

THE **ELDRITCH** NEW ADVENTURES of
BECKY SHARP™

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Chapter One: 1840 — *The League of Zervan Akarana*

Becky Sharp knew trouble, and she knew men and the kind of trouble men had to offer. But what she saw in these men's eyes was different, unnerving. It was not the usual type of desire she inspired. This was calculating, scheming — in short, what she saw in her own eyes when she looked into her vanity glass.

These days, however, Becky had little to be vain about. Still, she took care to lift the tattered hem of her skirt whenever she had to step over where the horses had relieved themselves in the streets. She had, after all, been down before, and life had taught her how suddenly and unexpectedly fortunes could turn.

The men had followed her from the tavern and were now trailing her down the street of one of the disreputable sections of Bath. Well, that was their mistake. A couple of panderers with whom she consorted were chatting loudly on the corner which she and the men were approaching. Withdrawing one hand from her muff as though to adjust her frayed shawl, she flashed the signal for “danger.” The panderers caught it, stopped their talking and attentively looked up at the men following her. They tipped their hats to them, pretended to return to their discussion, and, when the men following Becky were several yards ahead, fell into step behind them.

Becky turned into an alley way that dead ended on an ancient wall covered with ivy. The men followed. When she turned to face them, she saw the panderers just entering the mouth of the alley behind her pursuers. Becky smiled.

Blades flashed in the hands of the panderers. “’ere, now! Oy!” one of them shouted out, and the men who had followed Becky turned to find they, too, had been stalked.

“You want a bit of that on our street — you’ll pay for it. One way or another. And you’ve picked the other.” The spokesman of the panderers spat in his attempt at bravado.

The men trailing Becky remained calm, and now that she had time to study them outside the dark, smoky tavern, she was struck with their height and how sturdy they were — muscular arms and thick necks and shoulders. The panderers apparently made a fresh appraisal of their potential adversaries as well and seemed hesitant now to close the distance needed to press the advantage their knives would give them.

“Help me!” Becky implored her suddenly reluctant rescuers.

Shamed, one of the panderers charged. The man he’d picked to attack lashed out a long, muscular arm, and the panderer slammed face first into a large, hard, open palm. Immediately, he felt fingers and thumb hook into his eyes and nose. He slashed with his knife at the extended arm. But he had hesitated in surprise and pain, so his captor had plenty of time to grab his wrist and stop the knife in mid-arc.

Then the man twisted the panderer around, held him tightly against his oak-like torso,

and dislocated the arm of his failed adversary: the arm of the hand that held the knife. The weapon dropped to the alley's floor.

"Go away," the man hissed into the panderer's ear. "Next time, it's your neck."

He shoved him half-way back up the alley and, seeing his partner had already fled, the panderer ran.

The men turned toward Becky.

"Who are you? What do you want?" she asked, voice slightly trembling. Almost involuntarily, she cast her gaze down to the place where the dropped knife lay.

Following her line of vision, the man who had disarmed the panderer firmly placed the sole of a boot on the blade. "No, no. No false hopes, Becky Sharp. We are soldiers in Her Majesty's service. And you are under arrest."

"Impossible. I've been found innocent by a court of law of any wrong doing in the matter of Joss Sedly's death," Becky protested coolly. "Whoever you are, you have no right —"

"Your late lover was in possession of sensitive intelligence involving rebels in the Punjab. You sold that information, Rebecca Sharp, and put many of Her Majesty's agents' lives at risk."

One of Becky's hands emerged from her muff and moved up to clasp tighter her frayed shawl around her throat. "I was hungry," she said meekly, eyes wide.

"And apparently willing that the wives and children of those agents go without husband or father to provide for them and thus go hungry in your stead. Fortunately, we intercepted the information in transit — which led us back to you. Now, come."

Becky's affected meekness faded, and, chin in the air, she joined the men who parted for her to come between them. "Raise your hands above your head," the spokesman said.

"What?"

He grabbed a wrist in each hand, pulled Becky's arms up and held them there. Then he nodded at his comrade, who immediately began patting down her body.

Becky started, affronted at the unwelcome familiarity. Her eyes shone with outrage at the soldier who held her wrists fast as she tried to writhe free from him and his groping partner.

"What do you think you are doing?" she hissed icily. "Get off!"

"Suddenly so demure and bashful?" the spokesman asked with a crooked grin. "Perhaps you would not protest so if we were to pay your accustomed fee?"

Then the search of her person was over, both soldiers released her, and the one who had poked and prodded her produced a small icon he had taken from her pocket. He held it up for his fellow to see.

He immediately snatched it away and observed it closely: the figure was that of a naked man's body with a lion's head. From its back sprouted four wings. Wrapped around the legs and torso were six coils of a great serpent whose head surmounted the lion's. In each hand, the creature held large, ancient keys. In its left, it also held a staff a traveler might employ.

The soldier held it to her face accusingly. "Where did you get this? Did you steal it? Or was it given in payment for services rendered?"

"You know it doesn't matter," his fellow soldier spoke for the first time. "She has been

touched —

“Many times and everywhere, I’m sure!”

“I mean by one of *them*. Look, it’s out of our hands now. We dare not conceal our discovery. *They* have ways of knowing things. We’ll be held accountable.”

Becky listened to this talk, unsure of how to take it all. Did the discovery of her talisman signify a change of fortunes for the better — did it indeed bring the luck the one who had bestowed it on her had promised? She sensed that it was better not to speak, lest she give away her ignorance of what significance this figure had for the men.

The men had ceased their disagreement. The one who had addressed her pocketed the icon, while the man who had searched her attempted to take her arm. She drew away.

“You do not put your hand on me again, sir,” she said.

“As you wish — milady,” the leader of the two said caustically.



Becky was brought to a small holding cell in which, once she was secured, the arresting soldiers left her without comment. Less than an hour later, a guardsman appeared, ordered the door unlocked and told her to come with him.

Becky followed him down a back staircase into a basement. She noticed that the door to which she was led contained a small, barred window through which food on a tray could be passed. She assumed, then, that she was being transferred from the holding cell to a more permanent one.

The guardsman unlocked the door, pulled it back, and beckoned silently for her to enter. She did, and he shut the door and locked it behind her. She heard his footsteps echoing as he walked away. But her eyes were focused on the silhouettes of two men before her in the dim cell. One was seated; the other stood a small distance behind him.

She backed against the door. Had she been brought here and left defenseless, with total disregard for what these other prisoners might do to her?

“There, there,” the seated man said. “No need to be afraid, I assure you.”

“That’s exactly what I would expect a man who intended to harm me to say,” she said. But now she had caught the aroma of freshly cooked food.

The seated man lit a candelabra, revealing a table prepared for dinner. On a clean plate was set a roasted chicken breast with sparkling silver beside it. “Are you hungry, my dear?” he asked.

“Ravenous,” Becky was compelled to admit in a small voice, though she did not move. She had eaten nothing since the day before: it was the off-season for Bath, and customers with whom she might ply her trade were few. She had managed to forget how hungry she was, until this fresh aroma reminded her — poignantly.

Now the man was pouring wine in goblets gleaming by the candelabra. “Come. Do not fear. Look. I’ll pour and drink from the same bottle. You have no need to fear being drugged.”

While his companion remained in shadow, the seated man looked safe enough. Almost comical, in fact. He wore a powdered wig, unmindful or uncaring that it sat crookedly on his head. He was of average height, thin build, his cheeks sunken, his face skull-like. His true hairline receded, making for a high forehead.

Becky saw that the wine had no effect on him. Her eyes returned to where they had been all but fixated before: on the succulent chicken breast. She descended upon it. Casually forsaking any attempt at decorum, she snatched the chicken up in her hands and began devouring it.

Her dinner companion laughed. “Very good. We do not stand on ceremony here. Eat! Eat and drink!”

“My young friend here,” he nodded toward the standing man, “is Benjamin Disraeli. You’ve heard of him, perhaps?”

Busy chewing on the tender breast meat, Becky shook her head “no.”

“No, no. Of course not. Disraeli has been dismal . . . to this point in his political career, anyway. But that is soon to change. I am the Magus,” he said. “Lately of the continent you call Australia.”

“I assume you were in a penal colony there? Given your current ‘lodgings,’” Becky said, rolling her eyes to indicate the cell around them, as she daintily licked her fingertips.

“Not at all. I am one of the Great Race of Yith.”

“Yith? Is that aborigines? But . . . you’re white.”

The Magus smiled. “At the moment. And my race has not been remotely aboriginal for . . . ages. The records of our place of origin were destroyed long ago. As for these ‘lodgings,’ as you put it . . . our current environment is necessary for us to conduct our business.”

Becky stopped licking her fingers and looked at him straight on. “What business would that be?”

The Magus produced the tiny figurine that had been taken from her person. “Let us begin with Zervan Akarana.” Becky looked at the winged, lion-headed man, entwined by a serpent. “The ancient god of boundless time,” the Magus crooned. “I see by your face that the name is unfamiliar. Perhaps you know him as ‘Aion,’ as he was redubbed by the Roman cult of Mithra who brought his worship to your own isle of Britain. Now, shall I tell you how you came into possession of this particular icon?”

“You tell me?” an incredulous Becky asked.

The Magus smiled. “First of all, I want to take you back to an episode at the young ladies academy where you once taught French in exchange for room and board. On one Walpurgis Night, you led one of your students in a séance — unknown to the head mistress who would have surely disapproved. This particular student was from the West Indies.”

Becky’s jaw had gone slack as this “Magus” casually recounted her past, an event she had not thought of herself for decades. “Miss Swartz,” she said in a small voice. “But how can you know —?”

“Because she was black and you were little more than a street waif yourself, you both were often ostracized from the company of the other, well-heeled young ladies,” the Magus continued. “Miss Swartz, you’ll remember, feared the ‘Obi,’ the spirits of her native West

Indian lore, would be summoned by your proposed seance. But she wished your favor so much that she went through with your occult exercise. On this innocent girl, you hoped to inflict something of the measure of your own undeserved suffering at the hands of others. Thus, it gave you pleasure to frighten her. Pleased you, that is, until Miss Swartz began to convulse.

“She began to speak in a language you did not know — that no one of this earth knew — which you dismissed as the gibberish of a hysterical girl. *Until* she addressed you in flawless French, though her efforts in your class had been halting at best. Do you remember what she said to you, Becky Sharp? Among other things? She said —”

“*Je vois vous,*” Becky completed the sentence as though in a trance herself, remembering afresh just how unnerving Miss Swartz’s tone and gaze were when she spoke those simple three words. Even decades later, it made her flesh creep.

“*Oui!*” the Magus said with a smile. “You were frightened then, were you not, Becky Sharp? You knew you would be summarily put out on the street if it were known you had caused the nervous breakdown of this heiress. To your relief, she became calmer, if somewhat detached. From then on, she watched you like a hawk. That unnerved you. But you dared not confront her with this, for fear you would cause her to speak of the *séance* and perhaps be overheard.

“Some time later, Miss Swartz began to experience strange nightmares of what she claimed were the Obi. It was around this time that she returned to her old, eager-to-be-friends persona, and you returned to despising her.”

“You are wrong, sir,” Becky said, trying to gain some sense of the control that she seemed to be losing more and more of since being taken from that Bath alley. “That episode had nothing to do with my obtaining this icon. I had it much later, years later, of a —”

“Of a lover. I know. And the episode I just related has *everything* to do with it. Becky Sharp, you are, at this moment, conversing with an extraterrestrial consciousness from your planet’s far distant past. Just as you did when you spoke with Miss Swartz between her seizure and the emergence of her nightmares. *Another* mind controlled her. Further, that alien consciousness you engaged during your *séance* was seeking, not the body of Miss Swartz, but *yours*, Becky Sharp.

“We Yithians, you see, are able to cast our minds across time and exchange them with chosen human vessels. From our perspective in the past, your planet’s future history exists in a haze of parallel, probable realities. We explore them all. One of our race — Yathoth — while inhabiting a host during one of your possible 19th centuries, read a novel that details your exploits up to just a few years ago: *Vanity Fair* will be its title.”

“A novel? About me? You can’t be serious.”

“I assure you, I am. Your adventures offered a perspective on British domesticity surrounding the Napoleonic Wars that promised to be most exciting — as opposed to the more detached point of view of the scholarly type we traditionally favor for possession.

“Using the novel’s clues to locate you, Yathoth sent his mind forward to the days preceding the onset of your adventures. After displacing your own mind, Yathoth planned to play out your role as the author detailed. Your little *séance* seemed apropos for the

switch. But imagine Yathoth's surprise when your brain proved impenetrable.

"At first, Yathoth was greatly disappointed, but he was also intrigued. He observed you in the person of Miss Swartz for several days. You drew forth passions in him, Becky Sharp, the expression of which the body of Miss Swartz would not facilitate. So Yathoth departed Miss Swartz's body, and you met him again, unknowingly, much later, as your lover, Lord Steyne."

"It was Steyne who gave me that icon . . . that . . ."

"Zervan Akarana? 'Boundless Time?' Yes. Do you grasp its significance now? Steyne had learned that you were not alone in your mind's resistance to Yithian possession. Others shared your peculiar brain chemistry which, unfortunately, cannot be replicated in our laboratories. These others, admittedly, tend to be few and far between, scattered throughout human history. Still, they, as you, can be useful."

"How so?" Becky played along, her mind awhirl. This "Magus" was mad. And whoever that other person — this Disraeli — was, he was *not* a legitimate politician. The only explanation was her captors had placed her in the holding cell for the insane.

"Our race is not to become involved with those races we inhabit and observe," the Magus answered. "Our travels through time are intended as a purely intellectual exercise. If we meddle, we will be withdrawn back into our own distant age and not allowed to return. We are constantly monitored, but have found a means to counteract this. Though not for long, lest we become conspicuous by our absence from the psychic chart. This room," he gestured about them, "has its walls padded with felt soaked in mercury, which does not allow our monitors' scans to pass through. From time to time, when I desire mobility and still wish to conceal my thoughts and actions, I venture about with a felt hat treated by the same mercurial salts."

Becky shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She remembered Steyne insisting on keeping his felt hat on when they made love. She had attributed it to some kink of his. But now —

"Yathoth broke the code of the Great Race when the two of you became involved," the Magus continued. "But, alas, as I said, our psychic forays are monitored. Yathoth's enthusiasm for you made him sloppy, and his actions were called into account.

"He is now quarantined in the remote past. But not before he could get *this* to you," the Magus held up again the figure of Zervan Akarana, "so others of our secret society within the Great Race could recognize you, if need be."

"What do you want with me, then?" Becky asked.

"As I told you, your brain chemistry is almost unique. Your mind cannot be possessed by my people, nor can your thoughts be read by them. Unless a Yithian is purposely attempting to probe your mind — and Yathoth's interest in you was an aberrant one for my kind — you are effectively invisible to us. Another such potential agent, equal to your capabilities and capacity for amorality, will not be born within the parameters of the relevant time period until it is too late to do anything. And *then* it will be too late for all.

"Remember, from the Yithian perspective, your human history exists in a state of probabilities. Parallel realities. Some in which even the fiction of *Vanity Fair* is true. But there are certain junctures, catastrophic junctures, in which all may collapse into one . . . doom. Such a juncture is approaching just after the first quarter of the twentieth

century.”

“Then how can I be of any use, since I am nearing middle age in the first half of the nineteenth? Surely you cannot expect me to survive?”

The Magus smiled and returned the image of Zervan Akarana to her. “We do, actually. Mister Disraeli here is a liaison between my people, the Great Race, and the Meonia, an ancient order charged with overseeing the destiny of Britain. You see, there are those within the British government — as young Disraeli here is being groomed to be one day — who maintain higher allegiances to those whose purposes supersede that of the temporal powers they also serve.”

Then Disraeli spoke for the first time, addressing Becky. “I have come to understand, Miss Sharp, that the world is governed by very different personages from what is imagined by those who are not behind the scenes. But, I assure you, *we* are on the side of the angels.”

“Isn’t Lucifer supposed to be an angel?” Becky asked in a tone that managed to be both guileless and caustic at once.

Disraeli slightly cocked his head to the side. “A *fallen* one, yes. But it is not with the Devil that the Meonia — and you, if you become our agent — are allied. Refuse us, however, and you *will* meet with Lucifer, I promise, much sooner than you have ever expected.”

“I am slated for execution, then?” Becky asked, her voice suddenly small. “Is that what you are saying?”

“You became a traitor to your country when you passed on those military secrets; you willingly aligned yourself with Her Majesty’s enemies.”

Becky’s face paled. “Why should I believe you? Both of you . . . you’re mad men! And you’re prisoners yourself! What possible clout could you have with the government?”

“Soon, you will find, Becky Sharp,” the Magus said calmly, “that while Kings and Queens have their own schemes, their plans, on occasion, will serve to carry along our own.”

“Yours? You mean the otherworldly Great Race and this fantastical ‘Meonia’ who ‘truly’ govern the British Isles?” Becky asked. “What you’re saying is impossible!”

“Another of our agents, when confronted with this reality, determined thereafter to believe three impossible things before breakfast each day. I suggest you try hard to wrap your mind around this *one*,” the Magus said. “An opportunity is about to be presented to you, one which those who make it will not understand why. But they will obey. And if you accept, then you have your freedom and your life. But say nothing of our meeting: make no mention of either the Great Race or the Meonia.

“Miss Sharp, you haven’t finished your meal. You’d best be about it. Our interview is done and you will be returned to your cell forthwith. Eat! Eat!”

Becky, however, had lost her appetite.



As the Magus had said, she was soon escorted back to where she'd been held before. At sunrise, the two men who had arrested her rejoined their captive.

"Good morning, Miss Sharp," the spokesman of the two, whose name was Campbell, said. "A fine one to die, isn't it?"

Death? She was going to pay the ultimate debt, then? But, of course: had she really come to expect the promised option to materialize? Those men were insane! Very well then; she could not rely on succor from powerful agencies within the government. She would have to resort to basic — but definite — rights:

"Am I to be executed without a trial, then?" she asked.

"Yes. You are to be hung until dead. Your tongue will protrude, your eyes will bulge, and you will have soiled your petticoats. All very undignified."

"Such pretty talk. Why do you take the pains to torture me with anticipation?" Becky asked.

"So that you might consider seriously the opportunity I am about to offer. You are, if nothing else, a survivor, Miss Sharp."

"Opportunity? *What* opportunity?"

"You may, or may not, have read the sensitive intelligence you passed on. We only have your word as to the matter, and we can't trust you. That information is still sensitive and shall remain so for the foreseeable future. We cannot let you go and risk our operatives' lives. We could kill you, imprison you indefinitely, or 'bring you into the fold' as it were, of Special Military Unit. But then you're in for life."

"I live, then. With at least a modicum of freedom. Very well, I accept. What happens now?"

"Why, we three head for Africa. To the land of Kor. There are credible rumors of a natural resource there of extraordinary value to Her Majesty. If it can be harnessed, then her reign — and the supremacy of the British Empire — will be secured throughout our century and the one following. Indeed, into the next millennium."

"And, for some reason," Becky said, "this requires a woman's stealth instead of a man's blustering frontal attack. Is this resource located in the realm of some fierce tribal chieftain you wish me to seduce, then slit his throat while he sleeps?"

"Not at all. In fact, the Amahagger people inhabiting the environs of Kor are a *matriarchal* society. Among them are many who desire to topple the current cruel queen. We intend to see that they succeed, and then set you up as their new sovereign — a puppet ruler, sympathetic to Her Majesty's interests."

"And if all fails, and I draw the wrath of this terrible queen?"

"Well. Among the qualities which recommend you for this mission — your sex, your sense of preservation — there is also that of your expendability."

"I see. But why do these Amahaggers not rebel on their own and set up a ruler of *their* choosing?"

"They are terrified of their queen, 'She-Who-Must-Be-Obeded.' And of the ghost city of Kor which stands between them and her source of power. It is thrice cursed, and no one dare pass through it lest its doom falls upon him."

Chapter Two: 1841 — *The Doom That Came to Kor*

From Becky Sharp's Journal:
March 18, 1841

The revolution has failed before it began. I write these words in a sepulchre, one of an infinite number of caves near Kor. It has been adapted into a holding cell for me. I leave this record with no hope that any one may read it, but to occupy my mind as I await the inevitable.

We departed for Africa three months ago. While the journey by ship was uneventful, the trek into the interior was miserable. Perspiration drenched me, mosquitoes worried me, and my progress over the rough terrain was rendered more awkward than necessary, swathed as I was in a ridiculous dress that reached to my ankles and encumbered my legs. It was mere foolishness that my colleagues Campbell and Black insisted on propriety here in the wilds, when I might have eased my plight by borrowing a spare pair of their trousers.

We finally reached the settlement of the natives that live under the rule of "She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed," and they were much impressed when I removed my helmet and they saw my reddish blond hair. They took it as a portent that their deliverer had arrived. But those who met us bade me quickly cover my head, lest reports of my fair hair draw the attention of their queen.

Captain Campbell spoke in Arabic to the natives, these "Amahaggers." A map was prepared to lead us to the lost city of Kor and then unto the cliff beyond it, where we would find the caverns containing the coveted source of power.

The following morning, before sunrise, we set off. We arrived at Kor by noon. The sight of the city was ominous, and to our minds, weakened by exhaustion, the Amahaggers' fear of it seemed most sensible. We determined we would pass through and not spend the night there.

The dead city, with its majestic temple and ornate buildings, was a veritable eighth wonder of the ancient world. Still, we were willing to leave it to others to explore and exited Kor with much relief as the sun set. Before us, now, loomed the cliff we must needs ascend in the morning.

Though difficult, the climb was uneventful. We found the natural tunnel which, Captain Campbell remarked, appeared to have been formed by an explosion of lava. Journeying through the cavern, we came to a great rift, but our way had been prepared: a bridge of loosely connected slats swung over the abyss which we needed to cross.

I hesitated there at the threshold of destiny, even after having come all this way. My colleagues were having none of it, and positioned me between them, so turning and fleeing was not an option. The bridge rattled and swung, but the slats were firm, and, after exceedingly long minutes, we were on the other side.

There, in a small grotto which opened into another, much larger cavern, we discovered a man's skull possessing but a single tooth. On the cave wall, before which the skull lay, was rendered in primitive painting a huge death's head. "Self portrait?" I asked the skull on the ground. I ventured closer and found that, in my rush toward gallows humor, I had not completely perceived what was on the cave wall: the painting was of a huge, skull-like *mountain* rising out of the sea. In the foreground, there were natives in dugouts paddling away from it. I had no time to ponder whether this represented whimsy or memory on behalf of whomever had painted the image, for Captain Campbell insisted we not tarry in this natural antechamber but proceed into the huge cavern. Here was said to issue that which would render the reign of Victoria nigh everlasting.

At first we saw nothing but rock, though it glowed faintly with rosy light emanating from the center of the cave's floor. The effect was soothing, sensuous even, and when the ground below us began to rumble, neither I, nor the men with me, offered to flee. Instead, a feeling of ecstasy intensified, and we had no doubt that all would be well.

At that point, before us, a column of ruby red flame erupted from the center of the floor and touched the cavern roof, which was a good thirty feet above. Our countenance was made ruddy, and the sense of bliss mounted. I found myself wondering what effect this phenomenon might have on the act of love. . . .

It was then that I noticed the two men were making their way toward me. Dubious of their intentions, I still hesitated to move for fear of losing the ruby rapture that took me. Then their hands locked upon me. I struggled, but I was helpless before their desire. And then, I realized —

They were dragging me to that pillar of flame! And even as the realization of their intention broke upon me, it was too late, and I was thrust into the light . . .

Where I expected searing pain, the fire bathed me in a sensuous warmth, held me transfixed in bliss, as my clothing, touched by flame, withered away and I stood naked. Though handsome yet in early middle-age, in that light I felt my youthful beauty flush through me afresh. To judge by the expressions of the men, I was indeed a goddess incarnate. My mind and body filled with the sensation that I was without rival on the earth —

Ah, it was not so, as we were all soon to learn.

The pillar of light suddenly withdrew into the floor of the cavern and into whatever depths from which it had issued. The men continued to gaze at me, worshipfully, and when I demanded the shirt of one of them to cover myself, they responded meekly — if reluctantly.

"You planned to throw me into the flame all along; you could not have known if I would survive it or not!"

"That," smiled Captain Campbell as the residual effects of the flame receded and he regained his full presence of mind, "was a risk we were willing for you to take."

“Yes. ‘Expendable’ was how I believe you described me.”

“Fie! Let us be friends, Rebecca. It was not our wish that you perish, for then this adventure would all be for nothing. Your youthful beauty is returned, and, I daresay, superseded. What more could any woman desire? And, if the rumors of the flame of Kor are true, your mortal substance is nigh eternally young. For you, the kingdom of Heaven is come — as well as for Her Majesty and those to whom she would give it.”

Ah — but to sit on the right or the left hand of divinity would not be for the Queen of England to grant. When we returned to make the appointed *rendez-vous* with the rebellious faction, we were intercepted instead by the men of “She-Who-Must-Be-Obeded.” Campbell and Black fired but could not re-powder their muskets quickly enough, and the natives swarmed over us. “She-Who-Must-Be-Obeded” had anticipated the revolt, and, as one of the Arab speaking natives told Captain Campbell, our collaborators were already in the torturous process of a slow death.

“We are to understand,” Campbell informed Private Black and myself, “that we can expect no less.”

Upon entering the caves of Kor where “She” held court, I was separated from the men. My pack in which I carried my effects was rifled through before it was thrown in my cell with me. I retained pencil and paper inside it, and with that I have recorded my final adventure. It seems terrible to be so freshly filled with the essence of life only to lose it all, but I have no doubt that this “She” will not spare me.

There are footsteps in the passageway outside. My time has come.



Escorted by muscular mutes, Becky Sharp was led into the personal chamber of their mistress. Sitting at the Queen’s side, reclining on her bosom, was none other than Captain Campbell. The woman beside him was astonishingly beautiful: finely sculpted features, alabaster flesh and dark tresses that fell to her waist. Her delicate hands and long graceful fingers stroked Campbell’s bare chest — Becky still wore his shirt. He seemed the willing slave of Ayesha — for that was the name of “She-Who-Must-Be-Obeded.”

Ayesha then spoke in her Arabic tongue, and Campbell translated:

“Rebecca Sharp, I know that you have partaken of the flame of Kor. My vision traverses great spaces, and I saw from afar you three enter my land. When your fellow conspirators spoke of your plan under torture, I allowed you to continue on so that you might serve my purpose.”

“Why should I serve you?” Becky asked, looking the queen in the eye.

Campbell posed the question in Arabic. Ayesha smiled, answered, and as he translated, Campbell smiled as well. “Because, from what I have heard of you, Rebecca Sharp, you always serve your own best interests.”

Ayesha continued: “What think you of the force that flows through you now? Extension of days is given to you, and I myself have lived over two thousand years. But

what is length of days if this world you must inhabit is made desolate? If the doom of Kor becomes that of all?"

Becky, careful to keep her eyes level with Ayesha's, asked soberly, "How can that be?"

"I am Arabian by birth," Ayesha spoke through her interpreter. " 'An Arab of the Arabs,' a descendent of Yarab, not Ishmael, who inhabited the land long before Abraham's seed. In the ancient city Ozal I was born. But older than Ozal — older than Yarab himself — is the Thousand Pillared City of Irem, which bears the same mark of doom as Kor.

"Irem died in one day, when things older than men rose up and blighted its proud, beautiful gardens. The only clue to its destruction was inscribed in one of Irem's fallen pillars: 'That is not dead which may eternal lie . . . and in strange aeons even death may die.' It was not so written in the ruins of Kor when I came — yet the cause of this city's desolation was clear to me, for I had also seen Irem. Though the last priest of Kor left an inscription that his great city fell after twenty-five years of pestilence, 'twas only to conceal the disgrace that some greater power shamed his own god.

"For Irem, there was no hope when what stirred beneath the desert sands rose up, but for Kor there was a power in the mountain nearby that might have repelled its destroyer. Alas! It was only after the city's passing that the mountain side opened up the pathway to the pillar of fire. And so Kor *was* purged, hundreds of years after it fell, of the Abomination pleased to dwell in the ruins it had made. For then he came, he who dwelt by the flame — a seer and a holy man named Noot — who channeled the power of that hallowed light into the wreck of Kor and sent its destroyer beyond the veil of atoms."

"Was that his skull in the grotto?" Becky asked.

"Yes."

"Then he did not partake of the flame as we have."

"Aye, and was loath that I should, when I came to him," said Ayesha. "Only his death allowed my immersion. In this Noot was much mistaken. For such horrors as the Doom that Came to Kor appear throughout the world, and *those* Great Old Ones will not conveniently appear near the Fire of Life. But had Noot bathed in the flame, then he like I — and you, now, Becky Sharp — would have that force within him, and he could carry it and strike where he would. In you it is presently but a seed, and neither had I the ability to wield it at first, but in years to come you shall. Watch! I will show you!"

Ayesha barked something at the mute who guarded her door. He nodded his consent, stepped out, and in a few minutes Private Black was brought into her chamber, held by her men.

His struggles ceased as he laid his eyes on Ayesha. They filled with the same bliss that shone from Captain Campbell's. Ayesha stood, raising her arms and dropping her mantle from her. She nodded, and the mutes released Black and fled the chamber. Black still stood as though the sight of her was the beatific vision, and then Ayesha struck him down from across the room, her force like sheet lightning dropped from the sky.

And Black was dead.

Becky sat down — hard — on a silken pillow pallet behind her. Here was a ruthlessness manifested that stunned even her. Captain Campbell continued to smile up at his beloved, and Ayesha turned and spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, which Campbell then translated:

“At least one white head must be raised on the stakes with the dark ones, to show that ALL who disobey me can expect no mercy. Otherwise, I would encourage future insurrections, and more blood would be shed. Since this man —” she indicated the fallen Black — “was not as useful as the one who may speak for me, it is only reasonable that he should be the one to die.

“Now, hear me Becky Sharp — another abomination like unto that which destroyed Kor festers in the waters at the bottom of the world. So Noot foresaw. I might venture forth myself to confront it with the power of the flame inside me, but love holds me here, as it ever has, waiting for the man who traverses the centuries to return to Kor.

“The precise season of his arrival is unknown to me, and to have endured two thousand years among the dead and imbecilic and then miss *him* — no, it must *not* all be for nothing! Yet, it *shall* be so, if that thing some have called Tulu comes to power, for then nothing human can abide.

“Therefore, I send you in my stead, Becky Sharp, in whom the power to repel Tulu now resides! I see in your expression you already wonder how I might hold you accountable once you have crossed the borders of my kingdom. I need do no more than I have already, by giving you a youth that will not fade for millennia. Combined with your shrewd mind and the power that resides in you — you may live out your extended life as a queen. Yet, what life will you have, Becky Sharp, if Tulu is allowed to rise up and blast the world beyond human habitation?”

Becky held her lips pressed together, grinding her teeth. It was an old habit she had, a way of venting displeasure when it would not be in her best interests to let the source of irritation know her mind. She did not want this task, but if the entire world were made as Kor —

Eyes projecting a calculated meekness and deference, she asked,

“What would you have me do, oh Queen?”

