

The Rose Egg

By Jay Lake

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“The Rose Egg’ is the only story from which a character has visited me in a dream after I wrote it,” Jay Lake told us. “Benny Bueno came to me one night in a mood of sorrow, but I never did understand what was bothering him.” Jay has more stories upcoming in several places, including Asimov’s, Leviathan 4 and Realms of Fantasy. His fiction has been collected in Greetings From Lake Wu (a Locus recommended book) and Dogs In The Moonlight. Polyphony 4, which Jay co-edited with Deborah Lane, will appear in the autumn.

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Me and Skankin’ Hank was chilling in the alley down by the Sally first time I ever seen someone throw an egg. It was some skinny little black kid, darker even than Skank which is saying some, scam-pering by like he was running something hot and perishable from the safe house to the schoolyard. In a hurry, without the panic, you know what I’m saying?

He come loping along on them skinny kid legs and big kid feet, flash me and Skank a thousand watt grin, and cut the corner onto Sixth Street by leaping over three snoring winos in one go. He was carrying something the size of a football, look like it was made of stained glass or some shit.

“This I got to see,” I said to Skank. He nods like he always does, ‘cause Skankin’ Hank’s my main man and right hand, and off we go round the same corner, kicking a couple of them winos awake along the way.

Whoa Nellie and pass the Tabasco, there’s the kid, glaring up at the Sally like the Armies of the Road ever did anything to him. Then he cocks back that arm, aims that stained-glass foot-ball, and gives it a regular Roger Staubach.

Wham, the football hit the brick front of the Sally, shatters, but like in slow motion. Little shards of

sparkle came shooting out, with tails of color like paint scratches in the air. The main mass exploded into a beautiful graffiti, about four by six foot airbrush job of a sunset with one lone oak tree standing tall on the horizon

It even *smelled* like a fresh tag job, that tangy, quick-high reek.

Now understand, taggers been doing sunsets since Omar the Cuban first picked up a paint can back before any of us was gleams in our grand-daddy's eye. Ain't nothing special about a sunset. Any fool out of diapers can spray yellow, orange and red and get high sniffing fumes off what mother nature does for free every night.

But doing a sunset in one throw, that was something else. Something totally new.

And I knew action when I saw it. "Skank," I said, "give me my telephone."

"You bet," he said, his eyes gleaming bright as those shards just had. Skank never was one to fail to see the possibilities.

We did a fast fade to a tire stack behind the old ExxonMobil down on San Jacinto Street, and I placed some calls. My crew, Los Diabolitos, already ran a good chunk of the hot mRNA and sneaker data in central Texas, plus some good old fashioned dope just to keep in practice, but this here was going to spark a cash flow flood like we ain't seen since crack went cold.

I lit my upstream connections, and the regional bosses lit theirs, all the way up to the Glass King in his tall New York office, boss of us all. Two weeks later, I had a piece of every egg being thrown between Killeen and New Braunfels.

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"Egg," it stands for "enhanced graphics generation" or some domehead shit like that. Oatis the Lotus, from my crew, explained it to me. He was a skinny Chicano kid from Montopolis, south of the river, with more brains than all the rest of Los Diabolitos put together.

"Look, Marvel," he said, twisting his hands around like he was holding one of them finger puzzle things. Oatis would be a mute without his hands, I swear. "It's brilliant, man, simply brilliant. At manufacturing,

they preload these microreservoirs with program-mable pigments. There's a little miniRISC processor in there, accepts the image from any of a dozen standard graphics apps, controls the rupturing sequence of the microreservoirs and gooses the pigments with the right voltage to set them, bang, instant sunset. Virgin of Guadeloupe. Or whatever."

The whole time, his fingers was flashing and dancing like he had to lace this thing together by brute cleverness.

"Oatis, my man," I said, one hand on his shoulder, "your job is to understand how it works. My job is to understand how it works on the street. Keep it up and we'll all be rich."

"Marvel," he says real quiet, even his fingers barely twitching like they was whispering too, "I got ideas. *Big* ideas."

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Now, we had this P.R. kid name of Benny Bueno ran with Los Dia-bolitos. Benny ain't got the sense God gave a goose, but he got all the smiles in the world. Benny was always laughing, waiting to be let in on the joke, even when sometimes he *was* the joke. Some of the guys, like Skank, they'd screw with Benny, make him dance for dollar bills and shit like that, or send him out on stupid errands that just get him beat up.

I stopped that shit when I could. Secret to running a crew like Los Diabolitos is always be out in front of wherever it is they think they're going. One dude can't set direction by hisself, but a few smart homies and a lot of quiet effort can make things happen. I didn't like the way they yo-yoed Benny around. He was what God and a crack whore momma made him. It wasn't his fault.

Benny, he loved them eggs. He got to following Oatis the Lotus around when Oatis signed up for an Urban Extension program at the University up there, kind of like Oatis' lab assis-tant or some such shit. Oatis, he got to cooking up his own eggs, using pictures Benny thought up or pulled down off the Internet. And Benny, he had a nice sense of color for a stupid kid.

Benny came up to me one day when I was walking my downtown turf with Spider Gray and some of the other homies. "Marvel," he said, "what's up?"

"Whassup, l'il man," Spider Gray hollered back, shoving Benny with his hip.

Benny kind of stumbled over the curb, went down on one knee in the gutter of Sixth Street, then bounced back up like he was made of rubber. “Hey, Spider,” he said real shy, then turns back to me. Smile never left his face, I swear. “Marvel, I just wanna thank you for ever’thing you done for me.”

“What’s the score, little man?”

“Sounds like a suicide note,” Spider said, so I slapped him. “Shut up, fool.”

“Oatis,” said Benny, and he screwed up his face like he was trying to find courage, “Oatis, he packin’ up. I wanna go wit’ him.”

Oatis packing? “Where he going?”

“Oatis he got a ... a ... schooner ship... to MIT.”

“MIT?” Oatis was my cash man, cooking new eggs all the time these days. I was sending more eggs *out* of Central Texas by now than I was bringing in, taking a much bigger cut. Glass King was good to his field man-agers, when they good to him.

“You know,” laughed Spider, “In Massy-choosits.”

I hit him again, harder this time. “God damn it, I *know* where MIT is.” Sort of. “Oatis can’t leave me like this.”

Benny started crying now, like we was his momma and daddy fighting. Which in a way, we was.

I bent down. “Okay, little man, you’re not in trouble. You didn’t do nothing wrong. But you and me,” and I glared at Spider, “*just* you and me, we’re going to talk to Oatis now.”

“I wanna go to MIT,” Benny wailed.

“I know, little man. I know.”

“I was going to tell you, Marvel.” Oatis had his arms folded tight, leaning against one of them black-topped tables the domeheads called a lab bench, up here in some big orange brick building at the University of Texas. Place reeked of paint and alco-hol, and it had took me a while to find it. His fingers drummed on his elbows like he was trying to talk to me in machine code or something.

“*When*, Oatis? You don’t just walk.” I was exercising my consider-able patience. Oatis was far too valuable to rumble with, even to make a point, and if I ever broke his fingers, he might never work again. “You need more money, better chicks? Picked up a new habit I should know about?”

“It ain’t the money, Marvel.” He sighed, stared at the floor, while his fingers thumped away. “You always take good care of me.” He looked up, at me and Benny, his eyes gleaming. “Opportunity, Marvel. I got some ideas, how to make something new out of the eggs. Can’t do it here. Need the domeheads at MIT.”

“New what?” I asked. I knew I should be keeping an eye on the cash, but when Oatis get that gleam, look out.

“New like you never seen, Marvel. Trust me.”

“What about my obligations here?”

“I’ll keep your egg pipe filled, don’t worry.” Oatis grinned. “I’m gonna have assistants and everything.”

Benny busted into tears again. “But Oatis, I’m your assister.”

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Six months later, as the Austin winter rained cold on us, Benny came back from MIT. He took Greyhound, on account of no one thought it was a good idea to let Benny near an airport. Plus he was carrying a new egg from Oatis. That’s what Oatis’ email said.

The eggs had kept coming, and they kept getting better. All the big papers ran articles talking about

national scourge or street art, and the cops like to wanted to kill us, but we was big business. Sending Oatis the Lotus to MIT was the best thing I ever done.

I met the bus over on Highland Mall Boulevard, where they kept the station at. I had my new ride, a shiny bronze BMW Z9 with haptic controls and all that shit. Egg money was good money.

Benny, he got off that big silver bus like a turd slithering out of a tailpipe, hobbled across the parking lot, and climbed on in.

“Where your luggage, little man?” I asked him. He wasn’t carrying nothing but a bowling ball bag.

“This it,” Benny said, grinning fit to light up the sky as he held the bag. “You gotta see it, Marvel. Oatis he outdone himself this go ‘round.”

“Where we gonna throw that egg, Benny?”

“Someplace indoors, big.”

“Indoors?” Most eggs didn’t get thrown indoors. Lot of heat and shards and fumes come out of an egg, usually you didn’t want to stand around an enclosed space when it went off. That lesson been learned hard, a few times early on.

“Yep. New shit, Oatis say. I seen it. I know he’s right.”

I made some calls, and finally met Skank and Spider and most of the rest of Los Diabolitos at an old hangar at Mueller Airport. Ain’t been no planes flying out of Mueller for twenty, thirty years, but the redevelopment commission never could get its shit straightened out from the politics, so the old place just stood there, sinking slow into the muddy ground like the world’s lamest *Titanic* episode.

They were there in the old Mack flatbed we used for running equipment, bunch of guys sitting on the back. Skank had the crowbar, and Spider had the alarm box to hotwire security, and then we was in.

Airplane hangars, they big. Like the great outdoors, indoors. Or a mall with no stores or nothing. Benny, he just grin, then marched out into the middle of the hangar with that bowling ball bag. He set the bag

down, turned around and spread his arms, like Christ' Jesus on the cross.

That boy got some showman in his simple head after all.

“Diabolitos,” he said real loud.

There was some chuckling, but people settled in fast. They figured, like I did, these words was really coming from Oatis, passed on to Benny. The little guy wasn't much on speeches.

“This here's the new thing. The next thing. The *best* thing!”

He reached down, pulled out a quivery egg, maybe twice the size of what we'd seen before, this one all one sparkly color, kind of light blue. It wobbled in his hand, like jello or something.

“You ready?”

“Yeah!” Los Diabolitos shouted. “Go for it.” “Rock on, Benny.” Shit like that.

He picked that egg up, held it over his head like some pro wrestler, then hurled it further into the hangar.

It splatted onto the concrete, busted open into a hissing mist the same sparkly blue as the egg had been, and commenced to spinning like a gooey tornado. Leaves and papers and small shit scattered around the hangar floor got sucked into it, as did a whole lot of dust. It threw out arms, kind of like Benny had done, as the spinning slowed.

When it was done, there was this giant tree, an oak or something, quivering in the middle of the hangar. It looked like it didn't weigh more than twelve pounds, almost like a balloon, but it was *real*. So real. Every single leaf and twig was on there, and you could see the rough of the bark.

I walked over to the tree, where Benny stood beaming fit to beat the band.

“Careful, Marvel,” he whispered.

My hands brushed the trunk. The tree quivered slightly, almost like it was trying to bend away from me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Air-o-jell,” Benny said carefully. Oatis must’ve made him memorize that word. “Can’t stand wind, or much touching, but it’s beautiful while it’s here. Ain’t it?”

Then Los Diabolitos were whoop-ing and hollering and touching the tree, trying to slap it, dance around it, make it theirs. Benny screamed, ran around trying to make them stop, crying, “No, don’t!,” but he wasn’t enough.

It spooled away into a cloud of sticky smoke, settling gleaming blue dust on everyone in the hangar.

“You broke it,” Benny shouted, then busted into tears.

Everyone stared around for a moment, eyes bright in the gooey blue shadows of the hangar. “Fuck this shit,” said Spider Gray. “We out of here.”

Me and Benny stood there as the Mack rumbled off. I heard a crunch, Spider using the truck to clip the fender on my BMW. I’d have to hurt him later. Then I hugged the little man. “It’ll be okay, Benny,” I said, combing my fingers through his hair as he cried into my armpit. “That was a beautiful tree.”

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In fact, there was a fad for them 3-D eggs. People wanted to throw them at concerts and shit, high school bas-ketball games, you name it. The business was almost legit, sports mascots and company logos. I’d worked out a deal with New York to let me handle this, on account of Oatis being my boy and all, and they took a cut of my action nationwide.

Bigger cut than they would’ve given me, of course, but that’s why they was in New York and I was in Austin. Everybody got somebody bigger sit-ting on they head, except maybe the Glass King himself.

Los Diabolitos was getting rich off Oatis. It was a hell of a lot of fun. Everybody knew the 3-D eggs weren't gonna last, too squidgy, but the regular eggs still sold good, and we all figured some new miracle would fall out of MIT sooner or later.

Until I got a call from Oatis one day.

"Marvel," he said. Line warbled under his voice, that we was secure. No Feddies listening in. "My man... I got to tell you something."

"What's up Oatis?" I was in Denny's, eating key lime pie. I twirled my fork within the green slop. "You got some new shit for me to ooh and aah at?"

"Nah. My contract, with MIT, for my scholarship...it's been bought out."

Uh-oh. "By who? I'll kill 'em."

"Glass King, Marvel."

Ain't no killing the Glass King. "Oh."

"They sending you some remuner-ation."

"I don't want no money, Oatis." I felt a desperate flash, made me want to beg. I ain't begged since the night Lakeisha Jordan took my cherry, all those years ago. "I want *you*. I want the eggs."

"Way it's got to be, man. More money, better chicks, I'll be on top of world."

"What about Benny?" I asked. Benny been making plans to go back to Boston.

Oatis didn't say nothing for a minute, but his silence sounded sad. "He ain't in the contract."

“I see.” Poor Benny. He was mighty proud of being Oatis’ assister. “Look, you just stay happy there, Oatis.” What the hell else could I say? Glass King probably had somebody listening in at the other end.

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Most of Los Diabolitos took it better than I did. “Money,” said Skank when we all met in a bar down on South Lamar. Saxon Pub, even the name pissed off some of the homies. “What they buy us off with?”

“Fifty-five million dollars,” I said. “Everybody gets a mil.”

“Mexico-o-o-o!” shouted one of the newer boys, little Asian frou-frou named Light Mike.

“Whatever. We still got paint eggs and all our usual business to run.”

Things was different now, though. The edge was off. Nobody even seemed to miss Oatis except me and Benny Bueno.

He came to me, Benny did, about two weeks after I paid the gang out. We was respectable now, even Benny had a car, a nice Lexus hybrid. Though he paid some skinny white kid to drive him around. I’d had me a pointed little talk with the kid about money, hours and miles, since Benny couldn’t count so good on his own.

We met on the dock at Chuy’s Hula Hut, eating fajitas with pineapple slices in ‘em and drinking from honking big glasses of ice tea, while the ducks begged for chips just off the rail and fifteen feet down in the water.

“Marvel,” Benny said with his mouth full of tostadas and salsa. “I’m sad.”

“Sad is as sad does, little man.”

Benny wiped his lips with a napkin. “Oatis, he promise me something the Glass King done took away.”

Me, too, Benny, I thought. Me, too. "Yeah?"

"Oatis, he promise me a special egg. Just for me."

"What kind of special egg, Benny?"

"Nanny tech, he call it. One that *last*. Mine forever." He got all shy, his face kind of rubbery and folding in like it does. "To remember by. I don't remember so good sometimes, Marvel."

"I know, Benny. Sometimes none of us do."

He went on. "And that egg, it would be my memory, of my momma and you and all the good things in my life."

I wanted to say, 'what good things?', but it wasn't for me to kick this little man. So I kept my mouth shut.

He watched me for a while, screw-ing his face up more. Something big was coming out, I could tell.

"I want to go to the Glass King, and make him give me back what he took when he stole Oatis away from us!"

Holey moley fucking shit. *Nobody* talked about the Glass King that way. He was the biggest, baddest gang banger in all of America, with an office high above New York City and more souljah-boys on suicide watch than most of us had hair on our heads. Top of all our heaps, what those old Eye-talians called *capo di tutti*.

Benny jumped up on his chair, everyone around us staring. "And you gonna take me there, *Marvell*" he shouted.

I about like to pass out.

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Destiny's a funny thing. Los Diabo-litos didn't really need me right then. Glass King pulled our rug, paid us well to cushion the fall. Money's cheaper than a fight sometimes, I guess, and he wanted on Oatis' good side on account of Oatis was shaping up to be the genius of the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, Benny did need me. Most folks would've walked away, or locked him up, or both. He'd gone from simple to flat fucking crazy in two sentences, but there was fire in his heart. I had to respect that. Besides, I'd took him on the last few years. I had to see him through.

Destiny. Or maybe I just had a death wish. I don't know. Either way, there we was, cruising the interstates in my Z9, flashing through the checkpoints on my pass tag clearances while the cops worked over the tourists. *Some* good comes of working for the Glass King.

It took two days to get from Austin to New York, and another week to get into the Glass King's office. I made phone calls, I sent messengers with letters, I emailed Oatis, I slipped cash to people, threatened a few.

Nothing. No good. I'd have had an easier time springing a visit to the Oval Office.

Until one day Benny got mad again.

We was in our hotel suite, at the Fairmont-Midtown, Benny watching music videos on the television. "Marvel?" he said. "Why won't the Glass King see me?"

"We don't got an invitation, little man. It ain't enough just to come here. You got to be let in."

Benny turned off the television, sat up on the bed. "I'm part of Los Diabolitos, right?"

"Always, Benny, always."

"And you got a boss somewhere, who got a boss, who work for the Glass King."

He'd really been thinking this time. "Yeah."

"Then I got a *right* to see him. I'm an employee."

I laughed, straight from the gut. "That ain't the way it works, my friend."

He pouted. "Like hell." Then he put his shoes on and headed for the door.

"Whoa Nellie there, Benny," I said, grabbing his arm.

Benny shook me off. "Going to see the Glass King."

And that's just what he did.

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It was one of the biggest high rises in town, wrapped with black glass, anti-climbing spikes, and even missile launchers high up. There was a big old fountain out front, spouted pure fucking whiskey, the winos wouldn't come near it.

Not even the pigeons shit where the Glass King walked.

Benny marched right in to the lobby. Doors snicked open with that little bank-door whoosh, like air pres-sure's different inside. Keeps out bioterror and chemical attacks. There's about two acres of black marble in there, one tiny little desk no bigger than a night club doorman's podium, and a woman sitting at it with her head wrapped in an Italian leather virtual reality hood.

He steps up in front of her. "I'm here to see the Glass King," Benny pipes. His voice never sounded so small to me.

Her face, wrapped that in leather, tilts toward me trailing behind Benny. I shrugged. "Little man wants to see the boss. He ain't got no appointment."

“Don’t need no appointment,” Benny says, still angry.

Then there’s four souljah-boys pat-ting me down, and I mean *all* the way down and pass the Crisco, please. They get all three my rods, my boot knife, my holdout knife, even the throat-wire in the waistband of my underwear. No one’s smiling, no one’s being rough. Professional courtesy is all.

They even dressed me back up. Funny thing is, no one touched Benny.

Receptionist nods, not a word been said by anyone but Benny, and the souljah-boys walked me and Benny onto an elevator all mirrors inside.

Elevator went up, moving so fast it like to make my knees buckle. I stood there. I’m not small, but I was sur-rounded by four guys each built like a high-voltage transformer. One on my left, the only one of the four not a brother, cut his eyes at Benny.

It was a question, of sorts.

I felt like a fool, like I was selling out my best friend, but I wanted to leave that building alive. Hell, mostly what I wanted was not to piss my pants in fear. So I lifted my left hand, my off-hand that Benny couldn’t see, and made a little loopy move with my finger around the side of my head.

The white souljah-boy nodded real slight, then looked down at Benny again. His face relaxed, almost like Benny was a sight for sore eyes.

Maybe the little man was. Maybe I spent too much time too close to him to know different.

Then we let out into a room bigger than the lobby downstairs. This was a football field worth of black carpet, pil-lars, and windows on three sides, every view looking *down* on New York. It smelled like nothing, like the absence of smell, like Heaven after the angels done cleaned it. Big desk at the far end, size of a Maserati, big black man sitting at it, watching us.

Even from almost a hundred yards off, I could feel his stare like a laser sight punching death into my chest.

Souljah-boys hung back at the elevators, gave me and Benny a little shove. Benny marched off like a wind-up toy, me trailing behind. *Oh God*, I thought, get me out of this and I'll go straighter than a public defender.

It took forever, that hike across the Glass King's carpet. The closer we got, the more stout Benny's lip got. The closer we got, the weaker my legs got.

Benny walked up to the desk, which was empty as a crackhead's wallet, put his hands on it, leaned into this huge man who was bigger than any of his souljah-boys, wrapped in a gray silk suit cost more than my BMW. "You the Glass King?" he squeaked.

Now the Glass King had one of those faces you could carve granite with—big square jaw, a brother's flat nose, brown eyes with all the ages of the world inside them, muscles on his neck that outmassed my biceps. I seen weaker-looking gods in them Asian temples out at the edge of town back home. This man was fear itself, sculpted out of muscle and silk, smelling like Europe and old money.

And the Glass King chuckled. It made my guts clench, from stern to stem. His voice, when he spoke, was so normal it was scary. "I guess I am, little man. What can I do for you?"

"You owe me," Benny said. "Oatis, he promised me a real egg, one that would stay forever when it got thrown, but you took him away."

One handsome eyebrow cocked up. Glass King cut his eyes at me. "Oatis the Lotus, originally of Austin, Texas?" he asked me. The humor he'd had for Benny was gone from his voice, replaced with glittering knives.

"The same," I squeaked. I tried to gulp, but my throat was dry as Texas blacktop in August.

"And you think I owe you an egg, a special egg, little man?" he asked Benny, all in that warm voice again. It was like syrup.

"Yes, sir. And I ain't leaving 'til I get it." Benny folded his arms and stuck his lip out so far I figured he'd trip on it. If he lived to walk away.

This time the Glass King really laughed, threw back his head and bellowed in a voice three parts thunder and one part fear. It like to make me sweat, that laugh, and pray on all my sins. He laid one hand on the edge of his desk, took a square of raw silk out of his jacket with the other, and wiped his eyes. “Do you know, son,” the Glass King said to Benny Bueno in that syrup voice, “how long it’s been since someone simply asked me for some-thing?”

“No sir,” said Benny, and I could see the first fog of fear creeping into him on little rat feet. This boy had come this far on sheer determination, and he had no idea what to do next.

“Well, I don’t know either,” said the Glass King. “It’s done. One of my souljah-boys will take you to Oatis’ lab.”

Benny looked like Joan of Arc when she saw the spark, his eyes all lit up, fear blown out of him by that fire in his heart. It almost hurt just to look at him.

The Glass King turned his gaze to me, glittering hard again. “Is there something you wish to ask for, Marvel from Texas?”

“No sir,” I whispered. I couldn’t hold his stare, dropped my eyes to the perfect desk in front of me. I was ashamed of the fear upon my face. “Just to leave with my life, sir.”

“It’s done,” he said, and for a moment that sweet regard he’d shown Benny leaked into my soul, too.

On the way down the elevators, one of the brother souljah-boys said, “Ain’t never seen nobody do that and live to tell of it.”

The other three laughed, and Benny joined in. Me, I clenched my bladder tight and tried to keep my pants dry.

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I spent a month at the Fairmont-Midtown, laying around in my suite with a souljah-boy at the door. The desk sent me back my credit card slip. It was all on the Glass King now. Only I couldn’t go out, couldn’t make calls, couldn’t ask questions.

I was dead and buried in a carpeted coffin with cable tv and room service. I wondered what Skank and Spider were doing with Los Diabolitos. I wondered what Benny and Oatis were doing.

I wondered what the hell I was doing. Then I drank some more and watched television.

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One day Benny knocked on the door. The souljah-boy was gone. Benny had another one of them bowling bags, and a shy little smile. "You ready, Marvel?" he asked. "Your ride's downstairs, out front."

And like that, we was gone from New York City. The Glass King puckered his lips and blew and we flew off back to Texas like spring dande-lions. Benny didn't say much on the way, just stared out the window with that silly Little smile. I was somewhere between mad and scared, even yet, so I just listened to the radio and watched the road in front of me. Two days of tire noise and nimbly concrete high-ways, six or seven last greasy meals, and we was driving through downtown Austin.

"What you gonna do, Benny?" I asked.

"Nothing, Marvel," he said in his dreamy voice. "I got what I want."

I wheeled into the Hula Hut's parking lot. Felt like fajita time after a month of lox and bagels. "Well, come on, let's eat." I missed the smell of fry oil and jalapenos, truth be told.

We wasn't in there ten minutes before Skank and Spider showed up, trailed by most of Los Diabolitos. The dock cleared out fast, two or three dozen folks with urgent business in the restroom or whatever.

"Hey, there," said Skank. His smile was too big.

Spider nodded, while the crew mut-tered away behind them.

"Hey, yourselves," I said. This was bad business. I wasn't out in front of the crew no more. They didn't need me.

Skank nodded at Benny. “Word is little man brought him a Cracker Jack prize back from little old New York.”

“What Benny has is—” I started to say, but Benny interrupted me.

“It’s mine, Hank,” he said, “Glass King gave it to me, and I’m gonna keep it.”

“What’s *yours*, Benny?” Skank asked. “Show it to old Skankin’ Hank.”

And Benny, the little fool, tugged that bowling ball bag out from under the table and plopped it down between his sweaty glass of water and little bowl of limes. “This,” he said, and tugged at the zipper.

I ain’t never seen an egg like what Benny tugged out of that bag. About regular size, not any bigger than a foot-ball, it was black, blacker than Skankin’ Hank. Blacker than night, like it sucked light into it. Just looking at it made my eyes water and my nose itch. Where the 3-D eggs had been kind of quivery, this egg was solid like the earth. You could damn near fall into it.

Benny hugged that blacker-than-black egg to his chest. “This here’s mine, Hank,” he said, his voice squeaking. “Go ask the Glass King for your own egg, you want one.”

Skank’s laugh was coarse. “Ain’t going to be another one, Benny. Right after you left, Oatis burned the labs in Manhattan and drove his ride into the East River. Everyone else run off. Something big and bad in that egg, Benny.”

And the Glass King had let Benny walk away with it? That was the scariest thing of all.

“Don’t matter if there’s only one,” Benny said, his lip sticking out again. “This one’s still mine.”

Spider reached in, slipped it right out of Benny’s hands. “This here’s *gang* property, Benny. You don’t steal from your homies.”

“Is *not!*” he shouted, jumping on to the table and tackling Spider Gray.

Spider fell back surprised, as Benny kicked and bit at him. I slid out of the bench and stabbed Spider in the thigh with a steak knife. Benny used the confusion to grab back his egg.

“Enough,” I shouted, my right foot on Spider’s chest. “Benny’s his own man.”

“To hell with you, *pendejo*,” someone from the crew yelled back.

I spun, knife in my hand. Just like the old days. “Anyone wants a piece, come take it. Otherwise, me and Benny is walking out of here, quiet and easy. You can take this as my resignation, fuckwads.” Not like I could fight them all at once.

Los Diabolitos let me go, though I couldn’t understand why. Maybe a little tiny sliver of the Glass King had got into me for a moment.

* * * *

We drove my Z9 all over the west side of town, racing up and down those limestone hills. I found my com-fort in high speeds, while Benny cried himself near to death from hiccuping and coughing.

Finally he stopped crying, sucked in his breath, and looked at me. We was screaming down Highway 360 at more than twice the posted limit, taking that long run to the arch steel bridge over the Colorado that always looked to me like a bow aimed at heaven.

“Marvel,” Benny said. “Stop the car.”

“What?” I didn’t want to hear him.

“*Stop!*”

I stopped, sliding to halt in the graveled breakdown lane of the bridge.

Cliffs towered behind us on the west bank, while the bottomlands spread below on the east. Sun was setting, that same kind of glorious sky I'd seen when the first *egg* was thrown.

Benny clutched his black egg. "The world ain't ready for one perfect thing, Marvel."

"No, I guess it ain't."

"But I wanted the perfect egg, per-manent-like. I don't need to throw it. Just having it's enough. What it might be is greater than what it would be after I threw it. Right?"

This was Ph.D. philosophy, compared to most of Benny's ideas. "Yeah, Benny, I reckon so. What you gonna do?"

Without saying anything, he got out of the car, standing on the bridge as the wind cut across the bridge deck. I could smell the cedar off the hills, mixed water and damp limestone. Turkey vultures settling down, night-hawks coming out. Even at dusk, you can see a long way along the river from up here. Then Los Diabolitos' Mack truck rumbled up—they'd been following us—and Spider Gray and Skankin' Hank jumped out, followed by two dozen or more of the crew.

"Leave off, boys," I said in my best quiet voice.

Whatever authority the Glass King had lent me was gone now, because Spider just laughed and stalked toward Benny.

I popped my boot knife and went after him, street rules, which is no rules at all. Spider stepped into my swing, stuck out his foot, tried to trip me. I did a forward roll, twisting away from Spider's own knife which was out now, bounced up, caught him in the chest just hard enough to spin him against the bridge railing, and he was gone.

We all stood, listening to Spider fall two hundred feet or more to the water below. His last words was, "Marvel-l-l-l-l..."

Benny looked real sad, said, "See, what did I tell you?"

Then he ate the egg.

I don't know how else to say it. That egg was almost as big as his head, but when Benny crunched it in his hands, the black mass just shrank around the middle, got longer, like an animal that *wants* to get eaten. That 'nanny tech' stuff he'd talked about. Benny opened his mouth wide, a snake eating a mouse, stuffed it in, and smiled around it, his eyes twinkling in the last light of sunset.

"Oh, shit," said Skank behind me, as Benny swallowed.

For a moment, nothing happened. Benny smiled some more, opened his mouth like to burp, then he swole up. He got bigger, one of them Thanks-giving parade balloons, his dark Puerto Rican skin beginning to glimmer, fading to black.

Benny sort of erupted at that point, in a terrific thunderclap that knocked two more of Los Diabolitos over the rail and blew all the windows out of my Z9 and the cab of the Mack truck. Air swirled around us like a tornado, then there was nothing left but a perfect rose, black as the depths of night, the base of its stem about as high off the pavement as Benny's head, the bloom fifteen feet up among the cables of the bridge.

It spun, real slow, two sharp-edged leaves glittering like knives. Benny's voice echoed in the dying wind. "Marvel," he said. "Be my thorn."

* * * *

Glass King came, a month or so after the rose egg bloomed. His souljah-boys ran off the press and the other pilgrims who'd already started to make the trip, and the Glass King walked down the bridge by hisself to stand and stare at the rose.

It didn't say nothing to him, hadn't never said nothing to anyone but that one question of me. Still, he stood there a while like he was listening, then he said, just loud enough for me to hear, "I'm sorry, little man."

The Glass King gave me the gift of my life for the second time, after I hit him. He just smiled and walked away, left a splinter of himself in my heart for real this time.

People come to the bridge now, come from everywhere, praying for peace, healing, I don't know what all. Nanotech, miracle, it don't matter what Oatis wrought. It matters what is, that potential Benny wanted brought to life.

Spider Gray, he's a kind of saint, with his own little altar on the back of the Mack. Some people jump over the side in his name, screaming all the way down.

Me, I'm the thorn that guards the rose. I sit here on the rusting hood of my ride and tell the story of the rose egg to anyone that wants to hear it.

It's all I can do for Benny. It's what he asked of me.

It's all I can do for me.

* * * *