

THE CORPSE: HARBINGER
Adventures of a Long-Dead Detective
G. Wells Taylor

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WILDCLOWN MYSTERIES

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For Creech, Hanna & Max
Such a welcome at such a time!

Introduction by Julian Pachs, Esq.

So low had I been brought by this thing people call the Change, that I considered chronicling the exploits of a long dead detective to be a rise in station. My duties included the exigencies of caring for his very dead body, ills brought about by its exanimate state and damage received during its application in the normal course of detective work. Add to that the careful management of his business affairs and action as proficient if unremarkable chauffeur, the sum total of which was my position as reluctant if ruthlessly efficient aid, and personal secretary to Ryerson Stone, the Corpse.

Being the product of a misspent youth, and poorly cared for as a child, I found little sympathy for my employer's clients—victims all. Directly or indirectly, that's what they were. As my father used to say before or after my many beatings—*We are all victims*. Like a litany he said it, like an excuse and I considered all lessons taught me by that brutal man to be harshly, if well learned. It caused in me, as I approached manhood in the years before the Change, a detached viewpoint that allowed me to build upon a short stint as pathologist's assistant or *diener*, by briefly entering into the profession of funereal director. I found the social aspects to be more agreeable than my former employment without overtaxing my otherwise awkward and self-conscious persona. Likewise, my diener's duties well prepared me for the limited viewing and handling of human remains demanded by my new position.

I truly would have stayed a funeral director for the remainder of my years—doling out sad faces and rehearsed platitudes had I not been arrested and charged on several counts of fraud, theft, and committing indignities to the dead. I had developed a healthy appetite for painkillers and alcohol during my teenaged years that frequently led me to

depend upon more powerful and expensive pharmaceuticals. And so, the removal of luxury items and valuables from the dead I administered to during their final hours on the earth's surface became a necessary part of doing business. This was soon followed by the removal of gold teeth, body piercings and similar adornments, which led inevitably to the confiscation of prosthetic devices and dental appliances. All of this culminated in a sting operation that was funded by a reality television show of the day which completely illuminated my relatively new practice of removing clothing from the dearly departed—and switching expensive caskets for pauper's pine boxes. Slating the former for resale seemed to my deluded mind to be a sensible business decision.

I was out on bail awaiting trial when the Change came. The authorities extant at the time were completely overwhelmed by the phenomena's many developing challenges, chief among them the rapidly rising sea levels, and the rising of the dead. After a few tactically timed telephone calls from my lawyer to the besieged legal representatives and law enforcement officials representing the state, I was given the opportunity to slip between the cracks. Later I was to question whether I could consider that a fortuitous spin of the wheel. The following tumultuous social turnings accompanied by myriad religious and spiritual upheavals started post-Change society on a downward spiral in which I found my own life inexplicably tangled and dragged low.

These currents deposited me at the bottom of the world where I was able to indulge every self-destructive impulse that was in me. I was soon hopelessly addicted to several powerful intravenous drugs. Heroin chief among them. Their effects upon my body were just slightly worse than the spiritual damage I caused myself by the questionable means I employed to procure them. This malodorous turning of life left me near madness and on the brink of walking death from a drug overdose when the Corpse found me.

The Corpse does no more than shrug when he sees me at my entertainment now, fitfully filling the pages of numerous journals and diaries illuminating the days and nights we've since spent as partners. To say he shrugs is misleading. His necrotic state does not allow for such wanton use of motion. Instead his shrug is rather more a look that comes into his eye that suggests tacit comprehension, as if to say that no more will come of it than what he sees. *Julian scratches in his notepad. Nothing more.* The Corpse asked once, and asked no more when I answered as if to confirm my suspicions that he truly did not care for things that were not mysteries, nor for the fame and recognition that my recounting of his adventures in the City Times could give him. He was a dead detective who followed some ancient pattern or code and cared only for the balance that his deductive abilities could bring. The resulting restoration of law in some small way to answer to the Chaos that the Change represented. This I had long suspected because of the manner of our meeting and later suggested more. That his need to bring law to order hinted at a desire for atonement.

I say this with some confidence for whom better to discuss the character of sin than a sinner? But these narratives are not a discourse in modern post-Change philosophy or ethics of the Apocalypse. They are entertainment at their worst and engaging enlightenment at their best—or so I hope. The Corpse, I always think of him as such, for such he is, but the Corpse was known in life as Ryerson Stone. What he was called before the Change, I cannot divine, and I have tried. I have through surreptitious means discovered only that he held great wealth before the cataclysm that drove the world insane, and after that he used these monies in part to hide his true identity. And so

Ryerson Stone was born with the age of insanity and died inside its confines. Rising from the ashes, his revenant, the dead detective, held little with his living persona, though he allowed me the familiarity of calling him Stone when the need arose.

As in all drama the story will say better with action and words than my literate navel gazing ever could and so it is also with my relationship to the Corpse, our individual origins, and that which we share—our partnership. These I feel will be illuminated by the description of our actions in these dark tales.

The Corpse advertises himself as a consulting detective. I am his partner, receiving accommodation and small wage for my various heretofore mentioned efforts. I am of the family Pachs (pronounced Pox) of a very noble European line; I'm told, with rumored roots in the Bulgarian monarchy. I stand five foot six, have a lean frame, softening at the waist and bear a round head on narrow shoulders. I wear long sideburns, as is the fashion of the day, that are red-tinged in defiance of the curtain of dark brown hair that circles the exposed crown of my skull. I have large green eyes, narrow nose, and high cheekbones. My moustache is razor sharp and deftly follows the contour of my full upper lip. Outstanding to my appearance is my pale complexion strangely devoid of hue in a living man. Even with the near absence of light that comes with the sheltered streets of the City in the near constant downpour that came with the Change most men have more color in their cheeks than I.

My meager wages are enough to keep me in dark wool suits of blue shades and gray, which have the effect of accentuating the paleness of my skin, though the early days saw me, abashed, pull them from the rack.

The Corpse maintains an office and lodging on Butcher Street an otherwise unremarkable lane that runs north and south for one full block on Level One in the City of Light. Butcher Street received its name from a man on the City's last democratically elected council famous for instituting the Dead Authority. This group of lawmakers and enforcers were conscripted from the ranks of City Authority officers who had fallen in the line of duty. The Dead Authority was a mirror to the Living version differing only in the breadth of its power and its eventual mandate. Where the Living served to protect, the Dead Authority served to control. The Corpse has remarked on more than one occasion that this controlling power would one day be open incarceration for the dead.

SECRET OF THE SEVERED SKULL

1. Conversation in the Dining Room

We sat in the drawing room before the fire. As usual, the Corpse had his heavy wingback chair turned away from me in such a way that its ponderous shape hid his features. His long legs stretched toward the fire covered by a voluminous tartan blanket. I sat beside him taking full advantage of the flames. Since I was alive, my mortal flesh demanded its warm touch to chase away the chill of our drafty old domicile. A small dark-stained table stood between us on one pedestal leg. It carried a silver tray and decanter.

“Think of it Pachs...” I watched his pale hand lift his glass. The flames from the fire danced about the drink’s interior. “Since it is impossible for dead flesh to be animate, and considering that for all intents and purposes I appear to be dead, then this scene, you and I sitting here, sipping brandy, is impossible and therefore unreal. If that is the case then I have gone insane and believe I am dead sitting here sipping brandy with you. It is impossible to believe that the entire world has gone mad with me and shares a mass hallucination, or so it seems to me.” He drew in a breath to work his lungs in the same manner as a Highlander coaxed music from a bagpipe.

“But I don’t feel like a figment of your imagination, Stone.” I pressed my lips to the fine crystal glass and relished the burning liquor.

The pale hand that held the glass froze. “Of course you would not. How could you?” he said, his voice, always a strong whisper, had a mesmerizing effect.

“Then how can we tell?” I tasted my brandy again.

“I suppose,” the Corpse said, lowering his glass. “If indeed this is a figment of my imagination then sooner or later, my subconscious mind will speak and put an end to it.”

“But you’re already dead.” I let my eyes wander over what I could discern of my employer’s form—the legs were too still beneath the blanket. The chest rose and fell only to speak. And on other occasions, when deep in meditation, I had seen his hands lay motionless for an hour.

“So it seems, and yet I move about and speak, so hardly an end.” He illustrated this by lifting both of his hands and spreading the long cold fingers before him. He examined the palms then flipped them to study the backs before lowering them again. “No, Pachs, I believe *that* to be the greater peril. For I cannot have suffered ‘true’ death in terms of this hallucination. I feel that a true death or total madness and a death of the self-concept will affect the only release for me.”

“If *you* exist,” I said in my own defense, “by the way you’re saying this. Why can’t it be me who’s gone off his nut and is dreaming of talking to dead men?”

There was a pause. Again the Corpse was motionless until I saw his chest rise and his voice returned soft and dark. “That is the problem. How could we ever tell? The Change has simply given us something to compare reality to. In the days when corpses stayed dead, a man would have fewer indicators of his own reality or his sanity for that matter.”

“So we have been given an advantage by this Change,” I said, inspired by the brandy.

“Yes. I suppose we could say that. Or whichever of us actually exists has it,” he said, and paused again briefly, “the advantage.”

After a few moments of introspection, I left him in his chair by the fire musing upon the nature of his or my reality. So powerful had been his revelation that as I approached my bedroom, provoked perhaps by my liberal application of our fine brandy; I half-expected to wink out of existence like some imaginary beast as my employer’s mind flicked onto other objects of distraction. I took great comfort in the fact that I continued to ‘be’ as I went about my nightly ablutions—and later in the cold air as it chilled my body in the moments between street wear and bedclothes. I slipped into a dreamless sleep and woke only once that night to the sound of the Corpse’s footsteps as he passed my room.

2. Worse than Horror

I was rudely awakened by a rapid and powerful pounding upon my door. The repetitive solid knocking shook the frame and spoke of a puissant hand and arm that no longer felt pressure or pain. I glanced at the clock on my bedside table and saw immediately that my visitor had no conscience or concept for time since he had summoned me from my peaceful slumber at six a.m.

“Pachs!” My employer’s voice echoed through the ancient lath and plaster. I could tell by his rapid diction that his mood was of excitement. “Come to the laboratory at once.” Retreating footfalls followed as he made his way to the far end of our apartments. It was there he kept a small laboratory for the scientific functions of his detective work. A simple affair, the laboratory was an arrangement of tables and medical instruments that allowed the Corpse to apply his vast knowledge of forensics.

I lay for a moment on that comfortable brink of sleep, my thoughts drifting back to our discussion of the night before, and I imagined the Corpse had seized upon a notion that would prove his profound theory of reality and was propelled by this to revelatory exaltation. Little else provoked in him anything approaching feeling. “At once...” I said finally, and struggled from the comfort of my blankets. A dampness always gripped the air of our apartment like a Scottish fog, and there was nothing I could do to shake the chill it brought to my bones—save a long hot soak in the big claw foot tub. Little else could entice me to enter it or overlook the slight scent of formaldehyde in the air on those chance occasions when my employer’s bath preceded my own. The chill permeated everything as a result of the continuous rainfall brought by the Change. A persistent mist hung in the air at all times in and out of doors. I hurried into the poor comfort of my robe and searched my closet for something to wear. Whatever the Corpse had for me to see in the Laboratory, I would rapidly suggest we take our discussion from its tiled floor to the wooly carpets in the drawing room near the fire.

I dressed in trousers and shirtsleeves, drew a cardigan and thick smoker’s jacket around me before pulling on my slippers and padding down the connecting hallway. I saw with great delight that the Corpse had seen fit to start a pot of coffee in the kitchen nook that opened off the drawing room, and I paused one final time to pour myself a hot black mug of it. The Corpse had long ago explained that though his body was dead, his nerves were still invested with the shadow of life, and certain things like the taste of brandy, and the smell of coffee helped to invigorate his resurrected spirits.

I pushed the heavy door aside at the end of the hall and entered the laboratory. The Corpse was in the center of the room wearing a quilted floor length dressing gown, finely woven in some Oriental design of variegated bronze silk. Its hood was drawn back and formed a large obscuring triangle of cloth that depended at the nape of his neck and fell forward at his shoulders. His back was to me where he bent over a stainless steel examination table. I immediately marked a thumping sound followed by the hard ring of metal on metal. Another thump. Sipping at my java I circled the detective and found myself frozen in place by the sight of what he examined.

The head was human, and had been completely ‘skinned’ for lack of a better word. There was no scalp, skin on face, nose or ears. No eyelids to match the missing eyes. The gray remnants of optic nerves trailed from the purple sockets. The lips, also, were gone; exposing bleached white teeth in a hideous grimace. An intaglio of dark blue and wine-colored veins covered the exposed muscle, fat and connective tissue. A filmy smear of

greasy blood lay under it on the steel like a shadow. My employer leaned forward on both elbows now, his face scant inches from the severed head—a suggestion of puzzlement in his pose. Finally, he pointed at various dark red clots on the specimen lodged in the nooks and crannies created by twists and folds of torn flesh and ligature. His yellow fingernail came a hair's breadth from touching the surface.

“Devilish work, Pachs.” I saw his thick dead lips twist in silhouette. “But fresh. Had this vivisection been done to a dead man, we would not see this reddish hue here, and here—these clots. Evidence of oxygen remaining in the tissues.” He nodded his head then lifted a magnifying glass from an instrument tray. “This individual was alive not long ago.” His voice sank. “And is newly out of Blacktime.”

The Blacktime he referred was the amnesia-like state that the dead described experiencing between life and death. My mind attempted to calculate the average recorded length of Blacktime but rejected the conundrum. I could not focus on anything but what lay before me. I had watched the scene of the Corpse's minute investigation of the severed head with utter horror—unable to do anything else. For throughout it, the head twitched and moved, not spastically, but with intelligence. The jaw opened and closed as though forming words, the muscles around the mouth pursed and pulsed attempting speech—in concert with those ligatures that followed the contours of the bones around its eyes. And the tongue spoke volumes too, whipping out between the gnashing teeth, sometimes so violently as to threaten the severed head's stability on the examination table. My breath caught at one point when a flick of the jaw sent it rolling backward onto its left side. My employer righted it with a hand, then stepped back to observe.

“It's a horror!” was all I could muster to say: “A horror!”

Ignoring my emotional surmise and the head's mechanical motions, the Corpse spun the grisly artifact and inserted a physician's ear scope into a gory socket. He steadied the impossibly motive hunk of flesh with his free hand. “Worse,” he said now turning the head to peer in the other side. “Its ear drums have been punctured.” I looked at the horrid thing twitching in the growing puddle of blood. The Corpse pulled his hood completely forward as he rose to his full height. “Worse than horror.”

3. The Severed Skull Speaks

I sat by the fire nervously nipping at a short bracer of single malt and watching the Corpse. He stood with his back to me peering out onto the street through a crack in the heavy curtains. My employer had assumed the position some moments before to tell me the story of the grotesque item's delivery. His narration allowed me time to recover my composure. I watched his head, still hooded, resting dispassionately on his broad shoulders.

Our Butcher Street Irregular had delivered it, not an hour before. Grace was one of those poor doomed children afflicted by the Change with stunted immortality. Whatever powers were at work in the world, they had completely sterilized the adult population while forcing extant children into a permanent childhood. Physically, at least, for as we knew from our encounters with her, the affect did not encompass their minds. By the standards of time, though her body was that of a ten-year-old girl, her mind was

approaching sixty years of age—for five decades had passed since the Change began. The forever children as they'd come to be known were exalted at first, but soon came to be the focal point of the early Authority's heavy-handed scrutiny. The majority of them were rounded up for study, though many farsighted parents took their charges inland and were never seen again. Stories circulated of a place in the forest where they ran free, but it was easily recognized as myth or a misguided application of hope. Others, like our dear Grace, had found places in the City and methods to hide. There were many forever children that had been captured by the underworld for employment in the sex trade, though Grace strenuously denied any such allusion to herself. But over time, there were escapees and these found others who had discovered ways of disappearing and slipping into the shadows of our massive metropolis.

Grace bragged on many occasions that she knew every place to hide in the City of Light, and had at one optimistic moment challenged the Corpse to try to find her some time. He had replied with his characteristic, emotionless silence—scarcely moving in his seat. The memory of her expression and his lack of it still drew a grin from me when I thought of the girl's naïve nature. The Corpse could not be enticed into any games of mystery that did not bear some grave import.

Grace would have been considered a large child, four and a half feet if she was an inch, and was of Bahamian heritage. Hers was a skin so black that it shone like dark metal in any light. I had on one occasion commented on its beauty and on her athletic form—made solid, smooth and strong by her life on the run—which she had taken entirely inappropriately. So powerfully did she react, that I was forced to resort to giving her small loans so she would not take her suspicious and unfounded accusations to the Corpse who was, I understood too well, otherwise distracted by more worldly and important crimes than the neuroses of a forever child. I was nonplussed by the situation but found the rapacious urchin's plight irresistible, and came to covet the small association that it made between us.

It was almost five o'clock when the Corpse had been called from his silent contemplation by an excited tapping on the rear window that opened into our kitchen. There he'd found Grace, in filthy raincoat and boots clutching a bundled package to her chest. A torrential downpour must have afflicted the city's highest levels because Grace was almost lost to the Corpse in a fine curtain of mist and rain. He quickly pointed out to me that obscured or not, the forever child had been the first person to occur to him because the kitchen window was her customary method of entry. Our building had long ago been incorporated into the support structures of Level Two that covered the sky above us and went on to serve as foundation for Level Three and of Four that was now a decade into construction. Fully half of the apartments in our building and the rest of the block that made up the entirety of Butcher Street had been filled with stone and concrete and buried in the body of this mammoth concrete leg. And so our fire escape led to the ground, but also intertwined with an iron ladder that ran up and down the length of this gargantuan pedestal, and met other maintenance gangways that depended from other supports and from the massive Level Two above. It was Grace's great pleasure to suggest this system of ladders and walkways was used as a highway for fugitives like herself.

After the Corpse's customary yet socially awkward offer of food, warmth or drink, Grace had settled on a full four-fingered portion of vodka, twist of bread and hunk of cheese. Something softened in the Corpse's stance as he related these mundane facts and

I made mental note of it. I refrained from equating it with feeling or empathy—the Corpse had traveled that far from the living—but it was a customary dereliction of his mental rectitude that happened sometimes as he related the basic aspects of life.

As Grace ate and took warmth by the fire—admittedly at this point in the story, I found myself sniffing at the air, and somewhere distantly detected the scent of wet child—the Corpse had soon asked about the package she was carrying. The severed head was as agitated at that time as it had been on the examination table, rippling the surface of the wet newspaper in which it was wrapped and the Corpse could hardly have missed it. Grace had smiled over the rim of her glass and told my employer it was the very reason she had come to him.

The Corpse had made a rapid inspection of the package and what it contained before plying the forever child with questions. It seemed that at midnight on Level Zero of the City, near the rail yards where some of the oldest warehouses could still be found, Grace had been traveling from one hideout to another. She had heard the sound of dogs quarrelling, a terrifying thing I would think, since the Change had somehow turned all animals against humanity. But the plucky forever child had traveled toward the sound to investigate. She discovered a pair of sewer dogs fighting over something. These hideous curs I'm told have inherited the meanest qualities of their most ancient ancestors but use their feral cunning to escape the City Animal Controllers by hiding in the labyrinthine ways that run for hundreds of miles beneath the metropolis. These dogs she quickly dispatched with the application of a bootleg stunner—a defensive but powerful weapon that delivered an electrifying shock. The device was made from old world parts she said you could buy on the Black Market. Once the sewer dogs were sent running, she found the head. The Corpse mimicked the cadence of her voice. “Babbling and thrashing at the pavement... without a strip of skin on it.” She'd found no evidence of the rest of the body, but thought the situation unusual enough that she might be able to perk the interest of the Corpse. “She said I came to mind Pachs.” The Corpse told me then. “Because I'm always digging around in things.”

“I asked her for a complete description of the area where she discovered it. She was reluctant to speak of it until I offered her money for the information. I believe it is near her hideout.” The Corpse continued to stare out the window a full minute before turning. The darkened apartment and the shadow cast from his hood showed me only the motion of his chin. “I would like to travel there after I have had time to conclude my microscopic analysis of the severed head.”

He returned to the laboratory and left me to muse over the morning's grisly revelations.

4. Secrets on the Subway Train

My breakfast was never given a comfortable moment and had remained a most disagreeable guest of my gastrointestinal tract. I chalked the pains and cramps up to the rapid leave taking I had made of my warm bedding, and the grotesque and unsavory nightmare I'd witnessed so early in the day so soon from the comfort of my dreams.

We traveled by subway toward the warehouse district that completely dominated 'Zero,' the eastern side of the lowest and therefore oldest level of the City of Light. By

luck, we found ourselves in an empty car. This gave the Corpse an opportunity to expound upon those discoveries made by his scientific analysis of the head while affording us privacy from the mob. Groups of people at the best of time showed utter contempt for my employer when they could determine his lifeless status, and at the worst their suspicions provided a latent enemy for him. The Corpse had adopted certain affectations, the scarves, high collars, hats and hooded cloaks to hide the fact that he was dead but there seemed to be one person in every crowd who could sense his condition. Any scrutiny tended to be unfavorable because of the ease with which crowds could be incited. The early days of the Change had seen battles between the living and the dead, and all participants had come away hostile. It was less common to run into the prejudice on the City's lowest level, but because of the status of the living that shared space with the dead—often the poorest and least educated—those run-ins promised more heat and potential danger.

We had boarded the subway at the Giuliani Station on Level Zero after taking a series of stairs leading down from Butcher Street. The warehouse district was a thirty-minute trip—and so, I struggled with my indigestion and listened to the Corpse. He wore a dark ankle-length overcoat of heavy wool. A long scarf was wound around the high raised collar and a wide-brimmed hat pulled low completely obscured his features. Trousers, boots and leather gloves completed the picture.

“I found traces of coal in the creases formed by muscle and bone,” the Corpse began—he looked away as he spoke. “And pebbles, stone shards really, gravel of the type used as rail beds which seemed to confirm Grace’s story.” A gloved hand rose, pinched the scarf to settle over his nose. “My initial hypothesis that the head’s skinless condition was caused by the sewer dog’s fangs was unfounded. Though I discovered marks attributable to the canine fangs and molars, there was no evidence of the ripping and tearing that would have been required to denude the head of skin in this manner.”

The subway paused at a stop. On the platform, an old man—perhaps 60 pre-Change years—stood motionless, his beard stained with nicotine his pants stained with urine. The doors slid shut.

“Instead, I found evidence of blade work—I would suspect it was done by a surgical instrument, a short blade but sharp. In comparisons with other blades, skinning knives, the type a trapper or hunter would use, that usually leave a deeper longer cut, the marks I found were short and precise—but inexpertly applied if the objective was to retrieve the complete skin.” The Corpse seemed distracted by some inner notion because he fell silent.

“Inexpertly! But Stone, why?” I asked. “What kind of expert skins a human skull?”

“So I asked myself, Pachs,” he said, his tone held nothing but efficiency. “And those who do remove skin from human skulls, plastic surgeons, neurosurgeons, are too efficient with their knife strokes by comparison. They know what they’re cutting, and do so with pre-designated cuts.” He fell silent again. “I found evidence of hesitation. Which to me spoke of inexpert application of surgical technique.”

“How so?” I asked, clearing my throat against the burning pressure rising in my gorge.

“Whoever skinned the head that we have in our possession worked in a stop and go fashion. Cutting, removing parts—areas of the facial derma, before moving on to another

patch.” The Corpse drew air into his dead lungs as if to speak again, but let it out with a dry hiss.

“Exploring?” I almost burst out; so wretched was the vision of this grisly technique being employed.

“So it seemed to me, Pachs.” He shifted his arms and crossed them, continued to gaze out the window. “And of course, I had to ponder the question: who would need to explore such a thing?”

“There are medical texts aplenty, for the—curious...” I murmured, suddenly seizing upon the train of thought. “And if it were a doctor or medical student, there are films of dissections.” Since the resurrection of the dead, actual dissection had been outlawed.

“Indeed.” The Corpse raised a hand; let his fingers slide along the metal bar beneath the window. “Though I doubt it was a rogue or insane anatomist.”

“Because of the inexpert application of the techniques. Of course.” I pulled at my moustache. “Perhaps someone who wished to be a medical student, or was one and failed to complete his training. Someone who lacked the capacity, or discipline.”

“Or intellect.” The Corpse reached into his pocket then, and produced a plastic bag. I took it from him as he offered it, and held it up to the florescent light. Inside I saw a ragged piece of material. It was woven of a very thick wine colored yarn—fibrous, in a loose pattern. The entire sample was no more than two inches long by half an inch in width. “The victim provided me that clue.”

“The victim?” So shocked was I by the revelation that I almost dropped the bag that held the sample. “How?”

“As I inspected the head,” the Corpse said, falling silent a moment as though the memory was too much for even his dispassionate nature. “The movements of the tongue and jaws... I took them to be intelligently driven, and so I still believe. But there were mechanical repetitive actions that the tongue performed, driving up against the side of its molars and flicking forward. It was simple to see since there are no lips.” His voice trailed off to nothing.

I immediately mimicked the motion he described. “It...” My mind reeled. “It had something caught in its mouth.”

“I pulled that piece of fabric out—it was lodged at the juncture of tongue and jaw.” The Corpse took the evidence from me, and held it to the light. “It is a simple homespun. A variety of hemp that is rare because of its dependency upon light—I understand it is almost extinct in the wild; so pervasive has been our cloud cover since the Change. Initial chemical tests tell me that the dye is remarkable. My initial microscopic tests tell me that hemoglobin is evident.”

“Could it be the victim’s blood?” I was amazed at my employer’s acumen.

“Certainly, and others. I received positive test results for three different blood types,” the Corpse said, slipping the sample away. “I am not able to make a finer determination than that.”

“Three... Incredible.” I saw that we were pulling up to another subway platform. This one held a large number of travelers. My mind was too busy matching up the facts the Corpse had given me.

“Pachs.” The Corpse turned away slightly as a number of people crowded into the car and started sitting around us. “I believe the severed head is aware.” His voice sank—his

dead lungs exhausting their wind. “I tried to communicate, but was unable. And it has no lips to read.”

I was too profoundly overcome by shock and terror to feel the train pull away from the platform. When I turned to the Corpse for a word or a question, I saw that he had produced a large magazine from one of his pockets, and held this up in front of him. I was left with the faces of strangers for comfort.

5. The Rail Yard

Rail yards remain the dirty black places devoid of life and comfort that they have always been. Massive smoke-shrouded tracts of barren earth strung with a network of rusted rails ran into the distance with distorting speed. A place not fit for human locomotion, the rail yards provided traps and pitfalls for any creature that did not move on steel wheels. The Change had managed to warp the scene only slightly, exaggerating the constant damp that hung in the air, and widening the great standing pools of oily water. We moved gingerly toward the area described by Grace from the southern end. Rail House station is the last stop of the Seaward Line, and it is here that the subway trains are turned for their western circuit, and where my employer and I disembarked. Rail transport was still the most efficient and cost effective method of moving people and goods in the post-Change world and so; the old warehouses though decrepit often remained gainfully employed holding products for any number of eventual destinations. Most boasted watchmen as well, and these were frequently unusual men of varied histories with whom the line between crime and punishment was often blurred, swift and brutal. This section of Level Zero was well populated with unemployable dead and the assumption was usually made that anyone pawing around the tracks was a vagrant for whom the world no longer held justice.

So it was with trepidation that I approached the vaulted section on the warehouse side of the tracks. We paused only once to watch a line of eight great locomotives belching black smoke groan past us slowly pulling a line of variegated cars denoting this city or that company in once vibrant colors. I pulled my scarf close about my face as the clouds of smoke and coal dust descended on us. The Corpse’s physical attitude remained rigid and fixed upon the point past the freighters. His mental acumen once enlivened was relentless.

When we finally crossed the track and made our way to a gigantic sloping wall that made up one side of a long concrete valley beneath the Skyway—on which cars roared—the Corpse knelt in the damp rock and bitumen to begin his investigation. I watched his slow scanning of the ground. He would stare at the chunks of ugly black rock, and then rise to his feet to walk a pace or two only to drop again—eyes staring at the earth. I had long ago learned to stay clear of an area so selected by my employer so as not to disturb any evidence, and kept my distance of 10 yards or so—one eye on the Corpse, and the other searching for the rail yard watchmen. A passerby might wonder at the pair of us, the Corpse, shrouded in gray and black, crawling and creeping along the track like some infernal hound, and myself start upright white face flashing left to right. Anyone who took my alert stance to be the child of fear would have been mistaken, for in one of the voluminous pockets afforded me by my overcoat my fist was tightly clenched around the

grips of a .38 caliber revolver. Life after the Change had taught me the wisdom of keeping a firm grasp upon the essentials—and the uncomfortable and terrifying realities of death now would always heighten my already defensive nature.

I scanned along the rails that led into the shadowed valley of concrete and half expected a monstrous engine to come belching forth. For such a dark and forlorn place there was a cacophony of sounds echoing: the departing train, the cars on the Skyway overhead, and somewhere the groaning hiccup of an ancient working diesel sorting rail cars. The result was a repetitive background of rising and descending noise—perfect for working a gentleman’s nerves into a higher state of agitation.

During the investigations, my employer, moving spider-like on his long arms and legs finally made his way to the base of the concrete incline. He pulled a magnifying glass and flashlight from one of his many pockets and collapsed into a heap where the chunks of black rock met gray concrete. I continued my sentry duties, cursing the darkness brought by the many-leveled City’s design, and the constant overcast. In all that black and gray, I discovered there were nothing but shadows to peer into. Just as my imagination began to cause a watchman or worse to resolve out of a particularly dark area between a parked freight car and storage building, the Corpse reclaimed my perceptions.

“We must climb,” the Corpse said. His voice, normally a whisper could deepen in tone and force as the excitement of a case was upon him. His long index finger pointed up the cement incline. It could not have been more than 45 degrees. “I was able to find residue of tissue there amongst the stones. I suspect the head came from up there.”

With that he immediately began to climb.

“But Stone...” I started up after him, cursing my need to release the grip upon my pistol in order to use both hands to find purchase on the slippery surface. “How did it get up there?”

“I endeavor to discover that,” the Corpse whispered as he crept up the concrete slope with ease.

I labored along behind him, cursing my choice of hard rubber over gum-soled shoes. There was no point in letting the expletives rise to audible levels as I understood the Corpse to frown upon the use of emotional language, so I contented myself with a string of curses hissed under my breath.

I watched the slope ahead of me; goodness knows I would not look down, and after some few seconds more noticed that my employer slipped entirely from view. This left me in a rather precarious position which must have awakened old survival instincts because as I attempted to hurry after him one of my feet slipped and I found myself dropping flat to avoid sliding further down the slope.

“Stone?” was all I could manage to say. My loss of purchase had only precipitated me some ten feet down the slope depositing my splayed form a short twenty from where I saw the Corpse disappear.

“Pachs?” The Corpse’s muffled face appeared above. His eyes glimmering in shadow was all I could see of his features. His broad-brimmed hat cast his expression into shade. “Hurry! I’ve found something.”

Again, I worked to muffle the emotions that were elicited by this precarious position, and slowly made my way up again, more angry with myself than anything. But such was the world now that a wise man always leaned toward caution. Within seconds I had gained purchase upon the ledge, almost nose to nose with my employer. He was

completely bent over forming a mound like a collapsed structure of flesh, bone and cloth with flashlight and magnifier in hand. I smiled nervously as I threw one leg over.

“Here Pachs,” the Corpse hissed, holding his fingertips over the damp stony surface. “Blood.”

“Blood?” I said, clambering into a kneeling position of my own, momentarily hissing at the deep stains on my trousers legs. “Do you think it happened here?”

“No.” The Corpse’s full attention was on the stone in front of him. “Behind me. There.”

I looked up and started when I saw the great round shadow of a cement sewer outlet. It was easily five feet in diameter and opened out of the cement wall onto the narrow stone shelf upon which we were perched. A steady drip of water issued from it, forming a narrow pool that leached its way toward the incline we had just surmounted. “In there?” I asked, eyes searching the darkness as my hand dove into my pocket to rest upon my pistol.

“Yes,” the Corpse said before making a scraping noise on the stone. I watched him scratching the surface with a penknife. He had ground up a small pile of foamy red brown mud before him. “I must collect this.”

“Evidence,” I breathed before looking up in my self-protective way, only to see a form standing in the shadows of the cement tunnel. “Stone!” I called immediately, trying to pull my gun free, but when I managed to extract its glinting length the Corpse stood at my side. I looked to see that the shadows were empty of shapes.

“What is it?” my employer asked, quietly slipping his penknife and an evidence bag into one of his pockets.

“I’m—I’m sure I saw someone,” I managed, hands ceasing all tremors with the reassuring weight of the gun. “Cloaked, in there. In the shadows.”

“We must follow,” hissed the Corpse, stooping low to enter the darkness.

“We must...” I said without conviction as I hurried after the flicker of the Corpse’s flashlight.

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