

The Portal

**A cool collection
of short stories
and poems.**

**We've added new writers!*



Demons

By Edward White/CP Bialois

<http://cpbialois.wordpress.com/>

“Man, don’t you lay that crap on me. It’s not my fault we’re in this hell hole.” Despite the sound of his voice, Jonesy’s smile told those around him he was joking with them. It was his way of coping with the desert heat and with being stuck there for a third tour. Considered the platoon’s resident clown, he was often given greater latitude for his antics so long as they were done in the safe confines of HQ or an outpost while off duty.

It was because of their placement in a burned out building during their downtime that Sergeant Mike Anthony let his friend and Corporal have his moment.

“I never said it was, but you have to admit its gotta be someone’s. Why do we get this detail after RnR?” Jacob Linely sat off to the side and did everything he could to antagonize Jones into expounding on his antics.

Mike and the others chuckled at the exchange. “Give it up Jonesy, he’s got you dead to rights.” The look Jones gave Mike brought out another laugh.

“That’s right, yuck it up while you can. You guys know I’m right. I didn’t do anything too overboard. How was I to know she was a general’s daughter?”

The group burst into laughter at Jones’ innocent routine. Their assignment was routine and they simply had the luck of drawing a patrol mission with the rest of their unit and needed to blame it on someone. Jones happened to prefer his Hawkeye routine from M*A*S*H to blow off steam.

Times like those, when the six of them could sit around, were what made their time in the desert tolerable to their Sergeant. The small group formed a bond he never wanted to see broken and would do everything in his power to protect.

“I guess you want this now?” Jones held up a canteen before handing it over to Mike. “Wouldn’t want you to drop from thirst on my account. Don’t need *that* blamed on me too.” Jones’ smile was spread from ear to ear.

Mike took the offered canteen and swallowed a mouthful of the warm water. Despite the water’s room temperature, the water was far more refreshing than the alternative. After his second mouthful, Mike passed it back to his friend, “Thanks Jonesy, that hit the spot.”

Ezekiel Jones, was one of the few men Mike had learned to trust with his life. While the number remained small, they were a close knit group and rarely did anything without the others. Having them around helped Mike feel invincible, like he could take on the entire world and win. He assumed that was why he never wanted to forget them, so he’d always have a place he could retreat to from time to time.

Mike sat and watched Jones pass the canteen to the others. It was a ritual they began shortly after being placed into the same squad. At times like those, he forgot about his home in the states. Those men, his fellow soldiers, were the brothers he never had and his true family, nothing could change that.

A gentle shaking on Mike’s left

shoulder broke his attention away from the laughter of his friends. Confused, he turned his head to the left and right looking for the source of the motion.

Mike heard a gentle, soothing voice in his ear. “Sergeant. Sergeant, it’s time for your medication.”

Medication? Mike’s head began to hurt and his vision turned cloudy but his friends didn’t seem to notice when he reached out to them for help. When he reached out a second time, something took hold of his hands. The contact sent relief surging through him despite how sick he felt.

“Jonesy... something’s not right...”

“It’s okay, Sergeant. Everything’s going to be alright.” Mike recognized the voice as the same one he heard a moment earlier and he wanted to pull away, but that time he allowed the hands to control him. “That’s right, relax. No one’s going to hurt you.”

Hurt? The word seared itself into his brain and brought images of explosions and people being struck by shrapnel and debris. He recognized Jonesy’s face lying next to him, covered in blood and forever frozen with a surprised expression on it. Mike reached out towards his friend as an explosion next to him turned his vision white then black after the pain struck.

The images passed and Mike opened his eyes, locking his gaze on the slow moving ceiling fan above the hospital bed. The memories of that day faded as the pain of his loss began to settle in. He could hear, more than feel, the nurse beside him as she readied his regular dose of pills. The pills were designed to help him deal with the pain of his injuries, but they did far more than that. They helped him forget the reality waiting for him back in the States.

Mike continued to lie in a semi catatonic state as the nurse put the paper cup with the pills in his right hand. He knew what to do with them, he’d done the same routine a hundred times since the rocket propelled grenade round hit. The pills weren’t going to do him any harm, Mike couldn’t stop staring at them. To him,

they were a portal into salvation. Without a second's further hesitation, he flipped them into his mouth and swallowed. All that remained for the cup of water was the bitter aftertaste, but it didn't bother him anymore.

His task for the day complete for the next twelve hours, Mike sat back and rested his head on his pillow. How long had he been in the military hospital? His normally sharp mind was being blunted by the medication, but he could accept that. So long as it took him as far from where he found himself, he didn't care. The usual tingling sensation he'd grown accustomed to over his stay at the hospital began in his stomach and slowly spread, followed by the numbing sensation of the pain reliever.

Mike closed his eyes and settled back in anticipation of seeing his friends once again. As another fabric of fog lowered over the reality he fled, Mike was certain someone said something about going home. *Home. Yes, going home would be nice.* The thought about being home warmed him as he took the offered canteen from Jones once again.

The nurse remained by his bed for a few seconds more to check on his vitals and the intravenous tubes running into his left arm. The skin of his arm was marked by a half dozen stitched shrapnel wounds covered with an antibacterial cream and bandages. In many ways, he should be able to stand and walk to the plane and fly home, but the patient complained about agonizing pain when he was fully conscious. At first, the medical staff thought it was due to his injuries but in time they understood he wanted a release, an escape from a world where his friends and squad mates were dead. He was addicted to Oxycodone and their facility lacked the proper facilities and personnel to help him.

With her work done for the moment, the nurse strode towards the nurses station inside the doorway into the ward. To either side of her, cots lined the walls. Some had an occupant while most were empty, their clean white sheets serving as a beacon to the next

recovering soldier. She knew her job was the easy one. Barring an unforeseen calamity, only the soldiers with light wounds were sent there.

Growing up, Gloria Stevenson wanted little more than to help her fellow man. Being part of a military family helped her choose her course when it came to medicine but what she hadn't counted on was developing an aversion to blood. For that reason, she was assigned the position she currently held. Little more than an orderly, Gloria busied herself checking bandages and IV's all the while refusing to lose control over some of the minor injuries she now faced.

Minor injuries. She stifled a chuckle at the words remembering back to the young man that changed her outlook forever. It was in her first week in the hospital when the soldier was brought in, badly wounded but stable. The field medics did a remarkable job in keeping him together until he reached the hospital and everything seemed to be an ordinary day. Then the surgery began.

At first, Gloria didn't know what bothered her more, the fact the young man looked to only be sixteen or the fact the doctor was putting his hands into the young man's abdomen. While it was no different than any of the surgeries she was previously apart of, the man's internal organs seemed to be spitting blood at them. The scene was eerily similar in that her mind went to a documentary she watched while in high school about volcanoes and how they built the Earth. The ensuing release of blood in the form of geyser caused Gloria to fall backwards and scramble across the floor screaming. Seeing the young man explode like a volcano terrified her beyond all reason.

After being taken out of the operating room, she learned one of the young man's veins opened when the doctor pulled a tiny piece of shrapnel from it. The small squirt of blood ended her career as a operating room nurse. She only kept her commission after her father pulled a few strings with his friends.

Picking up her pen, she began to make notes in her hourly journal for the other nurses when she stopped and looked at the Sergeant in the throes of his addiction. On more than one occasion Gloria found herself envious of him, not pitying him like the rest of her peers. While the other nurses had no issue with blood or the injuries they sometimes were forced to handle, they didn't share the same apathy with the men like she did.

More times than she could count, Gloria wished to escape her fears but she could never do it through a means like the young man. No, her father would never allow it to happen if he ever found out. He was already angry enough with her over her disgrace. Sighing, she finished her notes before sitting back in her chair to contemplate her day and career. If only things could be as easy for her as they were for others.



Seals Playing Football By DiVitto Kelly

One day a large wooden crate washed up upon on the frozen shores. Two curious seals waddled over, gazing upon the square shape. "What is it?" one asked, slightly blubbery with a face full of bristly whiskers.

"I'm not sure," the other replied, a bit leaner than the other seal and with spotted fur. "Shall we see what's inside?"

The two seals climbed on top of the wooden object, tugging and pulling but to no avail. A narwhal, who was observing from the water's edge, had

an idea. Using his pointy tusk, the narwhal popped the sturdy top right off.

“Thanks Mr. Narwhal,” said the portly seal, waving his little flipper.

“Anytime pups!” replied the narwhal before submerging under the brisk water.

The chubby seal peered into the crate. “I don’t see anything.”

“Be careful,” the other seal said. Just then, the inquisitive seal fell in.

“Are you okay?” the slender seal asked. The other one, still trying to find his footing in the large container, emerged with a funny object on his head. “I’m okay,” he said. “What’s this?”

Stuck on his furry head was a vibrant orange football helmet. The crate was full of football equipment: helmets, jerseys, footballs, and even a book on how to play the game. The two curious seals sat down in the snow and began reading. Soon they had an idea. “Let’s play a game of football!”

The two seals went back to the rookery and told everyone about football. Everyone was excited about playing such a popular sport. The seals divided up into two teams: the Sea Lions and the Stellar Seals. A few seal pups marked off the field while two towering polar bears volunteered to be the goal posts.

The two teams did their best to look like football players, making sure their uniforms were on right, the helmets perfectly straight, and a few even put that black stuff under their eyes. The sun peaked through a sea of clouds just as snow flurries began to fall. The moment was perfect for football. Curious animals sat around the rough and ready field eager for the game to begin.

With a whack of his tail, a lean looking Stellar Seal player booted the football to start the game. The kick returner slid his way between defenders before being tackled.

The first series was a comedy of errors. The quarterback dropped back to pass, but the ball slipped out of his icy flipper. On another play, the running back tried to gnaw on the football laces.

On third and 20, the quarterback threw a pass that bounced right off the wide receiver’s helmet.

After much fumbling and bumbling, the game remained scoreless at halftime. Despite a field full of mistakes, the two teams noticed something. Many more animals had showed up to watch the first ever football game.

As the second half started, more snow was falling. The arctic sun slowly set and the temperature was cold, cold, cold. “Now THIS is the frozen tundra!” said one of the players.

“Get your fresh, tasty fish here!” hawked a boisterous seal vendor.

Another one, wearing a cap, waved pennants in the wintry air. A pair of snowy foxes bickered back and forth about who was the better team.

Despite the conditions, the seals got better as the game went on. There were running plays, passing plays, and everything in between. The Sea Lions evened pulled off the Statue of Liberty play! Yet the game remained scoreless.

Meanwhile at an observation tower nearby, a scientist peered through his binoculars. “Hey MacReady, I think the seals are playing . . . football? What should we do?”

The bearded man exhaled. “Why don’t we just wait here for a little while... see what happens.” The other man shrugged his shoulders in compliance.

Late in the fourth quarter, a Sea Lion player kicked a field goal right between the polar bear’s outstretched paws. A score! The fans cheered wildly. On the next series, the Stellar Seals took the kickoff and marched down the snow-covered field. In no time they had the ball on the ten yard line with only a minute to play.

First and ten. On the first play, the running back slipped through the defenders for a five yard gain. With less than 40 seconds left, the quarterback threw a screen pass for two more yards. On third down, the quarterback dropped back to pass. Finding no one open, he scrambled down to the one yard line.

“Time out!” yelled the quarterback. It was forth down and with only seven

seconds left. Rather than play for a tie, the anxious coach diagramed the play in the snow, and then looked up at his players. “Good luck.”

The quarterback huddled his teammates, calling out the play. He surveyed the defense, trying to spot a weakness. The middle linebacker, a big, burly seal with a scar on his chin, gave the quarterback an icy cold stare.

“Hut, hut, hut,” barked the quarterback. He rolled to his right, but the defense pursued. Seeing there was no way to score, he made an about face and headed in the other direction.

The middle linebacker tackled the quarterback, but the ball squirted out and ended up in the end zone.

Seal upon seal jumped on top of each other, trying to get the ball. “Where’s the football?” the seals barked out in unison. Finally, the undersized running back emerged from the pile with the football secured in his mouth. Touchdown! With the extra point, the Stellar Seals defeated the Sea Lions 7-3.

Afterwards, the players shook flippers and congratulated each other on a well-played game. “Same time next week?” the seals asked.

Months later, the snow melted revealing large fields of grass. The same portly seal waddled over to the waters’ edge, peering into the horizon. “What are you looking for?” asked his friend.

“More crates,” he replied. “You know baseball season is just around the corner.”

Meanwhile, somewhere on a distant beach, two walrus discovered a large wooden crate. Using their tusks, both animals pried open the large object. One peered his bristly face inside. “What do you see?” asked the other walrus.

After much rustling, he replied, “What’s badminton?”



**The Aquarium
By DiVitto Kelly**

It was a good run. Sixty years is a long time in the entertainment business to be the top dog, or in this case, the top dogfish. Marineland, the first ever constructed aquarium of its kind way back in 1938, was now vacant, victim to the newer, multimillion dollar grandiose species. The ancient tanks were drained and emptied years ago, the assortment of sea life shipped off to newer facilities.

Back in the day, Americans far and wide lined up to experience the world of Jacques Cousteau up close and personal, encountering dolphins, sharks, and a myriad of tropical fish through tank windows. Now, the only things remaining were rust covered railings, crumbling cement walls, and the ghostly cheers of children soaking in decades of dolphin shows.

But there was something left behind in a makeshift shed, set off in the back, adjacent to the maintenance building where visitors never ventured. A lone circular tank, no more than fifteen feet in circumference and eight feet deep, remaining unspoiled. It was filled to the brim with stagnant water thick as soup, a green film sat on top. Dragonflies and other insects hovered above, but never landed. Occasional bubbles belched from the center.

Daniel blurted out to his friend Seth as they approached the abandoned facility at half past midnight. "Where's the spray paint?"

He was built like a fire hydrant, short and stocky. He always wore the same weathered Rolling Stones t-shirt with olive drab shorts that went past his

knees, making him appear like some Neanderthal groupie.

"Keep it in your pants dill weed," Seth answered abruptly, a former high school football star now borderline slacker at age nineteen. "See? I got it right here: red, white, and blue. Very patriotic don't you think?"

"Idiotic more like it," Daniel replied. "Where the hell are the neon colors? No orange or green in that bag? That's what gets us noticed!"

The two soon to be twenty year olds thought of themselves as budding graffiti artists, but more closely resembled bored, middle class burnouts. They had taken a fancy in defacing the old aquarium, spray-painting fat rounded letters around the facility like some sort of Botero inspired alphabet. Daniel was particularly proud of his latest, a Jaws shark painted with a big fat dube hanging from its crescent shaped mouth.

"Over here," Daniel called out, like he'd discovered a hidden treasure. He waved Seth over, pointing to the towering wood fence. "This needs to come down."

"Why all the warning signs?" asked Seth, observing a half dozen posted haphazardly on the faded blue painted fence. He was Frankenstein strong, enough where he could probably rip the individual planks out one by one. Standing on a cement bench, he placed his meaty hands on the top of the rotted wood and pulled one right out, repeating the process four more times. As Seth peered through the opening, he spotted something else.

"Hey, there's a chain-link fence behind this one."

"A what?" said Daniel, taken aback by the double fences. "Maybe the aquarium people forgot something there – something very valuable." Both young men perked up, Seth especially, whose eyes lit up with dollar signs. He was broke, and his parents were tired of flushing money down the toilet for their begging son.

The two managed to squeeze through the wood fence opening then greeted the chain link kind; the door

secured with a heavy-duty padlock. It smelled stale, like an old refrigerator that hadn't been opened for months. "Crap, looks like we'll have to climb it," said Seth, pulling feverishly at the locked door.

"It's doesn't look too bad, maybe eight feet tops," said Daniel confidently. "I'll lend you a hand."

"Why me first?" replied Seth, sounding like a dimwitted sidekick. He looked at his friend; he knew what was coming next.

"Chicken are we?" said Daniel, a bottom of the barrel loafer who specialized in nothing particular. "Here, you can borrow my flashlight."

Seth snarled at this friend. "Alright nipple head, but I get sixty percent of what's in there, you hear?" Daniel nodded, a bit surprised by his friend's sudden assertiveness.

Seth scaled the fence like a circus monkey; already halfway down the other side in a minute before dropping the last four feet onto the damp, moss covered floor; his heavy body weight creating a loud, squishy sound. "Hey, there's a tank in here; decent size too."

"Maybe there's a rare species of fish in there," Daniel called out, who was horrible at climbing anything. He quickly experienced an elementary school flashback where in gym class he failed to climb the fitness rope. All he could remember was his whole class laughing at him.

"Are you coming or not?" asked Seth, looking back at his friend. "This is really cool."

Seth focused the light beam as he circled around the three foot high cement barrier wall like an archeologist discovering some ancient temple. The strange body of water was still as death while an indistinguishable green growth drooped along the walls. The reflected moonlight shined through the yellowed rectangular skylights, providing the young man with more visibility.

"Hey, I see bubbles. You gotta get over here."

"I'm tryin, I'm tryin," said Daniel, slipping back down to the pavement floor. His blunt tan boots made it

impossible to get a grip inside the tight chain link spaces.

“Try taking your boots off; you’ll get better footing,” said Seth. Daniel shrugged his shoulders like he should have come up with the idea himself. The floor was damp and he wasn’t keen on dirtying his white socks but figured if his friend could climb it, so could he.

“I’m on my way,” announced Daniel, like he was doing something monumental. “Not too bad so far.” The fence rattled and squeaked in the quiet room as he prodded his way up ever so slowly.

Seth continued to circle the tank, hoping to spot something – anything, in the murky liquid. He shined the flashlight on the inside walls and noticed cigarette butts and empty beer cans – some full, scattered along the dank floor. “Other people have been here.”

He noticed a small opening on the opposite end where someone had crawled through. He picked up one of the full cans of beer, sniffing it. “Dude, this beer ain’t too old.” He wiped off the top and popped the top, beer shooting out everywhere before subsiding. He poured some in his mouth, but quickly spat it out. “Ugh, this beer is skunked supremel!”

“I coulda told you that pumpkin nuts,” commented Daniel, still struggling with his inner climbing demons.

“Come on D, get moving,” said Seth, searching for a stick. The dollar store flashlight, cheap with a weak beam of light, barely penetrated the water. There under rotting cardboard was a foot-long decaying stick. He picked it up then stroked the surface, brushing away the thick green coat of slime. But something didn’t feel right.

“What the hell?” Seth ran the beam of light down the stick. “Oh for Christ’s sake!” It was a human bone, ants nibbling on the remaining bits of flesh. His foot knocked into something heavy, the object skidding a few feet. His heart racing, Seth pointed the flashlight and

observed a human skull, partially decomposed.

He trembled, doubling over like he was going to puke. “Oh holy shit,” he uttered under his breath before turning back to the tank.

Seth glanced back at the water, suddenly mesmerized by a slight movement in the center. His eyes followed a stream of bubbles heading in his direction. He inched closer to the edge of the tank and peered as hard as he could through the muck, but couldn’t decipher anything. There was a shape, slowly emerging through the murkiness -- closer and closer, like a revealing magic eight ball. Seth gazed harder.

There, like a horrific reflection, it looked humanesque, but with reptilian features. It had a textured dark army green face, a tapered snout and eyes sinister - slanted, but with a human-like mouth only larger with savage teeth. Seth’s wide eyes were way ahead of his words. He didn’t have time to scream. The shape lunged out of the water, chomping down on Seth’s jugular, dragging him underwater in an instant.

“Alrighty, I’m here,” said Daniel, finally scaling the metal fortress, jumping down to the ground like his friend. “Seth?” He picked up the flashlight from the floor, brushing it off. He noticed a faint ripple in the water then wondered if his friend fell in, or did he take off, leaving him there alone.

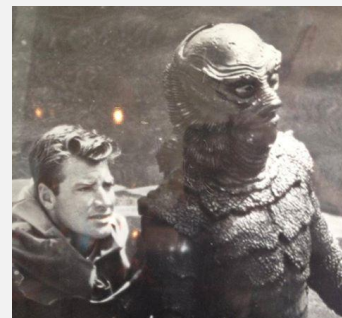
“Alright now, time to jump out and scare me,” said Daniel as he pointed the flashlight at the tank. The water had a brick red hue, almost rust colored; he could have sworn his friend said the water looked green.

Seth’s body suddenly rose to the surface, bloody and mangled. Daniel let out a primeval scream. He stood frozen in terror when the thing emerged from the water. Daniel stared in disbelief then scrambled towards the chain-link fence in desperation. He flung his outstretched hands upwards, grasping the thin metal, making a frenzied attempt to escape. “Help me please, anyone! Help!”

The gilled creature spilled out of the tank, then stood upright on its two legs, nearly seven feet tall. There was a rusted shackle attached to its right ankle and a chain that led back to the center of the tank. Whatever it was, it was meant to stay hidden. The creature hissed, closing in on Daniel, still frantically climbing the fence. He was almost to the top; almost. The creature, using its webbed hands and claws, easily scaled the barrier. It grabbed Daniel’s bowling pin like calf muscle and tore into it, shearing the flesh to the bone. Blood poured from the tattered wound. The creature climbed higher, digging its claws around Daniel’s waist. Both fell to the floor, the creature landing on top of the hapless victim. The last thing Daniel saw was the creature’s open maw biting down hard on his throat. The creature dragged the corpse to the side of the tank before devouring him.

A month later, a construction crew was out demolishing the remaining structures, making room for a brand new aquarium, promising to be bigger and better than the last one. The foreman surveyed the wood fence surrounding the decaying building and ordered it removed. A machine trashed both the wood and chain-link fences, revealing the round tank.

One of the men took a sledge hammer and crushed part of the barrier wall, the green water pouring out. It was later drained completely, revealing a mass collection of human bones. A thick, heavy chain sat on the bottom, the shackle severed in two.





Paralyzed
By Jamie White

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Rosalie stifled a scream and cowered under her blanket. She had to be having some weird dream that felt like she was awake. That was the only thing that made sense to her. There was no way she'd seen what she thought she'd seen walking by her bedroom door.

The figure was tall and so pale, she could see right through it. It seemed to pause outside her bedroom door a minute. She could swear it even looked in her direction. When it did, she held her breath, trying to bury herself further in the blanket.

What a joke... she would've laughed at herself if her vocal cords would cooperate. Every muscle in her body was paralyzed, but her mind was racing. She knew whether she made a sound or not, it was no use. The thing, whatever it was, had seen her. Rosalie was trapped in her bed, her eyes fixed on the door while praying the thing would just go away and leave her alone.

Wake up, wake up, wake up. The words ran through her mind like a mantra, hoping that would end the situation. There were no such things as ghosts and monsters; she'd been told that a million times. She had to be dreaming and she remembered her older sister talking about being able to will herself awake.

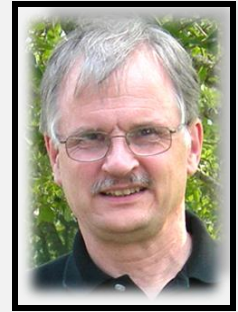
Normally, she'd take anything her sister said with a truckload of salt. The older girl spent most of her time trying to scare Rosalie, especially after they'd seen a scary movie. Still, it was worth a

try. What did she have to lose?
It's not working. The thought came with a wave of terror. Was she imagining things or had the figure come closer to the door? She hoped not, but it looked like it. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was it had. What did it want from her? Why couldn't she just wake up and end the whole thing?

Because you're not dreaming, genius. The thought made her freak out more than she already had. As long as she could keep pretending this wasn't real, she was safe. A dream couldn't hurt her, but this was most definitely not a dream. Briefly, she tried to convince herself that it was an intruder. As crazy as that sounded, an intruder seemed much less terrifying than the alternative.

The figure outside her door tilted its head as it continued to stare at her. Rosalie bit her lip and watched, wishing she could get her vocal chords and limbs to cooperate with her. After what seemed like an eternity, the figure straightened up and backed away from the door. Rosalie watched as the figure turned and moved to the girl's left, slowly moving out of the doorway.

As the figure disappeared from view, the young girl breathed a sigh of relief. The fact her voice was working at all startled her. She looked down towards her feet, wiggling a toe. She could move again.



Flip
By Rick Weber

Detective Christine Dunne stood at the door to the vacant interview room staring at an empty chair. "It's too good for him," she said out loud.

"Too good for whom?" She heard a voice behind her.

Turning she saw her partner Bill Prescott standing. The strong smell of stale coffee emanated from the white Styrofoam cup he held in his hand.

"Our defendant," she answered in a flat tone pointing to the chair. "He'll get comfortable and never talk."

"Not with what he has hanging over his head already," Bill let out in a slow drawl.

Christine Dunne, known as CD, to her colleagues in the Homicide Unit, had a reputation for getting the job done. Bill Prescott was also held in similar regard. For the task at hand, it was fitting that they caught this case. They were opposites who complemented each other perfectly. CD, a spitfire from New York, always let folks know where they stood. Bill, a quiet taciturn Texan, constantly evaluated what was in front of him.

They were waiting for a jail transport wagon to bring Edward Jones, a man they already charged with one homicide, to their office to be interviewed concerning another murder. Jones was classified as a career criminal with a long record for violent offenses, mostly purse snatches and aggravated assaults. Both CD and Bill knew he would be a challenge. Jones did hard time twice for robbery.

"Where is that jail wagon?" CD let out in an impatient snap.



“It’s probably stuck in morning traffic. Don’t worry it’ll get here,” Bill replied. “It has to make a drop off at the main courthouse first. Have you thought about how to approach this guy when we sit him down?”

Two nights earlier Jones was the wheelman in a convenience store robbery, and entered into a high speed chase with responding officers. The chase ended when he struck an oak tree head-on and got pinned inside their stolen vehicle by the airbags. His two accomplices in the back seat bailed out and got away. Jones was taken into custody. The night clerk at the store shot by one of Jones’ buddies was pronounced dead at the scene. Jones ended up charged with felony murder, as well as armed robbery, but had not yet “lawyered up”.

Exasperated CD bellowed, “We have to flip him on his two friends and cop out to that other job on Baker Street from last month. He knows he’s facing the death penalty for the one we got him on and would be stupid not to think he’s good for the other one, too.”

After taking a sip of his coffee Bill calmly said, “I agree. Jones has been through the system so much that he’s left his own indelible mark on it, but this is his first homicide beef. He’s got to be thinking about it. Loyalty to his buds can’t be that good.”

“It would have been a lot easier if those guys weren’t wearing pink hoodies when they did these jobs. Then the security cameras could have picked up their faces and we wouldn’t be here,” CD offered.

“Yeah, it also would’ve been nice if the gun we got out of their car a couple of nights ago matched the slugs from Baker Street. It didn’t,” Bill added.

“He may not know that, but I don’t want to take the chance. We can only leverage a guy like this with something he knows is for real,” CD said groping for a solution.

“We got nothing on a getaway car from Baker. No cameras on the outside of that business or any of the others in that neighborhood,” Bill said going over the initial offense report.

“Then why drop the hammer on the victim if they knew they had a clean getaway?” CD asked again hoping for an answer.

“They didn’t do as much homework on this last one. The whole thing was on video from start to finish from half a dozen angles. They had to know they were taking a big risk, but why,” Bill commented going over the report from the second scene.

“Jones isn’t a junkie but maybe his friends are. The shooting on Baker may have also given them a new rush they never had before,” CD said going over Jones’ rap sheet.

“The only links to both jobs are the pink hoodies. Jones’ attorney, when he gets one, will eat us for lunch if we add the second charge. He agreed to talk with us today without a lawyer. May be on a fishing trip of his own,” cautioned Bill.

CD shook her head. “If Jones leaves here feeling the least bit relieved, then we’re done. Do we know who he’s been hanging out with since he got out the last time?”

“Yeah, he’s been at a halfway house since leaving the joint and been making his curfews except for the night he got caught.”

CD groaned, “Great system! I take it that everyone there will back up his story...”

Bill interrupted, “Jones doesn’t know that. These other guys we’re looking for may also be from the halfway house. The residents will look the other way if one of them misses curfew, but three? No way! Let’s put the ball in their court. If we start leaning on the other people there, we may not need Jones to flip. They all have something to lose. Hell, we may even get a couple of arrests out of it.”

“Not bad, it’s worth a try. How many people do they have living at that place?”

“About forty, thirty in the men’s unit and ten in the women’s.”

“I wish we would have looked at this angle sooner.”

“With everything else that’s been going on, we haven’t had time. The

Captain has been pushing hard to have both cases cleared and we all know what rolls downhill. There’s no clock ticking for us. We can do this right...” Bill told his partner.

“And we will,” CD chimed in.

The sound of leg irons clanging against the floor caused them to look down the hall. They saw two corrections officers escorting Jones in their direction. He was clad in an orange prisoner jump suit with his hands shackled in front of him connected to a belly chain. As Jones neared them the detectives saw bit of a smirk on his face and a belligerent look in his eyes.

Before the trio stopped, CD addressed the guards, “Take him back to jail. We don’t need to talk to him.”

Jones’ smirk turned to a frown. Before he could say anything the officers turned him around and led him out of the office as CD shut off the light and closed the interview room door.

“I wonder how long it will take before you get his first collect call from the jail.” Bill asked rhetorically.

“Too soon,” replied CD. “Do you have the residents’ list from the halfway house?”

“Being run through Records as we speak.”

The interview would have been the lazy way out and the least productive one at this stage in the game. CD knew that they would have to come up with something soon if they wanted any interrogation to be fruitful.

The initial screening eliminated all of the females from the list as suspects; three were working night jobs at the time of both offenses. Three were in the advanced stages of pregnancy, and not able to participate. Four were on assigned duties at the halfway house as verified by the supervising staff.

Jones’ abrasive personality kept him from having a close relationship with any of the women which was also the center’s policy against them.

Interviews with the ladies about Jones in general yielded negative results for the investigators.

The men, on the other hand, were a mixed bag; everything from car thieves to drug dealers. The only common element they all had was that they never did time with Jones. From their initial interviews they were all accounted for on the nights of the crimes. Thirty men to weed through, it would not be an easy task. On the first go around none gave up anything about Jones.

“Cell phone records were the first thing I had checked,” Bill said as he and CD sat down at their adjoining desks. “Nada. Probably the first place they knew we’d look.”

“One big happy family, why call when face to face is more convenient,” CD remarked sarcastically.

“No two work together during the day,” Bill said to change the focus of his assessment.

“Any with horsepower like Jones?” CD asked with renewed interest.

“Over half with violent pasts.”

“Where does, or did, Jones work on the outside?” CD pressed.

“Auto supply, he delivered parts to shops all over town.”

CD’s expression quickly brightened, “I take it he used a company truck.”

“Yeah.”

“...with a company credit card for gas,” continued CD.

Bill slowly nodded his head and followed, “I’ll check with his boss. If we can put him at both places prior to the jobs, they’ll be steps in the right direction. Especially when it comes to Baker.”

“Anyone else with a lot of mobility in their jobs?” CD asked.

“Some, a plumber’s helper, a couple of day laborers that have to be checked out,” Bill said referring to his notes.

The next week was brutal for CD and Bill checking out the center’s other residents. They both knew that it could all lead to a dead end. Jones’ job as a parts courier did not put him at either location prior to the crimes. Talking with the employers who gave the residents jobs had to be done gingerly. CD and Bill only had to look at those who worked outside of their employers’

facilities. This came to eight who floated through the community on an average day.

Of the eight, four were laborers for different construction companies at varying job sites. All were picked up at central locations each day and dropped off back at them when work finished. None allowed for intermediate stops such as convenience stores. The list now came down to four; a plumber’s helper, an electrician, and a couple of furniture movers.

Midway through the week, the phone rang on CD’s desk. She picked it up to hear the recorded solicitation say, “Edward Jones calling collect from a correctional institution. To accept, if ‘yes’ push 1. If ‘no’, push 2 or simply hang up.” CD considered the latter but opted to accept the call to see what Jones wanted. Bill sat with interest across from her as she took the call.

“Detective Dunne,” Jones said to her on the line. “I wonder if we could pick up where we left off.”

“Left off where?” CD asked trying to gauge where he was coming from.

“Well, we never really got started,” Jones said in a patronizing tone.

CD quickly judged that this would be a long drawn out conversation with very little content. Before she let Jones go on, she cut him off.

“And, we’re not getting started here. Mr. Jones, if you have something to offer, say it. You know I can’t make you any promises, and whatever you say can be used against you in court.”

“Uh, uh, uh,” he began to stutter.

CD decided to end the call by giving him something to mull over in his cell.

“As you know, we’re looking into other suspects. Mr. Jones, the one thing that I can tell you and so will your lawyer, when you get one, is that the first one through the door gets the best deal.” Not waiting for a reply, CD hung up.

“That went well,” Bill told his partner. “What if he calls our bluff?”

“He’s down for one and worried about making it two,” CD said still annoyed with Jones.

“We have nothing yet for Baker Street,” Bill observed.

“He probably thinks we’re close. Anything stand out on those last four guys from the center?” CD asked in a more collected tone.

Bill nodded and said, “The plumber’s helper and the electrician –no, but the two movers –yes.”

“How’s that?”

Going into his notes, he explained, “The plumber’s helper and the electrician have pretty tight routines allowing for no side trips. The two movers work for different companies and stop by convenience stores when they’re on the job to use the men’s room, get coffee, and stuff like that.”

“Do you think they may have scoped out our two places beforehand?”

“I got a student intern going through the security videos and she may the movers at both spots prior to the robberies,” Bill said in his methodical way.

“Let’s see what she has,” CD let out rising from her desk.

In a cramped audio visual room, CD and Bill sat down with the intern who reviewed one questionable video from each site with them. Closer inspection showed one mover, Nate West, at the last location a week before the incident buying cigarettes and looking around the store. His interest did not appear to be as much in the goods on the shelves as it was at the security cameras on the walls.

“That’s what got my attention when I looked at the footage,” the intern said. “He was the only customer there with a security fetish. The same for Baker Street but it’s a different guy.”

The Baker Street video showed the second mover, Peter Hale, acting the same way a couple of days before the crime inside a fast food place a couple of blocks away from the target location.

“Still not much to go on,” Bill said.

“Time for The Box,” CD countered.

The next day CD had West and Hale each brought into the Homicide Office from their jobs by patrol officers. CD and Bill each took charge of one. CD had West, and Bill had Hale. Both

had been separated and had not had contact with each other since entering the building. They could see each other. At that moment, partly by design, the sound of leg irons clanging on the floor caught everyone's attention. Edward Jones, the person in the leg irons, was seen being led to a holding cell by jail guards. Jones saw both West and Hale as did they him. Not much time was given for the trio to exchange visual clues. West and Hale were each taken to an interview room which detectives called "The Box". The only question CD and Bill shared between themselves was, "Who would be the first to flip?"

CD began with Hale who denied everything. Bill had the same luck with West. After about an hour, the detectives thought it was time for Jones to be grilled. With West and Hale's interviews being continued by other detectives, CD began Jones' interrogation with Bill present.

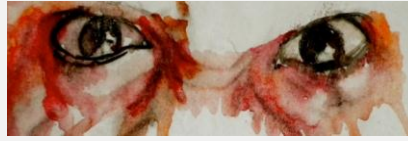
"Do you remember what I said on the phone?" CD asked Jones.

"Yeah, whoever comes through the door first gets the best deal."

"Other detectives are talking to your friends. What's it going to be?" CD asked the prisoner.

Jones buckled on the bench in the holding cell, and without further prompting gave a statement outlining both homicides from start to finish. He even included the location where the gun used in the Baker Street crime had been disposed. He named West as the trigger man in both murders. A fact corroborated later by Hale. Jones admitted to being the wheel man in both robberies. His only consideration was to get the death penalty off of the table.

By the end of their shift, Detectives Dunne and Prescott had gotten all of their men charged and a second homicide cleared.



Guided Eyes By Joanne Williams

Garlen was sitting inside of his Doctor's office with his hands closed together, nervously looking at the male model's eyes on the cover of a magazine. "Stop staring at me", he said. Garlen picked up the magazine and tore it to pieces.

"Garlen, the doctor is ready to see you now", said the nurse.

"Garlen, feeling guilty of letting his phobia get to him, took the shredded magazine into the doctor's office. It was a small office with a desk and three chairs with family pictures on her desk. She was jotting down notes on her pad as Garlen answers her questions.

"I'm sorry Dr. Croleen, he just wouldn't stop looking at me," said Garlen.

"Garlen, it's been years of you dealing with these thoughts about people in magazine photos. The people in the photos are not looking at you. I will assure you that it's only in your imagination," said the doctor.

Garlen looked at the pictures on her desk. There was a new picture of her and a man standing on the beach holding each other.

Garlen asks, "Who is that guy in the picture with you?"

"That's my new husband. We got married on the beach two weeks ago." Dr. Croleen. "We are doing an experiment with people who are afraid of being watched. Here's the book." The doctor handed him a book with eyes on the front cover and blank pages. "This may be the only way to get over your phobia of photographs."

"What do I have to do?" Garlen asked as he flipped through the pages.

"All you have to do is cut out the eyes in the front and put them on your eyes. I will begin writing your story tomorrow morning. You will live

according to what I write. Don't worry; I won't put you in any danger. I just want you to live a happy life."

"I'm confused." Garlen replied.

"Trust me, I know what to do.

Whatever you do, don't take the eyes off until I tell you to. Just go with the flow. Good things will unfold in your future," said Dr. Croleen. Garlen cut the eyes out and put them on.

The next morning, Dr. Croleen started writing in the book, giving Garlen a wife.

Garlen woke up to the smell of breakfast. He walked into the kitchen and saw a woman standing in front of the stove cooking.

"Who are you?" Garlen asks the woman.

"Don't be silly, dear, I'm your wife. I made your breakfast honey", the woman said.

"This isn't right; it must be a dream," he said.

"What's not right, honey?" she replied.

"I need to make a phone call." Garlen excused himself from the kitchen to call the doctor.

"What's going on with me?" Garlen asks after telling the Dr. Croleen about his peculiar morning."

The doctor explained. "I'm writing your story Garlen and you are living what I write. I figured that you don't need to travel this journey alone, so I wrote you a wife. Keep those eyes on. Your life is going to be great."

Garlen walked back into the kitchen to look at his instant wife. "What's wrong honey," she asked.

"I have a lot on my mind right now, I'm going for a walk", Garlen said as he headed out the door. He strolled down to the park and rested under a tall tree. He felt something walking across his foot. He looked down and saw a brown little puppy looking back at him.

"Hello there little doggy," he said

Garlen picked up the puppy and notices that it has a collar around its neck. He called the owner and returned the puppy. The owner thanked Garlen and gave him a reward of five hundred dollars. He was happy about the good

deed he did. Wanting to tell his new wife, he headed home.

Walking up to the house, he saw a brand new red convertible sitting in his driveway. He looked at address on the house to make sure it was his house.

“Happy birthday honey!” his wife said as she ran out the house to give him keys to his new car. He hugged his wife and drive off in his car with the top down. He jammed to his favorite radio station and drove down past Park Road to the local bar. After talking about his newfound luck, he called the doctor to thank her for his good luck story. Garlen savored his few days of good luck, but things took a turn for the worse. He was driving in the convertible when out of nowhere, he felt something warm drop from the sky on his arm. He looked at his arm to realize that it is bird poop.

“Yuck” he said as he tried to wipe it off his arm. Holding one hand on the steering wheel, he drove off the road and nearly crashed into a telephone pole. He finally made it home. His wife greeted him at the dinner table with a hot plate of food.

“Aren’t you going to eat with me tonight, honey?” she said.

“No, I think I’m going to go to bed,” he replied. Garlen called Dr. Croleen twice, but there was no answer.

The next morning, Garlen went for his customary walk down Park Road. He saw the cute brown puppy on a leash. He walked up to pet the puppy, but the owner came running and said to Garlen, “Get away from my dog. You returned him sick. You poisoned my dog.”

“What? I didn’t give your dog anything. I simply returned him to you,” Garlen replied.

“I want the reward money back, or I’m going to take you to court,” said the owner as he marched down the road.

Galen started to walk home wondering what was going on. He called Dr. Croleen, but again, there was no answer.

When Garlen got to his house, the driveway was empty. He stood there in the driveway wondering where his car

was. Then he heard it coming towards him at high speed. Garlen jumps out of the way onto the grass.

His wife drove the car into the driveway, coming to a screeching halt when she hit the wall.

“What is wrong with you?” Garlen asked while trying to catch his breath.

His wife was yelling hysterically. “You didn’t eat dinner with me!”

Garlen ran down the street and took out his cell phone, calling the doctor again, but still there no answer.

He arrived at her office out of breath. “Is Dr. Croleen in?”

“No, she has not been here for days,” the nurse said.

Garlen arrived at the doctor’s home address, pounding on the door. There was no answer so he turned the knob and opened it. Inside the house, he found the doctor tied to a chair with a sock in her mouth. Garlen quickly set her free.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” said the doctor. “It’s my husband, he’s in a rage. He stole the book from me and finished writing your story. Look, it’s right there on the desk.”

Garlen went to the desk and flipped through the book to the last page. Garlen’s mouth dropped open when he read the last sentence. “Lead Garlen to the house so that he will be murdered.”

“Garlen, take the eyes off now!” screamed Dr. Croleen.

As Garlen reached for the eyes, he was caught off guard by a cord being wrapped around his neck.

“Get away from my wife,” yelled the husband. Struggling for his life, Garlen managed to elbow him in the gut and wiggle his way free. Garlen grabbed the book and ran.

Garlen once again reached up to take the eyes out, but couldn’t. “I can’t remove them!”

He felt a thud against the back of his head and fell to the ground. Garlen stares at the crazy husband and realizes that his eyes are glowing neon yellow. The husband tried to hit him again, but tripped over Garlen’s leg and falls to the ground. Dr. Croleen jumped

on top of Garlen and rips the magic eyes off of his face.

The doctor and Garlen run down the street and call the police. Garlen, relieved that he cheated death, hugged the doctor as they waited for the police to arrive.

A week later, Garlen went to the doctor’s office waiting to be called. He is staring at the model on the magazine and takes it, ripping it into pieces.

In the room Dr. Croleen asked, “How do you feel?”

“I’m still shaken up by the whole guided eye thing,” he said.

“Well, did it help you overcome the fear of the photos staring at you?” she asked.

“It’s not only magazines, but books now too!” he said.

“I wish I could help you more,” the doctor replied.

“You can,” he said. “Let me write your story.”

“But my story is already written,” she replied.

“By whom?” Garlen asks.

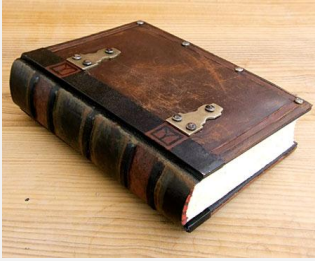
“It’s was written by my husband,” she added. “It’s the ending to what he started. Now, I must finish it.”

Doctor Croleen posted a wicked smile. When she stood up, her eyes flashes neon yellow and jumped across the desk.

Garlen sprang up and stumbled over the chairs to get to the door. “Help!”

Garlen fell to the ground as Dr. Croleen jumped on top of him. He tried to kick his way out, but to no avail; her strength was too much to handle.

She put her hands around Garlen’s neck and choked him until his eyes turned red and body lay motionless on the floor.



A Thief's Journal
By Yeshua Espailat

May 23

I was hired by a new client to steal a book from someone's private vault. Definitely the weirdest thing I've been hired to steal, but money is money and I need *lots* of it. So I guess it doesn't matter in the end. Supposedly, this book is thousands of years old and contains ancient secrets to the true origins of humanity or some weird bullcrap like that. I hate it when these crazies come looking to hire me. They pay decent enough, but the jobs are always so boring and low key it takes me back to the days when I was just learning how to pick basic locks to get into random houses. I guess I shouldn't complain, though. If this book is really *that* important I could always keep it for myself and sell it to the highest bidder. There's always a market for something like that.

May 24

Spent the whole day scoping out the place where this book is being kept and taking notes about security shifts and whatnot. Apparently, this thing is being held by Future Sight Industries of all people. Why would *they* have something like that? I know them by name, but not much else so I did some reading. They're a huge juggernaut in the corporate world dealing in everything from pharmaceuticals to computer technology, but... old books? Something's not right about that. I better take a few extra days to do more research before I end up involved in something I don't want to be a part of.

May 25

Jennifer came by today, so I spent all day and night with her. She just randomly showed up after I got out of bed this morning. I had to run off and hide the engagement ring I picked out last month. I don't think I've ever panicked like that before. I booked us a reservation for June 30th at the first restaurant I ever took her to. Our three year anniversary is the perfect day to propose. I'd be lying if I said wasn't nervous, but I know she'll say yes.

She doesn't know what it is I actually do for a living and I'd prefer to keep it that way. Most people wouldn't understand that a professional thief isn't the same as your run-of-the-mill burglar. I don't break into another person's house just to take their TV or something arbitrary like that. I've made enough money in the last 12 years to live off of for the rest of my life now, so I plan on going into retirement after a couple more higher-profile jobs. I could give it all up right now if I wanted to, but I just want to have a couple more "adventures" before I finally stop. Anyway, I'll try to see what I can do about getting some kind of security clearance for the job tomorrow.

May 27

I managed to swipe a keycard from the girl at the front desk. Thank God young girls are easily distracted by sweet talk. It's all part of the game. I probably could've been a spy if I wanted to, but the idea of working for the government would mean too many strict rules I'd have to follow. Anyway, I got what I needed from her. As luck would have it, the thing has a chip in it with all kinds of data I can use to get around the building, so that's what I'm working on now. Should have something interesting in an hour or so after the computer deciphers all of the encryptions. I'm a little shocked to see how hard it is to get anything from the keycard of a receptionist, but I guess a company like Future Sight would *want* to take every precaution in case someone like me got their hands on a key to their doors.

June 1

Well, I've been roaming around the halls of their office building for a few days now and the place is just as boring as any other office in the city. This keycard only has access to the doors with the lowest security clearance, so there's lots of ties and ass kissing everywhere; it's nauseating. I was able to get my hands on the blueprints for the building and there were a few empty spots that didn't make any sense to me. I'm going to check them out after I tweak this card to give me more access.

June 3

Now we're talking! I found an elevator that isn't on any blueprint and most employees don't even seem to know it's there. If that book is going to be anywhere in that building I'd bet it would be a secret basement level nobody except the higher-ups would know about. I can't do much else to this keycard to get more access, so I'll have to get in my own way. I can't wait to see what kinds of goods they've got hiding in the building. Maybe I can pick up a few things for myself, too. Illegal corporate secrets are lucrative than finding oil; they *never* want people to that they're hiding.

June 7

Holy crap! That wasn't just a basement! That was a whole goddamn building hidden underneath a normal one! Jackpot! I couldn't stay down there for too long because I wasn't prepared for that kind of surprise. I *barely* managed pickpocket a better keycard from one of the patrolling guards, so tomorrow night I'll be able to get an idea of what I'm dealing with. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited. I feel like a kid on Christmas Day. The underground facility is the tree and every little secret it holds is just another present waiting for me to tear off the wrapping paper.

June 9

I hit a snag with one of their security systems last night. When the alarms

went off they had guards crawling all over the place. I had to spend the night and most of the next day in the air ducts waiting for them to tone down the security presence a bit so I could freaking leave. I have no idea what Future Sight is doing underneath the city, but it must be serious. I'm starting to think I may be getting in over my head. I should call my client in the morning. There's obviously something he isn't telling me. I want to know everything he knows about this book before I lay a finger on it.

June 20

It's been a little while since the last time I made an entry, so I guess I'll just write the short and sweet version of what's going on; My client believes that this book could destroy the universe. That's it. He's just a lunatic, but he's still offering to pay me. He even offered to pay me double after I told him how risky it was for me to go down there for a damn book. Maybe I'm taking advantage of him, but if he's willing to pay me that much then who am I to refuse? With that extra money I could take Jennifer on a trip around the world for 2 years as a wedding present without touching another cent! But is the book *really* that important? I've seen people obsess over something *they* thought was important, but this is the first time that one of them offered to double my pay and it's definitely the first time I've ever seen something like it being hidden by a company like Future Sight as opposed to another crazy lunatic. It's pointless to dwell on it right now, though. When I have the book in my hands I can see what's inside for myself.

So anyway, I found a map of all the basement levels and there are 27 floors in total. The floor with the highest level of security is most likely where this all-powerful book is, so tomorrow night will be the big payoff. I've got all the tactical information I need and I got my hands on some of the most high-end equipment I could find. I'm pretty sure I could pull this off without a hitch, but I definitely won't be letting my guard

down while I'm there. The security personnel carry military grade rifles and one shot to a limb will pretty much force me into early retirement. I can't afford a single mistake.

June 21

I got the freaking book, but not without setting off every goddamn alarm in the city! The freaking thing is locked, too, so I can't open it up to read whatever is inside without breaking the lock. That asshole better have the key because I am NOT going back down there! I've never had so many armed guards hunting around for me like that before. I could've sworn I saw a guy in some kind of red armor, but I was so busy running and hiding that I couldn't get the best look at him. He kind of looked like something out of a sci-fi movie or maybe a robot of some kind. I have no idea what those people have down there, but they've clearly got a *lot* of secrets they don't want anyone to know about. I better head out. Whatever that thing was, I have a feeling it's more dangerous than any guard with a rifle. They didn't talk to it or even acknowledge it as if it was more of a tool than an actual person. It just kept tracking me down and finding me every time I hid somewhere and the normal guards lost me. I can't stay at home tonight. I don't think Jennifer would mind if I stayed with her for a couple of weeks.

June 21 (cont'd)

Jennifer isn't home, but she gave me a key to her apartment a couple years ago, so I didn't have to pick the lock thankfully. I'm worried, though. She never leaves home this late on a Tuesday night, not when she has work in the morning. Her car was still in the parking lot, too. I might just be paranoid, but is it possible they got here before me?

June 28

I've been running for a whole week now and I still have the freaking book! I tried calling my client so I could unload this thing on him and get paid, but he

doesn't answer his phone and I don't know where he lives. He gave me a fake name, too, so I've got no way to find his address. The only way I could find him is to go back home, get my computer, and try to do a trace on his cell phone if he even has it on him. I haven't heard anything from Jennifer and neither has anyone else. They must've gotten to her and I don't know what to do. I'm a thief, not a soldier. I can't mount a rescue without getting caught myself. God, I hope she's okay wherever she is. I have to figure something out. Maybe if I just give the book back to them they'll let us go.

June 29

I called them. They were expecting me. They told me they figured out who I was almost immediately and kidnapped Jennifer the night I stole the book. These bastards work fast. They said they'd exchange her for the book and let us go, but I don't believe them. I've seen the kinds of things they keep in that underground place and I know there's more than one facility like it buried under our feet. I have to see what's in this book and leave something behind in case I don't make it back out with Jennifer. I never should've taken this job. I should've just told this guy to piss off the second I saw the underground building and the guards armed to the teeth. This whole thing is screwed up and there isn't a goddamn thing I can do about it.

June 29 (cont'd)

I opened the book. If what I saw is true... we're all screwed. They won't let me go. Jennifer is probably dead. If anyone finds this journal my name was David Frost. I may have been a professional thief, but I wasn't a bad guy. I made mistakes like anyone else and now I have to take responsibility for what I've done. I love you, Jennifer. I guess we won't be celebrating our anniversary. I'm so sorry, baby. I should've quit this job the second I got down there and saw the facility. This whole thing is so much bigger than I thought. All I can do now is hope that

someone else can do something about Future Sight Industries. I'm as good as dead already.

I hope someone finds this journal and takes it seriously. There are people out there who will listen and they'll help you. There always are. Future Sight and the world you know aren't what they seem. Nothing you see is true. Don't bother trying to find out more information before taking any action. Just find their enemies and show them this journal. Find them and help them fight in any way you can because if you don't, you'll have as much blood on your hands as they will when the end finally comes.

-David Frost

Shadow Fields **By Yeshua Espaillat**

The foreboding gray mansion known as Shadow Fields stood alone on a desolate hilltop, lost among a dreary sea of skeleton trees. The low-hanging dark clouds that seemed to almost touch the roof made it look like it came from a world of shadows. Dried up leaves would occasionally be blown across the land it sat on giving it a menacing feeling to any who see it

Built in the early 1930's for a man named Reginald Lavalley, there have been countless reports of bizarre occurrences and mysterious disappearances since the unsolved death of Mr. Lavalley. The staff that once worked for him claimed to hear the sounds of lone footsteps shuffling through the empty halls like a drunken man years after he passed. They even claimed to hear someone playing the piano in the library. These plus several other eerie rumors made Shadow Fields a popular tourist attraction during the 70's.

People would travel from all around the world to the haunted mansion hoping to witness the supposed ghost of Lavalley. The stories were bringing a decent income and the interior was

restored to its original art deco designs after it began to decay, but the once popular tourist attraction became the scene of several police investigations. Five people staying in separate rooms scattered around the mansion vanished without a single trace and two others were found dead in the hall where Lavalley was rumored to have disappeared. After a decade of investigations, it was permanently closed to the public and began to decay once again. Not a single soul stepped foot inside the mansion...until today.

Amy McKinley, alone in the world, arrived at Shadow Fields late one night. She stepped out of the cab with her bags, paid the driver, and sent him on his way. There was a heavy fog all around that seemed to dance in the moonlight. Her instincts told her not to ever come to this place, but as the world's foremost paranormal investigator, she felt it was her duty to find out exactly what was happening in the mansion and try to put together the pieces of this unsolvable puzzle. The stories she heard about this mansion were unlike any other she had come across and it piqued her curiosity to the point where she had to know. She had to know what happened to Lavalley, why he was haunting this ghastly estate, what happened to the people who vanished and died, and she had to find out what other secrets the mansion itself may have been hiding.

She dug into her pocket for the key to the front gate wishing that she had waited for the rest of her team to arrive, but like all of history's greatest explorers, she wanted to be the first one in. With the key in hand, she approached the heavy iron gate feeling a cold shiver run up and down her spine. Her heart began to race as she inserted it into the lock and turned it. Then, the rusty gate slowly creaked open allowing her access to the stone path leading up the mansion's main entrance.

"Here we go," she said to herself not realizing the nightmare she was about to enter.

She took in a deep breath and made her first step onto the property. She reached the main entrance and just as she put her finger to the bell, the massive oak doors swung open, and there stood Marcus Lamb. She laughed inside when she first saw him. He was an old man with pale skin, nearly dead eyes, and few strands of greasy white hair; everything she expected to see from a cheesy horror film. She was able to stay professional and greeted him with a handshake.

"I'm so glad you could make it, Ms. McKinley. You're here a little earlier than I expected," said Marcus.

"I wanted to start the preliminary tests to save my team the trouble of hauling all of their equipment here in case things don't pan out."

"Did the gate give you any trouble?"

"No, the key you delivered worked just fine."

"That's odd. Usually, it doesn't allow anyone else to waltz in."

With a raised brow she asked, "It *doesn't allow* you said?"

He dismissed her and went on, "Yes, well, let me show you where you'll be staying."

She gazed past him and into the main lobby in awe. A deep red carpet led from the doors to a large staircase that split apart to the east and west wings. Up above, she could see a beautiful golden chandelier that lost its shine. Pillars made of marble lined the walls giving it an almost royal feel, but at the same time bathed many areas in shadows adding to the sense of it being a haunted mansion.

Looking nervously in every direction, Amy followed Marcus up the wide staircase and into the west wing as the sound of their footsteps on the thin carpet echoed throughout the vast room. She noticed various brightly colored paintings were hung on the walls depicting everything from children playing in peaceful fields to angels saving a woman and lifting her into the heavens. The only painting different from the others was a large oil painting of Lavalley himself hanging on the

section of wall on the stairs between the east and west wings. He was probably in his late forties with deep-set eyes, no hair, and an oddly shaped brooch on his coat. Already her mind was riddled with questions, so she decided it was time to start asking them.

“Was Mr. Lavalle a big art collector?”

“Not only art, but statues and gems, too. He was wealthy beyond imagination, but all he cared about was collecting rare objects. He paid all of us ridiculously when he was alive, so we knew money meant nothing to him.”

“Did anyone ever ask where he got some of these collectables?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll see why in a moment. I keep all the pleasant pieces out in the lobby, but the others are somewhat...disturbing.”

She realized exactly what he meant when they walked through the west wing door. It was poorly lit and incredibly stuffy, but the paintings stood out clearly enough for her to see. Lavalle seemed to have a taste for gothic and biblical works of art. The paintings here were much darker in color than what was in the lobby and they depicted terrible events like the infamous witch burnings in Salem, people drowning during the great flood from the story of Noah’s Ark, and even a painting showing a demon about to strike a mother and baby sitting peacefully in a rocking chair.

“Was Lavalle a religious man?” asked Amy as they continued walking through the narrow halls.

“Not at first,” he began, “Mr. Lavalle started by collecting beautiful works of art like the ones in the lobby. A few years later, he added statues that were replicas of priceless work like Michelangelo’s David, but then he included rare gems.”

“That’s when he changed?”

“Yes. I remember he was especially protective of one jewel when it arrived. I can’t recall the name, but he kept it locked in a small wooden box that had

strange carvings on it. The jewel itself was red and small, but it looked to me like it was part of a larger piece.”

“Is there any way I could take a look at it?”

Marcus shook his head with a disappointed look on his face, “Unfortunately, I don’t know where it is. He brought it over when the east wing was being built and made changes to the architect’s plans after showing us the jewel. After construction of the east wing was finished, he went back and made alterations to the west wing. During all of the construction and remodeling, he claimed to us that he lost the box with the jewel shard in it.”

“But you didn’t believe him?”

“Not one bit. His personality had changed so drastically after he acquired the jewel that I knew he was lying. He seemed to be in a constant state of paranoia, he was delusional, and he even attacked a member of the house staff in the middle of the night claiming she was some kind of demon that was going to kill him if he didn’t give her the jewel. Shortly after that incident, he told us he lost it.”

“He attacked someone?”

“Yes, but he paid for her medical treatments and gave her a hefty sum to keep quiet about the whole situation. He even built another smaller mansion behind this one for the staff to live in to avoid any other incidents.”

They arrived at the room where she would be staying. The walls here didn’t have artwork of any kind making it feel much less intimidating than what she’d seen so far. Across from the large bed against the wall to her right was a door that led to a small bathroom.

Unfortunately, it was just as stuffy and dusty as everything else she had seen so far. She set her bags down by the bed and sat on it to feel how comfortable it was for fear that she might spend the next few nights sleeping on an old lumpy mattress.

“It’s softer than I thought,” she said.

“It’s one of those Tempur-Pedic beds, actually.”

“What? They had those in the thirties?”

“Not everything here is old. I had a few things replaced a year ago thinking I’d be able to open the mansion to the public again, but then I decided I was too old to run a business.”

“Oh,” she replied feeling dumb after asking.

“Well, if you need anything, you can use the phone to reach me in the secondary mansion. The number is on a card next to it on the table. Goodnight,” he said with a smile as he left the room and closed the squeaky door behind him.

“Tempur-Pedic beds?” She thought to herself, “How haunted can this place be if it has Tempur-Pedic beds? I bet that story about the shard was just something he told the guests that used to stay here to make them feel scared about this place. The paintings were probably added later on to give Lavalle’s insanity more realism. I’ll probably be on my way back home tomorrow night.”

Marcus Lamb, the master of Shadow Fields, often disappeared mysteriously during the following days. He usually was nowhere around while Amy was conducting her tests of the mansion. She thought it was a bit strange considering how most of her clients liked to see how she hunted for ghosts. Every morning, he’d knock on her door and greet her in the same worn out suit he met her in. At times, he seemed to be distant when talking with her during meals like he left his body temporarily and went out into space. Even stranger though, was the fact that he never once asked her how the preliminary investigation was going. It was like he didn’t even care.

When she put more thought into it, she realized Marcus never really made it clear why he hired her to begin with. She dismissed the question in her mind only because it would serve as a distraction. She spent three days straight taking photos of various rooms, using her EMF detector to get energy readings, walking around the darkest places with infrared thermal scanners, and every test came up with negative results. As much as she didn’t want to

admit it, the story of the haunted mansion was turning out to be as bogus as Marcus' story about Lavalley.

The very night Amy was about to call it quits and break the news to Marcus, something happened in her room that terrified her like nothing else. She concluded her hunt for the night and wanted to shower before telling him the mansion wasn't haunted so she could head back home. She went into her bathroom with a small bag and ran the hot bath water. While the water was running she turned her back to the tub, set her bag on the counter where the sink was, and rummaged through it to find her iPod. When she reached over to shut the faucet off, a brief flash of light blinded her and disappeared. Her eyes adjusted a moment later and her bath water was crimson red. In confused awe, she dipped the tip of her finger into it only to realize that the tub had been filled with blood. Her body was suddenly frozen with panic as the odor bombarded her sense of smell. Before she could react, a rotting hand broke through the surface of the red plasma and took hold of her wrist. She tried to pull away, but only managed to yank the assailant out of the tub and they fell over on the floor with the blood-covered intruder on top of her. Amy caught a good look at the person and felt her stomach shoot up into her throat. It was actually a decayed corpse of a woman shrieking in her face like a terrified banshee. Amy struggled with the reanimated cadaver and managed to push her off while screaming in fear. She swiftly got back up feeling her heart beating so quickly she thought it would explode in her chest, but when she gazed back at the where the woman was, she saw nothing. All traces of her attacker and the blood had simply disappeared. Her mind kept playing the moment she gazed at the woman over and over until she realized that the corpse she saw was herself. After holding her hand over her heart for a moment, she calmed down and realized that she finally hit pay dirt.

The next morning, her two partners, Chris and TJ, had arrived. She and

Marcus greeted them at the main entrance, they went over the story of Lavalley and his lost gem, and then sat down for lunch after getting accommodated in their rooms. The head master served them their meal and went back into the kitchen leaving the three ghost hunters alone.

"So, what did you find so far?" Chris asked Amy.

She set down her salad fork and said, "At first, nothing. I didn't get anything suspicious in my photos, all my meters came back with nothing, and I was getting a little pissed. But then, I was attacked last night by a dead corpse that looked like me in my bathtub."

"Your bathtub?" asked TJ. "What were you wearing?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Chris asked.

"Nothing. I just wanted to get a mental image of our hot boss in the tub."

"The *corpse* was in the tub," she corrected him.

TJ groaned, "Ugh...gross."

"Anyway, I think it definitely has something to do with that jewel Marcus told us about. If we can find it, we should be able to close the book on this one."

"So, you want us to hunt a tiny jewel instead of invisible ghosts," TJ reiterated. "I don't know which one is harder."

"Where should we start?" asked Chris.

"We'll meet tonight in my room after Marcus leaves the mansion and go over a search plan. He said the west wing was remodeled after it was already built, so I think we should start there."

"You're the lady boss," said TJ.

Amy, looking out of her bedroom window, watched Marcus disappear into the night. The sun had just set and he was making his way toward the secondary mansion in the back. She looked at the smaller building and realized there was an area to the right of it surrounded by iron bars. After

glancing at it for a few moments, she realized it was a cemetery. Marcus had never mentioned it before, but she had a feeling there might have been a valuable clue buried somewhere in there.

There was a knock at the door and she called the visitor in. It was Chris and TJ right on time with some equipment ready in hand. They joined her by the window and gazed out at the cemetery she was looking at. She looked over to TJ with a wicked smile.

"Please, tell me you're joking," he whined.

She patted him on the shoulder and said, "Tonight, *you* are our grave digger."

"But you said a zombie was in your bathtub and now you want me to go into a cemetery? That's asking for something to happen! You know black people always die first!"

"It wasn't a zombie and you won't die. Try to scrounge up a shovel and come back with anything odd that you find," she instructed.

He stormed out of the room cursing under his breath.

"Lavalley became highly religious after getting the jewel," Amy explained to Chris, "so it's safe to assume that there could be clues in his private cemetery."

"How do you figure?"

"Ritual burials. We might be able to determine exactly what religion he followed by examining the way a body is buried. With that, we could start picking out statues and paintings related to that same religion."

"From what I've seen, he could've been Christian or Catholic."

"One of the first rules about hiding treasure is to make clues that could throw off treasure hunters. I wanna be positive about where to look."

"So what should we do while TJ's digging up graves?"

"We need to start looking for secret rooms or hidden passages in the mansion."

"This place is huge," exclaimed Chris. "With only two of us a search like that could take days."

“Well, we better get started then,” she replied.

Hours went by as the duo scoured the massive mansion and TJ dug up the graves one by one finding nothing on both ends. Those hours quickly turned to days without any repeated incidents like the bathtub. They spent every night sneaking around conducting their investigation hoping to find anything, but Amy was beginning to doubt herself. The only clue she found was a small journal belonging to Lavalle that mentioned his discovery of the cursed jewel that brought about his disappearance. It was described as a shard from a large jewel shaped like a flame. The poor souls that were unfortunate enough to come across this gem called it Hell’s Ruby. Other than that, she and Chris couldn’t find anything else related to it.

One night, the grave digger in the cemetery near the second mansion dug up an object, which he gave to Amy. Excited about the latest clue, she quickly took it to her room and began studying it. It appeared to be a small wooden cube with strangely shaped markings on all sides.

“Do you think it’s important?” Chris asked as he watched Amy sit on her bed tampering with the cube. “The shard could be inside it.”

“We won’t know until we figure out what it does.”

“Let’s just smash the damn thing until it breaks open,” TJ suggested.

“Do you really want to risk damaging the ruby shard and pissing off whatever ghost is haunting this place?” she asked.

“No, thank you. The only naked women I like seeing in my tub are ones that are still alive.”

She let out a frustrated sigh and clutched the tiny cube in one hand. Something clicked on it and the odd markings all fell off onto her lap

“What did you do?” Chris asked.

She picked up one of the pieces and examined it, “These are magnetic.”

Chris looked at the different sizes, “They look almost like puzzle pieces.”

She put the pieces together as best as she could and her eyes widened when she recognized the shape. She saw this exact object when she first entered the mansion. The large oil painting of Lavalle in the lobby showed him wearing a broach that matched the same shape as the magnetic puzzle. With the pieces in hand, she took off to the lobby while her friends followed her.

They reached the painting and she ran her hand along its surface. The small area where the broach was depicted felt hard like a metal plate was underneath it which meant that she probably found the location of an important clue if not the shard itself. With a smile, she placed each piece of the puzzle onto the painting until the broach was complete. There was a loud clanging sound that echoed in the vast lobby, and then the painting slid back and to the left revealing a long narrow corridor with practically no lighting.

“I ain’t going in there,” said TJ.

She looked to Chris.

“Do I get a raise for this?” he jokingly asked.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. It wasn’t much, but she didn’t bring any flashlights with her for this ghost hunt, so it would have to do. Together, the two slowly crept down the cold cobblestone hall and into the unknown abyss. The entrance behind them seemed to shrink in size the further they journeyed from it making them feel like they were walking into a trap. Eventually, the duo came to an old wooden door on the right wall. The hall kept going down, but there was no way to know if there were any other doors along the way.

“We’re not splitting up,” Chris said to Amy before she could suggest the notion.

“Fine,” she huffed as she pushed open the door.

It creaked open revealing a small library filled with shelves lining every wall. There were other shelves scattered around making it seem more like a maze than anything else. They

carefully made their way through memorizing each turn they made until they reached the very center where a small square table waited for them. A tiny candle stood flickering beside an open book. Amy approached the book and began reading it to herself.

June 24th: The cursed piece of ruby calls to me every night. It begs for chaos and demands blood. I’ve tried all I could, but nothing seems to work. I can hear it in my head. I can feel it in my soul. It is slowly driving me to the brink of insanity for no apparent reason. Is this my form of punishment from God? Have I angered Him in some way? Why am I being tormented like this?

June 30th: I figured it out! I figured out how to silence the bloody ruby! It needs a human sacrifice! Today, I felt the urge for violence and struck one of my servants with a shovel. He died instantly, but it calmed the ruby! I dragged the corpse through the secret passage and left it in the room where the jewel rests. Maybe it will be satisfied enough to leave me alone!

July 2nd: I killed three more servants today. I only meant for one, but a maid witnessed what I had done and rushed to one of the cooks. I had to kill them both to protect my secret! If the authorities found out what I’ve been doing, they’d throw me in a cage for the rest of eternity! I can’t have that! I must continue to satisfy the spirit of the ruby or face more torture!

July 4th: Parents visited today...killed them. Had to. Ruby wanted them. Brother and sister come in the morning. Wants them, too.

July: Ate today. First ate garden food. He taste good. We want more.

We...tired...want sleep...watch hall...

“What the hell happened to him?” Chris asked as he read the final sentence over Amy’s shoulder.

“It made him insane and turned him into some kind of monster.”

“He referred to himself as “we” in the end. Do you think it possessed him?”

“I can’t say for sure, but he *did* say he heard it in his head. He also said

there was a room here where he dumped the bodies for the ruby. Hopefully, it's still in that room. I just wonder if the hall he was watching is the same one where he vanished."

"I don't think we want to find out. Let's find the room and get out of here before we start hearing voices in *our* heads," Chris replied.

"TJ," someone whispered out to him. He turned around frightened and looked all over for the person speaking to him. He couldn't see anyone, so he started walking down the steps and stood in the center of the lobby. There was another loud clanging sound and the secret passage began to close. He yelled and ran toward it, but was too late.

The door sealed shut trapping his friends on the other side. He turned his back to the secret door and realized that all the other doors in the massive room were gone. Feeling panic take over, he dashed back down the stairs to where the main entrance used to be and began beating on the wall with his fist.

"What the hell's going on?" he screamed.

"There are souls that must be judged, TJ. We want you to pass judgment on them."

"Who are you?! Come out here!"

Marcus Lamb stepped out from behind one of the marble pillars with a devious grin on his wrinkled face, "You've been chosen for a higher calling, TJ. This old man is no longer capable of serving us. We need you."

TJ inched backwards as the old man walked toward him, "Back off, man! I mean it!"

Marcus' body began to twitch uncontrollably as he continued approaching TJ. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, blood began pouring out of his mouth, and his upper body looked like something was trying to burst out of him. The sound of skin tearing open was almost like paper being ripped in half and TJ could see massive amounts of crimson red seeping through his clothing. Every bone in Marcus' body began to break;

the sound of them cracking and snapping filled the lobby like an orchestra. Then, the old man ruptured sending blood and flesh flying in every direction leaving only a hideous monster standing in his place. It had a thick body, bulging legs and scythed arms, horns curling out from its head with spikes running down its spine, and it was soaked in Marcus' blood.

"Oh my, God," TJ whimpered.

The monster shook its boxy head and replied, "God isn't here to save you."

It dove toward TJ as its roar shook the entire mansion.

Amy and Chris took a deep breath and kicked open the door marked with a devil on it. They both gagged at the sight before them. Countless skeletons littered the room along with dozens of other bodies in various states of decomposition. The ones that still had faces bore expressions of pure terror. The stench of blood was heavy in the air and it caused Amy's stomach to twist in ways she never thought possible.

"I recognize some of the people here," Chris stated wishing it weren't true. "They're paranormal investigators like us. I used to work with them before I met you."

Amy tried her best to keep her last meal down, "Did you know they were dead?"

"I left their team, but lost touch with them a couple of weeks ago. I just thought they were busy."

The door slammed shut and startled them. They began pounding on it and tried to kick it down, but nothing worked. Then, something shuffled in the room full of corpses. Amy slowly turned her head to see one of the female bodies standing up with its jaw dropped open.

"Chris," she managed to quietly say.

He looked back to see the corpse and felt like his heart shot up to his throat.

"How do we kill it?" Amy murmured.

"I'm already dead," sobbed the corpse.

Caught by surprise, her only reply was, "What?"

"I was killed by Marcus Lamb almost two months ago, but my soul is still trapped here."

"How is this possible?" Chris asked.

"He hired my husband and I to find out what happened here. At first, we couldn't find anything, but then we got our first ghost sighting. It was Lavalle shambling through the same hall he vanished in. Later on, I found the passage behind the painting and went in to investigate. When I found this room, he killed me after performing some kind of ritual. Then, he killed my husband."

"How does the ruby tie in to all of this?" Amy asked.

"Hell's Ruby has an evil spirit within it. The ruby was shattered by someone and Lavalle found a piece decades later. He brought it here and the spirit started messing with his head. It made him kill everyone in the mansion and fed off the negative energy produced by each murder. If it gathers enough energy, it'll be strong enough to kill every human on the planet."

"How do we stop it?" asked Chris.

"You have to find a way to reverse the energy held in the shard. Only then will the spirit be forced to move to another shard and start over. By now, it's become strong enough to have a physical body of its own, but it still needs a human host like Marcus in order to reserve the energy it uses."

Amy turned to Chris, "We've gotta get our hands on that shard."

"Easier said than done," he replied.

"The door won't budge, remember? And we still have no idea where the shard is."

The corpse slowly turned and pointed her rotten finger at the wall opposite the door, "Through there you'll find the shard of Hell's Ruby."

Before the two could thank her, she fell to the ground and became as lifeless as she was before. Chris rushed to the wall and felt all around with his hands for a hidden locking

mechanism of some kind. Amy stood back and examined it from afar.

“I don’t think it’d be that easy,” she said to her cohort.

“What do you mean? Where else would a secret switch be?” Chris asked as he continued his fruitless search.

“This room is full of corpses. If anyone stumbled on it, like we did, the last thing they’d ever want to touch is one of the dead bodies. If I were as insane as Lavalley, I’d hide the switch in or around one of the bodies.”

“But the switch had to have been here before there were ever any bodies,” Chris pointed out.

“Exactly, so that’s why you disguise it as a body. Or better yet, as skeletal remains.”

The pair immediately went to work throwing around the grimy bones of Lavalley’s victims searching for the one that was false. Chris rummaged around randomly, but Amy deducted the switch would be underneath another body in the back of the room, so that was where she started her search. She was rewarded with success when she pulled on a leg bone that was attached to a chain in the ground. The sounds of heavy gears turning broke through the dead silence of the room and a small section of wall rotated halfway to reveal the secret chamber where the shard was hidden.

The chamber was smaller than the corpse room and had a circular shape, but it was well lit with torches on either side. The flames danced in the calm stillness randomly lighting different objects in the room. There were small shelves built into the walls that went all around the chamber and they were filled with various items like ancient books and small effigies from different supernatural beliefs. The two paranormal investigators ripped through each shelf like tornadoes throwing everything useless behind them until they came across a small chest. It had a lock and normal keyhole, but there wasn’t any time to try and find the proper key. Amy set it down on the ground and Chris used the heaviest statuette he could find to smash it

open. Eventually, the lock broke off and Amy opened the chest.

Resting peacefully on a small velvet pillow was the treasure that damned Lavalley and every person he encountered. The infamous shard of Hell’s Ruby glistened in the light from the torches. Amy picked it up and held it against the flame to get a clear look at it. Inside the deep red gem, she could see swirling clouds of what she assumed was the energy it had gathered up until now.

“Now what?” Chris asked.

“Now,” she began, “we find a way out of this room and figure out how to reverse the negative energy in this thing to positive.”

She pocketed the shard and looked around the chamber.

Chris pulled a medallion from the ground and said, “This fell out of one of the books I tossed while we were searching. It’s probably another one of those stupid puzzles.”

She took the heavy golden medallion and carefully examined it. It was round and about the size of a teacup saucer. On the edge of it were the letters “N”, “S”, “E”, and “W” which obviously represented north, south, east, and west. Depicted in the center was a woman pointing her hands east and west, her head pointing north, and her feet to the south. The woman wore a blindfold, held a large feather in her right hand and a scroll in her left, and her feet were bound together. Amy turned it over and saw an inscription that read:

The sun will set at half past nine and the path to Hell will be revealed.

“I don’t get it,” Chris responded after reading the confusing clue. “This thing has letters like a compass not numbers like a clock. And since when does the sun set at 9:30?”

“We have to look at it from every possible angle,” Amy said as she stood in the center of the round chamber.

On the wall directly in front of her was a carving of the number three and underneath her feet was a round indentation where the medallion needed to be placed. She thought the

clue over in her head and came up with the solution after a moment. She knelt down and began to rotate the medallion until it was in the proper position.

“Wait,” Chris interrupted, “do you know what you’re doing? If you get it wrong, something bad could happen.”

“I know exactly how it’s supposed to go,” she replied. “The sun always sets to the west. On the western side of the medallion, the woman is holding a feather in her right hand, but it isn’t a normal feather. The scroll in her left hand indicates that the feather is actually a quill pen, so I know she’s right handed. Moving on, human legs are longer than arms and if she were a clock, her bound legs would represent the minute hand while her writing hand would indicate the hour hand. Her left hand has to be pointing toward the three on the wall so that she’d be at half past nine. Her hour hand has to point at nine to the west where the sun sets. Got it?”

“No, but you’re probably right,” he said after trying to make sense out of her explanation.

She set the medallion in place and stood back up. For a few moments nothing happened. Chris was ready to deliver a smart-alecky remark, but was stopped short when the rotating wall that led them to the chamber sealed shut. They began to panic again as the ground beneath them split down the middle and the halves began to slowly retract into the walls. They scrambled to find a way to keep from falling into the pitch black hole, but once the floor was fully retracted, they plummeted downward at breakneck speeds screaming at the top of their lungs. To their relief, the darkness concealed a large slide that guided them safely down until they reached the end and landed on a small boat floating in an underground canal.

“That was actually pretty fun,” Chris said as his heart rate went back to normal.

Amy scoffed and grabbed a paddle attached to the outer right side of the boat. Chris grabbed the one on the left

and they began making their way down the canal. After thirty minutes of paddling, they came to the end of the canal and got off at a small dock. It seemed like nothing more than a cave, but they already learned that nothing was ever what it appeared to be. A large section of rock at the end of the area slowly rumbled open to reveal a doorway. TJ walked out of the opening and greeted them with a smile.

“How the hell did *you* get here before us?” Chris asked him.

TJ chuckled, “Fools. We’re the one that put the designs for this place in Lavallo’s head. For years this mansion has served as a buffet for us and the shard. In just a few minutes, it’ll be June 13th; the anniversary of the day the shard arrived here. Your deaths will give us the last bit of energy we need to wipe out your entire race!”

“We won’t let you take any more innocent lives!” Amy exclaimed.

“You don’t have a choice in the matter!”

TJ pulled a large dagger out from behind him and rushed toward Amy to attack her. Chris got in the way and knocked the weapon from TJ’s hand. They wrestled with each other while she scooped up the dagger and tried to pull her possessed friend away from Chris. He hit her across the face with the back of his fist and started choking her defenseless partner. She fell hard on her back and dropped the knife.

“Die!” TJ screamed as Chris began to lose consciousness.

Amy snatched the dagger again and plunged it into TJ’s back with a loud scream. He yelled in pain and instinctively let go of Chris to tend to his wound. Amy joined her friend while he caught his breath and his face turned back to its normal color. TJ successfully pulled the long blade from his back and growled loudly at the two humans.

“We don’t enough time to deal with you like this,” said TJ.

The monster that possessed his body burst out sending pieces of his bloody remains everywhere. It let out a tremendous roar that shook the cave like an earthquake. Then, it began to

approach them as each thunderous step it took made the ground tremble beneath them. Before it could reach them, something unexpected happened. A person covered in a tattered black cloak dashed out from somewhere behind Amy and Chris and delivered a kick straight into the monster’s chest that was powerful enough to send it flying backwards into a wall.

His dark hair was down to his shoulders and the bottom portion of his face was wrapped in black cloth showing only his dark eyes. The stranger helped Chris get back up on his feet.

“Who are you?” Chris asked.

“I’m the guy that shattered Hell’s Ruby,” he replied.

“It was *you*?” Amy asked. “Didn’t you think something like this could’ve happened? This whole thing is all your fault!”

“I didn’t have a choice. I’m sorry that you’ve been through all of this, but the responsibility of taking this spirit down is mine.”

To which Chris responded, “And I was really looking forward to fighting off an eight foot monster from Hell.”

The creature regained its composure and slowly started making its way back toward the humans.

“You have the shard, right?” asked the stranger.

Amy took it from her pocket and showed it to him, “Safe and sound.”

“Good,” he said. “Focus some kind of positive energy into it to weaken the monster.”

He took off to fight the creature again.

“How the hell are we supposed to do that?” Chris exclaimed.

As the two powerful beings fought each other, the cave rumbled more violently than before and large pieces of rock started raining down. Amy and Chris covered their heads to avoid being hit by smaller pieces of rubble, but the bigger ones caused them to start running for cover. They found a small area where they were relatively

safe, but they were pinned in that spot and were easy targets for the monster.

The heroic stranger found the dagger on the ground and quickly snatched it up. He took aim and threw it with expert precision at the monster’s head, but it deflected the thrown weapon and sent it flying off in a different direction. Before anyone could react, the blade plunged into Chris’ chest piercing one of his lungs. He collapsed as he felt his lung slowly filling with his own blood. Still clutching the shard in one hand, Amy used her free hand to push down on the area around the dagger. She knew taking it out would only result in killing him faster, but there was no way she could save him.

While the other two continued their battle, Chris softly spoke to Amy, “You have to get out of here.”

“I can’t leave you behind,” she said as tears of sadness flowed from her eyes like rivers. “I’m so sorry I dragged you and TJ into this. I never should have taken the case to begin with.”

“Can’t argue with you on that one,” he forcefully chuckled through his ragged breath.

She let out a small laugh at his dying joke, but the humor was replaced by sorrow when she realized he was no longer breathing. Her heart sank and she could do nothing but cry over his corpse. She lay his head down on the ground and felt something happen to the shard. She opened her hand and saw that it was slowly becoming lighter in color until it became crystal clear. It continued changing and had become a light blue as her tears continued pouring out.

The stranger noticed a difference in the monster’s strength and quickly shot a look back at Amy and Chris. He caught a glimpse of the scene taking place far behind him and knew exactly what was happening. The opportunity to finish off his enemy had almost come. All he needed to do was wait for the shard to change from Hell’s Ruby into Heaven’s Sapphire; a gem that drew power from the pureness in each person’s heart.

Amy didn't understand what was happening to the shard in her hand, but she felt unthreatened even when beams of white light began shooting out from it in all directions. The shard was now deep blue and brimming with positive energy brought on by the love she had for her friend and the tears of sadness for his untimely death. The light had become so intense, that it filled the cave blinding everything in sight and bathing everyone in stark white.

Finally, June 13th, the long-awaited day arrived. Amy McKinley found herself kneeling on the ground outside the iron gate to Shadow Fields. Stretched out beside her, was the body of her friend Chris. The moon was starting to set already. Feeling deeply confused, she stood up and approached the gate.

The mansion seemed completely normal for a while, but then, it started to rumble like the cave underground. Bright beams of light shot out through every door and window painting the dark sky with stripes of white and shooting glass and wood like an erupting volcano. The building eventually exploded like a balloon with too much air, but the debris stopped moving in midair and was slowly sucked back to where the manor once stood. A hole opened up in the sky above the mansion and strong gusts of wind kicked up out of nowhere as every single piece of Shadow Fields was sucked into the vortex. In a flash, it was over just as quickly as it had begun.

Amy stood silent for a moment, but jumped when she heard a moan come from behind her. She turned and her heart nearly skipped a beat when she saw Chris sitting up without any trace of ever being mortally wounded.

"I feel like I spent the whole night binge drinking," he groaned.

She hugged him and shouted, "I'm so glad you're alive!"

"What happened?" he asked.

"Weren't we in a cave a second ago?"

She showed him the blue shard she still held, "You died and the jewel changed color. I think it brought us out

here where it was safe and brought you back to life."

"Oh, that makes sense," he replied. "What about that other guy that came to save the day?"

She shook her head, "I don't know what happened to him."

He sighed as he picked himself up off the ground, "Whatever. I'm just glad it's finally over."

"It's not over, yet," she said.

"What do you mean? We solved the case and made it back out in one piece."

"There are other ruby shards scattered around the world. That dead woman told us that the spirit would move on to one of the others and this whole mess would repeat itself."

"You can't mean..."

She continued, "We have to find the other shards and make sure something like this never happens again. If you don't want to help, I'll understand."

He put his arm around her and said, "Well, I guess this means I'll get that raise after all. Let's get this show on the road, boss. Any idea where we should start?"

She looked on at the rising sun with a smile on her face. Her entire career was based on supernatural occurrences all around the world and she made it her business to document each and every one of them. This time, however, was different. She felt like she finally gained a true purpose in life despite the fact she could never reveal the events that took place at Shadow Fields to the public. And she was okay with it.

They exchanged smiles and together walked away from Shadow Fields and off into the sunrise. Lavalley, Marcus, TJ, and everyone that died in the mansion could finally rest in peace. However, the danger of being destroyed by the monster that resided in each shard of Hell's Ruby was far from over.

From this day on, Amy McKinley decided to spend the rest of her days finding and destroying each shard with Chris by her side. Unbeknownst to

either of them, the real menace was not the creature in the shards, but the being that created Hell's Ruby itself. They'd find out soon enough, though, that there are certain things that even the most evil beings are afraid of and they live in places where devils fear to tread. They didn't realize it now, but Amy and Chris were only small players in a massive story leading up to the end of all life.

Poetry Place



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