears, and an animal on a pole between two of them. Hunting party thought Flagstone. Abruptly the party stopped. They were sniffing the air. For several moments they stood sniffing in silence. Then one gave a hiss and the party resumed its progress back to their settlement.

The party hadn't taken four steps when a light buzzing sounded all around them. Poison darts flashed through the air. The entire hunting party was down in a minute, noiselessly. Pygmies appeared out of nowhere. They beheaded the lizards twitching on the ground. Then soundlessly they carried everything away into the jungle.

Several minutes later Flagstone remembered to breathe. "What is going on here," he whispered to Big Jake? Big Jake just shook his head in the negative. Flagstone shoved the folded map inside his shirt. Grabbing his pack in one hand and his rifle in the other, Flagstone led Big Jake into a dense cluster of undergrowth.

"I don't like this," Flagstone whispered to Big Jake.

"I'll say," answered Big Jake.

Big Jake pointed out into the jungle. Flagstone's mouth fell open. Hundreds of pygmies were moving silently toward the lizardman settlement. Flagstone hadn't thought there were this many pygmies in Jimland period, much less in one place. He picked out different tribal markings. Something was going on. Something he had to learn about.

He whispered in Big Jake's ear. Slowly, carefully, the two men strapped on their pistols, knives and canteens. A pouch of jerky was stuffed in their belts. A bandoleer of rifle cartridges was slung over a shoulder. They were ready to run or fight. Leaving their heavy packs behind they tiptoed after the pygmies.

The sun was down now. The jungle was growing dark fast. The pygmies encircled the lizardman settlement. Flagstone and Big Jake stayed well behind the pygmies. It was obvious that there was going to be an attack. Flagstone pulled Big Jake close.

"We give them three minutes after their attack starts then we head for the pyramid top. Anything gets in our way we shoot it. We get Toadbutt or not, in any case, we leave by the other side of the city, on the run."

Big Jake nodded. They tried to relax and wait. The jungle darkness became complete. The Pygmies waited in total silence. Flagstone wanted to scratch an itch in the middle of his back. He clamped his jaw tighter.

Noise in the settlement jerked his head around. Hundreds of lizardmen were heading toward the pyramid. Their torches lit up the night. The few pygmies Flagstone could see froze in place. A huge throng of lizard men was at the base of the pyramid where a flight steep steps ran to the top. Out onto the top platform in front of the squat building stepped the two creatures in the feathered headdresses. They hissed and clicked at the assembled crowd who hissed and clicked back in unison.

One of the creatures went back into the building. A moment later it appeared dragging a bound Reginald Toadburt with it. Toadburt struggled but it was to no avail. Four large lizardmen held him securely. The first lizardman hissed and huffed and clicked. The crowd responded in kind. It was obvious to Flagstone that they were getting worked up to do something. He had an sick feeling he knew what that something was.

The first be-feathered lizardman held up a gleaming knife of strange design. The crowd roared out. Flagstone and Jake took careful aim on the two lizard men in feathers. More hissing and clicking. The crowd was getting worked up.

Behind the crowd, the platform surface began to shimmer in patterns of light. The lizardmen seemed not to notice. Flagstone looked away from his rifle sight. The pygmies were closing in. He caught Big Jake's eye. Big Jake nodded.

The pygmies advanced rapidly in silence. The lizardmen crowd was chanting some rhythmic chant. They waved their torches. Toadburt was dragged to the very edge of the steep steps and pushed to his knees. A be-feathered lizardman grabbed him by the hair. The creature pulled his head back. Toadburt's neck was exposed.

The lizardman hissed loudly and raised his hand. He shook the knife in the torchlight. The crowd roared back.

The platform flashed into light.

The Pygmies unleashed a volley of arrows and poison darts. They yelled and charge the throng of lizardmen.

Flagstone and Big Jake fired.

Report 223 - 7.7 - JUNGLE BATTLE.

Date: 2004-04-22

7.7 - JUNGLE BATTLE.

Julius Flagstone's rifle kicked solidly back into this shoulder. The lizardman with the big knife tumbled down the steep steps of the pyramid. Next to Flagstone, Big Jake's rifle cracked. The second feather-wearing lizardman tumbled over backward. Flagstone and Jake fired again and again. The guards holding Reginald Toadburt stood in dumbfounded amazement as one by one they were shot down. Toadburt crawled to one and cut his bonds, then he crawled to the squat building on the pyramid top.

Flagstone and Big Jake crouched in the dense underbrush unsure of what to do next. All round the pyramid and in the settlement streets a desperate battle was taking place. Pygmies and lizardmen fought. No quarter was being given. There was terrible silent fury about battle.

The platform light blazed up. Onto the platform stepped a monster. It was fifteen feet tall, human shaped. Flagstone gaped. The thing was made of metal. It lumbered off the platform and into the battle indiscriminately killing both pygmies and lizardmen. Big Jake aimed at the metal monster. Flagstone laid his hand on Jake's gun.

"No. Don't tell it we are here. Let it be," he said over the noise of the battle. Big Jake lowered his rifle. Another metal thing stepped off the platform, and third and fourth. They were shooting colored beams of light that silently killed whatever they touched. The battle roared on.

Flagstone tapped Big Jake on the shoulder and pointed with his head. The two men ran crouching through the jungle. Flagstone clubbed a surprise pygmy coming out of the bushes. Big Jake shot a lizardman. They ran for the pyramid. Flagstone looked at the front of the structure. The steps were covered in fighting figures. Bodies tumbled down the pyramid sides. He waved Big Jake on.

The men circle through the jungle to the rear of the pyramid. Leading to the top of the pyramid was second steep stair covered in places by overgrowth of vines and creepers. The men reloaded as fast as they could. They could see Toadburt peering over the edge, undecided on what to do. Flagstone grabbed Big Jake's arm.

"Cover me," he yelled over the terrible racket of the battle. He thrust his rifle at Jake and drew his pistol. Without another word Flagstone sprinted toward the pyramid and began climbing the steep stairs. He heard rifle fire. A lizardman tumbled past him. He tried to climb faster.

"Reggie," yelled Flagstone as he clambered up the steps. "Reggie!"

Toadburt's astonished face peered over the edge of the top platform. "Flagstone?"

"Get your ass down here, Reggie. We are leaving."

Toadburt began climbing slowly down the stairs. A pygmy rolled by. A lizardman rolled by. Flagstone whipped up the pistol and shot a curious lizardman. A strange noise made him look up again.

At the top of the pyramid stood a metal colossus. It sprayed a colored beam over the pyramid side. Pygmies and lizardmen dropped, instantly dead. The hair on Flagstone's head stood on end. The metal thing turned slowly toward the rear of the pyramid.

"Reggie! Duck!" yelled Flagstone. Toadburt looked back at the dull metal monster turning slowly toward him. He slid off the stairs and down the smooth side of the pyramid. He whooshed past a surprised Flagstone. Flagstone crouched on the stairs for a heartbeat then followed Reggie sliding down the pyramid side. They hit the ground in a heap. The colored beam from the metal colossus passed above them. Four advancing lizardmen collapsed, dead. Flagstone smelled a peculiar odor.

He jumped up. Grabbing Toadburt's arm he began running for the jungle dragging Toadburt with him. Reggie was barely able to run. The jungle drew nearer. The metal thing raised its arm. The colored beams began tracking Flagstone. "Run, run," he yelled at Toadburt. The colored beams were approaching very rapidly. Flagstone despaired. "Run, damn it!"

Big Jake crouched and sighted carefully on the source of the colored beam. He squeezed the trigger. The big hunting rifle kicked back. The end of the metal monster's arm exploded. The color beam went out. The metal thing seemed to halt in indecision. Flagstone dragged Toadburt right past Big Jake and kept running. Big Jake looked around and followed Flagstone.

Over his shoulder Big Jake saw the metal monster open a compartment on its chest and remove something. That something was thrown at the base of the pyramid.

An explosion rocked the ground. Flagstone fell. Toadburt landed on him. Big Jake went tumbling. They stumbled up and ran into the jungle. Farther and farther they ran. Finally they slowed to a walk. Big Jake handed Flagstone his rifle. Toadburt leaned over and threw up.

"My sentiments exactly," said Flagstone patting Toadburt on the back.

Toadburt stood up and smiled weakly. Then he fell over. Flagstone pulled him to his feet. A poison dart whizzed by. Flagstone yanked Toadburt to the ground.

"Make up my mind," he muttered from the weeds. Flagstone chuckled.

"Sorry, Reggie."

"Let's get out of here. Follow me," whispered Flagstone. The three men crawled away.

Explosions rocked the ground. Flagstone stopped. Trees swayed overhead. The noise of the battle was very distant. More explosions thundered. One really big one lifted the men off the ground and flung them into the bushes.

They lay there gasping. A minute later they were running through the night jungle.

Roots tried to trip them. Vines pulled at them. Dark forms blocked their paths. Finally a low bough brought them down in a gasping heap. They lay on their backs trying to suck air and be quiet about it. The jungle was silent.

Something bright arced up into the air far away. It can down in a flash. The world erupted in flames and tumbling jungle. The ground heaved and buckled. Trees toppled over. Dense dust filled the air. Chunks of stone from small to huge rained down. Flagstone pushed the other two men under a large fallen tree. Debris continued to rain down. The ground vibrated. The dust made it difficult to breathe. Flagstone put his handkerchief over his mouth and nose. Big Jake ripped off a piece of his shirt and did the same. Toadburt followed Big Jake's example.

Another huge explosion rocked the world. Flagstone smacked his head on the tree. He fell unconscious onto the limp form of Big Jake. The dust swirled over them.

Silence filled the jungle.

When Flagstone regained his senses it was daylight. The dust still hung in the air. Flagstone couldn't tell if it was morning or afternoon. He trickled some water into Big Jake mouth and propped him up against a tree stump. Big Jake blinked himself awake. Toadburt stirred when Flagstone shook him. The men looked at each other. They were covered in dust. They looked like ghosts.

They struggled to their feet. The jungle was shambles. Trees were uprooted. Bushes shredded. Dead animals were scattered about. The Flagstone and Big Jake picked up their rifles and began walking. Toadburt shambled along after them.

"Which way we going?" asked Big Jake.

"This way," said Flagstone. They all began laughing in a high pitched giggle. It just seemed funny. They stumbled along.

"Toadburt, you still with us?" Flagstone asked.

"I'm trying to decide," said Toadburt. He grunted. "Ever forward."

"Atta boy, Reggie," replied Flagstone.

Several hours later the men found a fresh stream bubbling merrily. They stripped naked and bathed. The dust washed off hard. Flagstone sat at the edge of the stream. He felt better. Big Jake was cleaning his rifle with a scrap of his shirt. Toadburt was scribbling in his notebook. Flagstone looked at him. Amazing thought Flagstone. Where does he keep that thing, he

wondered? A piece of meat was roasting on the spit over their little fire. Fruit rinds litter the ground. They had gorged themselves. Their stomachs and canteens were full. Flagstone decide now was a good a time as any to tell them his plan.

"Jake, Reggie. I am going back to the ruins. I want to know about those Walking Stones. Whatever was going on back there, the Stones figure in it."

Big Jake kept cleaning his rifle. Finally he looked up. "Ever forward," he said smiling. Toadburt nodded agreement.

Two days later Flagstone was creeping through the remains of the jungle near the city. It was a ruined city now. Whatever explosive the metal monsters had used had wreaked havoc on the settlement and surrounding jungle. All the huts were gone. The Pyramid was partially destroyed. The squat house on the top and a good portion of the top platform were gone.

The Walking Stone platform was still there. It seemed undisturbed. There were gouges and cracks in the sides of the platform, but the top was still intact. The trio watched the area for several hours. There was no movement. Rotting carcasses littered the ground. Lizardmen and pygmies were scattered indiscriminately about. It smelled bad. Reggie threw up several times. Flagstone found himself wondering if he should follow suit. Nothing was alive but them.

Several huge craters marked where the settlement had been. These were filling slowly with water as the rain pounded down. Flagstone and Big Jake walked slowly into the area that had been the plaza. Toadburt scribbled furiously in his notebook. The platform was the tallest structure standing other than the truncated pyramid.

Flagstone walked right up to it. He put out a hand and touched it. Nothing. He walked up the three steps to the top. Nothing. He felt no odd sensations. Big Jake did the same. He stood back and tossed a destination marker on the platform. Nothing. He rolled the little ball across the platform. Nothing.

"It has been disabled somehow," said Flagstone.

"I guess," said Big Jake. He was walking around the platform looking at the stones. Flagstone sat on a lump of stone and stared at the platform. He had seen it work several times delivering the metal things. He assumed they had left by the same mechanism. So how did it work? Where did it go? He took off his hat and laid it on the stone. The rain felt good.

Toadburt walked up and sat next to Flagstone. "At least the sun's coming out." The sun peeked sadly through the clouds.

"Jake," Flagstone said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"You ever seen one of these work during the day," asked Flagstone.

Big Jake stopped walking. He looked at Flagstone. "No."

Flagstone and Big Jake built a little lean-to to get out of the rain. Flagstone pulled the map fragment out of his shirt pocket. He spread it carefully out of the rain. Big Jake and Toadburt sat next to Flagstone as they ate and stared at the map looking for a clue.

Big Jake pulled his discs out and spread them on the map. They examined the symbols on the tokens and the nearly faded out symbols on the map. They found two matches. Both were on the edge of the map. One was in the area of the Secret Islands, the other no where they recognized. Flagstone scratched his stubble.

"After dark, I'll try the one in the Secret Islands. If it works at least I'll have a general idea where I am," said Flagstone.

"Ok, after dark we try it," said Big Jake emphasizing the we.

Toadburt nodded. "All of us together."

Flagstone smiled, "Ok, we."

Darkness couldn't come fast enough. But come it finally did. Flagstone carefully loaded his rifle and pistol. Big Jake filled their canteens from a crater. Toadburt scribbled in his notebook. The men walked to platform. Overhead the moon shown brightly. The jungle was silent.

"Ready," asked Flagstone standing at the foot of the three steps.

"I guess," said Big Jake. He took out the token. Holding the token in front of them the men mounted the steps. A slight buzzing filled the air. They looked at each other. They stepped onto the platform top. A white square began to flicker and flash. They stood still. The white square shown steadily.

Toadburt cleared his throat loudly. Flagstone spoke. "Ever forward."

With Big Jake holding the token in front of them, they stepped on the white square. The square flashed, then went dark. The platform was empty. The stillness of the jungle was complete.

Report 224 - 7.8 - ALL THINGS END.

Date: 2004-04-24

7.8 - ALL THINGS END.

Julius Flagstone was never seen again.

One year to the day of his disappearance, Olivia Fate boarded a steamer bound for America. It is said she died, sad and alone, in the wild mountains of the American West.

Blind Bob was killed during one of Lord MacFraser's ill-fated Expeditions.

The Dullcotes grew weary of the Sultan's policies and returned to England. Dear Constance, wife of Norton, died suddenly soon after their return. Norton seemed to withdrawal from the world. He died a three months after Constance, leaving no will. His huge financial empire is still being fought over in the courts of the world.

Some say the eruption of Mount Jim caused the earthquakes, some say the earthquakes caused the eruption. Whatever the cause, the effect was a disaster of Biblical proportions. The fiery Mount Jim spewed hot gases, ash, and rivers of lava over the countryside. Thousand died from inhaling the gases and breathing the ash.

The great fault through the middle of the savannas broke like a china plate. A huge piece of Jimland sank noisily into the foaming sea. The resulting tidal wave caused damage around the world. In Jimland it scoured the land clean for miles inland. Jimland was transformed.

Those few lucky persons that survived found the jungles of Jimland gone. The savannas never recovered and the desert spread to slowly cover most of Jimland from the Great Mountains to the sea. Nearly every Secret Island disappeared. The few that remain are dismal lumps of rock and dirt, a far cry from the verdant lushness that was once their claim to fame.

Jimville along with all the coast of Jimland sank into the sea. It is reported that no one survived. The World Herald must sadly report that its entire staff was lost when the coastal plate of Jimland slid beneath the sea.

The small amount of aid that rushed to Jimland was of no use. There was no one to save.

As to the Fearless and Famous Explorers of note, we can report the following.

Expedition	Status
Airdrieonian Expedition, aka MacFraser's	unknown
Big Al The Marauder's Expedition	unknown
Churchill Expedition	unknown
The Coleman Folly	lost
Don Alverado Expedition	unknown
Flagstone Expedition	re-equipping
German Number I, aka The Damned	lost
German Number II, name unknown	lost
Glorious People's Expedition	unknown
Ponatowski Expedition	re-equipping
Robert the Puce	unknown
Ross Expedition	unknown
The Lost Shope Expedition	lost
Swindell Expedition	unknown
Teddy's Rough Rider Reserves	lost
Token Expedition	unknown

Anyone with pertinent information on the above Expeditions please contact the Herald.

Further information about the catastrophe in Jimland can be found in any newspaper around the world. Books are being written on the subject. Some call it the "Judgement of Jimland". Others call it just "damn bad luck".

The Herald must report that it will not be reopening its office in Jimland. The barren sand covered wastes that remain are not attracting foreign investors, nor is the native Jimland populace to be found along the coast. Those that still exist are now in the mountains. Heaven only knows how they survive.

The fate of Julius Flagstone is unknown. We can only hope.

Report 225 - 7.9 - BACK TO THE PRESENT FAR AWAY.

Date: 2004-04-26

7.9 - BACK TO THE PRESENT FAR AWAY.

Julius Flagstone reeled. Illusions and alternate destinies rocked his mind. He shook his head. No! No, it will not end that way! He shook his head as if trapped in an unseen cocoon. More visions passed before his eyes. Catastrophes. Triumphs. Flaming pits. Green Gardens. He felt his mind was being emptied and refilled. He concentrated on the present. He concentrated on Olivia's smile. He concentrated on not disappearing into the void. Flagstone felt something soft snap like a broken icicle. He was rocketing down a great dark tunnel. The movement suddenly stopped.

Julius Flagstone felt a chill, then stepped onto a Walking Stone platform. Big Jake let out a whoop while dancing a little jig. Toadburt scribbled in his notebook after throwing up. Flagstone stood, mouth open. No one spoke.

"I'll be damned," Flagstone finally muttered as the trio stepped off the platform into the dirt of the ruins surrounding the platform. "Jake, I owe you an apology."

"I owe myself one," grinned Big Jake.

"Wait till this gets published," said Toadburt waving his notebook in the air. "I'll be famous!"

"Let's get to Jimville first. I want to be rich and famous somewhere I can enjoy it." Flagstone said. "Anything weird happen to you when we stepped on the platform?"

"You mean other than being instantly transported who knows where?" asked Big Jake.

"Yes, other than that," said Flagstone watching both men closely.

"Nope," said Big Jake. Toadburt shook his head in the negative. A small shiver went through Flagstone. He shook it off.

"Any guesses as to where we are?" Flagstone asked Big Jake.

"Nope," said Big Jake.

Dawn found Flagstone perched precariously in the swaying top of the tallest tree around the ruins. He clutched a branch in one hand and shaded his eyes with the other. He looked around him. Treetops swayed in the gentle breeze. A small island mountain reared up not far away. Flagstone squeezed his thighs more tightly around the thin branch he was clinging to. He pulled his

compass out of his pocket and made a quick sighting. "Coming down," he yelled as he began to carefully climb down.

Back on the solid ground, he slapped his palm on his thigh. "Jake, you must be my lucky charm. I'm willing to bet we are back on the island where we rescued each other from Tastimin and the natives."

"I could buy that. I was looking for a platform then. This must be it."

"Maybe. I think if we head due east we will hit the shore in a two days at the most."

Toadburt cleared his throat. "Rescue? Natives? Tastimin? Isn't this a bad thing?"

Flagstone laughed. "Yes, but at least we know where we are. We just need to be careful. So stay close and keep quiet." Toadburt clamped his mouth shut.

"Ready, Jake?" asked Flagstone.

"Want to try a return trip first?" asked Big Jake looking at the tokens and the little sphere in his palm.

"Where would we be going?" asked Flagstone.

"Wherever these tokens take us. We can always come back here now that we know how these things work," said Jake. "We may never get another chance."

Flagstone shook his head no. "We'll go to Jimville, Get the Expedition together. Then come back here and try the round trip idea. Ok?"

Big Jake muttered to himself. Flagstone made notes on his map fragment. Toadburt scribbled in his notebook. Flagstone looked up at the sun. He put the map inside his shirt. "Let's go." He started for the jungle's edge by the ruins. Toadburt was right behind him, followed by Big Jake.

Flagstone walked through the jungle for several minutes. He suddenly stopped and turned around. Toadburt, watching the ground in front of himself, nearly walked into Flagstone. Flagstone roughly pushed him aside.

"Where's Big Jake?" he asked loudly.

"Don't know. He was right behind me when we left," said Toadburt.

Flagstone was running through the jungle. Toadburt struggled along behind him. They returned to the ruins. It was deserted. Flagstone looked about and swore. He walked over to the Walking Stone platform. A glint caught his eye. Stuck upright in a crack in a stone of the top step was a token. It was the one that had taken them to this platform. Flagstone picked it up and pocketed it. Toadburt huffed up beside Flagstone.

"No Jake?" asked the winded Toadburt.

"No. He's gone. I hope he can get back."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Only Jake knows the answer to that, Reggie. Let's go home."

At the edge of the ruins Flagstone looked back at the platform. "Good luck, Jake," he said softly.

Flagstone and Toadburt slowly headed east through the jungle. At high noon on the second day they stood on the shore of the Secret Island with the ocean lapping at their feet. Another day's trek found the two men peering through the underbrush at a small native village on the island shore.

"Friendly?" whispered Toadburt.

"Don't know," said Flagstone. "Only one way to find out."

Flagstone stepped out of the brush and began walking slowly up the beach toward the native huts. Toadburt was right behind him.

"If I say run, you run like hell into the jungle and don't look back. Your life will depend on it," said Flagstone as they approached the village.

"Run like hell," repeated Toadburt nervously. "Ok."

The villagers had spotted the men now. About twenty men gathered with bows and spears. Flagstone walked calmly toward the group. He raised his hand in the sign of greeting. An old native returned the gesture. Flagstone tried several native dialects before he hit on one they could both understand.

Flagstone bartered for many long minutes. Finally he turned to Toadburt. "Well, we just bought ourselves a large canoe with sail and provisions. Only cost us my rifle and your watch," smiled Flagstone.

"What! My watch, you say. It was a gift," sputtered Toadburt.

"Shut up, Reggie, and hand over the watch," said Flagstone smiling all the while.

Flagstone carefully unloaded the rifle putting the cartridges into the bandoleer. He handed the rifle and ammunition to the old native. Next was Reggie's watch. The old native smiled and nodded. He gave several curt orders. Flagstone and Toadburt were led along the beach to where a large canoe rested. While Flagstone was inspecting the reed sail, women brought two baskets of fruit and several large gourds of water. These were quickly loaded into the canoe.

The villagers gathered round the canoe and a couple of hefty shoves later, the canoe was bobbing in the surf. Flagstone double-checked his big revolver making sure the natives saw him do so. He ordered Toadburt into the canoe bow. He climbed aboard in the stern. Then, waving farewell to the villagers, the two men began paddling the heavy canoe out to sea.

After twenty minutes of strenuous rowing that left Toadburt collapsed in the bow Flagstone raised the reed sail. He was surprised at how it caught and held the wind. The heavy canoe was now making a good speed through the water. Flagstone sat at the stern using a paddle as a tiller, steering the canoe with his compass tied to his belt and resting in his lap. Toadburt ate some fruit and lapsed into a tired stupor.

Flagstone roused Toadburt when a rainsquall approached. They lowered the sail. As the squall passed they caught rainwater and topped off their water gourds. Sail back up, they sailed peacefully into the night, a luminescent wake following them across the gentle sea swells.

Report 226 - 7.X - ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS.

Date: 2004-04-28

7.X - ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS.

Julius Flagstone's return to Jimville caused a sensation, all the more so when it was realized that neither Olivia Fate nor the Jimland Bitch had arrived before him. Flagstone reported to the British Consul and the Sultan's Court Advisor that Cap'n Jack was presumed dead, killed by slavers.

The Sultan's Court Advisor took the news calmly. The British Consul had the Naval Brigade send a small force up the River Jim looking for both missing parties. Flagstone paced the balcony of his suite at the Empress, his lemonade forgotten on the balcony rail. Toadburt locked himself in his room to write his report as he put it.

Flagstone sauntered over to the cable office and, for a reasonable sum, made sure he saw whatever cables Reginald Toadburt thought to send. Flagstone returned to his suite and spent a restless night.

Eight days later the Naval Brigade returned. They had succeeded in their mission. They unloaded a tired but happy Expedition remnant. Flagstone had found Olivia on the boat and hugged her till it hurt. He carried her to the pier over her protestations. The remaining bearers got a good laugh out of the sight.

Flagstone paid of the remaining bearers at triple the agreed rate. Olivia shook her head as Flagstone handed out the money to each man as he called roll. He looked at her solemnly. "Just greasing the wheel, my Dear. We may want these fellows for the next trip."

The young Lieutenant in charge of the Naval Brigade force reported to the Consul on the pier. Flagstone listened carefully.

"We went up river as ordered, Sir. Four days up we found the Jimland Bitch. She was aground on a sand bar."

"You didn't haul her off and bring her back, Lieutenant?" asked the Consul.

"No, Sir. She was burned to the water. No one was on board. No one answered my hails to both banks."

"Very well, continue," huffed the Consul clearly not pleased by this news.

"At about this time Ms. Fate's Expedition hove into view on the east bank. They hailed us for help. I had them brought aboard and returned to Jimville. Mission accomplished, Sir, no casualties." beamed the young officer proudly.

"Well done, Lieutenant, I'll see it goes on your record," said the Consul still thinking about other things. "Well done, carry on."

"Thank you, Sir. Yes, Sir."

With that the Naval Brigade marched back to the British Consulate compound. The British Consul walked slowly back with the Brigadier in command of Her Majesty's Forces in Jimland. Flagstone walked back to the Empress never taking his arm from around Olivia's shoulders. Both parties were lost in quiet talk.

The Fetching Olivia Fate watched Julius Flagstone pace back and forth on the balcony of their suite at the Empress Hotel. Two weeks had passed since the British Naval Brigade had returned her to Jimville and Julius. During those two weeks Flagstone had been constantly at her side, tending her every need, but somehow he was not there. Olivia scowled as Flagstone paced. She quietly got up and went into their bedroom.

A few moments later she stepped onto the balcony and into Flagstone's path. The sun beat down on her smiling face. She was absolutely naked.

"A penny for your thoughts," she whispered.

Flagstone came to a sudden halt as Olivia's arms encircled him. "Uh."

"Uh what," Olivia whispered again as she held him close.

"Uh as in what hell are you doing," sputtered Flagstone between kisses.

"Working on my tan? Changing my lifestyle? Trying to get your attention? Pick one," she grinned.

"Your tan is fabulous. Not a line anywhere. Your lifestyle is fabulous. Admired by many, resented by many more. My attention? Well, you have it."

Olivia pulled Julius with her as she leaned on the balcony rail letting the cool breeze wash over her. She nuzzled his shoulder. "Where are you, Jules? You're not here."

Flagstone put his big left arm around her waist. "I'm sorry, Olivia. I really am."

"Still upset over losing Big Jake?"

"Not upset. He's not lost. And, yes, that's what I have been thinking about, apparently to the exclusion of you and everything else I hold dear." His hand slid down and patted her bare bottom.

Olivia realized she was enjoying this attention. "What are you thinking, Jules." She leaned against him keeping his hand on her bare cheek.

"I shouldn't feel responsible for Big Jake doing what he did, but somehow I do. I mean he's a big boy. He did what he did because he felt he should. There's nothing I can do about it. He left me the token that got us to the Secret Island. I must hope he has another one." Flagstone was unconsciously running his hand up and down Olivia's side. Her goosebumps couldn't get any bigger.

"He must have another token," Flagstone said forcefully. Olivia leaned against him, warm in the sun. He smelled the fragrance of her hair.

"So what are you going to do now," asked Olivia rubbing her leg against his.

"You mean after I ravage you and take you out to splendid dinner? I'm not sure." His hand stopped. Olivia giggled. "You have never looked better, Olivia."

"Works for me," she said taking his hand and leading Flagstone back into their suite.

Julius Flagstone and Olivia Fate strolled casually into the Empress Bar. Their evening meal had been wonderful. They were laughing softly together. Flagstone steered them to a secluded booth. Olivia's eyes sparkled like rare jewels. Flagstone held her hands in his big bronzed hand. He looked at her. He felt himself drawing in her beauty, refilling something that was almost empty.

Olivia felt herself blushing. "Jules, what are you thinking!"

"Nothing in particular, Olivia. Just enjoying your company!"

"Well, keep up the good work," she laughed feeling her ears go warm and red. Flagstone laughed with her.

He squeezed her hands gently. "Olivia, I think I know what I want to do next."

"Me too." She felt herself blushing again. "I'm shameless," she muttered.

"Me too," laughed Flagstone. "Isn't it great!" They laughed together.

The couple lay exhausted in their big bed. Flagstone had the pillows piled up against the headboard and was sitting up against them. He sipped his champagne. Olivia cuddled up against him taking her turn sipping out of his glass.

She sighed and slipped her arm around Flagstone's broad chest. "This has been the best day, Jules. Thank you very much."

Flagstone stroked her hair. "You are welcome. Couldn't have done it without you." They giggled like kids with a secret.

"I am going to look for Big Jake, Olivia," Flagstone said quietly while playing with a strand of her hair.

"I know," she said softly. "When do we leave?"

"We, and I do mean we, will leave after we gather as many tokens as we can find. We locate the ones we can on the map and get our bearings. Then we

make a guess and off we go." He pulled Olivia closer. She smelled wonderful.

"Ok. Where do we get more tokens?" She felt herself warming to the idea or maybe the champagne or maybe the big man next to her. Or maybe all three. She smiled in the moonlit room. The cool night breeze coasted in from the open balcony doors.

"It's simple. We ask people to bring them to us. I'll put out word that I am interested in buying old coins and similar things at a better than a fair price. I'll set up a table on the veranda, for a small fee I'm sure."

"I'm sure," chuckled Olivia.

"We can just sit and let Fate decide what we get. Of course, we will buy all sorts of things just to throw off suspicions. But we will always be on the look out for certain coins for which we pay a handsome price. Word will get out, trust me.

"I do trust you, Jules, with all my heart." Olivia could clearly see that go sailing right past Flagstone. She smiled. He was on a roll. She squeezed up closer to him and listened.

"We'll go through the bazaar. Surely those thieves will have gotten wind of what is going on. Pickings ought to be pretty good though prices will be higher. And."

Olivia threw a leg over one of Flagstone's and sipped out of his champagne glass. "And?"

"And we will go back to the "Island of Diamonds" and dig around the platform."

"Because?" She took another sip of champagne, the question framed on her face.

Flagstone kissed her forehead. "Because people drop things. Especially around doorways and steps and such places. Especially small things they tuck back into their pockets after using them, like coins and tokens." He refilled the glass and took a sip.

"But first," he continued.

"Yes," Olivia said with a sigh.

"Ok, second. I promised Norton I'd look for the source of the River Jim when I got back. Well, I'm back. Anyway it will take a while for you to collect a lot of tokens, the more the better."

"Me." Olivia squirmed around in the bed. She was lying with her back pressed against Flagstone's side.

"You, my dear," said Flagstone softly kissing her shoulder.

"I'm going with you," she said firmly.

"True, but not this time." He ran his fingers down her side and up over her hip.

"And just why not?" she asked a little more loudly.

"Because I need you here to organize things and collect coins and tokens. I don't really expect to find the source of the river. I mean with all its tributaries is there only one source? But I'll go looking for Norton, and while I'm at it I'll look for Walking Stone Platforms and even the long lost Jasmine the Honey-Lipped."

Olivia shivered slightly. "Jules."

"Please, Olivia, let's do it my way." He wrapped his big arms around her and pulled her on top of himself. He was surprised to see tears on her cheeks. "What's wrong?"

"Please come back to me," Olivia said softly.

"Of course I will," he said kissing her lips gently.

"Jules, say you will come back to me."

"Olivia, I will come back to you. I promise."

A tiny sob left Olivia. Flagstone held her close. She was trembling. He felt her warmth against his body. He gave her another kiss. She responded ardently.

Report 227 - 8.1 - EVER FORWARD.

Date: 2004-06-13

8.1 - EVER FORWARD.

Julius Flagstone sat in the Empress Bar. The crowd was thin tonight he noted. Must be the Sultan's latest post-curfew stop and search policy. He sipped his drink. He wondered for the umpteenth time if Norton Dullcote had been stopped by the Sultan's Guard. He also imagined there was a short list of persons the Guard was to courteously pass by as they roamed Jimville after dark. He hoped he was on the list.

Norton Dullcote huffed up to Flagstone's table and plopped unceremoniously into the only empty chair. "Damn nuisance, these Guards! Stopping innocent civilians and searching us for contraband. Contraband! Me!"

Flagstone opened his mouth to speak. Dullcote kept going. "Stopped me. Me! Of all people! I've a mind to speak to the Sultan personally. I may even move my business out of Jimland altogether! What rubbish."

Dullcote fidgeted in his chair. He pulled off his spectacles and cleaned them while blinking at Flagstone. "A cold drink would not be amiss here, Flagstone."

Flagstone smiled and ordered Dullcote a drink. The drink arrived. Dullcote grabbed the waiter's arm as he started to leave. The man backpedaled to stand beside Dullcote. Norton hoisted the drink, nodded at Flagstone, and downed the drink. "Another of these for me, and another of whatever Mr. Flagstone is drinking." The waiter hurried away. Dullcote carefully wiped his mouth on his napkin. "Contraband! Me! Rubbish!" He smoothed his vest down and looked placidly at Flagstone.

Flagstone smiled again. "Only contraband, Norton. I thought they had you marked down for piracy at least, and maybe fomenting rebellion, and perhaps ruining the Sultan's love life.

Dullcote laughed. "I'd like to ruin the Sultan's love life, the miserable scoundrel. But he's our miserable scoundrel. Better to deal with the devil you know, than the one you don't." Dullcote's second drink arrived. The waiter loitered. Dullcote waved him off.

"Now, what's up Flagstone? Nearly got arrested getting here, so it better be good."

"I'm ready to search for the source of the River Jim if your offer still stands, Norton."

"It still stands. My arrangements with the Sultan and the British Consul are good for six months. So there is still plenty of time."

"Good. I will arrange for a small Expedition then. We will use my steam launch to travel up river as far as we can. I can't guarantee anything,

Norton. Who knows which tributary is the actual source, if there is only one source? But I'll give it my best shot."

"I know you will, Julius. And to aid your efforts I will provide you a guide brought from the far north by me at considerable expense. I can't speak his lingo, but maybe you can. He speaks several languages including poor English."

"A guide, Norton? From the far north of where?"

"From the far north of Jimland. He claims to have lived beyond the "Rim of the World" wherever that is. He claims to have come to Jimville entirely by water, by the River Jim to be specific, through many adventures and obstacles. He was nearly killed several times from what I understand through my staff. He has agreed to lead you back up the river for a very reasonable sum."

"Why would he go back if he was nearly killed getting here?" asked Flagstone his drink forgotten.

"I doubled his reasonable sum. Seems he's a tad greedy."

"Seems he's a tad unreliable," put in Flagstone leaning back and sipping his drink again."

Dullcote smiled. "I told him he would be working for you and I gave you permission to shoot him if you thought he needed it. It seemed to stiffen his resolve so to speak."

During the next two weeks Flagstone and Blind Bob organized and outfitted the Expedition. Flagstone made several shakedown cruises in his steam launch trying to gauge the towing capability of the craft. Bearers and askaris were hired. Supplies accumulated and were carefully stowed aboard the steam launch and the boats it would tow up the River Jim.

Julius Flagstone stood on the pier, hands on his hips. He was ready to leave, Olivia's farewell kiss has been given long ago and she had left with a pouty, determined walk. Flagstone missed her already. But his new guide had not yet shown up. Flagstone paced a few steps back and forth. The rest of the Expedition team was calmly sprawled about the decks of the steam launch and the two towed boats. Flagstone was the only one showing any signs of anxiety. The early morning sun warmed his back. He hated waiting. The whole expedition was ready. Time was wasting.

Finally Flagstone saw Norton Dullcote striding purposely down the pier. Two men walked behind him grimly bearing a third man who looked less inclined to follow Dullcote. Flagstone rolled his eyes. Oh, just great, he thought.

Dullcote stopped in front of Flagstone. "We are not late, I trust?" asked Dullcote.

"You are not late at all, Norton. He is about an hour late," said Flagstone pointing at the smallish man standing by Dullcote's elbow. "But better late than never. Get aboard." Flagstone jerked his thumb at the waiting steam launch. The man timidly boarded.

Dullcote waved good bye to the man. "His name is Puddin. Try not to be too hard on him, Jules. He has been through a lot. Going back to face it all again has strained him a little."

Flagstone didn't smile when he said, "I thought your money overcame his fear."

"Tut, tut. He'll be alright. Have a successful and safe trip. I don't want Olivia hunting me down in a dark alley."

Flagstone laughed a little. "I'll try, Norton. See you whenever we get back."

Flagstone turned and bounded aboard the steam launch. "Cast off all lines," he yelled. The steam launch's wake churned as it took up the slack to the towed boats. Soon the three vessels were heading up the River Jim in an orderly line ahead. The men laid about clearly knowing this day of leisure would be their last for a long while. Still, they seemed happy to be going.

Puddin sat next to Flagstone. Flagstone offered a big bronzed hand. "Julius Flagstone. This is my Expedition. Do what I tell you to do and things will be fine. Welcome aboard."

Puddin shook the proffered hand. "I'm Puddin. Your guide. Trust me when I tell you something and things will be fine. Glad to be aboard."

Flagstone had to smile. I might like this little fellow after all, he thought. "Right," he answered. Puddin smiled back.

The steam launch, once new and shiny, now well used and not so shiny, puffed slowly up the River Jim. The green banks slipped quietly by. Flagstone ordered the canopies rigged. Soon all three vessel had a strong canvas canopy over the men's heads. Soon, too, the usual afternoon rain fell. One for me thought Flagstone smugly as he sat dry in the rain-shower.

The River Jim flowed by.

Report 228 - 8.2 - UP THE RIVER JIM.

Date: 2004-06-16

8.2 - UP THE RIVER JIM.

Julius Flagstone leaned out over the side of his steam launch. He looked back at the two boats he was towing. Each was about twenty feet long and five feet wide. Each was piled with supplies down their centerlines and men sat along each side. Men enough to row the laden boats if necessary or carry the supplies far inland. Flagstone nodded to himself with satisfaction.

Things were progressing smoothly. One week up the River Jim and no mishaps so far. Flagstone was pleased. He leaned on the warm rail and looked at his guide. Puddin seemed asleep leaning against the bag of supplies piled next to him. Flagstone found himself wondering about the little man. He had tried questioning the man about various things to judge his worth. Puddin's answers had been quick and honest. He professed little knowledge of this part of Jimland. He promised to learn. He offered only that he knew more about the far north, which would be useful as that was where they heading, yes? Other than that, Flagstone had learned nothing about why the man had come to Jimville and why he was willing to go back whence he came.

Still, the man seemed ok. His outward manner had changed once the Expedition was actually underway. He smiled readily enough and lent a hand without being asked. To Flagstone's experienced eye it seemed the rest of the men accepted him easily enough. Only Blind Bob seemed reserved, as he muttered, "We'll see."

The River Jim flowed quietly by.

The rains came again. Again Flagstone was glad he had the canopies for the boats. The men appreciated being kept mostly dry. Being wet with a breeze could chill you in the hot Jimland sun just as surely as anywhere. Thunder cracked overhead. The rain came down more heavily. It drummed on the canvas.

The River Jim flowed quietly by.

It was still raining the next morning. Blind Bob rubbed his thigh, raising and lowering his leg. He pointed to pieces of trees floating down the river. "Current's picking up too," was all he said.

Flagstone watched the debris pass by. Another hour passed. Larger and larger pieces of debris came floating by. Some thumped heavily into the steam launch. Flagstone ordered each boat to have a watch on their bow to fend off the flotsam with oars and boat hooks. Still the rain came down.

Flagstone immediately noted the change in the steam launch's rhythm. He was going down the ladder just as his lead engineman was coming up.

"What's the problem?" asked Flagstone quickly.

"Too much water coming down the stack. It's getting hard to keep the fire going to keep the pressure up. We need to rig a funnel cover of some sort."

Flagstone had never thought of such a problem. Or the solution. He reminded himself to give the man a bonus when they returned to Jimville. He nodded in agreement. The rain seemed to grow louder. "Tonight, after we beach." The man nodded and descended the ladder. The Steam launch moved sluggishly. The noise from the rain increased. Flagstone had never heard it this loud before. Maybe it was the canopies, he thought.

"Boss!" Blind Bob was yelling at him and pointing up river. Flagstone's mouth dropped opened.

Coming down the river was a foaming brown wall of water. Flagstone quickly estimated it was three for four feet high. "Everybody up!" yelled Flagstone. He jammed the speed telegraph to the full-ahead position. The water rushed on.

Thunder rumbled endlessly. Lightning flashed. The storm was upon them. The wall of water swatted the boats back and forth. Flagstone fought back with the little steering wheel. He was losing the contest and he knew it. Blind Bob was shouting and pointing again. Flagstone didn't have to look to know what had just happened. He did anyway.

The towed boats were loose. The line to the lead boat had snapped. The men in the second boat were chopping through line to free themselves. Oars appeared over the boat sides. Flagstone sounded the steam horn. Men's head turned toward him. He pointed to the bank. Heads nodded and were lost in the torrential downpour. The steam launch shuddered and whirled in the river.

A series of heavy crashes told of large logs and trees slamming into the launch. Flagstone spun the wheel. Nothing happened. "Crap," yelled Flagstone. Those last crashes must have been debris hitting the rudder and screw when the river has spun them around.

"Oars, damn it. Get the oars out. Now!"

The men on the steam launch scrambled about. Like wings the oars spread out along the steam launches side. Flagstone could see they were being carried down river at a good clip. He couldn't see the other two boats. He couldn't see the stern of the launch. He pointed to a bank. The men bent over their oars. Blind Bob was calling a beat, slapping his thigh in time with it. The men understood. They caught the beat. The oars caught the steam launch. They turned it around and point up-strean and toward the nearest bank.

Flagstone grunted as he pulled on an oar. Everyone was rowing except Blind Bob and the men in the little engine room. Flagstone noted that even Puddin was on an oar, pulling hard like the rest. He nodded. Puddin's grimace didn't changed. The steam launch edged toward the riverbank.

The rain poured down. More debris cracked into the launch. The lead engineman's head appeared in the hatch. Flagstone pulled on his oar, the chant of the rowers filling his ears. The engineman scrambled over to squat beside Flagstone.

"We are taking on water. Have a few broken hull planks. No problem. Yet." Flagstone nodded and pulled. The man disappeared down the hatch. Flagstone pulled. The bank was getting nearer. The rain poured out of the sky like a waterfall. The launch shuddered as another huge trunk rammed it. Flagstone pulled on the oar.

The bank rushed suddenly out of the rain. The steam launch thudded solidly into it. Men jumped ashore with heavy mooring lines. Soon the struggling launch was securely tied to the shore. The angry river foamed past. Trees bigger than the launch rushed by. Flagstone rubbed his sore arm muscles and stretched.

"Bob! Bob," he yelled into the growing darkness. Blind Bob appeared and nodded as the water ran off his hat in torrents.

"Try to set up some tents. Set a watch. We'll be here a while I think. The launch is damaged and I don't know where the other two boats are. We don't go on till we know."

Blind Bob nodded again, then disappeared into the rain calling out names. Flagstone returned to the launch and outfitted himself with his big hunting rifle and light traveling gear. Minutes later he found Blind Bob organizing the men to set up camp. It didn't take long. Most of the men had expedition experience; many had worked for Flagstone before. He patted Blind Bob on the shoulder. Bob jumped. They both laughed. Flagstone spoke.

"I'm going to look around now."

Blind Bob looked up at the darkening storm clouds. The rain pounded down. "It'll be dark soon. Better stay here. No point in getting lost."

"I've got to check on the other boats. You're in charge. Get the camp set up. Get a hot meal in the men if you can. I'll be back in couple of hours."

Blind Bob nodded. Flagstone turned and walked to the riverbank. Blind Bob shook his head at Flagstone's back. The River Jim hissed and roiled. Flagstone began following it down-stream. He wasn't sure where the other boats would be, but they didn't have the steam engine to help then so they were probably further down the bank. He walked through the pouring rain carefully watching the riverbank for signs of the boats.

The River Jim flowed angrily by.

An hour passed. No sign of the other boats. Flagstone did not have a dry spot on his body. He didn't notice. He stopped and looked about. The noise of the rain was deafening, but he thought he heard something. Thunder?

Lightning? He stood still and strained to listen. Nothing but the pounding rain. He turned and began retracing his path.

Ten minutes later he rushed to the riverbank. He knelt. Before him, dumped on the riverbank in an untidy heap, was one of the men from the towed boats. He was dead. No apparent injuries, thought Flagstone as he rolled the man over, must have drowned. Flagstone leaned his big rifle against a nearby tree. He dug a shallow hole with tree branch. Sadly he dragged the limp form into the hole and covered the body. After fashioning a crude marker, Flagstone poured the rainwater out of his rifle barrel and headed back upstream.

Flagstone walked into the camp before he noticed it. He was lost in thought. Blind Bob came up. He looked tired. Flagstone was sure he looked the same.

"How we doing, Bob?"

"Camp sort of set up. Cooked a hot meal down in the launch engine room. Saved you some too. Two men injured. Nothing serious. I'm told we have half a dozen broken hull planks. All of them can be fixed. That's about it. Oh, and."

Blind Bob smiled. Flagstone looked at him. "Oh, what?"

"It's still raining."

Report 229 - 8.3 - BUSTED AND BEAT UP.

Date: 2004-06-18

8.3 - BUSTED AND BEAT UP.

Julius Flagstone leaned out over the side of his steam launch. The launch was being tilted by heavy lines onto its side on the riverbank. Flagstone waved his fist in the air. "Tie them off there," he yelled. The men on the lines grunted and cursed at the heavy lines. He scrambled down from the leaning boat. His lead engineman was looking at two broken planks.

"A couple of days?" asked Flagstone as he viewed the damage. The engineman circled the damaged planks with a piece of charcoal. Then he thrust a long thin sliver of wood through the break.

"Yes, boss. Two maybe three tops. Got to find all the leaks and mark 'em. Got to make planks to patch the holes. Got to seal 'em tight, but not too tight. Got to flex, you know."

Flagstone nodded. He didn't know before; he did now. He patted the man on the shoulder and walked over to Blind Bob. Bob was watching the camp get cleaned up and reorganized. Supplies had been taken off the steam launch and neatly piled and covered. Blind Bob looked up at the swirling storm clouds overhead. The morning light was still dim.

"You look disappointed that the rain stopped," said Flagstone.

"I was just getting used to being a fish."

"Everything ok?"

"Pretty much. We'll have this mess cleared up by noon." Blind Bob looked up at the dark clouds. "Whenever that is."

"Good. I'll take the patrol up and down the riverbank. We'll be back at sundown." Flagstone looked up at the clouds. "Whenever that is."

The two men laughed. Flagstone walked over to the four men waiting for him. He looked them over. Puddin and three askaris in a light kit. He inspected each man's rifle and ammunition. Very good he thought to himself, till he got to Puddin. The man had only his food pouch, a canteen, and a big hunting knife. He frowned. Pudding smiled back.

"Scout. Not soldier," he said quietly. Flagstone nodded and shrugged. The askaris smiled big white smiles. If it didn't bother them then it didn't bother him, he thought.

"Ok, scout-not-soldier. Lead out." The party chuckled. Puddin gave his knife belt a last tug and lead the party into the jungle. The river hissed and sputtered loudly. The dripping jungle green enveloped them.

Water dripped from everything. It tip-tapped on the leaves. The little party moved quietly through the jungle. It was silent. No birds squawking. No animals grunting in the shadows. They pushed on keeping the riverbank in view as best they could.

Puddin walked lightly. His head swiveled from side to side and up and down. Flagstone found himself wondering how the little man didn't have a stiff neck. The river rushed past, thirty muddy yards away. Flagstone scanned the bank. No signs of the other boats. He was beginning to feel the first knot of worry. They walked on, wet fronds slapping then as they passed. They were as wet as if the rain had resumed.

A rifle shot. Another. No mistaking it. Flagstone pushed past a stopped Puddin, the askaris following close behind. Several more rifle shots. Flagstone began trotting through the jungle jumping roots and creepers. Wet leaves pawed at him. A shot. A great roar filled the jungle. Flagstone skidded to a halt. One of the askaris swore loudly.

Flagstone motioned them down. The men crouched in the jungle. The roar came again shaking the leaves. Water pelted down. More rifle shots. Just ahead and not far, thought Flagstone. Another huge roar, but different. Flagstone turned to the askaris and held up two fingers. The men nodded. Everyone slapped their rifle bolts up, back, forward, down. They crept forward.

The roaring increased. The answering rifle shots were few. The intermittent noise grew louder. Flagstone pushed a large leaf aside. One of his boats was on the riverbank. Huddled behind it were its crew, rifles thrust out. Flagstone thanked his luck for deciding to put several askaris in each boat. These men stood calmly behind the others occasionally lifting their rifles, aiming, and carefully firing.

Roars of anger and defiance brought Flagstone's head around to the problem. Two rather large problems. Two towering T-Rexes stamped and roared. They lunged toward the boat and crew. The askaris fired. The beasts reared back bellowing. One man lay in a bloody pile in front of the boat. A T-Tex lunged at him. It shook its head back and forth. The body was limp, lifeless.

Flagstone motioned the askaris into line beside him. "At the eyes of the big one, the darker colored one." The men nodded and took aim. The huge creature roared and stood tall. "Now." Four rifles fired, and again. The monster roared and staggered back. Its puny little forelimbs pawed at the air. Suddenly it toppled over with a crash and was still. The other creature roared defiance. It everyone was firing now. The creature roared and disappeared into the jungle. Flagstone could hear it stomping through the underbrush, its angry bellows filling the air.

After several minutes all was quiet. Flagstone found himself panting. He looked at the askaris. Everyone was panting. Flagstone pushed through the leaves and walked toward the boat. A little cheer went up from the men behind it. The boat captain came forward to meet Flagstone.

Flagstone took a glance around. "Report."

"After the line broke, we cut ourselves free of the number one boat. We made it to this bank. Three men lost overboard. I decided we'd just wait here till you came and got us. No sense in us wandering about. This morning those things found us. Got two men, they did." The boat captain shivered a little.

Flagstone shook his hand firmly. Loud enough for all to hear he added, "Well done. Very well done. A bonus for you when we return." The boat captain smiled.

Flagstone posted the askaris in a perimeter around the boat. With the help of the remaining crew he took inventory of what supplies remained. He was pleased. The men had not wasted anything. The boat had held up well, no damage he could see, but most of the oars were lost or damaged. He looked up at the lightening skies.

"Tie the boat securely in the bank. We'll carry the supplies to the launch and then drag the boat up too."

The men set to work only occasionally looking over their shoulder into the jungle shadows. Two hours later the men had their loads ready. Flagstone called in the askaris. He put Puddin and the boat captain in the lead. He and the bulk of the askaris formed the rearguard. They moved out. The sun peeked through the clouds.

By the end of the second day the boat had been dragged up-river to rest beside the steam launch. The sounds of work filled the air as repairs were made to both boats. New oars were being smoothed out of rough cut lumber. The Jimland Fauna was leaving them alone. And most pleasantly, the clouds left the sun to dry them out. Steam rose from everything.

Flagstone walked back into the camp, his askari patrol filing along behind him. Flagstone was unhappy. He could find no sign of the other boat. He hoped it had survived the storm. He decided it must be on the other bank. Blind Bob walked up.

"No sign of it, Mr. Flagstone?"

"No. It must be on the other bank. Maybe damaged." Flagstone looked around the busy camp. "Once the steam launch is ready we'll look again. I pretty sure it's not on this bank."

"Ok," was all Blind Bob said.

The smell of cooking fires and bubbling homemade pitch filled the air. Birds squawked and were occasionally seen fitting about in their gaudy colors. Other animals howled, grunted, and snarled from the depths of the jungle. Hunting was good. The animals were not man-shy. Flagstone stood and surveyed the scene.

The men were working with a will. Morale was high. Loss of supplies was minimal from the recovered boat. He frowned. Complete loss of the second boat would mean tightening everyone's belt, but if good hunting held out,

everything would be ok. People laughed when he took three of everything. He always laughed back that one was for breaking, one was for using and one for losing. Too true he said to himself.

His rifle came up with a mind of its own. The huge dark shape swooped silently in on the camp. With a cry it plucked a man up and was gone. Flagstone fired once, but the pterodactyl flew serenely away, disappearing over the treetops. The men barely stopped work before the whole affair was over. Looking up into the treetops they resumed work, their murmuring subdued.

Blind Bob walked up, his rifle held casually over one shoulder. "Never saw it coming," he said. Flagstone nodded agreement.

"Double the watch tonight. It'll make the men rest easier."

Dawn came bright and clear. Under Flagstone worried eye the steam launch was righted and nudged carefully back into the river. It bobbed happily alongside the riverbank. Flagstone stepped aboard and climbed down into the cramped engine room. The lead engineman was crawling around the machinery carefully inspecting the hull. He wiggled back into the engine room proper.

"Need another day to look at everything. Got be sure. Got do little tests. Then we are ready to go on."

Flagstone pulled at his chin. He was getting anxious about the other boat. But to rush would be not help anyone. He nodded agreement and climbed out of the stifling room. He could hear the engineman giving orders to his little crew. He smiled. The engineman would get a big bonus when they returned to Jimville. He was a good man.

Throughout the day wood was slowly loaded aboard the steam launch. Shortly after the mid-day meal the first puffs of smoke came out of the stack. It was then that Flagstone noted the little hat set above the stack. It was a simple hollow cone slightly larger than the stack. When asked, the engineman smiled a big smile and said it would keep the water out and the fire lit. Flagstone thanked him for his cleverness. He made sure many of the men heard his thanks. The engineman beamed from ear to ear. Flagstone named him launch captain. The man visibly swelled at the title. Everyone was pleased.

Flagstone was just returning from his afternoon hunting effort. The men were carrying two small deer-like animals on poles. Fresh meat for the evening meal tonight. Flagstone heard yelling from the camp. He hurried forward. He felt a surge of relief.

The lost boat was being hauled up onto the riverbank. It had several makeshift patched visible. The men around the boat looked tired and haggard. Their friends were hugging them and patting them on the back. Flagstone pushed his way through the happy crowd. A man stepped forward.

"Report, boss?"

"Yes," said Flagstone kindly, "report."

"The line to the big boat broke. Many logs crashed into us. Boat Captain was killed. Six men lost in the river. We got to shore. We waited but no one came for us."

Flagstone gestured to the other boats. "We couldn't come. We looked on this side, but we could come."

The man nodded yes. "We fixed the boat and came here. Sorry boat captain was dead." The man lowered his voice at the end and stared at the ground.

"You led the men?"

"Yes," said the man quietly.

"You fixed the boat?"

The man swept his hand at his tired crew. Everyone was quiet and watching the pair. "We all fixed the boat. Save the supplies too. All of us."

Flagstone let a big smile shine on the men. "Most excellent. You are the boat captain now. You did a very good job. You earned it. You are the boat captain, paid back from start of the expedition."

The man's eyes grew very large. "Me, boat captain?"

"You heard Mr. Flagstone," grunted Blind Bob his smile as big as the surprised new boat captain. The man's crew mobbed him patting him on the back and hugging him. Flagstone shook his hand and left the happy crowd. He was relieved. Things were not as bad as he had feared.

Four more days were spent repairing the boats and restoring supplies. New oars spread like the legs of waterbugs as the boats set tied to the shore. The morning meal was done, the pots and kettles cleaned and stored. The fire pits were filled in. The campsite was gone over again and left as clean as found. The steam launch puffed happily in the morning light. The Jimland sky was a lovely shade of turquoise. It always surprised Flagstone that the sky and the sea could exchange colors. He remembered the Secret Islands weeks away to the south. Would he ever see them again he wondered? He didn't know. He thought of Olivia standing in the surf smiling at him while the gentle sea breeze made streamers of her hair. He smiled to himself.

"Cast off," he yelled. "Ever forward." The steam launch tugged the boats into the river current. Slowly they gained speed until the little flotilla cruised slowly up-stream.

Flagstone wiped his forehead with the handkerchief Olivia had given him. She had embroidered a message on it, just for him she had said. He looked at it. "Come home to me." He smiled again and stuffed the cloth back into his pocket. I will he thought to himself.

The River Jim flowed quietly by.

Report 230 - 8.4 - DESERT RIVER.

Date: 2004-06-20

8.4 - DESERT RIVER.

Julius Flagstone leaned out over the side of his steam launch. He was standing next to Blind Bob and Puddin. All of them were watching the riverbanks. The jungle was thinning out. The flora of the riverbank was changing. It had been happening for several days, but today it was very obvious. Blind Bob seemed relaxed. Puddin seemed excited. Flagstone watched them out of the corner of his eyes.

Two weeks of pleasant steaming had done much to restore the men and erase the troubles behind them. Flagstone had nothing to worry about. But he was worried. He believed there was a balance in the world, good and evil, happy and sad, easy sailing and trouble times. Things were just going along too well. He snorted. Maybe I'm just getting old. He laughed aloud.

Blind Bob and Puddin were looking curiously at him. He flushed. Blind Bob laughed. Puddin looked confused. Blind Bob's laugh faded. "Time to start worrying, Puddin. The Boss is too happy!" The three men laughed together.

The River Jim flowed quietly by.

The hot humid jungle gave way to the hot dry desert. The steam launch continued to pull the towed boats up-stream. The daily trips for wood for the launch were growing longer. Flagstone knew a decision point was coming. Soon he would have to leave the steam launch behind. Fuel would non-existent. Steam power would give over to oar power.

Flagstone sat on the edge of the bench watching the dry desert riverbank. Clumps of greenery dotted the bank. Dry dirt, stone, and sand sucked moisture from the river. The river didn't seem to mind. Flagstone did. The river drew the desert dwellers to it. Flagstone knew one desert dweller he didn't want at the river. Sheik Fizzle would be their worst fear in the desert. Flagstone wished the hills along the riverbank would flatten out so he could see further.

The steam launch slowly huffed along. Flagstone looked up at the smoke trail they were leaving behind them. It slowly dissipated in the slight desert breeze. Flagstone suddenly slapped his thigh with a big bronzed hand.

"Head for the bank," said Flagstone loudly. "Now."

The three boats lay nestled together against the dusty shore. Camp was made next to the only trees around. The men were watching Flagstone. It was barely mid-afternoon. This was not normal. There were many hours left in the day for traveling. Blind Bob didn't ask a question. He simply got the camp set up. The watch was posted. Everyone tried to find some shade. Quiet settled over the camp. Flagstone sat in the shade under his tarp and watched the other side of the river. No one approached him.

A long afternoon in the growing heat put the men to sleep. The watch was changed. Evening came slowly. The evening meal was cooked. Flagstone watched wordlessly. Another thing soon to come to an end. There would be very little wood while they crossed the desert. Flagstone caught Puddin's eye and waved him over.

"How long to cross the desert?" Flagstone asked bluntly.

"Using the river, five weeks, maybe four if we don't have any trouble."

"Rowing and walking, no steam launch, and I expect to have trouble. How long?"

"Six weeks." Puddin seemed unabashed by the questions.

"What kind of trouble can we expect in the desert?" Flagstone watched Puddin closely.

"Sandstorms. Lightning storms, very beautiful, very dangerous. Animal attacks."

"What kind of animals?" asked Flagstone. "Anything to hunt for food?"

"Hunting, yes, maybe, but different." Puddin seemed lost in his thoughts.

"Different? How so?" Flagstone was sitting fully alert now. He waved Blind Bob over. Bob smiled at them and sat in the shade. Puddin stretched out on the blanket. Flagstone looked over them both, out over the river, and into the desert. "Puddin and I are just having a discussion about the desert. What kind of animals, Puddin?"

"Crocodiles in the river, yes. Wild sheep and goats come down to the river too, yes. In the grasslands there are great herds of wild mules, big mean black water buffalo, and many, many gazelles. And other things."

Blind Bob interrupted. "Big cats? You know, big with great long teeth?"

Puddin nodded yes. "Very big, very tough, very angry."

Flagstone leaned on his elbow, stretching his legs out. "What else? In the desert."

"Four legged animals are very few. Two legged animals there."

"Desert raiders?" asked Flagstone.

"Very bad men, yes." Puddin drew his knees up and wrapped his arms around them.

"Sheik Fizzle?" asked Flagstone quietly.

Puddin's eyes grew bigger. "Yes," he answered softly. "And worse."

"Hard to believe there is worse," grunted Flagstone.

"Please believe, Mr. Flagstone, there are worse. Much worse. Even Fizzle scared of them."

"Who is Fizzle scared of?" asked Flagstone sternly. Puddin seemed to squirm in his seat without moving. Flagstone's eyes never left him. Finally, Puddin threw out his hands as if pleading.

"Deadmen walk the desert. Of them Fizzle is afraid. Dogmen walk the desert. Of them too Fizzle is afraid. Great hairy desert hunting spiders. Of them Fizzle is afraid. The Great Sandworms are in the desert. Of them everyone is afraid." Puddin wrapped his arms around his knees and seemed to shrink. Blind Bob coughed. Flagstone looked at him. Blind Bob was smiling and slowly shaking his head back and forth.

"A little hard to swallow, Bob?" asked Flagstone.

"A whole lot hard to swallow. Dogmen! Giant spiders! Sandworms! Legends come to life. I say old Puddin here has been out in the sun too long." Blind Bob smiled at Puddin. Puddin stared at his feet, hugging his knees.

"The Dogmen are real, Bob. I've seen them myself. Right out of a fantasy," said Flagstone. Blind Bob sat quietly, his mouth open.

"No shit?"

"None whatsoever," grinned Flagstone. "They are the Anubis Warriors right out of the old legends. I don't want to run into them. Ever again." Puddin was rocking slightly back and forth where he sat. Flagstone sat up and crossed his legs. "I think we should give Puddin the benefit of the doubt here, Bob. Don't you?"

"I guess so," Blind Bob said slowly. He got up and walked off into the setting sun muttering. "Giant spiders, Sandworms, Dogmen. I'll be damned. I need to get out more often."

Flagstone chuckled to himself. He looked at Puddin. "It'll be alright."

Puddin rose. "If you say so," he said quietly and left.

The sun was going down. Flagstone and Blind Bob roused the men up. Flagstone ordered camp broken. He ordered non-essential supplies cached. The steam launch was laboriously dragged high onto the riverbank and tied firmly in place. Unused supplies were piled in it. The whole affair was covered in heavy tarps.

The two unloaded boats were now carefully filled under Flagstone's watchful eye. Only the barest of necessities were loaded. Light tarps instead of tents. All boxed goods were unloaded and put in sacks and bags. Extra clothes, pans, pots, shovels, and so forth were reluctantly put in the left-behind pile. Two canteens were issued to each man. Blind Bob went man to man making sure each had the canteens and a hat.

It was nearer dawn than dusk when Flagstone was finally satisfied. He ordered the morning meal made. One last hot meal he announced to the men.

Some grinned, some nodded in understanding, some looked about wide-eyed wonder what it all meant. The meal done, the men crowded aboard the two boats. The oars were set in the locks. The boats edged out into the middle of the river. A slow steady count sent the boats slowly up-stream.

Dawn came swiftly over the desert. The boats slowly made their way up the River Jim. The rowers changed off. Flagstone was glad for the extra manpower. He looked over his shoulder from the stern of the lead boat. Blind Bob sat at the tiller of the second boat, calmly leaning against the tiller arm. Flagstone turned his eyes up-river. Puddin squirmed around as he sat next to Flagstone. Everyone else was assigned an oar.

A gentle wind came up the river. Flagstone thought now was a good time to try his next little gadget. He ordered the oars in on his boat. He yelled at Blind Bob to stand by. Next Flagstone ordered the slim mast to be hoisted into place. It was a clumsy effort. Flagstone chided himself for not practicing the drill before this. After several minutes of grunting and no little cursing the mast pole was up. A lateen sail was attached. Unfurled it caught the wind. Flagstone waited. A moment later the musical sound of the bow moving through the water became clear. Having drifted downstream past Blind Bob's boat, Flagstone's boat now slid quietly, slowly, past.

"Raise your sail, Bob," hailed Flagstone. Blind Bob answered with a few orders to his men. Their effort was more successful having seen the first boat's struggle. Soon both boats were gently gliding up-river on the desert breeze. The men rested on their oars and smiled at each other.

Days glided past as slowly as the River Jim. Sail all day, rest and repair, sleep, and do it all again. Flagstone doled out supplies with a stingy eye. Hunting was proving poor. He set the men to fishing. This helped to stretch their food stores.

One man was lost at night. No trace of him was found. Puddin suggested crocodiles. That sent rumors flying through the men. Blind Bob walked the riverbank for tracks, but found nothing. Flagstone noted the incident in his journal.

The days passed by.

The riverbanks were now flat. Flagstone wondered how the river stopped itself from just flowing out into the desert to disappear. He sat back, the tiller bar under his arm. He shaded his eyes and studied the desert. It stretched endlessly on either side of the river. He noted it was particularly flat in this area, hardscrabble and low rolling sand dunes no more than four feet high. Flagstone made notes in his journal.

The sail flapped in the falling breeze. He gave no orders. The men were quiet familiar with the routine now. The sail flapped and hung limped for several moments. Two men brailed it up to the little yard it hung from.

Oars were run out and rowing commenced. Flagstone had not said a word. The two boat captains were handling things well.

Flagstone squinted in the flat light. Something glinted out in the desert. He watched carefully. It blinked in and out. It didn't move. The boats crept forward relative to the sparkle. Flagstone felt his curiosity rising. Days of inactivity made him fidget. He looked up at the sun. A little past midday he decided.

He spoke softly to the boat captain at an oar near his knee. "We are heading ashore." The man nodded. Flagstone swung the tiller bar. He glanced back and pointed. Blind Bob's boat followed. Men jumped ashore with lines. Quickly the boats were secured on the flat sandy shoreline. Everyone piled out of the boats stretching arms and legs. Chatter filled the air.

"Bob, get a party together to walk inland. Four days rations." Blind Bob started giving orders, calling names. The men's chatter increased. Something to break the monotony of rowing up-river was food for talk. Smiles flashed everywhere. Blind Bob soon had his party together. Flagstone assembled the rest of the men. He put the two boat captains in charge. A list of chores was made. A watch schedule established. Flagstone told them to pitch camp near the small grove of trees huddled not far from the riverbank.

A hour after landing, Flagstone led the small party out into the desert. The sparkle in the desert was directly ahead. Blind Bob walked ahead on the left, Puddin ahead on the right. The men trailed in single file behind Flagstone. He smiled. This felt like old times. He smiled and hummed a tuneless song to himself. The bearers smiled and nodded.

Report 231 - 8.5 - INTO THE DESERT.

Date: 2004-06-24

8.5 - INTO THE DESERT.

Julius Flagstone led the small party across the desert. The sparkle ahead grew and steadied. Flagstone called Puddin to his side.

"Any idea of what that may be?" he asked. The scout shaded his eyes and stared for a long moment.

"No."

"Anything around here I should be aware of?"

"I do not know this land, yes?" was Puddin's simple answer.

Flagstone waved him back out in front of the party. He walked on thinking, the sand crunching under his feet on the hardscrabble. He watched Puddin's back as the man rose and fell crossing the low dunes. Strange little bird he thought.

He pulled his binoculars out. They had been a gift from Norton Dullcote and were much prized by the all the Fearless and Famous Explorers in Jimland. Flagstone studied the sparkle as he walked. Nothing really to see he decided. The pace continued steady but unhurried. Day faded into night.

The little party camped in the lee of a larger dune. Cold food was chewed down to be followed with a drink or two of water. The men wrapped themselves in their blankets. Flagstone lay in his, watching the night sky. Nature was showing off tonight he thought. The stars were out in unprecedented numbers. The sky almost glowed.

Flagstone tensed suddenly, then relaxed. It was only the watch strolling around the little huddle of men. The sand shifted and sighed. A falling star shot across the sky. The men still awake oohed and aahed. Flagstone fell gently asleep.

Dawn came quickly. The desert night's chill was soon gone. Flagstone didn't even wait for the morning meal. He formed up the small party and led them up and over the small dune next to their camp. The men didn't seem to mind. They chewed on dried meat and hard biscuits as they walked. Flagstone did the same. The desert was still, not even a breeze.

Noon found them still trudging through the hardscrabble and sand. The sun was beating down fiercely now. Flagstone had Blind Bob go from man to man to check on water. The report was not encouraging. He warned the men and demanded better water rationing. The men seemed abashed. They were not used to the desert. Flagstone told his two lead bearers to keep an eye on the others. Water was not to be wasted out here.

The sparkling that had drawn Flagstone away from the river was larger and directly ahead. Flagstone held a steady pace though he wanted to run. Blind Bob was waiting ahead. Flagstone didn't slow down when he reached Bob.

"Anything to report?"

"Not a thing. I'm starting to think we are the only living things out here," said Bob.

"Maybe," said Flagstone pointing to a dust cloud on the horizon. There was no wind. "Maybe. Keep a sharp eye out."

"Right." Blind Bob picked up his pace and returned to his scouting position ahead of the little column. Puddin was returning to the column. Flagstone didn't like his scouts reporting at the same time. Independent reports and opinion were better and not influenced by one another.

"Report," said Flagstone as he steadily walked along.

"Dust cloud," said Puddin pointing at it. "No wind, yes."

"Yes." Flagstone spoke flatly.

"We go back now." It wasn't a question. Puddin was watching dust. Flagstone kept his pace steady. Puddin looked at him. Flagstone unslung his rifle and shook his head. He pointed with the rifle. Puddin hesitated for a moment, then returned to his scout position. Flagstone held out his rifle and waved it. He heard the lead men grunt out a couple of short orders. The armed men had unslung their weapons. Hope they're enough thought Flagstone as he walked steadily across the desert.

Night fell suddenly. No twilight in the desert thought Flagstone. He ordered the men to camp where they stood. There was no better place he could see. Puddin was suddenly in front of Flagstone.

"What?" asked Flagstone.

"No camping here."

"Why not?"

"Too much sand. Must camp on rocks from now on, yes." Puddin nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Why?" asked Flagstone calmly.

"Worms," was all Puddin said. He kept turning his head seeming to watch and listen to the desert. "No camp here. Camp in rocks, yes." Flagstone realized Puddin was almost pleading. He looked around. A rocky area met his gaze in the moonlight. He looked at Puddin's face. He was scared of something that was for sure. Blind Bob was standing silently behind Puddin. He was looking around also.

Flagstone didn't have to raise his voice. The desert was still. "Sorry boys. We are shifting camp over to that rocky area over there." Flagstone pointed. "Let's go. Just take a minute."

The men didn't have much to shift. They simply picked up what they have been carrying all day and walked to the rocky area and put it down again. Camp was shifted. The watch was set. Flagstone lay on his blanket and watched Puddin. He was walking around the edge of the rocky area, finding its boundaries.

As Puddin passed, Flagstone spoke quietly. "Alright?"

Puddin kept moving, but answered even more softly, "So far." Puddin lay on his blanket. Flagstone watched him. Puddin looked around, then up at the stars. Silently he rolled up in his blanket, his back to Flagstone's gaze. Strange little bird thought Flagstone. Flagstone pulled his blanket around himself and fell into a dreamy sleep.

Things moved in the desert. Many things. They were as silent as the night. Flagstone had the feeling of immense bulk, immense power. That was all. No feelings of anything else. Size and power, that was all that mattered in the desert. Flagstone shivered.

Flagstone set upright with a jerk. The rocky area was trembling ever so slightly. Flagstone quickly looked around the tiny camp. The two men on watch were standing talking in low voices pointing into the desert. Everyone else was asleep, everyone but Puddin. He was sitting up like Flagstone. He smiled when he met Flagstone look.

One of the watchmen headed toward Flagstone. Flagstone rose and picked up his rifle. He walked over to Blind Bob's dark shape. He started to nudge him with his boot. Bob rolled over and was on his feet in a flash, rifle in hand.

"Sleeping lightly these days?" whispered Flagstone.

"Absolutely," was all Blind Bob said.

The watchman pointed into the desert. Flagstone peered through the moonlight desert. He could see nothing. The rock trembled and stopped. Puddin joined Flagstone, Blind Bob, and the two watchmen. He squatted down on his heels and put his palm on the rock. The others did likewise. Flagstone could feel the rock vibrate or at least he told himself he could. Puddin moved his hand to his left side then his right. He held it there for a moment, then moved back to the left. He pointed to the left and swept to the right.

Flagstone understood immediately. Whatever was out there was moving left to right. He stood and silently watched the desert. It was still. Flagstone stiffened. He tapped Blind Bob's arm and pointed. A noise like the wind grew and changed to strange shifting sound like dragging a stick through the sand. Far out in the desert something moved. Flagstone squinted. Yes, something was moving.

The five men stared out at the shadowy desert. Something was moving. A little gasp left the group. Huge forms pushed dunes of sand out of their way as they came into the moonlight, arched and returned to the sand. Like a group of whales thought Flagstone. He watched awe struck. He heard Puddin's teeth chattering. Flagstone tried to count the things. He stopped, he couldn't tell if the humps were one animal or several. Suddenly it was over. The desert was empty again.

The men stood spellbound. Flagstone turned to look at the little camp. Everyone was asleep. He looked at Blind Bob. Flagstone shook his head. Blind Bob spit into the sand. "Sweet Jesus," he muttered as he walked back to his blanket. Puddin was still watching the desert one hand tightly grasping the little medallion he wore on a leather thong around his neck. Flagstone smiled to himself. I need one of those too. The sentries shook themselves nervously and began walking quietly around the little camp. Flagstone lay back on his blanket. Puddin hadn't moved; he was still watching the desert. Flagstone rolled onto his side and to his later surprise fell fast asleep.

Dawn found the men buzzing with excitement as the watchmen told of the strange shapes in the desert night. Excitement lifted the men's spirits. Flagstone led the men out, absently chewing on something. He didn't remember what. He led the little party toward where they had seen the creatures the night before. There was no sign of a passing. Flagstone called a short halt while Blind Bob circled the area.

"Not a sign. Nothing," Bob reported to Flagstone. "Did we really see something?"

"Yes." Flagstone looked around then signaled for the men to move out. "Keep a sharp watch."

Blind Bob smiled as he headed out. "No problem."

The sparkle in the desert resolved itself into a small huddle of low stone buildings with one three-story tower. A watchtower decided Flagstone. A watchtower with no doors. He pushed his hat back and scratched his head. He leaned back and shaded his eyes. The sun was high overhead. The little column was resting in the shade of the buildings, thankful to be out of the sun. Blind Bob was looking onto each of the few buildings. Puddin sat with the bearers looking very unhappy. Flagstone shook his head. Time was wasting.

"Yo!" Flagstone turned quickly around. Blind Bob was waving from a shadowed doorway. "Everyone stay here. Post a watch." Flagstone spun on his heel and walked quickly down the sand choked street to Blind Bob.

"You gotta see this, Boss," Bob said with a chuckle. Flagstone stepped into the darkness. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, but instead the ceiling began to glow illuminating the room in a soft cold light. Flagstone could only stare with his mouth open. Blind Bob just kept chuckling to himself.

In the center of the room was a stone table. Its top was a relief map of the desert. In the center of the map was a white dot, a light of stronger force that shown as a small beam shining up to the ceiling. Around the walls of the room were niches with statue standing mute within them. About the floor of the room were scattered the bones of human skeletons. The walls were painted in colors long faded to dull pastels. Scenes of tropical beauty graced the walls. Birds with gaudy colors flew through the air. Women and men reclined on ivory benches and ate from sumptuously laden tables at their elbows. Other appeared to be dancing or perhaps performing for those reclining. Still others appeared to be engaged in various sports; one was leaping over the horns of a huge charging bull.

Flagstone took it all in. He hadn't moved. Blind Bob had quit chuckling and stood silently by Flagstone. The room was bathed in the cool white light. Flagstone cleared his throat.

"Yo, indeed." Flagstone spoke softly like he might wake someone.

"Words failed me," said Blind Bob grinning.

"I'll let it go this once," laughed Flagstone. He walked carefully up to the map table, stepping over the scattered bones on the floor. He studied the map. Blind Bob pointed at the pencil thin column of light at the map's center.

"Us?" he asked.

"I'd say yes. See, here's the river. We came across here about here." Flagstone was tracing their path across the map relief. His finger stopped near the map center. A small square glowed on the map next to the light. A small square with colored lines radiating out from it an inch to more colored symbols. Flagstone felt his throat tighten. A Walking Stone platform! The thought raced through his mind. He had no doubt. His handed trembled a little.

"I've must get this on paper," he said a little too loudly. He found himself panting a little. "Look around for another door or something." Blind Bob grunted and began tiptoeing around the room. Flagstone smiled to himself. He pulled out his journal and began drawing the map.

Blind Bob carefully inspected walls of the room. He stopped at each niche and looked at each statue. Very lovely he thought to himself. He reached out to touch one but stopped just short. He didn't know why, but he pulled his hand back. Finally he turned to Flagstone at the map table.

Flagstone lay sprawled on the floor. Standing over Flagstone's limp body was a skeleton. The floor was stirring. Blind Bob felt his skin crawl. The bones on the floor were forming together and rising up as skeletons. Empty eye sockets glared at him. Blind Bob felt a bony grip on his ankle. A hand with an attached arm grasp at his ankle. Its touch was cold as ice. Blind Bob seemed to wake from a trance.

He kicked the hand away. A skeleton lumbered toward him. He clubbed it with his rifle butt. The head went rolling across the floor. More skeletons were starting to rise up from the floor. Blind Bob leaped over one and landed next to Flagstone. Bob lashed out with a his rifle again. The skeleton flew in several directions. Blind Bob grabbed Flagstone by the collar and scrambled for the door. Skeletons walked unsteadily after him. He jumped for the doorway hurtling one skeleton out the door before him. Blind Bob found himself laying in the sand next to Flagstone. He watched dumbfounded at the skeleton he had knocked into the sunlight turned to dust before his eyes.

Flagstone moaned and rolled over. He still gripped his journal in his hand. Blind Bob helped him to his feet. A dull crash staggered them back. A great cloud of dust burst from the doorway as the roof collapsed on the map room. Flagstone let out a cry. Blind Bob held him back from rushing into the room.

"Whoa there, Boss. Nothing to go in there for."

Flagstone stood still in front of the door. Dust hung heavily in the air. He could see where pieces of the ceiling had fallen in forever destroying the map table. The sun now triumphantly beamed into the room. Only dust motes moved, dancing happily in the sunbeams. Flagstone coughed and dusted himself off. Then he winced and gingerly felt his head.

"Thanks, Bob. What happened?"

Blind Bob shook his head. "Roof caved in," was all he said. Flagstone looked at him carefully, but said nothing.

"Did you get it all copied?" asked Bob.

"No, just a part of it. Damn."

"Let's get back to the men," said Blind Bob picking up his rifle and slinging it over his shoulder.

"Right. I'll organize a party to clear this debris out. Maybe some of the map is still intact."

"Whatever you say, Boss," answered Blind Bob.

The two men walked back to where the party was resting in the shade. Their party was gone.

Report 232 - 8.6 - BACK TO THE RIVER.

Date: 2004-06-25

8.6 - BACK TO THE RIVER.

Julius Flagstone and Blind Bob stood alone in the shade of the low stone buildings. Their bearers were gone, disappeared into the desert so it seemed. Flagstone shaded his eye and looked carefully around. He pointed at a long line of churned up sand leading over the nearest dune. Blind Bob nodded. The two men shouldered their packs and picked up their rifles. Cautiously, they began following the tracks in the sand.

Reaching the top of the first dune Flagstone immediately threw himself to the sand. Blind Bob lay beside him. Not two hundred yards away stood his bearers, surrounded by desert raiders. Sheik Fizzle, mounted on a beautiful white stallion, was calmly waiting. A man held a parasol to shade the Sheik. The desert was still.

Flagstone slid down the dune face. He looked at the dune top. Shaking his head he rose and began walking back to the ruins, carefully staying in the trail through the sand. Upon reaching the shade of the ruins he turned to Bob.

"No use walking into in Fizzle's hands. We'll wait until they move on."

"Or come back," muttered Blind Bob.

Flagstone smiled and nodded, "Or come back. Let's find a place to rest that won't try to kill us."

Blind Bob grunted.

Soon the two men were sitting just out of sight in a small stone building. The dark interior was empty and refreshingly cool. They watched in silence as the hot desert breeze slowly erased their footprints in the sand. Flagstone jerked his drooping head up. Blind Bob snored again. Flagstone smiled and watched the sun disappear. Night came to the desert.

Flagstone nudged Blind Bob with his foot. Bob was immediately awake, rifle in hand.

"See something?" he asked.

"No. I think its time we went out again. No one has come into the ruins. Fizzle is probably taking the men to a camp further out in the desert."

Blind Bob sloshed the water in his canteen. "Not to far out I hope."

The two men put their daypacks on and crept silently through the ruins. Quickly they reached the trail. It was nearly gone, blown away by the daytime breezes. Flagstone led the way. They slowly climbed the first dune.

Kneeling at the top Flagstone let out a soft moan. Blind Bob was more colorful.

"Holy shit, Boss," hissed Blind Bob.

Spread out below them were the bodies of his bearers. Their heads were stuck on spears in the sand. Flagstone trembled. Blind Bob wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and nervously looked about. The desert was empty.

"Let's go," said Flagstone turning to move down the dune again.

"You just leaving them there?" asked Blind Bob.

"Yes. I'm just leaving them there. There is nothing we can do for them."

"But, Boss," started Blind Bob.

"But nothing. If we go down there and bury them, Fizzle will know we are here. He may have men watching right now. It seems he doesn't know we are here, so let's get our asses out of this mess."

"But, Boss," stated Blind Bob again.

"But what?" growled Flagstone.

"Nothing. You're right. But if I ever get the chance I'm going to kill that miserable Sheik."

"If I don't do it first," whispered Flagstone.

The two men slid down the dune and returned to the ruins. They searched through the gear left by the bearers. They found a little food and some water. Flagstone didn't wait to look for more. He headed west back the way they had come. Blind Bob followed, turning occasionally to watch the desert behind them. They made no sounds as they walked across the sandy plains.

Flagstone was lost in thought trudging through the night stillness.

"Boss?" A whisper from Blind Bob brought Flagstone back to the present.

"What?"

"Listen."

Flagstone stopped. He heard nothing. Then he heard the sound of shifting sands. It was getting louder. Flagstone looked around in the darkness wishing the moon were fuller.

"Sandworms?" he asked.

"I think so, on our right somewhere," whispered Blind Bob.

Flagstone looked around. There was a sharp irregularness off to their right also. He hoped he was seeing well. "Come on. Run!"

The two men ran as best they could in the soft sand. The shifting sand noise grew louder. Flagstone looked only at the rocks ahead. He ran harder. Blind Bob was panting alongside him, pointing.

Off to the right was a moving dune. It was rippling across the sand, heading toward them. It was fast. Flagstone could see no others. He sucked in a big breath and yelled at Blind Bob. "Head straight for the rock, fast as you can."

Blind Bob grunted and replied and ran harder. Flagstone suddenly veered toward the moving sand dune. Blind Bob slowed. Flagstone yelled at him again, "Run, bloody run." Blind Bob ran for the rocks.

Flagstone ran toward the moving sand dune. He suddenly changed his path to the left. Something huge erupted from the sand. A great hissing filled the air. Flagstone ran as hard as he could. He dodged to the left again. The great creature disappeared into the desert throwing sand everywhere. Flagstone instantly changed his path toward the spot where the creature had disappeared.

Flagstone's breath was coming in gulps. The desert appeared still. He ran on. The sand in front of him trembled. He threw himself to the right and sprinted as fast as he could. The sand exploded on his left. He was thrown head over heels across the desert. The creature let out another great hissing noise. Pushing a great ripple of sand before itself, it came after Flagstone.

Flagstone ran. The rocky outcropping loomed nearer ahead of him. The creature loomed nearer behind him. The sand beneath his feet disappeared. He scrambled up into the small rocky area. The little rock outcrop seemed to bob like a raft on the ocean as the huge wave of sand whooshed by. Flagstone was shaking.

The creature circled the rocks once and disappeared into the night. The desert became still. A big hand clamped down on Flagstone's shoulder. He spun around. Blind Bob held out his canteen. "Thirsty?"

Flagstone laughed feebly. "Now that you mention it, yes." He took a long pull on the canteen.

"That was something to remember," said Blind Bob.

"I'd like to forget it actually," said Flagstone.

The two men sat in the rocks and laughed quietly together. The desert was still.

Two days of steady walking, camping on rocky ground at night, brought Flagstone and Blind Bob to the river's edge. Shading his eyes Flagstone peered downstream, then upstream. He grunted. Blind Bob looked up stream. A tiny knot of trees near the riverbank waved from desert's edge.

The two men walked quietly along the river's edge. As the sun reached its zenith and their shadows huddled under their boots, the men saw their camp ahead. Flagstone waved Blind Bob down. It wasn't necessary, he was already crouching, rifle at the ready. Nothing moved in the camp.

Flagstone looked around. There was no cover as far as he could see. He looked at Blind Bob who merely shrugged. The two men rose to their feet, rifles at the ready, and approached the empty camp. Flagstone pointed head. The burned remains of the two boats littered the river's edge. Several great river crocodiles idled their way back into the river. Flagstone stopped and swore an oath. Blind Bob just stopped.

Ahead were more heads on poles. It looked like the crocodiles had disposed of most of the bodies. Flagstone swore again. The two men walked into the camp. Flies buzzed heavily in the air. The camp was mess. What supplies hadn't be carried off were strewn about. All the weapons were gone. All the men were dead. It took them the entire afternoon in the hot sun to bury the few remaining bodies and all the heads. It seemed to Flagstone that he couldn't wash the dried blood off his hands and arms. He scrubbed harder while watching the crocodile watching him.

Dawn came after a tense night. Flagstone and Blind Bob wander through the camp gathering whatever they thought useful. Flagstone looked at the small pile of supplies, a tent tarp, and a few tools. Blind Bob stood looking at the little knot of trees.

"Could be worse," said Flagstone. Blind Bob nodded. "We could have our heads on a pole somewhere."

Blind Bob nodded again. "Time for a raft?"

"Yes," nodded Flagstone. "Time for a raft." He picked up the only axe and walked toward the trees.

Noon the next day found the sky clouded up for the first time since they had reached the desert. Flagstone and Blind Bob push their very small raft, if four short logs lashed loosely together can be called a raft, into the river. Flagstone had stubbornly insisted they cut down only two of the trees for their raft. That would have to do. He was intent on leaving the few other trees undisturbed. Blind Bob didn't argue. Three paddles were found unharmed. The two men piled their few supplies onto the raft and lashed them down with braided water reeds. Standing knee deep in the cool water the men gave the area one last look-over. Without a word they turned, climbed onto the little raft, and paddled out into the gentle river current. A light rain began to fall. The crocodiles seemed uninterested in the whole affair.

The River Jim flowed quietly by.

Report 233 - 8.7 - FAILURE IMAGINED.

Date: 2004-08-22

8.7 - FAILURE IMAGINED.

Flagstone paddled slowly down the River Jim. Blind Bob sat at the bow and paddled along. Neither man spoke very much, each lost in his thoughts. The skies cleared and the sun beat down on them.

The River Jim flowed quietly by.

One week passed quietly by. The river flowed steadily to the sea. Flagstone and Blind bob had little to do other than keeping their makeshift raft in the middle of the river. Their meager supplies finally ran out.

Day followed day as the River Jim gently carried them downriver. The men hunted along the riverbanks for food. They noted the foliage was changing. Flagstone and Blind Bob scanned the riverbank looking for the cached steam launch.

"Think we missed it?" asked Blind Bob one morning as they coasted slowly along.

"Maybe. No, not yet," answered Flagstone thoughtfully. They paddled on.

Two days later along a sandy piece of riverbank Blind Bob pointed and yelled. Flagstone quickly searched the shore. That was it. There was no mistake. The two men paddled to the riverbank. They pushed their makeshift raft up onto the sand.

The steam launch lay in a heap of charred wood. The small boiler sat blackened by fire and punctured by many bullet holes. About the boiler charred remains of the launch lay warming in the sun. The cached supplies were gone.

"Well, let's keep moving," said Blind Bob stoically.

"This is starting to piss me off", said Flagstone.

"I imagine so," said Bob.

Wordlessly they shoved the rickety raft back into the river and paddled out to mid river. Flagstone didn't speak the rest of the day.

Blind Bob splashed along the riverbank to where Flagstone was standing guard over their slowly falling apart raft. He tossed Flagstone a wild grapefruit

like plant, piling the rest in the raft. He deftly sliced open the fruit and began eating it with relish.

"Pretty good, huh?" Blind Bob said between mouthfuls. "Don't see how anyone cab starve to death out here." His big hand swept around indicating the jungle that was now lining the river's edge. Flagstone grunted something non-committal. He sucked at the juicy pulp.

"Boss, you got to cheer up. We'll make it back to Jimville no problem. How many times have we floated down this river to safety? This river has saved our lives many times, it will this time."

"Yeah, I know. This is the river of life as the natives say."

"So cheer up. Pretty soon Olivia will be handing you a cold lemonade on the balcony of your room. What more could you ask for?"

"Yes, I'll see Olivia soon barring a major disaster. What I could ask for is the name of the person who is trying to kill me and you or at least run us off? I know Fizzle has a hand in it. But who else? Who burned my steam launch? Who would know where it was without serious searching? Why would someone what me dead or gone or both? Don't you wonder about that?" asked Flagstone.

Blind Bob chuckled the fruit rind into the river and cut open a second one. "Nope. I like to keep things simple. Staying alive is number one, the rest will take care of itself."

"Mind of I worry about things then?" asked Flagstone with a smile.

"Only if you quit being so dreary about it."

"Deal," said Flagstone flipping his rind into the river. "Let's go."

The two men shoved off and paddled to the center of the river. Soon Blind Bob was lying back in the raft dozing in sunshine.

Flagstone paddled idly at the stern. He watched the riverbank slide slowly by and thought. The usual afternoon rain began to fall. Blind Bob muttered in his sleep. Flagstone covered him with a huge frond. He held another over himself as the rain pelted down. The water ran off the leaf into Flagstone's canteen. When it was full he filled Blind Bob's. Thunder rumbled overhead. Lightning flashed in the distance.

Flagstone daydreamed. The river of life or the river of death he wondered? Everytime I go upriver men die. I live. Why? Am I charmed or just lucky? Is Fate saving something really dramatic for me? What's this damn river trying to hide? Why do I keep trying to find its secrets? Why aren't we home yet? I miss Olivia.

Flagstone woke Blind Bob by prodding him with the paddle. Blind Bob sat up slowly. Flagstone pointed. Both men picked up their rifles. Ahead

something was rising from the water of the river. A long neck with a small head. The thing opened its mouth. It had more teeth than they could count. The creature swam easily upriver against current. It dipped its head in and out of the water, raising it to swallow a mouthful of fish. Flagstone estimated the thing was about thirty feet long, equally divided between neck, body, and tail. It was a dull gray color. Great fins propelled it effortlessly along. The creature turned its small head to stare at them as drifted silently past in the rain. It submerged into the river.

"What the hell was that?" asked Blind Bob still staring over his shoulder.

"Don't know what they are called. I've seen them a time or two, but only at sea around the Secret Islands, never up a river. Interesting."

"If you say so," said Blind Bob laying his rifle across his lap and paddling eagerly downriver. Flagstone looked over his shoulder. The creature had not reappeared. He smiled to himself. This is why I do this crazy thing.

"Life is good," he said through the downpour.

"If you say so," said Blind Bob still paddling with some enthusiasm.

The closer the two men came to Jimville the darker Flagstone's thoughts became. He started feeling like unseen eyes were watching him. He was sure someone was trying to kill him or drive him away from Jimland. His one attempt to discuss this with Blind Bob was fruitless as Blind Bob refused to be drawn into Flagstone fears.

Flagstone had to admire Blind Bob's simple view on life. It certainly allowed no room for conspiracies or evil schemes. Life was as Life was. Blind Bob just accepted that as a fact and didn't see the sense in trying to alter things. Flagstone chuckled to himself. Was Blind Bob simply happy or happily simple? He smiled broadly behind Bob's back. Whatever the case, he was a good man.

The next morning as the sun drew steam for everything in Jimland, the raft finally started to fall apart. That's not to say it hadn't been falling apart all along. Flagstone and Blind Bob slowly paddled to shore. Before they could stop it one of the raft logs floated back out into the river and disappeared.

"Time to adjust the raft," said Flagstone. Blind Bob said nothing. They picked the two least waterlogged logs and let the third float away. The afternoon was spent in weaving water reeds into several ropes. These were then carefully used to lash the remaining two logs together. Several new leaves were cut for catching water. Flagstone even found several edible tubers growing on the riverbank. These and some berries became dinner.

Looking up at the sky Flagstone made his decision. "We'll sleep ashore tonight. We can't be more than three for four days from Jimville now."

Blind Bob nodded agreement. The men hauled the raft farther up on the bank. Soon they had built themselves a crude lean-to of huge leaves and small branches. The evening rain came right on schedule, just as Blind Bob was trying build a fire. Blind Bob wiggled around under the lean-to avoiding the worst leaks. Flagstone listened to the rain drum on the jungle leaves.

Flagstone set up so suddenly he knocked part of the lean-to down. Blind Bob muttered. Flagstone grabbed his arm, his index finger of his free hand over his lips. Blind Bob instantly became silent.

A low drumming sound came up the river. It was soon followed by a dimly lit steam launch moving slowly upriver. For some reason he could not explain, Flagstone lay still and did not give a yell for rescue. Blind Bob was frozen. The rain poured down. A muffled sqawk came from the steam launch. It was definitely female. The steam launch chugged slowly by and disappeared into the night.

"Not a rescue party?" asked Blind Bob.

"Not sure," answered Flagstone as he tried to put his side of the lean-to back together.

"Couldn't see who it was," said Blind Bob.

"Me either," answered Flagstone still peering out at the river.

"Well, we're almost home now. It doesn't matter." Blind Bob found a dry spot and went to sleep. Flagstone squirmed around to get comfortable. Blind Bob began to snore softly.

"Right," said Flagstone quietly as the moon poked out behind the thunderheads.

The River Jim flowed quietly by.

Report 234 - 8.8 - FAILURE ADMITTED.

Date: 2004-08-23

8.8 - FAILURE ADMITTED.

Flagstone paddled slowly down the River Jim. Blind Bob sat crossed legged idling on the bow of their two-log canoe. He slapped at the bugs buzzing around them.

"You know I may draw up some plans and start selling designs of this thing. Darn good canoe for those who need instant water travel when stranded in the Wilds with murderers on their trail. Could make a fortune. Course, I'd expect you to pen a testimonial or two for me."

Flagstone grabbed the two logs and gave a great heave to the left. Blind Bob came to the surface sputtering and squirmed back aboard. Flagstone grinned.

"Just testing its stability," he said.

Blind Bob sat dripping in the bow. Flagstone smiled again.

"The flies have gone. Fancy that."

Blind Bob didn't even turn around. He just made a rude gesture with one hand.

The River Jim flowed quietly by.

Flagstone knew they were near Jimville by the familiar landmarks and the traffic on the river. Many natives he knew waved at him as he and Blind Bob paddled wearily down the lazy river. No one offer help or seemed concerned to see the two men on their two-log raft. Many strange things came floating down the river. In fact the two explorers did not seem in trouble at all to the natives.

Flagstone was very glad to see the first edges of Jimville along the bank. Blind Bob turned to look at Flagstone for the first time that afternoon. "Beach here?" he asked gesturing to the shore. A file of wet, mud-spattered Royal Marines were trudging along the nearest bank. Some men sported bandages and several were being helped along by their mates.

"Trouble?" yelled Flagstone.

"Pirates," was the single word answer yelled back by the tired Lieutenant leading the file. Flagstone waved and continued paddling.

"Doesn't look like much has changed since we've been gone," said Flagstone flatly.

"Doesn't look like anyone noticed we had gone missing either," said Blind Bob.

The River Jim was nearly to the sea. Flagstone and Blind Bob paddled to bank. There they stood, stretching sore cramped muscles. With safety at hand they both felt immensely tired. Blind Bob grinned at Flagstone.

"Need this anymore?" he said nodding at the raft. Flagstone shook his head no. Blind Bob cut the frayed reed ropes and the logs drifted slowly along the bank, then further out into the river.

"Hope they find a good home, God bless 'em," said Blind Bob. "I'm thirsty."

Flagstone laughed and clapped Blind Bob on the back. "First drink's on me."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," said Blind Bob. The two walked stiffly down the dirt road that widened slightly to form the main street of Jimville.

Word traveled faster than the two tired men walked. Soon a small crowd of native children was escorting the men, vying to carry anything that needed carrying. Several native women chased off most of the kids. Flagstone squinted into the sun. He smiled. "Meet you in the Empress bar in five minutes," he said. Blind Bob grunted and maintained his pace.

Olivia Fate swept by Blind Bob with a "Howdy, Bob" and into Flagstone's arms. Her kisses still tasted good, dirt and all, thought Flagstone. She squeezed him tight. Tears wet her cheeks. He gave her a powerful hug and then gently pried her off his chest. "Let's get out of the sun, Dear," he said softly. She griped his arm strongly and laid her head on his dirty shoulder. She nodded yes.

Flagstone led the way to the Empress and into the bar. Its shaded recesses seemed almost black. He led Olivia to the table where Blind Bob was sprawled. Flagstone laughed and Olivia joined in. Blind Bob had not a beer, but huge cold lemonade in his big fist. He seemed to blush.

"It just sounded good," he muttered over their laughter. Two more huge lemonades with big chunks of ice in them appeared on the table. All three quickly disappeared. Olivia finally spoke.

"What happened? Where are the rest of the men? Did you find the river source? Where's the steam launch?"

"Slow down, Olivia," said Flagstone softly. He finished his lemonade and waved for another round. They were quickly on the table. A small crowd was loosely gathered around the two filthy men. Flagstone looked around for a moment then turned his attention to Olivia. "I need to talk to Norton too."

Olivia nodded, "I sent for him as soon as I heard you were back."

"And here I am," said Norton Dullcote stepping through the crowd to settle into the only empty chair at the table. He patted Blind Bob fondly on the shoulder. Bob nodded and sucked on his ice cubes.

"First things first," sighed Flagstone. "Norton, we didn't find the source of the River Jim, so no charges to you."

"Tut, tut, Julius. I'm paying all your expenses as I promised." He eyed the two dirty tired men. "What happened?"

"We went up river for nearly three weeks, made it into the desert and were ambushed."

"Fizzle?" said a strong voice from the crowd. Four heads at the table pivoted to look at the speaker.

"Yes, Consul, how did you know?" asked Flagstone.

"Just a hunch." Said the British Consul smoothing his tie. "Please continue, Flagstone."

Flagstone turned back to Olivia and Dullcote. "We were exploring a small ruined village about two days march from the river when Fizzle struck. He captured all the men in my little party. Then." He stopped and took a drink of his lemonade. "Then he killed them all. Just killed them all."

"Put their heads on poles as a warning?" said the Consul quietly.

"Yes." Flagstone could feel Olivia's grip tighten on his arm. "As a warning or something. Another hunch, Consul?"

The British Consul said nothing, and smoothed his tie some more. Blind Bob silently waved his empty glass for a refill. Flagstone continued.

"We made it back to the river. The same thing had happened to the men we had left at the camp there." A little noise escaped Olivia's lips. A murmur ran through the growing crowd.

"To make a long story short, Bob and I made a raft and paddled back to Jimville. The end. Any questions."

No one seemed to have any. Flagstone pushed himself tiredly up from the table. He was stiff from sitting. He found the Empress manager in the crowd. Pointing at Blind Bob he said to the manager, "No alcohol for him today or tonight. Your best room, a hot bath, and whatever he wants to eat. Put it on my tab. No alcohol till tomorrow."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Flagstone," said the manager nodding quickly. "No alcohol, hot bath, good food. Maybe some good company also?" he said ever so gently.

Flagstone looked at Olivia who nodded hiding her grin. "Sure, why not."

Flagstone heard Blind Bob start to rise to say something. He turned to Bob smiling, "Aw shut up and have a good night's sleep. See you in the morning." Blind Bob sat back down shaking his head. Olivia leaned down and gave him a peck on his stubbled cheek. "See you in the morning. Enjoy your bath."

Putting her arm around Flagstone she steered him out of the bar and toward the stairs and their suite. At the top of the stairs, she rounded on the following crowd. "Mr. Flagstone is retiring to his suite. He will not be

seeing anyone until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. Anyone entering the suite without our permission will be shot straightaway by me. Any questions?"

The crowd seemed unusually quiet. It began to disperse as Olivia turned and escorted Flagstone to their suite. At the door Olivia spoke over her shoulder, "Breakfast in the morning, Norton, say 9-ish? My treat."

Norton waved over the departing crowd. Olivia closed the large door firmly. The 'do not disturb' sign hung on the shining brass door handle. Soon a request for a large meal came down plus a not so thin envelope of money to keep the water hot and the ice cold for the rest of the evening.

Report 235 - 8.X - EVER FORWARD.

Date: 2004-09-12

8.X - EVER FORWARD.

Julius Flagstone slept late. He didn't care. When he awoke Olivia was reading in the main room of their suite. The doors to the balcony and all the windows were thrown open. A gentle rain pattered down. A fresh breeze rustled through the suite. Flagstone lay in bed wide-awake with his eyes closed. He took slow deep breaths of the fresh air. He threw off the covers and let the cool air play over his tired body.

Finally he sat up and slowly stretched. Every muscle in his body was sore. He was stiff from sleeping so long. He watched Olivia sitting in a light nightgown reading. She looked over the top of her newspaper and smiled.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Much better."

The rain increased. The breeze picked up. On impulse Flagstone rose and walked past Olivia and out onto the balcony. The rain beat down on his bare body. He stood, face lifted to the clouds, and let it splash against his big frame. The rain felt wonderful coursing over him. He leaned on the balcony rail and let the water flow over himself.

He looked across the short distance from the rear of the Empress Hotel into the jungle. It was never far away he thought. The mist and rain were like curtains opening and closing, revealing brief glimpses of the sparkling emerald green mystery land. The dullness of the day seemed to suit Flagstone's mood this morning. He hung his head and let the rain drip off his chin and nose.

He smiled as Olivia padded up to stand beside him as bare to the rain as he was. She smiled back. He slipped his big bronze hand over hers on the balcony rail. They stood in silence letting the rain wash away their thoughts. The rain drummed down. The jungle was quiet. Olivia shivered and went inside. Flagstone stood a few more minutes lost in thought, then turned and stepped back into the suite.

Fresh, dry, and in clean clothes for the first time in more than a month Flagstone walked into the Empress dining room with Olivia's arm wrapped through his. Flagstone knew heads were turning. Olivia always caused that even when people saw her everyday. He smiled at her. She gave a radiant smile in return as they were shown to their favorite table by the big windows. Flagstone gracefully seated Olivia, then opened the two big windows by the table so that a gentle fresh breeze stole across their table.

A lazy late breakfast was ordered. Coffee, pastries, new potatoes, crisp bacon, eggs, ham, sausage, fresh fruits, toast, and jams came and went from

the table. They picked at everything, taking their time, enjoying one another's company. They loitered. It was decadent. It was wonderful.

Flagstone looked up from the table and waved. Norton Dullcote sauntered over and bowed slightly to Olivia. "You make me wish I were thirty years younger, Olivia."

Olivia laughed and pecked Dullcote's cheek. "You're a rascal even now, Norton. Thirty years ago, I can only imagine." They all laughed. "Where's Constance?"

"Staying at the Vistula Villa, visiting for a few days. I expect her back tomorrow or the next day at the latest. I'm sure she will be as relieved as I am that Julius made it safely home."

"I'm sure she will be," replied Olivia.

Dullcote looked carefully at Flagstone. "And how are you today, Julius?"

"Much better. Tired and stiff, but that is to be expected after that journey," said Flagstone.

Dullcote looked slowly around the nearly empty dining room. "Care to discuss it?"

Flagstone noticed Olivia was watching him carefully. "I suppose. It is on my mind obviously." Olivia gave a hint of a smile, slipped her shoe off and rubbed her bare foot against Flagstone's leg. He smiled. Dullcote cleaned his glasses and put them back on.

"Yesterday you mentioned you had not found the source of the River Jim," said Dullcote.

Yesterday, Flagstone thought with a rush. It seemed like years ago. He looked at Norton's attentive face. Olivia's foot felt cool against his leg. "Yes, I did. I'm sorry, but I didn't find it. It must very far north, in the great north mountains if not beyond. And I have no way of knowing if I was even on the right branch of the river to lead to the source. I think it is an impossible task, Norton, a worthy goal in itself, but impractical to do."

Norton nodded. "Probably so." Norton fidgeted for a moment. "What became of Puddin?"

"Lost, I assume, with the rest of my men when Fizzle ambushed us." He could still see the heads on poles. "I didn't go looking for him. It seemed pointless."

"Yes, you're right. I was just, um, curious, that's all." Dullcote played with the silverware in front of him. He seemed distracted.

"What's wrong, Norton?" asked Flagstone. Olivia's foot was still.

Dullcote stared at the table. He blushed slightly. He looked at Olivia then Flagstone. "I'm getting old."

"Aren't we all," Olivia said softly.

"No, I mean I'm getting old. I have a few good years left. I don't know."

"Tells us what's on your mind, Norton," said Olivia softly.

Dullcote sat silent for a moment. He blushed. He looked into Flagstone's steady gaze. "I'm getting old. I have all the money and more a man could ask for. But I have no family I'd call mine."

"Norton, you've got a veritable horde of relative in England. You could get a seat in Parliament with their votes alone," laughed Flagstone.

Dullcote chuckled slightly. "That's true. But they're not really family. They all think I'm just a crazy old man who wanders off to strange places for no good reason. Not one of them has ever offered to come with Constance and me." He looked blankly out the window.

"Well, we're here with you and anywhere you'd like to go we'll be happy to go with you," said Flagstone warmly. Olivia nodded agreement. "Absolutely," she added.

"I know that. I do. That's why I am so relieved you're back. I should never have sent you out on that silly quest. It was an old man's folly." Norton stared at the white tablecloth.

"Don't be foolish, Norton. I thought it was a reasonable thing to do myself or I wouldn't have gone. I'm back now, so let's hear no more about it," Flagstone said cheerfully.

"I am most relieved you are safely back. Constance was at me day and night about how foolish the whole thing was. She actually got in quite a snit about it."

Olivia patted Dullcote's hand. "I can talk to her if that would help?"

"Thank you, Olivia, but no. It's just that." He stopped and looked out the window again.

"Just what?" asked Olivia softly.

Norton cleared his throat. "It's just that Constance and I consider you both our family. If something happened to either of you because of something I did I couldn't face Constance or my own conscience." Norton looked at both of them.

Olivia hopped up from her chair and hugged a surprised Dullcote. To everyone's surprise Julius gave Norton a big hug also. Dullcote was turning several shades of red.

Olivia hugged him again. "Norton, how sweet. We are your family. Don't ever doubt it." She hugged him a third time and gave him a noisy kiss on the cheek.

Flagstone shook his hand and patted his shoulder. "It is an honor, Norton. Never thought of it any other way. Like Olivia says, we are family." Norton

sat down and opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Olivia leaned over and planted another big kiss on his pink cheek.

"Save some of those for me," chuckled Flagstone. They all laughed. Flagstone order champagne. Holding bubbling flutes aloft he gave a soft toast, "To family. Wherever you find it." They clinked glasses and drank the toast. Norton seemed visibly relieved.

The rain had stopped. The air was fresh and cool. Flagstone had several waiters move their table contents out onto the veranda. The breeze brightened them up. Turning to Dullcote, Flagstone spoke, "Now let me tell you about this last little adventure."

The rest of the cool afternoon was lost in earnest talk on the veranda of the Empress. More champagne made the rounds. Coffee appeared followed later by sweating lemonades. Olivia and Dullcote spoke rarely. Flagstone told the whole story.

Report 236 - 9.1 - LISTS.

Date: 2004-00-00

9.1 - LISTS.

Julius Flagstone sat in the main room of his suite in the Empress Hotel. Through the open windows and balcony door he could see the jungle, the Wilds of Jimland. It appeared a dirty green, cast in motion by the afternoon breeze. Flagstone heard the faint bustle of Jimville, the Capitol of Jimland. The street noise was muted.

He was doodling. Seated at the table with several sheets of paper strewn about in front of him, he let his thoughts wander. He absently looked at the lists he had made on the papers. Lists of supplies for an Expedition. Pounds of food, number of bearers and askari guards, weapons, the list went on for three sheets of paper. A fourth sheet was under his pen. The first list on it was shorter. It was titled "Problems and Hazards to Overcome." A second list had no entries only a title, "Solutions."

Flagstone reached out for the wet lemonade glass. He sipped at it. The breeze rustled the curtains in the suite. He looked back at the list and sighed. Resting his chin in his palm and his elbow on the paper he stared blankly at it. The empty solutions list stared mutely back. Flagstone gazed out the window lost in his thoughts.

Olivia Fate swept into the room. Her cheeks were a happy pink. She carried several bags containing the results of her latest shopping trip. She was smiling. Giving Flagstone a brief kiss, she bounced into the bedroom.

"Everyone thinks you are wonderful, Jules," she said dumping her purchases in an untidy heap on the big bed.

"That's nice."

"Really. They do. I was stopped in the street by several people telling me to thank you for your generosity."

"It was only fair, Olivia."

"Yes, but it was still a gracious gesture, paying the families of the lost men their full wages and a bonus to boot. Very well received."

"The men died because of me, Olivia, let's not forget that. Money won't replace lost husbands, sons, and brothers. Besides I have more money that I can spend. I think perhaps you could spend it all, but not me."

A snort came from the bedroom. Flagstone smiled to himself. Olivia returned to the main room wearing Flagstone's favorite green silk robe and nothing else. She settled into the overstuffed chair. "They don't hate you, Jules. They know the risks of this business. They do appreciate the money. It helps. It really does."

"I am honestly glad it does."

"Now cheer up or I won't parade around in this just for you." She uncovered a long lean leg. Flagstone smiled and shook his head. Olivia laughed. She came to the table and sat beside him. She began reading the lists. Done with these she nudged his elbow off the final sheet and read it, twice.

"My, we are in a black mood. This last expedition is bothering you day and night." She eased the front of the robe open a little more. Flagstone's big hand swallowed up hers. He looked into her eyes.

"There's got to be a way to go exploring without risking the lives of large numbers of innocent men and women. I know it's dangerous. And Jimland itself makes things all the more dangerous. I have a list of problems. But I can't find a solution. I'm not going out again until I find one."

"You're being mule-headed, Jules," said Olivia.

"No. People, places, and things conspire to try to kill me and everyone with me. Just look at what happened."

"Conspire?" Olivia arched an eyebrow. "That's a bit strong."

"Well, sometimes it feels that way." Flagstone knew he wasn't winning this one.

"Sheik Fizzle isn't conspiring against you. He hates you openly. He'll kill anyone he thinks threatens him in "his" desert. The animals of Jimland are impartial; they'll eat anyone. You're not special."

"But," Flagstone sputtered.

"And the weather is just the weather, though here in Jimland it is stormier than elsewhere, but when it's nice it's truly beautiful." Flagstone could see Olivia was warming to her rebuttal.

She went on, adding an entry under the hazard list. "Now the Sultan is a tad unpredictable" she laughed, "except where it comes to money, his greed being total predictable." Flagstone nodded. "Luckily Jasmine has his ear among other body parts and can talk some sense to him."

Flagstone thought about this for a moment. He opened his mouth. Olivia continued. "And the British Consul should be a hazard. He tries too hard and plays the diplomacy game poorly." Flagstone opened his mouth again.

Olivia didn't slow down. "Pirates are definitely a hazard. They're not even on the list." She added several more entries under the hazard list. "Tastimin gets his own entry being the scum he is." Flagstone simply nodded.

Olivia paused and looked at him a glint in her eye. "You put balloons down as a hazard? Why is that?" Flagstone opened his mouth. Olivia continued. "Yes, they have a few minor problems that need to be worked out."

Flagstone spoke quickly, "Like falling out of the sky."

Olivia wrinkled her nose at him. "Now, that doesn't happen all the time. And there are usually extenuating circumstances." She drew a line through the balloon entry. Then she stopped for a moment. Her eyes seemed to light up.

"I see where this is going," she said. She carefully wrote balloon again. Then she added steam launch, rowboat, canoe, and finally raft under the hazard list. Flagstone squinted.

"Why are those hazards? They work very well, thank you."

"You've nearly been killed in everyone of them, so they must be hazards."

"You're overreacting, Olivia."

She smiled at him triumphantly. "My point exactly. I think you are overreacting too. Yes, this last expedition was disaster, which you, of all explorers, are not used to having. You are used to being successful. It's your way. You are a Fearless and Famous Explorer, now act like it. List your hazards. Find solutions to your problems. And lets go exploring. It's what we do. We would be unhappy doing anything else. So cheer up or you sleep on the sofa."

Olivia stood up. The front of her robe fell open. She leaned over close and gave him a kiss. "Its time for dinner. Let's go eat."

Flagstone watched her walk into the bedroom. "God help me."

Dinner was great. Blind Bob and his latest girlfriend joined them in the dining room. The woman looked like she could be Blind Bob's daughter, thought Flagstone. Olivia seemed not to notice. The two women hit it off right away. The food was excellent. They ate and laughed.

After dinner the party went to the bar and played card games. Blind Bob's date let out a whoop of delight each time she took a trick. Dominos and other games made their way to the table. Everyone had a noisy good time.

When Flagstone fell asleep that night he had forgotten his troubles.

Olivia lay on her side; her head propped on her hand. She looked at Flagstone's profile in the moonlight. "Rest easy, my dear, the answers will come," she whispered. She gave him a soft kiss on the cheek and went to sleep her head on his shoulder.

Report 237 - 9.2 - TO THE RESCUE.

Date: 2004-09-20

9.2 - TO THE RESCUE.

Julius Flagstone looked up as Norton Dullcote burst through the doors of his suite. Norton was disheveled. He came to a sudden noisy halt in front of Flagstone. Olivia rushed in from the bedroom, revolver at the ready. Norton blinked unseeing at her, his breath coming in puffs. She stared, mouth open, at him.

"Constance has been kidnapped by pirates," shouted Dullcote. He looked from one to the other and back again.

"Norton, sit down," said Flagstone firmly, feeling his pulse starting to race. Olivia laid the pistol down. She put a comforting arm around Dullcote's heaving shoulders. He slumped in a chair.

"What happened?" asked Olivia kneeling beside Dullcote.

"She never made it to the Vistula Villa. I just met Casimir in the lobby. We simultaneously asked each other where Constance was?" Flagstone and Olivia exchanged a sharp look. "It must have been pirates. What shall I do?"

Flagstone stood up. "You will do nothing. Olivia, take care of Norton." He stomped off into the bedroom. Five minutes later he returned to find Olivia forcing cold lemonade on the shaken Dullcote. Flagstone was decked out in his trekking clothes. He held his field-pack in one hand and his rifle in the other. Without a word or backward glance he left the suite.

Another five minutes passed before Flagstone was pounding in Blind Bob's door. No one answered. Flagstone swore under his breath.

"I'm ready," said a voice behind Flagstone. He turned quickly. Blind Bob stood in the noonday heat ready for the Wilds of Jimland. Flagstone grimly noted that Bob was wearing an extra bandoleer of bullets just as he was. He smiled and nodded.

"Let's go."

"Just the two of us?" asked Blind Bob.

"Yes."

"Good. I have a nice light canoe sitting on the river's edge. Thought you might want that." Blind Bob smiled. Flagstone clapped him solidly on the shoulder.

"Well done."

Ten minutes later the two big men were paddling strongly up river. A gentle breeze ruffled the water. They hoisted a simple small sail. The little canoe moved easily upriver.

"News must have traveled fast," said Flagstone as he sat in the stern of the canoe.

"Bad news always does. I knew what you'd be thinking," answered Blind Bob lazily.

"That steam launch in the dark?"

"Yep. My guess too. Too much of a coincidence."

"I agree," said Flagstone scanning the banks. The few natives on the outskirts of Jimville were paying them no mind. "Don't think its pirates though."

"Hmm," was Blind Bob's answer as he carefully loaded his rifle.

Two days later the men were upriver, away from any last trace of civilization. They were still under sail for which Flagstone was grateful. They were proceeding much faster than he had hoped. The riverbanks slowly passed by. Neither man slept. They watched the banks for signs of activity.

"There." Blind Bob was pointing at the bank. Flagstone steered over to the area. He smiled to himself. Many small trees had been hastily chopped down. Debris littered the area. The two men climbed stiffly out of the canoe, stretched, and began combing the area.

Flagstone noted the many footprints in the dirt and mud. Barefeet and reed sandals meant natives. Soft hide boots could mean anybody. He stopped and whistled softly to himself. Boot prints. Heavy boots, military boots, and, he guessed, not British. Blind Bob walked up quietly handing Flagstone some scraps of paper. Flagstone gestured at the prints in the dirt.

Blind Bob squatted to examine them. He pushed his hat back. "Soldiers, Boss. German or Russian. Trouble to be sure." He stared around at the ground.

Flagstone examined the paper scraps. They were ration wrappings. Very little writing was on the paper, nothing that helped. They were general stores rations readily available in Jimville. He smelled them. They were dry.

The two men circled the perimeter of small tree stumps. Nothing out of the ordinary met their intense survey. Disappointed, they stood by their canoe eating fresh fruit they had found while circling the clearing.

"Soldiers, no doubt," said Flagstone.

"That's bad," replied Blind Bob spitting out a seed.

"Not too many, maybe a dozen."

"That's good."

"I'm guessing Russian, maybe the GPE."

"That's bad," muttered Blind Bob.

"I won't feel bad shooting a few of those buggers," said Flagstone with a smile.

"That's good." Blind Bob adjusted his bandoleers.

"But let's not go looking for a stand up fight. Let's just get in, get Constance, and get out. As quietly as possible."

"That's better," said Blind Bob climbing into the canoe. Flagstone looked around the clearing one last time. He flung his fruit rind into the river and pushed the canoe off the bank. In no time at all they were sailing briskly up the river again. Flagstone gave a silent prayer of thanks for the steady wind. He knew, of course, that it came with a down side.

The rain poured out of the lead-colored clouds like a waterfall in a hurry. The two men had been soaking wet for two days. They were paddling slowly now. The sail jammed roughly onto the canoe bottom. The canoe hugged the bank. Each of the proceeding days they had found where the mysterious steam launch had stopped for wood. Each time the site was fresher than the last. Flagstone was confident they were gaining on it, which surprised him. After some discussion as they paddled, Flagstone decided that launch crew was not experienced at running their vessel. Blind Bob suggested it was stolen. Flagstone thought that was probably the answer. The thought cheered him up. Maybe these kidnappers were not as organized as he had feared.

The clouds thinned a little the next day. The two men paddled along hardly speaking, their rifles across their laps, light rain dripping off their hats. Blind Bob pointed at something in the river. It bobbed along on the slow current. Flagstone grunted and the men paddled hard to catch the thing. Blind Bob caught it with his paddle and pulled it into the canoe. It was a seat cushion.

"Not far ahead now," whispered Blind Bob. He handed the cushion to Flagstone. Flagstone looked it over. A small smile crept over his face.

"I'll bet Casimir Ponatowski is really pissed off about now. This is from his launch."

"Do you think he's the kidnapper, Boss?" asked Blind Bob.

"No, of course not. Don't be silly. But the kidnappers have stolen his steam launch I'll wager."

"Hmm," answered Bob. Flagstone handed him the cushion. Blind Bob slid it under his butt. "Thanks." The two men chuckled quietly. They continued to paddle slowly upriver staying close to the riverbank. The rain increased. The river frothed.

Darkness was upon them quickly. The rain had let up to a soft hiss. Flagstone was thinking to himself as he quietly paddled in the twilight. Up, forward, down, back. His motion was automatic. He didn't think of it or how tired his shoulders were becoming. Up, forward, down, back. Up, forward. Blind Bob's strong grip stopped Flagstone in mid stroke. Bob pointed ahead. Flagstone peered through the soft rain and dim moonlight. A dull dim yellow light was ahead on the same riverbank they were on. Quickly, quietly, the two men swung their canoe to the riverbank and climbed out. They pulled the canoe up on the bank and lay some loose fronds over it.

"The launch," said Blind Bob sniffing the air.

Flagstone sniffed. He could smell the smoke even in the rain. They were close. He checked his rifle, pistol, and big hunting knife. Blind Bob was doing the same. They turned the canoe around on the riverbank to point downstream. They moved their packs to each end clearing out the middle of the little canoe. Standing in the rain they looked at each other in the dim moonlight.

"We follow the riverbank till we are sure, then circle around and come in from the land side if we can. We grab Constance and get back here as fast as possible. Into the canoe and paddle like hell down river. No waiting on each other. Whoever has Constance runs, the other provides cover. No shooting unless absolutely necessary," whispered Flagstone hoarsely.

"Right," answered Blind Bob equally hoarsely.

Flagstone led the way along the riverbank staying in cover as best he could. Noises came from ahead. Voices drifted toward them. Russian and native from what Flagstone could gather.

The steam launch was pulled partially up onto a low area of the riverbank. Several small campfires were set about the little clearing. A group of six or eight men were gathered around the bow of the launch gesturing and talking. Flagstone could see three sentries by the light of fires. He sank back into the darkness to lay next to Blind Bob in the dripping undergrowth.

"GPE," he hissed.

"Great," whispered Blind Bob.

"Looks like they have hit something with the launch. Three sentries I could see. Very lax looking perimeter watch." He started to say more, but one of Blind Bob's big hands covered his mouth, in a flash the other held his big knife. Flagstone froze, his blood pounding in his ears.

A GPE sentry had nearly walked over them. The man stopped and looked around. The rain pattered down. Flagstone held his breath. The man seemed to stand forever looking right at them. With a sigh the man turned and walked the three paces to the riverbank. He began to relieve himself into the river. Like a black flash of lightning, Blind Bob had the man from behind. The man struggled briefly trying to free the string hand over his mouth. The knife flashed dully in the moonlight and the struggling subsided. Blind Bob pulled the man to the river and gently pushed him out into the current. Wiping his knife on his pant leg he crouched and returned to where Flagstone lay cradling his rifle.

"That was uncalled for," growled Flagstone.

"He owed me money," said Blind Bob flatly, breathing raggedly.

"Right," said Flagstone. Blind Bob shrugged.

The two men crawled closer. Flagstone was inwardly furious with Blind Bob. The man could be missed at any minute. That would alert the whole camp. He crawled along thinking blackly to himself. He stopped abruptly. Constance Dullcote was walking directly toward him. Four steps behind her were two soldiers. Constance came to a clump of bushes. She turned to face the soldiers with her hands on her hips. "Stop," she commanded. The two soldiers stopped for a moment then fanned out on either side of the clump of bushes. Muttering to herself Constance entered the bushes.

Blind Bob grinned at Flagstone and shrugged. Flagstone couldn't help but grin back. He pointed to one guard, then to Bob, then to the second guard and himself. He put his finger over his lips. Blind Bob nodded. Both men slid their big camp knives out. Blind Bob crawled off into the wet darkness toward his man. Flagstone crept toward his closer target.

With a silent leap he knocked the man down and threw a big hand over his mouth. His knife flashed in the dark. The guard desperately fought back. The two men rolled onto the mud of the riverbank. The overhang of the bank sheltered them from the camp. The guard landed a heavy blow to Flagstone temple. Flagstone saw stars. He hit back. The man was biting at the hand that covered his mouth. Flagstone kicked at the guard. They rolled in the mud. Flagstone's big knife rose in the air. An arm shot out to catch the knife hand in mid air. Slowly the knife descended. Neither man yelled. They breathed in great ragged gulps, kicking, scratching, biting. The knife slowly descended. Flagstone noted oddly that the guard's eyes seemed to pop out of his head and stare at the knife blade. He brought up his knee. The man grunted, but did not loosen his grip. The knife wavered in the air.

Flagstone wrenched his bleeding hand free of the guard's mouth, and before he could utter a sound, smashed his fist into the man's throat. He did it again. The knife slipped down and with hardly a sound it sank hilt deep into the guard's heaving chest. The guard flapped for a moment then lay still.

Flagstone rolled off the guard. He could hardly breath. He forced himself to his knees and looked around. The rain was falling harder. The camp was still quiet. With a disgusted pull he jerked his knife out of the guard's chest. The body quivered and was still. Flagstone was shaking badly.

Unconsciously he wiped the blade on his trouser leg and slid the knife back into its sheath.

Regaining his senses he crawled weakly back up the riverbank and into the bushes. His rifle was still there. Blind Bob's was gone. He tried to still his shaking limbs. He began crawling back toward the canoe. Finally he staggered to a low crouch and began running toward where the canoe was. It was gone. Flagstone stood crouched in the rain like a cornered animal, dimly lit by the moon peeking through the black clouds overhead.

He noted a bundle in the mud by the river. He staggered over to it. It was his pack, a canteen and a ragged strip of lace tied to the pack shoulder strap. He tried to clear his mind. Blind Bob must have Constance. He left Flagstone his gear and headed downriver with Constance. A hullabaloo of noise behind him brought his senses into sharp focus.

Flagstone thought rapidly. They must have found one of the guards. A rifle shot sounded and another. Flagstone slung the pack over one shoulder. Gripping his rifle like his life depended on it Flagstone disappeared into the dark, wet jungle. The noise behind grew louder. Angry shouts and random shots filled the night. Flagstone soon left them behind. Further into the jungle he ran quietly dodging great roots and low branches.

The rain fell.

Report 238 - 9.3 - TO THE RESCUE A SECOND TIME

Date: 2004-09-25

9.3 - TO THE RESCUE A SECOND TIME.

Julius Flagstone walked through the jungle. He didn't look over his shoulder. He watched where he was going. The rain had stopped and the rising sun was making the place steam dramatically. Flagstone hopped over a big root. He was humming to himself.

All was going well. Blind Bob and Constance were safely returning home. The kidnappers didn't appear to have followed him. He raised a foot and stopped. Why weren't they looking for him at least? He continued on at a quickened pace. The river curved into view as he approached.

A dull thumping came across the river. Flagstone sucked in a deep breath. Smoke. The steam launch, he thought. He carefully approached the river. Kneeling in the underbrush he watched as the steam launch can into view and seemed to be heading directly toward him. He steadied himself and lay down.

The launch ran right up to the riverbank and stopped. A rickety gangplank was thrown across to the dry bank side. Several heavily armed, rough-looking men descended and fanned out on the shore. To Flagstone's surprise Tastimin the Despicable, the Scourge of Jimland, walked across the gangplank and stood on the riverbank. He looked carefully up and down the river. He gave a curt wave.

Constance Dullcote was led roughly from the steam launch to the shore. Blind Bob followed heavily bound in rope. He looked like he had put up a fight. Tastimin muttered as Blind Bob was led past him. Men unloaded four light tents and a hasty camp was set up in the shore. A cooking fire was started. Tastimin gave some gruff orders. Constance and Blind Bob were hustled into a tent and guard was posted at the front and back of the tent.

More curt orders from Tastimin had many supplies from the launch brought ashore and placed in and around one tent. Tastimin said nothing as three bodies were carried ashore and dumped unceremoniously on the riverbank. Flagstone was surprised again. They were GPE men. Russians without a country or a conscience. A fourth GPE man was dragged ashore still alive. Tastimin pointed at an empty tent. The man was taken into it. Another guard was posted.

Tastimin went back aboard the steam launch and disappeared below. Flagstone lay in the brush watching the pirates set up their camp. Dinner was starting to simmer over the fire when Tastimin reappeared. He turned and yelled down the small ladder into the cramped boiler room. "Fix it by morning or I'll flay you alive." Flagstone smiled. Good, they weren't going anywhere for a while.

Soon all the men except the guards at Constance and Blind Bob's tent were eating together. A light warm rain began to fall. The evening darkness closed in. Flagstone crawled on his stomach to the rear of the prisoner's tent. He peeked under the canvas. The GPE man was lying beaten, chained to

a stake in the ground. Flagstone crawled back into the brush. The night got blacker.

The guard was changed. Most of the men went into the tents out of the chill night rain. Tastimin and several men went into the prisoner's tent. The sound of another beating soon came out of the tent. Flagstone watched the guards of the other tent. The one in the rear was drawn to the front by the sounds from the prisoner's tent. He and the other guard talked in low tones.

Flagstone seized the moment. He ran to the back of the tent and slid under the light canvas. Constance let out a surprised gasp. Blind Bob jumped to his feet. Flagstone pulled out his big knife and cut Constance's bonds. She pulled the gag from her mouth.

"There's guards all around, Jules," she said.

Flagstone nodded and began to cut away the roped around Blind Bob. Suddenly a guard stepped into the tent. Immediately he pulled a short cutlass-like knife out of his belt. Before he could raise an alarm Flagstone jumped for him. The two men rolled on the floor. Constance and Blind Bob watched helplessly.

Each man had the other's knife hand in a tight grip. They squirmed on the floor. Flagstone rolled. The guard was on top now. Flagstone looked at Constance and hissed through clenched teeth, "Run! Run now!"

Constance took a step back then rushed forward and kicked the guard in the head. The man slumped on top of an exhausted Flagstone. Flagstone pushed him off and quickly tied him up. He gave Constance the man's big knife. It looked like a sword in her small hand, which was swallowed up in the looping guard around the hilt. A shadow passed over Flagstone. Another guard entered. He yelled an alarm. Flagstone tackled him. Men outside the tent were yelling.

Flagstone yelled at Constance, "Run! Run!" Blind Bib yelled behind his gag. Constance stepped to the rear of the tent. Ignoring the fighting men she slashed at the light canvas. As she turned another pirate ran into the room. Blind Bob, still bound and gagged, threw himself in the man's path. They fell in a heap. Constance disappeared through the gash in the tent and into the rain of the dark night.

Tastimin stood looking at the two men, bound hand and foot, kneeling before him. He almost laughed. He spat on the wet ground. Flagstone followed him with his eyes. Blind Bob seemed out on his feet.

"So the great explorer Flagstone seeks to rescue his friends," yelled Tastimin. "Not tonight, Flagstone, not tonight. Tie them to that tree," growled Tastimin pointing. As the men were dragged off Tastimin gave Flagstone a hearty kick.

"Men," roared Tastimin, "I want that old woman back. She's worth a small fortune. Bring her back unharmed. Let's go." With that the entire pirate band went running into the dark jungle. Only one man remained to guard the two men tied to the tree. Flagstone leaned toward Blind Bob. Bob struggled

to stand up right. The guard sauntered up and without warning savagely punched each man in the stomach, laughing as they slumped over in pain.

The night became quiet. The rain softly fell. Flagstone shook his head to clear it. He almost smiled. Blind Bob was snoring. Flagstone tensed. The guard came up and cuffed Blind Bob. Bob shook his head as the guard walked back to stand in the cover a tarp, out of the increasing rain.

"Bob, you alright?" whispered Flagstone.

"I'm hungry and pretty tired of that guy," replied Blind Bob.

"He said you owed him money," said Flagstone. Blind Bob chuckled.

"Maybe."

"You ok?"

"Pretty much," said Blind Bob. "Boss?"

"Yeah?"

"We're dead men." Blind Bob said it flatly.

"Pretty much," answered Flagstone.

Report 239 - 9.4 - TO THE RESCUE ONE MORE TIME

Date: 2004-09-30

9.4 - TO THE RESCUE ONE MORE TIME.

Julius Flagstone sagged against the tree. He was wet, sore, and tired. The ropes binding him to the tree cut and chafed. Blind Bob was in no better shape. The rain had increased. Flagstone couldn't see ten feet clearly. But he could see the guard still standing under the edge of a tarp steadily watching them.

Tastimin's pirate band had been gone thirty minutes by Flagstone reckoning. The quiet was unnerving. The rain tapped down on everything. The guard tensed and stood taller. Flagstone strained to see into the dark.

A small gray figure appeared. It walked straight toward the guard. The man stepped out into the rain. A big smile spread across his face. He was going to capture the escaped Constance Dullcote. She staggered a little as she approached the man. She staggered again and flung out a hand for help.

The guard stepped forward and reached out for Constance. There was a dull flash and solid thump. The guard stepped forward again and past Constance a dazed look on his face. Constance reared back. With all her might she smacked the man in the face with the big knife hilt. With a surprised look on his face the man tottered another step then fell over. Flagstone and Blind Bob stared.

Constance grabbed the unconscious guard's knife and, with a trembling hand, wordlessly cut the ropes binding the men. Both nearly fell to their knees. Flagstone massaged his legs. He could hardly stand. Constance pulled Blind Bob's arm over her shoulder.

"Let's go," she stage whispered gesturing at the jungle with her head. She and Blind Bob began to hobble toward the darkness.

"No. This way. This way," grunted Flagstone as he walked stiffly toward the steam launch. The others tottered after him. They clattered across the gangway. Flagstone kicked it off the launch. He went forward and began loosening the line to shore. Blind Bob limped to the rear line. He cut it with Constance's knife. Flagstone painfully lowered himself over the side. He pushed the reluctant steam launch away from the shore. He pulled himself back into the launch with help from the others.

"Oars. Paddles. Something. We must get out into the current," said Flagstone more strongly while lying on the deck. Blind Bob and Constance scurried aft. Soon the three of them were paddling, slowly driving the steam launch out into the river's slow current. The rain closed in and obscured the riverbank. The river's current began to send them downriver. Flagstone directed Constance to the covered steering station. She resisted a little, but settled thankfully out of the rain.

"Wouldn't want to rescue you, then have you catch a cold," said Flagstone as he stretched out on the deck. Blind Bob was slumped against a bulkhead.

"Who rescued who?" asked Constance with a grin.

"Sorry. Let's call it even." Flagstone lay back against the deck and closed his eyes to the rain. "Damn it, Constance, what did you think you were doing back there. You could have been killed."

Constance leaned back against the seat cushion. She smiled at Flagstone. "Just trying to help," she answered softly. Both men were asleep on the wet deck. "Good night, boys. My good boys," she sighed and fell asleep.

Dawn found the steam launch bobbing against a small sand bar. Flagstone was awakened by the sun in his face. He reached out and shook Blind Bob who awoke with a snort. Flagstone moved over to Constance asleep on the little bench. He gently shook her.

"Rise and shine, Constance," he said softly. Her eyes fluttered open and she stiffly set up. Flagstone looked around. "Let's get off this sandbar."

Flagstone and Blind Bob picked up the paddles. Constance got up to help. "I would much prefer it if you would make us a cup of something to drink and find us some food. Bob and I can handle this. We're all starved."

Constance looked perturbed for a moment. Blind Bob's stomach growled loudly. He grinned at Constance. She laughed and began examining the storage bins.

Five minutes later the steam launch was drifting downstream. Blind Bob manned the little steering station. From the tiny galley came encouraging smells as Constance banged and bustled about. Flagstone had gone down into the small boiler room. His clanging and scraping seemed very loud.

Constance handed Blind Bob a hot cup of coffee and a big slice of cheese with a half a loaf of bread. "Thanks," Blind Bob said as he took a sip. He coughed. He turned toward Constance who was leaning over the little hatch that was the boiler room entrance. "Little extra something in this coffee there, Constance?"

"Put a nip of whiskey in it to get your blood moving." She grinned at Blind Bob. He raised the coffee in a silent salute and took another smaller sip. Constance turned her attention to the hatch. "Julius Flagstone, get up here now if you want any food. I think Bob and I will eat it all ourselves if you don't."

Flagstone's dirty face followed by his grimy body climbed out of the hatch. He sipped the coffee raising an eyebrow at Constance. Blind Bob laughed. "For our blood, you know."

All of them chuckled together. They ate silently for a few minutes as the steam launch drifted along. Constance spoke. "Can you get this thing going, Jules?"

Between chews Flagstone answered, "I think so, maybe not full speed, but better than drifting and we'll have some control."

"Anything I can do," asked Constance.

"Just look after us. Bob and I'll do the heavy stuff." Blind Bob nodded in agreement.

"But I can do things, Jules. I'm not useless," said Constance more strongly.

"I'm sure you can. But I think you've earned a rest."

"Jules, women are not just pretty things you put on a shelf." Flagstone noted that Constance was getting that same flushed expression that Olivia got when she got worked up over something.

He butted in. "And after you've had a short rest you can relieve Bob at the steering station so he can help me in the engine room. Before you take your rest see if you can find us some guns." Everyone was quiet. "Just in case," he added lamely. Constance nodded and began rummaging around the steam launch.

Constance never did get her rest, but neither she nor Flagstone was much concerned. She found one old rifle and two pistols and a little ammunition for each. Then she took over trying to steer the powerless steam launch as the river's current carried it slowly downriver.

Flagstone and Blind Bob disappeared into the dark little boiler room. An hour later amid some loud cursing, a lazy stream of smoke wafted out of the little smokestack. It grew steadier. A tired sounding rhythm began to come from the hatch. Constance could feel the steam launch vibrate a little, like it was waking up. Blind Bob and Flagstone climbed back into the noonday sunlight. They sat tiredly on the deck. Flagstone reached over and turned a valve slowly.

"Heads up, Constance. You should be getting steerage shortly." She nodded. Blind Bob tapped Flagstone on the shoulder with a cup of water. Flagstone drained it eagerly. Blind Bob poured him another. They drifted quietly down the river.

Minutes later Constance spoke up. "I think I can feel it."

Flagstone rose and limped over to her. He took the wheel and turned it gently one way then the other. He smiled. He looked at Blind Bob. "I think that last colorful flurry of adjectives did the trick. We've got power."

Blind Bob slapped his thigh. Constance let out a little giggle. Flagstone returned the steering duty to Constance. He and Blind Bob climbed back into the little boiler room. Blind Bob soon reappeared and began carrying pieces of wood to the hatch and handing them down to Flagstone. The steam launch picked up some speed and began making its own way downriver. Constance pulled her dirty hat down firmly on her gray head and concentrated on staying mid-channel and off errant sandbars.

Finally Flagstone climbed out of the boiler room. He was soaked and very tired. He drank several cups of water and waved off the offered whiskey bottle. The sun was starting to descend. Afternoon was ending.

"Bob, you've got the boiler watch for a while. Just keep the pressure where I showed you." Blind Bob nodded, drained his drink of water, stretched, and descended into the little engine room. Flagstone turned to Constance. "If you wouldn't mind, how about something to eat before it gets dark. I'll steer for a while." Constance relinquished the wheel and headed to the cramped galley.

Supper was eaten with the steam launch nudged up on a sandbar in the middle of the river, more hot coffee and cold meat and bread. A tin of unidentified fruit was found, tasted, and tossed overboard. The sky had cleared and the moon came out after the sun went down. The trio set silently in the launch. Flagstone looked at the sky and spoke to no one in particular.

"I've shut down the boiler. I think we have enough wood to get close to home. We'll rest here tonight. We'll be home in two or three days barring any problems. I'll take the first watch. Then Bob."

Constance started to say something. Flagstone continued. "Then Constance. Two hours each. We should all get a few hours sleep that way. The watch will wake everyone at the slightest hint of trouble or the launch drifting off. Ok?"

Blind Bob and Constance nodded agreement. Ten minutes later Blind Bob was snoring softly, curled up on the deck his head on a pile of empty supply bags. Constance sat on the bench watching the stars. Flagstone walked quietly around the launch looking it over. He decided everything was satisfactory. He sat the deck and immediately stood up again as he felt sleep beginning to rush in upon him.

"Tired?" asked a foggy voice. It was Constance. Flagstone leaned against the little steering house.

"Yes. Haven't slept in two days," he replied. He was very tired.

"I'll take the first watch, Jules. Get some sleep."

"No, Constance, you need your rest," he countered.

Constance stood up and pushed Flagstone onto the bench. "I've had some sleep the last couple of days. You haven't, so don't argue," she said firmly.

Flagstone sagged against the bench. "But Constance, what if."

Constance stood in the pale moonlight a pistol in her hand. "Jules, I promise to wake you if anything goes amiss. Now get some sleep." She turned her back on Flagstone and walked the few steps to the stern of the steam launch and looked at the stars. When she turned around again, Flagstone was sound asleep.

The night jungle noises brought Constance fully alert. She shivered. Slowly she paced around the little steam launch. The pistol felt heavy in her hand, but she held it firmly. The night crawled by.

Report 240 - 9.5 - THE MONSTER IN THE RIVER

Date: 2004-10-05

9.5 - THE MONSTER IN THE RIVER.

Julius Flagstone awoke in the morning sun. Blind Bob was sitting on the steam launch gunwale sipping a cup of coffee. Constance was puttering in the tiny galley. Flagstone stretched. He felt stiff. He felt much better. He rose slowly to his feet. Constance heard him and held out a dirty cup full of steaming coffee. Flagstone accepted it with a nod of thanks.

"You let me sleep the night away," said Flagstone looking at Blind Bob. Blind Bob merely pointed with his cup in Constance's direction. She stood feet apart hands on her hips, a gleam in her eye. Flagstone knew that stance. "Thanks," he said to Constance. She smiled at him, wisps of gray hair sticking out in every direction from under her dirty hat.

"You're welcome, Jules," she said. Constance looked up at the sky and around at the river. "Hadn't we better get going?"

Flagstone and Blind Bob came out of their coffee cups and looked around. "Let's shove off," Flagstone said. Blind Bob muttered something. The two men stiffly climbed onto the sandbar and pushed the steam launch off. Scrambling aboard Flagstone found Constance attentively manning the steering station. He lowered himself down into the cramped boiler room. "Wood," He said as his head disappeared below the hatch. Blind Bob picked up a big piece of wood and lowered it down the hatch. Quickly a small, but steady, column of smoke was coming from the stack. The steam pressure rose. Soon the steam launch was making its own way slowly down the river.

Flagstone climbed out of the boiler room. It felt cold back on deck with a gentle breeze blowing. He drank two cups of water. Constance was still steering. Flagstone looked at Blind Bob. He stepped over and sat beside him.

"You should take a turn at the wheel, he said quietly.

Blind Bob chuckled. "I know where to draw the line. You try to relieve her if you think it's important."

Flagstone looked at Constance. He laughed to himself. "You are probably right. Don't want you to get injured this close to home." Both men laughed. Constance turned her head and gave them a brief smile, then returned to watching the river intently.

"Can you imagine her thirty years ago?" asked Blind Bob staring over the stern of the launch.

"She and Norton must have been an imposing pair," said Flagstone still watching Constance at the steering station.

"Bet she was damn scary," said Bob.

"Still is," laughed Flagstone.

"Yeah, she scares the hell out of me." They laughed again. Blind Bob stiffened in mid-laugh. Flagstone turned to look over the stern.

"What?" he asked in a low voice.

"Something following us in the river," whispered Blind Bob.

"Pirates?"

"No. Some kind of animal. Didn't see it clear."

"Keep watching," said Flagstone. Blind Bob nodded. Flagstone walked calmly to the bench opposite the steering station. He returned to hand Blind Bob the rifle. He tucked a pistol in his belt.

"Nothing," said Blind Bob as he gently bolted home a shell in the rifle. Flagstone only grunted. He stepped over to Constance. She gave him a cheery smile.

"Constance, something in the river is following us." Constance's smile vanished. Flagstone laid the second pistol next to her. "Keep this with you at all times from now on." Constance nodded. She threw a quick glance over her shoulder, then returned to attentively steering the steam launch. Flagstone descended into the boiler room again thinking Jimville could not be close enough to suit him. "Wood," he called up through the hatch.

Flagstone sat on the gunwale surveying the riverbanks. The steam launch was putting along. He knew it was on its last legs, but didn't mention it to anyone. Constance was steering. He smiled to himself. She really liked doing that. Blind Bob was down in the boiler room taking a turn in the heat. The jungle passed by on either hand with the usual squawks, squeaks, grunts, and growls. He relaxed a little. Home was getting close.

He caught a ripple in the river from the corner of his eye. It grew bigger. Something large was gaining on them in the river. "Constance, head for the right hand riverbank now!" he yelled. Constance jumped when Flagstone yelled. With a surprised look she steered sharply for the riverbank. Flagstone jumped to the hatch and yelled down it. "On deck now!" A sweating, grimy Blind Bob climbed out of the little boiler room. He took a deep breath of the fresh air. Flagstone pointed.

Blind Bob looked, but there was nothing to see. Flagstone watched the river. Constance bumped the steam launch against an overhang on the riverbank, got the craft under control again and brought it to a slow halt scraping along the mud. She, too, peered up and down the river. "What's going on?" Constance asked.

Flagstone shook his head. "I don't know. I saw something in the river. It rose up near the surface and shot past us going downriver." He pointed again. Again Blind Bob and Constance scanned the river. There was nothing

to see. "And the funny thing was I thought I saw a head gliding over the water."

"Boss, you've been in the sun too long," laughed Blind Bob.

"It was Professor Fate's head," said Flagstone.

"You been in the sun way too long," replied Blind Bob. "He's dead. You saw it yourself when his balloon crashed in the ocean."

"I never saw his balloon crash. Olivia and I jumped into the ocean because we thought it was going to crash, but I didn't see his balloon crash."

"Boys," Constance interrupted. She pointed. A small wake was moving in the river. It was moving upstream. Blind Bob grabbed his rifle. Flagstone pulled the old pistol out of his belt. As the wake went by in mid-river it disappeared. Neither Flagstone nor Blind Bob fired though it was clear both wanted to.

The steam launch idled against the shore. Constance stood hands on her hips looking up and down the river, her gray hair a frizzled mass. She put her hat back on, pulling it firmly down. "What now?"

Flagstone sat on the gunwale watching the river. Blind Bob paced up and down the river side of the launch his eye scanning the water. Flagstone looked at Constance. "Maybe it was nothing. I must be getting tired, that's all."

"That's crap, Boss, and you know it." Flagstone smiled. Blind Bob looked at Constance too. "I thought I saw something following us too, some big animal or something, I don't know." Blind Bob stood thinking. A loud gasp left Constance. She pointed into the river. The men turned around.

Coming down the river was large wake. It was moving fast. At the leading edge of the wake was some sort of head or huge eye. Rising slowly out of the water was a great long tentacle with a big lump on its leading end. Flagstone yelled, "Off the boat!"

He took two fast steps and nearly threw Constance over the railing onto the shore. "Run inland." She pulled herself out of the mud and staggered inland. A shot rang out. Flagstone turned to find Blind Bob calmly aiming his rifle. The thing was fast approaching. Its wake arched up off the river surface. Flagstone raised his pistol. They fired together. There was a loud clang. The beast bore down upon them. Its long snout raised out of the water. Flagstone grabbed Blind Bob's shirt and started dragging him across the boat. Both men turned and jumped off the steam launch. They hadn't run ten yards when a great explosion rocked the ground under them. They tumbled into a heap as pieces of the steam launch showered the jungle and river.

Flagstone rolled over in time to see a great metallic cylinder bob nearly out of the water and then submerge again. The front of the thing was caved-in like it had hit a wall. The river foamed angrily. Suddenly the cylinder burst to the surface again farther downriver. It coasted along on the river current for a minute, then submerged again. Even as Flagstone watched in amazement, the thing erupted to the surface again. It sank beneath the river's water till it was a barely covered. There it stayed as it moved with speed down the river. He shook his head.

Blind Bob stirred next to Flagstone. Flagstone looked at him. Blind Bob was just regaining consciousness. His rifle lay broken in two next to him. Constance Dullcote came toward them with unsure steps. She plopped down roughly beside Flagstone.

"What the hell is going on, Jules?"

"I don't know." Flagstone looked at the smoldering remains of the steam launch. "I do know we are walking from here on." He gave Constance a smile, which she returned weakly. They helped Blind Bob up and sat him against a tree. Flagstone went to the river and returned with a hat full of water. Everyone took a drink of the dirty water. Then they sat in silence staring at the river.

It was twenty minutes later before Flagstone spoke. "I'll check for anything useful in the wreck. Constance, keep an eye on Blind Bob. Bob, lay there and be still. And keep an eye on Constance." No one objected. Flagstone walked to the destroyed steam launch. He half-heartedly rummaged about in the debris. He found a canteen, a knife, and several scraps of canvas. He stuffed the knife in his belt and put the canteen over his shoulder. Rolling up the canvas he tied it into a loop. He sighed and walked back to where the other sat blankly watching him.

"Not much left," he said dropping the canvas on the ground.

"What was that thing? It wasn't anything I've ever seen," said Blind Bob. Constance nodded her agreement. Flagstone shaded his eyes and looked downriver. He spoke in a low voice.

"It was some kind of submersible. A small one. That thing at the front must have been a spar torpedo. I've seen one before at the Royal Navy Yards at Portsmouth. Never seen one here before."

"A submersible?" asked Constance.

"What in the world is it doing here and especially up this river?" asked Blind Bob rising to his feet to stare at the river. Constance fidgeted at him. He brushed her hands away. "I'm fine, Constance. Knock it off." Constance got a pouty look on her face but stopped fussing with Bob. She stood up beside the men. All of them looked up and down the river. Nothing unusual met their gaze.

"What was that thing trying to do?" asked Constance when Flagstone didn't answer Blind Bob's question. Flagstone thought for another moment. He picked up the canvas roll and handed it to Blind Bob. He picked up Constance's pistol from the ground, dusted it off, and gave it to Blind Bob also. He checked his own pistol in his belt. He weighed the canteen in his hand. It was full. He looked at the other two and pointed downriver. "Home is that way." They began walking downriver.

The little party trudged along the riverbank always keeping it in sight, but staying far enough away to have firm dry footing. They picked edible fruits and ate as they walked. As the sun went down Flagstone chose a campsite farther from the river. They made a makeshift tent from the canvas scraps.

"Sorry, Constance, tonight you've got to sleep with the boys."

Constance grinned at them. "I'll take my chances."

Blind Bob built a small fire. They sat around it in silence eating the last of their fruit. No one had said two words since they began walking. Constance noted Flagstone's eyes seldom left the river.

"Jules, what are you thinking. What is going on?" she asked.

"Constance, I'm not sure," answered Flagstone.

"I'm sure you have some idea. You've hardly said a word all day. You've been thinking and I want to know what you're thinking about." Her voice was firm and offered no room of argument.

"Me too, Boss," chimed in Blind Bob.

"Ok. One, Constance is kidnapped by pirates and members of the GPE," said Flagstone.

"GPE? Really!" said Constance.

"Yes, I think so. Russians for sure, and the Glorious Peoples Expedition are the only Russians I know of in Jimland. Even they keep a low profile nowadays."

Constance nodded. Blind Bob spit in the fire. "Should have shot them when we had the chance," he said. He stirred the fire absently.

"Maybe," said Flagstone. "Two, the kidnappers either sold Constance, the steam launch, and even your worthless hide, Bob, to Tastimin or he took you from them." Blind Bob laughed.

Constance shivered. "They didn't sell us. Tastimin and his scum attacked at night and killed everyone, but us. They took the steam launch and were going to ransom us for some exorbitant amount money and some X-Rock." Blind Bob nodded in agreement.

"You didn't tell me this before," said Flagstone.

"You didn't ask, and I've been rather involved in other things of late," said Constance. Blind Bob laughed. Flagstone nodded, hiding his smile.

"Point taken," he continued. "Three, we stole the steam launch and headed downriver. That might appear as treachery to a partner you were supposed to meet along the river."

"Maybe," said Blind Bob. Flagstone continued.

"Four, the partner decides he wants his share of the booty. He takes his submersible and attacks the steam launch blowing it to smithereens."

"Yes," said Constance hesitantly. Blind Bob tossed a branch onto the fire. Red embers rose like incandescent fireflies slowly winking out as they floated away.

"Five, I think the submersible was damaged in the attack. It seemed they had trouble controlling it after the explosion. My guess is the explosion was more powerful than they had counted upon."

"You think it sank?" asked Blind Bob looking through the dark at the river.

"No. I think they got it somewhat under control and headed off downriver."

"Six?" asked Constance her eye sparkling.

"Six?"

"Six, yes. You know there's more, Jules. Tell us," said Constance.

"Six. It was Professor Fate in league with Tastimin. It all fits together now." Flagstone looked up to find Constance and Blind Bob both watching him.

"Constance, Fate was going to buy you from the Tastimin after he got you from the original kidnappers. Then he was going to ransom you to Norton for money and X-Rock. What he is going to do with the money and X-Rock I have no idea though I'm sure it's for no good purpose. He thought Tastimin had double-crossed him, not a farfetched idea at all considering Tastimin. So he attacked the launch. And here we are."

Constance thought for a moment and nodded. Blind Bob laughed, "What about me?"

"You were icing on the cake. A freebie or a nuisance to be dealt with."

Blind Bob laughed again. "Gee, thanks a lot." Everyone laughed. Constance patted Bob's arm. "Norton would have paid your ransom, dear."

"Thanks," said Blind Bob.

"Seven?" asked Constance.

Flagstone gave a great yawn and stretched. "Seven. We walk home."

The little camp fire burned out unattended as the trio slept on the edge of the Wilds of Jimland. The river gurgled a stone's throw away.

Report 241 - 9.6 - RESCUED AGAIN.

Date: 2004-10-09

9.6 - RESCUED AGAIN.

Julius Flagstone awoke before dawn. He roused the others. Sleepily and with growling stomachs they resumed their march near the river's edge. The morning passed quietly. A passing shower soaked them with warm water. Flagstone thought it felt good. He promised himself the first thing he did once they returned to Jimville was to take a long hot bath and let the dirt get soaked out of his skin.

It was nearing noon when Blind Bob, at the head of their tiny column, suddenly signaled for a halt and fell on his stomach. Flagstone and Constance crawled up to Blind Bob in the dirt. Flagstone hissed at Constance out of the corner of his mouth.

"Constance, will you please stay behind us," he said sternly.

"No," was her equally stern answer.

"Jesus," whispered Blind Bob.

"No blasphemy, Bob. I won't have it," growled Constance.

"Only praying, ma'am," answered Blind Bob with a grin. He pointed at the river's edge. Constance let out a tiny gasp. Flagstone gritted his teeth.

Ahead, on the riverbank plainly visible to the party lying in the tall brush, was Professor Fate. Fate was waving his arms about and yelling.

"Max, cover the whole thing, not just one end. Put leaves and branches over the whole thing. It's suppose to be camouflage not a Christmas wreath."

"Right, Perfesser." Came Max's reply. Fate gathered more branches and tossed them out of sight somewhere lower on the riverbank. This went on for ten more minutes. Finally Fate stood looking down on the riverbank.

"Stand aside, Max. Let me see how it looks." He walked back and forth on the riverbank.

"It'll do. Is the boat ready?"

"Ready, Perfesser," came Max's answer. Professor Fate descended the riverbank and disappeared. Splashing noise came from the river.

"This way, Max, you idiot."

"Right, Perfesser!"

Whack. "Ack!" Splash.

"Max! Get me out of here!"

More splashing and indeterminate cursing followed.

"Now, downriver, Max. Full speed."

"Right, Perfesser!"

Flagstone crawled carefully up to the riverbank and looked over the edge. A rowboat was slowly heading out into the main channel of the river. Six figures were seated in the boat. Flagstone had no trouble seeing Professor Fate, his assistant Max, and some natives, pirates by the look of them. The rowboat reached the main channel and began to swiftly move down the river. Flagstone turned and waved at Blind Bob and Constance.

The trio crept silently down to the submersible. It was tied haphazardly to the shore. Branches and huge fronds covered the whole things. Flagstone quickly crossed the narrow gangplank. Blind Bob and Constance took cover in the bushes, watching the river. With a glance around, Flagstone pulled open the hatch on the top of a small round structure with thick windows. He descended into the twilight of the submersible.

It smelled. He sniffed. It stunk. Flagstone wrinkled his nose. He looked around in the half-light. He was on a small raised platform. He could see out the windows. He stepped down two small steps and found himself standing knee-deep in water beside a steering station not unlike that on the steam launch. He looked forward. He could barely see buckled metal plates with wooden plugs driven here and there into cracks.

He looked aft. Some kind of strange machinery met his eye. He sloshed over to it. His first look told him he didn't have time to figure it out. No chance using this thing he told himself. Back at the steering station he turned to a set of storage cabinets. He rifled through them finding nothing useful. Then he noticed a small wooden crate lashed under the chart table and out of the way of traffic.

A little knife work later and he was pulling the box out and setting it on the chart table. He found it unlocked. He undid the clasp and opened the lid. He opened his mouth then shut it, twice. Inside were clean canvas bags stenciled "Property of HM Government. If found, return to nearest British Consulate for a Sizable Reward." Flagstone untied the drawn strings on one of the bags. He reached in and pulled out a small handful of a coarsely ground substance. He whistled. X-Rock. He tied the bag closed. It took him a minute to hoist the box up the ladder and out of the submersible. He closed the hatch. Must leave everything as I found he thought. Cradling the box in his arms he raced across the narrow gangway.

"Bob," Flagstone yelled. Blind Bob and Constance arrived in a puddle of dust. "The canvas," said Flagstone with his hand outstretched. As fast as he could Flagstone made two small bundles of X-Rock bags with the canvas scraps. He gave one each to Blind Bob and Constance. Then he filled the box with dirt and sand from the riverbank. Another five maddening minutes later the box

was back on the submersible and the tiny party was hiking briskly into the Wilds, following the river toward Jimville.

"What's in the bags?" asked Constance breathlessly as she hurried to keep up with the men's long strides. She noted their determined looks. It was no time for silly questions, but she wanted to know.

"Fate's X-Rock." Flagstone didn't slow his pace nor look around, but Constance noted that Blind Bob turned to stare at Flagstone for a moment.

"Oh," was all Constance could muster as an answer as she hurried along.

Jimville sat before them, dark and silent. Flagstone looked down the dirt Main Street. He noted there were no patrols out. Blind Bob nudged him. Flagstone looked to his right. The lights of the Jimville Casino and House of Girls were out. The whole town looked deserted. Flagstone thought to himself.

Finally, he motioned for them to move deeper into the jungle. Slowly the trio moved out and around Jimville's edges. Something's going on thought Flagstone. They crept silently through the jungle night. It started to rain. Flagstone smiled to himself. Tonight he was glad to have it rain.

It took them thirty minutes in the jungle to arrive opposite the rear of the Empress Hotel. No lights were on in any of the rooms. Flagstone counted up and over. There was his suite. The balcony door was standing wide open. Olivia was standing on the balcony alone. The trio sat in the jungle darkness for many minutes watching her stare into the jungle. Finally Olivia turned and entered the suite. She left the balcony doors wide open.

Blind Bob grunted and pointed. A patrol of the Sultan's Guard shifted from darkness to darkness past the Empress and disappeared. Flagstone retreated farther into the jungle darkness.

"Looks like our return is expected," whispered Flagstone weighing the X-Rock bundle in his hand. Blind Bob unconsciously touch the one he was carrying. "I'll try to get a closer look. You two remain here till I signal. Two ring tail yelps, ok?" Blind Bob nodded affirmative. Flagstone crept closer to the Empress.

He suppressed a smile. Bless your heart, Olivia, he thought. Hanging from his suite balcony was strong, knotted scaling rope. Suddenly the rope was yanked upward and disappeared. Flagstone flattened himself to the ground. Another patrol of the Sultan's Guard came padding quietly past Flagstone. Shortly the scaling rope reappeared. Flagstone crept to the rope and gave it three tugs. He felt three in return. Flagstone returned to his hiding place and gave two soft calls into the night. He waited. A minute later Blind Bob and a breathless Constance huddled beside him. He whispered to them about the rope.

"Bob, you first. Then Constance. Constance, I'm going to tie the rope about you and Bob and Olivia can pull you up. Much faster that way. Then I'll come up." They nodded.

Blind Bob crept out to the rope, gave it a tug and swarmed up the rope in a flash. Flagstone counted slowly to ten. He and Constance stepped up to the rope. He tied a loop around Constance and tugged on the rope. Immediately she began to ascend. Flagstone returned to kneel in the brush. The rope came down. He ran for it and swiftly pulled himself up, then over the railing. Olivia pulled the rope up.

He was in the suite before he knew it. Olivia pulled him away from the door and planted a happy kiss on him. He returned the favor. The four of them huddled on the floor of the suite. Flagstone quickly explained to Olivia what was in the bags. She made a suggestion. The bags were swiftly locked in the suite safe.

"Does anyone know Constance was kidnapped?" asked Flagstone.

"Yes. Norton has made quite a fuss about it," answered Olivia. She hugged Constance. "There are several parties out looking for you."

Flagstone was lost in thought for minute. "Sorry, dear, but we must leave now."

"Why?" asked Olivia and Constance together.

"So we can be properly rescued," replied Flagstone.

Fifteen minutes later the tired trio found themselves back in the jungle trying to shelter from the rain under large leaves. It wasn't much good. The night wore on.

Before dawn the next morning, Flagstone led them to the nearest path to Jimville. Here they crouched in the brush waiting. Constance brushed her dirty gray hair out of her face.

"Tell me again why I'm not in my own bed right now, Jules," she said. Blind Bob looked away and smiled.

"We need to get properly rescued by one of the parties looking for us. It is important that we are rescued by someone sent to look for us. We can't just walk into Jimville this time. And we certainly can't be carrying X-Rock. For that matter if anyone asks we don't know anything about any X-Rock, we are just happy to be home safe and sound after escaping from the pirate kidnappers."

"No Tastimin? No Professor Fate?" asked Constance.

"Absolutely not. Absolutely no X-Rock either. Your life may depend upon it," said Flagstone solemnly. "You were kidnapped by pirates. Blind Bob and I found you and managed to steal you away and we ran for it. Simple lies are

the best. Stick to them. No details, kidnapped by pirates, escaped, ran, and returned home. No details. Got it?" said Flagstone.

Constance nodded. Blind Bob nodded, "Don't worry about me, I plan on being in my hut getting drunk when anyone tries to ask me a question. I might get cranky and shoot someone if they bother me. Word will get out."

Flagstone laughed. "Stay alert and listen."

"I will."

Dawn grew into day. Flagstone marched his little party farther from town. They began getting bored. Finally they heard the clink and jingle of soldiers coming down the trail. Flagstone peered out of the brush. A dirty file of Naval Brigade sailors was trudging along the trail. The lead men were alertly watching the jungle. The main body was carrying several stretchers with wounded men on them. The officer in charge did not look happy.

Flagstone melted back into the jungle. He told them what he had seen. "We'll let ourselves be rescued by the sailors. At least they aren't the Sultan's men. Remember the story and stick to it. Constance, not even a word to Norton till I say ok. Right?" Constance eyed him for a moment then relented and nodded.

"I hate lying to Norton," she said.

"It's just till we find out what's going on. I don't want Norton killed over this. Do you?"

"No," she said firmly. "I'll be fine. Remember, I'm just the flighty old woman married to the crazy old rich coot." She smiled. The two men laughed.

Flagstone led them through the jungle to a seldom used path the intersected the path the sailors were on. He waited till he could hear the sailors coming. They stepped out on to the trail.

Report 242 - 9.X - HOME, SWEET HOME.

Date: 2004-10-12

9.X - HOME, SWEET HOME.

Julius Flagstone stood on the path calmly waiting to be found and rescued. Blind Bob and Constance stood slightly behind him. The noise of the sailors of the Naval Brigade approached. A sailor rounded the little bend in the trail. His rifle went up on sight of the people in front of him on the trail. Flagstone raised his hands.

"Don't shoot. I'm Julius Flagstone and this is my party. We have Constance Dullcote with us."

The sailor didn't lower his rifle. "Lieutenant! I've got something here." More sailors appeared and fanned out on either side of the path. The Lieutenant approached. Flagstone recognized him.

"Klaxton. I'm very glad to see you." Flagstone stepped forward his hand out stretched. It took a moment for the Lieutenant to recognize the filthy Flagstone.

"Mr. Flagstone, very glad to see you. I see you have found Mrs. Dullcote. Excellent. Please join my company and we will see you safely home."

The Lieutenant gave a few orders and the little company formed up and began moving down the trail again. The Lieutenant walked beside Flagstone in the middle of the column.

"Been looking for us long, Lieutenant?" asked Flagstone.

"Haven't been looking for you at all actually, Mr. Flagstone. We were out chasing after pirates. Got into a couple of actions with them, but they ran away each time."

"Pirates you say. What's going on?" said Flagstone trying to sound surprised.

"Rumor has it Tastimin is stirring up the local pirate leaders to start a rebellion or something. Hard to believe they would trust each other long enough to start anything. Anyway, since the Regular Army is at the new Fort, the job falls to us, like it always does when the dirty work comes along." Flagstone let the Lieutenant ramble along noting that even while he complained about bad food, ambushes, leeches, endless rain, and lack of an proper Officer's Club in Jimville, the young Lieutenant's eyes kept scanning the surrounding land. Flagstone reconsidered, maybe he was young in years, but the Lieutenant carried himself like a seasoned veteran and gave straightforward commands to his men.

It was but a half day's easy march along the path to edge of Jimville. As soon as the smoke of the town was seen Klaxton sent a pair of men ahead with

a report for the British Consul and the Officer Commanding in Jimland. The rest of the column proceeded at a steady pace.

When they reached the edge of Jimville proper medical orderlies were there to meet them and attend to the wounded. These were detached from the little column and hustled off to the local hospital. Klaxton reformed his command into a column of twos. He placed Flagstone, Constance and Blind Bob at the front, behind himself and marched into Jimville.

The little column stopped smartly in a cloud of dust in front of the British Consulate. Constance was met by a much-relieved Norton Dullcote. Olivia ran into Flagstone's arms and squeezed him tightly. Much to Flagstone's surprise Blind Bob's new girlfriend came running up to him her face covered in tears. Blind Bob looked more embarrassed than relieved. Flagstone winked at him. Blind Bob shrugged and looked confused. He wasn't used to anyone meeting him on his return from the Wilds, much less anyone fearing he would not return at all.

Flagstone turned his attention to Olivia who was still hugging him and talking up a storm. He inhaled deeply. She smelled wonderful. He hugged her tightly.

"New scent?" he asked in a low voice into her hair.

"Yes, just for you."

"I like it. Wear it at supper tonight."

"Ok."

"Nothing else."

Olivia giggled and held Flagstone at arm's length. She was blushing. "Ok." She hugged him again and gave him a warm kiss. Ummm, good kiss, thought Flagstone. Flagstone suddenly realized the British Consul was talking to him.

"..find Constance? Used old Explorer tricks, I suppose, to track her down?" The Consul looked at Flagstone. Flagstone cleared his throat. Olivia loosened her grip and wrapped herself around his big arm.

"That pretty well explains it, Consul. I am happy to have been successful."

"Old Dullcote has a rather large reward offered. I imagine that will be yours," said the Consul.

Flagstone turned to face the embracing Dullcotes. "No reward is necessary, Norton. It was my pleasure. Please give my share to Blind Bob."

Dullcote bowed slightly. He took off his hat and bowed more deeply to a thoroughly embarrassed Blind Bob. "The reward is yours, sir. Collect it at your leisure." Blind Bob muttered his thanks. His girlfriend turned her admiring eyes back to Blind Bob and hugged him again.

Olivia squeezed Flagstone's arm. He looked at her. "Mildred, uh, Millie, is really sweet, Jules. Give her a chance, ok? She really likes Blind Bob. He

doesn't know how lucky he is, but I intend to tell him." She smiled honey and cream smiles at him. Flagstone burst out laughing.

Flagstone looked around Main Street. The tired sailors stood at ease in two short rows waiting to be dismissed. Lieutenant Klaxton was making his report to some Officer Flagstone hadn't seen before. The Dullcotes were surrounded by well wishers, toadies, and hangers-on. Blind Bob stood to one side with Millie holding him close and chattering nervously at him. He stood apart with Olivia resting her head on his shoulder and holding his arm close. She spoke softly.

"I'm moved your gift to the bigger safe. Everything is fine."

He looked down at her. She looked up at him. "Excellent. Now I need a long bath," he said.

She sniffed and laughed. "Yes, you certainly do."

Flagstone stepped over to the British Consul. The Consul shewed away a clerk and faced Flagstone. The Consul smoothed his tie. They stood looking at each other for a moment. The Consul quickly offered his hand. Flagstone shook it firmly.

"If you have no further questions, Consul, I will consider my business here done. Your Lieutenant did a fine job bringing us safely to town, my thanks to him. Now I am retiring to my suite. Good day."

The Consul made a slight bow to Flagstone. "Well done, Flagstone. Maybe one day soon, we can discuss your exploits more closely over a good glass of wine."

"Perhaps, Consul." Flagstone and Olivia waved to Blind Bob and Millie who were slipping away unnoticed from the crowd. Flagstone led Olivia over to and through thinning crowd around the Dullcotes. "Norton, Constance, I'm heading for a bath and a week's sleep. If there is anything you need, just let me know."

Norton Dullcote turned to Flagstone. A tiny tear had run down his cheek. He warmly shook Flagstone's hand. "Thank you, Jules, with all my heart." Constance reached up on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on Flagstone's stubbled cheek. "Thanks from me too! Take care of the rascal, Olivia."

Flagstone and Olivia walked at a leisurely pace to the Empress and up to their suite. They ordered an assortment of food to be brought up to their room. Soon Flagstone was soaking in a steaming tub. He sipped a cold lemonade. Olivia pushed a small table full of food close to the tub. Flagstone stuffed cold chicken in his mouth and slowly chewed. He closed his eyes and slid down in the big tub.

"Save me some room and some food," said Olivia as she stepped into the tub.

"Always," answered a half-asleep Flagstone with a tired smile.

Report 243 - CONSTANCE DULLCOTE RESCUED. PIRATES DRIVEN OFF.

Date: 2004-10-14

CONSTANCE DULLCOTE RESCUED. PIRATES DRIVEN OFF.

The Herald is pleased to report that the Fearless and Famous Explorer Julius Flagstone, ably assisted by his Head Scout, Blind Bob, has succeeded in rescuing our Beloved Constance Dullcote from the clutches the Pirate Scum that kidnapped her from the arms of her Loving Husband, the industrial giant, Norton Dullcote.

Although details are sketchy, it seems Flagstone and Blind Bob tracked the pirates to a landing site up the River Jim. Using all their jungle skills the pair managed to rescue Mrs. Dullcote from under the pirates' very noses. All parties involved returned safely to Jimville.

Mr. Flagstone graciously refused the reward money giving his share to his Head Scout, Blind Bob. Bob remains unavailable for comment. We are sure is overcome with emotion upon hearing of the size of the reward.

NAVAL BRIGADE ACTIVITY

The Herald has the pleasure to report The Naval Brigade engaged various pirate factions over the past several weeks and succeeded in destroying them completely. Thankfully casualties were light though the action was heavy.

The Naval Brigade continues unceasing patrols, on shore, along the coast, and up many of the Jimland rivers, in an effort to stamp out the many pirate nests. The British Consul assures us, that with the blessing of the Sultan and the Sultan's considerable help, the pirate menace will be eliminated.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

The British Government announced today that it has successfully negotiated to open a Consulate on Mars. Many nations of Earth have been trading with Mars and to a lesser extend with Venus and several of the larger moons of Jupiter and Saturn since the unveiling of the famous Aether Engine.

The Aether Engine design is a closely guarded secret of the governments involved. But how closely guarded can it be when it seems every government of note manages to acquire one. The secret police of these powerful states must be working overtime to protect their own Aether Engine designs while stealing the secrets of other designs. Many industrialists have tried to get plans for the Aether Engine, however, as far as we know none have succeeded. All trade to the stars is via government aether craft crewed exclusively by government crews, usually naval types. Occasionally reports of secret "black" craft from unknown sources filter into the public consciousness.

We of the Herald wonder where the first design came from? We know it can't be from the Martians or Venusians. Based on what little is known of their technology for flight, it seems to be based wholly on the naturally occurring Lift Wood. It is also well know that Lift Wood will not work for interplanetary flight. Or will it? We wonder, Gentle Reader. So back to the burning question, who created the first Aether Engine and where did the inspiration come from?

The Herald, as always and with Your Best Interests in mind, will find the answer Dear Reader. Rest assured we will bring you all the news you need to know.

HAPPY DANCE

The ladies of the Jimville House of Girls and Casino will be hosting a Happy Dance in honor of the rescue of Constance Dullcote. Everyone is welcome. All weapons must be checked at the door. Come one, come all, and join in the festivities.

SCIENCE CLUB

The Science Club is soliciting proposals for this year's theme. Please submit your proposal in writing to any Club member. The Membership Drive is also getting under way soon. Join up. Join the Fun.

CONSUL'S REQUEST

The British Consul would like his Deputy-Junior-Under-Assistant Consul returned, unharmed. Or as an alternative, submit a list of names for his replacement. No questions will be asked in either case.

Report 244 - 10.1 - VOLUNTEER

Date: 2004-10-23

10.1 - VOLUNTEER.

Julius Flagstone answered the polite knock on the door of his suite at the Empress Hotel. A man unknown to Flagstone stood outside. The man offered Flagstone an envelope. He took it and the messenger immediately left. Not a word was spoken between them. Flagstone looked down the hall. It was empty. He shook his head, gently closing the door.

Flagstone picked up his lemonade and walked back out on the balcony. The fetching Olivia Fate sat in a chair enjoying the evening breeze. Flagstone sat in a chair beside hers. He examined the letter. There were no markings on the envelope. He took out his pocketknife and slit open the letter. A single sheet of paper was inside. He pulled it out and held it at arm's length with a disgusted air.

Olivia laughed. "What is it, Jules?"

Flagstone read the three lines again. The first was harmless, "To: Flagstone, Empress Hotel. The second made his skin crawl, "From NAGS Ops". The third piqued his curiosity, "Say yes."

Flagstone held the message over the hurricane lamp on the small table between the chairs. The message burst into green flames with a pop. Olivia let out a noise of surprise.

"What was that?" she asked setting up and facing Flagstone.

"A note from a business acquaintance," he replied.

"Every time you've gotten one of those something happens. Jules, what is going on?" There was gleam in her eyes now.

Flagstone rose and leaned on the balcony rail. "We're about to have an adventure."

"Good," Olivia responded leaning back in her chair. "I was getting a little bored collecting dust and bric-a-brac."

Flagstone smiled at her. She only half smiled back. Another knock on the door interrupted the conversation. Flagstone walked to the door and opened it. A burly British Sergeant filled the door. Flagstone could just barely make out six equally big privates behind the Sergeant.

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"Mr. Flagstone?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Sir, your presence is requested at the British Consulate."

"Really," answered Flagstone trying to gauge the situation. Olivia came up behind him. He could feel her gently press the pistol barrel into his back twice.

"Yes, sir. We are to escort you there to ensure your safe journey." The big Sergeant edged forward. Flagstone knew he couldn't close the door now. His mind was racing.

"Indeed."

"Immediately. Sir." The Sergeant motioned gracefully down the hall. Flagstone decided against a brawl and the probable shooting of innocent soldiers. He turned to Olivia. He gave her a kiss while whispering, "Stay alert." More loudly over his shoulder he said, "Be right with you, Sergeant." Olivia followed him into their bedroom. The Sergeant waited, now fully four steps into the room. The six privates spread out behind their Sergeant.

"What's going on, Jules?" whispered Olivia as Flagstone noisily rummaged in his closet.

"I don't know. I'll bet I find out if I go with Sergeant Muscles out there."

Olivia pointed out on the balcony. "I saw soldiers on the ground under our balcony."

"Interesting," was all Flagstone could say.

Flagstone and Olivia returned to the suite's main room. He turned to Olivia. "See you in a little while, dear."

"Be careful," she said a trifle loudly.

"Always," answered Flagstone slipping his "town" pistol into its holster. The big Sergeant didn't even blink. "After you, Sergeant," said Flagstone gesturing out of the room. The Sergeant snapped his heels together and marched out of the room. Two privates followed him. Four privates followed Flagstone. The little parade disappeared down the hall.

Olivia Fate strapped on her pistol belt. She spun the cylinder around and snapped it closed. She stepped out on the balcony. The cool evening breeze ruffled her hair. The grounds around the Empress were deserted. She leaned on the railing and sipped Flagstone's lemonade, a frown on her pretty face.

The British Consul smoothed his tie as he faced Flagstone. "Nice of you to come so quickly, Flagstone."

"Nice of you to make sure I got here safely," replied Flagstone evenly, watching the other two men in the stuffy room. The Consul noted Flagstone's glance.

"Please, let me introduce Major Steel of the Guards." The Consul paused. Major Steel nodded. "And Mr. Smythe," continued the Consul. Mr. Smythe did not move, his eyes steady.

"Gentlemen," Flagstone said pleasantly, stepping to the nearest window and throwing it open. The cool breeze was refreshing. The Major stepped forward laying a hand on the raised window. Smythe cut him off, "Leave it open, if you will, Major. Thank you." The Major stepped back. Flagstone stood in the night breeze determined not to start the conversation. His pulse was picking up. For several moments the four men stood eyeing one another like duelist.

Finally the Consul coughed softly and motioned to four chairs around the only table in the room. "Have a seat, gentlemen." He placed a decanter and four spotless glasses on the table. Smythe sat lightly. The Major remained standing. Flagstone sat on a corner of the table. The Consul paced nervously.

"Mr. Flagstone, we have asked you here so that we may make you a business proposal," said the Consul without conviction. He smoothed his tie. Smythe never took his eyes off Flagstone. The Major watched everyone including the open window.

Flagstone decided to play along. "Ok, Consul. I'm here. What's the deal?"

"Her Majesty's Government would like you to lead an Expedition for us. You and Ms. Fate to be exact." The Consul smoothed his tie again and paced.

Flagstone ignored the Consul and faced Mr. Smythe. "When, where, what for?" He sat relaxed in the table's edge. He felt time was on his side. He looked at the decanter on the table. Then he rose suddenly and stepped toward the sideboard. The Major was between him and the door in a flash.

"Stand easy, Major," said Smythe quietly. The Major didn't relax or move away from the door. Flagstone was sure that on the other side of the door Sergeant Muscles and his detail were waiting with very specific orders.

Flagstone plucked some ice cubes out of their insulated bucket and replaced the lid. He poured a little water over the ice and sipped the cool water. Smythe poured two short shots of the liquor into glasses, no ice. He handed one to the Consul.

"Relax, Consul. Mr. Flagstone is interested in doing business with us. I am sure of it," said Smythe laying four small spheres and half a dozen coin-like tokens on the table. "Our proof of sincerity, Mr. Flagstone."

Flagstone knew in an instant what the objects were. They were Walking Stone tokens. He thought only he and Big Jake Frere knew about them. The he laughed out loud. Only Big Jake, himself, Olivia, and Reginald Toadburt, gossip columnist extraordinaire for the Times. He smiled at Smythe. Smythe gathered the objects up and returned them to his pocket. "After successful completion of our expedition, of course."

Flagstone smiled again. "Of course."

"You're an experienced explorer of these parts?" It was the first time the Major has spoken. He had a deep voice that dripped authority and expected obedience. Flagstone found himself thinking this man must be a holy terror in a battle. He found the Major watching him intently.

Smythe interrupted. "I don't think Mr. Flagstone's credentials are in question."

Flagstone faced Smythe again. The man was sitting comfortably but attentively in the chair. He sipped at his drink. The Consul seemed to have disappeared into a corner of the little room. Flagstone carefully sat in the chair opposite Smythe.

"Where are we going?" he asked Smythe ignoring the others.

"Into the Wilds of Jimland. A dangerous place I hear. Frightful things out there, strange things."

Flagstone felt himself being sucked into a bottomless hole, but he couldn't resist. Smythe played the game very well.

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"What for?" asked Flagstone.

"For a while," smiled Smythe. Before Flagstone could even reply he held up a hand to stop him. "All will be explained as we go."

"My fee?"

"Depends on our success, but at a minimum your customary expenses plus twenty-five percent." The Consul shuffled in the corner. Smythe waved him into silence.

"How are we traveling?" asked Flagstone. The short NAGS note was burning a hole in his mind, still he played the game.

"By steam launch for a way, then, well, then we'll see what turns up."

Flagstone looked at each man in turn. The Major watched him as if on guard. Smythe looked at him calmly. The Consul smoothed his tie for the umpteenth time. Flagstone tried not to seem too eager.

"Ok, I'm in."

"And Ms. Fate," added Smythe coolly. He sipped his drink.

"Why Olivia?" was all Flagstone got out before Smythe spoke again.

"And Ms. Fate," repeated Smythe. His glass sat before him. The Major seemed to be coiling like a spring.

"And Ms. Fate," agreed Flagstone knowing Olivia would rather go with him than be left behind.

"Speak to no one about this meeting," piped in the Consul. "Do not bother with supplies, everything will be provided. Bring your own weapons. Be here at four am ready to go."

"Anything else you'd care not to tell me?" asked Flagstone with a grin.

"Not at the moment," Smythe said with the hint of a smile.

Flagstone rose. "Gentlemen," he said nodding to the Consul and Mr. Smythe. "Major," he said offering his hand, "I'm sure we'll get along fine. See you in the morning." The Major shook his hand firmly while looking surprised. Flagstone smile hugely to himself when the Consulate door closed firmly behind him. Main Street of Jimville was nearly empty. He whistled as he walked back to the Empress. Wait till Olivia hears this he thought.

Report 245 - 10.2 - STEAMING UPRIVER.

Date: 2004-10-25

10.2 - STEAMING UPRIVER.

Julius Flagstone and the fetching Olivia Fate walked down the deserted dirt street that was Main Street in Jimville. They were fully kitted out and armed. Flagstone's eyes flashed as he noted the scene. Not a soul was stirring except them. Someone had very thoroughly cleared the streets of Jimville of everyone and everything, including the usual vagrants and drunks. Noises from the distant jungle came to his ears. Olivia squeezed his hand in hers. Flagstone looked down the dark street. Seven big shapes approached them silently.

"Not to worry, dear. It's our honor guard," said Flagstone.

The big Sergeant and his six equally big privates surrounded Flagstone and Olivia. The Sergeant gave Flagstone a crisp salute. The little party moved quietly down the empty street toward the main pier of Jimland.

"You got a name, Sergeant?" asked Flagstone.

"Brown, sir."

"Enjoying the night air, Sergeant Brown?" asked Olivia. One of the privates stifled a chuckle.

"Yes, ma'am," said the big Sergeant flatly. Olivia looked at Flagstone and shrugged. They grinned at each other. They were at the head of the fog-shrouded pier.

Flagstone saw Mr. Smythe standing on the pier. In the water was a large steam launch with smoke coming darkly from the single stack. As they came closer Flagstone also noted the naval ratings moving about the launch. The whole vessel was painted a dull dark gray. A formless shape was draped in canvas on the bow. Flagstone stopped smiling. It was a gun as sure as he was standing there. More canvas covered things from lay piled from the pilothouse to the stern. Flagstone stopped at the head of the gangplank facing Smythe.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Smythe," said Flagstone offering his hand. Smythe shook it with a surprisingly strong grip. "May I introduce Olivia Fate. Olivia, this is Mr. Smythe." They also shook hands.

"A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Fate. I have heard a lot of good things about you."

"Thank you, Mr. Smythe. May I ask who is speaking so well of me?"

"Marcello Viggio." There was a look of surprise on Olivia's face.

"Let's get aboard. We have a schedule to keep," said Smythe politely ushering Flagstone and Olivia down the gangplank before Olivia could ask more questions. Once on deck Flagstone looked around. He counted Sergeant Brown and his six privates, Smythe, and eight or ten naval ratings and an old looking naval Lieutenant. Quickly the launch got under way. Flagstone stepped up to stand beside Smythe.

"Where Major Steel?" Flagstone asked.

"He will be joining us shortly," answered Smythe. Smythe then entered the pilothouse and began talking to the elderly Naval Lieutenant in a low voice. Flagstone stood beside Olivia. She leaned slightly against him and shivered once.

"I don't like this, Jules," she whispered. He noted her hand was resting on her pistol butt.

"Easy, dear. We wanted an adventure and we got one. Sometimes they don't come complete with all the answers."

Olivia laughed out loud. Just then Sergeant Brown loomed up out of the fog carrying three steaming mugs of coffee. Flagstone and Olivia readily accepted them. The trio stood silently sipping the hot drink. Flagstone watched the big Sergeant out of the corners of his eyes.

"Been doing this long, Sergeant?" asked Flagstone.

"Twenty-odd years, sir."

"Is this our whole party?"

"Can't really say, sir. I just know my part, that's all. Safer that way. You know."

Flagstone was silent for a moment. "Just what is your part, Sergeant?"

"Follow orders. Keep an eye on you two. Nothing to worry about," said the Sergeant meaningfully.

"Nothing to worry about I'm sure," answered Flagstone.

The big Sergeant was silent for a moment. Then he looked at Flagstone and Olivia. "Good," he said softly and disappeared behind the pilothouse.

Olivia leaned against Flagstone. "Cheery fellow," she said.

"Just doing his job, Olivia. In fact, I'm rather glad he will be keeping an eye on us. I like someone watching our backs."

The large dull steam launch moved strongly up the river. The fog dampened everything with a sheen of moisture. Flagstone made Olivia comfortable on some canvas-covered crates. The two of them watched the knot of soldiers checking their gear. Flagstone and Olivia exchanged glances and began double-checking their weapons. Flagstone smiled to himself. You want an adventure, you get one. He wiped the dew off his rifle. Olivia was examining

her pair of pistols. He noted she had brought the biggest ones she had. He laughed softly to himself. Olivia gave him a glance and frowned.

The big steam launch rumbled up the river.

The morning sun burned off the fog. Sergeant Brown caught Flagstone's eye, and pointed. To Flagstone's astonishment two more large steam launches were following them upriver. Flagstone could see Major Steel on the bow of the closest. Steel waved. Flagstone started to return the wave, but saw that the naval Lieutenant was waving back. Flagstone saw more sailors and soldiers aboard the second launch and assumed the third was crewed the same way. He could see large canvas piles in the back of each of the new launches. He turned toward Olivia wondering about things to himself.

Olivia was smiling at him. "We seem to have our own private navy. Nice little adventure, Jules." She laughed.

"Only the best for you, my dear."

The three big steam launches powered their way quickly upriver. Shortly after noon by Flagstone's reckoning, the launches turned into a branch of the river Flagstone had never been in before. The river narrowed. The riverbanks closed in. The soldiers and sailors became quiet and constantly watched the shoreline.

The launches steamed on through the afternoon.

Flagstone and Olivia were left to their own devices. They had little to do. They walked around the canvas-covered pile of bags and boxes. Sailors politely blocked their path when they walked toward the bow or tried to enter the pilothouse. Flagstone and Olivia just exchanged looks and returned to their seat on the crates.

Smythe and the Lieutenant came out of the pilothouse. Smythe had changed into a simple private's uniform with no markings on it. He wore a revolver at his side. A wide brimmed hat sat squarely on his head. He nodded to Flagstone, looked up at the darkening clouds and motioned to Sergeant Brown. After a couple of short sentences with Smythe, Brown roused his men into setting up several impromptu canvas covers. His men gathered under them as a gentle rain started. Everyone was watching Flagstone and Olivia as the rain came down.

Flagstone smiled at Olivia. She smiled back. "A little test, I think," he said out of the corner of his mouth. She simply smiled. "Let's make a little shelter, shall we?" She smiled again. Quickly they made a simple lean-to out of the canvas they were sitting on and a couple of oars Flagstone found under the tarp. The pair settled comfortably under cover as the rain began to pour down. Flagstone smiled at Sergeant Brown who almost smiled back.

Flagstone leaned comfortably against a soft bag of supplies. He put his big arm around Olivia's shoulders. She snuggled up against him and put her head

on his shoulder. "Eat your hearts out, one and all," he muttered softly. Olivia's laughter floated over the water.

Just before the sun set the river branch dramatically widened out. The little squadron of steam launches continued to power easily upriver in a line-ahead formation. The rain let up and hot supper was served on the open decks. No one spoke to Flagstone or Olivia. Leaning back under their tarp, they slowly ate their meal. Olivia let out a little noise.

"This is pretty good, Jules. Not what I was expecting," she said between mouthfuls.

"No one said we were going to starve," he said as he finished his plate and rose to get seconds.

Flagstone timed his arrival at the food spread on a crate top with the arrival of Smythe. Smythe merely nodded and began filling his plate.

"Excellent food, Smythe. Olivia sends her compliments to the cook," said Flagstone.

"I'll pass it along. It's the Captain's private steward who made this. Wonderful cook. Been with the Captain for years." Smythe stepped aside so Flagstone could refill his plate.

"Anything you want to tell me, Mr. Smythe?"

"Not at the moment. Everything is proceeding according to plan."

"And the plan is?"

"We will continue upriver for three more days without stops as we have been. Being oil-burners we need not stop for wood."

"Then?"

"Then I will brief you further."

"I must warn you that I have not been in these parts before," said Flagstone trying to get a reaction from Smythe.

"I'm sure you will do fine, Mr. Flagstone. Enjoy your meal."

Smythe returned to the pilothouse. Flagstone returned with two plates of food.

Giving one to Olivia he plopped down beside her. "The man is a veritable fountain of information," he muttered. Olivia laughed and began working on the second plate of food.

True to Smythe's word the steam launches continued upriver at an unceasing pace Flagstone had to admire. The sailors knew their vessel well and handled it expertly. The seven soldiers did a few menial chores, but left the

running of the craft to the sailors. Flagstone noted two things about the soldiers. One, they seemed to be familiar with the sailors as if they had worked together before. There was an easy kinship between the soldiers and sailors. Second and very subtle was the fact that the soldiers had exchanged their smart khaki uniforms for more grubby looking attire. Nothing was said. When Flagstone asked Sergeant Brown about this, the Sergeant simply replied it was their work clothes. Flagstone and Olivia were left to discuss it quietly together.

Shortly after dawn the second day, the launches turned from the wide river they were on into a very narrow channel. Flagstone was absolutely sure he'd never been here before. He made careful notes in his journal. Two hours later, the little flotilla nudged onto the riverbank.

Sergeant Brown and his men were instantly ashore forming a perimeter. Flagstone noted four naval ratings standing attentively on the bow beside a now uncovered Gatling gun. The other launch crews were similarly deployed. Very nice, thought Flagstone to himself. I wonder whom we are invading? He gave Olivia a meaningful glance.

"Stay alert. I don't know what's going on or what to expect. If things go wrong, get back to the river and keep heading downstream." Olivia nodded and pulled on her light pack. Flagstone unslung his rifle. Smythe stood by the pilothouse. In a few minutes Major Steel came striding up the riverbank. He walked up to stand across from Smythe.

"All clear, sir."

"Thank you, Major. We will make camp here. I'll have the equipment unloaded. You know what to do."

"Yes, sir." Steel had his men fall in. Flagstone quickly counted. Three seven men squads. That was it. He was lost in thought. The soldiers formed a perimeter guard. Those not on guard began clearing a campsite. It was much larger than Flagstone thought necessary, but he said nothing. He and Olivia were asked to move ashore and stay out of the way. The sailors got busy.

Flagstone found the Major in the middle of the campsite watching things with a critical eye. "May we examine the area, Major?" asked Flagstone.

The Major smiled. "Stay within the perimeter, Flagstone. You don't want to miss tomorrow. Please ask Ms. Fate to come see me. I have some work for her and her alone. Thank you." The Major walked off toward a pile of crates and bags forming in the camp center.

Flagstone walked up to Olivia with a puzzled look on his face. Olivia looked inquiringly at him. "Yes?"

"The good Major has some work for you and you alone," he said.

Her eyebrows arched up. "Really?"

"Yes. He would like to see you immediately. Alone."

"Really?"

"Be sure to take good notes so you can tell me all about it. I'm going to take a little walk."

"Really?" said Olivia with a mischievous grin.

"Really," said Flagstone slapping her sharply on the butt and sending her off toward the distant Major.

Flagstone lost sight of Olivia in the activity in the camp. The sailors were unloading a large number of crates and bags of supplies. More huge bags were carefully carried ashore. Flagstone became bored watching the sailors. He was restless. He slung his rifle and slowly began to walk along the perimeter of the camp. He followed the perimeter from the riverbank, then inshore and back to the riverbank. He turned to retrace his path. He nearly walked into Mr. Smythe standing in his path.

"Lost in thought, Mr. Flagstone?" asked a smiling Smythe.

"More nearly just lost, Mr. Smythe." Flagstone shook his head. "Why am I here, and just exactly where is here?"

"Come with me and I'll explain."

Smythe lead Flagstone across the busy camp and back into the pilothouse of the steam launch. As they entered the Lieutenant was carefully marking positions on a chart. Flagstone tried to examine the chart, but the Lieutenant quickly rolled it up. Smythe spoke up, "Lieutenant, if you please." The Lieutenant immediately left the pilothouse.

"Does he do everything you suggest?" asked Flagstone with a smile.

"He does. And so does everyone else including yourself." Smythe was not smiling.

Flagstone nodded. "Ok. You're calling the shots."

"Thank you," said Smythe. He pulled a battered chest out from under the chart table and unlocked the big lock with a key attached to a chain attached to his belt. Smythe noticed Flagstone looking at the key and chain.

"Occupational hazard," he chuckled.

"Just what is your occupation, Smythe?" said Flagstone firmly.

"Hard to say, really. Always something different," said Smythe in an offhand manner.

Smythe pulled a rolled chart out of the chest and shoved the chest out of the way with his booted foot. He unrolled the chart. He placed a finger on the map. "We are here."

Flagstone was staring at the map. But it wasn't a map. It was a picture, a mosaic of pictures actually. It was like being a bird and seeing the Wilds of Jimland from the air for the first time. His mouth hung open.

"Where did you get this?" he wondered aloud.

"Don't you worry about that."

"It's great. Can I get one? Wait till the other expedition leaders see this."

Smythe laid his hand on the map. "No one other than you, Ms. Fate, Major Steel, and I will ever see this map, Flagstone."

Flagstone stared open-mouthed at Smythe.

"Is that clear, Flagstone?"

"But," sputtered Flagstone.

"Is that clear?" said Smythe strongly. Flagstone could see Sergeant Brown and his privates loitering about on the steam launch deck. He frowned. "Yes."

"Good," resumed Smythe good-naturedly, "We are here. I need to get to here." He moved his finger away from the river into a short strip of jungle, then out into the desert. Flagstone leaned over and looked carefully at the photomap.

"Is Fizzle out there?" he said tapping the desert.

"Maybe. We can't be sure."

"Great." Flagstone bent closer over the map. Smythe reached into the chest and pushed a pair of spectacles on little legs toward Flagstone. Flagstone looked dumbly at them. Smythe bent over the spectacles and peered into to them.

"Here is where we are going."

Flagstone bent over and looked through the lenses. The ground seemed to jump up at him and become three-dimensional. He let out a big "whew". He studied the area under the glasses. It was desert with rolling hills, no greenery. That meant no water. He moved the lenses back along the path that Smythe had traced.

He stood up and faced Smythe.

"That's going to be a rough haul. No water sources I can see after we leave the jungle. Probably five days each way."

"Our assessment also. But the return trip will probably take longer."

"We are bringing something or someone back with us?" asked Flagstone.

"Precisely. Look again." Smythe tapped the map again.

Flagstone studied the photographs through the lenses. There was something there in the desert, but he couldn't make heads or tails out of it. He stood up frowning. "There is something there, but I can't make it out. What is it?"

"That's something you probably don't want to know, Flagstone, and absolutely don't need to know. You just get me there and back. That's your job. Study the map for a while and figure out the best track to get us there." Smythe turned to leave. "Don't mention this map to anyone. Bad things could happen to you or Ms. Fate if word got out. I think you understand. Oh, yes, we have one week to get there and back."

Smythe didn't wait for Flagstone to reply. He stepped out of the pilothouse, closed and locked the door. At a command from Smythe, Sergeant Brown's men surrounded the pilothouse, all facing outward, all armed. Flagstone sighed to himself and shook his head. Seven days for a two-week trip is crazy he thought. What have I gotten into this time, he wondered? He turned and pulled out his journal. He was soon lost in studying the map and making notes of his coming journey.

Report 246 - 10.3 - ACROSS THE WILDS.

Date: 2004-10-30

10.3 - ACROSS THE WILDS.

Julius Flagstone lay under the tarp that represented his tent. Both ends were open. Flagstone didn't feel put upon. Everyone, including Major Steel and Mr. Smythe, had the same sleeping arrangements. Flagstone saw it as a simple statement by Smythe and Steel to their men that they were all in this together. Whatever "this" was, grumbled Flagstone to himself.

One more time he crawled out of the little tent and looked around the dark camp for Olivia. She was nowhere to be seen. He was certain though that she was over where sailors were still working in the night. Several lanterns dully lit an area he was firmly not allowed to enter. He stood for a few moments, then dropped down to his hands and knees and reentered his tent. He fell into an uneasy sleep.

Sometime in the night Olivia crawled in beside him. She snuggled up to him and fell asleep without a word. Flagstone sniffed. The odor of kerosene wafted gently through the tent. What have you been up to, he thought to himself? He pulled their thin blanket over Olivia. He fell back into a light slumber.

When Flagstone was shaken awake by a faceless private, Olivia was gone. Flagstone crawled out and stretched. He slowly revolved to take in the whole camp. He halted with his arms still out-stretched. Standing in the pre-dawn river fog were balloons. He counted them. Six big balloons, all in dull grays and browns, sat tugging gently at their mooring lines. Tired sailors and soldiers were loading a last few boxes and several huge bags aboard the line of balloons. Flagstone was surprised yet again. The three steam launches were gone.

As he stood there taking in the sight of the line of balloons, Sergeant Brown walked up. He offered Flagstone a small camp pot. Flagstone took it automatically. It was full of a hot, hearty stew. Flagstone started eating. Brown said nothing, but pointed at Flagstone's tent. A private appeared out of nowhere and immediately took the tent down rolling it into a compact sausage of canvas. The private carried it to a balloon and handed it aboard.

"Are we leaving, Sergeant?" asked Flagstone.

"Yes, sir. Very soon." The Sergeant was eating out of his own pot. They finished in silence. A private appeared to collect their camp pots and disappeared in the river fog. Flagstone pulled on his pack and slung his rifle. The Sergeant was walking around looking at the ground as the fog started to thin. The camp was nothing but a cleared area on the riverbank. Flagstone followed the Sergeant to the balloons.

At the first balloon, Olivia's head appeared over the edge of the small gondola. She smiled, her eyes alight.

"Balloons, Jules. Isn't it great!"

He smiled weakly. "Yeah, it's great." The big Sergeant actually smiled.

"They're not to everyone's taste, sir. But it beats walking," said the big Sergeant quietly.

"I've heard that before," said Flagstone.

"All aboard, sir," said the Sergeant gesturing to the rope ladder hanging over the side of the balloon. Flagstone scrambled up. Standing by Olivia in the gondola, Flagstone watched the Sergeant go over the camp once more. He walked to the second balloon and reported to Major Steel. Steel replied and the Sergeant trotted to Flagstone's balloon and climbed quickly aboard.

"The Major is ready, sir," said Sergeant Brown addressing Mr. Smythe. Surprisingly Smythe turned to Olivia.

"Let's go, Ms. Fate." He made a little bow. Olivia giggled. Smythe's eyes twinkled. Olivia stood by the burner controls. She fired a long burst. The balloon tugged at its lines.

"Cast off," she yelled. Four sailors sprang into action. The balloon rose quickly into the air and up through the river fog. Flagstone caught glimpses of the other balloons lifting off. He noted his white-knuckled grip on the gondola rail and relaxed. He stepped up to Olivia's side.

"Having fun?" he asked. Olivia shook her hair out of her eyes as the wind picked up. She laughed, pink-cheeked and eyes alight. She fired the burner again. The balloon rose higher. Flagstone smiled and moved to stand out of the way beside Smythe.

"We might make your schedule in these things," said Flagstone matter of factly.

"We might," replied Smythe equally matter of factly.

"What am I here for?" asked Flagstone bluntly.

"Consultation, ideas, suggestions, backup, insurance, whatever comes up."

"Right," said Flagstone dryly.

"If it makes you feel any better, Sergeant Brown thinks it is a good idea we brought you along." Smythe eyes were twinkling. Flagstone threw back his head laughing heartily. Olivia turned her head and flashed Flagstone a dazzling smile. He smiled warmly back. "Right," he said laughing again.

The balloons quickly rose above the fog. The bright light of morning flooded around them. Smythe stepped over to Olivia's side. They peered at a large compass binnacle and spoke in low voices. Olivia looked up at the telltales on the gondola suspension cables, then back at the compass. She spoke to Smythe again. He nodded and returned to Flagstone's side.

"Quite a capable woman, Flagstone. Have you ever noticed that?" asked Smythe not turning to look at Flagstone. Flagstone didn't answer; he just stood there with half a grin on his face and his mind racing.

The flock of balloons, well that's how Flagstone thought of the six balloons to himself, rose higher and headed east on a fast steady breeze. The river was soon just a blue ribbon in the jungle green. The jungle passed silently beneath them. Flagstone didn't interrupt Olivia while she piloted the balloon. They exchanged smiles, that was all. Instead he walked the few paces around the gondola. It didn't have a cabin like he was used to. Maybe he was spoiled, he decided. Boxes and bags were heaped in the center of the gondola. Extra burner fuel-oil tanks were carefully stored there too. Flagstone noted the other balloons were more crowded with supplies and burner fuel than their balloon.

The gondola passengers consisted of Olivia, Smythe, Sergeant Brown, four sailors, two privates, and Flagstone. He could see the other balloons had fewer people in them. In fact three looked to have only one sailor and two soldiers in them. Although Flagstone was curious, he refrained from asking Smythe. He already knew the answer.

Just before sundown the balloons landed at the edge of the jungle. Flagstone knew that over the next hill, maybe two, lay the edge of the desert. They had made very good distance this first day. Smythe seemed pleased with their progress. Olivia was lost in the joy of piloting the big balloon. Flagstone was happy for her, but was more impressed that Smythe listened to her when discussing the balloons and took her advice readily enough.

Camp was even more spartan here than at the riverbank. No tents were set up. The party lay under the stars wrapped in their blankets. The soldier glided silently through the night shadows on perimeter guard. The sailors fell into an exhausted sleep. Smythe and Steel huddled over their map in the firelight. Olivia ate her pot of food, then cuddled up next to Flagstone and promptly fell asleep. Flagstone felt slighted. He wanted to ask her some questions. She began to snore softly. He smiled, wrapping more of the blanket around her.

Dawn the second day found them eating a sparse breakfast and resuming their flying formation. Again Olivia piloted the lead balloon. The sailors followed her orders quickly. Smythe stood to one side his hands clasp behind himself humming a tuneless melody to himself. Sergeant Brown and two privates helped out when required, but generally just stayed out of the way.

The second camp was like the first, but they were now in the desert. They landed between some dunes. The evening meal was cold. Again the sentries patrolled the perimeter. Again Olivia fell asleep right after eating. Flagstone watched her sleeping deeply. He raised his head to find Smythe standing some feet off watching him.

Smythe shuffled over in the soft sand. "How is she?"

"Sleeping," answered Flagstone suspiciously.

"Good. She needs her rest." Smythe turned to leave. Flagstone was up in a flash and grabbed Smythe's arm. He didn't resist.

"You put something in her food!"

"Yes. Just to help her sleep."

"And to keep her quiet."

"Yes." Smythe gently pulled his arm free and walked off in the silent desert.

Flagstone said nothing to Olivia when she awoke. She looked cleared eyed. Olivia asked a sentry where she might privately attend to her needs. The sentry seemed more embarrassed than necessary. He called Sergeant Brown. Olivia explained herself again. Brown pointed to an outcrop of rocks. After Olivia departed Brown conducted a low voiced dressing down of the embarrassed private. Walking back across the camp, Brown noticed Flagstone watching him. The big Sergeant shrugged and kept walking. Flagstone hid his smile.

The balloons were soon aloft and moving east again at a good clip. Smythe seemed more animated today. They must be nearing the objective, thought Flagstone. He stood nonchalantly next to Smythe. Smythe was studying the desert through binoculars.

"Today's the day?" asked Flagstone.

"Yes," answered Smythe.

"Are you sure you have enough balloons?"

Smythe turned to eye Flagstone. Finally he said, "I think so."

"Fizzle may have heard about us by now."

Smythe returned to scanning the desert ahead. "Perhaps."

"The winds seems steady from the west. How to you intend to fly these balloons against them to return to the river?"

Smythe turned to face Flagstone again. He smiled. "There are many rivers to return to, Mr. Flagstone, if we decide to return to a river."

Flagstone stood digesting that little nugget. He decided he wasn't as clever as he thought himself to be. Smythe stood watching him patiently. "If we return to a river," muttered Flagstone, "or not."

"Yes. So keep a sharp watch, Flagstone. We don't want to be out here any longer than necessary." Smythe returned to scanning the desert below. Flagstone walked over to stand beside Olivia.

"Smythe has been putting a sleeping potion in your food at night. Just thought you should know," he said softly to Olivia. She looked at him wide-eyed. Then she shot Smythe a glance through squinting eyes.

"Thanks. Nice to know all the rules," she answered.

"Oh, that's not all the rules. I have no idea what all the rules are. I think Mr. Smythe changes them to suit his needs. Enjoy flying this damn thing while you can." He wasn't smiling. Olivia burst out laughing. Smythe looked at the pair then went back to watching the desert. Sergeant Brown was still watching the two laughing together.

It was mid-afternoon when one of the sailors gave a shout and pointed off into the desert. A dull glint from a dune top caught everyone's attention. Smythe was immediately at Olivia's side.

"Can you get us over there?" he asked.

"Let's drop down a little to see if that crosswind is still there." She pulled the release rope. The balloon slowly descended. The others followed suit. The balloon started to move in right direction. Smythe grunted his satisfaction. He turned to say something to Flagstone, but cut it short.

Flagstone was staring off at the desert that stretched out before them. He held his binoculars gently, not pressing them to his brow. He looked away, then back. He felt Smythe at his elbow.

"What is it, Flagstone?"

"Dust. Maybe. Don't know for sure. It may be nothing." Flagstone continued to study the desert. Smythe joined him.

"Where?'

"About two three five relative."

Silence for a moment interrupted only by the burner being given a long blast by Olivia. Sergeant Brown appeared at Flagstone's other elbow. He said nothing, but raised his binoculars. Flagstone decided the government must give every employee a pair.

"Got it," grunted Smythe. "Hmmm."

The trio watched in silence. Olivia broke them out of their trance. "We are getting closer. Where would you like to land, Mr. Smythe?"

"As close as you can on the upwind side," answered Smythe quickly.

"Right," said Olivia working the burner again.

Everyone's attention was now focused on the landing. It was going to be trickier than the leisurely evening landings. As they descended the wind veered and backed. Olivia worked the burner and release rope. She called orders to the sailors who instantly responded. With a heavy thud the balloon dragged itself across a dune top. Olivia pulled the release rope furiously. The balloon dropped between the dunes.

"Mooring team away," yelled Olivia. Two sailors and the two privates were over the side in an instant. Olivia yanked at the release rope. The balloon's big air bag sagged. Flagstone could see the men on the ground furiously pounding metal stakes into the ground. The balloon leaned over and the gondola scrapped across the sand. The whole affair snubbed itself to a sudden stop that sent one sailor flying out of the balloon to land roughly on the sand-covered hardscrabble. The sailors and soldiers began dragging the deflating balloon into a tidy pile.

Flagstone got to his feet. Smyth was being helped up by Sergeant Brown. Smyth fussily pushed him off. "I'm fine, Sergeant. See to the balloon. I want a man watching to the north immediately. We may have been spotted." Brown nodded and jumped out of the gondola.

Flagstone turned around in time to see the other balloons making landings, some better, some not. Soon all the balloons were down and a perimeter established. It was ten minutes before Flagstone could get Olivia alone. She smiled at him and started to say something. His look removed her smile and she remained silent. Flagstone looked around before speaking. He put a big hand on each of her shoulders.

"Wear your pistols at all times from now on. Have your pack close at hand and keep your canteen topped off." He had a serious look on his face.

Olivia reached up and gave him a kiss. "Glad you're safe and sound too!" she laughed. He smiled back.

"Olivia," he started.

"I will," she said cutting him off. "I saw the dust."

"Good girl," he said relaxing. She stood looking at him. "I'm real proud of you. You did a great job flying that damn thing."

Olivia beamed at him. "Thanks. That didn't hurt much, did it."

"Not nearly as much as being dumped on my face." They laughed together.

Smyth was calling Olivia. Flagstone looked at her with worry plainly written on his face. "Remember what I said. Stay alert. Keep an eye on where I am too. Just in case."

Olivia waved at Smyth, then dusted the sand off her pants. She straightened up facing Flagstone and patted her holsters. "I'll be careful. You too. Just in case." She left, walking briskly toward Smyth.

Report 247 - IN THEIR OWN WORDS, BLY EXPEDITION REPORT 1

Date: 2004-11-04

IN THEIR OWN WORDS, BLY EXPEDITION REPORT 1.

The Herald received this exclusive report for which we paid dearly. Though the Herald is unsure of the ability of Women to Endure the Travails of the Wilds of Jimland, we Heartily Applaud her attempt and Admire her Pluck.

We wondered if her success will goad Ms. Fate into forming her own Expedition? We tried to ask Ms. Fate this very question and were met by stony silent and a quick right jab. Our reporter suffered only a bloody nose and dented self-image. He is fully recovered.

As received by the Herald, at considerable expense, for You, Gentle Reader:

The Astounding Yet Entirely Veracious Travels of Miss Nellie Bly, Reporter.

Last winter the entire world thrilled to the exploits of a fetching young reporter for the New York World. Though of tender years, her previous exposés included political corruption in Mexico and incognito commitment to New York's infamous Lunatic Asylum. Now this intrepid correspondent proposed to better the record set by one Phileas Fogg in his fictional circumnavigation of the globe. With inimitable style and pluck, this courageous young woman beat Fogg by a week.

Her name was Nellie Bly.

But her greatest adventures were yet to come. Upon her return, Miss Bly astonished and confounded her loyal readers by tendering her resignation. "Having circled the globe," she wrote in her farewell, "I know, perhaps better than most, what a small place our world really is. I am in search of something really big." Whispers among envious colleagues speculated that Miss Bly had retired, married, or been stricken by a mysterious illness. No one anticipated the sensation caused when she revealed the truth.

The following missive made its way back to the World in a dirty, wrinkled envelope on thin brown foolscap:

I have rounded the globe and observed the richness of the world's mystery. But I assert without hyperbole that nothing compares to a land that I did not visit on that journey. I now propose to surpass my own accomplishments and to plumb the very heart of darkness. For the foreseeable future I shall issue periodic records of my experiences. And so, I give you -

Dispatches from Jimland

Sincerely,
Nellie Bly

Sherbet at the Empress

"NEVER!" he roared, punctuated with the smash of his hirsute fist upon the table, causing the crockery and fellow patrons to jump, though not, one might note, his dining companion.

"Accompany my expedition? A woman? To 'report' on it? To spy, like as not. No, Miss Bly. For your safety and my own, I can't allow you to accompany my expedition. Even if you were to last through the first few hours with the snakes, bugs, quicksand, and cannibals, you'd only serve as an hors-d'oeuvre for one of Jimland's nightmarish denizens."

His companion, a young American woman of excellent figure and breeding, observed this tirade with sphinxine smile.

"Only, Dr. Challenger, if you are so foolish as to allow one to wander into camp..."

With ample curiosity and appetite to match, the newly graduated George Edward Challenger had lately arrived in Jimville on loan from Edinburgh University. His unstylish hat did its best to contain a shock of wiry red hair, while his manservant insisted upon shaving him twice daily to check the progress of his beard. His large hands looked capable of works of great creativity and sudden violence.

He had arrived in Jimland, it was said, to pursue studies in paleo-biology (whatever that might be), though some who follow academic journals mentioned a quarrel with some Mentor at University. All that one could say for certain was that Jimland is about as far from Scotland as one might travel.

"Really, Dr. Challenger. Even you must be well aware that I am no inexperienced ingénue." As his companion spoke, Dr. Challenger mopped his brow with damp handkerchief. He was obviously still adjusting to Jimland's extreme humidity, unaided by his imminent corpulence. Observers might comment upon his companion's complexion, which was as cool and clear as alabaster. "While I have not yet acquired the accolades that years of cloister in the Ivory Tower affords, I have some small measure of Experience in matters of Adventure."

"Bah!" came the thunderous reply. "This is not a game, woman. This is not a ticketed excursion of first class cabins and attentive stewards. Where I propose to go there are no timetables and there is no Baedeker. We will encounter Trauma; we will encounter Terror; and we will most assuredly encounter Death. The editors of the World cannot buy your way in Jimland."

The young correspondent's lips grew tightly drawn as Challenger loosed his barbs. She signaled for another lemon sherbet, ignoring her companion's empty dish.

"It is well-known that I am no longer employed by the World. I tilt my lance for free, for the benefit of my readers the world over. Were a periodical of prestige to offer a modest stipend to defray my expenses, I would not refuse. But I set my own assignments. I am in the employ of no man."

If crimson spots glowed as fetching adornment to Miss Bly's fashionably pale cheeks, they faded as she daintily sipped her replenished sherbet. Her companion was speechless, as though transfixed by the gaze of one of Jimland's fearsome fauna. Then he snorted gutturally and leaped to his feet.

"Enough! I'll hear not another word. Neither you nor any other female shall accompany the Challenger expedition. What I propose to uncover will set you lot of scribblers yammering for years to come. If you are so set upon self-destruction, why don't you mount your own expedition?"

With a curt nod of his head, Challenger strode out the door of the Empress.

"It's a free country, last time I checked."

Conversation, which had dwindled and then fallen mute upon Challenger's parting salvo, resumed with accustomed vivacity. Those who cared to might observe Miss Bly frown as she composedly finished her sherbet.

Journal of the First Bly Expedition

August 31, 1890.
The Empress Hotel
Jimville, Jimland

Money on hand - \$322 in worn notes from the First National Bank of Jimland. I kit myself out properly for \$28, sparing no expense. I exchange my trademark checked-coat and deerstalker for a more sensible pith helmet and linen-and-khaki ensemble. Have never fired a rifle, but I am a quick study. Though he would never admit to it, Challenger seems to make every effort to hinder my progress. All of the usual hunters are either "on holiday" or otherwise engaged. I am able to hire the venerable Sir Harry, obviously past his prime and the worse for drink, but willing. Mysteriously, I discovered a similar dearth of scouts. The only amenable soul was one Abu who refuses to carry a firearm, instead relying upon a great sword of fearsome aspect. To round out the expedition I engaged a motley group of six askari. Let us hope they are worth their expense. Abu assisted in finding bearers for food and trade goods.

The balance sheet reads thus:

Cash on hand	\$322
Personal kit	\$28
Sir Harry, hunter	\$48
Abu, scout	\$48
Six (6) stalwart askari	\$72
Ten (10) crates food and bearers	\$100
Two (2) crates trade goods	\$20
Balance	\$6

I have met resistance at every step of the way, but I persevere undaunted. Challenger is the most odious of souls, rendered altogether more so by impenetrable accent and eccentric conduct. While my own dear father (rest his soul) traced his ancestry to the highlands, it was no doubt specimens of this

Challenger sort - perhaps his own forebears - who impelled my people to depart. It is not my habit to wish ill upon any man, I guarantee I shall not shed a tear should that man come to grief in the jungles of Jimland. Though I am a woman of tender years, I have already traversed the globe. This shall be as play to a child. I shall prove to Challenger and all of Jimville that Nellie Bly is a force with which to be reckoned.

Tomorrow we set out in search of fame, fortune, and the riches of antiquity.

September 1, 1890.
Darkest Jimland

Even before departing I discover that a quantity of trade goods have been stolen. I am certain that Challenger is behind this vexation. Ever forward.

We set out and in a day's march found ourselves in mountainous terrain. I confess I had no idea they were so close to Jimville! We encounter natives - friendly types - from whom we purchase a bit of sustenance, exhausting the cash on hand. Not to worry. I doubt I'd find a place to spend it anyway! Share a jolly evening with friendly natives.

September 2, 1890.
Darkest Jimland

We awaken to a horrific stench and discover that five crates of food have gone bad. Again, I smell Challenger in this. I foresee two possibilities: curtail the expedition or reply upon Sir Harry's prowess. God help us.

But perhaps Sir Harry will be the least of my worries. One day outside Jimville and Abu cannot find a pass through which a party of our size might pass. He merely shrugs, "I usually travel alone, Allah be praised."

I thank Allah myself that the bearers find enough nuts and berries to sustain themselves. Two walk unburdened, as though I were conducting a tourist junket!

September 3, 1890.
Darkest Jimland

Today we experienced our first real brush with the realities of Jimland. I awoke to hear a vicious growling and screaming from one of the tents. When torches were lit, we discovered that one of the askari and one bearer were missing. Abu shook his head ominously, but wouldn't answer any of my questions as to what might have transpired. This expedition is off to an inauspicious beginning. I don't believe I can blame Challenger for this latest tragedy, though I'd like to.

Abu has finally earned his salt, succeeding famously. We head due north into more mountains, following a small river, some unnamed tributary of the River Jim, no doubt, that forks to the west and east. Soon afterwards I experienced a shock greater than any in my short life. We stumbled upon some stone ruins, which Sir Harry assured me was quite uncharacteristic of those anywhere else on the continent. Further inspection revealed, to our horror, that it was

some type of burial area. We were immediately attacked by six animated skeletons - the shambling remains of some long dead warriors armed with rotting crossbows. It was like something a boy might dream up from a penny dreadful. Abu did not hear them, though I don't think I will hold this one against him.

Two of their shots flew by and missed. When the third fired wide we sustained yet another shock - An enormous creature erupted from amongst the stones, "Great Scott," Sir Harry ejaculated, setting down his glass. "A stegosaurus!" The fourth of their fetid quarrels hit Abu! But only a glancing blow. The fifth flew over my head, but the sixth struck home in my shapely left thigh. Without thinking, I reached down and yanked it out. Gritting my teeth, I shouldered my Martini-Henry and fired, obliterating the bony horror. Unfortunately the aim of my askari was not as true. Oblivious to the gunfire, the monstrous stone-plated lizard lumbered due east - blocking the fire of two skeletons!

The askari fan out to the west in order to obtain a clear line of sight. The loathsome creatures loose more bolts, hitting an askari who pulled out the missile as I had. The remainder shoot wide, including two shots whizzing over the tiny head of the stegosaur which took an about turn towards Ahmed, one of my askari! Abu began a mad dash towards the enemy, sword glittering. All of my able warriors, including Sir Harry, shot wide. I manage to destroy a second beast with a single shot to the skull. Frightened Ahmed shot at the stegosaur - missing its immense bulk completely - but the creature turned abruptly towards the exploding gunpowder. God preserve him.

Hazeem, a loyal askari, fell with an arrow in the throat. Abu dodged a missile, and a third missed me, recognizing, even in its mindless state, the mark of a leader. The stegosaur continued on towards poor Ahmed. On my command, our entire party launched a fearsome fusillade in which one stalwart askari hit and everyone else - the ineffectual Sir Harry and myself included missed. Abu had by this time nearly reached the enemy. The stegosaur meanwhile turned back towards the skeletons and Abu, no doubt attracted by the latter's guttural screaming.

The skeletons loosed their final projectiles wide of the mark, missing even Abu at point blank range. If they were capable of fear, I think they felt it now. The askari, Sir Harry, and I all miss, but frightened Ahmed mastered himself and sent another of the bony horrors to Hades. Abu reached his foes, brandished his sword mightily, missed his target entirely, which began to shuffle back amongst the stones. The scaly beast wandered back down a rocky path, and the night fell silently. The balance sheet reads:

Gained	Four dead skeletons
Lost	Brave Hazeem, askari

I bound my wounded thigh with the silk scarf my dear mother gave me as a parting gift and simultaneously reprimanded Abu for his rashness. I set the guard for the evening and then retired with a certain amount of satisfaction. My expedition had been tested and we had acquitted ourselves excellently. It seems I do know how to fire a Martini-Henry.

September 4, 1890.
Darkest Jimland

My enthusiasm was short lived. What I had taken to be a throbbing headache due to battle weariness turned out to be sinister drums beaten by some native, reverberating through the mountains. The result was a catastrophe greater than that wrought by those eerie undead.

As usual, Abu only shook his head gravely but would not enlighten me on the origin of the ominous music. I am beginning to think he actually doesn't know much about what goes on here in Jimland. Sir Harry made himself a drink and posited, "probably just some natives getting their ya-ya's out." The so-called brave askari began to mutter to themselves, which I accept, and then to one another, which I cannot abide. As the night progressed and the percussion reached its crescendo, they crept off one by one without a word. I stared up at the moon and reflected. Obviously, my expedition has ended, almost within sight of Jimville! I make an oath to cash in and organize a better party. The worst of it will be giving mirth to that blasted Challenger. I seriously consider camping in the jungle outside Jimville for a few days to look respectable.

Perhaps unnerved more than his stoic exterior revealed, Abu couldn't find the very pass we had taken two days ago.

September 5, 1890.
Darkest Jimland

Abu has gone from bad to worse - we are now officially lost and wandering amongst the stones. I pray we do not encounter any denizens of Jimland in our state of enervation.

September 6, 1890.
Darkest Jimland

What new woes will we face? I awoke with a start. A shadowy figure with prodigious nose and staring eyes had stuck its head into my tent. In my bleary-eyed state I was certain that Sir Harry had finally snapped and had developed some fresh ideas. I dealt him a quick backhand to express my opinion on the matter upon which the intruder emitted a deafening squawk and retreated. I discovered that I owed my comrade an apology - in the dawn light, I saw that my visitor was in fact a gigantic flightless avian. Abu let out a whistle, "Likely the last of its kind!" Sir Harry balanced his glass on a low tree branch and potted it at once. I dubbed it the Jimland Emu, *Dromaius jimlandiae harrius*, owing to the uncontested resemblance. Roasted with wild rosemary and garlic, the immense drumstick was most sustaining.

September 7, 1890.
Darkest Jimland

Quiet, nothing happens. Though I should celebrate the respite, I fear that it is in fact only the calm before the next storm. Soon after we begin the march it is apparent that Abu will earn his keep today. He has found the southern pass - Huzzah! - moving us within a day's march of Jimville. I sustain myself with thoughts of the look on Challenger's face when I return victorious.

During our march we discovered an empty village - more of the strange stone cairns we encountered before, though these are thankfully uninhabited. We emptied the last crate of food today. I am certain we will make it home tomorrow, however, else we are in the shaking hands of good Sir Harry.

September 8, 1890.
Darkest Jimland

As I write these words in the gathering dawn light I note once again a rustling at my tent flaps. What, dear readers, will this day hold? Taking no chances, I fired three quick shots to the chest of my assailant, but to no avail. The rustling continued, near the ground, it would seem. I looked down and beheld a most hideous visage.

"Oh really, Sir Harry," I exclaimed. "This time you have gone too far" and more words to that effect. But before my oath was long out I discovered that I had once again libeled my colleague, for I heard Sir Harry's unmistakable snore in the distance. I screamed to awaken my vigilant hunter and scout who stumbled to my aid.

The crawling intruder turned out to be - wonder of wonders - a fish! A creature of loathsome aspect with tremendous front flippers and primitive lungs by means of which it can traverse the ground from rivulet to rivulet. Abu whistled, "Likely the last of its kind." Sir Harry tucked his flask back into his nightshirt and potted it at once. I dubbed it the Jimland Lungfish (protopterus jimlandiae harrius) owing to the uncontested resemblance. Pan-fried with wild dill weed the immense fillet was most sustaining.

Perhaps inspired by the delicious repast, Abu was able to follow the remainder of the southern pass back to Jimville. A week ago, we trekked north - a neophyte and the men willing to follow her. I return with Experience and an initiation into the wilds of Jimland. I know that I shall return.

The final ledger of the First Bly Expedition

Food	nil
Trade	nil
Loot	nil
All females returned safely	\$18
Females lost	nil
Combat won	\$12
Discovered mountains with river	\$60
Villages discovered	\$35
New species - bird	\$24
New species - fish	\$34
Total	\$187

One point of experience added to my shooting. I believe I shall like this Martini-Henry of mine.

Signed,
Miss Nellie Bly

Here ends Ms. Bly's first report.

Report 248 - 10.4 - THE PRIZE.

Date: 2004-11-04

10.4 - THE PRIZE.

Julius Flagstone sat in the sand and was unhappy. The two big privates that were his guards stood not ten feet away. Flagstone had been prevented from going over the sand dune to see what was going on. His strenuous objections had resulted in the two very large privates being detailed to keep him out of trouble. He stewed silently.

He had not seen Olivia since Smythe had called her away. Strange things were going on he reckoned. As he sat in the fading sun the balloons the party had arrived in were one by one reinflated and moved over the dune at Flagstone's back. They had bobbed up and down, teasing him with their antics. The party had come in six balloons. To Flagstone's annoyance there were now eight large balloons visible, tugging at their restraints. A ninth smaller balloon came and went from view. Flagstone's curiosity was driving him crazy. He sat fuming. He had already tried to get past the two sentries. It had ended with him being carried down the dune side and dumped in a sandy heap. The privates didn't seem to take it as personally as Flagstone did.

Flagstone strolled to the last balloon left in the small depression between the sand dunes. The two privates strolled along with him. As he reached the balloon, the larger of the two very large men spoke.

"Don't even think about it, sir." The men were on either side of him just out of reach. Flagstone pulled a canteen out and took a drink. He held it out for the speaker. The man took a drink and passed the canteen to his mate. Flagstone dusted himself off trying to regain a little dignity. The soldier handed back the canteen. Flagstone put it back in the balloon gondola.

The balloon's bag was fully deflated. There was no swift getaway here. He sat in the gondola step. The two privates leaned easily against the gondola side. He decided to get to the point.

"What's going on over there?" he asked pointing at the dune.

"Can't say, sir," answered the talkative private.

"Can't say as in you aren't allowed to tell or as in you don't know?"

"Can't tell you, sir. Orders." The privates seemed genuinely sorry about the situation.

Flagstone watched the balloons. The big ones sat in a line, fully inflated. Occasionally one would be moved around and then returned to the line. The smaller balloon was moved constantly about, rising and falling in no particular pattern. Its burner was run from a ground control cable. There was no gondola suspended beneath it. Instead there was a large ring with a two huge pulleys and several lines coming off the pulleys. The lines would grow taut; the balloon's burner would roar and the balloon would be

sluggishly moved around. Then it would settle down and the lines would go slack.

It suddenly dawned on Flagstone that the smaller balloon was being used to lift things. It was being used as a little crane. He smiled to himself. Very clever, Smythe. He decided the other balloons were meant to carry whatever the little balloon was moving about. He chafed at his inability to see what was going on. But he decided against fighting with the two privates. He didn't know where Olivia was. It might endanger her. He sat fidgeting.

Darkness came swiftly in the desert. Several long poles were stuck in the sand and oil lanterns were hoisted up. The mysterious work behind the sand dunes continued. A private came running from the sentry station. He passed Flagstone and his guards at a trot. The two guards watched the man run by.

"What's up?" called one of the guards.

"There's something out in the desert heading this way."

"Desert raiders?" called a guard. The runner didn't answer as he crested the dune and disappeared over it. The two guards checked their weapons. Flagstone pulled on his pack and slung his rifle. The guards said nothing.

Shortly Major Steel and the man came trotting past heading for the sentry station. Flagstone was getting tense. Three minutes later the Major came walking past.

"Raiders, Major?" asked Flagstone rather loudly.

"I'm not sure, Mr. Flagstone," answered the Major as he passed.

"Worms?" asked Flagstone less loudly.

The Major stopped and looked at him. "Maybe. In any case, we are nearly finished here."

"Where is Olivia, Major?" asked Flagstone firmly.

"Ms. Fate is helping Mr. Smythe. She should be finished soon and will be rejoining you then." The Major trotted back up and over the dune. Flagstone stood easily between the privates. They watched him warily.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid," he said sitting back down. He placed his hand on the hardscrabble surface. He sat very still. The guards watched him. One started to walk about.

"Stand still," Flagstone ordered. The guard stopped and stared at Flagstone as he held his hand to the hard ground. He could feel nothing. He relaxed a little. The two privates came close. Flagstone stood up.

"What are you doing?" one asked.

"Just checking," replied Flagstone.

"For what?"

"Sand worms."

"You're kidding," said one.

"I wish I were," said Flagstone honestly.

"They get big?" asked a guard.

"Huge. As big around as those balloons. Sixty, eighty, a hundred feet long."

"Scary?"

"Only if you don't like being eaten alive," said Flagstone with a half-smile. The two privates looked uncertainly around at the dunes.

"Never seen one before," said a private.

"I've only seen them a couple of times. We'll hear them coming. Just stay on the rocks and you'll be ok."

"What did you do when you saw them," asked a private.

"I ran like the devil himself was after me," laughed Flagstone. The privates laughed along. Flagstone tensed up. Olivia was coming down the dune. Sergeant Brown was at her side. Flagstone hugged Olivia who looked tired. He nodded at Sergeant Brown.

"Almost done, sir. Mr. Smythe said to get your things together. Ms Fate is to get this balloon ready for flying with our help." The Sergeant nodded at the two guards. Olivia began giving orders like she had been ordering soldiers about all her life. Flagstone stepped out of the way. Sergeant Brown stood beside him.

"Don't get foolish now, sir. It's almost over. I'm sure your good lady will tell you what she saw. If she can believe it herself." The Sergeant walked off to lend a hand with the inflating balloon bag. The burner roared in the desert night.

Flagstone relaxed. The mood to sneak over the hill had vanished. He had the impression there was nothing left to see. He waited. The balloon bag rose into the night sky. It strained gently against its mooring line.

Smythe and two sailors came walking down the dune thirty minutes later. Olivia had the balloon ready to fly. The sailors double-checked everything.

"Prepare to take off," ordered Smythe. "Sergeant, send your men to the Major, he will need their help."

Smythe and the sailors were in the gondola with Olivia. Flagstone and the Sergeant climbed aboard. Smythe pointed up. Olivia fired the burner. The

sailors released the mooring lines and hauled them up. The balloon rose slowly into the night sky. Smyth cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted into the night.

"Major, whenever you are ready, shove off."

A distant shout answered. More balloon burners roared in the night. By the light of the moon Flagstone saw the balloons rise. To his surprise, two pairs of balloons had large objects slung between them in heavy cargo nets. The objects were covered in canvas. The balloons rose slowly. The rest of the balloons save the one he was riding all had cargo nets trailing below them carrying canvas-covered things of odd shape and sizes. Flagstone watched the balloon flotilla rise noisily into the moonlit night. He turned to Smythe.

Before he could speak, Smythe cut him short, "All in good time, Flagstone." Smythe gave Olivia a look. She returned it steadily, then turned her attention to piloting the balloon.

"Due east, Ms Fate, if you please." Smythe and Olivia peered into the compass binnacle. Olivia fired the burner. The balloons drifted through the night.

Dawn found the flotilla drifting east in a loose group in a strengthening breeze. Smythe paid more attention to the balloons behind him than the land ahead. Flagstone hadn't tried to talk to Olivia during the night. She hadn't slept, refusing to let the sailors pilot the balloon. She looked tired, he thought. He dipped a cup of water out of the balloon's water barrel. Standing quietly beside her, he offered the water. She smiled and emptied the cup. Flagstone filled it for her again. She drained it.

"Thanks," she said tiredly.

"Olivia, you can let the sailors, uh, steer now. I'm sure they are competent," he said quietly. Olivia turned a tired face to his. "Oh, Jules, you wouldn't believe," she started then stopped ashen-faced.

"It's ok. We can talk later," he said calmly. She nodded. Tapping a sailor on the shoulder she pointed to the burner controls and compass. "Due east," was all she said. The sailor immediately stood at the control station. Smythe stepped up, looked into the binnacle and up at the sky.

"Nice day for it," he muttered. Flagstone led Olivia to a pile of unused canvas and helped her settle on to it. He sat leaning against the gondola side. Olivia sat next to him and put her head on his shoulder. She was asleep immediately. Flagstone pulled a scrap of canvas up over her. Flagstone noted that the other naval rating was fast asleep also. Smythe stood staunchly watching the other balloons. The Sergeant stood watching Flagstone. Flagstone smiled. All was as it should be. He laughed to himself and drifted off to sleep.

Report 249 - 10.X - SAY GOOD-BYE.

Date: 2004-11-09

10.X - SAY GOOD-BYE.

Julius Flagstone awoke while Olivia was still asleep, curled up beside him. It was late afternoon by his reading of the sun. He carefully rose and stretched. Sergeant Brown stood by the sailor manning the balloon's controls. The watch has changed thought Flagstone. Smythe and the first sailor were sleeping in corners of the little gondola. Flagstone stood and watched the desert sweep by. The wind was very brisk. The balloons were making good speed over the ground.

Flagstone peered at the balloons. The canvas-covered cargoes were trailing under the balloons. Flagstone noted for the first time that the other gondolas were full of smaller piles of canvas lumps. He turned to the big Sergeant.

"Salvage mission successful, Sergeant?" he asked.

The big Sergeant peered around at Flagstone. A little smile came and went. The Sergeant nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Going back to base now?" Flagstone pressed a little more.

Again a little smile passed across the Sergeant's face. "Yes, sir."

Dusk found everyone up and alert in the balloon's gondola. They didn't land. Cold food was handed out and washed down with water from the fast emptying water barrel. Flagstone unconsciously felt his canteen. It was heavy and full. Olivia had not said a word after she awoke except to take a turn piloting the balloon. She now seemed to be comfortable allowing the sailors to pilot. Flagstone watched her carefully. She still looked drawn and tired.

Night came on. Olivia drove the balloon higher. The others, like a little flock ugly ducklings followed slowly in their wake. The wind freshened. Flagstone smelled rain but saw no clouds. He and Olivia huddled in a corner and wrapped a blanket around themselves. Olivia's eyes were closed, but he knew she was still awake.

"What did they find, Olivia?" he whispered.

"Some kind of flying craft."

"Whose?"

"I don't know."

"Markings?"

"None I could see."

Flagstone's curiosity was getting the better of him. "Can you describe it?" he asked.

"It was all broken up. A lot of it was burned like it had crashed into the ground pretty hard. There was a crater. It is made out of some strange material, light, but very strong."

"A secret balloon?"

"No."

"One of those new flying machines."

"No. It was kind of like a sphere, I think, if all the pieces had been there."

"Any crew?"

Olivia shivered. "I don't want to talk about it." She turned her head away. She pulled the blanket around her and fell asleep leaning against Flagstone.

The sailors were asleep. Olivia was piloting. Smythe stood by the binnacle. Sergeant Brown lounged at the rear of the gondola. Flagstone shaded his eyes and peered ahead. The horizon was turning green. Jungle he thought. A sparkle from behind the green. Flagstone was trying to place himself. Was it a river or the ocean? He couldn't tell yet. The compass said they were still heading east. Everyone looked tired. Flagstone stood beside Smythe.

"So whose flying machine did you steal?" He tried to sound nonchalant.

Smythe didn't even turn his head when he answered. "No one you'd know."

"Don't be too sure. I know a lot of people."

"You don't know these people."

"Were there any survivors?" Flagstone said playing one card at a time.

"Sadly no," said Smythe still looking ahead. "What else has Ms. Fate told you?"

"It's made out of some strange material. It crashed into the desert. That's about it."

Smythe turned and looked in the binnacle. He leaned against the gondola rail. Flagstone felt a little angry.

"What did you need us for on this little expedition of yours, Smythe? As interesting as it has been, I don't get it." Flagstone waited for Smythe to reply.

"We needed Ms. Fate's balloon piloting skills, especially her skills and experience in flying around the Wilds of Jimland. We had heard of many strange things happening here so we needed an experienced pilot. It seems the warnings were over-rated."

"Consider it beginner's luck," said Flagstone.

"Oh, I never trust to luck, though if it comes my way I'll take it."

"So what's my part in this?" asked Flagstone.

"We didn't think Ms. Fate would come without you, and we, that is I, thought you might be useful whatever happened. You surely would protect Ms Fate. Your knowledge of the Wilds is unsurpassed. As I said before you are insurance, plan B if you will." Smythe smiled slightly.

Flagstone pointed off to the north. Smythe looked, then raised his binoculars and watched for a minute. Two great pterodactyls flapped, slowly and silently, across the sky. They disappeared. Smythe smiled. "That was marvelous. Worth the trip."

"What was the trip for, Smythe? Is that really your name?"

"Oh, it's my name. For now. What's the trip for? Really, Flagstone, I expected better from you."

"Humor me anyway."

"If you had one chance in a lifetime to get technology many years if not centuries in advance of your own, wouldn't you jump at it?"

"Depends."

"Rubbish. You'd be all over it, Flagstone, and you know it."

"Maybe."

"No maybe. We have tracked this thing for months to Jimland. It's taken over a year to locate. We have lost several very good men looking for it. Well, now we have found, and it is ours."

"Technology can be dangerous, Smythe."

"We will be careful."

"Till you blow us all up," replied Flagstone with a hint of menace.

"That's not my problem. I just get people things. What they do with them is their business."

"Lucky for you," said Flagstone without a smile.

"Yes."

"What's in the cargo nets?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. Look at Ms. Fate. She doesn't believe it and she saw it." Olivia turned her head and gave Smythe a cold look. She fired the burner long and loud. Smythe smiled.

"Try me," said Flagstone dryly. He noticed the big Sergeant was an arm's length away. The sailors were awake and on their feet too.

"I see no harm in it since we will be parting company soon." Smyth smiled. Flagstone looked around. No one had moved. The jungle had drawn much closer. The ocean sparkled beyond it. Smythe cleared his throat to get Flagstone's attention.

"We have just salvaged an alien flying craft. I use the word alien to mean not from Earth. Where it is from I have no idea. It does not appear to be either of Martian or Venusian construction, both of which I am familiar with. It is more advanced."

Flagstone reminded himself to hold Smythe in higher regard.

"We have only recovered parts of it. Much was destroyed in the crash. We found two badly decomposed bodies. They were clearly not human. That's it. Go tell your friends. Tell Reginald Toadbutt. See if he will print that in the Times."

"I might," countered Flagstone.

"Good luck, Mr. Flagstone. No one will believe you. You will be labeled many things, but truthsayer will not be among them. Go ahead and ruin your reputation. We won't even bother to deny your claims."

"We?" asked Flagstone.

"Oh, various and sundry government agencies."

"Why won't you deny any claims I make?" asked Flagstone intrigued.

"Because we won't be hiding anything. These fragments will be put in some public location and left in full view. A shipyard perhaps. A junkyard somewhere. Maybe in an abandoned factory. Pieces will be removed for analysis and returned to the same or a different location, but always they will be in plain sight, unguarded, apparently worthless. Hiding in plain sight is always the safest way to safeguard something you treasure. Who would believe we would just leave something like this lying around?"

Flagstone faced Smythe and thought. He smiled to himself. He had to hand to Smythe; it was an ingenious solution. He shook his head. Smythe chuckled softly. "Can't claim it's all my idea," he said smiling. "Ms. Fate, land us on the edge of the jungle, if you please. Sergeant."

At that Flagstone turned around to find himself looking down the barrel of the Sergeant's rifle. The Sergeant didn't smile, the barrel didn't waver. Flagstone stood carefully still. Olivia was gently nudged to Flagstone's side while the sailors took over piloting the balloon. The few minutes it took them to bring the balloon to a landing near the jungle edge seemed to last forever to Flagstone. The big Sergeant never blinked and the barrel pointed at Flagstone's heart the whole time.

Smythe was holding out his hand. "Good-bye Ms. Fate. Thank you for your help. It has be my pleasure." Olivia looked at him for a moment then shook his hand. Smythe turned to Flagstone. "Mr. Flagstone, perhaps we shall work together again sometime."

Flagstone shook Smythe's hand. "Perhaps."

"Now if you please," said Smythe cheerfully as he gestured over the side.

"My tokens," said Flagstone his hand outstretched.

Smythe reached in his pocket and handed Flagstone two coin-like tokens. Flagstone opened his mouth, but Smythe spoke first.

"That's all you get."

"Thanks," said Flagstone. He paused. "They don't work do they?"

"Of course not. Can't have you gallivanting around with those can we?"

Olivia just stood there wide-eyed, her face starting to flush. Flagstone slowly bent down and picked up their packs and tossed them over the side. He gently pressed his hand in the small of Olivia's back. "Time for us to go, dear. Say good-bye to the nice man."

Olivia looked at Flagstone, then Smythe. "Good-bye," she said dumbly and climbed out of the gondola. Flagstone followed. They turned to face the balloon as it started to rise. The Sergeant held up Flagstone's rifle and Olivia's pistols. Flagstone held up his hands. The Sergeant tossed them lightly to him.

Flagstone waved. "If you ever need a job, Sergeant, look me up."

"Yes, sir," the Sergeant replied. The Balloon's burner roared and it rose trailing after the others still heading east toward the distant sea.

Flagstone turned to Olivia. Her face was flushed red. Her hands were balled into fists at her sides. Her eyes flashed.

"I never," she blurted out.

"It's ok, dear."

"They can't," she sputtered.

"They can. They did."

"But," she stomped her foot.

"Come on, Olivia. It's a nice day for a walk."

Olivia stood for a moment. She stomped her foot again. They shouldered their packs and began walking toward the ragged edge of the jungle.

"Now tell me all about it," Flagstone said as they walked into the jungle.

Julius Flagstone answered the polite knock on the door of his suite at the Empress Hotel. An envelope slid under the door. Flagstone quickly unlocked the door and threw it open. He looked down the hall. It was empty. He shook his head, gently closing the door.

Flagstone picked up his lemonade and walked back out on the balcony. The fetching Olivia Fate sat in a chair enjoying the evening breeze. Flagstone sat in a chair beside hers. He examined the letter. There were no markings on the envelope. He took out his pocketknife and slit open the letter. A single sheet of paper was inside. He pulled it out and held it at arm's length with a disgusted air.

Olivia laughed. "What is it, Jules?"

Flagstone read the three lines again. The first was harmless, "To: Flagstone, Empress Hotel. The second made his skin crawl, "From NAGS Ops". The third said, "Well done. Deposits to your account confirmed."

Flagstone laughed. You guys need to get more subtle he said to himself smiling. He laughed again. Flagstone held the message over the hurricane lamp on the small table between the chairs. The message burst into green flames with a pop. Olivia let out a noise of surprise.

"What was that?" she asked setting up and facing Flagstone.

"Another note from my business acquaintance," he replied.

"As I have said before, every time you get one of those something happens. What's going to happen now?"

Flagstone rose and leaned on the balcony rail. "We're about to take a walk along the beach then come back and cuddle up with a bottle of champagne. Have I told you how great you look this evening?"

"No," Olivia answered. "Have I told you how much I deserve it?"

Report 250 - IN THEIR OWN WORDS, BLY EXPEDITION REPORT 2

Date: 2004-11-14

IN THEIR OWN WORDS, BLY EXPEDITION REPORT 2.

Journal of the Second Bly Expedition

Jimville, Jimland
September 15, 1890

The chap behind the desk at the Empress was surprised to see me again. A little too surprised, I must confess. Apparently, owing to some "mix up," he had let my room to a couple from Bloomsbury on holiday and carted all my belongings to the Jimland Salvation Army. He just shrugged and mumbled something about never expecting to see me again. Several other of my acquaintances from my brief stay in Jimville were equally astonished by my reappearance from the jungle. It is difficult for one to maintain a feeling of triumphant superiority when people express such unqualified disbelief that one has survived! My victory was further vitiated by the fact that Challenger and his expedition have apparently departed during my absence. I remain, however, determined to return to the jungle and to extend my successes.

As Your Humble Correspondent, I feel I must disclose that during my days as an international celebrity, My Loyal Readers persisted in such embarrassing behavior as exchanging trading cards emblazoned with my determined yet comely countenance. In this spirit, I expect there will be an interest in knowing my vital statistics here in Jimland. With all due modesty, Save 16, Shoot 8, Fight 5.

Against my better judgement, I come to another agreement with Sir Harry (Save 14, Shoot 6, Fight 3) and Abu (Save 15, Shoot nil, Fight 8), such as they are. Having met with naught but calamity from the local askaris, I have instead engaged five furloughed members of the Sultan's Own Guard, proper soldiers who ought to be worth their salt. Abu rounded up 8 bearers and crates of food. I have \$17 on hand.

The Second Bly Expedition is ready to depart for the wilds of Jimland.

As an auspicious omen, Abu is able to guide us directly to the furthest extent of our previous excursion. We give wide berth to those strange stone cairns and their sinister inhabitants that plagued my previous expedition. As further evidence of our Good Fortune, we discover a deserted village and are able to salvage some trinkets decorated with emeralds and garnets. To celebrate, and to allow us to carry the newly found loot, I issue double rations. Men travel on their stomachs, I am told. Maintaining a waspish figure such as mine ought to prevent me from indulging, but considering what we may be forced to eat later, I'll risk it. We sleep with grins of satisfaction.

(Discover deserted village - 1 Loot, mountains, no river, no village, no natives).

Darkest Jimland
September 16, 1890.

Fortune smiles again or is it that I have grown skilled in such a short time?

Good Sir Harry, off, no doubt, to answer the call of nature, tumbled over some loose stones. His exuberant cursing brought all of us running. His improvised latrine turned out to be the stone font of an ancient temple. We all admired the fineness of the stonework, the skill evident in the detailed carving, and the grandeur of this lost culture, while Sir Harry readjusted his clothing. Abu whistled, "Likely the last artifact of this ancient culture." Sir Harry swallowed the remainder of his sherry and we proceeded to gather three full crates of Loot.

The men eyed the food crates eagerly thinking their Fearless, yet greedy, Leader would issue triple rations tonight, when we were suddenly accosted by a party of jovial Natives. We nonchalantly sat down upon the crates. When Abu translated their primitive gibbering, it would seem that times have been hard in the jungle, and they were actually out looking for work! Abu was able to negotiate the hiring of one strong-backed soul to join our Expedition (\$5, \$12 left on hand). I found the transaction slightly awkward as I suspected we had just ransacked the temple of their ancestors, but good Sir Harry was a brick. "Nonsense, my dear lady. They do it all the time themselves. As long as we march under the protection of the Union Jack," (I make a pointed reference to the brand new, forty-three star American flag that flutters over our camp) "we are welcome to whatever such artifacts we can carry, By Jove. For the sake of preserving the poor devils' culture, if you like."

(Discover ancient temple - 3 Loot, mountains, no village, no river, six natives appear who are Friendly. Engage one as bearer).

Darkest Jimland
September 17, 1890.

Catastrophe, catastrophe, catastrophe.

Our evening repose was arrested by fierce squawking and screaming coming from all directions at once. I heard the soldiers calling "Rocks! Rocks!" as I scrambled to set a brand alight. Suddenly I was dealt a glancing blow by an immense curved obsidian claw and then an even larger beak. I recalled my reading of the fantasy stories brought back by Burton and realized that I had mistranslated my Mohammedan guards. They were shouting "rok", the name of a gigantic, horrific bird.

Sir Harry set down the brandy snifter that he had been using to keep warm and discharged his weapon, but to no avail. The mammoth avian wrapped its talons about his waist and took wing. My superstitious soldiers threw down their rifles and fled into the rocks, but two were snatched mid stride. I loosed copious quantities of lead and invective, bringing the incursion to an end.

A distraught Abu was useless for the entire day and we did not break camp. One minute the second Bly expedition had uncovered evidence of a heretofore-unknown ancient culture in the mountains of Jimland, but in the next lost our

esteemed hunter. The fortunes of Jimland are varied and take no account of the wishes of Men. Each of us poured out a glass of brandy for our lost comrade.

(Giant birds attack - loose 3, mountains, no village, no river, no natives, missed Scout roll).

Darkest Jimland
September 18, 1890.

I awaken determined that we shall return to Jimville with our Loot. Sir Harry would want it that way. [And so would your Backers and Bankers. - Ed.] Also, the men are well and truly afraid, and I can't say I blame them. Energized by fear, Abu found the path and silently led us back southward towards Jimville.

This part of Jimland is characterized by steep rocky crags traversed by narrow stone paths. The valleys beneath us are filled with a thick mist, appearing almost as though one could jump upon it for a cushioned rest. On the journey north, I tossed rock and Sir Harry's (God rest him) application of schoolboy physics had revealed that the drop was in fact several hundred feet.

Today, however, Jimland was determined to reward us or to mock us. I'm not certain which. As we hugged the mountainside along the perilous path, the mist began to break up for the first time. First Abu, then the soldiers, shouted and pointed to the mountain opposite our own. I peered through the remaining wisps of fog and sighted what appeared to be stone dwellings carved into the mountainside. But not merely a small settlement, such as one might find in the American Southwest. No, this was a structure of cyclopean size. An entire city on the side of a mountain. I strained my tear-stained eyes to get a better view and swore to myself, as the mist closed in again, that I had seen movement.

Abu, the soldiers and I, looked at one another in amazement, but then resumed our trek to the south. We had made a discovery surpassing all others, undisturbed ruins of an ancient stone-working culture within two day's march of Jimville, but our rag-tag bunch was in no state to explore them. Triumph felt hollow in our somber state.

Soon afterwards we encountered a hunting party of primitive tribal types. Though exceedingly accommodating and affable, they would seem to be some lesser form of mortal, almost a union of traits of human and ape, if one can ignore the horrors of the thought. We used hand gestures to communicate and they revealed no knowledge of the mountain city. We parted and Abu continued his run of luck. We should be home tomorrow.

(Discover ruins, mountains, no village, no river, Tribal natives who are friendly).

Darkest Jimland
September 19, 1890.

I was somewhat suspicious when Abu offered to return Sir Harry's personal effects to Jimville, and now my reservations are confirmed. Curiosity, fear, or perhaps some form of respect for our late Great White Hunter has driven Abu to drink. He has imbibed the entirety of Sir Harry's private stock. Unfortunately Abu, a lifelong temperate, hadn't the stomach for it. He was thoroughly useless in his capacity as guide and disgustingly drunk into the bargain.

Between his clamorous bouts of retching I heard a strange chanting echoing off the stony mountainside. It seems that yesterday's happy ape-men had either been shamming or weren't as pleased with us as they let on. The ambush came from behind.

I wheeled about and sized up the lot. Ten primitive types armed with spears. My party consisted of Abu, three soldiers, and myself. With a guttural screeching, the natives charged. I urged the bearers onward and out of harm's way as the armed members of our expedition moved into position.

The natives covered the distance fast. Their weapons were as crudely fashioned as their makers were, useful only for a melee it would seem. Just as I could see the flaming hatred in their eyes, we loosed our first fusillade. Two of my stalwart soldiers felled foes while my shot ricocheted off the rocks. Abu grinned and readied his sword. Perhaps the brandy would come in handy after all.

Like a screaming, sweat-laden wave, the remaining natives closed. The stone tipped spears do not appear quite as crude when one is on the business end of them. Thrusting and tearing, enraged natives tore into our line. I dodged, but the soldier beside me fell. An immense brute with sloping forehead and receding chin planted himself before Abu and shoved his weapon home. The blow was perfect, plunging half its length into the brave heart of my trusted scout, exiting through his back. Abu looked surprised. His sword clattered to the rocks as he grasped the wooden shaft. He staggered backwards and then tumbled off the path, the path he had worked so hard to find for us, and was gone.

I had not a moment to reflect when suddenly a horrific buzzing form exploded from the mist to enter the fray. It appeared to be an insect, a dragonfly, but of gargantuan proportions that promptly ate one of the natives attacking us. The natives continued their attack, slaying one of my remaining brace of soldiers, but then fled with the dragonfly in pursuit. It apparently had acquired a taste for native flesh.

The sole remaining soldier and I fashioned a sort of stone cairn for our fallen comrades. Not as dignified as they warranted, but at least it would keep the local fauna from getting an easy meal.

I led the Expedition home myself. Just one soldier, ten bearers, and Your Humble Correspondent. I suppose, upon reflection, I must admit that Challenger was right in his admonitions. I have met with Trauma, Terror, and Death. While I think that Jimland has made me stronger, I know it has also made me wiser.

The final reckoning of the Second Bly Expedition:

Stalwart Sir Harry carried away by mythical bird
Two soldiers carried away by mythical bird
Two soldiers slain by ape-men
Brave Abu felled by a particularly bestial example of the same

Cash on Hand	\$12
Food	\$2
Loot	\$64
Female returned safely	\$5
Combat Won	\$20
Mountains, no river	\$54
Deserted village	\$37
Ruins	\$45
Total	\$239

Two points of experience. I add a point to my Save and one to my fight, owing to that scuffle with the ape-men.

Signed,

Miss Nelly Bly (Save 17, Shoot 8, Fight 6)