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THE NURSE

The old man popped into wakefulness cool and clearheaded. His fever had broken. He heard a bird chirp outside and felt resurrected.

And then the smell of cigar smoke hit him. He opened his eyes and saw a man sitting in the open window, smoking and looking out at the desert. From the angle of the shadows outside it seemed to be an hour or so after sunrise.

"Where . . . where's Domingo?" the old man croaked.

The man in the window turned his head and shot a jet of smoke into the room. He was young, dressed in black, and had shaggy black hair sticking out from under a black cowboy hat. Black stubble darkened his tanned jaw.

"I sent the boy away. I told him I'd take over."

"Who are you?"

"I guess I'm your nurse."

"Then help me to the crapper."

"Help yourself to the crapper."

The old man tried to outstare him, but it wasn't even close to a contest. The stranger's pale blue eyes weren't just cold they were frozen, with no chance of a thaw above the curl of cigar smoke.

Finally the old man struggled to a sitting position and then struggled to the bathroom. He blew out three days' worth of backup, washed his face and brushed his teeth. The medicine chest mirror showed a skeleton covered with sun-spotted skin. When he'd made it back to his bed he sat on the edge and massaged his aching knees.

"There," the stranger said, "I knew you could do it."

"What do you want?" the old man asked, huffing from his exertions.

"I want you. Let's go."

"Where?"

"You know where."

And the old man did. The stranger's eyes weren't so cold that they could hide the look of desire.

"I'm not up to goin'."

"Sure you are." The man flicked his cigar stub out the window. "You moved like a jackrabbit on that trip to the bathroom. Now it's time for another trip."

"I need to eat," the old man said. He couldn't remember when he'd felt so empty. He saw the tortillas and the glass of water that Domingo had put on the bedside table the night before.

"So dig in," the stranger said, gesturing to the food.

The old man ate. The rough-ground corn seasoned with salt tasted wonderful.

"Where's it at?" the stranger asked after a while.

The old man felt better, stronger. He finished the last of the water and said, "About a three-hour walk from here. Or four, the shape I'm in." He belched. "What's your name?"

The stranger had been studying the desert from his place in the window. He turned and looked at the old man.

"Just think of me as 'the killer.' That'll remind you what could happen if you don't do what I say."



A couple of hours later the old man got his second wind. He'd been shaky when they started out but, maybe it was psychological, when they passed the halfway point he felt better and picked up the pace a bit. That suited the killer, who'd been bitching about the trip taking forever.

Once he didn't have the pace to gripe about he started talking about the lamp. He was nothing like the man of few words he'd been in the window. He yammered like a child.

"This is a long walk but, you know, I walked a long way to get here. Or back there, where you

live. Why don't you have a castle or somethin', since you live this close?"

"I don't mess with the lamp, and it don't mess with me."

"But that old house you're in is a dump. You should get yourself a castle. I'm gonna wish up a *big* one."

The old man stopped. He may have been feeling his second wind, but his joints burned from arthritis and exertion. He removed his straw hat and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"You wanna talk or walk, sonny? I can't do both."

The killer motioned for him to continue. He put his hat back on and resumed walking.

Castles. He'd heard about some, but all of that was a lifetime ago. He thought back to when the lamps came down. At first everybody said it was just a meteor shower—a strong one, but still just a meteor shower. The big glowing streaks bombarded the earth for two days and two nights. All told about a hundred hit, according to reports, and then suddenly they stopped. Communications were still up and running and the old man, who was young then, saw pictures and video of impact craters all over the world. The grownups didn't seem too concerned about the event. They didn't seem concerned either when communications started to go down, but shortly after that was when things began to change.

From what the old man was able to piece together later, governments everywhere went to work studying the meteors. They learned that they could grant wishes, so they came to be called "lamps," after the story of Aladdin. But the genies in the updated story were fierce. Before long the world was engulfed in war. It was a dark time of nukes, bioweapons, misery and death.

So the governments had their moment with the lamps, and then after they collapsed the power

passed into the hands of people bold enough to seize it. Feudal lords ruled the earth. They arose, wished their castles into existence, and then turned their distrustful eyes on each other. The wars continued. They were fought with fewer numbers than the ones before, but they were just as brutal.

After the power mad were killed off, the less aggressive gained access to the lamps. They used them to wish for the traditional signifiers of importance. Rather than nukes and bioweapons, they conjured up things they'd been taught to value when they were young. Few wished for happiness or understanding, because they thought that wealth and position would lead to those. They didn't of course, and people went mad wondering why they couldn't satisfy their yearnings. Many committed suicide, and many simply wandered away into the wasteland beyond care.

And now the lamps were left to people who didn't make many demands on their magical powers. Either through genetics or philosophy the inheritors weren't very interested in improving their lots in life, and when they brought wishes to the lamps they were small ones. They wished for an easy childbirth, or for a green thumb so they could squeeze another turnip from a garden. They hoped for just enough to carry on.

But some people still had grand plans, the old man thought, people like his companion. No telling what he wanted, but it probably wasn't good. Anybody who would nickname himself "the killer" had a kink in his thinking.



"That's a long way down," the killer said.

They stood looking into the crater. It was about a quarter mile across and ringed with abandoned cars, luggage and other debris. The rust-colored dome of the lamp was visible a hundred feet below.

"That's a long way down," the killer repeated.

"Of course it is," the old man snapped. His legs hurt and he was tired. "It fell out of the sky and hit the ground, hard."

"But the other ones I saw, the pictures of them, they had steps 'n stuff going down to them. Why didn't you put in steps?"

"Well excuse me, mister la-dee-dah. If I'd've known you was comin' I'd've set up a lemonade stand."

"So what do I do now?"

"You go down and make your wishes. Ain't that why we're here?"

"But it's a long way down."

"Fine," the old man shrugged. "I'm goin' home." He started to turn away but the killer said, "Wait! I'd never find my way back on my own."

"Then get busy. And leave the water here."

The killer handed him the canteen and stepped over the rim of the crater. The old man watched him skitter down the slope. He thought of the doodlebug traps he'd been fascinated with as a child. Ant lions dug perfect little cones in the sand and then waited at the bottoms for ants to slide in.

He turned back the way they'd come and sat on the ground. The desert stretched away in front of him shimmering with heat. He eased down onto his back and placed his hat over his face.

He dozed for he didn't know how long and then woke feeling refreshed. He sat up and looked around. The sun was well past its zenith and he was still alone.

"Mr. Killer?!" he called out, but he knew there wouldn't be any answer. He took a sip of water and thought back to when the lamp changed. It used to be that people could climb all over it and then charge off full of vinegar, but nobody returned from the crater now. And the people who sought him out as a guide never listened when he cautioned them against going down. Most thought

he was trying to hog the lamp's power for himself. But he didn't need much power. Just resting on the crater's rim for a while allowed him to draw enough for his needs.

He stood up feeling good. He looked at the backs of his hands and saw a few less age spots than had been there that morning. The lamp kept the clock rolled back just enough to keep him going, and that was all he asked.

He took another sip of water and set out for home. His legs felt better. He'd be able to help Domingo and his mom now. If they hadn't broken ground for the onions yet he would do that.