

QUIET ROAD

Surreal horror in the Ashen Silence

Robin V. Belle

To my beloved sister, Marilynn. You were always the strongest of the two of us. You have earned your victories tenfold.

“Because the pale horse has been saddled, and the rider has put a foot in the stirrup.”
— Arkady & Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*

You were dead the second you took the job, though you didn't know it yet.

Of course, you needed the money or you were dead anyway. A life lived accumulates so many debts. You owed several people a great deal. When you got a tip of a hush-hush delivery paying top coin for a coastal run, you rushed to put your name in.

Some pause came when you realized the job was for the Church. Why would such a powerful institution need to follow smuggler protocols? You decided not to pry, and that's why they hired you. The box they gave you was branded with the 11 pointed Divine Star that marked all things of the Council of Gods.

The package itself was sealed and made of reinforced white ceramic polymer. It was clean and shiny, not the sort of thing you were used to out here. It wasn't particularly heavy, but the bulk of the cube required you to use both hands to carry it correctly. It secured well enough to the back of your horse, and that was all you could really ask for. You met a man at the back of town hall. He averted his gaze during the handoff and said little beyond "careful" and "you got it?"

You left town a couple days before St. Dralia's Day. Decorative lanterns were hung across the town gates and walls, burning in various colors. It would be disappointing to miss such a fun holiday on the road, but your client had offered a 20% bonus to get to Quietport in two weeks' time.

You wore two layers of heavy cloth pants, cinched by a leather belt. Over a shirt and patched sweater you fitted on a thick, grey hide jacket. Like most open-air wasteland travelers, your face was concealed by a protective rebreather system. You occasionally gave thought to getting respiratory filter implants, but the money had never worked out. To an outsider, you were the spitting image of the waster, like something off the cover of a convenience store pulp novel.

The guard at the gate didn't give you much trouble on your way out. Their job was more regulating incoming traffic than preventing departures. Trader's Sanctuary was a ramshackle series of prefabricated buildings sealed by airlocks, with poisoned air and ash strewn streets. It was no mystery to anyone why someone would want to leave. They flipped a switch and the north gate raised enough to let you out.

The skies were dark today. Rather, they were almost always dark and today was no different. Heavy, soot-filled clouds formed a thick ceiling above you. It was bright enough that you knew it was day, but you powered on an electric lantern for extra

light. When the road out of Trader's Sanctuary forked, you took a right and began heading east toward the coast. You had a good sense of direction and this had served you well. You were good at your job, or at least that's how you liked to imagine yourself.

The main highway was populated, but sparsely. You passed by settlements built around and on top of the ruins of the civilizations that had come before. There you saw other travelers on the highway, going by horseback or by vehicle. Occasionally on foot. Often in groups.

You picked up some extra provisions from a caravan of avians, the yasre. You thanked the gods you had run into one. Much cheaper than the shops in town. You got some extra food for your horse and yourself. You also grabbed a small supply of Sight from one. You packed a bit of it in with your normal polyspice and rolled them as cigarettes for later.

Further out from town, the highway traffic became sparse. Ruins still dotted the broken terrain, but increasingly few settlements rose to replace them. The world had once been teeming with life hundreds of years ago, but there was so much less of it now.

You rode carefully and eyed the rocks, bushes, and dilapidated buildings for anything that seemed a little off. Logically, you knew most people meant you no harm. Yet a lifetime of crime media and 24-hour news cycles, mixed with a few poignant anecdotes from those in your professional circle, encouraged a persistent background radiation of paranoia.

There was a flash of light overhead, followed by the rumbling roll of thunder. You remembered the forecast calling for a storm, but it was several hours early. Your eyes scanned for potential shelter, and then you knew that you were no longer alone.

Another flash of light illuminated him. One man, alone on a motorcycle jutting out somewhat into the road from behind the gentle cover of brambled shrubbery. You saw him too late, and he rolled out to block the road. An electric tension shot down your spine and you pulled the reins in on your horse until you stopped.

The stranger spoke with a raised voice over heavy winds and the mechanical purr of the engine. His voice was smooth and viscous. Not like honey but rather slime, "Good evening!"

You said nothing. Not at first. The stranger spoke with the calm of someone greeting a neighbor on the street, but that made you all the more wary. You eyed potential routes of escape, but they were all visible and unlikely to outrun a motor vehicle.

He dismounted and walked towards you. In the light of your lantern he was revealed. Tall, shaped like a human, but you couldn't be sure beneath the layers of jet black clothing that concealed his body and face. His walk was strained, not like he was pained, but like how a child takes steps in their father's clothes that were several sizes too large. You did not find it endearing, though. You were too focused on the snub shotgun attached to his hip.

He wore purple goggles that glowed from underneath the brim of his hat. For a second he regarded you. You looked around for anyone else on the road. No one. He spoke again, slowly, "Now why are you out here all by yourself? It's safer to travel with friends, ain't it?"

You said you were on an errand, and that it was faster to travel on your own. This was true, though in this moment you longed for the safety of companionship.

"Would that errand have anything to do with that cube you're hauling?" He looked at the cargo on the back and saddlebags of the horse, and backed up a couple steps, careful of the beast's barbed tail.

The tension in your spine turned to chills, and your face went hot. You thought quickly and said no, and insisted that it was provisions given to you by a traveling mission. You were not a great liar under pressure, but this was as plausible as you could have managed.

"Oh, is that so? Well I've been running a little low on supplies myself. It looks like you have plenty." He gestured to the rations you got from the caravan. "Maybe you'd let me take that box off your hands. It looks awfully bulky."

You refused, and insisted you needed everything you had for the long journey ahead.

The man let out a long sigh, or what seemed like it was meant to be a sigh. The noise was wet and guttural, as if a drowning last breath but in open dry air. "That... will not do."

You grabbed the reins of your horse, and tapped one of its horns to signal it to start moving. You began to maneuver around the stopped bike. The man said your name. Not your callsign. Not the fake names you give when you stay in town. He said your actual name. You stopped dead and turned around. He was holding the shotgun now, and the veneer of roadside conversation gave way to the reality of the situation.

You stopped the horse and dismounted. You held your hands up. Scenarios played in your mind. The client had been very clear that losing this package would be as good as dying. The Church had agents everywhere, you wouldn't be able to run. What of this man? Were there others of his kind? You got the impression he would gun you down without remorse or thought. So, you were dead in that scenario, too. You could give him the box and run, but who was to say he wouldn't kill you anyway? There was one option, a last resort.

You agreed to the highwayman's demands and began to make your way to unfasten the straps holding the box in place. You considered asking how he knew your name, but the curiosity was buried by the material threat.

Another flash of lightning overhead. Just what you were waiting for. You reached into your jacket and pulled out a pistol, already loaded. You spun around and fired just as the thunderclap responded. The blast left a crater in the man's torso, and threw him back to the ground, twitching. His gun fired into the air aimlessly, a futile gesture of defense.

Blood splattered the dirt and plants, and the body spasmed a couple more times. You averted your gaze and tried to calm your shallow breath. Your horse had panicked from the shot and ran off into the distance. You were outside of your body, watching the scene from some upper vantage point. You acted without your mind, and dragged the body- now surely dead- off to the side of the road.

It was mandated by faith and law to burn the dead, even if you were the killer. Of course, no court or sheriff would ever hold you to account for what you did. You were no murderer, just a person protecting yourself. Nonetheless, the task of burning the body and releasing the soul of the dead fell to you. You went off to secure your horse and retrieve a cremation capsule from your supplies, but you never came back.

Maybe it was the looming storm and the beginning of the rain. Maybe you figured another traveler on the main road would take care of it, maybe a traveling priest of

death. Maybe you just said fuck it. After all, this man would have gladly mowed you down. Why did he deserve your courtesy? So you left him there to rot.

You left his bike too, though you considered taking it with you. You remembered a delivery girl they called Siren who had stolen a vehicle from a law officer she had successfully overpowered. She had been tracked down and hung using some internal locator on the vehicle. You didn't know what organization the man you killed belonged to, but you didn't want to take the chance that they would be similarly prepared. You took your horse and your things and you left.

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You carried on the main road for a while, but a gnawing paranoia overtook you. Who was that man? How did he know your name? Were there others, and would they know where to find you?

You took the first fork in the road that you saw heading in the same approximate direction. This branch was less well kept, less trodden. It was littered with debris, and you might have lost the path were it not guided by an occasional splash of red paint against the rocks lining the sides.

Come to think of it, you had never seen this road before. You pulled open a map of the south you kept on hand, and found the intersection where the fork would be. There was nothing. You checked again, and checked the publication date on your map. It was a recent enough copy. No sign of this road. It wasn't unheard of, for side roads made by locals to not make the official record, but you clung tighter to the reins anyway.

The rain began in earnest, unforgivingly acidic. You stopped, covered the supplies and package with a tarp. You worked on a thick plastic-polymer poncho. It did not cover you entirely, but enough to be safe from the caustic downpour that was to follow.

It did follow, and the skies opened up over the plains. The rain beat an improvised rhythm on the road, yourself, and the hardened mutated hide of your horse. It started in that almost musical percussive way, but soon the torrent drowned out all else. If it kept up, you would need to find shelter.

You carried on for an hour, the toxic sludge that formed on the ground squelched and splashed beneath the reinforced hooves of your steed. You thought about the rains where you grew up. You had grown up on a farm, growing yams for a nearby city. Your whole family was part of the trade, along with several others. You worked

closely with your brother managing a harvester. You did this for a great deal of time, but wanderlust had always tugged at your heart. Your life was elsewhere. When your brother's accident happened- or at least you told yourself it was an accident- you wasted no time putting in your notice and you rode as far away as you could in a single week.

It had been years since that day. Some part of you missed the relative safety and comfort of that life. The larger part of you, even when traversing through the grime and mud of some forgotten road, would never look back for a second.

Though, you did look back in a more literal sense. First you noticed the scarlet paint on the rocks was washing off. Was that paint? Over the rain a hum could be heard, louder and louder. A rumble like thunder but too quiet for that. You turned your head and your jaw went slack. In the distance, but clearly enough, you saw the shadowed outline of a figure on a bike riding toward you.

There was no way it was him, you had certainly sunk enough lead in that man's body that even redundant vital organ implants wouldn't have saved him. You destroyed him. Yet that bike was coming right towards you, the rider with those damned luminescent purple goggles. There was no one else on this road, and he was gaining.

You did not wait to confirm your suspicions, you kicked the side of your horse and broke into a sprint as fast and far down the road as you could. It was no use, the motorcycle was going to overtake you. Your eyes scanned the horizon for terrain to go into. A petrified forest gave the most obvious hope of escape. Your heart pounded with the beating hooves beneath you. You cleared into the forest and maneuvered at top speed around long dead trees.

You were looking back to confirm you were making distance. You didn't see the stray root in front of you. The horse let out a hideous whine of pain and tumbled into the ground, launching you forward. You rolled head first into a log, and the world went black.

You did not die there, not yet. Though the blinding pain you woke up to made you wish you had. When you came to and the confusion settled, your hands went to your face, and you felt the blood soaking your coverings. You could barely breathe through your broken nose. You panted out of your mouth raggedly and your heart and head pounded in sadistic unison. A terrible noise was coming from not too far away from you. You sloshed out of the soggy ground and sat against the log to get a better view of the scene.

The bike was nowhere to be seen. You had lost him, or whoever that was, but your horse was crying out in pain. Two of its legs were apparently broken. You felt a twinge of sadness for it, then a rush of fear as you knew that your pursuer might hear. You crawled through the mud over to the beast. Only your nose had been broken but the pain in your body was too intense for you to stand on your own.

You got next to the beast and stayed clear of the poison barbed tail that thrashed wildly around its hindquarters. A knife went uneasily into the creature's hardened throat, and with some effort on your end you managed to sever its major veins and arteries. The equine blood you were sprayed with merged with your own and your clothes had become a macabre showcase of reds and browns. The horse looked at you with terror in its eyes, it did not understand what had happened to it, or why it had to die now. It kicked and spasmed, and its eyes rolled into its head. It died scared, and you looked away to spare yourself the guilt that bubbled within you.

When it was quiet, and when the pain you felt became manageable, you made yourself stand. You assessed yourself for wounds. Nothing serious, though you'd need to apply some healing formula to a gash on your nose, and your hip where you snagged a branch. You collected the crate and whatever supplies you could carry. You made camp there that night, carefully. Then you wandered out.

It occurred to you that you weren't sure which direction you were going. The gnarled brambles and broken trees didn't give much in the way of landmarks. You thought you identified a unique formation of a fallen tree balanced on the limbs of two others, but there were at least two other instances of that. You kept limping until eventually in the distance you saw buildings. You thanked the gods and pressed forward.

The structures were unusual, antiquated. Wood siding, hatch roofs, windows. No visible airlocks outside of any of them, though you'd heard that some recent designs had tried to obscure those. You approached, the weight of your gear on your back and the box in your hands compelling you to rest.

You collapsed near a well, another antiquated design. No machinery you could see. Were they really just pumping water from the ground unfiltered? Maybe they had filters in the houses themselves.

You craned your neck toward the town, two rows of houses down a main street. Not a single shop, bar, town hall, or anything else you'd expect to see. Isolated settlements weren't unusual, but to have nothing besides housing was odd. A faint

mist crept at the fringes and swallowed the distance. Leftover from the rains perhaps.

You tried to figure out what kind of place this was, and then you heard the laughter of children approaching. They rounded the well and you saw them. 5 children dressed for St. Dralia's Day, monsters and popular figures from all across the world. Their leader wore a red cape and a mask that bore the image of one of those titanic lizards from out west, a drak. You blinked and rubbed your eyes. You wondered if it was already St. Dralia's Day. You wondered further why the kids weren't wearing any apparent breathing protection in the open air.

They stared a while longer, and you stared back. The one in the drak mask pointed and spoke, "Bloody rags!" and started to laugh. The other kids began to laugh and sing along, "Bloody rags! Bloody rags!" They circled the well a couple of times, dancing and chanting their song. You got to your feet and began to walk. The mist had intensified but you could see everything within settlement, more or less.

They pursued you briefly but then broke off to a house. They knocked on the door. An adult in normal clothes opened the door and passed treats out to the assorted receptacles held by the kids. You looked back, and when they were done, the adult just stared at you. Face blank, eyes filled with something you couldn't identify, but made you walk faster.

The process repeated, groups of kids rang doorbells across the street, treats were passed out, and the occupants of the houses just stared at you. You were not too far from civilization, or at least you didn't think you were. These people acted like they hadn't seen an outsider in months. Years maybe. You resolved within yourself to clear this town and get back to the main road. You wanted to ask for directions, but you felt you'd find no answers here. The mist was consuming you now.

As you approached the edge of town the kids encircled you again. There were more of them now. Their song had developed, albeit tunelessly. "Bloody rags! Bloody rags! Walk a winding road, but there you'll find your end." You stood silently as they encircled you. From behind, the adults had gathered without protective gear, forming a stoic wall that blocked you from entering town again.

The mist overtook visuals, and the singing grew louder. "Bloody rags! Bloody rags! Thought you killed him, but there you'll find your end!" You clutched your things and tried to find an escape but it had grown so thick you couldn't even see a few feet in front of you. Your heart pounded and there was this gnawing chill down

your spine. You hadn't been seen when you killed him, when you didn't burn him. You were sure of it. Did someone tell them?

The fog cleared, the singing faded into the distance, and you were alone. No sign of the costumed children, no sign of the mob of adults, and the town that had once been restored and full of life had turned dilapidated and ancient. Long abandoned, and its inhabitants long dead or their descendants moved to a safer location. You were alone on a barren stretch of the wasteland, not far from a road.

You were paralyzed, the events of the last twenty minutes played through your head on repeat. There was no such thing as ghosts, you were sure of that. Though, you were increasingly less sure. You lit one of your cigarettes from the yasre caravan, and let the harmonious melody of buzz and high take you.

When it was burnt down, you carried on for a few hours more in the dark. The Sight you smoked let you move without a lantern, and the world had taken on a faintly light green hue. You spent the whole evening watching the terrain for approaching apparitions or the return of the rider. Finally you slept, and you dreamt of home.

You dreamt of the partner you had left behind when you rode away. You dreamt of your family, and you dreamt of your brother. You were there at your father's funeral again, and he was out on the veranda. They let you use the manor house to do your mourning, the owner of the farm was not cruel, though he was rarely overly kind.

You saw your brother crying out there. Some part of you knew it wasn't just about your father. He carried some unfathomable weight that you could only scratch the surface of. Something you could never truly get your head around, though you tried to in the days that would follow the accident. You thought about going out there, talking to him. You didn't, and only you really know why. So many of your thoughts are unknown to me. When it comes down to it, would it have saved him? Would it have saved you?

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You carried on for a week without much trouble. You managed to use some discretionary funds to buy a horse from a ranch you passed. You'd still make good time for the commission bonus if you kept up at this speed. The weather had been pleasant enough, and you even got a bit of natural sunlight through breaks in the clouds.

Some natural plantlife dotted the central south wastelands. You weren't far from the place from the Ancestral Glades from which much of the forest life of the continent once stemmed. It had been a comfortable break from the tumultuous start of the journey. No one knew, no one had followed you, and you wondered if the second encounter with that rider was even real. People saw things in the wastelands, too much isolation from life was bad for the mind.

Your new horse was white with a red mane and horns that curled like a ram. It lapped up water from a spring that would have been toxic for you, but was safe for its adjusted internal biology. You enjoyed another cigarette and lowered some of your cloth to get some sun on your skin. It burned your pallid flesh but it felt like being reunited with something missing.

When you heard the engine your heart stopped for a second. Then, not just one engine, but several. A multitude even, cresting the hill from whence you came. You saw trucks, buggies, and bikes pass by until the cloud of ashen dust they kicked up was too thick to see anything clearly. You kept your hand close to your pistol out of well-learned caution, and maybe some paranoia. The convoy continued on without a care for you, but you felt a piercing gaze buried in the crowd.

When it was clear, you wiped your eyes and you checked your things. The box was still on your horse's back. That wretched box. The one that had made your life such a nightmare for over a week. You had thought about opening it, but magical seals would reveal your treachery and you knew that. The Church would have its retribution and you would die. Still, some part of you so desperately wanted to know what all this was for. Why not carry it by caravan? Air travel? One courier was nothing. You weren't even a real courier by professional standards, more of a delivery person.

You shook your head of the thoughts and looked back to the road, now covered in tire tracks. There was something else in the road, too. Something large, in two pieces. You hesitantly walked over. Then you gasped and fell to your back. You scrambled away and peered over. It was a body, your body, but it couldn't be. The clothes, the height, the build, it was you. Except the head, which had been severed and replaced with a ceramic helmet. On its face a neon painted smile, sloppily scrawled like a kid would draw.

Away from it a few feet was the real head. You walked closely toward it, checking the road and surrounding terrain for traps and watchers. You picked it up with the caution of someone handling a bomb. The face you saw was not yours, but it was close. The hair color, the eye color, all correct. The nose was slightly off, but the

message was clear to you nonetheless. You dropped the head and screamed into your hands, trying to muffle it. You collapsed onto the ground and sobbed. Why this had to happen to you, you didn't know. You cursed the job, and considered just dropping the box. You knew this wasn't an option, not if you wanted to survive.

Your only options were to move forward and deliver the crate, or die to them or to this unseen tormentor. You steeled yourself, and you searched the body. You found two things on it, a note, and a small glowing orange capsule. The note was written in wild scrawl, by someone with not much control over their hand. "You should have burned me." and a crude drawing of a heart alongside a barely legible skull.

How could he have survived? You were so sure you had done the job. You cursed yourself for not burning him when you should have. It was a sin, the 12th sin in Church canon. You were not an avid practitioner of the faith but reverence for the dead went beyond religion. What if it had been you? You rationalized it, said it was a matter of time. You had been so sure a traveling burner would do the job for you. We like to explain our sins to ourselves in ways that make us out to be more noble than we ever really were. You were no different in this respect.

You took the capsule in hand and collected the two scattered pieces of the body, your body. You burned it, and it did not take long. The stench of flame searing flesh slithered its way into your rebreather's vents and stayed there long after the job was done. In mere minutes, the body turned to ash and this poor fool, killed as a pawn in some other game, was put to rest.

You got on your horse and rode as fast as you could away from there.

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You rode for almost a day straight before you found some caves you could convince yourself they were safe enough to take rest in. Another storm was coming and you thanked the gods for the shelter. You were another day from the nearest town.

You saw the lights in the cave and that gave you some pause. You carefully peered inside, and you were fairly sure it wasn't the man you were looking for. Instead, you came inside and found me. I had been waiting for you, but I didn't tell you this. You brought your horse and things in and I greeted you pleasantly. The fire was roaring and I was sitting cross legged in its warmth.

You were taken aback. Perhaps you didn't know what to make of me. After all, I don't wear the protective gear you did. I do not need to do these things to survive

out here. I marveled at you. You looked exactly how you did in your mind's eye, though maybe a little more ragged, and a little shorter.

I offered you a seat, and when you secured your horse you joined me. You had grown so wary by the time we met. You kept your hand near your gun at all times. Maybe you were always like this. I knew so many things about you, but I knew so much less than I wanted to. Even now, you're a mystery I'll never get to solve. This is okay, I do not need answers. I appreciated your company all the same.

You regarded me carefully. Perhaps you recognized me but you couldn't figure out where from. It clicked when we introduced ourselves. You said your name, which had such a delightful ring to it. I said mine, and you knew me as "Ridlek of Morwood." You did not believe this was a real name, as St. Ridlek is a figure of legend for you. For me, it is just life. The only life I know.

We talked. You asked me what I was doing out there, and I told you the truth. I was on pilgrimage to the Glades, and then I would continue on to the Veil that bordered the south. I asked you why you were out there, and you told me a lie. Something about going to see your family out in Sidersberg. I let you keep your secrets, we both quietly knew the truth.

I offered you some wine, and you said no at first. I took a swig and let its bitter, metallic taste fill me. I offered again, and this gesture of deference was enough to convince you to say yes. You took out your last two cigarettes and offered me one. We had a delightful evening drunk and high at the fire. You never asked what was in the wine that tasted so strange, and I never told you. It might have mattered, had things gone differently. They did not go differently, so it did not matter.

When we were thoroughly intoxicated, I asked more about you. We talked about a lot of things. Life on the ash farm, life as a delivery person, the differences between delivery men and couriers in Astaelian parlance. You asked about me and I told you about life in Morwood, what it's been like seeing the sights. You assumed I was lying. Maybe I was. Time, space, reality... All things I experienced differently from you. We would never have had enough time for me to explain the truths I knew and still know. It did not matter, this was not my story. It was yours.

We talked about your family, about your mother, father, and brother. You told me a bit, though not everything. You were glad to have a chance to speak about it. When the evening had grown long you admitted that you felt as though you were being hunted. That you had been turned into prey for some kind of predator that had decided to toy with you before making the kill. You did not tell me about

shooting him, or about failing to burn him. You just said that you were worried. Worried that if you didn't figure out something you would be consumed.

I told you, plainly, that you had to finish the job.

When you woke up the fire had smoldered to embers, and I was gone. I left behind the flask of wine and another gift for you. So you knew I was real, and so you knew how to best handle your phantom.

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Another week passed and you traveled safely. More signs that you were being followed cropped up. Dead animals, notes, splatters of blood. You had grown desensitized to it. It invoked less a sense of terror, and more a grim inevitability. You would find him out there. My words carried with you, and you would finish the job.

You picked a place and began your work. At the farm, hordes of wild boar would occasionally try to make a run on your crops. Fighting them with conventional weapons was impractical. So you would set traps and feast on wild pork. The same principle as now. You would hunt the hunter, or you would die trying.

My gift you placed in pieces against the exterior wall of a rocky tunnel, carved into a cliff face to keep the road going. A handheld device connected to them all, though you set several cables of thin twine to set it off should that fail. You stood at the edge of the overpass, and made certain that the natural lay of the land made it impossible to circumvent without passing through this point. Your enemy did not know you were prepared.

You waited, and kept waiting. So long passed that you began to wonder if he would even come at all. You knew he would, but he always seemed aware of your movements. Maybe he saw this trap coming?

When you were about to pack up and give up, you heard the familiar engine. The bike roared down the road right at you. You stood and held your hands up, a feint of surrender. By the time the man could see your smiling face, it was too late. You pressed the button and threw yourself to the ground as the blast shook everything.

You blacked out briefly and your ears were ringing, but when you came to you saw the tunnel collapsed. You cheered. Though you realized now you had no means of burning the body. You had to burn the body, so you started trying to pull scorched stones off the pile. Maybe the body was destroyed in the blast? Would you be so lucky?

You went back to your horse to grab a tool to dig through the rubble. You were met with another blast and a with a searing pain in your back and stomach. You gawked at the hole in your gut. You tried in vain, and through hideous pain, to put your intestines back in your body. You collapsed to the ground, the blow to your spine left you unable to walk. You spat up blood that filled your mask. You ripped it off and looked around in desperation for the source of your wound. At the edge of the tunnel there was a man, or a creature, half of one. Ichor pooled together into the body of a humanoid, you would not have identified it as the rider were it not for the hat and clothes had had been absorbed into its form.

It held a shotgun that smoked from the blast. It was not human, not any of the other species either. You'd never seen anything like it. Beige twisted flesh sculpted itself into new life from some kind of liquid slime state. It held the gun with distended, unnatural arms that flared off into tentacles in every direction. Some kind of mutant? A lab subject? You never got to find out.

You crawled toward the crate. Your blood stained the ground beneath you. Your head was light and your heartbeat irregular. You would not survive. You had to know what was in the crate. You had to know what this all was for. You pulled it down and unsealed it. The reassembled man- or rather creature- stood over you. It waited for you to open the box, and it trained the gun on you for a final shot.

Inside the box was the same sterile white. Secured in its center was some kind of book, face bound in ancient leather and marked in a language you couldn't begin to comprehend. Your head was light and your strength failed you. The rider kicked you over, away from the case.

When you come face to face with a monster, it is natural to expect to see cruelty, malice, bloodlust. These things make sense to us. They are impulses that even someone who isn't a monster could feel, given the appropriate context. In this way, we expect monsters to be like us. We make them more human than we have any right to, because we are more comfortable with the things we know.

When you looked into the rider's gnarled, twisted face. You saw nothing. No hint of desire or want, no hatred for you. It was as empty as the void, and in your final moments that is what scared you the most. When it raised its shotgun and fired a blast that pulverized your skull, it did so without care. It simply did what it was supposed to, like a biological machine.

It did not leave you there to rot. It burned you. Not because it cared about your immortal soul, nor had any sense of justice. It did so because whatever unseen masters that motivated it preferred no evidence of their intervention be left behind. When your body was totally gone, and your soul released, it simply picked up the package, took your horse, and rode away.

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Happy Autumn '23 from Robin V. Belle