

*One-Eyed Jack and the Suicide King.*  
*Las Vegas, Summer, 2002.*

It's not a straight drop.

Rather, the Dam is a long sweeping plunge of winter-white concrete: a dress for a three-time Las Vegas bride without the gall to show up in French lace and seed pearls. If you face Arizona, Lake Mead spreads out blue and alien on your left hand, inside a bathtub ring of limestone and perchlorate drainage from wartime titanium plants. Unlikely as canals on Mars, all that azure water rimmed in red and black rock. The likeness to an alien landscape is redoubled by the Dam's louvered concrete intake towers. At your back is the Hoover Dam visitor's center, and on the lake side sit two art-deco angels, swordcut wings thirty feet tall piercing the desert sky, their big toes shiny with touches for luck.

That angled drop is on your right. *À main droite*. Downriver. To California. The same way all those phalanxes and legions of electrical towers march.

It's not a straight drop. Hoover's much wider at the base than at the apex, where a two-lane road runs, flanked by sidewalks. The cement in the Dam's tunnel-riddled bowels won't be cured for another hundred years, and they say it'll take a glacier or a nuke to shift the structure. Its face is ragged with protruding rebar and unsmoothed edges, for all it looks fondant-frosted and insubstantial in an asphyxiating Mojave summer.

Stewart had gotten hung up on an upright pipe about forty feet down the rock face beside the Dam proper, and it hadn't killed him. I could hear him screaming from where I stood, beside those New Deal angels. I winced, hoping he died before the rescue crews got to him.

Plexiglas along a portion of the walkway wall discourages jumpers and incautious children: it's a laughable barrier. But then, so is Hoover

itself—a fragile slice of mortal engineering between the oppressive rocks, more a symbol interrupting the flow of the sacred Colorado than any real, solid object.

Still. It holds the river back, don't it?

Stewart screamed again—a high, twisting cry like a gutted dog. I leaned against the black diorite base of the left-hand angel, my feet inches from this inscription—2700 BC IN THE REIGN OF THE PHARAOH MENKAURE THE LAST GREAT PYRAMID WAS BROUGHT TO COMPLETION—and ignored the stare of a girl too hip to walk over and check out the carnage. She checked me out instead; I ignored her with all the cat-coolness I could muster, my right hand hooked on the tool loop of my leather cargo pants.

With my left one, I reached up to grasp the toe of the angel. Desert-cooked metal seared my fingers; I held on for as long as I could before sticking them in my mouth, and then reached up to grab on again, making my biceps ridge through the skin. *Eeny, Meeny, Miney, Moe*. Eyepatch and Doc Martens, diamond in my ear or not, the girl eventually got tired of me. I saw her turn away from the corner of my regular eye.

They were moving cars off the Dam to let emergency vehicles through, but the rescue chopper would have to come from Las Vegas. There wasn't one closer. I checked my watch. Nobody was looking at me anymore, despite dyed matte-black hair, trendy goatee and the ink on the sunburned skin showing through my torn sleeveless shirt.

Which was the plan, after all.

I released the angel and strolled across the mosaic commemorating the dedication of the Dam. Brass and steel inlaid in terrazzo described moons and planets, stars: Alcyone, B Tauri and Mizar. Marked out among them were lines of inclination and paths of arc. The star map was left for future archaeologists to find if they wondered at the Dam's provenance: a sort of "we were here, and this is what we made you" signature scrawled on the bottom of a glue-and-glitter card. A hundred and twenty miles north, we're planning on leaving them

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another gift: a mountain full of spent nuclear fuel rods, and scribed on its surface a similar message, but that one's meant to say "Don't Touch."

Some card.

The steel lines described the precession of equinoxes and define orbital periods. They marked out a series of curves and angles superimposed across the whole night sky and the entire history of civilized mankind, cutting and containing them as the Dam cuts and contains the river.

It creeped me out. What can I say?

THEY DIED TO MAKE THE DESERT BLOOM, an inscription read, across the compass rose and signs of the zodiac on my left, and near my feet, CAPELLA. And ON THIS 30TH DAY OF THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER IN THE YEAR (INCARNATIONIS DOMINICAE ANNO MCMXXXV) 1935, FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, 32ND PRESIDENT OF THESE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA DEDICATED TO THE SERVICE OF OUR PEOPLE THIS DAM, POWER PLANT, AND RESERVOIR. A little more than ten years before Bugsy Siegel gave us the Flamingo Hotel and the Las Vegas we know and love today, but an inextricable link in the same unholy chain nevertheless.

I try to be suitably grateful.

But Bugsy was from California.

I passed over or beside the words, never stopping, my ears full of Stewart's screaming and the babble of conversation, the shouts of officers, the wail of sirens. And soon, very soon, the rattle of a helicopter's rotors.

The area of terrazzo closest to the angels' feet is called the Wheel of Time. It mentions the pyramids, and the birth of Christ, and the Dam. It ends in the year AD 14,000. The official Dam tour recommends you stay home that day.

Alongside these dates is another:

EARLY PART OF AD 2100

Slipped in among all the ancient significances, with a blank space before it and the obvious and precise intention that it someday be filled to match the rest.

Stewart screamed again. I glanced over my shoulder; security was still distracted. Pulling a cold chisel from my spacious pocket, I crouched on the stones and rested it against the top of the inscription. I produced a steel-headed mallet and measured it against the chisel's butt. When I lifted the eyepatch off my *otherwise* eye, I saw the light saturating the stone shiver back from the point of my chisel like a prodded jellyfish. There was some power worked into it. A power I recognized, because I also saw its shimmer through my right eye where my left one saw only the skin of my own hand. The Dam, and me. Both something meant to look like something else.

Card tricks.

The lovely whistlestop oasis called Las Vegas became a minor metropolis—by Nevada standards—in large part by serving gambling, whiskey, and whores to the New Deal workers who poured these concrete blocks. Workers housed in Boulder City weren't permitted such recreations within town limits. On Friday nights they went looking for a place to spend the money they risked their lives earning all week. Then after a weekend in Sin City, they were back in harness seven hundred feet above the bottom of Black Canyon come Monday morning, nine a.m.

Ninety-six of them died on the Dam site. Close to three hundred more succumbed to silicosis and other diseases. There's a legend some of them were entombed within the Dam, but that's a lie.

It would never have been permitted. A body in the concrete means a weakness in the structure, and Hoover was made to last well past the date I was about to obliterate with a few well-placed blows. "Viva Las Vegas," I muttered under my breath, and raised the hammer. And then Stewart stopped screaming, and a velvety female purr sounded in my ear. "Jack, Jack, Jackie."

"Goddess." I put the tools down and stood up, face inches from the

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face of the most beautiful woman in the world. “How did you know where to find me?”

She lowered tar-black lashes across cheeks like cream, pouting through her hair. The collar of her sleeveless blouse stood crisp-pressed, framing her face; I wondered how she managed it in one hundred-twenty degree heat. “I heard a rumor you meant to deface my Dam,” she said with a smile that bent lacquered lips in a mockery of Cupid’s little red bow. The too-cool teenager was staring at Goddess now, brow wrinkled as if she thought Goddess must be somebody famous and couldn’t quite place who. Goddess gets that reaction a lot.

I sighed. Contrived as she was, she was still lovelier than anything real life could manage. “You’re looking a little peaked these days, Goddess. Producers got you on a diet again? And it’s my Dam, honey. I’m Las Vegas. Your turf is down the river.”

Her eyes flashed. Literally. I cocked an ear over my shoulder, but still no screaming. Which—dammit—meant that Stewart was probably dead, and I was out of time.

“It’s not polite to ask a lady what she does to maintain her looks, darling. And I say Hoover belongs to L.A. You claim, what—ten percent of the power and water?” She took a couple of steps to the brass Great Seal of California there at the bottom of the terrazzo, immediately under the sheltering wings of a four-foot bas-relief eagle. California’s plaque was front and center among those indicating the seven states that could not live without the Colorado, and twice as big as the others. She tapped it with a toe. The message was clear.

I contented myself with admiring the way her throat tightened under a Tiffany necklace as I shrugged and booted my hammer aside. Out of my left eye, I saw her *otherwise*—a swirl of images and expectations, a casting-couch stain and a shattered dream streetwalking on Sunset Boulevard. “You still working by yourself, Goddess? Imagine it’s been lonely since your boyfriend died.”

Usually there are two or three of us to a city, though some places—New York, Paris—have more. And we can be killed, although