

Manuscript: Ithliam

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Prologue

Sometimes things change right before your eyes. Gradual and uninteresting, it creeps, until you're so deep...you can no longer dig yourself out. Trapped and dying, you make your confessions and search for reasons to this end. One thought stands out among the many: If I am truly in control of my life, then why am I trapped and dying?

Part 1

Chapter 1 — The Asylum

Through potholes and sudden turns, the brooding figure behind the wheel followed the winding, thin dirt road towards the isolated, dead town of Ithliam. It was barely past midnight — there were no stars in the sky. The moon was hidden and the high-pitched whine of harsh winds rattled the car doors. The man paid no heed, except to wave the smoke of his spent cigarette from his eyes.

As he turned a hard corner, bright lightning crossed the sky, blinding him for a moment against the gloomy storm. Clouds parted briefly, revealing a swollen, red harvest moon, and then just as quickly, it was hidden away by new blackness and empty shadows. Unpleasant vibrations broke the heavens, reshaping the sky with unyielding atmospheric violence.

Familiar things help in unstable times, so Henry lit another smoke using the car lighter while keeping one eye on the road. One of those cheap brands that smelled like shit but had the satisfying taste. For a second there, just as the ember glowed brightest, he was comfortable. Like sharing an intimate moment with an old friend, it didn't last long, and was easily forgotten.

Another hard right and he was off the road. The hot ember landed in his lap and a tree loomed directly in his path. Tapping the brakes with a subtle turn of the wheel brought the car cleanly back onto the road. These kinds of close calls were frequent, and had been since he had been approaching town. Almost as an afterthought, he brushed the ember away, guiding it harmlessly to the wet floor mat.

He could already see it in the distance, cutting through the rain and fog like it wanted to be seen. The Asylum. An ancient iron-laced granite tower a hundred feet high, looming over a sprawling estate. At the centre of town, it was surrounded by those whom had served it, a town built for it, and ultimately destined to die for it. Ancient history, he thought, but reawakened evil was often angry and desperate. The Asylum would be sealed by more than just rusted locks and heavy stone doors.

With a certain grimness, the dark man checked his inside vest pocket for the little brown book that would get him inside. Magick doors needed magick words and the book held those words along with countless other arcane symbols which littered its pages. Elegant astral cursive, visible only to a precious few like Henry. Part gift and part curse, the magick had trapped him with circumstance, retraining his will with the bindings of obligation. He certainly didn't want to be here.

Suddenly, there was a loud thump on the roof and the car was forced left, then right. Henry managed to keep it on the gravel, but something was scratching at the metal above and dragging on the wind. It howled and banged, some sort of ravenous monster was tearing at the roof determined to get inside the

hard way. Henry knew the roof wouldn't hold it back for long.

He reached for his pistol sitting on the passenger seat, but it wasn't there. He felt around as he kept his eyes on the road, but it must have fallen down to the floor on that last hard right. He didn't bother looking. Instead, he hit the brakes, a full and sudden stop after a slight pick up in speed. Whatever was on the car stayed there; thick claws punctured the roof and began peeling the metal away.

Freed from driving, Henry grabbed the pistol from the floor and blindly shot over his shoulder. He hit the gas pedal with his foot while handling the wheel with his off hand. Something large rolled off the back of the vehicle, landing with a splash in the mud. The car raced steadily up the road. He didn't even bother looking back.

Likewise, he didn't look up at the nearly shredded roof. Instead, he almost casually waved a hand in its general direction, the metal reformed itself, as did the interior, seamlessly, until no damage could be seen. He placed the pistol back on the passenger side seat and snapped his fingers, a familiar click told him the gun was reloaded.

Besides his weapon, he had other concerns. He thought about the little brown book again, how every magical symbol he'd ever discovered was written in it by him in a very particular way. It mattered a great deal to him, represented unending hours of strenuous labour. Always with him, the book grew and changed with him. Sometimes Henry would imagine that his essence was recorded in it. Should another mage of note ever read it, a sense of him would come through, preserved by the record of his reasoning. Following his thoughts and deeds at the finest levels of detail.

He was brought back to the present by the overwhelming sensation of pure hateful malevolence that oozed from the Asylum. It was just up ahead, the glutinous black heart of this deserted ghost town. Approaching a closed iron gate, he pressed his foot softly on the brake pedal, the car slowed to a stop. The headlights cast a halo across the thick iron bars, revealing parts of the 50-foot granite walls running in either direction before quickly disappearing among the trees. Sharp spikes bent inward along the middle and top of the gate, suggesting it was designed to keep things in, not out.

Leaving his car parked, Henry walked over to the sizable rusted chain with the imposing padlock. A small silver hammer appeared in his hand as if from nowhere and with it, he gave the padlock a very light tap, it twisted and fell away. Long dead vines the colour of dried blood lined the gnarled iron bars right to the top of the gate, blocking most of the view. The unknown fear breathed its stink from beyond his mind's eye, his astral vision could not penetrate the grounds. This place was sealed by powerful forces and caution was called for.

Surely the great beast — the master of this domain, the root of all evil — would sense his approach. Let it look down on his long walk to its front door, the slick mud smelling of blood and death, the air heavy and choking. This night, a creeping doom, an ancient evil reawakened, stalked Ithliam. The deeds of the damned could not go unpunished, but first he had to get past this iron gate.

Henry dragged the left side open a few feet before it ceased and refused to budge, screams of protest from the hinges echoed across the landscape. The other side of the gate wouldn't move at all, unused in decades, its shape had warped and twisted like the rest of this place. There was enough room to squeeze through, but his car would have to stay behind with much of the equipment.

The moment he crossed over the threshold, a strange burning itch began in the soles of his feet. Working its way up to his knees like an insect burrowing through his flesh, an evil taint spread throughout his lower extremities. Even the rain couldn't wash this place clean. There was a deep obvious rot just under the surface threatening to drag him down with the rest of the shadows. It was never lonely in hell, he thought, as his mischievous smile betrayed an almost sinister humour.

The flecks of gold in Henry's bright amber eyes glowed intensely. Waves of energy spread from the centre of his forehead down through his body, out his legs and into the ground. The taint retreated rapidly, the grounds around him dried a little within range of his aura. The rain fell at a light drizzle for a dozen yards in all directions. Yet, even as he walked through the gate, the storm crashed around him, endlessly trying to penetrate his protections.

Lightning pulsed in the storm, cutting a thick fog, defusing a moonless gray. Shadow covered everything with soot, while an isolating fear traveled the winds bringing with it strange moans and distant thunder. It wasn't the noise of the storm that suppressed the land, but the pervasive silence of all life. This town was an open grave, and the Asylum, its headstone.

Its decaying granite walls marked the edge of its immediate territory. Lined with very old trees, the stones were marred by thick cracks where nearby tree roots had grown too close and too large. The grounds were grown over by uneven long stemmed grass and weeds. This was old land, there was powerful magick here.

Henry felt excitement run through him, clawing at the edges of his mind and threatening to spill over. He steadied his nerves, focused his attention on the task at hand. With fresh resolve, he looked up. In the centre of it all, standing dominant, the black Asylum was wrought of ancient granite, surrounded by decay. Rust bled from deep cracks and iron circles. Tarnished copper lined the thick bottle glass windows, several lacking glass altogether, some not much more than face-sized view holes.

Standing only a few hundred yards away, it was a fine example of corruption, defilement, and ultimately ruin. It has been said that evil withers the strong and humbles the fool. This place contained and nurtured great evil, it was infected by it. In a way, it became evil, too. Like a battery, it collected the energies of its victims, intent on the return of its master. Again, ancient history: its master had been awake for some time now, or Henry wouldn't have come this far.

A slight smile of clinical interest still played upon his thin red lips. He was close now, he could feel it — a pure, uninterrupted hate for all life. It came from the grounds, the Asylum, and finally from something deep underground. A dying god, still drawing lesser evil with each strained breath, granting sanctuary to other fiends, still hoping to increase its power, even as it passed into the twilight of its kind.

Soon, the doorway would open and beckon him to enter. Henry had come for one very simple reason, to kill the true Ithliam, a creature from a time when the world was more primitive and hostile, the town's namesake and master. It called the Asylum home, so through the tower Henry would travel, as deep as it went, as long as it took.

He lowered his head against the wind, placed his foot on a large flat stone and with some effort cut through the pouring rain, water splashing to his sides. He took long strides, avoiding the deeper puddles, lifting his knees high, he stepped over the taller grass and in this way crossed the entire grounds. He could easily see the large magickal door as he approached, glowing with ethereal light. It looked perfectly normal to the mundane eye, but when he looked from within, it blazed into the night like a beacon. It called to him, and he imagined, a few others as well.

Nothing was safe from the Asylum out in the open. The storm was becoming something more. There was a renewed viciousness to it that began to penetrate Henry's aura. The wind had risen to shrieking, rattling the nerves, pounding the yard and anything in it. It tore trees from the surrounding lands and threw them high into the air. The fence strained against the softened ground, rain whipped in large circles while more lightning flashed across the heavens. His presence was known.

He had to move quickly, careful to avoid the festering mud, he raced down the broken stone pathway. Treacherous with slick rain, the stones led him directly to the magick door at the base of the Asylum's

outer wall. It gave no retreat to the weather, no overhang to protect him. It seemed to be carved within the wall itself.

Henry carefully approached the round ledge beneath the door and when nothing lethal happened, he took a few more steps until he stood directly before it. He felt heavy with the magick pressed against him, when he closed his eyes, it was blinding. Every piece of metal on his body was vibrating and getting warmer, right down to the buckle of his belt and the silver buttons that lined his fine black cloak.

Odd vapours wrapped around his boots. A sickening, unnatural yellow mist bubbled up from the gray mud. It stank like dead flesh and poison. Could there be bodies hidden here? Breathing became difficult, and at times he caught himself holding his breath, not exactly sure for how long. Was something watching him right now?

Dark faces appeared and disappeared out in the trees. Obscured by the branches, they watched Henry approach the Asylum. Unseen and angry, they crawled over one another anxious for a better view, screaming with rage, yet the storm silenced them. They pressed against the gate but would not enter the yard for fear of Ithliam's attention. There was a yearning desperation in them. Henry was trespassing where they could not follow and it drove them mad.

Scheming faces in the shadows formulated their plans — something primitive like an ambush. Henry would come back this way eventually, assuming he survived the Asylum, and when he did, the scheming faces would be here to execute their justice upon him. They knew the dark man with the pale face intimately, and they had reason to despise him.

The miserable creatures scattered backwards deeper into the trees, as Henry suddenly turned and looked their general direction. The forest formed a perfect veil of secrecy for Ithliam's nefarious deeds, and served equally well as cover for whatever lurked in shadows.

He turned back towards the door again and the faces reappeared, snarling, bitter from long nights of hiding in the shadows and long days trapped in shallow graves. They craved the flesh of the living now, extracting the fluids through hollow fangs. Tentacles for tongues fell out of their mouths, dripping slime and venom. They were always hungry. Could any of them remember being human anymore?

They were unable to enter the grounds because of a binding contract. This land belonged to another much more powerful fiend. Ithliam didn't tolerate the trespass of minor evils, preferring not to share the souls he'd trapped within his great Asylum. Invoking envy in the creatures of the night, for those with supernatural senses, Ithliam could often be heard mocking them, laughing at their impotence. Both hated and feared, the lord of this domain had absolute authority.

And so they waited for their chance, the scheming faces with their endless ambition for more. They ate what they could, mostly animals, starving many nights, a hundred miles away from any living person, yet unable to leave for more fertile killing fields. Unable to fly or enter the mist, they'd been left to this damned unlife by an uncaring creator. Just another faceless monster they'd turned on and eaten decades ago, and so they enviously watched the man approach the Asylum door.

Henry moved with great care and caution. Years of experience had taught him the value of patience. He could already tell the storm would get much worse and he'd have to enter the Asylum quickly. Only a few feet away now — was there something familiar about it? He couldn't shake the feeling he'd been here before.

The great stone entrance was rounded at the top and made of smooth, dark granite, a masterpiece of detail with functional implication. There were no visible hinges, although large copper plates had been pressed into the centre about chest high. It would seem the door pushed inward, but the strength it

would take to move it was staggering. This was a door made for a giant.

The colours of metal and rock struck him, it was beautiful, the stunning work of a master craftsman. He marveled at the genius of its creation. It humbled him to stand before such skill, yet also saddened him to see it neglected like this, left to the elements by the living and abused by the dead. It was a fine relic.

Shrill whistles caught Henry's attention, wind through nearby tree branches shook dead leaves to the cold autumn ground. The trees were sick and wilted, their fingers digging into soft, wet clay, desperately soaking up warm rain. Worms, forced from their homes by the rain, squirmed over exposed roots while dark sap crept down their thick bark.

Watching the tree line closely, Henry shook his cloak free. Running his hands over his face, he pressed his palms into his eyes, rubbing the tension away. He could feel a strange cold radiating from a silver plaque at eye level to the left of the door.

It was a commemorative plate marking the first opening of the Asylum, October 15, 1905. The tiniest hint of rust bled from the writing. The plate was tarnished and warped from season after season of cold and hot, many years of harsh prairie storms had worn the silver down to a dull bronze. His waking eyes couldn't make out the hand-etched, elegant round cursive, however, when he closed his eyes, he could see the master's name, Ithliam, glowing brightly in a light that gave no illumination.

There was no doubt where this door led — creature was here, all the signs pointed to it. Deep in the bowels of this place like festering feces, stinking of evil and hate, it hungered for more souls to prolong its life. In great pain, injured, but still powerful and near immortal. Capable of earthly manifestation so long as it kept feeding, it might heal any of its wounds eventually. Only Henry's magick stood a chance at a final solution — he'd been preparing all his waking life.

The little brown book was secured with a thin silver chain in the inside left pocket of Henry's vest. It resembled a bible, with yellow, pressed cotton pages, the binding was hemp. There was a thick leather cover, a circle was burned on one side. Lifting it from its protection under his fob watch, in the upper vest pocket, he took an uncertain breath.

He leafed carefully through its pages looking for a special word — his finger stopped at a glyph on a page near the back of the book. He read the word or symbol inwardly as he lifted his arm and rested his palm on the large copper panel. It was warm to the touch. Pressing hard against the metal, he visualized the symbol clearly in his mind's eye.

A thin layer of frost slowly worked its way down his arm and time itself seemed to crawl along just behind it. The rain still fell in sheets around Henry, but he could see every drop. There was a long, deep moan from the trees instead of shrill whistles and the bushes and weeds swayed slowly while the clouds had stopped forming new shapes in the darkness. The sky was like a painting, and a single bolt of lightning very slowly streaked down toward Henry and the Asylum.

Though Henry was moving at normal speed, his chest rose and fell as the cold rapidly consumed him, frost inching its way up and across his cloak. His feet were stuck to the ground by frozen mud and the fluid in his eyes had solidified, fixing his gaze upon the door. He was trapped, ancient magick working against his spell, trying to resist his will.

Henry didn't feel helpless or concerned in any way, as one might expect from being frozen solid while who knows what lurked nearby. He did feel a great deal of pain, however, which might have explained his pragmatic calm. There was a ringing in his ears that just wouldn't quit and he found himself thinking about a bathroom. He hadn't gone since before he'd left his motel for this godforsaken place.

When the lightning hit the door, it ran over Henry, penetrating his body on its way to the ground. Ice sprayed in all directions as time caught up, throwing Henry hard against the granite surface. A loud

crack of thunder punctuated the first hesitant movements of the great stone door as it timidly creaked inward.

Fire now coursed through Henry's every cell, indescribable pain draining out of him as quickly as the electricity had surged through him in its chaotic escape from the sky. The ice had gone deeper than the surface of his body, he felt every muscle ache — the cold had done more harm than the lightning. He found himself on the ground; his head throbbed where he'd hit the frosty stone.

Blood ran freely down his face, instantly freezing on the ground. He rolled the wound over the frozen mud and the blood quickly stopped flowing. Its freezing burn paled in comparison to a dozen other pains that competed for his suffering attention.

With a grim effort, he called his strength back to him, the living fire of magick cloaked him in a safe blue aura. He reestablished control of his extremities and light sensations of healing warmth ran through him. He rose shakily to his feet and took a deep, regenerating breath. A shiver ran through him as he looked through the door. Seeing only a few steps into the darkness, he turned for a last look over the grounds and the surreal patterns of rain gliding through the air.

There was no one to tend the yard, it was wild and primitive, a forest of knee-high dandelions and crab grass. Taking over the inner pathways, the weeds slowly broke the stone away over years of persistent invasion. The old swing set had become weathered and stretched. Its chains, rusted through, swinging gently.

Henry could see the shadow cast by the Asylum across the ruined fountain in the centre of the main yard. He could tell because of the shape of their growth, the plants struggled in the areas where direct sunlight never reached.

He found himself hesitating, playing games in his head, not quite ready to chance the darkness. He felt his heart beating harder and a cold sweat ran down his neck, but he had to go in. He imagined the first few footsteps, thought about his feet crossing the line between out here and in there. He was somehow hung up on that first step. Quit stalling, he told himself. Get on with it.

The rain came down heavier. Each of the thick and murky drops was a bomb forming craters in brown puddles. The shrill wind crowded in again, muffling the sounds of trees swaying and thunder clapping. The clouds came alive just as Henry placed his little brown book safely in his pocket. He wore a self-satisfied grin. He didn't have all night.

That's what commitment was, the hard walk, the long route through places best avoided. Some perspective was gained through such trial by fire, but years later, Henry would look back and wonder if it was worth the price. It was what it was.

Henry couldn't ignore the gnawing at the edge of his mind anymore. The smell of half-dried urine and vomit wafted over him from inside the Asylum on dry, fetid air. As he stood in the threshold mostly protected from the rain, taking a slow measure and a deep breath, he choked on the bitter odour. He tasted bile in the back of his throat but he kept it down, turned, and walked inside.

A dead silence held its grip on the old Asylum and dust covered everything. The walls were made of polished granite like the exterior — although chipped and scratched and covered with narrow cracks, they were much less decayed than outside. Broken glass had been swept to the sides and forgotten papers littered the floor. Old footprints could be seen where the dust seemed new and years of layered cobwebs stretched from the ceiling to the floor. This place hadn't changed much in a long time.

To the right was a small office with a thick plexiglass shield separating it from the rest of the entrance way. It looked to be a more recent addition given the Asylum's age, a small slot above a shelf allowed documents to be passed from this side to the other.

On the other side, there was a desk with nothing on it and a very uncomfortable looking chair. There didn't seem to be any direct means from this area to access the staff side of reception, though quite visible through the plexiglass was some sort of multipurpose area.

Answering a familiar tickle on his neck, Henry turned to look outside and saw the rain was still coming down hard. It looked like a curtain or waterfall when seen from a dry place, a fog had settled low and covered the yard. He could no longer see the fountain or the swings. The pathway disappeared a few yards out, leaving the gate and car deep in the ethereal gray.

He also couldn't see the shadowy forms just beyond the limit of his view. Hundreds of faces watching him with lustful eyes, envious of his passage through unholy ground. Unaware of their intentions, Henry thought himself as safe as one could expect in such a place, had he listened closely, he might have heard heavy breathing. Meanwhile, thunder invaded the silence the Asylum offered, quiet but not peaceful, subtle vibrations ran through the stone betraying a deep unfulfilled tension. Henry reached out and pulled the door closed, suspending himself in total pitch.

It didn't bother Henry — with his unique gifts, he could see something well enough even in the near total darkness if it was close enough. He just had to close his eyes and the shapes that mattered would appear. Sometimes this told him more about an object than he might see with his waking eyes, an aura or a shine of certain colours, but most of the time, there was just a dull, glowing outline that confirmed the object was there.

He didn't carry a flashlight, although he did carry wooden matches and a pack of cigarettes. He took each from the same pocket and lit a smoke, taking a long smooth tug after which he put the cigs and matches back in his pocket. This was a big place, and he knew he wouldn't get through it all in one night, but he had a hunch that it wouldn't take long for something significant to happen. He'd just wander around a bit and what would be, would be.

A great hall lay directly in front of him. Along each side were large, rubber-coated iron doors with round view holes at eye level. They couldn't be forced open when locked, at least not from the inside — they locked at the top, bottom and sides with iron rods leading down from the roof. Henry imagined that somewhere else in the building was a lever that could open each cell. Some of the doors were open, some closed and some had fallen from their hinges and lay half way into the rooms they once guarded.

As he took a single step in towards the great hall, his shoe hit some glass busted out from a nearby view hole, sending a loud noise out for all to hear. He stopped for the briefest of moments before he continued slowly forwards past the glass, goose-necking from one place to another, letting his gaze dart around without specific purpose, taking it all in. He could smell the evil of this place calling him deeper, but nothing reacted to the noise.

A malevolent energy welcomed him, he had to open his eyes for a quick second to clear his mind. He was no longer so concerned with subtlety, he was a very heavy man, though he didn't look it. The silence broke occasionally as his thick-soled boots fell like irregular heartbeats. The sound echoed down the hall along new currents washing the dust from the air, disturbing many things that had grown restful in this place.

The floor was made of thick oak, a vast hardwood cover, easy to clean, easy to wax, worn from years of use. Even before this place was condemned, there were shallow grooves where wheeled carts had rolled the same pattern for countless decades. Several strips of wood had worked away from the walls, revealing worn stone underneath. Much of the original interior design was in place, a sterile pastel green theme with a few modern additions here and there.

Up in the corners hung large, low-tech speakers — they were something straight from the 70s, with big,

brown fake wood paneling like those old station wagons. Thick wires ran along the ceiling edge, glued to the stone, while faded tape held coloured paper frills around the edges. Henry could almost hear the endless drone of easy listening music that once played these halls on a continuous loop.

As he walked, the tiny ember from his cigarette bobbed through the darkness like a firefly. Once he was further down the hallway, he ran his fingers along the wall, admiring the cold touch of granite, its tactile character made the place more real. Another pull on his cig, an even slower one, taking his time, feeling that nicotine sink into his lungs, into his blood, taming the nervous laughter. He lived for this kind of thing.

Henry tried to make as little noise as possible, but he knew it was futile. On principle, he kept trying but inevitably the wood creaked, or something near him moved. He accidentally kicked a book to the side and it filled the hall with the sound of shuffling papers. He stopped and for a long time just listened.

Then, near the first door on his left, a sudden and deafening electric static wail came over the speakers. Henry covered his ears while his knees buckled. The sound was maddening and lasted several seconds before it abruptly stopped, leaving the place much as it had been, mostly silent, except for Henry's laboured breathing. He could still hear ringing in his ears as he stood up and faced the door, shaking and tense.

It was locked but he could see through the view hole by pressing his face against the dirty glass. It closely resembled a classroom — there were desks in rows and one large adult-sized desk at what he assumed was the front of the room. There was a tall chalkboard that ringed the room, but he couldn't quite make out the writing. It was with white chalk, yellowed from time, written by a young hand low on the board. A breath caught in his throat as he noticed empty cages with leather straps and buckles behind the desks at the back of the room.

Turning away in disgust, he thought he heard something from the classroom, prompting him to stop moving, even breathing. Listening, straining with the effort of it, he heard nothing more unusual and after a while, dared to breathe. With a passing glance through the thick glass view hole, he turned away. Had he lingered a moment longer he may have noticed a single piece of chalk begin writing slowly on the chalk board, always over the same letters, the same phrase:

I deserve to be caged. I deserve my punishment.

Henry crossed the hall toward the next door, this one was open so he walked inside, breaking through cobwebs on his way through. The hinges gave a short note of protest as he bumped the door and the webs made his nose itchy. He almost sneezed, but he managed to hold it off.

This was some kind of janitor's workshop with old rusted tools strung about, scattered nails and screws, and a waist-high workbench in the middle. A faded poster of a topless pinup girl hung on the wall. There were no windows, not even on the door, and the dust was heavy in the air and oppressing. In the corner on the floor and part way up the wall was a dark stain. After crossing the room and shuffling around the workbench, Henry crouched down, taking a good look at the stain.

Someone had died here: This was old blood unfaded with time on the cold granite. This was so unusual that Henry didn't notice something rising slowly behind him and a moment later, he was too busy watching someone else's memory play out vividly in his head. With a bright flash, like a migraine, intense and painful, he was shown the last moments of the poor janitor's life.

There was a heavy set man sitting on a stool, afraid and shaking. Spittle ran down his chin, a weak moan escaped his lips. Something slammed against the locked door of this very room, trying to get to him. The man held a hammer clutched tightly to his chest, his sweaty hands constantly readjusting the

grip. He had already pissed himself.

When the beast crashed through the door, it bowled the janitor over, sending the stool flying at the far wall. With a single horrific bite, the creature bit the janitor's head cleanly off. Blood splashed the stone wall just before the beast took the rest of him down. Henry couldn't see it very clearly but it looked like a man, sort of — a very large build, with unusually long arms, a wide lower jaw, huge teeth, and a thin forked tongue, slobbering all over itself. Howling in delight, it licked its thick, rubbery lips and raced back out into the hallway heading deeper into the towering Asylum.

Henry opened his eyes, still suffering the aftershocks of the vision — he barely ducked in time as a hammer flew at his head. The rusted metal sparked across the rock wall and came to rest a few feet away. The angry red outline of the dead janitor appeared near the blood stain, headless and swaying from side to side, all the more creepy in the surrounding silence.

Rising to his feet, Henry felt a great deal of sympathy for the janitor. He knew his name was Leonard, he could still read it on the name tag pinned to the apparition's chest. What he'd become in death was a commentary on how he died, taken by something unnatural and was now doomed by it. Could he see with no eyes? Headless Leonard seemed to see Henry easy enough and was advancing towards him.

The ghost took another swing, this time with its bare hands, which Henry easily avoided. Leonard's arm went through the spot Henry no longer occupied. He howled silently in frustration, then stood there facing Henry. They had watched each other for a long time when Leonard spoke words that made no sound. They formed carefully and slowly in Henry's mind so that he would understand the intention without error.

"Turn back", he said. "This place is my doom, don't let it be yours." The janitor then disappeared.

The hammer lay innocently on a pile of old newspaper, as the faint smell of sulfur spread through the room. All the commotion had kicked up a terrible dust that made Henry cough — it was a rusty dust, the kind that stuck in the throat. He tried breathing very little, putting his arm over his nose to block it out and left the room.

Out in the main hall again, Henry looked at his watch, an old manual wind — the hour hand said two and the minute hand said 13. Looking down either side of the hall, he could see the entrance very clearly and the classroom door. He thought about turning back, exploring more tomorrow night when there was more time, but he wasn't ready to leave just yet.

There was some time left, but not much — the sun was only a few hours away. He could handle the sun for very short periods of time, though it blistered his skin after a few minutes of direct exposure. The wounds healed, but they hurt, one of the many side effects of his unique gifts. There was more to see before that happened, however, wanting a good idea of what he was up against, he'd planned for several nights of this if necessary. The Asylum was a big place, and Ithliam had lived here a long time.

Not so very far away, maybe an hour or so in the bad weather, Henry was staying in a motel room up near the old highway. If he left this place by four, he could make it back with room to spare, pressured to hurry, he felt more anxiety. So much of this place remained unexplored — how many nights would it take? As many as it took to find and kill the beast.

Henry jumped as a loud bang echoed from further down the hall. An unnatural wind howled past him, crashing through the dust and debris. A chill ran down Henry's spine, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. Papers were scattered and two-way doors throughout the interior rocked an inch out and then in, almost like the place took a breath.

Heavy layers of dark mold crusted the dead fluorescent lights, that sagged downward from the ballasts. Had Henry looked back, he might have noticed the janitor's door was closing all on its own. He might

have looked for the janitor but he wouldn't have seen him. The place itself moved with infernal will, the Asylum was a tool controlled by an old power, and nothing escaped its notice. The lock made a soft click as the door closed completely, but Henry didn't notice.

He was more interested in what he was seeing down the hall — little dancing orbs of light. They varied in size and colour and for reasons unknown, were completely visible to his natural eyes, but not his magickal sight. Just phantoms, not even enough energy to manifest ethereally. Just harmless spectres as unaware of Henry as any child preoccupied with a new toy.

Driven by baser instincts, Henry found himself looking for a bathroom. The water was obviously not running any more at the Asylum, but he'd still rather use a toilet than piss in the corner. He frowned at the thought of more urine wafting through the hall, fouling his mood. At least the place was clear of rats or pigeons, so he wasn't stepping in feces as he walked.

A little ways down the left-hand hallway, he found a door with a small sign denoting the outline of a man. With a sigh of relief, he pushed on the door, but it was stuck. He pushed again with a particular symbol in his mind, yellow flashed across his eyes as a great primal strength coursed through him, a brute strength. His eyes glowed in the dark like an animal's, while power surged through him for no more than a couple seconds.

But it wasn't enough. The door was stuck tight and if he pushed any harder, he'd crash right through it. He really had to piss now, yet, as a practical man, he understood that some things just happen no matter what you plan for, so he improvised.

He pushed on the girls' bathroom door to his right and it swung open easily. He stepped inside and was greeted by the pleasant smell of mint, as if the place had been cleaned yesterday, though clearly it hadn't been. He wondered casually why the girls' bathroom always smelled better than the boys', didn't the same janitor clean both?

The mirrors were intact, and the room was clean, but dusty like everything in this building. And empty — there was no toilet paper or paper towels. The only window was blocked from the outside, mud and dirt had closed it up, probably on purpose. He noticed all this as the door swung shut behind him.

Henry entered the last stall, closed its swinging door, and slid the latch over. This was more of a habit than any real precaution, but it helped him feel more comfortable peeing in a strange place. He usually felt a little paranoid when his pants were down.

Leaning forward, he raised the seat and unzipped his pants, relieving himself — the sound of urine hitting porcelain filled the room. If he'd been paying more attention, Henry might have noticed the soft dragging footsteps enter the bathroom and the near silent shuffle of little feet entering one of the nearby stalls. He finished his business, tucked his shirt in his pants, and buttoned the lower end of his vest.

Opening the stall door, he walked over to the sink and looked in the mirror. He thought he looked good, all things considered, white as printer paper — the contrast with his black outfit made him appear even more pale. He fit right in with this haunted place: If another suddenly entered the room, Henry might easily be mistaken for a ghost himself.

Even now, some dust and cob webs draped over the shoulders of his cloak, he did his best to brush off what he could. Shivering unconsciously, he felt the emotional strain of his work wear heavily on him all of a sudden. There were lines by his lips from years of grim acceptance. He thought about the janitor: What a way to go.

His collar seemed a little tight so he undid the top button and pulled his hood back for a moment. He ran his left hand through his hair, it felt good — short blond curls. Using a fine silk cloth, he wiped away the beads of sweat from his brow and took a deep breath. He dropped the cloth casually and it

disappeared before touching the floor, one of his more convenient magick tricks.

The air was cold in this bathroom, colder than it had been when he entered. He could see his breath when he blew out — it was like a cold, bleak winter had descended in just a few seconds. It felt entirely unnatural, and to Henry a dead giveaway that something from the other side was close by.

As a creeping sensation ran up and down his spine, he was certain this bathroom was occupied. Henry scanned the room, but saw nothing, just a bunch of bathroom stalls, a shelf, two sinks and a mirror along the entire opposite wall. His heart was pounding a little faster, getting the blood flowing in case he needed to move quickly.

There was something off about the first stall. Two things, in fact: one, its door had been open when he first came into the room where now it was shut, and two, he could hear running water from its toilet which would normally be impossible given this place had been shut down for years.

It seemed entirely likely that there was a ghost in that stall and he had an opportunity to catch it unaware of his presence, a rare candid moment. Henry very slowly stepped back near the door that led into the hallway. He waited with one foot out of the bathroom just in case the situation went that way. He wasn't afraid, he'd dealt with the restless dead many times — he was just anxious.

Another minute or so went by and the sound of flowing water stopped, another minute still, and Henry realized he'd missed his chance. He went up to the stall and kicked the door open. Of course, there was nothing there. The cold air was returning to normal, the toilet was dry. Hanging his head for a moment, he realized he was being toyed with, so he turned and left the bathroom.

The hallway outside of the bathroom was much narrower than the grand hall that ran through the middle of the building, about a third the width with only a few solid doors speckled along the way. It showed just how big the Asylum really was, running another hundred yards to the left, ending with an open ceiling inner courtyard. There was no time to explore this hall at all. It was getting late — he only had another hour or so to get back in his car and leave for the motel.

Maybe it was time to go anyway. Why take the chance of delay when he could always come back tomorrow night for another try? He returned to the main entrance and with a deep breath, pulled the front door inward. The outer gate was now open and the weather would almost certainly improve further. Ithliam was buried here a long time ago; another night of demonic rot wouldn't change much. Besides, Ithliam was aware of his trespass already — why work on its schedule?

Henry rubbed his eyes again with his two index fingers, it'd been a long night already. He looked back down the grand hallway as he stood in the entrance way, half in and half out. There was a desperate sense that he should go that way. If Ithliam was a horrid, vile creature from the other side, wouldn't he live at the end of a grand hallway? Wouldn't he be right at the centre of all the paths in the building? All roads would lead to the creature, Ithliam. It was here, deep in the bowels of this place, which was the heart of this forsaken town, the unholy lynch pin.

He was getting excited again. It had been so long since he hunted a single monster with such patient intention. Ithliam was something from the other side, not some minor fiend caught somewhere in between. Henry had seen the other side once, but when he thought about it...the memory would slip away along with any interest in pursuing it.

Head spinning and feeling dizzy, Henry had to rest, but it was too late. He dropped hard to the ground a moment later. Nausea overwhelmed all other motive and before he could stop himself, he was throwing up — this had come on that quickly.

The milky vomit was near black, a swirly, mixed gray and brown, so much for leaving minimal trace. Spitting at a shadow, he reached his hand into a secret pocket and pulled out a round bottle full of pills,

with big black letters on a white label spelling Renelex.

He'd been using the stuff for over a year now, but it would still give him a headache later. Better than swimming on land, better than feeling the hunger. He pulled the hood of his cloak back over his head, hiding his face. Beads of sweat had formed again at his brow as he popped the cap and chewed a few pills dry. They tasted worse than aspirin, but in a few minutes, the sickness eased. It worked every time, his stomach settled, and his head cleared. As the sickness passed, Henry felt a disturbance far down the hallway.

Soothingly, a light breeze caressed his golden blond curls. He raised his eyes and peered into the darkness within the Asylum while the last remaining tremors moved through his body. He couldn't breathe through his nose anymore and there was a low smoker's wheeze when he inhaled through his mouth.

Eventually, his eyes focused on the other end of the grand hall. A door had opened and standing in the frame, backed by an eerie red glow, was the silhouette of a man. Henry couldn't see the man's eyes, but he was sure they were looking right at him, just like he knew it wasn't really a man. Henry dropped his hands to his lap, stunned, but when he'd moved, the silhouette was gone. The door, however, remained open. An invitation had been issued.

A trap. Ithliam was baiting him, it was aware of him and it was trying to draw him in, perhaps thinking another helpless victim had entered its lair. Henry was the fly and Ithliam was the spider, the Asylum the web. There was no time left to go wandering through its labyrinth tonight, though. For now, Ithliam would have to wait. A smile played upon Henry's lips at the thought of such an ancient creature waiting one more insignificant night for its meal.

Henry turned his back on the Asylum and the front door closed with a soft click behind him. The rain had slowed and the sky wasn't quite as dark. It was still night, but rapidly approaching early morning. There wasn't much time left — the fog had lifted somewhat and Henry could see all the way to the wall where his car waited just on the other side of the gate. Yet, there was something odd about all this, was the gate different? Was the mud? Something in his gut said there was danger.

Stopping just short of the gate, Henry thought he heard some shuffling in the trees, and there was that familiar tickle on the back of his neck. His gut was rarely wrong about these kind of things and he was sure there was something waiting for him on the other side of that wall. He pressed his back against the granite beside the gate, crouched down and scooped a handful of mud, tightly forming a fist.

The trick to elemental magick, Henry had learned in his travels, was to keep it simple. Take a single element, think of a simple command while visualizing the appropriate magickal sign. Simple. In this case, the element was earth and the command was "run." Tossing the mud over the wall, he waited for the fun to start.

By the time the mud hit the ground on the other side, it had formed into a man who looked just like Henry, and what is more important, smelled like Henry. At first just standing there letting the transformation complete, it soon ran along the wall into the trees searching for trouble. It didn't take long to find it, either, while the real Henry pressed tightly against wall where the granite met metal, watching the decoy do exactly what he'd told it to do.

When the scheming faces first saw Henry running toward the trees, they could hardly believe it — the cloaked trespasser had come right to them. With gleeful howls, they ran from the deeper shadows, clawing through the air recklessly, seeking his blood. They would rend his flesh and feed, sucking the marrow from his bones, chattering laughter echoed all around, hoots and whirrs responded from further back in the woods — there had to be hundreds of them. Now that he could see what he was dealing with, Henry wasn't entirely sure he could take them all at once should they discover the ruse

prematurely.

However, his fears were unfounded. The earth elemental ran along the wall drawing them out and away. Hundreds of flesh-eating ghouls ran out from their hidden places in pursuit of the decoy, saliva dripping from their oversized jaws, some even running on all fours like animals. Henry shook his head — disgusting creatures.

He hated ghouls. They were like weak vampires, but always running in large packs. They were stupid, they stank, and they always slobbered on you like an overly excited dog that had just finished eating some rotting corpse. They preferred the festering meats to the fresh kill — their competition was maggots.

None of them noticed him slide through the gate, staying low as he crossed over to his car door. He opened it slowly, trying to avoid a squeak from the touchy door hinge, then carefully slipped behind the wheel and pulled the door closed gently, very gently, every second would count.

The ghouls turned as he started the engine, confused, they didn't know which way to go. As the car pulled away, the Henry decoy crumbled into a mundane pile of mud and they realized they'd been fooled. Tricked out of their supper, the starving ghouls erupted into a barrage of frustrated screams. Henry watched them fade away in his rear view mirror as he sped down the twisting dirt road that led away from the cursed town of Ithliam.

Chapter 2 — The Long Drive

Usually, when an ordinary man finds himself in an extraordinary situation, he is faced with a choice. It's often easy enough to understand this choice, but not necessarily easy to make it. Yet, it must be made, a decision must be made, and often immediately. If Henry was going to survive this moment, he would have to make that kind of choice.

He was a little more than 45 minutes away from Ithliam, so the motel would be just up ahead. He drove with deliberate caution, rarely blinking in case he missed something. He didn't feel safe, and didn't expect to for some time. He was thinking about the scheming faces and how he'd deal with them more permanently upon his return. He couldn't just leave a small army of ghouls ravaging the countryside.

The dirt road was thin and winding, with trees lining the way. Tall evergreens and thick bush formed an almost impenetrable wall on either side. Though the rain had stopped some time ago, the dirt road was still mostly mud, and what little gravel still covered it was almost useless. Despite driving cautiously, when he came around a bend there was just a moment to react to the dark figure standing directly in his path, groaning, and reaching toward him.

At first he thought it was a small man as it seemed about that height. It was all happening so fast, a moment away from the abyss, but for Henry, time slowed to a thoughtful rate. The man was not small, but he was broken in half. Alive, though he should be dead, his upper torso was hanging freely to one side dragging its arm on the ground behind it. Henry veered to the left and tapped the brakes.

Grotesquely, Henry watched in still frames as the car's right side moved into the zombie's head, avoiding the body, but swinging the living corpse in a dangerous spin towards the trees. Henry watched in horror as blood sprayed across his windshield, but there was nothing he could do about it now. The zombie wouldn't come back from head trauma like that.

Henry managed to keep the car under control and on the road. He tapped his brakes repeatedly until he came to a slow, rolling stop. Sitting there for several minutes, he stared ahead contemplating his own mortality. How old was he now? He couldn't quite remember...older than he looked. How many close calls had he survived?

A well-fed, bloated corpse weighed as much as two hundred pounds, had he hit it straight on, what would have happened to him? As it was, the zombie was dead, for the second time. Who had this man been in his real life? Sometimes Henry felt responsible for things that weren't entirely his fault. Yet he was often the closest thing to blame, and often the only one who could change the situation one way or the other.

Henry ran his fingers over his face and through his hair. Taking a deep breath, he opened the driver's side door. He looked back and saw the body laying part way on the road. The fact that he wasn't being swarmed by other zombies already was a good indication this one was alone. Fortunate, since Henry didn't have much time to spare.

He stepped from the car and took a closer look at the damage done. His right headlight was destroyed, the paneling was scarred and the thick bumper was twisted at an awkward downward angle, nearly puncturing the wheel. Another inch, and the metal would have stabbed his tire, causing a high speed blowout and likely bringing this all to a much different conclusion. He shook his head and as he did so, the dull throb of his earlier headache returned.

Blood coated everything, forcing Henry to choke back the nausea, when his eyes fell upon the little strips of hairy flesh and bone stuck to his grill. The hair was dark brown, but with so much blood it looked fake, like something from a Halloween costume. His headache was worsened by his terrible remorse, but it was a small mercy that Henry only killed him the second time. Killing the living was nothing like the grim professionalism of killing the dead, it wasn't something any feeling man could get used to.

Henry moved slowly back towards his car, when he was stopped in his tracks by a faint gurgling noise which came from the side of the road where the body lay. Stiff-legged, he walked over and discovered the zombie wasn't quite dead after all. Its head was caved in on one side and its legs twitched sporadically, frothing blood bubbles ran down its broken jaw into the dirt.

Shit, he thought.

This was just worsening. The dead man struggled to take in short, harsh unnecessary breaths, groaning. The one good eye was wide and afraid, racing back and forth as Henry felt that constriction in his throat he always got when something had gone horribly wrong.

He'd seen his share of death, but he still felt terrible for what he had to do. It was clearly the only humane option, he told himself — it was the right thing to do and the faster he got to it, the less suffering and the less pain this poor creature would have to endure. It was beyond Henry's power to heal such grievous wounds in others, but he could give the unfortunate soul the final peace.

He hurried to the back of his car, opened his trunk, and took out his polished silver gun case. Flipping it open, he pulled out his .38, already loaded, shiny and silver like the case. Returning quickly to the immobilized zombie, he pointed the gun and fired twice with a steady, practiced hand. There was no hesitation — two in the brain or what was left of it. The zombie went limp, its struggles stopped instantly. Henry knelt beside the body feeling an unusual closeness to it. He felt the unlife leave it, the energy flow over him on its way through this plane to the next.

He looked at his gloved hands, fascinated by how much blood there was. It no longer oozed freely, but was everywhere around him. He was kneeling in it. Must have been a fresh corpse. He could smell the metal in the air and gun smoke, taste it on the back of his throat. Henry felt a chill; he could easily sense the evil within him that craved everything Henry fought against — the darkness, the flesh — the sickening hunger almost overwhelmed him.

A moment later Henry was in control again, but the whispers reminded him he was always at war deep

inside. A conflict between the part of him touched by the other side and his true will. His nature begged him to unleash more magick, knowing that every time he did, he would weaken and tire. If he was exhausted beyond a certain point, then maybe his nature would take over completely, maybe Henry would disappear for a while and a new monster would stalk the night.

The key was to practice magick in small doses and save the big stuff for big reasons. He was always improving anyway, the magick was easier to control if he used it on his own terms. Though he didn't always enjoy his own terms, some things went off suddenly like fireworks, and magick could do that without warning. He still didn't have a full understanding of it all, but he continued to refine the art in spite of his doubts. Survival usually meant using whatever tool was available at the time and magick was the ultimate tool in hunting the damned and avoiding the pitfalls of that pursuit.

An image flashed across his mind, revealing the zombie a few moments earlier out in the trees wandering casually in the forest. It seemed calm — the early morning was approaching and fresh dew appeared on leaves as the mist settled. It was peaceful. Then, it suddenly raised its head, alertly sniffing the air. A moment later, the zombie was running as hard as it could. It dodged trees and stumbled over brush, with wild fear in its bloodshot eyes.

A frantic, dark shape crashed through the trees behind it, chasing the dead man, or was it guiding it? It stayed just behind, just out of sight, taunting the zombie. In the vision, Henry couldn't make the shape out, couldn't tell whether it was a person or something else, like it was magickally shielded. A deliberate act of subterfuge.

Every time the shape had the opportunity to finish the chase, it would hold back, slow down and give more distance. In this manner, it went until the road was just up ahead. Prodding the animated corpse to continue, the hidden thing backed off into the trees. Something calculated was happening here.

The zombie slowed down near the road as its pursuer faded away. It walked into the road oblivious, when it turned its head toward Henry's car. He watched, unable to look away, as the zombie was thrown to the side of the road and the car came skidding to a halt, barely staying on the road.

As "past" Henry got out of the car and walked over to the body, "present" Henry turned his view over to the forest and the path the zombie had taken. "Present" Henry became "astral" Henry right around the time "past" Henry's pistol fired and soon found himself only a few metres away from the dark entity.

The vision ended, leaving Henry somewhat confused, stumbling back toward his car. Who was the dark shape and what did it want? Was it trying to bait him and why did it appear as nothing more than a dark shape to Henry's astral vision? Not even the hint of supernatural power, and yet definitely no heartbeat.

He put the gun back in its case, then grabbing the body by its back legs, he dragged it fully into the trees, leaving a dark smear across the road. The mud was already beginning to consume the corpse as he took a moment to collect his thoughts.

Henry looked solemnly into the forest. A few minutes beyond those trees lurked the dark entity, waiting for him in those woods. He'd been detoured on purpose, but why? Was it Ithliam? Did the foul creature's power reach even here? There was only one way to find out.

Okay, he thought, I'm going into the forest.

Mindful of the coming dawn, he left the car behind and delved into the woods at a fast walk, holding his cloak tightly around himself, his tense gaze lowered to the forest floor. He saw the dead man's path clearly, noting small broken twigs and deep footprints in the leaves and mud. Following the markings for several minutes, Henry was brought to an abrupt halt. It came from his right side.

He slipped through the trees like a panther, his eyes shimmering with otherworldly energy. He saw everything and missed nothing, his blood ran hot — he loved to run. A cold breeze stripped through his hair marking the significant spot. The scream must have come from where he now stood.

He scanned the area intensely, surrounded by a small clearing in the forest — a good view, but not a long one. The grass was smooth and thick, water dripped off the leaves above. It wasn't light out yet, but a very early morning glow was inching its way up the eastern sky. This made Henry nervous as it covered everything with ethereal fuzz. A thick mist was beginning to rise from the tree roots.

He felt uneasy and exposed, the smell of the forest was his only comfort. Was he being drawn out for a reason, was he walking into a trap? Usually, thoughts like these marked an important location. The wind had stopped and the leaves high in the trees were nearly silent. He could hear no animal, no insect, only the sad crunching of the forest floor beneath his feet. He shifted uncomfortably, suddenly feeling a presence nearby, maybe more than one.

Henry looked carefully for anything unusual. Why was this site so significant? Why had he been drawn here so dramatically? He walked a perimeter, mentally containing the location. His footsteps formed shallow indents, suggesting a barrier of sorts. One might interpret symbolism in it, a shield representing safety, but Henry didn't feel safe, even when he knelt down and placed his hand on the line he'd formed in the muddy dirt.

Thin strands of bright silver ran through the shallow trench, starting and ending where Henry's fingers touched. Completing the circle of protection, Henry stood and admired his work. A simple thing, he mused, but possibly the most important type of basic magick. Without these circles, unsympathetic forces would have surely destroyed him many times over.

The dead quiet was mocking him — the forest told stories for those who knew how to listen, and silence told a story, too. It spoke of danger, a terrible and unnatural presence deep in these woods, but close. Something had driven the birds and other animals away. The cold generated was real — he could feel it. Henry could see his breath. It reminded him of bleak winters back home.

He slowed his breathing and calmed his mind with closed eyes turned inward. He imagined the surrounding area outside of his protective circle. He pictured dead branches and yellow and red leaves. He felt the texture of mud and smelled the wetness of roots underneath. The breeze was chilling. In his mind's eye, he could see three forms becoming clearer. They surrounded him — one in front and one on either side. A deadly melancholy crept into his bones.

He stood calmly as the vaguely humanoid shadows reached out to him. Their touch burned as an image flashed across his mind. He saw an old swimming hole, it was here long ago, with children playing, laughing and swimming. There was a man hiding further back in the woods, watching them, rarely blinking.

Henry shook his head and opened his eyes — he was surrounded by trees and wind. He shivered, a burning chill pressed against him. He felt stiff, lethargic — his hands were shaking as white frost appeared on his arms. Invisible fingers held him tight. He closed his eyes sleepily. He could see them with his astral senses. Clearer now, they were children. The one in front hugged him gently. He could hear mocking echoes of laughter in the back of his mind; why had his magic circle not protected him?

Another image flashed across his mind showing those same children playing in the swimming hole. There were three of them, three little girls, little sisters, maybe 11 or 12 years old. The man hiding in the woods waited patiently, until they were all in the water. He shuffled slowly forward, restrained but excited. Henry couldn't make out his face, it was obscured. He was tall, though crouched over.

The children were splashing and playing as the dark man entered the clearing. They didn't see him

walking over to the water's edge. A sick smile marred his face, somewhere between a cruel lust and amusement. Henry felt sick to his stomach.

The man called them over, startling them. One shook her head. The other two swam over near her, they were scared and grouped together, treading water near the middle of the swimming hole. Their instincts knew what experience didn't — this man was a predator. The sisters held hands and whimpered.

Jumping up and down almost like a child himself, the man called to them, while they frantically looked around for a way out. The children screamed. They were calling for help, but there was no one but the strange man to hear them. Soon they would get tired, soon their little muscles would give out and they'd slip under the water. Drown or swim to shore and take their chances. Henry felt their helplessness. A memory couldn't be changed, he couldn't alter what already happened for all his desire to do so.

Henry concentrated intensely on the strange man, really trying to bring him into focus. Still, he couldn't see the features clearly, but the man had an unusual shape to his face. He was almost elongated, with razor-sharp teeth spread wide in a vicious grin. Thick saliva dripped down his chin. The man wasn't entirely human, but not entirely beast, either. No, he was something else, his hunger was more than a tormenting perversion.

The children could see him more intimately, however. They saw a monster, not a man, and they'd rather drown than swim toward him. Henry felt a searing pain on his arms where the spirits held him, still confused about the impotence of the protection circle. The pain quickly passed, leaving him numb, no longer so bothered by the cold, it almost seemed comfortable now. What he was forced to watch next was less so.

The man-beast licked its lips and dove into the water. The children screamed new horror and tried with all their tiny might to swim away toward the opposite shore. The stranger was under the water — neither Henry nor the children could see where he was. There was a long silence, then bubbles revealed the beast a moment before he came crashing through the surface a few feet behind them.

Henry couldn't look away as the man was on the first sister, grabbing her ankle under the water and pulling her down. The remaining two girls screamed helplessly as they approached shore. Blood rose to the surface, along with the first sister. She gasped for a final breath as the man-beast bit down hard on the her face. A triumphant howl pierced the air, as the other two scrambled up the mud at the edge of the water.

The man dove again, swimming just under the surface, dragging the dead little girl with him. He dragged the body up onto shore and shook the water off himself like a dog as the other girls ran into the woods. Branches scratched and cut their faces as they ran wildly, blindly, away in a last ditch effort to survive.

The man stood upright and sniffed the air — catching their scent, he pursued them with an awkward, short stride. He was fast though, much faster than the girls. He caught the second little one just after she tripped on a root. She lay unconscious having nosedived into a tree. Without hesitation, he snapped her neck with his overly large right hand.

The other girl didn't run anymore — she was alone and scared, shaking and huddled up against a tree. The man crept slowly towards her, the pretty girl, smelling the stink of her fear. It gave him pleasure, it completed his hunt.

The girl whimpered as the man hovered over her for a moment, clouding out her view. He was all she could see as hot saliva dripped onto her face from above. His breath was rotten. She lived in a tiny cloud of fear, she closed her eyes.

Within minutes, the dark man dragged all three bodies together into a pile. He stripped them of their swimsuits with long, hard, yellow nails, and drank deeply of their fresh, innocent blood. He spent several hours eating and laying about in the clearing. He felt the tall grass between his toes and enjoyed the sun on his skin, the wind through his hair. Something about the peace in his eyes made Henry shudder — too familiar, too close to home.

The man dug a hole and buried the bones in a single unmarked grave a few yards away from the water. He dug it with his bare hands, shallow and wide, his hard nails easily cutting through the soft, muddy dirt. The ground closed over them, leaving a small burial mound behind. He then wandered away, full and content.

Henry looked away and opened his eyes. The spirits still held him and there was the realization he was still paralyzed. He felt nothing and could move nothing, completely at the mercy of these little ghosts. He was in their clearing, the water long ago dried up, with their hidden bodies directly under his feet. He had made his circle of protection too big. The undead were already within it.

With amber flashing over his eyes, a classic sign of old magick, he concentrated his will into a fierce red point of light in his hand. Conjured energies ran up and down his body healing him, revitalizing his flesh with a soothing warmth. Strength slowly returned, his vitality rose — the ghosts could not hold one such as him for long and found themselves being pushed out of the circle. He stepped away from their ethereal grasp, his silver circle of protection resisting the more severe forces at play.

Now outside the circle, the spirits retreated into the forest away from him, recognizing something in Henry's eyes, repulsed by it, their mocking laughter receded among the trees. He pitied them, and thought about their killer. It was some sort of monster, not the man-beast he had just envisioned, but something he hadn't seen before, still haunting these woods and likely nearby, watching him right now. A ghoul? No, it was something else, bigger, older.

Henry took a deep breath and rubbed his arms — they had withered and weakened. His fingers had become skeletal, his skin gaunt and drawn, a sickly gray. A dull ache throbbed beneath his skull and he was having trouble catching his breath though he didn't seem burdened by it, taking several deep draws before he relaxed. His chest hurt, and his gums bled, he imagined death was like this, a slow rot, never quite reaching oblivion.

The little sisters would be back and soon, the red light was already fading. He poked his foot at the ground which felt soft, he marked the grave mound. He needed a shovel which was back at his car. He had what he needed in his trunk — it wasn't the first time he'd dug up bodies, and wouldn't be the last.

Lightning crossed the sky in a wide arc. A few seconds later, a thunderclap struck so loud Henry was nearly rocked off his feet. He had angered this place but he tried to ignore the little faces in the shadows watching his every move.

They'd returned, but they stayed back to see what Henry would do next. They'd thought he was strange, not like a normal man. He should be dead already, they'd drunk from his deep well of energy and still there was lots left.

Henry decided he'd come close enough to this. He ran back towards his car: A haunting of this magnitude was rare, he considered himself lucky. If he could save these kids from this half-life hell, he'd feel a lot better about his shitty night. He shuddered as he remembered the dark man drooling over those poor children — tragic memories.

Henry was covered in burrs, dead leaves, and random forest debris. He snapped his finger once as he ran, while visualizing a symbol that roughly resembled a cube with a spike on one side. It was blue, and likewise a light blue energy ran ahead of Henry, parting the brush and revealing a clear path to the road,

while the mud and leaves that covered his cloak floated harmlessly away into the shadows. Small magick, hardly an effort, but it was the little things that Henry enjoyed the most. He didn't like being dirty, it was unprofessional.

As he was leaving the area, he heard a loud snapping sound behind him. He stopped and turned just in time to see a very large, heavy tree falling in his general direction. He was too far to the left, he thought calmly, watching it hit the ground only a foot or so away. The shock it created knocked large branches from the surrounding trees, and bounced him a good inch off the ground, but otherwise he was unharmed.

Worms and beetles covered in thick slime beneath the fallen tree spilled out from the rotten hollow in waves. Disgusting — they piled around like a soupy refuse. Maggots and flies attacked Henry's eyes, swarming around the split stump, vicious and purpose-driven. Swatting them away from his face, he grimaced, annoyed.

All right, thought Henry, let's end this.

With renewed vigor, he ran back to the car, popped the trunk and rummaged through his special tools. He grabbed an axe and his shovel, his knees ached, though his mind was calm. Tortured thoughts of regret and feeble protest whirled in his brain. What would he do once he dug up the bodies — how would he lay them to proper rest?

It wasn't the girls' fault they'd come to this. Ithliam's corrupting influence touched many lives in this region. He used them for entertainment, perverting their eternal characters. Henry was going to sever this connection with the spirits of the girls if he could. He was going to end their presence at this unholy haunting.

He was no priest, but he was generally prepared for this type of thing. Closing the trunk with a dull thud, he looked back into the darkness of the forest. He could see as far as the trees allowed before their infinite crisscrossing obscured his view. It was time: He could feel the sisters drawing nearer, waiting for him to come into their world. A subtle itch on his skin reminded him of the ever-approaching daylight.

The astral world was dangerous out here, some kind of special place. He wasn't sure where the physical ended and the immaterial began. Was the man-beast in that forest nothing more than a ghost or a memory? Was it still somewhat human? Did it still have any strength left and would it try to get in his way? He hoped it did — revenge could be a sweet justice.

Henry looked up at the sky, he could see the clouds now, and the moon was low...it was getting late. He checked his watch, 5 a.m; the sun would be up soon. The light was unpleasant, but he wasn't going to lose his chance to help those kids. He was their only real hope at peace, a chance to move on from this world that held them like a broken clasp on a forgotten necklace.

He ran back to the remains of the watering hole, tightly clutching his cloak. The silver circle of protection glowed faintly as Henry approached. If Ithliam had any connection to this haunting, then Henry wanted it to feel this loss. He was going to pick away at Ithliam's power until there was nothing left.

Walking slowly with care around the burial mound, Henry pulled the magick circle with him, extending it around the unmarked grave. Something would surely try to attack him while he dug up their bodies — the circle would help protect him there. He could feel the dark entity just a few metres beyond his view.

Kneeling down, Henry closed his eyes and placed his hand on the dirt. The ground shook and debris flew everywhere as a skeletal hand tore through the mud and locked onto Henry's wrist with a crushing

preternatural strength. The little sisters had returned to possess their old bones one last time.

Henry stood firmly, reclaiming his hand and lifting his axe high in the air. With a single devastating swing, he severed the skeleton hand at the wrist, stumbling back as the still-grasping fingers reached for his ankle. The rest of the body pulled itself up from the grave, while on either side of him, the other two emerged from the mud. All three sisters were inside the circle, although it didn't matter much once they took on corporal forms.

The bodies were mostly just bones held by husky skin — each slid from the earth easily as though the ground was spitting them out. What little muscle was left to hang uselessly. These creatures moved under entirely unrecognized physical principles.

Henry had to remind himself this was part of the work, it hurt him deeply having to “kill” these children over again. Raising his axe again, he plowed deeply into the first little girl's skull. There was a sickening collapse of bone and sinew as she crumpled to the ground. She shook slightly, clearly trying to reform, and would come at him again given a few moments.

He downed the other two the same way, one merciful blow to the head each, but the bodies still shook lifelessly. Skeletons were a different breed from zombies. Harder to kill, older magick. Henry ran his fingers through his curly blond hair and over his face. He was sweating, the light of approaching dawn almost more frightening than his present situation. Wiping spittle from his lips, he looked around. He smelled like shit and felt like it, too.

The whole area contained a putrid cloud emanating from the three living corpses. He covered his nose and lower face with his cloak and took a few steps back. He was feeling dizzy again and nauseous as he stumbled away. He walked over to the fallen tree and threw up. He was just barely able to miss his shoes as cramps drove hard into his gut.

He pulled out his Renelex pills, popped three and chewed them like candy. The hunger was almost on him, he had to stay in control — shaking violently, he watched unable to move as the three little sisters rose shakily to their feet. They shambled toward him, hollow groans escaping their chattering jaws. They were the hungry damned and he was food.

Just as the closest one reached him, he was calm, the pain and shaking gone as though they never were. The drugs did what they were good at, and now it was Henry's turn. There wasn't much time left, all three had reached him and were leaning down clawing toward him. He could still see the bright blue eyes of the innocent somewhere deep in those hollow sockets. A skull of a child was distinct and called upon the deepest sympathies within a man. He wanted this to be quick for their sake, just like the suffering doe.

The axe was too far away, but he still had the shovel — he swung it around in a large sweeping arc, crashing into all three at once. They collapsed again, stalled but not stopped. The little sisters twitched lazily beneath his feet, as Henry stood, measuring his next move. It would seem he didn't have much choice now.

Henry grabbed the bodies, two under one arm, one under the other. They scratched and clawed at his sides, tearing strips from his shirt. He couldn't simply rebury skeletons, they don't stay buried — that meant cremation...he needed fire.

The bodies grew in strength as he moved, they strained against his grip, a few times almost slipping from him. He held them tight, crushing them against his sides — they groaned, not in pain, but frustration. Henry squeezed tighter, they weren't getting away. There were snaps and several cracking noises under his arms, but he endured.

Bound to their bodies as intimately in death as in life, once they became reanimated, they were stuck

until they reburied themselves. If Henry could utterly destroy the bodies before that happened, it would release the spirits anchored in this plane. By extension, Ithliam could no longer feed on the fear and pain they caused — this haunting was at an end.

He ran through the hollow of his magickally cleared path, free of tangles or roots — it was like running on a soft, well-trimmed grass, or a light blue tinted carpet. There was a gentle breeze carrying spring fragrance and an obscurely beautiful morning mist lining the sides of the path.

Henry could sense the man-beast nearby, moving with him, but keeping some distance. It was smart enough to stay away entirely or just be cautious. Sisters first, thought Henry, then back to the motel — morning was coming. The man-beast would have to wait...the road was only moments away.

Henry broke from the trees, crossing the narrow dirt road just as a pitch black flat top sedan with no headlights turned the corner, driving straight into him. The three sisters flew apart in pieces and Henry was thrown over the car and off to the side of the road. There was a cackling off in the distance as the car sped away, neglecting to stop.

For long minutes, everything was silent, the skeleton pieces were very slowly moving together, regenerating. The sisters were immortal, Henry, however, was deathly still, his body mangled, lucky to be in one piece, but he looked somewhat like a crumpled up piece of paper slowly unfolding.

It was another full minute before Henry opened his eyes, another before his hips faced forward again and he was able to stand up. He endured a great deal of pain though technically he didn't need to. A simple spell would solve the problem quickly, though it may invite the beast for another visit.

Henry preferred to wait and heal and took a deep breath. He was more than a zombie or a ghoul or a skeleton, he was unique, the sisters were still huddling in piles of bits on the road. Regenerating as fast as they did, Henry was faster.

One thing for certain, whoever was driving that flat top meant to hit him and was heading in his direction. Ithliam must have sent a proxy to stop him, or slow him down, someone other than the man-beast in the trees, were they working together? The early morning light was already creeping above the tree line, it was now or never.

Quickly approaching the skeleton piles, Henry crushed the sisters' bones beneath the heel of his steel-toed boot, a sacrilege born of necessity. He kicked them into more defined piles. He could expect nothing more than hate and death from them — skeletons couldn't be reasoned with.

He retrieved a container of lighter fluid from his trunk and lit a cigarette. Inhaling from it deeply, he sprayed the lighter fluid over the children's remains. He blew the smoke up into the air above as he tossed the empty yellow plastic lighter fluid bottle to the side, and at the same time, threw the cig on the bodies with his right hand. He watched time slow as the burning ember flew toward the fuel-wet ground near the bones.

Time sped up as the fire quickly consumed the first sister, traveling along the trail of lighter fluid to the next two piles. Headless torsos shook and twisted, while the heads groaned, wide-mouthed and desperate to remain on this world. The flames easily consumed them, eager to end this abomination, reaching for the colder air above. Smaller pieces tried to wiggle away, but Henry kicked them back in the flames — they, too, succumbed to the blistering heat.

As the remains of the sisters disappeared and the bones crumbled inward, three balls of orange energy tugged free and hovered above the ashes. The sisters, neither in astral or physical form, now pure spirits, floated on the wind for several moments, sending off warm waves of soothing light. The withering of Henry's arms reversed itself, his stolen power returned to him, his flesh was completely restored.

The little ghosts, gladly released from their cursed mortal coil, flew into the sky, leaving their bodies burned like dried leaves. As the fire consumed them physically so also it consumed their spiritual anchors and they were free to move on. A whimsical laughter filled the air around Henry. The sisters were free and the ground shook. Ithliam felt the loss and Henry looked forward to their final confrontation.

Henry stayed until the bodies were nothing but ash and little bits of blackened bone. Fascinated by the flames, he couldn't stop thinking about those poor kids. He wished it could have been different for them, they deserved better.

The wind scattered the ashes, and the charred bone remnants would soon join the dust on the road. Henry hoped Ithliam was angry — anger might weaken it, confuse it and help it make a mistake when the time came. This was a long game, with many moves. He just wished innocent people didn't have to get hurt along the way, but it would be a better world when it was all over.

As Henry sped toward the comfort of his motel room, a shadowy figure left the trees in pursuit. It walked over the embers and ashes, unaware or undisturbed by the remains of the fire. It was quick, and moved with a strange rhythmic consistency. Most notable was the thick trail of maggots it left behind it as it walked. This was not a zombie. This was something much worse.

Chapter 3 — Ash and Memories

Henry felt a headache coming on, the side effects of having used Renelex again — he found himself using it more and more frequently. In a few minutes, the worst of it would pass, and he could forget about it for the time being. It was a small price to pay anyway — the alternative of his beastly hunger was unthinkable.

The road had dried, widened and was of generally better quality than near Ithliam. It was still dirt, but looked serviced within months, rather than years ago, and the trees lining it seemed healthy and smaller, younger. The sky had cleared and the rain had become a distant memory. Henry lit a cigarette with the car lighter and took a deep drag.

The motel wasn't much further, a humble place with a small room waiting, isolated in the middle of rocky nowhere. The closest sign of active civilization on the edge of the barren countryside surrounding Ithliam. He hadn't left anything there, of course, he carried everything he had or needed with him or in his car. He couldn't chance his tools being found by another; it could be very bad if a regular person found them, worse if it was somebody with magickal knowledge.

The first full beams of morning light were coming up over the hills. Henry's tinted windows kept most of it out, still, sweat beads formed on his brow. The trees had thinned out considerably, the heat approaching would become unbearable. When the sun came all the way up, he'd be cooking — nothing fatal, but brutal, nonetheless. He needed rest badly, finding himself exhausted and worn down. He didn't really need sleep, but it was efficient and helped him regenerate faster...and feel more...human. He smoked in silence; there was nothing on the radio and his tape deck had never worked.

He preferred the quiet anyway, it gave him time to think, time to reason out his situation — he was usually in a situation. Sometimes the heat eased somewhat and he could plan a little ahead, go over the steps, start from the end and bring it back to the beginning. He could never remember the beginning, though; his life started at the middle and stayed there. Gaps in his past prevented him from seeing the whole picture.

He pulled down the shades on the side windows and turned on the air conditioner. The interior became much darker and cooler. That helped some — he was much better off in the shade. He opened the glove

box and pulled out the case containing his sunglasses, elegant gold-rimmed aviators; the lenses were a strange, liquid silver that shimmered like waves in a puddle. Henry put them on.

The expression on his face became grim. His night had gone well, all things considered, but had cost him more than was expected. His simple purpose in all things was to remove evil from this world. Ithliam was his biggest to date, as far as he could tell. These demons always seemed so powerful before he met them and showed them what real power was. This might be another time like that. Perhaps Ithliam wasn't going to be any problem at all.

The motel appeared over the horizon — it seemed closer with his sunglasses on, and much clearer. Henry sat up a little straighter, he'd have a shower first thing — he'd used enough magick cleaning cloths and was in the mood for something more thorough. He was still covered in dried blood, forest debris, and still smelled of death and fire. He considered burning his clothes — he had others — the boots, too.

There was only one narrow parking lot directly in front of the motel room doors. The caretaker's office turned toward the rooms while a dirt service path ran behind and out of sight to the garbage bins in the back.

He pulled up in front of his door. It was still very early morning, and no one else was up yet. That's a good thing, he thought, he didn't really want to explain all this right now — his car was literally a bloody mess. He held his cloak over his head like an umbrella as he left the shade of his car into full early morning sunshine. The unpleasant dawn had arrived in full bloom.

Henry used his motel card key from a secret pocket and pushed the door open to room eight on the far side of the motel. Dust spilled out on beams of orange light. He only had one neighbour in room seven, and he hadn't actually talked to the guy. Henry had checked in around 11 last night. He had then left for Ithliam almost immediately after. His next trip would require an earlier start.

He slipped inside quickly and closed the door behind him. He didn't bother with the light, he just stripped down, hung up his cloak, put his sunglasses on a table, tossed his soiled clothes in a corner and headed for the bathroom to take his shower. Some of his larger burdens fell away as the water splashed soothingly across his skin. It took Henry a long time to feel clean. He soaped up and rinsed a few times, brushed his teeth, shampooed, and soaped up again. Still, he could smell the bloody remains of earlier with his keen senses.

By his nature, his heart did not usually pump, unless he willed it so. His blood did not flow through his veins, unless he wanted it to, but he enjoyed the hot water running down his back, the steam in his lungs as he forced himself to breathe. His body was not really alive, but his magick sustained him in it, like others of his kind he was connected to it. Almost human, he thought, had he ever been...he couldn't remember.

When he finished his shower, Henry got dressed. Now he had to deal with the car. Mindful of being seen, he closed his eyes and flew his astral form high into the air for a wider view. No one seemed to be watching him or the motel and there was nothing but prairie and animals for miles around.

Satisfied, he braced himself for the sun and walked quickly outside. He ran his fingers along the damaged parts of his car while imagining a special symbol. He then stood back in the shadow of his motel room door frame and watched as the car reformed itself, repairing silently, even the glass of the headlights. Henry briefly wished he could painlessly heal his own flesh like he could repair base matter, but he had never found a symbol like that, though he had actively looked for many years.

That's when he noticed something was off. It was a vague something in the back of his mind born of experience with the unexpected. Outwardly, everything looked fine, but Henry was alert and thinking

sharply again. He returned to his motel room and grabbed the pistol he kept under his pillow. He stood just inside his door looking out.

Deal with it, he thought. Work to be done. He struggled with a bitter loneliness, but what else was new?

The motel had that mellow, deserted feel, like it didn't breathe anymore. There wasn't so much as a peep from the other rooms — no breathing, no heartbeats. Henry's hearing was very good, he probably should have noticed when he arrived this morning that something had cleaned this place out.

He'd been here not more than six hours ago and he wasn't the only guest, though he'd carefully chosen the room farthest from the others. He valued his privacy, it wasn't always safe for normal people to get too close to him. A greasy little man named Gus, the motel caretaker, had been yelling at his TV for the hundredth time just as Henry had left last night.

Was this now deserted motel related to Ithliam?

Impossible. He'd never heard of such range, for something to have influence this far from the source of the haunting was fantasy. There was a common sense rule about the supernatural, even with the more vile fiends, that they only had power within a certain limited range. If this was the work of Ithliam, it was off the scale, and the most dangerous haunting Henry had ever seen.

For the first time in many years, Henry felt some doubt, but quickly shook it off. Doubts hadn't gotten him anything in life, he'd seen the abyss and come back from it, bore witness to horrors and fiends, abominations left behind from when the world was meant for frightening things. All this had changed him and he'd paid dearly for his knowledge and his work; he wasn't backing off now, or ever.

Henry pressed the tip of his finger firmly into the lock on the caretaker's office door, and waited for a click. A moment later the door creaked open and the early morning light filled the room. The very tip of his finger dripped frost and his hand ached, but it got him through the door. All doors had powerful internal properties and characteristics — to open any door was difficult, more than it might at first seem. Henry found himself breaking doors down with his foot as much as his magic.

Henry wiped the sweat off his forehead, the salt burned in the creases of his lips as he moved through the door frame into the shadier office. He felt better out of the direct sunlight and closed the door behind him. The last bits of frost melted away as Henry ran his hands over his face. There was a short stubble of beard, coarse and stiff, a reminder, but of what?

The curtains were drawn. A light orange-brown, aged and worn by the sun, they cast a yellowish ambient glow across the room. Henry watched dust float through the air. Little pieces of old web hung suspended from the ceiling, cut by thin beams of the morning's light.

Henry wasn't sure if this place had ever seen a serious clean or improvement. Thick layers of dust had built up in tiny oil lamps that would no longer light, and on wide-framed cloth paintings of ships and bull riders. There was a half-full coin slot bubble toy machine in the corner, even its once bright red plastic shell had cracked with time.

Half the room was taken up by a cheap desk, made of particle board finished to look like real wood, and there were papers on it, mostly of the technical kind involved with the general running of a motel.

Henry could see order forms and receipts, photocopied licenses and old credit applications, all spread out like they'd been rummaged through. The book Henry had signed when he checked in a day earlier was open to a new page. It was a thick green book with plastic binding, about the only thing in the room that looked relatively new.

He flipped back a page to see who'd checked in after he'd left last night. There was a single new name, given room six at 1:30 in the morning, a good couple of hours after Henry left. The name was Charles

Dewitt, he'd left a cash deposit, but no license plate number and Henry hadn't noticed any new vehicles outside.

A string of significant occurrences crossed his mind: the silhouette in the Asylum, the scheming faces, the obscured presence in the woods, and then the car running him down on his way back here. He experienced a sudden sinking feeling and his already grim expression got worse. This whole thing had the feeling of a trap, and he wondered where this name in a book fit in.

Was Charles DeWitt connected to the car that hit him? No, that was unlikely, he had checked in hours ago, while Henry was still in Ithliam. Whoever hit him was someone else again and was coming from Ithliam or around there. Either way, where was Charles now? In his room? Henry looked up from the desk and peered out the window while hiding a few feet back in the shadows.

There were two other cars parked in the lot other than his and both had been there last night when he left. The curtains were drawn on every suite and a day that started windy was calming right down into a still dead heat. Silence everywhere, not even birds. Something was about to happen.

The TV stared blankly at Henry, following his movements from one end of the room to the other, a shallow reflection in its smooth gray screen. Henry involuntarily jumped a little when the TV turned on full volume, nothing but static. It startled him, but he reserved fear for more intense situations. He had to walk over and shut it off — there was no remote, this TV being a cheap little 12-inch with one channel.

There was no technical glitch, the TV was fine — something was trying to mess with him. Henry wasn't alone in the office, but when he closed his eyes there was nothing, he couldn't see anything with his astral eyes at all. That worried him a bit. He wasn't sure how that could happen, but he had options left, more tricks up his sleeve.

He turned away, but kept the TV in his peripheral view. There. Just a moment before it turned on again, apparently on its own, he saw the briefest shine of an ethereal hand. This was just a nuisance, a small presence that liked to mess with people too ignorant to realize there was no real danger. Turning on the TV or blow dryer or stereo was about the most one could expect from this type of annoying spirit.

However, the volume was loud and could draw the attention of less kind apparitions in the area. Henry walked over to the TV, grabbed its cord and yanked it out of the wall. The TV died. Instantly the screen went blank, and it was terribly quiet again — a cool breeze brushed through his hair. Henry was beginning to think this was a very young ghost, it was far from subtle, but how was it shielded from his magickal senses?

He knew how this worked — he took the TV down off the shelf in the corner, and placed it on the floor with its screen pressed against the wall. He waited for the TV to do something but it didn't turn back on, apparently having made its point. A simple thing, but Henry admired it, its not easy being dead.

Smart ghost, he thought, unusually interactive. In his experience, most ghosts were not so aware — they were trapped in patterns, and usually were only dangerous when a living person was in just the right position to become part of that pattern. Young ghosts still trying to scare people with TVs, he chuckled to himself, half expecting a radio to start dialing channels randomly and doors or shutters to shake.

But this was an unusual haunting, it felt personal. He'd known this one in life, which meant it was likely one of the people at this motel whom he had met before. Gus, the caretaker? He wasn't sure yet, but it seemed reasonable. Had Gus been killed in some brutal way — then he might haunt this room, and might even be trying to warn him. What had happened at this motel after he left last night?

Henry placed the odds of this ghost being benign at 50–50, whether it was Gus or not. Death had a way

of changing people, there was no guarantee that Gus even remembered his past life or much of it anyway. There was an almost trance-like condition that many young ghosts experienced, and some could be quite aggressive.

There was a noise behind him, like the shuffling of feet on carpet. Henry turned with the speed of a professional killer, his pistol aimed near the source of the sound with steady precision. He'd trained for years as a sharpshooter with the pistol and considered himself among the best. His fine, custom-made, heavy slugger dipped his strong left hand downward, while his right hand helped hold it steady from underneath.

There was nothing here for the thin cross hairs of his pistol to focus on, just empty space. Henry knelt low, his gun aimed high. There was nothing here...yet. He waited many minutes, very still — he was a patient man. He thought of it like a stakeout, he couldn't let his eyes wander or he might miss it. Ghosts function on a slightly different time line than more material beings, and usually at very low energy levels.

The ghost might come back after its energy levels were higher. His patience paid off — in the far corner of the room, for less than a second, he saw a disheveled old man scratching at the carpet, almost as though he was trying to dig through it. It seemed as though it was drawing Henry's attention on purpose, but that was not a usual thing at all. A fresh ghost, hours old, with this much self-control — amazing and rare.

The man did indeed look vaguely like Gus, the caretaker. He was short and greasy — even as an apparition, he looked desperate and afraid. Gus made no sound at all, no scratching noise or anything, it was as though he wasn't even there. Given enough time, it was likely this ghost would fade away, though some rare cases see the reverse, a more powerful spirit, growing more fierce with each passing moon.

Henry crawled over slowly to get a better look at the carpet. He hadn't noticed the dark stain before: It was fresh blood blending in, hard to make out in the black of the carpet and the years of dirt and grime. Blood but no body and not much blood either, just a half pint or so. Yet, Gus was dead, no doubt about it. His ghost had wanted Henry to see this, there was great injustice here that needed correcting.

The picture was becoming clearer: He could expect the other guests to be dead as well, but where were their bodies? Did Charles Dewitt do this? A disturbing thought crossed his mind — was Charles Dewitt after him, did these poor people get in his way? He could almost imagine this mysterious man flying into a rage when discovering Henry wasn't in his room.

Staying low to the ground, he cautiously made his way to the closed door leading from the office into the back living quarters. He kept his gun pointed high, should a cold, dead zombie Gus come at him when he pushed the door open, there'd be one shot, right between those vacant eyes. There wasn't a zombie in the world who shambled away from a bullet to the brain. Especially the kind of custom-made magickally charged bullets a guy like Henry carried as a matter of course.

There was no one here, just an unmade single bed, a small dresser, and a table with nothing on it. He was surprised to see a book on the bed, a lengthy paperback laying open page down saving Gus's spot. Henry had never fancied Gus a reader — the book was called *Road To Glory*, by Siegfried Holden. Henry wondered if the ghost would pick up reading it where his mortal self had left off, he turned the book page up — you never know.

Otherwise, there was nothing of interest in the room: the dressers contained clothes, under the table he found an old pair of shoes, but they weren't his size. Henry chuckled to himself, like he'd be caught alive or dead wearing sneakers anyway. He left the room and went back to the office proper — he'd have to go to room six, which of course, meant going back outside. There wouldn't be any ghosts in the

sun, but his skin would itch terribly, and he could already imagine the sweat pouring down his face.

Henry found his hand reaching for a lighter that wasn't there. He imagined it anyway, cold and smooth, the thought calmed him down. It was just a little bit of normal in the middle of an absurd adventure. It reminded him of a simpler time, when his most pressing concern was lighting a smoke and reading a book.

How many years ago had he left his research for more practical applications? He remembered drinking fine wines by a fireplace where he would read for days. Not a ghost, zombie, vampire or ghoul had bothered him for some time, so he had spent many nights furthering his magickal knowledge, working out spells and such.

It was during those wonderful few years that he'd made some of his first useful items, but they were just the beginning. It wasn't until he started using his skills to interfere with the darkness that he realized more specifically the tools he'd need for his real work to begin. Every vile creature was different, not a single one exactly like another. He'd learned that the hard way, self-experience, whereas most books tended to neglect those kind of details.

Henry thought back to the first ghost he planned to exorcise on purpose, the very first one he planned to remove from this earth. She had been a tall woman in a red dress, engaged in the act of forbidden love. Married, yet having an affair with the groundskeeper while the husband was away on business.

They were having drinks, laughing by the pool under the stars. It was nothing more than a tragic accident — she slipped and cracked her head on the cement. Henry watched from the bushes, as blood dripped from her slightly upturned nose, just as he'd watched every night for a week trying to figure out the pattern and the ideal way to release her spirit. This same scene would play out over and over for those with the eyes to see, the poor woman trapped in her last horrible moment.

Henry found himself walking toward her. He felt compelled, when he was only a few yards away — it happened. He was offered a glimpse into a world very few ever saw before their own appointed time. The woman's spiritual self rose from the ground and addressed him: her beautiful eyes, a tranquil amber, with electric blue flecks.

He was paralyzed: He felt an overwhelming, unexplainable fear. He couldn't talk, but he could stare with grim fascination as the spectre looked away and cried. It wailed with a hollow call, angry at her premature death, knowing that finally one had arrived who could hear her screams. Henry took a strained breath and the apparition looked at him — he could see her and she could see him.

He shook his head clear, burying it away, enough hesitating, he had to find Charles Dewitt. While what was in the past would stay there, the present waited for no one. He thought of the sunlight outside and the hunger again — the heat always reminded him of his true nature. His stomach had hurt now at various levels for many years; it had been that long since Henry last fed on the living as he stubbornly tried to maintain his humanity.

She saved me. Henry was thinking about the lady in red again, but his thoughts were drawn back by his hunger. It was always there, ready to ruin his day.

The beast inside taunted him, feeding off him, he looked like a man with one foot in the grave already, blood on his hands. Henry was thankful every day for Renelex, it allowed him to live much like a healthy man should, with a reasonably clean conscience. He tried not to think about the rare times he'd lost his grip, it was better that way, and he was finding it easier these days to dissociate from his actions.

He swung the door in wide with a short kick and hid to the side around the edge of the door frame. Henry snuck a quick peek and brought his head back to the safety of the office wall. He'd seen what

he'd expected to see, a short run across the parking lot to room six. The doors to the motel rooms were all closed except his, and he imagined still locked, but in situations like these, things weren't always the same from one moment into another.

Henry took a deep breath and dashed out across the parking lot covering his eyes as best he could. He dove into his room and closed the door behind him, relieved to have a few minutes to collect himself and let the sweat dry. His heart was pounding in his ears — full daylight for only a few seconds and he felt like he'd just run a marathon carrying a hundred pounds on his back. The intensity of the beams had increased with each clumsy step.

His room was small, and comfortable because it was dark. The windows had those thick plastic draw-downs that blocked most light. He hadn't used the bed yet, but he stretched himself across it just for a few minutes, just to catch his breath, stare at the ceiling and question why he bothered. Then he remembered it was about helping people he didn't even know who probably hated and feared him and any like him.

Charles Dewitt. The name slid unwelcome to his mind, who was he? What had happened here after he'd arrived? Was he responsible? Henry enjoyed the mystery, but he was tired and should already be asleep, gathering his strength for Ithliam. Okay, he told himself, get up and finish this. He stood, barely able to draw himself away from the comfort the bed offered.

Room six was two rooms over — it was locked, or at least it was likely, no guarantees in this place. He'd have to do this quickly, and at the same time avoid any fatal mistakes. He had his gloves on again, still brown with dried blood and he expected to find Charles Dewitt in his room. If his suspicions were correct, he expected a bloody mess.

He placed his hand on the door knob and prepared to open it. One, two, three, he counted to calm himself. He never looked forward to full sunlight, even less when he was about to deal with a serious foe. There was something sinister about Mr. Dewitt, and Henry was about to find out what that was the hard way.

He turned the knob and stepped out in the light, sweat forming on his brow instantly. It was bright, he would have been momentarily blinded by it, but his sunglasses helped him make his way to the infamous room six. Henry inched his way across the motel walkway, hugging the shadow near the wall. The curtains were drawn, he could feel the heat coming off the siding, see the heat waves drift up from the concrete.

The place felt all the more deserted in the full day's glow. He pushed firmly against the knob lock. A moment later, a click, and he was through the door, closing it behind him, a small trail of frost falling to the floor from his opening the door. He already knew what he faced the moment the door first opened — as the scene unfolded before him, hot death blasted him full on.

What he saw was an assault on his senses, the place literally covered in blood, sprayed absolutely everywhere. Partially devoured corpses lay scattered about, the various patrons of the motel. The smell was overwhelming, even the light from outside refused to enter the room, but Henry wouldn't be held back.

He noted Gus slumped over in the corner — the only one still clothed, he was drawn gaunt, more of a husk than anything else, like a wax statue with a final expression of exaggerated terror. Dry and fragile, Gus was like a statuesque form that might have been right at home in a freak show caravan, a mummified oddity.

This was clearly the work of a vampire or something like it. Henry looked away for just a moment in disgust, the rest of the bodies that littered the room had all been torn apart just for fun, just because the

fiend liked drama. Some creatures hunted for food, and some for pleasure, some for both.

The source of this mischief lay sleeping in the middle of the queen-sized bed, though his chest did not rise and fall with breath. Well-fed, well-sexed, Charles Dewitt, vampire. He was tall and thin, naked, covered only by copious amounts of drying blood. He was hairless and fat in the belly, swollen cheeked, with thick, deep red, almost purple lips. He smelled of excrement.

There was only one sure way to deal with a vampire — cut off its head. When in absence of a big knife, shoot it, but you took your chances. Henry didn't blink as he pumped two solid rounds into Mr. Dewitt's round, shiny, bald head. The creature didn't react much, other than to let out a very brief gasp at the first shot, he didn't bleed. Gun smoke filled the air — Henry was thankful for something familiar other than death and rot.

Henry took a moment to reflect on his circumstances. His eyes wandered from the gaping hole that was Mr. Dewitt's face, to the blood-splattered wallpaper and the bodies at his feet. Henry felt cold inside, he wanted to feel something, regret, sympathy, anything, but he was done — he'd seen too much in too short a time. He was mentally exhausted, constantly distracted by the growing hunger and temptation; he'd need more Renelex soon.

The gun felt heavy in his hand, solid and powerful. He was rarely without it these days, and it was the rare day he didn't use it. He used the mundane methods as much as he could, to use his magick was to invite the hunger more and more; it got worse the more powerful his magick became. It wasn't unusual to use Renelex several times in one day, but he didn't need it quite yet.

He clutched his cloak tightly against him, letting it heal him, feeling a soothing warmth penetrate his soul, rejuvenating his body and mind. There was far more to do here yet, Henry couldn't allow strangers to find evidence of what happened here, and the bodies couldn't be left as they were. Dewitt would surely heal if left like this. Henry could already see the hole in Mr. Dewitt's face closing up. The fiend would be conscious in a matter of minutes.

Henry grabbed him by his naked ankles, dragged him roughly from the motel room and tossed him into the full light of day. A violent seizure took hold of Mr. Dewitt, throwing him around like a sickening amusement ride. Dirt and gravel stuck to what remained of his slimy flesh. And Buddha help him, the stench.

Henry stood back in the shadow of the motel room watching the show. He was glad to put another of these creatures down, the world was better off for it. His only regret was not being here when Charles D. had arrived — this all might have been prevented. He ran his fingers through his curly blond locks. The sweat was cold, his breath low and steady. There was more to be done here yet.

He dragged each of the bodies in Dewitt's room and all body parts out into the sun. One vampire was enough and it wouldn't do if old Gus came back for a visit later. Within a few seconds, Charles stopped twitching. None of the other bodies had moved, but that didn't mean much, the vampire infection could take awhile to work itself through the dying organs.

Henry retrieved his axe from the trunk of his car and severed each head. He had to rest in the darkness of his room after each neck, but he soon completed his ghastly work. Without pause for thought, he bagged each head separately from the bodies, and dragged them all back into room six. Using a bottle full of a salt water mix, he sprayed over all the blood and miscellaneous bits and pieces, a proven method to kill the vampiric infection if it remained.

He used insulation foam to seal all the vents and windows, and finally the door. When he was finished at the motel, he planned to burn it all down, make sure this whole place was cleansed. It would look like an accident, a tragic event out in the middle of nowhere, which wasn't so far from the truth. The

motel had served its purpose, but circumstances beyond Henry's control had sealed its fate. If the motel was left alone, then surely a great haunting would begin here. It might anyway.

Right now, he needed the place. He needed bed rest badly — he was stretched too far for comfort. Henry ran over to the caretaker's office, turned the sign to say, "No Vacancy," and returned to his room. He couldn't get the door closed behind him fast enough, having no plans of opening it again until the sun went down, relishing the thought, visualizing the moon high, alone and a cold gentle breeze as the temperature dropped.

It was several hours until nightfall, plenty of time to restore his strength completely and to prepare for what lay ahead. It was likely that his head wouldn't feel a soft pillow for many days once he left for Ithliam again. He'd leave nothing behind of the motel but ash and memories. The hunger inside him would find no satiation on this trip, there would be no living person to feed upon. His Renelex supply was solid, no worries there — for once he entered the Asylum, he wouldn't leave until Ithliam was dead.

Henry took a deep breath, just to feel the air in his lungs and clear out the stench that hung in his nostrils, undressed once more and considered a serious sleep. He imagined sweet entanglements of the great dream surrounding him, pleased with his progress, having spent so many years in the body of a fiend, yet expressing his noble choices. He hesitated only when a disturbing thought came unexpectedly to mind.

What if the vampire was only one of many? Could he take the chance? Could he close his eyes for just a few hours? Was it safe? What of Ithliam — did that vile creature play some role with Charles Dewitt? The timing seemed convenient, almost contrived: While he was busy investigating the Asylum, send a vampire or a few vampires to attack his base of operations.

"I'm getting paranoid", he whispered to himself. "Relax."

Ithliam couldn't have known in advance Henry was coming, right? Charles was a random predator, and Henry had been away at the time by simple coincidence. It was nothing more than that.

He did check his door one last time to be sure it was locked tight, and strung a rope of small bells over the door knob just in case someone tried to open the door while he slept — an old but effective trick. He slid his pistol fully loaded under the pillow, and strapped his smaller .22 on his ankle.

A man never felt naked with a gun strapped on and more than one was even better. Henry pulled the covers up to his neck, and fell quickly into a shallow, meaningless sleep. Dreams didn't come — he did not rest, waking up every few minutes from nothing at all. Shaking unconsciously, he slept fitfully, the bed barely kept him off the floor. A deep, penetrating restlessness consumed him, he sensed danger approaching — even in his sleep he could sense that something was still very wrong at this motel.

By the time night fell, Henry was angry and impatiently trying to fish a little bottle of Scotch from the little fridge that passed for a mini-bar. No REM sleep meant no satisfaction, his muscles ached and his feet were sore. A little taste of the Scotch would calm his nerves and take his mind off earlier events. He'd decompress entirely later, but for now, he just needed to get by. He was still a little sore from being hit by that car. He didn't know who or why on that one, but he expected to settle the score soon enough. Where was that car now, he wondered, and what of its driver? Was there one...

Henry finished the little bottle in one go, letting the Scotch burn its way down his throat. The warmth in his belly gave him strength and just enough numbness to blunt the harsher edge. He lit a cigarette, pulled its smoke deep into his lungs and let the brief euphoria wash away his sins. He would never quit no matter how bad it got — he needed to see this through. Why had all these people been killed, what motive or purpose was in it? He had to figure out Ithliam's game and end it.

His gaze snapped to the door as the bell rope betrayed a slow turning of the door knob to his room. It stopped the moment a sound was made, but too late to avoid discovery. Henry was already on his feet and pressed to the far side of the window. He lifted the draw down just a crack to see what lay beyond.

On the other side of Henry's door stood a short, stocky man with straight, dark hair moving away a step. Henry choked back the bile forming in his throat and the natural revulsion he felt at the sight of this new player. A shimmering pool of maggots formed endlessly at the short man's feet. This man was not alive, not with maggots for friends. Another vampire, then? A retched stink wafted under the door, like backed-up sewage. Show time. He had his pistol in his hand now, safety off, ready to nail this fucker to the wall.

His head reared as dizziness washed over him — Henry felt nauseous again. Shit! Not now, he thought. He tasted bile on his tongue, he needed his medicine, he needed Renelex. The Maggot Man was dissolving outside his door into a heaping mound of fly larvae. Henry's pills were in his jacket on the other side of the room. The seeping, stinking pile of dissolved vampire was crawling its way toward his motel room door. Henry could see the first maggots slipping in under the crack.

He stumbled away from the window to his jacket, desperately and clumsily searching for his pills. He was out of time — the Maggot Man was re-forming on the inside of the door as Henry's hands fell on the thin, plastic bottle. It was too late — the short, stocky man was there now, his straight, black hair clinging to his sweaty forehead, an intense amusement playing across his lips. Henry could feel a dark energy radiating from behind him, felt a strong hand on his shoulder just before he was violently turned around.

Those eyes...blood red...hypnotic.

They were face to face — a sinister grin cut across the short man's tortured lips, as Henry pumped bullets into the man's stomach. No effect, they went right through and out the other side embedding in the wall and floor across the room. Maggot Man was only inches away, his breath was rancid, his tongue long and wet like flypaper.

It was too much for Henry's stomach to hold out any longer — he let loose a spray of vomit, wiping away the vampire's satisfied smile. The room was spinning, Henry could feel the hunger coming, somewhere deep in his churning guts. Maggot Man let out a scream and grabbed Henry around the neck as if to pop his head right off like a dandelion.

Henry choked as more vomit caught on its way up and his eyes rolled back in his head. The short man was strong, but even if he hadn't been, Henry was near helpless, weak and without obvious options. He still held tight to the bottle of Renelex. He spit up more vomit and drool trickled down his chin, dripping on the short man's large, calloused hands.

The vampire howled and picking Henry up over his head, threw him at the wall. With a dull thud, Henry hit head first and slumped to the ground. Behind a thin layer of gyp rock was solid concrete. Maggot Man laughed. It was a hollow, gravelly sound like two rocks rubbing together with great force. A small trickle of blood ran down Henry's face from a nasty gash above his right eyebrow. Henry's blood was thick, almost black, more like tar than blood, yet the wound was already healing.

The vampire paused, sensing something was not as it seemed. He'd expected more blood, red blood, delicious blood. What Maggot Man got smelled as vile to him as Maggot Man smelled to Henry. This was not food, it was garbage — Maggot Man was hungry and that made him angry.

Henry thumbed the lid off his Renelex bottle, spilling the pills into his hand, which he clenched tightly against his stomach. He couldn't see straight, and was beginning to shake. It started in his wobbly legs and was racing toward his chest where his heart felt ready to explode. The thought crossed his mind

that it might — not a good sign.

The vampire kicked him in the ribs as hard as he was able. Henry flew off the ground, over the bed and through the window out into the parking lot. When he hit the ground, he still had three pills in his fist — the bottle and other pills lost in the commotion. Several small to medium-sized pieces of glass stuck into his skin. A few were in his face, his lip was sliced deeply open, and there was more glass in his arms, which he'd used to protect his eyes. Again, his blood came slowly, almost reluctantly, like it knew how to bleed but just didn't want to — his heart would beat, but slowly or not at all.

Henry shook his head, it wasn't clear, he couldn't see through the sickness descending upon him. He tossed the pills in his mouth and chewed them down. Maggot Man stood at the doorway confused. Henry was still alive and worse, he was conscious. This worried him.

Henry's hands were shaking violently, followed soon by his entire body — rotting spit and bile left his mouth. It stung its way past Henry's wounded lower lip, and his dizziness was overwhelming.

Then as quickly as it had started, the pain and dizziness were replaced by numbness. The Renelex was making its way through his system and Maggot Man could sense the change — he watched the shaking stop as he approached cautiously, sniffing the air. This was a most unusual creature and he was not used to new things.

He was only a few feet away when Henry picked himself up and brushed himself off as though the vampire wasn't even there. Henry then raised his already healed brow and looked deeply into the vampire's blood-red eyes. His split lip closed, but Henry didn't smile, there was nothing to smile about. He stood exposed, yet he was far from helpless.

They had stood there for only a few moments, when Henry's hand moved so quickly, not even the vampire's heightened senses could warn him in time. Henry grabbed Maggot Man by the throat with icy fingers, magick coursing through him in a rhythmic pulse. A dull yellow flashed across Henry's eyes as he lifted Maggot Man off his feet and tossed him back into the motel room. The vampire hit the far wall just beside the mini-fridge and scattered maggots throughout the room.

The vampire was already reforming into a shimmering pool of larvae when Henry opened the mini-fridge, swept all the liquor bottles out on the floor, then tipped the fridge on its back. Two hands at a time, he shoveled the maggots into the fridge. Slowed down by the cold, they could barely move. Henry felt the heat from the maggots dissipate as he closed the door on them.

Henry was not quite sure how to kill a vampire this old and powerful. This was a vampire lord, each of them unique and just as unpredictable. Henry got a length of silver-plated chain from his trunk and a padlock. Returning to his room, he ran the chain around the mini-fridge and locked it through several chain links. He could smell the metal on his hands and the taste of iron hit the back of his throat. Finally, he placed his hands upon the chain and imagined a special symbol. A very faint red glow radiated from the chain, as Henry choked back the cramping in his guts.

He figured the creature was stuck in there indefinitely. He would leave Maggot Man to burn when he torched the motel, it was the rare corporeal fiend that could withstand exorcism by fire. Yet he suspected that even one maggot surviving might be enough for this creature to return like a bad dream. He tossed the mini-fridge into room six with the rest of the bodies.

Henry cleaned up in his motel bathroom, picking the glass out of his face and arms, then took a shower. Being his last chance for hot water, he took another long shower, took his time, thought about things. Faces flew by his mind's eye, the woman by the pool, Charles Dewitt, even Gus. He didn't really know them but he missed them just the same.

He ended his shower abruptly, tired of the memories. He stopped breathing, let his heart stop, and felt

nothing. It was peaceful — no pain, no memories, and when his heart started again a few minutes later, he slowly came back and let the world wash over him again as a shadow of human, almost real, almost part of reality.

Ithliam came uninvited into his mind — never far beneath the surface. It was time for the long road back to that godforsaken town. He got dressed and after loading his belongings into his car, as well as anything else useful, he filled his tank with gas siphoned from the other cars, then doused the premises with the rest, concentrating the bulk of it on room six.

It had already occurred to him that the Maggot Man might no longer inhabit the larvae, that his corporeal essence might be healing somewhere safe nearby. It was also possible that the fire wouldn't finish the job, but there were more pressing concerns. Ithliam must be the source of this region's concentrated evil, that's what its kind did — it drew evil to it...a great and mysterious puppeteer. A master of masters.

His car running and already halfway out of the parking lot, Henry flicked a lit cigarette near the doorway to his room where the gas puddles he'd left quickly caught fire. Henry watched the fire spread throughout the property, as he drove down the old gravel road, with the moon high above. Surrounded by asphalt and beyond that mud and wet field, the fire would eventually die out, but all it would leave behind was scorched earth and brick.

I'm coming for you, Ithliam, he whispered to himself, pocketing a new bottle of Renelex. I hope you're ready.

Chapter 4 — Killing Fields

Sometimes Henry got lonely and sometimes the realities of what faced him were just a little too heavy to bear. He found himself thinking about Gus again. The greasy caretaker was an ass, but didn't deserve to die like he had. He thought about the swimming hole kids and couldn't reason why such things had to happen. Life was precious — he of all people understood that, and to take life was to be personally responsible for your own doom. That was its own kind of horror.

There comes a point where you've buried more people you've known and loved than you have left in the world. Each day you forget a little more but still miss them just as much. With each new face, you care a little less. These kind of thoughts grew stronger with each passing kilometre toward the Asylum. Ithliam's sense of humour was warped, to say the least.

As the road narrowed, Henry was suddenly compelled to go back, to leave this place and never return. He would only find more death and more sadness. He thought again about the long history of broken dreams that haunted this whole region. It was like God had declared a little hell on earth. Ithliam, the vile creature, seemed less like a creature and more like an evil taint upon an entire people. It was a demon, maybe, gathering evil from all around. A true demon, the rarest of foe, had not penetrated this realm in some time.

Henry could feel it scanning his mind as he approached, it was getting more aggressive. Ithliam was not subtle. It didn't try to hide its presence — it wanted Henry to know this was its domain, that he was trespassing on the land of the damned. Ithliam would protect its dominion, and add endlessly to its kingdom, its lifespan was limitless by human reckoning.

Henry wouldn't turn back, though — he wondered how far Ithliam's corrupting influence went. How long had this vile creature been doing this, how long had it taken to suck the town dry like Charles DeWitt had done to Gus and the other motel guests? One drop of blood at a time until everyone was dead. The biggest question remaining was, Why?

It all started at the Asylum. Now, Henry wondered if the entire town was composed of former patients in one form or another, some less dangerous than others, but all crazy. One would almost have to be insane to live in a place like that. Watching your children disappear one at a time, your neighbours ready to snap at any moment. Was anywhere safe?

Henry could feel the tension, even now, after all these years. The town was like a powder keg ready to blow, a time bomb, and its time was almost up. The Asylum held secrets and danger, a wicked creature of unknown origins. Henry would end this haunting if he had to burn every house and leave the town for nature to erase.

While Henry was deep in thought, a low-hanging mist crept across the road. He didn't notice the twitching body laying directly in his path. As he drove over it, Henry was thrown up hard, his head hitting the roof with a sick snap, fucking zombies. A loud clang under the car was followed by a low dragging across the gravel. The car turned sharply, flipped a few times, coming to an abrupt halt, and wrapped around a large tree.

For several moments, Henry lay slumped over the steering wheel, a thin piece of bone sticking far out his neck. There was no blood — his heart had stopped pumping the black stuff the moment he lost consciousness. His breath had left him, but not his spark. He could never die, not in the regular way. His eyelids fluttered, and when he opened his eyes, the bone in his neck had already realigned itself, and the wound had closed. His neck ached terribly. The price was always pain.

Warm drool dripped on his cheek and the foul stench of rancid breath washed over him. His driver side window had been broken through while he was unconscious. With the hungry, open mouth of the damned, the living corpse he'd hit a few moments earlier was reaching a festering, mostly fleshless hand through the window, clawing at Henry's clothes. Henry steeled his expression into one of stern disapproval. He smelled just human enough to attract this kind of attention from flesh eaters, though he would never satisfy its hunger, any more than his blood would satisfy the Maggot Man. As the zombie pushed itself further through the window, Henry shuffled himself over the passenger seat while wiping the spit from his face. He wasn't very fond of zombies — when one spends time with the living dead, one begins to smell just like them.

The other thing about zombies is one could get unlucky when they were traveling in groups, so there was a good chance more were coming this way. Henry looked over with pity at the slow, clumsy, dead man groaning its pain, full of suffering and hunger. He opened the passenger side door and slipped out. Looking around he saw only shadows, heard only wind and the soft whimpering from the other side of his car.

The corpse pulled itself back from the car window, leaving wretched flesh behind, sticking to the metal and glass. Oblivious to Henry's actions, mindlessly driven to eat anything it could catch, the zombie shambled around the car. Henry, lifting his pistol to about shoulder level, aiming directly between its eyes, waited patiently until the dead man was only a foot or so away before firing a single effective shot.

The loud bang of gun fire was followed almost immediately with the sounds of shuffling feet behind Henry. As the first zombie collapsed lifelessly to the ground, rotten and soulless, other more lively cousins broke from the tree line, groaning, and eager to feed on warm life. Henry turned and watched unsurprised as dozens more tripped and crawled their way toward him. Henry took it all in — it would take a few minutes for the first of them to reach his position.

He walked up onto the road, looking down each direction, and out across the field on the other side. For a moment, he was startled by what he saw. A circle of man-sized spikes covered in blood and feces, holding up endlessly twitching corpses. Something had been cruel to these unfortunate people, doomed

to countless layers of pain. Within the circle stood several modest tombstones surrounding a single larger granite stone. He could feel the hints of old magick on that central stone.

Leaving the first group of zombies behind him, Henry moved closer to the crooked wood fence separating him from the field beyond. A few hundred yards further back from the tombstones, past an old barn, a deep, ominous swamp receded far into the darkness. The barn looked ready to collapse at the slightest breeze, leaning far to the right, but it stood its ground as it had for years. It would fall eventually, but not tonight.

Henry's attention returned to the thick granite tombstones, they were each marked with an unusual symbol Henry had never seen before, but he imagined was religious in nature — there might even be some magickal use for it. On the central stone, twice or three times the size of the others, written in a single concise paragraph were the following words:

Blessed are we who die for our great and noble Lord, to whom sworn fealty ensures everlasting life.
Praise Ithliam.

And in smaller letters, on which even Henry's amazing eyes had to focus intensely to read:

Only the chosen may pass; beware the lurker beneath.

Something very wrong was going on here and it worried Henry for a number of reasons. The smell of dead roses and grass came to him upon a gentle breeze. Those graves looked inviting, safe even, but Henry knew better. Ithliam was still trying to mess with his mind, make him do something he didn't want to do. Ithliam had many agents and many ways of dealing with intruders.

What alarmed him most immediately, though, was the group of zombies now grown substantially in number only a few metres away. They numbered in the hundreds, clawing their way from unmarked graves, converging on Henry from all directions. He could even see them down the road on either side — he couldn't shoot them all, there weren't enough bullets.

Salt. He opened his trunk and quickly sifted through his supplies. He had to kick a zombie aside to open it. Inside, he found a large bag of sea salt. Some used it for bathing, for Henry, it was the cheap and effective way to protect himself from certain walking dead. A little sprinkle on the forehead would paralyze them, and a circle or line could be drawn that could not be crossed.

Henry found himself surrounded by legions of the walking dead. He looked at them for a long moment, fascinated, like watching a deranged National Geographic. As they moved, pieces of flesh and bone fell away from their bodies. The groans had become a near-deafening chorus. This could account for hundreds of the town folk and farmers from all around these parts. Henry certainly hadn't come across anyone alive yet.

Reaching in the bag of salt and pulling out handfuls, he ran a thick line in a large circle around himself. The horde of zombies was slow-moving, but they were close enough that just as he completed the circle, the first of them crashed into the line. It was as if an invisible shield, very physical, and unmoving, had appeared between them. When Henry closed his eyes, the salt glowed a light blue — it seemed to pulse like a heartbeat.

The horde broke through the fence, joining the others pressed up against the salt line. They could never pass, yet they left him no clear path to escape. There was no thought to their actions, just base instinctual need to eat. They would throw themselves against the salt, and a few moments later, forget and try again. If he wasn't so disgusted, Henry might pity them.

The circle Henry stood in gave him an arm's length of clear view in all directions, but he stood nearest one particular zombie at the salt line. He could see its skin crawl with intimate detail: the colours, the

smell, everything about its corruption. He fixated upon it, looking deeply into the dark hollowness where eyes used to be, trying to see anything of its former intelligence. There was none.

The zombie strained against the line, which could reliably hold until broken by external forces. Rain would do it, but the sky was clear — stars were shining brightly in the country sky, no city lights to dilute their intensity. Henry lifted his hand in front of him. Reaching his pointed finger toward the zombie's forehead, he touched it gently. A risky move worth taking.

The effect on the horde was immediate and explosive. Two primary events occurred at the same time, playing out like a movie. A small red dot appeared where Henry touched the zombie, while the magick binding of the circle broke the moment Henry's hand passed the line. Protection at an end, the horde crashed forward.

The first of the ravenous dead spilled across the salt line overwhelming Henry, pressing him down under the weight of dozens upon dozens of bodies. The red dot grew and spread like a lesion over the first zombie and onto several nearby. Within seconds, as the first set of teeth bit hard into Henry's arm, tearing a large piece of muscle and sinew away, the red dot had spread to the remaining zombies. Henry screamed.

Several more bites later, the first zombies stopped and began to shake. Most of Henry's legs were already gone, with jagged bone tips where feet and ankles once were. He paid little attention — he was busy concentrating on his spell, he had to keep every dot in mind and could not be distracted by the concerns of his flesh. By the time all the zombies stopped, more than half of Henry's body had been consumed, even much of his brain — his skull split open, draining its contents upon the dirt, but still he did not die or stop thinking.

That's when the horde exploded. All at once, in one giant burst of guts, the entire countryside was fouled by a milky, dark yellow. The grass sizzled and stank like acid was burning through it. Henry collected his thoughts and concentrated his energies over his body to heal. It wasn't his magick that healed him, that power was innate. No, the magick simply cleaned him off, a separation from the puke all around him.

A few minutes later, he was floating inches off the ground, careful not to touch the acid soaking into the land. He tried not to think about the pain he'd just endured. He shuddered at the thought's shadow, but kept it buried along with the rest. Pain was the sacrifice of his kind of power, his nature healed any wound should even one cell remain, and his magick took his flesh and blood for its fuel. And, of course, there was the hunger.

His eyes fell upon the tombstones again. It was time for a closer look. Who was buried there, if anybody? He walked over the collapsed fence, his bare feet still always a few inches above the ground. The lower parts of his pants were ragged and torn. He was covered in his own deep, black blood, but his magick was already sweeping dark flecks away and restoring his clothes. He was taking his time, conserving his strength should he really need it.

As he approached the graves, he noticed the central large stone was not made of the same material as the rest. Henry recognized it as obsidian — a rare and powerful stone. This was a marker, when Henry closed his eyes, a mysterious symbol glowed a faint green upon its surface. Whatever its purpose, the magick was tired, it hadn't been renewed in some time. Was the symbol a name? He could already hear more zombies coming from the trees. Where were they all coming from?

Removing the little brown book from his inner vest pocket, where it could only be found if meant to be, he flipped it open to a near back page. Biting the tip of his finger, and taking a deep breath, he scrawled the symbol in thick blood which the book readily absorbed. It was hungry, too — Henry hadn't fed it in a long time, either.

The moment he closed the book, information about the symbol began to pour into his head. He placed the book back in its safe spot and allowed the images to flow across his mind's eye. Now, he understood, the obsidian rock had been here a long time, but not the surrounding smaller tombstones. The rock protected the entrance to a hidden subterranean domain, and the symbol unlocked the way for those with the means to penetrate it.

Henry placed his unusually long fingers upon the cold, dark surface of the large obsidian marker stone. He closed his eyes and imagined the green symbol blazing brightly. A loathsome feeling flowed into him from the stone. He felt an energy enter into him, crawling over and through him. Unpleasant, like a stranger's hand drawn across private flesh.

A sort of parasite, the symbol drank of Henry's magick. With such a large supply, Henry hardly noticed the loss but a lesser mage might have died on the spot. Once the green symbol had taken its fill, Henry stepped back, the lock having been satisfied, it should open. As expected, the stone fell inwards, revealing a deep hole with ladder leading down into the dreadful unknown. If the stone hit bottom, there was no sound of it.

Henry looked around. The plant life, as far as the eye could see, had all withered and died, he imagined it might take years to fully recover from this kind of pollution. His magick had just finished cleaning him and mending or replacing his clothes, when Henry stood upon the ground again, new shoes protected his feet from the decay beneath them.

His eyes fell upon the graves around him and then into the black hole leading to unknown terror and adventure. He couldn't help but notice his grave could be here if he wanted it to be. He could lay down and command the magick to cover him with fresh soil. All his efforts would be put aside for a final rest, but he was driven to continue. Not unlike a zombie, Henry felt compelled, not by his hunger, but instead by his conscience. He controlled the hunger, he couldn't control his conscience.

That's when Henry noticed Ithliam driving into his head again. It seemed much stronger now, like it was trying to make friends, convince him there was no fight between them. For a very short moment, Henry thought about a truce, thought about walking away, Ithliam was very convincing. It offered many rewards and comforts to those who were willing to surrender their will to the great beast.

Maybe they could work things out peacefully, but then it didn't take long for the list of atrocities Ithliam was responsible for to come into Henry's mind and convince him there could be no peace between them. If Ithliam died, which was tragically the way it had to go sometimes, then at least put in a position where it could do no more harm.

There had been a time when Henry had failed to resist the call of power. He'd made a deal he didn't want to make and it haunted him even now. There were consequences to all actions — he learned the hard way...no matter how noble the intention or small the action seemed or how delayed the result. Uncompromising purity had its own sacrifices, but it paled in comparison to the unintended consequences of selfish desire to win at all costs.

Henry thought about how sometimes people lived in a place of moral relativity, made to choose what one hoped was the lesser of two evils. And sometimes even a year later, one could have doubts about that choice. Given enough time, one doubted everything. One feared the mistakes of the past as readily as the present. He shook his head clear — Ithliam was patient, as patient as Henry, it seemed. There was almost mutual respect in the shadows of Henry's thoughts.

The rope ladder was surprisingly strong, considering it looked well-worn and old. Henry was a heavy man, he didn't look it, but he weighed as much as someone twice his size and his equipment added substantially to that. Yet, the rope gave no protest, not a single leathery stretch or strain that gave concern. Magickally augmented, no doubt. Henry felt vulnerable only in that he didn't know what he'd

find down here, or if he'd have been better off dealing directly with the horde above, and then walk the rest of the way. Thankfully they weren't able to follow him down into the depths, Henry was grateful to escape the putrid zombie stench up there for more natural surroundings down here like dirt and roots.

Call it instinct, but when a trail revealed itself, he was compelled to explore it. Somewhere in that was the source of his calling — why he'd chosen the professional path he now followed. He took a moment to catch his breath and listen. He thought he could make out sounds from far below, very much like long, deep breaths. Smooth and regular, there was also an echo and the very faint sound of water running.

A cave? Maybe a river or underground lake.

It was a ways down yet and he'd already approximated his current depth at several hundred feet. He'd left behind the sickening moans and groans of the horde. He'd moved slowly and cautiously. The air was getting thicker, not hard to breathe, but he noticed all the same.

It was getting warmer and the old rope ladder became slippery. Henry had to pay very close attention to stay safely attached. However, it was very hard for a man to pay close attention for so long, especially when the hole seemed endless, and each step the same. A misstep was almost inevitable.

Finally, he slipped. His foot flew out from the rope and his wet fingers gave way under his unusual weight in spite of his exceptional strength. He dropped like a bird dead in mid-flight. He uselessly reached for the ladder, but his body slammed hard against the rock wall. Henry tucked his arms tightly against his body, and a wind howled in his ears as he fell. He continued falling for some time, until the walls gave way and he was suddenly surrounded by open air on all sides. All he could hear now was that slow regular breathing...and then maybe a heartbeat. Monstrous in size, and alive.

As he crashed through the surface of the extremely cold water, involuntarily inhaling salty foam, he choked as his chest constricted. Ithliam laughed somewhere in the back of his mind. This was like a puppet show, staged by a grand master. Amusement seemed to play a large part in Ithliam's motivations. Henry was happy to endure the game, any knowledge of the mind of his adversary would improve his chances of a final solution.

The force of the impact was much like hitting solid ground. Henry was knocked senseless — he lost his direction, could no longer tell up from down. He was sinking fast at first and couldn't open his eyes for the cold. He felt as though his skin had been flayed from his body.

His mind wandered back in time as he waited patiently for his body to float back up to the surface of the water. Of course, he was in no danger of drowning, yet his human instincts always competed with his unnatural reality. If relaxed, he could endure as long as it took. He focused on his pain, thinking absently about his past and how he'd come to this. He hurt everywhere. His body had been pulverized by the fall, and although it was healing, he felt every pain. He distracted himself by thinking again of that first beautiful ghost so many years ago. He wished he'd met her alive. She was something special.

Finally, his face broke water and he could take a breath to ease the discomfort in his hollow chest. The air was stale and smelled of muddy dust, but he sucked it in gladly — he preferred not to wallow on the dead side of his nature. That's when something brushed by his leg. Something big — and deadly. Henry's leg burned where it had touched briefly. An acid-like slime ate through his pant leg and into his flesh. Even under the water as it was, Henry could make out a large gray-black mass circling beneath him.

He frantically scanned for dry land, several yards away, his eyes fell upon a narrow ledge and path along it. He had to get to that ledge. Visions of being eaten whole came unbidden across his imagination and treading water was clearly a doomed strategy.

He unclasped his cloak and let it fall into the endless deep. With a grunt, he plunged his arms forward and swam as fast as he could toward the ledge, carefully watching for the creature below. It was moving towards his cloak as it sunk slowly downward. The river didn't move much, having only a slight current. It was wide and deep, and stank like hard minerals.

Henry stretched toward the edge and dry land. His fingers touched rock just as the dark mass beneath moved back towards him, losing interest in the cloak. Perhaps it realized the trick or perhaps it was just too little food to bother with. Henry, however, smelled of meat and this thing was clearly a carnivore.

He lifted himself onto the ledge, but not before the creature sent out a thick tentacle to wrap around his ankle and pull him back. He caught a grip by sliding his fingers into a narrow crack, preventing him from falling back into the water entirely. His legs still dangled helplessly in harm's way, his ankle burning like it was on fire as the acidic slime ate away his pant, sock and a few layers of pale skin.

Henry didn't scream. Though he felt severe, unyielding pain, he remained calm. Not much different from with the common undead, acid wounds didn't heal — he'd have to take other measures when time allowed, most likely removing the affected flesh himself with a sharp knife and let the surrounding tissue take its proper course.

The creature pulled hard again — yellow flashed across Henry's eyes and he dug the fingers of his right hand deeper into the rock. He could barely hold out against the monster's strength. Even with magickal enhancements, his joints and ligaments protested. He was being slowly ripped apart. If he didn't resolve this quickly, then one of two things would happen. Either his ankle would detach or his arm would. Neither was a very pleasant thought under the circumstances.

He kicked at the slimy appendage and it melted away the heel of his shoe, but still he kicked at his own ankle irritating the beast, incensing it. It wouldn't let go but it came closer. It was frustrated that Henry wasn't coming along so easily. For the first time, he got a good look at what held him as it rose out of the water with a shrill roar a thousand times louder than any lion. This thing was the size of an elephant, but looked most like a giant squid. A mutant of some sort, it had dozens of eyes on the front of what Henry thought must be its face.

He could see now that it was a dark green in complexion, bumps and lesions covered its skin, bleeding, or maybe oozing a bubbly foam-like black acid that smoked faintly as oxygen touched it. Directly under its eyes was a large, vertical, tooth-filled maw. It looked almost like a gash up its face with uneven lips and receding gums. Multiple rows of teeth, each the size of Henry's arm, filled the dark hole. Its breath hit him like a punch to the gut. It made his head swim, and he almost lost his grip on the ledge.

It let go of his ankle, as several more tentacles came out of the water flying toward him. They wrapped around his waist, burning him, and around each limb, his knees, his elbows and even his neck. They overwhelmed his resistance — tearing him and the rocky ledge away from the wall as it tossed him high into the air.

For a very brief moment, Henry thought about writing a book. This would make a good mid way climax, a desperate situation with the hero on the verge of unavoidable doom. Who would help him here, down in the bowels of a corrupt and evil land? Below him was a monster from some nightmare waiting, mouth wide open, as he fell inevitably toward rows of razor sharp teeth ready to chew him up.

It didn't chew him up though, rather it swallowed him whole. Much like Pinocchio, he was being crushed in the belly of the beast, surrounded by moist, soothing slime. Henry would have shaken his head grimly if he wasn't being pressed from all sides with soft, spongy monster flesh. He was losing his mind if he thought anything about his situation was soothing. The stench made him woozy again — it smelled somewhere in between sewage and a cattle-processing plant.

Henry felt movement as the monster descended back into the deep waters. It was going somewhere, it had a purpose. Henry thought about crocodiles and how sometimes they didn't kill their food at first. They often dragged the food alive under the water and into some inescapable cave where it could stay fresh until later. This monster had swallowed Henry whole and was taking him somewhere, but where? And why? Again, deep in the back of his mind, he felt Ithliam working at him. Calling him, or was it calling the creature?

Henry waited patiently for his answers, unable to move, no air to breathe, and still unwilling to unleash his true power no matter how desperate the situation appeared. He had his ways out of this, he supposed, but curiosity had the better of him. If the creature wanted him dead, it would have tried harder. They kept moving for several minutes.

Sudden and violent contractions wracked the mutant beast, the lurker beneath, as it suddenly spat him up. Henry felt like a sardine. It was probably the grossest experience in recent memory, being chucked up by a giant mutant squid onto the sandy shore of a narrow river running alongside the ancient Asylum, in the middle of the town known as Ithliam. At least he didn't have to walk. The first thing he did was gasp for air, the most human thing he could think of to do.

His clothes were torn in several places, and acid had eaten most of the fabric away. He rubbed his ankle as he watched the giant shadow disappear in the waters. He checked his equipment. Secret pockets all over him had burst open, losing most of his finer tools. No rope, his salt was dissolved and his cigs had become a brown mush, but his little brown book was fine. Then a terrible thought struck him, a creeping horror that even the mutant couldn't render in him. His Renelex. He searched frantically, but it was gone.

He had to get back to his car, there was more in his trunk. He stood up, but then fell just as quickly. His ankle wouldn't hold his weight. Shit! Henry was still hurt. Not a common thing for his wounds to remain unhealed so long, but he'd dealt with these kinds of injuries before. The acid had done its job. Most of the places he was burned were superficial; however, his ankle took the worst of it.

There was no healing an acid burn like this by his supernatural means. His magick was mostly blood magick, by its nature, it took flesh; it didn't restore it. His one ankle was completely useless, his other could hold his weight but not much else, and his head leaned at a sickly angle. There was no strength in his neck whatsoever, to see straight he would have to hold his head up with his hands.

Okay, damn you, get up. He was shaking all over. Get up. He was on one knee. Get up. He placed his hands gingerly on the soft ground. He felt the wet sand, the small pebbles between his fingers. Get up! Henry stood with his weight mostly on his good leg and took a deep breath. The air nourished him, he closed his eyes and let the sweat drip from his brow. When he opened them, he was facing the Asylum. The place he'd first seen the silhouette of the vile creature, standing no more than a hundred yards away.

All right, Ithliam, let's finish it. You wanted me, now here I am.

There was laughter all around him. It wasn't in his head this time. It came from the ground. It was deep underneath the entire town. Ithliam had called him, used yet another one of its foul minions to retrieve him and bring him back here on his own terms. Did Ithliam suspect his nature? Obviously, Ithliam now knew Henry wasn't human. The entire time he'd been testing him, learning about Henry as Henry had been learning about Ithliam.

Henry felt as though he had been manipulated all along. Every step he'd taken toward this place was a step Ithliam had wanted him to take. It was about Henry all along. Henry hadn't escaped being baited earlier in the Asylum — he'd already fallen into the trap. This whole time he'd been no more free than a fly caught in a web.

The land began to shake, but Henry stood his ground as best he could, silently with proud defiance.

A crack formed at his feet, running endlessly in every direction. Henry watched helplessly as the town disappeared into the earth all around, leaving only him and the old Asylum surrounded by empty space and darkness. Even the stars above vanished from view, hidden behind unknown and screeching apparitions.

A narrow path led between him and the grounds. The magick door of the Asylum flew open, inviting him to join Ithliam for the final confrontation. Black steam came pouring out and over the cliff edges on all sides. The fog of doom covered all with a desperate and heavy malaise as every organic thing it touched instantly decayed and died. The trees that lined the yard became twisted monstrous things, horrors in themselves.

The grass gave way to squirming cockroaches that made a buzz of clicking sounds. They covered the path to the Asylum door for Henry, the rotten old wall that had surrounded the yard grew large and thick, broken in several places, as the ground twisted upward. Welcome back to hell, he thought, though he didn't plan on staying long. The whole scene was painted with dark red and dried blood browns.

Henry limped slowly along the path before him, through the long yard and stood before the gigantic, wide-open door. He couldn't see into the darkness — his special sight was failing him here. He'd have to walk through if he wished to see the other side, this was a master's place of power, and Henry was walking right into its welcoming arms. He wasn't even sure this was the plane of the living anymore, he'd been in some strange places, and this was no exception.

He felt the hunger faintly in his guts, he wouldn't have very long before it would take him. With no Renelex to stop it, he'd have to face his beast. For better or worse, so would Ithliam.

On the surface, it would seem that's what Ithliam wanted — another powerful fiend to control and do its bidding. With Henry under its influence, it could expand its territory much further — maybe even as far as the next city, a whole new killing field. Henry shivered as though cold, but it was the thought that bothered him, of being used for the very things that he'd always fought against.

With a disappointed groan, he shambled through the door into the darkness beyond, his lame foot dragging behind, his head resting weakly to one side. Once he was past the threshold, the door closed behind him and Ithliam's laughter stopped. Thank God for small miracles, he thought, as he collapsed unconscious to the floor.

Chapter 5 — A Deal Was Made

Many years ago, Henry had made a deal he should never have made. He couldn't blame it on any one thing, he'd simply found himself in a position beyond his ability to cope. Everyone had a breaking point, even tough guys like Henry. He wasn't entirely human, but not entirely inhuman, either. Convinced none could stand against him, during a time of self-indulgence and boredom, he'd begun to make mistakes. He'd lost his way.

He was full of that self-righteous smugness that comes with doing too much good for too many bad reasons. He'd crushed vampires and ghouls beneath his heel, while his well-planned strategies always overcame the deadliest fiends. He was the hunter of the hunters, a predator to the monsters that lurked in the night. He was riding a wave of blessed, unstoppable power, but all that ended the night he made the deal he should never have made.

In 1943, Henry was tracking a disturbance at a decommissioned underground train station. Left unused for many years, replaced by a more modern subway system, its tunnels were all sealed off. A

maintenance crew down there on other business had gone missing. Local authorities sent in a search crew that came back a few hours later running like hell, screaming and babbling incoherently. Most of the search crew members became jabbering idiots. Only one said anything understandable — a single word: Devil. Each of the men died a few days later. They had no visible wounds, the doctors signed off as a case of hysteria-induced cardiac arrest, in other words scared to death.

Henry had been excited. Not the excitement a human feels, with adrenaline and normal biological function. His feeling was deeper, generated and felt through a different instrument entirely, some connection to a plane far away. He'd dusted off old books and reread ancient magickal texts he might find useful. His preparations were quick, in hindsight, too quick.

Finally, after many years, there was the real possibility of a challenge, something to test him at the highest level. A devil, but more likely a demon, it didn't matter to him. He was growing bored of the same old fare and he hadn't noticed the battle rust grow so thick after a long period of inaction. Henry was no longer the man he thought he was.

There had been a long history of sightings and stories about the station and its tunnels. Retired conductors told him of strange sights and happenings on the tracks late at night. One mentioned seeing a little girl walking along the rails, only to disappear a moment later, along a track — there were no doors or adjacent tunnels for several hundred yards. Another talked of traveling with a full load of passengers, only to have no one on board when he arrived at the next stop. These events haunted these men well into their later years.

To Henry, these stories were potent indicators of a greater evil down below. A concentration of paranormal events like this was so rare, but nothing he hadn't seen before. How old was he at this point? How many centuries had he been at this?

A major demon seemed likely — after years of research and personal experience, Henry knew that demons were corrupting influences. They were most often material manifestations of great power acting as a sort of nexus point between this world and somewhere else — somewhere bad. Within several miles of such vile creatures, all the barely dead and loosely connected spirits became stronger and more aggressive.

Sightings increased and usually harmless spectres became dangerous things, stalking the shadows. That little girl walking on the tracks later appeared before a homeless man and tore out his eyes. The people who disappeared from that train attacked the station security guard as a mass of flesh-eating ghouls. A horrible fate plagued every encounter. This was the nature of a demon and because of it and other more terrestrial considerations, the station had been retired.

When Henry eventually located the station from its only remaining entrance in the sewer, he was already using his magick to weave his wardrobe, and wore a black wide-rimmed fedora and fine black wool suit. His shoes were Italian leather — he didn't wear gloves or boots and his hands were tough and calloused from years of hard work in similar sewers or houses or old cemeteries. His hair was longer, curly and near his shoulders.

He kicked open the thick metal grate to the train station, and with his hand holding his hat to his head, pressed through into the darkness. He had a nearly complete floor plan for the area, and all tracks, but some of the service tunnels weren't fully mapped out. Henry was, of course, convinced he had everything he'd need, a fatal mistake.

It was hard to plan for a demon — each was different. There were some biblical accounts and a few books about protective summoning circles and magick, spelled with a "k." They were mostly superstition and fantasy. If you believed the old stories, it took a man touched by God or the aid of angels to deal with demons effectively. Henry had tried hard to distill the truth in these accounts, but in

all his years of dealing with the supernatural, God hadn't come into it.

There were rules to the game that he'd discovered, usually the hard way. Often a spirit remained behind because the body was desecrated or hidden like a dirty secret. A good burial usually worked for this type. Sometimes they need vengeance for the wrong done them.

Ghouls and zombies, along with most of the other shambling dead, usually went down with a bullet to the brain, or if enough of their bodies were physically destroyed, explosions worked well on groups of them. Bullets could work for some vampires, usually only fledglings, but it often took sunlight to keep them down. Various monsters could be burned, blown up, even drowned in some cases, but a demon was something else entirely.

Demons were known to be intelligent, patient and brutal beyond description. They didn't know everything, but immortality had advantages and they were often keepers of buried secrets, frequently sought after by fools for ancient treasures or forgotten sciences. Demons liked to gamble and use mortal souls as chips. If they made promises, they were bound to keep them, though in the end, it was usually what they wanted all along — the devotion of their victims. Demons almost never lied directly, but every word they spoke was riddled with silver-tongued deception and misdirection.

Henry had goose bumps thinking about the impending encounter. He'd grown hungry for more knowledge, more power to slay the infernal damned. He was so convinced of his own superiority to these creatures that he forgot he was one of them, and planned to use this demon as a tool for his own ends.

He hadn't yet realized that this demon already had plans of its own — that it would gladly grant power to all who sought it, but there was always a steep price to be paid by the seeker.

Henry made his way through the old tunnels with little problem, heaving a bright, heavy lamp that gave him a good view for several metres on all sides. The light it gave was a strange green that seemed to highlight hidden objects in the shadows — one of Henry's more useful inventions.

The tunnel was thick with dust. The faint drip of storm water run-off echoed in the distance. Careful not to make much noise and trying to hear everything except himself, Henry walked slowly forward until after several hours, he thought he could make out a door in the distance.

He closely examined the strange door — it was very ornate, a masterwork of metallic curves woven into very old wood, probably oak or some other hardwood. Henry had never seen such quality — lines of gold and silver, mostly silver, with copper flames. The lock was large, taking up much of the right side of the door, and merged seamlessly with the design. It was literally part of the door, the line between metal and wood indistinguishable. This couldn't be part of the original tunnels, it would have cost a king's ransom. He wondered what was on the other side.

It was far too big and heavy for him to push open, although the round, smooth hinges looked to be in serviceable condition. This door was made for giants, it would seem, standing over 20 feet tall. There was no door knob — instead, a thick metal plate with a slight indent that served as leverage for a mighty press forward.

Henry pondered — clearly, this was a significant find, but how would he get past it? He noted several finely-etched symbols lining the left side, curving at the top along the seam separating the door from the tunnel wall. They seemed somewhat familiar. The source of this door was rooted near the source of all the magick he'd discovered these long years. The symbols were so similar, yet different and unique.

Henry placed the lamp down on the thick stone ledge leading up to the door and started sifting through his supplies. He knew he'd found what he was looking for as his fingers ran across an old book bound with some sort of unknown leather. He always felt a momentary impulse to throw the book away when

he touched it. Something about it repulsed him, but he needed it.

The title was *Nobilium Necrobis Huth Decta*, one of the only known surviving magick texts of the ancient world. It was written by an unknown author during the Babylonian golden age and was considered a great and authentic authority on the supernatural, specifically — the demonic arts. Some claimed it was the true *Necronomicon*, or *Book of the Dead*, but who could say for sure?

Henry carefully opened the book and as he did so, the door seemed to vibrate subtly, though it made no sound. He paused again to consider this new phenomenon. It had never happened before. He was simply trying to find a reference to the familiar symbols, but there was an undeniable connection between the book and the door. They had history together. Henry scanned the pages of the book. After several minutes, he found something — a single match to the third symbol in the sequence. It was on a page describing the various layers of a Babylonian hell.

He was getting somewhere, but he needed more symbols to have any useful idea of what was happening here. After a careful examination of the rest of the book, he found nothing. All he had was one symbol, and a vague reference to the third layer of hell. It seemed practical that the other symbols represented other layers of hell, but they weren't like the symbols in the book.

Was it possible that these other symbols were for other hells entirely? If that was the case, then this door might be a portal, one of the ancient gates from a time when demons coexisted with men to some degree and traveled between worlds. This could be the greatest discovering of his career and should he come to control its power, he could have entire worlds opened to him, free access to the other side, where he could hunt the sources of all evil and absorb their power to further his own adventures.

This door could also mean that there was no single demon in these tunnels, that instead, he could be facing more than one. These could be demons that could use this gate themselves and come out into this world at their leisure. A greater demon, with its impossibly dense mass and gluttonous appetite for power, could not remain long in this world without destroying it, and so it was likely to be back in its own world right now. It was inconceivable that Henry would have gotten this close to the door, should any of the higher plane beings be nearby on this side.

It was traditional thought in paranormal circles that those referred to as demons were only weaker, less dense members of their mighty race, trapped here against their will. These gates were thought to be either myth or destroyed long ago, as the darker and more powerful creatures of the early universe lost interest in this planet, having discovered larger worlds elsewhere.

Had the developers of these tunnels uncovered this door in solid rock? Or had this door appeared after they built it? Perhaps a lesser being had built it at the command of its greater lord on the other side. The questions swam through his head. Henry felt a little dizzy at the implications — his pulse raising, he felt very much alive and he enjoyed that.

One thing he did know was that the book and the door were connected by more than just information. The door had physically responded to it. Henry had a ludicrously simple idea. He brought the book closer while it was open to the page with the third symbol. The door vibrated violently, though silently, as he approached. All he could hear was dripping water far away down the tunnel. He was only a few feet away when the third symbol on the door raised itself with a dull thud and a soft, yellow glow.

Henry stood there stunned. What did all this mean? He suddenly had doubts. He almost saw that he'd made a mistake coming here, but it wasn't in his nature to admit such things. Instead, he clenched his teeth and got angry. He steeled himself for whatever lay ahead. The yellow traced its way around the door — its dull light crept into the near seamless transition between wood and rock, etched upon alien metals.

The tunnel became perfectly quiet — not even the dripping water could be heard, as though Henry had been suddenly stricken deaf. The yellow light disappeared and there was a single, almost inaudible click in the silence, before a long moment passed and the door swung easily open of its own accord.

Henry looked through, on this side was a tunnel deep in the ground, but on the other side was endless starlight from some point of view deep in space. It floated in unknown vantage, somewhere in a great material expanse containing all the wonders of the outer universe.

He couldn't take his eyes from it — he felt tears run down his cheeks. He was so shocked, he struggled to breathe. The starlight struck his skin and rather than searing pain came warmth and comfort. Home.

What seemed an eternity of bliss was in fact only a few seconds. Shortly upon opening the door, a great eye usurped the view and looked unblinkingly back at him. When Henry thought "eye," it was an approximation, the closest thing he could think of to what it was. This was a truly unique and unknown creature. He had not and would not ever see anything like it in his world, in his plane of existence, even in known space. It was not of his universe. It was easily the size of a mountain. His comfort left him, replaced by a brooding horror he'd never felt before.

"Ssppeeaakkkk", it shripped, penetrating both his mind and body. Henry felt his eardrums pop and black blood run down the side of his head. He was shocked to notice his ears were not already healing. They weren't healing at all.

This wouldn't be so bad if not for all the blood, nausea and pain, thought Henry.

The vile creature waited patiently for his response. Occasionally, it panned back, granting Henry a larger view of its body. It was a grotesque perversion of many things. A hideous mutation like something evolved over millions of years in many different places. Places with physical laws completely alien to the experience of man.

Henry lowered his eyes in respect, this is what he'd come for. He didn't bother putting his hands at his ears, he was deaf. His eardrums were shattered, he knew it. Black blood caked the sides of his head. He raised his eyes again, drank in darkness, and said these fateful words: "I want to make a deal."

There was laughter throughout the heavens as planets and other celestial objects shook at some quantum level. The great beast was pleased, expectant even. It had no mouth that Henry could see, but it was smiling...of that, he was sure. It still had not occurred to Henry that he was making a mistake. He truly believed he had the upper hand, like he could just throw the book away from the door and it would instantly close, returning him to the relative safety of his world. Henry couldn't feel the vile creature's presence in his mind, so subtly was it fanning the flame of his desire.

"Tteeeerrmmsss." Henry's head felt as though it would explode as the word buried itself with a long draw deep into his mind. Every word uttered by this creature brought him a step closer to his own hell.

Henry took his time, was careful, every word had to count. He picked his first question — he figured he had three before it was too dangerous to ask more. The celestial being knew his thoughts and seemed to concur. If the lore held true, then it would have to answer, but he wasn't holding his breath.

It waited. Henry gave a sigh of relief. Okay, here we go. He took a very deep breath, thinking it may be his last and recited his first question.

"Can you grant me the power and knowledge to stop all fiends on my world?"

"Yessss." It didn't hesitate, like it had waited for Henry to finish asking, only as a courtesy. Henry's knees felt weak, it took effort to remain standing.

"What is your true name?" His skin itched.

“Iiithhliaamm.”

Again, there was no hesitation. Henry hadn't expected it to give that one up so quickly — that name might give him more power over it. Could he have underestimated this creature? Was it underestimating him? Henry became suspicious. Something wasn't right about this — that laughter, again. It was deep and foreboding. Henry felt sick. It was washing over him like a wave of discontent.

He threw the book away suddenly and started running down the tunnel. The laughter followed him. He didn't look back to see if the door was closed. There was no pursuit, but he didn't stop running, either. He was sure he had only asked two questions, but...he couldn't quite remember the last few moments.

He turned a corner sharply but was going too fast. He slammed into the rock wall, sending dirt and stone flying in all directions. His eyes felt strange and heavy. He could see fine in the dark as always, but it was different somehow, even more clear. Objects appeared more like phantom shapes, almost truer versions of themselves. He seemed to know things about them, things he shouldn't know. He felt stronger — he barely noticed the impact of that wall. What's happening to me, he thought, as he got back to his feet and continued down the long tunnel back toward the only exit, the grate back into the sewer.

Horrible images crossed his mind, like memories from a dream. He'd spoken with a demon, seen the other side, but he couldn't remember a thing about it. What was its name? He needed that name, but it was gone. As quickly as it had been spoken, it had left him. He saw faces in his mind's eye that he had no recollection of ever having seen before. There was an old country road and people running in every direction. Shots were fired and all around people were dying. All this in the yards of some old asylum with large double doors.

Henry threw up, falling to the ground, feeling dizzy and sick. Seizures overtook him, his body shook, his head hit the rock tunnel wall and ground — midnight blood oozed from his ears. Deep in his gut he felt something strange. A hunger for something, but he didn't know what. It was painful and he needed to satisfy that hunger to make the pain stop. Henry screamed and screamed, but no one came to help him. He was on his own now. He'd made a deal, hadn't he? He couldn't quite remember the terms.

His personal perspective flew into the back of his head. He watched helplessly as his arms no longer responded to any of his mental commands. The shaking stopped. He watching himself rise up from all fours — he was much taller. His hands weren't his hands. They held themselves differently, like claws, and his nails had grown longer and thicker, even sharper. His skin had become leathery and coarse. He screamed with unfathomable rage. Long and shrill, it echoed throughout the tunnels.

His legs became stronger, but his flesh didn't cover all his frame, his organs had shrunk and stretched across his elongated limbs. He swallowed his tongue, craving fat and bone. He wanted to drink the blood of a fresh kill, feel warmth run down his throat, energizing his undead flesh.

Saliva filled his mouth and dripped from his open tooth-filled maw. He felt great endurance, like he could run forever. He was twice his regular size, he could hear and smell for miles and his eyes glowed with a dull yellow. He was inflicted. Cursed. He had become like one of those fiends in the night, no longer connected to the living. He was no longer of the innocent, of the noble dead.

He would kill that night and many more nights to come, remembering only loose details. Waking up in a pool of blood with the stench of fresh rot. Guilty for crimes he knew he'd committed, but could do nothing about. His mind was always clouded, and confused. It was like dementia, a split state where he was never quite sure what was real, or what was memory. The beast's recollection or his own. Killing and then sleeping, changing and then grieving.

He turned into a demon every single night — his appetite was insatiable. He was singularly the most

powerful and brutal fiend in the world. Henry consumed the strong prey, and with each soul he grew stronger still. His magick was innate when he was the beast. If he wanted it, it happened. He was a calculating, cunning, killing machine.

Henry absorbed the vitality of his victims. He enjoyed a fight, wallowing in the effort of it, living for the hunt. Had he really changed so much? Often the most pleasing were vampires. They were strong, fast, and when Henry sunk his teeth into any part of them, fledgling or master, they were consumed — mind, body, and soul. He would feel their spirit tear free from their immortal coils. He would feel their strength become his own.

Each night he turned into the undead monster that came to dominate his life, growing stronger, more powerful, faster — even in his more human side, the power bled over. Henry became more durable, and could summon great strength when needed. His magick was more potent, and it took much less time to recover from its sacrificial cost. He became much more direct, capable of effects that would have previously killed him. This went on for decades.

With time, he felt less confusion, and more resolve to get control of it, to use it. The beast was a berserker, and would kill every being in sight — the innocent as well as the evil. His guilt and humiliation had reached breaking point. And it was Henry who was left with the memories, a puppet aware of his own strings, but unaware of the puppeteer.

Deep inside, he still longed to help people. He still felt drawn to solving old mysteries protecting those who couldn't protect themselves. If he didn't do it, then who would? The creatures he concerned himself with were beyond most mortals. How had he let it come to this? If only he could remember his master's name....

He was almost himself half the time, but it wasn't enough. After years of murder and despair, as his mind began to clear, he knew what he had to do. He would find this demon again. He would take back what was his, and end its presence on this plane. Not for power or glory, not even for the personal challenge, but because it had to be done and he knew he was the only one who could do it. In a very real way, this experience had cleansed him, helped him define himself again as a force for good. All that was dark and selfish within him had become part of the beast, his unwanted guest.

A confrontation was coming — the price had been too high and he wanted payback. What was that vile creature's name, again? He'd visited the tunnel a few months after his first transformation. The door had disappeared, and the book along with it. It still hurt to think of the magick he'd lost that day, literally years of work.

It wasn't in his nature to give up, though, so he learned how to use computers and the Internet. Updating his research techniques, and with much trial and error over many months, he'd discovered a drug called Renelex. Without drowsiness or disorientation, it would prevent adrenaline from being absorbed by red blood cells — more importantly, it stopped the change. The modern world had proved its use to an ancient creature.

Had it been possible, Henry would have cried the first night he didn't turn, the Renelex had worked and it continued to work every time. The only catch was that he needed it every few hours except when he was sleeping. It was expensive stuff but he didn't care. There was no amount of money he wasn't willing to pay. He mused about telling his dealer the reason for the drug, wondered if he'd get a discount for not tearing his face off. Still, that dark sense of humour was there. Some things never changed.

For the first time, he counted himself lucky that the beast part of him was a mindless killing machine. Cunning, certainly, but motivated by primitive desire. It was about the hunt, the thrill of it, and the satisfaction that came with consuming the power of the dead. Like a junkie, once it had a fix, it'd fall

asleep content. It never tried to directly interfere with Henry's plans, uncaring. Henry had come to realize that the beast was likely not even aware of Henry, yet Henry was all too aware of the beast.

After Renelex, life became normal again, at least normal for a being like Henry and he almost felt happy. He used magick and technology to appear warm and healthy around others, alive even. He kept to himself mostly, but he continued to study and pursue his magick. He stayed away from huntings for a while, the beast had taken care of both their share of fiends for some time.

A year or so later, Henry found a book at an auction. It was a small leather-bound notebook about towns that had died in the Midwest and the ghosts that haunted them. Something about one town in particular seemed familiar. Its name, Ithliam, haunted him, he felt like he had been there before and it didn't feel good. Where had he heard that name before? It didn't take long to pack some supplies and hit the road. Some mysteries just couldn't be ignored and Ithliam was calling.

Chapter 6 — The Ultimate Trick

“Welcome home.”

The words came from nowhere and everywhere around Henry. They dripped mockery and pain, ending in shrill laughter. There was no air to carry dust or sound, just emptiness forever, and there he stood naked and alone, healing but very slowly, acid still burning through what remained of his flesh.

And heat. A horrible, stifling, dry heat, it pressed against his stretched flesh, drying it further, penetrating his magickal protections, irritating his wounds, and absorbing his matter. Henry watched helplessly as his skin dispersed in a cloud of fine particles — suddenly there was nothing but pain. He could no longer feel the heat. He couldn't even scream, all his organs were gone, but he would not die.

A small pinprick of light, what looked to be many miles in the distance, appeared suddenly, or was suddenly noticed — Henry couldn't be sure anymore. His magick failing, he had collapsed to the Asylum floor, which felt dead and plain. He could no longer make out the fine textures of the surfaces he touched — it was benign matter now, his bones telling him only that the floor was there, and without ligaments or muscles, he couldn't even move.

From the darkness of his eye sockets, Henry could see his bones blacken and begin to flake away. Soon his body would be gone entirely, taken by this place, his power, his soul forever trapped in this hell. Ithliam laughed all the while, more amused by this show than any in a long time. This was one of his better tricks, almost an ultimate trick. This world would be his at last, with nothing left to stop him, and he laughed and laughed and laughed.

With Henry taken care of, Ithliam stepped from the shadows nearby and began circling the spot of his final triumph. As he trod his path, the earth itself retreated from his feet so as never to actually touch him. Still, Ithliam walked comfortably as though he had in fact stepped upon a solid surface. The emptiness surrounding him folded in upon itself until the dirty truth was revealed.

Henry's broken form lay in a jumble of flesh and bone, twitching, he silently screamed, trapped under a powerful delusion, a magickal hell, care of Ithliam's near infinite power and twisted sense of humour. Henry was not dead yet, for Ithliam had use still for what he had become. Henry had been curious about what Ithliam knew, but hadn't fathomed the possibility that Ithliam knew everything, had heard every thought, planted many of them. It made Ithliam laugh again — it had been too easy.

“Do you want to know what you are, Henry?” Ithliam asked, spitting upon him, watching the spittle steam and burn where it splashed across the acid still feasting upon Henry's wrists and ankles, “You're just a ghoul, just an ordinary flesh-eating ghoul, and I, Henry, I made you more than that. I gave you magick — I gave you power. You answered my call, and justly so, you have come back to me.”

In truth, Ithliam was essentially a man, albeit a man with extraordinary powers. He was no demon, although he had enslaved several over the years. It was impossible to say how old he was, being one of the first ever born, and not of this mundane world. His power had grown immeasurable through millennia of near constant development across worlds unfathomable.

He was naked — his skin not like mortal skin, it was a blackish gold, with deep red veins pulsing under the surface of his hairless scalp. His eyes remained always closed as he had discarded years earlier any need of them, and there were only small holes where ears should be. His mouth had grown large, playing a perpetual wicked smile — life had been good to Ithliam, good for a long time.

Small in stature, though larger than a child, he was somewhat smaller than an average man. Ithliam was not really masculine or feminine, didn't need to eat or drink, or mate. He was something unique from a world long dead, motivated primarily by a desire to be relevant in a world both interesting and easy to control. He had destroyed his own race in wars long past, over similar goals. Ithliam lifted his hand subtly and Henry's little brown book of power floated out from its secret pocket and began a slow orbit above Ithliam's head.

"Shall I take his body to the tanks, Lord Ithliam," came the disembodied voice of a spectre. "The body, my lord, he will break from the spell eventually."

For several more moments, Ithliam continued to pace around Henry, thinking about the future, his plans, and where Henry fit into them. The spectre waited patiently for Ithliam to finish his thoughts.

"Yes." He turned and walked away down the main corridor of the Asylum to the door at the far side, the book trailing lazily above and behind him. The door opened for him as he approached. Passing through deeper into the Asylum, he turned and looked back out, silhouetted in the door frame, and as the door closed, he smugly thought about what he had planned for Henry. It'd be interesting to see if he was up to the challenge, even though he did get this far. We'll see, he thought.

With Ithliam gone into his sanctuary, the spectre knew it was free to act of its own accord. Letting out a deep, sorrowful groan, it sent a cry throughout the surrounding area, gathering lesser spirits with more corporeal natures to carry Henry away to the tanks, which were in the catacombs underneath the main Asylum grounds. It took more than a few zombies to drag Henry across the stone floor, down the secondary hall toward the inner courtyard, where the stairs descending into the catacombs could be accessed.

Once in the courtyard, the zombies dropped Henry and continued to clear away debris from the entrance to the first level below. The spectre roamed around, always bored, almost never entirely paying attention to where it was or what it was doing or why it was here, doomed to roam for eternity without real purpose, except that which Ithliam dictated. It didn't notice the shadows running along the edge of the courtyard, which, when taken in all at once, were quite large, affording many places to hide or lurk.

Cunning was the primary trait of a ghoul, and when they worked in groups, it could be devastating. They had taken over the courtyard not long after Henry had first escaped their hungry clutches. The plan was to poach zombies until something better came along and when they got word Henry had been spit up nearby, they knew what to do. They watched it all from the shadows, watched Ithliam playing with their food, but they knew better than to interrupt.

They laid in wait, stalking, trapping, ambushing. That was the way of the ghoul, and when the spectre, directing the zombies, crossed the threshold into the courtyard, the trap had sprung. As the zombies cleared the way of the deliberately placed debris, the ghouls had surrounded them all. The spectre was too busy, reenacting past sins in its mind, to notice or care that the zombies were being overrun by flesh-eating ghouls.

Rotten muscle tore free from broken bone as the ghouls feasted. There was no challenge to it — the ghouls vastly outnumbered the zombies, but when a zombie stepped through the head of a ghoul beneath it, the other ghouls were just as happy to eat that, too. With surprising control, they spared Henry for last. There was some dispute over who was due what part of him, so they focused on the zombies instead.

Eventually, the spectre did notice what was happening and with a great wail of a groan, it called out for help. Lord Ithliam should not be bothered by this, it thought. We shall handle it properly.

Some ghouls tried in vain to swipe their claws through the spectre, hitting nothing but empty space. As their claws passed through, however, all heat was sucked away, and the ghouls found their spindly arms withered beyond further use.

They howled their rage, but helpless to do anything about it, they turned their attention to easier prey. Several more zombies had emerged from their shallow graves to grab the nearest ghoul. The spectre hovered nearby, unable to stay interested, drawn back to painful memories from a life long over.

While the courtyard continued to fill with ghouls and zombies, Henry had been shuffled near the stairs to the basement. Having lost complete track of him, the legions of undead, in their fruitless struggle, ultimately kicked his enspelled body down the stairs. Upon landing face first at the bottom, his neck broken, and face torn on the jagged stone, he settled into an awkward position looking up over his back.

So powerful was Ithliam's magick that not even this violence could break Ithliam's paralyzing hold. Henry still found himself watching all this, unable to contribute. He couldn't remove the spell himself, always drawn back to that strange pinprick of light off in the distance. Sometimes it came closer, but never close enough to tell what it was or why it was there. For the time being, Henry was trapped, and he had no idea what Ithliam had planned for him.

Henry was healing, though. His neck corrected itself and most of his other wounds as well, except the acid burns on his wrists and ankles. He was still paralyzed by the magick, but his pain was subsiding. It had grown quiet up above — the zombies and ghouls must have worked things out, one way or the other. From the look of things, this stairwell wasn't commonly used, the dust was thick and old.

If he was lucky, he could just lay here for a while and the spell might wear off, but he knew that wasn't true. There was only one way out and that was Ithliam dispelling it, not something likely to happen. The pinprick of white light — what was that? It was almost pulsing. It seemed to be getting more intense and closer. What could he do? His magick book was gone, his clothes — rags, and his mind, shattered.

“Why don't you just get up, Henry?” Did that voice come from the light?

“I can't. This damn magick!”

“Nothing but illusion.”

Could it be that simple, had he fallen for it again? Ithliam and his tricks. Henry focused his energies — of course he still had power — he was healing, after all. Had he ever stopped healing? Had he ever lost power? Had Ithliam literally talked him down. Stupid. Henry rolled over. Stupid, he thought as he chewed his hand off at the wrist with his unusually sharp teeth. There was no blood left to bleed.

He was careful to take it off behind the acid wounds, and laughed with excitement as his hand was already growing back, within several moments, it would be fine, healed fully. Once his first hand was far enough along, he tore his other off and watched with satisfaction as it regenerated. Then he lifted a large flat rock from nearby and crushed the bones above his ankles and scraped the feet away from

him.

Albeit in great pain, he laid back and waited patiently for his feet and hands to fully recover. It didn't take as long as he thought it would — must be this place, he could feel power all around him. It was a familiar power, like Ithliam's, but different somehow. The pinprick of white light. What was that and where did it go? Henry stood and brushed himself off. He was barefoot and covered in rags, comfortable, it almost seemed the natural thing.

Suddenly, Henry was very hungry. The beast was calling. It hadn't been let out in a long time and it wasn't going to be denied now. Henry had to face the truth, he wasn't just Henry, he was both the beast and Henry. It was the beast that was real — he was a ghoul. Ithliam had been right, it was his own conscience that was the illusion — it was Henry who was the illusion. A personality of false memories constructed to torment the soul trapped inside the monster.

Long before Ithliam had enhanced and twisted his nature, Henry had died, drained by a vampire and reborn days later. Not as another vampire, but as a horrible ghoul. An eater of all flesh, mindless killer, brutal murderer. The beast was all that remained — it was all that remained still. His howl pierced even stone, and shook the foundation of the Asylum. Henry was long dead, though he just now realized it.

Ithliam, already aware of events, turned towards Henry from far away under the courtyard. Dirt and stone retreated from his gaze, and was pushed away, forming a tunnel through all matter, displaying a perfect view of events. He watched Henry transform: the arms growing longer, twisted like an old oak tree. The beast was old beyond years — what little fur it had was gray and mangy. Even its skin was insufficient in covering its elongated arms and legs, revealing large expanses of twisted bone.

However, it ached with strength, a seasoned energy, power beyond measure, comparable possibly even to Ithliam himself. Different power, direct power. Ithliam was more than the illusions he preferred, but illusions were useless on the beast. It had only one conviction, to kill the most powerful thing it sensed near it, and right now that was Ithliam.

The beast lifted its head, mostly man, but its jaw elongated with several rows of sharp teeth, allowing no mistake. This was a monster, designed to eat pieces as large as it could swallow, living or dead — it would consume it all and its hunger could not be satisfied for long. It howled its rage as it stalked up the stairway. Scanning the courtyard littered with corpses, both old and new, the beast began his feast. Its long rest had not dulled its fury.

Meanwhile, Ithliam, sensing a disturbance outside the Asylum, turned his gaze toward the front doors. Metal, wood, and stone gave way to his dominion. Beyond, approaching the door slowly, vampires. These were not fledglings, either. Maggot Man was with them, having escaped the motel when the flames began to melt away his tiny prison. Behind him, leaning against the black flattop sedan that hit Henry earlier and grinning stupidly, Charles Dewitt was flanked by two more powerful brothers anxious to kill the man who had embarrassed them and brought shame upon their coven.

The beast was already finished with the courtyard and working its way down the secondary hallway toward the main corridor and entrance way. It was on a collision course with the vampires who were just entering the Asylum. Ithliam smiled — this was getting better by the second, five master-class fiends for the price of one. He laughed — the shrillness filled the halls and the domain beyond.

As the beast stalked the corridors, everything stayed out of the way, until the spectre decided to stand its ground during one of its rare moments of lucidity. It hovered directly in the beast's path, ready to wither it down to dust. Grimly determined to please its master, it had nothing left to lose.

It was a futile gesture, as the beast, without even stopping, simply plucked the spectre out of the air with its bare claws and sucked its energy like any other creature. Its torment had ended, its energy

feeding the beast.

By the time the beast reached the main hall, the vampires had kicked through the large iron outer doors. The magickal protections Ithliam had in place couldn't stop them any more than they'd stopped Henry earlier. But, of course, Ithliam already knew that.

It was quiet for the briefest of moments as the vampires trod over the threshold, wood and stone chips, spraying the beast with disrespect. Maggot Man had returned for vengeance. Charles Dewitt hung back, sneaking behind the edge of the door. He preferred weaker prey, but he had to obey Maggot Man in all things. The others looked like they might even be more powerful still. There was an ethereal coldness to them, experienced and wise. Was one of these a true master? No, but Maggot Man came close.

The first of the vampires rushed with supernatural speed at the beast hoping for a surprise attack. He was stopped inches away as though hitting an impervious wall. The beast's massive arm penetrated the vampire's chest, fingers curled around the spine. At this, the second unknown player attacked while Maggot Man walked forward confidently as the melee pressed around him.

The beast swung the first vampire like a club, slamming into the second in spite of his great speed. Charles Dewitt crawled slowly behind Maggot Man, taking up as little space as possible. As Maggot Man approached, the beast grabbed the second vampire around his ankle and threw him. The vampire near-master ducked easily, maggots falling to all sides. The vampire near-master continued his approach.

Turning its attention to the first vampire, the beast squeezed its fist tight, crushed his spine and dropped him crippled to the floor. The second vampire screamed, as though it felt the injury, too. He pulled out a strange-looking six-shooter and fired, hitting the beast squarely in the chest six times with unerring precision. Fire consumed the beast, a deep red fire like that from hell itself, and it screamed its agony. Sulfur filled the air, Maggot Man loved that smell, taking it in as he came within a few feet of the burning beast. It wasn't unstoppable — it only appeared that way and soon Maggot Man's hand was fixed upon the beast's shoulder, draining its power rather than its blood.

However, he'd never seen a ghoul grown so powerful, then again, no one ever had. This was Ithliam's work, no doubt, another unique monstrosity. Maggot Man seemed unaffected by the flames, the fire didn't burn him, but a few maggots fell away sizzling. The beast continued to scream and scream. With increasing confidence, the Charles Dewitt moved closer.

"It always seems to come down to this." The gravel of Maggot Man's voice cut deeply into the beast's attuned ears. "Ithliam is watching this right now, you stupid beast, and what he will see, I wonder. Perhaps, he will see me kill you and know that I was the stronger one. He will give his power to me!"

The beast could not hear him. Down on one knee with its claws clutched tightly to its chest, it was still struggling from the fire and Maggot Man's crushing grip on its neck. Finally, Maggot Man, feeling the smooth flesh under the jaw and grabbing it firmly, pulled the beast all the way to the ground. He then pressed his foot on the back of the beast's neck, grinding it slowly into the stone. The other vampire was helping his companion, his feet already healing, Charles Dewitt was suddenly backing away. He'd noticed something in the beast's eyes. It was beginning to enjoy itself — the pain had turned to pleasure.

Maggot Man splashed across the nearest wall, scattering larvae. The beast didn't lay a finger upon him, yet had clearly thrown him with ease. The flames subsided as the creature wrapped magick around itself in a bubble of force. Crystal red liquid was splattered from the floor up to the ceiling, some kind of ethereal mucous — the beast looked longingly over at the vampire that had shot him, now attempting to reload his gun. The hole in the first vampire's chest had closed cleanly and he positioned himself between them.

The beast didn't hesitate further. It didn't move forward by taking steps, it wasn't competing with the vampires' incredible speed. Instead, one moment it was over near the wall surrounded by pooling maggots, and the next, it was between the two hired vampires, its massive claws gripping their slender, pale faces. Charles Dewitt grimaced as the beast crushed their heads effortlessly before dropping their already regenerating bodies to the floor.

Charles knew he was fucked. He wasn't a fledgling anymore, but he wasn't all that tough, not in this league for certain. What could he do but watch in uncomfortable silence as the beast's jaw enlarged, its maw greater still as it ate the vampire lords in large pieces, taking them down to their final sleep. If possible, it seemed with each piece it consumed, the beast grew larger, hungrier and more ravenous.

He tried to slowly back away. Using every vampire trick, he was totally silent, virtually invisible, but it didn't matter. He was almost at the door and freedom, but it didn't matter. He could feel the soft breeze and fresh air, the night and the moon calling him. An easy meal wasn't too far, either, but none of this mattered. He knew he wouldn't make it out of this Asylum.

The beast finished up the second vampire lord as Charles stole a quick glance over to the maggots. They had pooled together, a good sign because Maggot Man was re-forming. Come on, damn it, he cursed silently to himself. This shit can't be happening. He was ready to turn and go — he'd reached the door, his one leg had already crossed the threshold. The truth was, Charles Dewitt was a coward.

He felt a stir in his senses as Maggot Man began to re-form, but it would be far too late to prevent the final death of Charles Dewitt. The beast had already turned his way. A creeping smile, if you could call it a smile, twisted its way across its features. Charles would have cried had he the tears.

The beast acted in the eternity between Charles's conscious awareness of the situation and the realization he could do nothing about it. His freshly re-grown head was swallowed down first and the rest quickly followed. The beast bellowed its satisfaction. Charles was no more and Maggot Man shuddered at the loss. So much did it affect him that he didn't wait to strike when fully re-formed.

Maggot Man slammed his partially formed hands together hard. Vampire hard. A great thunder clap echoed through the main hall. A massive force slammed against the beast, knocking it down to its knees and more than a few yards back. As it wailed against it, Maggot Man slammed his hands together again. The thunder clap came louder this time, stone broke away from the wall and dirt and dust worked out from deep holes and crevices. The Maggot Man had fully re-formed at last, and he was tired of wasting time with lesser magick.

But the beast was not impressed. The vampire could match its speed, but not its strength. It rushed forward, its magick suppressed by the thunder. Maggot Man, instantly reacting, rushed to intercept, but was unable to stand up to the energy levels the beast produced. It tore through him, and maggots spilled out from his insides.

It wasn't the beast's grotesquely large arms sweeping through the cloud of larvae that stopped the fight. It was as though the energy around them both, beast and vampire alike, had risen to such levels, that the vampire's corporeal form couldn't endure, whereas the beast's could. The vampire de-materialized into a dense mist, his energy dispersing into the atmosphere.

As the beast prepared to absorb the vampire's power, Ithliam reached his golden hand forward. It stretched through his magickal tunnel into the front entrance way. Before the beast could consume anything at all, Ithliam had already taken it. He was thankful for its efforts, but ultimately there was only one master here. This, of course, enraged the beast, sending it stalking down the main hall looking for more victims. It was still hungry.

As the beast moved down the impossibly long hallway, it came to the janitor's door. It stopped for a

moment, as though it sensed something inside, before it crashed through the door, tearing it from its frame, sending rock and wood shards into the air. Sitting whimpering on a stool was a helpless ghost, hardly worth notice, a headless janitor with his hammer clutched tightly. False hope was common with the damned.

“Not again! Leave me be...,” cried the fearful spirit. There was no recognition for the beast, and the janitor stumbled backward. He knew what was coming and the beast was mercifully quick. Having grown in size substantially, it had no difficulty consuming the janitor down to the last drop. In a way it was a mercy.

Ithliam had expected all this and watched with anticipation of their final confrontation. Henry would be worthy to stand against him, and to take his power. Already the beast had left the janitor’s office, moving further down the main hall. Each step crushed several inches into the stone floors, unnatural heat scorching and cracking the walls as he passed.

To slow it down just a little, to facilitate the long walk, Ithliam pushed his hand forward and a great wind formed and pressed against the beast, slowing his pace. The more the beast pressed, the harder it was to move forward. To Ithliam, this spell was boring, something he’d picked up years ago, but useful at times like this. The nature of the beast was to confront force with force, so in a way this was playtime.

He watched the beast struggle against this, fruitlessly forcing his way through, each step taking longer and longer and harder and harder. Ithliam was getting concerned — it wouldn’t do to ease up on the beast, it had to reach him legitimately. But was it able to realize the gimmick of the spell? It roared helplessly against the wind, unable to move further. Ithliam turned away in disgust — had he misjudged this creature, was it too weak to reach him?

Rather than slow the wind, Ithliam raised it to new fury. Intent on blowing the beast out of his Asylum, he was bitterly disappointed — the wind raged down the hall as a bullet through a gun. Ithliam turned back, the beast was still there. Flesh was literally stripped from its bones, but already growing back to cover its snarling visage. It roared and pressed forward again — the more the wind pressed, the harder he pressed, the more energy and concentration Ithliam found himself using to maintain the spell. Nothing in the universe was free.

“Yes.” Ithliam was pleased. “Press my magick! Press it as hard as you are able! Defeat me!! Defeat me!!” His voice was so old and so unique, it was hard to call it a voice so much as presence. The beast walked slowly down the hall, Ithliam allowed only a slow escalation of the power, enjoying the energy raised in the exchange. He was flexing muscles that had gone unworked for countless years.

Suddenly, a small pinprick of white light appeared before the beast, who took a swipe attempting to consume it, but not recognizing it. Ithliam watched with great interest as its claw passed harmlessly through it. So, too, was it immune to his magickal attempts, vulnerable to no particular element, protected from physical force, apparently not subject to the beast’s power. Ithliam found this very interesting.

“You must not go further, Henry — you must take control of the beast.” Again, the beast took a swing to no effect. “If you reach him, you only serve him further.”

Ithliam watched the beast hesitate for the briefest moment. It almost wavered, but apparently its hunger was too great and it ignored the white light moving forward again. With each step, it grew more certain it had made the right choice, that the pinprick of white light had been a trick. The warning went unheeded.

The white light stayed back a ways, but it followed the beast towards the sanctuary at the far end of the

hall. It was careful not to get too close, not because it feared the beast, but it certainly feared Ithliam.

The beast reached the small door at the end of the hall. Breaking the doorway apart as it passed, the beast walked through it as if it wasn't there at all. On the other side was the base of the Asylum's bell tower. Wide stone steps wound up to heights unfathomable. An ancient winding staircase, complete with burning torches, protruding from the wall. However, the torches contained not regular fire, but gave off a strange, light-bluish flame. It glowed and danced as fire, yet in slow motion almost like a liquid unaffected by gravity.

The beast had grown too large for these stairs, so instead, proceeded to grip its claws into the stone wall, climbing rapidly. Drool running down its chin, it could almost taste Ithliam's power source, feel it vibrate far above. The pleasure it hinted at, a fleeting torture and possibly another false hope.

Ithliam stood ready in his circle of power, patiently waiting for the beast to enter. It wasn't long until it had crawled to the top of the tower, stopping several metres away from the centre of the room where Ithliam held out his hand invitingly. Being so close to its ultimate prey had excited the beast. Unable to hold back, not even as the pinprick of white light came streaking in between them, it rushed into the circle toward Ithliam.

Time stopped and stayed still for many moments. Ithliam, of course unaffected, walked over to the frozen beast and the suspended white light.

"Curious." He examined the pinprick very closely — it appeared to be a small hole to some other place, but he, even with all his great power, was unable to penetrate its mysteries.

"You cannot have him."

Ithliam was surprised, which wasn't common. The light had spoken, even while time itself stood still. This other place obviously existed beyond the scope of this world. That meant it was very far away. A wormhole, then, but to where? And what interest did it have in Ithliam's little experiment? Noting the pinprick itself remained frozen in place, Ithliam stepped around the beast — violating any idea of personal space, he hovered near every dangerous point, fearless.

"Of course, I already do," he challenged this new presence, "and I will do as I have always done. Take his power along with that of all those that he has consumed foolishly questing for my own." Ithliam laughed — it was shrill as before, heavily controlled, almost manufactured.

"This will not be tolerated." The voice became more hollow as though it was further away.

Ithliam continued to laugh, hoping to provoke and draw out this unseen interference, "How can you help him now?"

The answer wasn't long in coming. A quick flash of bright white light blinded Ithliam at a magickal level. The beast fell to the ground struck as though by lightning. The pinprick of white light was gone. Its power had forked into the beast, sending convulsions down its spine — it flipped around like a fish out of water. It experienced no pain, and made no noise, but a change was happening. The beast was forced back into its dormant state, leaving Henry naked and steaming on the cold stone floor as nearly human as he had been hours earlier.

While Ithliam walked casually to the centre of his power circle, Henry picked himself up. He had seen it all happen — the ghouls, the vampires — he wasn't all together upset to see Charles Dewitt go down, but was it worth having his memories floating around somewhere deep inside? Now there was another presence inside as well. A strange, inhuman presence, it didn't seem undead, nor was it a soul. Henry hadn't felt anything like it, not as beast or man.

It glowed brightly within him, coming out every pore. A power so great it could not remain entirely

within Henry's corporeal form. It leaked from him slowly, but he knew it had augmented him. He was ready for Ithliam, come what may. His magick was a match for any, but this white light was unstable power. He wasn't sure how long it would last, so it was now or never.

"Are you ready?" Henry's voice was much steadier than he felt.

"Yes," replied Ithliam.

Ithliam's fist hit Henry straight in the face, sending him flying back as far as the edge of the circle of power. Upon hitting its limits he stopped. Their fight would stay in the circle along with all the damage. It was just the two of them — there would be no further interference and the white light had neutralized most magicks so this fight would be up close and personal.

"Get up, young one. I have lessons to teach you."

Henry pushed himself to his feet. The final confrontation had begun.

Chapter 7 — The Day Ithliam Climbed The Wall

"There is no true death," said the golden man.

Defying gravity, Ithliam floated far above the surface of the planet looking down at a massive frozen amber wall of corpses and marveled at his discovery. Each moment a new body entered, another thawed and spit back into the universe. As many bodies as stars. His magick had brought him to this place. A dead world and source of wandering souls between worlds. Like every world this far out before it, a massive wall of frozen corpses was its most dominant feature, wrapping the planet, visible even from space.

Otherwise, this world was dead, or undead just like its inhabitants. Hot wind with no real force behind it slowly pushed sand over the desert in all directions — vague remnants of a world long gone reached out from the sand or specked an unmaintained highway. From his perch miles above the ground, Ithliam could see burned out cars, deserted gas stations, towns, and homesteads and little broken monsters endlessly wandering.

Throngs of the undead roamed free of interference. There wasn't much hunger here for the usually famished undead as time eventually satisfied the craving. There was no one living to eat. Except maybe Ithliam himself — he was alive though alien to these creatures, it was magick, not tragedy, that had gained him entrance to this forbidden place. He'd sought knowledge, and he'd found it. A both sad and exciting discovery about the nature of things.

He'd discovered there were countless inhabited worlds, how many was beyond anyone's knowledge exactly — he'd visited several now. A few alive as in some sort of biology, and many more dead like this one, given over to the deeper arcane forces of nature. These eternal magicks eventually formed amber walls to cycle the essence of willful animation.

Each wall of corpses seemed to have several source points along its foundation where newly arrived souls would collect for processing. As far as he could tell it was random for those caught in its cycle. If there was a pattern, Ithliam could not discern it, even with his incomparable intellect. This cunning system made it impossible to predict where any specific individual would appear again in the whole universe.

How disappointing, he mused to himself.

Sometimes, by error or design, someone would escape the frozen amber. Perhaps appearing too close to the edge of the wall, or pushed out by the forces within. The ice would melt or soften and the person

caught inside would break free, shambling away as some sort of twisted, half-made thing. Ithliam had never seen a person walk away just as you'd expect them to be. As far as he was aware, there were only mindless undead walking free, and those still forming their new lives appearing and vanishing within.

The system was self-correcting. Eventually, the wandering half-dead bumped up against the wall, and got reabsorbed. They were unaware how lucky they really were — a chance at new life somewhere deep inside, unseen from the world outside. Ithliam was amused by the way ghouls tried so hard not to get caught in the wall, but when hundreds of zombies mindlessly pressed around you, it seemed to happen eventually. All things in their time.

Even in this miserable place, when a better world waited behind simple surrender, what remained of life in these wild creatures fought to survive. The basic noble drive behind the entire system was struggle to keep moving. Frustrating and aggravating as it was, though, often it was the failure of a creature to get what it wanted that ultimately led to its own happiness as new opportunities and compromises are explored.

Ithliam wandered through these dead worlds especially, for many years. It took much work to travel to each one so he took his time, learned what he could, but behind him, he would leave portals to return. They were massive and intricate doorways crafted of fine metals and worked with powerful magicks to bond impossibly with hardwoods from alien trees. In this way, he was able to span the cosmos at increasing leisure. However, it was the new worlds that interested him most, and there were no shortcuts to them.

He'd mastered the ancient art of time-space travel with his alien sciences, achieving speeds capable of bending causality to place him in predetermined locales by small adjustments to the timeline. Through careful planning, he could travel anywhere and back again and it would seem as though in no time at all. Information had become his primary concern, and magick allowed him much leverage in interacting through multiple timelines. In his way, he could coexist in more than one place at once, which has led to some interesting experiences.

So it happened that while exploring a new world, Ithliam had come across a door not unlike the doors he had left behind him on each dead planet. Except, this planet wasn't dead, and he had never, to his memory, visited this world before. It manifested deep in an underground train system, and had attracted some attention from far too many mortals living nearby.

Driven by curiosity as much as concern, Ithliam approached the doorway cautiously, not quite sure what to expect. Did it go back to a familiar place? As he was moving up the tunnel from the north, he heard some movement coming from the south. Curious again, he melted into the surrounding rock to wait and see what happened next.

Moments later, a man dressed all in black, postured defensively, came up the tunnel. He didn't appear to be afraid in the least, and there was the smell of some minor magick to him. He walked with confidence and a certainty of his own power. Ithliam enjoyed a good show — clearly this doorway was beyond this man and his petty magicks. Ithliam scanned his mind, his name was Henry. Interesting — some talent, even. Interesting, indeed — there was more here than magick.

Ithliam remained beyond Henry's senses, but close enough that anything Henry experienced would also be perceptible to himself. Let this young idiot take all the risk. It was amusing to watch him struggle with the door — how would he open it? His mind contained no such spell. When Henry took out his book, for a brief moment, Ithliam was excited. Perhaps he'd underestimated the dark man. He might be very useful indeed.

Moments later, Henry stood dumbfounded by what he saw and Ithliam, too, was somewhat surprised. The massive creature on the other side was unlike any Ithliam had come across. Even several metres

away, Ithliam felt its power leak into this world. It was exhilarating. It was more energy in one being than Ithliam had ever seen, save perhaps himself. He watched as Henry died, foolishly speaking to this creature.

Ithliam was very interested in this new player, though he lay in a pile of loose flesh at the base of the magick door. Ithliam knew death was not a barrier so much as a challenge. He walked out of the shadows and stood over Henry. He whimpered, apparently not dead yet after all, but very close and getting closer by the moment.

The creature beyond the door was wandering away. When Ithliam stepped between Henry and it, a great shudder occurred. The single overgrown eye of the beast swung back toward him, but Ithliam was not Henry, and Ithliam held up his hand in a protective sign. The door swung shut as the great floating monstrosity howled silently, though magickally, through the vast expanse of space.

“We’ll meet again, creature, but right now, I have other concerns.”

Babbling upon the floor, near death, mouth opening and closing like a fish, Henry whispered fateful words, “I don’t want to die...demon...I want to make a deal.”

This took Ithliam back a bit — how easy could something be. This fool thinks I am the demon of the door. “I can grant you power in return for your obedience.”

“What is your name, demon?”

“Ithliam.”

With that, Henry died. At this time he was still mortal, regardless of his own false memories, convinced he was some sort of undead. A vampire or something like it. Well-dressed, but covered in blood that had run freely from his ears and eyes. His soul, visible to Ithliam, raised from its mortal coil, began its journey to the nearest frozen amber wall. What an opportunity, thought Ithliam, to actually follow the dead through its journey to the other side, and this one was so interesting — stupid, but interesting.

Henry’s spectral form, confused, wandering gradually, made its way down the tunnel and out into the night. Ithliam walked slowly behind it, savouring the moment. Ghostly and haunted, Henry took to the skies, ascending higher beyond the clouds and further still beyond the atmosphere. Space was coveted by Ithliam, considered his personal domain — he easily following the spectre through space and time.

Impossibly beautiful, the vast expanse was far from empty. Surrounded by the marvels of the universe, Ithliam basked quietly, knowing true peace. Henry’s spectre would travel for many millions of miles before finding its expected place, suspended and anonymous among the other dead. They traveled together, then, at speeds beyond comprehension, sliding between matter in the space between space as pure information.

Sleep was for mortals. Ithliam was content to observe, having no shortage of wonders to behold. The spectre’s route was direct, and Ithliam would leave it from time to time and explore other events more closely. Yet, somehow, he would find his way back to Henry’s spectre, light blue in the midnight black all around them both. And eventually, many years later, a dead world, a great recycler of souls, would reveal itself before them.

Henry plunged into the frozen wall, swimming deeply through the dead, seeking his rightful place. He clawed and squirmed, and wiggled tightly into place. As the ice took him, as he slowed, the spectre preparing to let go, Ithliam intervened. With a strong exertion of focus, he very carefully nudged Henry’s increasingly viscous form near the edge of the ice wall. The warmth called to Henry’s spirit, and no longer a spectre, his very solid corpse became restless.

A rebirth of sorts, Ithliam noted, as Henry broke free of the ice, showering fragments away in the sand.

He was human, sort of, a ghoul from the look of it. No matter — this was all part of the process. The near-mindless killing machine shuffled away from the wall, it seemed passive and content to roam aimlessly, displaying none of its more aggressive behaviour. No blood in the air, nothing to entice it.

Though not apparent on the surface, this ghoul was special. Its inner spark had not been lost to the wall — Ithliam had pushed him from it too quickly. Henry was trapped somewhere inside, forced to endure and witness the ghoul's mindless pursuits. No sleep and no rest, a mortal mind trapped in an immortal body. Maddening, but necessary. An apprentice would need a durable body — that frail human flesh was inadequate, he needed Henry dead or undead as it were.

Curious to see what Henry would do on his own for a while, Ithliam followed his movement at a distance. He watched his first encounter with other ghouls, laughed when Henry shied away, afraid — the other ghouls who noticed his fear sensed something different about him. Suddenly, the other ghouls were hungry and attacked him. That was the nature of ghouls.

They swarmed him, circling, tearing thin strips of ghoul flesh from him every few moments — Henry's screams were musical. Though unique in spirit, Henry was physically like any other ghoul, and he was currently outnumbered. Ithliam decided he needed an edge. What if the ghoul had magick at its command as he had in life? Ithliam reached his hand forward, the atomic particles around him retreating as if horrified by whatever material Ithliam's golden skin was made of. Henry was at this moment more skeletal than ghoulish, his flesh torn from him in brutal strips by his brothers on his way through the wall.

Ithliam's golden finger reached out and lightly touched Henry's skeleton on the shoulder. A small wisp of his power transferred from Ithliam to Henry. This was a sacred gift, a shield of force keeping the other ghouls at bay. Ithliam, nodding his approval, watched Henry float upright. His skin already covering the vast majority of his frame, mostly healed. A stunning anomaly of power, Ithliam could see great potential in this broken man.

Frustrated, the other ghouls in the area stomped their feet and jumped around growling and drooling. Worked into a frenzy, Henry howled, his arms elongated, his jaw expanded. Suddenly, the ghouls weren't something to fear — instead something to consume. The beast grabbed the nearest and swallowed it whole. The remaining ghouls tried to run, but the force field was now keeping them in rather than out. The beast slaughtered every last one of them, dozens easily while Ithliam observed silently.

There it sat gleefully licking the marrow from a bone, when Ithliam appeared from the surrounding darkness. At first, the beast didn't know what to make of this being. He didn't smell alive or dead. He didn't smell like flesh at all, but he reeked of power. The beast tried to rise — standing fully three metres, it would have towered over Ithliam — yet it found it couldn't move, nor oddly, did it feel like struggling.

“A very good start, but these hollow shells won't feed your power. This is but a taste of what needs to be done.”

“Waaahhaat's haaappeenned to me...” The beast was shrinking to almost the size of a normal man and soon looked just as Henry should, except covered in blood, shit and sweat.

“You've died, fool, and now you're undead, a lowly ghoul, a fitting outcome for a false ego such as yours. All part of our deal — do you not remember?”

He didn't. Henry couldn't remember anything more than fragments, and right then, they weren't making much sense. It hurt to talk, but he had questions.

“Who are..?” He coughed up very thick black ooze — blood was for the living, this was for those in

between, similar but thicker and lukewarm.

“I am your master, and you are my apprentice. You will serve me in all things. Though you will know great power, you will do my bidding. Count yourself lucky, for I have given you a second chance to matter.” Ithliam waved his hand and with it all dirt and grime vanished from Henry. He stood clean, clothed in dark robes, a blood red amulet around his neck, all hunger gone.

“I am not alive? Yet I feel more alive than I ever have.” Henry flexed his force bubble — it felt good. The magick had never been like this. This man, Ithliam — yes, that was his name — he was something far beyond personal experience.

“It will pass, and with each following year, you will grow less and less attached to your physical form, its pains and its pleasures. With experience, these become but few points of interest among millions. You are no longer a living mortal man — there will be changes. You will become comfortable with the advantages of your current nature, and with time, its weaknesses will fall away from you safely on this lonely planet. Your magick will grow and your power will feed my own plans. Do you understand what that means?”

“I live to serve you.” Henry couldn’t look him in the eye.

“Yes.” Ithliam walked away, pleased. Henry walked behind him a few metres back, somehow aware Ithliam was watching him all the time — Ithliam missed nothing and wanted him to know it.

They approached the frozen wall a few hours later, they hadn’t talked in all that time. Ithliam was one for few words, and Henry found himself enjoying that policy more and more. The sand always seemed to move out of Ithliam’s way, Henry wasn’t sure how he did that, never seeming to touch anything directly. This inspired Henry, and floating a few inches above the sand suited him just fine.

“What now, Ithliam?”

“You are too weak to be my vassal — I would be shamed should you not perform as needed. We will travel the doors, you and I. Come what be, you will handle it and I will not interfere. You will protect me from harm, you will learn to be strong, and in time, you may be worthy of what lay ahead.”

The image of a door splashed across Henry’s broken memory. It was beautiful, and twisted alien metals wound seamlessly with hardwoods, finely varnished, flawless. What was behind that door? Ithliam was not forthcoming — they continued along the wall for many days.

“Why do we travel so slowly? We are capable of greater speed.”

Ithliam stopped walking and turned to look his apprentice over. Henry wasn’t sure what he’d seen, but whatever it was, Ithliam chose to speak.

“Timing is the critical factor, not speed. The right speed is only important relative to the appropriate timing. Being faster does afford you more opportunity to achieve appropriate timing, but this is a potential. Again, I say the correct speed is the critical factor, and we are going the correct speed.”

With that, Ithliam turned again and continued to walk slowly along the wall. Henry knew he’d get no more from Ithliam for a while, so he let him be and instead tried to go over everything that he could remember happening. He drew an almost complete blank beyond the frozen wall — he remembered struggling against something, and then suddenly being surrounded by ghouls. Pain lanced his brain: Perhaps some memories were for another time.

If Ithliam was trying to teach him patience, it wasn’t working. This ghoulish body might work without fatigue, but Henry, the personality, demanded attention. This long walk along the wall was so boring, he starting playing with his magick. At first, it was little amusements like throwing fire pebbles out into the darkness and watching them burn out slowly. Sometimes, they formed glass snowflakes, they

burned so hot. Ithliam seemed to ignore him, not appearing interested one way or the other.

Holding his hands out in front of him, Henry examined the backs of his fingers. Concentrating, focusing his power, he imagined gold rings adorning his hands, but nothing happened. No rings appeared. He felt certain there was a way, something to work on. His robe felt warm and comfortable, Ithliam's fine work, though his skin was cold and clammy.

The robe struck him as unnecessary. It took time, several hours, but gradually, Henry was able to grow an inner warmth throughout his body. It was magickal in nature, but in many ways appeared as body temperature. When he looked at his skin now, it was warm with a very faint bluish aura. He focused on maintaining it as long as possible. After several days, he was able to maintain it without thinking about it all the time, and within weeks, it was persistent.

"We are close." A door lay just up ahead. "Here." Finally, Ithliam stopped walking and handed Henry a little brown book, much like his old magick book, but Henry had no memory of such things. The book was already open to a page, Ithliam wished Henry to note. A strange symbol had been traced upon the page.

"A sigil. It's a magickal keyword and a way of organizing spells or making scrolls. With a sigil, even a mortal man can cast magick, but rarely can a mortal survive the price." Ithliam smiled. "You can use this particular one to open any door even those I have created."

They looked at each other for a while, or at least Henry looked at Ithliam's golden face and he assumed Ithliam was returning the gaze in his way. Henry took the book, carefully studied the sigil, then closed it and placed it within the folds of his dark robes. Ithliam had already turned away again and was walking into the darkness beyond. He stopped on a small sand hill several hundred yards away from the frozen wall. Ithliam motioned for Henry to come close to him, then he pointed his long golden finger out across the desert.

At first, Henry wasn't sure what Ithliam was pointing at, but then it seemed as though all matter between them and the target disappeared, and suddenly, they had an intimate view of a very alarming scene. Henry looked quickly over at Ithliam — what he'd seen didn't make sense. If Ithliam was hundreds of miles away performing some kind of ritual, then how could he be right here with Henry watching it happen?

"But — "

"Watch," whispered Ithliam, standing beside him, intently interested himself.

Henry turned back and watched far away across the desert. The other Ithliam had conjured several pure minerals: gold, silver, platinum, and others Henry couldn't guess. The strange metals dissolved in mid air, became liquid, and mixed together. A large, round, thick, wooden plate, made of some kind of knotted hardwood, spun at incredible speed, drawing the liquid metals into it like a black hole.

Henry noticed the distant Ithliam looked different somehow, less seasoned, raw, and definitely used more flash and bang than the one who now stood beside him. They waited and they watched. It took several more hours before the door was built — magick heat blasted steam from beneath the sand and bubbling black glass rimmed the edge, forming a beautiful, almost fluid shape to the glass framing the door. And once finished, the distant Ithliam placed his hand upon the new door, instantly disappearing off to wherever he needed to go.

"Space and time are really the same thing." Ithliam was walking toward the door. Henry followed — though hundreds of miles away, it took them mere moments.

"That was really you, wasn't it?" Henry was impressed.

“Each of my doors can go to any other of my doors. These doors span the vast galaxies of this universe. You could say that time becomes a factor of order — once you enter a door to another, it becomes possible that a future you and a past you travel through the same place from different doors.”

Henry’s mind reeled with the implications. What if he met a double? What about paradox? Could he kill an earlier self, and if so, then what happened to the old self which would never have existed? Then how could he kill his earlier self if the old self had never existed? It gave Henry a headache.

“Nothing happens,” said Ithliam as though reading Henry’s mind. “If you meet your own double, ask him for help, since you may as well. If you’re lucky, you’ll come across a more experienced you and save yourself some trouble, but believe me, it’s a rare occurrence anyway.”

“Then why did we stay back here, didn’t you want to meet your other self?”

“No.”

Perplexed, Henry removed the brown book from the folds of his robe. The page with the sigil was easy to find. The book practically fell open to it. Upon bringing the sigil to his mind, Henry touched the door lightly. Frost shot up his arm — the suddenness of it caused Henry to involuntarily pull backward. His arm broke off frozen to the door. There wasn’t any pain, but Henry stared, mouth wide open, not sure what to do. Ithliam was laughing a few feet away.

“Hurry up.” Ithliam was pointing frantically at his arm. “Endure it.”

Endure it? What did he mean by that? He said to stop thinking like a mortal. What did that mean? Henry thought it over deeply. Mortals couldn’t heal like the undead. Already, his shoulder was growing a new arm. Henry moved against his frozen arm, letting it bond with the stump at his shoulder. The frost tried to climb his neck into his face — it had already consumed most of his chest and side.

The inner warmth! Of course. Henry focused on his belly just below his navel. He stoked the fire of his inner warmth, letting it penetrate every organ, radiating through his muscle and out his skin. Soon the frost was gone and the door swung open, a bright yellow light momentarily blinding Henry and Ithliam alike. His arm was fine, his robe had repaired itself conveniently — ghoul or not, with magick, he looked and felt human, but yet was capable of so much more.

“Good. There is hope for you yet.” Ithliam rapped Henry on the top of his head with the knuckles of his right hand. “Let’s go.” And with that, Ithliam stepped through the door, pulling Henry along with him.

Chapter 8 — Of Guns and Zombies

Henry awoke alone in the desert with two mid day suns blazing above his head. Looking at the deep, red sand, he wasn’t sure this was earth at all. Miles in every direction held nothing but empty dunes. A soft and blistering wind whipped sand around aimlessly. Henry paid little attention to the heat though — he didn’t feel such things without magickal aid.

Ithliam was nowhere to be seen and Henry felt nothing of his aura nearby. Had something gone wrong with the door? Had they been sent to different places? It seemed unlikely but still...a few hours later, Henry was walking through the sand in no particular direction. The suns hadn’t moved much — Henry wasn’t sure how long he had walked already nor how long he would continue. He felt no need to stop, there was no fatigue to speak of.

A few times over many, many hours, Henry thought he sensed something. It moved quickly a ways ahead, but then was gone like a phantom. This being a strange world with strange rules, he wasn’t quite sure what to make of it so he kept walking. Just in case, though, he used the time to weave an unusually strong protective field around himself.

Fueled by fear of the unknown, a very human trait really, he pictured his desire as perfectly as he'd ever achieved. The bubble of force glowed around him, vibrating. If touched, a massive discharge of kinetic energy would tear an attacker apart. He no longer felt satisfied protecting himself as he had while alive. He was feeling the need to hurt someone. It surprised him a little bit, how easy it was to let himself hate. It was easy to remember anger, not so easy to remember love.

Why had Ithliam left him here? What was the purpose? Henry continued to wander through the sand. After a while, he let the human illusion drop — why bother, there was no one to see, no one to hide from. He found his head sagged as though he'd broken his neck and his skin was rough and gray. It was dry like parchment, cheap and easy to tear.

He looked at his hands for a long time while he shambled through the endless red sand of a barren desert world. They were very wrinkled like old hands, but his nails had worn down to bone at the ends of his unusually long fingers. In fact, much of his body showed damage that must have been done before he died. The damage was extensive, and much of it clearly fatal. In truth, Henry didn't know what had killed him, and wasn't sure he ever would.

Henry thought about dying, tried to remember. He thought he remembered Ithliam standing over him or was that when he awoke? He just couldn't remember, and the more he tried, the more it slipped away. Regardless, he didn't like being left like this like an afterthought — where was that damned wizard? How long had he been walking?

It was dawning on him that the two suns were never going to move. Several hours had passed without noticeable change. The slightly larger red one still glared from behind, eclipsed by the smaller yellow one, a great celestial eye watching his progress across this bleak landscape. The sand dunes seemed bigger, but maybe it was optical illusion — the whole place seemed to shift here and there, nothing was real anymore.

Time had stopped as far as he was concerned. The weather was constant, as was his energy, he couldn't sleep anymore, likely never again. He had no way to tell one moment from the next. He stopped asking himself questions after a while. He stopped thinking for long periods, instead drawing inside himself... waiting...for anything at all.

Henry might not have believed he was walking those sands for hundreds of years, but he was. He worked his magick and improved much of its strength and duration. While he traveled, he met no one and nothing other than sand. He'd once spent several years digging down into the sand here and there, but he'd found nothing more than sand, slightly different colours of endless sand. He wasn't sure it was even sand, something told him it was more sinister than that.

He wished he could fly sometimes, and yet he was so far from anything else, there weren't even stars, just those two blazing suns and several more planets like this one and all sand. Feeling somewhat compelled to keep moving, he continued to wait for Ithliam, wait and walk, and practice his visualizations, his magick focus, and trying desperately to remember everything he could from his segmented life.

"I trust you've used your time wisely." Henry was still walking when Ithliam finally returned more than 300 years later.

They'd been walking together for some time, but Henry hadn't noticed and Ithliam, though not impatient, felt he'd waited long enough. Henry turned, at first stunned, not sure if the golden man beside him was real or not. Then he got angry when he remembered he'd spent the last seemingly endless time walking through blistering, hot red sand on some alien planet. Henry had decided to kill Ithliam some time during his very lonely walk.

He'd thought about killing him right away, but that wouldn't get him off this planet and it was likely suicide. No, not right away, but someday. Henry snarled at him and Ithliam chuckled derisively as though to say, What could you possibly do about it? In many ways Ithliam was a neglectful master, but he wouldn't apologize for it. Henry was no more than Ithliam's pawn, present to serve and just as easily taken back to the frozen wall or left forever on this forgotten rock in fringe space.

"You left me here."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Clean yourself up, Henry." Ithliam was looking far off into the distance.

"What?!"

Ithliam wasn't listening and was already walking up ahead, leaving Henry staring dumbly at his back. Just over the next dune, maybe 20 miles up ahead, speckling the desert, was a town. Its broken buildings were decayed and half-buried in the sand. There was only one main footpath through its centre, meant for walking traffic only, and as they approached, Henry noticed several zombies acting out past moments from their lives. Was he even on the same planet as the last expanse of loneliness implied? He'd never seen anything before now, yet the sand was the same colour and the unblinking suns remained predictable in the same place.

"Do you know how to use a gun?" Ithliam asked as though he already knew the answer was 'yes', but not as well as he'd like it to be.

"I don't know. I don't remember using one."

"The magick won't work on every world the same. It'll be more powerful on some and weaker on others. So there will be times when a gun is useful."

"Uh-huh." Henry looked over at the zombies. They were eyeing him up already, sensing his unusual life force — to them, he might as well be a flesh-and-blood living human. Ithliam backed up and began fading away.

As he vanished, he threw something at Henry. Catching it, Henry held up the handgun, but it looked strange to him. The zombies were now only a few metres away and there were many more coming out of the nearby buildings. Did Ithliam really intend for him to shoot all these zombies? There weren't enough bullets in the gun.

He pushed his palm toward the shambling corpses and with an act of pure will honed over many miles, he attempted to magickally push them back, but it wasn't working. Nothing happened. The zombies continued to press his position, Ithliam was obviously not going to help him and his magick was conveniently suppressed. Great! At least if they tear me apart, they might eventually shit me out, a good day by any measure, he thought sarcastically.

He ran back a ways, gaining metres between himself and the zombie horde. There were now several dozen conjoining at the edge of town. Their groans played like macabre notes in the desert's song. Sand was blowing hard against them all, yet another sandstorm was brewing, not something any of them really worried about, but it cut down visibility. It just got harder to shoot zombies.

By the time the first one lurched forward beyond the edge of town, Henry was already looking at them all through the gun's cross hairs. He felt sure he had aimed correctly, but the bullet zipped by harmlessly, embedding itself in the sand. Such was the fate of the next two shots, but upon the third, a zombie target was found. Though aiming for the head, Henry managed to hit it in the neck. The bullet went right through the soft tissue, but it knocked the already dead man back into the horde.

It was time for another to gain prominence amongst the anonymous. It was a young lady, from the look of it, her clothes mere rags of a once beautiful evening gown. It only took one shot for Henry to blow her head clean off. Her body fell hard — Henry watched with mild fascination as her spirit left her tortured form and returned to its long journey through the cosmos. He could see this kind of thing now, he was a part of it — he realized now that he had actually done her a favour. Was it this way for all undead?

Henry had one bullet left, and several more zombies bearing down on him. He wasn't sure what to do. How could he stop them all with one bullet? Maybe he couldn't. Henry ran back farther into the desert. The zombies dumbly and directly followed him. This gave Henry an idea and after several minutes, he'd taken the horde deep into the desert, while he circled back to the town leaving them to wander back at their leisure.

Ithliam was waiting in the centre of the town, his smooth, golden-black skin contrasting against the dull sand around him. That overly large grin played across his lips. What ego, this impossible creature, thinking himself a golden idol. Oh, how he hated him. Ithliam was playing games, but why? To train an apprentice, for amusement? More likely the latter.

“They'll come back here eventually, so we had better move on.” Henry made his displeasure known in the tone of his voice, but Ithliam didn't pay attention. He'd already turned and continued walking to the town square. A large golden oak tree stood in the middle, surrounded by broken cobblestones. Its branches, now leafless, at one time must have covered the entire square with shade.

Huge and ancient, it left an impression. This was a very old tree planted here long ago. Henry stopped to take it all in — the aura radiating from it was blinding, even more so than Ithliam's. Henry was amazed, the closer he came to it, the more it felt like a living being. There was warmth inside him that responded to the tree, called to it. Seeing through the illusion surrounding him, he watched his fingers heal, and felt his neck straighten. All wounds sustained before death corrected themselves.

“Another illusion?” he asked.

“No.”

“This is permanent? What is this?”

“In many ways, this tree is nature herself. So long as she grows, there is no true death. There are many throughout the multiverse.” How many universes had Ithliam explored, Henry wondered.

Henry marveled at this latest discovery. No true death so long as these trees exist? How many were there? Why was it like this? Ithliam stooped near the base of the tree trunk. Scratching frantically at the sand, Ithliam reminded Henry of a dog digging for a bone.

“What are you doing?”

Ithliam ignored him and continued digging. After a while, but not too long, the roots were exposed on the one side and he moved to another side. Digging there as well, he continued in this manner all around the base of the tree. When Ithliam finally stood up and walked away, the tree's entire root system lay exposed beneath it, and tangled in the roots, one of Ithliam's infamous doors.

It struck Henry as odd that Ithliam hadn't used his magick to do the digging, he wasn't usually so hands on. Ithliam's aura seemed dimmer the closer he got to the tree, not so much like it was weaker, just muted, not so intense. Looking at his own aura, he also seemed muted, but far more severely. Magick was absolutely out of the question for Henry, and it would seem likely for Ithliam, too. Henry brought the gun up to the back of Ithliam's head and fired.

Blood sprayed the roots of the golden oak tree. Unlike Henry, Ithliam had been alive and full of fluids.

As he fell to his knees, and then ultimately face first upon the tree roots, Henry lowered his gun unable to look away from what he'd done, unable at first to believe it had worked. Ithliam was dead at his feet, brains splattered across the tree, its roots absorbing the life force pouring out from his now lifeless corpse.

The ground didn't shake — there was no explosion of energy. Henry stood there for a long time. It was the groans that brought him back to the present. The zombies were near. They'd found their way back from the sandstorm. It was a unique talent of the walking dead, always able to find the way back to their haunting. Henry grabbed Ithliam's body and threw it over his shoulder. He had to pause for moment as he realized how good that dead flesh smelled — his stomach ached.

He almost doubled over as a shot from the gut brought him stumbling forward. He pulled his book of magick from within his dark robes. Trying hard to focus when the pain ripped through him as the change began, Henry in his last moments of control placed his finger on the symbol and willed the door open. As the frost spread across his body, his jaw jutted forward and his arms grew substantially involuntarily tossing Ithliam's body behind him.

By the time he was completely given over to the beast, the door had opened and he was falling forward through it. Leaving Ithliam unconsumed behind was Henry's last conscious act — the beast bellowed its displeasure as it fell, it wanted that power, but it was unable to stop the momentum, its own magick muted near the tree.

The beast hadn't noticed or cared that Ithliam's blood was being absorbed into the tree's roots or that leaves were growing on its branches again. Shade covered the square suddenly as if an eclipse or a thick cloud darkened the sky. The door closed — Henry never saw the grass spring up through the cobblestones, or the previously dried-up river near town flow with crystal-clear water again. Over the next several hundred years, the planet would become as flush with life as a planetary rain forest.

Once the door closed, the beast felt its magick acutely and folded force into a shield around itself. Darkness and prairie. Millions of thin yellow straws sticking up from fertile ground. Without a soul for miles, the beast could sense no one and nothing nearby. A large harvest moon hung low in the sky, and the beast gave off a blood curdling howl. Ithliam was beyond his reach now. Frustrated, it pounded down the highway in search of food.

The beast was loose on Earth, Henry's home, without anything to stop it. For the next several years, it dominated the night hunting for stronger and stronger prey, eventually moving away from eating just anything, to eating only the most powerful being it could find. Soon it had forgotten all about Ithliam — its memories and Henry's had become distorted and vague. He no longer had a clear idea of how he'd come to this.

For years, Henry worked to get control of it, but it never happened. The beast was too strong, too brutal and mindless. It was only driven by appetite, knowing nothing beyond the pleasure of the kill and the feast. Then there was Renelex, and then he found the book with the infamous name he hoped to never hear again, the name he'd forgotten after so many years. Ithliam.

A town not so far away named Ithliam. It was a familiar name, but why? Upon the realization, Henry knew the time had come. He was a part of things now — there was no running and he couldn't hide forever. He had unfinished business, a loose end — something still remained. It lingered like the smell of rot and death. He felt it in his bones: a final confrontation was coming and he wasn't sure he could win it.

Chapter 9 — The Final Confrontation

Henry's jaw ached. The punch had come from nowhere — Ithliam was so fast and so strong that it laid him right out. By the time he got back shakily to his feet, Ithliam was running at him and tackling him to the ground. He lifted Henry up into the air and then slammed him down against the hard rock floor. All this Henry absorbed, the white light's power sustaining him against serious harm. He didn't need to regenerate, he wasn't injured — it just hurt a lot.

"I killed you." He could remember again what Ithliam said. "I watched you die."

Ithliam jumped into the air, swung sideways and kicked Henry in the side of the head. Grabbing his wrist, Ithliam twisted, shooting his arm up, flipping Henry onto his back, and finished with an elbow to the gut. As Ithliam turned to set up some distance, he hammer-fisted Henry on the bridge of his nose and kicked his heel down on the side of the knee, cleanly breaking it. Henry screamed and the white light wavered.

"You remember what I wanted you to and most of it never happened." Another kick was followed by a couple of rabbit punches and a shrill laugh. "Besides, this isn't about you. It's about me!"

Henry blocked the next few moves, trying to change the momentum in his favour. He didn't get tired or fatigued, but it seemed that Ithliam did. He was clearly slowing down, one of the many problems with being alive, and when Henry saw his chance, he struck. A knife hand up, under Ithliam's arm guard, directly in his throat. Having seen Ithliam die once, Henry expected this should do some serious damage.

He was wrong — it did nothing. Ithliam took the blow with no apparent signs of discomfort. Henry found himself back on the defensive. A shower of blows rained down on him at speeds no mortal could achieve. Though most did little or no physical damage, they were taking their toll on his magickal shielding. It took more and more effort of will to block or to respond. Ithliam was wearing him down, methodically. He had to do something, take the edge off, even if just for a second.

"How do you come to still be alive?" asked Henry, putting everything he had into defense.

"How amusing that you haven't figured it out yet." Ithliam threw a punch but only one and it missed. "There are many Ithliams throughout the galaxies, one for each door I ever made."

Henry remembered how he and Ithliam had seen a younger version of Ithliam at a distance. It was so long ago, it didn't even occur to him that there might be more than one interested in the same worlds at the same time.

"Then are you an older version or a younger one?" asked Henry, jumping back, barely escaping a brush with Ithliam's side arm.

"You are quick, indeed. Of all those who have come for my power, you are the most worthy, but it is time to end this — it is your power that will be taken and added to my own."

"Then I understand you now. You are not the Ithliam I knew, either so far in the future you've forgotten me, or so far in the past you've never met me before — it makes no difference."

Henry wrapped himself in a fresh magickal shield, a technique he spent so many years working on while walking the endless desert. The vibrations echoed within the circle of power containing the fight. Ithliam hesitated for just a moment, though his own shield glowed all the brighter.

"I seem to be in the habit of killing Ithliams." Henry pulled out his gun and fired six shots. As he did, a symbol blazed in his mind, a special symbol in his book that he couldn't remember the meaning of until now. True shot. He watched hopefully as the first bullet was about to hit Ithliam's shield. Time

slowed, reaching almost a crawl, but still the bullets continued toward their target.

Henry squeezed his fist, concentrating, reverting the flow of time back to normal — the first bullet hit the shield and dissolved. The second, the same, and the third, though it got a little further, ultimately dissolved. The fourth bullet flew right through the shield only to stop on Ithliam's skin, the fifth and sixth bullets also flew right through the shield, but they struck bone. Ithliam's scream was short, and cut off at the end, like he was being strangled.

Suddenly visible to Henry's naked eyes were two more Ithliams behind the one he'd been fighting. While the hostile one was naked, these were dressed very differently and were not attacking him. In fact, they seemed to be holding the hostile Ithliam, who was struggling in their grip and threatening to escape at any moment. Henry reloaded his gun. Sometimes a gun was handy when magick wasn't an option, if so, it became a serious weapon against the magickally endowed.

Henry fired again, each shot hitting its mark precisely. Six bullets to the forehead — the fourth one hit, blowing the back of his head out. The last two sped through empty space. As the friendly Ithliams dropped the hostile Ithliam to the floor, Henry reloaded the gun. Ithliam might not be dead, would these others stay friendly?

Almost on cue, they started to advance — a couple of weaker versions pooling their strength, they wanted his power. They weren't helping him defeat a hostile Ithliam. They wanted Henry for their own and once they killed him, they'd fight each other for the prize. He was starting to wonder if there was an Ithliam that wasn't hostile. Was there any time at all when Ithliam was a nobler creature?

"Of course," said that voice again from the white light. "I evolved."

"Ithliam?" It made sense in a strange way — How long had Ithliam been at this making doors? How far into the future was this version from?

"Not so long, several million years or so," said the white light, answering Henry's thoughts. "And you must evolve too, Henry. Remember, there is no true death. Not while the golden trees still stand."

No true death, and he mentioned the golden trees again. What did they have to do with any of this? What was this all about? The dark Ithliams continued to advance and they reached Henry a few moments later. Henry figured they touched his protective shield at roughly the same time, sending both flying through the air, smashing into the edge of the power circle so hard their bones knit. While Henry's shield was violently repulsive, the protection circle was unyielding. They'd be no further trouble, though Henry barely noticed.

"Show yourself. Stop hiding behind that white light, Ithliam. If you really are Ithliam."

"I am, although I cannot reveal myself to you now. It's not worth the risk."

"What risk?"

"I cannot say. You will find out in time, Henry. Be patient. All things in their proper time...."

Part 2

1

"How long have I been doing this?" the dark voice whispered, dripping arcane implication. He looked back over his shoulder, as if to search for an answer creeping upon the shadows. What shadows? The voice sighed. He was alone, always had been — there were no answers out in the void.

What at first had been a simple desire, a satisfying adventure, had become an exhausted sameness, a

spent amusement. For all his power over matter and spirit alike, its value to him was dulled by the passage of countless millennia. The tiny increments of change made all the smaller for his infinite life span, his endless observations of new universes joining the ever-expanding ball of yarn that is the multiverse.

What curse is this, he mused, to be alone, yet surrounded by voices in every direction? They didn't speak to him, however. He was beyond them, invisible yet part of everything in their tiny worlds.

Though timeless, the galactic dark man was wounded from a battle eons in the past. A thin line spider webbed across his celestial features, leaking something the colour of melted red crayons. Every wound he had ever sustained gaped. He never healed and the loss was always draining his will a little more at each passing moment while forming the countless objects around him.

Parasites. Crawling through empty space without purpose or meaning, so-called Life. Using and abusing his precious materials while carelessly running amok through the cosmos. And the noise, the never-ending noise created by the constant activity of it. Maddening in its purposelessness, inconceivably pointless, and ultimately doomed like anything else.

His eyes, with no irises, only a deep black, deeper even than the surrounding pitch, stared across the great expanse of space. He cast his gaze randomly from one planet to another. With disdain and even some pity, he looked upon the diverse life that had grown on the matter of his own involuntary making. As annoying insects to him they seemed, yet worse, as the insects were also made of him. Of red tears from wounds caused through vile manipulation and war with his brothers.

He ran his fingers over the many wounds on his body, felt the burning heat of his divine essence flow slowly, but without hesitation from every cut, watched it add to the crimson pool, watched his slow death, which when all was said and done would take until the end of time. As the pool expanded out from its centre, it lost cohesion, sending small hardening pieces away into the abyss. He watched wisely as entropy dispersed his blood and all that his blood formed — fleeting shapes.

His power was limited only by itself. His current form was the hardest in existence predating the big bang and could never heal. The wounds, their shape, their substance, could never change, not now in his changeless state. The war that claimed his flesh in strips had ended long ago, ended in a time before time, now haunting his memory. He was the last survivor of the good fight. Remaining as the last threat was extinguished with his celestial blade. And so now he perpetually bled, with no further wound or recovery possible — just an endless, aching pain as his essence slowly slipped away.

Had he won, or had he simply endured, sustained by his intellect and by his strategy in his reclusion? He found himself questioning all of it. He did not miss his brothers, they of the same cloth, the same virtue. He was alone and always had been. Their infernal interruptions had been a constant annoyance. The silence he'd enjoyed at their passing had been true bliss, even if short-lived, ultimately replaced by this new unintended and unexpected progeny.

“Life is doomed.” Hollow words from a hollow creature.

He knew it. The rate of living reproduction outpaced his every effort. Still the words stirred something within him, a vague longing, as though he'd forgotten something important and couldn't quite place it. It incensed him again to old ideas newly thought. The words had power — they invoked, summoned his need to consume. Where he had found a peaceful indulgence at the edge of things, he now felt rage. Where he once found the stellar abyss vacant and isolating, it now flourished with unwanted light and activity. The light came from millions upon a millions of worlds, reaching out to lick his wounds with salty tongues.

“Is there no end, no peace for this solitary fiend?”

The galactic dark man opened his mouth toward the noise and light and a vibration left his mighty lips. It was not so much a sound, for who had the ears to hear it, but instead a shock wave through the no longer empty vacuum of space. On ether it travelled, fueled by his indomitable will, heralding what was to come, another attempt at universal silence, and with it, peace. It passed worlds by the thousands, by the millions and finally penetrated the whole great material expanse. And on some level all life knew he was coming and felt its effect within them.

Let them tremble, he thought. He squeezed his eternal hands closed in crushing fists pulsing with a deep red energy.

His thoughts slipped into darkness again. Bending reality to his whim, he brought all things toward him for he chose not to move through the universe so much as move the universe through him. Was there a measurement for his mass, a number large enough to account for it? Without his density, countless stars and their worlds would fly from their orbits around him.

Intimately aware of his curse, he pitied nothing, least of all himself. His end would come soon enough, but not before enjoying his last few moments of tranquillity.

Then again...what was the point?

“What was the point of anything?”

Another unexpected change of heart or was that a voice, quietly pestering him from the fringe of his awareness.

“Who speaks?”

A single point of brilliant white light had appeared nearby, only a few million miles away, but its presence was unmistakable to the dark god.

“Do it for the sake of it, do it because you can, do it because no one else will.”

The white pinprick drew closer still to the galactic dark man, its light soothing the pain of his wounds, not that he cared or could not endure the pain for his cursed eternity. Yet still the light came — it pulsed, radiating its healing magicks upon his great mass.

“You must not despair, Ancient Darkness,” said the white light. “He comes for you soon.”

“My would-be destroyer?”

“Yes, he has grown powerful, has formed his nexus and soon will be a singularity like yourself. Your opportunity has nearly arrived. Do you know his name?”

“Ithliam.” The man he’d glimpsed through a tear in time.

A second vibration scattered the cosmos, a great sigh of relief. It had been so long since any had challenged his power. Doubts had grown like cobwebs upon his unflexed muscles, could anything in this lonely existence end his misery?

“Yes, he is legion and comes for us all. Even now he aligns with his other forms, multiplying his energy, focusing it into a single point. He follows only one vision, total consumption. He will not stop or tire. He will not forget or disappoint you. Ultimately, you are his only defining thought. You are worth more to him than the entire universe with all her wondrous creatures.”

“Peace at last,” the god mused. Who cares about life anyway? If Ithliam destroyed the whole of creation to get to him, then all the better.

Moments later, after careful consideration, the small point of white light disappeared, hidden even from the nearly omnipotent senses of the solitary dark man. A curiosity to his infinite intellect, nothing more,

and hardly interesting enough to distract him from his deep introspection. Peace. The thought clung to his mind, unshakable peace, and with it the silence he so desperately craved.

With renewed vigor, the last known celestial consciousness pressed his energy outward. Ithliam would know of his presence, and be drawn to his strength, like a moth to the flame. The dark man summoned the legion to battle. Excited again for the first time since his original ascension, the celestial darkness oozed outward like a cancer tearing through flesh. He reached across time and space with a simple message.

“Come to me, Ithliam, and defeat me if you can.”

2

Mr. King took the punch like a man. It caught him on the cheek, high up, mostly on the ear. The flash of brilliant purple was brief like the pain which was sharp and immediate. It was when his knee touched and scraped on the dirty cement that he realized he could still swing back. But, the other man had already started to run. He could pull his gun, he thought, shoot him right in the back of the head, but no, this was too much fun. Mr. King liked to kill up close and personal.

“Hey, Rick, why you runnin’?”, he drawled. “I’m gonna catch you, and when I do, do you know what I’m gonna do?”

He was going to eat the poor man. He was laughing on the inside while rubbing his jaw. It was more fun when they run, he reminded himself. The very tall, thin man got to his feet, and ran after his latest victim. He ran like a lame dog, a little sideways, with one leg dragging some from an old wound that hadn’t healed right.

“Come on, Rick, scream for me. Ain’t no one to hear ya out here, but I like the sound of it.” He laughed out loud now, a shrill chittering noise like a cockroach. “I’m gonna catch you, we both know it. Why not make it a little easier on yourself? Save some dignity.”

The other man, Rick, was scraping against a fence now, trying to climb it, one of those old metal wire interlinking rust traps with faded orange stripes decaling the far side. It seemed to guard to boundary of an unused stock yard. Its iron fingers sunk deeply into the timeless brick walls on either side. Up was the only way, though it was topped with barbed wire that coiled around rusted razor guards. He was trapped even if he hadn’t figured that out yet.

Mr. King walked slowly, deliberately trying not to seem anxious — this punk didn’t need to know how close he’d come to walking away from this. That punch had nearly laid him out. He casually looked up at the starless sky. Tonight was just the kind of night for close calls, moonless and the smell of rain close by. He noticed his palms were damp, which was unusual. He kept telling himself it was the humidity.

Only a few yards away now, the ghoulish killer slowed up a little more, letting the other man flail hopelessly at the fence exhausting himself. Mr. King could see better in the dark than most, and could see that the fence hung over toward their side with barbed wire. This guy wasn’t going over, no doubt about it. He stopped a few feet short and waited patiently.

Mr. King enjoyed watching the man struggle vainly against his terror, trying to get a handle on the fear, but ultimately slumping down into a ball, quivering, and waiting for the worst moment of his life to end. He shut his eyes so tightly his soul was blind. Mr. King looked on quietly with great amusement. He was food. It was the nature of things, or at least the nature of creatures like Mr. King.

Crouching down so their eyes were roughly the same level, he pulled his cheeks back into a rail thin smile, curled his lips back an inch or so, and ran his tongue over the front of his yellow teeth. They

were straighter than most, thick even, and strong, but otherwise normal teeth. He wished they were sharp, monstrous like him, but he'd been cursed with a very normal, almost boring human face and features. His hair was dirty brown and common, his eyebrows were even, and his nose, though a little crooked, was average. His skin was pale, but clear of any major blemishes. Not a pimple, or pockmark, not even wrinkles.

He'd always felt the inside was so much more interesting than the outside anyway. Maybe that was why he always got a good look at the innards of his victims. More than just ritual, he was actually interested. He'd take out each organ with gentle care and examine it before he prepared each in its special way. Some pieces he'd cook while others were best left raw, or dried like jerky and spiced. His tongue was wet with anticipation. He had a sophisticated sense of taste and he'd known the moment Rick had crossed his path those many days previous that a rare meal was in the offering.

As he moved closer to the sniveling man curled neatly in a ball, he could smell that Rick had shit himself. That happened a lot. It got him wondering if they knew what he was about to do and were trying to make him lose his appetite. Of course, he never did. He never lost his appetite and was always hungry for more. Even after he'd just eaten, he was hungry and thinking about his next meal. He would eat slowly though, careful not to deny himself even a moment's pleasure.

Mr. King reached his hands in around the thick neck of the other man, and lifted him up to a slouch. He turned Rick's face toward him, his cracked and yellowing nails cutting deeply into the fatty tissue of the man's jaw. Rick whimpered, too tired to scream, saving it for the pain, no doubt. His arms hung loosely at his sides, his will broken, recognizing his life was at an end. Mr. King relaxed. The tainted rotting smell of the grave came pouring from his mouth as he brought his face close to Rick's face. Though, to his eternal surprise, Rick wasn't quite ready to die after all.

Mr. King broke the silence with a shrill cry as Rick drove his knee as hard as he could into Mr. King's crotch. He went down, and Rick ran. Helplessly, Mr. King watched him go from his sideways vantage, and duck behind a building out of view. Paralyzed with pain, his knees wouldn't separate, and his breathing was short and strained. Fucking shit!!! That little dirt bag got me after all, he thought, desperately trying to get back to his feet.

Slowly and without even a shred of dignity, the ghoulish Mr. King came to his feet. One hand still cupping his groin, he shambled in the direction Rick had gone. Given the few second lead, he wasn't too concerned about catching him. And in this world, where could he go anyway? Rick was far away from home and his nightmare was just beginning. The dirt smelled of old metal and oil, friction burn and black rubber.

Mr. King stumbled over to the cold brick wall. It was an uneven sort of brown like mud mixed with salt from some old government project. The brick was cheap and decaying. He leaned against it for support as he shuffled over near the edge. The pain in his groin had finally eased as he turned the corner. He was too arrogant to look first, convinced Rick was running like a scared rabbit.

He didn't see the thick steel pipe come down across the side of his head, Rick had been waiting with unexpected cunning just around the corner. It drove him down hard to the ground and his world exploded, spraying teeth, bone fragments and brown fluids. His last thought was that he was still hungry. This was all as Rick threw up on Mr. King's fine black leather shoes.

3

Standing alone at over a hundred feet high and as thick as you'd expect the oldest oak tree in the universe to be, she was walnut brown with a golden sheen, a bright and attractive beacon for many leagues around. She had lost every leaf long ago in the uncounted years since Ithliam fell at her roots, and local life had not entered her sphere of influence for many years. She feared nothing and her roots

ran deeply into the life waters of the eternal earth itself. She stood sentinel, the last remaining guardian of the essence of all life.

An entity of pure emotion, she felt unlimited compassion and sympathy for all things, even Ithliam who lay dead before her. Though unique, empathy came to her naturally. She shook her branches as Ithliam's black fluids seeped into the soil at the base of her massive trunk. Corrupting and corrosive, it burned into the ground, though leaving her bumpy skin untouched.

The tree was satisfied to watch over his soulless withering corpse, to protect it through its transformation. Though most of Ithliam's skull was missing, bone scattered into the air and dust, he still pulsed with energy from which she gladly drank. She appreciated his vintage, rare as it was. He had much evil to consume, much power to refine. Perhaps they could help each other.

She was surrounded by desert, her branches stretched high into the air, glowing with renewed ethereal light. Skeletal claws touched the sky as she harvested Ithliam's evil intentions like a maggot from a wound. The tree judged him with the highest standard. Noble, just and patient, she was all these things. Steady in her attendance of his recovery, she was careful to restore only the best of him. Hoping to avoid past mistakes, she drew new life energies up from the great source far beneath her and cradled him upon her unerring roots, healing him completely, body mind and soul.

By cosmic accident, one of the hundreds of Ithliams fell within her loving embrace and she rejoiced in her unexpected opportunity. Had the time come? Was this the circumstance that would push the universal pattern forward into new territories? As Ithliam took his first breath of actual life, the golden tree was concentrating all the evil she had taken from him into a single black acorn near the top of her longest branch. With time, she would distill the corruption, and its neutral energies would form the basis of her progeny.

She had spared Ithliam the mind-wiping swoon that came with the great wall of the dead, allowing him to maintain continuity of consciousness, and instead had re-formed him with a new purpose, corrected the mistakes of his original conception. He would appreciate life, for he could now die the true death. He was a genuine part of nature now, unique amongst his dark brothers. He could feel the limitations of the flesh but also the unlimited potential to grow, change and evolve.

Meanwhile, high on its isolated branch, his old evil would fuel her offspring. Heavy and perverted, the acorn pulled down against her kindly grasp. It was desperate to flee the confines of its mother, and find its own place in the world, but unable to fall away of its own accord. Nature wouldn't let it go until the time was right. It would suffer the indignity of its prison, for only so long, as required. Already it craved more power, more nutrients than the golden tree would grant it. This evil taint had driven Ithliam for millennia and it wanted to get back to it.

Ithliam lay dreaming for the first time in his long, uninterrupted existence. He was surrounded by the cold, endless, red sand desert. Ithliam groaned, unconscious still, but alive. Terrible nightmares raced across his mind's eye, tearing a path through his conscience, forcing him to remember and regret everything.

His heart ached, and the great golden tree of life smiled in her way. She had done well to clean this one — he would help the world cope with a new age of godlessness. In a new era without meaning or control, he would be a compass, a guide for those who become trapped in moral relativity and lost forging a unique destiny. She felt she was righting a wrong born of ignorance, an error from when she first shook her branches at the beginning of all things.

Ithliam tossed his regrown head back and forth, scratching his golden-black skin on small rocks, feverishly trying to awaken himself. Something unplanned was happening, something beyond the powers of the golden tree to predict. He'd seen the dark matter approaching, felt the tug deep inside as

a long shock wave of great might crashed into the planet from beyond. It shook the tree, the first thing that had in a million years, and from the most distant branch, the single black acorn saw its chance.

Knocked free, it hit the ground moments after the shock wave had come and gone, and where it landed, the ground split beneath its great weight. The acorn fell into the crack, and down into the darkness below, down to the life water of the eternal earth. The ground swallowed it like a sweet poison, unaware of its part in crimes to come.

The golden tree was troubled by this, having yet to clean the acorn of the evil energy from which she'd formed it. Expecting many years in the future to do this, she was surprised by the shock wave. She asked humbly of the great spring to nurture it, or to hold it in its care, but it was too late. The spring, with celestial grace, driven by its purpose, raised its water high and enriched the acorn with life-giving waters. The acorn was carried far away from its mother and began to take hold all on its own of the surrounding ground, made fertile by its presence.

The acorn was not the only thing affected by the shock wave. Ithliam awoke with a start, a gasp, and tears streaming down his obsidian cheeks. His flesh was black crystal while his new eyes were nothing less than intense golden points of energy. A new and unfamiliar force filled him, faintly, but warm. The golden tree encouraged him to rise to his feet. As he did, the tears dropped from his pointy chin, blackening the red sand where they splashed across the grains.

He looked upon the far horizon where another tree could now be seen, hundreds of miles away, taken to its place of eternal growth by the rapids of the great spring, arbiter of its nebulous destiny. However, this other tree was not golden — not like the great golden tree of nature at all. It was an ash gray, and it spread its branches across the land. Not high into the sky, but across the ground for miles around. It formed a canopy over the sand, creating endless shadows where before there had been only black and white — light or dark replaced by a million shades of gray. The shadows danced as the suns moved steadily across the sky.

The air warmed with this new tree's influence. A wind began to blow again, the dust formed weird shapes that moved across the sand. A dusty ambition to change and work the land for wickedness affected these shapes. This was an unlife made of dust and power, a timeless black silt crawling across the planet's ancient face seeking energy.

Naked and scared, Ithliam felt vulnerable for the first time in his long, protracted existence. The golden tree tried to comfort him, but it was no use — the horrible memories of a billion acts of cruelty played upon his brain. Heavy with guilt, uncertainty and fear, Ithliam struggled to remain conscious. The depression was matched only by his drive to rid himself of it. His ego was shattered, he fell to his knees. Finding no reprieve, no forgiveness, he was surrounded by his own demons, tormented.

A lesser being would have gone insane after only a few moments, but not Ithliam — in time it would all make sense, he was sure of that. The tree smiled, the process had begun. Redemption was a long and difficult path to follow. She had placed him on that path, but it was up to him whether to walk it or drift into oblivion. The cruelties he'd inflicted on others were now his legacy to live down. Time would pass, but the memories would remain clear. He would never forget. Not even a single face, not a single solitary scream.

“What am I to do?”

No one answered him. He was alone in this place. He thought of Henry, imagined the hate he must have felt to pull that trigger. How long ago had that been? Was Henry safe? It felt strange to care, but it eased his pain just a little bit, replacing it with concern. And what of the door? Where was the door? He pulled sand away from the base of the tree in large two-handed scoops, throwing it over his shoulder. Stopping to rest several times, before continuing, he briefly missed his immortal constitution. Would he

age? It wasn't until hours later he realized that the door wasn't there. He didn't know why. Was he in the past, or the future; was he even under the same tree?

He looked again toward the gray canopy in the distance and then back to the golden tree. She was magnificent and he wondered how he'd never noticed before. He'd never had much concern for beauty, but now realized there were entire layers of the universe of which he'd been ignorant. His purpose had been pure, but also shallow. He'd never really taken the time in all his immortal days to discover the simple wonders that he now could see all around him. Life was a miracle, he was sure of it, and it was worth protecting.

The other Ithliams had to be stopped. He, them, the others still all focused with laser-like precision on one goal — ultimate destructive power. Would they come for him, knowing he'd changed, recognizing the threat? No, he was not powerful enough to warrant the attention. He'd need to work through others. Henry. He needed to find Henry. Eventually, another Ithliam would find him, nurture and corrupt him, even as he himself had been planning before his unexpected demise.

“I need a door. But, where?” Anxiety rushed through him, another uncomfortable emotion. Could Ithliam find Henry in time? No, but it wasn't a matter of time, it was a matter of space and sequence.

If not a door, then what? A thought struck him. A tunnel might work, a tunnel through the fabric of space.

Could it work? Was there enough energy on this world to form a small worm hole, something just big enough to see through and maybe send a message? He wasn't sure, but he knew one thing. That distant canopy radiated familiar energies, if he was careful he might be able to invoke it. Then he might have just enough energy of his own to direct it, focus its energy sharply enough to cut the space between worlds. He visualized Henry — he would be the anchor. A connection to Henry's location was possible, but had the other already gotten to him? Had another Ithliam already absorbed him?

By providence or chance, the golden tree gave her final gift to Ithliam, as if to say, Get going — you have work to do. A thick, twisted branch, about two metres long, fell with a soft thump only a few inches away from where Ithliam stood contemplating his future plans. He looked at it long and hard for several minutes before reaching down to pick it up. It was much heavier than it at first appeared. The golden sheen deepened with walnut brown, became harder and if possible, it seemed harder as it withered and tightened in his sure grasp. Was time moving quickly or was he moving slowly?

When he touched it, he felt renewed. All the many aches and pains that saturated his body disappeared. The wind was held at bay by some invisible force, he was shielded from it and the hot, spitting sand. He leaned upon his new staff, carefully testing its tensile strength, and learned it would take more than physical force to break it. He immediately knew he'd walk many miles with it, and was almost overwhelmed by appreciation for his sponsor. She'd invested much in him, and he didn't intend to let her down.

A magus required a rod to help bear the burden of powerful energies. At one time, Ithliam required none of these things, but his dark power was gone and with it the evil it encouraged. He felt no real loss, having gained so much more at its sacrifice. Happy to hold the staff in his soot black hand, he directed his attention up and down its bumpy, uneven edges, infusing its already powerful magick with his own impressions.

He programmed it with the kinds of behaviours he'd need on his journey. As a receptacle, it was ideal for both collecting more power than his body could handle and maintaining persistent effects. Should he apply magickal impressions upon the energies within it, those effects would last long after his immediate attention had gone on to other things.

Naked but no longer entirely alone, he'd take his rod everywhere he went, and with it, the golden tree would always be nearby. Warm to the touch, his staff hummed with approval as he laid his hand one last time upon the golden tree's massive trunk. Fondly running his fingers down her bark, he smiled and began his long walk toward the distant gray ash.

Each step he could feel the life-giving energies recede behind him, and the familiar stink of evil grow before him. He expected challenges ahead — dead planets tend to be infested with monsters of all types, and that was before his old taint had been released upon this no longer barren land. He was safe near the golden tree, but he wasn't the conqueror he once was, the closer he got to the canopy, the more dangerous it would get. There were serious limitations to his magicks now, he'd have to be cautious and use his head. The brute force preferences from his past wouldn't protect him here.

The air tasted like powdered zinc and the strong metallic sensation stuck in the back of his throat as the clouds thickened and darkened miles above. These were weather patterns that hadn't existed for so long, it was impossible to predict their outcome. He could smell the rain long before it came pouring down all around him, not so much a storm as steady release of atmospheric pressure. He looked around for shelter but found nothing. Reserved to traveling through it, he marched forward. The rain took much longer to arrive than he at first expected, allowing him many hours of uninterrupted trance while he walked.

When the rain did eventually pour down, he remained dry, protected by his magus staff. A thick sheet of water pressed against the light golden oblong sphere, running harmlessly around him and into the ground a good metre radius from his feet. He felt vulnerable, and more than a little afraid, but he was physically comfortable. These again were not emotions he was used to, good or bad, but he kept going. He knew that even if he lost his bearings, that the canopy was vast and spanned many miles. As long he kept in the general direction, he'd be closer by the time the rain stopped.

The red sand was now red mud and each step Ithliam took sunk deeper. He was not a strong man and the effort caught up to him, prompting him to stop and rest. Lightning flashed across the sky and for a moment, he could see that there was nothing to see. The shadows seemed closer though, not too far away, a few miles at best. Were they moving? He couldn't be sure, but he wasn't taking the chance. The hungry black sand had ruled most of this planet for a long time.

That's when he heard the first desperate groans. For a moment, he wasn't sure — the rain was so loud, but soon it was undeniable, and there were far more than just a few of them, at least from the sound of it. They shambled through the rain and mud looking for him or anything else warm to the touch. They must have sensed his heat, as the only living being walking this planet other than small animals was him. They were attracted to him like flies to shit and there wasn't a thing Ithliam could do about it except run and hope for the best.

He'd barely caught his breath, but he had one advantage. Zombies were slow, and in mud even slower. Staying calm wasn't easy, but he reminded himself that all he had to do was move a little faster than he had been. If he could keep it steady, he'd leave them far behind. The groans came louder and more aggressively. They were close and closing in and seemed to come from all directions. Another flash of lightning allowed him to see how bad his situation really was. There weren't a dozen — there were hundreds and they had him nearly surrounded.

While some walked, others crawled, or pulled their way across the ground dropping rancid flesh and jagged slivers of bone. Many seemed to be digging up from beneath the earth itself, climbing from unmarked graves and hidden places. Ithliam wondered if they had dug into the ground years ago looking for a little peace, a break from the emptiness of exploring a land without food. Did zombies get bored? While Ithliam was surely a form of entertainment for them, he wasn't having much fun with it.

The noise became deafening — all Ithliam could hear were the hungry calls of the wandering damned. He felt a great deal of sympathy. How many of these pitiful creatures had he made in the past? How many more would he make, not him but another him, another Ithliam, one still seeking power and control over all things. Why did he feel responsible? Because he was the first of them. He'd made the first door under that beautiful golden tree, eons ago, and he'd destroyed this world to do it.

Still, he ran through it all like an army man avoiding land mines and enemy fire. Those zombies, still half-buried, reached for his legs as he passed, and more than a few times, he was forced to knock others away to clear a path. Up to his ankles in mud, blood, and death, Ithliam pressed on, while nightmarish clouds cried above trying to wash away the sin. Was it for him or this godforsaken place that they wept? He didn't know, but thanked the golden tree when he suddenly found himself beneath the edge of the canopy of gray ash, looking back at the army of the dead pressing against each other, unsatisfied.

This was the territory of other kinds of evil the zombies dared not enter. They crowded against the edge of the tree line, frustrated, furious they'd lost their chance. Darkness and shadows dominated the area, though Ithliam senses could penetrate it easily enough when he concentrated and stood very still. Oddly, there was a path before him, compelling him, as though he were an invited guest. He recognized that feeling — the canopy was made from one tree, a tree made of his old evil, and so it made sense that it would have similar motivations. He was invited all right, to come and join its power.

Unfortunately, much like the pawns he'd used before, what choice did he have? He needed to find the source trunk, the central point of the canopy's power, the place where the acorn had taken root, so that he could use its energy for his own noble purpose. Some things never change. Was he shaking? It wasn't cold. He held his staff tightly, the rough edges digging into his soft hands. The liquid crystal that served as his flesh was hard to tear, but scratches formed, burning him. Strangely thankful for the pain, he found it distracted from his fear, helped him concentrate and so he pressed on.

An odd tingle near the back of his neck alerted him just in time as a shadowing creature lurched out from behind a thick vine-like branch. Ducking at the last possible moment, Ithliam crouched defensively, with his staff held in front, ready to strike. The shadow disappeared with a fading screech behind thick bramble. Even now he found he didn't want to hurt this fiend, just protect himself. He marveled at this, there was a time not long ago, when he'd have found this moment amusing, and with cruelty an opportunity to create suffering. Now he was the one who suffered, not sure where that fine line stood between protecting himself and hurting something else.

Ithliam was exposed from all sides and knew it. Shades could come from anywhere in this place, riding the black sand on the wind. His hearing was acute — like all his natural senses, he could read the signs, and knew more were coming his way. With a strength that beguiled his appearance, he plunged his staff hard into the soft soil. Stepping back slightly, he placed his hands at his sides, palms lightly pressed against his thighs. As he took air in slowly, he brought his hands up to his waist balled into tight fists while keeping his arms relaxed. He then breathed out firmly from his diaphragm while opening his hands palms up.

He felt the energies from the staff enter him with his breath — as a spark to dry paper, the fuel poured over the fire in his belly, provoking it to a white-hot pulse. He lifted his hands higher to his arm pits, gliding them over his ribs with another breath, then pushed forward quickly on the exhale. The intense white energy glowed ever brighter an inch below his navel and another inch in front of his spine. Though within his body, the light escaped through his translucent black crystal flesh. He appeared as a glass man radiating dense energy and casting shadows away to flee into what little darkness remained. No shade for a hundred metres could penetrate his aura.

For a long time, his spell functioned admirably. He walked through the canopy secure from its inhabitants. Unmolested, he traveled down a path no one had ever walked before. With a destination

some unknown distance away, he wasn't sure how long he'd walked, months or years, probably the latter. He never slept or ate, having no need, so long as he held the staff of nature. He was alive, but not biologically — the only indication he had of passing time under the thick canopy were his heartbeat-like pulsations. He had no heart as such, so the rhythms were more like those of a clock, and in fact, the rise and set of his life force.

No other physical creatures, monsters, undead, or otherwise lived within the confines of the gray ash canopy. Only shades, held at bay by his magick, thanks to his golden staff. They let nothing live amongst them and found his presence intolerably difficult to accept, but what could they do other than watch and scheme. They could only bide their time and wait for the slim chance that Ithliam's protections might one day fail him. They were wrong. With time, it grew easier, not harder, to maintain his shields — eventually, he only drew off the staff during long droughts when he couldn't muster the energy from the environment around him.

With so much evil energy around, it was surprising he didn't have a fully charged staff and bright internal flame burning. With time, the shades vanished, leaving only harmless shadows in their wake. They recognized the futility of their interest in this obsidian man. This suited Ithliam just fine and he enjoyed the solitary nature of his journey, taking the time to think deeply of things gone by and things yet to come. He thought a lot about Henry and whether it was right to involve him. Would he even listen? Would he even care? There was a unique spark in that one, something he hadn't noticed when they traveled together so long ago, but in hindsight, his realization was as clear as the new day sun. Henry had a conscience, even as a ghoul, and potential because of that.

But what of the beast inside him? Could it be dispelled, and if so how? It was the product of his own magick, at his most powerful — was it even possible now to separate them? So many questions, and so few answers, but he knew one thing for sure. He had to try. It was his fault Henry had become what he'd become, and he'd had the courage to fight it, to seek the best in himself.

After many steps, Ithliam finally came to the centre of it all. A clearing and in the middle, a massively wide trunk from which all the other branches grew. It was the gray ash tree, son of her golden majesty — twisted and bulbous, he seethed evil as liquid mist slowly crept out along twisted branches. It blotted out the suns completely, having no use for their light.

Ithliam found himself staggering back with revulsion. Swooning, he felt dizzy and nauseous. A hard cramp took hold of his gut and pulled him toward the gray tree's base. He resisted, but it wasn't easy, it took every ounce of spiritual strength to stay on his feet. This was it, the place where all the energy originated. Ithliam lifted his staff high into the air, and slammed it against the tree. A thunderous clap knocked him back, crashing through the surrounding branches, until he hit a thick branch with no give.

When he awoke, most of his body was crushed and he couldn't move, but it didn't matter. His plan had worked and his staff was bursting with the energy he needed — he grasped it tightly in his unbroken fingers. Careful not to let even one drop of energy escape, not even to heal himself, he closed his eyes and began the internal ritual that would open his way into that far off world. Henry's last known location, the world Ithliam was off to conquer so many years ago before that fateful bullet.

He thought clearly of Henry as he'd last seen him, visualizing everything to the most mundane detail. If this spell had any chance at all of working, he needed a perfect impression of the magickal nature within Henry. This wasn't easy with all the pain, but he didn't expect it to be easy, only possible, at least familiar and only just. He blocked out distractions as best he could and prayed to the golden tree that Henry was safe, that he could still respond to his magick. Ithliam couldn't anchor to him if he was already lost and in one of those blasted walls. There was also a chance that a wormhole, if unstable, could implode, taking a good part of this solar system as it formed an inconvenient black hole.

After several minutes of his focused concentration, a small pinprick of white light appeared directly in front of Ithliam's forehead. As he drove all that energy into the smallest possible point, a wormhole formed and through it, he could see that Henry was alive but magickally subdued and about to face some serious trouble. By ghouls and zombies, spectres and vampires, and worst of all, more than one iteration of evil Ithliam. Compelled to help and thankful to have found him in time, Ithliam began his intervention.

"Why don't you just get up, Henry," spoke Ithliam with a disembodied voice, hardly able to hold in his happiness in spite of the great pain and anxiety he felt. "It's just an illusion, nothing more."

Taking his own advice, Ithliam squeezed his magus rod meaningfully and was healed. Now the real fun could begin.

4

Wiping his mouth clean with his sleeve, Rick spat the taste away. Choking on dust, he found his throat was torn up inside with a burning, constricted wheezing. The ghoulish Mr. King was dead, of that he was sure. That pipe must have weighed 50 pounds. He could still feel the cold metal vibrating in his hand and the echoes of that sickening sensation that followed in his mind, the softness as the head caved in. Rick shuddered. He wasn't a killer, but he did what he had to. He had a family and desperately wanted to return to them.

He'd put everything he had into that swing just in case he didn't have it in him for another one. It was enough, though — at his feet was a body from the neck down and a smudge from the neck up. King was a tall man and even without a head, he'd be taller than Rick. Weird thing to think about, he never would have imagined himself so calm in such chaos. Breathing hard aside, he was relieved to be alive, but fixated on the shallow puddle of milky blackness spreading over the ground toward his feet.

Get it together. You're in shock, he thought.

He had to find some help, but he had no idea where he was. He'd been bound and gagged during the car ride up here, having to listen to King hum stupid jingles the whole way. Not sure where they were going or why. How long had it been? He couldn't help but think about his whole life, how little control he really had. The waste and all the petty desires meant nothing now. All he wanted was to go home.

It felt like hours must have gone by since he woke up bound in the back seat — who knows how long he'd been under before that. The last thing he remembered was that psycho shooting him with that fucking stun gun. He thought he was dead, but bang, back of the seat, a toy to be played with later. Rick winced as he touched the two penny-sized burn marks on his lower back, right above his kidneys. Ouch. They still itched terribly.

Thoughts of his daughter came suddenly to mind. Sarah. He'd been on his way to pick her up from her mother's when all this happened. That was at 10 a.m. — it was dark now, just past dusk. His head ached, his stomach hurt, and he was still a little nauseous. Saying this was a bad day was an understatement. Running the back of his hand across his forehead, he wiped away the sweat. Even at night, it was hot in this hell. Hot and empty, he saw no people, only burned out buildings and abandoned industrialization. Cars with no tires or any other valuable part for that matter.

Where am I and what the fuck do I do now?!

He looked around, but was careful to keep one eye on the corpse. He'd seen enough horror movies to know you don't take your eyes off the killer, even when you're sure he's dead. Especially when you're sure he's dead. This asshole was unusual to say the least. Barely human, close, but when Rick got a decent look at him, it was clear something was wrong. Even before he saw his odd milky-coloured blood, and the odd skin colour, there were obvious distortions to the body. Unusually long arms and

fingers, strange eyes and jaw line. And a feeling, the unmistakable sensation, that he was more monster than man.

The body twitched, and Rick jumped, startled like a scared child waking from a nightmare. It was just the after-death playing out, rigor mortis he told himself, but it scared the hell out of him anyway. For a long moment, there was no more movement and Rick relaxed some, not too much, and backed up a few more feet anyway, just to be safe.

Okay, get it together, man, you gotta find a way out of here. How? The car! he thought.

He ran back toward the car which was just a couple of blocks away and even found the keys still in the ignition, the motor humming in neutral. It was a nondescript common model from the early 90s and cheap. There was nothing special about it, other than it looked worn and sand blasted like everything else in this place. The paint was faded almost to the metal, the rust was present but minimal. It worked well enough and the engine purred, ready to take him wherever he decided to go.

Almost boring, he thought, as a captive, he'd kind of imagined a big Buick or something more...well...killer-like.

The doors weren't locked and once inside the car, he turned the headlights on so he could see the surrounding area better. It looked like he was in some old ghetto. No people for some reason, no stars, no real wind and no sound other than that of his breathing in the deadness surrounding him. There wasn't much light other than the interior of the car and its headlights. It didn't smell like ghetto, but how would he know — all he could smell was his own urine from when he pissed himself a few hours back.

Thinking about the lowest scum he'd ever crossed in his life, he'd always wondered what could bring a man down so far. He prayed his circumstances were an exceptional case, but the world didn't seem so safe and secure any more. It seemed dangerous and menacing. Yesterday, his biggest worry had been getting time off work again this month to hang out with his little girl. Now, survival preoccupied his every thought and his loud bully boss was the last thing he cared to concern himself with. He hated his job. He hated his life, but he loved Sarah, more than he hated himself even.

He looked around the car for anything useful. In the back seat, he found what was left of a roll of tape used to bind his hands and mouth, and some plastic bags, but he left those, and a package of unused lighters. He opened the glove box and found a pack of cigarettes, and a small metal smoke pipe smelling of hash resin and butane. He then popped the trunk by pressing its small, yellow release button. He had to press it hard. Standing at the rear of the car a few moments later, Rick couldn't help but notice how spacious the trunk was, likely a selling feature for Mr. King. He morbidly wondered how many bodies could fit in here?

Distracted, he found his attention drawn down to his legs, where a throbbing pain began to take hold as his heart rate decreased, and he calmed down a little more. Lifting his jeans up to his knees, he noted unusual scratches and bite marks caked over with scabs above the ankles. They were red, swollen, and infected — he had no recollection of how he'd gotten them. He could see that the skin was thin and friction burned where the tape had rubbed for hours, but the scratches and bites looked like something had been gnawing on him. A small animal of some sort, maybe, rats? Adding the pain to a long list, he moved on.

He stood at the trunk looking in for a moment, thinking he was supposed to be wrapped in plastic right there, and still had trouble believing he wasn't. It was a miracle he'd escaped — a consequence of Mr. King's arrogance, maybe. It didn't matter, the important thing was he had escaped and he was never going in that trunk again. He spat on the plastic roll, dirty and foreboding. Painter's plastic for keeping important surfaces clean, there was also a workman's knife, rusty but sharp. Rick grabbed it and

slipped it into his back pocket.

Hurry up, he told himself, before this all changed for the worst again.

He shut the trunk, but he did so quietly, not wanting to break that enduring silence that covered the place like freshly fallen snow. The smell of old smoke wafted across him gently, there wasn't wind as such, but sometimes the dead air moved. Rick wondered if that meant movement elsewhere had disturbed this place. Who could say what other predators lurked in these burned out streets. He was dirty and alone, his fear was made physical in every shadow, and he couldn't help but dart his gaze here and there. It wasn't paranoia if something really was trying to kill him.

He took another quick look in all directions, then he got back into the driver's seat and locked the doors. Taking a quick moment to breathe, he then turned off the interior light and put it the car in gear. It was a standard and he hadn't driven stick shift in a while, but he knew what to do. Popping the clutch and nudging the gas pedal, he jerked forward, but the car didn't stall. He kept it slow at first, not taking any chances getting used to its controls.

One inch at a time, he thought, but he gained confidence with each passing metre. He was finally satisfied the car wouldn't blow up or that some boogie man would jump out in front of him. He turned the car around to follow what looked like the only road out. The street was mostly clear of debris, but the street lights were dead and with such low light, Rick thought he'd better keep it slow until he was clear of the city and on a highway.

He fought the impulse to stomp the pedal down as hard as he could. His self-control gave him some reassurance he was calming down and he almost felt normal again. In the mirror, he looked at himself straight in the eye. His face had a firm look, an angry look, which he met with a steady gaze. Exhausted more than scared now, he noticed his skin was drawn shallow in the cheeks, his hair greasy and stuck against his grimy forehead. His narrow features looked all the more rat-like for the dirt.

Taking a shower was the first thing he'd do once he was back at home — he stank terribly of fear and shit.

I may never be pretty, but goddamn if I can't at least be clean, he thought.

Clear of the city, thanking the starless sky he was near its edge, he took a deep breath and hit the gas. In five minutes, he was on what looked like a highway surrounded by desert on both sides. Arizona? Texas? There were no people, no people at all, and no traffic. Where was he? There was no light up ahead, not for miles and miles, just darkness — dust and darkness. He turned the high beams on.

He passed a sign, but couldn't quite make out what it said, but it looked like English. He slowed down a little, and upon passing another sign, read the faint letters, barely illuminated by his headlights: "Gas ahead, two kilometres." He looked at his gage, and whistled as the dial read there was less than a quarter tank, and that's if it was accurate. He slowed even more, not wanting to miss the station. If he did, it could be the end of him out here in the desert. But he didn't miss it — the gas station was coming up on his right and he thought he even saw a dull light hanging above what looked like a screen door.

Damn, it was hot! He again found himself wiping sweat from his brow, the salt stung his eyes.

He thought again of his daughter, Sarah. Did she worry where he was? He hoped she wasn't upset that he hadn't picked her up. He'd explain it all to her when he got back from wherever he now was. He sent out silent wishes that the ex-wife wasn't feeding her too much bullshit.

She probably told Sarah I'm snorting coke in a back alley somewhere, he thought.

He shook his head. That's ridiculous. Worry about that later, he told himself as he pulled into the gas

station. But, old anger was preferable to the unknown terror that seemed to lurk in every shadow. At this point, anything familiar was welcome. He sighed. Was it too late for regret? With a deep breath to steady his nerves, he parked the car and got out. He was very tired — maybe this was a good place to rest...maybe he could find some food...maybe things would be okay after all.

5

“We’re doing everything we can, ma’am. Unfortunately, this kind of thing happens a lot these days. Summer heat or something drives the crazies even more crazy.”

The portly, uniformed beat cop scribbled a note in his little black book. Denim couldn’t see that he was just drawing a pair of tits, and then a giant cock, as he leaned back, and yawned. Stupid cop — did he even think before he spoke?

“But he was supposed to pick our daughter up this morning and he’s never late for a day with Sarah!”

She looked over to her pretty little girl, playing near the television. Big blue eyes like her dad’s and a little button nose like hers. Sarah was completely unaware that anything was wrong. Too young, still only five years old this next month, to worry about her daddy. Thank heaven for small favours, she thought.

“His cell phone is off, which never happens, he’s on call all the time.” She grabbed hold of that annoying loose hair hanging down over her face and pressed it back behind her ear for the hundredth time in the last minute.

“Yes, yes. I know, ma’am, but I’m sure he’s just fine. He’ll turn up any minute, you just watch.” The rather dull-looking cop put his little book in his pocket and scratched his ass.

“But his car was found just outside his workplace,” she pleaded, wiping her oak-brown hair from in front of her watering eyes, yet again.

“With no sign of break-in or struggle, he probably took the bus.” He made a gesture with his hand of drinking from a bottle. His intent was clear. “Look, ma’am, we deal with this kind of thing all the time, and let me tell you, a lot of times, it ends up the fella met some skirt and found himself shackled up in a motel room somewhere, if ya get my mean’in.”

She could tell he was lying, but she couldn’t tell if he was lying to make her feel better or just to get out of doing more work. She looked at his uninterested eyes and decided the latter.

“Now listen here....” She took a good look at his name tag. “...Officer Dicks, I want you to look for him. Really look for him. He’s a good father, the only father Sarah has. Do you have an officer specializing in kids’ cases?” She was pleading for sympathy she wouldn’t get.

He looked her over, his eyes lingering at her breasts, as he turned the knob and opened the front door.

“No, and I have to be going. You’re not the only one with a problem today, ya know. But I’ll tell you what, if he doesn’t turn up in a few days, give us another call, we’ll see what can be done.”

With that, the dull cop closed the front door behind him, leaving Denim stunned and angry. She felt helpless. No one cared that a man was missing. He was just another one out of thousands gone at any given moment. Rick may have been nobody to the system, but he was somebody to Denim and Sarah.

“Son of a bitch,” she cursed, thinking, Fucking, good-for-nothing cops.

“Mommy?”

“Sorry, baby,” she said, rubbing her eyes with her fists, trying to keep her voice steady. “Sarah. Honey, time for bed.” It was approaching ten, darkness had descended a couple of hours ago. As summer

approached, the sun stayed out longer — it took until shortly after seven to go down these days, lingering a little longer each night.

The little girl in the plain, light blue pants put down her toy rabbit, and bounced over to her mommy for a hug before running to the stairs. She sat back on the first of the stairs and pulled herself up on them one at a time, until she reached the top and scurried into her bedroom. Denim didn't need to follow her — she trusted Sarah to find her way into bed, and she'd come up in a little while to tuck her in. Sarah was a good girl. Denim felt lucky to have her, she reminded her so much of Rick, with those soulful eyes.

“What am I going to do?” she asked the empty room.

She couldn't let it go — she had to do something. Walking into the kitchen, she sat down on a stool by the counter, then quickly got up again and paced around the room. Her palms were sweaty, and her eyes swollen and red with grief. She needed to calm herself down, clear her head, she wouldn't find answers if she was too busy worrying.

Denim mixed herself some green tea with honey, and took a long, warm sip followed by a deep, slow breath. Her yoga classes had taught her the value of deep breathing and she used it now. After a few moments, her heart rate slowed, her shaking stopped, and she ran her hands over her face to dispel the last of the stress, finding it easily replaced with anger and determination.

Damn it, Rick, where are you! she thought.

Their marriage had ended some time ago, and she blamed herself. It wasn't a great marriage — they had many problems and for a long time, but it wasn't horrible either. Rick had been a good father and a good provider, even if he was distant most of the time, obsessed with his work, and never really let anyone get close to him, not even her, his wife. But, when he held Sarah in his arms, Denim would watch that ice thaw, and there was warmth there, and much love. If only she could go back in time, she'd do things so differently. She'd find some way to get close to him, like in the beginning.

Lost in thought, her eyes fell upon her personal phone book only a few inches away near the edge of the counter-top. There was one person she could call, but was it a good idea? Denim wasn't sure she could handle seeing him again, it might be more trouble than it was worth, but what choice did she have?

Quickly, she leafed through the names, stopping when she found the right one. Kas was Rick's older brother, a crazy motherfucker, and one man she'd hoped to never think of again. Maybe he was in jail and wouldn't even answer. Surprising herself, she hoped that wasn't true. This was just one of those things where you didn't mess around, the kind of thing that Kas was good at, dirty work. She hesitated and took another breath, summoned some courage and dialed the number.

The phone rang many times, but Denim refused to give up — she'd stay on that phone until an operator kicked her off.

“What.” A deep voice came finally.

“Kas. It's Denim.”

Silence. They hadn't spoken since Rick walked in on them that night. That one terrible mistake and that was over a year ago.

“Kas, I need your help.”

“I don't have any money.” He never did.

“It's about Rick.”

“You know he won’t talk to me.” Even if their encounter was just one time, it was one moment of weakness that hadn’t happened before or every again since.

“He’s missing, Kas. Cops won’t help — I need you. I need you to find your brother.”

Kas hung up and Denim cried, but an hour later, Kas knocked on the door.

6

The old ghetto was hit with the force of a great shock wave from beyond. It caused the collapse of more than a few broken down buildings. Rust flew into the air along with dirt and random debris. A silty ash settled over the entire region. The air was dry, it was hot, and though it was dark, a strange aura seemed to pervade the dust. It was almost radioactive — a faint, light green glow, gentle and discrete, washed over the headless corpse of the murderous Mr. King.

The ground cracked and shook, yet there was very little noise. The metal pipe, laying near Mr. King, rattled as its metal clanged against the concrete, sending sharp waves echoing out into nowhere. In the distance, the clear sounds of displaced brick crashed against the ground. A dull brown, suppressing aura pressed out the green, returning the world to its usual bleak, empty deadness.

For several moments, it was quiet again, deathly silent. Then he twitched, like he had when Rick stood over him triumphant, hours earlier. Mr. King’s arms came around and he slapped his hands together hard, a cloud of dust kissing the air. This time, it was no after-death playing out. Like a puppet on a string flung here and there, he swayed to his feet, falling down again at first, but soon steady enough for the walking dead.

The headless Mr. King shambled over to the thick metal pipe, and wrapped his unusually long fingers around it with both hands. It felt good, warm, and somewhere inside, there came a bubbling laughter spitting blood up from between his shoulders. This had become so much more fun than he’d ever hoped. There was something special about Rick, something challenging, a genuine thrill. Spiritually, he smiled even if his material face was mangled beyond repair and flopped behind him. Across his back, his head loosely hung from his broken neck like a half-filled meat sack.

Mr. King lifted the pipe high above him as lightning streaked across the dead sky charging the air. He stood for a long moment with his mighty weapon of vengeance, absorbing the power of this place. A creepy hollow noise whistled through his throat. It could only be described as Mr. King’s silent scream. A moment later, he grabbed the remaining flesh of his neck and tore what was left of his head free, tossing it to the side like discarded refuse. He didn’t need it anymore and it was already forgotten. His flesh meant nothing to him — he was so much more now.

He didn’t question how he could still see where he was going with no head. He’d been dead a long time, and stopped asking those kinds of questions years ago. When one is among the walking dead, all sorts of things become possible — by divine intervention or magick, he didn’t care, he was consumed by his hunger. It was his only driving compulsion. In truth, Mr. King was a very simple creature, much like a parasite. Even if he was somewhat shaped as a man, he was far from human. He could, for example, “smell” the direction Rick had gone.

Shuffling down the street, he stepped out into the desert. He had a long way to go and was hoping to catch his supper before daybreak. He didn’t really need to eat for sustenance, but he liked to keep a schedule. Setting goals was a sign of good mental health. As the desert swallowed headless Mr. King, shrill chattering laughter faded off into the darkness.

7

Henry stood as a statue stands, immovable, impervious to harm, shielded, the most powerful being in

this part of the known or unknown universe. Hunted and alone, he stood waiting in the Asylum. Black robes flowed over his large, muscular frame, — gone was his pale complexion and rail thin arms. His constitution was strong. He'd absorbed the beast long ago. There was only room for him now, his evolution could only continue as a single being. The white Ithliam had helped him there.

He had shown Henry the way, how to control his magick, build on it, refine and isolate his noble nature from the taint of the dark Ithliams before him. The curse had become a blessing when focused and its source energies fed his recovery. Henry's cells regenerated, his heart pumped red blood again. He was alive, truly alive, but he did not suffer human weakness, no, not anymore. As instructed, he'd traveled the wall again, laid down within it and was reborn.

Ithliam had saved Henry's memories within that beautiful golden staff and returned them upon his guided rebirth from the wall. In this new life Henry was an orphan and when the time came to claim him, there would be no mother to abandon. Aged to perfection upon a living world white Ithliam personally protected.

Guided by caring grace, Henry was taught new magicks, like Ithliam before him — he, too, had evolved. His magick had grown well beyond any undead state. He could heal at will, and with each use of his magick, he got stronger, no longer bound to pay in blood and flesh. He was free and more powerful than ever, but with a righteous purpose to guide direction.

What being could hurt him now? He was unlike any magus before, even Ithliam who had given up his goals of ultimate power. Instead, he'd chosen to walk the sage's path and focus on his apprentice to the end of protecting all life. Henry considered him his loving father even though the two had never met face to face, as Ithliam was still trapped on his dying world, connected through time and space by the tiniest thread. He'd taught him right from wrong, nurtured his spirit as dark Ithliam had only nurtured his rage. He understood loyalty and honesty and courage, recognized a cause greater than himself.

Henry had vowed long ago to find Ithliam and save him from his prison out there deep in space on some unknown planet. Though Ithliam took pains to hide the truth, Henry knew he was constantly harassed. It was a formerly dead planet, haunted, and worse, corrupted by Ithliam's old tainted evil. His blessed golden energies couldn't protect him forever. Eventually, they'd consume him and add his power to the force threatening all things.

For all his strength, Henry could not yet save him, did not know where he was, or how to get there. He could travel through space easily enough, but without some notion of where to look, he could spend the rest of time in a fruitless journey. For now, he'd have to wait, endure the helplessness he felt every minute of every day. He didn't like to think about it, but if anyone could help him, it was another Ithliam. There must still be several of them out there still questing for the power to rule it all. It was this sad, unfortunate, idea that led him back to the Asylum.

Eventually, an Ithliam would pass near this planet and sense his power throbbing in this doomed place. Curious and unable to resist the potential, he would come walking up to the massive magickal door and enter the sanctuary within. In single combat, he would try to take Henry's magick again and add it to his own. Though Henry was powerful, this thought disturbed him — should he lose the fight, incalculable evil would be grown that much more deadly.

Ithliam knew nothing of his plan, having forbid any notion of rescue years ago. He didn't want to be saved — Henry was meant for more important things, he'd warned. Dark times were coming for all life everywhere, an age of suffering and none would be spared. Nothing short of life itself was at stake, the very real possibility that everything in the cosmos would be destroyed, that even all the Ithliams in the universe would not be enough to stop this new factor.

Henry could get nothing more out of him on the subject and hadn't spoken with his mentor for many

years. They'd gone their separate ways when Ithliam could teach him no more and required what energy he had left to keep his local demons at bay. He had preparations to make and Henry was told to continue his training alone. After several years traveling through space, Henry began his long journey back to Earth, hidden behind galaxy infinitum. He couldn't just do nothing while white Ithliam suffered alone — he would find a dark Ithliam, and force him to make a door back to that ancient world with the golden tree.

Henry closed his eyes, a single tear running down his cheek. In some ways, the wounds of the heart hurt more than anything physical he'd ever endured. Flesh was meaningless, life was all that mattered with its endless potential. Without life, everything was just dust, rock and noise. The golden tree, or more importantly, the life force she represented, called to those with the heart to listen. She caressed his soul, which was not a thing, not something given or taken away, but his awareness, the sum of his will and experience. He was no longer defined by compulsion, by properties and traits. Instead, there was sentience and choice, as hard as that was at times, he was truly responsible for his actions.

The room in which he now stood was familiar. It was the place he'd met his great mentor again, and vanquished those who would use him as a tool for destruction. The magicks were weaker than they had been so many years ago, the protective circle long broken and the rock even more decayed. The blood had rotted and fallen away; deep scratches and charred blackness still covered most surfaces. The far wall had caved in, revealing earth and unworked rock behind.

Henry took a deep breath and was met with the smell of dust and old smoke. His skin itched on the back of his neck, a clear warning of what was to come. His black robes flowed around him with a life all of their own, circling him like dry liquid. He opened his eyes, and calmly spread his arms wide at his sides. Arcane energy crackled in the air all around him, snapping at the dust like microscopic dragons.

“You may enter of your own accord.” The accent was unusual. The voice was a low gravel, commanding and ancient. Though Henry appeared no older than 30 years, he was obviously much older, and his memory reached back eons past every incarnation, every form he'd known since the beginning of time. His hair was a mane of sweeping blonde curls, his eyes most recently a solid mercury. Alive, yes, but human he was not, not anymore, not for a long time.

The creature that entered was dead, of course. It was a being of the negative plane — incorporeal and shadowy, it skulked near the edge of the room while Henry watched it patiently. He felt no concern, nor any of the hate he'd once harboured for pitiable beings such as this. Now, there was only a deep sympathy and an understanding that they were more like forces of nature. Choices were limited for this poor shadow and its behaviour was quite predictable. Still, Henry was not foolish enough to ignore it — where there was one shadow, there were more, and somewhere else, still the one commanding them.

“Speak, shadow.”

“Greatingsss, masssterrrr,” it whispered, harsh and blunt — its hatred was obvious. Its most dominate trait, however, the emotion Henry felt from it especially, was envy. Being a shadow, it desired substance that was beyond its present condition.

Henry waited for more. The hairs on the back of his neck still tingled. There was more here than a mere shadow in this room — of that he was certain. Something invisible was silently stalking no more than a few metres away as the shadow continued its misdirection. The unmistakable taste of sulfur crossed his lips, yet still Henry did not move. As a deeply rooted tree, he stood firm, while his liquid midnight robes caressed the surrounding space, searching.

“I come to ssserve the masssterr of thissss domain...to sssserve you.” It crept around the room hugging the wall, stalling, trying to buy time for some unseen ally.

Henry bowed his head, content to let the little shadow pass beyond his view. He closed his eyes. The greater threat was closer now, radiating ethereal heat from directly above. It must be a lesser demon, he thought, some sort of lurking doom. Yet still, Henry did not move from his spot. How powerful could it possibly be, stalking him from hidden shadows? Without even the nerve to face him in honest combat, it was most likely a servant of something greater still. He would wait and see, let it get as close as it dared, before he subdued it.

Even had the shadow's offer been genuine, Henry would have refused. He had no need of that sort of help. The cursed did not help the living, not without some selfish purpose, and though there were rare exceptions to every rule, he sensed this was not one of them. Sending his consciousness outward, Henry took an inventory of all the energy points within a radius of about a couple of kilometres. All things were made of energy, dead or alive, and it was through these energy signatures that Henry could learn useful pieces of information such as how many enemies surrounded him now, and what kind of firepower he could expect.

He was almost surprised by the number of enemies lurking just outside the Asylum, somewhere in the hundreds of shadows, several dozen ghouls, some zombies, but not many, a lonely spectre, and a few vampires circling above far up in the sky. How could there be so many still drawn to this place? He'd killed Ithliam years ago, and with him, the evil that attracted other evil into this place. He'd been trying to form a nexus point, a place to concentrate his power for some ultimate end game, though Henry didn't know the whole story. He didn't know why, other than Ithliam's drive for power seemed all-consuming. Regardless, that iteration of evil had been extinguished, so why was so much evil still drawn to this place?

In this room, the shadow was joined by other shadows. Half a dozen now slid across the wall, laughing their whispered snickers. Expectant, they waited for the abomination to strike down upon Henry, unaware as they were of who or what they were dealing with. To lesser undead, Henry would seem as nothing more than an interesting meal. They had no advanced powers, nothing capable of warning them to danger. Henry had a heartbeat and the innate warmth of the living. What more did a ghoul or shadow need to know?

But, he'd waited long enough. There was a crash and a loud bang as the invisible demon was thrown through the nearby wall. Mud and melted rock covered it in places, giving a visual cue to its size, and girth. Shaped something like a spider, it was easily fifteen feet tall, and almost as wide. Its many arms and legs were thick like fully grown pythons. It was surprised at its helplessness — nothing had handled it so easily before, not even its hellish masters were so direct. Its wounds were not healing, it felt pain for the first time on this material plane.

The shadows receded, hiding in cracks and behind rocks. Henry turned to face the broken wall and watched the abomination lift itself from the hole. It showed none of its pain, it couldn't take physical damage from mundane things like rock, or kinetic force, but the magicks had licked its bones to be sure it felt pain. It required powerful forces to directly harm a being from the under planes, and yet Henry easily controlled its manifestation in this world. He could make this creature dance a jig if the fancy took him, so long as it possessed a material body.

"Approach me with respect, and I will give you audience." Henry spoke only the truth, leaving lies to creatures such as this. The abomination was not stupid — angry and frothing with rage, it stepped forward, but did not risk another attack.

"I seek the power of Ithliam. Surely you are he that stands before me." The demon appeared to Henry, no longer invisible. It had no mouth, but that didn't stop it from speaking, and one eye like a full moon, solid yellow with no pupil. Bloody veins spread across its body, up its arms, pulsing. Grotesquely, its skin was like sun cooked mud with infected spider web cracks, grown around bony protrusions. It was

clearly not comfortable on this world. Each passing moment irritated it more and in its voice was a desperate longing to return to the comforts of its eternal hell. It was clearly not here of its own accord.

“You are mistaken, demon. I am not Ithliam, though I, too, seek his brief company.”

“You lie, Ithliam. The beautiful taint of your power pervades this place — who else could move me so easily against my will?” The demon flexed its power, Henry had caught him by surprise before, a difficult task, but the demon was arrogant and old, and now it was ready for whatever this magus could throw at him.

“Don’t be foolish, Artuzeal.” Henry recognized the particular vibration of the demon as he could now identify any physical entity he experienced and its place on this plane. “Look closely and you will see that I am not the one you seek. The taint of Ithliam has been washed from this place for some time, how is it you claim to smell it still?”

The abomination took a moment to consider, its eye enlarged, and it leaned into within only a few inches of Henry’s unflinching gaze. This was not Ithliam, no. This was something else entirely, but also powerful, yes, very powerful, and beyond its demonic strength. How came a being such as this to this mundane world? Its home must be out there, in the cosmos.

“You know my name. Are you a god?”

Henry thought about this. Was he?

“No. Again I ask you, demon, how is it you claim to sense Ithliam in this place?”

The damned thing stepped back and slumped against the wall. The rock groaned under its weight, scorching heat licked black soot across its surface. If this was not Ithliam, then all hope was lost.

“It is a faint impression, but in all the universe, it is strongest here,” spoke the abomination. “And if I do not find him, then all is lost.”

“Speak plainly, Artuzeal, for I also seek Ithliam. Are you suggesting he is no more?” Henry’s heart pounded and his chest constricted — was it possible? Had he killed the last of the dark Ithliams without even realizing it? Perhaps white Ithliam was right, that his search was a waste of time — had he known all along?

“No!” cried the demon, slamming several fists on the rocky ground, each of its eight muscular arms flexing angrily. The Asylum shook as debris flew harmlessly to all sides. “He lives, but I do not know where. He cloaks his power, hidden beyond the senses of my kind. But, we know he grows larger by the moment, and soon will have the confidence to challenge the Ancient Darkness for control of all things.”

The Ancient Darkness? Henry had heard Ithliam mention this being as well. The galactic dark man, from which all matter sourced. Compared to this celestial being, all others were but insignificant specks. Was this the great danger he’d referred to? If dark Ithliams were planning to attack the Ancient Darkness, such a battle could very well destroy the entire universe. That was insane — there would be nothing left to rule. That’s when it hit him, of course. The Ithliams were still compelled by their common nature and had no choice. They would consume power until there was nothing left to consume, that was the goal all along.

The demon seemed to pick up on Henry’s realization and nodded.

“Yes, all will suffer — your kind and mine. My brethren have sent me to stop him, to destroy every Ithliam I can find and prevent his ascension.”

“Then, we shall stop him together.” Henry smiled and reached his hand forward. At first, Artuzeal

looked at the outreached hand suspiciously. Then he looked up at Henry's honest face and huffed. There was no deception in those eyes — Henry didn't lie, he didn't need to. Rising from the floor, the demon sent the largest of its mangled hands to clasp around Henry's and returned a firm shake. A lesser man than Henry would have lost his arm.

“Agreed.”

A new deal had been struck — this time, Henry controlled the terms as it was the demon that needed Henry to save his world and his infernal kin. The irony was not lost on Henry, either. It made him chuckle slightly.

8

When Rick pulled up slowly beside the single old time gas pump, he did so with great care, as he could not shake the uneasy feeling he was being followed. The screen door did have a very dull orange light above it, but it was covered in so many layers of dust and caked desert sand that it barely gave off any light at all. There was no light inside the station building from what he could tell and he wasn't convinced this gas pump was even on, but he parked the car and got out anyway to take a look. The steady squealing creek of a screen door in the back opening and closing, and opening and closing again, was the only real sound to note. Rick thought it odd as there was no wind to speak of.

The pump didn't work. No surprise there, he thought. A shrill howl out in the desert startled him for a moment, until he realized it must be a dozen miles away, whatever it was. He told himself it was a coyote, but couldn't help but wonder why there were no birds, or even insects. It was very strange, indeed.

A great shock wave from beyond suddenly knocked him off his feet — strangely, it didn't hurt when he hit the ground — it seemed almost soft. He looked down, startled, as he was sitting on the mushy corpse of a uniformed gas station attendant. The smell hit him quickly and had there been anything in his stomach, he would almost certainly have thrown up.

“Ahhhhhhhh. Sheeit.” He quickly got back to his feet and wiped his hands on his pants. The shock wave had now been and gone. Backing up slowly, not sure what to do, he bumped into the screen door, causing a light, metallic, stretching sound as he nearly pushed the screen in. He stopped and stared at the body for a long moment, trying to guess what killed him, looking for anything obvious. There was no blood on the corpse — its face looked unmarred by injury, and the body was very soft, too soft. This place was getting stranger by the minute.

Rick didn't notice the movement behind him, behind the screen door, as he moved toward the body, poking it with his toe. He didn't hear anything either, as he bent down and took that long, closer look at the attendant. He wiped the sweat from his brow and whistled. This gas station was now officially self-serve. Once he got close enough, he could smell the decay again even over his own ripening odour. This body hadn't been dead that long, he guessed. A day maybe, cooking in the heat, yet nothing had come to take a nibble. No coyotes, or birds, or anything. No maggots.

Feeling like a scarecrow, stinking and paralyzed, Rick stared at the body, not sure what to do next. It twitched and he jumped back, then it twitched again. Rick moved away as the dead man got unsteadily to his feet. His eyes were closed and the head was bent to the side at a sickly angle. The gas man's mouth was wide open and drooling a thick black substance, while a cold, misty vapour rose into the air.

Rick choked on bile and maneuvered behind the car, putting it between them. The shambling mound of dead flesh paid no notice to him. Instead, it was looking toward the screen door, or at least it would have been if its eyes hadn't been shut. Rick looked, too, and there she was. Beautiful, flame-red hair and barely dressed, but confident in her stance. She pointed what looked like some kind of gun, no, it

was a water hose and she sprayed the attendant with it. It all seemed rather silly.

“It’s been like this since I got here,” she said calmly. He liked her voice, enchanting, like the subtle drops of water from a light rain.

She didn’t look at Rick, though, she didn’t take her eyes off the gas man. She sprayed and sprayed and the man fell to the ground, looking much like it had before. It was quiet and dead again, nothing but dust blowing in a new light breeze. The body sunk a little into the new mud.

Rick could only stare, stunned as much by her fine features, as by the surrounding events. She could have been a model. Very good looking, but just short of that star quality. Even if she was wearing a fancy dress, her smile was too unique, too quirky for the big leagues. He tried to gather his wits. This was far from what he’d expected to find driving home from the worst day of his life. He couldn’t speak, not a single word.

“Are you all right?” she said looking at him now. “That thing will be down for a few hours anyway. Not sure why water does that, but it does.”

He nodded slowly that he was essentially fine. Then it occurred to him that he smelled like shit and suddenly, with this fine woman in front of him, that mattered a great deal.

“Bathroom.”

“Sorry?”

“I need to use the bathroom.” It was short and to the point. You only get one chance at a first impression, and he was staying a good few yards away to hide his shame.

“Oh. There’s one around back. I’ve been all over this area. That gas man was the only one here, so you should have no trouble. The doors open, even running water. My name’s Kara, by the way.”

“Rick.”

“Sorry?”

“That’s my name. Rick.”

“Normal name. Normal guy,” she giggled.

It was nice, thought Rick, especially the way her whole body bounced as she did so. She had a very pleasing form. Attractive curves, attractive everything. She was young, but not too young.

“I’ll be right back, Kara.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

The bathroom was right where she said it’d be. As soon as he saw it, he was running, and once in, he closed the door tightly behind him and locked it. He fell back against the wall, and it all came crashing in on him. Not the wall, but the events of the last few hours. It all came rushing on him like a flood. His abduction by the murderous Mr. King, just how close he’d come to never seeing his little girl again. Don’t count your chickens, he thought — he wasn’t out of this yet.

Rick stank and it got so bad in the confined space of the gas bar bathroom that it brought him right back to the present. Itching horribly, he had to clean up. He reached for a handful of paper towels, undressed until he was naked and wiped off as much of the shit as he could with the dry paper towels. Then, he wet a new handful, and wiped himself down properly. When he was done, he still stank, but it was no worse than anything else around here.

Next, he soaked his underwear in the sink. It was cleaner, but far from the lemon fresh of a laundry

machine. He put them back on wet — he didn't care, it would help keep him cool in this overly dry heat. It seemed to be getting hotter out by the minute. That's unusual, he thought. Doesn't it get gradually cooler at night? He put on his jeans, and though the scent of urine was very faint, he still noticed it a little. He hoped Kara wouldn't.

How silly, I'm sure she's more concerned with the rotting body than whether I smell bad or not. He shrugged and finished rinsing his shirt before he put it on, too. By the time he left the bathroom, he almost felt like a new man.

"That's a lot better," he said to himself as he returned to the front of the station, but the girl with the pretty, crooked smile was gone. The gas man corpse was still lying here. His heart skipped a beat — was there danger? He quickly scanned all directions for any sign of trouble. He saw nothing, but where had she gone? It was quiet again. There was no wind and the yellow moon must have been cloud-covered as he could see nothing in the sky at all. The faint trace of rain in the air seemed stronger.

"Come inside," he heard her call from behind the screen door.

Sighing relief, he turned towards the voice. She was fine. He wasn't alone anymore — she was real and she was fine, and this nightmare was almost over. He had questions, many questions, and he wanted this pretty young thing to answer them. Was he still in shock? He thought briefly that he should be more concerned about the walking dead man outside, yet he couldn't help but think of this attractive girl with the quirky smile. I guess you hold on to whatever good you can find sometimes, he told himself. She was a good thing, she had to be.

Rick put his hand on the screen door, and stole a quick look over his shoulder at the corpse. He was dead still, at least he wasn't moving. It was hard to believe he'd done anything else except lay there.

What the fuck was going on! This whole situation is right off the scale of weird, he thought. He remembered that he needed gas — he'd ask Kara if there was a way to turn on the pump.

He turned back towards the screen and opened the door. He still couldn't see Kara, but he heard some shuffling noises behind the counter. This place was old, as in old-fashioned. There were chest-high shelves with dusty packages of products he'd not seen or heard of in years. All of it looked expired, but he grabbed an old bottle of root beer from the unplugged back cooler and opened it. The familiar decompression of escaping carbonation was music to his ears as he took a long gulp. He hadn't noticed how thirsty he'd been. It felt and tasted good, even if it was warm.

"We should do something about the body outside. We can't just leave it there," he called to where he thought she was.

"It'll keep," he heard her say from behind the counter as she stood up. In her left hand was a shotgun, in the right, some shells. "We're gonna need these, I think."

Rick pulled out a cigarette and lit it with one of those new lighters he'd taken from Mr. King's glove box. It wasn't his brand but it would do. He took a deep, satisfying, smoke-filled breath and slowly blew out pure white mist. With that came a quiet moment of reflection — he almost felt himself relax, some of the tension between his shoulders gave. This was getting better all the time, he thought. He could almost feel his little girl in his arms, he could almost feel the old arguments with Denim coming to his lips. He almost felt normal.

"So, who are you, Kara? How did you get here?"

She looked at him a long time when a sad expression crossed her face. He preferred her smile.

"You really don't know, do you?" she said with that quirky smile.

This puzzled him — what didn't he know? Was it any real surprise he didn't know, considering what

he'd just been through?

"Know what?"

"We're dead, Rick, and we've been dead, you and me, for a long, long time."

9

Headless Mr. King watched the woman talking to Rick near the entrance to the old gas bar. He had no eyes anymore, but he could see them. He watched Rick say something, and then go behind the station out of sight. How did this woman get here and why did she give him the chills? This was his world, empty and perfect for his every need. He'd traveled its deserts for centuries, knew every region, every place of interest. And most importantly, in all that time, he'd never come across anyone living that he himself hadn't brought here.

He didn't feel right — he was nervous and excited at the same time. Was this fear? He was the one who inspired fear, terror even. It oozed out of his pores like cold black play dough. All he had to do was to be near his prey and they'd literally whimper like babies. But, this woman...was she a woman...or was she something else? She worried him greatly. He hung back, watching. Rick could wait — the time wasn't right. He needed to know more about this other...human.

The clouds darkened overhead. Soon the torrential rains would wipe the desert clean again. It was no danger to his kind, a few hours after the skies cleared, he and his undead brothers would rise again. Nor would he lose their trail — he could track them anywhere they went. It was, however, an inconvenience, and though Mr. King was eager to get on with it, he had enough good sense to stay out of sight. The opportunity would present itself when appropriate, it always did.

Even the prolonged hunger was acceptable and would make the feast that much richer. If he still had a tongue, he'd have licked his lips. He was primitive and knew it, relishing in the pure carnivorous simplicity of it all. He was an animal in man's clothing, it was a sick joke if he could be considered civilized by the standards of his kind. Beauty was an illusion created by the weak to maintain peace of mind, but the world was always moving against you, trying to eat you, too.

That silent laugh came easily again — oh, how he amused himself. Even the zombies feared him — he smelled like one of them, but his cunning intelligence set him apart. He was obsessed with self-control as much as controlling others. He liked the game, enjoyed setting traps, marveled at the clockwork efficiency of his plans. And he liked this world, liked dragging his victims here to embrace their doom exactly as he envisioned.

He snapped back to the present as Rick entered the station — the screen door, fixed on creaky metal springs, crashed into the door frame behind him. They were safely inside, or so they figured. Time for another game and Mr. King had a new plan.

10

The galactic, dark man — The Ancient Darkness — was getting closer, eager to meet Ithliam in glorious battle. Scattering the dust of cosmos in his wake, he felt the growing presence of life all around him. It infuriated him further, incensed him. Every mile he traveled fed a maddening itch in every wound. Every planet he passed marked an increased rage. He would end this game soon. He would cleanse this universe, a million planets at a time, until it was quiet. Until he found the great solitude, the eternal reclusion he so desperately needed, one way or the other.

"Ithliam," he screamed, frustrated. This must end. "Where are you hiding?"

For all his power, he knew his limitations. He was aware he'd failed at this many times already to find his would be destroyer. He was aware this was but the thousandth attempt, and that he would likely end

up running back into deeper space when the noise of the living became unbearable. But, he would try again anyway, the ancient desire was strong in him. He could not ignore it, not even in the great void where life had not spread yet. It would find him, given time. It would drift slowly into his space, violate his seclusion just as he was settling into it. Life soiled his divine solitude. Only Ithliam offered an alternative. Where was he? How many planets had he searched now and found nothing?

It would take him thousands of years to travel the great material expanse and a thousand more to corrupt each living world. Each was protected by a golden tree, hindering his progress, unable to stop him but quite capable of slowing him down. He'd been through it before — he would tear the trees from the ground, should he find them, and cast golden branches into the stars. He would watch as all their planets decayed into dust and ultimately broken into countless grains of gray formless matter.

It would come down to Ithliam or the golden trees, whichever he found first. The Ancient Darkness shuddered at the thought of rending those ancient oaks into space, a much more unpleasant thought than dying in glorious battle at Ithliam's powerful hands. The golden trees were a part of him, nearly indestructible like him. However, he felt what they felt, and he would feel the roots leave the ground, leave their food and nutrients. It would be a slow suicide, he would feel all the connecting life scream as he did and it would deafen him. However, it was necessary — soon after the destruction, he would feel the sweet nothingness, the empty benighted void. A simple and everlasting peace would reign supreme if he could find them all.

“Can you offer me something better, Ithliam?” The words he spoke disappeared into nothingness. “Can you offer me death? Like my brothers before me, to continue my journey through existence. Release me. Release me from this eternal prison.”

The galactic dark man wept and from his tears formed twice as many worlds as he'd just destroyed. Thus was the futility of godliness and the constant reminder that he was damned. As cursed as any tortured soul the universe had ever known, he was trapped like an animal but without the teeth to gnaw himself free. Patience, he reminded himself, he would come soon. Ithliam would grant him the glorious finality he so desperately craved and then it would be his burden to bear. Just a little longer. He had to hold onto his sanity for just a little longer.

11

Denim was nervous, it was strange being this close to Kas again. He looked older — more than the year that had passed. He was drinking again. She could see it in the bloodshot eyes, in the way he frowned when he saw her look him over. He was wearing torn black jeans and a gray T-shirt that barely covered his broad shoulders. He was a strong man, built for trouble. His dark hair was cut very short, and a long, faded scar crossed his cheek near his right eye.

“Do you want some coffee?” Her voice broke as she spoke.

“No.”

“Can I get you anything at all?” Her voice was higher than usual. Kas could tell she was upset, so was he, but he was much better at hiding it.

“No. Tell me what's going on. What's happened to Rick?”

Rick was the youngest of three brothers. The oldest, Cole, had died over ten years ago. Kas still thought of Cole as the big brother, and even though he was older than Rick, he thought of them as the same age. They were only a couple years apart anyway. Hell, they knew most of the same people growing up. It wasn't until later that Kas got fucked up. Kas had been very close to Cole and when he was gone, well, it went downhill for a long time after that. But, Kas was still his brother's keeper, and they watched out for each other after Cole joined the service. He'd come back in a bag, after fighting and dying in some

war with no name in some country no one he knew could pronounce.

Denim wiped away the stress on her brow, then clasped her hands together. A few seconds later, she unclasped and then clasped them again. She formed her thoughts carefully, determined not to lose her cool. Panic would get them nowhere, she told herself — Kas needed to hear it the way it was. Even the smallest detail could be important. She took a breath.

“He was supposed to pick up Sarah this morning, but he didn’t.” Denim hadn’t slept yet, so it was still “this morning” to her though it was now almost one a.m. the next day. “He isn’t answering his cell, and his car was found at his office, in his parking spot. You know the place, right, over on Angus Drive?” Rick had basically worked at the same factory since he was a teenager. Good, steady work, good benefits, but high stress.

Kas nodded and she continued.

“The cops say nothing looked unusual, nothing obvious anyway, but you know how Rick is. He never misses a meeting, never misses an appointment, especially with Sarah. I’m scared, Kas. I still, you know, have feelings for him. And Sarah....” She was losing her cool, in spite of her best efforts. The little girl was already asleep upstairs, still peacefully unaware anything was wrong.

It went on like this for several minutes, Denim explaining the events of earlier that day, at least as far as she could, given how uninterested Officer Dicks had been. She told Kas how she’d called Rick’s workplace, and how his boss remembered Rick mentioning his pending visit even before he was done work, and how he’d left at the usual time. Whatever happened, Rick never made it to his car. She was scared — even his boss was worried, which was unusual for the old reptile. He was probably more concerned about filling the line tomorrow.

When she finished, they looked at each other for a long time — the minutes slowed. Finally, Kas took a deep breath and stood up. Denim unconsciously stood as well, pleading with her eyes, tight fists balled at her sides. They had never discussed what had happened between them, and they weren’t about to now.

“I’ll find him, Denim. I’ll find him.”

She needed to hear that. Denim knew he would, Kas was that kind of guy. He didn’t stop until he had what he was looking for. He’d take out anyone in his way to do it, too. He was a dogged fighter. Not a soldier like Cole, who had went to someone else’s war, but a fighter who fought his own battles all the time. Battles he always won, even when the sacrifices were great. He’d done time in prison — he’d do time again, that was his nature.

“I’m going now. I’ll call soon.” Deep in thought, he left with a grimace.

“Thank you, Kas, God, knows I’ve tried to....” She choked off. “Thank you.” She reached up to hug him, but he drew away from her. They’d been down that road before, and he’d learned the hard way that some sacrifices aren’t worth making.

He turned toward the door, opened it and without a word or a look back, stepped into the dark night beyond.

12

The spectre was reasonably sure neither Henry nor the abomination, Azureal, noticed it spying on them from just outside the room. It was faithful to the commands of its master. It soon turned away down the hall. Passing several rooms and the courtyard, it eventually reached the stairs where Henry had lain paralyzed years earlier. Still it continued through the catacombs, past broken chains and jagged stone.

Its path was well-known and practiced. Even while it often lost time inside its own demented thoughts,

it didn't stop or wander. After several cycles of lucidity or lack thereof, the spectre reached its destination at last.

Clean and without tarnish of any kind, old electronic equipment hummed and buzzed. The occasional sucking sound broke the steady noise. Symbols beyond the spectre's knowledge were etched across almost every surface, throbbing with arcane programming. It stopped before a beautifully flawless, round iron door.

The spectre opened the door, protected by design from the magickal defenses that would normally prevent entry. He had permission to cross. On the inside, the rust bled, the humidity was very high, and water drops had formed puddles. The stink of old metal and grease was as strong as any garage. The spectre enjoyed the consistency. As long he kept turning a gear here and releasing a valve there, his job was secure. When his master returned, he would get his reward for loyal service.

The room was long and narrow, mostly iron and rust. Unusual man-sized tanks lined the walls with long pipes and cords leading into the shadows and each other. The spectre closed the door behind it and floated over to each tank in turn. It looked in at the view slot on each and checked some dials and metres. Occasionally, it made a small adjustment. Had it been an engineer or a doctor in its past life?

These were the tanks Ithliam had used to store beings too powerful to kill outright. He would feed on their power when he required it, and absorb what he could the rest of the time. He was often not powerful enough himself to contain all the energy that they had to offer. That took time and planning. He created these tanks, so he could store the beings for future use. He had never been one to waste opportunity.

The spectre had watched over them for decades, since its master had been defeated, and before that even. To see his murderer stand in his former place of glory was too much insult to ignore. Ethereal chains hung loosely behind the spectre, and when it got low to the ground, they would drag across the stone, echoing a hollow rattle.

It wound its way through the pipes and cords until it came to a tank deep in the back. It was hidden behind other tanks, somewhat smaller than many of the others, altogether ordinary compared to its surroundings.

The spectre looked inside and smiled. It had been hard getting this far — in truth, it had taken several hours, as spectres are apt to fade in and out. Its attention span was broken by periodic mental journeys to its haunted past, but with nothing to interfere here, it would come back to the present and continue where it had left off as though nothing had happened.

That meant that by the time the spectre was looking in the tank, Henry, who had been observing for some time, was already well aware of it. At first surprised by the tanks and what was contained within them, ultimately Henry thought it made a sick sort of sense. Ithliam would do something like this, and it would have taken immense protective magicks to hide it this long. Ithliam's own forgotten collection of powerful monsters to thaw out as needed.

The abomination, Azureal, couldn't pass the threshold, so Henry had gone in alone, staying back and clouded from the spectre's awareness. He waited and watched as it stopped and lingered at one special tank. Why? What was in that tank — it was small and ordinary. Yet the spectre stood gazing into its view port for some time before it drifted off again, back to the door and away on some errand it would never finish.

Henry wasn't sure he should tell the Azureal about this. They might have been uneasy allies, but a demon was still a demon. There was a lot of dangerous stuff here. Some of these tanks contained creatures that even Henry might have some trouble handling alone, and he wasn't so naive to believe

the abomination would remain friendly if it no longer needed to be so. Henry walked to the smaller tank, leaned over and placed his eyes at the view port.

With a sharp gasp, Henry pulled back, stunned. Was it possible? He looked in again. It was an Ithliam — he looked to be sleeping, and not peacefully, either. The pipes released unknown gases at semi-regular intervals, and each time they did, the unconscious Ithliam would writhe and jerk, contorting as if in great pain. Thin pipes seemed to be force-feeding him intravenously, running energy siphoned from the other tanks.

Henry rubbed his eyes, and for a long moment, considered his next move. On one hand, letting this Ithliam out could be a quick means to an end — a way to save his mentor by forcing him to make a dimension door to the world of white Ithliam. On the other hand, it would mean freeing another Ithliam into the world, and who could calculate the harm that might cause? His teacher was unique, evolved. This one would terrorize galaxies given the chance.

Henry looked back toward the entrance where the spectre had left a few moments earlier. He expected the demon to let it pass unharmed, but who could truly predict what an abomination would or would not do. The one thing he knew for sure was that no one else must ever discover this place. There was more than just Ithliam to worry about here — any one of these beings would wreak havoc on this or any other world. They had all fallen before the dead Ithliam, but who could say the circumstances? Many were physically or magickally powerful, but anyone could be tricked, and that was Ithliam's favourite method.

He looked again at the unconscious golden man, searching for any sign of goodness. The Ithliam he knew was proof that it wasn't impossible to reform even the worst offender. But, Henry was not a golden tree, and he shook his head clear of fanciful ideas of redeeming this monster. He could not open this or any of these tanks, not here anyway — the risk was simply too great. Though he knew his teacher would approve of his choice, he felt an enormous amount of personal guilt. He was standing inches away from a good shot at saving his teacher and saviour, to repay him for the kindness he'd shown, yet he was about to walk away.

Now, his job had grown all the harder. Not only did he need to find a dark Ithliam already free of restraint so as not to make the situation worse, but he also had to protect this place in the meantime. It was hidden from most, but the spectre knew of it, and surely other Ithliams would come seeking its potential. Henry wasn't sure it was within his means to hide this magick. Would the abomination break through the threshold, would it bring help, unable to abide its curiosity?

Faced with uncertainty, Henry made a hard choice, and returned to the entrance. Crossing the threshold, he stood looking up at Azureal, who was invisible to every sense but sight. Henry could see it clearly as a glowing mist of energy. It was powerful, no doubt, likely one of the greatest warriors of its kind. It was evil, certainly, but also a part of the natural cosmic ecosystem.

Henry decided Azureal's own self-interest would have to see it through. This was not a fight Henry could win alone — there would be times that his power failed him, there were important parts for others, and ultimately it would take them all to win the day. Henry closed the iron door behind him, and after a brief moment to settle any remaining doubt, he spoke.

"Tanks full of power I've never known," he answered the unasked question, "beings from worlds beyond imagination."

"Perhaps your limited imagination," the demon growled.

"And there is something else."

The abomination waited, impatient and breathing heavily. Henry felt the heat blowing down across his

face. The demon was very close and leaning down towards him, a most viscious expression on its face to be sure. Henry was glad it was invisible, he didn't like looking at the ugliness. A demon wasn't like some alien life form, different but with its own inner beauty — no, a demon was ugly. A perversion of living systems, sickly, bulbous, decayed. It was by nature an insult to beauty, evolution gone wrong.

“There is an Ithliam in one of those tanks.”

The demon blew past and ran toward the entrance, crashing against the magickal protections. It roared in frustration, shaking the entire Asylum. If it could not go through the door, then it would take down the whole building around it — what magick could withstand such destruction? But Henry was already intercepting, his arcane robe flowing outward around the demon, trapping it within.

“Stop, demon!” he commanded.

It struggled to no effect within Henry's powerful spell, screaming with rage. All of the demon's efforts to escape met against the powerful ethereal fabric of Henry's robe, strengthening the very forces that held it. Henry looked around with concern, had this outburst notified others of this place? He willed silence upon the demon and it made no more noise. It would be screaming still, but the sound would not leave its containment. Finally, it calmed down, subdued within a situation beyond its control.

“We cannot free him, demon!” He released the abomination, which stood angrily a few feet away still looking at the door, closed before him, imagining the tanks within.

“He is the reason we are both here, human! How can we do nothing but stand here talking? We must free him, and destroy him just as quickly.”

“And should we fail? What then? Other Ithliams have tried, and this one was too powerful even for them. Consider carefully, Azureal — perhaps there is another way.”

Demons were arrogant. Even in defeat, they could not see the limits of their ambition. The abomination was direct, but sometimes that wasn't good enough. A certain subtlety was called for, and that's where Henry came in...strength of mind over strength of body, and strength of spirit over both. He had an idea. It might not work, but it was something.

“We release the others, one at a time — from there, they are free to find Ithliam again.”

“To what purpose,” the demon growled.

“All these creatures found Ithliam before, they can do it again, but this time they will do it for the same reasons you are here with me now. The stakes have been raised, and no one is safe anymore. If the dark Ithliams are not stopped, we will all perish. We must accept reality, demon — we are but few. No matter how powerful in combat, we cannot be everywhere at the same moment while the Ithliams can be.”

“Yes, of course. They will find iterations we cannot. If the most powerful one is denied the power of the weaker, there can be no battle with the galactic dark man. It would be suicide.” Was the demon smiling? Could such a monster feel...hope?

“The key to our success is the doors. So long as there are doors, the danger will only be delayed. It's by using these doors that Ithliam multiplies — he goes in a door, but does not come back out the same. He will instead travel space at magickal speeds, breaking the continuity of his regular timeline. Each iteration is driven by the same compulsion to find power and consume it. This eventually leads every Ithliam back to every other Ithliam. Once he forms a singularity, he will make his challenge.”

“Are you suggesting we find these doors and destroy them?”

“If only it was that easy.” Henry paced back and forth deep in thought. It would take a new door to find

his Ithliam, there were none on his prison planet, not anymore. It had vanished upon the destruction of its conjurer. “A door can only be dispelled by its creator, upon death or act of will.”

“Then we are doomed. It would take more time than we have left to find them all.”

A thought struck Henry.

“We don’t need to find them all, just one willing to dispel each in turn. Any Ithliam can sense these doors if close enough. We need an Ithliam to work with us, one on our side of the equation.”

The abomination huffed, scraping its massive legs against the stone floor.

“There is no such being. We both know Ithliam is consumed by his ultimate goal. There is not even one that would help.”

“You are wrong, demon. I know of one, though finding him may be as hard as finding all the others.”

“Explain yourself.”

So Henry explained. By the end of his story, the abomination was leaning against the wall. What wondrous events this universe was capable of, it was thinking, to imagine that even the unchanging can change. The demon looked at Henry for a long time, and there was some respect in that thoughtful gaze, though Henry couldn’t see it. This man had known suffering worthy of a devil. A kindred spirit and a great warrior, the demon would enjoy suckling on the marrow in Henry’s bones and wallowing in the memories he would harvest from his soul.

“I can find him, human. I know exactly what to do.”

13

She’s crazy, Rick thought to himself, trying not to show his thoughts.

“I’m not crazy,” she said, looking at him with a whimsical smile. That oddly pretty smile. “You’re dead, I’m dead, this whole world we’re on is dead. That gas man outside is alive, this is a world for him and his kind. We’re the ones who are dead. Get it?”

“Okay, this chick isn’t crazy — she’s fucking insane!” he thought.

“You’ll come to understand soon enough, I guess.” She put the shotgun and shells on the counter-top and went back to scavenging.

He moved over to the counter and snatched the shotgun and shells.

“I better hold onto these,” he said as he backed away. He leaned the gun against the inside wall beside the door, and put the shells on the floor beside him. Well out of Kara’s reach. At this point, he wasn’t taking any chances. He’d only known Kara for a short time after all.

“Look, Rick, just go find some water bottles or something — we’re gonna need ’em. And if you can’t find any, then dump some bottles of pop and put water in the bottles. We take as many as we can carry. That car of yours may get us a fair ways on a full tank, but who knows when we’ll find another gas pump.”

She might be crazy, but she was making sense now. He saw her flip a switch labeled ‘Gas’ and he determined the pump was active. Rick filled up 13 bottles of water from a tap in the small kitchen he found through a door beside the counter marked ‘Employees Only’. He also found a storage room with some dried food they could eat on the way to wherever they were going.

Rick wasn’t even sure they were in Canada anymore. Given the heat and desert, he figured they must be closer to the equator — since signs were still in English, he figured they were in the States

somewhere.

By the time he was finished, Kara had already filled the tank and dragged the gas man's body around back of the station. She'd sprayed it with water again first just to be safe. This girl was safety minded and smart. Why did he have the sudden feeling she'd been doing this for a long time? Her earlier words haunted him. Dead, I don't feel dead. But, how do the dead feel?

"Let's go, Rick, we're not alone anymore, we're being watched. Can you see it, way out there in the desert, can you see it?"

Kara pointed out into the pitch. It was dark, and the clouds made it even darker. With no moon or other light, Rick couldn't see much beyond the station. Rain was coming, he could smell it. There was a low tremor on the horizon. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and the scabbing on his legs itched.

"I don't see anything." He could feel it all right. That same cold sensation just before he woke up hog-tied by Mr. King.

"Mr. King...."

She whipped her eyes toward him.

"What did you say?"

"Mr. King. He's this crazy fuck who...." He shuddered. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Listen to me very carefully, Rick. I need you to tell me as much about this Mr. King as you can. Everything, do you understand?"

There was steel in her voice. She reminded him suddenly of his brother Kas. The giggles had stopped as she stared intently at him, waiting for his response. She didn't blink, neither did Rick. Who was this woman; she was no simple, young girl — that was for sure.

"Well, it's kinda embarrassing." He shuffled uneasily. "He was waiting by my car this morning, and he...." The story didn't take long and he brushed over the more gruesome parts, the parts he didn't want to think about any further than he had to. She listened. She was a good listener and when he'd finished, he thought maybe he felt a little better.

"A ghoul. Damn it. An experienced ghoul at that," she muttered to herself.

"A what?" He'd heard the word — he wasn't really sure what a ghoul was, but he knew it was some kind of made up monster.

"Ghouls are real, Rick." How did she keep picking these thoughts from his head? "And once they're on to you, they don't stop. Not for anything. We could be in real trouble here and we'll need more than water to deal with him."

He laughed. He'd bashed that head with a big steel pipe, and then by the time he'd stopped hitting him, the head was just a smudge, with chunks of jagged blood covered bone scattered about.

"He's not alive. He's not dead. He's a ghoul — an undead being, but there is no wooden stake to put this monster down. Water won't work, your thick pipe won't work, not for long. He'll track us and eat us, if the only thing left is his little finger. He's just barely a corporeal being anyway, material only so you can see and be afraid, which is the way they like it. Your fear is like the fine wine accompanying a well-earned meal. He can't die, Rick, it's impossible — I've seen them ground up like hamburger and still roll along, nothing but hunger and need to fill it."

Rick just looked at her in disbelief — her craziness was coming through again...but he remembered the gas station attendant. Could it be possible?

“What’s an undead?”

“Jesus almighty, a vampire, you fool, a zombie — a ghost — don’t you know anything about the world? Where the hell are you from?”

“Regina, Saskatchewan. It shouldn’t be that far from here actually.” Denial was the easiest thing for Rick to do now, much easier than facing the truth. Somewhere inside, he knew this wasn’t his home, that things were happening he couldn’t explain, but still...zombies? Ghouls? The gas man was probably suffering from heat stroke, right? There had to be a reasonable....

“Rick, you have to believe me, you are nowhere near where you think you are.”

That feeling in the back of his neck was getting stronger. Maybe there was something out there after all. Something he couldn’t see, but something real, and dangerous.

“Let’s go, Kara. I got a bad feeling about this all of a sudden. You can explain a few things along the way.” She might be crazy, but she knew more than he did — she knew a lot about many things, he gathered. He wasn’t stupid. He recognized he’d need her help, he found he wanted to help her back.

They got in the car after loading the last of the gear. They pulled out of the station and sped away along the lonely highway. She drove and Rick was happy to let her. He looked back towards the dull, orange light over the screen door, and for a moment, just a moment, he thought he saw headless Mr. King standing just inside the shadows watching them leave. If she’s crazy, he kept telling himself, I can’t be far behind.

14

There it was. The silver gray BMW Rick had insisted on buying whether he could afford it or not. Kas looked around the modern cement multi-floored parkade. It wasn’t empty, but there were only a few other cars on this level. It was around 3 a.m.. Kas hadn’t expected to find anyone here at this hour. He thought he’d have the privacy to think and reason his way through Rick’s last moments. He was standing there only a few minutes when he was interrupted.

“Hey! What are you doing over there?” yelled the scruffy, very thin security guard. This was his domain, and his shift had just started, so he was aching for something more interesting than walking the concrete all night. His knees always ached, even with the new insoles he’d gotten last week. He wasn’t even supposed to be here tonight, but the regular guy called in sick.

Kas had been looking in the side window when he heard the guard yell at him. He tensed for a moment and looked up. Reading him with a quick glance, Kas decided he wasn’t a threat and relaxed all in about one second, but he didn’t appreciate the attitude. Many guys gave him attitude, but he’d learn him. His uniform was a light gray. Though he was only wearing the pants, having left the jacket in his booth, Kas could see the security badge pinned to his white button-up shirt, and the baton and pepper spray on his belt.

“This is my brother’s car. His Mia.”

“So what? You can’t be in here at night. You work here? Where’s your ID?”

The guard placed his hand on his baton. He preferred the hard stick. He thought pepper spray was for pussies.

“Look, man, I need to see the video feed for that camera you got up there.” Kas pointed, but the guard didn’t look.

“You’re gonna show me some ID or I’m gonna take you down, rough-like. Ya know what I mean?”

Kas didn’t move, growing very still and very calm. He shook his head. Why do dumb people always

place themselves in my way? he thought.

“I need to see that video feed, man, and you’re going to take me back to your booth and show it to me.”

Kas didn’t make any threats, he simply stated the facts. He never threatened anyone — he believed it was better to do than talk about doing.

The guard didn’t have a gun, but the baton was now in his hand and he was slowly coming closer. He came close enough to see Kas was six feet tall, and thick, but he had a job to do. One he clearly wasn’t paid enough for. Or maybe he was paid what he was worth and that wasn’t much. The man seemed to shrink before Kas’s very eyes.

“Nn-now you settle down, Mister. I don’t want to have to hurt you, but I will.” The bluster was gone, replaced by the whimpers of realization the guard had pushed the wrong guy a little too far.

Kas was already moving, fast like a cat, way faster than a man his size could normally move. He was an athlete, a bit on the strong side, but he ran a lot and his movements were fluid and tested. The club was kicked away, echoing loudly through the parkade as it was flung along the floor under one of those few remaining cars. Kas had the guard in a headlock and he was squeezing.

The guard sputtered, and coughed. “L-let me g-g-,” He was cut off by a fresh squeeze.

“You made this hard. Well, hard for you,” Kas stated simply, and dragged the guard in the direction he’d come from. Not far away around a couple of bends, they came to the guard booth. It was locked up tight, but that was no problem — the guard had the keys. After throwing the sniveling man to the ground in front of the booth door, Kas poked him with his foot.

“Keys. Now.”

“N-no way.” The guard was rubbing his neck, hoping the feeling would return. He was still seeing floating particles swim across his vision.

Kas punched him once right in the face. The guard was sure it must have broken his nose, saw stars aplenty, and for a brief moment, darkness. Then he was back again, dizzy, sputtering, and involuntarily handed the keys over to Kas. His hands shook and he could hear bells in his head so loud, he held his fists against the sides of his head. He leaned over and threw up. Blood rushed down his face into his mouth and all over his chest. So much for his white shirt.

Kas took the keys and opened the door to the booth. He dragged the guard inside with him. He noticed his name tag said, ‘Fred Ferguson.’

“Look, Fred, I need you to understand something.” He sat Fred down in the only chair in the room. He grabbed the box of tissue paper from the shelf above, and handed it over to him. “Here.”

Fred took it and pressed the tissue against his nose. He winced with pain at the contact, but it held back the blood a bit. He leaned his head back to help even more. Well, when he thought back to boring nights walking, it didn’t seem so bad. He mused ironically if he’d get a raise for this as he shoved more tissue against his face.

“Now, please, Fred, I need to see the video feed for that camera. I love my brother, Fred, a lot more than I love you, if you take my meaning.”

“I get ya.” He sounded nasal and weak, but Kas could just barely make him out.

Fred spat a red glob at the floor, then pointed over to a stack of old VHS tapes on the far wall. Kas moved over and ran his fingers down their sides looking for one from yesterday. He found it. After removing the current tape, which he then placed in his pocket, he put yesterday’s tape in the machine. He leaned back against the wall, and he and Fred watched the silent black and white film like they were

on a date.

All we need is popcorn, Kas thought.

He fast-forwarded the tape until he found the spot he was looking for. They watched his little brother, Rick, walk toward his car, chatting away on his cell phone as always. Kas had never owned a cellphone — part of that “Don’t talk, rather do” philosophy. Rick approached the car in the video, put his hand on the door handle, then suddenly turned as if he’d heard something off camera. He said something to whoever was on the phone, then put the cell in its holder, ending the call.

Rick turned back to his car, and then the screen fuzzed a bit. Static interference. Kas could barely make out the shape of another man, much taller than Rick, even taller than himself. Even the cheapest security cams money could buy could not distort his unusual thinness and long arms. He was pointing something at Rick, who wasn’t even facing the man. He was getting his keys so he could open the car door. The screen went blank.

“No!!” Kas yelled, and hit the TV top. The screen went back on a moment later. Rick and the thin man were gone — nothing but his car remained.

“Son-of-a-bitch! What the fuck was that!!” The usually cool-as-a-cucumber Kas was enraged.

Fred stared wide-eyed. He’d just witnessed a gruesome crime. A hardcore sicko crime. This was real now. This wasn’t some greased up carjacker he was sitting with here — this was a brother, and he’d just watch his kin get taken by...he wasn’t sure what. Neither of them was sure. It was a man, but so thin, and that face, like a child’s face, but twisted with old malice.

Fred had a brother, he knew the score. He looked over at Kas, who looked right back at him. It wasn’t anger he saw — it was pain. Something was happening beyond his pay grade and he knew it, but some things transcend ordinary situations in a very universal way. If the roles were reversed would he do any different?

“What’s your name?” asked Fred.

“Fuck you.”

“What I mean is, what now?”

“I don’t know.” Kas had his face in his hands now. The tears came slowly. He knew the odds of Rick being alive now were slim to none. Fred said nothing, patiently waiting until Kas got it together before speaking again.

“What was that thing? I’ve never seen anything like it. Was it a man?”

Kas ignored him and rewound the tape to watch it again. He watched closely, very closely. That’s when he saw it. Just before Rick was hit with whatever hit him. The phone hadn’t shifted fully into its holder at Rick’s belt. He dropped it under the car just before the screen went blank. When the screen came back on again, Kas saw a new shadow, under the car near the rear tire. Something small, but it was definitely there. Was it possible?

Paying no attention to Fred anymore, Kas left the booth and ran to the BMW parked a few curves of cement away. When he got there, he got down on the cold concrete and reached under the rear bumper. His finger tips touched something almost immediately. It was something cold and plastic. The cell phone! Stretching, he caught the phone, pulled it out and hit the power button. Dead battery.

“Shit!”

“What’s the problem?” Fred had followed him from the booth. Kas had forgotten all about him. More guards were likely on the way right now.

“Fred, I have to go.”

“I understand. I’ll give ya ten minutes before I call this in. I’ll tell them you was a skinny white guy that sucker-punched me. I ran ya off, is all. You go take care of this.” He was getting hazard pay for sure.

Kas nodded his thanks, turned and fled.

Fred never called it in. Instead he went to the bathroom and cleaned up. His nose wasn’t broken after all, but it hurt like hell. Careful what you wish for, he thought with a smile — maybe boring wasn’t so bad.

15

Rick and Kara were both completely unaware that headless Mr. King was tagging a lift. He’d slipped into the trunk while they were inside the station, leaving it open just a tiny, little crack so he could easily escape later. He’d watched them from a distance at first, but it soon became clear that for all this woman’s unusual qualities, she was nothing to be feared by him.

He could hear them talking. Kara was trying to explain to Rick that he was never going to be safe again — that he could expect Mr. King to be at his back the rest of his natural or unnatural life.

How did she know so much about ghouls, he wondered. Does she have one hunting her right now, too? King mused about coming across another ghoul along the way and what that might mean. He wanted Rick, and if Kara was wanted by another, then maybe a deal could be struck.

Ha, unlikely, he thought. I haven’t run into another ghoul for many years.

Sometimes, he missed his old pack running through the killing fields, but that was when he was young and mindless. Patriarch ghouls are by nature, solitary, but they hunt anywhere it suits them, so it was always possible, even if unlikely, that he would find one. In fact, the odds would be so remote, he was convinced it was impossible. Smiling, he remembered only ever seeing one other old one. It was the night he was reborn. Not much more than a shadow, it came and killed his whole family. Leaving only him, a small boy at the time, an even smaller bite on his ankle.

He was convinced he’d been left on purpose. Certainly the old ghoul had still been hungry, but he took only a small piece of flesh and left a horrid hunger behind. It’d taken months to die, slowly wasting away from an illness the doctors couldn’t even identify, it’d taken three days to rise again. Only hours after that to make his first kill.

Mr. King snapped back to the present. The car was coming to a rolling stop and he couldn’t hear them talking anymore. It was comfortably dark in the trunk, but he wanted some fresh air. His own smell of rotting decay was strong now and concentrated. He craved the smell of his victim. He’d wait for now, but soon the opportunity would present itself. He could think of nothing but sucking the marrow from Rick’s sweet bones. The moment they were separated and away from their supplies...he’d strike.

The car stopped, and the engine turned off. He heard the doors on both sides open, and a few minutes later, close. Had they arrived somewhere interesting? Were they unloading the gear? Footsteps led away from the car. And then there was silence. He couldn’t hear them anymore. He’d give it a few more minutes and then he’d take a peak. Was it getting warmer? Rick must need to piss. That’s why they stopped. Of course, it was nothing more interesting than that. It was definitely getting hotter in the trunk. Was that smoke?

It was smoke. It came billowing in as a thickening noxious fume of burned plastic and fake leather lining. The car was on fire. Why? There was a loud bang above his head, and the click of the trunk closing all the way and locking. He was trapped and the flames were licking at his feet.

“You all right in there, Mr. King?” It was Rick. He knew he was in the trunk. How? “Getting a little warm for you?”

King kicked at the trunk door, trying to boot it open, but it wasn't happening. He kicked at the back of the seat. That wasn't happening, either. There was no way out, he was going to burn. Great, now he'd have to find a whole new body. Didn't humans have any consideration at all? He began to choke on the fumes, it seemed like the right thing to do. He was getting dizzy from the heat and he'd soon be unconscious. And all on an empty stomach. What a drag.

“Let me out of here!” he screamed, a hollow sound from deep in his chest, he kicked and banged against every solid surface. The flames had started to reach inside with him. He couldn't see anything through the smoke, but he could feel the searing pain of cleansing fire.

“This will be twice I've killed you, asshole! And if you keep at me, I'll do it again.”

“Let me out! Let me out!” There was a string of curses which nobody answered as King passed out.

“Have you ever tried fire before?” Rick asked Kara, a satisfied smile on his face.

“Of course, but it won't stop him for long. They don't heal, nothing in this world does, not even us. Not very quickly, anyway.” She was pulling out a cigarette from the pack he'd just passed her. “That won't stop him from coming at us again, somehow.”

Rick handed her a shiny new lighter. These lighters were the only thing shiny he'd seen since this adventure began, the only thing new. This world was old. It was different though, with subtle changes from the earth he'd known. He was coming to see that now. Ever since Kara had indicated the stowaway in the trunk, he'd thought maybe she wasn't so crazy after all.

“Yep, he'll keep coming, even when there is nothing but charred bones,” she continued, taking a long pull from her cigarette and stretching. She liked to stretch, he noticed, always looking over at him while she did.

“And if I were to completely destroy him? Grind the bone to dust and ash?”

“Should you destroy his corporeal form completely, he'll become some sort of wraith. A phantom with a hunger even greater, and a fury even more desperate, unable to move or affect things through his body — he'll find other ways. He'll become an altogether different kind of threat, even more dangerous than before.”

Rick shuddered. Was burning Mr. King a mistake? He was getting very tired. His own bones ached and his skin itched. He was thoroughly exhausted. Kara seemed okay considering what she had been through. She seemed as energetic as ever. He could barely walk he was so tired, yet she was always faster and never skipped a beat. He found this briefly disturbing.

“I need to rest, Kara. I need to sleep.”

“Soon. There is a place not far, maybe an hour more in that direction.” She didn't look at him when she said this, she only looked out over the desert searching for something. As far as Rick could tell, they were in near total darkness except for the ember of the cigarette and the flames consuming the car. How could she see anything? Yet as he focused, he found he could barely make out her and some of the surrounding landscape out. There was a very faint, dull brown glow coming off the sand.

“How did you come to this, Kara? I've told you my story, so tell me yours.” He said as they walked out into the desert.

She looked at him then for a long moment, considering.

“I died, Rick — I told you we're dead, you and me. You, I, and everything else in this world that still

remembers anything.” They walked while she spoke, “I’ve been here a long time, longer than the years that show on my face. And you’ve been here a long time, too, even if you don’t realize it yet.”

“But I’ve only been here for a day or so?”

“Here on this particular planet, maybe.” She paused thoughtfully before continuing, “Stay with me here, but we’ve met before. I have travelled with you many times. It’s always the same, though — you never remember me. It won’t matter if I explain it.”

“You’re not making any sense. I’ve never met you before, not in this life, and we have only one life to lead. Right?”

He gave out a nervous laugh. Was she familiar now? He thought so, and then shook it off. No, this was crazy. He’d hit his head or something. Maybe he was actually dreaming. Was this some nightmare? Now that made some sense.

“This is no nightmare, Rick.” She did it again, picked the word right out of his head, “This is hell, maybe. One of many hells — they change, you know. Sometimes, it’s cold, not hot like this. Sometimes, it’s a swamp, no insects, though. There’s never any real life anywhere, no animals or anything like that, just the walking dead. And sometimes, there are people like you and me who are new or otherwise mostly undamaged.”

She was being very serious. He could see that she believed what she was saying. Could it be? No. There had to be some other explanations. What about science?

“How did you or I get here? Are you saying I died back home and woke up here?” His breath was short, caught in his throat at the implication.

“Maybe — who can say for sure how Mr. King got you here? Dying is only one way to get to a world like this.”

His heart skipped a beat.

“And when you die here, which you will eventually, if you don’t become like them, you’ll wake up in another hell,” said Kara. “Maybe if you’re lucky, you’ll wake up on a planet that isn’t dead, reborn even. Like the one you just came from. I wish I could have seen your world, Rick, maybe it’s like mine. I’ve been here so long, I barely remember anything else anymore.”

This was a lot to digest. Rick needed to sit down — no, he needed to throw up, but he hadn’t eaten in hours, maybe longer, if Kara was right, and there wasn’t anything to come up. So he fainted, instead. Not very manly, he thought vaguely that Kara would think less of him, but he couldn’t help it — he hit the ground with a barely audible thud.

“Why does he always do that?” she asked the emptiness around her. “Every single time.”

By the time Rick woke up, an hour must have passed and Kara had been literally carrying him on her shoulder. She was very strong, much stronger than she appeared. She was, as always, not tired or exhausted, and there was no sweat. He struggled in her grip a little, letting her know he was awake and that she could let him down now. She complied, flashing that quirky smile. How he loved that smile.

“Uh, thanks. Sorry about that. It’s just, well....”

“Don’t sweat it. It’s not the first time I’ve seen you faint, ya know.” She winked at him. He was embarrassed all the more now, for the countless times he’d done that in front of her that he didn’t even remember.

“Well, sorry, anyway. Say, why do you remember me and I don’t remember you?” He felt smart for a minute there.

“Because you died here, and I didn’t. Time marches ever onward, while this world and I remain the same. Changeless. A day here is like a thousand years on a living planet. So I wait for you to across my path, or me to cross yours, again. It doesn’t seem like such a long time, ya know, sometimes, it seems like only a few days.”

Each day was the same. Rain always just over the next hill, but it wouldn’t fall until it was ready. There was no cycle to replenish this earth, no plants to feed. The planet’s core was the major source of heat. Was there even an atmosphere? Kind of, but it was thin and slow like time unending, marching forward without real purpose.

“How many times have I come here?” He was anxious for the answer, but he didn’t really want to know. The truth was, he was thinking about Sarah, and whether she’d already grown old and died long ago, while he was busy saving his own life, only to find out he’d already lost everything that mattered to him.

“On this planet, this hell, I have met you 23 times, this being the twenty-third. Sorry to say, you always end up dying on me. So we go through all this again and again. I don’t mind. With no one else to talk to out here, I’m just glad for the company, and I always liked reruns.” She winked at him. At least she was taking it better than he was.

“I don’t remember dying!” he called to the night, as though he could undo it.

“No one does. We all die — no one remembers anything about it — we just keep moving on. We just get up wherever we are and move on.”

Was there some comfort in that? Were his mistakes less meaningful, or more? What about karma and things like that, or was it all just cosmic cause and effect? Random chance? There were always more questions. He pulled off his shoes and poured out the sand. Somewhere along the way, he began to believe her.

“When was the last time you died?”

“I don’t remember,” she giggled. “Come on, we’re almost there. Oh, and pass me another cigarette.”

16

“Mushroom soup ain’t gravy!” Kas heard some woman yell as he passed an open door in the hall. The carpet was an old faded orange, and the lighting felt like something from the sixties. Thick layers of dust covered the hanging fixture so that the soft light barely penetrated the full length of the hallway. The walls were papered with ugly flowers and unusual swirls, stained in some places where the night life had gotten rough.

He was sure he’d find Rick’s apartment near the end of this floor, though — he’d only been here one time to talk to his brother about what had happened with Denim. To tell him it was a mistake, that things went too far and he was sorry. All the exact things Rick didn’t want to hear. He hadn’t even opened the door for Kas. Instead, he pretended he couldn’t hear him, and waited until Kas had left.

Here it is, he thought, Apartment 420.

The door was locked, but that wasn’t going to stop him. A sharp kick up near the handle was all it took. The door swung in fast, hitting the door jamb with a loud thwack and brrrrrrrr. The cheap lock broke so easily, the door frame was not even bent. Kas stepped inside quickly and closed the door behind him. A curious head peaked out from one of the other apartments a moment later, but everything in the hall seemed fine. All the doors were closed, except that one where the loud woman was yelling about something called Nacho Mama’s.

It was dark, so he flipped the nearest light switch. It wasn’t a large place and when the living room light

came on, he figured he could see whatever he needed to. The walls were a cheap eggshell shade, and the carpet a deep brown. He passed the kitchen on his right as he entered the living room. This place was bare, even for Rick. He obviously hadn't spent much time here. In, sleep, and out kinda thing. The man owned a Beamer, still paying for it of course, and yet he hadn't bothered to find furniture. The living room had a single black folding chair and a small television sitting on a rickety table.

The curtains were not real curtains, but those plastic blinds, and were drawn closed. Off in the corner, he noticed another table. Not the same brown as the carpet either, but a lighter, glazed brown, like it'd once been part of a set. On top of the table, there was a small leather pouch, an ash tray, and a cell phone charger.

"Gotcha," he muttered, and placed the phone on the charger. A little red light flared. He wasn't sure how long this would take as he'd never charged a cell before, but he was guessing an hour or less. He sat in the chair and turned on the television. There were only two channels and nothing of interest on either, so he quickly turned it off.

Restless, he looked towards the charger and his eyes fell on the leather pouch beside it. Snatching it up, he unzipped it. Inside was a half ounce of some very dry weed, a couple of roaches, roach clips, a lighter, rolling papers, and what looked like some kind of plastic rolling machine. It wasn't the big black cigarette machine, either, but a small device used with the double thumb roll-over technique. He remembered seeing variations of these as a teenager.

What the hell, he thought, I got some time and I need to relax.

He pinched enough weed to make a little joint. There was no need for the rolling machine as he was used to rolling his cigarettes with one hand. The weed was too dry for that, so he had to use both hands, but he got through it. After a few seconds, he had a thin joint, just right for one person who still had things to do that night. He even ripped off a piece of the cardboard rolling paper package, and rolled it in his fingers to make a crude filter.

Pawing at the lighter, he lit the joint and took the longest pull he could. He then held it in for a moment before letting it out slowly with a quiet whistle. He wasn't sure holding it in did anything, but he'd always done it that way. Rick used to make fun of him, saying there was always more where that came from, so don't worry about making the most of every tug. His brother was always trying to make sense of everything. Kas smiled.

A few more pulls and the joint was spent. He didn't burn his fingers or lips, thanks to the homemade filter, and then stuck what was left of the joint in the ashtray. Leaning back, he closed his eyes. It must have been 5 a.m. or so and the sun would be up soon. The weed hadn't really hit him yet — it would take a few minutes to set in. He was worried for Rick, that didn't go away. He'd already lost one brother, and to lose the other was too much even for a hardass like Kas.

Rick was the good one, he thought, the one who went for family, a real job, a career even — he'd done it right. And all Kas had ever done was fuck up his own life, and more recently Rick's, too. God, why'd I let her in that night? Why'd she have to call on me? Denim and Rick had had fights before and she could have called a girlfriend. Goddamn, I'm stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stup...he drifted off.

It was around 7 a.m. when he woke with a sudden start. A quick glance at the charger revealed a green light flashing where a solid red had been earlier. It must be charged. It was time for the next move. His chest was heavy — there was no more waiting. He wasn't great with these new digital devices, but he wasn't without his own cunning either. If teenagers could figure it out, then so could he.

Luck was with him — the last app running was still keyed up. It was as simple as pushing the talk icon. The phone played the last video-audio recorded. Rick had been facing the car window. Kas could see in

the reflection what Rick had seen. A very tall, very thin, man with sunken features in a black suit. He was walking up behind, slowly pointing something at Rick's back. His brother had known something was about to happen, and had just got the phone working when it did.

The phone fell under the car as Rick hit the ground. He watched as Rick fell, spasms coursing up and down his body. A stun gun! The dumb shit tasered my brother. Kas then watched helplessly as the tall man with the unusually long arms dragged Rick over to another car — what looked like a Civic, or an Accord maybe, and tossed him in the back seat. A deep anger became rage when Kas saw the strange man's gleeful smile.

The thin man then started talking. More like chanting in some strange language Kas couldn't understand. What he saw next was beyond belief. The little cell camera started shaking, as did everything in its view. Some sort of shock wave from beyond was running through the parkade setting off alarms with thunderous vibrations, and then just as suddenly, it all stopped. Kas blinked and the thin man slapped his hands together, hard. He, his car, and Rick disappeared into thin air.

17

The dark god looked out across the great material expanse. It took a thousand years to take it all in. He'd raised millions of worlds already and endured countless years of effort. Though he had a long way to go, he wasn't ready to quit yet. His exhaustion would come in time, it was inevitable. He'd ultimately fall short and retreat back to the void, always just shy of his goal. For all the millions of worlds he'd end, millions more would remain or be created in his wake.

Time was irrelevant to the Ancient Darkness. All material would eventually cease, reaching its maximum duration. No matter that the half life of every atom would be consumed or broken apart before he'd slip into his final retirement. Everything was doomed and dying just as he was. The Ancient Darkness was nothing more than a shallow reflection of his divine essence — one could say it was a living reminder of everything he wished to ignore, but could not.

The great recluse was a noble, pure creature. No ambition. He just wanted silence, his special kind of peace. What tragedy had befallen him when his brothers struck with their holy weapons, inflicting wounds that would never heal? Had they meant to set in motion the slow decay and this new creation, life, which slowly picked at his cosmic flesh crawling upon it? How he hated even the memory of his kind.

He'd wanted nothing to do with their war, retreating from the conflict, but not unscathed. They'd attacked him as he fled. They had attacked each other, too, and at the end of the last age, he was all that remained. His brothers were all destroyed by their own arms, their own unchecked aggression. He had gone deep into the void, deeper than any before or since. He'd watched from his distant vantage, as his brothers fell one by one, their eternal corpses floating away, never to be seen again.

He laughed at their folly and often thought of the irony. How the one being in the universe not interested, became the unwilling observer of Armageddon. The recluse had outlived them all. He knew how little they'd thought of him. He was aware of their scorn, but he didn't care. They were building an empire, so they claimed. They were working for the "greater good." Where had that misguided ambition led them? Now, they were just memories in the mind of their least favourite brother.

The chronicle of his kind had been written. He was just the epilogue. There was no future for him or his kind. The infinite had yielded to the finite. A new form of being had spread through the void, replacing spirit with material things. It was no more meaningful than the simple pleasure of existence, which for him, being in constant pain, was no pleasure at all.

He thought for a moment that if he could die before the end of all things, would any of this remain or

would it end with him? Could he leave this void, and material, and life, to journey elsewhere, to follow his brothers into the cosmic mystery? Had his purpose always been to do as he was now doing? No free will, no choices, only his inevitable nature and a lifespan so long that nothing else could overcome him.

His strength would fail him again soon, as always, just before his moment of triumph. Was this his hell? Had he died, after all, in that great battle, and now he was enduring the punishment of his abstinence? If he could take it all back, would he involve himself more with his kind? Could he have convinced them war was unnecessary and harmful? He remembered only discontent.

No. It was for others to change, not him. He was changeless. He'd been as he was forever, a force of nature. The last of the divine left to witness this new form of life that infected every corner of his senses. Without him, the material expanse would grow too crowded even for itself. It would become a diluted mess, all purposes overlapping, competing, winning, losing, all for no point at all. He gave them reason. As life brought order, he brought chaos. He was the force pressing amongst all things, and without him, there could be no distinctions at all.

He brought perspective. He brought meaning. With his meaning, applied across the planes at his undeniable call, life had a guiding friend. It had a goal, survival. It would not turn out like him. He would cleanse it, over and over, leaving each time only the best of creation, not by choice, but by righteous circumstance. Life was collectively an ever-evolving entity, as ever-changing as he was changeless. It would grow, as he could not grow — it would perhaps even grow around and replace him.

And he would sleep in the perfect silence of a being superior to himself. He would no longer require action, his purpose would be fulfilled. His skin would itch no more. His eyes would no longer burn and his death would come sweetly and gently, without effort or care. This was the only dream he had now, developed out of desperation and sadness at a thousand failed annihilations. Even he who stood alone required hope.

What foolish dreams, he thought. Should Ithliam kill me, I would know peace. Should I destroy all matter, I would know peace. Should life evolve past me, I would know peace. All dream and fancies. No, I am alone still. What hope could there ever be for me now?

Peace might never come and the sadness took him again, granting the material universe a much-needed reprieve from the Ancient Darkness's endless destruction. As short-lived as it would be, many generations gathered, aged, and died in his absence. He didn't even notice.

18

Denim hadn't slept at all that night. Sarah, thank God, had no trouble. The world was just right, and the biggest, most important thing in it was her stuffed dinosaur, Ruffus. Being stuffed, the toy had very few problems and Sarah liked it that way. Denim looked at her sleeping angel for the millionth time since this all started. She envied her little girl. Ignorance was bliss, they say, and this was what they meant, a good night's sleep and a pleasant dream about dinosaurs.

It was almost 8 a.m. now, and Sarah would be up very soon, so Denim went to the kitchen and started breakfast. Soy bacon and free range eggs. It made her think about that odd morning last year when Sarah told her, matter of factly, that meat was animals and she didn't want to eat animals. Denim chuckled — she'd learned to cook soy the very next day.

Denim ran her fingers across the smooth surface of the counter-top. She was very tired, but she had responsibilities. She wasn't going to let her little girl go hungry. Sarah had school at nine a.m., her kindergarten class. The bus would pick her up at 8:45 and her stove clock had just passed eight. She could hear Sarah's alarm going off upstairs.

Sarah was awake, just shutting off the ringer as Denim entered her room.

“Time to get up, sweetie.”

Sarah rubbed her eyes. They were puffy and crust had formed at their edges, but soon new energy overcame her, and Sarah bounced playfully out of bed. She was about to run out of the room, when Denim pointed back at the sheets. Sarah grumpily oohed and awed as she returned to help make up the bed, and straighten the sheets. This was a magick ritual as far as Denim was concerned, one that needed to be repeated every day.

A few minutes later, they were both in the bathroom, brushing their teeth together and spitting in the sink. Sarah stood on a little plastic stepping stool. It was bright yellow with pink stickers all over it. Denim dabbed at the toothpaste stuck to the sides of Sarah’s little pursed lips, then ran a shallow bath. The water was warm, never too hot. She splashed her hand through for certainty. A good mother was always protective of her young — that’s why she used special kid-friendly soap, just in case Sarah rubbed her eyes again before her hands were dry.

There were no floating plastic toys. There wasn’t time in the morning, but Denim did add some gentle bath beads and a little sea salt. It helped keep Sarah’s skin soft and smelling pleasant. Kind of like lilacs, those pretty purple flower blossoms Sarah liked so much. She always followed up with the tear-free shampoo.

Once finished, Denim got Sarah dressed and carried her downstairs to the kitchen where breakfast waited on the electric hot plate, kept warm from earlier at a low heat. The soy bacon tasted good, as good as fake meat could taste anyway. Sarah couldn’t tell the difference anymore, but Denim could. The eggs hit the spot, even if the bacon didn’t. They both chased breakfast down with large glasses of pulpy orange juice, the really thick stuff.

Sarah didn’t talk much as she was content to stuff the food in her mouth with a shovel-sized plastic fork. She was finished in less than five minutes. Denim had barely touched her food by the time Sarah’s plate was almost clear. Sarah bounced on her chair waiting for her mommy to finish up. She wanted to get to school. She missed her friends and was already thinking about coloured play dough.

Poof. Sarah farted. Denim shook her head, held her nose, and Sarah giggled. It was almost quarter to nine. They waited together by the curb. It wasn’t long. Right on time, the bus pulled up. A kiss, a hug, and soon Sarah was safely on her way to school. Denim watched her go, not taking her eyes off the bus until it turned the corner out of sight. She even waited a few extra moments. Why was it always so hard to let her go? Today was especially hard. The early morning sun warmly caressed her cheeks and for a brief moment, everything seemed to be okay.

Denim turned toward the house but stopped short, startled. Kas was leaning against the door waiting for her. He looked tired, as tired as her. He’d been up all night, too, she gathered. That was good, but Rick wasn’t with him. That was bad. She opened the door and they wordlessly walked inside. Kas didn’t say anything — not until they were both sitting, Denim on the couch and Kas on the chair farthest away from it.

“Well?” she asked urgently, anxious for news, any news at all. “Is Rick all right?” She knew he wasn’t by the way Kas carried himself, but she’d hoped she was wrong.

He didn’t answer at first, just looked at her for a long time, clearly wrestling with how to word his reply. He had something in his hand, a cell phone, but Kas wouldn’t have a cell phone, she thought, that wasn’t his thing. Finally, Kas gave up trying to find the words and instead handed the phone to her. She didn’t look at it, she looked at him. He looked away, couldn’t meet her gaze, not until she’d seen what he had seen.

She looked down — the cell phone had a video keyed up so she pressed ‘Play’ and watched. She watched it again. Then, when she was done, she watched it one more time. They stared at each other for a long time when she was done, a very long time indeed. She’d flinched at the sight of Rick’s disappearance, at first convinced it must be fake, but she knew it wasn’t. The grim look in Kas’s eyes revealed the context around finding the phone, an object Rick was never without. Whatever they’d just witnessed, it was all too real and just as impossible. The game had changed. Yesterday was a different life. The world had just changed forever and neither could go back again.

19

The car was nothing now but a charred relic, just another anonymous object floating through the sandy ocean. The metal and fiberglass had burned to a hollowed out shell. The trunk lock had given out under the pressure and swung open from the slow simmer of the fire heat. The charred remains of Mr. King might have blown away but for the lack of wind. The exposed bones steamed as they cooled.

The fire had caught easily in the heat, fed by an infernal purpose bent on destruction, leaving a bodiless Mr. King, or nearly so. His bones were mostly intact, but blackened by the flames. Most of his clothes had burned away and lines of heat and ember flashed across what was left of his stringy muscles. There was no head, but two faint, glowing, green “eyes” floated a few inches above his neck.

His image had become the eternal laughter of the implied skeletal grin. Ash and soot. His new wardrobe was ash and soot, and though he wasn’t much thinner, he was more fragile. The skeletal Mr. King raised himself up from the trunk and slowly placed a bony foot on the ground. It crunched and crackled under his weight, but stayed mostly intact, held together by infernal will. His big toes fell away, and part of his heel bone had burned through and caved in when it brushed the dirt. He carefully placed another foot and tried to stand.

His spine was split and several vertebrae crushed to powder. There was a sickening crack as his upper body fell to the right and hung there. The world looked sideways at first, but if he turned his shoulders upward, he could see well enough. He was a weak man and an even weaker skeleton. The only thing that remained the same was his hunger. It drove him on.

Taking a hesitant step and then another, he couldn’t bend his right knee, so he had to drag it behind, using it mostly for balance. As usual, he felt no pain, only varying levels of consciousness. His grip on what remained of his corporeal form was tenuous at best. It wouldn’t hold up to even a small child with a stick, but he could walk, a shuffling slow walk. And he could smell the direction of his prey.

The colours of ash and soot were perfectly matched to the gray sand and hid him well within the shadows of perpetual night. He’d left the highway behind with the car. Rick had gone into the desert with the woman, and so would Mr. King. He hadn’t had this much fun on a chase in a long time, decades at least. No, not a chase, but a hunt like the old days. As a young ghoul, he’d taken more chances. He’d let his prey run away for a few days and then catch them later when they were lean meat. He always got his victim in the end though...always. He’d lick his lips if he still had any.

He shambled along in silence. Rick had a big head start, but eventually, he’d have to rest. That’s when Mr. King would make up time. He didn’t need to rest, and he didn’t feel fatigue as a normal person might. As a broken skeleton, he thought it was ironic. He chuckled. People had called him the thin man for years.

He didn’t mind. There was a certain freedom in this undead prison. At least he never got bored. He always had something or someone on the go. He lived to eat. He loved the fear. It was the spice of his life. He could almost taste Rick, right now, right here. His tongue was gone, but he could almost taste him anyway. His spirit was strong and the body was not his true instrument anymore. It was mostly for show, but when the time came, it would tear through his prey, guided by his every command.

A shadow crossed his mind, interrupting his thoughts. He hadn't felt anything like that in a long time. Another had entered this world, and it wasn't human. This could be interesting. Patriarch ghouls could travel between planes, walk both the lands of the living and the dead. He wasn't sure what this new player was. It was very far away, thousands of miles, too far for him to know anything more. His thoughts fell back into the cesspool that was his cruel past.

Oh, sweet memories, he hummed, sounding somewhat like moths buzzing in a swarm. Mr. King shambled on.

20

"What is it?" asked Rick, clearly impressed. It was too high to see the top against the night sky, and it cut endlessly in the distance to either side.

"I call it the Deathly Wall." Kara was less moved by it than Rick — she'd seen it many times in her travels. Walk long enough and you always find it.

They had come to a stop in front of the wall a few moments ago. Rick didn't even see it until he almost stumbled into it. It seemed to consist of a thick amber crystal substance. Hard like rock, it wouldn't chip, even with a sledge hammer, but it was sticky. One couldn't touch it long without risking becoming a part of it. Rick thought about flypaper. About a foot or so within its surface, he could see row upon row of paralyzed people. They looked like they were asleep.

"Who are they?"

"People like you or me. Dead and stored here until its their time to walk again, one way or the other."

"Like the gas man at the station."

"Yes, or reborn...." She trailed as if deep in thought.

"Then how did their bodies get here in this wall?"

"I don't have all the answers, Rick. I'm trapped here just like you." She snapped at him a little bit. He wasn't sure why, but she was looking at a particular body while she did so.

"Do you know that man?"

"I did, once, long ago. I come here to remind myself that he's real, that he was real." She looked very sad. She wiped away the moisture in her eyes. "He's my brother. He was the only family I ever really had before all this happened."

She looked at him long and hard. "If I wasn't such a coward, I'd kill myself, you know. Try again on some other world. The thing is...there's no telling where I'd end up, maybe somewhere even worse than here." Then, she had a thought, "Besides, I'd forget all about you, wouldn't I?"

"I have a brother, too. One living brother, anyway — Kas. I had another...Cole...I didn't know him very well...I was only a kid when he died." Rick was rambling. He didn't deal well with these kinds of situations. He didn't know what to say to make a person feel better, especially when he saw no way to make it better. He was a problem solver, but some problems couldn't be solved.

"Strange how every time I find you here, you've had different family, different friends, a different life, but you're always essentially the same guy. Always trying to make the best of all this. Thank you, Rick. Knowing you care helps a great deal." She was smiling a little now, and she wasn't looking at her brother anymore, she was still looking at Rick.

It felt familiar — tense, but familiar. Rick wanted to kiss her, and he was pretty sure she wanted to kiss him. Had this happened before? It seemed almost like it had, but he couldn't quite remember. It was

just out of reach. Like a trace of something he could never have known, but it seemed so...he moved closer. Snap! A sound came from behind them out in the desert. It was close. There were no random sounds in this place — something was out there.

They froze, eyes locked on one another, the moment had passed. Rick shook his head clear and strained to see what had made the sound. He couldn't see far, maybe 50 yards, give or take, thanks to the soft glow of the Deathly Wall, but it wasn't enough. There were lots of places to hide out there. The dusty gray blended in well with the low light offered from the dull, yellow moon. The noise had sounded close...but closer than 50 yards, he wasn't sure. He couldn't see anything other than more desert sand.

“Wind,” he said, before thinking. But there was no wind, and he hadn't felt much more than the occasional hot breeze the entire time he'd been here.

Kara grabbed him by the arm and hustled in the opposite direction from which they'd heard the sound. She was moving fast, and it didn't take long for Rick to catch up to speed.

Soon, they were running as fast as they could along the wall. It radiated enough light so they could run quickly with reasonably sure footing. There was another noise to their right, but Rick didn't look — he could tell it was closer now, but he didn't look. What new terror lurked just beyond those shadows? he thought. His heart beat loudly in his ears. Would he ever know peace in this damned place?

He didn't see it coming, and he wouldn't have, even if he'd looked...it happened so suddenly. A blurry image raced by, knocking him off course, and just before he would have slammed very hard against the amber crystal surface of the wall, he tripped. He ate sand as the ground came up to meet his face, he had been just short of being reabsorbed by the wall. He could smell rain again. Where was Kara? What the hell just happened?

“Ahhhhhhh!!” He heard her scream. It was a painful thing to hear. She was much more distant now, a hundred yards away, then two hundred. She was moving fast. Something has her, he thought. He heard snuffling near him now, too, low and wet, a sopping impression of dragging meat followed by frantic digging in the sand.

It sounded something like a large animal searching for a scent, looking for a trail to follow. It's larger than a dog, he thought. Why couldn't he move? He tried to move, but his body wouldn't respond. He ached all over, but was kind of numb at the same time. Rick tried to turn his head and see what was happening, but couldn't. His breathing had become shallow and jerky. It looked like Mr. King had some competition for his meal, he thought humourlessly.

All he could do was move his eyes and wiggle his toes. It was a start, though, but it was likely too little, too late. Whatever was sniffing around was bumping its nose up against him and pushing against his back roughly. It smelled horrible. He could hear the low rumble in its belly, hot breath pouring over his neck. A thin trail of viscous slime threaded down the side of Rick's face, burning his skin wherever it touched. It's over now, he thought. He could bend his knees a little, and his fingers were working again. Still no hands or arms, though.

Close enough for him to see now, it looked like a large, rubbery, black starfish. Little suckers on tentacles and everything. It crawled over his head, taking its time, or maybe it couldn't move very fast. It hurt when a sucker pressed against his skin. It burned a little and left behind more of that slime. Horror seized him. It was trying to maneuver itself over his face! He tried to struggle, but couldn't move enough. He could weakly kick his legs now and move his hands at the wrist, but not arms. Moving his neck was dangerous — it might put his head right into it.

“Jesus, help me!” He could talk again. It was a quiet rasp, but he had a voice. The rubbery tentacles inched their way across his cheeks. The slime got in his mouth a little. It tasted sweet, like sugar or

antifreeze. He spat it out, sputtered, and willed his arms to work. This time, they did, sort of. He lifted them up to his face and grabbed hold of the starfish, but it was slippery and he found it difficult to get a grip. Wasn't there a movie about face-hugging aliens?

The creature was right over his face now. He could see a gaping hole in the centre of its round little body. This is it, he thought — one chance to make this work. He drove his hands under the starfish with all his effort in one burst of strength. Then he drove his arms up and in between the gaping mouth, the tentacles, and his face. It tried vainly to press against him, to move past his arms. Rick turned over to his side as the weird creature pulled even tighter, wrapping completely around his head.

It wasn't giving up and kept at him with the natural motives of predator hunting prey. It was hungry, and he was there. He was completely blind now, and his arms and hands were trapped against his face under this hungry little beast, it wouldn't be held back for long. He got to his feet and went in the general direction of the Deathly Wall. Just a few feet away, he slammed into it. It didn't hurt Rick, though — he had his face protected. It hurt the starfish. It squirmed as Rick bashed it repeatedly against the amber crystal, its sticky surface tearing layers of skin off the creature.

It squealed, finally let go of him, and dropped to the ground, crawling slowly away into the darkness beyond view. He noticed a very long, thin vine running from it to him. His eyes followed it until he realized the rubbery thread was embedded into the back of his head. He felt sick and his stomach dropped. He put his hands around the base of the line where it connected above his neck and he pulled. He pulled as hard as he'd pulled at anything in his life.

It came out surprisingly easily. The vine wasn't in very far, and there was only a superficial flesh wound. There wasn't bleeding much, either.

The starfish was gone now. Off to find an easier victim, he guessed. A sigh of relief, and then he remembered Kara. Shit! He scanned the area looking for her tracks. Finding them a moment later, he grabbed the shotgun from where it had fallen in the sand and dashed off in that direction. Whatever had taken Kara was much bigger than the starfish. Its tracks looked vaguely dog-like, but with a very wide gait. This thing was the size of a lion and there it was, just up ahead.

It was eating Kara's leg. It took its time like the starfish. It was licking the wound, savouring the flavour, crunching the bone a little at a time. Kara was mercifully unconscious. This thing preferred its meal fresh, eating her alive. Now that he could see what it looked like, it was indeed some sort of dog. Very big and mangy, it was something like a Rottweiler with patchy, short brown hair, and a big, wet nose. Unlike any dog Rick had seen, this thing had three rows of teeth and claws the size of steak knives.

He leveled the shot gun and moved closer. He wanted short range. He didn't want to get Kara with any stray buck. He would never forgive himself if he caused her even a moment's pain. He already had his doubts about doing anything with that leg. He was no doctor, but he knew some common sense survival stuff he'd seen on television. He knew he'd have to tie the leg off to stop any bleeding.

The doggyish beast turned toward him, but it didn't seem to fear him at all, even let him get close. Close enough to be dangerous. Rick stopped a few metres away. It looked up at him growling, completely unaware that the thing in Rick's hands was a gun, and it certainly didn't know what it could do. In this case, the shotgun from five feet away made a considerable hole in the beast's bulbous face. It fell to the side without a fight, or even so much as a whimper.

Rick rushed over the Kara. Her leg didn't bleed much at all — very slowly, anyway. He wiped at the back of his neck, it was also still bleeding, but very slowly. Weird, he thought, surprisingly calm considering Kara was missing a leg from the knee down and was thoroughly passed out from the pain. After tying her leg with his belt, he slid underneath her in the sand and cradled her head, rocking her

gently and waiting for her to wake up.

Is this hell? he thought.

The dead beast stank something awful and Rick tried to push it away with his foot, but didn't have much success. It weighed at least a few hundred pounds. He was alone for the time being and he couldn't help thinking of Sarah, her bright little smile, her innocence. He was glad she was far from this place. Safe with her mother back home, at least he could count on that. Rick passed out a few minutes later.

21

It was a gruesome display of brutal power, but Henry held his tongue. The abomination, Azureal, continued with its own brand of ceremonial magick, abusive and penetrating like an infection, but it claimed it was necessary. It involved the deaths of innocent young girls, yet Henry did not hinder the demon. There was a greater good to be served, he told himself, and the whole universe was at stake. It only needed the blood and entrails to draw its circle, not their souls. What was flesh compared to the possible destruction of all life, and Henry took care to guide the spirits to a kindly fate.

He stood back while Azureal put the final touches on its demon gate. Henry wasn't sure how this kind of magick worked — it was so alien from his own studies, but he watched intently, hoping to glean some idea of its method. He was used to manipulating energy directly, the method old magicks that Ithliam favoured. Demons used living matter...the fresher, and unfortunately, younger the material, the more powerful the effect.

Beyond the initial components involved, Azureal's magick seemed somewhat innate. It was almost as though its spark came from within, rather than from the surrounding plane. Was the demon connected to its home dimension even as it traveled other worlds? Was that the source of its power, or was it manifesting on the material plane as an avatar, remotely administered from the safety of whatever burning hell it came from? If the body was destroyed, perhaps the cunning monster simply shook its ego and conjured another.

Azureal walked a smooth circle, weaving silken lines of power from the surrounding walls and anchoring them to the centre of the circle. Its magick seemed to depend on the shape and size of its web. Henry briefly wondered how this creature could fashion such a complex, and some might say, beautiful structure, when all it had ever known was ugliness and brutality. It reminded him of threaded crystal sparkling in the rain.

By the time the web was nearly finished, Henry had already prepared his own protective magicks. He was concerned they might face unknown resistance. The corruption of dark Ithliam oozed across the land they were about to travel. Even for a demon, there would be risks. The gray ash canopy would surely try to absorb them both given the chance, and his mentor, the kindly Ithliam of the present, was not safe in Azureal's presence either. The demon might still feel that an Ithliam was an Ithliam and choose not to acknowledge the finer details.

Invisibly, Henry had woven his own spells beneath his obscuring robes. He had no need of components, having discarded those kinds of limitations years ago. Ithliam had taught him the true magick, the basis of the material plane. Atomic energy coursed through him, gathering impossible mass in a protective shield around himself. His magicks were drawn from the space between spaces, available to him anywhere and anytime.

There was also the possibility that the demon was trying to trick him, maybe even trap him. Foolish as that would be, it was what spiders did, draw flies into beautiful webs and then eat them at their leisure. So long as he traveled with this creature, he would have to remain completely vigilant. It was only a

matter of time before its nature would defeat its common sense. It might need Henry now, but should it ever feel otherwise, Henry was prepared.

He and Azureal had used Ithliam's battle room for the bloody ritual. Henry had added to the protections already in place while the demon had gone out to find living blood. No magus beneath Henry's level would ever find that place. To all outward appearances, even to the most advanced scientific device, the Asylum was an empty ruin, a decaying idea. To the naked eye, there was only crumbling brick and random debris. If his magicks held as he knew they would, Henry had several years to return, decades even to clean up the mess.

Azureal had returned several hours later with two young girls, mostly alive but dying, each under a grotesque, leathery arm. It killed indiscriminately, coldly, and without pleasure. Slaughter came easily to the sinister beast, habitually like any corner store butcher. However, corruption was its true desire — its version of real fun. This was simply necessary, a means to an end. Under different circumstances, the abomination thought it might like to spend more time on this world. There was much fun to be had here.

“Are you ready yet, demon?” Henry was eager to get on with it. The sooner they left, the sooner he'd return and deal with these tanks, a task he intended to accomplish alone.

His black liquid robes crept toward the edges of the demon gate, attracted to its aura. It sensed great danger, and yet a provocative energy potential. Henry seemed content to let the robe do as it pleased, having long ago earned his trust.

“Yes,” Azureal growled, there was clear menace in its hollow voice. “Enter the circle.”

To hesitate was to show weakness, and if there was one thing you didn't do in front of a demon, it was to show weakness. So it was without hesitation that Henry stepped forward into the magickal web. If the abomination could smile, it was surely doing so now, expectant, hardly believing that Henry had so easily walked into the trap. It laughed a loud, high-pitched whine like a jackal. This was a dimension gate, but not to Ithliam's prison world. Azureal followed.

Once he crossed the threshold, Henry confirmed his suspicions. The demon had sent them to one of the obscure planes of fire. Bizarre creatures of all different sizes scurried like insects across mountainous rock on all sides. There was no sky, instead, crater-like abrasions marred the underbelly of some massive black serpent, hardly visible to a microbe like him. He was either very small, or the serpent was very large. Henry expected the latter.

“Welcome to my home, Henry. You will obey me now.” The demon bellowed — it had grown ten times in size, no longer restricted by the rules of the material plane. The walls surrounding them had fallen away, replaced by hellish flames and blistering heat. The stench of sulfur hit Henry like a punch to the gut. He swooned, dizzy and disoriented, but it soon passed as his protections adapted. They were falling, but not as fast as they should be. Different plane meant different rules.

He looked down at what appeared to be an endless ocean of blood, boiling and steaming, and slowly coming closer as they fell towards it. Azureal towered over him, dripping mocking laughter. It glowed like an ember with more legs, teeth and malevolence than anything Henry had seen before. To describe the incomparable was to wallow in folly — this demon was a lord of its kind, reigning supreme within its domain. Even now, its brethren, lining blackened stone ledges, cowered at Azureal's power, careful not to interfere with its interests.

Though several winged devils circled above, hoping to catch a stray piece as Henry would soon be torn apart, they were careful not to come too close for fear that Azureal would turn its anger their way. The demon lord reached its claws toward Henry, grabbing him on every limb, and at his midsection, intent

on eviscerating him. The demon expected to free Henry's energies, to release a shower of charged particles.

"No. I think not." Henry's magick shot out at blinding speed, unhindered by the demon lord's grip — a red wound appeared on Azureal's massive girth and started to spread. While the demon squeezed, Henry smiled at the futility: he was harder than any diamond and far beyond the strength of this minor deity. With a small effort of will, Henry expanded his size only the slightest bit, but the point was made and each demon claw holding him cracked and broke, as the demon weakened from magickal infection.

Azureal struggled to be free as the wound spread across the rest of its body, but Henry's magick was simply too strong, too quick. It roared in pain and terror it hadn't thought possible, not in its own world. It was helpless and vulnerable in its own harsh environment. There was no mercy, a demon was tempered in fire and its hide was thick. The crushing gravity made it strong, and the strongest survived to rule the weak.

Henry was the master and he grabbed Azureal by the horns with both hands. It may have looked like he broke the devil's horns off like twigs on a dead tree, but underneath it all was a much more complex arrangement of magickal persuasions. Attack, defense, and counter-defense, the magus dueled the demon until every trick was turned. Most of his protections were breached by the time Henry pressed the final effort, but Azureal's hide had become thin, worn away by the forces colliding against it.

Ultimately, Azureal was defeated. Realizing the error too late, its magicks were swept away, incredibly, as they both plunged into the crimson, fiery ocean. For the first time since creation, the hellish dimension was near silent. The local creatures, large and small, watched in horror as their ruler met oblivion. The echoes of the demon's broken whimpers were the last thing they heard.

22

Denim and Kas looked at each other for a long time. Nether said a word or took their eyes off each other. Having just watched the video, Kas understood the shock Denim must be feeling — it couldn't be much different from his own feelings. He was still caught somewhere between disbelief and a dull, disturbed helplessness. What does a man do about a situation so far out of his element that he's not even sure it's real? Kas was a real guy. He liked the direct approach to real situations.

It was Denim who spoke first, kind of. It was more like a choked gasp. Her mouth hung open like a fish gasping for air yet it couldn't breathe. Tears welled up in her eyes, but they hadn't spilled over yet. Her skin was pale like fresh sheets, and her hands formed abridged fists, nails digging into the couch cushion. It's not over yet, she was thinking.

Kas thought she was about to lose it and who could blame her? "Look, Den — "

She cut him off with a raised hand, palm out. She stood and walked into the kitchen. When she returned, she was composed, the tears were gone, and in her hands were a couple of drinks. Red wine. Kas didn't drink red wine, and it was early morning anyway, but he wasn't about to argue with her. He took the glass she pushed at him and sipped at it. She downed hers all at once. Then there was silence again, lasting a few minutes at least.

"I recognized that man, Kas. He has a bookstore just off downtown, by the dried-up pond. You know where I mean?" She looked at him, pleading. She needed him to know where she meant.

He did know and he nodded. He could feel his anger rising. He used to pass that store all the time growing up, but he wasn't much of a reader.

"Rick and I would stop by there from time to time. I'd buy one of those pocket fantasy novels and Rick would go straight to the magazine rack. Computers, computers, and more computers." Denim was

pacing back and forth now, she was very nervous. Kas was still sitting watching her, thinking about what was about to happen. He was already visualizing what he was going to make happen.

“Well, I’m going there now, then.” Kas rose to his feet.

“Be careful, Kas — did you see his arms? He’s not human. I’ve never seen him look that way. He was always a tall, thin man, but on the video...he’s some kind of monster.”

Kas wasn’t worried. He was a stronger, more cunning man than Rick, and much harder to sneak up on. He was going to wring the neck of the sicko on the video and shake him until everything he wanted to know fell out.

“I’ll be careful. Give me your keys, I need your car.”

“Over there, hanging by the door.” She pointed in that general direction. “It’s the blue set, take ’em. Take Rick’s cell with you, too.” She hopped over and showed him quickly how to make or accept a call. She felt momentum building, they were getting somewhere at last.

“Okay, Denim, I’ll call you when I know more.”

He didn’t say goodbye. He just left, grabbed the keys on the way out the door, and drove straight to the bookstore. It was a bombed out pile of rubble. He stopped the car. There’d been a fire and it looked recent, maybe the last day or so. The familiar smell of bonfire pervaded the area and the sidewalk out front was covered in ash, soot and charred debris. Both levels of the store were hollowed and most of the brick wall had caved in on the far east side.

It’d been one of the original homes in Regina, a hundred years or older, converted into a store before Kas had even been born. As old as the city, it was in the memory of everyone who lived here. Now it was just a black pit, some rocks and melted glass. For a moment, he was sorry he’d never bothered to come here before. He knew Rick liked it, but it just wasn’t his kind of place.

He left the car and walked around to the back of the charred shell. The door was burned out, so he walked into the interior easily enough. The second floor and ceiling were all but gone completely. He could look right up at the clouds. This was good, he thought, now, he could see better. He shook his head. He knew there was nothing to see and turned to go. Anything of value was lost in the fire — how could this be anything other than deliberate? Even crazy psychos knew how to cover their tracks when they needed to and fire was so thorough.

Surprised, he caught a twinkle with his eye as he turned. In the corner of the little room off to the side was a little something. It was shiny, but covered in debris. He kicked the black wood and ember-licked hardcover books out of his way as he very slowly worked himself over to that part of the room. He was being careful, he knew the floor could give at any moment, and there were nails and sharp glass everywhere.

He’d stepped on a nail as a kid walking through a field, he recalled. He’d taken a step just like the many before, but he remembered the time his foot hadn’t come up off the ground so easily. He’d looked down and saw that he’d stepped on a board and a big rusty nail had gone deep into his foot. It hadn’t even hurt, but he remembered the sick feeling in his gut. He shuddered and was careful not to repeat the same mistake.

A few feet away, he could see it was bigger than he thought. It was about half the size of a man, but flat, like a mirror with fine metallic edges, smooth and copper. Where he expected to see smashed silvery glass, he saw a solid amber crystal surface, unblemished by the fire. It was shiny and reflective, but not quite like a mirror. Must be some kind of display piece, he thought. He brushed the debris away and lifted the object from the ground.

It didn't weigh much at all, a couple pounds at most, and it was beautiful. The copper was clear, a subdued orange-red. He set it against the wall, and quickly scanned for anything else. Something gnawed at the back of his mind. It was odd that this one item would survive without a scratch on it. Not a single burn, no warping of the metal, not even soot. This thing was spotless, and the amber crystal surface...what kind of material was that?

Continuing his search, he found a thick leather shoulder bag containing a book not far from where he'd lifted the mirror. He took out the book — it seemed very old, but it was also, like the amber mirror, untouched by the fire. Time had been kind to it. Though the leather that bound it looked old, he wondered if it was really old. The pages were made of some kind of cloth, yellowish, but not from age so much as the natural colour of the cloth. The book was a strange object like the mirror. Leafing through it, he saw that the words made no sense. He didn't even recognize the letters. Arabic maybe? They didn't look Chinese, he'd seen enough to know in kung fu movies growing up.

His fingers stopped on a page with a picture. It was a finely painted rendering of the amber mirror. He was sure of it. The frame was identical, but in the picture, the mirror was hung on some kind of obelisk — a tall, dark rock jutted out from the desert, surrounded by gray sand. There were words under the painting, but again, they were letters he didn't recognize.

Kas took a deep breath. This was getting crazy. Monster serial killers, strange objects of unknown origin. A great mystery just waiting to be solved, but why'd it have to be so personal? Why'd it have to involve his brother? This was no game, he reminded himself. He stuffed the book back in the bag. Then, after a moment of insight, he found the mirror would fit it in the bag as well. They were a set. He lifted them onto his shoulder. The bag with its contents weighed practically nothing — even less than when outside the bag, impossible. He headed for the door.

Again, he was careful. He didn't even stub a toe as he got to the back door and stepped out of the shadows. As soon as he was in sunlight, the bag grew hot on his shoulder, and heavy, very heavy. He stumbled back in through the door, into the shade, where the bag was weightless again and cool to the touch. He tried again. Same result. As soon as the bag, book and mirror felt sunlight, they'd change. Kas immediately knew this was not technology, but instead some kind of...magick.

He knew that intuitively that he couldn't leave these behind. He hadn't a clue as to what use they were, but they were his now, and they always would be. He'd never let them out of his sight. Not while Rick was still out there. He needed to know what happened to his little brother, whether he could help or not, and he just knew these strange objects were part of that. So he shuffled back over to the inner wall, and made himself comfortable in the shade. He'd wait all day, until the sun went down if he had to.

Clutching the leather bag at his stomach, he blinked and found he didn't feel like opening his eyes again just yet. He'd resisted sleep all night, always on the move, always one or two steps behind whatever was going on. Sleep had finally caught up to him, and he was grateful.

23

The skeletal Mr. King watched Rick shoot the hellhound in the face. The darkness was no barrier to his dull, glowing green "eyes." The woman, Kara, was unconscious. Now was the chance to finish his hunt. Rick put the gun down. He was holding Kara. The fool, King laughed inside. He'd put down the gun.

Mr. King was far too weak to win a direct confrontation. He'd used those other monsters to do his hard work for him. He was, frankly, surprised to see Rick and Kara survive it, but Rick was proving very resilient. He just couldn't seem to kill the motherfucker. Like a cockroach.

He walked slowly toward Rick and Kara and the shotgun that lay in the sand a few metres away. A

dirty gun in the sand, he thought. Would it even fire? Did it matter? Rick was busy crying, pleading for Kara to wake up, wake up.

As long as I don't make any noise, King thought, I can approach them. Were Rick's eyes closed? Ha ha, they were, look at that — they were clenched tightly together. Rick had passed out. Mr. King slipped into dangerously close territory, dragging his balance leg, but without a sound. Slow and steady. He reached for the shotgun.

24

The galactic dark man awoke from his deep trance. He sensed that Ithliam was close now, very close, and grown even more powerful. Was he coming for him at long last? He gazed across the universe searching, but still Ithliam was hidden. The impact of his many actions was evident to the Ancient Darkness's omniscient awareness, but his location remained a closely guarded secret.

“Where are you? Are you afraid to face me? Show yourself!”

But there was no response — Ithliam was still out there, and the challenge remained open. Even that strange white light was absent. Had the white light lied, was Ithliam not coming at all? No, there was no deception. He could feel Ithliam gaining power with each cosmic breath. He was coming and soon. The lonely god would wait. What choice did he have?

25

The cell phone woke Kas abruptly from his shallow sleep. Gentle breezes had covered him with black dust. He coughed as he awoke. At first, it had vibrated and he didn't know what was going on, then, he heard the ring and remembered where he was. He took the phone from his pocket, pressed the talk icon, and placed it near his ear.

“Kas? Where are you?” It was Denim.

“I'm at the bookstore.” He rubbed his eyes, noticing he was completely covered in soot. He coughed again.

“What are you still doing there? It's getting late.”

The bag! It was safe. He still held it tightly against his side. Looking at his watch, it was a quarter past eight. He'd slept almost ten hours. He blinked, and he was a little bit nauseous. He wasn't nearly as exhausted as before and was really hungry. Did he dream? He didn't remember dreaming. It was dark. Night had come — that's what mattered. He stood up.

“Look, Denim, I can't explain right now, but I found something. It doesn't make much sense yet, but I'll call you soon.”

“Damn it, Kas! You tell me what you found.” She was desperate, she hadn't slept like him. He could hear it in her voice. She was almost shrill and breathing heavily. He thought it over.

“Okay. Meet me at Jeff's Cafe. I'm broke, so bring some money, I'm hungry. I'll be there in an hour.”

“I'll need to get a sitter. If I'm late, you wait, goddamn it. I'll get there.” She hung up.

She wasn't late, she was right on time. Maybe she'd waited outside for the very minute of the hour. He'd been there awhile, already trying to make sense of the strange book. It had many pictures, each painted by hand on that unusual yellow cloth. The rich textures of the paintings gave off a three-dimensional effect, even though this was no high-tech gizmo. This book was old, from way before computers and printers — he was sure of that as he was of anything. He didn't know why, though. Both the book and the mirror, and the bag for that matter, showed not a single sign of wear. It was like they were new, but their style was ancient.

Denim sat on the other side of the table. They were way in the back, in the shadows. Rick had picked this spot because it was dark and he didn't want the book, mirror and bag to grow hot and heavy like they did in the sunlight. Most of the other customers were near the front. Not that it was busy. A few people were drinking coffee, minding their own business. It was quiet and it had good coffee.

Rick knew she would need good coffee. He was just finishing his first cup. He motioned to the waitress to bring him more and another cup for Denim.

She waited for Kas to speak, so he laid it all out. He showed her the mirror, its amber surface, its exquisite frame. He showed her the book with its strange letters and amazing paintings of bizarre worlds and creatures. He also showed her the smooth leather bag that the book and the mirror fit so snugly within. A perfect set always meant to be together.

"What does it all mean?" Denim asked him. She went through the first cup of coffee in minutes and then called for more. The waitress left a thermo-pitcher full of the stuff along with the eggs Kas had ordered.

"I don't know. I feel that we're close, though. I feel like these items are important. We have to figure out how to use them. I think Rick is caught up in something big, bigger maybe than just him, bigger than any of us."

"What's all this got to do with Rick? It's something to do with Mr. King, isn't it? I found out he's been around for a long, long time. As far as I can tell, he was around even when I was a little girl. My father remembered him, said he used to hear stories that Mr. King had just appeared one day...when my grandfather was young! He should be long dead by now!"

Finally Kas had a name to put to the face. Mr. King.

"I don't think he's human and I don't think he's from this world." Kas couldn't believe what he was saying. But he opened the book to a page of interest for Denim. One of the many paintings in the book showed a very tall, thin man looking up at a huge wall of deep amber crystal, spiraling up into the sky. In one hand he had a thick chisel, in the other, a hammer. An empty frame, like the one surrounding the amber mirror, lay at his feet.

"I think he was using this mirror to see into other worlds. I think he can go to those worlds...if he can see them," said Kas.

This was crazy what he was saying, thought Denim. She'd seen the video from the parkade, but could she believe in the impossible?

"How do you know this?"

He turned to another page. This time it showed what looked like a giant carved rock carved altar. On that rock, bound by hand and foot, a man lay writhing in agony. There was a dark gray ash canopy surrounding him. The man looked a lot like Rick.

Denim's breath caught in her throat.

"You think he's taken Rick to this place? Oh, my god, what's he going to do to him?"

Kas didn't want to say it, but it was likely that this had already happened. His anger rose at the thought.

"We should prepare for the worst on this, Denim. He may already be dead." He thought of Cole, how hard it had been to lose him and now Rick, too. Denim had her face in her hands.

"But in case he isn't. In case we can do something, we need to figure out how to use this mirror, how to get over to the other side." He saw her lift up her head. "I'm gonna kill that monster, Denim, whether I can save my brother or not."

Denim looked hard at the words under the painting. Strange nonsensical letters, and what of this mirror, what could it do? How did they see into other worlds with it?

“Kas, I can read these words.”

“What. How?”

“Look in the mirror.”

Goddamn, she’s right, thought Kas. There they were, clear as day in the reflection, sentences and phrased incantations in plain English.

“No fucking way!”

26

Bodiless Mr. King raised the shotgun and pointed it at the couple not more than a few metres away. He backed up a bit to get a better aim and to protect himself from a sudden dash should Rick get feisty again like back at the car. After careful thought, untying him had been a bad idea. Usually, when they’d already pissed themselves, they weren’t a problem, but he hadn’t even seen the punch coming. Oh, well. Hindsight....

“Did you really think you’d get away from me?” Mr. King’s raspy disembodied voice swam across the air. “I told you not to run — it was a waste of time, but I guess a man like you wants every minute he can get.” He wanted Rick to see his beaming smile, but some things weren’t meant to be.

With satisfaction, he saw Rick snap his head up and look with startled horror. King could only imagine what he must seem like. Seeing a frail, charred, headless skeleton, carrying a big single-barrel shotgun pointed right at him. He chuckled, if only he still had lips, his grin would split his face ear to ear.

“How — “

“Don’t strain yourself, Rick, I just walked on up here and took it. You were so busy fussin’ over your little plaything there.” Kara was still out cold.

Rick dagger-eyed him with pure hatred. Mr. King laughed out loud at this sweet victory. He could smell his meal already, the sweat sautéing of his succulent flesh. Should he cook him all at once in a big pot or a little bit at a time? Maybe raw like the old days — keep him alive and take a strip of flesh here and there. Or throw him on the barbecue and have a cookout with some friends. He laughed a weak croaking sound, he had no friends. His type didn’t work well with others.

“Now, come on, Rick, you get up now. She’ll keep. I came for you, not her. Tell ya what. Give me no trouble and I’ll leave her alive instead of shooting you both.”

He knew they were already dead, but he meant alive in this dead world. It wouldn’t do to have Rick get away again, reborn on some living planet, or reawakened on some other dead one. Eating him was symbolic, while it was his eternal soul he truly craved. He’d absorb it through the ritual and live another hundred years — his ghoulish body renewed, young with his memory and motives intact.

“Come on, come on, I’m getting bored and I’d like to get on with it.”

Rick slipped out from under Kara, and rose slowly to his feet, eyeing the shotgun thoughtfully.

“You know what, Mr. King, I do believe you’re going have to shoot me.”

“What?” He meant it, there was no fear in this man’s eyes. He even looked a little amused. Headless Mr. King didn’t understand. Why would Rick want to be shot at close range by a shotgun, it didn’t make sense. “Come on now, no fooling, let’s go.”

“I said, shoot me.” Rick started walking toward him.

Mr. King backed up a little and aimed lower, at Rick’s legs — he didn’t want to kill him like this — and pulled the trigger. There was a click, nothing more.

The chamber was empty. Rick hadn’t reloaded after shooting the hellhound. He grabbed the gun, turned it around and swung it into Mr. King as hard as he could. Just like the thick metal pipe, he thought. And just like the pipe, it smashed into Mr. King, doing terminal damage. In this case, the frail charred remains shattered. Black flakes and bone fragments flew everywhere in a cloud of soot. An ethereal scream left the charred bones behind. The dull green eye orbs flew apart, landing a few feet away from each other in the sand.

Rick didn’t wait for the spectre to rise, he poured a glass bottle of water out over the ashes and bone fragments, then scooped up the green points in the bottle. He placed the cap back on, squeezing it tight. Trapped Mr. King wailed helplessly in the bottle, his “eyes” flaring brighter, and he tried to press against the glass towards freedom. It wasn’t happening. Rick held up the bottle and looked closely at everything that remained of Mr. King.

“This won’t hold me! You hear me, Rick? I’ll never stop coming for you. I’ll never stop — “

Digging a hole a few feet down into the sand, Rick buried the bottle. Mr. King tried to yell, but only managed a pitiful muffled groan and all he could see now was sand. The genie in the lamp, he thought. Don’t rub it, though — this genie will kill and eat you. Rick backed up a few steps before falling on his ass. Was it over for now? How could Mr. King be a threat to them now?

“He’ll escape given time,” Kara said from behind him. She was awake. She rubbed her knee, letting her fingers explore where her lower leg had been and the wound that remained seething.

“Kara!” Rick crawled over and hugged her close to him. He could smell her sweetness and she could feel him shaking a little. Was this love? He soaked it up like a lizard in the sun. He kissed her like he’d meant to back at the Deathly Wall. It was a long, wet kiss that she returned eagerly. Yes, this was love, an old love. They held each other for a long time. They weren’t safe, but they didn’t care. It was their time and who could say how much time they had left.

27

There was a chamber sealed tightly under a great ash tree, surrounded by canopy and shadow for miles around. There was no door to this chamber and no windows. Yet to this obscure place there was a path, hidden in the canopy, only for those who knew the way. And for those who knew the way, they had to have the tools necessary to accomplish the journey.

In the distance, a great golden oak tree stood high, watching over the canopy. She watched warily, afraid all the time, for her champion, Ithliam, had not returned from his journey to the source. She could no longer feel his life force. The gray ash was blocking her efforts, preventing her from seeing within its domain. Where was he? Had he completed his journey? He wasn’t dead, she was convinced. She’d have felt his spirit leave for the wall of the dead.

The great confrontation would begin soon — the evil ones would come for her golden power. They’d bleed this first-of-all planets dry, and then use her power source to create a singularity. Against her will, but bound by her nature, she would gather the forces of life everywhere into one capable of standing before the galactic dark man. The battle would destroy everything she’d worked so hard to create in all these billions of years since the beginning of existence.

She knew what Ithliam was, her first attempt at life, the unfortunate recipient of her early mistakes. She’d corrected that mistake, given him a soul, given him all the things she’d given all life since and

nothing more. Had that been a mistake as well? Had it not been enough? She felt responsible for all his early destruction. She was pleased he felt that responsibility, too. He had become a worthy champion against the coming troubles, but again, was it enough?

Long ago, she'd made the first Ithliam from her own golden cloth, not born so much as made. He was to be a protector of life to come and to guide her children into the unknown darkness of space. How he had disappointed her, grown hungry for power with the passage of time. She had realized too late — his immortality was his downfall and that with time, he had cared less and less about noble deeds.

Though she'd learned from her mistake and granted all other life the gift of death, Ithliam had gone beyond her influence. Laying waste to countless worlds, absorbing energies never meant to be focused so precisely into a single being. He was bent, not on ruling the universe, but being the universe. All of it, every atom, every particle, every speck of existence he would add to his already massive condition.

From a time before death, Ithliam had no soul and could multiply infinitely like a cell divides, driven by his clear purpose. Predictable, yes, and nearly all-powerful — those who faced him fell away, provoking further tyranny as his power simply intensified. She'd marveled at the odds when a lone champion killed the first Ithliam at her very feet with nothing more than a mechanical device and timing. That was the key after all to everything it seemed — timing.

The golden mother reflected on this lesson. Perhaps there was still time after all. She'd set things in motion and would wait until the end of things. Her children would save this world or no one would. Patience. It was no longer hers alone to fight for. She'd created a concept greater than herself, greater than life. It was something born of the countless relationships amongst all things, a cosmic family. Whether known or unknown, felt or unfelt, all life was bound by this familiar relationship.

With this final thought, she sent a golden beam up into the sky and beyond through space. She knew this would call the galactic dark man and remaining Ithliams to her. It would reveal her hidden location to everything in the universe capable of recognizing the signal, but she knew it was right even as she did it. She would not only attract evil, but also the good and natural. Good or bad, they were all family and it was time for a reunion.

This is where her children should return, to the source of all life so she could marvel upon her creations one last time. The beam grew thicker, brighter, and vibrations radiated from it through all things. No one worthy could mistake it, not on any plane, not in any dimension. And none did — in an act of unity not seen in all the long years of existence, the spirit of every living thing and some not so living turned towards her.

And then she knew that the remaining dark Ithliams weren't responding and neither was her champion, a shadow of awareness, nothing more from the true and first Ithliam. There was only one explanation for that — the gray ash canopy. It was the only thing that could shield itself from her universal call. It had no need for the enticements she offered — where she offered life and death, the gray ash offered annihilation. All consuming, it craved eternal night and nothingness.

Just beyond her senses, the dark tree was feeding power into five dark Ithliams, creating its own warriors to protect its interests in the events to come. Torturing the true Ithliam with knowledge, it forced him to watch the process. The gray ash drained away his will gradually, methodically. Soon there'd be nothing left as even the first Ithliam would succumb eventually to despair.

His staff was broken and lost in the desert. Any useful magickal energies were long ago tapped by the shadows that stripped him of his humility one piece at a time. Only one thought kept Ithliam together and resistant — Henry. He was out there still, the gray ash hadn't captured him and neither had the other Ithliams. There was still hope for life.

As the golden beam from the oak tree cut through the skies, the one true Ithliam smiled, barely sensing the golden mother's call even as the gray ash tightened its grip. Henry would come now, he sighed, and when he did, the gray ash would reveal the source of evil to him. Henry was ready, well-trained and powerful.

The white Ithliam, in a final act of defiance, released his spirit beyond the domain of this forsaken place. A bright, glowing point of blue energy began its journey out across the desert, seeking its place within the wall. He was part of nature as he was always meant to be, and grateful for the smallest things as he finally died the true death. Peace at last, well-earned — he was grateful for it.

28

Thick as crude oil, the boiling ocean of blood consumed them both. Henry's liquid black robes wrapped him in a sphere of pure mana, keeping him safe from even the slightest harmful effect. The demon was not quite as lucky. Hell spared no one, it was said, and that was never more true than now as its flesh melted away and its bones powdered under the immense force of the crimson bath. If not for Henry's thoughtful preparation, he, too, would have already been dead, and his soul likely trapped on this plane until the end of days.

As it was, he already felt himself rising back to the surface. Like an insulated wire, the chaotic energies of this place flowed over him harmlessly. As he broke through the surface, his robe unwrapped and revealed to him all the wonders of the lower dimensions — their diabolic calculi belonged to him now.

Islands of porous rock glowing with ethereal power lined the horizon. The magnetic fields were visibly crashing against each other, refracting every colour Henry had ever known and some new ones as well. There were consequences to killing a greater demon in its layer...power.

Henry marveled at the beauty. He was surrounded by energy in a constant state of conversion and each form had its own wondrous colour like no other. His mind expanded and new layers of existence became known to him. He could "see" the connections amongst all things, physical or otherwise. He realized the unity of matter and energy, and the illusion of space and time. Henry understood singularity and the futility of power, and the great dance between nothingness and something.

Meaning was in the moment, the action and the intent. There were no accidents, no unforgivable mistakes and no ugliness. He understood it all in a flash of golden light. Mother was calling. The true Ithliam was dead, his staff broken in the desert where shadows had finally caught up to him. He gained perspective and knew it was time to go home — not for his mentor, but for existence herself.

Silently and with deliberate care, Henry rose through the great demon-lined fissure. The demons screamed and heckled with outstretched arms, clawing and raking the sulphuric fumes. Helplessly, they watch him move up beyond their grasp to some fantastical world their kind would never see. He closed his eyes in a solemn moment of mourning for his beloved mentor, but wished him well in his long journey. In time they would meet again.

"I will protect our sacred golden tree, my friend — I will find a way," he said out loud.

The quantum fuzz of reality was revealed to Henry in that moment as an endless tapestry of infinitely small threads. It was present everywhere and in all things, yet invisible to even the most powerful magus. There was no creature born with its knowledge, no spell book capable of conjuring it. Only the realization of its undeniable truth could unlock the ability to travel its pathways and to adjust reality within its elegant rules.

Henry reached out his hand, not because he had to, but because it reminded him of his material roots. He'd earned the luxury of style and could act as he pleased, and it pleased him to remain in essentially

human form.

With his outreached hand, he plucked an invisibly small string, and it silently vibrated. The universe changed and Henry stood before the golden tree. She recognized him, immediately — the man with the gun. He'd killed Ithliam all those years ago and without even realizing it, saved Ithliam and the universe because of it. Even now, she could sense his true nature. The nobility of enlightenment surrounded him with the serenity of a god. There would be others, to be sure, but today was his. Today, Henry would save the world.

29

“We’ve been here for an hour, maybe the book is wrong,” said Kas. They’d left the coffee shop when Denim insisted they go to the cemetery. It was one of those contemporary burial parks where most people end up in urns, not in the ground. Still, it felt creepy being in a cemetery at night. It gave Kas the shivers. He put a shiny rock on a stone marker just to be safe — the last thing he needed was a restless spirit haunting him. He didn’t really expect that kind of superstitious nonsense to work anyway, but then again, things had changed recently.

“It’s what the book says. We need to be in a place of the dead. The amber wall on the other side will resonate with the dead left behind here and then a conduit can be made,” Denim replied. She had figured out that the reflection of the letters in the amber mirror reshaped the words into whatever language worked best for the one viewing them. When they each looked at the same time, they were given different words, but with the same meaning.

In the short time they’d known this, Denim had read the book all the way through. She considered herself an expert now on this whole situation. Kas was glad for it. He didn’t like to read much and her company was pleasant. All this didn’t seem so overwhelming now that Denim was on board.

“Fine, fine.” We’re crazy, he thought, a couple of loons swimming in a lake. “But it also says that at the right spot, the mirror will glow and give us a way through.”

As if on queue, the leather bag got very heavy very quickly and a dull, throbbing yellow glow was cast off the surface of the amber mirror. Kas pulled the shiny disk out of the bag and set it down just before it got too heavy to move. It was beautiful. If they weren’t so anxious to get to Rick and deal with Mr. King, they might have stayed longer just looking at the mirror, but once they realized the door was open, they held hands and jumped through.

There was a flash of light and then silence. A distant echo of strange vibrations, colour and force, and then nothing for a long moment.

On the other side, it was also night, but there were no stars. The faint glow of the amber wall, and the dull yellow light throbbing from the mirror were their only guides. Kas shook himself. This was real. Even though they’d gone to the graveyard and everything, some part of him didn’t think anything was going to happen. Or hoped maybe he was going nuts and none of this was real, but it was.

“Holy sheep shit! It worked! I don’t believe it,” said Denim, who usually didn’t curse. She had fallen on her ass and was wiping sand off her jeans. She had a little girl, but she had just been teleported to a planet billions or trillions of miles away from her own. Suddenly, she was sick and threw up.

It was deadly quiet all around. The amber wall expressed a faint rumble, but it seemed constant and non-threatening. Kas jumped back, startled. He just noticed that there were rows upon rows of bodies — human adults and children — also what looked like alien creatures and monsters. This was unlike anything he had ever experienced or seen, even watching television. The beings in the wall all looked to be asleep or in some sort of swoon, yet they were all looking out at some distant place. As he looked closer, it became obvious that everyone in the wall was slowly dissolving, and most were being crushed

down within the crystal. He found it fascinating like a car accident.

“We better get moving,” Denim said as she wiped her mouth and got to her feet. She had very little spit left and her lips felt like cotton. “The mirror should get brighter in the direction of the altar. She picked it up and turned it until she had her bearings straight. “All right, Kas, this way — the book said we’d come out close by.”

“How close is close according to the book?” he muttered, but he walked over to her just the same. “Let’s finish this.”

They walked far away from the wall, but kind of at an angle. Then the wall seemed to twist and turn. After a while, Kas had lost all concept of their position from where they’d started, and was relying completely on the amber mirror. It was leading now. They walked for a long time, neither was really sure how long. Kas checked his watch, it indicated it was midnight. It seemed to work as usual, in this world, it was only good for measuring how much time had passed. It was always night.

They went on like this for several hours at least. They didn’t get hungry, they didn’t get thirsty — they just kept walking. Always holding the mirror, Kas also carried the leather bag and book. He figured he was the physically stronger, he should do most of the lifting, though neither of them seemed to feel any fatigue at all.

Suddenly, Kas sprawled face first in the sand. He’d tripped over something. Upon looking, it appeared to be a tree branch, thick and long, some kind of golden oak. Then he noticed another golden branch it seemed, and another a few feet away. It was then he spotted the twisted fingers of the horrible gray ash canopy spreading slowly across the sand.

“Denim. Look. It’s moving!” All around them to either side, they saw dark branches. Only the way they’d came was clear and the way ahead.

“What does it mean?” she asked. Her voice trembled.

“It means we’re almost there.”

Kas picked up the two golden branches, thinking they’d make good walking sticks for them both. The branches were thick, and though one was shorter than the other, that suited them both just fine as Denim was a good foot shorter than Kas. He handed her the shorter branch which she took with a nod. Their new staffs felt warm to the touch, comforting them both.

They walked for another hour or so when they noticed the path was narrowing. The faint light given off by the mirror was enough to show they had only a few yards on either side. They better get there soon, Kas thought — he kept thinking about how those evil gray branches could swarm in at any moment. No one would care if he never came back — lots would be thankful — but Denim had a little girl at home. She needed a mommy. That’s when Kas felt stupid for bringing her. He should have thought of that earlier. What a stupid thing to do, but he kept it to himself. It was too late now, anyway.

They walked closer together and picked up the pace. They weren’t running, it was more of a fast walk. They stopped abruptly, Kas almost dropping the mirror, when they heard a noise up ahead — something like a snake hissing and bee buzzing at the same time. It was quiet at first, but getting louder as they approached.

“Get behind me, quickly!” Kas whispered harshly. Denim didn’t argue.

Kas took the mirror and held it out high in front of him like a glowing shield. He still couldn’t see what was making the noise. The mirror suddenly flared brighter, casting a beam of light conveniently in any direction he pointed. Up ahead were hundreds of butterfly like creatures. They had butterfly wings anyway, but had the bodies of praying mantises. They swarmed around something in the sand that

looked like an animal of some sort. A dog, maybe, but bigger than any dog he'd ever seen.

When the yellow light fell upon the downed animal, Kas could see clearly that it was dead and these insects were eating its remains. They were taking their time, too. Kas and Denim watched for a few minutes in grim fascination — they had barely gone through any of it. They were as slow as a canker worm on a leaf and even though there were many of them, they took their time and appeared to savour every little piece. There was no rush and no competition for food. It was almost like they ate more out of pleasure than need. This was nothing like the Discovery Channel.

“Can we go around?” asked Denim. The path had become a little wider here, they had maybe 30 yards width, and if they hugged the far side, maybe they'd get through without disturbing these things.

“We can try. I don't know what happens when these things figure out we're here. I mean if they killed that giant dog, we're in trouble.” He thought about the tall, thin Mr. King and Rick. He felt close.

“I think we should try. For Rick.” Denim was thinking about Rick, too.

So they tried. They hugged each other tight and circled around the scene as far as possible. They were right at the tree line and neither looked away from the butterflies. They just shuffled slowly and quietly along, until they were safely on the other side, able to continue down the path. They walked backwards for a time, just to keep watch on what was behind them.

It was when walking backwards that Kas tripped again. This time on something partially buried in the sand.

He went down to his knees and dug it out. He had tripped over an old bottle. It had its cap on, and looked empty except for a pair of green fireflies floating inside. Interesting, he thought. How'd these get in here? He popped the cap and the little green points of light shot out of the bottle with a vengeance off into the night.

“What was that all about?” Denim watched after the fireflies took off.

“I don't know. I tripped.” He had a bad feeling. Everything happens for a reason. He could sure use a cigarette. He'd quit months ago, but was thinking about picking up smoking again, all things considered.

They continued down the path.

30

Kara told a story while they walked. She told it like it would just pass the time, nothing more important than that. She spoke of a galactic dark man. Something bigger than planets, obsessed with the destruction of all life. She spoke like she believed it, but it sounded like cloud talk to Rick. She went on at length so he only grasped some of it. He wasn't much for fantasy stories. He was more of a science guy who liked to keep it real. He'd learned that lesson from his brother Kas. Maybe when he was puffing his pipe, this would be interesting. Damn, he wished he had some weed right now.

Rick let Kara put her arm around his neck and shoulders for support. They walked slowly, towards what? Rick, didn't know. Kara was leading them somewhere, but he didn't know where or what to expect. She wouldn't talk about it, only saying it'd be safer there. It wasn't far now. She wanted him to trust her. He did trust her. He trusted her completely.

She said the leg didn't hurt at all, though it wasn't healing, that the rules were different on a dead world from a living one. She said he needed to watch and learn the ways, but that in the end, she reminded him, he would die and she'd meet up with him again later. She never talked about how he died — he guessed it must have happened in different ways. Rick just assumed it was some random event that eventually got the better of him. Until lately, he thought Mr. King might have had something to do with

it.

So they walked. They couldn't see very far around them. Occasionally, they'd stray close to the path's edge and he'd see the gray ash branches snaking across the ground far off into the distance. They walked a sandy route through those branches. How long that'd been the case, he had no idea. They might have been heading into this path the moment they left the car.

"We're here." Kara stopped and Rick halted along with her.

"I don't see anything," he said. There seemed to be a ways ahead still. The path hadn't come to an end. "Where is 'here'?"

"The chamber of Ithliam is just a few hundred metres more."

"Ithliam?"

"Beneath the gray ash is a sealed room containing the power of Ithliam."

She'd mentioned this before, he now recalled while they walked, but he thought it was just a story. What did this so-called chamber have to do with anything? Rick didn't like mysteries. He preferred facts, especially the simple, self-evident kind. He thought of Denim. She always did the jeopardy thing when he was bored, ask him trivia questions for points to pass the time. Well, she used to anyway. He found he missed Denim, when he wasn't so angry.

He looked further ahead. Would he discover something in this chamber, something to help him get out of this place? This was one of those things Kara believed was real, that he thought was impossible. She'd been right before. He was careful to listen for truth in her words. Maybe things weren't as they seemed? He wanted to go home. He wanted to see his little girl. Could he take Kara with him? Could he get back or had a million years already come and gone back home for his family and his friends?

Kara was on her knee running her fingers through the dirt. She was tracing a large triangle, big enough to surround the two of them. She then traced a circle around the triangle, and a square around the circle. She finished with another circle around the square, and four smaller circles within the inner triangle, at each of the corners and the very centre.

"You stand in that circle there." She pointed to the left one as she stood using the shotgun as a crutch, "I'll use this one."

Rick went and stood in the indicated circle. This was like some old séance. Was she going to summon a demon? Talk with the dead? Could she contact Cole? He shook his head. It only seemed ridiculous, he told himself.

"If you get dizzy, close your eyes. Do not, whatever you do, do not leave the circle."

"Why?"

"You'll be killed instantly."

"By what?"

"The spirits of the damned, of course. Spirits similar to Mr. King. Those who are without body and those who still have something of a physical form. Those who cannot pass on from this hell to another, and those who by choices made, cannot reincarnate on a living world. The ceremony will attract them here. They'll feel the energies gather and as desperately as we seek the chamber, they'll seek us, hoping our life force will grant them a new life."

"Is that what we're doing here? A new life."

She hesitated and wouldn't look at him. She quickly busied herself again with the diagram in the sand.

What was that, he thought.

“What’s wrong?” asked Rick.

She didn’t answer at first, but after a long minute or so, she looked at him. She took a deep breath and began this horrible sentence.

“You and I are not meant to be.”

He was paralyzed. He felt like a brick had fallen on his head from some old window sill above.

“To complete this ritual, to open the doorway through the tree, someone must die. You or me. Each time we’ve done this, you sacrificed your life to the ritual, to save your world. Each time you’ve ended up on another world, but never the one you saved. Do you understand yet?”

He didn’t.

“This time, I will sacrifice, so you can go back to your world.”

“But — “

“No argument. I want to do this. I want to send you back to your time, and your family. I love you, Rick. I’ve loved you over many lives. I’ve watched you die so many times, I can’t bear it. You can be happy, if even for one life. It’s your turn.”

Kara began to chant, cutting off his protest. Words Rick had never heard. He thought maybe he had, but didn’t remember now. He felt that vague sense of the familiar again, he felt numb, like what was about to happen was just a dream. It wasn’t real. He didn’t want to lose her. He had just found her. He was just starting to know her. This wasn’t real.

A not-so-gentle breeze interrupted his racing mind. Wind? A cyclone was forming around them. It was loud and howled, but still Rick could hear Kara chanting, which filled the circle and kept a gentle breeze within, but the cyclone out. Outside the circle was violent and terrifying. The crackles of arcane power surrounded the circle.

He saw faces in that wind, twisted visages of pain and desperation. These were the immaterial beasts that plagued this and all dead worlds. Then came the land walkers, the shambling dead. Their bodies did not decay from rot or time, but were in various states of disrepair. They decayed from usage. A broken leg would stay broken forever, a cut would never close. However, unlike Rick, or Kara, these pitiful creatures would not pass on. They’d remain until they too were immaterial and beyond.

He watched all this with abject horror and once his adrenaline kicked in, excitement. No one would believe any of this back home. He turned his head and was nose to nose with a skinny man who looked vaguely like his father. He was smiling at him, and then he was gone, caught in the wind, torn apart. Was that — no, his father was still alive. Wasn’t he?

“It’s time.” The wind grew stronger. Kara was pointing at the circle in the very middle of the triangle.

”Jump in when I’m gone.”

“I won’t do it. I don’t want to lose you, Kara.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be around.” She jumped out of the circle. He screamed and reached for her, but it happened too quickly. She was torn apart immediately by the forces surrounding him. The centre of the circle began to glow intensely and the light cast away the shadows from the immediate area. Rick could see the gray ash canopy only a few metres away. It was as majestic as it was a twisted perversion of life.

A deep hole appeared in the sand, perfectly symmetrical. What choice did he have? Thinking of Sarah,

he held his breath and jumped in. His last vision of the dead world before he fell out of view was Kas and Denim running toward him.

31

“Look at that!”

Denim was pointing at the cyclone. It was huge, at least 20 yards across. Sand and dirt gave it an almost solid appearance. Kas stopped walking and stared. He’d never seen anything like it, but this was a night full of surprises. If you took a tornado, and then shrunk it to a size small enough to scare a man on a personal level, it would be this cyclone. It was amazing. There was no wind here, but this thing was clearly fueled by something.

“Inside it.” Denim could barely make it out, but during gaps in the sand, she could see two people. Rick and some woman she didn’t recognize. Who was she? What was she doing with her husband...ex-husband...separated, anyway. Then she saw the woman jump out into the cyclone and disappear like a gooey stain in the dust.

“Jesus Christ!” Kas cursed and started to run towards his brother. Denim ran just a step or two behind. They watched Rick jump into a hole. He disappeared. He saw them. Kas and Denim both knew it. He’d seen them both just before he was gone. His eyes had widened in disbelief.

They stopped several yards short of the cyclone. They could see that at its base was a bright blue, glowing circle with a number of shapes within it. The cyclone seemed content to surround, but not invade this circle. Kas took out the book, and searched through the paintings — there was nothing like this.

“What do we do?” asked Denim. “If we try to follow, we’ll be torn to pieces.”

A grave voice came out at them from the shadows behind.

“I can get you through it.” They turned but saw no one.

“Who’s there!” yelled Kas, putting himself between Denim and the voice, a very familiar voice. He recognized that voice, though it was speaking as if very far away. “Mr. King! You son of a bitch! Show yourself so I can see you before I cave your face in!”

Denim sucked in her breath sharply, lifted her fists and got ready to fight. Mr. King had shown himself at last. His dull green, glowing firefly eyes came floating out of the darkness and into the circle of light the amber mirror formed around them. He looked into their minds and he knew them.

“I’m afraid you’re too late. Your brother already, how did you say it, caved my face in.” He laughed. The kind of laugh you’d expect from a disembodied immaterial psycho.

Kas grabbed at the green eyes but they floated easily up and out of range. He thought back to the bottle he’d opened from the sand and shook his head. I had him. I had him and I didn’t even know it.

“The game is: Let’s make a deal.”

“No deals. You give us Rick back, whatever you’ve done with him,” Denim trailed off. She didn’t want to think about it.

Bodiless Mr. King’s firefly eyes descended a little and for a moment, Kas thought he could see a shape, especially when he was closer to the amber light in the mirror. He had an idea, so he played along.

“What are you talking about, deal?” said Kas, almost friendly. Denim flashed him an angry look. He winked at her to trust him. She relaxed a little, but was still alert.

“I can get us through the cyclone, if you take me with you, it’s a simple matter.”

“How do you mean?” Kas was a little closer now. He could see that vague outline again. Bodiless Mr. King had a body after all.

“If I am close enough to you, then the cyclone won’t attack, and if you’re close enough to me, then the circle will let us in. Simple.”

“What’s on the other side for you?”

“Oh, nothing much, just a little something I want. Your tasty little brother.” Kas winced, there was a creepy hunger in Mr. King’s words.

“Not gonna happen.”

King had a texture now, more substantial as more of the amber mirror’s light reached him.

“You really don’t have a choice. Not if you want a chance to save your brother. Look at it this way. We both cross over and we both have an equal chance at the prize. If you get to him first, you save him. If I get there first, I eat him. Seems fair to me. Fun, even.”

“It’s never fun to play with people’s lives, asshole!”

Kas reached for Mr. King’s fully visible throat and squeezed. It felt solid enough, he could hear it pop, crack, but it wouldn’t break. He swung Mr. King up and over him down onto the ground with a slam. The spectre choked, and sputtered, vulnerable within the mirror’s light.

“H-o-www,” he croaked.

“You tell me, it’s your mirror.” Now, Kas was doing the laughing. “Okay. We’re gonna take a walk into that cyclone, and if you were lying about how this works, then we all die. Does that seem fair to you?” He squeezed tighter. Even as a wraith, Mr. King was weak. He couldn’t fight Kas. Not physically.

Kas saw the vaguely solid shape nod its head and dragged Mr. King towards the cyclone. Denim was smiling while all this was going on. She liked to see Mr. King suffer. He deserved it and it felt satisfying. She came in close, and the three of them stepped into the circling dust wall.

They felt nothing as they entered the chaotic winds. Just like Mr. King had said would happen, they walked right on in. No problem. Simple. Surrounded by an oddly quiet wall of cycling sands, they saw a hole in front of them — the one Rick had jumped into earlier. Kas and Denim looked at each other intently. They smiled. Almost there.

Without looking away from Denim, Kas stuck his arm into the cyclone, the hand squeezing Mr. King’s throat with the strength of an angry brother. He let the spectre go.

“Ain’t payback a bitch!”

The spell broke the moment Kas’s fingers no longer touched the pathetic spectre.

“Nooooooooo,” bodiless Mr. King screamed and so did Kas. On the one side, thrown from the cyclone, Mr. King was free but unable to cross within. On the inside, Kas looked where his forearm and hand had been. The cyclone of the damned had taken everything up to the elbow. Though he was exposed for only a brief moment, it had instantly incinerated his flesh.

“Kas!” Denim grabbed him and pulled him away from the circle’s edge where the winds would take more than just his arm.

“Jesus Christ!” Kas swore again and fell towards Denim as she pulled on him, but she couldn’t hold back his weight. They tumbled into the hole, one on top of the other, into the darkness below.

Bodiless Mr. King flew up into the cyclone, desperately looking for a crack in the spell. Of course, there was no crack or they'd all get in, all his brothers of the night, tearing at it with spiritual fury. Rick had gotten away from him. No one had ever gotten away from him. The cyclone died as the hole closed a few minutes later. The shapes in the sand blew away with the final remnants of spiritual wind. Mr. King stayed there for a long time reflecting on his failure while other undead slowly drifted back out into the desert.

In the end, he was the only one left. A lone, unsettled spirit, unable to achieve his intended purpose, he haunted that place. He haunted it for a thousand years and the hunger eventually subsided. He was something else now in this hell. He was one of the aimless dead, a doomed wanderer of the nether planes. Nothing more than demented spectre without master or purpose. Forgotten Mr. King.

33

Rick found himself in a single empty room. The walls were a glossy black and radiated a clear white light. He had fallen into it from above from a few feet up and he rubbed his elbow, which had hit the ground first. Noting that it was really hurting, he smiled — the numbness of the dead world had left him. He walked over to the wall and ran his fingers over the impossibly smooth surface. There was no friction, his hands ran across it like it was wet and slick, but his fingers came back dry.

Had he really seen Denim, all covered in dirt and grime? She was looking for him, he could see it in her eyes. That fierceness she always got when she wanted something and something was in her way. Had she come to save him? And Kas, had he come, too? For him. He felt his chest constrict, his heart pump faster. She still loved him. They both still loved him. He was a little surprised to realize he still loved them, too.

A few minutes later, Kas and Denim fell out of the ceiling, landing in a tangled mess right where Rick had been a moment earlier. He ran over and helped them both up. Nobody said a word. Rick looked at Denim first and he put his arms around her. He forgave her. She could tell, and she started to cry. She'd made a terrible mistake with Kas a year ago. It was just that, a mistake. She still loved Rick — with all her being, she still wanted them to be a family. Without letting Denim go, he reached out and grabbed Kas and pulled him in, too. They were a family, again, all of them.

"I'm sorry — " Kas began, but Rick stopped him, and held him tighter. A tear ran down Kas's cheek. When Kas tried to wipe it away, he realized he couldn't do it. He could still feel his missing arm, so he used his other one. They each had their own demons to exorcize and whether they liked it or not, that time had come. They all knew they might never get another chance.

That's when they all noticed, almost at the same time, almost simultaneously the door in the far wall. The amber mirror was glowing brighter than it ever had from its place leaning up against the wall, and its light revealed a thin outline of a door. They walked over. Rick braced his shoulders against it, looked at them both and then pushed with everything he had. The door moved inwards. There were no hinges; it slid back until it fell away into nothingness.

They looked through it, baffled by what they saw. It was a perfect, colossal man speeding through space. His skin was silvered obsidian. The galactic dark man, Rick thought, and then said it out loud to Kas and Denim. Kara had been right. They watched as this cosmic being flew through space. He didn't slow at all as he destroyed entire planets, not even leaving rubble and debris floating away behind him, but rather tearing matter itself apart.

He was coming for it all. He was going to destroy everything, and they had to stop him just like Kara had stopped him before, but she hadn't told him that part, hadn't told him how she'd done it.

"Kas, Denim, we have to stop this thing. Kara told me of a dark god intent on destroying the universe.

We need something called Ithliam to stop it.”

He thought about Kara and how she’d spoken those same words, but they didn’t really hit him until just now. He told them about the circle ceremony and how Kara had jumped into the cyclone to fuel the portal to get him this far.

“We’ll never see home again unless we succeed here today. Do you understand?”

“How, Rick?” She was ready for whatever it took.

“Sacrifice.”

They both looked at Kas.

“I need a knife.” Without thinking, Rick gave him the knife he’d found in Mr. King’s car.

“It’ll take more than a knife to stop this thing,” said Kas. “Start looking around, maybe there’s a button or something. There has to be some way to activate the chamber.” Rick stopped when he saw his brother’s face and the look in his eye.

Kas looked at Rick the way a brother looks at his brother. It was the secret language they’d developed growing up and Rick knew what he was thinking. A terrible thought, implanted conveniently at just the right moment.

“Don’t even think about it!” Rick wasn’t about to lose his other brother, too. “I won’t let you, Kas — you don’t owe anything to me or anyone else. You don’t need to do this.”

“Let me do this, Rick. I can finally do something right, something for everybody. I can matter.”

He knew intuitively that if he took the rusty knife and slit his own throat, that his life blood would activate the chamber and possibly save Rick and Denim, if not everything else.

“You take care of that little girl.” He imagined she was playing at her grandma’s house. Denim’s mother was watching her, happily remembering her own youth.

Rick tried to stop him, but wasn’t fast enough. Kas slid the dagger smoothly and quickly across his own throat. At first, they stood horrified, looking at what he’d just done, and at first, the cut didn’t bleed. But when it did, the blood spurted out with a thunderous force, spraying the room and everyone in it. Kas fell to the ground, twitching, like his strings had been cut. There was a sudden bluish flash, then Rick and Denim felt heavy like they were being crushed to the floor. Something was wrong: Laughter mocked them as the blood flowed up and out through the doorway into the space surrounding the magickal chamber.

The scene of the dark man had been replaced by the sadistic smile of a short, bald, naked man with golden skin. The laughter seemed to echo as four other nearly identical men stepped out from behind the first. They moved in unison, synchronized in motion and intent. Each raised their arm with accusing finger toward them.

“Stupid humans.” They all spoke as once. “So easily tricked.”

The book of paintings and the mirror flew through the door past the Ithliams, where they soon dispersed into fine particles. Illusion, nothing more than a false image generated within the gullible minds of weak mortals.

“Such childish intellect and arrogance, to think insects could affect the will of Ithliam.” It was Kara’s voice.

“K-kara?” Rick stuttered, confused.

Laughter again as the Ithliams each took the form of Kara — that unusual smile stretched across her lips.

“Willing blood was all we needed to draw our strength together, and you performed admirably.”

Rick and Denim were doomed. That was clear now. They’d been pawns of Ithliam all along as was Mr. King. Each played their part, coming slowly to this inevitable end. It was no accident that Mr. King had captured Rick, it was Ithliam who had suggested him as a victim back in that bookstore. It was Ithliam who had placed the mirror and the book in the ashes, after he’d started the fire. It was Ithliam who made Mr. King all those years ago, all so he could bring these willing victims to his lair.

The tree had not captured Ithliam — she was just the outward manifestation of his united purpose. The Ithliams had followed her power signature to the source and discovered this, the first of all worlds and each other. The source for all that was and would ever be. It was fitting that the golden tree, which was the origin of all life, was also responsible for the seed of her own destruction.

“And now, mortals, for the sake of my own vanity, you will witness my ascension and tremble in awe at the power that is Ithliam.”

With a loud clap of their hands, the Ithliams combined and grew larger than anything Rick or Denim had ever seen. The laughter crashed against the chamber in wave after wave of magickal ecstasy. They were sent sprawling back against the far wall, their eyes open and forced in Ithliam’s direction. He wanted them to witness his triumph, to recognize their new god before he destroyed them. Sand and rocky debris spray outward as the roof breaks apart to make way for Ithliam’s growing form.

The ash gray canopy receded from its cancerous infection upon the land, feeding Ithliam’s power all the more. He turned and looked into the sky, his gaze spanning the material expanse much as his predecessor had eons ago when he’d started his quest for universal destruction. The age of Ithliam had begun, or was about to — the battle call was sounded, the challenge accepted.

“I am here, Ancient Darkness!” he cried into the vacuum of space before turning his gaze out across the desert. “Watch me, Mother! Let me show you true power.”

Neither Rick nor Denim could look away, but neither could they ignore what was happening just a few feet in front of them. The golden walking sticks Kas and Denim had been using were glowing strangely and Ithliam seemed too preoccupied to notice from his view miles above the surface. One moment, they were two pieces and a moment later they were one, a complete staff, unbroken, thick and marvelous. And holding the staff was a muscular young man with liquid black robes flowing down to the deep brown ground upon which his bare feet rested. Like a living fluid, the robes wrapped around Rick and Denim, as the man with the curly honey blond locks looked up towards Ithliam.

A moment later, he turned his twinkling, mercurial gray eyes towards them and smiled. It was the kindest, gentlest expression Rick or Denim had ever seen. Wisdom wrinkles stretched across the man’s far too youthful cheeks, as he lifted his hand palm out and waved goodbye. They disappeared.

Neither Rick or Denim ever knew the full extent of what they’d experienced, or who their saviour was. Suddenly, they were together by Rick’s expensive car. They walked home hand in hand. Raised Sarah together. Grew old together and they never forgot what Kas had done for them.

Henry turned again toward Ithliam. The cosmic confrontation was upon them and he could feel the galactic dark man, the Ancient Darkness, approaching. The universal tapestry shook violently, threatening to fray and disperse into meaningless threads. Too much power in one place, he thought, the universe was never meant for such grandiose displays of ego. He chuckled — how little Ithliam had learned for all his efforts — how naive.

Upon the barren desert, the two giants condensed themselves into plasma forms and faced each other. One was of antimatter and one of dark matter. Far below them, watching with keen interest, Henry, the Quantum Mechanic, sat calmly holding the ends of this universe in his practiced fingers. He tightened his grip on reality, weaving the outcome even as it happened.

The End

Epilogue

Hidden and forgotten beneath the ruins of the old Asylum, the spectre lazily floated its usual route. The building had collapsed years ago, and the stairs leading down had filled in with stone and dirt. This was no barrier to the immaterial dead. It slipped through the stones as though they weren't there, following a memory as haunting as a dream. It was all that remained of the servant's mind. The shadows had long ago chased out the ghouls and the other weaker undead.

The spectre thought absently that it enjoyed the solitude. It gave it time to think about the past and dwell on the pain of nostalgia. There was a time before endless nights. He remembered the sun, and the heat of new day. He missed the thrill of pulling in a big bass, gutting it and frying supper. Cutting up hitch hikers for bait.

Soon it came to a door that until recently it couldn't pass, but as the protections failed, the spectre made it closer to the round iron door. It was fully committed to fulfilling its commanded purpose. Obsessively, it followed its assigned route, unable or unwilling to change its habits. Cursed, for centuries it persisted in its errand as best it could. It was repetition, not insight, that saw it through.

Eventually gaining access to the room within. It floated past the dusty tanks. Mostly full of the dead creatures it gathered each night, suspended in a sort of mercurial fluid as they're consumed. It concerned itself only with the smaller tank protected by the oldest enchantments. All other tanks seemed to connect in one way or another to this one. The spectre felt nothing upon discovering Ithliam's feeding tank empty.

It just sighed helplessly then faded away.