

Pulp Factory

featuring

M. C. Williams

Duke Raulston



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SHAKES²¹

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**Edited and Compiled by
Ian Mallon and Blake Ray**

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From the Editors

Dear Readers,

Welcome readers! We have had a crazy month here at Pulp Factory. We have had new additions, new houses, and new staff members to name just a few of the major life events that have come down the pipe. That is why this current issue is a little late.

In uplifting news, Blake has had a new addition to his household—a baby girl named Stevie. She is a beautiful little one who already has your editor-in-chief wrapped around her finger. The mom, dad, little one, and big brother are all healthy and happy (if a bit sleep deprived).

Ian has been in the process of moving into a new home. It is a lovely little house that will allow him to spread his wings creatively. It is also a little closer to work and the rest of the team.

Speaking of “the rest of the team,” in the last week, we have added a new staff member. Iz Woodhouse will be helping with editing and compiling the magazine as well as handling some of the art. She is full of great ideas and is going to help us move this magazine forward.

All in all, it has been a crazy but great month. We are sorry the issue is a couple weeks late. We hope you enjoy, and we will see you soon.

Cheers, Pulpsters,

Blake & Ian

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Edited by Blake Ray

Our winner this month is M. C. Williams. His story is reminiscent of creepy pasta stories as well as classic Lovecraftian literature. You're going to love it.

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M. C. Williams is an autistic fiction writer and the host of the long-running *Myths Your Teacher Hated* podcast. His work has appeared previously in *Descent into Darkness* #7 and *Pulp Factory E-Zine*.

Umbra Ex Machina

M. C. Williams

Recovered from Tobias Johnston's files, dated ten days after the death of Jack Corvo.

[BEGIN RECORDING]

"Jack is dead. I know he's dead - I watched him die. Dead men are supposed to tell no tales, so why won't Jack shut up? Even as a ghost, he just *has* to be the center of attention. He can't blame me. He can't. I didn't do anything that he wasn't planning to do to me first. [pause. buzzing] Just got another one. Another text message from an unknown number, another obvious code. This one's a classic Caesar cipher. The message is gibberish without the key, which is where the sender's number comes in: 1010 is just 10 in binary, and that's the key. If I write out the alphabet twice [scribbling in the background] with the second line shifted 10 spaces to the right, voila. It's an elegant code, but a simple one. Jack always did have more of a head for history than cryptology. That's why he needed me.

I haven't recorded one of these audio blogs in years; I mean, why make it easier for the government to spy on me? But...I don't have anybody to talk to. Jack was my best friend, the only person who ever listened, and now *he's* taunting me from beyond the grave. See? It's another cryptic number phrase. 'One is the loneliest number.' It's a countdown. It ends tomorrow - Halloween, when the veil is thin and spirits wander free. My birthday. I get a new message every day with some ominous message and they all have a number: 'behind the eight-ball;' 'thes seven deadly sins;' that sort of thing. It started the night after Jack died. They're coming from him. They have to be - he's the only person in the world who has my TOR address. The encryption is unbreakable, so it *has* to be Jack.

I don't know what Jack's counting down to, but it can't be anything good. He was always jealous of me, ever since middle school. Sure, Jack was the guy everybody liked, cool and charming without being an asshole about it, and sure, people wondered why we became best friends but Jack understood. Jack knew that I was the coolest person in that shitty school and everyone else was just jealous. I watched anime before it was trendy. I built my first

computer when I was ten. I even founded the Midnight Society, Baltimore's first gray-hat hacker society.

I mean, sure, I was the Society's only member, so I was thrilled when Jack asked to join. It felt good to have someone listen for a change. Jack made me feel heard. Of course, it turned out that he mostly wanted to know how to get around the school's firewall for some harebrained get-rich-quick scheme, but I think he actually liked puzzle-solving too. He stuck around with the Society for a long time, even after his scheme fell apart because his customers kept getting caught. Jack didn't get caught. Jack *never* got caught.

It went on like that for years; Jack would call me out of the blue, just to chat. We'd hang out and, for a little while, I could pretend to be popular. When I was with Jack, no one could tell me no. It was intoxicating, and I milked it for all it was worth because it came with an expiration date. Sooner or later, usually sooner, Jack would ask a favor. It wasn't like I could say no, not after everything he'd done, so of course I'd say yes: I'd destroy some files or transfer some funds or set up an untraceable email account. He'd say how grateful he was and swear to stay in touch and then he'd vanish until the next time he needed something.

When I saw the first Ruby Skull post on the Boston subreddit, I knew it was time for another Jack sighting. A difficult puzzle with the promise of riches at the end? It was like catnip for that smug bastard. Hell, even *I* was pretty intrigued. If it was real, if I could win, I'd finally be able to quit my bullshit IT job and start my own cybersecurity company. I could be my own man, make my own rules.

That first post was simple and to-the-point, a high-resolution photo of a skull carved from a single massive ruby with a block of text across it: 'There is a message hidden in this image. Find it, and it will set you on the path to finding the Ruby Skull, which waits to be claimed by the worthy. Beware, for the curse has claimed all who have dared to seek its power. Will you be the one to find it?' A small black bird perched beneath the text like a signature.

It was simple to download the image and extract the text tucked inside. Most of it was gibberish, of course, but at the end, I found what was clearly an encrypted web address. I ran it through one of my code-breaking algorithms and had the answer in minutes. It hadn't been a terribly complicated cipher. Amateurs. The address led to another picture, a cheesy poster for some old horror movie called 'The Screaming Skull' complete with the aforementioned bloody skull leering at a terrified, half-naked woman. Another small black bird preened on the windowsill. That was all.

It took me half an hour to discover that the skull on the original poster had been white, not blood-red—a clue. Too easy. I ran the poster through the steganography tool Red JPEG and got the next message: 'Kathy Anne is still at home with her favorite book' with a string of numbers and a link titled 'turnabout is fair play'. I wasn't sure who the hell Kathy Anne was, but the second part was obviously a book code. The link led to two images: a massive

blue diamond with red text scrawled across it and the cover of a Weezer album. The text was pure gibberish: Epn thvx fzgceozmûl, epn thva aknceozk, dte khur znchpkozmûl fce rzguvn-ktek lgnkshpwi.

That's where I ran into a brick wall. The text was clearly a cipher, probably the source for the book code, but I couldn't make heads or tails of it. I ran it through the algorithm, but no dice. I tried some other code-breaking tools, but naturally none of them could do what my program couldn't. I was getting nothing but a headache for my trouble. Naturally, that's when Jack called. Somehow, that bastard always knew just the right moment. I let him go to voicemail. I didn't plan on calling him back either. I never did. Every time Jack dropped me, I vowed to never speak to him again; every time, I knew I was lying. I still have that damned voicemail.

It's Jack. Hey, I dunno if you saw that Ruby Skull thing on Reddit. Crazy, huh? If that thing's real, it'd be worth a fortune and it'd be cool as hell to find it. I mean, an actual, honest-to-god treasure hunt? You know I can't resist something like that, and there's nobody I'd rather have on my team than you, Toby. I'll drop by later to hash things out. See you soon!

God, I hated being called Toby. Maybe I should have answered the phone. I could have told him not to come. I could have pretended not to be home. Maybe none of this would've happened. But I didn't pick up and I didn't check the voicemail, so when he knocked at my door an hour later, I answered it. Like a dumbass.

I tried to tell him to shove it, I really did, but Jack didn't listen. Jack never listens. It's why everyone loves him. Loved him. He was excited about the Ruby Skull, already dreaming about what he'd do when we found it. I hadn't agreed to anything, but it was already 'we'; *we* would be able to find the clue hidden in the movie poster. I laughed right in his stupid face, but the jerk didn't even have the brains to get mad. He just grinned that dopey grin and guessed that I'd already solved it. 'You're brilliant, Toby. I knew I backed the right horse.' And just like that, I was in.

I quickly walked him through the solution to the first puzzle and showed him what I'd found on the second, the one that had me stumped. Jack noticed something weird that I hadn't - they were both those Magic Eye things, with images hidden inside that you could only see if you unfocused your eyes. Or if you ran them through the right program. The diamond turned out to have a woman in a frilly dress and a bare, screaming skull, while Weezer held the Earth branded with '#3'. I remember Jack cocked his head like a puppy at the first one. He'd said something like 'Huh, another screaming skull. You know, that movie's based on a real haunting. Well, kinda. Katherine Griffith isn't in the movie, but she's the most famous screaming skull ghost. I bet that's her in the Hope Diamond.'

My ears had perked up. I'd asked him to repeat it, then skimmed back through my notes and asked if Katherine's middle name was Anne. Jack had smiled that damned smile and asked how I'd known—he didn't think I was a

history buff. I pointed out the message inside the movie poster, and then we dropped into a research hole on the haunting of Burton Agnes Hall. Dawn was breaking by the time we came up for air, but we'd cracked the next piece and I'll admit that neither of us could have done it alone. I didn't know that the third song on that album was 'Hash Pipe', but Jack didn't know what a geohash address was, which we used to crack the encoded message using a playfair cipher (my second guess).

I almost missed that we'd solved it since the quote turned out to not be English; hell, it wasn't even a real language. If Jack hadn't been a huge nerd, I'd never have realized it was fucking Elvish, some quote about a ring from that *Lord of the Rings* movie I never saw. Whatever, it was enough to decrypt the book code cipher and move on to the next step. Things went great for a while. We worked together on the Ruby Skull off and on for the next three months. Twice, we followed the solution to a countdown page and had to wait for the next piece to be revealed. It was...fun spending time with Jack again. He had a way of making you feel special; it was like a drug, but even during the best moments, I always knew it wouldn't last. Once we found the Skull, that would be it. We hadn't really talked about it, but I knew; it had happened enough times before.

Then everything went to shit. After months of breezing through puzzles and ciphers, of solving everything in hours, days at most, we ran dry. The previous clue had taken us into the bowels of the dark web to a tortured painting of a screaming man. His skin had been peeled off, leaving only soft bloody meat with deep, hollow pits for eyes. His mouth gaped open in a silently bloodcurdling scream. It was creepy as hell.

Blackbird hadn't left any obvious clues on this one, no text to point us in the right direction. I spent hours pouring over every pixel with Jack offering increasingly irritating suggestions over my shoulder. He said it looked like a distorted version of some painting called *The Scream*, which sent us on a wild goose chase for several frustrating hours. I did find one promising tidbit hidden in the html code; it was clearly meaningful, clearly important, but I couldn't crack the damn thing. By the time Jack threw in the towel, we were tired, hungry, and irritable. I offered to order food and keep working, but Jack didn't have the same work ethic.

As he left, he said I could keep working without him if I wanted, like he was being charitable. I'd had enough of his bullshit by then, and laid into him. I told him what I thought of him. All of it. Years of resentment spilling out in a stream of toxic sludge and honestly? It felt good. It felt *great*. Jack's face was priceless; I don't think anyone had ever told him off like that before. When I finally ran out of steam and collapsed, panting, into my chair, that little bastard smiled. He *smiled*. Like he thought I was funny, like it was all some big joke. I hated him then. I'd have given anything to wipe that smug grin off his stupid face.

'You're clearly stressed out, bud. I'll let you chill. Get some rest, and I'll come back when you're a little less anguished, man. You can apologize then.' And he left me alone with the silent scream on the screen. Turns out the only thing worse than having Jack making snide comments over my shoulder was empty silence.

I hated it. I hated *him*. I couldn't stop thinking about it, about him getting the last word in. Just like always. How dare he mock me like that! I didn't need him. I didn't need anyone! I'd solve this goddamned puzzle on my own; that'd show him. Microwaved ramen and lukewarm red bull powered my increasingly desperate search. Surely I'd be able to focus better without that asshole distracting me. Surely I'd come up with something clever.

I didn't.

Hours ticked by, mocking me with their steady disappearance. I had to solve this. I'd put too much time into this for someone else to walk away with the Skull. It was mine! I'd run the stupid image through every program I could think of to no avail. In utter desperation, I did the unthinkable.

I asked Google.

Now don't get me wrong - it's a powerful tool, but you need a lead. Otherwise, you're taking potshots in the dark and wasting valuable time. Jack had wanted to google everything on the first clues, run every image, the whole nine yards. We'd fallen down dozens of pointless rabbit holes before I finally convinced him that he needed to leave the technical part to the expert. It was almost 2am and I was no closer than when I'd started so I figured I had time to waste. Besides, it wasn't like Jack was there to say 'I told you so.'

That creepy picture was the only thing I had, so I ran it through a reverse image search. All of the others had been manipulated to prevent that from working, so I didn't expect to find anything. [pause. deep breath] I got a hit. Jack wasn't even there and I still heard him tell me 'I told you so.' Dammit.

It was a painting called 'The Anguished Man' and it had a very dark history. Legend said the artist had mixed his own blood into the paint and, as soon as he had finished, he'd killed himself. It was said to haunt whatever house it hung in, plaguing families with blood curdling screams in the middle of the night or slamming doors in empty rooms. Thinking about it still gives me the creeps.

As I sat there, shivering in the cold blue glow of my computer screen, alone with this cursed image, two realizations crashed down on my head. The first was that I'd been looking at that bit of code hidden in the page all wrong: it wasn't a cipher, it was a countdown. I checked again, and sure enough, the text was different. Still gibberish, but now that I knew what to look for, I could clearly see the syntax of a coding language. I figured it was a time-lock - at the right time of day, the code would resolve itself all on its own to reveal the next piece of the puzzle. All I had to do was be patient and present.

The second was that Jack had lied to me. He'd known all about this cursed painting, and he'd kept that knowledge to himself. He'd even taunted me as he'd left - 'I'll come back when you're a little less anguished, man.' He'd straight-up told me the freaking title knowing I wouldn't understand, that arrogant sonuvabitch. No doubt he was sitting in front of his own computer right now waiting for the ghostly painting to do its thing, for Blackbird to haunt his machine and reveal the Ruby Skull's location. This was the endgame, and Jack was cutting me out. He'd always planned to keep the prize for himself. He'd used me to get to the finish line and then ditched me. [loud thud] *Two could play that game!* [deep breathing]

The Skull was mine, I'd earned it, and I'd be *damned* if I was going to let him steal it from me. He'd never have gotten past the first clue without me. He *needed* me and he knew it. That's why he'd shown up on my doorstep in the first place. I was smarter than him, but he thought he was clever. Jack wasn't smart. Jack had never been smart, he'd just been lucky and popular. He'd been so smug, laughing at my frustration and taunting me. *Well who's laughing now, Jack? HUH?* [deep breathing]

I'd pounded another couple of Red Bulls and surfed the web while I waited for magic hour. I didn't have to wait long. At 3am, the painting started to scream; a slamming door echoed in my empty apartment; and, beneath it all, a man wailed about going down to the crossroads over jangling blues chords. It was jarring, even though I was waiting for something exactly like this to happen. I dove excitedly back to the Anguished Man and found that a small black bird now flew from the gaping mouth. Clicking it choked off the scream and downloaded an mp3 file. I played it, expecting instructions or maybe congratulations. What I got was weird, undulating, atonal music wailing from my speakers like the cries of the damned. I almost missed the screaming.

I was way too keyed up to sleep, so I cracked open the file and started digging. I'd just call out sick to work. The Skull was all that mattered. I could sleep when I was dead. And I needed to beat Jack.

By dawn, I'd solved it.

That awful spectral music was a MIDI file with a couple of independent tracks, and it didn't take me long to figure out that each one had 26 unique tones. I smiled. A musical cryptogram. Jack didn't stand a chance. I ran the files through a MIDI parser, spitting out blocks of gibberish text. I ran them through my algorithm and got a hit. That last bit was a Caesar cipher, child's play to solve. It felt like a tip of the cap from Blackbird. I'd done it. The last message was a congratulations on making it to the end and coordinates where the Ruby Skull waited. X marked the spot at a little crossroads on Georges Island, an old Civil War prison according to an online map. Seemed like an appropriate place to find a Skull, right?

I almost set out for the island right then before I remembered that it was the middle of the night. The ferry wouldn't run for hours. I made myself

stop and think things through. The Skull was so close, but Jack was only one mistake away from snatching it away. I couldn't risk it all on a mad race and hope that I beat him there, that I found it before he caught up. Too much could go wrong. No, I needed to be clever. I was smarter than Jack; I needed to outthink him.

Jack had dropped that snide little comment about the Anguished Man, so I had to assume he'd figure out the location of the Skull somehow. Maybe he had some other poor schmuck to do the heavy lifting. Maybe he'd bugged my place. Whatever it was, I needed to make sure I knew where he'd be, and there was only one way to do that. So I called him and told him I'd cracked it, that I knew where to find the Ruby Skull. We both pretended to be surprised and happy and then we made plans to meet at the ferry the next evening. Jack had wanted to go earlier, but I convinced him that it would be easier for us to look around after dark. The last ferry left the island at midnight, so we'd have time and, given the October chill, we'd probably have the place mostly to ourselves.

The awkward conversation had wound down and I figured Jack was about to hang up, but he surprised me. He asked if I was doing anything for my birthday. I told him of course I wasn't. I never do. People think having a Halloween birthday is awesome, but it sucks. Everyone's always too busy with costume parties to remember one measly birthday; I'd long ago given up trying to celebrate. It was less depressing that way. I was surprised Jack had remembered. It made me suspicious. He'd promised that we'd celebrate it together over the Skull—a toast to our victory and my birthday. It figured that Jack would find a way to make the one day that's supposed to be about me about him instead. Still, I agreed and tried to sound excited, even about his plan for ridiculous matching costumes. Couldn't have him getting suspicious.

I didn't sleep that night. How could I? In less than 24 hours, I'd find the Ruby Skull. I'd finally beat Jack at something. Who could sleep at a time like that? Besides, that stupid screaming painting was giving me the heebie jeebies (the Red Bull hadn't helped). No, I prepared. I poured over pictures and satellite images of the island, learning every nook and cranny where the Skull could be, where a person could hide. I memorized the roads, the trails, the places where official people would be. Then I packed my string-bag, the one from my trip to San Diego Comic Con two years ago. It was my favorite bag.

Once I was as ready as I could be, I took a long, hot shower to wash off the old day and prepare for the new. Dawn was breaking as I dressed. It felt prophetic. It was going to be *my* day. I should have known better; Charlie Brown doesn't get to kick that damned football. Not ever.

I was feeling optimistic as I headed out. I might have even whistled. I needed coffee, bacon, and a fresh supply of Red Bull to get me through the day, so I headed out for the South Street Diner. I knew they'd be open. There

was a 24-hour CVS across the street where I could stock up. Work calling to ask where the hell I was put a damper on my good mood. I hadn't gotten around to actually calling out. I don't think they bought my bullshit excuse, but I hadn't cared. By the end of the night, I wouldn't need them.

Jack was late for our meeting. Of course. It didn't bother me—later was better—but I had to wonder if he was just being thoughtless or if this was a power play. Did Jack suspect that I knew what he was up to? I'm still not sure how much he suspected. Would he have gotten on that ferry if he'd known I was on to his game? He *did* get on the ferry though and we cruised out to Georges Island. There were a handful of other people headed out with us. Most of them were talking excitedly about some ghost tour. I'd sneered at them, comfortable in the certainty that ghosts didn't exist. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe the dead *can* come back for All Hallows' Eve. I know it sounds crazy but... Ten minutes to Halloween. He won't come then, at midnight. He'll wait until three, until the witching hour, until the screaming starts.

Where was I? Right, Georges Island. The place was certainly creepy enough for a ghost tour, all crumbling stonework and dank passageways, at least once you got past the harbor proper. The area was plastered with tour flyers, many cheerily describing the horrible atrocities committed here during the Civil War. It all seemed in poor taste to me, but I guess it didn't matter. Anyone who cared was already dead.

Jack and I hung back, waiting for the various groups to wander away for tours of the fort itself or the island at large. When we were finally alone, we headed out along a small gravel path that, I'd been happy to note, no one else had taken. Not surprising since there was nothing out that way except a little beach, well away from the fort proper. There was no reason for anyone to head out that way except to look out at the water or maybe do some beachcombing.

Or find a secret treasure.

I didn't want Jack getting suspicious, so I talked while we walked. I apologized to him for yelling at him the other night, for spewing years of resentment all over him. I told him that I was under a lot of stress at work and that he'd just been a convenient target, but he'd always been a good friend to me so I didn't want things awkward between us. I asked him to forgive me. I was lying. I didn't mean a word of it, but Jack lapped it up. He just *loved* being the bigger person and lording his moral superiority over us mere mortals. Maybe that's the real reason he kept me around. He smiled that smug smile of his and said he understood, no hard feelings. I'm pretty sure he was lying, too. He wasn't better than me, he was just a better liar.

I'd made sure I knew where the spot marked by the coordinates was, so I knew exactly where I was going. I deliberately hadn't been specific with Jack when we'd planned this trip, circling a large chunk of land on the tip of the island that didn't actually include the correct spot. I needed to know if Jack was on the level. I'd had time to wonder if I'd gotten paranoid, if the

creepy vibe of being alone in the middle of the night with a screaming painting had gotten to me, so I'd decided to give Jack one last chance to prove he was honest. I let him lead. If he only knew what he'd told me he knew, he'd walk right past the Red Skull's hiding place. Then, I could tell him he'd missed it, be the hero of the hour. Or I could let him keep going and come back later. The Skull was mine by right anyway; I'd done all the real work to find it. Why should I share? Even as we were walking down the path, I wasn't sure what I was going to do if he walked past it.

But he didn't.

He stopped.

Jack stopped at the crossroads. That was when I knew, I *knew*, that he'd been lying to me. He'd been using me. *Again!* [loud banging] I mean, yeah, I'd been pretty sure he was an asshole before, but there's a world of difference between suspecting and *knowing*. I didn't expect his betrayal to hurt so much. Jack had been the closest thing to a friend I'd ever had. It hurt to know for sure that it had all been a lie. I hate him for it. He deserved what happened.

The sun had gone down hours ago, and an orange moon was rising, a...What's it called, the one where it looks like a big feral grin? That one. It bathed everything in a ruddy glow that did more to emphasize the shadows than to banish them. It also made finding a hidden treasure a real pain in the ass. Fortunately, I'd come prepared with a halogen head lamp in my string bag, the one I used to work on delicate circuitry. The thing glowed like a mini sun, lighting up whatever I looked at in sterile, brilliant white. Jack hadn't even brought a flashlight and he asked if I had one for him. I actually did have a spare at home, but I hadn't packed it. Oops. [laughter]

We started looking for some sign of the Ruby Skull. Well, I looked and Jack stumbled about blindly. [chuckle] Naturally, I found it. Even knowing almost exactly where to look, I nearly missed it: a small black bird, wings outstretched as though to take flight, etched into a flat white stone. The rock lay embedded in the dirt just at the crux of the crossroads, only a slightly different color than the surrounding gravel. It resisted being picked up; once I had it in my hands, I could see why. The stone was actually the lid to a buried metal canister.

It almost felt like the thing was vibrating in my hands. That was probably just in my head, right? I mean, it's not like you can *feel* a curse, right? I'd just been excited. The stone lid unscrewed surprisingly easily. Eagerly even. Red light sparkled inside the deep shadows. My heart stopped as I gently tilted the canister, rolling a glittering red stone the size of a cantaloupe into my palm. The flawless gem had been delicately cut into a skull, jaw dropped in a soundless shriek of agony. It was *huge*. And heavy. I didn't know exactly how much this was worth, but I knew I had just become a rich man. I'd done it. I'd won! The Skull was mine!

Jack couldn't have just let me have my moment. Jack wanted to see it. Jack wanted to *hold* it. I begrudgingly let him. My hand felt naked without it. I demanded it back, and that smug asshole actually laughed as he handed it over. Jack had never worried about money the way I had; he'd never struggled the way I had. He was always a lucky sonuvabitch. Everything always came up Jack.

Not that night.

I knelt down to put the Skull in my string bag for safe keeping. Jack approached, looming over me holding the heavy stone lid with the black bird. 'Hey Toby, hold on a sec. There's something I want to tell you.' The trap was sprung. Jack thought he had me dead to rights, that he could take the Skull from me like he took everything. Jack thought he could steal my glory.

Jack thought wrong. I'd come prepared.

I came up with a knife. Jack tried to swing the bird stone and bash my skull in, but I was too quick for him. Steel flashed in orange moonlight. Tiny drops of ruby sparkled between the stars. They were beautiful. Jack had gurgled something unintelligible at me through the ruin my knife had made of his throat. Blood dyed his hands crimson as he desperately tried to stem the flood. Couldn't have that, so I stabbed him again. And again. At some point, he stopped trying to fight. It was over. I'd won.

I opened my bag to change into the spare shirt I'd packed, but the glittering ruby leering up distracted me. Jack had wanted to take it from me. I decided to let him have it. In my own way. [giggling] The Ruby Skull isn't quite life-sized, but the canister it came in was big enough to do the job with a little pushing. Now *Jack* gets to be the Ruby Skull, screaming for eternity. Like he deserves. [giggling] I guess the Skull was cursed after all. Jack ended up a head in a jar. He wasn't as clever as he thought. [pause. buzzing]

Another message from Jack. This one's not even in code. 'Happy Birthday, Toby! I've got a surprise waiting for you—you deserve it. See you soon.' [buzzing] There's an address. Jack says he's gonna be there. Jack's *dead*. I killed him. I threw his headless body in the ocean. He won't be there. He *can't* be there. This has to stop—the texts, the emails—it has to stop. And the Skull. The curse is real. I catch it watching me sometimes, when it doesn't think I'm looking. Leering at me. Sometimes, in the dead of night, I swear I hear it whispering to someone. To Jack.

And sometimes Jack whispers back.

It has to stop. I'll be there, Jack. I'll play your game and I'll make it stop. I'll make *you* stop. Both of you.

[END RECORDING]

Excerpt from the personal notes of Detective Paul Finster

The tech guys say that our perp left some kind of booby trap on his computer; when we tried to break in, it wiped the whole thing. It's a miracle that recording survived the purge intact. Other than the confession, the only thing recovered was an email from Jack Corvo to Tobias Johnston dated a

week after Corvo's headless body was fished out of the harbor: an invitation to a Halloween party. The damned email is too corrupted to make out many details. We checked Corvo's devices, but didn't find this invite or any of the messages Johnston mentioned.

We've swept Johnston's apartment, but there's no sign of the Ruby Skull. We found clothes in the dryer and figure the perp already washed the blood out, not that we'd need physical evidence with a damning confession like the one Johnston left.

It doesn't matter much since the perp is dead. His decapitated body was found in the rooftop ballroom of the Omni Parker House. Staff found it lying in the middle of the floor when they opened it up to prep for the Halloween party scheduled that night. No one knows how he got in. All of the doors were locked, and Johnston isn't on any of the hotel's security footage. Witnesses said that the blood had pooled around the body's neck in the shape of a screaming scarlet skull, but someone threw a cloth over it before the police were called, destroying it. It was probably just an overactive imagination from a traumatized maid. The head hasn't been found yet. Honestly, we're not looking that hard. Bastard got what he deserved, case closed.

The Ruby Skull wasn't found on Johnston's body or in his apartment, which means it's still out there. Somewhere. If it's anywhere close to as big a gem as he said, it's worth a fortune. When my shift is over, maybe I'll spend some time looking for it.

This month we are publishing another installment of Duke Raulston's novella, *Redemption*. It is fascinating mashup of westerns, horror, and fantasy that we are super proud of.

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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 VI

Death

By Duke Raulston

Starr walked naked under the blistering sun. The stark white sand reflected the sunlight. He was dimly aware that the sun did not appear to have moved since Oya had sent him here last night. He wasn't sure. Sometimes it seemed like it had just been a few moments ago that he had stood beside her at the smoking sinkhole. Then there were times that it seemed like days had passed. He did not trouble himself with it.

What he thought about most was his terrible thirst. His tongue felt thick and sticky. His throat was hot and dry. Every once in a while, he would kick up some dry sand that would find its way into his nose and mouth. His lungs would spasm and he would have a fit of dry, hacking coughs.

He was having one of those fits now. He coughed and gagged until everything went purple. He fell on his side. As soon as his vision cleared he shook his head and rolled up on all fours. That is when he saw it. Some S shaped tracks in the desert sand. They climbed the sand dune in front of him.

A sidewinder! he thought. It never crossed his mind that this was the only sign of life that he had seen in this god-forsaken wasteland. All that Starr could think of was a meal. The rattlesnake's bodily juices would provide at least some measure of rehydration. Enough that maybe he could survive long enough to find water.

Suddenly there was hope where none had existed moments before. Starr got quickly to his feet and staggered up the dune following the sinuous trail as quickly as he could. He kicked sprays of sand up that he inhaled as he climbed. Coughing and hacking as he bent low enough to use his hands to help him climb the face of the steep dune. He crested the hill and lost his balance and rolled down to the base of the dune.

He crawled around on his hands and knees until he found the sidewinder's trail again. It led to an outcrop of black rock, twisted and broken, that appeared to flow across the desert floor. Starr saw the rattlesnake at the edge of the lava flow. He was too desperate to try and stalk the serpent calmly. He ran across the hot sand, kicking up rooster tails as he did.

The rattler curled up as it felt Star rumbling across the desert. Starr slowed as he approached it. The serpent rattled its tail menacingly. Somewhere, in his parched mind, Starr was dimly aware that this snake did not look like a normal sidewinder. It didn't blend in with the sand at all. It was bright blue with purplish diamonds on its back. Starr barely noticed and didn't really care. He knew that the rattler was his only chance of surviving. He also knew that it would more likely finish him.

Starr feinted with his right hand. The rattler did not strike; it just shook its tail.

"Damn snake is too smart for that!" he told himself.

He looked around for a stick. There were none; there were not even any stones this side of the flow.

"All I got is damned sand!" Star said aloud.

Starr kicked a cloud of dust at the coiled serpent. It uncoiled and tried to escape the rain of sand, rattling as it crawled away. Starr knew that this was his only chance. He pounced. He tried to grab the snake. If he had been fully hydrated, if he had not spent hours roasting in the sun, he might have been quick enough to grab the snake by the tail before it could strike—but not in this shape.

Starr reached for the tail. The snake turned and struck in the blink of an eye. Starr's first thought was that it was not much worse than a wasp sting, at least for the first second or so, until he felt the venom coursing into his bloodstream. It was like liquid flame moving up his arm. He staggered forward, still intent on catching the rattler.

It struck again. This time it hit Starr's calf. He felt the same liquid flame moving up his leg that was now coursing through his right arm. He tried to reposition himself to make a third attempt to grab the rattler, but the burning sensation had now reached mid thigh. Star's hamstring contracted uncontrollably. He pitched into the hot sand. He rolled away from the serpent, trying to avoid a third bite. He felt the rough sand rip the blisters on his naked skin open. He looked back as the serpent wound its way toward the outcrop.

"Well, I will be damned! Who'd have thought that it was going to be a rattlesnake bite that killed me!"

He tried to laugh at the irony, but all that came out was a dry rasping cough.

The venom was pulsing through his body now. He felt as if he was being consumed in flame. The burning sun that had hung high and still in

the sky for what seemed like days was now circling. The cobalt sky turned indigo, and now brightly colored stars circled above him...he slipped out of awareness.

"George, George, It's time to wake up!" Starr's mother stood over him. It was bone cold and he did not want to get out from under the quilt that his great grandmother had made and brought with her from Georgia.

"Put some wood on the stove and stir up the cook fire. It will warm up quick enough."

Starr grumbled under his breath as his bare feet slid out from under the quilt. He stood up and scratched and stumbled toward the cook stove. He grabbed a few sticks of hickory and an old dishtowel to open the door of the stove so he wouldn't burn his hand. He opened the stove and stirred the banked fire to life with one of the hickory sticks...

Just then John Starr sprang from the fire. He wasn't alive. He was grey-green and decomposing. His nose had fallen off revealing some of the yellow-white skull beneath. Starr was no longer George he was Starr he sprang back from John, and his hands flashed for the peacemakers at his hips. The guns barked and flame flew from the barrels. John laughed at him. There was a skinny Mexican woman standing on the street corner. She watched and shook her head sadly.

"You can't kill me again George!" the corpse laughed.

"I'm not George; I'm Starr!" He screamed.

"You took my life, and then you took my name!" John laughed, "I am here to take something back!"

The revenant lunged at Starr. Starr emptied his pistols and then threw the empty guns at John but couldn't stop him. John sneered as his rotting hands closed on Starr's throat...

Starr was once again naked in the burning sands of this alien desert. The snake was gone. In its place was a giant lizard. It was covered in iridescent scales: indigo, vermillion, and amaranthine; they glistened in the hot sunlight. The lizard regarded him with its black, beady eyes, its tongue flicking out periodically to check for scents. Starr knew he was nothing to this massive reptile. He was not a threat, and he was not a meal. He was merely a part of the landscape. A dying thing of no consequence...

He walked out of a saloon in Sequin.

"Starr, Starr Killer!" he heard someone call. He recognized that voice. It was Jimmy Allison, a two bit thug. He claimed to be Clay Allison's son, but he couldn't prove it and nobody really believed him. Starr had put his friend and fellow cut-throat Tommy Rielly in the town jail the night before.

"I don't see why they let you put a white man in jail!"

Starr stepped out into the street.

"I guess because he is no good white trash just like you, Jimmy!"

Starr regretted letting his anger get the best of him as soon as he said it but there was no taking it back now.

"That's the last white man you're gonna put in jail, Starr!" Jimmy reached for his pistol, but he was still drunk from the night before. Starr drilled him twice before he could get his pistol out of the holster. As soon as holstered his Peacemaker he began to wonder if he could have talked Jimmy down. Did he really have to kill him?

Starr was pretty sure he knew the answer. So were the townspeople that had gathered round. None of them were willing to draw on Starr, but they stared at him with accusing eyes. He knew he had to get out of Sequin...and there was that bony old Mexican woman again standing on the corner shaking her head.

"I guess you could do better!" Starr screamed.

But he was yelling at a giant lizard. It did not even blink its eye. It just watched. It's tongue licking the air. Starr blinked his eyes or he might have gone to sleep, when he opened them, the skinny old Mexican woman was there. He blinked again and it was the lizard...

He was back at the sink hole with Oya. The horde of undead creatures were climbing the wall of the pit. He knew that there were too many of them, and he knew that they couldn't win. He had to protect Oya, and the old woman...the skinny old Mexican woman was there too! He did not remember that, but he did not have time to puzzle over it. He drew his Peacemakers and the guns roared to life. He couldn't really see them but heard the bullets thumping into the charging hoard, and he could hear the screams...but it wasn't enough...then there was a burst of blue energy...

He was staring at the lizard again; then it was the old woman. But she wasn't always old. Sometimes she was young and beautiful, and sometimes she was ancient. However old she was, she always looked emaciated. Starving.

Starr kept waiting for the lizard to return. It didn't. The old woman stared at him sadly and shook her head.

"And they call me Death," she said.

"I guess you are here for me!" Starr answered

"To take you on? No. I think that you were sent here to find me!"

"Who are you? I thought I was coming to see some old medicine man or something, not some old lady."

The skinny old woman cackled.

"I already told you who I was."

"Death? Are you serious? Am I just hallucinating again?"

"What does it matter? You face a great evil, one that you can not defeat with your guns, you must stop being a boy—"

"I ain't no boy," he interrupted her

"Hush! Listen to someone for a change!" the old woman commanded and Starr fell silent. "You must become a man; you must surrender yourself to the goddess!"

"What goddess? I don't know nuthin' about no goddess."

"Oya!"

"Oya ain't no goddess; she's some kind of witchy woman but she ain't no Goddess!"

"You idiot!" the old woman cackled, "Do you remember meeting her?"

"Yeah she was tellin' fortunes at the Nashville House."

"Then you turned your back and she disappeared, right."

"She didn't 'disappear' she just wasn't there when I turned around."

"How did she leave?"

"How am I supposed to know that?"

"You asked the other people in the bar if they had seen her, right?"

What did they say?"

"They thought I was drunk; they hadn't seen no woman."

"That's right. Then you met her at a crossroads that night. Think about that Starr. Think about what your momma taught you."

It began to dawn on Starr. He knew something was strange about Oya the moment he laid eyes on her, but he couldn't place it. She knew about the Padre, knew about the fight at the ranch....

"Starr have you ever seen any witchy woman who could kill a man with a thunderbolt?"

"No!" He shook his head, "No, I ain't."

"She killed hundreds of monsters!" The old woman said.

"Damn! I knew somethin' was off, you mean I been chasin' after a literal Goddess?"

The old woman cackled again.

"You're not real swift are you?"

"Easy now old woman."

The old woman sprang up and grew till she seemed to tower over Starr. The face that would sometimes seem old and weathered and sometimes young and beautiful now looked to Starr as if it was no more than a yellowed skull.

"Who do you think you are talking to?" she screamed.

"D-D-D-Death!"

"That's right. You had best keep a civil tongue in your mouth or this 'old woman' will put you on your candy ass! Oya may put up with your mouth but I won't! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" Starr answered.

Death was once more a slender woman sitting in the sand.

"That's better," she cackled.

"Do you know why Oya sent me here?" Starr asked

“Oya is facing a monster. She needs a man to serve as her priest and help her fight it. What she had was a boy. She sent you into the desert, naked to learn some humility. She sent you to me to knock some sense into you.”

“Priest!?” Starr hollered, “She is barking up the wrong tree...I ain’t no Priest!”

“Not a Christian priest. Morales represents the one God. You will represent the goddess.”

“How do I do that?” Starr asked.

“You let Oya enter you.”

“What!?” Starr exclaimed, “Enter me?”

The shock was evident on his face.

The skinny woman cackled.

“I wish you could think about something other than food and sex. She is not going to enter you physically. She can’t. The physical form you call Oya is just an illusion to please you, same as mine is...”

“Meetin’ you has been real pleasin’”

The skinny woman rolled her eyes at him.

“Sorry,” he said meekly.

“Her spirit will enter you.”

“You mean like a possession?”

“No. You will still be you. She will still be her. But she will share her power with you. This is how you will defeat the Traveler.” She extended a gourd dipper to him.

“What traveler?”

“Drink!”

Starr took the dipper. He turned it up. It was ice cold and sweet like honey...

Starr came to at the edge of the sinkhole. He was still naked, but the blisters and scabs were all gone. He felt hydrated, rested and refreshed as if he had spent the night in a feather down bed in a Dallas hotel.