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Adam's Race, and Other Writings

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ABSTRACT

This collection is the culmination of four years as a Creative Writing minor at Cedarville University. It features four short stories which exemplify my own focus on fiction writing. It also includes an introduction, which gives some personal background behind my creative writing, and a foreword, which discuss my view of my Christian faith as it relates to creative writing, and fiction in particular.

ADAM'S RACE, AND OTHER WRITINGS

By

Eric Casmir Skowronski

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of English,
Literature, and Modern Languages at Cedarville University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor

Cedarville, Ohio

2014

Approved by

INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I always hated writing. I would wait until the very last minute to begin any written assignment, secretly hoping it would be canceled and I wouldn't have to do it. Of course that never happened. Okay, it happened once, but that's beside the point.

In middle school, I started taking online classes and was dismayed to discover that, of the two online classes I was signed up for, I was in my two least favorite subjects: math and writing. I remember thinking: *this year is going to be awful*. Looking back at it now, that year redefined my life. I started to have fun writing. It was a totally new experience for me. Now don't get me wrong, that year wasn't all sunshine and lollypops. I also remember breaking into tears the first day of math.

But all of a sudden I found a whole new world opened to me. My "masterpiece" for that class was a five page story about a colorblind Lego Minifigure. I was so happy with that story. Looking back at it now, it was really, really bad. But that's not what my teacher told me. Instead she encouraged me to keep trying, to keep working, and to continue to be creative. At the end of the class, we had to fill out a survey, comparing where we had started at the beginning of the year, to where we were at the end. I remember that was when I first said I was considering doing more writing. That was it, I was hooked.

So I started writing. I had grown up reading, or having read to me, works such as C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, or J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, so when I wrote, I wanted to write that. I remember sitting down to write and trying to figure out where to start. So I started at the beginning. My first story made it to about six chapters before I gave up. In those six chapters I covered about 70% of the story arc, and it took about 12 pages. Obviously this was going to be harder than I thought. But now that didn't matter, because it was fun.

So I started taking more English classes. By my senior year of high-school, I was taking three, two of which were marketed as college level courses. The third was a class specifically about creative writing, the first I had taken since junior high. I really enjoyed my classes that year. So when I started visiting colleges, I was looking at the English or Creative Writing Programs. That's half of where this collection

started. I wrote the stories in this collection either as responses to prompts or as free writings with in the creative writing classes I took in college.

The other half began much earlier. As I mentioned earlier, I read a lot when I was growing up. Even before I could read, my parents would read to me. Of course that started with books more my age, like Dr. Seuss's "Green Eggs and Ham." But I remember even at a very young age my parents reading "older" books to me, like Brian Jacques's "Redwall" or Roger Zelazney's "Nine Princes in Amber." So from a very young age, my parents encouraged me to read, and be interested in books.

I was also encouraged to be imaginative. When I was very little, my dad, my sister, my cousins and I would play a game we called "Save the Princess." In this game, Dad would take the girls and run off with them, then my cousin Sam and I would have to go and find them, and defeat Dad. To do this, we would carry around wooden swords.

Well, as we got older the game became harder to play, the girls got big enough Dad couldn't carry them off, Sam and I became strong enough to hurt Dad if we weren't careful. I wasn't old enough to know that, but we still wanted to play. So the game changed. Dad joined our side and the girls would run off on their own. That worked for a little while, but it just wasn't the same. There was no villain, there was no struggle.

One day, as we were sitting on my cousins' porch, Dad had an idea. We all gathered up our swords, and he started to tell us the story. "It started on a dark and stormy night; four adventurers were sitting in their house when all of a sudden they heard a knock at the door. What do you do?" That was the first of what we came to call "adventures."

We played those for years. As we got older we started taking turns coming up with stories and being the story teller. Some were simple and gimmicky, "it was a dark and stormy noon." Others were intricate and heavily prepared for. I remember one in particular. All of our characters were no more than a foot tall. To help us visualize this, Dad made oversized props out of tinfoil, little things like belt buckles, coins and silverware, but that were huge. Whatever the circumstances, we enjoyed these games. They quickly became the highlight of our visits.

The reason I told this story is because these “adventures” were fundamental in the development of my imagination. That, in turn, is a necessary element for creativity, which is the second half of where this collection came from. In that sense, you could say that I started this collection when I was five years old.

In the more conventional sense, I started writing this collection my sophomore year of college. That’s when I wrote the first two stories, “Mister Garhunkle’s Guest” and “Adam’s Race.” When I originally wrote “Mister Garhunkle’s Guest,” the oldest piece in this collection, it was all one gigantic paragraph. I’ve come a long way as a writer since then. “Adam’s Race,” the title piece, earned that honor by virtue of being the longest of the four stories. It ended up that way originally because I needed a certain number of pages for my fiction class, and I couldn’t think of another story to write and I was running out of time, so instead I focused on expanding a story I already had. It doubled in length in about four days. In the end, this story insisted on being as long as it is in order to tell the complete story properly.

The other two pieces, “New Eden” and “The Man in the Moon” were both written the next semester for the advanced fiction class. “New Eden” actually started as a personal exercise over the summer. I just started writing little paragraphs all along the same lines to see how it would go. Originally, there were twice as many characters, and each section was written in first person. Finally, we get to perhaps my favorite of my short stories, “The Man in the Moon.” I don’t remember what the original prompt was, but I know it was only supposed to be an exercise.

FOREWARD

A lot of people have asked me, “How does Christian faith fit with creative writing, especially fiction?” Okay, to be fair, most of the people who have asked me that are my professors, but that doesn’t make the question any less valid. Whenever people ask me this, my immediate response is always “How can it not?” My response may seem simple, or evasive, but believe me, it isn’t.

As a Christian I believe that man is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). You may ask, “What does this have to do with writing?” The simple answer is, everything. Being made in the image of God is not just about physical appearance, or metaphysical construction, it speaks of the very nature of our existence. It is an inherent desire of mankind to do things like God does them, to be like God. Now obviously, from the Christian perspective, this desire has gotten us into trouble, in the past, the present, and undoubtedly will again in the future.

Given that humans try to act like God, it is important to look at what that means. Using the Bible as the best source material for understanding God, what is the first thing we learn? God exists (Genesis 1:1). Okay, existence, that comes fairly naturally to us. What’s next? God created (Genesis 1:1). It is worth noting that not only is this attribute mentioned it is highlighted by its location. “Created” is the first verb used in the Bible. So we can see that being creative is hard wired into us as human beings made in the image of God. As such it should be no surprise to us that people strive to create things. Also, when the mind of God had conceived what He desired to create, the process that is described is Him speaking things into existence. God used words to create everything.

Obviously, we as humans are going to create things on far smaller scale than “the Heavens and the Earth” (Genesis 1:1). But that’s where writing comes in. When a writer sits down and starts writing he is either creating or recreating a world in his own image. This is a phenomenon that J. R. R. Tolkien identified about his own writing, coining the term “sub-creation” (On Fairy Stories). In this sense, creative writing is an integral part of humanity, as it helps to satisfy our need to create, and uses the same basic medium that God used originally, words. As Tolkien said, “Fantasy remains a human right: we

make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (On Fairy Stories).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Mister Garhunkle's Guest	1
Adam's Race	3
New Eden	21
The Man in the Moon	35

MISTER GARHUNKLE'S GUEST

The alarm clock shattered Arthur's uneasy sleep. Yawning, he slowly crawled his way out of bed and into his slippers. Despite having retired years ago, Arthur had kept up his old habit of rising with the sun. Slowly he made his way down stairs and into the kitchen. He poured the water he had set out the night before into the coffee pot and flicked the burner on.

While the appliance began its three minute miracle, Arthur pulled two cups out of the cupboard and set them on the counter. The sun shining through the window was more than enough light for the well rehearsed routine. Arthur grabbed a bagel from the drawer they and their ancestors had lived in for over thirty years and put it in the toaster.

When the coffee finished brewing, he carefully poured his own cup and then added just a hint of cream. When he poured the second, he only filled the cup halfway, with a generous helping of milk. He set the two cups carefully at the small kitchen table, across from each other. With a ding the freshly toasted bagel was added to Arthur's side. Then he went to the fridge and took out a small plate of cheese, this went to the other side. Then Arthur sat down, took a bite of his bagel, a sip of his coffee, and waited.

Before long the expected guest climbed into his place. He immediately began to nibble on the proffered cheese. "I made your coffee the way you like it, mostly milk." Arthur commented. The mouse looked up from his mouthful of cheese for a moment before returning to his feast. "Do I really matter to you?" Arthur rested his head in one hand while the mouse munched happily. "Am I just another house guest to you?" The mouse paused and looked across at him.

They ate in silence for a few moments. "It's been almost a year now hasn't it?" Arthur continued, as much to his cup as to his companion. "Jen always loved you guys, you know? I'd have rooted you out ages ago if it wasn't for her." He sighed and took another sip of coffee. The mouse shifted from the cheese over to the cup. He put his front paws on the rim and ducked his head down to the cool liquid below. "Why do I still do it? I'm no good to anyone now." The mouse looked up at him from the coffee, wide black eyes cutting right into the man's soul. "Don't look at me like that, you don't need me here to

give you coffee. You'd fend for yourself just fine if I were just to go off, or, or, or up and die." Arthur's fist banged on the small table and this small companion skittered away from the sound. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to scare you. Finish your breakfast."

Arthur cupped his face in his hand. "It's just, I don't know. It's just been so lonely around here since she left." The mouse twitched his whiskers at him. "Now don't get me wrong, you're fine company, but you're not much for conversation are you?" The mouse wrinkled his nose and returned to the cheese plate. "That's what I should do today. I should call Mike. It feels like I haven't spoken to my son in ages."

The mouse squeaked as Arthur pushed his chair back from the table. With his last mouthful of cheese filling his cheeks the mouse scampered off towards the small hole in the wall he had come from. "Don't worry about the cleanup Mister Garhunkle." Arthur smiled after him. "You can get it tomorrow."

ADAM'S RACE

Having decided to use the refrigerator to kill myself, I paused at the balcony to regret my life one last time, taking out a cold one (since it was there) to consider the merit of my plan, and its cause. "How had such promise, such enthusiasm gone so wrong so quickly?" I mused to the disheveled balcony. I picked up the newspaper that I had brought out with me and perused the last news stories I would ever read.

The first headline was all too predictable: "*Happy Obliteration Day!*" I scanned the article briefly. As far as we can tell it was today, just over a thousand years ago, that the old world had destroyed itself, forcing human civilization to start over. It was a thinly disguised version of the same article they've run every year I can remember.

It's a weird holiday. I couldn't help but think to myself. I guess it worked out okay for us. And people would rather party than mourn anyway. Maybe they did it on purpose. A new thought struck me. Maybe they discovered that the world would be better off without them so they culturally committed suicide. Like me. The world will be better off without me in it.

I skipped on to the next page. It featured a short piece by Professor Kalton about the progress being made uncovering the secrets of the Giant Lady Statue on the coast of the wild continent. After offering his condolences to the family of a student killed on the site, he talked about how they had found a book which might finally unlock the secrets of the ancient language. He claimed that if the book proves to be useful, it would cover any financial loss that had been accrued during the setbacks at the dig site, and that it was currently being examined by university specialists.

I couldn't help but laugh bitterly to myself. *If only.*

That article was followed by a huge article by some 'pro-dismitter,' sorry, 'Historical Protection Activist,' talking about how awful Professor Kalton is for trying to do his job and reiterating, again, why we should stop excavating the past before it blows up in our faces. This time he spouted some nonsense about the ancient civilization possibly leaving weapons of mass destruction armed and waiting to destroy

us. He was begging Academia to stop before more innocents died. No surprises there. But before I could move on his last paragraph caught my eye. It talked about how the collapse of the dig site had not only caused tremendous setbacks; it had claimed the life of a young graduate student. I turned the page quickly and was greeted by Alistair's face looking up at me from the obituaries. I pitched the newspaper to the side and grabbed my quill and notebook.

"My name is Adam Heart." I began to write. *"All my life I've given my best effort and for what? It's been all downhill ever since I got that job with Professor Kalton."* Setting down the pad, I walked inside and grabbed the rope. *'Get some on hand experience' he said. 'See some new digs' he said.* I thought to myself. *What has my life been since then?* I tied the rope around the fridge. I hoped the knot would hold; I'm no sailor after all. *Is that enough rope?* I started to measure the remainder. *I don't want to come up short and choke to death. Sometimes the judiciaries intentionally hang criminals that way. It looks incredibly painful, much better to break your neck at the end of the fall. On the other hand, I'd hate to have too much rope; I don't want to hit the ground. Great, I can't even kill myself properly.* I thought.

I threw back the last of my brew and went to wash the bottle out. Halfway through standing up I realized what I was doing. "What do I care?" So I sat back down and pitched the bottle lazily over the battered wooden railing. I ripped the sheet out of my notebook, crumpled it up, and let it drop to floor. *Where was I? Oh yes, my life sucks. Like that horrible business with Alistair.* There was a soft knock at the door. Ignoring it, I started writing again. *"I am responsible for the death of Alistair Burke. We were both grad students working at the excavation of the Giant Lady Statue. I convinced him to take my shift so I could go and see Professor Kalton's new find. While I was gone"* I ripped the sheet out and started over again. *"I didn't mean to. It wasn't supposed to be like that."*

The knock grew louder. *"If only I hadn't convinced him to take my place, he'd still be alive. I should have checked the safety protocols."* The quill slipped out of my hand as I scrawled the last few words. *I'd have kicked me off the dig right then and there. After all, my mistake had set the dig back weeks and the investigations had put us even further behind schedule.* I retrieved my quill and continued. *"But Professor Kalton wouldn't give up. Not on the dig, and not on me. They had just found an ancient*

manuscript at the base of the temple and he put me in charge of transporting it back to University City. Professor Kalton gave me the case with the book in it and put me on a ship back to civilization.”

That book, right? I turned and pointed at a large black case propped up against the bed. *Nope. I managed to leave the case unattended just long enough to let the book get stolen and now all I’ve got to show for my life is this stupid piece of junk.* Someone tried the door. *But I guess that does it.* I made the final marks with my quill. *“I’ve got nothing to show for my life but regret and the prospect of more regret, and I’m not going to prolong it anymore.”* I stood up and looked over the edge at the cobblestone street beneath me, prolonging my decision. “Look at me, I don’t have the courage to live or die.” Disgusted with myself, I searched for the end of the rope, which was buried under a forest of half-written suicide notes.

That’s when the door crashed back on its hinges. Startled, I wheeled around and saw a large man bearing down on me, a knife crackling to life in his hand. Even from where I was I could hear the distinctive electric hum. Instinctively, I ran for the nearest cover: a patio chair. He upended it with one hand and sent it crashing into and through the railing. I ducked back into the house, all thoughts of suicide driven from my mind. I threw my notebook, which I only vaguely remember hanging on to, in his general direction as I began scrabbling for some better defense. I tipped the empty dresser over as I ducked behind it. He leapt over it and came at me again. I fell backwards, narrowly avoiding the blade. He stood over me, leering.

I searched vainly for some means of escape. When none presented itself, I flailed wildly. As I inched farther away from him I managed to land a decent kick to his knee. I heard a distinct pop. He cursed and crumpled to the floor for a moment, long enough for me to scramble to relative safety. I grabbed the clock off the bedside table and threw it across the room in his direction. I missed, but it made a rewarding crash. He came at me again, limping a little on his injured knee. I grabbed the telegraph book from where it sat discarded from the night before and held it menacingly, if somewhat ridiculously, in front of me. He lunged. I squealed like a newborn pig. The knife sliced through my makeshift shield. The telegraph book saved my life. As I watched, the pages near the blade begin to sizzle and crack. Horrified

at how close to death I'd just come, I chucked the book as far as I could. To both our astonishments, it took the knife with it. For an instant we just stood there, staring at each other.

The next thing I knew his hands were around my slack-jawed throat. I grabbed his arms and tried futilely to wrench myself free. He threw me down onto the bed and pressed me deeper and deeper into the soft mattress. As my head sank so did my stomach. *He's going to kill me! And by strangulation no less.* I thrashed until I managed to grab a nearby lamp and smashed it on his head, temporarily dislodging him. I took a huge gasp of air and flopped off the bed. I had just enough time to think: *I did it!* before he grabbed me again. This time he pushed me into the large window leading to the balcony. I felt the wind driven from me even faster as I slammed into the glass pane. I tried to roll away from him, pulling us both unto the balcony. My vision started to shrink as he tightened his grip on my neck. Casting about for anything to help, I saw the refrigerator sitting by, coldly oblivious to my predicament. In a frantic effort I put one foot on it and pushed with all my might, trying to break out of my attacker's grasp.

Instead, the fridge toppled over and off the edge of the balcony. A whistling sound, like a snake cliff-diving, followed. My assailant and I looked down at our feet as the rope whipped past. We looked back at each other's eyes, sharing one brief moment of mutual panic. Then he was gone.

The force wrenched me from his grasp and dragged me face first to the edge. Below me I saw where the refrigerator had demolished a potted rose bush. I also saw where the deck chair had crumpled on the cobblestone street. But try as I might, I couldn't help but see the man now impaled on the wrought iron fence that surrounded the foot of the building, the rope still caught around his leg.

His right leg hung loosely while his left leg twitched between the fence posts protruding from the foot, calf, and thigh. His shirt was similarly blood-smeared as another two posts poked through his torso. Both arms hung beneath him at strange angles, fingers grasping vainly at nothing. His neck had avoided injury, but his head was not so lucky. One spike had been driven through his open mouth, coating his teeth with his own blood. Another had clearly entered the back of his skull, propping the head so that his vacant eyes stared back at me.

I added my vomit to his unsightly demise. I felt the shame of it well up similarly, but my eyes still refused to release me. Something about his eyes held me in place, unable to pry myself away. I don't know how long I lay there, gaping stupidly. It seemed like an eternity, but the next thing I knew, I heard someone shout "He's killed him!" It was then that I started to notice the people peering out of windows and doors at the body and then up.

At me.

"Someone graph an ambulance!" another bystander shouted.

"No, the police!" Cried the first.

Frantically I dragged myself away from the edge. The terror at what had just happened was still heavy on my mind, but no longer swayed my limbs and I found myself running about my room with purpose abandoned (like a chicken estranged from its head), grabbing anything I thought I could take with me as I prepared to depart. The clicking of the telegraph stirred me out of my frenzy. It must have actually been running for sometime because when I finally got to it the message was almost over. It just read "Hey its Frank just wanted to let u know i was thinking bout you STOP ive heard uve been going through a lot recently STOP thought id swing by if u r around STOP"

I put the headset to my ear and started tapping frantically. "Hey dont worry bout it STOP im actually on my way out why dont i go to your place STOP"

I grabbed my randomly assembled gear and fled.

* * *

I ducked through a back alley and ran in a series of random directions for about twenty minutes. The only thought in my mind was to get away. Away from my apartment. Away from the scene. Away from the gawkers. Away from my life. When my heart started throbbing so hard that I probably would have died if I was any fatter, I stopped to lean against a trash heap and take in my surroundings. At first I was delighted to see that I didn't recognize anything in the area. There were none of the tell-tale signs of the university students and the alley seemed relatively clean. Then a terrible thought struck me. I didn't

recognize anything in the area. I had no idea where I was. For a moment I had let panic direct me and now it had led me astray. I sank to my knees on the cobblestones, I may have escaped my crimes, but it would only result in my eventual starvation. I had never had to fend for myself before. Even at the dig site there was a whole crew of people taking care of the food. Panting and trembling, I closed my eyes in despair.

That's when I heard the hum of the hovercars passing nearby and I got an idea. By the sound of it they were no more than a dozen yards away. I got up and walked toward the sound. Sure enough, not far from where I had stopped there was an access road that led from the alley to the main street. Then it occurred to me that I only knew one person who was close enough to help, but that was far enough away to, well, help.

If I was going to get to Frank's house, I'd have to hire a cab. I frantically patted down my pockets until I found my wallet. Content that I could pay my way, I carefully walked out to the street and hailed a hovercab. When I finally got up the nerve to actually be seen, a hovercar pulled over and let me in.

"Where to friend?" He glanced at my reflection in his mirror. I gave him the address and we pulled away from the curb. "You don't look so good. You're not sick or anything, are you?"

"No, I just . . . uh . . . it's hard to catch a cab when you need one."

"Had to run a ways, huh?"

"You could say that." I mumble to myself more than to him.

"Not as many cabbies around here as there used to be. Things are tough all over. Did you hear about that killing?" My choked silence went unnoticed and he continued. "My last fare was a guy from the Southside housing district. Said he saw the whole thing."

"You don't say." I tried to sound natural as I hunkered down below the windows.

"Poor stiff. I wonder who he was."

"So do I." I admitted honestly, as much to myself as to the cabby.

Leaving the city behind, I found it difficult to look casual and invisible at the same time. Managing as best I could while avoiding any more conversation with the cabby, I took note of the

changes occurring outside the window as city yielded to country, and I wished desperately that my life could change so effortlessly. The steel and glass monoliths of technology that was the standard of the Western District vanished in the blink of an eye as we sped past. The buildings that replaced them were smaller, warmer homes and shops. It was clear by their handmade appearance and the way they sat snug and untroubled against an innocent landscape that those who lived there were unconcerned with the weighty matters of politics and progress. And death.

* * *

Upon arriving at the humble, country cottage where my boyhood friend, Frank, was waiting for me on the front step, I paid the cabby quickly. Free from any obligation to the man, I dashed from the cab to the wood door and ducked inside. “Did anyone follow me?” I cowered between the door and the window. Frank stared at me.

“Adam, what are you doing? Are you all right?”

“Quick, close the door.” I pushed him out of the way and slammed the door myself. “It’s for your safety, I don’t know if I was followed.”

“Are you all right?” Frank tried to guide me to a chair.

It was only as I broke free from his grasp that I remembered: Frank was the Sheriff for the small community of Waterside. “Yes.” He watched incredulously as I ran around and closed the shutters on all the windows. “Maybe. I’m not sure.”

“Adam, calm down. You look like death.”

I turned, dumbstruck at what had escaped my friend’s mouth. What did he already know? Had he been in on it? Had they called him? Was he going to arrest me? I sized him up again. The way he was proffering the glass certainly didn’t seem threatening.

“You look like you need a stiff drink and a night’s rest.”

Oh, it was just an expression. “Thanks.” I took the drink and swallowed it too quickly, choking a little as the cool liquid burned a path down my throat.

“You’re lucky there’s not much crime in this district, I’ve got a spare bed upstairs, if you want get some sleep,” he looked me up and down again knowingly. “I’ll hear your story in the morning.”

Gratefully, I took him up on the offer, unsure of anything other than my exhaustion. He led me up to the “spare bedroom” which doubled as the holding cell for the Waterside province.

* * *

During the evening-night-morning, I couldn’t tell anymore, I lay on Fraink’s spare bed looking up at the ceiling. Closing my eyes, I could see it all again, my attacker, the fridge, and the blood, oh the blood. It dripped through everything my closed eyes saw. I scrambled out of the sweltering blankets and rested my head against the cool floor. *This is what I deserve right? To be uncomfortable.* I tried lying on my back but as my eyes started to slip shut I could just make out the drops forming on the ceiling, getting ready to splatter my face. I snapped my eyes open to see that the ceiling was not in fact bleeding, but I couldn’t face it any more. I turned over, facing the small window. From outside I heard the sounds of someone shouting. To my tired ears it all sounded the same: *We found him! The murderer’s in there!* But it didn’t matter. I tried to shut it out and sleep.

When I finally did slip off, I found my horror reflected again and again in my dreams. I still heard the voices shouting at me, but now they came from Professor Kalton’s head which hung disembodied just outside my window. This image faded as I saw again my attacker hanging on the fence, but where his face should have been, Alistair’s looked up at me.

* * *

I woke up.

Was it all a dream? I pondered to my eyelids. Behind them my eyes searched restlessly for the answer. *Maybe it was all just some terrible nightmare .The man, the book, Alistair. Maybe I just dreamed it all.* But my body betrayed me. I could feel the hard floor pressing relentlessly against my face. When I opened my eyes I was still in Fraink’s spare bedroom. Disheartened, but rested, I waddled sleepishly

down stairs to where Frank was stirring in the kitchen. Literally. Coffee was brewing in the pot and he was just pulling the porridge off of the stove. Grinning happily, he set a bowl in front of me and sat down to read the newspaper while he waited for me to finish. I reached for the pitcher of milk as I glanced at the article facing me. It featured the story of a man who had died after being pushed off a second story balcony.

In my distraction and panic I didn't at first notice that I had managed to pour a nice helping of milk into my lap. In my sudden realization I frantically tried to grab a napkin but only succeeded in adding my porridge to the spill.

Frank looked at me from over his newspaper. As far as he could tell, I had simply finished my breakfast and was now enjoying a cup of coffee. He shook his head. "So, what's going on?" Frank folded up the newspaper and looked at me with concerned eyes. His voice embodied that cheerfulness that is obviously supposed to be contagious. "Start from the beginning."

"Well, once I had decided to use the fridge to kill myself—"

"Wait, kill yourself?" Frank jumped to his feet, obviously getting ready to hold me down if necessary.

"Yeah, but that was before the murderer broke in and . . ."

"Hold it. Murderer?" I could have cut the incredulousness with a spoon. Frank eased himself back into his chair. "There was a murderer in your apartment?"

"Yesterday was a very busy day." I admitted wearily.

"Why was someone trying to kill you? Who was it? Did you report it to the police? How did you get to the verge of suicide? Adam what is all of this?"

I just shrugged. There was so much.

"Adam, where is the killer now?" His determined eyes found mine and squeezed the truth out of them.

I turned the newspaper over so he could read the article. It took him a few moments to briefly scan the paper, then he peered at me in disbelief. His expression asked it all.

"I don't know . . ." I began slowly.

"Adam," he said reassuringly, "Adam, you and I go back a long way, I know you. It's obvious that there's much more to this than it says here. More than you've told me yet. I'm glad you came to me first." Grabbing up our cups, he emptied their contents into two of his flower pots. "If we're going to straighten this out, I need to know everything, and we'll need stronger coffee." He set about to make another pot. "Now tell me everything. Last I knew, you were headed off continent to some remote wilderness or other."

"Yeah, it's a long story."

"Well, start with that then." Frank pulled out a pad and started taking notes.

"Okay, here it goes." And so I told him this tale: "When I first applied to University City I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I had never been any good at math or science so any of those careers were out of the question. I was failing most of my classes by the end of my first year. That's when I met Professor Kalton."

"He's the head of the Ancient Studies department isn't he?" Frank interrupted. His quill was still furiously scribbling on the page.

"Yeah, anyway, he took me under his wing and introduced me to the wonders of the ancient world. That was the best year of my life. Then as the semester was coming to a close, Professor Kalton gave me the opportunity of a lifetime. He offered me a spot on the expedition he was leading to the excavation of the Giant Lady Statue. It was one of the first archeological teams to cross over to the other continent."

"I've heard of that. Isn't it supposed to be some ancient deity or something?"

"Yeah, that's one of the theories. Because of her position in the harbor, and her crown, most scholars think she was the goddess of the sun, or maybe the dawn. Not to mention that all of the pieces we've found so far have been this strange green color."

The telegraph began clicking from the next room over. "Hold that thought." Frank got up hurried over to it. Left to myself again, I awkwardly sipped at my coffee. It was a lot stronger than I normally

drink it. From the other room, I heard Fraink responding to whatever message he had just received. *Is he turning me in?* My mind couldn't help but wonder. But before too long Fraink was back.

"Sorry about that, back to your story." I noticed he had a second notebook with him now, which he occasionally compared to the other. "Wasn't that expedition pretty controversial?"

"You bet. There's a political group calling themselves the 'Historical Protection Advocates' who say that since the ancient civilization killed itself off, trying to learn more about it is only going to cause strife and potentially disaster. There were pickets and even a riot when we first set sail. Since then things have been pretty non-violent though."

"Doesn't that bother you?" He didn't look up, but I could see his brow furrowing in concern.

"No. Professor Kalton and some of the other faculty at University City say that learning about the ancient civilization is the best way to prevent what happened to them happening to us. Haven't you heard all of this before anyway?"

"I'm just making sure I have all the facts." Fraink stopped his note taking long enough to give me a worrying look. He was in policeman mode now. "Go on with your story."

"Well, needless to say, I jumped at the opportunity; I was really hoping that I would be able to try my hand at archeography, the study of ancient languages, which I had been studying recently. After we'd been there for about a month, Professor Kalton put me in charge of my own portion of the site."

"I see. Professor Kalton must have had a lot of faith in you."

"Yeah," I thought back to what had happened and shuttered before continuing. "It was my big chance. One day, I heard that Professor Kalton had found an ancient book. I was desperate to see it, so I traded shifts with Alastair, one of the diggers. He was really excited about it, since his was one of the graveyard shifts. Not five minutes after I left, my dig site collapsed and Alistair was—was—" my voice failed me.

"Buried alive." Fraink finished for me.

"We tried to get him out, but we were too late."

"I read about that in the paper, I had no idea you were there, I'm sorry."

“I should have checked the safety precautions before I left. Alastair would have done the same for me. But I was in such a hurry and now he’s dead. His family lives somewhere near here. I can’t imagine what they would say if they knew what I had done.”

“It’s not your fault Adam. Weren’t there people who were supposed to check the safety protocols?”

“Yeah, but—”

“And weren’t they supposed to report those findings to you?”

“Yes. But I—”

“Then why didn’t they report to you?”

I sat speechless for a moment. I hadn’t thought of that before. “Now that I think about it, it wasn’t the usual safety crew that came out that day. But I was in a hurry so I didn’t think anything of it.”

“Interesting. Well, needless to say, you were distraught.” Frank circled something on his second notebook.

“Yeah, but I was momentarily pulled from my despair by Professor Kalton’s discovery. He had uncovered an ancient book in the base the statue had stood on. It had been protected by some form of thick glass. If the Giant Lady Statue was as we suspected the deity of these primitive people, then this might have been their holy book.”

“Any idea what it said?” For the first time his face looked interested in my answer as a friend, rather than as a Sherriff.

“I don’t know. We still haven’t figured out all the ancient languages. But this work might have provided some key words allowing us to finally interpret some other ancient manuscripts.”

“Like the Rosetta stone?”

I got up and began to pace, accidentally spreading some of my breakfast across the floor as I talked. “Well, the Rosetta stone is a myth, but the concept is the same, yeah. Professor Kalton put me in charge of escorting it back to University City so we could examine it further. He put it in a large case and put

both me and the case on a ship headed back here. When we arrived, I collected the case and headed to my apartment, with the intention of stealing one last look at the book before I gave it to the university staff.”

“I see.” I spun around to face Frank, who was still making studious notes.

“And it’s just as well I did,” I began again, defensively, “because when I opened the case the book had been replaced with some small cylindrical glass container filled with a black sand. After everything that happened with poor Alistair, and the trouble that caused the whole expedition, and the attack that came on Professor Kalton’s reputation because of me, well, that’s when I decided to end it all.” I slumped back into my chair, once again disrupting the porridge on my lap.

“Hold that thought.” Frank stood up and took his mug to the counter. He asked if I wanted more coffee, I shook my head and he shrugged, pouring a generous amount into his own mug. “Now finish the story.” He said as he sat back down.

I told him the rest of the story, from fridge to flight. When I finished he stood up, stretched, and put on more coffee. He was processing everything I had said, thinking hard enough to grind stone to dust. “Why do you think he was trying to kill me?” I asked as he sat back down.

He didn’t respond. Instead he studied the two notebooks intently, occasionally making notes. After a few minutes he looked up.

“Anything?”

“Well, I’ve made a list of possible suspects based on your story and the recent police reports. One of the top suspects is a man named Gavin Trest. He’s claimed responsibility for a lot of the violence against the pro-historics lately.”

“He’s one of those nutjobs who thinks we should forget about our past? Why would he send someone to kill me?”

“You did make the paper when you left for the dig. He might have seen you as a prime target.”

“I guess, but it still doesn’t seem quite right. After all, there are plenty of professors who would undoubtedly make better targets.”

“Yeah.” Frank thought for a moment. “Wait, that container that you saw, are you sure it was in the same case that the book had been in?”

“Why?”

“What if it wasn’t the same case? Maybe you accidently took a different case. And the person whose case you took is trying to get it back. And that person thinks you intentionally stole their case and they sent someone to retrieve it.”

“By killing me.”

“Right.”

“If that’s true, then when they find out that their man is dead, they’ll go back to my apartment and try and get the container back. I could get it first and make a trade. If they get their hands on that canister first I’ll never see my book again!” I got up and dashed for the door, still wearing my breakfast. “Thanks Frank, I’ll let you know how it turns out.”

“Wait—“ But I was already gone.

* * *

When I got back to my apartment, it was much as I had left it; destroyed. The case was still under the upturned dresser. With a little effort I was able to free it and remove the contents.

The glass case was about the size of a water bottle. Inside the black grains shifted and swirled as if they had a mind of their own. The effect was vaguely hypnotic. *What is this device?* I wondered. *What does it do? And why is it so important that it was worth killing me over?* I stared at the grains for a moment longer before a noise caught my attention. I looked up to see two men standing in my open doorway.

“Hey, there he is,” one said.

“And he’s got the goods, let’s kill him,” the other replied, starting towards me.

The first grabbed his arm, holding him back. “Hold on, didn’t he kill Edmund? Are you sure we can take him?” While the two of them discussed it I looked frantically for a way to escape. With them

standing in the doorway, my only exit was the balcony. My stomach churned at the thought of the last man to exit that way. Then I had an idea.

“Well, there’s two of us and one of him. We’ll have to risk it.” The two men drew knives. Turning them on they started towards me.

I got up and scrambled out onto the ledge and held the glass container out over the edge. “This is what you want right? Well, it’s worthless to me, so if either of you take another step toward me I’ll drop it.”

They froze. “Careful with that, boy. You don’t know what you’re dealing with.” He squinted at me. “What do you want?”

“You have a case, like that one.” I pointed to the case next to the dresser. “It has an ancient book in it. I want that book, in exchange you get this.”

One of the men started towards me. “Enough of this.”

“I’ll do it!” I let the glass slide through my fingers a few centimeters.

“Wait!” Both of the intruders held their hands up and backed away. “We don’t have the book with us.” The one who had come towards me backed up again.

“Well, go and get it.” They looked at each other. “And hurry, because I don’t know how long I can hold this.” I glanced at the glass in my hand. It was a lot heavier than it looked. I hoped they knew that.

They conferred together quietly for a moment before one spoke to me. Despite their turned backs I could still hear most of what they said.

“Why don’t we just kill him? It’ll be a lot faster.”

“Don’t be an idiot. You know what’ll happen to us if he breaks that.”

“Oh, right.”

“Just run back to the house and get the stupid book. Get back as soon as you can.” The other man responded, but I couldn’t hear what he said. They laughed quietly before the first man turned back to me.

“Well?” I looked from them to the glass. “What’ll it be?”

“Okay, Boris is going to run back and get your book.” The man who must have been Boris left. “Why don’t you just step back inside, there’s no need for this to get messy.”

“I’m good out here.” I had no desire to risk my own life at his hands. It was about then that I realized the joy of trying earnestly to save my life, rather than trying to end it. Despite my precarious position I decided to make a hobby of it.

I couldn’t figure out how to make small talk with a killer, so we stood for a time in uncomfortable silence. He started sporadically throwing some of my stuff from one side of the trashed apartment to the other, apparently unsure of what to do himself. After a few minutes of eternity, Boris came back in with the book. “Okay kid, here’s your book.” He set it down carefully on my bed. “Now give us the container.”

“Just in time, I don’t know how much longer I could hold this.” I brought the container back over the balcony. The muscles in my arm were beginning to burn. “Here you go.” I rolled it across the floor to the man I had dubbed “not-Boris.”

He bent over and picked it up. “Just what we need. Boris, kill him.”

As I stood, dumbstruck by their treachery and my own stupidity, I saw Frank step into the open doorway. He was wearing his provincial police uniform, complete with black rubber armor, and holding his Government Issue sword in his right hand.

“Police! Put your hands in the air!” Frank’s voice caused the two thugs to spin around. “Put your knives on the ground and your hands in the air.”

Not-Boris looked down at the container then up at Frank. “One country sheriff? I’d have thought this would have gotten a little more attention. C’mon Boris, we got this bull.” He carefully set the glass container next to my book.

As he straightened up, the walls crashed in and men in rubber armor flooded into the room all shouting at once: “UCPD! Drop your weapons. Get down on the ground.” Panicked, Boris tried to make a run for it, but he got cut down before he made it five steps.

* * *

Fraink walked into my interrogation room, holding my book under one arm. It landed on the table with a thump.

“Careful with that!” I tried to reach for it but the chains on my wrists kept me from getting close enough. “It’s over a thousand years old you know.”

“Are you sure this is the book you were so worried about?” He pushed it towards my grasping hands.

I carefully opened it and scanned the columns. “Yes, this is it. Thank you for getting it back to me.”

He sighed as he slipped into the chair across from me. “We’re going to have to hold it as evidence until after the trial. After that it’s going straight to the Department of Ancient Studies.”

“Oh.” I looked down at my prize for a moment, before giving it back to Fraink. “What happened back at my apartment?”

“I can’t divulge that information until after the case is closed, especially not to a potential witness.”

“Come on Fraink! You can’t leave me in suspense like this. Who were those men? What was the glass container? How did the police know that I wasn’t a murderer?”

I must have looked miserable, because Fraink relented. “All right, I’ll tell you what I can. After you left, I graphed the local station and explained the situation to the captain. He authorized a sting to try and catch these guys as quickly as possible. I managed to hover in just in time for the arrest. It turns out I was right and they are working for Trest. The device you accidentally stole was originally stolen from an Energy Commission facility. I don’t know exactly what it is, but my snitch in the lab says it’s some kind of powerful energy source. If it fell into the wrong hands, the effects could be disastrous.”

“Wow, I guess it was a good thing that I took the wrong case after all.” I mused mostly to myself. “Well, as they say, it ends good, it was good. Right?”

“Oh, you’re not done yet.” Fraink smiled as he unhooked me from my chains. “You’ve still got something important to do.”

* * *

So that's why I came here. The ground hasn't had time to settle yet, but I was still too late to see your family. Rather than trying to find them, I decided to come and sit with you for a bit. Haven't you been buried enough? Goodbye Alistair.

NEW EDEN

“Welcome to New Eden Population 400,000” The sign was so riddled with bullet holes it was hard to read. It really conveyed the feel of the city. John Blake learned fast that being a detective here was like trying to bail out the ocean with a Dixie cup, but he decided to give it his best shot. Captain Jones told him he had been transferred there because they needed the best. What they really needed was a miracle.

The city rested on the Atlantic coast, just far enough north to get cold in the winter but still roast during the summer.

They had killed another one. Some lowlifes had found the body out on the pier; Rick got the tipoff, so he went to check it out. It was the third body this week. That wouldn't have been so unusual in this city, except that it was Tuesday night. He was there before the crime scene unit, his informants had already split. This body looked just like so many others. The girl had been beaten at least half to death before they put her down. Rick knelt down to examine the body more closely. It looked like she had tried to put up a fight.

Looking around it was clear to him that she had been killed somewhere else and dumped here. Most notable was the lack of blood splatter. Not that there wasn't any blood, but there wasn't enough to explain the body's condition. Another clue was fresh tire tracks leading away from the body. Then there was the girl herself. Based on her clothes, or perhaps more accurately her lack of them, she had been at the Stop and Sleep Motel with her attacker. It was impossible to tell if she had been there of her own free will or not. The sound of sirens interrupted his investigation. It was time to go. As connected to the mob as he was, Rick couldn't afford to be at the scene when the cops arrived. As he drove off, Rick saw the

crime scene unit driving up. Not a bad response time, all things considered. He kept an eye on the scene behind him as he drove to the only lead he had, the Stop and Sleep Motel.

Detective Blake was out of the car before it had come to a stop. CSU had already started sweeping the area. This girl looked just like a multitude of other unfortunates trying to make a life in this city. One of the camera men must have said something funny, because a nearby officer laughed. Blake, irritated at them, mused quietly to himself about the cheapness of life in this city before he knelt down next to the medical examiner. “What’ve you got?”

“Same MO as the girl last Saturday, blunt force trauma to the head and shoulders, initial thoughts on cause of death is a gunshot to the chest. Once I get her back to the morgue I’ll be able to tell you more.”

“Great, get to work on it.” Blake walked around the scene, trench coat flowing behind him. There was no sign of the kind of fight that would have left her in this condition. Also, there was no sign of a purse or any other means of identifying the body. It was so cliché. A Jane Doe, beaten, and dumped on a pier, it was even foggy. This was way too perfect to have been an accident. Somebody was covering their tracks. At this point it could have been the mob, any random thug trying to make a name for himself, or even a cop covering something up. It was a tough town to be a cop in.

“Room 12 on your right. Enjoy your stay.” The man behind the counter winked at the other as he walked off. Rick walked up to the counter. The manager had left by the time he arrived. Rick rang the bell. “Yeah, yeah. What do you need?” The man came back, just lighting a cigarette as he approached.

Rick looked down at him. "Hey, easy there." He looked genuinely terrified. "I ain't done nothing against you or yours."

Rick took the cigarette out of the man's mouth and extinguished it on the counter. "Recently. I'm looking for a girl."

"Room 5. On the house."

Rick grabbed his arm as he tried to flee. "A dead girl."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there." Rick glared at him. "But I do know a guy, perhaps I could get you in touch?" He reached for the phone behind the counter. Rick slammed his hand back down.

"Girl was found dead on the south pier, no ID, but I've seen her around here before. What do you know?"

"Is she, one of yours?"

"Just answer the question."

"Ok. Ok. One of my girls didn't show up for work yesterday. I figured she was pulling some overtime for one of the clients. I wasn't worried." The manager nervously checked his slicked hair.

"Do you have her stuff?"

"Yeah, I keep all of the girls ID and stuff in the back room, just in case one of them decides to try to, well, you know."

"Yeah, I know your tricks. Take me to her stuff."

"I'll just go grab it. Won't be but a minute."

Rick grabbed his arm again. "Do you really think I'm going to let you out of my sight? Let's go." He led Rick into the back room. It was full of purses, coats, and other personal items. The manager picked up a low quality purple purse and started rummaging around inside it.

"Ah, here it is." He pulled out the girl's ID, and handed it to Rick. "This her?"

Rick studied her face for a moment. "Yeah that's her. Natalie Thorn." Rick turned to leave.

"Hey, I'm gonna need that back."

Rick looked over his shoulder at him. “You going to try and take it from me?” He backed off muttering to himself. “I thought not.” Rick left the motel and headed towards the subway.

Blake walked back to the subway. He gave up on having a car after the third time it got smashed in the police station parking lot. It was less expensive just to ride the subway. It was crowded. Just like it was every day. Blake kept his head down and his coat close around him. In a town like this, it wasn't a good idea to be known as a cop. He only had to last three stops without being noticed. He stood by the door, waiting. As he rode, Blake thought about the day. The first body had shown up early in the morning. Mugging gone wrong, the poor guy had gotten desperate. Unfortunately for him, the guy he chose was a gang member. We could only hold him because he tried to take the dead guy's wallet. Second body showed up downtown in the early evening. The guy was a broken heap at the bottom of a building. Sergeant Fuller called it a suicide, case closed.

Blake and his partner had been on their way back to the station when they got the call about the girl. As much a mystery as she was, their shift ended and his partner was gone. Which is why he was standing on the subway waiting for his stop. The world outside started to slow down as they neared the platform. The doors opened and the mass of people started to disembark. As he started out, Blake brushed past a man and felt a gun handle under his coat. He looked back, he was getting in the train. Sighing, Blake turned back and followed him on.

Blake shadowed the gunman through the subway. He kept fidgeting in his seat. Blake tried to avoid looking directly at him. The man started to glance in Blake's direction more often than he would have liked. Blake was about to make his move when he saw a young mother moving towards the door, right between him and the gunman. Blake stood very still, watching for her to move out of the way. Blake saw what was going to happen just a second too late. The man stood up, grabbed her neck and pulled her

in front of him, his gun pressed against her temple. She screamed. Blake pulled out his own gun and began to stare him down. "Let the girl go." The train started to slow down.

"If I let her go, I'm a dead man." He looked at the railmap on the wall next to him. "Get off at the next stop or the girl dies."

Blake never took his eyes off of the man. "If I get off, the girl gets off too."

"Not a chance. She rides one more stop with me. And if anyone's waiting for me when I get there then she dies." The train came to a stop.

"No one needs to die today." Blake shifted his gun so that it wasn't pointed at the man anymore. The doors opened. No one on the train moved.

"Get off or she dies." Blake backed slowly towards the second set of doors. A man walked through the doors, right into the hostage situation. The gunman shifted his gun to point at the newcomer, his eyes never left Blake.

"You'll want to wait for the next one."

"You'll want to wait for the next one." The gun was six inches from Rick's chest. He slowly put his hands up and took a step back onto the platform. The man pointed the gun back into the car, out of the corner of his eye Rick saw one of New Eden's finest with his gun drawn. As he looked Rick realized it was Detective Blake, perhaps the only honest cop this city had left. He had been the target of a couple hits Rick had intercepted. It was almost time for the doors to close. Rick started to move forward again, just enough to get the man to point the gun back at him.

When he did Rick reached up and grabbed the man's arm, pulling it toward him enough to trap the man's wrist between the closing doors. Instinctively the gunman squeezed the trigger, barely missing Rick before he managed to pry the weapon from the man's hand. The train began pulling away from the

station, slightly behind schedule, protecting Rick from an unwanted encounter with the detective. As the train car sped off towards its next destination, Rick's phone began to ring.

"Mister Bernard wants to see you."

Blake took the subway back to the police station, his new captive in tow. When he arrived he passed the gunman off to a nearby officer and went looking for the medical examiner's report. It was fairly straightforward. "Time of death between 2 and 4 o'clock in the morning. Single gunshot to the chest. Multiple contusions received both pre and post mortem. Post mortem bruising consistent with being stuffed into a trunk." Blake had already suspected she wasn't murdered at the pier. There was also a note addressed to him with the report. "Blake, Sergeant Fuller may be able to identify the girl, he mentioned something about her at the crime scene." Silently thanking the medical examiner's memory, Blake made his way back to his desk and called up Fuller.

"What do you know about the girl?" Fuller yawned and tried to evade the question. Blake pressed until he caved.

"Fine, I'm pretty sure I saw her down at the Stop and Sleep. She was applying for a job. Her name was Natalie. Natalie Thorn."

"I'm not even going to ask. Get a couple uniforms and meet me down there."

Blake walked up to the counter at the Stop and Sleep Motel. The manager smiled wryly at him. "What would you like?"

"I'm looking for information about Natalie Thorn."

"Can't help you."

"Have it your way." Blake turned his back to the man. "Fuller!"

"Yes sir." Fuller came in at the head of a small group of cops.

Blake pulled the warrant out of his coat pocket and set it on the counter behind him. “Start kicking in doors. We’ll get what we want one way or another.”

The sergeant smiled. “Yes sir.”

“Don’t look so happy about it.” Blake turned back to the guy behind the counter. “Still don’t want to cooperate?” The manager started chewing his lower lip. “You know as soon as Fuller starts opening doors you start losing customers.” He stayed silent. Blake turned to Fuller. He was just getting to the first door. He glanced at the detective. Blake nodded. There was a crash and a woman screamed. Blake turned back to the owner. “That’s one. Talk.”

“Where have you been all day Ricky?” Max leered in Rick's direction.

“You don’t get to call me that.”

“Why not Ricky? Bernie does.”

“Mister Bernard is the boss. You’re not, no matter how much you pretend otherwise.” Rick pushed past him.

“Hey, don’t you walk away from me. I’m the face of organized crime in this city. You don’t walk away from me Ricky.”

Rick turned and slammed him into the wall. Max only came up to Rick's chin. "Don’t. Call. Me. Ricky. Got it?” He nodded vigorously. “Good.”

Rick left him in the alley and went into the parking garage. Mister Bernard was waiting for him on the roof. When Rick opened the door at the top of the stairs, a black-suited brute held out his hand to stop him. “I’m sorry sir, but I’m going to have to search you.”

“Don’t worry about it, Dan. I trust him more than you.” Mister Bernard said from the fair side of the roof.

"I'm afraid it is my job." Dan quickly frisked Rick and removed two knives and a pistol. "Alright you're clear to proceed."

"How are you today Ricky? Anything exciting happening?" Mister Bernard was looking out over his city, not even pretending to be interested in the answer.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with Sir."

He laughed "Please, Ricky, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Bernie? But seriously, I hear you had a run in with Detective Blake today. Is he going to be a problem?"

"No Sir, he has no reason to look into you or your business."

"Fair enough. Though I don't like having a cop on the force I can't control."

"Was there anything else?"

"A situation may have arisen, but Max put someone on it."

"What situation?"

Bernard looked at Rick out of the corner of his eye. "Just a fellow getting in over his head. Max sent someone to, take care of him. Don't worry about it Ricky, try to get some sleep. You look exhausted."

While Blake interrogated the manager of the Stop and Sleep, Fuller got a call he said he had to take and excused himself. By the time Blake had gotten all the information he could stand from the man, Fuller had called in another jumper. Blake told him to cover the case, his eyes were barely staying open as it was. He needed to get some sleep so he could hit the case fresh in the morning. Well, later in the morning.

When Blake got to his apartment, a package was waiting by his door. He looked at it while fumbling his keys out of his pocket. It was addressed to D. J. Blake. He was glad; he didn't need his neighbors knowing he was a cop. Blake picked it up and went into his apartment, locking the door behind

him. He carefully set the small package next to his window and grabbed the stethoscope from his dresser and pressed it against the sides of the box. The detective held his breath as he listened to the contents of his mystery parcel. Silence. Blake set the stethoscope aside and cut open the box. Inside was a flashdrive and a note which read:

"Detective Blake, I'm sending this to you because you are the only person I can trust. I've collected enough evidence to take down the man behind New Eden's curtain, but it doesn't tie directly to him. I'm still missing the final piece. I've sent you what I have so far, because he's found me. Most likely by the time you read this I will have already been murdered. My name is Greg Thorn, watch for me."

Blake grabbed for the dusty telephone on the bedside table and dialed the station number. When an older officer picked up, Blake asked for the contact information for Greg Thorn. The officer acknowledged and there was silence on the line for a few minutes. Blake took advantage of the pause to plug the flashdrive into his laptop and quickly scan the files. They seemed legitimate. Then the officer was back.

"Detective Blake? I have those numbers you requested. But I thought Fuller said you weren't working the jumper case." When Blake asked for an explanation, the officer responded, "Didn't you know? Greg Thorn was the guy swan-diving this evening."

"Is there anyone else in the city with the name Greg Thorn?" The officer said he'd check. A few minutes later he reported that there were two other Greg Thorns in the city. One of them lived in a high-rise on the far side of town, the other in a small apartment about five minutes from Blake. "We need to get these men into protective custody. Send Fuller to the high-rise, I'm close to the other."

Whatever faults Max might have had, he wasn't a rat. Rick had to beat him pretty badly to get the target's name. After finally getting the truth out of him, Rick did the decent thing and put Max out of his misery. He dumped the body off the south side of the pier for the ocean to clean before stopping at a

nearby payphone. There were three Greg Thorns in the New Eden phonebook. Rick's informants had already told him about the one denting the pavement earlier that day. Rick knew that if he did nothing both men would be dead by sunrise.

Blake ran up to the disheveled apartment building. He scanned the buzzers at the door until he found Greg Thorn. He pushed the button and waited a minute. Nothing. He tried again. Still nothing. Blake moved to the next button down. An old man answered. Before he could question Blake held his badge above his head. "Police. Open the door." Immediately the buzzer sounded, releasing the lock. Blake stormed up the stairs to Greg's apartment on the third floor. He didn't bother knocking when he arrived. The door flew back against the wall as Blake entered, his gun in hand. "Greg Thorn? This is Detective Blake, if you can hear me get down on the floor."

"In the kitchen." a voice came from down the hall.

Blake checked each room on the hall briefly as he made his way toward the voice. When he arrived in the kitchen, Blake saw a young man, maybe twenty-five, lying on the floor with his hands over his head.

"Sorry about not answering the door, I've been trying to lay low, hoping to finish my work before they find me."

Blake helped Greg to his feet. "It's too late for that. I need to take you into protective custody."

"Not yet. I have to wait for my sister, she's supposed to be bringing the final piece."

"Natalie?"

"How did you know?"

"She's dead. Now for your own safety you have to come with me."

Greg sank into a nearby chair. "Dead?" He sighed. "I knew it was a possibility." A crash echoed through the hall, followed by a silenced gunshot. "They've found me."

"Get into that closet." Blake turned the kitchen table on its side and crouched behind it. Greg obeyed and quickly concealed himself behind the small door in the corner. Once they were in position, both grew quiet. Floorboards began creaking out in the hall.

A man swore, then laughed. "You still here Blake?" Fuller kicked in one of the other doors. "I know you wanted me to protect the other guy, but by the time I got your orders he'd already found himself on the wrong end of a noose." He kicked in another door. "Kind of like the first guy taking a nose dive. I really appreciate you sending me to investigate that." Another door slammed back on its hinges. "Made it real easy to make it look like a suicide. Didn't even have to fool anyone." By the sound of his footsteps he was almost right outside the door. "It'll be a lot harder to do that here." Fuller opened fire. He had brought a submachine gun and he emptied the clip into the small kitchen. Blake tried his best to shield his head from wood splinters as they showered him from the table and the cupboards.

Fuller let out a yell of pain and rage. Blake popped out from his cover ready to fire on his enemy, but was confronted by the sight of a man slitting Fuller's throat with a large knife. The same knife had apparently already been introduced to Fuller's hand, which was bleeding profusely. As the body slid lifelessly to the ground, Rick looked up at Blake. "So, now what?"

"We need to talk."

Rick looked at his watch. "We have about an hour before someone figures out what didn't happen here."

"Let's go back to the station, I have to get Greg here into protective custody anyway."

Rick snorted. "The police station is the last place I'm going. And the last place you want him, if your goal is to keep him safe."

"I know there's a lot of crooked cops down there, but if we take this to the captain he'll make sure both you and Greg are kept safe."

"Detective, the mob owns the entire city. That includes the police. There's no safe place for him within the city limits. He needs to leave."

Greg peered out from the closet. "Does anyone care what I think?" Rick glared at him, causing the other to cower back into his closet.

Blake agreed. "And what about you? You just murdered a cop who worked for the mob. Where do you think you can go?"

"I've lived here my whole life; the boss trusts me. I'll survive." Rick wiped the blade of his knife on Fuller's coat before turning to leave.

"What will you tell him?" Blake called after him.

"Leave that to me."

Rick walked back to his apartment. As he walked, he tried to figure his way out of the situation he'd made for himself. He'd talked tough to the detective, but inside he was at a loss. He couldn't just go back to his everyday life, even if Blake didn't report him as a cop killer. Fuller's disappearance would be noticed soon, which would make Mister Bernard suspicious. His suspicions would make him call Max, who of course couldn't answer. Tomorrow, Max's body would show up in the police morgue and word would get back to Mister Bernard. He knew that Rick and Max had never gotten along, so he would send people to find out where Rick had been. They would either discover nothing, or manage to place Rick at Max's apartment right before his disappearance. Mister Bernard would then send someone to kill Rick. He could take the first assassin, maybe the second, but sooner or later, one would get to him. Then Blake would be left to face the full force of the mob alone. Within 24 hours of Rick's death the detective would be dead as well. Rick could only see one way to get out of this. He went to his desk, quickly wrote out a note, stuck it in his coat pocket and called his contact in the organization.

"Tell Mister Bernard I need to meet with him right away. Something's come up."

Blake dragged Greg almost bodily to the edge of the city. Greg kept trying to convince Blake that he had to stay and finish his work, but Blake ignored his pleas. Once they had made it safely out of the city, Blake tried to explain that Greg's life would be in danger if he stayed. Greg returned again to talk of his notes. He was only convinced when Blake reminded him that he now had copies of all of Greg's research and promised to continue the search in his absence. With Greg finally on his way to safety, Blake returned to his apartment and collapsed on his bed.

His phone was ringing when he awoke. Sunlight was starting to seep through his windows and onto the floor. Blake grabbed the phone and muttered his acknowledgement. It was his partner. Apparently there had been a double homicide in the night and they needed Blake on the scene. His partner wouldn't say anymore over the phone. Blake got the address and said he'd be there as soon as he could.

After a quick shower, Blake grabbed a cup of coffee and headed for the subway. It was a thankfully uneventful ride, which left him about a block from the scene. Once he was topside again, he saw the CSU cars gathered around the base of an old parking garage. As he entered the scene his partner came up and to give him the report so far.

"We got a call around seven reporting the crime, but by the time we got here the guy was gone. We found the first body, big guy at least 6' 5". He was pancaked just outside the parking garage. The ME says he had to have gone off of the roof to explain the condition his body was in."

Blake walked over to where the camera crew were recording the scene. "There seems to be a lot of that going on recently."

His partner laughed. "Well, they say people are more likely to kill themselves in the winter. But this guy wasn't a suicide. There's another body on the roof, you just have to see it."

"Let's go then."

"One more thing, the guy upstairs had this note on him." His partner handed Blake a scrap of paper. It was addressed to Detective Blake. "Hey did you hear about Fuller?"

"What about him?"

"Apparently he got a little too close to the mob last night. An officer found him stuffed in a dumpster not far from here, his throat slit. Good reason not to look too close into a case like this if you ask me."

"Nobody did." Blake left him downstairs and headed for the roof. On the way he opened the note and scanned it quickly. It was scrawled on an old scrap of paper which must have made it hard to read before it was bloodstained. From what Blake could decipher, it explained how the dead man was Mister Bernard Jones, the mob boss. It went on to say that a body was likely to wash ashore in the next day or so that used to be Max Brody, Mister Bernard's right hand man. With the two of them dead, a power vacuum would consume the mob until someone else ended up on top.

At the very bottom of the note was scrawled the line: "I bought you all the time I could. Make the most of it."

Frowning, Blake approached the spot where the medical examiner was finishing up the second body. Captain Jones was almost unrecognizable, as badly as his face had been beaten. Cause of death was pretty obvious, a large knife protruded from his chest. Blake recognized it as the same weapon that had killed Fuller a few hours before. The medical examiner asked what the next move was.

Blake sighed. "Get the body bags. It's going to be a long day."

THE MAN IN THE MOON

“Mission log day one: This is Captain John Drewer, geological specialist on Lunar Exploration 26a. Near the end of my second day of a ten day mission to the Goddard Crater on Mare Marginis, my rover was caught in a sinkhole. My suit maintained integrity during the fall, but my body took quite a beating. I don't know how long I was unconscious. I'll have to unbury the rover in order to test which systems still function. I intend to take soil and rock samples before attempting to return to the surface. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day two: Captain Drewer, LE26a. I have decided that I'm going to name this formation the 'Drewer Sinkhole.' Never before have we recorded a sinkhole on the moon. This implies the presence of some form of moving liquid under the surface. I'll be able to make more accurate assessments after I get my samples back to my lab. After freeing most of the rover, I was able to discern that while the oxygen chamber is still intact, most of the other systems are offline. I can't even check the clock. Also, my injuries appear to be worse than I originally thought. I became light headed while I was collecting samples. I found blood on my visor. After checking my head in the oxygen chamber I feel certain that I suffered a concussion. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day four: Captain Drewer LE26a. Still no sign of rescue. Communications with base had been inconsistent shortly before the accident. Base may assume technical malfunctions to be the reason for my radio silence. I attempted to climb to the surface, but I couldn't get high enough without detaching my suit from the rover. I tried shining my light out of the hole, but the odds of it being seen are particularly small. Reduced oxygen intake in hopes of prolonging livable oxygen levels. Current levels suggest fifty day survival time, rationing food and water to match, in case my rescue takes longer than currently expected. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day six: Captain Drewer LE26a. Attempted to restart communications systems, but the screen is smashed. No way to tell if I’m actually transmitting. Turned off lantern today to conserve power. Sleeping longer than before. Due to breathing irregularities, shortening daily report. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day nine: Captain Drewer LE26a. Labored breathing forced increasing oxygen supply. New projection of survival time: thirty days. Adjusting food and water intake to match. Tried to climb out again but the wall was unstable. Rockslide may have cracked ribs. Eyes still attempting to adjust to the dark. Breathing better but not good. Head still bleeding, unable to find suitable bandage. Beginning to wonder if rescue is coming. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day eleven: Captain Drewer LE26a. Felt my way around the edge of the Drewer Sinkhole. No sign of any other exit. Twisted my ankle in the dark. Any chance of climbing out before running out of oxygen virtually gone. Still no sign of rescue. Darkness beginning to feel heavy. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day thirteen: Captain Drewer LE26a. It’s been five days since I should have been back, why isn’t there any sign of rescue? I attempted walking around with limited success. There’s a lot of pain in my leg, especially when I try to put pressure on it. Since I can’t see what it looks like under the suit, I’ve decided to try and keep it motionless. I tried to gather my location based on the stars. I’ve been in here long enough that I should be entering the light, if the sun ever lines up with my hole, I’ll have a pretty good idea where I am, or I’ll cook, hard to say which. Anyway, if my calculations are correct I’m in . . . Utah. That can’t be right. Oh well, too tired to try again now, maybe tomorrow. My hope for rescue is diminishing. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day fourteen: Captain Drewer LE26a. So dark . . . So still. . . So alone . . . (sigh) . . . not much to say . . . Drewer out.”

“Mission log day fifteen: Captain Drewer LE26a. Lisa, I want you to know that I love you. I’m sorry that I didn’t make it home for our anniversary, but work was pretty demanding today. But I promise, this is my last mission, just like you wanted. Just know that I’m thinking of you and I’ll be home as soon as I can. Don’t wait up for me. John out.”

". . . (heavy breathing) . . ."

“Mission log day seventeen: Captain Drewer LE26a. Still no sign of rescue. My head still isn’t healing. It’s been over two weeks, why am I still bleeding? I started feeling lightheaded yesterday, possibly because of blood loss. I’m beginning to think I might have suffered some internal injuries from my fall. Fortunately I’m in space, there’s nothing out here to give me an infection. I’m still keeping my leg still, sitting here is becoming very boring. Very boring. My breathing is shallow again; afraid I won’t last as long as my oxygen. My situation sure looks bleak. Drewer out.”

"Mission log day eighteen: Captain Drewer LE26a. Vehicle power failing . . . Geologic mission . . . failing . . . Life . . . failing . . . (sigh). Bag of . . . useless rocks . . . abandoned . . .

cold . . .

no one . . .

Get me out! . . . Get me out! . . . I am here! . . . I am here . . . I . . . am . . . here . . . (sobbing).

“Mission log day nineteen: Captain Drewer LE26a. Mom, I know you didn’t want me to follow in Dad’s footsteps, and I tried, but it looks like this is how it’s going to go. I remember how hard it was on you the day we heard he wasn’t coming back from the war. I really didn’t want to put you through that again, but it looks like this is it. Remember I love you, John out.”

“Mission log day twenty: Captain Drewer LE26a. Thought I saw something today, I might be hallucinating because of the darkness. That might mean it’s time to turn the light on again. In fact, I think I’ll do that right now, hang on. Yep, my eyes still work. The terrain hasn’t really changed since last time I had the light on. It never really changes out here does it? (sigh). Good news, my oxygen is holding up much better than I expected. I was able to increase the amount of oxygen I’m taking in. Breathing much better now. I have no appetite, but I’ve been making sure that I eat at least twice a day, just to keep my strength up. Food may not last long enough. I’m beginning to look for alternate escape plans. Based on how much time has passed, it seems likely that the sun will never shine directly into this hole. While that means I don’t have to worry about cooking, I’m still unable to pinpoint my location. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day twenty-one: Captain Drewer LE26a. I’ve got a plan. Due to the darkness, search teams may not be able to spot me. If I can get my light to the surface any rescuers would be able to notice it from potentially miles away. I’ve been trying to figure out the best way to achieve this. I tried my leg again, but it’s still in no condition to climb. I don’t want to risk throwing the light in case I don’t make it high enough. I may have to cannibalize the rover to make some form of propulsion unit. To conserve energy, I’ll be ceasing recording until I figure something out. Drewer out.”

“Mission log day twenty-five: Captain Drewer LE26a. I’ve finished my rocket. In order to provide consistent upward thrust, I’ve attached my light to one of the primary oxygen tanks. The light is now mobile and awaiting deployment. Unfortunately, after I launch the rocket, I will have expended most of my oxygen. If my calculations are correct, after I open the valve, I’ll have enough oxygen left to last about six days. I’ll be spending most of that time asleep in an attempt to use less oxygen. After that, well, hopefully I just won’t wake up. I pray someone finds me in time. Drewer out.”