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"Blazing searchlights trained on dark-accustomed bodies, burning, searing, withering them like actual blazing heat."

# Far Below

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

*A weird tale of the New York subway, and horrible things with dead-white eyes that burrow up beneath the unsuspecting city*

WITH a roar and a howl the thing was upon us, out of total darkness. Involuntarily I drew back as its headlights passed and every object in the little room rattled from the reverberations. Then the power-car was by, and there was only the "klackety-klack, klackety-klack" of wheels and lighted windows

flickering past like bits of film on a badly-connected projection machine. I caught glimpses of occupants briefly; bleak-eyed men sitting miserably on hard benches; a pair of lovers oblivious to the hour's lateness and all else; an old bearded Jew in a black cap, sound asleep; two Harlem Negroes grinning; conductors here and there,

too, their uniforms black splotches against the blaze of car-lights. Then red tail-lamps shot by and the roar died to an earthquake rumble far down the track.

"The Three-One Express," my friend said quietly, "from the Battery. On time to the minute, too. It's the last, you know—until nearly dawn."

He spoke briefly into a telephone, saying words I could not catch, for the racket of the train was still in my ears. I occupied the interval by staring about me. There was so much to be seen in the little room, such a strange diversity of apparatus—switches and coils and curious mechanisms, charts and graphs and piles of documents; and, dominating all, that great black board on which a luminous worm seemed to crawl, inching along past the dotted lines labeled "49th Street," "52nd Street," "58th Street," "60th . . ."

"A new wrinkle, that!" my friend said. He had put down his phone and was watching the board with me. "Lord! I don't dare think what it cost to install! It's not just a chart, you know. It actually records! Invisible lights—the sort of things that open speakeasy doors and rich men's garages. Pairs of them spaced approximately every twenty-five yards along five miles of subway tunnel! Figure that out on paper, and the total you'll get will seem hardly believable. And yet the city passed the appropriation for them without a murmur. It was one of the last things Mayor Walker put up before his resignation. 'Gentlemen,' he said to the Finance Board, 'it doesn't matter what you think about *me*! But this measure *must* go through!' And it did. There wasn't a murmur of protest, though the city was almost broke at the time. . . . What's the matter, man? You're looking queer."

"I'm *feeling* queer!" I said. "Do you mean to say the thing goes that far back? To Walker's time?"

He laughed. It was a strange laugh,

that died eerily amid the dying echoes of the train far down the tunnel.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "To his time—man, Walker hadn't served his first term as mayor when this thing started! It goes back to World War days—and even before that. The wreck of the train, I recall, passed as a German spy plot to keep us from going in with the Allies. The newspapers howled bloody murder about alleged 'confessions' and evidence they claimed they had. We let 'em howl, of course. Why not? America was as good as in the war anyhow, by then. And if we'd told the people of New York City what really wrecked that subway train—well, the horrors of Château-Thierry and Verdun and all the rest of them put together wouldn't have equaled the shambles that rioting mobs would have made of this place! People just couldn't stand the thought of it, you know. They'd go mad if they knew what was down here—far below."

The silence was worse than the roar had been, I thought—the strange, echoing, somehow pregnant silence of empty vastness. Only the "drip, drip" of water from some subterranean leak broke it—that and the faint crackling noise the indicator made as its phosphorescent crawling hinted at "68th Street," "72nd," "78th . . ."

"Yes," my friend said slowly. "They'd go mad if they knew. And sometimes I wonder why we don't go mad down here—we who *do* know, and have to face the horror down here night after night and year after year—I think it's only because we don't really face it that we get by, you know, because we never quite define the thing in our own minds, objectively. We just sort of let things hang in the air, you might say. We don't speak of what we're guarding against, by name. We just call it 'Them,' or 'one of Them,' you know—take Them for granted just as we took the enemy overseas, as something that's just

down here and has to be fought. I think if we ever really did let our minds get to brooding on what they are, it'd be all over for us! Human flesh and blood couldn't stand it, you know—couldn't stand it!"

HE BROODED, staring out into the tunnel's darkness. The indicator cracked faintly on the wall. "92nd Street," "98th," "101st . . ."

"Beyond 120th Street things are pretty safe," I heard my friend's voice as I watched. "When the train reaches that point you'll see a green light flash 'all clear,' though that doesn't mean absolute safety, you understand. It's just what we've established as the farthest reach of Their activities. They may extend them at any time, although so far They haven't done so. There seems to be something circumscribed about their minds, you know. They're creatures of habit. That must be what it is that's kept Them in this one little stretch of tunnel, with all the vast interlocking network of New York's subway system to rove in if they chose. I can't think of any other explanation, unless you want to get into the supernatural and say it's because they're 'bound' to this particular locality, by some sort of mystic laws; perhaps because it's lower than the other tunnels—chiseled far down into the basic bedrock of Manhattan, and so near to the East River you can almost hear the water lapping on quiet nights. Or maybe it's just the awful dankness of the tunnel here, the fungoid moisture and miasmatic darkness that suits Them. At all events they don't come up anywhere else except along this stretch. And we've got the lights, and the patrol cars, and three way-stations like this one, with ten men on constant duty from dark till dawn—oh yes, my boy! It's quite a little army I command down here in the night watches—an army of the Unburied Dead, you might say; or an army of the Eternally Damned.

"I've actually had one of my men go mad, you know! Two others had to be placed in sanitariums for a while, but they got over it and are serving here still. But this fellow—well, we had to machine-gun him down like a dog finally, or he'd have got one of us! That was before we got the 'dark lights' placed, you see, and he was able to hide out in the tunnel for days without our being able to find him. We'd hear him howl sometimes as we patrolled, and see his eyes shining just as Their eyes do in the darkness; so we knew that he was quite 'gone.' So when we finally ran him down we killed him—just like that. No bones made about it. 'Put-put-put!' and that was the end. We buried him down in the tunnel, too, and now the trains run over him as he lies. Oh, there was nothing irregular about the business! We filled out full Departmental reports, and got the consent of his relatives, and so on; only we just couldn't take the poor fellow above-ground and run risks of people seeing him before interment. You see, there were certain . . . alterations. I don't want to dwell on it, but his face—well, the change was just beginning, of course, but it was quite unmistakable; quite dehumanizing, you know. There would have been some excitement up there, I'm afraid, just at sight of that face! And there were other details—things I only found out when I dissected his body. But I think I'd rather not go into them either, old boy, if you don't mind. . . .

"The whole point is, we have to be rather careful down here, all of us in the 'Special Detail.' That's why we have such unusual working conditions. We wear police uniforms, of course, but we aren't subject to ordinary police discipline. Lord! What would an above-ground 'cop' make of having every other night off and every day all to himself, and with a salary that—well, a corporal down here gets as much as does an Inspector up there!

"But, at that, I think we earn our pay. . . .

"I know *I* do. Of course I can't tell you what my salary is—they made me promise never to disclose it when they hired me from the Natural History Museum back in—well, I don't like to think about how long ago that was! I was Professor Gordon Craig in those days, you know, instead of Inspector Craig of N. Y. P. D. And I'd just returned from Carl Akeley's first African expedition after gorillas. That was why they brought the Thing to me for examination, you see, after that first big wreck in the subway that'd only been opened less than a year. They'd found it pinned down in the wreckage, screaming in agony from their lights on its dead-white eyeballs. Indeed, it seemed to have died from the lights as much as from anything else. Organically it was sound enough, save for a broken bone or two.

"**W**ELL, they brought it to me, because I was supposed to be the museum's leading authority on apes. And I examined it—believe me, I examined it, old boy! I went for six days and nights without sleep or even rest, analyzing that dead corpse down to its last rag and bone and hank of hair!

"No scientist on this earth ever had a chance like that before, and I was making the best of it. I found out all there was to be found before I collapsed over my laboratory table and had to be taken to the hospital.

"Of course long before that I had told them the thing wasn't an ape. There was vaguely anthropoid structure, all right; and the blood corpuscles were almost human—quite shockingly so. But the head and the spade-like appendages and the muscular development were quite unlike any beast or man on this earth. Indeed, the thing had never been on this earth! There was no doubt of that! It would have died above

ground in half a minute, just like an angle-worm in the sun.

"And I'm afraid my report to the authorities didn't help them much. After all, even a fellow scientist would have found it a bit difficult to reconcile my classification of 'some sort of giant, carrion-feeding, subterranean mole' with my ravings about 'canine and simian developments of members' and my absurd insistence on 'startlingly humanoid cranial development, and brain convolutions indicating a degree of intelligence that—'

"Well, there's no use going into all that now! I firmly expected them to order me up before a Sanity Commission when I reported my findings. Instead, they offered me a position as head of the 'Special Subway Detail,' at a salary that was, to say the least, fantastic. It was more a month than I'd been getting a year from the museum.

"Because, you see, they'd deduced much of the stuff for themselves without needing me to tell them! They had facts they'd deliberately withheld from me, not wanting to influence my report. They knew that that train had been deliberately derailed—the mutilated track proved that beyond all doubt. No less than three ties had been taken up and laid some distance away down the tunnel. And the condition of the earth about the wrecked cars showed conclusively that extensive mining and sapping had taken place there—it was like a gigantic mole-hill, only worse. And while I'd been analyzing stomach fluids and body tissue to try to find out what my subject fed upon, they'd been burying, secretly and with most elaborate precautions, the half-dessicated corpses of half a dozen men and women and children who—well, they hadn't died in the wreck, old boy! They hadn't died in the wreck, any more than had that screaming thing that hid its eyes from the lights when they found it pinned in the wreckage where it had been caught

while trying to drag a dead victim out—God! What a hideous shambles that place must have been before the wrecking-crews got there.

"Mercifully, of course, there was total darkness. The poor devils who were merely injured never knew what charnel horrors were going on in the Stygian depths about them—nor cared, no doubt, in their agony! A few of them gibbered afterward about green eyes, and claws that raked their faces—but of course all that was set down to delirium! Even one man who had his arm chewed half off never knew—surgeons amputated the rest immediately and told him when he regained consciousness that he'd lost it in the wreck. He's still walking the streets today, blissfully ignorant of what almost happened to him that night.

"Oh, you'd be surprised, old boy, how you can hush a thing up if you've got a whole city administration behind you! And believe me, we *did* hush matters up. No newspaper reporter was ever allowed to see the wreck—freedom of the press or no freedom of the press! The Government wanted to appoint a commission to investigate—we squelched it! And by the time the crews had cleaned out the smashed train and removed the last victim, the Special Subway Detail had gone into action. And it's been on steady duty ever since—for the last twenty-odd years!

"**WE HAD** a terrible time at first, of course. All these modern improvements weren't available then. All we had were lanterns and guns and hand-cars—with which to patrol nearly five miles of tunnel. It was Mrs. Partington sweeping back the sea all over again—only worse. A handful of puny mortals against Hell itself, in the eternal darkness of these long gloomy tunnels far below the city.

"There were no more wrecks after we took over, though; I'll say that much. Oh, an accident or two. How could we prevent

them? We did everything we could think of! How we worked in those early years! Once we sank a shaft fifty feet deep in the earth, where we'd seen queer disturbances beside the train-tracks and heard queerer sounds. And once we blocked up both ends of the tunnel for a mile stretch and filled it with poison gas. And once we dynamited—but why go on? It was all useless, utterly useless. We just couldn't get to grips with anything tangible. Oh, we'd hear sounds sometimes on our long dismal patrols in the darkness; our little lanterns mere pin-pricks of light in these vast old concrete vaults. We'd catch glimpses of glinting eyes far off, find fresh earth piled up where only a moment before there'd been hard-packed cinders and gravel. Once in a while we'd fire our guns at something whitish and half seen, but there'd be only a tittering laugh in answer—a laugh as mirthless and savage as that of a hyena, dying away in the earth. . . .

"A thousand times I was tempted to chuck the whole thing, to get back above ground to sunshine and sanity and forget the charnel horrors of this mad Nyarlathotep-world far underneath. And then I'd get to thinking of all those helpless men and women and children riding the trains unsuspecting through the haunted dark, with Evil out of the primeval dawn burrowing beneath them for their destruction, and—well, I just couldn't go, that's all. I stayed and did my duty, as the rest did, year after year after year. It's been a strange career for a man of science, and certainly one I never dreamed I'd be following during all the years I prepared myself for museum work. And yet I flatter myself that it's been rather a socially useful career at that; perhaps more so than stuffing animals for dusty museum cases, or writing monstrous textbooks that no one ever bothers to read. For I've a science of my own down here, you know: the science of keeping millions of dollars worth of sub-

way tunnels swept clean of horror, and of safeguarding the lives of half the population of the world's largest city.

"And then, too, I've opportunities for research here which most of my colleagues above ground would give their right arms for, the opportunity to study an absolutely unknown form of life; a grotesquerie so monstrous that even after all these years of contact with it I sometimes doubt my own senses even now, although the horror is authentic enough, if you come right down to it. It's been attested in every country in the world, and by every people. Why, even the Bible has references to the 'ghouls that burrow in the earth', and even today in modern Persia they hunt down with dogs and guns, like beasts, strange tomb-dwelling creatures neither quite human nor quite beast; and in Syria and Palestine and parts of Russia. . . .

"But as for this particular place—well, you'd be surprised how many records we've found, how many actual evidences of the Things we've uncovered from Manhattan Island's earliest history, even before the white men settled here. Ask the curator of the Aborigines Museum out on Riverside Drive about the burial customs of Island Indians a thousand years ago—customs perfectly inexplicable unless you take into consideration what they were guarding against. And ask him to show you that skull, half human and half canine, that came out of an Indian mound as far away as Albany, and those ceremonial robes of aboriginal shamans plainly traced with drawings of whitish spidery Things burrowing through conventionalized tunnels; and doing other things, too, that show the Indian artists must have known Them and Their habits. Oh yes, it's all down there in black and white, once we had the sense to read it!

"AND even after white men came—what about the early writings of the old Dutch settlers, what about Jan Van der

Rhees and Woulter Van Twiller? Even some of Washington Irving's writings have a nasty twist to them, if you once realize it! And there are some mighty queer passages in 'The History of the City of New York'—mention of guard patrols kept for no rational purpose in early streets at night, *particularly in the region of cemeteries*; of forays and excursions in the lightless dark, and flintlocks popping, and graves hastily dug and filled in before dawn woke the city to life. . . .

"And then the modern writers—Lord! There's a whole library of them on the subject. One of them, a great student of the subject, had almost as much data on Them from his reading as I'd gleaned from my years of study down here. Oh, yes; I learned a lot from Lovecraft—and he got a lot from me, too! That's where the—well, what you might call the *authenticity* came from in some of his yarns that attracted the most attention! Oh, of course he had to soft-pedal the strongest parts of it—just as you're going to have to do if you ever mention this in your own writings! But even with the worst played down, there's still enough horror and nightmare in it to blast a man's soul, if he lets himself think on what goes on *down there*, below the blessed sanity of the earth's mercifully concealing crust. Far below. . . .

"We've figured out—we who've been studying Them all this time, that They must have been pretty numerous once. No wonder the Indians sold this place so cheaply! You'd sell your home cheaply, too, if it were fairly overrun with monstrous noxious vermin that—but with civilization's coming they were decimated, killed off, pogromed against, blasted with fire and steel by men whose utter ruthlessness sprang from soul-shuddering detestation, who slew and kept silent about their slaying, lest their fellowmen think them mad—until finally the blasted remnant of the Things went far underground, bur-

rowed down like worms to charnel depths that — well, we daren't conjecture just where, but we think that there's some fault in the basic bedrock of the Island, some monstrous cavern whose edge this lowest of all the subway tunnels taps, and which lets them through somehow into the tubes. . . .

"Oh, it took us a long time to find all that out. At first we thought we had to patrol the whole subway system of the city! We had guards even out under the river, and over in Brooklyn and Queens. We were even afraid they'd get into upper levels of the tunnels, perhaps into the very deserted streets of Manhattan during the pre-dawn hours. We had half the police department down here in those days, even the mounted force. Yes, indeed; though God knows what even a trained police horse would do if it ever came face to face with one of those things! But horses were faster than the hand-cars we used then, and could cover more territory.

"But as time went on we got things pretty well localized. It's only in this one stretch of tunnel that the danger is, and only here in certain hours of the night. Don't ask me why they never come up in daylight; for it's always night down here, you know, hundreds of feet below the surface. Maybe it's the constant passage of the trains—they shuttle by at two-minute intervals all day long, you know, and until the Broadway theatres close at night. Only for about four hours of the night is there a lull when long miles of tunnel are lifeless and deserted and silent, when anything could come and go at will in them and not be seen.

"And so it's only during these hours that we really worry, you see. It's only now that we're vigilant and ready. Although of course it's no longer warfare, you understand. We hunt them now, they don't hunt us any more! We run them down howling with terror, kill them or capture them as

we will—oh yes, I said capture! A half-dozen times we've had a sort of mad 'Bronx Zoo' of our own down here—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say a living 'Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors.' I have cages in my laboratory, and there have been times when it seemed judicious for influential people above ground to—well, to realize just how important is the work we're doing down here! So when we have a really stubborn skeptic to our program we'd take him in there, hand him a flashlight and let him train it himself on what was prisoned there in total darkness—and then we'd stand by to catch him as he fainted! Oh, a lot of city officials and politicians have been down here. Why not? They couldn't possibly speak of the experience afterward—they'd just be locked up as lunatics if they did! And it made them much more liberal about funds. Our menagerie was a great success, only we just couldn't keep it going for very long at a time! We'd get so soul-sick at the very proximity of the creatures that we'd have to kill them finally. There was just no putting up with them for any length of time!

"OH, IT'S not so much the appearance of the Things, or even what they eat—we got an unlimited supply of *that* from the city morgue; and to anyone who's spent half his life in dissecting-rooms, as I have, it might be a lot worse. But there's a sort of cosmic horror the Things exude that—well, it's quite beyond description. You just can't breathe the same air with them, live together in the same sane world! And in the end we'd have to gun them and throw them back underground to their friends and neighbors—who were waiting for them, apparently. At least we've opened the shallow graves a few days later and there'd be only a gnawed bone or two there. . . .

"And then, of course, we kept them



alive in order to study their habits. I've filled two volumes with notes for my successors who'll carry on the fight when I'm gone—oh, yes, old boy! It'll always have to be carried on, I fear! There's no possibility of ever really wiping them out, you know. All we can do is hold our own. The fight will go on so long as this particular tunnel is occupied. And can't you just see the City Fathers consenting to abandon twenty million dollars' worth of subway tunnels for nothing? 'I'm sorry, gentlemen; but, you see, the place is infested with——' God! What a laughing-stock anyone would be who even suggested that—above ground! Why, even on our own furloughs, when we walk sunlit streets among our fellow men, with God's own blue sky above and God's own clean air about us—even *we* wonder whether all this foulness isn't just a bad dream! It's hard, up there, to realize what can go on down in the crepuscular earth, the mad gnawing eternal darkness far below—Hello!"

The telephone was ringing.

Somehow I didn't listen as he spoke briefly into it, perhaps because I was listening to something else—to a faint crackling from that great blackboard on the wall, where one little light (no glowing worm this time, but only one minute spark) kept flicking oddly on and off and on again. "79th Street" it marked, over and over. "79th Street—79th——"

My friend hung up the phone at length, and stood up. "Queer," he said softly. "Very queer indeed! The first in months; and tonight, now, while we were talking. It makes one wonder, you know—about those supernatural telepathic powers that they're said to have. . . ."

**S**OMETHING went past in the tunnel outside, something that moved so fast that I could scarcely make it out; just a little low platform on four wheels, with no visible engine to propel it. Yet it

scudded along with the speed of a racing car. Uniformed men rode the bucking thing, crouching with glinting objects in their hands.

"Riot Car Number 1!" my friend said, grimly. "Our own version of the 'squad automobiles' above ground. Just one of the little electric hand-cars used in subway construction—but 'souped up' by our engineers until it'll do nearly eighty miles an hour. It could traverse the entire sector in less than five minutes, if it had to. But it doesn't, of course. Another one, also with machine-gunners aboard, left 105th Street at the same time. They'll meet somewhere along the tunnel's length—with the—er, disturbance in between. Let's listen to them!"

He crossed the room to the strange apparatus, threw switches and adjusted dials. There was a burring and crackling from what looked like an old-fashioned radio amplifier that stood on one of the cabinets.

"Microphones every hundred feet along the tunnel!" said my friend. "Another small fortune to install, of course; but another great step forward in our efficiency. A man listens all night long at a switchboard—and you'd be surprised to know what he hears sometimes! We have to change operators pretty often. Ah! there we are. Microphone Number 290—approximately a thousand feet below one of the busiest corners, even at this hour of the night, in all a great metropolis. And—listen! Hear that?"

"That" was a sound that brought me out of my chair, a strange high tittering, blasphemously off key, that merged into a growl and a moan. . . .

"There we are!" my friend grated. "One of them, certainly—perhaps more than one. Hear that scratching, and the rustle of the gravel? All unsuspecting, of course, that they're broadcasting their presence; unaware that we modern human beings have got ourselves a few 'supernatural' powers

of our own, nowadays; and unaware that, from both directions, death is sweeping down upon them on truckling wheels. But a little moment more and—ah! hear that shriek? That howling? That means they've sighted one of the cars! They're fleeing madly along the tunnel now—the voices get fainter. And now—yes! Now they double back. The other car! They're trapped, caught between them. No time to dig, to burrow down into their saving Mother Earth like the vermin they are. No, no, you devils! We've got you! Got you! Hear 'em yell, hear 'em shriek in agony! That's the lights, you know. Blazing searchlights trained on dark-accustomed bodies; burning, searing, withering them like actual blazing heat! And now 'Brrr-rat-tat-tat!' That's our machine-guns going into action—silenced guns, with Maxims on them so that the echoes won't carry to upper levels and make men ask questions—but throwing slugs of lead, for all that, into cringing white bodies and flattened white skulls. . . . Shriek! Shriek, you beasts from Hell! Shriek, you monsters from the charnel depths! Shriek on, and see what good it does you. You're dead! *Dead!* DEAD— Well, you blasted fool, what are you staring at?"

To save my life I couldn't have answered him. I couldn't look away from his blazing eyes, from his body crouched as if he would spring at me across the room, from his teeth bared in a bestial snarl. . . .

FOR a long moment that tableau held. Then suddenly he dropped into a chair, flung his hands up over his face. I stood regarding him, my mind sickly ticking off details. God! Why had I not seen them before. That lengthening of jaw, that flattening of forehead and cranium—no human head could be shaped like that!

At last he spoke, not looking up. "I know!" he said softly. "I've felt the change coming on me for a long time now.

It's coming over all of us, bit by bit, but on me the worst, for I've been here the longest. That's why I almost never go above ground any more, even on leave. The lights are dim down here. But I wouldn't dare let even you see my face in sunlight!

"Twenty-five years, you see—twenty-five long dragging years down here in Hell itself. It was bound to leave a mark, of course. I was prepared for that. But, oh, Great Powers above! If I'd for one instant dreamed what it was to be! Worse, oh, how much worse than any mark of the beast! . . .

"And it's spiritual, you know, as well as physical. I get . . . cravings, sometimes, down here in the night's loneliness; thought and charnel desires that would blast your very soul if I were to whisper them to you. And they'll get worse, I know, and worse until at last I run mad in the tunnel like that poor devil I told you about and my men shoot me down like a dog as they already have orders to do if—"

"And yet the thing interests me, I'll admit; it interests me scientifically, even though it horrifies my very soul, even though it damns me for ever. For it shows how They may have come about—*must* have come about, in fact, in the world's dim dawn; perhaps never quite human, of course, perhaps never Neandertal or even Pilt-down; something even lower, closer linked to the primeval beast, but that when driven underground, into caves and then beneath them by Man's coming, retrograded century by uncounted century down to the worm-haunted darkness—just as we poor devils are retrograding down here from very contact with them—until at last none of us will ever be able again to walk above in the blessed sunlit air among our fellow men—"

With a roar and a howl the thing was upon us, out of total darkness. Instinc-

tively I drew back as its headlights passed; every object in the little room rattled from the reverberation. Then the power-car was by, and there was only the "klackety-klack, klackety-klack" of wheels and lighted windows flicking by like bits of film on a badly-connected projection machine.

"The Four-Fifteen Express," he said heavily, "from the Bronx. Safe and sound, you'll notice, its occupants all unsuspecting of how they were safeguarded; of how

they'll always be safeguarded . . . but at what a cost! At what an awful cost!

"The Four-Fifteen Express. That means it's dawn, you know, in the city overhead. Rays of the rising sun are gilding the white skyscrapers of Manhattan; a whole great city begins to wake to morning life.

"But there's no dawn for us down here, of course. There'll never be a dawn for poor lost souls down here in the eternal dark, far, far below. . . ."