

Valley of the Bears

by David A. Elsensohn

Major John C. Fremont was shouting, and I stood like a pillar, gazing resolutely ahead at the ornate porcelain altar hung on the wall. His voice echoed most impressively through the entire mission.

I was, thankfully, not in the crosshairs of his steely disappointment, but winced inwardly for the poor soldier next to me who was the subject of the Major's dressing-down. Sergeant Brant had dared to stride through the echoing nave of La Misión de San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, and demand that we should comb the surrounding woods with guns and horses, destroying anything unusual we found. The Major, who had commandeered the mission's dining room as his office, did not respond well.

“We have come south, Sergeant, through rain and wind and gunfire and damnation, raising the flag without protest, until now! This valley is killing off my troops, if you've noticed, and until I discover the cause of it, I'll be good and Goddamned if I'll let you send more squads blundering into the woods! Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

I remained, eyes fixated on the finely decorated altar, as Sgt. Brant was summarily dismissed. Major Fremont changed expressions immediately, face now stony behind wide-set eyes and flaring sideburns that reached to his upper lip.

“Sergeant Talbot, at ease, grab a chair,” he said.

“Sir,” I replied, standing.

Behind Major Fremont sat Captain Dana in buckskins, legs crossed and coffee forgotten, touching his temples as if they pained him. The Captain lived a day’s ride south; owner of the Nipomo Rancho, he had received our few hundred exhausted mounted infantry with good grace and a fresh supply of beef.

“We *are* in a church, John,” rebuked Captain Dana mildly, eyes creased under fading blond hair. “Let’s make the inhabitants happy and try not to take the Lord’s name.”

“If the good Lord would see fit to stop dropping enough rain on our heads to float an ark, I might do,” Major Fremont said, tiredly. He coiled into the rocking chair under the altar, swiping up his mug of calinche, a blood-red concoction made from prickly pear, and into which he had poured a healthy measure of whiskey.

“Sorry, Captain. We have a goal, and not since Sonoma have we been balked so dreadfully.”

“You had some vampire trouble up there, I hear.”

“Yes, sir, up near Petaluma. Not too bad. We had daylight on our side and all that, and wooden bayonets. Nothing like this. Sergeant? You know what happened.”

“Yes, sir, I heard the commotion last night, but have not yet been to the scene,” I said.

“Seventeen men dead in their barracks, Talbot, the same men sent out yesterday to find what was killing our horses. You had to have heard it. Crashing and thumping and roaring like a locomotive fell over on the building, and my men slashed to pieces. Four more horses killed. Two days before that, my scouts vanish.”

“I’d venture to say a bear, but the grizzlies don’t generally bother the ranchos,” said Captain Dana. “We’re in the habit of leaving some dead livestock around now and then, but it appears only the forts and the barracks are being targeted. Beeves are spooked lately, though.”

“Captain McLane marked that the barrel on the six-pounder was bent. Bent! Captain Dana, we’ve got a couple of bronze field guns, nine hundred pounds if they’re an ounce, and something hit that barrel and dented it enough to make it useless. Can a grizzly do that? All that destruction, and a single pair of footprints off into the woods.” Fremont turned to me. “But see here, Talbot, you’re our arcanist. I want you to find out what’s going on.”

There is typically a single spellcasting company among a battalion, a specialized unit like the artillery. We arcanists perform various sorcerous duties, according to our skill: with our spells we scout with more than human eyes, remove small obstacles, set bones and close wounds, and put blessings on the rifles. I have, fairly often, been tasked with making the food taste better for morale's sake. The best of us can bring down fog on an enemy, feed all the troops, heal grievous wounds, or even kill from a distance, but gentlemen of that stature get to work with the big armies. I was fortunate enough to serve with the weatherbeaten California Battalion—buckskinned, moccasined and shabby, unsuited for a parade but more than capable—working its way south with a mission to bring California under the flag of the United States. I led the magical platoon, which consisted only of myself.

“I want to know, first, what's blocking us,” the Major continued, dark eyes pinning me. “Rain coming down in unseasonal buckets. A mounted company unable to travel more than eight miles south, because the horses will not advance a step farther, even though Captain Dana can come and go freely. Something is keeping us, here, and that's your department.”

“I attempted some spellwork, sir, but there were... difficulties. Extenuating circumstances.” In one of the small adobe houses attached to the mission like shy children, I had sat this morning on my bunk and concentrated, casting my will

outward, trying to see outside the oak-tressed valley; each time I encountered firm resistance, as if floundering through mud. An independent will, dark and determined, halted me. I finally tried a Phrase of Dismissal, and the response had nearly pitched me forward senseless on the floor.

“Talks like a lawyer, he does,” muttered Major Fremont to Captain Dana.

“I will bring results, sir,” I replied, hoping I was not digging myself an accommodating grave. Without meaning to I gouged a booted toe into the square-tiled floor.

“Take Burroughs and Copeland with you. Dismissed, Talbot.”

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Outside, I paced under the arched porticos of the mission, past neatly tended rows of fruit trees and shrubbery that hissed at the heavy hand of the rain. I tapped my mustache in thought. Until today, everything our footsore battalion encountered was simply, if perilously, dealt with: ambushes by the resistance, a coven of bloodsucking undead, storms. Rifles, and hearts, and spells, and the idea of a collective California had been enough. Yet something here did not like us, and I could not fathom what.

It could not be the mere presence of humans in this still-wild land, for the Chumash had dwelt here peacefully for time out of mind. I had heard of nature striking back against the settlement of white men: sudden elemental storms driving

buffalo herds through towns, the very trees rising up to crush homes and collapse mines. We were a barely-perceived insect, annoying enough on occasion to bring a killing swat. Yet the Spanish-built mission had been here for over seventy-five years, and the Danas for almost a decade, on land granted by the Mexican government. It was something here, and now, due perhaps to something we'd done.

On a whim I pushed my wide-brimmed hat downward, although it was nearly sodden, and vaulted out into the rain, splashing toward the adobe where our impromptu prison was. I passed the stone well jutting from the marshy earth, normally the source of the mission's water, but currently unemployed due to the sheer abundance of the stuff. It had been newly repaired, a chore not relished by the men and horses who had hauled new stones from the foothills, but the Major had insisted, as payment for our board. I shook my head at the wasted effort and ran on.

Corporal Stanley shot upright as I entered the prison, playing cards scattering from the table like leaves, but relaxed immediately, knowing I was not likely to reprimand him. I wrung out my hat and nodded to him.

“Who is here, Stanley?”

“Just the two,” he drawled, picking up his cards in a vain attempt to reconstruct his game. “The curly-haired hombre there, that's Tortorio Pico.

Court-martialed, due to be hanged tomorrow. Behind much of the resistance trouble we had coming down, I hear.”

I looked into the larger of the two cells, at the rotund man snoring in his cot. He looked disheveled but well treated, and the remains of a steak dinner lay just outside his barred door.

“And him?” I gestured with a thumb.

In the other cell stood a silent man, barefooted on the damp stone, gazing at nothing. He was broad-shouldered but emaciated, his face hard-bitten, and he wore only leather trousers. Thin wisps of black hair trailed from either side of his lip. I could not discern his age, but assumed he was Chumash.

“Don’t know. He was found near where we picked up Pico, so we brought him in. Doesn’t say much,” said Stanley, bored with my presence.

I replaced my nigh-useless hat and left.

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“Don’t you have nothin’ to keep off the rain, Talbot?” growled Burroughs. He always growled, because he hated everything, and mostly everything returned the sentiment. The lanky blond man was, however, a marksman without peer, hence his presence at my reluctant side. I went unarmed, but then my skill with a gun was indifferent at best.

“I have my hat, and someday I hope to obtain another,” I replied placidly.

“Damned useless sorcery is, then, and I don’t wonder the Good Book bans it,” he sneered. Despite his brutal attitude toward the world, he had a fondness for reading the Scriptures, and hurled them at people when the chance arose.

“I like the spell you put on the rations,” grinned Copeland over his shoulder. He bent low over the rain-ruined grasses, trying to track the prints that had walked away from the carnage the previous night. It was a futile effort, but Copeland was as capable a scout as Burroughs a rifleman. We got along well; the red-haired, freckled farmer’s son was inherently agreeable. “The orange taste on the biscuits, I think I’ll tell Martha to try that when I get home.”

Burroughs did not sneer exactly, but his face took on a more severe twist.

We were marching upward, east of the mission into the foothills. The rain had lessened to a begrudging spatter, but our boots and moccasins yet suffered the indignities of ankle-high mud. I was reaching with my thoughts, murmuring under my breath words that extended my sight as if through a brass telescope, feeling the spiritual weight of the land. It was heavy here, a wool blanket pulled over a sleeper’s eyes, and old—there was not a presence so much as an exhalation, as if something massive had pressed deeply on its way through, and the land was slowly unfolding and creaking in its wake. Darkness, and anger. My words faltered as I brushed against what was no longer there.

“Look,” said Copeland gently, pointing ahead at a clearing, in the center of which thrust a white shape. We advanced, and saw a mound of pale stone. Heaped in a ring, the stones were an ancient construction, grass long grown through the seams. Atop its crown was a depression, filled with a myriad of objects: leathern garments, beads, shells, bones, feathers, even food. It could only be something ritualistic in form; I had read of northerly tribes who danced and held ceremonies for a god called Kuksu, or perhaps Cooksuy, and who employed such cairnlike mounds.

I passed a hand over the rocky altar, smoothing the air over it like the flattening of a map. It did not feel as oppressive as the rest of the mountain’s roots, but it felt—locked. Dead and unmoving. Without much reason I dug into my canvas pouch, drew forth a fistful of hardtack crackers, and scattered it on the jumble of offerings.

“You have got to be kidding,” muttered Burroughs.

“We’ll camp here,” I said. Copeland nodded and rooted through the underbrush for wood that might still be dry.

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Burroughs had scoffed at my offering, but his head kept turning to look back, as if the ancient mound would somehow awaken. He kept his weapon close; he was one of few in our battalion who had laid hands on a muzzle-loading M1841

Mississippi rifle, and his skill was such that within a minute he could hit four targets a thousand yards away. He loaded it, and laid back against a tree, peering about him.

It had taken a goodly supply of flint, tinder, kindling, cursing, and spells to get the fire going, but it was now licking at the night air, no longer spitting in anger at the drops falling from the sky. Clouds scudded quickly past in front of a sickly moon. Below us rose the white mound of stone, above us the rocky slope blanketed with trees. My eyelids grew heavy.

Something tickled the edges of my temples, and I snapped awake. The moon had traveled several handspans across the heavens, and the fire was a muttering orange glow. Copeland gasped and sat up, and Burroughs scrambled to his feet, rifled musket swept up into his practiced hands.

A burly, very tall man stood silently downhill, palms raised. Dressed in pale leathers, his angular face looked vaguely Chumash, but white hair grew down the sides of his temples and jaw, and his eyes shone gold in the firelight. A necklace of bones sprouted from his breast, hanging to his waist. He seemed familiar, as if—yes. A face very like the man held prisoner back at the mission.

I stood up slowly, prepared to speak with what little of the several Chumash dialects I had learned, but froze. Behind the man were shapes—very large shapes. They moved between the trees, hulking and deliberate. Burroughs swept his barrel

back and forth like a broom, not knowing where to aim; Copeland crouched low, hunting knife in hand. I could hear his breath, quick and shallow.

“You are the people,” said the tall man, slowly, not as if our language was a barrier, but as if language itself was. He stood downhill from us, yet met our eyes; he was a giant among men. “Your people brought this.”

“Brought what?” I asked. “We do not wish to harm anyone. We came to find out what is attacking our men.”

“Im-prisoned,” he said, pointing at the white stone altar behind him.

“Imprisoned? Is there something we have done, that we can put to rights?” I asked.

“We are its protectors,” he said. “The tallest *nunashish* walks.”

“Holy...” began Copeland. For one of the other shapes had advanced forward into the combined light of the moon and our fire. Covered in the deepest brown fur, the bear on its four paws stood as high as I did at the shoulder, the orange glow glinting from its eyes and nose. Fearsomely large, it would have been but a grizzly, save for the bone necklace that circled its ruff; what hung loosely from the tall man’s neck was embedded snugly in the bear’s coat. I saw the beast move, and felt it too, its shadow larger than its body, mighty and wild.

It huffed like a bellows, and from its throat came speech.

I could not follow it, for its voice was lower than the deepest bass, but I caught a word or two in Obispeño, one of the Chumash languages: *tawa*, moon, and *siqsa*, to kill. The tall man listened, and nodded, and to our shock hunched toward the ground and began to change. His body swelled and darkened, with a sound of cracking and rustling like a flag snapping in the wind, and his necklace tightened about him until it, too, fit like a choker around his great neck. Two grizzlies stood now before us, one dark, one grey-muzzled.

“To the blazes with you!” yelled Burroughs.

“No!” I shouted, but he had already aimed and fired, filling the night with blaring orange fire and a wall of sound that crashed into the ring of trees. A lead ball over a half inch in diameter roared through a grey bloom of smoke, to strike the grey-muzzled beast in the shoulder, and it barked in deep pain and anger.

Something rushed from the trees to our right, and the Mississippi rifle was batted away, bent nearly in half, spinning like a daisy to crack against an oak bough. Burroughs was swept from his feet, thrashed from left to right by paws as large as his head, then dropped to collapse on the cool grass. Copeland hiccuped in terror and scrambled backward, somehow tumbling upward into a long-legged run that took him out of view. I fell flat, weaving words into a spell of shadow and speed. I vanished from view; the firelit camp faded into a fog, and I rolled away and to my feet, dashing downhill into the night.

I raced with fear gnashing at my heels, ran past trees and over boulders, ribs threatening to split. The three of us had walked all day, painstakingly, tracking and searching, but it took me a pair of hours to hurtle back down into the lantern-lit settlement around the mission. I crashed against the side of an adobe house, my breath gone and my lungs rasping with ice, hoping against hope that Copeland was still alive. I did not think Burroughs had survived the vengeful mauling.

Imprisoned. Still gasping, I pulled myself up and staggered to the prison and through the door. Stanley shouted himself awake at my entrance, but I passed by him to the cell where the emaciated man stood.

“It’s you, isn’t it,” I groaned.

“No, it is not me,” he said quietly.

“I get it. We imprisoned you, we offended your god Cooksuy, how can we make it right? Stanley! Go to the Major, get permission, tell him Talbot said we need to release this man.”

Stanley, displeased but confused enough to obey, shuffled out.

The man shook his head, the wisps of his black mustache swaying. “It is too late. But you left a token, and that is good. That is why they spoke to you. But there are other mounds, and you tore one down. The mounds are not to appease the Creator, which you call Cooksuy. You awoke the darker side of the mountain.”

I was not surprised that he somehow knew of my night's endeavours, but I gazed open-jawed at him, wringing my brain for something that made sense. Other mounds. A mound that we tore down, and awoke something, something that now hampered us and destroyed what it touched. When the realization came I bent my head forward to knock against the bars.

Leaving him, I rushed to the barracks where the Supply Sergeant slept, and had him awakened. Sergeant Adams had a permanently bored expression, and he applied it now as he asked me what audacity possessed the battalion's arcanist.

"The well. You repaired the well," I snapped.

"We did, and in the rain, too," he replied. "Why that was so blamed important when water was all around us I could not tell you, Talbot. I thought it was you who'd insisted on it, I would have expected it of you, what with all that lack of sanity you call magic."

"Where did you get the stone?"

His eyebrows actually raised upward, equivalent to a startled scream by a lesser man. "Southeast a half day or so. Found one of those old Indian burial mounds, or altars, or what have you. Lots of good stone in that. We were ordered, and so we did."

My face went as neutral as his, and without a word I turned and went back to the prison. The soldiers could not have known—but I was now trapped between loyalty and a desire to restore balance.

Stanley had returned and unlocked the barred door. The emaciated man loped out, face as serene as ever, and silently received his belongings; he immediately reached into his pouch and extracted a hand-rolled cigarette. He looked at me until I absent-mindedly flicked a spell at it, and he drew in its vapors, pleased.

I followed him as he set out eastward, in ground-eating strides back toward the foothills from which I had fled. He spoke evenly as I tried to keep up.

“A dark voice has been released, white magician. Full of hatred, once buried beneath the mountain. One of the *nunashish*.”

“So the altars kept it... locked away?”

“Kept it sleeping.” He bent to pick a tall arroyo lupine thrusting its way through the sodden earth, as if that was the most important thing to look at; in sunlight it would have been a brilliant purple. He tucked it in his hide trousers, drew in smoke, and continued.

I knew of such barriers between the sheets of existence; much of the symbol-laden spellwork of centuries past, the province of hoary, secretive scholars,

had assumed such bastions of protection between the caster and whatever powerful entity was summoned.

“So we can put it back! We’ll take the stone from the well,” I began.

“When a prisoner escapes, does he return because you repaired the door?”

This darkest of the *nunashish* has power, white magician. ‘*Atishwinic* power has no heart, it has no cares, and it lives strong in this being. You are your army are mites crawling on its skin, and it is slowly crushing you, and will not let you leave. Your men cannot touch it.”

He had straightened and resumed his pace uphill. The long day, lack of sleep, and my panicked flight was beginning to tell, and I struggled to keep pace.

“So we are doomed.”

“I am Merikubu,” he said. “Come with me, and we will talk with the bears.”

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I sat crosslegged at another campfire, nodding with exhaustion but sparking with fear. In my hands was a stick of elderberry; called a *wansak*, it was split along its length and bound together at one end with a hawk’s feather. I kept it clacking rhythmically in my palm like a drum according to Merikubu’s instruction, and tried not to think of the fact that we awaited beings who my companion had attacked. I hoped they would not seek revenge on me in his stead.

He sat across from me, warming his hands and humming. Another cigarette dangled from his thin lips. Every now and again he lowered his head and sighed deeply, as if considering a deep regret, and sent a tower of smoke upward.

I did not even notice when they arrived, and tried not to flinch when a bear's muzzle moved slowly into my peripheral vision. They were there, and I suddenly saw them, and smelt deeply of their wild, pungent essence. I kept beating the *wansak'* against my palm, looking at Merikubu and hoping he would keep me safe, or at least hold them off long enough to explain my actions.

The world began to turn a little, like when one lies drunken on the floor, and they began to dance, shuffling in low waves around the fire, some with feet of men and some with paws of bear. I could not count them. Their voices raised like the thunder of ocean, and along with my rhythm they rumbled and whistled, until the white-haired, burly one raised a palm, and they snuffled, growled and grunted themselves to sitting positions. All of them were strange but familiar, native and yet older than human.

"You are not hurt," I ventured to say to the white-haired giant. Burrough's ball had struck him solidly.

"Our will and a balm of *temelhepe* saw to this," he said, as slowly as he had earlier that day. There seemed to be no anger in his dark eyes.

“We have a task, white magician,” said Merikubu, as if translating. “And you have need of us, and we have need of you. The *nunashish* fade away before daybreak, but not this one. He walks, and he walks toward us. It will take everything to stop him. Will you help us?”

“Of course,” I said. “We set it free in our ignorance... but I’m not powerful.”

“All you do will be enough,” he said, and he pointed up the hill, far up against the moon-burnished sky. The silhouettes of the trees could barely be discerned, but I could see a shadow above them.

Its form was not certain, but fear coursed through me like a hot wind. The shape had eyes, red and blazing like distant torches, and horns that stretched from each side of its head, like the Minotaur of ancient tales. Its shoulders stood higher than the trees. I saw this only when it moved, its deeper darkness obscuring the shadow of the hills or blotting out the tiny stars that hung near the horizon—and it moved toward us.

All around me the men, the bears, and those in between, massive furred idolons who strode on two legs and grasped with sharp claws, all rose and shuffled upward to meet the *nunashish* who walked with mile-long steps down at us. Sheer, vital power throbbed near me, and I felt ashamed at my own small, unlearned prowess.

Merikubu patted my shoulder, smiled, and rose, rustling and crackling into the shape of a black bear even as he did. Light flecked around his shoulders and eyes, as if eager to escape and seek an old enemy.

When battle was joined there was no ceremony or announcement or call to arms, only an onrush of spirit and fury that battered the trees and bowled me onto my back. Lightning streaked a sky empty of clouds. The air shuddered with roars and shrieks and hisses, and the night was lit by fires that were sometimes yellow, or blue, or white. Magic was exchanged in godly amounts, nature meeting the unnatural, each terrible in its effort to cast the other down. I could not imagine what the men of my battalion saw and heard, away up on this distant hillside.

It was all I could do to run forward and apply my own spells, laying healing hands atop wounded furred shapes, weaving clouds of strength and goodwill and certainty into my allies. From somewhere I even drew enough to hurl bolts of fire against the horned creature, who crackled and roiled in fury against us, and was at once a man-sized brute and a gigantic horned shadow. I have never known from whence an arcanist's power comes, but I stretched mine to its limits; my throat was a dead desert canyon, my arms sand-filled twigs, my eyes granite marbles. I felt only pain hissing through me, as if my veins ran with silver, but I did not stop, helping the stewards of the land drive the *nunashish*, who had slain so many of my

own kind, back into its sleep. I saw men and bears advance into shadow, claws and teeth gleaming, and others fall, never to rise.

In the corners of my mind I knew this was the last battle they would ever fight. They were not fighting it for me, or my battalion, or even humans, but I was glad, for there would have been nothing to stop the demon that once waited beneath the mountain, unless all the arcanists from all the armies and academies of the world could be gathered and brought to bear, palms upraised and magic flashing from fingertips.

It was, somehow, enough. Dawn edged over the mountains east, revealing only bodies and a few stragglng souls, and a blasted landscape. Trees splayed out in all directions, and in places the wet grasses had been burnt down to the grey rock. My friends who had fallen began to fade, until they seemed nothing more than heaps of brush and old boulders that had always been there. There was no sign of the fearsome horned shadow that blocked out stars when it walked.

Merikubu sat near me, alive, his left arm nearly missing, but peace in his eyes. From somewhere he had produced flame for his cigarette, and he nodded at me as he puffed.

“Goodbye, white magician,” he said. “Those of us who remain will remember.”

It was almost noon when I stumbled into the camp, bleary-eyed and bloodied around the nostrils and ears. Major Fremont received me with a cheery smile, as if I had delivered the newly sunny day. The battalion was packing up, readying itself to finish its mission; I swore I saw Copeland's rust-colored head among the men drawing water from the white-stoned well, and I nodded, relieved.

“Bully! I don't know what you did, Talbot, but you sure kept us awake last night with the lights and the thunder,” laughed the Major, mug of whiskey-spiked calinche in hand.

I begged for a bunk and a few hours, and Fremont waved me away, but I did not sleep, staring upward at the ceiling, thinking of ancient lives and history that had been lost forever that night. When the battalion moved on I moved with it, resuming my role as rifle-blessor and food-seasoner, and I kept to myself.

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Major Fremont and his battalion finally worked its way down through Los Angeles and San Diego, and was not hampered in its quest. California became a state, finally, in 1850, and San Luis Obispo was among its first counties. I like to think I had something to do with that, because it was a near thing, but I will remember the name given to this place by Father Juan Crespí, back when the mission was new: *la Cañada de los Osos*—Valley of the Bears.

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