

Clarion Review ★★★★☆

FANTASY

The Tegen Cave

Inge-Lise Goss

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From its gut-grabbing prologue to its explosive conclusion, Goss's spine-tingling debut story gives new meaning to the phrase "a blood-curdling adventure."

Sara Jones is about to celebrate her twenty-fifth birthday. The venue is the Tegen Cave, the cobweb-covered home of the flesh-eating, black-robed Tegen cult and thousands of venomous Hobo spiders (*tegenaria agrestis*). It's an event that would cost Sara her life were she to refuse. *The Tegen Cave*, Inge-Lise Goss's spine-tingling debut story for fantasy-thriller fans, gives scary new meaning to the phrase "a blood-curdling adventure."

After three years in Houston, as the bedmate of a gang member from a notorious crime family, Sara scoops up some incriminating ledgers and flees by bus to Billings, Montana. There, a series of sudden deaths by spider bite occur around her. As she wins new but suspicious friends, she begins to display strange, spiderlike traits. Torn between staying and leaving, she gets duped by members of the Tegen cult. They claim to be a species that exists on their enemies' flesh and blood, but they "never kill anyone who doesn't deserve it."

The crime family, however, kills indiscriminately, and when her former lover's brother tries to kill her in a hospital morgue, he's slain by the Tegens just before mealtime. While Sara sorts out who her real friends are, she discovers a closer connection than she ever imagined between herself and the never-aging Tegens.

From its gut-grabbing prologue to its explosive conclusion, Goss's imaginative story is worth reading for its originality. Some things, like spiders trained to kill, may seem far-fetched, and cult members eating the flesh of cadavers may seem abhorrent, but Dracula set that table long ago. Besides, given Goss's endowment of the cult with an air of historical respectability, the story is more imaginatively acceptable for anyone predisposed to the fantasy genre.

There are occasional unexplained factors, such as how Sara's Tegen handler gets by an eight-foot-high electrified fence unscathed. But there are far more engaging scenes, including spider-inspired fright, stalking by the menacing "dark-haired man," an attempted rape of Sara by a crime-syndicate thug, the bloody meal in the morgue, and the novel's excitingly choreographed conclusion.

Even with their affinity to spiders and miraculous healing powers, the ageless Tegens are plausible characters. Sara's vacillation about joining them on her birthday is believable, as is her overpowering sex drive, a side effect of her stages of "transformation." Overall, the Tegens are more fully rounded and less stereotypical than the shoot-'em-up crime family folks. A few characters, such as Jacob the intern, seem superfluous to the story. The dialogue keeps the action moving and engaging.

The prominent ring and the cobwebs featured in the cover art enhance the bizarre subject matter of this well-written novel. The synopsis on the back cover perfectly represents the writing style within. However, the chapter page numbers listed in the table of contents for chapters eight to thirty do not match the page numbers in the text. The word Tegens should be consistently capitalized throughout, and the spelling of "tegeneria agrestis" should be corrected to

tegenaria agrestis.

Goss's novel about a quirky spider-based cult has the potential to attract a well-deserved cult following of its own.

WAYNE CUNNINGHAM (December 29, 2013)

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