

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

EPISODE



ELEVEN

CLEARLY SCRAPING THE BOTTOM OF THE PROVERBIAL (AND QUITE POSSIBLY LITERAL) BARREL, OUR FECKLESS HOST SPARES NO EXPENSE OR ECONOMY IN THIS WEEK'S FRUITLESS ENDEAVOR, OFFERING US AN ENTIRELY SUPERFICIAL INTRODUCTION BY WAY OF APOLOGY IN ADDITION TO THE CUSTOMARY ONE WE'VE SOMEHOW LEARNED TO ENDURE OVER THE INTERVENING MONTHS, ALONG WITH AN EQUALLY INTERMINABLE AND POINTLESS EXERCISE IN NAVAL GAZING EXCESS BEFORE INFLECTING UNPOLISHED FILLER FROM HIS APPARENTLY ETERNALLY FORTHCOMING NOVEL, OPERATING UNDER THE ASSUMPTION THAT WE WILL FORGIVE THE LACK OF CONTEXT, CHARACTER, OR COHERENCE THAT THE MORE THOUGHTFUL AND TALENTED AUTHORMIGHT LABOR TO INCLUDE IN A TYPICAL STORY SHARED WITH A READERSHIP WHICH IS WILLING TO INDULGE FOR THEIR PLEASURE. UNLIKE, OF COURSE, US. ✱

MARSHALL WOKE IN DARKNESS...

excerpt from "Pantheon" by T.M. Camp

Marshall woke in darkness, rolling over in time to see the luminous numbers on the clock radio click over. He groaned, his voice flat in the stale air of the trailer. Two o'clock in the morning and he'd already sweated through the sheets.

He rolled back over, away from the amber glare of the clock, in search of a cool spot on the mattress. The damp sheets clung to him like plastic wrap.

After tossing and turning for a few minutes, he gave up on sleep.

He'd woken angry, fretful. Again. A half-forgotten, hazy dream. A group of people arguing, voices buzzing in the back of his mind.

The bed frame squealed under his weight as he rose and padded to the tiny bathroom, pissing a steaming amber arc of last night's bourbon into the stained plastic bowl.

Snapping off the light, he went back into the bedroom. He stopped to peer out between the blinds at the depth of the Texas night outside. It was quiet out there, just a few campfires still flickering in front of the other trailers and tents arranged in a semicircle at the back outskirts of the fairgrounds.

It almost looked like an encampment, he thought. Something from the war between the states — if you ignored the rusting trailers and RVs, of course.

For a moment, he could almost imagine he heard someone plucking a banjo, the lonely whine of a harmonica. And, beneath it all, the low thunder of approaching hoofbeats.

Marshall shook himself. He'd been dozing on his feet there at the window, hands hooked into the blinds.

He rubbed his face and turned to flop down face-first onto the bed, panting old fumes into the steaming mattress. He tried to slow his breathing, to push back against the insistent, heavy heat in the air.

After a long moment he sat up again and leaned against the wall, his back sticking to the paneling. He tugged a cigarette from a battered pack on the nightstand and lit it.

There, sweating in the dark, he smoked and didn't think about anything at all. He'd figured out a long time ago that if you're not happy, it was best not to think about it too much. And so he hadn't.

That was around the time he'd learned to drink, too. Eventually he figured it'd do some good. At the very least, it dulled the edge of that ongoing argument raging through his dreams, night after night.

Apart from that, it had been a long time since he'd thought of anything, felt anything. A long time since he'd known a good night's sleep, a long time since he'd felt anything remotely resembling peace or comfort . . . a long time since he'd felt at home. One of the many curses of this life.

He fell asleep eventually, despite the heat and despite the glowing ember of his cigarette as it burned down, slowly, between his fingers. Marshall didn't stir, not even when the ember crept down to smolder inside his fist for a minute before, finally, going out.



Marshall woke with the sun in his eyes. He groaned and rolled over, burying his face deep into damp sponge of his pillow. His head still buzzed — though from his dream or hangover, he couldn't tell. He lay there for a long while, the air of the trailer boiling around him.

Unable to fall back asleep, he rose and pulled on a pair of ragged jeans. He stood for a moment, listening to the sound of the fairgrounds outside. Closing his eyes, he could see it all — dusty, stale, and cluttered. During the night it glowed with the promise of magic and carnival. By day it looked terrible, stripped and exposed — like a battleground autopsy.

Marshall could feel the bands of heat rippling through the air around him. A trailer. An aluminum trailer. In West Texas. In August. For six weeks he'd been trying to figure out what in God's name had brought him here.

He checked the clock. It looked like he had a couple of hours before he had to go to work. He made a mental note to head over to the tent ten minutes early. Taylor liked it when Marshall was early, liked giving him a little pep talk before the show kicked off. Maybe today he'd get his chance.

Marshall padded out of the bedroom and down the length of the trailer to the kitchenette. He fished a battered saucepan out of the cluttered sink and ran it under the tap, scraping away the lingering scabs of canned chili. Once the pot was reasonably clean, he rinsed and refilled it with water. He moved another encrusted pot off of the stove top, snapping on the

burner and setting the water down on top of the gray coil as it slowly faded to orange.

He went to the refrigerator, ignoring the clattering chug of its overtaxed compressor battling back against the heat. He took out a carton of eggs and set them down in a band of sunlight on the countertop to warm them up.

The open space beyond the kitchenette — they probably called it an “Entertaining Nook” in the catalog, back in the 1970’s — didn’t offer much entertainment beyond an old naugahyde recliner patched with duct tape and a broken television set. Marshall spread an dishtowel across the back of the chair so his skin wouldn’t stick, sitting down with a sigh. He picked up a battered bible lying open-faced on the floor next to the chair, leafing through the thin pages.

He sighed again, lit a cigarette, and settled back into the heat and the Book of Ezekiel while he waited for the water to boil.



“O my people, I will open your graves and bring you back into the land of plenty...”

Marshall could hear the water boiling on the stove. Laying aside his bible, he peeled himself off of the recliner and went into the kitchen. He switched off the burner and took a rusting can of coffee from the counter, dropping a few handfuls of grounds into the water and stirring it with his forefinger. The sunbeam on the counter had drifted to one side, leaving the eggs in shadow. He lowered five of them gently into the water, one by one, watching to make sure none of them cracked.

Making eggs and coffee in the same pot — a trick he'd learned a long time ago. Another life.

He lit a cigarette and surveyed the war zone in the kitchen. Casualties of past meals lay strewn everywhere. Dirty dishes clogged the sink, beer bottles crowding the counter alongside tumblers filled with the murky memories of old ice and bourbon. He pulled on the cigarette, grateful for the sharp smoke overpowering the sweet smell seeping out of the trashbag under the sink.

Outside, he could hear the fairgrounds coming to life. They opened at noon on the weekends and Marshall was on at one o'clock.

Even with Taylor's ten minutes early, he still had time for coffee and eggs. Relying on his cigarette as a timer — when it burned down, his breakfast would be ready — Marshall went back into the little nook and sat down.

Taking up the bible once more, he moved his teeth over the old words, tasting the stale prophecies and cigarette smoke while he waited for his breakfast.



Marshall stood at the center of the makeshift boxing ring beneath the shabby circus tent. The afternoon sun streamed in through a hole cut into the canvas high above his head, highlighting Marshall in the ring like a spotlight. The air inside the tent was stale — saturated with the sour tang of old cigarettes and sweat. At night, they used the tent for the striptease act. The only difference was the moonlight.

Marshall could see Taylor pacing outside, passing back and forth in front of the open flaps as he barked at the crowd. The little man was angry, Marshall could hear it in his voice. The day was too hot, the crowd too small. Holiday weekends were the worst and Veterans Day was one of the worst of them — a perfectly vague holiday that sent most people to the cemetery and not the fairgrounds. For everyone else it was just another excuse to have an extra six pack at the backyard barbecue.

All told, there were maybe fifteen or twenty people in the tent, staring up at Marshall while they waited for the show to begin. He ignored them all. It was just another crowd, same as every other one he'd ever been in front of. Anyone could get in on a day like this. For five bucks you could watch him run through the usual strongman routine. It hadn't changed in a hundred years: Weightlifting, chain pulls, and other tests of his mighty strength. Nothing you hadn't seen in a dozen old movies, nothing you'd be impressed by. Not these days.

But that wasn't what you were paying for, after all. Every show, someone in the crowd — if he had twenty bucks to buy his way into the ring — would be brave enough or drunk enough (or both) to spar with Marshall. If the rube stayed on his feet for three minutes, he got a hundred bucks. And if he managed to put Marshall down, he'd get five hundred bucks prize money. That was what everyone else paid their five bucks for. They came to see Marshall wipe the floor with some knucklehead or get his ass handed to him. They came to see the money go to one of their own when Marshall fell.

Five hundred bucks. Not bad for three minutes work, providing you could go the distance. So far, no one ever had — not here in Texas or anywhere else. For the past twenty-odd years, Marshall'd been doing the same

show in fairs and carnivals all over the country. Lately he'd seen the crowds thinning out and he had a feeling he'd have to move on to something new soon enough. He'd been doing it long enough to know the signs.

Even if he stuck to the same racket, he was going to have to cut loose from his current gig. Taylor was starting to get on his nerves and Marshall knew well enough what that would lead to. He just didn't like the little man, didn't like his foul mouth or foul temper.

For his part, Taylor liked Marshall well enough. The big guy brought the crowds in, that was enough. But with two years as manager of the carnival, he didn't think Marshall completely understood the showman side of the business — not that Taylor hadn't done his best to teach the old dog a few new tricks...

Marshall's first night with the outfit, Taylor called him in to the trailer the little man referred to as "my office."

"You made it look too easy," Taylor said before Marshall even had a chance to sit down. "Nobody's paying five bucks to see how fast you can kick some kid's ass."

Taylor was sitting behind a cheap desk littered with old receipts and the tattered, dogeared horror novels he used to pass the time between when he was chewing somebody out. In the window behind him, a decrepit air conditioner — the one tangible sign of Taylor's status in the hierarchy of the carnival — shoved the air around as best it could.

"They aren't?" Marshall stood there, waiting for Taylor to either fire him or hand over his take for the day. He honestly didn't care which, just so long as he could get

away from the sweaty little creep as soon as possible. He was afraid, if he stayed, of what he might do.

Taylor shook his head. “You think they give a shit how much you can lift? You think that’s what they’re paying for?”

“Aren’t they?” Marshall shrugged, hating himself for taking the bait. He had a feeling that Taylor was deliberately drawing this out, just to piss him off. Sizing him up on his first day.

Taylor rolled his eyes. “They’re paying to see you lose, dumbass.”

Marshall didn’t reply.

Taylor leaned back in his chair, digging in the pocket of his jeans. “Next time, just try not to be so fucking...” he trailed off, holding out a wad of cash.

“What?” Marshall asked, reaching for the money. But Taylor held on to the folded bills for a moment, just being an asshole one last time before letting them go. Once he had it, Marshall counted the money.

“Just work it a little bit more. Fucking work it, man.” Taylor sighed. “You think you can manage to do that?”

“I guess.” Marshall pocketed the money and wiped his hand on the leg of his jeans. The bills had been damp with the little man’s sweat. “Sure.” He turned to go but Taylor held up his hands, palms out.

“Whoa whoa whoa there, big guy. Where you headed in such a hurry? You gonna get laid or something?”

Marshall hesitated, halfway at the door. “No.”

Taylor chuckled. "You know why fighters don't fuck before a big bout?"

Marshall did know but he also knew that men like Taylor never really asked questions they couldn't answer themselves. He kept his mouth shut. It'd get him out of there faster.

The little man tapped his knuckles against the underside of the desk. "Makes you weak, baby. Makes you weak." He shook his head, grinning. "Maybe you should get laid tonight. Or just stick it in enough to give us a better show. What do you say? You think you could pull out early this one time?"

Marshall said nothing.

"Yeah, good plan. That way, everyone gets a little pussy. You get some tonight and the rubes get some t'morrow." He rose, shuffling through the wreckage on his desk. "I'm just fucking with you, dumbass. But there's a couple of good bars in this town, if you're interested in cheap beer and cheaper broads." He winked. "Real live Texas Pussy, next best thing to your left hand. You ought to try some before you die."

Marshall raised his eyebrows. "Before I die?"

Taylor didn't notice. "Yeah, I'm headed over t'night with a couple of guys from the crew. You want to come along? Might get you laid, if we run into a blind broad." He smiled, all friendly and good natured. "I don't think you got paid enough today to get a normal woman drunk enough to fuck you, but I might be wrong. Maybe you've got hidden charms."

"No..." Marshall felt the flush in his face and looked down at his boots. "Uh, that's okay. Thanks anyways."

Taylor stayed at him. “You son of a bitch. You already got something lined up tonight, don’tcha?”

The bloom of crimson on Marshall’s face flared brighter, rushing up to ring the edges of his graying pompadour. He shook his head.

Taylor whistled slowly. “Goddamn. You’ve only been here one day. Who is she? One of the crows from town? She in the audience? I seen them sizing you up today, and not just the men either.”

Marshall shook his head again, still locked on his boots. He didn’t want Taylor to see his eyes.

“One of the girls in the show?” Taylor made a sour face. “Shit, man. Don’t go there. Everybody’s gone there. Carny Pussy’s like sticking it in an ATM on payday. Everybody else already made a deposit before you.”

Besides, Taylor thought, most of the girls with the show are already hooked up. This stupid fuck could stir up trouble if he went sniffing around any of them. Not that anyone could do anything about it, given the sheer massivity of the shithead. But it’d still be trouble.

“It ain’t like that.” Marshall pulled a folded sheet of paper from his back pocket and held it out.

The little man grunted as he rose and came around the desk. He took the paper from Marshall and unfolded it.

Then he burst out laughing.

“Jesus H. Fucking Christ!” he hooted. “A revival? You think a tent meeting’s gonna save your soul? Or are you just looking for some Bible Thumping Pussy?” He shook his head. “Goddamn it, Marsh. You come with us. We’ll set you up. Honky Tonk Pussy may not be as

clean as what you'd get at a tent meeting, but at least they'll let you have more than a sniff of it."

He looked up at the man. The blush had returned in a blaze, like a sudden sunburn. Only Marshall wasn't smiling shyly and staring at his boots anymore. No, his ice blue eyes were drilling into Taylor's with a hatred so ragged and naked that the smaller man stepped back quickly, wondering if he could get to the revolver in the desk behind him fast enough.

Carefully, respectfully, he refolded the flyer and handed it back to Marshall. The larger man accepted it and slipped it back into his pocket, his eyes never leaving Taylor's.

Taylor swallowed thickly. "You're fucking with me," he smiled weakly. "Right buddy?"

Marshall didn't answer, didn't move. After a second or two, he lifted his chin slightly — an acknowledgment, maybe a dare.

"Really now?" Taylor could hear the whine in his voice and he hated himself for it. But he couldn't help it. "What're you, Baptist or something?"

And then the storm cleared. The air in the office lifted and the heat that'd been pouring off of the big man collapsed back in on itself. Outside, someone turned up a radio, "Ida Red" blaring out into the night. And suddenly Marshall was back — the shy palooka with an iron grey pompadour and a face like a brick road. He ducked his head and muttered something.

"What's that you say?"

Marshall cleared his throat. "Assembly of God."

Taylor whistled again. "Goddamn. A good ol' A.G. boy working in my sideshow." He stopped and made sure that the other man hadn't taken offense. "That, uh, that don't bother you?"

"What don't bother me?"

"The cuss, uh, the cursing?"

Marshall shrugged. "Every man's soul's his own."

Taylor raised his eyebrows. Maybe there was more to this nimrod than what showed on the surface. He pursed his lips. "Well, that might be true. And if you'd rather sip watered-down lemonade with the baby Jesus than hang out with us sinners, it is well with my soul." He chuckled, turning away. "But my soul is hankering to head out and find some pussy. And you are holding my shit up, Brother Marshall."

The big man nodded and turned to go. When he was almost out the door, Taylor called to him. "Hey Marsh?"

Marshall turned back with a sigh.

Taylor nodded toward the door. "You really going to that?"

Marshall lifted his chin again.

Jesus Christ, this fucker gets pissed quick. Taylor held up his hands in the universal symbol for Please Don't Kick My Ass. "No man, I'm not fucking with you. I just want to know."

"Yeah," Marshall said. "I'm really going."

"Why?"

Marshall shrugged. “Cause that’s where God is.” He nodded one more time and pushed open the screen door, his old boots heavy on the rickety wooden steps outside.

Taylor sat back down, shaking his head. He chuckled, then laughed. “Bible Thumping Pussy” was a new one and he mentally filed it away for future use.

Outside the tent it sounded like Taylor had grown irritated with the crowd and was warming things up, shaming guys in front of their friends, wives, and girlfriends, daring them to come inside the tent. But it was working and the crowd inside was starting to fill out. Mostly men, a few high school kids walking around with their thumbs hooked into each other’s belt loops and their fingers splayed out across the ass of their lover’s jeans. Young love.

The first few days Marshall’d been with the show, Taylor’d begged him to work the crowd while they were coming in. Taylor was a big fan of pro wrestling and he had a strong conviction that a little snarling and beating your breast went a long way towards getting a crowd worked up. But once he saw Marshall standing there, staring blankly out at the crowd — once he saw how women shivered and even the biggest men dropped their eyes every time Marshall passed his gaze over them — Taylor admitted he’d been wrong. “No man, fuck that Hulk Hogan act. You keep doing that silent psycho routine. They’re eating it up.”

Truth be told, Marshall wasn’t putting on an act. Nor was he crazy or angry. He was just bored. If it looked to everyone else like he was crazy, he couldn’t care less.

Taylor'd be closing the tent flaps soon, Marshall decided. The crowd inside had grown to forty or so with his bullying, about as good as could be expected for today.

He knelt down to check the laces on his boots, the stained red satin robe pooling around him on the scuffed canvas. Watching from under his brows, he studied a group of guys standing together in the crowd. They laughed and nudged each other, slyly passing a pint bottle back and forth between them. Just a bunch of fratboys out to make the most of the weekend, as young and stupid as puppies off the leash.

Then Marshall saw him: The kid easily stood a head taller than his buddies. His USMC t-shirt looked to be about one size too small, probably so he could show off his muscles. The kid had the classic jarhead buzzcut to match the shirt and Marshall could see the blue edge of a tattoo peeking out from one of his too-tight sleeves. The kid wasn't smiling and joking with the others. He stood with his arms crossed, fists under his biceps to push them out. The kid stood there sizing Marshall up and not giving a shit if Marshall noticed.

Marshall didn't give a shit, when it came right down to it. But he was relieved to see the kid in the crowd. It meant that Taylor wouldn't give him too much grief later for not selling it. No one would expect this kid to take a dive.

He heard the flaps close. Showtime.

He stood up quickly and stripped off his robe, slinging it over one of the corner posts. He straightened up, rolling his shoulders and walking backwards into the center of the ring. He rolled his head around on his neck and if he heard the crowd fall silent, he made no sign. The people moved in closer to the ring. The sound of his vertebrae crackled loudly around the tent.

Even the rowdiest of crowds fell silent at the sight of the topography of old scars laced across his chest and torso.

Marshall stood, shifting quietly on his feet and letting his gaze drift lazily across the crowd once more. He could feel their eyes crashing over him as they took in his pitted, scarred frame. From time to time he'd catch someone's gaze, but their eyes skipped away from his like a stone on a pond.

Except one, of course. The muscular boy in the crowd, he stared back at Marshall. His face was familiar, the old fighter realized. He'd seen the boy in the crowd the day before, seen him earlier in the week as well. The kid had been out there, sizing him up for days. Marshall let his gaze linger for a moment, just long enough — an acknowledgement, perhaps even a greeting . . . and then he moved on. They might be strangers after all, but he knew this boy a little bit.

Taylor approached the ring, squeezing through the crowd. He snaked through the ropes and stepped into a corner to watch as Marshall turned slowly in the shaft of light from the hole above. Dust motes drifted above the fighter and it might have even been a little bit beautiful, if not for the brutality below that was to come. All part of the act.

Once the crowd had waited long enough, Taylor began pacing the perimeter of the ropes as he started in on his usual spiel. Marshall had been with the carnival for two weeks. During that time he'd never heard Taylor alter his pitch more than a word or two. The little man started quiet, pitching his voice low to draw the people in. This was when the show really began.

There. Marshall heard his cue. He leaned forward, falling face-first towards the canvas. At the last possible moment he caught himself and, using the

force of his fall as momentum, went straight into a series of pushups. The crowd let out a little gasp as he fell, but they recovered quickly enough to start whispering the count as the number of pushups began to mount. Eventually, they were shouting out the count.

Taylor let them into it, making them part of the act and counting along with them. As Marshall rounded the corner towards 300, Taylor reached out to a woman in the audience. “How ‘bout you, ma’am? You interested in show business?”

The woman blushed and shook her head, but her friends egged her on, pushing her towards the ring. Taylor held the ropes open for her, a silly formality in his gesture. Marshall knew the man had already classified the woman in her polyester pants and sequined shirt as “Trailer Park Pussy” or something equally charming despite the fact that he acted every inch the gentleman as he helped her into the ring. He led her, still giggling and nervous, towards the center where Marshall mechanically continued his regimen of pushups.

At his next cue, Marshall stopped on the downstroke, suspending his massive bulk two inches off the canvas floor.

“Step right up, ma’am.” The woman kicked off her shoes and Taylor helped her up onto Marshall’s back, settling her in between his shoulder blades. “No worries, ma’am,” Taylor told the tentative woman. “A little thing like you’s nothing to this big boy here.”

The woman stood on the broad expanse of Marshall’s back, wobbling a little as he began his pushups again. She gave a little scream as he slowly moved into motion once more. Taylor let go of her hands and she rode Marshall, her arms outstretched like a tightrope

walker. The crowd started up their count again. When they reached 500, Marshall lowered himself once again and Taylor helped the woman down. There was general applause and a few whistles as he led her to the edge of the ring,

Marshall rose and stretched out his arms, rolling his shoulders. There was a murmur from the crowd when he turned, displaying the red marks the woman's feet had left on his back. He cracked his neck again, his face as flat and scuffed as the canvas under his feet.

Taylor picked a few more volunteers — two men with the pudgy faces of high school quarterbacks who'd gone to seed over the intervening years. Once they'd climbed into the ring, he led them over to a large crate in one corner. The two men struggled together to lift out a length of chain perhaps twenty feet long. Taylor, still yammering, handed one of them a ball peen hammer.

The men looked over the chain. Each link was the size of a closed fist and rang dully under the hammer. The men stepped back, satisfied and a little relieved to let the chain fall. Taylor took the hammer back, clutching the head of it in his fist and pointing the wooden handle out into the crowd like a pistol, picking out volunteers.

One by one, the others climbed up to join the little crowd of men in the ring.

Marshall took up one side of the chain and stood in his corner, holding it limply in his left hand. In the center of the ring, the five volunteers lifted the longer length of the chain with visible effort and drew it tight between them.

With Taylor urging them on, the men began to pull, throwing their whole weight backwards in order to pull Marshall off balance.

Marshall stood in his corner, the chain clutched in his fist. If he felt any sign of strain, if he had to make any effort, he did not show it.

The men stopped pulling for a moment and huddled up, glaring over their shoulders at Marshall. They nodded to each other and moved forward, bearing the length of chain, closing the gap between them and the fighter. The crowd increased its murmuring and no one missed the fact that Marshall showed no sign or reaction at the men's advance.

"Careful now, gentlemen..." Taylor called. "The management won't be held responsible for any injuries."

"We won't hurt him much," one of the men joked. The crowd laughed.

"I wasn't worried about him, sir." Taylor grinned, winking at the crowd.

Marshall said nothing, did nothing.

The men stopped a few feet away from him and, all at once, one of them shouted "Now!" as they all threw themselves backwards, running as fast as they could towards the opposite side of the ring, dragging the chain and howling like barbarians.

Then the chain snapped taut, whiplashing them off their feet. As a body they fell, landing on their backs.

There was Marshall, still standing, solid . . . his left hand still gripping the other end of the chain.

The volunteers groaned and the crowd filled the tent with their noise. Taylor crowded over the top of the voices, egging them on. In the midst of it all stood Marshall, solid as a stone on the shore.

Taylor helped the volunteers up and slapped them on the back as they exited the ring.

The tent filled with the noise of the chain once more. All eyes went to Marshall, watching as he deftly reeled in the links and coiled it over his shoulder. He carried it over to the wooden crate and replaced it once more as the noise in the tent increased, a low babble of voices rising and falling around him. Once the chain was stowed away, Marshall went back to the center of the ring and waited, giving no sign he could hear the noise of the crowd revving up around the tent like a turbine.

Taylor had started a call and response with the crowd, riling them up for the grand finale.

Marshall blinked, a momentary crack in his deadpan gaze. For a moment he'd thought he'd heard . . . there, underneath the noise of the crowd: Someone was whispering.

Marshall shifted his gaze, a slight catch in his slow rotation. He thought for a second that he'd heard — there, underneath the noise of the crowd.

There. Someone was whispering.

Marshall turned to pick out the voice and all of the hum of the crowd, but it drifted away from him like smoke.

He blinked. It was gone.

Taylor's voice rang out. "Is there anyone out there, anyone so brave and bold, so plain crazy, to face the champion in the ring?"

Marshall knew, he could have told him. The kid in the T-shirt met his eyes. Around him, his friends chipped in for the fight, handing a wad of crumpled bills to Taylor as they made way for their buddy to enter the ring.

The kids eyes never left Marshall's, not for a moment.

"How old are you, kid?" Taylor asked.

"I'm 19."

Taylor nodded at Marshall. The big man went to the opposite corner of the ring and slipped an old pair of boxing gloves on. One of them, the left, was split and had been mended with duct tape.

"You ever box before?" Marshall heard Taylor ask.

"High school," the kid said as he stripped off his T-shirt and slung it over one of the ropes. He was big, muscular but not toned. He gone for size in the weight room, not looks. "Mostly just screwing around," the kid said, holding out his hands to vanish inside a pair of gloves Taylor laced up for him.

"Yeah, I bet. Well, this ain't high school and you ain't screwing around anymore." Taylor pulled the laces tight. "You got that? "

"Yes sir." The kid kept his eyes on Marshall.

"And keep it clean out there, because he'll get righteously pissed. Got it?"

The kid nodded, waving off the headgear Taylor offered.

“Suit yourself. Since your looks obviously ain’t an issue.” Taylor unwrapped a mouthpiece and held it up. “What about those teeth, Trap Jaw?”

The kid jerked his head back, sneering at Taylor around the mouthpiece as it went in.

Taylor spun, leading the kid to the center of the ring where Marshall was waiting.

While Taylor got the crowd worked up, Marshall and the kid waited in the center of the ring. Marshall was glad to see the kid kept it cool. Some guys like to talk trash and start a shoving match while Taylor put on a show. But this kid was playing it cool. Marshall liked him for that.

Marshall nodded to the insignia tattoo on the kid’s upper arm. “You in the ‘Corps?”

“Rotsee,” the kid said around his mouthpiece. “After I graduate, they get me for four years.”

Marshall said “They get you for longer than that, son.”

The kid nodded, serious and almost respectful. “What about you? You a jarhead?”

Marshall shrugged. “I was a soldier for a time. But no, I’m no Marine.”

The kid curled his lip around the mouthpiece and jerked his head towards Taylor. “He going to be done anytime soon?” He wiped the spit off his chin with the back of his glove.

Marshall shrugged. “I never can tell.”

Taylor came back and said, sotto voce “Last chance, chief. Three minutes is longer than you think. No shame in stepping out now.”

The kid didn’t even look at him. “Start the fight already.”

Taylor shrugged. “You got it, fucker.” He stepped back and held his hand out palm down between them. The two fighters tapped gloves.

No one rang a bell . . . but the fight was on.

Marshall watched the kid move — good form, but a little sloppy. *Too bad*, he thought, *the Marines could have used you.*

The kid moved forward. Marshall let him come.

Three hundred bucks if you went three minutes...

Twenty-three seconds later, the kid was being helped out of the ring by two of his friends. His toes dragged as they walked him out, one on each side, supporting him. All his bluster, nothing but stuffing leaking out his old ragdoll seams.

Marshall watched in his corner while Taylor did his best to persuade someone else to give it a shot. The little man was angry, Marshall could tell. And no one was game for a fight, not after what Marshall had done to that kid.

As the last of the crowd was filtering out, casting disappointed looks at the ring, Taylor came over to Marshall’s corner.

“Sorry,” Marshall said. He’d tried to make it last as long as he could.

Taylor didn’t say anything. He unlaced one of Marshall’s gloves and then started on the other. Once he’d collected them both, he turned away. “You fucking asshole,” was all he said.

Marshall stood there, watching the dust motes drift in the beam of light from above.

There was another show in 20 minutes. Not enough time to go back to his trailer, not enough time to read for a while or maybe catch a few winks.

No time at all.

FIN ✨

This is a work of fiction. All situations, events, and characters are nothing more or less than products of the author's imagination — at least, for now. You never can tell with this sort of thing. At any moment in this life, the things in which you would have invested nothing more than an ounce of faith have a tendency to ambush you, often late at night when the shadow of your smug certainty has no clear edge. Just saying.

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He's the one to blame.

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FORGET THE HEARTS AND FLOWERS.



WOE TO THE SOUL THAT DEPENDS ON THE FLESH.