

The hulking, hirsute creature lumbered up the mountainside, and Professor Edward Travers followed.

Clambering over icy rocks, he hardly noticed the wind stinging his eyes or the jagged granite abrading the skin of his palms. He even ignored the burning stitch in his chest, which he supposed must stem equally from his excitement at this unexpected discovery and from the energy he was expending in pursuit of it.

*No small thing for a man of middle age and appalling diet*, Margaret would no doubt add. *Let alone one barely accustomed to the thin air and harsh terrain of the high Himalayas.*

The thought of his wife's wryly disapproving voice caused his cheeks, sweaty and wind-bitten, to grow hot with dismay. *You don't even have your camera to hand, Edward, let alone your rifle. Just what do you plan to do if you do catch up with the bally animal?*

The bally animal in question was now loping over a scrubby, snow-streaked hummock just thirty or forty yards ahead, clearly desperate to be away from him.

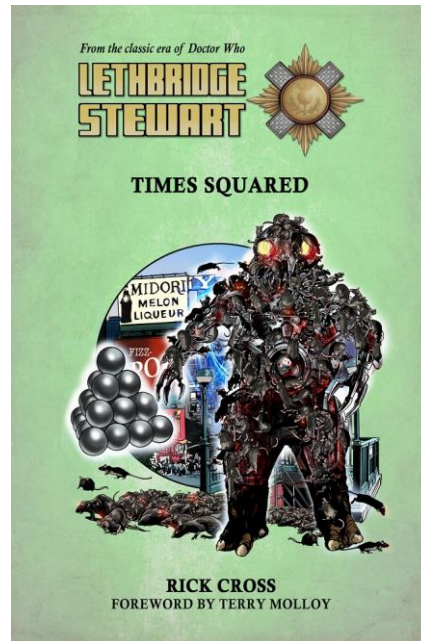
If he was being honest with himself – and twenty-four thousand feet above sea level, honesty was as crucial to survival as a sure footing – that niggling voice wasn't wrong. It also hadn't escaped his attention that his inner voice sounded more and more like Margaret's lately. When it wasn't aping that of Professor Walters, of course; his smug, hectoring rival in the Royal Geographical Society.

He supposed it was an indication of how much he missed her. And he *did* miss her. And hoped to see her soon, back home in the relative warmth of England's more civilised clime.

All of which now brought him up short, even as his quarry disappeared down the other side of the snowy hillock. *Damn*. His rifle had been shattered early on, and his camera, a brand-new Voigtländer with the Skopar lens, a gift from his wife, was probably still lying somewhere in the tent he and Mackay had pitched weeks ago, before his dear old friend had been attacked and the whole ruddy affair set in motion.

No camera. No rifle. No one at his back. So just what *was* he thinking, haring off all alone after a six-foot-tall, clawed and muscle-bound *animalia paradoxa*?

Words replayed in his mind. *It's a splendid thing to have a dream, even if it does turn out to be a legend*. That had been his strange new friend, of course; the unkempt little



man who became their saviour in the end. Aided by the cocky young Scot and the waif-like English girl, the stranger had unravelled the curse of Det-Sen Monastery and caused its unnatural attackers to be destroyed, leaving the monks to rebuild the fabled Buddhist priory and start again. Travers and the strange trio had climbed into the highlands for a last check on their 'equipment', which looked to the stunned professor very much like one of those Gilbert MacKenzie Trench Police Boxes, only to have their goodbyes interrupted by the very thing he'd originally come here to find: a true Yeti! And not one of the bulky monstrosities that had laid siege to the monastery, but a taller, more graceful thing. Lithe as a panther, with silky fur like a great housecat and ringed eyes like those of a lemur.

At last, Travers had found evidence that his life's work had not been mere folly. *This* was the lost creature of lore. A living, breathing Yeti!

And a fast one at that. It had squealed in surprise and fled up the mountainside, cat-quick. Travers had barely managed a farewell wave to his friends before bolting after the thing. *No*, by heaven! He refused to let it escape him again!

Despite his misgivings, despite the stitch in his side, he would not stop. *Could not* stop. He set forth again and topped the hill the Yeti had climbed a moment earlier. The landscape here, so close to the lifeless heights dubbed 'the death zone' by that mad Swiss climber Edouard Wyss-Dunant, was almost devoid of greenery. Without crampons and safety gear, his quarry would very shortly be beyond his reach.

'No!' Travers moaned, scanning the slope for sign of the beast. It must not elude him now, after all he'd seen and endured in the last few weeks. Where in *blazes*—

There! A shadowy cleft in the rock face, twenty yards off. A cave mouth. Travers drew in a reedy breath. There was simply nowhere else the animal could have gone. He steeled himself and jogged towards the black slash in the grey expanse.

But the logic-driven part of him still spoke up, this time in his own brisk voice. *The question now is simple: Will it submit meekly, or turn and fight like a cornered wild animal?* If it were indeed a mild-mannered plant-eater, he had little to fear. But if it was a carnivore, accustomed to running down goats and other prey...

The robotic Yeti certainly hadn't lacked for claws, but he'd seen no sign of sharp incisors among the brutes, or teeth of any kind. If they'd actually been modelled after the real creature, perhaps he was in luck. Those fearsome claws might be meant primarily for digging up roots and grubs, rather than, say, disembowelling its prey.

He swallowed. *Analyse the facts, man. Bipedal ambulation, indicating evolutionary advancement. Still able to run on all fours, however. Probably enabling short bursts of speed necessary to run down a meal on the move. Eyes facing front, thus good depth perception for tracking quarry. Skull structure suggests pronounced temporalis muscles, for pushing teeth into meat and locking the jaw, permitting the animal to hold on whilst its prey struggles its last.*

*What further evidence of carnivorousness would you require? Its teeth sunk in your throat?*

He pondered a moment longer, then took off his parka and wrapped it tightly around his left forearm. He approached the cave mouth with this crude protection thrust out in front of him. Should the thing swipe at him with its claws, or snap at him with whatever sort of teeth it might possess, he would block with his padded arm, hopefully protected from a serious wound by the extra layers of the coat.

And, so resolved, he stepped into darkness.

The temperature seemed to drop twenty degrees at once, and he felt panic try to boil up his throat. He slipped further forward, and shortly realised he could make out shapes in the blackness: rock outcroppings and a distant red glow. Fire light.

Then he heard the Yeti's distant grunt, and a voice answering it.

A human voice.

Travers crouched, listening. He could make out no words, only murmurs. The voice was male, but young or old he couldn't tell. It almost sounded as if it were... By Jove, *yes!* As if it were *addressing* the newly arrived animal!

*'Ah, Kabadom, tashi delek.'*

That much Travers grasped. *Tashi delek. Welcome, my friend. And Kabadom...* Might that be the Yeti's name? Had this stranger *named* the beast? Fascinating!

Despite his nervousness, Travers was grinning in delight, once more overcome with child-in-a-sweet-shop excitement. His eyes continued to adjust. The narrow passage sloped downward perhaps thirty yards to the large chamber occupied by the Yeti and the stranger. There were side passages cut into the rock about a third of the way down, permitting access to other areas of the hideaway.

At the tunnel's far end, he saw flickering, orange light. He supposed, from the crackle of wood, that it was a small fire on the cave floor. He also heard a low, vibrating thrum. *Something mechanical*, he thought. *With a bellows or an air bladder.*

He itched to move forward. But partially visible through the cleft was the Yeti. *His* Yeti. It stood motionless, back to him, head cocked to one side, listening to the speaker as the cave around them crackled and thrummed. *By the stars, it was listening!* Surely there could be nothing else like it on Earth.

The unseen cave dweller began to speak more rapidly, his voice raised but his words still unclear. He sounded angry. Travers wondered who he was. Not one of the Det-Sen monks, it stood to reason. After the chaos wrought at the monastery, none of the monks would have so agreeably welcomed the Yeti.

That strange, thrumming rose in volume, and the angry speaker fell silent. Travers shook his head in wonder and fear and—

Something shifted behind him. Outside the cave entrance.

He turned his head. In the rapidly falling sunlight still creeping into this deep

expanse, he could see shadows shifting on the rocks behind him. *Big shadows.*

Something was coming.

Heart banging in his chest, he duck-walked further into the passage, wincing at every scrape and crunch of the gravel beneath his feet, but the brute did not turn. He slipped into a side passage, crouching low, breath burning painfully in his throat.

A moment later, something big tramped past his new vantage point. He risked craning his head upward, and saw the brief flash of two great, lambent eyes.

Another Yeti, of the kind that had wreaked terror on the monastery below. It swept on past. Another followed. And another. And another. A column of Yeti filed in, their bulk filling the narrow corridor. Claws scratched the stone and clattered menacingly. Robots or not, their fur was real enough, and the stench clogged Travers' sinuses, turning his saliva into a sour paste at the back of his mouth.

He clamped a hand over his mouth, sinking lower with each passing Yeti. All it would take was for one of the brutes to glance down. He choked back a moan.

A cry of surprise from the unseen stranger. Travers looked up again. The last of the Yeti had passed. Twelve of them? More? He wasn't sure. But now that thrumming note was once more—

No. Not a thrum. A *voice*. So deep it was almost beyond hearing.

*...must come, I have work for you yet. Yeti to London, you to New York... new source...*

Babbling from the stranger, words too thick with imploring obeisance to be anything other than fearful pleas to a terrible master. *Oh my word*, Travers thought in horror. *It's him*. It. *We ended our campaign too soon, Doc—*

The stranger cried out again. Several Yeti snarled threateningly, clearly warning against the stranger's protests. The humming sound rose, becoming a rushing torrent of wind and noise. Travers felt hot air push at his face, then a stranger sensation: a pull on his clothes, a tug at the skin of his face. His hair blew back, then forward.

Another shout from the stranger, diminishing in volume as if he were being rapidly carried away, and cold white light abruptly filled the world, blinding Travers. Forgetting the need for quiet, he shouted in surprise. It made no difference.

Because the light began to pull at *him*.

He fought to see, fought to understand. He could see nothing of the large cavern now. Just a swirling brightness that seemed to reach out for him. *So bright*. The tumult of wind and alien noise increased relentlessly. He shielded his eyes as chips of granite and shale pelted him, flying from the mouth of the cave towards the glow. He felt tiny gashes open on his cheek, on the back of one hand. Something sharp tore his trousers and gouged his shin.

*If I don't get out, he thought wonderingly, I'll be stoned to death.*

He began to shuffle back the way he had come, hands still protecting his face.

One thought now ran through his mind. His friends. He had to warn his friends.

*The Great Intelligence lived!*

He made it halfway back up the stone throat towards the entrance, staggering through the hail of debris. Then the relentless wind and light stopped him in his tracks, dragging him backwards. Travers scabbled desperately at the walls, felt a fingernail peel back, and shouted one last time. It might have been his wife's name; it might have been nothing but a last, wordless, defiant shout.

Then he was pitching backwards into the maelstrom, eyes rolling wildly as he plunged into blinding white nothingness.

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