

The Thousand Forms

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Flash Granger awoke wondering where he was. At first, he thought he might still be in the "hospital" which he'd been kept in. But he was lying on something even lumpier than that bed and there was no pillow, so wherever he was, it was probably somewhere even worse. He decided to open his eyes.

It was dark, and he could see stars. He couldn't recognize any of the constellations. He was no astronomer, but he remembered the night skies of Chappaqua, New York where he'd grown up and this sky was not like those from Chappaqua. Then a memory intruded. Africa. He was in Africa.

A light shone into his eyes. Then it went out and some of the stars were blocked by a man's shape.

"You're awake." The voice was familiar, but Flash couldn't quite place it. He'd prided himself on his good memory, a quality very useful for a reporter. It sounded a bit like Dr. Weber, but yet not quite. There was something different about it, an excited, almost exultant tone.

"Weber, is that you? What happened? Where are we?"

"Yes, it's me, don't you remember, and near the Mountain of the Black Wind, respectively."

The Mountain of the Black Wind, Flash said to himself. He repeated it, hoping it would stimulate more memories. It did. He hesitated to speak.

"I remember... seeing it. Or was it a dream? Did I really see it?"

"You saw it, I saw it, the others saw it. The God of the Black Wind."

"But it looked different from the first time we saw him. It. As the Black Pharaoh. The Black Pharaoh looked human. This time, it was... monstrous. Alien. I can't describe it."

"The Black Pharaoh and the God of the Black Wind are, I theorize, merely two aspects of the same being, only a few of which are human-shaped. Although some books say it has 999 forms, I believe that is just a placeholder to mean 'too many to count'. It may in fact have an infinite number of aspects. Another of its names is Nyarlathotep."

"You and the others went towards the mountain before it arrived. What happened after that? I think I must have blacked out once I saw it."

"The others and I went inside the Mountain, along with all the cultists. We saw Hypatia Masters with her belly huge and distended. The Child, the Spawn of Nyarlathotep, was growing inside her."

At the mention of Hypatia Masters, more recollections flooded into Flash. The Carlyle Expedition. That's what had started it all. And his good friend, Jackson Elias. He'd been murdered.

The Carlyle Expedition was named after its leader, Roger Carlyle. He was the heir to the Carlyle fortune, but he'd mostly led a dissipated life. He was widely known to be a playboy. Why

someone like him would suddenly want to lead an archaeological expedition was a mystery. It was totally unlike him.

The other Europeans were Sir Aubrey Penhew, Hypatia Masters, Dr. Robert Huston, and Jack Brady. Sir Aubrey was the founder of the eponymous Penhew Foundation in London, a widely known and respected organization that sponsored expeditions to Egypt. His participation provided the educational gravitas and would have gotten official governmental permission. Probably a real stuffed shirt type, mused Flash.

Hypatia Masters had been "involved" with Roger, and was the photographer for the expedition. Flash wondered why Carlyle had brought along an ex-lover. Dr. Robert Huston was a famous psychologist. Flash couldn't think of a reason an expedition needed a shrink, except maybe to figure out why Carlyle had brought Masters along. Jack Brady was a combination bodyguard and secretary to Carlyle. He must have been well paid to stay with Carlyle, thought Flash.

The Carlyle Expedition had left from London in 1919 and traveled to Cairo. They'd done some desultory digging, but found nothing of note. In the summer they'd upped stakes and gone to Nairobi, ostensibly to escape the summer heat in Egypt. Then they'd left Nairobi, heading north, when the entire expedition had disappeared. They'd all been declared dead. The following year, it was discovered that they had been massacred.

The blame had been assigned to a local tribe, the Nandi, and some of its members had been brought to trial, quickly found guilty, and executed. The case was declared closed.

It stayed closed for three years. In 1923, the investigative author and skeptic Jackson Elias found evidence that Jack Brady had been seen alive in Hong Kong. Elias had written books on death cults and other outré subjects, and he'd decided to backtrack along the route the Carlyle Expedition had taken, with the goal of writing a book. Early in January 1925, he had sent Flash a telegram that said he was coming to New York and had asked him to put together a team to help.

Flash had called several friends and acquaintances and gone to the Chelsea Hotel to meet Elias. They'd found Elias disemboweled and mutilated. The memory was painful. Flash forced himself to return to the conversation.

"Masters's pregnancy wasn't normal. Those amateur newspaper reporters never noticed, but the photos don't lie. She went from zero to six months in only two. What did that to her?"

"Certainly nothing from this Earth. By Occam's Razor, it was Nyarlathotep. I believe that it might have been during the time they spent in the Bent Pyramid. Or more accurately, where they were after they met the Black Pharaoh there. You recall Warren Besart said they disappeared after going inside the pyramid, only to return a day later. When we went inside, the Black Pharaoh opened a portal, presumably to ancient Egypt. I surmise they went through the portal and were rewarded by Nyarlathotep, then brought back after only a day's duration here. Who knows how long they might have spent back there, or should it be 'then'? I must say though, given the nature of Hypatia's reward, I wonder what benefit the others' rewards were to them?"

"What happened inside the Mountain? You said you saw Masters? And what about that priestess who was demagoguing all those cultists?"

"Hypatia died as the Spawn started to... come out. Then it was blasted by multiple gun shots. The crowd wasn't too pleased at the gunfire. The priestess shouted some orders, everybody ran for it, but they were all caught and... disposed of. I honestly don't know how I escaped. There were so many cultists. But maybe it was..."

"What?"

"Shortly after the gunshots, the God of the Black Wind dispersed. I mean that literally. The God's form disintegrated into tiny bits and a strong, fetid wind blew them away from the Mountain. The Black Wind. Most of the cultists collapsed, choking on the wind, dead or unconscious I couldn't tell. I held my breath as long as I could. When I finally had to breathe again, I guess the concentration was low enough that it didn't affect me."

"What do we do now?"

"Now we have to get away from here, in case the cultists were only rendered unconscious. We have to get back to our camp and try to make it back to Nairobi. After that... it depends. There are still some leads we haven't followed. There's that matchbox from the Stumbling Tiger Bar in Shanghai. And then there's the cult of the Sand Bat headed by the Father of all Bats in Australia that we learned of at Professor Cowles's lecture back in New York. There are also the crates addressed to the Randolph Shipping Company in Broome, Australia, and to Ho Fong Imports in Shanghai. Oh, and there's the rumor that Jack Brady was seen in Hong Kong. It looks like we'll be heading east."

Flash thought about it. "It'll be expensive to buy passage to any of those places. And if you're right, then Bane the banker isn't around to splash the cash."

"I found Bane's money belt where we all, uh, took off our clothes. There's enough money to get us to wherever we go next. After that, we might need to be frugal."

Flash couldn't resist. "'Frugal' is my middle name." It wasn't.

* * *

"Flash, Dr. Weber, you're alive," exclaimed Sam Mariga. "I thought you were all dead!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," replied Flash, not too rudely. Sam had been a warrior in his youth, but was now a grandfather, and tended the gardens around Nairobi's train station. He'd been the one who'd found the site of the massacre of the Carlyle Expedition five years ago, but had never completely explained how or why he'd been so far away from his duties. He'd been their guide and had seen them safely to the Mountain.

"We saw the strange lightning around the Mountain, and a little while after, a foul wind blew from there. Some of the bearers got sick and a few collapsed, but most are okay. Do you know what that might have been?"

"A little present from the God of the Black Wind. Are the bearers able to start heading back now? If we wait until morning, we might find ourselves in bad company."

"Yes, but we'll need to take more frequent and longer rest breaks tomorrow."

"Good, you get them organized."

"What happened to the others?"

"According to Dr. Weber, they..."

"They sacrificed themselves thwarting a plan of the God of the Black Wind," Dr. Weber completed.

"Then they were true warriors," replied Sam. As he spoke, his demeanor changed, and Flash caught a glimpse of the spirit of the former warrior. "We should honor them."

"Maybe we can dedicate an obelisk to their memory," Flash said

* * *

The trip back was remarkably uneventful. It seemed to Flash that even the ever-present insects were less active. The wind was not blowing as strongly as before, and the entire landscape seemed quiet and hushed. The animals that they saw immediately fled. Flash wondered if this was a consequence of the Black Wind.

They were getting near Nairobi when Sam said, "I think that's Okomu up ahead."

Flash looked in the direction Sam was pointing. He saw a tall youth, dressed simply like most of the local population. As they approached, Flash saw that it was indeed Okomu, who was the apprentice or protege of Old Bundari, a diviner or magician who'd given them information and magical gifts. A fat lot of good either of them had been, Flash thought sourly.

"Mr. Granger, Old Bundari requests that you let me bring you to him. He knows what has happened, and would like to offer you advice."

"I'm a little busy, Okomu. There's a hotel room waiting for me, along with a soft bed and a hard drink."

"That would not be wise. Your presence in Nairobi is not entirely welcome. I believe you were... motivated to 'leave for your own protection'?"

He and the others had arrived in Nairobi in a burned-out train carriage, which had been caused by two floating balls of fire, though they hadn't told the police that. Then the offices of the Nairobi Star had burned down after they'd visited. The police hadn't accused them, but they'd made it clear that the sooner they leave town, the better it would be.

Okomu continued. "Several nights ago, an ill wind blew in from the north. People have taken sick. A child has died. You were seen leaving in that direction. Despite having no proof, nor any credible theory of just how you are supposed to have done it, you will be blamed. Who knows what a scared crowd might do? And the police might just turn a blind eye and fail to protect you from the mob."

"I'll disguise myself."

"With what supplies?"

"All right, all right," conceded Flash. "I'll talk to the witch doctor. Come on, Weber."

"Just yourself, Mr. Granger."

"What about..."

"Dr. Weber is in no danger. Your people will not recognize or remember him. He can begin making the arrangements for your departure. You can take the next train back to Mombasa tomorrow."

"Then lead on, MacDuff."

"Macbeth, act 5, scene 8. And you've misquoted it."

While Sam escorted the remaining bearers back into Nairobi, Okomu took Flash to Old Bundari's tent and held open the flap for Flash. He entered, and made his way into the center, following the spiral interior walls that reminded him of a nautilus shell. An old man was seated

on a cushion in the central room of the tent. He was thin and his skin was wrinkled, but Flash sensed an innate toughness, and the man's eyes were disturbingly bright and piercing.

"You have beheld a great evil, Mr. Granger. And your friends have disturbed the plans of the God of the Black Wind. They have sadly paid the price for that accomplishment."

"How do you know this? Did Okomu or someone else follow us?"

"No, nothing like that." He pointed at a wicker cage that contained a chameleon. "Do you remember 'Who Is Not What She Seems'? She could not tolerate the evil presence of the God of the Black Wind, so she left. I had to search for a while to find her and coax her back. While she was... still there but not there... she observed. And she has told me what happened."

"Seems like everybody knows what happened except me," grumbled Flash.

"You chose to not get too involved," said Old Bundari with a slight mocking tone.

Flash felt a bit embarrassed. "Hey, how was I to know what was going on inside that mountain?"

"You couldn't have. But you could have chosen to follow your friends."

"And died with them."

"Yes."

After a moment's silence, Old Bundari continued. "I do not accuse you. But since you survived, do you wish to continue? Do you wish to solve the mystery of the Carlyle Expedition, as your friend Jackson Elias wished to do? Will you carry on his work, in tribute to him? Or attempt to further thwart the plans of the God of Many Forms."

Flash thought of Elias. At one level, Flash had avenged Elias's murder. The three who'd done the deed were dead, along with the cultists of the Bloody Tongue in the basement of Ju-Ju House in Harlem. But that was clearly only one small piece of the puzzle. The Bloody Tongue still existed here in Kenya. There was the Brotherhood of the Black Pharaoh in London and in Cairo. There was the Cult of the Sand Bat in Australia, and certainly a cult in Shanghai. If Weber was right, then all the cults were related. Like branches of a public library. A world-wide conspiracy.

"What can I do against such evil?"

"By yourself, not much. But if you work with friends, old and new, you can do more than you might imagine. Even with a friend such as Dr. Weber."

"What do you mean? What about Weber?"

"He saw the God of the Black Wind, and the sight of it should have destroyed his mind. For some reason, it did not. I do not know why or how he continues to reason."

"Has he gone over to the... other side?"

"It is possible he has made a bargain, much like the members of the Carlyle Expedition. That may have insulated his mind from the sight of the God of the Black Wind. What Dr. Weber had to give in return, though, I cannot imagine. Its motivations are beyond human comprehension."

"Yeah, he was pretty inscrutable when I saw him as the Black Pharaoh."

Old Bundari did not show any surprise. "And you survived that encounter. You are fated, Mr. Granger."

"I don't believe in fate, or luck either."

"You are a skeptic. And yet you have seen many things that would normally be considered 'impossible'."

"Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast," quoted Flash.

"Your skepticism may protect you. Or it may not. Where will you head next?"

"Either Australia or Shanghai, I'm not sure which." He told Old Bundari of the clues leading to each location, and explained the world map they'd discovered inside the Bent Pyramid. Three rubies set into the map made a triangle: one in East Africa, one in Western Australia and one off the Chinese coast.

"You should expect to encounter members of the Carlyle Expedition at each location. Clearly each location is important. Poor Miss Masters was here, along with the High Priestess M'Weru. I wonder which other expedition members are in Australia and China?"

"Jack Brady was also seen in Hong Kong."

"Mr. Brady may not be part of the conspiracy."

Flash recalled that Jack Brady did not disappear inside the Bent Pyramid, according to Warren Besart.

"And now you should prepare for your journey. Sam has the items you didn't want to leave at the hotel, but you will not need them all. I will send Okomu to Sam with a list of the items you may take with you."

"May take? You're being pretty cavalier with our belongings."

"You should travel light, since you do not have the resources of Mr. Vanlandingham. And it would not be wise to allow Dr. Weber access to some of the items."

"Do you think I should try to go on without him?"

"It is up to you, but if you travel together, you can at least keep watch over him."

"Well, if you're done with me, I'll head back to the hotel and join Weber for a bath, a drink, and a bed, in that order."

"As Okomu told you, that would not be wise. You will stay with Sam and his family tonight, then take the train tomorrow. Dr. Weber is purchasing tickets."

"If I'm *persona non grata* in Nairobi, how will I get to the train station?"

Old Bundari closed his eyes, spoke some words that Flash didn't understand, and gestured with his hands.

"To all other eyes but us and Dr. Weber, you now look like one of us. You will need to adjust your behavior. After you arrive in Mombasa, you will be once again be perceived as you actually are."

"All the world's a stage."

"And you still have many parts to play, Mr. Granger."

* * *

Flash rode in the third-class car on the train from Nairobi to Mombasa. He'd spent the night with Sam and his family. They had never seen Flash before, and they thought he was a fellow tribesman and tried speaking to him in their native language and then Swahili when Flash didn't respond. Sam explained what Old Bundari had done, and that had impressed them. They understood the problem he would have on the train. They offered many suggestions, only a few of them unrealistic. He decided he would act as though he were a deaf/mute. That turned out to be fairly straightforward: he didn't understand the language, and thus couldn't be caught

automatically responding to anything said to him. Sam had bought him his ticket and shown him which car to board.

Flash held out his hand. "Thanks for everything, Sam. May your garden always grow."

"Thank you, Flash. I hope you accomplish what you have set out to do."

In his battered and travel-worn luggage, he carried what Old Bundari had let him have: all the pictures he had taken, the matchbox from the Stumbling Tiger Bar, the address to the Randolph Shipping Company in Broome, Australia. There was another photograph that Jackson Elias had had with him, a portion of a ship with the name "DAR" visible at the edge of the photo.

Old Bundari had not let Flash have any of the books and scrolls that they had stolen from a secret room beneath the Penhew Foundation. They had also found a collection of books in a safe in the Carlyle Estate that had belonged to Roger Carlyle, and a number of items in the basement of Ju-Ju House. Those had all been stolen while they'd been in London, perhaps because Dr. Boucher had told the Penhew Foundation where they had been staying. Flash was still mad about that, but since Dr. Boucher was dead, perhaps he should be forgiven.

On the other hand, he was glad to be rid of the two small statues also taken from the Foundation. The sight of one of them had profoundly unsettled Flash, Leon, and 'Handsome' Hank. Hank was dead, having been possessed by the Black Pharaoh inside the Bent Pyramid. Leon might still be in the same hospital that Flash had been committed to in Cairo after the encounter with the Black Pharaoh. He (it?) had shown them all a vision of the massacre of the Carlyle Expedition. The sight had been truly terrifying, and Flash and Leon had been badly affected. Flash still refused to look at a window if he could help it.

Flash had alternately pretended to be asleep and had actually slept. He and the rest of the third-class passengers ate on slightly dirty plates when it was their turn in the dining car. He didn't see Dr. Weber and hadn't expected to. The first-class and third-class passengers were kept well apart. Each in their proper places.

Flash saw Dr. Weber outside the train station. He had only a few suitcases with him.

"I wasn't sure whether to bring anything of the others with me. Asking to access their stored luggage at the hotel might have raised questions, so I took a page out of your book and found they'd left the door to the storage area unlocked. I have all their notes and letters and that's about it. We took all our money and weapons with us. Most of that is back at the Mountain. I still have my gun, what about you?"

Flash patted his coat pocket and nodded.

"I suggest we stay here for a few days. Or maybe somewhere closer to Australia, such as Singapore. I want to send a telegram to Professor Cowles about that diary of Arthur McWhirr. And maybe you know some people who could meet us in Australia, or who are already there. We can't take on the cult of the Sand Bat by ourselves. We're going to need a team of professionals."

"Singapore Slings in the bar at Raffles, that sounds good. Let's get to the telegraph office and then buy some tickets."

The End or A New Beginning?

Author's Note

From 2009 to 2011, I ran the Call of Cthulhu campaign "Masks of Nyarlathotep". It was recorded on audio and released as podcast episodes by The Gaming Grunts. The campaign ran for 51 episodes and ended with a near-TPK. I had always hoped that the campaign could be resumed, with the one surviving character assembling a new team of investigators.

In late 2019, I tried to resume the campaign, recruiting some of the original players along with several new players. We would play on Slack and instead of using the Call of Cthulhu system, we would use a system I designed to be simpler than Call of Cthulhu and would be more appropriate to the asynchronous nature of Slack.

To bridge the gap between the two campaigns, I wrote this short story, taking Flash Granger (one of the original characters) from deep in the heart of Nairobi to a place where the second campaign could start, as well as providing background information to the new players.

Somewhat unfortunately, Flash's player wanted to play a new character. We agreed that Flash recruited this new character, who would then transitively recruit the other investigators. It worked, and off they went to Australia.

The campaign lasted a few months. The characters managed to make it into the "location" that's in Australia, but ultimately real life took priority, and the game fizzled out.