

And Every Living Thing After Its Kind

The pose of the skeleton, tortured and preserved in agony, indicated that the creature's capture under lava had been sudden and terrifying. It was all there in the splayed spidery limbs and the wild arch of the spine. The off-angle set of the mandible even suggested an attempt to cry out, although the presence of a vocal apparatus was, as yet, only conjecture.

Ellen Vireo knelt on a pyroclastic slab that would have chewed the knees of ordinary mortals to meatloaf. This was her domain, and she was spellbound by the treasure she had partly unearthed. Only when the rain came again did she notice how dark it was getting. Soft drops pattered on the tent roof, warning her that the next downpour would start soon. *Intermission's over*, she thought. *There go the chimes*. She mopped auburn hair off her forehead to re-tie it at the back. She was already as damp as the rain would have made her. Outside the tent, crisp highland breezes would have kept her cool and safe from mosquito hordes, but in the waxed canvas shelter she had pitched directly over her primary excavation spot, she was overwarm in her light mountain jacket.

The flush in her face was not all heat, however. She wondered if she should, or even could, keep her discovery a secret. If what she now dusted and probed under flickering work lights was what she believed it to be, then she had been visited by a monumental stroke of destiny. Her function was that of a scouting party, anticipating the arrival of Professor Maxwell, who was due in the morning. She was to prep, test and measure her assigned spot of ground, while the more advanced doctoral candidates were busy digging out the larger village structures. She had expected the ordinary odds and ends she found at first – weapons, pottery, firewood, the bones of snakes and peccaries – but today's find was altogether different.

Until now, Ellen had only seen the species illustrated in books. Its rarity in the fossil record meant that she was one of extremely few to look upon it in the flesh (so to say). Long extinct, or so believed, it bore no strong hint of outward beauty. Even where keen artistic minds had inventively filled in its grotesque array of cavity and bone, the painted-on textures fell short of majesty. It was one of those hideous little marvels that survive in the fissures of strict natural order. It fit no recorded system, and theories about its ecological function ranged from the fanciful to the bitterly ironic. In taxonomic isolation, its nature remained substantially unproven. Eminent biohistorians quibbled endlessly over such fundamentals as its astonishing migratory range and its unguessed methods of reproduction. She had none of the scant literature available on the creature in camp, but Maxwell would surely arrange to send for it once he arrived. She meant to take full advantage of the discovery while it was still hers alone, and a single question rang in her head like Bedlam's bell.

Could there be any more of them here?

The stratovolcano Taquinarumi, a minor outlier of Ecuador's *Cordillera Occidental*, sits about forty kilometers southwest of Riobamba, the capital city of Chimborazo province. Standing roughly five hundred meters at last measurement, it barely tops the dwarf volcano Taal in the Philippines. It is a mere foothill up against its Andean sisters. Peaks like Cayambe "Sun Gullet" and Cotopaxi "Fount Of Life" reach almost six thousand meters (between nineteen and twenty thousand feet), boosted by the already high elevation of the great mountain chain. The long-dormant Chimborazo, namesake of the province, tops out at nearly sixty-three hundred meters over sea level.

So modest a spout is little Taquinarumi, the “Singing Rock,” that it went virtually ignored by the scientific world aside from perfunctory charting and measuring until the early 1990s. Ecuador is well accustomed to volcanic turbulence, and as in most things the mighty, not the slight, get all the attention. To the east are volatile Sangay “The Frightful” and Tungurahua “Fire Throat,” whose recent awakening from dormancy requires daily assessment. Meanwhile Cotopaxi has slept fitfully for a century, but holds large areas around Quito hostage with the memory of molten tides that could come again without warning.

Here, in this land of looming cataclysm, a small enclave of academics have gathered to catalog one more speck in the staggering geological, anthropological, bio-botanical history of South America. Primary tests put the eruption which filled this valley and stewed at least one Quichua village between three and four hundred years ago. That range of time saw violent episodes from almost all the major peaks in the region, so any chance witness to Taquinarumi’s eruption would have seen it as a footnote. Just one more apocalyptic belch in the wind. How hysterical it would be if this tiny, isolated bowl of dry lava were to yield a discovery of historic moment on par with... well, maybe not Pompeii, but...

Okay, Vireo, she chided herself, get a grip. She was sweating as much from flights of grandiose fantasy as from the exertion of coaxing her precious curio out of its igneous tomb.

Everyone knew that Professor Maxwell had conceived this trip as a reward of sorts, a little vacation for his most trusted students and colleagues. By some remarkable clerical error, the archaeology department had closed its previous year with a hefty grant surplus of nebulous origin. This was the best and rarest Chance card in the deck, the “Get Out Of Semester FREE” card.

Maxwell, basking in the success of his latest book, had snatched the plum for his beloved inner circle. For acts such as these they loved him and aspired to his brash, swaggering greatness, even when his personality in the heat of heavy field work turned him as mad and inconstant as a bucket of frogs.

Ellen paused to shed a layer. She'd hung another hot tungsten hook light over the work space as evening came on. The rain was ramping up outside, and every minute she expected the generator to run down as her colleagues covered their own sites and prepared to batten down for the night. Her bottom layer was the old purple "NOLA Jazz Fest" t-shirt her brother Andy had lent her once during a lost luggage fiasco, then insisted she keep for good luck.

Talismans for good mojo were essential when in the field with Professor Maxwell, whose decision to excavate the single rainiest valley in the Ecuadorian Andes was just plain typical. Had any of them guessed at the clockwork cycle of precipitation, they'd have spent a lot more time beforehand waxing their canvas tents and tarps, instead of shooting celebratory tequilas. On the other hand, each member of the team had worked in far less comfortable and more hostile conditions, on this continent and others.

The expedition had been up and running eight days, with only Maxwell himself still absent. He was arriving by way of Cairo, where he was supposed to be presenting an award or cutting a ribbon or merely cashing in a drink ticket with some Old World cronies before another of his holy cities crumbled for good. The vanguard had come straight from the university to O'Hare to Guayaquil, and thence by bush plane and jeep convoy and *llama* caravan to the foot of Taquinarumi to set up camp. Those with delicate equipment to transport had followed shortly

behind. It was new territory for Ellen Vireo, who had dosed herself as prodigiously with research as with quinine and mezcal in preparation for the trip. The past two hundred hours had been a gauntlet of jet lag, thin mountain air, hasty and imprecise lessons in the local Quichua dialects. The constant exhilaration she had felt since leaving Guayaquil was either the thrill derived from tapping new stores of endurance, or the slow euphoric death of an overtaxed brain.

The universe was clearly a step out of balance here. The curious rains were one sign, but this nearly mythical oddity of evolution, buried in a common slab of lava, was something else entirely. She knew that word of the find would not take long to spread through the camp, probably before Maxwell even showed up, but Ellen wanted to savor it for herself just a bit longer. She sat on her callused knees in a moment of reverent silence, then slowly her hands resumed their ministrations.

She had a sudden, vivid picture of the thing in the throes of crisis, scuttling from a camouflaged burrow to judge the danger of the sudden violent rumble in the earth. Perhaps it sensed the growing alarm in the nearby village. Had it seen its young to safety before destruction fell, or might it have devoured them alive in panic? Perhaps, choked with pyroclastic ash and feeling its skin burn away, it had felt a spark of conscious hope for evolution. Could it wish for the sudden means to fly or swim away safely, or was its prayer for a spontaneous miracle less defined than that, an inchoate surge of energy in the brain stem? Staring extinction in the eye, had it thought of a nice color for its wings? Having nothing particular in common with this bizarre appendix of natural history, she had no trouble imagining the many things it must have felt at the moment of its death.

A metallic pinging sounded in her ear, the ring of a heavy flashlight being rapped on a pole

of the tent. This was the accepted knock of the camp, and a moment later Clark Baxter poked his head inside. He was tall and beefy, one of a sizable geologist contingent Maxwell had booked along, officially headed by Dr. Lois Texeira. When not helping to analyze the terrain, they worked in conjunction with the local guides and porters recruited from nearby villages. All told the expedition had an efficient maintenance and logistics team, keeping the sites clean and the supplies well stocked.

Clark had a sweet, guileless face which could easily turn handsome if he ever lost the baby fat around his cheeks. Despite his proven mastery of reading volcanic strata, he looked too jolly for a scientist. He grinned from beneath his threadbare baseball cap with the University of Wyoming cowboy on it.

"Heya, Vireo," he called. "We're calling for shutdown when you can manage it. You're just about the last one. Must have found something major, huh?"

He was teasing, having no idea how right he was. Reluctant to leave off just yet, she stalled.

"Yeah, some decent stuff today. I'm finally starting to get good at this. You really have to kill my lights right now, do you?" There was enough flirt in her tone to buy her a few more minutes.

He hung awkwardly in the doorway, tacitly respecting that he hadn't been invited in, the way nice guys do with women that make them shy. His grin never wavered, although his eyes showed an ounce of strain.

"Wish I could just let you work all night, but we've been burning a little too much midnight oil. We're powering down Big Jenny early tonight, so we have something left for emergencies. We're taking some extra sherpas tomorrow when we go to collect Maxwell. They'll help us bring

back a whole mess of *petróleo*."

"By sherpas, you mean the *quichuas*?" She meant it to sound chummy, not reproachful, but he absorbed it with a sheepish face.

"Yeah, they... we just started calling them that, kidding around. They think it's pretty funny."

"I guess the pre-Columbian races are just discovering humor."

"They got names for us too. They call Bill Zagars *kuchi*, which means pig or something, I think. And me they call me *urku*."

She laughed. "That's, uh... hill, right? Or some kind of tree?"

"Yeah, I guess." He shuffled his feet.

She knew the guys at the generator switch would be wondering what the holdup was. Clark could have called "lights out" on her ten minutes ago, was not even obligated to come over and give her the courtesy warning.

She motioned him into the tent. "Listen, come take a look at this before I power down."

He brightened a little bit, striding over with his neck craned to see her handiwork. His face froze for a second, then tightened with urgency.

"What the hell is that?"

She just looked at him, shrugging with the corner of her mouth. "I can't tell you for sure. There are lots of better biologists than me walking around camp, but Maxwell's going to want some heavy paleontologist to confirm it. If he thinks it's what I suspect it is."

"And what's that?"

"I don't know that it even has a common name. I'll show you the Latin taxonomy if I can find

it."

Already she had given something away by letting Clark, even as trustworthy a friend as Clark, in on the discovery. But he would keep it under his rain-soaked cap until she could present her findings to Maxwell and start the machinery she hoped would carry her to greater things.

Clark took a knee and leaned low over the bones. "Have you found something like this before?"

Ellen dropped into a sitting position and drew her knees up. "Not... well, not an original specimen. I know next to nothing about it, but I don't think anybody does, really. It's kind of a tall tale in the paleo circles."

"So... whatever turns up," he mused, "this is big for you."

She chewed her lip, weighing the thought. "I really don't know, but... yeah. I think it's big."

Clark wavered slightly. He might have been wondering whether to offer a high-five, a handshake, a hug. Instead, he met her eyes.

"Good for you," he said. "Remember me when you need a chauffeur. I'm a great driver, even when I'm tanked."

She laughed, and rested a blessing hand on his kneecap. He flashed a grin, then turned his attention back to the skeleton.

"So, what's the story here?" he asked, indicating four small protrusions near the creature's jaw, and then the same pattern on the other side.

Ellen sat forward again. She had not noticed these before. Outside the tent, she heard the soft, rapid chatter of the native crewmen, joking in their Spanish-Quichua creole as they closed up camp

for the night. She traced around the series of points with one finger, brushing away dust and debris to expose as much as she could.

All at once, it came to her. She spread out her fingers and touched them to the row of brittle thorns, measuring the span. She put her other hand against the second set of points and drew in a shaking breath.

"Phalanges," she whispered.

Clark may have been a rock jockey, but he knew what that meant. "Finger bones," he murmured. "Human?"

"I, uh..." she swallowed. As far as she knew, none of the few known specimens had been found in close proximity to another animal, let alone a primate or hominid.

"I mean, could it be an ape or something?" Clark offered, with a look of mild concern.

Ellen shook her head. "Not an ape. No apes in the Andes. There's ah... there's some kind of howler monkey it could be, maybe, but I don't think they range this far from the coast." She knew it, in fact. It came back like a lecture remembered just in time for the exam. The mantled howler was mainly in Panama, thinly sprinkled along the western verges of Colombia and Ecuador. The red howler was an Amazon monkey, not a mountain dweller. And who was she kidding? They were on the outskirts of a buried tribal village. Her creature was moving among mankind, and the proximity of the specimens indicated active engagement. Had the owner of those fingers been hunting the thing? Fighting it off? Petting it? Mating with it?

The ideas were still forming when the noise of the generator sputtered away and the work lights in the tent sizzled out. They sat quietly in the dark for a while. She now allowed herself to

conclude that this was, indisputably, a big deal. They did not say much as he helped her tidy up the tent by flashlight beam. They walked out and across to the cook tent, really an open-walled canopy where native helpers tended several struggling campfires. There would be no hot cooked food tonight on account of the rain - the fires were for drying shoes - but it was pleasant to sit outside, even in heavy showers, feasting on cold canned goods and beer which was nearly as cold. Ellen Vireo and Clark Baxter stayed quiet, listening to the voices of the others, taking polite swigs from the jugs the natives passed around, full of that potent stuff they liked to drink.

There would be more than enough to talk about in the morning. The day would bring changes, not just to the tone of the trip but to everything. It would be a day for adding something new to the world, which seemed like a more terrifying responsibility than Ellen could imagine. It would be all they could do to sleep through the night, not worrying that it was all an illusion of high altitude and hard labor, not hearing the mountain rumble as it contemplated burying them alive with their knowledge, not wondering with every sound of wind or leaf what secret things were moving through the dark.