
The Mechanical Mechanic, His Apprentice, and the Judge

By Sarah K. Castle

First published at Helix, A Speculative Fiction Quarterly www.skcastle.com

"No business after six!" Lewis yelled from his chair next to the milling machine. The shop had been closed for an hour, and Epictetus was the only company he wanted tonight. After a minute, the polite knocking resumed. Smiling at the irony, he traced a passage from The Discourses with a titanium finger.

When you close your doors and make darkness within, remember never to say that you are alone, for you are not alone; nay, God is within, and your genius is within. God and genius were damned tonight; whoever was at the door needed a mechanic.

He lurched upright, using the pile of books next to the chair for support. The rewired nerves in his hip always took a while to wake up, leaving him unsteady on the prosthetic leg. He took the clean coverall hanging on the drill press' handle and pulled it over his worn jeans and t-shirt, to cover his steel arm.

"Can't read the goddamn sign or what?" he grumbled, passing the dusty metal shelves piled with car parts on his way to the front door. Paula Larsen from the Alma Township Council stood outside, her fist raised, ready to knock again. A bulky young man stood several paces behind her.

"Mr. MacBain, sorry to disturb you."

"Like the sign says, I conduct all of my business at the gate, Ms. Larsen."

"I'm not here to discuss the cars."

"The gate." He shut the door firmly and walked to the side door, cursing himself for having nipped into his whiskey stash tonight. If Council sent Paula, they wanted something. Whiskey on his breath would give her more leverage to get it. It was probably about the fight at the Top Deck last weekend. They'd want him to come to a prayer meeting to account for himself and decide on a restitution for that young fuck.

Lewis would make the restitution if it kept council out of his business and him out of those goddamned prayer meetings. Alma needed vintage race cars and he had the materials and

knowledge to produce them. He made cars for their track and in return asked only to be left alone. That was the deal. He didn't need or want to go to meetings to praise God, Alma and Country. He'd done his service for the country forty years ago, and if anything, he figured this grass-roots theocracy owed him on several counts. From the way it'd grown wild across the whole country, Lewis knew they could afford to pay.

Larsen stood, arms crossed, on the other side of the razor wire-topped fence as Lewis unlocked the gate. The oldest of his dogs, a black-spotted grey shepherd, snuffled at her and her charge when they entered the junkyard. The old bitch was the only dog tame enough to leave unchained when he had visitors. He hoped she did not make them feel welcome.

Lewis didn't recognize the young man. He wore a black tank top, revealing arms densely inked with tattoos from wrist to shoulder. Black hair, trimmed close to the scalp, extended along his jaw as thick stubble, framing a pale face with a light olive tone. Muscled arms and shoulders told Lewis he'd worked as a laborer. The cast on his forearm told him this must be the boy he'd roughed up at the Top Deck. Apparently, if they couldn't get Lewis to come in for their moral judgment, they'd bring it out to him. Lewis' skin crawled. The cast was bulky; it must have been a bad break.

Lewis sat in one of the two lawn chairs next to the big wooden cable spool he used as a table. Moths fluttered past on their way up to the floodlight bolted to the shop wall. Ms. Larsen sat in the second chair slightly tilted; it was missing a strap from the seat. The young man stood next to the fence.

"I believe I smell alcohol on you, Lewis, and it's not even the weekend. How could that be?" Larsen squirmed to sit up straighter in the crooked chair.

"I need solvents for my work every day of the week."

"You work hard, Mr. MacBain. No one in Alma could deny that, and Lord knows we all appreciate it. But if you don't attend weekly meetings, what are we to do when business that concerns you comes up? We can't allow you to evade restitution for harm done. Don't you want to make things right with Mark? For the love of God, you broke his arm and put him out of work, maybe for months," she gestured to Mark who stared silently at the ground.

Fucking punk couldn't even work it up to look him in the eye. Lewis watched him so he'd catch him if he tried. The little bastard had been at the Top Deck bragging on his so-called service: sitting on a ship in the Persian Gulf for two years. He'd been high on crystal and bitching about why didn't we take care of Iraq and Iran forty years ago. As if those first ten years of fighting meant nothing. Lewis had been there only four months and it left him able, forty years later, to break a man's arm and not even know it.

Lewis pulled a cigarette from his chest pocket and lit it with a stiff motion. His left hand rested on the table top and he tapped each metal finger on it in turn. The rubber-tipped finger rods and hydraulic tendons moved with powerful delicacy, sliding on their spherical servomotor joints.

Usually, he hid his mechanical parts, kept his hand in a pocket, limbs under pant legs and sleeves. He knew they made people uncomfortable.

Larsen stared at the hand for long seconds before she looked away. "We all appreciate your sacrifice for our Country. But you aren't the only one who's made sacrifices, and it doesn't give you the right to beat on any youngster who spouts off about it. Mark served two years. Every young man serves God and Country these days."

Lewis tapped his cigarette ash into the piston that he used for an ashtray. He moved quickly, so she couldn't see his hand trembling. Did she think he'd only lost his hand?

"There isn't anyone in Alma who can say a goddamn thing about my sacrifices. What they do today isn't service. They're just working for their welfare checks. Get to the point. What do you want me to do?" He cursed to shock her, to hurt her. But she just stiffened a little; he'd never been able to strike back as hard as he'd been hit.

"We discussed your retribution to Mark at the Wednesday meeting, as I'm sure you knew we would. You weren't there."

"A person doesn't have to attend the meetings."

"By not attending the meetings, your opinions and vote on any matters discussed there are abrogated. Surely you know a machine works best when it has all its parts, and you are an important part of Alma, a powerful part."

"Get to the point."

"The Council is concerned with all community member's salvation. We're aware of your moral failings."

"Which of my moral failings concern Council today?"

"We know about your arrangement with the bartender at the Top Deck, to get more than your allotment of alcohol."

"If that's such a terrible failing, all our grandparents are in hell."

"Some sins are greater than others, but Council is concerned about you. We have to be. Your work, supplying cars for the Township Races, is a vital part of our economic machine. The president himself watches our races each month on his sports-feed."

"The president himself, how nice for Alma to have his attention." Lewis interrupted her, his voice tight.

Larsen stared back at him. "Who will do this work when you're no longer with us? The community needs you to train someone. At the same time, restitution is required for the harm

you've inflicted on Mark. After much discussion, Council decided that you will take him on as an apprentice."

"You've got to be kidding. I work alone. I always have. That's the way I like it. That's the way it will stay." He flushed, and was glad his beard covered his cheeks.

"We can do without new cars at the races for many months, MacBain. How long can you go without the drink? If it comes right down to it, how long can you go without your daily bread? Without electricity and everything else the Township provides? None of us really works alone, do we Mr. MacBain?"

Lewis leaned back in the chair, felt the wood frame push into his shoulders. He stubbed the cigarette out in the piston, and then lit another one, holding it in the ever-steady prosthetic hand.

"Why him? He's a crystal addict. Anyone who's been in the military could see it."

"We believe the arrangement will be mutually beneficial."

"What's your name, boy?" Lewis addressed the young man.

"His name is Mark Peterson," Larsen answered. The boy nodded at Lewis before dropping his gaze back to the ground.

"Peterson. Any relation to Percy Peterson, Council chair?"

"Mark is his son."

"Surprise, surprise. Council will inherit my business in the end. How convenient. He's an addict, Ms. Larsen. Doesn't anyone on Council have a son who has his shit together?" Lewis' heart pounded. He didn't want any help, didn't need it, especially from a fucking crystal addict. How could they do this to him after what happened with Katherine? It had been a long time ago, but surely someone on council remembered.

"The more bitter the trial, the fuller the salvation."

"I can't think of one person on Council who personally knows anything about trials or salvation. I'm not running a half-way house here."

"No, and from what I've heard of your history, you wouldn't be the best man for that job. Peterson, however, wants his son in your business. Mark will finish the two month detox program he's in now, and will arrive to assist you a month from today, on May first."

So they did know about Katherine and they were inflicting this boy on him anyway. His throat tightened and he smashed the cigarette out half smoked.

"Though God and grace, Mr. MacBain, this arrangement will work out for the best for all involved."

As Ms. Larsen stood to leave, Lewis flicked the switch he'd rigged up on his left inner forearm disabling the peripheral nervous system feedback. Feeling no resistance, no pain, from the mechanical hand, he picked up the aluminum alloy piston and crushed it slowly.

Ms. Larsen smiled sourly at him, "Let's go, Mark."

Mark watched Lewis from under his eyelashes in mute terror. Lewis wanted to throw the crushed piston at him, but with the feedback system turned off he'd likely break yet another bone in the boy's body.

#

Lewis enjoyed his last days of solitude. The bristle-furred junkyard mutts leapt and barked when he opened the back door. All five dogs mobbed him as he set down their food bowls. Twenty acres of junkyard spread away from the back door. His lot was the largest piece of privately-owned property in the entire township, as much as property belonged to anyone privately anymore. The old cars weighed on it. Lewis could bring value from these junk piles, so they and the property beneath them remained his alone for all practical purposes.

Mentally picking through the scrap cars and their usable parts, he began to plan the overhaul of Johnson's 1969 Pontiac GTO Judge. Johnson wanted it fixed up for his grand-daughter, who wanted to race. The car's body was almost rust-free, but the motor would need work after seventy-plus years in a barn.

It had taken Lewis a week to get the tow truck running after Johnson came to see him. Nobody needed things towed these days. All the cars made in the last twenty years were subject to a mandatory recycling program. They had to be turned back after five years. Their bodies were light weight plastic-carbon composites. Engines could not exceed forty horse-power. They ran on bio-diesel or ethanol. Lewis would rather ride a bike than drive those toys.

The massive steel Judge now sat outside the shop door, just feet from where the dogs gobbled their food. The white rally stripes had mostly crumbled to dust, leaving ghosts of themselves in less faded orange paint running along the quarter panels and doors. The two rectangular air grills up front looked like shovels to ram air into the carburetor hidden beneath the hood's smooth sweep. Lewis imagined the fat tires he would mount on the broad, cast-aluminum rims and the torque they would transmit. The car was beautiful sitting still. When it raced, it would inspire awe.

Put two or more such vehicles on an asphalt track together, race them around with their motors bellowing, and a crowd would gather. People traveled by train for days to get to Alma, to hear the old engines grumble, see smoke trail from the tires as they screeched around the curves, and smell the burning oil and rubber.

Lewis himself never went to the races. He knew the cars more intimately. He had built them all. Lewis didn't care which car won, they all belonged to him. When they left the junkyard, they were tuned perfectly for their purpose. To keep them tuned, the drivers would bring them back. Lewis' contribution to Alma began and ended at the junkyard gate, clean and simple. It made Council nervous to depend so much on a crotchety old atheist living just outside of town. They'd tried for years to draw him out of the junkyard. Now, with this damned apprentice, they'd found a way to get themselves in.

#

After breakfast, the dogs wandered off into the weed-choked rows of cars. The old grey dog moved to follow them, but stopped short of the junkyard's shadows. She lowered herself clumsily to the ground, stretching out in a sunny area near the house. Before opening the shop, Lewis stroked her head and rubbed her shoulders, sympathetic to her aches. The big shop door rattled its chain pulley as it rose, letting in more light and fresh air with each pull. The boy would arrive today.

Lewis put his notebook in the front basket of his big, sturdy tricycle. He wanted an inventory, on paper, of his Pontiacs and their relative conditions. Before he started taking Johnson's Judge apart, he needed to know what he had to work with. He felt he shouldn't start anything until the boy showed up, and it irritated him. The boy would have to learn to work on Lewis' schedule. He headed out through the rows of cars, the knobby tires of the trike crushed weeds as he pedaled.

Mark was pacing next to the gate when Lewis returned about three hours later. He didn't notice when Lewis pulled up.

"Mark," he said, dismounting the trike.

Mark's head snapped towards Lewis.

"Hey man, you're Mac-Bin," he stumbled on the words.

Lewis approached him. The boy's pupils were black wells. He was high.

"Lewis MacBain, son. Say it."

"Loo, loo, loo-iss." Mark said. "That's cool, man, that's a cool name." Then Mark started to laugh uncontrollably, gasping "Aw man, aw man..."

Lewis turned away from Mark and left him there, laughing outside the gate. Lewis rolled the trike around to the shop door. He fired up the forklift and pushed the Judge into the shop and onto the lift. One dog stood sentry at the fence, growling and barking at the boy. As he pulled the chain to close the door, Lewis looked around the corner of the shop and saw Mark pacing and picking at his hair. The dog had quit barking but watched him warily.

He called Ms. Larsen at the Township.

"Mark isn't going to work out here."

"Mr. MacBain, Mark does have problems, but we as a community are bound to help him find a way to solve them. He just finished detox. Meaningful work will help Mark kick his addiction."

"I'm a mechanic, not a therapist."

"The therapists recommend work for Mark. Just as we will care for you, when you get too old to care for yourself, you must help us care for Mark."

"How long before we can admit the therapy has failed?"

"If it doesn't work out in three months, we'll identify another candidate to be your apprentice."

"It's not working out right now. He's at the gate, high. This is my home; he isn't coming in high."

"Just keep him," Ms. Larsen said tightly, "eight hours a day out at your place. He needs to be out of town, away from temptation. If you really feel he can't learn your trade after working with him for three months, we will send someone else."

Ending the call, Lewis roughed his beard. He had to wait it out. The boy could show up each morning, buzz around the shop door for the day, then head back to whatever they had for him in town at night. He wasn't stuck with this broken boy. He couldn't fix him, wouldn't try.

He approached the Judge, opened the hood. After seventy years sitting, he didn't try to fire it up. He would work it top to bottom; down through the valves, pistons, and crankcase, then on back through the transmission. With the heart and guts rebuilt, he would start on the linkages, drive shaft and axles.

Around six o'clock, Lewis finished work, happy with his progress. His mind already drifted towards the volume of Robert Frost's poetry he'd started last night. He pulled the shop door down, and then went out the side door to feed the dogs. He found Mark still there, sitting against the shop wall outside the fence. He walked quietly to the gate and saw the boy's chest rise and fall, still alive, just sleeping. The boy would get cold eventually, wake in the night and walk home.

#

A dull banging sounded through the shop, waking Lewis from a deep sleep. He'd fallen asleep earlier than usual, lulled by the poetry. The dogs began to bark and a deep tension shot from his stomach to shoulders.

How did someone get to the door without the dogs barking before hand? If this was a joke, it was damn cruel, reviving a forty-year old nightmare.

The moon through the skylights allowed Lewis to make it through the maze of shelves without a flash-light. He flicked the switch on his inner arm and threw the front door open, hoping to catch the intruder by surprise.

He found himself eye-to-eye with Mark. The boy hugged himself, shivering.

"Oh, thank god, I'm so cold I..." Mark took a step towards the door as if to enter. Lewis struck out with a two-handed push to the chest, remembering too late that the safety was off. He watched in horror as his hands hit. Mark stumbled backwards and fell to the ground.

Lewis crossed the threshold and knelt next to him. Mark's breathing was quick, but deep and smooth. His dark eyes, wide open, reflected the moonlight.

Lewis stood up, "You broke?"

The boy rolled to his side, then pushed himself to a sitting position with both arms. Lewis was relieved, he'd be screaming if his ribs or sternum were broken.

"Go the fuck home, tweaker. You aren't coming in here," he said, voice rough. The sense of déjà-vu overpowered him. Katherine in the moonlight, begging at the door. He'd always let her in. Always. It hadn't changed a damn thing. She always left again eventually.

He slammed the door, throat tightening as he tried to shut out the memories from forty years ago. The dogs stopped barking after a while, but it took a long time for him to go back to sleep.

#

The dogs yipped when Lewis opened the door, breaking the morning quiet of the junkyard. He took deep breaths of the rust scented air, waking slowly. Setting the food bowls down, he noticed the old grey dog was missing from the scrabbling canine crowd. She must be dead somewhere out in the yard.

No, here she is. He smiled, relieved, seeing her limp stiffly around the corner of the shop from the gate. She's just late off the line today.

The old dog kept pausing in her short journey to look back over her shoulder toward the gate. When she reached the bowls, he pushed the other dogs aside for her with his flesh leg, and then walked to the gate to check it out.

Mark sat against the wall, just like yesterday. Dried grass and dust clung to his hair and clothes. He'd pulled the shirt collar away from his neck and looked down at his chest. The gate rattled when Lewis touched the chain link. Mark looked up at him, eyes half hidden by long, black eyelashes.

"You bruised me," he said.

Lewis felt a push on his own chest, "Go home."

"I can't go back there, man. I'm de-toxed. For the first time since I was a kid," he said, his voice deep and slow.

"You were pretty fucked up yesterday," Lewis said.

"It was the last time. The last time. I just wanted to do it once more before I go off for good."

Lewis said nothing. Mark stared at Lewis' feet.

"I know I can get it in town, and I know I would."

The smell of damp grass hung in the humid air. The sun rose above the top-most leaves of the trees at the junkyard's east edge. Mark shivered and hugged himself.

"May God deliver me from evil," he said.

Lewis took the keys from his pocket and removed the padlock from the gate. He couldn't fix the kid, but the boy was trying. Being in town had fouled him up and he needed a break. Lewis could relate to that.

"God never did a damn thing for anybody. Come on in. You can build yourself a place to sleep in the yard."

Mark looked at Lewis' face for just a second before he got up, "Thanks, man."

#

Mark would be waiting with the dogs at the door each morning. Wrapped in the grey wool blanket Lewis had given him, he stared out at the thin strip of forest separating the junkyard from town. Lewis figured the boy slept in a car someplace. The Cadillacs and Buicks from the seventies could be comfortable, but he was disappointed that Mark hadn't built anything for himself. Same thing with the Judge. Mark would do exactly as Lewis directed and no more.

The carburetor, a well-preserved Rochester four-barrel with a RamAir intake manifold, was a little rusty and corroded in places, but Lewis believed it could be cleaned and made serviceable again. Mark sat by the work bench watching, silently, as Lewis, silently, took it apart.

The constant dullness of Mark's face hadn't been so hard to take when they worked with the car's larger parts. Lewis had kept his eyes on the engine block when they tore it out and built it back up. He'd occasionally ask Mark to hold something steady or tell him to finish tightening bolts on

a part he'd installed. Lewis still checked the torque on every bolt Mark tightened, even though he'd done okay so far.

Now, the dirty pieces of the Rochester were arranged on the spotless metal work bench. The acrid smell of cleaning fluid burned Lewis' nose.

"Mark, clean these up. I'll make the gaskets."

Mark's eyes widened a little. The carburetor's parts were delicate compared to other engine parts.

"I don't know anything about carburetors," he said.

"They aren't the only goddamn thing you don't know anything about. Sometimes you've just got to pick a thing up and start messing with it," Lewis said.

Mark just stood there fidgeting, staring at the workbench.

Maybe he doesn't want me looking over his shoulder, Lewis thought. He took the scissors off the tool rack over the bench.

"Be gentle with the parts, they're more fragile than anything you've worked on yet and we'd have a hell of a time finding good replacements if you screw them up," he said.

Lewis walked away, leaving the boy to figure it out on his own, do something on his own for fuck's sake. Back in the parts shelves, he took his time finding the gasket paper. When he returned to the bench, Mark had cleaned most of the tiny parts and laid them on a clean rag, like he'd seen Lewis do with other parts. Right away, Lewis saw one of the tiny jets had its threads stripped. He pointed to the stripped jet with a metal finger, and watched Mark's face for a reaction. He saw nothing, no apology, no explanation, nothing. Mark glanced dully at the jet and kept cleaning. Anger welled up, he'd let Mark into his business, let him live here, and in return he got nothing but obedience and this constant, dull silence.

"What's wrong with that jet? Do you even know?"

"I stripped it out. What do you expect when you leave a junkie alone?" Mark answered, not stopping work.

Lewis hit him hard in the face with his open right hand. Mark's head whipped toward him with the force of it. He looked surprised for a second, then hurt and confused. Lewis held Mark's stubbled cheek.

"I didn't leave a goddamned junkie to do it. I left it to you, boy. If you break something in my shop, anything, you tell me about it. We'll talk it over. You will learn from it."

Mark's eyes stayed on the bench, but Lewis saw his cheeks flush red and his lower lip quiver.

"Go find another one." Lewis turned away and walked back towards the parts shelves. When he heard no movement at the work bench, he added, "Now." He heard Mark's quick footsteps fade through the shop door. Lewis slowly squatted to the floor, drained, right hand stinging.

How do you teach a boy? he thought, and his own lip quivered. How do you teach a man?

A deep, aching hopelessness he hadn't felt since Katherine left overtook him. People could never be fixed. No tool, no amount of care you could apply, would bring them back once they were gone. But Mark had stayed off the crystal for almost two months now. Katherine had never stayed off, not long enough to matter.

When Mark returned, the shadows were long in the yard. Lewis sat outside with the dogs at the spool-table. Crickets sang in the evening light. Mark placed two carburetors on the table in front of Lewis. Lewis did not want to look at him, so he looked at the carbs. Mark had chosen well. They were both Pontiac and four-barreled.

"Let's take them inside and get them apart. We should find what we need in one of these." Lewis said.

The florescent light over the work bench made a bright pool in the fading light inside the shop. Lewis stood at the side of the bench, leaving it open for Mark, who stepped up, hesitating. Mark looked briefly at Lewis, and then started to work on the Rochester, right where he'd left off. Lewis quickly disassembled the carbs Mark had found and extracted the jets from them. When it came time to install the jets in the Judge's Rochester, Lewis took over.

"These little nozzles are critical; not just for the carb but for the whole engine. They control the relative amounts of fuel and air. If the mixture has too much air you call it lean. The engine will sputter and lose power if the mix is too lean. Too much fuel and it will run rich. You get power, but it wastes fuel and fouls the spark plugs; too much of that and the car won't even start. You've got to jet it so it's just right."

"Too rich, never thought you could be too rich."

"It's easy to be too rich. Most people are and they can't switch out their jets. I think it's why some people get addicted. Too much of anything, you get too rich and you're going to foul up."

At two in the morning, they installed the carb on the engine, which they'd bolted back into the car's frame several days earlier. Lewis rigged up the ignition and turned the engine over.

The Judge rumbled to life for the first time in seventy years. The faint smell of burnt oil in exhaust drifted back into the shop through the open back door. Mark stood at the front of the Judge, hands on the left quarter-panel, eyes closed, reverent. Lewis turned the car off after a little while.

"All we got to do now is link up the power train and axles. Then she'll be ready to race. I'll show you how to do that. You'll do it yourself."

For the first time Lewis had seen, Mark smiled. He brought a pile of extra blankets and left them by the workbench. Mark may as well sleep inside tonight.

Lewis' cot was on the opposite side of the shop. Turning the small reading light on, he took off the grubby coverall and dropped it to the floor. He folded his jeans and shirt, placing them on the pile of already-read books. He couldn't remember the last time he'd fallen asleep without reading.

He thought about Katherine, the wild helicopter pilot he'd met in Iraq and the lost, craving woman she'd become ten years later. He felt the same love for her the day she disappeared, after three years home, as the day they came together in the back of that dusty Humvee. It didn't make a damn difference, didn't fix anything.

#

The leaves in the forest were just beginning to change color when Johnson called Lewis.

"Lew, Dawn has learned to drive the Judge like it's her second nature, man. She screams around the track. You did an incredible job on it. She'll be in the Veterans' Day Race."

"You must have done a damn good job teaching her," Lewis told him, but he was proud of the car. The Judge had left his shop closer to its original condition than any car he'd built in the last ten years. It had been in good shape when it arrived. There were very few parts in it that Lewis had to re-fabricate from scratch. Complete cars from that era were harder and harder to find each year. He did want to see it race. But not on Veterans' Day.

When Lewis hung up the phone, Mark stood up from under the hood of a 1978 Chevy and looked at him.

"The Johnsons are going to race the Judge on Veterans' Day," Lewis said, looking out into the yard.

"You gonna go?" Mark asked.

The old grey dog lay in the sun just inside the shop door. "What the hell is this dog doing in here? I told you the damn dogs are not allowed in the shop, ever. We'll have dog hair all over the goddamn place before you know it." He didn't move to shoo the dog out.

"I like her, she's not hurting anything. You gonna go?" Mark asked, questioning more strongly now.

Lewis pawed the ground with his metal foot, feeling the ground pushing back up at him through his rewired nervous system. He could feel the pressure in his hip.

"Not on Veterans' Day, no."

"Why not?" Mark raised his voice. "You're not going to watch the Judge race?"

"You can go without me. Let me know what happens. You can tell me everything."

"I can't go without you. I can not go by myself."

"If you want to see the Judge race, you'll go by yourself."

"Well, what happened to you then?"

"What do you mean?" Lewis asked.

"What happened to your leg and your arm, then? I thought you lost them in the early years of Iraq, that you were a veteran."

An electric buzz traveled through Lewis' body, through every part except the metal ones. "Not really."

Lewis didn't have to look to know Mark stared at him from under those heavy-lidded eyes, waiting.

"I was only there for four months before I ran over the land mine. They sent me right home and set me up with these." He stretched the prosthetic arm out in front of him, palm up, and then brought the leg up, bending it back and forth at the knee. The movement was smooth and silent. He didn't even sway. "I was like new again by the time I turned twenty-two. Better than new."

"You lost your arm and leg in the war, Lew. If you don't deserve some honor for your service, I don't know who does."

Lewis let the metal foot drop to the ground and slowly lowered the arm.

"My wife Katherine did," he said. "She flew Apaches over there for four years and came home with nothing but an honorable discharge. I got a purple heart in four months."

"What happened to your wife?"

"Just didn't come home one day. The war was always on her mind. I listened to her dream it, held her back from fighting over it, watched her salute the fucking flag every time she passed one. She got hooked on dexies over there, got into crystal when she got home."

"Oh man." Mark looked around the shop, at anything but Lewis. He knelt down on the floor and stroked the dog.

Lewis had a funny feeling in his chest and remembered how good it felt to be alone. He'd said too much. He walked out the shop door and started down a weedy aisle between the cars.

Katherine had never figured out how to live outside the military. In those last years, she sometimes saluted the flag with reverence, other times with deep bitterness. The crystal didn't break her, the war did. All the love and care he gave her at the end, when her body was wasted, it hadn't been enough to keep her home. The country had lost so much in that war. He had lost so much. He needed a drink, but he'd have to face Mark back in the shop to get his stash.

#

Paula Larsen met them at the entry booth to the Alma Township Race Track. She wore a small American flag tucked in the back her baseball hat. People crowded the concession stands buying sodas and hot-dogs.

"Mr. MacBain! I'm so glad you and Mark made it! I knew it would be a good fit. Restitution and maybe some revelation?"

"Where I can redeem my alcohol voucher? Do they have whiskey here or just beer?" Lewis asked.

She pursed her lips, "Mr. MacBain, I want you to meet Mr. Peterson. He's over at the announcer's stand getting ready to do the Welcoming. We have seats for you both in the Council box." Lewis turned his back on the woman and headed for the men's room. Mark disappeared into the crowd behind him. Lewis took a stall and sat in there until he heard the crowd clear out to head for the stands.

The races were about to start. Lewis wandered through the almost empty concession area. Everyone had taken their seats. He found Mark standing with a blonde girl at the entryway to the east section.

"Lew, Lew, man, meet my friend Sherry. Sherry this is Lew. He is soooo fuckin', I mean fuckin' awesome. We built that car, babe, number eight. The Judge, it's gonna kick ass." Mark's eyes were wide open and glassy black. He hadn't said this many words in a row since he first arrived at Lewis' shop. He was high. Lewis couldn't believe it. He raised his right hand to smack some sense into the boy. Mark flinched. Lewis stopped the blow just in time. Mark had scored drugs already, right here at the track.

"Th, th, the Lord forgives, always." The grin faded from Mark's face.

Lewis shook his head. He could forgive, but it would be foolish to forget. Foolish.

With the mechanical hand, Lewis turned Mark's head to face him. He put his flesh hand gently on the other cheek and felt the skin, soft and freshly shaven.

"Well I don't, not always. But you come back to the shop after the races. If you don't come, I'll come looking for you and I'll be pissed."

Lewis walked away, heading for the exit. Passing an opening in the stands, he saw the cars lined up on the track. Johnson had waxed the Judge so well Lewis could see its dull orange gleam from down the track. For a second, he considered staying to watch. No, he wouldn't stay, he didn't want to see Mark high. The Judge would win if the girl was half the driver her grandpa said she was. He wanted to go home, read a book while the sun went down over the junkyard, then settle down in the shop for the night. If Mark came back he'd open the door this time, but just this time. There was nothing he could do here for Mark or the Judge.

The announcer's voice sounded over the public address system, "Welcome, welcome everyone to the Alma Township Races! We'll start off with our traditional honoring of the veterans. Any veterans in the audience please come on down to the infield for the national anthem. Let's give them a round of applause and few minutes to get down here folks. That's right."

Lewis watched as several people emerged from the crowd. A few passed him on their way to the access tunnel gate. They reappeared in the infield, where the band stood in ranks just beyond the flagpole. There were about two dozen of them, a couple with metal glinting at their cuffs.

"Mr. MacBain!" Paula Larsen waved urgently at him from the stairs by the Council box. "Get out there! They're waiting for you!"

Lewis turned away from her and watched the veterans take their places next to the band, facing the flagpole.

"You, you gonna go out there?" It was Mark.

"You gonna come back to the shop?"

"I was followin' you, comin' right now. I just had a little, little bit." Mark's eyes had the brilliant shine that drew people in to crystal so hard and fast. Lewis felt a tightness in his throat. He wouldn't forget. Alma shouldn't either.

"All right," he said. "I will."

Lewis unzipped his coverall, peeled it off and threw it on the ground. Pink scar tissue covered his left shoulder where skin met metal arm and wire. His prosthetic leg's sprung metal was strung with small cables and driven by long, slim hydraulic pistons where his thigh had been. The knee joint was an intricate device of titanium ball joints, plastic cartilage and rubber ligaments.

"Holy shit," said Mark.

Lewis felt naked, even though he wore cut-off jeans and a white undershirt. The guard at the access tunnel gate stumbled backwards when he passed. Clank, thump, clank, thump, his steps

echoed unevenly in the tunnel. His metal leg wasn't quite keeping time with the adrenaline-fired live one. Coming out of the tunnel, he saw the stands lining the first turn and realized, suddenly, how many people the stands held. They were all here to watch his cars race, to remember, or imagine, the old days when every car and every person had a lot more power than they did today.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer’s voice boomed, “please welcome a very special veteran, Mr. Lewis MacBain. Mr. MacBain is the man who builds us these cars. He provides the horsepower behind these races.”

The crowd roared, clapped and banged on the stands. Lewis walked across the infield towards the vets and the band. The vets were lined up in two ranks, standing more or less at attention, watching his approach.

The band stood next to them, sweating in their military-style uniforms. The bandmaster looked over his shoulder at Lewis, his baton raised high.

In front of the band, a heavy woman in a red and white striped dress clutched a hand-held microphone.

Lewis walked past the veterans without stopping. The applause had died away as he'd walked across the infield, the flat stainless-steel springs of his prosthetic leg flashing in the setting sun. Some of the brass players peered over their instruments to get a better look at him. The only sounds on the infield now were the flag snapping in the wind and the banging of the rope against the pole.

He approached the woman in front of the band. Her mouth gaped in a horrified expression. Lewis touched her gently on the shoulder, looked her in the eye and nodded. Then he reached for the microphone and pried it gently from her hand, which as soft and limp as the fabric of her dress.

A horrible scratching sound squealed from the loudspeakers as Lewis crushed the microphone with a single squeeze. He tossed the wreckage to the ground and turned to face the flagpole. Behind him, some of the musicians uncertainly lowered their instruments. The bandmaster remained frozen, baton still raised.

Lewis strode past the veterans. He went to the flagpole and undid the rope from its cleat. The crowd’s bewildered mutterings grew louder.

Flesh hand over metal hand, he lowered the flag to half-mast. As the crowd noise became a loud chorus of angry shouts, curses and boos, he secured the rope tightly to the cleat. Lewis stepped back to look up at the flag and gave a quick salute.

Then he faced the crowd and grinned. Every sports-feed camera in the infield was on him. He raised his metal hand and extended a gleaming middle finger, first to the sky, then to the crowd, and finally to the cameras.