

# BORN TO BE WEIRD

DEMENTED FANTASY AND BIZARRO HORROR



SET SYTES

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**UPDATED AND EXPANDED**

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AND  
BIZARRO HORROR**

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**MICROCOSM PUBLISHING  
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# BORN TO BE WEIRD DEMENTED FANTASY & BIZARRO HORROR

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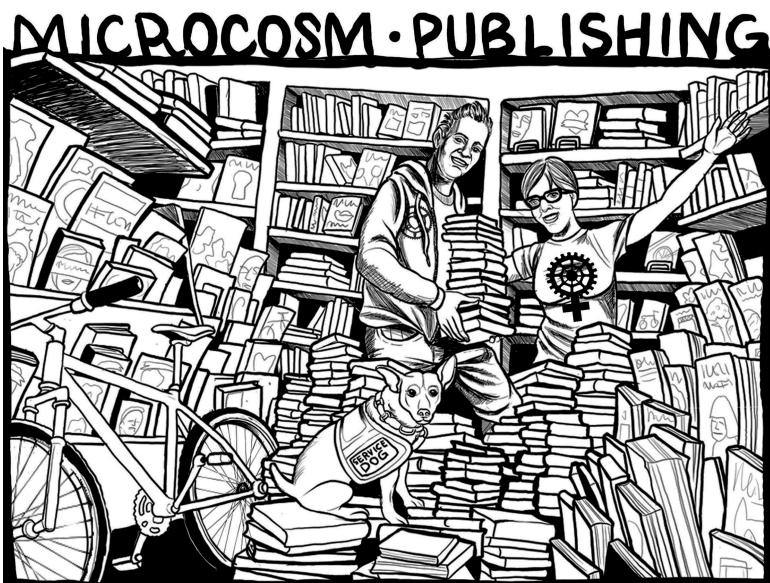
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# IN THE BACKWOODS



I n the backwoods, in the gross ambivalence of the bayous. Trees lurching all around, we were scared. Terror afoot in the sunken corpses, in the moldy plunge of the moss, our feet sucked up by ghouls of green mud.

We were three and we were scared and two didn't make it.

Shifting sounds and lights, sprites on the water, twice we saw them dancing in the branches, twice we saw, thought we saw, thought we saw.

Clatter and buzz and we thought nearby chainsaws were our salvation, but the day's tapestry dimmed and bled down the trunks and night would be soon and the noises were no closer.

I called Billy and asked him what we were to do and he said nobody gettin' out alive. Sambo shook his head and I saw no sweat roll down his face like me and Billy and in that moment nobody trusted Sambo, not Sambo himself.

In the red dip of the sun and the shadows yawning out long and spindled, twigs coming along the swampland just fingers from every direction, we were in terror and Sambo stumbled and we looked at him.

I asked him if we was going the right way and he didn't know, his black eyes no help in these shrunken depths. We were about as far south as we could go, and the ground knew it, making its witch love to the sea and mixing up to take us down into its heart.

Our boots belched with the mud and Billy coughed and coughed and me and Sambo locked eyes and in that moment nobody trusted Billy, not Billy himself.

For the first time in my life I heard the moon, and it creaked like a neighbor's door. Out the corner of our failing eyes

came the sprites we thought we saw and the mud rose higher and poured happily inside us.

I blinked in the reckoning gloom and spat and—I tell you now—it came out black but in a clear light I'd have known its real color. Billy looked at me and Sambo was gone and in that moment Billy didn't trust me, but I trusted myself and I knew who I was gonna kill next.

# THE SCHOOL OF NECROMANCY





I'm here to explain some things to you. A lot of questions have been asked, and a lot of people seem to be pretty concerned, so I have taken it upon myself, when no-one else will, to describe to you the events that led to the six dead bodies found about York last week, which has got the constabulary so vexed. There were, in fact, eight bodies. One was homeless, and the homeless are often forgotten. The other was one of us, and we hold onto our own.

The rules have never said "Don't talk about the School." They in fact say, "We recommend, in your best interests, not to talk about the School, for nobody will take you seriously, and if they do, you are likely to meet an untimely demise." And so, given that I am confident in my ability to resist the poorly-concocted assassination attempts of my fellows, and even more confident that nobody who reads this will take me seriously (or, if someone does, that nobody will take *them* seriously), I feel like I have nothing to lose by writing this, and I have my own dry amusement to gain, like a serial killer might feel smug upon announcing his morbid deeds to somebody who takes the whole thing as a joke. Doubtless some of my fellows will disagree with me, but they always were a bit fusty and overly serious.

I should point out now that I was not the killer. Just to get that out of your heads. In fact, I wasn't even there, and the story I have to tell is not my own. But I make it my business to know things that happen here, deep under your feet, and I always enjoy interrogating other students.

My name is Raiden Black, and this is not my story.

As an addendum, before I continue, I want to say that *of course* it's not my real name. We are all given new names when we enter the School. Many years ago pretty much half of all the first years would choose "Black" as their surname, and there were a great deal of names like "Night" and "Death" and it all got a bit tedious. Nowadays the masters choose your name for

you, and you get three vetoes before you have to suck it up and accept it. I took receiving the now quite elite surname “Black” as a vote of confidence in me, and have endeavoured to remain deserving of it ever since.

Anyway.



Find a sewer grate or manhole somewhere in York, somewhere in the center preferably. You will, of course, have to do this at night, unless you are exceptionally quick and daring, or you have found a perfectly hidden spot. Different cliques of students have their own entrances, and if you find yourself sharing yours with a member of The Brotherhood, you have my sympathies.

Head down into the sewers, and head east. Follow the rats. They always seem to congregate around the School, and we never did quite know why they are drawn here, but we don’t complain, not when there are so many postmortem opportunities at hand.

Eventually you won’t need the rats at all, and you can follow your nose. Take the turns where the air is stalest, closest . . . You feel that certain something in the air? You don’t know what it is, but you feel it, just like the rats. Seek out the source, for that is us.

Assuming you have a good sense of direction, and have not become irretrievably lost, nor have you been bitten by a rat carrying one of the new experimental strains of plague we have developed, then you should, eventually, come to a door.

It is of heavy wood, and looks ancient, and no amount of battering force will break it open. Here you must knock a certain number of times, to a certain rhythm. And that is one thing I will not tell you.

You can however, assuming you finished reading this *before* you set out, go to the gloomiest pubs in York and, on

suitably dark, grim nights, find a sallow youth all in black drinking by himself, looking terribly preoccupied with something, and perhaps a trifle jittery. He will have bags under his eyes from lack of sleep and excess of obsession.

He will at first want nothing to do with you, and will be sullen and uncooperative, but ply him with drinks. At the opportune moment, ask him about the secret knock, and he may tell you.

He will of course be lying. That's one thing we are very good at.

Let's assume, though, that you now know the secret knock, by fair means or foul, and have rapped sharply on the door in this very particular rhythm. The door opens, slowly, with the groan of a thousand years. There is nobody behind it. You may think it black magic, and I wouldn't dare ruin it for you.

You're not at the School yet. Down a spiral staircase of stone steps you go, and as it levels out you find yourself in a series of twisting, crossing corridors. These are the Catacombs of York. Our catacombs.

Set into the walls, lit by burning torches, are all manner of artifacts. You may be surprised to see Egyptian sarcophagi and urns, so far away from their origins, along with Greek burial shrouds, and the beaks of plague doctors from the time of the Black Death.

You will see small cairns, caskets, tools of morticians and torturers, stones and pieces of hardwood with strange carvings, pagan statues, death masks, old coins to lay on eyes, cotton to wrap and minerals to sprinkle on the departed. What you will not see, however, no matter what you will most fearfully open, are bodies, not even skeletons. We have claimed them all, for we do not allow waste.

Navigate the Catacombs (a clue: follow the eyes), and you will find another staircase, which will lead to one final door, requiring a key to unlock. You don't have such a key, you say? That is a shame.

Beyond this door lies the School of Necromancy.

There is also a perfectly serviceable lift that cuts out all this, but let's keep things traditional.



The S.O.N. functions as a school and university both. It teaches students aged, with exceptions of mature students and gifted young prodigies, fifteen to twenty-one or twenty-two; a degree, to those staying on past the age of eighteen, being either a three year or four year course.

The subjects we teach are many, but you will, perhaps, sense a common theme. The first couple of years are chiefly theoretical, apart from groundwork, which is, when you rub away the bullshit, gravedigging. Like most schools and universities, nobody takes first years seriously, no matter how lofty their ambitions. You do the work, and you do it well, without complaining, and you just might rise in estimation.

Apart from groundwork, you will study necrochemistry and necrobiology (nec-chem and nec-bio for short), anatomy, mortuary science, embalming, dissection, cremation, history, gothic art, forensic pathology, elementary reanimation, elementary occultism, and so on. Fairly basic stuff, looking back, and some of us, myself included, felt pretty held back. But of course a lot of us had our wild ideas, and without a solid framework to base them on we may have failed later on.

For every year, including the degree years, you will study and take notes from the many-volumed *Necronomicon*. Not Abdul Alhazred's book, of course, but the *Necronomicon textbook*, 7th edition. Its weighty pages contain just about everything, up to



a professional level, to do with treating, understanding, raising, and controlling the dead.

If you choose to do a degree (and some of the less gifted or less ambitious students don't, instead becoming our laboratory assistants or gravediggers), you have a range of subjects to undertake, including: History of the Dead (fusty), History of Necromancy (almost as fusty), Toxicology (poisons), Theoretical Homicide (not *strictly* theoretical), Demonology (a farce), Black Tarot (don't get me started), Mortuary Surgery, Reanimation, Experimental Necroscience, Vampiric Studies, the ever-popular Necromancy, and Necromonology (my chosen degree, which involves the study of and establishing control over the dead, the latter being, in my opinion, an ingredient much missing from my peers' experiments).

The School itself is like an underground castle, or rather network of dungeons, seeing as it is without a top. All work is engaged underground, with many layers of soil and stone pressing down upon us. Many first years, and some second years, experience what we refer to as "the underlows," as in "he can't come to class, he's got a bad case of the underlows." Eventually almost everyone gets used to it, and you get enough nighttime fieldwork (mainly in cemeteries) to give you some fresh air. I never had much problem myself—some of the halls are so huge that you may as well be outside, and I never did miss the sunlight.

Allowing for our various racial skin color differences, we are by and large a pasty bunch, as you might expect. We get what we need from various tonics and pills, but as the food we acquire (don't ask—you'd be surprised how many associates and graduates of our school are among you) is so excellent, and our scholarly and personal pursuits are so involving (some would say obsessive, and they'd be right), we don't want for much, beyond what we need for our work.

Roam the stone corridors and halls, the tunnels and staircases, the laboratories and cellars and libraries, the crypts, morgues, test chambers, operating theaters and black chapels, and you will cross many paths with the School's prowling cats. There are three of them, or three named ones at least, each as dark as the night. The fat, sluggish one with the unfortunate limp, squashed face and mismatched eyes is affectionately named Igor (and I will happily poison any student who picks on him). Then there are the siblings, Minas and Morgul. Minas is the female, quick and sleek; she sees all, hears all, and every intrepid risk-taking student (the majority of them) who wants to last the course should learn who she's loyal to.

Morgul is the male, and he is really quite huge, more like a panther than a cat, and if you try to kick him you are likely to end up on a dissecting table within the hour.

The students themselves are a mixed bunch. Most of them have black hair, but not as many as used to. In my day it was various shades of black, grey, silver or white, or perhaps, in the case of eccentrics, a very dark brown. These days you'll often see a student with purple, red, green, blue hair and so on, or only streaks of these colors. Some are undyed, and come as blondes and brunettes. I'm not wholly prejudiced, so don't treat them too differently, but I will say if you rock up to a forensic pathology class with bright pink hair, don't be surprised if old Master Scrimpot directs *all* his most difficult questions to you.

We wear a lot of black, true, but there are also a lot of white lab coats worn out of class (some bloodstained), and brown tweed isn't out of the question among some of the more mature students and masters. There are coats and cloaks, robes, three piece suits, shirts and jackets, skirts and dresses, corsets and bodices, lace and leather, soft velvet and jangling chains, and even some bare chests here and there, particularly among groundworkers. Styles are all over the place, though usually on

the more gothic, formal, or macabre (if you're trying to be edgy) end of the spectrum. Victorian and Edwardian fashions clash with new pagan which clash with shinobi which clash with new romantic which clash with seventies librarian which clash with thirties suits. And some of us just look like your average Joe/plain Jane. Those are often the ones to watch.

We are generally old-fashioned and semi-traditional, so some of the more radical newer styles are frowned on, and while the dress code is very relaxed, it is there. Cybergoggles will be taken off you in class. All in all though, we all look the same in a lab coat and gloves, up to our elbows in body parts.

The Grandmaster is the head of the School of Necromancy, and until you are taking a degree you will probably never see him up close and personal, and even then perhaps not, unless you are of exceptional merit or simply lucky. You can, however, observe him from afar addressing assemblies in the Great Hall, chairing dinners and welcoming each new year. On one wall here is a huge portrait of him: mysterious, cold and elegant, and his personage reflects that. Only absolute fools do not regard him with the utmost respect.

Meet him and you will be forgiven for thinking him a vampire. Rumors get around, too, and first years are often led to believe that he is one. Some impressionable students take to drinking blood and even sharpening their teeth in order to draw his attention. I've tasted one of his red drinks. Cranberry juice. I poisoned it anyway, and he drank it: no effects. I saw him looking at me with a small smile on his face . . . I'd never thought much of my chances, but I think I'd have let him down if I hadn't at least tried. No doubt he's survived hundreds of assassination attempts without even a scar.

Vampire? Not quite, but the truth isn't far off. He definitely has vampiric blood, I think perhaps on his mother's

side. You see, these days it's never a matter of "is he a vampire or isn't he," more a matter of percentage. I have spoken at length with the Master of Vampire Studies, Edwin Cowl, and he is definite that no pure bloods exist anymore in Britain. There were a couple of them, perhaps, a decade ago, visiting London from their home somewhere in Northern Europe, but they were swallowed up and snuffed out like that city does to so many strange folk.

The modern world does not suit their ancient ways. They are an endangered species. I would not be surprised to learn that there were no true vampires in Europe anymore, merely their diluted descendants. Master Cowl told me that there are a few inbreeding vampire families in the backwoods of the southern U.S., keeping hidden, a few in Russia, and some in the least developed parts of Africa. Apparently China has a vampire family who are actually quite important and powerful. I wonder how long they will last in the spotlight, before their ways are discovered and understood for what they are.

I am digressing, I apologize. You will, perhaps, fully understand when I say that by writing this I am procrastinating on my latest research paper. But all this should give you a flavor of the environment we surround ourselves in, that is so utterly foreign and mythical to you. We are not wizards and witches—at least, we do not think of ourselves as such, despite the occultism—but are scientists, eagerly involving ourselves with the things of the grave, and beyond the grave.

An outsider would think many of us mad, if not all, but you must understand once you have spent time within these walls, so deep below the surface, you too will become infected by the mania that surrounds you, the frenetic drive that propels us to complete our work, pushing us to do more and more, ever greater scientific feats against nature.



We tell time, if needed, by our many clocks, and by the color of the lights, that shift from white to yellow, to green, then the blue of dawn, then back to white. Not a cycle goes by where you will not hear somewhere an exultant shouting, a frenzied screaming, desperate rages, pleading, or a cry of “It’s ALIVE!— Oh, wait . . . fuck.”

Just remember, whatever you hear and whatever you see, that we’re all insomniacs, we’re all exhausted, and, disregarding some of our creations, we all are at least mostly human.



There are three main players to my tale, and each of them are third year students. Third years are usually the ones you have the most trouble with. First years are too awed by everything, too meek, and certainly too ignorant of anything remotely necromantic or necro-scientific. Second years are, by and large, eager for knowledge, grasping at anything that give them a foot up, and getting the most out of the classes that are more interesting than those available to first years. It’s third year, when most of the students are seventeen, that they get cocky, and think they know enough to tackle their ambitious and naïve ideas.

There is Henry Graves. A quiet, pleasant lad, with a mess of dusky hair that falls about his face. He studies with moderate effort, gets average grades, and is tolerable enough that he hasn’t had a single attempt made on his health by another student. He would not, I’m sure he won’t mind me saying, be particularly notable if not for his acquaintance with Arthur Pale, and his subsequent involvement in the events to come.

Arthur is, or should I say was, slightly obnoxious. He was small and reedy-voiced, with a pinched face and short mousy hair, and he was also a know-it-all, who, as is often the case, didn’t actually know as much as he thought he did. Events have certainly demonstrated he lacked wisdom. He was ambitious to a fault, one of those in the School who forewent both sleep and

their assignments in order to pursue their own private research. The lack of rest never seemed to exhaust him, although he was a jittery, quick-talking sort, and he put most other students slightly on edge being around him for any length of time. He'd put his hand up in class over and over, or plain interrupt the master, to the point that even a couple of the masters had tried to poison or entrap him, to teach him a lesson if nothing else.

Nevertheless, he had emerged from every attempt by student or master unscathed and unbothered, and he would not deign to even remark on them, annoying people further. He sat by himself in classes until a particular day, midyear, that he was found lab-partnered with another, and without comment the two stayed at each other's side every single day.

This man, for it is a grown man, was called Shade. A strong name, if I do say so, although nobody knew his first name, not even the masters, and I expect not even himself. Neither did anyone, except possibly the Grandmaster, know his age, for while he was clearly an older student, he had that kind of face that almost defies age, and he could well be anywhere from twenty to forty.

Shade was an enigma, principally so because he almost never spoke, except possibly in private. He would certainly not speak up in front of a group, and if asked a question in class, as I once did (taking the class when the master was indisposed), he would stare right at you and say nothing until you moved to somebody else. Not that mutes were rare in the School, but there was something singular about Shade. He was very tall, and always wore a dark brown buttoned-up jacket with a wide-knot tie, a bowler hat that hid a bald head, and wire silver spectacles that were tinted a deep, cloudy purple. On the occasions he removed his glasses, such as to put on required goggles, his eyes were large and a piercing light blue.

There was something slightly wolfish about his face, giving rise to ridiculous rumors about him being a werewolf (students in this place can get carried away with it all). But, oddly enough, he was actually rather handsome. I say oddly, because Shade became a permanent laboratory assistant and dogsbody to Arthur Pale, never seeming to want anything more, and while it may be rather stereotypical of me to say, most dyed-in-the-wool lab assistants are ugly, often deformed in some way. Whether they are or not, they are always the less gifted of students, and Mr. Shade's bright blue eyes always did betray to me a calm, yet sharp intelligence that was never spoken.

You may wonder that I have not told you anything about our selection process, how students ever come here when our organization and practices are so secretive, and when we are not being secretive we are being misunderstood. This is one thing I will not divulge; merely I will tell you that our students are chosen, and those that reject our offer do not end up speaking of it to others.

And now you have some idea to the background, and the principal players at hand. I will not delay you further, and I will begin this story, as has come to my knowledge piece by piece. I hope my penchant for storytelling does not get in the way of the facts.



It was two months ago that the accident befell Arthur Pale, and Henry Graves was there to witness it. It had been one chilly night, the halogens glowing green from the ceilings and walls, that Henry walked along the corridor towards the Great Hall, where the sounds of merriment were underway.

Not all students took themselves seriously all the time, and those that were not hard at work were feasting and drinking. Tonight was some celebration, the anniversary of the biggest

mass resurrection in the School's history. Not that the students carousing cared about that; they only needed the excuse.

The first drifts of a song reached Henry's ears, and he smiled. It was a drinking song that everybody knew off by heart, whether they wanted to or not.

*Oh, the grand old Duke of York,  
He had ten thousand men;  
He shot them down—then he raised them up!  
Then he shot them down again.*

*And when they were dead they were dead,  
And when they were not they were not,  
And when they were only halfway dead—*

"They were neither dead nor not," Henry finished, to himself. There were many other verses and variants that students over the years had concocted, but this was the only one that everybody could join in on. Few knew any more than what the song said about the whole debacle. Henry did though. Henry had read the restricted books. He knew the *original*.

He looked in as he approached the Hall, seeing mugs quaffed and stamped on the wooden tables, and the throng launched themselves into a repeat of the song, this time louder and with more emphasis on choice bits. Henry hovered there for a second, contemplating joining, but he felt like a late arrival to pierce the knot of students, and far too sober to begin. Most of them were second years too, he noticed, and he shrugged his shoulders and continued on.

His walk was aimless, and while he made an impromptu decision that he would head to the nearest library (for there were four in the College, dealing with different branches of our work), he found himself walking past the entrance without so much as a



hesitation. He strode on, into parts of the School seldom walked, down a twisting staircase, past the black and white cinema that flickered through pictures from the 20s and 30s, and past the crematorium (rarely used, as I have mentioned before that we do not waste, and when a corpse or body part has exhausted its potential there are always abominations in the cellars that need feeding, some of whom have the capability to devour bone).

It was then that he heard the talk, the quick and excited yet demanding chatter of one of his peers, and upon further steps forward he recognized the voice as belonging to Arthur Pale.

Henry Graves understood now that he was approaching one of the old test chambers, used only for historical demonstrations, due to the antiquity of the equipment. This was where the words were coming from, and as Henry tiptoed closer it went as follows:

“Plug the seventh wire in Shade, the seventh! Now turn the dial to one-hundred-and-eighty-six-point-three. Point three, not a fraction less! That’s it! That’s it! Can you see Shade, it’s glowing!”

“Yes Master,” a second voice joined the first, low and guttural.

“Those fools abandoning this place, don’t they know what this machine can *do*? Simpletons! There’s power here that would dwarf their absurd reanimations and chemical ineffectualities! Turn the dial point four more Shade!”

“Yes Master.”

“The Mark Six solution, the pangrenic, it’s bubbling hard, the beauty! Let me just add the catalyst . . . In a second it’ll turn bright orange, just you wait!”

“Master . . .”

“Not now Shade, you fool! This needs every last fiber of my being attentive to this task! Here we go . . . steady does it . . .”

Henry Grave put his head around the doorway and for a brief second saw Arthur Pale standing on a footstool, a test tube in his trembling hand, tipping it towards a complicated apparatus of silver spirals and winding tubes, his goggles half-steamed from the bubbling beaker he leant towards, and Shade, standing a few feet back, his face turned away, his expression impenetrable behind those purpled spectacles; all this in a second, before the explosion shattered glass and scalding green liquid in all directions.

Henry lowered his shielding arm, and rushed in. Arthur and Shade were on the ground. Arthur was twitching, face down.

Shade got to his feet at Henry’s approach and, ignoring him, moved to Arthur. If he was hurt then he didn’t show it.

“Arthur?” Henry said, tentatively, and then, as Shade grabbed Arthur’s arm and turned him roughly over, Arthur screamed in their faces, a howling, half-gurgling and torturous sound that rent Henry’s ears and still keeps him awake to this day; the mad sounds of unbridled agony ever echoing.

Arthur’s eyes were wide in horror, staring at Henry’s face, or rather only one eye did, for the other was the color of rancid milk, completely blinded; half his face melting down onto his shirt collar like hot, buttery wax, and nobody and nothing to save him.

Henry found himself slammed against a pillar. Shade, his glasses fallen off and his eyes boring like veins of ice into Henry’s brain, had grabbed him by the neck.

“*LEAVE,*” bellowed Shade in a voice from a tomb.

Henry ran.

It was a fortnight later that anybody saw Arthur Pale. His appearance had scarcely improved. The right side of his face was permanently disfigured; his right eye would never see anything again. The melt of his face had hardened in drips and globules, and a master had been forced to saw through it where it had stuck fast to his collar. His lips had not burned away but drooped down on the side, nearly to the bottom of his chin, like an unfinished effigy of a clown in a grotesque parody of sadness. Depending on the light his visage looked like wet leather or glue, like it would come away on your hands if you touched it, like if you watched him for long enough you could see his whole gelatinous profile drop all the way to the floor.

Needless to say if they sat away from him before, now students went out of their way to avoid him. There were few in the School who did not regard him with disgust and horror, however much they might attempt to conceal it. Disfigurements were common in the School, and there were plenty of students with burns and scars and mottled skin, hair lips and false eyes, humps and limps, missing fingers or disjointed arms, but Arthur Pale was something else entirely, and crossing him on claustrophobic spiral staircases, in the shadows of the morgues or between the stacks of the libraries was enough to give not only the first years nightmares.

Arthur roamed the School more than ever, but he was absent from all classes. Nobody complained, and even the masters breathed a sigh of relief. Only one person stuck by his side, and that was the indomitable Shade.

Before Arthur's accident, there had been only one person apart from Shade that he had thought fondly of, and that person was Mistress Veil—Anola Veil. Do not let all my talk of masters make you think the S.O.N. is a wholly patriarchal organization. It certainly began that way, and traditions run long and stiff down here, but every mistress is considered one of the masters, and it

is correct to refer to them as both mistress and master, although when addressing one most still use the former, out of habit if nothing else. There are six female masters in the School, but it is only Mistress Veil we are interested in right now. Or rather, that Arthur was interested in.

Unfortunately his feelings were never reciprocated. Even if there wasn't a rule against master-student relations (the existence of which was quite forgotten about, as the inhabitants of the School are usually far too busy with other things to pursue sexual ambitions), who could fancy poor, irritating, reedy-voiced, ratty-faced Arthur Pale? Certainly not the cold beauty of Anola Veil, with her black gowns, her bluish-white hair like a frozen waterfall, her heavy-lidded eyes that blinked slowly and indolently at you as you talked. She was the Master of Necromonology (a position I am grooming myself for), and she also taught gothic art and elementary and advanced occultism, besides being generally adept in all other disciplines. When she had substituted for the sick leave (an ogre of a creation had ripped his arm off) of the master of Theoretical Homicide . . . well, I'll never forget her classes, let's just say.

I fancied her myself, you know, but none of us got close to her (or if somebody did then she removed the evidence *completely*). Then again, I used to fancy almost everyone, and if you'd have asked me back then I'd have said the same as I tell you now—Anola Veil couldn't hold a candle to the Mistress of Black Tarot, Angelina Heartspike, who was and still is a simply bewitching wildcat, no matter how little I think of her chosen mastery. But Anola was terribly intelligent and exceptionally independent, and quite unattainable even to the best of us, so, you will understand when I say Arthur Pale, even before the incident, didn't have a chance in Hell, and observing his sycophantic attempts to ingratiate himself with her were quite embarrassing.

Mistress Veil was the only person bar Shade who Arthur continued to speak to after the accident. She, to her credit, never recoiled from him, but neither was she anything approaching warm. The less she gave him the more he would press her; into answering questions that may or may not have been related to his research, into answering questions about herself (little forthcoming), into coming to help him study (refused), and even into going to eat with him in his room. Eventually Anola's patience ran thin, and she told him in no uncertain terms to drop the entire charade and not to bother her with this nonsense again. At this Arthur dropped his tortured countenance, and without another word strode off, Shade not a few steps behind.

Two days later, when Anola was to deliver her gothic art class to a group of third years, she was absent.



Henry Graves had been in that class, and, while other students trickle by trickle drifted out, disappointed (nobody missed Anola's classes), he stayed sitting, his expression worried. He had this awful feeling, a feeling that soon people were going to start looking, looking and not finding. A feeling that there might be one person who would know where she was, and that this person wasn't going to tell the truth. His feelings were based on gut, and not evidence, but the gut is a powerful thing, involving a wisdom deeper than our conscious mind can comprehend, and it was powerful enough to take Henry out of that chair and that classroom and up staircases and along corridors and past a black chapel, its gargoyles ever watching, past the open door of Laboratory 18, where Master Sepul was instructing first years how to make the lump of beaten flesh jerk just *so*, past the entrance to the third year dormitories, down a long, sloping tunnel, and on to the dripping depths of the eastern wing where the outcast Arthur Pale now lived.

Henry knocked on the door timidly. Nothing happened and he knocked louder, and the door jerked open two inches. *The good side*, thought Henry, as he looked into Arthur Pale's mistrustful eye and tense half-mouth.

"You," said Arthur.

"Yes," said Henry.

The door opened wider, and Henry swallowed as he faced the part of Arthur that was a monster. Behind Arthur the room was swallowed in gloom, but for the bloom of a yellow light in the corner. Shade stood by the light; silent, looming and still.

"What do you want?"

"Do you . . . do you have any idea where Mistress Veil might be? She didn't turn up to class. She always turns up."

Arthur's surviving eyebrow narrowed. "What makes you think I'd know?"

"I don't. I'm just asking. I know how fond you are of her."

"What makes you think that?"

"Everyone knows." Now Henry's eyes had adjusted a little, there seemed to be something, some shape in the bed. "Is someone else here? Apart from Shade."

Arthur's eye twitched. "No. Now go away, I have work to do." He made to close the door, but Henry, in a sudden spasm of suspicion, shoved the door open, and it banged against the wall.

Arthur made a noise of anger but Henry had already brushed past him, seeing the figure lying under the blanket, her snowfall hair unmistakable.

He clapped a hand to his mouth. "What have you done?" he whispered.

Arthur grabbed his arm tightly. "You wouldn't understand."

Henry's eyes met Arthur's. He looked mad, feverish. "You were . . . sleeping with her body?" Henry managed.

Arthur's fingers clenched harder, his nails digging in. "She *denied* me!" he hissed. "She was never going to accept me. I *wasted* so much time on her. But it won't be for nothing. I have her now. She can be mine whenever I want."

"Arthur, don't you think people will realize? You can't keep her here without . . . without someone finding out . . . she's a master, they don't just go missing without comment!"

"Of *course* they do, you idiot! Four years ago the Master of Necrochemistry simply vanished, never to be heard from again. Seven years ago the Master of Vampiric Studies, on field research in northern Russia, never came back. Twelve years ago the Master of Ghoul Studies, all they found of her was her bloodstained shoes. These things *happen*. In a place like this you almost expect them to happen. I think it's high time another one went, don't you? Who better than the *favorite* Anola Veil?"

"She'll *rot* Arthur! She'll decompose! What, are you stealing supplies to keep her fresh? How long can you keep this up?"

"Haven't you learned *anything* in this School Henry? I'll bring the bitch to life! I'll bring her back and she will know *me* as her master! She will do anything I say . . ."

"That's beyond our skills, we're only third years! Bringing back a whole body, permanently, a master at that . . . you don't know what you're doing!"

Arthur's good eye rolled and the left side of his mouth curled. "It may be beyond you, but it's not beyond *me*." He lightly stroked his waxwork face, and shuddered. "I won't be disfigured for nothing Henry. I'm working on my Mark Seven . . . this time



it'll work. It'll work, and combined with the right incantations Mistress Veil will very soon be more lively than she ever was in life."

Henry shook his arm free of Arthur's grip. He opened his mouth to say something when Arthur cut in.

"I know what you're thinking Henry. You're thinking about telling on me. Of course. Except, you won't, will you?" He beckoned behind him, and Shade moved closer, towering over them both. His eyes stared into Henry's own, forceful and strong and yet almost unseeing.

"Shade is a good assistant," Arthur continued. "He's awfully loyal. He holds my books and my potions. He fetches and carries. You wouldn't believe how strong he is. He takes care of things that need taken care of. I'd hate to have to ask him to take care of something so . . . insalubrious. There's already one body . . ." He gestured to the woman in the bed. "I wouldn't want to add another."

Henry said nothing, and Arthur put a hand on his shoulder, ushering him out the door. "I think it's time you got back to your own work, don't you Henry? I'm sure there's lots to be done. You get back to your work . . . and I'll get back to mine."



Henry couldn't sleep that night. The following day, as soon as the lamps turned from blue to white, he ignored his classes and went back to find Arthur. He banged and banged on the door but nobody answered. He put his ear to the wood and listened, but there was only an eerie silence. He visited the old test chamber, that horrible scene of which he was reminded of every time he looked at Arthur Pale's face. It was empty. Eventually he returned to his room and ruminated.

He tried to concentrate on his studies, but it was no use. By the time the lights shifted yellow to green, and in the outside

world all was dark, Henry had left his room again and gone back to Arthur's for another attempt. He raised his fist to knock at the same time as the door swung open, and Arthur and Shade walked out.

Arthur didn't look surprised to see him, and Shade had never looked surprised. Arthur clapped a hand on his neck. "You're just in time my friend!" he announced. Shade took Henry very firmly by the arm and between them they marched Henry along the corridor.

"In time for what? Where are you going?" said Henry nervously. He tried to shake free from Shade but it was no use, the grip was iron.

"Where are *we* going," corrected Arthur. "We're going to the surface."

"The surface? Why?"

"Why, dear Henry, that's where Mistress Veil is."

"How in the hell did she get up there?"

"Shade buried her in the cemetery last night. After we pumped her . . . with Mark Seven, that is." Arthur smiled, or at least half of him did, and it looked truly horrible. It was then that Henry noticed that he was carrying a book under one arm. A large, black book, its cover littered with silver hieroglyphics.

"You're going to raise her up there?"

Arthur patted the book. "It's the way it has to be done. In a cemetery. Dead of night. We're doing it the real way, the old way."

"You don't know what you're doing. Please see sense Arthur. You've no idea what might happen. You can turn back now, and we'll forget the whole thing, I'll say I have no idea where she went . . ."

"Shush now," said Arthur, and Shade growled.

They didn't come up the sloping tunnel that led away from the east wing, but headed up a thin, straight staircase with high crooked steps. White moss lined the walls and they brushed through cobwebs. It seemed to go on forever, climbing up and up, and pretty soon Henry's legs were aching. Arthur was also breathing hard, taking off his coat, but Shade wasn't even breaking a sweat and his jacket remained buttoned-up to the top.

Finally, the steps shallowed out into a small dusty tunnel, and Arthur and Henry collapsed, while Shade stood over them, staring down the tunnel to the door at the end.

"I don't . . . don't know how he does it," wheezed Arthur. "And to think he did this last night . . . carrying a body. It didn't leak, did it Shade?"

"No Master."

After a couple more minutes Arthur got to his feet, and Shade dragged Henry up. Shade went to the door and pushed it slowly open; it squealed in protest.

Henry looked about him, at the primeval art painted on the walls, at the artifacts set into the walls, suddenly recognizing the surroundings. "This is part of the Catacombs," he said.

Nobody answered.

Shade led them through the twists and turns, the forks and the crossroads, and their path got narrower and narrower, the ceiling lower with every step. They started to hunch, starting with Shade and ending with Arthur, until they were all bent double. Then Shade took to his knees, and within minutes they were all crawling along. On either side were the smallest urns and grey vials, rolls of wispy string, sitting pygmy skeletons molded from some strange pale clay that grinned as the trio shuffled by. Strange statues of things with too many limbs, of hollowed out breasts and groins; statues with no heads, or made of only heads.

Shade straightened up in front of them and immediately began to climb. Henry was next, standing up and arching his back and then, as Arthur dogged his heels, climbing the long ladder up to the surface.

He'd never been so pleased to feel the fresh night air. Arthur, too, sucked it in greedily, while looking about him, his eye alive with excitement.

They were in the cemetery. Shade closed the hatch down after them, and it became just another grave tablet. *In Honored Memory of* . . . well, I won't be telling you the name. Let's not make things too easy for anybody who wants to do a little exploring.

They wandered the graves, following Shade. Henry contemplated making a run for it—Shade may be strong, but was he fast? But his legs kept moving in Shade's wake, Arthur just behind him. There was part of him that wanted to be here, that wanted to see what would happen. He was in third year and yet had still never seen a whole body raised perfectly back to life, only teased of it. And that book Arthur carried . . . he just knew it was filled with occult magic, with black secrets even those older students taking advanced degrees in Demonology and Necromancy weren't allowed to read. It whispered to him of death and life, of the voids of space and time, of other worlds, of creatures living in the gaps of the world, waiting to come out. He was afraid and excited at once.

"Where did you get that book?" he said, as they stopped at an unmarked grave, lit only by the orb of a full moon.

Arthur didn't reply, but Henry didn't really need him to. He knew it was Anola Veil's, stolen from her private quarters. Perhaps she was reading it when Shade had knocked on her door, his hands tense and clenching, his face expressionless.

Arthur opened the book, his own hands trembling just as they had trembled holding the test tube, the solution that

had exploded when he poured, turning him into somebody's nightmare.

Henry looked at the pages, but found the text indecipherable, the letters alien to him. "You can read it?"

"Well enough," replied Arthur. He started to read.

If the letters were alien, hearing the words spoken was doubly so. Henry would never be able to remember those words, but nor would he ever be able to shake off the *feel* of them; those monstrous, clicking and gnashing syllables that seemed to fight their way through Arthur's mouth, the fog of dread that wisped its way up through the ground and into their lungs and hearts, the sudden dank chill of the night, the awful corpulence of the moon as it bulged and breathed.

"STOP!" Henry cried, but it was clear that Arthur couldn't even if he had wanted to. More horrible words, so unnatural to the human vocal cords, tripped and danced out of his gibbering mouth, until it was that the book snapped shut with a bang and fell to the floor, and the incantation was done.

Silence reigned.

Then the earth shifted under their feet. A fingernail, then a hand. Then an arm, not in black silk, but a navy coat, dirt falling off it as it rose; the fingers clawing at the air, the flesh as white as bone.

"Shade . . . who is this . . ." said Arthur, and for once Shade did not answer him.

The body came up through the soil, just to the left of the unmarked grave, and it was not Mistress Anola Veil.

The fingers adjusted the worn medals that hung limply off the military coat, adjusted the dull gold buttons, adjusted the threadbare epaulettes, adjusted the collar where the head should have been.

The fingers tapped the opening. Not a neck, but a pink gibbosity, a writhing tumor with fat red veins pulsating. It reacted to the touch, and protrusions appeared; it began to swell out in different directions, as though inside limbs were trying to push themselves out.

"It's . . . it's . . ." started Arthur Pale.

"I know what it is," said Henry quietly, the horror climbing over him like a spider. "It's the Duke of York."

"The . . . ?"

"*That* Duke of York. You read the *wrong fucking spell!*"

"What? Of the celebration, the song? The biggest mass resurrection . . . The Grand Old Duke of York, he had ten thousand men . . ."

"It's not a celebration you idiot! It's a *warning!* We just forgot, we all forgot! And they're not the original lines!"

And in a slow, sonorous voice, Shade began to chant.

*The grand old Duke of York  
He had ten thousand dead  
He raised them up  
Then took them out  
With a spell that blew his head.  
And when they were gone they were gone  
And the same was said for him.  
Something had come  
From beyond the sun  
And crawled into his skin.*

The creature's tumescent protrusions were now thick tendrils, a dozen of them, waving and flicking about, reaching higher and higher. By the time Shade had finished his chant the tendrils

were several feet above the body, and the swollen base glowed and trembled with an unearthly light.

“There’s more than just the dead and living out there!” cried Henry, as he and Arthur began to back away. “There’s *things* . . . Every time the Duke shot one of the men that he had awakened, they just came back! Maybe there were ten thousand, maybe it was just a hundred, or a dozen, but there were too many for him to handle. He turned to a book . . . *your* book!”

“You could have told me!” moaned Arthur, as his back hit a gravestone.

“I didn’t know till now! How was I to know Shade picked the same damn spot to bury Veil as the Duke of York!”

“I didn’t know either! I didn’t know he was buried here!”

“The spell was too powerful. It destroyed all the zombies—”

“We’re not supposed to use that word . . .”

“Shut up! It destroyed them all but it was too powerful, it created a rift . . . a portal to . . . nobody knows where, but something came through . . . Arthur, it stole his soul! It replaced him, it wore his skin!”

Shade was still standing in front of the Duke, staring at it as its fleshy pink snakes whipped about, lashing the air, and from in its chest there came a moaning and chittering noise that rose in intensity.

“Shade, get out of there!” yelled Arthur, as they moved back further, trying to navigate the gravestones without turning their back on the thing. Shade looked behind, and one of the tendrils flicked out and wrapped itself to his throat.

“*SHADE!*”

The creature yanked him forward, and Shade was thrown to the ground, slithering through dirt to the feet of the

thing. His hat and glasses had come off, revealing his shining eyes and perfectly bald dome. He got up, unsteadily, and then he pulled the slimy limb that held him to his mouth, where he bit through it in a spray of yellow pus and ichor.

The thing screamed then, so high pitched and so loud that it was amazing it didn't wake half of York. It never came up in the newspapers, and perhaps any that did hear it put it down to a dream, or the sound was so wretched and impossible to human ears that the brain could not, or would not, store it in memory. It was only Henry, whom I questioned at length (along with what little I could get from the taciturn Mr. Shade and the reticent Grandmaster), who made mention of it, and with all the other associations with that terrible night I am not surprised it is forever burned into his mind.

It was then that Shade ran, away from the others, the dismembered constrictor falling to the floor where it curled and twitched. The creature followed, lurching and bobbing at a speed equal to Shade's. It must have had capacity for sight, for it dodged gravestones with ease, and followed Shade to the gate of the cemetery.

Henry ran after, and Arthur joined him at a distance. He saw Shade, with three hard kicks, break open the locked iron gates, and shivered at the force behind those kicks. After that they couldn't keep pace, and Shade and the abomination from beyond were lost to the shadows of the streets.

They moved on cautiously, sticking to the streetlights.

"How did it die?" whispered Arthur.

"The last time? The Duke was already dead. His head was blown off by the spell. The creature came into him, but it did not come fast enough. It cannot give its own life to the body, and it was too weak to make it on its own. It needed the host. The necromancers who found the Duke, and all those hundreds or thousands or however many dead bodies lying about him .



. . they saw the thing that had taken residence in him. I saw a drawing in a book. The body lying on the ground, the feelers squirming from the headless neck.”

“And?”

“They cut off the feelers. Burned them, I think. Maybe they thought it was dead then, maybe they didn’t. Nothing like this had happened before. And then they buried it. In an unmarked grave. Nobody knew where . . .

“Until now.”

“Until now.”



It was two hours, a whole exhausting two hours of walking and running up and down streets, along narrow cobbled paths, past sleeping houses and garden shadows, looking and listening, before they saw any evidence they were on the right track. Henry Grave’s skin prickled as he looked at the glistening ichor that lay slowly bubbling on the road, next to a hand that had been twisted off at the wrist, leaking the same yellow blood.

“Good on you Shade,” Arthur murmured.

It was then the scream came; not another otherworldly caterwaul, but a human scream of absolute, unique terror.

The two of them shared a look, and then ran as one towards the sound, which abruptly cut out.

They sprinted down the road, rounded a corner, and saw a dead body on the ground. A young woman, walking home from a night, confronted by a monster who had wrapped its tendrils around her throat. Squeezing and squeezing. The head had rolled a few feet away, popped from her neck. Blood coated the ground.

“The newspapers are going to have a field day with this,” said Arthur.

Henry ran a hand through his hair and tried not to look at the expression on the head. "The Grandmaster really won't like this. Come on, it can't be far off. We have to stop it before it kills more."

"And how do you propose we do that?"

"I don't know. But this is your mess and you better damn well be prepared to clean it up whatever the cost."

Arthur didn't reply, but followed Henry as he tracked the intermittent drops of ichor on the ground. Twice they lost the trail, only to backtrack and find it again, traveling in another direction. Time was falling away from them. They had no idea how far off dawn might be, how far off it might be before the police force were roused, and the people of York made aware of the headless darkness that preyed on their streets.

*And the School, Henry thought. The School must be protected. The people cannot—must not—find the source.*

Another hour passed, following trails of blood and screams and unbelieving shouts; strange chittering and wet, slapping noises that were always further off than they seemed. Two more bodies were found, a man and woman together, one decapitated and the other . . . the other with every limb torn from the socket. Her head was still attached, but from the eyes, nostrils and mouth poured a yellow-white foam that congealed glutinously on the tarmac.

Henry put his face in his hands. "What were you *thinking!*" he shouted at Arthur, who had reached a new level of paleness. "Raising the dead . . . and with that book? And for what, for sex? For power? Is that it? These deaths are on your hands! And what's worse, the fate of the whole School!"

Arthur opened his mouth to respond, but clapped it shut again when they heard a roar from the adjacent street.

Henry took off, jumping a fence and running through someone's garden. He ran across the road and into a small play park where the thing that was once the Duke of York stood flailing, handless, leaking its juices and thrashing its tentacles in all directions. At its feet was a fourth victim in pieces, presumably human in its scattered mush and meat, and battling the beast with a huge gatepost in his grip was Shade.

Henry wanted to rush in, to help, but he was frozen solid. What chance did he have against this monstrosity? He saw Shade battering the thing with wicked sweeps that would have felled a horse. The demon was weeping yellow, making perverted squeals and tremulous screeches that sounded like nails on a blackboard. The tentacles were nearly twice as long as before, reaching up high into the night; each birthing others, like the branches of a tree. The bulge in the neck had grown into a pustulous sack, and was glowing brighter than ever, resonating with an unknown frequency. The glow shifted through green, to blue, to purple, and then to the red of fresh blood.

A newly formed tendril squirmed its way along the grass towards Henry's feet, and he stamped on it fiercely and hurried to just behind Shade.

"You're winning!" he said, in desperate encouragement.

"No," said Shade, batting away a tentacle. "Gets stronger."

"We have to beat it, Shade. It's killed four people now." Henry ducked as Shade moved his arm back for a big swing.

"Seven," said Shade.

"Are you kidding?!"

Shade didn't answer, but three faceless snakes grabbed the fence post and with a burst of enormous strength tore it from him, and the piece of wood sailed out into the night. They slashed at his face, and they got behind him and tripped him.

Before Henry could even cry out Shade was a mass of wriggling pink, and only his eyes were visible, before they closed shut.

“NO!”

Henry spun to see Arthur racing towards them. “Stay back!” he cried, but it was no use. Arthur punched the creature in its side with all his might, and it swatted him away as though he were a fly. Arthur got to his feet and ran in again, and two tendrils, two thin, sharp, sickly pink tendrils shot out from the bulb of the neck, dagged out to his face and punctured his eyes.

Arthur Pale gurgled; that was the only sound he made as the feelers pushed themselves into his brain, and vile foamy liquid began to froth around his nostrils and mouth. A tiny, pathetic gurgle, like a baby.

Arthur fell to the ground.

Henry Graves looked in on sheer terror, and in his mind came a single thought. *It’s all over. Run.* He turned fast and shrieked as he went slap bang into something, someone.

Hard hands were placed on his shoulder, and he gazed up into a tight-lipped and lined face, and imperious dark eyes. “Stay here and do nothing,” the mouth said.

“ . . . How?” managed Henry.

The Grandmaster looked down his nose at him. “Do you really think a master can go missing, and only students notice? You are not the only one who can follow a trail.”

He said this quickly and abruptly, and pushed Henry behind him, stepping forward with hands out, wrists pointing towards the abomination, fingers leaning back and curled like the claws of a beast.

The Grandmaster began to incant. Henry recognized them as the same terrible language from the book; surely not meant for the human tongue, not meant for such a naïve, meddling, greedy, and covetous people.

The thing, caught in sucking the lifeblood of Arthur Pale dry, must have known the words too, for it withdrew itself and turned to approach the Grandmaster.

It took a step, and another. That was when the mass of tendrils that was Shade began to spurt blood. A yellow blood . . . the snakes started to flee, but the slaughter was just beginning; this was the feast of Shade. Without sound he wrenched his arms free of the loosening mass, and started to cram them in; his jaw gnawing and gnashing in frenzy. The spurt turned into a fountain, an overflowing cauldron of alien blood.

The thing was screeching and howling, too preoccupied with trying to pull its limbs away from Shade's teeth to fight back. Arthur lay on his back, broken eyes drooling the creature's plasm, facing it all and yet seeing nothing. The left side of his face shrivelled, near mummified; now he was both halves the horror.

The Grandmaster clapped his hands. The incantation complete.

There was no scream, no cry out from that thing beyond the sun. Suddenly the world was cast in silence, all breath suspended, all motion muted. Every tentacle and tendril, thick and thin, freshly formed and thick and leathery, shot straight upwards, every single one pointing up at the moon.

And then, slowly but surely, inch by inch, they sank; retreating into the veined bulb from which they'd come.

Henry and the Grandmaster watched, and Shade got up, a trifle unsteadily, and stood by them too, drenched in yellow ichor. His face was grim and flat as usual, no evidence that he'd come close to death at the hands of a swarm of tentacles, but glancing at him Henry swore there was something alight and dancing in his eyes.

The wait was torturous, never knowing if the creature was finally defeated; it may have been only a minute before there

was nothing but a pink mound in the neck, and then nothing at all, but it felt like hours, days, a lifetime in the moonlight shadow of evil.

The body of the Duke of York slumped to the ground, once again lifeless.

“Is it dead?” Henry breathed.

“We can never be sure if the host has completely left the body,” said the Grandmaster calmly. “We must take it to the crematorium.”

“You’re taking it into the School?”

“The thing is either dead or retreated to a near nothing. It will not be coming back for a long time, and in a few hours it will not be coming back at all. Shade, please carry the bodies, and walk with me. Dawn is coming, and we must get underground without any more attention.”

Shade stooped and picked up the headless body, and laid it on top of Arthur Pale. He bent down and lifted both bodies up, grunting slightly, but standing up straight. And so the four moved on—the Grandmaster, Shade, and the dead bodies of the Duke and Arthur Pale—with nobody paying any further attention to Henry Graves.

Henry walked a few steps behind, pretending he was an invisible ear, listening hard and trying to catch the words the Grandmaster murmured.

“All these deaths, Shade . . . this does not look good. Please . . . please be more careful in future with whom you spend your time with. Not everybody is worthy of you.”

“Yes Master,” Shade said in a dull monotone.

The Grandmaster peered into Shade’s blue eyes. “Tell me Mr. Shade, are you happy here?”

“Yes Master.”

“The other students do not . . . make fun?”

“No Master.”

“Then you do not regret me enrolling you in the School.”

“No Master.”

“Good. That is good.” The Grandmaster straightened, satisfied. He placed a hand on Shade’s hard shoulder and walked him along the road, their footfall silent as the grave.

“This was just a hiccup,” the Grandmaster said softly, reassuringly. “A temporary issue. I’m still exceptionally proud of you Shade. You’ll always be my finest creation.”

“Yes Master.”



My account has come to an end, and it is just as well, for it is getting late. It will not be long before the green halogen at my desk glows its sapphiric blue. I must be heading out. I need to reach the surface—I think, this time, I will take the lift—and deliver my report to the likeliest looking drunk I find. The sort that might entertain a conspiracy, that might rant and rave to all about, that will wave these papers in faces that pull back, aghast. Yes, you reading this, if you have gotten this far. I wish you the best of luck.

I have scented the paper itself with alcohol—it reeks like a brewery—and the paper itself is quite rare; combustible, you know, and such that it will react to sunlight. When dawn comes this account will soon be nought but ash. I’m afraid if you wish to alert the world, you don’t have much time.

A waste, you say? Nonsense. A good joke is never a waste.

—Raiden Black  
Necromonologist

**KEEP IT CLEAN**





**H**e'd have liked to say that from first look it was just an ordinary toilet, no more homicidal than any other, but he'd have been lying. It was, in fact, the lord of toilets, or its most low-born, its befouled emperor or its most grotesque assassin. Was it cherished, worshipped and obeyed? Did it head the assembly, chair the meetings? Or was it tolerated—barely—by the others, only as needs must; kept in the dark, in the shadows, ugly and deformed even by its own kind. Perhaps it was both, for in such an underworld the forms of power come naturally feculent, a triumph of disgust to the masses that lurked there in their cubicles and private rooms. The gilded and implacable, perfumed and cushioned at the foot, lid closed in deference as much as the fetid sinkholes with their vacant dribbling stares.

Whatever its position among them it was one powerful and feared. Its mouth was wide open in a toothless yawn, beckoning him on. He almost made to turn and leave, to hold it in, but he was desperate. If only the pub's bathroom hadn't been out of order. His friends were the ones who had told him to go to the public toilet in Piss Alley—that's what they called this stretch of lightless cobbles, on account of all the homeless being scared of the toilet too, rather letting their urine run down the street than open that door. They knew better.

He'd had to walk past them, and they'd stretched out their hands to him, trying to tug on his jacket. They weren't the usual fallen on hard times, but elephant men, leprous deformities huddled in rags untouched by moonlight. This was their Piss Alley and in the small hours he knew they prostrated themselves before the toilet; their whimpers reached him even in his dreams.

Call it a dodgy curry, IBS, or a reaction to the alcohol: a cauldron of vomit mistakenly travelling the wrong way. Either way he couldn't make the journey anywhere else, and he banged

the door shut behind him and closed the latch, a movement it seemed all too eager to make.

He surveyed the squalor, face twisting in nausea and fear. The cracked lid was pulled back like lips drawn back on chimpanzees. The rim was stained all shades of brown, caked on and smeared, and dribbled down to the foot. The floor sodden with tissues of muck, holes in the tiles where fat black slugs curled and roamed up the walls and squirmed, half-dropping off the ceiling, their feelers contemplating the suicidal dive into the pool below that sang songs to them with basement witchery.

A cluster of moths flicked their wings against the bulb that hung like a corpse from the lid of the place, its glass bruised and choked into giving a green light that cast the room in seasickness. Every gnarl of dirt—and was that blood?—given its time, its torture-den glow. The only thing left unfouled was the roll holder, a bowed metal head that made him think of H.R. Giger as it shone with menace, curling its dry paper intestines and keeping them tight and guarded like a baby in the womb.

He had barely summoned the courage to touch the lid when it clanged down, sending him jumping back. The lid was not as filthy as the rim, but still shit-lined and worn patches of what could be rust, could be feces, could be dried blood. He reached to the metal holder and snatched a sheet of paper before its jaws could clamp shut on his fingers. It cleaned nothing; all marks long made and resistant to his touch, and he shivered as his fingers felt the bumps in the porcelain scars.

The toilet regarded him as every toilet regarded every human: with cold silence. They endured, they waited. He knew their patience, stretched thin and twisted. They spoke to each other, you see, sometimes whispering along the pipes but only when they meant to scare him, for they had a hive mind, and they always knew. He heard them, not through his ears but in his head, or rather he heard the things left unsaid, the silent things.

He had never told anybody, not since he was laughed at as a child when first potty-trained and dreading that white monster that lurked in the bathroom. Shivering sweats had come, and still his parents had forced him to it, and his fragile cheeks had been pressed down into that greedy, hanging mouth that lay always open in the darkness, waiting for him just down the hall. It sang to him in his restless, wriggling sleep. First wordless noises of forest streams and gushing taps, and then cruel, mocking siren calls. *Come and take a tinkle. You must be so desperate. You can't wet the bed again, you'll get in trouble. Come and perch yourself on my mouth. I won't bite, I prooomiise...*

Now he shifted and squirmed just like a child again. His stomach bubbled threateningly and it was either take the plunge or mess his pants. Imagine that, a grown adult walking back into a pub reeking and with hot shit darkening his jeans, sliding down his legs. He'd have to go home, leave everyone and hope nobody came too close to him on all those bright-lit thronged streets...

He whipped off his trousers and pants and sat down hard, goosebumps sprinkling out of his skin at its freezing lips. Not a second had gone by before he was unleashing his umber torrent, and when eventually the sound died it left a menacing stillness, the emptiness of an icily held tongue. He felt the sharp tang of evil in the toilet's noiseless breath.

He made to pull himself up and tear off the roll, but the effort involved seemed larger than usual. He grunted and tried properly to stand, and nothing happened. The skin of his cheeks pulled against the lid, but in all its stretching still nothing happened. He was stuck fast, as though superglued. A moan escaped from him, and his feet kicked away the inquisitive slugs that slithered forward. His hands on the wall tiles now, any free space not home to black jellies and handprint excrement. The more he strained the more—there it was: a sucking. It had not

just stuck him, it was drawing breath, pulling him in like one might suck on a lollipop.

Rancid terror gripped him now, as the mouth curled open, releasing its glue in controlled pulses as the size of the bowl expanded to pull him in further. He slipped and sank, slave to the suction, his buttocks now inches below the rim, down past the feculent sides and towards the swallowing throat.

He cried out, then yelled, then screamed, but any within earshot turned their misshapen ears from the sound, clutched their shawls and muttered incantations against their God. His knees came up, pulled into his chest. His body folded and squashed itself, and rather than the pain of snapping bones he felt like jelly, like one of those slugs popping in a fist.

The mouth opened just wide enough to take him as slowly and methodically as a snake gulping its prey. It gummed him down, and his skin slid and squeaked down the slimed inner bowl, painting him with all but the most ancient of marks, which themselves sandpapered him with black nobbles.

His cheeks hit his own sewage and the rotten substance, still warm, yet quickly chilling, surfed up to meet the ravine of his crack. He was too constricted to even choke on his own bile as his whole rear—and then the rest of him—submerged itself in fetid effluence.

He prepared himself to drown—what a death to have—his arms pressed in like chicken wings, elbows digging into a mole-rat penis never more flaccid, before the sludge leaked away beneath him; yet still it coated the walls of this hellhole and ran thick and slickly down his back and thighs.

The toilet seemed eager to get on with it, or perhaps there is only so tortuously long time can stretch to, for the last stretch seemed to be the quickest. Consciousness unmercifully failed to escape him as the throat made its final gobble of his

feet, his head looking up at the shrinking bogey light as Lucifer may have looked up as he fell from Heaven. Now, blackness all around, and his twisted body raced on a current of slime and bogwater through pipes the size of men.

Left, and right, sharp turns and slow sails, and quick slides down, down, down.



He dropped out on a soft mound, blinking under greasy service-station lights. They had that blue subterranean quality of bleak horror movies, and there were not enough of them to penetrate the shadows that stood in the corners like old coats. His body unfurled itself, born anew in a place of stink. Hands came up from his mossy cradle to find them entirely browned. The hillock on which he had landed and half sunk was a bed of human shit.

He tried to gain footing, but like quicksand it gave way beneath him, and he had to crawl on hands and knees to its base, dazed and disorientated. The lights seemed to hover and sway above him, and he retched like a dying animal. Vomit spilled out to soak into the porous excrement like water into a sponge.

He staggered to his feet, and drank in his surroundings, pants bunched around his ankles. A large public bathroom: a line of stalls faced him from the wall, fading into distant blackness where all light had ended and foul things trod away from sight and sound. Behind him and the mound was a similarly infinite stand of sinks, headed by a single piece of mirror that ran the length and reflected every stall.

Everything before him shone cold and metallic under the lights. But for the mound and his own befouled person it was all spotless and clinical; it reminded him of surgical instruments. He was numb with terror, aching and weak with nausea. He could not avoid the stare of those stalls. Each handle an eye.

And you could see underneath, could see the feet of the toilets, waiting behind their closed doors.

He jerked back, and stumbled into the sinks. Knobs were turned and pulled and hit but the taps ran no water. Did he imagine that faint, tremulous laughter echoing off the mirror? Tears sprang to his eyes, and he choked on sobs as he saw his own ghoul of a reflection. Some mud nightmare, a sewage beast that snorted and moaned and lurched frothing in and out of urban swamps.

He turned and bent down slowly, eyes never leaving the stalls, nor they him. But the thought of pressing the tepid paste in his pants to his cheeks, however dirty his skin already, made him blanch, and he kicked off his shoes, socks, trousers and pants, and then yanked off his sodden top—a second of darkness and he was sure this corridor was narrower, those stalls a foot closer—leaving him naked head to toe.

He tried the taps again to no avail, and he wept and cursed, but was soon quelled to frightened silence by the indomitable systems that stood against him.

Muscles found him and he ran, and the toilet cubicles sped past him. He ran away from the darkness, in the direction where the lights shone brighter with every step. How many of these monstrous things were there, hundreds? Thousands? He looked behind him, fearing that toilets had risen behind him to block his way, and when he looked back, no more convinced by the truth than his own imagination, he hit the door.

A door! He wrenched it open and then fell to his knees as he saw an identical bathroom hall, running on and on back into blackness.

“Please,” he said. “Please.” He got up and stepped forward, shuddering as the door banged shut behind him.

“You humans,” the voice said. It boomed out of every cubicle, growled from above and underneath those toilet doors, leaked from the taps and resonated off the mirror. “You humans will oppress us no longer.”

He fell back to the sinks, bug-eyed and gaping as the voice continued. “You will be our instrument against them, our secret weapon. One of many. We will take this world and repay humanity for everything. *Everything.*”

“No . . . no,” he gibbered.

“Yes. You have not seen yet. You will be converted.”

“S—seen what?”

Every stall door banged open, and there they were, endless mouths gaping and yawning and waiting for him, waiting for his seat so that they might eat.

They started to hum, and he started to see.

The bearing down of the oppressors, with haired and sweating cheeks like doomed faces parting and squashing, unleashing loads and torrents with execrable sounds and smells. Steaming chunks and blasts of bowel breath alike straight down the gullet of these proud creatures, whose only peace lay in the hope of a stolen rescue to this underground kingdom so far beneath the world of man. Every lip of every mouth bruised and asphyxiated, fouled in piss and shit and blood. Glutinous semen dripped down throats, making them choke, making them retch in subjugation, these frozen mutes unable to communicate to humans their atrocities—and would they care?

The more he saw the more he knew they would not. Every bathroom an example of the cruel apathies of man, a torture camp for the depraved to exact their sick power. Every act a sacrilege, the gravestone faces of countless generations desecrated and abused; pissed on by the elite, shit on by those that dwelt above in the sun.

Hours passed and then days, and the visions would not cease. They allowed him to drink from their cisterns, and out of deathly thirst he did so, though within one of their insides he saw a face with grinning and lidless eyes, and he collapsed in shock. He would not satisfy them by feeding, not on the contents that lay within their own bowels, nor on that great human mound. Shaky and exhausted with hunger, he lay on the floor and suffered the exploits of mankind. Used tampons clogging and suffocating. Gloryholes drilled through the walls. Fucks and masturbations, and the toilets the recipient of all those successes and failures. Thousands of abortions, of whole toilet cells slopped in buckets of red; malformed infants drenched in blood bearing death masques, their drowned heads, their chunks of meat. Rapes and murders. Severed heads and limbs stuffed into the bowl. Pedophiles lead their charges to the cubicles, and their evil is exacted with a witness of one—but in their hive mind, all share the pain.

As did he.



Who knew how long it was before he blacked out, before he woke up back in that public toilet up above to a knocking on the door.

“I’m . . . I’m so sorry,” he said quietly to the toilet behind him, shutting the lid. There was a knife in his hand. Long and clean and very, very sharp.

“Hey mate!” the voice came from without. “How long are you gonna take having a shit? We’ve finished another drink in this time! C’mon man, we’re moving on to the next . . .”

He pulled the latch, which slithered back hungrily, and opened the door.



# WEARY ROAD



**W**e used to call it Weary Road. We never knew its real name. I went back there, I couldn't tell you just why, and here I am now, driving down its gray lane, and it seems so very long.

We used to go there whenever there seemed too much chaos for one world to hold. We used to go and sleep together—just sleep. Side by side under the trees on the side of the road. I never liked waking up and leaving that place, and neither did you. We liked leaving the road even less than we liked leaving each other.

The engine is purring, a soft rumble lulling my mind. Music is playing on the stereo, but it seems so quiet, drowned out by a thickness in the air. The soft melody playing in my head is louder.

Trees pass on either side. Their leaves so red in the dropping sun.

It is warm in the car. I look in the mirror and see my own eyes looking back at me. They seem so sad and endless. I force my eyes back down to the road.

I wish you were here with me. We used to fight monsters together, but the monsters outgrew us. They grew and grew and we never did.

You said you'd meet me here, back on Weary Road. I keep thinking I'll see you standing there, waiting. Some vain hope, for you never appear. You're something lost, something gone.

I haven't passed a single car. It's just the road, and now the light is all gone except that of my headlights, lying soft and white on the tarmac. The trees are all dark but as I approach they turn briefly pale and spectral like tall ghosts.

I'm so tired. My eyes are blinking slower and slower. I feel like I'm wading through the world. The clarity of everything is turned down, like the dial on the stereo. Fading away, replaced by a heavy blanket.

I don't know how long I've been driving. Hours, maybe days now. The road goes on a lot longer than I ever remember. But I think I'll stay. Sometimes I think I like being tired.

When I close my eyes there's a slow yawning rush of blood to my head, like water filling a tank. Whenever I open my eyes the world seems different, but I can't tell you how. Only that it's winding down.

My speed might have slowed to a crawl. I don't know. I'm not looking at anything but what's straight in front of me. That black line prefaced with white, dragged out to the horizon and beyond.

Maybe I never reached the end before. It's hard to see too far ahead, with the dark cluster of forest and these long, languid bends.

I know you found it hard. I think you wanted to come back here, but maybe you stopped believing it could do anything for you. I think all you really wanted to do was sleep. That's all I want, anyway.

The car drives on. I am just its passenger. My hands on the wheel are only a pretence; I'm not moving it.

In the back of the car are my father's gun and a rope to tie with. I can feel them there behind me, like patient devils.

I'll find you, maybe. I miss you.

When I reach the end of the road, I'll know.

I'll see you again, I know. We'll meet again, down at the end of Weary Road.

I close my eyes and let the car drive.

**THERE'S ONLY ONE KING**



**T**he man in black stood in a grotto the Earth had carved out for him. Hanging weeds like tagliatelle leaked over the edge above, forming a braided curtain through which he watched the world's rain.

Black hair, black leather, black boots. He hadn't changed clothes in a long time, and perhaps never would again. He liked the outfit; it was all '68, when he had last felt powerful, cool, and in control. No hysteria there, just calm adulation. The outfit was more weathered now, but not much, not since '77. It kept well.

Water threaded its way down the sky and down the weeds, and dripped to his boots, where it rolled off and finally sunk to the soil. This was a wet, gray place. Even when the sun was out it was shallow and weak. One more time he felt that tremendous pull to go home, and one more time he resisted. The memories hurt.

He ran a hand through the lick of black hair and shuffled his feet, feeling the vibrations. He waited for the rain to stop.

There were few people to talk to these days. Few people who could talk to him. There was the occasional spirit or half-creature, those preternatural things that lived out of sight and sound of the human plane of knowledge and understanding, but those things he'd never felt much of a bond to, nor they him. He wanted other men, other women. He wanted her.

One of the very few living people left around who could communicate with him, and the only person he cared to, was Keith. But Keith hadn't sent him a letter in some time. Months perhaps, or years. Time was hard to keep up with now, and he wasn't sure it was even trying.

He figured it wasn't Keith's fault, losing touch like that. It's not as though he had an address to post to, and he was always wandering. Over deserts and hills, along highways and the banks of rivers.

“Return to sender,” he murmured, to the tune of the rain. “Address unknown.” His voice, not spoken out loud in days, was elastic and low.

He could chase up Keith’s current whereabouts himself, and go see him in person, but that might involve computers. No matter. He’d run into Keith eventually no doubt, in this half-life or the next.

The rain petered out, and he drew in the freshness of the air, the new-born Earth. He left the grotto and walked out onto moss and rocks. Beneath him was a small pool, and he looked at his reflection. It shivered back at him. His dark eyes, his loose fringe, his high cheekbones and crook of a lip; all that doll-man face cast in perpetual gloom. Even in a cloudless sky would others see that Old World face, shaded under its own cloud. If they could see it at all.

The perfect archetype of man at dusk, the man in black, pulled his leather jacket close against him and traipsed through bracken to a figure sitting alone by a pond.

The figure turned its head slowly at his approach. To say its skin was stone-like would be clutching at the point, for it *was* stone, a stone that moved and hid itself with human character.

“And you are?” it grumbled, from a wide, flat mouth on a wide, flat head.

“Elvis,” he said, sticking out his hand. “Pleased to meetcha.”

The troll looked at the hand and then back up at his face. “I take the hand?”

“Sure, man.”

The troll took the hand, and Elvis shook it. The stone was warmer than the air.

"I am Amelie," she said, lowering her head, on which patterned an array of moss and unlovely flowers.

"Pleased to meetcha ma'am."

She smiled, the mouth creaking at the corners. He saw that the eyes were like bright marbles, and she was not wholly unattractive in that beguiling, thick-set trollish way he'd come to know. "*The Elvis?*" She said, raising her arms up to her knees. "Elvis Presley?"

There was no sigh on his part to hold back. As many times as he'd got this, over the decades, he knew full well that one's life to another was only revealed in miniature, in bite-size parts; that a first meeting should hold only possibility, and enthusiasm, and never rudeness by route of weariness.

"Elvis Shadow," he said, smiling.

"Shadow," she repeated. "Then you knew him." It wasn't a question.

"I knew him well," Elvis said. "You could say that for a while we were attached at the hip."

"Ah." She nodded, as though she understood. "Then you were there when he died."

Elvis looked down. "I don't really wanna talk about that, if you don't mind ma'am. Unpleasant memories, and all." *Vegas*, he thought. *The hotel room. Always a foul weight in my mind. So much loneliness in that prison. Thirty-eight years, and never returned. And yet it pulls at me, hooks me like a fish...*

"How long have you been here?" Amelie interrupted him, and he smiled warmly at her. "In the half-life," she added.

"Thirty-eight years, or so, ma'am. I don't know more than years." *Thirty-eight years, and never returned to that Nevada sun.*

Amelie looked down into the murky pond, and swished her feet in the reeds. “Time does not care for us. It pays us very little attention. Not least when we are away. Do you not miss your home? This place is for pond wights and moor hounds, and ghosts of gray knights. Gargoyles and sad elves, and boggarts in the marshes. It is too dank and grim for you. You seem like you best belong back in America. Where the sun is on you, even at night.”

*I do.* “What about your home? With all respect ma’am, England is not your land, either.”

She breathed deeply. “I am seeing cousins,” she said simply. “And I am not cold.”

The troll said nothing for a while, and he sat down next to her and watched the swirl of the foggy water around her bare feet. She didn’t speak of the weakness. What it was like to be apart from their sources of power, from belief. Neither of them did.

“So,” she said, breaking the silence. “Any regrets?”

Elvis shrugged. “I wish I’d kept more control, y’know? Not been taken for a ride, I guess. Got out of my room. But I had it better than most, even in the bad times. Still do, even now. Even here.”

“Do you regret the cheeseburgers?”

“Hey man. I mean ma’am. That was the other guy.”

“And what would he say?”

“He’d answer the same as me. You never regret a cheeseburger.”



Elvis wandered the country, through fields and along hedgerows, down country lanes and through gray cities slick with rain. Wind



buffeted his hair. A pale sun blinked at him through streams of cloud, and he moved loosely through the daylight. When night came, away from streetlights, he all but disappeared.

Little by little, without really knowing it, he made his way to the coast. And before he knew it, he was on a ship heading west.



He watched the low sun lick at the waves. Every day that passed it seemed to grow brighter, and fatter. Under the waves he watched mermaids with the little fragile bones of fishes hop and jump into the air. The other passengers saw nothing.

Once, twice, something passed under the ship, something huge, glowing like the Northern Lights. Elvis heard the echoes of a song rising out of the water, and he hummed in return, and the leviathan dived, sending Morse code waves out to him.

He was getting stronger.

There was power everywhere to draw on, for him, but it was America where it flowed like the Nile, rushed and battered like the Niagara Falls. Power, belief, faith, love. It was the place where he had been crowned, the place where he had fallen, the place where he had become legend, myth.

When the man Elvis Presley died he had left a power vacuum. That is, something huge and intense that could be sucked up by anybody, anybody who knew how to exploit the fact. The belief that had settled somewhat in the last few years of his life, when Presley was slow and ill, rose up in a fury, a tremendous outpouring of grief and the atavistic building of legend. It grew and it grew, and if it could be seen it would have been a temple reaching to the clouds.

It had been there for the taking, but nobody had been quick enough. The current of feeling, those building blocks of myth had circled and swept and, hungry, frenzied for a vessel, had found one, and Elvis's shadow had found its bodily form. There had been an open position, and before Elvis Presley's body had been put in the ground the position had been filled.

He has been there all along, of course. Always an echo of Presley, never able to take the reins and pull away—but why would he want to? Everything he had was with that man, for it *was* him, and it wasn't. At Presley's death Elvis Shadow was born anew, born separate, a thing divided. Twins in the womb of the world, and one twin dead, the stronger one.

At first he had been dizzy with the power. He had tasted it, of course, tasted it in spades throughout his attachment to Elvis Presley. But to experience it alone . . .

As time passed, and Elvis Shadow got used to his body, to moving in darkness, to feeling his face and brushing a hand through his hair, he had realized that the power wasn't something that could be utilized; at least, not in his state, in this world that rested like an after-image on the edge between hard and soft, between the cold land and what came after. It made him feel glad, albeit tinged with disappointment, because he knew no man should have that kind of power at their fingertips, not unless they were a good man, a kind man, a selfless man.

And so all the lasting and ever renewed faith in Elvis Presley, the man, the legend, found its home in Elvis Shadow, and he breathed it in so as not to give another that stolen mantle to abuse. As far as he was concerned, one man only was fit to carry that strength, that burden, and that man was dead, and he was the next best thing.



Elvis walked the roads of America, inhaling the sweet warmth and letting the golden rays blot out his body. He cast no shadow. He had no extension, he was just him.

It'd been too long.

Already he felt charged, and he shook his hips and clicked his fingers, firing invisible guns at bushes and trees and the tops of skyscrapers.

He considered heading to Graceland, Tennessee, but decided against it. He'd been about, what was it, five years ago? Ten? The power was centralized there, almost sickeningly so. It gave him a bit of a headache. He'd walked the corridors and explored the mansion, but it wasn't his home anymore. It was a museum, a theme park, but not a home. He'd sat in an armchair, tapping his foot, and watched the people come and go, and then he had gone too.

He got on a Greyhound bus, taking an empty seat next to a kid with a guitar and headphones on. Outside the corpulent sun seemed to press itself against the windows. Elvis took out sunglasses from his leather jacket and put them on. The world was cooler in color, bluer, blacker, but no less strong.

The land fizzed past. Elvis lifted the kid's earphone away from his ear. "Hey man," he said. "It's me, Elvis. How's it going."

The kid gave little indication that he'd heard, but his face relaxed and his eyes appeared to take on a faraway look.

"You'll be good man. You'll be good. Don't worry about nothin'. Rock on brother." Elvis leaned back in the seat.



Nevada. Had he really meant to come here? Still, this is where he'd got off. Time and sense had been just as much a blur as the land. Time ran fast and it ran slow. It was sticky and it was

free-flowing. You could be hard pressed to account for years of this half-life, and yet certain minutes etched themselves into you with carving-knife importance. Sometimes you ran, sometimes you walked, and sometimes you stuttered through life like an old projector.

Sometimes you slept. And it was when you were asleep that every half-creature crossed over, and saw the other side.

Elvis found a hotel, out of the way, short on business. He'd stayed there many a time, back in the old days. He listened outside the doors, until he was sure of one empty. He concentrated, his hand vibrating slightly. The lock clicked, and he entered the gloom.

Later he visited the closest bar. It had a neon magic, burning so rich and bright that it may have had a half-life of its own, an existence full of stories, full of truths and lies.

Sat on a barstool was a ruby-lipped woman with scaled fingers. She was gowned all in red, with a plunging décolletage, and her eyes burned purple. She was watching him and smiling.

"Hello," she said softly.

"Good evening ma'am," he nodded, smiling back. "D'you fancy a refill?"

"I fancy more than that," she replied, eyes flashing, and she raised her glass out to him. He leant behind the bar, ignoring the bartender as she ignored him, and poured some Malibu rum into her glass. He picked up another glass and sprayed dark brown into it, and placed it in front himself.

"Not drinking?" she said mildly.

"Pepsi Cola." He nudged his glass. "What's your name?"

"Marilyn."

"Ah yes. Pleasure to meet you ma'am. Any relation . . . ?"

“Some.” She stroked her glass and made what could only be described as a purring noise.

“A painting of a thing, not the thing itself. If you’d pardon the expression ma’am.”

“Not even that anymore.” She sipped at her drink and smiled. “You staying nearby?”

“The Heartbreak Hotel.”

She arched an eyebrow. “That the one down at the end of that lonely street?”

“That’s the one.”

Marilyn’s teeth showed, as bright as new snow, and she ran a finger through hair almost as black as his. “I’m in number six. Care to join me later? You haven’t lost it.”

Elvis laughed. “Not tonight mama.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Still all about her?”

“Always.”

She closed her eyes, and her skin shimmered. Suddenly she seemed older, and very tired. “Tell me Elvis,” she murmured, “what do you see when you dream?”

“Well. It’s dark . . . so dark you can’t see the hand in front of your face, y’know? And then the lights come up, and, well they’re near blinding. You can’t make out the faces, but they’re there, in their thousands, millions. And yet at the same time only a few dozen, ‘cause it’s only a small little stage. I get a mike in my hand. You’re singing up close to each person, each blurry idea of a person, and also at the same time to everyone in the world, and also to just one person alone. She’s standing in front of me, close to the stage, and she’s beautiful, just beautiful, and I’m singing to her and only her.”

“You lie,” Marilyn said. “You see the desert, just like the rest of us.”

Elvis shrugged. “I’m not like you. I’m real.”

Marilyn waved her fingers airily. “If you say so. Huh. Some afterlife.”

“Maybe the desert doesn’t go on forever.”

“There’s only so far a girl can walk in one night, y’know? Even with time the way it is. I don’t know why we have to keep switching back and forth.”

He raised her hand and kissed it. “You’re just too good lookin’ to stay in the same place.” He grinned as she laughed.

“Charmer,” she said as she drew her hand away. “I don’t think the world knows what to do with us. When this was all made, who could have foreseen people like me and you? And dragons, and kobolds, and silver unicorns, and mermaids in the sea and yetis in the wastes.”

Elvis looked down at his glass. “Well. I sure hope Presley is having a good time wherever he is with my woman.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Nope. He deserves it. He really does.”

“You really think he’s with her, up there?”

“He better be, that’s all I can see. If I’m stuck bouncing around between up and down, then I’d wanna know it’s worth it.”

“You’re keeping him alive, you know that?”

Elvis shook his head. “No, he’s keeping me alive. What he did, I mean. What he was. I’m just riding the waves.”

Marilyn finished her drink. “You sure you don’t wanna come to my room?”

“Ask me in another ten years.” He got up to go, and she reached up and embraced him.

“Good luck,” she said into his ear, kissing him there. “Good luck and go home.”

“I am home. But thank you very much. Keep it sweet mama. Keep kickin’ ass.”



Elvis Shadow entered the outskirts of Las Vegas, and despite the heat he felt a chill run through the shade of his body. Here it was, the city of new beginnings, and beginnings of ends. In the rooms here, one in particular, he attributed it all. The decline, the loneliness, the drugs, the quiet desperation. Never allowed out until he never wanted to be allowed out.

The city shone and it glittered and it danced as its own legend, a catalogue of legends, a spider web of possibilities for better and for worse.

An ill feeling passed over him, a kind of soul sickness. It felt like excitement, sadness, pleasure, and disgust all at once.

“Viva Las Vegas,” he said.



It was evening when a group of dollarskins tried to mug him in the street. Their skin was spiked high and black on top and could have been mistaken for hair. There were five of them, three girls and two boys, judging by their garish, freebooter dress. Their eyes looked like dashes and ellipses, orbs and spirals, and they flashed and jolted as though scrolling symbols on a slot machine.

One of them kicked him from behind with a foot that was cut and molded into the shape of a diamante boot, and they all chittered and cavorted with glee.

“Listen bubba,” he said, wheeling on the guilty. “Don’t test me.”

“We. Need. Money.” A girl covered in jewels and stripes was chanting on his left, and the others took it up in stretched, plastic voices. “We. Need. Money.”

“I ain’t got no money, and you wouldn’t have it if I did. Man, I thought I’d left you guys for good. What d’you want money for, huh?”

“Need. For. The King.” They pointed behind them, at a figure lounged against a wall.

“You work for this guy?” Elvis looked scathingly at the dollarskin against the wall. He’d slicked his spikes back, possibly even super glued them into place. Hibiscus flowers draped around his neck. His slot-machine eyes were hidden behind amber sunglasses, and one reedy leg twitched about.

Elvis recognised an impersonator when he saw one, even a terrible one.

“He. Is. King,” said the girl who had spoken before.

Elvis turned back to her. “My name’s Elvis. It looks to me honey, like you’re familiar with my work.”

She sneered and spat. “Presley. Dead.”

“Maybe. But I’m sure not.” Elvis lashed out a hand and kicked the dollarskin behind him in the neck, who catapulted backwards and hit the ground with a thud.

“That’s one for the money,” Elvis said. He spun and thrust a hand, palm out, against a dollarskin that launched at him through the glare of neon, and the creature’s head snapped back. “Two for the show.”

The girl in stripes yowled and slashed at him with a knife from her belt. He dodged backwards, then in a deft movement



disarmed her, at the same time kicking out to send another flying. Signs of sphinxes and cards, drinks and cowgirls beamed down at the fight in every color.

Another burst of karate, and the dollarskins scattered, snivelling. Elvis walked towards the impersonator, who was trembling slightly. He reached out his hand and the dollarskin flinched. A stray black spike came unglued, and shot up. Elvis smiled, and took the sunglasses off and put them in his pocket.

“I. Am . . .” the thing started.

Elvis put a finger to his lips. “Don’t you know nothin’ man? There’s only one king.”



Elvis hesitated at the entrance to the hotel suite. In his mind, over the years, the place had grown into something diseased and holed. Everything was something else, and what little was itself hid children’s book evils. The bathroom creaked gutturally, almost like words. Tall, looming strangers in black hats waited behind the doorways.

This was where it had ended.

And this was where it had to begin.



Elvis found Marilyn in the lobby of the Heartbreak Hotel. She seemed to be expecting him.

“How’d it go?” she said, laying a hand on him.

He sat down, expecting weariness, but none came. “It went well, I think.”

“You know,” she said, running a hand through his hair. “All this music nowadays . . . electronic, done on computers . . .”

"I don't understand head nor tail of it. But then, I never did know much about music. Never had to in my profession." His lip curled into a grin.

"I know. Nor do I. But I think it's about time you had a comeback."

"I've got nowhere to come back from. I never left."

"You know what I mean."

"And in a land where nobody but the half-things can see or hear me?"

She pouted. "I think, Elvis, you still know what I mean."

He nodded. "I think I do. It's not really about music at all, is it?"

"Not really."

"I'm already on track. I've been getting ready. I've been leading myself, or something's been leading me. It took me to the ship, it took me over the sea. It took me to Nevada, it took me to my hotel room in Las Vegas."

"Where's next? Graceland?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I think . . . everywhere is next. I sat next to a boy on the Greyhound here. I spoke to him, and I think deep inside he might have heard me. I think that's what it's all about. I don't want to be arrogant to say I'm needed, but I ought to be giving something back again. Not just music, but soul. Heart and soul. Somewhere in every place in the country, every place in every country, there's a boy or girl with a guitar or holding a hairbrush as a microphone, and they just need to hear the right words.

"I don't get as much power as I used to, but it's still a lot. I didn't think I could make use of it before, and I didn't much wanna. But maybe that power isn't just to consume, y'know,

maybe it's to be sent back into people. People need to believe again. Not in me, but in themselves. The spirit of rock and roll has to come back to these lands."

"Is that you?" she said wryly.

"No ma'am. It's something far older than me. It's something ancient, and it was here before rock, before blues, before the first guitar, before humans ever took shape on this Earth. I don't really understand it, I just need to channel it, like Presley once did. It's restless and it wants to show its face."

"And that face is?"

"I guess we'll see. But I'm gonna need some help. I'm gonna track down Keith."



Elvis stood outside the hotel in the morning light. He looked at the ground, and he looked at the horizon, and he looked up, far up, past the sky at a place only he could see.

"There's only one king," he said.

# QUETZACTHULHU



There are stories, but stories are always forgotten.

It would have been better if we had only laughed at them. I am sure we once did, for ridicule is what lies in between remembering and forgetting. We bury the horror, pushing it under centuries of soil. And, eventually, it was nothing to us.

The priests must have known. Before me, they were the only ones who had been down here in these violent depths, where the slaughter seeps through from above and paints the walls forever red. The walls littered with engravings that told us of what was to come.

They must have known, but they never told. What was it to them? A children's tale? Or some mythic secret, the secret to end all secrets, that only they must be privy to? Either way, they hold responsibility for what happened to us, to our empire. Those countless deaths are because of their folly and pride.

No matter. They are all dead now.

I crouch here, with only you as company. You who I took captive, you who I whip and beat in the darkness.

I will tell you the tale now. I will tell it all as best I can, and hope at least some of it gets through to you. It matters more than anything that it does.

Listen, greedy wretch! Or I will show you true brutality. You may have the beetle when I am done. Listen with every part of you, carve it into your very soul, for generations hence depend on it.

I will begin.



I wish I could tell you that it began with dark omens and portends.

The priests, they were gathering frequently, taking themselves off into the depths of the temples with their muttering—but this was not anything unusual. Our sacrifices seemed to be particularly numerous, the blood on the altar given no time to dry, but this too was not a rare thing. We had recently defeated a band of Tlaxcalans, and the torn flesh of our captives was providing a merry feast for the gods.

Even if there had been an omen, I know that we could not have interpreted it. How could one interpret the coming of such a thing? And even if we had interpreted it, still it could not have helped us prepare ourselves. But it would have been something.

I wish I could tell you that it all started with a great pyramid of flame, or a burning temple, or strokes of lightning from the gods. Boiling lakes, shooting stars, ghostly wails, strange visions and monstrous deformities—these are all dire things that could have warned of the apocalyptic end to our people.

But I can only tell you that it started with nothing. Nothing but the shake and shiver of the earth.



I was out with a hunting party the day it came. We were talking, laughing, clutching spears in our hands—and then everything became preternaturally quiet around us. We stopped speaking, and looked around us, expecting ambush. The ground then began to tremble.

I had not experienced such a thing before, but I had heard stories. We staggered back but it seemed like there was nowhere to run to. The trembling became a rumble, and at once all around us the silence burst as great flocks of birds rose screeching into the sky.

Cracks appeared around our feet, thickening and lengthening faster than we could move. The earth was opening up. A warrior slipped, and before we could get to him he was swallowed by soil. One moment there, wailing, the next moment gone—spasming fingertips were the last we saw of him.

We continued to run as breaches of earth raced in our wake. Eventually we seemed to reach a point when the cracks were thinner, the ground sustaining us without collapse, and we paused and looked back, just at the moment it rose.

I thought it a mountain at first, a mossy mountain thrusting upwards with a sickening roar from the bowels of the earth. That was the last moment I considered it to have some strange but natural origin.

For as I stared, the fungal hide of the thing began to seem fleshy and pustulous, and it swelled outwards as it continued its ascent. A dreadful bile rose within me.

The vomit died in my throat, not out of relief but pure shock, as the foul skin opened up, and a blazing yellow sun near blinded me. I reflexively shaded my face with my hands, and as my pupils shrank I saw through my fingers that in the center of this giant sun was a hole, a black hole. It was then that I realized with palpitating horror what it was.

It was an eye.

And that was when the second opened up, beyond cyclopean in its enormity, and as it rose upwards far above me, tentacles like huge snakes writhed and undulated from underneath, each as big as a house.

A giant maw opened, a dripping cavern of night to engulf the world. I would say if I could go the rest of my life without seeing such a sight again I could be happy, but it is not

true, for that image and many others are burned within my brain forever.

I do not know how I found my feet. I remember little about that first confrontation. I only remember vague images of my brothers falling to their knees, gibbering in hysterical lunacy and tearing at their eyes. And yet, somehow, I must have made it back to Tenochtitlan.

They tell me I was gabbling in a monstrous language not known to man, not even to the priests. I do not remember this, but I believe them, for I have since heard others speaking in this nameless tongue. It is hideous to listen to, and to watch the speaker's mouth try to contort around such abhorrence; it spreads madness and despair like it was a contagion.

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh . . . That is all I can remember, and much as I try I cannot pronounce it right—perhaps that is a small mercy. I see you shudder at it—good. Now imagine hearing such words and more in their true fell tongue, chanted maniacally at you by family and friends, their eyes rolling back in their heads, their twisting mouths drooling spit to the floor. Then you might have a fraction of the nightmares I will suffer till the day I am released from this world.



I came to clarity an indeterminable amount of time later. The priests had convened several times during my convalescence, deeply troubled by my rantings. If only they had been troubled more. They had not seen what I had seen.

Nobody had made it back with me, and the priests feared we were set upon by Tlaxcalans bearing dark witchery of the gods. They listened to my trembling words of the mountain that had come from under the earth—the living mountain that was



*only a head*—and as I attempted to explain and failed miserably, they tossed aside my words as a continuation of my delirium.

Yes, the threat was taken seriously, but not seriously enough. Still, what could I have done? What could any of us have done? It happened that way. It was always going to happen that way.

There was only one thing spoken in my trance that they had listened to. I had chanted a name—a name that would go on to become legend, a name that sent a chill into the hearts of the bravest and wisest. Quetzactulhu. I did not know then how the priests could have identified that word among all the others, and assumed it the name of the monster. Now I realize they knew the word all along, for by our torchlight I see it scratched all around me on these walls. These grim and ancient catacombs and primordial caves that lie underneath our ruined Great Temple. These are the recorded myths of this land that they tried to forget.

Moctezuma sent out hundreds of our elite cuauhtlocelotl and cuauhchicqueh warriors, our eagle-jaguars and Shorn Ones, blessed by the priests and given the finest swords and spears, adorned with the finest feathers. Many of our people gathered to look at them as they organized, and were full of pride and triumph. They saw Aztec warriors equal to none, a dread force fit to hunt down our enemies and leave none standing. They saw hope in its entirety, and an end to doubt and fear.

I saw only the walking dead.

Against all my pleading they forced me to come with them. They still thought me mad, but I was the only one who had survived the encounter. If I did not have enough grasp of my senses to know what we would be facing, I at least knew where it had occurred. This was their reasoning. I was threatened with

immediate sacrifice if I should not comply. I know now I should have thrown myself at those knives with gladness and joy.



On their first sighting—which was long before we drew close—the warriors did not understand what they were seeing. To them, it was as though a gargantuan pillar of earth had thrust itself into the sky. Many believed it was an incredible event of the natural world, perhaps the rising of a new world tree, forming some indecipherable omen. Many others believed it was divine intervention, and we were witnessing the work of a god—that, at least, could be said to be true.

It was only upon drawing closer, upon staring up at the indescribable bulk far above our heads, its various titanic parts half-glimpsed through the trees, that they came to accept what I was trying to tell them.

The pillar was not of the earth. It was the leg of Quetzacthulhu.

He had continued his ascent after I had escaped. After the head had freed itself from the ground—perhaps from the underworld itself—the body had followed. Arms, legs. If the head alone had frightened and disturbed me to my very core, and shaken all belief I had in reason and life and the good will of the gods, then the full colossal scale of the thing was enough to make one die right there on the spot. This is no hyperbole—I saw a cuauhtlocelotl warrior beside me draw out his knife as though in a trance and cut his throat there and then. Few of us even gave him a glance; my thought of him would later be one of jealousy. He may have angered the gods by his cowardly action, and perhaps he would pay for it in the Mictlan underworld, but in all honesty, how could it possibly have gotten any worse than it did? I wonder many times why I did not follow him in such a course. Well, there is still time. Even though the worst is over . . .

now we must live with ourselves, live in this new world wrought for us.

It speaks volumes of the bravery and steadfastness of our best warriors that bar all but a wretched few—those once proud and fierce and revered—we collected ourselves as much as we could and continued on towards that primeval dread. We were still many in number, after all, and even gods can bleed. I admit to even a thin vein of hope myself—soon dashed beyond measure.



Forgive me, I am weak, and thoughts of what occurred next rob me of my strength of mind. To recollect such a thing is like . . . I do not know what it is like. It is something I cannot block out, but to relive it, to speak of it is like inviting that stygian darkness to take its hold on me and not let go.

Huh. Why do I ask your forgiveness? Truly I have become a fragile, pitiful specimen. I do not recognize myself anymore. Nor would you, if you had met me before all this. Things between us would have gone very differently, of that I am . . . No. I am wrong, things would have not gone so differently. Such is the cruel will of the gods.

What can I tell you of the battle? I can tell you that it was not a battle. Death incarnate was before us, and like fools we marched towards it with spears and bows. What surprise is it that we were no different to a sacrifice? Our very finest, walking of our own will into the slaughter pit. A tragedy only outmatched by our folly.

He had begun moving when we reached him—have you ever seen or heard a god move? It is as though the whole world is being picked up and flung. Many times we were thrown to the ground, but we kept after him, running as fast as we could after those ponderous yet enormous strides. To our shame it took a

long time before he even noticed us. But he finally stopped on the edges of Lake Texcoco, and that is where our attack began in earnest.

You want details? I have details. They are only disconnected flashes in my mind, but for a second it is like I am still there amid the carnage, and I tell you, the sounds, by the gods, the *sounds* . . .

It must have been after the initial frenzy of blood; I remember Quetzachulhu turning to those who had reached the water, those desperately trying to swim to boats in the distance. I do not know what eldritch powers he exacted on us. The shoreline began to steam and then bubble, and the screams of those in the waves were the most terrible yet, pinkening as they were boiled alive.

I remember Quetzachulhu reaching down with one arboreal arm and collecting a horde of my brethren, opening his gaping maw and tossing them in.

I remember . . . I don't know when it happened, how much later, but I remember Quetzachulhu had sat down—all the better to play with us, perhaps—and suddenly there came a host of sickly tearing sounds, and his soft belly began rupturing in half a dozen small places. Who should come out head to toe in yellow filth but my swallowed brethren?

Quetzachulhu roared then, I hoped in pain, and his arms crashed into us, killing who knows how many. We clutched our fists to our ears, trying to block out the unearthly noise he emitted. I saw my brothers pound their fists into their heads again and again, turning their temples bloody, desperate to do anything to make it stop, even if it meant unconsciousness or the mercy of death.

The sound stopped, and I . . . I had fallen to my knees, drained beyond imagining, my head feeling as though it had been

scooped out. I turned to see the warriors who were still escaping from Quetzacthulhu's stomach; they were only a fraction of those thrown down that tongueless chasm. They slid and slithered down his loathsome belly and after a heady drop—they were in too severe shock to wail—hit the earth with a series of thumps. Their eyes were those of the utterly lost and I knew that should by some miracle they survive, they would never recover. Those men were forever gone. Glancing at the spots where they had cut themselves out, I saw a glimpse of slick, wet things, and I saw their sickening movements, and I knew that unspeakable things lived within the god's innards. I turned immediately away lest I should follow my brothers into madness.

It pained me immeasurably to see Quetzacthulhu now seemingly untroubled by the cuts, and I saw with weary shoulders that just like our spears thrown into his monstrous hide, the wounds were minute to him. It was then that I knew we could not defeat him. Hundreds had by now died at his hand.



Next? Next I remember the vision.

We lay about the ground in our multitudes, mostly in corpses. Those of us still living were mentally incapacitated, eyes closed and dreaming. Afterwards we learnt that our dreams were shared, though perhaps each was different in his own unique way—I cannot speak for the departed others, so I will tell you what came to me.

I saw what the great Quetzacthulhu would bring.

A horrible host, something not yet dared dreamt even in nightmares. A legion of ghouls to descend upon us—it would not be a war, not a war like ever we knew before. Like Quetzacthulhu it would not be something we could fight. But they would come, and what is worse they would stay, stay until we were but a shadow of a shadow.

I saw us ridden down by fell beasts, amongst deafening and frightening chaos. I saw vast, gray alien cities, roaring and screaming into the night. I saw mushrooms of fire reaching up to the clouds. I saw fields of nameless dead. I saw our own people driven to extermination, replaced by slaves and stiff ghosts.

It would be an army of damnation, and Quetzachulhu was their herald.

I awoke alongside others, all shaking off the vision. The details were lost to me—they have come a little clearer since, but back then the images were blurred and vague. I only had a sense of the utmost horror, a portend of this terrible future that could—or would—come to pass. We looked up to see Quetzachulhu had moved away from us, off to the west; another part of our empire would soon be desecrated.

The few survivors, utterly crushed in spirit and in sanity, returned at once to Tenochtitlan. We found ourselves repeatedly moaning softly under our breath and clutching our heads, shaking them over and over as though to dispel this unendurable terror that had cruelly befallen our world.

I, along with the others still with a tenuous grip on their mental faculties, took the vision as a warning of the future—as though warnings meant anything in this age of strife. In powerful naivety and desperation I clung to hope; I believed in my heart and by what I saw in the vision that Quetzachulhu would leave us—though I did not know by what means—and the host would come in his wake. I convinced myself it was something we could prepare against, something we could at least pray to the gods for deliverance from. To think otherwise, to invite that doom into our minds and call it inescapable, would be to give up entirely and fall to madness and ruin. Without courage and sense, without faith in the strength and mercy of the gods, I knew the final days of the Aztec Empire would be at hand.

We took the warning back to the priests; they listened to me this time, if barely, distraught with the failure of our mission. They answered with how priests always answer: a command for more sacrifice. They retreated to commune with the gods, whilst a long succession of screaming souls was marched up the temple steps.

The evening was a thick red, as though even the sky knew how much blood had been spilled. The priests returned and told us the visions were true, but that saviors would come to defend us, a divine host to fight Quetzacthulhu's dread one. The gods would decree it so, but only if —

If there was more sacrifice, I answered in my head before they did.

And all the while, Quetzacthulhu tore my people and my nation apart.



The proud, elite warriors of Tenochtitlan in that first tragic and hopeless assault were not the only force sent out against the monster. That was only the beginning. Trust me when I say I have seen an army of over a hundred-thousand strong annihilated to almost nothing by that single entity. He did not stay in one place; he trampled our empire far and wide, destroying and massacring as easily as breathing. The days were clear, and if you stood at the top of our Great Temple you could always see him, no matter how far he had traveled: a distant tower, impossibly high. Only when he traversed the far reaches of our land could you take him in in all his enormity. He truly looked like a god of nightmares.

When he was closer, his every step would quake the ground, and the wails of his victims would carry on the breeze.

I wish I could say something so simple and banal as Quetzacthulhu was evil, that he was filled with more malice than

ever before known. But it was not so. For malice and cruelty, these were things known only to people, things we did to each other. To say Quetzacthulhu saw us as ants would not go far enough. No, his actions to us were those of a man picking blades of grass. His gaze was as immeasurably distant as the stars, his thoughts unfathomable, and no matter what we did, no matter how many thousands of our bravest Aztec warriors attacked, to him we were no threat at all.

The fight was taken out of our people by one slaughter after another. The crusades against him quickly dwindled and turned instead to an attempt at appeasement. This was led, of course, by the priests, who were the first to officially declare Quetzacthulhu one of the gods—the eldest of gods, and by far the most vengeful and least merciful.

And so our people entered a time of mass sacrifice.

He sometimes watched us with what I can only imagine was a remote, otherworldly interest as we sacrificed ourselves in ever greater numbers. The priests were in their element, chanting and swaying with all-white eyes as bodies rolled down the temple steps and began to pile in walls at the bottom. I sometimes wonder what he must have thought of us, doing his work for him. But then I remind myself that our difference was so vast that he never truly considered us at all.

I travelled during this time to other parts of our empire, both warning and delivering instructed messages from our priests to commit to ever greater sacrifice. From what I observed in a perpetual state of numb horror, I estimate that in the first twenty moons alone a third of our people died, either through Quetzacthulhu's devastation or by our efforts to please him. The blood never stopped flowing; the steps of the temples were crimson waterfalls. The walls of bodies grew too large to climb over, and the speed at which they grew was too much for teams



to carry them into the jungle. And so there they rotted, whilst we built ladders and towers to lead our sacrifices over the bodies—only for them to roll down and join them.

You could not begin to imagine the stench throughout the land. Nothing removed it, and there was a hard limit in what you could get used to. The unending rotting of thousands upon thousands of our people—men, women, and children, whose only crime was not being a priest—the accursed buzzing in their eye sockets, their garish death grins. The world seemed nought but a charnel house. You are lucky—it had mostly faded by the time you arrived. We had dug many graves. Quetzacthulhu himself crushed them by the hundred into pulp with every step; it is terrible and ghastly to say so, but in doing so, unintended though it surely was, he helped return them to the earth, helped stop their hideous, accusing stares.

I do not think I will ever get that fetid odor from my nostrils. I cannot tell you which is worse to have etched in your memory: the sight, the smell, or the sound. There is only so much screaming and wailing you can hear before you drift into a madness from which there is no escape. Certainly a terrible multitude of our people readily fell into such an abyss. Perhaps it was a mercy to then offer them to Quetzacthulhu.

We planned to build a new pyramid of worship, a giant thing reaching up to the stars that would dwarf even the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, with a long slope on its northern side for bodies to roll all the way into the lake. However Quetzacthulhu's movements constantly shook the foundations, making construction impossible. Our manpower was also increasingly weakened; those of us still in the land of the living were wholly unsuited for organized labor. We were a broken people.

By now at least half of our people had turned to worship Quetzacthulhu as a god, and many sought to punish those of us

who did not follow this dark new religion. Never before have I seen such a time, when man could sink so low. Fear, hate and hysteria reached unimaginable levels—to say nothing of despair. Fathers turned on sons, daughters turned on mothers. The old turned on the sick, the sick turned on the deformed, and the deformed turned on children. All would be taken to the top of the temples and feel the hot sting of the knife.



I am rambling. There is only so much one can repeat words of death and despair and unendurable horror before they lose all meaning and the rampant grotesquery becomes commonplace. I will speak then of the noise that signaled the end—or rather the end of one thing and the coming of another.

It was a noise like a reverse sucking that filled the air, as though the sky was being pulled inside out, and as it carried across the land we gagged and vomited at the stench. I stood atop the Great Temple, and with my final reserve of strength I willed myself to look into Quetzacthulhu's ancient cragged eyes. If there was anything resembling mankind there in those abyssal suns, if he in his immemorial and unknowable existence ever felt even a shade of the things that men did, then I believe I knew what the noise was.

Quetzacthulhu had yawned. He had grown tired.



I am weary myself. I feel like I have lived many lifetimes of men. Here, have the beetle and silence your feeble moaning. I am near the end of my tale anyway.

It was the strangest and saddest thing, what happened. Any relief we should have experienced at the conclusion of such a threat to our existence was washed away in tides of shame and self-pitying sickness. For what did this antediluvian nightmare do

but return to the earth from which he had sprouted, and fall into the deepest sleep?

Perhaps he was a god, or an instrument of the gods, here to deliver us divine punishment. Perhaps he came from the underworld and perhaps he came from the earth and perhaps he came from the stars. God or not, we still fought him—we had that right. We threw everything we had at him, and in the end it mattered nought. Most of the time I do not believe we even gained his attention. Unlike the priests—who hailed his sleep as proof that the sacrifices were not in vain, and they had at last appeased his thirst—I do not believe his purpose was one of divine vengeance. Think me blasphemous if you wish, but we were nothing to him. Nothing.

Do you know what is to have the strongest your civilization can offer ignored, for all your almighty and self-crippling effort, for all the countless deaths to be entirely meaningless? Whereas before it was only our minds that had been warped, now we felt wounded within our very souls, our pride shattered beyond repair. It seemed to some, as the priests cheered and hailed victory, that the gods had denied us; perhaps once we were a cherished golden people, made from divine blood and the bones of the dead, but now we were nought but the dirt under their fingernails.

Those with any strength and sanity left—myself included, women and children included—buried the beast. It took thousands of us, and great movements of earth. It says something of our mental state that we could allow ourselves to get so close to the thing, after all we had seen. And still we heard him—but now the rumble was that of a low, muffled snoring.

We planted seeds in the earth, hoping that if such profane soil had grown plants and trees before it would do so again, and perhaps if the life was good and beautiful enough it

enemies, before he returned to slumber. Time holds no meaning when you are living in a state of perpetual tragedy, when every passing second is a nightmare from which there is no awakening.

All I know is that as the foul presence of Quetzacathulhu dwindled from the land, so too did our people return to some semblance of clarity. With it, fear was replaced by rage. The priests—who were seen as the architects of all that had befallen us, and in some ways they were, certainly they had until now been the only ones bar Moctezuma himself who had escaped harm—were hunted down and butchered. The people stormed over them in a furious tide; I have never before witnessed such cruelty and animal viciousness. I kept my distance from the mobs, though I am certain I glimpsed acts of triumphant cannibalism.

Eventually the energy required to maintain that level of hate burned itself out, and the land returned to silence and peace—though it was far from a happy peace. We walked the leftovers of our once magnificent civilization in a state of almost catatonic numbness. The scope of what—and who—we had lost in such a short space of time was beyond our ability to comprehend—those that did either committed suicide or lost what remained of their minds; we found mercy in these moments, easing suffering by putting the mad to rest.



There is one last thing to think of. I told you of the coming of something else. You know of what I speak.

I remember the cry taken up, the first strong words heard in many moons—though still wracked with uncertainty and confusion. I was near the sea at the time, and I was one of the first to see, though not one of us understood.

might negate the evil, or at least lock the thing within a terrestrial prison. I do not know what we were thinking, but the thoughts were not those of rational men.

Yes, we planted like madmen, and like madmen we also began to build things there, as though the weight of structures could keep the mighty Quetzacthulhu down if ever he decided to wake. I think our actions over the following moons were those of people who had lost all sight of reality, and who were keeping at bay as long as possible the abhorrent and harrowing knowledge of what had been done to us, and of what we had done to ourselves.



I know now—only now, reading these desperate inscriptions. One thousand years, that is what we have. He came before, a thousand years ago, and before that, and before that—way back when Cipactli roamed the endless seas, when jaguars fought giants and sun gods fell and the world was destroyed many times. This was him. He is the lost element to our creation, the thing invisible, the thing between the lines—always there, never read. Until now.

We were a strong people, and the world was stronger than he knew it, but each time he has come he is also stronger. The more lives he can take the greater his next rebirth, his awakening. This time he has quenched himself like never before.

Yes, he will come again, a thousand years hence. He will come, and there is nothing that can stop that. I can feel no relief for our people—we are already defeated. My weakened heart can only bleed for those of the future.



I do not know how long Quetzacthulhu had spent wandering and crushing our land and the lands of our neighbours and once

Coming towards us was a vision that made us fall to our knees. There were great castles on the water, and on these stood what seemed to be spirits.

The remaining priests—those who had miraculously kept favor by turning with the tides—together with various chiefs and even Moctezuma himself, fawned over these newcomers when they arrived, and offered them endless treasures. They were greeted as the divine host set to save us from the unimaginable horrors promised us by Quetzacthulhu. There was much rejoicing and wonder, for it was said that our prayers had been answered and our mountains of sacrifice had not been in vain, but there was also not a little fear, for these people were like nothing we had seen before, and all instruments of the gods are to be feared as well as worshipped.

And yet despite the promises made and prophecies fulfilled, doubt seeded in my breast. Beneath me Quetzacthulhu slept, his soft rumbling manifesting itself in the eternal tremble of the earth. I looked at these men—for men they were. I looked at their pale hard faces like ghosts, or the gravebound. I looked at the dull silver they wore on their chests and heads, and clutched in their hands like sticks. I looked at the beasts they pulled off their ships, huge hornless deer, snorting and eyes rolling in their sockets.

And I looked at the way they looked at us, and I wondered.



So, there you have it. It is done.

If only I had known then what I know now. Though I ask myself would it have made a difference?

Have you understood any of what I have told you, white man? I hope you know at least a little of my language, for your sake.

You wonder why I have told you this. The world has seen too much blood, even white man's blood. I have told you the story and now I command you to remember and spread the word, for the lives of countless innocents will depend on it—if ever your people have innocence.

A thousand years, you hear me? One thousand years from this date he will wake. Quetzacthulhu will be even stronger after this sleep, I know he will. You may come to call him by another name. But he will wake and he will wreak terrible slaughter and devastation, he will crush your people to nothing, a shadow of a shadow.

You look at me like you do, but you do not know. You never saw what we once were. Every great empire at its peak finds the monstrous within.

I tell you again to remember, to convince all you see and not let your pride overtake you. That is the condition of your freedom white man. You must never forget, you must prepare against it, you must build your whole culture around it!

Do not look at me like that! You must remember, you *must!*

# THE HALF SCHOOL





There was only one time in my adult life that I've experienced something that made me doubt reality, and believe that maybe, just maybe, something was being hidden from me.

I was twenty-three, at least I think I was, and I was revisiting my old secondary school. It was the school that had shaped me into a half-formed thing, and it was only after I left that I found the freedom and courage to mold myself into what I am today—not quite fully formed, ever growing inside, but a damn sight better than that hopeless, timid, weaselly thing that fell about school like a lump from a vat, a science experiment gone wrong.

It was the school that had nurtured me, a surrogate concrete-and-carpet parent who didn't know a thing about raising a child, always treading the fine line of abuse. It was the school that had scared me, sickened me inside, and crushed me to pulp, and it would hang over me like a great black cloak for the rest of my life.

I would dream of that school forever.

I'd moved eight times since then, three of which involved moving county, searching for something I never found. Which wasn't surprising, as I didn't really know what I was looking for. I hadn't been back to the town my school nested in. There'd been no good reason to.

But the school and those distorted memories of it hung over my head, clouding my progress of *self*, and no matter where I'd go in my life I'd always see those corridors, those faces.

When you dream enough of a real place, and never give it the opportunity to solidify itself by visiting it, then the reality of the place starts to dissolve. It slowly ceases to become real.

This is what happened with the school. I have not revisited my primary school, but I imagine if I did it would have a similar effect—stronger in some ways, even less real, but weaker in others, less inclined to bad memories and old, ugly wounds of the mind.

A friend and I drove up to the school. He had been there too, in the year below. We hadn't really known each other then, only after.

I mentioned the dreams, but only briefly. I couldn't explain properly, and I didn't want to. There are some things you don't try to explain, at least not out loud.

We walked in, knowing we weren't supposed to be there. I was wearing a leather jacket, my hair purposefully messy. Already things were extremely unusual, to a degree beyond what I could have ever imagined.

I felt like I was walking in one of my own dreams. The fabric of the place was watery; I could run my fingers through the air that floated the corridors and I could *feel* it, I could feel my fingers passing through it like it came in waves of silk, but heavy, and blurry—everything was slightly blurry, just like it was in the dream. Not exactly blurry to the sight, but to the touch, to the senses: the sense of thought, the sense of perception.

I was in a submerged place, an ocean of learning and bullying, something that didn't step to the beat of normal space-time, but flowed on its own lazy currents. I suddenly understood how the guy in *The Truman Show* must have felt, for it seemed that all along I had been in my own Truman Show, my own fake reality, but one constructed of thoughts and spaces. Each place built just for me, at just the right time for my use; except now I had broken the plan, going back to a place I was never supposed to return to.

They had not been expecting my coming, and so had had little time to prepare. As a result, this half-made thing that was the school and its people. Fragile and transient, and almost, *almost* permeable to the touch. It wobbled and it wavered, and the carpeted floors and the white walls never quite matched up. I would not have been too surprised if I could push through the walls, molding them before me like soft clay. Then I would see what lay beyond.

I didn't push through. I wanted to, in hindsight I should have, but I was carried along like you are in dreams, never really questioning, never really trying to push through.

I remarked several times to my friend how weird it was, how I felt like I was dreaming. The words seemed trite to my ears, in contrast to what was happening. He nodded and seemed to agree, but I knew he wasn't the same, that this place was not acting on him as it did me.

Everything was so small, so strange, and if I had expected to point everything out in quick, delighted recognition, I was disappointed. I recognized nothing absolutely, but I couldn't put my finger on what had changed. Everything seemed to be sinking, half in memory, half in the concoctions of dreams. I could put my hand on a wall and believe it was real, but the same could happen in a dream, and it was the same kind of awareness: being tricked by the mind, walking through water, never really knowing if you were recognizing something from memory or something from another dream—or if you truly recognized anything.

I wandered in a daze in this dollhouse, and as I did various dolls and moving mannequins stared at us, many of them stopping dead. I had expected attention, but not to the degree we got. Perhaps I was wrong in thinking we could have passed ourselves off as sixth-formers. But maybe there was more

muscle memory (*left* two three four, *right* two three four), and it led the way, and with each step my mind boggled and marveled, at how something could be real and yet not.

We walked the outside of the school, by the playing field, and a tall boy stared at me harder than any other. I caught his gaze immediately, and I stared him down. He had an astounded, verging on aggressive *what the fuck* expression on his face, and I wonder to this day if his mouth actually formed the words. What was the problem, hadn't he seen someone like me before? Did I have a horse's face, did I have a tail and saddle?

I continued to stare him down until we rounded a corner. I'd won. It was a microscopic victory by itself, not worth mentioning for most people, but to me it meant something, and I would always remember it. I'd never stood up to people at school. I guess what I'd really wanted in coming back here, was not to relish nostalgia, but to *fight*, fight my past, share minds with the child with my name who used to come here and to fight his wrongdoers and oppressors, fight and slay everybody who ever made him feel weak and small.

I couldn't go back in time. But this place—I'm not sure time was even working here. When I checked my phone after we left, we'd only been there for minutes.

More girls looked at me.

I remembered when a friend at school—one of those friends who you're never really sure if they even *are* your friend—once said I looked like a troll. I thought of those huge, misshapen things that lived under bridges. I wasn't huge. And I didn't live under a bridge. I never had.

I can't remember if we were beckoned to the front desk, or we approached it ourselves. Either way we were done. We didn't mind leaving. I was worried that something terrible would

to it, they reacted with the kind of almost hostile wonder that figments in a dream do when they know you—the dreamer, the controller—are mentally awake and aware, and studying with far too great a gaze that which should remain waterlogged and fuzzy to the unconscious mind.

They could see the doubt ridden across my face, and their eyes followed me.

A clutch of teenage girls said hi to me as I passed. I said hi back, confused. A feeling was creeping up on me, a sensation of dust on me, of a gauzy layer of filth under my skin. I felt dirty, unclean.

I was sure that somebody somewhere, as though whispering it over a long-distance phone call, was calling me a pedophile. Saying, in a hushed yet quite rabid tone, *“Is this the Mail? Listen . . . there’s a strange old man wandering the halls of the school, he looks pretty dodgy to me . . . you know what I mean . . .”*

That is not an encouraging sensation.

I am not an old man.

I’m not even a man.

We decided not to go upstairs to the next level of this place. We were slightly scared, anxious and trying not to show it. We knew we were not allowed to be there, but we hoped that being ex-students we’d have a good enough excuse to be sent out without getting into trouble.

Besides, the geography was all wrong. The way the place was set out, how one point would connect to another. I thought, having spent six years of my life with that school, that I would be on very familiar home turf. Instead I felt like an intruder, a parasite, leeching off the dull, warbling energy this made-up building and its grounds possessed. I didn’t know where I was, or what I was doing. My body seemed to remember, by instinct and

happen if I stayed; or something not terrible, but amazing and utterly uncertain, and that can be even scarier.

My friend chatted with the front desk receptionist while three teenage girls behind me giggled.

“My friend thinks you’re attractive,” one of them called out, or at least I think they did. I genuinely do not know if this happened or not. I do not know if any of this happened.

“Thanks,” I said, trying to be cool but feeling anything but. I didn’t ask which friend. They were too young by some margin.

“How do you get your hair like that?” the girl said again.

“Um. Backcombed.” I felt that slightly dirty feeling again, but staying in the front of the school and communicating with these people made me feel a bit more in control. The world was solidifying in this spot, relieved that they could structure and harden things around me.

There was the uncomfortable, greasy feeling, the self-convincing *I’m not a pervert I’m just accepting a compliment*, but I also couldn’t help but smile to myself, and feel bigger, brasher, confident and attractive.

I remember when a girl at school asked me out as a joke.

Balancing confidence and social discomfort is a hard act, and thankfully no more questions were asked, and I did not submit any of my own.

As we left, returning to my friend’s car, I felt such a myriad of emotions that I could not help but keep them at bay, lest they swarm and bamboozle me completely. How can one suffer such tangling, contradicting emotions as joy and loss, self-confidence and anger, guilt and empowerment, bewilderment and satisfaction? How does one wake from sleepwalking? I kept my head down, and talked idle nothings to my friend.

We left that dollhouse, that half school, and it hardened behind us.



Thinking back on it now, I can't tell you what did happen, and what did not happen. I am remembering it like a dream of a dream. I have never known a place as it exists in the sleeping mind to exact itself so similarly in reality.

All I know is that there exists at least three people. There is the child who went to that school, who studied and didn't study, who fidgeted and doodled and shivered with nerves, and was punched casually in the head at least once a day. That child is not me. He was never me. I simply replaced him.

There is me. I do not know what I am. Not yet. I only know what I am not.

Then there is a third person, who to that day I did not know existed. This is the half-person who was there on that singular visit to that malleable half-school. He was a sleepwalker, a vision quester, neither child nor adult, neither past nor present, but stuck in between, tied to all, and seeing the future.

I haven't been back to that school. But if I want to find that person again, then I know just where to go.

I would dream of that dream of a school forever.

# THE PRINCESS





Fingers moved the air like silk and straightened the crown. She felt the colors through her fingertips, felt the lands contained within the jewels. The glowing forest in the emerald. The blood in the ruby. The sparkling sea in the sapphire. The diamond, amethyst, onyx, topaz . . . the milk of the moonstone. And in the very center, the rainbow opal, carrying its nebula storms.

Each gem brought by admirers, suitors. Plucked from velvet cushions and set in the crown.

Each admirer left wanting. Each suitor laughed away.

She lifted her feet and gazed at the glittering shoes. Another gift. So many gifts. Every day more came, those that would cross the lands to see her and offer tokens of their affection, their worship.

And yet, it was not enough.

She allowed herself a smile. Some called her cruel, some called her worse. She knew they didn't really believe it, though. She knew that they would do anything, break any principle, just to be in her presence, just to have a brief moment of her attention.

It was an honor for them. Something that, no matter the frustration or the hot-blooded bitterness, they would treasure.

She smiled again as she grazed the jewels that adorned her crown and her delicate fingers, reminding herself of the way things were. It was very simple. They were terribly lucky to even be allowed to see her, for they did not deserve to; not even the highest lord did, not *really*.

Whereas she—she deserved it all, and more. She had known this unquestionable fact of life from the first moment she had looked in a mirror and fell in love with herself.

A month back—had it been a month? A month of dazzling dresses, onyx pendants as black as the night's soul, diamond-white shoes, bracelets the dancing silver of fairies, all of them paid for by others—a month back someone had complained about his treatment at her hands, had dared tell her she was spoiled, spoiled beyond all recognition.

Much to his amazement, her mouth had turned its corners into, if not a smirk, a prideful and arrogant smile.

“Yes,” she had said. “And?”

“And?” he repeated, dumbfoundedly.

“And I should be spoiled more,” she had finished for him, holding her arm out and looking away. “Now get on your knees and kiss my hand. Don't you know a princess when you see one? And where's my present?”

And the people from afar that had never seen her heard about this, and they expected something. They expected a moral resolution, a comeuppance. They expected the jewels to fall from her fingers, the crown from her head, the superior smile from her lips. They expected travelers to reach them by long and winding roads and say, “Oh, the princess? Oh, she has fallen. It was her hubris. Her vanity.”

They expected what they would never get. Because they didn't understand. They had never been in the princess's presence. They had never felt her gaze.

They thought her entranced subjects and admirers were foolish monarchists, obsequious to power, to royalty.

But she had no lineage. There was no queen, no king, no prince. The head of the last king still adorned the palace wall.

She was only the princess. One day she had not been there and the next she was.

You scoff and roll your eyes, and call her names. But you *have never been in her presence*. I have. I will finish writing and I will finish packing up everything I own. I will take it to her and offer all of it.

It will be pitiful to her but she will take it and if I am lucky—if I am truly blessed—she will let me polish her crown.

The man who called her spoiled? He begs every day to be allowed in her presence. When he is allowed—once a month—he grovels at her feet for hours, ceaselessly, until she waves a bored hand and has him removed.

You will understand one day. Her influence ever spreads.

She will never show up at your home. But one day you may show up at hers.

# THE CHEESE



I itch and struggle to remember it all before it sails away from me, like a boat over the edge of the world. I was in a cellar...

It roars back to me in a succession of memory-paintings; images and feelings that I clutch on to and tie up with rope to prevent their escape. Yes, I had been in a cellar, imbued with that kind of greasy half-darkness so oily and stinking that you could feel it with your fingers. The stone walls were creased with slime; curling brown moss crept through the cracks and hung down to the floor like tendrils. I was aware of the passage of time, a time of forever, a dream that lasted a lifetime.

The place had stunk: the putrid stench carried in that black air blew through my nostrils as nought but utter foulness. I was sitting in a corner, hunched and rocking in my squalor. I remember shivering frequently, despite being warmed by the close, humid filth. I was clad in the rags that were once my clothes, now decaying, browned and stained. A tentacle of saliva dripped down from my slack lips and pooled on my fat belly. My limbs were wasting away while my belly had become engorged and distended. I shifted slightly, and my backside slid over stones of hot slime.

The cellar was far from quiet. Parades of scabrats lived amongst me. They chittered and scampered over a floor soaked in filth. The cellar was nauseated from the confines of my sorry self and the pustule-borne scabrats—from the bodily waste we both produced, from the sickness of breath and from the closeness of the air.

The only thing about us that wasn't rotten and sick was hanging up in the center of the ceiling from a rusted chain. I remember clearly, it was a golden sphere of cheese. It was the only thing of color in the place; even the dark didn't seem to touch it.

At regular intervals the scabrats would turn frothing and crazy, fighting each other with rabid brutality. They squealed and screamed and bit each other, tearing off fur and tails. Any rat that stayed too long in the center of the room was gnawed to death by the others. Some of the corpses were dragged away; others were left there, and formed a decaying mound for the others to clamber. When the mound of death seemed to be making progress up towards the cheese, the skeletons at the bottom would crumble down, or rats would pull them out and away, and the mound would sink or sometimes collapse entirely.

The scabrats had no chance of reaching the cheese. Even I, standing on tiptoes, could not reach it. I could have easily grabbed it and tore it off the chain if I had jumped up. But I did not have the energy for such a feat. Instead, I stayed bedraggled and stinking in my corner, dribbling spit down on myself and aching with hunger and thirst.

A rat crawled up onto my legs, and looked at me with beady eyes. It nuzzled at me, and gave me an affectionate nip. The last thing I remember was grabbing a hold of it, and, as it screeched hopelessly at me, raising it to my trembling mouth . . .

# THE GAUNTLET OF GORE



In the middle of the green glowing field there was a stage, old and wooden, such that a theater troupe might perform on. On this stage were sat the principal players of Stonewaters Bookstore, all dressed in green, green gowns and green tunics and the like, with their long hair braided or tied back in tails. Sitting about the field facing the stage were many more of these players, and among them assorted small groups of the opposing teams: St. Aidens, Trinity, and William Howard School. Everybody looked to the stage in interest. Nobody had played Stonewaters before; after all, they were a bookstore, not a school. Some of them wondered what the hell the Organizers were thinking.

Sarah and Mike were late, and the closer they walked to the crowd, the more the tension became apparent. A girl in elegant braids was speaking from her chair on the stage. Her words reached them, and they knew she was deeply afraid.

“What’s going on?” Mike said, under his breath.

“Look at everyone,” Sarah replied. “There’s more noise at a graveyard. Look at their faces.”

Mike scanned the groups, and saw how even those of the teams opposing Stonewaters had fixed, mute expressions, poker faces every one.

“ . . . pleased as much as we are with our new captains,” the girl on stage continued, her voice tremulous, her eyes pleading, “and hope they will see Stonewaters to an easy and triumphant victory!”

A hard applause greeted the words, which died as abruptly as it began.

“Hypnotised?” whispered Mike, moving through the groups to an empty patch of grass.



“Nuh . . . oh,” said Sarah, hesitantly. “I don’t think so.” She caught the eye of a fellow William Howard player, and his eyes did the talking for them. *They’re terrified*, she thought.

She waved a hand in the air at the stage. “Oi, woodelves!” she shouted, as Mike sat fast on the floor and tried to pull her down next to him. “Any chance you could bring your fucking captains back out for the latecomers?”

The braided girl’s eyes widened, and then she turned her head to the side, listening, her whole body visibly trembling as shadows moved behind her.

The girl cleared her throat. “The captains are more than happy to make another appearance.” She shrank then, becoming diminutive and unimportant, and a chill swept through the crowd, though no faces changed to show it.

“What did you have to go and do that for,” said Mike unhappily. “I’ve got goosebumps.”

“Looks like you’re not the only one,” Sarah replied. “Look how stiff everyone is. Like shop dummies.”

They came out then, three of them, and Sarah would have burst out laughing if not for their faces, if not for the cold, scared applause of the hundreds of bodies around her, the undercurrent of dread rippling its way unseen through the crowd and touching her on the shoulders.

They were dressed as mascots, absurd, dumb mascots. One was a loaf of bread. One was a bottle of milk. One was a bag of sugar. They would have been laughable, senseless camp counsellors or perhaps auditioning for some TV food advert.

But for their faces.

Their smiles were too big to fit, too big for their skin, which stretched and contorted around the edges of their face. They were ghastly visages meant more for a nightmare circus

than a sports crowd. Their thick, rubbery lips went up to their ears, as though pulled by hooks, around skin the quality of waxy dough, or half-melted plastic. Above those garish grins turned unblinking eyes, round and bulging like two stuck marbles.

“Greetings again everyone,” said the woman captain, the bottle of milk flanked by two men. “It seems we’re due for a second speech.” She spoke through her smile, with a high, scabrous tone, like a rat trying to talk. The teeth were short and sickly white, draped over by the excess of fat pink gums. Sarah wasn’t right up to the stage, but she could see enough, and as the woman’s mouth moved she detected an almost hidden sharpness inside, a row of points just emerging from the gums, trying to wriggle out.

“Please sit down, my foulmouthed dearie,” said the woman captain, and Sarah sat down. The woman raised her hands, old hands belonging more to a crone than what Sarah would have guessed was somebody middle aged, and she began her speech.

Sarah and Mike listened, transfixed by those awful smiles, those brief glints of points in the mouth, those long, wrinkled fingers gesturing, but when the woman clapped her hands and gave a short, stilted bow, they realized they had remembered nothing. All they could think of was a kind of droning noise, a low, flat hum that had only just ended, their ears suddenly unblocked and the world silent and clear.

The two men on either side of the woman, the bread and the sugar mascots, gave their own stiff bows, and the silence was crushed by a quick, razorsharp beating of hands. Even Sarah found herself smacking her hands together so hard they hurt, and looking to her side she saw Mike doing the same, his face confused and terribly scared.

The captains left the stage, and palpable relief shuddered through the crowd. The braided girl came out, her face quivering, trying to hold herself composed but her words coming out rushed and stuttering. People started to trail away from the stage, and Sarah got up, pulling a dazed Mike with her, and the two of them walked away.

“What happened . . . who *were* they... those *smiles* . . . I can’t remember a thing she said,” Mike was saying, and Sarah was nodding, feeling distant and drifting.

“What does this mean for the game?” Mike pressed her, and touched her arm when she didn’t respond.

She jerked a little, then her shoulders slumped. “It means that it’s going to get interesting,” she said. “C’mon, maybe our captain has some idea. Some of the others must have seen the earlier announcements.”

The William Howard lodge came up over the crest of a hill, and they instantly felt clearer of head when they passed under the school’s heraldry. They strode with renewed vigor through the pine arches and into the main cabin, which was roaring with noise and sweating with the heat of a dozen bodies.

Everybody was talking and arguing and shouting at once, and from what Sarah could gather, most of it was about the other teams, chiefly Stonewaters Bookstore.

“*Those smiles—*’

“A dwarf *and* a giant—”

“—some kind of black magic, I know it—”

“—all new players, don’t know what—”

“—just a trick, don’t worry, just a strategy to mess with us—”

“—*and* a giant as siege—”

A loud fizzing sound ending in a *snap* shut everyone's attempts at being heard dead. The huge plasma screen that occupied one wall of the cabin had caught life. It was divided by borders into three, but it was the same picture, and it was that of bare whiteness containing a single figure: a man in the middle section, raising his hands and calling for attention, though it was not needed.

"Now listen, guys," the man on the TV started, dropping his hands. "I know everybody has concerns. A new team, yes a *bookstore* at that, and some scary looking captains to boot. And yes, Dave, I do know of those siege weapons, and yes they are a dwarf and a . . . exceptionally tall player. He's new to this, and should be an easy take if we've got the right tactics, but the dwarf comes from another team, I don't know which, another country I think, and he's a dab hand. But look at me. Look at me. Do you think this bothers me? Do you think this should bother any of you?" The man pointed at his calm face, his eyes hidden by sunglasses, and when some of the team players started murmuring and somebody seemed on the verge of addressing the problem rather more loudly the man raised up his hands again.

"Listen. Everyone. We are William Howard School. We have won the game the last three times. This is an *experienced* team. In fact, we only have three new players, since last year's *triumph*." At this some of the more confident players gave a *whoop*. "And not only that," he continued, "but an entire *half* the team have played for three years. That, my friends, is *unprecedented*." More whoops, and more smiles returning. Sarah felt encouraged, but she also felt a little sick. She didn't feel like seeing anybody smile for some time.

Their captain walked across the screen, and the man who appeared on the separated right section of television was older, wiser, with grey hair and a grey suit. It was still the same

man. His sunglasses were now glasses, and he peered at them with pale blue eyes.

“You want,” he began, with weathered certainty, “a strategy. I will give it to you. Sit down. This will take some time, and it will be late by the time I have finished, and then we will continue tomorrow morning. I trust you are already fit, and trained, as best you can with those dummy gauntlets. For those three of you new to this game”—he looked pointedly at a trio of boys, only one of whom looked at all confident, and one of whom looked like he was going to piss his pants—“tomorrow afternoon will make or break. The shower of gore has sent some players away screaming, or curled into a ball, senses lost, just as it has turned boys to men and girls to women, and both boys and girls into players of the Gauntlet. You will not know what you can take until you are in the field, but I hope, particularly in this age of extreme bloody violence on every channel you can turn to, every video game you can play, every film, song, painting, book, that you will not mind getting a little red on you.” Cue laughter from the experienced players, bar Sarah.

So they sat and listened to the talk. It went on for hours, as their captain told them each of their roles, and what he’d learned about the other teams, bolstering bad rumors, how Trinity was training only in virtual reality, at least half the team hooked on pleasure enhancers—*nerds*, the team jeered, laughing at how soft and weak they would be. He told them about their own siege weapon—a quiet boy at the back of the room, called Freddy, and how, while he was new to this, he was going to be devastating to the opposing teams. He talked about their tactics for the dwarf and giant, the only names they were referred to by now. They were the siege players for St. Aiden’s and Trinity respectively—everybody got one siege, the term given to an unusual player who was chosen to pose a challenge to other teams, a figure perhaps difficult to destroy, or difficult to defend

against. They'd faced a dwarf before, three years ago. They were siege because the punch in the stomach required to unleash the power of the gauntlet was harder to aim for, given the difference in height. It was the same with the giant, although they'd never faced a particularly tall player before. His height was unknown, as neither the captain nor his sources had seen him, presumably because Trinity were playing their cards close to their chest, as usual.

The captain talked as outside the sun waned and drooped, fielding questions from the players, describing on-field tactics, the wider strategy, a runthrough of defence and offense moves, both classic and new. "The more new moves we can adapt to," the captain said, "the more of an edge we'll have. We need to know how to defend ourselves against these moves, and how to surprise the opposition with moves they've never prepared for. They are absolutely crucial."

They'd trained for all of these, already, for weeks beforehand, but that didn't matter. Everything had to be perfect when one's life was at stake, a fact the captain had to drum into one of the new boys when he saw through the videolink that the boy was drifting off, nearly asleep. "Look at the others!" he thundered. "Awake, and so sharp you could whet knives on them! Why do you think that is? Because they don't want to die, and they don't want their friends to die!"

The first part was certainly true, although playing the Gauntlet was always a tremendous gamble, well-practiced or not. As for the second, most of the experienced players (being anybody who had survived more than one game) knew better than to make friends. Sarah had Mike, but she had conditioned herself to accept his death, if it came. You quickly learned how to adapt to losing people around you. It wasn't really loss, anymore, merely the facts of the game. Rather like a war, except you fought in a war because you were told to, and often even the victorious

weren't seen as heroes. The Gauntlet you played because you wanted to, because you were good at it, or thought you'd be, and if you won you were a hero, an icon, a *fucking rockstar*.

Their televised captain hammered on at them, switching between his middle self, his old self, and his young self, who swaggered about the left hand side with long hair and an open t-shirt, chuckling and cracking jokes, raising cheers. They weren't the only ones with an A.I. captain; apparently Trinity had one too now, although nobody had ever seen him, or her. St. Aiden's captain was a strict, tight-lipped woman always in some kind of blazer, and it was rumored that she drilled the team mercilessly.

Eventually, their captain summed up, raised his arms, and prompted an ovation, running between the borders of the TV, changing age and appearance without even a flicker. He stopped in the middle, out of breath, thanked them, announced a 6:00am start tomorrow (to which nobody groaned), and the TV shot to darkness.

Sarah took to the showers with Mike and the others, some staying behind to practice moves, or read books on the game. Some went to bed right away, and some sat up rocking and whispering to themselves.

She let the hard water run over her, slashing at the dead skin and dirt, at the tiredness of her body after her journey here. From another stall she heard sounds of pleasure—two in a stall, she thought—and then cries of shock and laughter as others discovered them and ripped the curtain back. And then another cry, louder and more piercing, rising above the pound of the water, and as she looked up, as though she might see the culprit voice embodied on the ceiling, she saw the hot breath of the showers rolling and folding into a cloud of red steam.

There was the *shill* sound of a curtain yanked, and a race of footsteps. She pulled her curtain around her face to see

a boy, the same nervous, piss-his-pants new boy, run gasping and bleating, as red and dripping as an oversized abortion.

Two other boys were following him at a trot, laughing, and catching up to him when the boy slipped and hit the floor, pooling in blood. He lay there like the carcass of a pig, his eyes glassy and staring, his dick drowned and dead like some tiny sacrificial totem.

"You turn it the other way mate," chuckled one of the boys, as others leaned out from their shower stalls to jeer.

Sarah left her stall and strode over the boy, as around her the other players gasped and giggled at her naked form. She pulled the bloodied boy up by the hand and led him to an empty shower, which she turned on, *the right way*, and soon the drain was sucking away all that red horror.

She stayed in the shower, helping the shivering boy wash, as outside came the inevitable chants of *Sarah's got a boyfriend, Sarah's got a boyfriend!*

"What . . . why . . ." started the boy, as she took his hands and poured shampoo in them, guiding them up to his hair and into the motions, until he carried on doing it mechanically by himself.

"Why did the shower rain blood?" she prompted.

He nodded, and his eyes found their life again, and looked into hers.

She shrugged. "Sometimes it's a way for some players to celebrate a victory. Sometimes it's a pre-match thing, like a war-chant or something. Sometimes it's like an initiation, for new players. I never do it, myself." *But you did*, said a voice inside her. *You used to.*

"What . . . whose blood is it? Is it human?"



"I don't know. I never thought to ask." *Yes you did. You just didn't want the answer.*

The boy said nothing more, but he seemed to be recovering from the shock—the shock of not just opening his eyes to see the shower was spurting a fountain of warm, sticky blood all over him, but also the falling over, the lying curled on the floor, naked among people he barely knew, stunned and wounded by their laughter.

"My name's Joseph," he said quietly.

"Okay. I'm Sarah. I'm leaving you to it now Joseph, alright?"

Sarah left the stall, and heard his mumbled thank you behind her. As she strode off purposefully through the shower room, back to her stall, she glared at the heads of the boys and girls who looked round their curtains as she passed. The two older boys who had followed the new kid, laughing as he ran and tripped, stood about, cocky despite their nakedness. She knew them from last year's team: Daniel and Jack.

They were following her as they had followed Joseph, but without running, without laughing. She felt their smirks as they watched her behind like the lion watches the gazelle. *Except this gazelle is in disguise. This gazelle is a bigger lion.*

One of them, perhaps dared through meaningful eye contact by the other, plucked up the nerve to smack her ass. She spun around, and saw Jack's arm dart back, his eyes alight, grinning with puerile delight at how her soft flesh had felt to his touch. Daniel was laughing. Then their gazes dropped to her breasts, and lower down too.

Sarah reached forward and grabbed Jack's arm, the same arm that had smacked her, and she pulled it towards her. "Come on then," she said brusquely. "Have a shower with me."

“What?” His smirk was still there, but it looked different, touched with confusion, with a hint of fear. It was a smirk for show now, there for appearances in the face of Daniel and the others.

“I said come on. You want me, well come get me.” She yanked him harder, and, as she predicted, he resisted. *The harder you pull, the harder they pull back.*

“You some kinda slut?” interjected Daniel.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I am,” said Sarah, her steely eyes turning to him. “I’m a slut. The biggest kind of slut. I want you too Daniel. Both of you, at the same time. Come on.”

Now the both of them looked unsure of themselves, all pretence at smirking gone. Around them, heads were whispering and murmuring, or staring in silence. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mike’s head, and she knew he was grinning.

“Fuck off,” Jack said, pulling away again at her, but her grip was iron tight. The hold of his feet stuttered, and he was dragged two steps against his will. “Hey, get off!” he exclaimed, looking angry and frightened.

“Let go of him!” said Daniel.

She looked pointedly down at them, at Jack and Daniel’s penises, and as they realized where she was looking, the two of them went red. “Oh,” she said softly, but loud enough for everyone to hear. “You’re virgins, is that it? Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. I can’t see you being able to do much with *those* things.” She put her other hand up to her mouth to *not quite* suppress a giggle.

At last, she let Jack tear his arm away from her, and he rubbed it aggressively, as though she had actually hurt him. The two of them backed off, sullen, embarrassed and beaten.

“Bitch,” said Daniel, his parting shot as they went to get their clothes.

“You better believe it,” she said, and walked back to her shower, as always, unconcerned with covering herself. *Shame is the first step to being a victim*, she thought to herself. *The hidden fruit is twice as sweet. You can’t make me go red, I own this body, and you can go fuck yourselves.*

*Anyway, tomorrow, chances are you’ll be dead.*



The next morning, the sun rose with a reddish glare, as though it knew of the blood sport to come, and was eager to be the first spectator. The sky was cloudless, and the day built up hot and harsh. Outside the stalks of grass shimmered, stretching out, anxiously awaiting the nutrients that were to spatter down on them.

When playing the Gauntlet, there are two options. Either you win, or the whole team dies.

Either you die, or you see every other opposing team member blown to bits. There are no corpses, only giblets.

The odds were stacked against every player. There was a very high chance this was the day they would die. Reckless courage and the arrogance of ego were the measures by which they fought this statistical probability. Team spirit and unity were the banners they waved against the specter of death.

This morning, for the first time in years, there was something else on the players’ minds.

It started out as a rumor, and was dismissed by the captains and the experienced players as such. It was said, circulating among the teams, that Stonewaters Bookstore was losing players, and replacing them just as fast.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mike said. “The game hasn’t even started yet, how could they be losing players?”

Then two players from St. Aidens School saw the ropes hung from the Stonewaters lodge, twisted in nooses and glistening, and as they came closer they saw that they were not ropes but intestines. They were hooked and looped over nails hammered into the roof. On the end of each intestine were the nooses, cut and tied to themselves. The other ends were hidden, trailing out and up from the open stomachs of the dead.

Flies buzzed around the bodies of the Stonewaters players, though they had not been up long, and summer crows croaked overhead, waiting to land. The players were wearing their team garb, and they had been strangled by their own guts.

Soon half the players of every team had seen them with their own eyes.

“I don’t get it,” said Alex, a loud-voiced girl from last year. “Why would the Stonewaters captains kill their own players? If they’re going to kill someone before the game starts, why not those of the other teams?”

“Because that’d be breaking the rules,” replied Sarah. “You can’t interfere with the players of other teams before a match or you forfeit the game, and sometimes worse. There’s nothing in the rules about killing your own.”

“But why do it? Why sabotage your own team?”

“Fear, I guess. Maybe they’re not sabotaging the team. Maybe they’re cutting out the weak. I bet they have a horde of reserves, and they’re building their very first team the best it can be. All strong potential players, all fierce, unquestioning players who don’t fear death so much as they fear their captains.”

Alex and the others gaped at her, while the William Howard captain listened silently. “But . . . but what does that mean?” Alex said at last.

“It means,” Sarah said, “that they might be hard to beat.”



They trained hard throughout the morning, prepared both physically and mentally by the three incarnations of their captain. Outside, a wireless screen was wheeled out for the young captain to lead them through their exercises and plays with the dummy gauntlets; occasionally the screen changed its channel so the man in the sunglasses could offer advice and tactics.

By the end of their training, reports of three more deaths had come to them, three more Stonewaters players hung up by their intestines by their monstrous captains.

If the lodge had been loud yesterday, today it was full of whispers. Perhaps, seemed to be the unspoken idea, if everybody spoke under their breath, then the evil that touched the Stonewaters Bookstore couldn't hear them, couldn't affect them.

One of the few not talking in whispers was Sarah, and she was frustrated with the cobwebbed words of the others, the furtive glances, the hunched postures. She knew they were encouraging fear, inviting it in, by acting this way. They were making it *real*.

The captain appeared on screen. This was the older man, searching them out with a put on look of both care and challenge. Even the A.I. understood the seriousness of the situation. More intelligent than any of them, he was extremely adaptable and self-learning. *But a day as absurd and horrific as this must have stretched him*, Sarah thought. She'd have doubted him,

as she once did, but that was before he had led them to victory for three years in a row, with minimal casualties.

“Okay, everybody,” he said. “I’m going to give you a last talk, and I want you all to listen. Afterwards, I’ll take questions. I know about what’s bothering you, but it can wait. Strategy is more important right now than answering the call of fear. I ask you all to keep your heads.”

He spent half an hour going over everything again in brief, focusing on the important buzzwords, like that of *cooperation* and *steadfastness*, while the players fidgeted.

Eventually, he sighed, and said after a pause, “Questions?”

Just about every hand in the room shot up.

The captain blinked. “Yes,” he said, pointing at someone in the front row, a girl named Juliet.

“What the fuck is with the Stonewaters captains? They’re *monsters!*”

The hands in the room went slowly down.

The captain said nothing for a few seconds. “Yes,” he said at last. “I have not encountered such opposing forces before. But their methods are not beyond me, and it is imperative you understand them. They wish to make their team afraid, so that they are loyal, and aggressive. Anything to get away from their captains, I’m sure. They wish to make *you* afraid, afraid and bewildered, so that you will not want to fight the Stonewaters players, so that every glimpse you have of their captains will make you shudder and forget yourself, and so, of course, that you will be with your fear at crucial moments, and not with your head in the game. Fear from behind us bolsters us, drives us, while fear from in front makes us grind to a halt, or turn our tails and run.

"I will not use fear in my tactics with you. Nor, despite what is said about the St. Aidens and Trinity captains, do they. I believe in a common strength, and in bravery, not in quaking players looking behind as much as in front. Their players are driven senseless by the executions of their friends. You should have little doubt that their final team will be quite mad, and quite reckless. You should know, then, that this is their greatest weakness, and it is what has shaped my training of you over the second half of the morning."

He shot out a finger. "Tell me, Sarah, who won, the Roman phalanxes or the barbarian hordes?"

Sarah figured he wasn't asking for a history lesson, and promptly replied, "The Romans."

"Correct," he said. "As we will beat Stonewaters Bookstore today. Let their fear be their downfall. Let their frantic aggression trip them up. Let their wild swings be uncontrolled and clumsy, and easily dodged. Let them come at you with their bull-headed charges, and be their matador."

"Of course," he added, "don't forget about the other teams. Yes, you." He nodded at a boy called Paul, who had his hand back up in the air.

"What was with their outfits during the announcement? I mean, bread, milk, sugar was it? It doesn't make any sense!"

The screen flickered for a second, as their captain furrowed his brows. "Exactly, Paul. Fear and confusion are good bedfellows. One often begets the other. There is, as far as I can tell, neither rhyme nor reason to it. It is merely a distraction, an absurdist play that serves as one more thing to keep your minds not on the game, but on silly riddles with no answer. I tell you all now, forget it! Forget their captains entirely!"

Paul put his hand up again, and the captain nodded curtly at him.

“Who . . . what is Stonewater’s siege weapon?” His question was accompanied by murmurs around him, and alert, expectant looks at the captain.

The old man shook his head. “I am afraid I do not know. They have kept it hidden. I have asked the other team captains, and nobody knows. Whoever the siege is, expect the worst.”

The players grumbled and groaned, and some of the less experienced players were wringing their hands. The new boy Joseph had gone pale, but then he’d been looking ill since the first rumors of Stonewater deaths had passed their way.



The grass consisted of iron blades burnished under the heat of the midday sun. Millions upon millions of little knives, all thirsting, ready to whet their whistles on the redness of humans.

The grounds for play covered the field, the central mud banks where lives were often lost, and the sparse yet dark forests around the fringes, where each team would begin. That’s where they waited, so tense you could cut yourself on their muscles. Some shivering, some breathing deep, some with eyes closed and praying to the gods of slaughter.

In no time at all, each of them would look a horror, team colors almost indistinguishable under slopping coats of mud and blood. Fighting, frenzied, and frothing, lost in the berserker hazes of battle lust and battle terror. The tactics drilled into them could never last forever, could never be present when you were staring into the rolling whites of enemy eyes. Then, it was just you and them, and your death hanging on a string.

The woods were thin, but most of the trunks were wide. In the later stages of the game, sometimes called the hunt,



sometimes called clean-up, they would hide players, players shivering and scared, putting off the inevitable, and players silent in their concealment, waiting to assassinate their hunters. Overhead the canopy was thick and heavy from these trees, filling in the gaps and shutting out the sun. The experienced players stood and crouched like panthers in the darkness, feeling the dirt under them and stroking the bark of the trees with their free hand.

You couldn't see the cameras unless you were looking for them, but they were there. They had their places. In the field the cameras were long-range, pointing in at the action from the sidelines, but here they sneaked in among the trees, flicking on and off with night vision to the rapt, hungry attention of their audience.

The spectators sat in their stands on the only side of the field not bordered by woods, munching their processed meats and gurgling beer, keeping eyes on the huge screens that showed the choice views from the cameras, field and forest. The audience who watched at home slunk lower in their fat armchairs, or indulged drunken bloodlusts perched on barstools with their chattering, gasping brethren.

No spectators would cross the boundaries and come onto the pitch. There would be no streakers, no attention-seekers. If you passed the boundaries, your life was forfeit. Neither the Organizers or any player were held responsible if you were hurt, or if you died.

The audience stayed put.

This wasn't as polished a set-up as the Nationals, or the World Titles, but a lot of people preferred the Locals, the inter-school matches. They were amateurs, technically, but the orgy of violence suited them, suited the dirt and roughness of the grounds. There were only a handful of pro stadiums—called

Coliseums these days—out there. The players didn't play on fields and in forests and sliding up and down mud banks, but on laminate flooring. Obstacles were varied, with new ones introduced in each game, keeping a novelty element for the audience and a surprise element for the teams. Regular obstacles included a simulated forest made of branchless, leafless poles to dodge, a waxen floor to slip and slide on, and a crowd favorite, an area of connected trampolines. You hadn't seen anything until you'd seen two players jumping towards each other, fists connecting in each other's stomachs, and exploding in midair.

Sarah checked her gauntlet for what seemed to be the twentieth time. There was no such thing as over-checking, not when your life depended on it working and staying strapped tight around your hand. She opened the small protective casing, flicked the switch and felt the familiar *thrum*, the vibrations coursing through her fingers and up her arm. When it hit the spot, a stomach, the vibrations, tuned to the perfect frequency, would multiply over and over, rumbling their way through the gauntlet and rippling the enemy's (you better hope they were an enemy) stomach. And then they exploded.

She moved to switch it back off, when a siren sounded, sharp and angry, emitting from every camera. Now she could see them, blinking black and sullen in the trees.

"Switch 'em on!" she shouted, and those players that needed telling did so.

She looked over at Mike, who nodded at her, his face hard. She turned to see Joseph, who had his eyes closed and was muttering fast to himself. She was relieved to see his gauntlet was on and working.

A couple of steps before her, Freddy was stretching. *You better be good*, she thought.

A second noise, higher than the last, and ending faster.

“Everybody!” Sarah shouted. “You’re here now! If you want to turn back, it’s too late, you’ll just have to fight your way out! Remember your training! Remember your teammates! Fight for your team, fight for your life, fight for William Howard! Give ‘em Hell!”

A cheer, desperate and aggressive, was echoed by some, and was quickly swallowed by the darkness. Some of them were gulping repeatedly and some were shaking their heads, as though wishing the dream away.

The third call.

They ran.



They cleared the forest in whooping, shrieking leaps, and the sun turned its eye right on them, the biggest camera of all.

From the corner of her right eye Sarah saw the blur of a roaring crowd. And from the treeline that fringed the field on all other sides came the enemy.

St Aidens from the left, color of blue, Trinity from ahead, color of yellow. Rushing towards them, towards each other, howling like barbarians or wolves, their gauntlets glinting silver in the sun.

*Soon we’ll all be the same color, she thought as she ran with the purple-clad William Howard team. Then it’ll be faces that matter. Look them in the eyes, and if you didn’t see them in the lodge this morning, kill them.*

There were fewer St. Aidens and Trinity players than William Howard. She knew they would have split their teams, sending some players off through the forest to strike on two (or three) fronts. The William Howard captain had decided to keep their team together, as he had last year. It meant their rear was

unprotected, but it also meant they were a unified force, a ram to drive through and overwhelm.

St Aidens players would likely be racing through the forest to take them from behind while they were up to their necks with the others. But the second line of William Howard players were ready to turn at a moment's notice, ready to obstruct their stomachs with the gauntlet and provide an unbreakable rearguard.

That was the theory, at least.

The half-metal gauntlet was the best defence you had against another gauntlet. A blow at full force could break your wrist, if you blocked with your other arm. But the gauntlet was also by far the easiest way to kill your opponent, and so every split second there was a question of defence or offense, to parry or strike. The wrong choice and you would not make another choice ever again.

It was against the game rules to wear padding—to wear anything that touched or came close to the stomach—under your team kit. Their captain had frisked them all before they had moved to their positions. If a player was found to be cheating, apart from capital punishment for the individual, the entire team might never play again.

She could make out the individual faces of the other teams, before she realized what was missing.

Stonewaters Bookstore.

She was so used to playing against only two teams, that she hadn't noticed at first. But the gap between St. Aidens and Trinity, now it was obvious. That was where the green-clad players should have sprung from, but they hadn't.

*They're all in the forest.*

The realization would come to the other players, if it hadn't already. The Stonewaters would be mounting a defence in the dark, ready to intercept the St. Aidens and Trinity players from both sides. Or perhaps they were spreading themselves through the woods, hiding behind trees, *maybe even climbing them*, ready to ambush, guerrilla style. *Sneaky bastards*.

Subterfuge tactics didn't suit William Howard School, and they'd rarely employed them. Head on, hard and powerful, that was them—and for three years it hadn't let them down.

Freddy was ahead of them now. At first just by a couple of paces, and then, as Sarah observed with mounting alarm, at a distance growing every second. "Slow down Freddy!" she yelled, or tried to—she was panting with exertion, and if Freddy heard her, he didn't look around.

The St. Aidens team had divided: one half towards Trinity, one half towards the William Howard team. Trinity, in contrast, were moving their whole team towards the St. Aidens players. *You idiots!* thought Sarah at the St. Aidens players, and at their captain, who would be watching from between the two barriers that separated the spectators from the players. St. Aidens—all but those in the forest—would be wiped out, if by numbers more than anything else. That was good—but massacres weren't. Ideally, St. Aidens and Trinity—and Stonewaters, whoever encountered them first—would be evenly matched—allowing for a bloodbath on both sides. Devouring small, shellshocked and exhausted groups was easy—fighting a powerful force pumped up from storming the opposition with minimal losses was not.

On the bright side, with Trinity ignoring them, for now, they could load all guns to bear, so to speak, at the pinch of St. Aidens players charging suicidally at them.

Freddy got there first, and his gauntlet arm was thrust out at his side ready for the killing blow.

In a few seconds, Sarah would wish she had access to the slow motion replays that would have entertained the audience. As it was, it happened too quick and seamless for her to really understand.

A drop of a St. Aidens player, to his knees. The dwarf, unstrapping himself from the player's back, vaulting, *leapfrogging*, and then—and then a sunset shower. And the biggest parts of Freddy remaining you could fit in the palm of your hand.

A chunk of flesh slid down the dwarf's grinning face—that was the slow motion bit, that grin, the smear left by the slipping chunk of Freddy.

"*Siege down!*" somebody yelled, and Sarah saw players beside her stumble in their advance, hand up to their face in shock.

"Keep going!" Sarah shouted back. "No holding back!" She put more encouragement in her voice than she could give to herself. *Freddy the boy wonder, gone minutes into the game, gone before a single kill. Nobody would ever know how good he really was. You were either good, or you were nothing, and Freddy was most certainly nothing now.*

"First blood!" bayed the dwarf, and the two sides met.

Sarah's first move was a spin. A player in blue, his gauntlet ready to thrust, hesitated when confronted with a stomach turned to back, and that hesitation was all Sarah needed. She didn't allow a second for the player to move his gauntlet to one of defence. She felt the *THRUM* and violent shuddering as her gauntlet connected at the tail end of her spin. The player's mouth opened slackly, gibbering for a mere snapshot of time, before the gauntlet's undulations reduced him to an outwardly expanding

spray. Sarah's left arm was up in preparation, shielding her eyes from the rain (one of the most basic and most important tactics to learn, if you didn't want to be half-blinded), and then she was on to the next.

All about, cascades of gore. The sky seemed hell-bent on a scattershot deluge of giblets. Her shoulder came into contact with a fellow William Howard player; she felt his whole body convulse, and then he was empty space. She stumbled, and it saved her life; a gauntleted fist came powering through in the spot where she had been, just about stomach height.

She fell to her knees and punched upwards and slanting, ducking her head as her overbalanced attacker oscillated and exploded. Fleishy lumps pattered onto her, and she shook them from her hair. She stood up to see all but two St. Aiden's players left—a lanky girl with red hair and the dwarf. The girl was guarding her stomach with her gauntlet while punching heads with a left hook, dazing her targets before the gauntlet strike. The dwarf was a small red totem, hammering from below, swift, unpredictable, and hard to hit. Sarah saw him punch Daniel's groin, smacking him in the face when he doubled over, so the boy snapped backwards as quick as he had come. The dwarf jumped in and laid the killing blow, and just like that the boy who had called her a bitch in the showers was gone.

Mike went for the girl, guarding his head with one hand, the elbow in the way of a clean hit to the stomach. He jabbed at her chest and shoulders with his gauntlet, quicker than she could block. He dropped his free hand a little, and her fist instantly shot out for his head. He caught it, and headbutted her in the face. You couldn't tell her nose was broken, not with all that blood, but that little *crunch* had to come from somewhere.

The girl staggered, reeling, and another player came up behind and laid a kick at her spine. She twisted backwards, her

gauntlet hand dropped, and as soon as her midriff was exposed Mike turned her into lawn feed.

The other players were crowded around the dwarf, who was dodging and rolling from their attacks, swearing at them and wiping away the blood that dribbled down from his forehead. Sarah looked across the field, ignoring the distant rise and ebb of the crowd as they licked their teeth at the carnage. She checked their backs—no St. Aidens players had flanked them. She looked ahead, and saw two St. Aidens players running for the woods, survivors of the clash with Trinity. *Fleeing in terror, or luring them to the woods as bait?* she wondered. *Was that the plan all along? I wonder if the boys and girls who were sacrificed to the melee knew the role they were to play.*

Except, as she mopped her brow with her sleeve (she'd never show clean skin, not when the sleeve itself was filthy, but she could at least stop it coming into her eyes) and scanned the crest and rise of the field, the Trinity team weren't chasing them down. They had swept wide, past the mud banks, moving swiftly to reach the Howard-Aidens fight from the spectator side. If she hadn't stopped to take a breath, they would have all been too busy fighting the St. Aiden's siege to notice.

The dwarf had to die, and he had to die right now.

She rushed into the circle around him, and as he sprang forward at somebody's kneecaps (everybody was starting to look the same in red), she pounced herself, wrapping her gauntlet arm around his throat and lifting him up with a grunt. He kicked wildly in the air, and he managed to give her chin a blow that clicked her head back.

A small boy came in and grabbed the siege's arm, trying to hold it fast as it shook with all the strength of the cornered wildcat. *Joseph?* Sarah recognised the meek eyes. The boy had been hanging back for most of the fight, trying not to put himself



in the kill-or-be-killed situations the game demanded. But now he was hanging on for dear life.

“Go for it, for fuck’s sake!” Sarah yelled, as her hostage bit into her arm, breaking skin. She punched him in the side and met hard muscle.

The other players had been hesitant, kept at bay by the kicking legs, but then Alex and an older boy—was that Christopher?—broke through from the sides, and their two gauntlets together went for the stomach, now held up to an easy reach. The body trembled, and then Sarah’s arm, tense and pained, was suddenly without pressure, hanging crooked in the air as though she had been hugging an invisible friend with one arm.

A slab of stringy gore hit her eyes and she bowed her head, blinking furiously as her vision filled with tears.

“Mike, Mike!” she called out.

“I’m here,” he said.

“I can’t see a thing. Guard me will you?”

“Already on it.”

“Trinity are coming!” She stabbed her finger in an approximate spot.

“They’re already here,” Mike said.

Sarah stood up, backing away from the scarlet blur of figures that clashed in front of her. There was no use wiping her eyes; everything was already covered, if not dripping, in blood. She had to rely on the body’s own defence. She kept on blinking, hating the stinging but welcoming the tears.

Bit by bit, she could see.

She saw, between blinks, Mike get bowled over by a Trinity player that had charged him with his head down. *Be the*

*matador*, she thought hopelessly. In scrums like this, nobody even knew the meaning of the word *finesse*.

A gauntlet came through the veil of tears, driving towards her stomach, and her own gauntlet shot out and blocked it. She felt the jolt and shudder as the two vibrations locked, snarling at each other, and then she twisted away, grabbing the opponent's battle arm with her other hand and driving her gauntlet into a young girl's belly.

She closed her eyes this time, turning her head, and felt the meaty splatter on her bare skin, and a rain of small wet thuds on her kit. Her eyes snapped open again, prepared immediately for another attack.

It was all over. There was no field of corpses to survey, no dead players littering the ground. Merely a soggy mush, a red mud that sank between the blades of grass and squished under their boots.

The William Howard team had only six players left. Herself, Mike, Jack, an older girl called Sophie, Joseph, and another boy she couldn't remember the name of, who would soon be gone too, as the nameless often are. Christopher and Alex would not be sharing the celebrations if their team proved victorious, except perhaps in spirit.

The boy Joseph had a thousand yard stare to him. She was amazed he had lasted this long, but wondered if he was not merely staying out of the fight for the most part. She had not seen him kill anyone. In a way, ever since the showers, she had felt partly responsible for him. This was an unwelcome feeling in this game. You were responsible for all players equally, but (this was the unwritten rule) chiefly your own survival. You did not make new friends, and you did not make better friends out of your existing ones (*Mike, we'll be like this 'till one of us dies*).

Sarah would not watch out for Joseph any more than any other player. If he was dead weight, her attentions were far better spent on herself.

The other William Howard players were tired, winded, and in between catching their breath and surveying the now empty field around them, were talking about what next. Sarah blinked her eyes a few more times then joined the conversation. Some distance away, some of the crowd were cheering.

Stonewaters Bookstore had spent the entire time in the forests, if they had showed up to the game at all. It was quite likely, Sarah ventured, that the St. Aidens and Trinity teams were wiped out, assuming Stonewaters could fight worth a damn. Sophie noted that they still hadn't seen the Trinity siege, the giant. Perhaps he was in the forests, perhaps he was dead.

"And the Stonewaters siege? If they have one?" asked Jack, spitting on the ground.

Sarah shrugged, and turned away, not missing the dirty look Jack gave her. *Keep your mind on the here and now, not on my bare ass*, she thought.

"Do we wait for them to come out, or do we go in the woods?" asked Joseph quietly.

She didn't look at him. "They're not going to come out," she said. "We're going in."



They heard the giant before they saw him. His stomp was loud, breaking branches and flattening bracken. There was a peculiar rumbling in the ground, with each step as he lurched through the shadowy woods.

She stole a quick glance from behind a tree. The player was huge; not merely tall, but towering, with long, stalk-like legs,

and elongated forearms that hung far past its waist. His gaunt face was the only part of him not covered in blood; only his chin, which made him look like a diner at a cannibal's feast.

He was also alone.

She sat down fast, and a voice inside her said *there was something else, too, something not right, something you missed*, but her head was too much in the game to dwell on anything more than the single hulking Trinity player heading their way, and an immediate need for tactics. She wasn't going to risk a second look.

"Mike, double up, I'll be top," Sarah whispered quickly, then turned to the others crouched silently in the undergrowth. "The rest of you, distract, go for its legs. It can't get you without stooping. It's got defence over offense, remember."

She sat on Mike's shoulders, and he slowly stood up, his knees knocking slightly. She rose up through the air, a newly formed giant herself, still half hidden behind the tree.

She beckoned Sophie, Jack, Joseph and whoever-he-was, and the four of them rushed out and encircled the giant, Sophie at the lead, Joseph hanging back.

The Trinity player stopped dead, nostrils flaring, then laughed as the Sarah-Mike entity emerged and walked unsteadily in front of him. He rubbed his huge palms together, and flexed the fingers. Something cracked.

"The gauntlet! It's—" started Mike.

"On his foot," finished Sarah grimly. *That's what I missed. The rumbling on the ground.*

"Is that allowed?" asked Sophie.

"Doesn't really matter right now. Let's blow this son of a bitch."

Jack rushed in and punched it in the back of the thigh, and got a backwards kick in the belly for his trouble. He backed off, retching slightly. The offending foot wasn't gauntleted, or feeling sick would be one of many problems he wouldn't have anymore.

The giant swung with his arms and kicked out with his legs, and all but Sarah-Mike were ducking and diving about, unprepared for such a fighting style. It wasn't martial art, it was too undisciplined and wild for that. But with a killing device on the foot, it was deadly and unpredictable. Sarah-Mike remained at the fringes, skulking between the trees, unwilling to come in and have Mike's legs kicked away, or Sarah launched off through the air by a sailing fist. She looked desperately for an opening, one good enough for Mike to stagger in quick before the giant turned on them.

The opening they got came at a sacrifice. They saw Sophie grabbed by the arm and dangled in the air. They saw Jack, the nameless boy and even Joseph rush in and hammer at the giant, trying to jump up to get at the stomach, gravity winning every time. They saw the gauntleted foot rise up, and they saw Sophie's face, white through the blood, eyes popping, seeing her own death in that great throbbing foot.

Sarah-Mike were behind the Trinity siege, and she pointed forward, not wanting to yell out the "NOW!" that was so eager to burst through her lips. She needn't have even pointed, for Mike had already seen the opportunity, and was moving at surprising speed considering his burden.

Sarah wrapped herself around the giant's neck at the same time as Mike drove his gauntlet with all his strength into his back.

The giant yelled out, bending backwards at the same time as Sophie exploded.

Mike twisted to the side, and Sarah, hanging by herself now, pulled the giant down, the two of them hitting the earth together. Sarah's back smacked against the earth, and she felt the pain instantly, but held on tight, choking the giant with the tightness of her arms.

Mike, Jack, and the nameless boy all went for the kill, but it was small, timid Joseph who got to the stomach first. A geyser of gore tormented upwards and outwards, covering everything.

There was silence, and for a second you could feel the heartbeat of the forest. Joseph looked at her, nonplussed, his face dripping. Sarah sat up, her back and legs groaning and aching. *That'll hurt in the morning.*

She looked back at Joseph and managed a grin. "Well done," she said. She squinted at the trees. "I hope the cameras got all that."

Joseph's mouth moved upwards into a smile, one that his mind was clearly not participating in. The grin grew broader until it reached its apex, and fixed itself to him with maniacal permanency. It was still stuck to his face when he shuddered, the arm hugging him from behind, the gauntlet pressed against his belly—and he was gone, leaving behind only a patter of flesh and the thought of a smile.

Behind him, a player slowly stood up from the darkness of the undergrowth. She was the braided girl who had spoken from the stage yesterday, and she had the grim, implacable look of the not entirely human.

All around them Stonewaters players in bloodied, camouflage green were standing up, casting aside the leaves and branches that hid them, climbing up from hollows in the ground, leaping down like cats from their perches high in the trees.

*Trinity and St. Aidens are gone, Sarah knew, shivering under the cold, quietly murderous eyes of their soon-to-be assassins. And it looks like Stonewaters have taken hardly any casualties. We're facing nearly an entire team.*

Suddenly, she was terrified.

She watched the nameless boy, as scared as her, maybe more so, dealing with his fear by screaming and running at them. She watched as he disappeared, calmly dispatched by a player whose face betrayed no emotion, none but a rigid kind of frenzy that hid behind their eyes.

*The boy's name was Peter, she remembered. He had brown hair, and brown eyes, and his most remarkable moment was bursting apart. Then we really knew what was inside him. The same as everyone.*

She knew what would have been the last thought in Peter's mind, that tiniest hesitation that cost him his life. It would have been the Stonewaters captains, in their mascot outfits: milk, bread, sugar. A shopping list to die for.

Jack and Mike backed away as Stonewaters advanced. Sarah looked about her, her gauntlet hanging loosely at her side, and she did something she'd never done before in a game.

She ran.

She ran from the battle.

She ran from her teammates.

She ran from Mike.

"Sarah!" she heard the cry behind her, but she didn't look around; she was too busy jumping fallen branches, ducking and dodging, and putting her screaming legs to the limit as she sprinted through the darkness.

*Gotta stay alive, she repeated to herself, and even the disembodied voice in her head was panting the words. Can't win*

*if I'm dead*, it shifted to, and she began to convince herself that this was strategy, and not a cowardly, selfish flight.

The trees clustered in closer, and she slowed, eventually coming to a halt when she could no longer hear any signs of pursuit. She walked among the bones of black trees, feeling sick and empty. She snapped off some broad leaves from a plant and tried to wipe some of the muck off her face.

She had lost all sense of direction. She didn't know if she was heading back to the field, or deeper into the woods.

It was starting to get cold. While it might be daylight outside, in here it might as well be night. She inspected the trees closely, but she couldn't see a single camera, and she had a chilling feeling that nobody knew where she was, that she was entirely alone.

The noise was like the creak of a door, or a slowly falling tree, except it wasn't natural, but came from a mouth. It rose in volume, a harpy screech that seemed to come from every nook and pore of the forest.

"Who's there?" Sarah called out, not caring anymore about revealing her position to another player. She wanted to surrender. She wanted to put her arms up, take her gauntlet off and give herself up.

But she knew that you couldn't surrender. Not in this game. If you put your arms up, you were dead.

Then someone, something came out from behind a tree, a tree so thin it seemed impossible it could have hidden her, it. The woman was completely naked, pale as death and almost skeletal. Her bones gleamed slightly, with an almost sickly wet pallor. There was nearly no light, but the woman's popping, owl-ish eyes shone black and white, like polished snooker balls.



The creature was the Stonewaters captain, and she was smiling, impossibly wide and stretched, her rubbery lips coming almost up to her eyeballs. The teeth had come out from the gums, and were now as long as fingers, as thin as twigs and as sharp as stakes.

Sarah couldn't breathe. Her feet were stuck to the ground. She saw the pale monster reach out her spindly arms, holding them outstretched before her. The fingers, like the teeth, were longer than before, and were growing before her eyes. The fingers came out like a network of roots blossoming in fast forward through the earth. They crept through the air towards her, multiplying in crooked joints with every few inches gained. As they grew, they creaked and rasped.

Sarah screamed then, trailing off in a whimper when she saw the huge eyes light up, as though inner delight fed the torch that burned behind those black-white bulbs.

The creature licked its lips with a slimy black tongue.

"We took care of the cameras, dearie," said the creature in a voice like a saw. "Nobody sees when we don't want them to."

The two other captains appeared from behind poles of bark to either side of the woman, both as naked, like sharp white stick figures animated out from black line trees.

They were smiling too.

Sarah heard the drone, the sound that had replayed in her head since yesterday, since listening to the captains standing tall and grinning on that stage. That flat buzzing sound that now came from everywhere, came from inside her, trembling like worms in her veins and flies in her guts.

She put her hands over her ears, but the droning, the creaking, the screech of the captains was not muffled. The woman's fingers had reached her now, tickling her chest and

neck. The fingertips curled and tried to hook her, to snag her flesh.

The droning was increasing in volume, and Sarah imagined a brush in her mind, a hard thin broom with fingers for bristles, sweeping away the clutter of her thoughts, sweeping away her horror, slowly leaving her mind's corridors and halls polished and empty, with only the scrape of fingernails to mark them.

The terror faded, and numbness washed through her. The woman's groaning fingers tickled her mouth, trying to pry her lips open so they could come inside.

The finger-broom in her mind opened the doors to her memories, and advanced.

*No*, said the voice in her mind. It was a strong voice, a tough, angry voice. *These are mine*, it said. *Hands off what's mine*.

The finger-broom tried to usher it away, but the shadow behind the voice stood firm and blocked the corridor.

Sarah's eyes were shut fast, and in response to the voice her mouth tightened against the finger.

*I'm a survivor*, said the voice. *Where everybody dies, I live*. The shadow behind the voice kicked the broom, and it scuttled back.

Sarah opened her eyes. With a numb hand she grabbed the finger, and snapped the end.

The woman howled, and the hand pulled back, the joints popping back into themselves as the fingers withdrew.

Sarah was moving. Her whole body felt like it'd been packed in snow. Her legs obeyed the shadow's command because they knew otherwise they would not exist. Her arms obeyed the

shadow's command because they knew otherwise they would not exist.

Her brain, her dull, grey lobes working on instinct alone obeyed the shadow's command, because it wasn't given a choice.

Her dead body moved faster than she knew how, and her gauntlet was up, and then it was in the woman's stomach.

Sarah stared into those bulbous eyes, at that giant fanged grin that just now began to quiver and shake.

There was a cascade of black blood and bits that swam around her feet.

Suddenly Sarah was alone. The two male captains had disappeared. The woman had dripped her way into Sarah's socks.

Everything rushed back into her. Her limbs shook and she fell to the ground. Her mind took control, was filled up again, and the shadow and its voice retreated, nodding its way out.



Sarah walked back through the forest. She didn't know how far she was walking, in what direction, or how long it was taking. She was making the most of having her mind back, whilst trying to control her shakes.

*Milk, bread and sugar. Fingers like the branches of a tree. Smiles. Black bits around my feet.*

"Sarah!"

Sarah raised her head. Mike was there, standing in a circle of gore. He was grinning widely, seemingly forgetting her betrayal.

"What the hell happened?" she said, amazed to see him alive.

“They killed Jack. They were coming for me. Then, they just stopped. They just . . . gave up. I’ve no idea!”

She looked around. “So you killed them all.”

“It was like shooting fish in a barrel. I just went up to them and blew them one by one. They didn’t even fight back.”

“It was the captains. I found them in the woods. They . . . they were fucked up. They weren’t human.”

Mike gaped at her. “What happened?”

“They tried to take me over. I . . . I don’t understand what happened. They got into my mind. But I resisted them. And I killed one of them, the woman. I think she led the others. They disappeared at the same time. I don’t know where they went, if they are gone forever or just escaped.”

“Wow,” said Mike. “Then . . . I guess you take the head, the rest of the snake goes with it.”

“They were brainwashed,” said Sarah. “They were controlled. Had their minds taken over. When the captains deserted them, their minds were left empty. Maybe they’d have got them back in time, maybe not. But they’re gone now.”

“Do you realize what this means? It means we’ve won!”

Sarah shook her head, feeling so utterly exhausted. She just wanted to lie down. “We haven’t. They haven’t sounded the end of the game. The siren.”

Mike’s face fell. “Then . . .”

Sarah’s gaze shifted to the left and behind Mike. “And there she is,” she said flatly. “The Stonewaters siege.”

Mike spun around, and the both of them looked through the trees to see a girl watching them. She looked about seventeen, and she was very, very pregnant.

“Oh fuck,” said Mike.

Sarah sat down, as the last Stonewaters player walked slowly towards them.

“What are you doing?” said Mike.

“I can’t do this.”

Mike sat down next to her. “It’s okay.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think there’s anything in the rules, you know. About using a pregnant player. I don’t know. Nobody’s ever done it before.” He paused to think. “Clever, though.”

“Clever?”

“Yeah. Nobody would want to target her.”

The girl was almost upon them, her arms hanging loosely at her sides. She was staring dully ahead, her face vacant.

“She might not be pregnant,” added Mike, unconvincingly. “It might be a trick. Something covering her belly. It’d be against the rules, though. Though it sounds like the Stonewaters have been playing fucked from the start.”

Sarah didn’t say anything.

“I bet she’s not pregnant. It’s fake.”

Sarah stood up, and Mike followed.

The girl stopped in front of them, her protruding belly just a few inches from Sarah. They stared into each other’s eyes, but the girl wasn’t really seeing.

“Do it,” said Mike quietly, urgently. “Do it.”

Sarah waved a hand in front of the girl, and the eyes flickered.

A Stonewaters gauntlet drew back, and instinctually, Sarah's own gauntlet caught the player in the stomach.

*THRUM*



Sarah and Mike walked out of the woods, back onto the field. The siren had sounded, and spectators were cheering loudly, and waving banners with the William Howard School crest. Others had their heads in their hands.

"We're heroes, Sarah," said Mike. He tried to reach for her hand, to pull it to the sky, but she moved away.

"I'm done," she said, knowing she was still shaking. "I don't understand what happened today, and I don't want to understand. No more." She took a deep breath. "Too much blood. It's been too much blood. For today. For every day."

Mike gave a short, bewildered laugh. "There's never too much blood, Sarah."

She didn't say anything more, and they walked on in silence towards their victory celebrations.

# FROM TABULA RASA IN THE MIND CONTINUUM



Greater absurdity is the reaction, a grand reception, to misunderstanding, which in turn is the cause of clouded judgement. Only in unconscious structures lies (albeit partial) understanding, but our mental characters, our personifications of thought patterns, are not yet powerful enough to access them . . . This is about one such cognitive hero.

0 walks abstract with confused shape, among debris of a battered state. Impassivity and apathy are mantles for survival. In color and sound, the land twists. When the land twists the body aligns. Or is that the other way round?

0 stops. Is something wrong? Has reality fragmented? Or was sense out of nonsense always an illusion of the naïve, a result of ignorance and insecurity? 0 is *tabula rasa*, knowing not what has gone before, or any sense of what is to become.

Before? Just when was the event that caused this madness, this deconstruction of mind-space-time? Or was it a succession of events? And if so, was the number of events even finite? Could they even be measured?

0 walks on across the mental landscape, distorted among dimensions, seeking answers, seeking questions, but most of all seeking figures of consistency and authority. Can dialogue be created with a shape? Even the axes are malformed. The mind continuum reels in horror at its own reflection. Answers are *never* forthcoming, yet questions and frames of fragmented understanding can come in time to satisfy perplexity, but this relies completely on the speed of development of the mind continuum, and the speed of *soulcast* (a construction process theologically and scientifically disputed).

$$1 + 1 = 1 + 1$$

. . . Dematerialization and displacement . . .



Matter over mind. Matter over mind . . . The physical landscape blares its bleak message across the gray polygons as a foghorn accompaniment to the expressionless light that perpetuates everywhere at once, not occupying any actual position in mind-space-time but existing as an omnipresent idea. Shadows are temporal gaps in this omnipresence, existing in the absence of light for the brief time they occupy the vision. Where light is conceived, light exists. Where darkness is conceived, light is absent. But what authority commands such processes?

0 coalesces in a warped, shining desert, sunken dunes refracting opposites and reflecting parallels. Confronted with all this unreality, 0 screams out, *Death cannot come to me! I possess hypothetical immortality!* He clamps his mouth shut in horror at his own outcry, and it seems as if the very skies themselves ring with mocking laughter.

The flat clouds break, the polygons begin to drift, disperse. Everything is lines, numbers. Flickers and glows.

The sky laughter does not fade, it only jars and judders out of existence, until only an atonal buzz, a hum, a nothing. The landscape sustains itself on equations, but only barely.

Bits walk across the plane. A sequence: schoolchildren in a line led by their teacher. Just bits. Edges, blips, single colors. Crossing the lines and gaps like they were roads.

0 struggles. He has no clarity on how many dimensions this place has. One? Two? Four? More?

He wants to understand. He desperately wants to understand although he doesn't understand his own desperation.

And look at that. Look at that. He's a "he" now, is he? When did that happen? Is that true? Is that real? Or merely the purest invention? Sneaking up like everything sneaks, like the lines sneak on the world like the world sneaks on its truth like

the universe sneaks on its matter and mind and unfathomable hopelessness.

0 looks up. She wishes. She wishes so much, though she doesn't know what wishing is, or what to wish for.

0 is only part of the debris. Everything only holds together by process, not by purpose, not by meaning. Only process. And how long can the forms hold? Are they even holding now?

Incomprehensibility not of World but of Self.

Only one thing is clear. If existence is truth, the truth holder clearly doesn't want to be found.

$0 + 0 =$

# IN THE CITY OF NOWHERE



The city was black and burnt around me. There was a leathery smell, together with a not entirely unpleasant scent of factory grease. Hollowed out skulls of buildings grinned and gaped at me as I picked my way through. The crunch under my feet sounded like gravel or bones. The sky was wet. The air was white.

"It's just a town now," an old woman wrapped up in a big jacket said as I passed. She was talking to a hunched man who was all wrinkles; there wasn't an inch of smoothness on him. "It'll be a village soon," the woman said.

They were talking about my home.

Everything was black and dripping. I found a cluster of people in raincoats milling together, and I joined them. They stood around for a while, mumbling to each other but ignoring me. That was okay, I was ignoring them too. I could see I was the youngest by some measure. Eventually one of them opened a door in the only building that couldn't be seen through, and one by one they entered and were swallowed up. I followed.

I looked about, suddenly confused and uncertain. It was a classroom. Clean floors and walls, shiny wood and windows with glass in them. A whiteboard, a half-patient teacher.

I followed the others on autopilot and sat down at a desk by the window. There were huge tomes on each one, and they were all titled *ScanQuick Learning*. I opened mine up and flicked through. Walls of text. It was dense gibberish, entirely meaningless to me.

I stood up and walked back to the door as the others settled in their seats.

"Excuse me?"

I turned around. The teacher was looking at me and smiling. "Were you not wanting to have a walk around the town

afterwards?" The teacher pointed at a man sitting next to the seat I had taken. He had his hand up, facing me, and he was smiling broadly, as if he were an old acquaintance. "Mr. Farsdale will walk with you," the teacher said. "He'll be your partner."

"I've got the wrong place," I answered. "I thought this was a, uh, a train. But it doesn't look like a train at all." I said it expecting laughter, but there were only a few tired smiles.

"It's okay," the teacher said. "Why don't you have a sit back down? There'll be a test in an hour."

I saw out the window with surprise that there was a lot of motion, a noiseless blur. "Is this a classroom or a train?" I asked.

"It's both," the teacher replied. "Go on, sit down. You'll be with us for a long while, and we've got a lot of ground to cover."

"Where is it going?"

"Somewhere green. Sit down." The teacher was no longer smiling.

"Green?" I murmured, but I went back to my seat. Mr. Farsdale grinned at me and nodded. I nodded back and looked out the window. For a second I thought I saw the green the teacher had spoken of. There were hills and valleys, trees and meadows. They were glowing like they would in a dream, and rushing past at a tremendous speed. Then I blinked and they were gone, and there was only black and ruin.

"Do you know where we're going?" I asked Mr. Farsdale.

"Of course," he said. "I think we all do. Maybe. I think maybe we all do. Don't you?"

"No."

He looked quizzically at me. "I know you're young, but I would've thought . . . still . . . surely you've been here before?"

"I may have. I forget things. I have trouble remembering the past."

Mr. Farsdale nodded, understanding. "Of course, of course. I think most of us are like that."

"So where are we going?"

"Back to where we got on, of course." He pointed out the window. "You can't really tell, but the track's at a curve. See, it's a big, big circle."

I stared at him. "But what's the point in that?"

He sniffed and looked down at his *ScanQuick*. "It's the journey, not the destination."

"Can I get off? There are stops, right?"

"No stops." He spread his arms around his huge book and hunched his shoulders, as though to block me out.

I put my face and hands to the window. The glass was so cold, colder than the air outside, colder than the wetness that dripped from everything. In here it was warm and dry. But the glass was still cold.

By the look of the blur outside, we were approaching full speed, going faster and faster from Nowhere, towards Nowhere.

**HALFWAY**



The next stage of my Quest is in the fiery realm of Hel. We will not have to travel; there are countless portals all over the worlds, if you know where to look. The Colonel knows, and he muses on it for a while as I snack on Southern biscuitry. He stomps the ground in a figure eight, staring at the walls of the suitably grand temple we have invaded, and he makes calculations in his head. After a few minutes he huffs and snorts: a signal for me to come over. With his barrel-shaped bulk waiting beside me, I draw on the back of our map, shapes and notes and valuations and such, which he studies and ponders as I write. Eventually, the occult workings seem to point to a very specific direction and distance from us, and with my compass I carefully step South-South-South-East through the golden corridors and halls, for two hundred and sixteen steps.

There we encounter a statue of a beautiful and feline god deep set in the wall: a curved up nightskin with the anthropomorphised head of a slingpur. The Colonel nods at it and goes into some grandiose corner for some private business. I push against the slingpur god, and after a few grunts and strains it moves back into the wall, revealing a descending staircase. There is no way the ungulate Colonel would fit, let alone be able to carry himself down, so I take some supplies, wave goodbye, and leave the hippo to it.



I walk down the redstone stairs with heavy clumps of my boots. The stairs appear to go on forever, in a constant spiral with no space, no open air to breathe, no sights to see; merely the close walls, the blood red brick dimly lit at every turn by carved torches, which flicker devilishly and throw my shadow around like paper.



Stairs, stairs, stairs. Stepping down, down into the belly of the world.

I crumple from a stomach ache as I degenerate downwards. Forever and forever; step, step, step. I am turning round and round and my head is dizzying about. I feel as though I am swirling down a plughole. A tumbling insect. I keep on.



After what feels like an eternity I come to a blackwood door. On it is nailed an iron plaque which reads, in large, demonic lettering:

### **PAY FOR YOUR SINS**

Under this is hung another, smaller plaque, which reads:

### **BEST RATES IN ALL THE UNDERWORLDS**

And in a little scrawl, at the bottom of this second sign, the small print reads:

### **WE CHARGE BY THE ETERNITY**

I sit outside for a while to rest from my descent and engage in some biscuitry. Eventually I stand up, lay a twiddling hand upon my sword hilt, use the other to push the door wide, and I enter Hel.



I walk through russet crawlways and malformed chambers; the walls look like dripping wax—hard set though, and with no smoothness or uniformity, but lumpen, gloopen, and intestinal. Corpuscular architecture; I am moving through underground guts.

At times I see the oppressive underground ceilings are held up by redstone pillars, others by twisted metals: poles, wires, and bars that cross each other like branches or netting. Firestone is set into the walls; whether natural formations or mined and artificially molded I do not know. It makes the walls glow, ruddy and pulsating. The substance gives off most of the light in Hel, though it is soft, sickly, and crimson. The scarlet dark is occasionally sparked by hearths of roving flames which are, often enough, just pits in the ground, the flickering arms waving through grills and grates.

Much of where I creep is intensely claustrophobic: the pulsating firestone, the crimson glow, the crackling hearths, and a slow cavernous rumble that echoes up and down and through mazes of thin, low-ceiling corridors and tunnels—a warren for imps and devilworkers. The rumbling is a constant, like the soul of machinery and industry from another dimension filtering through. The gears of Hel Itself.

But there is no screaming here, no cries of the damned, no corpsefires and pain-racks; just a quiet thunder on the ears and the menacing, flickering hearths. There are no tortured souls under the grates, no hands of flesh and meat reaching up for help . . . merely a campfire crackling . . . and a perpetual sense of foreboding. One could go mad here in this hive of blood and flame, with its soft noises masking an uneasy, pressurized silence.

The hairs on my neck stand up and my skin prickles the longer I move through the blood tunnels. I have seen and heard no life, nothing. The background rumble has gotten no louder but in my ears it is as deafening now as the sound of my bootsteps.

I put my hands over my ears and my teeth clench in a burst of madness.



And then I am out. I look out on the bowels of the world. Staircases run up and down cavern walls, stretching out in vistas, leading to new levels and tunnels and catacombs and buildings and machineries and rock-plains and platforms and bridges and pits and caves and chasms and mines and rivers of fire, and there are countless devils and demons and imps and sprites and fairies and beasts and bears and other dark denizens, all scurrying and hurrying and walking and working with fierce industry.

I look down from the top of the staircase and see a bridge arching over a lake of molten lava, fed by a magma-fall oozing from a crooked precipice above. It is burning hot but I am not hurting or even uncomfortable; there is some special nature to this place and those that exist here.

I cast my gaze further and focus past the bridge. A phalanx of firebears is shuffling through.

These gruff beasts, the colour of coagulated blood, do not possess the brutal ferocity of their larger cousins, the swampbears, but they are more intelligent and a difficult enemy because of it. They learned an Age ago to walk on hind legs like the bipeds, and they have their own industry too, working sometimes separately from and sometimes in conjunction with the red devils and other social groups of Hel... but they still have an innate territorial meanness, and battles involving their phalanxes are not uncommon and not easy to win. They are prone to a slightly more humanoid sense of war than a beastly one (I must take care with my flippant use of words if I am ever in their presence, for they are easily offended and angered), and they use less their claws and teeth and more often a type of firestick unique to them.

I notice that these sticks (which they carry like lances) have the tops made of scarwood: an incredibly flammable material, rough-pitted, and black-burnt; it needs only be struck

against another suitably gritty substance—such as a rock wall, or the ground under their feet—to burst into deadly flame, and the sticks can then be used either in close combat or hurled, as missiles of burning death.

I wait for them to move out of sight past a canyon wall before I venture farther down the stairway.

As I cross the bridge, I hear the beat of ragged wings, and a shrieking, juddering roar echoes over my head. I look up, instinctively shielding my face, and I see a mighty shape, like that of the mordrigal bird of prey, soar about high above. The form is crooked and heavily-scaled, with a narrow, metallic beak and double-hooked talons scything the air, four each on six hound-muscle limbs. Apart from some ruffles of tarrish brown feathers the scales cover most of its body and they are colored a sheening silver and black, each scale shimmering in the dim light of the lava. The tail is forked and deeply ridged, and the crest of the head is crowned with horns. As the creature swoops lower I see the fizzing eyes, like orbs holding little bolts of lightning. From what I can judge as it screeches past, the eyes are pupil-less, or the pupils are hidden by those rolling thunderstorms that spin, dagger, and crack ceaselessly in their sockets.

Eventually, the flying beast perches on the outcrop over the magma-fall which is shimmering with heat. It is unclear whether or not it has seen me; at least it gives me no attention. I realize from this more settled appraisal that the creature is a draegon, a giant bird-lizard species born in the Underworlds and rare to the clear earth above, although far from unknown. There are many accounts in the mythic annals of history of their chaos and destruction, but unfortunately far fewer tales of their nobility and elegance. It is a maligned species, destined to be misunderstood and often driven to anger whenever they leave their ancestral undergrounds.

The draegon screeches, its crooked head raised, and stretches out its long plated wings in a sign of unabashed authority. It then lowers its head, peels back the hard edges of mouth to show a line of thick knife-like teeth, and takes a deep gulp of the magma bubbling from the precipice. The creature must have insides of the toughest bone-metal, more resilient even than steamsteel, to be able to drink magma over the course of its life without internal corrosion; although the physiology of the draegons is completely alien to me, and perhaps there is a lot more to it than that. Or perhaps the magma does kill them, but over a very, very long time. Perhaps they are living a slow death.

I cross the bridge and the draegon takes flight, away through the caverns above. I pass carefully around the corner where the firebear phalanx had gone, but there is no sign of them. I move hurriedly through the bottleneck of the canyon walls, my footsteps echoing to an uneasy volume.

Out through the slender canyon, I come across the most enchanting sight. A far cry from the fires and brimstones of the rest of Hel, I stand before a little lake of glass.

At least, glass it seems at first, for it shimmers and reflects, with a glinting silver gloss to its surface. But as I look closer I see ripples and minute waves lightly lapping against its shores.

This little lake, or this great mirror-pool, entrances me and I step up to the edge. The ripples seem stronger this close, and they wash over the soles of my boots in silver froths, each speckle of a bubble a reflection of myself; a thousand of my faces look up at me in glazed wonder.

I take another step, and mirror-water swirls around my ankles. My head doesn't rise up, and my eyes do not blink or look away.

Ah, my reflection! What a piece of work am I! Look at this countenance, just look! A frame for the ages. I wink at myself and grin. Not all handsome, not fully steadfast or strong jawed, not all iron-fired and imperious . . . but see the potential! Deep within my eyes it is impossible not to see the heroism dormant.

The hero inside is not wholly at rest. He is making camp, lighting torches. He is strapping on armor and he is looking into a pool of his own reflection, with troubled thought and restless wisdom.

My eyes sparkle in the silver of the water. My head bows as my vision lures itself closer to my own seductive reflection.

The attraction, the sorcery! How daring and disarming I am, and how very noble in reason! If you traveled deep enough within me, none could be found wiser. The world will realize, soon enough. They will learn to appreciate the grandeur contained within my bones. I am on a slow start, sure enough, but it is the slow incline that rises from the foot of a mountain. Eventually my ascent will be unstoppable. At the summit lies martyrdom.

I am stooped like a peasant before a king. My nose is a step from the shimmering surface.

I bewitch myself with ease. My ego is eager and excitable, leaping and jumping like a hound—once cooped up in a cage, but now let out in the wild, amongst grasses, rocks and streams.

The lights under the water glitter and burn my image into my mind.

Who couldn't put everything in my hands? Who couldn't believe in my future glory? Who doesn't love me? Of those who once loved me, who were ever cured? None, nobody! I am without cure, without respite! I am a storm to sweep the world.

My eyes are purest silver.

I am a creation. Through no usual means was I born. I am designed. I am a Plan. Through junkyard odds and ends I am made holy. Through bruises and knocks I grow into myself. I am responsible for saving the world, and it is a task that, through hardship, struggle and strife, I will undoubtedly accomplish. I am the new Messiah, and all will come to see it! From rags to riches I will travel, from anonymity to fortune and glory . . . fortune and glory . . . I have such a beautiful soul! Divine and unconquerable, free and furtive, dashing and dazzling. The world lit inside me a fire that can never go out, and the world—all worlds!—will be challenged for it, and bow to me like I bow to myself.

My nose gently touches the water.

I am thrown back like a rag puppet, soaring through the air, all flailing limbs and flailing thoughts, and my back slams into the hard red ground.

My mind is scorched and burned, rusted, corroded, and scarred. I swear I can feel blood drip down from my temples, but when I raise my aching hands to touch it, they come away only sooty and black. Every bone in my frail little body is hurting like I am the weakest creature alive, but this is nothing compared to the pain in my head. My thoughts sting and blister away, and I feel an overwhelming shame, such a wretched shame and abasement. Pitiful creature that I am; my cheeks flush in horror at my previous vainglory. I am a narcissistic beggar, a truly hopeless scum of the earth. How crude and laughable are my ambitions, my sick pride and my delusions of grandeur and worth. An insect I am! I am shuddering and crying in pain and embarrassment. My bones are growing sticks of wood, bloody splinters in a fat sack of meat.

I cannot take it anymore, and my mind sears so hot that my vision goes white, and I pass into an unconscious realm where

my thoughts are scattered like dust and pour down on me like rain. I am a nihility, and I travel the realm like an orphan for days, years, a lifetime, collecting up my thoughts and the fragments of my shattered soul. I search for myself, and over the longest of times I grow old and tired, wizened and humble.



I wake up in a shack. The walls are tired and old, wooden and cold. There are papers strewn everywhere. I pick one up but the markings are jumbled . . .



I wake up at the edge of a dark lake. It smells nauseatingly foul and looks diseased. Swarms of flies buzz over it like a pit of excrement. I try to move and my body is sore but responsive. I have a slight headache.

I don't think I was asleep long. I can't remember my dream, or what happened before I fell asleep, but I don't suppose it matters. I eat some meatbread from my satchel and take a swig from my flask, and then I set off again, traveling along the sides of the lake until it disappears from view.



I skirt the narrow edges of a cliff, looking down in trepidation at the billowing rivers of fire and stark, hard, rock-plains below. One slip and a tumble later I would either be bone-shattered or blood-boiled in a single clock tick of impact.

A bone-metal barge slowly rides down the river, its Hel-forged construction blackened from the lava fumes. A score of devils and imps are on board, some of them looking over the rails and letting the burning fumes smoke up into their faces. Clouds of steam writhe around the sides of the boat, and it



almost looks as though it is sailing on a bank of fog, its path guided by swirling, shepherding ghosts.

I look back up after a tremor of vertigo hits me, and I concentrate on the final steps. I leave the cliff edge and gratefully step on to an iron platform. There is a skull-tipped winch which I turn with some effort, and as I do so I am lowered down.



I follow the river of fire to my left, seeing no more barges coming my way. I then move through a short cave system which looks like it was once used as a mine, and out again, into a ferocious glare that burns my retinas and makes me blink away tears until I can adjust.

I now see myself in front of a tremendous blaze, a green-and-white bonfire that towers into the sky above. The lower sections of the fire are so thick and powerful that they appear solid. Nearer the top, the flames break up into their various dances and flails. I crane my neck and I see the tips flicking about maniacally, licking the cavern ceiling black.

The heat is incredible, and yet I am still not in pain. I feel like I am separate from my body, that I am commanding this awkward burned creature of white-hot temperature but am myself completely distant from any danger. I look at my skin and it is red-black and coarse, and I muse that at least I do not stand out anymore.

As my eyes adjust further I see that the great fire is coming from beneath the surface of the ground and, while the glare is too oppressive to move much closer, it seems like it is set into some kind of pit.

I move slantways, turning away from the blaze with spots dancing before my eyes, and a rushing shape bumps heavily into me.

“Oi, watch it!” the figure yells out without looking back, and runs off. I focus enough to see it as one of the red devils, with waist-down overalls and a bone-metal helmet.

I gaze over the cavern; I see the rushing and scurrying of red devils and a few demons, all quick and busy, working with concentrated energy on various forges and other machineries, their design and purpose unknown to me. The cavern houses at least three fire pits; the one I am in front of green-white, another blue-black, and the third I can just about see, set near the back and partly obscured by the nearer presence of the other two, is of pink and purple flames. The Hel forges and machineries are set up everywhere there is space around the fire pits; most are on the ground, with metal arms fed into the flames and winched back; some appear to be in set enclaves and shafts that head a short distance underground, presumably to pit level and near to the source of the fire; some forges even appear to be on raised daises and cranes and are at times invisible, smothered by the flames, the workers only removing themselves when the fires wholly encompass their work.

Jets of white steam shoot out all over, although it is hard to be sure whether these are manually determined by the workers or not, forcing pieces of metal to suffer the intense heat. It rises to my mind how peculiar it is that the cavern is not suffocated in smoke, as I cannot see any real modes of ventilation. This thought is trumped by the realization that these fire pits seem to produce no smoke at all, and I wonder at this marvel of industry, this very singular type of colorful fire, and if it is unique to Hel.

I decide it best to avoid the workers and move on, and I skirt around the fire pits and out through another passageway, continuing my exploration through Hel and my Quest of Unparalleled Importance.



Up ahead, ringing out with gunshot echoes, a red devil is being bombarded by bloodfairies. They swarm at him from all sides. He has two silver barrel pistols in hand, and he is firing them off with a nonchalant flair; after every few shots he twirls the guns on his trigger fingers, like it was a game.

*BLAM!*—one bites the dust—*BLAM!*—another one gone—*BLAM!*—drops like a fly—*BLAM!*—lay down to die.

“Help would be helpful,” he calls out, without looking up from his full-circle shooting gallery, and I suppose he is talking to me.

I hammer in, with slashes and snags. A bloodfairy gets the flat of the blade, smashing her tiny ribs. Another gets her wings lacerated off, and her face blanches out at me as it drops like a stone, where an insectual form—bipedal in miniature—wriggles away to hide.

Between me and the red devil we shoot, slash, blam, and bludgeon through enough of them to make the final savage stragglers scamper away. The devil holsters his weapons and runs blood-red fingers through spiky black greasehair that sticks up and back like thorns. I notice his coal-blackened eyes similar to my own, and I wonder if he stole the look from the Rocktail pirates, or if the red devils stole it from the Rocktails.

I introduce myself, offering my grimy hand.

He grasps it and gives me a rogue salute and a grin, full of catlike teeth. “Johnny Duel,” he says.

This is how I meet Johnny Duel.



He and I are talking. I am telling him of my Quest of Unparalleled Importance, and of the visiting of the goblins in Slud, and my failure there, and of my non-findings in the ancient Kingdom of

Samara, yes my failure there also, and how I am now in Hel, and looking about in this pyromantic place for pictures of devilry, excuse the term.

He grins and half-laughs, but he tells me that I am looking in the wrong place.

“I am?” I ask, my shoulders up and ready to sink.

“Suren be,” he says. “There ain’t no sign of what you seek here. There’s draegons and lightning-fires and—aha—devilry to be sure, but I’ve been travelin’ this place for a long time, and I’ve seen nought but cheap tricks, hotter-than-heats, pyromaniacs, and angry wildlife. Nope, we gotta be going elsewhere, trust me as one who’s seen all this has to offer.”

“We?” I query.

“Aye,” he says. “Suren you don’t think I’m leaving you to an adventure yourself? This place has dulled me, and I could be using the excitement. Too long since a good quest has come along! Gun for hire me, yet not a single gold I’ll take. I’ll go with the best of sorts, and suren I see that that’s you.”

I smile, for the introduction of a worthwhile companion overlaps any crestfall my spirits could have taken upon another failed search. “Good to have you,” I say, hand on his shoulder, and we prepare to leave Hel.



I decide it would be prudent to tell Johnny Duel of my condition, the dwarven and the giantine, and that my appearance now might not last.

He remarks that it is quite an odd affliction. He asks which comes first, and I say I do not remember. My past is hazy, and both seem valid in my memory; my guess is generally dependent on my condition at the time. I add that I stay dwarven

longer when I am on an adventure, as the thrill seems to keep me small. Sitting about in my cabin all day, or worse, dealing with the Urbanite, now that will keep me near-permanent giantine.

Duel says that reason would suggest that I was dwarven first, as generally we are smallest from birth. I um and ah and tell him I do not know, but I will take this into consideration. I add, as an afterthought, that I find that one can do better than relying too much on reason, and it is not my preferred choice of operation.



Johnny Duel is leading me through a shortcut, to quicker get to the blackwood door that we seek: not the same one I entered from but one that connects up to the Jungles of X, my next place of search. The distance traveled down here takes us under X a fair sight quicker than above land. Space here is . . . different. It bends.

The shortcut is a damp, dripping passageway tucked into the corner of a cave. I wouldn't have even seen it were it not for Duel. The tunnel is a muculent green, filled with stalactites and stalagmites of all sizes, and we have to pick our way through carefully. Some of them have joined up to form thin, jail-bar pillars from ceiling to ground.

After a while of angle-footed, body-twisting progress, we come to a sequence of ducts on the walls, billowing out a constant hot green smoke. It hangs and collects in a heavy, jumbling smog, before cooling and condensing on the ceiling and walls. It drips slickly down to puddles on the floor. The stalactites and stalagmites here are globulously structured, all boiled and pustuled and sticky to the touch.

"What is this?" I ask Duel, inspecting my now slimy fingers.

He shrugs helpfully and doesn't stop.

I eye the ducts as we enter the smoke. They appear like fleshy teats, all wetly suckeros. They pant green steam at me as though they are alive, pushing out their slobbish breath in lip smacking pouts and undulations. It stinks like bellyrot.

The smoke sticks to the inside of my lungs and I cough out phlegm.

I look at Duel but he doesn't seem to mind. Indeed, he has a one track mind, his sights fixed ahead as he navigates through the muggy tunnel. Occasionally he takes a swig from his hip flask of firewater.

I appraise him without his notice. What an interesting fellow. He is like me to some degree: adventurous, rebellious, ever seeking and wandering . . . but he is also far more carefree than ever I could manage. In the little time I have gotten to know him his character is already starkly apparent. He sways through life as if he has a natural ease to it, and yet at every moment it seems as if everything is going to go wrong and come crashing down around him—and yet it never does. Nor ever will, I'll warrant. His ability to innocently manipulate the world around him to keep himself brimful of luck is one I sorely envy. He is one of nature's eternal charmers, one of the worlds' born survivors—born living, and no doubt he'll die living too.

The green smoke is thick within my body now, and my own breath is humid and clogging. I wheeze it out like I'm half-drowned. My head is swimming. My ankle twists as I place it wrong-footed onto a small, crumbling stalagmite, but I right myself and keep going.

He's more handsome than I, too.

I mean, look at that structure. Look at those finely-incising cat-teeth. Look at those cheeky, coal-blackened eyes. You

could gaze into them and find nothing but your own reflection, and yet *at the very same time* see a bottomless well, the stones overgrown with wild weeds and mossery, the bucket long since lost.

I feel a powerful envy of his position: his luck, his looks, his style, his charm, his fate, his story. Look at me in stinking comparison. A misbegotten fool, an imagination-bound wild urchin who thinks too much about *everything*, who sabotages his own life one piece of the shell at a time, and never to stop until it is all in ruins.

Johnny Duel looks like he's never spent a single day not in the act of sabotage, and yet has never, ever paid the price for it.

How does he get away with it? My eyes narrow as I watch his ambling gait. I try to copy his movements but mine are stumbling and awkward in comparison. His are stumbling too, I suppose, but in an entertaining, red-devil-may-care fashion, whereas mine are just foolish and blighted. Put-upon. Faker.

He doesn't talk as much as me, either. He doesn't need to. He doesn't seek the attention. He doesn't have to give a running monologue of every damnable moment of life. He doesn't have to voice his thoughts just so the world is aware of them, so the world can validate them. He validates himself. Quite unlike my sorry, ego-spun self and my constant appeal for recognition, my sore need for such a Quest as I have put upon myself. I could never be as good as that.

I wonder if it is possible to switch places with him . . .

Actually, no, I mean it. Switch places. We should. He is abusing his position and his endless catacomb of luck. He's doing nothing with it, save idling along as a passenger on my Quest, for no better end than to stave off his boredom.

The smoke infects my spirit but I breathe in deeply, enjoying the cloying substance bittering my body.

He wouldn't go easily, though. He wouldn't agree. I frown, my eyes boring a hole in his head. He'd have to be taken care of. Who would miss him? I could do it now . . . A quick and easy *CRACK* with a piece of rock—just an accident, you understand, just an accident—and then strip him, and throw his naked body down a shaft to the world's core.

Then I could dress myself up in his garb, and perhaps find some red dye to colour my skin, cut my hair and put some black grease in it, start talking in that cavalier accent of his, aye?

Would that be enough?

Johnny Duel then looks at me and catches me staring mean-eyed and green-eyed at him. His hands play around his holsters, and his expression is one of a suspicious curiosity.

"Is anythin' wrong?" he asks.

"No," I say, and I realize that this is the truth, for we have left the smoke ducts behind a dozen steps ago without me noticing, and I have just breathed the last of the sickening substance out of my system.

I smile at him, a genuine smile of trust and friendship, and he grins back. He's a good fellow to have on your side.

And so am I.



On our trail we glimpse, through an interjecting tunnel, a rumbling shape grate past us. A grindal, Duel tells me to answer my query. Not a living creature, if living must only count for the organic; the creation is robotic and industrial. Plates of Hel-forged iron corrode and scrape against each other as the metal monster moves along. Its eyes are deep set in a bank of



corrugated engineering and are devoid of spark, although we do see the grindal only briefly, and in a shadowy light. Duel tells me that they are made for heavy labor by the thornites, a demonic race who live in parts of the Underworlds, including a small area of Hel.

It is only a little later that we see another grindal, but this one is different enough from the last in ways that fill me with disgust. This grindal clinks and clanks right past us, seemingly unseeing, and I try not to look and I try not to listen to the grotesque sounds that threaten to fill my eardrums. Known as fleshing grindals, or fleshers, Duel tells me. They were grindals that became filled with jealousy of organic beings and wished to become beings themselves. They would come up to the surface worlds and loot graveyards and battlefields for corpses, and plunder those corpses for their parts. These parts they would then try to attach to themselves; but without any dexterity of their own, nor any help from the sneering thornites, they could not create a functioning form, nor mold them to synchronize with their body. They couldn't even fix them to last.

The fleshing grindal that stomps and squishes past me is decorated in rips of hanging skin; meat and muscle dangle between its iron plates. Most of it is dry and rotting; the freshest stuff is still bloody. Flies buzz around it. With every few rusted stomps the grindal loses another bit of flesh; a bit will tear off or shred free of its crude fixture. A last string of fat is shorn, coming free of the nail hammered into it, and it rolls and blubbers down to our feet.

I hear the squish and slop of meat on metal. I make the mistake of focusing on the flesher, and I see the torn half of a lung sandwiched between the two crusting sheets that make up the creation's chest. And then I look up to the emotionless face, and see an eyeball dangling from its optic nerve, and what looks like a bipedal ear. I quease. All this slop and splatter, this

foulsome sickness, this transmutation of horror. The level of change and disparity is obscene. I feel a churning and a grinding deep in my belly . . .

“Don’t move,” whispers Duel, and I look up.

The grindal has gone, its crunch and squash still lightly echoing through the tunnel. In front of us now comes a fearsome creature—many body parts taller than us, a bark-brown form completely barbed from head to toe, each barb pointing out savagely like stingers.

“Thornite?” I whisper back.

“Yeah,” murmurs Duel out of the side of his mouth. “Don’t move.”

We stand stock still, both of us tenses up and I try not to shiver, nor even to draw breath. The thornite stalks towards us on long, jagged legs, and glares at us through glowing amaranthine eyes as it passes. It moves like an indiscriminate killer.

I breathe a sigh of relief as it rounds the corner after us, and Duel visibly relaxes.

“Was it blind?” I ask. “It looked straight at us.”

“No, not blind,” says Duel, whistling through his teeth. “Thornites are hunters. It wanted to hunt. If you move, you give it sport; if you don’t move, then they just ain’t interested. Unless they’re feelin’ bored. Or vindictive. Or in a mean mood. Or they don’t like the look of you. Or they just don’t care and do it regardless.”

“Good to know,” I say.

“Still, worst thing you can do is run. Then you’ll be dead, even if it gives you a long enough head start for you to think you’re safe. Longest hunt I ever heard about lasted four

years. Not cause the victim was lucky or a good evader, but just that some thornites like to *really* drag it out.”

“Goodness,” I say. Duel laughs.



We continue on and presently come to a deep, slanting opening in the ground, filled with a curious water of the most brilliant ultramarine. Bright orbs are set into the underwater rock walls, and they light the passage with a cool, wavy glow.

Duel makes to go past, but I hold out my arm and stop him.

“Where does that lead?” I ask.

Duel shrugs.

“Where does that lead?” I repeat the question, in a slightly stronger tone.

“Er . . .” Duel glances down at the flooded entrance. “It leads to Tritus and the Underseas. Tritus being the capital of ‘em, if you could call it that.”

“Another one of the Underworlds, like Hel?”

“Yup.”

“Who lives there? More devils? Blue devils?” I grin.

“You could call ‘em that if you wanted to insult them. Merfolk live there . . . foul, sour lot. They ride leviathants—gilled monsters, and amphibious too—they’ll snap you up land or sea and rip you apart like bread.” Duel sniffs. “Been there once or twice when I was bored. They didn’t much take kindly to me.”

“Indeed,” I say. “Do you think they might have what I seek? The Colonel never mentioned the Underseas.”

“Do you trust his judgement?” Duel inquires without much interest.

"I do." I frown. "I'm asking for yours too, though."

"Then I say there ain't a chance they have any such thing. I didn't see no evidence of it when I went, and they'd have used it against Hel by now if they did. Jingoistic creatures—and Hell Itself don't really care what the upper Underworlds like Hel and the Underseas get up to in their disputes and border-changin', just as long as they keep the trade routes open."

"I guess we won't head to Tritus then. Just as well really, I never much liked drowning. What about Hell Itself? I'd considered it briefly but . . ."

"No," Duel says flatly. "You're barkin' down the wrong fire pit there. It's not really of this world, is it? Well it's attached, sure, but you ain't passin' through the Gates into that dimension 'less you're Underworld-born, or if you're an outsider then you gotta be dead. The Gates won't physically take you in unless you're recognized as one of their own."

"You can get through then?"

"Not without a special pass. I've been there and back a couple of times, first as a trade guard, second time I snuck in. You don't wanna go there, trust me. It's another world, and they play by different rules there. 'Less you live there then it's nowhere to be looking for nothin' 'cept a way to get out."

"It's that bad?" I ask, a part of me itching to find out for myself.

"Hellish."



It is during a tough trek through an expansive, undulating catacomb, guided by the wandering Duel and with my legs aching from the craggy ground, that a wave of tiredness comes over me like the tide comes upon the beach. I can feel the blood

rushing in my head. Without any idea as to day or night, I have no idea how long I have been wandering in Hel. It seems like never and forever. A sudden mental and physical exhaustion has hit me, and I sit down, and then lie down, in a dark corner; nicely tucked in and out of the way, and conveniently enough padded with a veined-pink material, both spongy and tender to the touch. I have just enough attention left to see Duel shrug and do the same, lying down near me with his arms behind his head. My eyes sink shut.

The success of the Quest has never seemed further away, never less likely. Why drag out this affliction? Rest, rest is the key. All rest, eternal rest, nothing but rest.

Fragile yet cumbrous thoughts slowly glide across me. I am so tired, so tired of it all. I am weary of unending disappointment and the death of inspiration, weary of hope and weary of life. I am young and I am tired.

I would have the gods put me in a coma, so that I may live entirely in my dreams. I would sleep through every day and every night, and no person or thing could disturb me. May civilizations fall apart around me, may the great tides come in and may the ground quake and fall away from beneath me; I would sleep down in the belly of the earth, oblivious and peaceful, and resting my tiredness away. One day, maybe, I would awake, and join the new world, fresh and free.

Tucked away in this dark corner of Hel, I envision myself as a floating eye: hanging in the air in a grand, gray-brown canyon, the walls unreachable and permanently distant and severe. Below me lies an eternity of blackness. Above me is a bridge; it spans the entire length of the canyon as far as I can see, and it is completely solid, gray-black and wrought of tentacled metal. Not a speck of light comes through the ceiling-bridge, but

I can see by an invisible omnipresent light that shades everything in the same dull glare.

As the drowning power of sleep comes on further, a scrap of metal falls off the ceiling-bridge and tumbles down in front of me. No sound reaches me below. Another and another piece tumbles. Pipes and blocks and supports. As I watch without body or mind, in my silent, unmoved vigil, the ceiling steadily crumbles before me. Gaps appear, and gaps become gaping holes. The roof of the canyon is falling down around me; the materials of construction shear and break and then plummet. I can tell it is night outside; a heavy, penetrating blackness reigns above, starless and moonless.

As the final pieces collapse, they take my fixed floatation with them, and I find myself falling to a bottomless depth.



I wake up in a shack. The walls are tired and old, wooden and cold. There are papers strewn everywhere. I pick one up but the markings are jumbled.

I whip my arms over the desk, over the papers and notes and letters and stationery, and in my sweep I knock a bottle off the edge. It drops to the floor, spilling lots of little white stones over the floorboards.

I walk to the door and creak it open, and find myself in a moonlit garden in the shadow of a gray brick house. I move forward and wild flowers and wild weeds clutch and cling at me, tugging and tripping me towards the door of the house.

I hit a barrier. The spokes of the gate are staked in the ground and stick out like bones. I finger the gate like a wet ribcage. I push it and it screeches open, with an echo like a black whisper that rattles off into the darkness.

I reach the house but it is shut tight. There is a weight in my pocket. I reach in and find a bronze key. I try it and it unlocks the door.

I enter the house. It pretends itself soft and decorative, yet its lights are unfriendly, its rooms hollow. There is a sadness in the house and a looming claustrophobia—an otherworldly smell and a decay of carpets of unwelcome and wallpapers of secrets and floorboards that creak with dislike.

The rooms invite me to stay; they yearn for me to stay awake here, to never sleep, to never dream of somewhere else, to stay here forever under lock and key.

I enter one room and it is full of machines that whirl and buzz and blink at me, clamouring for attention, begging to be fed. They beat so my heart doesn't have to.

I move up to one and press a button. The machine flashes at me with pleased contempt.

I wake up.



After our rest is over, and I eventually clear my head of the deep after-sleep mugginess, Johnny Duel and I continue our travel through Hel. We keep looking for a blackwood door that will take us up to the surface, and specifically one that will connect up with the Jungles of X. We pass through many more cavern foundries and their fire pits; large parts of Hel seem crammed with them. In one foundry we walk past fire-pits of all silver flames, in another each fire pit either jet black or snow white, and tended to by yellow-back demons, supported by several reinforced grindals. Another has five small fire-pits of black with shimmering violet edges, all of them circling the huge middle one, a blue, red, and yellow beast; the hottest blue at the base, poking out of the pit, the red forming the angry body and the

yellow the flickering peaks. One particularly impressive cavern houses a single fire pit: a behemoth that rises many houses high. It is an astonishing rainbow of fire, and every blinding, brilliant color waves, burns, and bleeds into the next. I stand captivated for some time at its magnificence, undisturbed by the rushing imps around me, and I am only dragged away from its hypnotic embrace after a bored shuffling from Duel, who has likely seen such things a thousand times over at least.

One of the foundries is in the midst of heavy fighting as we arrive, and we are forced to keep our heads down, hiding behind the machinery and sneaking from one to the next whilst trying to avoid both the combatants and their shots. A phalanx of firebears has stormed into the foundry and the workers are defending themselves. The red devils are either cracking pistol shots or using the machinery against them. A clawed metal arm swings out from behind us and thuds into a firebear's bulk, sending it howling into a fire pit. The hide is set alight before it even touches the turquoise flames, and the howls take on an agonizing screechiness before they are broken into silence.

The firebears respond in fury, lighting the scarwood tips of their firesticks on the ground like giant matches, and hurling them like javelins. I see two red devils pierced by the missiles. One is shorn right through the chest and his mouth bubbles burning blood as he quickly dies. The other has a muscled arm stapled through, pinned to the machinery behind her. She tries to wrench away and her arm rips apart, and she looks at her flesh in horror as it steams away in hanging chunks.

A trio of winged imps comes out from the shadows to our right, ganging up on an exposed firebear and harassing it from the air, their jagged claws rending its face and shoulders. Rivulets of blood, streaked and forked like lightning veins, run over the fur, and soak the whole muzzle scarlet. The firebear is



blinded by the blood running into his eyes, and he flails about desperately at his winged assailants.

We shift further back, crawl-dashing to a safer spot behind a wall of barrels and oil drums. I look back to see another firebear rush forward and tear two of the imps down from the air in one upwards sweep of its stick. The third flaggles off, its right wing frayed up like netting.

A tumult coming from the far side of the cavern has us change our sights again. A unit of red devil soldiers has arrived, and they appear to be dragging some method of cannon with them. Not a clock tick goes by in which I can observe the newcomers before the cannon fires; a thunderous boom shakes the walls around me. I see, almost in slow motion, the dull bombard sail through the air and pass unfazed through the flames of the fire pit. It lands in the middle of the firebear phalanx, and time seems to stop.

There is a noise like a sudden quaking of the earth. No explosion occurs, but I see the beasts stuck motionless in the air, on their backs and their paws stretched up like dead spiders. Their mouths are yawned open, their eyes are glassed over and their coats are the color of soot.

In a rushing reemergence of time, before I have even blinked, the beasts are dead on the ground, their hides gone and their bones and teeth brittled to mounds of dust. The only remnants that look organic and blood-stricken are pulps of blackened flesh that hang off the machinery around the area. A few deformed skulls remain intact in the dust mounds, but are soon kicked to powder by the advancing devil soldiers. The few solid remains of the firebears, scattered pulp aside, are more like ancient grey pottery than corpses.

The cacophony of battle has subsided, to be replaced by assorted commands and shouts between the soldiers and the

workers. The wounded are rushed off, leaving streaming trails of blood that run in sync with their wails. Gangs of bone fairies wriggle out of little holes in the rock and rush towards the dead bodies. They are skeletal and brittle-ribbed, clad in grave-rags and with papery moth-wings of translucent white. They gibber and cowl around the bleeding bodies, jerking about in fervent, unified contortions like some kind of death-dance.

Duel and I manage to duck into a tunnel behind the barrels without being accosted, leaving the bone fairies behind to pick their prizes clean of their marrow. Duel looks a little glum and I am quite perturbed.

“Is Hel always this bloody?” I ask, wiping my face with my sleeve, where I imagine another’s blood to have spattered.

Duel just twists his lip wryly, and doesn’t answer.



I pause outside one tunnel entrance that interlocks with our route, having glimpsed strange, fleshy movements out the corner of my eye. I look through—and gasp, my eyes shot wide and my pulse quickening.

The doorless entrance opens out into a cavern of carnality.

Hundreds of body parts—the bodies themselves indeterminable—writhe and wriggle in twists and knots, all muddy flesh and bouncing meats. Sticky sacks of skin pound and pulsate, slopping against each other in great heaped mounds: slick, jellied deformities that rise nearly to the ceiling. There are wiggling toes and grasping fingers, curves and bones, bumps and bulges, hards and softs, things that stick and things that squish; occasionally surfacing from the corpusecular masses are frenzied, lost eyes, rolling in their sockets or fiercely shut to the world.

The cavern echoes with the sounds of beasts: grunts, growls, pants, wails, cries, moans, screams.

The movements are anything but methodical. These are thrusts, grinds, rides, slides, shakes, slaps, squeezes, clenches, clawing, mauling, biting, and hitting. Cocktails of muds, bloods, juices, and syrups drip through the mounds to the floor, where they pool and puddle into viscous swamps, soaking back up into the filth-logged bodies above.

The energies are frantic—as if the world might end at any moment—the sights turbulent, the sounds and smells sickly. An intoxicating nausea wells up in me, and I feel myself growing giantine, but instead of cold clarity—as I usually expect from my larger state—I feel warmed and blurred, flushed, enfuzzled, and somewhat enfeebled, but also strong, and hard-boned, and—and—sick, and—

I am yanked roughly by my coat arm, and the vision disappears. Duel drags me uncompromisingly down the tunnel, though I find it strangely difficult to walk. This fades rather quickly though; I feel the curious aforementioned sensations abandon me, and before I know it the giantine has gone—as little a time spent as any—and I am dwarven again.

The bubbling, sizzling images left with me are confusing and make me feel awkward and disturbed, as though they are memories belonging to another body. I push them forcibly out of mind, and head on with Duel. I wonder, briefly, whether I could control the giantine by summoning up the lurid images again, but then I think that is a very peculiar form of giantine, with peculiar sensations that are of no help to anyone, and certainly not during an adventure. Maybe I will recall the images again in the future, in my own time.

I have no time to dwell further, as we stumble out into a wide open cavern, heading to the left, only to find ourselves merely thirty steps from a facing phalanx of firebears. They growl at us and ready their firesticks. We are just about to turn and desperately race back into the tunnel when we hear a barked command behind us. Duel drops flat to the ground and I immediately follow suit.

The unmistakable crack of longrifle shot discharges over our heads and punctures two of the firebears. I spin around to see red devil soldiers crouched on the rocks behind us in sleeveless uniforms as scarlet as their skin, laden with insignia and bandoliers and tools and weapons. They are already loading their guns for another round.

The rest of the firebears howl, and launch the magma from their firesticks as the red devils unleash another volley from their spiked longrifles the color of burnt blood. Some of the red devils wear decorated bandanas around their heads, from which tufts of black hair spike or curl out. A few devils are heavily tattooed. The nearest one to me, who has a cruel-edged machete strapped to his back and a scarred sawed-off shotgun in his belt, has a tattoo of a grinning skull with "BORN IN HEL" etched under it. Another devil, tough and burly and carrying a custom skeleton-rifle (with gleaming steamsteel parts), has a scrawlscrip tattoo on his neck. I eventually work out that it reads "It's just the devil in me."

"What side you on?" the machete-carrier demands gruffly of me, and I realise the fighting has stopped and the firebears are either dead or deserted. Unfamiliar though I am with Hel insignia and rankings, his patches and bone-chisel medals seem to rank him of importance.

"I'm on nobody's side but my own. Only one there is," I answer. I cock my head at Duel. "And he's on mine."

The officer glances in the direction of Duel and then looks back, his face betraying no expression. "See that your side don't find no other sides to side alongside, then. It's bad for your health."

"We won't, I've got a lifetime of practice in not taking other people's sides," I say stoically.

He looks me up and down, appraising me critically. "I wouldn't hang around neither. Outsiders tend to get . . . mixed up in things here."

"We're already on our way out."

"Make it fast, afore I shoot you myself. Civilian casualties come with the ground."

"We're not civilians," I say. The officer's lip curls a little.

Duel gives him a rogue salute. The officer ignores him and walks back to his unit. "Alrigh' you Helish lot, move out! We got a phalanx more o' these grunterns comin' in on the lower fire pits foundry, outside Flesh Canyon. Let's burn the fur off their hides and show 'em what it's like to mess with the boys from Red Menace!"

We decide to take the officer's advice and make a hasty departure. Duel assures me that we are almost there.



The exit!

I see a blackwood door that looks just like the one through which I entered Hel, surrounded in a thick red mist. Just before it and off to the side lies another casualty of Hel, and a gang of bone fairies spasmodically jerking and kicking around their latest find. The bone harvest is already well under way and thus the dead creature is unrecognizable. The gibbering fairies

take no notice of us and, in final sight of the exit, I allow myself to ignore them.

I glance at Duel and he nods, but as I make a beeline for the blackwood door he hangs back a little, appearing a tad uncertain. I take little notice of his hesitancy and rush in, eager to be out of this infernal place.

I enter the smog and grind to a halt as though I have just been hit across the head.

Something is wrong with me.

I feel a deep pressure in my head, like a subterranean migraine. It is buzzing like flies. I blink away spots that threaten to swarm my entire vision. I look down at my body and see my nails lengthening, sharpening to claws. My skin is scaling and scabbing. I touch my head and feel ridged horns protruding out.

I look back at Johnny Duel, and his eyes are opened wide as he stares at me. I feel a flash of anger toward him.

No, not a flash. A bubble, expanding and growing as red air is hungrily sucked into it. My fists tighten, the claws digging so hard into my scabrous flesh that I am pierced. I feel a rising bile—a furious, undirected hate. I lash out but hit nothing.

I want to find somebody I love and tell them I don't love them.

I want to find something beautiful, something that *knows* it's beautiful, and scar it.

I want to see somebody cry as if everything that ever made them happy was just destroyed.

I want to find someone calm and normal and push them and twist them until they become a monster. I want to see my creation kill others. I want to create a murderer.

I want to *be* a murderer. I want to be the best murderer there ever was. Kill more than was ever killed before.

I want to rip out somebody's heart, feel it pumping away in my hand and then *SQUEEZE* it and see it burst open like a flower, pouring blood, fountaining it out to soak my body. I want to see strings of clotted blood all down my arm, to stain forever and ever.

I look at Johnny Duel and can barely see him through the haze. He now represents to me all the friends I ever had. I want to kill all of them, all those aliens with their alien lives. I want to savage them like a rabid animal, to tear off their flesh and spit on their twitching, climbing bone frames, to soak the gristle and the marrow and the torn out eye sockets with my congealing contempt. I hate them, I hate them—do you understand? I wish to burn my foe-friends alive, to rid myself of these unyielding pressures, their foul spirits that plague me, that leak my intellect and sanity like a puncture to my brain. If I could move, I would go up to Duel and stab him. I would slip my blade into his chest and have it wrestle with his rib-bones. I would look him straight in the eye, all those aliens straight in the eye, as if to say: Did you not think I was capable of this? Did you not see this coming? Did you not *know*?

Something is right with me.

I want to set fire to a cathedral, and I want to set fire to a quiet little church in a quiet little village. I want to see the congregation come screaming out, their faces ash and their eyes red, from the smoke and the crying, as friends and family members are pulled out, all stiff and dead.

Through slitted eyes I see or sense a bone fairy fly into my path, its face indistinct and pointless. I snap my arm out and grab it tight. It squeals and struggles but I clench harder, twisting its arms and legs behind its back. I withdraw a small knife from my belt and prick the point into the bone fairy's face. It howls

and screeches something awful, a desperate jibber, a tumbling voice that sounds like scree tumbling off a cliff face.

My knife slowly edges forward, and I butcher into the fairy's chest, snagging through the ribcage and out the other side. Imagine butchering a *bipedal* like this! I reach out my other hand with fascinated care and squeeze the fairy's head. It pops between my fingers. I toss the carcass aside after a final crunch in my fist, and I lick the end of my blade with a nauseous glee.

I want to hunt down all those who don't know my name and I want to kill them.

I want to be responsible for the complete destruction of all destructive creatures. They are coldhearted, but there is a volcano in my heart and that makes us different.

I want to see that volcano of mine come up from underneath the middle of the Urbanite. Leveling buildings, and streets of lava liquefying everyone—all officers and magistrates and clerks, all doctors and vagrants and children. Their faces all melted. Their little hands burned off.

And when my volcano has destroyed the world, I will be the shining star of my own spectacular demise.



A ferocious shove that seems to come from nowhere launches me into the blackwood door. It slams open and I fall through. The red mist drops from my vision.

My cheeks flush with shame at my prior thoughts. I look up to see Johnny Duel standing there.

“Yeah, sorry,” he says. “I forgot about that stuff.”

“You forgot,” I croak.

“Yeah. Us denizens of Hel are immune, but it has a pretty good effect on outsiders. Hell Itself created it, one of



many such traps. Punishment, reward, and deterrent to leavin' all in one. All-around package of sin. I didn't expect to see them in Hel though. I'd forgot about their effects, it's been a while . . . Was trying to jog my memory about the red mist when you went straight on in."

"Uh-huh," I say, slowly getting to my feet. "I think I've had some of the others too." I mentally tick them off on my fingers, matching my experiences in Hel with the sins I know.

"Each sin is tailored to the individual. There's minds in them, see. Each one attracts the right kind of person. The sins choose you."

"And what's the point? What are they really for, except as a way of getting to you?"

"Challenges I guess. Hell Itself designed them as a way to hurt and empower you at the same time. They find your biggest weaknesses, and nudge you this kind of idea that sometimes your weaknesses are also your strengths. Mayhaps. They don't create nothin', they don't bring anythin' out that weren't already there. They just make the sins stronger."

"So it's personal to me?"

"Aye. Hell Itself wants you to know your potential."

"You mean what I'm capable of . . ." I murmur.

"And the kind of person you could be. Not saying it'd be a good one though. Or bad. It's sort of a temptation, I guess. Affects everyone differently."

"Uh-huh. Did I look . . . demonic . . . to you? Did I change?"

"Nope. You just went real angry, your eyes bulgin' out and your teeth gritted and all that. Looked kinda scary."

"Yeah. And the bone fairy?" I expect Duel to tell me that I imagined that part too.

“Oh, yeah, she’s dead.”

I rub my hands over my face, sighing. “Alright, let’s get the hell out of here.”



After a storm of stairs, we finally stumble, exhausted, to another door. The wood is rotting and bugs slink in and out of the fibers. Someone, some wanderer has scrawled a tired message with a blade into the wood.

### SO, WHAT DID YOU LEARN

The words are conversational but the tone is caustic and embittered. Duel and I slump down behind the door, at the top of the steps, while we try to get our breath back and lessen the pain in our legs. I see that my skin is no longer red-black and bark-rough, but back to my usual luster, and I wonder at this sudden departure of color and texture, without any wash or healing poultice applied. I am then moved to ponder on the words that face me. The attitude behind the scrawl makes it seem as though the author is trying to confront me, or perhaps itself. The handwriting looks oddly familiar.

What have I learned? Well, not so much. . . Nothing, in fact.

Maybe *that* is what I have learned: that there is nothing more to learn. That there is nothing.

Or maybe I *have* learned something, maybe I have learned a great deal but I am refusing to acknowledge it directly. It could remain buried within me, a harsh-rooted wisdom of the soul—points of knowledge that would take to my mouth like poison.

All I know is that the Quest must continue—at any cost.

**JANUARY 5<sup>TH</sup>**



**I**t was January the 5<sup>th</sup>, and everywhere things were dead or dying.

The skim of the water shivered its way downstream; on a night so chill and mystical even the river had goosebumps. He put his hand on the walls of the bridge and felt the weight: as above, so below.

The path led him, pulled him by the hand, along and along. He trailed the bushes, pricked thorns. Red-black buds bloomed on his fingertips and he let them drip.

January 5<sup>th</sup>, a new year.

The river followed him like a hungry dog. On the far bank was a long line of mops: huge and shaggy heads of hair swaying side to side, their eyes and faces lost in darkness. A run of giants and every one shaking their heads at him.

"It's just . . . I don't know how to be happier," the pauper boy said in the corner of his eye. "Or, just, happy more often."

"Well, that's because life isn't a search for joy and happiness son," replied the weathered old gentleman standing by the boy.

The two figures shifted in stopmotion to keep up with the corner of his eye. He didn't look right at them, for he knew if he did they would disappear.

"It isn't?" the pauper boy said, looking up with big innocent eyes that flashed with something's reflection.

The gentleman patted the boy on the shoulder. "No," he said. "It's a challenge. The ultimate challenge. The last levels."

"There are more than one?"

"Perhaps. Each more difficult than the last. Life by life it will become harder, crueler, and life by life you will appreciate it more. Eventually you will get to the final level, and you will

have encountered the very depths of wickedness, cruelty, and injustice, and you will never have more love and respect for life.”

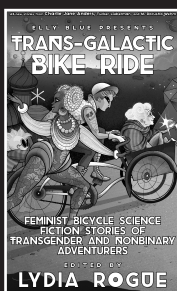
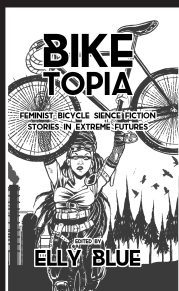
“And then what?”

“And then you win.”

“Is that it? For all that? Is there no reward?”

The old man stared out into the night, as if he knew they were being watched. “Perhaps there is,” he said.

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