

And the Deep Blue Sea

by Elizabeth Bear

The end of the world had come and gone. It turned out not to matter much in the long run.

The mail still had to get through.

Harrie signed yesterday's paperwork, checked the dates against the calendar, contemplated her signature for a moment, and capped her pen. She weighed the metal barrel in her hand and met Dispatch's faded eyes. "What's special about this trip?"

He shrugged and turned the clipboard around on the counter, checking each sheet to be certain she'd filled them out properly. She didn't bother watching. She never made mistakes. "Does there have to be something special?"

"You don't pay my fees unless it's special, Patch." She grinned as he lifted an insulated steel case onto the counter.

"This has to be in Sacramento in eight hours," he said.

"What is it?"

"Medical goods. Fetal stem-cell cultures. In a climate-controlled unit. They can't get too hot or too cold, there's some arcane formula about how long they can live in this given quantity of growth media, and the customer's paying very handsomely to see them in California by eighteen hundred hours."

"It's almost oh ten hundred now— What's too hot or too cold?" Harrie hefted the case. It was lighter than it looked; it would slide effortlessly into the saddlebags on her touring bike.

"Any hotter than it already is," Dispatch said, mopping his brow. "Can you do it?"

"Eight hours? Phoenix to Sacramento?" Harrie leaned back to check the sun. "It'll take me through Vegas. The California routes aren't any good at that speed since the Big One."

"I wouldn't send anybody else. Fastest way is through Reno."

"There's no gasoline from somewhere this side of the dam to Tonopah. Even my courier card won't help me there—"

"There's a checkpoint in Boulder City. They'll fuel you."

"Military?"

"I did say they were paying very well." He shrugged, shoulders already gleaming with sweat. It was going to be a hot one. Harrie guessed it would hit a hundred and twenty in Phoenix.

At least she was headed north.

"I'll do it," she said, and held her hand out for the package receipt. "Any pickups in Reno?"

"You know what they say about Reno?"

"Yeah. It's so close to Hell that you can see Sparks." Naming the city's largest suburb.

"Right. You don't want anything in Reno. Go straight through," Patch said. "Don't stop in Vegas, whatever you do. The overpass's come down, but that won't affect you unless there's debris. Stay on the 95 through to Fallon; it'll see you clear."

"Check." She slung the case over her shoulder, pretending she didn't see Patch wince. "I'll radio when I hit Sacramento—"

"Telegraph," he said. "The crackle between here and there would kill your signal otherwise."

"Check," again, turning to the propped-open door. Her prewar Kawasaki Concours crouched against the crumbling curb like an enormous, restless cat. Not the prettiest bike around, but it got you there. Assuming you didn't ditch the top-heavy son of a bitch in the parking lot.

"Harrie—"

"*What?*" She paused, but didn't turn.

"If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him."

She glanced behind her, strands of hair catching on the strap of the insulated case and on the shoulder loops of her leathers. "What if I meet the Devil?"

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She let the Concours glide through the curves of the long descent to Hoover Dam, a breather after the hard straight push from Phoenix, and considered her options. She'd have to average near enough a hundred sixty clicks an hour to make the run on time. It should be smooth sailing; she'd be surprised if she saw another vehicle between Boulder City and Tonopah.

She'd checked out a backup dosimeter before she left Phoenix, just in case. Both clicked softly as she crossed the dam and the poisoned river, reassuring her with alert, friendly chatter. She couldn't pause to enjoy the expanse of blue on her right side or the view down the escarpment on the left, but the dam was in pretty good shape, all things considered.

It was more than you could say for Vegas.

Once upon a time—she downshifted as she hit the steep grade up the north side of Black Canyon, sweat already soaking her hair—once upon a time a delivery like this would have been made by aircraft. There were places where it still would be. Places where there was money for fuel, money for airstrip repairs.

Places where most of the aircraft weren't parked in tidy rows, poisoned birds lined up beside poisoned runways, hot enough that you could hear the dosimeters clicking as you drove past.

A runner's contract was a hell of a lot cheaper. Even when you charged the way Patch charged.

Sunlight glinted off the Colorado River so far below, flashing red and gold as mirrors. Crumbling casino on the right, now, and the canyon echoing the purr of the sleek black bike. The asphalt was spiderwebbed but still halfway smooth—smooth enough for a big bike, anyway. A big bike cruising at a steady ninety kph, much too fast if there was anything in the road. Something skittered aside as she thought it, a grey blur instantly lost among the red and black blurs of the receding rock walls on either side. Bighorn sheep. Nobody'd bothered to tell *them* to clear out before the wind could make them sick.

Funny thing was, they seemed to be thriving.

Harrie leaned into the last curve, braking in and accelerating out just to feel the tug of g-forces, and gunned it up the straightaway leading to the checkpoint at Boulder City. A red light flashed on a peeling steel pole beside the road. The Kawasaki whined and buzzed between her thighs, displeased to be restrained, then gentled as she eased the throttle, mindful of dust.

Houses had been knocked down across the top of the rise that served as host to the guard's shielded quarters, permitting an unimpeded view of Boulder City stretching out below. The bulldozer that had done the work slumped nearby, rusting under bubbled paint, too radioactive to be taken away. Too radioactive even to be melted down for salvage.

Boulder City had been affluent once. Harrie could see the husks of trendy businesses on either side of Main Street: brick and stucco buildings in red and taupe, some whitewashed wood frames peeling in slow curls, submissive to the desert heat.

The gates beyond the checkpoint were closed and so were the lead shutters on the guard's shelter. A digital sign over the roof gave an ambient radiation reading in the mid double digits and a temperature reading in the low triple digits, Fahrenheit. It would get hotter—and "hotter"—as she descended into Vegas.

Harrie dropped the sidestand as the Kawasaki rolled to a halt, and thumbed her horn.

The young man who emerged from the shack was surprisingly tidy, given his remote duty station. Cap set regulation, boots shiny under the dust. He was still settling his breathing filter as he climbed down red metal steps and trotted over to Harrie's bike. Harrie wondered who he'd pissed off to draw this duty, or if he was a novelist who had volunteered.

"Runner," she said, her voice echoing through her helmet mike. She tapped the ID card visible inside the windowed pocket on the breast of her leathers, tugged her papers from the pouch on her tank with a clumsy gloved hand and unfolded them inside their transparent carrier. "You're supposed to gas me up for the run to Tonopah."

"You have an independent filter or just the one in your helmet?" All efficiency as he perused her papers.

"Independent."

"Visor up, please." He wouldn't ask her to take the helmet off. There was too much dust. She complied, and he checked her eyes and nose against the photo ID.

"Angharad Crowther. This looks in order. You're with UPS?"

"Independent contractor," Harrie said. "It's a medical run."

He turned away, gesturing her to follow, and led her to the pumps. They were shrouded in plastic, one diesel and one unleaded. "Is that a Connie?"

"A little modified so she doesn't buzz so much." Harrie petted the gas tank with a gloved hand. "Anything I should know about between here and Tonopah?"

He shrugged. "You know the rules, I hope."

"Stay on the road," she said, as he slipped the nozzle into the fill. "Don't go inside any buildings. Don't go near any vehicles. Don't stop, don't look back, and especially don't turn around; it's not wise to drive through your own dust. If it glows, don't pick it up, and nothing from the black zone leaves."

"I'll telegraph ahead and let Tonopah know you're coming," he said, as the gas pump clicked. "You ever crash that thing?"

"Not in going on ten years," she said, and didn't bother to cross her fingers. He handed her a receipt; she fumbled her lacquered stainless Cross pen out of her zippered pocket and signed her name like she meant it. The gloves made her signature into an incomprehensible scrawl, but the guard made a show of comparing it to her ID card and slapped her on the shoulder. "Be careful. If you crash out there, you're probably on your own. Godspeed."

"Thanks for the reassurance," she said, and grinned at him before she closed her visor and split.

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Digitized music rang over her helmet headset as Harrie ducked her head behind the fairing, the hot wind tugging her sleeves, trickling between her gloves and her cuffs. The Kawasaki stretched out under her, ready for a good hard run, and Harrie itched to give it one. One thing you could say about the Vegas black zone: there wasn't much traffic. Houses—identical in red tile roofs and cream stucco walls—blurred past on either side, flanked by trees that the desert had killed once people weren't there to pump the water up to them. She cracked a hundred and sixty kph in the wind shadow of the sound barriers, the tach winding up like a watch, just gliding along in sixth as the Kawasaki hit its stride. The big bike handled like a pig in the parking lot, but out on the highway she ran smooth as glass.

She had almost a hundred miles of range more than she'd need to get to Tonopah, God willing and the creek didn't rise, but she wasn't about to test that with any side trips through what was left of Las Vegas. Her dosimeters clicked with erratic cheer, nothing to worry about yet, and Harrie claimed the center lane and edged down to one forty as she hit the winding patch of highway near the old downtown. The shells of casinos on the left-hand side and godforsaken wasteland and ghetto on the right gave her back the Kawasaki's well-tuned shriek; she couldn't wind it any faster with the roads so choppy and the K-Rail canyons so tight.

The sky overhead was flat blue like cheap turquoise. A pall of dust showed burnt sienna, the inversion layer trapped inside the ring of mountains that made her horizon in four directions.

The freeway opened out once she cleared downtown, the overpass Patch had warned her about arching up and over, a tangle of banked curves, the crossroads at the heart of the silent city. She bid the ghosts of hotels good day as the sun hit zenith, heralding peak heat for another four hours or so. Harrie resisted the urge to reach back and pat her saddlebag to make sure the precious cargo was safe; she'd never know if the climate control failed on the trip, and moreover she couldn't risk the distraction as she wound the Kawasaki up to one hundred seventy and ducked her helmet into the slipstream off the fairing.

Straight shot to the dead town called Beatty from here, if you minded the cattle guards along the roads by the little forlorn towns. Straight shot, with the dosimeters clicking and vintage rock and roll jamming in the helmet speakers and the Kawasaki purring, thrusting, eager to spring and run.

There were worse days to be alive.

She dropped it to fourth and throttled back coming up on that overpass, the big one where the Phoenix to Reno highway crossed the one that used to run LA to Salt Lake, when there was an LA to speak of. Patch had said *overpass's down*, which could mean unsafe for transit and could mean littering the freeway underneath with blocks of concrete the size of a semi, and Harrie had no interest in finding out which it was with no room left to brake. She adjusted the volume on her music down as the rush of wind abated, and took the opportunity to sightsee a bit.

And swore softly into her air filter, slowing further before she realized she'd let the throttle slip.

Something—no, some *one*—leaned against a shotgunned, paint-peeled sign that might have given a speed limit once, when there was anyone to care about such things.

Her dosimeters clicked aggressively as she let the bike roll closer to the verge. She shouldn't stop. But it was a death sentence, being alone and on foot out here. Even if the sun weren't climbing the sky, sweat rolling from under Harrie's helmet, adhering her leathers to her skin.

She was almost stopped by the time she realized she knew him. Knew his ocher skin and his natty pinstriped double-breasted suit and his fedora, tilted just so, and the cordovan gleam of his loafers. For one mad moment, she wished she carried a gun.

Not that a gun would help her. Even if she decided to swallow a bullet herself.

"Nick." She put the bike in neutral, dropping her feet as it rolled to a stop. "Fancy meeting you in the middle of Hell."

"I got some papers for you to sign, Harrie." He pushed his fedora back over his hollow-cheeked face. "You got a pen?"

"You know I do." She unzipped her pocket and fished out the Cross. "I wouldn't lend a fountain pen to just anybody."

He nodded, leaning back against a K-Rail so he could kick a knee up and spread his papers out over it. He accepted the pen. "You know your note's about come due."

"Nick—"

"No whining now," he said. "Didn't I hold up my end of the bargain? Have you ditched your bike since last we talked?"

"No, Nick." Crestfallen.

"Had it stolen? Been stranded? Missed a timetable?"

"I'm about to miss one now if you don't hurry up with my pen." She held her hand out imperiously; not terribly convincing, but the best she could do under the circumstances.

"Mmm-hmmm." He was taking his own sweet time.

Perversely, the knowledge settled her. "If the debt's due, have you come to collect?"

"I've come to offer you a chance to renegotiate," he said, and capped the pen and handed it back. "I've got a job for you; could buy you a few more years if you play your cards right."

She laughed in his face and zipped the pen away. "A few more years?" But he nodded, lips pressed thin and serious, and she blinked and went serious too. "You mean it."

"I never offer what I'm not prepared to give," he said, and scratched the tip of his nose with his thumbnail. "What say, oh—three more years?"

"Three's not very much." The breeze shifted. Her dosimeters crackled. "Ten's not very much, now that I'm looking back on it."

"Goes by quick, don't it?" He shrugged. "All right. Seven—"

"For what?"

"What do you mean?" She could have laughed again, at the transparent and oh-so-calculated guilelessness in his eyes.

"I mean, what is it you want me to do for seven more years of protection." The bike was heavy, but she wasn't about to kick the sidestand down. "I'm sure it's bad news for somebody."

"It always is." But he tipped the brim of his hat down a centimeter and gestured to her saddlebag, negligently. "I just want a moment with what you've got there in that bag."

"Huh." She glanced at her cargo, pursing her lips. "That's a strange thing to ask. What would you want with a box full of research cells?"

He straightened away from the sign he was holding up and came a step closer. "That's not so much yours to worry about, young lady. Give it to me, and you get seven years. If you don't—the note's up next week, isn't it?"

"Tuesday." She would have spat, but she wasn't about to lift her helmet aside. "I'm not scared of you, Nick."

"You're not scared of much." He smiled, all smooth. "It's part of your charm."

She turned her head, staring away west across the sun-soaked desert and the roofs of abandoned houses, abandoned lives. Nevada had always had a way of making ghost towns out of metropolises. "What happens if I say no?"

"I was hoping you weren't going to ask that, sweetheart," he said. He reached to lay a hand on her right hand where it rested on the throttle. The bike growled, a high, hysterical sound, and Nick yanked his hand back. "I see you two made friends."

"We get along all right," Harrie said, patting the Kawasaki's gas tank. "What happens if I say no?"

He shrugged and folded his arms. "You won't finish your run." No threat in it, no extra darkness in the way the shadow of his hat brim fell across his face. No menace in his smile. Cold fact, and she could take it how she took it.

She wished she had a piece of gum to crack between her teeth. It would fit her mood. She crossed her arms, balancing the Kawasaki between her thighs. Harrie *liked* bargaining. "That's not the deal. The deal's no spills, no crashes, no breakdowns, and every run complete on time. I said I'd get these cells to Sacramento in eight hours. You're wasting my daylight; somebody's life could depend on them."

"Somebody's life does," Nick answered, letting his lips twist aside. "A lot of somebodies, when it comes down to it."

"Break the deal, Nick—fuck with my ride—and you're in breach of contract."

"You've got nothing to bargain with."

She laughed, then, outright. The Kawasaki purred between her legs, encouraging. "There's always time to mend my ways—"

"Not if you die before you make it to Sacramento," he said. "Last chance to reconsider, Angharad, my princess. We can still shake hands and part friends. Or you can finish your last ride on my terms, and it won't be pretty for you"—the Kawasaki snarled softly, the tang of burning oil underneath it—"or your bike."

"Fuck off," Harrie said, and kicked her feet up as she twisted the throttle and drove straight at him, just for the sheer stupid pleasure of watching him dance out of her way.

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Nevada had been dying slowly for a long time: perchlorate-poisoned groundwater, a legacy of World War Two titanium plants; cancer rates spiked by exposure to fallout from aboveground nuclear testing; crushing drought and climactic change; childhood leukemia clusters in rural towns. The explosion of the PEPCON plant in 1988 might have been perceived by a sufficiently imaginative mind as God's shot across the bow, but the real damage didn't occur until decades later, when a train carrying high-level nuclear waste to the Yucca Mountain storage facility collided with a fuel tanker stalled across the rails.

The resulting fire and radioactive contamination of the Las Vegas Valley proved to be a godsend in disguise. When the War came to Nellis Air Force Base and the nuclear mountain, Las Vegas was already as much a ghost town as Rhyolite or Goldfield—except deserted not because the banks collapsed or the gold ran out, but because the dust that blew through the streets was hot enough to drop a sparrow in midflight, or so people said.

Harrie didn't know if the sparrow story was true.

"So." She muttered into her helmet, crouched over the Kawasaki's tank as the bike screamed north by northwest, leaving eerie Las Vegas behind. "What do you think he's going to throw at us, girl?"

The bike whined, digging in. Central city gave way to desolate suburbia, and the highway dropped to ground level and straightened out, a narrow strip of black reflecting the summer heat in mirage silver.

The desert sprawled on either side, a dun expanse of scrub and hardpan narrowing as the Kawasaki climbed into the broad pass between two dusty ranges of mountains. Harrie's dosimeters clicked steadily, counting marginally more rads as she roared by the former nuclear testing site at Mercury at close to two hundred kph. She throttled back as a sad little township—a few discarded trailers, another military base and a disregarded prison—came up. There were no pedestrians to worry about, but the grated metal cattle guard was not something to hit at speed.

On the far side, there was nothing to slow her for fifty miles. She cranked her music up and dropped her head behind the fairing and redlined her tach for Beatty and the far horizon.

It got rocky again coming up on Beatty. Civilization in Nevada huddled up to the oases and springs that lurked at the foot of mountains and in the low parts in valleys. This had been mining country, mountains gnawed away by dynamite and sharp-toothed payloaders. A long gorge on the right side of the highway showed green clots of trees; water ran there, tainted by the broken dump, and her dosimeters clicked as the road curved near it. If she walked down the bank and splashed into the stream between the roots of the willows and cottonwoods, she'd walk out glowing, and be dead by nightfall.

She rounded the corner and entered the ghost of Beatty.

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The problem, she thought, arose because every little town in Nevada grew up at the same place: a crossroads, and she half-expected Nick to be waiting for her at this one too. The Kawasaki whined as they rolled through tumbleweed-clogged streets, but they passed under the town's sole, blindly staring stoplight without seeing another creature. Despite the sun like a physical pressure on her leathers, a chill ran spidery fingers up her spine. She'd rather know where the hell he was, thank you very much. "Maybe he took a wrong turn at Rhyolite."

The Kawasaki snarled, impatient to be turned loose on the open road again, but Harrie threaded it through slumping cars and around windblown debris with finicky care. "Nobody's looking out for us any more, Connie," Harrie murmured, and stroked the sun-scorched fuel tank with her gloved left hand. They passed a deserted gas station, the pumps crouched useless without power; the dosimeters chirped and warbled. "I don't want to kick up that dust if I can help it."

The ramshackle one- and two-story buildings gave way to desert and highway. Harrie paused, feet down on tarmac melted sticky-soft by the sun, and made sure the straw of her camel pack was fixed in the holder. The horizon shimmered with heat, ridges of mountains on either side and dun hardpan stretching to infinity. She sighed and took a long drink of stale water.

"Here we go," she said, hands nimble on the clutch and the throttle as she lifted her feet to the peg. The Kawasaki rolled forward, gathering speed. "Not too much further to Tonopah, and then we can both get fed."

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Nick was giving her time to think about it, and she drowned the worries with the Dead Kennedys, Boiled in Lead, and the Acid Trip. The ride from Beatty to Tonopah was swift and uneventful, the flat road unwinding beneath her wheels like a spun-out tape measure, the banded mountains crawling past on either side. The only variation along the way was forlorn Goldfield, its wind-touched streets empty and sere. It had been a town of twenty thousand, abandoned before Vegas fell to radiation sickness, even longer before the nuke dump broke open. She pushed two hundred kph most of the way, the road all hers, not so much as the glimmer of sunlight off a distant windshield to contest her ownership. The silence and the empty road just gave her more to worry at, and she did, picking at her problem like a vulture picking at a corpse.

The fountain pen was heavy in her breast pocket as Tonopah shimmered into distant visibility. Her head swam with the heat, the helmet squelching over saturated hair. She sucked more water, trying to ration; the temperature was climbing toward one twenty, and she wouldn't last long without hydration. The Kawasaki coughed a little, rolling down a slow, extended incline, but the gas gauge gave her nearly a quarter of a tank—and there was the reserve if she exhausted the main. Still, instruments weren't always right, and luck wasn't exactly on her side.

Harrie killed her music with a jab of her tongue against the control pad inside her helmet. She dropped her left hand from the handlebar and thumped the tank. The sound she got back was hollow, but there was enough fluid inside to hear it refract off a moving surface. The small city ahead was a welcome sight; there'd be fresh water and gasoline, and she could hose the worst of the dust off and take a piss. God damn, you'd think with the sweat soaking her leathers to her body, there'd be no need for that last, but the devil *was* in the details, it turned out.

Harrie'd never wanted to be a boy. But some days she really wished she had the knack of peeing standing up.

She was only about half a klick away when she realized that there was something wrong about Tonopah. Other than the usual; her dosimeters registered only background noise as she came up on it, but a harsh reek like burning coal rasped the back of her throat even through the dust filters, and the weird little town wasn't the weird little town she remembered. Rolling green hills rose around it on all sides, thick with shadowy, leafless trees, and it was smoke haze that drifted on the still air, not dust. A heat shimmer floated over the cracked road, and the buildings that crowded alongside it weren't Tonopah's desert-weathered construction but peeling white shingle-sided houses, a storefront post office, a white church with the steeple caved in and half the facade dropped into a smoking sinkhole in the ground.

The Kawasaki whined, shivering as Harrie throttled back. She sat upright in the saddle, letting the big

bike roll. "Where the hell are we?" Her voice reverberated. She startled; she'd forgotten she'd left her microphone on.

"Exactly," a familiar voice said at her left. "Welcome to Centralia." Nick wore an open-faced helmet and straddled the back of a Honda Goldwing the color of dried blood, if blood had gold dust flecked through it. The Honda hissed at the Kawasaki, and the Connie growled back, wobbling in eager challenge. Harrie restrained her bike with gentling hands, giving it a little more gas to straighten it out.

"Centralia?" Harrie had never heard of it, and she flattered herself that she'd heard of most places.

"Pennsylvania." Nick lifted his black-gloved hand off the clutch and gestured vaguely around himself. "Or Jharia, in India. Or maybe the Chinese province of Xinjiang. Subterranean coal fires, you know, anthracite burning in evacuated mines. Whole towns abandoned, sulfur and brimstone seeping up through vents, the ground hot enough to flash rain to steam. Your tires will melt. You'll put that bike into a crevasse. Not to mention the greenhouse gases. Lovely things." He grinned, showing shark's teeth, four rows. "Second time asking, Angharad, my princess."

"Second time saying no." She fixed her eyes on the road. She could see the way the asphalt buckled, now, and the dim glow from the bottom of the sinkhole underneath the church. "You really are used to people doing your bidding, aren't you, Nick?"

"They don't usually put up much of a fight." He twisted the throttle while the clutch was engaged, coaxing a whining, competitive cough from his Honda.

Harrie caught his shrug sideways but kept her gaze trained grimly forward. Was that the earth shivering, or was it just the shimmer of heat-haze over the road? The Kawasaki whined. She petted the clutch to reassure herself.

The groaning rumble that answered her wasn't the Kawasaki. She tightened her knees on the seat as the ground pitched and bucked under her tires, hand clutching the throttle to goose the Connie forward. Broken asphalt sprayed from her rear tire. The road split and shattered, vanishing behind her. She hauled the bike upright by raw strength and nerved herself to check her mirrors; lazy steam rose from a gaping hole in the road.

Nick cruised along, unperturbed. "You sure, Princess?"

"What was that you said about Hell, Nick?" She hunkered down and grinned at him over her shoulder, knowing he couldn't see more than her eyes crinkle through the helmet. It was enough to draw an irritated glare.

He sat back on his haunches and tipped his toes up on the footpegs, throwing both hands up, releasing throttle and clutch, letting the Honda coast away behind her. "I said, welcome to it."

The Kawasaki snarled and whimpered by turns, heavy and agile between her legs as she gave it all the gas she dared. She'd been counting on the refuel stop here, but compact southwestern Tonopah had been replaced by a shattered sprawl of buildings, most of them obviously either bulldozed or vanished into pits that glared like a wolf's eye reflecting a flash, and a gas station wasn't one of the remaining options. The streets were broad, at least, and deserted, not so much winding as curving gently through shallow swales and over hillocks. Broad, but not intact; the asphalt rippled as if heaved by moles and some of the rises and dips hid fissures and sinkholes. Her tires scorched; she coughed into her filter, her mike amplifying it to a hyena's bark. The Cross pen in her pocket pressed her breast over her heart. She

took comfort in it, ducking behind the fairing to dodge the stinking wind and the clawing skeletons of ungroomed trees. She'd signed on the line, after all. And either Nick had to see her and the Kawasaki safe or she got back what she'd paid.

As if Nick abided by contracts.

As if he couldn't just kill her and get what he wanted that way. Except he couldn't keep her, if he did.

"Damn," she murmured, to hear the echoes, and hunched over the Kawasaki's tank. The wind tore at her leathers. The heavy bike caught air coming over the last rise. She had to pee like she couldn't believe, and the vibration of the engine wasn't helping, but she laughed out loud to set the city behind.

She got out easier than she thought she would, although her gauge read empty at the bottom of the hill. She switched to reserve and swore. Dead trees and smoking stumps rippled into nonexistence around her, and the lone and level sands stretched to ragged mountains east and west. Back in Nevada, if she'd ever left it, hard westbound now, straight into the glare of the afternoon sun. Her polarized faceplate helped somewhat, maybe not enough, but the road was smooth again before and behind and she could see Tonopah sitting dusty and forsaken in her rearview mirror, inaccessible as a mirage, a city at the bottom of a well.

Maybe Nick could only touch her in the towns. Maybe he needed a little of man's hand on the wilderness to twist to his own ends, or maybe it amused him. Maybe it was where the roads crossed, after all. She didn't think she could make it back to Tonopah if she tried, however, so she pretended she didn't see the city behind her and cruised west, toward Hawthorne, praying she had enough gas to make it but not expecting her prayers to be answered by anybody she particularly wanted to talk to.

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The 95 turned northwest again at the deserted Coaldale junction; there hadn't been a town there since long before the War, or even the disaster at Vegas. Mina was gone too, its outskirts marked by a peeling sign advertising an abandoned crawfish farm, the Desert Lobster Facility.

Harrie's camel bag went dry. She sucked at the straw forlornly one last time and spat it out, letting it sag against her jaw, damp and tacky. She hunkered down and laid a long line of smoking road behind, cornering gently when she had to corner, worried about her scorched and bruised tires. At least the day was cooling as evening encroached, as she progressed north and gained elevation. It might be down into the double digits, even, although it was hard to tell through the leather. On her left, the Sarcophagus Mountains rose between her and California.

The name didn't amuse her as much as it usually did.

And then they were climbing. She breathed a low sigh of relief and patted the hungry, grumbling Kawasaki on the fuel tank as the blistering blue of Walker Lake came into view, the dusty little town of Hawthorne huddled like a crab on the near shore. There was nothing moving there either, and Harrie chewed her lip behind the filter. Dust had gotten into her helmet somehow, gritting every time she blinked; weeping streaks marked her cheeks behind the visor. She hoped the dust wasn't the kind that was likely to make her glow, but her dosimeters had settled down to chickenlike clucking, so she might be okay.

The Kawasaki whimpered apologetically and died as she coasted into town.

"Christ," she said, and flinched at the echo of her own amplified voice. She reached to thumb the mike off, and, on second thought, left it alone. It was too damned quiet out here without the Kawasaki's commentary. She tongued her music back on, flipping selections until she settled on a tune by Grey Line Out.

She dropped her right foot and kicked the stand down on the left, then stood on the peg and slung her leg over the saddle. She ached with vibration, her hands stiff claws from clutching the handlebars. The stretch of muscle across her ass and thighs was like the reminder of a two-day-old beating but she leaned into the bike, boot sole slipping on grit as she heaved it into motion. She hopped on one foot to kick the stand up, wincing.

It wasn't the riding. It was the standing up, afterward.

She walked the Kawasaki up the deserted highway, between the deserted buildings, the pavement hot enough to sear her feet through the boot leather if she stood still for too long. "Good girl," she told the Kawasaki, stroking the forward brake handle. It leaned against her heavily, cumbersome at a walking pace, like walking a drunk friend home. "Gotta be a gas station somewhere."

Of course, there wouldn't be any power to run the pumps, and probably no safe water, but she'd figure that out when she got there. Sunlight glimmered off the lake; she was fine, she told herself, because she wasn't too dehydrated for her mouth to wet at the thought of all that cool, fresh water.

Except there was no telling what kind of poison was in that lake. There was an old naval base on its shore, and the lake itself had been used as a kind of kiddie pool for submarines. Anything at all could be floating around in its waters. Not, she admitted, that there wasn't a certain irony to taking the long view at a time like this.

She spotted a Texaco station, the red and white sign bleached pink and ivory, crazed by the relentless desert sun. Harrie couldn't remember if she was in the Mojave or the Black Rock desert now, or some other desert entirely. They all ran together. She jumped at her own slightly hysterical giggle. The pumps *were* off, as she'd anticipated, but she leaned the Kawasaki up on its sidestand anyway, grabbed the climate-controlled case out of her saddlebag, and went to find a place to take a leak.

The leather was hot on her fingers when she pulled her gloves off and dropped her pants. "Damned, stupid ... First thing I do when I get back to civilization is buy a set of leathers and a helmet in white, dammit." She glanced at the Kawasaki as she fixed herself, expecting a hiss of agreement, but the black bike was silent. She blinked stinging eyes and turned away.

There was a garden hose curled on its peg behind one of the tan-faced houses huddled by the Texaco station, the upper side bleached yellow on green like the belly of a dead snake. Harrie wrenched it off the peg one-handed. The rubber was brittle from dry rot; she broke it twice trying to uncoil a section, but managed to get about seven feet clean. She pried the fill cap off the underground tank with a tire iron and yanked off her helmet and air filter to sniff, checking both dosimeters first.

It had, after all, been one of those days.

The gas smelled more or less like gasoline, though, and it tasted like fucking gasoline too, when she got a good mouthful of it from sucking it up her impromptu siphon. Not very good gasoline, maybe, but beggars and choosers. The siphon wouldn't work as a siphon because she couldn't get the top end lower

than the bottom end, but she could suck fuel up into it and transfer it, hoseful by hoseful, into the Kawasaki's empty tank, the precious case leaning against her boot while she did.

Finally, she saw the dark gleam of fluid shimmer through the fill hole when she peered inside and tapped the side of the tank.

She closed the tank and spat and spat, wishing she had water to wash the gasoline away. The lake glistened, mocking her, and she resolutely turned her back on it and picked up the case.

It was light in her hand. She paused with one hand on the flap of the saddlebag, weighing that gleaming silver object, staring past it at her boots. She sucked on her lower lip, tasted gas, and turned her head and spat again. "A few more years of freedom, Connie," she said, and stroked the metal with a black-gloved hand. "You and me. I could drink the water. It wouldn't matter if that was bad gas I fed you. Nothing could go wrong ..."

The Kawasaki was silent. Its keys jangled in Harrie's hip pocket. She touched the throttle lightly, drew her hand back, laid the unopened case on the seat. "What do you say, girl?"

Nothing, of course. It was quiescent, slumbering, a dreaming demon. She hadn't turned it on.

With both thumbs at once, Harrie flicked up the latches and opened the case.

It was cool inside, cool enough that she could feel the difference on her face when she bent over it. She kept the lid at half-mast, trying to block that cool air with her body so it wouldn't drift away. She tipped her head to see inside: blue foam threaded through with cooling elements, shaped to hold the contents without rattling. Papers in a plastic folder, and something in sealed culture plates, clear jelly daubed with ragged polka dots.

There was a sticky note tacked on the plastic folder. She reached into the cool case and flicked the sticky note out, bringing it into the light. Patch's handwriting. She blinked.

"Sacramento next, if these don't get there," it said, thick black definite lines. "Like Faustus, we all get one good chance to change our minds."

If you meet the Buddha on the road—

"I always thought there was more to that son of a bitch than met the eye," she said, and closed the case, and stuffed the note into her pocket beside the pen. She jammed her helmet back on, double-checking the filter that had maybe started leaking a little around the edges in Tonopah, slung her leg over the Kawasaki's saddle, and closed the choke.

It gasped dry when she clutched and thumbed the start button, shaking between her legs like an asthmatic pony. She gave it a little throttle, then eased up on it like easing up on a virgin lover. Coaxing, pleading under her breath. Gasoline fumes from her mouth made her eyes tear inside the helmet; the tears or something else washed the grit away. One cylinder hiccuped. A second one caught.

She eased the choke as the Kawasaki coughed and purred, shivering, ready to run.

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Both dosimeters kicked hard as she rolled across the flat, open plain toward Fallon, a deadly oasis in its own right. Apparently Nick hadn't been satisfied with a leukemia cluster and perchlorate and arsenic tainting the ground water; the trees Harrie saw as she rolled up on the startling green of the farming town weren't desert cottonwoods but towering giants of the European forest, and something grey and massive, shimmering with lovely crawling blue Cherenkov radiation, gleamed behind them. The signs she passed were in an alphabet she didn't understand, but she knew the name of this place.

A light rain was falling as she passed through Chernobyl.

It drove down harder as she turned west on the 50, toward Reno and Sparks and a crack under the edge of the clouds that glowed a toxic, sallow color with evening coming on. Her tires skittered on slick, greasy asphalt.

Where the cities should have been, stinking piles of garbage crouched against the yellowing evening sky, and nearly naked, starvation-slender people picked their way over slumped rubbish, calling the names of loved ones buried under the avalanche. Water sluiced down her helmet, soaked her saddle, plastered her leathers to her body. She wished she dared drink the rain. It didn't make her cool. It only made her wet.

She didn't turn her head to watch the wretched victims of the garbage slide. She was one hour out of Sacramento, and in Manila of fifty years ago.

Donner Pass was green and pleasant, sunset staining the sky ahead as red as meat. She was in plenty of time. It was all downhill from here.

Nick wasn't about to let her get away without a fight.

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The big one had rerouted the Sacramento River too, and Harrie turned back at the edge because the bridge was down and the water was on fire. She motored away, a hundred meters, two hundred, until the heat of the burning river faded against her back. "What's that?" she asked the slim man in the pinstriped suit who waited for her by the roadside.

"Cuyahoga river fire," he said. "1969. Count your blessings. It could have been Bhopal."

"Blessings?" She spared him a sardonic smile, invisible behind her helmet. He tilted the brim of his hat with a grey-gloved finger. "I suppose you could say that. What is it really?"

"Phlegethon."

She raised her visor and peeked over her shoulder, watching the river burn. Even here, it was hot enough that her sodden leathers steamed against her back. The back of her hand pressed her breast pocket. The paper from Patch's note crinkled; her Cross poked her in the tit.

She looked at Nick, and Nick looked at her. "So that's it."

"That's all she wrote. It's too far to jump."

"I can see that."

"Give me the case and I'll let you go home. I'll give you the Kawasaki and I'll give you your freedom. We'll call it even."

She eyed him, tension up her right leg, toe resting on the ground. The great purring bike shifted heavily between her legs, lithe as a cat, ready to turn and spit gravel from whirring tires. "Too far to jump."

"That's what I said."

Too far to jump. Maybe. And maybe if she gave him what was in the case, and doomed Sacramento like Bhopal, like Chernobyl, like Las Vegas ... Maybe she'd be damning herself even if he gave it back to her. And even if she wasn't, she wasn't sure she and the Kawasaki could live with that answer.

If he wanted to keep her, he had to let her make the jump, and she could save Sacramento. If he was willing to lose her, she might die on the way over, and Sacramento might die with her, but they would die free.

Either way, Nick lost. And that was good enough for her.

"Devil take the hindmost," she said under her breath, and touched the throttle one more time.

The End

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