

## Omnes Morimur

Jane shifted uncomfortably on the air mattress in her tent. She wished now that she'd agreed to stay at the Bed and Breakfast in town with the others. Only she and David had stayed at the site and camped. The diehards were what the others called them. The hard-ups would have been more accurate. Jane sighed and rolled over onto her back. She was thirty-five and starting to seriously question some of her life decisions. She'd always wanted to be an archaeologist and she was never happier than when she was in the dirt, but it was a hard way to make a living. David was also in his thirties and they'd worked on several projects together. She didn't consider him a close friend, but they got along well enough.

Abruptly, she lay completely still and listened. What was that? There it was again. It sounded like someone howling in pain, no, it was more than one person. She sat bolt upright and crawled to the edge of her tent. She unzipped the flap and poked her head out. The noises stopped. She couldn't see anything. It was a cloudy night, so there was no light from the moon. What could have made a sound like that?

"Hey!" she heard David before she saw him, striding over from his tent a few paces away. "Did you hear that?"

"I could hardly have missed it," she said, "What do you think it was?"

"That's what I came to ask you. I have no idea."

"Could it have been some kind of animal, a bird or something?" Jane asked.

"I don't think so. It sounded so human. It sounds crazy, but it sounded like there was a group of people being murdered right outside. When I went to look, there was nothing."

"That's what I thought it sounded like, too, like people screaming in pain. It reminded me of a battle scene from a movie, except it was right out here. Do you think it's safe for us to go back to sleep?"

"I don't think we have much choice. It would take us hours to walk back to town from here."

"I guess you're right." She hesitated for a moment, "Do you want to move your mattress into my tent? I'm not looking for a booty call, I'm just really freaked out."

"Yeah, thanks. I'm glad you asked."

The next morning Jane quietly picked away at her two by two test pit. She robotically bagged the bones as she dug them up. She'd excavated plenty of funerary sites in her career from historic graveyards to prehistoric funeral complexes, but something wasn't right about these skeletons. The crew was finding a ton of human remains, but all the bones were all horribly damaged.

Archaeology is meticulous work and digging up in situ skeletons is the most delicate of all. No one was doing anything to damage the bones as they pulled them out, but they were all broken.

There were other anomalies with the skeletons. They were all female and none appeared to have died in childbirth. These two facts were strange enough. In some populations, female remains were more prevalent than male ones because women tended to die at home of natural causes while the male populations could be decimated in battle, but there were always some men, the elderly, the young, the sick. They hadn't found a single male burial.

These women had all sustained serious injuries in life, some of which never would have healed properly. The injuries were all concentrated on the distal side of the skeletons, which

meant that they were running away from whoever was attacking them. It gave Jane chills just to think about it. She imagined men from another settlement waiting until the young men left for a hunting trip or a battle and then attacking, kidnapping the young women and slaughtering the old. It was a practice known as wife raiding in the textbooks. Looking at evidence like this, it was truly horrific.

She felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up and she looked around, certain that she would find one of her coworkers trying to get her attention, but they were all working intently on their own tasks. She couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her and after last night, she wasn't at all sure it was a friendly presence. A tap on her shoulder nearly made her jump out of her skin.

"Jesus! You feeling a little jumpy today, Jane?"

"Sorry, Ruby. I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Bow chicka wow wow," Ruby indicated David.

"What? No! Nothing like that. We heard some strange noises last night, things we couldn't explain."

"Yeah, that's why I don't like to camp. I love being outside during the day, but everything looks different at night. I can totally understand why our ancestors were afraid what lurked in the forest."

"It wasn't like animals or anything. It sounded human. This is going to sound crazy, but it sounded like people being murdered. They were screaming in agony. We went to check it out, but there was nothing there. I've never heard anything like that."

"Oh my God. Are you guys okay?"

"Yeah, nothing happened to us. We didn't even see anything. It was just hard to go back to sleep after that."

"Yeah, I bet. You know the locals think this place is haunted, right?"

"No! Why didn't anybody tell me before I decided to camp?"

"Oh please! Like you would have listened to anyone. Hey Jane, you might want to spend some more money and stay in town with us, not because you'll be more comfortable and we can hang out, but because there are evil spirits wandering around out here at night."

"Okay, you're right. I would have laughed at you guys before, but I'm not laughing now."

"It's not too late to change your mind. The Bed and Breakfast has empty rooms. Why don't you check in after work? Why torture yourself out here?"

"Maybe you're right. I need to check with David first though. I can't leave him out here by himself."

"Bow chicka wow wow."

"Seriously, knock it off. Why do I have to be sleeping with him to stay out here? Isn't it enough motivation that he's another human and we should look out for each other?"

"I like how red your face gets when I mention it, which is why I think it's true. He's a good guy. You've known each other for years. Why don't you give it a try?"

"Can you leave me to dig up my murder victims in peace?"

Ruby sobered immediately, "Isn't it awful? I never imagined I'd work on a project this disturbing."

Jane nodded, "I agree. This is what the worst impulses of human nature look like thousands of years after the fact. It was a massacre."

"That's not entirely accurate. There's horrific damage to the bones, it's true, but a lot of what I'm finding shows new bone growth after the trauma, so they lived for a while after it happened."

"That doesn't make any sense. I thought we were digging exactly where the raid took place. Why would they attack and leave the women alive?"

"I don't think this is where the raid happened. If it is, then where are the men? We should find at least a few of them."

Jane began to feel uneasy as work wrapped up for the day. "Hey David, what do you think about bowing to the elements and going to stay in town with the others?"

"If it was really the elements we were bowing to, I think my pride could take it, but this is a mystery. I don't want to be chased off because of some noises, even some really freaky ones."

"Okay, I'll stay out here for one more night, but if we hear anything, I'm packing up and moving to town for the rest of the project."

"You'll spend all your per diem allowance."

"That's what it is, a spending allowance. I'm as thrifty as anyone, but I can't keep working if I'm too scared to sleep."

"Yeah, I'm with you on that. Alright, I agree. We'll see how it goes tonight and if anything weird happens, I'll haul my gear back to town, too."

That night, Jane and David laid side by side on their air mattresses. Everything seemed quiet until Jane was roused from a deep sleep by a piercing scream.

"David, it's back. Are you awake?"

"Of course I'm awake. What to do we do?"

"Well yesterday we looked around there was nothing. Maybe tonight we just wait?"

Eventually the screams of terror faded into the moans of the dying and those faded to death rattles. Then everything was quiet. "I think it's over," said David.

"No," Jane whispered, "there's another sound. Listen." They held their breath.

"It sounds like someone is cutting meat," David said. "My uncle owned a butcher shop and this sounds like someone sawing through bone and sinew. I remember because the sound always made me feel sick." They waited for another moment. "I don't think they're cutting things anymore. I think I hear chewing."

Jane's stomach roiled. "Maybe the two scenes aren't connected."

"Right, so we're hearing the sounds of an ancient battle and then what? A feast? They don't sound like they're celebrating."

"Maybe they're cleaning meat after a kill. They could just be focused."

"Why are we even arguing about this? This whole thing is impossible."

"Maybe it is, but it's happening. We both heard it. What other explanation is there?"

"This is hardly an explanation at all."

Jane thought for a moment, "David, who usually cleaned and cured the meat after a hunt? Did they do it right away after they killed the animal?"

"It depended on the size of the animal. I worked on a mammoth kill site last year in Montana. It was fascinating. They had to butcher the thing right there because it was too big to move. I assume the same was true for other big game, but we're talking the earliest modern humans. Wherever modern man migrated, he pretty much wiped out the megafauna right away."

"Right, but for smaller game, things that could be carried, what did they do?"

"I think they usually brought it back to camp. Cleaning the meat was considered women's work. They also wanted to divide it up in front of everyone so that no one could accuse

the hunters of being stingy. According to the cultural anthropologists, equality is still a big deal in societies that live in small groups."

"Do the screams sound female to you?" Jane asked.

"How would I know that?" He sounded affronted.

"Think back to the horror movies you watched as a kid. Do they sound like women screaming and crying?"

"It's hard to tell, but I think not. I think they sound more like men. Where are you going with this?"

"Bear with me. The bones we've been finding at the site are all female, right? They all look like victims of major trauma which is concentrated on the back sides of their bodies. Isotopic analysis also reveals that none of the women are native to this island."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Ruby told me earlier today. You know she loves doing the spectral analysis. I didn't think about what that meant until now."

"Care to share with the group?"

"What if we're not hearing the initial wife raid like we assumed? What if men from this island went somewhere else, waited for the able-bodied men to leave on a hunt and then came in and grabbed all the women? What if they brought them back here to be wives and mothers, but things didn't work out the way they'd planned? I think we're hearing the aftermath of the kidnapping. I think the women waited for the men to fall asleep, maybe plied them with strong drink, and then murdered every single one of them."

"Normally I'd say you have a twisted mind, but that makes perfect sense. That's why we're hearing moans of the dying instead of the cries of battle. That's why the skeletons all show

signs of healing. They must have lived here without the men until the whole group died out. Some of the skeletons show signs of advanced age."

"That's so sad."

"I don't know. Maybe it was like a utopia. I don't think archaeology can tell us that part."

"Do you think you'll be able to go back to sleep now?"

"I'm never sleeping again. I should have listened to you and gone to town with everybody else."

The following morning, David and Jane left the tent just as the rest of the crew was arriving at the site.

"Bow chicka wow wow," Ruby called.

"Knock it off," Jane cried.

"How did it go last night?" Ruby asked. "Did you hear any other strange noises?"

"As a matter of fact, we did. That's why we were in the same tent. I came up with a theory, but I know it sounds batshit crazy."

"I'm all ears, but first let me tell you what I found out last night. We went to the pub after closing up yesterday. There were some locals there. At first, they were standoffish, but after a couple of pints, they started to loosen up. There was this older bloke who told us that the locals don't just think this part of the island is haunted. They think it's cursed."

"Is that why we don't have any local volunteers on this dig?"

"I suspect so. It was interesting though, he kept saying that no man should come here and he was very specific about that. Apparently, the curse doesn't apply to women."



That night, Jane and David headed back to the Bed and Breakfast. The project was supposed to last for several more weeks, so it made sense to get comfortable. Jane started to think about what Ruby had said. Maybe David could be more than a friend. After everyone had turned in for the night, she went to knock on his door. She told herself that she just wanted to check on him. After what they'd been through, she felt like they shared a bond. He didn't answer and she figured he'd fallen into a deep sleep. She realized she was exhausted, too.

The next morning, the whole crew assembled to take the van to the dig site.

"Where's David?" Ruby asked.

"I'll check his room," Jane volunteered, her stomach plummeting. She took the stairs two at a time.

"Hey David," she knocked on the door. There was no answer. She turned the knob. The door was open, but the room was empty. Jane ran back down the stairs. "He's not there. I don't know where he is."

"Maybe he hooked up with a local?" Ruby suggested.

"When? The only place he went last night was dinner and then to bed."

"I don't know. Maybe he wandered down to the pub after we went to sleep. Let's get going. We're all going to be late if we don't leave now. If he's not back by tonight then we'll ask the front desk to see if he checked out. Maybe he left early for another project. He likes to plan ahead."

All morning Jane felt agitated. She had a hard time focusing. Normally she felt at peace when she was digging. She was like an artist with a trowel. Today she couldn't keep her mind on the task at hand. She felt confident David wouldn't just take off. Suddenly there was a piercing scream.

For a moment Jane thought that she was back in her tent in the middle of the night, but then she saw one of the young archaeologists, a girl whose name she didn't remember, run past her. Jane climbed out of the pit and called after her, "What is it? What's happened?"

The woman turned around, her face completely drained of color, "They found all the men from the settlement. They're buried over there in a giant pit. It looks like they were literally butchered. There are cut marks on the bones. They were eaten."

"Oh," Jane breathed. "I can see how that would be disturbing for you."

"That's not the worst of it. They found David in the pit. He's dead. He's... well there's not much left of him."

Jane went through the rest of the day in a fog. The police questioned her, but she doubted she gave them any useful information. She couldn't stop thinking about what Ruby had told her about this part of the island being cursed. She thought maybe it was her fault for not making him go back to town sooner. She didn't have any explanation for what happened that made sense. After spending most of the day wandering around listlessly, she made a decision.

"Are you crazy?" Ruby asked as she packed up her things. "You can't go back out there! Look what happened to David."

"The curse only applies to men, remember? I'll be fine."

"Come on, Jane. Think this through. You don't know for sure that it had anything do with a curse. There's probably a crazed killer walking around this island right now."

"I know what we heard out there. I have to do this."

Later that night, Jane sat on the floor of her tent. She wasn't trying to sleep this time, she was just waiting. When the screaming started, she called out an answer, "David, is that you?"