

Reckoning

A Short Story by
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RECKONING

Awash in a sea of mist, he lay, as he sometimes did on those long hot days when the long-necks grazed upon the wetland's fringe, and the rippers and scrappers, kept a safe distance by Protector's ring, waited patiently with stone-cold eyes and merciless teeth. He pushed away into the mire, his willowy scaled frame slithering between flat-pads and reeds; his adolescent mind churning countless thoughts.

Growing weary and bemused, he pulled himself upon a boulder and rolled to his back. He covered his ovals with the webs of his hands, soaking in remnants of the sinking sun's bitter warmth.

"Teacher?"

"Teacher!" He leaned up suddenly, his heart beating wildly. Teacher never left me, he mused. No, not ever! He inhaled deeply through the slits in his face.

"Patient learner..." Teacher's reply, although somewhat tardy, soothed him like no other—not even his mothers, or elders, or Tabernacle's priests.

"I thought, you..." He exhaled calmly.

"Rest easy, I will never leave you."

"I thought, perhaps, because the *Reckoning* draws ever near."

"Nothing has changed, young student; you can always be assured of my presence."

Comforted once more, he laid his head back to stone, gazing upon the tiny specks of distant suns emerging within the deepening sky. For a moment, his heart warmed, imagining the vastness of eternity and the endless possibilities it'd once offered all who could dream.... But his mood quickly dimmed to somberness, when his ovals fell upon the intruder's escalating fury—a menacing beacon hovering over the golden horizon.

"A lesson?" Teacher asked.

Teacher's voice danced in his brain, amusing him to the core. Although young, he knew irony. Teacher itself taught him well. "Now," he replied incredulously. "Is it not a sliver too late?"

"Sentience," Teacher said, ignoring his pupil's feeble insolence.

He gurgled with resignation. "A consciousness all intelligent creatures possess."

"All intelligent creatures?"

"All who perceive. All who feel suffering or joy."

"Do the long-necks and leaf-eaters, or rippers or scrappers...?"

"Only those who are aware of themselves as a self-conscience being; those who can reason and communicate; those who perceive worlds outside our own—our moon, the sun, the red one, the gas orb, the ringed giant." He gurgled with satisfaction at the answer he'd given.

"And the leaf-eaters?"

"Perhaps not." He mused for a moment. "But they do feel pain. I've heard them wail woefully when they shatter a bone." He smiled inwardly, asking. "Do you, Teacher, also feel pain?"

"I am a product of intelligent sentient beings, but not sentient. I cannot feel, or

laugh, nor can I muse.”

“Ha! Then you cannot answer all?”

“As a sentient, you know better than I what you sense.”

He rolled off of the rock and into the marsh, content with this one superiority over the voice in his head. He felt no great joy in this, though; knowing that all before him shared the same dreadful fate— even Teacher.

He sloshed around, flipping and twisting amid the cool, dank marsh.

“You approach Protector’s ring,” Teacher’s voice issued the dry warning. He froze, treading water, eyeing angry teeth and glowing eyes lying in wait just beyond a patch of towering fuzz-heads.

“Over there,” Teacher advised.

His mind directed him towards dry land, an assumed safe haven. He swam forth confidently, knowing Teacher would never lead him into danger. Protector’s invisible barrier lay in the darkness beyond, he reasoned.

He crawled upon the shore and crept along the muck. He halted suddenly, sensing a great leaf-eater’s presence. He could feel tremors from its dawdling steps, and he heard it moan a deep, lonely drone. He saw the dim outline of its great neck reach for the trees and snatch a broad leaf. In his mind, he imagined it munching and swallowing— a vacuous stare and expressionless eyes. He smiled inwardly at the futility of the leaf-eater’s endeavors. “By morning’s light, all will change; the creatures will likely never excrete what they’ve devoured tonight. Is that not correct, Teacher?”

“Perhaps,” Teacher replied. “Yet, do you suppose they comprehend *Reckoning*?”

“No,” he replied with conviction, turning his ovals to the sky once again. “I could easily hide their brain in the folds of my hand. They are more likely to worry about their next feast or next mate. They live pleasantly ignorant of the events to unfold.”

“Then how do you feel about what is to be?”

An odd question, he thought. Teacher usually posed queries requiring specific answers. Not trivial inquiries into one’s emotional status. “Am I afraid? Is that what you ask?”

“Do you feel fear?”

“Not fear, like being in a ripper’s grasp, or wondering beyond Protector’s shield. But a fear, nonetheless...”

“Elaborate.”

“A fear of emptiness, a fear of nothingness, a fear of—”

“What lies beyond life?”

“Yes.” He exhaled deeply, as if a great weight were shed.

“A conundrum.”

“An unanswerable question?”

“Yes,” Teacher replied. “A sentient creature will never know with certainty what death brings. Death is the great barrier all living beings must breach, yet never return. Death, by its very definition, is a linear journey.”

Through the darkness’ veil, he could sense the giant beast move onward. No longer could he see its shadowy outline, nor feel its footfalls, nor hear its groans.

He was alone once again. “Then all will end for me tonight?”

“None can say with sureness, young sentient— even I cannot. I am merely a machine, programmed to entice you to muse, nothing more. Although I can calculate and predict with great accuracy.”

“And what of *Reckoning* can you predict with certainty?”

“No creature larger than the webs of your feet will survive the passing of three hundred earth-spins.”

Teacher’s dire words struck him like no other, although he had heard this all countless times during the last ten moon-spins. The scholars and elders all lectured repeatedly until it bored him to numbness. But Teacher had been his unseen companion since barely a hatchling, and his words bore great significance to him, especially on his last day on earth.

“Come, you must leave,” Teacher said. “Protector’s barrier will soon be deactivated. Predators will waste no time closing inward. ”

Suddenly, his mind cleared, and his thoughts focused. He stood erect, raising his head. Deep in his conscientious the message was clear: *Summoning*—

He crept along the landscape’s fringe under moonlight intensified by a cloudless sky. The stars blazed brightly across the arc from mountain to valley and lake to jungle. *Reckoning* had disappeared from view; never again to show its face, so the Scholars predicted; we would feel its fury when it joined the earth many horizons distant. Tabernacle stood before him, shining like a gem from the earth, teaming with sisters and brothers and mothers and priests.

He entered through a triangular entranceway and waddled down a hallway of polished alloy. A cavernous room lay before him, bathed in soft glow-light. To either side and down its center, great canals of orange gel ran from end to end. Mothers and nurses scurried amongst the canals. He stood puzzled of what motivated their frantic actions. He contemplated querying Teacher.

“Mothers of the inconsolable,” a mature voice spoke before him.

He sensed an elder and stood mute in respect.

“They require your help in the nursery. The time for congregation is upon us.” The elder waved his hand, moving abruptly away.

He approached the nearest canal with great trepidation. One of a multitude of mothers clambered through the gel covered eggs. She grasped an oval orb in her webbed hands and held it aloft, and a after a moment of reflection, dropped it offhandedly, shattering it upon the stone below. She moved hurriedly to the next, and then the next, and the next. In his mind he could sense her anxiety, laced with sorrow and grief.

The mother held one of the eggs for a few moments longer. She caressed its off-yellow shell, appearing to gaze into the embryo’s life-force. Suddenly, she held the egg high in the air. She moaned loudly, but a subdued blissful noise. The other mothers halted briefly to join in a melancholy chorus, before hurriedly returning to their somber tasks.

The mother stepped carefully to him and held forth the egg. “A fledgling,” she said, her voice trembling with dread. “Take it upon the Tabernacle with the others. It will be born to see the world before the conflagration. Take it!”

He grasped the egg firmly as the mother turned away. In its shell, he could feel its life preparing to burst forth. He shuffled away and through the crowded nursery, and up a wide stairway.

Before him, the once bustling city lay cool and inhospitable. The vast fountains and moats, usually flushed with torrent, lay vacant and tranquil—a testament to a passing age, he mused. The habitats stood open and powerless, the majority of power-givers only recently disengaged and disassembled; this following the elder’s collective will, deeming the planet returned to its most rudimentary form — before the rise of intelligent beings who could manipulate and engineer vast elements of nature upon their beckon will. Now, even Protector’s ring was deactivated, leaving all vulnerable to predatory creatures waiting patiently beyond. Only a few of the great computing machines remained powered; but those also would fall silent upon the sun collector’s eventual failure. He gurgled with glee, imagining Teacher lecturing only to himself. Yet alas, even Teacher will cease to exist, dissolving to nothingness, he reasoned quite sadly.

He strode along with the solemn masses, emerging on Tabernacle’s court. Many amongst him also bore eggs, and they placed their burdens gently on the stone before them. He selected a spot, doing the same. Although several had already cracked forth, squirming with tiny webbed feet and hands and almond shaped heads.

Above his head, the moon had now disappeared, and the stars blazed gloriously above the jungles and swamps. The eyes of gathered thousands gazed upward in awe and trepidation.

The time is near... The priest’s voice swept through his conscience, clearly as if spoken aloud.

He inhaled deeply and leaned back to stone. “Teacher,” he asked, settling in comfortably. “Will we be the last to ponder our destiny on this earth?”

“There are many variables to your query, young student.”

“Another conundrum?”

“No, not such. Your kind evolved from the tiniest squiggling creatures. Why could it not, again?”

“But in such an inhospitable place?”

“That will pass, young pupil. Eventually, the air will clear and the jungles will re-grow and flourish, and the small and durable will seek the sun’s warmth, and rise again to eat and mate, and use whatever small intelligence to ponder and create—”

“Only to be destroyed, again?”

“Most probably...”

He gurgled merrily at Teacher’s most predictable response.

Suddenly, the far horizon glowed like the rising of the morning sun. He could feel intense shock and dismay sweep across the collective minds of all before him. He, himself, felt panic and confusion.

Reckoning’s time has arrived... he heard the unified voices of the priests chant. Slowly and assuredly, all were drawn inward and back into the collective— an apex of thoughts, peaceful and tranquil. He too felt eerily calm once again. Gazing upward, he observed half the night sky glowing orange, red, and yellow.

All was terrifyingly and uncomfortably silent.

A sharp tremor struck the Tabernacle's base. The stone shook violently, tossing him asunder. He steadied himself while the ground roared and grated. Before him, he witnessed great structures toppling upon hundreds where they stood. Very few of the first victimized ran from their fate— most simply accepted their doom, he reasoned.

“Teacher,” he said, in a faint voice daring not disturb the other's incantations. “Of the long-necks, you asked?”

“Yes.”

“Of sentience... is your point, are we better off then they?”

Teacher's response came after but a moment of synthetic reflection. “Does foreknowledge of your fate fare better than blissful ignorance? To answer that question, you must reflect deeply within yourself, young student— you will ascertain it, nowhere else.”

Suddenly a screaming projectile burst forth from the sky. He watched with awe as it flew over his head, disappearing over the jungle just beyond. Moments later, a cluster of fireballs rained downward from the roiling sky.

In his thoughts, he felt calm reassurance. At least I had Teacher; it would never leave me. Not ever, not now.”

END

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Mark Paul Jacobs lives in lovely Dauphin, Pennsylvania. He enjoys fishing the Canadian north, poker, and annoying his wife. He has authored two novels: **How Teddy Roosevelt Slew the last Mighty T-Rex**, a Historical Science Fiction tale set in 1914, and the hard science fiction novel: **The Yaakmen of Tyrie**, a powerful and mysterious tale of bravery, loss, perseverance, betrayal, and redemption. He is also quite proud of his awe-inspiring short story: **The Day God Winked** and his chilling novelette with the provocative title: **The Watchers from within Moments Revealed**, an almost universally well reviewed work for which he has written a screenplay suitable for an ‘Outer Limits’ episode. These and several other works are available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Apple, Sony, and Smashwords.com. **How Teddy Roosevelt Slew the last Mighty T-Rex** and **The Yaakmen of Tyrie** is available in paperback via Createspace.com. Mark is working on a movie screenplay tentatively called **Stain** which is a gritty murder conspiracy based in Central Pennsylvania similar to the movie ‘ Fargo’ or ‘Reservoir Dogs’. Please enjoy his works and don't be afraid to tell him what you think on his Facebook page, twitter account, or by email. And lastly, please take the time to leave him a review of his work; it doesn't have to be long or long-winded, but it does make him feel that his hard word has touched someone's life in some way. You can leave a review wherever his books are available.

A few notes about my novel: How Teddy Roosevelt Slew the last Mighty T-Rex: Still stinging from his recent election loss, former president Theodore Roosevelt sought refuge in the Brazilian jungles in early 1914 on an expedition to

trace the last unmapped Amazonian river system, the Rio da Dúvida or The River of Doubt. Co-commanded by famed Brazilian explorer Colonel Candido Rondon and staffed with Roosevelt's 24-year-old son Kermit, naturalist George Cherrie, and more than a dozen local porters and laborers, the Roosevelt-Rondon Scientific Expedition was plagued by disaster from its very onset—incompetent planning and inadequate outfitting would result in near mutiny, hunger, death, and even cold-blooded murder. But Roosevelt meets an odd stranger along his ill-fated journey, who tells an astonishing tale that could challenge the very core of modern Natural History. Weakened by illness and starvation, Teddy Roosevelt is caught in a web of unfathomable danger, the results of which would alter his life and the lives of his companions forever. **You can find “How Teddy Roosevelt Slew the last Mighty T-Rex” at major ebook outlets right now.**

A few notes about my novel: The Yaakmen of Tyrie: currently offered at Amazon (Kindle) and Smashwords.com. An epic adventure of monumental proportions; A heroic tale of perseverance, bravery, loss, betrayal, and redemption; A deep, jaw-dropping mystery that will keep you guessing until the very last pages. The Yaakmen of Tyrie is set on an alien world with a double moon, and where men's lives span only ten or eleven long years. Quintar is a Yaakman—one in the latest generation of men and women who partner with the giant, hairy bipeds to connect remote settlements nestled in the mountainous regions surrounding the Great Confluence of Tyrie. But Quintar realizes his destiny only after he stumbles upon an odd object high in the mountains, and he dreams of the mythical Thrimara. Thrust suddenly into politics by the Supreme Yaakleader Carathis, a man whose stare could melt any man's arrogance; and accompanied by the brooding Lenna, the proud fisherman Barrazan, the young apprentice Kristren and Kristren's mentor Entya, the secretive trapper Ruppen, and the diminutive scholar Porrias, Quintar embarks on a harrowing journey into the unknown wilderness on a quest to unravel Tyrie's greatest mystery. Enjoy!
Download: The Yaakmen of Tyrie, Now! [Smashwords \(all formats\)](#)

A note about my Novelette: The Watchers from within Moments, Revealed currently offered at Amazon (Kindle) and Smashwords.com. Jim Vedder, chief engineer at California's FastTech Corporation, has developed the world's fastest camera. But exploring the bizarre universe of the super-fast, soon uncovers horrific entities that captivate the world's consciousness. And FastTech is quickly, and somewhat unwillingly, drawn into a quagmire of politics, fate, and the unforgiving press. **Download: The Watchers, Now! [Smashwords \(all formats\)](#)**

A note about my short story: The Day God Winked currently offered FREE at Amazon (Kindle) or Smashwords.com. Every human on earth would remember exactly where they were on the day everything changed. Like Pearl Harbor or JFK's assassination or September 11th, 2001, the event was firmly anchored in everyone's conscience—sometimes clear, sometimes hazy, confusing, and ultimately unfathomable. *The Day*, so labeled by the billions who bore witness—the *Day* that swept away any other single episode in the history of mankind was

so profound that many, even three years later, firmly believe that it was all some sort of delusion or dream; although only a few of the skeptical would openly admit they thought nothing at all happened. But for one troubled man, *The Day* meant so much more. Warning for strong language and depictions of drug use.

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A note about my short story: *Incident at Walter's Creek* currently offered FREE at Smashwords.com. What really happened on that remote Tennessee farmstead on a chilly fall night in 1828? Sixteen years later, Zacharias Neil, Andrew Jackson Thomkins, and Zack's little brother, Aaron, are determined to find out. An eerie tale of paranormal terror. Warning for mild language and strong dialect. **Download: *Incident at Walter's Creek, Now!*** [Smashwords \(all formats\)](#)