

Vincent Lakes



The Crapshoot

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1

The Deal

The scorching wind blew dust and debris across the desolate scenery, the merciless sun was tormenting the desert with ungodly heat and brightness. It seemed impossible to have anything surviving in this environment; the plain hills and the arid valleys, all lifeless and dull.

A large vulture was sitting on the branch of a dead tree, watching a group of harsh looking men driving by on three motorcycles. The low growl of their engines filled the otherwise silent landscape as they headed toward a silhouette of a town in the far distance. They had been driving for hours, looking for a place that was not much more than a rumor or a legend, determined to find out the truth. Marlach, a guy who had brought them the map, was tied to the back of one of the bikes, informed that he would get the bullet without further discussions in case the coordinates were wrong. So, needless to say, Marlach was greatly relieved when the first structures appeared in the horizon.

Marlach was a scoundrel and a thief of the worst kind, but had managed to survive in a world where life was cheaper than a bottle of water, which, of course, was an achievement in itself. A bad hand dealt by the fate was well compensated by quick brain and natural skill to play against the odds, but now it seemed like Marlach's luck had finally ran out. He had been positive that the money to pay back a small loan from Zack and his gang could be arranged in one way or the other, but the gamble did not pay off. And so when Gavin Redden, Zack's number one guy, came to ask for the money, he found his life hanging by a thread. During the few seconds of panic that followed, Marlach lost control and revealed the secret he had been keeping to himself should an opportunity arise to reap the rewards without relying on additional help. He squealed hoping it would be enough to prolong his miserable life for at least a couple of days. Being a gambler and a cheater at heart, Marlach continued to trust in his chances despite the temporary loss of edge.

* * *

Zack stared at the map, then at Gavin, then at shivering Marlach, and then again at the map. The worn piece of paper had some coordinates and other markings drawn on it, but it definitely lacked any signs of actually being valuable.

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"What the fuck is this shit?" Zack grumbled straightforwardly, a rather incredulous expression on his sullen face.

"That's what he offered as a payment," Gavin explained, "which is why I figured it might be best to bring him here and let him tell you straight." A careless shrug accompanied his words, meaning he did not really expect Zack to bother with it at all. He would probably shoot the bastard right where he stood.

A rusty automatic did appear in Zack's hand, and a barrel was pressed against Marlach's forehead quicker than he could realize what happened, but the shot never came. Something, however, did. Apparently the thrill of the situation had been too much for Marlach's sphincter, and no one in the room was safe from the consequences.

"Are you fucking serious?" a third man with a long braided hair and sunglasses snarled, but Zack did not take his eyes off the gambler.

"Keep your mouth shut, Bailey," he ordered. And even though the man who was called Bailey stood at least ten inches taller than Zack, he turned away and moved by the window without further arguments. The stench was horrid in the stuffy room, but no one dared to complain.

"Now, tell me about this piece of paper before I paint the walls with your brains," he urged, and Marlach needed no further incitement.

"Have you heard about the old gods?" he started, unsure of what his audience already knew.

Zack shrugged impatiently. "An old religion full of tricks and riddles - some ages old mambo jambo. Nothing that would save your sorry ass," he added dangerously, and the sharp click of arming the gun was the only sound that echoed in Marlach's world. But out of despair and fear, his tongue moved almost faster than his mind, seeking a way out of this flood of misfortune to a higher ground.

"Please, let me talk. If you shoot me now, all you've done is wasted those five grand for good." Knowing that Zack's world spun around money, he had a good idea of the strings he needed to pull. All he really had to manage was the fine balance between Zack's anger and greed. And as he realized this, Marlach was able to breathe a little easier - but by no means was he safe. The presentation he was about to give should be the best one ever if he wished to sneak out of this alive. One little mistake and it would be all over the walls - literally.

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Marlach sighed, wishing Zack would finally point the gun elsewhere, for the presence of a threat that his head might suddenly get blown into pieces was not exactly the kind of encouragement he was looking for, but it was all he had.

"I found, well, actually, I won the map," he began with an unwanted jitter in his voice. "An old man came to the Garden and wanted to play, so we played. After about an hour I had him cleaned out of his money, and that's when he presented that map. Told me it was a guide to riches if I wanted to - needless to say I was very interested."

Trying to keep an interested, even excited glimmer out of his eyes, Zack lowered the gun a little as a sign showing that Marlach was on the right tracks.

"Keep going," he growled and snapped his fingers. A woman, or a girl, who seemed barely legal, took out a cigarette, lit it up and sucked the filter with her brightly painted lips to make it burn properly, then she brought it to the man.

"Thanks, Dawn," he hissed quietly without lifting his eyes from the gambler. The girl stroked her mid-length, pitch black hair nervously and backed away to the couch where she had been sitting and observing everything with her large emerald eyes.

Dawn was Zack's girl, whenever he felt like it; the rest of the time she snoozed around high on heroin. She was a bitch of the worst kind to everyone but Zack, and because of that, no one ever did anything about it.

"So, like I was saying," Marlach continued, "I got interested in the riches, but when I studied the map, I realized that the place it's pointing at is in the middle of the desert, near the radiation wall."

"So that's why you haven't crawled there yet, you little worm," Bailey said sarcastically, taking a sip of Johnnie Walker Red from the old stock. Most of the whisky was bottled using the remains of the ancient marked bottles with etiquettes like Johnnie Walker and Jim Beam and sold for ridiculous prices all around the Frontier, but this was real stuff, which made it almost priceless. He and Zack had found it from a collapsed basement a couple of weeks earlier, a whole rack full of the highest quality whisky, probably more valuable than even water. A true liquid treasure that had been buried under piles of rubble and other debris. A warm, melancholic smile appeared on Bailey's face as he tasted the quality on his tongue, a taste of the old, better and safer world - something they had called civilization.

"Cut the shit and let him talk," Zack snarled, clearly eager to hear the rest. Marlach noticed this and knew his chances had just improved.

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"He's right though," he admitted, defending Bailey's statement. "It's dangerous out there, especially so close to the radiation wall, but you could make it happen no doubt."

The gun was pointing at the floor now. Zack took a long smoke from his cigarette and blew out a thick, white cloud.

"Do you know where that place is?" he then asked, wanting to weigh if the possible reward was worth the trouble.

"You know the ruins of Berklan, about sixty miles southeast from Needles?" Marlach asked carefully, not sure how well these marauders knew the surrounding geography.

"I've seen them once years ago, but I never went there. Looked pretty creepy around there," Gavin explained, momentarily gaining their attention.

Marlach nodded eagerly. "That's the place!" he announced.

"Sixty miles is a long way though," Zack muttered fretfully, but the promise of riches burned at the back of his mind. There was no man who could pass such an opportunity these days, even if it meant almost certain death. "Is there anything else we need to know?"

"Well, there's some instructions on the backside, but it all seems very vague to me," Marlach said as he turned the map around and showed the sloppy handwriting on the worn paper.

"Whoever wrote that was in a hurry or hurt - really badly," Gavin pointed out.

"Dawn, can you make anything out of this?" Zack asked, offering the piece of paper to the girl who seemed less than uninterested, but she was smart enough to keep her mouth shut about her own feelings. Zack would not have bothered with Dawn, but she was absolutely the best one of this bunch to decode old writings. If Dawn could not make sense out of it, no one could. She grabbed the paper and studied it for a moment, then glanced at the others, clearly confused by what she saw.

"It looks like a description of some kind of a ritual you're supposed to complete once inside the chambers," she read with great uncertainty. "Put on the five masks of divinity in the city of the ruined and make your choice between wealth and infinity."

"I believe infinity means immortality," Marlach dared to comment.

"Or death," Gavin reminded shortly, effectively silencing the entire room. They were all staring at Zack, who seemed to be lost in thought. Gun in one hand, and a burning cigarette in the other, he was weighing the options, and eventually he reached a conclusion.

"We'll go," he decided. "Take Stinky to change his clothes and get ready."

"Why we don't just shoot him and go by ourselves?" Bailey insisted. "He's nothing but dead weight since we got the map and everything."

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"The map talks about five masks," Zack said, "and without him there's only four of us."

"You mean three?" Dawn argued. But before she could say anything further, Zack had grabbed her by the hair, dragged her to the floor and slapped her so hard that she could not hear anything but a sharp whistle in her ears.

"Fucking bitch," he yelled, as if he completely lost control over himself. The others watched in silence, expecting him to either continue beating the helpless girl or to simply kill her, but he did neither.

"Get up and get ready. You're the fifth member of this merry group or I'll make sure you're nothing at all."

Recognizing the barely hidden threat, Dawn crawled away from him, trying to conceal tears that were quickly messing her black makeup. She did not say anything as there was nothing to be said. Zack's word was always final, for he had brought them to Needles and provided them a good standing by making a deal with the townsmen. The town offered them shelter and they brought protection in the form of guns and knowledge of how to use them. Over time they had actually managed to start a fairly successful gambling business at the ruins of the local casino, which was now partially renovated to serve the ever growing customer base. And now they would go and dig around the ruins of Berkland, hoping to find riches based on some vague text scribbled on a worn piece of paper, and there was nothing Dawn could do to keep herself out of this uninviting adventure.

2

The Hand

The exhaust fumes and the reek of the burning oil filled Marlach's nose as the band of three motorcycles rode across the desert. He was put on Gavin's bike, who had been furiously against the idea. A lengthy cleanup took place before the resistant driver agreed to even consider such thing. Finally, after a bottle of true Johnnie Walker changed owners, Gavin had reluctantly promised to take him on his bike.

The heat of the pounding sun was stifling, but the travelers lacked the option to undress a single piece of clothing, for the remnants of the destroyed ozone layer barely filtered any ultraviolet radiation. Going out in anything that left skin exposed would result in severe burns and likely malignant cell mutations within an hour from exposing to the cruel sunlight. Eyes had to be protected by glasses to prevent damage that could occur within minutes at worst. But the intense heat and dangerous radiation were not even the most disturbing hindrances in the desert - the sand was. Tiny, little dust particles that found their way underneath the clothes, glasses, hats - any layer of protection no matter how tightly they were wrapped on. Once it got through, the fine crumbs itched on the sweaty skin like tormenting rash, driving the helpless victim absolutely crazy.

Marlach felt the uncomfortable stream of sweat running down on his back, feeling slimy and slippery like eels crawling on his skin. His glasses were worn and cracked, which prevented him from seeing too well, but he did not need to see. Marlach knew where they were going, and while he was hopeful to come out as a winner with the hand he was dealt, there were too many uncertainty factors in the game.

The black ruins of Berklan grew taller as they approached the coordinates given on the old, tattered paper. The shadows of the ramshackle houses reached over them tall and dreadful as the group drove slowly through the torn and broken streets, carefully dodging the largest cracks to prevent accidents. As they passed the first buildings and entered the ghost town, a strange phenomenon occurred - the dry desert wind died completely. Now, this did not mean that the temperature dropped at all, which turned the otherwise shadowy streets into a dark oven.

"This is insane," Dawn hissed to herself, but for her own good, she did it so quietly that Zack could not hear the words.

"It's that church ahead," Gavin informed the group, gaining an approving nod from their

leader.

The three motorcycles veered in front of the ruined building and stopped. The silence of the place was almost overwhelming once the dominant roaring of the engines ceased. There was absolutely no sound, everything was dead and still, like if the town was spared from all forces of nature since the day of its abandonment. Only the inevitable effects of time were showing on fallen houses and dusty streets. The wood on porches and window frames was still untouched by the wind and sand, but the decay was clearly visible on everything. It seemed like the town was isolated somehow, protected by an invisible wall that kept the consuming weather and critters outside.

A lonely statue was kneeling near the tall metal-reinforced door, looking strangely out of place by itself there. The door was slightly open, as if left in a hurry.

"This is it?" Zack wanted to make sure.

Gavin studied the map again and nodded. "Yes, we're exactly at the coordinates."

"Let's go see what we can find out," Bailey growled and stepped toward the door, but then something completely unexpected happened.

The ashen statue by the door moved, opened his grey eyes and glanced at the intruders. There was no emotion, no life in them, and yet he was slowly moving. His mouth opened, the cracked lips tried to form words, but failed to produce a sound. The wrinkly, dried up hand reached out for them, but the movement was so slow they had no trouble staying out of range.

"What the fuck is that?" Bailey wondered, scratching his long beard, unsure of what to do.

The sound of the shot was unnaturally loud as it echoed in the empty streets. The head of the statue broke into a dusty cloud that sprinkled all over the concrete front of the door.

"Who gives a shit?" Zack uttered while putting away the still smoking gun. "Come on, let's go inside!"

Marlach's feet felt weak, but he followed the others. The vision of the ashen man refused to disappear from his mind, although he knew painfully well that there were much more important matters to be concerned of than this little oddity. Shaking his head angrily to rid himself of such thoughts, he stepped into the hallway of the old church.

* * *

The stale air tickled his throat as he followed Zack inside. Holding the sleeve of his shirt in front of his mouth to muffle the sound, Marlach coughed as quietly as he could while glancing

around hastily to possibly gain the upper hand if someone was still there, but the church seemed empty. All the signs indicated clearly that it had been that way for a long time. A thick layer of dust covered everything; the floor, benches, altar - the frames of stained glass behind the sanctuary. Before the nave, at the beginning of the hallway where they had entered the dark building, was a rusty spiral staircase leading down.

"You think the chambers and masks are in the basement?" Bailey asked the leader, pointing at the stairs.

"If there are any chambers or masks," Zack muttered balefully, glaring murderously at Marlach who swallowed hard. The moment of truth was almost at hand. It was time to see whether his gamble would pay off or if he was to lose the life he had placed on the table.

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Dawn said. She was getting frustrated, for the long hours without her beloved heroin were getting hard to bear. Zack knew this, but did not care too much. A drug addict skank was not enough reason to rush ahead and jeopardize everything.

"Wait," he ordered before Dawn was able to take a step. "Gavin, get the flashlights from the bikes and let Marlach lead the way. If there's anything dangerous down there, I want this little shit to take the first hit."

Dawn could not argue his impeccable logic and stepped back to wait for Gavin, but rolled her eyes without trying to hide her true feelings about this delay. Gavin returned in a couple of minutes with three black flashlights. The batteries were becoming quite a rarity, but this situation was the kind where using them was definitely justified. Marlach did not get a light, but was instead pushed head over heels into the darkness, only the wobbly rays of light showing flashes of what was ahead of him, and it was not much. An occasional brick wall or a dusty concrete floor, Marlach tried to feel his way by reaching ahead with his arms. The clattering stairs seemed neverending, and the darkness around him more dreadful than the Ravagers - mutated people who lost the last of their humanity in severe radiation during the afterglow. But even though the basement was dark and very uninviting - it was also silent and dead. There was no squeaking or rattling in the corners, no indication of movement or breathing at all, which came as a great relief for Marlach, who stumbled down the last steps before landing on the dusty floor.

"I need some light over here," he said to Zack, who followed right behind him, but still far enough to back off quickly if something was to attack Marlach.

"Yeah, so do I," the frontman of the gang replied abruptly. But within a couple of seconds he stood by Marlach, pointing around with the flashlight. There was a light switch right by the

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staircase, but the chances for electricity were small, almost non-existent.

"Can't hurt to try," Zack shrugged and slammed the switch on. A soft clip accompanied a small miracle as six bare lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling came alive, one in the middle, the rest in each room around the strange hexagon shaped center, casting their flickering, dim light upon the filth lying around the floor. Somehow one of the power lines must have remained intact through all these years, supplying electricity all the way from Hoover Dam.

The wallpaper was torn and faded, the walls were cracked and partially crumbled apart, but the general layout was now easily seen. Five open doors leading to seemingly identical rooms, and the staircase they had climbed down.

"Five chambers, five masks," Dawn whispered as she reached the bottom.

"Well, what do you know. It seems like Marlach's map was right," Gavin wondered, clearly having trouble believing his own eyes.

"Why the fuck someone bothered to build something like this?" Bailey wished to know, but there was no answer to his question - good guesses at best.

"The rites of old were weird, does it really need more explaining than that?" Zack sniffed. "Is there any further instructions on that paper?" he then asked, unsure of how to proceed.

"No," Dawn said firmly, "the rest of it is just barely readable babble about rewards and the gods."

"Fine then, let's get inside the chambers, each to their own, and see what we can get from here," Zack ordered, and everybody walked slowly to a door. They saw a small platform at the end of each room. A pile of mouldered clothing and old bones were randomly scattered around, a detail that caused some of them to hesitate.

"There's fucking bones and shit in here!" Dawn screamed. Bailey swore loudly to prop his own courage and Gavin glanced around nervously like a trapped rat. But Zack, unlike the rest of the group, remained perfectly calm and quiet.

"They must have made a mistake," he said, "perhaps they lacked people or something; maybe they wished for different things, so do exactly as I tell you to do. Go inside, search for the mask, put it on and think about money!" he instructed. "If anyone fucks this up by thinking about anything but money, I'll come dig your fucking eyeballs out and feed them to you!"

It was not friendly, but very effective. Everyone stepped inside, unwillingly, but they did so without further groaning.

"Close the doors and do what we came here to do!" Zack's voice thundered in the confined

space.

* * *

Marlach closed the door and sighed deeply, it was time to play. This was his one chance to either make it out alive or perish as the others would reap the rewards of this strange system. The dirty, yellow lightbulb lit the room with its faint glow. The air was full of dust and stale stench that made him want to sneeze and cough his lungs out, but there was no time to be wasted. First glance at the platform revealed nothing that could resemble a mask, and for a while Marlach was sure someone had stolen the masks - sold them for a puny profit at one of the nearby towns. But then he noticed something with unnaturally sharp edges to be human remains or just clothing. With a shivering hand, he reached for it and pulled out an item that looked like blackened goggles.

"This must be it," Marlach whispered to himself, fiddling the scratched goggles nervously in his hands. Trying to gather his thoughts and focus on what he needed to do, Marlach stepped closer to the platform. Unsure of how he was supposed to position himself, or if it indeed even mattered, he sat on the filthy floor and brought the goggles upon his face.

Everything went dark as he could not see through the completely black lenses, but something else occurred as well. More like a subtle sensation than anything else, Marlach felt alone, like the world around him had been suddenly drawn away. And then - nothing. He was not sure what to do next; was it time to choose between wealth and infinity or what? Trying to focus his mind on being immortal, Marlach was testing if something would happen, but there was still nothing - a peculiar feeling of being the only creature in the entire universe was all he got. And while it was definitely strange and scary, it was not what he was looking for. He had to wonder if the others had any better luck in their chambers, but he could not hear anything. And at that point he did not want to risk everything by removing the goggles too early.

Minutes passed without change, and eventually Marlach figured that if something was supposed to happen, would have already happened, and him sitting still in this little room was just utter waste of time.

Carefully he removed the goggles and looked around. It was quiet - too quiet. He tried to listen if he could distinguish any sounds from the neighboring rooms, anything at all to convince him that he was not alone, that there was still four other people around him separated by nothing but cheap, thin plywood and plaster walls. But he could not hear anything, and it was becoming

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increasingly disturbing, for even his own movement did not seem to create any noise. All the junk he stumbled upon while struggling toward the door; the old bones, clothes, boots, even broken drug syringes and bottles, all of it seemed to ignore him completely, and it drove him absolutely insane!

"I gotta get out of this fucking place," he hissed to himself as he reached for the door handle.

3

The Payout

The door opened silently and Marlach stepped back into the hexagon-shaped room. The other doors were still closed, perhaps the others saw it proper to wait longer - maybe something actually happened for them. Marlach saw the chance to run and leave them all behind, but how far he would get in the desert? The motorcycles required a key to start, and all the water they had with them was inside those doors in the bottles and flagons of his captors. Marlach could probably figure out how to drive, but he was not skilled enough to start the engine without a key. His strong points were in quick hands and mind, not mechanical puzzles.

Walking was also out of the question. He would die in the merciless flats, just as likely as he would do here. And so he made his decision, whether it was base indolence or some deeper, more meaningful subconscious choice, and sat on the floor by the rusted staircase. Whatever the outcome, he was going to take it like a man. The spineless lizard that he was, it was quite funny to pull out such principles and backbone in a situation like that. But then again, it was not like he had too many options to pick from.

The time ticked on, but nothing came out of the doors. The silence that had fallen upon him when he had put on the goggles never seemed to retreat, like his head was full of foam plastic preventing him from hearing any surrounding sounds. He had to question himself though. Had he heard anything but the others talking before? Yes, definitely. The sand beneath their boots had crackled against the concrete, the door hinges had squeaked when they entered the church, the heavy breathing had hissed in the dark, but now it was like somebody had just unplugged the cord from the loudspeakers of the world. The undeniable conclusion was, however, that something had gone terribly wrong.

After a time that felt like an hour at least, but what probably was not more than five or ten minutes, Marlach stood up and walked by the door next to his chamber - Dawn's chamber. But as he pressed his head against the door and listened, he could not even hear the blood rushing in his veins. A hesitant, careful knock did not create any kind of echo, it did not really even create a sound. There was no answer. The rising panic and despair made Marlach bold enough to try and open the door, but the door insisted to keep its secrets and refused to let him in.

Frustrated and confused, Marlach walked away. At least he was free, even if just for a few

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moments before death would collect his filthy soul and the world forgot that he ever existed. He climbed up the stairs and stumbled outside, and he noticed how the sand beneath his boots had ceased crackling. It was maddening, the most disturbing silence he had ever experienced, and he had no clue why and how to make it stop. The street in front of the church was empty, desolate, almost like Marlach's whole life, but it was the only kind of life he was familiar with, and it had gotten him this far. The sun was shining from the west foreshadowing the approaching evening, which left the front of the church protected from its deadly blaze.

"Hey there."

His heart skipped a beat as he almost bounced in the air like a panicky rabbit, as those two words were the only thing he had heard since putting on the weird goggles. And it was not just words, but also the tone they were spoken in; colorless and bland, and yet something that could be almost referred to as friendly.

Marlach turned around as it seemed like the voice came from behind, from the direction of the church door, which felt kind of peculiar. A man dressed in very old clothes, from the time when there had been no radiation wall - thick and covering almost every inch of his body. A tan colored bandana covered half of his face like he had just come through a sandstorm of the century. There was a lively glimmer in his pale blue eyes, and as he removed the bandana from his face and gazed at Marlach with a faint, careless smile, the gambler could have sworn he had seen the man before. But no matter how he tried, he could not connect his face to anything he remembered.

"I'm so happy to see you here," the man said cheerfully. "I've been waiting for so long."

"Who are you?" Marlach asked astoundedly, still unable to believe his own eyes.

"Oh, I'm— was part of the group that came here before— decades ago. I'm the one who your leader tried so mercifully to put out of my misery." Marlach saw tears in his eyes and realized that there was no sarcasm in his voice - he was still genuinely touched by Zack's deadly gesture.

"You're the ashen man?" he wondered, remembering how Zack shot a bullet through his head, leaving nothing but black dust behind.

"Yes," he said, "but unfortunately such acts of kindness never helped me— and neither will they help you." And as he continued to speak, his voice turned colder. "I'm free now, and I'll be traveling beyond the sunset soon to a land with no troubles, and you will take my place here in this forsaken pit of devilry."

Suddenly Marlach felt scared and unsure of what to do or to think, but the jolly figure had not finished yet.

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"I should tell you something before I go," he said, shifting his weight for a more comfortable posture. "I spent a good amount of years trying to figure it out, and I think I finally did." He took a step closer, lowering his voice, as if there was someone unwanted trying to listen what he was about to say. "Every member of the group must choose the same. If even one picks differently, the rite leads you to a dead end, just like it did us. I picked immortality. I mean— who wouldn't, you know?" The man took a deep breath before proceeding. "Anyway, I chose immortality and sentenced my whole group to death, and now you have done the same, my friend. But you see, the moment when you made your choice, I was set free."

"How did you survive here?" Marlach was curious to know. He had trouble comprehending what exactly was happening, so instead of trying to grasp the whole concept, he concentrated on details that might be helpful.

The man laughed. "What an odd question," he said and laughed some more. "I suppose you didn't quite get it, my friend. No one, who does the rite and fucks it up, survives - no one."

"But that would mean I'm dead," Marlach argued.

The man clapped, and the hauntingly dry sound echoed in the cracked walls of the surrounding buildings. "Well, I really hate to break this to you, but you, in fact, are as dead as a pile of rotten meat with maggots on top!" Then he laughed, clearly proud of his little wordplay. "Now, excuse me, but my time here is over. I can finally move on."

And while still talking, he began to walk toward the town limits, waving mockingly at Marlach, who was too confused and dumbfounded to function at all.

"Hey, wait a second!" he finally broke out from his momentary paralysis and tried to stall him, but the man smiled without bothering to grant him another look and walked on. And as he moved away, his figure began to wither. Small holes appeared all over his body, like cutworms eating away the green leaf, expanding quickly as he walked through the street until there was nothing left of him, and the crushing emptiness took over once again - worse than ever before.

"Please, come back!" Marlach yelled, trying to run after him, but as he stormed through the streets in his desperate attempt to catch the vanished man, he suddenly found himself back at the church. He screamed in primal, animalistic rage and frustration, but received no answer - not even an echo. His throat was dry, and quite strangely, the heat of the sun still burned on his skin like it did on any healthy, living tissue, leaving Marlach utmost puzzled.

"How the fuck is this possible if I'm dead?" he asked loudly, unable to understand what was going on, but also realizing and slowly accepting that the empty streets would not give him any

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answers. His mind still insisted that if he could not get any water, he was going to die eventually, and the pain and suffering would all be over. But at the same time the words of that man remained haunting him, that he was already dead. Marlach had made it through several tight situations during his short life, but this one was finally the kind where all options seemed bad or worse. He remembered how bad the guy by the door had looked, and wondered how long it would take to reach that stage of decay while still lingering in this woeful place. And where was the map? Locked inside the chambers where the rest of his group would turn into dust, so no one could even find it anymore.

But the map could not be bound to the ghost town, not in the same way as the people who were lured there. The map was free to wander, and it would continue to fly around, seeking new victims to fall under its temptation.

* * *

Jimmy Kruger flushed the toilet and stepped outside. The Dirty Dice saloon was filling up nicely, but it was still early and the largest crowd yet to come. As he walked across the tiled hallway, something caught his eye and brought him to a halt. A worn piece of paper had stuck behind the sink pipes, and for obvious reasons it ignited his interest. It could be a secret message between customers - gang members - who were preparing drug deals, which led him to wonder if there was a way for him to snatch a share.

Jimmy was a fat man, and bending down like that required real effort, but somehow he managed to fish up the paper and straightened his spine with a long sigh of relief.

After unfolding the paper he stared at it for a moment as a wide smile appeared on his ugly face. "I better send my boys to check this place out," he muttered to himself and slipped the map into his pocket, still sure it was a drug related hideout or a meeting place. In any case, there was a good chance for a good profit, which made it well worth finding out. Of course, Jimmy did not bother to read everything that was scabbled on the map. He saw the coordinates, which was pretty much all he needed to see. The boys would take care of all the rest.