

## Endangered Species

“How cool is this? I never thought I would get matched up with a lovely lady like you! Please do come in. I appreciate that it’s always potentially dicey when meeting someone at their house. You can never be too careful. I did offer for you to have a friend accompany you, ... not for any salacious reason, just for your, ... what would be the best word?”

“Maybe it’s more than a single word. How about this? Confidence of safety, or, I won’t chop you up like Dexter?” Anechka smiled a *do you dare me* coquettish smirk.

Travis laughed a *love the sarcasm* laugh.

“One of things that grappled my attention to you, your texting, triple entendre quips. You are living evidence that the sharpest minds exhibit themselves with sizzling sarcasm.”

“I like that. I’ll take that as a compliment. And yes, I would love to come in. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you in the flesh. Literally.” Anechka bubbled up a double-chuckle and a half.

“I too was pleasantly surprised at even finding someone enlightened like you. A delightful surprise.

Imagine, AI driven linkages. We’re both devout vegetarians, live our lives as though there *is* a tomorrow, believe in wonderful social-conscience activities, and most importantly we have a devout appreciation for that lovely libation, now an extinct species; Rolling Rock Pale Ale in green glass bottles!”

Like the bubbles in the booze, spontaneous, genuine laughter engulfed the entryway and poured out into the portico.

“Who would’ve imagined wonderful plasmolyzed *Saccharmyces cerevisiae* cells, with a special botanical, hops, immune enhancing malted barley, and the life-giving waters of the Allegheny Mountains? Would now be, ... a somber note from the wind, ... extinct.” Travis would never be accused of intelligence envy. The world and all the connected universes paid homage to his mealy mouthed-minutiae.

“And that’s one of the things that attracted me to you. I admit I’m a complete sucker for a guy with smarts. Sapiosexual is in my genes.” Anechka did the eyeball-adoration glance at Travis.

He smiled. Not a toothy open-lips smile. More of a narcissistic smile that messaged, *it’s nice that someone recognizes me for what I truly am!*

“Come on in and let’s sit. I’ll go grab two bottles of that rare breed of booze for us.”

“Seriously? I thought it was a joke, humor at the expense of dissipated pleasant thoughts.”

“Tasty pale ale seriously. I have a generous supply that I sequestered away. They’re even stored in a special room that is flooded with nitrogen. I know the bottles are glass, but I intentionally over-engineer things, occasionally.”

“I noticed. Over-engineering is a good thing. Let’s go sit. You had me with *glass bottles Rolling Rocks.*” Her laughter was music to his happy-sound greedy ears.

“Delightful. Please follow me to the library.” Travis casually trod down the mahogany paneled, art niche hallway. The gentle light from the Franklin bulbs contributed to the relaxed ambience.

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“That’s interesting. What’s so special about the coffee cup?” Anechka was most curious of the curio in the infra-red lit alcove. On a marble pedestal a single coffee cup was poised for visual attention. A red amanita mushroom graphic beckoned ever greater attention.

“That’s a very special cup. It’s from around the early 70s. It was a gift to a magazine distribution company in Connecticut. Maybe you have heard of the magazine, *High Times*? I don’t think there are even ten in existence today. That was the beginning of the turning of the cannabis tide. It has a seductive energy. You can hold it if you wish. It is rare so please be gentle.”

Travis handed her a pair of brand spankin’ new silk gloves. She looked at him with a playful quizzicalness micro facial expression. Her humor and sarcasm was not limited to that which she said. Her sarcastic irony was locked away at this moment. Inside was the truth and on her face was the mask of *I’d love to touch your cup*. She slipped on the soft front paw covers.

Her inner anima was thinking if this gets kinky, these could be a nice bit of accessorization.

“Go ahead, you can touch it and feel its unique energy.” Travis smiled a borderline insulting gentle grimace. He had to now trust that Anechka wasn’t a futzmuffin who would drop the cup. Travis took obsessive compulsions to an intergalactic level. Does he possess the cup, or does the cup possess him?

Anechka gently wrapped her long fingers around the girth of the cup and made a deep, short lasting, purr.

Travis eyes opened a squinkle more and he queried her. “Feels great. Doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does. Nothing like a big fat limited edition coffee cup to be the focus of our attention.” With that she upped her giggle to a *how do you like that big boy* laugh.

“Shall we go on? If you found the cup enticing, there is far more to see. It’s wonderful to be with someone who appreciates the rare and unusual in life.”

“You lead, I follow. Otherwise I might need a new app on my phone to guide me around in here. Big house. Doesn’t it get a little bit creepy being in so many huge rooms?”

“Interesting point. I’ve never been much of a people person. Maybe when I was a baby, I learned to be content with my own baby thoughts. All of the story-rich items in my humble abode tell me stories of life, and the lives of others. Besides, when you live somewhere, you become accustomed to the space.”

“Very true. On many travels I have taken my inner home with me. That was especially true when I was in Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia. Tents and sleeping bags that make you a human sushi for some hungry, inquisitive big cat. Thinking too much out there can be dangerous for one’s sanity.”

“You’ve traveled there? There we go again, more things in common.” Travis was clearly blushing happily at the thought they had both traveled to Africa.

“Sure did. NGO stuff. Nothing exciting. Pretty mundane actually. Hey, can we go on? Love to see what’s behind door number two.” Her perfect, pearly, pouty-lipped smile went ethereal, and an ectoplasmic kiss landed on Travis’ cheek.

Travis blushed.

A few more steps down the hallway and in a sealed box was a vial of suspended yellow liquid. There was no way to access the insides of the polygraphene box, except through the rubber gloves.

“Good grief, Travis, what the heck is this?” Anechka’s face went from curiosity to WTF is this shit?

“I’m especially proud of that one. The graphene test tube container has a deadly, ancient microbe that is not a virus, nor a bacteria or fungi, its genetic profile is older than life on earth. A meteor crater was found in the Gobi desert with a cigar shaped cylinder in the center of the impact area. The researchers who first excavated the area have all passed on. Their bodies are at a BSL-4 facility. Each cadaver is in a bath of pressurized liquid nitrogen. And that which you see, is an actual live specimen from that facility in Wuhan, contained in liquid nitrogen.

The gloves are warmed and if you would like, you can reach in through the glove box and touch a container that has one of the world’s most deadly microbial pathogens. Don’t be afraid. It’s safe, ... my over-engineering peccadillo.”

“I appreciate the offer. I’ll pass on this one, if you don’t mind. Something in my genes says keep away from things that could kill you. A self-preservation peccadillo.” Anechka beamed a genuine smile. A firm smile that stated *thank you but no thank you* in the same expression.

“I understand. I really do. I hope the next artifact will be more interesting in a morbid sense.” So, Travis does have teeth. Nice shiny perfect teeth. Wonder who his dentist is.

A few more steps and they paused in front of a digital representation of the *Naturom Demonto*. Travis slit-smiled after articulating, *Demonto*.

“You’re also a funny guy. No such book. It was a made-up thing in the Evil Dead movie.”

“I beg your pardon. I have the original. I had it digitized so that I can ensure no one or no thing can acquire that powerful tome. Many of my artifacts are profound rarities. Just as this magnificent book of evil is.” Same slit-smile, same dead pan take it or leave it projection. “You can use the keyboard and type in a topic, and we can see what comes up. Your choice, of course.”

“How’s this? *The Dark Ones*, ...”

“Maybe something else, if I may sugg, ...”

Too late. Anechka had already keyed it in. All the lights in the hallway flickered and the monitor image went pure black. As quickly as everything went wonky, all the lights came back on, but not the monitor.

“Oh my! I think I broke it.” Anechka was sincerely embarrassed.

“Not at all. The book, and even the soft copy has its own personality. Everything will be fine. Let’s go on. Shall we?”

After several more steps, they paused in front of a large glass-door refrigerated case. Within that case was none other than a beaucoup bunch of Rolling Rocks. The LED readout clearly indicated thirty-three degrees Fahrenheit.

“I see you like your ale almost freezing. Me too. The colder, the better, just no ice chunks.”

Anechka reached out to open the glass door.

“Please don’t touch that. Any other item here I am happy to have you, ... interact with. Just not the Rolling Rocks.”

“Seriously? You’re serious.”

Travis didn’t say a single pip squeak, inch dick word. His look said volumes of *I would rather see you thrown off a high rise than to have you even seriously think about touching one of those emerald gems.*

“Alrighty then. Over to you.”

“I’ll return shortly. I need to disable the alarms so that we can enjoy a bottle, or maybe even two of that delicious potion.” He smiled, she didn’t.

“Can you point me in the direction of the powder room? Need to make room for more liquid.” She smiled, he didn’t.

“Keep going down the hall and it’s the third door on the left. It’s unlocked.”

“Thanks! I’ll be right back.”

“So shall I. It will take me a few minutes. The closest alarm pad is on the other side of the house, for all the right reasons.” Travis smiled an *excuse me please* smile.

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Anechka narrowed her eyes to slits and casually looked back over her shoulder to make sure Travis had exited stage left.

She was going stage right, alright.

Her quick steps brought her to a securely locked, intricately carved, large Brazilian Cherrywood door. She looked at the panel to the left and waited for the LED to go from red to green. All in sync with Travis temporarily disabling the alarm.

Green, it went, and in went Anechka.

She was not prepared for what she saw.

In the mellow lighting she could see what she did not wish to see. Upon the walls and on the floor were so many endangered species trophies, she dry heaved.

A full-sized spotless giraffe here, a white rhino head there, a completely taxidermied vaquita on the wall, and pretty soon you have the rogues’ gallery of rogues’ galleries of a self-indulgent monster. Travis.

This bastard was more than just a collector of oddities. He made oddities by killing off the most critically endangered animals and petrifying them for his own sadistic masturbational proclivities. A predator who didn’t even consume his kills for sustenance. He killed for the thrill and dark web bragging rights. Honorless, soulless, and godless he was.

A gallery of extinction horror. There was an Amur leopard head, Kakapos, tooth billed pigeons, and an assortment of other extinct or to be extinct avians filled in the smaller empty spaces.

Travis had the world's largest collection of mindless animal death fully displayed in this room.

As Anechka turned to quickly exit the room her eye caught what she first thought, at a distance, was some type of diminutive albino ape. She steppedity-stepped to the upright glass case.

She stopped breathing. It wasn't an ape it was a, ...

She heard Travis call out her name and she stealthily went back the way she came. Silently she closed the door behind her.

"There you are! I thought I had lost you! Here, I took the liberty of opening the bottles. Shall we toast to a remarkable, budding relationship!"

"Sounds great!" Anechka grabbed the open bottle and placed her other hand on her stomach. She doubled over a bit.

"I think I need to go. I thought I needed to pee, but nope. Period. And I don't have any pads with me. So, I'll take a raincheck on the Rocks." She went to hand the bottle back to Travis, but it accidentally avoided both of their grasps and plunged to the floor. Hundreds of green glass shards swimming in the frothy spilled beer.

Travis looked at the broken bottle, and then to Anechka in pure horror.

"Yes, I think it is time for you to go. You can see yourself to the door, I'm sure. Goodnight, have a nice rest of your evening."

He grimaced, she smiled, and was gone quicker than you can say, ...



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“You’re sure it’s him?”

“Look mashed potato brain buddy, who I happen to like, for now, it’s him. I saw the trophy room. He’s a one-man ongoing environmental disaster.” Anechka glared into her iPhone.

“Did you see, ... did you see, ...”

“I sure did. And you’re not kidding. This guy is a blood-covered wrecking ball. I think he’s the latest rendition of a Morlock.”

“He’s worse than that. You only saw a brief glimpse of his darkness. He’s a bottomless pit of very harmful nastiness. You did what you agreed to do. We cannot thank you enough.”

“The thanks are nice. Make sure the transfer is done tonight. This file is closed on my end.”

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*How interesting*, he thought to himself. A rag paper envelope, delivered by courier, with a most enticing invitation inside.

*“Dear Mr. Travis Degno,*

*It is with great honor that I extend this invitation for a very special safari in Tanzania.*

*Your safari, if you wish to attend, will be catered to just you and your unique tastes.*

*You will need to use Tor and go to our website, [gizalinatawala.com](http://gizalinatawala.com). Your single use password is Idare.*

*Please memorize the information in this invitation. The ink will fade to nothingness now that it has been exposed to air, and light.*

*You can confirm all the arrangements for travel, satellite phone, and various sundry items you will require for your once in a lifetime safari online.*

*Signed,*

*Aziz*

And that was all he wrote, ...

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“I hope your travel was uneventful?” Aziz politely asked of Travis.

“Love private jets. You guys don’t skimp. The Gulfstream is a very nice touch. All went splendidly well, thank you for asking. By the by, how did you folks find out how to contact me?”

“I hope it was not an imposition, we have extensive capabilities to find the best fit for adventure to the right people. You are not offended?”

“Not at all, not at all. When do we book into the wilds?”

“Your reservation begins tonight. It will be night vision. I have a surprise for you. You will be hunting a very endangered species. I hope you appreciate surprises.”

“Only good ones. I trust this will be a good one.”

“Or are you fatigued from your travels and wish to rest?”

“Well rested and ready to go. This is my pharmacological motivation.” Travis pulled a yellow prescription vial from his kit. He opened the bottle and showed its contents to Aziz.

“A very good choice. I have not partaken of Captagon myself, but I hear magical things about it.”

“Very magical. My kit is in the belly of the plane. Can you have your porters see to it straight away so we can get going. To tell you I’m excited is an understatement. I can smell the thrill.”

“Let us get on with it then. My porters will attend to your kit. I also have a special instrument for you to play with.”

“And it is? Do tell.”

“It’s a wonderful surprise. It is a specially modified Dan-Inject tranquilizer dart gun.”

“I’ve never used one of those. Easy to use?”

“Exceptionally. The darts are calibrated with just the right amount of tranquilizer.

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“Over there. The guides have determined your prized, extremely rare, endangered species can be seen in your night vision scope, but first use my Sionyx, it provides color imaging. Here, ...” Aziz was ever the detailed focused super guide. He never missed anything.

“Yeah, it looks, ... like a young human. Huh?” Travis nervously shared.

“Yes. Perfect is it not? An albino African is the rarest of the rare. Would it not be a splendid trophy?”

“Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh yes. But a human?”

“Now is a judgement moment, if you do not hit him with the dart, someone else will. The albinos are great lucky charms. Even a pinky finger can ward off evil.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Take the shot. At least it will be a merciful kill. Sooner or later someone will take this charm. It should be you.”

“Hmmm, ... okay, you’re the ace lead here.”

Click.

Click.

Click.

“It’s not working. What the fuck!”

“It is working fine. You act so innocently when I mention albinos, but you have an intact trophy in a case staring out with custom light blue glass eyes.”

“Wha, ...what, ... what are you talking about? What’s this bullshit?”

“It is not bullshit.” Aziz fellow guides knew their cue and completely disarmed Travis. The burly fellows wrapped their arms around him.

“Let me show you something.” Aziz took his large, camo shemagh from his neck and slowly wiped the makeup from his face.

“You see, we are the hunters and shepherds of this land. You poached and killed for bragging rights, not for food.”

The other guides also wiped the brown makeup from their faces. They looked with complete disdain and disgust at Travis.

“Do you see a resemblance, Mr. Travis Brigham Degno? Probably not. The trophy you have is my embalmed brother. It is difficult to see how he would look when an adult. We were twins.

And now Mr. Degno, you are about to become an extinct species. Goodbye and go with haste to a dark, hot, unforgiving place, Jahanamu.”

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“We received a welfare check for this place. We’ll probably kick up the alarm so call it in that this is a welfare check. There’s an ADT sign over there. Give them a call too.”

“Roger that sarge.”

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They shined their lights on the wall. They never, ever, evah expected to see what they did. Their mouths dropped open like gangplanks.

Upon the wall, over the stone mantle was a very well taxidermied Mr. Travis Brigham Degno. Complete with shiny glass blue eyes. A totally extinct, dangerous species.

The End