

Sweeton's Shangri-La

By Rachel Aukes

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"We're definitely on the right track," Mark said as he climbed out of his car and slung his backpack over his shoulders. "It looks like no one's been out here in years."

Tatum swatted at a mosquito buzzing in front of her face. "Because no one would ever want to be out here in the first place." She slapped her arm, squashing a bug. "My God, I've never seen so many mosquitoes in my life."

"That's because you've never been this far out of Sweeton before." He did a three-sixty, holding before him the aged piece of leather with markings on it. A wide grin erupted on his face. "I tell you, Sweeton's Shangri-La is real, and we're going to be the ones to discover it."

As he spoke, she was busy rummaging around her pack. She glanced up and gave him a droll stare. "Oh yeah? If no one's discovered it before, then how did you get a map for it?" She pulled out a can of bug spray and doused herself in chemical.

Mark pursed his lips. "Do you always have to be this difficult?" He ventured out farther from the car. When he saw the next symbol on the map – an ancient-looking Cypress leaning the opposite direction the other trees leaned, he tucked the hand-drawn map into his cargo pocket. "Come on. It'll be an adventure of a lifetime."

Tatum dropped the can back into her bag. Rather than follow Mark, she looked around. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"I'm sure." He pointed to where the trees grew thicker. "It's this way."

As they made their way through the swampy woods, he was careful to hold low branches so that none would swing back and whip his girlfriend. He was surprised she'd even offered to come out with him on this adventure. She rarely wanted to do anything that didn't involve shopping, drinking, or sex. His guess was that she was going to use this day for a quid pro quo request. He cringed thinking what the request might be. *Don't ask me to come meet your parents.*

"With all these trees, I can't even get a decent tan out here," Tatum said as she trailed behind him.

He rolled his eyes before he glanced back and took in her long, lean legs. Her skimpy white tank and short shorts accentuated her curves. A rivulet of sweat ran down from her neck and

into her cleavage. He licked his lips before sighing and wiping the sweat from his face. Tatum was a wildcat in the sack, and he loved her, but she was also the epitome of high maintenance. "I told you to cover up more. There's always going to be more bugs out in these swampy areas than back in town."

"I wish I'd brought more bug spray."

"You've used up a whole can already?"

"Not quite all of it."

"What'd you do, take a shower in it?"

"Quit picking," she scolded. "You said you wanted us to do more things together, so here I am."

"You're right," he said.

She shooed him forward. "So, let's continue our first adventure."

The hike was long and hot and damn near unbearable. Mark constantly rechecked the map, and he was beginning to doubt himself. It had been nearly an hour since he'd seen the last marker – a series of three mounds pointing the way forward. Sweat soaked his clothes, and it seemed like the heat was seeping into his confidence as well.

"Ugh. My mascara is running."

Mark's pace hitched. "You're wearing makeup?"

"Of course. I figured we'd stop by somewhere for a drink on the way back to town. That's assuming we ever make it to this make-believe place."

"According to this map, it won't be much farther."

Tatum grabbed his arm. "Let me see." She plucked the map from his hands and rubbed her fingers over it. "It's made of leather?"

Mark nodded. "Bison is my guess. I suppose when it was made, paper wasn't as readily available."

"This is cool," she said, running her fingers over the dark lines. "The ink isn't black. It almost looks like it could be blood or something."

"I'm sure it's 'or something'," he answered and snapped the leather back from her grip.

"That map looks like it belongs in a museum. Where'd a guy like you get a hold of it?"

"A guy like me?"

"You know, you're not exactly an archaeologist yet," she replied.

"Long story."

"Oh, you know I love stories. Tell me how you found it."

His lips thinned. "I just found it, all right?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, I'm not letting you get off that easy. I'm not taking another step until you tell me where you found it."

They glared at one another for a long moment before Mark relented. "I found it while cataloguing Professor Ransom's private collection."

"The head of the archaeology program? The professor you're working for?"

"How many Professor Ransom's do you know?" he countered.

She cocked her head. "I don't get it. This map is old. It's probably worth something, and he just *let* you have it?"

Mark sighed. "He doesn't know I have it."

Her eyes widened. "I can't believe you stole the map."

"I *borrowed* it. I plan to put it back. He won't even know."

"I always thought you were so straight-laced, but you're kind of an outlaw." Her lips curved upward, and she sauntered closer to him, running a hand down his arm. "I find that incredibly sexy."

He gave her a cocky grin. "Oh yeah?"

She leaned closer and whispered into his ear. "*Oh yeah.*"

He shivered and reluctantly backed away. "We'll continue this conversation later. Right now, the next marker we need to look for is a large, round rock that has a chip out of it, showing the last turn we take.

"Party pooper," she said with a pout before looking around. "Any rock out here is probably covered by moss or slime."

"Just keep an eye out for it."

She mock saluted him. "Yes, sir."

They continued deeper into the woods. Mark checked his compass against the hand-drawn map. The sun was getting high, meaning they'd already used nearly half of their daylight. If they didn't find the rock within the hour, they'd have to turn back. He'd try again later when he didn't have a city girl slowing him down.

"So now that I'm your partner in crime, tell me more about Sweeton's Shangri-La."

"You've never heard the story?"

She shrugged. "Only that there was some mythical cave in the swamplands outside Sweeton."

"It's a natural grotto, not a cave."

"What's the difference?"

He took a breath to explain, then shook his head. "Never mind. So, that's all you've heard?"

"Yeah. You're the archaeology major, not me. What else do you know about it?"

"Well," he began, "Sweeton's Shangri-La wasn't always called that. It used to be called Malsumis's Grotto. It's a story about a beautiful woman, Lagita, and her steadfast lover, Heng."

"That sounds romantic."

"It would've been if an evil god hadn't gotten involved."

"Oh." She cocked her head like she was examining him. "How do you know this stuff?"

"I'm an archaeology major, duh." *And, I Googled it.* "Can I continue?"

"Sorry. Go ahead."

"As I said, Lagita was a beautiful woman. She drew the attention of men across the tribes. Many courted her, but she refused them. After all, she'd already given her heart to Heng, a scout within her own tribe. When she chose him, the other men were dismayed. Heng wasn't the strongest or smartest and certainly not the most handsome man. However, Heng loved Lagita with all his heart, and he showed it in every action and word. They were a match made in heaven, but remember that god I mentioned?"

Tatum nodded. "Yeah?"

"Malsumis was the worst of the worst. His heart was so shriveled up that the he only found pleasure in destroying anything good. A scheming god, he often eavesdropped on the tribes. He happened to pass through Lagita and Heng's tribe on their wedding day."

"Oh, no," Tatum interrupted.

"Oh, no, is right. So, what does Malsumis do?"

"I don't know, what?"

He shot a glance at Tatum. "It was a rhetorical question. Anyway, Malsumis steps up to the couple, in all his godly glory. In awe, they drop to their knees. He announces how he's never seen a couple so much in love before and offers them a gift. The gift is a map to a hidden paradise he created just for them."

Mark jumped over a mud puddle and helped Tatum over before continuing. "You see, Heng and Lagita didn't know which god Malsumis was, or else they never would've followed

the map. Instead, they rushed off to spend their wedding night in this ethereal grotto. They found it, and it was exactly as the god described to them. They consummated their marriage on the soft moss and fell asleep in each other's arms. It was an absolute Eden."

"I don't get it," Tatum said, frowning. "If this Malsu-whatever guy was so evil, why was he so nice to these two?"

Mark held up a finger. "Malsumis never lied. However, he tended to *omit* very important information. The god neglected to warn the couple that the grotto flooded every night. Basically, by day the grotto was heaven on earth; but by night it became a proverbial hell. The star-crossed couple awoke to discover the water rising. They tried to swim to safety, only to be attacked by sea monsters. But, these weren't your run-of-the-mill sea monsters. These creatures sucked their spirits along with their blood, tethering the pair to Malsumis's grotto, even in death. By morning, their bodies were completely eaten away, leaving no trace they'd ever been there.

"Except for the map," he continued. "Which floated on the water to where a treasure hunter supposedly came across it. According to Ransom's journal, the guy followed the map and found the place but escaped as soon as he saw the water rising. The notes said he barely got out alive; he lost a leg in the process." Mark took a deep breath. "So there you have it. The story of Sweeton's Shangri-La. What do you think?"

Tatum stared at him, slack-jawed. She clamped her mouth shut and swallowed. "That's an *awful* story. Why would you ever want to find a place like that?"

Mark chuckled. "It's a legend, not a real story. Just imagine – what if this grotto exists and it has a treasure or some Native American artifacts? Or, what if it's a burial mound containing the remains of Lagita and Heng? Wouldn't that be cool?"

She scowled. "I thought we were searching for a paradise, not a graveyard."

"It has to have some historical significance to have a map. This could launch my career."

"Assuming you don't go to jail for stealing the map."

He scowled. "I *borrowed* it."

She rolled her eyes and then cocked her head as she looked over his shoulder. "Hey, that looks like the rock on your map."

He twisted around to follow her gaze. Sure enough, lodged in between two ancient Cypress trees sat a gray rock, looking strangely out of place in all the green. It should've been covered in

moss, yet here it was, as white as marble. It was oblong and smooth, except for a jagged edge on one side. He followed the invisible line it forged. "Looks like we go this way."

He led her down the narrow trail that had been carved out by small, local wildlife.

"Are you sure you want to keep going?" Tatum asked.

"Of course," he answered as a matter-of-fact. "Aren't you?"

"Not if we're going to see corpses."

"We're not going to see corpses. That was just a story. Besides, any bodies would be decomposed in this humidity in just a few years. Lagita and Heng would've died centuries ago."

When he pushed past a low-hanging branch, he stopped cold. Before him was a solid rock wall. After further scrutiny, he found an opening where two stones overlapped. Adrenaline replenished his energy, and he hustled forward. He shot a grin back at Tatum. "It's the final marker. We're almost there."

He ignored her wary gaze as he squeezed through the opening and out the other side. He looked around before turning back to his girlfriend. He held his hand through the opening. "Come through. It's safe."

After several seconds, timid fingers interlocked with his, and Tatum stepped through.

As she took in the scene, he continued holding her hand. "You see? Nothing to worry about. It should be straight ahead." Here, the heat was still sweltering, the sun beat down, and the mosquitoes were still annoying. A paradise this place certainly wasn't. But, in the distance...

Mark pointed. "There."

She looked. "I don't see anything."

He led her through the brush and trees until the stone became unmistakable. The swamplands ended, cut off by a massive rock wall. "The grotto's in there," he said.

She giggled. "You sound like a little boy about to open his Christmas presents."

Their pace quickened as they approached the wall. He placed his hands on the rock and found it cool to his touch. He looked from side to side. "We need to find the opening."

He moved to the left, while she checked the right. After a minute of searching, she called out, "I think I found it."

He jogged over to see her discovery, what looked to be a manmade entrance in the stone. He ran his fingers over the cuts and gouges as he admired the arch. "This is it all right." After

peering into the darkness and seeing no exit, he rummaged through his bag and pulled out a flashlight. "You ready to discover Shangri-La?"

Her brows furrowed. "I'm not so sure about this. It's beginning to feel a bit too *real*."

"How so?"

"This morning, it was just a little adventure. But everything on your map has come to be. What if the story is true?"

He brushed her hair behind her ear. "Do you believe that Odin is real? Or Thor?"

"Of course not."

"So, why would you think Malsumis is real?"

"I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right. Now, let's take the last few steps in our adventure, shall we?"

He grabbed her hand again and clicked on the flashlight, and they entered the tunnel. He shone the beam straight ahead as they walked. There were several smaller shafts, too small for a human, that broke off from the main tunnel. Water dripped from all the walls. Every few feet, the tunnel curved, and Mark felt them descending at a gradual pitch.

"Mark, I'm scared," Tatum whispered.

He squeezed her trembling hand. "It's okay. Look. There's light up ahead."

With every step, the air grew cooler, and he felt Tatum shiver, though he suspected it was more from fear than from the temperature. The light at the end grew brighter and larger until he no longer needed his flashlight. He clicked off the beam. When they reached the edge, they both paused.

"My God, it's beautiful," Tatum said.

He found himself nodding. "Yeah." It was beyond beautiful. The grotto seemed to be a perfect sphere, with moss climbing the stone around them. It was fully enclosed except for top—at least one hundred feet up—which let in a single ray of sunshine. A grove of trees sat in the middle, at the top of a small hill, with the rest of the grotto covered in moss and tiny white flowers. A burbling creek ran out from a waterfall and wound around the hill.

"I get it now," Mark said. "Whoever discovered this place concocted the legend to keep others away."

"It's amazing," she concurred. "I can't believe it. I haven't seen a single mosquito. The air is cool. It really is Shangri-La."

As they stood there, Monarch butterflies fluttered by their cheeks.

Mark turned to Tatum, a wide grin on his face. "Race you to the hill."

Her lips curled upward. She let go his hand and leapt forward. She ran fast, but he was nearly a foot taller and quickly caught up. She hurdled the narrow creek, with him right at her heels. He caught her and wrapped his arms around her and rolled them onto the ground. She went down with a squeal.

The spongy moss was so thick it was like falling on a mattress. Mark pulled Tatum into a kiss. The kiss turned into foreplay, which turned into sex, followed by wine and crackers they'd brought in their backpacks. "Here's to our first adventure together," he toasted and clinked their wine glasses.

Mark sipped wine as he strolled around the grove of trees. A flash of color near a trunk caught his eye. He bent down to look closer. When he touched the object, the breath in his lungs froze, and he snapped his fingers from it. On the ground lay a Native American necklace made of turquoise and bone. It was old—very old, and he thought of the grotto's legend. He swallowed and took a slow step away before hustling back to Tatum.

"We should go," he said.

She stretched lazily out on the moss and let out a feminine sigh. "I wish we could stay here forever."

He peered up at the opening above and noticed the sun had disappeared behind the stone. "We really need to head home, or else we'll have to spend the night in the swamps."

"Fine." She reluctantly grabbed his hand, and he pulled her up.

"I'll make a copy of the map," Mark said. "Then we can come back anytime we want. It'll be our secret place."

She smiled and kissed him. "Our place, I like the sound of that." They leisurely dressed and began to pack their gear.

Her eyes widened. "Mark, the water!"

He looked up in time to see a torrent burst forth from the waterfall. The creek tripled in size as waves rolled down it.

He turned to her. "Get to the entrance!"

He twisted around to see the water carry away his bag—the bag with his car keys in it. He dove, his finger snagging a strap. He pulled the bag to him, and he rolled away as the water rushed upward. He jumped to his feet and backed up the hill.

"Mark!"

He looked up to see Tatum standing between the entrance and the creek. Only now, water flooded out from the entrance toward her, and the creek had become a wide river. She turned and ran back toward him. He shot around, looking for another entrance, but found nothing. The rapids in the creek slowed, but its width had grown to over fifty feet.

"Can you swim to me?" he called to her. "You need to get to the hill!"

Terror filled her wide eyes. She nodded before taking off at a run into the water. The current knocked her off her feet, and she went under. Mark gasped, searching for her. "Tatum!"

She broke the surface in a flurry of limbs and sputtering.

"Are you okay?" he asked, taking several steps toward her and into the water.

She coughed and swept hair from her face. "Yeah." She swam toward him. About halfway across, she cried out. Her eyes widened, and she disappeared under the water. It was only an instant before she burst forward, pulling at her skin. "Get them off me!" she cried out. "Get them off!"

Mark took a step toward her. He froze and looked down at the water. Fear clenched his muscles, and he tumbled back, falling as he scrambled to get out of the river. In a rush, he climbed onto the bank and ran several feet up the hill. He searched for Tatum to find her crawling out on her hands and knees. Mark rushed forward to help but then stopped cold.

Covering her were leeches – each at least a foot long and each with a scaly shell. Bile rose in his throat, and he fought back the urge to throw up.

"Help me!" she cried out, yanking at one of the worms.

Her wail snapped him back to attention, and he rushed down the hill. He pulled out his pocketknife and knelt beside her. His first touch was fearful, but his resolve grew as he wedged the blade harder between the leech and her skin, trying to pry it off. Rivulets of blood ran down her skin. She screamed in pain, and he watched the monstrosity latch on even tighter. He tried to stab the leech but didn't make a dent in its reptilian shell. His hands shaky, he kept trying while she cried out in agony.

Seconds became a minute, and Tatum's sobs mellowed into whimpers as she fell into shock. The waterline rose to cover her legs, and he watched another leech clamp on to her calf. She seemed oblivious to the addition.

"*Help me.*" Her words were barely above a whisper.

Gripped by terror, he dropped the knife and edged up the bank. He watched his lover grow paler. As the water covered her body, more leeches latched on until they enveloped her. He

stared while the last of her life drained from her eyes. As she disappeared below the surface, he stumbled to the top of the hill and fell against a tree.

The water rose, inch by inch, toward him. It was no more than thirty feet away. Mark didn't move. Instead, he dropped his head into his hands and sobbed. "Why?"

No one answered.

As the sunlight grew dimmer, the water rose. Mark took a deep breath and pulled himself to his feet. He tried to climb a tree, but the trunk was slick with moss. He searched for another entrance but knew there'd be none, not on this side of the water.

The water was less than twenty feet away now.

He saw the necklace. He picked it up and took a seat, leaning against a tree, watching the water rise. He looked over to the entrance to see that water was no longer pouring from it. He wondered if he could swim faster than the leeches. He laughed drily and then sobbed, already knowing the truth.

When the water reached ten feet, he stood.

At seven feet, he slid the necklace over his head and dropped the map.

At five feet, he heard laughter.

He frantically sought the source. When he looked upward into the twilight sky, he saw a shadow of a man standing on the edge of the stone, gazing down, with a gleeful grin on his skeletal face.

Mark felt the water on his toes, but he continued to watch the shadow. The cool liquid edged up his ankles like a caterpillar climbing a twig. He waited for the inevitable pain, but it didn't come. The water reached his calf, then his knee. When the water reached his hips, he clutched the necklace, and it brought him a strange sense of comfort to know he wasn't alone in his suffering.

The water reached his chest.

He stood there. Still, nothing attacked. He watched the map float away.

When the water reached his neck, hope bloomed.

Perhaps he could swim across. He could —

The first sting was a molten bullet in his thigh. He was yanked under the water. Then, a dozen more attacks followed, piercing every part of his body. They all came in quick succession, like popcorn kernels waiting for the first one to pop before all following suit.

Mark screamed, but the water drowned out the sound. Coldness filled him from inside out as his life was sucked from him. His lungs burned, and he fought to get to the surface, only to be pulled even deeper.

Something bumped into him, and he saw Tatum's brown hair moving in the water. He quit fighting, and he reached out to her, clasping her hand. She watched him with her beautiful green eyes.

He inhaled.

Water was fire in his chest. After the moments of torment, his pain bled away. He felt Tatum squeeze his hand, and he went with her to the shadows. Tatum's wish had come true after all. They did get to stay at Shangri-La forever.

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