

Forgotten

By Diego Morello (2nd prize)

Stratified sedimentary accretions outlined the outer edges of the mat, ever so slightly raised from the grainy film of still-living biota that covered the bottom floors of the basin. Half a mile wide, and half over again across, the shallow waters, warm and rich in minerals, bloomed in the vivid colours generated by the resident archaeal and bacterial populations. Two lone figures, dark and minute against the raw scale of the scenery, trafficked along either side of the basin.

Slackening the bindings on her pack, she sat down by the edge of one of the many drops facing the vents, her knees lamenting the move audibly with the snap of strands of tautening of sinew and bone. Field work ill-suited her these days - what with old age creeping in, as well as a general sense of dissatisfaction at the state of the world.

Lighting a cigar withdrawn from a tin box in her pack, her gaze wandered eastward.

Dotted by unlikely scatterings of erratic boulders and other refuse left by past glacial migrations the landscape still held onto a certain sense of yawning, primal antiquity, although the violence of its recent re-birth prevailed in the raw contour of the earth.

What land had once been covered by permafrost and perennial ices had now thawed, freeing all of the debris it had trapped in its ancient wake. Now, for as far east as the eye could stretch shallow pools of stagnant, knee-deep waters bubbled over with heavy refractory silts. Humps of rotting plant matter as well as the occasional carcass, previously left intact by the crushing forces that had once trapped it, lay misshapen, blackening in the tepid sun.

-All in all, it's a downright mess- she resolved wryly.

Sipping on some lukewarm tea from her thermos flask, as if influenced by the changing winds, her gaze left the glacial barren, moving north-westward.

There a lone spire of raw bedrock, breaking free of the sodden, fuming earth, pierced the rotting tundra like a colossal, crooked finger. The encampment, a motley collection of prefabricated huts squatting in its shadow, was ever tormented by the gales that whistled incessantly through the rocks. Strange rocks, those. The anthropologist attached to the expedition was having a field day exploring and cataloguing the murals and petroglyphs left in the vicinity of - never on, strangely - that ancient place of worship, even if going a bit mad while at it. As for her, the biology side of things was quite enough to deal with and thank you very much. Never mind that she had to man an undermanned, underfunded expedition, that place gave her the chills - it was downright eerie.

Still the whole stint was going well. Plenty of interesting, long-buried and forgotten bugs had resurfaced from the basin. The place had, after all, once been a highly geo-active site, its waters warmed by vast underground magma chambers. Once, long ago, before the heat was spent and the furnace-fires turned ashen cold, whole ecosystems would have depended on the chemical exudates of the vents, as processed by the chemosynthetic bacteria that clung to the chimneys and smokers. Now, those dark pits on the lower floor of the basin yawned open like hungry mouths, their depths dark and inscrutable.

Finishing the last dregs of her tea and cigar, she rose up, knees still creaking, and descended the first of the rough-cut steps that led to the only passage that cut through the basin. Her colleague, she saw, had started doing the same.

"Colleague" she mulled that word over.

No matter how long they had been together, and that she was now in the privacy of her own thoughts, old customs die hard. "Can't teach an old bear new tricks" she resolved, not for the first time. After all, they had been exactly that, colleagues, for the largest part of her forty-seven years of age, having first met nearly thirty odd years ago. It still struck her as impossible that it had taken so long for her to realize the obvious. It struck her even harder that it had taken Marie' just as long, she always was the smarter one, after all.

-Guess she had to wait for the old bear-

Today, Marie' was collecting samples by the southern edge of the basin. Some of the earlier isolates

they had derived from there had shown promising growth patterns, as well as hinted at the production of some interesting bio-active, possibly bactericidal, compounds. What with the recent rise in antibiotic resistance all around the world, it was worth the extra time and effort spent, they had decided. It might finally bring in some extra funding too, which they sorely needed.

She could see her now, a dark figure silhouetted against the dying afternoon light. They'd be heading back to camp now, another day's work done and dusted, listen to Howard's manic description of some new site of anthropological significance and then head to bed, at last.

She was growing preoccupied for the man, she had to admit. Increasingly, he was becoming more and more reclusive, poring over his work, always alone and often working late at night

As she continued along the path, the light in the basin seemed to grow smudged - ahead, Marie's silhouette had become hazy and undefined.

For a moment, her eyes were drawn away north, to the tip of the spire, still visible over the edge of the basin. The horizon in that direction was seething, seemingly boiling over.

Maddening things crept along that thinning line.

Instinct made her turn back to the path, blinking away the tears. When she blinked again Marie's silhouette had gone.

Gripped by a sad panic, a complete inability to speak or comprehend, she fell to the ground. Then, it seemed to her in her delirium, that the wind had changed. A noise like a voice whistling through her very bones and sinew rode it. And at that moment, she felt, that finger of rock moved.