



DELTA GREEN

EXTRAORDINARY
RENDITIONS

CTHULHU MYTHOS
STORIES OF
MODERN HORROR
AND CONSPIRACY

CARTER
FARNELL
GLANCY
HALBANY
HARMS
IVEY
MANA
STOLZE
WINNINGER

DETWILLER
FIELDING
GOODFELLOW
HANRAHAN
HITE
LOWDER
MICAL
TYNES



DELTA GREEN

Extraordinary Renditions

Edited by Shane Ivey

with Adam Scott Glancy

ARC DREAM PUBLISHING • 2015

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Published September 2015 by Arc Dream Publishing, 12215 Highway 11, Chelsea, AL 35043, USA.

www.arcdream.com

ISBN 978-1-940410-17-3 (hardback)

ISBN 978-1-940410-18-0 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-940410-19-7 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

By Shane Ivey

THE OFFICE OF STRATEGIC SERVICES, THE SHORT-LIVED COWBOY spy agency in World War II, has always been a favorite of conspiracy theories. After running commando operations across Europe and in Burma, the stories go, the OSS in league with the Vatican helped Nazi ODESSA refugees flee to safety—the heads of the OSS being in the same Catholic secret society as SS intelligence officer Reinhard Gehlen and the Pope. As the war ended, you might read, the OSS caused the accident that killed Patton by breaking his neck with a rubber bullet. The OSS was the strong arm of the Skull and Bones, secret masters of Yale and the American intelligence world.

One OSS story around the conspiracy-theory websites seems more quotidian. We're told some U.S. government personnel files from the 1940s to the 1960s bore stickers, little green triangles. No one in the personnel offices could explain them and the occasional clerk's inquiries went nowhere. Of course no one would remove them; no bureaucrat would risk the trouble in case the little green triangles had some purpose after all. Once in a while a little green sticker would be seen on a file folder in the Army, the Navy, the IRS, the FBI, anywhere. Eventually such files were digitized and the physical files and their mysterious stickers shredded with them or buried in dusty warehouses.

Especially diligent conspiracy-theory sites link the little green triangles to an old OSS program called DELTA GREEN, and that's when things get interesting.

We know a program called Delta Green really existed. You can find a couple of references to it in documents uncovered by Freedom of Information Act requests. Delta Green was a psychological operations unit in World War II, created to take advantage of the bizarre occult beliefs of Axis leaders. The public documents, which may have been released with the name unredacted by mistake, don't say whether it had any success. The OSS was shut down after the war. Many of its people helped launch the CIA in 1947. We can only speculate whether the OSS's lessons from Delta Green informed the CIA's notorious psychological operations in the coming decades.

Conspiracy theorists have done more than speculate. Delta Green came back as a secret project to track down Nazis after the war, they say. Delta Green brought federal agents, spies, and special forces together for missions too secret even for the CIA. Delta Green was the precursor and rival to Majestic-12, the U.S. government conspiracy that allied itself with aliens after Roswell. Delta Green fights otherworldly monsters and evil sorcerers under the cover of the Global War on Terror. Once you climb into the rabbit hole, the fall never ends.

In this book we turn up tales from the rabbit hole: Delta Green case histories rendered as short stories.

They begin in the Dust Bowl, with a Naval intelligence unit supposedly called "P4" and memories of the abandoned

New England town of Innsmouth (another bottomless well of conspiracy theories).

They look at the days after World War II when secret agents pursued Nazis all over Europe, the early CIA attempted its first infamous schemes, and anticommunist witch-hunts seized on American terrors back home.

They bring us through the Cold War desperation of the Seventies and Eighties, when America was shocked by its own crimes and Delta Green allegedly went underground again.

And they come to the present day, and a Delta Green divided after it rebuilt itself in the secret government—but many old outlaws refused to trust the new order.

What is the true story of Delta Green? We can't know. The U.S. government will always have its secrets. The NSA, the NRO, Delta Force, SEAL Team Six, and JSOC were all secret in their time, acknowledged only when concealing them could do no more good. We've learned that the U.S. government spies ceaselessly on its own citizens. It abducts suspected enemies around the world; it imprisons, tortures, and murders without trial or recourse; it launches missiles over foreign soil with or without diplomacy. Having learned a secret, we become complicit in it and the need for secrecy fades. Perhaps one day Delta Green will be just another secret acknowledged when the lie does no more good: a longstanding psychological operations program with its roots in World War II, transferred to the Department of Defense after the war, disbanded after one failure too many in Vietnam, and dubiously resurrected after 9/11 for the War on Terror.

Until then we have only the rumors of Delta Green—rumors and case histories like these, outré stories of alien science and inhuman intelligence, of mass murder and hopeless suicide, every rendition more extraordinary than the last.

CHELSEA, ALABAMA

SEPTEMBER 11, 2015

The Color of Dust

By Laurel Halbany

“ARE YOU THE RED?”

Marion’s finger slipped off the shutter lever and she nearly dropped her camera. She turned around to look at the man who had come up behind her. Under her sharp gaze he shifted nervously and shifted from foot to foot. He was young, and from his broad Northeastern accent and the fashionable cut of his hair she judged him not long out of one of the Ivies. She glanced at his soft, slender hands: Yale, probably. No wedding ring. She could work with that.

“No, I’m the photographer.” Marion pointed to the heavy camera slung around her neck. “Didn’t they tell you anything? The Relief Administration’s starting up a project to document what the farmers are going through.” Like all good cover stories, it was partly grounded in truth; it would hold up even if they went beyond checking her identification and sending a telegram. In Marion’s experience, they wouldn’t bother.

“I’m very sorry, that was terrible attempt at a joke. Some people don’t approve of the president’s relief efforts, you know. They talk about how it’s all Communist propaganda, and I—well.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Christopher Hart. I’m one of the junior researchers—well, the only one really. Dr. Leflore is in charge but he’s rather busy, you know, does most of the management.”

She took his hand and shook it firmly. He blinked; surprised, she guessed, at how strong her grip was, that her hands

were calloused, not smooth and delicate like the college girls he was used to. His eyes flicked down in a way that suggested he was trying to be casual; checking for a ring, which of course she didn't have. Yes, Marion thought, *I can work with this.*

"Marion Prentiss," she said. "Is it just the two of you, keeping track of all these farmers?"

"Well, there aren't as many as you'd think. This is a pilot project, and their routines don't vary that much day to day. Just when there's a harvest, for example. Of course we have to keep track of any problems with the farming, make sure everyone's health is good. Here, let's walk back to the research building. Did they tell you much about the project before sending you out?"

Marion fell into step next to him. P4 had given her a very thorough briefing on this project—as thorough as possible, anyway, given the little information they had. "Not much. Just that you're working on a way to keep crops from getting smothered or blown away by the dust storms. Oh, and that you've got awful tight security here. I had to show my identification to about five different people before they'd even let me past the gates, let alone bring me up here to wait for you."

"And I'm sorry for making you wait!" he said hastily. "The folks back in Washington aren't very organized, I guess. They told us to expect someone from the Relief Administration to catalog the project, but you weren't supposed to be here until Wednesday, and besides we assumed—" His ears reddened.

"You assumed they'd send a man?" Marion made sure she was smiling and that the tone of her voice was light. "It hap-

pens all the time. I'm used to it. They were supposed to drop off my things, though. The Brownie's fine for fast work, but I'll need my Graflex for the wider shots, and the materials to set up a darkroom so I can get you prints quickly."

"Yes, that's all taken care of. We've got you a fairly new cabin and there's a separate outbuilding for your darkroom. Electricity, even. Rural electrification hasn't gotten far out here, but we need it for the project headquarters. And here we are, Miss Prentiss."

The long building was new, its plain, unimaginative architecture marking it instantly as a government facility. Hart rushed ahead to open the door for her. It was cheap wood coated with military gray paint. She guessed in another few months it would stick in its frame. From the other side came the staccato sound of a typewriter.

She stepped through into a cramped, square room, its floor speckled black linoleum that was no less ugly for being brand new. The walls were hung with bright posters, exhorting the Works Progress Administration with the kind of energetic, innocent wording that only a government agency could use with a straight face. A fiftyish white woman installed behind a squat metal desk looked up from her Underwood and the gunfire sounds of typing stopped.

"Mrs. Vicker? This is Miss Prentiss. She's the photographer from the Relief Administration who's going to help Dr. Leflore document his work."

"How do you do," Mrs. Vicker said. Her voice was not exactly hostile, but conveyed that hostility was right at hand if

need be.

“Very nice to meet you,” Marion said. “I hope I won’t get in anyone’s way.” She ducked her head a little as if embarrassed or shy. She’d been in enough government offices to understand that, stenographer or no, Mrs. Vicker would use what little power she had to thwart Marion in every way possible if she got crossways.

“I’m sure,” the older woman said. She seemed mollified, if still displeased; probably the best Marion could hope for. “Dr. Leflore’s in his office. I suppose you can go on back.” She returned to her typing without bothering to wait for a response.

“Thank you, Mrs. Vicker,” Hart said, raising his voice to be heard over the noise of the Underwood. If the woman heard him, she didn’t look up. He gently steered Marion towards a door at the far end of the room and ushered her through, shutting it firmly behind them. Ahead, the narrow corridor took a sharp turn to the right. Featureless doors punctuated the right-hand wall at intervals.

He nodded to let Marion go ahead, which seemed silly to her given that she had no idea where they were going. The sound of Mrs. Vicker’s typing faded behind them. “Sorry about all that, Miss Prentiss,” he said. “She’s been with Dr. Leflore since he was at Brown, and she’s a little protective.”

“That’s all right. And call me Marion, please. We’ll be working together a lot, no need to be so formal.” She looked over her shoulder and flashed him her showgirl smile, the one that got her out of more tight places and past more hard men than she could count. Even the gray-faced man at P4 had been

put on his heels. *Only for a minute, though. Just long enough for him to realize that he wasn't the only one in the room who could play the game.*

It worked on young Dr. Hart just fine. "Um—yes, you're right, we will be. Then you'll have to call me Christopher."

"Christopher," she said, as if weighing the sound of his name. "Well. Where do we find Dr. Leflore?"

"Ahead on the far right, there. Just knock."

The head man's office door was as cheap and undistinguished as all the others. Marion knocked on the pale wood. A moment later came the sound of metal rolling over linoleum, and heavy, impatient footsteps. The door swung open.

She expected a pale, neurasthenic academic, squat and rounded from decades of faculty dinners and port, or perhaps tall and reedy like Christopher, stoop-shouldered from endless hours poring over obscure books. Dr. Leflore was neither. He was a head taller than Marion. His shoulders nearly filled the doorframe. His face was lined and wind-chapped, not the soft, pale visage of a man who spent a comfortable life indoors. If he traded his three-piece suit for coveralls and walked onto the loading docks at San Pedro, nobody would look at him twice. He whipped a pair of spectacles out of a breast pocket and jammed them over his eyes, the better to glare down at Marion. She took a half-step back without thinking. Leflore didn't seem to really *see* her. His gaze had a red, unfocused intensity she'd only seen in the faces of drunkards and madmen.

Hart quickly squeezed next to her. "Dr. Leflore, this is Miss Prentiss, the photographer who—"

"I can see that, Christopher, she's got a camera," Leflore said. "A girl photographer? Well, miss, I assume you know how to use that thing or Roosevelt wouldn't have sent you. I expect that you won't be shipping any film back to Washington without my approval. This is a secure project, and I'm not letting some desk-bound egghead back in Washington ruin things because of incomplete information."

"Of course, Doctor," Marion said. "I've got the materials for a darkroom here, so I can develop my photos and show them to you before anyone else sees them."

Leflore grunted. "Good. All right, Christopher, why don't you show Miss Prentiss where she'll be staying, help her get her darkroom set up. You can show her around tomorrow. Lattimer's farm would be a good start. I'll be in the lab running more tests on the new additives. Good to meet you, miss."

"Thank you," she managed, before Leflore stepped back and shut the door in her face.

Hart motioned her back down the hall. "Sorry. He's preoccupied with his work, and he can be very brusque when he feels he's been intruded on. I think he likes you, though. He didn't yell at you."

"Oh? That's good," Marion said. "What are additives? Something for animal feed?"

Hart paused and looked at her with a degree of caution Marion didn't like. "Part of our experiments involve alternatives to the commercial fertilizers currently in use, which are expensive and inefficient on the small scale. You know that everything we're discussing is confidential?"

“Christopher, I did have to pass a security clearance check to even get *assigned* to your project.”

“Um, yes, of course. Well. One of the things we’re experimenting with is adding fertilizer directly to the water the farmers use for irrigation. It’s a bit tricky, because you have to get the mixture just right. Too weak and you achieve nothing, too strong and you burn the crop. We’ve had good results so far, but it’s an experiment, so we try different formulations.”

“Oh, I see.” Marion put her hand lightly on his arm. “It’s probably over my head, really. I’m mostly here to take pictures to document your work.”

“Right,” he said. His ears turned pink. “I’ll take you to your cabin. We usually have dinner around six o’clock. Nothing fancy. We’ve hired a few women from the farms to prepare meals. The kitchen is around the other side of the building. It’s a short walk from where the residences are.”

“I’d like that very much, thank you,” she said. “Lead the way.”

MARION SAT DOWN ON ONE OF THE EMPTY PACKING CRATES. The shed they’d fixed up for her darkroom was much better than she’d expected; recently swept, the windows painted in layers of black, a long workbench for her trays of chemicals, and they’d helpfully left her a thick roll of jute twine and some clothes-pegs to hang up prints. There was no running water in the sink, but a water pump and a bucket were only a few steps from the door.

She unwrapped a hunk of beef jerky and slowly chewed

her way through it, washing it down between bites with warm Coca-Cola straight from the bottle. Tonight, she'd tell Hart that she was tired from the long trip and unpacking and wasn't hungry for dinner. Later, she could pretend to have a ladylike appetite, and eat at odd hours so that nobody noticed most of her food was going straight into the garbage. Eventually, she knew, she'd have to eat something grown here.

As little as you can get away with, the government man had warned her. His windowless office in the Naval Building had been just big enough for a battered desk and a couple of office chairs. *You won't be there long, so we think you should be safe even if you have to eat their food regularly. As a precaution, though, stick to your own food when you can. We'll send jerky, canned goods, some things that won't spoil.*

What the hell's in their food, anyway? Arsenic? She'd lifted her hands from her lap, reminding him her wrists were handcuffed together, that she wasn't in his office because they were friends. *You sons of bitches sending me off to be a miner's canary? You'll call in the troops when my corpse turns up somewhere in East Nowhere, Kansas?*

The gray man had let Marion's anger wash over him. She wondered if he could really feel guilt about sending her into something dangerous, or if his work had ground him down so far that he'd lost the capacity to get angry right back. *Nothing like that. There's something going on there with the way they're trying to bring the land back, and it likely means there's something about the food and water that's unnatural.*

Unnatural. You mean like Innsmouth—

Yes. That's why you're here instead of rotting in jail up in Ossining. He'd opened a drawer in his desk, pulling out a bottle of whiskey and a dusty glass. Let me unlock those cuffs. We'll drink some of this, and then I'll tell you what we know about Project Increase. You can have the glass.

MARION WAS IN THE TINY CAFETERIA, HOLDING AN UNTOUCHED cup of black coffee, when Christopher Hart staggered in. He nodded politely at her and made his way to the cook's station. In a few minutes he returned with a plate of fried eggs, bacon and a bowl of something that looked like lumpy white oatmeal. A black hatbox with a lens and a winding knob sat on its long edge at the table where his plate should go. Marion picked it up and set it awkwardly in her lap with an apologetic smile. "My Brownie," she said. "I don't like to put it on the floor where it might get kicked."

Hart smiled. "I completely understand." He arranged his plate and napkin neatly in front of him, as if he were about to consume a fancy dinner at his club, and tucked into the white lump on his plate. "Grits," he said in response to her raised eyebrows. "You've never had them? Our cook is from Georgia, where I understand they're as common as toast at breakfast. We make them from corn we grow here. They're really quite good when you get used to them."

"I'll have to try them sometime," she said. "I've already eaten, you go ahead."

She pretended to sip her coffee while he devoured his breakfast. If there was anything poisonous in it, he gave no sign

of noticing. When he'd finished he dropped his napkin next to the empty plate. "There's really nothing like food fresh from its source. I should warn you, if you're used to food that's trucked into the city, you might find yourself overeating. I'm sure I've gained ten pounds since we started the project."

Marion smiled over the rim of her cup. "I'll have to be careful and mind my figure, then."

Hart glanced away and fidgeted with his napkin. "Er, yes. So, are you ready? One of the farm hands will drive us out to the Lattimer place."

The farm hand waited outside, leaning against a Ford pickup truck so thick with dust that Marion could have written her name in it. He straightened and doffed his cap when he saw her. Hart introduced the man as Francis; the man nodded politely and opened the side door of the truck for them. His hands were wide and square from years of manual labor, his age somewhere between twenty and forty, probably younger than his sun and wind-chapped face would suggest.

Francis helped her get up into the truck's cab with the Brownie in her arms. Hart squeezed in next to her and pulled the door shut. Marion took off her sun hat and put it on the floor, hoping it wouldn't get too dirty, but unwilling to set her fragile camera on the floor and risk it getting damaged. She moved over to give Francis room to work the shift. Her thigh pressed against Hart's. "Sorry, kind of a tight squeeze," she said. He blushed and mumbled, but didn't pull away from her. If Francis noticed, he said nothing.

The Ford bounced slowly over the packed dirt road that

ran straight out into farmland as far as the eye could see. There was nothing to see along the road but row after row of green, growing corn, stretching out all the way to where the wide blue sky finally curved down to earth. Hart made small talk that quickly faded; there was only so much to say about the weather, and he seemed unwilling to talk about the project with Francis listening. Marion thought that strange, given that the man worked here and likely wasn't going anywhere as long as there was work to do and he got paid regularly. She began to sweat as the sun climbed higher and the summer heat rose from the land in earnest.

It seemed forever before a farmhouse rose up out of the endless green landscape, and then longer still before they actually reached it. The house was similar to the one Marion had been given for her stay; wooden planks, neat but irregular, as though cut by hand rather than a mill, the outside painted with whitewash and gray with dust. Marion saw a flicker of movement through one of the windows.

Francis stopped the truck. Hart pushed the door open and jumped out, stretching his arms and legs, before turning to help Marion. "Good thing you brought the smaller camera. If you bring the larger one we can have Francis put it in the back of the truck, but you'll need to pack it in a crate so he can fasten it down."

Francis had gone to the house, and she and Hart waited while people were called in from out of the field. Marion guessed the movement in the house had been Mrs. Lattimer, a weary, bent woman who looked shyly at Hart when she man-

aged to look at anyone directly. Her husband seemed older, but equally weary. Their five children, ranging from nearly grown to waist-tall, bore the repressed energy of children desperate to stare and ask questions. Marion was struck by how marked they were, none of them free of signs of injury or disease. The arms of one of the older children were shiny and white with burn scars; another stood canted at an angle, as if one leg were shorter than the other. Out of the corner of her eye, Marion saw Hart watching for her reaction. She pretended not to notice.

“How are you, Mr. Lattimer?” Hart asked. “We’re just showing Miss Prentiss here around some of the farms. She’s going to take pictures of how things are getting along, to help Dr. Leflore with his record-keeping.”

A reaction passed through the group at the mention of Leflore’s name and just as quickly vanished, too fast for Marion guess what emotion these people felt for him. “Happy to help, Dr. Hart,” the man said quietly. “Anything you folks think is necessary. Not much interesting today, but we’re settin’ up some irrigation pipe.”

“That would be wonderful, Mr. Lattimer. Why don’t you lead the way?”

Lattimer turned without a word and walked toward the fields. His family took it as a signal to disperse back to whatever tasks they’d had before Hart and his entourage showed up. Marion watched Mrs. Lattimer, especially, the woman gently herding the youngest children back inside the house. Without really planning to, Marion followed her to the narrow row of

planks that made up their porch. "Excuse me, Mrs. Lattimer, would you mind if I took some pictures of you?"

Mrs. Lattimer paused and glanced back toward the corner of the house; the men had already walked far enough to be out of sight. She put her bony hands on Marion's shoulders and pulled the younger woman closer. "Are you takin' them for Dr. Leflore?" she whispered.

Marion stared back at her. She had spent a lot of time seeing angry people up close, people furious that she was in places they didn't want her to be, taking pictures of things they didn't want recorded. Mrs. Lattimer wasn't angry; she was terrified. Afraid to refuse, but afraid of what would happen if she said yes.

"You don't want Dr. Leflore to have any photographs of your family," Marion whispered. It wasn't a question, and Mrs. Lattimer didn't treat it as one; she squeezed Marion's shoulders in response. Too scared to even say it out loud.

"Marion, is everything all right?" Hart called. He poked his head around the corner of the house just as Mrs. Lattimer let go of Marion and stepped back.

"Everything's fine. I was just asking Mrs. Lattimer if I could take some pictures of her in the kitchen, but the sun's not at the right angle for the shots I want."

"I see," Hart said. He looked slowly from Marion to Mrs. Lattimer, who stared down at the floor. "Coming along, then?"

"Of course! Sorry to keep everyone waiting," Marion walked over to Hart and took the hand he offered to assist her down off the porch. She carefully did not look back at Mrs.

Lattimer as she followed Hart out into the cornfield.

Off in a distant field, this one bare of growing things, four mules plodded in a straight line, pulling a man riding behind them in a kind of small wheeled wagon. Marion pointed it out to Hart. "Sulky plow," he said. "We do have a few Deere tractors for the farmers to share, but some of them insist on using animal labor. You don't have to buy parts or gasoline for a mule, is their thinking. It also lets us compare work-hours on farms using animal labor versus those using modern machinery, so we've not required them to switch over. Eventually I hope to examine whether eating feed grown here makes the animals healthier, too."

They trudged along a wide, flat space between long rows of green corn that stood a little higher than Marion's knees. Puffs of brown dust rose from the dry ground with every step. It seemed a long time before they reached the edge of the cornfield. Lattimer joined some farm hands who were carrying long, narrow boxes made out cheap scrap wood. Dirt had been mounded up to make a slope that rose up several feet to an empty, dry ditch that ran perpendicular to the rows. The men laid the boxes down, setting one end at a row of corn and nestling the other into the wall of the ditch. Marion nodded politely and half-listened as Hart explained what she had already figured out, that the boxes were crude pipes that would carry water from the irrigation ditch and down to the cornfield.

"Mr. Lattimer, do you think we might see a demonstration of how the irrigation system works?"

The man cleared his throat. "Don't usually turn it on till

near sunset, Dr. Hart. Too early in the day when the sun's high and the water just dries right up."

"I know it's trouble, but Miss Prentiss is here to take photographs. For Dr. Leflore's records, do you see?"

Without another word, Lattimer turned and walked away, along the slope of the irrigation ditch. The farm hands followed, and after a brief pause so did Hart. Marion trailed after them. Lattimer walked up the slope at a point where the ditch turned a corner and stopped at a wide catchpool. Some kind of enormous pumping mechanism, a little bigger than a car and twice as tall, squatted on the far side of the catchpool, a wide metal pipe jutting out from one side and angling down as a kind of faucet. Lattimer and his workers gathered around it and took hold of spokes jutting out of a horizontal central wheel. Lattimer called out a count, one-two-three, and the men pushed against the spokes, walking counterclockwise around the pump. Water sprayed out of the huge spigot and splashed into the catchpool, slowly filling the ditch and running down toward the cornfield.

Marion blinked. It was hard to look at the water in the catchpool. Looking strained her eyes and made them lose focus, as if she were looking through a powerful lens from a few inches away. There was something wrong with the play of sunlight on the water, too; its color was all wrong. She glanced up at the machine to clear her sight, then back down, and her vision rebelled again.

Hart beamed at the farmers' labor, oblivious to her reaction. "We have a system of graduated storage tanks, you see.

Underground pipes made of vitrified clay run downhill from the main well station, where we purify the water and measure in the additives. It runs to the farms into smaller tanks, so the families can use it for the fields quite easily, and for their households as well. We'll get them all indoor plumbing, eventually."

"That's wonderful," she managed. The beginnings of a headache dug into the back of Marion's eyes. "Let me get some photos of this."

She twisted the lens aperture on the Brownie and looked down into the viewfinder. She pointed the camera at the men turning the pump wheel, centered them in the frame, pushed the shutter release lever down, moved the camera up slightly to capture more of the pumping machine, and took another picture. Marion realized that she was reluctant to photograph the water running down the ditch into the cornfield. She forced herself to turn the camera to the brimming catchpool. Through the mirrors of the viewfinder, the water didn't look quite as strange, but it seemed oddly out of focus, even though the edges of the pool were quite sharp. She took a long step back to improve the focus; the pool stayed blurry. She took the picture anyway. Marion walked carefully toward the ditch, looking through the viewfinder, spending almost the entire roll of film on pictures of the running water.

She lifted the camera up and pointed it at Hart. He had just enough time to manage a startled smile before she pushed the lever again: her last shot of the roll.

"That one was just for me," Marion said. She tried to smile again, but the headache lanced through her skull and she

wincing, spoiling the effect.

Hart stepped forward, his face all concern. "Are you all right?"

"Just a headache. It's the sun, I think." She turned sideways so she wouldn't have to look at the water.

Hart walked over and took her arm. "Of course. You're not used to working outdoors in the sun the way the men are. I wasn't thinking. Mr. Lattimer, thank you for the demonstration. Francis?"

The farm hand let go of the pump wheel and moved to Marion's other side. The two men helped her down the slope to the truck. It took much longer to get back than it had taken to drive out, in no small part because they had to pull over twice for Marion to get sick. The men helped Marion to her cottage, where she spent the rest of the afternoon with the curtains pulled shut and a pillow over her eyes. It was well after sunset by the time the headache faded. At least it got me out of lunch and dinner. She sighed and threw her legs over the edge of the mattress, and set about finding the can opener.

ICY WIND TORE AT MARION'S EXPOSED FACE. SHE STOOD IN A canvas tent the size of a living room, and the cold ripped through gaps in the walls. It carried in the smell of old seawater. Metal lamps in the corners filled the tent with harsh yellow light. She shivered as she waited for the government men to bring in prisoners, one at a time, to be photographed, before they were loaded back into the trucks guarded by sullen men with machine guns. Her gloved hands held the Brownie camera,

the one she'd bought five years after that night in the tent, and she realized she was dreaming, remembering Innsmouth. She pulled off one of her gloves and pinched her cheek in a desperate effort to wake herself up. Her face was too numb from cold to register any pain.

The flap door of the tent twitched aside and Robert Allen stepped through. "Ready? Christ, I hope they run these people through here quick." He looked at her bare hand. "Better put your gloves back on, sweetheart, or your fingers are going to snap off like icicles."

"You're dead, Rob," Marion said. "You killed yourself in 1929. You left me a note saying you were sorry you ever dragged me into this job. You said never to trust any of those government sons of bitches. Not even if they paid well and ran a line of horseshit about helping your country."

Allen grinned. "Sounds like something I'd say. What was it, bullet to the head? Gas?"

"You drank half a bottle of bourbon and then lay down under a freight train."

"Guess I wanted to be sure." There was a huge camera in the center of the room mounted on a tripod now, and he busied himself checking the apertures and the shutter speed. "You're back here because of the sea, right?"

"The sea?" Marion looked at him in confusion. "You mean the longshoremen's strike?"

"Nope, but you got yourself into a mess on that one, too. Running around with Reds to help the strikers, and then you get all sappy for a guy who turns out to be an undercover

G-man? You should have paid more attention to my suicide note.”

“Go to hell,” she snapped.

Rob turned his dead eyes to her. “Way ahead of you,” he said. “Anyway, I didn’t mean the Pacific. I meant the old sea. You didn’t know? Kid, half the country used to be one big ocean. It’s dried up now, but you know how it is. Not everything that dies is really dead. Especially if it’s from the sea.”

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“You will.” He checked the focus on the camera and dragged it back a foot. It was pointed at a metal chair. “Got the board?”

Marion was holding a chalkboard slate and a stick of chalk. INNSMOUTH was written at the top in somebody else’s handwriting, and underneath in smaller letters, LANG, ELLS-WORTH. Beneath that was a string of numbers ending in a one. “I guess so.”

“Good. Let’s get this job done quick. I want to take you somewhere we can warm up.” He gave her a wink that would have made her blush and laugh back in 1928, when she was still an innocent young girl. Now it made her look away in unease.

Someone yanked the flap all the way open and held it there. Two Marines in greatcoats half-marched, half-carried a man into the room and forced him down in chair, standing on either side of him. A third Marine stood in the open flap of the tent, rifle pointed low. The prisoner was dressed in a stained flannel nightshirt that barely covered his knees, yet he seemed not to

mind the cold. He was squat and spindle-limbed, with a lumpy head like a pumpkin. A few strands of hair drooped over the slope of his forehead. His eyes were a weak, washed-out hazel and bulged out of his face. He glared at them all with a hatred that was nearly physical.

“Ready with the board, darling,” Robert said, and without thinking Marion walked over and held the slate in front of the man’s chest. The stink of rotten fish rolled off him in waves and choked her lungs. Marion gagged. She held the slate at arm’s length, leaning as far away from him as she could. He shifted in his seat and the Marines tensed, the one at the tent flap raising his rifle a few inches. The man hunched, sullen, as Robert snapped off two quick photos.

“Done,” he called. Marion scrambled out of the way as the Marines hauled the man to his feet and dragged him back out of the tent. Marion looked down at the board. CAHOON, ISAIAH was there in her own handwriting, and the last digit of the long number had changed to a two. The Marines returned, dragging another prisoner, older and uglier than Ellsworth Lang had been, if such a thing were possible. Marion held out the slate and tried to not to breathe.

They had taken eighty-one photographs. She woke from her dream after twenty. Sunlight blazed through the flour-sack curtains of her cabin. Someone knocked hesitantly at the door. “Sorry to bother you,” Hart called. “You slept through breakfast. Are you all right to go out today and see more of the project?”



MARION WASN'T ALL RIGHT, BUT AFTER A SHORT BATH AND A late breakfast of cold pork and beans out of a can, she'd shaken off the worst of her restless night and the previous day's headache. She considered putting Hart off and spending the day developing the pictures of the pump, but decided against it. She wasn't sure whether she was worried he might get suspicious if she begged off, or if she was reluctant to see what was on those photos.

Hart was very solicitous and made sure she wore her sun hat, even in the truck, where she had to be very careful not to shift her head in a way that would catch one the men in the face with its wide brim. Francis had filled a box with ice and salt and buried bottles of Coca-Cola in it, so they'd have something to drink and guard against heatstroke.

This time their journey took them far past the cornfields, where men rode behind mule teams or drove improbably large tractors that clanked and rattled along the rows. Francis turned down a road that was little more than a dirt track and wound through empty fields that gave way to long grass. He pulled up just past a small farmhouse and parked the truck. The farmhouse was little more than a cabin, whitewash chipped and faded, porch sagging, its grimy windows empty of curtains.

Hart led them out into the field. After a few minutes he stopped. "Buffalo grass," he said. He swept an arm out to indicate the entire field. "It used to cover the plains everywhere. It's very well-adapted to the prairie; the roots bind the soil against

the harsh weather. When the pioneers plowed it up to plant crops, it made the ground vulnerable to erosion. Intensive farming broke down the soil even further. That combined with years of drought caused the dust storms. This is a parcel where the buffalo grass was left alone, and we've encouraged it to spread so that we have a control area for study."

There was really nothing to see other than the thick grass and the empty cabin, but she dutifully snapped off half a dozen photos. They wouldn't upset Leflore, and she saw nothing that looked strange or made her eyes hurt.

Something small bumped off Marion's ankle. Startled, she looked down; a jackrabbit shot past her, leaping through the buffalo grass as if it were chased by dogs. There was more movement in the grass, in front of them, and more rabbits, long hind legs pushing them forward as their front paws scabbled at the earth to swerve away from the three humans, but not so far that it would slow their headlong flight.

"Now that's a thing," Francis said. "Never seen so many together like that. Something must be flushing them out."

"Not just the rabbits," she said. Far off to the west, a cloud of blackbirds rose to the sky, the flock twisting to the side, regrouping, then overhead, the same way the rabbits had run. They spread out as they passed by, turning into a panicked chaos of wings before level heads prevailed and pulled the flock into a V formation flying pell-mell to the east. Marion squatted down, the camera awkwardly bumping against her thighs, and parted the grass. The ground in between was black with ants, lines of them slashed across the dusty soil, carrying their larvae

and their queen away from whatever lay to the west.

“Perhaps there’s a storm coming,” Hart said.

“Really?” she said. “There’s not a cloud up there.”

Francis peered off to the west. “It’s not always anvil clouds and green skies before we get a storm fit to drown you.” He pointed at the horizon. “See? Thunderheads coming in fast.”

Marion stood up and shielded her eyes against the sun. Now she could see what he meant: a thick smear of black, low above the land, growing bigger as she watched. It didn’t look to her like a thundercloud, or even a stretch of them; it was too close to the ground, too wide, moving faster than a cloud ought to move on its own on a bright, windless day. “Should we get inside the house?”

Hart said, “We should have some time before it gets close to us. We can watch it roll in, if you’d like. I imagine you’ll be pleased to see some rain, Francis?” He turned to Marion with a smile. “It’s been so long since these poor people had rain, once the worst of it dies down they’ll be out dancing in the puddles and thanking Jesus.”

Francis shrugged, his attention on the approaching storm rather than Hart.

Marion smiled back at Hart, and was just about to make a flirtatious remark about dancing when the storm caught her eye. It was bigger now, and closer, moving faster than it ought, and to her eyes it looked nothing like rainclouds. The storm was a muddy brown-black, its edges rough and restless. It looked like a tornado as tall as the sky had dropped down on all fours and put up its back. A new wind stirred the buffalo grass.

Francis turned to them, his broad face ashen. “Dust storm.”

“This far east? I thought that was in Oklahoma—” Marion nearly bit her tongue when Francis caught her wrist and dragged her toward the cabin. “Damn you, I have to get a picture of this!”

“No time,” he shouted. Hart was already past them, running flat-out toward the cabin.

Marion twisted out of his grip. “I didn’t *ask*,” she shouted back at him. She swung the Brownie up and held it pointed at the oncoming storm, as if the heavy box could protect her. The wind rose hard enough to push her back a step. She opened the shutter without looking or trying to focus, hoping that the sheer size of the dust storm would put it right in the framing. Francis grabbed her again, jarring her aim and ruining her last shot, and she cursed him even as she let him pull her away, sprinting after him toward the cabin.

Her foot was on the porch when the storm caught them. It swallowed the sun. Francis’ hand slipped from her arm. He might have shouted something to her that she couldn’t hear over wind that roared like a locomotive bursting its boilers. Marion yanked her shirt collar up and pressed the fabric hard over her nose and mouth, a desperate barrier against the grit and dirt that lashed at every inch of her skin and fought to clog her breathing. When she tried to open her eyes it felt like they were scrubbed with sandpaper. It was as dark as a locked closet; she couldn’t even see the door that she knew must be only a few steps away.

Marion slid her foot out, seeking the doorframe, or a wall, or anything solid. She stepped into air and fell, hard, off the edge of the porch. The Brownie's carry strap yanked up and over her head and the camera went flying into the maelstrom. Marion crawled up onto the porch, flat on her belly to keep the wind from throwing her down, probing ahead with one hand while the other kept her shirt jammed over her face, her eyes squeezed shut. Her fingers touched a wall. She frantically patted to either side, trying to guess whether to go right or left. Someone seized her arm and the back of her shirt and yanked her forward, hard enough to send her tumbling, and a door slammed behind her.

She was in the cabin. Fine, powdery dust coated the floor. Footsteps moved past her; there was a muffled sound that she guessed was cloth being stuffed into the crack under the door. A moment later someone struck a match, and a glass kerosene lamp flared. It made just enough light to pick out dim shapes that must have been furniture, and Hart's face as he shook out the match. Outside, the storm beat on the cabin with fists made of dust and gravel. Fine dust sifted through cracks in the walls and drifted in the gloom.

Marion coughed out a wad of phlegm and dirt. The inside of her nose and mouth felt sandblasted. "Where's Francis?"

"I don't know," said Hart. His voice was as raspy as hers, and he had to raise it to be heard over the storm. "The door was open a crack and I saw you crawling around on the porch, so I pulled you in, but I didn't see Francis."

"He was just here. He was just there. On the porch with

me. The storm pulled us apart.”

Hart glanced at the door. “Francis doesn’t talk much, but he’s smarter than your average farmhand. He came down from New York, I think, or perhaps Buffalo, like a lot of fellows did when jobs dried up. Some of those men don’t last; it’s very different work on a farm than a factory. Though the farmers tell me he takes direction well and does things right the first time. They say he puts in a good day’s work...” Hart trailed off. “So I’m sure he’ll—he’ll be just fine out there.”

They waited out the storm. There was no clock in the house and no way to judge the time of day from the sun they couldn’t see. They huddled in opposite corners, as far away as possible from the door and the window and the sandpaper dust that worked its way in through every crack in the building. Marion leaned her head on one wall in a futile attempt to sleep. The noise of the storm beating the walls made sleep impossible. The raw, blistered thirst in the back of her throat only made things worse. She wondered if any of the Coca-Cola bottles would make it through.

It seemed hours before the storm faded. Marion lifted her head to see afternoon sunlight, thick with dust motes, streaming through the window. Hart had dozed off sitting up, his head thrown back against the corner. Marion staggered to her feet and went over to shake him by one shoulder. He blinked and pulled the handkerchief away long enough to wipe caked dust from around his mouth. “Is it over?”

“I think so.” There was at least an inch of dirt on the floor of the cabin. The cloth Hart had jammed under the front door

had been blown back toward the far wall. Marion picked it up and saw that it was Hart's suit jacket. She handed it to him without a word. He looked it over and shook his head. "It's ruined. I apologize for the informality, but under the circumstances I'll have to stay in shirtsleeves."

Marion shrugged. Her mouth was too dry to make speech anything but painful. She yanked the door open, bringing more dust sifting into the room. Outside, the buffalo grass had been erased, buried in earth. The Ford had been shoved a good ten feet away from where they had parked it, drab brownish-black dirt piled halfway to its tires.

Hart trailed after her. "I don't see him. Perhaps that's a good thing? He is a large man, we'd probably—see him, if he were lying out here. Unless the storm carried him off...."

Marion looked at the Ford. The porch was low to the ground, too low for a decent crawlspace. That left one place with room enough for Francis to shelter. She hurried to the truck and used her hands to dig the mounded dirt away from the undercarriage. After a moment Hart joined her. When they had excavated a space a few feet across, Marion dropped to her belly and scooted under the truck. Francis was lying face-down, his blue cotton work shirt pulled halfway up his torso and wrapped completely around his head. In the gloom Marion couldn't tell if he was breathing. She reached out, flinching against the possibility that she would be touching cold, lifeless meat.

Francis grunted. Marion backed up to give him room to crawl out from under the Ford. He leaned against the side of

the truck and coughed like a man in a tuberculosis ward, bracing his hands against his knees. It was a long time before he straightened up. "I figure that storm must have gone two, three hours," he rasped. The words started another coughing fit.

Hart waited nervously for him to finish. "I don't know. Do you think that the engine of the truck will still work? If not, we'll have no choice but to walk all the way to the nearest farm."

Francis shrugged. "Probably seized up. I'll take a look."

Marion hauled herself up into the truck's bed, just managing to avoid shards of broken Coca-Cola bottles. She found two that remained intact. Shared between the three of them, it was the only thing that made the long walk back bearable.

WHEN THEY FINALLY DRAGGED THEMSELVES TO THE NEAREST farm, its residents dropped everything to help them. The farmer—Kurtner or Kuttner, Marion wasn't sure and didn't want to ask him to repeat it—had gotten his mules into shelter before the storm hit. He hitched them to a wagon and drove them back to Dr. Leflore's compound, the animals trotting smartly at a speed that seemed to be pretty close to that of the truck.

Dr. Leflore hurried them through his building to an examination room far in the back. He examined Marion first, taking particular care to listen for sounds in her lungs when she breathed deep and coughed. He was entirely professional and competent, but there was still something about the man that made it hard for her to keep from cringing away from him. Even when he looked directly at her, it was as if he was looking

through her, for something else that should have occupied the space she was in. When he finished, he sent her out and examined the other two in turn.

“Keep drinking plenty of liquids, and cough when you can, to get that stuff out of your lungs. You particularly, Francis. I don’t like the sound of that cough. We’ve got to be careful you don’t get dust pneumonia.” He glared down at all of them as if he expected them to contradict him. “Miss Prentiss, once you’ve cleaned yourself up, you’ll join me and Christopher for supper at five o’clock. I have time this evening for social matters.”

“Of course,” Marion said. Her spirits sank. *It’s a miracle I stalled them this long. Besides, one meal won’t kill me, if that idiot from P4 was right.*

THERE WAS JUST ENOUGH ROOM IN THE CAFETERIA FOR THEM to sit around two tables pushed together. Someone had laid a beautiful setting, with curlicues of flowers and vines embroidered around the edges of the linens. A cut-glass vase full of fresh tulips sparkled in the center.

“This is lovely,” she said. “Please tell me these are your things, Dr. Leflore. If they were requisitioned for your project I’m going to have to make a career out of government work.”

He stared at her with a flat, unfocused gaze. After a minute he shook his head. “No, all this is Christopher’s. Brought it with him from Yale. Mrs. Vicker likes it.”

Hart looked away from his mentor. “There’s nothing wrong with putting on a little extra for special occasions.”

Leflore grunted. Fortunately, it was only a moment before the awkward silence was broken by the arrival of food. Mrs. Vicker herself brought out fine china plates loaded with food: fat slices of ham, sliced potatoes swimming in butter and parsley, a mound of fresh peas. She made one more trip for a plain, unmarked bottle of maroon liquid that she left on the table next to the tulips.

“You won’t be joining us, Mrs. Vicker?” Marion asked.

“No, thank you, Miss Prentiss. I have a special hygienic diet. Rich food like this just upsets my digestion.” She paused and looked at Marion thoughtfully. “I have some pamphlets I could give you. It’s a healthy way of eating based on Dr. Graham and Dr. Kellogg’s methods—”

“Thank you, Mrs. Vicker, you can give those to Miss Prentiss another time,” said Leflore. The woman turned on her heel and left without another word.

“She’s a demon for keeping our records in order, but she does go on about her ‘health food’,” Hart said. “Would you like a little French wine with your dinner, Ma—Miss Prentiss?”

“I would, if it’s not going to get us into trouble,” she said.

Leflore stirred. “I don’t take orders from the damned government. They keep snoops and spies from sneaking in. Otherwise, they gave me a grant and they expect results at the end. That’s all they get for their money. Damned if I’ll let them tell me what to do in the meantime.”

“What Dr. Leflore means is that they leave the day-to-day operations alone,” Hart explained. “There’s nobody *to* get us into trouble, here, unless perhaps we drove out to the perimeter

fence and started a Bacchanalian sing-a-long. Do eat your food while it's still hot."

Leflore had already started eating while Hart talked. The man went at his meal with the determination of a soldier digging a foxhole. Hart picked up his knife and fork and used both, Continental style. Marion knew that she'd reached the point where they would get suspicious if she put off eating any longer, and took an experimental bite of ham. For a moment she wondered if it had started to spoil. Under the rich, salty tang of the meat was an overpowering current of rot, the flavor so strong and gamey that it seemed about to turn. Marion quickly washed it down with a mouthful of wine. She surreptitiously turned over a slice of potato, checking for mush or black spots, and seeing none, tried a bit. It, too, tasted foul, overripe, the butter sauce oily and near-rancid.

Hart swallowed a bite of ham and put his fork down. "Something wrong?"

"I think my food's rotten. It tastes very strong, like it's about to go bad."

Hart and Leflore exchanged a quick glance; Marion pretended not to notice. "May I?" Hart asked. She nodded, and he cut a quick bite of her meat and popped it into his mouth. He shook his head slowly. "It tastes perfectly ordinary to me," he said. "A bit salty, perhaps."

They were both watching her carefully now. Marion shrugged. "You did tell me at breakfast the other morning that the city food I'm used to is pretty anemic."

"So I did," Hart said, smiling. "As Mrs. Vicker said, the

food here is very rich, particularly if you're unused to it. The farmers smoke and cure their own ham, churn their own butter. No fillers, and no time for the food to grow stale as it makes the long trek from farm to city."

"I'll just be careful not to overdo it until my stomach gets used to it," she said, and forced down another bite of potato.

"We had a few casualties from the storm," Leflore said abruptly. "Couple of children from the Sullivan farm were out wandering when it hit. The mother went out looking for them, she's got a cough I don't like. The Keanes had to abandon a tractor out in the field. Engine's probably full of grit. Francis' truck is a loss, he says."

"And your camera, I'm afraid, Miss Prentiss," Hart said. After a pause, he added, "Though of course that pales beside the deaths of the children."

"Of course," Marion echoed. She concentrated on looking as if she were eating more of her meal than she really was. It was the childhood game of pushing your vegetables around the plate, only with much higher stakes.

"They tell me the crops are poking back up through the dust already," said Leflore. He forked the last few bites of ham from his plate.

"Doesn't the dust bury them? I thought the storms killed them."

Hart nodded eagerly. "Exactly, Miss Prentiss. That is the entire point of our project! It's a cycle, you see. When the storms kill the crops, there is nothing left growing to bind the soil. Without growing things, there will be more dust storms.

But our experiments invigorate the plants, so that they will grow not only wide but deep, and will bind the ground all over the plains just as the buffalo grass once did. We will *reclaim* the earth! Do you see?"

Hart and Leflore stared at her intently, and for once she could see little difference between them. Marion forced herself to smile and lifted her glass. "I do. A toast, gentlemen, to the success of the project?"

"A toast, indeed," said Hart, and they clinked glasses.

There was an agonizing wait before Mrs. Vicker reappeared to clear their plates, and then a dessert course of strawberries and cream that Marion choked down and proclaimed delicious, then more conversation full of little tests and questions that Marion got past—she hoped—with her winning smile and the pretense of not truly understanding half of what was said. She excused herself as soon as she could, and felt skeptical eyes on her back.

When she flipped back the sheets on her bed she found the Brownie.

There was something different about it, something Marion couldn't quite put her finger on, and it wasn't until she opened up the back that she figured it out: this wasn't *her* Brownie. Her initials, which she'd carved into the backplate right after she bought it, were missing. This camera was newer and in better condition than hers. She turned it over in her hands, looking for any sign that it had been caught in a dust storm and finding none.

She wondered if Hart had left it as a surprise present, or at

least had someone leave it for him, since she'd been at dinner with him all evening. Surely if he meant to delight her with a new camera, he'd have presented it over dinner with a little speech? If he didn't want Leflore to know, or if he meant it as some grand gesture, there would at least be a note.

Unless Leflore had bought it, somehow, as compensation, though he seemed more the type to simply shove it at her, not leave it mysteriously next to her pillow. The thought of Leflore poking around in her bedroom made her ill.

Marion put the Brownie inside a dresser drawer and piled clothes over it. Someone would admit they'd given it to her, probably, tomorrow. Otherwise, she'd keep quiet about it, and act as if the Graflex was all she had left. She sensed that it would be unwise for Hart or Leflore to become any more curious about her than they already were.

She slept restlessly that night, dreaming of the catchpool. Water oozed up and lapped at its banks. Her Brownie floated in the middle, film trailing in the water behind it like a dead woman's hair. Water trickled into its open back. It sank, leaving a trail of bubbles that rose for a while and then ceased. Marion stared into the strange anticolor of the water, looking for her camera, her eyes aching from the effort to focus on something they were never adapted to see. In desperation she leaned out and felt along the shallow bottom. Her fingers dug through the mud until she felt a curl of film brush the back of her hand. She leaned out further, probing. Her hand pushed through a soft place in the floor of the catchpool, flimsy like rotten wood, and then she was falling through a hole that swallowed her like a

hungry mouth, her throat filling with the taste of rotten brine.

MARION HAD PLANNED TO MAKE A BREAKFAST OUT OF WHAT was left of her stash of canned goods. None of it appealed to her in the slightest. *I'll just eat in their cafeteria for a change. One breakfast won't kill me. If they see me eat another meal after that dinner last night, they'll be less suspicious.*

Hart was just finishing his own breakfast when she walked in. The cook handed her a cup of coffee and followed it not long after with scrambled eggs, two strips of bacon and a biscuit. She brought her plate over and sat down across from Hart. He was cheerfully buttering the last scrap of his biscuit.

"I don't think I've had the opportunity to see what you think of our breakfasts," he said. "A shame we don't have grits for you to try today."

"I'm more of a toast-and-coffee girl in the morning," Marion said. She took a careful bite of egg. The undertaste was still there, something unpleasant and just on the edge of rot, but not as strong as it had been the night before. She could chew through breakfast and hide her distaste. "These are really good. Fresh from the farm?"

Hart looked pleased. "All of it. Except the coffee, naturally. I'd love to ask your opinion once you've finished breakfast, but I'm afraid I really have to dash. Francis and I have to do a survey around the farms, see how much damage remains from the storm, and Dr. Leflore will be stuck in his office with the interminable paperwork. Will you be all right fending for yourself for the day?"

Marion brought the coffee to her lips, took an experimental taste, and put it right back down. "Yes. I've got all that film piling up that I need to develop and bring to Dr. Leflore. I could use a whole day for that, really."

"Excellent! I'll see you this evening, then." He stood and gave her a friendly half-bow before he left.

Marion waited until he was gone to try a strip of bacon. Like her eggs, it wasn't as repellent as her last meal had been. She wondered if the food was better, or if she were just getting used to the taste.

And what does that mean, if I'm starting to find it tolerable? What happens to me when it starts to taste good?

She pushed the remains of her plate to the other end of the table. She had to figure out what to do next and get out. Between the poisonous food and the two madmen watching her, she was running out of time.

MARION EMERGED FROM THE DARKROOM WELL INTO THE AFTERNOON. Out of all of the photographs she'd taken, there were only a handful that she felt safe giving to Leflore. Those were the photographs of the fields, the men turning the pump wheel, houses, young farmhands riding proud on a new Deere tractor; nothing that showed the water. Those prints she'd carefully wrapped and tucked away in her suitcase. She'd ruined a few trying to get the exposure right; the film didn't seem to like the water much better than her eyes did. When she'd finally given up and developed them correctly for the surrounding scenery, the color of the water was different in every print, ranging from

a bright, overexposed, washed-out white to mottled black that looked as if the chemicals had eaten into the print. One showed the ditch flowing with water that was an iridescent blue-green. She'd leave those for the government man to puzzle over.

Marion tucked the prints she'd mentally labeled 'safe' into a manila folder and went back to the office building. Mrs. Vicker was at her desk, sorting a towering stack of paper into neat piles. She glanced up. "Yes?"

"I have some photographs for Dr. Leflore, so I thought I'd just bring them by." She eyed the stacks of papers that covered every inch of Mrs. Vicker's desk that wasn't typewriter. "Should I leave them with you?"

"I don't have time. Go ahead and take them to his office. If he's stepped out for a minute, just push them under the door." Mrs. Vicker went back to her sorting, dismissing Marion from the world of things requiring her attention.

"All right, thanks," Marion said. Mrs. Vicker didn't look up as she walked past.

Marion hesitated at the door of his office. She raised her hand to knock and then saw that the door was very slightly ajar, just enough to keep the latch from catching. Someone hadn't closed it all the way. She put her ear to the door and listened. Hearing nothing, she decided he wasn't there; it was impossible for her to believe that Leflore could avoid making any noise, even sitting still. She pushed the door open slowly.

She had expected a disorganized room full of books and papers, the stereotypical professor's den of knowledge, and as far as that went, Leflore's office held no surprises. The sheer

number of papers did, though. Not mere piles: they rose to the ceiling in columns. The only clear space between Marion and the far wall was made around a topographic map. She leaned across the desk to get a better look at it. It marked the locations of the building she was in, her own small cabin, the Lattimer farm with its pumping station, and between the two and further north, a round building labeled marked “Reservoir”.

She memorized its location as best she could and straightened up. On one corner sat a glass and a pitcher of water. The water seemed to shift in its container, its transparency blurring to a color at and outside the edge of her vision. Marion hastily looked away. Her gaze fell on the papers strewn across Leflore’s desk; even though they were upside down, she could read MORBIDITY / MORTALITY printed across the topmost sheet in large letters.

Marion took a step closer and craned her neck to read the paper. It looked as if it were a standard form that Leflore filled in by hand, with spaces for a name, age, cause of death and date of death. There were a string of names over the last several months attributed to “Dust Pneumonia,” with two of the most recent aged four and seven; the Sullivan children Leflore had mentioned at dinner.

The last name on this list was hers, with the date of death left blank.

Marion backpedaled and nearly tripped over a chest-high stack of papers. She had no signs of dust pneumonia at all, no cough. It was Francis that Leflore had fussed over. He couldn’t possibly mean to kill her; he must know the government would

nose into his business if she went missing, or turned up with a bullet in her head.

They don't need bullets. You saw enough deaths in San Francisco passed off as 'accidents', and nothing was done because the authorities were the killers. The murderers wrote their own excuses. If you turn up smothered, or get thrown out to die in the next dust storm, who do you think will do the autopsy and sign the death certificate?

She knew that there wasn't much time until Leflore got back. She eased through the office door and pulled it not quite closed, hoping that it looked enough as Leflore had left it that he wouldn't notice it had been opened. As she did so, she heard heavy, purposeful footsteps around one corner. She turned to the door and raised her hand as if just about to knock.

"Oh, hello, Doctor. I didn't realize you'd stepped out. I managed to get a few of those prints developed." She held out the folder.

Leflore took them out of her hand and flipped through the prints without much interest. "Sent these to anyone else?"

"Of course not. We agreed I'd show them to you first, before the eggheads in Washington got them." Marion gave him her flashiest smile. It was like trying to charm a stone. Leflore had already shifted his attention away to his office.

"Good. If you have more, bring them to me." Marion stepped back to get out of Leflore's way as he shoved past her and into his office. He didn't seem to notice anything amiss about the door.

She thanked Mrs. Vicker on her way out. The secretary

barely glanced up.

THE HILLS IN THIS PART OF THE COUNTRY HARDLY DESERVED the name; even so, on a night with barely any moon and far away from the electric lights of a city, she could barely see her own hand a few inches from her face. She walked slowly and turned her flashlight on in short bursts, and then only when she really needed to, worried that even its small light would give her away in the absolute darkness. The silence was almost a pressure on her ears. She expected crickets, frogs, wind blowing through grass, some rural version of the thousand little noises that filled the night in a city; there was nothing other than the too-loud sound of her own footsteps and the camera thumping against her chest in time as she walked.

It took a good hour of wandering before she got anywhere near the reservoir, and then only because someone else was either careless with their own light, or didn't expect to be seen. Marion dropped to her hands and knees to keep from being spotted; unnecessarily, she realized right away, because she was too far away from the lantern. In the oppressive silence she could hear men's voices. Leflore grumbling, and Hart lecturing; then a hacking cough. That could only be Francis. The shadows around their lantern moved around what looked like a gate. One of them bent slightly and with a metal rattling, the gate swung open. The men moved through. Marion strained to hear whether they locked it behind them, but caught nothing other than their footfalls moving into the building.

She forced herself to count to one hundred before she fol-

lowed them. There was still no light. She crept up to the gate and opened it a few inches. It scraped against the ground, but otherwise made no more noise than when the men had gone through. She pushed it open a little wider, to let her squeeze through sideways without the camera banging into the gate.

With no light Marion navigated by sound and touch, almost as if she were back in the dust storm. The building on the map had been circular, squat like a grain silo. When her searching hands brushed a concrete wall she followed it clockwise, shuffling her feet to avoid tripping. After about thirty feet of wall there was a bright flare of light: the edge of a door, illuminated from within. Marion went to it slowly and put her eye up to the crack. The inside of the building was one enormous space, strung with electric lights. It was packed with machines, pipes large enough for her to crawl through, valves and wheels and dials everywhere, all of it giving off a low, discordant hum that she could feel through her shoes. Beyond an open door in the wall a metal staircase wound down out of sight.

She slipped through and moved toward the staircase, keeping her back against the wall. There seemed to be voices floating up from below, which she thought strange given how much noise was coming from the pumping station. Marion crouched down as she reached the staircase and moved crabwise, one painfully slow step at a time. It took her several feet of movement before she reached a vantage point that allowed her to see what was going on below.

There were no electric lights here. They weren't necessary. The floor here was little more than a walkway around a gigan-

tic cistern, the catchpool writ large. It was the same abomination to human vision as before, but here it was concentrated, vigorous, illuminating the entire chamber with an ugly parody of light. It *seethed*. The room stank of seawater gone dead and stale. Marion held her breath for a moment against the memory of Innsmouth, but when she breathed there was no rank dead-fish odor. She guessed that if this water oozed from the same contamination as Innsmouth, it was too foul, too poisoned, to allow even those horrors to live. She felt a wave of nausea and stared down into her camera. The mirrors made the horrible vision a little easier to bear. She turned the camera until it was pointed more or less at the three men, and inched further down the stairs to bring them into focus.

They were naked. Leflore was as huge and sinewy as his frame suggested, but without the camouflage of his suit his body was bloated and unhealthy, like a waterlogged corpse. Hart was nearly skeletal. Where he should have been padded with muscle and flesh, his frame had strange growths that bulged and swelled like tumors. Francis was the only one of the three who looked entirely human, and as they talked, a hacking cough bent him over with his hands braced on his knees.

Hart waited for him to finish. "It's the only way, you see," he said cheerfully, as if he were discussing the right fork to use with dinner. "You've seen what happens to people who get the dust, Francis. Dr. Leflore is very gifted, but he can't work miracles." He smiled and gestured to the roiling pool. "This, however, can."

Marion squeezed her eyes shut as she pressed the shutter

lever. To her relief, none of the men seemed to have heard it.

Francis looked apprehensively at the pool. He shook his head and started to speak, and then Leflore seized him and shoved him into the water. Marion watched in frozen horror as the doctor crouched on the rim of the pool, heedless of the filth lashing up at his face or Francis' desperate attempts to claw his way out. She was very dimly aware that her hands were working the camera.

It seemed a very long time before Leflore dragged Francis back out of the pool. The farmhand rolled onto his side and heaved up rosy strings of water that did not so much flow back into the pool as crawl. When he could breathe again he pushed himself up to his feet. Hart watched him as if bored. Francis wiped at his face and stared at Leflore as if he was going to charge the man, and then suddenly his expression changed to surprise. "I don't need to cough no more."

"That's right," Hart said. "You're cured. You can thank God for that." He grinned mischievously. "Not your old God, of course. The true old God. You'd better be properly thankful, too, if you know what's best for you."

"Sure, I can do that," Francis said, uncertain. There was something changed about his form, too, something Marion couldn't quite describe. His skin looked stretched and thinned, as if there were pressure underneath, like a sore trying to burst. His color had a pale and unhealthy shade. Marion glanced up from the camera and for just a moment, the play of light over his skin mimicked the ugly sheen of the thing in the pool.

She looked back through the viewfinder and focused to

see Hart looking up at her, a jaunty grin spreading across his face. "Would you care to join us, Miss Prentiss? I'm not much bothered if you don't, but it will be a great deal less painful if Dr. Leflore doesn't have to come fetch you."

There was a moment of stillness as Marion froze in terror and the men looked up at her. Then she scrambled to her feet and ran. She stumbled and pushed herself up with her hands, the camera on its heavy strap banging painfully against her chest. She ran flat-out through the open door at the top of the stairs, gasping for air as she frantically turned to get her bearings, and then someone grabbed her arm and yanked her sideways to the wall.

It was Mrs. Vicker. In her free hand was a Winchester pump-action shotgun. Marion stared at it in terror and missed what Mrs. Vicker was saying to her. Somewhat impatiently, Mrs. Vicker repeated herself, louder. "You took photographs?"

"Yes," Marion said. She hugged the Graflex to her chest.

"Very good. Sit down here and wait." Marion huddled against the wall. The secretary peered down the stairway, apparently without a shred of worry. "And stay here. If you run I will have to come after you, and I promise you won't like that at all."

Mrs. Vicker descended down the stairs and out of sight. Marion knew that she couldn't possibly be hearing what was going on downstairs, but she was sure that she heard voices, and then the shotgun firing again and again, the sound echoing off the concrete walls below.

It seemed a very long time before Mrs. Vicker trudged back

up the stairs, carrying the shotgun loosely in one hand and pointed at the ground. She offered Marion a hand, and steered the younger woman out of the building.

“My car’s around the far side of the building. I drove up during the day so they wouldn’t see me coming, of course.” She peered down at Marion. “You’re not one of those girls who faints, I hope. You don’t seem the type.”

“What was it?” Marion whispered. “That thing.”

“An abscess,” Mrs. Vicker said. “A cancer. The rotten afterbirth of something very old and evil that should have died a long time ago when the seas dried up. Not everything dies when it’s supposed to, I’m afraid.”

Marion let the other woman steer her, not unkindly, into the front seat of a Chevrolet sedan. “My father’s,” Mrs. Vicker said, as if Marion had asked. “So was the Winchester.” She started up the car and steered it smoothly over the dark landscape. If there was a road, Marion couldn’t see it.

“Who *are* you?” Marion asked. “I thought you were his secretary.”

“Oh, I was. How better to keep tabs on him? Leflore’s been messing around in rather unpleasant areas of study for a long time. It didn’t turn into anything concrete until this Hart character met up with him, and they dug up the—oh, let’s call it a fossil, that makes it easier to think about—and started experimenting on humans.”

“You’re with P4,” Marion said. “You were all along.”

The woman’s expression, illuminated by the faint light of the dashboard, didn’t change. “Well, of course, dear. P4’s

responsible for keeping an eye on this sort of thing, after what happened in Innsmouth. I hear you were there, doing your small part.”

Marion clenched her fists. “So I *was* a miner’s canary,” she hissed. “Just here to test the poison in the air. I could have been killed.”

Mrs. Vicker slowed the car and gave Marion a long look. “Yes, you could have,” she said. “You think that anyone would have missed a dirty Red? Do you think you bought your way out of those murder charges with a pretty smile?”

There was a long pause. Mrs. Vicker said, “If it comforts you any, we really weren’t expecting you to get killed. You were doing a job I could not have done. I had to play the reliable old maid. I couldn’t sneak around with a camera getting evidence. We need documentation before we can act. Due process, of a sort anyways. You were the catalyst for getting Project Increase shut down. Can you imagine if they’d convinced the government to put their special ingredient in the nation’s water supply?”

Marion looked out the window into the black night, lit only by the Chevy’s headlights. “What’s going to happen to them?”

“Leflore and the others? They’re dead. At least, as dead as they can be after having invited that thing into their bodies. They’ll be taken care of.”

“I meant the farmers.”

They drove in silence for a while. “We might be able to save a few,” Mrs. Vicker said.

Marion shuddered. "You're just going to execute them."

"They're dead men walking, Miss Prentiss. That creature, for lack of a better word, takes more than it gives. Imagine having a cancer that thinks. It's not execution, it's mercy killing."

"And what about me?" Marion asked. "I've been here for days, eating their food and drinking their water."

Mrs. Vicker sighed. "If you'd like, I can stop the car, take you round the side and put you out of your misery. If not, when we get back, they'll run you some tests. You've only been here a few days, not months like these poor people. It's likely that we have a treatment that could, well, clear you up."

"And the...creature?"

For the first time, Mrs. Vicker looked uncertain. "I expect they'll seal it up somehow. That's not really my part of the business, dear."

"And what happens to me? Someone takes a photograph with my name on a chalkboard, and then I vanish?"

Mrs. Vicker brought the car to a full stop. She stared out the windshield for a few heartbeats and then turned to face Marion. "You just helped save millions of people from being consumed by an ancient evil, my dear. Let's set aside your agreement with Roger—"

"Is that his name?" Marion heard herself say. "He told me it was Eddie."

"Yes, well, it may be. He's a sweet man but he can't always keep his cover story straight. As I was about to say, your debt to society is paid. You can walk away, if you like." Mrs. Vicker shrugged. "But you kept a cool head down there for the most

part. You've collected invaluable evidence for us. Isn't this better than fighting policemen?" Her expression turned serious, almost sad. "I can't promise this job will be any nicer than your work at Innsmouth. But if you'll stay with P4, you can do a lot of good in the world."

Marion closed her eyes, and thought about the stink of Innsmouth, and the swimming anticolor of the thing in the pool, and the look on Mrs. Lattimer's face as she silently begged for help. She opened her eyes and looked Mrs. Vicker square in the eye.

"I'm in. Assuming you don't have to put me down like a sick dog. Assuming your tests say that I'm clean of this...this infection."

"I'm sure that they will, dear." Mrs. Vicker smiled gently and started up the Chevrolet.

PAPERCLIP

By Kenneth Hite

THE LIBRARIAN STEERED HIS JEEP THROUGH THE STREETS OF Vienna, braking for the work crews manhandling rubble out of the roads and into ruins that had once been city blocks. The city was a labyrinth, blown open by a god too impatient to decipher it. The bombs and fires had left some walls intact, though even they seemed about to topple onto the Jeep with just the right shove. Where the buildings had survived, they served as hosts for alien life: Careful signs in Cyrillic letters and rapidly stenciled U.S. Army designations covered the old lintels and even the windows.

He had already been in Vienna too long. Too long for comfort in this undead city, too long for his cover to remain bulletproof. His lieutenant's bars and his authorization orders from the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section of U.S. Forces Austria would survive superficial scrutiny, such as that offered now by the bored French soldiers on duty at the rear gate of the Justizpalast. But a determined investigator could discover that they were no sturdier than the blank walls of the bombed-out city outside. He had to keep moving, keep on the track of Hermann Mülder, because an inhumanly determined investigator was searching for his quarry as well, as certain as the sunset.

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“Richter demanded...masses of books not only about Freemasonry, but also on occultism, anthroposophy, telepathy, European and Oriental religious sects and, lastly, on the history and literary pattern of the English detective-story.”

—SS-Obersturmbannführer Dr. Paul Dittel, Acting *Leiter* of Amt VII RSHA, under British interrogation, 13 September 1945

THE TWIN KRAKENS OF GERMAN AND AMERICAN MILITARY bureaucracy had tangled the track, however, and the librarian was still in Vienna. Müller had been attached to Kaltenbrunner's shadowy PROJEKT LEO, but perhaps fearing interference from Himmler's own Karotechia staff, Kaltenbrunner had run LEO in Vienna through two different RSHA sub-offices, at arms' length from his own RSHA headquarters in Berlin. Nobody in the SS except Kaltenbrunner's picked specialists even knew LEO existed. And perhaps only the librarian knew that *Sturmbannführer* Hans Richter, special assistant in charge of acquisitions for LEO, existed. Certainly nobody in the U.S. Army knew, or cared, and keeping track of a paper-pushing archivist caught up in the last draft of the *Volkssturm* in Austria had been nobody's priority. He might have been in the big P.O.W. enclosure at Wegscheid, or among the SS prisoners sent to clear the airfield at Tulin, or—if Richter had managed to throw away his papers and uniform fast enough—even at one

of the displaced-persons camps around the city.

U.S. Forces Austria had passed the librarian to the U.S. Constabulary, who had eventually shuffled him down to 42nd Divisional HQ from whence he had slowly climbed back up to U.S. Vienna Area Command, sharing space here at the *Justizpalast* with the other three Allies. But it wasn't the curiosity of the other occupying Powers, or even the slipshod handling of Richter by the Army, that had put someone else on his trail. He had ventured on his own detours, as well, to the Kaltenbrunner group's villa in Alt-Aussee in the British sector. Here his MFAA cover had gotten him into the library, but it had also very likely rung bells somewhere, and certainly someone else was listening.

He had found no sign, of course, of the *Ghori Nigral*, and barely any sign of LEO's operations, except that the library held rather more specialized tomes than he suspected most resort villas or hunting lodges in the area did. He spent a day paging through them all, and spotted some annotations in an 1839 first-edition copy of von Junzt that confirmed he was on the right track. It was that copy he pulled from his olive-drab ammunition bag and laid on the table in the interrogation room now; it was that copy that drew Richter's eyes, and seemed to dry up all the moisture in his mouth.

"Where did you get that?" Richter finally managed to croak the question.

"My job is to keep books safe," the librarian replied. "It seemed dangerous to leave it just lying around, as you carelessly did." He toyed idly with the cover, lifting it and closing it gently. "Anything could happen."

“What do you want?”

“I want Professor *Doktor* Hermann Friedrich Mülder.”

The eyes across the table suddenly flattened and focused on the librarian, the sunken hollows of what had been fat jowls inflating as Richter pondered what he could afford to give up now.

“We never saw him. He never came down to Austria.”

The librarian spun the book around, flipped it open, and pointed. “Mülder’s handwriting. Lie to me again, and...” More pages flipped, to a Sign printed in red ink.

“I’m telling the truth!” Richter babbled, sweat starting on the broad forehead. “He was *zu viel Wirklichkeit*...too much real! Kaltenbrunner wouldn’t let us bring him down, Himmler would have found out! We had to go to him!”

“When? Where?”

Richter just stared ahead now, eyes seeing nothing except possibly the past, which had somehow come alive to haunt him.

“Schleiersee, in Bavaria. He was there with his Karotechia control, Soukup. Nineteen forty-three, Kiev had fallen. We knew the time had come to open the book. To open the *Ghorl Nigral*. He gave us these notes, these scratches at the margin. We had to ready ourselves to read it. To read the book.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. We never knew. Only Soukup knew.”

“So he betrayed you. He gave you a taste and left you helpless.”

“Oh no. Not a taste. A scent. He gave us a scent and let us follow it. Like in your mysteries. In your detective stories. There

was one path. There could be only one path. We all followed it. Even Soukup. You follow it now.”

As the librarian left the room where Richter still sat mumbling and staring in his wooden chair, he saw a figure in the brown tunic and blue jodhpurs of an NKVD colonel coming down the hall, escorted by an American captain made talkative by uncertainty. “Hans Richter? He’s in Interrogation Room 5, right this way, Colonel Glyukin. Funny you wanting to see him, too. He’s real popular today. What’s he done?” The librarian didn’t hear Glyukin’s response because he immediately turned his back, went up a side staircase, left through the front gate, and had to walk all the way around the *Justizpalast* to get back to his Jeep.

“In September 1944, arrangements were being made for Norfolk’s access to some of the books in Deutsch Gabel, with reference to his own special collection on aesthetics (Schöngestige), which was to be kept separate from the rest of the Amt VII 1 library.”

—Patricia Kennedy Grimstead, “Sudeten Crossroads for Europe’s Displaced Books: The ‘Mysterious Twilight’ of the RSHA Amt VII Library”

HE SAW COLONEL GLYUKIN AGAIN AT THE RAILROAD STATION in Reichenberg, now Liberec, in the old Sudetenland, now Czechoslovakia. His MFAA cover was getting positively threadbare, and the Red Army soldiers in Liberec were much less

casual about letting him go about his business. As he repeated “Monuments, Fine Arts, Archives Section, Inter-Allied Command Austria” for the fifth time, he heard the train whistle. The engine had not quite emerged from the covered tunnel leading into the station, and the shriek of steam ran up the scale to a piercing soprano cry while echoing off the concrete and stone with a weird, contrapuntal sonorous quality.

Much of the crowd in the station, even the disciplined Red Army obstructions in his path, glanced in the direction of the sound. But the NKVD man’s head whipped around in near-panic. As if shoved from behind, he surged forward on suddenly unsteady legs. The librarian saw his hands spasmodically open and close, the fingers tight against each other. His document case spilled from his suddenly clawlike grasp, and his face paled against his dark collar. The scene was enough to squeeze the librarian free, for the moment, of Soviet scrutiny; he collected his papers from the distracted guards and hastened out of the station as the train whistled again and again.

Major Katek was comfortably based in Prague, was probably the old OSS or the new SSU, and was possibly in over his head, but he could absolutely provide a commandeered Opel in Reichenberg and maps of the Sudetenland for a man from the MFAA. The librarian hadn’t gone to Yale himself, but he could drop certain New England names that an ambitious intelligence officer wanted to pick up. So better still, Katek could provide credentials from the Minister of the Interior and letters of introduction from the new National Librarian of Czechoslovakia. And best of all, Katek’s good friend the Deputy Minister

of Prisons could arrange a private interview with Friedrich Soukup, Czech author and poet and Nazi collaborator.

“The first thing you need to know is that my name is Norfolk. I had it legally changed in 1939. I feel very at home in English. I’m confident that I could translate any of my novels into English, or at least supervise the translation personally.”

The librarian relaxed slightly. Desperate writers were something he understood, and Czech prison hadn’t made Soukup any less desperate. From his satchel (he had replaced the ammunition bag at the same time he changed from his uniform into tweeds) the librarian took out a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of brandy, both courtesy of the munificent Major Katek.

“It may just be self-indulgence, Mr. Norfolk, but I’m most interested, at least at first, in something like your witchcraft novel, *The Recantation of Dietrich Flade*. You see, I attended Miskatonic University, in Arkham.” He pushed the cigarettes and brandy across the table. “Please.”

“*Ach*, ‘witch-haunted Arkham!’ Keziah Mason! Such a history is there! Such a book you could make of it!” Soukup pocketed the cigarettes, but uncorked the brandy and sniffed it.

“Precisely. Now for an American audience, we’d need more than just the same tired recitations of the legend. We’d need more facts, more in-depth research. Of the sort I believe you used to do.”

Soukup glanced around the room, then wet his lips with the liquor nervously. “Well, I hardly think....”

“Not at all, Mr. Norfolk. If you don’t think you can remember your work with the *Hexenkarthotek* well enough,

perhaps access to another archive could be arranged.” The librarian caught the brief shuttering of the eyes and then the relief there, as Soukup heard the cover name. Soukup took a more generous swallow. “I understand you managed the *Amt VII-1* archive at Neufalkenburg near Gabel, for example.”

“I, I shouldn’t say I managed it. That was...another office, on the main floor. I mostly used it in research for...for my new novel.”

“A new novel! Now there’s something that would get American readers interested! A new unpublished novel of witchcraft, written in a haunted castle during the war!”

Soukup probably hadn’t had a drink in months, and his nose and ears were turning the color of uncooked sausage. “Neufalkenburg isn’t haunted, precisely...Mülder explained that the, the Presences could be contained within the images....”

“Mülder? Hermann Mülder? The great Asian expert? Himmler’s mystic? You knew Mülder?” There was no such thing as overdoing it with a writer.

“Why yes, of course I knew him, we were very close. He trusted me, you know. He had accompanied Schaefer’s SS expedition to Tibet, but went farther in. Perhaps as far as Yian-Ho. He knew certain...approaches. From his great-grandfather. Blood memory. Seeing the past. He told me that. He told me a great deal when we...worked together.” Soukup’s throat bobbed as he drank.

“I imagine he must have been happy to have a fellow aesthete to converse with. Someone who could share his soul, as it

were.”

“Well, nobody could do that, truly. But we were friends. He said so. When this is all over, he said, you must come see me on the mountain. On the Dead Mountain, you’ll see the end of all we’ve worked for. I wrote down what he said. Wrote it down and kept it safe.”

“Kept it where?”

“Safe. Safe in the novel. Safe in the castle. Nobody read it. You must come see him. Dead Mountain.” The alcohol had done its work. Hollowed out by captivity, by Himmler, by whatever had happened in the castle at Deutsch Gabel, Soukup collapsed on the table. Little bubbles of saliva and brandy pooled by his mouth and he started to snore, delicately, like a cat or an infant.

In the cleared gravel before Neufalkenburg, the librarian saw a commandeered Mercedes with the red hammer-and-sickle flag flying from its hood. After a brief period of internal argument, he approached the seemingly unguarded castle doors and pushed them open. He smelled cold and dust and mildew before he saw the crumpled Czech guard on the floor of the vestibule. Crouching down, he saw the guard’s chest rise incrementally, touched his throat and felt a faint pulse. The guard had somehow fallen into a deep sleep or perhaps a coma, but he was still alive.

Checking on the guard had stopped him in the vestibule long enough to hear the curiously syncopated thuds coming down the main staircase. The librarian risked a look upward, from behind a miraculously un-looted suit of armor, and saw

black boots and blue jodhpurs slowly moving from step to step, carefully down foot by foot from Soukup's library annex on the upper floor. Clip-clop. Pause. Clip-clop.

Glyukin had a book and a sheaf of papers clutched tightly under one arm, and held the other in a peculiar extended curve, out over the empty space where the mahogany railing had stood while the castle was SS property. The colonel's free hand opened and closed almost robotically as his legs gradually lowered themselves, first one then the other, to each new step below. Under the peaked cap, his face was screwed up in concentration. The librarian hoped that Glyukin's ears wouldn't hear the sound of the door, or of the Opel driving away to the south.

"Kaltenbrunner looked gaunt and pale. He clearly showed the effects of what he had been through since I saw him on May 12. He gave no indication of wanting to remember me; it seemed as if he had mesmerized himself into a state of complete forgetfulness."

—Special Agent Robert E. Matteson, 80th Infantry CIC Detachment, "The Last Days of Ernst Kaltenbrunner"

WITHOUT SOUKUP'S NOTES, THE LIBRARIAN HAD TO GO BY THE principles of detection, or perhaps by the principles of detective stories, as Richter had put it. The Dead Mountain could be anywhere, from the Brocken to a plateau in Central Asia, but perhaps it made the most sense for it to be literally the Totes Gebirge, the "Dead Mountain" above Alt-Aussee, where

Kaltenbrunner and his men had been captured five months before. He drove the Opel through the Bohemian countryside and thought about the pattern. When he stopped in Prague to refuel the car, over dinner he pumped Katek for details on Kaltenbrunner's surrender. He read a few pages of von Junzt; he wouldn't need to stop for sleep. The clues began to interlock, take on a life of their own.

In 1943, Kaltenbrunner knows the war is lost. He also knows he can't use Himmler's pet Karotechia, so he sets up a parallel program of his own, PROJEKT LEO, scattered all over Austria and the Sudetenland disguised as intelligence operations, occult libraries inside *SD* and *RSHA* archives. His occultists tell him he needs the *Ghorl Nigral*, the living text at the heart of Yian-Ho, center—if von Junzt can be trusted—of the Cthulhu cult, or worse. From somewhere—not hard, when you control the Gestapo—he digs up a handle on Hermann Müller, the great-grandson of von Junzt's companion Gottfried Müller. Gottfried Müller, the only man to read the *Ghorl Nigral* and leave Yian-Ho, the man who wrote *The Secret Mysteries of Asia, With a Commentary on the Ghorl Nigral*, and unlike von Junzt did not die immediately. Hermann Müller produces a new edition of his great-grandfather's book for Himmler, which lets him travel to Tibet. He brings an annotated von Junzt to PROJEKT LEO, enough to give Kaltenbrunner's coven a clue.

Unreel to 1945. Kaltenbrunner and the Reich are both out of time. He hides out not in Norway or Argentina but in the Austrian Alps. Both we and Himmler think he goes there to establish a "National Redoubt," just as Kaltenbrunner meant

us to think. But he doesn't bring resistance fighters. He brings a few LEO men and his mistress Countess Gisela von Westarp, who coincidentally happens to be the niece of the secretary of the *Thule-Gesellschaft*. And he heads for a cabin in Alt-Aussee, on the slopes of the Dead Mountain. Mülder knew that LEO would head there, because he pointed them there. Where else would he be waiting for them? Or did he lure them there as decoys? Once we'd found Kaltenbrunner and his coven, we pretty much stopped looking, after all. Or is it something about the mountain itself, something that Mülder might have recognized from his time in Tibet?

Following the thread through the maze occupied the librarian the rest of the way across Czechoslovakia and into Bavaria, the American zone of Germany. It was the slightly longer way around, but the U.S. Army waved his Opel and his MFAA papers through checkpoints. The impossibly young soldiers carried themselves as if bored with peace, but no doubt secretly delighted in it, already planning their next black-market excursion into the ruins of Germany's demimonde. The librarian, too, was distracted and lost in thoughts of the pattern, Mülder's maze. When he crossed the old-new frontier into the American zone of Austria, it was just one more stop, even more perfunctory than the last. The night was dying and the sentries distant or resentful. When a dirty, red-eyed corporal handed back his papers, he saw his own extended hand shaped into a Sign from von Junzt. Mülder's pattern had him, too.

When the Opel had climbed up into the mountains past Bad Ischl, and the librarian saw the structure on top of the

Totes Gebirge silhouetted against the rising sun, he almost thought he was seeing a Tibetan lamasery on the crest of some Himalaya. A low jumble of squares with protruding beams and no lights showing, it could have been rocks or ruins. But it turned out it was a sanatorium. Or it had been, anyhow, some time during the German national fad for such things, buildings carefully placed where the best minds believed the healthiest, clearest, *purest* air could be found.

Now it was empty. Except perhaps that some new intelligence had occupied its blank walls. The librarian had long since changed his tweeds for a uniform. Now he belted on his pistol, checked his flashlight, and walked through the door of the former place of health. Although the layout was jumbled, it wasn't difficult to search completely. The main floor was offices, kitchens, and a few large common rooms: a refectory, a solarium, a room where a diagram in white paint on the floor froze him for ten minutes until he finally recognized it as a faded shuffleboard court. The basement was for storage (all looted) and for therapy rooms: a hydrotherapy pool covered by a wooden clamshell, a sauna, an empty surgical theater probably cleared out in the last desperate fight for Vienna. One chamber held a horrible arrangement of wires and straps that must have been an electroshock machine. Even though there was no power, he avoided that device, shuddering away from the horrid frisson of déjà vu it somehow engendered. Why put mirrors there? And why had no one broken them?

The second floor was an office, nurses' ward, and patient rooms, rapidly revealed as dusty and empty dead ends by flash-

light. When he climbed back up to the third floor of the main block, he found the rooms lined with jars that shone golden in his flashlight beam, row upon row of them up against the walls. Just as he realized what they held, he turned a corner and saw him. Hermann Müller was seated on the floor in a lotus position, wearing the saffron robe of a Tibetan monk.

“I can subsist on the aerial energies of this place, but my body must still replenish its water. Fortunately, the pool remains quite full. I believe it is spring-fed, in fact.”

The librarian’s hand sought the butt of his pistol. “You are Professor *Doktor* Hermann Müller....”

“I am what you seek, yes.”

“Where’s the book? Where’s the *Ghorl Nigral*?”

“It is in a safe place.” Müller rose to his feet with an economy of movement. “We should be away from this place. I can remain invisible here, but you—”

Somehow—doubtless the healthy, clear, pure air carried the vibrations—the librarian heard the engine and the tires on the driveway outside three floors below. He knew it was a Mercedes, and what flag flew from its hood. Many pairs of boots crunched and stamped outside, no hesitation in their sound this time.

“We’ve got to move.”

“So it is to be the Russians, then. Well enough. They have their own gateways, and they *are* so much *closer* to Yian-Ho than you Americans.”

The librarian pressed his gun against Müller’s kidney, the heavy barrel of the Colt folding the saffron cloth. “It’s Ameri-

cans until I say it's not. Now move."

The Russians had to spend the same amount of time searching the sanatorium as he had, and he thought that without radios they had no real advantage in numbers, either. As he ushered his prisoner down the rear staircase, he nearly paid for his mistake upon opening the stairway door into the refectory just as two Russians entered it from opposite ends. He jerked his automatic up and fired three shots at the near soldier, saw the far soldier flinch three times and bring up his rifle, fired twice at random and dived back downstairs. The sound of converging boots told him they didn't need radios, and Mülder confirmed it.

"Mental joining. Interesting. I had no idea that Lunacharsky had gotten so far."

"I don't think he has. In here."

In the hydrotherapy room, the librarian shoved Mülder down the steps toward the wooden deck, climbed down himself, and waited.

He did not wait long. Colonel Glyukin—or the thing in his body—emerged at the other side of the room, at the top of the other steps down to the pool's edge.

"If your plan..." He daintily picked his way

"...is to take advantage of my delay..." down the stairs

"...on these bogus constructions..." to the wooden deck, and put his hands firmly on his hips

"... and shoot me, I advise against it. In fact, as the supreme intelligence here, I advise you to toss your gun away right now."

The librarian's hand jerked and the gun went sailing into the darkness to clatter on the wood.

"That's better. I abhor mess and complication, and I am so looking forward to the dark gray uniforms we get in a decade or so."

Mülder stared at the colonel. "You're one of them! One of the *Pnakotiker!*"

"We prefer Great Race, Professor Doctor. I advise you to use that term when you come back with us. You should be used to something like it by now, albeit incorrectly applied." Glyukin stepped forward a bit, peering at Mülder curiously. "You're a very hard man to find, even for us. Perhaps even especially for us. We have looked simply everywhere for you. We've even had to hastily fish in other minds for you, in the minds of your puppet patrons, so cleverly do you hide yourself. And so cleverly do you hide the *Ghorl Nigral*."

"What, this is all over the book?"

"Yes, my dear fellow. Something like that. We are librarians, after all, much like yourself. And yes, Pnakotus very much covets the *Ghorl Nigral*. It can establish the track of history, that one. It can bring the stars to new courses."

"So that's it? You just take his mind back with you to the Great Library?"

"You know...oh, yes, that Peaslee human. That *is* this century. Well, there is the small matter of reconstructing our machine. But now that I know where and when to send them, we will already have placed our components in this building. Possibly decades ago."

"So you won't be seeing those new uniforms after all." Step

by step, the librarian moved backwards, talking slowly and calmly.

“Who is to say? I personally feel quite at home in the good colonel’s mind. This place has many similarities with home, with our realm of planned, inevitable reason...you might best think of it as ‘fascistic socialism.’”

Behind his back, the librarian’s hand touched Bakelite. The boasting Glyukin didn’t notice. The superior intellect must get very lonely with nobody to talk to.

“Why not extend a bit here? Why not plant a brief scientific expedition here, before your clever-paws primate printed books all vanish in silicon and anarchy? We could easily burrow into the KGB...my apologies, it’s still the NKVD, isn’t it? Oprichnina first, Secret Department, Praobrazhensky Office, Secret Chancellery, Secret Expedition, Third Section, Okhrana, Cheka. NKVD now. MGB soon. Then KGB, then FSB, then... an intelligence of intelligence, perhaps, changing institutional bodies through the centuries, discarding them as needed. Perhaps we are already here.”

“Or perhaps not.” The librarian closed his hand around the lever handle and pulled. The clamshell deck swung open, and all three bodies dropped into the freezing, ten-foot-deep pool.

The librarian had grown up in Marblehead. Summers were all about swimming, off Cape Ann or on family trips to Kingsport Head or the new reservoir. He swam now, pushing off against the back of the pool, long strokes closing the distance to the thrashing Glyukin.

Peaslee had described the Great Race as ten-foot cone beings with tentacles sprouting from their necks. Not natural swimmers, in other words. The librarian had seen its tentative use of Glyukin's body—the thing had likely spent too little time in any one human to master the form. And did Russians learn to swim, anyhow? Probably not. Glyukin, at least, was not. He—or the thing inside him—was thrashing and kicking and spitting, swallowing water by the lungful.

The librarian had to do very little except keep out of reach of the flailing arms, and of the hands opening and closing like clicking crab pincers. He got his own hands around Glyukin's neck and shoved downward and held him there and it was all over.

He dived down and retrieved his gun from the floor of the pool, and when he came out he cleaned and dried it and reloaded it before he did anything else.

Mulder had pulled himself to the edge and was cursing in German. His waterlogged saffron robe had sunk, and he was naked. He did not shiver—the water steamed as it left his body, and the tattoos all over his torso and limbs seemed to glow in the fog he created.

“How did you know I could swim?”

“I didn't.”

“You fool! You gambled with the *Ghorl Nigral!*”

“I don't think so.”

“Don't you understand yet? Understand why the *Pnakotiker* could never find me? Why my lightest word could send generals and sorcerers and even...that thing...onto tracks,

tracks that I foresaw? I learned much in Yian-Ho! I learned much the first time, and even more the second! Arts of memory. Patterns of force on my body and in my mind. Arts of communication and transference in blood. I am Hermann Müller! I am Gottfried Müller! I am the *Ghorl Nigral!*”

The librarian squeezed the trigger five times, tearing the tattoos to shreds along with the rest of the body of Hermann Müller.

“My job is to keep books safe.”

On the way upstairs, he stopped and looked into the electroshock chamber. It was a medical machine, no different from any other. The mirrors were all broken, and had been for years.

The rest of the Russians had fled. Having an alien thing die inside your head must do that to a person.

He found the manuscript of Soukup’s novel with an Ahnenerbe-printed copy of *Geheime Mysterien von Asien* in the Mercedes. He piled them on top of the corpses of Müller and Glyukin. The thermite he took from his ammunition bag burned them all, even the soaked body of the NKVD colonel.

When the fire was roaring up white and alive, he threw on the 1839 von Junzt.

Although no specters sprang from its pages, no voices gibbered from the curling illustrations, and the cold wind was the same that had been blowing off the Alps all day, he never took his eyes off it until the last.

A Spider With Barbed-Wire Legs

By Davide Mana

THEY WERE ABLE TO SAVE MY LEG BUT NOT MY LEFT HAND.

This is how I think it went. It was April in Paris, 1953.

SITTING IN THE *DEHORS* OF THE CAFÉ ON THE CORNER OF Place Blanche, I watched the skeletal blades of the Moulin Rouge windmill slowly spinning in the still air.

A dapper man in a camel coat and an Italian hat walked up and sat at the table on my left. The ancient waiter came and went, limping slightly, taking the man's order of *croissant* and *café-au-lait*. The man placed his hat neatly on the small round table and leaned towards me.

"May I borrow your newspaper?"

I handed him my pristine copy of *Le Monde*. He thanked me with a nod, and slowly unfolded it.

"How was the Riviera?" he asked.

"Nice," I said.

He chuckled.

From a distance, we were just two strangers commenting on the news: the Mau Mau, the new Russian big shot. Not that it really mattered: This was not security, this was the Dance.

"I'm looking for a man," I said.

"Isn't everybody?" he said, genially.

His order came, the *croissant* smelling of sugar and butter.

I ordered another coffee. We waited in silence for the small, fragrant cup to be delivered.

“A German gentleman,” I said as soon as the waiter departed. “First time in town.”

The man in the camel coat nodded. “A friend of yours?”

“This man has no friends,” I said.

He broke a piece of his pastry, dipped it in his *café-au-lait*, chewed it pensively. He brushed the crumbs from his coat.

“He’s much requested, this German gentleman of yours, yes? For a man without friends, I mean.”

I nodded.

A bent old lady passed by, hefting groceries in a carry-all.

“I hear this gentleman might be selling some commodities,” he finally said. “Would you be interested in buying?”

I finished my coffee. “We might,” I said.

He finished his breakfast, folded the newspaper. “I might be able to arrange a meeting,” he said, handing the paper back to me with a smile. He stood, put his hat back, dropped some coins on the table, nodded a goodbye. “I’ll be in touch.”

I watched him cross the square. The Dance was over, but I felt like the music was still playing.

THE ONLY PHOTO WE HAD OF *STANDARTENFÜHRER* WILHELM Krueger captured him in his early thirties. A bronzed, bearded face grinning at the camera, an awkward-looking man in a wool sweater. A smiling Asian in a silk gown and a conic hat stood with the group, bare trees and a lamasery in the background. A typewritten tag was glued to the back: Schaefer

Expedition, Yarlung Valley, 1938.

We had little else on the man. While his companions made it big upon returning, joining *RuSHA* or other pet projects of *Reichsführer* Himmler, Krueger had been swallowed up whole by the Wewelsburg clique almost as soon as he stepped down from the plane. He disappeared from the records in 1939. Gone without a trace.

Until two weeks before: In March 1953, a British listening post in Berlin caught Russian babble about a man on the run from his former SS pals. We were interested—someone with inside information on the Nazi underground railroad, and willing to trade. The man went to ground in Paris. I was assigned to the case.

Then the name Krueger came up and I got his thin, reticent file.

WITH THE WORD OUT ON THE GRAPEVINE, THE WAITING GAME began.

It was not bad, being Paris. The American embassy was a-bustle with parties, Uncle Sam wining and dining the Parisian uppercrust as part of the propaganda effort. Two days stretched uneventfully, punctuated by the music of Dave Brubeck, Buddy Rich, Louis Armstrong. We used jazz to help the French forget the rest.

“Are you familiar with Thibaut De Castries?”

She smiled, her severe burgundy lips the only color accent in an otherwise pale face framed by straight black bangs. A black silk number wrapping her fine hips, black pumps defining

her silken calves, she was the epitome of the Parisian existentialist pin-up. Her French ‘Rs’ were wonderful.

I nodded at the elegant crowd milling around us. “Embassy staff duty,” I told her. “There’s some kind of event every other day.” I flagged a waiter and picked two martinis. “I meet a lot of people but have a bad head for names.”

She chuckled, her already impossibly arched eyebrow arching some more. Amusement played with pity in her clear violet eyes. “He was a writer, a philosopher,” she said. “He hated Paris.”

“Can’t imagine why.” I smiled back.

She sipped her martini. “He hated all cities,” she explained. “Called them the tombs of our civilization.” There was a thick red smear on the rim of her glass.

I felt a light touch at my elbow and Adam Canfield crashed in our budding liaison. “Terribly sorry and all that, miss,” he said with a grin, winking at my monochrome companion, then half-turned to me. “But that cablegram you were waiting for? It’s in, and it looks urgent.”

She cocked her head on one side, scrutinizing him.

“Official matters,” he stage-whispered conspiratorially.

She sighed just as theatrically. I shrugged, smiled at her, and followed him.

THE “CABLEGRAM” WAITING IN CANFIELD’S OFFICE WAS A young Asian man who introduced himself as Wangdoo Norbu. Very smart in a dark gray suit, he carried a letter. He was from Tibet by way of Colorado, one of the kids from the CIA’s Proj-

ect CIRCUS.

A Kamban, a monk, most likely. Acting consultant on the Krueger affair, the papers said.

“Do you have some insight on what’s going on?” I asked him. “What Krueger is trying to pull here, what he’s offering?”

He took a deep breath, remaining impassive. He seemed incapable of smiling. “We guess he is holding important artifacts belonging to my people,” he finally said.

“Artifacts?” Canfield asked, sitting on the corner of his desk. “So this is not just ODESSA?” He cast a quick glance at me, but I turned back to the Tibetan.

“Artifacts from the Schaefer Expedition,” I said.

Norbu nodded. “Stolen by Ernst Schaefer, yes,” he said.

“And Krueger has this stuff?”

“We think it likely,” Norbu said.

“Who’s ‘we’?” Canfield quipped.

Norbu ignored him. He kept looking at me with his unblinking, heavy-lidded eyes. “Acquiring these artifacts might be a strong propaganda tool, to further the cause of freedom for my country.”

I traded a glance with Canfield.

I did not like Canfield very much. He had spent too much time working with the Brits during the war, when he was some kind of OSS buckaroo. Consequently he rode the Paris desk like it was a cloak-and-dagger affair from a *Scarlet Pimpernel* novel. He smiled too much.

But right then I knew we both shared a sense of foreboding. Our runaway SS had just turned into a pawn on a vaster

chessboard. We did not yet imagine how vast it really was.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, THE MARKET AT LES HALLES FELT like October, the streetlights still splashing yellow light on a pavement slick with the night rain. I wandered through the stalls with stone-faced Norbu in tow.

A guy pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with flowers whistled some melancholy tune, and the sweet perfume swept by us, incongruous in the gray light.

“Is this necessary?” my companion asked.

“Yes,” I said.

He did not look convinced. He did not look like much at all save for impassive and alien.

“It’s part of the Dance,” I told him.

Might as well start to learn something really useful.

“The dance?” he asked.

“The Dance.” I stressed the capital. “The ritual, the unwritten protocol, the tradition. It’s like courtship, like an engagement. There are rules to engagements, right?”

“So we stand in a marketplace, fully exposed?”

Hopeless.

“You want an orange?” I asked him. A fruitier in a black beret was selling oranges, lemons, grapefruits.

“These are good for your health,” said a familiar voice.

The man in the camel coat and Borsalino hat was by my side, inspecting the fruit. He idly selected a few grapefruits.

“I see you have company,” he said, without turning.

“A friend from out of town,” I replied. I started picking

some oranges myself, slipping them in a brown paper bag. The guy in the black beret grinned his approval.

“I take it you have some news for me,” I said.

He nodded, his smile disappearing. “The German gentleman we discussed,” he said. “He’s a very unpleasant sort of individual.” He looked at me. “Very unpleasant.”

“We realize that,” I said.

He cast a sideways glance at my companion. “I do not think you do, no.”

“Do you have something for me?”

He handed his grapefruits to the black-beret man to set the price. Turning to me, he dropped a ball of crunched yellow paper in my brown bag, nonchalantly, smiling with his mouth but not his eyes. “You don’t have to pay for this,” he said. He paid, took his purchase, said, “Watch your back,” and was gone.

I went back to grim Norbu and handed him an orange. He still stared at the retreating back of my contact.

I told him, “You’re looking in the wrong direction, my friend.”

He looked at the orange in his hand, then up at me.

“Why?”

“Behind me, by the big stack of crates. Man, tall, blond, leather jacket, certainly not French.”

His heavy-lidded eyes glanced quickly over my shoulder.

“Now what?” he asked.

The crunched paper from the bag had an address on it.

“Now you eat your orange while we take a stroll.”



WE CRAWLED THROUGH PARIS LIKE TOURISTS, TAILING THE blond man as he followed our contact. But our contact in the Borsalino led him, and us, on a merry chase through the Paris tourists seldom see: narrow crooked lanes turning suddenly into stairways, side passages leading to dead ends, small courtyards, shops and workshops. Old men sat on benches smoking *papier-maïs* and talking politics. Women wearing threadbare coats came and went with their groceries. White sheets hung in a strip of sun over the heads of kids playing cowboys and Indians.

Soon we stood out like whores in church. I felt like the city itself was trying to single us out.

Camel-coat stood on a corner, then turned sharply on the left, his tail following suit. We passed by, looking idly right and left like stupid Americans lost on the wrong side of town.

There was another staircase, and a school of small children in black tunics, uncannily silent, led by a sour-faced nun. As they climbed up the steps two more nuns, monochrome in their wide white cowls, held the rear of the bunch down on the sidewalk below. The blond man was adrift in the flood of children, unable to go on, hands held high not to touch them, trapped.

We walked on, leaving him with the nuns. One of them gave me an impression of a smile.

THE PLACE WAS CALLED GOBLINS.

At the address we'd been given stood a large boxlike build-

ing with a brick façade and a black slate roof: black Renaults parked by the sidewalk, a bicycle chained to a lamp-post, people coming and going. The valves of the big gate were open.

We asked our backup to leave us around the corner, give us ten and then park the Citroën Tube van on the other side of the street. Then we walked in causally, two foreigners looking for whatever tourists look for in Paris.

Nobody challenged us. No dogs started barking. The building was silent and still. No sound drifted down the stairwell at all. No wives nagging at idle husbands, no couples fighting, no children rough-housing, no radios or gramophones playing. Nothing.

I thought back to my black-clad friend at the party and her tomb-like cities. I shuddered, and took the left staircase. Norbu followed me, grim and unspeaking as ever.

On the third floor were three apartments, three tall and narrow doors, and a light bulb flickering sickly in its socket. Now what?

“The door is open.”

Norbu’s voice startled me.

I cursed under my breath, pulled my pistol and pushed slightly against the door. It was warm and tingling. I pushed some more and it swung silently in.

A foul stench hung in the air, making my flesh crawl.

I told Norbu to wait, but I knew place was empty. Nothing could live in a place so thick with the tang of death.

A small, neat kitchen. A prim living room with mismatched furniture. A messy bedroom. The whole apartment looked

bleached, like all color had been wrung out. Only in the bathroom, the walls and floor and ceiling were painted bright red and dripping.

I cursed and walked back, trying not to slip on the bloodied floor tiles.

I turned to Norbu. “Go get the guys,” I told him. My voice was broken as I fought back sickness.

He hesitated.

“Get Canfield,” I said. “Tell him we need cleaners. Tell him it’s a mess, and the Frogs will want in.”

He stared at me.

“For Chrissakes, beat it!”

He took two steps back, then turned and ran down the stairs. I waited for the backup team. My hands were shaking. I pocketed my gun on the third attempt.

From that moment things got uglier, fast.

“AND YOU MEAN THEY ALL DID IT AT THE SAME TIME?”

Adam Canfield sat stiffly behind his desk. He was not smiling. “Eighteen people, all in the same building, each in his or her apartment, young and old, all of them took their own lives at the same time?”

Nineteen, considering the nightmare of an unknown woman found in Krueger’s bathtub. Parts missing. I just shook my head.

Two of the cleanup guys had done a tour of the building sporting rubber badges, fake IDs from the *Sûreté*, criminal investigation branch, checking on the neighbors. First they found

the dead caretaker, in her bedroom, ground floor. Then the others. Eighteen suicides.

I watched Norbu in his chair. "You know what's happening, right?"

He ignored Canfield's glare. "It's complicated," he said finally.

Canfield cursed. "Complicated? Are you having us on?"

"It is not Krueger," the Tibetan said. "Krueger is not...." He made a vague gesture.

"Not what?"

He finally turned to Canfield, as if realizing only in that moment the gray-haired man was there behind his desk.

"Krueger is gone," Norbu said. "Been gone for a long time. Only, he did not know yet. Now he does. Maybe. But he does not matter. Never did."

"The Schaefer affair," I said. "It all goes back to 1938, right?"

He nodded.

"What is it?" I asked. "Some kind of drug? Some bug Krueger caught?"

"A bug causing eighteen people to kill themselves?" Canfield laughed grimly.

"Got anything better?" I asked.

We turned to Norbu, expectantly.

"They stole a black *tulku* of Padmasambhava," the Tibetan admitted, finally. "And a *terma*."

"A what?"

Norbu defined some space in front of himself, with his

hands. “Sort of a box,” he explained. “An earthenware pot, sealed, holding texts, scrolls. Buried for people to find it in the future.”

“Like a time capsule?”

“More like a treasure map. *Terma* are signposts along a way.”

“Leading where?”

He stared at me. “This one led here.”

THE PHONE RANG. THE FRENCH WERE HERE. CANFIELD SIGHED, straightened his tie and went to see them. I waited in his office with Norbu.

“What happened in Tibet?” I asked him. “The Schaefer Expedition. What was it?”

He scrutinized me at length. “The Nazis,” he said finally. “They unearthed the dark *terma*. Krueger became its carrier. Now it wants....” He cocked his head on one side. “Out.”

He was dead serious.

I stared at his sleepy eyes. “Are we talking about some kind of, what, a spirit?”

Did he really believe this stuff? Was he leading us on, as Canfield had suggested, or was there really a superstitious savage beneath that prim gray suit?

He shook his head, only once, from left to right and back. “No,” he said. “The dark *terma* is not a thing—born, it is a thing created. An artifact.”

“Like a machine?”

“Like an idea. A new and different idea. One that did not

exist before somebody put it into writing.”

I could hear the clock ticking on Canfield’s desk and the faraway sound of traffic outside the embassy’s courtyard. The room felt unpleasantly hot.

“An idea,” I repeated.

Norbu nodded. “An idea so complex it becomes alive,” he said. “It spreads, it multiplies.” He plainly believed what he was saying.

“And now Krueger—”

“He carries it. His body does. Krueger is gone. It lives inside his brain. It fed on his soul, and now it rides his body like a beast of burden.” He lifted a hand in a vague gesture. “Certain Germans thought they could own it, use it. I imagine they put their former soldier through some thorough examinations.”

“But now he escaped.”

“It did, yes.”

“And what does he want in Paris?”

“It wants the darkness that lives here.”

Where the hell was Canfield? “I don’t understand.”

“You call it City of Lights, but it’s woven with darkness.

The *terma* wants to possess the city, the darkness. Be it.”

“Possess it.”

“Look at your hand,” he said. “No, the left.”

I examined my left hand.

The fingertips were smeared in black, like with some sooty stuff. I rubbed my fingers with my thumb, but the black stain would not go away. I turned the hand, and saw black veins snaking underneath my fingernails. I looked up at Norbu.

“It’s spreading,” he said.

I recalled the faint itching when I pushed the door open in Krueger’s apartment. I remembered Norbu staying on the apartment’s door, hands in pockets.

He believed it because it was true.

“You knew! You bastard!” I moved towards him but my legs felt weak and my blackened hands stretched to grasp him. “You knew and you never said a fucking word! You just stood there and let it get to me!”

He slid from his chair and stood at a distance, out of my reach. “Now it is imperative for you to find the dark *terma*,” he said. “And easier, too. Now you see, and believe. Now you feel it, and you have a reason.”

I stared at my blackened fingers again. Was the stain really spreading?

“Will it stop?” I asked. “If we find this *terma* of yours?”

He just looked at me.

“How do we find him?” I asked.

“It. Having taken you by the hand, it will lead you. As its power increases, it will become easier for you to feel it.”

Then the door opened, and I pushed my left hand inside my pocket.

Canfield came in. He was not pleased, his mask of adopted British suavity somewhat skewed to reveal fear underneath.

“This is getting big,” he said.

I needed a drink.



I DO NOT KNOW HOW WE GOT TO BELLEVILLE. MOST OF WHAT happened after the meeting with Canfield is as blurred as in a fever. We walked the streets, we drove around, looking for something. Paris was closing in on us, the street filled with faceless people, the lanes around the *Arc de Triomphe* jammed with cars. The Metro stations were Egyptian catacombs filled with wraiths. And yet some choices seemed forced, some spots impossible to miss, a path evident in the labyrinth.

Then, Belleville.

There was nothing pretty about Belleville. Not that road, not that neighborhood. The place had been blasted to rubble during the war and very little had changed since then. A cobblestoned street with no name snaked idly uphill, winding through piles of fire-blackened bricks. Any scrap iron had been salvaged, any wood used for fuel, but the useless rubbish remained.

Beyond a rickety fence a building loomed, its doors and windows boarded-up, its face black and forbidding. A monolith sitting in blasted desert. A single, lone lamp-post stood on the opposite corner, the kind that wants a hooker smoking a cigarette in its light. But there was no hooker. The lamp cast a scrawl of shadow on a broken, whitewashed tract of wall, which in turn shaded a gaping basement filled with the remains of a collapsed building. The War had been here and had never left.

Fifty yards uphill, the old street intersected with a more

modern thoroughfare. Cars and bicycles ran on a broad strip of black tarmac, casting reflections in the glass windows of well-lit shops. But no noise could be heard below. The black building felt like a weight at the back of the mind, like a continuous note on a church organ. This place was frozen in 1944.

MY HAND THROBBED. THE SOOT-LIKE STAIN NOW REACHED MY knuckles. My thumb was black like I'd hit it with a hammer, the fleshy part at its base criss-crossed by a webbing of black veins. I slipped a glove on, and with a nod I told Norbu to come along.

One of the boarded-up doors had been opened, pushed back so that it was possible, by bending and passing beneath the lower plank, to squeeze through.

Once inside, the smell of mold hit me like a punch at the throat. Blades of gray light slashed the air, causing floating motes of dust to glow faintly. The walls were covered by a thick, velvety layer of some black fungal substance. I pressed a handkerchief over my mouth and nose and kept my right in my pocket, gripping my gun.

"It is here," Norbu said, his eyes slowly turning towards the sagging ceiling.

A stairway arched around a pillar in the far corner, beyond a desert of rubble, broken glass and trash. In the dim light I could make out the remains of unidentifiable pieces of furniture, the spider-like skeleton of a rusty bicycle, and a rotting limp mattress propped up against a wall by a window. We started through the junk, squinting in the dusk. I kicked a rusty

can and it rolled away rattling among the debris.

THE BLOND MAN CROSSED ONE OF THE WEAK SUNBEAMS. THAT gave me time to turn and catch his blade across my forearm. He pushed closer and kicked me as I tried to pull the gun I crashed to the floor on my right shoulder and landed in a heap on the rusty bicycle, entangled in the misshapen front wheel and the broken chain.

I rolled on my back as he advanced on me. Bad idea on his part. Attacking a man on the ground with a switchblade is harder than shooting a man from the floor through a jacket pocket. I put a bullet in his right shoulder and he staggered back, stepped on some junk and fell.

My left sleeve was soaked in blood. It does not feel warm, like they tell you in books. It's the same temperature of your body, and in a hot room it feels cold and wet.

I stood and walked to the man. He was bleeding badly. He said something in German.

His switchblade was lost somewhere. I looked at his hands and arms, black up to where the dead skin disappeared under the leather of his jacket. Black veins snaked up his neck, and around his fevered eyes. I cursed through gritted teeth.

Then something hit me hard from behind and I fell forever through darkness.

IN THE ABSOLUTE DARKNESS, SOMEONE WAS TRYING TO SMOOTH-
er me.

I tried to take a gulp of air and my mouth filled with some-

thing damp and bitter. I turned and kicked and coughed and pushed the rotting mattress away in a cloud of dust. Or maybe it was black spores.

The faint light dripping through the cracks in the boarded-up windows had taken an ocher tinge.

I squatted on the floor for long minutes. My left arm was on fire. The cut was not deep enough to cause any real trouble but caused a lot of pain. The jacket sleeve was dark brown with blood, the glove sticking to my aching hand, dark veins visible under the edge.

I stood and felt a surge of nausea. There was a big lump at the back of my head, and my gun was gone. But three bullets were still here: one where I put it, embedded in the shoulder of the dead German, one in his chest, and the last somewhere in the mess that had been his head. Questions floated in my mind.

My legs felt like rubber. I steadied myself against the wall, ignoring the black stuff on it and the reek of death, waste and decay. Then I started towards the curving staircase, a dark certainty pulling me upstairs like a siren's song.

Something glittered on the floor. I bent, staggered, found my balance, and on the third attempt I closed my right on the dead man's switchblade. Better than nothing.

I crawled upstairs, hoping the floor would stop swaying.

THE ROOM WAS BATHED IN THE LAST LIGHT OF THE PARISIAN sunset, one dirty window splitting the sun like a kaleidoscope.

The floor was covered with a complicated design, like a pentagram but more complex, colorful, a glittering surface

made of glass shards, pieces of broken windows and shattered bottles. It was like one of those weird Asian designs the Buddhists create with sand or pebbles: each shard had been placed with extreme care, defining fields of dark and pale green, dark brown and black.

A man stood stiffly in the middle of the design on bleeding feet. He was dead-eyed and haggard, clothes splattered with blood and maybe fouler stuff. He was a sad shadow of the man I had seen in the photograph, his beard patchy, his hair wild and almost devoid of color.

Norbu was in front of him, standing clear of the glass design, holding my gun at rest along his leg.

I leaned against the door frame and tried to pull some air in my aching chest.

“You should have stayed below,” Norbu said, without turning. He lifted his hand and shot me in the leg.

Pain screamed some focus in my mind as I rolled on the floor. The wreck of a man in the middle of the room seemed to come awake, his breathing becoming deeper.

I tried to stop the bleeding. A dark pool was spreading on the floor all around me, slippery and cold.

Norbu crouched, observing what was left of Krueger, at times watching a rivulet of my blood moving towards the glass pentagram. He squatted like that for long moments as I bled.

“You feel it?” he asked me, his eyes on the German. “How it draws upon the darkness of the city, how it connects with the pain and frustration and....”

He turned to me. “Ennui, they call it, right? This weaken-

ing of the soul? So European.”

He was strangely loquacious.

“You’re crazy,” I told him.

“You are,” he replied.

“You were sent to collect him.”

“It, “ he corrected me. “It could be a strong advertising tool. It could be the fulcrum to move entire populations.”

Pain kept me alert. “An idea, taking control of the whole mind. Of every mind.”

“The communists only dream about something like this,” Norbu said. “We made it.”

Krueger, or whatever he was, started moaning rhythmically, a low chant which rose in volume and became a high buzzing strangely mingled with human words.

“A strong advertising tool,” Norbu repeated.

“The Krauts could not control it,” I guessed.

He widened his eyes. “I am not a Kraut.”

The chanting was louder, like the walls themselves were picking up Krueger’s moaning. It seemed to echo in the small room, words multiplying and interweaving. My head hurt, my left hand throbbed, and my blood was running straight from my mangled knee to the glass mosaic.

“And we trained you,” I said.

He shrugged again. “There are things that your people could not teach me, nor I teach them.”

“It will swallow the city,” I said.

“It will!” He grinned, and I finally saw he was completely insane. “It will make us all perfect!”

I felt the knife in my hand.

“You are too weak to throw it,” he said, calmly.

He smiled. He seemed to be on the point of saying something else, but his head exploded.

ADAM CANFIELD SUPPORTED ME DOWN THE STAIR AND OUT IN the open. Fire trucks, police cars and an ambulance choked the nameless street. No civilians, no bystanders, innocent or otherwise. All accesses had been cordoned off, guarded by truncheon-wielding *flics*.

“Why—?” I tried.

“The building is about to collapse,” he said, matter-of-factly.

And as we walked into the bombed-out rubble, the black building shuddered and folded upon itself in a cloud of black dust that whirled in the electrical light. I thought it might take forever: It crumbled and collapsed and the ground itself seemed to swallow it up, until nothing remained but broken bricks and bent iron.

The sounds of traffic from up the street sounded in the air. It felt like birds singing on the first day of spring.

A medic ripped my trousers open and grimaced.

I gestured to Canfield, asking for a cigarette. He patted his jacket, shook his head.

“How did you know—?”

Again his trademark smile. “It’s our business. A bit like the Shadow, the radio chap, you know? We know what evil lurks—”

“In the hearts of men,” I finished.

“There, too,” Canfield said softly. “And in a few other places.”

The medic stabbed me with a needle.

It was coming to me, now. “You knew Norbu wasn’t right,” I croaked. “But you let him use me as his stalking horse. Then you were right there to tag him out. You knew what he was doing. That’s a bit esoteric for an Agency station chief.” My heart was pounding in my ears, slowly. “Of course, during the war there were stories, rumors. Spooks chasing actual spooks. You ever hear those rumors?”

“No, can’t say that I have.” Canfield smiled his British smile. I was too weak to punch him.

I cursed softly. “You used me.”

“The Shadow does have his helpers,” he said. I was too weak to punch him.

“And here I thought Delta Green was just a legend.”

“Sooner or later,” said a French voice by my side, “they will be.”

My black-haired existentialist muse nodded, and handed me a lit cigarette stained with the burgundy of her lips. She had not worn any makeup in her nun’s costume. The cigarette tasted awful. The French had been in it from the beginning.

Whatever the medic had shot in my leg was working its way to my brain. “Will I ever understand what happened back there?”

Canfield and the woman traded a glance. “As if anyone could,” she said. She turned to contemplate the field of rubble.

Was there something roaring frustration underground? Or was it the drugs?

“It was such an unsophisticated thing,” she said. “A bogey dreamed by goatherds, thinking Paris would not swallow it as it does with us all.”

I must have looked very stupid, because again she took pity on me. “It’s like the game, up and down, all trapped. What’s it called, Snakes and Spiders?”

“Snakes and Ladders,” Canfield corrected her.

“Whatever,” she said. “A spiderweb is not a chessboard, where two play as equals. The spider lets the fly move across the web, for a while. The fly thinks it owns the web, but it is the other way around. And the spider enjoys the dance of the fly, the waning of its hope. The growing vibration though the lines, the fear as the fly comes to understand, is music to the spider. Melodrama, just like opera. Refreshment for its soul. That is the reason for waiting. “ She shrugged, her perfect eyebrow arching ironically. “But then the spider’s mouth closes on the fly, and the fly is just food.”

She shook her head in mock disapproval. “Your poor upstart goatherd bogey was just a fly that thought it owned the spiderweb.”

She smiled reassuringly, and her eyes seemed to sparkle like a cat’s. Her ‘Rs’ were still wonderful.

“You own this spiderweb,” said my voice. Then I went under.

I drifted away on her last words. “*À chacun ses obsessions....*”

Le Pain Maudit

By Jeff C. Carter

THE TIRES OF THE DIESEL TRUCK SLID AS IT LURCHED TO A STOP on the dark country road. The passengers tensed and shot nervous looks at the driver. Frank noted how Edward's pale face remained neutral as his hand slid into his heavy wool jacket towards his silenced HDMS pistol. The driver, a gray pug-faced man, crossed himself. Outside the truck, snow hissed against the windows and scurried through the ruins of a desolate French town.

The driver turned and explained in broken English, "Oradour-sur-Glane. Nazis massacre everyone. Six hundred and forty two innocents. This town, this is now a monument. To the martyrs." He crossed himself again.

They were surrounded by burned-out cars and fenced in by pockmarked walls like tombstones. No one looked at Gerhard, the pudgy, disheveled man in the passenger seat, but he spoke up anyway. His lilting accent was unmistakably German.

"*Ja*, I have heard of this. Isn't it true that they were all in the Resistance?"

The driver's eyes bulged and he spewed bitter smoke from his homemade cigarette. "How can you say this? They burned these women and children alive!"

Gerhard pulled both his hands through his tangled blonde hair.

"I mean no disrespect. There are no martyrs in such tragedy, because warfare is pointless. This is what the town says to me."

Edward leaned forward and pointed a finger between them towards the windshield.

“The storm is closing in, *monsieur*. We should keep going if we hope to make Carcassonne before morning.”

The authority in his tone made the suggestion a command. The driver gunned the wheezing engine and the truck pulled forward.

John, a doughy man in a short crew cut, slipped his own hand out of his jacket, revealing a flask. He took a long pull and swayed with the rhythm of the truck. Gerhard looked content to watch the ghost town’s jagged bones rolled by.

Frank nestled his thin head into the hood of his voluminous winter coat and pretended to rest. His eyes remained on the German.

THEY SET UP IN AN OLD STONE FARM HOUSE OUTSIDE PONT-Saint-Anthony, a quiet village not far from the walled city of Carcassonne. Frank struggled to haul heavy crates of electronics up stairs to the attic with Edward. John cheered and greeted each component of their communications center like it was a family member that had survived a transatlantic crossing.

When the last load was unpacked, Frank wiped the thinning gray wisps of hair from his sweaty forehead and peered out a dirty window, down into the weatherbeaten barn where Gerhard arranged shelves of chemicals and fixed exotic glass flasks onto racks.

They left John to his electronic revelry and headed down to the gloomy main room. Edward’s footsteps creaked as he

inspected the mottled yellow plaster walls. Frank ran his hand along the only piece of furniture, a dining table dulled and scarred by age. He stopped at a painting, nearly black on black, of a tiny fishing boat adrift and tilting across a moonless sea.

Edward dragged in a chest of tools. He arranged the tools on the floor and pulled out a false bottom, revealing a small arsenal of British and German weapons. Satisfied, he replaced the false bottom and closed the chest. Frank cocked his head.

“Will those be necessary?”

Edward ignored him and knocked on the wall separating them from the back bedroom.

“We’ll put the two-way mirror here.”

The flaking plaster wall offered little resistance and the work went as quickly as they had rehearsed. They installed a two-way mirror in an antique brass frame. The glass featured enough scuff marks and blemishes to resemble a family heirloom. They stepped back to admire their work in time to see Gerhard enter.

He stomped the snow from his boots, making sickly puddles in the yellow plaster dust.

“Can I start the fire?”

Edward looked at the ash filled stone cubby in the back wall.

“Help yourself.”

Gerhard busied himself with the fireplace. John came down and helped them pull the empty crates around the table. Edward arranged his files.

“Communications?”

John drained his flask. Disappointed, he shook it for a final drop. "My masterpiece is ready for action. Where do you want the bugs?"

"You can start with the mayor's office and the telephone junction. We'll hit town in the morning to pick up supplies."

Edward ripped open a carton of American Chesterfield cigarettes and tossed everyone a pack.

"Take these and let the locals come to you. Bone up on your cover stories, but feel free to pose as an oafish American."

He broke open a pack and lit one for himself. He tossed a thick sheaf of documents onto Frank's bulky metal clipboard.

"These are the locals of interest, all former members of the Communist Party. Let us know who we should start with. Herr Doktor, is everything in order?"

Gerhard stared out the narrow windows, enrapt by the twisted vines running up the window that were strangling the frail winter sun. Frank tapped him on the shoulder and he whirled around, his small glasses flashing with reflected firelight.

"Jawohl!"

He smoothed down his hair and smiled.

"Everything is in order and we are ready to proceed."

Edward tucked an extra cigarette behind his ear and packed up his files.

"Make sure your things are secure and grab some shuteye. We start at oh five hundred."

Each man retired to his respective domain. Frank had hoped to bunk in the main room with the fireplace, but Edward

insisted on guarding the cottage door.

Frank moved his belongings to the back bedroom. There was no window, but the two-way mirror embedded in the wall let in some firelight. He started up a Coleman lantern and pulled the dossiers from his clipboard, a rectangle of sheet metal stamped with the name of their fake investor, Solomon Imports.

He flipped through the files, scanning the black-and-white photographs of villagers. A balding municipal councillor, a thin *gendarme* with a flat kepi cap, a frumpy housewife. He longed for a picture of his own family, but it was forbidden to have anything that could compromise his cover.

He locked the door and picked up his heavy jacket. His cover was more secure than the CIA knew. He opened a secret pouch sewn into the lining of his jacket and pulled out a one-time pad, a small booklet crammed with five-digit sequences of random letter keys used for encrypting messages. His true mission was for Delta Green.

He tapped a pen against the pad, idly working out the alphanumeric cipher for 'Gerhard' in his head. He was there to discover if the German had a secret agenda as well. He was used to taking copious notes, but he could not risk it here. He recalled the mission briefing and details he had memorized before the trip to France.

The German doctor was barely recognizable as the flinty young SS officer in his file photo. His appearance was unkempt, his manners informal and his mind often distracted. He did not appear hostile beyond the scorn he regularly heaped upon

communists. That seemed to be enough for Edward, who was gripped with the same Red Menace hysteria as the rest of the U.S.

In the war Gerhard had been a staff doctor at Raisko, an agricultural facility that used slave labor from Auschwitz. He had committed no war crimes, at least none that the U.S. government wasn't willing to overlook, and they had recruited him in Operation PAPERCLIP. Gerhard had received a new identity and position as chief scientist of the Army's Edgewood Arsenal. The CIA wanted his research on mind-altering drugs to find an edge in the Cold War.

Was Gerhard a simple mercenary who served whichever master held his leash, or was there some undiscovered connection to things worse than death camps? Was he tainted by the occult Karotechia and their insane plans born of suicidal desperation?

Frank put the pad back into its hiding place and hung the jacket by the door.

On the other side of the two-way mirror a plume of smoke drifted from Edward. He was still dressed in his black suit, sitting on a crate facing the door. His pistol lay on the table, close at hand. Frank wondered if the man planned to sleep at all.

The paranoid vigil brought back disturbing memories of Frank's sudden induction into Delta Green. He shut them out and rummaged through his shaving kit for his mouth guard. He popped the rubber bite plate between his worn, uneven teeth, lay back in bed, and massaged his aching jaw.

Through the mirrored window he could see the shadows of

the firelight bring the painting to life. The waves seemed to lash at the tiny boat and shove its lonely sailor further out to sea. Frank bit into his mouth guard and closed his eyes, grinding his teeth until he drifted off to sleep.

IN HIS DREAM HE WAS YOUNG AGAIN, HIS THICK DARK HAIR contrasted by a thin pale body. Unfit for the front lines, he brought his degree in psychology to a desert internment camp for 'enemy aliens'. The world was tinged red, like all his memories of New Mexico.

A crowd of sunburned 'incurable agitators' grumbled behind barbed wire fences, mostly in Japanese, although there were snatches of Italian and German. He picked up languages easily, which helped him oversee the inmates' welfare as well as their interrogations. When there was a particularly tough nut to crack, the interrogators relied on Frank to push the right psychological buttons.

He paced the unassuming graveyard behind the camp, signing a thick stack of reports on his clipboard. None of these reports represented the subtle triumphs of his wit and training. There was a fresh grave for each falsified report, and the ink stains on his hands were red like blood.

A gust of wind tore the reports from his clipboard and the internment camp vanished in a cloud of pale red sand. All that remained was a flight of stairs descending into the earth. His mind had merged his wartime assignment with the classified post he held after, at a covert underground facility.

He descended into the dark and reappeared under a harsh

fluorescent light. The creases, angles and hollows of his face were deeper beneath the stark glare, but it was not a trick of the light. He had aged only a few years but he had become gaunt and rawboned.

He slowed as he passed the population of the secret prison. The inmates were severely inbred, with bulging eyes and far-off stares like shell-shocked G.I.s. They gibbered in a thick patois peppered with invented words, neologisms like *fhtagn* and *R'lyeh*.

Frank entered his office and donned a pair of headphones like a crown. As he eavesdropped through microphones hidden in the cells the guttural chatter distilled into a fluent language. He listened to their private whispers and deciphered their secrets. By the end of the year he was gathering new information and higher levels of security clearance.

Aboveground, Frank met a woman. She was a Russian Jewish immigrant with a sharp mind and a cookbook of family recipes. In a year they were married and living in a small adobe bungalow. Frank regained the weight and then some, his sunken cheeks taking on dimples that framed a broad, even smile. His bowties pinched and his clothes didn't fit, but he didn't mind. When he left each morning the aroma of fresh-baked bread lingered on his blue herringbone suit.

IN THE MORNING, THE GROUP SHARED A BREAKFAST OF C-RA-tion powdered coffee, canned pork and cigarettes. Edward ordered Gerhard to stay behind and finish the lab. The rest of the group trudged through the snow into town.

Frank trembled against the cold and pulled up his fur-lined hood. The cold metal of his clipboard made his cracked, dry hands ache, so he tucked it inside his ridiculous coat. He had never imagined the south of France in winter. He had always imagined rolling green hills, pastel flowers and quaint sun-kissed villas.

A pair of muddy tire ruts traced the winding goat path that served as the main road to Pont-Saint-Anthony. The town was a gray and somber reflection of the winter sky. Thick stone buildings lined the narrow streets like fortress walls buttressed by snow banks. An empty fountain squatted in the town square. The peaked roof of a grain elevator stood mute over the village like a derelict cathedral.

John slipped away to tap the phone lines and plant microphones in the mayor's office. Edward would buy groceries and chat up the locals while Frank visited those listed in his dossiers. Frank wanted to keep the German close, but he needed to support the CIA mission to avoid suspicion.

The library was the first stop on his list. He scraped his boots against a horse-hair mat and removed his wool hat. The smell of old paper and tea warped his tight lips into a slight smile. He pretended to scan the shelves while he looked for the head librarian. His finger stopped on a well-worn book and he slid it free.

It was *Le Petit Prince*, a children's book he had read to his son.

"Bonjour."

Frank turned and found a stern middle-aged woman star-

ing at him. Her black hair was gathered in tight curls, framing her broad forehead like a tiara. She looked at the book in his hands and smiled, dropping a decade from her appearance.

“Um...*bonjour, madame.*”

“Are you in town on holiday?”

“No, *madame*. I am touring vineyards for an American investor.”

The woman frowned.

“In December?”

“We want to be ready before the spring.”

“But of course.”

She looked at the book in his hand.

“Are you traveling with children?”

“No, *madame*, just practicing my French.”

She smiled again, revealing a hint of faded beauty.

“My son adores it. I read it aloud every night or he will not sleep. Do you want to sign it out?”

“Actually, I was hoping to speak with *Monsieur* Tatin about his estate.”

The woman made the introductions, and Frank was happy about her as well. Her name was Charlotte.

FRANK WRAPPED UP HIS PRELIMINARY INTERVIEWS AND JOINED the others for lunch at a *charcuterie*. A forest of severed goat legs hung from the ceiling with other cured meats. An old woman served them a basket of baguettes and plates of *violino di capra*.

Edward leaned back and stuffed a napkin into his collar.

“*Merci.*”

He made sure they were alone before gesturing for John to start.

“Two ‘new vines’ by the mayor’s office and the telephone hub. We can cut their ‘old vines’ whenever we want.”

Edward pointed a fork at Frank.

“Any prospective ‘clients’?”

Frank took a sip of steaming black tea.

“*Monsieur* Tatin is interested. The farmer was reluctant but willing to hear an offer.”

“Set it up. Any others?”

“No one else wants to do business with foreigners.”

Edward cursed under his breath and threw his fork down with a clank. Frank and John shared a nervous glance.

Edward yanked the napkin from his neck.

“Pay the bill. I’ll wait outside.”

Frank turned to John, who was holding up his wine glass for a refill.

“Can you plant another ‘vine’ for me?”

John shrugged.

“I won’t promise any miracles.”

Frank slipped him the address for Charlotte, the assistant librarian. John tucked it into his bag of equipment and left.

Frank settled the tab and wrapped up the uneaten food.

Edward was on his second cigarette. He stomped up the muddy road, and once they were clear of the town he began to rant.

“They should be more welcoming to Yanks around here.

We saved their bacon! They call themselves allies, but they've always been Godless communists."

Edward flicked his cigarette into the snow and smoothed back his thick white blonde hair. He dipped his chin to whisper.

"It's one of the reasons we chose this town."

He stalked into the cottage and went upstairs to radio in a progress report.

Frank set the parcel of food on the table and pulled apart its twine wrapping. The official briefing would be soon. If he went out to the barn to retrieve Gerhard, he could use that opportunity to search the lab.

His thoughts drifted to Charlotte and he smiled. His reverie was interrupted by John stomping the snow from his boots.

Frank looked past John through the doorway, surprised at how dark it had become while he was lost in thought. Gerhard entered behind John and closed the door.

John snatched up a piece of bread and ripped it open. It was mushy and gray inside. He sniffed it and wrinkled his nose.

"What's this supposed to be?"

Edward spoke from the stairs.

"That is what the agency has identified as an opportunity. State regulations keep the food prices down. The local bakers are forced to use the flour mill here in town. If we exploit that chokepoint, the bakers will do the rest."

Gerhard sank his teeth into a hunk of bread and laughed. Doughy gray clumps danced in his open mouth.

"And no one will taste the difference. *Bon appétit!*"

Frank glared at Edward in disbelief.

“You intend to drug the entire town?”

Edward met his stare with a neutral expression.

“It depends on our initial tests...and your analysis, of course.”

Gerhard gestured with his bread.

“LSD can be synthesized from ergot fungus. Even if they test the bread for contaminants they will conclude it is merely ergot poisoning.”

John drained a glass of white wine. “The booze is still good.”

Frank shook his head.

“I was told that our research was going to be simple, confined to this cottage. LSD is difficult to study without strict controls.”

Gerhard took another bite.

“*Nein*, LSD is too unpredictable. We must use something like LSD, but stronger.”

Frank narrowed his eyes.

“How strong?”

Edward crushed out his cigarette.

“We don’t know. The Koreans are brainwashing our boys, and we’ve got jack. Our psyops can’t do anything but drop leaflets and shout slogans through megaphones. We’ve got nothing! We need to beat the commies at their own game.”

Frank watched the vein stand up on Edward’s forehead and decided to hold his objections.

Δ

FRANK, GERHARD AND JOHN STOOD SHOULDER TO SHOULDER, watching through the two-way mirror. Edward was negotiating with *Monsieur* Tatin over wine, cheese and bread. John filmed the proceedings with a purring film camera.

Frank idly scratched his pen on the metal clipboard balanced on his forearm while he observed the German. Gerhard marked his log each time Tatin took a bite or sip. He checked a stop watch and smiled.

“Any moment now.”

Frank pulled off his headphones and whispered.

“What did you dose him with?”

“*Shwarzlotos*.”

“Black lotus?”

“*Ja*, a potent hallucinogen. It enhances the truth-serum effects of LSD.”

A crash from the main room turned their heads.

Monsieur Tatin had dropped his wine glass and stumbled against the wall. Edward eased him into a chair.

“Relax, *monsieur*. It’s all right.”

“*Je suis désolé*, I do not feel so well. I just....”

Monsieur Tatin twisted to stare into the firelight. His eyes had dilated into gaping black holes.

“How are you feeling, *monsieur*? What do you see?”

The Frenchman licked his wine-stained lips and wavered.

“A black temple...with spires that reach the stars. It’s impossible. So vast. So ancient!”

Gerhard's scratching pen fell silent. Frank looked over. The German had closed his eyes in an expression like prayer.

Tatin gripped the edge of the table and shook.

"I'm being pulled inside. I'm sinking! In the crypts, they dwell...fungal things...silently waiting. I'm frightened! They know I am there! They know!"

He spewed a stream of bile across the table and collapsed. Edward hurried over and checked his pulse.

"*Monsieur?*"

Tatin looked around with blurry, bloodshot eyes. His pupils were returning to normal. He finally noticed Edward standing over him.

"What happened?"

"We drank too much, *monsieur*. Let me walk you home."

JOHN TURNED OFF THE RECORDING EQUIPMENT. FRANK PRETENDED to finish his notes while watching Gerhard. The German gathered the remaining food and wine with great reverence, like a priest handling sacraments.

Frank stepped out of the bedroom and waved a pen.

"Was that a success or a failure, *Herr Doktor?*"

Gerhard smiled and shrugged.

"For now, merely data. I will measure this in the barn to determine the amount ingested, compared to body weight and time frame. *Gute Nacht.*"

As he walked out to the barn, Frank thought he heard crunching and slurping, but it might have been footsteps in the snow.



FRANK SAT BY THE FIRE AND FINISHED HIS NOTES WHILE JOHN packed up. The black lotus was certainly potent. He hadn't seen any proof that it had value as a truth serum, but of course there had been no real interrogation. It all seemed unnecessary. These people were not the enemy. The human race had far worse things to fear than conflicting politics. As for Gerhard, his loyalty was still unclear.

John shuffled out of the bedroom with a heavy load of film canisters and audio spools.

"That 'vine' you asked for, Charlotte Sampaix's place? It's up."

He indicated some equipment strung along the floor.

"I left a cable and some headphones for you to use. I was able to plant the microphone inside her radio, a BF412A Corvette, a real beauty with six tubes and a permanent magnet dynamic speaker...."

Frank thanked him and ushered him out of the bedroom. He clasped the headphones to his ears and heard the rasp of a turning page, followed by Charlotte's voice. It was softer and more intimate than it had been in the library.

"Les serpents boas avalent leur proie tout entière...."

She was reading from the opening passage of *Le Petit Prince*. They must have started it yet again. He slipped in his bite plate and leaned back, listening to Charlotte's flowing voice, punctuated now and then by the contented sighs of her son. She told him about the book's hero, a downed pilot

stranded in the desert, and his encounter with a laughing young prince from another world. Frank drifted off to sleep.

HE DREAMED OF THE NIGHT HIS WIFE WENT INTO LABOR. THE tiny newborn arrived in the wee hours and formed an instant bond with his mother. The exhausted pair rested within their bubble, self-contained and perfect. Frank observed them through a window outside their hospital room.

In the morning, the prisoners were manic, rattling the bars and howling in their made-up language. He was quelling a riot when an armed guard appeared. Frank was hauled down to a sub-level he didn't know existed.

The dry air of the sub-level was thick with the incongruous stench of rotting fish. A pair of guards blocked a cell, fingers white-knuckled around the grips of their tommy guns. He could barely make out the hunched figure hurling its body against the thick metal wire of a temporary holding cell.

A pale, buzzcut man in a two-piece olive suit grabbed Frank by the collar.

"You speak French!"

It wasn't a question, but Frank nodded emphatically. Buzzcut jabbed a finger at the cell.

"Tell the prisoner to stand down or we will shoot!"

Frank scraped his addled mind for the words and called out.

"Calmez-vous ou ils vont vous tirer!"

His tongue loosened and he repeated the phrase several times. The jarring clang of flesh on steel ceased. Frank got a

good look at the prisoner and nearly fainted.

He was hideously deformed. His misshapen head was bald, and his eyes protruded so far they must have come out of their sockets. His gray skin was cracked and bleeding, with a ragged red wound on each side of his neck. Frank's first impression was of a radiation victim.

Then the man croaked a stream of antiquated French, punctured by the same nonsense words used by the inbred prisoners upstairs. Frank covered his mouth and his knees wobbled. He turned away from the obscene thing and saw a man bleeding on the ground, his mauled face out of proportion with his broad shoulders. Frank slipped on a severed human jaw bone and the world became a gray blur.

He gathered his senses in a dim cluttered office. A Dixie cup of coffee quaked in his hands. Buzzcut presented him with a choice. His first option was to receive a new security clearance, DELTA GREEN, and the opportunity to research the strange people—or perhaps creatures was the better word. Frank noted the pistol on Buzzcut's desk. He did not ask what his other option was.

Frank set aside his shock and revulsion a sip at a time, and by the time he reached the bottom of his Dixie cup he was determined to forge ahead with rational inquiry. He had honed his ability to separate emotions from behavior through rigorous self-observation and analysis. He didn't remember Buzzcut leaving, only that the agent left him to review a thick pile of Delta Green files.

In the dream he couldn't recall the details of those pages,

but he saw the expression on his own face. He watched his dimples fade and his jaw grow tight. His lip curled in a lopsided grimace, revealing teeth that had already begun to grind away. He locked the files in a drawer. He stood up, smoothed out his baggy suit and focused on the job at hand.

When he returned to the hospital that night, his wife and the baby were still in their perfect union. Even when he was admitted to his wife's bedside he felt invisible, like a stranger behind a two-way mirror.

HE WOKE TO THE KNOCK OF EDWARD'S KNUCKLES AGAINST THE mirror. Frank pulled the headphones off and joined the others at the table.

"He'll sleep it off, right *Herr Doktor*?"

"*Ja*, I should think so. It was a small dose."

John played back the audio of the trial. It was unsettling to hear the panicked words where they had been spoken just hours before. The echo of his terror lingered like the tang of his vomit.

Edward lit a Chesterfield and leaned back.

"It beats the tar out of LSD."

Frank tapped his pen against his clipboard.

"It was certainly disorienting, but I wouldn't call it a truth serum."

Gerhard shifted in his chair, wiping a half-formed expression from his face.

Edward leaned forward and spoke.

"He was spilling more than he knew. That black temple

was probably the *Cathédrale Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption*, a Gothic church built out of volcanic rock. That's where Mister Tatin grew up, in Clermont-Ferrand."

John scratched his head.

"And the fungus?"

"*Les Caves Champignonnières des Roches*. They're caves and quarry tunnels full of mushrooms in the Loire Valley. Which just so happens to be the location of Tatin's estate."

Gerhard chuckled.

"Yes, *Herr Doktor*?"

"I did not know that you worked as a tour guide for the French."

Edward crushed out his cigarette.

"I was in the OSS running guns to the French Resistance. You learn your way around."

He lit a fresh cigarette.

"I'll be sure to conduct a more thorough interrogation of Mr. Fragonard tomorrow. Can you up the dosage?"

Gerhard smiled.

"I will double it."

"John, send what we have so far to the branch office and I'll make my status report. The rest of you can turn in."

Gerhard went directly to the barn without a look over his shoulder. Frank waited until Edward and John were upstairs and then snuck outside. The wind cut through him like a razor and he instantly regretted not grabbing his jacket. It was agony to walk slowly, deliberately placing his wet boots into the ruts of Gerhard's footprints.

He peered between the slats of the wall into the shadowed barn laboratory. The German was walking in a circle, shuddering and mumbling to himself. The words were impossible to hear over the wind.

Frank moved around the barn, hoping the fresh snow would cover his tracks. He made his way closer and pressed his ear to the wall. Drips of German squeezed through the warped barn wall.

“Will you show...the Black...reveal....”

Perhaps *Herr Doktor* was reviewing his notes and pacing to fight off the cold. Frank could not risk further exposure. If Gerhard didn't catch him stomping around, the others would. He reluctantly crept back to the cottage.

He peeled off his wet clothes and grasped for the headphones. Charlotte's son was too excited to sleep. They were leaving to visit cousins in the morning.

Frank's stomach sank, already missing their soothing ritual. Charlotte threatened not to read the book and the boy submitted.

The Little Prince was describing his home on a desolate asteroid. His only companion there was a rose, and he felt miserable and lonely now that he had left the flower behind.

“Tu deviens responsable pour toujours de ce que tu as apprivoisé.” You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose.

A surge of homesickness hit Frank. He wanted to be with his family. He wanted to see his boy. Maybe he could convince John to patch a call through to the States. If he could just hear

his son's voice, he would be OK. He sat up in bed.

The headphone cord yanked him back. Charlotte whispered the Little Prince's final words. He was going home, he explained, but he had to leave his body behind. If the stranded man was ever overwhelmed by loneliness, he need only look up at the night sky and it would seem as if all the stars were laughing.

Frank yanked the headphones off. He stared at the painting of the lost fisherman and brooded. He hated that Charlotte and her son were leaving. It was a betrayal, all the more painful because he must bear it alone.

He was being irrational. He had two missions to complete. He could do neither if he could not control himself. He chewed his rubber bite plate and fell into a troubled sleep.

FRANK DREAMED OF THE SECRET SUB-LEVEL BENEATH THE CLASSIFIED prison. Inhuman prisoners, captive and cut off from the sea, wailed in despair. The cloying reek of their dry, peeling flesh was palpable. Frank struggled night and day to break through to them.

He found the first suicide with her head rammed through the bars of her cell, twisted at a wrong angle. Her jaw gaped and her legs flopped on the concrete floor. Frank watched as the life drained from her bulbous eyes.

More prisoners followed, as well as several guards. Frank knew the dangers of suicide contagion. It was a type of *folie à deux*, a syndrome of shared psychosis. He was able to counsel the staff, but the prisoners were doomed. The misery spread

from cell to cell like a rotting disease.

Frank avoided his family for the duration of the crisis. He knew that he could contaminate them. It was safer to keep his problems secured in the prison. When the last prisoner was dead, he went home.

There was nothing waiting for him but a letter from his wife. In the dream he could not recall the details of the letter, but he saw the distortion of his features as his jaw muscles locked tight and ground his teeth. He walked through the empty house and locked the rooms one by one. He tossed the key to the front door in the yard, got back in the car and returned to his prison.

THEIR NEXT SUBJECT, THE FARMER HONORÉ FRAGONARD, paced around the cottage on crooked legs. He was more interested in gossiping about the family that used to own the cottage than discussing prices for his land.

Fragonard took loud slurping gulps of wine while complaining about the quality. He stopped to stare at the two-way mirror several times and scratch his gray beard.

Edward snuck a look as well, with a raised eyebrow apparently directed at Gerhard. John lifted his head from the eyepiece of the camera.

“That old-timer can really put it away.”

Gerhard smiled.

The old man was still staring at the two-way mirror, but his pupils had mushroomed into black pits.

Edward called out.

“Honoré? *Monsieur* Fragonard, can you hear me?”

The farmer’s trembling fingers crawled through his beard. His throat clucked as it strained to find words.

“Can you not see them? *Mon Dieu*, so many. They are loose. The walls have fallen and they are coming...it is too late....”

Edward inched closer.

“What is loose?”

“The black goats.”

“Is it your herd?”

Fragonard shook his head violently, spraying the mirror with hot tears.

“They will spread across the earth! The Black Goat, mother of a thousand young!”

The farmer slammed his head against the mirror, splashing it with a corona of blood. John and Frank jumped back. Gerhard stood rooted to the spot, peering into the wide black eyes.

Frank opened the door and snuck out his head. Edward had pinned Fragonard to the ground and twisted the old man’s arms behind his back. He looked up at Frank and shook his head.

Frank closed the door and waved for the others to hold their position.

“*Iä! Iä!* The black goat will over run the world! *Shub-Niggurath!*”

The old man’s breathing became hoarse and he blacked out. Edward checked his vitals and made a motion in the air to keep the camera rolling.

When the farmer came around, his forehead was clean and bandaged. Edward assured him he had become tipsy and fallen. Fragonard brushed off any further offers of help and shuffled home.

John shut down the camera and wiped sweat from his forehead.

“Mean drunk.”

Edward snapped his fingers.

“Send that film to the courier immediately.”

Gerhard stepped out to collect the food and wine. Edward’s hands shook while he attempted to light a fresh cigarette.

Frank looked at their red reflections in the mirror.

“Did he overdose?”

Gerhard flashed a smile.

“Nein.”

“That was a psychotic episode. You can’t expect to get useful information from anyone.”

Edward shrugged.

“Truth serum isn’t the only goal. Good work, team. Johnny, get HQ on the horn for me.”

Frank cleaned the blood off the mirror. The surface was clear, but he could see the stain of guilt on his face. He separated the feelings from the facts and wrote up his observations.

He grabbed his heavy jacket and headed outside. Thick clumps of snow were piling up, smothering the world an inch at a time. A blizzard had descended and swallowed all sound. The darkness was richer between the stark veils of snow.

A faint sound drifted across the field. Frank let it build,

layer by layer in his ear. It was high-pitched and querulous, like the bleating of goats. He shuddered and hurried inside.

He couldn't sleep. He chewed his bite plate ragged until his teeth broke through its thick gummy skin.

Hurried footsteps rumbled down the stairs. Frank emerged and nearly ran into Edward.

"What's going on?"

"We've got the green light. Get ready to run the operation on the town."

Frank shook his head.

"You haven't read my report on the last trial. Let me summarize. It was a failure. There is zero evidence that the black lotus has any value as a truth serum."

Edward slid a magazine into his pistol.

"Project ARTICHOKE explores all pharmacological tools. This drug could prevent our captured agents from leaking intel. We might be able to alter memories and personality. Maybe deploy it to create confusion and panic in the enemy. If we control the mind, we control the battlefield."

"That farmer became psychotic! You can't do that to an entire town! Have you ever heard of *folie à deux*? Hallucinations spread from person to person until you have full-blown mass hysteria."

John entered with Gerhard. The doctor beamed and firelight danced on his glasses.

Edward set down his pistol and raised his hands.

"I understand your objections, but there's no need to worry. Our operation here is only the end phase of extensive

experiments conducted at Edgewood. We know what we're doing."

Gerhard put a sweaty hand on Frank's shoulder.

"We have but a small supply. Each person will receive a fraction of what *Herr* Fragonard ingested. The town will recover in less than a day, I assure you."

Frank glared at the horseshoe of men around him. He was outnumbered and alone. He understood that the ends justified the means for Delta Green, but plotting a sneak attack on an innocent village's sanity for political reasons was grotesque. If the CIA was willing to violate America's allies, it was no better than Gerhard.

"I will not censor my report. The agency will hear everything."

Edward gave a curt nod.

"That's why you're here, isn't it? Let's get to work."

THE SHORT TREK INTO TOWN WAS ARDUOUS IN THE DEEP SNOW. The sun was not yet up and the half-buried road was hard to follow. John lugged a pair of film cameras disguised as suitcases. Gerhard had a basket filled with refined black lotus and LSD. Edward secured his pistol in his leather valise. Frank tucked his heavy clipboard inside his jacket and punched his gloves into his pockets. He wrapped his right glove around the pistol he had stolen from the crate. The heavy lump was a cold comfort.

John patted himself down and checked his pockets in a panic. He pulled his flask from an inside jacket pocket with

relief. He took a long drink and then shot a defiant look at the group.

Edward leaned in between the men.

“Easy, fellas. This is going to be smooth, just like we practiced. Cold day like this, folks will hustle out for their bread and cheese and then hole up inside. The ones who remember what happened will laugh about it in the morning.”

Frank gave him a stony look.

Edward pulled out a pack of Chesterfields. It was empty. He retrieved a new pack from his valise and fished out a cigarette.

Gerhard lit a cigarette of his own and spoke around the filter as he puffed.

“This project is the culmination of years of toil.”

He exhaled a cloud of smoke.

“I could not have completed it without you. Thank you for your support.”

Frank pictured the German conducting his early experiments in a Nazi prison camp.

Edward turned.

“I’ll keep a lookout for *gendarmes* while John sets up the cameras. You two stick to the timetable and you should have no problems.”

He faded back into an alley. John hefted his cameras and trudged after him without a word. Gerhard winked at Frank and took off for the snow-capped grain elevator that loomed over the town.

Frank had to jog to keep up. Gerhard was bounding with

unrestrained glee.

“Slow down! We look suspicious.”

Gerhard darted across an arching stone bridge over a swollen river. He was soon dwarfed by a roaring water wheel. Frank caught up and leaned against the wall of the old mill to catch his fogging breath. Gerhard offered him a cigarette. Frank waved it off. He had ground his teeth all night and his jaw was almost too sore to open.

The German produced a skeleton key for the heavy wood door. They would be in and out before the miller returned from his morning trip to the river’s sluice gate. The thick stone walls blocked most of the noise of the water wheel. Inside, a labyrinth of gears and turbines squeaked, rattled and purred to each other as they ground wheat on the upper levels. Fresh flour hissed in the dark as it slid down chutes to fill large burlap sacks.

Frank pulled off his gloves and closed the door. Gerhard kept the hanging light bulbs dark and flicked on his flashlight. The giant steel spur wheel over their heads cast restless, sharp-toothed shadows across clouds of flour dust.

Frank’s naked hand stroked the icy metal of the pistol in his coat pocket. He watched Gerhard overtly now for any final clues his intentions were darker than the CIA’s own.

Gerhard hunched over his basket, obscuring a glass pipette from view. Frank pushed in closer.

“I need to observe.”

Gerhard turned and drove something into Frank’s stomach. Frank staggered back and looked down. The slim black

handle of a dagger protruded from his coat. The metal clipboard tucked inside had not stopped the blade. Both were skewered to his body. Blood trickled down his pants and clotted in the loose flour at his feet.

The pistol in his pocket forgotten, he turned and tottered out the door. The mission. He had to warn the others.

He collapsed on the bridge. The dagger probed deeper, grinding against a rib. His blood steamed in the air and he could smell it, coppery and bitter.

Gerhard flipped him over and shouted in German, his words lost in the thrash of the water wheel. He seized the dagger but it would not come loose. It twisted in Frank's guts. The muscles of his abdomen clenched tight around the steel. His spine arched in agony and he tumbled into the rushing black water below.

Icy fingers drove into his wound and rendered his body blessedly numb. He bobbed above the surface and saw Gerhard standing on the bridge, already far away, and then saw nothing at all.

BLINDING LIGHT AND PAIN. FRANK TRIED TO SIT UP AND gasped, falling back with a thud against a solid wood table. Ceramic clattered to the ground and smashed. He tentatively explored his naked torso. He felt sutures along the wound in his stomach.

He pushed himself up with an elbow and a groan. He was on a dining table in a small rustic kitchen. Through a dusty, copper pot framed window the sun was high in the sky. How

much time had he lost? Where was he?

He swung his legs over the side of the table and awkwardly sat upright. His stomach hurt when he moved, but not when he breathed. The wound was ugly but smaller than he imagined. Its bright red lips were yanked tight by loops of thick thread. The sutures started neat and ended in a lazy scribble of dangling string that wept fresh blood. He pressed a hand to the wound and looked for his clothes.

They rested in a pile before a crackling fireplace. The bloody dagger lay on the hearth. There was no sign of the gun.

He lowered his bare feet to the cold ground and felt a prick of shattered ceramic. A puddle of black coffee leaked from a broken mug and soaked a half-eaten crust of bread.

He rooted through his clothes for the pistol. They were barely damp. He must have been here for hours. A chorus of tremulous bleats floated under the thick oak door. It was high and panicked, almost human. A fresh trickle of fear prickled across his naked skin.

He bit his cheek to stifle the pain in his stomach as he struggled into his heavy clothes. He grabbed the only weapon in sight, the black dagger. There was an SS eagle inlaid on the handle. That treacherous German bastard.

He shuffled to the drafty door with the dagger in his fist. Through a crack he saw a herd of black goats screaming and straining against a fence. What was the goat farmer's name?

The animals thrashed in a tight cluster. Some tried to jump the fence and collapsed, flopping back into the herd. They appeared to be tangled in a net.

A naked man, pale and hunched as a crescent moon, dragged them back. It was *Monsieur* Fragonard. Why was he naked in the snow? Frank looked back at the crust of bread on the floor. The old man had eaten the dosed bread. How far had Gerhard gone?

Frank turned and yelped. A gaping black eye pressed against the crack in the door. The old man rammed into the door and spilled inside. Frank held the dagger out to ward him off.

“*Monsieur* Fragonard, please stay down. You are confused.”

The old man raised his black eyes to the sky and wept.

“She comes! She comes!”

Frank backed out of the farm house, keeping the dagger pointed at the prostrate lunatic. He skirted the goats and slipped in a pool of slushy dark blood. The herd was not tangled in a net. They had been stitched together in a writhing mass of yellow eyes and scrambling hooves.

He lurched into the winding road, churning muddy snow in his wake. The town lay in one direction, the cottage in the other. He knew now that Gerhard was a traitor. Worse, he was an occult fanatic. He should report to Delta Green, but what of the people of Pont-Saint-Anthony? They were all at Gerhard’s mercy. If he could find Edward and the others they could contain the situation. It had been his job to watch Gerhard. He broke into a sloppy run, clutching his stomach and wincing with every step.

Pillars of dark smoke undulated in the distance, glowing

orange where they crossed the setting winter sun.

Pont-Saint-Anthony looked like a war zone. Bodies lay strewn about the streets, draped across doorways and hung out of windows. This was mass suicide, or perhaps mass murder.

EDWARD'S VOICE STARTLED HIM FROM ACROSS THE EMPTY village square.

"You're back! We were looking for you." Edward was on his hands and knees in front of the frozen fountain. His eyes were black and his arms were painted to the elbows with blood. "Have you made your final assessment?"

"Where is John?"

"In the restaurant. We need to submit our report by oh eleven hundred. Do you have your conclusions?"

Edward returned to his work, spreading clumps of mangled brain matter into a strange geometric configuration. His pistol peeked from the open mouth of his nearby valise.

Frank spoke using the measured, even tones he had developed working in psych wards.

"I haven't had time to finish my report, Edward. Do you know where Gerhard is?"

Edward waved his hands, sending drops of gore flying.

"I don't need a piece of paper to tell me this was a resounding success! We will dominate the commies and push them back to the Stone Age. *Iä!*"

He gestured to the steaming brains cooling in the pink-stained snow.

"If you just form the thoughts in your mind I will add them

to the files.”

Frank backed towards the restaurant.

“I have to find John and Gerhard. We’ll reconvene and I’ll give my final assessment. We can sign off on the report together.”

“Are you trying to undermine this operation? I knew there was something wrong about you. You’re a dirty Red spy!”

He reached for his blood-caked pistol. Frank charged in and swung his boot for Edward’s throat.

The agent avoided the clumsy kick but fumbled the weapon. He recovered and dove on the pistol.

Frank brought the SS dagger down on Edward’s neck.

Edward writhed and slumped forward, arms outstretched across his pile of brains.

Frank squeezed his eyes shut and fished out the knife and pistol. He tossed the bloody weapons into the valise and wiped his hands with snow. He scrubbed until they were numb, but the lurid rims of blood beneath his nails stood out against his pale skin. He buried them in his pockets and ran into the *charcuterie*.

John hung from the ceiling among the cured meats, wrapped in a web of oily black ropes.

“Frank, please...”

He looked closer. The web was composed of tangled film stock woven together with slick purple intestines. John’s face was pale with blood loss. His eyes were jet black.

“Finish the cocoon. Prepare my body. I am food for the gods!”

The floor was awash in blood. He would be dead soon. Frank lined up the quivering barrel of the pistol with John's forehead and squeezed the trigger.

An obese naked man bounded past the window on all fours. The lunatic caught sight of a young girl and threw back his bearded face to bay at the winter sun.

The girl, a thin blonde in a plain wool dress, carried a broken mop like a spear. The naked man leapt upon the spear tip and they collapsed in a bloody heap.

Frank stumbled out of the *charcuterie* with the pistol rattling in his hand.

The naked man stood and helped the girl up. They strolled off arm and arm, trailing blood and howling with laughter. They joined a gathering parade of townspeople, lurching to the music of hysteria and exultation. Young and old, draped in torn clothing and maimed flesh, the remnants of Pont-Saint-Anthony slouched towards the old grain mill.

Frank cowered as he followed the mob, certain it would turn and engulf him at any instant. He gripped the pistol tight and put one foot in front of the other. Together they crossed the arching stone bridge.

He heard a brief shriek over the thunder of the water wheel. He snuck closer and peered through the heavy wood door. The harsh light of a bare bulb revealed the miller's kicking legs. The townspeople forced him into the steel teeth of giant spinning gears.

Next they attacked the sacks of flour, tearing them apart and stealing greedy handfuls. A girl in pig tails scraped the

blood-speckled flour from the floor with her tongue. Behind her, a silver-haired hag pushed gobs of flour into her toothless mouth with long crooked fingers. A fat woman drooled glutinous paste into the open mouth of a baby that stared up with wide black eyes.

“A glimpse of truth has left them starving for more.”

Frank jumped at the sound of Gerhard’s voice in his ear. He spun and pointed the pistol.

Gerhard was nude and ghostly white, his skin encrusted in layers of flour. His bulging black eyes stared at the SS dagger he had pulled from the valise in Frank’s distraction. He turned it over in his hands.

“It is not too late for you to taste the truth, *Herr* Frank. I thought I would get the black lotus into your mouth guard, as I did in John’s flask and Edward’s cigarettes. Alas, it was a difficult thing to time.”

“You’ve destroyed them all!”

“*Nein*, this is truth serum!”

Frank’s finger tensed on the trigger.

“Stop the lies. I know you’re Karotechia.”

Gerard rubbed the handle of the dagger.

“For a time. I was tasked to duplicate the research of my counterpart in Unit 831. Once I tasted the lotus for myself, however, my eyes were opened. I saw that governments and politics are meaningless. Religion, morality, physics...all pathetic lies. Do not worry, your America still has a role to play. Once they witness what we have accomplished here, they will deploy the black lotus themselves. First Korea, then China, and

finally the Soviet Union.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

The German giggled.

“The plans are already in place. I prepared the aerosol weapons myself at the Edgewood Arsenal.”

A surge of hatred hooked Frank’s finger tight against the trigger. Hatred for Gerhard, hatred for the government for pursuing such madness, and hatred for himself for letting it happen. He forced his finger open through sheer will.

“You’ve studied the drug, you know how to treat its effects. Help me take care of the villagers and I’ll let you live.”

“It is too late to stop it. Behold the black lotus!”

Gerhard lifted the dagger and deftly traced an x across his eyelids. He seized the delicate flaps of red flesh and peeled them back around his glistening coal black eyeballs.

“IA! CTHULHU R’LYEH WGAH’NAGL FHTAGN!”

Frank’s hand clenched shut and he fired. Silenced .22-caliber rounds drilled tiny holes into Gerhard’s chest and shoulders.

The naked German staggered past Frank, headlong into the townspeople. They absorbed him into their blood- and flour-caked huddle. He crowed his alien gibberish and they took up the chorus, croaking through clots of undigested flour.

Frank’s mind swelled with revelations. He shook his head until they fragmented into a swarm of frenzied, stinging questions. Would the government really use the black lotus against cities? They had dropped the Bomb, hadn’t they? Was Gerhard right? Was the black lotus a truth serum? Was it too late to save

these people?

There was only one way to contain the mass hysteria.

He leveled the pistol and emptied the magazine into Gerhard. The German cackled and flailed, smashing the hanging light bulb as he died. He collapsed with a plume of bloody flour.

The dust hit the sparking light socket and ignited with a flash that raced into the upper floors. A thousand tiny fires sprang to life. The villagers continued to fill their distended bellies with fistfuls of flour and spew their unholy prayers.

Frank slammed the door closed and held it shut until the wood scorched his hands. He had cured Pont-Saint-Anthony of its madness. Now he had to cure the CIA.

He trudged back to the cottage, hands pressed over his ears to shut out the shrieking goats. He could not see them, but their screams filled the air. He tried to conjure the memory of Charlotte's gentle voice. She would return to face the aftermath, but at least she and her son had escaped the horror. Frank held fast to that glimmer of relief and pushed onward.

He smashed the two-way mirror and cameras. He hauled the files and film, everything they had learned about the black lotus, into the barn. He turned over the racks of vials and spilled all the chemicals. He barely had to strike a match to make the barn leap into a pyre.

The only thing left was his report to Delta Green. He worked out the message on the one-time pad hidden in his jacket's secret pocket.

He tuned John's radio and read the sequences of ciphertext

from the one time pad. He repeated the message like a mantra, taking solace in the dry numbers that obscured the horrific truth. *Gerhard dead. Town lost. Stop Edgewood.*

The radio squawked a single transmission. He subtracted the five-digit message from his random encryption key. *Clear.*

A wave of fatigue crashed over him as though he had reached the far shore of a storm-tossed sea. He ripped the microphone from its cable and dragged the equipment to the ground.

He plodded downstairs and ripped the gloomy painting off the wall. He jammed it into the fireplace and dragged flames across the wooden floor. The damp old cottage breathed in drafts of cold air and exhaled pale smoke. He opened the door and wandered out into the deepening night.

A burst of static barked above the crunching snow and crackling timber. He strained to pick out the tinny voice and followed it inside, halfway upstairs to the dismantled radio equipment.

The voice crackled again from the back bedroom. It came from the headphones transmitting from Charlotte's house.

Frank sprinted across the smoldering floor boards. He fumbled for the headphones and cranked up the volume. He could not identify the voice. It could be a lunatic from the village. It could be Charlotte and her son, scared and alone.

He plunged into the thick smoke and tripped over the trunk of tools. He dumped it over and searched for a weapon. His groping hands closed around the lean steel body of a pistol. He kicked up scalding embers and fled, boots hissing in the

snow.

He reached Charlotte's villa drenched in clammy sweat and tears. He shook so hard from cold, adrenaline and fatigue that he could barely hold the doorknob. The indistinct voice leaked through the door. The faces of his wife and son flashed before his eyes. He had to save them.

He reached out. The door creaked open.

He crept through the house. He could identify Charlotte's voice now. He followed the soft trickle of French to the child's bedroom.

"Tu deviens responsable pour toujours de ce que tu as apprivoisé."

He pushed open the door. Charlotte looked up from *Le Petit Prince* with bulging black eyes. In her son's bed was a lump tangled in dripping crimson sheets. She smiled and turned the page.

Frank shot her through the head.

He stumbled out of the villa, hot tears freezing on his cheeks. An agonized moan crawled from his throat. Smoky black figures danced in the woods surrounding the house. The inhuman screams of goats rattled on the icy wind.

Frank put the gun beneath his chin and cast his wet eyes up to the night sky.

He could hear the stars laughing.

Cracks in the Door

By Jason Mical

GEORGETOWN, WASHINGTON, D.C., MARCH 1948.

BAD NEWS TRAVELS BY MANILA ENVELOPE AND DAVID HUNTLEY didn't know how much more bad news he could take. Yesterday, a Manila envelope waited for him on the mail table at home. He kissed Karen and asked about Michael just like any other day: the good husband and father, taking care not to let Karen feel his palms in case she noticed how clammy they were. She said nothing about the envelope, even though it said REGISTERED and she must have signed for it.

David knew what the envelope contained before he absconded to his office and opened it, neatly and professionally, rather than follow his instinct and tear it to pieces. He knew the mortgage company's address by heart now.

The letter inside was on a single page of thick paper with a glossy blue letterhead. Whoever typed it used extra space to give the illusion that the paper contained more information than it really did, when the only important piece sat at the top, applied with a precision rubber stamp in crimson ink: FINAL NOTICE. As David pulled the letter out, a helpfully stamped-and-addressed white envelope fluttered to the floor.

David said a handful of words over dinner. That night, as he brushed his teeth, he realized he couldn't remember what he had eaten. His mouth tasted like dry nothingness even before he smeared the toothpaste on his brush. When he turned off the

bathroom light and checked in on Michael, the fifteen-year-old was already asleep. The kid's cross-country practice made sure Michael didn't stay out late.

"I love you," David whispered to Karen when he came to bed. She mumbled something, and he leaned down to kiss her cheek. Her partly-open lips smelled of morning breath already. *Her* morning breath. David smiled a little, and focused on that comfort as he fell asleep.

The next morning Karen shot him knowing looks over his newspaper. Michael ignored them both, lost in a world of corn flakes and baseball stats. David pursed his lips and refused to look Karen in the eye. Not yet.

The second Manila envelope waited for him at his office after the half-hour bus ride from Georgetown into the heart of the city. This one sat on his chair, as obvious as a ship's klaxon. Unlike the one in his mailbox, the only hint as to what might be inside was a large, black stamp that read [TOP SECRET | EYES ONLY], followed by a smaller stamp that read [SECURITY CLEARANCE 5 REQUIRED]. The envelope was so thick the flap barely sealed it.

The only consistent thing between the two envelopes was the clammy chill on David Huntley's palms as he unwound the string loop sealing this new complication. Huntley's hands shook as pulled glossy photographs, hand-typed phone transcripts, and at the bottom, a smaller folder with a photo of a man twenty years younger in a Marine's dress uniform stapled to a twenty-page report and witness testimony about a town in Massachusetts called Innsmouth.



“WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS,” HUNTLEY DEMANDED, SLAMMING the offending file on Deputy Director Kirschner’s expansive cherry desk. Kirschner’s secretary stood at the door, exasperated, and Kirschner himself hadn’t bothered to stand when Huntley flew past her and burst into his office moments before.

“Sit down,” he said. “We need to talk.”

Huntley’s nostrils flared. He looked down, realized he was clutching the edge of Kirschner’s desk, and relaxed his grip. He settled into one of the government-issued wooden chairs. Huntley’s broad frame filled it, and the shape of the chair forced him to lean forward to remain halfway comfortable. Kirschner watched him without moving.

“I’ve got this, Miss Eider,” he said to the secretary without breaking eye contact with Huntley. Behind him, Huntley heard the door quietly click shut.

“What the hell is this, Devon?” Huntley demanded again. He met the Deputy Director’s stare without blinking. Kirschner was in his fifties, and what gray hair remained was cut so short that his head resembled a fat, fuzzy egg. Like Huntley he still kept his military bearing, but a generous paunch pushed the front of his plain white shirt towards his desk. Kirschner picked up the file in a hammy hand.

“Your next assignment.”

“Do you know what’s in here?”

“Of course we do,” Kirschner said, leaning back a half-inch. He opened the envelope that Huntley had not bothered to

reseal. “That’s why we assigned this to you.”

“Kingman’s my friend. Jesus Christ, we went through Basic together. My kid and his kids played together.” If Kirschner cared, he didn’t show it. “I’d trust him with my wife and kid’s lives. He’s a good guy.”

“Not according to HUAC he isn’t,” Kirschner countered. “Or at the very least, he ought to have known better than to get wrapped up in that Commie shit, especially at a time like this. Does he read the fucking papers?”

“Oh come on, he’s not calling Moscow and talking to Uncle Joe for fuck’s sake. He works in a factory because it’s the only job he can get.”

“Then why’d he join the American Communist Party?”

“The hell should I know? He’s always been an idealist. That’s his problem.”

“So are you. That’s why this one’s yours.”

“Bullshit.”

Kirschner snorted. “Listen to yourself, David. You’ve been around long enough to know how this works. If you were some green recruit I’d expect this from you. You’re one of my best consultants, and your field work has been commendable on every assignment.” Kirschner tossed the file back in front of Huntley. “Go on.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Do you think he’s a liability?”

“No more than he’s been.”

Kirschner snorted again. “Even though he’s about to testify in front of the HUAC?”

Huntley considered.

“We think he’s a liability, David. Look at those psych evals, for Christsakes. I give him ten minutes tops before he starts talking about what he saw in Massachusetts.”

“This isn’t why I’m here,” Huntley said.

“Come again?”

“I said, this isn’t why I’m here.”

Kirchner shook his head, his ample jowls jiggling with the motion. “Then why are you here, agent? Tell me.” He leaned forward, resting his head on his hands.

“Because...” Huntley couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence.

“Because you’re a fucking hero, right?”

Huntley shrugged.

“What kind of hero misses three mortgage payments in a row?” The fact that Kirschner knew this stung, but Huntley hid it. “Your job, the one I sign your check for every two weeks, is to keep people like Kingman from becoming liabilities. And right now, that’s exactly what he is.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Huntley said, defeated.

“Seal the crack before something leaks out. Go be a god-damned hero.”

HUNTLEY TOOK THE LONG WAY HOME AFTER THE BUS DROPPED him off. He circled a local park before choosing a bench and sitting so he could watch a mother with two young boys toss birdseed to a flock of pigeons. Huntley hated the fucking birds. He’d told Michael countless times not to feed the filthy vermin

when Michael was the boys' age. They carried diseases. Their little orange eyes drilled, unblinking, straight through your head. The way they moved reminded Huntley not of a warm-blooded, soft creature but a cold and merciless lizard. Bobbing up and down as they walked, stalking the specks of seed that littered the ground, the larger birds pushing the smaller out of the way so they could satisfy a hunger that never ceased.

The boys tossed the gray and brown creatures more seeds, squealing with delight as they flocked back and forth across the grass. The birds that couldn't run fast enough took flight, beating out their slower companions on the ground. Their sharp orange beaks snatched the seed before their unblinking eyes turned back to the children, waiting patiently for them to toss the next handful of food.

Huntley stood, straightened his coat, and walked down the gravel path towards his street.

His house rose two stories in a row of brownstones. His front yard, tiny as it might be, was several days past being mowed. Something he'd have to take care of this weekend. Huntley climbed the steps to the front door and fished his key from his pocket.

"I'm home!" he called.

"Back here!" Karen shouted from the kitchen.

Huntley tossed his coat over the banister and found her taking a casserole out of the oven. "Work late?" she asked after pecking him on the cheek.

Huntley mumbled assent.

"Mike's off with Lucas. Said he wouldn't be back until

after dinner.”

David plopped into his chair at the table. Outside the kitchen window, he could see a sparrow digging into Karen’s birdfeeder in the back yard.

“Honey, your hat’s still on.”

“What?” Huntley reached up. He removed his hat and set it on the newly-pressed tablecloth.

After a few moments, he became aware that Karen was standing in front of the oven, staring at him. He looked her over: in her early 40s, but echoes of the girl he fell in love with were still there. A bleached white apron covered her dress. She’d curled her brown hair today, and it hung around her face in large rings.

“You’re beautiful,” David said.

She laughed, that deep, loud laugh he fell in love with so many years ago when he whispered jokes to her while their friends drank and smoked and planned.

“Well, I’m glad you think so.”

“You are.”

She tossed her head, a gesture that made her hair tumble messily. “This casserole can sit in the over for a while,” she said. “It’s not going to go bad.” Her eyes darted towards the ceiling.

Huntley loosened his tie and undid the top button.

“Here, let me help you with that,” Karen said. Her fingers wrapped around his tie, brushed it aside, and quickly worked his next button apart. Her unique mix of Chanel and soap flooded his nostrils, replacing the smell of dinner.

The casserole did not go bad.

Afterwards, Karen lit one of her rare cigarettes. “What was that registered letter that came yesterday?” she finally asked.

Huntley rolled over and grabbed one of his own Chesterfields. “It was nothing.” The smoke raked his throat.

“Nothing doesn’t come registered mail, David,” Karen pressed.

“Nothing I can’t take care of,” Huntley grunted. He stood and stretched, still naked. He twitched slightly at the thought of Karen looking at his ass. “I’m going to go take a shower.”

The brownstone wasn’t equipped with an upstairs shower, so Huntley padded downstairs, towel in hand, to the makeshift nozzle the previous owner installed in the basement next to the coal chute. He stood letting the ice-cold water flow over him, carrying the soap and sticky residue from their lovemaking into the basement flood drain. The quick escapade in the bedroom whet his appetite. Huntley closed his eyes, thinking of Kingman. Dancing eyes, that easy smile, and that dumb fucking optimism. The charm of youth. Huntley’s hands wandered, teasing life and blood back into his body.

His mind blanked, and when he looked up at the clock on the far wall, a half-hour had passed. Huntley shut off the water and checked his face in the mirror far longer than necessary, taking an inventory of the blemishes and scars. His stomach growled as his body tingled.

When he finally climbed the stairs, the kitchen no longer smelled like casserole. A single place setting lay accusingly next to his newspaper on the table. Huntley didn’t bother to look in

the fridge. He found Karen in the bedroom reading, now in a nightgown. An overflowing ashtray and the yellow reek of her cigarettes revealed that her rare smoke had turned into a chain.

“I’m going to the bar,” he said.

Karen put down her book. “The casserole’s in the icebox.”

Huntley waved her away. “I’m not hungry.”

“I noticed.”

He dressed quickly, ignoring her eyes on him. She asked nothing and he offered less. Before leaving the house, he stopped at his office and took a small book from the shelf: Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*. Huntley removed several crisp \$20 bills from a stack shoved between the yellowed, pulpy pages. *My money, not mortgage money*, Huntley told his nagging guilt. *Mine*.

It was a two-block walk to find a taxi, and a twenty-minute ride south of the Potomac. Traffic was dead: the wind-up clock on the cab’s dashboard read 9:30. He had plenty of time.

“You gonna be all right, buddy? This ain’t the best part of town,” the cabbie opined, watching Huntley from the rear-view mirror.

“I know that. I’ll be fine.”

“Oh, I get it,” the cabbie winked.

“No, you don’t,” Huntley countered.

The cab crawled through the spider-web streets. Huntley invited his imagination to start running wild. This would be just the thing to clear his head. The cabbie didn’t reply but kept stealing glances at Huntley in the mirror until the accusing eyes in the rearview crashed through Huntley’s fantasy. “Watch the

road, buddy,” Huntley told him. The man looked forward and ignored Huntley for the rest of the ride.

The cab finally pulled up in front of an old warehouse, its painted name a faded white streak. A single weak electric light illuminated the area. Huntley handed the cabbie one of the twenties.

“I’ll get your change,” the cabbie said.

“No need. Just meet me here at one. There’s more where that came from.”

“You got it, boss.” Huntley couldn’t see the cabbie’s expression in the dark, but liked the tone of implied discretion.

Huntley grabbed his hat and coat and exited the cab into the dense evening air. The swampy moisture that permeated the city filled his lungs. It felt safe, like being under a blanket on a winter night. A murder of crows, disturbed when the cab pulled up, squawked and settled back on a utility pole for the evening.

Huntley crossed the deserted street, rounded a corner, and in a few steps ducked down a narrow alley sandwiched between two faceless brick walls. He knew the door by heart, and the knock he practiced every day at his desk. It opened immediately, and a small, muscular man, clad in a toga and barely out of his teens by Huntley’s estimation, led him inside. Huntley checked his coat and hat and descended a flight of stairs to a room so sparsely lit that he closed his eyes to force them to adjust. That evening’s wares paraded through a door in the far wall: some like the man—*boy*, Huntley corrected himself—who met him at the door. Some older. Some in dresses, some in suits. Huntley rolled his tongue around in his mouth, trying to decide

what flavor sounded good.

He chose.

“I need this,” he whispered at one point in the next few hours.

“I know.” It was the only thing his companion said that evening.

HUNTLEY MET KINGMAN AFTER WORK AT KINGMAN’S FAVORITE bar, a run-down blue-collar watering hole called the Queen’s Head. Earlier that day, Huntley found a half-dozen excuses to pass by Kirschner’s door, which was either closed or open just enough of a crack to be uninviting. He heard male voices inside, sometimes raised. Two men he didn’t recognize in flat-blue suits stalked down the hall an hour later.

After that Kirschner’s door remained shut.

David Huntley and Harry Kingman started in on a pitcher of beer. Huntley poured; Kingman’s hands shook visibly as he reached for the glass.

“When did that start?” Huntley asked, putting his hand over his friend’s to steady it.

“When the fuck do you think?” Kingman said. “When I got that goddamned subpoena.” He looked up at Huntley. Kingman had always looked gaunt and hollow—a haunted man, Huntley’s grandmother would have said—but now he looked like a walking corpse. His bloodshot eyes were ringed by puffy circles, and his breath carried the strong scent of cotton mouth and old booze.

Huntley moved his hand up towards the inside of King-

man's elbow. His friend reflexively jerked his arm away.

"Don't tell me you're back on that shit, too. What's Becca going to say this time?"

"She's not going to fucking know if you don't tell her," Kingman hissed. He licked his lips, hoisted his beer, and drained it in one go. He grabbed the pitcher before Huntley could and poured his next.

"Harry, listen. It's *all* going to come out in the testimony. You know that, right? Everything."

"David, I—"

"No, shut the fuck up for a second. This isn't just about whatever you've been up to with the Reds. The fucking *Reds*. I mean, Jesus Christ. What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I needed something to do," Kingman mumbled.

Huntley ignored this. "It's not just that. It's twenty years ago. It's what we did afterwards. They're going to see all those gaps in your file and they're going to start asking questions." He grabbed Kingman's hand and held it up. Even in the jaundiced bar light, both men could see it shaking. "They're going to see *this* and it won't be long before they roll up that sleeve and take a look. They'll see all those redacted areas in your file, and they're going to roll up that other sleeve and take a look."

"Is that what this is about?"

"Yeah, Harry, it is. You're running out of options."

"Fuck you for falling in with those bastards," Kingman spat. He drained the next glass of beer.

Huntley leaned back on the stool so he could put Kingman's fists in his line of sight, just in case. "No, fuck you for

not getting your shit together. You could have been there with me. This is good work. Important work.”

“Yeah, sure it is. You’re a regular hero.”

The word stung like an angry wasp. Huntley’s jaw clenched.

“At least I’m not colluding with fucking Communists.” He glanced down. “Or killing off twenty-year-old memories by filling my arm with hop.”

Kingman reflexively rubbed his elbow joint. “You know what? Fuck you. You never got it, you self-righteous son of a bitch.” A shadow passed over Kingman’s face, as though a machine turned itself off and back on. His expression softened. “What is this shit anyway? This isn’t how my best friend acts. What’s into you?”

“What’s into me is this: there are things more important than you or me,” Huntley lied. The guilt he felt last night before he distracted himself, those long black smoky fingers reaching inside his chest and slowly squeezing, returned like a familiar dance tune. Huntley’s left fist curled and his jaw clenched as the balancing anger came with it. *Fuck Harry for making me do this.* He took a deep breath, fighting to get it under control.

There might still be a way to talk him into this. “Why didn’t you ever do it?” Huntley asked, changing tacks.

“Do what?”

“Finish what you ended up in the hospital for.”

Kingman’s burst of mirthless laughter made several other patrons turn to look at the two men. “Why do you think?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

“Do you have any idea how often I think of it?” Huntley shook his head. Kingman continued. “Every fucking day. When I’m waiting for the bus. When I look at myself in the mirror in the morning. I see Becca and it goes away for a bit, but it always comes back, along with everything else. Those memories. Those *people*. Those *things*. I hear a prayer in my head, over and over. It’s like my foreman looking over my shoulder and telling me the same shit every goddamned day, even though I’ve been on that assembly line for the last eight years. It’s the same phrase: *Put the gun to your head. Put the gun to your head. Put the gun to your head.*’ You know the only time it’s different? When it says *Put the gun to your head and pull the trigger.*’

“When I go take a leak in a minute, I’m going to look at the tile over the urinal, and I’m going to hear it then too. You want to know why I got so involved with the ACP, with the Reds? Because it’s something to do where I can’t hear that shit *all the fucking time.*” He stopped, took a breath, and finished half his drink.

“Hey, at least you’re slowing down,” Huntley said, nodding at the remaining beer swimming in Kingman’s glass.

“Don’t tell me you don’t hear it too. Don’t tell me you don’t see those *things.*”

“I...” Huntley paused. He considered his own beer for a minute. His arm muscles tensed, the residual anger guiding them to a larger purpose. “Of course I do. But what I hear is a reason to drag myself to the office every morning. A reason to

keep going.”

Kingman chuckled mirthlessly. “Really? That’s fucking rich. You really do think you’re the good guy.”

Huntley’s hand squeezed his glass, which thankfully held up to the pressure. “I have to. If I’m not fighting it, what then? Try to off myself by emptying my wrists in the bathtub?”

“You know why I haven’t finished it?” Kingman said, ignoring the jab. “Because however bad this is, what’s on the other side might be worse. Have you thought of that?”

“Buddy, I can’t imagine anything worse than this.”

“I said the same thing. Before Innsmouth. Remember?”

Huntley didn’t, and shook his head.

“That’s the bitch of it. It just keeps getting worse, and still, it *has* to be better.”

They talked for a few more minutes before Huntley finished his beer and clapped Kingman on the shoulder. Pleasantries were exchanged. Lawyers were suggested. On the bus ride back to Georgetown, Huntley went over what Kingman told him of Becca’s schedule and his last days before testifying, which were likely to be his last as a free American.

Fuck him for not having the balls to do it. Fuck him. Of the two of us, he has no right to think it could possibly be worse.

He has no fucking clue.

Huntley clenched his jaw and flexed his fingers into a fist. He didn’t notice when the businessman sitting next to him stood and changed seats. He didn’t notice that he started soundlessly muttering, over and over, “Tomorrow. Tomorrow.”



HUNTLEY'S OLD MARINE SIDEARM, AN M1911 A1 .45, STILL lay in its shoebox on the top shelf of his closet. His CIC revolver replaced it long ago, but for some reason Huntley lifted the pistol out of its cardboard coffin and started to clean it. The movements were rote, learned so long ago in Basic that he could do them in his sleep.

Karen still slept as Huntley holstered the pistol under his suit jacket, then slid his service .38 in his jacket pocket. When he arrived at work he pushed papers around his desk, ignoring the revolver's weight pressed against his belly, until Kirschner's secretary knocked on the door and informed Huntley the assistant director wanted to see him.

Kirschner's door hung open just a sliver, and Huntley knocked on the frame so as not to push it inwards.

"Come in!"

Huntley opened the door. Kirschner stood, in conference with the two navy-suit-clad G-men he saw walking out yesterday. "You asked to see me, Devon?"

Kirschner grunted. "How is that case file?"

"I'm almost done with it," Huntley replied. The two men studied him like a laboratory specimen. One jotted something in a notebook. "What is this?"

"I don't need to remind you that time is of the essence," Kirschner pressed.

"It'll be done by this evening," Huntley had no idea who these two were, but their presence set him so far on his back

foot that he almost stuttered, a tic mostly eliminated in elementary school and something he hadn't ever done in front of Kirschner.

"That's good. We're glad to hear it's taken care of," the deputy director replied.

"We?"

"Please call Miss Eider's line this evening and tell her when it's finished."

"We?"

"That will be all, agent," Kirschner waved his hand. Huntley briefly considered asking again, but thought better of it when the G-man with the notebook raised an eyebrow at him.

"Gentlemen." Huntley nodded and left and gently shut the office door behind him.

Back at his desk, Huntley refocused his newly-stoked anger at the two strangers by reexamining Kingman's file. Delta Green's notes on his friend were extensive: details he didn't even know. Relapses into heroin he'd managed to keep hidden. Photographs of Kingman walking arm-in-arm with a woman in a too-short skirt, her bruised legs and arms and tattered hat lending an air of sadness to the scenario.

Huntley briefly wondered how many other such files existed. Probably one for every Marine at Innsmouth who saw those awful things. Marines like Kingman who washed out and couldn't be recruited or serve as contacts. Huntley knew a couple of these: Captain Jerome, whom he saw around the office from time to time, had been a sergeant during the raid. Daniel Sulla worked at the National Archives; he always was

more owlsh than field agent material, but Huntley had leaned on him more than once to fish a rare book or manuscript out of storage.

Sulla knew. He had seen them too.

Which brought Huntley back to Kingman and the Manila envelope. After torturing himself with details for another hour, he grabbed his coat and hat and locked his office door. It was Friday anyway; he might as well just plan on going home when it was done.

He checked a gold-plated watch that Michael surprised him with a couple of years ago for Christmas. Nickel glistened where its outer shell had started to rub and fade away. There was still time for lunch. Huntley walked five minutes down to a small park, bought a hot dog, and took his time eating it. He kicked at a pigeon that got close enough to openly beg for a piece of his meal; it flew off with an annoyed jabbering to join its friends, who circled lazily, biding their time for some bun. Huntley watched them in disgust. He soon tired of the game and threw a small piece of bun on the grass to his right. The birds fought for it, the victors flying off to feast while the unlucky and the slow pecked at the ground for microscopic remnants.

Huntley stood, shaking a few remaining crumbs from his jacket. The birds quickly snatched them up. He slipped a worn pair of thin driving gloves on his hands and started walking. He picked a side street at random, one of the many brownstone-lined capillaries feeding the nation's corpus. Huntley put purpose into his step. Pretend you live here, you belong here.

He tried the first parked car, a decade-old Packard One-Twenty, the once-proud white on its tires fading into street grime and mold. The door swung open with satisfying ease. He allowed himself the tiniest of smirks as he settled into the driver's seat.

Huntley produced a small screwdriver from his pocket. It took less than thirty seconds to start the Packard, its enormous engine growling to life like an alert guard dog.

A half-hour of driving dropped him at Kingman's front door. His house was smaller than Huntley's: one of the flimsy-looking suburban bungalows in the new tracts they started to build for GIs. It was a young neighborhood: tiny trees, mothers walking babies in strollers, golden retrievers, kids on bikes. He backed the Packard into Kingman's driveway and pushed his hat low on his forehead.

Becca answered the door on his second knock. "David! This is a surprise. Please, won't you come in?" She was younger than Karen, a brunette with close-cropped hair who smelled of the strong kind of perfume meant to mask cigarette smoke. Kingman's living room hadn't changed since Huntley was here last, before his last assignment in Europe: same radio, same sofa, same layer of dust on everything. A handful of yellowing black and white photographs littered the wall. He'd studied those pictures years ago, in happier times when he and Karen had come over for bridge, holding trays bearing meatloaf.

"Can I get you anything?" Becca asked, snapping him back to the present.

"Just water, thanks. Is Harry around?"

“Not for another hour,” she called as she retreated back to the kitchen. “Maybe sooner. You’re welcome to stay, of course.”

“I don’t mean to impose,” Huntley replied, taking off his hat and hanging it on the rack. His coat followed. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“None at all,” Becca called from the other room.

“I’m just going to step into the john then,” Huntley half-shouted towards her.

“Down the hall!”

“I recall, thanks.”

If she noticed that he kept his gloves on, she didn’t say anything. Huntley locked the bathroom door, shrugged off his suit jacket, and unholstered his .45. It felt heavier than he remembered from the Corps. He leaned forward, looking at his reflection in the mirror. A man in his 40s stared back, blond hair retreating backwards and vastly thinned out, the crow’s feet around his eyes spreading like estuaries. He lay the gun on the counter and leaned forward, towards his reflection. Something behind him caught his eye: a framed print of a bird in colored pencils, like an Audubon illustration. Its neck twisted to show its brilliant red plumage, but Huntley thought it looked like a corpse coming down from the noose.

He quickly removed the picture from the wall and set it on the ground, revealing the paler color underneath. The yellowish smoke tinge painted every surface here.

Why couldn’t he just have done it himself? Why did he have to be such a chickenshit?

Kingman's face replaced his own in the mirror: younger, the man Huntley knew from Basic, from sharing drinks and girls in Boston bars, from the boat ride to Innsmouth, where they laughed at what their sergeant told them about what they'd find there. *Bullshit*, they'd both said around their cigarettes. Whatever it was, it couldn't be that bad.

It was worse.

He and Kingman kicked open a door and found her huddled on the floor: a woman, her eyes bulging, opening and closing her mouth mechanically as she cowered in the corner of the room. Both men had seen them up close by now, knew what they were fighting, and operated purely on muscle memory from their training. When she didn't fight back, it confused both of them. The smell of old fish, which permeated the entire town, oozed from her the closer they came. Her homespun dress clung to her body in oily, wet patches: the source of the odor that made Huntley's eyes hurt as he crept across the room, sidearm raised.

"Move, ma'am," he said. "We need you to come with us."

She made no reply; she only opened and closed her mouth and tried to tighten herself into a ball.

"We said, come with us!" Kingman repeated with greater force. He reached out to grab her by the shoulder. Her thick lips flopped together, a hollow, sick sound that Huntley would hear years later echoing in quiet rooms.

When Kingman finally pried her out of the corner, a tattered, blue blanket fell to the floor. It was slick with blood and the same oil that oozed from the woman's skin. She pointed

a webbed finger at it, her mouth flapping, her too-wide eyes rolling wildly around the room. A gurgling sound came from somewhere inside her and Huntley saw she still clutched her stomach. When she pulled her hand away, she revealed a ragged hole in the gingham dress where more blood trickled.

“Is...is that her baby’s?” Kingman asked, pointing at the blanket.

“I don’t fucking know and I don’t fucking care,” Huntley lied. “Let’s get her down to the camp.”

“Jesus, Dave, *look at her!*”

“I’ve been looking at her all fucking afternoon!” Huntley snapped. The pent-up sights of the last few hours seemed to coalesce and take shape in his mind. Huntley’s jaw locked, and he drew fists so hard his nails tore into his palms. The woman stumbled towards him, her bloody hand reaching for him, and Huntley’s training kicked in. He smashed his .45 into the side of her face, ruining her left eyeball and tearing her skin from her skull. She gurgled as she fell to her hands and knees, and Huntley’s combat boot rose and fell until he couldn’t see her face or her stringy, black hair for the pool of blood and brain and bone spreading across the house’s wooden floor.

“What the fuck?”

“She was attacking me,” Huntley replied, wiping the sole of his boot on the dead woman’s skirt. “You saw. Self-fucking-defense.” His breath rose and fell in short bursts.

“Oh shit,” Kingman said. “Oh shit. Her *baby*.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Huntley exploded. He stopped and took a deep breath. “Just shut your goddamned mouth! She

was a *threat*. She was *attacking us*. Do you understand?”

Kingman crossed his arms straightjacket-tight and ground his teeth. He stared at the heap on the floor.

“Oh God, David, oh my God.”

Huntley cut his friend short as he aimed his sidearm at Kingman’s head. “Oh God what? What, private? Do you have something to add here?”

Kingman didn’t flinch away from the barrel. His hands started shaking. “I can’t—” he started.

“You *can*,” Huntley demanded, pushing the barrel into Kingman’s forehead. “You can. I can. We both can, and we will, *together*.”

Kingman looked up. He ground his teeth again. The sound echoed through the trashed living room. “We can,” he repeated.

“Fucking right, my friend,” Huntley said, holstering his sidearm.

The same sidearm that now lay on Kingman’s bathroom counter twenty years, several hundred beers, and a labyrinth of shared nightmares later.

“Oh he knew, all right,” Huntley muttered to the blonde man wearing his face in the mirror. “He knew, and he couldn’t cut it, and he was too *chickenshit* to do *what we had to fucking do!*” He slammed his hand on the counter. The gun and an old bar of soap jumped. Huntley turned on the tap and splashed ice-cold water over his face.

Someone knocked at the door. “Are you OK?” Becca’s voice asked. “I thought I heard a shout.”

“Fine, Becca!” Huntley said. “I’ll be out in a second!”

He kept the water running as he reholstered the pistol and pulled his jacket back on. The white noise calmed him a bit. When he finally exited the bathroom, Becca greeted him with a glass of water and a plastered smile.

Don’t smile at me, bitch. You have no idea.

Huntley parked himself on Kingman’s old couch. He felt a spring dig into his back. *Fuck, you can’t even keep your goddamned sofa fixed.* Becca tried to make small talk, but Huntley’s one-word answers eventually drove her back to the kitchen; she brought Huntley the newspaper and excused herself to work on dinner. Huntley glanced at his watch. *I hope the little coward didn’t end up getting arrested with his Red buddies.*

Halfway through the sports section keys jangled outside the door. When it opened, Kingman stood there, surprise stitched across his face. Huntley stood up, folding the paper neatly and setting it on the arm of the sofa.

“David? What’s going on? Is everything all right?”

“Sure, I was just in the neighborhood and thought I’d drop by,” Huntley replied. He clasped Kingman across the shoulders. His friend glanced at Huntley’s gloved hand, but said nothing.

Huntley dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Look, I feel bad about last night, all right? I was way out of line, and that’s the last thing you need from a friend at a time like this.”

Kingman hung his coat, a wan smile briefly flashing across his face. “I appreciate it. As much of a son of a bitch as you

are, you're my best friend. Come on, you're welcome to stay for dinner, of course." He started back towards the kitchen.

You brought this on yourself. If you'd finished it before, I wouldn't have to do this.

His hand hesitated just outside of his jacket. For the first time he noticed the stoop in Kingman's back, the defeated gait as he loped towards the kitchen, and the way he subtly cradled his hop-arm at his side like a wounded bird. The wave of pity surprised Huntley. He opened his mouth to warn Kingman and slammed it shut before he could.

No. His jaw muscles clamped like a nutcracker.

This ended twenty years ago. You know it. He's been a walking corpse since Innsmouth. A corpse who married a corpse. Huntley dragged his teeth across each other.

Kingman, hearing him, or sensing something, hesitated in the small hallway outside the kitchen.

Not a bird. Not my friend. Another fish woman. A walking goddamned corpse.

Huntley drew his pistol and fired twice into the back of Harold Kingman's head. The sound was hellish in the narrow hallway. A spray of blood painted the black and white photographs, and Becca screamed, dropping something with a clatter. Kingman lurched forward, and Huntley caught a glimpse of his friend's ravaged face. Huntley didn't need to take Kingman's pulse to know his friend was dead before he hit the ground. Huntley stalked into the kitchen, where Becca clung to the counter, a large knife in her right hand. She pointed it towards Huntley.

“Get away!” she said impotently, hurtling a half-smoked cigarette at him with her left hand. It bounced off his chest in a harmless explosion of sparks. Huntley raised the pistol again and fired two more shots. The first hit Becca in the chest, and the second clipped her shoulder, spinning her against the ice-box. She went to her knees, wet gasps rattling from her tobacco-stained lips, and Huntley grabbed her short hair and shoved her face-first to the ground.

“I didn’t want to do this! He should have been enough of a man to fucking take care of it himself!”

“David, wait...” she choked.

“I can’t anymore.”

The third bullet tore into her head, swallowing any reply, before ricocheting off the linoleum and shattering a cookie jar on top of the icebox. Ceramic and chocolate chips rained across the kitchen. Huntley brushed the debris from his jacket. One of the chocolate chips stuck to his thumb, and he licked it clean.

Huntley paused long enough to rummage the key from Kingman’s pocket and lock the front door on his way out. He kept his hat low. One of the neighbors, standing on her porch, ducked inside. He wadded up his suit jacket, wet and sticky with Becca’s blood, and tucked the .45 inside, tossing both on the Packard’s passenger seat. The beast of a car squealed into the street, and Huntley allowed himself to exhale only when the suburbs started to fade into Maryland’s farmed hills. He stopped in some speck of a town and made the call to Miss Eider’s line from a phone booth.

“It’s done,” he said, slamming the receiver down before the faceless puppeteer could reply.

Δ

HUNTLEY ARRIVED HOME FOUR HOURS LATER AND LET HIMSELF in through the basement door. He'd ditched the Packard in an old barn he'd long ago marked for a job like this, buried the ruined jacket, and walked the quarter-mile into town. There he caught a ride with some kids heading into the capital for a Friday evening. They dropped Huntley by a bus route.

The car wasn't in the driveway; Karen was probably out shopping somewhere, or with a friend. He peeled his shirt off and threw it into the sink. His pants might be salvageable; they came next, then his socks. He stepped naked under the shower. The icy water cascaded over his body. He soaped his chest, his face, then his ass and crotch. His body started to respond.

Kingman's voice interrupted. *It didn't have to be this way, David.*

It did. It kept getting worse. That's what you never got.

Because Innsmouth was the beginning: the first point on an exponential equation that kept growing. The fish woman was the next point. Huntley looked down to the water spiraling into the drain and saw the charnel houses of Europe, the things his unit found that looked like windows into Hell. Bodies stacked like firewood. The experiments, the pieces of things in jars in secret places tucked into the Bavarian Alps that the SS didn't have time to destroy. Heads with mouths that ran up and down instead of side to side, with row after row of sharklike teeth. Orange eyeballs, just like the pigeons' except the size of basketballs. Things that Huntley didn't have words to describe:

chunks of flesh with human fingers, ape lips, nipples with fore-skins, all next to each other, arranged as though randomly sewn to the muscle beneath.

And those fingers still wiggled in the formaldehyde, beckoning us closer.

It knew we were there.

That point was pretty far up the equation's graph.

Kingman was a hole in the dike, a crack in the door. He had to be sealed.

The tingling returned to his crotch and Huntley knew he'd need to raid the cash book for a trip to the warehouse tonight. He usually didn't time them so close together, but as his anger moved from his arms to his cock, it was either that or try his luck with Karen.

If doing what he had to do to Kingman was to keep people like Karen ignorant of those jars, those bodies, those *things*, then he *earned* time with some luckless street lad in a dress. Watching his despicable flesh disappearing into some kid's ass—where not even he could see it anymore—almost made him feel human again. At least there was a place in the shadows and back alleys for *that*. Karen owed him ignorance for what he did for her. It wasn't like he didn't love her and Michael.

He finished his shower and stood soaking wet until his lumpy body was covered with goose pimples. The day's light had already started to fade when he heard the car pulling into the driveway. Huntley shoved his clothes into an old burlap sack, jammed it into the coal bin, and ran upstairs before Karen unlocked the front door. He was fully dressed, his sidearm safely

back in its box, by the time she dropped her shopping across the bed to sort through it.

Huntley did not bother calculating how close the clothes would put them to another mortgage payment. The previous evenings' adventure set him back another month, but his plan was to march into Kirschner's office first thing Monday morning with an expense report that would turn the FINAL NOTICE into another FIRST NOTICE: his price for another successful after-hours assignment.

The cab dropped Huntley off at three in the morning. Karen barely moved when he slid into bed next to her. A telltale pile of fresh cigarette butts lay in her ashtray; he'd hear about staying out late tomorrow, but he'd sort that out then.

He woke to the sound of a doorbell. The alarm clock read 10:10, and Huntley smelled old, burned coffee wafting from downstairs. He sat up, coughed, and lit a Chesterfield. He heard Karen open the door, talk to someone, and shut it again. His eyes stung from the cigarette smoke hovering over the bed. He rolled to a sitting position when Karen appeared at the door, a Manila envelope in her hand.

"Get your things and get out," she said. Her hands trembled so violently the envelope rattled.

"What?"

"I said, get your things and get out of this house. You have five minutes."

Confused, Huntley rose. Karen glanced down; he was still naked. "What?" he repeated.

She pulled a photograph out of the envelope. "It's all here,

so stop pretending, you son of a bitch.” She held it up like a proclamation. There he was in crisp black and white, the catamite from two evenings ago underneath him. Both men’s eyes were closed in ecstasy. “I can ignore only so much, David.” She threw the first photo at him and pulled out another one: Huntley and Kingman in the bar, Huntley’s hand on his friend’s. Both men appeared lost in each others’ gaze, secret smiles on their faces. “I should have known, you son of a bitch.” A third photograph: him on a park bench not far from their house, seemingly watching a mother and her young sons. The flock of pigeons was out of frame, so the mix of emotions on Huntley’s face seemed directed at the kid.

“You were having me followed?” he asked weakly.

“No, you piece of shit! You filthy...” she choked on the words.

“This is blackmail,” he tried. “Someone’s trying to blackmail me.”

“They’re doing a great job!” She slapped him, and he tasted blood. “Get out of this house, get out of our lives. You’ve got four minutes!” Karen yelled, the words turning into sobs. Huntley stumbled backwards towards the closet door. She ran from the room, and he heard her stomp down the stairs, followed by a far-off door slamming.

Huntley gathered himself long enough to pick up the envelope. It was addressed to Karen Huntley. The letter inside bore no signature or letterhead; the pictures stretched back for years. Various rendezvous in filthy industrial parks, hotels, even one of him and a German prisoner in the war.

So I have a file somewhere, too.

And now, I'm someone else's Manila envelope.

Another crack to be sealed.

He toyed with running. Buying a ticket to some South American hidey-hole with the last of the mortgage money tucked inside Mann's book.

He might last six months.

Huntley had to hand it to Kirschner: The old fuck gave him a shovel and just let him dig. Part of him appreciated the setup's mechanical genius. Quietly collect those dirty little pictures and just wait to toss Huntley at one of his old friends. Instant, built-in solution for both liabilities. Two queers in a classic murder-suicide. No suspicions raised, no questions asked.

He had no doubt that his Manila envelope contained warnings and assessments too. A sodomite meant liability, even if in wetwork circles it meant asset. Another battle in their grand little war against the universe.

And that's what it's all about, right? Keeping this from Karen and Michael and the kids in the park, the beautiful young men in that warehouse, and the rest of these ungrateful shits?

Of course I'm going to do it. And Kirschner knew it from the beginning.

Huntley dropped the stack of papers and walked, still naked, into the closet. He shut the door, but it popped back open; the latch was broken and Huntley had been meaning to fix it for months.

Once more he took his .45 from its shoebox. Huntley sat cross-legged on the hard wooden floor. He looked at the row

of Karen's shoes along the wall; he always loved her in heels, especially the glossy black ones. He picked one of the shoes up and held it against his naked chest and ground the heel into his skin, smearing the street dirt collected there across his heart.

Karen shouted something else. He couldn't hear her words but Huntley could guess based on her tone and his sense of time: Four minutes had elapsed.

He picked up the pistol and traced the rough outline of the grip. Huntley rubbed the cool metal against his cheek, then over his lips. His tongue snaked out and licked the inside of the barrel. It tasted like burnt gunpowder.

Huntley put the gun to his head and sealed the crack.

Ganzfeld Gate

By **Cody Goodfellow**

CLOSE YOUR EYES.

What do you see?

Not uniform blackness at all. Even with no available light, the interior cells of the eye throw off just enough photons to trigger the ultraviolet phosphene blobs that come between you and any true void. It's a subtle defense mechanism that renders you immune.

To Them.

You know all that nonsense about how we only use five or ten percent of our brains? It's horseshit, but the brain is remarkably resilient. Given time and care, it can reroute synapses around damage from a stroke, assigning crippled functions to new regions with remarkable elasticity. You can also fit almost ten more brains' worth of mind into one, before it breaks.

I was undercover at Cal in '67 when the Group approached me. We had a TM guru who could zone out in this impossible yoga position and hang in between breaths for almost four hours, both hemispheres just glowing like Christmas. So one time we get him all the way into his total consciousness state and we dose him with this experimental new Sandoz ergotamine derivative, and he just *Gets It*. His EEG lights up like Times Square and he looks around and asks a question, and both lab techs stroke out, bleeding out their eyes like horned toads. After his first telepathic contact with our resident sensitive, he was described as a total medium—that is to say, he had

attained optimum function in his neocortex, that dubious piece of cerebral hardware unique to human apes.

Our guru's total enlightenment lasted about three minutes. He got outside and two security guards shot themselves instead of him, and then the sky started falling on him.

A hummingbird, first, just seemed to appear in his face, a tiny emerald knife sticking out of his ruined eye. Mouth open to invoke a curse or just to curse the bird in his eye, and a curlew flies in, jamming itself down his throat and dislocating his jaw.

They come too fast to count, let alone identify—battering, burrowing, burying, spending bodies like bullets to shut that brain off. The Delta Green operatives who responded to the incident activated me as a friendly and advised me to expect worse.

Adam and Eve were real. Sentience was the fruit of the forbidden tree. The Garden is gone, but there's still a Devil waiting to punish you for every bite of that apple. You don't have to go to Hell, you don't have to go to the ends of the Earth. Just stare into a whiteout snowstorm or a perfect, pure darkness or any kind of illuminated solid color field knowing what you're about to know, and sooner or later your mind will stop tricking your eyes and make a door.

And sooner or later, that door will open.

Or you could go back to sleep.

I HAD NO MORE CONTACT WITH THE GROUP UNTIL '69. I WAS contemplating leaving the Bureau after a nine-month stint

inside this radical splinter-group of AIM. Undergraduate psychology degree and law school made me a solid field agent, but I'd never get out of the toolbox. Eighth Nez Perce and eighth Choctaw, so I got called Chief all the time and sent on undercover work, and my formidable psychopharmacological expertise made me a valuable counterculture tool. My reports stressed they weren't interested in planting bombs, even when we gave them the makings. The Bureau wanted me pulled as a weak sister because my reports stressed that the "shamans" of the Walking Snake Lodge just wanted to drop peyote and Ghost Dance around the White House until the Earth opened up and ate it. But unknowable forces of darkness prevailed, as they always do. Because of the little green triangle on my confidential file, I went with the Indians of All Nations to Alcatraz in November of '69 to keep tabs on Graham Stephens, the Blackfoot shaman who in January, '70, instigated the infamous Alcatraz Incident, that fed his four acolytes and a boatload of federal agents to an Ohlone death-god at the bottom of a whirlpool.

By the time I got off the island, for reasons never made clear to me, Delta Green had ceased ever to have existed. I was part of the cosmetic purge of Hoover's old COINTEL-PRO tools, the unworthy field slaves cast out into the desert while the most loyal were buried alive with the Director in his Washington tomb. We dressed up as hippies and threw rocks at his coffin as it lay in state in the Capitol rotunda, and sexually assaulted a male *Post* reporter on the steps. Penance, but nothing was enough. The Pharaoh of America was gone. His ghost

demanded sacrifices.

Then a Pentagon pencil-neck went berserk and scalped three superior officers with a bayonet. He ran through the halls shrieking an Indian language not even the old Navajo code-talkers could identify before the MP's and a rookery of perfumed staff officers took the opportunity of a lifetime and shot the everloving shit out of him and each other.

Somebody, somewhere, had the presence of mind to play the tape for me. I'd heard Graham Stephens use snatches of it to call a massacre on Alcatraz. I knew it wasn't really Indian at all, but a cant used in some of the oldest rituals, inherited from the Ancient Ones of K'n-Yan, who were long gone when the first red men came trucking down the Bering Ice Bridge.

I might've cooperated if I'd been brought in as a consultant and not as a suspect. They'd let Stephens escape in spite of my warnings, and now believed I had "gone native" and was helping him wage war on the Great White Father.

I was only looking to find a way out of the country and never get found, when the Group came back into my life.

I was given a new passport and face to match a Billy Keel, a Bay Area drug smuggler who was never coming back from Afghanistan, and a week to burn my old covers and forget my real name. Plastic surgery was out of the question, so a caring professional broke half the bones in my face with a roll of quarters to replicate the tender mercies of Pakistani customs.

They paired me with this freak chemist who they said turned BZ into a zap bomb that got two thousand Khmer Rouge to kick out the jams and eat each other to the

soundtrack from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The new assignment was from another group I'd never heard of, but essentially the same work. I had every reason to suspect I was dealing with the same people.

Infiltrate and provoke, but this time, we were explicitly instructed to assume operational control of the group and turn it into a full-fledged research arm. We were strictly incognito, no budget, no contact, *don't call us, we'll call you*—

High above the clouds, our “handler” described us as America's inner space program to the snowy-haired Illuminated Masters of our fate, but that was selling us criminally short. While the CIA had Vegas mentalists straining to detect what Prince Sihanouk was lying about and the sinister machinations transpiring within Mao's moribund, impacted bowels, our courageous narconauts plumbed the unimaginable depths of the psychosphere and brought back riches—cosmic wisdom, actionable intelligence, paranoid scenarios too tasty not to act upon...and hostages.

MEMORIES LOUDER THAN THE NOW, LIKE MOVIES THAT starred someone else...

Sapphire waves subside lazily on tawny sand. The skeletons of drowned dogs nap in brackish quicksand tidepools along the barbed wire perimeter fence, where they were chained up by the previous tenants until the tide claimed them.

Hooting, coconut shells and feces fly out of the palm trees around the drained children's swimming pool. Virgil Szabo sprays them with seawater from a firehose, blasting them from

their perches like the spider monkeys they've become. "*Happy Mother's Day, Freedom Riders!*"

The troupe refuses to dress or share in chores or eat with the others, roaming naked and pilfering from the vegetable garden. Billy Keel believes they fried their speech and social processing centers, regressed into the phony caveman myth of humanity's origin that they had studied all their lives, but Virgil says it's all an act for an experiment that's getting federal funding.

Virgil shuts off the hose. Takes a glassine packet of fine Colombian flake out of a pouch made from a hollowed-out frog. The troupe's only human vice. "Which one of you monkeys wants to go for a flying lesson?"

"That one," Billy says, pointing at the silverback. Anthro professor who fried his brain on the Castaneda diet snarls and thumps his formidable potbelly, paws the ground and charges Virgil.

Billy shoulders the tranq rifle and pots the professor in the neck. The silverback goes down, almost human outrage frozen on his face, as if he suddenly remembered how to speak.

The others, his wife and grad students, pound the sand and scream until Virgil tosses them the coke. Virgil and Billy drag the professor onto the flatbed golfcart. Before Billy can get behind the wheel, Virgil touches his arm. "We're surrounded."

"*Tus apestosas garras de él, maldito simio,*" says the Guide, and the few who remember last week's ineptly dubbed Movie Night laugh shrilly with her. Her black hair, braided into snakes draped over the shoulders of a flowing white dress, reeks

of incense and chicken blood. A gaggle of raw-eyed, naked maenads draw up short behind her, nails curled into claws, covered in body paint and alchemical symbols. Almost all the men took the sailboat across the Gulf to catch a big swell at Cabo San Lucas. The Guide banished them so her Sapphic alchemical orgies would purify the menstrual energy of the full moon, or some such nonsense.

“Cool it, Eva,” Virgil says. “You said it yourself, exploration is everyone’s duty.” He slaps the monkey-man’s filthy cheek. “It’s just Professor Horowitz’s turn, that’s all.”

“He’s already a perfect innocent,” she says. “Take someone who wants to go.”

“That’s no way to run a space program, baby,” Billy says. “Laika didn’t volunteer.” He howls like a dog and the coked-up monkeys in the trees howl back.

She comes close, the piercing sunrise outlining the ghost of her curves inside the shapeless dress. “You’re just like the creeps who killed Adam. I smell pig blood.” Her unblinking stare is just one of her less witchy gimmicks. The others think she’s psychic because she recalls all the sick strange things they forgot they confessed while tripping, yesterday.

Billy almost touches her. Almost. “That’s like crazy-talk, Eva, don’t...” Looking sideways at the hissing Maenads. “Don’t even joke like that. Listen...like, we’ve just been getting the best results from the people who’re the most out of it—”

“You haven’t found anything. You’re just brainwashing them, and you’re making a dog’s breakfast of their heads.” A quick look at her retinue gooses them back a few steps. “Take me.”

Virgil scratches his patchy beard and spits out cracked sunflower seeds. His harelip splits against huge, cheddar-yellow teeth as he reloads from the pouch in his pocket. “You want to fly, pretty mama? You bring your broomstick?”

She smiles, and the light seems to come out in rainbows from her eyes, through the prism of her brain. “I want to meet the Space Brothers.”

OUR COVER WAS A DEFUNCT BAY AREA PSYCHEDELIC DRUG cartel called the Brotherhood of Light. Dead-end grass peddler kids who got zapped by acid and turned into a direly sincere drug church. After these bold pioneers hooked up a foolproof pipeline for Afghan hashish through Long Beach via Karachi, they soon stockpiled enough cash to mass-produce their own LSD, Blue Moonlight, which they distributed with evangelical zeal. Then somebody clipped their guru, Adam Olcott, and most of the inner circle disappeared or went insane trying to turn smalltown America on with a disastrous new acid strain called Snakeladder. It was a classic COINTELPRO burn, but deeper, darker, like the ARTICHOKE bunch testing doomsday drugs for the Pentagon.

Covertly hunted by the FBI as psychedelic terrorists, the handful of survivors who got out of the country had had enough of trying to change the world. They fled by boat to Mazatlan with the rest of the drugs and cash, huddled around Olcott’s widow, Evangeline. They just wanted to buy an island in the Caribbean and hide out and surf and fry the rest of their brains out trying to astrally contact the Space Brothers, the

enigmatic UFO people who kept giving them messages of hope in their deepest drug trips.

It only took about a week for it to turn back into a cult.

To shell-shocked flower children ripped out of their make-believe garden, Eva Olcott quickly became the Guide. We convinced her to stay in Sinaloa and set up a commune at Xtal, a beautiful former plantation and resort spa along the Gulf of California midway between Mazatlan and the narco stronghold of Culiacan, where the Brotherhood still had more than a few steady business alliances.

Friendly tenant farmers were just bringing in the cash crop of Panama Red *colitas* when we took possession. Up with the sun for group meditation and guided visualization exercises, then toil in the garden or sail out to catch fish or scallops or, more likely, buy them from the locals with our dwindling cash.

We promised our hippie brothers we'd turn the resort into a human-potential resource center to shame Big Sur and Berkeley. Roll out the red carpet for any and all burnt-out heads on the run from Uncle Sam. We would make good on all the bullshit fairydust their dead guru blew up their deep-fried asses—astral projection, telepathy, clairvoyance, telekinesis, teleportation, time travel, and skull sessions with the Space Brothers.

We promised our ad hoc federal contacts that we were dusting off the old MKULTRA protocols and taking the training wheels off.

The truth is, all that crypto-psychic head-game bullshit—psychic driving, remote viewing, ancestral memory regression,

neurolinguistic reprogramming—got boring inside of a month. Since we had done all the work of setting up the research opportunity and had to bilk our guinea pigs for the funding, we felt more than entitled to indulge our wildest curiosities.

WHILE BILLY PASTES THE MONITOR LEADS TO HER NECK AND chest, Evangeline pulls a handkerchief out of her sleeve, a golden-green silk. She holds it to her nose, breathing deeply through it, holding it in. Ties it around her head, binding it tightly over her eyes. “I’m ready.”

Virgil chuckles fiendishly, rolling the medication trolley to the suspended egg chair.

Her breasts are pale with tiny purple nipples, untouched by the cruel tropic sun, fuller and heavier than the angry, starved nymphets swimming overhead. Like she was once a mother. At once utterly innocent of what she’s doing to both men and yet keenly avid for it, even blindfolded, she sits poised in the chair like an Ursuline nun awaiting martyrdom.

The lab is in the old spa’s secret octagonal orgy chamber underneath the big swimming pool. Padded floors, two-way mirrors in the ceiling so the light is mottled, sifted through the scum of green water, the shadows of naked bodies passing to and fro like half-starved clouds.

She agreed to put herself in their hands, but hasn’t stopped giving orders. “Too claustrophobic, thanks,” she said of the tank, and, “I won’t need but a bit of grass for a muscle relaxant and some nitrous oxide for the kick. Adam and I trained for this.”

Strapping the jet pilot's mask over her mouth, thin lips mechanically, cyclically breathing. Eyelids half-closed, all but out the door even before he turns on the gas.

She relaxes into the recesses of the egg chair, head lolling into the crown of speakers that begins to emit a binaural delta-wave drone over a Tangerine Dream bootleg.

Virgil checks her eyes. Billy ostentatiously checks the styluses on the EEG printout while his partner drips a single dose from an eyedropper into her half-closed left eye.

"Bastards," she says through the mask, but makes no move to get out of the chair.

Tesselated honeycomb patterns swim across her face. Billy rubs his eyes. "What did you...?"

"Weird, huh?" Virgil giggles, shakes out a handful of sunflower seeds from the ever-present packet in his filthy doctor's smock, tucks them into his cheek.

"Fuck this." Billy gets up and heads for the spiral staircase.

"Relax, man, it's not what you think. It's not Snakeladder...but I figured out the valence ring that makes it like telepathy...." When Billy turns away again, he calls out, "Hey, relax, we've got plenty of Thorazine...."

Sunset, and everyone who's not insane is feeling mellow. This Australian cat who calls himself Raja Ram turns the purple sunlight into a sticky narcotic through his skirling flute, sending oceanic twitches through the lotus-eaters on the beach. Gleaming, unblinking marbles staring up into infinity, contemplating their reflections in the clouds. Empty rainbarrels. Baited hooks.

Naked children with matted dreadlocks scurry out of the undergrowth to steal unattended packs of cigarettes. Despised by the Guide, kids at Xtal are worse than rats. Taking care of a child was the most severe punishment handed out in the Brotherhood, but in the face of revolt she gave up enforcing the law. The only truly communal aspect of the commune, the children are everyone's problem.

Billy goes snorkeling in the Gulf, paddling in his holey Converse sneakers among the kelp thickets, molesting adolescent octopi and jousting with irate stingrays and blowfish.

Out past the brown snarls of seaweed, the white sandy ocean floor falls away into a perfect aquamarine void that beguiles his eye as none of the spiny, shiny, scaled things that filled it ever could. A blueness bright enough to wipe out the floaters—*muscae volitantes*—in the vitreous humor of his retinas, an emptiness more perfect than the void behind closed eyes, it pulls him out of himself and his mind, overheated in this torpid soup of predators, starts to invent patterns that flow and churn in sync with the hypnotic pulse of his breath through the rubber sinuses strapped to his face.

Billy comes flailing out of the surf, screaming, "The ocean tried to eat me!"

Coming back down the stairs into the lab, he sees Evangeline with her gown open and trailing behind her in a tangled train, straddling Virgil, who lolls insensate, pants around his ankles, powder on his snout. Grinding him like a dressage rider in perfectly controlled pelvic thrusts, she beckons for Billy to come closer. Her face is hidden by the reptilian snout of the

pilot's mask, the roar of pure nitrous oxide, but her eyes on his are as cold and steady as a father confessor's.

Billy shivers and backs up against the wall as she finishes with Virgil and stands to eject a cocktail of red and white fluid down her thigh, then bends to do something on his chest.

Only when she is long gone does Virgil open his eyes and taste the blood from the dripping sigil inscribed on his chest. "That was worth it," he says.

"Fuck you," Billy snarls, but then he sees the printouts....

THAT BREAKTHROUGH CHANGED THE GOALS OF OUR RESEARCH. Virgil had been toying with temporal lobe stimulation to induce quantum regression: conscious articulation of the holographic resonance of the carbon particles of the body itself. We were nowhere nearer to glimpsing the Big Bang or the Akashic Codex, so we combined the temp lobe stim with the *ganzfeld* field and the drug.

What we had developed was an astral projection regime that made remote viewing look like a nickelodeon moviola next to 35mm Cinemascope in Technicolor. Even the weakest of our trippers could tell us exactly where Nixon was in a parallel universe where the Nazis got the Bomb and nuked us in '44 or telekinetically grope the plains of Mars so future astronauts would have to explain away the plague of stones arranged into astrological and phallic shapes.

Our acid-shocked narconauts slingshotted right out of the known universe into interstitial dimensions beneath and behind our own, into transmaterial spheres where sentience *is* matter,

and if they went out as enhanced but effectively empty vessels, then they seldom came back that way.

Like human crab traps, we lowered them into the psychotronic abyss, and they routinely came back possessed of alien intelligences—fellow travelers out of time and space, and stranger predators and parasites of the immaterial planes. Without the benefit of a UFO, we had become Earth's first alien abductors.

The tank was unwieldy and made it too hard to observe and record the subject, so we installed hammocks and studied up on curare dosages. Once the Guide gave her blessing, we had too many volunteers to monitor at once.

Virgil came up with the protocols for the Travelers; his inspirations, the antibiography indoctrinations, the surgical modifications to make them perfect narconauts. I just got them higher than God and watched the dials.

We had not gone native. We were doing our fucking jobs for our fucking beloved country. Virgil genuinely believed we'd be immortal names someday, like Giordano Bruno or Magellan. Being burned at the stake would only validate his theories. I helped him because it was the only way I could still be what I was: a double, a triple agent, fighting to preserve and destroy Hoover's crypto-fascist legacy; to do in, find and doggedly pursue the only thing I could find that, in an age dead to outrage, still felt *wrong*.

We were pretty well prepared, we thought, the first time we captured a bona fide alien intelligence. We didn't realize it was really our second.

Δ

MIDWAY THROUGH HOUR EIGHT, THE SUBJECT TRIES TO ESCAPE the box.

“Holy fuck,” Virgil grunts, rolling out of the beanbag in the corner and pulling the headphone jack out of the hi-fi so the lab is flooded with Pink Floyd’s “One Of These Days.” “I forgot he was in there.”

The subject floats in a sensory deprivation tank. Dosed with 3600 mics of Blue Moonlight with a ketamine chaser and cruising mellowly through the collective human fever swamp, he should be halfway back to sober by now.

The subject goes by Dave 7, or Captain Love. Nobody knows his real name, and he doesn’t remember. Dave is an ideal subject for exotic research. Where most of the past-life regression subjects just drifted into half-baked liminal Cleopatra and Napoleon fantasies, Dave lapsed into an ancient Nahuatl Indian dialectic and tried to chop Keel’s heart out of his chest.

“Purple,” says Dave 7 over the piezoelectric transducer on his throat. “Make it purple.”

He can’t feel his body or hear any sounds beyond those of his own body, but there’s so little functional gray matter left in Dave that when he’s not watching something, he nods off like a hooded chicken. So he’s wearing a pair of illuminated goggles that bathe his eyes in an undifferentiated color field.

When the eye sees nothing, that part of the brain shuts off, but when it sees color but no shade or shape, the brain starts inventing shit. The ganzfeld effect: stare into a whiteout

snowstorm and you'll see a black mouth spilling out ultraviolet worms, all kinds of shit your brain throws up there to make sense out of the infuriating absence of meaningful sensory data.

He bolts out of the tank, neatly snapping the cheap pad-lock Virgil put on the hatch. "That color tried to kill me!"

Billy rushes to tackle Dave 7. Virgil shouts, "Don't touch him!"

Rips off the goggles and for just a moment the color spills out of his eyes in a corrosive wash of almost invisible light. His sunburnt, newborn face splits in a zipper rictus and he giggles and says he's going to cut you into little pieces.

"Look, man." Virgil holds up a coil of the printouts spewing out of the EEG printout. "Delta is spiked, it busted the fucking stylus. And look at this." The row of screens on the control board, showing wiggly oscilloscope waves. Virgil wired them to map individual brain regions. Right now everything behind his eyes is dead Jell-O, except the temporal lobes, which are on fire.

The same region where epileptic seizures originate, the manic bug-zapper glow in the brains of paranoid schizophrenics. Just touching electrical current to the skull over the region could bring on instant near-death Tunnel of Light visions, alien abductions, glimpses of Hell...

Pupils dilated, glistening mirrors, Dave 7 bites the tip off his tongue, gurgling through his blood, "*Gyaaaaaa azazaza-zath.... Gyaaaah.... Yyaaawghsah....*"

"See?" says the Guide.

Δ

WE WERE HARDLY EVER SURE WITH ANY OF THEM, COMPLETELY, whether they were just insane or whether they came back changed. One guy, Chipper Marston [219–Burgundy 004], was totally straight until he hit the sunlight. Then his skin reacted violently to it and he turned blue-black. Hissing and freaking out, he tried to bury himself in the compost heap. The women got worked up about ol' Chipper like he was a spider in the bathtub drain, and they set the men on him. The impromptu mob pulled him out of the compost and impaled him on a tomato stake. Oddly, it never came up at morning chore discussion.

Another kid nobody knew by name [42–Periwinkle 002] but who some were pretty sure was once some bomb-making guy in the Weathermen, came out of the tank acting like some kind of slug-creature, oozing across the floor with his flailing hands crabbed into pincers or eyestalks. Virgil and I sedated him and kept him in the twilight room. Eventually he started talking, but none of it made any sense. Time-traveling, brain-stealing snails....

In spite of the odd bummer, they kept coming, and not just because the Guide ordered them to, when she was not playing Barbies with them, dressing and undressing, pairing them off and punishing them for things they did in her dreams. While their children roamed the grounds, naked and feral, they dreamed of bringing the messages of peace and secrets to applied evolution that would usher in a new utopia.

But it would have to be a posthuman utopia.

I couldn't believe they were so desperate to get high, or even to meet their precious Space Brothers, but Virgil always said they knew it wasn't just a shower. The only thing they still know, he said, is that they need punishment.

We also had, naturally, many untried theories as to why the wandering human mind was psychic flypaper. The bedeviling notion of all that succulent, untapped computing potential, that found the powerless astral traveler as irresistible in the interdimensional void as the lure of a benthic angler fish in the black depths of the Pacific. Perhaps they were seduced by the promise of a material body, of incarnation, but one and all, host and guest alike seemed to really regret the deal.

A few bad power trips aside, most of our hosts described the sensation of being possessed in ecstatic terms, not like that ugly drag of a Catholic head-trip movie, but more like the ancient Greek psychopomps, or the ferocious divine orgasm of being ridden by the Haitian loa. Most came and went without leaving any quantifiable data, leaving the subject with only scrambled neurons and a bloody nose. Others, those that could coherently operate the body they found themselves trapped in, were more trouble than they were worth. Most of them remained semi-catatonic, sometimes babbling aphasic word-salads as they tried to articulate incomprehensible thoughts with the blasted flotsam of the human hippie cortex. Sensory and motor impulses must have been so complex as to overwhelm, or so primitive as to leave the body's new inhabitant stupefied, or simply too strange to relate to.

We converted the old stables and kennel into an interdimensional zoo, an astral psycho ward. We experimented with the doses, the variety and volume of psychedelics, but in the end discovered the Guide was right. All they needed was a little push into the color field, and some intangible wind lifted them up like kites and carried them off.

We stopped touching anything stronger than weed, ourselves, but then we started sneaking speed behind each other's backs to stay away from the dreams. And a hundred times a day we caught ourselves daydreaming and staring into the pure blue sky, or the starving emptiness of a blank page or the emerald infinity in a banana leaf, as if leaning out a window and catching oneself, and it's like that fear of heights that isn't really the fear of falling, but the creeping certainty that, given half a chance, for no good reason at all, you'll throw yourself off the ledge.

The world is full of traps, of half-shut doors waiting in every opaque pool of color. We went to sleep with a Gysin dream machine spinning on the nightstand between our sleeping bags, keeping the phosphene eyelid lightshow sparking out of fear that, even in the depths of sleep, our optic stimulation would fall below a critical level, and we would be dragged kicking and screaming out of our own heads.

The most dangerous ones, the truly monstrous things, made spectacular abortions out of the human bodies they found themselves trapped in. But the worst ones, the ones we had no defense for, were the ones who walked and talked and thought with our bodies better than we ever did—the ones who

proved that all we have, all we are, was never any more difficult to imitate or invent than any other animal's mating cries and protective plumage.

Some were so clever, they walked unseen among us. They beat us at our own game. Infiltrate, provoke and explore. Didn't know until way too late that they were always in charge.

"A GANG-BANG JUST ISN'T A GANG-BANG," VIRGIL SZABO SAYS, "until someone starts crying."

Midnight.

Circles within circles drawn on the beach in white, red, black and gold, all within a massive eight-armed star that took every last drop of every goat left on the property.

All able-bodied men and women must contribute to the grand project, revealed at last to the Guide in all its glory.

Just before the gibbous moon looks away behind an incoming tropical storm, see the gleam of sweat and paint on the rigid equation of joylessly copulating bodies.

The Space Brothers cannot come in fullness until suitable bodies are provided, until a glut of sensation makes them irresistible. The Guide lays back upon a circle of silk at the intersection of all spheres, aloof of the train of men encircling her, fucking and regrouping and returning in cycles through the other circles, the other three women, each splayed out amid alchemical scratching in the sand and accepting her own worship.

The rasping intakes of breath, the sougling groans of attack and release, weave in and out of sync with the sleepwalking waves. All of them labor under the unspoken command of

the Guide, all of them, except for her, blindfolded.

Billy Keel struggles to stay erect, but it's like an icicle in a kiln. All the others, priapic unto torn foreskins and avulsed urethra, tirelessly slave on, but he can't and he can't stop peeking around the border of his blindfold at the icy succubus and she smiles at him across the expanse of her orgasm plantation, every inch an empress as she shoves off an exhausted suitor and spits in her palm to slick up the raw, enraged flesh of the next.

Somewhere behind him, Virgil circles the ritual with a 16mm camera.

The sound of crying goes unnoticed for several minutes. Billy is tugged forward and made to kneel. His blindfold tightened until the scarlet fabric becomes an abstract, a red *ganzfeld* realm.

A hand cold and clammy as a dead fish tugs brutally at his cock and he almost faints from the drainage of blood from his tingling limbs, his swimming brain.

A shy, nearsighted blonde everyone calls Heidi rears up out of the herd, gouges the sand and shrieks impossible octaves that snap her vocal cords like cheap viola strings. The sound is almost as if some ingenious pervert has electrified a dolphin and is playing it like a guitar. But through the awful agonizing sound, it's screaming for Billy Keel.

The orgy devolves into a crawling, screaming catfight as the naked bodies come alive in a frenzy of scratching. The Guide fades behind locked arms and is spirited away to the house.

Heidi rakes flesh and gyrates at the moon as if giving birth to its bastard.

Out of the undergrowth come the children. Naked, howling, they've been out of sight for weeks. They bound over the bodies to claw at Heidi like hunting dogs on a fox. Heidi throws them off, kicking them aside, to get at Billy.

Billy keeps the hooting kids at bay while Virgil tackles her and jabs a syringe of sodium pentothal into her throat.

She goes limp. "Help me get this one back to the lab," Virgil says. She sags out of his grip. Her bones, soft-boiled, give way in her flesh, and then she comes alive. Thrashing across the sand like a tangle of snakes, she convulses and expels a stream of ejaculate from her vagina, and then a foamy torrent from her mouth. Her jaw sags to her chest and the jet of fluid from her mouth seems to congeal within a translucent membrane, to hang suspended over her, curling and twisting into the air like a curious snail.

Manifesting ectoplasm was a favorite old medium's trick, but it seldom amounted to more than a few tongues of ghostly fluid floating in air, emitted from the mouth or from underneath the fingertips.

Heidi's ectoplasm surges out in a sizzling pillar and licks Virgil across the right cheek. His flesh comes off the bone like frosting off a hot cake. He goes into shock instantly, sloughing off her as the boneless thing Heidi's become undulates like an octopus across the sand and into the surf.

Billy wades in after her with a torch and a knife, but he runs for cover when the Guide's bodyguards come back with M3 greaseguns and strafe the waves. The Guide screams at them to shoot all the children—

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AFTER THAT, I GUESS YOU COULD SAY WE KIND OF LOST OUR way.

The Guide obsessed over getting impregnated by one of our psychopomps and becoming the Queen Mother of the first earthly Space Brother. We set up an assembly line whereby men would be drugged, hooded and mounted the moment they began to act zapped. But the only place we could not repeat our results was in the lab.

Two more guests spontaneously manifested in the next week. One tried to eat himself, chewed his fucking hands off in his sleep, then extruded red ectoplasmic stilts and tried to flee the compound like some gigantic daddy-long-legs. We shot him down before he reached the highway. The other leapt into the sea speaking in tongues and never came back.

Heidi washed up a few days later, thoroughly wrung out, bones all out of order. The fishermen stopped selling to us, told me that one of our group drowned one of theirs, just dragged him overboard the morning after Heidi went swimming.

Virgil barely pulled through, and as soon as he was able, he went back to the States. I woke up to find all the coke gone and a note on top of the iso tank.

“I never really gave a shit about the research, anyway. I just wanted them to hurt because they thought they were better than me.”

The stupidest thing I could’ve done at that point was to get in touch with our contact. So that’s what I did. I took a bota

bag of sangria laced with Blue Moonlight and a squirrel rifle up into the hills.

No mail or phones at Xtal, and our neighbors monitored the radio waves for American spook chatter, so all conventional channels were out. But my handler had never used them.

Rowan Hawkshaw was an old-school CIA operative who went native on the drug culture before there was one. How native? Back when the CIA was putting acid in the water cooler to build up their “immunity to psychedelic torture,” someone got the bright idea of trying to use it for telepathy. Hawkshaw had already showed some glimmer of clairvoyance as a POW in Germany, so they dosed him to the gills and asked him what his counterpart was drawing on a notepad in San Francisco. He could hear everything, everyone, everywhere. He was pushed out a window at Bethesda to shut him up in ’53 and used as a cautionary tale on the dangers of LSD. Two of the agents closest to Hawkshaw killed themselves within a year, claiming they saw Hawkshaw in flashbacks.

Hawkshaw has been dead for twenty years. But if you take more than 2,600 mics of truly potent acid and meditate upon a particular tartan plaid until all else dissolves into a worsted blur, you might just begin to perceive him.

I tried to break my brain with LSD after I got drummed out of the FBI, when I first heard his voice. He fed me the usual stew of soothing half-truths, unspeakable nonsense, patriotic occultism and chummy pep school cajolery, but in the end, he turned out to have exactly the morsel of forbidden lore to let me know exactly how damned we really were. He never prom-

ised redemption, only blood and secrets. It was not in spite of his being an insane drug-ghost, but because of it, that I believed I was still working for Delta Green.

He listened patiently to my plea, from chattering teeth and blistered lips, and told me what I most fervently wanted to hear. *I think we've learned everything we can from the Guide.*

Get ready to be delivered, he said, *and delivered in a hurry.*

DAWN.

Longhaired soldiers patrol the perimeter, dragged by kill-trained German Shepherds. Donovan is singing about Atlantis on the last tinny speaker nobody has smashed or shot yet. All the palm trees are burning.

The dogs rove relentlessly, pausing only to piss on their predecessors' skulls. The kids are all locked up in the kennels. The Guide changed her mind about them once she saw what great hosts they made.

Everybody meditates and sleeps in pairs, eats together, but fires keep starting. The animals keep escaping from the zoo. Most of them stalk like wild beasts with no instincts, trying to eat rocks and trash and scorpions, but some vivisect each other or offer up desperate sacrifices to unrecognizable stars, trying to escape these awful, mortal bodies.

Billy sends word to the Guide that she has to come to the lab. Alone. She trusts no one, so the warning could be about her own closest disciples, and when was Billy ever a threat? When was he ever anything?

She comes down the stairs in a white gown plastered with

bloody white feathers. “I told them to bring me the sky, and the fucking idiots killed all the seagulls.”

“You can’t be poetic with zombies. At least they still follow orders.”

She shifted uncomfortably. “I have morning adorations, Billy.” Crepuscular submarine light animates the sunken circles under her eyes, the tension in her chattering jaw. “What am I here to see?”

He retreats back into the shadowy nest of the pharmacy. Baker’s racks of human shit sprouting forests of knobby mushrooms; grinders, shakers, ventilation hoods; apothecary’s jars, jugs and an icebox with a padlock on it. Knowing her tastes, he passes her the mask.

“We’re way past all that, now,” she says.

He growls, “Put it on,” glaring at her and realizing he’s got her by the arm and twisting her across the lab to the restraint chair. “You’re going to want it before you hear this.”

“One peep from me and they’ll come down and fillet you, whether or not I try to stop them.”

Fumbling around on the counter, Billy comes up with a gun. “Put it on.”

“Christ, you can’t even play dominance games right.” She puts on the mask and her eyes widen maybe for just a moment, and then she sits back in the chair, tucks her legs in a lotus position. Inhaling deeply, she whispers, “I’m not laughing.”

“It’s not laughing gas.”

Smacking her lips like a wine connoisseur. “Sodium pentothal and...what is that...BZ...? Ketamine? Fuck’s sake, Billy, you stupid queer.... All the doors are *walls* and all the walls...”

“Why should they keep following you? The Space Brothers—”

Now she’s laughing. “Oh, they’ve come among us! You and your sicko friend twisted everything beautiful about this place and made it a deathcamp.... My husband would—”

“Adam,” he said.

She blinked. “Yes, my hus—”

“No, you. *Adam*.” He snaps his fingers in her face. “That’s you in there, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Smiling owl-ishly.

“Yeah, you do. Here’s how I know you’re full of shit. See, my evil crypto-fascist friends know all sorts of forbidden lore. They even read me your husband’s dossier. He was sexually omnivorous, made the most of being the head of a hippie drug cult in San Francisco. There’s practically an orphanage named after him. More bastards than Jefferson and Screamin’ Jay Hawkins combined. All those feral little monsters running wild all over the property, right?

“But Evangeline was a virgin. Adam made a big deal of it, didn’t he, that his old lady was keeping herself pure to be a perfect vessel for his sexual magic? Whatever his trip, Evangeline showed no interest in the sexual act. No orgies, none of that shit. Until that first time. You were bleeding all over Virgil. You even wrote in it—”

“You never forget your first.” She takes another big hit off the mask, gesturing for him to turn it up. Her head lolls on her neck and she bites her lip and chants under her breath, through

bubbling blood, “*Gnaaa Yaaagha shutaaaahthh.... Iiiiäääää Yog—*”

He aims the gun at her, biting his lip. He picks up a hammer and smashes the regulator off the top of the nitrous tank. The shredded hose flies in her face as the tank rockets across the lab to smash into the control console. Sparks and laughing gas conspire to stage the worst Fourth of July celebration ever.

The Guide lets the useless mask fall away. “You don’t get it, G-man, as per usual. Your masters.... What they want is not exploration, but a war on consciousness itself. So really, we’re all on the same side.”

“Then who’s the real enemy?”

“Everybody knows that. It’s us...or you....” Wiping sudden tears from her eyes, she looks at them in wonder. “I don’t know what the hell I am, anymore. Sometimes I think I’m something that thinks it’s Adam Olcott, trying to be his wife. Her memories were like...like light in the dark to a moth, you know? Food on fire at the bottom of the ocean. I couldn’t resist following her out of the Outside...and I don’t know...what... what I was...and she won’t...let me go....”

Billy cocks the gun, steadies it against his knee. “You can go any time you like.”

Evangeline laughs. “We’re not the ones who’re going, Billy.” She rubs her belly, pulling the gown snug against the slight but unmistakable swelling. “Can’t close the door you opened now. All these kids came down here to get free, to be cleansed, to be perfect. And it’s beautiful, because unlike all the other stupid hippie dreams, it came true.”

“It’s shut. I flushed all the drugs.”

“Didn’t you learn anything? It was never about the drugs. It was about opening yourself up to change. And we all knew change was coming. Don’t feel bad, Billy. If something comes along that can do what you do better than you, with less waste and bullshit, that can articulate the will of the Infinite better than you ever could, and could do it right there in your own, useless, wasted body...well then, wouldn’t you have to be one hell of a selfish bummer to say no?”

He points the gun in her face. “No.”

Evangeline closes her eyes and begins to chant again, but immediately falters. “Listen, do you hear that?”

He doesn’t, but a moment later all doubt dies. The mottled sunlight from the glass ceiling is violently eclipsed by a woman’s body plunging into the deep end of the pool. The light stained scarlet as thunderheads of blood unfold across the water.

Two more bodies fall in on top of her. Billy runs for the stairs, then pivots, his hands shaking. All the hardware, the tapes, the notebooks, the data, the discoveries—

Leave it. He starts up the spiral staircase. “They won’t find us here,” she says, even as he rounds the last curling turn and runs into the butt of an assault rifle.

Tumbling ass over teakettle back down the stairs and he sprawls across the Persian rug at Evangeline’s feet, and whatever it is in her head says, “*Tus apestosas garras de él—*”

Three guns shoot her, punch through her, rip her into wet red kindling. Her arms out wide in acceptance, in embrace, she explodes at them like a claymore of liquid flesh, unfurling so

swiftly as to fling a wall of bone shrapnel at the first one down the stairs. A lashing Kundalini serpent of red ectoplasm like a column of lavalamp wax hovers above Billy Keel, a predator guarding its prey.

Billy can't see the other gunmen. His panorama is dominated by the dying man next to him on the floor. Short, neckless, rough *mestizo* features with a craggy jaw and beetling, simian brow, but a shock of glossy black hair, almost like a horse's mane, fanning out over his sloping, sunburned skull. He gags and spits, blinking at a shard of rib jammed into his left eye, and shoots the ceiling.

The other gunmen open fire on the bloody phantasm. Billy stops two slugs from a pistol, in his leg and lower back.

A growling fissure meanders across the ceiling. A column of fetid, blue-green water slams the floor and becomes a curtain, and then twenty thousand gallons of it claps down on the lab like the cover of a book.

THE CLEANUP CREW WAS DRAFTED FROM THE CULIACAN CARTELS. They had no idea what to expect. These were hard men, proud torturers and masters of the rich secret vocabulary of corpse defilement. Half of them were dead by their own hand by the end of '73.

They burned Xtal to the ground. Eighteen bodies were discovered, if not identified. Two or three canny survivors waded out into the Gulf and swam south with the tide, turning up in Mazatlan the next morning on foot and hysterical. One of them almost made it onto a plane before somebody intercepted her.

After everything we'd gone through, to lose all our evidence, all our priceless research, was the only unforgivable sin. Virgil had eluded his handler and was somewhere at large in Latin America. I was quarantined and exhaustively debriefed in Mexico City under drug therapy and hypnosis.

They had no faces. I told them everything. At first they didn't believe me. Then one of them started laughing and had to be excused.

Someone else had co-opted me and run our operation. They said they'd never heard of the Hawkshaw Protocol. When they got some inkling of what Virgil and I were doing down there, they tried to contact us, but we were cut off and didn't want to be found. They had no choice but to use the *sicarios* as a cat's-paw to burn down Xtal before my patrons could extract the menagerie and all of our precious data.

They still suspected I was a triple agent and had burned them. They were furious until they realized I'd thought I was still working for Delta Green all along, that I was just a burn-out who took his orders from hallucinations.

I would not have been surprised at all if they decided to eliminate me. But they always know, don't they, when you can still be used for just one more.

They told me about the Santissima Chupamuerte.

They promised redemption.

OUTSIDE MATAMOROS.

The circus is closed, but a steady stream of suckers from town file into the whore tent. Another tent behind the barricade

of camper vans and trailers entertains a slower, sadder traffic. They come to witness miracles, and perhaps to play host to the angel that walks among men.

Billy crouches in the dry arroyo behind the circus compound, waiting for the gunman in the snakeskin cowboy boots to shuffle past. He carries something heavy enough to have a strap, clinking against his belt buckle. Surging out of the creek-bed, Billy closes behind him and throws an arm round his neck, plunges the knife in behind his jawbone before he can draw in a breath to scream.

Billy takes his weight, dragging him towards the arroyo, when he sees her in the dead man's arms.

Not a rifle.

He's carrying a girl.

She slides out of his arms, small as a doll, misshapen legs in bulky braces, incurious eyes staring up at the moon, offering no resistance when Billy picks her up and walks in to the compound. He doesn't have to fake desolate tears. *Later*, he promises himself, *if there's a later, you can pay for this, too*.

A loose gaggle of clowns eyes him suspiciously as they pass a jug of tequila and a rag soaked in ether.

Two burly men sit outside a camper. One, with a hook for a hand, stands and blocks the door. Still holding the girl, Billy reaches into his denim jacket, pulls out a wad of dollars.

Wrenching screams come from inside the camper—a child's screams...

They call it the Sainted Death-Sucker. The *Federales* had to be made to connect the dots, the string of desiccated corpses

from Sinaloa to the border. One *patrulero* on the border highway stopped them and was gunned down, or nobody would have noticed at all, perhaps.

They worship it as an angel incarnated on earth. They protect it, travel with it, performing miracles, accepting sacrifices. Everywhere, the people bring their wounded, diseased, deformed, to be swallowed and made whole.

Billy climbs the steps into the camper. Inside, the stifling heat is stuffed with fanatical peasants and freaks. Dwarves, pinheads, a woman with a furry monkey's face, a man with alligator skin, all gather round a sickly shade of a man on a bed. His stringy hair is glossy black, but his face is creased and sunken, his eyes barely open as he sits bolt upright in the bed. The only thing alive about his body is the tangle of scarlet ectoplasm reaching out from his eyes, mouth, nostrils and fingertips to converge to lift a boy out of his mother's arms, to go down his throat and into his ears and cradle his horribly twisted spine.

The weightless proto-flesh cocoon shimmers with an eerie witch-light that pulses in time with the muttered mantra of the sideshow cult. The boy screams louder as his bones soften and settle, stretch and straighten.

When the boy seems to settle into shock or deep sleep, the anemone of ectoplasm unsheathes the remade body and retreats back into the body in the bed, but still lurks like snail's eyes from under his drooping eyelids awaiting the next patient.

Slowly, the tendrils open into flowers. Clutching his chest, the man falls back on the bed. The cult erupts in dismay. The alligator man and the monkey woman take the mother by the

shoulders. Apparently she knows the rules, and doesn't fight as the boy is drawn towards the bed.

The dying man on the bed turns to look at Billy and his mouth falls open. Spitting out sunflower seeds.

In the time it takes Billy to drop the girl and drag his 9mm automatic with a silencer clear of his improvised shoulder rig, the ectoplasm shoots back out of the man, visibly draining color, blood, life from his almost-translucent flesh. Billy drags the boy off the bed by his collar as he fires into it, chopping through the forest of tapering plasma tendrils that reach out for his face even as they twist together into a basket to catch the falling girl.

"Billy," whispers the thing in the bed, "where the hell've you been, man?"

Billy shoots it in the chest, forehead, chest again as whips of ectoplasm lash out. The alligator man lurches into the stream, bellowing his faith in Quiché Mayan dialect.

"Get away from him!" Billy shoots into the ceiling. The alligator man doesn't even look at him, but falls across the dying host, mouth open wide to accept the gushing tide of ectoplasm from orifices natural and man-made. The monkey woman takes the crippled girl, who looks around her for the first time, and begins crying.

Opening the door, Billy tackles one of the roustabouts. The other one shoves past him into the camper. A one-eyed clown offers him the ether rag and he takes a deep, deep breath of it. He walks blindfolded into the desert, raging at the sky, trapped inside himself.

Utopia

By David Farnell

EYES OPEN TO DARKNESS. WHERE? HEAD THROBBING. STICKINESS on fingers. Someone...hit me? Popping—gunfire? No, the machine. Sputtering, dying. Sparks across the darkness. Overlapping smells of funereal incense, death old and fresh, blood, electrical burning. A sound, behind. Heavy, rapid breathing. A growl from a feminine throat.

HENRY NAKATA WAS HAVING AN EXCELLENT BOWL OF TONKATSU ramen when the shop door slid open with a rattle and the fat American entered. Nakata was sitting in the corner of the shop furthest from the door, but the American was only a few steps away as he entered. And he was obviously American; more than the pale skin, the ice-blue eyes, the massive rolls of flesh that started under his chin and continued down his torso, it was the way the man held himself, fanning himself with a pamphlet for some local bar as he sweated in the Kyushu August night, just oozing the smell of a high-meat diet that the average Japanese person couldn't possibly afford despite the expanding post-Occupation economy. The man's baby-round face made him look younger than his years, but Henry noted the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes and made him for fifty or so. Say, ten, fifteen years older than Henry.

The master of the shop called out a hearty "*Irasshaimase!*" which elicited a half-smile and a slight dip of the head from the man, who then caught Nakata's still regard. The smile turned

full and victorious and the man stepped over the Henry's table. Without any hint of asking permission, he pulled out the tiny chair and sat carefully.

"Jesus, size of this furniture, I feel like I'm back in kindergarten! *Hisashiburi*, Hikaru! Been a long time!"

Henry just kept his face still and let the man's too-loud voice wash over him, evaluating what he was learning of this complete stranger. *He knows my cover name. He knows at least a little Japanese.* The man looked over his shoulder and asked for a bowl of whatever "Hikaru" was having, his Japanese stilted, the grammar off, but perfectly understandable. The proprietor nodded and immediately set about filling the order.

The man looked back at Henry and, with a jerk of his head at the master, asked, "How's his English, you think?"

"I don't believe he speaks more than a few words of it," Henry responded, his voice low, purposefully adding a slight Japanese accent to his native English. "But this is only the second time I've eaten here. I suppose it will be the last, now."

"Aw, don't sound so glum." The man chuckled as the master brought him his large bowl and a small glass of ice-cold barley tea. The big man took a pair of disposable chopsticks and broke them apart with practiced ease. Henry noted that he did not, like most Americans, rub the sticks against each other to smooth them, a pointless action that had always irritated him. The man dug in with gusto, leaning back after a few loud slurps, dabbing with a paper napkin at his chin and the spots of oily soup now speckling his white, sweat-darkened shirt. "Damn, that's good! I tell you, I was never big on ra-

men, but this stuff is the best I ever had. No wonder you're so blue, thinkin' you can't come here anymore now that you been seen with me." He twisted to address the proprietor. "*Sensei! Gochisōsama!*"

The master smiled and thanked him for the compliment, ignoring that it was one normally given at the end of a meal, then turned away to concentrate on making noodles. The fat man turned back and grinned at Henry. "But yeah, you're right. Probably best not to come here again for awhile. Sorry 'bout that." He didn't appear at all contrite and he resumed eating.

Henry looked at his unwanted companion calmly. "This is the best ramen in Fukuoka. The best in Japan as far as I know. May I ask what brings you here with such disappointing news?"

"You can call me Greene. Bill Greene." He locked Henry's eyes with his own and his smile disappeared. "Joe sent me."

Henry sat perfectly still for a long moment. Then he carefully set his chopsticks down. He clinically noted the goosebumps that had broken out across his forearms. "Joe.... You mean Joseph?" He almost said the surname, but stopped himself.

"Mm-hmm." The man nodded as he continued to eat. Pausing, he casually said, "He and I were campin' recently, y'know. He kept talkin' about you. And opera. Man sure does love his opera."

Joseph Camp, Henry thought. Mister Greene. A night at the opera. Shit.

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I ROLL OVER TO FACE HER. WEAK GLOW FROM THE STAIRWELL. She can't see it. Huddled in the corner. Face a mask of blood below empty sockets, ruined by taloned fingers. She moans and growls like an animal, but I can make out words now, in no language I know. Nothing human.

AS THEY WALKED THROUGH THE NAKASU DISTRICT—WOMEN IN fashions inspired by Karen Carpenter and Diana Ross, men in wide-collared shirts and flare-legged jeans, *yatai* stalls selling beer and food, a group of three American soldiers on R&R from the war in Vietnam looking around warily and trying to figure out which hostess bar would rip them off the least—Greene explained.

“Back in World War Two, you know we all had these crazy secret-weapons programs goin’ on. Them, us. Bats with incendiaries tied to ’em, hydrogen-peroxide fighter-jets that ate the meat off the pilot, all kinds of stupid garbage.”

“Atomic weapons,” Henry added, his voice flat. Out here on the busy street, he’d stopped trying to sound like English was not his native language.

Greene laughed. “Yeah, those actually worked. Anyway, Japan had its own skunkworks. They had a scientist workin’ for ’em, a woman by the name of Mitsutomi. Doctor Shizuka Mitsutomi. We got a file on her—I’ll give it to you when we get to my hotel. She was all into effects of electromagnetic waves on brain function. The military set her to workin’ on some

kinda pulse weapon that would knock people out, or demoralize 'em, stuff like that." He paused to chuckle at the American soldiers as they finally succumbed to the entreaties of two women in slit-skirted Chinese *cheongsam* dresses and entered a club with posters that promised exotic dancers. "This place is just made to separate guys like that from their wallets, ain't it? Anyway, she came up with an insanity bomb."

Henry out-waited Greene, who appeared to expect more of a reaction to an announcement like that. The fat man finally gave up with a sigh, and said sarcastically, "Yes, that's right: *insanity bomb*. Designed to be a boobytrap. Troops come in, trigger it, start the timer. Few seconds later when it's right in the middle of a group—don't want some point man settin' it off early, y'know—it goes off. Sends out a pulse of energy, disrupts brainwaves, drives everyone in range instantly bug-fuck. They fall down cryin', or start screamin' about six-foot-tall lizards, or think they *are* six-foot-tall lizards, and maybe start bitin' the guy next to 'em."

"Was it ever actually built?" Henry asked.

"Prototypes only. They tested it on some Chinese prisoners. I've seen the film." Greene shook his head. "One of them guys really wiggled out. Killed another prisoner. I wasn't kiddin' about the bitin'. Had to be shot."

Henry suppressed a shudder. "Why was it never deployed?"

"Too expensive, too delicate, too unpredictable. Explosives fucked people up a lot better for a lot less money."

"Fine." Henry paused to make sure no one was in hearing

distance. “So, what, the plans for the device have turned up and the government wants them? How does this earn a Delta Green classification? Why not just send the police in? The Occupation may be over outside Okinawa, but America still owns Japan. Why do you need me?”

Greene grinned at him sidelong. “You mean the all-American CIA man who can pass for Japanese? Or the guy workin’ to make sure Japan don’t turn into the next commie domino to fall, seein’ as we’re gonna lose Vietnam anytime now?”

Henry shook his head in disgust. “Japan will never go communist. We’re just wasting money, propping up those far-right assholes. But I do as I’m told.”

“That, brother, is right,” Greene said, clapping Henry on the shoulder, laughing. “You and me both! And that’s who Joe wants. The guy who does what he’s told.”

OFF TO THE SIDE, A TWITCHING HEAP. THE MAN. NAME? A choking sound. He rises, silhouette, hunched. I lie still, praying the darkness hides me. The woman mutters and growls her prayer. Screams and raging laughter echo down the stairs. The man turns and launches himself.

AT THE HOTEL ROOM, GREENE GAVE HIM THE FILE ON DR. MITsutomi and laid out the mission. “We don’t need you to get the plans. We got the plans. We need the Doc. See, she’s active again, with somethin’ new. Not a weapon. Hell, we don’t know what it is. But it makes people...happy.”

“Happy?”

“So happy they disappear and you never hear from ’em again.”

And that, apparently, was that. The doctor was living in a small apartment building in the Nishijin neighborhood of Fukuoka. So that was probably the biggest reason they had called on him. He was in the city and was familiar with it. That and the fact that he’d done his job and kept his mouth shut about the things he’d seen in his previous ‘operas.’

P4, Delta Green, or whatever they were calling themselves these days—something bad had gone down in Vietnam a couple of years before and there had been a big reorganization. When Henry had asked about that yesterday, Greene had hinted that everything was running better than ever, with less bureaucratic interference.

Henry spent a lot of time in Fukuoka. It was the largest city on the southwestern island of Kyushu, its port and proximity to Korea bringing in wealth and serving as a prime entryway for smuggling, human and otherwise. He lived, however, in a small apartment in Tokyo. Henry had been living there without diplomatic cover as a Japanese citizen, a down-on-his-luck independent businessman who was always hustling deals and making just enough to get by. It gave him a reason to be at loose ends, to be seen with shady characters, to travel all over and disappear for weeks at a time. His neighbors weren’t the nosy type anyway, and he didn’t try to make friends.

The reality was that he propped up semi- and not-so-semi-fascist organizations in Japan by slipping them money and information, and in return they provided information and favors

for Uncle Sam. They smeared left-wing politicians, terrorized ordinary citizens into voting for the decidedly non-liberal, non-democratic Liberal Democratic Party, and used other underhanded tactics meant to keep Japan firmly within America's sphere of influence and out of the Soviets'. The ultranationalists might drive around in their armored trucks, blasting out pre-war patriotic anthems on their tooth-rattling speakers and declaring that America must leave Japan and that the Emperor was a living god, but in private they took bags of cash from Henry and drank whisky with him and joked about how they were the only thing keeping all of Asia safe. They weren't the types to try to inspire coup attempts and pointlessly commit *seppuku*, like the gifted but foolish author Mishima had last year.

Henry hated them all. They were the same kind of people, often the very same people, whom he had volunteered to fight against in World War II. Granted, he'd never actually fought during the war—he'd been made a translator, and he'd only joined active service shortly before the end of the war, after having spent most of it in an internment camp in Texas, another idiotic American reaction to the wrong threat—but he blamed those people he drank with for nearly destroying the land of his ancestors. And their *yakuza* sometime-allies were even worse. Stupid and vain, most of them, strutting tattooed peacocks always ready to take offense at imagined slights and prone to turning violent without warning. The rivalries between the gangs were difficult to negotiate, as well. They were a whole culture of their own, hidden behind the civilized veneer of Japa-

nese society.

Still, as much as he hated them, and himself for helping to further these pointless policies, these wastes of time and money and lies, he had to admit it gave him a thrill to play the game. But the truth was, none of that mattered.

As he stood outside the small apartment building late the next morning, feeling a headache coming on, he reminded himself that as long as he maintained his position in the CIA, he was of use to Joseph Camp. He'd only met the man once, a few weeks after an incident up north in Hokkaido just after the end of the war. That was when Joe Camp showed him that the petty prizes that humans fight over were nothing more than distractions. Camp had showed him there are inhuman forces that could wipe the entire species from the surface of the Earth.

So if Joe Camp wanted him to check out some scientist's happy little commune, he'd do it.

Though it was midmorning, the August sun was already beating down on him, and the humidity was so high his sweat was not cooling him at all. He mopped his face with a small towel-like handkerchief and wished he had a hat. The buzzing song of the *kumazemi*, the largest species of cicada, filled every tree and was so intense that it exacerbated his headache. Henry mused momentarily on the life cycle of the huge insects, emerging from the ground after years in another form, metamorphosing from squirming worms to flying bugs nearly the size of small songbirds. The males sang desperately for a mate, only to end up twitching, dying on the sidewalk after passing along their seed to the next generation of subterranean grubs.

He entered the building, which bore the improbable name *La Belle Chateau Nishijin*. A postwar, slapped-together concrete eyesore, its whitewashed exterior was weeping rust from bolted-on pipes. The little lobby had the names of residents next to battered mailboxes. He saw Mitsutomi's on her box, the two *kanji* of her family name handwritten with marker on a piece of white tape, together meaning something like "shining wealth."

A cheerful greeting rang out behind him, startling him. Henry turned to see a smiling man, perhaps in his thirties, prematurely bald. He carried with him an odd scent, sweet but also redolent of rot. For a moment Henry thought the man was drugged, or perhaps mentally deficient. He had an intensely friendly expression and almost aggressive way of locking his eyes with Henry's. Henry squinted as his headache worsened, and briefly regretted not taking Greene up on his offer to wait outside as backup. But a huge white man waiting in a taxi would be talked about by the residents for weeks.

Without waiting for Henry to reply, the man asked in slightly slurred Japanese, "Are you looking for an apartment? We have an empty one! Mr. Ōshima left us! I am Yamamura, the owner!" He bowed, still locking eyes with Henry in a way that reminded him of an American pastor he'd met as a teen, who would not stop shaking Henry's hand until Henry had had to forcibly pull away.

Henry bowed more shallowly in return. "I am Hara. It's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you, but I am here to visit a friend." He smiled nervously and bowed again, and turned to

head for the elevator.

“Professor Mitsutomi?” the building owner called after him. “I’m very sorry. I saw you looking at her mailbox. Did you come seeking bliss, like the others?”

Henry froze and turned back to the man, then stepped closer. The man was assuming he was some sort of supplicant; he would play the role. “Is it true? What they say? That she can provide freedom from desire?”

Yamamura nodded enthusiastically. “Oh yes!” He stepped intimately close and laid his hand on Henry’s chest, violating his personal space in a shocking manner. “We are all broken things, disconnected from ourselves and the universe,” the man said conspiratorially. “Why should we not at least be happy?”

Henry nodded. “Yes, I think so, too.” He resisted the urge to remove the man’s hand from over his heart. The smell that hung about the man, perhaps in his clothes, made Henry want to lean away. “Do you think she will see me?”

“She sees everyone!” The man smiled more broadly, revealing brown, widely separated teeth. “I’ll take you to her! Come!”

Henry followed the man toward the elevator. Ōshima had been the name of the man whose daughter had contacted the police, claiming he’d been inducted into a cult in *La Belle Chateau Nishijin*, and possibly murdered. But when the police were told he had moved out, they had merely shrugged and said there was nothing they could do. They had no reason to expect foul play.

Yamamura took Henry up to the third floor and went

along the exterior concrete walkway to knock on the door to apartment 302. Leaves from a tree beside the building were pushing through the rusting railing, and the cicadas' song was so near that it made Henry's teeth ache. He could see one insect clinging to a twig. It was as long as his index finger and seemed to be staring at him as it buzzed. Without waiting for an answer Yamamura opened the unlocked door and called out, "Sorry to bother you! Professor? Someone is here to see you!"

"Yes, please come in," a voice called from within. Yamamura used his toes to slip off his shoes with automatic ease, and Henry did the same, leaving them in the entryway.

"Professor?" Yamada asked. The apartment was dim and stuffy, lights off, curtains drawn. Though there were some windows open, the curtains prevented the air from flowing. Henry felt sweat break out on his forehead and chest. He caught the scent of incense, the type used for praying for the souls of the dead.

Yamamura led Henry into the small living room. It was tastefully decorated with a scroll on the wall, the characters for "harmony" painted by hand with a large brush in black ink. On the opposite wall was a small European-style oil painting of a bridge, with people walking across it in the rain; one figure, a woman, stood at the edge. Something about her forward-leaning stance made Henry think she was considering jumping.

A set of shelves was overstuffed with books, some vertical, some stacked horizontally, most with scraps of paper stuffed in them as bookmarks and notes. Some of the titles on the spines were in Japanese, some in English, some Russian or Ger-

man—all languages Henry knew, though his Russian was weak. They were books of psychology, electronics, brain structure, philosophy. One caught his eye, *Revelations of* something, its spine partly obscured by a ceramic cup holding sand and ashes and the almost-disappeared stumps of two smoldering *senkō*, incense sticks.

But his target was sitting before him on a low sofa, a small *kotatsu* table in front of her. Doctor Mitsutomi was nearly sixty, but she sat straight and slender, her knees slightly to one side, her face plain, moderately wrinkled, no makeup, but so peaceful that it almost glowed with a quiet beauty. Her loose grey-streaked hair cascaded down her left side, partly hiding her face, reaching her lower ribs. Her eyes were an unusually light shade of brown, hazel really. They looked at him intently.

The quiet had achieved a frozen quality, and Yamamura opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again and looked from Henry to the scientist. After a long moment she glanced at him and said, “Thank you, Yamamura-san.” Her voice was gentle, but clearly telling him he was no longer needed. The building owner bowed and withdrew, padding away in his socks. Soon Henry heard the soft scraping of the man donning his shoes, and the apartment door shut very quietly.

Affecting a hesitant attitude was not difficult. “I am Hara. It is an honor to meet you. I...did not expect to be allowed to meet you today. I have brought no gift—”

“That is of no importance,” she said, interrupting him. “Sit, please.” She indicated an armchair behind him, to his left. As Henry settled into the chair, she rose and entered the tiny

kitchen, from which came the click of the gas turning on and the strike of a match, and then the sound of a kettle being filled from the sink. Henry sat in silence as she boiled the water, feeling the headache grow from a vague discomfort to a sharper, more piercing torment behind his right eye, throbbing with his heartbeat. He tried to ignore it, but as she returned to the room with a lacquered-wood tray bearing a small Japanese tea set, he saw her passing glance, and a flicker of a nod told him she saw his discomfort—and that she had expected to see it.

“Shall we speak plainly?” she asked, as she poured hot water into the small ceramic pot, over the tea leaves in the pocket of wire mesh. She placed the top back on the pot and swirled the water, letting it steep only briefly before pouring the green tea into two cups, a little into one, a little into the other, and back again so that both had equally strong tea.

“Yes, please,” Henry said, still playing the supplicant.

“You are here under false pretenses.” She handed him a cup with both hands, one supporting it from beneath, the other along the side. Her voice was just as gentle as before, so unchanged that he had already taken the tea from her before the accusation registered. Before he could formulate a response, she continued, “You do not seek what I have to offer. You are here to steal what you cannot understand.”

“I—”

She glanced at his eyes and her utter calm somehow froze him. “It is all right. I have known this day was coming.” She sat in the same position as before, and smoothed her hair with one hand, then took up the other cup with both hands and,

eyes closing, took a sip. If anything, her peace deepened. She opened her eyes and her mouth, for the first time, curved very slightly into a smile. “You are broken, you know.”

Henry felt the truth of it from her like a blow. The word “broken” caused his headache to flare like a star, a ball of plasma behind his eye. He almost spilled his tea as he cringed from the agony.

“This pain will pass if you stay with us.” Her voice was soothing him now, the torment receding slightly. “It is a manifestation of your wrongness. Your disharmony. You are out of synchronicity with the universe. All humans are.”

Struggling to master his trembling hands, he leaned forward and carefully placed the teacup on the table, and stood. “How are you doing this to me?” he demanded.

She looked up at him. “I am doing nothing to you. It is what you are. We are all flawed. Our consciousness brings us only misery, because it sets us apart from reality. Look at us, compared to the animals, who live in harmony with the world as it is. We are all insane, slaves to falsehood. You know this to be true.”

And he did. It was not a revelation. Everything he observed of human society, of human interaction, was manifest proof of this truth. Every time they went to war, every struggle for the fictions that were money or country or race or religion, every “I love you,” it all flew in the face of reality.

“We hide from honesty,” she continued. “We create layers of gauze between our imagined selves and the cold, beautiful truth: *We are nothing*. We, as individuals, as a species, as a

whole world, are nothing in the face of the vastness of the cosmos. It is absurd self-deception to think we are of the slightest importance, isn't it?"

"Yes, but...." He could not finish the thought as the pain flared again and his knees buckled. He pressed the heel of his right hand to his eye while grasping the back of the armchair with his left.

"The pain you are feeling is a physical manifestation of your brain attempting to adjust to reality as it truly is. This will happen slowly. It means the pain will take a few days to fade, but a too-quick adjustment causes the psyche to shatter."

"The...bomb." He pressed against his eye so hard he thought he might burst the orb. If it would stop the now-nauseating agony, he would welcome the loss.

She sat quiet for a moment. "You know of my early work. Of course. Of course you would. Yes, the resonant waves overwhelmed all defenses and shattered the subjects' insanity in a moment. Raw reality, pure sanity, destroyed the psyche. The personality crumbled and an unreasoning fight, flight, or freeze response took over." She shook her head. "Fools, using this technology as a weapon. It was a perversion of everything I believe." Her voice held no bitterness. "Still, I learned much."

"Your victims!"

"We are all victims, Hara-san. We are a cruel joke. My 'victims' at least experienced the truth. What is a long life of illusion compared to that?" She shrugged. "What I learned eventually led to this. Those who live in this building become adjusted to the truth slowly and with kindness. After the initial

pain, they fall into synchronicity with the cosmos, and achieve a *satori* far beyond that falsely promised by any religion. Though I must admit that primitive Buddhist meditation rituals ease the passage. They realize their true place and are not dismayed. Some have taken their lives, it is true, but they do so in peaceful acceptance of the pointlessness of life.”

“Ōshima?”

“Yes. He was one.”

“Why?” Henry gasped. “Why do you do this? If there is no point....”

“There is still intellectual curiosity,” the scientist replied. “And I feel some measure of satisfaction in bringing peace to others. If we can prepare the entire species, we will find ourselves ready for when our true masters awake. We will be suited to their purposes.”

“What?”

Her smile increased infinitesimally. “There are greater beings than us. Of course there are. Ancient, in tune with the harmony of the universe, unfettered by the insanity we call ‘sanity’. Other, younger species serve them. It is better for us to do so as well. Would you not like to have a purpose?”

Sweat was rolling down Henry’s forehead. “Where is it? The...device.”

“I will show you, after you have adjusted your perception.” She cocked her head slightly. “You are not Japanese. Under stress, your pronunciation has changed. American? You must be from their government.”

“Others know I’m here. They’ll come looking for me. You

can't stop them." He swallowed and mastered himself as best he could, bringing his hand down to his side. "Look...I believe you. Think. You've achieved a great deal here. But what is next? Are you going to build a more powerful device? Take over a larger area? There's no way people are going to endure this pain without investigations being launched."

She regarded him emotionlessly. "Bringing people into harmony against their will is impossible. Resisting too long causes a breakdown. I am not sure what the next stage should be. Perhaps a disguised religious movement, though using falsehood to reach truth is distasteful."

"Fine. But think of what American resources could do for you. Our money, our scientists and engineers, our...our advertising firms. The potential is enormous. And the government, if they imagined they could be in charge of pliant sheep, they would love it. They don't have to know the truth until it's too late."

He was rambling, but somehow it all rang true.

"Show me the device," he said. "I need to know. Can it be transported by truck?"

She looked at him for a moment longer, then seemed to make a decision, a fatalistic air settling over her features. "Very well. Come."

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AS THE MAN FALLS RAVING ON THE WOMAN, HER ALIEN WORDS rise into a shriek but do not stop. Move. Move. Goddamnit, move! Scramble, on my feet. Her screams choke off. Go, go! Hit the stairs, sounds of a skull being bashed against the concrete floor behind. Screams of children and adults ahead.

YAMAMURA UNLOCKED THE HEAVY STEEL DOOR ON THE FIRST floor and accompanied them into the basement, still looking blissful. He propped the door open, and Henry immediately knew why. The odor of death was not completely masked by the scent of dozens of sticks of incense burning. Henry realized this must be where Yamamura spent much of each day, the smell of incense and decaying bodies permeating his clothes.

They descended into the smoky basement. Three bodies were laid out on old *futon* at one end of the room, wrapped tightly in blue-plastic tarps and bedsheets, their heads pointing north, the direction of death, and little bowls of sand with burning incense sticks before them. There was a cushion for kneeling on, and next to it a meditation bowl, a sort of inverted bell, with a tiny padded club for a striker. Yamamura immediately went over to the bodies, kneeled, lit more incense, and struck the bell. It rang out with a pure, serene note that refused to fade. Yamamura assumed a position of prayer with a short string of polished-stone beads and began to murmur “*Namu Amida Butsu*” rapidly over and over.

Henry felt his headache lessening, and didn’t know if that

was a good thing. He looked at Mitsutomi, questioningly. She said in an undertone, “He is aware that it means nothing. They are dead. There is no afterlife. No spirit. We are flesh and bone. That is all. But the words please him, so why not?”

She indicated a wooden box, a sort of cabinet, on a table next to tools, some for carpentry, some for electronics, and opened it for him. Inside was an electronic device that Henry could not begin to fathom. It had switches and circuits and transistors and other things he could not name. The hand welds were small and precise. Green lights indicated that it was running within expected parameters, he supposed. There was a whine coming from it, and it was hot.

“It is important to power it down slowly,” she said. “This will cause distress to the residents, but it won’t really harm them. I believe over time they will, however, lose their sense of connectedness to the universe. If it were shut down too quickly—”

“Why am I not feeling greater pain, when I am so close to it?” Henry asked.

“You are adjusting faster than most,” she replied. “You did not seem surprised when I spoke of entities greater than ourselves. You knew something of them already. You already know the truth, on an intellectual level. You have not yet fully accepted it, but you are close.”

He picked up a hammer and hefted it.

“What are you doing?” she asked, though from her voice she already knew. “If you destroy it, the results will be...undesirable.” She sounded more curious than afraid.

He ignored her. He raised his hand to smash the device. He barely heard the nearly silent Yamamura move behind him, and just as Henry swung, a blinding flash erupted in his optic nerves as a powerful blow hit his skull.

POWER SURGE? HAND THROBBING, BURNT. MUST HAVE smashed the device after all. But unconscious. The surge shredded the minds of all the residents, but Yamamura saved me, knocking me out. Lucky. Survived again.

HENRY STAGGERED UP FROM THE BASEMENT. HE SAW A STREAK of blood on the floor of the lobby, leading to a man standing in the corner, butting his head against the wall. A broken doll, a child of maybe seven, lay at his feet. The man moaned softly, wordlessly.

Henry froze, thinking, *They were happy. They were happy. I smashed it like some killer ape, some Neanderthal. Why? What did I think I was freeing them from?*

More shrieks from upstairs. The elevator was descending, and inside were animal cries of pain and frenzied grunting. Not waiting to see what horrors would spill into the lobby, Henry bolted for the front entrance. He burst into the humid August day, his thoughts drowning in the pitiless sun pounding his skull like a hammer, and the deafening chirring of the cicadas.

GREENE DEBRIEFED HENRY IN THE HOSPITAL AFTER THE wound on his scalp was sewn up. He told Henry that the police had taken in all the residents, and a story was put out that some

sort of gas leak had made the residents ill and killed a few. The reality was that nearly all of the survivors were insane, talking nonsense or claiming to be able to see shapes and beings that weren't there. Some were violent. Eleven were dead—eight at the hands of other residents, often their own family members, two by their own hand, one killed by the police in self-defense.

"You couldn't've known, Hank," Greene said by way of comfort. "Anyway, you did what had to be done."

"Did I?" Henry muttered. "I could've left them alone. She was stuck. No way to really expand it. No way to move."

"And what about when the Soviets come to see her?" Greene snorted. "They would've been real nice, I'm sure. Anyway, all that gadget had to do was lose power in a blackout or blow a fuse and the same thing would've happened."

Henry shook his throbbing head. "Maybe. Maybe by smashing it I made it surge. Anyway, I killed those people. All of them. Even the ones who are still alive."

Greene said a few more things but Henry tuned him out. As the fat man was leaving, he stopped in the doorway. "Hank," he said, "you did the right thing. And one of these days, you're gonna have to do it again. I hope you'll be ready, brother."

When Greene left, Henry sat alone, the silence filled with the muffled hiss of the cicadas outside the window, begging to be of use before their deaths.

The Perplexing Demise of Stooge Wilson

By David J. Fielding

DETECTIVE HENRY BURGESS LOOKED THROUGH THE TWO-WAY into the small room beyond. He frowned, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand.

Eighteen weeks of hard work trying to nail the bastards; setting up dummy buys, stakeouts, countless surveillance photos, the works. Finding out who was going to be there, when the shipment was coming in and the precise location and time the buy was supposed to go down.

It should've been perfect. Would've been the biggest bust of '73. Hell, the biggest in a decade. Instead it was just piss down a drain.

And all he had to show for it was the half-crazy drool bucket sitting at the table behind the glass.

The sting would have netted them three of the Bluff's biggest dealers and taken three-quarters of a million in China White off the streets. That alone would've made all the planning and investment worth it. But the real prize was supposed to have been the man the dealers were there to meet, their supplier, an elusive and faceless bastard who went by the name of Hawkwood.

It wouldn't have cleaned up Vine City for long; hell, nothing would accomplish that. Whatever hole they would've

created by removing Hawkwood's business would've been filled within weeks, a few months at the longest. You remove the big fish from the pond, all the bottom feeders rise up to fight for the top spot. But at least they would've had that bastard Hawkwood.

Six hours before everything was to go down, everything went to hell. According to the dumb shit sitting in the interrogation room behind the glass, he and two other idiots had crashed Hawkwood's warehouse meet on Boone Boulevard. He hadn't been too forthcoming with why they had crashed the buy, but Burgess was ninety-nine percent sure it wasn't anything other than a bungled heist. These fools went in hoping to rip everyone off and the wrong thing got said or someone smelled a rat and then the guns came out. The fuckups had unleashed a shitstorm that resulted in the warehouse and almost half the block being blown to hell. They were still pulling bodies from the burning rubble. All Burgess's team got to do was mop up the mess that got left behind.

But it was losing Hawkwood that really pissed Burgess off.

Burgess heard the door open behind him and looked back to see a stranger in a crisp, immaculate brown suit walk in. The man had a case file in his hand.

"Who the hell are you?" Burgess asked, annoyed. He had a headache and wasn't in the mood for I.A. or any other—

"Special Agent Gregson Marks, FBI," the man in the brown suit answered. He wasn't looking at Burgess but straight ahead, through the glass at the man sitting at the table in Interrogation Room 3.

The man at that table was rail thin, disheveled, with stringy, dirty blonde hair that hung in his face. The hair didn't quite cover the puffy left eye or purpling bruises.

"You're shitting me," Burgess said.

"I am not shitting you," the other man said, still gazing through the glass. He nodded toward the figure on the other side. "He tell you anything?"

Burgess took three seconds deciding whether or not he was going to answer that or storm into Kincaid's office and raise holy hell over the fact that some jerk-off Fed was sticking his nose where it didn't belong. He decided he was too tired and too pissed off to risk a fight with the chief.

"Wilson? Oh, yeah, he's told us everything," Burgess griped, rubbing his sore hand. "None of it makes a lick of sense, but he laid it all out, didn't skimp on a single detail. Can't pin the nine who're dead on him, but what we do got is assault, possession, weapons plus accessory to a dozen other counts. He's fucked."

The guy in the brown suit opened the file, looked through a few pages and then closed it and looked through the glass again. The whole time he'd been in the room, he hadn't looked at Burgess once. Not even a glance.

"Don't you guys normally wear black?" Burgess asked.

Special Agent Marks didn't even crack a smile.

"I'm going to have a word with him," Marks said. "We have jurisdiction now. You're done here, detective. Go home. Guzzle some more rotgut, or stuff another heaping bowl of beans and ham hocks into your white-trash face. I really don't

care what you do. Just get gone from here. You do that, and I'll forget you ever had anything to do with this case."

Marks turned and put a hand on the doorknob.

Burgess started, "What the f—"

"Burgess," the man in the brown suit cut him off, his voice low and mean. "They told me you are a good cop. Efficient, by-the-book; one of Atlanta's best. What I see in there tells me different. What I see in there is the work of a thug. I'm pretty sure the D.A. would see it the same way. He's not really a fan of misconduct, brutality and coercion, am I right? So just play ball and stay out of my way."

DUANE WILSON, WHOM ANYBODY AND EVERYBODY KNEW AS "Stooge," was in pain. A lot of pain. Worse than that, he was pretty sure he was losing his mind.

He sat in the hard metal chair in Interrogation Room 3, gazing down at the surface of the table and talking to himself. His hushed words were the same ones he had heard seeping from the tinny speakers of Tugg's beat-up two-tone Monte Carlo last night.

"Coolness...shadow," Stooge muttered. "Silence...deep."

The lyrics from The Youngbloods' "Darkness, Darkness" kept swirling through his fevered brain, over and over; one moment loud and strident, the next whispered and sibilant. If you had asked Stooge thirty-six hours ago what the song meant to him, he would have said the song brought him comfort. Now it echoed madness.

The song had been one of his sister's favorites. It reminded

him of her, before things went bad. She had been on his mind, with the song playing on Tugg's car radio, just before they gone into that place. The place that looked like a warehouse on the outside.

But it hadn't been a warehouse on the inside.

When the police had found him, collapsed in the gutter across the road from the warehouse on Boone Boulevard, Wilson had been muttering and mumbling snatches of the song. There were sirens and shouting all around, screams and gunfire from inside the burning structure, but to Stoooge they were merely distant and unimportant reverberations. The song and the lyrics resounded bright, loud and all-encompassing in his mind.

He continued to sputter them as they handcuffed him and put him in the cruiser. He burred them repeatedly when they booked him, took his prints, and took his mug shot. Even after Burgess had hauled him into this very room, he muttered them over and over while the detective grilled him.

Burgess had been furious from the start, screaming at him, asking questions he couldn't answer. The fists and the pain that followed was nothing compared to the shards of rainbow-colored agony that flared in his mind each time he thought about the man with the yellow eyes.

The only thing that kept the horror from claiming him completely was remembering his sister's favorite song.

The door to Interrogation Room 3 opened and Stoooge flinched back instinctively, his handcuffed hands coming up to shield his face. Burgess had promised to come back. Stoooge

knew he was in probably in for another round of beat the clock, so he tried to make himself as small as possible. But it wasn't Burgess.

A clean-cut man in a chocolate brown suit walked in and closed the door behind him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wilson," the man said in a soothing tone, standing with his hands crossed in front of him. In his hands was a Manila file folder. "My name is Gregson Marks."

The man stood for a moment, smiling at him. Then he moved to the table and sat in the chair opposite. Duane inched further back in his chair. The man paused and then smiled reassuringly.

"Don't worry, Mr. Wilson. The man who was in here earlier won't be back. I'm just here to take your statement."

"M-m-my statement?" Stooge asked.

"Yes. About what happened."

"But, I already done that," Stooge replied, his words slurred through bruised lips.

"Well, yes," Marks answered. "But I want to hear it for myself. I want to double-check the statement that the other... officer took matches that of other witnesses. To make sure he hasn't forced you to say something incriminating."

"Other witnesses?"

"Yes," Marks said. "Now, you are Duane Wilson, of 32 Hawthorne Street, Atlanta, is that correct?"

Stooge looked at the man and then nodded. He was still expecting Burgess to come back in, to start back up, yelling and punching. But there was a change. He felt a bit calmer, and the

bright pain in his head had retreated. The song had faded too. Like someone had turned the volume knob down seven or eight notches. He took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes.

“How are you feeling, Duane?”

Stooge looked up, wincing from the pain. Burgess’ right cross had not quite closed his left eye and it hurt like a mother.

“Uh, OK. But, you don’t have to call me Duane. You can call me Stooge. Everyone else does.”

“Well,” the man in the brown suit sighed. “That’s not a very good nickname, now, is it?”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Stooge tried to crack a smile. “I’ve had it since way back. You know the guys in those shows, Larry and Moe? And the real funny one, Curly? They’s stooges too. So I don’t mind. I like being a funny guy.”

Marks smiled.

“I see. But I don’t think the people that call you that think you are funny, Duane. Stooge also means patsy. Do you know what a patsy is?”

Stooge looked at the man. He tried to think, tried to remember. But the only thing he could think of was a cartoon.

“You mean like Peppermint Patsy?”

“No, Duane. A patsy is a fall guy, someone who takes the blame. A fool. People who call you stooge are making fun of you, Duane. The people that call you stooge are not your friends.”

Stooge frowned. It was the same frown he wore whenever anyone talked to him for longer than three or four sentences. The words just seemed to pile up and he couldn’t keep things

straight. It had always been like that, since as long as he could remember. His mother used to get so frustrated, having to tell him six or seven times how to do things before he got it right. Same thing at work, which is why he just did simple things, nothing complicated. He stuck to a routine so he wouldn't forget.

"Oh," Stooge said in a small voice. "I thought it meant I was a funny guy. Like on TV."

"People can be cruel, Duane. It's not your fault."

Stooge nodded. He wasn't sure if this was going to be any better than with Burgess. You didn't have to hit to hurt someone.

"Who are these men you say you were with? The two you say were called Tugg and Krank?"

"They was...they was my friends. I didn't know them long. They called me Stooge. Everyone calls me Stooge."

"Do you want me to come back later, Duane?"

"No," Stooge sighed and closed his eyes. The colorful pain in his head was back; and the lyrics to the song as well. "Be my pillow, let me sleep."

"What was that, Duane?"

Stooge shuddered and said, "I just want this to be over. So I can go to sleep. I need to sleep, I think."

"We'll get through it as quickly as we can. Now, why don't we start from the beginning? Why did you go to the warehouse on Boone Boulevard last night?"

Stooge took a deep breath, and then told it again.

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I WORKED AT THE PIGGLY WIGGLY. I DID NIGHT STOCK; DO YOU know what that is? I put stuff on the shelves, to make up for the stuff people buy during the day. It ain't hard. Some of the pallets get heavy, though. I worked at night, when nobody was there. Well, when I say nobody that ain't really true.

There's three of us that would do night stock. We was always training new guys, though, because Roscoe's an asshole.

Roscoe's the night manager. He's this big ugly buck with bad front teeth. He's always moaning and griping about everything and making everyone do his share of the work while he stands out on the loading dock smoking his Camel cigarettes. Anyway, about three weeks ago we had a new guy join the crew.

Roscoe come up to me one night and told me to train this new guy. That was Tugg. Tugg was a big guy, just as big as Roscoe. Roscoe was scared of him. I think, 'cause he would always walk away whenever Tugg came around. Tugg had long brown hair, had it pulled back in a ponytail. I thought he was one of those hippies at first. He smelled funny, like incense my sis used to stink her room up with, you know? But the more I looked at him, I knew he wasn't a hippy. He was too big, for one thing. Not skinny, and he had this big mustache, one of the ones that hang down, you know, like a biker? And he had a badass tattoo on his forearm. A sword crossed with lightning bolts, it was cool. He told me he was in the Army, had been in the jungle and everything.

We was supposed to be stockin' but we spent most of that first night just kind of talking. Roscoe yelled at us near quitting time, said we had to stay over cause we didn't get the paper and dog food aisles done. Said he was gonna dock us a full day's pay. Tugg got up in his face told him what he could do with himself, and if he wanted to do something about it Tugg would take him out in the parking lot and beat him like a bitch. Roscoe looked like he was gonna cry, but Tugg just told him to get the hell out and we stayed and got them stocked. Roscoe didn't mess with us after that.

Three nights after that, Tugg asked me if I wanted to make some extra money.

I asked him what he meant and he said he and a buddy of his had a score to settle with Kenny Devereaux. I knew him, you bet I did. Kenny Devereaux was a bad guy, a dealer.

About a year ago, my sister Kathy, she got mixed up with Kenny and he got her hooked on the bad stuff. My sister was older than me, real pretty, and smart too. A whole lot smarter than me. I loved her. But after she started going with Kenny she changed. She got mean, and dirty. She stopped wearing her bra, yelled at me and Mom a lot. She would be gone for days, and when she came back she looked like hell and had puke on her dress. And then one day Kathy got herself dead. They said she had OD'd. I tried to tell the cops it was Devereaux and the guys he hung out with, that they was the ones selling the stuff.

But the cops didn't do anything. They said they didn't have any evidence. And I remember one of them laughed and said, "Who cares, anyway. What's one less dead hooker?" I got

mad, then. My sister wasn't a hooker. They told me to go home before they arrested me for being a crybaby.

Mom and me, we buried her. Not too many people came.

So when Tugg told me they was gonna get back at Kenny, I told him whatever he needed me to do, I'd do.

We both had the next night off. Night stockin' has one day off in the week and that was a Wednesday, so I met Tugg like he asked me to, down at this place on Peachtree Avenue. It was a bar called Dooley's. I didn't go in there much, mainly because it gets real loud, what with the pool tables and the TV with the game on and people drinking and such. But I met Tugg there, eight o'clock on Wednesday and that's where I met Krank.

Tugg had told me at work that Kenny Devereaux was mixed up with a lot of bad people, these two or three other guys that sold the same stuff Kenny did, all over. And they was getting ready to meet the guy who made the stuff. No, wait—that's not right. He didn't make it, but he had it shipped in from someplace overseas. Tugg said that was the real guy they was after. Krank and him had run into him before, back when they was fighting over in the jungle. When he talked like that, I knew he was a real soldier.

And he had a habit of playing with a black metal compass at work. He kept it in his pocket, but every now and then he'd take it out and rub it with his thumb. He must've had it a long time, the paint was rubbed off on the edges and the glass on it was stained. I asked him about it once, but he gave me this real mean look, so I shut up about it.

Tugg had told me a little bit about what we was supposed

to do, but we had to meet with this other friend of his, Krank, and finalize all the plans. We was gonna have to move quick, Tugg said, because the deal was supposed to go down not too long from then. Tugg said he had it all worked out, and it was good I was there to help out with it. He said I had a real important part to play. And I was glad about that, because my sister wasn't a hooker, and Kenny Devereaux needed to pay for what he did to her.

Only everything went bad from the start.

That was account of that Krank guy. He was crazy. Even when I met him at Dooley's I could tell he was. This guy Krank was a rough customer. He looked even worse than Tugg. I mean he had a real nasty look about him, you know? He was the kinda of guy that would just look at people and they would tuck tail and run. And he was shaggy and had tattoos like Tugg's. And he wore what looked one of those army jackets, the faded green type, with all the pockets and his name in army letters on the front. And that told me both he and Tugg was the real deal, you know?

They was both soldiers. Hard and mean, the kinda fella what my Mom used to say was someone who'd been deep in it and come out the other side. That's what she said of all the guys that went to Viet and Nam. They came back different.

But Krank, he was worse than most. His eyes was hard to look at, you know? They had a shine to them, and he was always looking this way and that, like he was afraid someone was gonna sneak up on him. I got the heebie-jeebies the first time I laid eyes on Krank, and over the next few days, when

he'd brush by me or I got too close, that feelin' would come right back.

And besides that, while sat in Dooley's he kept sayin' these things to Tugg. I mean I know I ain't smart or nothin' but these things, they didn't make sense to me at all. In code, maybe. Weird things.

Stuff like, the Aether Nodes was aligned. Or coordinates Delta 1.76 through Echo 1.34, was what the perimeter was. And then he leaned in over the table and whispered real fast that we had to get this done fast because stanzas six and nineteen of the *Pokey Kotex Fragments* or something like that said that this thing was gonna happen and happen soon. He said it was a portal membrane breach. Does that make sense to you? Didn't make sense to me.

The first time that Krank got up to take a piss, I whispered to Tugg about maybe I wasn't the guy to help them out. That maybe they should get some of their special army buddies to help with this thing. But Tugg said there weren't many of 'em left no more.

They was on their own, he said, something about all the Delta G's was dead and gone. I guess his unit got shot up real bad in the jungle or wherever they had been before. I knew I shoulda got up and said thanks but no thanks, but I wanted to see Kenny pay for what he done. So I stuck it out.

We had been there about an hour when Tugg told me what they had planned out. He told me that when it was all over with, he was gonna give me ten thousand dollars. I about fell out of the booth. Ten thousand dollars! I asked him where he

was gonna get that kind of money and Tugg told me that it was all the drug money that Kenny and this guy was gonna have. After we took care of them, we was gonna divide that money up. Ten thousand was all mine he said, because I was good enough to help him and Krank out.

Him and Krank were real serious about doing this thing. Tugg said they'd been after this guy, they called him Hawkwood, for three years. Chased him all the way from Cambodia. Cambodia had been bad, he said. Real bad. And this Hawkwood guy, he had been a part of that. So Tugg and Krank were gonna make him pay. This guy, they said, he had come up with a new version of this stuff they were sellin' on the streets. That was the reason he was meeting with everyone. So he could give them the new stuff. It was supposed to be even worse than the stuff they already had. And lots more people like my sister were gonna get hooked and maybe dead because of it.

They had trouble tracking him, though. Krank growled that he wasn't like anyone else, called him a slippery bastard. He said that when I seen him, that I'd know what they were talking about. He was good looking, Krank said, the kind of good looking that made him seem like a friend, but he wasn't.

Tugg called him a fancy Dan, you know what that means? I didn't. Tugg told me it meant he was the kind that always got what he wanted, always had a nice woman on his arm, the right clothes, all the things to make everyone jealous. And then I knew. He was the kinda guy my Mom woulda called a struttin' peacock. I knew a kid in high school, Jimbo Sparks, he was like that. Popular with the girls, star at sports, everybody's

friend, but in the halls he would shove people into lockers and knock books outta your hands. He got killed in a car wreck out on the freeway a day or two before graduation, and they gave a big speech about him at the ceremony but hardly anybody clapped but his parents.

Anyway, that's the guy that Tugg and Krank was after. They said we had to be sure though, because this guy, he had the Devil on his side. And I asked, what did they mean by that? One time he was tall, blonde and blue-eyed, Krank said. Or the next he was black-haired and short, or the next he wasn't a white guy at all, but a big black fighter type, like Ali. And another time he was old, like my Grandpa. It all sounded crazy to me and I looked at Tugg, but he was lookin' at that compass of his, just listenin'. That was the Devil's secret, Krank said. To keep himself safe, to get people to do his dirty work for him.

You think you're dealin' with a guy who's on the up and up, just a regular guy like you or me or just anybody else walkin' the streets. It was only later, when he was laughin' at ya, when you saw his mean, yellow eyes would you know you had met the Devil. That was his secret. The Devil never looks the same way twice.

We sat in Dooley's for hours, talkin' about what was gonna happen. All them people in there, just drinkin' and laughin', they didn't know what we was plannin'. If they did, they woulda said we was gonna get ourselves killed. And they'd be right, too.

Two nights later, Tugg drove his car over and picked me up outside the Piggly Wiggly. He had told me back in Dooley's,

with all the money I was gonna make from this one thing, I could tell Roscoe he could take his crummy job and shove it if I wanted too. And that's exactly what I did. That made me happy, let me tell you. I hated that job. Roscoe too. So I laughed when I told him I quit. Gave him the finger, just to prove I was serious.

And then we drove over to this old run-down hotel, which was where Krank had been staying. Krank got in the back and he had this duffle bag with him and it must've been everything he owned, 'cause he asked me to help him put it in the trunk and it weighed a ton.

We drove around for a bit. Tugg said we had to wait until almost midnight, that was when the whole thing was gonna go down. We sat for a while in the parking lot of the Seven-Eleven. Krank went inside and got into an argument with the guy behind the counter over some Ho-Hos. Tugg pulled him outta there and we drove off without paying for them. Tugg had the tape player going, and he was playin' that song, you know the one? By the Youngbloods? Lot of the guys who been in the jungle listened to it. My sister loved that song.

Listening to that song, while we was sitting in the car outside the warehouse, I thought about my sis, Kathy. I thought about her a lot. About how good it was going to be to pay Kenny Devereaux back for what he did. He was the one that killed her, I knew that now. Kenny and that poison he sold and this Hawkwood guy, the guy who gave it to Kenny to put on the street. They was all gonna pay for killing my older sister.

Tugg had explained back at Dooley's that he'd already

cased the warehouse and he knew where the deal was gonna go down. It was gonna be in the big open space on the third floor, the space where they used to stack crates of whatever it was they used to make in there. I think it used to be furniture warehouse or something like that, but it wasn't anything now but a dealer's den.

Krank had already scouted it too, he said, and had found a place around the back that wasn't boarded up. We was gonna go in through this busted-out window, sneak up to the third floor, and then Tugg and Krank were gonna take out Hawkwood. Once he'd been blown away, all the other small fries was gonna tuck tail and run. They told me that was when I'd be able to take care of Kenny. And once that was done, we would take the cash and split. Tugg and Krank was headed to California, they said. And I was welcome to join in with them, too, if I wanted.

I ain't never been to California or seen the ocean. So that sounded real good to me. Mom might miss me, or maybe not. She don't really pay any attention to me anymore. Not since Kathy died. So I said yeah, I'd go with them. But of course it didn't work out that way.

Like I said earlier, it went bad from the start.

We got out of the car and Krank took the duffle out of the trunk. He handed me this big pistol, I mean the thing was huge. I hadn't ever used a gun before, but Tugg told me it would be fine. The damn thing would blow a hole through a barn, he said, so I should just point it straight ahead and pull the trigger. But just to be safe, I should make sure I was standing up

against a wall when I did.

Tugg had a gun too, it looked like mine, but it had all these weird things stamped on it. I asked what they was and he said unit insignias. But I swear some of them looked like the shapes on my Zeppelin album. And then Krank pulled this big old book out of the bag, and a sword. I shit you not. He said it was from Roman times. It was short and wide.

I'm not smart, you know that. I shoulda run away then. I mean, who goes into a place like that with a sword?

We snuck around the back. There was a bunch of cars parked on the boulevard so we knew all them that was supposed to be there were inside, meeting with Hawkwood. Krank led us through the dark and the dead bushes to the busted-out window. We went in one at time, Tugg first, then me, then Krank.

On the outside, the place looked like a warehouse, brick with boarded-up windows.

On the inside, things didn't look right. It looked too big. We looked like kids standing in that first room. The doorway to the hall across from us, it had to be three maybe four times bigger than normal. And the air stank. You ever smelled a wet dog? Like that. But worse. The walls had paint peeling off them. And it looked like—but I can't be sure because it hurt my eyes to look—but it looked like what was behind the paint was moving. You know, in and out. Like it was breathing. It was wet too. But I didn't look too close.

We moved out into the hall and the whole center of the place looked like it had been hollowed out. And I swear to

you, it looked like it was made of stone. Tugg had said the deal was supposed to be happening up on the third floor, but there wasn't a third floor. The big place in the center just went up and up and up and then up into the sky. I could see all kinds of stars up there.

And down below us, in this big open stone pit was all the dealers and their bodyguards, laid out, dead. I heard Tugg yell something and he took off trying to find a way down to that pit. And Krank, he opened that big old book and started shouting something, holding the sword up to the stars.

My head started hurting then, all the colors started trying to dig their way in and I remember going to my knees. I dropped the gun because I had to put my hands on my head it hurt so bad.

And through my fingers, I looked down and I saw there were like six dead guys at the bottom of those stairs. I saw Kenny Devereaux down there too. And I saw Kenny Devereaux's head lying beside him.

They were all at the bottom of these big stone stairs. And the stairs led up to this big round platform with what looked like a stone block in the middle. It was covered in that weird, shiny, wet, breathing stuff, like what was behind the walls. It was dripping this black liquid that kinda shined red when the light hit it. All around the block were these things. I thought they were men at first, but the legs and arms were all wrong. They folded too many times. They looked like dog legs, you know what I mean?

There was a man there with them too. I think it was a man.

He looked up and all I could see were his eyes. He had yellow eyes. The eyes of the Devil.

That was when Tugg let out this terrible scream and jumped off the balcony, firing his big gun at one of the men with the funny legs, and when Tugg's bullets slammed into it, the guy with dog's legs, he let out this howl, and it didn't sound like anything I'd ever heard of before. But I guess bullets hurt it like anything else, and it fell over and then rolled down the stairs. Those other guys, they started to move then too, and moving real funny, and the Devil with the yellow eyes, he pulled out something that had been hanging around his neck on a gold chain.

He held it up and I heard Krank scream. Behind the man I saw a hole in the world open up and the stars above me were in that hole. And something else too. Something that was climbing up to get in.

I saw Tugg firing below, fighting with the men with the funny legs and then Krank hauled me up and he had spit all over his lips and he was yelling at me to get out, to get out and to tell them that the door was open. He shoved me back into the room we had come through and I ran like hell for the window. I swear to you, when I was running I heard that awful thing making noises like I had never heard before. And don't ask me why, but Kathy's song was suddenly right there in my head. The words, I mean. And they made those other awful sounds go away. They made me forget what I just saw, made me forget that the walls around me was coming to life and full of eyes and teeth. They let me get to the window. They let me

get out of that place and across the street.

And that's what happened.

I hope Tugg was stronger than me. And Krank too. I hope they got the Devil. I hope they killed him. Because if they didn't, then that means that thing, it's still out there. And it's gonna eat us all.

THE MAN IN THE BROWN SUIT SAT THERE FOR MOMENT, LOOKING at Stooie.

"That's what you told Detective Burgess?"

Stooie licked his lips. His throat was dry, so dry. He wanted a drink in the worst way.

"Yes, that's what I told him. And he told me to stop lying, to stop being such a dumb shit and to tell him the truth. He said they went inside the warehouse and there wasn't any huge giant chamber or stone stairs or breathing walls or anything like that. Just dead dope dealers. But there wasn't any dope or cash. Just bodies. He kept asking me where the dope was, to stop making up crazy stuff and tell him the truth."

Stooie was sobbing now.

"But that is the truth, I swear."

The man in the brown suit nodded sagely, closed the file and then smiled at Stooie. Stooie tried to smile back through the tears.

"You believe me, right?" Stooie asked.

"Oh, I believe you Duane, I surely do. And I'll make sure all of it gets taken care of."

The man in the brown suit got up from the table and

moved to the door. The lock clicked into place with a metallic click. Then he turned back toward Stooze.

And Stooze tried to scream, tried to call out, but the muscles in his throat wouldn't work. All he could do was stare in horror at the man's steaming, yellow eyes.

DETECTIVE HENRY BURGESS SAT AT HIS DESK, STILL FUMING about what the prick in the brown suit had said. The self-righteous bastard was way out of line. He had half a mind to walk back there and give him the same working over he'd given that idiot Wilson.

Phillip Kincaid walked around the corner down the aisle from Burgess's desk. The station chief had been walking back to his office from the restroom when he rounded the bend and saw Burgess sitting and scowling.

"Burgess," the Chief barked. "What the hell are you doing? I thought you were interrogating that halfwit from the Hawkwood case."

Burgess threw the Chief a sneer and said, "I got bumped. Some jerkweed Feeb is in there with him now."

"What the hell are you talking about?" the Chief snapped, and took a step towards Burgess. "What Fed?"

Burgess sat up, confused.

"Some smart-mouth in a brown suit, Markinson or Marks something like that."

The Chief glared holes through Burgess.

"No one has called in. There ain't no Fed here. Get your ass back to that room and march the perp back to the holding

cells. And since you don't give two shits about doing your job, I'll get Swofford to get his statement. I am sick and tired of you screwing around, Burgess!"

No Fed? Then, who the hell—?

Burgess jumped out of his chair and pounded down the hall to the interrogation room.

DETECTIVE HENRY BURGESS HAD BEEN CONVICTED OF MURDER and sentenced to death. He sat in the hard wooden chair, mere minutes from riding the lightning all the way down to Hell, trying to think it through.

He hadn't killed the lackwit. Sure, he'd roughed him up, but that was how you got things done. When he'd left the room, the idiot had been alive and well. Bleeding yes, bruised definitely. But he wasn't dying. He wasn't anywhere close to that.

But the jury hadn't bought it. The circumstantial evidence was too overwhelming, they said. And his simpering lawyer hadn't helped one bit. In fact he made it worse by not being able to explain how the door to the room had come to be locked from the inside. All anyone seemed to care about was that Burgess had been the last man in that room with Stogie Wilson. There hadn't been anyone else, even though Burgess said there had been. There had been a man, a man in a brown suit, Burgess had insisted. But no man in a brown suit was ever found. All that mattered was that Stogie Wilson was dead, and Burgess the last one to see him alive. It was an open-and-shut case.

Out-of-control cop beats suspect to death.

Burgess couldn't figure it. It just didn't make sense. He sat, strapped into the chair, as the second hand on the wall ticked toward midnight, to that moment when the switch would be pulled and his life ended by a massive surge of electricity.

He couldn't figure it, after seven years of rotting in this hellhole, even here at the last moments of his life. It just didn't make sense. How had that dim son of a bitch managed to lock the door? How had he died? Burgess hadn't murdered him.

The investigation into the death of Duane "Stooge" Wilson ruled that he died from blunt force trauma as the result of mistreatment and physical violence perpetrated by Detective Henry Burgess during the course of a seven-hour interrogation.

And while the M.E. had ruled the death a homicide, he could not explain why the victim's lungs had also contained a liter and half of salt water.

As the black cloth fell over his eyes, Burgess took one more look toward the faces of those that had come to watch his execution, sitting stone-faced behind the glass not ten feet away. There in the back—the last thing Hank Burgess would ever see—was a man in a brown suit. Smiling.

A man with yellow eyes.

Dark

By Daniel Harms

HIS RIFLE WAS GONE. SLEEP TO WAKING, DARK TO DARK, ONLY intuition marked the difference. Muscles tensed. His right arm stretched through the heat thick as water, fingers curling around an absent grip.

He jerked it back, sliding it under the pack he used as a pillow—the fabric felt wrong—to the pistol. They hadn’t cut his throat, but—no time. Listen. Smell. Push through the jungle air, heavy with summer. He was back in the cave with the twins...

The phone in the hall rang again.

Coyote let go of the gun. “Ringo?” he called out, not expecting a response.

Katie muttered something, her hand fluttering for covers kicked off hours ago, and nestled her head back into the crook of her arm.

The phone kept ringing.

Pain in the ass. He got up, his head ascending into the stuffy, suffocating atmosphere, pushing against the reek of sweat and pot and sex and cheap incense. The window was open. He didn’t recall opening it, but it didn’t break the heat.

Something was off. But what? He brushed Katie’s shoulder, then squeezed some aloe onto his dishpan hands as he moved toward the door, stepping around soggy paper plates, scattered drawings from Katie’s portfolio, a broken record next to the wall.

In the hallway, darkness hid the pay phone. Bulb burned

out again. Whatever pothead was calling Ringo for a dime bag should just give up. No luck.

He grabbed the phone as he pushed the hair out of his eyes. “Fuck off. He’s out.”

“First Lieutenant Harold Evans?”

He stood up straight, involuntarily. “N’more, man,” he mumbled.

“...invited to a night...”

Fuck. Fuck Delta Green.

“...proceed to 154 East 17th Street, where you will...”

No.

“No way.” He shook his shoulder-length hair, damp with sweat. “You fuckers are gone.” Delta Green, Jefferson, Hyde, McCowan, Quang Binh—all gone.

The voice paused. “Lieutenant, have you looked outside lately?”

He balanced the receiver on top of the phone and moved to the window at the end of the hall.

He had stood there often, looking out on Tompkins Square, a patch in a sea of incandescence from the surrounding streetlamps and high rises under a dully glowing Manhattan sky. Tonight, black swallowed city and sky alike. The lamps were out. Pinpricks of candlelight shone in a scattered constellation in the windows across the square. Below in the park, heat from trash bonfires lifted burning paper up to twist in the air, up in a sky with stars he hadn’t seen since Nha Trang. He grasped the frame for a moment and breathed in deeply. His blood was racing.

He jogged back and picked up the phone. “154 East 17th Street. Right.”

THE LIEUTENANT—NOT COYOTE, NOT AFTER HE HAD COME back in after answering the phone and cut off his hair with a knife, not after he shed his shuffle for a purposeful stride—was already halfway down the stairs when Katie finished her phone call. “It’s my mom!” she called out, grabbing her purse and a flashlight, dropping the heels for the sneakers. By the time she got to the bottom of the stairs, he was striding off toward First. He had changed into a black t-shirt and jeans, a shadow among shadows.

“Wait up!”

He didn’t stop, but he slowed down. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Old job called.”

“You’re not Army any more.”

“Neither are these guys.”

“They’re overreacting. You’re overreacting.” She had seen the pistol from under the pillow in his rucksack. “We all did this in ’65. Just one big party.”

The lieutenant pointed down an alley. Katie heard a caterwaul. She pointed the flashlight. The beam caught three men in tie-dyed T-shirts, two holding down a cat while another raised a switchblade over it. They dropped the cat and scuttled back from the light, knocking a garbage can over with a crash.

“Some party,” the lieutenant grunted. He dodged around a woman who reeled unsteadily, most likely from some potent

cocktail of booze and hallucinogens, pointing upward, eyes unfocused and empty.

“So they’re mobilizing.” She didn’t know much about Army planning, except that he should probably be walking uptown and he wasn’t. “Where?”

“Chelsea.” He stopped and took her shoulders. “You should go home.”

“Walk to Prospect Heights? No way. I’m coming along.” She put up her hand and spoke quickly. “I wouldn’t mind being near a guy with a gun. I’ll take off when you meet up at your HQ, or whatever you guys call it.”

She watched him bite his lip, his brow furrowing with a dozen thoughts. She also knew what he’d say.

“OK,” he muttered. “But keep out of the way.”

THEY WERE ABOUT THIRTY CLICKS NORTH OF THE DMZ, slowly winding between mountains with razor-sharp outcrops. First Lieutenant Evans was pulling leech duty, a tasty morsel after everyone else had waded across the rivers and stirred up the little bastards. He found them in the worst places when bedding down nights, flicking them off with his knife. As such, he didn’t mind heading uphill. In fact, there wasn’t much that he minded at all. He was with the guys he was closest to: all committed, all Phoenix, all with a 201 somewhere with a little green triangle sticker in one corner.

Somewhere up ahead was a crack in the rock, something that was whispered of even far south—a cave that the locals shunned because, on quiet nights, at the edge of hearing, some-

thing howled. It was too easy to dismiss this as superstition; the tellers knew it was probably an underground river roaring through unfathomable caverns. Nonetheless, they were afraid; the howling was a convenient excuse.

The footsteps of those ahead stopped and he brought himself up short. Against the bulk of the mountain, a dim shape in the gloom, he could see a slash in the face of the rock. By the time he got there, the rest of the squad had slipped through, and Hyde was turning his pack to avoid wedging it between walls of stone.

Evans listened to the scrapes and occasional muffled curse, the chirping of the insects in the ravine, to the muted rush of water below them. And somewhere, gaining resonance against the rock, a wailing.

Evans checked his weapon and the darkness devoured him.

THE ADDRESS WAS A NONDESCRIPT STOREFRONT AMONG SEVERAL, the name in the window lost in gloom. Beneath it hung an elaborate neon diagram, now just a tangle of thin glass pipes. The door was open. The lieutenant went through and Katie followed.

The beam of her flashlight reflected off a white sphere high on a shelf. A skull. Bundles of herbs hung from the ceiling, and the high shelves held all manner of books, bottles, pentacles, and other occult paraphernalia. At the front, in an oblong of dark grey thrown by the window, a counter sat in front of two toppled display cases, candles and paperbacks strewn about. When she shone the light at it she caught a hint of red.

The lieutenant was already behind the counter, muttering to a man with a caved-in face, a tooth wiggling on a gum. She glanced about. “Shit! Where are your friends?”

“They’ve already been here,” he grunted. He pulled up the man’s head by his hair.

Christ. Skirting around the mess, Katie went into the back, where she found a tap and a dirty Marvin the Martian glass. She filled it and came back to the front, kneeling in front of the two men. “Here.” She extended the glass to the injured man, who was now blubbering.

The lieutenant pushed it aside. “Not yet.”

“Oh, come on!” Even in the dark she could feel his eyes. “Just—don’t hurt him, OK?” He grunted and turned back. She put the glass on the counter, above the athames and cheap jewelry.

The lieutenant was talking to the man. “Now, about the lectures...”

The man nodded. “It was all sorts, man. Enochian, witch-hunts, the Black Mass. He wanted to get in with LaVey or Aquino’s crew, but they brushed him off, y’know? Then dude got spacy.”

“Spacy, how?”

“Last time, he was babbling about books by some dude. Michael from Istanbul, or something.” The man shifted to a more comfortable position and winced. “He talked about a Lucifew—Lucifuge? Some fucking demon that hid from light and choked people in the dark.”

“Sounds fucked up.”

“Yeah.” He half-coughed, half-giggled. “It was a Tantric

sex class, man.”

The lieutenant gave a quick laugh—Katie hadn’t realized how much she’d missed it—and reached for the glass of water. She turned to the counter, where a paperback rested open and face-down. *The Complete Books of Charles Fort*. She turned the book over, shining a light on it.

Or let it be that we have data of many dark bodies—still do we incline almost irresistibly to think of one of them as the dark-body-in-chief. Dark bodies, floating, or navigating, in inter-planetary space—and I conceive of one that’s the Prince of Dark Bodies:

Melanicus.

Vast dark thing with wings of a super-bat, or jet-black super-construction; most likely one of the spores of the Evil one.

Hell of a read. Next to that book sat *The Book of Black Magic*. No, thanks.

The lieutenant put down the glass next to the man. Marvin’s eyes stared out from the blackness beneath his helmet and the red stains on the rim. “Team’s headed out.” He nodded to the books on the counter. “Chuck here’s been helpful. Apparently some guy here—the Magus, he calls himself—has been giving lessons on sorcery and witchcraft. He says he made a pact with the Darkness, and that he’d call it when it came again to engulf the city. Now it has.”

“So they called out your team of psychos because of some

wacky poseur?” She shifted uneasily.

“Wouldn’t be the first time. But their job is to find out and make sure he’s not a threat. This guy says they took off in a hurry. We need to catch up.” He was out the door already.

“It’ll be OK,” she called toward the man behind the counter. Her voice lacked conviction. She hurried away.

As they walked away from the shop, Katie saw a car’s headlights come on up the street. She kept walking.

SIX MINUTES LATER, THE LIEUTENANT SLAMMED DOWN THE taxi’s accelerator and wove through the snarl of traffic merging onto the West Side Highway. Across the river, the lights of Jersey burned bright under a sliver of moon. *At least Mom’s OK*, Katie hoped. On this side there was nothing but headlights and, if she looked out the rear window, the red warning beacons atop the World Trade Center. Even now, one of them winked for a moment.

She clung to the handle above the door as the meter clicked away, not that it mattered. Outside the shop, the lieutenant had casually walked into the middle of an intersection, pulled out his gun, and pointed it at oncoming headlights. The taxi’s tires shrieked as it skittered to a stop. He shouted something, and the doors banged open as six people emerged, confused, clutching battered green Samsonites and shopping bags.

A police car turned onto Broadway, going the wrong way, and roared toward them, red sirens on a white roof. The little balding cabbie waved his cap in the air. “Police! Police!” The black and white flew past them, siren howling, and vanished

between the buildings.

The lieutenant hopped into the driver's seat. "He was rooking you anyway," he shouted at the frightened former passengers. "Come on, Katie!"

Now she was on the highway, with the lieutenant careening between cars like a madman, heading for—"Where?"

"Morningside Heights." The lieutenant blasted his horn at a station wagon as he swerved around it. "Our Magus is one James Levinson. In the Heights, he's a second-year student in the economics program at Columbia. A black shirt and a subway ride to the Village, and he's the Magus, master of the arcane secrets of the universe and darling of cooing co-eds." He grimaced. "Some guys get off on being someone else."

She stared at his face. She missed Coyote. Coyote was gruff, but sweet and shy with a little coffee or booze, who loved Bill Murray and sun and brushing her hair in the morning. He had an edge, true, and sometimes got mad and broke things, but he would always make it up so sweetly. Sure, he had secrets and a past he wouldn't talk about, but didn't everyone? Not like this. "No kidding."

He ignored the remark. "So, next I meet up with my friends. They've probably talked with this guy already, but they might need help with the mop-up."

Katie sat back and crossed her arms. "If it's all the same to you, I'll stay in the car and take my chances with your choking demon."

"Your choice." He gunned the taxi down the exit ramp. He hadn't looked at her once the whole time.



THEY HATED THE FLASHLIGHTS. THE BEAMS BARELY CUT through the gloom, leaving their boots in shadow, and they stubbed their toes and banged their shins as they wound up and down the passage. Yet for anyone who might be waiting in the darkness, behind a boulder or around a corner, they were perfect targets. They had no other choice, though. They trudged down into the damp, howling night of the inner earth.

Evans' light caught the wall nearby, revealing deep green on grey. Small stones with flecks of red had been embedded into the wall, into an intricate pattern. Three feet across, it bore the shape of a palm leaf. Its character was not that of a plant, however, but of a mysterious glyph of a long-forgotten civilization, bereft of meaning. Thomas ran his fingers over it, muttering that the stone must have come from China. Neither of them knew what it meant.

McCowan grunted, and they fell in again, groping their way into the earth.

IN THE HEIGHTS, SCISSOR GATES ON STORES HAD BEEN wrenched open, the doors behind gaping wide. People wandered, sat on stoops, smoked joints, made love in alleys.

Two blocks from campus, the lieutenant pulled over outside a nondescript brownstone. The lock on the main door had already been jimmied. They let themselves in and climbed two flights of stairs to a back apartment, its door hanging open

A slight breeze from the window lifted the shade slightly

before it smacked back against the sill. Katie turned on the flashlight. Cheap, mismatched furniture was covered with books, those on monetary policy stacked beneath lurid works on astrology, occultism, and witchcraft. On the floor were chalk circles with a triangle within, toppled candlesticks, and a pot of ash in the middle. The wall had a custom poster with a hypnotic swirl on it, with a crude diagram of askew angles painted in black. Underneath it was scrawled “You and I are one—Law of the Trapezoid,” the latter word slashed through repeatedly.

The lieutenant was leaning over something in the corner. She joined him. A glint of silver resolved into a necklace with a pendant. She picked it up and let it swing back and forth, a bluish-green stone shot with flecks of red catching the light.

“It’s a bloodstone.” He turned away and walked through the rest of the apartment. “Supposed to defend you against demons. Guess it didn’t work out so great.”

Katie went to drop the pendant, but her fist wouldn’t open. *Come on, K. Put it down. This is the Seventies, Linda Blair isn’t crawling around, and the only demon out there is the Son of Sam.* She lowered her hand, fingers still clenched.

Footsteps from the back. “He’s gone. The team, too. Probably out the back.” He pushed the shade aside and saw red light flickering against the iron. “Shit.” He jumped down the fire escape.

A block and a half down, two police cars blocked off an alley. One cop sat on the hood of each car, pistols out but not pointed at anyone. The lieutenant approached them and presented an I.D. which was accurate enough.

“You here to take them away?” The cop’s eyes shifted to the radio in the car. “These guys’ll stay put, and the station’s filling up. They’re opening the Tombs again, just so they have space for all these fuckers.”

“No kidding.” He stepped around the end of the police car.

He felt his guts turn to lead as he looked at the bodies, illuminated in flashes by the patrol car lights. It was not the carnage, but memory, that made him run to the wall, biting his lip and choking back bile. He wiped his face; tears mingled with sweat. The night air pulsed around him.

After a minute, he returned to the bodies, gritting his teeth, and turned out what was left of their clothing, hoping for a clue, for...something. “Did anyone see anything?”

“Fella across the way saw them chasing some guy. He went back in for his camera. Two minutes. Comes out, sees them like this.”

“And the guy they were chasing?”

The officer shrugged. “Who knows? This doesn’t look like one guy did it. Doesn’t look like nothing I ever saw. CO wants to know when we’re coming back.”

The lieutenant shook his head. “Tell him it’ll be a wait.”

Katie was standing next to the police car, hands kneading her purse. “Oh, God...” She flinched as the lieutenant approached. “What is it?”

“As of now, I’m not the backup. I’m the team.”

She pursed her lips. “Great. Any idea where your Magus went?”

He shook his head. “I’ll figure it out. Let’s get going.”

“How are going to figure it out? Scour New York City in a blackout? Drive up and down the Heights and call out his name?”

“Something like that.”

She stared into his eyes for a long time. Too long. He was irritated. *Dumb bitch. Doesn't she know we need to go?* She shook her head and stepped around him.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting out of the way. Phone?” The cop jerked his thumb, and she walked off in to the darkness, fishing through her purse for change.

THE BODY IN FRONT WAS A MESS. EVANS WOULD HAVE LOOKED away, but Jefferson already had his flashlight on. Blackened pieces of flesh hung from a rib cage, the sternum dribbling into the innards. One hand still gripped an M-16, the barrel melted and twisted. The top half of the face was gone, bone and flesh and cartilage fused. The scalp was partially burned away, patches of hair clinging to the skull. He was blond, or had been. A quick glance revealed that the other seven men were in no better shape.

Evans had seen napalm, and flamethrowers, and gangrene. None of them killed men like this.

Jefferson reached out gingerly and pulled on a swatch of olive near the collarbone. A green bird with black wings, surrounded by yellow branches on a red background. Their own insignia. Hyde gave a little chuckle. “Just the phoenix left.”

McCowan whispered, and the men immediately moved

into tactical formation. Their speed and efficiency had always reassured Evans before.

HE DROVE AROUND THE HEIGHTS, LEFT AT ONE CORNER, RIGHT another, passing under rows of dead traffic lights and dodging people wandering in the streets. The sliver of moon was swinging lower in the east.

On an impulse, he swung toward it onto 125th Street, driving down and passing the Apollo, its red sign dark. Doors along the street spat out streams of rapidly moving shapes, clutching cardboard boxes, dresses, toasters. Police cruised past and ordered them to stop. The people dispersed until the cruisers roared off elsewhere, and the looting began again. Two men stood on the sidewalk screaming at each other, in a tug-of-war over a stereo. He nearly ran over a young boy jogging across the street, clutching a pair of PRO-Keds to his chest.

Something in him stirred, marvelling at the theft and flame and revelry. He pushed it down. He had a mission. *Mission*. He quietly muttered the word until it lost all meaning, a hieroglyph of sound and unknown purpose at the center of chaos, fire below, sky above.

And there it was. It only blotted out the occasional star, but he had felt its presence for the entire night, humming through his temples. And he would follow.

He drove on, over the Triborough to Bruckner, high above the South Bronx. Columns of flame, haloed with sparks, licked the sky, and faraway gunfire popped like firecrackers. He sang, snatches of verse slipping into wordlessness at the beauty of

the scene. Soon the dark masses of Co-Op City blotted out the stars on his left. He crossed the Pelham Bay Bridge, the night of fire behind, the night of forest ahead.

Evans first felt it as a wind dispersing the oppressive atmosphere. He heard rustling and the drip of water ahead. His light caught the pale green of creepers at his feet. Carter risked sending a beam up, and swore.

In front of them, the ceiling had collapsed, opening up a patch of dark grey against the black. Beneath it, the jungle had crept in, small trees and undergrowth alike straining for the absent light. Water sloughed down the sides of the sinkhole. They stood transfixed for a moment.

The chatter of gunfire surrounded them. Carter and Tallmadge dropped immediately. Before Evans could think, he found himself behind a pile of scree ten feet away, firing at a muzzle flash. Someone screamed.

It was over. Three of the team were up. Jefferson and Thomas took up guard while Evans and McCowan checked the fallen. It had been quick for them. Tallmadge grasped his chest, a warm red seeping out. In the field, he'd get a medivac. In a deep cavern under enemy lines, all that Evans could do is grasp his free hand until it no longer quivered.

McCowan ventured a cautious beam of light. Three VC on the ground, Type 56 assault rifles still in their hands, each wearing a bead of bloodstone on a piece of twine.

It was then that Evans realized that the howling was not the river, and that he could see McCowan's shadow in a dim light.

The twins, no older than six, stumbled out of the trees, belly to belly, a tangle of spindly limbs under hollow eyes. Their shared abdomen heaved, bloated and pulsing, as a three-lobed eye, white-hot, seemed only to deepen the darkness as it strained against skin and organs.

They each threw up a wiry arm toward the men. Jefferson's body twisted and writhed like a piece of grass in flame. McCowan was screaming and started to fire. His body doubled over as bullets ricocheted off rock. Something brushed against Evan's forehead, like a lover's caress.

He fired.

HE PARKED THE TAXI AT THE SIDE OF THE ROAD AND PLUNGED into the dark rustling of the park. He weaved through the trees and dodged whipping thorns. The night air seeming to buoy him up, as if he had vast wings spanning the gulf between planets.

For a moment he saw a man running, incense and sweat stinking in the pure air. Then it was gone, and he was running again, this time in a different direction, to make the vision a reality.

Harry Ev, Ev. The words had no meaning. What did they mean? No time. Only the hunt.

He tossed the heavy gun aside. He pushed back branches, leapt over roots. He was close.

In a clearing he found the Magus, clothing shredded by thorns, tossing around typewritten pages. "Come on, come on, come on..." One of the pages was at the pursuer's feet, its text

indecipherable. The Magus looked up. “Holy shit!” He tossed his wallet into the grass at the other’s feet. “It’s all there, man.” The other did not move.

Everything blurred. Hands clutched a fragile throat—

Lights everywhere. Someone—more than one—was pulling him off the Magus. He bit and kicked and fought, but they pressed him into the grass until he stopped moving. He heard a snap, and the cuffs were cool on his wrist.

“Lieutenant.” The voice from the phone came from a portly man in front of him, white hair flecked with red. “We weren’t sure if you’d make it.”

“You—”

“Did what we wanted,” the portly man said. He called back over his shoulder. “Not like some people.”

Katie sighed. “I was good up to the bodies. I wasn’t counting on this shit.”

The man grimaced. “That’s our fuckin’ motto.”

Evans put his head down on the ground, feeling the cool grass against his forehead. After a while, he realized the man was still talking to Katie.

“—call the Haunter, bonds with a selected host. We hoped it was the Magus, but given the lieutenant’s background—”

“Sorry—is this bullshit supposed to help?” Katie walked away. “Men.” She stepped out of the light.

A chilling breeze picked up, and people were shouting orders. The man from the phone gave a quick nod as Evans and the Magus were propped up on their knees. “Your country thanks you.” He was about to say more, but he rushed back-

wards as the lights died and the howling rose in pitch as massive wings plunged from the sky, jet black super-construction in free-fall.

Next to the lieutenant, the Magus twitched and dropped backward. *Clean*, he thought, and then it was his turn.

AFTERWARD THEY CLEANED UP AND DROVE OFF. THE NIGHT closed in, quiet and eternal.

Morning in America

by James Lowder

THE ONLY SUN THAT SHONE ON ANTONIO CHAPIN THAT MORNING was made of I-beams. The statue was officially titled “The Calling,” but Chapin, like most in Milwaukee, knew it as “The Sunburst.” On bright days, the forty-foot-tall abstract was a cheerful red-orange flare against the blue sky and not-quite-blue waters of Lake Michigan. Today it was an asterisk, a placeholder for a dawn foiled by the October clouds shrouding the city.

Chapin wove a careful path through the crowd gathering near the statue. The majority were rallying against the president, with placards and signs criticizing the impact the government shutdowns were having on the poor. Chapin sympathized, but he wasn’t about to let on. The last thing he needed was to get drawn into the demonstration. He’d learned while riding the bus these past few weeks that all federal employees were a convenient target for the discontent on either side of the issue, so he made certain to leave his cap at the office and kept his winter coat closed tightly over his Customs uniform shirt. He was grateful no one stopped him as he pushed past the demonstrators and hustled up Wisconsin Avenue.

“Forget your sign at the soup kitchen?” a young woman sneered at him as he passed the entrance to the city’s largest office tower. Chapin stared at her in stunned confusion for a minute, until he realized that she’d mistaken him for a would-be protestor, as if a black man in the business district that time of the morning could be nothing else.

She moved away quickly, one more lawyer or banker or secretary merging with the babbling herd of white-collar workers drawn into the tower's revolving doors, but Chapin followed her with his eyes. Despite himself, he imagined her as she'd been in college: a sorority girl, coasting through UW-Madison or maybe Carroll on her parents' dime. Then there came the night of the party up at the cabin, where she'd gotten drunk and her boyfriend drunker still. She could have stopped the truck after they hit the man whose car had broken down on that lightless rural road. Her boyfriend had been on a basketball scholarship, though, and—

The images lingered as he turned away and started again toward the Old Federal Courthouse. The phantasmagoria followed him, crawling through his thoughts, obscuring the world around him. It left him feeling panicked and out of sync. To keep moving he looked down at the tips of his shoes and willed himself to continue in a straight line, like a frightened drunk trying to follow the chalk laid out by the cop at a traffic stop. He trusted that the other poor souls haunting the cityscape would steer clear of him as he struggled along the sidewalk.

A security guard on the stone steps of the courthouse clapped a hand on Chapin's shoulder. The shock of sudden human contact banished the images, pulling him back to reality. "Another day of whining ingrates," the guard said. He gestured in the general direction of the statue and the protestors. Chapin muttered something non-committal and hurried inside.

Passing through the arched entryway, beneath the ever-watchful eyes of the gargoyles higher up on the façade, always

reassured Chapin that he was here for a reason. The building had resolutely stood its ground for just shy of a century, all grim and gray Mount Waldo granite. It had been a major post office at one time, and the home for the district courts, in addition to accommodating an alphabet soup of federal agencies. A place of the people's business.

Once inside, though, Chapin couldn't help but notice that the people didn't seem to think the business going on here worth much attention. The once-grand arcaded entrance was as dismal as the October morning outside. The glass-and-iron skylight overhanging the central atrium looked misplaced and shabby, and the marble wainscoting and plaster ceiling moldings all cried out for restoration. No help for that sort of work would be coming from Washington any time soon. The government had shut down twice the previous week, as President Reagan skirmished with Congress over a civil rights bills he opposed and funding for the Nicaraguan Contras he desperately wanted. Every day it seemed like some new squabble threatened to shutter federal buildings around the country.

As he waited for the elevator, Chapin looked at his distorted image in the polished metal of the doors and then read and reread the hastily handmade sign—*Temporarily In Service*—taped below the call button.

"It's all part of a plot," said a deep voice at Chapin's side.

The tone was so smarmy that the Customs officer could see the smirk on the speaker's face even before he turned to look. It was Ross Eberhardt, one of the FBI agents from up on the fifth floor. With his muscular good looks and his crewcut, he

resembled the narrator of a Fifties government training video on ferreting out communists. “The shutdown,” he said. “It’s part of a plot. Just ask her.”

Eberhardt jerked a thumb over his shoulder at a sad old woman making her way through the atrium. She came by the federal building every few days, stopping at two or three of the offices to offer up bizarre complaints. Chapin thought she was harmless enough but exasperating. He had to deal with her more than most because he worked the Customs service window. Normally that entailed answering questions for travelers about duty-free shops or registering their high-end cameras and new Walkmans before they jetted overseas. Some days it meant nodding through the woman’s ramblings about mind-altering drugs in the water supply or snake people at the homeless shelter stealing her thoughts.

“If you’re looking for me to dump on her like the rest of you, forget it,” Chapin said. “If anything, we should all be complaining about the lack of funding for mental hospitals. That’s what’s put people like her out on the street.”

“Your heart’s bleeding right through your coat this morning,” Eberhardt noted as he and Chapin stepped into the elevator. Then, through the swiftly closing doors, he called to the woman, “Full up, dear, but we’ll talk again soon.”

“That was a rotten thing to do,” Chapin said.

“I didn’t see you jumping up to stop the doors and let her in. Besides, I was serious. I will be talking with her again soon. She usually comes up to see me right after she talks with Customs. Winona Jackson.”

“What?”

“Her name—it’s Winona Jackson, though you probably knew that already.”

Chapin didn’t, but he wasn’t about to admit it, either. He stood in uncomfortable silence as the old elevator crept up to the fourth floor and the doors slid open with painful slowness. It was only after Chapin had stepped out into the lobby and the doors were about to close again that Eberhardt threw his hand out to stop them. “Oh, I forgot to mention something: You have a meeting scheduled with me, starting right now. Don’t bother checking in down here. Your boss knows where you’ll be.”

Chapin was instantly concerned that the FBI wanted anything from him, and he started a little when the elevator alarm screamed in annoyance at the door being held ajar too long. He leapt back into the car. The doors shut behind him with a definitive thud. “What’s this about?” he said.

Eberhardt remained provokingly silent as they exited on the fifth floor and got buzzed into the FBI suite. The agent nodded greetings to his coworkers. Chapin knew none of the other Bureau staff, uniformly white and clean cut, scattered throughout the cubicles. They eyed him suspiciously as he trailed along in the bigger man’s wake. Chapin knew that they were probably guessing he was a suspect or an informant or some other trespasser into their sanctum of law and order. He kept his jacket zipped up tight to let them hold onto their misapprehensions. It wasn’t his place to correct them.

The office they ended up in was as bland and predictable

as Eberhardt. Framed commendations, both from the military and the Bureau, covered one wall. There were a few photos displayed throughout the room, mostly outdoors scenes, with smiling, buzzcut men standing over dead deer.

“Not a hunter, I see,” the agent said as he settled into the large black chair behind the desk. He rested his hand on a personnel folder sitting in the center of an otherwise immaculate workspace. “This is my boss’s office. He keeps those pictures around to gauge people’s reactions when they come in. Tells you a lot about them, even beyond their files.” He patted the folder. “You’re more of a baseball fan.”

“Um, right,” Chapin admitted.

“Rooting for the Padres in the Series.”

Chapin nodded. “Is that in the folder, too?”

“Nope. You wore a Padres cap all summer. Hard to miss. The file does say you grew up out there, though. Hometown loyalties?”

“Not really. I’d be rooting for the National League no matter what. They play the game the way it’s supposed to be played.”

“Ah, the designated hitter thing, right? Which is more important to you—the rules as they’ve been enshrined by tradition or the game as a whole?”

“The game, I guess. Watching the neighborhood kids play pickup is still a good time for me.” Chapin finally unzipped his coat. It was uncomfortably warm, and he was getting nervous about the rambling track of the FBI agent’s questioning. The last thing he wanted was to have to spend the day in a sweat-

stained shirt. “Look,” he said, “you’ve obviously been watching me. Am I under investigation for something?”

“Yes and no.”

“Then I want my union rep here.”

“Good for you! Glad to see you finally pushing back a little and taking stock of the weapons at your disposal. But the rep thing’s not going to happen.”

Chapin stood up to leave.

“This isn’t an official or even an unofficial hearing,” Eberhardt said. Any hint of the earlier playful tone was gone. “This is me asking you for help with an interrogation. Please, have a seat and hear me out.”

Chapin took off his coat and sat down. Arms crossed, he waited for the FBI agent to continue.

“I’m driving up north this afternoon to talk to someone connected to a Posse Comitatus offshoot. There are several mentions in your jacket here about a talent I think you have.”

“I have no idea what—”

“Don’t give me any of that crap, Antonio. Oh, I know it’s not actually written up anywhere, but I pieced it together from scuttlebutt down on four, as well as the bad-conduct raps and the paperwork trailing along behind you as you transferred from station to station. Take that disagreement in the port of San Diego. Your first post. You refused to work with a guy because you said he beat his wife.”

“He did beat her. They put him in jail for it.”

“Yeah, but he hid it better than David Copperfield hides a fucking elephant. You somehow knew before everyone else.”

“So you think—what?” The Customs officer shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “What are you saying?”

Chapin was sweating now, even without the coat. He hated that his mind went to those places, but it was a reflex, a tic. He couldn’t control it. When he looked at someone, he sometimes saw the crimes lurking in that person’s past, the sins that had poisoned his soul since childhood. He witnessed each sordid incident from the vantage of a front-row spectator. It mostly happened when he was tired or bored, but at other times, too, like when he’d been surprised by the woman’s insult in front of the bank tower that morning. His mind had just reeled out the awfulness about her. He never knew how much was accurate, though there were times, like back in San Diego, where he glimpsed some hideous truth. In those moments, Chapin wondered if he was cursed or simply mad. He brooded on those possibilities, and only by focusing on the details of daily life could he stop himself from pursuing the matter to one of several unbearably dark conclusions. It was willful self-delusion, he knew, but better that than the alternative.

Eberhardt could see the discomfort playing across Chapin’s face. He leaned back in his chair, trying to give the man a little space, to let the silence do his talking. But the leather creaked loudly. It was remarkably close to the sound used in old dark house horror movies when the hero tried—and failed—to stealthily creep up on the monster, thus giving himself away. The agent scowled then and said, “I’m not assuming this is a trick or that it’s magic. Let’s just say it’s some sort of Sherlock Holmes thing. An untrained but potent skill in observation.

You're just really good at spotting behaviors and clues, and drawing conclusions based on those."

All the tension went out of Chapin's wiry frame. Sherlock Holmes. He'd have to remember that.

Eberhardt cleared his throat. "I need you to give that skill a workout today."

"Do I have a choice?"

"The alternatives are less attractive than playing along with me, Antonio. Look, let me put this in a parlance you should appreciate. You may not like the designated hitter as a concept, but I need you to be one for the Bureau this afternoon. If this goes as I think it might, it could help you expand your horizons a little. Put some things in perspective. Plus, you get on my good side, and who doesn't want a friend in the FBI?"

"As your designated observer, I can observe something right now: You're crazy if you think some white supremacist up north is going to talk freely around a black man."

Eberhardt's smirk was back. "You're good. You've already caught on to part of the plan: Keep the bastards off balance."

It took no special power of observation for Chapin to recognize that Eberhardt meant to keep him off balance, too. He decided right then that it would be in his best interest to foil that part of the plan as thoroughly as possible. For the life of him, though, he couldn't think of a way he might manage that.

CHAPIN ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT TRAVELING THROUGH WISCONSIN was like skipping around in time. The city of Milwaukee was anchored in the present, a locus of urban blight and

lingering racism, with the phantoms of its beer-baron dynasties polkaing their way out of the downtown as fast as possible ahead of a hip-hop-soundtracked onslaught. Only the memorial street names and the empty shells of former breweries were left to mark their passing. Go west a little and you're into a Republican suburban dreamland built upon the foundations of a Fifties America that never was. Coked-up high schoolers belted out "Born in the U.S.A." as if it were a hymn to American exceptionalism, not a paean to glory lost, and imagined accomplishments worthy of their privilege, like one day down the line naming the local grade school after the Gipper. Wander northwest an hour and you're in Madison, a city built upon acid flashbacks to an equally mythical Sixties. There the well-heeled hippies bickered about recycling plans and green space, while sniggering at the rural yokels and white-bread suburbanites, who answered that disdain by peopling the Capitol—the cancer at the heart of the love-in—with reactionaries and goons and quislings.

Go still farther north and you passed through little communities displaced not by a decade or two but by centuries. Here, too, lurked pockets of deeper strangeness unstuck from time—and reality—altogether. Throughout the sparsely populated northern half of the state, little groups congregated to remake one-stoplight towns or isolated expanses of forest into their own little demesnes, subject to whatever laws struck their addled fancy. Some were harmless. Many were not. The more virulent groups remained unknown to even their neighbors until they got too big or amassed too much firepower for the

authorities to ignore. Then the state police would roll in, or the ATF would descend, and the woods would fill with automatic gunfire well outside the hallowed bounds of the annual deer season.

It was toward a woman deemed too unstable even for one of these fringe groups that Eberhardt directed their nondescript government Ford that gray afternoon. Charlene Juba and a few of her friends had been kicked out of Tigerton Dells, a self-declared “constitutional township” of a couple of thousand acres, for beliefs that unsettled the white supremacists who had staked out their kingdom and proclaimed the right to appoint their own foreign ambassadors, before the feds showed up to correct their misperceptions of the Constitution.

“She eventually got spooked by her friends’ activities, too—frightened enough that she’s talking to us. That means pretty damned frightened. So I need just one thing from you,” Eberhardt said as he guided them along a nearly empty midday highway. “Watch her as she answers my questions. When we’re done, you tell me anything odd that comes to you about her. Anything.”

Chapin had spent the time since they’d left downtown Milwaukee watching Eberhardt, trying to get a read on him. He focused his thoughts on the FBI agent’s past sins, but could only imagine mundane transgressions: cheating on tests or taking bribes, screwing around on his wife. None of the visions were substantial, though, as if Chapin were straining to assign the man some guilt that would not stick. The only vivid impression was of Eberhardt playing park ranger and taking large, gape-

mouthed fish away from some little Asian girls at gunpoint, a vision more unsettling than damning.

“You said it was a plot,” Chapin offered after his latest failed attempt to read the agent. “The government shutdown.”

“Right. I was exaggerating a little when I said poor old Winona was right about it. The culprits here are not things from beyond the stars, just beyond morality as we hope we understand it. If you ask me, the whole point of these shutdowns is to demonstrate that the government is broken, so Reagan and his pals can then speechify about how it needs to be reshaped into their leaner, meaner image.”

“Leaving the poor and the helpless to fend for themselves.”

“Pretty much.” Eberhardt slowed the car and maneuvered it onto a long gravel drive. The house stood far back in the woods, behind a huge barbed wire gate with a sign that read *Federal Agents Keep Out. Survivors Will Be Prosecuted*. “These yahoos will be the loudest supporters for the death of Washington as we know it—and the first ones put up against the wall by the kind of regime that would come after.”

Whatever Chapin had expected Charlene Juba to look like, it was not the pretty young woman who met them at the front door of her cabin. Then she spoke and he found she met all his other expectations to a T. “I agree to talk to a fed,” she drawled, “so he brings a fucking mud man with him. Well, come in, the both of you, before someone sees you and tries to blow your fucking heads off.”

“Tell me something new about those crazy shits you were running with, Miss Juba,” Eberhardt said without preamble.

“Something I don’t already know—like what caused you to walk away from Drury and those other charming fellows you followed out of Tigerton.”

Chapin was getting used to the man’s style, so the abrupt demand didn’t surprise him this time. It didn’t seem to shock Juba, either. She casually walked over to her battered couch, sat down, and lit a cigarette. “Have you accepted Christ as your personal savior?” She gestured to a gaudy painting of Jesus on the wood-paneled wall behind her. It was the only picture in the room hung straight. “We all did at Tigerton. Only some of us took that idea more serious than others. Especially the ones that left, at least at first. We knew that the Battle of Armageddon was coming. We needed to get ready to be part of God’s army once the fighting started. We had our roles and we knew it was our duty to fill them.”

From there she continued into an Apocalyptic ramble, with Drury as one of the Archangel Michael’s chosen vanguard. She and the few women of the group had been cast as some Christian version of valkyries. Once or twice she hinted at a falling out with Drury over a new book he’d worked into their revivals, but the topic clearly terrified her. She would get close to it and then scurry away into a screed against taxes or the iniquity of the Jewish banks or some other typical, tedious rant about the encroachment of the lesser peoples on the God-chosen Aryan folk in the City on a Hill that was America.

Eberhardt simply let her talk. He didn’t take notes. He just glanced over at Chapin from time to time, to check his reaction. Only after the Customs officer suddenly and violently vomited

all over the dirty living room rug did he declare the interview over.

"I ain't cleaning up that nigger puke," Chapin heard Juba shout as he hurried outside to vomit again.

The Customs officer retreated to the car. He was still shaking when Eberhardt slid behind the wheel of the Ford. "I had to clean up after you, even after paying her off. I hope this was worth it."

"They killed some people," Chapin said.

"We knew that already." Eberhardt finally flipped open his notebook. "What else?"

Panic flashed in Chapin's eyes, and he struggled to ground what he was going to say in rational terms. "Based on the, uh, pictures she had hanging in the room, and, uh, the—"

"It doesn't matter how you know, just tell me what you observed."

"They did something to the people after they killed them. Something they learned about in the book she mentioned. I couldn't see what, exactly, they did, just that it was awful."

"Ah, Wisconsin," Eberhardt sighed as he started up the car. "Where we kill you and *then* the bad stuff starts."

FULL NIGHT HAD FALLEN BY THE TIME THEY REACHED THE Drury compound. It had taken longer than expected to drive the few short miles because they'd had to stop again for Chapin to be sick. His nerves were raw, both from what he had endured so far and all that he feared lay ahead. As they finally pulled the car onto a frontage road and shut off the lights,

Eberhardt handed the Customs officer a Valium. "I need you to be calm and have your head on straight," he said.

Chapin gave him back the pill. "This won't help, then. What I need is for you to explain what the hell is going on."

"It's kind of like your powers of observation—more than I can ever describe."

"But you have an idea what I can see sometimes when I look at other people?"

"I can make an educated guess. You aren't unprecedented, if that's any comfort. Neither is any of the strangeness going on out here." Eberhardt slouched a little in his seat, his air of confident control gone for the first time. "Don't worry. This won't look bad to anyone back at the office. What our bosses think we're doing does not quite match up with our real mission."

"Our 'mission'? Who are we working for?"

"Ourselves. And the people," Eberhardt replied. "From everything I know about you, Antonio, that should matter." He paused, mulling over his words. "I'm going to sound a bit like good old Winona Jackson for a minute, but there are groups out there aligned against our way of life. Against humanity. They're part of the strangeness."

"And you made me see something horrible they've done?"

"Yes."

Chapin's punch landed squarely on Eberhardt jaw, snapping his head sideways.

The FBI agent rubbed the right side of his face. "Thanks for not hitting me in the eye. That'd be harder to explain back at the office." From the way Eberhardt said it, Chapin real-

ized that the agent thought he could have blocked the punch, but that he'd let the blow fall wherever it had been aimed. The realization was more depressing than infuriating.

"You can wait in the car or you can come with me," Eberhardt said. "Either way, I have to end this Drury problem tonight."

"Wait, you're not calling for backup? You should have an army out here to deal with these lunatics! There's no telling what we're going to find."

"Oh, I have an idea what's waiting out there. I'd prefer it be us dealing with it, but I'm going to handle it myself if need be. It's your call. You've done your swings as designated hitter. Can't ask for more than that."

"What the hell are you thinking you're going to do, even with my help?"

"What I always do: the right thing. The thing that should be done, no matter the consequences." Eberhardt rubbed his jaw again. "There was a time when someone in power would have authorized what we're doing here, but now—well, you sat on your ass last week like a lot of people all over the country who wanted to help. People who just wanted to do their jobs. The group that should be overseeing the kind of problems we're looking at here have had some of us sitting on our collective asses for a lot longer than that. Too fucking long, by my calendar." He shrugged. "In the end, you decide whether or not you want to do the work that needs to be done."

Chapin was quiet for a moment. "Any player worth a damn stays in the game until the last out," he said. "I brought

my sidearm.”

Eberhardt didn't gainsay Chapin as they got out of the car and walked around to the trunk. Inside was arrayed an arsenal the likes of which the Customs officer had never seen, even during his training. The FBI agent selected a Ruger prototype, some extra ammunition for the pistol, and a long armament in a bag camouflaged for night maneuvers. He handed Chapin a large, square bag, similarly camouflaged, and simply said, “Get this safely to the site and you'll have done your job. Keep your sidearm handy, though, just in case.”

The Drury farm was as heavily protected as any Posse compound in the state. The militias liked to brag about the training they sometimes received from disaffected ex-military, particularly former Green Berets and Army Rangers, which helped them properly deploy everything from land mines to punji stakes around their homes to punish trespassers. Drury put this training and more into practice. His ten acres were crisscrossed with tripwires and planted with dozens of devious traps. Close to the house itself, militiamen patrolled the grounds day and night. The guards were alert and heavily armed.

Eberhardt avoided all the threats as if he were working from a map in the light of a fine summer afternoon. Even with the inexperienced Customs officer in tow, he directed them around the traps and skirted the patrol routes. Only once did Chapin nearly stumble into a snare. He'd been distracted by a drone coming from deep within the compound. It was not, as he first assumed, the hum of a generator. It was human voices chanting. The realization so unnerved him that he nearly

walked right into the trap.

They moved more deliberately as they got closer to the dilapidated old barn at the property's center. The building was a remnant of an earlier time, when this had been farmland and not woods. It had remained untouched by paint or hammer from any of its most recent owners. Defeated and dissolute, the barn slouched forward, as if its rotting timbers yearned for the annihilating touch of the massive bonfire Drury had burning in the clearing before it. A dozen men and women, all in military-style clothing, circled the fire. The harmonious chant had ended. They now shouted discordant words that made no sense at all to Chapin, yet still made his skin crawl.

The master of the rite emerged from the barn. Gerald Ray Drury carried a scepter and a large book. Flanking him were a pair of flag bearers. One carried the stars and stripes, the other a black flag with a trio of circled white crosses in the center. And in their wake, it came.

The thing was not shaped like a man, though it was fabricated from mostly human parts. Where joints fell, they inevitably bent the wrong way. Somehow, though, it pulsed ahead steadily on multiple stolen faces and hands and the occasional hoof. A score of strong limbs protruded from its bulbous, segmented torso, all flexing with menacing intent. The features of what passed for its face congregated on one limbless patch of flesh. It boasted too many eyes and no nose, and a cavernous, toothless maw. The mouth gibbered and yelped along with the cacophonous chanting.

The moment Chapin saw the thing, images of its birth

blasted into his mind. They spun out from the hints he had glimpsed at Charlene Juba's cabin of the crimes committed by Drury and the rest of his militia to bring this nightmare to life. Using an illustration in the book as a pattern, they'd cobbled together something to fit its alien design. The final step in its animation had involved scribing the pages themselves onto the flesh as they sutured and welded it together. Then it rose—the first of their militia's new minute men.

Terror paralyzed Chapin. He experienced what happened next only as fragments: Eberhardt slipping the camouflage covering off the portable rocket launcher and reaching for the bag Chapin had muled to the conflict. Then came the explosion as the RPO-Z incendiary did its work, and the pistol shots that followed as Eberhardt finished off the few survivors and the pair of luckless scouts that came running from the main house. There were five precise shots and then a flurry of gunfire as the remaining guards resisted. Flames had spread to the barn and the surrounding woods by the time Eberhardt got them ready to go.

When next Chapin could think clearly, and then for only a moment, they were back in the car, tearing away from the Drury compound at top speed. He could not speak, could not put words together to form even the simplest of questions. Trembling, he reached a hand toward Eberhardt. His fingers had just brushed the agent's arm when the first vision overwhelmed him:

The quartet of young girls in the Cambodian village with the strangely malformed babies. The children all have gro-

tesquely piscine features—too-large eyes and wide, gaping mouths. Eberhardt flicks off the safety of his pistol and draws a bead on the first tiny face. An officer taking fish from children....

The anomaly had crept up from the tunnels of the Boston subway system, making its way to the more agreeable confines of Symphony Hall. There it infects the music so that it might prey upon the city's patrons of the arts. Eberhardt forges a treaty with the thing, allowing it to continue its predations in return for a promise to aid him against other beings seeking a foothold in the Hub. It offers him a sample of its stolen feast, the thoughts and dreams extracted from the music lovers with the burning, viral sound, and like a good guest, he tries it....

The shifting shapes in Sauk City. They burst from the small, ancient statue after Eberhardt and the professor try to remove it from the altar. The rasps of the hunting things' breath grow louder as they close in. Each exhalation fills the room with the cold of the void between the stars. The hunters overtake the professor first. Eberhardt ignores the scholar's pleading, outstretched hand as he scrambles for the door and safety....

On and on the visions continued as the nondescript government Ford—and Antonio Chapin—screamed through the pitch-black Wisconsin night.

THE NEXT MORNING DAWNED SUNLESS AGAIN, ANOTHER TYPICAL October day in Milwaukee, but Chapin scarcely noticed. He passed oblivious through the protestors gathering beneath

“The Calling” and through the scrums of office workers, some of them chatting about the Padres’ loss in the first game of the World Series the night before, on his way to the Old Federal Courthouse. It was habit more than anything that made him report for work. A way of maintaining the loosest of grips on his sanity.

He was picking at a rotted piece of wood molding in the lobby as he waited for the elevator when she came up behind him.

“Did you do that?” Winona Jackson asked. She jabbed with a cloth-wrapped finger at the sign beneath the call button. Someone had added the letters *S-A-N-E* to the notice, so that it now read *Temporarily Insane Service*. Chapin hadn’t been the vandal. He’d been so caught up in his thoughts that he hadn’t noticed the graffiti, but he sincerely wished for a moment it had been him.

“It’s not nice to make fun of people with problems,” the old woman said. She rubbed her hands together to warm them. “Well, I have to go talk to the Internal Revenue people. I finally figured out where them snake people are living—the Jesuit Residence at Marquette. Maybe the school’s tax status can be changed. Flush the bastards out if they don’t want to even pretend to act like Christians. You know that they put cages over the steam grates by the church and the priests’ residence so no one can sleep there?”

Chapin couldn’t meet her eyes. He was afraid now of looking too closely at anyone for fear that he would see their sins, as he had with Eberhardt. After what had happened last night,

he couldn't pretend the visions were offering him anything less. But the question was out of his mouth before he realized he'd asked it. "Why do you think the priests are snake people?"

"Not all of them are, but I seen one of them let its disguise slip as it was heading into the Jesuit Residence. I was sleeping on a grate near there one night. That's why they blocked the grates off. They don't want anyone else seeing who they are or who they consort with."

Chapin stared at his warped image in the elevator's polished metal doors. Just twenty-four hours earlier, he would have written off everything she was saying as delusion. Now, though, he knew better. "The world is a strange and terrible place," Eberhardt had told him, when he finally calmed down enough to be dropped at his apartment. "Once you know that, you can fight and do your broken best or you can struggle to forget. I think I'm right about which you'll decide to do."

Eyes still downcast, Chapin put a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder and said, "No, come talk to me, Miss Jackson. If what you say is true, I might be able to do something for you."

She pulled away, regarding him with the practiced wariness of the longtime poor. "All those times I tried talking to you and you're finally going to do something for me? Why?"

The bluntness of the question surprised him, though the answer came to mind readily enough. For confirmation, all he had to do was look around at the people shuffling beneath the atrium's skyless skylight, the desperate in search of aid and the dispirited off to their jobs, the same as every other day Antonio Chapin had come to work at the Old Federal Courthouse.

Everything had changed for him, and nothing.

“I’m from the government,” he said simply, “and I’m here to help.”

The Mirror Maze

By Dennis Detwiller

THE AUTHOR TAPPED TWO MORE WORDS, A PERIOD, AND THEN stopped and sat back, and the chair squealed. He peered at the screen in the empty room. On it, in the words, the character Jack Castle considered his enemy, Special Agent John Fosey, at gunpoint. Beyond them, in the ether between worlds, the immortal spirit of the sorcerer Haon-Dor hung over the scene like a haze.

All of this in seventy-two words. Amazing.

Outside, past the shades which shook and fluttered back from the darkened window, the storm raged. Shapes there—trees—bent in the wind and rain. Shadows visible through the slits, past the reflection of his own eyes, rocked and moved. All noise covered by the sound of the storm, like an endless, distant freight train.

The room was plain with a scraped, bare wooden floor, a table and a desk with an anonymous laptop. A chipped and ruined chair with a squeaky leg, and a small door, painted green, scratched and chipped to reveal a long-covered glossy coat of black paint beneath.

The author stood, stretched, and placed his fingers on the low ceiling, feeling the plaster and wood there stretch slightly. He wanted for nothing. On this night he was glad to be here, in the room. Warm and dry. Out of the storm.

The cursor winked in and out, counting time. What next in the story?

He sat, and pondered the last line. He read it carefully.

“What next in the story?” it read. Beyond this, the cursor blinked. Something was wrong.

The feeling was not a small one, but it was hard to locate. It sat on his mind, so complete and perfect, it was a cloud within which the author existed. Something was bad. Wrong.

“What next in the story?”

What next for Castle? On the screen, he saw, he had actually typed “What next in the story?” How? What was the count again? Three hundred and twenty-one words.

Why did that seem odd? Never mind.

What did he know about Castle? His real name was Peter Simms, for one. He was an FBI agent with two children, who lived in Brighton Beach and the door to his car was damaged. It stuck and made noises when it was opened. He knew quite a lot about him, it seemed. Simms worked for the Group, which fought supernatural threats like Haon-Dor and his vessel Fosey.

Outside, then, a noise above the din of the storm. Something like a voice. Brief. Gone.

Something is wrong.

The author popped the metal shades apart with his forefingers and looked into the dark. Out there, only rain and wind and the sounds of ruin. Near the window, in the light cast from the house, he could see rivulets of water piling in puddles and rushing through gutters up the street.

Beyond this, the other houses were dark, unlit. It seemed vague. The story. What about the story?

He sat again, and cracked his knuckles and leaned forward. The chair groaned.

Δ

NOW. FIVE HUNDRED AND THREE WORDS. HE WAS GETTING there. Progress had been made. But the headache was bad and the storm worse. The pain was greatest in his right temple. It rose in waves there and radiated down his neck to his right hand. Cramped.

What about Castle? On the screen, Haon-Dor had seized Fosey and was working through him. Castle had collapsed in the kitchen (what kitchen? It was unimportant), and was struggling across the checkered tiles for a gun.

His head. The pain wailed there, like a siren behind his right eye.

Outside, something heavy fell and struck the roof. A branch? Wires? The rain hit the window face on as the wind changed, peppering the pane, making a musical percussion that startled the author.

He stood again, restless, and grabbed the shades and pulled them up. Outside, a murky night seen through a wave of rain that trickled down the glass, never resting as it was struck by drops blown by a heavy wind.

Out there, in the dark, the author saw someone move. Across the street. A shadow. Something barely lit from the dull, dark, purple and grey sky. A tall shape, that just as suddenly was gone.

Castle's (or Simms') son Cody came to mind, though there was little room for nostalgic ruminations in the story, which was obviously a thriller or something. Cody, still, was insistent,

and was such a well-realized character that the author couldn't really get his mind away from the boy.

The kid was three and rambunctious, and he loved nothing more than sitting in things and sliding down the back stairs in the house on Linden Street. Once he had tumbled and smashed his head, and blood had flowed and Eloise was screaming and then the fire department came, and it had been *horrible*. Just the worst.

He still had a scar on his temple. On the left, unlike Simms who had a huge gash on the right side of his head. Wait. The author leaned in. Yes, it said that. Maybe he could tie it in to the story. Somehow? Maybe Simms was hallucinating? Who knew?

MANFRED KOLLER WAITED FOR THE SIGNAL, AND AFTER FIFTEEN minutes, when none came, he crept up the steps at the back of the house and found the door open. Feeling like someone else was doing it, he pushed the door open, and it slid soundlessly wide and struck the wall next to a washing machine.

On the floor in front of him, someone's leg pushed through the door from the other room. Simms' shoe, and bloody fingerprint marks on the checkered tiles. He was down.

OK. THIS WAS TOO MUCH. CHARACTERS WERE COMING OUT OF the woodwork. Koller was totally out of the blue. A blank to him. Someone he didn't know and couldn't write. It was almost like it had written itself in. Nine hundred and eighty-four words

now. Almost done.

The noise was sudden, and close, though it felt slow and hollow in the clatter of the rain. A voice, shouting an imperative, drowned in the sound of nature, outside the window.

The author pulled up the shade with a metallic shriek, and outside, in the dark and the storm, he could see two figures past the pane of glass. One tall and thin, the other short and portly. The fat one was waving a silver gun that caught the light. They faced off in the rain, standing above a shape on the ground.

Another shout. Then a shot.

The gunshot was deafening, and sounded much louder than the author thought it should. And despite the distance, and the intervening glass and wall, he could smell it. His ears rang and he stepped away unconsciously.

The two shapes struggled in the storm.

Just then, as he turned to go outside to help (the fat man, he should help the fat man), it struck him. The perfect ending. The story folded in his mind like origami; perfectly edged and turned on itself for the ultimate meaning. The cursor blinked and his eyes were fixed there. But only for a moment.

SIMMS' EYES FOCUSED ON THE GUN, AND HIS BLOODY HAND fell on the handle. It spun on the tiles and he struggled to find the grip. A foot danced into his vision, and then another. Two men. Grunting. Another gunshot. But his ears were already lost in tinnitus, shrieking in a register so high he couldn't hear anything, really.

Pistol up. With a shove, Fosey smashed into the gas stove,

causing the pilot to spark over and over again. Simms popped the safety and put four in Fosey's chest, just as the man brought his right hand up in a gesture—something he had seen before, once; hooked fingers held in complex positions. Something arcane.

There were no big gouts of blood. No explosion. Fosey sagged and then slumped backwards, back hyperextended, head pushed to the shelves above, eyes blank and half-lidded. There was a noise, something like the whistle of a tea-kettle, but they didn't hear it with their ears. It built until Simms dropped the pistol and covered his ears, feeling the tacky wetness of the blood on his face.

Nine pieces of glass, and the clock over the stove popped, all at once, glass fracturing suddenly. Simms felt something malevolent move around him, like a stench that, finding no entry, passed him.

Koller grabbed Simms by the arm and pulled him up.

"Castle, what happened?"

"This almost ended...differently," he replied, voice far away. One thousand, four hundred and twenty-seven.

A Question of Memory

By Greg Stolze

CHARLES JUSTINIAN GAINES, AGE 27, WOKE UP CONFUSED. He remembered getting out of bed and getting dressed. He remembered packing his lunch and his camera and his notebook. The last thing he remembered was putting on one of his boots.

Now his face hurt. Now his back hurt. Now his wrists hurt and, when he glanced down at them, he saw it was because they were handcuffed to the arms of a chair. He flexed—and his arms were very strong; he lifted almost daily—but they barely moved. These weren't typical handcuffs; they had no chain, just a straight hinge. To break them, he'd have to shear through a steel bolt. He could roll his wrists forward a little, but that was it, and they were painfully tight. His hands were turning pink.

He shuffled his feet and heard a clank. They were shackled. He pushed against the floor and felt the chair resist. A twist and a glance confirmed that it was bolted down. He also saw, and felt, a thin fleece blanket over his thighs. His brow furrowed and his eyes widened as he realized that his pants were around his ankles and that he was resting on a toilet seat.

"What the...? Where am I?" he called, looking around to the left and right. He seemed to be in a long, narrow metal room with a wooden floor. A semi-trailer? Shipping container? Boxcar?

"I'm sure this must be terribly confusing to you."

The voice was soft, feminine, elderly, and it came from directly behind him. He twitched, and then a short thin woman stepped around, pulling a folding chair behind her. She was wearing a cardigan, cushiony shoes, wire-rimmed spectacles and a white surgical mask.

“Let me talk to a lawyer!” Gaines cried. “You’re damn right this is confusing! Who the hell *are* you?”

She positioned the chair in front of him and went back for a small rolling cart. Charles did not like what was on the cart: syringes, a box of latex gloves, a mass of electrodes plugged into a laptop computer. Putting on the gloves, she reached for a plastic box that proved to be a timer. She set it for thirty minutes.

“Just give me a minute...there.”

She pulled down her mask. Her eyes were terribly sad, her thin mouth dimpled with frown-marks.

“My name is Margaret Hartford. What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I...I got up, I ate breakfast, put on my shoes, um....”

“We dosed you with a chemical that erases your memory,” she said. “That’s why you don’t recall being arrested and Mirandized.”

For a moment, the prisoner just stared, mouth open. “Jesus fuckin’ Christ! That can’t be legal!”

“It’s not. That’s why we’re going to dose you again when the timer goes off. It works in very specific thirty-minute chunks.”

She reached behind the laptop for a plain white plastic

clipboard.

“Tell me where you hid the bodies of Mary Lou Creed and Darcy Penobscott.”

Her tone of voice had not changed since that first gentle murmur.

“Eat my shit!” Gaines replied.

Hartford’s brow furrowed, just a little. “Look, you’re chained to a chair with a bedpan under you. We’re clearly prepared for a long haul. We can blank your mind and start over if we hit a dead end. I don’t want to spend ten hours in here, giving you twenty doses of something that, obviously, never got FDA approval. Why not just talk?”

“Go to hell!”

She looked down at her papers, resigned.

“How did you come into possession of a book entitled *De Vermis Mysteriis*?”

“Go to hell!”

It went like that for quite some time. After thirty minutes, the timer went off and, in the midst of Gaines telling his captor that she wouldn’t get a damn thing out of him, a man he hadn’t even noticed stuck a syringe in Gaines’ buttock and depressed the plunger.

“WHAT THE...? WHERE AM I?”

Charles Gaines looked around wildly before hearing a mild, feminine voice from behind him.

“I’m sure this must be terribly confusing to you.”

Soon, Hartford was setting the timer and explaining the

situation. “Is there a message you’d like to leave for your future, memory-blanked self?” She opened a cam-corder and looked expectantly at him through it.

“This is *bullshit*, if you are seeing this my name is Charles Gaines, it’s October twentieth, I’m being held prisoner against my will, these people are drugging me!”

“Actually Charles, it’s the twenty-first.”

Behind Charles’ back, his other captor smiled and started peeling waxed paper off the sticky surfaces of biometric electrodes. Gaines twitched, startled, when this second senior citizen appeared, sticking tabs on Gaines’ sweating forehead, on his grotesquely muscled chest, on his dense and veiny forearm. The prisoner tried to resist, but the man—thin, cadaverous, in a worn black polyester suit—was patient and let him tire out.

“Who’s this asshole, huh?” Gaines whined.

“Don’t you worry about me, tiger,” the suited man said, keeping his face hidden as he positioned a tiny camera right before Gaines’ eye. It would measure his pupil dilation even through a closed eyelid.

“Oscar, have you normalized the readings?” Hartford asked pleasantly.

“Double check ’em for me?”

“But of course.”

Gaines let out a low moan.

“All right,” Hartford said, sounding quite satisfied. “I’m going to show you some pictures and read you some phrases. Some are relevant. Some are meaningless—a control group to give us your baselines. In many cases, I don’t even know which

is which. You don't need to speak. The monitors will tell us what you recognize."

"And what if I close my eyes, huh?"

"Then we'll have to immobilize your head and secure your eyelids open. It's very unpleasant," she assured him.

"Ever see *A Clockwork Orange*?" Oscar asked. Then he read the screen hooked to the monitors and added, "Oh. Looks like you have."

Gaines ground his teeth together, but only until Hartford held up a picture. He flinched away.

"Gah!"

"Revulsion," Oscar said, watching lines crawl on the laptop, "but no recognition."

"Mary Lou Creed," Hartford intoned.

"Recognition," Oscar replied.

"I...I probably read her name in the newspaper!" Gaines cried.

"*The King in Yellow*... 'use the Force, Luke'... 'a man alone is an apple fallen from the tree'..."

Behind Gaines, Oscar pointed up for recognition and down for ignorance. When Hartford showed reproductions of paintings by Richard Upton Pickman, Oscar gestured like he was inducing vomiting after the thumbs-down. It wasn't really necessary. Charles Gaines was not maintaining a poker face.

"... 'to be or not to be, that is the question'... 'in our new skins, we will taste with new tongues'... 'do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law'... 'The Mysteries of the Worm'..."

When the timer approached zero again, Oscar prepared

another shot. "Right," he said. "Pigs this time?"

"I think so, yes," Hartford replied.

Gaines was quietly sobbing.

EVENTUALLY, THE TWO INTERROGATORS GOT TIRED AND TOOK A little break. They left the steel box, squinting into unusually bright October sunlight, breathing fresh air and rubbing sore necks. All around them, it was shipping containers as far as the eye could see.

"Never thought I'd be back here again," the man muttered.

"This time is different," the woman replied.

"That crazy crap you got from OUTLOOK is better than scopolamine, I'll give you that, but the hot box? The third degree? It's like 1989 again in there. All that's missing is Margaret Thatcher and my old mustache."

"No," the woman patiently replied. "The responsibility. The legitimacy. We're not out on our own. Lemuel said."

"Oh yeah," Oscar scoffed. "Now we're a *legitimate* black-book, compartmentalized, password-access, beyond top secret...*thing*. What does that even mean?" He rubbed one hand's knuckles with the other hand's fingertips. His arthritis was flaring. "How legit can this be if they're digging up fossils like you and me?"

"We have skills and knowledge," the woman replied, unperturbed. She hadn't looked up at him once. "Speaking of which, do you know how to change the datestamp on these videos?" She was in a camp chair, fussing with the cam-corder, linking it to a tablet computer. "I want him to think he's been

here for three days. I'm thinking I'll leave today's date on the 'If you see this I'm a prisoner' one, and put tomorrow's on that thing where he was screaming."

Oscar squatted down beside her and took the tablet. "That kinda...startled me," he said. "Why do you think he did that?"

"To startle you," she said, not meeting his eyes. "He was trying to assert some kind of agency over his situation, with the limited means at his disposal. Stupid of him. Now we can convince him he was tortured and doesn't remember it."

"You think that'll work? The pig masks didn't seem to throw him much."

She kept her eyes on the screens while he stared at her profile.

"The pig masks are for later," she said. "To break up any retained memories with surreal images. Cognitive camouflage. By the time we park him in a hospital, he'll think he was held for three days, being tortured by people in pig masks."

"Back in the saddle, eh, Hartford?"

He reached up to detangle a lock of her hair from the arm of her glasses, but she leaned away.

"I was a guest at OUTLOOK. I learned from the best." She still wouldn't look at him. Not until he pulled out a pack of Marlboros.

"All business," he grunted, casually extracting one. "Well, I'm here for you if you ever want to talk about—"

"Are you smoking again? No! I won't have it! I will not tolerate that, Oscar!"

He looked up, cigarette comically stuck on his lip. "Maggie, c'mon—"

“Give me those cigarettes!” Her voice was high and shrill.
“*Give me those cigarettes right fucking now!* The lighter too!”

Slowly, he did it. She methodically shredded them, sticking the disposable Bic in her pocket.

“I can’t take it, Oscar,” she said, voice tight. “Not you. No. I won’t let you smoke. I *won’t*. If you need to start a fire, I’ll give you the lighter—”

“OK, Maggie. OK. Um...how about I take the next round of questions. That all right?”

“WHAT THE...? WHERE AM I?”

The last thing Charles Justinian Gaines remembered with any certainty was tying his shoes, but there was...a fog, a glaze, over his mind. As if he had misplaced himself. He felt like he’d just awakened from a dream of pig-faced men with needles, and he found himself restrained, looking at an old man in a black suit.

“Hey Gaines.” The cynicism was palpable. “We’ve been interrogating you for a couple days, using memory inhibiting drugs and a lie detector.”

Gaines was uncertain and uneasy, but his instincts were aggressive. “Oh bull *shit*,” he scoffed.

In reply, his captor held up a small video camera, its screen winged out on the side. “Also, this happened.”

On the tiny screen, Gaines saw himself, in this chair, screaming. He couldn’t tell if it was fury or terror or pain.

“All that stuff stuck on your head and such is a poly-graph,” the old man continued. He spoke like a functionary

at the DMV, telling you how to get your picture taken. “State of the art, too. Brain waves, skin conductivity...I have no idea how it works, but it’s basically foolproof. I’m going to ask you to answer some questions truthfully, and you won’t, but it doesn’t matter. Did you kill Mary Lou Creed?”

“No!”

Behind Gaines, where he couldn’t see her, an old woman in a cardigan shook her head.

“Did you kill Mary Lou Creed with a gun?”

“No,” Gaines said, quieter this time.

“Did you kill Mary Lou Creed with a knife?”

“No!”

“Did you kill Darcy Penobscott with the same knife?”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Charles insisted.

“*Did you kill Darcy Penobscott with the same knife,*” the interrogator droned.

“Yes!” Gaines shouted. “Fine! Yes! There! Yes, I killed them both with a knife, you happy now? You’re clearly not going to believe me until I say I did, and there is *no fucking way* this bullshit is admissible...”

“Your vitals say it was a relief to confess.”

Gaines froze. He searched his thoughts for a memory of this voice, this quiet little librarian voice, and he found nothing, nothing to explain the terror that set his heart throbbing. But there was nothing to explain his dry mouth, the arid pain in his sinuses, or his need to blink, either.

“Oh my,” the woman continued. “It looks like someone’s having an emotional reaction. The drugs suppress conscious

event recollection but feelings like fear or love are stored differently.”

“Is this going to be a problem?” The man was fiddling with a flap on his black suit, put there to resemble a pocket even though there wasn’t one.

“Shouldn’t be,” she replied. “There’s a big difference between recognition and recall.”

“Who said that?” Gaines asked, trembling. “Who...who the fuck is that? Who’s there?”

The inquisitor gave no answer, just went back to his questions. “Did you hide the bodies together?”

“No!”

“True,” said the hidden woman.

“Too much to hope for,” the man sighed. “Do you still have the murder weapon?”

“NO!” Gaines shrieked.

“False.”

Charles paled as the man before him started chuckling. It sounded like coffin-nails being dropped on a marble floor. “Wow, Gaines, that was a dumb-as-shit mistake.” His voice had changed from its previous formal monotone. He now sounded relaxed, confident, like he was having his first Scotch whisky after a long day at the office. “Was it some secret special *black-magic Satan* knife? You stick it in your ass while jerking off, maybe over news articles about the dead girls? Blank his memory, Maggie, we’re a game of Twenty Questions away from finishing this.”

“No! No! *Leave me alone! Leave my mind alone! Stop*

fucking with my head!"

"Oh come on, Charles, grow up."

SO IT WENT.

"What the...? Where am I?" Charles would ask, every time. Maggie Hartford found it interesting how his intonation and body language changed as the hours wore on, adrenaline and its aftereffects convulsing the prisoner's system, stress and confusion exhausting him.

Despite leveraging water for compliance, the prisoner consistently complained of thirst. His eyes seemed to have a yellow glaze, and after four hours, he developed a very slow nosebleed.

But still, every time: "What the...? Where am I?"

Oscar's questions were repetitive, but that was how they got results.

"Did you hide Darcy Penobscott's body somewhere in Whiting Creek?"

"Did you hide Darcy Penobscott's body close to Whiting Creek?"

"Did you dismember Darcy Penobscott's body?"

"Did you disfigure Darcy Penobscott's body?"

"Did you have a legal or personal connection to the location where you hid her body?"

As Oscar started to flag, Maggie took a turn. Neither one of them had Gaines' endurance, and his restraints were sufficient for a lowland gorilla. She recognized, distantly, that she hated the shipping container. She knew she should tough it out, but the stink and the dark brought back some very bad memories.

Maggie's questions were different from Oscar's. She wasn't interested in the dead girls, beyond a cursory pro-social impulse to punish a murdering rapist kidnapper. Her concern was with other matters.

"How did you acquire your copy of *De Vermis Mysteriis*?" she asked.

"Please," the prisoner whispered. "Just...I can't, I'm so tired, please...can't we take a break?"

"Maybe after these questions. How did you acquire your copy of *De Vermis Mysteriis*?"

"I'm so thirsty...."

"I'll get you some water after this page is filled out." Her pen made a circle on her documents to keep the ink flowing.

"How did you acquire your copy of *De Vermis Mysteriis*?"

"Why do you even care?" he whispered.

She wondered if answering it would create a bond, would make it easier for him to forgive himself for cracking. She decided to give it a try, after a glance at the timer told her she had eighteen minutes before reset.

"All that Crowley magick-with-a-k business on your profile? Some of it works. At first, the FBI thought you were just a typical girl-butcher, which is reprehensible of course, but finding that book in the apartment you abandoned? Oh, that changed things. Now you might be a girl-butcher with an... architecture. Most necrophiliac serial killers just *think* they're doing something magnificent and profound, but a few...." She gave him a little shrug.

Gaines looked down at the blanket over his lap, but really,

he wasn't looking at anything at all.

"If that's all true, why would I ever tell you? Why wouldn't I try to get out, get to...the reality of it?"

"Because—and listen closely Charles, I know this like nobody else—when your brain gets over-processed by drugs or ECT or psychotherapy or just structured control of input...it stops being okay. It's like a dollar bill that's been crumpled and laundered and spent too many times. You can still buy things with it, but it's worn out and faded. If you fight us too long, there won't be a real 'you' left or a 'reality' you'll ever believe again. The lights will be on, but even you won't know if anyone's home." She leaned in, staring, and repeated, "*I know this like nobody else.*"

He blinked, again, hard.

"This guy had it, um...Pitts? Potts?" He licked his chapping lips. "Potter? Something like that. Wouldn't shut up about it. Real prick, kept bragging...so I lifted it. I went to a thing at his house, everyone got kinda drunk, people were doing...well, I called the cops on it, smashed open his display case and ran off with it just as the police showed up. Tried to read it a couple times...but the language was just too much. I tried to translate it word by word but it didn't make any sense. Nothing was there, nothing at all."

Strangely, she smiled the whole time she let him drink a bottle of Poland Springs. Then it was the needle again, and back to Oscar.



“...ALSO, THIS HAPPENED.” THE FIRST TIME HE’D SHOWN Gaines the screaming video, Oscar had been in the moment. The second time, he found it kind of funny that the reaction was exactly the same, seeing it again for the first time, changing at the same rate. Then, he found the repetition increasingly disturbing. Seven hours in, though, it was just tedious.

“Did you hide Darcy’s body in the Frederick Williams forest preserve?” Oscar’s voice was scratchy, hoarse.

“...no...” Gaines’ voice was even rougher.

“Did you hide Darcy’s body in the Settler’s Branch marshlands?”

“...no...”

“Mmm hm. Have you visited the site of where you hid Darcy’s body in the last year?”

“...no...”

“When you visited the site where you hid Darcy’s body, did you find it using a landmark?”

EVENTUALLY, GAINES GOT THE CLIPBOARD. OSCAR PUT IT ON his thighs and the prisoner read it, eyes widening at the details.

“This is a confession,” Oscar said. “I’m empowered to take the death penalty off the table if you sign it.”

“What the...how did you do...? I didn’t...I didn’t say any of this.” Gaines seemed tired and younger. Shrunken.

“You may not remember, but you told us. Sign it and things get a lot easier. This offer is good for the next five seconds.”

Oscar looked tired too. More tired than the young weightlifter, actually. “Four.”

“Fine! God. Fine. I’ll sign it.”

Oscar put an uncapped ballpoint in the prisoner’s hand and unlocked the cuff.

“Good job. Your life is about to get...”

He didn’t finish his statement, because Gaines slammed the tip of the pen through the back of Oscar’s hand, hard enough to hit the metal chair arm.

“*Cocksucker!*” Gaines hissed.

When they’d snatched him off the street, he’d been carrying a lunch (including two types of fruit, a big sandwich and a bottle of Super Mass Gain drink, caramel flavor), a notebook (charting when a 14-year-old girl named Jenny Hemphill was leaving the house, coming back, and turning out her lights at night), a camera (its SD card filled with candid shots of Jenny Hemphill) and a high-tension grip exerciser.

Neither of the captors had paid much mind to the grip exerciser, but Gaines had been habitually—almost obsessively—squeezing grippers of progressively greater resistance. So when he grabbed the old man’s uninjured right hand (the one with the handcuff key in it), it wasn’t much of a contest. Oscar screamed as his bones ground against each other, dislocating and tearing ligaments. The metacarpals leading to Oscar’s thumb and pinkie both cracked in half.

“Gimme that key, y’old fuck!”

As the old man crumpled to the floor, Gaines took the key and unlocked his left wrist.

“Goddammit you motherf—” The man in the black suit was sobbing.

“SHUT UP.” The other cuff opened, but Gaines’ triumph was short lived. Despite his mangled hands, Oscar had jerked upwards and slammed his elbow down into Gaines’ crotch as hard as he could.

“Oh you *bastard!*” Gaines shrieked.

His massive arms were terribly sore from being handcuffed too long, but the flood of adrenaline masked the pain as Gaines grabbed his tormentor by the throat. Oscar had his chin tucked and got his forearms up to interfere, but there was only one way that fight was going to end.

“*Time to die.*” Gaines’ voice was terrible, fierce and utterly confident.

He hadn’t heard the door behind him open. Hadn’t seen the light change, because night had fallen, leaving the outside as dark as the interior. He never imagined that a small woman with a small gun might step up behind him in her soft-soled shoes, take aim with care, and fire. He had, after all, forgotten her.

“STUPID, ASSHOLE, ROOKIE, *SENILE* MISTAKE,” OSCAR MOANED, grimacing.

“It’s OK. You’re fine. You’re going to be all right.” Maggie was kneeling at his feet, bandaging his hands. “I’ll get you something for the pain.”

A half-hour later, Oscar was blissed on morphine and reclining in a bathtub, with Maggie shampooing Gaines’ blood

and gray matter out of his thinning hair.

“I always loved you Maggie. I never...never regretted...”

“Please be quiet, Oscar.”

As she was tucking him into her bed, he was already starting to pass out. But he fought it long enough to mumble, “Fuck, who’s minding the store?”

“Lemuel,” she said. “I called him.”

Gaines had been dead three hours by the time she got back to the trailer. She called her boss’ number and heard it ring within.

“Maggie? Where are you?” he asked.

“I’m right outside. I didn’t want to startle you. I’m coming in?”

She had a bucket full of bleach and sponges, and saw her boss in a disposable, coated polypropylene jumpsuit. He had Gaines’ body wrapped up in a tarp and was mopping the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” she started.

“You’re all right?”

“Oh me, I’m fine. This fellow was a dud, we were going to throw him to Justice, but then he tried to escape. He hurt Oscar.”

“Yeah, you mentioned. He OK?”

“Sedated.”

There was a pause, during which they worked. Then Lemuel spoke again.

“And the book?”

“Gaines got nothing,” Maggie said.

“You’re certain?”

“I can show you on the readouts. Cerebral electrical activity, pulse, blink rate, eye drift...it all confirms that he didn’t understand a word out of it. I don’t think he let anyone else read it, either. Why would he?”

“To impress them?” Lemuel said, playing devil’s advocate.

“Would it impress them if they understood it and he didn’t? No, he’d keep it hidden and forget about it, one more dead end in his ‘vision quest’ or whatever. I think we just got lucky with this one.”

“Yeah, I feel lucky as a leprechaun,” Lemuel said, hefting the bucket into which he’d gathered pieces of Gaines’ skull.

Another half hour and they were on the road, Gaines in the back of a windowless van. During their forty-five minute drive out to a parcel of farmland that was under an EPA quarantine for the next forty years, neither one spoke a word. A green John Deere backhoe sat waiting for them. It was spotlessly clean.

“I thought you told me it was going to be different,” Hartford said at last, as they climbed out of the van and sucked in cold air, with night just starting to change to pre-dawn morning. “Now that we’re legitimate.”

There were three rough oblongs in the ground, about six feet long, two or three feet wide, heavily overgrown with weeds.

“It is different,” her boss said, setting off for the earth-mover. “We used to dig the graves by hand.”

Pluperfect

By Ray Winger

THE SAND CASTLE. JANUARY 16, 2011. RIGHT NOW.

“Goddamn it, Roger. I need you to understand two things—you’re going to die here today, and you’re going to tell me what I want to know.”

Fucking Farris just sobs, rocking back and forth on his knees. The Program’s best interrogators spent the last three solid months with Farris, playing their greatest hits album over and over again—interview, rapport, drugs, sleep deprivation, mock drownings, hot/cold—all to no avail.

“It’s showtime, Roger. We’ve been at this for four days now and I can’t protect you any longer. You’re tired. You’re bleeding. You think you’re hurt.” Isabelle rolls her sleeves back down and neatly buttons each cuff.

“Trust me, you’re not hurt—not yet. I can’t even *describe* what comes next. Again, today’s the day, and you *are* going to tell me what I want to know, one way or another. Help *me* to help *you*. Just get this over with. Then I can put a bullet in your head—quick and clean.

“This is your last chance, Roger. C’mon, talk to me. Talk to me about LeClerc.”

ROGER FARRIS. OCTOBER 23, 2002.

Back more than nine years and Roger Farris still can’t mend the crack in his core. Worse, he can’t even describe his ailment. For a man of his passions, that is the most frustrating

part. The vulgar terms employed by his friends and doctors—“*melancholy*,” “*desolation*” and especially “*depression*”—have been debased by decades of lazy usage, but even their etymologies failed to provide anything he could work with. There isn’t a word or combination of words in any language he knows, and he knows many, that captures what ails him. Farris is a linguist, not a poet.

In the years since his mysterious disappearance and equally mysterious return, Farris has done his best to approximate a genuine human existence. He returned to teaching for a time, but just couldn’t connect with the students. He started writing, and then abandoned, a handful of books. He contrived to enter into a series of brief and meaningless relationships.

Three times he kicked sand over what tiny sparks of life he managed to kindle, telling himself and his friends that a change of scenery was just the thing to realign his compass. In truth, he is running, attempting to flee the indescribable. But not just running—running and...*questing*? In a sense, he is simultaneously fleeing from a black hole he can’t understand and searching for something important. It’s a difficult concept to convey. Once again, language—*all* his languages—betrays him.

The best word Farris can use to describe himself is “abridged.” Something vital was torn out of him. It’s true, he has no memories of anything that transpired during his disappearance, but that’s just the beginning of it. He knows that he also lost some odd piece of his soul that is infinitely more valuable. Some existential secret, some fundamental truth, had been glimpsed and then erased from his being, and its absence

is unbearable. This, more than anything, is the source of his dread.

During the past nine years, most of what little solace Roger Farris managed to muster came from an unexpected source: a newfound passion for mathematics. In the years he was missing, Farris mysteriously accumulated Ph.D.-level proficiencies in a handful of mathematical disciplines. Neither the doctors who examined him over the years nor the police officials who investigated his disappearance could offer any plausible explanation for how he might have obtained these gifts, but they were undeniable. At some point, it seems, Farris recognized that numbers were a beautiful language all their own and his linguistics training provided him with curiously profound insights into its grammar.

And of course, his oldest love provides the occasional respite, as well. On a good day—and those are rare—he can still lose himself in words, savoring the little nuggets of meaning they create as they bounced off each other like billiard balls. These days, he is exploring language through the art of its greatest practitioners—unpacking Ovid, sampling Christopher Marlowe, and savoring Goethe in the original German. He hasn't read the classics with such devotion since he was an undergraduate, and re-reading old favorites sometimes helps transport him back to better days. These little treasures from his past have become a sort of narcotic and he chases them like an addict.

It is just such an urge that brings Farris to the Huntington Beach Public Library in October 2002. He is in search of a

poem called “Pnossus, Pnossus!” from William Blake’s *Songs of Experience*. He first read the poem as a freshman at Vanderbilt and it stayed with him ever since. Of late, one of its couplets keeps barging its way into his consciousness.

*In the looking glass I see
A riven bridge twixt me and thee*

But when he cracks open the library’s copy of Blake’s *Complete Poetry and Prose*, he discovers that it was somewhat less than “complete,” since it doesn’t include “Pnossus, Pnossus!” or even mention it at all. Nor does the copy of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* shelved right next to it. Or the bibliography of Blake printed in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*.

Stunned, he pulls out his iPhone and conducts a quick Google search. “Pnossus, Pnossus!” doesn’t seem to exist at all.

And that’s when something clicks. That’s when he recovers just a tiny sliver of his soul.

Roger Farris is beginning to remember.

AGENT ISABELLE. 2003–2010.

Farris’ Google search for “PNOSSUS, PNOSSUS” attracts the attention of Delta Green after it is picked up by a Trojan horse inserted into an NSA data-mining algorithm. On its own, a simple Internet search—especially a search for a heretofore unknown phrase that only *appeared* to be derived from antediluvian Aklo, a language used primarily by dark scholars and thaumaturges—doesn’t mean anything, but it’s enough to flag

Farris for further scrutiny.

And it's a good thing, too. Less than a week after the Google search, Farris is fired from his teaching position at Golden West College in Huntington Beach, California. The Internet search takes place on Monday the 23rd. Farris doesn't attend any of his classes on the 24th or 25th. On Thursday the 26th, he shows up just long enough to visit the College Library and verbally abuse a librarian. When he fails to turn up for a disciplinary hearing on Friday the 27th, Farris is quietly terminated. Two days later, Costa Mesa PD picks him up on a DUI. He is a no-show for his court date.

After being fired, Farris spends the next seven months bouncing around the midwest. Automatic monitoring of his bank accounts confirm that he has no discernable source of income. For the first time in his adult life, he is accumulating credit card debt.

In March 2003, Farris turns up on the passenger manifest of a British Airways flight from Denver to London. He spends six days in the UK, and surveillance camera footage suggests that he is holed up in the British Library for four of them. He then boards a flight from London to Boston and, two days later, visits the restricted stacks at the Orne Library at Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts, where he spends eleven consecutive days perusing a pile of ominous texts known as the *Pnakotic Manuscripts* in the library's rare-book room.

That's how Farris lands on Agent Isabelle's radar. The 2002 Internet search plus the visits to the restricted stacks were enough to prompt her superiors to open a case file and order

up active surveillance. Isabelle is briefed on the assignment and its particulars on April 6th, 2003. She welcomes the op because Farris booked a flight to Bermuda after he finished in Arkham, and she is hoping to soak up a little sun. Delta Green—the Program—arranges highly classified counterterrorism cover assignments to make sure her CIA bosses foot the bill and ask no questions.

Isabelle soon discovers that Farris had an interesting and unusual history. No criminal record—not even a traffic ticket—or unsavory associations. National Merit Scholar, PhD in linguistics from the University of Chicago, landed a job as an associate professor at Indiana University before the ink on his thesis was dry.

So far, so dull.

But then, one day in 1990, Farris suddenly disappeared. Dropped entirely off the grid. When friends entered his apartment eleven days after he was last seen, they found the television on and a bag of popcorn in the microwave. Police were notified, but after six weeks of failing to unearth a single clue, the investigation was suspended and the case pushed to the back of the filing cabinet.

Then, two years later, Farris reappeared just as suddenly, with no memory of where he'd been. It was almost as if he nodded off during *The Late Late Show* and woke up two years later, though it was obvious that something happened to him. Shortly after he re-emerged, he started undergoing intensive psychotherapy and scarfing down increasingly potent anti-depressants. Before long, he left his teaching post and never spent

more than eleven months at an address again.

Stranger still, Farris somehow acquired an aptitude for post-graduate level mathematics while he was missing.

Isabel finds Farris' story strangely familiar. According to Delta Green casefiles, something similar happened to Hugh Dyson, a DG fixer and fearsome wetworks specialist who disappeared back in 1983 and reappeared three years later. Dyson had no recollection of where he'd been or what happened to him. Isabel once met another operative who heard Dyson mysteriously acquired a conversational fluency in classical Latin while he was gone. Nothing like that was noted in the casefile, but files from the those days are notoriously patchy. Four years after he re-emerged, Dyson went catatonic in the middle of a firefight and was institutionalized. He didn't speak for six more years, until he finally said, "Goodbye," just before pushing a sharpened bed slat through the roof of his mouth and into his brain.

Isabelle catches up with Farris in Bermuda and surveils him for a few weeks as he continues to globetrot—Rome, Chicago, Cairo, Nairobi—further juicing his credit cards and visiting university libraries at each stop. He's perusing dozens of titles on the Program's black list—*The G'harne Fragments*, *The Ponape Scriptures*, *Under Alien Suns*—but also advanced neurological texts. Isabelle shares his reading list with a DG brain surgeon who hypothesizes that Farris was researching the biochemistry of memory.

When his world tour finally reaches Australia, Farris buys a bunch of camping equipment and hires a guide to take him

deep into the Outback. Isabelle is so surprised by the change-up—Farris is no outdoorsman—that she fucks up. On the evening before they are scheduled to set off, Farris makes her in a hotel bar. He must have realized he'd seen her elsewhere, halfway around the world. Twelve hours later, he is *completely* off the grid. He checks out of the hotel in the middle of the night, drives away in his rental car and vanishes.

For the next six and a half years, Farris is a ghost. He never visits the apartment he left back in the States, uses any of his credit cards, or opens a bank account under his birth name or Social Security number again. Every once in a while, image recognition software picks him out of grainy security cam images shot in an airport terminal or a museum, but he's always long gone before Isabelle finds out about it. The Program's spies that work in libraries housing blacklisted books never spot him, its unwitting informants never catch wind of him, and he never attempts to contact any of his old friends or family members.

How the fuck did a nebbish like Farris acquire the counter-surveillance and evasion skills to elude a full-court press? How did he even know what the Program was capable of?

Worse, Farris eventually starts teasing her. In 2008, Isabelle receives a FedEx envelope containing a cell phone. The phone holds hundreds of snapshots of Isabelle, taken all around the world over a period of two years—a present from Farris. If it's supposed to be a message, she never figures out what it means, but it's chilling nonetheless and earns her blunt reprimand from her superiors. It's about that time that Isabelle starts taking her nightly medicine: ten milligrams of Sublinox washed down with

a double bourbon gives her an outside shot at getting some sleep.

The Program recognizes that Farris is up to some pretty scary shit. One of Isabelle's colleagues obtains evidence linking him to a ring of computer hackers who managed to download the complete texts of *Tot und Untot* and *The Book of Eibon* from a secure server believed to be operated by the Chinese government. Security cameras start capturing glimpses of him more frequently, and in some scary fucking places—a gas station just outside a nuclear missile silo in Kansas, the lobby of a Tunisian insane asylum, a mortuary in Mexico City. Farris might have even turned violent. Isabelle is convinced he is involved in the 2009 kidnapping and presumed murder of a Connecticut doctor. Two months before he disappeared, the doctor published comprehensive research on memory disorders in *The Lancet*.

In June 2010, another of Isabelle's colleagues—Agent Konstantin—places a note in Farris' file identifying him as a Known Associate of Sebastien fucking LeClerc! The fugitive head of a nihilist cult, LeClerc is the Program's Public Enemy Number One—one of them, anyway—and by now nearly a legend. Delta Green has hunted him ever since he and his followers opened a portal for an extra-dimensional virus that wiped out every albino in Central Africa in 1982, back when the Group was a bunch of stubborn outlaws and the Program wasn't even a wish. Konstantin intercepted intel indicating that LeClerc was making plans to rendezvous with Farris somewhere in South America, the first clue to the Frenchman's whereabouts in more

than ten years.

Three weeks later, Isabelle receives a text message from an anonymous source containing the time and place of the LeClerc-Farris meet. LeClerc is a no-show, but Isabelle apprehends Farris with the help of the Peruvian army. Someone in LeClerc's organization—possibly even LeClerc himself—sold Farris out. Apparently the Program wasn't alone in concluding that Roger Farris was too dangerous to remain on the board.

The Program takes custody of Farris within twelve hours of his capture. His association with LeClerc buys him a first-class ticket to Camp Oscar Zulu, an abandoned weather station *cum* prison camp located on an otherwise uninhabited island ninety miles off the coast of Barrow, Alaska, and accessible only by helicopter. Oscar Zulu is a deep, dismal shithole in which the Program stashes the very worst of the worst—nihilistic cult leaders, depraved sorcerers, even the occasional shambling monstrosity. Anybody too beastly to breathe civilized air and too valuable or difficult to kill wastes away there. DG operatives call it “the Sand Castle.”

Agent Isabelle spends the next four months watching Farris get the shit kicked out of him. No attempt at rapport takes root. Not even the Program's biggest and baddest interrogators can persuade him to spill the beans on LeClerc; not a single word passes through his lips, not even desperate lies or fantasies. Isabelle isn't sleeping any better.

Δ

THE SAND CASTLE. RIGHT NOW.

“Last chance, Roger.”

“Isabelle.” Farris’ first spoken syllables in four months sound like sandpaper scraping a sidewalk. “Is Mr. Eiko ready?” His lips quiver and twist. The fucker’s trying to smile, flashing the few teeth he has left.

“Roger, where did you hear that name?”

Eiko’s very existence is one of the Program’s most precious secrets. A sorcerer who specializes in torture, he doesn’t so much interrogate his subjects as peel apart their souls and pluck out the truths from within. His methods are infallible—and also monstrous, lethal, and astonishingly painful. Legend has it that an NSA office manager who once had to watch Eiko go to work on some poor bastard went straight home and poked out the eyes of his entire family before swallowing a hollow point. Eiko is always the very last resort. His services are obscenely expensive. Rumor has it that every time Eiko works his creepy mojo, it costs him three months of his life. Someone, somewhere thinks it’s worth it.

And now, Eiko is standing right outside the cell door. How the *fuck* could Farris know that?

The heavy bolt slides and the door groans open. In come Agent Cyril and Mr. Eiko carrying a big leather satchel. Isabelle gets her first look at the legend—skeletal face, ashy gray complexion, long wool coat and fedora, black surgical mask over his mouth. He’s already hopped up; his eyes are on fire and the

whole room gets colder when he enters.

Cyril says, "Thank you, Isabelle. I'm afraid it's time."

"Cyril, give me just a few more minutes."

"Isabelle, it's time."

"So how does this work?" Isabelle asks.

Cyril addresses Farris directly. "Roger, you're going to die in a few moments and your death is not going to be very pleasant. But before you leave us, we're going to get our answers. Mr. Eiko here is going to tear open your mind and shake loose all your secrets. You're going to tell us things that you weren't even aware you knew. In the next couple of minutes, you're going to experience several thousand years' worth of torture that's so...well, I can't possibly describe it. Then, while you take your last few breaths, Mr. Eiko will help himself to anything you've ever thought, experienced or dreamed."

Eiko is absent, lost in a creepy mantra he's chanting under his breath. He pulls a gleaming black scalpel and a vial of orange liquid out of the satchel. Farris is still trying to smile. Eiko leans over and stares at him, eyeball to eyeball. The chanting gets louder until Cyril and Isabelle are both starting to squirm.

Tears are welling up in Farris' eyes.

Eiko lashes out like a cobra and seizes Farris by the throat. He uses the scalpel to deftly slice a crimson sigil into Farris's forehead, then dips his thumb into the orange liquid and dabs it over the cuts, an unholy parody of a priest's benediction.

Farris is silent for a moment, shocked. Then the screaming starts—the terrible gurgling and shrieking. Isabelle watches Farris age before her eyes, every scream cutting a new wrinkle

into his face. His hair goes white and then falls out entirely as he bites off two of his own fingers while trying to stifle his own screams. He's babbling now, and a milky film spreads over his eyes. Bones wither and break as he writhes in agony, until he lets out one last howl and comes to rest face down on the cold floor.

Eiko kneels and cradles Farris in his arms. At last, the sorcerer speaks, in a voice like a whistling tea kettle. "You can ask your questions now. But hurry; he won't be with us much longer."

Isabelle is shaking and sobbing herself. She notices the strange expression on what's left of Farris's face. Not resignation, not relief, not fear; more like—*victory*.

Cyril gets to work. "Roger, do you finally remember what happened to you when you disappeared all those years ago?"

Farris could only manage a faint croak. Eiko places his ear next to Farris's lips and relays his answer.

"Yes. All of it. Finally. Even their terrible secret."

"*They?* Who are they?"

"Visitors. A great race from another galaxy. The *first* race. Traded bodies. I was with them. In their gleaming citadel. There were many others there like me, each of us plucked out of time—Crom-Ya the Cimmerian, Corsi, Peaslee. Our minds all intermingled, all their memories tearing me apart."

Cyril again, "This Citadel. Where is it?"

"Not where. When. Right now, its ruins are in Australia. Ninety years ago, it was just a poem. Their mathematics. Their architecture. Unbelievable. Seventeen dimensions—length,

width, height, time, but also various emotions. And language. They can traverse it. They travel through our age as exotic words, imperceptible, burrowing in and out of stories and poems—Pnossus, Pnomus, Phthor. Their syllables are just shadows cast by living, feeling beings onto our realm.”

“And then these things finally released you? Returned you?”

“Yes.”

“Were you trying to get revenge on these things that kidnapped you? Is that why you joined LeClerc’s organization?”

“No. Trying to remember. Trying to remember it all. I needed to remember *the secret*.” Farris coughs. Is he *smiling*? “All of this. Worth it.”

“Where is LeClerc?”

Farris via Eiko: “I don’t know.”

“Someone else who’s close to LeClerc sold you out. That’s how we found you. Who was that?”

“No. Not close to LeClerc.”

Something isn’t right. Isabelle is pulling out the puzzle pieces in her head.

“You’re quite the accomplished spy, Roger. Did LeClerc’s organization train you in how to recognize and evade our surveillance?”

“No.”

More puzzle pieces, falling into place. What was that he said earlier? *There were many others like me, plucked out of time*. Agent Dyson disappeared in 1983. Dyson was with Farris. *Our minds intermingled; so many memories*.

Farris and Dyson merged minds. That's how Farris knew how to elude surveillance and how he knew about Eiko. That's how he knew the Program's secrets.

Oh shit! Isabelle pulls out her phone and sends out a priority message to Konstantin over the Program's encrypted spooknet: "BOUNCEBACK URGENT."

Cyril continues. "All those books, all over the world. What were you looking for, Roger?"

"Trying to *remember*. *Anything* to remember." Even Eiko was growing uncomfortable with the messages he was relaying. "Hurry now! He's on the very brink!"

Cyril urgent. "What's LeClerc planning?"

"Don't know."

"You don't know?" Cyril is surprised. Now he too senses something's wrong.

"Are you in contact with LeClerc or his organization?"

"No."

The glow from Isabelle's phone lights up the room—incoming message over spooknet. ERROR CODE 304. USER "KONSTANTIN" DOES NOT EXIST.

Enough of the puzzle pieces fit together for Isabelle to make out the picture. The intel on LeClerc—fake; Farris planted it himself. He knew that if the Program considered him dangerous enough, he'd end up right here, in front of Eiko. Eiko is his goddamned endgame—a last resort strategy for dredging up this big secret he's forgotten. Farris himself sent the text that led to his capture!

"You have just seconds left!" Eiko hisses.

Isabelle asks the question herself. “Roger, did you just discover this alien secret you’ve been trying all these years to remember? What is it?”

Farris lets out an audible sigh. He’s peaceful now, in his final moments—relieved. Eiko bends closer to listen to his last words.

“I’m...I’m afraid Mr. Farris has expired.” The fire in Eiko’s eyes goes out, revealing something else. Unease. Dread. He hesitates.

Isabelle has to *know*. “The secret, Mr. Eiko. Did he tell you the secret?”

Eiko’s shaking; tremors make his fingers dance. “Yes. Yes he did.” Eiko picks up the gleaming black scalpel and neatly severs his own jugular.

Friendly Advice

By Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan

THEY DON'T BRING HIM STRAIGHT BACK TO THE STATION.

Instead they go to the roadhouse, and in ghoulish irony pick his usual table at the back, like they were all trooping in here to see Ritter. They fetch him coffee, whisper urgent solicitous advice. Tell him to get his story straight, how best to salvage his career. Tell him that he did the right thing.

His hands are shaking. They should bring him a small coffee in a large mug. That's how you do it.

BACK WHEN THIS ALL STARTED, MORE THAN A YEAR AGO, HE'D been the rookie on the force. Deputy Jessen, Addison County Sheriff's Department. He got all the odd jobs, the details no one else wanted. Ritter, Sheriff Winthrop told him, was a former FBI agent, forced to quit when he got sick. The nature of this sickness went unspoken; Ritter was dying anyway, so what did it matter? Ritter had bought a cabin outside Monkton to die somewhere beautiful and lonely. The Bureau asked the sheriff's department to keep an eye on him, and so Winthrop kicked the unofficial assignment down the chain to Jessen.

Jessen and Ritter had nothing in common, so they talked shop. He'd fill Ritter in on local events, ongoing cases, and reports that came in over the wire. All Jessen needed in exchange was a promise, renewed weekly, that Ritter was doing OK, that he wasn't dead yet.

He got more than that, though. Ritter had a mind like a

woodchipper, and had to keep it fed or it'd chew through his own sanity. Ritter's hands shook too much for him to read, and his eyes got tired if he watched TV for long, but he could still listen. He devoured Jessen's petty cases and incident reports.

His advice lifted Jessen's career, made him the county's golden boy. He got promoted early, got his name in the papers, and he owed it all to Ritter.

A MEMORY.

"I swear, I searched under every bush and rock along Lincoln Road, and there was no sign of it."

"How did you search? Show me."

Jessen got up and mimed searching around the booth, peering under the table and fumbling through the underbrush of napkins Ritter used to mop up the coffee spilled by shaking fits.

"You dumb fuck. Try looking up once in a while. It's in the crook of a tree or caught in some branches."

Another memory, fresh and raw. Sheriff Winthrop's body. The other man, Noyes, a mess of broken meat. The sudden, sickening realization when he saw the gun half-hidden up in a hollow tree.

THE FIRST BAG SHOWED UP IN NOVEMBER, WITH THE FLOODS. The best guess at the station was that it was a dead deer, killed out of season and hidden in the woods, and the rising waters had dislodged it and carried it downstream, to leave it in a ditch outside town. Maybe bag was the wrong word—it was a transparent sack, like saran wrap, full of pink-brown slime.

Organs, too, chunks of disassociated muscle and bone. It might have been waste from a slaughterhouse, but they checked every abattoir in the county, and those were all dead ends.

There were plastic objects, too. Smooth grey things, each about the size of a thumbnail. They looked like traces of electronic components, but Jessen couldn't work out what they were for.

Something about the way the bag huddled on the floor of the evidence room made it look like a human body, no matter the angle.

The sheriff told Jessen to ignore it, that it was a waste of time. Some sick idea of a joke, he said. Forget about it. And the next day, the bag was gone from the evidence locker like it had never existed.

Still, Jessen mentioned the meat bag to Ritter.

"Is your watch slow?" asked Ritter.

It was.

Ritter carefully took a long shaky drink from his coffee, then seemed to make a decision.

"You're going to find more of these bags. They'll show up after storms, especially around the new moon. I need to know where you find them, and who else is looking for them."

Jessen objected, pointed out that the sheriff had said to ignore it.

"Get the CME to take a look at the next one," Ritter had advised.

The next one broke in his hands. He found it in a forest clearing and tried to haul it back to the road, but the wet mem-

brane parted beneath his fingers. A slurry of meat and organs flooded over his hands and ran down the sleeves of his jacket. The smell of it hit the back of his throat like tear gas. Momentarily blinded, he heard something buzzing in the trees nearby like a hive of angry bees. But it was ten days before Christmas and the forest was blanketed in snow, so how could he have heard bees?

The chief medical examiner found traces of human tissue in the gunk he brought back. It couldn't be identified, but they hauled out old missing-persons reports and started looking into medical waste incinerators and hospitals. Every time a bag showed up it was reported, and he'd dutifully reported it to Ritter.

AROUND THE TURN OF THE YEAR HE DETAINED A MAN NAMED Noyes. He spotted him trying to load one of the meat bags into the trunk of a brand new car. Noyes claimed that he'd just seen it at the side of the road and was going to get rid of it before anyone crashed into it.

So why was his trunk already lined with plastic bags? Why did he have a radio set on the passenger seat of the car, with a police scanner?

The sheriff said that meant nothing, that they couldn't hold him.

The radio, he remembered, was tuned to the ULF band. Earth Mode communications, used only for talking with miners, deep underground.

A month after that, Ritter asked Jessen for a favor. They

sold postcards behind the counter in the roadhouse, but Ritter was too shaky to write one. Would Jessen write for him?

*“Dear Gladys,
wish you were here.”*

Sent unsigned to a post office box in D.C.

He asked who Gladys was. Ritter just laughed and called him a dumb fuck.

By then, Ritter was somehow both skeletal and bloated, like all the flesh had moved from his limbs and face and congealed in his belly. Sores on his neck left dark stains on his shirt collar. Sometimes, when he got a coughing fit, he’d grab onto his stomach and dig his fingers in, and Jessen was reminded of that second sack breaking when he’d tried to move it. He was suddenly afraid that Ritter would just burst, right there in the roadhouse, rotten guts pouring out like flood debris, carried on a brown torrent of bad coffee.

ANOTHER MEMORY. LAST WEEK.

“The FBI are here. They want to talk to you.” The sheriff, jaw clenched, fingers white. “It’s about those fucking bags of meat you keep dragging in. I swear, you’re like a dumb cat leaving dead rats on the patio. Go on, go. Interview room one. Just get rid of them.”

There were three of them, two men and a woman. Blandly professional, forgettable. They hardly asked him any questions, just asked for a copy of all reports relating to the meat bags.

Said they were part of an interstate investigation into illegal dumping of hospital waste. They'd take things from here.

As they left, the woman lingered for a moment.

"I worked with Agent Ritter a few years ago. I hear you see him regularly. How's he holding up?"

He answered honestly. "I don't think he's going to last much longer."

The mask slipped for a moment, but only a moment.

"Did he call you?" he asked.

"No. I haven't talked to him in a long time," she said.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Deputy Jessen."

NOW SHE BRINGS HIM COFFEE AND THE MASK SLIPS AGAIN.

"You're going to need a lawyer," she tells him. "Just tell them exactly what happened, everything about him, about Ritter, and you'll be OK." She pauses. "Tell them that he'd shown you the gun before. That's how you knew it was his."

Through the roadhouse window he can see the one of the other agents, talking on the radio. The third agent must still be back at the cabin, with the body.

Past floods into the present as he remembers the last few hours, gets them straight in his head for the endless questioning to come.

While driving home from a bar, I saw a fire in the vicinity of Coyote Ridge. I investigated and discovered it was a vehicle on fire. I recognized the vehicle as belonging to Adrian Noyes, whom I had previously detained for questioning on an unrelated matter.

There was clear evidence of automatic weapons fire.

Nearby, I found four bodies, including those of Addison County Sheriff Richard Winthrop and Mr. Noyes. I could not identify the other two.

And even as he sits in the roadhouse, he cannot bring himself to recall the fifth body, in the shadows, already dissolving, melting away as pink ichor gushed from the bullet-holes in its carapace.

I also found an automatic firearm, an Ingram MAC-10, that had recently been discharged...

Ritter, he knows, would have worked it all out. Filled in the details, made the connections, seen the motive and purpose behind it all. He's not Ritter.

I knew the gun to belong to Malcolm Ritter, a former FBI agent. He had a cabin nearby. I should have reported the murders of the sheriff and the others immediately, of course, but I was in shock and was not thinking clearly. The next thing I know, I'm at Ritter's cabin. I was going to question him, but as soon as I approached the cabin my vehicle came under fire. Fortunately, I was uninjured and exited the vehicle on the far side, and used it as cover before I entered the cabin.

Ritter was waiting for me. He was armed, and attempted to shoot me as I entered, but his hands shook and he shot wide. Fearing for my own life, I returned fire, killing Agent Ritter.

"YOU DUMB FUCK." RITTER'S LAST WORDS, AND HE'D GRINNED as he said them, like it was all some private joke that Jessen would never get.

They'd found Jessen then, the other agents. He hadn't heard their car pull up, but they said they arrived after him. They were there on an unrelated matter, personal business, looking up an old work colleague. If only they'd arrived sooner....

The shape of it—*a* shape, anyway—takes form in his mind as he finishes the coffee. Ritter was bitter, unstable. Maybe he was the one making the meat bags, some perverted statement about his own illness. Maybe half the missing persons in the state ended up in those bags. The sheriff worked it out, went to confront him, and Ritter ambushed him. Jessen knows with complete certainty that the prints from the MAC-10 will match Ritter, that the weapon is registered to Ritter, that the mud on Ritter's shoes will match the dirt from Coyote Ridge. The shape of it is so clear, so simple, even Jessen has no trouble putting it together.

The fact that that Ritter could barely stand and certainly couldn't shoot straight doesn't matter in the face of undeniable physical evidence. And the other things that don't fit, like the first bag going missing, like the sheriff letting Noyes go, like the postcard, like the coincidental arrival of the FBI agents—there's no place for them in that simple narrative.

Red and blue lights flood the roadhouse's parking lot. "It was self-defense," she says, "Malcolm had already murdered four people. You'd have been number five if you hadn't shot him. That's what you tell them. That's what happened."

There's a note of pride in her voice as she leads him away from the booth, pride mixed with sorrow, and he doesn't know

why it's there.

Ritter's last words echo one more time in his head. *You dumb fuck.*

Passing the Torch

By Adam Scott Glancy

HE WAS ON FIRE AGAIN. WILLIAM RAYMOND WEEKS SHRUGGED off his jacket and tossed the flaming garment aside. He managed to keep a hold on the Saiga shotgun during his fiery contortions. In the back of his head a voice was screaming that the magazines he was carrying were going to cook off in their ammo pouches. The voice screamed to drop them before he went off like a grenade. Another voice screamed that there was no way he was dropping his weapon and ammo before he was ten miles away from this inferno. Smoke, hot enough to roast his lungs, filled the hallway. Flames were flicking out from between the wood boards in the ceiling, making it impossible to stand without scalding the tops of their heads. Behind him, Avery Mitchell, crouched low and holding a Colt Commando rifle with a fifty-round drum, pushed him forward. Every step caused the shells in the drum to rattle like a can of marbles. “Keep going!” Mitchell choked and spat. “Don’t stop!”

It was only then that Weeks realized that they’d lost the third member of the team, Sam Park. Behind them was only the inferno. It was just the two of them now.

The door at the end of the corridor was wreathed in flame. Weeks and Mitchell hurled themselves forward, howling like mad dogs. The lock and hinges exploded as they threw their shoulders into the door. Weeks and Mitchell stumbled into the room, clothes smoking, their faces red with blisters. The seven men beyond the door turned in unison, like a line of Vegas

showgirls, their sickly sallow faces locked in an expression somewhere between anger and astonishment. The fusillade of gunfire wiped the expressions off their faces and sent them scrambling. Weeks and Mitchell screamed with mad joy as the men in yellow saffron robes erupted with dozens of miraculous stigmata, their spasmodic flailing lit with the strobe of muzzle flashes. The pale scarecrows fell and stumbled as their bones and sinews were hacked into rags, lifeless hands spilling books and bundles of papers onto the carpet. One spun away with a load of buckshot splashed across his shoulders and fell into the far wall—not against the wall, into the wall—and vanished like a drop of rain on the surface of a lake. Weeks' next shot punched a fist-sized hole in the plaster.

The empty casings were still skipping across the floor as Weeks charged the far wall, navigating the tangled maze of limbs, blood and settling papers. He threw his shoulder into the wall. The plaster crunched and spilled dust across his blistered face, but the wood studs beneath did not budge. "Fuck!" he screamed. Weeks took two steps back and emptied his last two rounds into the wall. Plaster leapt into a cloud of white particles, swirling in the heat. There was nothing beyond the wall but another burning room. "Avery!" he screamed. "He went—he fucking went through!"

"Bill!" Mitchell was kneeling over the sprawled bloodied form of one of the robed men. "C'mon! Help me find one that's alive! C'mon man! We've gotta find Rebecca."

Mitchell turned another one over and then jumped back as the man's spilled intestine struck at him like a snake. The thick

bloody rope rose from the ruins of the man's abdomen, its striking end ringed with teeth or hooks, searching. Weeks stripped the magazine from the shotgun and struggled to drive the next one into the weapon. Before he could fire, Mitchell shot the thing's squealing head off with the rifle.

"No!" The wail of anguish came from a face-down figure, "No! Don't! Don't kill her children!"

Weeks grabbed the figure and rolled him over. A neat line of bloody holes ran across his chest. Bright red blood bubbled from his nose and mouth. "Please," the man gurgled wetly around a mouthful of gray and broken teeth. "Please don't kill her children."

Avery shoved Weeks aside and savagely shook the dying man. "Where is she? Where's Rebecca, you sonofabitch?"

The dying man's head lolled drunkenly. A vague smile drifted across his lips. He coughed blood over Mitchell's hands. "She's in the pool—"

"Where!" Mitchell screamed.

The dying man weakly rolled his eyes towards a flight of stairs leading deeper into the basements. "She waits for you—" he hissed. Avery punctuated the man's sentence by dropping him to the floor and shooting him through the face with a three-round burst.

"C'mon, Bill." Mitchell didn't even look to see if Weeks was following. Weeks made no objection to plunging deeper into the burning labyrinth. Maybe his thinking was turning to sludge as the fire devoured the last of the oxygen. Or maybe he'd given up any thought of making it out alive once the Mexi-

can *Federales* had pulled out and left them behind.

The flight of stairs was short, anticlimactically short. Weeks and Mitchell emerged onto the deck of an indoor swimming pool, its marble Romanesque furnishings gone grey with filth and mold. It was a vast echoing space. Tiles from the ceiling dropped like hail as the grout blackened, splashing into the pool just out of their sight. The only light came from the flashlights mounted on their weapons and the fire licking between the exposed timbers in the roof. They appeared to be alone in this cavernous space.

“Rebecca!” Mitchell bellowed. “Rebecca! Answer me!” Bringing their weapons up to their shoulders, they crept forward to the edge of the pool. The water jumped and churned as the smoking tiles plummeted into its inky depths. Their flashlights panned across the angry water as they swept their weapons back and forth. Then something huge and white surged beneath the surface.

“There!” Mitchell barked.

“I see it. I see it,” Weeks hissed as he scanned back and forth for movement.

It exploded to the surface, a bulbous cylinder of surging white flesh, pulsing and distended. Vestigial arms and legs flopped uselessly from its sides. A human head flopped at one end of its body like a pom-pom at the end of a ski cap.

Both men froze, just for a heartbeat, just long enough for it to turn and for that dangling head to look right into their eyes.

“Avery!” it howled.

“No.” The word was a choked whisper in Mitchell’s throat.

“Avery! Please!” the thing wailed. “Please!”

“Jesus!” Weeks choked. “Rebecca?”

“NO! IT’S NOT REBECCA! ITS NOT! KILLIT! KILLIT!
KILLIT!”

The roar of the guns drowned out their screams.

Then it had Weeks by the ankle. His feet came out from under him as he was jerked effortlessly across the bedsheets. He reached for the SIG Sauer pistol on his nightstand, like he’d rehearsed a thousand times before, but it was already beyond his reach. He cracked his elbow against the footboard hard enough to numb his fingers before landing hard on the bedroom floor. His hip took the impact, so he kept his breath, but they were on him fast. The men in his bedroom moved with confidence and coordination. They’d done this sort of thing before. They were very strong and very fast. Weeks managed to kick once before his knee joints were wrenched and a zip tie cinched his ankles together. One elbow made contact with a tactical helmet before both his arms were twisted like taffy and his wrists zip-tied behind his back.

The four high-tech ninjas dumped Weeks back on his bed so hard he lost his balance and rapped his bald scalp against the headboard. He struggled to get into a sitting position and showed his teeth to his captors, breathing far harder than he preferred them to see. Even wearing what looked to be better than forty pounds of tactical gear and weapons, and covered in black from their balaclava-covered heads to their shooters’ gloves, his captors didn’t look like they’d raised their heartbeats above a lazy stroll.

Weeks looked around his bedroom. There wasn't an open window or a det-cord created hole in the outer wall. In fact the only thing that looked mussed up were his sweaty bedsheets. However, if they were in his cabin that could mean only one thing.

"Just so you assholes know, anything you did to my dogs, I'm going to do to you."

"You're dogs are fine, grandpa," laughed one of the figures. "We didn't touch a hair on their heads, OK?"

"How'd you get past them?"

"Can't talk to a civilian about that," said the spokesman. "But tell you what? How about we show you instead?" With a nod from the chatty ninja two of his companions lifted Weeks up under his armpits while the third, bringing up the rear, hefted his bound ankles. As they dragged Weeks out of his bedroom and into his cabin's den, he could hear Mr. Chatty key his throat mike. "Target secured. We are extracting, over."

The three men hauling Weeks out into the den took a turn straight towards the stone fireplace that dominated the rustic, high-ceilinged room. Walking fast with no sign of slowing, Weeks suddenly realized they were going to ram him face-first into the rough stones, smashing his face to bloody pulp. "What th' fuck—" He instinctively turned his face from the impact, but it never came. What did was infinitely worse.

He'd felt it once before. Knew the sensation immediately. It was nothing so much as like being poured down a drain filled with icewater. Perception of one's self and one's place was brutally pulled and distorted and then snapped back together.

Weeks screamed high and piercing, whatever shreds of dignity gone with the shock of sliding into and out of a space where our three perceivable dimensions only make up part of the spectrum. He pissed himself.

“Everyone OK?” called the spokesninja. His team sounded off in the affirmative. “How about you, grandpa? Oh shit! No, you are not OK. Quick, get a corpsman in here!”

“You fuckin’ pukes!” Weeks choked, struggling not to punctuate his sentence by actually vomiting. “I’m fucking fine. Just put me down!”

“Just pissed yourself like a toddler, Billy. That is most definitely not fine,” said a new voice. A woman’s voice. No, not new. A familiar voice. Weeks looked up. The spots in front of his eyes were clearing. He and his four captors were in a cavernous warehouse. Cargo containers in dull military shades were stacked to the ceiling. A flock of fluorescent lights hovered overhead, diffusing everyone’s shadows to less than ghosts. Behind him squatted a hexagonal column, cut from dark stone, about five feet tall and thick as a telephone pole. Each of its six facings was etched with curvilinear hieroglyphs. The basalt non-Euclidian artifact was balanced clumsily atop the twin forks of a forklift. In front of him was a card table with a simple folding chair in front. Behind the table sat the woman he had known ten years ago as Agent Gillian.

She looked older. A decade will do that, but Agent Gillian looked older than that. Her brown hair had gone absolutely steel grey. She wore glasses. That was new too, but she still cut a trim and measured figure. “Put him in the chair, gentlemen.

Gently, if you don't mind."

The muscle planted Weeks and his soggy boxers on the folding metal chair directly in front of her, then moved off to one side, all except the spokesninja. He hung around in Weeks' peripheral vision, just off to the right. "You've looked better, Billy," Agent Gillian said. "You really have."

"You've looked worse. How's the G.S.W.?" he asked. "Any residual effects?" The question didn't cause her to flinch, but Weeks could see that she was favoring her left asscheek over her right. The scar couldn't have been terribly comfortable to sit on.

"It's not a problem, no thanks to Agent Garrett."

"You're still here, aren't you?"

"Garrett did a shit job digging that slug out of me. We all did a shit job back then. Operating under Moscow Rules? Here? In America? That was crazy, Billy."

"I got you out. I got Nolan out. We finished the job."

"New Orleans made you a star, Billy, that's for sure."

Agent Gillian leaned forward, planting her elbows on the table, fingers laced together. "There was a time when just about everyone in Delta Green could say they'd worked with the legendary Agent Graham down in the Big Easy. And you did finish the job. No doubt about that. Every last DeMonte is dead and burned to ash thanks to you."

"And yet somehow I never got a place on the Wal-Mart Wall of Heroes," Weeks said. "Why am I here?"

"Delta Green needs your help again, Billy."

"Call yourselves whatever you want, you're not Delta Green."

“Yes, we are.”

“No, you’re not. You know how I can tell you’re not Delta Green? That stunt with the gate!” he yelled, pointing back at the stone column. “You couldn’t just take me out the front door? No! You just had to show off your new toy, didn’t you? Do you even have the first idea of what moving like that can do to a person? Or what the long-term effects are?”

“Back in the 19th century people thought that the human body couldn’t withstand the stresses of travelling faster than fifty miles an hours.”

Weeks clamped his mouth shut so hard he could feel his teeth pushing deeper into his jaw. Agent Gillian blinked, but she never looked away. “We need your help,” she said.

“I don’t work for you. I don’t even work for the FBI anymore. I’m retired. I’m retired from everything.”

“How many times did you tell me there’s no gold watch, Billy? You’re in until you’re a liability. Did you become a liability? Did A-Cell put you out to pasture?”

Weeks said nothing.

“We’re tracking down a former colleague,” the tac-suited spokesninja said. “Someone you used to work with closely.” The expression on Agent Gillian’s face told Weeks that this was not part of the previously discussed debriefing script. “We know you still have contact with the Cowboys, so you need stop wasting our time.” The spokesninja had pulled off his balaclava. With his throat mike and ear jack he cut quite the dashing figure.

“I’m wasting your time?” Weeks snarled. “There are pro-

protocols in place for cooperation, liaison, and joint operations between our groups. If you're jerking me out of bed in the middle of the night, then I can be positive whatever this is hasn't been vetted by A-Cell."

"Jesus, Billy," Agent Gillian said sadly. "There are no protocols for cooperation between our groups, because you don't have a group. There's only one group. Just us. Just Delta Green."

"You're not Delta Green. We are."

"What you are," snapped the spokesninja, "is a bunch of fossilized adolescents who wouldn't climb down out of your tree fort and join the grownups. You gave up your right to have any say in the mission when you refused to come in."

Weeks turned to look the spokesninja over. The man was half his age and hardened by places like Fort Bragg, Fort Benning and Kandahar Province. The spokesninja could kill Weeks a dozen different ways, even if his hands and ankles weren't zip-tied. He could probably kill Weeks even if their positions were reversed.

"So, you've seen some shit, huh?"

The spokesninja straightened. "I've seen enough to know what the stakes are."

"Really?" Weeks said. "Like what? Seen the dead walk? Seen monsters wear masks made out of human skin? Seen them talk with the voice of their last meal? Seen the Yellow Sign?"

"Bill!" Agent Gillian slammed her hand down on the table. "That's enough. You know better than that."

"I suppose I do," he said. "So what is it that I'm not going

to help you with?”

“We’re looking for Grendel.”

Avery Mitchell, Delta Green code name: Grendel. It was not lost on Weeks that he’d been dreaming of the last time he’d seen Grendel just when the goons jerked him out of bed. “Good luck with that.”

“Have you had any contact with Grendel?”

“Not for a while. Why do you want him?”

“Grendel’s gone AWOL.”

“So? Grendel’s been AWOL since the turn of the century. He hasn’t had much to say to A-Cell since they demoted him to Friendly back in 2002.”

“He’s stolen some important technology. It’s not the sort of stuff you’d want to see proliferate.”

“Like what?”

“Like the technology that brought you here,” Agent Gillian said gravely. “You really didn’t think I’d have you folded through space just to show off, did you? You need to know how important this is.”

“You— He stole that. From you?”

“Yes.”

“That does beg the question,” said Weeks, “who’d you get it from?”

“That’s not really pertinent to the situation before us,” Agent Gillian said. “We just need to find him and fast. You knew him. You worked with him. He was your cell leader before he got demoted. There were even rumors that you worked with him off the books. In Mexico.”

“That’s a lie,” Weeks lied. “I never attended a Night at the Opera that wasn’t booked through A-Cell. Hell, I’m not even sure Grendel would have worked with me after what happened in South Carolina. You know about that?”

“We knew it cost him his status as a Friendly. We knew he resented A-Cell for that.”

“Did you? And what? You figured that was your way in? He hates A-Cell so he’s vulnerable to a recruiting pass? Didn’t work out so hot, did it?” Agent Gillian’s face betrayed nothing at Weeks’ accusation, but Mr. Spokesninja looked genuinely alarmed to hear their dirty laundry being so accurately discussed by an outsider.

“Yeah, let me guess,” Weeks continued. “You recruited him and he played you. That’s how he stole this, Jesus, what did you call it? Technology? Nice work.”

“The situation before us is that he’s in possession of dangerous materials that cannot be allowed to proliferate.”

“Get these zip ties off me first.”

Agent Gillian gave a nod to the spokesninja, who produced a slim Gerber commando knife and quickly cut off the zip ties from Week’s wrists and ankles. The motions were so quick that Weeks presumed that they were supposed to make him nervous, having all that razor-sharp surgical steel flashing past his veins. Weeks hoped he didn’t show any fear. When they wanted to cut him, he’d be cut. And not one second earlier.

Weeks rubbed the divots the zip ties had pressed into his wrists. “No chance he was snatched?”

“None. He packed a bag, but didn’t take his car.”

“Have his credit cards turned up?” Weeks asked.

“Looks like he left them and his cell phone for some homeless guy to find. We lost a couple hours on that. What do you know about his access to cash? Did he have an emergency fund squirreled away?”

“Grendel had everyone in G-Cell keep a bug-out bag ready to go. Something pre-loaded with cash, weapons, burners, and a new identity. Presuming he took his own advice, he could stay below your radar indefinitely. Are you looking for him openly?”

“Not yet. It’s been suggested that we could bad-jacket him with a kiddie porn charge. If he’s still in the country we could Amber Alert him in no time.”

Weeks frowned. “Grendel must have humiliated you pretty badly if you’re going to paint him as a chickenhawk just to locate him.”

“We need every eye looking for him, Billy. We can make the evidence disappear later. What matters right now is finding him fast.”

Weeks could feel the flesh on the back of his skull tightening like a knot. “Does this have anything to do with the Children?”

“What do you think?”

“I think Avery Mitchell would need to be dead before he gave up on tracking down the Children of the Worm.”

“So do we,” Agent Gillian said. “So you knew his real name?”

“Yeah. Speaking of which I guess I can’t call you Agent

Gillian any more. I mean, you didn't take your code name with you when you sold out, did you? What do they call you over at the Special Access Program?"

"I retain my rank with I.C.E., so Senior Special Agent Morrison will do," said Not Agent Gillian.

"You get married?"

"Divorced," said Morrison. "Maiden name."

"Ah. Welcome to the club."

"Are you going to help or are you going to keep wasting our fucking time with this memory-lane bullshit," the spokesninja said.

"What do you call this guy?" Weeks asked Morrison.

"You can call him Chief Petty Officer Clifton."

Weeks stood up. Clifton shifted his weight on the balls of his feet just in case Weeks was stupid enough to throw a punch or do some other tough-guy nonsense. "C.P.O. Clifton, despite your bad-cop routine, I am going to help you. And my first bit of advice is that you guys put me back where you found me and forget about Mitchell or Grendel or whatever you're calling him now. Grendel is on a mission. His mission. He is never going to quit until it destroys him."

"What happens if he manages to find the Children of the Worm and takes them out first?" asked Clifton.

"Grendel doesn't care about his future. He only cares about victory."

"So he's a Kamikaze?" asked Clifton.

"Worse. He's Ahab. Kamikazes work alone. Mitchell may have a team of equally disgruntled folks with him on this. He's

very persuasive. I should know. He talked me into going on a suicide run with him two years ago in Mexico.”

No one commented on the earlier lie.

“How did it go?” asked Morrison.

“In Mexico, Avery got what he wanted in South Carolina but failed to get: a heavily armed tactical response. No knock. No fair warnings. Mexican *Federales* just went in guns blazing. Most of the Children still got away. We lost two of our own and a bushel of *Federales*. Needless to say, the *Federales* were pissed. Avery and I split up to make it back to the border.”

“What was the time and date of that last contact?” Morrison asked, her fingers floating across the touch screen of her iPad.

“That’s another way I can tell you’re not Delta Green,” said Weeks.

“Because we have a budget and you don’t,” sneered Clifton.

“No,” Morrison said without looking up. “Because I’m recording this in a digital medium. Things are different now, Billy. Now that we’re back on Uncle Sam’s dime there are stakeholders to answer to. What was the time and date of that contact?”

“January 27th, 2012.”

“And you haven’t heard from Grendel since?”

“Nope. Ever met ’em?” asked Weeks.

“Yes. As you say, I recruited Grendel.”

“No, I meant your stakeholders.”

Morrison ignored the question. “What’s it going to cost us for some more of your not helping?”

“Unless you’re going to let me go home, you can start by letting me get a shower and a change of clothes.”

“That’s fine. Clifton, go see what’s available on base.”

“And you’re going to have to show me how this new technology of yours works,” Weeks said.

“That’s never going to happen,” Morrison said.

“You opened a dimensional doorway in my fireplace. Henceforth my home security is permafucked. Until you show me how to lock that door and throw away the key, we’ve got nothing to talk about.”

“Our mission objective here is non-proliferation. Telling you how to operate this technology strikes me as counter to my mission objectives,” Morrison scoffed. “You get that, right?”

“Then buy the damn house,” said Weeks. “Market value plus twenty-five percent. Cash.”

Morrison smiled wryly. “Sure. That’s doable.”

THIRTY MINUTES LATER WEEKS WAS SHOWERED AND DRESSED in sweats with the word “Air Force” in muted tones across the chest and up the legs. The track shoes fit well enough but he felt decidedly less cool than the tactical ninjas who’d stood around watching him shower and change. When he was done they escorted him to an office in a command trailer parked next to the warehouse he’d arrived in. The stars overhead told him he was in the Tropic of Cancer. The heat and humidity suggested the American southeast. The sound of jets and the glow of city lights from the northwest and southwest suggested MacDill Air Force Base, just south of Tampa. That sucked. The place was

surrounded on three sides by water, which made ditching his hosts even less likely than before.

In the air-conditioned trailer Morrison and Clifton were waiting. Morrison sat behind a desk. Clifton paced. Weeks knew from experience that all that body armor and gear made sitting uncomfortable.

“Better?” asked Morrison.

“Do you know about Grendel’s place up in the Panhandle? Near Eglin?” asked Weeks as he took a seat across from her. The trailer was filled with communications equipment and computer workstations. One wall had a flat-screen monitor showing real-time footage of the various elements of the search for Avery Mitchell. Sure enough, there was a big red dot on top of Grendel’s place, just north of DeFuniak Springs, Florida.

“We’re not irredeemably stupid, Billy.”

Weeks let the opportunity to say something sarcastic pass. There would be others. “What did you find?”

“Not much, but they logged what they’ve found so far.” Morrison punched up the inventory on her tablet and passed it to him. It didn’t take long to see what wasn’t there.

“I need to get to Grendel’s place in Florida.”

“We’ve already got people there.”

“I need to see the place,” Weeks said tapping the tablet. “I need to walk around in it. I’ve never been up there but I want to get a feel for his headspace.”

“Are you expecting to find something up there?” asked Morrison.

“I don’t know. He may have left something detailing his

intentions. A journal, a confession or something?”

“Or a suicide note,” Clifton suggested.

“Yeah,” said Weeks unhappily. “That too. But sitting here with me is a waste of time. I need to be up there in that house if I’m going to be of any help.”

It was a short flight to Eglin Air Force base. When they arrived a pair of utterly predictable black SUVs were waiting to whisk the seven of them away. Weeks, in his dorky sweats, stood out among the trim suits and tactical gear. An hour later they arrived at the home of retired DEA Special Agent Avery Mitchell: a bungalow, deep in unincorporated Walton County, isolated on acres of twisting oaks draped in Spanish moss. The sun was just coming up.

AFTER MORRISON’ PRELIMINARIES WITH THE SEARCH TEAM leader, Weeks stepped into the bungalow. Avery Mitchell had described it to him but never allowed him to visit. A swarm of agents were checking the contents of the house against lists. Others in work clothes were tearing out the drywall. The bungalow was too small, too dark, and there was more bric-a-brac from the Children of the Worm than Mitchell’s own possessions. It looked more like one of the Children’s nests than anything else. The search team hadn’t turned up any narcotics. That at least suggested Mitchell hadn’t been made a host for one of the worms.

The team leader was a lanky middle-aged FBI agent with a crew cut and black-framed glasses, named Rauch. Weeks figured he was ex-Pentagon. “We’ve been through the place from

top to bottom. So far we're coming up dry."

"Which way to the bathroom?" Weeks said without affect.

"We've already checked the toilet tank," Rauch snapped impatiently.

"Which way?"

"Through there," Rauch said with a gesture.

Weeks spent a whole three seconds in the bathroom before emerging. "Morrison, could you come in here?" Morrison shouldered her way past Rauch and came to the bathroom.

"Got anything I can use to mark glass?"

Morrison dug in a pocket and produced a lipstick of an appropriately professional and muted hue.

"Thanks." Weeks went to the bathroom window and looked out again. When he found what he wanted he marked the glass with the lipstick and stood aside. "Now, stand where I was and look through there. See that tree I marked with the lipstick? Get me a radio and talk me over to it."

Morrison bent to the window and checked the stripe of lipstick against the tree-line at the edge of the property. "What's the tree mark?"

"When Mitchell was the leader of G-Cell, he told me that if he ever went off the reservation he'd leave a note near the oak with the Y-trunk that I could see from his bathroom window.

"Near?"

"Near.

"How near, Billy?" Morrison said, taking her lipstick back. Weeks just folded his arms and leaned against the doorframe. Pulling out her radio, she called to Clifton. "Take two men and

give a radio to Mr. Weeks. I'm going to talk you over to a stash near the tree line. If Mr. Weeks does anything to make you nervous, shoot his feet off."

"With pleasure!" the radio answered.

"Okay, Billy, go fetch."

Weeks walked out past the puttering search team and into the back yard. Clifton tossed him a radio and fell in behind him with two other ninjas.

"Where are we going?" Clifton called after him.

Weeks walked straight to the tree line. He held the radio to his ear. "Is it this one?" he asked placing his hand on fat oak.

"No, you need to move to my left."

Weeks repositioned himself and walked around to the back of the tree. There was a knot-hole. "Gimme a light," he grunted at Clifton. The commando handed Weeks a small flashlight. Inside the knothole was a composition book sealed in a ziplock freezer baggie. He looked around for any sign of a booby-trap—the glint of monofilament, any sign of a motion sensor. Could there be a pressure-sensitive trigger?

"There's a notebook in a baggie in there," Weeks said to Clifton, ever mindful that he wanted to keep his feet. "I don't see a booby-trap. I'd like your permission to pull it out."

"Fuck that," said Clifton. "Stone, you check the hole, retrieve the notebook."

The only thing that shone from under the balaclava were Stone's eyes, and those didn't look too thrilled at the order. Nevertheless, Stone pulled out his own flashlight and checked the knothole.

“This Mitchell guy, he ever booby-trap his caches that you’re aware of?” Stone asked as he shone the light around inside.

“No, but there’s always a first time,” Weeks said.

After about thirty seconds of careful examination, Stone took a breath and gingerly removed the ziplock baggie with the composition book. Nothing happened.

Stone popped the composition book out of the baggie and immediately flipped it open. After just a couple of seconds of reading he looked up at Weeks and held the book out to him. “Looks like it’s for ‘Agent Graham.’”

“It’s for the team leader,” Clifton said, snatching the book out of Stone’s hand. “Back to the house.”

Apart from the words “For Agent Graham” at the top of the first page, strings of numbers filled three pages of the composition book. The rest of the pages were more of those same curvilinear hieroglyphs found on the black stone back in the warehouse at MacDill AFB. Morrison used her tablet to snap a pic of the pages filled with numbers, then forwarded them via encrypted satellite uplink to Fort Meade, along with a list of the books found in Grendel’s house. She used her clearance to jump the decryption queue at the NSA, and within five minutes of hitting send the algorithms had unraveled Grendel’s book code. For the next few minutes she sat at the kitchen table reading the translation off her tablet. Weeks sat in the next room on one of Avery Mitchell’s unkempt couches saying nothing. Clifton orbited slowly between the two of them. Finally, Morrison closed her tablet and looked up. She found the rest of the search team

standing around the kitchen, in uncomfortable silence, watching her read.

“What is it?” Rauch asked.

Morrison held the composition book in both hands as if she were judging its weight. “It’s Grendel’s itinerary. He’s going back to South Carolina, back to the Devereux Mansion. He’s going to finish this.”

“Finish what?” Rauch asked.

Morrison didn’t let her frustration show. She got up and shouldered her way past the other agents into the den. She stood over Weeks and threw the composition book into his lap. “Grendel says he’s really sorry about the way things turned out in Mexico. He understands why you don’t want to work with him any more, but he really needed you on this. He plans to use the technology he stole to open the gate in the basement of the Devereux Mansion. If he doesn’t come back, he wants you to take the formulae in this book back to A-Cell and get them to open the gate themselves and get some payback.”

Weeks said nothing.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell us you’d already seen him?”

“I never saw him. He contacted me yesterday around 2 p.m. through a dead drop, gave me a number to call. He said he’d found a way to get to the Children of the Worm. I told him I wasn’t going to have another disaster like Sinaloa. I wasn’t in unless we brought A-Cell into the loop too. He hung up. I called back but the number read as disconnected. End of story.”

“You could have told me all this back at MacDill.”

“I didn’t tell Delta Green. Why the fuck would I tell you posers?”

“A-Cell doesn’t know a thing about this?”

“No.”

“You didn’t go with him? You didn’t tell A-Cell? And you’ve been fucking me around all morning?” Morrison’s voice tightened like a knot. “You really can’t pick a side, can you, Billy?”

“I know where my loyalty lies,” Weeks said as he handed the composition book back to her.

“Do you?” Morrison said snatching it back. “You want in, but you don’t want in. You think A-Cell is useless, Grendel’s a lunatic, and we’re sell-outs. So whose side are you on? Who exactly are you loyal to?”

“I’m loyal to the mission.”

“The mission?” said Morrison. “And what exactly is this mission? From where I’m sitting your only mission is to have any goddamn mission at all. As soon as Avery hung up you regretted not saying yes, didn’t you! And that’s the problem with the mission, isn’t it? You always think you’ve got one more left in you. One more chance to do it flawlessly and make up for all the others that went completely FUBAR. But you lost that chance when he hung up on you. So what next? Some pacing? Some bourbon? Couldn’t quite bring yourself to call A-Cell or us, so you decided to sleep on it. But then we showed up, didn’t we? And from that point on you’ve been trying to keep yourself involved. Giving up just enough intel to stay relevant, but not enough to be discarded.”

Weeks said nothing. Morrison pressed on.

“You wanted to feel like Delta Green again. One last Night at the Opera.”

“You don’t paint a very flattering picture of me,” Weeks said. Every eye in the house was on him. Their expressions ranged from disgust to pity, as if he’d wet himself again. “So if you know where Grendel is off to, why are we still talking?”

“Because we need him alive. We need to know if he stashed any more of these around,” she said, holding up the composition book. “I need to be sure we’ve contained this breach and I can’t do that if he forces us to kill him. The way I figure it, there’s an outside shot he might surrender if you approach him. So if you really want to feel like Delta Green again, how about you help talk Grendel down before he gets himself killed.”

Weeks didn’t hesitate. “I’m in.”

TWO HOURS LATER, MORRISON HAD RAUCH, CLIFTON AND both their teams in the overstuffed cargo hold of an Air Force C-135 bound for Saudi Arabia. There would be a refueling stop at Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, before the hop to Riyadh. Not a long stop, just enough time for the fifteen of them to disembark and catch a chopper to Fort Jackson. Weeks didn’t have to wear handcuffs, but he never went anywhere without two of Clifton’s men close at hand. During the first flight Morrison briefed Rauch’s team on the change of deployment. This mission was now the location and apprehension of a dangerous target. They paid attention. Weeks didn’t have much to add, didn’t hear much room for improvement. Going into a rural county, to an isolated ruin at the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains, to try and talk a rogue agent back into the fold was going to be just as dangerous as it sounded.

Morrison put a call in to the Oconee County Sheriff's Office to get a deputy to cruise by the charred remains of the Devereux Mansion before her plane was wheels-up at Eglin Air Force Base. In mid-flight the deputy reported that someone had cut the padlock off the front gate of the Devereux place. A rusty, dented Ford F250 pickup was parked on the property. The property itself had been interfered with, but there was no sign of anyone in the area now. Morrison told him to stay on site, keep his hands off the truck, and wait for their arrival.

They tore out of Fort Jackson like they were rolling on Route Irish. Four big army Humvees with a Browning .50-cal machine gun in every ringmount, over-watch provided by an Apache Longbow AH-64D attack chopper flying high. Peering out the windows into the noon-day sun, Weeks couldn't see the Apache. He supposed that was the point. "What's it armed with?"

Morrison looked to Clifton for the answer to that question. "It's a mixed package of ordnance. Some Hellfires, some Hydras, a 30-mm chaingun."

"You're gonna drop that hammer on South Carolina?"

"We've got the clearance and we've got the cover stories," Clifton said smugly. "This isn't the Delta Green you cut your teeth on. Things have changed."

Weeks kept quiet. There were about ten different Nights at the Opera when he'd wished he could call down death from the skies. And one where he dearly wished he hadn't. Weeks would have appreciated having a dedicated disinformation team to call on that night.

Morrison drove the lead SUV, with Clifton riding shotgun besides her. Weeks hadn't been introduced to the ninja sitting next to him. Somewhere behind them the ninja Clifton had called Stone was in one of the other vehicles with two other members of the heavy mob. Rauch and his mixed bag of agents brought up the rear in the last two vehicles. They checked in with the Oconee County deputy when they were less than a mile away. No trouble. No activity. Morrison barked out their ETA and signed off.

"The best part about Delta Green today isn't the firepower, Billy," Morrison said over her shoulder. "It's being able to work with local law enforcement without having to go behind their backs. The extra eyes and hands make all the difference."

"So, do you tell them about Carcosa?" Weeks said while watching the woods go by.

"We tell them what they need to know to do the job. They know it's national security so most don't ask too many questions we can't answer. People keep quiet because no one wants to look like a fool. And no one wants to be the snitch who lost the department all that Homeland Security money and DoD surplus. Besides, we do all the heavy lifting."

"I notice you didn't tell Deputy Dog up there that the guy we're looking for is an ex-Marine sniper who's killed more people than your deputy has Facebook friends."

"You really think Grendel would put a hole in a cop?"

"No," said Weeks. "Not an American one. But if Avery had booby-trapped the road approaching the mansion, somebody would have ended up passing Deputy Dog's widow a

folded flag over his closed casket.”

“I’m not unaware of that, Billy,” she said coolly.

As they neared the old wrought-iron gate, Weeks could see the blackened walls of the manse. The roof had collapsed during the fire he and Mitchell set back in 2006. Eight years later all that remained were the stone outer walls and the brick chimneys reaching for the sky. They’d just pulled past the weed-choked, bone-dry fountain in the middle of the gravel cul-de-sac when Weeks saw signs of Mitchell’s excavations in the ruins. One of the outer walls lay spilled across the yard, possibly pulled down to ensure it wouldn’t collapse at an inopportune moment. Then he caught sight of the police cruiser parked behind the ruin, right next to Avery’s F-250.

“I don’t see the deputy,” Weeks said from the rear passenger seat, straining his eyes against the blinding summer daylight. He suddenly felt very exposed with just that narrow ribbon of driveway to get them back to civilization.

“Nope, there he is,” Morrison said as she turned the wheel and pulled the Humvee around the cul-de-sac driveway. She pointed across the overgrown lawn to a spot near the trees. The deputy stood in the shade just at the woodline, one hand on his belt, waving to them.

That’s when a change in the wind blew stink of carrion through the Humvee. No, not carrion. Not the stink of a bloated corpse. This was the smell of an open plague pit.

“Do you smell—” Before Weeks could say another word he was slammed back into his seat. Morrison had floored the accelerator and swung the Humvee madly for the gate. “Shit!”

Clifton barked in surprise.

Both hands on the wheel as she struggled to steer the Humvee back towards the gravel drive, Morrison couldn't key her throat mike: "Clifton! All channels! Break contact! Break contact! It's an ambush!" Clifton repeated her orders into his own throat mike. The drivers accelerated around the gravel cul-de-sac and charged back towards the leaning iron gate. In his peripheral vision Weeks saw a bluish blur as the deputy's body was jerked bonelessly off its feet and disappeared into the woods. Something huge moved in the trees. Its passage stirred the leaves in the tree-tops like a shark's passage disturbing the surface of the sea.

They were barreling towards the exit at nearly forty miles per hour when a pine tree fell across the road just beyond the front gate. As it crashed across the gravel road, the sound of its branches snapping was like a string of firecrackers. That was all the impression of it Weeks got before he was slammed against the back of Clifton's seat. Morrison braked hard and reversed away from the gate at full throttle. She swung the wheel left and almost missed the Humvee behind her. She stripped off its driver's side mirror with her passenger side mirror as she reversed past them.

"Ambush! Ambush!" Clifton was screaming into his mike. Then, over his shoulder to the ninja sitting across from Weeks, "Get on the fifty!"

The soldier acted like a soldier and popped up through the ringmount in the roof of the Humvee. He charged the Brown-.50 caliber machine gun like he'd done a thousand times

before. He started swinging the barrel across the landscape.

“No targets!” the gunner bellowed.

And then something the size of an Airstream trailer heaved itself out of the forest. Parts of it coiled and waved like snakes underwater. Shoved onto the end of one of those coiling intestines was the flopping corpse of the Oconee County deputy sheriff. The tip of something flailed like a prehensile tongue from the dead man’s slack jaw. The massive shape charged them on an uneven number of appendages.

Morrison screamed for Clifton to get some fire on that thing. Clifton screamed profanities. The ninja in the ringmount just screamed. Weeks held on for dear life, tried not to scream, but did anyway.

Morrison bounced the Humvee back across the front lawn, all her attention focused on not hanging it up on the remnants of the fountain or the cluttered beds where unbidden grasses choked the life out of anemic rose bushes. Throwing the Humvee into a J-turn to take them out of reverse completely threw her gunner’s burst wild and wide. The gunner on Stone’s Humvee, still reversing, cut loose. His first volley lasted just shy of the burst-timing mantra of “Die, motherfucker, die!” before the thing threw the deputy’s corpse at him. The snaking appendage cracked like a whip, sending the deputy’s corpse pin wheeling directly into the line of fire. Despite limbs being chopped off in mid-air, the ragged torso crashed into the gunner, silencing his weapon and dropping him back down into the Humvee.

The other two Humvees hadn’t opened fire. They broke left and right, trying to veer off from the colossal bulk that was

crossing the yard as sprightly as a deer bounding through the woods. Weeks looked, really looked, at the thing.

It was like a garbage bag full of shit, sloshing atop three somethings that passed for legs. Most of its mass was in the forest of tentacles erupting from the top; the largest were twenty-five feet long and as thick as telephone poles. Wet pink orifices, more sexual than oral, spasmed on its tumorous surface and bellowed liquidly. It was perfectly illuminated by the mid-day sun. There was nothing to doubt. Nothing to misapprehend. It was a nightmare. Simply a nightmare.

It turned its body like a dancer performing a barrel roll, spinning on three legs and swinging its crop of tentacles in a huge arc to build momentum. It spun towards the Humvee that broke right, then heaved its tentacles up, over and down like a medieval flail. The slithering mass of flesh came down atop the Humvee's crew compartment. The rear doors blew off their hinges under the impact, the rear bumper driven into the dirt. When the front wheels crashed back to the earth the stricken vehicle blundered blindly away like a dog with a broken spine, crashing into the treeline a few seconds later.

Bracketed by the dense treeline, a fallen trunk blocking their only exit, there were few options but to orbit the mansion and stay out of the thing's reach. No one was thinking. Just reacting. The only thing with a plan had no eyes and too many mouths.

"Cobra 1-1! Cobra 1-1!" Clifton screamed into his mike, "Engage! Engage! We need fire on that thing right now! Danger close? Fuck danger close! Light it up! Do it now! Now! Now!"

Thirty-millimeter rounds exploded around the thing almost immediately. The shrapnel tore its hide open in a dozen places and something thick and black like bloody stool erupted from within. The thing swung its undulating crown of tentacles over its center of mass and threw itself into a tuck and roll. It tumbled out of the clearing, into the treeline, and vanished.

“Cobra 1-1! Maintain fire! Maintain fire! What? Lost it? What? Fuck.” Turning to Morrison Clifton’s voice almost dropped to inaudible tones. “Cobra 1-1 says it doesn’t show up on the thermals. It’s got no heat signature.”

Morrison struggled to cue her mike while violently twisting the steering wheel. “Never mind precision! Keep it back in the trees with the Hydras, then get down here and clear that bottleneck with the Hellfires! We need a way out!”

“Cobra 1-1. You are cleared to engage. Best guess with the Hydras, just keep it in the woodline!” Clifton bellowed. “Everyone else get on our six and stay close!” Morrison steered the Humvee to put the mansions teetering walls between them and the anticipated impact zone.

The Hydras rained down in the forest. Slow enough to see, fast enough to be nothing but blurred stars. Weeks had never seen this kind of firepower rolled out on a Delta Green operation before. He’d never seen anything like it in his life. Deep, ear-splitting cracks, slightly muted by the trees, sounded in the forest. Black dirt, smoke and fragments of wood from disintegrating old-growth forest leapt skyward with every detonation. The concussions shook loose everything that had been precariously balancing in those branches, leaving the forest a swirling

blizzard of green motion.

“Stone, get on your fifty and keep the treeline suppressed. Rauch, you’re with us to pull out the casualties. Cobra 1-1, be ready with that chain gun.” As soon as Morrison said it, Weeks could feel his insides liquefy. Attempting to recover anyone left alive in the smashed Humvee was the sort of thing he’d have ordered in Morrison’s place. He’d even done the same in the past. But this wasn’t his mission. He wasn’t in charge. The lack of responsibility left his instincts focused on self-preservation. All he wanted was to run for his life.

Stone’s Humvee pulled around the mansion to get a firing solution on the treeline. The ringmounted .50 caliber machine gun opened up, banging away blindly with short, three-round bursts. The terrifying big fifties were just the sort of things that would keep the average Jihadi’s dick in the dirt. Suppressing fire, they called it. Fuck only knew if it would have any effect on the thing that had exploded out of the forest.

Morrison stopped their Humvee just a few yards shy of the wrecked vehicle, Rauch coming in close behind. Two plainclothes agents from Rauch’s team were already out of the wreck. Both struggled clumsily to hold on to their carbines and pull a limp third agent from the rear passenger compartment. They were covered in blood. Weeks popped his door and was moving to help when the fifties atop Morrison’s and Rauch’s Humvees opened up. That close, the report of the fifties felt like being punched in the head by a boxing glove on the end of a jackhammer. As soon as the weapon spoke, Weeks leapt back towards his vehicle. If the gunner had a target, Morrison was

going to hit the accelerator and leave Weeks standing by the treeline with his dick in his hand. A panicked look around revealed nothing the size of a house rearing back to slam Week's skull down through his pelvis. The jackhammers were just more suppressing fire, less tactical than nervous.

Weeks scurried to catch up with Clifton, who hadn't broken his stride when the fifties roared. He waved Weeks toward the driver's side of the Humvee while Clifton went to help the bloody plainclothes agents with their companion. Even before Weeks got a look inside the wreck, he could smell the blood. The roof had collapsed so violently onto the agent in the backseat that it had folded her up like gut-filled accordion. The roll cage hadn't helped at all and the only thing the agent's Kevlar vest seemed to have accomplished was to direct her intestines into her pants rather than letting them burst out of her shirt. There was nothing to do.

Weeks moved to help Clifton and the other agents but they had it in hand, insofar as they were blocking his ability to get back into the Humvee. Clifton and one agent were pushing the injured man into the vehicle while the second pulled the limp man through from the other side. The limp agent was soaked in blood. Weeks didn't much care for making space for a corpse.

"Is he alive?" Weeks shouted.

The agent helping Clifton had pinkish brain matter stuck in his hair. "Yes! Yes!" he shouted. "The blood's...it's...not his." The agent's face was pale, his cheeks pink. Whatever his previous experience, today he had well and truly seen the elephant. He did not want to see it any more.

Then Weeks heard the rising roar of the approaching Apache. It passed over the collapsed mansion at tree-top level, its rotors sweeping all the dry earth and grass into a stinging whirlwind. It just kept coming closer and closer to the ground. Weeks wondered what the pilot could possibly be doing. Landing? The chopper only had two seats and there seemed no way anyone could cling to the outside of the fuselage for an evacuation.

“Get down!” Clifton shouted. Weeks complied, covered his head with both hands, and nothing happened. The noise of the rotors got louder and louder and the firing from the fifties intensified. Weeks snuck a peek and saw that the helicopter was less than ten feet off the ground, hovering just in front of the ruined mansion. The Apache’s gunner fired a Hellfire. The missile shot across the yard, low enough that it looked like people would have to jump out of its way, and struck the fallen tree blocking the drive. The explosion was deafening, shattering the fallen tree trunk into carbonized splinters. Through the cloud of smoke and dust, Weeks could see that the angle of attack had chopped the road-block in half without cratering the roadway. It was time to fucking go.

“Get in!” Clifton yelled at the agent beside him. Then to the man on the opposite side of the vehicle he shouted “You! Get in Rauch’s Humvee! We haven’t got room—”

The deputy’s police cruiser spun through the air like a matchbox toy hurled to skip across the surface of a pond.

It struck the Apache right behind the engines, just as the engine noise was rising to signal a climb in altitude. Most of

the chopper's blades sheered off with a shriek, flinging broken titanium and graphite shrapnel across the open area in front of the mansion. The impact snapped the tail off the helicopter, spinning it around as it dropped onto the overgrown lawn. As it flopped ungracefully into the yard, the Apache rolled onto its side, driving the remaining blades into the ground. Dirt and more bits of rotor flew in every direction. The police cruiser nosed into the dirt just beyond, bouncing grill over trunk until it rested on its roof. For some reason nothing exploded.

Weeks stared in awe as the fragments of rotor shot lethally past him. He wasn't alone. Everyone froze. Weeks was reacting to messages sent from his brain seconds ago, like a dinosaur. He didn't even start moving when the thing charged out from behind the mansion.

"Get in, old man!" Clifton shouted. Weeks complied, finding himself tangled in the backseat with the struggling panicked agent and his limp companion. Morrison was standing on the accelerator before Weeks got the door closed.

The other two Humvees were already tearing toward the now-cleared front gate. One of them, presumably Rauch's Humvee, had the other blood-soaked agent from the wreck hanging half out of the rear door. He'd have been thrown into the dirt if not for the hands from inside the vehicle struggling to hold him. Weeks fought against being bounced against the wounded man heaped in the back with him. The panicked agent was screaming something about not stopping. Out his window Weeks could see that the thing was bounding across the overgrown yard, throwing up clods of dirt with tombstone-

sized hooves. “It’s coming up on our left!” he screamed. The gunner in the ringmount swung the fifty and held down the trigger. The front gate was just a few car lengths ahead.

“We’re gonna make it!” Morrison laughed hysterically.

They didn’t.

The gelatinous bulk plowed into their Humvee and sent it rolling. Weeks heard the gunner’s spine and ribs collapse as the Humvee rolled over him. On the second rotation centripetal force hurled the dead man out of the ringmount and into the path of the tumbling Humvee. Glass shattered. Everything that wasn’t secured orbited around inside the passenger compartment. The agents in the back seat pummeled Weeks as they bounced off doors, floorboards, ceiling and each other. The Humvee came to rest upside down.

Weeks couldn’t see anything, but the ground shook with the footfalls of a titan. Was it moving away? Somewhere outside the wreck he heard voices. The wounded agent was on top of Weeks, wedging him against the rear passenger door. Pushing against the man did nothing to shift him. Weeks struggled to turn himself and grope blindly for the door latch. He found it and, when it popped, the weight of the wounded man pushed them both out onto the ground. Clifton, pale and sweaty, was right there to pull him to his feet. Morrison stood off to the right, peering over the Humvee’s undercarriage. The panicked plainclothes agent had lost his jacket and was trying to pull his unconscious partner from the wreck. Just a few hundred feet away the thing was charging down the driveway after the two escaping Humvees. Its three-legged gait appeared to have noth-

ing to do with skeletal structure or muscles.

“We’ve got to make a break for the treeline!” Clifton hissed through clenched teeth, as if he were afraid that the thing would hear him and lose interest in chasing the escaping vehicles. Clifton held his M4 carbine without much confidence.

“We can’t!” the panicked agent burbled, his words spilling violently. “We can’t! We need a stretcher for Franklin. We won’t get anywhere carrying him on our backs.”

“Exactly why we have to leave him! If you want to live we’ve got to move now!” Clifton turned to go.

“No! No!” Weeks grabbed Clifton’s webgear to keep him from bolting into the forest. “You saw how that thing came out of the woods. We won’t stand a chance in there with it.”

“Stop talking bullshit,” Clifton snarled, knocking Weeks’ hand away, “and move your ass now!”

“No, Clifton. He’s right,” Morrison said. She locked her eyes onto Clifton’s. She needed him on board for what she was about to suggest. “We’ve got to get to the mansion.”

“What the fuck for?” Clifton said.

“The portal,” she said. “It might be a way out.”

“Can you operate it?” Weeks asked. He tried to speak clearly, but his mouth felt like it was full of spackle.

“Maybe.” Her candor was not encouraging.

“Where the hell would we end up?” Clifton hissed.

“Any place but here,” Morrison said quietly. “Let’s go.”

“What they fuck are you talking about?” the panicked agent gasped on the verge of hyperventilating.

Morrison tried to sound confident. “We’re going to the

mansion, Ward. There's a way off this hill through the mansion. Do you understand?"

Ward didn't look particularly less panicked, but he nodded that he understood.

The thing howled like a chorus of whales, deep and full and shot through with veins of soprano wailing.

"We have to go, now," Morrison ordered. Considering what they were up against she didn't even bother pulling her sidearm. What good would it do? She just grabbed Clifton by his webgear and Ward by his shoulder holster and pulled them out from behind the Humvee wreck. Weeks needed no such encouragement. Nobody said another word about the wounded man they were leaving behind.

Weeks led the way. He ran to the rear of the ruined manse, moving instinctively in a low crouch. Somewhere on the far side of the ruin was the section of collapsed wall that looked like it might have been pulled down with the winch on Avery's F250 truck. There was no way to be sure if that was how Avery got into the basement, or even if he made it inside. Or what the fuck had happened to him. When Weeks got to the rear wall of the mansion, he slowed. The four of them were now out of line of sight with the front gate. The thing shouldn't be able to see them; not that Weeks had spotted anything on it resembling eyes.

Weeks slowed to a fast walk, crouching low as they passed beneath the empty window frames. The boiling hot sun above them felt like a hand pressing down on his head and shoulders. Then they heard the return of the titan, its hooves beating out a

full gallop.

Everyone froze. No one spoke. They could hear the massive cloven feet slamming into the lawn somewhere on the other side of the ruin. Without warning, it stopped. Weeks turned to get a read on Morrison, Clifton and Ward. She raised a hand to signal him hold in place. Clifton looked like he was trying to bite his tongue in half. Ward looked like he was going to throw up.

The behemoth began to run again. Building speed. The impacts shook the ground. Chunks of masonry trembled from the mansion's wall and landed among them. There was a sound of an explosion from deep inside the ruins of the mansion—the sound of timbers collapsing and stone hurtling down onto piles of rubble.

No one had to say 'run.' Everyone picked a direction and ran.

The thing exploded through the rear wall of the Devereux Mansion like a wrecking ball. Two stories of teetering masonry crashed to the earth. The avalanche swallowed Clifton instantly. The weight of the falling wall pulled the back of the mansion down like a wave of falling dominos.

The thing scrambled to keep itself upright atop the shifting fragments of wall beneath its hooves. Masonry dust frosted it, giving its wrinkly surface a desiccated appearance. A wet hole opened, deep and pink and fluttering like the gills of a fish. A sweet feminine voice flowed out. It was a patient voice that just wanted to make itself understood to children like Weeks and Morrison.

“Diane Morrison, you have been found guilty of confusion. Your sentence is inclusion.”

The thing took a couple of bounding steps after her. A tentacle grabbed Morrison and stuffed her, screaming, into a sphincter that spasmed open and shut like the iris on a camera shutter. Then it turned and went after Ward, who was screaming as he ran towards to woods.

Weeks stopped running when he got down behind some cover. He watched the thing go, leaving the stink of corruption like the slime trail of a slug. He looked around. There were no options. He couldn't open the gate in the basement, presuming the thing hadn't caused the rubble to block it. Trying to lose it in the woods would be like jumping in the ocean to get away from a shark. Weeks couldn't process why it had chosen to reverse course and go after Ward instead of him. Was it because he'd been unarmed? The thing now seemed to be squatting at the treeline, better than a hundred yards off, bending what passed for legs rhythmically, its tentacles forming and dissolving geometric patterns above its bloated, sloshing torso. Fuck. It wasn't even chasing Ward.

Weeks' only thought was to find a weapon. Some firearm he could use to blow his brains out before he followed Morrison into the thing's bowels. He didn't remember seeing any teeth. She'd likely suffocate before the digestive fluids killed her. Weeks shook his head and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands to banish the image. He needed a gun and he needed it now. Morrison took her weapon with her, Clifton's was buried with him, and if Ward had any smarts he'd already put his side-

arm in his mouth and blown out the back of his head.

When he stopped rubbing his eyes and blinked, Weeks finally recognized that the cover he was squatting behind was Avery Mitchell's truck.

There was a way out.

If past experience were a predictor, Avery would have no end of firepower stuffed in the truck. Or better yet the truck would be booby-trapped and explode the moment Weeks fucked with it. That bastard Avery owed him. After all his bullshit, dragging Weeks off into poorly-planned shit storms, leaving him a trail of bread crumbs that led here, the bastard owed Weeks a clean death.

The truck bed was covered with a blue, waterproof tarp. Weeks ripped it off. Nothing exploded. The bed of the truck was filled with black plastic rifle cases, a crated M249 Squad Automatic Weapon, a half-dozen steel ammo boxes, and a dark green case bearing the stenciled yellow legend:

M18A1 Claymore Antipersonnel Mines

Weeks' brain skidded to a halt. Another option. Did he have time? Did he remember the arming sequence? No, wait—the carry bandolier for lugging the mine and all its gear had the damn arming and firing instructions printed on it. He could arm it if he had the time. Did he have the time? He climbed into the truck bed and yanked open the case of mines. Inside were three bandoliers each containing a claymore directional mine. His teeth chattered with adrenaline.

Weeks pulled out a bandolier and slipped it over his neck like a bib and let the heavy curved mine lie against his chest. Weeks looked up. The thing hadn't moved, but appeared to be either shitting or puking buckets-full of some pale fluid into the grass. Weeks looked away in case whatever was left of Morrison spilled out.

He looked around. The mine was essentially the biggest, meanest shotgun on the planet. Over a pound of C-4 explosive would send some seven hundred steel balls out in an arc at nearly four thousand feet per second. But the detonation only sent the swarm of shot in one direction. If he placed the mine wrong he could miss the thing completely. And if Weeks was within 50 feet of the mine when it detonated, it wouldn't make any difference whether the side of the mine marked "THIS SIDE TOWARDS ENEMY" was pointed at him or not. A claymore was the sort of thing you set off while squatting in a foxhole a hundred feet away. Nothing like a foxhole presented itself. Weeks knew how this was going to go. He was going to have to arm it with the manual firing device and just fucking wear the armed claymore in the carrying sling around his neck. When it took him he'd fire the detonator. He'd never know if the claymore did its work, but at least he wouldn't feel it.

The thing was still on the opposite side of the field by the overturned Humvee. It looked like it was grinding the unconscious agent they'd tried to rescue under its enormous heel. Then it strode off into the woods, presumably to find Ward.

It was finishing off the wounded. That provided an option. Weeks didn't have to be the bait. Someone else could have that

honor.

Weeks jumped down from the truck bed. Who was left? Ward was on his way out. There might be someone in the chopper wreck? Clifton might be alive under the collapsed wall. Maybe? But how long would it take to find him even if he was alive? Fuck it. At least he could quickly determine whether the chopper crew was alive or dead. He ran for the crash site.

The Apache lay on its side, crumpled like a swatted insect. Weeks ran around to the cockpit. The canopy was open and empty. Fuck! They'd already legged it. Maybe they'd make it clear? Maybe they'd die buying him some time? Weeks ran back to the collapsed rear wall of the mansion.

The masonry dust was still settling over the broken timber and cracked stone. Weeks scanned the field of rubble for any sign of Clifton. When the wall came down he'd been standing between Morrison and Ward. He'd bolted perpendicular to the collapse. Most of the wall came straight down onto the lawn, the second story had swatted Clifton like a fly. Weeks made his best guess and started moving stones. Somewhere in the forest Weeks could hear the pop-pop-pop of someone emptying a pistol as fast as it could fire.

The screaming started about the time Weeks found Clifton's boot. He followed it to a leg, wet with blood from a compound fracture. He rolled more stones aside, bloodying his hands. He was pushing a timber off Clifton's chest when another fusillade of fire erupted from the woods. Can't be Ward. That was an M4. Must be the pilots.

Weeks lifted a timber off Clifton's head. He took off the

Claymore's carrying sling and set it down. Everything he needed to do, step by step, was printed on the inside flap of the sling. He pulled out the M181A mine, the M57 firing device, the detonator, the firing cable, the circuit tester. Aim the mine? Skip that step. Test the firing device? Somewhere in the woods the whales were singing again to the accompaniment of a man shrieking. OK, fuck that. It'll either work or it won't.

Weeks slid the slotted end of the priming adaptor onto the firing wires of the blasting cap. When it was firmly seated he began to screw the primer adaptor into the mine's detonator. He was checking the instructions again when Clifton put his huge SOCOM .45 pistol under Week's chin.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Weeks had no time to lie. Worst-case scenario, Clifton blew his brains out and he didn't end up dissolving and suffocating in the things bowels. "It's finishing off the wounded. I'm booby-trapping you to kill it."

Clifton showed his teeth. Weeks could hear the man's gloves creak as he tightened his grip on the pistol.

"Get me out of here," Clifton said, a tremor in his voice.

"There's no time. Your leg's broken. Possibly more. What do you want to do, chief petty officer?"

Clifton's face twisted into an angry grimace. He looked around, trying to catch up on what had happened since the wall fell on him.

"Anyone left?"

"Just you and me. It got Morrison. Any gunfire you hear is it finishing Ward and the chopper crew. We've got seconds,

maybe a minute before it comes back.”

Clifton looked at the primed claymore mine sitting on his chest. THIS SIDE TOWARDS ENEMY.

“Gimme the firing device.”

“You’re losing a lot of blood, I don’t know how long you can stay—”

Clifton cocked the hammer back on his pistol. “Give it to me. Now.”

“Let me hook it up. It’s not hooked up.” Clifton took his pistol out from under Week’s chin. Weeks found the firing device, removed the dust cover and clipped it to the end of the firing wire. He turned the firing device from SAFE to FIRE and offered it to Clifton. The broken man reached over with his free hand and took the small grey plastic firing device. He was still aiming his pistol at Weeks. All he had to do was squeeze the trigger. Either trigger, really.

“You’re going to have to draw it to you. When it comes for me you can either shoot at it and draw it to you, or you can let it chase me down and kill me first. Up to you.”

“I’ll let you know what I decide,” Clifton wheezed.

Weeks got up. Looked around. Nothing was moving. No more shots or shouts from the woods. Just a low breeze, warm, wet and putrid like the breath from the mouth of a rotting corpse. Weeks was surprised at how similar it smelled.

Weeks turned slowly, running his eyes over the treeline. He almost missed it. When it stood utterly still it blended into the forest almost perfectly, its color and surface texture changing like one of those mimic octopuses. It stood, dismissively casual.

What was it waiting for?

"I see it. It's at your ten o'clock," Weeks said.

"What's it doing?"

"Nothing. Just standing. Maybe it wants me to run."

"Then start running," Clifton coughed through red teeth.

"I haven't got all day."

"Be seeing you, Clifton."

"Be seeing you, Weeks."

Weeks ran. As soon as he did, the thing at the treeline followed. Its movements were impossible. They defied evolution and anatomy. And yet it came on like a train.

Weeks couldn't look back. If he did it would catch him. He sprinted as hard as he ever had in his life. Everything inside him felt like it was going to tear away from his skeleton. Then he heard Clifton's big .45 sounding off. Weeks veered to his right and aimed for Avery's truck. He threw himself and skidded across the long grass like a baseball player sliding into home plate. He stopped about half-way under the truck and elbow-crawled to one of the oversized tires and tucked himself behind it.

Weeks saw the explosion. The image burned into his retina like it was a photographic plate. Clifton skipped the patten and just hit the trigger as the thing stepped up to grind him under-hoof. The C-4 boomed and threw out a blast wave that distorted the shape of the creature into something like a parachute that had just popped open. Its hide and mass compressed and spread across the edge of the concussion in a way that forced most of its mass up into its tentacles. The hundreds of steel

balls, with no room to spread out, were injected into it through one tight hole, and exploded in every direction once they were tunneling through its liquid insides. The top of the thing blew off, bursting like a lanced boil and spurting hundreds of gallons of thick black putrescence into the bright summer sunlight. It stumbled back on two of its three legs, fell over and spilled out onto the lawn like an overturned rain barrel filled with shit.

Weeks stood up from behind the truck. He could see that parts of the thing were still moving, like the four huge tentacles. Unlike the rest of the thing, they didn't look like a deflated waterbed. They still had some of that black ooze inside, filling them with monstrous animation. But it wasn't going to last. As the tentacles squirmed off in four different directions, their severed stumps hemorrhaged filth out onto the withering grass. As they emptied, they weakened and stilled. It wouldn't be long.

Weeks wasn't going to wait for it to die. He went to the bed of the truck. There was still that M249 SAW back there. At eight hundred rounds per minute, it would be deeply satisfying to punch some extra holes into those things before they expired. He climbed up into the bed again and pulled the case out from where it was wedged between the ammo cans. Then he fell on his face as the first bullet took him in the back and exited just below his ribs.

Weeks screamed. His legs kicked frantically as he tried to flop himself over onto his back. He'd just managed to turn himself over when the second bullet went through the sole of his shoe, out through his laces and ended up in his calf muscle. Weeks was no stranger to injury, but all those complex bones

in his foot shattering was something new. He screamed and screamed. He saw someone walking towards him. A tall pale figure trailing...smoke?

Weeks raised his left hand to block the glare of the sun, to get a clear look, and the third round went through the heel of his hand, bounced up between his ulna and radius and lodged in his elbow. His arm flopped lifelessly into his lap. Weeks was still screaming, something about begging the shooter to stop.

The shooter stepped in close. Smoke rose from her skin. Smoke or steam or something. Her clothes were dissolving even as she stood there dripping with the pale slime that must have been something between digestive juices and afterbirth. As the shirt sloughed off, it revealed multiple sets of pendulous teats. Her hair was gone, replaced by thick curled horns. The skull had lengthened to an impossibly pointed jaw which her stretched lips could not contain. The legs had too many turns in them, ending in what looked like the broad fleshy pads of a camel's foot.

"You did this to me," Morrison gurgled around a tongue that no longer fit. "You did this to my men! You and that petty bitch Avery!"

Weeks' eyes shot back and forth looking for his next move. Gutshot. Foot shattered. Arm useless. There was nothing. He could feel himself shivering with shock. He was going to pass out and Morrison was going to empty that pistol into him.

"You fuckers don't want to be Delta Green anymore, but that's not enough for you! You don't want anyone else to be Delta Green either!" the changing Morrison ranted wetly.

“Morrison! Wait! Wait! You’ve got to listen to me! Please! Just listen to me,” Weeks stuttered.

“Listen to you?” the Morrison thing laughed as its spine bent and its skull widened. “To more of your lies? To more of your pathetic posturing? While you try and act like you’re anything but a bitter discarded asset?”

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Weeks bellowed, black dots swimming in front of his eyes. “You fucking think you’re Delta Green? Delta Green kills monsters. Clifton showed he was Delta Green. He blew that thing apart. So what about you? There’s a monster right in front of you. What the fuck are you doing about it?”

“I see the monster,” Morrison hissed. She raised her pistol. Looking straight down the barrel, Weeks played his last card.

“No you don’t! Look at yourself, Morrison! Go on. Look at yourself! Look!”

Morrison’s eyes were black featureless orbs now, but even so they registered confusion. Then she saw the hand at the end of her arm. The fingers so swollen and shortened that they could barely hold her pistol. Her eyes followed the arm back to her torso. She looked down at herself, at the teats swinging like cancerous tumors, at the obscene hinges in her legs, at the naked rat-like tail that swished. Her hands began to shake.

“If you’re Delta Green then fucking show me!” Weeks spit. “Show me!”

Her bleating scream wasn’t human. Morrison pressed the gun to the side of her head and pulled the trigger. The first bullet dropped her to her knees, but it didn’t do the trick. Still bleat-

ing, she tried again. The second bullet took her left eye with it on the way out, but the bleating sobs didn't stop until she put the pistol in her mouth and fired three shots in quick succession. She collapsed, kicked and was still.

Weeks was cold now, despite the sun-warmed truck bed. His mouth was dry. Circulatory shock was setting in. Those funny metal channels in the bed of the truck were filled with his blood. He could hear it pattering onto the grass like rain running off a corrugated steel roof. He tried to move but was almost immediately flattened by a black wave of nausea.

Weeks looked around the truck bed. The sun was too bright, shining right into his eyes. It made his head pound. There was a U.S. Army Combat Livesaver Kit piled up with the rest of the gear. Of course it was on the opposite side from his good arm. He rolled to pick it up and blacked out. When his eyes fluttered open he had no idea how long he'd been out. But he had the kit in his lap. He took the zipper in his teeth and maneuvered the bag with his good hand until it was open. He didn't know much, but he knew he was going to have to pack that gut wound first. Reaching the exit wound on his belly wasn't going to be so hard, but how the hell was he going to get to the entry wound in the middle of his back? He couldn't even reach that spot when it itched.

He wasn't done. There were options. He had options. Those other Humvees had gotten clear, right? They'd be back. They'd be back with the Marines in tow. Not that he could just wait for them. If he just lay there waiting they'd be zipping him up in a body bag. No, he'd patch what he could and worry

about the rest later. The golden hour was ticking and that hole in his belly wasn't going to pack itself.

Yeah, thought Weeks as he dug around in the bag for the combat gauze. That's the plan.

But no plan is perfect and it was nearly two hours before anyone found him.

Boxes Inside Boxes

By Dennis Detwiller

JENNIFER PULLED THE RUSTED HANDLE OF THE GARAGE DOOR, but it would not budge. It was 6 a.m. on a Monday, and it was the first night of the year that a frost had gripped the land. She'd struggled to get here—scraping the car window, letting the car heat up, wasting gas. All to rush to a \$9.50-an-hour job picking through abandoned lives, searching for valuables. Rushing to be there just in case Marco decided to be, which he never did.

He wasn't there this morning, either. No one was there when she drove up, and in, to the storage facility.

"Don't think I don't know when you find good shit," was the way Marco once put it, shaking a keychain the size of a pistol at her. "I always know when my people find good shit." Turn it in or hit the road. Don't try to pawn it. Marco knew *everyone* in junk and antiques from Westchester to Sheep's Head Bay. He watched "the e-Bay" too, or so he said.

She thought Marco mostly ate pork rinds and watched the inside of his eyelids in his taxi stand. But he had the cash, so....

His "people" were a deaf/mute who perpetually wore either a Home Depot shirt or a SHIT HAPPENS WHEN YOU PARTY NAKED shirt—Marco only ever referred to him as "the other guy"—and herself. She'd seen the mute only occasionally, twice really, picking through storage lockers like her, once in the same row. Marco spent what money could be scraped from his taxi service to buy up expired lots, houses and

storage lockers. Employees, not so much.

Now here she was, in the cold. Storeall, Locker 11351, payment past due, sold to Marco. She pulled harder on the door and with a scream it suddenly shot up. She sat down hard on the cold pavement. The door hit the roof with a huge CLANG and rust flaked down in a spray which made her instinctively close her eyes. Birds erupted from the bushes behind her, arcing to the sky, wings flapping a crazed beat.

A locker filled with file boxes. Again.

Fuck.

FILE BOXES WERE THE WORST. THEY WERE HEAVY, FOR ONE, BUT also could hide all manner of valuables—bonds, treasury notes, even cash. One box could take a minute, hours or even days. Once, a year before on one of her first days on the job, she found an engagement ring taped to a photograph filed among tax documents from 1951. Marco later told her that he had sold it to a Jew for three thousand dollars.

If she didn't tear the boxes apart, one by one, Marco would give her hell. Or fire her and get a replacement.

She dragged a legal box, rotted on the edges, across the cement to her knees. Inside, under a thin patina of dust, were dozens of carefully prepared file folders. She dragged out five, all that fit in a normal handful—some fat, some skinny—and dropped them on top of the box. They kicked up a cloud of filth in waves. It looped and dropped again, like fallout, and then vanished in the fluorescents.

She flipped through a file. Inside were photos of cars, crime

scenes, a gun, people, black and white, all very old. The text could not catch her eye. Her gaze ran up and down the carefully typed pages and retained nothing. So much work for nothing. Effort poured into the void.

She pushed the box across the concrete with a hiss and pulled out another. This one held something wrapped in a Styrofoam-like substance, almost like bubble wrap that had yellowed with age, held together with old tape. She found it surprisingly heavy. She popped the tape and inside found a dagger the size of her forearm. Old and deadly looking, like something bashed out of a wrought-iron candelabra, twisted and flattened to be dangerous and sharp but then carefully worked with finer tools. The handle was decorated in filagree. The markings were completely unrecognizable, though it was clear they were a language. Even before she noticed the gem, covered with a stitch of peeled, yellowing masking tape in the middle of the hilt, she knew Marco would want it.

It was only when she placed the dagger down on the wrapping that she saw the edge of the paper-stuff bent back. There was writing on it. She flipped it over and unfolded it. She looked at the scrawl for a minute before realizing the words—written with a black marker in haste—were upside down. It read DO NOT STARE AT GEM IN HILT. The stink of the marker, chemical and faint with time, was still detectable.

Just another loony. She moved the dagger over to her “keep” pile.

In her first year, she’d learned it was pretty common for unclaimed lots to be the result of mental illness. Not everyone

went crazy in a way that someone noticed. More often than not, those with money boxed their crazy up and piled it in a locker, where it fermented with time into something truly insane. When the bill finally went unpaid, she ended up rooting through it.

In the box with the dagger, more files. She picked up a file, rifled through it, shook it, and let it drop in a pile to the side. Legal depositions or something. Once she had found a signed picture of Orson Welles in a file like that, and managed to sell it online to cover her food for the month. Marco never checked eBay after all. Fuck him and his shit job.

Jennifer lifted a folder stamped with a green triangle and flipped it open. Numbered, typed lines, another deposition. The top of each page was stamped NOT FOR RELEASE. In it, on page one, was a photograph of the dagger with a stamp on the picture.

FBI.

She sat on a tarp-covered steamer trunk which let out one, solid CRACK, but didn't collapse, and read the file from the beginning. This one caught her attention.

IT WAS FROM A 1973 INVESTIGATION IN AMES, VIRGINIA. THREE FBI agents—Nigel Holloway, Jerry Ham and Kent Wayson—had tracked down the leader of a cult responsible for what were believed to be random attacks on religious facilities near Richmond. In the ensuing shootout at an isolated farmhouse, all but Holloway had been killed.

The cult leader, recently returned from Vietnam, was

Sergeant Major Ernest Rowland. Upon leaving the army he changed his name legally to ZOGNAR. He took up giving heated sermons about the end of the world in a rotted-out trailer home he called the Church of the Cleansing Flame. The FBI tracked the source of the bullets which had been peppering local religious schools to a rifle purchased by Rowland in California upon his return.

Portions of the document had been heavily edited, struck out with overtypes and black marker. Other portions had been cut out, and then sections of the pages had been taped together. All in all, nothing too shocking. Until the middle of the file.

A page in the file dictated special steps used to bury the remains of Sergeant Major Rowland. Two other agents, Matthew Marsh and Devin Little, along with Holloway, had apparently, under orders from “the Group,” beheaded the body of Rowland, stuffed the mouth with garlic and thyme, inserted silver ingots in the corpse’s eyes, and thrown the weighted body bag in a Maryland river. There were pictures. They were graphic.

She read the rest of the file with great avidity.

The last page was a yellowed sheet of paper marked HARVARD UNIVERSITY. It outlined, in three paragraphs, that Zognar was a Sumerian deity representing death and travel to the after-life. This entity was also worshipped in Rome in a so-called “death cult” which persisted until 1499, when agents of the Holy Roman Empire, “confronted the creature in Ghent and dismissed it. [See attached missive THE JOURNAL OF ABETTO OF SCERA].”

What?

Δ

“DID YOU FIND ANYTHING?”

“Not yet. Lots of files. Still looking.”

“You want the other guy to help?”

“No, not yet.”

“Okay.”

Click. Fuck you, Marco.

PREDICTABLY, SHE DREAMT OF A CITY IN THE DESERT. THE CITY was crawling across the basin of a desert marked with light blue and black sand. The city struggled and walked, and stumbled and shook. As it moved buildings vibrated and collapsed, kicking up tiny motes of smoke the size of city blocks. Her point of view spun in until she swept through the streets, flying in and then out and away, again and again, like a bird.

People fell about each other in the streets, insignificant as gnats, screaming. The city was the world. The sand was the stars. In the dream, this all made some sort of sense. This transcendence did not last.

It wasn't that interesting a dream. She woke at two and ran a hand through her hair.

She pulled her laptop from the mess of blankets and sheets and flipped up the lid. Nothing happened. Black screen. She tapped the space bar and the screen came to.

Google.

Nigel Holloway, FBI. In seconds she was peering at an old man smiling at a church dinner in Maryland in 2008. “Nigel

Holloway, 65, retired FBI special agent, enjoys Mark Sutter's famous apple pie."

Beneath this image and caption, in the listings: "Find Nigel Holloway's Address, Phone Number and Public Records in 60 Seconds or Less!"

So she did. It gave her only the basics. Just a bare address. No phone number, nothing else. If she wanted the rest she'd have to pay.

The address was enough. She wrote it down and closed the computer.

The dagger lay on the bedside table next to a stack of files, incredibly out of place on the plasterboard Ikea furniture. She picked up the blade and flipped it over in her hands. The gem caught the light. Inside the gem, it seemed, something moved.

THE FIRST SNOW HAD FALLEN. HE STEPPED FROM THE HOUSE gingerly on his old man stick-legs and crept down the steps, uncertain. He looked up in the sky and saw only a gray expanse with no definition. The air stunk of ozone.

It was only when he made the car, through the light snow, that he realized he had forgotten his keys in the bowl near the door. A bowl that had sat in the same place for twenty-six years, soon to be twenty-seven. He let out a plume of resigned breath.

"Excuse me," the voice said behind him.

He turned to find the woman. Red hair, maybe in her thirties. Worn-looking, and tired. She wore baggy sweat pants, high boots, a huge jacket that said PETERBILT on it. Cheap, he

would say, though he would never say it out loud. He straightened out, startled out of his moment of isolation.

“Can I help you?”

“I—my car.” She pointed back at an economy car. One door, the passenger side, stood slightly opened. Bright red. Across the street.

OK. He had places to be. He put on his best smile and followed her around to the open door.

“I’m—” he started, but she interrupted.

“Can you pop the trunk?” she asked walking around to the front of the hood, hands out.

Fuck, lady.

He leaned in the passenger side, his smile feeling fake and too wide, and grimaced as he leaned in, fingers looking for the latch on the far side. He wasn’t paying attention to the sounds, and only afterwards did he realize they were all wrong. The moment his face went in the car, her footsteps crunched rapidly around to his side. Then, a blank.

HE WOKE NEXT TO HER IN THE CAR. SHE SAT BOLT UPRIGHT, A look of intensity on her ragged face. Bad teeth, sallow skin, too-dyed hair. His hands were handcuffed behind him and he was sitting on them, and they were long since numb. His feet were bound with tape.

His lower right back sang with shrieking pain. His memory dropped off into the void after leaning in the car. She didn’t look at him but she smiled, nervously.

“I know what you did.” A small pistol was balanced be-

tween her knees.

“I think maybe we should pull over and talk about this.”

She looked over at him, and her expression was of rapture. Joy. Her mouth stretched from ear to ear. Her eyes furrowed from the effort of grinning.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll put two in your stomach to see what that makes your smart-ass fed mouth say? How about it?”

His training faded into a deep humming fear. He said nothing.

They drove in silence. Twenty-two years in the FBI had taught him enough to know when people meant a threat of violence.

THE SIGNAGE WAS CONFUSING. OR HIS MIND WASN’T WORKING properly. Or both. They cut down tracks and backroads. There was a cellphone in the tray in the center console, but she used an old gas-station map. Stopping to consider it, she traced routes with her soot-covered fingers.

“Yeah,” she said, finally, when finding something marked RT 232 Mile 12. “This is it. It wasn’t even on a marker, last time.”

They drove down the road until it became a dirt track, peppered and edged with dirty snow.

“We’re going to have some fun.”

THEY PARKED IN A CLEARING THAT HAD BEEN HASTILY SHOVELED, revealing a rough oval, twenty feet by ten. On it a blue tarp was folded around something heavy, blowing in a light

wind.

She came around the car, holding the pistol at her side. She popped the door and suddenly jammed the pistol as hard as it would go into his right eye socket, forcing it there, his face screaming in pain under the pressure. His breath came in gasps, and there was a click, and then suddenly his legs were free, the tape cut.

“Get out.” The gun vanished from his eye, leaving afterimages and fading pain.

She stood back at a safe distance, watching him.

“Why—” he began, but she answered by clicking the pistol’s safety off and lifting her arm so that the barrel peered right into his face. His hands, madly, wanted to come up to cover his face, but the cuffs would not allow them past the small of his back.

“Get over there, you’ll see,” and she giggled. She *giggled*.

He stumbled through the mud over to the tarp. They were miles from anywhere. Miles and miles. No one would hear.

“Under the tarp,” she said.

He struggled to keep his balance, and shifted it with his foot.

On it, laid out with precision, were a folded body bag, a large industrial hacksaw, a bundle of garlic cloves, a tied cluster of thyme, and two lead ingots topped by once-molten silver.

“It’s a shame I woke so late,” she said. “Back in 1984, Agent Little fled somewhere I can’t get to him. But there’s you and Agent Marsh. Or there was you and Agent Marsh. Now there’s just you.

“I have to say, Agent Marsh fought much harder than this.

“What’s the matter, Agent Holloway? Don’t you remember me?

“Because I remember you.”

The Lucky Ones

By John Scott Tynes

THE HENS CLUCKED AND FUSSED IN THE COOP. THE BREEZE shivered through the garden. The mist stretched over the lake. The woman drank from her cup of coffee and thought about tomorrow because that was always preferable to thinking about today.

The little house stood on its own, on a large plot of land, and the rear porch looked out onto the water. A canoe was flipped over on the shore. The garden lay on one side, the coop on the other. Opposite the lake the face of the house looked onto a winding road that led off through the trees.

She took another sip, thinking about tomorrow.

Tomorrow there were the chores, of course. There was beekeeping gear in the shed and a rotary tiller. In the root cellar there were strands of onions and a chest of potatoes and a big old wardrobe she'd mounted shelves in and filled with preserved green beans and peaches and other bounty. In the spring and summer she was a slave for the woman she would be in the fall and winter. But even now in the warming days of spring she had time to herself. Time to go out in the canoe and just drift, read a book, even take a nap. She was retired, or divorced, or something.

And covering a hole out past the garden was a hinged metal sheet with a loop on one side, and if she tied a rope through the loop she could pass it through the old pulley she'd mounted on a thick branch of the oak tree overhead, and with that she

could just barely get the metal sheet opened up, and down inside the hole were weapons and explosives, and she hadn't even bothered to check on them in three years. It had seemed prudent, once, to inspect the guns and oil them and all the old disciplines. Today she was more concerned with her crops, with the food that was far more necessary to her life than those old things down in the earth. Occasionally she noticed the metal sheet, stained and moss-covered, and felt a pang of guilt, as if she'd buried a body down there. But then there were the chickens to feed.

IN THE WARM AND DROWSY AFTERNOON SHE ROWED OUT ONTO the lake. The sun had burned off the morning mist and the day was only partly cloudy. Around the vast lake she could see other houses, other lives, dotting the shore. She knew a few of those families by name and would nod to them in town. But they had long since given up on asking her over to cookouts and bonfires. She never accepted, kindly though she seemed. Occasionally she would paddle across to whichever family had strapping young men in need of money and pay them to do some particularly arduous chores. She always paid cash, even when they said cryptic things like, "You can just PayPal me," and none of them ever noticed that all her twenties were at least ten years old.

She took the canoe out onto the lake and then rested the paddle inside. She spread out the sleeping bag and lay down, her hat over her face. She drifted there, suspended on the surface, above the deep and the dark below. Once she'd wanted

to know what was down there. She'd wanted to look into the darkness and see, to shine a light into it, to drive it off.

That's what the guns were for.

Now she was content to lie atop it, dozing on a vast and turgid bed. But this was no idyll. It was a retreat from a battlefield that once meant everything to her. It was a sinecure. She had every intention of spending the rest of her life here, alone, drifting, unable to see down into the dark.

She'd forgotten an old lesson. Sometimes the dark can see into you.

WHEN SHE AWOKE IT WAS WITH A START. A NOISE, A SHOUT. SHE lifted the hat off and sat up, instantly alert. She started to reach for her gun, which she hadn't worn in years. Instead her fingers found the paddle and she squeezed.

Maybe forty yards away there was another boat, a rough-hewn log canoe. A man and a woman stood in the canoe and argued. She held a baby. The woman shouted again. The man swung a paddle into the side of her head. She and the baby went overboard with a dull splash.

Special Agent Jill Sanders rose to her feet, her body electric with adrenaline, in a way she hadn't felt in a very long time. She was strong and sinewy from hard work, with severe cheekbones and a gaze that had suddenly gone icepick like in the old days. She couldn't traverse the distance fast enough.

"HEY!" she yelled. "HEY! I SEE YOU!"

The man didn't look at her. In the water there was only silence. The woman had fallen and now was not struggling,

probably unconscious from the blow. The baby was in the water and Jill could not see it. The woman's scarf settled gently onto the floor of the canoe.

"HEY!" she yelled again. "GET THEM BACK IN THE BOAT RIGHT NOW YOU PIECE OF SHIT! I'M COMING OVER THERE!"

He continued to not respond. He raised the paddle.

Jill sat and drove the canoe forward. It was too far. She had to try.

He brought the paddle down on the woman in the water.

"HEY! HEY! I SEE YOU!" Jill screamed. "I SEE YOU!"

The man turned toward her. He peered. He squinted. He turned away again, to watch the woman and the baby drown.

"I SEE YOU!"

WHEN SHE AWOKE IT WAS WITH A START. THE LAKE WAS QUIET. There was no log canoe. There was no one at all except her.

She rose to her feet, the adrenaline already fading, looking around blearily. She felt something wet on her face. She touched her cheek with one trembling finger and looked at it.

A drop of blood rolled lazily down towards her palm.

Jill sat and worked the paddle. Towards shore. Towards home.

IT'D BEEN MORE THAN TEN YEARS SINCE JILL ACCEPTED THIS life. Sitting there in the little clinic outside Jackson Springs with the very burly, very tall old man named Alphonse. She'd worked for Alphonse for years. He'd never been this man

before. The man changes, the name remains the same. You got used to surprises, in Delta Green.

“You can’t go back to work,” he told Jill, his deep voice rumbling in the little room. “Not in person anyway. Cities are out. You need to go someplace away from people. Someplace you can just be.”

“Or what?” Jill asked, wiping bloody tears from her face.

“The longer it goes on, the more serious it gets . . . you’ll have an embolism or a stroke or who knows what. We don’t know why this is happening to you. We can’t fix it.”

“So that’s it? I’m just done? I’m fired?”

“We’ll take care of you. We’ll keep you on the Office of Export Enforcement’s payroll until retirement. We know how to cook the books.”

“Where the hell do I go? This shit is punching holes in reality all over the place and when I get anywhere near it I start bleeding. Where could I even be safe?”

“I have an idea,” Alphonse said.

FAIRFIELD POND WAS A LOUSY NAME. IT WAS A HUGE LAKE IN rural Vermont, vast and deep. The property was unusually level because it had been razed. The tunnels and chambers had been filled in with concrete mixed with barrels of elderflower tincture. The cabin was long gone. Major General Reggie Fairfield died here in 1994 after initiating a supernatural catastrophe to slaughter his enemies. He’d been the leader of Delta Green but eventually turned into a dangerous liability, launching rogue operations to stir up trouble without any concern for the conse-

quences and eventually invoking a monstrous evil from beyond our world just to get revenge. The government conspiracy that murdered him spent two years surveying the area before finally packing up and leaving. Delta Green let it sit for a few more. Meantime the land grew wild.

Any number of agents and friendlies had been trotted out here over the years. No one was quite sure what had happened, just that Reggie had called down the thunder and almost no one there that night survived.

Whatever happened was gone. Nobody could find anything. Magically speaking, the old Fairfield property was a dead zone. All the juice had been sucked right out of it, as if a black hole had opened up and collapsed and pulled all the unnatural energies in the area down inside of itself on the way out.

It was the perfect place to park an agent whose eyes started bleeding around supernatural activity. Which, as Jill had quickly learned, was just about everywhere you went.

The first time she came to Fairfield Pond, after an excruciating plane ride that required three boxes of bloody tissues to complete, she felt more at peace than she had in weeks. It was like she could breathe again. She walked into the house Delta Green had built on the land and it felt like home.

She'd only met Reggie once and that was plenty. He was an arrogant and angry old man, embittered by how both his career and his body had failed him, but still deeply dangerous. He was desperate to go out in a blaze of glory, to matter one last time, no matter the cost. But now Jill was grateful the old monster had gone out with such a bang. He'd given her the one place in

the world where she could actually live in safety.

THE HINGES OF THE METAL SHEET GROANED WHEN SHE PULLED the rope through the pulley.

INSIDE. DOORS LOCKED. HOLSTER ON HER BELT. SOMETHING IN it, something heavy. It did not make her feel safe. Its weight dragged her down into the past.

You can't shoot a ghost, or whatever that was out there on the water. She could dismiss it as a dream if it weren't for the blood. It had stopped almost immediately, just a few drops, like the warm sprinkles of rain that precede a thunderstorm. There was a vast and unseen horizon out there, a horizon that spanned a different reality. Something was there, looming behind the tree line in the gloom. Something wanted to break over the summit and come here. A thunderhead from another world. A storm that would never end.

She had been on the lake before. Many times. This had never happened. But at least here, in this house built on Fairfield's land, all evidence said that nothing would occur. It was her stronghold.

But the lake. The lake was huge. The water seeped into the soil. Who could know what was in there? Maybe it had taken years for the water to leach all the way under the earth of the house. Maybe its watery fingers had finally stretched here, and maybe now they were closing their grip on this place. Maybe soon she would see the man and the woman and the baby and the boat right here, in her living room, the violent blow over

and over.

She thought all this sitting on the sofa, blanket over her legs, the room growing darker. She had not turned on a light.

There was nothing for it. She ate dinner and went to bed. She kept touching her cheeks to ensure they were still dry. She fell asleep with the gun under her pillow, like the old days.

MORNING AND COFFEE. HER HAIR A MESS. HER USUAL WHAT-ever outfit: jeans and an Adidas t-shirt worn thin from many washings. Humdrum except for the weight in the holster. She kept the curtains closed. The idea of someone, somehow seeing her walking around the house armed bothered her, even though she had no real neighbors.

I used to be a secret agent, she thought. Turned it over in her mind like a small smooth stone. The long nights and welcome dawns, the screams, the horrors, the camaraderie. It was all so important. But now years had gone by and the world was still the world, even without her playing the hero. Had it mattered at all? Perhaps the boil only swelled at the approach of the lance. When you turn out the light, the moths fly away.

She sipped her coffee and headed for the sofa to think.

There was a conical spray of ash on the floor of the living room, radiating out from the fireplace. It looked as if the house had taken a deep breath, inhaling down through the chimney, pulling the ash with it, and depositing it on the floor.

She approached warily. Checked the damper. Closed. Her feet made little poofs of ash fly up with each step. Her fingers fluttered to her cheeks. They were dry.

She sat down and drank more coffee. Stared at the ash a while.

Finally, she got up and went to the closet. She took down a metal case from the upper shelf. Inside was a satellite phone, a custom job. The battery was dead. She plugged it into the wall and it woke up with a chirp. Old tech, a decade and more. It was waiting for her here in the house when she first arrived, a final gift from Alphonse. She'd never used it before.

She turned it on. There was a small LCD screen. She pushed some buttons. There was one phone number stored. The name next to it just said "A".

She could call that number and talk to Alphonse, or whom-ever answered these days. It might take a while for them to understand who she was. No doubt she was long forgotten. But they would listen, they would believe her. They would help.

What did she really have to report? A dream. A mess on the floor. A few drops of blood.

There was no case, no operation here. No chanting maniacs clutching ancient books. Would they believe her?

She hesitated only a moment. Delta Green was not in the skepticism business. They would help.

She pressed the button and dialed the number.

When the three ascending tones played she almost dropped the phone. Then the message came. "This number has been disconnected or is no longer in service."

She stayed on the line. Maybe this was just protocol. Maybe someone would come on the line. Maybe persistence meant something.

The tones and the message repeated. And again. And again. And again.

She let the phone stay connected while she used a broom and dustpan to clean up the ash. And again. And again. And again.

She knew protocols changed. New threats emerged. People came and went. Maybe Delta Green was gone. Maybe it was still out there.

But she. She was alone. They didn't know about her anymore. They weren't going to help.

This was between her and the house and the lake.

She turned off the phone. She sat on the sofa and finished her coffee.

The headlights flared in her face and she went into the ditch with a crash. The airbag inflated. The impact drove her back into the seat.

She was completely disoriented.

The blood brought her back into focus. The airbag sagged on the steering wheel, streaked with blood. She touched her face and felt it there. She flipped down the visor and looked in the mirror.

Tears of blood. She looked around wildly.

She was in her Jeep. She had no idea how she'd gotten here. A moment ago she was on the couch with her coffee. Now it was night and she was in her Jeep in a ditch beside a road.

What the fucking fuck, she thought.

There was a noise from outside the Jeep. She saw her holster on the passenger-side floor. She reached for it desper-

ately. The seat belt held her in a tight grip. She fumbled with the buckle, got it undone, lurched over the gear shift, grabbed the holster, pulled the gun, swiveled back up, pointed at the window.

“Whoa!” a man outside said, hands rising up, terrified.
 “Don’t shoot! Jesus! Please don’t shoot!”

SHE DIDN’T GET HOME UNTIL 3 A.M.

Somehow she’d gone from the couch and coffee to packing a suitcase, collecting several firearms, and driving off to the west without any memory of it. She’d driven for hours before the accident, before she was herself again and suddenly went off the road in surprise.

The other driver was OK, once Jill understood he wasn’t trying to kill her. They straightened things out. No need to call the cops. She cut the airbag away and got a tow-truck to haul her out of the ditch. She stopped at a diner to get over the shakes and used up every napkin in the dispenser wiping the blood from her eyes. She drove home again.

Back to the house. Back to the lake. Her eyes only stopped bleeding when she pulled into the driveway.

Her dry eyes said she was safe again. She no longer believed them.

THE NEXT DAY SHE GOT IN THE JEEP, FULLY AWARE THIS TIME, and drove to the nearby town of St. Albans. She brought several boxes of tissue with her.

Her eyes began to weep drops of blood as she approached

the outskirts. It was a small town. There were no monsters here, no conspiracies, no sadistic murderers. She bled all the same. These energies, these tendrils from that dim horizon, were everywhere people were and many places where they were not.

The crimson tears were small and sporadic, but they grew more frequent as she reached the center of town and her destination: The St. Albans Historical Society on Church Street. It was a fairly grand old structure for such a small town, formal and fancy, and she imagined a flock of church ladies roosting in the attic, descending daily to dust the shelves.

Jill had already checked the newspapers and even called the sheriff's station to ensure there had been no recent murders or disappearances. Whatever she'd seen on the lake, whatever had followed her home, it was old. The canoe she'd seen looked primitive and the more she recalled the scene, the more she felt the clothes of the couple were from an earlier time. If this was a real murder whose ghosts were plaguing her, it was not recent.

She approached the front door, already envisioning, even relishing, the thought of long afternoons in dusty stacks of old records and letters. Research was a part of the job she'd always loved. Somewhere inside, she was sure, she would eventually find answers.

IT TOOK ABOUT NINETY SECONDS. "OH YES," THE ELDERLY VOL-
unteer said as she peered over her bifocals, "you're talking
about the Clifford murder. Terrible business. That's why they
call it Dream Lake, you know."

She didn't know. She only knew it as Fairfield Pond. The thought of that vast and fathomless place being known as Dream Lake made her shiver. She dabbed her eyes.

"Here's the pamphlet. We go through a dozen of these a month! 1842, Eugene Clifford. Drowned his wife and baby on the lake to inherit her land, then hid her fancy scarf in a swamp. He'd overlooked it in the boat, you know. A neighbor dreamed she followed him to an old stump where the scarf was hidden and when she went there the next day, she found it! So he was convicted of murder because of her dream, and that's why some folks still call it Dream Lake. And Clifford, well, he went mad and died in an asylum before they could build the gallows. Good old Vermont!" She laughed and her soft old body shook. "Would you like some tea?"

Jill took the pamphlet and the tea and a few homemade maple cookies. She dabbed at her eyes and thanked the old woman. She got up to leave.

As she did, she felt something. Her attention was drawn to a display case in an alcove. Several household objects of the seventeenth century were there. Blood welled in the corners of her eyes. She looked down at a small hand mirror intricately carved from bone. Her reflection in the mirror filled her vision. Another face overlay her own, from inside the mirror, looking out into a world it could but dimly sense. It was as if someone had shone a light into the mirror and the strange face was drawn closer, out of the darkness, towards the woman who saw, the woman whose eyes were blazing stars in the black sky of that other world.

Blood flowed freely from Jill's eyes. She could not get the tissues out fast enough. Slowly and silently the mirror cracked into an intricate spiral, its surface fractured in craquelure as finely textured as the skin of a reptile.

Jill ran for the door, drops of red staining the carpet with every step.

THAT NIGHT AT HOME, EYES DRY, SHE READ AND RE-READ THE pamphlet. The story was as the woman had said and just as Jill had seen that day on the lake.

Dream Lake. Dream Lake whose water reached out into the soil, into the earth, maybe even beneath her feet. Seeped through the ground into Reggie's old bunkers, full of concrete and elderflower.

Eugene Clifford murdered his family on that lake. Claimed it was an accident. Died insane. The neighbor had dreamed that too. Mrs. Marvin. In her dream Clifford led her past a stand of alder, through a swamp, to a stump, and in its hollow showed her his wife's scarf. Then she'd dreamed of him in prison, and in the asylum, dying alone in his cell instead of hanging from the gallows.

Was that her now? Was she, Jill, the new Mrs. Marvin, the stalwart dreamer? Clifford had received his justice and then some. From what she'd seen on the lake he was certainly guilty. Was he the one plaguing her, trying to escape justice at long last? Or was it his wife, trying to escape her fate by seizing control of Jill's mind and fleeing?

Jill did not know. What she did know was that she never

wanted to return to the St. Albans Historical Society or, indeed, any place other than here. But even here her safety was slipping away.

The fireplace had not breathed again in her absence. There was no sign of any activity. Whatever had seized her and sent her driving away into the night was spent. For now.

HOURS LATER SHE HAD THE DREAM.

A knock at her front door. Eugene Clifford was there, dressed as he was the day of the murder. He was pale and weak. He trembled. He took his hat off his head and nodded to her grimly. Then he turned and walked away.

She followed. In the dream she brought a gun. *Can't shoot ghosts*, she thought, but you never knew. She'd shot impossible things before.

They walked a long time along the shore. She kept wary eyes on his hands, wondering if he'd turn violent. But no. He led her past the landmarks cited in the brochure: the alder, the swamp.

The stump.

The sky was slate. The lake was choppy. The wind was cold.

He pointed at the stump, trembling again. She knelt down. Wondered briefly if he would strike her from behind. He did not.

From the hollow, the scarf. She stood up and held it out to him.

He took it, looked at it, held it over his head. The wind

took it away and it blew out over the lake, then sank suddenly like a stone and disappeared into the water.

He pointed at the stump, still trembling.

Jill felt a cold shiver pass through her body. They were not done. This was not the dream of Mrs. Marvin.

She knelt down to the stump again. Reached her hands inside the hollow. Found only mud and pebbles.

She stood up again and faced him, raised her filthy, empty hands to show him. There was nothing in the stump. His secret, his tell, was a hundred fifty years gone and done.

He shook his head, lips quivering. Tears ran down his face. They were made of water.

IN THE MORNING SHE RAN THE PILLOWCASE THROUGH THE washer three times. The sizable bloodstains were still faintly visible. Between cycles she cleaned the ash out of the carpet.

SHE HAD TO DIG THROUGH BOXES IN THE CELLAR FOR AN HOUR before she found it. A little spiral notepad, tattered and water-warped. Random notes from her last Delta Green op. There were addresses, timelines, words underlined three times with question marks, arrows connecting hints and mysteries. They'd cracked it, in the end, but the final encounter had left her with these witch eyes.

There she was: Veronica Sharp, an assistant professor of folklore at Boston University. They asked for her help. They got her in over her head. She'd hung tough and saved three children from Grimalkin Meadow by enclosing them in a circle of salt

and hair pulled from her own head until dawn came and they could escape the thing that came out of the well. Jill hadn't talked to her since, but if anyone would know what to do about a New England ghost, it would be her.

Tracking her down took six phone calls. Veronica was now a full professor at Université Laval in Quebec. Once Jill persuaded the department admin to speak English, she learned Veronica's office hours and waited to call.

While she waited she fed the chickens. She walked through the garden. She pulled some weeds. She kept an eye on the lake. Once she saw a canoe and her heart raced, but it was not her ghost.

Finally, it was time. She came inside, tossing her work gloves into a basket in the mud room. She sat down and dialed the phone.

"*Bonjour.*"

"Professor Sharp?"

"*Oui*, hello."

"This is Agent Macaw. We worked together about ten years ago?"

"No. No. You people said you'd never call me again."

"Please. I'm not with them anymore. I'm alone. I'm in trouble. I need help."

"No. You've taken too much from me already. I don't care. I can't care. I'm sorry."

She hung up.

It was three and a half hours to Quebec. *Maybe the highways will be OK*, Jill thought.



WHEN SHE STOPPED FOR GAS OUTSIDE THE SMALL TOWN OF Saint-Germain-de-Grantham, the tall unkempt grasses beyond the parking lot slowly began to weave themselves into effigies of children. She blinked the blood from her eyes and grabbed for a paper towel as the gas pump clicked and clicked and clicked, filling the tank so slowly, and as the figures in the grass acquired form they drew fireflies who settled into the eye sockets. The grass children stared at her with their glowing eyes, listing slightly in the breeze. In the field behind them a dark shape slowly began to rise. She heard a cry and turned around, saw the frightened face of a child in the window of a car pulling out of the lot. Jill yanked the handle out, spilling gas on the ground, screwed the gas cap on with trembling fingers as the shape in the field grew larger, hurried back into her Jeep, cranked it, and sped away.

Behind her, the fireflies rose one by one and drifted lazily on their way. The grasses unwound. The shape shriveled and submerged.

Back on the highway, she cried tears of both blood and water. *I can never leave home again*, she thought. *This is the last time I ever go anywhere. Because everywhere I go the dark world rises up to meet me.*

SHE WAITED FOR VERONICA OUTSIDE OF HER BUILDING. IT WAS a big risk. She kept looking at the trees, the windows, the students, sure that at any moment one of them would notice her

and reveal some fresh horror.

A maintenance truck approached. She felt a trickle at the bridge of her nose. The truck slowed. The truck stopped. A man inside looked at her with frank interest.

He got out of the truck, tall and lean, a wraith of a man with pale skin and thin blond hair and grey eyes so shiny they looked like precious stones. Jill reached a hand behind her back, to the waist holster beneath her jean jacket. She stood there as he approached. Students walked by unconcerned. Pigeons gathered on the sidewalk.

“Hey, bright eyes,” he said as he walked up. His tone gave nothing away.

“I’m not here for you,” she replied, her voice a stone. “Whatever you are, whatever you’re doing, I don’t care. I’m just passing through.”

“Me too,” he said, still toneless. He knew how to speak words but not how to use them. Not the way a human would. “I’m just passing through. But I see something shiny, I stop and pick it up. I’m a magpie. It’s my nature.”

Jill gave no ground. She raised her free hand and bent her fingers and thumb in a certain configuration. She held it before her face, the tip of her thumb almost touching a spot on her forehead. She left it hanging there.

The man’s eyes grew large with recognition. Jill lowered her hand.

“I said I’m not here for you. But I could change my mind about that.”

The man backed away. “I’m not alone,” he asserted.

“There are many of us here.”

“I believe you. I’m just passing through.”

“I see you again, I bring the multitude. We open the door and welcome the fire. All these people burn.”

“You won’t see me again.”

He started to speak but noticed someone nearby, watching. He made a sound like a bird and ran for his truck. Jill took a deep breath and exhaled.

Veronica Sharp stood in the doorway. She was in her mid-40s now, a decade older than when Jill last saw her. She was short and stocky, in mannish tweed with a Burberry silk scarf. A few wispy brown hairs stood straight up in the air atop her head, elevated by static electricity. Her eyes were hard. The fingers of her left hand executed a repeating pattern of motions. She did not take her eyes off the man until the truck drove away. Then she turned to Jill, her fingers still, the hairs settling back down upon her head. Jill realized her right hand was made of plastic.

“I told you already. This—I don’t want this. I don’t want any part of this. Ever again.”

“I don’t either. It happens everywhere I go. I stir it up just by being there.”

“You put people in danger.”

“I know. There’s only one place in the world where I’m safe, where everyone is safe from me. And now it’s under attack. And I can’t fight it without you.”

“Yes, you can,” Veronica said.

“How?”

“You can kill yourself.”

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO PERSUADE HER. DELTA GREEN ALWAYS had a fundamental appeal to a certain type of person. It said to them: You could die a hero. That was an idea powerful enough to overcome self-interest, family, age. It got Veronica into the Jeep.

THEY TALKED AS THEY DROVE BACK TO VERMONT. JILL SHARED her story. Veronica shared hers. She'd lost her right arm during her final op, eight years ago. Something ate it.

“It grows back in the winter,” she said.

“It what?”

“It grows back in the winter. First there's a kind of tingle in the stump. Then boils form on the skin. They leak some sort of resin that extrudes and hardens. It takes about six weeks and then there's a whole arm there. Totally stiff, useless, can't move. It's like a stone's memory of being a boulder. Eventually it dries and falls off.”

“And that happens every year?”

“Every year.”

“How do you keep it hidden?”

“I have a bigger prosthetic. A hollow one. I switch to it when the tingling starts.”

“Does anyone know?”

“Just you. There's nobody in my life who would look that close.”

“I'm the same. I can't be around people. I can't go any-

where. I've barely left my home for a decade and until this started, I didn't know how bad it was. I thought I was a barometer, you know? Turns out I'm a lodestone. I just want to go home. I just want to stay there. I just want to raise my chickens and can my beans."

"You just want a happy ending. You know what I've learned from folklore? Happy endings are a modern affectation. You go back to the real stories, they all end with everybody eaten by wolves."

IT WAS VERY LATE WHEN THEY REACHED JILL'S HOME. THE house was as she'd left it. It made sense. Nothing happened unless she was here.

They started right away. They'd already discussed this on the ride home. They couldn't take the chance that Jill could be possessed again, that sleep could bring more dreams and more trouble. There was no time to waste.

Jill got her biggest pot from the kitchen while Veronica opened the fireplace damper and started a fire. Jill cut some tall grasses down from the yard and brought bulbs of garlic up from the cellar. They added them to the fire, put the pot on top with a little water in it. The smell of burning grass and garlic filled the room.

"Sit down there," Veronica said, pointing at the floor before the fireplace. "I'll get the salt."

She poured a thin circle of salt all around Jill. With her foot she pushed open a gap at the back, an opening between Jill and the pot, and then made another opening at the front.

“Make the sign. Not all the way, just the first touch.”

Jill configured her fingers and thumb again and pressed the thumb to her forehead.

The fire flared. Ash billowed into the room. It swirled around the salt circle. Blood ran down her cheeks.

The ash found the front gap in the salt. It rushed in and surrounded Jill.

Veronica closed the front gap. The ash swirled faster. Rivulets of blood were pouring from Jill’s eyes. She could barely see.

“Now, Jill!”

Jill touched her thumb to her lips. She went somewhere else.

A KNOCK AT HER FRONT DOOR. EUGENE CLIFFORD WAS THERE, dressed as he was the day of the murder. He was pale and weak. He trembled. He took his hat off his head and nodded to her grimly. Then he turned and walked away.

Jill followed. She left the gun behind this time.

The lake was turbulent. The wind was blowing. Everything smelled like burning grass and garlic.

In the swamp, they reached the stump. Eugene pointed, trembling. Jill knelt down and pulled out the scarf. She let it blow away again.

Eugene kept pointing.

She reached her hands into the hollow. She pulled out dirt and pebbles. She kept digging.

The stump was termite-ridden. The wood was falling apart. As she dug through the crumbling wood the entire stump split

in half and the sides fell away. The ground turned to muck. She kept digging and digging, pulling great hunks of mud and clay and tossing them to the side.

She felt something buried. Something hard.

She dug around it. She thought it might be a skull.

It was a head. The top of a head, the top of someone's body, buried here in the earth beneath the stump. She kept digging. Skin, hair. Eyebrows. She imagined someone buried there, buried but alive, their lungs full of mud, trying to breathe. She dug faster, desperate now, wanting to help, hoping to free them in time. She pulled handfuls of mud away from the face.

Behind her, Eugene whimpered and turned to ash, blowing apart in the breeze, as if he was never there.

More of the face was revealed now. It was covered in mud, indistinct. She kept tugging and pulling and rubbing off the mud.

The eyes opened. They stared directly into hers.

Suddenly she knew.

The ground ruptured. Powerful arms emerged. The man buried in the earth pulled himself up, struggling free from the muck that encased him. He was halfway out before he spoke.

"Agent Sanders," Reggie Fairfield growled. "I guess you'll have to do."

IT WAS MORNING WHEN SHE AWOKE. HOURS HAD PASSED. SHE was lying in bed, crusted in dried blood.

She got up, groggy, and the first thing she saw were three words written in her own blood on the wall.

BE SEEING YOU.

She ran downstairs. To the living room.

Everything was covered in ash. The pot was on its side. The fire was out. Veronica sat in an armchair, badly beaten, head lolling back, her body completely coated in ash.

Dead.

Jill closed her eyes. Her eyes were dry. *I have time*, she thought. *I have time before he's strong enough to come again.*

THE TREE ABOVE HER HIDDEN WEAPONS CACHE WAS A MAPLE, tall and strong. She'd never tapped it to make syrup—it was one of those things she meant to try sometime, another marker of her self-sufficiency. Another way to be alone.

She stood on a thick branch fifteen feet off the ground. Climbing that high had taken some effort.

She leaned against the trunk and bound her legs together. She remembered the knots from Girl Scouts. That part was easy, although it made it hard to keep her balance.

Tying her own wrists together—they didn't teach that in Girl Scouts. It took half an hour of deeply frustrating failure. Finally, she worked it through with her teeth and pulled as tight as she could get it. There would be no magic signs, no miraculous escapes. Reggie was not getting away. He was not bringing his rage, his madness, back into the world.

Then she was ready. She kept leaning against the trunk, panting. It was hard to catch her breath with the two loops tight around her throat. They called it a double honda.

For three excruciating hours she waited. She watched the

lake. She'd opened the chicken coop and the birds were in the garden now, eating her crops. It made her happy, a little bit, to hear them cluck.

A breeze stirred. A ripple appeared in the lake. It expanded towards her. It reached the shore and then the grass moved. It was so subtle no one else would notice it. But Jill saw the blades of grass bend slightly. The wave rolled towards her. Blood ran down her cheeks.

"I can't fight it without you," she'd said.

"Yes, you can," Veronica had replied.

She felt the stirrings in her mind. The clammy fumbling of another's fingers, unseen but very real. The fingers closed around her, starting to strangle her most essential self. He began to step into her body.

She leaned away from the trunk. Teetered for a moment. Felt herself start to drown. Felt him taking control.

She closed her eyes. In her mind she dragged him from the earth. Wrapped her arms around him. Pulled him tight. Laced her fingers together behind his back. Turned her arms to stone. She would not let go.

By the time he knew, the air was already rushing past them. They fell as one and died the same.

Syndemic

By Shane Ivey

ELLIE STARED AT THE DOOR AND HER TEARS SPARKED IN A SOFT, silvery glow. The door's matte paint absorbed the light, its wood-brown turned almost black. A deadbolt held the steel door to the steel wall, locking out the world.

Jim had insisted on building the safe-room ten years before, about a year after the Bureau tapped him for counterterrorism. He came back from an assignment that had gone bad and left him shaken. He wouldn't talk about it, of course—Ellie was used to that after his years in counterintelligence—but he couldn't let it go, either. He said he was meeting with a Bureau psychologist regularly. He said that helped. Ellie didn't believe him.

The safe room: steel walls and ceiling and floor, a thick keylock and a manual deadbolt, a ventilation shaft that could be closed from the inside, a massive air tank to last the whole family days, a chemical toilet in a little closet, a huge locker full of survival gear, another with rifles and shotguns and pistols, a cellular radio transceiver, telephone landline and broadband cable, a monitor for security cameras outside. They'd been frugal with their salaries but building the safe-room burned through their savings. She disliked it, disliked the fear it represented, but it eased his stress. She went along.

They never had any need for it, of course. It became his office, a temporary storage room for projects related to the job. They kept the keys in a kitchen drawer and for years she hardly

ever touched them. She might have forgotten the place but for the nights Jim retreated there to work.

Not long after it was finished, another case went bad and Jim came home staring like a soldier with shell-shock. The Bureau gave him two weeks off. That helped, but he went back to work looking like a man condemned. Ellie told him he should retire, get on the board of a bank or insurance firm, watch the kids grow, show up for their recitals and plays and debates. Even if he didn't nail down anything lucrative, she had her realty money. She might as well have been speaking a foreign language. The work was important, he said. The work was necessary. The work needed him. He'd find a way to make it all work. He did, for a while. But it always got worse again.

Even when home he was half-gone. He stared in thought or buried himself in notes and files. He made love like it was a task, perfunctory, as distant as the sky, and eventually they gave up on that altogether. Asleep he twitched and sweated in silent terror.

Joanie and Edwin had learned not to run to him for hugs anymore. Two years ago Jim told them they were too big for that. Joanie, then ten, and Edwin, eight, knew better. They remembered the times Daddy had recoiled from happy shrieks like they hurt his ears. But they went along.

This morning he'd gotten another call. He took the phone from the kitchen into the never-used dining room while Ellie cleaned dishes. But the kids were already in their rooms and she heard him quite clearly.

"What signal? No. That's just—I don't know, an echo. A

fluctuation. Look, the—that thing is just fragments now, right? I took care of it six months ago. You saw it go up. This is something else. Tell them to reconfigure—yeah.” Jim sighed. “Yeah. I’m coming.”

Ellie knew she had changed, too. The house had grown strange, filled with alienation. She’d watched water spiral away and felt adrift, like she was spinning into darkness with it, clinging to nothing. She’d heard the front door close and knew Jim was gone again.

SIX MONTHS BEFORE, JIM HAD COME HOME FROM ANOTHER bad one. Ellie had stopped counting the bad ones by then. Assignments often took him away for a week, a month, sometimes a season. Usually he came back no worse for wear. She’d jokingly ask if he’d saved the world again and he’d laugh and seem vaguely relieved.

But six months ago he came home barely speaking. Ellie pieced together that he’d spent a week in a hotel, apparently alone, before he returned, a full week of down-time and still he came through the door of his home with his jaw set like he expected an interrogation. He stashed a new box in the safe room. Ellie didn’t bother to ask how it had gone, but the next Sunday morning he broke into tears when she surprised him with pancakes. She made empty motions of consolation. They both knew that after this many years, any pain he brought home was his to own. The work may have needed him, but he was the one who kept going back.

The next morning she’d stayed home from work. She had

to hunt for the old key; Jim had moved it from the kitchen drawer but she knew every nook of their house. She found it in the box of a false power outlet in the garage, a spot so obvious she half-wondered if that's what he secretly wanted.

Inside the safe room Jim kept souvenirs from the job, from the Navy, from law school before that. She'd seen all those. More of a mystery were his computer and file boxes that smelled of dust.

The computer required a password, and Ellie was a little surprised when her second try worked. Eight digits, their anniversary date with every other digit one lower and the rest one higher. Just like half their other passwords.

A clean desktop on the computer. She found the most recent documents in a folder with a long string of random letters for a name, as arcane as his password was plain. Video files. Photographs. Scans. Text documents. After all those unquestioning years, Ellie explored her husband's secret life.

A series of screen grabs showed analysis of electromagnetic signals detected by NSA devices installed in commercial cell towers. The descriptions of the signals meant nothing to Ellie.

A screenshot of a map with the towers' locations and the dates of the readings highlighted. Huge spreadsheets of residents, employees, and visitors tracked from tax records, social media, cellphone signals. Brief reports on correlations in the data. Addresses and names.

In a grainy surveillance-camera video a young man in a hooded sweatshirt staggered across the narrow lobby of a derelict apartment building, clutching something tight to himself.

A flash of light and a sudden moment of static, then the video resumed. The man was on the ground, splayed in wet pieces as something fungal and grasping lurched weakly out of his ruin. It twitched feebly, over and over, and Ellie realized the lobby's broken front window was completely gone, shattered all around, and there were little pinprick flashes from the darkness coming closer. Three men and a woman in gas masks and body armor, shooting the bizarre shape. One of them wasn't shooting but carried something long and bulky. It turned out to be a flamethrower.

In a gruesome close-up photo, smoke blurry in the foreground, a hand held the dead young man's viscera-soaked face upright for posterity. The face was Asian; Ellie couldn't have said more than that. The hand—the blotch of freckles near the index finger, the wedding ring just slightly too tight—was Jim's.

Ellie closed the photo and the video and sat still for a long time. Some rational part of her brain was putting a story together. Jim must have begun hiring out as a consultant on Hollywood action films. He was helping them make the story look convincing. She sifted through the dusty file boxes, breathing heavily, stifling panic without realizing it.

The newest box was on the floor next to the others. Inside, curiously, sat a bowling-ball bag. It looked full but felt too lightweight. Inside it she found an aluminum box. Some instinct told her to wait, to leave it, to let Jim explain. Stronger instincts prevailed. She opened the box to a silvery glow, soft and strong as love.



THINGS FELT DIFFERENT AFTER THAT. BETTER. SHE LEFT THE wonder in its case, the case in its bag, the bag in its box, and left the safe room as if she'd never intruded. She never felt a need to ask Jim a word about it. Her old worry felt absurd.

She and Jim had been disintegrating for so many years that deep joy felt strange. It wasn't the same as her love for her husband or her children. It was detached, unfocused, inchoate, expectant. She felt no urge to share it. She had found a contentment that was sufficient to itself, for a while.

At first Jim and the kids seemed relieved. Jim let it settle into the way of things, a new kind of emotional background noise. He needed Ellie and Joanie and Edwin to be happy and healthy. He needed their demands to be simple. It had been years since he had much to offer them in return. Ellie's new attitude calmed him.

It calmed Edwin, too. She came when he called and she helped when he needed it. He didn't distinguish this new joy in her life from her old joy in him.

Joanie was another matter. Gifted and volatile, Joanie played moods the way other prodigies played the violin. But the next screaming match was one-way. Joanie was overwhelmed and lashed out at her mother, always the safest target, and Ellie only smiled.

"What are you smiling at?" Joanie sobbed.

"Nothing, dear." Ellie was doing paperwork, revising sales contracts, the kind of detailed but mindless work she liked best

those days.

“Nothing? What’s that supposed to mean? Didn’t you even hear what I said? I could be suspended!”

“It means I’m happy. That’s all.” Ellie looked up at her, smiling still. “Maybe someday you will be, too.”

Edwin played a game on his tablet, oblivious behind his headphones. Joanie retreated in misery, baffled at the vast indifference of her mother’s love.

Over the next few months Joanie’s troubles at school skyrocketed. Even her father noticed. His flat silence cracked into anger and resentment at Joanie for acting out and at Ellie for letting things slip.

But things began to change for Ellie, too. Her bliss felt increasingly aimless. It would not fix itself on Jim, on either of the kids, on anything. Even sneaking back into the safe room to hold the wonder that Jim still kept there did no good. It only told her to wait. She began to feel lost.

They had a bad night. Each screamed about the failures of the other. Neither faced their private terrors: Jim’s certainty that his family was slipping away at last, Ellie’s rising panic that the happiness she’d found might wither away unfulfilled. It took days for that feeling to return.

But life went along.

Until the morning Jim got the call.

“THAT THING IS JUST fragments now, right? I took care of it six months ago.” The words hung in Ellie’s doubtful mind, growing, feeding.

Of course he had not “taken care” of it. He had brought it home. But it had not spoken to him, not in any way that mattered, not beyond the subtle urge to keep it safe. It hadn’t spoken to Jim’s colleagues, the strangers on the other end of the line with their guns and flames. It had spoken to Ellie.

Suddenly she became afraid.

She hurried stumbling down the safe-room stairs. She opened the box, the bag, the case. She lifted the wonder inside, glowing softly. As soon as she touched it, she gave a loud cry of relief. She realized what she had missed. She felt it in a sudden euphoria, stronger than when she had nursed her babies, stronger than anything she had felt with her husband. The connection had deepened over the months. It was all so simple, so pure. Everything was ready at last.

Ellie watched the security monitor for ten unthinking hours until she saw Jim drive into the driveway. He leapt out of the car and the strangers from the video tumbled out of the passenger and rear doors, racing to keep up as he rushed for the house.

By then Ellie was at the top of the stairs, staring at the inside of the safe-room door. She had a chance, an irreplaceable chance, to bring into the world and nurture something unique and precious. Something rarer and more profound even than her own offspring. She thought of the gift she could offer to them, and to Jim, and ecstatic tears lined her face.

In silence the hard, silvery shape in her hands, streaked with faintly shifting white, asked a question. Ellie thought perhaps its entire existence was the asking of that question, and at

last she could hear. With all of the heart she had once called her own, she answered.

She opened the door and the seed began to bloom.

Acknowledgements

SPECIAL THANKS TO THE KICKSTARTER BACKERS WHO MADE this book possible: Jonathan Abbott, Achab, Oliver Adam, Lance O. Adams, Joe Adams, John Addis, Waseem Aftab, Jason Aiken, Dan & Emily Alban, Tim Aldridge, Caleb Alexander, Alise, Tom Allman, Alphonse, Jessica Alsop, Mykel Alvis, Omar Amador, Hsile Amune, Chad Anctil, Svend Andersen, Jesper Anderson, Nels Anderson, Christopher Anderson, Martin Andersson, Tim Wettrek Andersson, Espen Andreasen, Andrew, Chris Angelucci, Anonymouse, Antero, Egoitz Gago Antón, Astral Ape, Mark J. Appleton, Mark Argent, John Paul Ashenfelter, Hughie Ashman, Ross Athey, Doug Atkinson, Russell ‘Guplor’ Auer, Dave Auer, Richard Austrum III, Dave Avery, Mark Ayres, Frank “PurpleTentacle” B., Badgerish, Norbert Baer, David “Rugose” Bagdan, Morgan Baikie, Candice Bailey, John N. Baker, Paul Baldowski, Rafe Ball, Bill Barnett, Matthew Barr, Paul Barrowcliffe, jason e. bean, Michael Beck, David Bell, Dustin Bell, Ben W Bell, Marina Belli, Jim Bellmore, Paul Bendall, Scott Bennett, Eli Berg-Maas, Jaron Bernstein, René Beron, Anders Bersten, J. Michael Bestul, Brian Bethel, Isaac Betty, Tim Betz, Thomas Beuleke, Nicholas Charles Bianchi, Robert Biddle, bie, Adrian Bigland, Craig Bishell, Robert Biskin, Richie Bisso, Jan Bjørndalen, Kristian A. Bjørkelo, Chastity Blackwell, John Blaikie, Ken Blakey, John Bobita, Thomas Bockert, Jacob Boersma, Sean Bohan, Daniel Boisvert, Jean-Francois Boivin, Jeff (Icarus) & Malinda (Ophelia) Boles, Matthew Bongers, Nathaniel Boothe, Professor

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