

Dr. Silvestri and the Teeth of the Tigon

"In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thoughts but for the teeth... and of Berenice I more seriously believed that all her teeth were thoughts... the white and ghastly spectrum of the teeth... meditations were never pleasurable... the phantasma of the teeth maintained its terrible ascendancy..."

-Edgar Allen Poe

Happy Hour at Borsellini's is a blandishment often too tempting for those of us in the medical profession. I was enjoying a cognac with my associates and long-time friends: Dr. Andrew Napoli, a general practitioner at the Valley Hospital and my roommate in Boston when we were both in our distinctive schools; Dr. Ranjit Astreepida, a radiologist with a private laboratory in the same shopping center as my dental practice. We were laughing about some old tale of Andrew's when my cell phone rattled.

Now I am no fan of the cell phone: it is only through the constant coercion of my compatriots and assistants that I had come to acquire one not a week previous. I excused myself from the raucous table and flipped the phone open outside the bar.

"Dr. Silvestri," I answered.

"Emile?" It was Thandie, my receptionist.

"Thandie, it's Friday and I told you where I would be--" I spat, moving towards rage.

"I know, Doctor, and I'm sorry, but we never did our weekly review..." Thandie pleaded. My anger subsided at the cool, pleasant tones of Thandie's voice.

"Yes, yes, you're right, I was out most of the day, there was no communication," I relented. "The fault is mine entirely. Let's run through it quickly now. Appointments?"

"You've made... almost all of them this week. You called in most of today's cancellations, which was good. All Friday appointments were rescheduled by 10:00 this morning. No one was very upset. So you're improving."

"Excellent!" I exclaimed into the mouthpiece, perhaps too loudly. (I had taken my fourth cognac right before 7:00.) "The Barassos were rescheduled?"

"Yes, next week. But they did make an offhand remark about switching to Goldman and Goldman for the girls' braces--"

"Contemptible Hebrews! Their bungling will send our prodigy running back. Next week?"

Thandie coughed delicately. "Two crown operations, some radiology, a complete wisdom tooth. Mostly checkups and fluoride. Nothing special."

"Excellent. I was hoping to take it easy this weekend for once." Spring was in the crisp evening air: perhaps some soccer, lunch on the piazza, church on Sunday... "Are you going to stay at the apartment tonight, Thandie?" I asked. 'The apartment' was my apartment in E_____.

"Yes, I was hoping to stay the weekend," Thandie said softly. At this remark I was back at the table, rejoining my friends.

"Right, well, be awake by the time I get home, or the courts will consider it rape," I said as I folded the phone back up. Andrew and Ranjit exploded with laughter, and I joined them.

"That was Thandie?" asked Ranjit in his singsong accent.

"Yep," I replied. "Holding up the fort. She's staying over."

"Emile," Andrew started, a sly smile on his face, "you dog, I can't believe you--"

My cell phone rang again, and I grimaced to the company as I turned about and opened it. I swore that I would discard the thing at the earliest possible opportunity.

"Emile?" A voice buzzed through the interference. It was Thandie again. She sounded upset.

"What now, woman? The sun is still up!" I roared.

"An emergency. Who's there with you?"

I squinted, looking down the bar. Seeing no one I recognised, I spoke into the phone, "Just me, Dr. Napoli, and Dr. Astreepida. Why?"

"Bring them all," she said quickly. "There's been an incident at the zoo."

*

*

*

Luckily Andrew had taken his Corvette with him, and now we were skidding giddily on the shoulder of Crosstown, speeding our way to the Public Zoo on the East Side. Ranjit was folded up awkwardly in the space capsule-like back seat, and I wondered just how many drinks Andrew had slipped from our nubile waitress as he weaved through traffic.

"Why do I always get back?" Ranjit asked.

"Because you're an ass man," Andrew replied. I looked at him dubiously as he ran a red light.

We were waved through the gravel auxiliary lot at the Zoo after I flashed credentials. A short, bespectacled man in a lab coat was waiting for us at the Service Gate. His face was pale.

"Dr. Silvestri," he panted. "We have a problem in the Savannah area that demands your expertise. These are?" He looked at Andrew and Ranjit.

"Drs. Napoli and Astreepida, my associates. Dr. Napoli is a doctor at Valley Hospital, Dr. Astreepida a radiologist."

"Yes, yes! I read your article in *Reports In Radiation Technology*, Doctor," the man gushed at Ranjit, who looked pleased. "Your commentary on progenitive T-cells--"

"Can wait until we are within the gates," I said briskly.

Dr. Terwether (as this mousy Exhibit Director introduced himself) led us into the equipment shed, where we were given Mossberg shotguns (which shot hypodermic darts), field kits, Maglites, sirens with undermounted signal lights, and Nightsight goggles (darkness was now complete over the Zoo grounds, wondrous families having left hours ago). The problem was tersely defined: a lion was going berzerk in the Savannah area, and we were to detain it, preventing harm to other animals.

"It's been wounding any animal it encounters," Terwether told us.

"Why us?" I demanded, checking the stock of my shotgun. "Wild animal vets and police are both more conversant choices than Dr. Emile Silvestri and his drinking buddies to defuse such a situation."

"Because," Terwether paused. "Because the lion is, in fact, a crossbreed of tiger and lioness--"

"A tigon," Ranjit mused.

"--That we have bred without... recognition from the State Authority," Terwether said. "Dr. Silvestri, you are the most respected medical authority in this town. You and your friends must do this thing discreetly."

"You are the overseer of this exhibit--" I began.

"And I will make sure you are duly compensated." He looked at me gravely.

Ten minutes later the four of us found the entrance with our goggles on and firearms front. Standing by the clusters of broad-leafed deciduous trees that flanked it, we peered into the milky black of the exhibit.

"We should split up," I said. I heard the cry of a jaguar in the distance.

"Ranjit and I will go northwest, that's the straight line to this thing," Andrew told us.

I spat in the grass. "Right, I'll stay with him and we'll approach from the southwest end. Signal with your light before moving. Make sure you--"

A jaguar leapt over a small hill to our left and ran directly for me, as I was the foremost of the group. Terwether cried out. I spun and braced my gun on my left forearm, but Andrew shot first. The breakneck pace of the cat terminated in a few flip-flops, with the animal landing almost at my feet. Its eyes glistened in the beacon light as it heaved softly, drifting out of consciousness. I stared at it briefly as Ranjit and Andrew trotted off, sobered by the situation. "See you there," Andrew called over his shoulder.

"Right," I muttered, leading Terwether across the sculpted veldt. We maintained contact with the blinking lights every 500 feet or so, finally halting before a scraping sound in a tangle of lamely exotic trees.

"It's in there," Terwether whispered.

I heard a sharp cry. It was Ranjit. I bit my lip, leveled my shotgun and sprinted into the trees. I saw nothing and heard nothing as I ran madly, craning my head left and right to catch movement on my flank. As I cut a circle to cover the perimeter of the woods, I saw it, out of the corner of my eye.

Its pale bulk loomed before my vision, and I felt its foul breath on my face as its jaws snapped before me. I jerked back reflexively and fell backwards, onto my gun. The beast reared back on its hind legs, springing--

I rolled to the side, bracing my shotgun, and shot it several times as it stomped over the grass still pressed flat from my back. It wheeled about lazily towards me, crumpling on the forest floor. I waited a few seconds, shivering in the brisk night, then waving my signal light wildly to show the others.

Andrew arrived as I knelt over the tigon. "Good Lord, Emile. You could have been killed."

I grasped his jacket. "Where is Ranjit?" I demanded.

Andrew just laughed. "He's okay. The others are coming. That Dr. Terwether is useless. What's going on with this thing?"

"Look at its teeth," I said. "That's why they called me." I took out my tape recorder and field dentistry kit just as Terwether sidled up. "Get transportation," I ordered him as I turned my attention to the tigon. Right away I noticed its jagged, immense canine, which made the tigon look more horrific than it already was. I pressed Record.

"Animal patient, cross-breed of tiger and lion," and I added the date. "Extensive decay... *caries* in pits 12, 13, 15, 17, 18; nearly all fissures. Note: inflammation centered on bottom left canine. Infection, some marked ulceration... it looks like there's some residual bismuth poisoning. Infection has reached alveolar bone and periodontal membrane. I'm filling the tissue..." I turned off the tape recorder and began mixing the cement.

"You mean to tell me--" Terwether began.

"Excessively bad gingivitis," I explained. "See the canine? Look at the black around its root. These animals, I'm sure, have not been getting their fluoride and Vitamin C." I looked up at him. "This thing's teeth are confused by its breed, and it doesn't help that you aren't pulling your end. I want this animal attended by a dental veterinarian, post-haste. And get these jaguars some corrective headpieces." I finished the filling and folded up my bag. "We're donating our fee to this project. This is cruelty to animals."

A jeep pulled up to the edge of the woods, its headlamps knifing through the leaves. I walked over to it with Andrew.

"Good work, Emile," he chortled, slapping me on the back. "I'll check out the animal pens. You should tell them you're making a report to the Governor."

"I will. Where *is* Ranjit?" I asked.

He led me through a thicket and pointed down, over the forest ridge. There was movement in the darkness a few feet below. "He fell in a holding pit," Andrew told me, and we began laughing so hard that we were bent over, holding our sides.

"Get me out," Ranjit called, looking up at me. His eyes shone in the darkness like the jaguar who would have crushed the life out of me. "Get me out."