



## Chapter 1



### **My Uncle's Obsession**

Evil exists in the world. I don't mean biblical evil like Sodom and Gomorrah, coveting your neighbor's wife, or debasing yourself before false idols and graven images. Just beyond our imagination scrabbling at the edges of our nightmares something far worse abides; a hungering indescribable evil, powerful and hoary long before the Australopithecines took their first tentative steps in Olduvai Gorge. We humans stumble along in tranquil ignorance as in the eye of an unsuspected storm while maelstroms of infinite blackness swirl about us. A merciful god must exist, for how else do we account our minds' inability to comprehend the horror that waits in restless slumber?

I decided to write down these particulars, not to try to make sense of what occurred, for that is a task beyond the gifts of a sane mind, but rather as a warning to others who would at their own peril tread the same path. I will hold nothing back save the location of the place and the true names of some of those involved. No matter what I write or do, I'll never sleep soundly again. When I awake from diseased fancy, screaming, drenched in sweat, I think I would rather suicide than relive those loathsome days. I say that I am sane, but it is a tenuous sanity.

It began as good or ruinous events often do, as a family matter. Two years ago, on a cold cheerless day in November, I sat at my kitchen table toying with a stack of unopened mail. Just visible, tucked in among the usual dead forest of advertisements, offers and solicitations, lay an official looking envelope. Its gold embossed return address proclaimed its origin, “The Offices of Atterly, Clyde, and Dunn, Attorneys at Law.” I pulled the heavy envelope toward me and eyed it with a revulsion that I couldn’t ascribe. Debts, due to my poor judgment and even worse investments, were circling around me like crazed satyrs round a May pole. Still, my distaste for the envelope was far less mundane than a simple fear of foreclosures, creditors’ threats, or demands for payment. For no clear reason I found myself envisioning terrible stygian darkness. I picked up the letter with reluctance so strong that my hands shook and I fairly trembled with anxiety as I tore it open. Moments later my fear gave way to extreme surprise and I am ashamed to say inordinate relief. The source of my curious disquiet proved itself nothing more or less than a notice, couched in several pages of legalese, informing me of the sad and untimely death of my cousin, Janet.

Cousin Janet was the daughter of the well known archeologist and Mayanist, Dr. Carl Webber, the only issue of an ill fated and loveless marriage between Dr. Webber and my mother’s younger sister, Elaine. Uncle Carl met, wooed, and wed Elaine while teaching as an adjunct professor at Miskatonic University in Arkham Massachusetts. At six-foot one with chiseled good looks and fiery red hair he had no problem filling his classes with swooning co-eds. He was the rising star of Miskatonic’s Archaeology and Ancient Cultures Department and young Elaine was a wide-eyed grad student drawn like a moth to the flame of his success.

As children, Janet and I were never close. Uncle Carl was another matter; I worshipped the man, swearing to all who would listen that he was a cross between Indiana Jones and Sherlock Holmes’ smarter brother. Until I reached about the age of twelve, we were frequently together. Elaine and my mother were extremely close and they both saw to it that they were never long apart. It was obvious that Uncle Carl quietly chafed at family obligations which pulled him from his beloved Mayan studies. Nonetheless, he was ever ready to sit me at his knee and regale me with tales of ancient and mysterious rituals, performed to appease the appetites of shadowy and forgotten

gods. To illustrate his stories and bring them to life, he frequently gave me small relics from his digs, tiny pieces of statuary or shards of painted clay that wrapped about them an air of utter strangeness and dreadful antiquity. For a boy of twelve it didn't get much better. I memorized his tales and treasured every enigmatic bit he tossed my way.

It was just after Christmas the following year that things changed. Uncle Carl discovered something, something overlooked among the obscure and ancient tomes of the university's musty archives, something that pushed his avocation into obsession. He requested and received a leave of absence from his teaching position so that he could devote himself entirely to field work. Within weeks, Uncle Carl left Massachusetts with Elaine and Janet in tow embarking on a quest that would consume the rest of his life.

He started in Mexico at well known archaeological sites in Yucatan and Quintana Roo, but rapidly moved to locations that were less and less well known and farther and farther a field. Dedicated to the solution of a puzzle that in the beginning only he understood, he spent years dragging Elaine and Janet through horrible and remote malarial jungles searching; seeking something that even he could scarcely define.

Despite his unhealthy fixation it was during these years that Uncle Carl did some of his best work, writing the two books that placed the name of Dr. Carl Gilbert Webber at the top of his field. Our contacts by then had grown increasingly tenuous. Despite my mother's deep and abiding concern and her untold letters sent, we rarely heard from Carl, and never from Elaine or Janet. What little we knew of their whereabouts came to us mostly in tales brought to our attention by newspaper clippings and the pages of particular scientific journals.

The rare exceptions were certain cryptic letters sent directly to me from Uncle Carl. Why he chose me as his confidant, I have no idea, but invariably, his letters were months old and always the worse for the wear for their journey. In the tattered missives he hinted obliquely at things he seemed reluctant even to form into words on paper. Each letter contained roughly the same message. He repeated that he was close to amazing and mysterious discoveries and without specifics tried to arouse my interest and possibly even enlist my assistance. Even now it is difficult to express the deep and vivid impressions produced on me by these messages.

The final envelope that I received from Uncle Carl was different in that it contained no letter. When I tore it open, the only thing inside was a faded, yellowed, and almost indistinguishable Polaroid photograph. The image was clearly of some carved monument surrounded by jungle, but so blurred that it was impossible to draw further certain conclusions. For reasons I didn't then fully understand, the tattered picture filled me with unease and a sense of things that shouldn't be known. There was something indefinable and outlandish about the geometrical principles of that ancient stone. The only words that I can use to describe the sensation it evoked in me are "blasphemy" and "infinity." I was utterly baffled by the terrible picture and destroyed it without showing it to my parents.

Following the arrival of that enigmatic and disquieting photograph, our family heard no more from Carl, Elaine, or Janet. Our contact was nonexistent. Finally, my mother spotted an oblique reference to their whereabouts in "Field Archaeology Magazine." Desperate with worry, she forced my poor father to take her all the way to their isolated camp deep in the wilds of Chiapas.

What she found after two days on horseback left her shaken. Despite Carl's success, the esoteric and secretive nature of his field work left him perpetually underfunded. The dig site was primitive, noisome, and unhealthy in the extreme lacking in even the most basic of necessities. Carl was cloaked in an air of secrecy and feverish intensity better suited to a Klondike gold miner than a staid academic. At his side was Janet, by then eighteen years old, a strange light in her own eyes, his apparent confidant and co-conspirator in whatever overzealous enterprise it was that they pursued.

Growing up among the ancient temples and secret places of the once mighty Maya Janet's only companions were her brilliant but erratic father and her increasingly withdrawn mother, her only playthings the detritus of a lost civilization. Instead of following her mother's example, she'd taken after her father. In fact, at a very early age, she'd become something of a prodigy in the field of Maya Epigraphy, making not only significant discoveries but also publishing results that were the envy of many older scholars.

Aunt Elaine hated every minute of their existence and by the time of my mother's visit was a mere shadow of her former self. She was clearly the odd person out, excluded by a shared bond that she could neither fathom nor embrace. Mother related that her

appearance was terrible. Elaine appeared shrunken and listless, her face the color of old tallow, and her once radiant hair stringy and unkempt. Mother suspected her of alcoholism or worse. As it was, the visit was short and consisted of nothing so much as unanswered questions, inanities, and awkward silences. When it was time to leave, Mother begged Elaine to forsake that horrible place and return at her side. Although Elaine clutched at her sister and cried piteously, she nevertheless refused to go.

A month after my mother and father returned home, I walked into our living room and found my mother sitting listlessly in her favorite chair. Her head was in her hands and her body shook with occasional loud wracking sobs. Horrified, I tried to comfort her and begged her to tell me what was wrong. She could only look at me with empty tear stained eyes and nod at a wrinkled sheet of paper that lay at her feet. There scrawled in Uncle Carl's firm hand, were the scant details of her sister's death. A moment's inattention and a false step had thrust Aunt Elaine's poorly shod foot into a serpent's nest. Under the best of conditions even a single bite from the deadly and feared Barba Amorosa is frequently fatal. Days from any kind of aid and inadequately equipped, Elaine's situation was worse than hopeless. It was evident from the tenor of the letter that Carl and Janet simply stood by and watched her die a quick but agonizing death.

Day by day I watched as deep and abiding anger slowly replaced Mother's anguish. In time her anger itself was eclipsed by an even deeper and darker emotion that I can only call hatred. She blamed Carl and Janet for Aunt Elaine's death, but it wasn't that which made her to vow to never speak to either of them again. It was what came after. To my mother's unending horror Uncle Carl's grim letter closed with the disclosure that Aunt Elaine laid in an unmarked grave somewhere near their camp. He and Janet had discussed the matter and had decided that their work was at a juncture that was too important and critical to be set aside.

Less than a month later in an action so unexpected that it literally left me speechless Uncle Carl called me on the telephone. The call was long distance person-to-person, from God knows where, and of such poor quality as to be almost unintelligible. I listened dumbfounded as amid pops and crackles he excitedly announced that he and Janet had made an astounding breakthrough; it was just as he'd always suspected. With a half suppressed giggle he whispered conspiratorially that the temple of the Dreaming God was

within his grasp. Next, he implored me to come at once and ranted that riches and knowledge beyond measure were ours for the taking. In truth, he sounded like a madman. Stunned by both my uncle's demeanor and the sudden and astonishing nature of his call, I offered him a few vague assurances that I might soon be on my way, said a quick goodbye, and then hung up.

Although I still treasured the uncle of my childhood I had no intention of running off to the ends of the earth to follow the obviously deranged person who'd called me on the telephone. We heard nothing further and after a few days I began to even question the caller's identity.

**Continued in Chapter 2**

In his stone house the dead god waits dreaming

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*The Bequest*



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