

THE IMPROBABLE ADVENTURES

\$2.00 OF ETHAN DUPRE II

THE HAUNTED LAKE



WRITTEN BY
PETE WYETH

Previously, Ethan Dupreii and Rose Sheffield, his new employer, have set off to San Francisco, CA to find her missing brother, James Lanahan before the Turks and Men in Taupe can find him. Thinking that they lost both groups, Dupreii and Rose jumped on a train bound for the west coast, only to later discover that not only the Turks, but also the Men in Taupe were aboard the train. After Ethan discovered their cabin was broken into by a monkey that the Turks had with them.

Dupreii gave chase and followed the monkey atop the train where it was able to get away. Before he could return to his cabin, he was ambushed by one of the men in taupe, after a brief fight in which the man in taupe was killed, Dupreii and Rose jumped off of the train while it was stopped in Kansas City moments before it left the train station. Dupreii and Rose have continued their trip via air travel, seemingly safe from both of the parties pursuing them.

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“I think that we should also disembark right before the train leaves and find another route to San Francisco, since they know that we’re here.” Rose stated.

“I agree.” Dupreii nodded. “I suggest flight, it will ensure that we get to California well ahead of the train as we don’t know how much of our plans they know, or how they found out where we were heading to begin with.” Rose nodded in agreement.

A half an hour later, the train rolled into Union Station, where just before the train was to depart, Dupreii and Rose disembarked. As far as Dupreii and Rose were aware, they were unseen by the Turks and Men in Taupe. The flagged a taxi cab and had it drop them off at New Richards Field near Kansas City’s downtown area where they were able to book a flight to San Francisco that was to leave an hour later. When the airplane was finally airborne, they breathed a sigh of relief and could finally relax. Dupreii and Rose slowly drifted off to sleep to the drone of the airplane’s triple motors as the plane winged its way to California.

They were only awakened three times during the night for fuel and to change the flight crew. However, they were usually back in the air within the hour and back on course. Dupreii jerked awake as the plane hit a pocket of turbulence and was about to doze back off when he realized that something was wrong, the plane’s three engines had a strange whine to them, and the plane hadn’t stopped violently shaking. Dupreii leaned over and looked out the window; he saw that one of the engines was on fire. Quickly, he woke Rose and showed her their predicament. Dupreii unbuckled his seat belt, and undid Rose’s, forcing her to the floor just as the engine exploded, sending the propeller ripping through the hull of the plane, where they had previously been sitting, missing them by mere inches.

The cold wind, snow, and ice pelted them as they attempted to crawl along the floor of the plane so a covered section. Just as they reached the plane’s center aisle, it lurched to the side, and they were sent flying from it through space. It seemed that they plummeted for ages, before finally landing in

bloody heaps on the side of a snow-covered mountain. The world then went black.

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The siren at the fire station in Truckee sounded, rousing the town's volunteer force from a deep slumber. After they had assembled at the fire station, William DeLane, the town's chief addressed them.

"Alright men, we've got reports of a plane down in the mountains west of town, wreckage is strewn from here to Donner Lake, I'm not positive that there'll be survivors, but we've gotta look. With the snow storm we've got going outside, we'll need to go on ski and snowshoes; I want six volunteers to aid in the recovery efforts. I've contacted John Myles to serve as a guide as no one knows these mountains better than him." The assembled men whispered quietly among themselves before six men reluctantly stepped forward. "Excellent," the burly fire chief smiled beneath his walrus-like moustache. "Let's get ready men, and I want the rest of you to wait here, just in case we're contacted by survivors." There was a general bustle as the firemen began gathering their gear together. Within a half hour, they were outfitted and ready to go, while they waited, a tall, rather burly man dressed in a bearskin coat and covered in blowing snow and ice, walked into the fire station, his full beard was iced up around his mouth, and he was missing his left eye.

"Good to see you again John!" DeLane addressed him as they shook hands, John Myles towered by nearly a foot over the fire chief, who was slightly over six feet himself.

"Where we headed, Bill?" Myles inquired with a deep bass rumble, his pale blue eyes twinkled.

"West of Donner Lake."

The twinkle in Myles' eyes quickly faded and he looked darkly at the fire chief. "That's haunted over there, Bill. If there's any survivors, they'll be done for before morning." William DeLane pulled John Myles away from his gathered men.

"Enough with the superstitious talk, John. You've been out of work for sometime now, if you're going to work at all, you need to be able to assimilate into normal society!"

"Why would I want to do that, Bill? I know what I seen out there. 'twas the ghosts of those poor souls that were fed on when they found themselves stranded in the mountains 'cause of the snow."

"Stop it, John, no one else's seen 'em, or any sign of 'em."

"Callin' me a liar, Bill?" The large man asked threateningly. DeLane shook his head.

"Of course not, John. But if it were the Donner Party, don't you think that there'd be more ghost sightings in the past ninety years? Look, you're the best tracker out there; we need your expertise, John."

"Alright, I'll go Bill, but you and your men have to do everything that I say when I say. Got it?"

“You’ve got a deal, John.” The two men shook hands. “Alright men, let’s move out!” John Myles, William DeLane, and the six firemen exited the fire station, making their way through the biting wind, snow and ice to the western edge of Truckee.

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Ethan Dupreii regained consciousness to find himself freezing on the side of a mountain, he was beneath the heavy canopy of a pine forest, and boulders littered the mountainside. Dupreii checked himself for injuries and found much to his relief, that he had largely escaped any serious injury though he was bruised and battered. With great willpower, Dupreii struggled to his feet, and fought off a wave of dizziness and nausea. He wrapped his overcoat tightly around himself and began to look around for Rose.

Dupreii blindly wandered about the side of the mountain, finding no signs of Rose anywhere, he stopped and leaned against a tree and wiped the sweat that had built up, despite the blowing snow and ice, from his eyes. Dupreii forced himself to continue and began to trek down the mountain toward a valley, hoping to find some sign of life. For reasons that he didn’t understand, Dupreii turned and looked up at the pine tree that he had leaned against and saw that the entire top of the tree was split in half, and about one hundred feet down hill, he saw a propeller from the plane embedded into another tree. Dupreii shook his head realizing how lucky he had turned out to be, now hopefully, Rose would turn out just as lucky. Dupreii was delirious as he stumbled and rolled down the side of the mountain, eventually the ground leveled out, and he fell into a deep snow bank unconscious.

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John Myles was leading the group of men around the northern shore of Donner Lake when he saw someone, or something, stumble out of the trees north of the lake, and fall over, possibly unconscious. Myles approached it cautiously and found a fairly tall, bloody man dressed in a dark overcoat. Myles knelt beside the man and laid his rifle on the ground next to him and rolled him over to see a clean-shaven man, his face cut and bruised. Myles checked him over and found that the man had a couple broken ribs; despite no apparent broken bones, Myles determined that the man had a skull fracture.

“Let’s get this one back to town!” Myles shouted at the others as they struggled through the waist deep snow. When the other men reached the unconscious man, Myles cautiously and slowly searched the snow around the man looking for other tracks; he only found a single set of tracks heading up the mountain. “I don’t think that there’s anyone else up there. If they are, they’re likely dead.” Myles looked back up the mountain, thinking that he saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

“Well, the snow and ice are coming down too strong I suppose, ain’t no point in risking our boys if we don’t need to, let’s get this one back and see if

there were any other survivors. If the weather breaks in the morning, we'll head back up." The rescue group turned around and slowly made their way back to Truckee.

Dupreii didn't know how long he was unconscious, but when he finally came to, he was in a dimly lit room with only a single window that had its shade pulled down to give him light. Dupreii attempted to sit up, but found himself in pain on his left side and he seemed to have a bandage encircling the top of his head. Cautiously, Dupreii sat up, pausing when he felt dizzy until the feeling passed. Dupreii then slowly gathered his feet beneath him and stood up, the world violently spun out of control and the next thing he knew, he was being lifted back into the bed by a pair of young men at the direction of a short, older, and rotund woman with kind eyes.

"Can't be doing that Mister Dupreii...Y'ain't well enough to go anywhere just yet. Might not be for a while, actually."

"I can't, I need to find Rose..." Dupreii tried to stand again, but the young men held him down when the woman clucked her tongue.

"Y'ain't gettin' out to the mountain in your condition, boy. The men have been searching the past two days; they've found the wreckage of the plane already. Nobody else has survived; you're a right lucky one."

"She wouldn't be on the plane, we fell out at the same time, though."

"Are you sure of that? There were no signs of anyone else when and where they found you, they've searched the whole mountain. Nothing." Dupreii grew quiet as tears moistened his eyes.

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The next day, Dupreii was able to hobble around on his own with the aid of a cane; he had been staying with the town's doctor and his wife while his wounds mended. Now, he found himself standing outside of the fire department in his search for the man who saved him. Dupreii tentatively pushed the fire station's door open and entered the building. His eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the building, his eyes ran along the lines of the fire trucks that were parked inside, and he heard someone moving around in the back, so he slowly limped toward the back of the building, where he found an office with an open door.

Inside the office was a tall, heavy set middle-aged man with a walrus-like moustache. The man looked up at the newcomer and stood up, presenting his hand to shake it.

"Good to see that you're up and around, Mister Dupreii." The man smiled. "The name's William DeLane, anything that I can do to help you?"

"Yeah," Dupreii smiled as he took DeLane's offered hand and gripped it as tightly as he could. "I'm looking for a Mr. John Myles...I understand that he was the one who found me."

DeLane nodded, "that he did, that he did." DeLane took his hand back, and entwined the fingers of both hands as he rested them on his desk. "The problem is, we're not sure where he is right now. Been missing for the past

couple of days...But, that's not unusual for him, we sometimes don't see him for weeks or months at a time."

"No one worries about him?" The fire chief shook his head.

"No, he lives alone in the mountains. No family as anybody knows, nor where he's from originally."

"Is there anyone else that can take me up?" DeLane raised an eyebrow.

"Are you crazy son? You've got a head injury, ain't no survivors that's been found, and the temperatures have been well below zero for a better part of the week now. No one could have survived out there if they're not prepared, especially if they're at all injured."

"I don't believe it, if she was dead, she would have been found, and Rose fell out of the plan when I did."

"She could have landed anywhere, lay there until some animal found her, or she died of exposure."

Dupreii shook his head. "I don't think so. Call it a gut feeling."

DeLane leaned forward and spoke softly and with deliberation. "You're a city boy, believe me when I say that she's likely dead, it'll save you a world of pain. Let her lie in the mountains, others have been lost there over the years, and more will as the years move on."

Dupreii quietly stood up and turned to leave, pausing; he turned back toward William DeLane. "I can't do that, sir. If you don't help me, I'll find someone who will." He turned and left the fire station, slowly making his way toward a restaurant that he had seen in some of his rambling about Truckee.

The Mountain Rose restaurant was in an old clapboard building, the paint had long started to peel off, it was on a corner and Dupreii supposed that prior to prohibition, it had once been a bar, he idly wondered if there might be a speakeasy somewhere in the back or the cellar.

The interior of the Mountain Rose was painted in cream colored paint that had a very slight pink tinge to it, the wall had lightly stained wood wainscoting and there was a bar for customers to sit at, as well as several tables and booths. Dupreii took a seat at the far end of the bar, well away from anyone else.

"I'll have the meatloaf sandwich and a coffee." Dupreii stated without looking up when the waitress walked over. She wrote his order down and headed back to the kitchen.

"Yer the man what fell out o' the airplane, ain't ya?" Dupreii turned to see a dirty young man, probably in his twenties with bad teeth starting to sit on the barstool next to him. Dupreii turned back without responding, lost in his own dark thoughts. The young man pointedly cleared his throat, then grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him on his barstool so that their faces were inches apart. "I said..."

Dupreii pulled away from his grip with a grimace. "I heard what you 'said' boy." Dupreii angrily hissed. "It should be obvious that I don't feel like talking about it just right now."

"Yer bein' rude and I don't like it." The young man sneered.

"Look, *son*, I've fallen out of an airplane, busted myself up pretty good at that, I think I've earned the right to be rude when I don't want to deal with some

toothless yokel." Dupreii turned to the cup of coffee that was placed in front of him by the waitress.

Ethan Dupreii was suddenly swiveled in his stool by the man with bad teeth to come face to face with him and a fist about to be plunged into his face. "I'm only tellin' you once, ain't no one who talks to me like that. We clear?"

Dupreii just stared into his eyes and narrowed his own eyes at the man with bad teeth. "Don't you ever touch me again, *boy*," he growled at toothless before shaking his shoulder free of the man's grasp and turning back to his coffee.

"What's your problem, man? I'm jus' tryin' to start a little friendly conversation wit' you!" Toothless raised his voice in anger.

"More like you're trying to get a free meal, Earl." The Waitress replied as she deposited Dupreii's Meatloaf Sandwich on the counter in front of him. "I told you once, and I'm tellin' you again, stop hasslin' the customers. Plus, Wilson has said that you can have a job here."

"As a dish washer, Irene, I ain't no dishwasher!" Earl shouted with anger, and then he got up and left when he noticed a police officer had gotten up from his table on the opposite wall and walking over.

"Everything alright?" The officer asked Dupreii and Irene, after he watched Earl practically run from the restaurant.

"Everything's fine officer." Dupreii quietly replied, then began eating.

"Let me know if Earl continues being a problem, Mr. Dupreii." Dupreii nodded as he had a mouth full of food. "I've also heard that you're looking for a guide to Donner Lake..." Dupreii turned to look at the police officer. "I know a guy who can help you."

"How'd you hear that?" Ethan inquired.

"Small town." The police officer smiled at him. The officer turned to leave, but then turned back to Dupreii, who had, by this time, returned to his meal. "Oh yes, there are investigators in town who would like to ask you a few questions about the crash."

"Of course." Dupreii replied. "Just let me know when."

"Certainly, Mister Dupreii." The officer turned and returned to his table.

That night, as Dupreii was sitting in his room at the Doctor's house, there came a light rap on the window, drawing his attention. On the ground outside the window was a man who had a large backpack, two pairs of snow shoes and skis with him.

"You Ethan Dupreii?" The man asked in a loud hiss.

"Yeah." Dupreii responded.

"Get down here then, Officer Noonan told me you wanted to search the mountains for a friend. But, don't let the Doctor or his wife hear you, they'll never let you go up in the state you're in now." Dupreii solemnly nodded and quickly and quietly got dressed, he then crept through the house to the backdoor, where he found his guide waiting for him.

"The name's Paul Carrol, I'm your guide." Dupreii nodded as the man shouldered his pack. "Can you shoot?" Carrol asked Dupreii as he handed him a rifle. Dupreii nodded. "Good. We're going to start at Donner Lake, where you

were found, I also know where it is that you're believed to have landed after your fall, we'll work our way there, looking for any signs of your girlfriend." Carrol started heading through Truckee. "Oh, and another, thing, do as I say, or we're coming back. Understood?" Dupreii nodded as they made their way through the town.

A couple of hours later, Dupreii and Carroll found themselves standing on the north shore of Donner Lake, looking up at the mountain and the forest that Dupreii had stumbled from only a few days earlier. "We think you landed about fifteen hundred yards further up, there were some trees with their branches broken, and the top of another was split wide, possibly by the propeller that we had also found a little closer to here." Carroll stated. "Are you ready?" Dupreii nodded and the pair set out up the side of the mountain.

As they neared Dupreii's impact site, Dupreii began to grow uneasy, as if he and Carroll were being watched. Slowly, Dupreii slipped the rifle from his shoulder and began to survey the snow-covered trees. The darkness hid whatever was out there. By the time they reached the impact site, the hair on the back of Dupreii's neck was standing straight up, and he was nearly at his wits end due to the feeling of being watched for the past hour.

As they searched the impact site beneath the split tree, Dupreii's unease continued to increase, he couldn't focus on the ground as they looked for evidence that Rose had landed near him in the plane crash. Not finding anything, Carroll widened his search area in circles, until he found a hair clip buried in the snow some five hundred feet up the mountain from where they were. Carroll handed the hair clip to Dupreii who examined it closely. It was made of bakelite and was in the shape of four roses, starting small on the ends and growing to a large one in the center of the bunch. The clip was broken, but Dupreii recognized it as one that Rose had worn in the past.

Examining the area even further, Carroll found tracks that looked like they had been covered over with snow, they were did not appear to be Rose's; rather they were very wide, and short. The tracks seemed to lead further up the mountain in a switchback fashion. The pair followed the tracks up the mountain, though they consistently lost the tracks time and again, it was nearly dawn and they only covered about one thousand yards up the mountain from where Dupreii had landed after falling from the tri-motor airplane.

Dupreii and Carroll both became aware of someone following them at the same time, they both swung around, and Dupreii aimed his rifle in the direction that they'd heard the crunch of snow. A very large man who was dressed in snow-covered furs and wearing snowshoes emerged from the trees downhill from Dupreii and Carroll. He was nearly seven feet in height with a large, brown bushy beard.

Carroll smiled and put his hand on the barrel of Dupreii's rifle, gently pushing it toward the ground. "Myles, it's a relief to see you. Thought for sure the mountains had got you." Myles shook his head.

"Ain't no mountain smart enough to take me." What you doin' up here with the flatlander?"

“Looking for a friend of his that he says was sucked outta the airplane with him.”

“Ain’t no one up here, you’d do best to head back down, the mountain is angry and has awakened the dead.”

“Shit, Myles, you goin’ on ‘bout your ghosts again? There ain’t no ghosts of those people that were cannibalized in the 1800s haunting these mountains.”

“Shows what you know, Carrol.” Myles intently leaned forward. “I’ve seen ‘em with my own eyes. Besides, Somethin’ attacked a couple of farms two days past, I’ve been trailing ‘em since, when I’ve been able to. They led me to this mountain.”

“Anyone hurt?” Dupreii inquired.

“Dunno, they’ve all been carried off. As well as tools and food.” Myles responded, a grave tone in his voice. “‘tis ten people that’s all gone missin’.”

“Could it be that whoever kidnapped those other people could have found Rose and carried her off as well?” Dupreii inquired, looking up the mountain.

“Why would they leave you?” Carrol pointedly asked.

“I was busted up pretty good, maybe they felt I wasn’t worth the time for whatever purposes they took those people if I was bad enough off.”

“That could likely have happened, especially if they’re mountain folk as well.” Myles replied. “And who can tell as far as angry spirits are concerned. But, if you’re goin’ to travel with me, then you need to be able to do your own work, things can get mighty deadly up here, and this ain’t the city.”

“Don’t worry about me, I grew up on a farm in the upper Midwest.” Dupreii shouldered his rifle and began to slowly make his way up the mountain. Carrol quickly caught up to Dupreii and whispered to him.

“Part of doing your own work is admitting when you can’t. In short, don’t become a burden on him and we’ll all be fine.” Dupreii nodded and continued to climb the mountain.

The sun finally rose above the mountains and the trio stopped for a break on an outcropping high above Donner Lake, they lightly ate and were about to start up the mountain as they continued their ascent to the mountain’s summit. When they were ready to continue their climb, Dupreii nearly put his hand into blood-soaked snow and he couldn’t help but let out a little yelp of shock and surprise. Myles and Carrol rushed over to Dupreii, who pointed at the bloody patch in the snow. The pair of men began to brush it away with their hands and they found wedged between a pair of large rocks human bones, they looked as if the flesh had been scraped off the bones recently.

“What the bloody hell?” Carrol asked as Dupreii turned around and emptied the contents of his stomach onto the mountainside.

“Now do ye’ believe that the spirits of the dead have risen?” Myles grimly asked. “There’s a cave near the summit, if they’re on the mountain, they’ll likely be there.” Dupreii, Myles, and Carrol began to slowly ascend the cliff-face to the summit high above them.

After nearly three more hours of climbing, the trio reached the top of the cliff, and Myles led them to a small outcropping about one hundred yards further up the mountain, Dupreii could see a shadowed space beneath the rocks. As

they approached, Dupreii could see tracks in the snow leading in and out of the cave. Around the entrance were scattered animal bones that looked like they had been chewed upon, there were also old ashes that had been scattered. As they cautiously approached the cave's entrance, they could smell a strong horrid scent wafting from it. Dupreii brought the front of his shirt up and over his nose, as did Carroll; Myles seemed oblivious to it beyond his initial nose wrinkle at the stench. Dupreii tightly gripped the flashlight that he had been given by Carrol, who had shouldered the rifle that he had taken back from Dupreii. Myles, on the other hand, wielded a dark stained hatchet. Myles led the way down into the cave.

They had to crouch for the first ten feet into the cave, but then the cave's floor angled down, they slid down the sandy incline, the tracks continued along the cave's passage. At the base of the slope, Dupreii caught the smell of wood smoke mixed in with the overpowering stench that filled the cave. As they continued on, the hair on the back of Dupreii's neck began to stand on end and he once again felt as if something ominous were watching him from the shadows.

The cavern's passage angled down sharply again, and its floor became sheer stone while the walls narrowed to only a couple of feet apart, forcing the trio to turn sideways. Myles nearly got stuck, but with a fair amount of pushing, Dupreii and Carroll were able to force him free of the narrow constriction. After they pushed Myles free of the constriction and they squeezed through as well, they noticed the dull red glow of embers from a dying fire in the darkness, they could also hear the light sound of someone whimpering in fear or pain.

Dupreii swung the flashlight that he carried toward the embers, and they could see a nearly nude woman with dark hair that might have once been stylish, trying to melt into the wall from fear. Dupreii's heart leapt as he recognized Rose Sheffield. He immediately started forward, but Myles grabbed his shoulder with an overly large hand.

"Take this." Myles said as he fished an ancient looking crucifix from a pocket in his large, hide coat. Dupreii took it and examined it. The crucifix was dainty and looked as if it had been part of a necklace, it was made of gold and had ivory inlaid for the Christ figure's body. On further examination, he noticed that a small section at the top of the cross was made of actual wood. "In case they really are ghosts, its protection can't hurt, you know." Myles smiled, though it seemed to Dupreii that the large man was about to rip his throat out with his own teeth and he couldn't help but smile nervously in return.

Dupreii Slowly edged his way over to the dying fire as Myles held the flashlight for him. Occasionally Myles would wing the light about the rest of the cavern, it was of moderate size and it appeared that it had been inhabited within the past few days or hours, there were animal skins that looked as if they had been used as blankets, piles of bones, some human but mostly animal, stone-bladed axes and even spear tips, these looked to be relatively freshly constructed, not like the ones that Myles or Carrol would sometimes find on the mountains, leftovers of the native inhabitants of the area.

In a distant corner of the cavern, Myles could see the carcasses of deer and even cougars that had been skinned and were hanging to bleed out, near

those carcasses looked like there was pictographic art that had been painted on the walls in reds, yellows, and blacks. At the opposite side of the cave, he and Myles could see a pool of fresh water, crudely made leather water skins were piled up near the pool, they looked to be full on first glance.

"Ain't ghosts that need water 'n' food, Myles..." Carrol whispered hoarsely. "Think we got some lunatics on our hands..."

Dupreii slowly edged forward, he noticed that Rose didn't seem to be moving, though he could still hear her quiet whimpers, they sounded almost as if she were in a troubled sleep. He quietly crossed the remaining feet between himself and Rose and knelt next to her, the flashlight was shining on the pair as he lightly shook her. Rose awoke with a start and panic, but then realized that it was Dupreii who had his hand on her shoulder. Rose started to cry as he reached down to help her stand-up.

Dupreii paused in aiding Rose, noticing a small platform had been crudely built of wood, on the top was a small round figure, it looked like a very hefty woman. On the platform were dried plants and human skulls. Dupreii grabbed the small statuette and slipped it into his pocket.

"Are you alright Rose?" He tenderly inquired. As Dupreii helped her to walk back toward the cave entrance where Carrol and Myles were waiting for them.

"I- I think so..." Rose deliriously looked up at Dupreii. "H-how did you find me? I'd given up all hope..."

"Determination and two skilled trackers..." He grunted as Rose leaned on him for support. "Do you know where the people are that did this to you?"

"N-no, and they're not people, at least not like we are. Closer to beasts, really." Rose involuntarily shuttered as she thought about her ordeal.

"Well, we'll get you out of here, there's a town only a couple of miles away, we'll get you there safe and sound. And then..."

"And then what?" Rose asked.

"I'm going hunting."

"Ready to leave?" Myles inquired as he took Rose in his massive arms.

"Yeah." Dupreii paused, then looked at John Myles. "How much dynamite can you get your hands on?"

"How much you need?"

"Enough to blow the top of the mountain..." Dupreii replied.

"What makes you think they'll return?"

"They left their food, hides, and water skins." Dupreii replied. "Plus, I found what looks like a small shrine over by Rose." It might be why they didn't kill Rose. Perhaps they saw her as a manifestation of their god."

"Or, it could be that they're just bat-shit crazy." Carrol bluntly stated.

"Well, whatever they are, we'd better get the hell outta Dodge." Myles stated, and they worked their way back up the cave's passage.

When Dupreii, Rose, Carrol, and Myles emerged from the side of the mountain, the sun was nearly set, but they could see almost two dozen powerfully built figures surrounding the cave's entrance, they were a little shorter than Dupreii, had a slightly stooped and bow-legged posture, with a low sloping

forehead. The figures were dressed in skins and carried spears tipped with flint spearheads. Thinking quickly, Myles grabbed the hatchet from his belt and threw it as hard as he could into the skull of the closest one to him, its head exploded in a spray of blood and bone fragments, it then crumpled to the ground.

In one swift move after throwing the hatchet, Myles shoved Rose into Dupreii's arms and drew a large bowie knife from his high boot. "Get outta here, all of ya', back into the cave. I'll hold the lot of 'em off!" Without a word, Dupreii, Carrol, and Rose fled back into the cave that they had just exited, Dupreii and Rose made their way back down the narrow passage, while Carrol turned just inside the cave's entrance and saw the group of men advancing on John Myles as he defiantly stood, towering before them with nothing but an overly-large bowie knife for defense.

"Go!" Carrol hissed, "I'm goin' to help Myles, we'll catch up in a minute!" Dupreii nodded and he and Rose continued down the passage as Carrol shouldered his rifle and took aim.

Dupreii and Rose fled deeper into the cave as the reports of Carroll's rifle echoed through the stone passage. "Those are the things that had me..." Rose said in terror. They, they had a bunch of other people, and would cut the flesh from their bones while they still lived...And then, they offered it to me, almost as if they thought I was a god of some sort..."

"That explains why they didn't kill you there then." Dupreii stated grimly. "Did they..." Dupreii paused briefly. "...do anything else to you?" Rose shook her head. "Good. We need to find a way out." Dupreii stated as Carroll's screams of agony could be heard echoing through the cave's passages.

"There's a refuse pit in the main chamber." Rose stated flatly.

"Where?"

"In the back, beyond the water skins, they use it for waste."

"Do you know if there's a way out from there?" They could hear the guttural language of their attackers descending into the cavern, rose shook her head.

"I don't..."

"Well, we've no choice but to find out, perhaps we'll at least be able to hide until they leave again..." Dupreii helped Rose to the small opening in the floor, there seemed to be a light breeze blowing from it, and Dupreii thought that he could hear water moving echoing through the hole. "There may be a way out!" he excitedly stated. Dupreii then shined the light into the hole, revealing a pile of fecal matter, bones, and other waste products. "This is going to be disgusting...You go first." Dupreii said as he dropped the flashlight onto the softer pile. "If I don't make it, try to find the water, it should surface somewhere eventually." Rose nodded as she slowly sat on the edge and peered into the disgusting hole before dropping through it feet first into the pile of waste.

The last things that Rose heard in the chamber above was the grunt of rage from her captors as she slipped through the hole. As Rose scrambled off the pile, Dupreii dropped down and nearly hit her, he rolled down the disgusting mound alongside Rose and stood shakily as he dug into the pile for the now

buried flashlight. When Dupreii recovered it, he shined it up at their pursuers who were angrily trying to widen the hole so that they could fit into it.

“What now?!” Rose shouted at Dupreii, fear and panic raising her voice an octave or two.

“Follow the breeze... That should get us out.” Dupreii and Rose began to jog across the small chamber to a narrow passage that deeper into the mountain. The Passage narrowed after about two hundred feet to the point that Dupreii had to shed his bulky outer clothes to fit through. They still couldn’t hear their pursuers behind them and they hoped that the creatures had been lost in the tunnels.

Thirty minutes later, they came across a placid pool of water that seemed to be part of a larger stream, they could hear the muffled sound of the rushing water, the tunnel they had been following, however, had come to a dead end with this final chamber, and no other passages that they had passed were of a size that would permit them to travel through it.

“What now?” Rose asked, panic rising in her voice.

Dupreii stood and thought, then they heard the guttural, rage-filled language of the creatures getting closer. “We have to go in. I say we head downstream, if we’re lucky it will come to surface somewhere on the mountainside.”

“And if we’re not lucky?”

“We’ll still be away from those creatures...” Rose nodded, understanding Dupreii’s unspoken fear. Without a word, he removed the last of his outer garments, hoping that the reduction in cloth and weight would help him to stay afloat better, both Dupreii and Rose held hands and said a silent prayer, then they jumped into the shockingly cold water and were swept away with the powerful current into the channel through the mountain that it had spent eons carving. Dupreii quickly lost track of how far they’d travel and how many times he was battered against the stone walls, floor, and ceiling. Dupreii even lost track of which way was up as the pair was carried along by the rushing torrent.

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Dupreii slowly regained consciousness, he couldn’t move his arms and legs, but at least he could feel them, he was tightly bound and wrapped in fur. Dupreii became aware of his surroundings, he was in a dimly lit shelter that was made of branches and earth, and there was a small fire that was not only illuminating the small, domed shelter but also helping to fill it with smoke, though he was aware of a hole at the top of the shelter’s ceiling. Dupreii turned to his left and saw that Rose was bundled up in furs that were tightly bound with leather cords as well, she seemed to be breathing shallowly, but was otherwise unconscious. Dupreii noticed that despite his covering, he was violently shivering and seemed to have a bit of a fever, when he glanced back at Rose, he could see that she was sweating profusely and shivering.

Dupreii turned his head toward the small fire and saw a figure that was blurred by the heat and light sitting on the other side of the fire, he seemed to be

watching them. When Dupreii moved, the man stood up, walked over with a slightly stooped posture and shambling gate, knelt near him and began to shove pieces of cooked meat into his mouth. At first, Dupreii tried to fight it, but his situation of being tied up and having more meat shoved into his mouth when he spat the first bit out dissuaded him of the fight and he began to chew and swallow what he hoped was the meat of an animal. When Dupreii had eaten his fill, the man brought over a water skin, uncorked it, and brought it to Dupreii's lips, the contents smelled heady and pungent, when some of it was poured into his waiting mouth, he found it to be thick and bitter. Dupreii attempted to spit the liquid out, but the man firmly held Dupreii's mouth shut until he swallowed it, which caused Dupreii's eyes to slightly burn and water copious amounts of tears.

The man then stood, went to Rose and gently awakened her, he fed her once she got her bearings and gave her the thick pungent liquid to drink as well. When they were finished eating, the man returned to where he had been sitting across the fire from Dupreii and Rose, who were still bundled into the animal hides.

"Who are you?" Dupreii finally found his voice. The man quietly sat, poking at the fire with a long stick and watching them suspiciously. Dupreii noticed that his build was very similar to the creatures that had attacked them at the cave.

"I am Muurg, the Wolf Hunter." The figure responded in a very thick and guttural accent. "where, did..." he paused, as if searching for the right words. "...find this?" Muurg held up a dark, round shape that was about four inches high. Dupreii finally recognized it as the idol he had taken from the cave.

"In a cave, on the mountain." Dupreii said.

"Show me where."

"No, my friend is ill, she needs a doctor."

"She of no concern to me."

"She is to me." Dupreii paused and took a breath gathering his strength.

"And until I know she's getting the best care that she can, you'll get no help from me."

"I could kill you."

"And you'll not know where I found the idol at then."

"Fine. We return her to your tribe. Then, you take me to where you found Great Mother."

Dupreii nodded in ascent. "That's acceptable enough of a deal." Dupreii narrowed his eyes at Muurg. "Where are you from? What are you? You're not human, that much I can tell. But, you're so much more...civilized than the others..."

"From far north of here. Others are of my tribe. They are..." Muurg paused again, and quietly sat there, then he continued a few minutes later.

"...dangerous. They warriors, not like your kind, blame you for driving us from our homeland."

"Where is your home? I don't remember seeing anyone quite like you ever. Except...But no, that can't be..."

"We come across the narrow land, chased by your kind. We lost them, but eventually they find us again. Or so say the storytellers." Muurg poked at the fire

with his long stick. "Another warrior of my tribe decide that we need kill all of your kind and others follow. They left village way north where it always ice and snow and I follow them here. I had lost them, but this..." Muurg held up the idol. "This prove that they are here."

"What's the stature of?" Dupreii asked.

"It statue of 'The Mother', she bring fertility to land and tribe. We give offering of animal to it, some tribes give offering of their own tribe, and other tribes capture other tribes in battle."

"There were skulls of my kind on the altar, My friend, Rose, was kept near it. Why? Was she to be murdered next?"

"They are dangerous. I seek to kill them, they try to get favor from The Mother by giving her your kind."

"Why would they keep Rose next to the altar?"

"I don't know. They think she's The Mother?"

"But why? She doesn't look like your kind...Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Rose and I fell from the sky, maybe they saw her when she hit the mountainside..." Dupreii scowled. "We need to get her back to Truckee before they find us...And then, we need to return to that cave and blow the top of the mountain off." Dupreii saw the confused look on Muurg's face, so he made an exploding sound and simulated it with his hands at the same time. "Can we leave now?"

"No, bad storm come, put snow on top of us. Wait until it over." Dupreii nodded.

"Can you at least free me from this wrap so I can tend to Rose?" Muurg seemed hesitant.

"I won't hurt you or try to escape. I promise."

"Okay." Muurg stood up and drew a long stone-bladed knife from his belt and began to saw through the leather straps that bound Dupreii, he stretched when he was free, then turned to Rose, her fever seemed to have gone down a bit and she wasn't shivering anymore, but she appeared to be having a nightmare as she was muttering in fear in her sleep. Dupreii couldn't work out what it was that she was saying though.

For three days and nights they waited for the storm to let up, in that time, thanks to Dupreii's devoted tending and the liquid that Muurg fed her, she regained consciousness by the end of the second day, and when Dupreii explained that they were in no danger, she relaxed a bit around Muurg, though she still seemed to be on edge around him. Shortly after dawn on the third day, the storm finally ended and the clouds were blown away by a westerly wind.

When Dupreii, Rose and Muurg finally emerged from the cramped shelter, they found that there was about five feet of newly fallen snow covering the mountains. Muurg produced three pairs of snowshoes and handed two pair to Dupreii and Rose, who watched Muurg as he fastened them to his feet, they then quickly followed suit, with Muurg's careful instruction, and they set out on their way. Dupreii determined that they were on the west side of the mountain, opposite of Truckee, he could see a waterfall higher up the slope and hoped that

they hadn't fallen down the cliff that it descended. They set a slow but steady pace once Dupreii and Rose were acclimated to walking in the snowshoes, and they found that they made good time as they around and down the mountain toward Donner Lake.

About three hours later, the trio was skirting around the northern bank of Donner Lake and they could see the pass that would take them into Truckee, when from out of nowhere they were attacked by four cavemen in animal hides and wielding long spears. Two of them immediately faced off against Muurg, and the other two began to approach Dupreii and Rose, laughing and calling to them in their guttural language.

"You don't have any kind of weapon, do you?" Rose quietly asked Dupreii who shook his head. The pair kept circling around in an attempt to keep their attackers in sight. "What are we going to do then?"

"I don't know, hope to God that Muurg is the better fighter?" One of the cavemen lunged at Dupreii, he narrowly dodged the spear thrust. Without thinking, Dupreii grabbed the spear's haft in one hand and gave it a pull, revealing the cavemen to have over extended himself. Dupreii smiled and with a violent jerk of the spear, sent the creature tumbling off of its feet into the deep snow. Dupreii then twirled the spear in his hands and brought it into a defensive posture against the other caveman.

"This certainly evens things out a bit..." Dupreii grimly stated and Rose smiled in response.

"You're truly an amazing man, Mister Dupreii."

"I try." Dupreii grunted as he menacingly waved the spear toward the caveman that was circling them, the other one was working on regaining its feet when the report of a rifle firing echoed through the mountains, dropping the caveman that was still armed. The first shot was followed by several more, and two more cavemen were hit, the third one turned to flee, but was shot down as well. Dupreii spun about in disbelief and saw five men cautiously approaching, their rifles leveled at their chests. Dupreii waved at the men, but they turned their rifles in his direction, thinking quickly, Dupreii removed the fur coat that Muurg had given him to wear.

"It's me, Ethan Dupreii!" He shouted at the men. They seemed relieved when they realized it was true and they approached at a quicker pace, though two of them still had their rifles trained on Muurg. "It's OK, he's helping us!"

"You sure about that, Dupreii?" William DeLane asked. When Dupreii nodded, he motioned for his men to lower their rifles. "Where the Hell have you been boy? We've been lookin' for you and Paul Carrol for a couple of days now."

"We found Myles. Dupreii said, and we also found the ones responsible for the abductions."

"Did you find the missing people?" DeLane inquired, "I see you found your friend." Dupreii nodded.

"Found the others as well, but they were all ready killed. Mutilated."

Dupreii could see the affect that this had on DeLane's men. "I plan on helping Muurg here," Dupreii motioned toward their companion, "to kill them."

"What's your plan of attack son?"

"Got any dynamite in town?"

"Yup."

"Blowin' the top of the mountain off sounds reasonable enough to me, gotta be sure that we get all of them, after all."

"No, too dangerous, we'll have to drop 'em one at a time. How many do ya' think are up there?"

"Over a dozen." Dupreii began. "Rose also needs a doctor."

"OK, you and you!" DeLane pointed at two men. "Take the lady to see Doc Valentine and meet us up top, bring extra bullets, just in case."

"We'll be at the top of that mountain." Dupreii pointed toward the mountain north of Donner Lake. The men nodded and motioned for Rose to follow them, she turned to Dupreii and embraced him, fear in her eyes as she mouthed the words "be careful". Dupreii just smiled in reply.

Rose Sheffield then released her embrace of Dupreii and followed the men toward Truckee.

"Alright son, I can now see why you were so darned eager to find her again." DeLane smiled broadly at Dupreii then turned his gaze toward the mountain. "Let's see what we've got goin' on up there, then." The group set off toward the mountain's slope with Dupreii and Muurg in the lead. Several hours later, the group found themselves quietly watching the cave's entrance, looking for any sign of the cavemen. The snow had been stamped down through their entering and exiting the cave, there were also the severed heads of John Myles and Paul Carrol hanging in the cave's entrance, the blood that had been dripping from them was long frozen into bloody icicles.

"Guess I don't need to ask if this is the right place, Dupreii." DeLane said through gritted teeth, knuckles white on his rifle.

"The cave is a bit constricted in a few places." Dupreii stated as he gripped the rifle that he had been given by one of DeLane's men. "I'll go first, I know the route down, not that there's much in the way of side passages that they could fit into."

Dupreii stood, and quickly dashed toward the cave's entrance while DeLane and his men covered him. When Dupreii got to the cave's entrance, he quickly shoved the muzzle of the rifle into it to make sure that his path in was clear. Dupreii ducked into the cave and shined a flashlight down the cave's passage further into the mountain, he found that it was empty, Dupreii poked his head out the cave's entrance and waved for DeLane and his men to dash to the cave.

DeLane followed next, followed closely by Muurg, and the rest of DeLane's men. "Undoubtedly they'll already know we're here because of the light." Dupreii hissed, "We'll have to move quickly, shoot to kill."

"Leave Gornex to me." Muurg stated in his broken and heavily accented English. "We have fight to finish."

"Alright, which one's Gornex?"

"The strongest one."

"Alright." Turning to DeLane, "Are you ready?" Dupreii asked. DeLane and his men nodded and Dupreii turned and began to slowly edge his way down the

cave's passage, shining the light into dark spaces that he thought would be large enough for a caveman to conceal itself in. Just before Dupreii arrived at the constriction before the cavemen's chamber, he thought that he heard a couple whispering in their guttural language.

Thinking quickly, Dupreii motioned for the others to stop and he turned off his flashlight, the other two lights followed suit and it was quickly darker than night within the cavern. Dupreii was well aware of the heavy breathing from himself and his companions that fear was causing, yet he could also hear someone moving closer from further back in the cavemen's chamber as they slid through the constriction.

Within a few minutes, Dupreii could feel something bump against the cool metal of his rifle. Dupreii slowly nudged it with the rifle's muzzle and he heard a shout of surprise, then something seemed to grab his rifle's barrel, and without Dupreii bothering to resist, the rifle was tilted up.

With nothing but a click, followed by the roar of the gun, a brief flash of light from the rifle's muzzle, and the heady smell of gunpowder, Dupreii fired his rifle, there was a shriek of surprise, then the pair of flashlights behind him clicked on, revealing the body of a caveman slumping to the ground, its left eye was shot out and presumably was mixed in with the blood and gore that had hit the cave wall behind it. A second caveman had just turned and was trying to get through the constriction as quickly as it could. Muurg, however, slipped past Dupreii and drawing a large flint knife, plunged it in the creature's back, burying it up to its handle, the caveman spat up blood in surprise before slumping to the ground lifeless.

Dupreii stood up from his crouching position and clicked on his flashlight, shining it further down the cave's passage. "OK, they know we're here for sure now." Dupreii smiled grimly, and then him and Muurg descended further into the cavern, they were closely followed by DeLane and his men.

Muurg exited from the constriction first, and several cavemen leapt at him with their spears, two made contact with him, stabbing deeply into his right shoulder and left arm. With a grimace and scream of rage, Muurg dropped to his knees, the move was unexpected by the cavemen and he was able to free himself of the spears, the move also gave Dupreii a clear line of sight and he brought his rifle up and the bullet he fired ripped into the throat of one of the cavemen, dropping it to the cave's floor almost instantly.

As soon as Dupreii was out of the constriction, he stepped to his left to clear the path for DeLane and his men to be able to get out of the constriction, which would help bring more guns into the fight. Dupreii kept the cavemen back so that DeLane and his men could get out of the cavern's constriction by waving it at them whenever they would try to get to close with their spears. Dupreii could count maybe about ten of the cavemen surrounding them, a large one was in the back, it looked to Dupreii like he might be armed with Carroll's rifle and he idly wondered if he could figure out how to work the weapon and put it to use in a manner that would be dangerous to him and the others.

Muurg slowly stood and lunged past the other cavemen toward the caveman that Dupreii assumed must be the caveman Muurg referred to as

Gornex. Dupreii turned his attention toward the other cavemen, who were dropping quickly to the rifles of DeLane's men, and helped with the slaughter of their foe.

Muurg leapt toward Gornex with murder in his eyes, for months he had tracked Gornex and his murderous followers across the northern wastes of North America, then he found that their trail turned south and he had finally caught up with them at these mountains. Muurg was about to kill Dupreii and Rose because of their injuries when he found the idol to The Mother and he decided to spare them and heal them to locate exactly where Gornex and his kin were.

"It good to see you again, Muurg. Have you come to join me at last?" Gornex inquired with a taunting tone in his voice. Muurg gritted his teeth as the two cavemen grappled each other in close combat.

"You are nothing, Gornex." Muurg replied bitterly. "You must pay for what you did to our tribe."

Gornex laughed as he and Muurg continued to try and bring one another down, they were grabbing at each other's arms in an attempt to get a hold. "You just can't stand that The Mother spoke to me, can you Muurg?"

"You're crazy." Muurg replied, hate and rage filling his voice.

"Am I, Muurg? You're the one that allowed our people to start starving, I only did what The Mother told us to, attack the other tribes for fresh meat. You were far too weak to do that."

"The other tribes were suffering just as we were."

"And yet, we survive."

"You have no women. You'll not survive long."



"We can mate with the women of the round heads." The two cavemen were wrestling about on the ground by this time, and they were rolling closer to the pool of water. The rest of the cavemen had been killed by this point by Dupreii and the others.

"We are not like them." Muurg growled through gritted teeth.

"Oh we are, they just don't know it yet." Dupreii and DeLane were both trying to get a bead on Gornex, but the two cavemen were rolling about the floor too much. Muurg was on top, and was trying to get his thick fingers around Gornex's thick neck, until Gornex brought a large rock up and smashed it into the side of Muurg's head. Muurg slid to the ground, dazed. Dupreii brought his rifle to bear on Gornex, who leapt at him, attempting to claw at Dupreii's face with his thick fingers.

Gornex's attack took Dupreii by surprise and he stumbled backward, leaving Gornex's path to the constriction open for his escape, and he leapt at his chance and dashed toward the constriction. Just before Gornex could escape through the constriction, there was the report of a rifle being fired, and then it was followed up by DeLane's and his men's rifles, Gornex was shoved forward and into the cave's wall by the force of the gunshots and he fell in a spray of blood, his screams of agony and rage gurgled forth as his life's blood spilled out across the cave's floor, soaking into the sandy floor.

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Ethan Dupreii, Muurg, William DeLane, and his men returned to Truckee late that night after burning the corpses of Gornex and his followers, they then tracked down the remains of the humans that they had killed and buried them on the mountain with a simple cross. Rose had been given the room that Dupreii had been sleeping in at the Doctor's office, so DeLane set him up for the night at the fire station.

"Muurg, would you care t stay on in Truckee?" DeLane asked as he, Dupreii, and Muurg sat inside the station and ate a simple meal of pasta and venison. "You could make one hell of a guide once you got to know the lay of the land.

Muurg shook his head. "No, must return to my people. There is much that they need to learn. One day, I return to teach your people."

"As you will, Muurg, but just remember, you've always got a place here." DeLane smiled broadly at the caveman, who returned it with his own toothy smile and deep, guttural laugh.

Early the next morning, a train had stopped at Truckee's train station and it was heading to San Francisco from Kansas City. After a long discussion, Dupreii and Rose decided to purchase tickets and head out that day. As the train left the station at Truckee, Dupreii was certain that he had seen a monkey wearing an eye-patch paying close attention to them, but by then, it was too late to disembark.