

Hellgate

by David Ackley

“ How you want to call it? ”

Spook hadn't put together the signs until then, but he saw what Coudreau meant. They were driving a dirt road along the roaring Sabrohos at the tail end of the spring freshet. The road ran beside the river up toward the source, a remote pond in the high timber. Nearing the big lake at the bottom, the river flattened out, but higher up it was fairly extreme, stepped whitewater mostly too bad to even rate for canoeing, class six rapids at the easiest. Midway from pond to lake, the river roiled and frolicked darkly in the canyon, Hellgate.

They'd noted the black Wagoneer with a kayak rack, parked at the last takeout before the lake. Someone had dropped the kayaker upriver and left the Wagoneer for him to pick up at the end of his run, the keys probably under the floor mat.

In midstream the river climbed a boulder and curled over backward in a constant foamy break. Tannin from the spruce barrens upstream stained the water the color of weak coffee and it was thick with sediment.

Usually, when the question of outcome arose, they'd been called to go after someone lost or stranded, a hunter in the deep timber; scared kids hung-up on an ice-fall on Frankenstein Cliff; winter hikers caught above treeline by a blizzard. But this time they'd just happened on these traces, whatever was to be made of them.

“ You call it,” Spook said.

“ Recovery, no doubt. ” Either it was rescue—if the customer was alive to be found—or recovery, the term for bringing out the dead. Coudreau wasn't the most dedicated warden, but he'd grown up in the woods, and had a feel for the convergence of weather, terrain and hubris that in the back country constitutes fate.

“ It could work out. Maybe he's good. I've seen them run some mean water. ”

“ This aint the Discovery Channel. If he’s still upright we'd of see'd him by now.”

Spook nodded. “ I'd say rescue; he could just be stove up. ”

“ Fuckin' ay, stove up. ”

He knew Coudreau had no grudge against the dead, though his surliness made it seem like that. Their habitual silence could appear thankless when you were lugging them down a rocky pitch in a bivvy sack.

An upturn rock maple, dirty roots dragging like hair, passed downstream. He was starting to believe anyway, even before Coudreau held up his hand and he saw the yellow stern pointing at a low angle skyward, the bow pinioned deck-down under a protruding boulder. You didn't sit in a kayak, you wore it, they said. The same might be said of a coffin. Lucky for them if not the paddler, he'd made it through Hellgate.

In his wetsuit, Spook waded slowly out, figuring to tie up to the boulder with the rope in his hand, the current so heavy against his legs it was like wading through a delivery of liquid cement. A slick stone kicked out from underfoot and he fell and went under, turned by the current as in a large, rubbery hand, and despite that, thinking in clarity, *This might be the way it is*. He came up thrashing and blowing twenty feet downstream; on the belay, Coudreau played him into shore like a salmon. When he clambered up the bank and got back to his starting point, Coudreau said, “ You don't want to drown going after a dead man. ”

“ Wouldn't be the first time someone did. ”

“ That don't make it a good idea.” They'd both been on the cluster-fuck in the Whites when a warden and an AMC guide got blown off a cliff in a snow-squall, going after two fools already froze in each other's arms. All that, over so much inert matter.

He got to the rock on the second try, and felt his way underwater to the kayaker dangling head down from the kayak skirt. By the time they'd walked corpse and boat back to shore against the throb and treachery of the current, they were both clammy with sweat.

Laid out on the bank, his face a purplish grey, eyes wide and glaring, teeth bared in a final rictus, the man was hard to look at.

Coudreau said, " Don't seem like no adventurer now, does he? "

The news would befall those nearest him like a wolf in the night. Who were they? He wondered. There was nothing to go on except the known effect: Whoever they were, they'd be somebody different after they were told.

" Feels funny, don't it? " Coudreau said. " We never seen this poor bastard before and we're the only ones knows he's dead. And anyone who cares, still's thinkin' what a high old time he's havin' out here in the wild, paddlin' his little boat, havin' a beer by the campfire... "

The two men, who thought in terms of those perfectly matched opposites, the quick and the dead, were silent before this stranded ticket-holder awaiting official confirmation of his altered status. Spook had a sudden urge to call the man's people and give them the news before all the others bereft of category—the lost, the taken, the unremarked—came gibbering through the gate.

* * *

