



# PULP FACTORY

ISSUE IX  
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FEATURING: JEREMY WININGER & DUKE RAULSTON

# **Pulp Factory E-Zine**

## **August 2021**

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**Issue 9**

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**Edited and Compiled by  
Ian Mallon, Blake Ray, and Iz Woodhouse**

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Edited by Blake Ray and Iz Woodhouse



## From the Editors

**Dear Readers,**

**Welcome back! We are here again to share some stories from our frequent contributors. We love our authors here and are proud to share their visions with you this month as we do every month.**

**Things are settling down here in Pulp Factory Land. Iz Woodhouse is settling in as our new art editor and cover designer. Ian is settling into his new house, and Blake is loving the time with his new baby daughter.**

**Soon and very soon, we will be expanding our reach and bringing you even more content. We plan to bring you criticism and analysis as well as the wonderful stories we already present you with every month. Be vigilant. Something is coming.**

**Cheers, Pulpsters,**

**Blake & Ian**

**This month's winner is Jeremy Wininger. He is a frequent contributor whom you may be familiar with from previous issues.**

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Jeremy Wininger is an up and coming writer and life long story teller. He is currently working on a series of fantasy adventure stories and creating a world of modern urban fantasy/horror.

## **Forecasting Method**

Jeremy Wininger

It was almost four in the morning when Ashley pulled in to her drive way. She took a few minutes to build up the nerve to leave the safety of her car. It was embarrassing how scared she was, but, like her grandma used to say, she had a bad case of the heebie jeebies. She knew what was about to happen. She would get out of her car in a near panic, race to her front door, fumble with her keys like a psycho killer was right on her tail, get into her apartment, and find her boyfriend, Nick, safe in bed asleep. She knew this was what would happen because this was the real world. This was the real world, and what she had seen at the party earlier couldn't be real.

It had been a little gathering of her old high school friends that still lived in town or, at least, close enough to make the drive. The five of them were acting like girls about to have a slumber party. It had been great up until Cassidy had suggested they do some dumb ritual she had read about online. Cassidy said it was something fun that she and her husband had tried out. It was supposed to let you see your future. It sounded like one of those dumb 'creepy pastas' that Ashley listened to online, but she didn't want to be a wet blanket.

Cassidy got all the girls to sit in a circle and then took her necklace off. "It says that you have to have a focus," she explained, as she put the simple pendent on the floor. "We'll use this." The fire opal in the center sparkled in the room's dim light; only the candles burned because Cassidy had turned off the electric lights. "Now, we all have to close our eyes and focus on the desire to know the future. As you are thinking of that, reach out and take the hands of those on either side of you." Cassidy's voice had become softer and lyrical. She almost sang the instructions and continued a hum in between them.

Cassidy continued her instructions with a soothing tone to her voice. She then started the chant she had found online, instructing everyone to chant along with her.

"King of Colors, show us your will. King of Colors, bless us with a touch. King of Colors, take from us as you give." They repeated this as if it were a mantra for several minutes. Instead of becoming bored and the chant stopping as Ashley would have expected, their voices grew more intense. A

sense of something building up came within her. As if rehearsed, their chant sped up.

Suddenly, Ashley was overcome with a vision so powerful that she knew it had not come from within her. She saw a figure coming for her. It was shadowy and full of malice. Fear and adrenaline hit her as hard as if the figure was chasing her. Her eyes flew open and the figure was there, in the middle of their circle. It was looming before her like the specter of death incarnate. One boney hand reached out and touched Ashley. Its freezing cold aura filled her with pain, and, as his hand moved away, a strand of gentle pink light seemed to come out of her. Ashley screamed and the candles all extinguished at once.

And then, she was sitting in the room with the other girls. The candles were lit again, as if they had never extinguished. The others were all giggling and talking about how it was so stupid, and of course nothing had happened. Cassidy almost looked embarrassed to have even mentioned the idea in the first place, as she turned the light back on and snuffed out the candles.

After that, Ashley had excused herself as politely as possible and rushed home. The twenty-minute drive from Kennesaw to Acworth had been the longest drive of her life. The whole way, she kept checking her rearview mirrors and looking around in the car. She didn't even know what she was checking for.

She finally worked up her nerve, opened her car door, and rushed to her apartment. After fumbling a bit with her lock, she was safe inside her home. The thudding in her chest lessened a bit as she stepped toward her bedroom. Everything seemed in place. Nick slept quietly under the covers of their bed, and she joined him. Ashley, comforted by her boyfriend's presence, slowly calmed. She pressed close to him and, reassured by his warmth, drifted to sleep.

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She felt changed. Lucid dreaming was not new to Ashley, she had them occasionally, but this was different than normal. She felt as though she were trapped within her own head. She knew that this wasn't real, but it also didn't feel like a dream. She looked around what she knew was her mindscape. It was a barren landscape; it seemed to be mostly sand and rock. It seemed so bleak, so sad. In what felt like a dusky sky, shone a bright moon. It was the only spot of beauty in her surroundings. She slowly turned to take in everything about her and, in the distance, saw something shimmering. She went to it.

She was struck with a horror so deep that she could do nothing but watch. There, laid open before her, was her very own essence, her soul. It was damaged. The crystalline form of everything that was truly her had been ruptured. It bled light slowly and steadily. A light, gossamer strand, so fine it could barely be seen, went from her wounded essence and traveled further on. Mutely, Ashley followed the strand with her gaze, until she saw it led into

darkness. No, it wasn't darkness; it was a shadowy figure. The figure held an object in its inky black hands. Ashley couldn't quite make it out, but the strand connected her soul to whatever the shadow held.

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Ashley was in a cold sweat when she woke up. She couldn't quite remember her dream; mostly just that it was a bad one. It was bright when she woke up and Nick was already out of bed. She must have really needed the sleep; Nick couldn't normally get out of bed without waking her up. She looked at her clock and it read four o'clock. She climbed out of bed surprised. Checking her phone, she saw that Nick had texted her.

*Hey hon, went ahead to the show. You were sleeping way to good to wake up. See you there.*

Ashley quickly moved from wondering about her exhaustion to a combination of annoyance at Nick's refusal to learn the difference between to and too, and the rush to get ready to go to Nick's show. She fixed some food, showered, and dressed. Nick had two performances, one at seven o'clock and one at nine. She had missed a lot of his shows because of work and really wanted to show support by being at both of them. Plus, it would give them a little bit of time between the shows together. Nick was very understanding of her busy work schedule. She was working as a developer in a small startup video game company, and what it lacked in pay, it made up for in long hours. She enjoyed the work, but had to admit it had become more of a burden than she would have liked.

She sat in front of her mirror to put on her make up. She froze as she looked at her reflection. Her eyes. They were almost white. It looked like she had bad cataracts. She tried to scream, but her horror was trapped in her chest. Her heart pounded ferociously, as her reflection began speaking. Ashley's lips did not move, as her quickly changing form in the mirror addressed her.

"The King of Colors has found his pink, but he knows not the price of his indulgence. A king he claims to be, but in the end, he is no better than a pawn."

As Ashley's doppelganger spoke, its hair began to gray, and a web of purple veins began to surface on its cheeks.

"He has connected you to the ether to draw upon you, unknowing that the ether is an ocean, not a river. You are a vessel, though you never knew. We send this to you, keep the words."

As she spoke, the doppelganger's voice became rough and cracked. It took on a resonance and a higher pitch, no longer resembling Ashley's voice in the least.

Ashley was unable to move of her own accord but, as a tear rolled down her cheek, she found herself leaning over and retrieving a pen and her small leather-bound day planner. She placed the book on her makeup table and, in

perfect time with her doppelganger's words, she began writing at a furious pace.

The doppelganger's lips had now turned purple as she spoke.

"The light of the sky will falter before the brothers that are the same person."

Ashley wrote as fast as the being before her could speak.

"Death will ride forth upon a pale horse and claim three, but they will be unknown.

"The Lady, controller of destiny, she will die for her sins, but not before she takes the Magician's heart.

"The Love that plays at magic will be a skeleton in your wake."

Ashley began crying in earnest, tears blurring her vision, but still she wrote every word down.

"The Guardian will sing, and the dead shall rise."

"The Forgotten Door shall be reopened, and the charlatans will be exposed in the falsehood of their abilities.

"The First will fall into long slumber; his denial will be his power. Once his denial passes his mantle will be bestowed.

"They Who Pull the Strands will return in half death. War will be their song and Death their audience."

Ashley's hand was now cramping from the uncontrollable exertion.

"A great fire will come from the sky. The first calamity of the new age will begin.

"The King of the Dead returns in the wake of the false leader.

"A new country will be recognized and the plague will rise.

"That which You broke will be fixed at great cost; it would be better if it were not so."

Ashley's pain was overcome by a profound grief.

"Death will claim you, at long last, and the era of your foretelling will come to an end."

Ashley sobbed, and control of her limbs returned to her.

It was several minutes before Ashley had regained enough of her composure to stop crying. She had slumped down to her knees and was shaking with fear. In her hands, pressed against her chest, she held the book and she looked down at her writing. She had written it all down, in bold handwriting, nothing like her own. A list of the thirteen things she had been told. Confused and scared, Ashley stared.

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Nick had been worried about Ashley for the last couple of weeks, ever since she had missed his shows. It wasn't anything new for Ash to miss shows. She got tied up at work a lot, and Nick always felt bad for her. Plus, it wasn't like going to a magician's stage shows was exactly at the top of everyone's list of weekend plans. If it were, then Nick wouldn't have to work a day job. But if Ash told him that she would make a show, then she always

did. But lately, she just seemed tired all the time. She had finally gotten another weekend off and was insisting on going to his show. Nick had tried to talk her into staying home and getting some sleep, but that seemed to really upset her. Now, they were in Nick's car driving to the little theatre that he had been working out of for the last couple of months.

"So, it looks like Kate may have really found us a great deal. She's having the contracts drawn up; it would be a real Vegas show. With that kind of money, we could move; you could take a long break, and look for a job when you're ready. Heck, if the money is good enough a job would be optional for you," Nick glanced at Ashley as he spoke. He hoped news like that would cheer her up, and she was smiling like the idea pleased her. But there was that tiredness behind her smile. The excitement he had hoped for was muted by a lack of energy.

"That sounds great, hon," Ashley responded, to her credit, with some excitement in her voice. "Vegas would be a great change of pace." Nick took it as a good sign that they were still on the same page. But if she was still drained for much longer, he was going to insist she see a doctor.

"She's supposed to have all the details worked out with the promoter next week and then the contracts can get finalized. Shouldn't be long before we know some dates." Nick spoke with genuine excitement, hoping it would rub off on Ashley and revitalize her to some extent.

By this time, they were pulling up to the small back parking lot of the theater. The two of them headed in and, while Nick prepared some new illusions he had been working on, Ashley hung out and socialized with the other performers and stage hands. She spoke with Derrick for a bit—one of Nick's closest friends in the 'business' and future partner in Vegas if their agent, Kate, could manage to work the deal. Derrick was a short, stocky guy, about 10 years older than Nick and Ashley. He was the nicest guy that she had met here at the theater, if not a little dopey at times.

He was excitedly jabbering about a new illusion that he wanted to work with Nick on.

"That's what always made the Zig Zag Woman such a great illusion, it could withstand the audiences' scrutiny, and you know how good Nick is at figuring that stuff out. Way better than me." Derrick ended the sentence like a confession. It wasn't the first time Ashley had heard that tone in his voice. Ever since Kate had set up the deal for Derrick and Nick to step back as performers and focus on trick design, Derrick's confidence had been injured.

"Don't sell yourself short, Derrick. Nick's told me plenty of times that he wishes he had your ingenuity for coming up with new illusions. He's good at polishing them up after you come up with the idea. You two make a good team." Ashley meant the words sincerely, but was afraid she carried a placating tone.

Derrick's face lit up with a smile.

"Really?"

“Definitely”, Ashley responded, with a reassuring smile.

“Thanks Ash,” Derrick said as he noticed Nick had gotten free from working with one of the stage hands on a spot he would be performing tonight. “I’m going to talk to Nick about it. Enjoy the show.”

Ashley took a few moments of peace to try and get her mind off of the dream she kept having. She no longer had any trouble remembering it, and she had it every single time she fell asleep. That, coupled with the hallucination she had the day after her party with her friends, had her very worried. It was getting harder to just write it all off to stress; something was wrong. She started watching the activity on the stage to try and relax.

It was during the rehearsal that the problems occurred. Ashley, who was sitting at the cabaret style tables watching the Bingham Brothers act, was the first to hear the cracking noises. As the identical twin’s rehearsal continued, the noises became louder and more noticeable. Suddenly, one of the supports for the main chandelier came loose with a pop of dust and one of the four chains that stabilized the light broke and swung free. As it swung, many of the prisms attached to the lights crashed into one another and broke.

A few people screamed in panic, but the other three chains supporting the massive chandelier held. Ashley bolted from her seat, dodging the falling glass. She ran to Nick, who had been moving with haste towards her. He grabbed her and spun his back toward the chandelier, just in case some debris shot their way. For a few moments, Ashley felt really safe with him protecting her.

While no one was hurt, it was deemed necessary to cancel the show, so they could get people over to make repairs and inspect the ceiling to make sure the rest of the supports were secured. All the talent were told to go home to decrease the chance of injuries.

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Ashley found herself in a state of introspection on the drive home with Nick. He was understandably disappointed with the show being called off, but in this instance, it was a weird relief. Normally, Nick was very attentive to Ashley, but right now she wanted to be left alone. The show served as a distraction to him and gave her time to think. Something about tonight was tickling the back of her brain. The chandelier had been scary, but not that bad. Something else about the evening was bothering her. Honestly, she was happy to have this nagging feeling. It helped her forget the dream.

It was almost fun to explore her feelings and think about anything else. What was it about the chandelier that was bothering her so much? They had been very lucky that it hadn’t fallen all the way, and really it hadn’t fallen at all. It had just faltered. They got on to I-75 North coming out of Atlanta, when suddenly Nick swerved his car to the side, jerking Ashley from her thoughts. There was the screaming of tires, with brakes pushed to the floor and Ashley saw an old muscle car swerve recklessly in front of them. Once, years ago, the car had probably been a bold yellow; now it had faded

almost to white. In the fading light of dusk, she saw the car clip the rear end of another car ahead of them. The muscle car was moving so fast that the contact caused it to spin out of control. The sound of metal rending assaulted Ashley's senses. By this point, Nick had already safely passed the wreck, and Ashley swung herself around to look through the rear window. The car had flipped and slammed into the side of an old work van. It looked bad.

Nick was pulling over to see if he could help and Ashley slowly got out of the car and called 911. She wasn't sure that was the right number to call for this situation, but she was sure this was an emergency. The police and ambulances arrived quickly enough for Atlanta traffic on a Saturday night. Nick and Ashley stayed for hours. The guy in the old car had suffered from some sort of episode. A seizure, maybe? Nick and Ashley were witnesses to fatalities. Three men had been in the work van and all three had been killed in the wreck. It wasn't until Ashley overheard that none of them had any identification on them that it clicked in her head. She excused herself quickly to Nick's car, and she stared into the night sky, unsure what her life had become.

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Ashley's sleep had only gotten worse in the week since the car accident. She wasn't worried anymore that she had something medically wrong. At first she had been worried that she had a brain tumor or something, but now she thought that would have been a blessing. Many times, she had simply gotten up from her restless slumber and walked over to her planner, which she now kept hidden in the top of her closet, and just stared at the page where she had written those thirteen lines. Her dark hair now carried a streak of white through it, which had worried Nick horribly, but she had convinced him that she would wait just a while longer before a doctor visit was necessary.

The streak of white had suddenly appeared in her hair the morning after the wreck. Perhaps, if Ashley hadn't been suffering from sleep deprivation, she would have gone on to the doctor anyway. But a stubbornness had developed in her mind. Tonight, she sat in the floor in front of her closet door, obsessing over the first three lines of what she believed were prophecies. The twins at the rehearsal and chandelier had to be the first one, and with the second one, it was easy enough for death's pale horse to be that old car. Plus, none of the victims had IDs; they were unknown. Ashley reasoned all of it over and over and had, thus far, succeeded in scaring herself horribly. But she couldn't let it go. The things that were happening here were bigger than her. She felt like she was sitting on a lit powder keg, scrambling to find the fuse before it was too late to put it out.

Next on the list was the Lady, controller of destiny, she will die for her sins. But not before she takes the Magician's heart. This one really freaked her out. What did that mean, was Nick the Magician? What did heart mean? Anxiety filled her chest like it never had before the dreams had first started.

It was almost more than she could bear. A spiraling feeling, like there was no end to it. This is what her life had become. Every night was an agonizing exercise in terror and futility.

Ashley quietly wept. She was having a hard enough time concentrating with the lack of sleep, and the stress of what she was imagining could happen next was pushing her toward an edge. She cried until the sun came up, and then she pretended everything was all right as she climbed back into bed.

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The next day, Nick worked at the little restaurant in Kennesaw where he waited tables. He worked absent-mindedly, worrying about Ashley. The exhaustion was bad enough, but the white streak in her hair was too much. By the end of his shift, late that night, Nick had decided he didn't care if she would fight him all the way to the doctor's office, she was going. It was just as he was walking out to his car that his phone rang.

"Hey Derrick what's u—" Nick's greeting was cut off by his friend's sobs.

"I killed her Nick, she's dead."

Nick could barely make the words out, as they were choked out between Derrick's crying.

Nick must have heard him wrong. Derrick was the absolute nicest guy he knew. The man wouldn't hurt a fly.

"Whoa buddy, what happened? Are you okay?" Nick maintained a calm tone to his voice.

"Kate's dead," Derrick spat out, as he continued sobbing. "I shot her".

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Kate Andrews was not a kind woman. She would not be remembered for any charitable graces; she had none. She wouldn't be remembered fondly by friends. The closest she had to friends were rivals, and while they did respect her, they would not mourn her. She also wouldn't be remembered by her family. What few relations she had remaining alive, she had shunned through abusive acts and manipulation. No, Kate was fully independent of sentiment or guilt. She had cut for herself a small talent agency for the booming entertainment industry in Atlanta, and while she was not particularly blessed with a lot of talented clients, she did have several that were almost talented. She saw an opportunity in that for herself.

Most importantly, in her stable were 3 magicians. Samantha Michaels, who could be taught to perform other magicians' illusions with charisma that the crowds loved. Unfortunately, she had very little talent for much else. Then, there were Derrick Chambers and Nicholas Vance, two men who both had keen minds for innovating new tricks, but had the collective panache of a dung beetle.

Kate realized that she might have something special if she could put these three together and work them as a team. They might even be good enough to headline a show out in Las Vegas. Kate had sought and delivered

on such an opportunity. One of the mid size hotels needed a new act to run several times a week. The hotel couldn't afford an established act and had to go with something new, and Kate had convinced them on her talent. The stars had aligned and everything looked like it was a done deal.

But there was a hitch; in Kate's experience, there always was. Kate had been a failing agent in L.A. before moving to Georgia to get her fresh start. She was on the wrong side of fifty and, financially, things had been rough. The kind of rough where she had made the wrong bets with the wrong kind of people. She owed a lot of money to a lot of bad men.

But she was a survivor. She knew a bigger piece of the pie could take the heat off of her for long enough to strike gold, as long as she made the right bet this time. Samantha was that bet. Kate had contracts drawn up that would transfer ownership of Derrick and Nick's original design illusions over to herself. This would give them the option of long-term salaried positions and a low percentage of the gate for any future independently ran shows in which Samantha used their inventions. Kate would then actually take on Derrick and Nick's performer's share of the money. Two thirds for her and one third for Samantha, after her ten percent agent's fee off the top. That would buy her time. If the show were a big success, it would pay it all off. She was almost certain there would be a law suit from Nick and Derrick, but she could tie that up in court for a few years and then, once her debts had been settled, she could pay them off with a little settlement.

Nick and Derrick weren't idiots, but they weren't lawyers either, and Kate was able to have enough legal jargon put into the contracts to hide its true purpose. Two days ago, all three performers had signed without knowing any better. Kate had been able to set up the dates for the Vegas shows and, with proof of payment coming, she felt safer. That was until now.

Derrick stood in front of her desk, the gun in his hand pointing at her horrified face. "Do you think I'm some kind of idiot, Kate!?" Derrick was screaming and had a drunken slur to his question.

"Derrick, babe, just put the gun down and let's talk about what this is all about", Kate pleaded. He wasn't supposed to find out about any of this until it was too late to do anything and Kate could arrange the proper security for herself. Now, she needed to play dumb. Maybe she could blame it on the lawyers.

"Don't Derrick babe me, you whore! My brother looked at that contract, you're screwing us Kate, me and Nick both!"

As Derrick spoke, his hand wavered, almost pulling the trigger more than once.

Since when did Derrick have a spine? She couldn't imagine either of the men marching in here with a gun, but especially not Derrick. He was a teddy bear. It shocked her that Derrick was even the first to realize anything; Kate had always thought of Nick as the shrewder of the two. "Derrick, look, if something is wrong with the contract, then let me see if we can fix it. Maybe

the lawyers made a mist- “, her voice was cut off by the gun’s blast. A look of perfect surprise rested on Derrick’s face.

Kate’s body hit the ground lifeless, the matters of earthly debt now settled. He hadn’t meant to pull the trigger; his hands had just been shaking so bad that he had accidentally fired the gun. He wanted to use the gun to force her to fix things. Not this, never this. Derrick was crying as he called Nick’s cell phone.

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Ashley was numb as she got off the phone with Nick. He was at the police station giving his statement. Kate was dead and so were Nick’s dreams of Vegas. Without Kate working as the center piece of the agreement, the whole thing would be washed down the drain. Ashley had been shocked at first. She had never really liked how fake Kate seemed, but she had always guided Nick’s magic career in the right direction. The shock wore off, and the situation became all too real. Ashley could see Kate scheming towards the goal of having everything for herself. She spoke with Nick for a while about everything—helping him process what clearly felt like the end of his dreams. Then, right before Nick had told her he would be home soon and ended the call, Ashley had a simple thought go through her head. She had just thought, poor Nick, this must be tearing his heart out.

She walked to her closet and looked at the planner again. She stared at it for so long, reading the list of thirteen passages she had long ago memorized. Passage three had happened, it just had, Ashley was so sure of it. Now, she focused on the fourth prophecy. The Love that plays at magic will be a skeleton in your wake.

“No, oh no. No no no no no no, please no.”

Ashley’s voice broke, as she fell to her knees crying. She couldn’t lose Nick. She couldn’t survive without him. She would do anything for him. She stopped crying as suddenly as she had started, and she stared at the planner again. Her mind was clouded by lack of sleep, and she was full of a reckless desperation that she had never experienced before. A sudden resolve filled her, as she looked at the thirteenth prophecy.

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It was around three in the morning when Nick got home and found Ashley and her note. She had been as open with him in her final letter as she always had been. She told him about the vision, the prophecy, and about the dreams. She told him that he meant more to her than anything ever had or ever would. She had taken the pills from the medicine cabinet and ended her life because she truly believed that it would save his. He called 911, weeping, and tried to resuscitate her. He cried after they took her away. He cried as he found the note and then the planner and saw the prophecies. He cried most bitterly of all reading the thirteenth one, Death will claim you at long last and the era of your foretelling will come to an end. It was a very long time before Nick stopped crying.

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Cassidy left the apartment complex that Ashley and Nick's home was in before the police arrived that night. She had sensed that her ritual had almost completed. Never had it taken so long for one of her stones to collect a soul, but she must admit that Ashley's had been worth the wait. She indulged herself with another look at the necklace she had hidden just outside of Ashley's bedroom window. The fire opal now glowed with a deep pink glow, the strongest glow she had ever collected. It was the same necklace she had placed at the beginning of the ritual at the party with her old friends. Normally, she didn't have a group that big to choose a victim from, but fortune had smiled on her when she received the invitation. The stone had many targets to choose from, and it had attached itself to the strongest soul present, other than Cassidy's of course.

She moved through the darkness, anticipating her master's pleasure. So caught up in her own ego-centric thoughts, it never occurred to Cassidy that there might have been more to Ashley. And so it was that Cassidy was completely ignorant of the prophecies of Ashley Monroe, and of the fact that Ashley had been wrong. She had prevented nothing, because none of her prophecies had yet come to pass.

**This month we are publishing another installment of Duke Raulston's novella, *Redemption*. It is a fascinating mash-up of westerns, horror, and fantasy that we are super proud to present.**

\*

Duke Raulston owns *The Marion County Messenger*, an online newspaper. He also co-hosts a weekly horror show, *Tennessee Macabre* that airs on OtherworldsTV and iTVChattanooga. He has always loved pulp fiction.

Duke grew up reading Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft. It is his desire to spend the rest of his life creating pulp fiction.

## **Redemption**

### Part VII

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## **The Chariot**

Father Morales woke slowly. He was not fully aware of where he was, but wherever he was it was blurry and spinning. He was dimly aware that his arms were bound over his head, and his ankles were bound as well. He was still too groggy to realize that he was in pain. The blurring was starting to clear, but he was seeing double. He could dimly make out the tall, slender figure of Father Tremblay before him.

"Ah, Morales, I see you are waking up. It seems the only way to safely transport you is drugged." He gestured to a man with a black eye and a swollen jaw. "Young Phillip here should really be in bed. It seems that he wouldn't miss your imminent demise even if it killed him." Morales' tongue felt thick and hairy. He licked his lips and slurred, "I am flattered. If I get free, I will break his neck."

"Now, now, Father Morales, is that anyway for a man of the cloth to talk? We both know that you are going nowhere. In fact, we can take a few moments for you to recover your senses. I want you to be fully aware when we summon our master." He turned his back on Morales.

Morales slumped back against the wooden cross he was fastened to. He felt daggers of pain shoot through his shoulders. The bonds on his wrists were tight. His vision was clearing fast, and he could now see four or five men in the flickering torchlight. Worse, he could see creatures that weren't men. Lycanthropes, men like creatures covered in fur with yellowed fangs, slathering at the foot of his cross, and undead creatures like Starkiller had fought at the O'Hanlan Ranch. Morales hung his head. He knew that escape was not possible; he was going to die a horrible death. He was going to die a martyr, like the Saints of Old.

"Quo Vadis Domine?" He whispered.

“*Eo Romam iterum crucifigi. /Let us hold to the faith we profess!*” was the whispered reply.

None of Morales’ tormentors were paying any attention to him. He knew that voice. It could not be. It was Emilio. “Emilio” he called.

Tremblay laughed, “Soon enough Father Morales, you will meet him soon enough. Shall I begin?” he taunted.

“I am prepared to join Emilio this evening, indeed I look forward to that reunion. I do wonder Tremblay, when your time comes, and come it will, will you rush to meet your master as eagerly as I rush to meet mine. I rather think not.”

Tremblay’s smirk disappeared. It was replaced with a shocked look.

“Summon whatever demons you can, Tremblay, I am ready!” Morales yawned.

“Let’s see how smug you are when you face the creature,” Tremblay screamed. “You will die begging for your life just like that pig Sanchez.” Tremblay had gone red in the face and flecks of spittle flew from his lips when he screamed.

Father Morales just smiled at him.

“Let us begin!”

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Starr had already begun his descent down the slick limestone walls of the sink hole when he first heard the chanting. He didn’t know what was going on, but he was pretty sure that it was not good. He tried to move as quickly as he could down the walls, but the limestone was worn smooth by millenia of rainwater.

There was a faint glow of firelight coming from somewhere in the depths, but it was nowhere near enough light for him to see. He had to feel for cracks, crevices, and ledges so that he could get hand and foot holds. More than once he slipped and sent dirt, roots, and gravel tumbling to the floor of the hole. Fortunately, the chanting covered the noise that he was making. He began to feel something in his mind. It was the spirit of the rattlesnake that had bit him in the desert. At first he was frightened, almost paralyzed. He thought it meant that there was a serpent somewhere on the ledge that he clung to. He hung there, suspended, Lord only knows how high, above the floor. Afraid to move for fear of feeling the prick of a serpent’s fangs. The tell-tale rattling that he feared never came.

He came to realize that he could sense the walls. He could see them. Not with his eyes, but in his mind. He reached out to where he *felt* a foothold and sure enough it was there. Now the descent became almost as quick as climbing down a set of stairs, or a good steady ladder. He was soon standing in the bottom of the pit.

He looked around and sure enough, his .45s were at the bottom of the hole just like Oya said they would be. His clothes were nowhere to be seen.

“Dammit! Witch woman, or Goddess, it don’t matter. They all have the same fucked up sense of humor! I bet she’s watchin’ and laughin’ her ass off.” Star grumbled as he belted the six shooters around his waist. He tied each holster down to his nude thigh. “That’s gonna chap!” He grimaced to himself.

Starr took a deep breath, he put his hands on the hilts of his six shooters and walked toward the light. The chanting grew louder, and the narrow passage that Starr had been walking down opened into a large chamber. Starr paused in the darkness at the mouth of the passage.

It was a blood curdling sight. There were a handful of people in the room. He counted at least two werewolves and a handful of undead like he had fought a few nights ago. There was a blond haired Catholic Priest chanting and swaying in the center of the room and then on the opposite side, his blood boiled as he saw Father Morales hog tied to a cross at the far end of the room.

He pulled his pistols, and was about to open fire, when a hand on his shoulder nearly caused him to jump out of his skin. He swung one pistol around into Oya’s face.

“You know that ain’t going to do you a lick of good.”

“It’s you. You didn’t happen to bring my clothes did you?” Starr asked.

“No I am afraid not, I want to see our enemies die laughing.” She replied.

“Very funny!”

“All these people you see, they are just minions. The real evil, what you might call the Demon, is coming down that tunnel there just behind Father Morales. That’s who we need to kill. Kill him, and we can hunt down the rest. If we don’t kill him. He will just make more; the evil will continue.”

“They are using Father Morales as a sacrifice?” Starr asked.

“Yes. I am afraid so. There is nothing these creatures hate more than a loyal servant of the God or Goddess. They will not suffer even one to survive if they have their way.” She replied.

“They ain’t gonna have their way!” Starr replied. “I am gonna kill every Mother-fuckin’ one of em if it’s the last thing I do.”

Starr stopped for a moment. He could feel the scrape of scales against limestone. He knew that the Demon Oya spoke of was coming. “It’s comin’.” he whispered.

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Tremblay was swaying back and forth in an apparent trance. Father Morales could hear the scrape of serpentine scales in the tunnel behind him. Whatever it was, it was coming for him. His heart was pounding and he could hear his pulse, but his last great act of defiance in this life was going to be to let Tremblay think that he was unafraid. Tremblay and the others backed away and looked up as the thing emerged from the tunnel behind him. He was going to try to get a good look at it before he met his doom, when the

strangest thing that had ever happened in his life, a life that was filled with strange things, happened. Starr emerged from the tunnel behind the crowd. He was wearing nothing but a pair of six guns. The Monk burst into laughter.

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Starr didn't pause, when he saw what appeared to be a giant serpent emerge from the passage behind Morales. He knew that he had to kill it. He only had twelve shots. He decided to kill the weird shit first. He was going to start with the two werewolves. Then move to the six undead creatures. He was hoping that the human acolytes would run. That would leave him four blessed bullets to deal with the fifty foot snake. Sure that all made perfect sense to him. Then Morales saw him, and started laughing.

That is when everything went straight to Hell. Even the damned snake froze. Guess it had never had a sacrifice laugh in its face before. Starr knew that it was time to strike. His .45s barked twice and the two wolves howled, and fell twitching and kicking in the dust. Starr had expected the snake to come for him. It didn't. It was going to finish the priest quickly, and get away. It lunged at Morales.

Another Priest, a Franciscan, emerged from the shadows and struck the serpent with nothing but his balled up fist, right before it could bite the monk. He must have had arms like a black smith. The snake sprawled against the back of the cave. Morales screamed "Emilio!" Tremblay froze clearly in shock.

Starr was impressed. He didn't have time to dwell on it. He had been right about the human acolytes. They had frozen when Starr had killed the werewolves but when the priest sent their serpent-god sprawling that was more than they could take. They were fleeing. All but Tremblay, he was rooted to the spot.

Now he was dealing with the undead, and the giant snake was coming for him as well. He was cycling through his ammo way too quickly, and the undead were not dying fast enough. He was going to wind up fighting these things with his bare hands.

The serpent drew itself to its full height. Starr fired his last bullet at the head of the snake. The blessed bullet bounced off of a yellowish, mottled scale above the creature's eye. It did not even seem to notice. Two of the undead creatures were back up, and coming at Starr. He threw his empty pistols at them, as he backed toward the passage that he had come through.

Oya stepped in between him and the undead creatures. She smiled at Starr. "If you are willing, I can enter you. Together we can defeat these creatures."

Starr nodded his consent. Oya walked right into him. He felt a warm sensation, like slipping into a hot bath. He could hear Oya talking in his head, and she could hear his thoughts, but otherwise he felt no different than he had. Oya raised his hand. Now, that was a little strange; his hand just

started to raise. He felt it and he could see it, but he did not have any input. There was a warm sensation at the tips of his fingers. He could feel blue energy crackle between his fingers; then it leapt from his fingertips.

The blue energy danced between the two undead creatures, they twitched for a moment and then fell to the ground burning and crackling. The mottled, yellowish serpent was pulling away from Starr; sensing a power that it had never faced in the countless millennia of its existence. But it was too late, Starr felt Oya summoning energy again.

This time he joined her. Oya pulled her energy from the heavens, but not Starr. He drew his energy from the Earth. It was the energy of molten rock and green growing things, and the electrical currents that flow between rock and water. It is scattered all over the planet in bits and pieces, but for a person that can draw on it and pull it together, it is powerful. Starr felt a twinge of fear from Oya as their energies merged into one. It was brief, but it was there.

If Starr's hand had felt warm before now his body burned with energy. He knew that he could not contain it much longer. The serpent coiled to strike. Its' eyes were black and lifeless; burning balls of Obsidian. He could sense fear in them. The snake's head darted forward quicker than the human eye could see. Starr unleashed the energy in a blue bolt the thickness of a tree trunk. The serpent uttered a death scream that was like nails on a chalkboard. Its' head and upper torso disappeared, and all that was left was the burning tail.

Starr looked around the room. There was no one else left, but Tremblay. He was on his knees whimpering. The Priest that Morales called Emilio was standing over him. Starr felt Oya leave him. He knew that the others would not see her. She left the hole quietly. He picked up a knife that one of the acolytes had dropped in his haste to escape, and walked over to cut Father Morales loose.

Tremblay looked up at Father Sanchez, "How," he stuttered, "how do you live?"

Father Sanchez looked at him, "I do not! What do you think of that Tremblay?"

Tremblay looked up at him, "I know I have no right to ask..."

"That is correct, you have no right to ask at all. How many people have you fed to that eldritch abomination? How many children have you abused? You are a disgrace to that collar you wear Tremblay. It is people like you that oppress the faithful, and give the church a bad name."

"Please, Sanchez, in the name of God..." He broke off mid sentence when Sanchez back handed him.

"I hereby de-frock you Tremblay, you are no more a servant of the Church, I do not believe that you were ever a man of God. Furthermore I consign you to the pit where you may serve your master for all eternity."

"No, Sánchez, no!"

Sanchez pointed at the collar around his neck. Tremblay clawed at the tightening collar in vain. He coughed and kicked as he fell over in the dust. Then the coughing and kicking stopped. Starr had cut Morales loose. He ran to Father Sanchez. Sanchez shouted, "No Miguel, you can not touch me, not in this world."

Father Morales stopped dead in his tracks. He hung his head. "Then it is as I feared. You are dead."

"I am afraid so. Miguel, I hate leaving you like this but I must. I can only tell you, what will seem a lifetime to you, is but the blink of an eye. We will be together soon."

"I am sorry Emilio. If it weren't for me you would not have been involved in any of this."

"How can you think that, Miguel? Even if I did not know you, members of my parish were being turned into monsters. I would have gotten involved anyway."

"I am sorry!" Morales murmured

"There is nothing to forgive Miguel. I came to give you a piece of information. Do you know who you seek?"

Starr answered him, "People keep talking about a preacher."

"That's right. I met him. He disguises himself as a preacher in a traveling medicine show. He is not a preacher, he is not even human."

"What is he?" Starr asked.

"They call him The Traveller. He is like the one you killed tonight, but he is able to make himself appear human so he can travel in our world."

"How does he do..." Morales questioned.

"It is ancient magic. This evil has spanned eons. I have no idea how old it is, or where it learned that piece of magic. I only know it's using this power to find sacrifices for the creatures here below. It usually poses as a religious figure so its authority is not questioned. It trades sacrifices for worldly power. There have been times in history where it has lived as a God-King. That is what it is trying to do here."

"Where is it?" Starr asked,

"It left Sweetwater headed west, that is all I know. Miguel I must leave now. I will check in from time to time." Father Sanchez drifted away as if he were vapor in the wind.

Starr stood quietly for a moment with Father Morales.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"No, not really."

"Are you aware that you are wearing nothing but a gun belt?"

"Yes, I am. It's quite freeing really."

"Freeing?"

"Oh yeah baby, I got a full range of motion, did you see how I was movin' in that fight back there?" bragged Starr.

“Oh yes I saw. I was tied to a cross facing a giant serpent, and I was laughing uncontrollably.”

“That’s my secret weapon, it disorients the enemy.”  
They walked to the wall of the pit and began the long climb out.