

## “Manifestation”

The regiment spread out across the clearing in an old-fashioned skirmishing line, the officers trailing behind the companies with pistols drawn. They entered the wood methodically, their eyes anxiously looking for signs of anything unnatural. Smoke hung over the horizon, billowing into the sky in huge plumes to obscure the Green Mountains. The commandant waved his pistol in the direction of the right flank, then the left. The captains acknowledged the signal and peeled their companies off in their respective directions. The acrid smell of burnt paint grew on the breeze, autumn leaves shuffling like scrap paper. The soldiers held their rifles higher, their heads tucked into their shoulders as they peeked around trees and through the brush. The tension meant they saw the first lick of flame before the specks of ash falling around them, the lively orange of the fire dancing in and out of the half changed canopy. The burning building was tucked into the leeward side of a hill, so as to be protected from winter’s winds. The regiment stood upon the crest examining the scene below. The house was engulfed but the outlying structures remained untouched. Equipment and debris lay strewn about, some half buried in the ground by the boots of dozens of people. Not far from the barn was a body. The commandant holstered his pistol and sighed. Nodding to a company captain, the regiment picked their way down the hill to the complex.

There were no signs of anyone living on the site except the middle-aged man who lay face down in the gravel. The captains reported the large backyard garden had been stripped bare and the unripe produce pulled up by the roots. The regiment’s medic was covering the body when the commandant crossed over from work shed.

“A single bullet to the head from maybe four feet away. They must’ve been talking because it was in the forehead,” said the medic.

“That’s cold,” said the commandant. “Any ID?”

“Taylor Emery, 52, this was his residence.”

The commandant turned back to the burning house. It didn’t make sense. The Federals were usually good about leaving civies alone, especially when they had nothing of value and this Taylor Emery was certainly that. He didn’t raise significant amounts of food, was not a mechanic, and had no other materials of value. So why kill him? What excuse did he give them? The commandant turned to the barn. It was closed and the body lay directly in front of the doors. He called to a captain and ordered the doors open. It was locked, but a series ax blows took down the door handles and locking mechanism. When the troops came back out they had a look of bewilderment and bemusement on their faces. A burly sergeant with fingers thick as table legs muscled the doors open.

The first thing the commandant noticed was the twisted metal face of the object. It stared down from a height of eight feet with great sunken eyes and a black hollow mouth. Metal arms outstretched from a gaunt body with giant nails protruding out in a gesture of embrace. Nothing on the figure was symmetrical and its unevenness added to the stark, dull sheen of the iron and steel that made its frame. At the figure’s feet were dozens of smaller figurines, each individual in design. Some were bent with pain, others twisted in joy and some blank, their faces an untouched plate. The metal shone in the flickering light of the fire from the burning house, shadows engaging in a ghost dance on the back wall of the barn. The commandant walked gingerly among the metallic crowd, inspecting their expressions. He stood beneath the gaze of the giant holding court, the eyes swallowing his attention. An obvious cough from a subordinate drew a sideways glance.

“Do you think he died for the metal?” the subordinate asked.

“No. They would’ve taken it for their own uses after they killed him. He must’ve said something to really get under the skin of whoever was in charge.”

“Why?”

The commandant didn’t answer. He turned his attention back to the giant, this time into the gaping black mouth.

James Northton arrived at the brigadier’s checkpoint six hours later. It was set up along the side of the road in front of a farmhouse. Rifle fire cracked in the distance towards Ludlow, echoing amongst the bulbous, rolling hills. Troops streamed down the road towards the sound, a determined look on the faces. James’s own face drooped with fatigue and sadness. The brigadier snapped to attention when he saw him, a pencil tumbling from behind his ear onto a map. James saluted back.

“Tell me what the situation is, brother.”

The brigadier sheepishly picked up the pencil and looked back at the map. He outlined the thin Federal line that was strung out at the base of the abandoned ski resort west of Ludlow overlooking the road heading south and east. James listened to the brigadier explaining the Federal placements and dispositions listlessly, his eyes wandering over the crisp contours of the map. His eye caught sight of a strange, twisted metallic figure weighing down one of the edges. He focused in on it and examined the frozen pleading face that gazed back at him.

“General, do you think this is an ambush?”

James continued staring at the figure.

“Anything is possible. It’s a good precaution to take, but if I had just lost close to fifty thousand men in a day all I’d care about is getting my ass back across the Connecticut.”

He picked up the figurine. His thumb felt the face, pausing in the grooves and depressions.

“Reinforce the First Burlington Brigade with the Second. Have the rest of the army continue on its pursuit of the main body. If the Federals try to come down, block them.”

The brigadier turned around and marched to his communications officers to relay the orders. James looked around the checkpoint, his eyes scanning each face methodically. At end of driveway into the farm was a barrel full of water being fed from a hose. By the barrel James spotted a heavily bearded man in a filthy flannel shirt and black jeans. He spoke in an old school, clipped Vermont accent. His eyes lit up when James approached and he lifted his dirty cap high on his forehead.

“Afternoon, brother,” James said.

“Afternoon.”

“You know where this came from?” He held up the iron figure.

The man’s face scrunched in thought. Suddenly his shoulders slumped and he shook his head.

“So, they got Emery.”

James passed the heavy object to him. The man’s fat fingers held it gingerly, as if it were made of glass instead of iron.

“I saw a regiment tromp off through the field across the way towards Emery’s place, followin’ smoke. This came from there.”

James nodded. “Can you show me?”

The man nodded. They drove in James’ state issued Jeep down the mile long driveway through the splattered fields of corn and into the shelter of the woods. The house was still

smoking, embers glowing in the massive timbers that made the frame. A platoon of soldiers continued to guard the property in a lazy circle, gossiping more about the battle brewing to the southeast than paying attention to their surroundings. Taylor Emery's body still lay in front of the barn, covered with a dusty piece of tarp. The commandant was organizing a burial detail with two captains who were trying to weasel out of the obligation. One of them swore when he recognized James. The commandant stood at attention and gave a crisp salute. The captains stood peevishly behind him. The bearded neighbor of Taylor Emery knelt beside the tarp and lifted it back to see the head with a hole in the middle.

"Fuckin' assholes," he muttered.

"Report, commandant," said James.

The commandant recounted his afternoon up until the moment James had arrived. When he'd finished James turned to the bearded neighbor.

"That sound like Emery to you?"

The neighbor frowned. "He was always obstinate, even in school. All he ever did was draw."

James nodded. He assigned the guiltiest looking captain to bury Taylor Emery in the shadow of his smoldering house and requisitioned the neighbor's services to oversee the rest of funeral arrangements. James turned to the commandant.

"Show me why he was killed, brother."

The commandant made a motion to the guards at the barn door. They pulled them apart to reveal Emery's metal communion. James made a wide circle around the collection, drinking in each figure's countenance. Finally, he stood below the giant with the hollow eyes and mouth. He

sighed and motioned to the commandant. He weaved his way through the smaller figures to stand behind him.

“How long do you think it took to gather all this metal?” James asked.

The commandant’s eyes narrowed as he thought. “Ten years. Maybe more.”

“Definitely more.”

James looked down at the sea of faces looking up at the giant. He fixed on the ones expressing pain, anger and anguish. The sound of an artillery piece booming in the distance drew the commandant’s attention. A flash of regret moved over the contours of James’ face.

“It’s not theirs,” James said.

The commandant nodded, a smile lighting up his face.

“Are we closing the door, like in Rutland?”

James opened and closed his fist in a tight movement.

“No. Never again.”

“Sir?”

“Commandant, I want one of your companies to take all these sculptures and deliver them to Rutland. You’ll have instructions on where to place them when you arrive.”

Given the extreme shortage of petrol, it was a back breaking assignment. Horses and oxen were also scarce, so the majority of the trip was spent hauling the heavy metal by hand. While the troops swore and cursed their commanding general, they were secretly grateful that they missed out on the desperate, ultimately futile battle at White River Junction. When they arrived in Rutland Center they were accosted by a curly haired woman bearing instructions from both James and the Demos of Vermont as to where Emery’s creatures would stand. The curly haired woman, who introduced herself as James’s partner, led them up into the valley where the

Federal army had been slaughtered only nine days before. The vast majority of the Federal dead had been drug off to the mass grave near the farm that ran along the valley stream bed. Not all had been collected through and a faint, rancid smell of rotting meat hung in the air. Some lifers to the area commented they'd never seen this many vultures and scavengers in one area. The morbid feast overpowering their fear of man and his guns.

Just outside of town they skirted around the first shell hole. The second and third were close by and the troops soon lost count the farther along they got. They picked their way around the edges, the smell of damp earth and sulfur filling their nostrils. Jagged pieces of shrapnel lay harmlessly on the ground. A few of the troops grew green as they recognized torn bits of flesh amongst the debris. Some even vomited when they identified individual parts – a finger, a couple of toes, an elbow joint torn from both ends. When they reached the entrance of the valley the ground resembled the cratered surface of the moon with the spare remnant of a tree sticking like a broken bone for the ruptured Earth. They stopped at the pinnacle of the valley's entrance, where the bracketing hills created a natural bottleneck. It was here that James' had concentrated his artillery to trap the Federal army from escaping. Many had tried to brave the shells, only to be smashed by the storm of steel churning the ground. James' partner found the spot of greatest intensity and began directing the tired, grouchy soldiers where to place Emery's creations.

Years later, after the Fall of the Republic and James' trial and imprisonment in Europe, his partner visited the memorial she'd help erect that day. The metal had been polished by the locals on a yearly basis so rust had never fully taken hold. The figures still stared silently up at the giant, their faces frozen like a snapshot. You could buy such snapshots now at the museum nearby; they were a popular item ever since the President's visit and the newspaper columns hailing the memorial as a masterpiece of "outsider art." James's partner stood below the giant,

her attention swallowed by the dark eyes and mouth. Many said you could feel your own death descending upon you when you stayed on that spot. James's partner never saw that. She saw what he had seen the day he'd found it – the manifestation of his horror when he realized what he had done.