
The Long Dark Night of Kabiribiri

It is said when the first human feasted upon the flesh of another, he died soon afterward. He awoke in the stinking bowels of a corrupt Gakko demon. His flesh had turned pale gray. His mouth had narrowed and it housed a vicious row of pointed teeth. Inside it contained a slender tongue as long as a man's forearm. His eyes had turned a beady red and filled deep, almost empty, sockets. Extending from his fingers were talons of bone and his feet were hooves. He found himself the ruler of a segment of Hell especially created for him. It would become his task to torture all those who had committed the same sin.

Each night he feasted on the flesh of his victims. Tearing morsels of meat from their squirming bodies as they screamed. Yet each time he began to savor the taste of human flesh it turned to ash in his mouth. Still he could not help himself. Each night the terror and the feasting began anew, but still Kabiribiri was not satisfied.

Each creature he devoured was reborn in the same way, until he had an army of followers. Each as misshapen as he was. His victims screamed in terror as they were dragged to his table. It was music to Kabiribiri's ears. A few offered penitence for their deeds and fewer still offered bribes. Little was of interest to Kabiribiri, except for portals. Those fabulous portals; doorways between worlds. It offered Kabiribiri the opportunity to cross into mortal planes and sate his endless hunger.

One such supplicant as named Sanele. He, like many others, claimed innocence. Sanele was once a mystic of some repute and offered Kabiribiri a sacred artifact ... a portal to both another time and place. He claimed he has spent decades acquiring it. To Kabiribiri's eye it was an odd-looking item. Small and round with a clear center, so one could see objects through it. Around it were large, fixed bolts as if the owner was afraid what could be seen through the center would escape. Kabiribiri had seen portals before, doorways, arches, coffins, wooden chests larger than a man. This ... This was a nothing but a hole. A hole in the universe. He laughed, his teeth gleaming in the firelight.

Cecil Ragsdale sat across the table from Captain William Thomas Turner. Ragsdale was rather famous. Physically, he is small, wiry, and quite unattractive. His face was the foundation for a massive beard and short hair which had a tendency to stick up with all the audacity of a wire brush. His one skill was his marksmanship, where he had no equal. Ragsdale was returning from a long trip to America where he had regaled audiences with his tales of being a professional hunter. Now he regaled the Captain with the same stories and anecdotes.

Many claimed Cecil Ragsdale was the model for Alan Quatermain. The similarities are striking between Ragsdale and the Quatermain character: both were small and wiry African adventurers; they mutually sought and revealed prehistoric treasures and civilizations; both battled great wild animals and traveled extensively with native peoples. The two were equally renowned for their ability to track, even at night;

and both men shared similar nicknames (Quatermain, "Watcher-by-Night"; Ragsdale, "He-who-sees-light-where-there-is-none").

Ragsdale's beliefs differed slightly from Quatermain's. Cecil harbored no illusions concerning the superiority of the white race; he had a great admiration for "warrior races," such as the Zulu. Ragsdale had frequently encountered natives who are braver and had more innate wisdom than Europeans, and even women who were smarter and emotionally stronger than men. Ragsdale also differed from Quatermain in his choice of weapons. Instead of the big gun, Ragsdale preferred the Zulu assegai, a short stabbing spear. He reveled in the exploit of coming face to face with his foes ... or rather claw to steel.

"I say, you're definitely the right man to help us. We be greatly honored if you could lend your hand with a slight problem menacing us," the captain related.

"Oh," Ragsdale displayed a big grin as he took a sip of his drink, "I'm not one to shy away from adventure, but I'm not much of a sailor I'm afraid."

"And my crew are not much for hunting," the Captain agreed. "It seems someone has smuggled on board some kind of animal and it's gotten loose in the hold. No one has seen it as of yet, but we've found evidence of its passing. Torn flesh, trails of blood and gnawed bones. It's causing quite a disturbance and more than a few of my crew have gone missing attempting to restrain the creature."

"More than a few animals have gone down with even the most basic of weapons," replied Ragsdale. "I'm sure a few of your men with beriberi pistols would be able to make short work of any beast small enough to go unnoticed in your hold."

"That's the rub, you see," Turner whispered quietly to the adventurer, "It not supposed to be widely known, but the hold is full of explosives and ammunition destined for the war effort. A flare pistol would be a great danger in amongst the cargo. Could cause the ship to go down."

"Well then," Cecil Ragsdale responded, whipping his lips with a napkin, "We best get to it then." Ragsdale turned to his aide, a towering African with gleaming, oiled muscles. "Manqoba would you be so good as to fetch our assegais from the cabin? It seems we will not have to wait after all for a return trip to Africa for a decent hunt."

"CR, is it your wish to hunt deep in this maze of lifeless steel?" Manqoba asked, placing his hand on Ragsdale's shoulder. "There are no trees. There is no grass. Such is not good for a pursuit of the elusive."

"Bad omen?" the Captain suggested.

Ragsdale let out an unrestrained laugh. "You misunderstand my companion, Captain. He's not superstitious in the slightest. He's simply pointing out that without a natural setting, tracking will be more difficult than normal. No, I'm the superstitious one. That's why I travel with Manqoba."

"How's that, Cecil?" the British captain sounded confused.

"In his language," Ragsdale explained, "Manqoba means the-one-who-conquers-in-hopeless-situations."

"Well ... " The captain pushed back his chair only to find Manqoba standing beside him. Staring straight ahead, the captain's eyes lined up with the lower part of the African's neck. Turner looked up. The man's

white teeth gleaming with an almost unnatural snow-like shine. Manqoba tilted his head down at the English captain. As he did so, the lofty feathers fixed to the leopard band he wore on his head, scraped the lower jewels of the chandelier.

“Yes,” Turner remarked, somewhat taken aback, “I can see why.”

Kabiribiri finished his latest snack when it finished struggling. But he found it unfulfilling. It had screamed most delightfully, but the taste was not what he desired. He examined the mystic Sanele’s strange object. Round, it was only large enough to easily fit over the head and rest on the shoulders. Yet it had no other attachment for chains. It felt heavy in his hands. Heavier than the neck collars he often strapped to his future victims to make them watch as he demonstrated their fate on other hapless victims. He toyed with the contraption with his long taloned fingers. He found the bolts moved with astonishing ease. At first, Kabiribiri had thought the generous size of the bolts was intended to torment the prisoner. Taunting it with the illusion of freedom. Yet he found this was not the case. Perhaps they did nothing and were simply a device to sneer at the captive, their true purpose a mystery. It would be a useful toy of only the bolts reduced the circumference of the steel circle when turned, but they seemed to have no effect.

At last Kabiribiri turned the handles of the nuts so they all faced the same way. Instantly the clear crystal in the center swung away on a hinge. As it did so, air rushed through the opening at a fantastic rate, like wind forced through the eye of a needle. Torches were extinguished, smoke swirled and rushed for the opening. The sound of the screaming rush of air was deafening. Kabiribiri found himself stretched into a long, gray version of himself, well within the parameters of the opening of the steel circle. He passed through the epicenter like water flowing out of a cup. When he was through, it closed shut with an almost mouse-trap like snap. It spun on the floor, the middle crystal reflecting the light in gleaming flashes as it spun on its edge. The spin grew more rapid as the object neared the floor. Until at last, it settled in the now empty chamber with a scrape and stood immobile, as if it had not moved in centuries.

Kabiribiri found himself in a forest of wood unlike any he had ever experienced. The smell of the wood was familiar, but the resemblance ceased there. The trees were without both leaves and bark, with the interior grain exposed. The trunks seemed to form in the same shape as a deposit of Galena. Square cubes seemed to grow upon four-sided bases. These formations were also oddly marked, like one might carve one’s name into a tree. Yet these were no mere carvings. They were strange symbolic marks, placed on the wood with a black pigment. All the marks appeared identical, as if the artist was writing their name with endless repeating style, void of any deviation.

The forest was oddly broken up in a regular pattern, separated by long open paths. But instead of soil they grew from a flat surface of cold steel. Kabiribiri admired the fine texture of the iron-hard soil, but was amazed at the chill of its touch. Where he came from, steel was always at a temperature well below its melting point, but hot enough to cause unending burning torment to those who handled it. Kabiribiri was intrigued by the power of these strange plants whose roots could penetrate and make their home in such an unyielding environment. From his youth, he recalled small weeds pushing aside heavy rocks far larger than they were, but this went way beyond such scope.

As he examined the bizarre landscape, a human appeared wearing a brilliantly clean white suit. He carried a lantern, but appeared stunned at the appearance of Kabiribiri and his glowing red eyes. The man stepped back, looking sickened and ill. Yet, Kabiribiri was thrilled. He could smell the animal's fresh meat ... and the aroma was fantastic; a culinary treasure.

Kabiribiri made manifest his flail ... a weapon of twin heads hanging from the handle on lengths of chain. In this case, the word heads had a unique double meaning. The masses at the end of the chains were indeed heads; skulls to be more precise. Each one encased in bands of iron, sported vicious looking spikes. He swung the evil-looking armament at the cleanly dressed human with the lantern, shattering the light and sending splatters on crimson over the cubic trees. Still more red spirted from beneath the now stained uniform of the hapless investigator. He fell to the floor. His body jerked and thrashed uncontrollably for a moment before lying still. Kabiribiri was most disappointed. He preferred to eat his meals live. He felt the still beating heart made a delightful texture when you popped it into your mouth. Still the meat was fresh and the taste was divine.

Cecil Ragsdale and Manqoba skulked quietly around the ship's hold, their assegai's drawn and ready. Only Manqoba held the long eye-shaped, cow-hide covered shield so well known to visitors of South Africa. They proceeded along narrow paths between the crates of nitrates and fulminate of mercury, following trails of blood, broken only by the drag marks of victims as they were taken away to some place unknown. The two crept along in the darkness, hoping to spot the animal without giving it a warning to their presence by carrying a light.

Here and there they found the broken remnant of a storm lantern giving evidence to their caution. Around one corner Manqoba crouched and pointed in the distance. Listening intently, they heard the unmistakable scraping of teeth against bone. The sound of flesh being torn from connective tissue. It had the rhythm of a lion devouring its prey. Cecil Ragsdale, never one to shy from facing even the most maddened animal strode forward. Manqoba grabbed his arm as he attempted to pass. The big man shook his head no and then pointed at the upper decks. Ragsdale, not to be dismayed, responded with the same shake of his head, but then pointed forward, toward the sound.

They turned corner after empty corner, each time Manqoba tried to convince the adventurer to withdraw, but to no avail. At long last they turned the right corner, but what they saw was not what they expected at all. Creature it was, but nothing they had ever encountered even in the darkest jungle. Its skin was a sickly gray, stretched over a hairless skull with pointed ears which looked like nothing less than the devil himself. His mouth was dripping blood from a double row of teeth and had only recently finished tearing the flesh from the thigh of what might have once been a ship's steward. As he casually devoured the meaty tissue, his head swung around, the red beady glow of his eyes directed at the two approaching hunters.

The creature grabbed at a femur, but it was no ordinary bone. From it hung two spiked skulls dangling from chains. Kabiribiri lunged at Ragsdale and Manqoba swinging the horrifying flail with the determination of a mad-man. His first swing sent Ragsdale flying off into the crates with a prodigious crash. Manqoba skillfully fended off the second blow with his shield. The massive warrior thrust his spear point forward, but the foul creature avoided the blow gracefully. What followed next was a

furious exchange of blows. Kabiribiri striving to get the head of his flail around the warrior's shield and Manqoba striving gallantly to gore the wretched creature on the point of his assegai. It was a ballet of swing and thrust, with neither of the combatants seemly able to gain the upper hand or strike a blow. To an observer, one would have imagined the advantage belong to the otherworldly creature. Surely even a great warrior like Manqoba would eventually tire and make the first mistake. The pale creature moved with unnatural speed, a swiftness which would exhaust even an Olympic sprinter. Yet it was Manqoba who struck the first blow. He pierced the creature's abdomen with his blade, deep enough so the point protruded from his back. The creature slowed, his face in the contortions of one mortally injured.

Manqoba withdrew the blade ... and there was nothing. No blood, not even a hole; not the slightest sign of any indentation. When a man sees the unexplained, he naturally hesitates as the brain tries to make sense of what it has recently experienced. As great a warrior as Manqoba was, he was still a man. He spent less than a heartbeat carving out a new plan to defeat a creature who's hide was impenetrable. But in that fraction of time, Kabiribiri saw this chance. In an instant, Kabiribiri's flail found its way around the Zulu's shield and made entry into his cranium.

Manqoba stood for a moment, thought still evident in his eyes. He first sank to his knees, as his great legs, uncontrolled by his will, crumpled under the weight of his upper body. Then the warrior slowly leaned to one side, smashed into a nearby pile of crates and gradually slid to the floor.

The almost lifeless body of Cecil Ragsdale stirred back to motion. He scanned around briefly for his lost spear, knocked from his shattered grip by the creature's first rush. He had no time to complete his search. In an instant, the disgusting gray creature was upon him. Cecil pulled out a pistol he kept hidden up his sleeve. He pointed it directly at the horrid creature's head, taking aim at point blank range. Yet when he pulled the trigger, he saw its gray, bald head slip to the right in a blur. As if in slow motion Cecil Ragsdale's eye followed the lead projectile as it crashed into a crate marked Amatol. For an instant he saw the flash; it was the last thing Ragsdale would ever see.

Approximately 11 miles off the Old Head of Kinsale a passenger liner crossed directly in front of one of Imperial Germany's latest naval weapons. A submarine couldn't ask for a better target. Walther Schwieger, the commanding officer of the U-20, observed the line of bubbles representing the track of his attack against the passenger ship. He had given the order to fire one torpedo, but in the rush to strike the fast-moving liner, the crew had set the torpedo's depth too deep. Schwieger watched helplessly as the trajectory of the torpedo passed the Lusitania under the starboard bow, beneath the wheelhouse. Moments later, an explosion erupted from within Lusitania's hull and the ship began to founder much more rapidly than it should have from a single torpedo, quickly acquiring a prominent list to starboard.

Schwieger snapped the handles of the periscope up and pushed it down towards the floor. His crew looked at him expectantly as he took off his cap and wiped his sweating brow.

"Captain?" The crew was anxious to learn the results of their work.

Schwieger paused and then announced, "We missed, but we sunk her."

“Captain?” They were both elated and astonished. Yet more than a little surprised at their commander’s words.

“Don’t ask me to explain,” he remarked, “The depth was set too low, I saw it pass under her keel. Then ... then she ... blew up. Write it down in a log as a successful torpedo run. We’ll say nothing more about this. We’ll go home and accept our medals. Understood?”

The crew nodded in agreement, “Aye, captain, whatever you say.”

Kabiribiri soon found himself back in his own portion of hell. Lucifer was once again angered at his absence and set him back to work in chains. The Prince of Darkness confiscated the Lusitania’s porthole, as he did with all of Kabiribiri’s other portals. Once more the meals were unfulfilling, with a taste like dried ash as he ate the screaming flesh. Kabiribiri lost track of time as it flowed into and around himself and his endless task. Yet, as always, it was broken by something captivating. In this case, in the person of one Sidney Chenoweth, who offered Kabiribiri another gateway. This one was a fair size window, with a small triangular hole in the lower corner glass. Sidney claimed it led into a delightfully occupied little room at 13 Miller's Court, Whitechapel.