

The Well  
By Leviathan Joe

The troughs of the sand dunes shielded the traveler from seeing the impossible, undulant sprawl of naked desert that surrounded him, but not from the burning white void that seethed overhead.

For however long he had slogged across the sands, so had those sands worked upon his flesh, his eyes, his muscles, and finally at the shell that cradled the sanctity of his consciousness. At points long past his face had borne expressions of exhaustion, anguish, and despair. The thirst of a thousand travelers upon a thousand deserts parched his lips and drew them tight and splitting against his teeth. At last his countenance was a meaningless carving, a palette of miseries mixed by brushes of desert wind.

How long he had plodded upon his loathsome course was subject to conjecture. Days and nights were useless references; the absolute reality of one precluded even the knowledge of the other in its absence. The day pulsed high and cruel overhead now, as it had been and always would be as far as the traveler knew. That he yet lived might have indicated the length of his tenure here, but now even that already-flimsy distinction between life and death had eroded into dust.

Presumably he had once been someone and had been somewhere else before but the endless blasting grit had swept clean the feeble etchings of past experience from the sandstone tablet of his existence. He existed only where he stood, in the displaced desert beneath his boots, in the indistinguishable featherstrokes in the sand where his form had briefly, vainly altered the course of winds.

Once he had turned--perhaps to reckon his progress or on the insane notion of checking some bearing-- and had observed the inexorable erasure of his bootprints, swept over and smoothed away as he watched, ghost steps undone and advancing upon him, until there was no evidence had been anywhere but where he stood. He was but a dull and unique fact upon an animate canvas, a rod drawn through an ocean of primal broth.

He'd stood there for some time then resumed his course. He did not look back again.

The sun lolled off its celestial zenith and sent his shadows playing long over sinuate ridges of sand. Those variegated patterns mimicked the surrounding terrain so that the man, though he trudged with his head slung low, might wonder if the endless dunes he crossed might not themselves be but fine details upon a much grander canvas. He crested the one before him and stopped. Then he looked up.

The cabin squatted low in the next valley, parched black wood and skewed rectangular shape marking with its mute fixedness the procession of the sand beasts. He stared at it and tried to summon some emotion, some sense of relief or wonder, but none arose; only a churning sensation as his mind orientated that infinite desert sprawl around this defiant anchor.

He sagged down the hillock and across the valley, an inert body in space drawn into the cabin's cold gravity. He observed as he approached its textured weathering and the unsettled quality of the planks, as though it had been broken down and rebuilt with each dune's engulfing passage.

The porch offered solid footing and relief for his acid-sapped muscles.

He wrenched the door open. The hinges shrieked and shed their embedded grit.

It was one room, one window at either end. A wooden desk hunched on withered legs in one corner. Upon it was a ceramic lamp. No shade, just a bulbous absurdity. It was bright red, maniacally red, a gaudy alien artifact in that tonal wasteland. There was a crudely excavated pit in the desktop wood. Beside it lay the offending instrument: a gleaming metal scalpel, untarnished and waiting to be taken up to resume the task. There was no chair. By the far window was a gathering of bones that once been a man. The skeleton lay prone, its skull tilted toward the mote-laden sunlight that angled through.

There was nothing else in the cabin. The man went to the desk. He examined the scalpel. The tip folded beyond the visible plane and the soft desktop wood yielded to it.

He took up the lamp. It sat smooth on the parched pads of his hands. His reflection was but a vague distortion in its wax-like color. He nudged the chair's remains with his foot and then went and did the same to the bones. He went to that window.

The dune swelled up from the valley like some breaching monster. Little sand streams ran down the slope and settled so that the rest might follow. He watched this for a long time and went to the other window, where another dune plowed onward, away from the cabin.

Something began to emerge from the beast's back. As the wind scattered and urged the dune away it was unearthing a low cylindrical structure. He watched as the shadows stretched and a deeper blue flushed into the sky. The well emerged.

He went out to see. He sank to his knees on the slope and examined the well. It was choked to the brim with sand. He was very thirsty. He drove his hands deep into that packed dead grain.

The support under his hands shifted. The sand covering the rest of the well's opening began to sink in, pulsing and slumping before dropping away into the darkness with a grainy whoosh as though taken by breath. He lay on the edge of the well and stared down into its sudden and unnatural darkness. A breath of something sugary sweet wafted up. It filled his with dry vapor. He let his arms dangle but began to feel an unsteadiness: a vacuous tug on his fingers. He went back to the cabin, lay down in the center of the room on the soft planks, and waited.

It was night when he awoke to the sounds: scuttling, scritch-scratching. It started faintly, like water muttering along rocks. Then the sound gained dimension, as though that rocky stream were filled with bones. It swelled and spread as the legion of armored desert crawlers swarmed under the floorboards. They rasped along the roof and tapped at the windows.

He gathered himself up and crawled across the floor, blindly feeling. His hand found the skull first, then the desk. He scrambled up on it. It held for a second or two, then leaned to one side and kept leaning and crashed down, throwing up floorboards. The man struck out his arm as he fell, but it went through the floor space. His hand pressed into a chitinous garden of segments and stingers. They swarmed up his arm and into cabin.

And then it was day. Dry gusts lashed the cabin's walls. Breath stung his sinuses and his glands puckered for the want of sweat. His clothes were stiff. Some vague sense of dread and urgency dripped from his brain, as though it had been steeped in nightmares. He rolled to one side. The sunlight stabbed in, evaporating the dread, arousing the only familiar thing to his mind: thirst.

The desk lay on its side, upset but unbroken. The red lamp lay intact in the corner. There was a heap of splintered wood by the desk; in the corner, an array of polished bones.

He sat with his back to the wall and wondered how many days he'd woken up here. He wondered if thirst had any limit, if there was a point after which it was all a mercifully delirious descent to the end. He wondered how long it would take to get there.

There was a dull chattering sound. The skull cast an oblong shadow, sunlight coming through the sockets and cracks. A shadow played through them. A pair of quivering black pincers emerged from the skull base, followed by a trail of armored segments, carried on jointed legs. It scurried out and through the ribs, the shadows playing long across the floor. The stinger tapped along the spine like the fingernails of an anxious hand.

It made across the expanse of floor between them, paused in front of his outstretched boot and thrust up its back end, stinger held curled and aloft. The man pulled back his feet and the scorpion clambered through a gap in a loose floorboard.

The man stood and looked out the window, his eyes swollen and aching in their sockets.

The dune had moved off, completely exposing now the well, a truncated stalk of stone. As he watched the scorpion went out from the cabin's shadow, black and loathsome as it padded across the fine grains to the well. Up it clambered like an insect and dropped over the lip and was gone.

He turned away from the window and slumped down against the wall.

The sky drained of color as the day set in, then filled again as it wore on. The bones cast a glyphic shadow that contracted and rotated like an archaic sundial.

Thunk. The scalpel was embedded, shuddering, in the floor beside him. Some shavings drifted down from above, where it had been lodged. He looked up and there on the wall near the ceiling was one word, raggedly carved.

He said it aloud.

"Frenklits."

He cleansed his parched lungs with an arid breath and said it again. "Frenklits. Frenklits." This saying was like sandpaper in his chest but it was real and it was his own. "Frenklits." He looked out the window at the dune. It crept forward with steps of streaming grain. He said it in defiance: "Frenklits."

The light faded and deepened and flared out orange and red at sunset. The well's shadow stretched out across the sand toward the cabin, crawling up the wall and through the window and over his body. He moved to the corner by the overturned desk and sat and waited as the shadows became one and became all.

New sound that night. A dry and incessant brushing of sand. A sound of weight and girth, grating the earth under the floor. The boards rose and creaked, bone and wood disturbed and resettled. The saccharine stench wafted through and froze his breath.

He gathered his legs to his chest and held them.

Day again. Sight and sense. He was still in the cabin. He didn't get up for a long time.

Then he felt the weight in his hand, a cylindrical heft in the crease between his palm and fingers. He looked and it was the scalpel.

Below the first word, high up on the wall, was another. Another etched relic of intelligence, of reason. He struggled to find the necessary breath, terrified that the words might disappear before he could recite them.

"Molm." He turned the words over in his head. "Frenklits. Molm. Molm. Frenklits. Molm."

He said them until breath rent the lining of his throat and he coughed up splotches of bright red blood that was instantly tacky on the dusty wood. He held the words in his swollen brain.

The birds came that night. Their wings rushed up from the well like a continuous ashy vomit. The man huddled by the desk and tried to think his words as the unseen flyers surrounded his shell and pecked and worried and scratched and sounded their rancid sugary screams.

Purple light began to pulse in the lamp, just tingeing the darkness as the frenetic feathery storm raged on. The swelling light revealed the wall, the floor, the ceiling, the entire cabin as a canvas, every surface carved upon: words, diagrams, symbols; the story of his fate illustrated in glyphic schema. His mind grasped at pieces, at sections of wall dense with intricate, mute information, until the wood began to tremble and soften and flake away as the enveloping swarm of birds pecked through and filled the cabin with sound.

Day stabbed into the cabin through the thousands of worried cavities in the wood. From the wall beside which the bones lazed, however, the light was dim. The dune hulked outside, peering in the window, blocking out the light. With the wind the sand blasted through the holes and gaps.

The man lay on the floor and did not get up.

The man lay there in the cabin with the bones and the table and the red lamp as though they had all been arranged on the altar of some reliquary. He stared up at the wall. The section had endured the birds. There were his two carved words. The third was new.

Ontogeny

Cubicle

Passport

He stared at those words, vainly gathered them as running liquid to splash on his mind. His blood was full of dust and his lungs packed with cotton. Splinters in the marrow. He looked forever at his words as the hulking sand dune churned forward and filled that place and filled his eyes and filled everything.