

An oil painting depicting a woman in a vibrant red coat and a man in a greenish-grey trench coat and fedora. The woman is in the foreground, looking back over her shoulder. The man stands behind her, looking forward. The background is dark and industrial, with a large metal pot and a wall with a yellow sign that reads 'RUN', 'LAI', '100%', '100%', '100%'. The title 'Mythos Rising' is written in a stylized, gothic font at the top, and 'Tales from the Shadows' is written in a similar font below it.

Mythos Rising

Tales from the Shadows

STEPHEN HART

The Grinning Frog

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- Vastral's Guide to Magical Oddities Vol 2
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- Frontier Gazette 03
- Frontier Gazette 04
- Frontier Gazette 05
- Frontier Gazette 06

The Grinning Frog

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- Arena Rumble: Elves (F)
- Arena Rumble: Humans (F)
- Arena Rumble: Orcs (F)
- Arena Rumble: Undead (F)
- Arena Rumble: Demons (F)
- Arena Rumble: Humans (F)
- Astro Bar Blues (S)
- Cheese Bites (M)
- Detective Casebook (M)
- Frontier Patrol (F)
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- Zilight: High Noon (Z)

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- Final Quest 2 (F)
- Final Quest Fiana's Quest (expansion to FQ2) (F)
- Final Quest: Side Quests Vol 1 (F)
- Mythos Rising (N-M)
- Mythos Rising: The Broken Circle (N-M)
- Sinners (F)
- Star Marshal: The Hunt for Red Sparrow (S)
- Star Marshal: The Paper Trails (S)
- Xenos Genesis (S)
- Zilight: Original (Z)
- Zilight: Seattle (Z)
- Zilight: Dark Ages (Z)
- Zilight: Egypt (Z)
- Zilight: Wild West (Z)
- Zilight: Pax Romana (Z)

Genre Key

(F) Fantasy

(N-M) Noir-Mythos

(M) Modern

(S) Science fiction

(Z) Zombies

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Welcome to the Stories

After writing into the small hours of the night last night I have a suspicion that deep inside of me there is a novelist wanting to come out.

That was never my intention, but I remember, in another lifetime before Covid when I started to run 'to get a bit fitter' and ended up doing a half-marathon. A feat I always considered off-limits. The running however just had a natural progression. I wonder if the writing will?

For now, I have the pleasure of sharing with you several short stories that expand on events before and between the different Mythos Rising games.

Whether that novel will ever emerge I can't say, but I can tell you that Joe and Darlene have taken up residence in my head, and I suspect that further short stories will come your way.

I also need to get back to the running, but that's another story entirely!

Until next time, keep reading.

Stephen Hart

July 2026

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The Entity

Partial dramatisation of
Mythos Rising:

Directions

Darlene reached out a manicured hand and pushed open the half-glass panelled door that led into the convenience store. The door caught slightly, resisting her push; scratches on the floor showed this was an old problem. She looked around at the coal and stacks of wood piled next to the tinned food and a half-empty shelf of out-of-date magazines. If the four-hour drive hadn't been evidence enough, this scene would have told her she was in the country.

Once she would have sighed at this, but the woman she was now merely noted it and stepped inside. She looked around to get her orientation. The till was on the right, apparently unmanned. She walked forward, her hard-heeled boots barely making noise against the worn wooden floor.

Just before she reached the till, a high-pitched voice came from behind a motor oil display. 'Be there in a moment.' Darlene reached for a bag of Lay's potato chips. She wasn't a fan, but her partner was, and after the long drive she didn't need him being any grumpier than he already was.

A slim body extracted itself from behind the stacked machinery and came forward. The face that went with the body was also thin but topped with a shock of unruly ginger hair that gave the youth an unbalanced look.

'Can I help you, sir? Oh, I mean ma'am?' His gaze took in the buttoned-up suit and trousers the woman was wearing.

'I must be getting old if someone thinks I'm a man,' Darlene replied, looking directly at the boy.

He glanced down her body, flushing violently, before stuttering and averting his eyes. 'No, no... we just don't get many dressed like you, ma'am.'

Darlene chuckled. 'That's okay, kid. Guess not many people wear a suit while they're riding one of those.' She indicated a picture of a tractor on a can of engine oil.

'Oh, why no, ma'am. Not many at all.' The boy half smiled. He looked at the woman again, his gaze mostly meeting her eyes but flicking

over her body as a teenager's gaze is wont to do. 'How can I help, ma'am?'

'Two Cokes, one Zippo, these chips and a packet of Lucky Strike. Also, where do I find Bishop's Mill?'

'Bishop's Mill?' The boy's voice was muted as he dug deep into the cool box behind the counter for the Cokes. 'That burned down last summer. Ain't nothing now.'

'I know, but I hear it's the best way to find the old logging road.'

'Well, yeah, that starts just behind it, but there ain't anything up there save old Johnson's place and some huts the loggers used to use.'

'Johnson's place?'

'Yeah, big creepy old house. Folks say old Johnson went mad and killed his family, then himself. Place has been boarded up since before I was born.'

'Ever go up there?'

'Cripes, no. I ain't that stupid. My cousin went near it once and he said he saw lights and moaning and all sorts of unnatural things.'

'He said that, did he?'

'Yeah, he did. I mean, he's a lying, cheating little rat, if you don't mind me saying, but he looked scared just talking about the place.'

'Ah. Well, I might give it a miss then.' Darlene said.

'You do that, miss.' The boy's tone was earnest. 'Ah, you sure you want the Zippo? We got a sale on Ronson, fifty cents off so same as the Zippo.'

'Zippo, please. I like their reliability.'

'Sure thing. One Zippo.' The boy placed a plain brass lighter on the counter before reaching under it and pausing. 'Oh, darn. Sorry, ma'am, I forgot. We're waiting a delivery. We're out of Lucky Strike. We have Camels, those are nice and mild.'

'No.' She almost spat the word out, as one might spit out an unwelcomed bone in a piece of fish.

'Oh, I... I'm sorry. It's not my... the delivery was due Tues—'

Darlene raised her hand. 'Sorry, kid. That was me. I... I don't do Camels.'

The boy glanced back under the counter, and then around him and back again, as if doing so would summon into being a stash of the desired cigarettes.

Darlene took a deep breath, then let it out, forcing herself to smile, to remember this was just a young lad. He hadn't seen what she'd seen... hell, he probably hadn't ever been out of state. She cleared her throat. 'Sorry. I was in Egypt once. It... it wasn't... pleasant. I don't like to be reminded of it.'

Under his mop of ginger hair his eyes opened wide, then narrowed slightly as a frown came and went. The lad opened his mouth to speak, then closed it, opened it again and finally spoke. 'Egypt. Oh my god, that's so ace. My uncle told me all about that movie stunt where they had people dressed like mummies and people pretending to be cursed and eating other people. About ten years ago.'

'Sixteen.'

'Really? Are you sure? I thought—'

'Trust me, kid. Sixteen years ago. I was... I heard about it too. I'm a movie fan and I'm also' - Darlene made a show of checking her watch - 'on a schedule. Here, five bucks. Keep the change. And if I want to avoid the mill?'

'Oh, thanks! And that's easy. Head straight west just after Creaky Bridge. Bishop's Mill's down the turning on your left, so just ignore that and drive straight. Have a good day, ma'am.' This time, the youth's gaze lingered well below her eyes.

Darlene couldn't suppress a grin as she picked up her purchases. Validation is never a bad thing.

As Darlene got into the blue Plymouth a grunt greeted her. Joe took one of the Cokes.

He was a big man, squarely built with a nose that had been broken and set more than once. He could have been considered handsome, but he had an air of weariness about him that soured his looks.

His eyes were sharp though, and as he was taking a long drink from the cold bottle they were studying Darlene as she settled herself in the car.

'Tried to sell you Camels, eh?'

'What, were you watching?'

'Nah, don't need to. You always get that look when it happens. Was it really that bad?'

'No, he just didn't have any Lucky Strikes.'

'I meant Egypt - oh, those for me?'

'Yes, and yes. Also, you know I don't like to talk about it.' Darlene passed over the potato chips. 'You'll get fat.'

'Charming. And speaking of charming did you—'

'Yup, sounds like we have the right place. Abandoned house, strange sightings, locals reckon it's haunted and avoid the place. And the only building nearby that might have been renovated or reused mysteriously burnt down.'

Mouth full of chips, Joe nods.

'I thought we'd reconnoitre, then call it in. We're in Portland. I'd rather we do this by the book. We don't want to upset the Pale Man. You know this is his patch.'

'Sure, he can be territorial, but then shouldn't he be sorting this out himself if he was that territorial? Want one?'

'No thanks, and you're right, but he'd say "It's about the balance" or some such, or how if he gets involved then other things get involved and everything escalates.'

'I think he just says things like that to bag the ladies.'

'Jealous?'

'Hun, I've got you, what other woman do I need in my life?'

Darlene laughed. 'Right, time to earn our pay cheque?'

'Sure. You drive, I'm eating. Did you get me a new lighter?'

'Oh, yes. Zippo. They had Ronson on sale.'

'Nah, Zippo is the way to go. The last thing you need when you're trying to set an entity on fire is a glitchy lighter.'

'You know that entities don't take that much damage from fire, right?'

'Yeah, that ain't why I do it.'

'Why do you do it then?'

'Cause it really pisses them off. Now drive. If we're calling this in, it will be dark before we're ready to go in. That ain't the best timing.'

'Fair point.'

With that, Darlene put the car in gear and set off, the wide wheels sending up billows of dust from the dry roads as the evening clouds drifted in.

The Entrance

'And now it's dark.' Joe grimaced.

'You insisted on stopping and getting that burger,' Darlene said quietly as she looked around the clearing. The trees had been cut back, giving a hundred yards of clearance around the two-storey wooden house that stood in the centre of the space.

This would have posed a problem, except they must have been cut back a long time ago as they had already started to reclaim their land. They pushed raggedly inwards from the forest, the advance troops in their return being bushes and tall grasses that went almost to the property.

Only the driveway, and its gravel parking area to the side, where Darlene had brought the Plymouth to a gentle stop, were clear,

and even those were nettled and bedevilled with sprouts of vegetation.

'Look,' said Joe, 'I don't know how I'm going to go out, but I'll be damned if I go out hungry. Not that I plan to go out today, but as my old ma used to say—'

'We're all on a train but none of us know where the track ends,' Darlene recited.

Joe glanced at her. 'I said that before?'

Darlene grinned. 'More than once. Kind of a clunky saying if you ask me.'

Joe returned the grin, before stepping out of the car and closing the door softly. Darlene followed, and they both half-crouched next to their car.

'Looks pretty derelict,' she whispered. 'All the windows boarded, and clearly no one does the gardening.'

Joe chuckled as he moved forward to the front corner of the car, his gaze intent on the property ahead. 'Someone's taken boards off the door. Look, there.'

Darlene looked where Joe was pointing. He was right, a stack of boards lay to the side of the door. She checked the windows again. All boarded up and no large gaps.

The setting sun was still lighting the front of the house, but as Darlene was checking the windows, clouds drifted in, obscuring the already weak sunlight. It was then that she saw it. A glow that wasn't reflected sunlight, a light from inside the house, from an upstairs room, under the eaves. Attic most likely, she thought.

She called Joe's attention to it and moved around the car to be next to him, keeping lower now it was clear the house was occupied.

'Did you see it?' she asked.

'What?' Joe drew his gun, a tightness coming over his face.

'A light, top floor on the right. Attic, I reckon. If we wait, that sun will be down, and we can—'

A howl came from inside the house, crashing out into the quiet of the clearing before petering out. The silence afterwards seemed hesitant, tentative, as if it was trespassing.

Darlene looked at Joe, eyebrow raised. He met her look with pursed lips and a shrug. 'Dog, maybe?'

'Maybe. I'm going to say we have the right house at least. What'd you bring?'

'Salt, two quick changers, moon water, couple of Babe Ruths, witch ball and the usual bottle.' Joe patted his pockets as he listed the items.

'Four Roses?'

'Nope, Old Crow. I know you like it.' Joe grinned.

'Urgh, funny man. I'm buying the bourbon next time. Old Crow tastes like old crow. I hate that stuff.'

'It's an acquired taste. Lights up a treat though.'

'Yeah, so does Four Roses, and at least if we have to drink that, I don't feel like my insides are corroding.'

'You are so melodramatic. Shall we?' Joe accentuated the question by waving the barrel of his .38 Police Special revolver at the house.

'Front door, then? Together?'

'Like peas in a pod, hun, like peas in a pod.'

Darlene chuckled, swinging out the cylinder of her revolver and checking the rounds. 'That another one of your ma's old sayings?'

'Nope, far too slick for her. Come on.'

Dusk had finally fallen, and light was glowing dimly around the edges of several windows in the building as the pair stepped away from their car and approached the house, keeping low and putting as much vegetation between them and the house as possible.

An owl fluttered out of a nearby tree, startling the pair of them, before swooping low over the clearing in a silent glide; otherwise, there was no reaction to their approach.

Reaching the door, Darlene put her hand out and looked at Joe, checking he was ready.

He stood back, legs braced, his gun forward and up, looking almost small in his meaty hands. He nodded without taking his eyes off the door.

Darlene turned the handle, slowly, gently. The old springs inside squeaked and groaned. She could feel them resisting as she continued to apply pressure, and for a second she puzzled over why anyone thought a round handle was a clever idea on an outside door. She was having to grip hard to turn it; a lever would be so much simpler. Then the catch cleared, and the door creaked outwards an inch, spilling a dim light with it.

She yanked it fully open - long experience had taught her a fast door opening was safer, and she wanted to give Joe a clear shot if something was on the other side.

He didn't fire, and from her angle she could see no one, and no immediate threat.

She stepped forward into the dirty, dusty reception area. Doors led off to the left and right, and at the back of the room a large staircase extended upwards. She had time to notice the flickering candles on a side table and multiple shoe prints in the dirt before Joe joined her.

They stood there, listening and adjusting to the place, getting a feel for it.

At first, it was silent. Then, as they concentrated, they started to hear distant sounds... bumps, scuffs and other faint noises on the edge of hearing. The fainter they were, the more distorted, as if echoing in from another building entirely.

The air in the house was dusty and smelt of damp and rot, as was to be expected, but under it, something else. Something unwelcome, like a terrible secret that, once spoken, taints the very air itself.

Something was wrong.

'Damn,' Joe cursed softly.

'You can feel it too?' Darlene asked over her shoulder as she walked softly to the left-hand door.

'Feel it? I can bloody taste it,' Joe replied in a low grumble.

Darlene held up her hand for silence, listened at the door, then gave a thumbs up before moving to the other door, pausing and repeating the gesture.

'Bet you wish you hadn't had that burger now,' she quipped, looking up into the gloom of the staircase. Was that movement up there? No, just shadows.

'Or you could have driven faster.'

Darlene turned and gave Joe a hard stare, her eyes narrow. He held her gaze for a moment, then put up his hands, before cocking his head and looking behind her.

Turning, she could see a close-fitting cupboard door in the side of the staircase. Joe moved to flank her, and she crouched to open it. Empty, save for a black-and-red spider that scuttled off into a dark corner, and a crooked lead pipe.

'Nice,' Joe said, peering over her shoulder.

'What, the spider?'

'No, the pipe. Pass me that.'

Joe hefted it in his hand. 'This is going to come in handy. And look.' Joe pointed with the pipe.

Darlene followed his gaze, and it was a second before she realised what he'd noticed. The smoke from the candles wasn't rising upwards, it was falling, curling down and around the candlesticks before dispersing like morning mist.

The pair watched for a second in quiet union, then finally Darlene said softly, 'An outsider then.'

'Yup, an outsider.' Joe watched the smoke twisting down the candles. 'You good for that?'

Darlene let out a sigh. 'I really wish you'd bought the Four Roses. I'm going to need a drink.'

'Sorry, hun. Next job.'

'Yeah, with my luck that one will be an insider, and I won't need a drink. Right, let's get this done. Keep an eye out for anything that tells us what this thing is.'

'Don't worry, first weird writing I see that makes my head ache, or pictures that make me want to tear my own eyes out, I'll let you know. Quiet!'

Somewhere nearby a door closed, and they could hear the tramp of booted footsteps.

'Quick, up here.' Darlene took the stairs two at a time, and the pair disappeared into the shadows on the staircase as four robed figures strode purposefully into the reception area.

To Be Continued

1939 - Interlude

Set between the first two
Mythos Rising games

The faded sign over the diner door hadn't given Darlene much hope, but she had to admit, the coffee was pretty good and the waitress had that no-nonsense professionalism that she admired. Krystal, with a K as she emphasised when introducing herself, took Darlene's order while Joe went to the private phone booth at the back of the diner.

This was a big reason for picking this place: rather than an open booth, this diner's phone was sectioned off by a half-wooden door. The space inside the booth was tiny, and Darlene had suppressed a chuckle as Joe manoeuvred his large frame inside.

He was turned away from her, so she couldn't see his face, but he seemed to be doing most of the talking. That made sense; their last assignment had taken a turn for the unexpected. It's not every day that you find scientists attempting to weaponise the dead. Not even when you work for the Midsummer Institute.

The head scientist, if he deserved that title, had escaped, despite Darlene and Joe's best efforts. Joe had sulked about it all the way to Seattle.

Darlene sipped her steaming coffee and sighed. For a big man, he sure was sensitive. Not that he'd admit it. He hated to lose, though, and, as he'd said multiple times over the car journey from Yakima, the only thing he hated more than losing was when the bad guys got away. In all honesty, Darlene felt that those two things were much the same, but clearly to Joe they were different.

Oh well, she'd just ordered the man a full stack of pancakes with a double side of bacon. That should cheer him up.

As she waited for Joe or the food to arrive, she looked around the diner. It was early, and the place was mostly empty. Other than her and Joe, there were only two construction workers, their hard hats scuffed and dirty, sitting at the counter, tucking into full

breakfast plates and arguing about the likely fate of the Cincinnati Reds this year after their drubbing in the World Series in 39.

She thought about joining in, after all; anyone with sense knew the Reds needed another star pitcher, but she kept her peace; she wanted to hear what Joe had to say. Also, she was hungry and didn't want to get deep into a ball discussion with her food about to arrive.

A double creak snapped her out of her inner dialogue as Joe pushed open the phone cubicle at the exact same time the outer door was opened; a pale-faced priest in a traditional black suit and crooked dog collar walked in. Darlene caught his eye and the priest looked away nervously before Darlene glanced around to see a grinning Joe approach the table.

Something had clearly put a spring in his step, and he nearly collided with the priest as he came back to their table. A collision was only averted by some fancy footwork from the priest.

Darlene pursed her lips as the priest made to sit at a table within earshot of her and Joe's table but at the last minute he chose a booth just a little further back. Close, but shouldn't be too close.

Public diners were a good place to report in from as they always had phones, the coffee was typically good and Joe loved the food. The only downside, apart from Darlene preferring a somewhat different type of cuisine, was that sometimes getting a table where they could talk privately was a trick.

Switching tables once they'd sat always felt too obvious to Darlene. With the priest taking the further table, all was fine again now and Darlene turned her attention back to a happy

looking Joe as he sat hard, making the table jump, before half-draining his coffee.

'Good news.' He said, placing the cup down.

'Good enough to almost run a priest down?'

'What? Oh, him - bad timing, that's all. Anyway, good news.'

'Yes, you said that. Perhaps some details.'

Before Joe could reply, Krystal appeared at his shoulder with hands full of blue-rimmed plates stacked with food. 'I'm pretty sure I know where these go.' She said as she placed the pancakes and bacon in front of Joe, and the three-egg omelette in front of Darlene.

'Well done.' Darlene replied, 'I thought you'd figure it out.'

'Didn't take much guessin' sugar. Now you enjoy.' And with that, she went to serve the priest.

As Darlene looked at Joe she saw he'd already started in on the pancakes. 'Hey! I got all that to cheer you up, but you seem pretty chipper so spill the beans, or I'll send it back.'

With a heavy sigh, Joe stood down his cutlery. 'Okay, so the business with the scientists, Barnaby was actually pretty interested in that. He thinks he might know the main man and says he'll do some digging. But right now, he has a new assignment for us.'

'Already? We've not unpacked from the last one. And there's a ton of paperwork to do. Also, we need to research those runes.'

'Well, something's come up. Something urgent. Apparently, if we wait, the situation will just get worse.'



'Don't they always say that?'

Joe paused, frowning slightly and absent-mindedly taking a mouthful of pancake.

'Oh no, don't play 'thoughtful Joe' with me. You know they say that. You've mocked them about it often enough. Talk now, then eat.'

Joe shrugged, a half-smile on his lips as he chewed. 'Worth a try.' He managed around his food before swallowing and continuing.

'We're going to Texas!'

Darlene blinked. Then frowned. 'Texas.'

'Yes.' Joe replied, defiantly taking another mouthful of pancakes and chewing slowly.

Darlene frowned, taking a small bite of her omelette, which was surprisingly good as she considered what she'd heard. Finally it was her turn to shrug. 'Okay, you got me. Why is that good?'

'Well, it's not good as such.' Joe's face became stern. 'Shapeshifters are sickening the land and have to be eliminated. But the positive part is Texas.'

'Yup, still not following.'

Joe shook his head. 'What's in Texas?' He asked, starting on the bacon.

'Dirt, dust and old oil fields?' Darlene said in some frustration, glancing around the café and hearing the chef loudly checking with Krystal that the new order was for a three-egg omelette, no sides. Same as Darlene had ordered.

Reflexively, Darlene glanced at the priest as Joe ask a question she didn't hear. He didn't look like a man who'd order an omelette. Maybe he's keeping an eye on his figure Darlene chuckled to herself before focusing back on Joe.

'Okay, answer me this. What famous figure, in a mask, on a horse, roamed the state of Texas and fought bad guys?'

As Darlene considered this, the construction workers got up and paid before the taller of the two tipped his hat at Darlene as they left the diner.

'Hmmm, ' she muttered around her food, stalling for time that Joe, in his enthusiasm, didn't let her have, adding, 'Silver bullets, silver mine...'

'Oh, him.' Darlene said, surprised. 'But he's just a story, right?'

It was Joe's turn to be silent as he ate, his face a mask.

The moment stretched before Darlene leaned forward and whispered excitedly, 'Wait, really? He was real?'

'Let me put it this way: next time you're in Barnaby's office, ask about that silver bullet paperweight that sits on the side desk. See what he says.' Joe replied enigmatically before continuing. 'And that's where we are going, right around where the man in the mask is said to have operated. Maybe his mine is even there. Who knows. It's possible.' Joe drew out the last word of emphasis.

'Shapeshifters and an old legend. Okay, could be quite a trip. Hang on. Going to powder my nose.' Darlene rose, picking up her handbag.

'You want the rest of that?' Joe asked, pointing his knife at the remains of the omelette.

'Go ahead. Wouldn't want you to starve,' she said lightly, as she moved towards the restroom at the back of the diner. She heard Joe clattering the plates behind her as she passed the priest's table. He looked up briefly and Darlene bobbed her head in greeting, 'Laudetur Jesus Christus'.

The priest looked surprised for a second, then replied, 'Peace be with you, my child.' His hand resting on a small bible closed on the table in front of him.

When she returned a few minutes later, slowly closing the bathroom door, she saw the priest engrossed in the Bible, and Joe settling the bill with Krystal.

She couldn't hear what Joe was saying but Krystal was laughing. Darlene found herself smiling to herself. Joe tended to look like a broken-down gangster with his crooked nose and typically crumpled suit. But he had a real way with people, at least when he wanted to. And he was a good investigator. Whenever she worked with him, she knew her back was safe. Which was good to know. Especially at times like this.

She started back towards Joe, then paused, turned and slid into the booth seat opposite the priest, her bag tucked under the table.

'Father,' she said, flashing a hundred-watt smile.

The priest blinked. His pale face paling further. 'My child-' he stuttered before Darlene interrupted. 'Skip the 'my child' routine. You might look the part but you're no priest. Ah, no.' Her tone sharp on those last words.

The pale man's hand stopped, halfway towards the inside of his jacket.

'I'm thinking you're new to this. Let me give you a tip. Always watch the hands. Where are mine?'

The man's eyes flicked downwards nervously then back to meet Darlene's firm gaze. 'Yes. Under the table, with my bag. Now, maybe I'm just a genteel little woman with lipstick and a compact in my bag. Or maybe I'm a whole other thing, and I'm packing some heat which might right now be pointing at your most valuable assets. You decide.' Darlene's smile was cold and challenging.

The man squirmed, pressing backwards hard, as if he could push through the wall and escap.

'Yeah, so why don't you tell me who you are, who sent you, and why, and maybe, just maybe you get to have kids someday.'

Joe put his change carefully in the tip jar, eliciting a thanks from both the short-order chef and Krystal. He tipped his hat and leaned on the counter, ostensibly reading the back pages of the newspaper but in reality, watching Darlene talking with the priest.

The .38 Police Special was a familiar and reassuring weight under his arm and Joe kept his right hand free, just in case. He didn't know what Darlene was up to, but her body language said something was going on and the priest was clearly on the ropes. He had that look of brittle fear that in Joe's experience resulted in one of two things - complete capitulation, or sudden fight.

He knew Darlene could take care of herself, so he contented himself with watching her back and being ready to help when needed. His ma had taught him that.

After a few minutes of what looked like intense conversation Darlene raised one finger and wagged it back in forth in front of the priest's face before sliding out from the table.

Joe straightened up slightly, this would be the moment, if there was to be an incident, but then he realised it was over, the priest had folded; Joe could see it in the slump of his shoulders.

Joe hmphed in appreciation. For a woman, Darlene could be a force to be reckoned with. She was the first investigator in five years Joe had agreed, albeit begrudgingly in the beginning, to work with, and she'd proven her mettle multiple times over since those days. He was looking forward to what she had to say about the priest.

Ten minutes later, the tyres of the Plymouth hummed on the almost dry road. The rain of the early morning had given way to an overcast but mild day.

'So, how did you know he wasn't a priest?' Joe asked, his eyes on the road.

'Two things. First, he just didn't feel right. All the priests I've known have a certain - aura. But mostly it was the omelette. Back when I joined the Institute, someone told me that one of the dangers of tailing someone was that you got sucked into their world. You started to copy them - like ordering the same food, or the same drink. I don't know why, but that's always stuck with me.'

'Maybe he just liked eggs?'

'Sure, but without hash browns? No, it just felt off. What man of his age goes into a diner like that for an omelette? So I figured I'd test him, hence my trip to the restroom. I said, "Laudetur Jesus Christus."'

'Erm, praised be Jesus Christ? Bit early for Latin don't you think?'

'Maybe, but this morning it was ideal. Do you know what the correct response is if you're a priest? No, let me tell you - In saecula. Amen - or in other words, forever, amen.'

'An' I'm guessing he didn't say that?'

'No. And that's because the rat fink isn't a priest. He's one of us, but not us.' Darlene paused intently, waiting for Joe to step in.

'Son of a bitch. A Directorate man?'

'Barely a man, more of a youngster. First assignment or something. But yes, they wanted to learn what we'd discovered in the laboratory complex.'

Joe frowned, turned the wheel as the big car gently followed the sweeping curve of the road. 'The secret complex that we only found by accident last month?'

'Exactly, so they are clearly one step ahead.' Replied Darlene.

'Do you think they could have helped Dr Graft escape?'

'No, if they had, they wouldn't have sent the new boy to spy on us.'

'Good point.' Joe agreed. 'And you're sure he didn't know anything else?'

'Nope, he was a lackey. Got a call, rush job. He picked us up at the Spokane Street bridge crossing just as we entered the city.'

'Okay, so they knew we were coming here, but not where we were before, and they don't know about Texas?'

'Pretty sure they don't. Also, you know the directorate. If there isn't money to be made they aren't interested. From what you said it doesn't sound like there is any profit to be made in Texas.'

'Not that I can see. Still, we should keep an eye out. They've got a lot more people than us.'

'True, but they aren't as good as us, are they?' Darlene smiled glancing over at Joe.

He glanced back, laughing. 'Not even on their best day.' But a serious look came over his face, 'so how do you think priest-boy got that tip about us?'

'I suspect someone on the clean-up crew leaked something and that led them to us. They might lack the training, but like you say, they have more people than us, and more money.'

'Maybe, I reckon Barnaby has some Swiss accounts squirrelled away.'

'No, more like rooms with Faberge eggs knowing him.' Darlene replied.

'You might have a point. Speaking of him, he said Texas was urgent, so I reckon we proceed as ordered but we let him know about our priest encounter.'

'Absolutely. I figured we'd do it when we stop for lunch.'

'Now you're talking.'

The End

Darkness Rising

Prequel to Mythos Rising:
The Broken Circle

A blood red stain crept over the land as the sun slowly set behind the Texan hills. As it receded, the red shifted hue to something darker, more primal, and Jacob could feel the darkness gathering. Not just in the growing shadows across the desolate fields, but in his bones. And deeper still, in his soul.

A person striving to find cheer in this scene might make a quip that at least the sun will rise, but to Jacob, it never would. Whatever hopes or ambitions he had once had for life were gone now, as vanished as the sun now only a tip of red on the horizon. Around him, and in him, the shadows bloomed and deepened, with the weeds in his lawn and the newly acquired repossessed sign fading into the gloom.

And it was at that point that the darkness found him. His despair and despondency a dark beacon in the night. The source unseen, but traceable.

And so it came to him, the darkness. A darkness as old as man, born, some say, from the first anguished steps of humanity as mankind rose up, and fought back against nature to stand, shakily, as master of the world. At least so mankind told itself.

But those primal forces are not gone, they are merely more remote. Pushed back by what man calls civilisation. The darkness lingers. It lingers in the polluted creeks, the burnt forests and the soiled fields. And it hungers for the despair that lives in the hearts of men like

✦ Jacob. Men who are too weak to be outwardly cowardly, so

they make their way violently through the world to mask their inner fear and loneliness.

Men and women like that are at their core desperate to be accepted, to be loved and to be safe. And that's what the darkness offers them.

So that cold Texan night, as Jacob stood on the porch of his ramshackle house the darkness came to him. It whispered in his ear of injustice, prejudice and above all, of understanding. Of understanding his pain, of understanding all the injustices he had suffered, that his ex-wife had made him beat her, that the bank had tricked him into that mortgage, and that his boss was a communist - and that's why his job was taken from him.

All he'd ever wanted was to have a wife, a house and enough money for small luxuries. He wasn't a greedy man, or a drunk; he was misunderstood, he was under pressure, unfair pressure. All this and more the darkness said as Jacob emptied a bottle of Old Crow and stood, eyes glazed, staring across his overgrown lawn into the middle distance.

And then it left him - a desolate man with a broken home and shattered life. But with a simmering anger. An anger that warmed him.

And so it was over the following weeks that at night Jacob found himself further and further from the house that had ceased to be his. Deeper out towards the far

mountains, in the plains where the scrub grew thin, and the snakes and scorpions scuttled and scurried between the rocks.

Each night, a little further. The setting sun and the Old Crow were the two constants in Jacob's broken life. That, and the growing sense in his heart that he was due better, deserved better, and that better was something he could find if he listened to the darkness of the land.

Many folks misunderstand ego. Ego can be a strength but it has a vulnerability. Feed an ego, and it will want more; it's a reflex that takes a strong man to resist. And thus, the weak fail, not by giving in to temptation but by eagerly grasping it. Convincing themselves that it was not only their idea, and thus a good idea, but also that it is their God-given right to do so.

Months later, when the blood moon shone down on the rocky hollow on the plains where Jacob sacrificed the coyote, it wasn't the darkness that had told him to do it. When he then drank its blood, ate the bitter herbs and recited the incantation in a language that pre-dates the rise of modern civilisation, it wasn't the darkness that told him to do that either. He wanted to do it; it was his idea, his way of manifesting his destiny and finally getting what he deserved.

When his bones began to crack and his flesh stretched and formed into new shapes with his blood darkened in his veins, the agony he felt was no more than a reflection of

the pain he'd felt his whole life; the snubs he'd endured, the putdowns and comments from those who felt they were better than him.

Well, now he was better than they. He'd found a path, all by himself, a path to power. He could feel it coursing through his veins.

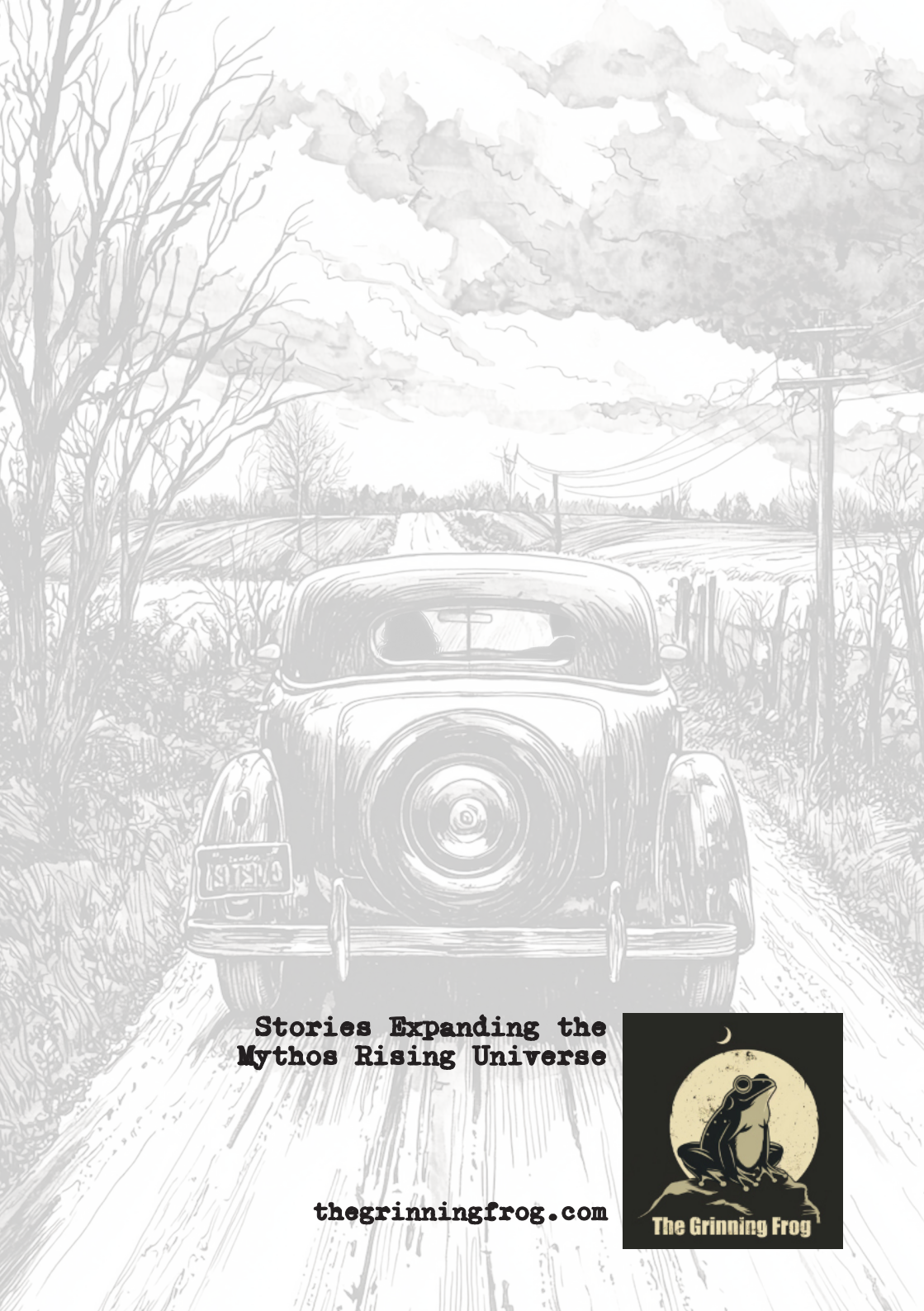
And more, he had strength and power beyond anything he'd had before. People were as nothing to him; they cowered at his mere sight, broke under his hands if they were stupid enough to stand against him.

He could smell their fear, divine their most basic thoughts - to fight or to flee. And he was so much more than them. Faster, smarter and stronger. He revelled in it.

Over time, he found other individuals like himself. People who had always been on the edge of society; the matron with questionable personal hygiene and a cellar it was rumoured no one came out of, and a young, thin vagrant man with a fondness for substances of all kinds. These two were not afraid of him, they were drawn to him, they bowed to him and called him sire and sought his wisdom. Sought to share his power.

So, he bequeathed it to a few, a select few who could see him for what he truly was. Finally, he was recognised for his true self. He no longer had to hide.

The End



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