

THE DEVIL DRIVES A '66

& OTHER STORIES

by

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THE DEVIL DRIVES A '66

It's tempting to say, looking back, that it began with that warped wall—the wall in the basement garage which had been flat and firm when I'd first bought the house but had morphed into something misshapen and hideous. But in truth, it started with her voice, Mia's, a voice I would fall in love with—although, at the time, it existed only in my mind—a voice that had captivated me from the very first moment I heard it.

That would have been March 5, 2019, the day after they'd begun digging for the pool, when I'd taken to the deformed wall (which had been water damaged, I presumed, and was not part of the concrete foundation anyway) with a pickax—hacking away at it mercilessly until both the sheet rock and studs (which had been corrupted, as well) lay in ruins, and I was sitting on an inverted 5-gallon bucket, recovering, just staring at the exposed earth.

At least, until I heard that voice, which said to me, weakly, faintly, and yet somehow clear as a bell, *Please, Dear God. Help me. I have been buried alive.*

It's funny, because the first thing I thought of was a TV movie from the '70s—*The Screaming Woman*, about a girl found buried alive on a rich crone's property, and it's possible I mistook the voice for a memory of that, at least at first. But then it came again (once more managing to be faint yet clear as day), and I realized, finally, that it was not only real but emanating somehow from my own mind, as though I were not so much hearing it as transcoding it into a form I could understand. And what it said was: *Please ... there isn't much time. I'm not far, but as I have awakened, so have they. Now, use your pickax—I won't be hurt—and dig, dig!*

And, because I was captivated, that's what I did, approaching the earthen wall and swinging the ax again and again, grunting each time the blade struck the sediment, feeling the shock in my hands and arms whenever it hit a rock, until at last she cried, *Stop!*—and I stopped, wondering what had come over me that I should throw myself at the stones with such total abandon, or that I should suddenly feel as though I had the

strength of twenty men rather than one. At which instant the voice said, *Now, look. See.*

And I did, see that is, and realized that something was glinting, ever so slightly, through the dirt—something metallic, something man-made. Something which revealed itself grudgingly as I dropped the ax and began clearing away the moist, black earth ... until at last I was looking at a State of New York license plate, its blue and yellow colors seemingly vibrant as the day it was pressed, its characters personalized to read: BRN 2 KILL, and its black and white tab dated 3—for March—1966.

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AS IT TURNED OUT, WE finished our excavations—me and the pool guys—at about the same time; in no small part because they'd lent me their conveyor belt over the weekend, which enabled me to move earth from the garage into the payload of my truck as fast as I could dig it out. Not that I couldn't have managed without it—I felt *strong*, as I said, stronger than I'd felt in years, as if the car and the voice had somehow infused me with super-strength. Nor had my new vitality gone unremarked, especially at Home Depot—which I'd been haunting like a wraith, primarily for support beams—where I was asked more than once what supplements I'd been taking.

Regardless, 48 hours (and several dump loads to my friend's farm) later, it was done, and I was hosing off what a web search had told me was a 1966 Corvette Stingray hardtop, black and red, with a 435-horsepower/5,800 rpm V-8 engine and a sterling Peace symbol—which hung from its rear-view mirror like a charm. Nor was that all, for dangling from its ignition was a set of keys—one, presumably, for the trunk—along with a maroon rabbit's foot, or possibly a cat's, affixed to a silver chain.

Here I pause, in order to better render what I was feeling and what had carried me through the last couple days. For while it is true I began digging (beyond the wall, that is) in response to the girl's cry for help—believing, as I did, that a living person might yet be saved—it is

also true that that conviction faltered upon uncovering the 52-year-old plate, to the point that, considering the voice had fallen silent, I no longer expected to find a survivor—but a skeleton. I tell you this plainly so that you will understand why I didn't open the trunk immediately, and why, to be frank, I feared doing so. Rather, I believe it was the car itself that goaded me on during this time, growing as it was in power and actively suppressing Mia's attempts to communicate with me. Whatever it was, she must have at last found a way to break through, for as I opened the driver's side door and seated myself in the cockpit, I once more heard her voice, which said, as clearly as if she were standing next to me: *Hurry. Please. The keys. The trunk ...*

I paused, my fingertips kissing those very keys. The interior smelled of death, and decay, and something else—oily, pungent, like cilantro or burning tires, or a black beetle crushed underfoot. The truth is, I was terrified—what could the voice have been if not the ghost of someone buried with the car? And there was something else too, a completely different reason why I was so hesitant. And that was that—

I closed my thumb and forefingers on the keys, pushing in the clutch.

Don't do it! came the voice. Mia—their specimen. The butterfly they'd intended to collect. *That's what they want; what it wants. What the previous owner gave them. Resist—and open the trunk. We have work to do.*

But I hesitated.

And then came another voice—several others, actually, one after the other—which said, in a language older than words (but which I could understand): *Start it, James ... turn the key.*

Yes, yes, James. Continue the process.

Do it, James!

And I turned the key.

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THE TRUTH WAS, I HADN'T noticed how much attention my little digging project had garnered until I backed the rumbling, sputtering

‘Vette up and out of the garage—and found half the neighborhood looking on. I shouldn’t have been surprised; there were piles of dirt and stone everywhere—some of which had spilled onto the Merton’s lawn (and the Diller’s, too) and made tempting obstacles for boys on BMX bikes, not to mention that the conveyor running at 3 am would have undoubtedly stirred Miss Harper, who had once called 911 because a dog was barking. It’s hard to credit, in retrospect, how I’d avoided a visit from the cops. Maybe *they* had something to do with it. The bugs. Who knows.

Regardless, the kids waved and hollered as I backed onto the street and put it into gear, and I gave them a rev or two before easing up on the clutch and moving down the road, the radio giving me a start as it came on without warning (and without my having touched it) and began playing “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival.

Then I was off, cruising the streets of Schenectady as though I hadn’t a care in the world, relishing it every time I drew alongside some kid in his Honda, speeding up a little as I handled corners, tapping the horn as I rumbled past female joggers. The truth of it is I was under the car’s spell, and didn’t think to question why the girl had fallen silent (again) or who—what—the other voices had been or how a car that had been buried for 52 years had simply rolled over and leapt to life. I felt young again, vibrant, strong, as though nothing could touch me and nothing could hurt; as though the logical part of my brain had simply turned off, as it does when you smoke a good blunt; as though I were in the clouds and nothing could bring me back. Indeed, I felt free of all human constraint and concern—at least, until I saw the Lyndon B. Johnson campaign sticker on the clean, chrome bumper ahead of me, and, realizing that both it and the Beetle to which it was attached were in as perfect condition as the ‘Vette—“Black Betty” it said on the ‘Vette’s door, I’d nearly forgotten about that—began to come out of it.

That’s when I really noticed it, the fact that the landscape immediately around the car had changed; that it had—*reverted*, somehow. I can only describe what I saw, which was that *none* of the vehicles at the

light could have been newer than a '66, and that the *light* itself looked decidedly retro, decidedly quaint, at least compared to the one only a block away. More, the storefronts alongside had changed, so that a Kinney Shoe Store now stood where a Taco Bell had just been, and a Woolworth had replaced an Indy Food Mart. Likewise, the pedestrians had changed—yoga pants giving way to miniskirts, athletic shoes giving way to go-go boots and winklepickers, short hair giving way to long. And it was as I observed these things that I noticed something else—the Stingray's reflection in the Woolworth's front windows, or rather, the reflection of something which was not the Stingray but which stood—hovered—in its place: a long, translucent, green-black thing, like an enormous wine decanter, only laid on its side, which glowed slightly from within its bulbous body and seemed to warp the very air around it, to bend it, to curl it like burnt paper.

What you see is the car's true form, came the voice, the girl's voice, Mia's, startling me with its clarity, seeming at once to be both inside my head and without, causing me to turn instinctively—revealing her to be sitting beside me, right there in the passenger seat. “... *and the field in which it operates. That field is weak now but it will grow. And the longer it remains free—the car, the artifact—the stronger it will become, until the world itself becomes threatened. Now do you see why I tried to warn you?*”

But I could only stare at her, even as the late afternoon sun caught her auburn hair—which was styled in a flipped bob—and seemed to set it on fire. *Beautiful*, I remember thinking, even though her eyes and skin were all wrong: bluish-gray, almost green; deaden, but in a very specific way, as though she had drown. “Look at yourself,” she said (actually said, it seemed, not communicated silently, like a specter), “Although its passengers are immune to the field it has already affected you—in other ways.”

I adjusted the rearview mirror to look at myself, and saw that she was at least partially correct: my skin was sallow—almost greenish—and there were dark spots beneath—

That's when I saw them. *The bugs*. Three of them, to be precise, scrunched up in the storage area beneath the fastback, each about the size of a chimpanzee, and each a kind of hybrid between a locust and a mantid.

It was all too much—the car that had been buried for 52 years yet started right up, the flashback to the 1960s and the ghostly girl, the bugs the size of dogs whose stench filled the cab and caused me to wretch. I gripped the door handle instantly—even as the little chrome knob dropped, locking me in. Then we were accelerating— abruptly, powerfully—whipping around the cars in front of us and blasting through the intersection: the girl vanishing, just winking out of existence, the bugs making a sound like crickets but magnified a hundred fold—the V-8 (or whatever it was) roaring.

Yes—yes, James. Want this, we do ...

Want it! Want it!

Right there, James. The infestation. Do it!

But I wasn't driving—

No, I could see that wasn't true: my foot was on the peddle just as sure as my hands were on the wheel. And that foot dipped suddenly even as the skateboarder came into view—his eyes widening, his free leg kicking—so that he disappeared into an alley even as we exploded past—fishtailing to a halt in the middle of the road, where the high-compression engine sputtered and the glass packs rumbled—before my foot once again hit the gas and we tore after him, burning rubber.

And then we were bearing down upon the kid, as he kicked and kicked furiously and glanced at us over his shoulder. As I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the bug-things leaning forward (as though in anticipation). As I fought whatever impulse had taken over my limbs and partially succeeded—too late.

There was a *thud-crunch!* as he vanished beneath the hood—and the car bucked violently, as though I'd driven over a curb. I ground the brakes, glancing in the mirror—saw him tumble after us like a bag of lit-

ter. Only then, after I'd come to a complete stop, did it occur to me: I could see out the back window. The bugs were gone. The kid, meanwhile, was still alive—good God!—and thus it wasn't too late; I could still help him, still *save* him.

Yes, yes, James. Save him.

We're not finished yet, James.

Finish, finish!

I felt the gearshift in my hand—saw that I'd already put it in reverse and was stepping on the gas, letting out the clutch. And then the car launched backward—reversing straight as an arrow—until it bucked and rolled up onto the kid; and stopped.

"Please, mister," came the kid's voice—muffled, garbled—through my partially open window. "Please, God—"

But then my hand was shifting and the engine was roaring—the wide tires were spinning—and I saw through my side-view mirror that his blood was fanning the nearby bricks and a window—spraying them like rifle shot, spattering them with entrails, hurling pieces of bone against, and through, the glass—until the positraction gripped bare asphalt and the car leapt forward: roaring down the alley, skidding back onto the road, releasing its control over me.

At which moment Mia reappeared, like an apparition, and, rolling her milky eyes to face me, said, "Now will you listen? Now will you open the trunk?"

And then promptly faded away.

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THE KEY SLID IN SMOOTHLY and I paused, looking at the abandoned drive-in theater: at the rusted, canted speaker posts (the speakers themselves had long since been stolen) and the weeds bursting through the concrete berms; at the dilapidated concessions bar and the partially-collapsed steel fence. *Do it*, I told myself, and turned the key, hearing sirens in the distance as the trunk popped open, trying not to think

about the kid. As it turned out, it wasn't that difficult, considering what I found myself looking at.

They were arthropods, of course, and so appeared in death much as they'd appeared in life, although their eyes had long since rotted out and their shells had become gray as tombstones. But that's not what interested me so much as what was beneath them—which, having shoved them all to one side, I realized was a kind of—well, *egg*, for lack of a better term. A huge, glass egg—built into the car and full of a greenish, glowing liquid—within which, curled into a fetal position, floated a naked woman. A woman I recognized as Mia her-self.

Now do you understand? she asked, speaking directly into my head, directly into my mind—again, as though she were standing immediately beside me.

"No. No, I don't," I said, shaking my head in the dimming twilight. "Maybe you can explain it to me."

Get in the car, she said. And I will. All of it.

That's when I looked over the trunk lid I saw that she was back, just sitting in the passenger seat like a zombie, staring straight ahead at the screen. A screen, I might add, which had been restored—and over which danced images of hot dogs and fountain sodas and fresh-popped corn; of cotton candy and licorice twists.

For the drive-in, you see, had *warped*—just like the streetlight, just like the storefronts—and was operational once again. Operational and rapidly filling up—with cars, that was a given, old yet somehow brand-new—but also with people, at least some of whom would have been dead, or so it seemed likely to me, only a few scant moments ago.

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"TALK," I SAID, SHUTTING my door, settling in. "Starting with why you encouraged me to unbury the car—when you knew full well what could happen." I glanced at her in the dark. "And you *must* have known."

"I knew that their spirits—which are fused with the car, as is mine—would attempt to influence you, yes. What I did not know is the extent to which they'd succeed, how easily you'd succumb!" She seemed to shift gears: "It's not important. What is important is that the car gets reburied—deeper, further away. So that it may never threaten the surface again."

"But, what is it ... and who are they? Who are you, for that matter?"

"The car? Why, it's a spacecraft, of course. A *time*-craft. It has been matter-cloaked to mimic an automobile, that's all—of a make and model that was popular in the year they came. It was their way, I suppose, the bugs, of moving amongst us; of observing us at close range—at least, until they decided we should be exterminated. That's where I come in: their specimen. The sole butterfly they'd planned to harvest as an example of what they'd wiped out—for that's precisely what they'd initiated before a flu strain killed them all."

She laughed suddenly and what looked like the green fluid from the egg gurgled up out of her mouth. "The Common Cold, I suppose. Like in H.G. Wells. At least that's what Crowley thought, when he found them, that is."

"Who—"

"Crowley, the man who first discovered the car, full of bugs and rolled over in a ravine near Schenectady, in 1966. It was his theory that the foreigners had taken the appearance of humans while piloting the cloaked craft, but reverted to bugs after they'd died—either way, he knew right away that the 'Vette was no mere car. As for me and my egg, he hadn't a clue what to make of that. But the bugs spoke to him just as they've spoken to you; and before he knew it he'd stuffed them in the trunk and towed the car home and applied for title—he even had a personalized license plate made, 'BRN 2 KILL,' something to do with his service in Vietnam—as well as commissioning someone to paint 'Black Betty' on its door. But by November of that year he was done, and wanted nothing further to do with it, even going so far as to bury it in the

landfill he worked at, the Copperhead Earth Works, where he plowed it 6 feet under with his bulldozer and—”

“Copperhead?” I interjected, and thought instantly of Copperhead Farms, the name of the housing project which encompassed my new home. “How do you know all this?”

“I began to, project myself—sleepwalking, I call it—shortly after being preserved in the back of the ship. Nor do I know how that is possible. I only know that it is, and that I was able to monitor Crowley as he interacted with the car—although I could not yet communicate with him as I have with you. And it was during that time that I became aware of *them*, the bugs, but in spirit-form. I even learned how to intercept their thoughts, as I had Crowley’s. All of which brings me to why I reached out to you when you began to dig—”

“You wanted to be free,” I said, feeling as though I suddenly understood her, suddenly got it. “Either by death or by rescue ... you wanted to be free.”

“In part, yes. Of course. But also because the car was insufficiently buried, insufficiently interred. It was bleeding through the sediment, you understand. Because what the bugs started before falling ill is still underway—an exponential charge, using the ship’s warp field as a weapon of mass destruction. And as I’ve said, the longer the car remains free, the stronger it will become ... until at last all life on Earth will be threatened. And before you ask, the answer is no, it cannot be destroyed, not without detonating it at its present charge, which would still be enough to destroy half the planet.”

I moved to speak but paused, letting it go.

“That’s what I meant when I said we had work to do. We *have* to find a way to re-bury this car. And re-bury it for good. And for that you’re going to need help—real help, not a disembodied voice. Or a ghost. And so I am asking you to at least try to set me free. But in order to do so you’ll have to *see*, and I mean see in a way you’ve never seen before. I’ll show you. I—I have faith in you, James. I know you can do it.”

And then she placed her hand over mine and it faded into my skin, and I got out and went to the trunk.

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I'D JUST TOLD HER THAT, because of her help, I could see—actually *see* the alien-looking control panel (which before I'd missed), when a youthful male voice said, behind me: "Excuse me, sir?" —and I spun around.

What is it, James? What's going on?

And found myself facing a security guard—one right out of 1960s—peaked hat, whistle, Billy club, and all.

"Y—yes?" I stammered, easing down the trunk lid, stepping away from the car. "Can I help you?"

He aimed his flashlight, a ribbed, chrome thing which looked positively primitive, into the empty cab.

"It's just funny," he said, "because I could have sworn I heard you talking to someone—in the trunk of your car. Just now, as I was coming up the aisle."

He paused, sizing me up. "You know, a lot of people seem to think that ripping us off by sneaking people in through the trunk is just good, clean fun." He unhooked the radio from his belt and placed it near his lips. "But 3.50 a carload means just that—3.50 *per carload*." He keyed his mic. "K-91 to K-54, where are you?"

"Look, can't we just—"

Get in the car, James.

"I mean, I'm a little old to be sneaking—"

Get in the car, James!

"Stay right where you are, sir. K-91 to K-54: Request back-up in section A. *Excuse me, sir ...!*"

But I was already getting in the car, turning the ignition—revving the engine as Barney Fife rushed to my door and began yanking the handle—which I'd locked—putting it in gear.

“Get us out of here,” said Mia, having re-appeared in the passenger seat. “*Go, go, go!*”

And then we’d backed up and swung around and were beginning to launch forward, the ‘Vette’s engine roaring, its rear tires spinning, until we blasted between the rows and I began searching for the exit, the skinny guard gradually giving up the chase, people running helter and skelter out of our way.

Yes, yes, James! Infestation!

Kill them, kill them!

Wipe them from the Earth ...

The bugs again—reaching into my mind, seizing control of my hands—as the radio sputtered to life and the Beatles began singing: *Well, shake it up, baby, now (Twist and shout) Come on, come on, come on, baby, now (Come on and work it on out ...)*

My hands jerked the wheel as a man in a suit ran out in front of us and we struck him like a hammer—causing him to tumble up over the hood, splay against the windshield, where his bloodied face pressed against the glass. *Well, work it on out, honey ...* The wipers activated even as I slammed on the brakes and he slid off, then we were accelerating again, rolling over the top of him, as Mia screamed and the bugs ticked and cackled, as the Beatles sang, *You know you got me goin’ now (Just like I knew you would ...)*

“Fight it, James! Resist them!” cried Mia—even as the car bounced up and over a berm and the Peace symbol hanging from its mirror swung. As it targeted a woman with an enormous beehive and rammed into her at full speed—knocking her at least twenty feet, trampling over the top of her, leaving her a bloody ruin.

“Get it together, man! Concen—oh, no. *Oh, no!*”

I followed her gaze as we fishtailed around the end of the front row and accelerated toward the screen, saw the children begin to scatter as we bore down upon the playground.

Do it, James, do it!

Faster, faster!

I fought the wheel but it had taken over completely—steering for the running kids, seeming almost to growl at me, jerking against my grip. The cab shook as we piled over the railroad ties at the edge of the playground and began tearing through the sand, aiming at a little boy even as the headlights popped up and drowned him in harsh light, as the glass packs roared and the Peace symbol swung.

“James!”

And something just—kicked in. I still can’t explain it. But for a fraction of a second I was able to just, *merge* with the car—with the ship. All I know is that for that fraction of a second we were one: one entity, one organism. And as I applied the brakes and swung the wheel the car responded, fishtailing and skidding to a stop in the sand ... where it idled roughly as I looked at Mia and she looked at me. And it was at precisely that moment that an idea came to mind—an idea I thought just might work. If we could get there in time. If I could maintain control of the car.

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IT WASN’T EASY, COMMUNICATING with the car, ordering it to lower its warp field; nor was it completely successful—the family we’d left twisted and mutated at a stoplight, partially fused with their car, was proof of that. Nor did we stop anymore after that but instead rumbled straight for my house, ignoring every sign and limit, rushing against the clock, praying we could make it before my concentration finally gave out and we were back in the ‘60s—back where we’d killed so many and the cops were surely looking for us. Back where the bodies lay scattered and broken everywhere we’d been.

“Hang on!” I shouted as we broke through the fence and hurtled toward the pool excavation—forgetting, for the moment, that Mia was yet a kind of ghost, and that if anyone need worry about the coming impact it was me. And then I was throwing open the door and rolling up on the ground—as the ‘Vette which was not a ‘Vette launched off a dirt

berm (left over from the pool dig) and crashed into the pit, its steel frame seeming to howl like a wounded beast and its fiberglass crunching and breaking, its windows shattering ...

Hurry, James. The cement truck ...

“But you’re still in the car!”

And it’s possible I’ll remain there. The world, James ... The world comes first.

I cursed, staring into the pit. At the Stingray, which had begun to glow and to morph. At *Black Betty* ... a bitch if ever there was one. Then I hurried to the cement truck and, to my great relief, found the keys still in the ignition (we’d become friends, after all, the contractor and I, nor was it a bad neighborhood). But I was not alone as I started it up and activated the mixer, for in addition to Mia the bugs were still in my head, louder than ever and seeming to sense what was at stake. *Angry*, for that was their nature, but terrified, too. Vulnerable at last.

Don’t do it, James. You mustn’t do it ...

Return, return. Drive us some more.

The girl, James. You must save the girl!

I looked at the pit as it began to fill up with concrete, frowning, then scrambled from the truck and into the hole, my shoes squelching in the cement, my heart racing, as I opened the door and retrieved the keys. As I hurried to the trunk and popped it open.

But the alien control panel was no longer there, which is to say I could no longer see it given the maelstrom in my head, the energy I was expending to thwart the ship’s warp field. And it *was* becoming a ship again, that much was clear, as though the bugs’ fear and vulnerability had weakened it and compromised its ability to multitask. As though their hatred of us and of the human race had trumped every other single thing. The charge had to be perpetuated; I could practically hear it in the air. The purge had to continue—even if it was from beyond their own graves!

And then a miracle occurred, one Mia and I talk about to this very day, although really it was just the result of the green-black ship losing its bizarre cloak: for as the wet cement reached my knees and threatened to overwhelm the trunk, the control panel reappeared, at which instant I was able to access the bugs' minds—for Mia's abilities had rubbed off on me in a way we still don't understand—enough to depress the right sequence and cause the egg to open, its greenish fluid flooding the ship's surface as Mia inhaled violently and coughed up yet more liquid—the bugs chattering and cursing indecipherably as the concrete reached for my thighs. And then, somehow, somehow, I was able to scoop her into my arms and climb out of the pit, although, again, the fact that I was able to do so remains a mystery to us even today. Perhaps it was just love and the power it can confer. For I *did* love her, of that much I was certain. And I wasn't about to abandon her to another eternal limbo.

All I know is that at some point the pit had been filled and I'd successfully shut down the mixer, and that we'd stood there for what seemed a long time just watching the cement cure and feeling grateful for our lives. Nor was it a time for celebration considering how much pain and suffering the thing had caused; but rather a time to reflect and meditate and yes, to pray.

Pray that no one ever came and dug the cursed thing out.

Pray that the bugs, whatever they were and wherever they were from, would never send another.

Why did I do it? *Because I was meant to.* Because that's why I had been allowed to live. This was the whole of the affair in one simple statement.

Memory, of course, can be a dodgy thing: why else would my recall of the Benton Boys—and how Old Man Moss had brought their reign of terror to an end—have lain dormant for so long (forty years, to be exact), right up until that moment I saw what I'd at first taken to be a man—but quickly realized was not—ascending the tower crane just beyond our encampment?

The obvious answer is that a lot can happen in forty years. A man could go from being an innocent kid in Benton, Washington (population one-hundred and seventeen) to a scary homeless dude in Seattle—Belltown, to be precise—just as I had. But there's another answer, too, one we don't talk about as much, which is that some things get buried not for any lack of a mental space to put them but for their very unfathomableness and steadfast refusal to make sense. For me, Old Man Moss' handling of the Benton Boys had been just that, something I'd sublimated completely in the years following not because the event—the events—had been forgotten, but because I simply hadn't the means of processing them up until that night; the night I climbed the massive tower crane in downtown Seattle and came face to face with the brute. The night the string of gruesome murders that had plagued the city for months had, at last, come to an end.

"I don't see anything," said Billy the Skid, his boozy breath seeming to billow with each syllable, as he stood beside me and squinted up at the crane. "Who would it be? Construction's been halted for months, even I know that."

"I didn't say 'who,' I said 'what,' as in what is that, right there?" I pointed to where the gray figure could once again be seen (ascending not the ladder inside the scaffolding but the tower itself, like some kind of huge spider). "Do you see it? Like a man, and yet somehow not a

man. And look, it's got someone thrown over its shoulder. It's right there, damn you!"

Billy only shook his head. "Whatever you say, boss." He chuckled as he made his way back to his shopping cart. "Someone thrown over his shoulder. I say if you can't handle Thunderbird you ought to leave the drinking to me. Who the hell did 'ya think it was? The Belltown Brute? Ha! And I suppose he ..."

But I wasn't listening, not really. I was still watching the gray man, the gray *thing*, ascend the tower—the hammerhead, I've heard them called—its tail swinging like a cobra (yes, yes, it had a *tail*), its ashen skin seeming to catch the lightning and throw it back, its cone-shaped head turning to face me.

Yes. Yes, it could be. Still ... was it even possible? Well, no, to be frank—it wasn't. But then, everything about the summer of '79 and what had happened to the Benton Boys and Old Man Moss' ancient Jewish magik had been impossible. That didn't change the fact that it had happened—and it *had* happened—hadn't it?

I didn't know for sure, no more than I knew whether the entry point to the crane would be locked or if I had the courage to scale the ladder or if lightning would strike as I climbed killing me just as dead as the Benton Boys. In the end I was certain of only one thing—one thing alone as I gazed up at the tower crane and watched its great jib swing in the wind. And that was that if what I suspected was true, I was at least partially responsible—for the Benton Boys, for the string of murders across Seattle and the so-called "Belltown Brute," all of it.

And that meant I had a responsibility to do something. Indeed, that I was the only person who could.

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THEY'D HAD NAMES, OF course. Rusty, Jack, and Colton—otherwise known as the Benton Boys. But their individual identities had long since been subsumed by the group, the pack—I'm sure if you would have

caught any single one of them alone they'd have been just as agreeable as could be. The rub, of course, was that they were never alone—that was something those who challenged them learned quickly. I learned it the day I was to meet Colton at the flagpole after school to settle our differences and he didn't show; which left Aaron and I to hoof it home feeling both victorious and relieved, at least, that is, until we rounded his block—and found them waiting for us. All three of them.

I wish I could say I was shocked that Aaron got the worst of it—it was my fight, after all, not his—but the truth of it was the Benton Boys' race-hatred was well known, and they weren't about to miss a chance to thrash a genuine Jew. Not when his idiot friend had created such a perfect opportunity. And so the racial epitaphs flew, faster even than the Boys' fists—kike, shylock, yid, Christ-killer, a few I'd never even heard before—and poor Aaron bled, and by the time it was done we'd both suffered concussions and Aaron had lost a tooth and Old Man Moss had begun screaming—in Yiddish—from his door, calling the Boys chazers and hitsigers and paskudniks, and informing them the police were already on their way. Which they weren't, actually, because Old Man Moss didn't trust anyone in a uniform.

Regardless, the Benton Boys promptly fled, and after a brief sojourn in the emergency room we were back in Aaron's front yard—just sitting there on the porch with his parents and watching the shadows lengthen across the grass. That's when I first heard his old man utter the word "golem," which he pronounced *goy-lem*, drawing a stern rebuke from Aaron's mother, who said, quickly, "Feh! And bring tsores upon us? Oy vey! *Mishegas*."

The Old Man only snorted. "It is Mishegas to do nothing." He stroked Aaron's hair absently. "No. An eye for an eye. A tooth for an actual tooth."

"Bubbala ..."

"No. *Meesa masheena*. So it will be."

And nothing more was said—not by the Old Man or by Aaron’s mother or by anyone present at all.

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BY THE TIME I SAW OLD Man Moss again, Spring was moving rapidly toward Summer and we’d been out of school for nearly two weeks—long enough to have already tired of jumping into the river and/or bicycling out to Shelly Lake; which, in case you were wondering, were the only things to do in Benton, during that summer or any other. I was luckier than most in that I had a lawn mowing business to occupy my time—mostly for friends and family, the Mosses included—which is what I was doing when Aaron tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I could lend he and his father a quick hand.

“Is it out of this heat?” I remember shouting over the lawnmower—which was louder than most—the sweat running in rivers down my face and arms, “Because I’m dying here, and that’s no joke.”

“It’s right here, in the garage,” he said breezily, but seemed uneasy as I killed the motor and sponged my brow. “Look ... not a word about this, okay? And, please, don’t laugh. Whatever you do. He—he’s touchy about his art.”

I think I just looked at him. It was fine by me; I’d no idea he was even an artist. “Sure, man. No problem.” I must have leaned toward him. “What is it? Some kind of naked pictures?”

He blushed and stepped back. “No, man. Jesus. But it is—strange. Not a word now, okay?”

“Not a word,” I promised, and gave him a salute.

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IT’S FUNNY—because the first thing I noticed upon stepping into the garage wasn’t the fact that Old Man Moss was holding what appeared to be massive gray arm in his hands. Nor was it the fact that in the middle of the room stood an 8-foot-tall giant—a giant which appeared to have

been fashioned from solid clay and resembled not so much a man but a hulking, naked ape. Nor was it even the thing's frightful visage or stoic, lifeless, outsized eyes.

No, it was the fact that the room was illuminated by candles and candleabrams—as opposed to bulbs or work lights or sun seeping through windows (all of which had been covered with what appeared to be black sheets). It was the fact that the garage didn't look like a garage. It looked—for all intents and purposes—like a temple.

"Ah, Thomas, by boy! *Vus machs da!* You are just in time."

It was on the tips of my lips to ask him what for when he handed me the arm, which was surprisingly heavy. "I'll need you and Aaron to hold this while I sculpt. Can you do that?"

The clay was tacky and moist beneath my fingers. I looked at Aaron, who looked back at me as if to say, *Just go with it. Humor him.*

"Sure, Mr. Moss. But—" I followed Aaron's lead as he positioned the arm against the mock brute's shoulder. "What on earth *is* it?"

His face beamed with pride as he worked the leaden clay. "Why, this is Yossele—but you may call him Josef. And he is what the rabbis of Chelm and Prague called a golem—a being created from inanimate matter. This one is devoted to *tzedakah*, or justice."

At last he stepped back and appeared to scrutinize his work. "And justice is precisely what he will bring—once he is finished. Once the *shem* has been placed in his mouth." He took a deep breath and exhaled, tentatively. "Okay, boys ... you can let go. Slowly."

I didn't know what justice had to do with art, but we did so—the clammy clay wanting to stick to our fingers, its moist touch seeming hesitant to break contact. "Aaron, won't you be a good *boychick* and bring me the *shem*. Easy does it, now. Don't drop it."

I watched as Aaron approached one of the workbenches and fetched an intricately-crafted gold box.

“Ah, yes. The *shem*, you see, is what gives the golem its power—thank you, son, a *sheynem dank*. It is what gives it the ability to move and become animated.”

I glanced at Aaron, who only looked back at me uncertainly, as his father approached the golem and opened the box, the gold plating of which gleamed like a fire before the candelabrum. “This one consists of only one word—one of the Names of God, which is too sacred to be uttered here.” He withdrew a slip of paper and placed it into the golem’s mouth. “I shall only say *emet*, which means ‘truth’ ... and have done with it. And so it is finished. *Tetelestai*.” He turned and looked directly at me, I have no idea why. “The debt will be paid in full.”

Nobody said anything for a long time, even as the birds tweeted outside and a siren wailed somewhere in the distance. We just stood there and stared at his creation.

At last I said, “So are you going to enter in the Fair, Mr. Moss, or what? How will you even move it?”

At which Old Man Moss only smiled, ruffling my hair, and said, “No—it is only for this moment. That is the nature of Art. *Tsaytvaylik*. Tomorrow it will be gone. Now run along and finish your lawn. I’ve involved you enough.”

And the next day it *was* gone, at least according to Aaron, and both of us, I think, promptly forgot about it. At least until the first of the Benton Boys turned up dead, Sheriff Donner directing the recovery while his ashen-blue body bobbed listlessly against the Benedict A. Saltweather Dam.

It was June.

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BY JULY, THE BODY OF a second Benton Boy had been discovered—my very own buddy, Colton.

They’d found him in a stone quarry about fifteen miles from town—the Eureka Tile Company, as I recall—his limbs broken and bent

back on themselves (“like some discarded Raggedy Ann,” wrote the local paper) and his head completely gone—which caused a real sensation amongst the townsfolk as each attempted to solve the riddle and at least one woman reported having seen it: “Just floating down the river, like a pale, blue ball.”

But it wasn’t until Rusty was killed that things reached a fever pitch, with Sheriff Donner under attack for failing to solve the case and neighbor turning against neighbor in a kind of collective paranoia—for by this point no one could be trusted, not in such a small town, and the killer or killers might be anyone, even your spouse or best friend.

It was against this backdrop that I was able to break from my lawn duties—which had exploded like gangbusters over the summer—long enough to visit the Mosses: which would have been the day before Independence Day, 1979. A Tuesday, as I recall. It’s funny I should remember that. Aaron’s mother was working in her vegetable garden—just bent over her radishes like an emaciated old crone—when I arrived, and didn’t even look up when I asked if Aaron was around. “He’s in his room—done sick with the flu. Best put on a mask before you go.” She added: “You’ll find some in the kitchen.”

I think I just looked at her—at her curved spine and thin ankles, her tied up hair which had gone gray as a golem. Then I went into the house and made my way toward Aaron’s room, passing his parents’ quarters—upon which had been hung a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign and a Star of David—on the way. I didn’t bother fetching a mask; I’m not sure why—maybe it was because I was already convinced that whatever Aaron had, I had too. Maybe it was because I was already convinced that by participating in the ritual we’d somehow brought a curse upon us—a curse upon Benton—that it had never been just ‘art’ and that it could never be atoned for, not by Aaron or myself or Old Man Moss or anybody. That we’d blasphemed the Name of the Lord and would now have to pay, just as Jack had paid, just as Colton had paid. Just as Rusty had paid when

they'd found him with his intestines wrapped around his throat and his eyeballs gouged out.

"Shut the door, please. Quickly," said Aaron as I stepped into his room—immediately noticing how dark it was, and that the windows had been completely blacked out (with the same sheets from the garage, I presumed). He added: "The light ... It—it's like it eats my eyes."

Christ—I *know*. But that's what he said: *Like it ate his eyes*.

I stumbled into a stool in the dark—it was right next to his bed—and sat down. Nor were the black sheets thick enough to completely choke the light, so that as I looked at him he began to manifest into something with an approximate shape: something I dare say was not entirely human—a thing thick and rounded and gray as the dead, like a huge misshapen rock, perhaps, or a mass of potter's clay, but with eyes. Then again it was dark enough so that I may only have imagined it—who's to say after forty years?

"Jesus, dude. What's happened to you? And where's your dad? I saw a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on his door. Is he—"

"Like me, only worse," choked Aaron, and then coughed—wetly, stickily. "Listen. I haven't much time. Do you remember the ritual ... and how we inserted the *shem* into the golem's mouth?"

"Of course," I said—and immediately started shaking my head. "Now wait a minute. You don't really think—"

"*Shut up, man. Just shut the fuck up.* This is important. The Benton Boys—what's happened to us—it's not a coincidence, okay? Dad—he created a golem ... do you understand? Not a work of art—not what Ms. Dickerson calls a metaphor. But a genuine, animate golem—right out of the folklore. Now, my mother called Rabbi Weiss when the murders started happening and told him what she suspected—that my dad had created Josef to avenge the Benton Boys' attack on us. And do you know what he said?"

"Aaron, Jesus, man—"

“He said this type of golem would go on killing, that it wouldn’t stop with just the Benton Boys but would continue on to different towns and cities—for months, years, even decades. That it could make itself invisible—at least to anyone who hadn’t a hand in creating it—and thus go about killing with complete efficiency; and that not even bullets could stop it, only the hand of its creator or someone who had assisted in that creation—by removing from its mouth the one thing that allowed it to move in the first place ... the Holy Shem, the slip of parchment upon which was written one of the secret Names of God.”

He gripped my arm suddenly and I could tell by his cold, clammy embrace that it wouldn’t be long; that his flesh had become like clay and his blood had turned thick as mud. “It’s you, Thomas, don’t you see? You! Only you can stop it now, only you can—”

But I didn’t hear anything else he had to say, for I’d scrambled to the door and burst back into the hall. And then I ran, ran as though the world could not contain me, faster and faster and further yet—across forty years and from every type of responsibility—into drugs and alcohol and the cold numbness of the streets. Into a dream of forgetfulness which ended only when I saw the man who was not a man scaling the ghostly tower crane near our ramshackle encampment in Belltown. Until I went to the base of it, and, finding its gate lazed open, mounted the ladder at its center. And began to climb.

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I WAS NEARING THE TOP—ALTHOUGH still a good fifty feet away—when there was a sound, a series of sounds, actually, *thunk—thunk—thunk*, like a ham bouncing down metal stairs, and something sprinkled my face. That’s when I realized that what had fallen (and bounced off the beams) was in fact a human head. By then, of course, it was gone, and I was continuing my ascent: trying not to acknowledge how the city had become so small or that lightning could strike at any instant or that the shaft of the crane was swaying woozily

in the wind. Trying and mostly succeeding—at least, that is, until I reached the top, whence I climbed onto the platform next to the operator's cab (which was hanging wide open) and proceeded to vomit, although whether it was from a fear of heights or the smell of decomposition from the cab I couldn't have said.

Nor was I surprised to find that the compartment was stuffed full of bodies and body parts, like a veritable meat locker ... filled with arms and legs and heads and torsos ... or that when I turned away to retch again I saw the golem itself at the end of the crane's long jib—just crouched there in a kind of lotus position, as if he—it—were meditating. As if it—he—were waiting for me.

I can see you, Josef, I thought as the American flag crackled at the back of the crane and the great jib swung languidly in the wind ... *Can you see me?*

And then I began moving forward, slowly, tentatively—the rails of the jib like ice beneath my grip.

You can, can't you? I thought, and knew that it was so. *Tell me, Josef. Why is it you think I was spared—why I've been spared all these years—when your other creators were turned into little more than pillars of salt? Have you ever thought about that?*

Lightning flashed in the distance and turned everything white—turned the golem white—so that its monstrous features fell into stark relief; so that its cone-shaped head shown like a knife.

We are bound together, after all—don't pretend I don't know that. Even as I know you can hear me—just as plain as though I were speaking. And I ask you again—have you thought about it? Because I have.

Thunder rumbled as I drew to within twenty feet of him and paused, wondering just how I would go about it, how I would remove the *shem*. At last I said, "You were created not by God but by a man and the sages before him—now you must return to your dust. Do you understand that? It is not now, nor has it ever been—nor will it ever be—your earth to walk. It is time to go, Josef. It is long past time."

He—it—whatever—just looked at me, its slanted gray eyes inert, uninhabited—lifeless—and yet, *not*. And it occurred to me that creation was itself a kind of blasphemy; a fracturing of some perfect, unfathomable thing into something separate and purely reducible—something alone, something apart. That it was, in a sense, a cruelty. And if that were the case—wasn't it at least possible that the golem—

But then it was *moving*—suddenly, impossibly, and I was stumbling back along the gangway, and before I could do much of anything it had leapt upon me and begun gnashing its teeth—at which instant I jammed my fist into its mouth and groped for the *shem*, and whereupon finding it, yanked it free.

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AT THAT IT HAD SIMPLY collapsed, its full weight pinning me to the gangway, and its body had broken apart like so much old masonry as its arms and legs snapped in two and its head rolled back from its shoulders—to promptly shatter against the steel mesh floor.

That's when the rains came, washing away the clay and drenching my hair and clothes, which were a beggar's clothes, until finally I rolled upon the gangway and peered down at our encampment—which was visible only because of Billy the Skid's battery-powered light—and realized, abruptly, that I still gripped the *shem*. The Holy Shem.

The Secret Name of God.

I didn't move, didn't breath, for what seemed a long time. In the end, I merely turned my fist and opened it—letting the slip of parchment fall. Watching as it fluttered into the void.

And then I slept.

At length I dreamed, of Benton and summer and freshly-cut grass ... and the first time I'd had matzo; as well as of Aaron and his parents and my parents too, whom I hadn't seen or dreamed of in years.

And when at last I awakened I did so not to the gray ceiling of my tent but a swirl of seagulls and the entire sky.

Malachi suspects something—has suspected, it's clear to me now, since the raid on Medea Coven. I can see it in his eyes as we stare at each other across the War Wagon: something cool, dispassionate (even behind the smoked lenses of his gas mask), predatory, like a cat. He is on to something, he knows.

My headset crackles as the driver updates our status: "Fifteen minutes to target. Check your belts and harnesses—it's going to get bumpy."

I check my belt and harness, the wagon starting to rock, our tanks clinking and sloshing. Jeremiah offers me a stick of gum—but I shake my head. Nobody says anything.

"Remember, we're going in fast and we're going in hot," crackles Patrobus (as though he has taken up residence in our very minds), "Look sharp. And don't get so preoccupied with your kill count that you forget; this is an *intelligence* op. Find the lab, extract what you can, air it out, and then *get out*. Is that clear?"

Although he doesn't mention him by name we all know who he's referring to: Malachi, who once let a witch escape just so he could prolong the pursuit. A *witch*. A woman. A carrier of the M24 virus. Something to be killed on sight.

"It is clear, Captain," says Jeremiah, glancing at his friend—at Malachi. "I'll make sure Doctor Aluka leaves him some targets. We'll keep him occupied."

"Find the lab, Jeremiah. Find out what it is they've been doing there. Then get your men back on this side of the Transom."

And then he is gone and there is just the twelve of us, our buckled hats canted low on our brows, our flame-retardant Puritan tunics black as night and white as snow, our muskets charged and ready to spew fire.

At which moment Malachi just looks at me, seeming to smirk behind his mask (which has been spit shined to a gloss), and says, "How about it, Brother Aluka? A contest! Who can kill the most women? That is—if you still have the jewels for it."

“Lay off him,” says Jeremiah. “The Medea raid was tough on everyone. Besides, his record’s better than any of us.”

But I don’t say anything, only use the time remaining to dissemble and clean my weapon, wondering: What did he see and how much does he know? And what will happen when I can no longer hide my eyes—which have begun to turn white when I sleep, witch’s white, and take longer to clear each morning? How long is it until I—who am not fully man nor fully woman—have at last become neither; neither male nor female, neither Witch Doctor or witch?

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THEY DON’T KNOW, OF course. That I am so-called intersex. How could they? When I first came to the guild I had yet to even reach puberty, therefore my feminine attributes had yet to develop and I was diagnosed instead with a mild form of AIS, or androgen insensitivity syndrome. My face, in short, resembled a woman—at least, more so than it did a man’s. Nor was I drafted at the age of twelve as are most Witch Doctors—or so I’ve been told—but rather just showed up one day at the station-house: starving, dehydrated, dressed in rags. Lost. If not for Doctor Patrobus—who was not yet even a captain but argued effectively for my indoctrination—I would have perished. As for my life before that time, I have little memory. Only vignettes, which come to me in the twilight between sleep and wakefulness and—bearing more in common with dreams than truth—are best forgotten.

Concealing my identity from my fellow doctors, meanwhile, has not been difficult, for it is the expectation amongst the men of New Salem that everyone should become self-sufficient—and at the youngest age possible—thus, I have lived alone in a cottage near the station-house for nearly twenty years—and have never had to shower or otherwise disrobe in their presence. Only the machine men and women of the brothel know for certain (one man and two women, to be precise), and they do not speak, save for the words for which they’ve been programmed. And

so my secrets have been kept safe even while my identity has been tested—enough so that I had determined myself to be a heterosexual male in a half-female body; feminine, it is true, and yet, psychologically, all male. All witch doctor.

Until, that was, the raid on Medea Coven. Until the oddly boyish girl in the crystalline shower—that haunted, singular girl, whose eyes might have been a lover's and yet, queerly, a sister's too. The pale girl with the pale, milky, alabaster eyes—though not quite white. The witch with the labrys tattoo.

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THEY SWARM ME LIKE wasps the instant the elevator doors open, pale hands groping, white eyes flashing—and the raid on Medea, which has already been a disaster, becomes very nearly a rout. In the end all I can do is to open my musket—even as they claw and tear at my clothing—and bathe the compartment in flame; hoping the fireproof quilting of my vest will protect me now that it has been so gravely compromised.

Somehow, it works—and I am able to climb out from beneath them, triggering the doors behind me before any can escape to continue their attack. (As Captain Patrobus likes to say: “A burning witch is not a dead witch—it is, however, a pissed off one.”)

Then the car is descending and I am clasping my tunic—which has been ripped open to expose a breast—knowing that if I am to sweep and clear the floor I will have to do so one-handed—something I am not sure I can do. But the Captain—my Captain!—is counting on me; this much I know too, as are Jeremiah and the others (whether they would admit to it or not). And so I push on to the first unit (the coven has squatted in an abandoned luxury hotel) and kick in its door—where, having begun to squeeze the trigger, I first glimpse the girl in the crystalline shower (by which I mean a shower so exquisite it seems to have been hewn from some great diamond rather than constructed of metal and glass; a

shower, oddly, which stands at the very center of the room); and where, inexplicably, I pause. For she is looking directly at me.

It is a mystery—why I do not fire. Why I do not simply squeeze the trigger and send an explosive projectile hurtling into the glass. Why I don't just drench the room in fire and smoke and quickly move onto the next: sweeping each and every unit, clearing the entire floor. Instead I find myself barking at her, ordering her, shouting for her to *get out, get down, down upon the floor—hurry, hurry, do it now!*

But she does not listen, only gently turns the taps, then, reaching for her towel, wraps it about herself and exits the stall—calmly, serenely—until she is standing before me and simply staring, her eyes beginning to widen, her expression one of complete puzzlement. And it is at this moment and none before that I realize that, in my haste and terror, I have gripped my weapon in both hands—allowing the torn flap of uniform to fall. Allowing my breast to fall and be visible. And though I push it back up immediately and press it to my chest, the damage has been done; so much so that the girl feels emboldened to approach me, to enter my immediate space, to reach up and to touch my mask, feeling its rubbery flesh, tracing its cruel contours, as though I were a book of Braille beneath her fingers.

“You poor, poor, pitiable thing. How lost you must feel. How lonely. What have they done to you, that you could do this? That you could eat your own so—willingly. How did they break you so completely?”

But I am frozen, paralyzed, managing only to divert me eyes, managing only to note the tattoo on her shoulder: two female symbols entwined, what is known as a labrys—the symbol of female solidarity, the symbol of mutual Eros. And I feel myself coming undone, feel my hand lower and the torn fabric fall, feel my legs buckle like so much rubber until I collapse against the floor in a jangling heap and she reaches out to me in a way no one has ever reached out to me, feeling my pain, anticipating its reach, empathizing as though I were a sister, touching me as

though my weakness could not only be forgiven but was to be expected, as though—

And her head simply explodes—blasting apart like a watermelon, speckling the lenses of my gasmask with blood, spattering the crystalline shower like shot. And when I look behind me I see Malachi seeming to laugh through his mask; laughing and feigning to blow on his gun, before twirling it like a gunslinger and depositing it into its holster.

After which he says, “And an Empath makes twenty. Oh, Aluka! If I didn’t know better I’d say you were about to dance!”

He goes to the girl’s flaming corpse, and, snatching up her towel—which has somehow survived the blast—begins beating out the flames. What he does not do is to help me up. What he does not do is ask me if I’m all right.

I clasp my uniform against my chest and stand, hoping he hasn’t seen anything, hoping he is just as self-absorbed as he seems, praying he has paid no witness to my failure. At last he asks, “Do we need a medic, is that it? You look as though you’ve been shot. Let me have a look—”

I jerk away before he is able to touch me, gripping my uniform like a vise, retreating back through the door.

“It’s nothing,” I say, “Screamers outside the elevator. It’s just—just a flesh wound. Where’s Jeremiah?”

He pauses, abruptly, as though it wouldn’t have occurred to him to ask that, not in a thousand years. “He’s—being Jeremiah, killing witches on the seventh floor. What am I, his mother?” He looks me up and down once—twice. “Are you good to go, or what? We’ve still got the rest of this floor to clear.”

I hold my uniform, feeling suddenly nauseous, suddenly disoriented. “Maybe—maybe it’s worse than I thought. Maybe—can you handle it, you think?”

That’s when I see it—the first sign of real unease, the first inkling that there is something amiss, something not right—something he should be seeing, but cannot. Then he is gone—out the doorway and down the

hall, after which I hear a door being kicked in and a series of blasts, which echo throughout the corridor like thunder. Which reverberate from the walls like a storm.

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WE ARE CLOSE ENOUGH now that the driver has activated the loudspeakers: *Ohhh, myyy love, my darling, I've hungered for your touch ...*

It is time; there's a riot of clicks and ca-chinks as everyone primes their muskets, pressurizes their masks. I double check my grip reservoir (crucial in the event one gets separated from their tank): it is full.

And time ... goes by ... so slowly ...

I notice a few disconnect their arm hoses—Malachi, Ishmael, Artemas—against regulation but a favorite hack, for it allows the musket to be switched from hand to hand or spun like a wheel from its ring lever. The problem is that witches have been known to use telekinesis to snatch the weapons away—that and the fact that the grip has limited capacity and reseating it can take precious seconds.

And then we are there, we are at the former hospital—the wagon lurching to a stop, the rear doors banging open—and everyone is unbuckling, piling out.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” shouts Jeremiah, even as the first charges are thrown and detonate against the doors—blasting them to smithereens, rocking the grounds like an earthquake. “Aluka, Malachi, Lazarus—levels 3 through 4, go! Ishmael, Silas, Artemas, come with me.”

Ohhh, myyy love, my darling ...

We enter the foyer—fanning out like black specters, winding up staircases, pouring into hallways, as the first of the witches are lit up like little suns and a collective gasp echoes throughout the building. Seconds later the screaming begins, the shrieks, the mournful wailing, like mothers over dead children.

I focus on locating the lab—knowing Malachi will clear the floor; knowing he will leave nothing standing.

The truth is I don't know if I can still do it: kill witches, murder women. The truth is something has awakened that I cannot put back to sleep— something ghostly, elusive, something I cannot parse or ration away.

I push it from my mind, ducking into a side corridor, an inner voice seeming to tell me what to do, where to go, as if a kind of third ear has opened, *a third eye*—a window into the world of the witches.

The blue door at the end of the hall, the voice seems to say, the *voices*, rather. *Do you remember? We put it in ourselves—the witches of Scarth Coven—put it in to withstand the blast of their muskets. But you know the code; it is embedded in the hive. Just use your intuition, and let thy hand be thy guide.*

And then I am there and am punching in the code—66-67-66—understanding not at all what has happened; as the lock mechanism buzzes and the bolt retracts. As the door swings open and the lab, so long and white and evenly-lit (precisely as it appeared in the spy photos), so incongruous with everything we thought we knew about the witches, appears.

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NOR IS IT UNOCCUPIED—FOR a woman has approached in the time it's taken me to stand there; a tall woman with long, straight, black hair and eyes as white as her smock—a High Witch as far removed from the screamers as is a human from a chimpanzee. I train my weapon on her.

"Based on the fact that you have not yet incinerated everything," she says, her voice calm, clear, mellifluous, "I'll take it you are surprised." Then she laughs a little. "What did you expect, a boiling cauldron?"

I look at her, saying nothing.

She adds, "I must say, *I* am surprised. By you. Some things never change. We still underestimate each other. Women and men."

She moves the hair away from her eyes and regards me—coolly, clinically. “How did you know? The code, our very existence ... It seems, improbable.”

I glance about the room: at the vertical glass tanks containing dyed water and floating cadavers (both male and female). At the jars containing fetuses and inner reproductive organs and phalluses.

“Information,” I say. “Program objectives. Military applications. Outcomes. For your life.”

She doesn’t move, doesn’t blink. “We both know that isn’t going to happen ... *Witch Doctor*.”

I stare at her as muskets discharge in the distance and grenade blasts rock the building. At last I reach up with my free hand and decompress the mask ... then take it off completely and swing it around to my back. “Perhaps I’m not asking as a *Witch Doctor*. Or even a man.”

She looks at me incredulously, disbelievingly, then, suddenly, rushes to within several feet of me, where she pauses. “You’re ... But—your voice, *your eyes*. How could a woman have clear—”

I only shake my head.

Slowly, it dawns on her, spilling across her face like the sun, illuminating her eyes. “Oh, my God.” She sways as though she might fall upon the floor; then, recovering, begins pacing back and forth. “I mean, what are the odds ...”

“You begin to see my interest,” I say, even as my finger tightens against the trigger. “Now—again. Your life for information. What is all this about?”

She stops pacing suddenly, her face a riot of emotions, as though she is experiencing some kind of epiphany. “But, don’t you see?” She gestures at the tanks and jars. “*You’re* what all this is about. Facial reconstruction, breast reduction, eye normalization—all attempts to place spies amongst your ranks; to infiltrate you, as you have infiltrated us.”

She steps to within a few feet of me. "The Power—do you have it? How about identity? Orientation? Do they know—the men, that is—do they accept it?"

I hesitate, questioning my own motives. At last I say, "No, they do not—know, that is. I came to them before puberty. As for acceptance, they accept that I am a man with androgen insensitivity syndrome; a man who's face resembles a woman's. That is all. As for having the Power ... my eyes have begun to change, at night, but clearing as the day goes on—if that's what you mean. Now ... please. Details."

She looks at me as though having achieved a minor victory. "That's how you found me, by accessing the hive mind, though you wouldn't have been aware of it. So, you've stayed among them and killed for them in order to survive, but now all that's changing. Isn't it?"

I don't say anything, only continue to stare at her.

"And it *is* changing—make no mistake. That's how M24 progresses. Your eyes will remain white longer with each passing day—until the transformation is at last complete." She scans my face as though attempting to read my thoughts. "Tell me, Witch Doctor. What will you do when that day arrives?"

I say nothing, even as my skin begins to twitch, my musket begins to waver.

"What kind of mercy do you expect from men who have sworn to kill witches on sight, even were it their own mother? Do you presume to think that they shall make an exception for you, and you alone? Or have you considered another way, the only way ... the way of the witches, the way of women. Have you considered following your will to survive unto us—we who will accept you without question and offer you a safe haven amidst the conflict?"

I listen, no longer certain if I am just playing along or not. At last I say, "In return for information, of course."

"Of course," she says, "we are at war. And not just information—but service. For a time, at least."

"You want me to spy, then." I shake my head. "Refuse. For one, the whitening of my eyes is occurring too rapidly. For two, I could never—"

"We have developed a serum for that," she says, and points to a row of vials along the wall. "M-6. It is crude—untested—but it is my belief that it will work."

To my own amazement, I begin lowering my weapon, slowly, tentatively. "And after this period of service ... you would welcome me into your fold. Knowing I am neither male nor female. Knowing I am neither witch nor—"

"But you *are* a witch, Aluka," she says—and, noticing my reaction, adds: "I have reached into your mind for your name, I am sorry. It was not hard to do—you are one of us now. And we accept all who have been blessed by M24; every living thing—we would accept a man, if he was so gifted."

She extends her hand—languidly, gracefully—smiling beatifically, her hair and skin seeming to shine. "Give me your weapon, Aluka. It is no longer needed. Come home, come home—to how it was in the womb. How it was intended ..."

She touches my testicles through my clothing, seeming almost to fondle them, almost to be initiating intimacy, as I drop my weapon to the floor and look into her eyes—finding them beautiful beyond measure, wise beyond comprehension. Hypnotizing ...

"As the Goddess says," she whispers, her hand raising to my manhood, touching its shaft, "If thine eye offends thee—pluck it out. So, too, if thine sword, thine weapon, causes ye to do harm," She grips me suddenly and violently. "Ye must cut it from thine body—yea, cast it before the swine!"

And then I am being electrified from groin to crown, her façade of beauty falling away, her eyes seeming to glow like hot coals, her mouth lazing open as the burning, black bile erupts toward my face—and I duck, rolling, snatching up my weapon, firing from the floor, lighting her up like a Christmas tree.

I waste no time but instead scramble to my feet, rushing toward the vials she indicated, even as she spins about the room, screaming and flailing, knocking over Bunsen burners, smashing test tubes. I spot it instantly—M-6, the serum which can conceal the eyes—and snatch it up, stuffing it into my tunic, ensuring it cannot be seen. Then I back toward the door, opening my musket wide, drenching the lab in flame, causing the tanks holding the cadavers to boil and explode and spill their specimens, setting off a series of blasts as chemicals throughout the lab are superheated and ignited. And I have but turned to go when I am suddenly faced with a wall of witches—screamers, naturally—crowding in from the hall, groping at my accouterments, tearing open the vest where I'd repaired it, toppling me backward so that I crash upon my tank.

I swipe the musket left to right, igniting them one by one, bursting their eyes, causing them to squeal like pigs. Then I am up and scrambling, through the door and into the hall, where I am once again blocked—for his confrontational posture is clear—this time by Malachi, who has taken off his mask and is smiling at me—smirking—chewing gum. Training his weapon.

“Not so fast, Aluka,” he says, chomping on the gum, his eyes sparkling. “I think, just now, that you should drop your weapon. Can you do that for me? Be a sport now—this is awkward enough. Let us make no more messes. Not today. Just drop it, and we shall go.”

I look at him for what seems a long time, weighing my options, formulating responses, until, feeling as though something is different, I reach up—and touch my exposed breast.

Malachi only nods, seeming almost regretful, almost empathetic.

I drop my weapon.

“How long have you known?” I ask, wondering how Patrobus will respond, and will I at least be given a dignified death?

“I’ve suspected from the beginning, if you need to know,” he says, adding: “The Medea raid only confirmed it.” He studies me as though I were a marvel, shaking his head. “Patrobus’ favorite pupil. His pet! Not

a man with AIS but a woman, in truth—deceitful by nature, treacherous by impulse—and pre-M24, no doubt. Think of it: M24, in the very heart of New Salem!”

“No, it’s not that simple. I—”

“Patrobus will decide, once he knows the truth. Now. Come with me.”

“Malachi! Aluka! Is that you down there?”

Jeremiah, at the end of the smoke-filled hall— coming to investigate. Coming toward us.

What happens next happens very quickly, so quickly I cannot recall having actually decided to do it—instead it just flows over and through me until I am reaching toward Malachi and his gun is flying from his hand, flashing through the air like a missile, slapping into my own, at which instant I squeeze the trigger and his head simply explodes, his body bursting into flame, the tank on his back combusting.

Then it is over and I have adjusted the musket for maximum heat, whipping it back and forth over his crumpled body, incinerating him completely, as Jeremiah jogs up and asks me if I am okay, if I have seen Malachi, if the burning room behind me was in fact the lab ... until, noticing my torn uniform and exposed breast, he falls silent. Silent as the grave as I clasp the rent fabric and nudge it back into place. As I look at him and see myself reflected in the lenses of his gas mask—the large brown eyes, not yet white, the tangle of reddish-brown hair.

“We took the lab together,” I lie, “but, I’m sorry, Jeremiah.”

He looks beyond me, at the burning lab, the clouds of chemical gas, then at the ashes strewn all about the floor. At last he puts a hand over the side of his mask, as though receiving a transmission. “Yes, yes. Yes, it’s been completely aired out. Yes, unfortunately. KIA include doctors Silas and Malachi.”

I wait, knowing my fate is in his hands. Knowing I could never kill him—not Jeremiah—to save myself. That I am a liar, it is true, and a

freak, but a *human*, nonetheless. A man. A woman. But not, as yet, a witch. Not, as yet, a monster.

“Doctors Malachi and Aluka, who is right here beside me,” answers Jeremiah. He looks at me blankly, stoically, his expression impossible to read. “Yes, sir. I will. Jeremiah out.”

And we just look at each other, the building eerily silent, the raid over, the killing done. At last he says, “You’ve been promoted to alternate Lead, directly after me.” And extends his gloved hand—which I take.

And then we are heading back, back to the War Wagon, across the Transom and the shattered wastes, back to the clean, sterile station house and New Salem.

CRASH DIVE

T-minus 15 and counting. All set there, Chief?

I look at my reflection in the cockpit's front window—the tired eyes, the premature wrinkles and crow's feet—and beyond: to the blue hole and return mirror—which will remain invisible to the naked eye until I am almost upon it.

Roger that. All systems are go and I am hot to drop.

Roger that, *Diver 7*. Nine and counting: 8 ... 7 ... 6 ...

I brace myself as the launch indicator switches from red to green—like a streetlight in the void—and the helmet's blue visor lowers ... locking into place.

2 ... 1 ...

I grip the Jesus handles.

Launch.

• • • •

ELTON JOHN ONCE SANG, “And all this science, I don’t understand. It’s just my job five days a week.” That’s how it is when you’re a Crash Diver: you don’t need to understand blue holes or how they differ from wormholes and black holes or what a mobius mirror does—only that it *must* work, every time—because, at the end of the day, that isn’t your job. Your job is to be a guinea pig: to be shot into the vortex at near light speed and experience what effect blue hole-assisted mirror travel has on the human body and psyche. Your job is to penetrate to whatever depth they’ve set the mirror—and, if you’re lucky, to enter that mirror and get bounced back.

It hasn’t always been like this. Before there was *Zebra Station*—with its luxurious gravity centrifuge and its row of black and yellow delta divers hanging like bats from the launch jib—there was *Blue One*, a sparsely-manned outpost which had sent the first human souls into the maw of the blue hole, men who had come back white-haired and emaciated, debilitated—mentally and physically—mad.

The Crash Diver Program changed all that. From now on only specially-trained pilots would be sent into the Hole, pilots who had the benefit of the first men's experiences as well as spacecraft designed specifically for the task. A lot was learned in a very short time—one of these things was that men who entered the vortex experienced a series of hallucinations, or Dive Visions, in which they briefly felt they had become someone or something else: a soldier in the Holy Roman Army, say, or a person of the opposite sex. Some even purported to have become animals or alien lifeforms—it was the latter which had apparently driven the men of *Blue One* clinically insane.

Another lesson was the fact that the farther a mirror was projected into the vortex the farther it could “cast” to its attendant portal; meaning the Hole might well hold the key to intergalactic space travel. This more than anything had accounted for the program's generous funding, not to mention its exhaustive launch table, which sometimes saw us drop as many as three times in a week. The chief problem, however, remained—and that was that the deeper one dropped, the more acute the hallucinations; hence, the missions had become increasingly volatile, increasingly dangerous.

Regardless, a decision had been made to make the next drop the deepest yet: all the way through the ergosphere—right up to the outer event horizon. By which they meant right up to the point of no return, even by mirror refraction.

And I was the one who drew the unlucky straw.

• • • •

IT IS RAINING. THAT'S the first thing I notice, the first thing that tells me I am no longer in the cockpit. The second is that I'm bleeding—bleeding from the leg, which is making it difficult to press the attack. The third is that I'm dying—as is my opponent—dying beneath a blood red sky.

"It is finished," he says, stumbling forward and back—his blood flowing freely, his hair matted in sweat. "Look at you! Your broadsword is shattered. Your armor is compromised. Why is it you continue?"

But I do not know why I continue—only that I was a Crash Diver once and will be so again, and so must face the vision, endure its consequences. Endure them so that future generations may bridge the gulf of galaxies!

At last I say: "Are you better off? We die together, Sir Aglovere. Surely you—"

But I am baffled by my own voice, so familiar and yet strange, and by my own words, which have materialized from nowhere.

And then he is charging, hacking at me wildly, and I am forced back along the hedgerow: until I lose my footing over a protruding root and topple headlong into the mud and bramble—whereupon my opponent falls on what's left of my sword and is promptly run through, his entrails unspooling like loops of linked sausage and his eyes turning to empty glass.

At length he says, "We kill ourselves," and laughs, even as I push him off me.

And then we just lay there, staring at the sky, neither of us saying anything, as our blood pools together and spirals down the slope. As the clouds continue to rumble—pouring rain into our dying eyes.

• • • •

THE DIVER TREMBLES violently as I shake the vision off.

... repeat, *Zebra One* to Diver 7, are you all right?

I feel my leg through my flight suit, half expecting it to be flayed wide open—but I am unharmed, of course.

Roger that, *Zebra One*. However I am experiencing turbulence I cannot account for—what can you tell me?

There is a long pause which is pregnant with static, after which *Zebra One* responds, chopply, Diver 7 ... *Zebra One*. Be advised ... some kind of anomaly. We are working ... before it effects the mirrors. Please ...

And then they are gone.

• • • •

I AM GONE, TOO. AT least, I am no longer in the cockpit. Instead, I awaken from a dream I cannot remember in a place I have never been—no, I can see now that is incorrect. I am *home*, still sequestered in the dingy sleeping quarters at the very back of the Temple—where I have remained now for three days without benefit of food or water, and where I shall stay—unto death, if necessary—until Rue Umbra shows me His face. Until He Who Created Everything bestows upon me the gift of His Holy visage.

“Master Hezekiah ... the Artifact is ready.”

“Bring it to me, Jocasta. I will view it here in my chambers.”

“Yes, Master.”

I rise and swing my legs out of bed, and am startled briefly by my reflection in the bureau mirror. For it seems at first that I am someone—*something*—else; someone/something alien, with a gray, rumpled body and a face that is smooth like glass. Then it is gone and I see only myself: the green scales, the angled brow, the tired eyes of the High Priest of Samara.

At length Jocasta re-enters the room and places the box on the rug at my feet. “It is my hope—*our* hope, Master, the entire congregation’s—that you will end your fast soon. May Rue Umbra light your way.”

He moves to leave but hesitates, pausing in the doorway. “It is also hoped ... that you will be careful. This so-called Artifact—it is not of this world.”

Then he is gone and I am alone with the box, the box containing the meteor which has somehow survived its entry into our atmosphere. The hollow meteor with the strange runes printed on its surface (at least, that

is how it has been described to me). The thing whose existence is responsible for my crisis of faith.

Show me, Oh Highest One. Send me a sign. Reveal to me, your faithful servant, the naked face of God.

But Rue Umbra is silent as I open the box and lift out the Artifact, and proceed to examine it by the dim light of the candles. Nor is the object so unfathomable as I'd presumed: for it is clearly something designed to protect the head, similar in many respects to our Centurions' helmets (although charred and blackened from its journey through the atmosphere) and composed of materials I have never seen; some of which glow at the touch of my fingers and cause the Artifact to hum and to vibrate ...

Show me your face, Oh Lord, so that I may believe again!

But in the end there is nothing, only silence, as a glassy shield lowers smoothly and locks into place. As I stare into its curved, indigo-blue surface—which has become a kind of looking glass, a mirror—and see only myself, Hezekiah. Only the High Priest of Samara laid low by his fast.

• • • •

SOMETHING IS WRONG. This much is clear as I stir from the vision and find the diver shaking—shaking as though it might fly apart any moment. *Zebra One*, meanwhile, is talking at me through my headset:

... get it back. We're trying ... but ... long shot. Repeat: we have ... return mirror. It's just ...

Again, damn you! You're breaking up. What about the mirror?

... has failed. We are trying—

But they are gone—and I am alone. Alone against the ergosphere, whose end must surely be near. Alone—in light of the mirror's failure—against the event horizon, beyond which lies Hell itself.

• • • •

I PAUSE, FEELING IT again. As though someone were in the cave with me, as though someone were watching.

I look to the mouth of the cavern, beyond which the snow continues to fall. No, it is nothing—the wind, perhaps, coursing through the opening.

I return to my work, continuing the stroke which will complete our leader (his snout blue with war paint, his shoulders broad and hairy), knowing he will be pleased. For I have captured him in truth—as well as the spirit of his hunt—captured him so that he might live for all time. And yet, as the winds moan and the torches falter, the feeling I am not alone persists, so that I again look to the door of the cave, and this time—someone is there.

• • • •

THE HOMINID DOESN'T move, doesn't seem to breathe, as I look at him, and for an instant I think, *Dr. Livingstone, I presume*. Then I laugh a little behind my visor, marveling that I can do so under the circumstances, and take a step forward, eliciting a growl from the creature I would not want to hear twice.

I hold, looking back at the diver—which is suspended nose-down in the middle of the air— before turning again to regard the creature and his art ... only to find them gone, replaced by a very old man in what appears to be a Tudor-style study parlor.

“Livingstone, Einstein, Hezekiah, we've been them all, at one time or another.” He begins moving toward me, casually. “You are ... Diver 7. I presume.”

I just look at him, saying nothing. Behind him is a blackboard which runs floor to ceiling and wall to wall, and is crowded with equations. Noticing my gaze, he says, “Ah, yes. Well. The hominid has his work, and I have mine.”

He stops within a few feet of me, examining my flight suit. “Your helmet. You won't be needing it.”

I look at him for what seems a long time. At last I reach up and trigger the visor, which glides up and out of the way, and take a deep breath. The air is fine.

"Where am I?" I ask, glancing about the room, noting its exotic décor: a red, cactus-like plant (without needles) which looks as though it belongs at the bottom of an alien sea; a black and silver obelisk the height of a man; a polished suit of armor standing sentinel in a corner. "And who are you?"

The old man smiles, warmly, compassionately. "I should have thought you'd have guessed. As for where, why, you're stone cold dead in the middle of a blue hole. Where else? The mirrors, alas, have failed—but you knew that already. No, what you really want to know is ... what does it all mean? The Hole, the visions, everything. Isn't that right, Diver 7?"

I look at the old man expectantly.

"Beats the hell out of me," he says, and moves toward the blackboard. "A blue hole is where mathematics go to die. No. What I have left is only conjecture, speculation—metaphysics rather than physics, notes as opposed to a complete script." He puts his hands on his hips, examining his formulas, and exhales, warily. "Of the trail of ink there is no end."

At length he begins moving again, pacing beyond the red plant and the black and silver obelisk, past the suit of armor which gleams like gold in the umber firelight. "Say, just say, for the sake of argument, that the Buddhists are right, and that reincarnation is real. And that its purpose is to evolve souls, to grow them—from the first spark of sentience to something approaching divinity. Would you allow that this was a worthy end to our travails?"

I don't say anything, only continue to watch him.

"Say, too, that these incarnations are infinite, or nearly so, occurring not just in this universe but a *multiverse*, so that, in time, we have experienced creation from every window and every door, every viewpoint—in short, we have been everyone and everything. *Mmm?* Shall we say it?"

He stops and turns around, begins pacing back toward me. “And that, as we reach the point of infinite progression, we begin to, slide, if you will, back and forth amongst our lifetimes—putting the lesson together, as it were, making of it a sphere, rather than a line, compressing everything into an infinitely dense mass, an Alpha and Omega, a singularity such as is found in the heart of our blue hole. Would you say then that we had solved the riddle of its phantasmagorias?”

He pauses not three feet away and I just look at him: the tired eyes, the deep wrinkles and crow’s feet—at last, I understand.

I lift off my helmet.

“I was you, once,” I say. “We were ... We will ...”

He nods, slowly. “Not only us but all men, all sentient beings. Nothing is wasted.”

My mind reels. “But ... The Hole. My diver. It took those things to—”

He laughs suddenly. “Oh, that. Why, that’s just a happy coincidence. You still don’t understand, do you? You never needed the ship, or the vortex. You—we—were ready. Our infinite progression had reached—”

“Madness,” I say. “Shadows within shadows.”

But he is gone, replaced by Hezekiah. “It’s the shadows that exist,” he says, and I understand him perfectly in spite of his alien tongue. “The objects that create them; those are the illusions. Put another way: The ghost is real—the machine is not. Now—it is time.”

And I am back in the cave, standing so close to the hominid I can smell him, watching him rub chalk on the stone, watching him create entire worlds. Until he looks at me sidelong and hands me the tool—thoughtfully, knowingly—as if he were encouraging me. As if he were saying: *You too can do it. You, too, are the Creator.*

Until I close my fingers on the chalk and everything fades to black.

And that blackness becomes Light.

I AM BECOME THE WHITE Fountain, the creator of worlds—the Big Bang which will expand outward, creating a new universe. Nor has the previous universe ceased to exist; for it dreams behind us on the other side of the Hole—its galaxies and star systems safely intact, its sentience growing by leaps and bounds.

Meanwhile, even amidst the crash and swirl of creation, I have remained—the godhead of an entirely new paradigm; the observer, and yet, somehow, the observed; the ghost in the rapidly expanding machine. Nor has every vestige of my former self been annihilated; for something has survived the explosion which even now hurtles outward into the maelstrom, spinning, tumbling, drifting ever further. For a billion years, it drifts, until, caught by a mid-size world's gravitational pull, it falls like a shooting star into an alien sea—a sea as red as blood—whereupon, again, it *drifts*.

Until it is retrieved from the water by a pair of eager hands—four-fingered hands—which grip the helmet firmly and place it into the boat, after which it is passed from one being to the other like the physical manifestation of a riddle, and finally put into a box.

Where it will remain—its secrets safe, its numeral '07' unseen—until delivered to the priest.

THE QUICK AND THE JURASSIC UNDEAD

After the time-storm ...
After the dinosaur apocalypse ...

They were in bad shape, and Williams knew it. The quill raptors had struck just when they were most vulnerable—when they were still waking up—and while they were able to fend them off (Ank did most the fending, because Williams had taken a quill early in the attack), the melee had left them cut up and exhausted. Worse, it had left Williams delirious—no matter that he'd managed to pull out the quill before it could deliver much of its poison. Enough remained that walking was difficult even on the smooth, level highway, plus he'd begun to see things—like the huge, Google-style sign which read: WELCOME TO DEVIL'S GORGE: LIKE THE OLD WEST, ONLY BETTER.

To say its oversized gunslinger and buxom saloon girl statues were incongruous with the bleak, rain-drenched landscape would have been an understatement, but there they were, bidding them welcome to a town “forgotten by time, alone against its hills, where adventure and thrills await!”

“You seeing what I’m seeing, Ank?”

The big ankylosaur didn’t respond, not so much as a mew. His gait, however, had slowed—enough to convince Williams that the sign was real and he was seeing it too. Sure enough, after they had taken the indicated exit, a town appeared—a town straight out of *Gunsmoke*, only this one was surrounded by a tall cyclone fence, its upper edge crudely festooned with concertina wire and its base reinforced with sandbags. Moreover, it was *inhabited*, for Williams could clearly see people rushing to greet them—or so he thought until two of the men took hold of the gates beneath the head arch and swung them shut. After that, all that was left to do was to approach the fence with hat in hand so to speak and inquire if perhaps there were a doctor.

“There’s a doctor,” said a man dressed all in black—a man wearing a badge—who reminded Williams for all the world of the gunslinger played by Yul Brynner in *Westworld*. “But care and medicine are rationed, like everything else here. What’s happened? And what are you doing with this ... *thing*?”

Williams started to speak then paused, wondering if he'd finally lost his sanity. For it wasn't just the man in black who looked like he'd stepped out of a western—the entire crowd was dressed in much the same manner, as though they'd raided one of those old-time photography boutiques you used to see at the State Fair. "Quill raptors," he said at last, and added, "They caught us early this morning, before it was even daylight. I took a quill in the arm, my, ah, playing arm. As for this 'thing,'" He indicated the ankylosaur. "His name is Ank."

Ank mewed at the sound of his name and stepped forward, causing a riot of steel as several men aimed their rifles, including the man in black. Williams hurried to place himself between his friend and the weapons. "He's gentle as a cow, I can assure you. Note the eyes ... there's no light in the irises. No presence of ... them." He indicated the queer lights in the sky, which bled in and out of each other silently. "He hasn't been *touched*; you see. Not like the others." He turned to face Ank and gestured with his hands. "Sit, Ank. Lay down. It is time to sleep."

The great beast, which was the size of a small bus, looked at him, flies buzzing about its cow-brown eyes. At last it lowered on its haunches and everyone gasped—everyone, that is, except the man in black, who only tightened his grip on his smoky-barreled weapon and seemed to calculate cold equations.

"That's it, Ank," said Williams patiently. "Now lay down. It's time to sleep."

More gasps as the great, armored, turtle-like creature slid its front legs forward—then sloughed over on its side, causing rainwater collected in the mudpuddles of the ruddy road to splash and the fence to rattle slightly from the impact. Someone giggled, a woman—a woman dressed as a saloon girl—whom Williams was attracted to the instant he saw her.

"That's enough," said the man in black—the Sheriff, the Marshal, whatever—and the tittering stopped. "So you can make it do tricks. My question is—can you make it kill, also? Can you say, 'Sic 'em, boy,' for example, and send him crashing through this fence?"

Williams approached the ankylosaur and stroked him between the eyes. “Crash through the fence—possibly. But kill? No. Not people. Not in a million years. He *likes* people. There’s, ah, no accounting for taste.” He made eye contact with the Marshal. “I dare say he even likes you.”

More titters—from the saloon girl and one other, a ruggedly-hand-some man who was also wearing a badge, but not dressed all in black. “I would remind the deputy of his duties to Devil’s Gorge,” said the Marshal, and to the saloon girl: “And saloon girls of their place.”

“And I would remind the Marshal that there’s a sick man standing hat in hand outside our gates ... and that I’ve got a duty, as well.” A man stepped forward from the crowd—an unarmed man. A mild-mannered man in a trim vest who looked as though he might be a barber ... or a country doctor. “A raptor quill doesn’t have to be a big thing if it’s removed promptly, which this young man has done. But that wound has to be treated.” He looked up at the Marshal with his own cow-brown eyes. “Most of us came to be here through these gates and under similar questioning ... I see no reason why we should turn this one man away.”

“I agree,” said the deputy.

“So do I,” said the saloon girl, clearly not remembering her place. “Can you play that guitar, mister?”

“Williams,” he said, and took off his hat. He approached the fence at once cautious and cavalier. “And ma’am, I can play this guitar like the angels sing. Once my arm heals, you understand.”

“Well, that settles it,” said someone else. “Ain’t none of the saloon’s been the same since the power went out. A little live music would be good for morale.”

“And what about his ‘friend?’ Are you just going to tie him up with the rest of the horses?” The Marshal was beyond annoyed. “Him in here, *it* out there. Do you see what could go wrong here?”

“I see that that dinosaur would be a site more useful than a mule for getting things done around here,” said Someone Else. “Why not let him in? You can see with your own two eyes there’s no alien fire in ‘im.”

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," the Marshal said at last. "You people take the cake, you know that? You really take the fucking cake." He lowered his weapon at last. "All right. Looks like it's just not my day. I've got two deputies down with the flu and that means I'm not in a position to argue with the whole damn town." He made eye contact with each and every person who had gone against him, including his own deputy. "But, when you find the time, the more vocal of you might want to take a walk out to Serpent's Butte ... and remember our shared history."

He turned to Williams. "You've got some time on the inside, I ain't saying how much. But the *thing* stays outside the fence. The rules of Devil's Gorge are simple: Make yourself useful. Don't break the law. And check your weapons at the armory until called upon to use them." He motioned to his deputy. "Open the man door."

Williams turned to Ank. "Okay, *stay*. It's time to sleep. *Back*. I will be back."

He stepped through the man door but was stopped by the Marshal.

"Your guitar case. I'll need you to open it up."

Williams paused as though taken aback. "It's just a guitar ..."

"Then you'll have no problem showing it to me."

Williams looked from the Marshal to the deputy, and finally the saloon girl. Everyone nodded.

"Okay," he said, and crouched, opening the case. He looked up at the Marshal. "Satisfied?"

"As long as you don't play it in my company." He spat upon the ground. "I've got no use for a guitar man."

They all started walking, everyone talking at once (except, of course, the Marshal, who watched Williams' every move, his lips pressed tightly closed).

"You can stay at the inn above the Long Branch Saloon," said the girl, "if you'll agree to play your guitar in the tavern most nights. Can you play anything else? There's a beautiful piano set up just past—"

“How did you and that beast ever hook up, anyway?” asked Someone Else. “I ain’t never seen anything like it. Say, do you think we could get him to—”

“A raptor quill is nothing to fool with, son, even if it was removed quickly,” said the doctor. “First thing we’ll do is clean up that wound. Then we’ll make sure no remnants got left behind when—”

“Don’t let Marshal Rimshaw here scare you— not too much, anyway,” said the deputy. “Everyone knows he’s just a big pussycat. Decker’s the name, by the way. John Deck—”

There was a tremendous *crash!* behind them and they all turned around, and Williams was horrified to see that Ank had rolled over the security fence like an M1-A1 Abrams tank, and was now plodding to catch up with them.

Marshal Rimshaw wasted no time and had already squeezed off several rounds before Williams was able to holler to the others, “Hold your fire!”—and to his amazement, they did. Rimshaw’s slugs, meanwhile, only bounced off Ank’s armor with complete impotence—until the Marshal got wise to the problem and sighted one of the creature’s eyes. He was just beginning to squeeze when Decker knocked his barrel away with his own and targeted Rimshaw himself. “Not today, Marshal,” he said, adding, “Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day. But not today.”

Neither of the men moved or said anything for what seemed a long time. At length Ank lumbered up to them and began licking Rimshaw’s face, knocking his hat off with his great, slimy tongue and lapping at him again and again until it seemed he had been dunked into a trough of fetid water.

And everyone laughed—everyone, that is, except Rimshaw—not out of mean-spiritedness but out of sheer surprise, and because they were convinced the Marshal would begin laughing too. But he did not, and by the time Ank had sated his affection the man who was Marshal appeared to be drenched in anger as well as spit.

"No," he said at last, and picked up his hat before swatting away Decker's rifle with surprising violence, "today is just not my day at all." He wiped his face with his handkerchief and then redonned his cover. "There it is. You've all had a good laugh at my expense ... and I've had a good reminder of two things I already knew." He began pacing slowly and everyone gave him a wide girth. "The first is that a 10-ton dinosaur, when left alive to do so, does precisely what it wants to do. In this case, it wanted to get to its master—this man, right here, *fucking Guitar Man*. A man admitted to this encampment against my wishes and in flagrant disregard of my authority. A man whom any asshole could tell you is and will remain nothing but trouble. The second is that there's but two kinds of people in Devil's Gorge—those that are the Law, and those that ain't. Me and those deputies I trust are the Law. You ain't." He gestured at the hills, at Serpent's Butte. "Now I know none of you have forgotten what happened the last time we went through this. What happened the last time you all acted up. And I'm here to tell you, the same thing can happen again."

He shifted his gaze to Williams, who had crouched low to the ground with his guitar case and remained there throughout the action, and sneered. "Ready to play a song, were ya? Well know this. You've got forty-eight hours to heal up and get on down the road with your stupid guitar and your goddamn dinosaur. If you're here one second longer, so help me God, I'll have you shot."

Several people gasped and Williams realized by looking at their faces that they were reliving a nightmare they had all experienced before.

"And I'll kill the dinosaur, too. Two shots. One through each eye. Let's see his goddamn armor stop that." He moved to leave then paused. "Oh, and Decker, give your firearm and badge to Smithson. You're fired." He gestured at the downed gates. "Smithson, guard the goddamn hole."

Then he tipped his hat to everyone present and was gone.

WILLIAMS WANTED THREE things more than anything in the world when he entered the Long Branch Saloon after being treated by Doc Allen and watering Ank—a tall glass of water for himself (or twenty), a cold beer, and the answer to a single question:

“Why do y’all talk and dress like it’s 1865?”

The saloon girl—her name was Katrina—didn’t respond right away, only sat his water and beer in front of him and busied herself by wringing out a bar towel in the basin. At last she said, “You have to remember, Mr. Williams, this place was a tourist attraction before it was a functioning city. Before the Flashback. Those of us who worked here were encouraged to talk that way—it was part of our job.” She laughed. “It’s funny, because we found ourselves talking that way even when we weren’t at work. My mother said it was because dialects are contagious.” She propped her elbows against the bar and leaned toward him, and he had to struggle not to glance at her cleavage. “Listen to you. You’ve only been here a couple of hours and you’re already saying, ‘y’all.’”

Williams smiled and tipped his beer to his lips; it was warm, stale. She was precisely right, of course. Language was contagious. The entire old-time vibe of this place was contagious. He watched as she bent over a bin of beers and began collecting bottles for the shelf. She was contagious.

“But the clothes ... that Marshal ...”

“The clothes,” She laughed again. “Well, there’s a couple of reasons for that. I guess you would have had to have been here right after the Flashback. We lost power sooner than most, is what I understand. So when the clean clothes started running out we turned toward Fly’s Photo Studio; it was easier than washing everything by hand. You have to understand; things were no different here than they were everywhere else during the Flashback: we were fighting for our very survival. Tyrannosaurs, saber-toothed cats, quill raptors— if it had teeth and claws, it wanted a piece of us. That’s how it all began, anyway. As for why it’s continued, well, look no further than Marshal Rimshaw and his

deputies—not Decker, mind you, but his real deputies. The ones who got the illness. Ha! The flu. You should see ‘em: pale and black-eyed as serpents, just lying there in the Rio Grande like zombies.” She leaned toward him over the bar again and he caught a whiff of her fragrance, and there was a stirring in his groin he hadn’t felt since, well, since he couldn’t remember.

“What do you mean, like zombies?”

“I mean like zombies, like men who are dead but still walking, or lying there staring at the ceiling. See, something attacked us only a few weeks after the Flashback ... something ... *new*. At first everyone just assumed it was a rogue raptor, because it didn’t have a pack—that was the first thing. But then it started talking, like a parrot, I suppose, saying things like ‘Pig’ and ‘Eggsucker,’” She laughed her contagious laugh. “Can you imagine? A raptor calling you names as it attacked you? Deputies Creebald and Teller put up one hell of a fight, you can be sure, and they did eventually kill it, with Rimshaw’s help, but all of them were wounded in the fight, and the deputies worst of all. After that, things started changing around here. At first it was just Creebald and Teller acting strangely, abusing their power, you might say, telling me not to forget to paint on my mole, or insisting Doc Allen wear that ridiculous little vest. But then Marshal Rimshaw started getting into the act, as well, and before any of us knew it we were living in a kind of police state. Decker was the only one who didn’t pile on, which is funny, because he was the only one not wounded in the fight with the raptor. It all came to a head when Deputy Teller had his way with one of the saloon girls—Molly, was her name—after which there was a full-blown shootout between the Marshal and his deputies—not Decker, he tried to maintain the peace—and the rest of the town.” She unscrewed the cap from a bottle of beer and took a swig, then concealed it behind the bar. “You didn’t see that. Anyway, the town didn’t fare so well, and now there’s a row of graves out by Serpent’s Butte.” She paused, locking her beautiful brown eyes up in his own. “They were good men, Williams. The best I’ve ever known.

And now they're just as dead as that raptor." She snapped the bar towel in her hands and then wiped the counter. "And that's why we all talk and dress this way." She indicated his empty glass. "You want another?"

"Sure," he said.

She pulled one from the wall and unscrewed its cap, sat it down in front of him.

At last she said, "So what about you? What's your story? And how did you come to be travelling with an armored dinosaur?"

Williams took a swig of his beer and then glanced out the saloon window, where Ank was standing with several horses. "Well, Ank and I don't talk much about it. We just ... sort of crashed into each other at the intersection of his life and mine. As for myself, I guess you might say ... that I'm seeking Tanelorn." He laughed a little to himself. "Do you know what that means? To be seeking Tanelorn?"

She shook her head slowly, her eyes never leaving his own.

"Yeah, well, who would? It's something from an old novel—one I only partially remember. But what it means to me is to feel homesick ... not just homesick, but homesick for a place you've never been, or don't entirely remember." He toyed with his beer distantly, began peeling the wrapper from its smooth, brown glass. "And to want to find that place. See, I wasn't exactly myself when Ank first found me—rescued me, for all intents. I had; how do you say it? Amnesia. I knew things had been different ... I just wasn't sure how. I guess I just knew that something terrible had happened, not only to me but to the entire world ... and that there hadn't been flesh-eating dinosaurs waiting to eat you around every corner before." Now they both laughed. "And I knew that I'd been separated from something," He glanced up from the bottle. "*Someone*, who had been vitally important to me. Someone who was ... is ... waiting for me even now."

He stared into her eyes which betrayed a hint of disappointment.

"And that they are north of here, somewhere." He quaffed the rest of his beer and sat the empty bottle on the counter, a little too hard. "And

that's it ... that's all I know." He winked at her. "All I want to know, if you want the truth. So long as I'm in your company."

She quickly recomposed herself, staring back at him with something like bedroom eyes, and said, "I've always been a sucker for a man with a guitar. I know you're still healing ... but you're sure you won't play something?"

He didn't respond right away, only continued looking at her. At last he managed, "Look, Katrina, there's something—"

And then there was a scream, a ragged, wet, blood-curdling scream, which came from the general area of the downed gates, and when Williams looked instinctively out the saloon's window he saw that while the horses had remained completely un-phased, Ank had vanished without a trace.

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THE MAN—SMITHSON—WAS dead, all right, but his killer or killers hadn't been content just to carry him away or let him lie. No, whoever or whatever had killed him had felt the need to leave a calling card—his severed head—which they'd sat atop a thick, wooden post so that the vertical railroad tie resembled a grizzly kind of totem pole. Otherwise, save for a nearby pile of spurned entrails, there was no trace of him.

"Now I want you all to take a long, hard look at this," said Rimshaw, projecting his voice so that everyone could hear him, even those in the back of the mob. "And I want you to remember it next time someone gets the wise idea to question my judgement."

Williams scanned the crowd, Katrina beside him, trying to gauge their mood, seeking signs of a lynch tenor. Because Rimshaw had a point: if he hadn't been allowed into the compound the gates would still be standing ... which meant he was responsible, however indirectly, for Smithson's death—assuming the townsfolk even believed the attack had come from outside. If they believed otherwise, that meant the door was

open to blame Ank—regardless if he was herbivorous or not, and regardless of the absurdity that a quadrupedal animal, or any animal, could leave such a gruesome calling card.

Something attacked us only a few weeks after the Flashback ... something ... new.

Something which had talked, she'd said.

"Now the way I see it is there's only two possibilities," continued Rimshaw. "And that is that a man, or men, did this ... or that that armored dinosaur has been touched all along and is not what he appears. If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times: these things are *not* dinosaurs—not animals. They're weapons made of flesh and blood, sent here by *them*"—he indicated the lights in the sky—"to exterminate us no different than we would an infestation of rats. And now we've got one among us—right now—somewhere in Devil's Gorge. Hiding, perhaps, until dark. But that's okay. Because we've got another among us whose true nature must also be suspect. And I think if we were to shackle this man right here, against this very post, and begin whipping him, say ... the beast would show its face."

Williams began to recoil even before Rimshaw pointed him out, and then he was seized suddenly by the men around him as Decker protested and Katrina cried out, his guitar case falling to the pavement as they drug him to the post while still others began shouting for a rope.

"No," he exclaimed, struggling furiously. "Can't you see you've got this all wrong? Can't you see what's really happened? Katrina herself told me you were attacked by something different, something new. Something with the power of speech, that used words like 'pig' and 'eggsucker.' Can't you see that that's what did this? That there was more than just one of them?"

He fell silent and doubled over as someone punched him in the stomach, then toppled completely as someone else shoved him. And then, suddenly, there was a cry—a cry that sounded as though it had come from Ank and yet utterly different from any Williams had ever

heard. A warbling, frightened, pitiful cry—the kind an animal might make if it were sinking into tar while surrounded by predators.

“Marshal?” said someone. “That came from the Lonestar Corral.”

“Then that means we’ve got ‘im cornered,” said Rimshaw, and shouted, “Johnson! Let ‘em into the armory! Let ‘em all in!” And to everyone else he said: “Get your weapons and meet me at the corral. And someone fetch Creebald and Teller. I don’t care how sick they are. I want them by my side.”

“But, Marshal, I just came from there,” said Johnson, pausing. “And they’re plumb gone.”

“What do mean, *gone*?” snapped Rimshaw.

“I mean they ain’t there. They’re not at the Rio Grande. *No one’s* at the Rio Grande.”

Williams craned his neck on the ground to observe Rimshaw’s reaction, and what he saw sent a chill up his spine, for it all but confirmed what he’d begun to suspect. For as Rimshaw stared at the man coldly, his eyes black as coals and his face pale as the dead, his tongue slipped between his lips like a snake’s and was just as quickly sucked back in.

And Williams knew exactly what and who had killed Smithson even as the townsfolk’s boots pounded past him on all sides and he tried to get up but could only grip his stomach in both hands.

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TO SAY ANK WAS CORNERED would have been an understatement; in fact, he was surrounded: surrounded by the strange, pale raptors who circled him slowly within the corral, surrounded by the corral’s fencing, surrounded by the townsfolk who had pressed against its perimeter and trained their rifles and pistols upon them, and surrounded by the sound of Rimshaw’s voice, which echoed off the nearby buildings, the Papago Cash Store and Bauer’s Union Market, Fly’s Boarding House, the Palace Saloon.

"You only need remember two things," he shouted, aiming his rifle at Ank—and only Ank. "And that is to aim for the armored dinosaur's eyes ... and that he is the bigger threat. Now let loose some hell, and let's take back our town."

His voice cracked and seemed to change tenor as he shouted.

"Belay that order!" belted Decker, leaping onto the first wrung of the fence so that everyone could see him. "Can't you see what's going on here? Look at them! They're the same type of animal that almost killed Creebald and Teller."

"Pig," said one of the raptors, glaring at him.

"Eggsucker," said the other.

"Don't you see? Ank has lured them here to *protect us*, not hurt anyone. *Let them fight*. If you can get a clear shot at the raptors, take it. But let the armored dinosaur be."

There was a *crack!* As Rimshaw squeezed off a shot at him, grazing him in the leg, and he toppled from the fence.

And then everything was chaos and fury as the raptors charged and the townsfolk opened fire—at Ank, apparently, for his great shell sparked and crackled as though strung with firecrackers. And so furious was the combat that few noticed the guns being shot from everyone's hands one by one—nor Decker crawling toward Rimshaw until he was able to grapple with him from the ground—at least until Ank spun suddenly and brought his great, clubbed tail whistling around, knocking one of the raptors clean off its feet and sending it smashing through the boards of the corral ... where Williams stood propped up by Katrina, his guitar case open upon the ground and his hands sighting what appeared to be an exquisitely-crafted rifle, which he pumped and fired again, knocking the weapon from Rimshaw's hands.

His *claws*.

Then the wounded raptor pounced upon both Rimshaw and Decker—or perhaps just Decker, it wasn't entirely clear—and Williams simply took it out, *pow, like that*, right between its eyes. At last he looked at Ank

in time to see the armored dinosaur charge the remaining raptor like a ram—smashing it off its feet so that it blasted through the boards of the corral and took out the window of the Papago Cash Store.

And then it was over, save for the struggle between Rimshaw and Decker—who managed to free himself from the half-man's grip even as the former Marshal completed his transformation into a slathering beast, which circled and paced as the townsfolk gathered around and Williams levelled his rifle.

"Pig," spat the Rimshaw-raptor venomously. "Eggsucker."

Williams squinted, sighting him between the eyes.

"Pig-fucker. Human filth."

Decker stood, bracing himself against the fence. "And behold their latest abomination," he said, and indicated Teller's body, which had reverted to human form and lay dead upon the ground. Someone handed him his rifle. "A dinosaur that will not only tear you to pieces ... but turn you into itself if you survive. Like a werewolf. Or a zombie."

He gazed at the sky, at the alien lights which bled in and out of each other and seemed redder than usual, angrier. "Just their latest attempt to scrub us from the face of the earth. To erase us from time itself." He looked back at the thing that was Rimshaw. "The Marshal, having been wounded the least, took longer to transition. That's all."

"Pestilence!" hissed the raptor. "Ape-man. Evolutionary dead-end. A mistake of your God."

And then its eyes lightened inexplicably and its voice became like that of Rimshaw, the old Rimshaw—only tortured, frightened, alone. "Help me," he—it—whimpered softly, agonizingly. "Please ... God. Shoot me."

But Williams couldn't do it, and only continued staring at him down the length of his barrel.

"Please ... God. Do it." His voice changed yet again. "Pig-fucker. Eggsucker. Human—"

And the thing leapt at him—at which instant there was a *crack!* as Decker fired and a stream of blood shot no less than seven feet from its head. Then it fell, convulsing ... and died. And no one said anything as thunder rumbled in the distance and rain began to spot everyone's faces, including Ank's, which only looked on, grayly, stoically.

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BY THE TIME EVERYONE gathered at the downed gates to see Ank and Williams off, there were three new graves out at Serpent's Butte and the worst of the rain had passed.

"See?" said Williams, showing someone the hidden compartment beneath the guitar façade in his case for the millionth time. "I don't play. I never have. At least, I don't think I did."

"But how'd you come to be so good with that rifle?" asked Someone Else. "Ain't never seen anything like that in my whole life."

Williams stroked Ank between the eyes. "That's something I hope to find out ..." He glanced at Katrina and smiled. "When I get to Tanelorn."

She approached him slowly and looked up into his eyes, then kissed him softly on the cheek. "You know where we're at, cowboy, if you don't find what you're looking for. Or even if you do."

He smiled down at her, as inexplicably drawn to her as he had been from the beginning. "I will. Take care of yourself, okay?" He looked at Decker, who was wearing a bigger badge than he had before. "Marshal."

And then they were on their way, north toward Washington State and a city called Spokane, leaving Devil's Gorge to brood beneath the rain, forgotten by time, alone against its hills.

The End

