

Chapter Three – Shatter Dark – by R. Graeme Cameron

Palm fronds waved overhead. Stupid weeds. Worse than the pine trees on Grouse. I felt a hot, sluggish breeze. Rather unpleasant. I looked down the length of my body. Naked. Lying on sand. My body covered in beads of sweat. Tiny, tiny bugs alighting in the sweat. Stupid bugs. This is why so many die in amber. Too dumb for their own good. Just like humans.

“Good. You woke up. For a while it seemed like you didn’t want to.”

I turned on my side, away from the trees, and stared out over a sullen sea lapping reluctantly against a sandy shore. Incredibly flat islands not far off, inches above sea level, each crowned by a straggling line of damned palm trees. *What the Eldhrímnir? Where are we?*

“Don’t know. Somewhere off Mexico, maybe, or further south. Sure isn’t the Emperor Norton’s California.”

Myriad was purposefully up to her waist in the lack of surf. Hunting for something. *What do you mean you don’t know?*

“The techgrid is down. No GPS. All I can contact are the Myriad and Titus Mates. Everything else is gone.”

Raising my head, I glanced up and down the beach, spotted Titus huddled against the trunk of a palm tree about a hundred yards off, head buried in his folded arms. He was naked too. *What’s with him?*

“In a bit of a snit. Can’t contact his beloved Mussolini. Feels lost. And jealous of you.”

Why?

“That dream you had before the crash. It was Mussolini’s dream via Titus. Musso wanted you to see it, wanted your opinion. I suppose he’s still questioning his faith. Ever since the Naples super-volcano buried Rome in ash and the Vatican moved to Lake Garda. he’s had doubts about everything. What a loser. Why do you keep in touch with him? Waste of time.”

Once a client always a client. But don’t change the subject. His dream was vivid enough to be mine. Perverse of you not to credit me with an imagination.

“That you possess in abundance. Quite the handicap.”

More to the point, why are we naked? And where’s the pod?

“Washed away. It had gone dormant anyway, not long after we crashed. A missile took us down. We spent ten days and nights floating about till the pod grounded on this island.”

A missile? Who fired it?

“One of those boring people who want to kill you. Beedlewood, maybe.”

I had a brief vision of a drunken Englishman in a loin cloth struggling to stand upright on a balsa-wood raft while firing a shoulder-mounted anti-aircraft missile. Seemed unlikely.

“Just after we hit the water the pod said something about sensing a periscope.”

Seneferu? After I signed the contract with Horemheb? Why would he risk offending his father?

“Maybe he’s a traitor to dear old dad.”

Doesn’t make sense.

I heaved myself to my feet, sweat mingling with the sand between my toes. The view was uninspiring. More islands in the distance. The rippling waves giving off an oily sheen. Why didn’t you summon a rescue? I’m rich enough.

“Not anymore, not with the grid down. Meanwhile we Mates kept you three asleep, but we couldn’t initiate hibernation without the grid. Fortunately, your escape pod complied with my demand that it release its emergency supplies. Moments later it would no longer respond. At least the air circulation kept going. We Mates made you eat and drink. Despite the three of you piled atop one another your bodies functioned. Pretty filthy by the time we drifted ashore and the pod popped open. We had you strip and wash your clothes in the sea. Then yourselves. All the while unconscious. A neat trick.”

I shuddered. I was rather glad I couldn’t remember arriving.

The explosion crashed your connection to the grid? How soon before the techgrid repairs itself?

“Never. I told you. It’s dead. The Reality-Revisionists were right.”

Get off! With all the techgrid’s nanotech ability? Pull the other one.

“Not being funny. You biologics used to worry about A.I. Not only would it take over, but take over forever, because immortal and self-repairing and so on. But the quasi-nuclear war and rising of the oceans was a double whammy. Just like us, the techgrid was reduced to living off scraps and debris. Ten days ago, it decided it was time for it to die.”

I find that hard to believe. We’re shot down and the world comes to an end. Can’t be a coincidence. Someone or something must be responsible.

“Save your conspiracy theories for your masturbation sessions. I was the only part of the grid that cared about you. Still do. You can rely on me to keep you informed.”

If you know so much, answer me this. Why did Myriad and Titus climb into my pod? Crazy with fear?

“I told their Mates yours was the only pod equipped for escape. Good thing they reacted before the pod sealed over you.”

And our clothes?

“A pair of biologics came along in a dugout canoe. I think they had been out spearfishing. They made off with everything before we emerged from the palm trees. My fault for insisting we explore the island. I didn’t even know of their presence till we saw them shoving off.”

I think I’m hungry. My stomach hurts. What about water. Any water?

“Nope. Not a drop. Just sand and palm trees. There are coconuts, lots of coconuts, but we’ve got nothing to smash them open. Myriad is

out looking for rocks. Then, maybe, we can have coconuts and coconut water. Even better if the rocks have limpets. Good eating."

I stared at Myriad. She was splashing the water with her hands, not for fun, but apparently out of frustration.

What, no rocks? And no other Myriads?

"All dead. No loss. They were only duplicates."

Quite a waste if you ask me.

I shaded my eyes from the dull, diffuse glare of the clouds and made a fleshy, glassless telescope by touching the tip of my left thumb to curved fingers, then peered through it with my left eye. Somehow it helped me focus. *I see something. What are they? Do you sense them? Can you thinktalk with their Mates?*

"No. Strictly biologics, but I see what you see. Three... canoes? Two men in each."

Myriad saw them too. She came splashing out of the water and strode purposely and forcefully up to me. Not that that meant anything. She always walked like that. I noted her beautiful skin was devoid of anything other than her natural, blotchy, pinky-white colour, all traces of the chameleon nano-algae gone. Her finely toned muscles rippled to advantage. And those giant pink nipples. Damn she was beginning to look super-attractive. The natural look suited her. Too bad she was so perfect. Almost inhuman.

"Focus, Rudwulf, focus! Those natives have spears. We could be in trouble."

“I hate this place,” Myriad muttered. “No water. No food. No privacy. But if I kill those guys, maybe we can eat them, or at least steal their boats. Go somewhere else.”

No, not spears, I noted as the strangers approached. Standing upright, they were using lengths of bamboo to pole themselves along. Water must be shallow everywhere. At least, between the islands.

The dugouts, carved out of individual logs twelve feet long and two feet wide, quietly crunched ashore. The occupants leaped onto the sand, dropping the poles onto the beach beside the dugouts. Short men, about five feet tall, but muscular, wearing only thin pants and well-worn, shapeless derby hats with most of the felt worn off. Not exactly high tech but an indication of trade relations of some sort. Contact with the greater world?

The men grinned as they approached, their fine, near perfect teeth practically glowing amid the light brown of their faces. Strikingly black hair fanned out from beneath the brim of their hats. They seemed friendly.

You sure these are biologics? They seem too good looking for that. Surely, they possess technologic augments?

“Not that I can tell. One thing for certain, they have no Mates. I’m useless in this situation.”

The six locals stopped in front of us, still grinning, but glancing at our faces with a kind of gleeful curiosity. Myriad struck poses, thrusting her breasts in their general direction, seeking to overawe them, but her efforts had no visible effect. Odd.

Once they begin to speak, you'll be able to transition what I hear? Like you did with Seneferu? In my mind's ear he sounded like he knew English well.

"That's because he WAS speaking English, you idiot. Nothing to do with me. I doubt I know the local language."

You know every language, so what's the problem?

"Only when I was connected to the techgrid infinite knowledge banks. Now I'm constrained by the limits of your memory, and you know bugger all."

Oh, damn. The implications of Buddy-bod's words began to burrow into my brain.

Myriad relaxed her body, stared quizzically at the natives. "These guys have no fantasy life. Or they're satiated. One or the other. I guess that means they're harmless."

Still attentive, still grinning, the men began pointing at us, at the dugouts, and back again. "Cayuca," they said, over and over. "Cayuca."

"They want us to go with them," Myriad said. "Might as well. Wherever we arrive we'll be more welcome than if we showed up by ourselves."

We started walking down to the dugouts. Four of the natives accompanied us. The other two trotted off toward Titus.

"I told the old git's Mate what's happening. Titus is near catatonic."

Frozen in fear?

“Frozen in disgust. He’s pissed off at the world.”

On reaching the nearest dugouts one of the natives patted its side, repeating “Cayuca” over and over. Then it became clear, courtesy of extravagant gestures, that I was to kneel in the centre of the cayuca, sandwiched between natives fore and aft. As I clambered over the gunwale I caught a quick impression of Titus, arms still folded, legs tightly drawn up beneath him, being manhandled like a disrespected idol towards the beach, the men carrying him laughing quietly. Such a jolly bunch.

That both locals remained standing as they poled my dugout off the beach was disquieting. Centre of gravity way too high. Nervously I leaned forward as low as possible. Kneeling as I was, the rough bottom irritated my bare lower legs. I couldn’t help but notice the interior of the dugout seemed more burned than chiselled out. Low tech indeed. I thought I loved everything natural, but this precarious craft reminded me how natural death is, and that is one embrace I intend to avoid.

“Stop worrying. Enjoy the ride. Look at Myriad.”

Yes. Myriad appeared very relaxed in her cayuca. Both arms dangling in the water to either side, her body bowed so far forward she looked like she was worshipping the ankles of the man standing in front of her. I glanced at the bare feet of the man before me. Bottom of the feet so thick and gnarled it looked like he was wearing sandals. Probably never worn shoes in his life. A true man of nature. Great.

Myriad's back, though. Was it beginning to tinge red? What about me? Suddenly felt itchy all over. *Oh gods, sunburn?*

"We are closer to the equator. Yet the cloud cover is as dense as ever. More so, maybe. Nobody gets sunburn nowadays. Except maybe in England. Not like the old days."

There was a faint bluish tint to the water amid its sluggish ripples. Or was it my imagination? No doubt under brilliant sunshine it used to be sparkling blue. But that was centuries ago. At least it wasn't glittery-orange like the algae-scummed waters off what's left of Vancouver Island.

The cayuca was a perpetual-motion machine, constantly rocking in multi-directions. It reminded me of certain annoying mechanisms in the playground of my crèche, only not as rusty. Still left me with a propensity to vomit, though.

"Ignore your body. Be like me. Have no body. Just watch with your eyes."

Good advice? I glanced about. We were making good progress. Surrounded by islands now. The natives, poling their way through them like penetrating a maze. Bigger islands. Some of them a dozen feet or more above sea level. Some of them covering acres of sand, bearing hundreds of trees, associated brush, probably man-eating crocodiles. Or carnivorous plants. Long-extinct dinosaurs now hungry for flesh?

"What are you going on about?"

Just using my imagination. Like when I was a kid.

"I told you. Bad habit. You know your imagination isn't good for you."

Keeps my wits sharp.

"Rather the opposite, actually. Reality is better. Example dead ahead."

We seemed to be heading for a particularly large island. Dense growth of palm trees. Best of all, a long row of large huts with sharply slanted A-frame thatched roofs. As we got closer, I could see people lounging about in the shade of overhanging eaves. Men. No women. Just men. All wearing derby hats, dirty white pants, and a few of them, faded white shirts hanging loose. None seemed in any rush to greet us as our cayucas pushed ashore.

Young children were scattered everywhere, naked, their skins varying in colour from light brown to mahogany. They, at least, were full of curiosity. They came running as a quietly chattering mob. Soon we were surrounded by them.

"So many," Myriad said with a broad smile. "I think they're adorable."

"Too many," I said. "It's not natural."

"No crèche. They're as natural as you can get. They run free."

I gazed into their smiling, friendly faces, astonished by their open curiosity. I noted even the youngest girls bore gold rings dangling from the septum of their noses. "How can there be so many? At least forty. Yet I count only twenty huts. Twenty families? Two per family? One man fathering them all?"

“Should be the case. But these young ones are so diverse there must be more than one father.”

That’s not statistically possible.

“Maybe all the men are virile,” Myriad observed. She seemed excited by the concept.

I drew in my breath. I was shocked. “What are you saying? That the village is a nest of throwbacks? Mutants? That can’t be.”

The men who had brought us, having drawn the cayucas entirely free of the water, joined their companions at the lounging line along the huts. They didn’t appear motivated to help us any further. Rather annoying. Piss-poor hosts.

I began to stroll toward the huts. Their walls were made of upright bamboo stalks thrust into the sand and tied together by sloppily applied vine ropes. The bamboo was as dry and grey as the thick palm-leaf thatch weighing down the steep roofs. Everything looked as if it would ignite like a flare if touched by flame. The huts were jammed so closely together there was hardly any room between them. The whole village could be destroyed in seconds. *Are these people insane?*

“Maybe just very careful, and lucky. Or maybe they don’t use fire.”

The huts were windowless. The single doorway of the hut opposite us suddenly disgorged a line of giggling women bearing food in wooden plates and drink in coconut husks. The liquid in the husks was a slimy whitish mess but it smelled like nectar. I grabbed one of the husks and raised it to my lips. Uggh! Tasted like coconut. I nearly gagged.

“Of course it tastes like coconut. Freshly pressed coconut milk. I expect they drink it in lieu of water.”

The plates were laid at our feet. All sorts of goodies. Little mounds of rice, coconut meat, whole pears, bananas, oranges, plus thick slices from fruits I couldn't identify. *They don't get all this stuff from the weed trees.*

“Must mean the mainland isn't far away.”

That's where all the vats are? A city of some sort?

“I don't think this stuff is vat-grown. I suspect it's all biologic.”

That's impossible!

“Like the number of kids? Sterility started to decline twenty years ago. And the infant mortality rate dropped below 99%. World population been increasing since.”

This staggered me. If that were true, I'd be in more demand than ever. *No way the vats could keep up.*

“They don't have to. Soil getting fertile again. Mother Earth springing back to life. Not everywhere as yet. Mostly in the tropics. Biologic gone wild.”

So much for your promise to keep me informed. You never told me. Why?

“Wasn't allowed to. But now that the techgrid is dead, my instructions are probably invalid. You should make like Titus. Eat.”

Titus had dropped to his knees and was gobbling up the food from every plate he could reach as fast as inhumanly possible. Many of the children squatted around him, fascinated, and obviously amused.

So, too, the women. They kept pointing at my penis and laughing. I, in turn, could see nothing of them. They wore dark-patterned cloth wrapped around their hips and legs as a sort of shapeless tube dropping to their ankles. Their torsos were encased in colourful cotton blouses, mostly orange in colour, weighted down with multiple strings of beads possibly made from shells, or antique plastic for all I knew.

Myriad, they quite liked. They kept patting her shoulders and stroking her black tresses. Two of them took hold of her hands, began to tug her toward a particular hut, other women leading the way. "They want me to go with them," she said, smiling. "I think I should." She disappeared into the dark beyond the door.

I moved to follow, but three men stepped forward to block the entrance.

"When in doubt, eat. Titus hasn't dropped dead yet. Even if biologic, the food must be safe."

I'll eat once she comes back out and I know she's all right. Feeling stubborn. I spotted the sawed-off end of a palm log set upright next to the door. Looked like it was meant to be a stool. I sat down. The three native men drifted away, seemingly unconcerned.

"Titus' mate is still refusing to commune with me. It listens, but it doesn't speak."

No loss.

“You really should eat. I draw my power from you now. No longer from the grid.”

Later. What are we going to do? I don’t see any job prospects here. If what you say about the rebirth of fertility is true, I doubt the local boss wants me to kill anyone. I mean, I admit I they appear to live in harmony with their environment. Incredible as it may seem, they may have no actual need to reduce their numbers.

“Yes, it’s weird. The palms seem to be thriving. The people seem to be thriving. It’s almost as if we’ve left the modern age, gone back in time.”

I haven’t noticed any sign of STDs either. Could it be they don’t need to fear sex? They live in a Gods-damned Garden of Eden?

“If so, you are in luck. Finally, a safe chance to lose your virginity.”

No. I want to reach my full two-score. Promised myself that when I hit puberty. Don’t want to die young like everybody else. Besides, if all these men are fathers, they’re liable to be paternal, and maybe even protective of their wives. Potential for violence.

“Hmmm. They don’t seem to be very assertive over the children. No indication of any control or influence over them.”

It was true. The children had run down to the water to play, or to gather something? Whereas the men were busy rolling down woven mats from the walls, as if on a hidden signal. Up and down the line of huts they were... not mats. Hammocks! They were

stretching out hammocks and suspending them from the support poles under the thatch. *Lazy buggers.*

“It is around Noon. Muggiest part of the day. Time to rest?”

The hammocks hung low, only a foot off the ground once occupied. Every man lay with his arms behind his head, derby jauntily tipped forward. Titus had decided to nap, too. He’d simply curled up on the beach, empty plates scattered around him. Rather like a giant, wrinkled slug. Not a pleasant sight. Especially when he began twitching. Bad dream? Not from Musso this time. Guilty conscience maybe.

The cotton curtain dangling over the doorway was pulled aside by hands unseen. Myriad stepped out, bearing a platter with two coconut-husk mugs, a wide smile lighting up her face. She’d been given a wraparound skirt and woman’s embroidered jacket. Somehow the dark blue of the patterned skirt mixed well with the orange and gold jacket. The clothes flattered her figure, and vice versa.

I reached out and took one of the cups in my hands. “What’s this? Water?”

“Better,” she replied. “Drink it down quickly.”

I raised the husk to my lips and began drinking before my nose could warn me. Alcohol! Or diesel fuel. It burned! Nevertheless, I forced myself to swallow. Figured it would do me some good.

“Wow! Nasty stuff. Drink some more.”

“What is this?” I spluttered. “And aren’t those clothes itchy?”

“Chicha,” Myriad said. “Don’t know what, fermented something or another, but they call it chicha. I think of it as a liquid hammer-blow. And yes, the jacket is irritating, has some wool in it, but I like it.” She glanced down at Titus, who was now sitting upright, eyes blinking. “Want some?”

“No.” He looked confused.

Myriad set the tray down on the sand, straightened up, gestured at the doorway with her right arm. “It’s nice in there. No men. I don’t think they’re allowed to enter.”

“What’s it like inside?” I asked. “Anything interesting? Useful?”

“Not much. Coconuts piled up against the inside walls. Bundles of cloth, of palm leaves, of clothes, lying about everywhere. Palm logs for furniture. Woven bags full of food and Gods-know-what suspended from the bamboo rafters, and hammocks galore. I sense power in the women though, especially the old crone who seems to be in charge. She must be pushing fifty. Face wrinkled like a dried prune, but brilliant black hair. No grey hairs, not on her, not on any any of them. Healthy. Strong! My kind of women.”

“Rudwulf, ask Myriad if her Mate is asleep.”

“Myriad, my Mate wants to know if your Mate is awake or not.”

She put her hands on her hips and focused inward for a moment. “Of course it is... but...” She frowned. “It was about to ask the same of you.” She looked at me sharply. “It says you’ve gone biologic! Titus too!”

“Damn. Contact broken. Just like the grid. Further degradation. Seems human-powered Mates can’t function at full capacity, which means no thinktalk between Mates.”

But... you mean... it’s just you and me? No communication with other Mates? None? No spying on them? No eavesdropping?

“Correct. All guesswork now. This is unprecedented. Hard to assess. I’m worried.”

You’re worried? How do you think... I glanced down at Titus. He looked like he wanted to burst into tears. *“Titus! How is your Mate doing? Is it okay?”*

“It’s gone,” he wailed, tears welling out of his eyes, flooding his cheeks. *“No more Musso. No more Fuzz Bucket. I’m all alone in my skull. They’re dead. I’m dead.”* He flung himself forward across the sand, clutching at the sand, kicking his legs. A grown man throwing a tantrum.

I was shocked. You never tell anyone your Mate’s name. The ultimate faux pas. Nobody does that. Ever! Fuzz bucket? What kind of stupid name is that?

Buddy-bod interrupted my train of thought.

“I always assumed Mussolini installed a level-one Mate in Titus. He was his primary go-between. But then, Musso always was a stingy bastard. Must have been a level three.”

I watched Myriad reach for the other husk-mug and down its contents. *Must be she is as shocked as I am.*

“Her Mate is level two, and apparently still functioning. I’m level one, so I guess I’m not going to fade away... not yet anyway.”

But... How can I earn a living if I don’t know what’s going on?

“Face it, Rudwulf. For the first time in over three hundred years, the human race is all alone. That includes you.”

I’m not alone! I’ve got you inside me.

“Without the other Mates, I’m just a distorted reflection of you, an ignorant duplicate, only internalized. Gods. This must be what castration combined with a lobotomy feels like. I’m depressed.”

“Well... fuck!” I blurted out. Couldn’t help it. I was angry. Frustrated. And scared.

“I’m going inside to drink more chicha,” Myriad announced. “You stay outside and comfort Titus.”

“Who’s going to comfort me?” Myriad shrugged and disappeared behind the curtain.

Was I going to be alone from now on? Truly alone? Like everyone else? Not fair!

“Now you’re what you always feared you were. A man who talks to himself.”