



NIGHTWISE

R. S. BELCHER

"If you love complex, fantastical worlds, this is very intriguing."

FELICIA DAY ON *THE SIX-GUN TAROT*



NIGHTWISE



R. S. BELCHER



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In memory of Torri Lyn Saunders.

“The sun loved the moon so much, he died every night to let her breathe.”

ONE

The banker was crucified on the wall of his Wall Street office, fountain pens rammed through both wrists, an Armani Jesus.

The pens are Montblancs, very nice. Each one is custom-made, decorated with emeralds, sapphires and rubies, and then hundreds of tiny diamonds just for good measure. They run for a hair under a million dollars each. They're sturdy too, obviously. I doubt that their current function would be of much use in a marketing campaign, but still, a fun fact to know.

I left the shitty meth-lab-trailer-on-cinder-blocks I called home when I was thirteen. I remember writing the good-bye letter to my snoring, drunken mother on the back of a disconnect notice from Allegheny Power. I wrote my good-byes with a gnawed-on pencil, whittled to an uneven point by a pocketknife. I left the letter on top of a pile of past-due bills, truancy notices, and empty Marlboro cartons. No Montblancs in our clan, no sir.

Another dead end. This pattern was getting old. Every connection, every lead I had made tracking Slorzack had dried up. To date: three strangulations, one incinerated alive while taking a shower, one exsanguinated, a "car bomb" that left no trace of the explosive device, and now, Wall Street performance art.

I considered a working on the body—wake the old boy up for a bit of Q and A—but if the killers had any experience in the Life they might have set traps for any would-be necromancer.

I pulled the high-backed leather chair out from behind the desk, rolled it to where I could have a decent view of the tableau, sat down, and admired the effect, the craftsmen's work, for a moment. Every artist signs his portrait in some way.

I pulled out an American Spirit, only three left in the pack, second pack today. The Zippo snapped open with a hollow, metallic clank. A hint of sulfur stung my nose as the wheel ground against my thumb and the flame kissed the tip of my coffin nail. Pa called cigarettes that. He was a Lucky Strike man. Too bad he hadn't lived long enough for them to kill him.

The crucifixion itself had no occult symbolism that I recognized from the position of the body, hands above the head, almost crossed at the wrists but not quite. It did cause me to flash for a second to an image of an old bondage playmate of mine, the languid way she would raise her arms above her head and await the cuffs. If there was a safe word for God's snuff play, he kept it to himself.

The positioning of the body and hands didn't indicate traditional Judeo-Christian iconography, there was none of the overtly brutal but metaphorically and mystically powerful symbolism of Teutonic or Norse rites. He wasn't hanged upside down, for example, or missing an eye, and I saw not a crow.

I took a long draw on the cigarette, ran a hand over my shaggy hair. I had pulled it back, tight, in a ponytail to keep it out of my way. I rubbed my eyes.

The murder didn't betray any of the subtle trademarks of Dalí Absurdist Chaos Magic, the telltale covert rendering of metaphysical, four-dimensional, transcendent hypercubism that old Salvador had extrapolated in his *Anti-Matter Manifesto*. A good read, by the way. Even if you didn't care for his art, you had to admit Dalí was a top-notch psychosocial alchemist.

Signs of Satanism? Please. So last millennium. Go listen to Gorgoroth and sacrifice a puppy, what don't you.

No, no hocus-pocus. This was just someone killing a man in a very nasty way. More likely two or more killers, given the strength and flexibility needed to wrestle him up there, pin him, and hold him till the blood loss did its work. I was suddenly taken by the beginning of a very bad joke: *How many faceless conspiratorial hit men does it take to crucify a banker?*

This wasn't a ritual or an execution. This was a message. For me. *Stop searching. Back off.*

Dark streams flowed from the dead man's wrists, staining the pens' jeweled lengths, ending in swollen, pregnant drops that fell down into his eight-hundred-dollar Orlando Pita haircut, saturating his hairline and trickling across his pale, downturned face. The blood split and fractured into a web of black web, finally meeting again to pool at his perfect chin and tumble down, splashing dark stains on the expensive wool carpet. The lines across his face reminded me of Alice Cooper's makeup after a long, hot show.

I wrestled a small leather couch close enough to stand on it and reach the banker's body. I braced one boot against the wall and pulled the Montblancs free with a lot of grunting and effort. They were sturdy and had been sunk deep through skin, bone, paneling, and plaster.

The body fell, bounced off the couch, and landed with a muted squish into the dark, wet stain on the carpet that had gathered below it like a lengthening shadow.

I wiped the blood off of the pens with a monogrammed silk handkerchief I found in his pocket and slipped them into my coat. He wouldn't need them.

I hopped down, leaned over the body, and tried to imagine the killers, the struggle. It wasn't as hard for me as it might have been for most and, unfortunately, most of my insights were through the eyes of the killers, not the victim. I kept thinking how I would have killed this man, how I would have left him as an example to be found. This was far from my first visit with violence and death.

Sane, healthy, normal people grew up in fucking Disneyland when it comes to evil and the beings capable of inflicting it. Monsters, human and otherwise, roam this world, I assure you. It would be nice to blame dark powers and inhuman fiends for most of the troubles in this life, but sadly, we can't. There is more human evil out there than inhuman. Our world chokes on it, drowns in it, but some of us have learned to swim.

Hitler was the Henry Ford of the infernal. He developed a production line, a process, to make those horrible, soulless acts more cost-effective and efficient while removing accountability and guilt for his "workforce." He knew the importance of branding, sound-bite speeches, props, and jingles. He also knew, like any good marketer, the importance of images, symbolism, and meme, and he stole from one of the best. Like Ford, Hitler developed a process other sick, sad little psychopaths could duplicate and

improve on across time and space. A process of atrocity that was as clean as the faces and reputation of the American industrialists who did business with him up until the war and even after it had begun. No dirty fingernails for the boys in the home office, no hands-on work for them.

Somewhere in the process, someone has to get dirty hands, though. Someone has to strap on the IED, feed the starving women and children into the ovens, drop the bomb, or pull the trigger; someone slaughters the schoolchildren. In my experience, the best of these “men of action” are weak-willed sheep. The worst ... well, the worst enjoy their work. Some get off on it.

Evil is out there, right now, today, maybe watching your kids play too intently at the next table at that restaurant with the overpriced pizza and the giant rat for a mascot. Fun fact: Did you know that restaurant was founded and dedicated as a temple and feast hall to Karni Mata, the bride to the rat god Mushika. It's true. Those little gold tokens your A-B honor roll students are clamoring for are sacrificial blood coins feeding the god of plagues and vermin, and trust me, you don't even want to know why they got rid of the ball pits.

It's all out there—dirty nails, nails caked with graveyard dirt and the coagulated blood of infants.

I know these monsters, I have fought them, and if I am to be honest with you and myself, more often than not I have been the monster.

The man I was hunting had nails that were very dirty indeed, and I had promised Boj I'd find Dusan Slorzack and make sure he paid his account in full. But now, a dead banker and another dead end.

* * *

Two weeks ago:

I found my friend, Branko Bojich in a decaying hospice in Brooklyn that smelled of shit and Vicodin VapoRub.

“You look like hell,” I said, standing in the doorway of his tiny cell-like room.

“I'm dying from AIDS, asshole,” he said with a weak grin. “What's your excuse?”

I tossed him a small gift-wrapped package. “I got your call. How are you, Boj?”

“Dying, Laytham. Just dying, that's all. No big thing,” he said, putting the gift aside. “How's my favorite West Virginia cracker doing?”

“Fair to middlin', as they say at the tractor pull. Just got back from Egypt last night. It's good to see you, even like this, man.”

“Thanks, thanks for coming. I need to ask you to do something for me. It's going to be messy though. But I figure you...”

“Yeah, I owe you for messy,” I said. “What?”

“I want you to find the man who killed me, Laytham,” Boj said.

“I'm looking right at him, Boj. You put that spike in your arm, no one else.”

He squinted into the afternoon sunlight that squeezed through filthy blinds. His eyes were still, as dark as opals, but his dusky skin was now washed-out and blotchy. He talked to the sunbeams, not me.

“I told you I was married before I came to America, right?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“She died in Čelebići, in Bosnia, back in '92,” he said. “She was raped, every day for months, tortured. They nailed...” He swallowed hard and I saw him trying to beat down the vision. He let himself fail. “They nailed an SDA badge to her forehead and then kicked her to death.”

“SDA?” I asked.

“It’s the initials of one of the Muslim political parties over there. The stupid bastards didn’t even care how little Mita thought of politics. She believed everyone was good at heart ... look what that got her.”

He looked back to me with dry eyes, dead eyes. Whatever lived behind those dark wells had preceded Boj out of this world; the rest of him was just waiting to catch up.

“I was here in the States handling my family’s business. I was planning to bring her over.”

Boj’s family’s business was called “import-export” in polite circles. The cops called them the biggest heroin production and distribution network in Eastern Europe. When I met him, he was handling everything for them from L.A. through flyover country—Middle America. I saw him at work with the Russians, the Triads. He was the Alexander of the street—bloody, raging, glorious, and terrible. Now he was a skeleton stretched over gray skin, one good bout of flu away from Hell.

“Stupid bastards,” he muttered. “I found out the name of the chief stupid bastard just a few years ago. It took the last of my resources. Most of my ‘friends’ have abandoned me, and even my enemies pity me and wait for me to die like a rabid dog. But I knew you would come, Laytham. I know you want you to find him. I want you to see he gets what he deserves.”

“Why the fuck me, Boj? I’m no cop, I’m not an enforcer, a leg breaker. I know some wise guys who’ll do him for...”

“Because he’s into the Life, Laytham, the Art, the Dance, *bajanje*—whatever the fuck you call it, just like you and Harel and all those other weirdos we used to hang out with. I think he used it to escape from the law, even the street’s law.”

Down the hallway there were echoing shouts in Spanish. Someone named Tuni needed to mop up Mr. McGowan’s piss from all over the break room. I sighed.

“This chief stupid bastard have a name? We may have bumped into each other at one of the weird conventions.”

“Slorzack,” he said. “Dusan Slorzack. He was indicted for war crimes back in '96, but he hasn’t surfaced anywhere since then. He seems to have found a back door to slip away from everyone.”

“That was awhile back, man. You sure he hasn’t just died somewhere?”

Boj said nothing. His face was sunken, a skull with tatters of skin and bone pulled over it, a constellation of sores marking his face.

“No,” he finally said. “Bastards like me don’t get that lucky. My karma is fucked. He’s out there laughing and drinking and fucking and Mita is only a memory in my skull, and when I’m gone, she’s gone too, like she never was, and that is the greatest crime I think I have ever known. I’d do it myself if I could, Laytham. I can’t.”

I scratched my head and sighed. Boj waited patiently with the ghost of his dead wife for me to mope it over. Slorzack. The name meant nothing to me. A long-cold trail. My enthusiasm must have been shining out of my face.

“You owe me blood, redneck,” he finally said when he felt me trying to pull away from it.

“Yeah,” I said, “I reckon I do. Okay, I’ll look into it.”

“Good,” he said, and I saw his whole body relax. He smiled. His teeth were rotting, and his gums were gray and recessed, but it made me feel good to see him smile, all the same.

“Thanks,” he said.

“I got to go. I’ll keep in touch,” I said.

“Yeah. What the fuck is this, Laytham?” he asked.

He unwrapped his present. His eyes widened as he recognized the worn, battered leather case. He unzipped it and smiled again. Everything was like he had left it. The hypodermic, the needles, even the cooking spoon, caked and blackened. The rubber hose uncoiled like a tan viper, eager to wrap around his arm and sink its fangs into his vein. A small red balloon filled with poisonous rapture also fell out, tied tight to keep its contents from spilling.

“I figured what the hell, right?” I said.

“Yeah,” Boj said, arraying his works before him, looking at the balloon like a groom looks at a bride on their honeymoon. “What the hell.”

* * *

I knelt over the dead banker’s dumb face frozen in agony and terror. The dead always look fake, like wax mannequins or grotesque rubber sex dolls, but the death smells were there to remind you it wasn’t a special effect. Sweat, shit, piss, blood, all stuffed up my nostrils to assure me it was as real as it gets.

His eyes reminded me of Granny’s. All dead eyes did. I half expected him to blink, for those cold empty windows to shift, focus past the gathering cataract clouds, and regard me from a sitting room in Hell.

They didn’t. I started to breathe again and felt the cool sheen of sweat wet the back of my shirt. I closed the dead man’s eyes, more out of a desire for reprieve from their regard than anything approximating respect or human kindness. My hands shook a little. I needed a drink.

A man like this would be missed—and soon. He had been here all night, and now, in the cold gray light of dawn, his office manager, or one of his racquetball buddies, or his steroid dealer would walk in and find him. I needed to be gone by then.

I tossed the room, looking for anything that might put me back on the frozen trail of Slorzack. My short-lived friend, the car bomb guy, had left a few legal pads in his desk drawer that hadn’t ended up blown to hell. They led me here. Slorzack had paid a lot of money for an introduction to this man, Berman, James Berman. Why?

I skipped searching the plundered desk and the computer with its blue screen of death. The people who killed the banker had done a professional job of tumbling the place. They had found whatever they were looking for, if indeed they were looking for anything at all. Tossing the room might have just been a ploy to divert attention from the murder. Unlike the crap you see in the movies, nobody methodically tears up a room and then misses the McGuffin in the false-bottom chest. It just ain’t so. The only hope I had was to pick through the scraps. Look for the unseen.

I closed my eyes, steadied my hands, and slowed my breathing and my heartbeat. I opened the lenses of energy that resided along the bone staircase of my spine. I exhaled and opened my eyes.

I started with the primary reason for the killer's visit: Berman himself. If they just wanted to take the place, they could have done that when he wasn't here. No, they came to do this to him. Ransacking the office was either a secondary concern or a ruse. I examined his body. Berman was a very tan man. He had good hair and good teeth and was tall and had a body that was a testament to many hours worshipping at the temples of the racquet club and spa. He had a class ring—a big, squat, ugly thing designed to announce to the world his pedigree. On his left hand was a simple gold band and a Masonic ring, gold with a ruby glaring up at me in the harsh office light. A Mason. He was a little more interesting now.

A sudden insight, a flare of intuition, made me open his shirt, ripping the buttons off the broadcloth and pushing his tie aside, so that it now clutched his bare neck more like a hangman's noose than a banker's badge of office. His chest was smooth, hairless. Around his neck, on a thin expensive silver chain, were two slender cylindrical handcuff keys on a simple wire loop of steel.

I touched the keys and felt the swell of tantric power roar through my mind and down in my Swadhisthana chakra. The flicker of the candles, the spatter of hot wax, the feel of warm leather in my hand, the smell of blood and sex, the scream of pain and desire, echoing. This was the first real part of this man I had come across here. These keys were soaked in secret power, hidden desire, and I could track that.

But I felt a familiar pressure squeeze between my brows as my Ajna chakra opened its petals wide. *Something else.*

I took the chain and the keys, dropped them in my pocket. I reached for the mug of overpriced, and now cold, coffee on his desk and dipped a Montblanc pen into it. I stirred counterclockwise as I incanted, "*Aperio latito conspici ... iam.*"

I took the pen out of the mug and moved it across his still chest, left to right then right to left, finishing the charm by circling his chest widdershins and touching the tip of my makeshift wand to the spot where his cool, still heart was.

This was a risk. If the killers had planned on me using the Art to search, I could get a nasty surprise, but this was a very unobtrusive bit of magic. A trap would have to have a hair-trigger to activate against this.

The skin wavered like asphalt on a hot day and the tattoo appeared, spread across the dead man's chest. Emerald ink, racing, arcing, forming symbols, finishing in the pattern of the pyramid with the All-Seeing Eye boring into me as it hovered at the apex amid a halo of brilliant radiating light rays.

Illuminating.

"Shit," I said, with more than my usual amount of West Virginian twang. I said it out loud to no one but the dead man and me, a soon-to-be dead man.

"You're with the fucking Illuminati."

TWO

I exited the office building of the late James Berman—would-be secret master of the world—faster than a preacher leaving a whorehouse. The sky was ash. Dawn was a thinly veiled threat of bruised light only moments away. The row of streetlight orbs that stood silent sentry glowed in perfect unison. Most busted streetlights on Wall Street. They winked out one by one as I passed them, their duty to hold the night at bay finished.

It was September, and dead leaves, empty Starbucks cups, and crumpled McBurger wrappers swirled in the terminus of the wind cutting between the shafts in these concrete fortresses. I pulled up the collar on my ratty Navy pea coat, lit a new cigarette, and kept walking away from the crime scene with my aura all over it. My stupid, unique, mega-magicy redneck aura.

The Illuminati. Fuckity-fuck-fuck.

Down the street, a group of Occupy protesters were huddled together beside a small domed tent trying to avoid the wind's cold regard. Their cardboard signs bent and bowed in the force of it. None of them looked like they had gotten much sleep. I recalled not too long ago when there had been thousands of them down here. Most had packed up and headed home, but not these kids. They were young, college age, and they were true believers. In other words, cannon fodder.

While their leaders gave speeches and then drove home to Rockaway or Brighton Beach, or NYU for dinner and a nice warm bed, these kids manned the front lines. They were foot soldiers, the ones who end up dead in every war, the dumbasses who most likely volunteered.

Screw volunteering.

Belief has power. Getting someone else to believe what you believe has even greater power. I've always been all about the power, not so much with the following or the believing. I believe in me, that's pretty much it. Believe in someone else too much and they'll fail you or screw you, or both.

One of the kids handed me a flyer. It was shaking, snapping in the wind.

"Learn the truth about who is running our country into the ground, bro," the kid said. He was maybe twenty and had a mop of curly, brown hair stuffed under a Nike lid. He sported a week's growth of beard. A blue North Peak jacket helped keep him warm, and he had an iPad in his hands with Angry Birds fluttering across its glowing screen. "Help fight the corporations that are bringing us all down."

"Irony," I said. "Do you know it?"

"Huh?" the walking billboard responded eloquently. I shook my head and took his flyer. "Fight the power," I said, and gave him a fist bump of solidarity as I slid the two Montblanc pens into his pocket without him seeing. I kept walking. If he knew who really ran this world ... well, he'd be as screwed as I was. If they found those pens on him, he'd be a damn sight worse than screwed.

And better him than me.

* * *

The Illuminati. Really? For half a second I thought maybe Boj was setting me up to get killed. I did owe him, and maybe he thought this would be a good way to get fair market value out of me. One last “gotcha.”

No. I saw the look on his skull-face, in his heavy-lidded eyes: hate. Not for me but for the man who had taken the only light he had known in this world. No, Boj had said Slorzack had mojo. If he was hooked up with the Illuminati, it might explain why Boj couldn't find him.

I fell into a booth at Jack's Stir on Front Street. For the millionth time since I saw that symbol manifest on Berman's chest, I thought about saying fuck it and rabbiting. Boj would be dead soon and I could tell him I did my best but I couldn't find Slorzack. I'd live, Boj would die either way. You meet with the “I” and you end up with someone using your nerves as violin strings while you lie somewhere and feel every draw of the bow, every note of agony. No, thank you.

The waitress was pretty, Mediterranean with long black curls and tanned skin showing in all the right places to help with the tips.

“What to drink?” she asked. Her English was pretty good. The tag next to her cleavage said DANNI.

“Cheerwine,” I said as I unwrapped, and tapped, a new pack of smokes. I knew I couldn't smoke here without a lot of bullshit following me, but the ritual comforted me and made me think of the next cigarette to come.

Danni frowned. “Wine? I'm sorry, we have no liquor license for...”

“No, darlin', Cheer-wine. It's a soda.”

“Soda.” Danni nodded. “Oh, pop. We have Pepsi ... we have...”

Suddenly I felt like I was in an old *Saturday Night Live* skit with John Belushi. No Coke, Pepsi. I shook my head and smiled.

“Coffee, darlin'. Black as my soul and those pretty eyes of yours.”

Danni looked confused and then smiled and wrote something on her pad. “Coffee. Yes. Very good.” She looked me in the eyes. I sent a little current back to her, just a nudge of power from my sacred chakra, to make sure I got a decent cup of joe and her attention while I was here. She walked away and glanced back to see if I was watching her. I was. We both smiled.

Great. Here I was in the Big Rotten Apple, no fucking Cheerwine to be had—I hated going north. No one ever carried it up here. I could make the most of this day right now by asking Danni to come back to my hotel with me.

And then there was Boj, dying. Waiting for me. Fuck.

Boj. He took a 9mm rune-carved heart seeker for me in Vegas, back in '99, when we burned Joe Dross and stole his philosopher's stone. Boj was the only one who came back for me when everything went to shit in '01, with us trying to save that little girl from the breeding pools under Carrabelle, Florida. He risked his life to pull me out of there when the Mosquito Queen was draining me dry and I was begging for her to do it. He stayed with me during the sickness, madness, and addiction that followed.

Boj, black-hearted, grinning, mean as a snake, smooth as gun oil, eager to die—happy to kill Alexander the Great of the occult underworld, the Life. Boj.

I couldn't give this up, not now. And not for any noble reason you might attribute, not out of loyalty, or friendship, or debt. No. It was the small, cowardly, skittering part of me that had kept me alive for so long. It said that the Illuminati were now in this and they would find me, after my visit to Berman's office. No, I couldn't just drop this. The only way out was going to be through. So I needed time. Time to figure out the link between Berman and Slorzack, to find out what Berman's handcuff keys were all about, time to work some angle with the Illuminati that kept me from getting disappeared.

I drank my coffee and admired Danni's ass in her tight uniform and listened to my inner bastard tell me exactly what I needed to do.

I tipped Danni fifty dollars and walked out into the growling late Manhattan morning.

I stopped at a newsstand on Water Street. The guy running it had a Rasputin-style beard and was wearing a ratty Primus T-shirt over his enormous beer gut.

"Give me a pack of American Spirits," I said, handing him some crumpled cash, "and a white B&W lighter."

He handed me the cigarettes and a purple lighter out of the display behind his counter.

"No," I said to Rasputin, "I asked for a white lighter."

"What's the fuckin' diff, man?" Rasputin rumbled. "'Sides, white lighters are bad luck, everybody knows that."

"Yeah," I said, "I know. Now give me the damned white lighter."

* * *

I went back to the hotel and was saddened that there wasn't a hot Greek waitress waiting for me. I got my working bag out—an old, frayed canvas bag with two worn handles and a zipper that often stuck. The bag was the color of desert sand. It was covered with various symbols and runes drawn in black Sharpie. It had a few dark, ominous stains. It also bore the logos of numerous bands I had been enamored of in my youth: Kiss, Led Zeppelin, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Alice Cooper, AC/DC, Pink Floyd, the DKs, and, of course, the Stones.

Pop quiz: What do Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Kurt Cobain all have in common? Answer: They were all awesome. They were all left-handed, they all died at the age of twenty-seven, and all the police reports said that a white plastic lighter was found in their possession at the time of death.

I stripped in the stale, silent air of my hotel room. My body was still in pretty good shape for my age. Not bragging, but I was rocking the Iggy Pop look, without the heroin diet plan. Still a little muscle, still a little cut, still a little rock star in me. My skin was covered with tattoos and scars. A lot of my ink was work related, you might say. Symbols, formulas, pacts, and wards. My scars, ah, my scars. They came from motorcycle accidents, knives, bullets, claws, broken bottles, bites, whips, self-mutilation, and a bunch of other stuff, not the least of which was the wound in my back from being impaled by a giant mosquito woman. That one still itched most nights, and sometimes, when the moon

was new and far away, her wound sang horrible, beautiful songs to me.

I closed the drapes to hide from the light and to muffle the never-ending scream of the city, wanted to make sure I didn't lose any of Berman's psychic "scent" off the cuff keys, so I put them in a safe place—the glove. I took it out of my canvas bag and unrolled it. It was the skin of a powerful *sante* down in Miami, tanned and treated with all the fingers still intact, taken from his hand, severed at the wrist. Anything put in the glove was preserved and hidden from the view of the world and those with the Art. In short, it was gruesome mystic Tupperware. I dropped the keys in the glove, folded it up, and set it on the nightstand.

I took my working bag and entered the bathroom. I set up candles of black and red around the tile floor and on the sink counter. I took a handful of ritual Klonopin pills, called benzos on the street by the nice young man I had purchased them from, and washed them down with cold champagne ordered from room service. Then I sat down on the floor, lotus style, and closed my eyes. I centered the energies of my chakras. I felt the loci of forces align and then dipped into the power building in my Rasatala chakra, a minor point of energy in my ankles. I let the forces of selfish energy build a channel up my legs. I mixed it with the fear in my Atala chakra in my hips; I began to feel the power swirl in me, like the first smoky, heady rush of heat from a sip of good whiskey. I rolled the power around in me and felt the high envelop me. The candle flames all flared, burning bright blue, illuminating the dark bathroom. Goddamn ... Why the hell would anyone be fucking normal if they didn't have to be?

The universe was roaring through me like an open door, and I told it what to do. Yeeeeesssss I stood, took the white lighter out of my bag, and placed it in the sink. I looked at myself in the mirror, lit up by acetylene blue light. My eyes were wide and dark, pupils dilated. I smashed the mirror with my left fist. An explosion of silver-blue fire supernova, jagged teardrops falling down into the sink. A distant, muted echo of pain, screaming from my nerves. The power welling up in my chest, in my throat.

Shape the words, carve the energy, vomit it up into the sink, into the lighter.

*Ego sum mea parasitus
Nil opus hostiam vivam
pascimus off de invicem
Possumus nostrum endorphins
Doll CARNIS! Test cibum!*

The words carried the power with such force, they felt like they were loosening my teeth. Even through the chemical shroud of the benzos, I felt like shit. This was dangerous magic for an old bastard like me to be trying.

*Non opus est mihi molestus varius novum amicus
Non opus novum amicus tribulant me titio
Et non indiget aliquo egere me*

Video balneo patet

Puto autem quod alicuius prope

Scio quod aliquis post me, O yeah.

I clutched the counter and growled the words into the sink. With each syllable, the shards of mirror snapped and fragmented.

Habitabant in speculis me auferre, cum viderem me omnes. Crepitus ego me spiritum meum et specula, nunc adest mundo videre. Etiam Castella fecit de arena, cadunt in mare ...

Blue smoke drifted from the sink. I looked at my bleeding left hand as if it was some alien thing unattached to me. I let the blood drip into the sink, onto the broken glass of the hotel mirror, onto the pure white lighter. *Drip, drip, drip.* Suddenly, I was in Berman's office again. His pale, blood-streaked face looked up, and his eyes opened. They were Granny's eyes, milky white, soulless.

Nosti opinor penitus infantem et non in corde recto,

Numquam numquam numquam Numquam exaudiet me cum clamavero nocte

Infantem et clamavi tota die;

Sed quotiens me, inquam, bene ferre possum dolor

Sed in armis tuis me dicis, ego iterum psallere.

Dicam age, age, agite, et sequere eam?

Power, any power, has a price. I was preparing to damn someone to a painful death, to an eternity of suffering. To save my sorry ass, to buy me a few extra days. I reached into the sink and my bloody fingers wrapped around the white lighter. I was damned too. Damned again.

Tolle it!

It was done. The candles' guttering flames were no longer blue. I staggered out of the bathroom feeling the cosmic hangover of the power departing me. Like a junkie coming down. No longer a god, only emptiness and remorse. A hollow man.

I carried the champagne bottle, taking deep, thirsty gulps, pausing long enough to pour some over the wounds on my hand, and then taking a nice long draw off the bottle. I set the lighter on the nightstand beside the glove. It was pristine, clean, and perfect.

I fell into the bed, the bottle still in my hand, and I slept, the only sleep my kind ever truly enjoys: drugged and dreamless.

I slept for about a day. I awoke to the predatory sounds of night in the city. For a moment there was a thrill of terror, that I had waited too long, that the faceless crucifiers would be crashing through the hotel room door any second.

I got up, stood in a hot shower for a long time, and wrapped my busted-up hand with duct tape, put on clean clothes, a Bauhaus T-shirt and jeans, and I began to feel human again. I gathered all my

things and finally, as I prepared to leave, I put the lighter in my pocket. The hotel room looked trashed. I left the lights on and shut the door.

The Port Authority Bus Terminal is on 8th Avenue, near the *New York Times* building. I walked there. It was cold, but the fresh air helped me. I entered the terminal and made my way to the men's room. There was a rancid lake of piss on the floor. In the gang tags and graffiti smeared across the walls and stalls, I saw the names of twenty-six minor lords of Hell, hidden.

I placed the lighter on the counter by the sink, looked at it for a second, and then walked out, keeping walking.

Someone would pick it up. I didn't know who exactly, but I did know the person would be twenty-seven years old and left-handed, and would be inheriting all my troubles with the Illuminati. Whoever it was would be tracked, disappeared, questioned, tortured, and then would finally die, if he was lucky.

The sounds of the street and the cold air slapped me as I walked out of the terminal and down the street, looking like just another asshole.

I couldn't see the face of the person who claimed the lighter. And I could see them all.

THREE

The sun choked on the concrete mountains of Manhattan and died. The night was ascendant, swollen with victory, the shrill howl of sirens, the dull murmur of human misery, and the spoor of blood, sex, and garbage soaked the air. One of the reasons the night is so full of hungry things is that it is born of death and rapacity.

I took the subway out of the city. The Keep had been operating out of “the Gates of Hell”—the abandoned Glenwood Power plant in Yonkers—for the last few months. The building was impressive for its dark sprawl. It squatted like an old whore pissing in the Hudson River, its lower levels already flooded and eaten by rust. The club moved on a regular basis, trying to stay one step ahead of New York’s finest. I got the address from a Haitian cabbie for a hundred bucks and a bag of weed.

The building was huge, its crumbling, filthy walls thrummed from the bass of the sound system inside. At one hundred yards my guts were vibrating. A crowd of club kids practiced looking bored as they waited to be chosen to go inside. Their breath and cigarette smoke swirled about them like warring ghosts. Two muscled myrmidons wrapped in Kevlar, armed with steel batons, stood watch over the dented fire door that was the only way into the Keep. Their faces were bland masks with cold, laconic violence leaking out the eyeholes.

I walked up to the bigger one, a black guy with a shaved head. I noticed a sheet of paper taped to the fire door. It had a symbol on it: a circle that held the yin-yang teardrops, but this symbol included a third teardrop, the trio eternally circling, like little Zen sperm.

I looked at Baldy and knew immediately he was the man to be talking to. His companion, like me, wore his hair long, for fun, not business. This man shaved his head, so that when he was kicking your ass, you didn’t have anything to grab on to. No hair, no piercings, no bullshit. Business.

“Grinner here tonight?” I asked.

“I’m not his fuckin’ appointment secretary, motherfucker,” Baldy replied in a quiet, even voice. No anger. “You in or out?”

“In,” I said, and handed him a hundred. I started to walk past him to the door, flicking away my dying cigarette.

“No fucking trouble tonight or you be pissing blood tomorrow,” Baldy said.

“I look like trouble to you?” I said.

“Shit, you stink of it,” he said.

I pushed open the fire door, which stuck slightly and creaked. The furnace blast of heat, music, and smoke roared over me. I stepped into the belly of the beast.

The last thing I heard before the Keep swallowed me whole was one of the club kids whining. “He

How come he gets to go in?" the droning, drugged voice asked.

"Because he's the real motherfuckin' deal," Baldy replied.

The Keep writhed and sweltered. Lasers strobed and burned across a sea of swirling, milky smoke fog machines, clove, tobacco, and pot. The sky was a thousand HD monitors shifting and fading between images: Klimt paintings, a slaughterhouse, Kenneth Anger's *Lucifer Rising*, sadism-themed porn, nebulae and northern lights, napalm runs in Cambodia, *Nosferatu*, X-rays of tumors, terroristic beheadings, and Dalí's *Andalusian Dog*. The music thundered: DyE's "Fantasy." Below the video sky hundreds of glow sticks held in sweaty hands or twirled on strings made ever-shifting constellations. The dancers surged and receded to the ethereal strains. Some dancers wore glowing, burning LED glasses, others wore lighted gloves with firefly fingertips. A few had bottles of bubble soap that had been dosed with the chemicals in the glow sticks and glowing green bubbles drifted like will-o'-the-wisps.

I drifted through this realm. The energy throbbed, swelled, and pulsed like the dark ocean at high tide. There were alcoves, ledges, and tables everywhere. A young woman, nude except for a feathered Mardi Gras mask, hung, moaning, at a ninety-degree angle with hooks, small and large, attached to her chains, piercing her skin. Her bloodred lips were parted in ecstasy while fat, shirtless men in leather pants and zippered masks pulled on the chains that tore through her.

I paused at a table covered with a mosaic of colored pills, amyl nitrate poppers, ether aerosol canisters, blotter acid, coke, and weed. I snorted a few lines off a black glass mirror, felt the freight train crash on my head and chest exploding in bright, sharp, white pressure. The rush made me remember everything for a diamond-edged second, and I suddenly recalled, for the thousandth time, why I stopped doing coke.

Coming up from the mirror, I saw a man on a table on his stomach, glass cups, the air within heated by the blue blade of a handheld acetylene torch, were attached, one by one, to his naked back by a slender girl with a mane of white hair. The girl was wearing a corset and skirt of bloodred leather and a gas mask. The hot air inside the cups created a vacuum that, when pressed to the man's skin, sucked the flesh up into the cup and made the man hiss in pain and sensation.

I watched the show, along with the small crowd that had gathered. As they watched gas mask gags add more and more cups to the shuddering man's back, I lost interest and turned to regard a beautiful nude Asian woman, her head shaved, a coiled serpent of emerald and crimson ink flowing down her flawless body. She stood like a queen, regarding the crowd and me with utter contempt, then lowered her eyes and knelt at the feet of three well-dressed men in suits and featureless black leather masks. Each man held a crackling neon purple wand that sputtered and hummed with electricity. They thrust the wands into the flesh of the Snake Queen. Her aristocratic features contorted in pain and ecstasy. The whole tableau was overseen by a woman in a flawlessly tailored man's suit, a leather mask, like those of her knights, obscuring her features. She sat in an antique electric chair, in rapt attention to the Snake Queen's torture.

The pain was sudden and severe, and it came on me instantly as I watched and listened to the violet wands sizzle the Snake Queen's nerve endings. The pain was centered between and slightly above my eyes, and I knew exactly what it was. I walked away from the crowd and the show and let the yawning

ache in my third eye lead me. It was at a table near the terminator between the churning dance floor and the conspiratorial darkness that was haven to lovers and criminals. It was skinny, almost gaunt with long blond hair tied back into a ponytail and a fringe of a beard. Its eyes were heavily lidded and reminded me of a lizard's.

It was feeding on a young man at a table about twenty feet away. The boy was pale, weeping, his makeup streaming down his cheeks. Black tears. I saw the kid stuff a handful of pills into his mouth and drown it with a shot of Jägermeister. The pain radiating off him was sharp and bright, like a scalpel. The blond "man" with the ponytail smiled when the boy winced in emotional pain. I stepped into its line of sight, blocking its view of the boy.

"Try me," I said. "Go on, try it on me."

The psychic vampire regarded me for a moment like a cobra preparing to devour a mouse, and then its lidded eyes widened as it encountered my defenses. It sniffed me and quickly did the math of the jungle.

"Go on," I said, lighting a cigarette, "eat me."

I leaned over the table and flicked my ashes in its drink. It started to rise. I put a hand on its shoulder and pushed it back down.

"Don't come back here," I said. "You do and I'll rip your aura off and we'll see how long you can live with every nasty entity and negative essence in here chewing on you."

I released it. The psychic vampire stood and nodded slightly. Its face remained a mask of blank indifference.

"My apologies," it said in a near monotone. "I didn't realize this was your feeding ground." It walked onto the crowded dance floor and disappeared into the forest of sweating bodies.

"Fuck you," I said to the empty table.

* * *

I found Grinner on the fifth floor of the old power station, up where the really weird shit goes down. I ascended the wrought-iron spiral staircases, rusted helixes that took me lower and lower as I climbed higher and higher. On five, two more of the bulletproof legionnaires, like Baldy outside, told me Grinner was in the cages. They looked at me as I passed with the same guarded disgust I had given the psychic vampire. When you work in a place like this, live in this world long enough, you can smell danger, dangerous, crazy, and sick, like dog shit on someone, and you never turn your back on it.

I passed the snuff room with its burgundy velvet drapes and muted Schubert, where, by invitation only, serial killers and things much, much worse watched the murders performed on the circular stage at the center of the large, darkened room.

I paused and scanned the crowd as best I could without drawing the predators' attention. Many wore masks. I wondered if one of them could be Slorzack; this looked to be his kind of crowd.

Tonight's murders were a ritual, a tribute to Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec god of sorcery, destiny, and the night. Not that most of the shadow men sitting at their tables watching the young girl struggle and beg for her life knew or cared. I saw one shadow's arm jerking furiously under his small candlelit table. It struck me that once that would have made me puke; now it just was. A string quartet wearing tuxedos

and skull masks performed “La Muerte y la Doncella.” The cellist turned to regard me with hollow brown eyes and cocked his head. I walked quickly away from the door.

The cages were a maze of steel wire and human degradation. Speakers hidden in the room blasted and distorted a club mix of Depeche Mode’s “Master and Servant,” bouncing it off the concrete walls. I walked past people wrapped in plastic like mummies with straw holes for them to breathe through. Some were suspended in their cocoons like alien moths, twitching to be reborn. Eyes followed me as I moved through the corridors of cells, some feral, insane with fear and high from it too, others content and serene in their enforced captivity, drooling happily behind ball gag pacifiers. And then I came to Grinner.

Grinner’s real name was Robert Shelton. He was a big guy, six two, well close to three hundred pounds, covered with tats. He was nude except for a steel contraption like a cage that encircled his genitals. He hung by leather wrist restraints inside a large cage, suspended a few inches off the floor. His dyed hair was the color of asphalt, shaved on the sides and put up in a topknot. His hazel eyes were only slits. His lips were cracked and dry. He didn’t seem to recognize me or even be fully awake.

“Hey, Grinner,” I said, and whistled. “Rise and fucking shine, man. I need you. Got work for you. Playtime is over.”

“Who,” a powerfully built bald man in a black leather and mesh wife beater with a dull steel ring sewn into the chest said, “the fuck are you?”

The music faded, morphed into a home-brewed mix of Prodigy’s “Smack My Bitch Up.”

“I’m the client,” I said, and took a long drag on my cigarette. “I need him.”

“Well, I am his master, and I say when he comes out of there,” the bald man said, and held up a key on a thin steel ring that had several collected on it.

“Look, Fifty Shades,” I said, “I’m not looking for trouble. Just need his expertise and I know he always needs cash.”

Grinner moaned, and his eyes opened for a second. His breathing was a dry wheeze.

“How long has he been in there?” I asked Grinner’s master.

“Six days,” the master replied. “No food, minimal water. He contracted to give me seven.”

“Well, I’m sure you have gotten your rocks off plenty of times in the last six, so I’m getting him out of there now.”

Master edged into my space, into my face. “He’s not going anywh—”

I jammed my lit cigarette into his left eye. He managed to close his eyes in time to save his cornea. I drove my right fist into his gut, and he went up off the ground and then down in a heap. I flicked away the crushed cigarette and then kicked him a few times in the flank and stomach with my steel-toe boot. I knelt down and took the key ring out of his hand.

“Do not try that dom bullshit on me, my friend. Now roll over and play dead. Good boy.”

I unlocked the cage and slid the straps off Grinner’s wrists. His voice was cracking from lack of use and a dry throat, but it was still a booming bass.

“That was epic,” he croaked. “I was ready to get the fuck out of this about a day ago.”

“Where did the Marquis here ditch your clothes?” I asked.

“Locker over there,” Grinner said.

“Lean on me,” I said, and handed him the key ring. “You can unlock your own crotch cage.”

“Don’t be judging, man,” Grinner said as he tried to laugh. It came out a jagged cough. “Seen you up in some weird shit too, Laytham.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But I was usually the one with the keys to the cage.”

Grinner tossed the genital cage away and pulled out a pair of purple and gray camo pants and a black T-shirt with a faded Special Forces logo on the back. He sat on the chest with a groan and slid his feet into a huge pair of black Chucks.

“Look, we’ll talk business at my place. You go hail a cab since you have to go outside anyway, and I’ll settle up with Master,” Grinner said.

“This clown is really your master?” I asked. “And why did you say I had to go outsi—”

A powerful set of hands grabbed me under the arm and behind my head, and I was down on the cement hard and fast, a brilliant flash of pain-light filling my vision as my brain flopped back and forth inside my skull.

“I told you, didn’t I?” It was Baldy’s voice calm and even in my ear. More hands grabbed me, most likely the security boys from the stairs who had given me the hairy eyeball. They dragged me away, and me and my headache didn’t argue.

“Glad to see you still got a way of bringing out the best in people, Laytham,” Grinner said as he helped his master to his feet. “I’ll meet you at the cab.”

* * *

“One fifty-five Avenue C,” Grinner told the back of the cabbie’s head as he climbed in the cab. “Loisaida.”

Even through the headache, that sounded familiar to me.

“That’s C-Squat, isn’t it?” I said. “Punk House?”

“Affirmative,” Grinner said, pulling his cell phone out of his leather jacket. He frowned at the screen and then began to text someone. “I am an artiste, after all.”

C-Squat was the name of an abandoned building in a part of the East Village known as Alphabet City. It had been claimed by squatters, homeless, kids from the emerging punk scene, in the 1980s. Other buildings between Avenues A through D, they governed themselves and claimed the land as their own. They ended up fighting a war for it. The NYPD came numerous times in the dead of night to dispossess them. I knew secret heroes of those shadow wars—“the Alphabet War,” they called it. It was driven by many of the same Secret Master Illuminati douche bags I was dealing with now. There were initiated sects within the NYPD, cults with badges and clubs, who worshiped much more than poor Lady Justice. Some of them were little more than death squads for the Illuminated. In the end, twelve buildings survived the secret war and were still in the possession of the squatters. The city had even cut a deal with most of them, to buy the buildings. That was the way of the world; if you couldn’t take it by force, buy it with money.

“Where you staying?” Grinner asked as he continued to text, his fat thumbs dancing over the touch screen.

“Figured I’d crash with you,” I said. Grinner said nothing, intent on the screen.

We got out in front of the building. It was still dark, and a trace of snow was blowing. A group of street people and tenants stood around old oil drum bonfires warming themselves, talking, joking, laughing, singing, living. A group of musicians, black leather and duct-taped troubadours, jammed on the crumbling tenement stairs. They greeted and fist-bumped Grinner as we passed. The elevator was a death trap, so we walked twelve flights of dark stairwells that smelled of piss and stale beer. Street artist murals were everywhere. No gang tags, just beautiful, primal art. I liked this place in spite of myself. They had fought the fucking Secret Masters of the city and won. Maybe I could survive this.

Grinner rapped on the door as he unlocked it. There was a dream catcher made of a rusted hubcap, old wires, rats' skulls, and pigeon feathers mounted on the door.

"Christie, baby, I'm home, and I brought company, right behind me."

Grinner entered and turned immediately to his left, sharp. His wife, Christine, a tiny, waiflike woman, pretty, with auburn hair, sharp, well-defined features, and piercing green eyes, was about twenty feet from me. She was aiming a big military-looking rifle straight at my guts, and she looked like she knew what she was doing.

"Hi, Ballard. Don't move or I'll cut your redneck ass in half. Hi, baby. Did I do good?"

"You did great, baby," Grinner said from behind me. I heard the front door close and many bolted chains, and bars locked into place to secure it.

"Hi, Chrissie," I said. "You look prettier than ever and a damn sight more pretty than this sorry SOB deserves. My god, are you pregnant, darlin'? You are glowing, baby!"

Christine smiled sweetly from behind the rifle and nodded eagerly. She smiled so wide her eyes closed in happiness. The rifle never wavered. I felt a large cold barrel of steel rest at the base of my neck just behind my left ear.

"You have never, ever wanted to stay with us, motherfucker," Grinner said from behind the massive pistol resting against my head. "So I figure you are running from someone and you think my wife and my family might slow them down a little bit. That how it goes, buddy? I remember how you did Malcolm XYY and that sweet little girl from the Crusade of Secret Saints. You fed them to the fucking dogs, feetfirst."

"It's not like that, man," I said. "I need you to..."

"Erase your ass? Hide you until some trouble with a badge and a gun kicks in my door and fucks my world up while you go dancing away? That what you were going to say?"

"I need a crosshair go-to on someone, full package. Everything. I'm looking for someone, and yes, I will have trouble nipping at my ass, but it won't be back on my scent for at least a few days and by then it will be gone and..."

"And who did you have to throw under the bus to keep your pretty fucking ass alive for a few more days, Ballard?"

I turned slowly to stare into the gun, into Grinner's eyes. I felt a great sense of peace flow over me at the prospect of the gun ripping my head off, destroying my brain. The feeling passed.

"No one either you or I give half a damn about," I said. "Now, you want the job or not?"

"Fifty K," Grinner said. "And you are a ghost in forty-eight hours, no matter what." He lowered the gun. "You can crash down the hall next to Megan's room."

Christine lowered the rifle and leaned it against a wall. She ran over to Grinner on tiptoes and embraced him.

“Missed you!” she said. Grinner picked her up, bear-hugged her, and spun her around before setting her back down. Her laugh was the sweetest, most innocent thing I had heard since getting off the plane in this city. “You had fun with your friend? He beat your ass real good for you, baby?”

Grinner laughed, kissed her, and nodded. “He was a punk-ass bitch compared to you, beautiful.”

“Who’s Megan?” I asked. Christine hugged me now and kissed my cheek.

“Roommate,” she said. “You’ll like her. She’s last door on the left, you’re on the right. Watch the floorboards near the window, Ballard, they’re a little rotted.”

“Does Megan man the damn flamethrower when company comes?” I asked, and kissed her forehead.

A wave of exhaustion settled over my bones like early-morning frost. The sun was coming up soon. The coke had lost some of its manic magic after Baldy had dribbled me off the cement. My body wanted to sleep, but I wasn’t sure if I could.

“You got any beer in the fridge?” I asked Grinner as he and his wife fell on the couch into a pile.

“Been dry for about two years,” Grinner said. “Got some smoke, if you want.”

“Thanks. I’ll pass,” I said. I walked down the hall and opened the door on the right. There was a bare, stained mattress thrown in the corner. The room was about ten degrees colder than the rest of the apartment. The only illumination was the sodium light bleeding in through the broken window covered in cardboard and duct tape. Something scuttled deeper into the shadows in response to my entrance.

I dropped my bags, fell onto the mattress, kicked off my boots, and was asleep before my cigarette became ash between my fingers.

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