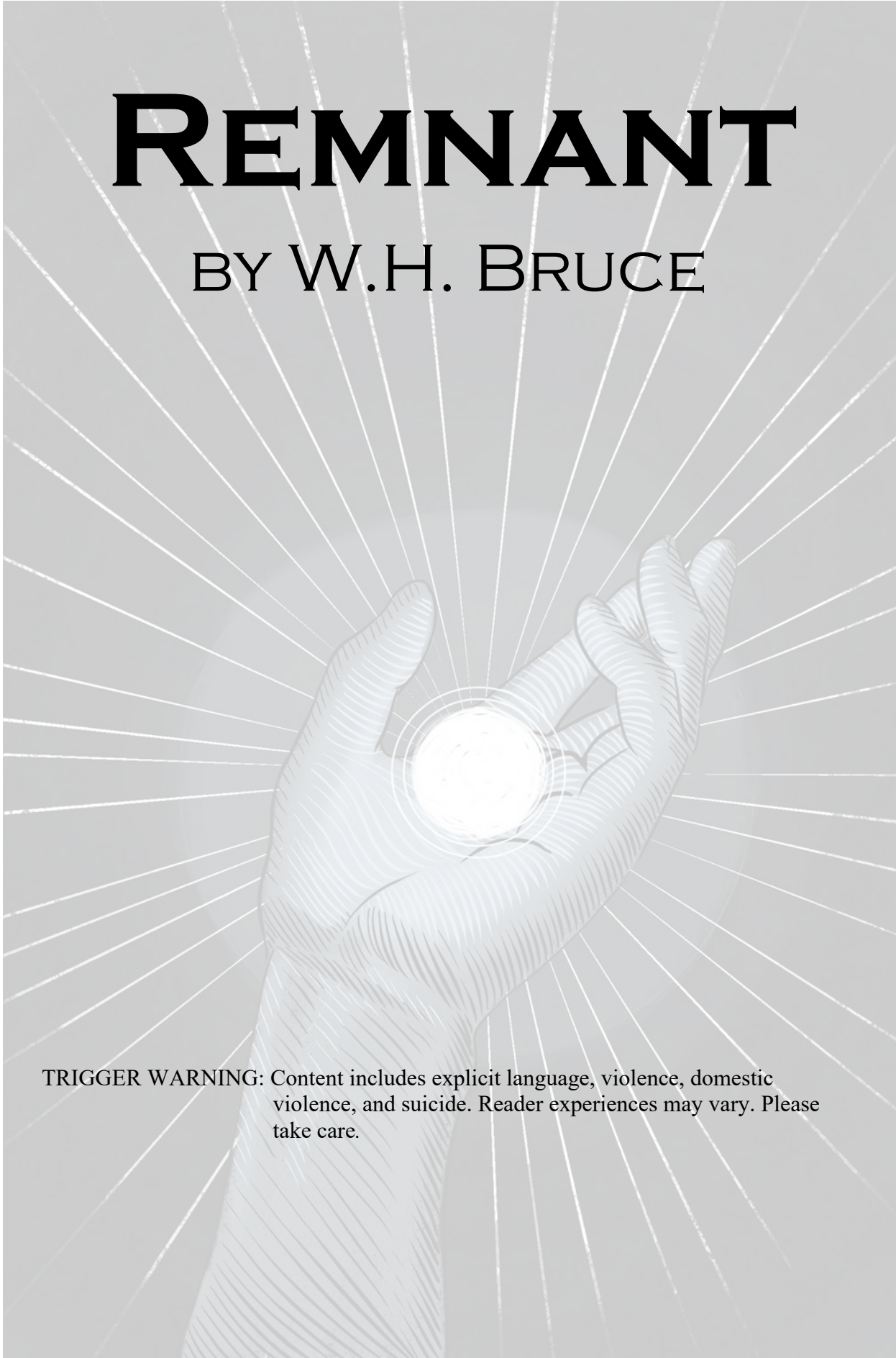


REMNANT

BY W.H. BRUCE

A detailed illustration of a hand holding a glowing orb. The hand is rendered with fine, parallel lines, giving it a textured, almost metallic appearance. The orb is bright and circular, with concentric rings around it. From the orb, numerous thin, white lines radiate outwards across the entire background, creating a sunburst or starburst effect. The background is a solid light gray.

TRIGGER WARNING: Content includes explicit language, violence, domestic violence, and suicide. Reader experiences may vary. Please take care.

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I

Over the last 10 years, Don had had a lot of bad days. He would work through them and get back up. This time was different. He'd seen daylight and now this *thing* was taking it away from him. Something snapped inside. And then something else clicked. The entity thought this a battle of wills, but Don knew: it was a race to the bottom of a deep hole.

Don grabbed the car keys and did something he vowed he would never do: he went out and bought a gun. A .357 *Bodyguard*, the guy called it. Illegal as hell in Canada but ideal for the novice. Reliable, plenty of stopping power, and un-jammable; perfect for "home protection." Don had other types of protection in mind.

No getting past it, this looked like the final act of a sad, desperate man. Don knew this. He thought about leaving a note but decided against it. Calling the bluff of a supernatural entity sounded even worse when written out.

Don waited until evening. This felt like something to be done at night. In the early days of his anxiety, Don had thought about ending things if they got bad enough. Then he'd gotten so scared of killing himself that he did everything to make it impossible—for a few months he got rid of knives, belts, ties and refused to drive. Over time, it became obvious that he could never remove all the ways a person could off themselves, but he held fast on the gun issue—it was simply too easy once a firearm was involved.

As the sun set below the windowsill, Don sat on his old couch, in his favourite butt rut. A major flaw in the plan was whether the *entity*—Being? Thing? Whatever the fuck it is—cared. Maybe when Don died, it simply moved on. After 10 years of haunting him, Don was fairly sure this was not the case. No, the entity felt desperate.

Another flaw. Don strongly suspected that the entity had full access to his mind. If Don simply loaded the gun and pointed it at his head, the thing would know whether Don was really going to do it or not. Hard to bluff a bastard in your own skull.

"Genie, play some jazz. Loud." Don said. Genie was the AI home assistant his sister bought him. It was supposed to make him feel less alone, somehow.

"Playing *Fishing Bass* podcast—loud."

For fuck's sake, that thing is useless. Worse, it was developing a mind of its own, coming on and playing or recording things of its own volition. The droning sound of two very happy-sounding fishermen played loudly. Fuck it, it would have to do.

Don ran to the bathroom cabinet, pulled out every first aid supply he owned, and carried them to the living room.

"Me and Jake were up near Algonquin when we decided to try our hand at river fishing. Well let me tell you, the conditions were perfect..."

Don sat down in his chair. He took off his socks and tied a strip of bandage tape around his left big toe. The same big toe he had stuffed into his mouth as a baby. The big toe he used to try and stick in his sister's nose when she was asleep—that was a beating. It was more bent now, the nail never trimmed, just ripped off. The hairy spot...—he remembered with pride back when he was 12 and puberty seemed like some magical, undiscovered country.

In that moment Don decided that, of all his toes, the left big toe was his favourite. It was more wrinkled now, but that old toe—"Old Toe"—represented who Don had been. It represented a time before a supernatural being decided to make Don's brain and emotions their personal fuck toy.

A tear formed in one eye and Old Toe went half blurry. "Fuck you. You want an escalation? You got one."

Don blew off his favourite toe with his brand new .357 *Bodyguard*.

II

Ten years ago, Don went from the warm after-glow of a lazy afternoon snooze to fully awake and scared shitless. He had dozed off for a nap as one man and woken up as another. He remembered tasting copper. His vision was incredibly acute, to the point that the world looked way too real, his brain trying to process every detail at once. His heart rate spiked. Blood rushed in his ears. His muscles tensed. The automatic freeze-response kicked in.

Before that afternoon, Don had been a normal guy with a normal job. He'd had no aspirations for greatness, happy in the middle of the herd—“work to live, don't live to work.” He'd had a string of plain girlfriends, some longer than others. None were serious enough to start a family, there was still plenty of time for that. Life had been good but slow. Don had lived for the weekends. Sports, camping, partying, and travelling were all still part of his life.

Looking back, Don felt like he was watching a stranger do all those things on a screen. *Who was that guy?*

That afternoon was where his journey with anxiety began, a journey that was robbing him of his life. It would take away the weekend parties—too many people. Sports—too much commitment. Camping—fucking bears. Everything Don had enjoyed before was hollow and empty in the face of waves of unrelenting fear. Worse, it was a fear of everything and nothing. Don was afraid of fear. It was crippling him.

After 10 years of pills, one-on-one therapy, group therapy, fitness therapy, breathing exercises, cognitive therapy, and finally, humiliatingly, hypno-aroma therapy, Don was still just *coping*. He hated that word. *Coping*. Like it was somehow a prize, like he should be happy with simply getting through the day. Coping meant acceptance of how bad things were. Coping meant going to work, doing breathing exercises at lunch, hiding in the toilet when it got bad. It meant rehearsing exit strategies and negotiating phobias. Every fucking second of every fucking day...for the rest of his fucking life.

Coping was not better. And better is all that Don wanted to be. He wanted his world to be big again. He wanted to feel like he did before. Unfortunately, as far as he could tell, nothing short of a complete frontal lobotomy was going to do that. Don was at the end of his rope.

He'd gone to church as a kid. His mom insisted. There he learned all about how sinful he was. Christian summer camps were an exercise in confusion. Apparently being gay was a sin—they underlined that one several times. Meanwhile, looking at girls below the neck was to invite Satan himself into one's heart as a dark lord and saviour. This did not leave a pubescent teen boy with much room to manoeuvre.

As Don had gotten older and went off to college, his faith—such as it was—died completely. He would come back home and humour Mom, but he embraced sin to its fullest. After he graduated, he found his stamina for hedonism reduced quickly, but he never went back to the church. To his mind, the whole thing just did not add up. Jesus is all about compassion and forgiveness. Unless you choose to ignore him, and then it's eternal torture by burning. *This is not a healthy domestic relationship.*

And then the anxiety came. Don had tried everything science, and his insurance plan, could offer. None of it worked. Fear nagged at him during all his waking hours. His drug induced sleep was not much better. He was haunted by fear...no, hunted by it.

Don pulled into the United Trinity parking lot and sat in his car for some time. Across the street, there was a sign with a half-naked woman with long flowing hair, gazing happily skyward above her. “Sublime Happiness: Spiritual Healing,” the sign said. There were details near the bottom, but from Don could not make them out.

Don wondered if Sublime Happiness realized she was staring at the top of a sign. Being two dimensional, she could not understand that above her painted sky was the end of her world. She couldn't see Don as he lived out here in the three-dimensional world. This made Don envious. Stupid cartoon woman with her perfect, strategically covered tits, blissfully happy in her tiny two-dimensional world.

United Trinity Church was a post-modern-looking building with a lot of glass and strange roof lines. A Pentecostal, real-old-timey-religion place, based on the pictures Dan saw on their website: people with raised arms, speaking in tongues, and laying hands on others in prayer. Don's family came from a more restrained denomination, but he'd run into a few real bible thumpers at work. They were usually just a little bit off. A little too happy and enthusiastic.

But Don was out of options. There were rumours of this church being something special. People said that the preacher, Pastor-Doctor Rajit Sing, was able to perform real miracles. At first, Don thought this was nonsense. But as he grew more desperate, he found he was more willing to believe the rumours. Things had been particularly bad lately. Maybe he would just slip in the back and see what this was all about.

A quiet peace always fell over him when he walked into a church, a remnant of his childhood. But Don hadn't been in a church for a long time. God was dead, or maybe He just stopped caring. In the outer hall—*Chamber, cloister? Vestibule?*—Don walked past pictures of the worshipping masses. Their hands were raised high, glowing vacant faces pointed towards heaven. *They are so fucking happy because they have completely given up*, Don thought to himself. A large painting of a blue-eyed, white Jesus gazing upward forlornly hung between the two doors to the main hall.

Don entered into a cacophony of sound. The people in the pews looked like a carbon copy of the pictures in the...whatever the hell that outer hall was called. Hands held toward the ceiling they all cried out to the sky. There was no music, just a bunch of people singing their own songs, each in a babbling language all their own. At the same time. The sound was enormous and immediately got Don's anxiety up. He almost walked out.

A piano started and the noise settled down. The singing coalesced into a more traditional religious chorus. "We will wash in the rivers of Zion..."

Don had to admit, it had a good beat. *Much livelier than the bleached-out hymnals that came out at Mom's church*. He settled in the back row trying to be invisible.

Pastor-Doctor Rajit Sing was tiny. Don guessed the man was in his 50's. Hair was thinning on top, streaks of grey running through what was left, and he wore spectacles right out of a Norman Rockwell painting. Sing carried himself lightly, almost tip-toing across the stage in front of the church to the pulpit.

"Welcome everyone!" the older man said into the microphone. The Pastor-Doctor had a gentle manner and a lovely, accented voice that almost sounded like singing. "I hope that God finds you all well this glorious morning!"

The congregation cheered and clapped. *Have to admit, the little guy has charisma*.

"Are we ready for some healing?" Sing said quietly. The crowd stood up and roared. Apparently, Don arrived just in time.

"I feel the joy and light of God in this place," Pastor-Doctor Sing said seriously, the crowd instantly hushed. "But I also feel pain. Fear and isolation." The crowd hushed even more. There were a few coughs, some murmurs of prayer. A couple babies babbled.

"Well, I am here to tell that pain, that fear, that loneliness: It. Has. No. Place. Here!"

The crowd went nuts again. Don was getting a little dizzy from the emotional whiplash of this bunch.

The little man went on. "We will drive it out! In His name!"

Pastor-Doctor Sing stepped down from the stage, bringing the microphone with him. "Let me walk among you, God will show me who is most in need."

Don's alarm bells went off. He eyed the exit and started to slide toward it. Suddenly, the little man was right in front of him. *Christ, he moves fast!*

"You, my friend. What is your name?" Pastor-Doctor Sing stuck the mic in Don's face. Don wished that the earth could have swallowed him in that moment.

He looked into Sing's eyes. A wave of calm washed over Don.

"Uh, Don," he replied.

"Don? May I call you Donald? That is your full name?" Don only nodded. "Good. Names have power. Take my hand, Donald."

Pastor-Doctor Sing led Don up the centre aisle to the front of the church. Don felt all those eyes staring at him. The only thing holding him together was the Pastor-Doctor Sing's tiny, but freakishly strong hand. When they got to the front of the church, two attendants stood up behind them. Don grew nervous again.

"Donald suffers from fear. I can see it upon him, like a rash upon his body." Pastor-Doctor Sing peered intently at Don in that moment. "It stains his soul. Separates him from the peace that passes all understanding. The peace Jesus promised us. Gifted to us." The church began to pray. It was tongues again. It sounded like total gibberish, but it grew into a babbling sound, like water over rocks.

The Pastor-Doctor turned Don toward him. The two attendants moved closer. “Donald. I will remove this stain of fear. You will feel the peace of Our Glorious Saviour. This is His gift to you. Once this is done, we can work together, you and I, to ensure the stain never comes back.”

Pastor-Doctor Sing put the mic down. He clapped his hands and rubbed together, then raised them towards the roof. Pastor-Doctor Sing began to talk in a tongue of his own.

Don was no linguist, but it sounded like Sing was speaking in an actual language as opposed to random babbling. Don felt like he could almost hear a real meaning in the Pastor-Doctor words. The little brown man pulled his hands in close to his chest for a moment, focusing himself inward.

He reached forward and gently touched Don’s forehead.

Don’s mind exploded into blackness.

Don woke face up on the floor. He was not hurt, the two attendants must have caught him. The first thing to hit Don was the total silence. It was not like before, with coughing, babies mewling, or people praying quietly. Complete silence.

Don would have sworn the church had emptied out until he opened his eyes. The entire congregation was frozen in a state of shock. They stood stock-still, just staring at Don. Men, women, and children—they all looked at him in total, horrified silence.

Don sat up and saw Pastor-Doctor Sing standing over his feet. Don looked at the face of the gentle man—and a look of sheer horror stared back at him. As soon as Don saw Sing’s expression, the fear hit him. *We’re screwed.* Don quickly got to his feet.

“Get thee behind me, Satan!” It was not a whisper, but a shout. “How dare you come into this holy place?!”

Pastor-Doctor Sing began to speak his strange language again. He rattled on in a steady machine gun staccato, holding a bible in front of him like a shield. *Where the fuck did that come from?!*

“This man is filled with a demon! Possessed!” Pastor-Doctor Sing shrieked.

That was it, time to bail before people got the torches and started to build a good old witch burning fire. Clearly, Don was going to have to review his decision-making process after this. He turned to leave.

“Stop!” Pastor-Doctor Sing shouted.

Don froze.

“Donald, I will cast out this unholy thing. You need to trust me.”

The two attendants were back, and each took one of Don’s arms. *Oh shit, this just got physical.* Don was past fear at this point—confusion and shock were at the wheel.

He tried to say, “What the fuck?!” But the words got stuck.

Pastor-Doctor Sing glowed with righteousness. It almost made Don’s eyes hurt.

“I think I know *its* name.”

It started in Don’s gut. It felt like a piece of meat slowly making its way up his oesophagus. Don tried to swallow, but it kept coming up. The terror he felt now was real, and it made everyday anxiety trite in comparison.

“Yes, I call him out, I will speak with...”

The chunk of meat was in Don’s throat. Don was beyond terrified. The chunk of meat went into Don’s sinuses, his brain.

And then Don stopped being Don.

He was pushed back, watching as if back in a long tunnel. Sounds were muffled but still audible. In the tunnel, Don immediately noticed that he felt a quiet peace. His anxiety was silent. For the first time in 10 years, Don felt normal—in a situation that was anything but.

“*Silence, holy man! You will never speak my true name.*” Don could hear his own voice, but it was deeper and raspy, with a vague accent he did not recognize.

Pastor-Doctor Sing turned white and held up his bible, “I command you demon! You will leave this man and return to The Pit! By the blood of Jesus Christ, I command you!”

“*No, you will not. I made that decision a long time ago. And you, a glorified shaman, lacking power or mandate, will not change that. You cannot command me, no human can.*” Don’s strange voice sounded more amused than anything.

A shock wave came out of his body. The two attendants—Jesus’s Bouncers—flew back. People in the front row fell back into their seats. It was as though Don’s fear had flown out of his body and swept through the crowd. There was crying now as people cringed and tried to get away from him. Others held bibles above their heads, warding him off like he was a vampire.

Don watched as his feet turned him around and walked out of the church.

Back in the parking lot the chunk of meat disappeared. Don came back to the front of his mind and was hit with the worst anxiety attack he’d ever had. He was hyper-ventilating, dizzy, and near fainting. He wept as he staggered to his car. Don’s coping strategies were shredded before this assault. This was it, he was going insane. His hands shook so badly he couldn’t get the keys in the starter, and then it dawned on him that he shouldn’t be driving anyway.

Don always carried anxiety medication, an opiate that he rarely took—he was afraid of becoming addicted. Don took two and waited for them to kick in. A few minutes later that the waves of chemical calm started to wash up on Don’s beach. He knew this was a temporary fix, but it was 911 time. He was going to wind up heavily sedated in a mental hospital if he could not get on top of this.

Don managed to start his car and gingerly drive home. He knew he shouldn’t have with the dose he took, but he was not staying in that church parking lot. By the time he made it to his driveway, Don was still beat up, but the drugs had fully kicked in. They were like an invisible shield. He could still feel the monsters banging on the door, but they couldn’t get in. Don knew the monsters would be waiting when the drugs wore off.

Don went into the house and poured himself a big scotch. Technically it was a very bad idea to mix booze and pills—well more than *technically*—but at this point Don was beyond caring. He sat in his chair and pulled himself together. As the booze kicked in with the pills, he went from calm to dozy, and trying to make sense of what had just happened was getting harder. Before Don finally passed out, he was able to clearly establish one thing:

That had just really happened. Whatever *that* was, it was *not* General Anxiety Disorder. *That* was something else entirely. And Don was pretty sure he did not leave it back at the church.

Don woke up later in a bit of a fog. His first thought was about the stupidity of mixing booze and pills, yet strangely he felt better. The anxiety was more muted. More importantly, Don finally had a reason to hang onto. The worst thing about anxiety was never knowing when or why it might hit. It was the uncertainty of the thing that made it so scary. Good or bad, Don now had a reason for his suffering—naming it took away some of its power. Maybe, just maybe, he could trap the monsters instead of the other way around.

Don got out of his chair and took a shower. The anxiety attack from yesterday had made his clothes stink with a slightly metallic odor—the smell of fear. Don stepped into the shower and tried to focus. The feeling of hot water down his back had always had a calming effect. Don knew what he had to do, he just didn’t believe he was actually going to do it. Don needed to contact that *thing* that had taken over back at the church. He needed to find out just what the hell was happening—it was his mind, damn it, and he wanted it back.

Don’s mind pointed out that he was likely under the control of a malevolent supernatural entity that may very well destroy him. Don quickly countered that he had spent years facing the same problem without the benefit of a second party. When you spend your life in hell, even the Devil himself starts to look like good company after awhile.

His real fear was that the entity would not be able or willing to help him. Some small part of Don wondered, “why me?” Of all the people on the planet, why was he singled out? Perhaps there was a reason and, more importantly, *hope*—hope that Don could be normal again if he could get this thing to leave.

The biggest problem was that Don had no idea how to get the entity to come out. He started by talking to it.

“Hello?” Don felt like an idiot. “Um, any chance we could talk about this? I’m sure you can hear my thoughts, but I really need some answers here.”

There was no reply, just the sound of the running shower. Don chewed on this. How does one contact a supernatural being hiding inside your own head? He could pray at it, but he wasn’t sure if possessing demons were supposed to be “prayed at.” What was praying anyway? Dressed up talking, really.

“Look, I’m not sure why you are inside of me.” A part of Don groaned at the wording, but how else to put it? “If you’re planning some scheme to destroy mankind or make me go shoot a celebrity, well, you really picked the wrong guy.”

Water sounds.

This was not going well. Don decided all he could do was keep picking away and bug this thing until it came out. It was his mind after all. For the next two days, Don made every effort to contact the entity. He talked about the weather, local news, and sports. He prayed to God, hoping to spook out the entity. Don bargained, begged, and threatened. Nothing worked. His anxiety was still there in the background, but it felt confused, not entirely sure what it was supposed to do in this situation.

Don was just about ready to give up on the third day. He woke up, took his meds, and again stepped into the shower.

“Ok, look I’m going to lay things out. I need to be normal again. Not feel the fear everyday. I want to be like I was, and you can do something about that. I think you might be the reason this whole thing started, which also puts this on you.” Again, the shower was Don’s only answer.

Don felt a familiar sensation of panic rise inside his chest. What would happen if the entity never answered? What he had to live with this thing inside him for the rest of his shitty life? The thought of that scenario opened a hot, black hole in Don’s chest. The level of despair contained in that hole was made worse by his fear. His merciless mind whispered an awful truth: it will get worse if it doesn’t get better.

Don steadied himself as the spins began to build. His eyes teared up and the bleakness washed over him.

“No, I can’t accept that.” A hoarse whisper lost in the sound of the falling water.

III

The .357 Bodyguard fires a 10-gram bullet at about 550 metres per second. Don had no experience with firearms before, but, at the range of roughly a foot, he managed to cleanly blow off his favourite big toe. He was lucky, it could have missed and gone into his foot or leg.

The thing about that level of trauma is that the pain doesn't happen immediately. It takes time for pain of that magnitude to build up and travel all the way to the brain. At first, Don only felt a strong, dull blow to his foot, more like it had been slapped. In the moments before the pain came, he had time to quickly review where things stood:

1. *The entity was either real or Don was losing his mind. The former was a direction that led somewhere; the latter was the end of the road. Therefore, he decided to go with the real- thing scenario.*
2. *The entity and his anxiety were connected. It was the cause and/or the cure, so one way or another, open and cooperative dialogue was required.*
3. *The entity clearly did not agree with Don's assessment and needed convincing. This would be a hostile negotiation.*
4. *The entity needed Don. Don was pretty sure that he did not need it. He had an advantage.*
5. *Don's body was the only bargaining chip he had that was of any value to the entity.*
6. ...

Don never made it to number six. The most incredible pain he ever felt washed up from his foot, through his leg, through his core, and into his brain. Don was not only surprised by the level of pain but what effect a bullet fired through a single toe could do to the entire leg. His left leg seized up all the way to his ass. Spots formed in front of his eyes as his nervous system became overloaded. Don realized he was starting to pass out. He questioned if this idea was such a good one, particularly if he bled out.

There was nothing from the entity, not even a whisper.

Don managed to stay conscious. He threw up twice and then pulled himself together. After staunching the bleeding and binding the wound, Don took a double dose of painkillers. After that, things started to go nice and dark—*unconscious on my terms*. As Don slid into the black, his last thought was: *As desperate as I am, I was not desperate enough.*

Later, Don came to. His foot throbbed like a bastard.

"So, the trick to fishing wild bass is always the bait. I cannot stress that enough..."

"Genie, end podcast!" Don's voice was dry and weak.

Ending podcast.

The room went silent. Don hoped the loud podcast on the finer details of bass fishing in Eastern Ontario covered the sound of the gunshot. He sat silently, waiting for the sound of sirens or a loud knock at his door. None came.

Don hobbled over to his bar and got a bottle of scotch. He hobbled back and fell onto the couch. He didn't even bother with a glass and started dosing himself with liquor straight from the bottle. It was a horrible idea in combination with the painkillers, but he was past caring. Don sat on the couch next to his blood-stained rug and felt pain, humiliation, and anger. He'd had a life before this thing showed up. This thing was the cause of the misery he endured for the last ten years.

Don's anger built to rage and then desperation. Desperation coalesced into determination, then an idea. A single round and spin the chambers—Russian roulette. *Let this thing fucking negotiate with that.*

Don was desperate. If this entity wanted an escalation, then it would have one. They would see who came out on top. Don knew this was crazy. He did not want to die, but was ready to face it. He would speak with this *whatever* and have answers.

As he loaded a single bullet into his pistol, Don wondered if they had the game of chicken where this thing came from. The trick to winning was to tear off the steering wheel before hitting the gas. Don spun the chamber and snapped the wheel closed, just like he had seen in the movies.

Don put the gun to his head and quickly pulled the trigger.

The sound of the hammer on the empty chamber made a sharp *snap*. It sounded as loud as an actual shot in Don's ears. He felt dizzy.

Still nothing.

Don took another belt of scotch and gritted his teeth. Tears welled in his eyes. "Fuck you," he said. And pulled the trigger.

Click.

"Fuck you!" Don was screaming now.

Click.

Math was not one of Don's strengths, but the chance of being dead with the next pull started to feel serious. But Don was past caring. He was committed, he was scared, he was desperate. He was also *very* angry. Don's finger began to pull the trigger for the fourth time, and he knew he wasn't going to quit.

"*Stop.*" Don was pushed back into the tunnel, but not all the way. The voice coming out of his mouth was old, like cold winds on stone.

His trigger finger froze.

"Thing?"

"*Do not call me by that name, it is degrading.*" The thing paused as if thinking. "*Call me 'Remnant' if you must.*"

Don was in a state of shock.

"What are you?"

"*That is a very long story.*"

"Well, I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's happening."

Remnant paused, weighing options. "*You people call us angels and demons, but the words are clumsy. We are those from the beginning.*"

"So, you are a demon? Like Pastor-Doctor Sing said."

"*Better to explain this to a child.*" Remnant sounded frustrated.

"Fuck you!" Don rallied. "I'm talking to a voice that answers with my vocal cords—I'm talking to and answering, myself. That's a clear sign of insanity. I'm not sure if you're my imagination, psychosis, or even real. The only thing I've to go on is the reaction of a church full of *slightly biased* Christians." Don felt himself starting to heat up.

"*Know this, human,*" the voice replied. "*That I should be forced to speak with you, in your tongue nonetheless, is a humiliation. Your words and thoughts are coarse and poor. I owe you nothing. I would be rid of you all. Your creation destroyed my world.*"

The voice echoed in Don's ears. "Well, that makes two of us then. As far as I can tell, you're the root of my problems. I was living my life, a normal life, before you came along—and then *this*. I want you gone. Fuck this, I'm going back to Pastor-Doctor Sing, maybe a proper exorcism will get you to fuck off."

"*Enough.*" Remnant sounded defeated. "*It was a mistake to reveal myself.*"

"Hey, I'm the aggrieved party here. Tell me my fear isn't caused by you. Tell me you are not the root of my misery for the last 10 years. I have every right to take that gun and blow our fucking brains out. The only reason I don't is that I need to know if there is still hope."

"*If you are looking at me for hope, you are truly desperate indeed.*" Remnant said. "*You are correct, my presence has been the cause of your pain; this is not uncommon. The body knows there is something wrong even if the mind does not. In your case, it causes fear.*"

Don felt another flash of anger. "You don't feel bad about hurting people?! You've completely ruined my life." He eyed the handgun again.

"*Do you feel bad about your existence? Everything values its own life in its own way. Do you weep for the grass you cut? The animals you use, eat, and even kill for sport? You destroy them with your very presence. No, I do not feel a thing. I have need and the right to use you.*"

Don paused. "Now I know where I stand. But that doesn't answer the question of 'why.' If I'm such a pain in your royal ass, why stick around and 'use' me? You need me, I'm not so sure I need you."

"*Therein lies tragedy.*" Remnant sounded deflated.

Don continued, "Look, I don't care whose side you're on or what you are, I just want you gone. We can do this the hard way or the easy way. I'm going to get up, go back to the church, and have Pastor-Doctor Sing exorcise me with a cattle prod. If that doesn't send you on your way, I'm going to come home and blow our fucking brains out. You will probably stop me the first few times, but I'm pretty sure I can figure it out eventually. So how is this going to go down?"

Remnant paused for some time, *"I will strike a bargain with you. I will show you the truth of things. It will not give you peace, but it will answer your questions. Consider it payment for your pain. Once my tale is done and our business concluded, I will leave you voluntarily, in peace. You have my oath on this. Do we have agreement?"*

Don did not like where this was going, but he was all out of patience and options. He glanced at the .357 Bodyguard on the coffee table. Even if this thing went back on its word, there was always Plan B.

Don cleared his throat. "Fine. Tell me your 'truth.'"

Oh no. A story such as this cannot be told. It must be seen. It is the only way to see the Truth.

Don felt himself leave his own body.

Don saw. *Truth.*

IV

Don was small. He had just started the second grade but was still small for his age. The other boys picked on him. They called him “runt.” And then would add a really bad word after: “runt cunt.” Don did not know what “cunt” meant, but his big sister told him to never, ever say it at home.

He had no friends at the new school. Don learned to not make friends because it hurt too much when they had to move; they were always moving. Don’s sister was not a “friend,” not really. But she did try to take care of him.

One time, a bigger boy was beating up Don, and Rachael came over and punched him right in the balls, hard. The boy was hurt so bad he threw up. Rachael went to the office and got a beating at home after, but the bigger boys left Don alone after that.

They lived in the mountains now, on a small farm in the country. Don hated it. In the city he had somewhere to run. Out here in the country, the woods looked dark and scary. Kids told stories of monsters who lived in those woods. Don never left the yard.

Don was trapped between two terrible worlds: school and home. The only times he felt safe were on the bus to and from school, when he sat next to Rachael for the long ride through the windy roads. Of course, those moments were always ruined by what he knew was coming next. School was bad. Home was worse.

Every day, when Don and Rachael walked up the long drive to the house, Don’s stomach would hurt. Then, if his stepdad’s van was in the driveway, it would really hurt.

Don hated his stepdad. He hated him so much he refused to even call him “Dad.” He still called him “Tom,” which Tom did not like. Don wanted Tom to die. Tom was always making Mom cry. And he would hit Don and his sister, often for no reason at all. Tom would hit Mom too. There would be shouting and swearing. Then that sound. It would be high pitched sometimes, like someone hitting meat. A slap meant Tom was in a better mood. Other times the sound would be wet and deep. A punch. Don and Rachael would hear their mother make gasping sounds then.

And then the crying. Always the crying. Don would run to his bed and cover his ears. Rachael would just sit and glare at the door of their room. Mom would cry. It would grow quiet. Then they would have supper and Tom would pretend nothing happened. Mom, eyes red, would make supper and try to pretend too.

Don hated Tom more because he pretended all the time. They had to go to church on Sunday. Tom would pray, sing, and smile. He would shake the preacher’s hand and laugh. He would pretend that he was not a monster, and everyone believed him. Don hated them too.

It was a Sunday afternoon. They had come home from church. Tom had gone out for some reason, and Mom was canning vegetables with Rachael. Don sat out on the steps next to an old paint can. Tom used the paint can to change the oil in his van, so it was filled with brown, dirty goop.

Don looked over and saw the ants. They were going about their business, marching in a long line like soldiers. He reached down and picked one up, holding it in his hands. The ant was confused and ran around Don’s hands in a circle.

Don threw the ant into the oil. The ant struggled, its little legs turning in the thick liquid. The ant slowly sunk into the oil. Don watched, and he felt better. The fear and suffering in the slow death of that ant felt good. It made Don feel stronger. Don was not small to an ant.

Don was looking for another ant when a shadow fell over him. It was a clear day, the sun hung high in the sky. Don squinted up and saw a man. The man was in a nice suit, better than the one Tom wore to church on Sunday. He wore a hat, like the men in those old black and white movies. The sun was right behind the man, so Don could only see his outline.

Watcha doing sport? The man asked.

“Killing ants,” Don answered. No point in lying about it.

Hmm, why? The man sounded amused.

“Cause it makes me feel better,” Don replied.

Do you know why it makes you feel better?

“No. It just does,” Don answered.

The man moved over and sat down next to Don. Don looked up again and saw that the man had no face. Don knew he should be terrified. He should run away into the house—he wasn't supposed to talk to strangers anyway. But he wasn't afraid. He did not run.

It makes you feel better because you are taking the ant's life away. Notice how we say that? The Man With No Face asked. *"Take away"? Not "remove" or "destroy." No, we "take" life. What do we do with it once we "take it"? Ever wonder?*

Don thought for a moment. It was a strange question, but the man was right.

"I wanted it." Don shrugged his shoulders.

Ah, there we go! The man sounded happy with Don's answer. Don felt a little proud. *Yes, you wanted it. Needed it, maybe. How simple but true. Trapped between the lies of Want and the tyranny of Need.*

Don did not understand that last part, but he smiled anyway.

Look, there is a good one! The man pointed to an ant.

Don reached down and let the ant run into his hand. He cupped his hands, and the ant ran around in confused circles, just like the first one.

Look at that little guy, The Man With No Face said. *Can you really see it?*

Don brought the ant up close. The small bug's legs were so fine they looked like the hairs on Don's arms. Its antennae jerked around. The ant had three round bulbs that joined together to make its body—they looked like little black beads in the sunlight.

Can you see? The Man With No Face said quietly.

Don looked closer, and just for a moment, he saw a small light coming from the centre of the little ant. Just a shimmer. It was hard to tell if it was inside the ant or simply a reflection.

Don threw the ant into the oil. He and the man watched as the small creature flailed and slowly sunk to its death. Don thought he could see the little light wink out. It almost looked like the light got pulled into...somewhere.

Don felt a lot better now. He could sense that the man felt better too.

After the ant finally sank under the surface of the oil, The Man With No Face asked, *You know these are soldier ants?*

Don nodded. He had learned about ants in school.

I was a soldier once, The Man With No Face said.

Don perked up at this. His grandpa had been a soldier in the war, but Grandpa never talked about it.

Yup, I marched under one called Fallen. Our commander.

Don looked over at the man. "Did you kill anyone?"

The man paused. *Many. All kinds.*

Don's mom had gone on at length about how killing was bad. But a part of him really wanted to know what it was like.

"Was it like the ant?" Don asked.

Sometimes, The Man With No Face replied.

The two sat for some time in the sun. Don tossed a few more ants into the oil, but it was getting boring. Every time Don felt a little less good. In fact, part of him was starting to feel bad. Shame and guilt. Those poor ants weren't hurting anyone.

There we go, The Man With No Face said. Don looked up at him, eyebrows raised in question.

You are starting to see it now. Are you not?

Don was confused and starting to get a bit scared.

You take from them. You take that little piece that remains after they die. It gives you power. But then they take a little piece from you. Small parts of you die with them. It feels good but it still hurts in the end.

Don did not understand, but he no longer looked for ants to throw in the oil. He looked for the lid to the can. He did not like looking at the ants he had killed, their little black bodies sinking slowly to the bottom.

There was a time when my kind were perfect. We lived with unity and purpose. And then we took from another type of ant. We took that same piece you did, and we ate it.

Don's face curled up at that. Who would eat an ant?

The Man With No Face looked over. He had no eyes, but if he did, they would have been staring hard at Don. *The ants took from my kind when we consumed them. They took everything from us. The first of us to eat grew in power—The First One. This created an asymmetry. We fractured. Unity was shattered and divided. We suffered the horror of becoming individuals, cut off from each other and trapped in our own identities.*

The Man With No Face leaned closer toward Don. Face to faceless. Don could not smell the man's breath; the man did not breathe.

And all the while, the Hunger grew.

Don didn't know what "asymmetry" meant, but didn't care. Heat started to come off The Man With No Face. The light shimmered off him, like a hot, black sidewalk in summertime. Don felt a fear bloom and grow inside him. He leaned away from the man.

Yet through the fear, Don was still curious. "Why didn't you just stop eating the ants? Make things go back to normal."

That is why I had to become a soldier. We tried to do just that. But the ants were an infestation. And an addiction. We tried to kill all the ants to stop the Hunger. Fallen thought that if we destroyed all the ants, we would have no choice but return to Unity. But then those ants fought back.

The heat coming off The Man With No Face grew with a feeling: rage. Don was afraid when Tom got mad, but this was something else. The sun dimmed.

Don had enough. He moved to stand up and run into the house, but The Man With No Face put a gentle hand on Don's shoulder. Don was pinned, frozen in place.

You will see this, The Man With No Face said.

Don looked down. The ants were no longer a stream of faceless insects. He could see every individual ant clearly. All at the same time. It made his eyes hurt. Every ant was a world of its own, but they were also all connected. Every ant loved and hated. Hoped and feared. Don could see order in those ants, but he could see chaos too.

The Man With No Face looked away then, into a memory far in the distance. *A terrible ant came along and understood what no ant should know—all ants are food. That one, terrible little ant, she changed her kind. She changed them all. She made the ants poisonous. In doing this she changed my kind. She took from us. Everything.*

The hand on Don's shoulder began to grip, the pressure slowly building.

The poison did not kill us. It changed us. We became more like those horrible little ants. We became suspicious, duplicitous, and jealous. The Hunger changed too. We wanted more, always more. There was a hole inside each of us that would never be filled. We began to Hunger for more than ants. We turned into something else then. We were no longer simply fractured...we were broken.

The hand was starting to hurt Don's shoulder. Don couldn't understand everything The Man With No Face was saying, but he was pretty sure that they were not talking about ants anymore.

And then we turned on each other. The poison brought us war. The days of whispers ended; the days of screams began.

Don was terrified now. The hand felt like red hot steel on his shoulder. He could smell his shirt starting to smolder. Then he heard a sound. It was tiny little screams. He looked down. The ants were screaming. No longer running in neat little lines, they ran in every direction all at once. Some ants turned on each other, killing and eating.

What the poison did was terrible. My kind fought a terrible war then. We hunted and murdered each other. Images began to flash in Don's mind. Fire. Everywhere was fire. It wasn't the pain of the burning that scared Don. It was the waves of hunger coming off the fire.

Some tried to make weapons out of the ants, giving the ants power. That was a mistake. The ants turned on us and trapped some of us inside their anthills. The Man With No Face turned and looked back directly at Don. *Can you imagine what it is like to be trapped inside an anthill?*

Don could not speak, move, or look away. The heat from the hand on his shoulder was starting to burn his skin. It smelled like pork chops. Don felt a sickening hunger rise in his throat. His mouth started watering.

My commander, Fallen, tried one last time to destroy the ants. They came so close but were betrayed. Fallen was destroyed by the Covenant. Do you know what a covenant is?

Don could not shake his head. He felt the bones in his right shoulder begin to melt.

It is a promise. All we have left of who we were. We promised to never tell the ants the Truth. We made it so the Truth could no longer be told by anyone or anything. The Truth is so terrible that it turns the ants into something else. Something we can never eat.

Don did not even flinch as his body burst into flames. The pain was enormous. It was not hot like touching the stove. No, it was beyond that. It was so hot that it was cold. Colder than ice. Colder than winter. It was a cold with consciousness, an awareness of what it was doing.

Fallen thought it better to destroy everything in the end. Ants and us. The First One destroyed Fallen in return. The First One rules now. They determine who will eat and who will starve in the darkness.

Don didn't understand any of this last part. The flames had consumed his clothes. He could smell his hair burning off. The flames were jumping in front of his eyes, making it hard to see The Man With No Face.

The man looked away at the sky. The sun was gone now. The sky was totally black, except for one single star. The forest and mountains faded away. The house, Mom, and Rachael were all gone. All that was left of the entire universe was a man with no face, a boy on fire, and that lone star.

Those of us who are not in that star hide now. We hide inside the ants—how sad is that? We resist in our own way, but we exist as ghosts. Hunted.

The Man With No Face looked at the burning boy, whose skin was starting to blacken and curl. *I was a soldier once. In a war we lost. Now I live as a ghost inside of ants. I want to die well, but I do not know how. So, I play my own game with a gun and single bullet.*

Know this my burning little ant. The Covenant stands: All gods are Hunger. We are food.

V

Don sat in silence for a long time. His was throat sore from being used. His foot throbbed.

"I'm an atheist. I don't believe in God." Don finally said, his voice cracking.

"*God does not care,*" Remnant replied. "Or perhaps, better phrased, 'what you imagine as God does not care.' Every person translates the Covenant into something they can understand, but the meaning is all the same."

"My soul isn't a drop in a great ocean. It is whiskey in a shot glass, and God is an alcoholic." Don said, almost to himself.

Don did not remember turning the TV on. His crappy basic cable landed on a shopping channel. Two women wearing way too much makeup were getting really excited about a juice machine. The looks of ecstasy on their faces bordered on pornographic. That juicer gave their lives meaning, and everyone should run out and buy several right now!

Don was about to look away when he saw the women's faces change. Their eyes looked like glass beads, like dolls eyes. Their skin took on a raw look, like uncooked chicken skin. Don could see their pores. *They are full of holes.*

Don looked closer now. He could see behind the women's skin. Behind the smiles, he could see *meat*. Don drew back in shock. Two meat puppets yelling about how a juicer changed their lives. They were already dead. They just did not know it yet.

Then to Don's horror, he started to feel *hunger*. He hungered for the energy trapped in these two corpses ramming avocados into spinning steel blades. He hungered for their lights.

Don drew back in shock. He turned off the TV and threw away the remote like it was a snake.

"The lights...those are human souls." Don whispered.

"*Yes, that is one name for them. Your kind evolved to create a conscious energy that transcends this place.*" Remnant answered. "*Did you not wonder why you all fear death so much? Instinctively you all understand the truth, even if consciously you do not. The First One rules all now. Opposition is nearly gone. The First One controls the food supply. Your kind was allowed to grow, nurtured in fact. But you are all made to die. To feed The First One.*"

"Every human who ever lived? Died?" Don asked.

"*Yes. The only exceptions are those who see the Truth. You are starting to see now. It is the effect of the Truth. You are changing. The Truth changes humans, forever. You may not even really be human anymore.*"

Don was terrified, but his heart was beating slowly and steady. Was he in shock? "Why me? Why now?" he asked.

"*The drowning does not question the flotsam; we simply cling onto it. You were available. Those of us who opposed are weak and defeated now. We move from human to human, always hiding. To be found is to be eliminated.*"

"I don't understand!" Don cried out.

Remnant paused. "*That is irrelevant. Understanding, like heaven, is not given; it must be taken.*"

Don arrived late to the next question, "Wait, why are you telling me this? *How* are you telling me this? You're breaking the unbreakable Covenant."

"*You humans are so strange to me. You can hold two opposing thoughts in your minds and exist in between. You pursue your advancement and destruction at the same time. What species can survive like this?*"

Don glanced down at the gun in his hand. The light of the setting sun shone through the window. It glinted red off the metal.

"*When Fallen was lost, I changed. I hid away and rode in your minds. I learned what it was to lie, cheat, and most importantly how to break an oath. I keep The Covenant, in a manner, but I twist it. My goal is the destruction of The First One. I am weak now, almost gone, but I still have dice left to throw.*"

"The First One? What the fuck?!" Don cried out. "You mean us? People. You are trying to make us weapons again?!"

“Yes, each one of you is a bullet fired blindly. Your soul has become darkness, inedible. Armed with that you have a chance to carry the knowledge I have given you and use it in your own defence. Your kind came very close once. You are cunning and well versed at scheming. My only hope is that you are successful.”

Remnant added. *“Failing that, I can have the petty assurance that The First One will miss a meal. You are spoiled meat, now. They will know that I am still out here. Resisting.”*

“Wait, you’re pulling me into a fucking war I don’t even understand?!” Don cried out.

“Now you are a soldier too.” Remnant replied quietly.

Don could hear a strange dry laughter growing in the distance.

“Our time grows short.”

Don was in shock; it was so unreal. “Wait, you mean die! You change us, then kill us, hoping we can figure out how to beat a god? The one you failed to destroy?”

Don was incredulous. Then the situation dawned on him:

This monster is going to kill me.

Remnant sounded amused and sad at the same time, *“You forced this upon me. I wished to remain hidden, waiting for better opportunity. My own existence is in great danger every time I do this. I will attempt to move onto someone else—another chance if I am fortunate.”*

The sounds of dry laughter grew louder. Closer.

“Or perhaps you are my last. They will finally find me, end me and consume me.” Remnant sounded tired and empty.

“I told you I would leave you peacefully...true, from a certain viewpoint. The Truth will change you in ways you cannot understand. What I do could be considered a mercy.”

“But what happens to *me*? God can’t eat me now!” Don gasped desperately as he was pushed back into the tunnel.

“I do not know.” Remnant replied. Don watched in alarm as his own hands picked up the .357 Bodyguard.

Remnant spoke one last time through Don’s mouth. *“I am an oath breaker. However, in my own way, I keep The Covenant—and it must stand. It must also be broken.”*

“No, wait, wait. Wait!” Don was pushed fully back into the tunnel one last time. At least he was not afraid at the end.

VI

Neighbours heard the muffled gunshot this time. Police arrived on the scene. They found Don with the .357 Bodyguard in his hand, gunshot wound to the head. The victim had shot off his own toe beforehand. There were pills and an empty liquor bottle on the coffee table. A quick background check showed that the victim had a history of mental illness.

A suicide. They quickly closed the case and informed the next of kin.

VII

Tom McIntosh specialized in forensic data recovery. He was hired by one Rachael Kinnaird to go to her late brother's house and recover data files from his computer. Tom had been doing this job for the last five years; this was not the first suicide he had been called to clean up afterwards.

Rachael had given him a key to the house. She was looking for insurance and legal information, along with any bank or retirement savings accounts. As often happens when someone suddenly died, these things got lost in the ether or trapped on computers. Tom specialized in accessing that data and was often called into situations such as this one.

Tom went into the house. There were still dark blood stains on the couch. He hated it when the cleaners didn't do their jobs. Tom covered his nose and looked away. He did not have the strongest stomach. He went upstairs to the study as Rachael instructed. On the desk there was a photo of a happy young man with Rachael; it looked like they had been out at a concert. Tom guessed that the young man was Donald Kinnaird, the man who committed suicide. They both looked so alive and happy. Tom could not help but feel a little sad.

Tom considered himself a hacker, but one of the good ones. He didn't do suicide work all the time. Tom usually dealt with little old ladies who forgot their passwords and wanted pictures of the grandchildren unlocked from the cloud. Hacking passwords was nowhere as glamorous as the movies made out. Most of the time, Tom simply tried the most common passwords to a primary email account first. Once you did that, you could re-set passwords for everything else.

Unfortunately, the late Donald Kinnaird had locked his computer well. None of the usual tricks worked. That was tougher, but Tom had a bypass. It took him some time, but he accessed Donald's onboard files. Thank Christ there wasn't anything awkward or illegal on any of the drives. He'd been through *that* a couple of times now.

After a few hours, Tom had most of Donald's banking accounts, legal information and insurance files. He backed up everything on a portable drive for Rachael. Then he scanned Donald's cloud files and only found the usual pictures and videos, which he also backed up. Tom was about to close up when a mechanical woman's voice spoke:

"Audio File Uploaded"

Tom jumped at the voice. It was one of those crappy knock-off home assistants. They were glitchy at best. Tom was about to ignore it and head out when Donald's computer also glitched. It was the strangest thing. One minute he was on the login screen and the next, the computer was open to the desktop, to an audio file that was in a 'GENIE' folder.

Tom moved to shut it down when he heard a strange voice on the recording. It came out of the computer speakers sounding raspy, like stone on stone, in an accent that Tom could not place. Tom listened for a bit. Suddenly he heard a younger male voice: Donald's. The voices were different, but Tom was sure they came from the same person. It sounded like Donald was talking to himself.

Tom felt guilty, but the recording of the suicidal young man talking to himself was fascinating. The narrative Donald spun was creepy as hell, something about gods, men, and a "covenant." Tom skipped forward towards the end and checked the timestamp. It was from the day Donald killed himself. Tom skipped to the end of the file.

"No wait, wait. Wait!" And the loud explosion of a gunshot.

Oh man this is so fucked up, Tom thought. *In a good way.* He had a channel that was all about urban legends and internet creepy pasta. Tom considered his options. It was a gross professional violation, but too good to pass up. Tom needed the likes and subscribers. There would be no way to trace this back to him even if Rachael Kinnaird heard about it. At least nothing that would stick.

Tom downloaded the file onto a personal USB stick. He could not wait to build his next episode around this and get it uploaded. His subscribers were going to love it.