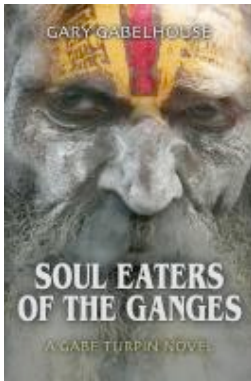
A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a Hindu deity's face, likely Lord Shiva. The face is covered in white ash (vishudhi). A prominent yellow and red tilak (sacred mark) runs vertically down the forehead. The eyes are heavily shadowed and appear closed or looking down. The nose is large and prominent. The overall texture is grainy and aged.

GARY GABELHOUSE

**SOUL EATERS
OF THE GANGES**

A GABE TURPIN NOVEL



When a shadow-government agency executes an entire town in East Africa because of what was seen, visiting anthropologist Gabe Turpin is also targeted, and pursued by a ruthless assassination team across the Great Rift Valley. Turpin begins to unravel the web of lies and cover-ups, to discover a profound secret, and a plot to steal the souls of world religious leaders, and thirty million holy men congregating on the Ganges at Allahabad's Kumbh Mela.

SOUL EATERS OF THE GANGES

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SOUL EATERS OF THE GANGES

~ ~ ~

A GABE TURPIN NOVEL

GARY GABELHOUSE

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PROLOGUE

Great Rift Valley, East Africa: 1495

Pedro Cavilhõ watched in horror as the mobs of ape-like men attacked with weapons made of bone and flint. Over the crater of the old volcano to the east, they poured across the grasslands between the great escarpments—throwing themselves headlong onto the troops of the great Christian King, Prester John.

The pelicans, flamingos and marabou storks from the nearby, soda lake clawed their way airborne as the entire valley was cast into a state of chaos—death everywhere.

Cavilhõ's weaponless hand groped to at least find his rosary. The ape creatures quickly advanced to his position which was held by only a few Ethiopian troops. Cavilhõ began to pray and knelt down on his knees in the high grass of the valley—the northern extension of the Serengeti as it would be known centuries hence.

~

Cavilhõ had been a prisoner of means for ten years, now—held by the famous Priest King of the Indies, Prester John. Years before, Cavilhõ and a number of others had been sent by King John II of Portugal to find the legendary King, and cement an alliance between Portugal and Prester John's vast Kingdom. Basically, the King of Portugal wanted to trap the Muslims and Turks between two forces—with Portugal swooping in to claim the entire spice trade.

Most who set out on this grand, diplomatic mission had died—even Cavilhõ's best friend and fellow

traveler, Afonso de Paiva. Afonso was closer to him than his brothers. Many brave Portuguese adventurers had died, but not before revealing their understandings of the dark continent of Africa. Cavilhão's own intelligence had found its way to King John and then to Pedro's mentor and friend, Vasco de Gama.

Cavilhão had gone overland to Yemen and then sailed as far South and East as the legendary land of Foltana—or Madagascar as some named it. He had, over the months, sailed up and down the East coast of Africa and now found himself deep inland with a sortie of the Ethiopian King—the legendary Prester John. They were looking for Solomon's diamond mines, said to be in the rain mountains to the west—perched above an alkali, desert, lake that was thought to have drained into the Nile.

~

The ape men were pouring out onto the high plains of grass and shrubs, growling and hooting as they waved their crude weapons over their heads. They clashed with the Ethiopian troops with an unbridled fierceness, cleaving and cutting into the soldiers of the Ethiopian King.

The closer the ape men came, the more assured was Cavilhão that he needed a weapon. In his benign imprisonment under the King, Cavilhão was allowed no tools of war.

The Portuguese diplomat shouted out to one of the force's lieutenants, "Kalidin, please, sir, give me something with which to defend myself. Perhaps I can help us against these abominations!"

Without hesitation, Kalidin threw a *kisu*—a native broadsword—back to Cavilhõ. Its blade flashed golden in the failing sun as Cavilhõ grabbed it from the sky.

"We must attack!" cried the Ethiopian officer. "We cannot wait to find our death. We must run forward and seek the death of these monstrosities in God's eyes!"

Kalidin commanded his contingent of warriors and formed what was for all intents and purposes a Roman battle phalanx. The wedge of men and cold steel ran at a jog toward the oncoming sea of hairy, growling bodies. Cavilhõ jogged along with his brothers in arms and found in himself a strange exhilaration as he got closer and closer to this grotesque and savage enemy.

The Ethiopian band, with the lone Portuguese, ran toward the rim of the crater and literally crashed into the front line of hairy warriors. Spittle and blood flew in the air as Cavilhõ hacked with his *kisu* again and again. Not only did the ape men have weapons that dealt grave wounds, but as the animals they were, the creatures did not hesitate to bite and grab the Ethiopians. Hideously, the apes would rend the very joints of the soldiers with their powerful arms—slashing with their teeth to taste the warm blood of the soldiers of Prester John.

A furry hand suddenly snaked out and laid hold of Cavilhõ's left wrist. In fear of becoming dismembered like some of his fellow warriors, he viciously slashed down with his *kisu*, severing the arm of the ape man, as it dropped to the ground, its fingers twitching as it lay there among the tussocks of grass. Suddenly Cavilhõ faced his adversary and saw only a brief moment of pain register in its eyes. Then, its remaining hand wrapped itself around his neck and began to

choke him to death. Other ape warriors began to rain down blows with their jaw bones and flint blades as Cavilhõ's vision constricted and faded to black. The last thing he remembered was finding the will to swing his kisu wildly at the simian warrior that held him by his throat. With a puzzled look, the head of the creature fell back off of its shoulders as it was severed free from the body of the beast. Cavilhõ lost consciousness as throngs of primate warriors poured down from the crater toward the remaining, small group of Ethiopians.

~

Cavilhõ woke in the night to the sound of hyenas and jackals feeding on the bodies of the dead and dying. Deep throated moaning came from the throngs of hyenas—devil dogs of the bush, as they found easy meat. He heard the hyenas feeding, snapping bones and slurping the blood and pulling out the entrails of downed warriors who lay about him in the grass. The horrifying scene was back lit by a full moon. Beyond exhaustion, Cavilhõ merely began to shiver in fear as a hyena found a feast in a nearby soldier, not yet dead. The man screamed pitifully as he was eaten alive by the scavengers.

Cavilhõ was roused to action upon hearing the man's agony, and he struggled to stand upright. The kisu was still held in his grasp, and for that he was thankful. He lurched forward, trying to maintain his balance. Blood had dried and crusted over his right eye and he surveyed the battlefield—trying to maintain his balance.

The hyenas were everywhere, and growing bold and unafraid as they found the easy meals of dead soldiers. Also, he saw a pride of lions amble out from a stand of

acacia trees over toward the soda lakes—all seemingly seeking easy meat.

Exhausted and blind with fear, he studied his predicament with a growing resolve to just die well. He would die in a dignified and collected manner. That was now his only hope.

Suddenly, the sky exploded with an impossible light, which began to pulsate from within the crater rim and above the carnage—apparently from the source of the ape-like warriors. He was suddenly aware that the primate warriors were gone—all having abandoned the field of battle—leaving it to the scavengers and denizens of the grassland's night. The pulsing light changed to a beam that shot skyward—a column of light surrounded by huge, arcing spider webs of lightening. He noticed that the hyena and lions had stopped their feeding.

In that moment, he ran like a mad man into the night—racing toward the huge soda lake which was dotted with the shadows of flamingos and pelicans in the light of the moon. The glowing light and towers of lightening issuing from the crater kept the wildlife entranced as the Portuguese ran for his life. He was unaware of his breathing or anything else. He was running with desperation—intention. Hope had suddenly replaced acceptance of his death. Anthills and tussocks of grass reached out to trip him up in this, the run of his life. Yet, again and again the barriers and traps were turned and rebuffed by the man's will.

The pride of lions again took interest in the running man, and started trotting toward him—coming from the soda lake. Without slowing his pace, he calculated the angle the pride had on his escape and swallowed hard, realizing that it would be more than a close thing. The

lions picked up their pace, their bellies swaying back and forth with their lazy trot. Cavilhõ pressed even harder and his strong, brown legs pumped like pistons as he ran through the high grass that cut his feet.

The crater above the plains seemed to explode in huge arcs of light. The pride of lions hesitated to again focus on the source of the strange sound and light. Cavilhõ continued to run—his quick-moving shadow cast against the ground behind him in the eerie light. He ran straight toward the water and slipped, falling heavily on the marshy shore of the lake. The lions began to run full speed and with purpose toward him as he now flailed in the shallow water of the lake.

With a cry, he lurched forward running, and took a desperate dive forward, and splashed into the lake—hopeful to find deep water. He heard the splashing of the lion pride as they, too, entered the lake in pursuit. Desperate and crying out with his effort, he lurched forward until his feet no longer found bottom. He cast himself into the deep water as shore birds and flamingos took wing in the night.

He treaded water in the deep hole of the lake, and watched the eruption of lightening from the crater as the lion pride studied their options of capturing him as their feast. Spitting and blowing water out his mouth, Cavilhõ tread water and waited until the big cats turned around and waded toward shore. Just beyond sight, the lions grunted in the dark, waiting to claim their prize. Cavilhõ swam out from the shore and concentrated on his breathing and swimming. Hopefully, there were none of the giant, green lizards he had seen in a large lake just a few days' journey to the North.

He slowly swam out and down the lake's shoreline, away from the crater and the field of battle. His feet

finally found bottom and he crawled toward shore. He decided to wait in the shallow water until dawn. He found a tussock of horsetail reeds in the shallows, and used that as a pillow so he could rest—or even sleep without drowning. As the alkaline waters lapped over his body, he found sleep, curled into a fetal position, his head propped clear of the water by the clump of reeds.

~

The feeding of the pink flamingos woke him—their slurping through the muddy water with their beaks providing a unique sound in the morning light. The sun was already burning hot on the water and Cavilhõ slowly opened his eyes. His body was wracked with pain and stiffness. Soaking wet, he walked out of the shallows of the lake and stripped himself of all of his clothes. He lay on a rock beside the lake like a huge, pale, lizard.

Waking in the heat of the afternoon, he methodically donned his robes, which were still somewhat damp despite they had been roasting in the sun for hours. He stuck the kisu between his robe and leather jerkin and slowly worked the leather of his sandals—trying to keep them supple. He studied the position of the sun. He drove a stick into the gravel of the lakeside and observed the movement of its shadow.

He, Pedro Cavilhõ, the diplomat of the King of Portugal, took his bearings from the stick in the lake's bank, and walked across the plains. He strode back north toward the realm of the Priest King and away from the horror and splendor of this rugged landscape

with its strangeness and ever-present face of beauty and death.

CHAPTER ONE

Great Rift – Lake Nakuru, Kenya

Gabe Turpin sat in the back seat of the Peugeot taxi and tried to get his bearings as the vehicle swerved to avoid another huge hole in the macadam of the A-104 Highway from Nairobi to Lake Nakuru. The taxi was coming down the escarpment and into the Great Rift. The swerving maneuvers resulted in the many gold tassels lining the dash of the Peugeot to sway wildly back and forth. On the taxi's cheap, tinny radio, Mama M'binga wailed to a simple, choppy beat as Gabe breathed deeply the scent of diesel and highlands grass. The taxi careened into a roundabout. For Gabe, diesel and highlands bush was the unique scent of...Africa. Swaying back and forth in the taxi, Gabe had found himself, once again...home.

Gabe's giant, Lowe Alpine pack sat beside him like another passenger as he sorted through his briefcase in the back seat of the Peugeot. He looked for the print-out of the Internet reservation for the Kunste Hotel. The hotel was South of Lake Nakuru proper, in a suburban settlement, and only a few hundred yards from Hyrax Hill—the Neolithic site originally excavated by the Leakey's in the 1930's—the site he would visit first thing in the morning.

Gabe was a professor of anthropology at the University of Nebraska. He specialized in tribal ceremony and ancient forms of worship, as well as the oftentimes dark and paranormal side of ethnology. His graduate students often referred to him as *Doctor X-Files*. Gabe was a mountain of a man—just over six feet four, and weighing in at a solid 260 pounds—Gabe

filled a room. Just shy of his 60th birthday, Gabe still trained regularly in the dojo—holding dan ranking in Goju Ryu Karate-do and Daitoryu Aikijujitsu. He took solace in the fact that his teacher, still active and vital, was going for 80 years old now.

Some years back, Gabe's wife of thirty years had divorced him. She was fighting the demons of alcohol, while Gabe was fighting dotcom busts and 9/11—trying to keep his department and field projects afloat. Though Gabe would never speak of it, the divorce had nearly killed him. Cindy, had ripped his heart from his chest and had thrown it in the dirt. Whenever he reflected back on the divorce, Gabe wondered at how someone could feel so bad, as he did, without...dying.

Their daughter, Malindi, had the namesake of a town on the Indian Ocean, north of Mombasa. Gabe had first been to Malindi in 1974. As he was drinking tea poured by a Sikh and planning his re-entry into *real* life, Gabe had been captured by this Hemmingway, coastal town. He vowed that if ever he were to marry and have a daughter, he would name her Malindi. He did and he did.

Gabe sat in the back seat of the Peugeot taxi and smiled broadly. He was, again, back in his spiritual home—Africa. Starting to doze off, Gabe opened his eyes to slits and saw the familiar highway down the escarpment of the Great Rift—the green of the forest, like an arbor, encroaching over the highway. The Peugeot swam through the turns on the tarmac—miraculously avoiding collision with the wide and lumbering lorries—all lurching unevenly like beetles in the heavy rains.

Gabe had not been back in Africa for nearly five years. His work now was not in the field, but more so,

in the board rooms of corporate America—raising funds for what was *important academic work* that needed to be done. His funding *trump card* of the Babson Foundation had disappeared as Edith Babson had suddenly died, leaving the trust to her granddaughter. Normally, if Gabe needed funding of a last-minute project of importance, he would go to the Babson Foundation and Edith Babson, or Paul Babson before his death, and they would have wired the funds within 48 hours. Not that Gabe held *carte blanche*, but he was one of the inner circle—he had become family. He would always bring back to Edith a souvenir—something *unique* along with a tall tale to go with it. Edith was always thrilled with the gifts and the stories. Paul Babson would watch his wife and smile. Gabe’s adventures kept them young at heart. Now, rather than taking notes in the weak light of a headlamp, Gabe networked over the Internet—securing funding sources for the expeditions that were under his aegis. Rather than finding Edith Babson a relic and a story, he calculated funding sources with the most intellectual equity in his fields of study.

The Peugeot swerved wildly to avoid a careening country bus that had listed into their lane. The top of the bus was full of squatting bodies like tick birds on a rhino—diesel smoke leaving a contrail behind bus. Gabe’s brief case full of papers flew across the seat and onto the pack—spewing papers, pens and a satellite phone all over the floor of the taxi.

“*Polē-polē!*” shouted Gabe to the driver, telling him in Swahili to slow down. “*Nugu!*” Gabe further cursed the Kikuyu driver by calling him a hyena—the most reviled animal of the Kikuyu Tribe.

The bus roared by, barely missing the taxi's right-front fender—its passengers staring slack jawed. The lumbering vehicle coated Gabe and the driver of the Peugeot with a film of diesel.

Then, within the rush of green foliage Gabe saw what the bus had tried to avoid—a bent figure—running—perhaps a large simian running bent over, although it could have been a small man. Perhaps a member of one of the reclusive Kalidan tribes. For a split second, the creature or man looked over its shoulder at the dueling vehicles and Gabe's blood froze as it showed its ancient profile. He shook his head and tried to focus, but there was suddenly nothing there but fig and camphor trees, and the thick, green undergrowth of bushes and ferns. Gone was Gabe's vision of an ancient image that had somehow appeared beside the A-104. Gabe shook the cobwebs from his head and, again, settled into the seat of the Peugeot.

Mama M'binga oblivious to the near disaster continued to wail over Nairobi's only radio station with enough power to reach into the Rift. Idly watching the side of the road, Gabe saw a jackal skulk down and run back from the road into the deep green foliage, its feast on road kill interrupted by the screeching, swerving traffic. After he had straightened out his briefcase, Gabe again began to doze—sanding off the sharp edges of his jet lag. At first all he could see was a large, ambling primate. *Impossible* he thought, near sleep. *The product of fatigue and exhaustion—dehydration and jet lag*, thought the logical scientist as he drifted into a soft and deep sleep.

The Peugeot forged on up the A-104 past Limuru and Naivasha, flanking the large crater of Mt. Longonot which loomed over the Rift at over 9,000 feet high. The

driver's braking to enter the southeast edge of Lake Nakuru woke Gabe.

"Lake Nakuru, bwana," announced the driver in his soft, sing-song voice.

"M'zuri," said Gabe, replying with a simple statement of *good*.

"Wapi Hoteli Kunste?" the driver asked where Gabe's hotel was.

"B5 to Nyeri—RIGHT! Polē-polē," said Gabe—motioning with his right arm, telling the driver to go slow and right on the B5 to Nyeri. "Polē-polē," Gabe said again as he began to study the city and his route.

The Kunste hotel was a relatively new establishment in the Government Subdivision called *Section 58*, South of Nakuru town proper. It was represented as being quieter than most of the inner city hotels which were oftentimes pits of poverty and filth. The Kunste hotel was advertised to be literally a 5 minute walk from Hyrax Hill and the museum which was the venue for Gabe's morning meeting.

"Hotel Kunste!" shouted Gabe to the driver—pointing.

The driver swerved and wheeled the Peugeot into the gravel lot of the hotel, lurching to a stop. The driver rushed around the vehicle to open Gabe's door, then running back around the Peugeot, he hoisted the huge pack out of the taxi, as he precariously shouldered the load and motioned for Gabe to proceed into the hotel's lobby—working it for a good tip.

"*Asante sana rafiki*," replied Gabe, thanking the driver who he now referred to as a *friend* rather than a hyena. "*Begoni shillingi*?" asked Gabe of the pre-arranged fare.

The driver counted it out in *five's*, methodically saying, "*Kumi-Kumi-Kumi...*"

The driver had only upped the price of the pre-negotiated fare the equivalent of a dollar. Gabe willingly paid the man and even gave him a dollar tip which brought a gapped, jack-o-lantern smile to the Kikuyu face.

The Peugeot sped off, back to the warrens of Nairobi and River Road as Gabe settled into his room—typically small, clean and euro-simple. Gabe hefted his pack into the corner of the room. He fished for his shaving kit, novel and satellite phone which he placed all on the small desk table next to the photocopied flyers about the hotel's Snake Show and the Reptile Gardens just south of town. For five minutes, Gabe sat on the bed in the small hotel room—contemplating his lot. It was another room—like all the others. No TV or radio, no English, strange birds sounding in the open window—the subtle smell of diesel and over-ripe fruit wafting on the breeze.

The mosquito-netting canopy had been gathered and draped behind the bed's head board. He contemplated the shroud that would be drawn around him in the night and, at the same time, the shroud of a lost life. Gabe felt suddenly empty and maudlin. Most certainly, his chasing of ghosts and *mojo spirit* in Third- and Fourth-World countries had ruined any prospects of a normal life. Even when he was married and respectable—going to as many school functions and soccer games as he could, Gabe's soul was lost somewhere behind in the strange and wild countries to which he was spiritually tied. Gabe's spirit was claimed by worlds that few could ever imagine—worlds of great peace and horror—desperate squalor and majesty—

visions of hell and striking beauty. Gabe had lived a life on the ragged edge, and so, he would never be normal again. He had ventured too deep into the forest of life and looked to see the leaves had blown over the trail back home. Gabe had seen and done stuff so far outside of the norm, he had a unique *embarrassment* at his having to *lip sync* normal life.

His whole body ached. He wanted to shuck his malaise, and walked out of the hotel into the gathering dusk and up toward Hyrax Hill. He was reconnoitering the route he would take to his meeting the next morning. He was walking along the road and noticed the flashing blue and white lights of police vehicles and a growing throng of people gathering at the gate of what Gabe saw was Hyrax Hill.

Gabe pressed through the throng and found himself staring at the remains of what appeared to be four soldiers—though it was difficult to define the number, given how they were dismembered. There were large, gaping slashes on the necks of some of the victims and with others, it looked like their joints had been twisted, literally ripping the members from the body. Women were wailing. Old men looked resolute. Dogs positioned themselves for a necrotic feast.

Gabe saw an old man squatting beside the bodies—his jaw and chin full of white sprouts of whiskers—his eyes rheumy and his mouth populated with only a few teeth. His weathered hand wiped his brow as he shook his head back and forth. It appeared as if he was just confirming something he knew—staging witness to something he was afraid of, but having to confirm for himself, all the same. He was of the Kalidin Tribes—Maasai, Samburu or maybe even an N'dorobo.

Gabe went over to the old man and asked with tribal politeness, "M'zee. What is this about? Do you know?"

The old man shifted his gaze onto Gabe's face and studied him for a while before responding.

Then in almost a whisper, the old man said, "You are not a m'zungu like most of the whites, my son. You have walked this ground for much of your life—I can see that in your eyes. Maybe you will understand. The devils of *Menengai* are awake, again. *The old ones*. They come out from the ground as they did in my ancient grandfather's time. They howl in the darkness. You can hear them almost every night now, if you listen. It is not the wind as some say. It is our misfortune that now they will come for us all."

Jefferson Hotel-Washington, D.C.

"Goddamn it to hell!" shouted the Chairman of Majestic-12.

The Chairman was a smallish man—his tanned and leathered face cleanly shaven sported sharp features—high cheek bones, a nose that tended toward pug, with stingy lips and eyes of hard blue quartz. His close-cropped, white hair was a holdover from the man's days in service to his county—military service on every continent. Upon every battlefield, and in many dark streets and alleys across the world, the Chairman had killed his enemies and the enemies of his country—doing so with efficiency. Older now, yet still vital, the Chairman sat in the large antique side chair in the hotel's lounge and considered his unlit cigar and the untested Bloody Mary alongside an order of huevos rancheros with mango salsa and tortillas. Impeccably

dressed in a silk suit made for him by his tailor in Hong Kong, the man exuded an energy—a sort of spiritual intensity. He radiated the battlefield glow of...invincibility.

"You're tellin' me we have *another* goddamned pod activation?"

"It would appear to be so," said the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States and Air Force General Brian Boles.

"Christ, man! After Baghdad I thought we were clean. All buttoned up. Now, your buddies in the ether have forgotten another? For such enlightened, goddamned assholes, they sure seem to have shitty memories," continued the Chairman. "Fix the fuckin' problem, Boles," said the Chairman. "Maybe this time we won't have to fabricate a whole goddamned war to cover for cleaning up your benefactors' shit. Damn!"

"I'm sure it won't come to that, sir," said General Boles. "We can nip this in the bud. Also, it's only...Africa."

"Things have a way of coming *undone* in Africa, General," said the Chairman of Majestic-12. "If you want my input, go extreme right off," continued the Chairman.

"How do you mean, sir?" asked the General.

"Erase problems with broad strokes, General. If you've located the source of the compromise, eliminate that compromise by at least 120%. If you have to burn friendlies and civvies, so be it. It's Africa, like you said. Hell, nobody misses a half million Tutsis hacked to death and dumped in the river. Why should they miss thirty or forty thousand kyukes who get an acute case of...gas?"

"I hear what you're saying, sir," replied the Air Force General—as he considered the Chairman's comments.

"Where's *this* pod that's—startin' to hum?" asked the Chairman, now sipping his Bloody Mary. Without waiting for a response, the Chairman attacked his eggs and ranchero sauce with a fork and a folded tortilla. He seemed to relish each and every bite.

"Kenya, sir," replied Boles. "A couple a hundred clicks north and west of Nairobi—just a bit Northeast of Lake Nakuru—supposedly within the Menengai Crater. It's in the Great Rift Valley, sir, not far from where the other pods are currently...resting."

"Hell, then, Boles, that's an easy extraction," said the Chairman. "Gas the area, drop down in the crater with three bricks of Delta—secure the pod and move it in with the others, which are already secured in that fly-blown country."

"Yes sir," said General Boles. "Both the Baghdad and Cairo Pods are *pastured* just south at the Longonot Earth Station outside of Narok."

"Hell, Boles," said the Chairman, as he finished his eggs and took a long pull on his Bloody Mary. "Don't rightly know why you woke me so early for this. It sure is a simple fix. Just do it. And, Boles?"

"Yes sir?" replied the one-time, Viet Nam fighter ace and now, the top man in the Air Force.

"Would you get me your report file on the outcome of this operation by tomorrow afternoon?"

"You want this operation completed within 24 hours?" asked the Air Force General.

"Hell yes," said the Chairman. "We wait too long and God knows what kind of problems will be poppin' out of that pod? Hell, wasn't it monkey men in

Baghdad?" enquired the sharp old man. "We still have some detainees who swore they were being killed by apes with jaw bones—not U.S. Special Forces as the press was led to believe. Hell, we even got a passel of Spec Ops players still wondering at *what* they were killing North of Tikrit."

"Yes, sir," replied the General, neither acknowledging nor denying the truth of the operation—more so just informing the Chairman that he had *heard* him.

"Carry on, soldier," said the Chairman as he renewed an attack on his eggs and frijoles—aggressively soaking up egg yolk and salsa with his tortilla. He paused to take another long pull on his Bloody Mary and then looked at the General.

"Son, this meeting's over," said the Chairman definitively.

"Yes sir!" replied the General—a bit too loud for the Jefferson's dining room. A few patrons of the restaurant stared, and then quickly broke eye contact, going back to their cocktails and brunch.

The Air Force General, out on the street, was looking at his feet and feeling much put upon as he felt the buzzing of his cell phone.

"Boles," the General spoke simply into the phone.

"Sir, I am the African theater Chief for Aquarius—Maji 12. We've got a situation that requires your attention," the androgynous voice reported over the phone.

"SITREP abstract please," replied Boles.

"All hell's broken loose at Longonot, sir. Everything is off the hook. All levels in all out combat—even on the ground above the facility."

Longonot Earth Station: Great Rift, Kenya

Delta Force Commander Marcus Davila crouched behind one of the huge procreation chambers of the pod as the shadows of the ape men danced on the walls around him. They waved dismembered arms and legs over their heads. More than a few danced about, holding the decapitated heads of Davila's troops. Davila keyed his mike again and waited to establish a communications link. The response came like a whisper in a strong wind.

"Delta Alpha, please read me your position," came the reedy voice over Davila's ear bud. "Do you read me, Delta Alpha?"

Davila cautiously whispered into his micro-com unit, "Read you, Mother Goose. We are burrowed deep, no way out. Target is painted. Put in place *Humpty Dumpty*. I repeat, execute *Humpty Dumpty*."

"Commander Davila, is that you?" asked the voice against the sea sound of static. "Do you copy?"

"Yes, I copy, and yes, it is me," whispered Davila into the communications unit. "Now, hear me—execute Humpty Dumpty. Confirm your order, sir."

"Roger that," responded Mother Goose. "On my count, executing order for Humpty Dumpty."

Davila looked up and suddenly saw one of the creatures standing over him, poised to bring down upon him a jawbone full of flint blades. Davila fingered the MP-5 and a two-round burst blew the thing's head off its hairy shoulders. Davila duck-walked deeper into the chamber, waving his weapon in front of him.

Thirty-thousand feet above the Great Rift—cruising across the Southern Cross, the Missouri-based B2

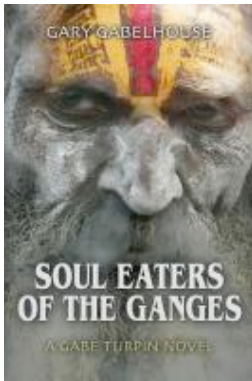
Bomber delivered the bunker buster bomb. Earlier that day, the pilot had enjoyed taking his daughter to pre-school in the small Missouri town of Knob Noster. Now, and after refueling over Monrovia, Liberia, he was unleashing hell in East Africa.

Davila, totally lost and without direction, stalked resolutely forward. In this Dante's Inferno world, Davila found a strange solace in killing the creatures that were now hooting and growling around him. Fearful of the man and his *fire stick* the ape-like men kept a respectful distance—though they still displayed aggressive postures.

In the ear bud, Davila heard, "Humpty Dumpty down. Five seconds till Humpty Dumpty's great fall."

Davila, knowing he had only seconds to live, roared the names of his troops and threw himself at the throng of hairy things. He emptied his MP-5 into the howling creatures, and then drew his pistol as he continued shooting. Out of ammunition, the spec ops warrior drew his Kabar knife and flung himself into a knot of hairy things. He cut and gutted the ape men with a rapture that filled him. Davila felt the pressure of the explosion long before he could have heard it. The light collapsed about and within him. Davila and the things of the pod were crushed under tons of explosive force of the bunker buster bomb.

Miles off to the south in the Loita Hills over the Maasai Mara, a leopard hesitated in its hunt and stared at the huge flash of light which was followed by a deep rumble. The troop of baboons the *chui* was stalking also paused to wonder at the surreal light and sound that crept over the escarpment toward them—now a surreal thunder in the night.



When a shadow-government agency executes an entire town in East Africa because of what was seen, visiting anthropologist Gabe Turpin is also targeted, and pursued by a ruthless assassination team across the Great Rift Valley. Turpin begins to unravel the web of lies and cover-ups, to discover a profound secret, and a plot to steal the souls of world religious leaders, and thirty million holy men congregating on the Ganges at Allahabad's Kumbh Mela.

SOUL EATERS OF THE GANGES

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