

## Twenty Years After

The coolest woman I ever met taught me that magic was real.

I don't think she meant to. No, I'm sure she didn't mean to, but she did it anyway.

I was six when she healed me of sickness brought on by dehydration. My Mom remembers it, but she thinks it was just a lucky chance that a police officer happened by with water and a soothing touch. Me, *I* remember the cool rush of strength that poured in me. It was like a drink of water in the desert--and I hiked the Mojave last autumn, so I have some idea of what that really feels like--except it didn't just soothe my throat or wet my mouth. It did line my esophagus the way a cold drink does, all the way to my belly, where it spread out nice and cool, but cold water stops there. You don't feel it wash through the rest of you, still cool and refreshing as it runs through your blood. I felt the magic through my whole body, tingling and bright and comforting. When I'm having a bad day I can still call that feeling up, the way it made my fingertips and toes buzz, and even now, twenty years after, it makes me feel better.

Then on my seventh birthday, Joanne Walker and I went down a rabbit hole in a police station and played Tar Baby with Brer Rabbit. I told her that day I was going to grow up just like her, a police officer and full of magic. Things didn't work out quite how I planned. I did four years in the military instead of becoming a cop, and it took twenty years of trying and hoping and practicing before I accepted the truth: I'm not magic.

But I'm smart.

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The Yakima River started up in Cascades, fed by Keechelus Lake. It was a major tributary for southeastern Washington, providing irrigation water for the orchards, grapes and crop fields, as well as being a year-round fishing and kayaking river. The valley it fed had range lands that were used by the military for training grounds. I'd spent a few months there during my time in the Army, so it was familiar territory, but more important, it was just about in my back yard. But then, a lot of the Pacific Northwest was: I ranged down to Salem and as far north as Whistler. I'd gone out to Coeur d'Alene a few times, too, but anything big enough to draw me farther away was in Joanne's weight class, not mine.

I headed down through Snoqualmie Pass on the scent of a rumor. That was how most things worth hunting came my way: rumors or small independent news sources. The major media had nearly collapsed under the weight of microreporting, but they'd never carried news stories about this kind of thing anyway. Boiling lakes only made the news if a scientist could explain why it was boiling. When there was no obvious cause, the news outlets shut up and pretended it wasn't happening. Most people were like that too, which I'd never even wanted to understand. As far as I was concerned, a world with active magic in it was a far better place to live than one that had none. No doubt Joanne had had a significant effect on me, but she'd had an effect on the whole Northwest, too. There was flat-out more magic now than there'd been when I was a kid, and people tried harder than ever not to see it. I didn't get it.

Keechelus Lake, held in place by Keechelus Dam, was a simmering froth. Steam billowed skyward, killing trees and sending birds to other nesting sites. No insects droned in the air and there wasn't a hint of sulfur scent or anything else that might account for boiling lakes. There *was* a faint scent of boiled fish. Just as well they'd

dammed up Keechelus, not Kachess, one of the other lakes that fed the Yakima. Keechelus meant *few fish* in the indigenous Yakama language. That was one of a million bits of almost-useless information I'd picked up while studying anthropology and world mythologies after I got out of the military. Almost useless, but not entirely. Not if you'd chosen to hunt monsters for a living. Well, not exactly a living: it wasn't like anybody paid me to keep the world safe from things that went bump. I was a grad student in Spokane, halfway done with a degree in world mythologies. I taught two classes a semester, kept my ear to the ground for monster reports, and worked on my dissertation when I had no other option.

Where water was allowed to spill through to the river, it hissed and bubbled. I left the dam and drove downstream, taking Highway 10 and then Canyon Road, which ran closer to the river's route than the interstates did, and watched to see where the water cooled.

It didn't. All the way south, through Ellensburg and into the city of Yakima, where I turned around and headed north again. If the river boiled for ninety miles out of the headwaters, it probably boiled all the way down to the Columbia. I stopped for lunch at a diner perched on the river's edge. It was almost deserted, windows steamy and the whole place smelling heavily of fry grease.

My waitress, the only one working besides the cook, looked wrung-out and flat. I ordered two vanilla milkshakes to go with my chicken breast salad, and gave her one of them when she brought them to me. She gave it a sad smile, then went ahead and sat down with me. "Not like there's anybody else waiting on their order today."

"Yeah, I almost thought you were closed when I pulled up. Nobody in the parking lot. How long has this been going on?"

"Two or three days." Her name tag said Marnie. Marnie was in her thirties and trim in the way women who worked on their feet and didn't snack on too many french fries could be. She looked like a nice person. She wiped the back of her hand across her

forehead, making almost no difference to the damp sheen there. "This is the first time in years we haven't been swamped at lunchtime. Good thing, too, because the pipes are drying up. We won't even be able to do dishes soon."

"Drying up, really? I wonder if the water's boiling out of them."

"They're not hot, just dry. I don't know why. We've had a couple geologists in, but they just wipe steam off the windows and frown at the river. They won't answer any questions. It's like it's creeping even them out. I mean, shouldn't there be news reporters down here? Big ones, I mean, not just the locals and the crazies." Her expression went guarded. "You're not one of them, are you?"

"Local, or crazy?" I smiled to take the edge off, and sipped my milkshake. There was real vanilla in it, which surprised me. "Neither. Not a news reporter, not a crazy. I bet the crazies say there's other strange things going on too, though. Because it never rains but it pours, right?"

Marnie shivered. "I wouldn't care if the crazies were saying things. That's what they do. But some of my friends say their kids, I mean good kids, not trouble-makers, you know? That they've seen some crazy things up in the mountains just the last few days. I mean, they've gone out looking, of course, who could stop them with the river all boiling up like that? And they come home saying they've seen--" She stood up abruptly, almost knocking her milkshake over. "You *are* a reporter, aren't you? And you're going to make me look like one of the crazies. You've got a camera on you somewhere, don't you? One of those micro ones you can put in earrings or hair clips." She looked at me suspiciously, but I hadn't put earrings in, and my chin-length blond hair was simply tucked behind my ears.

"Not even in my rings." I lifted my hands to show her how they were bare of jewelry, too. "Honestly, the only camera I've got is my phone, and that's in the car. I was just going to go hiking until I saw the river, and I wondered if it was even safe out there anymore." I edged a foot out from beneath the table to show her my hiking boots. "If

kids have been out there hiking it's probably safe, huh?"

Marnie sat down again, still wary. "I don't know. They said there were...landslides."

"Landslides" was an obvious euphemism. I wondered what for as I made a show of letting my shoulders slump. "Aw. All the heat and steam making a mess of the underlying soil, you think? Maybe I can find someplace rockier--"

Marnie said, "No," sharply, then curled her lip. "I mean, maybe, but they said--they were up pretty high, where the treeline stopped on that snub-faced mountain, so there wasn't much soil. Rock slides, not landslides, I guess. I just don't think anybody should be out there."

"You're probably right." I finished my salad and had another sip of milkshake. "That's the best vanilla shake I've ever had."

That restored her ease and earned me a smile. "It's our specialty. We've got customers who drive out from Spokane and Olympia once or twice a month for a Sunday brunch with milkshakes." Her smile faded as she looked toward the steamy windows. "They're not going to keep coming if the river keeps boiling. I don't know what I'll do if this place closes. There aren't a lot of jobs out here."

"I'm sure it'll settle down. These things do." Another customer came in as I spoke. Marnie gave me another smile, grateful if disbelieving, and got up to say, "Sit anywhere," and offer menus. I put a twenty down on the table and left. She would think it was over-tipping of the finest degree, but to my mind, I was paying for information as well as the meal. I knew more--a little more--than I had when I'd sat down, and that was worth a lot.

In the car I pulled up a web interface and put in a search for boiling rivers, dry pipes, rock slides and supernatural origins. An unsurprisingly short list came back to me. I opened the most-likely looking pages onto the windshield and scanned them, thinking that Joanne would have skipped this step. She could afford to rush in where angels feared to tread, though. All I had was combat training and silver bullets. I'd

never met anything that specifically had to die by silver, but I hadn't met much that wouldn't. Better safe than sorry.

Most of the search hits were a miss. The one that looked most promising also looked the least promising, as in "Don't be stupid, Ash: call Joanne in on this one," least-promising. Demons and godlings were out of my league. I double-checked the data from the normal channels against the undernet sites most often used by adepts like Joanne and reapers like me, and didn't come up with anything better. Either I was on the money, or the thing I was chasing was so obscure not even the connected world-wide efforts of scholars, demon hunters, and magic-users could had a database entry for it.

I cleared the windshield and muttered, "Joanne's mobile," to the car, which phoned her as I pulled out of the diner's parking lot. Her phone went to voice mail, which made me check the time. No, I wasn't calling at a bad hour, she just wasn't picking up. Fair enough. "Hey, Jo, this is Ash. I'm heading for Keechelus Lake and maybe a Sumerian demon. If you're not busy this afternoon I could probably use your help. The river's boiling and the mythology says a god killed this demon back in the day. Give me a call if you can make it." I hung up, drove back toward the lake, and pulled off the road where the bushes along the roadside were densest.

It wasn't dense enough, to my eyes. I backtracked to fluff grass up where I'd stepped on it, and to drag deadfall into more of a blockade, but I still thought the car stood out like a sore thumb. That was potentially a huge problem. This far out of town I had to worry about State Troopers, and they were the leos with the millimeter wave scanners that a lead box in the trunk couldn't trick. But there was road and there was mountainside. Not much choice in the matter. Not for the first time, I regretted driving an older vehicle: my Cadillac was three times as long as the newest electric cars. I could have buried one of those in the roadside bush without a problem.

But new cars minimal trunk space, and unlike Jo, I couldn't afford to go into battle

with nothing more than my charm and good looks. She had a magic sword, for Pete's sake.

I had a grenade launcher.

I wasn't supposed to, of course. Nobody was, especially since the country-wide crackdown after the election riots when I was seventeen. That was part of why I'd gone into the Army instead of becoming a cop--it had become clear there would be advantages to having friends who worked in military supplies. As a result, the trunk of my Caddy looked like I was preparing for the zombie apocalypse, though from what I understood, zombies were extremely difficult to raise and that threat was negligible. My arsenal was meant for other, more likely scenarios, and the grenade launcher was the least of it.

Most of the grenades I carried were flash-bangs, not frags, but I had lethal capability if I needed it. I also had stun guns, pistols, knives, a garrote, and a slingshot. I'd been surprised at how loud a gun with a silencer was, the first time I shot one. Movies lied. So I'd learned how to use the slingshot for when silence really mattered, and if I thought I would be doing range-hunting, sometimes I took the compound bow out of the trunk too.

Not today, though. I packed grenades, flash-bang and frag alike. I took my space blanket, in case I was out too late and needed warmth. The brand name was something else, but the common name had stuck through the decades, even though a modern space blanket was nothing like the sheet-of-Mylar old ones. Mine didn't just trap body heat. It absorbed and re-focused solar power, and could be set to release warmth either slowly or quickly. I folded it over my backpack so it would gather heat while I hiked, then slipped my phone's tiny flat-panel subwoofers into the pack's outside pockets, muttering, "In case I'm out too late and need a party in my pocket to keep me going." It sounded like something Joanne would say, which pleased me. I strapped knives to both thighs, slid the stun guns and one pistol into the backpack along with the frags, and

shouldered the pack on before sliding my Glock into the custom holster built into the pack's straps. I put a water bottle on my hip and shook my shoulders, a slosh inside the backpack assuring me the second bottle inside the pack was full, tucked snacks into pockets, and went hiking.

*Asag*. Sumerian demon of sickness, who, according to my undernet search, made rivers boil with his ugliness and had sex with mountains to make rock-demons to protect himself with. Rock demons and landslides had enough in common to make the link, especially with Marnie's discomfort about what the kids had reported seeing. The boiling water was a clue, too, even if I couldn't imagine what a Sumerian demon was doing in the Pacific Northwest. There'd been no reports of unusual sickness in the area, but it was possible he brought sickness, rather than followed it. With boiling rivers and drying-up wells, it was easy enough to see how sickness could come in his wake.

And he'd been defeated by a god in Sumeria. Ninurta, god of sunlight and of healing. I would probably have to wait until Joanne caught up with me to take Asag down, but at least I could locate him on my own.

Marnie had claimed the kids were up at the treeline. I doubted it. Most of the Cascades had a timberline around six thousand feet. Keechelus Lake was just south of Snoqualmie Pass, which was only about three thousand feet above sea level. If the local teens were getting hit by rock slides a couple thousand feet above the mountaintops, I was not only out of my league, but way envious of the flying teenagers.

The terrain wasn't bad. Low underbrush sprang back after I passed over it. Fir and pine trees provided cover from afternoon sunshine. Birds and squirrels scolded me for intruding on their territory, but weren't disturbed by anything stranger than me. I wasn't in the right area yet, in that case. I worked my way up the mountain, switch-backing around a few steep hills covered in huckleberry bushes. Another month and they'd be ripe. On the off chance I had time to go berry-picking, I stopped and recorded the latitude and longitude on my phone. Then I started uphill again, combating



mosquitoes until I had to stop again and dig the subwoofers out and hang them on my pack. I couldn't hear the sonic buzz that vibrated the air in a way that made bugs back off, but I could feel it crawling on my skin. Hikers had been using the tech in lieu of bug spray ever since the sound industry--with some help from the military industrial complex--had turned stereo speakers into something you could roll up or put in a back pocket. They were covered with a solar screen that stored about sixteen hours' worth of low-level power usage, too, so they could be used as back-up batteries. I vaguely remembered that when I was little--when I'd first met Joanne Walker--cell phones and cameras had to be plugged in, but cars didn't. Even knowing it had been like that in my lifetime didn't make it seem any less strange.

There was a rhythm to the climb, a comfortable cadence that clearly let my mind wander. I reset my thoughts toward the data I had available, considering what I knew as I edged upward. Boiling rivers and dried-up pipes weren't making the news, but there had been a recent story about a proposition to dam the other Yakima River source lakes. I didn't know if Asag was an opportunistic demon, or the kind someone had to raise, but the threat to the free-flowing sources might tie into the signs of his presence here. All the big US rivers and a lot of the smaller ones were already dammed, and the effects of that were visible in dozens of ways all over the country. An environmentalist with his head on wrong might've thought a demon would help solve the watershed problems, but it was just as possible that demons struck where the terrain was inviting. The Cascades offered mountains for mating with, plenty of rivers, lakes, creeks and streams, and enough people that if he survived by making them sick, he'd have a steady diet of illness coming his way.

But it didn't really matter how he'd gotten here, unless someone had raised him. In that case, capturing him would give me a line back to whoever had done the summoning. If he'd simply spent the past four millennia digging his way through from Sumer and only just made it to Eastern Washington, then all I had to do was bury him

again. In another four thousand years he could be someone else's problem. It wasn't the kind of solution Joanne would embrace, but I'd made my peace with what I could and couldn't do. Burying evil worked for me.

I'd climbed high enough on those thoughts that the fir trees had thinned around me. A few sturdy ones still grew higher on the mountain, but I'd reached something close enough to a tree line that I sent a silent apology toward Marnie's teens. They'd no doubt been up around this level too. I checked my phone, which told me I was at about 2600 feet above sea level. A good day's hike under ordinary circumstances, but probably nowhere near my destination. Rocks slid beneath my feet and bounced a few yards down the mountainside before settling into new beds. The mosquitoes weren't so bad this high up, but I left the subwoofers on, just in case. Then I started circling toward narrow waterfall trickles and stream rivulets spilling downhill.

I had a great view of the simmering Keechelus Lake. If my instincts were right about the causality being the demon Asag, he had to be within view of the lake himself, or it wouldn't be boiling. I didn't want to think about how many square miles the lake was visible from, because Eastern Washington would be a wasteland before I'd explored them all. But Marnie had said her kids were up on this snub-nosed peak, so that was where I had to start. I gulped down most of a sixteen ounce water bottle and stuck what was left into my pack. I had another larger bottle, too, and an unwise lack of concern about what would happen to my guts if I drank straight from the streams. The way I saw it, they'd probably been boiled recently, and besides, my water bottles had filters that were supposed to clear the bacteria out. I hadn't gotten sick yet while on mission.

More stones shook loose as I made my way around and over boulders. I had rope in my backpack along with some very basic rock climbing gear, but if I ended up anywhere sheer I was going to have to find a way around. Being prepared for every possible contingency just weighed too much. I stopped for another drink of water, wiping sweat away and listening to rocks crack and bounce on their way down the

slope.

A long gulp and a few steps later, I realized I hadn't been walking on shoaly ground for some time now, and hadn't knocked any stone loose in longer than that.

Carefully, I shrugged my backpack off, knelt, and unzipped it as I looked over my shoulder. Everything in the pack had a designated place. I didn't need to see what I was doing to find the frags, nor to gently swing the grenade launcher into place so I could load it.

The boulders just down the mountainside from me were moving. Rocking slowly, like giant eggs trying to right themselves on invisible legs. Smaller stones were crushed beneath them as they shifted, puffing into dust and bouncing into the distance. I caught signs of more movement uphill from me, and breathed carefully as I loaded the last grenades into the launcher. Then I looked up.

Stone golems were staggered across the mountainside above me. Taller and broader than me, they had visible black pits of eyes and no hands or feet, just blunt ends to their long arms and stubby legs. They had mouths, too, gaping maws like caverns built into a moving mountainside. They moved slowly and in rhythm with each other. Below me, one of the boulders cracked, egg-like again, and another golem emerged from it. The snap of a second boulder breaking apart sounded like a gunshot. I counted six, and more being birthed. I would need a blanket assault to take them all out at once, and my grenade launcher wasn't going to be enough.

A rumble started, so deep it made hairs on my neck stand up. It felt familiar, but the sensation slipped away as one of the golems below me crouched, then leapt.

I caught it in the belly with a grenade, and flung myself behind a man-sized huddle of rock to protect myself from the fragments. The roar disrupted the rumbling, but it started up again a moment later, angrier this time. The golems picked up their speed, converging on me. I waited a count of eight, long enough for the ground beneath me to vibrate hard with their running steps, then bounced up and fired again, hoping to catch

more than one with the next grenade.

Two golems exploded into pebbles. I bellowed, "Hoo-ah!" and dropped again, waiting for the rest to come closer.

The stone next to me cracked open and a golem dropped its full weight on me.

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Air slammed out of me in a sob. My ribs weren't shattered, but I'd felt them crack. If the golem levered itself up a few inches and dropped on me again, I'd be flattened. I couldn't afford that, and I didn't have many other options. Neither did it, though. It growled and snapped at me toothlessly, but I was certain if anything got caught between those flat gums it would be crushed. I exhaled to get the last air out of my gut so I could breathe in again, and when all the air was gone, I squirmed one arm free. The frag rifle was crushed between me and the golem, but even Joanne might think twice about setting off a grenade on her chest. Maybe not--I'd seen her take hits at least that hard and walk away--but it was a rash idea.. And I didn't have magic to back me up. I wheezed a breath past the pain, fumbled a grenade from the backpack, and swore I would never do anything this stupid again if I lived through doing it once.

Then I pulled the pin and shoved the grenade into the golem's mouth. I grabbed its lower jaw and jammed it up, closing its mouth on the grenade, and I counted eight seconds in a prayer: "Please, God, let this work. Let it work."

Stone exploded on top of me. Shards slammed into my belly. Dust penetrated my pores. A *thump* like being hit by the shockwave of a sound barrier breach drove me a few inches into the ground. My ears started to ring, the noise building until it had a visual of its own, rings spreading through the black behind my eyelids.

On top of that, I heard something else. An irritating vibration, enough to set the teeth that didn't feel loosened on edge. It made the air shiver, like a barrier set up

around my skin.

Like a subwoofer playing a pitch to drive mosquitoes away. Subsonics that humans couldn't hear. Subsonics that rattled the air, though, and probably the earth.

I'd led the rock golems right to me.

Maybe I wasn't so smart after all. If I'd done it on purpose it would've been clever, and it was still better than hiking all over the eastern Cascades trying to find them, but I was supposed to be the one who relied on thinking ahead. Thinking ahead was supposed to keep me from getting cracked ribs and grenade concussions.

The ringing in my ears faded a little. I had to sit up, even knowing it was going to hurt. It was going to hurt a *lot*. I did it all at once, rubble falling away in a noisy counterpoint to the pain crashing through my body. I didn't dare prod my ribs to see how bad they were. I could find out later, after I'd finished destroying rock golems and taking out their demon father. I rolled all the way to my feet, panting through the pain, and didn't dare stop to take stock of what other damage I'd sustained.

Four golems had been reduced to sand. There were four left, and no obvious signs of more generating. I wondered if eight was a number of significance in ancient Sumer, or if I'd just interrupted their spawning session before it reached the number I knew *was* significant, which was sixty. I had to hope so, because I didn't have enough ammo for another forty-two golems.

The four left were spreading out, acting more wary. That was anthropomorphizing: rock did not act wary, even when animated. It didn't plan, either, but *I* did, and to my eyes, it looked like they were preparing a more strategic attack. If all four picked up speed and moved in on me at once, I was done for.

At least I could even the odds. There were two grenades left in the launcher. I hefted it to my shoulder, took a breath against the oncoming kickback, and fired.

The grenade flew where it was supposed to, but I dropped. The kickback was centered against my shoulder, but it slammed the whole body at the best of times.

Firing it with cracked ribs was not the best of times, and I didn't have a tripod to brace it with for the final shot. I gritted, "Hoo-ah," through my teeth this time, sat up, and fired a second time before I let myself think about it.

I blew a leg off the closest golem. It would have to do. The remaining two hesitated and I seized the opportunity to snag more grenades from my pack. Only two frags left, but three flash-bangs as well. I detonated them close enough to myself to provide cover while I crept away, an Army crawl that banged my ribs against the ground but meant not having to get to my feet again. I had dust in my teeth. Even the Mojave hadn't ground itself into me as much as this mountainside was doing.

I covered forty yards before the smoke cleared. Then I rolled on my back and stared at the sky, taking deep cleansing breaths. I couldn't manage another frag unless the golems got close enough to throw one at them, and I didn't want to let them get that close. I put the frags on my belt anyway, just in case, then quietly drew my pistol. They had eyes. Eyes were normally vulnerable. I just had to be steady enough to make the shot. I breathed, and listened, and when the cracking footsteps came clear, I rolled to my feet a second time, sighted, and fired.

The first volley was perfect. I caught one of them in the eye. Its head exploded into puffs of dust. The other one turned its face away. All the way away, so the back of its head faced me. The third one, the one I'd blown the leg off, was still down. I thanked God for small favors and got the second-to-last frag out. I knew how far I could throw it, uninjured. I figured I could manage half that distance with my ribs on fire, then knocked another three yards off to be safe. It put the detonation range dangerously close, but I couldn't risk the launcher again. Another hit like that and I'd be unconscious. And I hadn't even laid eyes on the big show yet.

That didn't bear thinking about. I watched the golem stumble over uneven ground, edging toward me with its head still on backward. They really did use their eyes, unlikely as it seemed. I flung the frag, collapsed to the ground, and tried to breathe

around shooting pain while I waited for the explosion. Noise and smoke billowed after eight seconds, but it took another minute and a half to get back to my feet. The golem didn't make it to me in that time, so I knew I'd done it some damage.

Quite a lot, it turned out, though it wasn't dead yet. It was like the robot in that old sci-fi movie, pulling itself along by one arm and its grinning jaw. I didn't have an industrial metal crusher handy, so I just shot it in the eye. It died. I didn't dare sag to the earth beside it, because there had to be a creator-demon around here somewhere, and I didn't think I could get to my feet if I went down again. So I just waited. The air cooled off as the sun started sliding into the west. I could still smell boiled fish, and the frothing lake down below gave me something to focus on while I waited. Demons did not beget golem protectors just to run away while somebody went through the golems with a bunch of hand grenades.

Although now that I thought about it, that seemed like a very smart thing for a demon to do. I wondered if I'd been had. I slumped to sitting and awkwardly searched my bag for some snack bars and the rest of my water. I put the water on a rock while I ate, which hurt more than I thought it would. Light refracted in a bubble rising from the bottom of the water jug, and then in another.

By the time I realized the water was in fact *boiling*, Asag was just about on top of me.

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I unloaded a clip into him, naturally. Sparks pinged off him where the bullets hit, and he rolled back, but I hadn't done any real damage. One for the notebooks: silver didn't stop demons any more than it specifically stopped anything else. I had, though, been counting on the bullets be as reliable as always, and they weren't. That was unfortunate.

He rolled forward again, having given me a chance to see what I faced but having lost almost no momentum. I expected a gorgon, something to freeze me in my tracks as well as boil water. I was a little disappointed: he was ugly, but not ugly enough to turn me to stone. He was round and multi-limbed, with a hide that looked as hard as the golems I'd blown up. He had eyes everywhere, protruding from each of his three arms and legs. They were all of almost equal thickness, so he could cartwheel in any direction. I wished I had an elephant gun, but I didn't even have one of those in the Caddy's trunk. I'd never met anything a bullet didn't at least slow down.

I had one grenade left, but my aim was too bad to risk using it unless he was on top of me, and I'd done that once already. I was still trying to work out a line of defense when he rolled over the last chunks of stone between us, and bloomed into a Lovecraftian horror.

The hide was just that: a protective outer covering. Within it lay a silently screaming mess strewn by faces of the dead which were marked with pox and stretched long in pain. Greyish-white intestines pulsed as they strangled the dead, and tentacles popped back in from looking out of the hide, every one of them ending with a red staring eyeball. The entirety of Asag's innards dripped with acidic slime. The stench was overwhelming. Tears flooded my eyes. I coughed and threw my arm over my face, afraid the air would become toxic, and nearly fainted as the action pulled my ribs.

One of his arms unfolded. They weren't thick and stumpy after all, but multi-jointed, long, and very thin. Folded up they had to be strong as a bundle of sticks to support Asag's weight, but extended--

--extended it lashed at me like a whip, scoring a slice across the arm protecting my face. Acid burned so deeply I couldn't even cry out. All I could think was I'd have lost my eyes if my arm hadn't been in place. I could fight a demon, but I couldn't fight it blind. I curved my spine and rolled backward, narrowly escaping another lash, and waited for adrenaline to kick in hard enough to let me push past the pain in my ribs.



The crunch of hitting the ground did the trick. I'd been sitting, so it hadn't been a long fall, but it didn't need to be. Endorphins flooded my system, burning pain away so fast I knew I'd pay dearly later. But it was the only way there would *be* a later, so I was willing to pay. I rolled to the side, pulled a knife from a thigh holster, and braced myself for the next hit.

Ichor spurted from Asag's arm when it met the knife. A clean cut, severing the end, which fell to the ground lifelessly. The silent faces in his belly screamed aloud, and I drew another gun to open fire into the tender flesh.

This time the bullets had an effect. He staggered back, reeling from one thick leg to another. Both his other arms unfolded, snapping at me almost too quickly to be seen. I tried firing once, then stopped wasting bullets: I was a crack shot, but they were slim and speeding. The knife was a better weapon against them.

The third time an arm lashed at me, I dropped the knife--I had another--and grabbed it. My hand went around it easily, and it wrapped around my lower arm like a lover's embrace. An abusive lover, because it pulled me back toward the demon's body, knocking me against rocks and yanking my feet out from under me. Still, I needed to be close if I was going to inflict the most possible damage. Letting Asag reel me in was a more likely avenue of success than trying to dart in on my own.

When I got close enough, I shot what would be a kneecap on a human, but the bullet lodged in the stony overhide. Wrong angle, or not enough exposed flesh on the legs. I didn't have time to try again. The arm shoved me toward one of the gaping mouths. I wished I dared detonate the last frag, but there was no way I could get out of range before it went off. I shot the screaming face instead. Acid muck rained everywhere, scalding my arms. Between boiling lakes, dry pipes and the distance to the nearest hospital, I was going to come out of this one scarred.

Scarred was fine. Dead wasn't. I shot another face and came up empty on the second squeeze. The faces screamed again, but this time in triumph, and then the whole

demon folded shut again.

Around me.

It was not how I'd planned for this mission to go. I didn't dare breathe. My ribs began to throb, adrenaline or no. I squirmed an arm back, trying not to think about the burns scoring my arms with each move. They'd gone beyond pain already, reaching a dull red state that would later burst into flame. Later was all that mattered.

I fumbled, tugged, and found it: the switch that activated my space blanket. Solar power radiated out, heating Asag from the inside.

He'd been defeated by a god of healing and sunlight, back in Sumer. Maybe I was smart after all.

Five seconds passed. The rotten fish stench changed to cooking rotten fish, permeating my nostrils even when I held my breath. I gagged and bit my tongue to keep from either vomiting or breathing. Ten seconds had gone by. Normally I could make it for three minutes, maybe four, without breathing, but that was with preparation, and without cracked ribs. I figured I was good for thirty seconds, maybe forty-five, and then I was screwed.

At thirty seconds, a howl vibrated through the demon, and he erupted.

I flew into the air like a geyser was propelling me, coming down hard on pointed rocks. Agony ripped through my back muscles, spasms tugging at my ribs and taking away any chance of drawing a comforting breath. I couldn't even whimper. Teeth ground together, I stared at the sky and thought *hoo-ah, hoo-ah, hoo-ah*, until a spasm released me and I could suddenly move my toes again. Nothing critical was broken, then. I was going to have a bad night exposed out here on the mountain, but at least I'd survive.

Stone slipped near my head. I twisted just enough to see what was coming at me.

The golem. The one I'd blown the leg off but hadn't killed. Stone was patient, crawling down the mountainside toward me while I fought the father demon. I closed

my eyes, thought *fuck*, then whispered, "Hoo-ah," and opened my eyes again, because damned if I was going to die with my eyes closed. I had one last frag. At least I could take the bastard with me. Inch by painful inch, not much faster than the golem was moving, I tugged my backpack out from under me and dug down for the frag. When the golem was five feet away, I pulled the pin.

At the count of five, the golem disintegrated in a shower of blue.

At the count of eight, the frag did not go off. It should have. I was still staring in bewilderment at where the golem used to be. I hadn't put the pin back, or even thought to. Stones rattled, sliding and cracking against one another as footsteps pushed them out of the beds they'd settled in. I stayed on my back, clutching a grenade that should've gone off. Thin white clouds spun across the sky. If Asag had re-amalgamated and was coming back, I was in trouble. He didn't seem like the type to creep up cautiously after one defeat, though, and I was certain he hadn't destroyed his own golem.

My spine hurt.

After a minute or so a face intruded into my line of vision. Green eyes, a thin scar on one cheek. Pixie-cut hair scattered with iron grey that stood out sharply against the original black. A few lines around the eyes and mouth, but not that many for a woman pushing fifty.

When I was a kid, I'd thought she was beautiful. Now, as an adult, I could see she wasn't. Attractive, yeah, but not beautiful. Her nose was too beaky, her chin too sharp, her height too great and her shoulders too wide for anybody's idea of conventional beauty. Put it all together, though, and I still thought she was beautiful. Some of that was hero worship. Some was the power that lit her from within. But mostly it was just Joanne Walker, who had taught me there was magic in the world.

Politely, even solicitously, she said, "Mind if I take this?" and removed the frag from my death grip on it. Only when she lifted it did I see a glimmer of silvery-blue magic stuffed in the pin hole, keeping it from detonating. She gave it a casual toss that had

great upper body strength behind it, and a few seconds later it exploded at a safe distance. Then she looked down at me. "I hope you don't mind me putting the kibosh on that last thing. I'm sure you could have handled it, but I was in the area. I take it you defeated the bad guy?"

I nodded.

She crouched. Her hands dangled in front of her knees, above my sternum. "Got your ass kicked doing it, too, hm?"

I nodded.

"Couldn't wait a couple hours for me to get down here to help, huh?"

I shook my head. Joanne grinned. "Yeah, I wouldn't have either when I was your age. I didn't. All the time, I didn't. I tell you, Ash, hook up with one of the Holliday kids. Get a little mojo on your side to go with the impressive martial arts skills. Clara's single."

I closed my eyes. Joanne laughed out loud and ruffled my hair. "Good news is you're only bruised all to hell and back, sweetheart. Hang on a second and let me patch you up. It'll make getting out of here easier."

The drink-of-water-in-a-desert magic rushed me. It pushed away all my aches and pains, until I could tell my spine hurt because a rock was sticking in it. My feet were numb because of the rock's location, not because I'd shattered anything. I exhaled deeply, more relieved than I wanted to admit.

Joanne curled her hands around mine and pulled me to my feet. I was four inches shorter, twenty years younger, and with far less magical aptitude than she, but she punched my shoulder like we were equals. "You okay?"

"I think so."

"Good. There's a diner with the best milkshakes in Washington about twenty or thirty miles back up the road. Let's go there and you can tell me all the ways you're more awesome than I am." She turned and slipped back down the mountainside,

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sending scree in bouncing waves before her. I followed more slowly, testing muscle and reflex reactions in the wake of the beating I'd taken. Nothing hurt anymore. I felt like I was fresh out of bed, ready to face the day.

I picked up a tiny stone and winged it at Joanne, catching her on the butt. She yelped, rubbed it, and turned around. "What was that for?"

"I just wanted to say if I had to slay the demon, you're buying the milkshakes."

Joanne grinned and waited for me to catch up. Then she slung an arm around my shoulders and tipped her head toward the distant diner. "Absolutely, darlin'. It's a date."

We hobbled down the hill together, and went for milkshakes.

*the end*