

Darkworld
By Red Savage

"Go then. There are other worlds than these."

-Jake
The Gunslinger

1.

The side of the mountain was dark with the cold slate of granite, and snow licked the pockmarks and crevices that broke down its side. The sheer face of the cliff was nearly a quarter mile long, and not even the slightest of weeds grew unto its surface. It was barren. At its base, a man barren of any expression stood waiting. His face and eyes tilted towards the ground, the hood of the roughed, woolen coat draped his high cheekbones.

A flash of red appeared somewhere in the upper nothingness and began to descend along the cliff side. It was square and crumpled. Once it bounced off the face of the cliff and away, and then straight down again. The whistle of wind against its mass hummed through the air. But the cloaked man made no move to watch it fall. He made no move to listen to its descent. He made no move.

As the red mass neared, it took a clearer shape into something very much man-made. It was a vehicle, a compact Jeep with a wheel missing and its chassis twisted. The front window was white with spider-webbed cracks and the red paint was spotted and scraped black where it'd rocked against the granite. It neared ever closer to the ground, tumbling ever so gently end over end.

When it did collide with the slated sandstone, it landed on its roof. The windows blew outward in a cavalcade of glass that raced over the flat ground. The crumpled metal boomed out as it flattened, and a loose engine block bounced off into the darkness that surrounded the site. The remaining wheels spun for several moments than stopped. It was over.

From within the folds of his cloak, the man pulled out three black leather straps. On one end a chromed halter clip sat stapled into the leather. From a sleeve he pulled out another cloak, similar to his, but different in that the fabric was lighter in both feel and color. A tawny tan with smoothed sleeves, and a pocket on either side.

The man stepped forward to the Jeep and paused, seeing that he was not quite yet needed. From the crushed vehicle three lines of black matter had begun to crawl over the rock, a fourth the color of dark, wetted sand. The sandy mass came from the passenger side, crawling up and over the body and axel of the utility vehicle, and down its side over the driver's door, from which came one of the black streams. The other two seeped from between the slats of the tail gate. All four immaterial rivers came to rest in separate pools in front of the man.

The sounds of them were like whispers behind walls.

The first of the black pools began to take form. It rose merely three feet into a four legged form. The head, shapeless at first, elongated and tightened into the shape of a Doberman pincher, teeth sharp and nose black against yet blacker fur with rust red markings. Its eyes were human, however, and rife with anger, fear, and confusion. Before it

could make movement, the man was there with the leather strap. He pulled out a collar which he strapped around the Doberman's neck and pulled tight. He clipped the leather to the collar and held him there. The Doberman looked up at him, but found it could not speak. Not yet.

The second black pool grew upwards, taller than the Doberman, but no further than the man's hip. From the cloak the man pulled a horse halter, and waited. The sides of the form bulged outwards in a pot belly, and a neck and head pulled out and upwards from the mass. Along the nape, long streamers of black fibers transformed into snow white hair. The head of a pony came forth from the black much, smaller than that of a horse. The fine texture of horse hair impressed behind liquid until it became solid. As before, the man stepped forward to halter the animal once it'd been formed. Rather, just before its senses had caught up with it. The pony tugged gently on the reigns, but did not run. It did not know why, but knew somehow that it couldn't. As did the Doberman, the pony possessed human eyes, bright blue in the iris.

From the third mass came forth a hog. Big and fat, with droopy ears, it was a black and white Poland with dull brown eyes. The man used no collar, but merely slung the leather strap beneath its belly and clipped it unto itself. The hog had no urge to run. No urge to speak. It merely looked up in dumb wonder at its predicament, and observed.

The final pool rose longest to rise because it was tallest. At first, it appeared merely as a woman. The bottom of the mass separated into two trunks; strong, shapely legs. The slender curves of hips tracing midway up its sides. And the thrusting roundness of breasts upon her chest, pulled down and outward with their weight.

But, when it came to the head, it formed not into the rounded head of a Man-woman. It elongated in the fashion of the Doberman pincher, but in a broader, stronger slope that became predatory. And two large, curling horns pulled back from the skull, forward, and back again, coming to a semi-dulled point. They darkened from the tawny brown color of the ooze into a textured black that held slight reflection. The rest of her head turned from the sand color to a darker brown, that of earthen loam, and took both a soft and rough texture where undercoat pushed through the fur. The rest of the body followed suit, except where flesh showed through on her breasts and between her legs, where it turned black instead.

From behind, a long, dexterous tail fell down to the ground, long, black fur draping down from underneath it. The final details of the eyes came forward, human, though gold rimmed with a sense of shine. As the mouth opened wide into a yawn, she shivered. The being brought her tail up around her. She clutched it to her chest without much second thought, though, as her memory came clearer, she felt as though she should. The man stepped forward and held out the cloak, and spoke for the first time as she took it.

"Your cloak. You do not owe me for it," he said.

She looked and found the opening at the bottom and tossed it over her head, finding the neck to be ample wide for the wide set of horns upon her head. With luck, she managed to go without hooking it. Once it fell over her and her arms pushed through the sleeves, she bowed forward with slight trepidation and nodded.

"Thank you," she said, joining her hands together in front of her so that the sleeves joined and conserved heat. Despite the man's nonchalance and the fur, she was cold. There was no breeze, but the lack

of light in this grey plain seemed to source the air with its frigidness. She looked up and around and wondered where they were. No stars. No discernible horizon. Just darkness and grey.

She remained silent, not unlike the others. Though unlike them, she had no sense of being bound one way or the other. She only possessed patience, and was more concerned with lifting the cloud that seemed to possess her mind.

"Follow me," the man said, "We are bound to a schedule. Though, if we meander here much longer, the time will pass in a way that is not kind."

They walked forward into the darkness with a sense of direction possessed only by the pallid man who held the three leashes. The Doberman bounded forward a step, always at the fullest length of the strap. The white pony plodded along side, its hooves the loudest of the sounds in the nothingness that surrounded them. The hog followed behind, grunting with effort. Behind it, the horned-woman.

Camping, she thought. The word drifted in. They'd been camping before this place, but she couldn't remember what camping was or how they'd transitioned on to this place. She cast a glance over her shoulder at the pile of metal from which they'd come. Jeep, she thought. The word floated through her. That's a jeep, and they'd been inside of it when it killed them.

A tightness overcame her stomach as she glanced back forward again. Emotion ran through her. It made her throat tight, but confusion quelled any reaction beyond a quickening of the breath and heart beat. She couldn't remember anything of the life she'd left--not yet at least. She caught glimpses as a shadow from the corner of her eye. A black haired boy running from her, laughing. The feel of warm lake water against her bare body in the privacy of night. And her name. It flitted through her mind.

"Alisa," she said quietly to herself. She stepped forward next to the cloaked man and said, "My name is Alisa. Sorry I could not introduce myself."

The man glanced towards her and back forward. After a moment, the slightest ghost of a grin met the corner of his mouth. They walked further into the darkness, and it was only when the Jeep and mountain disappeared behind them did he speak.

"Alisa, my name is Theo. It pleases me to know that you are remembering so quickly, and with gravity."

"Thank you."

"You have questions?"

She nodded, ears tilted forward.

"Then hold them at this time. We are not the only actualities in this darkness. Words with meaning attract them like insects to light, and much of their attention

Alisa's ears fell back on her head. A worried expression consumed her features. The darkness around them had become consummate. Even the ground beneath them had lost its stony texture and held no depth or form. Light, she realized, was a myth here. They simply existed on an unknown visible spectrum in complete blackness. They followed Theo with a sense of graveness. Even the Doberman had fallen in step behind him, tail tucked between its legs.

Alisa jerked when she thought she heard something pass close by her head. She saw nothing, but maybe imagined the grotesque shadow of a

massive, tentacle appendage retreating into the darkness. Lovecraftian horrors, she thought to herself. Though she could not recall the exact horrors that Lovecraft had created, she could imagine it was close to what he'd probable spoken of. Creatures of unspeakable existence.

The darkness was difficult to look into. She kept imagining leering grins with hundreds of needle shark teeth taller than her body, interlocked in sickened angles. Wide open maws of infinite depth gaped in her vision, waiting to swallow them as an ocean swallowed a river. Thousand limbed creatures with mechanically impossible bodies writhed by with faces that seemed human.

Alisa shuddered and looked ahead. It didn't help. It seemed no matter where she looked the horrors watched her, dissecting her every movement. Searching for weaknesses. She felt fear in a sickening way that made her want to cry out, but she did not. The edges of her eyes turned moist with tears of pure anxiety.

She looked away and forced herself to examine Theo's woolen robe. It did not look comfortable. The fabric was worn thin, scratchy with stray fibers. No discernible thread patterns. Alisa realized that she had been given the better garb. She thought of ways she might thank him. And of his role in this new life of hers.

Alisa distracted herself with the thoughts until in front of them appeared a doorway of whiteness. It was full of light, but kept it within itself and gave away no glare. It was there the five paused. The Doberman crouched shivering and lost small control of its bladder. The eyes of the horse rolled inside its head. The hog had its eyes closed.

"Hold on. We wait," Theo whispered, holding up his hand as if to belay entrance though no one had stepped forward to walk through. The doorway remained blank. The sound of mile long claws clicked leagues beneath them in the black abyss.

Alisa swallowed on a dry throat.

"Why do we wait?" she whispered.

"Because I must be absolutely uncertain that it is time for us to walk through," Theo answered.

Confused, Alisa fell silent again. The darkness swam around them. The things swam in the darkness. Her mind drifted haphazardly. What was going on, exactly? She realized she'd once been like Theo. A human. In fact, all four of them had. The three had been her friends. Tom, Kelly, and Allan. She noticed that all three of them had begun to tremble, and she knew that they too were remembering their past lives.

They cast glances towards her. Suspicion and fear. Alisa knew they wanted to know why she was not bound. Why she was not being lead by a leash. Alisa knew they were under some spell, but that theirs had constricted them to the harshest binds.

She also knew it's been Tom who killed them all. The newest memory she recalled was the he'd been driving the Jeep. He'd been angry but she could not remember why, and nor could she recall if it was necessarily his fault. She could remember the sound of Kelly's scream. She could remember closing her eyes as weightlessness took them.

Alisa remembered thinking, Okay. Whatever happens, happens. She had accepted her final moments and rode the wave of adrenaline all the way down to the ground. Her friends around her had screamed and cried to the last moment. And then--a blackness. A nothingness in the moments where her consciousness had been jarred from its original body.

She remembered thinking, That wasn't so bad. And then her memory left her.

Alisa's heart began to thrum in her chest, and she wondered if she could have a heart attack and die again. She couldn't remember any more details. But she remembered that black-haired boy placing something in her palm as he lay down in a bed. And she began to fear the possibility of never remembering who the boy was, but realized she could not miss what she could not remember. Maybe it was for the better, that she only recalled what was necessary.

If this was true, then she realized with pitying horror that her three friends were doomed.

"Alisa? It is time," Theo said. He grasped her hand and intertwined it in his. He gripped the leashes tighter and led them forward.

Alisa thought again to herself, Whatever happens, happens, and followed Theo into the light.