



8.

THE END

Three Incarnates had been designated to guard the front doors of the mortal education facility which the Almighty Trofonag had chosen as his mainstay. One of them paced back and forth across the entrance in front of the others, so fuming mad his eyes had turned to a pulsing blood-red.

“We are missing the hunt,” this one said.

“There will be no bloodshed,” another answered. The words were a bit mangled due to his loose jawbone; he expected this body to give out any time now. “You heard the orders. Manners and the other human are to be found and brought here unharmed.”

“We should kill them *both*,” the first growled. “There is no reason to leave them alive.”

“The human is insurance, in case the mortal now in our custody does not break fast enough. Manners however...Manners will be sent back to stand before the Stranger for his actions. He will pay for his betrayal.”

“And what if escapes across the barrier?” the third asked.

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“Then finding him in the mortal world will be our first priority once we secure a connection between universes.”

The pacing Incarnate turned and started back across the paved walkway. He pulled the ragged blade from the sheath at his side and waved it over his head. “I tire of this place! This endless boredom! I want to be back in a sinning world again, I want to rend children with my bare hands and watch the Light drain out of their accursed eyes—!”

“Freeze, all three of you!”

The Incarnate was so surprised by the sudden intrusion, for a second he actually did halt. When he looked up, he was shocked to see the human all the way at the end of the school’s pathway, wielding one of the projectile weapons they loved so much. Manners covered behind him.

The other two drew their own weapons. None of them paused to wonder at this turn of events or the mortal’s stupidity for coming here; their ways were brute force and immediate gratification over thoughtful consideration. They started forward. “Fire that, if you think you can hit all three of us before we reach you. You will only bring a hundred more of us down on your head.”

The human lowered its weapon. “Then I guess we better try something else.”

Manners spoke the Old Language. Artcrafts beyond the Incarnates’ understanding. There was a shift in the air between the two groups, a rush of displaced air, and suddenly a crowd of thirty deformed mortals appeared on the lawn.

The first thing the Xerox mutants saw were the Incarnates. Manners had been careful to make sure they appeared turned the right direction, so the murderous rampage didn’t backfire. The assemblage shrieked and ran to meet the three decaying demons, crooked limbs reaching.

The two forces clashed. The Incarnates waded into the fray, swinging their long daggers and hacking apart the mindless men and women, but there were just too many. Once they got their hands on the red-eyed fiends, they tore at them, pulled in different direction until rotted limbs separated, and then threw themselves on the ground to feast on the de-

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cayed flesh. The grisly sight was enough to make Andrew gag.

“C’mon!” He grabbed at the professor while the Xerox suburbanites remained distracted.

“Oh no, I never said I would accompany you!”

“Tough! Now move!”

Manner planted his loafered feet. “Shoot me if you must, but I’ll not walk willingly back into their arms on this addle-brained mission of yours! If they get their hands on me, I’ll suffer far more than Mr. Pearson, I assure you!”

Andrew paused. Manners had called him selfish before, and maybe that wasn’t far from the truth. The intent of returning here had been to save his world—to secure a future for Joey and Michelle even if he didn’t make it back—but if these creatures took possession of the professor again and put him back to work making these staging docks, then *all* worlds would be in danger.

A trillion other Joeyes and Michelles on a trillion other worlds, if he understood the situation.

He released the man and looked into his eyes. “Don’t you leave me, Professor Manners. Don’t you go back without me.”

“I can only promise to give you as long as possible. Mr. Pearson’s resolve won’t hold forever; frankly, I’m surprised he lasted this long. And, as I said, this staging dock is collapsing.”

He pointed. Andrew looked past the still feasting clones at the school. Stress fractures stretched across the brick and concrete front of the school. The whole midnight sky felt heavy above them, like it was squeezing in, to such a degree that Andrew imagined he could even feel the pressure change in his eardrums.

“Those Elohaman...you’re sure they won’t be around?”

“No, they couldn’t. Their influence on the physical world will be exhausted for a while.”

“And there’s not any other nasty surprises waiting for me in there?”

Manners flinched. It was barely perceptible, but as someone trained to watch for lies on the faces of drunks and criminals, it could’ve been a neon sign. “No. Just whatever Incarnates were left behind. But once they’re aware of your presence, the others will probably come running.”

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What aren't you telling me, Professor? Andrew thought. He gave no outward indication of his suspicion. There wasn't enough time to coerce information the man wasn't willing to give.

Manners straightened his suit coat. "I must set about preparing for our exit. I'll shift back and collect you once the deed is done."

"How..." He swallowed to wet a suddenly bone-dry throat, brought about by the thought of 'the deed' in question. "How will you know?"

"Trust me," Manners said, and rattled off a string of those guttural words. He disappeared, not all at once, or with a puff of smoke, but more like a door had been closed in front of him; the term 'shifting' made complete sense. He took the deformed cannibals with him, leaving only Andrew and a collection of gnawed Incarnate body parts strewn across the school lawn.

He hurried to the front doors, taking no great pains to be quiet. He could hear the place creaking and groaning as he entered, slowly being crushed. One of the interiors walls buckled beside him.

An Incarnate raced down the hallway to the left at him, presumably drawn by the noise of the battle on the lawn. Andrew took careful aim with Ronnie's huge revolver and squeezed off a round when the creature was just a few yards away. The bullet hit it square in the forehead. A few dribbles of sluggish blood came out, and he went down. These things were tough, able to take a lot of punishment, but their bodies (and Andrew got the idea the flesh and blood was the equivalent of a cheap suit) could be killed. A wisp of black smoke wafted out from its eyes as the fire in them died. Andrew was careful to stay away.

He ran. Down the cracking hallways, killing two other Incarnates along the way with well-placed shots and then reloading. His memories of being carried through the school before were vague, but in order to find his destination, he only had to keep his palm against the wall and trace the titanic flow of power beneath its surface. Before he knew it, he was standing in front of a door marked FURNACE.

The black aura still surrounded it. A dark halo that ebbed and grew in waves, pulsing outward from the door's surface. The murk reached out for him when it was at the height of each cycle, with wispy hands made of a substance like the smoke that came from the dead Incarnates' eyes. A

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fountain of ill thoughts sprang up in his head as he regarded it, awful memories and hidden desires he'd never told a soul and base, vile fantasies dredged from the deepest depths of his Id. He had trouble believing such things could even originate in a human mind, let alone his own.

Andrew's heart squeezed up into his throat, where its frantic pulse threatened to choke him.

He couldn't open that door. To reach into that oily mass and turn that knob was lunacy. Doors were made for a reason, and whatever was on the other side of this one needed to stay here. His instincts—not just those honed by his cop background, but the ones that came with being human—urged him to run from here, find Manners, and beg the man to lead him out of this hell. And something told him that once his resolve broke, there would be no second try.

He wished he could say that it was the thought of Ronnie that stopped his flight—the punk had come back for him, after all, and Andrew believed in returning favors—but if he was being honest, he would have to admit it was Joey. God, he loved that boy *so much*. From the second he held him in the delivery room, Andrew knew there was nothing he wouldn't give up for him. All he wanted in that second was to hold his son again, to kiss those slender, artist fingers of his, and tell him it was all right to color outside the lines once in a while.

But in order to do that, Andrew had to get himself back *inside* the lines.

And ensure there was still an inside-the-lines to go back to.

Andrew reached into the layer of smog covering the door, wincing at the slimy feel against his skin, found the knob, and pulled it open, waiting for whatever lay behind it to pounce.

No monsters. Nothing lay in wait. Only a staircase leading down into darkness. He started down them, knowing that it couldn't be this easy.

The pain.

The pain was.

The pain was all consuming. Everywhere. Around him and in him. The past, the future, and the present coming together in one mind-

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blowing mental cataclysm.

Inescapable.

His mind was a blank. An empty landscape colored a screaming shade of red. He couldn't even remember his own name anymore, let alone why this was happening.

And then it stopped. Something swam through the haze of his vision. He (*wait, Ronnie, that was his name*) blinked away tears and stared up into the leering, cancer-ridden face hovering over him.

"*Plea...se...*" he rasped. His lips had forgotten how to form words. Each breath made him shudder. "*N. No m-more.*"

"Only you can make that happen, human."

He couldn't remember what, exactly, the Incarnate had done to him during this last session, but it had involved a pair of gardening shears, thumbscrews, and a toilet brush. Ninety percent of his body was either contused or burned, with several small wounds along his extremities cut down to the muscle and one on his right side exposing ribs. A puddle of his own blood squelched beneath him on the table.

What he wouldn't give for the days when the only things hurting him were that piddly broken nose and chomped ear.

"Your species is so sensitive," the Incarnate rasped. "So delicate. You haven't learned to ignore the sensations of the flesh. I have seen pain do fascinating—and amusing—things to your kind. Unlocking long dormant abilities. Devolving into all manner of lower life. Agreeing to absolutely anything. All just to escape that which your pathetic minds should be capable of blocking out."

Ronnie didn't respond. No strength left in him to crack jokes. He used his tongue to raise the blood in the back of his mouth up and let it dribble down the side of his cheek.

The Incarnate went to the wall of torture implements and selected a new tool. He held it up where Ronnie could see. It was a steel rod with a crank on one end, and a metal bulb on the other, several inches in diameter.

"Do you know this, mortal? It is called a Pear of Anguish. Another instrument from the medieval period of your history. Exquisite era; torture, religious persecution, plagues by the dozen. It exists across almost all

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dimensions, no matter how different the timeline. Which I believe just proves you humans are as eager to be rid of each other as the rest of the cosmos is.” He held the bulb over Ronnie’s face. “If you do not tell me what I want to hear, I am going to insert this down your throat. Then...”

The Incarnate turned the crank at the other end. The bulb separated into four pieces, opening wider with each turn of the handle until it became a shiny blossom of sharp metal.

Ronnie wept. Blubbered as never before in his life.

His torturer leaned closer and crooned, “The internal damage will be massive, but it is not likely to kill you. You should even be able to speak enough to proceed.”

“Don’t. Oh God, please don’t.”

“Then TELL ME!”

“I don’t remember what I’m supposed to say!”

“TELL ME I MAY RIP YOUR WORLD ASUNDER!”

Ronnie opened his mouth to give this creature what it wanted. He couldn’t remember why he’d held out so long in the first place. It seemed like he’d been waiting for something, *hoping* for something, but whatever it was obviously wasn’t going to happen.

He got as far as the letter Y when the door set into the brick wall to his left flew open. A man burst into the room. Ronnie didn’t recognize him.

But he surely looked Jappy.

It took Andrew several moments to realize the bloody, beaten, burnt sack of meat in front of him was Ronnie. The kid was chained to an ornate little pedestal in his underwear, shaking like a palsy victim.

He couldn’t see the opposite wall; this room stretched away (or was it down? Looking over there gave the impression of depth, like staring over the lip of a tall building) into impenetrable shadow. But on the far side of the table was Andrew’s old friend, his seatmate for the bus ride. The last time Andrew saw this particular Incarnate was when he caved in the demon’s skull with his shoe in the classroom where they brought him to Manners. Even with those smoldering eyes and the dent along the side of

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his head, the surprise on the creature's face was obvious when saw Andrew bursting into the room.

"YOU!" he screeched, coming around the table with a metal pole in his hand held up and back to swing.

"This is what you get for threatening my son," Andrew told him coolly. He raised the gun and fired, emptying an entire cylinder into the Incarnate. The flesh was so necrotic, so eaten up by whatever cancerous disease ravaged them, the large-caliber bullets tore gaping holes right through his torso. He didn't so much crumple as he disintegrated, splattering wet, blackish chunks across the cobblestone floor. The remains of his face released that puff of smoke which, Andrew suspected, were these things' true form.

From the darkness across the room came a roar of purest fury. He couldn't tell if he actually heard it or if it was only in his head, but he felt it all the way to his bones. It seemed to come from an impossible distance away, echoing across miles, oceans, light-years; distances so far they didn't have measurements. After it faded, he could feel a slight breeze against his skin, a wave of displaced air with a fetid understench.

Something was coming. Something large and fast, hurtling up the brick-lined tunnel toward them. He could feel the power crackling from it, the source of all that latent energy running through the school.

And he did not want to be here when it arrived.

Ronnie looked the same direction when the blast of sound came, but now he twisted his head back around. The Incarnate had done a real number on him. He bled from more wounds than Andrew could count, but even more startling, the punk attitude was gone, wrung out of him like blood from a rag, leaving only a terrified, hurting young man. "Andrew," he gasped, as though recognizing him for the first time. "Help. Please."

Help. There was only way to help him now, one way to help both of them, and no time to waste talking, not even with himself. *Especially* with himself.

Andrew opened the cylinder of the revolver, fed in more bullets with a shaking hand, then snapped it closed. He crossed to the table quickly and pressed the barrel against Ronnie's forehead. The least he could do was make this quick and painless.

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Ronnie gaped, crossing his eyes to stare up at the revolver. The confusion on his face smoothed out into understanding and, even worse, acceptance.

“I’m sorry,” Andrew said, feeling moisture on his cheeks. “This is the only way.”

Ronnie nodded beneath the gun. “D-do it. Put me outta my fuckin misery.”

Andrew looked away. Squeezed the trigger. Felt the tension in the metal as the hammer pulled back. Wondered if he could ever face Joey again.

A few seconds later, the gun went off.

And the chain holding Ronnie’s arms over his head was blasted apart.

“You don’t get out of this that easy, you little shit,” Andrew murmured. He turned and shot the chains holding the kid’s feet, leaving steel bands around both his ankles. “C’mon, can you walk?”

“Walk? Man, I don’t even know if I can *move*.” Ronnie leaned up on the table and cried out, clutching a gaping wound in his side. Blood seeped between his fingers.

A crash swept out of the horizontal hole, the sound of smashed brick and collapsing mortar, definitely auditory rather than mental this time.

It was hollow and dull with distance, but much closer than the roar.

“We gotta go,” Andrew said. “Right now.”

Ronnie struggled up and swung his legs off the table. Andrew tossed him the shredded remains of his t-shirt from the floor by the fire-pit and he slipped it over his head, hissing through his teeth when the material touched his tender skin. Every movement fired pain up somewhere on his body as working muscles reopened fresh wounds. Two of his toes on his right foot were gone; one by heat, the other by blade. His Marglo bite pulsed heat.

But he didn’t slow down. Not for a second. A chewing, grinding noise came from that darkness behind him, like a freight train was barreling at them and crashing through anything in its path. Ronnie remembered the Incarnate looking into those shadows as though seeking guidance just be-

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fore starting his torment. There was increasing vibration in the floor and the walls as whatever had been at the other end of the— tunnel? hole?— approached at tremendous speed, a worm tunneling up from hell.

Oh, c'mon Ronnie-o, you know what's comin just like I do, his name starts with T, ends with G, and makes you feel like you just masturbated in the middle of an orphanage when you hear it. And he ain't gonna fit inside this tiny room when he gets here; this motherfucker is BIG.

He hopped off the torture table and his feet almost went out from under him. Andrew caught him before he went down. Ronnie put an arm over the man's shoulder and hawked a monstro loogie on the remains of the Incarnate. "There's your permission, bitch," he wheezed.

Andrew half-led, half-carried him through the door and up the dark staircase beyond. He ignored the screaming aches and sharp pains from all over his body as best he could. By the time they emerged into the hallway of the school again, the entire building quaked hard enough to drop plaster ceiling tiles from above. And Ronnie didn't think it was all because of whatever was burrowing up beneath them either. The place was flattening out like a pancake, the walls scrunching up like an accordion. The roof seemed at least a foot lower than the last time he'd been through here.

"It's collapsing!" Andrew yelled over the constant, unnatural grind. "The whole place, the entire universe!"

"It's like the trash compactor from *Star Wars*!"

"We have to find Manners!"

They moved as fast as they could toward the front doors, Ronnie in his t-shirt and underwear and Andrew supporting him while keeping the gun ready. The vibration beneath them continued to grow all the time.

Outside, the night sky was threaded with cracks. *Cracks*. Ronnie felt like he could go mad staring at that sight. Something bled through those chinks in the very air, an inky black that made the false night feel as bright as high noon in the desert. He imagined this world as a giant bubble suddenly, a delicate boundary of soap separating them from whatever lay beyond.

What would happen when the stress became too much, and the bubble finally burst?

He shivered, wincing when something in his side flared.

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“Manners!” Andrew screamed, wandering out toward the where the school property met the street. Ronnie hobbled after him. “*Where are you?*”

“What do we do, man, what’s the plan?” Time seemed to be slipping away like water through a breaking dam. Ronnie only knew one thing: he would rather die than go back into their custody.

“*I don’t know, he said he’d be here!*” From the panic in Andrew’s voice, Ronnie figured he probably felt the same.

The front doors of the school banged open again. A throng of Incarnates came sprinting out through them.

“Then we better think of something fast.”

Too many to fight. All they could do is run. Andrew urged Ronnie across the lawn of the school, but the kid’s injuries were slowing him down so much. Andrew took a few potshots into the closest members of the mob on their heels, giving him time to get a little further. Everywhere the ground shook, like the few earthquakes he’d been in, making them wobble as they moved.

When he turned back to sprint, he saw his truck shift into existence at the curb, the front end complete and undamaged once more. Even the bullet holes and shattered windows were repaired, all as new as the day he drove it off the lot. Manners appeared beside it, hurrying over to meet them, but stopped when his eyes landed on Ronnie.

“What is *he* doing here?” he cried.

“He’s escaping, just like us!” Andrew shouted as they reached the professor and continued past to the truck. “We’ll just have to find another way!”

“I told you, there is no other way! You weak fool, *you’ve doomed us all!*”

The Incarnates were still coming, a forest of red eyes and snarling mouths. Andrew yanked open the driver’s door of his truck and let Ronnie slide in first. “Worry about that later, and let’s get out of here!”

Manners ran, skirting around the hood and hurtling into the passenger door. Andrew dove behind the wheel and twisted the keys that were already dangling from the ignition.

“*Go, go, go!*” Ronnie screeched.

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Andrew put the car in gear, floored the gas, and rolled all of two yards before the street in front of them cracked violently open.

The pavement rippled and thrust upward in a rough circle approximately thirty feet in diameter. Chunks of dirt and concrete—some of them the size of small automobiles—rocketed into the air, leaving a dark, round pit. At the same time, the trembling underneath them stopped.

And from the hole climbed...something.

Andrew coasted to a stop and stared in awe. Two gigantic, spider-like appendages rose up and found purchase to either side of the hole. They heaved, and, like a slow-motion jack-in-the-box, up came a head as big as his truck, a conglomeration of disgusting creatures, parts from rats, snakes, bugs, and more all jammed together in a Frankensteinian stew. It had pincers on either side of a mouth filled with grimy fangs, any of which was longer than a human body. Two iridescent green eyes—orbs that looked like they should be staring out of a forgotten swamp—regarded them as it roared, emitting the same sound Andrew had heard in the furnace room of the school. That mashed, misshapen face kept rising as it climbed from the hole, towering over them, revealing the eel body it was attached to, from which a thousand wiggly legs dangled in twin rows.

Andrew suspected this was the source of the shadow they'd seen, just before the doll attack. The king surveying his dock before nestling back into his putrid nest beneath the school to watch the torture show.

"Uh, maybe we don't go this way," Ronnie whispered.

"That's Trofonag, isn't it?" Andrew asked. The word twisted his stomach into knots.

"Yes," Manners answered.

"And you knew he was down there all along. You were going to let him take me, too."

"You insisted on going back. I never expected you to make it all the way in, much less out. And certainly not with Mr. Pearson in tow. I assumed, one way or another, that your world was finished."

Andrew didn't have time to get angry. He stomped the gas and twisted the wheel, swinging the truck away from the three-story tall Lovecraftian monstrosity in the road. From the edge of his vision, he saw one giant limb take a lumbering swipe at them and miss. Trofonag bellowed.

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Before he could get the truck up to speed, the group of Incarnates reached them and swarmed over the vehicle. A body climbed the hood, obstructing his vision momentarily before sliding off. Glass shattered as the truck windows broke for the second time this day. They pulled away fast, but not before several of the demons climbed into the truck bed.

In the sideview mirror, Andrew saw the beast destroy the school with one swing of its jointed leg, before wriggling the last of its bulk out of the ground.

There was hardly time to breathe, let alone think. No sooner had they left Trofonag behind than the back window of the truck rained down glass on Ronnie's head. Rotting hands reached through and hauled at him. They yanked him out of his seat and had his head and shoulder through the window and hanging over the truck bed before he could grab onto anything. The remaining chunks of glass in the frame tore at his back.

Three Incarnates stared down at him. One moved to put a rusted blade against his vulnerable throat.

The truck swerved. All three of them stumbled sideways, one so much that it flew over the side. Ronnie thrashed in the grip of the other two, his tortured body screaming at the effort, and tried to worm his way back into the cab.

Gunshots blasted next to him. Andrew had one arm twisted backward out the window while he drove, firing the revolver over Ronnie's chest. One of the Incarnates let go of him after a bullet hit it in the shoulder and knocked it away. It crashed against the tailgate, which popped open and spilled the demon into the road.

That just left one. Andrew would have a hard time hitting it from his angle. Ronnie reached out, grabbed it around the head, and sank his thumbs into those glowing red ovals in its face.

The Incarnate howled. Ronnie expected blood or liquid of some sort, but got smoke instead. Like a miniature tornado, it funneled out of the creatures eyes...

And headed straight for his.

The movement was unnatural, denying the direction of the wind

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whipping around them. He shoved the dying Incarnate away, which sent it tumbling off the back of the truck with its brethren. The first wisp of smoke brushed against him, and, for just a moment, he felt a *presence* in his head, something clawing at the insides of his brain for purchase like a man about to fall off a cliff.

Then it was gone, and he slid dazedly back down into his seat just in time for the front windshield to be filled with the monstrous form of Trofonag.

Andrew drove as fast as he could while trying to help Ronnie with the Incarnates in the back. Since leaving the school, the streets had been empty, so he didn't have to worry about weaving. But no sooner was the kid safe than a giant shadow swept over them from the right, and suddenly Trofonag scuttled into the street, trampling an entire row of houses along the way.

All three occupants of the vehicle screamed.

Andrew had no idea how the monster had gotten in front of them. Probably the same way he and Ronnie had ended up back at their vehicles after taking a stroll this morning. One of its huge legs smashed into the pavement right in front of them, and he yanked the wheel to swerve around it at the last second.

Then they were sweeping under its reptilian belly, staring up at mottled flesh. Trofonag moved fast, turning in a circle to stomp them. Andrew flew around a corner fast enough to lean them up on two wheels. They sideswiped a car that deflated like a popped balloon before the truck shot back into the open. This time, Trofonag gave chase, the ground and car jumping every time one of its limbs thudded down.

Andrew leaned around Ronnie and shouted, "Where do we go?"

"*THERE ISN'T ANYWHERE TO GO!*" Manner screamed back at him. "Not for all three of us! This vehicle is bonded to take us back to your world, but I told you, only two can cross the barrier!"

"He's gaining!" Ronnie yelled, twisting around to look behind them.

"That's only one of our worries! This dock is dying!"

Andrew glanced at the suburban houses running alongside the street.

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The ones that hadn't faded away were badly crushed out of shape, that invisible hand steadily mashing down on them. Even these looked more like cartoon drawings than reality now. The sky seemed right on top of them, claustrophobically close. For the first time, he realized even Trofonag was keeping his head low as he scrambled after them.

"It isn't too late! One of us has to die or stay behind!"

"Definitely die," Ronnie said softly. "You don't wanna be alive if they get their hands on you, believe me."

Andrew coaxed a little more speed from the truck, bringing the odometer up to 90 miles per hour, an insane speed for streets designed for no more than 30. "What do you suggest then, Professor? Draw straws?"

"There's no need for that! I already told you, *I'm* too important, and *you* have a child!" Manners jabbed a finger at Ronnie. "Eliminate this thug! He's nothing to us, nothing to your world! Shoot him and be done with it!"

Ronnie turned to Andrew. The kid's eyes looked clearer than the entire time Andrew had known him. He wasn't sure where or how the metamorphosis had occurred, but this wasn't the same bankrobbing punk he'd chased down a scant few hours before. "He's right, man. If that's the only way, you gotta do it. Prob'ly be quicker than what ol' Red Eyes started."

Andrew made the hardest decision of his life in less than a second. "No. I didn't shoot you before, and I'm not going to now."

"*Think about your world!*" Manners screeched, absolute desperation on his face now. "*Think about your SON!*"

"I am," Andrew said, and stuck the barrel of the revolver in his own mouth.

He intended to pull the trigger immediately, no hesitation, but Ronnie moved fast, pulling his wrist away and knocking the gun out of his hand with an elbow. It hit the seat and rolled into the floorboard. "It ain't happenin like that, Andrew!"

Behind them, Trofonag roared and snapped at the back of the truck. Andrew could hear the beast in his head, speaking an alien gibberish that tore at the anchors of his sanity.

"*I'll not die like this!*" Manners declared. "*If either of you are too weak to do*

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what needs to be done, then by God, I WILL!

He leaned down and retrieved the weapon.

“Look out!” Andrew yelled.

Manners fumbled the revolver, trying to get it turned correctly in his hand. He might be comfortable with quantum mechanics and the laws of the cosmos, but he was a ditz when it came to firearms.

Ronnie leapt on him. Manners snarled and fought with the kid. One of them must’ve hit the handle in the struggle, because the passenger door popped open, forcing the professor to grab at the seatback with one hand to keep from falling out. Andrew reached over, trying to get a grip on him while keeping his eyes on the road and the titan in their wake. The passenger seat became one big tangle of bodies.

The revolver went off.

Ronnie fell back in his seat, covered in fresh blood.

But Andrew saw immediately that it wasn’t his. Manners sat up in the open truck door, looking down at a hole in his tweed suit vest the size of a quarter, from which a maroon flood gushed. The gun was backward in one limp hand, and Andrew plucked it away.

The professor’s bewildered eyes came up to them. He muttered, “But I was going to save worlds...”

“Sometimes you can only save your own,” Andrew said, “And let the rest worry about itself.”

He fired the revolver again.

The bullet pushed most of Edward Manner’s face through the back of his head. He flopped over backward and fell out of the vehicle. Andrew saw his corpse roll in the street before Trofonag crushed it flat with a careless step.

He and Ronnie said nothing to each other as the kid leaned over and pulled the door closed. The monster was almost on top of them, but so was everything else. The sky was falling, those cracks widening and black slime running through in steady streams. The houses on either side were disappearing, the street beneath them losing definition, becoming one big, black, featureless plane and even that was *squeezing* in around them...

And suddenly the road ahead was awash with light. Pure light, clean light, *sunlight*. It came from nowhere and everywhere, brightening so hard

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and fast that it blinded him, made the truck glow at every angle where it kicked up sparks of light. He felt the tires leave the ground, and then they were travelling toward the light at incredible speed.

The last thing Andrew saw before his vision blotted out entirely was the neighborhood behind them shrinking to a pinprick in the rearview mirror, an island in the middle of rich, deep darkness, and Trofonag screaming as it closed in around him.

The sunlight was too bright. Ronnie covered his face and peered out through his fingers.

The truck sat diagonally across the access road, the freeway just ahead and below them. Cars whizzed by without taking any notice.

“Are...are we back?” Ronnie asked.

A horn blatted from his left, and an angry driver edged through the narrow space between truck hood and guard rail, shaking his fist at them as he passed.

“Yeah, we’re back,” Andrew answered.

He opened his door and stepped out. Ronnie did the same, leaning against the side of the vehicle for support.

Behind them sat the red brick wall that flanked the entrance to Strangewood Homes. Except it wasn’t called Strangewood Homes anymore; now the sign read ‘*Stern*wood Homes.’ People drifted out of the houses closest to the entrance—real people this time, limbs all numbered correctly and in the right location, folks in bathrobes who peered curiously at their stopped vehicle.

Ronnie imagined what they were seeing—two bloody men, one of whom was in his underwear—and began to laugh.

Andrew pulled the truck over against the curb, out of the way of the minimal traffic. Far down on the opposite side of the freeway, right about where the bank would be, he could see an ocean of flashing red and blue lights.

Joey would be down there. Andrew wanted to see him so much.

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But first things first.

He left the door of the cab open and stood outside, loving the feel of sun on his face. He knew what the Beatles meant now: it *did* feel like years, in his heart. And though his head told him it had at least been hours, as near as he could tell they'd only been physically gone for a few minutes, if even that.

Ronnie was a few yards away, sitting on one of the wooden guard rail posts with arms wrapped around his own torso. His bare legs and arms were caked in dried blood and filth, but his face—aside from his lumpy nose—looked surprising clean. Andrew went over and sat down beside him.

"I would ask if that really happened, but I'm still in too much pain for it not to've," the kid said.

"We have to get you to a hospital."

"It's all good, dude. None of what that fucker did was designed to kill me, so there ain't no rush." Even so, he winced when he removed his arms and put his hands in his lap. "So you think...it's okay? They're not gonna get through or whatever?"

Andrew turned to look across the street. The Sternwood residents were gathering at the mouth of the housing edition, staring down the street at the cavalcade of cops around the bank, more arriving all the time, glancing warily at the two of them every few minutes. He didn't know what it would be like if Trofonag and the Incarnates breached the boundary between worlds—if it would be immediate chaos or a far more subtle infiltration—but the feeling in his gut told him they were safe.

"I think it's all right," he said.

A wistful smile crossed Ronnie's face as he whispered, "We saved the world. Awesome."

"No, not we. *You*." Andrew held out a hand, the way he had when this whole mess was first getting started. "I don't know a lot of men who could've held out during what you went through. So...thank you. Thank you for giving my son a chance."

"Yeah, yeah, just be sure to tell the judge that. I'm sure they'll let me out in a couple of decades." Ronnie accepted the hand with a roll of his eyes. Then a cloud seemed to move over his disposition. "Back at the

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school...or even in the truck... Why didn't you do it, Andrew?"

He didn't have to ask what the kid meant. He also didn't have an answer ready.

"I would say you didn't have the balls, but you blew away Manners when it came down to the wire."

Andrew frowned at the mention of the professor. He could already feel guilt gnawing at him, and he only expected it to get worse in the days, months, and years ahead. The man was a monster—a different kind of monster—but his death was a further tragedy.

How many worlds had Andrew doomed by killing him? How many *universes*?

He answered, "You didn't shoot me when you had the chance. And you came back for me when they had me in the school."

"Yeah, but that's different. We didn't understand the stakes yet. But you *knew* you had to kill me to stop them from gettin through. You *knew* you had to do it if you ever wanted to go home again."

"But I didn't kill you, and yet here we sit."

"Goddamn it, you know what I mean." Ronnie spun on the post to face him, and Andrew saw the stark need to understand in his eyes. "Manners was right. I ain't nuthin to you. I ain't nuthin to anybody. Nobody here would shed a fuckin tear if *I* was the sacrifice needed to make sure the world kept on tickin. To make sure the Sternwoods of the world got to keep watchin bad Michael Bay movies and eatin themselves to a heart attack. So why were you ready to throw your life away for me?"

Andrew grabbed Ronnie's wrist and pressed the truck keys into his open palm.

"Because everyone deserves a second chance to color inside the lines, Ronnie."

The kid stared at the keyring for several seconds. "Does this mean you're not arrestin me, Officer Andrew?"

"Can't have the savior of the world rotting in prison. Just go. Fast. They're going to come looking for us any minute. I'll buy you as much time as I can."

"Sure you won't get in trouble?"

"Not looking like this, I won't. Just don't get caught, because I'm go-

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ing to have to tell them you did all this to me. Ditch the truck as soon as you can get some new wheels, then run as far as you can before you stop to clean yourself up. I hope I don't have to tell you—"

"—not to try this again. Yeah, I'm way ahead of you."

Ronnie got up and hobbled for the truck.

He backed up, intending to go the wrong way on the access road for the short distance it would take to get to the overpass. His body still hurt, but besides the toes, the ear, and the nose, he didn't think it was anything permanent. Even his Marglo infection felt better; apparently germs couldn't cross the barrier either.

Mark's funeral. He probably still had time. But after that, he had no idea where he was going. Usually that realization thrilled him, but at the moment it just made him very, very sad.

Andrew stood at the open passenger window. "Take care of yourself."

"You too." He grinned. "Thanks, Jap."

"Thank *you*, shithead."

Ronnie pulled away. A glance in the rearview showed Andrew waving his arms and running after him. He braked.

Andrew yanked open the passenger door, leaned into the floorboard, and came up with a plastic bag with Spider-man's face on it.

"Everyone deserves a second chance," he said, "but not *this* much of a second chance."

Ronnie laughed, and drove toward the dazzling California sun.

AFTERWORD:

Thanks to all the many readers and subscribers of “Outside the Lines” who stuck with the story for the past eight months. If I’ve done my job, you came out of this novella with a sense of satisfaction that the story of Andrew and Ronnie was over, but still with multiple questions. The good news is, there are answers to be had.

For those familiar with my work, the Dark Filament is a pervasive presence that shows up in several short story and novel-length works, the true meaning of which is known only to me. “Outside the Lines” is the biggest chunk of information I have given thus far about the Filament and its shadowy backers, but you can find other hints and tidbits in *Race the Night*, *Second Unit*, and my short-story collection *Howling Days*, released in March.

And of course, there is so much more to come...

Russell C. Connor—May 15, 2010

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