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Ring Around the Cobra

by Linda Ruth Pfonner

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Part 2

Indiana stood in complete awe, utterly motionless. This was a temple--undoubtedly a private chapel.

Maybe ... just maybe... Blucher, the Nazis' chief archeologist--Indy considered him barely competent to dig privies, but he had been at Tanis longer than Indy had--had explained to Indy what they had already found: a few scraps and fragments that hinted of dabblings in dark magic and why Shishak had stolen the Ark from the Temple of Solomon.

The inscriptions said that Shishak was a great sorcerer, and that even Osiris and His Son Horus were respectful of his skill. There were also hints that Shishak's father, Shishenen, had been a sorcerer, too, that he dabbled with the idea of controlling demons to prevent their wrecking havoc on the Two Lands when the gods were busy elsewhere. Maybe this is Shishenen's 'laboratory,' as it were...

Moving slowly, in a good deal of pain but too fascinated by his discovery to really notice, Indy read the inscriptions on the wall by the door he had entered through. The light was uncertain, and he missed his glasses fiercely, but the hieroglyphs were plain.

After what must have been hours, the light began to fade. When Indy realized it, he glanced up, for the first time, at the ceiling cracks

where the light filtered in. What he saw froze him in his tracks. It was a cobra.

Not your ordinary, dusty beige, Egyptian cobra; this one was coiled on a pedestal against the far wall, its hood flared four feet wide, its mouth open, and fangs as long as Indy's forearms glistened like slickly polished ivory in the wavering light.

After one eternity-long moment of heart-freezing terror, Indy forced him-self to relax. It was a statue.

A throne, actually, he mused idly, not quite able to bring himself to approach it. He deliberately looked away from it, for in the fading light, it looked as if it might be breathing, and he did not even want to think about that possibility.

Byalhotep, the Worm, the Snake, the Death of Eternity, he read the titles off the wall and understood a little more. To the ancient Egyptians, one must have a physical body in order to enjoy an afterlife. If a corpse was not properly mummified, then the worms and basic decomposition would destroy it; the ultimate nightmare.

Indy kept reading, wanting to know if Byalhotep was the demon that Shishak had been attempting to summon. _It would seem not,_ Indy commented to himself. _I never heard of anything like Og'horot ... that's what it looks like..._ He did not get much farther; it was too dark to read. He felt his way around the chamber to a spot as far away from the Cobra as he could possibly find. There was a pile of wind-driven sand here, it must have leaked in through the cracks in the ceiling that let in the light. He flattened the drift a bit and lay down. He was asleep in seconds.

Indiana dreamed. He knew he was alone, but someone, or something, was watching him. It was not malevolent, but it was not particularly friendly, either. It simply watched, and after a while, he felt constrained to turn and look.

Indy rolled over lazily and froze, his breath caught in his throat as he stared, paralyzed with utter terror, at the image of the Cobra Throne alive and staring directly at him, intelligence alight in its golden eyes. Its tongue flicked out and touched him.

Indy woke up with a scream echoing in the temple and nearly fainted. The Cobra Throne had moved and it was staring directly at him. Indy could not move. He was held prisoner in that steady gaze as any snake holds a bird mesmerized by its lidless stare.

The tableau held for an eternity, and then the Cobra moved. It lowered its hood and dropped its head to the floor by Indy's foot. It stayed there for a moment, then, slowly, it moved closer. Indy inched away, and the Cobra's head moved up a little. Its tongue flicked out once, and, despite his rational decision to hold still and not alarm it, Indy flinched violently away.

But the Cobra did not strike. Instead, it ducked low and nudged and worried at the sand until it could get its head under him. His skin crawling, Indy sat up to avoid the touch of shiny hard scales that felt incongruously thin and horribly alive.

A part of his mind sat rationally up in its vantage point and wondered why an animated statue should feel anything like a live snake, but the rest of him was shivering, fighting an intense longing to yammer in mindless fright.

The snake touched him lightly on the small of his back, and Indy scrambled awkwardly to his feet, backing away from it. He saw sunlight glint off the black and satiny smooth scales on the serpent's head and neck, but was unimpressed. What did impress him was the obviously conciliatory actions of the serpent. It could have killed him a dozen times or more, yet it was plainly not inclined to strike.

It continued to nudge him gently; it wanted him at the other end of the room. When he got there, he found a chest about the size of the Ark, made of acacia wood covered with gold, like the Ark. It was decorated with snakes, but he hardly noticed the vignettes. What burned itself into his brain was the hieroglyphic inscription on the lid. He read it aloud, and his voice was firm and clear in the dimly-lit temple.

"This is the Chest that belongs to the Priest of the Cobra. Within the Priest keeps the Symbols of the Power of the Cobra. Touch them not, for the Power of the Cobra is within Them, and the Impious One shall be smitten by the Power of the Cobra for His impiety."

Totally enthralled, Indiana forgot his phobia. He turned and actually looked at the snake. It was gone. He looked over at the Throne, back on its pedestal, and thought he saw a flicker of life.

"Like that, is it?" Indy asked rhetorically. Much to his amazement, the Throne serpent moved, flicking its tongue out at him. It happened so swiftly that he really was not certain that it had happened. But before he could react, he heard a woman's scream.

"Marion!" Her voice was unmistakable, and he was not surprised to know that she was in Egypt. He had expected her to be at Sallah's when he escaped and made his way there.

The voice seemed to have come from beyond that wall...Indy limped over, feeling a little dizzy, and prowled until he found what had to be a priest's spyeye. "Christ!" The exclamation was jerked from his lips.

His field of view was necessarily narrow, but Indy could see Marion, bound to a pillar, her face dirty, her shirt torn, her khaki slacks scuffed and dusty. Her hair was a mare's nest, and her eyes were stormy. She cursed volubly at Kruger, who was standing before her. Indy frowned as he took in the outfit the SS officer was wearing.

The kilt and flowing shawl were purely, even classical Egyptian, the sandals were accurate, and he was even wearing the distinctive sphinx-type headress that hid his short-cropped blond hair. In his hands he held a sceptre that clashed terribly.

It was the spinal column of a human being, surmounted by the grinning skull. Totally unadorned, it was a dead, flat, bone white. There was a thin dowel inserted to stiffen it, but there had been no other visible alterations.

Kruger ceremoniously placed a clay bowl at Marion's feet and dropped a match--an anachronism--into it. An extraordinarily fetid smoke began to drift about and Marion choked on it. Kruger disappeared from Indy's field of view, but a few moments later, another plume of smoke joined the first, and Indy heard a man coughing as Marion was.

"Sallah..." he whispered. That meant that, unless that hydrocephalic idiot Musgrove sent in the Marines, their only hope was Indiana Jones.

"Now, what the hell can I do? I'm here, and I can't get over there," Indy muttered. He cast around desperately, but there was no way to get from the Shrine of Bialhotep to the chamber where Marion and Sallah were tied. _Besides,_ he realized a little belatedly, _I'm unarmed. Literally. This arm's been giving me fits. I'm in no shape for anything remotely resembling combat._

It was a difficult admission for Indy to make. He had always prided himself on his physical prowess. But he was realistic enough to know that he was on his last legs, and honest enough to admit it, at least to himself.

He was suddenly and completely disheartened. He turned away from the spyeye, but he still caught a whiff of acrid smoke that sent him, choking, to his knees.

After a while, he managed to crawl to the throne, and he pulled himself up into it. He sagged there, his body spent and his mind gone numb. His head fell back against the snake's intricately carved jet belly, and he closed his eyes, willing himself to find new reserves, new strength--somewhere ... anywhere!--before Marion and Sallah coughed their lungs out in the next room. They would die very soon unless he did something about it--they had no other hope than him.

At first he thought he had fallen asleep again, and he was furious with himself. But when he opened his eyes, he knew that was not so; the temple was still there. _That doesn't mean anything,_ he reminded himself bitterly. _I've dreamed this temple before._

Slowly, then, a black haze crept down out of somewhere and covered him. It felt like a cooling bath of chocolate pudding, cooling and numbing his body, clearing his brain of the heat and fever of thirst and pain. Indy opened his eyes and everything was tinted a definite but transparent black. He stood up and found his body a little insensitive; not unaware of the pain and exhaustion, but uncaring. He lifted his hand to his face and felt the cool silkiness of scales...

Scales?!! "No!" He threw himself away from the Throne to fall and roll in the sand. The cool serenity of body and clearness of thought were left behind, and his arm was a throbbing blaze of fiery red agony when he rolled to his knees, cradling it against his chest. "Oh, God, no...!" he whispered, shaking. But after a long moment, during which the Serpent did not move or show any signs of pursuing him, Indy relaxed just a little and began to think.

Stop it, Jones! he scolded himself when he realized he was still shaking. It's just a statue. Then he paused, struck by a stunning revelation.

I don't believe in magic the way Blackstone does it--that's just sleight-of-hand. But I know that the supernatural is real. Superstitions are often orphaned traces of old religions.

Shishak was a sorcerer, he realized, the small, unrelated facts and hints of facts suddenly beginning to add up. _He was trying to raise himself a demon to do his bidding, and he so offended the local priest of

Ra that, rather than bother Ra with the problem, and thus give Shishak the ego-boost of angering the the Sun Himself, the priest called Byalhotep to deal with the Pharaoh!_ Indy studied the Throne for a moment, then went back to the spyeye.

Marion was fighting her bonds frantically, her eyes fixed on something Indy could not see. Her panting grew louder and more frantic until she was screaming hoarsely and crying, biting at the air for breath only to scream it out again. off to one side, out of his line of sight, Indy could hear Sallah, his voice almost unrecognisable as he choked out terrified prayers to Allah and Jehovah as well as to Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

His decision came swiftly. Indy turned back to face the Throne. "Byalhotep--can we save them?" His voice, oddly, did not echo. Something soaked it up. The statue flicked its tongue at him, and Indy grinned viciously. This would be a remembered fight!

He half-ran, half-stumbled across the sandy floor to the chest and unhesitatingly threw the lid back. His hand jerked away reflexively--and then he grinned. What he had seen as a small black cobra reared to strike was actually a royal headdress, the pharaonic uraeus. Still amused at himself, Indy set it on his dusty hair. "If I'm going to be your agent, I ought to look the part, eh?"

Beneath the uraeus was a priest's shawl of snakeskin, which he threw on hurriedly, not even noticing what it was made of. What he saw in the chest beneath the shawl made him chuckle in genuine delight. He picked up the long black whip and flicked it expertly, underhanded because of the low ceiling. Made of the finest of leathers and fully twenty feet long, this was a whip man's treasure, and he marveled that it even still existed after three thousand years.

"My choice of weapons, too, Snake One?" he laughed, truly happy. Then he dropped, tiredly, into the Throne, easily relaxing. "You'd better be able to do something about me, Snake One. I'm exhausted."

There was no direct answer. The cooling, soothing, calming blackness slipped over him, and his thoughts were cool and emotionless.

Whose thoughts?

Marion knew, without fully understanding, that she and Sallah were sacrifices. The German seemed to know what he was doing, and she had inadvertently absorbed enough of her father's studies to understand some

of the usages. The smoke from the clay braziers wafted up around her, making her throat feel corroded. She coughed to clear her lungs, but nothing helped.

Suddenly the very air around her chilled, and she shivered, despite the noon sun. Out of the darkness before her Something oozed. She heard someone scream, and only afterward realized that it was her own voice. Somehow she knew It was there--It smelled nauseatingly of corruption and decay, and she could feel its presence, though she could not see it. It could not really be seen, and, somehow, that made it all the more frightening.

Marion fought the ropes that held her against the pillar, knowing escape was hopeless but unable to hold still.

Kruger called out to It encouragingly, shaking his gruesome sceptre so that the skull's jaw rattled.. The Thing oozed forward hesitantly, and extended a portion of Itself to touch her foot. Marion flinched away, and the Thing cowered back. Kruger, standing behind It, shouted at It, his tone full of reprimand.

The room quivered with a low, subsonic rumble, followed by an earthshaking crash. Everyone looked up.

The wall separating them from the rest of the building had collapsed, and there, standing motionless amidst the billowing dust, was Indiana Jones. Marion's heart leapt in her when she felt the Thing retreat from Indy's presence. Then she looked more closely at him and frowned worriedly.

Indiana had not moved or even blinked. He stood as motionless as a statue, his face as pale as marble under the week's beard. His left arm was bruised and discolored and he had tucked it into the front of his shirt. In his good hand, he held a long black whip that twitched and writhed as if it had a life of its own. His eyes were glazed and he stared directly at the Thing.

Marion blinked. Indy was wearing a uraeus--a coronet shaped like an angry cobra--but she had never seen one made of jet before. Its diamond eyes were so bright that she half-expected it to move.

"Indy?" she called, almost afraid. "Indy?"

He did not respond, but stepped slowly through the rubble toward Kruger and his Thing. When he spoke, no one, save perhaps the Thing, understood the words, though Marion recognized the language as ancient Egyptian. Then she gasped in horror.

Over Indy's head, hovering motionless, was the nightmare image of a huge cobra. It, too, was staring at Kruger's Thing, which retreated from Indiana's personality. Then Kruger shouted incomprehensively, and It started toward Marion again.

Indy snapped one syllable and the shadowy snake solidified a little. The Thing yammered--Marion found herself wondering insanely if the Thing had a mouth--and retreated from Indy as he walked, with visible majesty, down onto the main floor.

Kruger began to chant a string of strange syllables while standing over his Thing, and Marion gasped. Suddenly she could see It. For the first time, It had shape and substance. She strained to see It through the clouds of smoke still eddying around, and then wished she had not as her stomach lurched. She averted her gaze to smile at Indy as he came to stand behind her. She felt him working at her binding with his good hand and smiled wider.

"Indy, are you all right?" she asked as she stepped away from the pillar.

He did not even look at her, but went to free Sallah. Before he could, however, Kruger, yammering in much the same tone as his Thing, chivvied his attendants to the attack.

Five young SS soldiers, who felt more than a little uncomfortable in Egyptian kilts and headdresses, attacked awkwardly, unaccustomed to the short spears that were their only weapons.

"Indy! Look out!"

He whirled lithely, and, with a rather bored expression on his face, dodged the two spears that were thrown at him. Then the whip flicked out, underhanded, on a very flat trajectory, and caught soldier after soldier straight across the eyes. One, two, three soldiers screamed and grabbed at their eyes.

Indy went down as the two remaining soldiers tackled him. He clubbed one with the lead-weighted butt of the whip, and the last soldier grabbed at his whip hand. A strange light flared in Indy's eyes, and the jet uraeus moved, suddenly vital. It sank its deadly fangs into the soldier's cheek, and the shadowy Cobra Shape over Indy darkened, looking a little more solid. Its massive fangs glinted in the sunlight as Indiana rolled to his feet and straightened his clothes as he turned to face Kruger and his Thing.

Marion was enthralled. All five soldiers were down, and four of them were not breathing. She was not at all sure how a whipstroke could kill, but they died just as quickly as the snakebitten one had.

"Sallah," she whispered as she moved to free him. "Did you see that uraeus cobra?"

"Yes," he spoke just as quietly, rubbing his wrists.

"How can a jet cobra kill?" she wanted to know.

Sallah did not answer; someone else began to speak.

"Og'horot, get ye back, ssspawn of the Outer Darknessss!" Indy's voice hissed and blended into the slithering of the shadows and the whip, which was still twitching. "I am Byalhotep, Who isss the Sssnake, and the worm, and the Enemy of Life and the Foe of Forever! I am the Ending with No End and the Beginning of the End."

The longer Indiana spoke, the darker and more solid became the substance of the Furious Serpent that hovered over him, its cobra hood wider than his shoulders, its mouth open as it threatened Og'horot and its priest, its fangs framing Indiana's rapt face. The uraeus, which had been a crown of jet, was now a diadem of living, scaled flesh that coiled around Indy's head and hissed menacingly at Kruger.

"Indy hates snakes!" Marion marveled. "How can he stand that?"

Sallah's expression was intense. "That's not Indy," he said softly, his eyes rivetted on his friend as he confronted Kruger and Og'horot.

"What do you mean?" Marion gasped. She, too, was unable to tear her eyes away from the man who was so familiar and yet so very different.

"You heard what he said," Sallah replied. "That's not Indiana Jones. That's Byalhotep, the Foe of Forever, whose aspect is the jet cobra. I hope Indy's alive."

"What?!"

Sallah grabbed her arms and shook her once, very hard, forcing her to see his fear. "If Indy died in the Shrine of the Cobra, then it could take over his body to fight Og'horot. But I don't think that such an old god--and a minor demon-god at that--could take control of a living Indy unless he invited it. And this is a snake-god..." His uncertainty was plain, and Marion shivered, moving closer. Sallah put an arm around her

shoulders as they watched the confrontation between devil and demon. It never occurred to either of them to run.

Og'horot whined and tried to scuttle away. Kruger stopped it with a sharp command, and struck it hard with his sceptre when it balked.

"Ssssooo," came a mocking hiss from Indiana/Byalhotep. The uraeus-snake hissed counterpoint. "The ssservant beatsss the massster, now? How low hassstye sssunk, Og'horott To sssell yourssself for a bit of meat and blood?" Suddenly Indy's face reflected the Serpent's fury. "Ye are a nathling, now, Og'horot, and I defeated ye once before, when your Pharaoh had ye well-fed and ssstrong! Even your Pharaoh could not sssave you! Now, get ye hence, or, by One Drowned, I will assuredly thiss time desstroy ye utterly!"

"You're a fine one to talk about One Drowned, Byalhotep!" Kruger spat, the words alien to him yet fitting in his persona as priest of Og'horot. "You, who were the devil and one cursed by all the Children of the Nile and the Sons of Horus! Og'horot will feed! His kind ruled in the Beginning of All Things, and they shall rule again! Once Og'horot is strong in this place, It will guide an army of its kind here to feed on the enemies of the Thousand-Year Reich and grow ever stronger!"

The witnesses were stunned into immobility. Certainly Og'horot seemed to have a stronger hold on this level of reality; Byalhotep's image was still transparent, obviously dependent on its link with its human representative for substance, while Og'horot had become nauseatingly solid, a lump of SOMETHING that was alternately oozing and scabrous, phosphorescent and light-absorbing, and always It exuded the fetid, stomach-churning odor of a damp, mouldering grave. Its shape seemed to be largely a matter of opinion, but It was unquestioningly solid and aware. It left evil-smelling slime on the floor when It moved.

Indiana spoke coldly. "Ye are not, by any rightnesss, of thiss world, Ssslimy One, in any time or any place. I am a Ssson of the Two Landsss, and I will not permit thy like among my people!" on the last word Indiana leapt at Kruger, and it seemed to Sallah that Indy had fangs to match the Cobra-God's.

Marion screamed. A whip and the uraeus-cobra seemed to be hardly sufficient weaponry to face down and defeat Og'horot and his priest, and the whip was use-less at close range.

The whip cracked like a gunshot, and wrapped itself around Kruger's wrist as he swung his charnal staff like a baseball bat. Indy jerked the lash,

and Kruger stumbled. The staff slipped and the skull that tipped it was smashed to splinters against the stone floor.

Og'horot squalled and leapt at Indiana from behind. Kruger, his eyes alight with demonic fury, jumped at him from the front. Indy was thrown backward onto Og'horot's heaving side. The Thing wrapped its amorphous self around Indy, whose body arched backward in agony. He screamed and his body wavered, seeming to shimmer and, for a moment, turn almost transparent. Marion shrieked in horror, but before she could dash to Indy's aid, the Serpent Image flared. Its shadow reared high and then, deliberately, lowered itself to merge with Indiana's shimmery, unstable form, solidifying it. Indy's long-drawn scream of torment changed in midbreath to a savage, reptilian hiss. His arms pinioned by the Thing's slimy embrace, Indy bared cobra fangs and whipped around to strike at Og'horot like a serpent, burying those fangs again and again in the stomach-churning mass that held him. Og'horot squalled again, but this time obviously in agony--a high-pitched keening--and threw Indy as far as it could.

Indy hit the wall with a reassuringly solid thud, and roiled to his feet. When he straightened, apparently unhurt, Marion finally let herself breathe. Og'horot sobbed, and everyone turned to watch the slime demon melt.

Indiana did not watch passively. He began to chant in a low, hissing voice. His clothes were disheveled, but his attention was firmly on the Thing, which twitched and moaned and keened helplessly, seeking an escape. Indy sketched a symbol in the air and it began to wail and smoke. It turned to flee, but he was too fast for it. He began walking around it, building a barrier of sound and fear to keep it imprisoned while the poison of the Cobra worked. It was not long before there was nothing left of Og'horot except a noxious, steaming puddle on the stone. Indy smiled thinly then, caught up a torch and tossed it in.

A cloud of thick, vomit-green smoke billowed up. Sallah breathed incautiously and got a lungful. He collapsed, retching. Marion had a little warning and inhaled through her sleeve. The smoke eddied in some freak draft and she caught a glimpse of Indiana leaving, climbing back over the rubble the way he had come, but not as easily.

"Indy! Indy!" She scrambled to her feet and dashed after him.

The other room was shrouded in darkness, and it took her a moment to find him. He was carefully coiling the black whip. As she watched, he laid it carefully in a golden chest. Then he pulled off the priest's stole and

laid the length of snakeskin over the whip. His hands went to his head and he removed the again-inanimate uraeus, and laid it reverently in the leather and snakeskin nest.

"Indy?" she called timidly. "Are you all right?"

He turned then, and saw her for the first time. He smiled at her, and she bit her lip in dismay--that was not Indy's familiar crooked grin.

He did not speak, but went to stand in front of the black Cobra-Throne. He looked up into its diamond eyes and spoke to it in a normal conversational tone.

"Byalhotep, Who isss the End Without End and the Beginning of the End..." Indy's voice trailed off and he staggered, fighting to keep his feet as something shadowy and black lifted itself from his shoulders and vanished into the statue.

"Indy?" Marion started forward and he turned.

"Marion ... ? Byal-ho-tep..." He crumpled to the ground.

"Indy!" She dashed to his side, where she was promptly joined by a rather sick-looking Sallah. "Indy!"

Sallah pulled Indy up into his lap and Marion started chafing his good wrist. Indy was completely limp in Sallah's grasp, and Marion had to fight down her fears and remind herself that she should be thankful that he was alive.

"Indy? Indy, wake up...answer me!"

Sallah pushed aside the tatters of Indy's shirt and his fingers probed lightly at the obviously broken arm. "Let's set this before he wakes up--it will be less uncomfortable."

"Okay." They switched places, Marion sliding in under Indy's head and shoulders while Sallah stood up and took hold of Indy's left wrist. He planted his foot in Indy's armpit and tugged. When he felt the bones slide together, he released the arm and laid it down gently. They had nothing to bandage it with. Indy did not react at all--if he had not been breathing faintly, they would have believed him dead. Marion looked up at Sallah with undisguised worry plain in her eyes.

"He'll be all right," Sallah assured her with confidence he did not feel. "I'll be right back." He rose and hurried away.

He was back in a few moments with a canteen. He tore a piece off his turban and soaked it. He used it to gently bathe Indy's face, letting the water drip between Indy's cracked lips.

After a few moments, Indiana moved. He moaned and blinked his eyes open, licking greedily at the water. His hand went to the canteen when Sallah held it for him to drink, and the Egyptian had to forcibly restrain him from gulping at it.

"Easy, indy ... easy..." Sallah pulled the canteen away. Indy tried to take it but could not coordinate well enough. The brief effort exhausted him, and he fell back, his eyes closed, panting.

Marion stroked his cheek gently, ignoring the dark golden-bronze stubble of beard. "Indy, are you all right?"

He looked up at her and she could see the exhaustion in his eyes. But he grinned weakly. "Thirsty," he whispered.

Obligingly Sallah held the canteen for him again. indy drank slowly, forcing the water down his shriveled throat, relishing the cool dampness. After a while, he relaxed, closing his eyes. "Indy?" Marion was still not reassured.

He let his head roll to one side, and when he opened his eyes, he saw the Cobra Throne. Instead of the flinch that Sallah expected at the sight of the colossal snake, he saw a brief expression of--what was it? Appreciation? Gratitude?

indy smiled faintly and struggled to sit up, cradling his left arm against his body. Marion helped, And when he was steady, he took the canteen away from Sallah.

"Are you going to tell me what happened or am I going to have to beat it out of you?" Marion demanded, her eyes flashing.

Indy grinned at her and sipped from the canteen before he answered her. "That sounds like it might be fun." He grinned even wider at her furious blush, and continued. "Right now I guess I'm okay. I think I'm hungry."

"That's not what I asked, Jones, and you know it! How did you break your arm?"

"I was pushed into the Map Room, and I landed on the arm on the edge of the step. That part's a little foggy," he admitted. "I wasn't really

paying a lot of attention." He cocked an eyebrow at his Egyptian friend. "Sallah? Were you hanging around there? I thought I heard your voice."

"Yes, Indy. I was playing watercarrier, trying to get to you."

"You're a little late," Indy grinned, hefting the canteen, "but better late than never."

"Damn you, Indy, don't you ever go off alone like that again!" Marion snarled, somehow not wanting him to know how frightened she had been for him.

Indy grimaced and sat up a little straighter. "It wasn't my idea, Marion. They had guns and they as much as told me they'd kill you if I alerted you. I figured I could get away from 'em, and I did."

"How?" Sallah demanded eagerly. "You had the whole camp in an uproar. How did you get out of the Map Room?"

"Through the door." Indy chuckled at their dumbfounded expressions and savored another swallow of the ambrosial water.

"What door?" Marion demanded.

"The one in the wall. It was hidden behind a rockfall but it was there. I moved a couple of rocks aside, slipped through, and filled the hole up again from the other side."

Marion was about to demand to know what had happened to him in the temple when a new voice was heard.

"Kruger? Kruger?"

The three in the Shrine of the Snake froze. Indy was the first one to speak, and he spoke in whispers. "We can't let him find this Shrine!"

"Why not?" Sallah wanted to know.

"You heard Kruger's plan for Og'horot!" Indy growled. "Blucher'll want to use Bialhotep for the 'Honor and Glory of the Third Reich!'" Indy scrambled to his feet and headed back the way they had come.

With the lightning reflexes that she had often exhibited, Marion grabbed him to stop him. Typically, she did not think of anything except stopping him, and she tugged, hard, on his broken arm.

Indy winced, falling against the wall with a harshly choked-off cry of pain. "Get out of here!" he ordered through set teeth. "I'll... I'll...catchup...later..."

"Indy!"

"Go on!" he almost shouted. "I'm not alone in the Coils of the Serpent!"

They heard Blucher and his followers approaching and hesitated, torn between flight and concern for Indy. He forced a smile.

"Go on," he said gently. "I'll be okay. I've got a plan."

Sallah nodded once and took Marion's arm, pulling her farther back into the dark corridor.

As soon as they were out of sight, Indy let himself slip to the floor, cradling his broken arm, his panting loud in his ears. His gamble paid off--it was only moments before the German archeologist found him there.

"Jones!"

Moving with agonized deliberation, obviously little more than half-conscious, Indy blinked up at the German. He did not even try to speak. Blucher frowned worriedly. Jones looked to be on the verge of physical collapse, and that would never do. He dropped to one knee in front of Indy, who was leaning his head against the wall with his eyes closed.

"Doctor Jones? Can you walk?"

Indy ran a dry tongue over dryer lips and smiled hesitantly up at Blucher. "Could try," he whispered, his throat obviously too dry for speech. "No guarantees..."

Blucher took his good arm and helped Indy stand. Indy was rather wobbly, and Blucher half-carried him back into the Shrine and headed for the Cobra Throne.

"Here. You sit down here and rest, Doctor Jones..." he began. But Indy took one look at their intended destination and panicked completely.

"No! No, don't! I won't do that again! I won't be a snake again! No! No! You can't make me!" He fought, desperately, to free himself from Blucher's hold, but he was too weak.

Blucher looked speculatively at the terrified American, and back at the Throne. The one guard who had survived had reported to him only moments ago, but the story had seemed so utterly incredible. But he could feel nothing but scorn for Jones, or for anyone else who could fear power that much. He held Indy easily while he deliberated, and, after a few minutes of hopeless struggle, Indy sagged to the floor, too spent to fight any further, whimpering his terror.

Blucher made his decision. He waved a hand to summon several of his Egyptian diggers over. They helped him carry the exhaustedly struggling American to the Throne. When they sat him down in it, Indy began to fight harder. Two of the fellahin efficiently tied his feet to the Throne, and looped a rope over his good wrist, pinning it to the arm of the chair.

Indiana stopped struggling and lay back, his eyes closed, his every breath a moan of terror. The soldier he had only knocked out in the earlier battle stepped forward.

"Herr Doktor, he was before wearing a snake crown and a kind of a shawl over his shoulders."

Indy was hard pressed not to betray his glee. They would clothe him in the trappings of Byalhotep's priest, and he and the god would destroy them all! He fought down the killing rage he could feel building inside him for fear it would show on his face. He sagged a little farther in the chair, and watched with eyes dead and lusterless as Blucher opened the priest's chest and removed the accoutrements.

One of the fellahin held Indy's head up for the uraeus, and Blucher draped the snakeskin stole around his shoulders.

"Call the god, Jones," came the dispassionate command.

"No!" Indy protested weakly, while doing just that. "No! I ... won't..." His eyes focused on something Blucher could not see, and a shadow fell over him. Indiana stopped fighting; indeed, he stopped moving and for a moment, Blucher thought he stopped breathing.

Snake One, take me into Your Power again; there is another foe to defeat.

A FIGHT ... A FIGHT... IT HASSS BEEN TOO LONG SSSINCE I HAVE FOUGHT... !

Snakes have no morality, Indy thought involuntarily, and then hoped that Byalhotep had not heard him, or, if he had, that he would not be offended.

Byalhotep, this foe is just a man, but I need your help to kill him. Once having fought with the Power of the Snake, I wanted to display the Power once again.

A FIGHT! was the only reaction Indy got from the god, and he gave up trying to reason with the Reptile. He just submitted himself to it. The now-familiar cold wave washed over him, and he straightened in the cold jet throne.

"Ye ssseek the Cobra? Ye hasst found Him."

Blucher stared. There was something horribly reptilian about Doctor Jones now. His eyes were level and cold, and he did not blink. The German found it distinctly difficult to tear his eyes away from the other man's.

"Ye sssummoned Our Presssencce, mortal! Ssspeak!"

"Doctor Jones?" Blucher asked incredulously.

"I am Byalhotep, the Foe of Forever, the End of the End and the Beginning of the End. The Jonesss-thing isss merely Our Priesst."

Blucher was stunned, and stared at the Thing on the Throne, speechless. After a few moments, Byalhotep got impatient and turned its attention to the three fellahin.

Two of them fled from the unblinking yellow gaze, but the third one was frozen where he stood. His shovel fell from numb fingers and he began to walk toward the Throne, his steps slow but steady, his face blank.

The digger knelt before the Throne of the Snake, but never took his eyes from Indy's. After a few moments, the fascinated digger began to untie the ropes that held Indy prisoner there. Before Blucher could stop him, Indiana was free.

He stood and stretched sinuously. The digger, released from the hypnosis of the Snake's eyes, fled in terror.

"Ye sssummoned Our Presssencce, mortal!" Byalhotep repeated, furiously angry. "Ye had besst have had a good reassson, or we will begin Our NewIncarnation with another death!"

Blucher swallowed convulsively, remembering the contorted bodies in the outer room and the almost-hysterical report he had gotten from the sole survivor. "If it is deaths you seek, Byalhotep, I think I can offer you

many," he stammered, "My...my king ... has many enemies, and I know it would please him if you would..."

"The Cobra fightsss for no King, no Pharaoh, no Other God, but only for Hisss Own Pleasssure!" Furious, Byalhotep leapt at Blucher, who yelled in horror, stumbling backward and tripping over the digger's abandoned shovel. As he rolled to his feet, he grabbed it, swinging the blade like a scythe.

Byalhotep dodged it, and the shadowy serpent shape began to grow and darken above Indy's head. The uraeus-cobra began to move and hiss, and cobra-fangs flashed when Indy snarled.

The Priest of the Serpent was lithe and agile, and probably would have eventually worn Blucher out, but for one lucky swing of the shovel.

The blade was angled high and Indy ducked under it. It grazed his hair and struck the uraeus-cobra, shattering it to glimmering fragments. Indy screamed--a high-pitched wail of indescribable agony. His body spasmed violently once, and then he fell to the sandy floor, panting hoarsely.

Gasping for breath himself, and congratulating himself on his prowess, Blucher just leaned on the shovel for a moment. Then he tossed it aside and knelt beside Indiana, who struck at him with cobra fangs and eyes that were reptilian yellow and quite mad.

Blucher screamed as he-felt the fangs sink into his shoulder and the instant numbness that followed. It raced down his arm and into his chest, where it made breathing impossible. His eyes wide with terrible realization, his mouth open as he fought to pull air into paralyzed lungs, he collapsed beside his killer.

Marion ran from her hiding place. She and Sallah had not fled, but merely hidden to watch the fight. Now she ran to kneel beside Indy.

"Look out!" Sallah was afraid Indy would bite her. But that single, twisting strike seemed to have taken all his energy. He slumped down, his chest heaving as he fought for air, his mouth open and filled with sand.

"Indy? Indy, can you hear me?"

Sallah frowned worriedly when Indy did not react at all. Marion reached out hesitantly and smoothed his sandy hair. "Indy ... ?"

There was no reaction; Indy's breathing was calming, but he did not seem to be aware of them. Every now and then, he gave a convulsive shudder, but he was unaware of her touch.

"Sallah? Have you still got that canteen?"

"of course."

Moving swiftly, Marion washed the sand off Indy's face and tried to get some water into him. He flinched and tried to bury his face in the sand. "Indy? Are you hurt?"

He rolled over and, with visible difficulty, focused widely-dilated eyes on her. "Marion?" His voice was hoarse.

"Yes. Are you hurt?"

He coughed heavily and then sat up very slowly. "Yeah ... I think so..." He did not sound at all certain. He used his right hand to cradle his left, and his fingers brushed the snakeskin stole. He flinched hard, and shoved it away, shuddering.

"Indy, get up, please. We have to get out of here--there are Germans everywhere!" Sallah was worried and making no bones about it.

"Away?" Indy whispered. He glanced around, hardly noticing Blucher's motionless body. When he saw the Throne, he looked hurriedly away. "Yeah," he said in a hushed voice, struggling to his feet with Marion's eager aid. "Yeah--I want to be away from here. Far away!"

After all the trouble they had had in the past few hours, their escape seemed frighteningly simple. They sneaked out of the dig under cover of the falling darkness, and found Sallah's truck right where he had left it. The Germans never found it.

Indy slept, cradled in marion's,arms, all the way back to Cairo. Much as they wanted to hear his entire story, they could not bring themselves to insist,when he was so plainly exhausted. Sallah parked the truck, as always, at Omar's, and woke Indy up for the short walk to the house. They were within a few yards of the door when Indy stopped short.

"Wait a minute. Something's screwy."

They stopped. "What?" Marion wanted to know.

But Sallah was frowning, too. "He's right," the Egyptian rumbled. "This is strange."

"Sallah--scout east. Marion and I'll go west. Meet back here in ten minutes."

"Of course, Indy." Sallah ghosted away, completely delighted; Indy was his old self again--completely in command of himself and most of the people around him.

"Indy, I don't understand!" Marion protested violently. All she had seen had been the silhouette of Sallah's oldest daughter through a window.

"Ssssh!"

Marion froze. That sounded rather snake-like, and she did not care to be reminded of snakes at this point.

Indy grimaced. "Sorry," he whispered, fully understanding her reaction. "But Fayah's in trouble in there. There's a light burning in the wrong room; Jasmin would never voluntarily silhouette herself like that. You never advertise a teenage girl's presence on an outside wall like that, especially when her father's not home. So something's screwy."

"Okay." She could understand that; some Egyptians still kidnapped wives from their neighbors. "What are we going to do about it?"

"First, we're going to identify it. Plans are for later, if and when there's time."

Glad she was wearing pants and boots, for they made it much easier and more comfortable to sneak around in a cluttered city alley, Marion tiptoed after Indy. They found a first-floor window, and Marion, who was too short to see through it, waited impatiently while Indy peeked in.

What he saw brought a muffled oath to his lips. Fayah sat in a straight-backed chair, glaring at USAI Colonel Musgrove, her hands firmly bound to the back. The younger children were clustered about her knees, and Major Eaton, looking more than a little distressed, was tying Sallah's oldest son to another chair.

Mother and son exchanged glances, and suddenly the boy was a dervish. He planted a foot strategically in Musgrove's groin and bit Eaton's hand.

Sometime in the midst of the fracas, Fayah snapped orders at the rest of her brood, and the kitchen was briefly full of running children, all shrieking at the tops of their lungs.

By the time the two Army Intelligence officers had recovered, the only prisoner they still had was Fayah, and they were not pleased. Fayah, on the other hand, wore an air of quiet satisfaction.

"The children," she said in her quietest voice, "will find their father. Then you will learn what it means to trifle with my Sallah!"

"We don't give a damn for your husband!" Musgrove snarled, pain still audible in his voice. "We want Jones!"

"Then go out and find him! Do your own work! Men," and she pronounced the word pointedly, "do not use children for work they have not the belly for!"

Eaton blushed and looked away; Musgrove went very white and lifted a hand to slap the scorn off the Egyptian woman's face.

"Don't touch her," came a cold voice from behind him.

The two American officers whirled and then froze, faced with two steady rifles and a revolver.

"Doctor Jones!" Eaton managed to squeak. "Please..."

Indy's pistol never wavered. Marion set her rifle up against the wall, and, staying out the line of fire, she edged into the kitchen and freed Fayah.

"What are you doing in the house of my friend?" Indy's voice was cold and his eyes were flint-hard.

"Looking for you, Doctor Jones." Somehow Musgrove still managed to sound cocky.

"With ropes and threats against children?" Indy spat. "I could shoot you both and no one would think anything of it here."

"Go ahead," Marion urged from her end of the room. "No one would miss a pair of cockroaches. And our lives would be cleaner."

Indy appeared to be considering the suggestion, and Eaton swallowed hard.

Sallah, heretofore silent, broke the silence then, with the distinctive click of the bolt as he locked it in.

"If anyone is to kill them, it is I who have first rights," Sallah rumbled. "They have taken my family prisoner and hostage to entrap my friends. By law--such as they are here--I have the right."

Indy made a slight bow to his friend and lowered his pistol.

The two Army men stared at the angry Egyptian and Musgrove finally found his tongue. "Dammit, we weren't going to hurt anyone! We've been trying to find you for three weeks, Doctor Jones!"

Indy snorted in disgust. "How many asses did you have to kiss to get your rank, Musgrove? Damn straight you didn't win any promotions for skill at your work. It took Sallah two hours to find me, and Marion figured it out from Connecticut. And you guys are supposed to be professionals!" Suddenly weary of it all, Indy tossed the pistol across the room to Marion and fell heavily into the nearest chair.

Fayah eyed him sharply, then moved decisively. She found a glass and poured Indy a large tumbler of the flowery red wine that he liked so much, and then raised her voice in command. A shrill, childish acknowledgement came from outside, and they all heard the patter of running feet.

Indy smiled wanly at Fayah and raised the glass to her in wry salute. He sipped and felt the wine's warmth go through him like a gentle flame.

"Thank you, Fayah. That's just fine."

"You don't look well, Indy," she commented quietly.

"Just between you and me, Fayah, I feel worse."

"I have sent Agba for the healer."

Indy took another swallow of the wine. "I heard. You don't have to go to all that trouble..."

"Nonsense." She sounded very maternal. "No, really, Fayah--I'm just tired."

Her smile was the warmest thing that side of the Egyptian sun. "So sleep, then, Indy. My home is always yours."

He grinned at her and relaxed a little more, feeling the adrenaline fade from his limbs, making them heavy and his thoughts labored. He heard some kind of commotion around him, but it was too far away to matter, and he ignored it. He was just barely awake when the sound of running feet was audible and a small child bounced once on the kitchen floor and landed with a stunning thump on Indy's stomach.

Indy came awake violently, his hand reaching for a weapon he no longer held. His arm throbbed in time with his racing heart.

"Unca Indy," Sallah's youngest son stared at him solemnly. "You're a mess. How come?"

Marion fought not to giggle and failed miserably. The boy's parents traded amused expressions. Indiana sighed.

"I had a lot of fights, Kamal," he explained, tiredness plain in his tone.

"Did you win, huh, did you, Unca Indy? Did you?"

"Yeah," he allowed, slightly surprised to realize it. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"Doctor Jones?"

That was an unwelcome voice, but Indy was too tired to fight any more. "What?"

"Is there any possibility that the Nazis will be able to use Byalhotep?"

Indy frowned and looked up. The situation seemed to have been resolved; everybody's weapons were lowered, and the two Army officers were seated at the far end of the room looking only normally suspicious. Indy shook his head.

"No. The key to Byalhotep was the uraeus-cobra. And Blucher smashed it." Indy shuddered as he remembered that sensation, and felt Marion's hands on his shoulders.

"What happened, then, Indy?" she asked quietly. "Even after it was smashed, you were still Byalhotep."

He shook his head. "No--Byalhotep was me. He was trying to... to ... hold on...to stay in this continuum. But I wouldn't let him, and I had a

stronger hold on this body than he did. So I threw him out, and had to listen to him die." He shivered at the memory.

"Die?" Sallah asked skeptically. "He was a demon-god. How can he die?"

Indy shrugged. "If I knew all the answers, I'd be God. It may not have been actually death as we know it, but it was certainly an ending, and Byalhotep feared it."

"As long as it's over," Marion stated, with audible relief.

"Yeah. I think I've had my fill of ancient Egypt for a while."

Musgrove lifted an eyebrow. "Interesting that you should say so, Doctor Jones. We have received reports that there is a detachment of SS troops in--"

"No!" Indy stood up and glared at him. "I'm not going anywhere near the SS or the Nazis of any other brand. I'm going to bed, and I'm going to sleep for a week and a half. Then I'm going back to Connecticut, and I'm going to spend the next five months teaching empty-headed girls archeology. I'm going to be painfully bored, and I'm going to revel in it! Find yourself another patsy!"

Musgrove watched Indy leave the kitchen, but he said nothing, and he made no attempt to remonstrate with him.

Yet.

End

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