

Lemuel Schneider

“A short story of around eight thousand, four hundred words; a tale of the supernatural for Halloween 2024. Moongates are everywhere; there might be one in your local park. Round structures that form an entrance to somewhere, or built purely for decoration. When Silas Schneider had bought Orchard Hall, he’d assumed the old stone Moongate was harmless. In that, as with so many other things, Silas had been wrong.....”

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Some darkness, a little humour and a lot of quirkiness. Is there a happy ending ? That depends on your definition of happy.

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Lemuel Schneider really had been christened Lemuel, as his sister Lilibeth really had been christened Lilibeth. Their brother Arthur was resented by both of them, for his fairly standard first name. Going through school as Lemuel and Lilibeth hadn’t been a picnic. Silas, their father had always told them it was their mother who’d insisted on their eccentric names. As for their mother.....She was a Schneider family secret. Her children had never seen her, or even knew her first name. One Nanny had told the children that their mother had a little bit too much of the Fae about her. The Nanny had been fired when Lemuel had asked their father what Fae meant.

“Damn.....Father’s double barrel shotgun is still in his study.” Muttered Lemuel. “Here I am in this hell, without even a stick as a weapon.....Or anything to eat and drink.”

Silas Schneider, his father, was dead. Nothing strange or untoward, just old age punishing him for drinking too much, smoking too much and doing everything to excess. Even so, Silas had reached the age of eighty two and he’d still been active. Not really a recent passing, but Lemuel was still in the middle of tidying up his father’s complex business affairs. Lemuel had lived in a wing of Orchard Hall for years, but rarely saw his father. No excuses about being busy, or the old family mansion being huge, which it was. Lemuel hadn’t liked his father and he suspected the feeling had been mutual.

“What do you want from me ?” Yelled Lemuel.

There were several of them now, all of them wanting to hit him. Not that the hits were that hard, but repeated over and over again.....Lemuel was sure they were doing him serious harm. His liver, his kidneys, the blows seemed deliberately aimed to damage internal organs. How long had it been going on ? Time was wrong in the hell on the other side of that damned Moongate. It was twilight where he was, a weird perpetual twilight. Lemuel thought at least three days had elapsed since he’d arrived there. He punched one of the creatures, but it came back at him. They always came back at him.

“I’m going to die in this awful place.” Lemuel muttered. “Worst of all, no one will know.....They’ll think I’ve vanished, or run away for some reason.”

He’d drank water from a puddle, barely enough to take away the constant dryness in his mouth. Lemuel was sure the water must have been polluted; there had been stomach pains since he’d sipped at it. Nothing to eat of course, apart from the red berries on the trees. No one ever eats red berries they don’t recognise. He was going to die, probably from being constantly beaten by the creatures.

“Why ? I’ve done you no harm.” Shrieked Lemuel.

He'd climbed up into a tree with no leaves, in the hope of getting a little sleep. He wasn't a young man; he was at the age everyone refers to as getting on a bit. Lemuel had slept for a while, before falling out of the tree. He might have cracked a rib in the fall, the right side of his chest now hurt, all the time. Lemuel punched one of the creatures and ran away, though he wasn't running that fast anymore. Once he'd have said his chances of surviving what he'd been through; from the number of blows his rather plump body had taken.....Were just about nil. Maybe they were, he felt so ill and so tired and.....So damned thirsty. The wood he was in seemed endless; he'd already given up on finding a way out.

"Damn you Silas.....You knew your journal would lead me here." Lemuel muttered.

There were more of them this time, there were always more of them. The creatures looked like people, naked people. Warm to the touch when he pushed them away. Hotter than human body temperature, though that wasn't particularly useful to know. Male and female, none of them had ever said a word. Not even a cry when he'd managed to land a good solid punch. Mind you, his ability to hit hard had diminished with his lack of food and water. He'd tried chewing at a few leaves, but they'd all made him feel nauseous. Was it hell ? Perhaps that was where the Moongate had brought him. He'd once believed in a personal hell, until he stopped believing in much at all.

"Leave me alone.....Find someone else to hit." Lemuel yelled.

The female creature didn't even blink, as he put his hand on her face and pushed. Lemuel turned, intending to run again. There were two more of them in front of him and a large male hit him hard in the belly. Lemuel went down onto the ground and they began to kick him. Even kicks from bare feet would kill him, if he simply gave up and remained there, lying in the dirt. Why not give up ? There was no way out and just about all of him ached.

"No.....They can't win.....Not like this." Lemuel muttered.

He was going to die, but he'd do it up on his feet and swinging his fists. Lemuel rolled to his right and forced himself to stand. A good hard shove at a body in front of him, without noticing its sex. By some miracle there was a gap in the wall of creatures. Thirsty and oh, so tired. Lemuel managed to run though and gain a few feet of space from his attackers.

"Oh.....Not now, please not now." Lemuel mumbled.

A stroke maybe, or a heart attack ? It might have been that his body had decided enough was enough and was shutting down. There were flashes of light in his peripheral vision. The pain in his chest seemed far worse than just a cracked rib. Three more paces and Lemuel Schneider's legs buckled under him. His vision became very blurred, as he went to put his arm out, to break his fall. No good, his arm refused to obey him. Lemuel's face hit the leaf mould covered ground, just as whatever will power was keeping him alive.....Gave up.

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Lilibeth Schneider hadn't seen either of her brothers in a while. She now lived in California and there had been all the unpleasantness when their father had died. Money can be corrosive in the best of families and Silas Schneider had left a huge sum of money in his will. The house too, Orchard Hall had been worth several millions. Every penny left to Lemuel, the oldest male heir. Not unusual, but for their brother to get everything, while Arthur and her received nothing.....It had caused a tremendous amount of ill feeling. Actually they hadn't received nothing.

"A quarter of a million each, Lili." Arthur had said. "Have you seen how people on game shows react to winning a quarter of a million ? Annoying that Lemuel gets so much, but we haven't been left even close to penniless."

Arthur was like that, always able to see the good in anyone and the plus side of every piece of bad news. It could be annoying, yet she couldn't help loving him for it.

'Turn right at the next junction.' Said the car's satnav.

A car hired at the airport, she was still having to really concentrate on driving on the left. Lili had a brief moment of confusion, before turning into the driveway for Orchard House. Not that she could see Lem's home, it was still half a mile away and hidden by tall trees.

"Of course, it's not Lem's anymore." She muttered. "I wonder who gets it this time?"

Lilibeth, Lili to friends and family, had boarded a plane because of two phone calls. One from the Hampshire police, the serious ones in Aldershot, not the local guy. The second call was from the housekeeper who looked after the house and her father. No doubt Lem had asked her to stay on and look after him. Kathy Johnson was in her mid-thirties and managed Orchard House and the other staff. Not that Lili knew how many staff there were, though there had to be quite a few. The house was large and the gardens covered several acres.

"A gardener found him, all broken apart, as he put it." Kathy had said. "Found him in the tennis courts behind the main parking area. The police say he was either bludgeoned to death, or fell from a great height. A great height indeed.....Around here. I told them.....They need to bring in the CID from Aldershot, instead of listening to the local guy. Pete once arrested the Vicar for littering.....It was confetti at a wedding....."

There had been more, much more, all of it slandering the competence of the local police. Lem was dead and Lili really didn't think he'd been bludgeoned into the next life. Her oldest brother had been a quiet man, who enjoyed playing bridge. Like her he'd never married and like her, there had been rumours about that. Despite a lot of rumours, Lili didn't prefer the attention of other women. She quite liked men, in a baffled sort of way. She just hadn't met one she'd wanted to marry.

'You have reached your destination.' Said the chirpy female voice of the satnav.

The house looked good, it always did. Silas had hired excellent staff and paid them well, but he expected Orchard Hall to look better maintained than any royal residence.

"Will it be mine now?" Lili muttered.

Arthur was the last male heir, but he was younger than her. Lili admitted to being in the general vicinity of her late fifties. Arthur had arrived unexpectedly and was in his early fifties. A change of life baby? Maybe, but as none of them had ever met their mother, it was hard to be certain. Lili stopped in front of the main entrance to Orchard Hall and beeped the horn of her hire car. One of the staff could take her vehicle to the car park at the rear of the house.

"I'd quite like this place.....And Arthur always claims to hate it." She mumbled.

Efficient as ever, a young gardener drove the car away, as the housekeeper helped carry her bags. Just two bags, Lili wasn't planning on a long stay. Listen to Lem's will and if it didn't go her way, contest every damned thing.

"What the hell are the police up to, Kathy?" Asked Lili. "Bludgeoning.....We're the Schneiders for God sake, not Colombian drug dealers."

"I keep telling them they're imbeciles.....In a polite way of course." Said Kathy. "The autopsy pointed to a fall from a great height, but there are no great heights in the village. The police seem to have decided bludgeoning is at least a possibility."

"Be truthful, I'm not looking for someone to blame.....Did my brother mention trying to activate the Moongate?" Asked Lili.

"Well.....Not activate, but he was always looking for information." Said Kathy. "There were all sorts of strange deaths and disappearances in the eighteen hundreds. No less than three maids from

Orchard Hall went missing.....Vanished without a trace. Your brother paid an investigator to look into the matter. A proper ex-police investigator from London. I can show you where your brother kept all the papers sent to him, and his journal.....If you'd like to see them ?”

“Oh, I would, Kathy.....I really want to see those.”

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Arthur Silas Schneider had been the last to arrive, despite living the closest. Arthur was a small animal veterinarian, with a successful practise in Scunthorpe. They all had the Silas middle name, even Lilibeth. None of them used it, though it was on their birth certificates. Silas had registered the births of all three children and put their mother as Sara Schneider. Either Sara was totally silent and invisible, or she didn't exist.....An invention of their father.

“I can see why you think Lem stepped through the gate.” Said Arthur.

They were both looking at the ancient stone structure, the Moongate. It was harmless unless activated; the local children came and played there during the summer school holidays. Who was brave enough to risk the wrath of the witch ? Who would be first to enter the gate ? Lots of children had run through the gate and none of them had vanished. As far as Arthur knew, there never had been a witch, even if she was part of local folklore.

The round stone Moongate was covered in moss and stood in a gap in hedge, between the kitchen garden and where Silas had experimented with keeping bees. The hives were now empty and it had been at least a decade since a living bee had called any of them home. No one knew who'd created the gate, but it definitely predated the house and probably the local village. Lilibeth had always said that their gate, probably predated the Great Pyramid of Giza.

“He fell from a great height.” Said Lili. “The highest thing around here is the oak tree in seven acre field....And I'm sure Lem didn't climb that. His body was found in the tennis courts. So yes, he entered the Moongate and died of it. Something then dragged his body to where it was found, which is worrying.”

Lili had made it to the big time, without access to the Schneider family fortune. She'd gone to America and worked for a talent agency. She seemed to spend a lot of time pandering to the needs of spoiled film stars, but she now owned the talent agency. She was bright and had probably read more about Orchard Hall and its environs, than anyone else in the family. Plus, at the age of ten, she'd stepped through the gate once and survived.

“You've got that let's go scrumping look in your eyes, Lili.” Said Arthur. “Don't you think we're both getting a bit old for dangerous adventures ?”

“I can remember raiding Old Tom's orchard.” Said Lili. “Haven't you ever wanted to use the Moongate ? Now is the perfect time to try and get all the way to the final gate. This isn't just about finding out what killed our brother.”

“You've never said much about it.” Said Arthur. “What did you find on the other side of our Moongate ?”

“I was ten and it was an accident.” Said Lili. “I never thought the Roman general would put the correct words in his journal. I couldn't even pronounce the Latin correctly, not then. I ended up on a beach with huge creatures in the ocean. Massive living beings, far larger than whales. That was alright, until something came running along the beach.....And it was coming in my direction. Roaring at me and it looked like an enormous gecko. I ran back through the gate at that end and I've never had the nerve to try again.”

Arthur had heard the story many years ago and being honest, he'd assumed it was a lie. Not a nasty lie, just the usual sort of nonsense girls her age concocted. Like snogging the best looking boy in the

class, or the family dog eating their homework. When Lili had been in her twenties and still talking about her one trip through the Moongate; Arthur had believed her.

“So, big sister.....When we go through our gate.....We’ll end up on that beach. The one with all the monsters ?”

“Yes, everything I’ve read suggests the locations remain the same.” Said Lili. “Use different words, use the gate on the beach and we get to gate two. Use different words again and we reach gate three.....And I’m sure you get the idea. Of course we can stop somewhere for a while, if it looks nice there.”

“How many gates are there ?” Asked Arthur.

“Lots of them, maybe thousands, but most are just harmless stone blocks and cement. There are eight gates we can activate, and then.....The ancient Egyptians wrote about the eighth Moongate and that it would take you to somewhere magical and incredible.”

Arthur was becoming tempted, even if it sounded very much like a one way trip. He was younger than Lili, but in a few more years, he’d be dreading invitations that meant travelling far. He’d be grunting as he got out of a chair and having to be careful about his blood sugar level. If they were going to have an adventure, it had to be now. He just had one or two questions.....Actually he had lots of questions, though only a few seemed crucial.

“Can the words to activate the gates be changed ?” Arthur asked.

“Yes, of course.....The original builders wouldn’t have known Latin.” Said Lili. “The activation words can be added to, changed and most scarily, even deleted. Silas was keeping a journal, as was poor dead, Lem. It seems there are words for the forth gate..... ghu' Qav'e' rur ghaH.....You’re not laughing, so I’m assuming you’re not a Trekkie ?”

“A safe assumption dear sister, what do the words mean ?” Asked Arthur.

“I think the translation from Klingon was poor, but they were aiming for Live Long And Prosper.” How had they come out of the same womb ? Lili was chuckling very loudly and Arthur was hoping to never meet a Trekkie, whatever they were ?

“So.....We’re trying to activate gates, where someone might have wiped, or changed the words we need. Mind you, I won’t moan if we end up stuck somewhere warm, sunny and populated by friendly people.”

“Silas wrote that the fifth gate always leads to Hamilton in Bermuda.” Said Lili. “He had no idea why, but he did spend a weekend there and thoroughly enjoyed it. Just remember, Arthur.....This is real life, not a computer game. If we get into a desperate situation, there are no cheat codes, or reloads.” Arthur had already decided to go gate hoping with his famously eccentric sister. Now there was the chance of ending up in Bermuda, he didn’t hesitate.

“Alright, Lili.....Looks like we’re going exploring.” Said Arthur.

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What to take with them was a big thing. What they took meant only what could be carried. That meant what the two of them had the strength to carry. Lili remembered several literary quotes about only owning what you could carry.....While running. That now made wonderful sense. No trolley or sled, the ground might make them impossible to use. There was a chance one of the Moongates might be under a few feet of water.

Nothing on the floor, it was too easy for something to get kicked and damaged. Everything was laid out on wooden pallets, next to their half full backpacks. Lili couldn’t help touching the double barrelled shotgun that had belonged to her father. There was a full box of shells lying next to it. She wasn’t a pacifist.....Lili had even used a shotgun to kill rats, before she’d run away to the USA; as her

father described it. There was something though, about taking weapons to new, unspoilt worlds.....

“We agreed a weapon was essential.” Said Arthur. “Neither of us is much of a shot. Father’s old shotgun is the ideal thing to take. I’d take a cannon and horses to pull it, if I could.”

“I know it’s needed and might save our lives, but.....Never mind, just ignore me.”

They had lists and knew the weight of most things. It still came as a shock, when Lili lifted her pack and put it on her shoulders.

“You gave me half your stuff, admit it.” Said Lili.

“It’s the water.....We may not find drinkable water anywhere we go.” Said Arthur.

It was irresistible; she had to lift Arthur’s pack. If anything, his was heavier than hers. Then he had the shotgun on a strap over his shoulder. Not their only method of defence, the huge gecko had left Lili with the jitters. She’d bought them both a large military style knife in a sheaf, from a dubious looking hardware store in Winchester.

“Wow.....In our camouflage clothing and packs.” Said Lili. “We look like real bad asses.....As the Americans say.”

“My ass doesn’t feel bad.....But yes, big sister.....I do feel ready for anything.” Said Arthur.

The gardens were huge and the Moongate was quite a way from the main house. By the time Lili was stood in front of the gate on a dark autumnal night, her legs were already aching. They’d nearly forgotten their lamps and batteries, which hadn’t helped her confidence.

“I need to ask.....We’re volunteers, not conscripts.” Said Lili. “Are you ready to do this, and of course, willing to go wherever we might end up ?”

“Yes, just say the words.....I want to see sea creatures larger than whales.” Said Arthur.

Just four words in Latin, probably the family motto of a long dead Roman general. There was a slight pale glow above the Moongate, which told Lili it had been activated.

“Come on faithful minion, here we go.” She said.

Through the gate and Lili was expecting to see sand under her feet and hear the sound of waves. It was light there, wherever they were and a lot warmer than Hampshire in the early autumn. No sand though, or the sound of waves. No whales, no huge lizards.....Definitely no ocean....Just reddish soil and several lines of trees, which seemed to be struggling to grow.

“Crap.....We’re not there are we ?” Asked Arthur. “We’ve arrived at the wrong place.”

“Not necessarily wrong.....Just not where we intended to go.” Said Lili.

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For an accidental visit, the world with stunted trees wasn’t too bad. The air had a slightly worrying smell and the daylight was like dusk in Hampshire. Nothing had attacked them though, or even come out to be curious. Arthur had the shotgun close to his hand though and they hadn’t risked moving far from the Moongate. Lili was digging through various journals and notes, trying to work out what the hell had gone wrong. Arthur simply looked around and pondered on the fact that they were no longer on the planet they’d been born on. Their first Moongate and they’d ended up further from home than any astronaut. That thought was terrifying and exciting.

“As Dorothy would have said, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore.” Said Arthur. “The sun gives it away really, far more yellow than ours and less light. Could we end up somewhere with no air, or so hot that we get cooked ?”

“I doubt it; the gates were built by some kind of intelligent life.” Said Lili. “Built thousands of years ago, but still a blink of an eye to the universe. I think the worst we’ll have to put up with, is wading

through a flood, or up to our ears in mud. Our biggest worry is going to be the local fauna. We're strangers, Arthur.....We have no idea what bites, poisons, or wants us for lunch."

"All this and we never brought a camera." Said Arthur.

"We agreed.....No cameras." Said Lili. "Who could we show the pictures to?"

A good point, but there'd be no record of the wonderful places they might see, as long as nothing decided they'd taste great for its dinner. No wandering far, Arthur kept one eye on Lili, as she muttered and looked through Lem's journal. The trees obviously weren't getting enough light from what might be a dying sun. There were miles of them, millions of stunted trees. No touching them of course, there was the whole not knowing what might sting or poison thing.

"Wow, my first alien bugs.....Now I'd kill for a camera." Arthur muttered.

Between the few small green leaves, were two tiny creatures. They looked like a cross between grasshoppers and praying mantis. Plant eaters by the look of it, both were biting the tough looking leaves. Not just plant eaters, hard times and evolution had made the food choice flexible. The larger of the two bugs, leapt on the smaller one and bit into it. Once its friend was dead, it began to eat it.

"National geographic would love you guys." Arthur muttered.

If there was a next time, Arthur was going to bring a camera. An expensive one, the best he could afford, with an option to take movies. He'd bring a camera, even if it meant hiding it from his sister. Lili was calling out to him and her voice sounded, different. There was definitely something odd about the air on the accidentally discovered world.

"I found two bugs.....The big one ate the little one." Said Arthur.

"Like shopping on black Friday." Said Lili. "I found the solution among a few of Lem's scribbles. Our brother's writing really was spider scrawl. Makes sense really, several destinations can be attached to the same activation words. Before you ask, I have no idea how to do that. But.....Saying the words again will take us to the next destination. Hopefully, that will be the ocean with the huge whales."

"Sounds dangerous.....Could we go straight to Bermuda?" Asked Arthur.

"I'm working to a list created by Silas." Said Lili. "Deviate from it and we might get permanently lost."

"No emergency return to base words?"

"I did mention it not being a computer game." Said Lili. "We go to the beach and the whales. Then we move onto the third Moongate."

"Fine."

The beach was a name to evoke images of parents enjoying a day lying about on the sand, while their children paddled in the ocean. Actually, that sounded dangerous, but Arthur didn't have much experience in looking after children. He knew from what Lili had said, that the beach wasn't an idyllic location.....It sounded incredibly dangerous. He held the shotgun up and ready, as Lili spoke the activation words. When the Moongate glowed with a little blue light, they walked through it and out onto a sandy beach. There was the sound of waves and huge creatures swam just offshore.

"We're here.....I'm not sure if I'm happy, or sad." Said Lili.

"Crap, three of your friends have spotted us." Said Arthur.

Like giant gecko lizards, they obviously had good eyesight, or staggeringly good hearing. Daytime on the beach, though it might have a day hundreds of hours long. Another new world to explore, if it hadn't been for the three massive lizards hurtling towards them. They were giving a roar, mixed with a bellowing sound. The noise reminded Arthur of an angry bull elephant he'd seen in a documentary.

"We're leaving.....I'll say the next group of words." Said Lili.

"Be quick, they'll soon be on us." Said Arthur.

Lili sounded as though she was gargling. Some of the activation words were in languages far more exotic than Latin. As she finished, Arthur took a step forward, but the gate wasn't glowing.

"Fuck." Said Arthur.

He rarely used profanity, but the situation seemed to call for it. Arthur could hear the rapid breathing of the lizards now and although he didn't turn to look, they had to be getting quite close.

"I'll try again." Said Lili.

"Be quick, they're getting close."

"I know that, Arthur.....I do realise that." Lili snapped.

Ripped apart and eaten by alien geckos. It wasn't the words he'd imagined on his gravestone, but there was definitely something cool about it. Lili said the words again and.....The gate refused to activate and glow.

"Shit.....I'll try something else." Said Lili. "Without my notes.....It's not for here, but the words in Klingon are all I can remember."

"Fuck." Said Arthur, again.

Arthur was sure he could feel the hot breathe of a lizard on his neck, as the Moongate began to glow. It seemed something about living long and prospering....Had actually worked. They both stepped into the gate, with no idea where it might take them.

"Ouch.....We're somewhere high, my ears are popping." Said Arthur.

A mountaintop somewhere, the vegetation had that sparse and struggling feel of somewhere up in the mountains. So high that they seemed to be in a cloud. Arthur swallowed a few times to relieve the pressure in his ears. The air was different again, fresher and cooler.

"A mountain on a strange world.....Any idea where we've ended up?" Asked Arthur.

"Not a strange world, we're almost back home." Said Lili. "Not anywhere on our list, but Silas mentioned this place in his notes. We're in the High Andes, somewhere in Chile, Arthur. There should be a temple here, if we can find it in this mist."

"Any wild creatures to avoid?"

"We might see the occasional mountain hyrax, but they won't bother us." Said Lili. "Our father said this was a special place to whoever built the Moongates. There is a statue of one of them in the temple."

"We'll finally be able to put a face to our.....Tormenters." Said Arthur.

"I must admit to being curious.....Silas doesn't even offer a description of the statue.....Just that it seems to have existed for many millennia, but remains unaffected by the passage of time."

Definitely up in the clouds, the mist didn't clear. If anything it got worse and it was making their clothing clammy and damp. It took them a while to find the temple. It had to be the place, it was the only building they'd found in the High Andean mountain valley.

"It looks like copy of the acropolis." Said Arthur.

"More likely the other way round.....This is probably the original." Said Lili.

Lots of marble columns, it must have been staggeringly difficult to get the construction materials to the top of the mountain. There had been some damage over the thousands of years since the temple had been built. Most of the roof had gone and two of the columns had collapsed. All in all though, it looked pretty good for a building of such a huge age. Grass of some kind had grown inside the temple. It could easily have been deliberate, the way the grass made a pathway to the foot of the statue. Easily twenty feet tall, the statue was of someone wearing clerical robes, there was even a hood over their head.

"The marble still shines." Said Arthur. "It's as though the sculptor finished it yesterday."

“Oh, this damn mist.” Said Lili. “If I get a light out of my pack, we can probably see her face.”

“Her face.....You think it’s a woman ?”

“The curves dear brother.....If that’s a man, he has problems.”

Lamps were at the top of packs and Arthur helped his sister dig out one of their LED lamps. Lili aimed the lamp at the face of the statue.

“I know that face.” Said Lili. “It was a long time ago and neither of us saw her for long. I’ve no evidence for it.....But you never forget the face of your mother.”

“Are you saying that is our mother ?” Asked Arthur.

“I am.”

Arthur was the youngest, but he had no recollection of their mother. She’d fed and looked after him, until a nanny had been hired to take care of him. To Arthur the word mother, just brought back memories of the nanny, a dark haired Cypriot woman. Andrea had looked after him until he’d been old enough to attend a boarding school. Was the face of the statue his mother ?

“Damn.....I said we needed to bring a camera.” Said Arthur.

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Lili saw no reason to rush, even if Arthur kept trying to hurry her. There was something written on the base of the statue, words probably chiselled into the stone by a long dead sculptor. The grass had grown high though, as had a few bushes.

“We don’t want to be here at night.” Said Arthur. “It feels like a place that will be really cold at night, maybe even below freezing.”

“Help me clear the grass and we’ll leave here sooner.” Said Lili.

Arthur had been a sulker as a child, but he’d grown out of it. Using bare hands, they both pulled and tugged at everything that covered the words on the foot of the statue. It might simply be a standard platitude, put there to soothe the living.....Or, it might be important Moongate activation words. It probably took two hours to get a good look at the words. Lili had a watch, but had given up looking at it. Strange worlds and moving via Moongates, had effectively take away her trust in what her watch was showing her.

“Four sets of words, all in characters I’ve never seen before.” Said Lili. “Hold a lamp, Arthur.....I’ll copy the words to my journal. They may come in useful.”

“Can I say all the effort was a waste of time ?” Asked Arthur.

Maybe there was a little bit of sulky small boy still inside him, somewhere.

“You can, but I may thump you.” Said Lili.

She smiled at her brother and he smiled back. As kids she’d threatened him with Chinese burns, she was good at those. Then a teacher had said Chinese burns sounded a bit racist, so Lili had moved onto simply thumping her brother. Arthur held a lamp, while Lili copied every character on the statue into her journal. There was something about the words, a vague understanding that kept vanishing as she tried to look harder.

“We both deserve a treat.” Said Lili. “It’s out of the correct order, but our father seemed sure the words would work from anywhere. Do you like the idea of a few days in Bermuda ?”

“You’re saying our dear departed dad, had a back door to Bermuda ?” Asked Arthur.

“It seems so.....Are you up for it, little brother ?” Asked Lili.

“Yes, but we need to change and put the shotgun in my backpack.” Said Arthur. “Otherwise.....We’ll end up getting arrested.”

“Yes, of course.....Though I’ll miss looking a bit of a bad ass.” Said Lili.

It was cold to be wearing shorts and short sleeved shirts, but it was likely to be hot and humid in Hamilton, Bermuda. Plus there was the whole fitting into the crowd thing and everyone would be wearing shorts and shirts. Lili looked at her brother and the backpack looked wrong for a holiday in a sub-tropical paradise, as hers probably did too. Backpackers didn't really fit in with the millionaires and five star hotels.

"We're going to get a lot of strange looks." Said Lili.

"I can live with that.....Say the words." Said Arthur.

Four words in Dutch, which Lili only vaguely understood. Someone had tried to use something quirky to get to Bermuda, a general idea of needing a break. Ask any honest actor; you didn't need to understand words to pronounce them correctly. Lili said the words and the mountain top Moongate, gave a slight glow.

"Please let it work.....No more huge lizards." Muttered Arthur.

They stepped through together and found themselves in a car park. Disappointing in many ways, but at least there was nothing attacking them. A quiet car park at around dusk, with only one or two people getting into, or out of, their vehicles. There were waving palm trees and a lovely warm breeze coming off the ocean. Higher air pressure though, Lili's ears were hurting a little.

"The Moongate.....It looks modern." Said Arthur. "Those look like.....Yes, modern bricks."

"The workings are deep in the ground." Said Lili. "Father mentioned the hotel rebuilding the gate, but it still works."

"Whoever built these gates.....I'd like to meet them one day." Said Arthur. "Come on; let's book a room, the best in the place. Actually a suite.....I brought my platinum card."

"Nice idea, and we did bring our passports.....But, no entry stamp from the airport." Said Lili.

"Crap.....Yes, might be awkward." Said Arthur. "They might think it was an oversight at the airport."

"Or.....They might not. I bet we can find a cheap place that isn't worried about passports." Said Lili.

~ ~

Not suites, though the accommodation was comfortable, quiet and there'd be quite a bit of privacy. Small bungalow style accommodation, with quite a few vacancies. There were broken tiles in the shower and the aircon had seen better days. There was a small kitchen though, with plenty of pans, plates and cutlery. It was easy to see why there were vacancies, but to a brother and sister there without the right visa stamp on a passport, or even air tickets.....

"I like this, it's perfect for us.....And a quarter of what I'd expected to pay." Said Arthur.

"The manager gave us a weird look." Said Lili.

"We'll probably only be here a couple of days." Said Arthur. "I know we're both tired, but we still need to eat. How about a slap up meal in the best restaurant we can find."

"In his notes.....Silas ate at Rum Runners on Front Street." Said Lili. "He goes on quite a bit about it. Our father seemed to love the place. We can get a taxi, or hire a couple of tourist bikes."

In his mind, Arthur pictured pedal bikes for two, like modern tandems. It sounded a bit energetic for two tired and hungry people. When had they last eaten proper food? All the bits of days here and there in the universe, had to add up to two or three full days.

"I've reached an age where I'm comfortable saying no." Said Arthur. "Me on a pedal bike.....No, it's not going to happen."

Lili removed a worn looking pamphlet from their father's papers. She threw the pamphlet at him. It was for small motorbikes you could hire by the day, week, or even for several months. There was a short mandatory driving test, but Arthur had ridden a motorbike in his late teens.

“The address isn’t far away.....Could be fun.” Said Lili. “Quite cheap too.....We’ll save a fortune on taxi fares.”

“And if we crash and end up in hospital.....It’s the whole visa, passport thing again.” Said Arthur.

“Oh, little brother.....Where is your sense of adventure ?”

It was still on that beach, being trampled by giant lizards. Arthur knew when he was beaten and they were soon heading to Rum Runners on two rather noisy tourist bikes. Lili pointed at a large building on Front Street, with a sign that said Rum Runners. It was a building that seemed to shout, here be fun, lots of fun, at him. Arthur felt in need of good food, a little booze and some fun.

~ ~

Lili had drunk a little too much, especially as she was on her first motorbike in close to thirty years. Drink driving was definitely not the kind of low profile existence they needed to be living. The computer system deep in the bowels of UK intelligence would probably explode. If there was a couple in Bermuda with genuine passports, but no airline tickets to get there. It wasn’t like carefully going through the woods to get from Canada to the USA. Bermuda was one of the most isolated places on the planet. Yes, the computer would definitely melt.

“I know I should feel ashamed, but I thoroughly enjoyed that.” Said Arthur. “The wind rushing past, the narrow roads. If they have cameras, we’ll be back in Hampshire before they identify us. I wish them luck with that prosecution.....We never left home.”

“Father seemed to think drink driving here wasn’t as strict as in Hampshire.” Said Lili.

“He put that in his journal ?” Asked Arthur.

“Well..... He did like his drink.”

The lounge in their bungalow didn’t seem as large after a few glasses of wine. Her pile of papers and journals seemed to grow and her feet kept tripping over them. The damned bits of paper seemed intent on tripping her up. Lili was becoming quite angry and actually kicked her own notebook out of the way. Call it serendipity, call it luck.....Or call it fate. One of her drawings of the words on the statue, were now facing her, but upside down.

“I knew it.....I knew it meant something.” Said Lili.

Three lots of words were still gibberish, but that forth set.....When Lili had been at college, people were forever tapping numbers into calculators. Turn the calculator upside down and abracadabra.....There was a word in English. Sometimes it wasn’t that clear, but everyone was doing it.

“Wow, how did you discover that ?” Asked Arthur.

“I fell over it.”

There it was, so easy to see if you knew how. No cypher, no invisible ink.....You just needed to turn the words upside down.

‘First one and three

Second four and four

Third two and one’

“Look.....Maybe I’m drunk, or a little thick.” Said Arthur. “But I don’t see.....”

“I say words one and three from the first set.” Said Lili. “Then words four from the second set, twice. Lastly, words two and one from the final set. With luck and a following wind.....Well get there. The final gate my dear drunken brother. The final gate !!”

The excitement of it was making her hands actually tremble. Being honest, Lili had never thought they’d get all the way to the final Moongate. The journey would be fun though and as long as they

didn't die.....They'd have some incredible memories. Now though.....They had the activation words for the last Moongate.

"What do you think we'll find there ?" Asked Arthur.

"I have no idea, but I bet it's something incredible."

~ ~

Arthur discovered that a hangover ruined any nice feelings about the night before. He'd showered, dressed and shaved, yet still felt a little grubby. The furry feeling in his mouth reminded him of why he wasn't a regular drinker. His sister had got up a little later than him. He'd made coffee and toast, before Lili appeared in the kitchen.

"Never again.....I'm now a non-drinker." Said Lili.

"Until Christmas.....You need to exempt Christmas from the booze ban." Said Arthur.

"Of course, goes without saying. Birthdays too and other special occasions." Said Lili. "Apart from that though.....I'm cutting back on the demon drink."

They drank coffee and ate toast and.....Very gradually, Arthur began to feel human again. A sound began to make him curious; the manager of the accommodation wasn't far away. He seemed to be talking to someone. Lili hadn't liked the man at all, so Arthur peeked around the edge of the curtain.

"That manager, Lili.....What is his name ?"

"Michael.....Something or other, I can't remember his last name. Why do you ask ?"

"He's outside on the grass, talking to a policeman." Said Arthur.

Lili rushed across the room and they were both looking at Michael, as he talked to the policeman.

There was no police car, just a motorcycle with all sorts of equipment attached to it. Michael put his arm up and pointed at their two tourist bikes.

"I knew it; I could tell he was a creep." Said Lili. "The cop will be over here next."

Arthur's head filled with plans that were either impractical, or just not something he'd ever do.

Threatening the local constabulary with a shotgun and tying him up, was something that would follow them back to Hampshire. No one would care how they'd got to Bermuda; they'd do serious jail time.

"Crap.....They're both coming over to our bikes." Said Arthur.

No real panic, though Arthur could feel his heart pounding. Lili seemed to know it too; she wasn't opening up the backpack which held the shotgun. It was like a silent agreement that they'd have to talk their way out of trouble, if they could.

"He's going.....The cop has got on his motorbike." Said Lili.

Michael glared at their windows as the policeman went away on his bike. He'd obviously been trying to cause trouble, but hadn't succeeded.

"Gone for now, but I bet he comes back." Said Arthur. "Probably with a few colleagues."

"I'd set my heart on a few days here, but we need to leave." Said Lili.

"Yes, time to enter the magic words into the Moongate."

A few things to jam into their backpacks, though they hadn't properly unpacked. Back into what Lili called their bad ass clothing; there was no telling what weather they might find at the final Moongate. Surprisingly quickly, they were on their tourist bikes and heading towards the car park and its Moongate. The car park was nearly empty.

"Good, we'll have privacy for the big event." Said Lili.

Someone would find their abandoned bikes and borrowed crash helmets. Arthur's crash hat had been filthy and he was going to wash his hair about eight times, when they got home. Lili ripped up some flowering plants and shoved them inside her waterproof camouflage jacket.

"A souvenir.....Had to grab something." Said Lili.

"No one around." Said Arthur. "I could unpack the shotgun without causing a panic. What do you think?"

"No.....I'm not sure how I know, but we're going to be alright." Said Lili.

His sister had a page of notes in her pocket. She quietly read the notes several times, before nodding at him.

"Here we go, little brother."

Words he didn't understand and he was fairly sure his sister didn't understand them either. Lili must have pronounced them correctly; the Moongate began to give off a faint glow. Arthur held his sisters hand, as they stepped into and through the magical gate.

~ ~

Lilibeth Schneider saw the forest first, a little below them, but covering much of the valley. Early morning probably, the sun was still creeping up over the horizon. Not their planet, the bushes close to them were like nothing that had evolved on planet Earth. The air smelt fresh though and the temperature was comfortable, even in her bad ass clothing. Recent rain had left puddles, but it was currently dry.

"Beautiful, but there'll be something." Said Arthur. "Something huge and nasty will be waiting to come after us."

"I don't think so, not this time." Muttered Lili.

Lili walked down the path into a valley, with Arthur following. There were signs of people there, farmers judging by the plough. The plough was harnessed to a huge six legged creature, with horns. Beasts of burden were usually friendly. Lili petted the creature and was rewarded with a happy gurgling sound. Well, the gurgling sounded friendly to her.

"Crap, big sister.....It might have eaten you."

"But it didn't." Said Lili. "Smells fairly bad, but seems friendly."

Down the path again, which was getting steeper. The small town came as a surprise, as they neared the end of the path. Like something designed for a wow effect, the town had been built at the bottom of the valley. Hidden by the trees, it seemed to appear out of nowhere.

"I wonder what the people look like.....Six legs maybe?" Asked Arthur.

"We'll soon know.....A few doors have opened."

Quite a few dark shapes in doorways, became quite human like as they came closer. Two arms, two legs, but the third eye was quite startling. Right in the middle of their foreheads and the same size and colour as their other two eyes. There was a lot of touching from the creatures, but it all felt done out of curiosity. The big shock was when one spoke English. Not good English, or even passable English, but it was understandable.

"We will take you to her."

"Who will you take us to?" Asked Arthur.

"We will take you to her." Repeated the creature.

A few more tries for information, but it was obvious.....The creature had spoken one of the few things it could say in English. It led, with everyone else following.

"Oh, their town is so beautiful." Said Lili. "I hope they let us stay for a while.....I want to explore everything."

"It's alright, but all these wooden houses.....It'll be freezing in winter." Said Arthur.

Arthur may not have liked the wooden houses, but Lili liked it because it was so different to their village in Hampshire. Large six legged creatures who looked vaguely like dogs, played with children.

It probably wasn't idyllic in a bad winter, but it was all so wonderfully different. Their guide left them at the front door of a house that looked slightly grander than the rest. A small man opened the door. He had the usual three eyes and he too, seemed to know a tiny amount of English.

"Come in.....You're expected."

Through the house, right through the house and out of a back door. There they were taken to a tall woman with just two eyes. She looked impossible young for the part, but Lili had no doubt who she was. They'd seen her statue in the temple on the mountain.

"I know you, you're our mother." Said Lili.

"I am and it is good to see my children. I'd expected you all to arrive much sooner."

"Not all your children." Said Arthur. "Lemuel was killed trying to get here."

"Yes.....A terrible thing. The Quiet people had him before I realised. They live in the outlands now, but can still be dangerous. If poor Lem had known.....Shouting the true name of the Seer of the Woods, makes the Quiet people run away."

"Can we stay here, at least for a while?" Asked Lili.

"Just for a while.....I can't survive for long in your world and you can't survive for long in mine. A few days though, long enough to do a lot of catching up."

"Every child should know the name of its mother." Said Arthur. "Lili and I have never known your name."

The tall thin woman who looked too young to have carried them in her womb, looked sad.

"We can put that right straight away.....I am Zirakai.....The Seer of the Woods."

~ ~

~ The End ~

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