

PEREGRINATIONS

Thanks for reading. This is a collection of short stories that have accumulated since the mid 70s. I figured since I had fun writing them, there might be folks who might enjoy reading them. It is a bit of a grab bag collection of genres because inspiration often tends to be that way. I've heard it said that short stories are sort of dying out but I have always had issues with what people say. Good times don't always come in 1,000 page epics and we don't always have the time and patience to wade through that.

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SILVERTIP

The big fat tired Ryco jeep hummed as it bounced up the rough side of Teewinot Mountain. The sun was settling on to the jagged peaks of the Rockies to the west but on the east side of Teewinot it was already dark. The passenger in the Ryco craned a neck around to look back down on Jenny Lake, whistling softly at the burnished gold surface over a mile below them.

"It's beautiful."

The burly driver grunted as the jeep lurched around a deadfall.

"S'all that'n more. Some folks say this is the most beautiful place on old Terra." He wrenched the wheel around to miss a small cave-like hole. "Me, I been to a few places, like Sirius and Deneb, an' I say this here Grand Tetons is the most beautiful place in all of God's creation."

"Oh come now. The rings of Saturn and the ice fields of Uranus are quite stunning. And the area around Telax is very impressive also."

The old man grunted again but kept his attention on the trail. It had been three years since he had last tried to make this trip. Nearer to forty since the time he had taken the last Government fool up the next-door neighbor of the Grand Teton peak. He shook his shaggy head, remembering the trip. He had been Wild Bill Blenker then, adventurer, soldier of fortune and big game hunter. Now, at seventy-five, he was still a solid man in better shape than most men a third his age. Then he had been one of the best and the wildest hunters of the galaxy. He had taken the Paulin Serum when it had been perfected in 2752. It didn't have much effect on a man in his middle years. All it had done was make it easier to get up on those cold Wyoming mornings.

The terrain began to look more familiar. Will felt a shiver of apprehension as memories of that night in '36 came back. A burned-out rusted hulk of an APF lay tilted crazily on one side. His passenger inhaled sharply and glanced at him but he stared straight ahead. Finally his eyes fixed on the mammoth bulk of rock that loomed up out of the blackness. Involuntarily his eyes went up the slope to where the scar lay hidden under the years of undergrowth. He knew it was there though. Just as he suddenly knew something else was too.

Or some one.

His rider saw him tense in the dim light from the dashboard.

"What is it?"

Will stopped in the small clearing and shut off the Ryco's lights. It was the same procedure he always used. He pushed the top back and stood up to look around. His neck prickled and a cool trickle of sweat ran down the middle of his back.

"What's wrong, Mr. Blenker? Is it here?"

Will waited, testing the air, feeling the wind. Yes, he was nearby. Without looking he nodded his answer.

"Excellent." The Agent from the Department of Terrestrial Affairs, Terran Division, cried and stood up to look around. There was no movement in the area, no sounds. After a minute of watching the Agent began to pout.

"I think you are lying to me. There is no one out there. I think you are trying to scare me. Let me remind you I don't scare easily. I have been..."

"I know." Will cut in wearily. "You've told me." The Agent was about to reprimand him for his impudence when a piece of the huge rock in front of them seemed to move. Despite his fear, Will felt a surge of relief and warmth as the shadow began to tower up into the night. Beside him the Agent fell silent, staring at the massive bulk becoming clearer in the new risen moonlight.

"And like I said Missy, there never was and never will be another Silvertip."

He stepped onto the car door and vaulted lightly to the ground. The effort it took to make it look easy cost him but it was worth it. He didn't like the snotty aristocrat of an Agent who had been on safari on Tertius. He had been on Tertius just after Milin in 2721 when it was still a wild new planet. Now it was more resort than frontier. He had been to worse places. Like the portside dives near any spaceport.

His disgusted contempt faded as he walked across the thick loam of centuries of woods. Back before Earth had burned out her resources to the point where every one had packed up and left, this had been a park. It had been left relatively untouched by the locust-like appetite of Twentieth Century man. It was as beautiful as it was primal. He stopped near the boulder and waited in the pale light.

"Come on Ben, I know it's been a while since I come to see you but this ain't an easy trek for a man my age."

He spoke easily, keeping his tone as light as he could. But he knew he couldn't hide the fear. Not from him. True, it wasn't his fault but he was still worried as to what Silvertip's reaction would be to his rider. His knees quivered for an instant as the iridescent shadow of a silver gray ghost stepped into the moonlight without a sound. It seemed to float across the moss as Ben Silvertip came towards him.

"You've brought some one else."

Will winced at the tone in the deep rumbling voice.

"I didn't know you would be here, Ben."

Will could feel the thunderheads gathering in the thick silence of the night. When the voice came again it was quieter but the hate in it was undisguised.

"Government."

"You have to take me up there, Mr. Blenker. it is imperative that I verify his presence on Terra. At once."

Will looked at the tall slim woman. She had come to his lodge in Jackson by the noon flitter with two small suitcases and a lot of officious nerve. She had bulldozed her way in to his home and now she was making a demand so ridiculous it was all Will could do to keep from laughing.

"Nope. Can't do it." He tried to keep his face solemn but a trace of a grin kept creeping up on him. She glared at him, her dark eyes under the faddish bangs of black hair glowing with bright anger. Will could feel the next wave of threats coming before they left her lips. Pretty lips too, he thought to himself.

"It won't do you any good to protect that monster. I can get the official backing to force you to do as I want."

"Whoa, Missy. I didn't say I wouldn't. I said I couldn't. Ain't nobody what can contact Silvertip, not without him wanting them to. Not even me."

"But our reports in Telax say you are the only person who has ever communicated with this creature."

"Yeah, that much is true. I've talked to Ben over the years. But it was always him what started the talks. I never knew when he was going to turn up here or walk up to my fire out in the woods. So Missy, I'm afraid there ain't no way I can help you."

"How many places could an animal like him go?"

Will chuckled at the distaste in her voice.

"Kin tell you don't know much about Ben."

"How much is there to know about a vicious beast that should have been exterminated years ago?"

The smile faded from Will's eyes and he glared coldly at the bureaucratic idea of his friend.

"Missy, it was talk like that what got me to come here on that big scare hunt back in '36. I'd heard tell of some monster what was tearing up the landscape, killing women and babies and all kinds of horrible things. I was still young enough to believe them. I come here figgering to find Earth covered with mangled bodies. I was born on Celene so I had never been to Earth. She was just supposed to be a burnt out husk. When I saw that was a lie I should'a listened closer to what we was told. Back then I

figgered I knew a bit about hunting, counted myself a good man in the woods. An' I recognized a whole bunch of other men who figgered the same. Men like Mander and Koch, Palawanka from Little Venus and Xryl from out by Sirius. And Lafa, that no good green devil from God knows where. I knew them and they knew me. There was over fifty of us gathered down to Denver space port."

"I am perfectly familiar with the events of that hunt Mr. Blenker."

Will walked over to his bar and poured himself a glass of illegal homemade whiskey.

"Yeah, I read the report. Fact is I helped write the first one. The one they threw away. Like I was saying though, we was gathered up down to Denver when this little twerp of an Orion come along. He worked for the same people you do. He filled us in on this beast what was terrorizing the populace he said. We all laughed at the little bugger."

He sipped his whiskey and looked out over the town of Jackson but seeing the events of that hunt.

"We come up here by chartered flitters. Those Government boys spared no expense for us. They had all kinds of gear waiting for us here. Even refitted a old armored personnel floater to carry it all to where we were going to set up camp. We laughed at them again. The next morning we headed up that peak," He pointed to Teewinot where it stood in the shadow of the Tetons, "and set up camp about a mile up. We divided the hunt to make it more fair to us. Couldn't figger out why they had so many of us. Should'a known to check an' see why. We would'a found out about the half dozen poor buggers they already sent up an' never heard from. I remember the only one of us who hunted alone was Lafa. Nobody cared to argue neither. He was a big goon, must'a weighed nigh on to five hundred pounds of fighting fury. He could move twice as fast an' three times as quiet as any three of us. He also had a temper like a Sirian padi."

Will went to take another drink and was surprised to find his glass empty.

"Well we hunted for the better part of a week with out turning even a sign of this monster. It wasn't 'til my second or third visit from Ben I found out he had been down to the Grand Canyon. Anyhow, one morning we heard this gawdawful screeching from over towards the Potholes then we heard that big Coligrine rifle of Lafa's cut loose. We all slapped each other on the back and cussed some that the green devil beat us out of the kill. I didn't feel quite right about what was goin' on so I got some of the others an' we headed out to see if Lafa needed any help. He didn't. We found him tossed up in the top of a big hemlock tree what had been growin' there since Moses climbed the mountain. He was tore up real bad. His rifle never did turn up."

Will looked in wonder at the empty glass in his hand. He could have sworn he had just filled it. When he refilled the tumbler from the old bottle his hand trembled so that he spilled a little on the polished wood.

"Missy, we was shook up. Lafa didn't have many friends but there wasn't a man what didn't know how good he was. We lasted all of three days after that. Guys was dyin' in groups of seven an' eight. It got to the point where no one left camp for anything. On the third night it all came down. Mander was over to the latrine, heeding the call of the wild when all of a sudden, he wasn't. I know because I had been talking to him and I turned to fill my coffee cup. When I looked back he weren't there. I think the only reason me, Koch, an' Phandrin made it was because I yelled then."

"It was somethin' to see him Missy. He come into the fire light all silver and brown. Ten foot what seemed like twenny an' almost a ton of fightin' mad man-bear. He tore into us lady an' we didn't have a prayer. I was off to one side, hidin, some. I ain't ashamed to say it. I was scared bad. I could see him moving out there like silver lightening, him with at least six bullet wounds in him. One of them from that Coligrine. You ever see what that shoulder cannon does to meat? I have an' it ain't pretty but this guy was still movin'. I come close to passin' right out when he tipped the floater onto its side and ripped the door clean off it. I saw at least three more bullets hit him while he was fighting. Might as well have thrown rocks, mad as he was. Inside of ten minutes it was all quiet except for the sound of his breathin'. He stood out by the fire an' looked around camp 'til his eyes fixed on me."

"He was hurt bad. We both knew it so I stepped out an' faced him. I had my big Nitro Express and a small hand charge on my belt. We stood there just watchin' each other for a piece an' I knew I had been lied to. Maybe it was the look in his eyes. Or the fact he looked like a man. Deformed, hell yes, but still a man. He was bleedin' a bit an' weavin there dead on his feet but Lord Harry, that man was proud."

"Man?" she snapped disgustedly, "You call that thing, that monster, a man?"

Will looked up at Teewinot, remembering. He nodded slowly.

"Yeah I call him a man. Wasn't his fault he's like he is. It was that crazy poppa a' his. They should'a hung him. "

"His father was working under secret orders from the government."

"Orders." Will snorted. He turned and faced the woman, his leathery face lined with anger. "He was still a man and no real father could do to his own boy what that lizard did to Ben."

"But they needed special creatures to use in the Colonization and Exploration Program of 2713."

"An' they made due with what they had because Ben never did nothin' for those creeps. He was one of a kind. Even I know that."

The woman stepped back and looked at him with a mixture of contempt and uncertainty.

"Don't let those pompous idiots fool you with their lies like they did us. The man they call Silvertip don't deserve to be hunted like an animal. That night over the fire we learned a lot, the two of us. I stood there debatin' on whether I should kill him and I'll be jiggered if he didn't smile at me. He knew he was dead if I wanted him to be. He turned real slow-like and walked over to the nearest body and picked it up. It took me a few minutes to figger out what he was doin'. He gathered up all them dead men and stacked'em neat as a pin in the middle of the clearin' He looked at me one last time an' shuffled off towards the woods. Somethin' about him reached me though an' I called for him to come back. Shocked three years out of my growth when he did. I went to the supply tent and broke out our first aid kit. I had some experience with bullet wounds so I took to diggin' out the lead. It surprised me how much that big hole Lafa's gun had made had healed. He wouldn't let me stitch or bandage him so I doused him with 'biotics and disinfectant."

"He motioned for me to follow him. We climbed some sixty feet up the slope to where there was this big slab of granite just waiting to be knocked loose. It was right over the camp. Well I used my hand charge to blast this tree down an' Ben, he picked it up an' used it for a pry bar to push it loose. It cut free and landed smack on top of those bodies, coverin' them up perfect. A real fine tombstone."

"And you base your claim of intelligence on this feat of engineering?"

"No Missy, I've seen animals what were natural engineers before. An' I've seen some what looked more human than Ben. What I haven't seen or heard of is one what can say thank you."

"Government, Will. Why?"

"She come up here lookin' for you Ben." Will said moving closer to his erstwhile friend. Somehow the towering bear body comforted him. "To Jackson, that is. Seems the clowns at Telax are gettin' anxious about you runnin free still."

Ben muttered a damn under his breath and shambled off towards the Ryco. He could see the tall form of the rider on the top of the passenger seat. She was digging frantically in her purse for something. He stopped next to the door opposite her. She looked at him in terror then looked to Will as he came up on her side.

"You stole it! You brought me up here for this monster to kill." she screamed hysterically. She lunged at Will, grabbing for the small blaster at his belt but she froze when she felt the powerful paw-like hand on her shoulder.

"Now Missy, I had to take that there gun of yours. It might a' been enough to kill Ben but more than likely it just would a' tore him up some. Whatever, I couldn't take the chance if we was to run into him. He's been too good a friend."

She wasn't listening to the old hunter. She was looking up at the shadowed face over her. Small animal noises escaped her mouth along with a thin trail of saliva as Ben leaned forward. Mercifully she fainted away. Ben picked her up gently then motioned for Will to climb on his back as he had many times in the past to go somewhere with the man-bear. He set out up the mountain at a brisk pace. Will wanted to ask where they were going. He suspected it was to the home he figured Ben to have on Teewinot.

Ben scrambled up a narrow trail onto a park like ledge on the southern side of the mountain. Bending under the spreading branches of a pine he stepped into a rough hewn passage. It led to a big door like rock that slid open as they approached. Inside Ben squatted to let Will down then carried the woman over to an outsized couch. He laid her down gently. Will looked around the room. It looked like any other living room he had seen except all the furnishings were made to accommodate Ben's size. There were pictures of every kind on the walls along with tapestries and maps. Astrogating maps used for interstellar travel back before the Hackmire Globe.

Will followed Ben through the door at the far end of the room. He was amazed at the smoothness of the walls. The only thing that could glaze rock like that was an atomic torch. The second room was a Brobdignagian kitchen with the latest appliances. Ben was at the sink filling a basin from the tap. He picked up a towel and pointed to the cupboard to his right.

"Glasses in there and there is a pretty fair grade of whiskey in that one there. Ice in the fridge. Sorry about the size of the glasses but I never figured on entertaining any one up here."

"Ben, how can you do this. Them walls is cut with atomics and from the looks of this place you got the same for power."

Ben chuckled.

"I've got a small plant down about three hundred foot. Heavy on the ice."

He went out and began to bath the Agent's forehead with the cool damp towel. Will came in a few minutes later juggling two glasses and fuming about the size of everything. Ben hoisted him up on to a chair to keep him from spilling his whiskey then returned to his charge. Her eyelids fluttered then flew open. She started to scream but bit it off. Bewildered she looked around the room then at Ben. She got a tentative grip in her nerves and sat up halfway.

"Where am I?"

She felt foolish asking because she doubted if he had more than a rudimentary grasp of language. It shocked her when he spoke.

"In my home."

His voice was a rumbling bass that was strangely quieting. He stood up and moved over to the mate to Will's chair and eased himself into it. He picked up his drink and sipped it. Will chuckled from deep in the cushions next to him. He was watching the Agents wide eyes as she regarded Ben.

He was big. The reports said ten feet but it was actually closer to eight. The musculature of his grafted upper body caused his shoulders to hunch forward and his back to bow. It gave him a menacing appearance. All of his visible body surface was covered with a shaggy light brown fur, the ends of which glistened a dull silver in the room light. The hair on his head was smoother, like human hair. It lacked the silver sheen but it hung in neatly trimmed wings on both sides of his face. His face, though human, appeared to be too small for the size of his body. The eyes were the color of glacial ice but there was no animal cunning in them. They were alive with a bemused tenderness that puzzled her. They were sensitive eyes given to things of the heart. It angered her that she found she liked them. Impatiently she looked at the rest of him.

His hands appeared to paws until a closer inspection revealed the well-formed digits. The claws were nothing more than well developed nails, trimmed and cleaned. The legs were short for the length of the chest. They were bowed out once again by the strain of muscles meant for a heavier frame. His feet were wide and flat, his bare toes as clean and even as his hands. He wore only a pair of baggy hiking shorts with huge pockets. They seemed to be filled with all sorts of minor objects. She looked back up at his face to find him smiling bemusedly at her. She flushed deeply but met his eyes.

"What's your name?" He asked softly, the gentle thunder of his voice soothing her rattled nerves.

"Lisa Carboy."

He nodded and sipped at his drink.

"A very pretty name. May I call you Lisa?"

She gasped and made fish mouths at his courteous manner while Will laughed in his chair. He looked funny half buried in the big chair. Then Ben laughed too. It was a rolling tympani of sound that echoed through the room. Like a rapids roaring at the bottom of a deep gorge.

"Please Lisa, don't be so frightened. I am not the beast your people would like to have every one believe I am. I'm really quite civilized."

She stared at him in wonder.

"I'm afraid your people have some bad information on me and I am to blame for it. You see I have access to your master information computer bank. It is true my father was responsible for making me what I am, but no one but myself knows when he did it. I keep changing the data in the computer, making it deliberately vague and classifying it. My father was a great man, a genius. He was centuries ahead of his time in genetics and medicine. The only thing he loved more than his work was my mother. He tried everything he knew to save her but having me was more than she could take. I'm still not sure what she died of. Whatever it was it snapped something in Dad. He had been working with bears on a serum that would stop the rejection of alien tissue. It worked. He started by grafting a small piece of muscle on my arm when I was less than a month old. He had several bears on the place. Grizzlies."

"In the space of a year he injected me with five serums that he hadn't tested. Deep down he wanted me to die. I didn't of course. I became more and more like a bear every day. He continued to graft muscles from the bears the serums causing my body to accept them. I became two creatures with two sets of genes. I grew up fast. So fast I scared Dad into a last ditch try to kill me."

"As I said why father loved my mother. I didn't find out how much until years later. Dad had been working on a longevity serum similar to your Paulin Serum for a number of years. He meant to use it on mother and himself to keep their love alive longer. It was still in the experimental stages when mother died. He didn't even test any further after that. When the grafting and the anti-rejection serums failed to kill me he injected me with a massive dose of the prototype serum. It almost succeeded in doing the job but I survived. I think it was due to my strengthened body. It drove him over the edge when he saw he had failed by succeeding and he killed himself when I was twelve."

"That was when the Government stepped in for the first time. They tried to hush my existence up. I was a freak and a horror. They did a good job. None of the news stories even mentioned my existence. Ever since I've been roaming the night like my half brother, the bear."

Lisa looked at him and her heart went out to him.

"How long have you been alone?"

Ben looked at her trying to get into her thoughts. He glanced at Will to find the old man had fallen sound asleep, his empty glass in his lap. He looked back at the girl and smiled at her over the rim of his glass as he made to take a drink.

"About seven hundred years."

Lisa sat up quickly.

"Seven hundred? That's impossible. No one can live that long even with the Paulin serum."

Ben chuckled and stood up. Lisa cowered back, still afraid of him at his full height. He walked over to the door and looked out into the night.

"I was born back in the late Twentieth Century. August the twelfth, 1987. My father had been working on what I call his Ponce de Leone Serum for better than twenty years. I said he was a genius, how much of one no one knew. The serum worked. I aged to full maturity in about forty months then ceased aging totally. Dad couldn't take it. He had meant to have me die. Instead he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. I would live longer. He saw he couldn't kill me through any further experimenting without the chance of it backfiring more and he still was enough of a father to not be able to kill me outright."

"He kept over a dozen bears in cages on the place. Most of them silver tip grizzlies. He goaded one of them into a killing frenzy then opened the door to the cage. They never found the bear. The government was all for blaming it on me until some enterprising Intelligence type saw a possible source for a particularly potent warrior. He convinced the authorities to keep me alive for testing. I was sent to Alaska which even then was becoming crowded but it was the most isolated place they could put me. They had all of Dad's notes and formulas. The world was lucky Dad never labeled anything. I was learning quickly what it meant for me to live and what it would be like if they did it to more. I loved my father even then and I knew the horror he felt at what he had done to me. I found out after five years that they had another person just about 'finished'. One night I broke into the lab and found him. It was a girl. I guess she had been about five or so when they had started. They hadn't found out about the Ponce Serum yet. She was a pretty girl or rather she had been. I killed her. I couldn't let them do it to some one else. Especially some one who had been a human, who had learned something of what it was like to be normal. I tore that place apart, killed every one there and took the records."

"They began a search for me but the shift/warp space drive was discovered and the rush was on. Within the year they discovered Celene I and all of Earth shifted into high gear making space arks with Kramer/Nabikov drive. It was a massive effort to keep mankind from dying out. I was forgotten in the mass exodus to greener pastures. By 2015 there was less than a billion people left on Earth. And none of them knew of me. It took them another two hundred years to forget Earth the rest of the way."

Ben stirred as he heard her slide off the couch and pad across the room. He turned and looked down at the fragile woman. By Earth standards she was a big woman but to him she was like a tiny doll. Twin tracks of tears shown on her cheeks as she raised her hand and laid it gently on his arm. He stood dead still as she recoiled from her first touch of his fur, waiting patiently for her to gather the courage to try again. When her hand lay lightly on his, he looked into her eyes. Seeing the pity and

concern in her face brought out all the pent up emotions he had buried deep inside himself. He felt his eyes begin to burn.

"You've been alone on Earth all those years?"

Ben smiled and shook his head.

"With seven hundred years of nothing to do and an unlimited supply of reading material one tends to learn quite a bit. I hadn't seen my three hundredth birthday before I had a series of foundries and assembly works in limited operation. It was a slow process hand making all the parts.' It took me better than seventy years to build my first ship but it was enough to get me to the stars. I studied astrogation from the primitive works I could find on Earth before I could establish commercial ties with Celene 1. There are several companies on your home world that have helped me a great deal without knowing. Since then I've seen every world man has and then some. No, I have not been stranded. Only alone."

"Why did you attack Mr. Blenker and his men in 36?"

"Survival. I may be tired of living but I won't be killed, hunted down like an animal by men who are like infants to me. I've been in contact with some of your higher learning centers Lisa. There isn't anything there I haven't know for quite some time."

Her eyes searched his.

"Not even how to make yourself a companion?"

"Immortality isn't a boon woman. Nor is this form I'm condemned to for the rest of my life. Certainly there are advantages to being larger, stronger, faster but they don't mean anything if I can't walk the worlds of men without being hunted and feared. I've learned more than even I believed possible in my years. But I still haven't learned how to play God. I still haven't gone over that line that would let me do to another human what was done to me. I can't do it."

"Not even to make your life more livable?"

"Not even then."

She looked at him a long time with solemn, searching eyes before she asked in a broken voice,

"Come down here, please?"

Ben crouched down so that his head was a bit above hers. He held her eyes as she cried silently. She reached up and kissed his mouth, agonizingly tender lips tearing at his soul. It was all he could do to remind himself she was human. Reluctantly he stood up, breaking the heart destroying contact. He pointed to the couch with a trembling hand.

"Get some sleep. I'll take you back to the jeep in t the morning."

"Ashes to ashes, dust to....

The preacher droned on but none of the ten people listened to his monotonous words. A drizzling rain hissed on umbrellas dripping off hat brims down onto cold backs.

"He was a good man, a friend to every one who knew him. I remember William Blenker as a...

A tall woman at the edge of the small cluster of mourners raised her head and looked around. Lisa Carstairs at sixty was a handsome woman. The tightness of her younger years was gone replaced by an internal calm that glowed in her every move. She was Secretary of Terrestrial Affairs, Terran Division, now. So much had changed in the thirty years since her first visit to Terra.

She had come back many times to visit the Grand Tetons and talk with her two friends. Mostly she came to see the magnificent grandeur of the mountains and to call on Ben Silvertip's vast stores of knowledge. She looked around the area thinking still that it was the most beautiful place in the galaxy. Remembering Will's words from her first visit brought a pang of loss. She scanned the misty woods wondering if the big man-bear had gotten word of his friend's death.

She knew he could be anywhere. He traveled extensively gathering knowledge, trying to fight the boredom of his existence. He was safe on Earth now. Lisa had made sure of that. She had been the one to still the hue and cry to have him put away. It hadn't been easy but the effort had gotten her the secretary's seat. Now Ben could roam Earth without fear of harm from the government at Telax. Lisa smiled as she wondered what her bosses would say if they knew Ben had been to visit her twice at Telax without the Space Defense Ministry or the New Dew Line noting his presence. It didn't really matter. Not to Ben. He came and went as he pleased chuckling benevolently at the feeble attempts made by men to stop him.

Still she wondered where he was. She had tried to contact him from Telax and again from Denver when she arrived but both had been negative responses. They were lowering the casket into the ground and there still wasn't any sign of Silvertip. Feeling very worried Lisa walked back to her hotel, checking the woods as she did.

The moon came up glistening with quicksilver light making the entire valley around Jackson seem like some fairy wonderland. The rain had stopped about sunset. Lisa had tried to reach Ben again with no effect. Looking out over the valley at Teewinot she felt something grow in her. It was a feeling she had thought buried long ago. She longed to be with Ben Silvertip as he wandered the cosmos. At his side as his mate, his woman. She had long ago resigned herself to the fact she loved him. And she suspected the gentle brute felt the same. Yet he would never think of changing her with

his science and his medicine. Change her into a suitable mate even though she knew he could. It was part of the reason she loved him.

Sitting on the porch of the hotel she felt the urge to see Will's grave again. Walking through the quiet night eased her troubled mind feeling the gentle wind and the warm night air that made her think of Ben. As she reached the edge of town she thought she could make out a hulking shadow at the graveyard. Unconsciously her step quickened. It was Ben and he was standing still as stone over his old friend's resting place. Lisa knew he heard her approach but he didn't turn.

"I got your message when I came out of shift near Taurus. I came as quickly as I could. I guess it wasn't quick enough."

Lisa put her hand on his, a gesture time worn from habit. She knew he liked it.

"I think he understood, Ben."

"He probably did. He was one of the good ones."

Ben continued to look out over the valley at the mountains Will had loved so much. Lisa stood quietly next to him as he wandered back through the long corridors of memory, remembering his friend. Suddenly she wondered if he wasn't thinking of how many times he had stood over a grave of 'one of the good ones'. She wondered how many he had seen die. And how many he had loved. She knew what the little death in her was like when some one like Will died. As she watched the single giant tear slide down his cheek she wondered just what this man/monster/godling condemned to solitude among the masses for an eternity had seen.

And she pitied him.

SHAGGY DOG

Ichabod Mordecai Anahzyuzee had been a professor at Twit College for most of his long and boring adult life. A committed bachelor, more by temperament than choice, he lived to teach and write. Several of his papers and treatises had been published by such prestigious organs as the Society of Important Multipage Papers and Journal of Esoteric & Righteous Clerks. He was finishing a review of a paper in which he had found several, ok two, errors that he had gleefully pointed out in scathing terms. That he had no understanding of the topic never really bothered I.M. much. He knew what was right and what wasn't and had no qualms about saying so. As he put the critique in his out basket he thought to himself with smug pleasure, 'Relate to that, Al.'

The professor was surprised to see a young woman standing in the doorway to his office. He had thought the door to be locked as he didn't like to be disturbed while he was in the creating process. He vaguely recognized her as one of his freshman students but chose to ignore that knowledge as he looked over his glasses at her.

"Yes?"

"My name is Lydia Carter. I'm in your Pedantic Demagoguery class? I wanted to talk to you about the grade you gave me on my term paper."

"I'm sorry Miss Carter, I never discuss grades, I give them."

Lydia stepped into the musty office, twin tears penciling her thin face.

"Please Professor Anahzyuzee. If I get an F in your class I will lose an academic scholarship. And if I lose that I can't stay in school."

The Professor removed his glasses and wiped at them carefully with his handkerchief, studiously ignoring the woman's pleading.

"I am sorry but I never change grades. And I always give the grade that is deserved. If you had studied harder and applied yourself better in high school you would have been better prepared for college. As it is, you received the grade you earned."

The Professor put his glasses back on his nose and looked at the student. His jaw dropped and his eyes goggled at the sight before him.

Gone was the winsome and plain student. In her place was a monstrously huge toad. It glared directly across at him with glittering obsidian eyes that were devoid of all emotion. Its massive mouth opened partly in what would have been a smack in a creature with lips. Its tongue glistened wetly inside its cavernous maw. The Professor tried to rise from his chair to flee the horror squatting before his desk. The mouth began to open again.

'Thwip'.

I guess one has to be careful when one is being toadily honest.

SPRING FEVERS

Classes were over for the year leaving the high school all but deserted. It was a beautiful June morning that left those who had to be in the school wishing they were elsewhere. Some more so than others.

The first pair was a young couple in their late twenties. The man was tall and thin, his black hair hanging down in his eyes in an oily shock that he brushed back constantly with a nervous flip of his hand. His wife was a petite woman in black and white with a Prince Valiant hairdo in soft brown that framed her thin face. High cheekbones drew her cheeks up above full lips. Her thin patrician nose seemed too severe for the rest of her face but her fire-bright green eyes dimmed its overall impact.

The younger man that came in behind them stopped in the doorway and looked over the office. His broad shoulders pulled the thin cotton of his sport shirt tight across his chest. His thick blonde hair hung stylishly long over his ears in a styled cut. He had a perfect Aryan face with chiseled jaw, hard blue eyes and broad impassive features. Bill Simms was there to represent his father, who sat at the bedside of his youngest son.

The secretary looked over at the young woman and gave her a sad smile.

"He is going to be here, isn't he, Mrs. Fredricks?"

Marie Fredricks started to shrug but was cut off by a voice from the other office door.

"He sure is. He wouldn't miss this circus for all the grass at P.J. Jacobs."

A young man in faded jeans and a polo shirt leaned against the jab. Marie walked over and put a hand on his arm. She didn't like looking into his eyes. They were every bit as green as hers but since their parents death they had been like glass. It gave her a chill to look at that much emptiness. His nose had looked like hers once but his lone football game last year had seen it broken and bent. He smiled down at her his eyes twinkling roguishly behind his aviator glasses. Marie hated it when he smiled like that.

"I wouldn't mess you up, Sis." He smiled wryly "At least not any more than I already have."

"You haven't messed me up, you big dope. It's you that will get in trouble if we don't get this worked out. You are an adult now."

He laughed shortly. "So says the State."

Marie was about to say something when her husband stepped up and glared at her brother. They had been appointed guardians of Randy when his parents had been

killed in a car accident two years earlier. Stan Fredricks had been against taking him in being fully aware of what life would be like around the house without a father to control the willful youth. Randall Tyson Sr. had had his hands full with the antics of his only son. Stan had been amazed at the lack of emotion the boy had shown at the funeral. It was less than four hours from the time the last shovel of dirt had fallen on his parent's grave when Marie had gotten the call from the police. They had picked Tye up, stone drunk, in one of the local taverns. At sixteen.

"The principal will see us soon, Randy. I don't want you getting lippy in there. They can hurt you badly if you make them. I don't think that any one wants to make a big deal of this so you just sit tight with your mouth shut and I may be able to talk the Simms' into a deal."

The smile stayed on the tanned youth's lean face but the light sank from his eyes as he looked at his brother-in-law.

"No need to worry about a thing Stan."

They were all excused from any further incidents when they were called into the principal's office. Stan took his place as a dutiful husband behind the lone chair as Marie sat down with quiet dignity. Bill Simms stood off to one side leaving the center of the room in front of the desk for Tye.

Dr. Mathers stood behind his desk. He was a quiet unassuming man given to wearing flashy ties. Though he was forty-two and the father of three he still cheered at pep assemblies on Fridays and gave himself willingly to the high jinx that are synonymous with high school.

"Well, it seems that we are all here. Shall we get started?"

Tye sighed quietly to himself. This was all, everyone involved. No one had tied the real reason for his attack on Tom Simms Friday to the whole deal. It still got to his insides as he thought back over that afternoon a weekend and several thousand years ago.

Tye sat next to-the window watching the cars as they stopped at the intersection below. It was a queer feeling knowing it was for the last time. Today was the final day of classes and the last day he would have to endure sitting in a class full of morons and watching Helen Bierce as she taught English. He felt the familiar tingling in his loins as he brought a mental image of the thirty-year-old English teacher to mind. From the first day of class when she had come in wearing a midi skirt open half way up the front, Tye had wanted her. No schoolboys crush this. He thought of her long legs that she seemed so unaware of, her perfect hips and backside that swayed the material of her dress like grass in a summer breeze, and those impossibly taunting breasts that threatened Tye with heart failure every time she bent over.

Tye shook his head to clear his thoughts before the ache in his groin became too much to endure. He could hear Tom Simms and his clique of Jocks and Jockettes on the far side of the room. Tom had been harping on him ever since he had dropped sports at the beginning of the year for drama.

He felt a touch at his shoulder and turned to find Liz Bellins sitting behind him. She had been dating Simms until just a few weeks before. No one knew the reason for the split but Tye suspected he was part of it.

"It's almost over, Tye. This is the last day we'll see each other. Every day, I mean." She blushed faintly under her spring tan.

"That doesn't mean we stop seeing each other all together, Sweetheart." He smiled and leaned over close, grateful for the distraction. He reached over and ran a finger along Liz's jaw line. She smiled back shyly.

"I was hoping you would say that."

The flicker of recognition in Liz's eyes told him before the voice reached him that Helen Bierce had finally come to class.

"If I could have your attention for a minute, class, I promise I won't keep you any longer than necessary. That is if I can get every ones attention."

Tye knew she was directing the last at him where he sat turned completely around in his desk. Liz mouthed the words, 'Will you please turn around' her eyes flashing hotly as a blush crept up her neck. It worked all the way to bright crimson under the catcalls and jeers from the rest of the class. Tye ignored the noise with practiced ease and slowly turned around. He propped his suedes up on a neighboring desk and gave Mrs. Bierce an insolent smile.

"Howdy Teach. What brings you around on this fine day? I warn you right now I ain't doing no homework over the week end."

The class laughed loudly as Mrs. Bierce smiled and walked over to tip Tye's feet off the desk. She understood the jibe as she had understood the continuing flow she had gotten from Tye since the start of the school year.

"Any homework, Randy. I would think that after four quarters of this dreary subject you would have learned something. Evidently I was wrong."

He shrugged his broad lean shoulders,

"Guess I'm slow is all."

The rest of the period went quickly. All Mrs. Bierce had wanted to say was thank you and good luck. After that, Annuals had gone around with the usual noise and rowdiness that accompanies a graduating class. Tye would never know what made him look up at the teacher when he did. Maybe it was because it was Tom Simms having his annual signed. He looked up in time to catch the look on the jock's face. It was a leer

he knew all too well. Helen's face was blank, cool. Simms leaned across the desk to pick up his book and lingered close to Mrs. Bierce's face. Tye's heart began to pound like a trip hammer as he watched a hand cross and carelessly brush one of those impossible breasts.

Helen's face went cold as she said something Tye couldn't hear. She could have screamed it and Tye would have remained deaf. Tom laughed as the bell sounded and walked out the door ahead of the press of students.

Tye sat frozen in horror, not wanting to believe what his eyes told him had happened. His hands started to shake, the trembling spreading up his arms into his chest until he couldn't breathe. He closed his eyes trying to get a breath that wouldn't come. No single thought ran through his head, only a bubbling cauldron of anger.

Scooping his books up he lunged for the door. Simms' taunting laugh rang in his ears as he pushed his way through into the hall. The halls were silent and empty to his blood deafened senses as he jostled people in his rush to reach Simms. His folders and books slapped the floor two steps away from where the jock stood unaware. Tye grabbed his beefy shoulder and spun him around. He threw his fist as hard as he could right into the middle of Tom's angry surprised face. The punch sent waves of pain up his arm and sent Simms staggering back against the lockers. The area cleared quickly as Tye stepped in and slammed his left into Simms stomach, doubling him over with a painful wrench of air. He threw Simms against the lockers. His head banged loudly as he bounced limply back. Tye shouldered the dazed form against the locker and with cold deadly patience he began to pummel Simms' midsection with both fists.

Behind him he heard kids screaming. Hands closed on his arms and he let them pull him away. Teachers were appearing from the crowd of students hurrying to help. Gil Ronan, the football coach, held him as another teacher eased Simms to the floor. Later Tye remembered Ronan asking him why he had beaten Simms so badly. He also remembered Mr. Peter's burly form as he bulled his way through the people to take him in one massive paw and lead him down to the office. He was shaking horribly by the time he reached the first floor, the shock of what had happened finally breaking through the rage.

Then had come the hours of questions that he couldn't, wouldn't answer. Questions from Peters and Mathers, from the police and the school nurse and Mrs. Waugh the guidance counselor. And finally Marie. She had been the hardest to ignore. She was his only family yet there was something in Tye that wouldn't let him open up.

It was dark out when they had finally let him out in Stan and Marie's custody. The ride home had been made in silence but as soon as they reached the house Stan had started in. He threatened to let the police have him if Tye didn't start talking. Tye told him to stuff it and rode off on his motorcycle telling Stan he could call the cops if

he wanted to. Stan had tried to physically restrain him but Marie had intervened. In the face of the tearful pleading look in her eyes he promised to be at the principal's office Monday and rode off into the night.

Tye had grabbed a quick shower and change of clothes at a friend's house before coming to the meeting. As he stood watching the principal there was no way of telling he hadn't slept in almost seventy hours. A bit of redness showed at the edges of his eyes but nothing else. He stood with his hands clasped loosely in front of his body. He had spent the weekend riding all over the state trying to put his mind straight. He looked up as Dr. Mathers cleared his throat

"I asked if you still set an remaining silent, Randy?"

Tye took a deep breath, hesitating while he wondered if he had the courage to do what his long ride had decided him on being the right course.

"No. I'll tell you why I did it."

"Well, Randall, I am glad to hear you understand the gravity of this situation. We will help all we can but young Simms is in bad shape. Some form of compensation may be called for. Do you understand Randall?"

"Sure."

"Well then I can see no reason why we shouldn't start with your explanation for your behavior."

Tye paused long enough to make every one uneasy. The smile never wavered from his lips but Marie could see the pain and loneliness in his eyes, silent tears formed in her eyes as she realized what it meant.

"Tom Simms had been riding me all year for dropping from sports. I figured it would be a good way to leave school by putting that snotty sonofabitch in his place."

He heard the gasps at his language. Dr. Mathers sat behind his desk, his smile faltering as he stared at Tye with the fast cooling eyes of a man who doesn't like being the butt of a bad joke.

"And this is the reason for your attack that put a boy in the hospital? You have no other?"

Tye swallowed the dust in his mouth and waited for the stabbing cold fear in his middle to subside before he tried his voice. It cracked horribly over just two words.

"Yes sir."

Dr. Mather's hands played idly with a pencil as he thought over how the boy's words would affect the outcome of the situation. Simms was in a towering rage. Now there was no alternative but to turn the lad over to the civil authorities. He hated to have to do it. Dr. Mathers had worked with students long enough to know that the

story he had heard wasn't the whole truth. But it was all they were going to get. He was a good student with potential but Tyson refused to use it. He wasn't afraid to stand up to any one, which was why Mathers knew something was missing. Dr. Mathers remembered his own run in with Tyson earlier in the year. It had been over the dress code issue. Tye had been chosen by his classmates as the person to carry their petition to the administration. He had presented a logical cool argument with a surprising amount of calm eloquence. Enough for Dr. Mathers to adopt the proposed changes to the code.

It hurt him that the boy had forced him into a position where he couldn't help him. He also knew he had been maneuvered into it.

"You are certain you have nothing else to say Randy?"

Tye nodded silently, not trusting his voice. He looked back at the principal and hoped the trembling in knees wasn't visible. He kept the same smile on his face even though his muscles were beginning to ache.

"I have a few questions I would like to ask him Dr. Mathers. There are some points my father wanted me to clarify before he makes his decision on what to do. May I?"

"Go ahead Bill."

Tye turned and looked at Bill Simms. The similarity between the brothers caused a twinge of uneasiness in Tye's chest.

"You say that Tom was riding you. What do you mean by that?"

Tye shrugged. "He figured the reason I quit sports for drama was because I was a pussy. I didn't care for what he said about me and what I did with my life. He's a loud mouth jerk who thinks people owe him something because he's a Simms. I got tired of it."

"Tired enough to break Tom's nose and rupture his spleen?"

Tye looked into the older youth's water blue eyes and nodded.

"Even though you had taken his girl from him?"

"Liz left of her own free will. Don't blame me if your brother is too much of a pig to keep a girl around."

Tye could see the anger rise with the color to Bill's face but when he spoke it was with even control.

"Tom thought differently about his losing Liz."

Tye interrupted him with a nasty laugh.

"He didn't lose her, man, she ran."

Simms ignored the remark.

"She told Tom she didn't want to have anything to do with him anymore and she named you as the reason."

"Not this cowboy."

"You gave her the lead in that workshop play you did."

"She was the best for the part."

"Tom thought there was something more there. I checked and found out you have quite a reputation as a ladies man back stage."

"And if you had checked a bit closer you would have found I was dating some one else then."

"They say you like to keep a stable."

Tye made an obscene remark

"That will be enough." Dr. Mathers said in a low tone. "Are you satisfied, Bill?"

Simms thought about it, glaring at Tye, then nodded.

"Does anybody have anything to say?" He looked around the group. "Then Randall, you leave me no other choice. I told the police I wanted a chance to settle this out of court. Now you leave me no other recourse. I'm sorry boy but you have tied my hands."

Tye's insides slid slowly past his knees leaving an empty cold in their place. The grin was still in place and his slouched stance didn't waver as he heard what might just as well have been his death sentence. A trial would mean money he would have to pay back to Stan. Assault. He almost shivered violently catching himself at the last instant.

Dr. Mathers watched the boy, trying to figure out what was going through his head. He needed an out and he wouldn't give it to himself. There had to be a reason for him to keep silent and Randy Tyson was a stubborn youth. Mathers was about to dismiss the gathering when the door burst open and Helen Bierce came in.

"Mrs. Bierce, we are in the middle..."

"I know Doctor. And I'm glad you are still in the middle. I apologize for the interruption but have you made any progress yet?"

She glanced at Tye. The moment she had walked in he had fixed his gaze on something outside the window behind the principal and he watched it doggedly, ignoring her presence.

"I'm afraid the matter is out of our hands. Young Tyson says he beat Tom Simms for no reason."

Tye could feel her hazel eyes on him. He felt the sweat begin to flow down his back and he wished she hadn't come.

"If you could let me talk to him alone I think I could get to the bottom of this."

Every one looked at her waiting for an explanation but she was watching Tye.

"Couldn't I, Tye?"

Tye gathered all the will left in him and turned to meet her eyes. He tried to make his reply as light and cool as he put all of the sardonic edge he could into his voice.

"Whatever turns you on, Teach."

Mathers looked at the two wondering what was causing the tense undercurrent. He looked at his Senior English teacher wondering if she still wanted to try in the face of his obvious antagonism. She nodded.

"All right Helen. At this point I'm willing to try anything. If no one has any objections we'll wait outside."

They filed out reluctant with curiosity. Dr. Mathers paused at the door.

"Take your time. I don't want to lose him."

When the door was closed Helen walked over and leaned her hips against the front of the principal's desk so she could look at Tye. She searched his face totally undaunted by the mockery in his eyes.

"See the monkey in the zoo. You like to watch people when they're down Teach? Is that how you get your kicks?"

Tye waited for some reaction. When it came he felt his stomach curl and burn as she smiled slowly and shook her head.

"You can drop the tough guy act, Tye. I haven't believed it for a long time now."

Tye looked down at her, the smile dying on his face leaving it a blank mask. Instinct told him to run, to get away from her. She was too close. Why did she have to come now? The hardest part was over. It would have been all downhill if she had just stayed away.

She smiled at the puzzled look trying to fight its way to his face.

"I am still not sure what it was exactly that set you off. I guess I'm still shocked that you did it at all. You never seemed to be the violent type."

"And what type did you think I was?" He snarled remembering the hand on her breast.

"Sensitive. And compassionate."

"Passionate is more along my line." He said, roughening his voice. She laughed lightly.

"I'm sorry Tye. I just can't take you seriously."

Humiliation fanned the rage growing in his heart and the pair came roaring up in a flood of pain. The suppressed fires of a long year of frustration burned in his veins singing a wild song in his ears as he grabbed her arms and pulled her roughly to him.

"What's the matter, afraid I would be better than that damn jock?" He hissed, regretting the words as soon as they left his lips. But they were out and there was no taking them back. He pulled her close, hesitating as he saw the look in her eyes. She blinked as she had just awakened from sleep then relaxed into his arms.

"Go ahead Tye, go ahead and finish."

Tye realized he had begun to shake again. He pushed her away disgusted with himself. He turned to the window, trying to get the feel of her off his mind.

"How did you find out what was going on in here?"

"Liz Bellins."

"What has Liz got to do with it?"

He jumped as she laid her hand on his arm and he stepped away.

"Tye, Liz was sitting behind you Friday. She saw everything you did."

The world wavered and faded as 440 volts of pain slammed across Tye's insides. His eyes went wide then clenched shut as he realized what it meant.

"She came to me this morning and told me what you both had seen. It explained a lot. I was hurt that you left so quickly. I wanted to talk to you"

"About what?" he cut in savagely turning to face her. "About how nice it was to have me as a student? Or maybe another little pep talk like Cover Girl Waugh's about me applying myself and becoming President someday? Thanks but I've have had my fill of that bull."

"Tye, I..."

"Don't call me Tye. Tye is for the people that I can call friend.

Helen paused and took a step back in the face of his verbal attack. Tye turned back to the window again, hating himself for what he had said. She was quiet for a long time.

"I'm sorry. I guess I deserved that."

Tye started to say something but she shushed him.

"Let me do the talking for a few minutes. I want to tell you the reason why Tom Simms did what he did."

"I don't want..."

"Will you shut up and let me talk? Or are you dead set on going to jail like a pretty little martyr? I haven't told this to any one yet and I have to get it off my chest. Maybe if I tell you it will help both of us."

She paused, looking up into his eyes. Hers faltered for a moment under the agonizing hurt in his but she bit her lower lip and started. At first her voice was low and husky. So low Tye had to get closer to hear.

"Two months ago I ran into Tom in a bar. I had been out partying with some of my old girlfriends and I was pretty well loaded by the time I saw him. He came over, and asked me to dance. I knew then I should have turned him down but I was drunk enough to be daring. My husband was out of town for a basketball tournament and I hadn't been out in quite a long time. We danced a few fast ones. A slow one came up. I started to leave but Tom wanted to dance it too. He's a big guy and I didn't want to cause scene so I went. I thought I could handle him, a boy from one of my classes. Boy. I'm surprised I can still call him that. Anyway, he started to get fresh out there as we danced. I should have stopped him right away."

Tye started to tremble again, the black anger building as imagination raced ahead of her story. She put a hand on his chest as she saw it climb.

"Please, let me finish. I did put a stop to it and I left right after. I drove home and took a hot shower to get the feel of his hands off me but I couldn't. I was pacing the floor when the doorbell rang. It was Tom and he'd had a lot more to drink. He came in and...damn it all, there isn't a nice way to say it. He tried to rape me. I was lucky he was so drunk. If he had been sober I doubt if I could have kneed him as hard as I did. It took the steam out of him but not before he tore my robe off me and mauled me badly. I don't know how he got home after I pushed him out the door and I don't care. Please, calm down. I don't want you flying off the handle again. For both our sakes."

"If I had known this before..."

"You would probably be in jail for murder. Or you might not have been so easy to pull off and Tom would be hurt worse than he is. Will you quit blaming it all on him? I led him on. He was only following up on what he thought had been offered. I can't imagine why he would want me with all the girls he has to pick from his own age. I'm afraid there isn't much comparison."

Tye snorted through his clenched teeth.

"An immature pack of giggly little teases. Next to you they're like choosing between a quick burger at the drive in and a gourmet meal. You're a beautiful woman."

She looked up into his fiery green eyes and a smile played at the corners of her mouth.

"Why thank you. But I'm afraid it isn't so simple. I am not the woman you think I am. I toyed with Tom. And I was unfaithful to my husband in doing so. In a way I guess I'm still not playing it the way I should. I should tell him."

"Maybe you're afraid he'll react the way I did."

She smiled and said. "No, I'll make up my own rationalizations. Bob would probably look at me as if I'd had grown a third eye and push me away. Maybe that's why I haven't told him."

"So you decide to see what reaction you could get out of me by offering it to me in the principal's office. Is that your new game?"

Her eyes saddened and the smile turned at the corners of her full lips as she leaned in towards him. She ignored the hurt in his voice as she placed her other hand next to the one on his chest.

"No, I came in here thinking you were a child. I forgot, like I did with Tom, you aren't a kid anymore. We've been trying to help you grow up for the past thirteen years and some grow faster than others. In Tom's case, he was more a child in a man's body. His methods were crude, his style brutalized by the ego we build into our athletes in school. But he will always have that flaw that will keep him from being great. He can't feel. There is no tenderness, no gentleness in him. I didn't think you cared as deeply as I can see you do. You've been hiding behind that macho bastard act all year trying to keep every one from finding out you had the hots for the teacher." She felt the muscles of his chest tighten and went on quickly before he could speak. "I'm sorry. It means more to you than that, doesn't it? I don't have too high an opinion of myself right now."

Her voice faltered, her lips trembling, as her eyes grew bright with tears. She slid her hands around his neck.

"I'm sorry if I spoiled your image of me, Randy." She whispered as her eyes became heavy lidded. She stretched up until her mouth was almost touching his and Tye could taste the warmth of her breath. He reached up and pulled her hands from his neck and held her away from him.

"If I can't play Bogart, you can drop the Bergman."

Helen blinked as if she had been slapped. She pulled her hands free and went over to the couch. She stood studying the painting on the wall lost in thought.

"I was right about you, you know. You are too honorable. You have your own rules and they mean something to you." She turned around and gave him a shy smile. "I'm glad it wasn't you that night. I don't think I would have fought if it had been. But then I wouldn't have had to with you. Thanks for being you."

"Your welcome, I think."

Helen laughed. She turned, her hazel eyes meeting his green ones in a light fencing duel.

"I'm going to miss you next year, Randy."

"Tye."

She stopped her hand as she was raising it to wipe the tears from her face and looked at him closely.

"Thank you...Tye."

He smiled sheepishly as he used his own hands to wipe the glittering trails from her face. Helen's smile trembled then slid from her mouth as the warmth in his eyes reached her. Relays clicked and switches threw as the messages came through clearly on both receivers.

"Tye, I'm going to tell Dr. Mathers about what happened that night. I'm sure Liz will add anything she can if he still needs convincing. Legally I can't do a thing against Tom and I think that maybe I'll be in some trouble when the truth is known."

Tye stiffened in protest and she smiled.

"Don't worry. I'll just tell Mr. Simms it would be to his advantage if we forgot the whole thing, period. I'm sure I'll find he's a very reasonable man."

"Then I guess all I can say is thanks."

They both stood holding each other, unwilling to break the contact, even though they knew they had to. Finally Helen reached up and kissed him lightly on the lips.

"Do you remember the day we had that discussion about reincarnation?"

Tye gave a bark of laughter. "Of course. I hadn't done my homework the night before and I had to do something to keep you from finding out so I detoured the talk early."

Helen thought about for a minute and her eyes went wide.

"You scamp! It was you that started it. I guess it doesn't make any difference now. What I wanted to say was, next time around?"

Tye looked down at her his brow creased in question.

"Next time?"

"Around. I always thought I would come back as a horse. A quiet bay filly with white stocking, and my own valley out where the sun would keep the grass green and I could run to my heart's content. This being human is too hard."

Tye laughed.

"It sounds tempting."

Helen bit her lower lip as the feelings for the youth in her arms rose up and engulfed her. She tried to laugh but it died quickly under the stress leaving her nothing more except words.

"It will be a big valley."

Tye came up short at the soft huskiness in her voice. In that instant he knew the world as it was. Love made the world sing and gave the strength that it took to live. He smiled and brushed a stray lock of hair from his teacher's face.

"If hammer headed roan comes to visit, be nice to him."

MIRROR LAKE

"For the last time Jane, I haven't seen Chrissy Page for two weeks. Not since the night we had dinner with her and Craig."

"Why do you keep lying to me?"

I stood back and looked into the eyes of the woman I was to marry. She was crying again, a state of affairs that was happening all too frequently for me. Since my discharge from the Army, we had begun to fight with surprising regularity. And it was always on the same subject.

I don't know where she got her information but she was adamant I was seeing my best friend's wife. Chrissy and I were old friends, as old as Craig and I were. I had taken her to lunch a little over a month ago. Since then I had seen her only as part of our foursome. I could live with Jane's accusations; even prove them wrong given time. What stood in the way was the fact I had seen Jane with another man. Five times in three weeks. I hadn't been lucky enough to be close enough to recognize him though.

"Pete, I love you. I want to marry you but I can't if you won't give her up. She's married, Pete. And Craig is your best friend. Why won't you let her go?"

I could feel the anger building in me. My temples throbbed as the ragged pulse of fire in my veins pushed me. My jaw creaked as I clenched my teeth and tried to calm down. I knew if I stayed any longer the thin control I had would disappear, so I turned and left without saying a word. I could hear her calling after me, the anguish in her voice cutting deeply. She was still calling me when I flipped the canoe off the dock and into the water. I thrust the paddle down in deep biting strokes that made the slim canoe seem to leap away from the shore. I paddled hard towards the setting sun. By the time I reached the center of the lake my arms ached horribly and I was panting from the effort.

I laid the paddle across the gunwales and leaned back. The last sliver of sun made a bloody mirror of the lake that was broken only by my fading wake. It was absolutely silent, not even the sounds from the shore reaching out to me. The only noise was the rushing in my ears.

I hated to run. Especially from Jane. She was the one constant in my life. Pictures of her, smiling, long legged in a white sunsuit taken while I was home after basic training, were still in my duffle. She had been married to a guy for a year before I met her. The divorce had only been finalized a week when I met her.

And now we were on the verge of parting.

The thought of losing her; black shining hair, sun browned skin and freckles, hurt. It bore into me until it covered my anger. All I knew was I wanted her and no one else. I turned the canoe and began to paddle back. I was still angry but something told me I couldn't afford to let that anger rule. I couldn't lose Jane because of foolish pride. My arms still felt like hollow reeds but I was moving for the cottage.

I felt like crying. Her parents had lent us the cottage as a last ditch attempt to keep us together. I paddled harder. It was full dark by the time I tied up to the dock and headed for the cottage. I was opening the screen door to the front porch when I heard Jane scream from the kitchen. The sound of her words froze me.

"You bastard! You dirty bastard!"

Before I could think to do anything, I heard the back door slam and then her Toyota as she started it. I walked stiffly to the kitchen door, her headlights flashing across my face as she drove off.

He was still there looking out the door, hands on his hips. His shoulders were jerking slightly as he chuckled. He was wearing a tan polo shirt and denim cut-offs with a pair of beat up tennis shoes. My skin began to crawl as I stared at his back. He had brown hair, just a bit shaggy. As I watched, he reached up and tugged at his earlobe in a hauntingly familiar gesture. I must have said something because he whirled and glared at me in the yellow light from the small unshaded bulb overhead. I shook my head, horror slowly growing in me like a terrible cancer.

His eyes widened, then narrowed as the full impact of the situation hit him. Slowly an all too familiar grin crept into his eyes. One corner of his mouth raised in a mocking salute.

"Fancy meeting you here, Pete."

I stared at him in silence.

"S'matter Petey, cat got your tongue?" He chuckled and straightened up. The animal fierceness was gone from his eyes now. All that remained was that mocking smile.

"I didn't think you would be back so soon. I was going to be gone when you got back. Just like her."

"Bastard."

He threw back his head and laughed. He opened the refrigerator and helped himself to a beer.

"Want one?"

"How did you get here?"

He laughed again. "One track Petey boy. Anyway, does it really matter?"

"Yes. Yes it does."

He shrugged and sat down at the table, kicking his feet up on its scratched formica top.

"I suppose it might at that."

"What in the hell is going on here?"

He smiled crookedly.

"What are you doing here? What are you trying to do to me?"

"You're getting a bit redundant old buddy. I'm here because I didn't have any choice in the matter."

He dropped his feet to the floor and pointed at me with his beer bottle. This can't be real, I kept telling myself. These kind of things don't happen.

"Admit it Pete, you've been toying with the idea of ditching that long drink of water since you got back. You've been wondering about Chrissy, wondering if you could get to her again. You can't lie to me boy."

"You're the one feeding those lies about Chris and I to Jane." The warm September air burned at my throat as I tried to take a deep breath, tried to fight down the anger in me.

He shook his head.

"I'm disappointed Petey. Now how could I be spreading dirty rumors to dear, dear Janey? Get serious boy."

He smiled and finished his beer, putting the empty on the counter by the sink.

"I'll be moving along now Pete. Take it easy pal, you'll be hearing from me soon."

I stepped in quickly and hit him on the chin. He staggered back against the counter. He felt his chin and moved his jaw tentatively. When he met my eyes again, the mockery was coated with anger.

"I didn't think you would go Neanderthal on me, Petey. It won't do any good though. I won't fight with you. Take a good look at me. Can you fight me? You always were the romantic type at heart. Can you find it in you to fight what you've done?"

It was his mistake. I was a romantic, enough of one to be able to feel shame and anger at the very things he had said. It took him by surprise when I hit him again. He tried to bull his way past me and we tumbled out the screen door and down the steps into the yard. He knew how to fight, but then I knew he would. We shuffled back and forth in the darkness trying to find the openings we needed. He tripped me and pulled back before I could regain my balance.

I knew he was going to swing. And I knew it was going to be at my stomach but there wasn't a thing I could do to stop it. His fist sank into my middle forcing the breath from my lungs. I backpedaled until the fender of my car stopped me. He hadn't

followed. He stood at the edge of the porch trying to regain his wind. The open door cast an oblong rectangle of light across the side of his face. I could see his color wasn't very good. I could also see he was worried.

"What's the matter?" I taunted. "A little fight like this isn't that hard on a man. Come on, let's get this game over with."

My stomach hurt but I stood free of the car and stepped towards him. His eyes glanced furtively around.

"Don't try to run. We're going to straighten this out here and now."

I should have been suspicious when he smiled at me.

"Sure thing Petey."

I caught the flash of movement as his hand came out from the shadows under the porch. He had found one of the barbeque grills while I had talked. I ducked, turning my shoulder towards the grate. It glanced off without doing any damage, giving him a running start into the dark.

As I chased him I wondered if it would be better to just let go. He scared me. The whole idea of what was happening scared me.

He had to be the man I had seen Jane with. He wanted to hurt me but I couldn't figure out why. It was instinct that launched me into the flying tackle that carried us over the canoe and into the shallow water.

We fought there in thigh-deep water, the only noises coming from the splashing water and our grunting efforts. He slipped in the silt and we both went under. I felt something cut the side of my head and then I was on my feet again. I pulled a fist back to hit him. He relaxed, kneeling on one knee in front of me. I had him by the shirtfront but something was making me hold my punch. He grinned up at me, his chest working as hard as my own. I grabbed him with both hands and hauled him to his feet.

"What now Petey boy?" He smiled insolently.

There was a trickle of blood down the side of his face from a cut on his temple. I stood in the shallow water, the autumn breeze chilling my wet back. I worked to get my breathing back under control. The smile was still on his face. I hated it, all insolence and mockery. I licked my lips as the strength drained from my arms.

"Check Petey." He chuckled. "And maybe mate?"

"One thing I want to know. Why? Why like this?"

He wiped at the blood on his face with a careless hand.

The mockery faded from his eyes and a different, more pained emotion shone in the pale new risen moonlight. It confused me.

"It doesn't make any sense."

He smiled with sardonic irony.

"What does?"

I let my arms drop to my sides, the bones having turned to water. He took a step back.

"What now?" My voice croaked in my throat.

He laughed. It sent a chill through me to hear it. His face was a mask of pure evil, twisted by the silver light into a basic relief of black and white planes. I watched in silent horror until the black humor left him like a dying breath. The silence was complete as he looked at me, his eyes blankly reflecting the gleam of silver from above. Terror and panic began to well up inside me.

"We'll call it a stalemate for now. Until you force me to come again."

"And then?" I whispered hoarsely.

His smile fell into the black water at his feet, emptying his face of any emotion I could read.

"And then maybe you don't find me in time."

It still made no sense but there was a cold anger growing in me. "We might be able to end it all here."

He smiled but I could see the beginnings of something in his eyes. Was it fear?

"You're serious?"

I nodded once, not trusting my voice.

"Do you think you could do it?"

I swallowed and wiped the back of my hand across my mouth.

"I have to. One of us can't leave this lake and I think we both know it."

I expected him to answer, to debate or stall. He went for my throat, his face distorted in an animal snarl. The force of his charge knocked us back into the water. We struggled under the surface, his hands like a vise on my neck. He held me under as I pushed up under his jaw with my fingers. I felt my lungs begin to buck as they fought for air. Bright sparks of light danced at the fringes of my vision. I pressed desperately, hoping he would be forced back enough for me to get my face clear of the surface.

Suddenly the pressure on my throat was gone. His hands were flat on my chest holding me under. I kicked myself free and pushed for air. I expected him to be on me so I staggered a few steps towards shore as I gulped huge hunks of sky into my empty lungs. It wasn't until I reached the dock I realized he wasn't following.

He stood out in the lake, its silver glass cutting him off at mid-thigh. He was breathing hard as he watched me.

"Damn you." He gasped weakly.

Only ten feet separated us. I covered it in three lunging steps. This time it was my hands that clamped on neck muscles. It was him who struggled under the water.

His hands fought to pull mine from his throat but there was no strength left in them. Water dripped from my clothes onto the lake, their ripples blurring his already distorted face.

Without warning, I felt a paralyzing wave of panic rip through me. The wind at my back became an icy current of black water and the air I breathed burned wetly at my lungs. I was drowning as I drowned him. I was lost, unsure of where I actually was. I looked into his eyes and saw the hot desperate anger backed by the most primal of fears. Fear for survival. My senses swam in confusion. If it was all real, then I was going to die. If it was my imagination I just didn't know.

I pushed harder on his neck, feeling the flesh give and the muscles squirm. I began to scream then. I continued to scream as I felt his pulse hammer under my clenched fingers. Steadily at first, then raggedly, threading off until it was gone. My screams turned to sobs as I let him go and staggered blindly to the dock. I lay there, legs dangling limply in the water, crying into years of water logged, fish smelling, log planks. I cried hard. My already sore throat was aching from the abuse. I didn't stop until I felt something brush against the backs of my legs.

I didn't want to turn around. I didn't want to face what I had done. An agony of panic wrenched at me until I was screaming again. I clenched my eyes so tightly that my temples pounded. The bumping on my legs continued, gently persistent. I knew I would crack if it kept on so I turned and looked.

He lay face up to the moon, his eyes open and staring. There was no mockery in them now. Only a deadly silent disbelief. I wanted to run. I wasn't sure of anything anymore except the dead body was nudging my knees. The massive implications of what I had done began to sink in. I knelt down and looked at him.

His face was slack in death, grotesquely unfamiliar. The small scar on the bridge of the once broken nose was there. I forced myself to scrape at it with my fingernail. The skin moved like the scum on the top of an opened paint can. It shifted and then came back slowly but the scar remained. I checked the two scars on the left hand and the birthmark on the elbow. All there. All appeared to be genuine. I stood up and looked around the lake.

It was past the tourist season. The rest of the lake was deserted. There wasn't a light in sight. I was reluctant to move but I knew there was still one thing left to do. There was a big concrete block on the bank Jane's dad had used for a temporary anchor and some twenty feet of line tied to it. I put it in the canoe. He was heavy, impossibly so. For a frantic minute I didn't think I could get him in the boat. Fear gave me the extra strength I needed. The canoe rocked dangerously but stayed afloat as I tipped him into it. I untied it from the dock and headed for the Narrows. I knew them to be the deepest spot in the lake. The bright moonlight helped me find the landmarks I

needed but I couldn't help but wonder if it didn't also put me on a stage, black and macabre, for any one on shore. But there was no turning back and I knew it.

The night was silent. Only the gentle lap of water on the canoe accompanied me as I began my grisly chore. The line dug into his skin as I pulled on it. I had to quit twice as my stomach threatened to rebel. When I finished, his legs were trussed securely together, the block laying less than a foot from his tennis shoes. I sat back and looked around one more time. The lake was still dark and empty.

Fitting for a grave.

I felt as weak as a damp rag. I had never killed before and I didn't like the feelings that went with it. Unwillingly I hefted the block over the gunwale. The canoe tilted wildly as I manhandled him after the concrete anchor. I hoped it would keep him down. A gargling rattle of air escaped his lips as his legs went over the edge then he was gone. I watched as he sank, the block pulling him slowly into the blackness.. The last thing I saw was his face turned to me, his arms floating up as if in supplication, begging me. A thin streamer of bubbles trickled from his mouth as the darkness took him from my sight.

Mechanically I picked up the paddle and headed for the cottage. I felt a thousand years old. My insides felt full of broken glass and lye. The whole thing seemed to be a fantastic dream. But the cut on my temple burned with reality's pain. There was a puddle in the bottom of the canoe and a white scar of cement dust glowed dimly where the block had rested. I tied the canoe to the shore end of the dock and walked out to its end. My clothes were clammy from the dunking and the sweating. I felt like hell.

I sat on the wood planking and put my chin in my hands, my feet hanging loosely over the edge. I stared at the shining water until I began to see the little fishes under its surface as the sun came up and lit the world again. Only then did I raise my head and look out at the spot. Nothing marked it. No ghostly hands clawing for air, no bobbing corpse. The lake was as blank as always. Something in the back of my mind heard the hesitant footsteps on the dock and identified them as Jane's.

I felt her kneel next to me. Her fingers traced the cut on my temple, lighter than spider silk. I knew she was looking at me.

"Pete? What's wrong?"

I looked out at the Narrows. What was wrong. The ache in my muscles told me it hadn't been a dream. I looked up at the shining dark eyes, full of concern in spite of her anger. How could I tell her? What could I tell her?

That I had killed myself last night?

FINN MacCOOL

They say when you die your life passes before your eyes, an instant replay of the pageant of your deeds. Maybe some sort of refresher course so when you get to the Pearly Gates you can't claim you don't remember. Either the rewind button was fritzed on my personal recorder or I was headed someplace where it didn't matter if I remembered or not. There was just a sort of grey time where I wasn't any more and then a real impressive receiving hall/nightmare cavern with smells designed to keep the breathing shallow and a décor heavy on flames and oppressive rock carvings. The place was huge. Smoke swirled in twisting clouds, wafting new waves of rotten eggs smells laced heavily with other things that brought dark depressing thoughts and made your gorge rise repeated into your throat.

Half hidden in the smudge was a raised dais with steps designed for giants, all slicked over with a disgusting mess. At the top was a throne even Frazetta couldn't have imagined. It was flanked by a pair of demonic uglies holding halberds with huge blood crusted blades. Their armor was ornate and the lower portions were cut away like chaps displaying monstrous genitalia that made one wonder about the sort of plumbing it was designed to match up with. Seated on the throne was an even bigger demon that appeared to be chewing on a human leg as if it were a buffalo wing. Its eyes were lambent pits of glowing fire and it beckoned to me with its free hand.

I started across the floor, ignoring the congealing mess underfoot and the piteous cries from the mangled pustulent forms that had probably been humans somewhere in their past. After what seemed to be a day or two I was no closer to the hideous throne so I stopped. I would have sat down but the prospect definitely lacked appeal. The big guy gestured again that I approach so I gestured back. Hey, if you are slated for an eternity of hellfire and damnation one last bit of defiance before it kicked in seemed like pretty small potatoes. The air shimmered and the smoke swirled around me and when it cleared, I was standing at the foot of the stairs. Beat walking.

"Your pitiful show of defiance has earned you some special attention, human."

I shrugged. "Get real, fat boy."

Suddenly I was surrounded by flames, engulfed in demonic napalm. I screamed and fell to my knees. There was no more thought of anything but impossible pain. It went on, my flesh falling away in charred slabs only to reappear to be burned all over again. And then it was gone and I was back before his demonic majesty, hale and hearty again. I shook my head and stood up, trembling. After a moment I gathered myself and stood again. He was glaring down at me so I repeated my gesture.

He started to do something that would most likely make the last little taste look like chickenshit so I grinned at him.

"Look, I know you can make my existence absolute hell, damnation and torture. Either get on with it or quit playing. No, I am not going to grovel and beg yet. Can you force me to do it? Probably. You know it and I know it so what's the point? If you get your jollies out of torturing kittens and puppies, that's your problem. If the only way you can impress me is by breaking me, you ain't squat."

"Are you saying that if the table was turned you wouldn't indulge yourself?"

"What's the point? One, the tables aren't turned nor are they bloody likely to be. And two, no I wouldn't. Pulling wings off flies when they can't do anything to stop you just means you are one sick puppy."

"I have heard these brave speeches before."

"It isn't bravery. I'm scared spitless. You can do whatever you want and I get to suffer. This is just my one last chance to say I don't give a shit. After you get through with me, that is sure to change but then I won't be here anymore. All you'll have is a mindless pile of puke. Have your fun, bozo."

"Ah, there you are wrong. I can bring you back, reassemble you." He rumbled darkly.

"Maybe but I still won't be me. I'll be a nice little recording because if you bring me back just like I am now, I'll know all that pain and torture is just a game. And if I don't know that, you still lose." I watched him drum fingers with claws like fence posts on the arm of his throne. Me, I'm nobodies hero, just a contrary sort. It was obvious he could make my life hell, literally. Just like they had told me in grammar school. The thing that was bothering me was I knew I hadn't learned that in grammar school. At least not in PS whatever number or Jefferson or any other kind. That knowledge went a lot deeper than Mrs. Grundy or Sister Mary Catherine.

And suddenly I knew, way down deep that this whole bit was something out of a bad horror movie.

"I believe another demonstration is in order, human. I do so love the defiant ones." He waved his hand in my direction and I felt a brush of power. My skin tingled and my vision blurred for an instant and then it was gone. It took a moment for him to realize I wasn't collapsing into a quivering, screaming heap and his fire pit eyes narrowed.

"You know, I'm thinking this whole thing has got to be just a little bit taxing for you, fat boy. I'm impressed with it but not that much. Hollywood does it better."

He rose from the throne but it wasn't to the gargantuan heights I had expected.

"Damn you, Finn."

I chuckled. "I thought that was already done."

He continued to shrink as the aromas shifted to salty tang and the monstrous throne room condensed down to a posh oceanside suite overlooking what seemed to be the Caribbean. My erstwhile host cum demonic master headed for the cabaña style wet bar on the patio. He was still a large man, dressed now in some sort of black Armani jacket and slacks with tasseled loafers on sock less feet and a bronze silk shirt, open at the neck. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Beer would be fine." He waved his hand over the bar and a faux coconut shell appeared with a cute umbrella. Beside it was a frosty Amstel. He picked them up and headed over to the collection of beach chairs. I figured it might be interesting to follow. The Amstel was delicious. He shifted the umbrella so it wouldn't poke him in the eye and sipped his drink. "So, you're back."

I shrugged. I couldn't recall ever having been in the Caribbean before but what the heck.

"There are quite a few people who have been wondering when this would happen."

I put me at the top of that list. Old Beelzebub had settled into a form that reminded me of a certain multi gajillionaire, which was probably even more unsettling than his last incarnation. Especially when he was treating me like an old college buddy. "You never can tell how things will fall out."

"So it would seem." He finished his drink and waved a hand. The froo froo shell was gone and in its place was a glass of Scotch. He glared at me, toasted with his glass and took a healthy knock. "I really didn't want this duty."

"I can imagine. Had to be a bitch to set all that up for nothing." I had no idea of what I was saying but my host nodded.

"I told them it probably wouldn't work this time."

I filed the 'this time' away for later reference and nodded sagely then drank beer. I understood drinking beer. "So why bother?"

He shook his head disgustedly. "You can't beat City Hall. And I got to be dog catcher." He caught my look and raised a hand. "Figure of speech."

"So just what is it you're supposed to talk me into?"

His eyes narrowed. "The usual. You know the drill."

Again, I nodded and again I had no idea what he was talking about. "So talk."

He stood up and threw his glass at the bar. "Damn you, Finn. I don't have the patience to talk to retards. Or heroes."

A silvery trill of laughter came from inside the suite, followed by a moonbeam goddess in a red and gold sari. "Jados, you are as subtle as Tor's hammer."

I stood up and watched as she walked out to join us. I had no confidence there was enough blood left in my body to allow either my brain or tongue to function. She was beyond gorgeous, desirable a very dim memory. Her hair was a red gold fall of glory and her figure something Michelangelo just might have imagined. The kicker was the eyes, flashing steel in a tanned face that could make any man a babbling idiot at fifty paces. Looking at her kicked every ductless gland in my body into maximal overdrive. She took every advantage and then some of the half dozen steps it took her to reach me, her hand coming up to gently touch my cheek.

"Hello, Finn."

I managed not to gargle or stammer only because my entire body had frozen. I think I managed a head nod. Her smile kicked up a few megawatts before she turned to my host.

"Do I get a drink?"

Something told me this gal hadn't gotten her own drink since the fall of Troy. Right behind it was the knowledge of how accurate that thought was. Jados saved me from a social faux pas by going over and mixing her a drink. Once she had it in hand, she looked at me over the rim of her glass. I was surprised the damn thing didn't shatter or melt.

"So, how've you been?"

I managed to lift my beer to my mouth without hitting my ear and took a drink. Had to. Without priming, my throat was so dry I doubt I could have managed a croak in response. "I can't complain."

She arched a perfectly sculpted brow seductively. This lady had not only invented sex, she still held the original patent.

"Can't? Or no one will listen?"

I managed a shrug. "Or I don't know who to complain to."

Her laugh was tiny temple bells, in at least three octaves. "Ah, Finn Mac Cool, its good to have you back."

Her words hit me. I knew that name. Not as my own but I knew it. Somewhere down in the archives a little man brought out a massive tome and paged through it to the old legend. The same train led to others in lightning sequence. Suddenly the grey glamour of her eyes diminished as memories flooded back.

A ballroom with a gathering of people. A big guy in leather with a crude iron hammer at his belt. Another in gold and green, his right sleeve pinned back. A lady with multiple arms dressed in silk, absolutely gorgeous. Another in a chiton, unstrung bow at her shoulder. A hunchback with a limp talking with a man with skin like sandblasted

iron. A man as beautiful as the woman before me, equally as desirable. Another in feathered headdress and plate copper armor.

Dragons and selkies. Stone rings. Ravens and coyotes. The images flashed across my mind in quick time, each pausing long enough to be seen, none long enough to be understood.

Just like the woman before me. Flashes of an ancient walled city with hordes at the gate. Many oared ships and silk dresses. Old stone castles, armored men and great battles.

Legends and myths.

I could see in her eyes she had followed my memories. "Was I wrong in naming you?"

"Depends on what you're looking for."

Somewhere in the interchange Jados had disappeared and the scene had shifted subtly to something out of the Arabian Nights. I wasn't terribly surprised because it had been a good time for us and I knew she was hoping for that memory. For all their public prudence, the Arabs were a sensual and decadent lot.

She leaned into me, her breath a nightingale's kiss on my chin. "Have you finally come back to me, Finn?"

I sniffed her hair, jasmine as I finally remembered. Her hips under my hands were warm, their pressure against mine a siren's call. I had never loved another woman as I did this one.

I pushed her away and brought up another Amstel to my hand. She hovered for a moment, caught still in the desire we had both emanated. "Finn?"

I shook my head. There was no denying the desire was there but the desire itself could be denied.

"Too many legends, lady."

She looked at me, her gown draping loosely from her shoulder, her eyes reaching for me. "Finn!"

"Aye. Finn Mac Cool. And Menelaus. And Arthur. And how many others? How many that have been lost to legend? How many betrayals?"

She stepped back, the stricken look fading behind the cool. "You haven't really changed."

I raised my bottle. "Nor have you."

"I love you, Finn."

"And I've never doubted that. I just wonder what it means to you. You've sold me out more often than a K-Mart blue light special so I'd say that love doesn't mean a whole lot."

It was amazing how a fast a love light could cool, providing one didn't know the history. "We can send you back again. Strip your memories."

Suddenly I knew they could even though I wasn't exactly sure who 'they' were. Immortal beings of some sort and I was somehow a part of them. Yet not a part. I was a black sheep, someone they either feared or had no use for. And it dawned on me this process could be done because it had been done. For some reason they couldn't kill me but they could take away my knowledge of who and what I was.

Prometheus. Lucifer. Loki. That was me. I was the rabble rouser, the fly in the ointment. I was the god they couldn't control. But they could contain me. Bind me to the rock and make me the forgotten one. Forgotten so they could continue their plans without conscience.

Somehow they had sent me back, blanked of my ideas and drive. For over a millennia. They had neutered me and had their way with mankind.

That was where I had been. That was why Jados had been watching for me. I had been banished to Coventry because I disagreed with their plans, whatever they were. And suddenly, I knew why. I had also been the Buddha. And the carpenter from Galilee. I was the one who wanted mankind to be.

I looked at my Circe, Astarte, Diana, Guinivere and a host of others. We had played the game for mankind, given them hope and then snatched it away. Kept them on the cusp of understanding with the magic of legends, the hope things could work. It all made sense now.

I looked at her, knowing her real name finally but remembering all of the other possibilities.

"You've failed. That's why you want me back. You've finally managed to kill the magic. You want me to play your stalking horse again. The planet is in the toilet because of your greed. Because you over fed their greed. Global warming, mega-corps glomming onto every buck they can and to hell with the consequences. Political machines raping the general populace. You built all that and now you can't stop it. It's feeding on itself. They learned everything you taught them and now it's self-destructing. I love it."

"We don't need your holier-than-thou attitude." She said icily. I matched her deep freeze with my smile.

"No, you need my magic. You need me to get back in the game and slow down your greed. I remember now. We agreed to build this planet so they could come up with an interplanetary drive so we could go home. Or, at least, somewhere else someday. Only you guys came to like being gods. Ok, so you are gods. Fix it."

She looked away. "We've tried. Gansha did his best on the Indian subcontinent. But he isn't you."

I nodded. "And there were a couple of half-assed attempts in America. But it's too far gone, isn't it? You did too good of a job."

I didn't even hear her words of denial. Whatever else we had meant to each other, I could still read what she wanted. Too many times in the past, I had given in.

"You know what I'm going to do? I'm heading for the Grand Tetons. Or maybe Costa Rica. Or New Zealand. I'm going to go someplace and watch it all turn to shit because even if you break down and give someone a boost by pointing them at the interstellar drive idea now and it can only be the Americans, it is still going to collapse. You have sown so much distrust and greed it can't work now. Your campaign of division has found fertile ground because there isn't enough of anything else to stop it. So when the planet finally says basta, enough and scours things clean and leaves all of you right back where we started 3,000 years ago, I'll be drinking beer and waiting."

WILD GEESE

Mason Jackson sat on the edge of the art deco desk and looked at the back of the hottest young female country singer as she looked out over the streets of Nashville. There was a slight slump to shoulders under the faded chambray shirt tied off under what the media had called pert breasts and the cant of hips in the tight jeans wrenched at him, speaking words to his heart of a forlorn waif, the gal who had it all. All but what she needed. It had taken her four years of waiting tables, writing music, singing in the small clubs before someone had realized her pixie looks and whiskey voice was something the public would eat up.

She had come from a small town out on the cap rock of west Texas, a child of parents scraping a living from a small ranch. She had never known anything but hard work and tough times for the first 17 years of her life. As the youngest child and only daughter she had had to fight for everything she ever wanted. At five foot five inches carrying 120 pounds in a family of three older brothers who could have played any kind of pro ball, she knew about underdog. What the family lacked was an understanding of the creative energy, the marrow deep desire to fly that the black haired sprite had in her soul. They knew she had some talent but life in the hardscrabble of west Texas just didn't allow for the kinds of dreams little Jane held so dear in her heart. So at the tender age of 17 she had bailed on school and headed for heaven with a backpack of dusty clothes and bright dreams.

Those first couple years had almost beaten the dreamer. Mason knew that first hand. He had met her on a gig at a roadhouse on the outskirts of Nashville. He had long since resigned himself to his lot as studio musician. He hated the road, the shallow glitz and lousy hours of a bass player for anyone's road band. At 35 he had done his bit and was happy to take the studio time. The money wasn't as good but he slept better nights. And the night he had given in and replaced a sick friend playing in a two-bit bar for a band that would never make it past the honky tonk circuit, he had found something he had never suspected.

The first was an angel. A girl on the edge of quitting, almost beaten, with a voice, a talent, a presence that was very definitely way beyond the cheesy band she was singing with. The first time he heard her sing, he knew there were people who had to hear her. And his years in the biz gave him the ears of just the right people. She had been suspicious at first, having heard the same sweet promises but the dreamer was ready to try one last time. Mase had been powerfully tempted to take advantage but a little voice in the back of his head put a tourniquet on his dick and he played it straight. Within two weeks, a door cracked and little Janie Rivers slipped into the big time.

A record producer liked her sound, a promoter spotted an opportunity and took her under his wing. She was a total natural. There was an honest innocence coupled with the instincts of a vamp that came through in her personality as well as in her music. She was curvy enough with a sense of rhythm and enough moves to make her the darling of the camera. With the right backing, she had shot into the limelight and become the latest hot star burning bright in the firmament that was the fickle public. And Mason Jackson had ridden the rocket. It had been a pretty torrid affair full of the excitement of the older, experienced man and the energy of a star going nova.

Mase smiled to himself, remembering what it had been like. There had been a flavor of the old Star is Born with his own jealousy of her fame but the bottom line came down to dreams. He still wanted her to find hers and after too many angry scenes he realized that he wasn't hers. He loved her and still wanted the best for her and was just barely honest enough to see it would never be him. So he had slowly backed away and moved over into the role as her business manager. It hadn't happened overnight and had surprised both of them that it was something he was exceptionally suited to.

And now he was worried.

It had been almost a year since Lacy Dane, nee Jane Rivers, had hit the charts with anything of any power. The demands for her concerts was still there but with an instinct coached by years in the business, Mase knew it wouldn't last. And the reason for it was simple. Her heart wasn't in it. At thirty, she had been riding the tsunami for 8 years and it was losing its strength. She had been on top, done more than most and enjoyed the adulation. There had been a couple of men, more than affairs but less than what she had needed. The last had been particularly hard on her. Mase had watched as she had tried to make things happen the way she wanted them to but the glamour had been too much.

He knew what the problem was. Lacy Dane had become more real to the world and Janie Rivers just plain didn't exist. Except in Janie's heart.

"Hey, kiddo."

The fading darling of Nashville looked back over her shoulder, her eyes lost.

"Giving up?"

She searched his face for a moment then smiled.

"Now how can it be called giving up when I've got everything I ever wanted?"

"So, are you going to retire at 30?"

She turned back to the window.

"Maybe a break. Maybe I need some time off."

"Honey, you know as well as I do if you fade now, on the down slide, it would be almost impossible to come back. Is that what you want?"

She shrugged.

"Maybe I just don't care anymore."

"Hey, this is Mase you're talking to."

She hesitated a minute then turned to him, her eyes bright with tears.

"It's not worth it anymore, Mase."

He was tempted to go over and hug her but he knew it wasn't the right thing to do. It was what she needed and he wanted to in the worst way but he knew it would lead to things that were better left alone. Instead he crossed over to the stereo and pushed a tape into the deck.

"Maybe what you need is a new hit."

She waved him off angrily, wiping at the dampness on her cheeks.

He hit the Play button.

There was the hiss of a homemade recording then a gravelly voice, a product of years of hard living.

'This is a little something I put together. Maybe somebody will think its worth something...'

*Somewhere tonight, hearts will be broken
Silent backs turned, bitter words spoken
A little disappointment, a quiet bit of sin
Dreams will be shattered and the bleeding begins*

*She cries in her sorrow, for her lost tomorrow
He just couldn't be fitting the mold.
He drinks up his guilt because what they had built
Became a life that slowly turned cold.
What she expects and what he forgets
Become more real than the all of the rest.*

*But in the dark night, tween the mists and the sky,
they follow their hearts without asking why.
There just ain't no pattern,
And no thought out reason
Wild geese who give us their cry.*

Could be there's just too much thinking

*And way too much drinking
We lose sight of that plaintive cry
Its there in our hearts,
right from the start
If we could just quit asking it why.*

Mase watched as the song slowly reached out and grabbed Lacy. It was totally out of character for her. She had made her name singing the upbeat, bouncy material, working her spirit into the music. This song was only a half step from the blues. It spoke of broken hearts, shattered dreams and a soul close to being beaten. The singer played it simply, chords in a blues riff and his rough voice gave it a poignancy that had caught Mase's attention.

And he could see it was striking a resonant chord in Lacy. She had tried to ignore it at first but had been drawn into the harsh baritone litany, the feel of a man on the edge of defeat who just wouldn't quit. By the end of the song, the tears were silently running down her cheeks.

"It isn't my style." She said softly without opening her eyes.

"So maybe you need a new one."

Her eyes came open, the blue shading to violet as she cocked her head in question.

"Can we buy it?"

Mase shrugged.

"He's outside. Why don't we ask?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. Mase punched the intercom button and asked that the writer be sent in. He stood back against the wall by the sound system and watched Lacy as the door opened.

He was a big man. He stepped inside and paused at the door, his smoky grey eyes taking in the room in a sweeping glance. Faded jeans, well worn white oxford shirt, battered work boots and denim jacket all would have seemed out of place with the lined face and thinning hair but Mase knew it was him. Something of a Marlboro man, an old cowboy with shaggy hair and bushy moustache, broad shoulders and narrow hips. Mase had thought it a carefully staged look made to sell the song when he had met him a couple of days before.

He almost smiled as he remembered how close he had been to dismissing the guy as some kind of huckster. He had been short with him, pretty flip and bored in his responses. And he had been about to write the man off when he had been beaten to it. Those grey eyes had taken on a chill and the weathered hand had picked up the tape

just as Mase had been about to tell him thanks but no thanks. Whatever it had been, Mase knew he was the one being dismissed, found wanting. And he had found himself asking nicely if he could hear the tape.

He could see the same bored look in Lacy's eyes but there was something else along with it. The man was on the high side of fifty but there was something, a subtle bit of power in his casual attitude. If he had been wearing a hat, it wouldn't be in his hands now. He looked over at Mase and knew at a glance that the one he would be dealing with was the diminutive package of dynamite by the window. He crossed over to the front of the desk and waited for Lacy to take her place on the opposite side.

"That's quite a song. You wrote it?"

He gave her a small, noncommittal smile and nodded.

"It isn't my usual kind of music. Why did you bring it?"

He shrugged.

"Call it a hunch."

Mase watched Lacy stiffen.

"How much do you want for it?" she asked brusquely.

The writer watched her for a moment, his expression giving nothing away.

"Whatever its worth."

"Right now, that's about nothing."

Mase was about to step in but something held him back. He could see the battle lines were being drawn. Lacy was riding her anger, her business side held up front like a gladiator's shield. The normal progression could go to an angry response from the writer or maybe a bit of acquiescence, a touch of groveling to placate, to get the song published. Mase didn't expect either. Nor was he disappointed.

"So call it a gift."

He turned and headed for the door. Lacy stood, frozen in shock for a moment then came around the desk.

"Just a minute."

The man stopped, his hand on the doorknob, and looked back over his shoulder.

"I don't take gifts from strangers. What do you want for the song?"

"Whatever its worth." He repeated.

"I can't promise I'll do anything with it."

He grinned.

"Well, I sure as hell won't."

Lacy's eyes narrowed in frustrated anger.

"So who do we write the contract with?"

"I don't do contracts."

"So how do you expect to get paid?" she asked.

"You're a bright lady. You'll figure something out."

The door closed quietly behind him leaving Lacy seething and in shock.

"Just who the hell does he think he is?"

Mase hid his smile as best he could and kept his voice neutral.

"I'd say someone who wrote a hell of a song."

She turned to him, her eyes bright with anger.

"That he gave me. Mase, you get this thing arranged. I want to be in the studio with it as soon as possible."

"I thought you said it wasn't your style."

"Just get it set up."

Mase nodded to himself as the studio band finished the latest arrangement for Wild Geese. It had been a rush job but there was something about the tune that had grabbed at everyone who worked with it. Mase had that deep down burn that told him this was going to be a big one. It hearkened back to the classic roots of country with a strong overlay of the blues and if Lacy got behind it, she had the voice and personality to make it work. He was a bit concerned about that part though. Lacy had been on a short fuse since the song was dropped in her lap a week earlier. Mase had never seen her so distracted. Granted, she had been more distant this past year, alternating between running with the wild crowd and hiding out in her remote home in the hills of Arkansas but she had always been able to put on her public face when dealing with people. Lately she had been more withdrawn, given to short answers to direct questions and blazing waves of anger when she felt crossed. From most singers it wouldn't have been tolerated but Mase had seen the sad acceptance in the boys in the band. They had seen too many flame out and it was breaking everyone's heart to watch it happen.

Mase looked up from the mixing board as Lacy came into the recording studio. She was wearing faded jeans with the knees worn out and an old sweatshirt with the collar torn so it hung off her shoulder on one side. She smiled absently at the band and went right to her stool. Mase felt his heart wrench at the lost waif look but he knew if he showed any sympathy she would respond like a spitting bobcat. Or worse, just look at him blankly.

He leaned forward and switched on the mike.

"Lacy, you want to run through it first before we record?"

She hitched herself around and looked at the band members.

"What do you think, guys?"

Bo Merrick had played studio for most of the big stars of country and he had been doing it for over twenty years. This was his third session with Lacy and he was worried about the changes in her. The glitz and legend had hardened her but Bo had a feeling the spitfire just might not be done yet. He gave her a slow smile and a shrug.

"Now that would be up to you, little lady. You got it in you or has it done got good for you?"

Mase held his breath. Anyone but Bo asking that question would have set her off like a Roman candle but he could see the confusion in her face, a load of doubt she had been carrying from asking herself the same question. Finally she gave Bo a wan smile.

"Let's find out."

She put the headset on and drew herself up, taking a deep breath, pushing every bit of reality away, ignoring the words coming from the booth as she put herself in the groove. Mase fought the urge to cross his fingers and nodded at the group.

Bo led off with a lead he had put together himself, a fine piece of picking right on the edge of mournful. The bass line came in playing a gentle but persistent backbeat. And then Lacy flowed into it. There was just a trace of a sorrowful quiver as she began the tale that grew to a tart poignancy by the time she hit the first chorus. Mase listened, a feeling of awe slowly growing. Some songs took multiple runs to get right. And sometimes, on very rare occasions, there was a magic that rose up and drew the entire world into the process. He was glad they had decided to record because this was one of those sessions that would never be repeated. The band felt it and was going with that power, letting the miracle guide their music as they played for Lacy as she sat on her stool, head back and eyes closed, totally lost in the song.

Halfway through the second verse the tears began to flow, glistening tracks on her cheeks that she was totally unaware of as she poured her heart into the music. Or maybe, the music was working its magic on her. It continued, her voice rough with emotion yet angel sweet in its purity until the final note, a half caught sob. She seemed to fold in on herself as her hands went to her face and she cried quietly. Mase was through the door and at her side only a moment behind Bo. They stood on either side of her, close enough so she knew they were there but neither touching her. She pulled herself together with an effort and looked over her hands at the floor.

"What's wrong with me?"

Bo put a hand on her shoulder.

"Nothing that can't be fixed, Janie."

She turned to look at him. He smiled and took her hand, bending to kiss it.

"Anybody can sing that, ain't nothing can be too wrong."

She smiled and turned to hug him fiercely.

"Mase?" She said, her voice muffled against Bo's chest.

"Yes, Lacy?"

"We have to find him."

She leaned back out of the hug, gave Bo a small smile and a quick kiss before she turned to Mason. She sniffed and wiped at her wet cheeks with her hands.

"Where is he, Mase?"

"No idea, Lacy."

"That isn't possible. How did he get the song to you?"

"Hank Fredricks. He's friends with the lady that runs a honky tonk outside of town and she asked him to listen to it. Hank liked it and got hold of me."

Lacy dried her hands on her jeans and looked through her pockets for a tissue. Bo handed her a bandana from his hip pocket. She gave him a grateful look and proceeded to repair the damage, ending with a very unladylike honking. She made a wry face and looked at Bo who grinned.

"You keep it. I got more."

"So find that lady."

Mase shook his head.

"Already tried. I started tracking him down while the boys were working on the arrangement. His name is Jack Smith. He turned up at the Dew Drop about two weeks ago and ended up helping out behind the bar for a few nights. He has a beat up old camper that he stayed in for the first couple nights. I went out myself and talked with Alice Brennan, she owns and runs the joint. She'd like to find him too."

Mase wasn't ready for the look of naked hurt in Lacy's eyes as she realized someone else might have an interest in the man. As quickly as it flashed it got hidden behind a look of bland indifference.

"He left owing?"

He almost agreed just to spare her but something told him she would know the lie anyway. He shook his head. She bowed her head and was quiet for a minute. Finally she shook herself like a hound coming out of a pond and looked at him.

"So, do we need to do it again?"

Mase glanced at the band, then at Bo.

"Let's see what we got this time."

Wild Geese soared to the top almost on the day of its release. Within two weeks it was firmly settled into the #1 spot on the country charts. Another week and it took the same spot on the rock chart. The CD went gold, then platinum and Lacy was back

in the saddle again. Her Wild Geese tour was a massive success. The old magic was back, the energy, the music. City after city, she wowed audiences with a show that was less glitzy than in the past. Gone were the fireworks and the big screen TV's. No costume changes and wild gyrations, just simple, pure music. And every show had one big thing in common. Before she sang Wild Geese, Lacy would talk with the audience. Tell them the story behind how she got the song and it always ended with a request for the mysterious Mr. Smith to contact Lacy. Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati, they loved her but no response. Richmond, Atlanta, city after city, the plea was made. It was printed on every CD sold, copied in numerous papers and magazines. Jack Smith, contact Lacy Dane. Please.

Three months and hundreds of requests.

"Thank you, Santa Fe. You've been a great audience tonight and I have the song you've been waiting for. And before I sing it, you know I have to say it. This isn't my song, I'm just passing along a gift given to me. I'd like to at least be able to say thank you to the man who gave it. So, Mr. Smith, please..."

Mase climbed the steps into Lacy's bus knowing it would be quiet and empty. The signature parties that wrapped up her old concerts on previous tours were conspicuous in their absence on this one. Just the dim lights and the lady sitting in the quiet. Tonight was no different though Mase knew it was wearing on Lacy. Tonight the tears had flowed silently down her cheeks throughout the song and there had been no curtain calls in spite of the demand. He had expected the crowd to get ugly when she didn't respond to their call for an encore but they had felt the sorrow. When Lacy had finished Wild Geese, her finale number, the pain in her voice had reached them and they had heard.

"Hey, kid. You ok?"

She looked up at him and smiled sadly. Mase was transported back 8 years to that ratty bar, to the caprock angel he had seen that first night. Lacy Dane had slowly been disappearing the past couple months and tonight Mase saw the raw innocence of little Jane Rivers and he felt his heart breaking just as it had then.

"Why won't he come forward, Mase?"

"I don't know. I'm sure he has his reasons."

One eyebrow raised after a moment.

"They suck."

Mase grinned and quickly turned to look out the front of the bus so she wouldn't see the quick flood of tears.

"So what's on for tonight?"

She got up from the couch with a boneless grace and crossed over to the big side window.

"This place reminds me of the ranch where I grew up. I'd pretty much made myself forget that. The heat and the sand. And that damn wind. I used to hate it. But nights I'd go sit in the rocks and watch the stars and dream. Oh, I wanted it all. A big fancy house with lots of trees and flowers and a lawn, a cool green stretch of grass I could walk barefoot through and not have to worry about scorpions or rattlers. I wanted folks to look at me and say, 'There goes the hottest star in Nashville'."

She paused then slowly bowed her head.

"Know what? I got it. And I miss that damn wind."

Mase waited until he was sure his voice wouldn't shake.

"So, what say we take this bus up into the mountains and find a nice quiet place to park it. We don't have to be in Flagstaff for a couple days. The rest of the crew can go ahead and get things started and you can have a night or two to commune with the lizards or coyotes or what ever?"

She stood motionless for a moment then slowly shook her head.

"You city boys."

She looked up at him and smiled around her tear bright eyes.

"You all talk or does this bus roll?"

She sat on the sandstone ledge and looked out over the moonlit valley beyond. The bus was out of sight behind her, the sole reminder of the present. Overhead the stars twinkled their greetings, glad to see their old friend back. Jane sat back and let the peace of the desert night flow through her bringing back the feeling of her childhood without any of the details. Mase and her driver had taken off and would be back sometime the next day so she was alone with the night, something that hadn't happened since her teen years. She had always thought she liked the constant press and excitement of Nashville but as she listened to the mournful call of the coyotes, she realized she had missed this as well. Dreams were fine things but she couldn't help wonder if maybe there wasn't more to life than plans.

"Nice night."

Jane froze at the unexpected words. It wasn't a voice she knew yet she did.

"Where've you been?"

The chuckle floated over her shoulder like a wisp of smoke.

"Working. Just like you."

Anger flared in her but she forced herself to remain still.

"You don't have to work. You're a rich man."

"What makes you think I wasn't before?"

Without warning, the tears began to flow. Without knowing why, she was sobbing. Offering her tears, her water to the desert. She wanted him to come forward but he remained still in the night, a presence felt yet not. He let her make her offering without interference or aid. Finally, drained and weak she leaned back to look at the sky and was surprised when her back met warm support. She flinched then relaxed into the comfort. They sat like that in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Why did you do it?"

She felt the deep breath he took as he thought of his response, felt the warmth of his slow exhalation in her hair. Her back arched into the presence like a cat to a petting hand.

"I gave up asking why I do some things a while back."

"Why didn't you stay? Or come back?"

"Told you, I had work to do. And I'm here now."

"I set up an account for you. It has a lot of money in it now."

She felt more than heard the soft rumble of his laugh.

"Knew you were a bright lady. But you can find something else to do with it. I don't need it."

She wanted to turn and look at those remembered eyes but fear held her back.

"Please...tell me why."

Slowly his arms came around her and he held her close, his face softly exploring her hair and neck, his lips almost kissing as they brushed across the skin of her neck and cheek.

"Once I was about so far down I figured I'd never find daylight again. That's when I wrote Wild Geese. It just sort of flowed out of that despair and when I was done, I didn't hurt so bad. I knew it was some kind of gift, something sent to pull me back from the edge. I don't know why I brought it to you and Mase, I just figured that was where it belonged."

They sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts and the comfort of closeness. Finally, when Jane thought she couldn't handle the feelings of tenderness that were engulfing her, she leaned back, her mouth seeking his. Slowly she opened her eyes but found she couldn't make his out under the shadowed shelf of his brow.

"Who are you?"

He chuckled, his mouth pulling to one side.

"Nobody you need be concerned with."

"Are you an angel?" She blurted.

This time his laugh was deep and from the heart.

"Been called lots of things but never that one. No, I'm just a man."

"But you came just when I needed. With what I needed."

He shrugged.

"Life works that way sometimes. When we get lucky."

They sat enjoying the night and company until the eastern sky began to turn to rose.

"You're going away again."

She felt him shrug.

"Got places to go, things to do."

She felt the tears begin to well again.

"And you won't be coming back."

He pulled her close, his face against her hair. He smelled of smoke and whiskey and he needed a shave but she raised her hand and held his head against her.

"You got you what you want."

"I don't care about that." She whispered fiercely.

"Not the song, honey. Not the money."

She froze, wondering but afraid to ask.

"That manager fella has got him a hard case, except when he looks at you."

"That was over a long time ago."

His head pushed against hers playfully, like a little billy goat.

"Ain't nothing over til it's done, kid."

"But I want you..." For a statement that started out so definite, Jane felt it slip away.

"Sorry, kid, but I got things to do. I'll be around though. Seems I got a knack for turning up at the damndest times."

"And there won't be any way to get in touch with you. You know, for a man who wrote a song like that, you sure don't have much belief."

He was so silent and still for such a long time, Jane was afraid she had said something wrong, gone too far.

"I've got it. I know that love can rise right up and smack you across the chops without any kind a warning. But sometimes we get confused about what we want and what we need."

He nuzzled against her neck, kissing her gently where her neck joined her shoulder.

"You've got you a piece of magic, a power in you that can reach out to folks. I'd be lying if I said it didn't reach to me too. Reaches real deep. But, gal, you got things to do that just don't include me. You got no idea how much I wish they could but they don't."

She hugged his arm fiercely.

"I can make it be that way."

There was a long pause as he held her, his lips brushing her skin gently.

"I'm not the answer, girl."

She pushed back against him, her hand pulling his face against her.

"I don't want answers. I want you."

"Even if I'll be gone tomorrow? Or the next day?"

She turned in his arms and looked into his eyes.

"Will you?"

He opened his mouth to speak but no words came. Slowly he closed his mouth and looked into her green eyes. It was there, the promise of tomorrow, the desire, the need, the love. And then it slowly pulled back, his eyes slowly shading to regret.

"Yeah, I will be."

The tears flooded her eyes as she heard the words, heard the truth in them.

"But you don't want that." She cried plaintively as she clutched at him.

"It's that want and need business. Trouble is, it isn't always just about any one person. Sometimes there's those old timey words like duty, honor and responsibility. Some of us have things we have to do."

"Don't you owe something to yourself? You can't always be doing for others. Sometimes you got to do for you."

She buried her face against his chest, her hands crushing his shirt front.

"You know, Mr. Jack Smith, I don't have much of an idea about anything about you."

She leaned back and held his eyes, a wan smile on her lips.

"But I'd like to learn."

"I'm not hard to figure out. I just try to live the way I feel I should. For me it isn't about money or fame. They come and go too easy and don't amount to much. Look at you. You managed to build up a whole mess of both and I don't see either one has made you one little bit happier. I got things to do and I can't tell anyone what they are because I don't rightly know what they are until I find them. All I do know is I'm not going to find them if I don't go looking."

"What about me?"

"That's up to you to find. You got that part of the dream that adds up in the bank but money doesn't taste as good as most people think it will so I'm thinking there was something else in that dream. Maybe something more."

Lacy turned from him and walked to the edge, looking out over the valley below. The sun was beginning to rise, fingers of light reaching for the high ground sending the night into the depths below. She hugged herself against the night's chill.

"How much more of a dream do we get?"

"As much as you can dream I'm thinking." He answered.

She turned and gave him a wry grin.

"How much more does somebody want? Rich, famous, what else is there?"

Jack stood and stretched, twisting his head sharply to clear the kinks. Finally he looked over at Janie, his face half hidden in the night's vanishing cloak.

"Pretty chintzy dreams, kid. All that takes is a little talent and the willingness to do just about anything. When we're kids, we get these ideas and sometimes they get to be dreams. Problem is, teenagers don't have the experience to see the difference. They get told what's important before they find out for themselves. You had it rough, money was tight so you figured the best thing in the world was to get rich and famous so you wouldn't have to put up with that again. Now maybe you're seeing there is more to life than you knew, than you had been told."

She turned back and glared at him.

"What do you care? You've got things to do, you can't be bothered."

He met her gaze for a minute then shook his head and turned to head back towards the bus.

"Jack!"

He kept walking. Finally she ran after him and got in front to stop him.

"I'm sorry."

"No you aren't. Confused maybe but you aren't sorry."

She stepped back as if his quiet words had been a slap.

"You got no clue what you want. You just want someone to make it better. It ain't me. You're right, I don't want to be bothered with some spoiled kid. I figured out a while back that life is best when it's a two way street. You've been on a one way for so long you've lost that. You made your choices. Maybe you didn't have enough information to make them right but by God and the Lord Harry, you ain't changing them. Or if you do, it will be for you all over again."

A sound drifted on the morning air, a voice calling Lacy's name. They both looked up at it. It came again, a bit closer, a bit clearer.

"I ain't heard no fat lady sing, Janie."

Janie watched as he walked away in the opposite direction than the voice that was getting louder. He vanished into the rocks as Mase came up behind her. He started to say something but stopped as he watched her crying quietly.

"Hey, you ok?"

She remained silent, watching the empty path for a long time.

"No, Mase. I'm not."

She turned and looked at her manager and former lover. After a few minutes she cocked her head and tried a sad grin.

"But I think I can be. With a little help."

CLICKETY

Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack.

"Today, America mourns the loss of three of its most prominent citizens who died yesterday in a plane crash. The former Speaker of the House, George Walker, CEO of AllWorld Security and Pastor John Astor of the Church of America were returning from..."

Clickety clack. Clickety-clack.

Elton Frobish looked around. He was seated on a crushed velvet seat in the middle of a luxuriantly appointed rail car reminiscent of the 19th century hey day of rail travel. Across the aisle he saw George Walker and John Astor were looking about them, confusion on their faces.

Frobish remembered a few moments of confusion and panic on an airplane, Walker's personal jet, followed by a flash of pain. And now they were together again in the lap of luxury.

"What the hell is going on?" Walker exclaimed as he took in his surroundings.

"George, I would say that is an inappropriate remark, all things considered." The Reverend Astor replied.

Walker started to respond then paused as things sank in. "Maybe you are right, John."

They were distracted by an elderly black porter at the far end of the car who discreetly cleared his throat. Frobish noticed he was standing beside a buffet set up with aromas wafting into the car. Frobish looked out the window beside him but it was darkened, revealing nothing of the passing scenery.

"Gennimans, this buffet is for you. They's a bar heah. Feel free to partake to pass the time."

An hour or so later, the three sat back after enjoying a repast of gourmet food that matched anything they had ever purchased in their well-padded lives. The wine list and liquor selection fit to their personal tastes. They sat back, exchanging talk while they smoked fine Havana cigars, feeling replete and comfortable in their journey to the here after.

Finally, the Reverend Astor stifled a belch and rose, heading for the end of the car. Rich food always seemed to have a disturbing effect on his system so he headed for the bathroom. When he reached the end of the car, he noticed there was no door to either a bathroom or to exit the car. As his belly became more insistent in it's needs, he hurried quickly to the opposite end of the car, only to discover the same thing. Clutching at his rumbling gut he made his way back to his friends noticing the increasing haze in the air from their cigars.

"Where is that porter?" He demanded.

Immediately the man was there.

"Yassuh? Kin I hep you?"

"Yes, you can direct me to the facilities. And you can open some windows to clear the air in here."

"Ain't no facilities, suh. Ain't no ventilation, neithuh."

The three looked at the man in shock and rising anger.

"Well then, when does this train arrive in Heaven?" Astor demanded as his gut rumbled ominously and his butt clenched in a desperate attempt to contain the spasm.

The porter pulled a tattered schedule from his jacket pocket and peered at it intently for a few minutes. Finally he looked up at Astor as the right Reverend experienced an embarrassing moment from his infancy. His companions flinched away at the sound and smell but all looked to the porter for his answer.

"Why, suh, I don't rightly spect this train stops anywheres."

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

The long beams of light moved down the road like the lances of the knights of old, cutting a gleaming path through the darkness. Lucille Calvert watched them pass, half wishing one of them would stop. Normally she didn't want much to do with the rough handed truckers but the middle of the graveyard shift in a lonely truck stop was enough to ease her misgivings with the pangs of loneliness. She was a pretty enough woman, not that it made a whole lot of difference to the long haul drivers who stopped in at the Beeson Diner on State Road 47. It was the middle of the night on a long lonesome haul for them too. Lucille took the hairbrush from under the counter and absently ran it through her long dark hair. It was her best feature, all glossy black with a hint of a wave as it fell almost to her waist. It wrapped around her pleasantly chubby face, two wings of it curled carelessly under both chins. A few years and a number of pounds ago she had been very attractive. That was before a bad marriage and an ill-fated pregnancy. Her husband had run off with a honky tonk woman from the next town just two days before their child had been born without drawing a single breath leaving Lucille with a stack of bills and a mound of guilt.

A pair of lights panned across the front window as a truck pulled into the lot. It was a semi, the sounds of its air brakes snapping and hissing through the glass almost burying the soft music coming from the small radio on the back counter. Lucille put her brush away and turned to fill a pair of water glasses. Like a plump little robot, she took a pair of coffee cups down and set them by the coffee maker. The voices of the truckers came through the closed door, followed by raucous laughter. Lucille smiled in spite of herself. The door opened and three men came into the diner, talking in loud voices and stretching their road cramped muscles.

They were all fairly big men, two of them sporting a low overhang of belly. The youngest was a blonde man in his mid twenties. He had a rough and tumble look that the long scar on his cheek did nothing to hide. The thinnest was taller than the other two, a lanky rail of a man with a Lincolnesque face. The third was the leader, a stocky heavyset man in his forties with his hair cut short to hide the salt in its peppery blackness. They were laughing at something when the stocky leader looked up and saw Lucille.

"Will you look here, boys. If the food is as fine as this little lady looks, I'd say we found us a gold mine."

Lucille blushed and smiled at the trio.

"The food is better. You boys want coffee?"

The three sat down with a chorus of you bets and reached for the menus behind the napkin holders on the back of the counter. The blonde held his in front of him but was watching the front of Lucille's uniform that was pushing an ample cleavage against the polyester.

"I'll take a couple of those... He paused smiling insolently, watching Lucille blush. "eggs, over easy with sausage and hash browns on the side."

"Sounds good." The thin man rumbled, sticking his menu away.

"And I'll take mine with a rare steak, cutie."

Lucille finished writing up the order and turned to begin fixing it, slowly beginning to like the rough attention of the group. She felt better that it was three, the solo drivers tending to make her nervous. The blonde was good looking enough but she had promised herself no more one-night stands. She hated sleeping alone but that was better than having the man gone in the morning. There was an emptiness to that way of life, a hollow feeling that tended to settle in around mid morning and sat heavy for the rest of the day. And lately it had been lasting longer, a dark gloom that shrouded her for days afterwards.

As she was bringing the orders to the counter another car, a sedan, pulled in. A few moments later a young couple came in and the newness of their marriage hit Lucille hard. That they were in love and happy was incredibly obvious as they took seats at the counter as far from the truckers as they could. Lucille felt her depression grow as she took their absentminded order. The girl was barely in her twenties, just a little younger than Lucille, a red headed tomboy type with a generous splash of freckles across her nose. The man was barely older, his blonde hair hanging in a stylishly long cut over his ears and collar. Lucille found herself near the edge of crying as she turned to get their order started.

She was bringing their coffee when the door opened and a man walked in. Lucille looked out in the lot for his vehicle and was surprised to see only the truck and the sedan.

He was a big man built along western lines, wide in the chest and shoulders with narrow hips. His carefully patched jeans were faded to near white, several shades lighter than his denim jacket. He wore a long underwear shirt open at the throat. His hair was the color of the dust in the parking lot and hung in ragged unkempt waves over his collar. It had been a while since he had seen a barber, only a little longer than the last time he had made the acquaintance of a razor. He looked over the people at the counter, his quiet eyes resting momentarily on each. Lucille felt a shiver as they passed over her. As he walked over to take a stool midway between the truckers and the couple she noticed his booted feet made no sound on the tile floor. Lucille set a cup of coffee on the counter in front of him and was rewarded with a quiet smile as he

reached for a menu. He was sipping his coffee when the truckers pushed their plates forward. Lucille took her pad from her apron pocket and walked over to hand them their checks.

"Might as well save your energy, honey." The heavysset man chuckled. She looked up sharply. The man was smiling but his eyes were cold. "In fact, you best be opening the register for us and handing over what you've got there."

Lucille felt her knees go weak and tears of fear formed in her eyes as she damned her boss for making her work the night shift alone.

"You don't really mean..." She broke off in mid sentence as the thin man took a gun from inside his shirt.

"Now Tom, you didn't have to go bringing that out." The big man's voice was reproachful but it didn't match the hard gleam in his eyes as he leaned across the counter. "Tom gets a bit antsy whenever we pull a job. If I was you, I'd open that cash box real quick, honey."

"Please don't hurt me." Lucille begged.

"We won't." The blonde replied with a grin. "Leastwise I never heard of it hurting before."

He swung over the counter and took Lucille roughly by the arm leading her to the cash register. As they walked by the young marrieds he threw them a quick grin, his eyes taking in the red headed wife. "You folks might as well break out your wallets too."

The young husband reached mechanically for his hip pocket but his wife stopped him with an angry hand.

"They don't dare do this, Roger. They couldn't hope to get away in that truck."

The leader got off his stool and walked down to them. He motioned to the blonde to go about what he was doing as he walked over and put his hands on the couple's shoulders.

"You are so right, gal so that's why we'll be wanting the keys to your car too. You see, we hijacked that rig and shifted its load already so now we made our haul, we need a way to get away. Now, you hand over your keys and nobody gets hurt."

As he spoke, the leader's hand slid off the young bride's shoulder and roughly covered her breast. Her husband saw it and lunged from his stool, swinging wildly at the bigger man. Which was exactly what the hood wanted. His big fists flashed, hitting with a sickening meatiness and the youth fell bonelessly and bloodily to the floor. With negligent ease the big man kicked at the young man's head, his pointed boot cracking ominously into the boy's temple. The redhead was off her stool and fighting wildly, trying to scratch the man's eyes. He gathered her in with childlike ease and held her

pinned to his chest while she sobbed her hate. Behind the counter, Lucille stood woodenly while the blonde emptied the cash drawer into his pockets. In the midst of the turmoil, the jean clad stranger sipped at his coffee.

Tom got off his stool and walked over to him.

"You too, bud. Hand over the wallet."

"Don't have one." Was the negligent response.

Tom raised his gun and put the muzzle against the man's temple.

"I ain't kidding."

The man shrugged.

"Neither am I. I got enough change in my pocket for this coffee and no wallet."

As he spoke a thin cry came from the back room. The redhead looked around and saw that the waitress and the blonde had disappeared. Again the cry came, thinner and more drawn out. She glared at the man holding her.

"You damned animals. Goddamned filthy animals."

She turned her attention to the quiet man.

"What kind of man are you? Are you going to let these animals get away with this? Do you think they will let any of us walk out of here alive? What kind of man are you?"

The stranger drew a breath as if to speak then bowed his head. When he spoke his voice was ragged and soft yet it's mellow baritone carried well over the pulsing cries from the back room.

"There isn't anything I can do. They chose their path a long time ago and only they can choose a different one now."

The thin gunman jerked but his gun remained steady against the stranger's head.

"A Christer. And crazy at that." The big man said.

All were shocked by the laughter that rolled through the café. Tom stiffened and jammed his gun at the man's head.

"Shut up." He hissed, his thin face white with anger.

The laughter slowly died.

"Don't bother talking to him, Tom. Just shoot the bastard and let him get on to his reward."

The young woman screamed and redoubled her efforts to break free, to no avail.

"What are you getting so het up about, honey? A minute ago you was screaming at him to be a man. Let him have his chance. Meanwhile, you and me can have us some fun."

The girl took advantage of the big hood's reaching for her shirt front to spit in his face. Without pause, he responded with a backhanded slap that sent the girl sprawling into the corner. The sounds of the ruckus brought the blonde from the back room, bucking his pants as he came. At the counter a tight smile crossed Tom's face as he pressed his gun harder against the stranger's head.

"What's the matter, Christer? Ain't you gonna fight for the lady?"

The man ignored both the words and the gun and spoke to the blonde.

"There was a chance for you, Kevin Hanley but now you have the blood of an innocent on your hands. It's a stain that will never wear away. Ask Tom Watkins. His hands have accounted for five people, sould who haunt his nights with their screams. Ask him how often he has awakened in a cold sweat and not known why. Or your leader, Frank Whitley. He has his own list of crimes, his own victims who he can never escape. Ask him what it is like at the bottom of a whiskey bottle when you see a six year old girl jump and twist under the bullets from the gun in your shaking hand. Go ahead, kid, ask."

The room lay in pregnant silence as the three hoods stared in disbelief as they heard their crimes and personal hells read off to them. An eerie chill crept over the room as the dust covered man stared quietly at the newly christened killer. Cold sweat glistened on Hanley's brow.

"She ain't dead."

"She is dead and you know it." Came the answer in a hard flat voice. "You knew it when you felt the cartilage break under your hands. Was it worth it? The ultimate orgasm? Wasn't her fear enough?"

"He's crazy!" The blonde shrieked as he felt the soft bone give under his fingers again. "Shoot him!"

Frank Whitley glared at the stranger. "Yeah, Tom. Kill the smart bastard."

Tom trembled in anticipation as he pressed the gun against the man's temple.

"With pleasure."

The .38 blossomed flame, the crash of it deafening in the small café. The redhead watched but saw no sign of damage, no shower of gore. Tom stepped back and fired into the man's chest. Puffs of dust flowered over the denim over the man's heart but he didn't even flinch. Tom Watkins, murderer, pulled the trigger again and again until the hammer fell on a spent chamber. Two more clouds of dust rose from the stranger's jacket and the final round was fired with the muzzle inches from the man's face but he never moved or acknowledged the activity. He watched the gunman with calm deadly eyes. He continued to watch as Watkins stepped back and thumbed the revolver open, spilling empty brass casings on the floor while he fumbled for fresh

shells. Several dropped to the floor with metallic plinks before Watkins snapped the cylinder closed and raised the revolver for another try. His eyes met the stranger's.

"Stop."

The word was spoken quietly and without force but Tom Watkins froze.

"Put the barrel in your mouth."

Frank Whitley watched in amazed horror, unable to move or speak while he watched the man he had always thought to be one of the most cold blooded killers alive lift the barrel of his own gun to his lips. The man's face was fish belly white and gleaming with sweat.

"The trigger."

Watkins was shaking uncontrollably but the muzzle was clamped firmly between his teeth.

"Pull it."

The gentle command was a whip crack only a moment before the muffled thud of the pistol firing. The redhead screamed horribly as she and the other two men were spattered with the gore from the killer's exploding head. The body fell to the floor like a marionette with its strings cut, the gun still clenched tightly in its mouth.

The two hoods stared in horrid fascination for a moment then Frank turned and ran for the door. The movement broke the kid from his spell and he bolted after his boss, the pair crashing heavily into the glass door. It should have dumped them into the parking lot in a shower of glass but the door held. Panic running high in him, Whitley grabbed up an old metal hat rack from next to the door and stepped to the big window in the front wall. Swinging with all his strength, he battered the window. The heavy coat rack rebounded from the glass as if it were rubber.

"You can't leave."

"What the hell are you?" Hanley screamed as Whitley continued to beat at the window. The stranger rose slowly and turned to face the pair.

"Judgment."

The man a hand at the redhead just as she began to step forward and she froze in place, her eyes going blank. A frown creased his brow as he regarded the two killers, reduced now to frightened animals. Slowly his face tightened and the room took on a reddish glow. He stepped forward and stood before Kevin Hanley. Long forgotten litanies poured from his mouth in breathless haste as he stared into the stranger's eyes. Flames began to dance along the walls casting a twisting garish light on the café interior. The blonde continued to stumble over his clumsy prayers while Whitley kept battering futilely against the glass.

One thing was not a trick of the pulsing light. Slowly, the crumpled heap that had once been a man rose from the floor. There was no light in its eyes and its movements were wooden. Carefully, the gun was raised until it pointed at Frank Whitley's head. The hood's mouth opened in a wordless scream of terror that never found voice as the pistol crashed and a small black dot appeared in the middle of the man's forehead. With mind tearing slowness, the gun swiveled until it was aimed at Hanley. The blonde was on his knees gobbling unintelligible words meant to be prayer. A small smile crossed the quiet man's face as a light broke through the growing smoke haze, bright and clear, almost painful in its intensity. Again the gun spoke but this time the dead man's face bore a peaceful smile rather than the terror-ridden grimace of his bosses.

Only then did the stranger move. Quickly he picked up the paralyzed girl, the contact breaking the spell that held her. She gasped a short cry as she saw the flames greedily consuming the diner around them. She had seen the escape attempt by the killers and had registered its results so she was surprised when the stranger kicked the door open and carried her into the parking lot. He set her down clear of danger. For a moment she stared at the flames, hypnotized by the sight until she remembered her husband was still inside. Just as she made to rise, she felt his hand on her shoulder.

"He's dead. Whitley's kick killed him."

She jumped at the nearness and gentleness of his voice. She could still hear the icy command that had resulted in one man's death. She shuddered as she slowly turned to look at him.

"What's your name?" The man asked her quietly. The question surprised her, especially after hearing him call the three dead men by name.

"Lillian. Lillian Conway." She looked up at him puzzled by the quiet smile on his face. "Why don't you know my name?"

He shrugged.

"Who are you?"

The stranger smiled.

"Who do you think I am?"

"I-I don't know. I saw that man shoot you and you're still alive. And then you..."

"You'd do best to forget what you saw tonight."

"Please. I want to know." She paused. "Are you the Devil?"

His lip lifted slightly in a deprecating smile as he nodded.

"That isn't possible. Why would you save me? Why would you stop those men? They were doing your work."

He shrugged.

"Not really."

"But they were killers, rapists."

"Works of man."

"But..."

"You are like every other fool of a mortal. You believe I make you do these horrible things against your will. I don't. I can't make you do a damned thing anymore than He can. I am an angel, an archangel, Lucifer, the Light Bearer. Somewhere along the line I was named the Prince of Lies and I find that very ironic. A disturbed soul discovers the darkness within and because of the real liars, I get blamed. They needed a heavy, an opponent for Him to be able to shunt off their own weakness and fear. It is a creative bit of mythology but it won't wash. Even if I were the rebel they claim, even if I had been cast into the pit, which, by the way, only God could have created, as a fallen angel my powers would be considerably less than the Maker of All. The truth is man needs no tempting to give in to his fears. Every bit of evil ever done was man's doing."

"But you killed those men."

"And you slaughter for less reason. You think nothing of fouling the beauty of this world if it will gain you the smallest bit of anything. You rationalize it by saying someone will do it so why not you so that you may gain the earthly power or wealth. Your holy men even go so far as to claim Divine Right as God has given you dominion. The sad truth is He did give you dominion as well as two gifts so that you could live your lives in this garden. But the liars have corrupted it. They have twisted the message to serve their own purpose. Those braying asses who can't decide which temple He finds most pleasing seek to glorify themselves. What edifice made by man can compete with the least of His creations? Nor are those who call for peace and love in His name while they line their coffers with money taken from those who need it most and give nothing but empty words in return worthy. You mortals are such blind fools when you fail to see that your religions are a farce created only to wield power in this world. Your books and prayers are naught without love in your hearts. With a true love and compassion for your fellow travelers in your heart, you have no need for religion. You have found the true meaning to your pointless existence."

"How can there be a true meaning to a pointless existence?"

"A paradox, just as your lives are. You are hounded by them from the first squalling breath you draw to your dying gasp. There are always doubts, questions, in everything. But you have the ability to make sense of the paradox. Man has those two gifts beyond what He gave the beasts. You have the ability to communicate information across generations. No other creature can do this other than by rote, by example. You have resources for information that span centuries and cultures that you can tap with

only a small effort. And you have the capacity to assess that information for veracity by evaluating it against the palette of time and life. The other gift is that of sustained compassion. No other species has that. Whales will aid a wounded or sick member of their own family group as will almost any creature that lives in a family grouping but only man is capable of expanding that emotion to include creatures beyond his sybs and family. To a predator an injured creature is prey. Only man is capable of seeing it otherwise."

Lucifer rose and looked down at Lucille.

"The only lies out there are those of man. Life is sustained by growth, by building. It is positive in nature. Evil and destruction are self-limiting because once all is destroyed there can be nothing more. There is no force or entity dedicated to this, as it would ultimately consume itself. That is a fantasy of man because he always has to have someone other than himself to blame. You will only achieve life when you realize you are the one responsible for it. The world will continue, with or without man, and only when you accept there is no higher authority, there is no external evil, will you truly find your place. You are part of life, if you choose. You have been given the gifts you need but it is up to you to use them because no one else can do it for you. Not me, not God, only you."

HIGH GUN

It was finally beginning to gel. I stood in the deepest shadows of the doorway and watched the rain-wet street. It glistened like fresh blood under the light of the big neon sign on the building across the way. The eastern sky was turning rose as the sun made it's way over the curve of the earth, casting a surreal light over the street. I knew things would start soon.

The dark Plymouth at the corner had a plume of exhaust coming from it's tailpipe as the occupants used the defroster to keep the windows clear. It was a dead giveaway that told me they were sure of the cards they held. Too damn sure. I knew there was another car further down the street waiting to seal that end of the trap.

Soon.

A red Jaguar sedan turned onto the street and pulled into the parking lot directly across from the Plymouth.

"Eagle, stand-by."

I picked up the walkie-talkie and keyed it. "Roger."

I turned the box off and set it on the window ledge next to me. Across the street, the Jag's engine died. The driver's door opened and a tall dapper man in a tuxedo got out. He stretched, putting his hands behind his head as he inhaled the fresh morning air. The others would see that and think nothing of it. From my darkened vantage I could see those dark eyes quickly scan the street, pausing for half a heart beat on the Plymouth. It wasn't running anymore but a small cloud of white hung over it in the still air. He knew something was going down. With the casual gestures of a man adjusting his jacket, he shrugged the shoulders and adjusted the lapels. Then he straightened the cuffs. All natural and innocent if you didn't know about the blades up each sleeve in spring holsters. Or the double brace of them inside the jacket. Or the pair at the back of his collar. It was an eight pack of silent death, all checked and ready.

I reached under my vest and my own eight-pack jumped into my hand. I slipped the hammer of my .45 back to full cock. Seven wad-cutters were stacked inside the grip and the eighth sat ready under the hammer. My wrists burned and my mouth ached as I watched the quarry. Through the pounding in my skull I knew the hunters would soon realize their Eagle had been compromised. Their high gun, the assassin with the long arm, wasn't going to make it easy for them. There wasn't going to be any silent blast of death from on high to open the door for them. They would have to do their dirty work up close.

I wondered if they had any idea of just what that meant. The Snow Bear's file was full of holes and I knew their leader had no idea of what it would mean to try and take their target down without the rifle above. The quarry turned to walk to the building and four doors opened together.

In the dim wash of the street lights I could see four men climb quietly from the Plymouth, unlimbering guns as they did. As the first was bringing his gun to bear the quarry spun, both hands flashing. The pair on the street side got off one abortive burst on their Uzis as the knives found their targets. The quarry dove for the cover of the Jag. The others, shielded by the car, propped their cracker box machine pistols on the hood and trunk and opened fire. In seconds the Jag was a perforated mess. Down the street I heard the second car start. It leaped from the curb and roared down the fresh silence of the street.

I leaned my arm against the doorway and fired coolly into the oncoming car. After the stuttering spit of the Uzis my Colt's boom was like God's thunder. Four shots shattered the windshield and side windows. The car lurched sideways and crashed into the front quarter of the Plymouth. The two gunmen leaped clear, their shocked faces searching for the new threat.

I showed them where I was by putting two rounds into the ruptured gas tank of the Plymouth. The look didn't do them much good. The guy closest to the tank actually got his gun in line before the tank whoomped into a massive fireball that grabbed him and threw him against the wall. One of the doors of the crash car had opened but was blown shut by the explosion trapping who ever was left in the inferno that engulfed both cars. I waited in the shelter of my doorway until there was nothing left but the snapping roar of the flames. I could see the target watching from the shelter of the Jag. In the distance sirens began to sound.

I walked out into the street holding my left shoulder. It hurt more now that the anger and the adrenalin were fading. The quarry approached warily from the lot. As he did I was vaguely aware of the sharpening expression on his face. Things were beginning to fuzz around the edges.

"Mutt!"

"Lo Willy."

I staggered. Spanish, 'Willy', Murdoch grabbed me and held me up. "Jesus, Mutt. what happened to you?"

"I found my lost weekend."

His eyes narrowed then looked over at the fire. The sirens were louder now and I could see people coming from the Casablanca. "Help me around the front."

Spanish put my bum arm over his shoulder and we worked our way around the fire. A man lay on the sidewalk. His hair was badly singed and he had flash burns on his face. As we walked up he stirred.

I took my arm from Willy's shoulder and locked my knees. He didn't recognize me at first but as his mind cleared he made a painful grab for the gun on his hip. I kicked him as hard as I could, then stomped on his hand. He screamed as my heavy boot snapped bones in his hand.

"Mutt."

I leveled my .45 at his face, ignoring Willy's protest.

"Willy, the cops will be here soon. I figure you ought to know who these clowns are and what they were doing before the law gets involved. They work for Uncle...Callendar's outfit."

Willy looked at me. Surprised anger darkened his face but I was watching my pinned bug. Even through the pain of his crushed hand and burned face he was trying to kill me with his hate. My gun hand trembled as a look of triumph began to glimmer through the hate. He knew what would happen once I turned him over to the law. "This one is Greg Anders, chief hatchet of a nifty super-secret cadre of Commie hunters headed by Callendar's heir apparent."

"Why?"

Willy wasn't protesting. He was a pro.

"Because the agency has been compromised. His name is Vasili Andrevich Plechenov. VKR. I don't know his boss's name yet but it won't take long once I turn the info over to the right people. They're trying to use the agency to break into the Llama's network. They grabbed me and used chemotherapy to try and pick my brain. When they found out I didn't have anything they could use, they erased the whole session from my memory. Then they hung a tail on me to try and get to you. That was double stupid. They didn't have any reliable information on you and they thought that just because they had erased my memory they had also turned me into some kind of tapioca brained jerk. Maybe I couldn't remember the session but I was still a professional. I picked up their tail and put things together from there."

"But why this?"

"There's a dead sniper up on the roof across the street, Willy. They figured to blast you, then move in on Casablanca with all their neat little warrants and tear the place apart before the locals could get involved. I guess they figured they had me on ice but they put a couple of clowns in as babysitters. And the head clown here ran his mouth. He filled me in on their plan just to see me squirm. When they left to tag you,

they figured I was too far gone to do anything. I fooled them. I killed the guards and came hunting."

Willy shook his head. "I owe you a big one, Mutt."

I glanced at him. Things were getting hard to hold onto. "I didn't do it just for you."

"I know, but I owe you all the same."

I nodded. I was almost out on my feet. Ander's little torture session was bringing me down. The world was taking on a wah-wah effect as I fought for the strength to stay on my feet. "I'm calling you on it, Willy."

"How?"

I looked up at the red lights flashing in the distance. The cops would be here in a few minutes and they would take control. Anders would be handed over to them and he would go to a hospital. His boss would find out what had happened here. I looked at my friend, then down at the triumphant gleam in Anders' eyes.

I put a bullet between them.

"Visit me in jail."

As the squad cars braked to a halt, I crumpled down into blackness.