

## **The Encounter**

### **By David Silver**

#### **I.**

It was one of those late Summer days where the air is clear and utterly motionless and the sky is slightly overcast with occasional breaks in the cloud through which the sun feebly strains rays of its welcome light.

He had spent the day working in his greenhouse, cross-pollinating his collection of rare orchids and tending to his exotic cacti. He loved this work; it took his mind away from the troubles of his own memories and the cares of the world. Not that he had much to do with the world, living as he did alone in his remote cottage, his nearest neighbour being a weak-telescope distance away. In his early forties, he had tales of exploration and encounter a-plenty. Personal tragedy had led him to this isolated life as a botanical illustrator. He could work in peace without the distractions of human encounter.

As evening approached the sky broke up into an ocean of mackerel, red and blue under-lit by the setting sun. He decided to walk for half an hour or so before making his supper. At the end of the long pathway that led away from his house he turned into the little lane that was lined on the right by a high dense hedge and on the left by a dry stone wall, beyond which the moors fell way. Mature trees grew at irregular intervals along each side.

He was familiar with this walk but unfamiliar with the perfectly still air and, whenever he stopped to quell his footsteps, almost perfect silence. The only sounds were of small creatures scuttling unseen out of his way as he walked along. The quietness was somewhat unnerving and even unnatural. You can hear a silence but he had never heard one like this before except perhaps, as he recalled, in a hidden corner of Mdina, the Silent City of Malta. And even then one knew that there were people around, not far but out of sight and out of earshot.

Dusk. He knew he should turn back but now there was something in the air. A faint perfume. And an even fainter vibration. He was not a superstitious man but something was causing the hairs to stand on the back of his neck. A small inner voice urgently advised 'Turn back. Turn before it's too late' but his feet didn't heed the warning and kept up their tempo. A slight sense of panic started to well up but the scent was drawing him forward, becoming more powerful with each step. He felt he was being drawn, like a creature of the sea hooked upon the line of a determined fisherman.

He summoned up his will and managed to stop, to stand still and to gather his senses. Actually, was it his will or that of Another? Silence. Then out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw a slight movement in the hedgerow. By now the sun had set and everything had turned to shades of grey. He couldn't make out what was hidden in the hedge until ... until a cloud passed and the Full Moon appeared in all its glory framing the terrible shape of a huge flower towering above him. It moved! It 'looked' at him! The scent raided his senses again and he was rooted to the spot. The vibration in the air he'd heard earlier returned too, almost but not quite below the threshold of human hearing.

As he stood there the vibrations seemed to take on meaning, forming themselves into words within his terrified but fascinated mind. On one hand he feared for his sanity or his life or perhaps both. On the other, his botanists' scientific curiosity held him fast. "Dear, dear sir, why don't you come just a little nearer. You know you would like to. And I would so like you, too" came soft, feminine words. He now knew his life was indeed at stake, but the words soothed him and he began not to care any longer. The emptiness of his life, the lost love, the disappointments, the futility – they all fled before his mind's eye. He moved closer and was now able to regard the Creature in a little more detail. His remaining wits enabled him to bring to bear his botanical knowledge, observing inside the giant crown of petals and sepals a ring of anthers atop gently waving filaments surrounding an almost face-like stigma which he knew was perceiving him just as he perceived it.

She slowly extended a tendril toward him. Tentatively he reached out a trembling hand. As the two met, a rush of euphoria flowed through his being. He knew that his whole miserable life had been designed toward this one encounter. He cared no longer for his humanity, he ached to be one with Her just as She ached to be one with him.

## II.

One evening a young woman decided to take some exercise and walk along the lane. She had been cooped up at home for several days preparing her doctoral thesis on metamorphosis and symbiosis. After a quarter of a mile or so she passed the gateway to the long path that led to the now empty house of the reclusive botanist who had disappeared in such mysterious circumstances some months ago. She recalled the rumours of an astonishing array of plant-based toxins and hallucinogens being found in a greenhouse-cum-laboratory by those who had come to investigate his fate. She was lost deep in casual imaginings as to what might have happened to him in this remote undisturbed part of the country and so wasn't sure exactly when she'd started to become aware of an enticing, seductive scent in the air. Faint, almost inaudible vibrations seemed to form themselves into words in her mind. "Dearest young lady, why don't you come just a little closer. I would so enjoy your company. You know you would like to. I so wish you would" came the soft, gentle but persuasively masculine entreaty.