

THE FABULIST

by

Andrew Johnston

To Timothy Huang Hanzhe

You will never remember me, I will never forget you.

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CHAPTER 1

~Date Unknown~

There was a corpse lying in the center of the footpath, frozen eyes glaring up through the phantom haze that enveloped the sun, a dead hand pointing to a redeemed sign that read "Madison Encampment" in faltering letters. Even here, at the fringe of stability, this was an unusual sight - the fallen, even those disreputable types who had been slain while committing an act of violence or thievery, were typically buried in haste lest their presence draw scavengers of some sort. This man, though, was allowed to lie exposed in the heat, untouched, without even a handful of dust to conceal his earthly remains. The traveler knelt beside the corpse, studying the remnants of this poor soul at arm's length. His was a brutal death, his emaciated body marred with slashing wounds - struck down either by a true sadist or a terrified amateur. He carried nothing of any particular value, yet he had not been robbed - he still wore his boots, worn nearly through at the heels but still the most useful thing most wanderers would ever possess.

The traveler dared do nothing more than utter a silent elegy for this victim of the wastes as he returned to his feet. Like the dead man, he had a physique shaped by life in the wastes - lean, bony, of average height at best, with a timid and weary gait that made him appear even smaller. He had a youthful face, though with features eroded by the rigors of a life on the road to the point where his true age could not be easily gleaned. The clothing he wore was an odd patchwork - strips of countless garments stitched together, bestowing the appearance of some wasteland harlequin. An old cloth satchel swung freely from one shoulder, the worn strap straining to keep the weight of the traveler's possessions aloft.

Tension gnawed at the traveler as he stepped over the body - an act of disrespect in a more

civilized time - and neared the encampment, his newest destination. There had been a community here once, nestled in the standing shadows of the fallen buildings, but now there was nothing save a handful of miserable shanties encircling a communal field of sickly crops. There was no sign of human activity inside, yet the traveler was not convinced that this encampment had been abandoned. The still-smoldering coals in the watchfire, visible even from outside the perimeter, suggested a recent presence. Violence was a safe assumption on sighting such encampments, yet there was no sign of a struggle within - no other bodies, no signs of destructive looting, the crops standing tall and awaiting the harvest blade. This absence felt staged, more like a ruse than genuine flight.

"Hello?" The traveler took a few cautious steps into the ring of shanties. "I can see that you have faced trouble, but I mean you no harm. I bear no weapon, see?" He held his hands aloft, rough palms exposed. "I've no intention to stay long, but I would like to rest for a time and perhaps conduct some trade. Hello?"

Then traveler caught notice of something new, some trinket glinting slyly in the dusty midday sun. He knelt down to examine it - a knife, perhaps a few inches long, more tool than weapon. Resting the knife in a hand held far from his body, the traveler noticed narrow streaks of crimson-black crossing the steel. This was unquestionably the murder weapon, though he was at a loss as to why anyone would casually abandon an item of such obvious utility.

"Yaaargh!" There was a bloodcurdling scream, and before the traveler could react he was struck from the side and pinned to the ground. With the sunlight flashing in his eyes, all he could make out of his attacker was that the man was half again his size, his face locked in an expression halfway between rage and terror. "Who are you? The next forward man? Who is your master? Speak!"

"There's been some mistake. I have no master." The traveler applied a feeble smile. "I am just a humble wanderer, a man of peace. I mean you no harm."

"You went for the knife. The bloody one laying in the dirt." The man seized the traveler by the flesh of his neck. "Why would you do that?"

"I had no notion of what it was," said the traveler. "Mere curiosity, I assure you."

"Watchman!" There was another voice from the ring of shanties. From the corner of his eye, the traveler could spot people peeking from the sheds, most staying in the relative safety of the shadows. Only one person emerged - a slender but strongly-built woman clutching a short-handled shovel. Gripping the tool like a weapon, she approached the two men. "Did you find another one?"

"Not sure, Harvester," said Watchman. "He says he's just a traveler, but he went right for the knife."

Harvester crouched next to the traveler, her shovel held as a blade ready to cut his throat.

"What do they call you?"

"Storyteller, ma'am," he said. "May I stand up now? This is actually rather painful."

"Not yet." Harvester snatched Storyteller's satchel, resting a few feet from his head, and rudely shook the contents onto the dirt, swinging it about until only flakes of imitation leather fell free. Most of it was what one would expect from a man on an extended journey - sturdy plastic bottles filled with dusty water, assorted scraps of dried food, odd articles used for clothing repair, an ancient map that was little more than faded shreds of paper. But at the bottom was something unexpected - a well-used notebook, bound in true leather turned black from the grime of the wastes, and a pen with gold plating just barely shining through years of tarnish.

"What's this junk?"

"Personal accessories, from the world before," said Storyteller.

"The world before?" Harvester drew back and studied her guest with skeptical eyes. "Either you're a grifter or the sun cooked your brain. Ain't no one who remembers what it was like before everything burned up."

"I am no deceiver," said Storyteller. "My memories are clear, right up to the very day of the disaster."

"Now I know you're full of shit." Harvester held the pen between middle and forefinger, studying it for some undisclosed secret. "You'd have to be nuts to carry this crap so far."

"There are those who would agree," said Storyteller. "I suppose I am a hopeless sentimentalist. They've been my traveling companions for many years, truly my only friends. The notebook especially - one day, I plan to fill it to the margin on the last page."

Harvester paged through the notebook, squinting at the cramped penmanship. "You're not far off. Tell me, what do you get for filling this thing?"

"Something very good," said Storyteller.

Harvester tossed the notebook aside. "He's got no weapons. I doubt he's a raider, and a thief wouldn't have announced himself like that."

"Fair enough." Watchmen eased his grip on Storyteller. "But you'd better watch your ass. Another settlement, they might have just killed you for reaching for that knife."

"Advice that I will take to heart, believe me." Storyteller brushed the dust from his clothes and crammed his belongings back into the satchel. "Tell me, who was the man lying in the road? I've never seen a victim left to rot in such a way."

"Victim." Watchman grumbled the word as though it were profane. "Asshole raider scout. We left the body there as a warning to his friends. We're not helpless like those other people they've

been burning out."

"So that's the state of things," said Storyteller, slinging his satchel back over his shoulder.

"Why are you here, anyway?" said Harvester. "There's no salvage around here and we don't make anything."

"Oh, I'm no trader," said Storyteller. "In truth, I once lived in a place not far from here. I was hoping to return to my home and see what had become of it. Specifically, I'm headed for a place I believe you call 'Westhigh.' From there, I can find my way back."

"Well, Westhigh is about a day or two away from here," said Harvester. "Why go there, though? Nothing worth salvaging, that's for sure."

"As I said, I am a sentimentalist," said Storyteller.

"It's all dead lands, too," said Harvester. "No food, not much water."

"Well, perhaps I can offer my services here," said Storyteller. "I don't much, merely a crumb or two."

Harvester's eyes flashed with contempt. "Don't be a fool. We don't need stories here, and we don't have anything to spare. Do yourself a favor and head straight north. Maybe you won't die before you reach Nexus."

"I understand," said Storyteller. "May I at least rest here for a while?"

"We can't keep you out. Now, I've got something more important to deal with." Harvester turned on her heel and walked into a nearby shanty. There were maddened and anguished sounds coming from within, the sounds of a luckless man perishing from an intolerable wound.

Storyteller perched himself on a fragment of concrete, treated himself to a sigh of relief and studied the encampment with a more educated eye. The village was only slightly more active than when he had entered - he could hear people milling about within the shanties, yet none were

willing to emerge more than a few inches into the daylight. Nevertheless, there were a few brave souls creeping out to catch a glimpse at the stranger in their midst. Storyteller could see them crouching in the doorways - children, perhaps five or six of them. This was a rare sight, as the traveling bands he had accompanied in previous years were solely adults traveling on their own. Children were a feature of the largest outposts, places with well-built walls and regular guards, secure grounds where where their parents had felt comfortable leaving them behind.

Storyteller softened his expression - he hadn't been charged with entertaining children in ages, but the gift was still in his head. "Hello, little ones. Would you like to hear a story?" The children kept their distance, hovering just out of sight. Storyteller smiled and set his satchel on the wall beside him. "That's okay, don't be shy. This one is free, because it looks like you need it."

"Once upon a time, there was a place called Pinnacle, the Vault of the Gods. This was where the powers of their day kept their sacred wealth, safe from the prying eyes and sticky fingers of the mortals who dwelt in the surrounding lands. You see, the wealth stored within the vault was considered so precious that it was never to be touched by unclean hands, not fiends or spirits and certainly not men. Only one man in a million would even have a chance to witness the contents of the vault, and no one had ever taken even a single coin for his own."

"The location of the vault was widely known, but there were none who would dare draw near it. You see, the gods employed a giant to secure their wealth, a true beast who looked as though he was carved from the very mountain he guarded - fists of marble, skin of granite, and a heart of obsidian. Any fool who drew near, he would crush within his mighty grip."

"But in a nearby village, there was a thief known as Valeri who had dreamed since his childhood days of retrieving a coin - merely one coin! - from the vault for his very own. It was a risk to be sure, a terrible trespass to even ponder it, he knew that this would secure his position as

the best thief who ever lived - a man who stole from the gods and got away with it. So day after day, he sat in his hut and plotted his escapade."

Storyteller paused to look around the encampment. There were more children now, perhaps ten, with more edging out of the shanties and taking seats on the ground a few yards away from him. Behind them, he could see the parents, poised and ready to snatch their offspring back into the house at the first sign of danger.

Taking a deep breath, Storyteller continued. "Now, Valeri was very clever, but he could devise no plan to distract the giant, and he knew that the brute could not be bribed. It seemed a hopeless cause, and he would have given up were it not for a bit of good fortune. He was walking through the hills around his village one day when he discovered something very strange by the river. It was a strange black goo, unlike anything he had ever seen. When he touched it, it bound fast to his hand and would not let go. Panicking, he thrust his hand into the river, and the goo melted away almost instantly. As he beheld his discovery, a smile crossed his face. He knew how he could use this substance to fool the giant."

"Valeri took an iron bucket, a waterskin, and several pieces of coal and headed back to the river. Wetting his hands and the inside of the bucket, he carefully placed a bit of the goo inside, dusting it over with coal dust. Bucket in hand, he traveled to the vault. When he drew near, the giant bellowed at him, 'Who dares to near this forbidden place?' roared the giant. Valeri was frightened, but he knew that if he hesitated, it would mean his doom. 'So the titan knows not who I am?' said Valeri. 'Sad, for I have come so far to witness his might for myself.'"

"Valeri held out a piece of coal in his open hand. 'I have heard that it is possible to turn one of these into a diamond, but in all my days, I have yet to meet a man with the necessary strength.' The giant laughed. 'There are none stronger than me, little man!' He snatched away the piece of

coal and pressed it between his mighty hands. When he opened them, a small, flawed diamond sat in his palm."

By now, most of the encampment was outside, standing or sitting in a circle around Storyteller. Harvester had emerged as well, leaning against the shanty just behind him. The tension had vanished, replaced with a stillness alien to such a place.

"'Not bad,' said Valeri, 'but it was a small fragment. Even a giant could not perform such a feat on a larger piece.' The giant roared. 'There is nothing that is beyond my might!' The giant thrust his hand into the bucket, seizing the mass of goo at the bottom. Without a moment's thought, he squeezed it between his hands, but rather than producing a diamond, he found his hands stuck together. 'What kind of sorcery is this?' howled the giant. Valeri merely gestured to him. 'I am sorry, great one. Allow me to release you.' Valeri poured out some water into his hand and tossed it across the giant's hands, freeing them in a moment. The giant fell to his knees, shaking the ground as he did. 'You must be a god to perform such a feat! Please accept my apologies. The vault is open to you.' 'There is no need for your apologies,' said Valeri, 'and I desire only a single coin, that I may remember this day forever.' The giant turned over that coin, and Valeri tipped his hat to the brute and walked away."

Storyteller stood up and took an exaggerated bow. "Thank you, dear listeners. Now, I must be on my way, but perhaps I shall return one day, if hope still lives."

As he turned to depart, Storyteller saw Harvester, a small bundle in her hands. "There's little we can spare, but this should be enough to get you to Westhigh. You can fill your bottles at the stream in the field, the water's clean."

Storyteller packed the bundle into his satchel. "Your generosity humbles me. I appreciate this greatly."

"One question," said Harvester. "Why did you give Thief that other title?"

"You mean his name?" said Storyteller. "I suppose I'm accustomed to characters with names."

"Then it's true," said Harvester. "You really do remember what the world was like before."

"That's right," said Storyteller. "Memory - my blessing, until it becomes my burden."

"Then you had a name yourself?"

"I have a name now, but it does me no favors. 'Storyteller' fits as well as any."

"There's one more favor we need." Harvester snatched the knife from the ground where it had fallen from Storyteller's hand. "Take this thing with you."

Storyteller held up his hands. "I'm sorry. I am not a man of violence."

"That's what we all thought." Harvester looked down and sighed. "When that raider scout came, Hunter took this knife and went out to kill him. He's killed plenty of animals, and he said killing a man couldn't be so different. He was wrong. Hasn't been the same since." She pressed the grip of the knife into Storyteller's palm. "Throw it away if you want, but we don't want it here. Please, take it away."

The knife was a terrible weight, but Storyteller nodded and tucked it into his satchel where the sight of the gory thing would not trouble him. "As you wish." With that, he walked off into the plains, the cruel sun marching in time behind him.

CHAPTER 2

~T-minus 108:02~

It was the summit of noon, Patmos, Illinois, the rays of the advancing sun glittering magnificently in the lidless eyes of the cameras that lined Icaria Street. The police - a conspicuously potent presence for such a small town - traced their patrol routes with care, scrutinizing the shops and their patrons for signs of dangerous deviance. Behind the distorted tableau, there was an almost melodic electronic hum from the metallic cylinders concealed in the trees, their function an enigma to most. Passersby couldn't help but take notice, but only surreptitiously - no one dared give too much attention to the presence or even acknowledge it save for the odd peek at those digital eyes.

Will Scarborough, if he even noticed anything awry, didn't waste the energy to express any dismay. Life was simply too full - too many plans to parse, too many factors to consider. The machines and the guards ranked highly among those factors, but not so high that they became an undue distraction. His goal of the moment - hardly one that would be hampered by surveillance - find a place to eat and to unload his thoughts. Harper's Last Stop, with its greasy spoon aesthetic and lethally inexpensive food, was convenient for the purpose.

Will's energetic entrance nearly knocked the tiny bell free of its mount. "Ralphie! My man! How's it going today?"

"New day, same crap," said Ralph. "What can I get you today?"

"Oh, today it's a matter of what *I* can do for *you*. But first, let's get some music going. I'm in a mood for something classic." Will slipped a quarter into the vintage 45 jukebox and jabbed at the buttons. "Come on...come on, you piece of shit, you worked yesterday! D4! Damn it, D4!" He

threw a series of body blows at the machine, each meaty punch fueled by the machine's stubborn refusal to obey his commands. "Goddamn it, play!"

Ralph leaned over the counter. "Knock it off, Will. Ixnay! You'll piss him off again!"

"What the hell is going on here?" A new voice entered the fray. It belonged to the owner, drawn into the dining area by the sound of Will's knuckles colliding with his expensive antique, the fire in his glossy marble eyes erupting into a blaze at the sight. "Get away from that thing, you imbecile! It's vintage! Do you have any idea how much that thing costs?"

Will's assault on the jukebox continued unabated as he addressed the owner. "Hey, don't blame me. The servos, or...you know, the moving parts get stuck sometimes, they need a good rap to jar them loose." *Bang. Bang.* "That's why they don't make these anymore. If you would've gotten a digital one, this wouldn't happen." *Bang. Bang.* "Felt something give. Just one more-"

The owner grabbed Will and pulled him away from the jukebox. "One more time and you're gone! Banned for life!"

Will stared down at the angry man, his stumpy hands clutching Will by his white t-shirt. There was a significant physical disparity between the two men, one which was all the more pronounced when framed by the threat of a brawl. The owner was a diminutive ball of flesh and hair with a cherry for a face. Will was a good two heads taller, with a frame best described as portly with hints of strength - a wall of muscle concealed beneath the products of a rich diet. It was not a fair fight, and Will was not about to be the bully. "You wanna let go? All right, I won't hit your precious jukebox, all right? I promise. Cross my heart." No sooner had his words rippled the air did the first notes of an Elvis Costello song filled the room. "Well, it looks like Will Scarborough isn't so dumb after all, huh?"

The owner, his face transitioning to a less intense crimson, turned Will loose. "Hands off the

box."

"Yeah, yeah." Will took a seat at the counter, resting his stubbly chin in one hand. "Man, that guy's uptight."

"You gotta watch it, man," said Ralph, leaning in close. "He spent like ten grand on that box. It's like his son."

"No need to replay the song, I got the message the first time," said Will. "Not that it matters. In a couple days, that jukebox, this diner - they'll all be history."

Ralph, who had long since given up any pretense with his best customer, let out an audible groan. "Not this crap again. Will, you gotta lay off the end-of-the-world stuff. It's not healthy to go around obsessing over that."

"Hey, I know I've been wrong about a lot, but this is a sure thing," said Will.

"They were all sure things."

"Yeah, but this time it's different."

"Because you have proof?"

"Yeah."

"That you can't show anyone?"

Will slammed his dense fists against the counter. "Come on, man, forget about that and just use your head. Does any of this make sense? That fortress of a lab just outside of town? The media blackout? And the excuses they're giving us? None of this shit's normal."

"Excuse me." A young woman - petite with cropped straw-colored hair and the intense, stern look of a jaded wanderer - leaned over from a nearby stool. "Don't mean to butt in, but I take it you're talking about Jameson Labs?"

"Oh, don't get him started," said Ralph.

"As a matter of fact, I was," said Will, waving Ralph away. "My friend here doesn't like it when I tell the truth too loudly. It upsets the customers, kills their appetites."

"Well, my appetite's fine." The woman pulled a memo pad and pen out of her bag. "Sara Mills. I'm working on a personal project connected to the lab and its effects on the community."

"Project?" A light sparked to life in Will's eyes. "So, you're what...some kind of journalist?"

"The desperate and unemployed kind. This is just a little thing I'm gonna try to get published while I wait for an opening in one of the last five reporting jobs they have in this country." Sara flipped the memo pad to the desired page as she brushed the cap from her cheap pen. "I'd love to take a few comments, if you have the time, uh..."

"Will Scarborough. And I'd be happy to give some comments, but I should really put in an order first." Will spun back to Ralph, eyes flitting between the counterman and the menu. "All right, give me a double burger with Swiss and a side of onion rings, a basket of Cajun fries, a side of spicy slaw, and a chocolate shake. Oh, and if you've got any of that turkey chili left over, I'll take a little cup of that. And some pie, the rest of that peach thing you've got in the case." He flicked a few bills down on the counter. "Keep the change, man."

Sara gaped at him in numb silence. "Not terribly health conscious, I guess?"

"Well, it's not like I have to worry about my health for much longer," said Will. "That's the great thing about the end - you get to live however you want, and damn the consequences."

"Yes, I gathered that much about your, uh...theory from what you were saying earlier," said Sara. "Could you explain this 'end-of-the-world' scenario for me? You know, I've been following the Rudra story for weeks now and that one's brand new."

"That's because I figured it out first. It all started with this." Will slammed a crumpled flier down on the table:

A SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT FROM JAMESON ENTERPRISES

To the residents of Patmos, Illinois:

Over the past few years, you've seen a number of changes - large and small - come to your town as a result of our development. We're very pleased at how well you've tolerated these changes and adjusted to our presence.

Very soon, you will be privileged to see the first fruits of our labor. On Sunday, April 16th at 11:59 P.M., we will be running the first practical test of the RUDRA ENGINE, the prototype for a new energy plant. We believe that this device will form the cornerstone of the American energy policy in the near future and beyond.

More than anything, we want the people who have lived with our work for so long to share in the experience. While the lab itself will remain sealed for the duration of the test, we will be using our telepresence setup to give you a glimpse from the comfort of your own home. The test will be broadcast locally on every Jameson Communications-owned television and radio station; there will also be a stream open through the Jameson Enterprises website for a global audience.

Thank you for your assistance, and let's build a better future together.

"Yeah, I'm familiar with that." Sara pushed the flier back towards Will. "But I don't see anything about the end of the world in there."

"Neither did I, at first," said Will. "Let me start with a question: What are they building at Jameson Labs?"

"Well, it's some kind of energy source," said Sara. "I mean, I don't really get the science behind it, but it is a model for a power plant."

"...Or so they'd like to have you think." Will clapped his hands together. "Truth is, they're working on something a lot more dangerous in that building. Something a lot more sinister, even."

"Sinister? What, like a weapon?"

"Not quite. You use a weapon against your enemy. This thing, they're using against everyone. Friend and foe."

Sara scratched her head, rolling the words around in her head as she searched for the proper summary. "So you think Jameson Enterprises...you think Joshua Jameson is building a doomsday device?"

"That's a dramatic way of putting it, but...yes, that's accurate."

"In southern Illinois?"

"They had to build it somewhere."

"But why..." Sara shook her head. "...Let's try this another way. What makes you think that Joshua Jameson is building a doomsday device?"

"Well - and I'd prefer you leave this part out of whatever you're doing..." Will glanced over his shoulder and dropped his voice a trace below his typical bellow. "...A while back, I received an anonymous email detailing certain aspects of this little project that aren't public knowledge.

You'll keep my name out of this part, right?"

"Sure, you'll be my anonymous source."

"Just anonymous, or will you give me a code name? I could be the 'Prophet of Patmos' or something like that."

"Could you just get on with it?"

"Right." Will threw another glimpse about the room, eyes resting momentarily on each fixture

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