

*This wonderful tale by our regular contributor Matthew Baugh draws its setting from H. P. Lovecraft's Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath, a classic novella penned in 1926 or 1927, heavily influenced by Lord Dunsany. It borrows its protagonist, Madame Palmyre, from Renée Dunan's (herself a character therein) Baal (1924), a novella in which this modern day sorceress encounters the other-dimensional entity Baal, whose octopus-like form is described as the three-dimensional projection of some incomprehensibly vaster entity. (Baal is available from Black Coat Press in a translation by Brian Stableford, ISBN 978-1-61227-046-3.)*

### **Matthew Baugh: *The Peculiar Cats of the Sea of Dreams***

*Kurdistan, 1925*

"We are very close to Atlaänat," Ishmeddin said in his surprisingly good French. "Before I guide you the rest of the way, I would learn more. How did four *firangī* women learn of the old ruin? And what prompted you to make such a long and dangerous pilgrimage?"

Palmyre smiled, an expression as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa but with a strong note of mischief.

"Our reasons are our own, *effendi*. You do not need to know them."

"Ah, but I do."

Victoria Custer scowled and placed the cup with the dregs of her coffee next to the cooking fire.

"Don't say anything, Madame Palmyre," she said. "I know how these native guides operate. No matter what we tell him, he'll use it as a pretext to demand more money."

The old dervish returned her glare with his own fierce expression. He reached a dirty hand into his even dirtier garment and produced a handful of golden coins, worth several hundred francs. Without hesitation, he flung them into the darkening marshes.

"See what I think of your money, *sayidati*."

"The cheek!" Victoria said, but Palmyre placed a hand on her arm to quiet her.

"Are you saying that you will not guide us further unless we answer your questions?"

"I hold my curiosity as important as you do yours, *sayidati*."

"We don't need him," Victoria said. "He said we're close to Atlaänat. We can find it ourselves."

"If God wills it," Ishmeddin replied.

"By the tone of your voice, I gather you think God does not will it," Palmyre said.

The dervish only smiled slyly in reply.

"I suppose there's nothing for it, then."

Palmyre turned her eyes to Mademoiselle Kephra and gave a little nod. The dark woman's expression didn't change as she spoke. Her beauty and stillness made me think of the famous statue of Nefertiti the Berlin Museum had placed on display last year.

"The city is a mystery that I have known of for as long as I can remember," she said. "That is all the reason I need."

"I have a... a lover," Victoria said. "Madame Palmyre said there is a man in the city who may be able to help me find him again."

Ishmeddin turned an inquiring gaze on Palmyre.

"The only man who dwells in Atlaänat is the Dreamer."

"I know," she replied. "He is the one we seek, Mademoiselle Custer to find her lover, and me, because I think the dreamer may be an old lover of mine."

That gave the old dervish pause and he was silent for several moments before locking eyes with me. There was an intensity in those eyes, a sense of strength that made me want to turn away. But Palmyre would think less of me if I showed weakness, so I matched his stare.

“I am Madame Palmyre’s assistant,” I said.

That seemed to satisfy Ishmeddin, who dropped his gaze and reached into his garment to withdraw a handful of small figs.

“We should fortify ourselves before we go on.”

“Go on?” I said. “You don’t mean we’re going to travel by night, do you?”

“There’s no moon,” Victoria added. “How can we find it?”

“Twilight is the only time you can find the city,” Ishmeddin replied. “Please, eat.”

We each took one of the proffered fruit. Victoria popped hers into her mouth impatiently. She made a face, as if surprised by the taste, but kept chewing. Mademoiselle Kephra’s face remained enigmatic as she chewed. I sniffed my fig before biting it and found the fruity aroma mixed with an array of spices. There was something familiar about the odor, something that I’d smelled before in Palmyre’s Paris rooms.

“Palmyre, stop,” I cried. “The figs are drugged.”

My friend smiled, as one smiles at a small child who has just discovered that the ocean is wet.

“Of course they are, my dear Renée. Don’t fret, I will not let anyone harm you,” she said, then bit at her fig greedily.

I stared at the fruit a moment longer. I distrusted the old Afghan, but if Palmyre told me this was safe, I would do it. I took a bite and savored the exotic blend of flavors, then my mind slipped away into a miasma of colors, sounds, and aromas.

When I became aware of my surroundings again, the five of us were standing in a ruined stone vault. There was no roof and the stars stood out with peculiar brightness. Ishmeddin held two lanterns and, as I stared around at the ancient stones, passed one to me and the other to Victoria.

At the far end of the vault stood a massive archway that led into another, darkened, chamber. Someone in some distant age had carved several lines of Arabic script into the capstone.

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“I wonder what it says?” I murmured.

“It is a warning, or perhaps a promise,” Mademoiselle Kephra said. “*The thing that sleeps forever is not dead, and in strange times, death may also die.*”

“It is from the writings of an Arab scholar of centuries past,” Ishmeddin said. “An American friend translated it more poetically as, ‘*That does not sleep, which doth eternal lie, and in strange aeons, even death may die.*’”

The words didn’t make any sense to me, but hearing them gave me a chill that reached to my marrow.

Taking my lantern, Ishmeddin led us into the chamber, which proved much larger than it had seemed from the outside. It swallowed the light from our puny electric lanterns, yielding only glimpses of distant stone walls decorated with carvings of figures of disturbing aspect.

“Hence lies the Dreamer,” Ishmeddin continued. “Before we enter, I ask you again what you seek.”

Perhaps it was the drug in the plums, but I no longer felt the need to hide my thoughts from this stranger. Indeed, I felt compelled to pour them out and only the fact that Mademoiselle Kephra spoke first stopped me.

Cleo spoke first, her voice as distant and emotionless as the stars.

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“This place is very old,” she said. “It may be that its Dreamer is even older than me. Perhaps he can help unravel the secrets of my past and my future.”

It was odd hearing this woman imply she was ancient. She radiated a timeless sort of beauty, it was true, but there is a limit to that. It was difficult to credit her as more than thirty.

“What is old?” she replied, her voice dreamy. “I only know that I am weary of life and the suffering it brings.”

“You long for death?”

“No, for I have already died many times.” She stared dreamily into the dark opening before speaking again. “Eight times, I think. Without finality, it offers no relief.”

“Then what?” Ishmeddin asked, his voice barely audible.

“I long to reach the scales of Maat, where Anubis waits with a feather to judge my heart.”

“And then?”

“Then, I expect I shall be devoured, for my heart is heavy after all that I have seen.”

“Wishing that, what do you seek here?”

She sighed and there was such sorrow in it that I wanted to weep.

“I cannot remember my beginning, nor can I imagine my end. Perhaps the dreamer can tell me these things and give me a measure of peace.”

The dervish nodded, as if her answer was nothing so strange to him. He turned to Victoria Custer.

“The lover you seek, who is he?”

“He is Nu, the son of Nu,” she replied. “He is a hunter and a killer of great beasts.”

“And where did you know him?”

“In Africa. We were together only a short while, but I have known him in my dreams since I was a girl.”

“What became of him?”

“There was an earthquake.”

Victoria crossed her arms and shivered.

“What became of Nu?”

“We were separated.” She drew a breath to steady herself. “I did not see him again, only a skeleton that had been dead for a million years. My brother said that was him and that I had only dreamed he was alive, but I knew better. Madame Palmyre said, since he was my dream-lover, perhaps the Dreamer could reunite us.”

Ishmeddin nodded again, still looking as if nothing extraordinary had been said. He turned his gaze to Palmyre, and her eyes shone bright and full of mischief.

“Aren’t you going to ask Renée your question first?”

“Her answer is obvious,” Ishmeddin said. “She cares nothing about the Dreamer, but follows because she loves you.”

A blush suffused my face and upper body. Even if such a thing were true, who was this dervish to make such a suggestion? I opened my mouth to protest but both Ishmeddin and Palmyre ignored me.

“You mentioned a lover,” the dervish said.

“Not a human lover, but a being from beyond time and space as we understand them,” she said. “You would call him a god.”

“There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet,” the dervish replied mildly. “Perhaps *you* would call him such.”

“He is known by many names,” she said. “Some call him Azathoth, others Cthulhu, and others Mana Yood Suchai. I knew him as Baal.”

Fear rushed through me, chilling my entire body. My mind was filled with the memory of a rift, somehow torn into the empty air of Palmyre’s Paris apartments; squid-like tentacles emerged from it to loop around her slender body, threatening to drag her into the chaos beyond, a space of impossible curves and angles. She had scarcely escaped that alien embrace and her flesh was burned where the tentacle touched her. How could she yearn for another encounter?

“You think that the Dreamer is your Baal?” Ishmeddin asked, echoing my thoughts.

Palmyre suppressed a laugh.

“I am certain of it.”

“Palmyre!” I cried. “Baal’s touch nearly killed you. Why would you want to experience it again?”

“Because, my dear Renée, his love for me is purer than the love of any man or woman could ever be.”

That stung me to silence.

“Surely you understand the implications of your plan, *sayidati*?” Ishmeddin asked. “All of us, all the world, everything seen and unseen, are but parts of the Dreamer’s dream. If he awakens, we shall disappear into the nothingness that all dreams must return to.”

“So say the stories,” Palmyre said. “But how do they know?”

“You would dare to test them?”

“If I am right, he will waken and we can be together. If I am wrong and the universe disappears...” Palmyre spread her hands in an exaggerated shrug. “Of what importance is the passing of an illusion?”

Ishmeddin shook his head.

“This is the madness of all you *farangi*. You seek to master what you cannot even understand.”

“You are foolish to assume that,” Palmyre replied. “Will you try to stop me? I warn you, I control forces powerful enough to blast you where you stand.”

“No, *sayidati*. I have warned you. The choice is yours.”

Palmyre gave a nod of satisfaction and crossed the threshold into the cavernous room. Victoria, Mademoiselle Kephra, and I trailed in behind her. Our torches revealed a seated figure on a low throne at the far side of the chamber. At first, I thought he was a statue, for he was motionless and covered by a layer of grey dust. As we drew closer, I could see that his chest moved, slowly and steadily.

“I wonder how long he can have been sitting there,” I whispered.

“Since before the building of the city or even the foundation of the world,” Kephra said.

“Nonsense,” I replied. “How could he have sat there before there was a place to sit?”

She shot me a look, her annoyance briefly showing through her sphinx-like stoicism.

“Do you think we should do this?” Victoria asked. “The old dervish said...”

Palmyre smiled and moved close to the dreamer.

“Have you come this far just to run away now?” she asked. “Waking the dreamer is the only chance for you to see your Nu again.”

Victoria nodded and Palmyre’s gaze shifted to Mademoiselle Kephra, who also nodded. Finally, her eyes fell on me.

“I’m more afraid of losing you than the world,” I said.

Palmyre laughed.

“Do you imagine that I would leave you to be with my Baal? No, Renée; wherever he takes me, I shall bring you with me, I promise.”

She turned back to the Dreamer and bent until her face was close to his.

“The fairy tales teach the best way to do this, I think.”

She pressed her warm, living lips to his dusty and gray mouth. As she did, the room fell dark and silent, and I lost all sense of feeling.

I can’t say I woke for I do not believe I had been sleeping, but when I next became aware of my surroundings, I stood in a twilight field. To my right lay a dark and placid ocean, while on the left pretty green hills dotted with quaint cottages merged with the foothills of a snow-capped mountain. Straight ahead stood a city, like something out of a storybook, with gleaming marble walls and burnished bronze gates. Distant figures milled around the base of the city and I wondered if this was the Atlanaät that was, long ago.

“You look quite stunning, Renée.”

I turned to see Palmyre standing near me, a small, striped grey cat in her arms. Next to her stood a woman I barely recognized as Victoria Custer. Her dark hair hung around her shoulders, wild and unbound, and her clothes were gone, replaced by a crude loincloth and moccasins made of animal pelts. It seemed to me that her skin was even more tanned, her muscles even firmer than just a few moments

before. As for Palmyre, she was taller, slimmer, more goddess than mortal now, and dressed in an Art Deco gown that I recognized from Erté's painting, *Symphony in Black*.

"What...?"

"It is a lot to take in," my friend said. "I believe the Dreamer has sent us to earth's Dreamlands, though I cannot say why. If we seem different here, it is because each person's dream-form is an idealized version of their own self image."

"Where is Mademoiselle Kephra?"

As if in answer to my question, the cat sprang from Palmyre's arms, trotted to me and meowed. I bent to scratch her cheeks and she received the gesture with feline dignity.

"That is how she sees herself, it seems," Palmyre said.

"As a cat? But that makes no sense."

Palmyre shrugged.

"How often do the things in dreams make sense?"

"So, Victoria sees herself as a naked savage?"

"Nat-ul!" the fur-clad woman said.

"You're not Victoria?" I asked, startled.

"That is the name I am called by some, but my true name is Nat-ul."

"Palmyre, you said this is only a dream," I said.

"Have you never had a dream that felt truer than waking reality? To paraphrase Zhuang Zi, who can say if our friend is a modern woman dreaming she is a savage, or vice-versa."

I shook my head, not really understanding but feeling the need for more time before pursuing the topic.

The city proved about an hour's walk and we passed many people on the way. The bay was filled with tall ships and galleys, and the more richly dressed travelers rode on horses, elephants, ostriches and other, stranger, beasts. The aromas as we passed through the gates and into the great onyx-paved marketplace were as exotic as the people. The mixture of spices, incense, and cooking meats was so heady that I felt a little dizzy.

Then there were the cats. Every breed, and many I had never seen, in a bewildering mix of sizes and colors. They strode through the market or basked in the waning sunlight with that typical feline panache. But, where in the world I knew, they might have been shooed away, cursed, or chased, here they were regarded with great deference. The butchers gave them the best scraps, the dogs didn't bark, and people ceded them the right of way, often with a reverent bow.

"This is wrong," Victoria said. "We will not find Nu in a place like this."

"There are no coincidences in dreams," Palmyre said. "We can only be here because it is useful for us to be here. Keep your eyes open for something that may help."

I was about to ask what sort of thing to watch for when I saw it. Two lines of Arabic script had been inscribed on the lintel of the door of a small residence on the edge of the marketplace.

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"If there are no coincidences, I suggest we start there," I said.

Palmyre knocked, and a gaunt but pleasant-looking man in exotic robes answered.

"Can I help you?"

"Perhaps so," she said. "We are dreamers in search of a particular dream."

The man's lean face brightened.

"Ah! You must be the women who my friend, Ishmeddin told me were coming. I am Randolph Carter, late of Boston and presently of Celephais."

Palmyre's eyebrows rose at the mention of Ishmeddin, but she did not exhibit any surprise otherwise.

“Greetings, Monsieur Carter,” she replied. “I am Madame Palmyre and these are my companions, Mademoiselle Dunan of Paris, and Mademoiselle Custer of Nebraska.”

“Charmed, especially to meet a fellow Ameri—” Carter’s face froze as he turned his gaze to Victoria.

“This is how our friend sees herself in her dreams. She doesn’t mean to scandalize you.”

I knew Palmyre’s words to be true, but it seemed to me that she was enjoying the man’s discomfiture.

“I know that, Madame,” Carter replied stiffly. “Nevertheless, as an American, I am mortified to see any white girl—let alone a Custer—in the semblance of a savage Indian.”

I suspected that the Indians would be equally mortified, but held my tongue as Carter turned to Victoria. He seemed about to say something, but hesitated when he saw that she held Kephra at her bosom. With a musical meow, the small creature leapt into his arms and he held her with an expression of sheer joy. Carter scratched the cat’s head and she nuzzled his hands, even butting her head into his chin affectionately. I could have sworn there was some sort of unspoken communication between them, for when Randolph Carter looked up, he beamed at us.

“It is an honor and a pleasure to welcome you,” he said. “Please, come in.”

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK