

## Dark Intrusion

by James Lynn Smith

My name is Mike Marley and I'm a journalist. Despite the convenience of the internet, I sometimes visit our municipal library. Walking home from the library one evening was a pleasant stroll before I felt an eerie premonition. My pace slowed and I grew alert.

A dark feeling intruded my mind and I stopped. The same thing occurred twice yesterday. Though I tried to ignore the sensation, my pulse was racing.

I resumed walking and sensed someone close behind me. Too close. Swirling around, I faced a pistol in the hands of a large, tawny-haired man with a reddish birthmark on his cheek. A deep scar angled across his forehead.

He shoved me into the alley we were passing and pushed me against a brick wall. "Do as I say or I'll bust your skull. Don't need the gat, but I'd love to use it. First your watch, then your wallet."

With foot traffic sparse, he could carry out his threat and no one would notice my body for hours. I pulled off my watch, handed it to him and began fumbling with my back pocket for my wallet.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I want you to *beg* me to take your wallet." His grip on my collar tightened, almost choking me.

I coughed and stopped squirming as I tried to figure him out. *He wants to humiliate me. It's not just the money.*

"Where do you work, buddy?" he asked gruffly.

"*Downtown Journal*. Writer—local events," I said in raspy voice.

"I'll bet you're paid well. Maybe one of the *elite*? Yeah, you write about

crime-ridden scum and what they do to each other. How superior do you feel now, big shot?”

The night was cool and his long, dark coat cloaked his anatomy. I had no idea how strong he was, but I felt my ire rising. If he moved the gun away from my face, maybe I could overpower him and get away.

“Now, beg. Say ‘Please, take my wallet because I’m a muck-sucking leech.’”

He was enjoying himself enough to be animated. Maybe in gesturing, he would move the gun away just enough. I indulged him. “Please take my wallet because I’m a muck-something.”

“Muck-sucking *leech*, you SOB. Now say it.”

A passing patrol car stopped and beamed a bright light down the alley. An officer got out of the passenger side. In a loud voice she said, “Police. What’s going on down there?”

The assailant jammed his other fist deep in my gut. “Okay buddy, this is not over. I’ll see ya around.” He fled down the alley as I keeled over in pain.

“Police. Stop right there,” the officer yelled while running. Having seen the mugger’s weapon, she prepared to pull hers but he had already fled to safety.

The other officer hurried to join her. “That’s the same one, right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “Call it in. Sir, are you hurt?”

“I really don’t know...Maybe.” I had never taken such a powerful belly punch and felt my sternum was damaged also.

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The hospital confirmed that my stomach was badly bruised and X-rays showed the lower end of my sternum to be displaced. Police came by and told me this particular assailant was obsessed with leaving his victims robbed, bloody, and lifeless. Departing the hospital, I remembered his words, “...this is not over. I’ll

see ya around.”

Soon I was back at work and my sternum began to heal. After a few days most things returned to normal. I work at the *Journal* but occasionally I travel for a special interest story. It helps if I can piggyback on another project for economy’s sake.

Not long ago an odd coalition of DEA, NIH, and professors from LSU allowed me and biochemist, Francine Jones, to join them for a trip to South America. The DEA was tracking a group who pillaged tribes in the Amazon basin and promoted U.S. drug distribution. Francine and the professors were the NIH connection. They wanted to query tribes and locate herbs that might have medicinal value. I just wanted to write about our experience. Though this was new to me, Francine had taken such trips before. On this trip, however, we did not find the particular tribe we sought and returned without results.

There was something important Francine wanted to tell me about the trip, but the mood of disappointment and pressures of returning on schedule with limited funds squelched that.

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Although *most* things returned to normal at work, I recently went to bed with trepidation. Unable to identify what bothered me, I lay awake for hours before a dream-filled slumber came to me...

I was observing a botanical garden landscape. The sky was bright and a golden light graced leaves, vines, and flowers. Then it began to darken. In the center of my vision, an object drifted near. It had red angular facets in the center and numerous green spots dispersed on the circumference. Around the object, clouds darkened and I felt a floating sensation. A sudden appearance hit like a hammer. Animal or grotesque human, the darkly illuminated face lunged toward me. It had long black hair and irregular black projections above the head. Fierce

lines and facial patterns surrounded a mouth drawn back in a grimace. A deep, guttural humming grew louder.

I sprang up in bed, damp with perspiration. After going into the bathroom and looking in the mirror, I began to calm and realized what it was. Another weird mental intrusion. Now they were invading my sleep.

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A few days later, I had an urge to go to New Orleans. Visions of the French Quarter and unique shops kept coming to me. Unusual, because I had never had the slightest interest in that city before. I felt the need to confide my odd experiences to someone.

I called Francine and told her about the strange emotional intrusions, the mugger, and my dream. She was not only an eccentric biochemist with interests in the bizarre but had become a friend during our joint ventures. Sometimes her perspective was useful.

“I’m not certain but the dream you described is almost like a trip on ayahuasca, a brew Shuar Indians make from two plants used in Amazonia. Non-natives who drank the stuff had frightening experiences. Weird images, nausea, and feeling dizzy. The Shuar shamans, however, drink it to dissolve the barrier between the everyday world and the spirit world. They use it in healing rituals. The shaman puts on headdress, paints his features, and makes sudden movements. They say he can see illness when drinking ayahuasca. The patient may have some also.”

“But I didn’t drink any. Remember, we never met the tribe you were looking for.”

“That was disappointing. I wanted to sidle up to the shaman and see if he would let me have specimens of their healing agents. Plants they use contain DMT, MAOI and other chemicals used in our pharmacology. There’s a lot more to learn about them.”

“Sounds like you and the Shuar have a lot in common.”

“Yes, but their ancestors were head-hunters. Severed and shrunken heads were expected after conflicts with neighboring tribes. I was looking for a tribe whose shaman was called P’aqo Wakan. It’s rumored he led a renegade tribe that broke away from the main Shuar, and some head-shrinking practice still exists. So contact requires finesse.”

I ventured a question churning in the back of my mind. “Would you like to visit New Orleans? It might be interesting.”

“New Orleans? I would love to. The French Quarter, especially. I might get my NIH grant at UK to fund an ‘investigation’ of psychogenic drugs from the Amazon basin at U.S. Ports.”

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I arranged our flight to the Big Easy. We selected a hotel in the French Quarter on Dumaine Street. When we checked in, I asked for a map and saw that several small, quasi-private museums concerning voodoo and shamanistic practices were not far away. I thought Francine might be interested.

The next day, we went to a moderate-sized museum that was nothing more than a tourist trap. Then we explored on foot and found a couple of smaller places that were authentic. The first was curated by a black man with dreadlocks, but most relics pertained to voodoo, in particular. The next establishment contained both objects for sale and displays of relics from northwest regions of South America. Francine was riveted.

An obscure, nondescript counter in back contained smaller objects. A dark-skinned, older Hispanic man stood behind it, passively watching visitors. I felt a sudden urge to go back there. When I approached, a strange pull directed my attention toward the center shelf. Flashes from my disturbing dream flitted through my mind. There among surrounding trinkets was a bejeweled object, a red ruby in

the center with numerous smaller emeralds around its circumference. It was connected to a thin leather strap to make it a pendant.

“May I see that?” I asked the old man.

He pulled the jewel from under the counter glass and handed it to me. “All objects here for sale, Senor.”

It was fascinating, good-sized but mounting a little rough, as though fabricated with primitive tools. The quality of the gems was exquisite. “How much?”

“Fifteen thousand dollar,” he answered.

I was floored. *How can such a jewel find itself in a place like this?* Reluctantly I handed it back.

“Unusual for here, Amigo,” he said. “Have an offer now. I’ll mail it soon, insured. See the name?” He pointed to a mailer envelope on the counter. “You pay more?”

“Sorry, that’s way beyond my budget.” Seeing the mailer with the buyer’s name and address prompted me to leave my own. “Let me leave my contact information with you.”

He reached for a piece of paper but found only another mailer envelope, slightly larger than the one on the counter. I put my name and address on it and turned away.

Francine called me over to look at the photo of a Shuar shaman. In the next case was a photo of shrunken heads with text describing the gruesome shrinking process. Displays included real weapons for hunting and war.

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Two days later, Francine and I said goodbye and I was back at work. Late one afternoon, I drove back home, parked in my driveway, and got out. Upon closing the door and turning, I almost bumped into the large man standing there.

Looking up, my stomach churned with alarm. He had the forehead scar, cheek birthmark and tawny hair peeking from under his cap.

“I said this wasn’t over, buddy.” He glanced at the nearby pedestrians and traffic surrounding us and sneered. “It’s just a matter of time. When you least expect it.” He turned and walked casually away, glancing back with a sinister grin.

Unnerved, I went inside and called the police. There was little they could do considering their resources, but they agreed to record the encounter and include my street in their drive-by patrol. Though I was angry, I knew the menacing man had the upper hand. He was obsessive and could afford to await opportunity. I located my hand-me-down pistol, loaded it and put it in the drawer of my bedroom lamp table. A lot of good it would do if I were asleep.

The phone rang and I picked up. “Hello.”

“Mike, Francine here. I was rethinking things you told me before our New Orleans trip and I remembered something I meant to discuss with you for some time. We’ve both been so busy I keep forgetting. Back when we were in the Amazon jungle, you and I got separated from our entourage and became exhausted. We ran out of food and you ate a wild plant that made you ill. Finally you went nuts and charged off into the jungle. I tried to follow but, feeling weak and hungry, I collapsed. Later the group found me and moved me back to the camp.

“Two days later I felt a little better and convinced them to go back where I had collapsed and look for you. When we arrived, you were *there*, lying on a mat of woven vegetation, tired but no longer ill. At that time, I was too exhausted and depressed about missing the tribe to discuss what may have happened to you. Later I returned to a pile of postponed work and forgot.

“I don’t remember any of that.”

“The illness probably blanked your memory, but something happened to

make you better. And someone put you on a hand-made mat and moved you back where you could be found. Do you think some tribe discovered you and nursed you to health.”

“*Nursed me?*”

“They would give you some foul stuff to drink and have the shaman do a healing ritual. It’s complex, dark, and frightening for people who don’t understand. The dream you told me about brought it to mind. Do you suppose it’s a fragmented memory of what really happened?”

The idea sent shivers through me. “If true, it’s more than a healing. I’m feeling these eerie warnings and urges. Ones that compel me to do things I don’t understand.”

“Why don’t you say it? You feel you’re under a *spell*.”

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The next afternoon, I arrived home to find an insured mailer waiting in my mailbox. It had my name and address in my own handwriting. I opened it and found a smaller mailer inside. The inside mailer was addressed to the person who supposedly bought the jewel I saw in New Orleans. After tugging at the self-adhesive flap and emptying contents, I saw the large ruby surrounded by emeralds and attached to a thin leather strap. *The old man must have made a mistake*. Gazing at it, I felt it projected some secret power laced with both beauty and dread.

I wanted to find out what happened before forwarding it. But there was no answer at the little establishment in New Orleans when I tried to call.

Hunger was insistent so I prepared and ate my evening soup and sandwich. When I sat down to watch TV, the doorbell rang. I looked through the peephole and saw a well-dressed, dark-complected woman with long black hair. I opened the door.

“Forgive the intrusion,” she said, with a slight accent. Are you Mr. Michael

Marley?”

“Yes, and who are you?”

“I am Sheripia Montez, representing the SEATA chapter of New Orleans.”

“What is SEATA?”

“The Society of Esoteric Arts in Tribal Amazonia.”

“I see...and why are you here?”

“I want to introduce a person from a certain tribe in South America. He is the shaman called P’aqo Wakan.”

A man, tall for a South American native, stepped into view. An adrenalin surge hit my gut. His tan face was familiar, having deep facial lines in his cheeks and about his mouth. Even without fierce ritual paint and black feathered headdress, I knew.

No longer in Amazonia, he wore fabric trousers, shirt, and a cape-like covering made of short jaguar fur. A deep crimson headband restrained his long black hair.

“P’aqo Wakan feels you have an object that belongs to him and his tribe.” Sheripia said. “A jewel containing spirits for protection and prosperity. This object is important to them. It was stolen when a band of drug traffickers pillaged their village. A counterattack killed most of the band, but two got away. They brought the jewel to the U.S. and sold it illegally.”

“What does it look like?” I asked.

“Blood red ruby circled by small green emeralds. He has another of similar appearance but it does not have the spiritual powers.” She turned toward Wakan and spoke in his dialect.

He responded in a deep, wheezy voice.

Looking back at me she interpreted. “Secret procedures induce spirits to make a particular object home. This one has been sacred for generations.”

“Why does he think the object is here?”

Again she conversed with Wakan and looked at me. “This is a mystery to us on the U.S. mainland. But he claims a shaman can contact spirits that influence people and events. Spirits led him here.”

I felt no need for more questions. “Come in. Let me show you something.”

Upon entering, Wakan placed his hand on my shoulder and said in broken English, “I find you in jungle, sick. Make sick spirits come out of body.”

I nodded, reached for the jeweled pendant on my kitchen counter and held it up to him.

He smiled and took it, tying the leather band about his neck. Then picking up the mailer with the buyer’s address, he took a similar-looking jewel from a pouch on his belt and inserted it. “Send away. Ignorant buyer still get gem, not shaman treasure.” He then spoke to Sheripia in his own language.

She turned to me. “Mr. Marley, we will be in town for few days and then go back to New Orleans. There P’aqo Wakan will catch flights taking him to Iquitos, Peru. From there he will trek into Amazonia to join his tribe.”

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A few days later I caught up at work so I called Francine, telling her about the jewel and my visit from P’aqo Wakan. She was beside herself with thrill and frustration.

“I missed him in the jungle, but then he comes here and I miss him again. Don’t be surprised if he leaves you a little gift of some sort. What did he look like?”

We talked another few minutes about Wakan, speculating on what he may consider a gift, considering the primal, perilous nature of his tribe’s existence.

I said, “If he was going to leave a gift for the role his spirits made me play, I think he would have already done it.”

Francine changed the subject. “How about that mugger you encountered. Have you seen him around?”

I told her about his threatening appearance outside my house and my storing a pistol near my bed.

“Mike, be careful. This is serious.”

“I know. It has me constantly looking over my shoulder.”

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The next night I took out the trash, and while searching for the displaced lid in the dark, I heard a noise in my house. *God, no...My gun's inside.* Cautiously approaching my front door, I remembered stacking cans on the counter when I began to reorganize the pantry. *Maybe they fell.* Back inside, I slipped past the kitchen and went to my bedroom. After taking the pistol from the lamp table drawer, I did a quick search through every room, turning on lights along the way. Nothing appeared out of ordinary, so I put the gun away.

Watching the late evening news, however, did not calm my restlessness. *A warm shower might help.* I took a bathrobe from my closet, entered the bathroom and reached behind the shower curtain, turning on the tub water faucet. Under the circumstance, disrobing made me feel vulnerable. A dreadful feeling crept up my spine. I drew back the shower curtain and stepped into the tub.

A bolt of alarm hit my chest when I looked up at the shower head. Hanging from it by tawny hair, was a hideous, grayish-tan, little head. Among its grotesque features was a distinct forehead scar and slight reddening on one cheek.

A gift from P'aqo Wakan.

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