

## Monster

Consuella's patience was running out. It was well past one in the morning and the brats wouldn't settle down. How could they have so much energy? They'd begun hiking around since before ten that morning. Five hours later they'd made this camp. The four o'clock nap had definitely been a mistake she decided.

She was hungry but she couldn't bring herself to eat one of the many hot dogs they'd brought along. The kids didn't seem to have any problem eating them, though. Or running around. If she wasn't careful one of them might wander off and get lost.

The idea struck her. A story would settle them all down around the fire. Maybe lull them a bit.

"Gather 'round girls," she had to raise her voice to be heard. She doubted the park would ever be the same after their visit. "I have a story to tell."

"Oh goody! Is it a ghost story? I love ghost stories." Sandy Jones seemed to love everything. It was cute even while it got on her nerves. At least the camp out would be over soon. Consuella focused her attention back on the storytelling.

"Not quite a ghost story; it's a story about a monster! The Devil That Is Many."

Shrill little girl screams of anticipation promised to give her a headache. Still, they were all sitting down finally. Maybe they'd grow lethargic soon.

"Ok. Now our story begins with a young woman...."

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Her name was Maria. She'd gone camping with her boyfriend, Albert, around a lake not too far from here. Now Albert wanted to get close to Maria so he decided to tell her a scary story so that she'd want to stay very close to him so he'd protect her. It's a little trick boys have that they think we're not wise to.

So with them sitting on a boulder looking out over the water Albert began to tell his own scary story....

Some time ago, Albert had left his easy college life to go into Mexico and study some ruins he'd found marked on an ancient map. Way out into nowhere, where the jungle covers all. At the last village before civilization ended completely, he'd found some men to guide him and to help him catalog and chronicle everything he was sure he'd find. Albert was quite smart and had managed to figure out where the map led. And now he knew he was very close. From here he just had to cross less than twenty miles of jungle. Not that twenty miles is a small amount in the jungle but Albert was as determined as he was smart. Twenty mile and then he'd be at the entrance into the into the Valle Blanco. That means the White Valley in English. And once in the White Valley, he knew he'd find the legendary Follower's Temple.

The night before his expedition was to leave, an old man came up to him. "Don't go to the lost temple," the old man pleaded. "The place is cursed and all who go there die. The Devil That Is Many, lives there. It forever guards the valley."

"Yeah, sure. If there's a guard, then there's something worth guarding. A treasure perhaps. And just what treasure might it be? Some fabulous lost Aztec treasure I'm sure." Actually that was what Albert was hoping to find but he wanted to hear it from the old man.

"Please, sir. You must listen. Legend has it that when the conquistadores came and the power of the Aztec priesthood was all but destroyed, the high priest came up with a plan. He had his followers move as much of their treasure as they could in secret to the remote temple which you seek. The Follower's Temple.

"In that building, hidden in the most devious manner and guarded by the most ingenious traps, was the treasure placed. Using the evil magics, the high priest summoned dark spirits into this world. The high priest did then begin to sacrifice his followers to these dark spirits. He hated the conquistadores more than anything. He commanded that the spirits would place protections upon the treasure and keep it away from the greedy conquistadores. The temple and its grounds ran red with blood that day and night.

"Not yet satisfied, the obsessed priest did one last thing. When the night was darkest the priest made one special sacrifice. Using the darkest of magics, now thankfully forgotten, he called upon the powers of evil to create a guardian. Purest evil it was. The creature was to be bound to the temple by the magic of the spirits. A dark and eternal guardian."

"Do not take these young fools to that place," pleaded the old man. "They are the future of our village. Please do not go! You will destroy them all!"

Albert smiled. "If they're the future of your village then you will have a rich future indeed. Thanks for your advice and don't you worry. When we return, we will all be rich." With that Albert walked around him and went to bed so he could get an early start in the morning.

The next afternoon saw them far away from the village, leaving their motorcycles to proceed on foot. The jungle was not easily crossed but they managed.

Following the ancient map, they finally found and entered the White Valley. Nothing grew within this cursed valley. Nothing living moved except for Albert and his men. No animals, no bugs, nada. Albert and his intrepid group quickly discovered why it was called the White Valley. Bones. The whole valley was carpeted in bones. Most were ground to dust and covered with mold but they were still bones. Human bones.

Albert led the way whistling. Shuddering and murmuring prayers under their breath, his helpers trailed after him through the cursed valley to the Follower's Temple. There, with much trepidation....

'Lisa, that means they were scared and uncertain. May I continue now? Thank you.'

...With much trepidation they setup their camp and did some preliminary scouting. One of the guides, a fellow named Jose, disappeared that evening. Albert was sure he'd gotten scared and run away but the others weren't so sure. Jose was a brave man and they'd heard the stories. Old stories of people who came to the White Valley and never returned. But Albert wouldn't listen. He'd come a long way and had spent all the money he had to find the Follower's Temple.

The explorers spent many days looking around the large step pyramid trying to find a way inside. The pyramids of the Americas are not like those of Egypt. They have no chambers inside - only this one was rumored to be different.

Searching about the large pyramid took time. They found a few pots and a few other artifacts

but none of the gold they had come in search of. At last on the third day they found the way into the huge structure. A secret entrance near the top led down into the pyramid.

In the first chamber they found Jose. He had apparently died when a large ceiling stone fell on his head. They were saddened by this but determined to press on. They would bury him later. The glitter of gold now burned bright in each man's eye.

Lower and lower into the pyramid they went. First Enrique then Salvadore fell victim to the ancient traps left by the high priest. There were only three men left with Albert and they were beginning to get scared. Had Salvadore not been further up the corridor scouting ahead, they would all have died in a clever trap that spanned the length of an entire corridor.

But by this time the gold called out to them in a voice that overwhelmed reason. Onward they persevered through dark, dank corridors and down treacherously steep stairs. At last they found the bottom chamber. Here was the gold. More than they had ever imagined. It filled a whole chamber from nearly floor to ceiling. Incredible works of Aztec art long preserved. Then they heard the bloodcurdling scream from behind them.

Panicked, they spun around but saw nothing to account for the scream. A quick head count determined that Carlos was gone. Could he be the one who screamed? There did not seem to be anyone who could have but why did he not answer their calls? Regretfully they left the great treasure room to search for Carlos afraid that he might be injured.

Albert insisted that they could cover more ground if they split up. Carlos could be in a trap and need immediate medical assistance. He really wasn't too keen on the idea of walking around the maze of corridors alone, but he was most eager to get back to the treasure. Juan went straight, Philippe went right, and Albert took the left passageway. They would meet back at the treasure room

in half an hour.

After ten minutes of wandering the maze, warily searching for traps and jumping at shadows, Albert thought he saw Carlos go across a side passage up ahead. Shouting and running to catch up, he reached the side corridor only to find it empty.

Discouraged and a bit worried, he headed back to the treasure room. On the way there he thought he heard something down another side passageway. Quietly, he began sneaking down the side corridor. His flashlight found Juan in the darkness, his face frozen in a mask of terror. Juan had his foot stuck into the floor. Evidently the floor stone was only as thick as a few sheets of paper. The evil priests had downward pointing blades added all underneath the cover. Juan's foot had been caught and badly sliced up. They would probably have to cut the foot off to get the body out.

After a quick examination of Juan's body, Albert determined that the foot wounds were not what had killed him. Half of Juan's head was missing. There was a gun laying on the floor next to him but he apparently hadn't been able to fire even a single shot. The eerie part was that there was no blood except down in the blade-filled hole. Ever the stoic hero, Albert got sick on the spot.

He found himself staring at the gun as he wiped his mouth. He didn't like guns. Respectable people shouldn't carry guns, after all the police would always be there to protect him. That was what his parents always told him. Unfortunately, he didn't see any police now. Something was horribly wrong here and he didn't think it was going to be solved with words. Uneasily, he looked at the firearm.

Another shattering scream echoed down the corridor walls. He twisted around in a circle but he didn't see anything. With all the echoes he wasn't even sure which way the sound had come from. With newfound resolve Albert took the pistol. Slowly he began making his way through the darkness

back toward the treasure chamber.

Halfway back his flashlight began to go out. He was on the edge of panic and the several wrong turns he seemed to have made didn't help. So it was with a flickering light, rapidly beating heart, and panic looking over his shoulder that he finally made it back to the treasure chamber which was still lit by their lantern. There he found Carlos.

He was sitting on a pile of treasure with a look of horror on his face. Albert started towards him to try to bring him around when he heard a noise behind him.

Spinning on his heel, he brought the pistol up and almost shot Philippe. Philippe threw up his hands and almost fell over backward scrambling away.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot! It's just me jefe! It's just me." Philippe seemed very shaken and almost being shot couldn't account for it all.

"Philippe! Dammit! I nearly shot you. I think there's someone else down here. I found Juan but someone had killed him. Hey, Carlos doesn't look so good," he ended with a slightly distracted air.

"I'm scared, Alberto. Something is not right here. I think we should leave while we still can." Philippe was looking around nervously. "Let's get Carlos and go."

"Maybe you're right." Albert was looking around nervously now. He picked up their lantern and a golden amulet from the treasure pile in one hand. "Come help me with Carlos, Philippe. I think he's in shock." He then bent down to get his other arm around Carlos.

Together, they got Carlos up and then froze.

"Alberto. Carlos...he is cold." Just then Carlos' head fell forward and the hair on the back of his head flipped over to reveal the gaping hole where his brains should have been.

They dropped Carlos as one and Albert began racing towards the pyramid exit seven stories up. "Wait for me, Alberto! Wait for me!" Philippe's cries fell on panic deafened ears. They ran.

Six stories and several hundred yards later Albert had to stop and breathe. Huge wracking breaths of air he took in. His side hurt so much he could barely keep himself standing. Philippe came staggering up after a few minutes.

"We are almost there Alberto. Just a little further, " Philippe gasped.

Albert nodded and began staggering up the stairs to the last floor. After a moment Philippe joined him.

At the top of the stairs was a short corridor. The last of the daylight filtered into the hall from outside. As one they began moving toward the exit. When they were a scant five feet away, Philippe stopped Albert.

"Alberto. We've endured a great deal but I'm afraid I can't let you leave."

Albert put his hand on the pistol handle. "What do you mean you can't let me leave. Are you the one who killed the others Philippe? Was it you? Did you somehow do all that? You want the treasure all for yourself!"

"Alberto, Alberto," he said shaking his head. "You have it all wrong. Philippe never killed anyone." Albert relaxed only a little. "Do you still have that little amulet so that we have proof we were here? Proof that you found the treasure?"

"Yeah," he said, the very picture of wary caution. "It's right here." He held the amulet out to his side by the chain.

"Now tell me, what does that have to do with this silliness about not letting me leave?"

"Bueno. Bueno. I'll explain in a moment. Can you see the sunset from where you stand?"

It seems so long since I've seen a sunset."

Seeing that Philippe seemed content to stand some ten feet away, Albert gave a long look but kept listening for footsteps from Philippe. "Yeah, I can see it. It's a real beaut', too."

"That is good, Alberto. You know, you are the first blonde man I've seen since the last of the Conquistadores died. I'm afraid it's time for you to join them."

As Albert spun around, the creature who looked and acted like Philippe changed. Hair and scales sprang out from all over as the clothes seemed to melt away. The face elongated and became filled with fangs. The fingers and toes were all suddenly tipped with two inch long razors and to top it all off it seemed to have gained six inches and a hundred pounds worth of growth.

Still spinning, Albert fell down trying to back away. He reached the edge of the entrance just in time to see the lantern and amulet bounce over the side where his shock-loosened grip had allowed them to fall. Tilting slightly, the pistol lay balanced on the edge. The last red rays of the sunset were reflected in the monster's eyes.

"Too bad, Alberto," the creature said in a deep, gruff voice. "It seems that by leaving with some of the treasure, you have broken the spell holding me here. I'm free to go now from this prison. Muchos gracias."

"No," Albert said in denial. "A monster. This can't be real. You can't leave. You can't be real. This isn't happening." Albert was rapidly becoming incoherent.

"Oh, but I can...and it is. Thanks to you, Alberto. Thanks to you. Regretfully, I cannot allow you live. That part of the curse still remains." The creature took a step forward.

"No!" Albert shouted. "No!" Diving, he reached for the gun.

Gunshots shattered the night's peace.

...And it seemed that the young man's story ploy had worked. Maria was snuggled into the young man's lap just as he wanted. They sat in silence looking over the lake.

"So," Maria said after some time had passed. "Let me guess. After killing the monster you came back to the university?"

Albert was startled for a second. "Who me? Oh, after I found where the amulet had fallen, I first went back to the village and told the villagers what had happened. I left before the funerals. The university didn't believe about the monster but they were very excited about the amulet. After several days of being grilled by eager profs, speaking the journey logs onto tape, and writing 'til I thought my hand would fall off, I finally said 'enough' and invited you out here."

"I saw the amulet," Maria told him musingly. "In a guarded display case over in the museum hall. Quite a story, if even half of it turns out to be true."

"You've been away a long time, Albert. Did you miss me?"

"Oh, yes! I most certainly did." Albert leaned back a little then Maria felt him snuggle closer.

"You know," he said, his voice deepening, "With a little practice the fellow may have actually been able to hit the monster and live to tell the tale."

Looking into the reflection of the water. Maria began to scream.

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"Gee, Consuella," began little Nancy Coolidge frowning, "that sure was a scary story."

"Call me Maria, I never really liked my middle name...and yes it was a scary story."

"I don't like that story." Stated little Lisa Miles firmly.

"I didn't either. That wasn't just scary! It was gross!" Mareela exclaimed, her delicate sensibilities ruffled, "Those poor people."

"Yes, it was gross and scary, too," Maria agreed as hair and scales began to sprout from her body and her clothes began to melt away, "All the more so because it's true!" Shriill screams and monstrous laughter vied for dominance in the dark night.

The park truly was never was the same afterward.