Jak & Jul

Derek Whorley

They were three days out into The Pale—that scorched and wicked land—when they came upon the city. It glittered like shards of glass among the rolling hills of ash, far into the bleak haze. Jak made no note of the city and continued to sit upon his mule. As the beast veered off the linear trail it had been making across the plain, Jul could only stare at its rider, waiting for him to keel over. They had been out of water for some time now, dried by the hot winds that tore across the endless fields of waste. Jul almost called out to him, but she now saw the flat pool in the distance. She began to holler and kick the sides of her mule. She passed Jak, kicking up scraps of plastic from the chalky dirt; Jak continued steadily upon his aged mule.

The water was dark and motionless in its crater. When Jak arrived, Jul had already begun the process of filtration, constructing the apparatus and filling the reservoir with the filthy liquid. Having nothing more to do he sat himself upon a large rock beside the husk of a willow tree. He imagined that if the dangling vines still grew from it that it might have been a nice spot to hide from the infernal sun. Still grateful for the slight shade of a twisted branch overhead, he regarded the city in full now. It stood like a shell; most of it remained upright, but vacant. Whatever magic had saved it from the brunt of the end of the previous world could not protect it from the elements of the world that followed.

The slope upon where the watering hole was established overlooked the city, a vacuous stretch of gray lay between them. He figured if any vagabond sorcerer was out there, they could have spotted the two of them.

With a great heave he stood himself up and grabbed the stakes from his bag. He began his spell by driving the spikes, wrapped in the auspicious tongue of saints and little gods, into the ground in a wide and misshapen perimeter. He chanted his prayer as he went, punctuating with his hammer strikes. “Blue Moon. Relieve us. O’ Moon. Deliver unto us. A curtain of safety.” He carried on, chanting and driving the shanks into the ground with a satisfying and dull thump. Jul did not disturb; she was far too concerned with the water slowly dripping through the filters into a small glass jar. Soon it would be in their stomachs and their waterskins and soon those skins would be in the city. It stood like a temple abandoned, full of dead things and lost treasures. It was this she thought of as she stroked her mule who drank directly from the pool.

By sundown, they had a crude encampment established. Plastic bags containing a thick stew of beans, mushrooms, and rice were gutted above a small pot—the carcasses were tossed away and quickly blended in with the rest of the surrounding debris. Jul had pulled up tufts of sappy weeds among the trash and rolled them into sticky balls to place among the coals. She held one of each in her hands, clasped together until a white smoke snaked out between her fingers. After burying them among the pile and wiping her hands on her denim, she placed the metal grill on which the pot sat.

Jak was proud of that find; it was buried beneath a bunch of other metal junk piled on an old man’s carpet. He sat, laxed and long-limbed; at once it was clear that this man had found ease in his old age. His large fibrous mane and beard hid his frame somewhat. One could still see the lean muscle that swam beneath his skin—still taunt. A fat bottle was nestled in the crooked of his leg as he sat against a brick wall. Unlike the other vendors of the market street, who had tents

and stands to guard against the heat and attract the eye of passing citizens, he sat perfectly comfortable. He had said something about how he tends to make a few *actually* decent things every now and again; now he's simply possessed by shaping metal. He was like Jul: a descendant of pyromancers. While unable to summon torrents of fire and cast great waves of flame like his exiled ancestors, he was able to easily heat his medium and manipulate it with his bare fingers. The great ropes of veins in his hands were evidence of his craft.

"It calls out to me," he said to Jak. "I feel as if everything has been leading to that moment. It never stops." When Jak had picked up the grill, the man quickly pointed out that *that* was the best out of the pile. "Its little legs fold out—see?"

They passed the time by drinking as much water as they could hold and preparing their bedrolls. They sat and played war with a battered deck of cards; Jul talked about one of the stories she had read in one of her magazines; Jak listened patiently, smiled easily. The day soon faded into night. The fire's light did not cross Jak's boundary and the smoke vanished some few feet into the darkness above. They finally began to talk about the city once they ate.

"That place is probably dangerous, right?"

Jak nodded, still working a mouthful of stew. His eyes were half-lidded, intent on his bowl.

"Do you have any idea on what *could* be in there?"

He looked off into the still and dry night. "There's no telling." He paused and added: "Don't step outside the curtain."

Jul replied with silence.

"How're your hands?" He meant her magic.

"Better now, but it's still pretty weak—I feel it."

"Show me."

Jul frowned. Still, she set down her bowl and held out her hands, palms facing one another. Soon she felt the sap that remained on her hands begin to melt before tiny sparks of white and pink pushed themselves out from the creases of her palms. Her finger bones began to hum in their skin as more sparks began to jump between her hands.

"Try putting them together again."

It began to hurt again. She brought her hands closer, tremors of thousands of tiny explosions made it difficult. The sparks continued to bounce until they began to collect in the space between her hands. A ball of light shook the air around it, a great and pale pink heat. Jul glanced up at Jak; he was not looking at her, but at the sphere of light. He stared with such intensity that Jul faltered for a moment. The ball flickered; it needs more energy, she thought. She tried to push more out. The ball swelled, then just as quickly imploded into itself and winked out without a sound. Jul remained with her hands outstretched, feeling all of the aching pains that were returning.

Jak appeared pleased. He rummaged in his bag before producing a small metal sphere and tossing it to Jul. "You did good," he said. "Hopefully that balm'll help with the aches. We'll have to be ready for anything tomorrow."

Jul only nodded while soothing her fingers.

They watched the fire in shifts. The curtain ensured the travelers could not be perceived by those on the outside, but it could not protect them from the cold that blanketed The Pale at night. Jul fed in more tufts of weeds and dead wood scraps, attempting to ration their supply of coals. Far above the curtain, blue lightning cracked and thunder roiled off in the distance. The mules continued to sleep by the pool and Jak pretended to. Jul had always thought Jak never truly slept. His little movements and slowed breathing were just part of the act. Jak had told her once that he doesn't sleep, that he can't—that he is "seeing" all the time. For Jak, the future unwound before him like thread and he must chase the spool that is constantly tumbling away from him. He claimed that he does not question it too much, but simply continues to follow. Right now, in this wasteland, Jul thought, this is exactly where he needs to be.

Then why are you *here?*

The voice had penetrated her mind so deeply she thought the speaker was right next to her. Jul whipped around, her fists radiant and pulsing with heat. Fear overrode any pain. She searched the night for the voice that did not make a sound. Far beyond the curtain, a jingling could be heard; the sound of many tiny metal pieces, gently, rhythmically, tapping together. Out in the darkness, in a flash of blue, Jul saw him dancing, dressed in spoons.

They covered him like a dress; there must have been hundreds of them. They all dangled from his shoulders to the middle of his thigh, spotless. The entirety of his head was gleaming silver, reflecting all of the barren hills. The sound of the metal was his music as his arms and legs seemed to flow with exuberance and honest joy. At once Jul was captivated; he knew it.

Yes, girl, I can see you, your companion, and your mules. I see it all with these spoons!

They were his words, but he continued to twirl and bounce around as if he was the only being among the hills.

Now, why are you *here?*

Jul released her fists, but did not sit. Jak did not pretend to stir in his bedroll. *We're hunting for treasure,* she thought. *It'll set us up for life.*

Going to the city I assume—he slid to the left—*that's the only thing out here worthwhile.* He clapped. *But you don't want to go there.* He slid to the right.

Jak had a vision: there's something there.

Two claps. Y*ou will die there.* The sorcerer shimmied, rattling his spoons. *That is what* I *have seen. Besides, you still have not answered my question: why are* you *here, offshoot pyromancer?*

The word touched a piece of her, a pebble of shame in her gut that she could never get rid of.

Oh don't feel bad, girl, the sorcerer exclaimed as he began kicking his legs high up into the air, hands on his hips. *You have a rare lineage, most of the pyromancers bit the dust hundreds of years ago. This*—he spread his arms out wide—*this is your heritage.*

She said nothing to this.

No matter! However—he stopped dancing; Jul could feel his eyes piercing her through behind his mask—*I will not ask a third time.* She clenched her fists again. *That won't work. Please, I'm only curious.*

She glanced at Jak. *Because of him. He's placed his trust in me. I trust what he sees. He has never led me astray*.

To this, the sorcerer resumed his dancing. *So lovely! And lo!—what heartship! He's always looked after you, hasn't he? He must have seen great things! But you do not want to enter that city. There is only death and dead things. But I know you will not listen—I've seen that too.* He began to giggle like a child and spin on the dust and plastic without friction. Another flash of blue and he was gone, the sound of his spoons echoing away with the thunder.

Soon after, Jak had risen from his "sleep" and took his shift at the fire.

"See anything?" he asked.

"I didn't," she glanced up at him from the fire. "Did you?"

Jak could only smile.

They packed at first light. Jak unearthed the spikes and Jul roused the mules. The elder of the two was the most balky; it had risen, eventually, and was slow to move. Jul had become so frustrated with the beast that her own mule had stepped away from her. Jak, however, seemed to coax his mule into cooperation; he whispered to it, stroked its head, and fed it some scraps by hand. The mule began its journey once more, slower this time, but steadfast. Jul rode behind and resumed watching the mule and its rider in silence.

The day's heat began to swell as the pair made it to the outskirts of the city. The mules had come to a stop and refused to enter the city limits. Jul tried to search for meaning in her beast's dark, dumb eye that seemed to only scan the waste. Jak simply shouldered his bag and let his animal ease itself onto the dirt. Jul's mule, being relieved of its own burden, followed its elder and sat beside it.

"They'll wait for us here," Jak said. "We can continue on foot."

"And you're sure it'll be safe?"

He nodded and began to walk. "I saw it, remember?"

"How accurate are your visions anyway?" She followed.

"Accurate enough; they're a bit jumbled, but I've gotten good at sorting them. If I hadn't, we wouldn't be here right now."

"What else have you seen in this city?"

He looked back and smiled, as he always did. Always that knowing smile. "Don't you worry; I know exactly where we're headed."

The pair made their way through the ruined streets. The asphalt was littered with potholes and craters that had collected trash, debris, liquid filth. Automobiles were either left abandoned, doors still open, or turned over, wrecked and crumpled. Whole blocks had been completely

obliterated, blackened with ash and caved in. Individual buildings varied in their destruction; some were caved in, completely blown out, or stood tall, proudly unscathed among the fallen. All of it meant nothing to Jul; she was only after the treasure. Jak did not seem to take notice of them either, only glancing around to ensure they remained on the right path.

The two passed what seemed to be a jewelry store that was very much intact. Jul called to Jak, suggesting they look inside. Jak shook his head. “There’s nothing in there.” Jak was always certain; his sight granted him that luxury. However, this did not stop Jul from challenging that certainty every now and again. She placed his trust into his visions, but the urge to see for herself was never deterred.

She crossed the street and hopped up and over the hood of a car and peered into the gaping hole left in the large pane of glass. Jul had already entered the store before Jak turned to retrieve her. She quickly scanned the dim interior; many of the glass cases were left shattered and headless flocked busts had long been stripped of their pearls. Behind the counter was a door; Jul thought there might be something worth back there. Quickly, she rounded the counter and stopped short. Lying in front of the door was some lumpy mass. It was hard to make out in the darkness. It began to move.

It threw out an arm and raised itself up on a four fingered hand. The smell now registered for Jul, a rotting and putrid musk—blood and sweat and decay. It raised itself on it’s legs now, a third foot protruding from another, the skin spotted with bruises, welts of discolor. In the light, she could see the remnants of clothes, sticking to patches of wet beneath. Confusion and fear could not conjure her magic. The towering mutant rose up, reaching with it’s single, fragmented arm. There was a flash of uneven, flat teeth before it was struck down.

Jak had leapt across the counter and caught it right in the mouth with his baton. The mutant fell back. Jak did not hesitate, jumping onto it and beating it again. Jul could only watch, trying to ignore the sounds that devolved into meaty squelches. Finally, Jak stopped, waited, wiped his baton on the rags of felled body and stepped back. He turned Jul away and escorted her out. Eventually, she could make out the words he was saying to her.

“Come on, let's go,” he said. “It didn’t get you. You’ll be okay.”

She moved away from his gentle guidance and found a rusted bench to sit. Jak said nothing and allowed her to regain herself.

“You said there was nothing.”

Jak was silent.

“Didn’t you see that *thing* in there?”

“My visions exclude living things, besides myself.”

She looked up at him, his expression did not waver. “You’re telling me this *now*?”

“It doesn’t matter, Jul. We’re going to be fine.”

“What did you see—tell me exactly what you saw last night.”

“I saw it—the treasure—a chalice. It was in my hands; I could see myself in it; I could see everything we could ever want in it. Beyond that, I honestly don’t know. But I know where we’re going.”

“But is it safe? Are we going to die?”

He looked down the street, where the treasure must be. “I’ll make sure we get that treasure and that we make it out of this city. That is what I can promise.”

Jul glanced at where they had walked before, then to Jak. She thought it was a foolish choice, but she had placed everything in his sight long ago. The two continued their way deeper into the city.

The top half of the skyscraper had toppled over, laid over other ruined structures like a dead snake. The lower portion had collapsed in on itself, creating a vacuous maw built with ancient bones of grey and steel. Jak stepped straight into the gaping mouth, flashlight in hand, over the chunks of what had been a spacious lobby.

Jul tried to produce her sparks; she wanted to make sure she still could after their last encounter. They sputtered, but she managed to produce a steady glow from her palm like a flare. She caught Jak smiling back at her before squeezing through a gap in the rubble. When Jul had made it to the other side, Jak was attempting to open a metal door with a sigil scrawled on it. The symbol had been used to ward off angry spirits and creatures deemed unfit for civilization’s second-coming. Whatever was smeared to write the sigil was cracked and most had fallen away, useless now.

Jak forced the door, behind it were concrete steps leading down. The two descended four flights before the stairs fell away; a scratchy rope tied to a bend strand of rebar disappeared into the pitch below. Jak kicked down a piece of rubble. One…two...*thud*. Nothing stirred below and he deemed the rope safe enough to hold their weight. He went first, then Jul, making sure her hands were cool enough to not burn their escape.

The bottom was a perfect square carved out of the earth, fleshy heat seemed to ooze from the muddy walls. There was a single arched tunnel that seemed too sophisticated for such a foul place. Jul had begun pushing out sparks again, but Jak shook his head, put his finger to his lips. He withdrew his crusted bat and entered. At regular intervals, the tunnel had small holes. They appeared to be pipes, struggling to pour out rosy liquid. It dribbled at the end of the pipes, leaving stains as it was soaked into the dirt walls. Some would trickle out more than others and run ahead of them in lazy, thin streams that hugged the walls. Jul wanted to talk, ask him what he thought of all this. Would the pipes carry their voices into some malformed ear, or whatever those things used to hear? All she could do was follow Jak into the depths.

After a silent age, a glow radiated from the end of the tunnel. Jak turned off his light and advanced. Jul felt something winding in her guts, then she heard it. A humming that echoed in from the glowing mouth. Somehow, she also heard Jak’s grip tighten around his club. It was a gentle, rhythmic hum.

Mmmm—mm… Mmm—mm—mm… Mmmm—mm...Mmm—mm—mm.

Glowing roots shone down on the horrid congregation. Fleshy splotches bowed to long pools of red ichor, their bodies heaving as they drank deeply. Some were limp, their heads

bobbing in the pools that ringed around a huge mound. This is how the pools were eternally fed; atop the mound was a golden chalice, overflowing with the stuff. It trailed down in narrow lines, widening until they all intersected at the bottom of the slope. Four stretches of dirt divided the pools into quarters and led up the top of the mound. The air was pungent with the rot of their bodies and the sweetness of ichor. For once, she could see the unease that gripped Jak now, drawing his expression tight, twisted, thinking. She wanted to puke.

Mmmm—mm… Mmm—mm—mm… Mmmm—mm...Mmm—mm—mm.

Without a word he slowly slipped off his pack and set it behind him, still holding his club. She wanted to puke even more. She couldn't bring myself to say it, but she gripped his arm. He placed his hand on hers and gave a terrible look. Not one of anger, not a self-assured grin, but simply a face that said: *I'm doing this.*

Jul slowly withdrew her hand. She could only stand and watch him creep down the steps. She held her breath as he stalked between the rows of mutants. One seemed to quiver as he stepped too close and he paused, reeling back his arm to strike. The mutant continued to drink undisturbed and Jak eventually lowered his arm.

Mmmm—mm… Mmm—mm—mm… Mmmm—mm...Mmm—mm—mm.

He slipped past the rows of these pale creatures and made it to the top. He stood, staring into the chalice for what seemed like an eternity. Whatever trance he was in pulled his head closer. His hands reached to cup the chalice, to prepare himself to be anointed into the mutant cult.

Mmmm—mm… Mmm—mm—

Jak ripped the chalice from its place, roots untangling and snapping from beneath its base. They spurted like arteries. Whatever ichor was in the chalice was ejected and splattered on the backs of some mutants. They pulled their faces away from the drink, drooling it from their haggard mouths of few teeth. Their features were all varied, but all were twisted, mutilated, stained red with the ichor.

Jak was quick, down the slope before they were beginning to realize what had been taken. But they were vengeful things. The humming had ceased and the glowing from above began to dim and ferocious, inhuman groans began to swell. Not even the most disgusting and debased creatures could produce such noises. Jul was yelling, screaming for him to keep running as the darkness closed in. As he ran he drew his arm back, and threw the chalice at her.

No.

It soared, glittering in the remnants of the light.

Please.

His voice cut through the cacophony. A single, drawn, desperate syllable she couldn't make out.

Jul caught the chalice and there was no light—only noise. Monsters.

If Jak put up a fight, she did not know. If he screamed, she did not hear. She only ran, blind through the tunnels. Pink-white bursts guided her way. With each flash Jak's face seared into her eyes. Tears could not drown the afterimages. Footfalls could not replace the echoes.

Pathetic and sobbing Jul pulled herself up the rope and collapsed on the steps, finally safe. The grail did not shine in her hands.

She managed to find her way out of the city, past the burnt out quarters and through the streets of a war long past. She could still hear them wailing far below and for a moment she wondered if he wailed with them. She crumpled, pushing out hot tears and almost puking again. Still, she picked herself up and walked on. What else could be done?

The old mule had died; it lay like a rock now, somehow serene among the ashen fields. The younger mule lay beside it, licking the other behind its ear. Jul looked past the beasts at the dusty expanse she would have to cross to return home—alone. The mere thought exhausted her.

The sound of dribbling water pulled her attention. The chalice in her hand had conjured up clear, pure water that flowed from nowhere.

She knelt by her mule and raised the drink up to its snout. "Here," she said. "it's good. You need it."

The dumb animal drew its snout away and continued to lick the corpse.

She looked at it for a long time. "He's dead."

The mule said nothing.

"He's dead! Dumb thing!"

She struck the mule's skull with the chalice. She mounted it, kept it from running. Jul could not hear its cries, only the sound of metal and bone and meat as it wobbled, stupefied with pain. When it was over, the chalice was dented and bloodied in her hand and something that felt like accomplishment washed over her for a moment.

The chalice began to vibrate wildly; the blood hissed away into smoke and the dents popped back into place. As she watched this, she could make out the engraving etched around the rim of the vessel:

IN ASH & UNDER EARTH WE SHALL PRESERVE

Only a single soul could hear her mad screaming; he made himself known with the sound of his spoons. He used his real voice now, melodious, cruel.

"I told you, girl; only death and dead things!" He laughed, clapped his hands over his silver head and twirling about, kicking up ash. She could see herself in the reflection of his face; a pathetic thing, with nothing left.

She wanted to kill him. She needed it. The chalice vibrated once more.

"It's time to claim your inheritance," he said. "You have nothing to return to and no way of returning. But I can teach you the ways of this land, train you to become a *real* sorcerer! Won't it be fun?" He was giddy now, shaking his fists with excitement.

Red ichor poured forth from the chalice into the sand. At once, she knew this would allow her to do it. Unlock all the channels; she would become a *real* sorcerer. She raised it up, let it fall into her mouth and all else fell away. She felt it—everything; she could do *everything*.

Jul could see the hesitation in the sorcerer now as he took his stance, ready to fight to the bitter end.

"Show me, fucking fiend!"

The tinkling of spoons never sounded among those hills of ash again, replaced by a ceaseless storm that ran all across The Pale—that desolate waste. With it came lighting and fires that found new ways to scorch the earth. Down came the city that had once stood impervious to the great wars of the end times; it had become heaps of dust to be scattered with the rest by the screaming winds of that endless tempest.