

Redemption

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Klaastu rose up from the muck of the pit, his many-limbed form dripping with the detritus of Hell. A voice of thunder spoke to him from the sky, a sound to make him shiver. "It is time," it said simply. Klaastu understood. He had waited for thousands of years for this moment, longer still since the Day of Reckoning which had delivered him to this place of torment.

He slithered across the hard baked terrain, plunging without pause into the river, the mighty Styx. The enormous bulk of his body sent waves rushing down the shores in both directions. Idly, he wondered what Charon would do if the wave capsized his precious boat. The river bottomed out at fifty feet, and Klaastu dug himself into the cold mud at the bottom. Here, just where he had left it, was The Book.

It was heavy with the weight of age, with the weight of dreadful knowledge. Klaastu heaved and swam back to the surface. He clambered onto the shore, pushed through the Forest of Tears, and found a quiet place. Not easy to do even on the fringes of Hell.

The Book opened dryly. The waters of Styx were not the kind to leave a wetness. His eyes misted over as he read, as he remembered writing them oh so long ago. When he was human.

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I sit here and weep, for the words are lost to me. Try as I might, I can not transfer the images of my mind into coherent reading. What I will tell you now is a pale shadow of what has come before, the reality I witnessed, experienced, and the glory that is now lost, destroyed by the Hand of God. It may seem fantastic, but it is true nonetheless. No one wants to believe that the world they surround themselves with is but a façade.

Where is truth? Does it lay on the tongues of prophets, or in the written pages of the ancients? Truth is a trick of the moment, what we focus on and perceive becomes real to us because of our faith. The world is peaceful, the world is in turmoil, we move towards a bright future, evil is all around us ready to strike us down. Truth is fiction, and myth is reality. All the dreams of our lives haunt us at every waking moment, and voices from beyond the void whisper lies in our ears which speak to our secret hearts. That is the danger of belief, of faith. We rely on it like an old man on his cane. In the next moment,

what was true has become a dim memory, and what we refused to believe is eating our souls. Beware, young Wanderer, life is a weather beaten road and around each twist and turn lies a demon, hidden and waiting for just the right traveler.

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Klaastu closed the Book and set it aside. He looked up, a gesture of longing and hope that was quite out of place here, and out of character for him. There was no sky here. No stars to look up at with wonder and dreamy desire for freedom and a different life. It was another reminder to all the souls who came here of all they had lost.

Besides, it was his longing for a different life that got him here in the first place.

Klaastu set himself in motion again. Time, here, had little meaning, but he had a schedule to keep, a precise arrangement of events whose sequence would lead to his redemption. Beyond the edge of the forest was a range of mountains. There were no tectonic forces at work here, and Klaastu had visited those hills once, and only once. Instead of vaulting spires of granite, outcroppings of basalt or layers of chalky sandstone, he had found towering heaps of garbage. Cars, stereos, crushed houses, clothes, jewelry, mounds of cash from hundreds of countries. There was furniture, boats, books, appliances, all the detriment and waste of a life centered around material possessions.

All the pundits had been wrong. You do take it with you. All of it. It was a punishment of sorts, an object lesson designed to teach the newly arrived souls that the only things that truly mattered was what you could carry inside. There were barriers all around this place, difficult to find but there just the same. To cross them, to move to the next higher level or to escape at all, one had to evolve.

Klaastu moved toward the nearest mountain. Somewhere in that heap, he knew, was his carriage, his manor home, and millions of now worthless coins. He had already removed the important things from his own heap, hidden them where he could get at them. Slowly, over the centuries, he had forgotten about them all. All except the Book.

He clutched the tome closer to his rubbery chest. This was his passport, his ticket to eternity. The document of his transformation.

The ground here was sticky, wet with bile and similar fluids. There were craters too. Indentations in the soft ground, made by bodies at the end of their long fall from mortal life. Klaastu pushed ahead, trying not to breathe here, trying not to inhale the vile odors. Not that there was anything in his stomach to bring up. The dead do not eat.

He could still remember his own fall, a descent from more than just life. The impact he had mercifully been allowed to edit from his memory, but he had seen the result often enough since then. The sickening sound of the body striking the ground, the long interval before bones knitted enough to take weight, before flesh solidified again into meat, the long time of wailing as the dead men and women floundered through a haze of pain more

intense than any they could have ever experienced in life. There was no release from horror here, no end to suffering. They could only lay there and wait.

Klaastu looked nervously up at the sky. The blackness was complete, no hint of any end to the void above, no clue that it connected to anything at all. At least there was nothing falling at the moment. But that could change at any moment. Almost no one chose to remain here once they could move again. Hell was a vast and wide land filled with the promise of wonders to see, adventures to experience, of salvation to be had.

A well worn path meandered between the mountains. Klaastu lifted himself off his belly, rising up on all nine of his spidery legs, and picked his way carefully down the path. He was not as large as he once was, but still the lane could barely contain him. To brush against one of the mountains was to invite an avalanche of smashed and broken materials, leaving him trapped for as long as it took Nessus to discover his exit blocked and to clear it again. It had never happened to Klaastu, and it was rarer still that Nessus left his resting place. Today would be the worst time for an accident, especially with time pressing so cruelly upon him.

The path eventually led to a clearing. At the center of a perfect circle of brown grass was an old shack, assembled from bits and pieces scavenged from the surrounding mounds and so dilapidated in appearance that it seemed ready to collapse at any moment. Nessus was resting in the front. Although designed differently, he was just as large as Klaastu, and equipped with just as many natural weapons. He opened one baleful eye to watch Klaastu approach, the muscles of his sleek body rippling in anticipation. Wisely, Klaastu stopped at the edge of the grass circle.

Nessus closed his eye and sat as still as stone. Klaastu settled his weight down to his belly once more and prepared himself to wait. From experience, he knew Nessus would not answer any hail. He would speak only when he chose. If Klaastu crossed onto the grass, Nessus would spring upon him. But it was conversation he wanted, not a fight.

Time did not truly exist in Hell, yet it was perceived just the same. Klaastu was adept at waiting. He studied Nessus for what seemed like the hundredth time. Like Klaastu, Nessus had once been human. And, like Klaastu, he had traded his humanity for the Dark Gift, living for a time as a god among mortals. Immortality had a price, and they were each paying it now.

With nothing else to do, Klaastu opened his Book and skimmed the pages. On the first page, he had still been human. He hoped that when the last page was complete, he would be so again. He stopped flipping pages as one passage caught his eye and stirred the echo of memories.

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I felt the darkness shift the other night. That blackness which lives and breathes within our secret hearts, which connects us all to the fires of hell and the purity of evil that

comes from being a little too human. And, of course, I am not quite human. Not anymore.

At least I can still go out in daylight. I have that consolation. It's surprising to learn which legends aren't really legends, which fanciful tales handed down generation after generation have suffered the curse of embellishment, and which ones have stood the test of time. Daylight kills, but only slowly. Wooden stakes mean nothing. Crosses? Holy water? What a laugh.

I'm sure you've figured it out by now. I've given you enough clues. Before you ask, no, I am not a vampire. Not exactly. But I did sell my soul to the Devil, and what He gave me is unmeasurable. There was no trickery. Just a handshake, and at a touch I became something bordering on divine. I see the world with unfettered eyes. I drink from the cup of life, and it never approaches empty.

And, yes, I drink blood. I don't have to, but the blood gives me power. It fuels my strength, and with every drop I swallow I become farther removed from my mortality. I am a lord among men! I can touch their souls, their minds, bend them or twist them into shapes of my choosing. I am the master. All men are my slaves, and all women are whores to my every whim. Who would not trade his soul for power such as this?

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It was disturbing now to remember how arrogant he had been. He had been given a chance to do good, and he had turned the opposite way. He closed the Book as Nessus stirred. "You aren't going to leave, are you?" he said, opening his eyes and fixing his gaze on Klaastu. A shiver ran down both of Klaastu's spines. It was good to hear anyone's voice. Opportunities for conversation were scarce in Hell. People were usually too busy screaming.

"It is time," he said to Nessus. "The voice has spoken to me."

Nessus growled deep inside his body. "How lucky for you," he said. He unfolded his cat-like body and stretched. "What has it to do with me?"

"I thought you might like to come."

"Bah!" Nessus snorted. "I wasn't summoned. You were. I wouldn't be allowed."

"You could always try."

"I'm not as old as you."

Klaastu sighed. "What has that god to do with it?"

"I haven't had as much time to slough away my evil."

“You should,” Klaastu insisted. “You’ve been here longer.” Nessus growled menacingly. He did not like to be reminded of how long he had been in Hell, or that he had died before Klaastu.

“You’re wasting time,” Nessus said.

“Tardiness isn’t a sin.”

“I’m trying to be polite. Go away.”

Klaastu smiled, not easy to do with the face he had. “You’ve never been polite before.”

“I’m trying.”

“Ah.” Klaastu let it go. There were many roads to redemption. Nessus had chosen his, and it was an empty highway.

“Why don’t you cross the line?” Nessus urged. “Step onto the grass and let’s have one last fight.”

“I think not.”

“Coward,” Nessus spat. He closed his eyes again. Klaastu would have shrugged if he had shoulders. Instead, he turned his back on the clearing and began to retrace his steps. Nessus said nothing more, and neither did Klaastu. They had used up all their words.

He had come here seeking the thread of an old friendship. He felt foolish now, for such things cannot exist in this place. Perdition’s flames were meant to cleanse the spirit, and it was ironic that in the vastness of Hell there was no provision for the warmth of affection. Nessus thought that his isolation was protection, and Klaastu could see the logic in it. He, himself, had felt the pain inflicted by too close association with those he judged inferior.

The Dark Gift was power beyond imagining, yet it was consuming. The more he grasped at godhood, the more his humanity slipped away. The transformation had been subtle at first. Pallor, hypersensitivity, increasing disinterest in the delights of flesh. And the thirst, the terrible, unquenchable thirst. The more blood he drank, the more he needed to drink. Immortality became a prison. He had thought the Gift to be free of traps, yet the Gift itself was the curse.

It had taken a long time for him to realize it. By then he had been driven into darkness, transformed into this hideous shape by the twisted magic of the blood. No longer human, no longer able to associate with anyone, Klaastu had boiled away all his hopes, his dreams, his desires, so that all which remained was a silent plea for death.

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I hate this world with a black passion which daily grows more intense. It is an ill fit, like a pair of pants one size too small. My thoughts are like shards of glass clawing up through my psyche to burst upon my tattered ego.

The headaches are a daily occurrence, and my soul aches with a loneliness I cannot define. Though many profess a certain fondness for me, I sense their secret disgust, and I am shunned in a way only I can feel. They turn my will aside and blunt my purpose, yet all will end in a rain of blood.

I shall glory in their pain, their anguish shall cleanse me of the filth of their opinions. Can they not see I am a god? Outcast, cast down, cast aside, left forlorn on this desolate plane, imprisoned in this flesh. I yearn to love, yet I am constrained. My desires are channeled into narrow crevices, my needs are blunted and turned aside.

What they call obscene, I call sweet. They are blinded by their own inadequacies, and I am forced to abide. I yearn for freedom. I can taste the air, it burns, it burns. All soon shall burn. Only death is freedom.

I am entombed in this existence, this prison of blood and bone, and mortality eats at the edges of my soul. I would scream, but who would care. This world is filled with the cries of the damned and dying, a cacophony of shrill discord which only my ears, trained to listen for the celestial harmonies, only my immortal ears can hear.

I burn. The pain of this existence is tortuous. Once I soared, now I crawl, grating along through the muck on my belly, licking the dust of distant days, burned by the embers of dying time. These others, these mortals who surround me, they do not perceive how low they are, what squalor their lives seem to be to one who has fallen. And oh, I have fallen.

I have been broken. Cast into the infinite void by those who once claimed friendship. By the ghosts of those I have destroyed. Once I was a god, now I am a creature of the muck, spawned of the primordial slime, the defecation of creation. These creatures, clinging to existence by such a thin thread, feigning enlightenment and daring to believe they are in some way special, they disgust me.

Darkness fills me, and I yearn to release it, to watch it consume this horror, this world, so that all may all taste my pain, share my misery, suffer as I suffer.

The flame of life burns hot within me. And I burn, I burn.

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Klaastu remembered the words as if he had just written them. He had felt cheated, betrayed by his own lusts. He was supposed to be a lord, a master of the world with all

humanity his slaves. Instead, he had become a slave to the Gift. His body had become the beast he felt slithering through his heart.

He emerged from the mountains onto dry lake bed. It was an illusion. There had never been water here. Occasionally one of Hell's rivers would change course, but they were never impeded. The ground was covered with salt several inches deep, razor edged crystals that clung to each other to form jagged knives. Klaastu kept his belly well above the landscape.

Everything here was meant to inflict pain or create disquiet. Unlike life which only seemed to be that way. Klaastu had wasted most of his life, his mortal life, in pursuit of pleasure. Wine, women, and wagering, his three W's as he called it. He ran his own farm into bankruptcy that way, but he had been fairly successful as a landlord. He was ashamed of the way he had used people, treated them like property. He was a bitter old man living in a large, lonely house when Satan's minion came to him.

"Why me?" he had asked. "I'm old and rich, my life is done."

"You answer your own question," the demon had replied. "You know exactly what has been missing, what you wanted most and did not get. Your soul is destined for the inferno already. What do you have to loose?"

It had seemed to be a good decision. Klaastu had gained immortality and so much more, and by living forever he denied the Devil his due. In retrospect, he had served the cause of evil by accepting. Two hundred years later there was no way to calculate all the lives he had changed, all the families he had destroyed. From behind the scenes he had manipulated world rulers, infusing his lust for power into them.

As he climbed the crumbling slope that marked the far boundary of the salt flat, Klaastu told himself that he had only obeyed his nature. He had even written about it, as though by placing the words in his precious Book he provided the structure of truth to a hollow ideal.

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Sometimes, the darkness is a tangible beast. It moves and breathes and stalks the living with relentless fury. A creature from the depths of Hell and from the tangled web of our inner demons. Evil is the core of every man.

We lie, we cheat, we steal. We call it sin, and we think of ourselves as damned for defying the commands of our sundry gods. Yet we do not hesitate to repeat what we have done. We revel in the forbidden, the taboo, and take pleasure in our defiance.

And so we push through this life, dreading its end and fearing what is to come after, if anything. That fear is not enough to offset what we have in this present, not enough to dissuade us from our course. Even those who worship their gods with reverence, who

flock to the temples and churches and whose lips frame the words of ritual designed to absolve them of sin and bring them closer to the purity of lost innocence, even they are not immune to the lure of the darkness. Even they heed the call of the demons buried in their souls.

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At the crest of the hill, a wizened form rose from the shadows in Klaastu's path. He jerked himself to a halt and lifted two of his front legs to use as weapons.

"Wait!" a thin, nearly hoarse voice exploded from the figure. "Please! Don't hit me."

Klaastu froze. This was no imp laying in wait to snatch a passing spirit, it was only a poor lost soul. Still, he decided to keep his guard up. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "You're supposed to cross the Styx."

The figure, a man, huddled against the ground, trembling. "I don't know why I'm here," he said with a bit of a whine. "I wasn't a bad person."

"You're supposed to cross the Styx," Klaastu repeated, pointing to the river visible nearby.

The man looked up with hollow eyes. "I'm lost," he said. "Please, don't hurt me, demon."

"I'm not a demon," Klaastu said. "I know what I look like, but I'm just as human as you." That was a lie, but a forgivable sin. The man relaxed visibly, although there was no reason for him to believe what Klaastu told him. "What's your name?"

"Edmond."

"My name is Klaastu."

"That's a strange name."

"I have never thought so. How long have you been here?"

Edmond looked around at the bleak landscape. "In Hell? I don't know."

"Do you remember your arrival?" Klaastu turned to point back over the salt flat. "You would have landed over there." Edmond craned his head to look, but his face showed no recognition.

"I don't remember arriving," he said. "It seems like I've been here a long time."

“You didn’t cross the flats,” Klaastu said confidently. “Your flesh is too soft. You must have circled around.” Only that was impossible.

“Flesh?” Edmond asked. “I thought I was dead.”

“You are. Your soul has left the boundaries of the normal universe. The rules you lived by don’t apply here. You can’t die, but your perceptions can be altered. You’ve always perceived yourself as a man of flesh and bone, so that’s why you look as you do.”

Edmond gave Klaastu a long stare. “Is that why you look that way? Like a…”

“A monster,” Klaastu finished for him. “Yes. This is what I had become by the time I surrendered my life. It is part of my punishment that I look this way now.”

Edmond started to sway. “I don’t feel well.”

Klaastu looked off into the distance, to the place where the Styx bent and disappeared behind another range of low hills. That was where Charon was, and that was where Edmond had to go. He looked up at the sky, wishing the voice would come again, would tell him what to do. The black sky was silent.

“Very well,” he said at last. He extended two of his legs and lowered his arms. “Climb up. Get on my back and I’ll carry you to the crossing.”

Edmond took a step back. “Why? Why would you help me?”

“Because I wish to. Judging by the way you reacted to me, you must have been beset by demons already. They infest the land on this side of the Styx. They won’t bother you if you stay with me.”

Gratefully, Edmond grasped the extended limbs and pulled himself onto Klaastu’s back. There was enough space there where his upper torso blended into his thick abdomen for the man to lay back. Klaastu set off again, altering his intended course and angling for the river.

“What did you do in life?” he asked, curious despite himself.

“I was a teacher,” Edmond replied. “I was a father, a good one I think. I don’t know what else.”

Klaastu picked his way carefully over the bumpy terrain, careful not to dislodge his passenger. “We always have labels for ourselves,” he said. “More labels than anyone else ever applies to us. I’m sure you have more. You just don’t want to use them.”

Edmond sat up. “I don’t belong here,” he repeated his claim. “Whatever I might call myself, I wasn’t evil.”

Klaastu laughed. "What is evil?" he demanded. "Be logical. You are here. You did something to deserve it."

"It's a mistake."

The man was in denial, that was obvious. It was a waste of energy to argue. Klaastu felt gregarious, though, euphoric that he had at last been summoned to judgment, and the opportunity for conversation was too good to pass up. "Tell me," he urged. "Define evil."

Edmond shrugged, the movement of his body transmitting tiny vibrations through Klaastu's sensitive skin. "Murder?" he offered. "Sadism? Torture, I guess."

"Interesting choices." He sped up, rushing through a dark section. Something stirred in the shadows, an imp, but it did not leap. Most of the demons had learned long ago that Klaastu was not an easy target. "I can't speak for everyone, but I usually enjoyed a good spanking. Not actually a valid argument, I suppose. I'm in Hell, too."

Edmond laughed for the first time. "What about you?" he said. "What did you do to get here?"

Klaastu sobered. "I was a mass murderer," he said. "I performed human sacrifice, drank the blood of children, masterminded genocide, engaged in magic of the dark arts, things like that."

It was awhile before Edmond spoke again.

"You say it so calmly," he said uneasily. "If it's true, I can see why you went to Hell."

"Yet you must be evil, as well."

"Not as evil as you."

Klaastu laughed loudly this time. "Life is not a game," he said, "though it seems humans are always keeping score. We cheat and lie and firmly believe that it does not matter so long as we do not get caught. And who am I to say that is not the way it should be?"

He twisted his head to look at Edmond, startling the man with his dexterity. "Let me share a truth with you. There is nothing that we can ever say or do or think or imagine which is really and truly evil, for there will always be a way to explain it away. And there will always be a way to twist what others do in a way such as to define it as evil."

They arrived at the river, and Klaastu turned to parallel the shore. "You sound very sure of yourself," Edmond commented.

“I’ve had a long time to think about it. Longer than you.”

“Because you’ve been here longer?”

“Because I’ve *existed* longer. That makes a big difference.”

Edmond shifted uneasily. He had spotted the landing ahead. There were a few dozen people lined up, waiting for their turn to cross. It was an efficient system, Klaastu mused. People arrived in Hell by the thousands every hour, falling like flaming comets from the sky. Some healed faster than others, some found their way through the wilderness with more alacrity, but there were enough barriers that there was never more than a few dozen waiting to ride Charon’s boat at any one time.

The shore made a twist and a strand of blackened trees rose up to block their view. Klaastu turned to skirt the edge of the small forest. Edmond was struggling. “Why do you think I’m here?” he finally managed to say, relieved to break the silence with any sort of comment.

“I can’t say,” Klaastu replied. “Deception, lust, theft, there are so many little things. Where should the line be drawn? Maybe you took pleasure in something forbidden.”

“Pleasure can’t be a sin,” Edmond protested.

“Why not? We say that some pleasure is good, others are bad. The man or woman who derives pleasure from pain, from exhibitionism or voyeurism, from narcotics or brutality, these are often labeled as evil. To those who enjoy such things, they most certainly are not. So evil, it seems, lies in perception. Whatever we enjoy, to us that is something good, and those things we find abhorrent, that is evil.”

“That’s silly. You’re saying that the nutcase who gets a thrill molesting a child hasn’t done anything evil.”

Klaastu came to a halt. “Listen to me carefully,” he said, turning to look at Edmond again. “So often in our lives, we seek Truth as though it was something that could be measured, held in our hands, held up to the light and waved as a banner for all to see. Vindication is what we really want. Proof that the things we want to indulge in are our own business, sacrosanct against intrusion and a shield against the judgement of others.

“In the end, the question of evil is one we must answer for ourselves, for Truth is different for us all. As it should be.”

He turned his back on the man and pushed his body into motion again. The silence stretched out, becoming deafening. Edmond, it seemed, had lost his volition to debate.

Coming from around the last tree, they were once more in sight of the landing. A strange mist had formed over the water, obscuring the far shore. The Styx was easily several miles across, and Charon took his time poling his way across.

There was a rumble of thunder from someplace deep in the blackness overhead. Klaastu looked up in alarm. Storms were rare but not unheard of, and they were always horrible. Edmond sensed his host's unease. He shifted his weight uncomfortably. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it," Klaastu told him. "You don't have to be judged."

"Judged?" The confusion was plain in his voice. "But, we've already been judged. We're in Hell."

The crowd at the landing had caught sight of Klaastu approaching and were stirring, caught between their compulsion to wait for the boatman and their instinct to flee from the monster. Klaastu took pity on them and slowed, coming to a smooth halt. Edmond would just have to walk the rest of the way. Without consulting him, he reached onto his back and plucked the man free. Edmond kicked in surprise, his strength no match for the larger creature's.

Klaastu set him down gently and took a step back to show he meant the man no harm. "Judgement," he said, "has less to do with arbitration than with the measure of your self worth. Death removes all of life's handicaps. Physical, mental, and social. Even the crazy become sane when their spirit flies from the tomb of flesh.

"That's why you came here. You perceive yourself as evil, just as I realized how truly deep I had fallen when the mask of self-deception was lifted. When my spark was finally extinguished, only then could I see the light."

Edmond was staring at him blankly. "You're telling me I put myself in Hell. That's ridiculous."

"But true."

"No." Edmond shook his head violently. "No, that can't be. I would never do that to myself. Never. Never!" He turned and fled. Klaastu called out to him, but the man was unwilling to hear. The crowd at the landing parted to let him pass, and he ran, gibbering, into the wilderness beyond.

Klaastu shook his head sadly. Some people were unready to hear the truth, and equally unwilling to accept Truth. It had taken Klaastu a millennium to grow weary of life, and even longer to accept his evil for what it was, to absolve himself.

He turned away from the crowd and headed toward the horizon. He was still clutching the Book, and he knew he should have let it go along with all the other material

possessions. Let it go along with his past. Yet his past was just as important as his redemption. Some things were too disturbing to allow to fade into oblivion.

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There are times in a person's life when he sits and stares back at what he's done, at all the years that have gotten behind him or away from him, at all the things he's done, and all the things he's left undone, and he makes a judgment. It's not a time for decision, though some men foolishly think so and choose to disrupt what they have without considering it. Once it's gone, it is gone forever. That's the fragility of life, that it changes with each passing breath and the things we've done can never be undone. Likewise, the things we've left undone can't be pursued with the same energy and economy that we might have used in our younger days.

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The terrain was roughest near the river. As Klaastu clambered over steaming cracks and jumbled boulders, the pockets of demonic activity were seen less frequently. He was leaving. Whatever twist of reality that the ground was made of was become smoother the farther he went. The darkness was deepening.

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So the wise man sits and contemplates. He might dream of might-have-beens, but he know they are just dreams and can never be used to replace reality. He will look back at his life, and the decision he comes to, the judgment he makes, will change him and stay with him until his dying day. There are most certainly regrets, there's no escaping those. But they don't have to poison our lives, they can just be placed away in the attics of our minds, remembrances to be brought out on rainy days, dusted off, smiled at for what they are, then placed back upon their shelves. The wise man does not choose his future course by the choices he has made in the past.

No, the wise man will look back at his life and come to only one, inescapable conclusion. It is the same judgment every wise man makes, whether he has led a lucky life or not. The foolish man squanders his life in regrets, in bitterness, and never climbs out of the pit he digs for himself. He is trapped in the cobwebs of his mind. The wise man knows that, for good or ill, all the decisions of his life have led to where he is at, and that he must be content with what he has.

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He had experienced the thought often enough over the course of his journey. What would he do if he could go back in time, to undo the decision he had made? Would he? Could he? His legs were making clicking sounds on the ground now. The ground was smooth and ebony. The horizon was invisible, with nothing either ahead or behind.

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I have often wondered what kind of man I am. Sometimes I am foolish, for I look back at my life and linger on the regrets, the choices that, in retrospect, were stupid. But sometimes I am wise, for I look at the crooked path of my life and realize that had I taken any other forks in the road, I would not have arrived at the place I am today.

Life is not perfect. It was never meant to be. It is not a puzzle or a mystery, either, for such things have answers, solutions. Life is our one and only chance to realize who we are, and our opportunity to become the persons we were all meant to be. There is no destiny, no fate, no ultimate plan, unless it is to find ourselves, and in so doing, to find contentment.

I look back at my life, and the only wise thing I can decide is that I am not yet wise enough to make a judgement. The only revelation I have had is that no one should ever be that wise. Life changes too fast to ever decide it is over, that we are through with our evolution.

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There was a light ahead. With no landmarks, there was no way to guess how far he had come, or how long he had been traveling. The light must be his destination. There was no other way to go.

~ ~ ~

I wander through the attic of my mind. I look at the clutter, and I realize there are no regrets. Because life happens here. Now. Not in the past. I am happy with the choices I've made because I'm happy with the life I have. It could be better, sure. That's the beauty of it. There are always more choices to make. There's always space in the attic.

~ ~ ~

The sound of his footsteps was lessening. With a start, Klaastu realized he had lost some of his legs. In fact, he had lost the monstrous body of his cursed state. The light was shining all around him now, coming from the air itself. He stopped when he thought he was at the center of it. He lifted a hand to shade his eyes, and thrilled at the sight of a normal, human limb projecting from his own body. For a fleeting moment, he felt the touch of the Gift, still present even here in death.

There was temptation, an urge to reach out with the power. It was there, still there like a flame in his blood. He had wanted to deny it, to refute his black past. That was why he was here in Hell. That's why they were all in Hell.

~ ~ ~

Am I wise? or am I a fool? I think we must be a little of both. Wise enough to see what is wonderful in our lives, and foolish enough to ignore what is bad. Wise men are content with what they have. Fools will loose themselves in love. Wise men don't dwell on what they do not have. Fools accept their choices, even if they weren't the best.

So it seems we must be both, and that is the judgment we all must make. Acceptance or denial? Which path will we tread? Ultimately, the judgment is different for us all, for no two lives, however similar they might seem on the surface, could ever be the same. Change one factor of our lives, and everything changes. A wise man accepts change. A fool makes the changes.

~ ~ ~

The light soaked into the core of his being. He was whole, complete. He had traveled to the center of Hell, and to the core of his being. There was a monster in every heart. The difference between good and evil was only made apparent when the monster was revealed. It was not a matter of control, it was a definition of degree. Everyone was evil. They had to be, or they would not be human.

“You’ve brought your Book,” the voice said, arriving from the fierce hot darkness outside the light.

“Yes.”

“I should be surprised you held onto it.”

“Are you?”

“No.”

Klaastu held the Book out before him, lifted it to where he could see it. His body functioned smoothly, his calm belying the duality of his emotions. “Should I leave it?”

“It does not matter. The story is who you are. But not who you have become.”

That felt right. “I don’t want to be a vampire anymore.”

“You were always human. You could not be otherwise.”

He nodded, more to himself than for the benefit of the voice’s unseen owner. Like a mist rising from the morning lake, the Dark Gift left him, but what was left behind was not lesser for the departure. He felt stronger now than he ever had before.

“I’m ready, then,” he said.

“Yes,” the voice said. “You are. Come to me now.”

With a sigh resonating with the echoes of immortality, Klaastu released himself, and was lifted on a golden breeze into the arms of eternity.

~ ~ ~

I am wise enough to know that I am happy to be a fool. That, in the end, is the only judgement I am qualified to make. So it is for us all.

Amen.

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