

Silicon County

Postlude to Fire: The Interloper

1

The lake's water encroached on black roots attached to skeletal trees. Its stagnated surface reflected the ash-gray sky, suggesting a lake of molten silver.

The knight stood at the water's edge within the embrace of the charred forest, a relic in the desolate place. Its armor was in a state of ruin—chips, dents, and gashes carved out by gigantic claws littered the mental suit, a history of violence embossed on its unsightly steel.

The knight stared, perhaps since the Beginning, toward the pyramid which sat on the lake's mirror surface. Lifeless vine vestige clung to its battered brick as if it had perish in its slow attempt to climb the medium-sized structure.

The knight's helmet shifted, giving the pyramid an inquisitive look before it uprooted a one heavy boot, set it forward, then repeated with the next. Its joints groaned in defiance, rusted chainmail broke apart, metal plates scraped against one another. The knight walked on the mirrored surface of the lake, a distorted reflection underfoot that vibration as large ripples resonated from the its footfalls.

Drawing closer, ripples began to rebound off the structure, rolling back into others and cancelling each other out. The water grew restless, settling once the knight stopped five feet from the bottom layer of bricks.

The knight drew its sword—in equally poor condition as its own armor—and poised to strike the pyramid.

The water began to boil. A thump resonated from the beneath the water, echoing to the surface and further disturbing the hot froth that was forming. A ripple stead, hitting the shore on all sides repeatedly as the surface grew violenter.

A voice rose from the depths.

"Turbator..." it intoned, its voice a malevolent whisper in the brewing chaos. "Metentis... Immemor... Libertatis..."

The knight swung its blade and the lake's temperament suddenly shifted from boiling malcontent to full torrent. Water erupted and swirled all around the knight, half storm at sea and another half blizzard of ash.

From the chaos, a single word was screeched: "INTERLOPER!"

The knight's cut through geysers of water as it struck the pyramid. Brick and mortar flew. Thousands of richly gray orbs burst from the pyramid's interior and through the breach, rising in a section of the depressing sky, filling it with color, every one a miniscule window into a gray stormclouds.

Simultaneously, a monstrously large creature broke the water's surface and rose into the sky as it

bellowed in rage. It stood fully, a towering thing As the monster scooped up the escaped orbs, the knight acted. It snatched eight of the balls—each a peephole into a world full of naked trees and an earth covered by a variety of fall colors—and tossed them into a pack on its belt.

The knight turned and ran. Restoring order to its hoard, the towering monster turned, screamed a piercing cry at the fleeing shadow in the dead forest, and pursued the interloper.

2

Half a ton of steel and iron moved with fox-like precognition between charred trees, trampled the entanglements of deadfalls at an unhesitating speed, and ran straight through the decaying husks whenever it was of convenience with the momentum of a locomotive.

The monster was an ivory-colored tower in the knight's peripheral vision, halfway vanished into the dark overhanging haze, looming closer with each lumbering step. Each mountainous footfall crushed several dozen tree husks into dust at ones, spreading billowing clouds of powderized black soot like isolated sandstorms while larger tree fragments shot skyward, deteriorated as they fell downward, and shattered and threw clouds of dust and ash on impact.

The monster, closing the rapidly closing the gap between it and the knight, deliberately uprooted trees with its mockery of hands—masses of intertwined human and animal bones that split into five opposable appendages with a resemblance to palms and fingers—and threw the improvised projectiles over- and underhanded until one might strike the fleeing speck of dull metal in the sea of dead forest.

"I DREAM, BUT DOES IT?" the monster bellowed above the concealing haze, the passage of each prolonged syllable through its throat lined with protruding bones audible in its obscene imitation of language. "DOES IT ENVY?"

The moment the tree stuck the knight's back, it exploded into dust and harmless fragments—but the attack knocked the knight off balance and caused it to tumble into a clump of trees. Before the cloud of debris could settle, it was scattered by the speed and mass of a hand-thing that succeeded in its attempt to pin the tripped knight, but not before the knight had rolled onto its back and drawn its sword in time to allow the force of the monster's own attack to the blade up to its hilt in the monster's palm. Bones crunched and split. The monster screamed with rage, the knight's grip tightened on the sword tilt, and the world became a black and gray blur as the monster swung its arm in a wide arch and flicked its hand.

Mental tore the knight sailed through open air.

The knight flew, tumbled end over end above three miles of blurred landscape. Its trajectory degraded as it entered the remains of a desolate, modern city, crashing to a building and vanishing into the hole it made. The knight reorientated itself, rose to a kneeling position among upturned office chairs and collapsed cubicles, and glanced at its stump. Ash and pulverized drywall cascaded from the breach in the two-story office building's side. Though the breach, the knight observed for a moment the dissipating cloud of destruction trailing from the now out of sight lake, the separate plume of dust where its severed arm impacted, and the abomination as it closed five percent of the gap in several bounds.

Weaponless and with no time to waste, the knight ran through opposite wall of the office space, fell to the street below amidst a shower of debris, and resumed running south. A brief howl issued from the southeast like the signal of a warhorn then died out to silence. The knight adjusted its course.

3

The Interloper, 03-01 — Postlude to Fire, 03: The knight crawled on its stomach through the blackened living rooms and kitchens and hallways of half-collapsed houses on its way southeast, having adopted a strategy of stealth once past the center of town that had been previously impossible before being thrown through the air.

Chunks of ceiling fell on the knight's back as the custodian—the abomination—flattened blocks of residence in its search for the knight some distance away. The earth rumbled and ash was shaken off of ruined appliances and metal surfaces.

Rising to a crouching position with slow, calculated movements, the knight approached a gaping hole in the living room wall and cast all that was visible with an analytical look. The yard ended where the dead forest began again about forty feet ahead. Wiping away ash, the knight placed a glove on the floor, felt the vibrations, and waited until they receded ever so slightly.

The knight crouch-walked out of the hole in the ruin's side. Scorched grass crunched beneath its careful steps. A building was destroyed somewhere behind it, and another bellow of frustration echoed far away.

Over its shoulder, the knight heard the abominable custodian yell: "THERE'S A PLEASANTNESS TO THEIR THOUGHTS AND DESIRES AND DREAMS WHICH YOU WILL NEVER TASTE. SHOW IT OR DON'T—YOUR JEALOUSY BURNS, FOR YOU WILL NEVER BE AS BEAUTIFUL A THING AS THEM OR I."

The knight crossed the yard easily, broke apart a section of barbed wire fence with a deft swipe as if it was nothing more than spider's web, and vanished into a confusion of tree husks stretching onward for miles.

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*Off the beaten path of cracked asphalt was a lonesome cabin. Here, the knight was sure, the howl had emanated. The knight appraised the charred timber pikes of the caved in roof, the walls that still stood on two sides, and the flame-licked pickup truck, its paint job turned into curling black chips, sitting on mounds of partially melted rubber, all imbued with depressing blacks and grays.*

*The knight reached into the pouch on its belt and retrieved one of the orbs at random. Holding the orb like a looking glass a foot from its slit of a vision, the orb showed a different picture through a window of miniscule proportions. Acting as a peephole, the orb revealed a world unburned. There were trees merely bare for the fall season, leaves littered all over the ground, and a subdued but comparatively brighter light. Seen through the orb was the undamaged cabin and the counterpart to the burned truck, a truck with blue paint that was only fading.*

*The knight pocketed the orb again and looked at the cabin without the its filter, seeing only a ruin. The knight stepped onto the cement foundation and found a hole leading descending into a basement. The*

*knight waded through the mass of debris and walked down steps piled high with ash.*

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"I'm glad you came," the skull-wearing prince said, its tendrils of strange hair flowing from the back of the mask and cloaking its form. It was standing just opposite the stairs over a pile of brick and soil which had been dug out from the wall. Bones protruded from the pile, dark gray in the nonexistent light. "I suspect there's much to do before we may rest, rest and wait, for the correct time."

The knight made no reply. Nor motion.

"Madam Knight," the Prince of Wolves said slowly, "I, of course, called you here for another reason than what was discussed. For a request, specifically." The prince extended a thin, scaly arm from beneath its cloak and unfurled its talons to reveal the orb—looking through it, the knight could see through a peephole into an undamaged basement, an undamaged brick wall. "This one is dead but not unuseful. I found him, if you can believe it, in the wall. That's rare, as I understand it. I will give him to you. Now, may I have my sleepwalker?"

The knight plucked the orb from the prince's talon and dropped it into its belt pouch. The knight then reached into the bag, shifting through the other orbs meticulously. Even though it could not see them, the prince could scent the other orbs and their tidings—two weren't in the correct place, and there was the one he had just handed over, which smelled unfortunately of death. The knight retrieved one of the orbs and handed it to the prince.

The prince held it in one talon, tighten its grasp, tossed the little orb into the air and caught it, as if either testing its fortitude or playing with it. At last the prince merely let the orb sit in its scaly, dark green palm. A slight tint of shadow appeared beneath the orb.

"You're no longer a divine dreamer," the prince whispered slowly, almost solemnly to the orb, the darkness spreading within the glass like ink spreading through water until it was pure black—now, it could no longer be seen through like the others. "You're a sleepwalker now. I confess, my dear new friend... Thomas... that I'm sorry."

After a moment the prince handed the blackened orb back to the knight, who put it into the pouch with the others—the darkness, churning like ink, would not spread.

The knight turned to leave.

"Good luck, madam Knight," the Prince of Wolves said unsarcastically. "I think you will need it. As will I, if I'm supposed to find those two that are missing. Send Crane my regards if you see her again."

The knight did not pause its ascension of the stairs as it replied to the prince, its voice cold and hollow, like a note sustained in some metallic chamber, but faintly feminine: "Neither of us will see her again. Good luck, O devourer-forevermore. You will need it more than I."

The prince's silence as it watched the knight climb up the stairs and vanish at the top, sending more ash and debris cascading through the hole, was thoughtful and just a little sad.

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*The knight's stroll from the cabin was casual—the custodian, the knight knew, had given up its search and returned to its dream in its resting place beneath the lake. The knight didn't search for its arm and broken sword and instead moved onto the next stage of its mistress's plan: placing the orbs where it had been instructed to place them. The first destination was within the ruins, where the knight was now. It found a reasonable place under a solid if charred tree and left the orb buried there under a layer of ash where it wouldn't be discovered.*

*The knight found the entryway to the crossroad, entered its crystal, hexagonal chamber, and traveled onto the next place. It was a battlefield which the knight passed through on its way to its next destination without depositing an orb. The knight deposited the other orbs in place throughout the Divine Dream—twice it passed by the Palace Gates without being interrupted—until it at last had only three orbs left was reaching the end of its journey and purpose.*

*The knight found itself in a city by the coast of some great but lifeless sea to deposit the first of the three remaining orbs and saw, in the distance, this place's custodian—a two-legged thing with an equine face. The custodian watched passively from about several miles away as the knight left the orb there without worry.*

*Two remained—the one filled with inky clouds that the prince had touched and the one the prince had unexpectedly added to the roster. The knight found itself in another dead city where it left these two together, separated by only a moderate distance.*

*With that task complete, the knight returned to the ruins of Silicon County and only now retrieved its arm and sword, sheathing the broken weapon. Beneath the tree, the knight set to work repairing and reattaching its severed arm in the company of the unawakened dreamer. Then that was completed. To finish its final task, the knight lay on its back in the ash and jettisoned its endoskeleton from the exoskeleton to the tune of unfolding plates of armor. As the armor plate slid back into place, the metallic endoskeleton fell back into ash several paces away, facing upward, and its dark lenses—bearing a reflection of the dark and clouded sky—dilated before finally closing.*