

Subterranea

By Matthew Tansek

The man behind the two horses stumbled to his knees in the dry riverbed, the ropes that bound his hands pulled him forward relentlessly and he scrambled awkwardly to get his legs back under him. He looked even worse now than he had when Calico and her sister had found him; his disordered clothes now caked with dirt and his pale amphibian like flesh now baked pink in the sun.

“Can’t we just shoot him and throw him over the back of a horse?” Asked Calico from beneath her great sunbleached hat. They had been plodding along for most of the day and the man’s increasing struggle was becoming irksome.

“Half the reward if we do, that’s only twentyfive percent once we split it.” said her sister Ralle from the adjacent horse.

“It’d be almost worth it to get out of this heat a bit faster,” Said Calico patting the side of her beast and pulling her hand back from the heat on its hide. He might die anyway, we’re only sixty percent of the way back as it is.”

“You and your numbers,” Said Ralle with a grin, “besides, it lifts my soul to see him have to take each step back toward justice. Kind of poetic isn’t it?”

“Poetry has no purpose, it is for fat men and small children. The scrublands were bad enough in the rainy season, but this time of year and with this walking refuse in tow. I don’t know how much more I can take.”

Ralle scowled at her sister, “Don’t you care about the people he murdered? With that kind of a reward I reckon there was quite a few.”

“I care about getting back and getting paid, not about setting some cosmic scales. You wanted my help as a guide, all I’m saying is that the slow way back is assuredly not the best course.”

Ralle looked at her waning horse, who’s plod had become weak and it’s breathing irregular. “Yes, perhaps we have lingered out in the devil briar a bit too long.” She watched as her sister hoisted a great cylinder of leather from one of the rear bags on her horse and pulled off the cap. “It’s a good thing you spent so much time out here with those gold hunters. Might be some of the only maps of the area ever drawn.”

“They were Geologists, and they weren't looking for gold.”

“Everyone is looking for gold of one kind or another.”

Calico thumbed through the rolled parchment and extracted one. The Geologists had found a set of caves that she thought would not be too far, and had flagged them for future study.

“Those are wise words,” said the parched voice of the prisoner, “are we not the three of us people willing to go to great lengths for reward? Do you think I could spend it all in a week?”

“You left town for ten days.” Said Calico not looking up from her map.

“Ten days then. A man can’t piss away fifteen large in ten days. Not if he were whoring and drinking at every moment he couldn’t.”

“I think you’d better shut up and concentrate on your walking, criminal.” said Ralle putting one of her gloved hands on the stock of the carbine rifle slung at her side.

“All I’m saying is that it might be worth letting me trade my life for a fortune.” rasped the man at the end of his tether.

“My sister was right, you’re more trouble than you’re worth,” Said Ralle drawing the carbine.

“Put that away,” said Calico stowing the map, “at the intersection of that eastern dike with the shelf of rock beyond it there should be some caves. If we’re lucky, water too.”

“I was only going to hurt him,” Ralle said squinting into the distance,
“Water, out here? How?”

“The mysteries of the earth are great. And there was water the last time I was there.”

The dike which looked like a wall of black fencing in the distance proved to be much larger and further away than expected. But the thought of water can pull on a spirit and spare it from the beating sun in ways that shade cannot. The mans stumble evaporated. The horses however, who knew nothing of the predicted water, took more than a little encouragement to hasten their step. The bleached sands and seared rock gave way to a dark blot on the shear surface before them.

“God himself must have bore that out of the living earth,” said Ralle squinting against the spraying sand.

“It is anomalous.”

The intoxicating smell of dampness flickered in the wind as they drew closer to the mouth of the cave.

“This might be the only source of water for leagues, be on your guard sister,” said Calico drawing from amongst the fabric that wrapped her body an old but well cared for revolver. Her sister followed suit with the carbine.

The mouth of the cave was far wider than it was tall and provided a substantial overhang and bulwark from the fire in the sky. Ralle the tracker scanned the shielded earth for any signs of recent activity.

“Looks like it’s been some time since anybody’s been here,” she said dismounting, “I can see coyote and some other little critters have been through, but nothing that gives me pause.”

“There was an underground spring perhaps a half mile into it. That’s as far as the Geologists got before they decided to move on.” Said Calico jumping down from her own horse and leading it further into the gloom.

“Shame we can’t stake a claim to it. This hellbound filth could,” Ralle gestured to the bound man, “explain that.”

“We have been deemed misfit women,” said Calico coming over to her sister, “and violent gun toting women at that.”

“How do you want to handle him?”

The man, who had sat down on the cool earth looked back at them then, a smile widening across his cracked lips.

“Hang a lantern from him, and bind his legs so that he can’t move too fast.” Said Calico moving toward her packs at the back of her horse.

After a few minutes their marching order had been reversed, with the prisoner at the lead and the two sisters leading their horses behind. Ralle's lantern had been tied to the ropes between the man's hands and bobbed before him with each of his strides, truncated by the rope that now bound his feet.

"My ol' pappy used to tell me stories about an old heathen temple out in the scrublands. You suppose that's what this was?" said the criminal breaking the silence that had fallen.

"This is not a temple, it is a natural formation." said Calico

"Don't need to be hewn to make it a temple. The old folk worshipped and preyed at what was 'round 'em. The more special a place, the more holy it was. You said it yourself that this hole was abominolous, I figure that makes this place mighty holy."

"Anomalous." corrected Calico, "and if you don't stop your talking I'm going to let my sister put a wad of lead between your eyes."

The horses, torn between the want for water and anxiety of their environment stomped and bridled as they went along. The passage, while remaining just as wide as it was at the entrance became more and more littered with stone as they continued down it's slight decline.

“Damn rocks,” said Ralle struggling to navigate her way, “could do with a little less of these springing up out of the ground.”

“They didn’t come from the ground. They came from the ceiling.” said Calico trying to keep her lantern steady, “the geologists suspected that it probably took lifetimes for the amount of debris to accumulate.”

Ralle looked dubiously up at the surface above her.

Finally after rounding a bend in the passage they came upon the water. It cascaded from an unseen vaulted height like rain down into a shimmering pool at the back of the tunnel. Man, woman, and beast drank deeply.

“You almost would forget the sun and sand was even out there,” said Ralle as she dried her face against the sleeve of her cotton jacket. The water tasted cold and empty. “We could rest here for a bit, head back out the rest of the way at night. What do you think?”

Calico checked her time piece against the light of the lantern. “Yes. A few hours or so would be fine. We haven't deviated too much from our rout.”

“How are you holding up?” asked Ralle taking a seat beside her sibling.

“I’m fine,” said Calico with a false smile, “although I won’t so readily volunteer to assist with any more of your jobs out on the frontier.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you only came out here for men with degrees.”

“Can you blame me for wanting a life less dangerous?”

“I think you should live the life you’re good at.”

“Well maybe I’m not going to be good at it for much longer. Doing this, you’re good until the day you find you’re not good enough.”

“We’re in the home sprint now. Have you decided what you’re going to do with your cut?”

“It’d be nice to-”

A series of splashes and the only light suddenly became the one next to Calico.

“Damn, he’s gone into the water,” said Ralle bolting upright and drawing her rifle, “must be deeper than I thought.”

They both stared into the jet surface of the pool for a moment.

“The average human being can hold their breath for only two minutes,” said Calico holding the light high and drawing from her vest pocket a timepiece, “I might give him three considering his situation.”

Each tick of the second seemed tripled in that primordial space. One sister watching the clock, the other with gun drawn scanning the surface of the water. The two horses undisturbed merely shuffled and continued to drink.

“That’s three minutes,” said Calico snapping the timepiece shut, “You think he’s trying to end it with a lungful of water?”

“I’ll be damned if I let my bounty get cut in half in the eleventh hour,” said Ralle, stripping the extra fabric from her body and checking the large blade she wore in a scabbard at the small of her back.

“Are you sure that’s wise? He may try and drown you too.”

“If he tries to drown me I’ll gut him. Three outcomes here, he dies by water, dies by blade, or dies by hanging when we get back.” Ralle waded out into the water, “let’s roll the dice of fate shall we?” and with that the woman dove into the water and was gone from view.

For a minute or so Calico held aloft her light, a lone beacon for her sister to swim to from the depths. At two minutes however she could bear waiting no longer and readied herself. The guns would be useless wet, so she would have to resort to more primitive weapons like her sister. She

carefully placed the lone lantern on the edge of an outcropping of rock that jutted into the black water and followed suit into the cold liquid.

Ralle was strong, certainly stronger than a bound man forced to walk so many days in such oppressive conditions, Thought Calico as she pushed herself into down through the pressure of the water. *Why hadn't she come back up yet?*

Whatever feeble light was thrown from the lantern did not penetrate far into the pool, and it began to feel as if she were swimming through a starless sky. Panic struck her suddenly as she struggled to orient herself. She brought her hands to her mouth, trying to feel through the numbness of her fingers which way the bubbles flowed. Then, after failing to do that, she became aware of a light in the darkness. She thought at first that it must have been the lantern that she had set, but as she approached she could see it was far more violet in color. A current seemed to speed her approach to the light and as she saw what it was she felt both panic and amazement.

Calico had heard about fungus that could glow in the night, and before her in that dark rushing water shon a spectacular variety. It danced with waving tube like stems, it's slimy sheets providing no grip to her as she

was drawn onward into the pressing cold. Calico's lungs burned, her limbs numbed, and the undertow was gaining in speed. She could feel her lungs flutter in desperation against the seal of her lips, and her eyes wide in the spectral light of the fungus saw the darkening rift as she was drawn through it.

Ralle waded from the water into a space so large she thought at first she were out doors. A kaleidoscope of strange pinks and golds rolled high overhead and bathed her in it's strange glimmer. She was still in the cave it seemed, but unlike any she had ever been in. She shivered in the alien space, but kept one hand on the hilt of the great knife she wore strapped to her back. Her ears rang from the pressure of the water, and her thick dark hair that had been tied up now draped down around her head in wet tendrils. She felt like an animal that had fallen for a trap, cornered and confused. Ralle bared her teeth and relished in it.

Ahead of her in the sour yellow light of the cave she could hear the familiar sound of footfalls against the hard compacted earth of the floor. Her hawk like eyes strained in the dim light, searching for her quarry. She was sure that the criminal had swam through that passage as she had, swimming strangely with his feet together. She could not abide the thought

of failing her mission, or failing her sister, and heat flooded her veins once more.

Perhaps it was only chance that caused her to look back over her shoulder at the pool behind her, at the unobtrusive water that had whisked her to this strange subterranean space. But when she did her feet froze in their tracks and the thought of her bounty was eclipsed. Floating serenely and unmoving in the gloom was the body of Calico.

She rushed to her looking for any sign that the reaper had faltered in its harvest. Wrenching at the wet clothes she dragged the lifeless clay of her sister to the bank. Her head and limbs lolled that that of a corpse, stealing Ralle's breath away to look at her. She straddled her sister and gave to her her air, her warmth, and her silent hopes. In her core the flicker of Calico's life revived and the sisters were united.

"Where are we?" asked Calico after she had purged the water from her lungs and the spasms had subsided. Her eyes shon wide in the dim space and marveled at the bioluminescent grotto she found herself in.

"Why didn't you wait by the horses? You could have..." said Ralle regaining her composure.

“Yes, well I thought something must have gone wrong.” she stood gazing up at the distant roof of the cave, “Are they some sort of plants that are giving off that light?”

“More like the ones in the water I suppose. Our captive is here too, though he is captive no more. I heard him scooting off into the dark just before I saw you in the water.”

“We might be trapped here. The current that pulled me down isn’t something one could swim against.”

“Well all that means is that we’re going to have to find another way out of here.” said Ralle in a saccharine tone.

“We will need to find the criminal first.”

“That’s the spirit.”

The two stalked like panthers through the titanic underground space, weaving through the jutting spires and crystalline pillars that glinted with razor tipped fragments as they passed. After a time their eyes became used to the low light and the vast distances of the realm they had discovered became apparent. At the crest of a substantial mound of earth the sisters stopped to take stock of their surroundings. Great forests of stalagmites rose up from the landscape around them, clustered in bare parody of trees.

Beyond, glistening dome like hills in whose reflective surfaces rolled the light from above, playing as if they were the hills of a verdant countryside. So too did the planes of bucolic minerals ape the beauty of the blossoming world above. The sisters marveled at the sight and grappled with what the true loss would be should the depths and their dark mockery keep them.

Ralle, the expert tracker, seemed uncannily alive in this place. Her eyes glinting from behind her wild hair and seeming to never fail at detecting the slightest trace of the man they pursued. Several times Calico was forced into silence as her sister focused on dropped thread of twine or a scuff in the dirt.

Twice in the damp and muted twilight Calico suspected that she saw great pale things moving along the shear surface of the glowing lichen ceiling far above, but no noise ever reached her ears and she convinced herself that they were only tricks on her eyes. Finally after they emerged from a narrow worm eaten passage Ralle exclaimed. Validation of her assumptions and proof of her skill sat perched upon a jagged spine of stone. Unmistakable there hung the remains of the twine rope the two had used to bind their captive.

“He can’t be far now,” said Ralle picking up the frayed cord, “and once we have him we’ll concentrate on our escape.”

Calico seriously doubted that they may ever see the sunlight world again, and smiled at how her sister could reduce such a monumental task.

The sisters pressed on, noting that the cave seemed more alive than they previously thought. Puddles of water shimmered as they passed with little points that may have been eyes sliding out of sight. Congregating cave crickets lined the walls of several of the tunnels, and when a foot faltered one hesitated at the thought of bracing against such a surface.

“There,” said Ralle in a harsh whisper as they passed through a low slanting chamber and into a semi-circular enclave that terminated the shelf they had been traveling upon. It was an odd sight, about forty feet from their position stood the criminal, motionless. The whole of the ground before them seemed to simply drop away in this chamber, as if in some titanic geological fit it had been sucked down to the bowels below. This would have undoubtedly been quite the impossible barrier save for a natural bridge that spanned its center. Undoubtedly one of the largest stalactites had somehow come detached from its anchor amidst the dizzying vacua of the cavern’s roof and spared itself the full fall by wedging across

the expanse of the pit. Its crumbling rounded surface did not inspire confidence, and the criminal remained smack in the center of it.

“What’s he doing?” Calico asked coming shoulder to shoulder with her sister as they watched, “he’s just standing there.”

“Maybe he’s trying to be silent, afraid that we will hear him.”

“So what do we do?”

“We get as close as we can to him. I reckon he’s not going to run again knowing how easily we could catch him now.” Ralle motioned with her hand as she spoke and began creeping toward the spanning earth over the chasm. Calico followed suit, although still perplexed at the man’s behavior.

“You may be more trouble than you're worth,” called Ralle, squaring her shoulders and brandishing her knife before her as she approached.

The man moved then, pivoting on his feet to face them and wobbling slightly. His face wore a blood drained look of horror and he mouthed something unintelligible.

“You’re going to walk toward me and come along quietly or so help me I’ll toss you down this pit and leave you for dead,” Ralle continued crouching like a wolf ready to leap.

The man did not move from his spot, but only extended the index finger of his right hand and pointed down to the stygian depths he was precariously balanced above. Ralle leaned out over the edge to look.

The twilight of the lichen filtered down poorly into the cleft, but what little Ralle could see froze her innards. The sides of the plunging walls seemed to be *moving*. What exactly they were Ralle did not know, but she held up a hand and motioned to her sister to approach.

Calico ran a hand through her short hair and obeyed, approaching with hesitation the great rift that held the other two in frozen terror. If Ralle had hoped that her sister would be able to shed some light on what the animals were she could not; they were wholly unlike anything she had ever seen. They looked like gigantic sinewy baby birds, pinkish white in color and gripped the rock wall with vicious hooked claws on their back feet. Calico licked her lips and studied that animals, they seemed to be sleeping for she could see their great bulging eyes behind almost translucent eyelids flicking about. The upper most clump of them contained perhaps ten or so of the animals, each one nearly six feet in length, but beyond them into the darkness below, she shuddered to think of how many there could be.

“I think you both had better move away from this hole,” Calico whispered, continuing to study the animals, “carefully.”

Ralle kept her knife drawn and backed away slowly, her focus returning to the man before her once she was out of eyeshot of the creatures below.

The sisters beckoned to the man, who after a moment of fighting the paralysis of fear took one clumsy staggering step forward. His worn boot came down hard and sent down a shower of accumulated gravel and dust. The three held their breath for several terrifying seconds before an ear-splitting baritone wail erupted from below. Ralle was eager to cross the divide and grab the dumbfounded criminal herself, but before she could even shift her weight to dash, the mottled pink heads of the creatures could be seen rising up around the rim.

“Well we found him, now I think it’s time we found a way out of here!” shouted Calico over the rising cacophony of noise.

Their forelimbs were almost winglike in nature, although clearly not capable of flight. The few stiff and skeletal feathers that adorned them rasped at the dirt as they pulled themselves over the rim. The sisters could

hear the screams of the man behind them as they fled, images of what must have been a gory demise flashing in their minds.

What the creatures lacked in speed, lunging along as they did with their black clawed hind feet, they made up for with a superior knowledge of the terrain. At each junction through the twisting tunnels it seemed another pair of screeching black beaks would come leaping out of the darkness as the sisters fled.

At last, after a quarter hours hot pursuit the sisters found respite within a hollow just wide enough for them to squeeze into. Their eyes swimming in the dark and their bodies scratched and bleeding from their blind flight.

“How can there be such creatures?” Calico asked once she had recovered a bit.

“The mysteries of the earth are great,” replied Ralle, “these caves could be endless. Who knows what else might be down here. For each moment that I feel like we are returning to the surface it is matched with one that forces us back down.”

Calico wished she had an answer, but could only sit with her back to the wall and listen to the raking feathers of the animals as they sought for them in the serpentine subterranean world.

Just then a sound that had up until that moment been lost in the background came to the surface. It was a light squeaking or chirping sound and seemed to be coming down from somewhere above them.

“Bats,” said Calico excitedly poing her head out from under their hiding spot.

“I should think that dying of thirst or of being torn to pieces by one of those hideous devil spawned things would be more of a concern than,” Ralle shook her head in the dark, “well...something you would *expect* to find in a cave.”

“Bats do not feed in caves Ralle, they exit each night and return each morning.”

So where the bats are going, must lead out of the cave?”

“Undoubtedly.”

High above them the little brown bats might as well have been angels. They chattered and swooped their way in great numbers around the contours of the cave surface.

Following the sounds of the bats proved to be difficult, as the chambers of the cave reverberated the sound and made directionality almost impossible at times. This hardship was compounded by the fact that at several points the bats far above seemed to move through passages totally unscalable. The hooked beaks of the stalking beasts too were relentless, and again and again Ralle's blade flashed red in the glow of the cave as she fought off the creatures that leapt upon them from darkened corners and steep walls.

Eventually the smell in the air changed and the sisters found themselves looking up a steep fissure in the rock to a dim sliver of sky far above them. Had the forces of the earth been slightly more potent and the fissure widened to a point too great for them to brace themselves against, the escape would have been impossible. As it was however they were able to put their backs against the shear surface and their and and feet against the wall opposite and slowly force themselves upward. Confused bats buffeted them as they rose closer to the opening, and far below the deep baying of the creatures that stalked them could be heard. Whether or not it was the light of the moon that kept the things below neither sister could

say. But both were thankful that they were not pursued, for there was little doubt that they would have been caught and killed.

The stinging spray and burning heat of the desert had transformed into a placid and cool moonlit sea of rippling dunes.

“I thought I would never be so happy to see the scrublands,” said Ralle breathing deeply of the night air and scanning the horizon.

“Nor I,” came Calico’s reply from her collapsed position on the ground nearby. “Can you see where we are?”

Ralle’s eyes were used to the mutations night can bring to the appearance of the world, and the dimness of the cave had only sharpened them. The moon in the heavens seemed to be as bright as her memory of the sun, and her vision seemed to be as unlimited as an eagle’s over the sea. One thing stood out to her, the long low rock wall they had initially used to guide them into the ravine and into the accursed cave.

“This is good news,” said Calico standing and beginning to lead the way forward, “our horses and gear are not far away. We can make it to the city by daybreak if we are fast though.”

“I only wish we were coming back with a fat bounty in addition to our lives.”

“Yes, well I’m glad we came back with at least one of the two.”

Without the dim light and damp moldering smell of the cave to enervate them the sisters made short work of the miles that separated them from the original entrance.

“I should think that the discovery of this cave might prove to be somewhat lucrative,” said Calico as they came around the last pile of wind beaten stone and into view of the mouth, “there are plenty-”

The sisters stopped short. Standing at the mouth of the cave and tied to a post in the ground were their two horses.

Ralle’s muscles tensed. Calico’s mind whirred with explanations. But before either could react a voice broke from atop the slanting earth above them.

“I figured the dark haired one would maybe somehow make it out, but both of you? Not a devil’s chance. But yet here you are.”

The sisters saw the criminal, bloodied and slumped against a boulder, Ralle’s carbine pointed at them. His face, an aspect of victory.

“You’re still a wanted man,” said Calico raising her arms slowly, “killing us will only postpone the inevitable, and raise the bounty to a level where every man woman and child will want to cash in on your hide.”

“You’re asking me to choose between life and death? To return to a forced march to my own demise? Is that really a choice? I’ll be long gone before the next set of fortune seekers gets word of what I’ve done here to you. Beyond that, well, I’ll take my chances.”

Ralle’s steely grip clamped on her sister’s shoulder and the duo dove to the rock wall as the carbine thundered. White hot pain erupted in Ralle’s right arm as they found cover just out of sight below their sniper’s view.

“You’re arm!” said Calico with a horrified look at the deepening blood stain on her sister's sleeve.

“I’ll live,” Ralle grunted, “take my blade. You’ll need to get up there and end him.”

Calico’s eyes widened, “And you’re going to distract him somehow? It seems likely that you will be shot again.”

“It seems likely dear sister that we both are going to get shot.”

Calico drew the great serrated blade from its sheath at her sister's back and readied herself as low as she could get. There was an embankment by the mouth of the cave that she could use to get up to the upper ledges where the criminal was. However as fast as she was it would

take her a moment to scale it, and if noticed would leave her well exposed to any lead pointed her way.

“Are you ready?” Ralle asked.

Calico nodded.

Ralle started first, running hard and fast away from her sister. The shock of the wound flooded her veins with adrenaline and she focused it all into her legs. Twice she heard the gun ring out behind her, and twice she saw a cloud of dust rise up from the pallid sand nearby.

Calico for her part had to ride the delicate balance between stealth and speed. She made her way to the embankment, pausing for his attention to be fully turned on her sister. Each time the gun fired her mind recalibrated the odds of survival. A few more seconds and she would have closed most of the distance.

The experience in the cave had left the criminal's hand shaky. He fired at his former captor in quick succession, but now that the distance was mounting he needed to take his time. He wiped the sweat from his brow against his shoulder and slowly breathed out, steadying his aim. One clean shot was worth a hundred glancing blows. He would not miss again.

Ralle waited for the third shot to miss, for another spurt of sand, but instead heard the report of the gun, and saw the horizon warp before her and the ground heave up towards her face. The taste of blood was vivid and overwhelming. Somewhere in the distance there was a scream.

Calico saw her sister fall, the bullet seemed to strike somewhere about Ralle's head or shoulders. Rage blew away all rational thought from her mind, and a cry burst like steam from her throat. In three bounds she had closed the distance to the shooter. He had only time to half-turn. The point of the blade hit squarely in his right eye and was instantly buried to the hilt. Within a second she had withdrawn it and brought it down again and again into the chest of the gunman as his body crumpled to the ground, blood trailing in arcs in the wake of each blow.

Rationality returned to Calico like an abused cat to a new hand. She leapt down the ridge and rushed to her sister's form, a mote of brown adrift in a sea of silvery waves. Delicately she turned her over, and gasped as her sister stirred. The bullet had glanced the side of Ralle's face, perhaps damaged her eye, but had not taken her life. There was still a long ride before her, but at least it was a ride towards home. Besides, they were now cashing in on at least half of the bounty.