

The background image is a fantasy landscape at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene. In the foreground, a rugged, rocky cliffside rises from the left, with a small, stone-walled town or village built into its crevices. The town has several buildings with crenellated roofs, suggesting a medieval or fantasy setting. In the distance, rolling hills and mountains are visible under a sky filled with soft, orange and yellow clouds. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

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THE STUDY OF MONSTROSITIES

by Greg Kurzawa

On the morning of his interview with Dr. Alabaster, Ethan rose at dawn to claim exclusive use of the shared lavatory at the end of the hall. He wiped down the interior of the tub before adding three inches of hot water from the spigot. He bathed with a washrag, then lathered his face sparingly with soap. Other men used thick cream to shave, a practice he found not only lavish and uneconomical but a sore compromise for maintaining a keen razor. When finished, he carefully rinsed and dried his ebony-handled razor before folding it away. Again, he wiped down the inside of the tub, the spigot, sink, mirror, and every tile upon which he had stepped.

In his undecorated flat, Ethan dressed in a dark suit of a cut fashionable thirty years past. He'd bought it from a widow ten years ago, who had shared—without him asking—that her husband had been killed by wolves. Ethan had mended the suit himself. The cuffs were threadbare and the sleeves left his thin wrists exposed, but he kept it immaculate.

He ate standing up in his drab larder—his usual breakfast of dry toast and water. Afterward, he inspected himself in the

full-length mirror behind the door. Satisfied in every respect, he picked up his valise, donned his bowler, and departed his flat for his interview with the doctor.

* * *

Doctor Zev Alabaster lived third in a line of decrepit row houses opposite an overgrown park. Ethan climbed seven steps to the door, where he stopped to consult the timepiece in his pocket. He was three minutes early. Facing the door, he watched the seconds pass. At the appointed time, he knocked.

He wasn't kept waiting long. Hearing the bolt drawn back, Ethan removed his hat, and when an older man with an unshaven face cracked the door to peer at him with jaundiced eyes, Ethan extended a slight bow. "Dr. Alabaster," he said, presenting a calling card printed on stiff, white stock.

"Professor Grimur?" the old man replied.

Ethan inclined his head.

The door scraped tile as the doctor pulled it open, admitting Ethan into a disordered foyer. "I didn't expect you so early." The doctor's accent, faint enough to be almost imperceptible, recalled any number of upriver dialects.

Ethan frowned. "Did we not agree—?"

"Oh no," the doctor said, lifting a hand to stall Ethan's protests. "We did, we did. It's just that you professor types are

so usually late.” He held Ethan’s card at arms’ length, squinting to read the precise script. “Fashionably, isn’t that what’s said?”

“I favor punctuality over fashion.”

“How excellent of you.”

Ethan passed his bowler to the doctor, who then conducted them to a shabby study warmed by a few coals burning in a grate. Near the center of the room was a small table flanked by several stiff-backed chairs. The drapes were drawn, and from the musty, unpleasant odor, Ethan guessed the room had not been aired for some time.

Alabaster crossed the study to transfer a few coals from bin to grate. Brushing black dust from his hands, he smiled at Ethan. “The older you get, the harder it is to keep warm.” He gestured to the table. “Please, sit.”

Ethan chose the nearest chair. Laying his valise on the table in front of him, he unbuckled the straps and withdrew an unused pad of paper and a freshly sharpened pencil. He set his timepiece face-upward within easy reach, then moved his valise to the floor. The doctor, meanwhile, shrugged into a sheepskin overcoat taken from a stand in the corner.

“During our correspondence,” Ethan said, “I explained that I sometimes lecture at the university in Skaad.”

Having watched Ethan's preparations with a look of faint amusement, Alabaster settled into the chair opposite. "On mythology, yes. Fascinating subject."

"You yourself once taught at Skaad."

"Indeed," the doctor confirmed. "I came to the city when I was young—younger than you. It was my dream to live, learn, and teach in the heart of the empire." Alabaster produced a pair of wire-frame spectacles from an inner pocket of his coat; holding these in front of his eyes, he re-examined Ethan's calling card. "I lectured for many years on biophysics and moral theology."

"An odd combination."

"Not very," Alabaster said in a distracted manner. He raised Ethan's card in two fingers. "This says you offer your services as a 'Fine Art Appraiser.'"

"My services are most often sought by private collectors prior to making a significant purchase," Ethan said. "I provide a valuation of legitimate pieces. Doctor, my purpose in coming here—"

"Legitimate pieces?"

"Anything not a forgery. Doctor—"

"Do you find very many forgeries?" Alabaster asked.

"A surprising number."

“And you’ve never been duped? You’ve never mistakenly claimed a piece of art to be authentic? Never denounced a piece as forgery when in fact it was not?”

“Of course not.”

“You are infallible, then,” the doctor declared, impressed—or seemingly so. “The charlatan’s nemesis.”

Ethan felt sure he was being mocked, but before he could defend himself, Alabaster pointed the calling card. “You appraise art, expose forgeries, and teach mythology at the university. Where do you find the time for such demanding enterprises?”

Ethan drew a short, decisive line on his pad. “I keep my social obligations to a minimum.” He allowed Alabaster a brief moment to comment, but the doctor seemed delighted with the given answer.

Impatient with pleasantries, Ethan adjusted his timepiece in what he hoped was a significant manner. “It is not my intent, Doctor, to occupy a great deal of your time. I hoped to speak not of my endeavors, but of yours.” He paused to gauge Alabaster’s reaction—which told him nothing—before continuing. “The scope of your research at the university was impressive. But it is your final, unfinished work that specifically intrigues me.”

“Unfinished? What was it that I left unfinished, young professor?”

Ethan drew a neat circle, then bisected it with a sharp line. “Your theory on the divisible nature of man.”

Taking Alabaster’s silence as invitation to continue, Ethan produced a thin folio from his valise. “The entire body of your work leads to that theory. The logical next step was to present your hypothesis and establish proof. There was an experiment—the outcome of which was tragic. That much is remembered. Filed among your records I found this.” Ethan lifted the folio. “It mentions the experiment, but only briefly.”

Ethan surrendered the folio to Alabaster, who flipped it open. Inside was a transcription, upon which Ethan had made a few small notes in an indecipherable shorthand and underlined passages of particular interest. After skimming the page, Alabaster lowered his spectacles and pushed the folio away with disdain.

“*Victim*,” he said. “They called him a *victim*.”

“Your subject.”

“His name was Mikhail. He came to me because he believed he had a sickness I could cure. He begged me to help him. He understood the risks. They—” But the doctor stopped himself.

Ethan touched the sheet of paper with his pencil. “I can find nothing more detailed than this. At the university, there are some who pretend to know; they are liars and frauds. They revel in the mystique your name offers, but cannot speak intelligently of what happened. There are also those who do know, but pretend not to. They mention surgical exorcisms, but...”

Alabaster made a noise of derision. “Is that what they say now? Exorcisms?”

Ethan shrugged. “Among other things. Invention fills gaps as readily as truth.”

“And is more comforting.” The doctor shifted in his chair. His agitated gaze touched on the page between them.

“My experiments were conducted outside the sanction of the university,” he said at length. “My proposals were denied by the university savants. Not only that—they expressly forbade me to further my research. They wanted my books closed.”

“You proceeded regardless.”

“The university towers are run by drooling old men. For all their babbling of progress, knowledge, and science—they are nothing but meek and squeamish relics. So yes, I proceeded privately.” He winced in sudden self-recrimination. “But I made mistakes. In some things, I was wrong. When rumors of

my failures became known, I was stripped of my tenure and ostracized.”

“And you published nothing?”

“Our great empire is brutally unkind to those who speak knowledge that it is unwilling to hear. Greater men have died for smaller truths than what I stumbled upon, and—though I am bold in my laboratory—I am too much the coward to follow in the footsteps of those men.”

Ethan leaned forward to press his hand flat on the transcript between them. “This is why I came to speak with you: your experiment, what you attempted, what went wrong.”

“What makes my failure so enticing?”

“Your research has significant impact on my own.”

“Which is?”

Ethan hesitated the barest moment. “The Raah.”

“Ah,” Alabaster said. “The elusive Raah. An appropriate focus for the mythologist.”

Ethan was surprised. “You’re familiar with the Raah mythos? It is too obscure a subject for most.”

“Mythology and theology are more closely related than you might think, though you won’t find many professors of theology happy to admit it.”

Ethan drew a long horizontal score across his pad, crossing it with a series of short, vertical lines. “By tracing the evolution

of the Raah mythos, I've begun to construct a possible historical record of the Raah themselves. My ultimate intent is to prove their existence."

Ethan stopped himself abruptly at the look on Alabaster's face. "You think me foolish?"

"You're chasing ghosts."

"I realize the subject is difficult for many to consider seriously."

"The Raah are a . . ." Alabaster moved a hand over the table as though to describe the essence of something ephemeral. "A fabrication. The nightmares of the culture from which we evolved. They are—"

"Nothing more than folklore?" Ethan supplied. "The attempt of the collective mind to explain what the sciences cannot? The uneducated, superstitious, and weak-minded drawing a face on their fears?" He had heard endless commentary on the nature of the Raah, and it bored him. He'd allowed himself to hope Alabaster would not be slave to such limited perspectives.

"A face on our fears, yes," Alabaster said, either not seeing Ethan's irritation, or not caring. "And what we fear most is ourselves. Man has ever struggled to deny the darker parts of his nature. Confronted with the brutality of atrocious men, it is far better to blame an imposter than to believe man himself

capable of such behavior. We invent a scapegoat upon which to heap our evils so we will not have to bear them ourselves.”

Ethan looked at his timepiece.

“They help us to sleep, you see?” Alabaster continued. “They help us to feel safe with ourselves. But if there is no scapegoat—if we allow the offender his humanity—Ah! Then we must accept that the capacity for such evils is intrinsic to our race. We must accept that it is possible to become that which is abhorrent to us.”

“What men abhor, and why, is no concern of mine,” Ethan said.

Alabaster sat a little straighter. “No concern? But you are a mythologist! What is mythology if not a catalog of all that men fear, hate, and love. All that we fail to understand?”

Ethan rebuked himself for letting the doctor subvert his interview and moved to regain control.

“Let us for a moment, Doctor, consider the Raah in an historical, rather than a mythological context,” Ethan said, then continued before Alabaster could protest. “As a scholar, you are aware that we have access to histories older than the empire, much of it written in dead languages. The history of our empire is not lost, as many suppose. It is there to be found for those who seek diligently, and who teach themselves to understand.

“Of necessity, I’ve become a student of history in my search for truth, and something of a linguist. I speak seven languages, Doctor Alabaster, and can read five more. As far back as you care to look, in any language you care to read in, you’ll find evidence of the Raah as a living species, though they’re not always called by that name.”

Alabaster scoffed. “And why should they be? Every people constructs their own mythology to describe the source of all they find detestable, the wellspring of evil. The mythologist knows this.”

“Doctor, I have—”

“How far back have you looked, Professor?”

“I’ve found references to something very like the Raah in Krovian texts. The behavioral similarities are striking.”

For a moment, Alabaster seemed startled. But he quickly dismissed this with a wave of his hand. “At that distance, history and myth are inseparable.”

“Even myths contain kernels of truth.”

Alabaster’s expression turned pitying. “You dig through centuries of forgotten history to find some obscure evidence of truth? If it’s truth you want, you don’t have to go so far, or so deep.”

“I have textual evidence—”

“Insufficient,” the doctor said. “I assume you have tangible artifacts to support your claim? You have art and literature attributable to your Raah? A record of their own history, language, and mythology?”

“No.”

“How can the existence of a sentient species be proved without these things—the most basic of material evidence?”

Before Ethan could answer, Alabaster leaned forward. “And the most important question: assuming they ever existed, what happened to your Raah? Where have they gone? What catastrophe purged an entire species from the face of the continent, erasing all evidence of their existence?”

Ethan was momentarily perplexed. Alabaster’s line of questioning had begun with an invalid assumption, and spiraled quickly to irrelevancy.

“You’ve misunderstood,” Ethan said carefully, even as he realized the fault was his for failing to state clearly his hypothesis. “The Raah have gone nowhere.”

Alabaster stared at Ethan. Then, as though suddenly presented with a repulsive offering, turned away in aversion.

“They exist among us now,” Ethan said. “Hardly forty years ago they were called mummies. It means—”

“I know what it means.”

“Camouflage is a vital mechanism of survival, Doctor.”

“Yours is not a new idea,” Alabaster said. His chair scraped the floor as he stood. “As preposterous today as when I first heard it fifty years ago. It is no more deserving of serious consideration now as it was then.”

Ethan rose with him, lifting his valise to the table. Withdrawing a small stack of sepia photographs, he thrust them at the doctor.

“You’ve seen these before,” he said.

Reluctantly, Alabaster accepted the photographs. He studied the first for a long moment. “Where did you find these? They couldn’t have been in the university archives.”

“They were confiscated by a gendarme who claimed to have been present when the creature was removed from a basement laboratory in Wythe. The gendarme passed the photographs to his son, who allowed me to make reproductions.” He observed Alabaster closely. “You were living in Wythe at the time.”

The doctor shuffled through the remaining photographs quickly, spending barely a moment with each image, then tossed the stack on the table as though eager to be rid of them. The glossy prints fanned out in a distasteful array.

“I see now that you’re not chasing ghosts,” Alabaster said. “It’s monsters you’re after.”

Scooping the photographs together, Ethan neatened their edges on the tabletop. Though he'd already studied them exhaustively, he examined the first of them again. Even in the company of others he didn't enjoy having them out of the folio.

"This is the result of your experiment," Ethan said. He turned the stack toward Alabaster, less to force the doctor to look again than to face it away from himself. "This is the experiment the university would not condone. This is a Raah."

Alabaster winced. "No. This is just poor Mikhail."

Ethan looked at the photograph again. A man? No, it was anything but. Wondering if the doctor's eyesight had failed him completely, Ethan thrust the picture forward. "How can this be human?"

Disgusted, the doctor waved the photograph away. "How can it be otherwise?"

Offering no excuses, Alabaster turned from Ethan and departed.

Abandoned by his host, Ethan was left feeling both angry and foolish, wondering if the doctor would bother returning to escort him out. Seeking knowledge, Ethan had succeeded only in alienating the man to whom he'd applied. Such experiences were not new for him. He was well accustomed to others finding his nature difficult to tolerate.

Ethan still hadn't decided what was expected of him when Alabaster returned. Under his arm he had a worn journal.

Ethan began to offer a stiff apology, but the doctor waved him to silence. He dropped the journal on the table and indicated the spread of photographs. "You've seen the outcome of my work. And you've drawn your conclusion. Do you care to hear mine?"

Ethan sat without further comment. Alabaster lowered himself into his own seat, and laid both hands on the journal's worn cover.

"Man is *diseased*," Alabaster said decisively. "The sicknesses plaguing us are called different names by different people, but the symptoms are the same: cruelty, greed, hatred." He barely lifted the fingers of one hand off the journal. "And other things. Many things."

As encouragement for him to continue, Ethan nodded. "I understand."

"You don't," Alabaster said tiredly. "I believed these diseases to be distinct and tangible, each its own viable entity. If not sentient, at least possessed of rudimentary awareness. And not so deeply entrenched that it would be impossible for them to be isolated and removed. I set out to prove that."

"To cure man of his sins?"

“The diseases of which I speak are not the intrinsic virtues and vices of man. They are parasites with which we are burdened. To which—some would say—we are enslaved.”

Alabaster raised a hand before Ethan could question him further. “I designed and built specialized instrumentation. I developed procedures—”

“Surgical procedures?”

The question seemed to tire Alabaster. He made an indecisive gesture that Ethan couldn't be certain was intended as acknowledgment or evasion. “I developed my procedures, and I applied them.”

With one finger, Ethan rotated the top photograph to better examine it. “Your subject—Mikhail?—must have been a man of vile character.”

“He was unwell,” Alabaster admitted.

“Your surgery produced this. Yet you consider it a failure?”

“The intended results were not achieved.”

“You were attempting to extract the vilest parts of man's nature. You expected something more pleasant?”

“You prefer to believe that my subject was Raah?” Alabaster asked. “Was a beast even before scalpel touched flesh?”

Ethan turned his hands palm up, balancing two imaginary exhibits. “Good and evil are concepts dictated by society. They

manifest in physical actions, not in corporeal bodies. What you exposed during your experiment was flesh and blood. Claiming it to be a materialization of the darker parts of man's nature is absurd."

Alabaster's eyes narrowed. "You listen poorly, Professor."

"Your subject was Raah," Ethan declared. "You would not have known him to be one before you brought him to your laboratory. He might not have known himself. But the evidence speaks clearly—" he pointed at the photographs between them. "Whatever your intent, you stripped it of its mask. You laid it bare."

Alabaster looked steadily at Ethan. "Certainly," he said.

Ethan stopped short. "You agree?"

"It is as you say."

Stunned, Ethan wasn't sure how to proceed. He felt certain Alabaster did *not* agree, but he couldn't very well debate someone who had conceded. He felt he had overlooked something vital.

"Mikhail was the third of seven subjects," Alabaster said.

This was new information.

"Three men. Three women. One child." Alabaster tapped the journal with a crooked finger. "All is documented here. But the child was the last. I could do no more after the child."

Alabaster nudged his journal across the table, encouraging Ethan to take it.

“The first subject died under the knife,” Alabaster continued. “A complete failure. I almost ceased everything that day, but I felt I was close, so tried again. The second subject produced results much like Mikhail did later. In my fear, I destroyed it immediately. I thought something had gone horribly wrong. That I’d made a mistake. So—again.” He tapped the photographs. “Mikhail. Seeing what came from him, I thought that I had selected terrible men indeed, that their wrongs would produce such aberrations. I chose my next subjects more carefully. Are women not more pure than men? Kinder spirits? Gentler souls?”

Alabaster seemed to expect answers, but Ethan had none.

“They are not,” the doctor said. “The results were the same: monstrosities.”

He gestured at the journal in Ethan’s hands. “Read for yourself. Believe what you will. The creatures were destroyed, the husks returned to their families.”

Ethan narrowed his eyes. “Husks? I don’t understand.”

“Because you don’t listen,” Alabaster said. “What is a mask without a man to wear it?”

“Nothing.”

“Not *nothing*,” Alabaster said, seemingly appalled that anyone would say so. “Let us pretend a clever snake comes out of the woods, or up from the ground. He walks upright; he dresses himself in the skin of a man; he looks and speaks like a man.”

Ethan raised a hand to bely the doctor. “There’s no need to speak in parables to me.”

Alabaster slammed a hand to the table, jarring Ethan. “You come into my home with talk of Raah disguised as men and tell *me* to refrain from fairy tales?” He leveled a finger at Ethan. “You’re an unlikable young man, did you know that? You’re arrogant, and I dislike arrogance.”

After glaring a moment more, Alabaster began again, this time louder. “A snake pretends to be a man. He is excellently disguised, and deceives everyone—even a woman, who marries him and bears his children. These hypothetical children: are they human, or are they snakes?”

“They are half of each.”

“And that,” Alabaster declared, “is why you fail to understand. There are gaps in your knowledge, and because you cannot think beyond your own assumptions, you’ve filled them with invention.”

Ethan opened his hands, inviting enlightenment. “What then are the children?”

“The children are snakes,” Alabaster said. “They are snakes through and through. But to you and I, they seem as any other children born of any other woman. And now we see that the story has never been about their father—the snake who knows he is a snake—but rather about the children, who do *not* know they are snakes.

“Now answer this, exposé of forgeries, how is one to know the difference between a child and a snake who merely *believes* it is a child?”

“Peel back the skin,” Ethan answered with offhand confidence, knowing that Alabaster was speaking of the Raah regardless of whether he understood his own story.

“The children grow,” Alabaster continued, not bothering to judge Ethan’s answer. “They are handsome children, though they have the appetites of snakes. We cannot blame them for this; who among us can help what he is? But one day their mother discovers her precious children swallowing mice in the garden.”

“You’ve described the Raah,” Ethan said calmly. “Though I would have compared them to wolves rather than snakes.”

“No.” Alabaster said. “I’ve described *Man*. And my story is not done.” Though very warm in the study, he tugged his overcoat tighter around himself.

“Mortified, the woman summons her husband the snake, and together they strip the disguises from those snakes they call their children. And now they have two skins the exact size and shape of children. The skins have long been part of the deception and so carry on out of habit and instinct. They go on being little children, you see?”

“Another question, Professor—you may answer or not, as you like. Is the skin more or less grotesque than the snake it once concealed?”

“I don’t know,” Ethan said. Then, “Less.”

“Less?” echoed Alabaster. His passion subsided, he seemed to have fallen to distraction. “I kept the child for days,” he said, “because I was afraid of what I’d done. And I hoped she might recover. Sometimes she spoke, but her words never *meant* anything. Mostly she sat and stared, barely responding. She shuffled between rooms looking for familiar things, performing meaningless gestures. Everything was a mystery to her.”

Alabaster touched his temple, as though the act of remembering exhausted him. “What should be done with such things? And what with snakes?” Apparently at a genuine loss, he looked to Ethan. “What is done with forgeries, Professor, when they are discovered?”

Ethan shrugged. “That is the owner’s prerogative.”

“Are they not destroyed?”

“A rare few, I imagine. Most are simply taken away and sold elsewhere, to someone lacking the prudence to verify their legitimacy.”

“But if it were your decision?”

“I would rather see them destroyed.”

Alabaster looked away, perhaps remembering a time when he had faced the same question. At last, he shrugged helplessly. “Perhaps that is best, but who has the heart for such things? If a beautiful painting is copied, is the copy not beautiful in its own right?”

Ethan thought not, but said nothing.

Alabaster sighed. “In my little tale, the children were sent to bed; the snakes were destroyed. You would have done otherwise, I know. But me—” he lifted his shoulders. “How can I be wiser than those in my own tale?”

The doctor looked at Ethan’s drawings. He nodded and tried to smile, though it seemed more a grimace. At length, he said to Ethan, “A man should know himself.”

“As should a people.”

“We are more alike than you think, Professor,” Alabaster concluded. “We find the same thing in different places, but call it by different names.”

With that, Alabaster put his hands on the table and pushed himself wearily to his feet. “And now I’m tired, and I want to sleep. Take the journal. Use any of it—all of it—to further your research. Find the truth, if you can. But remember, the truth has sharp teeth, and often resents being unmasked. My advice to you, though you didn’t ask for it, is that you stop searching for the Raah.”

Ethan smiled tightly. “Because they do not exist.”

“No. Because we find what we seek.”

Sliding his effects into his valise, Ethan rose to bid the doctor farewell. As he donned his hat in the foyer, a thought occurred to him, and he stopped with his hand on the door. There had been so much talk of serpents; so much talk of masks. The doctor had accused him of not listening, while saying nothing—or not enough. Turning to face Alabaster, Ethan wondered:

“What are you hiding?”

Instead of expressing indignation, Alabaster turned a sly smile on Ethan, as though they shared a wicked secret. The doctor shifted his shoulders, which for a moment gave the impression that his body was reconfiguring itself beneath the overcoat. Ethan couldn’t see the doctor’s hands, and felt vaguely threatened by this. It might have been he’d pulled

them into his sleeves for warmth; it might only have been him hunching his shoulders.

“You’ve seen,” Alabaster said. “You know.”

Ethan opened the door. “Goodbye, Doctor.”

“It’s the same thing you hide, Professor.”

* * *

Ethan studied his face in the mirror of the shared lavatory at the end of the hall. Having just finished bathing, he was neither dried nor dressed.

Seven subjects, he thought. One of them a child. All of them physically torn into two distinct beings: a functional husk, and an abomination. He had read Alabaster’s journal. The subjects had come from different families, different boroughs, different backgrounds. None of them had known any of the others. All of them Raah?

Impossible, thought Ethan, rinsing his face with water.

All diseased, then?

No, Ethan decided. He could not believe in such diseases as Alabaster proffered. To find such horrors in men was expected. In women, acceptable. In a child? No.

Ethan opened his mouth, stretching wide his lips to better inspect his teeth. He probed them with his tongue, then with his fingers. He counted them.

“Masks,” Ethan said to his reflection, evoking Alabaster’s tone. “What are men without their masks?” And what was the mask without the man? And which of the two, Ethan wondered, would he recognize as himself?

Ethan unfolded his razor and leaned close to the mirror, his face inches from the glass. Holding his own gaze, he turned his head slightly. He touched the ebony-handled razor to the tender skin just beneath his right ear.

We find what we seek, Alabaster had said.

Ethan’s flesh opened with surprising ease. Blood filled his palm as he dragged the razor down the curve of his jaw. It warmed his wrist and coursed from his elbow to patter in the clean, white sink. He pressed deeper, and layers of muscle parted with a kind of shocked, thankful relief, as though bound too tight for too long.

The truth, as Alabaster had promised, was possessed of many sharp teeth.

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THE CROOKED MILE

by Dan Rabarts

No way, Rosco knew, that Sheriff Dylan would let a killer walk the town loose for no good reason. But Sheriff Dylan weren't around when the stranger rode up with two bodies slung over his saddle all shot to pieces, just Rosco; Rosco, with his shiny new deputy's badge and his Pappy's six-shooter that his Momma had given him after Pappy hadn't come back from down the Mile, all that was left just his gun and his boots and what little pieces the sheriff could find.

Rosco guessed he'd have to handle the situation, what with the sheriff being away down the Mile and all. He stepped out into the main road that ran down the middle of Gutshank, population one-hundred-fifty-three, and rested a hand on the pearly handle of his revolver. Tried to look mean, like his Pappy would've done.

"Trouble, partner?" Rosco hailed the stranger.

The man's cold eyes settled on him from a-ways off. "Yup," he growled around a mouthful of tobacco, "I got me some wizard trouble."

Rosco swallowed hard. Anything to do with wizards was trouble of the worst sort.

The man dragged at one of the corpses, letting it flop over. “Dead wizard trouble. I’m here for the bounty.”

“Bounty?” Rosco was just a deputy, after all. He didn’t know nothing about bounties. But he knew well enough to be shit-scared of anything involving wizards.

“The *federal* bounty. Don’t be messing about, Deputy. I killed me some wizards, and I come for my coin.”

“Well,” Rosco said, trying to sound like he wasn’t trying to sound brave, “that’s the sheriff’s business. He’s down the Mile. You’ll have to wait ‘til he gets back.”

The stranger stared at him for a long minute, chewing slowly. “Down the Mile, you say.”

“Yup. He’s got business.”

“Then I guess I’ll go down the Mile and find him. Got a cell? I want my dead ‘uns locked up.”

Rosco chuckled, shuddered. Last thing he wanted or needed was a couple dead wizards in his cells. “You’re scared someone might steal ‘em?”

The stranger’s salt-pepper beard crinkled into a ghost of a smile. “More worried they might walk away on their own. You don’t want dead wizards wandering around your pretty little town now, do you, Deputy?”

Rosco's stomach tightened. "Sure don't. But I don't much see as how a jail cell's going to hold 'em back, neither."

"Well, I guess we'll just have to take 'em along, when you and me head down the Mile to find your sheriff and get me my bounty."

Rosco's breath hitched in his throat. "Me and you? Sorry mister, but I can't leave my post. Sheriff's orders. I'm here to watch for trouble, see."

The man leaned forward and hawked a gob of black spit into the sand at Rosco's feet. "You see any trouble, Deputy?"

Rosco saw it all right. And he didn't want nothing to do with it. "You just keep on riding, mister. You head on down the Mile. You go find the sheriff."

"So now you and your badge are driving me out of town, me with my rightful claim to the president's good gold?"

"Now don't be talking like that, mister. We're just a small town, and we ain't got no cells fit for wizards. If you want the sheriff you'll have to go find him, and take your wizards with you. They're your concern, and you won't be making 'em mine."

Rosco wondered if Pappy would've been proud to hear him talking so tough to this dangerous, mean-faced varmint. The stranger stared, long and hard, and truth was it took all the iron in Rosco's blood to keep his chin up and his eyes straight as that gaze bore him down. Yep, Pappy'd've been proud.

The stranger nudged his horse into a walk. “I’ll find your sheriff and bring him back here for my coin. Then, depending how I feel, we just might have to settle this here disagreement.”

Rosco could’ve let it go; he could’ve just let the stranger ride off. But no man with any pride could let a challenge like that hang over his head. He thrust his jaw out, the way he’d seen Sheriff Dylan do. “You threatening me, mister? Because I can lock you up if you’re threatening a deputy, and I can confiscate your bounties, too. That’s the law, that is.”

The stranger pulled his horse up hard and twisted in the saddle, them cold dead eyes freezing Rosco stiff. “You know about laws, boy? Then you know that these scum here, they break ‘em all, not just the ones writ by men in their warm offices way back east, but the laws of nature and physics and even *god*. Men like me, we have to do the same, as best we can, to protect weaklings like you who hide behind your badges and your *laws*. So don’t you be lecturing me, son. I’ve been killing wizards longer’n you’ve been alive. Maybe you’re brave, maybe you’re trying to prove something, but me, I think you’re a fool. Don’t you be crossing my path again, Deputy. Ain’t worth your while.”

Rosco watched him go, his fingers tight around the grip of Pappy’s revolver secure in its holster. He hadn’t never wanted to shoot a man more than he wanted to shoot this wizard

hunter right now, but the law was the law. Until a man did something amiss, he was free to go.

The townsfolk began to drift away once it was clear that the spectacle was over. Rosco stood for a long while looking down Gutshank's dusty main road, wondering if he had just done the town a service by moving the vagrant on, or if he'd angered a dangerous man enough that he'd bring them back nothing but grief.

Not to worry. The stranger was riding into the Crooked Mile. Oft times folks didn't come back from the Crooked Mile. It was what kept Sheriff Dylan so busy down that twisting road so many days and nights in the month. Whatever the stranger thought he knew on account of his years hunting wizards, he ain't never seen the likes of what lay down the Crooked Mile.

When Rosco couldn't see the stranger's back no more, he retreated to the cool shade of the awning and his mug of ice tea. Carefully, he unloaded his revolver and began to clean it. Chances were good he'd need it before this was all over.

* * *

Rosco woke with a start. Summer lightning, and thunder, that was all. Not a gunshot. Sleep had been a long time coming, him jumping at every sound, worrying the wizard hunter would steal back in the dead of night to put a bullet in him while he slept.

The night was hot, the crickets whirring up a storm, and Rosco wasn't getting back to sleep. He got up, shrugged into his clothes and gunbelt, and stepped out into the muggy night to cast an eye over Gutshank.

What a fool he'd been to say the things he'd said. Damned hothead. Who'd dare stand up to a man who made a life killing himself wizards for coin? Sheriff Dylan maybe, but not many others. Most honest folk, *sensible* folk, they'd hide themselves away from that sort of trouble.

A riderless horse came limping up the street. Rosco thought it was a paint, white with brown or black patches, but something about the way it stumped closer sent a shiver through him. Thing was hurt, for sure, but where was its rider?

Summer lightning crackled, leaving Rosco with flickering after-images of white and red. He stumbled back, fumbling for his gun. Horse weren't no paint. It was covered in blood. And Rosco knew that horse, knew her like he'd know his own Momma by the smell of her biscuits.

He reached out and gently took her reins, suddenly feeling a fool, holding his revolver like an idiot frightened of thunder. He holstered it and looked to the horse, checking her over to see what injury she'd done herself. "Martha? Hey girl, where's your master? Where's the sheriff?"

Despite all that blood, it weren't Martha's, which could only mean one thing. One awful, awful thing.

Rosco thought about Sheriff Dylan, thought about bringing him back in little bits and pieces, scraps of meat and bone and buckskin, like they'd brought back his Pappy. His stomach churned, and only a voice from behind stopped him from keeling over there and then and baptizing the road with the beans and beef and pumpernickel he'd eaten for his supper.

"Hey, Deputy," the voice sang, deliciously high, "there's sweeter company inside than out there with that old nag. Discount for lawmen, you know?"

Rosco felt his face flush, refused to turn and look; refused to let the whores see his shame. Momma didn't hold with whores, and Rosco was a good boy. Loving between a man and a woman was for married folks; that was the law. He gripped Martha's saddle and swung up onto her back. "Sorry ladies," he grunted, without looking to where they hung over the rails of the brothel on the far side of the street, their bosoms struggling to burst free of their thin tight dresses, "duty calls." He urged Martha into an awkward trot.

Gutshank seemed to fade from around him as he realized what he was doing. He was leaving his post. He was disobeying the sheriff. He was riding into the Crooked Mile, where dead wizards would be the least of a man's troubles. He was going to

find the sheriff, because the sheriff might be shot up, or cut up, or worse, and Rosco was the only one who knew. He was heading into the Crooked Mile, where Pappy's ghost was waiting for him.

At least he had Pappy's gun. Not that it had done Pappy a whit of good.

* * *

Gutshank didn't disappear around a corner or into the distance. The town just vanished with a hiss. There one second, gone the next, now nothing but stunted acacia clinging to wind-howl ravines at Rosco's back. Even the moon above the canyon walls was different here, her visage twisted into something that Rosco thought more wolf, or maybe rat.

He resisted the urge to pull his gun, knowing he needed both hands on the reins. He didn't want to have Martha fall lame under him. She knew the way out, and Rosco didn't. All he knew was that the way out of the Mile weren't never the same as the way in, and you never arrived in the Crooked Mile at the same place twice. He scanned the barren rock for signs of passage, traces of blood, but it was no use. He was as much a tracker as he was a marksman, which is to say he could as well find his way in the dark in unfamiliar territory as he could hit the moon with a rifleshot.

“Come on Martha,” he patted the mare’s neck, “take me to Sheriff Dylan.”

* * *

Rosco found trouble before he found the sheriff. Water cackled over a dark ford and Martha slipped, skidded, threw him, hard. By the time Rosco staggered out of the narrow creek she was off down the gully, favoring a leg but still scarpering into the twisting canyons of the Mile faster than Rosco might hope to catch her up on foot. “Martha!” he shouted, but she was gone, gone like she ain’t never been there.

“Martha!”

“Well, look what we have here.”

Rosco spun, fumbling for his gun. Always with the fumbling.

The wizard hunter’s cold eyes glistened manic in the broken moonlight, his revolver already raised. Rosco put his hands up, wondering where the wizard hunter’s horse was and why he was leaning so heavy on that boulder at his back, why his shirt looked wet and slick, why he held one arm real close to his side. Like Martha, hiding her hurt.

“Guess you found the sheriff then, and he weren’t too pleased to see you?” Rosco’s knees might’ve been weak under him, but he had bluff and bluster. When a man’s got you dead

to rights and all you got is your tongue ‘cause your hands are thick as treacle, then your tongue best be quick on the draw.

“You didn’t warn me your sheriff was a necro.”

“A what?”

“I seen lots of sour things in my time, Deputy, but you know what I ain’t never had the mighty bad luck to come across? I ain’t never before tonight come across a necromancer right in the middle of casting a witching what for to raise the dead, right when I happened to be in the unfortunate possession of two dead wizards.

“Now, suddenly, I find myself outnumbered by two wizards, them all angry as hell on account of my having shot ‘em all up to pieces, and one necromancer posing as a sheriff so’s he can carry on with his gruesome deeds out here where no-one dares come looking for him, not to mention whatever the hell it was that he was pulling up from the ground.” He wheezed, like his speaking was an effort. “So yeah, I might’ve been caught a bit off my guard and got on the wrong end of a load of buckshot, but I gave back pretty good too. Way I figure it, Deputy, is you gotta ask yourself this: whose side am I really on?”

Rosco dropped his eyes. It couldn’t be true. Sheriff Dylan weren’t no wizard, sure weren’t no wizard what brought the dead back to life. At least Rosco didn’t think he was. Mind you,

he sure did spend a lot of nights down here in the Mile. Down here among the dead.

He lifted his face to the wizard hunter's. "You say there's a bounty for wizards, then?"

The old man cracked a smile that glinted silver in the starlight. "That's my boy. See, I knew you had gumption, way you stood up to me back in that hole of a town. You know what's right from what's wrong, and that's what matters, ain't it?"

Rosco nodded. "You show me that Sheriff Dylan's breaking the law, and I'll help you bring him in, dead or alive. That's the law."

The wizard hunter holstered his revolver and extended his hand, not moving from the rock, as if he expected Rosco to come on up to him and shake it but he wasn't up to the walking needed to meet him halfway. "Call me Garth."

Rosco lowered his hands. "You got a last name?"

"Naw. Sold it long ago."

Rosco frowned. He was used to the folk about town jesting at him, but with a wizard hunter, who knew what was hot air and what was God's own truth? "You're hurt pretty bad."

"This? Just a scratch. Nothing a hot bath won't fix."

"Can you shoot?"

“You’re gonna need me for more than just shooting when we find this little clutch of hellspawn. You ever fought a wizard before?”

Rosco ain’t never *seen* wizards before today, and they were a couple dead ones. Apart from Sheriff Dylan, of course, if what Garth said was true. But he just said, “Sure. Plenty.”

“Course you have,” Garth slapped him on the shoulder and staggered forward. “Now, why the hell’d you let that horse get away?”

* * *

The Crooked Mile bent and twisted away from them as they rode down one canyon, then up another. Finding Martha had turned out to be easy enough, her trail of wet hoofprints leading Rosco to a patch of clover she’d been chewing on. The blood on her coat was drying to a crust, all crackling and crinkled like the faces of the dead wizards. She didn’t complain when Rosco hefted Garth into the saddle and then led her by the reins down the gulch. He was glad to be wearing his good boots.

“So how’d you find me, then?”

The question took Rosco by surprise. “How’d you mean?”

“Well, I saw your sheriff after I shot him, bleeding like a stuck pig all over his horse as it spooked away, and then up comes his deputy on that same horse, from a completely

different direction, like he's a-come looking for me. Don't it seem odd to you?"

Rosco didn't look back. He could almost feel the steely gaze of Garth's revolver at his back. "I didn't come looking for you. I came for Sheriff Dylan."

"Still don't explain how you got around behind me."

"These canyons is haunted. You ain't figured that yet?"

Garth fell silent for a while. Then: "That's the most sensible thing you've said all day."

"It don't seem strange to you?"

"Son, I spent my life hunting wizards. Ain't much surprises me." Garth sat up awkwardly, and Rosco thought he was mighty stiff for a man who ought be ready for fighting. "Up there. What's that?"

Rosco looked where he was pointing. Ghostly lights shifted and danced on the canyon walls. "Wizards?"

Garth frowned, his face collapsing into crags and shadow. "Nope. It's a lure cast by wizards to draw in greenhorns like you. Like as not they're behind us already." He twisted, gun raised, scanning the darkness. He winced.

Rosco peered between the black slashes cast by the windblasted upthrusts, trying to pretend that his legs weren't shaking as bad as they were.

Something huge and equally dark slid through the night, an indistinct shape rasping its bulk across dust and stone, sharp edges scraping rock with an eerie squeal. Rosco thought of his Pappy, how he'd ridden into the Mile and come back nothing more than a few scraps of blood and bone. He thought of the teeth, the claws that must have done that to his Pappy. Thought how the thing must have smelled *his* blood, blood it had a taste for, a hunger for.

“Don't you shoot at that now. It's only as real as you let it be.”

Rosco realized he had his Pappy's gun drawn, was aiming into the dark where there was nothing to shoot at, nothing but the memory of the thing that had taken his Pappy. He hadn't even known he'd pulled it.

“Don't let them wizards get to you,” Garth warned. “We're in their spellcrafting now, to be sure. You let 'em, they'll try to put one of your own bullets in me, or in you. Easier that way. Course, if you waste all your ammo shooting at shadows, well, that's just about as good.”

Rosco nodded and holstered the revolver. Its grip was warm in his hand, like his blood was running hot. What if, he wondered, it weren't a spell? Something had killed Pappy, after all. Something lived down here, down here in the twisting maze, down here among the dead.

“Just you watch,” Garth muttered, “they’ll bring up the wind next. Wind so hot and sharp it rips the air from your lungs and fills your eyes with sand ‘til you want to lie down and curl up until it’s done, or until you’re dead.”

But it weren’t wind that came up, just a cool evening breeze, chilling the sweat on his spine. Rosco managed a chuckle. “Maybe the wizards are getting tired. They’re dead, after all.”

Then came the smell. It might have started in the bottom of a potato sack, where a bad spot had grown soft and moist and white and turned first to spoil and then to rot but then it had rolled through an open latrine trench, gaining the hot stench of human waste. More foulness followed, the stink of dead bodies, like when the cattle pox had taken Pappy’s goats and he’d dragged them down the gulch and left them to rot, and the vultures had come down and ripped open the dead things’ guts, strewing them about in the sun, dragging them across the sand with those claws of theirs. Rosco gagged, reaching for a kerchief to wrap around his face.

Garth chuckled. “Looks like your beastly just did itself a good old-fashioned dump. Eyes forward, soldier, they want you looking at the ground.”

Through watering eyes, Rosco scanned the trail, saw nothing, and wanted to vomit.

“Enough with the parlor tricks,” Garth muttered, and when Rosco glanced back, he was still talking, low and to himself, his fingers twitching oddly where they hugged his bloody chest. “Time to finish this.”

As if on cue, Garth was suddenly hurled backwards off Martha in a spray of dark blood. The sound of the gunshot rang around the canyon a sharp breath later. Martha bucked, and Rosco with his hand still looped in the reins could barely think about getting to his own gun or running for cover until he had calmed the horse. Garth was lying somewhere in the shadows, scraping across the rock. Not dead then, not crying out, just shot. Hiding his hurt.

Martha reared, her hoofs thrashing at air. Rosco abandoned his valiant attempt to rein her in and let her clatter away into the night. Then he scrambled for cover, wondering why the gunman hadn't shot him down already.

“Don't you worry about bringing this one in, Deputy,” came Sheriff Dylan's voice from the darkness. “Hanging's too good for 'im.”

“Sheriff?” Rosco scanned the shadows, trying to spot Dylan among the boulders along the canyon floor. “What's going on? Garth here tells me you're a wizard or some such, down here messing with the dead.”

“You believe a wizard hunter, Deputy? Only wizard down here is him. Don’t know who those two dead fellers were he brought with him, but I’d guess his game is crossing this land killing innocents and falsely claiming wizard bounties for ‘em.”

“Don’t you believe him, lad,” Garth wheezed from behind a boulder. Rosco could only see his boots.

He realized he was the only one here who hadn’t been shot. Whoever he decided to trust, they’d need him to get them back to the doc’s in Gutshank. If they made it that far.

“You’ve known me since you were a boy, Deputy. Who was it took your Momma in when your Pappy died? Who was it taught you how to clean your gun and shoot it straight? Who was it gave you a good job? This feller, he’s nothing but a murdering trickster, and he’s done gone and shot up a sheriff, and who knows how many innocent folk.” Dylan’s voice was bouncing around the rocks, making it hard for Rosco to guess at where he might be. “Do your job, Deputy. I’d say dead or alive, but as long as he’s alive he’ll be trying to trick you into letting him go.”

“I dunno, Sheriff. Why don’t you come on out so’s I can see you.”

Beyond him, something moved. Something that scraped and rasped and vanished into the gloom. Something hungry.

“You’re wondering why I come down here, boy? Why I come down the Mile, nights at a time? Someone been filling your head with nonsense about me being a wizard? Well, Deputy, it’s time for the truth. I come down here on account of your Momma, and your Pappy. I come looking for answers. If you want to try and take me in for that, that’s your right. But if you do, we’ll never know what happened to your Pappy. You want to know what happened, don’t you? What killed him?”

Rosco’s hands shook. The shifting shadows in the back of his eyes, in the back of his mind, took on a more menacing shape. “What *about* my Pappy?”

“Ask your friend there. Ask him why your Pappy came down here.”

“He’s lying, Deputy,” Garth called. “I ain’t never been down here before.”

Rosco swallowed hard. He knew the law, and he knew how guilty men talked, their tongues shivering like rattlers. “The sheriff didn’t say you had been, but you denying it like that makes me think you got a case of the guilts, mister.”

“The posse your Pappy was in,” Dylan continued, “we came hunting some feller, way back. Rumor was he was a wizard what wanted to use the haunting in the Mile to bring demons across from Hell’s own fires so that he could use them for himself, but he didn’t know how to control ‘em. Fool went

and let ‘em loose instead. Can’t you hear ‘em out there? Sniffing you out? That’s how your Pappy died. That’s why there weren’t nothing left of him.”

“Pappy?” Rosco squeezed his eyes shut, blinked them open. Damn dust in the air, making them go all watery like that.

“He’s playing you like a fiddle, Deputy,” Garth growled. “The only monsters out there are in your mind.”

“Stop it!” Rosco screamed. “Both of you!” He clutched his hands to his ears, felt the cold press of his Pappy’s gun against his face. Again, he had the revolver in hand. Again, he hadn’t known it.

“Glad to see you kept it clean for me,” came a new voice, a soothing presence at his shoulder. A voice he knew. A voice he had longed to hear for more years than he cared to remember. “Pappy?” Rosco was too afraid to move, to turn and look. Afraid what he might see. There were too many ghosts down here, too many beasts, too many crooked roads and broken memories.

“How’s your Momma doing?”

Rosco’s voice was barely a creak in the night. “She’s doing good, Pa. She’s happy. Sheriff Dylan looks after her real good.”

“Son, I know you were always a special kid, always good with rules but never so good with people. That weren’t your

fault. None of us can help how we were born. But you made good choices. You learned your law, and you know what it means. But there's more to people and what they do than just laws. You understand? People and laws, they don't really go together real well. The worst of 'em, they just don't fit inside of laws, right? Cattle rustlers and the like, outlaws, wizards. Some of 'em break laws because they figure they're too good for 'em, some just because they need to know how far they can push a law before it breaks. You know what I'm saying, son?"

Rosco nodded, like he understood, even though he really didn't. Dimly he could hear Garth and Dylan shouting at him, shouting at each other, but he let their voices roll over him. He was talking to his Pappy. It was against the rules to talk while Pappy was talking. "I think so."

"Even the good folk, they can't follow the law all the time. Sometimes more important things come along."

"What's more important than the law, Pappy? Can't have folks breaking the law just a-cause it suits them."

"See, I always said you'd make a good lawman, you with your sense of right and wrong. But folks ain't so black and white. Sometimes they can hate real bad, and that makes 'em dangerous. Sometimes they love too hard, and that ain't no better."

"Pappy, what are you trying to tell me?"

“You say you’re Momma’s good? She’s happy?”

“Yes, Pappy.”

“Do you remember, before I went away? Was she happy then?”

Rosco choked a little. He wanted to say yes, but it was wrong to lie. Momma had never really been happy. Only sometimes, those times when Pappy was out working the range and Sheriff Dylan used to come by the homestead to check up on her, to check she was OK out there on the ranch all alone. Those times when they used to give Rosco a nickel to ride into town and buy himself an ice while they talked like grown-ups. Rosco caught a sob in his throat, like all the pain he had been hiding from ever since they’d brought back Pappy’s boots and gun was creeping up on him, huge dark wings spreading out, ready to open up its jaws and devour him.

The voice at his shoulder softened. “Ask the sheriff about the stray shot, son. Ask him how we got split up from the rest of the posse that night, how we were lost in the Mile, how I rode on ahead a-ways. Ask him how he kept my boots and my gun and said how a demon took the rest. Ask him about the bullet that killed your Pa.”

Rosco’s eyes were squeezed shut, but he felt something press into his hand. When he opened his eyes, Pappy was gone,

if he had ever been there at all. A cold weight sat heavy in his palm. The same leaden chill hung on his heart.

The moon lanced across the canyon, her feral eyes yellow, fever-touched. Rosco held the revolver close. His hands no longer shook. One held Pappy's gun. The other, a shattered metal slug.

Rosco pushed himself to his feet. His legs were steady. In the yellowed cast of the moon he could see a hunched figure in the gully, sighting down a polished rifle barrel. To his left, Garth had pulled himself tighter behind his rock.

"Sheriff," Rosco called, his fingers easy on the six-shooter, "I say we take this criminal in."

"You fool!" Garth swung around the rock, gun sweeping into view, but Pappy's gun barked, true, like another hand was guiding Rosco's. Like he was hanging outside himself, just watching. Garth howled, dropping his revolver. Another shot, a spray of bone and blood and brain, and he collapsed, still. Rosco stared at Garth's shattered skull, suddenly bright in the moonlight, and felt nothing. "The only good wizard's a dead wizard," he mumbled, numbness seeping through him.

"You made a good choice," Sheriff Dylan called, rising brokenly from the shadows, his rifle dropping as he limped forwards. Grinning, grimacing, hiding his pain. So many

people, so many faces, hiding their hurt, their shame, their guilt.

Rosco nodded slowly. “You came down here looking for ghosts, Sheriff. You find any?”

“There ain’t no ghosts, Deputy. Only the voices in your head.”

“Maybe.”

Dylan was bent nearly double, blood staining his buckskins from his hat to his boots. He stumbled forward to lean on the boulder where Garth lay sprawled and regarded the corpse. “Wizards, eh? Can’t trust ‘em.”

“They just want to change the world, that’s all,” Rosco said. “Not as bad as cheats. Not as bad as murderers.”

Dylan turned, real slow. “Rosco?”

Rosco held up the slug. “I found me a ghost, Sheriff.”

Dylan went for his six-shooter. Pappy’s gun cracked, twice, three times. This time, Rosco didn’t feel distant. He only felt the bleak seeping warmth of bloody justice.

He looked at the body splayed across the boulder, how the bullet had pierced the sheriff’s badge shattering the star. Thought how there were laws, and how some folks would never be able to follow them. Thought how even the ones who wear their faces of goodness still hide their rot on the inside, hide

their hurt, and steal love away from others to fill the holes in their own lives.

“So,” came a voice at his shoulder, “now what?” As if someone was easing his arm down, the revolver dipped, slid into the holster. Like a puppet’s.

“Well,” Rosco said, “I figure I’ve got me a couple wizards to take in for a bounty, for starters.”

“You gonna tell your Momma what you know? About the sheriff?”

He turned his face to the moon, to the dark shapes that crawled along the canyon walls, hungry for carrion. “That’d break her heart, I reckon.”

“No doubt. But it’s wrong to lie, ain’t it?”

“I think,” Rosco said, turning to face the empty night where his Pappy’s ghost should’ve been but wasn’t, “that sometimes, it’s better if we do.”

“She was a cheat too, remember? She broke a law, the law between a man and his wife.”

Rosco shrugged. “At least she didn’t kill no-one.”

“You don’t think it was part her doing that killed me down here? You think she’s innocent?”

“I reckon I don’t know, and I ain’t one to judge. I reckon Sheriff Dylan pulled the trigger, and for that he’s paid his due. And I reckon that you can’t talk me into killing no-one else, no

matter how you try. I done enough of that, right here.” It was a hurt he’d have to hide, he knew, forever. “Because at first, I thought you were just a wizard’s trick, thought the way you were talking at me about the sheriff, you must’ve been something Garth had conjured up, like he brought up that awful stench, and tried to pretend like he weren’t the one magicking it. But then he was dead, and I could still feel you there. If you were his magic, you should’ve died with him. But the slug. When the sheriff saw it, I saw the guilt in him. He would’ve shot me down, so I knew it was true, what you said he did.”

The shadows hissed and surged around him, creatures swarming closer, silvered shadows under yellow moonlight.

“And maybe I wanted to shoot that wizard hunter, ‘cause of how he shamed me in the street. Maybe I wanted to shoot the sheriff, because he killed my Pa, and there ain’t no law as right as vengeance. If the Good Book taught me anything, it’s that revenge is right and lawful. So long as you only look at the old book.

“But Momma? My Pappy wouldn’t never want my Momma’s heart broken. Wouldn’t never want her shamed. Don’t matter what she did, don’t matter that she weren’t happy, or that she loved another man. Pappy always loved her, better’n any man ever could. Even Pappy’s ghost couldn’t be that bitter.

So that's why I reckon you ain't no ghost, you're just a black old spirit trying to do mischief, trying to spread it out of the Crooked Mile. Like the ways you sat at a fire with some cowboy and told him how you was my Pappy, how you didn't die that day, but you been hiding out here all this time waiting to get back at the man who killed you. Yeah, we all heard that story, but I guess the sheriff believed it more than me.

"See, I came to terms with my Pappy being dead and gone long ago. I knew my Pappy never would've left me alone, never would've left me thinking he was dead just so's he could get *revenge*. That ain't right. But I guess Sheriff Dylan still had some guilt he'd never quite got past."

The night swelled around him, darkness billowing upwards to blot out the moon's lupine gaze, swallowing him in a flurry of wings and claws and teeth, scraping and scratching at his skin. Yet he felt braver now than he ever had, even with Sheriff Dylan dead, even knowing his Pappy was truly, truly gone. He had a peace about him now, because he knew that he'd be making his own way from here on out.

"Martha!" He called through the tearing darkness. The veil broke apart, a mass of white and red surging towards him between the shifting black.

"Don't you worry about them," Rosco said as he grabbed Martha's reins and patted her on the neck, "they can't hurt us.

They're against the law." Rosco hauled first one body, then the other, onto Martha's saddle and lashed them on, oblivious to the spirits swirling around him. Then he calmly let the horse walk, trusting her to take him out of the maze.

"Goodbye, Pappy."

Shrieking, the darkness tore apart, wispy clouds against the night, drifting towards the coming dawn.

Rosco walked slow, easy, up the canyon. Thought how funny it was that now he'd be the one come walking into town with two dead bodies on his horse, him with his eyes grown cold from the killing, and how if he was sheriff he wouldn't trust him, neither. But, he guessed, he *was* the sheriff now. He wondered if his Pappy would be proud to see him, Town Sheriff, hauling away the dead, and him not daring to cry nor quiver.

He rolled the broken hunk of lead between his fingers, thought how strange it was that something so small, just a little piece of metal, could do so much wrong in people's lives, like rules writ down in a book or the way a man might feel about a woman in the quiet places where no-one could see, in those places where the rules and the laws didn't make a whit of difference, down in the places where folk hide their hurt. How in places like this, down here among the dead and the crooked ghosts, there were no rules, no laws, only hurt.

He raised his arm and tossed the slug into the darkness. That was a hurt he was done with hiding. It could stay here, with the ghosts, where it belonged.

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Dan Rabarts is a New Zealand writer of fantasy, horror, science fiction and the odd things in between. He has twice been a finalist for New Zealand's Sir Julius Vogel Awards, both for fiction and non-fiction. His fiction can be found in Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, Aurealis, in anthologies including Regeneration – New Zealand Speculative Fiction, and at the Tales from the Archives and Wily Writers' podcasts. His audio narrations can be heard at StarShipSofa and Tales to Terrify, among others. Find him lurking on the web at dan.rabarts.com.

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COVER ART

“TheVillage,” by Sergio Diaz



Sergio Diaz lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He has studied with artists such as Eduardo Labombarda, Marcelo Maccarrone, and Ariel Olivetti, and has worked for Bridger Conway Agency and Gizmo studio. He currently freelances for several studios and agencies whose clients include Coca-Cola, Ford, Nestlé, Panvel, Nissan, Royal, Honda, Arcor, The Radical Company, and Clarin. View more of his work at www.sergiodiaz.com.ar.

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