Love and Horror in a Cavern in What is Now Chile

Picture, dear reader, a marvelous tableau—a section of the Andes of antiquity, post-Colombian by a matter of only a few short decades, in a heavily forested and sparsely populated region of what is now Chile. Look down from the highest point around, a craggy mountaintop, and behold leafy verdance and harsh stone, mossy plateaus and stomach-churning drops. Add a condor in flight, perhaps two.

With a swelling of violins, enter the hero of the piece. Imagine him to be young and fair; these he may well have been. If it pleases you, imagine him to be fleeing the depredations of Pizarro and de Soto, decrying their actions and bearing no part of their monstrous guilt; this seems less likely. At any rate, imagine him to be bold, armed with a sword, and named Cristóbal de Torres; these he most certainly was.

Sure-footed and sunburnt, having traded his armor for a bit of flat bread and safe passage through a hostile stretch of land, see him scale sheer cliffs without once looking down, leap ravines without hesitating to collect himself, walk crumbling ledges of stone with nothing securing him but a whispered Ave Maria. What drives this man to scramble thus? What could propel any man so far past the edges of the map? Gold, of course, which when mixed with hubris creates a fuel so powerful that it has already sent his countrymen and him skidding merrily for thousands of miles across the face of the deep. Sent them to scratch a line all the way over the skin of a black abyss that could have swallowed their homeland two hundred times without a trace and to conquer it entirely with wood, canvas, and low cunning. Who can say how the native legends of a city of gold came to him—this man who speaks scarcely a word of any tongue save his own native Spanish? Who can say how he plans to lay claim to, transport, or make use of whatever fortune he might find? Not I, dear reader.

But look! While we have been speculating on his motives and designs, young Cristóbal has secured himself by his fingertips to a lip of granite, and hangs suspended hundreds of yards above the mountainside that will break his fall! Cursing as only a Spaniard separated from his mother by seven thousand miles can (plug your ears, gentle reader), he pulls himself bodily up, and lies panting on the first flat surface large enough to support his prone body that he’s encountered in the past six hours. Blood drips from his fingers and palms, but save your pity, for just before him looms the mouth of a great
cavern, darker than sin and only slightly less foreboding to Cristóbal than the long climb down.

It’s no use telling him to steer clear; you’re more than 470 years too late. Without stopping to collect his breath, he rises to his feet, and in he goes, brandishing his bright sword before him. Three feet of steel as protection against all that lies within the earth! Three feet of steel, to ward off darkness itself! In blissful ignorance of what awaits, the booted feet of young de Torres never falter. Follow him in, and then follow him down. There is no light, true, but keep a hand on the wall as Cristóbal does and fear not, for there are no pits, nor is there even so much as a stray stone to trip up the step of an adventurer like yourself. Quite the contrary, in fact, for as the subject of our mutual observation is now noticing, the floor is smooth as glass and the walls that rise from it at right angles, cold and hard, are not rough stone either but rather composed of swirls, ridges, and figures hewn into smooth stone with precise tools. The craftsmanship is like nothing Cristóbal has encountered in his life; he does not need the use of his eyes to tell him that he approaches El Dorado. Listen closely and you will hear his pace quickening. Keep up.

But no, lag behind; after all, the next few hours are largely uneventful, and you need not accompany Señor de Torres the whole way. Rather, put yourself behind him at the moment when the faintest bit of light begins once more to suffuse the tunnel. Lo and behold—the man comes to a complete halt for the first time that day. Why? Surely his goal is near, for the end of his blade gleams and twinkles once again.

Look to the quality of the twinkling, and you will find the reason. There’s no luster to it, nothing remotely auric. It’s pallid and cold, sunlight’s consumptive younger brother. No, whatever lies at the end of this strange journey, it is no city of gold. Cristóbal by now knows this as well as you or I, but to come this far and no further is unthinkable; if he had ever had common sense he would not now be half a world away from his home, brandishing a sword at the cavernous bowels of the Andes.

Forward, then, carefully and slowly as the light increases. Now you can begin to make out the carvings on the wall. Your guide does not turn his head to view them, looking straight ahead and catching only glimpses of the shapes carved thereon from the corners of his eyes. For god’s sake, follow his lead! But of course, I am too late; they
draw your eyes as they do his, and even in the split second before you screw them shut, you cannot help but absorb an impression of horrific scale, abominable continuity. A single tremendous story, carved in black stone images on the wall from ceiling to floor, stretching miles back into the darkness. The crude men, women, and children being torn apart, devoured and defiled by each other and by ill-proportioned fiends shock you and Cristóbal little (you are men of the world, after all), but there are other things—glimpsed and forgotten, as they must needs be, leaving only intimations of horrors multitudinous and formless and evil, bred in darkness and never meant to be seen. Running up and down the wall and twisting into and through each individual scene, running, no doubt, through every tunnel of the mountain, is a curling, unraveling body of obscene length, its exact shape and texture unclear in the dim light. Don’t think on it now; you’ll have plenty of time to consider it on long winter nights years hence. I daresay you’ll scarcely be able to think of aught else. And whatever you do, do not turn to consider the opposite wall.

Cristóbal walks onward, quickly now, squinting to try to block out his peripheral vision entirely; he cannot. The human mind is an essentially physical thing, a mass of electricity and chemicals, and informed bravery is thus sadly limited, but ignorance is boundless and infinite, wider by far than the Atlantic Ocean and many times longer than the unspeakable being now uncoiling down from the wall to your right and into your heart, freezing and shattering it and planting a bit of itself, there to stay.

Behold, the light grows, if not brighter, at least more distinct. You can see clearly now the sweat on young de Torres’s brow. The passage widens. More space between the dread walls and you.

Now the end of your journey. A cavern, arching up into darkness and out far beyond the limits of sight. In the middle of it, an enormous pit, perfectly circular and very (possibly infinitely?) deep. In the center of the pit, a pillar of jet, perhaps seven feet in diameter. On the sides of the pillar, the carvings again, growing more horrible still as they descend into darkness. On top of it, the source of the illumination, an altar carved from the same stone, unadorned yet menacing, and glowing with a radiance that even from this close appears dim. Lying on top of the altar, breathing shallow as she has been these past millennia, a girl of perhaps sixteen, by all appearances a native of this land, but beautiful beyond anything that Cristóbal de Torres has ever seen or imagined, beautiful in that way.
that makes desire impossible and worship inescapable. Naked as the day she was born, lying on the long black hair that flows down almost to her knees.

Do you believe in love at first sight? In love transcendent and immanent and inexorable? In love as infinite as ignorance? If not, it matters little, for Cristóbal de Torres certainly does, as of thirty seconds ago. He has found something more precious by far than a thousand cities of gold, and he sprints towards the pit.

It is not extraordinarily wide; It can be jumped by perhaps ten men on the face of the earth, and therefore, Cristóbal’s leap is not strictly impossible in terms of length. But can a chasm to be too deep to jump? Certainly our hero would not have attempted it if he had been able to comprehend the fall, but if human beings were capable of understanding the vastness that lies below and above and around them they would cease to be capable of living life, of so heedlessly traversing the thin mantle which shields them from all that lies beyond.

He crash-lands, sprawls on his stomach before the altar. For a moment, he lies there, bathed in the white glow, bleeding from his head. Then, shakily, he rises, views his prize, and plants a single kiss on her lips. Her eyes flutter open, look into his. She opens her mouth, and words from a tongue that has not been heard or spoken for a string of generations uncountable fall out. Feminine surprise and deep admiration are discernible. Silly girl.

For from the pit there comes a rustling of feathers, and the same shape that has already embedded itself in your mind arises, huge beyond measure, more wonderful and more awful than anything below the earth or above. Quetzalcoatl resplendent.

Here is death, at the very least. The girl screams. The face of God looks down on Cristóbal de Torres, and fear not, sweet reader, for it sees you as well. It descends.

A flash. Movement from the Spaniard. A hiss and a note of the purest song ever sung, a note that will never be heard again. Three feet of steel in the mouth of the Almighty. Had Cristóbal only known what he was facing, he would have dropped his puny weapon nervelessly, would have accepted hell as lenient, would have died on the pillar of jet. Instead, he has killed God. He takes his bride in his arms and leaps once more over infinity, and with that, dear reader, our tale is done.