

“What’s in this room?”

“It’s just junk. McClaskey’s old stuff. No need to see it.” Rendell had been relieved until this moment. Unannounced internal audits weren’t unheard of, but they were rare. Still, everything had gone smoothly until now.

“This is an internal audit, Mike. I need to see it all.” Eben Tasker said the words mildly, but his intent was plain. He would see the room. He was a small man, grey and pudgy with age. Even so, the set of his jaw, the look in his pale blue eyes, the tone of his voice often put him in charge of situations—including this one.

Rendell tried to stand his ground. “Look, there’s nothing in there,” he growled. “It’s the room where old McClaskey spent his last days. That’s all. God knows what he left lying around. We’d need bunny suits.”

“Two words for you, Mike: Compost Technology. Now get the suits.” Compost Technology was a venture Mike Rendell ran on the side, unconnected and unknown to the massive agri-business where they both worked. It was doing well, in a small way, and Tasker could see no damage being done to his employer. It remained leverage anyway. Rendell could lose his job if his little sidebar business was reported.

Half an hour later both men were suited and checked, ready to enter the workspace of the dead biochemist. As they waddled to the metal door, Rendell checked the exterior and interior pressure gauges on its face. Interior was lower. No air would get out. “Ready if you are,” he said to Tasker as he turned the door’s handle. “This is a big waste of time.”

“We’ll see about that, Mike,” Tasker said with a chuckle. “Time I’ve got.” There was a hiss of air as they went through the portal and the door swung shut.

The windowless cave they entered was a small clean room, after a fashion. Several glove boxes lined the walls, and all surfaces were spotless. In the middle of the room stood McClaskey's desk, just as he must have left it the day he died. It too was spotless. Others had long since removed his files and working papers.

Rendell turned slowly about, his arms outstretched. "Like I told you, a waste of time," he said. Inside the bulbous helmet he shook his head.

"That's not what I hear," Tasker said with a smile. "I hear there's a little patch of something left in here—something I want, Mike." He walked toward the glove box at the far end of the room as he spoke. Its lights were still on, and there, there in the center ... yes! The rumors had been true. It was still there.

Rendell followed him. "I don't know what you're ..." he stopped in midsentence as he saw it. "You don't mean the grass, do you? That can't happen. I can't let you."

"Yes. Yes, you will, Mike." Tasker's voice was brittle. "That is, unless your wife and kids can live off of Compost Technology. I only need a little piece. Just a cutting. Nobody will notice. I can assure you of that."

"Be reasonable!" Rendell was almost shouting now. "Nobody knows what's in that stuff. McClaskey got strange just before he died. Half his notes are in code. Nobody's figured them out to this day. We do know one thing. He was afraid of the grass getting out. That's why he set this room up the way he did."

"Nonsense. It's grass. Grass that has a quality I need." Tasker thought of his place in the Poconos: a beautiful little cabin, centered on a broad meadow surrounded by trees, far from any neighbors, with a grand view of sunsets perfect for reflection when abetted by a martini or two. The only problem was the noise. It wasn't the noise of people. There was none of that. Nor was it

the occasional chirp of birds. It was the incessant hum of the insects, which grew to a clamor during the night. Tasker had tried the poisons and the sprays, but nothing seemed to work. He had resigned himself to selling the little cabin and finding another place to retire. Then he heard the whispered rumors about McClaskey's last project.

If the rumors were true, the grass killed bugs—especially the ones that make noise, the grasshoppers and the crickets. It didn't eat them ... not exactly, anyway ... but it did kill them. If any of the whisperings were true, that grass was just what Tasker needed. He could keep his cabin and his sanity. It had required a lot of work to find Rendell's weak spot, the lever that could pry some of the grass from him. Now it had all been worth it. He'd have the grass, just in time for retirement and golden years of quiet bliss.

Tasker had no wife or family. There had been a few women years ago, but each had eventually left—unable to find any warmth beneath his cold shell. He was alone, and preferred it that way. He treated himself well, but without ostentation: a good car, a new suit every year, a nice vacation. His only real vanity was his cabin in the Poconos. The furniture there was the best money could buy. The wine cellar boasted the finest grape. The wooden floors gleamed, and the large stone fireplace promised a perfect setting for reading the books in hand-built shelves that lined the walls. If Tasker had ever loved anything, it was the cabin. Now, he could keep it.

Rendell grabbed his arm. "Listen to me, Tasker. You can make me do this, but it could be a big mistake. When he died, McClaskey was working with chimeras—organisms cobbled together from the genes of other things. We know the grass is part cedar, part saw grass, part Bermuda, but we don't know what else it is. You could start a plague with it. If you want to kill bugs, the company makes some great stuff. I'll give you all you want of that."

Tasker shook his arm free. "I've tried our stuff," he hissed, his face contorted. "It doesn't work. It's crap. Now listen: my retirement party comes up next month. You're invited. You don't have to stay, but I want that cutting in my hands before it ends. Otherwise, the Compost Technology file will be on my boss's desk the next morning. Are we clear?"

They were. His instructions were followed to the letter.

Six weeks later, freshly retired, Tasker drove slowly down the gravel path to his Poconos cabin. His affairs were in order. If he lived carefully the money would more than cover his needs for the rest of his life. He was in moderately good health—a little overweight, but hell, who wasn't? He had enough canned and frozen food in stock to last a year, enough gin and vermouth to make several thousand martinis. The water came from a well, the heat from a well-supplied oil furnace, the power from a large bank of solar cells on the roof and a wind turbine nearby. The TV came in by satellite. In short, Tasker had constructed his own world in the hills of central Pennsylvania, a solitary world where he was king.

His retirement party the night before had been perfunctory. It consisted of several other people near his own age telling him how much he'd be missed, a forgettable chicken dinner, and the award of a gold plaque set in plastic (inscribed "for thirty years of exceptional service"). He didn't have the heart to tell them they'd spelled his name wrong. The whole affair lasted under two hours. None of it mattered. The only important part of the whole event occurred in the parking lot of the restaurant where it took place. There, as Tasker left his car to enter the building, he noticed another man quickly leave his and walk toward him. A very nervous Rendell approached.

Tasker stopped, awaiting him. "Do you have it?" he asked softly.

Rendell reached inside his coat, paused. "It's still not too late," he pleaded. "I can have this back in the lab tomorrow. Nobody will know."

"Indeed they won't, unless you tell them, Mike." Tasker extended his hand, beckoned. "Come on, now. Just hand me what you've brought. Nothing bad is going to happen, unless you fail to keep your end of our bargain."

With a sigh, Rendell removed an envelope from within his coat and put it in Tasker's outstretched hand. "Plant it as quick as you can," he whispered. "You're making a mistake. I hope it's not a big one." He turned on his heel and walked quickly away.

Tasker heard a car door slam and an engine start. He smiled as he tucked the envelope gently into his coat pocket. As he walked to the restaurant, he felt slightly thrilled—certain that his life was about to change, as if he were finally the arbiter of his own fate.

Now, as he parked beside his cabin, he knew the first thing he had to do. Opening the car door, he slid from his seat and hurried to a patch of ground near the middle of his meadow, fifty yards from the side of his home. Pulling a spade from his coat, he dug a small pocket in the earth. There, he tenderly placed the plug of grass from the envelope Rendell had given him. He irrigated it with some bottled water he'd brought along, turned back to the cabin and the car. There was unpacking to do, and the beginning of his new life.

The weeks that followed flowed into one another. The bug noise remained as loud as ever. At first, Tasker wondered if Rendell had cheated him. Easy enough, after all, to take a plug of grass from some neighborhood yard and put it in an envelope. A look at the area where the grass had been planted allayed that concern. The new grass had spread quickly from its initial bed. It was visibly different from the meadow around it—a deeper, almost blue green. It was far

denser than the surrounding grass as well and uniformly about four inches in height. Whatever it was, it was not from anybody else's lawn.

Within a month, the new grass covered about one hundred square feet of the meadow. Since it was to the side of Tasker's cabin, it was easy for him to look at it from his screened porch. He remembered the euphemism about "watching grass grow," and laughed at himself. Still, he was drawn to look at it almost every day.

By the end of summer, the grass had displaced all other plant life between the woods and the side of the cabin. Tasker noticed that it didn't sway in the breeze, but stood stiff as bristles. He couldn't be certain, but he thought the bug noise from that side of the cabin had largely ceased. There was more. A week ago, he had watched the grass kill a bird.

The bird had been a crow—a nasty, raucous creature, always cawing loudly to others of its kind, disturbing Tasker's reading. Its noise caused him to look up from his book, and that's how he saw what happened.

The crow had landed on the grass, making great commotion as it pecked about for whatever it was seeking, pacing through the tough, bristly lawn. All at once, the grass near the bird receded – falling low to the ground as though the air had been pulled from it. Almost at the same instant, the grass immediately around the crow rose impossibly. At its crest, Tasker judged it must have been a full foot in height. It fell on the bird, engulfed it, then all the grass returned to its normal state. The bird lay in its midst, in several pieces. The pieces were attacked in turn by lower waves of grass, until after a few minutes nothing visible remained.

Tasker decided to go to the site of the attack, to see more clearly what had happened. He put on his boots and stepped onto the chimera sward. Interesting! The grass did not sink beneath

his feet, but resisted his weight. It would probably not be a good idea to go barefoot on this lawn. He shrugged. He never went barefoot anyhow.

As he trudged toward the site of the bird's murder, he noticed the grass to his front and sides flattened as though suddenly mowed. He looked down. His booted feet were being attacked, just as the crow had been. Walking became difficult, as wave after wave of disturbed grass tried unsuccessfully to engulf each boot. He realized that if he stopped walking his boots might well be stuck, so he turned and worked his way back to the cabin.

That evening, as he sat on his porch with martini in hand, Tasker considered what he had seen. The grass had probably killed the crickets in the lawn the same way it killed the bird. Continuous dicing of the remains made it possible for the fluids and viscera to sink into the ground, possibly augmenting the lawn's nutrition. Rendell had said something about cedar, that day at the lab. Perhaps the grass was interconnected, like a stand of that tree. It certainly seemed to act with common purpose. Tasker wondered how big an animal the grass could successfully attack. He noted that his boots had been severely lacerated, the laces sawn through in several places. He remembered that Rendell had mentioned saw grass, as well.

"The hell with it," he said to himself as he drained his glass. Winter was coming. Most of the stuff out of the lab was delicate. The grass probably wouldn't make it through the cold weather and the snow that was sure to come. And even if it did, it was a nice-looking lawn, wasn't it? As long as he left it alone, he would have just what he'd always wanted: peace from those wretched insects. He decided to hedge his bet. Just in case the grass did not survive, he'd cut a plug or two and save it in his unused root cellar. That way, he could choose whether or not to replant in the spring. Satisfied, he decided to celebrate, and stumbled off to work up some more martinis.

Winter came and went quickly. As he had planned, Tasker spent most of it in southern Florida at a rented apartment, and capped the season off with a Bahamas cruise. He returned to the cabin in late March, just as the worst of the winter snow was beginning to melt. As he left his car, Tasker looked for spots where the snow had melted away, trying to see if the grass had survived. Nothing could be determined, at least not yet. All vegetation seen on both sides of the meadow was a uniform yellow brown.

The month that followed brought yet more snow to the meadow, but by the beginning of May the temperature was definitely higher, and precipitation wet instead of white. By now, the meadow around Tasker's cabin should have begun to bloom. Yet it remained the yellow brown of dead grass. Tasker was unsure whether to be happy or sad. If the grass were dead, that meant the cacophony of insects would soon return. If it lived—less probable every day—he would have other concerns.

“Looks like that meadow's dead,” said the mailman one morning, as he handed Tasker his two-day old issue of the New York Times. “Never seen the like. You spray sumpin, trying to make it pretty? Gonna take a lotta sod or a few years to get all that back. What's it? About four acres, I'd say.”

Tasker discarded the answer initially in his mind, choosing instead a noncommittal shrug and sigh. “Thanks for the paper,” he muttered, standing at the cabin's door, still in his bathrobe.

The mailman turned to leave. “You need sod, let me know,” he said over his shoulder. “My brother's boy does a real good job at it. Give a good price, too.” Tasker gave a small wave as the man climbed into his truck and drove away. He decided he would rather pave the whole meadow over than hire the mailman's brother's boy.

It was not until the end of May that any change in the meadow could be seen. One morning, a small area around the spot where Tasker had originally planted the grass from the lab showed its blue-green luster once again. After that, more appeared each day, spreading from the spot the same way it must have taken over the lawn in the first place. Within two weeks, the entire meadow was the same color, height, and consistency. The whole meadow! Somehow during the winter, under the snow, the grass had conquered the rest of Tasker's holding.

Close observation revealed more. The trees in the meadow were dying. There were four located around the cabin, including two Box Elders in the back where Tasker had mused about putting up a hammock someday. Five more were scattered about the meadow, White Oak and Pine. All should be showing new leaves by now, but none did. Instead, their drooping branches were signals of worse to come.

He tried to visualize what was happening. Perhaps the grass, as it straddled the root structure of each tree, sliced it to pieces as it did everything else in its path. Eventually, the dead trees would fall, only to be sliced again and again, until no vestige of any remained. That didn't bode well for the forest surrounding the meadow, Tasker realized. But surely, he thought, surely that would take time ... a lot of time. The woods were over a mile deep on every side of his meadow. Still, the realization was unpleasant. Unacceptable. He decided he needed to see Rendell one more time.

Getting to the lab manager was not easy. Without his prior position to help him cut through layers of management, it was difficult to get a call or message through. No matter. Tasker had always been patient and relentless. He simply pushed until the right door opened, and then barged through.

"You've been avoiding me," he said when they finally talked by phone, two weeks later.

“Yes,” the biologist answered. “I don’t like you, Tasker. I didn’t want to talk to you. You’ve hounded everybody who works for me, with me, and above me to get this call. This is your only shot. What do you want?”

“We need to meet.”

“No.”

Tasker sighed. “We need to meet, Mike, and soon. I need to know more about ... about the material you gave me.” He hesitated to be more explicit. For all he knew, the line could be bugged.

“Just how are you going to make that happen, Tasker? You can’t hold Compost Technology over my head, not any longer. I took that down as soon as you left. I even admitted it to my boss afterwards, and gave up my intellectual property to the company. You know what? It got me a promotion, you jerk.” Rendell gave a short, barking laugh.

Tasker chuckled. “I wasn’t even going to bring that up, Mike. I really hadn’t planned on it at all. I guess you have two choices. Either you meet with me as soon as you can, or you watch my interview with the media. The, ah, material has been busy, very busy. You wouldn’t dream how busy. Naturally, in my interview, I wouldn’t be able to help mentioning who supplied it to me—full disclosure and all that.”

“I was a fool,” Rendell replied, his voice choked with emotion. “All right. You win. Where and when?”

“I want you to come up here, Mike. I want you to see exactly what’s going on ...”

“Impossible, I have commit ...”

“... you'll come here and soon, Mike,” Tasker continued over Rendell's interruption. “And you'll bring the old boy's notes, the ones we can read. I need more information and you're the only source I've got.”

Rendell laughed again. “Something got you worried, Tasker? Something bad happening?” he sneered. “Maybe you should start listening to people, instead of pushing them around. Yeah, I'll come up. It will be the last time you'll ever see me. I want to be able to finally tell you some things to your face. Email me directions.” He broke the connection.

Rendell arrived a week later, carefully driving his company car down the rutted gravel drive that fronted the cabin. Even through their mutual animosity, Tasker was relieved to see him. As the week had progressed, he'd watched the grass kill a skunk, some kind of dog or fox, a bear cub, and a deer. The deer had been the worst.

A young buck had entered the meadow at a full run, heading across the clearing. As Tasker watched, the deer's progress began to slow. It reared on its hind legs, tried to turn, lost its balance, and fell. The grass ominously flattened for fifty feet on all sides of the struggling animal. Then it reared up, at least four feet in height. The blue green wave settled over the thrashing beast, and as it did the deer's movement subsided. In less than a minute it was a pile of unrecognizable, quickly diminishing pieces. A round glistening object shot from the fray, landing several yards closer to the cabin. In the few seconds before a wavelet of the grass erased it, Tasker saw that it was an eye. In less than an hour there was no evidence it or its owner had ever existed.

As he watched, Tasker realized two things. First, he noted that the grass reared much higher than it had the previous summer. Maybe, he thought, that had something to do with the

total area it had taken over. His second realization was more chilling and personal. The deer's death convinced him that the grass could kill a man—could kill him, as well.

Tasker walked quickly to Rendell's car, carefully keeping to the flagstone walk that led to the drive. Rendell opened the door and climbed out of the car before he got there. "Stop!" Tasker cried, running now. "For God's sake, stay on the walk!"

Rendell halted in the drive. He started to speak, paused to look around. As he took in the meadow, he shook his head in amazement. "It's all McClaskey's grass, isn't it, Tasker?" he shouted.

Tasker lurched to his side, gasping from his exertion. "Stay off ... the grass ...," he panted. "Dangerous."

"This is truly amazing," Rendell marveled, "and in less than a full year, at that. It must be, what, four or five acres? I'll have to get samples."

"The hell with samples," said Tasker, now recovered. "I need to see those notes. Come into the house, but be sure to stay on the walk."

"Got 'em right here," Rendell replied, "right here in this briefcase. Lead the way."

For several hours the two men sat in the cabin's great room, going through the papers Rendell had brought. There were many, and several carried the bright red or blue striped covers of classified documents.

"You're not supposed to see half of these," Rendell said. "If they're not back in the safe on Monday morning, there will be hell to pay."

"So ... this was a government project?"

"Tasker, from all I can find out, this grass was supposed to be a weapon."

"A weapon? Grass? How could that possibly work?"

“Well, you’ve seen what it can do, and you’re right—it gets more powerful as it takes over more area. Suppose you put some in a missile and dropped it in the middle of an opponent’s farm lands?”

Tasker thought. “It would take over all the crops, after a while,” he said. “But surely people would burn it out, or spray it dead. It’s not invincible.”

“I don’t know about that. Have you tried to kill it?”

“No, but you’d think ...”

“If it was a weapon, as these records seem to show, it would have been designed to resist herbicides and other measures. Remember, old man McClaskey was working on this for a long time.”

“Didn’t anybody oversee him? Who did he report to?”

“He had seniority over all of us. From what I can see his work was funded out of defense department resources. It brought the company millions while he was alive. Nobody cared about much else. We left him alone to his government handlers.”

“So what happened?” Tasker shook his head, incredulous. “Why haven’t the feds swooped in and taken the lab and everything attached to it out to area fifty-one?”

Rendell smiled. “You have to read between the lines, but it looks like the project was cancelled about two days before the old man was hit by a truck.”

“An unsolved hit and run. I remember the news reports. Cancelled? Why?”

“It’s like chemical or bio-weapons, Tasker. It’s no good unless the user can defeat it. In this case, they couldn’t find an antidote.”

Tasker turned visibly pale. “You mean ... you mean ... you don’t know how to stop it?” he whispered.

“I mean McClaskey didn’t know. You and I have created a mess here, Tasker. I’m as responsible as you. I’m going to take some samples, get back to the lab, and see if we can’t find a way to kill this grass. Hell, maybe we can turn it into a product and make the company some more money.”

After Rendell had left, Tasker—though still shaken—felt better. Rendell was smart, and his staff was first rate. It was just a matter of time before they found a way to kill the grass. All he needed was a little patience. He just had to wait. With that in mind, he fixed himself the day’s first shaker of martinis, and sat down to watch a spectacular sunset.

During the next three weeks Tasker willed himself to refrain from calling Rendell. It was high summer now, and the silence he had once demanded now became a frightening pall. No birds flew in the meadow any longer. The few unwary animals that entered were quickly dispatched. He examined the tree line with binoculars, trying to see if the grass had begun to encroach upon the surrounding forest. He found no sign of it, but remembered that the grass did much of its work beneath the winter snow.

As it turned out, Rendell called him instead. The call came in the evening, just as Tasker was climbing into bed. He jumped, unprepared for its shrill noise. Puzzled and shaken, he picked up his phone. “Hello ...” he mumbled.

The voice on the line’s other end was low and urgent. “Tasker,” it said, in a voice he recognized as Rendell’s, “you’ve got to come down here. We have to meet.”

“It’s a long drive, Mike. Maybe I can swing by on my way south, in a couple of months.” As he spoke, Tasker labored to express a calmness he did not feel.

Rendell’s voice sank to a hissing whisper. “This can’t wait, you old fool! I’m trying my best to help you ... maybe save your life! Don’t try to act like you don’t know what’s going on!”

Tasker decided to take advantage of Rendell's state of mind. It was an instinctive reaction, learned over a life of manipulating others. "Maybe I know what you're talking about, Mike," he said, "and maybe I don't. Why don't you tell me what you've been up to since your visit, and what's got you so lathered up."

Rendell was silent for several seconds. "It's always a mind game with you," he finally said with a sigh. "All right. I'll play. But you'll have to call me back. I'm at a pay phone in a bar. I don't have enough quarters on me to keep feeding it." He spat the number in Tasker's ear and abruptly hung up.

Tasker decided to wait a few minutes before calling back. He was sure each minute that passed would seem like an hour to Rendell. When he finally called the pay phone back, it rang a long time. Eventually, an unfamiliar voice came on the line. "Hello?"

"I'm trying to contact the man who just called me from this phone," Tasker answered. "Is he there?"

"Look, mister, I just work here," the voice replied. "There was a guy on the phone, but he left—just now—with two other guys."

Tasker hung up and went to bed, but got little sleep that night. First thing the next morning, he called Rendell's number at the lab, resolved to continue the aborted conversation. To his surprise, a new voice answered. "Project 956," a younger man said, "how may I help you?"

"I need to speak to Mike Rendell."

"I'm afraid Director Rendell is unavailable, sir. May I take a message?"

"Just tell him Eben Tasker called, and that I'd like a call back. He knows the number."

"I'll let him know, sir ... oh, Mr. Tasker?"

“Yes?”

“I’m looking at my notes. Director Rendell left a message for you. He thought you might call. He said to tell you that, let me see. Oh, here it is ... that you should leave the lawn alone. He will call you when he can. Does that make sense? Was he helping you with your lawn?”

Tasker hung up without answering.

By mid-September he had lost his patience. Calls to contacts where he used to work had established that Rendell’s lab was now under tight military security. Rendell himself had not been seen in weeks. The call Tasker had awaited seemed unlikely to occur. Besides, winter was coming, and he needed oil for the furnace. He decided to call his distributor, and kill two birds with one stone.

“Ed, I’m going to need more oil than usual,” he said to the oil supplier.

“Tank only holds so much, Mr. Tasker,” Ed replied. Damn come-heres, he thought. Got more money than sense, all of them.

“Oh, ha, I know. I know that, Ed. But I want an ... emergency supply. That’s it, an emergency supply! You can bring it in a bunch of twelve-gallon cans. A dozen should do it, I would think.”

“I don’t carry them cans, Mr. Tasker.”

“Oh, of course not. Of course you don’t, Ed. Go buy them. I’ll pay you.”

“Got to fill them too, Mr. Tasker. Takes time. Time is money.”

“Of course. Just put it on the bill, Ed. Glad to pay for it. Glad to.”

“OK then, Mr. Tasker. We’ll do like you say. I’ll be out on Monday. First thing.”

Ed smiled as he hung up the phone. It wasn’t every day you could make an extra buck or two. “Johnny,” he called to his youngest son, who was lounging in an Adirondack chair outside

the office. "Johnny, you get your butt in here. We finally found somebody to buy all those old cans we got out back."

Tasker was just finishing breakfast when he heard the oil truck coming down the drive. He hurried from the cabin, intent on reaching the truck before anybody set foot on the grass. He waved to the driver, old Ed himself – with one of his many sons along, he noticed. The truck pulled beside him, and Ed leaned from the cab. "Mornin', Mr. Tasker," he drawled. "Got them cans you wanted, all full. Cost was dear."

Tasker grinned, showing every tooth. "That's fine, Ed. Just fine. I'll write you up a check before you leave. You can just leave the cans on the drive. I'll take care of them later."

Ed frowned. "They's awful heavy, Mr. Tasker," He said. "Sure you don't want my boy to set 'em somewhere for you? It's why I brought him along."

"Just leave them where I said, Ed. That will be fine." As he spoke, he noticed the young man, a large hose in his hands, about to step from the drive to the grass. "Wait!" he yelled, turning to the boy. "Stop!"

By now Ed had left the cab of the truck. He walked to Tasker, stood in front of him, towering over the smaller, older man. "What's got into you, Mr. Tasker?" he asked loudly. "Don't you want your oil?"

Tasker forced himself to calmly reply. "It's the lawn, Ed. Look at it. Imported Bermuda. I did the whole meadow. Very, very expensive. Shouldn't walk on it."

"Well, it sure don't look like the grass I'm used to," Ed agreed. "But if we can't walk on it, how are we supposed to fill up your tank? A man can't fly, Mr. Tasker."

Tasker considered the situation. Perhaps it was time to try an experiment, he decided. The tank was to the rear of the cabin. The young man was tall and looked strong. "Silly of me, Ed. Go ahead and do what you came to do."

Ed nodded to his son, who once again set off through the grass, dragging the ponderous fuel hose with him. Tasker watched with great interest as the grass seethed and flattened beneath the young man's feet. As he reached the side of the cabin, the boy stumbled. The grass reared around him, engulfing him to his shoulders, pulling him to the ground. The boy screamed. "Papa," he yelled. "What is it? It hu ...!" his yelling ceased as he was completely drawn beneath the blue-green wave. The hose fell from his unseen hands; already cut from the nozzle he had carried. Oil began to ooze upon the grass, causing it to recoil.

Elated, Tasker turned to run to his car. He needed to get to the emergency kit in the back. A callused hand grabbed his shoulder, spun him around.

"What the hell is going on here?" yelled an enraged Ed. As he spoke, he leaned toward Tasker, poking him in the chest with an outstretched hand. "This some kind of a joke?"

Tasker recoiled from the older man's contact, trying to back away. He raised his hands to fend off the blows. "Calm down, Ed," he pleaded.

"Calm down my ass," yelled Ed. "You hurt my boy, you'll wish you was never born!" With that, he grabbed Tasker by the front of his shirt and pushed him to the ground. Standing over the smaller man, he spat as he spoke. "You stay right there, you little shit! I'm going to get my boy now! If he even has a scratch on him, I'll whup you fair!" He turned and lumbered through the grass toward the writhing blue-green mound that had been his son.

Tasker's mind skittered into corners he had not explored in years. His father had been a big, raw boned man like Ed—equally versed in Bible, bottle, and belt. The army had gotten him

away from his father's savage, whiskey-fueled beatings. College afterward had polished his speech and his outlook. He had never gone back, hadn't gone to the old man's funeral either.

Now, frightened and pushed, the barriers of a lifetime he had built so carefully in his mind dissolved. Once again he became the sly child of a hated, abusive father, trying desperately to think of a way to avoid the beating that must follow. A plan formed in his mind.

Ed trudged through the grass, moving slower with every step, his face red, his arms wind milling. He didn't notice as Tasker rose and sprinted to his car, opening the trunk to remove the emergency road kit he kept there. Tasker pulled a flare from the kit and walked toward the fuel truck. With a twist he initiated the flare, which he tossed at the spreading pool of oil on the lawn.

The oil ignited with a soft "wumph," and immediately spread toward its source, the hose still leaking on the grass. Tasker was elated. He ran to the truck and pulled up one of the canisters Ed had brought with him. Giggling, he ran up the walk and poured its oil on the grass as well, causing the fire to spread. Laughing out loud, he ran back to the truck for more.

Ed watched all of this, but could only pay limited attention. All of his energy and concentration was centered on moving back to the road, as the grass beneath his feet worked to engulf him. Something slammed into his back, between his shoulder blades. Off balance, he fell—and the grass began to do its work. He was dimly aware he had been hit by an oil canister, thrown by Tasker. After that, he thought of nothing but the pain. Soon, even that was gone.

Meanwhile, an energetic Tasker emptied one canister after another on the grass to the front and side of his cabin. "Who's in charge now, old man?" he thought. "Who's the big man now?" The grass burned freely, issuing acrid brown smoke. He could walk where it had been consumed without danger. Soon, he had used all the canisters in the truck.

Tasker stood on the burned grass, panting with exertion. What to do? If only he had more canisters. His gaze focused on Ed's truck. Filled with oil, he realized. He walked quickly to the back of the truck, and inspected the controls. Was there a way to control the pump from here? Yes, there it was! The simple push of a well-used button, that's all it took.

He felt the pump engage, watched the oil begin to flow from the damaged hose, saw the fire spread with the oil. He stood, transfixed, as the fire leaped from the grass to his cabin. Soon, all was ablaze. He heard, but could not see, his car explode, and realized he must get as far from the truck as he could.

As he ran, he heard the ear-shattering explosion that could only have been Ed's tanker. Its force knocked him to the ground. Shards of smoldering debris rained around him, starting desultory fires around the meadow.

Then, suddenly, all was quiet. Bruised and singed, Tasker rose from the gravel path where he'd fallen and looked around him. The fire had scorched the entire area around what had been the cabin, and much of the meadow to its eastern side. It was largely out, with only a few embers showing smoky life. The cabin, his car, and Ed's truck were completely destroyed. No sign of either Ed or his son remained. Silence—the silence he had always craved—reigned.

Something in his mind was broken, Tasker realized. He needed time, sleep, to mend. It was too far to walk to a neighbor's house, and he didn't have the strength to attempt it. Everything was gone. Would he have to sleep outside?

His vision settled on a mound, immediately behind the smoldering ashes that had been his cabin. Of course! The root cellar! It would have survived the fire. There was even some food and a radio inside, and a cot to sleep on. He staggered unsteadily through the burned grass to the

mound. All he needed was some sleep, he decided. In the morning, he'd feel better. He could deal with the world then.

He reached the root cellar's door, pulled it open, hurried inside—and realized his final mistake. He was surrounded, then engulfed, by the grass. It was bigger here, thicker than it had been above ground. Tasker realized that, like seaweed, most of the grass was below the surface. “It must have been those clippings I put here,” he thought, as the first sharp tendrils began to flay his arms and legs.

Then, for a while, there was no thought—just the unrelenting pain of being chopped to pieces, small parts at a time. After his nerves were overloaded or killed, he was able to think once again, but only for a short time. As he lay in the ravenous caress of the grass, he now knew that the fire hadn't killed it at all. Underground, it was still as strong as ever. In a few days, no one would know there had ever been a fire. As the last moments of life fled from him, Tasker wondered how many worlds would end like this: not in a flash of fire or a tomb of cold, but in a smothering cloak of green.

The grass continued to grow. Soon, no evidence of Tasker's cabin or any other human artifact marred the blue-green meadow. During the coming winter, a swath of the adjoining forest would be consumed. In the meantime, the grass assaulted the gravel drive, slowly working its way toward the valley and the wide, wide world beyond.

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