

The Scarlet
Gospels

Final Draft

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For David and Justin.

Abyssus est altissimus aura , quod aura altissimus Abyssus.

BOOK ONE

Part One

Dying to the World

One

After the long quiet of the grave, Joseph Ragowski gave voice, and it was not pleasant, either in sound or sentiment.

“Look at you all,” he said, scrutinizing the five who’d woken him. “You look terrible, every one of you.”

“You don’t look so good yourself, Joe.” Lili Saffro snapped back, “Your embalmer was a little too enthusiastic with the rouge and the eye-liner.”

Ragowski snarled, his hand going up to his cheek and wiping off some of the make-up that had been used to conceal the ghastly pallor his violent death had left on him. “You didn’t go to all this trouble just to bitch at me,” he said, surveying the paraphernalia which littered the floor around him. Necromancy demanded an obsessive’s eye for detail. It had to be the eggs of pure white doves that were pierced

and injected with the blood of a girl's first menstruation, then cracked into alabaster bowls surrounding the raising place. The birds couldn't be speckled, the blood couldn't be that of a second period, or the bowls anything but pure alabaster. And the two thousand, seven hundred and nine numerals that were inscribed in black chalk starting beneath the ring of bowls and spiraling inward to the spot which the corpse of the resurrectee was hung, had to be in precisely the right order, with no erasing or corrections.

"This is Kottlove's work, isn't it?" Ragowski said.

The oldest of the five, Elizabeth Kottlove, her skills in some of the most complex and volatile of magical workings unable to keep from her face the gaunt look of a woman who'd lost both her appetite and her ability to sleep for more than a few snatched, uneasy minutes, admitted to the work being hers.

"We need your help, Joey."

“Oh it’s Joey again, is it?” Ragowski said. “It’s a long time since you called me that. It was usually when I’d given you a good long fuck wasn’t it?” He looked over at Theodore Felixson, his rigid face cracking into a smile that paraded his nicotine stained teeth. “Oh didn’t you know, Ted? You were married to her, for God’s sake. You must have known somebody was satisfying her. And it obviously wasn’t you. She said you were hung like this.”

Ragowski wiggled his little finger. Felixson threw an embarrassed glance at his fellow magicians, Lili Saffro, Yashar Hedayat and Arnold Poltash.

“Nobody gives a damn, Ragowski. Whatever we did or didn’t do, whatever we had or didn’t have, none of it matters anymore. It’s all gone to shit!” He shook his head. “The time we wasted, fighting to outdo one another. Time we should have been taking pleasure in what we had.”

“Spare us your regrets, Arnold.” Lili said. She was the only one of the five summoners sitting, for the simple reason that she was missing her left leg. “I’m sure we all wish we could change things —”

“I can’t let another moment go by, Lili dear.” Ragowski said, “Without remarking that you’re not quite the woman you were. What happened?”

“I was very lucky, believe it or not. He nearly had me.”

“He being — ”

“Yes. The same. He’s gone through the list very thoroughly.”

“How thoroughly?” Ragowski wanted to know. “Be specific. Who’s he taken? Besides me and what, the seven or eight before me.”

There was a silence, as the five exchanged little looks. It was Kottlove who finally spoke up.

“We’re all that’s left.” She said quietly, staring at one of the alabaster bowls and its blood-stained contents.

“You...five? *Five?* No.” All the sarcasm and petty game-playing had gone from Ragowski’s voice manner. Even the embalmer’s bright paints could not moderate the horror on his face. “How’s that possible? There were a hundred and what —?”

“A hundred and seventy-one in the High Circle. That’s obviously only those who chose to be counted amongst us. There’s no telling how many he took from outside the Circle. Hundreds? Thousands?”

“And no telling what they owned either.” Lili Saffro pointed out. “We had a reasonably thorough list of grimoires and stratagem sheets owned by the members of the Circle —”

“Even that wasn’t complete.” Poltash said. “Everybody kept something to themselves.”

“That’s right.” said Felixson. “We only know what people owned-up to. We’ll never know how much he really got his hands on.”

“Five of you.” Ragowski said, still having difficulty believing what he’d been told. “Why didn’t you put your heads together and work out some way to trap him? He wasn’t working with any other members of his Order.”

“Ah now, you see that’s why we go to the trouble of bringing you back.”

Heyadat said, “Believe me, none of us do it happily. It is a great trouble we go to, getting your corpse out of the mausoleum, and then all this Nether Testament stuff – doves and numbers and having to fast for five days – ” He rubbed his ample belly. “I’m starving, I tell you. I can eat now, yes Kottlove?”

“Yes, yes. Go on, stuff yourself.”

“Thank Christ for that.” Heyadat rummaged in his over-tight jacket and pulled out two candy bars which he speedily stripped of paper and bit into side by side. Then as he ate he continued to talk, flecks of chocolate and spittle accompanying every vociferous point. “You think we never try to catch this bastard. But he is one smart demon, let me tell you that —”

“And getting smarter all the time.” Kottlove added. “Every library he ransacked, every brain he takes. Every—”

“Wait, what? You said he takes brains? Literally? Like some demented brain surgeon?”

“No, Joseph.” Ted Felixson said. “He just takes the thoughts and leaves the meat. It’s probably a working he learned from Kobin’s St. Amant Grimoire. You’ll remember how Kobin used to boast about the things it contained; how he could turn us all into mindless zombies if the notion seized him?”

“I remember.” Ragowski said. “Was Kobin taken early then?”

“You were third,” Felixson said, “He was sixth.”

“I suppose in a way you should be flattered,” Lili Saffro said, “He took you early because he’d done his homework. He knew you had the force of personality that might have brought us all together against him.”

“But that didn’t happen.”

“No, of course not,” Poltash sighed, “We argued and pointed fingers like squabbling schoolchildren. It was thoroughly self-defeating. And of course the demon knew there was no love lost between us. That all the Cabals and Orders, and Cuiles had come unglued over the years because we were so damn suspicious of one another. He just picked us off, one by one, jumping all over the globe so we never knew where he was going to strike next. A lot of our colleagues were taken without anybody knowing a thing about it. We’d hear months later, even a year or two. Just by chance. One of us would try to make contact with somebody and discover their houses had been sold, or simply left to rot with nobody to take care of them. I visited a couple of places myself. Remember Brander’s house in Bali? I went there. And Doctor Biganzoli’s place outside Rome? I went there too. There was no sign of any looting. The locals were far too afraid of what they’d heard about the occupants to take a step inside either house, despite the fact that it must have become very obvious after a time that nobody was home.”

“What did you find?” Ragowski said.

Poltash took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one as he went on. His hands were trembling, and it took some help from Lili to steady the hand that held his lighter.

“Well everything of nay value was gone, of course, from the Ur-texts down to the most trivial Blasphematic pamphlet. The shelves were bare. Brander had obviouslt put up a struggle – there was a lot of blood in the kitchen, of all places, where he’d plainly been tortured. There were a few dried slices of flesh that might well have been cut from Brander.”

“Do we really have to go back over all this?” Heyadat said. He was unwrapping two more candy bars. “We all know the details.”

“Eat and shut up, will you?” Ragowski said to Heyadat. “If you drag me out of a very welcome death so I can help save your wretched souls then the least you can do is let me hear the facts.”

“It’s a waste, that’s all.” Heyadat said. “Who knows when he will come?”

“Well he won’t come here,” Felixson said. “He wouldn’t take on five of us at the same time. Six, including Joseph.”

“Keep me out of this. I died my death. I don’t need another, thank you. You were telling us about Brander’s house, Arnold. You said there was blood in the kitchen.”

“Old blood. A lot of it, but dried many months before.”

“And where was Brander?”

“What was left of him was out in the shrubbery behind his house. Mostly bones, picked clean by local dogs.”

“Same with Dr. Biganzoli?” Ragowski said.

“No. Biganzoli’s place was still sealed up when I visited. Shutters closed, doors locked. As if he’d gone on a very long vacation. But he was inside – lord, it was hot in there – hanging in his study. He’d been dead in that dry heat for a couple of years I’d guess. His body was withered up. But the expression on his face – well, maybe it

was just the way the flesh had retreated from around his mouth as it dried up, you know, exposing his gums – but by Christ he looked as though he'd died screaming, the mouth was so wide open.”

“Did you say he'd hanged himself?” Lili asked Ragowski.

“No, I said he was hanging, which is quite a different story isn't it?”

“Hanging how?”

“By chains attached to hooks which had been put through his flesh in a lot of tender places.”

“That's always been his method.” Heyadat said. “The hooks, the chains, the box.”

“Except none of us would ever have been tempted by his silly little puzzle box.” Elizabeth said.

“Not so silly.” Felixson said. “That box – what does he call it?”

“The Lament Configuration.” Heyadat said. He was heading for the door. “I need sustenance. There’s got to be food in this place somewhere.”

“It’s a mausoleum, Yashar.” Poltash said.

“A gravedigger’s forgotten lunch could do in a pinch.” he said, and headed off hunting.

“You were saying, Theodore. About the Configuration.”

“Well I did want to add that I cut him down, which was the most I could do under the circumstances. And while I was doing it, black ashes poured out of several holes that had been burned in his skull. So I think the Cenobite had found early on some way of taking what he wanted – the knowledge in our heads – and burning up whatever was left. It must have been something he found after killing Joseph. Perhaps even in one of your own books?”

Ragowski didn’t comment on the suggestion, so Felixson continued:

“Anyway, your thoughts were left un plundered, Joseph, which is some small mercy I suppose. At some point in their thefts they found the knowledge to steal from our heads as well as our shelves. The sum of information the Order of the Gash now possesses is vast. Between us all they’ve harvested most of the major workings in every magical system in the Western World, and a good proportion of information from Russia, China, India...the list goes on.”

“What do they want it for?” Ragowski wondered aloud.

“The same reason we wanted it. The shaping of matter by will. And of course the stuff we don’t own up to. The getting and keeping of power. These creatures haven’t just taken our treaties, scrolls, and grimmies. They’ve cleared out all the vestments, all the talismans, and annulets —”

“ —staves, flags, bowls, compounds, drums, horns, incense burners — ” Poltash went on.

“ —in short, every damn thing our dead friends— ”

“Oh please, Lizzie. It’s a little late to be calling them friends.”

“It’s never too late for regrets,” Elizabeth said bitterly. “I for one mourn the loss of these friends. Maybe we can be kinder to one another in death than we were in life.”

“I will not hear talk of death,” Felixson said, “We’re not going to die. At least not for many years. We have power to accrue. Pleasures to indulge. And no minor demon is going to —”

“Hush.” Said Ragowski.

“Don’t hush me. You’re here by the conspiracy of our wits, and don’t —”

“I said *hush*. Listen to that.”

“It’s a bell.” said Lili. “Sounds like a funeral.”

“At one-nineteen in the morning?” Poltash murmured.

“That’s no ordinary bell, ladies and gentlemen. That’s the Bell in the Tower of the Burning Wood and its tolling precedes *his* arrival. I’m sorry to have to be the bearer of bad news, but he’s found you.”

Two

The assembled company, excepting Ragowski, let out a confusing babble of prayers, protectorates and entreaties, no two of them in the same language. The company brought Yashar Heyadat rushing back in gasping for breath.

“What’s...what’s the...panic about?”

“The bell.” Arnold Poltash said. “The Ragman tells us it means we’re in trouble.”

“This we didn’t know?” Heyadat replied.

“The Ragman?” Ragowski said to Poltash. “How dare you? When did you start calling me that?”

“All of us did it, behind your back.” Lili Saffro said, “I mean, look at yourself, Joseph. You’re not exactly well-dressed.”

“I’ve been dead five years, woman!” Ragowski yelled, his voice raw.

“But you were buried in your Sunday best, Joseph. The rest of your wardrobe wasn’t exactly befitting of a man of your intellectual sophistication. You dressed like a derelict most of the time.”

“Derelict now, am I? Well fuck you, fuck you all. Whatever you thought I could do for you, I can’t, and even if I could, I wouldn’t. There’s for your resurrection, Elizabeth!”

He started to kick over the alabaster bowls, working his way around the necromantic circle in a counter clock-wise direction. The broken eggs and the menstrual blood, along with the other ingredients of the bowls, each one different,

but all a vital part of the Lazarine Waking, were spilled across the floor. A couple of bowls rolled off on their ruins, weaving like drunks before hitting a wall.

“That’s your return ticket,” Kottlove warned him.

“Believe it or not I can die again without any help from you. But I think I’ll wait to watch what he does with you.”

“Wait, Joey. I didn’t mean any offense. And yes, I do look back on our times together with gratitude.”

“As in: thank you for the fuck, Joey?”

“It wasn’t just the sex, you know that. We learned together. All that Tantric work —”

“More sex.”

“Listen to you both!” Poltash growled. “Blowing kisses at one another, while that thing, that Pinhead monstrosity approaches the threshold. We made peace, finally, to share our knowledge, protect ourselves —”

“No, they’re right Arnold.” Ragowski said with uncharacteristic gentility.

“You made your peace too late. Maybe if there’d been fifty of you, sharing your knowledge, you might have a hope in Hell. But, let’s be honest here, you’re outnumbered. Sure, there’s only one assassin but he’s imbibed the wisdom of a lot of very powerful minds, and no doubt passed it all on to his Order. It’s not just the books, but the minds, all those secretive minds. That’s where the real power was hidden away: in all the brains they’ve had access to. I’m assuming he got Poggenpogl, Allman, Turgeon, Merle Northrup?”

“Yes. All of them.”

“Right there you’ve got four brilliant thinkers. I wouldn’t have admitted it when I was still alive and kicking, but death has a way of humbling you. Can you imagine the problems a mind as powerful as Turgeon’s was tussling with? And the solutions he must have found? And knowing what a paranoid prick he was, he probably never put any of that on paper, in case of theft.”

“Can we please stop wasting time extolling the virtues of the dead?” Felixson said. “That bell’s getting louder. Give us some help Ragowski.”

“Listen, Ted. It’s too late. Anything you try he’s seen before. He caught me in Philadelphia —”

“The Temple of the Athacrine.” Elizabeth Kottlove said. “Behind the altar.”

“How’d you know?”

“The Chief of Police in Philadelphia was a lover, thirty, no, almost forty years ago. He sniffed the magic in what his people had found and called me in.”

“How did I look?”

“Less than dignified. For some reason he’d left you there, wedged in that space between the altar and the wall. Hooks in your face, in your hands and of course —”

“Did you tell him where all your manuscripts were?” Poltash asked him.

“With a hook and chain up through my asshole pulling my stomach down into my bowels, yes, Arnold, I did. I squealed like a rat in a trap. And he left me there,

with that chain slowly disemboweling me, until he'd sent one of his acolytes —one of the damned, at a guess — to go to my house and bring back all he found there. By the time the man got back I'd confessed to nine other hiding places where I kept various very rare materials. I didn't hide anything from him. I just wanted the pain to stop. I wanted death. Which I got, finally. And I was never more grateful in my life."

"Jesus wept!" Felixson yelled. "Look at you all, listening to his babble! We raised him to get some answers —"

"And I'm giving them to you, if you'd only listen!" Ragowski snapped sharply. "Get five pieces of paper, five pens, and write down the whereabouts of every last pamphlet and article of power you own. Do it! He's going to get the information anyway, sooner or later. You, Lili, have the only known copy of Cruelties, yes? By Whitebear?"

"Maybe..."

"Oh for fuck's sake woman," Poltash says, "He's trying to save our lives here."

“Yes. I own it.” Lili Saffro said. “It’s in a safe buried below my mother’s coffin.”

“Write it down. The address of the cemetery. The position of the plot. Make it easy for him.”

“I have no pen nor paper,” Heyadat said, his voice suddenly shrill.

Poltash was writing on an envelope which he had up against the marble wall of the mausoleum. “I don’t see how this saves us from his tampering with our brains.” he said.

“It’s a gesture of utter humility, Arnold. Something none of us have been familiar with in our lives. But the only thing that may perhaps save you now. Ah! I see light between the cracks.” Kottlove and Felixson glanced up from their scrawlings to see what the dead man was talking about. “There,” he said, pointing to one of the walls, where through the finest of cracks between the marble blocks a cold blue light was coming. “The door is about to open, I think. Release me, Elizabeth, will you?”

“In a minute. I’m still writing.”

“Release me, damn it! I don’t want to be here when he comes. I don’t ever want to see that face of his again. Send me back, Elizabeth!”

“Just be patient!”

“Christ, I’ve told you all I know. Give me my death back. Now!” Kottlove ignored him. “You bitch. You utter selfish bitch!”

There was a grinding growl from the mausoleum wall, and one of the enormous marble blocks, at about head height, was slowly pushed out from behind. When it was about eighteen inches clear of the wall a second block, below it and to its left began to move, and a matter of seconds later another, this time to the right and above the first also began shifting. The light that found its way between the blocks grew stronger making the mausoleum chillier than ever.

Ragowski, meanwhile, had picked up the destruction of Kottlove’s necromantic labors where he’d left off, kicking at the remaining alabaster bowls, and

then getting down on his knees, pulling off the jacket he'd been buried in and using it as a very expensive cleaning cloth, scrubbing out the numbers Kottlove had written out in that immaculate spiral. Even though he was dead he felt beads of fluid on his brow, which became rivulets and trickled down his face. He knew better than to think he was working up a healthy sweat. It was a dark liquid that fell from his face and spattered on the ground, a mingling of embalming fluid and some remnants of his own corrupted juices. But his effort began to pay off after a minute or two. A welcome numbness spread from his fingers and toes up into his limbs, and a lolling weight gathered behind his eyes, as though the semi-liquefied contents of his skull were responding to the demands of gravity.

He glanced up from his work and saw the five magicians scrawling madly like students racing to finish an examination paper before the final bell. Except, of course, the price of failure was rather worse than a D minus. His gaze went from the magicians to the wall, where now six blocks were on the move. He watched the first

of six that had responded to the infernal pressure from the other side slide clear of the wall and drop to the ground, where it broke into several large pieces and a mass of smaller fragments. A shaft of frigid light, lent solidity by the marble dust that hung in the air from the unseated block, spilled from the hole and crossed the mausoleum, striking the opposite wall. The second block came mere seconds later.

Theodore began a prayer, the divinity at its destination usefully ambiguous:

“Thine the power,

Thine the judgment.

Take my soul, Lord,

Shape and use it.

I am not the sword

Or shield, Lord – ”

Elizabeth Kottlove interrupted him.

“It’s not another Lord we need here,” she said, “It’s a goddess.” And she began her own entreaty while Felixson picked up the thread of his own prayer.”

“Honey-breasted art thou, Neetha,

Call me daughter, I will suckle –

I am but the earth,

On which you walk, Lord –

Take your face, your voice, your nature,

Wipe all other names but yours –

And soak your blood, Lord

Into my unworthy dirt –

Oh Neetha, fountain, river, sea;

I am nothing. You are me —”

It was Heyadat who bellowed loud enough to stop the din of supplications.

“Shut up! Shut up! I never heard such hypocrites in my life. When did you make your last prayers, huh? Long years ago, I know it —”

“I still have faith.” Elizabeth protested.

“Oh goody-goody for you and your faith. You think the demon cares two bits?

No. Of course not. He is hearing your prayers and he is laughing. Laughing.”

“There you are wrong, Yahshar Heyadat.” said a voice from the place out of which the cold light came. The words, though in themselves unremarkable, seemed to speed the process of the wall’s collapse. Another three blocks began to grind their way forward, while another two dropped out of the wall and joined the debris accruing on the mausoleum floor.

Meanwhile, the unseen speaker continued to address the magicians, his voice as cold as the light which accompanied it.

“I smell menstrual blood and dead flesh.” he said, *“But with a certain quickening in it. Somebody’s been raising the dead. I’d imagine that’s Kottlove’s doing. You had a way with the dead, I heard.”*

Two more of the blocks came crashing down and a moment later three more. There was now a hole in the wall large enough to allow the entrance of a man of some stature, except for the fact that rubble blocked the lower third of it. For the entity about to make its entrance however, such matters were easily resolved.

“Clear my way.” he said, as if issuing an order to some invisible. The response was instantaneous. The rubble divided, offering the approaching demon a path cleared of even the finest particle of marble dust.

And thus, his way unhindered, the Cenobite entered. He was tall, and looked much as he did in several of the books of notable demons that the five had pored over, looking vainly for some mention of a frailty in the creature. His flesh was virtually white, and his hairless head ritualistically scarred with deep grooves that ran both

horizontally and vertically. At every intersection a nail had been hammered through his flesh and into the bone. Perhaps once they'd been polished silver, but there was no gleam to them now. It was from this bizarre arrangement his nickname, Pinhead, had come. In every text about him the name was mentioned, and so too was his repugnance for it. Whatever torments he had planned for his victim — and this demon had a knowledge of torture that would have made the Inquisition look like dilettantes — its viciousness was certain to be cranked up to new heights if a subject, in his agonized delirium, let the nickname slip out.

The rest of his appearance was just as he'd been pictured in the old books of demonic hierarchies: the black vestments, the hem of which brushed the floor, the patches of skinned flesh on his chest, which exposed patches of blood-beaded muscle, the personal collection of surgical instruments that hung from his belt —amongst an amputation saw, a trepanning device, a dental file, skull chisel and silver syringe.

They brushed against the chain-nail apron he wore, a garment common to any abaltair worker.

He brought flies with him, in their many hundreds. They crawled on the scraps of human meat in the teeth of the saw hanging from the Cenobite's belt, and blackened with their profusion the fresh blood on his apron. They were four or five times the size of terrestrial flies, and their excited buzzing echoed around the mausoleum.

“Joseph Ragowski, as I live and breathe,” the Cenobite said. *“You went early, didn't you? Before I'd learned to take the most important book in anyone's library. Their mind. Oh don't panic, Joseph. I have no intention of pilfering your thoughts; I can't imagine your brain carries anything of any significance.*

“No, it's these five I came to catch, more for neatness sake than in the hope of some great revelation. I've been to magic's length and breadth, to its outermost limits, and occasionally —very occasionally — I've added the thoughts of a truly

original thinker to the library. But they're rare. Just as somebody said, all philosophy is footnotes to Plato, at magic is footnotes to the Nineteen Volumes of Zurzolo, which I am pleased to say I own in two complete editions, and a third missing the eleventh book, which an old lover of yours, Elizabeth — and my, my, my weren't you profligate with your affections in your youth? —told me you owned."

"Who told you?"

"Does it really matter anymore? I mean, really? If you must know it was Nathaniel McGhee, whose testicles, by the way, are of such prodigious size that I've kept them for my other collection: The Noteworthy Anatomical Remains of the Western World's Great Thaumaturgists."

Lili Saffro had started to hyperventilate a little way into this speech, and now reached into her purse, digging frantically through its chaotic contents.

"What are you doing Lili?" Poltash said. "The man's talking."

“My pills. Oh Jesus, Jesus —where are my pills?” In her jittery state she’d lost her grip on one end of her purse, and its contents were spread across the floor. She snatched up her pills, oblivious to everything but getting them into her mouth, where she chewed and swallowed the large white tablets with very little saliva to ease them down. Then, without bothering to collect up her scattered belongings, she stood up again. Felixson was talking.

“—any of it, all of it, it’s yours. I have four safes. You can have the codes right now. Look, look, I’ll write them down for you. Or if that’s too much bother we can go to my house —oh Lord, you’d like my house, I know you would. Huge. Cost me eighteen million dollars. It’s yours. You and your brethren are welcome to it.”

“My brethren?” the Cenobite said.

“Oh, there are sisters in your order too, I was forgetting that. Well I’m sure I’ve got plenty to go around. Nothing inconsequential, believe me. First editions of everything. Pristine.”

“Your lordship —” said Heyadat. “—or your Grace is it? Your Holiness?
Your Unholiness, perhaps?”

“Master is perfectly acceptable. You stand to me as a dog to man.”

“Dog am I?” Heyadat said, his notorious temper surfacing for a moment.

Poltash struck Heyadat’s arm a light back-handed blow. “If he says we’re dogs,
then dogs we are.”

*“Well said, magician. But words are easy, aren’t they? I think you should be
down on the ground barking like a dog, don’t you?”*

Poltash waited for a moment, hoping it was just a throw away remark. But no.

“Down, dog.” the Cenobite said. Poltash began to kneel. *“Wait. Dogs go
naked, surely.”*

“Oh...yes. Of course. Naked.”

He proceeded to undress.

“And you, the profligate Elizabeth. Be his bitch.”

“You mean —?”

“*Naked, on your hands and knees.*” He took one long stride towards her. She flinched. But he merely reached out and lay his hand on her lower belly.

“*This is a truly perverse piece of magic I picked up from the marginalia in Flaunt’s Diversions.*” He rubbed his hand on Elizabeth’s belly. “*How many abortions did you have, Elizabeth? Eleven, I counted.*”

“Thirteen.” she said.

“*Most wombs would not survive such unkindness.*” He clenched his fist.

Elizabeth let out a little gasp. “*But even at your advanced age – how old are you, truthfully now?*”

“Seventy-eight.”

“— *so even at seventy-eight I can give your abused womb the capacity to do what it was made to do—*”

“No.” Elizabeth said, more in disbelief than denial. “You couldn’t.”

"It's done. The child will be here in a matter of minutes. Now weren't you about to play the bitch for me?"

Elizabeth was out of words. She simply stared at the demon as though she could somehow make him take pity on her.

"Naked, woman." he said. "Go on. Help her Felixson! That's it. Put some work into it! Rip the stuff off her. She's never going to be putting it on again."

"Can I speak?" Poltash said quietly.

"Be my guest."

"I could be very useful to you. I mean, you know my circle of influence. It reaches to Washington. To Pennsylvania Avenue."

"That's right, you used to tell fortunes for the Reagans."

"He never made a move without consulting me."

"Are you offering me the same service?"

“Oh God no, I wouldn’t presume. But there are still a lot of people there that owe me their positions. Now there’s power, if you want it. And I could bring it to you.”

“And for this service you would require...?”

“Only my life. Everything else is yours. I don’t think there’s much in my collection that your Order hasn’t already gathered from other libraries, but you’re welcome to it anyway. And then you just name the names in Washington you need at your feet. I’ll make it happen.”

“That’s a very intriguing offer, Poltash.”

“He’s a lie,” Heyadat said, “Maybe three, four times he talks with the Reagans, but that was all. They preferred that woman Sidikaro.”

“Yes, I have her reminisces,” the demon said. “In fact I have every conversation about magic she ever engaged in.”

“She wrote journals?”

“No. I have it all in here.” He tapped his temple. *“So you won’t be alone.”*

“But you pass it all on, no?” Heyadat said. “To your Order.”

The Cenobite didn’t reply. His attention had been claimed by Lili Saffro, whose panic attack had peaked and was now subsiding. She stood in the corner of the mausoleum, ashen and shivering in the coat of sweat her panic had put on her.

“I knew your father, Lili.” he said, approaching her. Felixson was still standing in his underwear, with Elizabeth beside him. *“Everything!”* he said to them. *“Both of you. Look at that belly of yours, Elizabeth. How it swells! And your breasts too!*

Let’s see them.” He pulled on the middle of her brassiere. It snapped and fell away.

The dry purses of her breasts were indeed growing fuller. The Cenobite gave them a cursory glance. *“You’ll do for one more breeding, eh? Only this time you won’t be dragging it out of you with a piece of wire.”* He returned his attention to Lili. *“We were speaking of your father.”* he said.

“Yes?”

"I owe him a great deal. He was the first one to point out how vulnerable you all were. They're so possessive of their own little rocks they don't realize they could be a mountain if they joined together. They're like my little Lili Hi Lo –"

"Lili Hi Lo?"

"That's what he called you."

Lili nodded, her eyes swelling with tears. "That was his private name for me.

Nobody else was allowed to use it. Even my mother. Where was this?"

"In Switzerland."

"The house by the lake?"

The Cenobite nodded. *"You were three, perhaps four. Chasing one of the cats outside in the sun. And us inside, the curtains drawn, talking about magic."*

"He was friends with you?"

"Don't sound so appalled. If I were to leave you alive tonight it would be for his sake."

“They hanged him.”

“I know. I visited him in his cell, the last night. Your mother had already been and gone. The priest was waiting. He never saw him. But I had twenty minutes or so with him.”

“Was he afraid?”

“Of course not. He had his plans made for the next part of the journey.”

“That’s what he called it?”

“His only regret was you. He asked me to guide you now and again. But never let you have sight of me.”

Lili’s tears had brimmed and fallen. Now she looked at him clear-eyed.

“The books...” she said. “...the box of books that came for me when I was still at school. My first books of magic...”

“I sent them. And I got Doctor Straszheim onto the staff, to start your real education. Your father would be ashamed of you, to see you like this.” He trod on

the plastic pill bottles, grinding the medications to dust. *“He had such ambition for you.”*

“I know, I know.” she said, “And I had the plan. I worked it all out with Straszheim. But after his death...” she sighed, “I lost the appetite for power, once I saw how little joy it had brought to him.”

“So see how it ends? I picked them off one by one. All the greatest workers of the Influence West of Cairo, taken in three years and two months.”

“You had help.” Ragowski said.

“Did I?”

“Must have.”

“Must I?”

“The other members of your Order...”

“Are not with me.”

“I don’t understand,” said Ragowski, “Are you suggesting —”

He was interrupted by a moan from Elizabeth Kottlove, who was now on all fours beside the Cenobite's other dog, Felixson.

"Silence!" the Cenobite said, directing a sharp kick at Kottlove's bony behind. By contrast her belly and breasts were now round and ripe, the Cenobite's influence powerful enough to already have her nipples leaking milk.

"Don't let that go to waste." the Cenobite said to Felixson. *"Get your face to the floor and lick it up, dog! Go on! Don't make me ask twice."*

As Felixson bent to his task, Poltash made a dash for the door. He was two strides short of the threshold when the Cenobite threw a look into the passageway from which he'd come. Something glittering and serpentine sped from the other side of the wall, and caught Poltash in the back of his neck. A beat later three more came after it; chains, all of them, ending in what looked like large fish hooks.

Poltash shrieked with pain. The sound brought an appreciative smile to the face of the pain's connoisseur.

*“Not bad. Not bad at all. But we can do better than that, don’t you think,
ladies and gentlemen?”*

Three

A tiny gesture from the magician, and the chains tightened, reeling Poltash in.

“We’ll have no more of that.” the Cenobite said. Another chain snaked across the floor and out to hook the handle of the door. Then, tightening like its comrades, it pulled the door closed.

“Some things are better done in private, don’t you think, Joseph? Do you remember how it was for you? How you offered to be my assassin, if I’d just take the hooks out of you? And how you shat yourself in terror, like a child?”

“Aren’t you just a little tired of all this by now?” Ragowski replied. “How much suffering can you cause before it fails to give you – whatever sad, sick thing it gives you?”

“Each to their own, Joseph. You went through a phase when you wouldn’t touch a girl over thirteen. Lili has never once let a man into her bed. Pussy or nothing for little Lili.”

“Will you do it if you’re going to?” Yashar said. “If you will kill me, then get it over.”

“Soon, Heyadat, soon. You must remember, you are the last. After you there’ll be no more games. Only war.”

“War?” said Lili, “Who with? You’re not going to try for Heaven, surely?”

“Well now listen to that,” the Cenobite said, *“Is it possible that you’re actually concerned for my welfare, Lili?”*

The old lady looked into the shiny darkness of the Cenobite’s eyes. “Is that so hard to believe?” she said. “What little pleasure this wretched life afforded me came of magic. And now I realize you were there behind my progress from the beginning. So why shouldn’t I squeeze my heart for a few drops of gratitude. If not to you then who?”

“That was good, Lili.” said Heyadat. “You get an Oscar-prize for that.”

The Cenobite spat a word in the direction of the open wall, and a flight of twenty or more hooks and chains came at Heyadat and caught him everywhere — mouth, throat, breasts, belly, groin, legs, feet, hands — the hooks large and brutal. Whatever information Yashar Heyadat might have been able to provide was of no interest to the Cenobite. He was going to bypass the torture and interrogation and go straight to the execution. Heyadat babbled anyway, as the hooks worked themselves steadily deeper into his three hundred pound body. It was hard to make much sense of what he was saying through the snot and the tears, but he seemed to be listing the rarities in his collection.

“...the Zvia-Kisor Dialogues, immaculate condition...and the only copy of Ghaffari’s Nullity, with the Doctor’s annotations...”

The Cenobite called seven more chains into play, which came weaving through the air out of the passageway and presented themselves to their summoner like obedient cobras. They raised up their massive and elaborate hooks to attend to a

few murmured orders. Then they did as they'd been instructed, sweeping around behind Heyadat's convulsing body, and hooked themselves into his back, legs and arms, securing themselves by wrapping lengths of chain around the handles on the front of each place of internment.

Lili retreated into her corner and covered her face with her hands. The others, even Kottlove, who was suffering agonies of her own, watched as Heyadat struggled. The Cenobite watched the last of the three cobra chains secure itself. Then he murmured another order, and the chains that had pierced the magician's body from the front took up any slack that was in them and then proceeded to pull on his three hundred pound body, which was securely anchored from behind. Even now, as the chains pulling him from the front took up their own slack and began to pull on him, he continued to list the treasures in his library.

“...Eshaghzadeh's Fourth Symphony, the Death Symphony, the only known recording...Romeo Refra's...Romeo Refra's – what is it called? That damn book?”

“Yellow night.” Ragowski prompted. He was watching Heyadat’s torment with a dispassion perhaps only the dead, or those whose souls had died leaving their bodies to continue their work as tortures or potentates, could have worn.

“...yes, ‘Yellow...’” Heyadat started to say. There the list stopped as Heyadat, only now comprehending what was happening to him, unleashed a stream of sobs, pleadings, cries, prayers, all rising in volume as his body was pulled back towards the door to the Pit, against the demands of the three master hooks that held him close to the opposite wall. His body could not long withstand the contrary claims made upon it. His skin began to tear, adding fresh rivulets to those coursing down his body from the wounds made by the hooks. He began to thrash wildly, his last coherent words, his entreaties, erased by the ragged howls of agony that he now unleashed.

His belly flesh succumbed first, the hook, which was huge, and had gone deep, stripping off a sizeable patch of skin along with a layer of bright yellow fat. Blood ran streaming from the wound. His breasts came next, skin and fat, followed by blood.

Even Lili watched now, through her fingers, as the spectacle escalated. The hook in his left leg, which had entered behind his shin bone, broke it with a crack that was loud enough to be audible above Heyadat's screams. His ears came off with scraps of scalp attached, his shoulder blades were both broken as the hooks there pulled themselves free.

But despite the thrashing, the screams, and the blood pool now so large it lapped against the hem of the Cenobite's vestments, the demon was not satisfied. He issued new instructions, using one of the oldest tricks in magic, farspake, his whispered instruction finding their destination despite Heyadat's unrelenting shrieks. His instructions were instantly obeyed: three new hooks, as large as those that had secured Heyadat's back, their outer edges sharp as scalpels, flew at the exposed fat and flesh of his chest and stomach, and sliced its way into his interior. Only then, once they had cut their way deep into him did their hooks sink deep into him.

The effect of one of the three was immediate: it pierced his left lung. His screaming stopped and he began to gasp for air, his thrashing becoming convulsions.

“Finish him, in mercy’s name.” Ragowski said.

The Cenobite turned his back on his victim.

“Did you address me?”

“You know I did, you fuckhead. No, that’s not what they call you. Pinhead!

That’s it! That’s what they say, isn’t it?”

The Cenobite’s lip curled and he reached out for Ragowski, seizing the man’s scrawny throat and pulling him close.

“There is no refuge in death, Ragowski. Trust me on this.” Without his taking his black gaze off Ragowski for an instant he lifted his trephine from his belt and pressed it against the middle of Ragowski’s upper brow. He activated the device with his thumb, and a bolt was fired through Ragowski’s skull, and then retracted.

“Am I supposed to be pleading for mercy, Pinhead?” Ragowski crowed.

The Cenobite made no reply. He simply hooked the trephine back on his belt and put his fingers into his mouth, seeking out something that was lodging there.

Finding it, he returned his fingers to the trepanning, and a second or two later removed them, letting go of Ragowski's throat in the same moment.

"What the fuck did you do?" Ragowski growled.

But the Cenobite had already turned his back on one victim, just in time to catch the final moments of another. The hooks had clearly waited for their master to turn back to them before they performed the *coup de grace*. And now, blessed with his gaze, they showed their skills. The hook through the roof of his mouth, the Fisherman's hook the Cenobite was to call it, was attached to a chain which had found purchase in the ceiling, lifting Heyadat's entire body clear of the ground. Now as eruption following eruption, his hands split in two, the feet the same, the huge bulk of thighs gouged from groin to knees, his face stripped of skin, his ears torn off,

and finally the three deeply embedded hooks in his chest and stomach pulling out heart and lungs above and uncoiling his entrails below.

The hooks now dragged what parts of him they'd claimed through the pool of blood and towards whence they'd come. Only one remained: the Fisherman's Hook, from which the empty carcass of Yashar Heyadat hung, slowly swinging back and forth, the drooping doors of his stomach, bright with fat, flapping open and closed.

"All the fireworks were red again tonight." the Cenobite said. *"Is it any wonder I've grown tired of this?"*

Felixson, who had retreated from the spreading blood, but remained on all fours, dared to speak.

"Poltash..." was all he said.

The sight of Heyadat's slaughter had been too much for Arnold. He was slumped dead against the door where the Cenobite's hooks had caught him. There was a stricken expression on his face. Whether a heart-attack had brought him down

or he'd taken poison to avoid Heyadat's fate it didn't matter to the Cenobite. He was weary of seeing the same descent played out, with variations, over and over. From the confident men and women he found in their mansions and penthouses; or later, as news of the Cenobite's vendetta spread, in their hiding places, to the clammy-palmed deal-makers, listing their hidden possessions in the hope that one might be rare enough to buy them their lives. And then of course, when the hooks started to fly, the descent quickened. The magician's voices, schooled in precision for the accurate recitation of spells, falling from pleas and entreaties to sobs and blubberings. And always the same tired spectacle of death.

"Well then," he said, turning to face the living survivors, and to Ragowski,

"Let's be done with this, quickly. Felixson?" The man's face was all snot and tears.

"Wait for me in the passagery. I have work for you; work that calls for what little gifts you have. Go on."

"May I take my clothes?"

“At least my cigarettes?”

The Cenobite could not keep a smile from his face. “Where would we be without our little addictions? Take your cigarettes, Felixson, and your matches too. Quickly.”

Felixson rummaged through the pockets of his jacket, and secured both cigarettes and matches, pitifully happy with his lot at the moment, though he was going naked into Hell on the heels of the creature that had slaughtered almost every friend he'd ever had.

Nor did he look back as he scurried through the ragged door in the mausoleum wall to wait for his Master to come to him. He went far enough down the passagery to be reasonably certain he would not hear the women screaming, then he squatted against the encrusted wall, and counted his cigarettes. He had fourteen. Well, it wasn't twenty, but then it wasn't two either.

“Small mercies.” he muttered to himself. “That’s it, Theodore. Be thankful for small mercies.”

Then he lit up and waited.

Four

Elizabeth Kottlove was not a screamer, except in the throes of the sexual act, which pleasures she had put behind her on the morning, many years ago, when the face she'd met in the mirror unquestionably resembled that of her mother. Even now, with whatever the demon had done to her womb close to being born, and the pains of its convulsions inside her withered body excruciating, she refused to give her tormentor the pleasure of her pain. She remained on her hands and knees, the bitch he had demanded she play at being, while the thing she carried and brought to imminent delivery in fewer minutes than a natural birth would have counted off in months. She could not control the gasps that escaped her now, though she turned her face away from her tormentor so as not to draw his attention. Even so, it seemed he was about to come her way, but Ragowski stopped him.

“What’s wrong with me?” he said.

“You’re dead, Joseph. And in a natural world you would have been devoured by worm and rot. But you relinquished your claim to oblivion when you took up

your rod and book and empowered your will to rewrite the laws of nature and of men. There's no recourse here to cold compassion of rot. You must take what you are given, Joseph."

"Less metaphysics, if you please, and more particulars. What exactly have I been given?"

"It's a tiny sibling of mine. A worm, made from a piece of me. One of the countless experiments inspired by the books of your fellow manumitties. A worm homuncilus. They have no intelligence to speak of, but they possess two noteworthy attributes."

Ragowski did his best to match the Cenobite's restrained tone, as though they were speaking of a matter inconsequential to both.

"Is intelligence difficult to forge in homuncilus? It was never a path that called me to it. So I have no knowledge of the craft at all."

“It is not a craft, Ragowski. It is an art. It takes technique and patience, yes, but it also takes passion.”

“Ah.”

“You could not imagine passion as in me. That’s good. It means I’ve buried it well.”

Ragoswki looked mystified.

“What’s your question?” the Cenobite said. “Spit it out. Time is shorter than you think, and time to think still shorter.”

“I was just wondering what this passion of yours was for?”

The Cenobites’ benighted gaze flipped briefly to the women: Lili in the corner mumbling to herself behind her hands, Elizabeth on the ground, her waters breaking.

Neither was listening to the exchange between demon and man.

“To stand, as it were, upon a great height, and survey my will unmaking all that lies below, to the horizon and beyond, all unmade at my yes, and in the Heavens Forward.

“The rock upon which I stand. Even that. For what need would I have of rocks when I could walk the air?”

It was not only his words which carried a freight of new meaning, this voice rose to seize the epiphany and lift it up.

“Two noteworthy attributes.” Ragowski remembered allowed.

“Ah yes, your worm.”

“Mine?”

“I passed it from its crib beside my cheek, and into a hole in your skull.”

“Why?”

“It has two noteworthy attributes, as I have said. The first, it does need a mate to reproduce. It’s body is filled with tiny eggs that needs only the presence of

nourishment to be born. Their growth is amateur manifestation of the unnatural.

Their skins are their stomachs. Assuming they can feed, in sixteen seconds they are fully grown, and in the seventh second they are extruding eggs. The defiance of nature is a thing of beauty.”

Ragowski was not a stupid man. He understood completely the significance of what he'd just been told. It explained the unwelcome fullness in his head; the churning motion behind his eyes; the ting of bitter fluid running down his nose and down the back of his throat.

“As I told you—”

“There’s no refuge in death.”

“Exactly so.”

Ragowski hawked up a wad of phlegm and spat at the Cenobite, who deflected it with a tiny motion of his hand.

When it hit the floor, back at Ragowski's feet, he saw the truth of the matter.

It wasn't phlegm he'd brought up, it was a little knot of worms.

"It's appropriate, I suppose," Ragowski smiled, "that the single thing that comes of you that might be a child would be a worm.

"Oh bitter, Joseph, bitter."

"I know your history, master. Minor temptations, many of which were laughable failure."

"I will rewrite that history, when the time comes. But you will neither see my future nor read my revisions to history past. You are getting wormier by the moment, Ragowski. And your spirit is tied to whatever the worms shit out. That was your first mistake, you and all your miracle-workers. Locking your souls to your bodies in perpetuity."

"I was young..." Ragowski said.

His voice was weakening, as the worms invaded his voice-box.

‘...I thought I’d have found some way to ship the contract by the time by death was imminent. Either that, or the means to preserve my youth.’

“Error upon error, Joseph. You can at least take comfort in the knowledge that all your comrades made the same mistake in their pursuit of the Great Wakings. I have all the master contracts. Every one. And I will hold them forever, so that your soul is never free.”

“Why? Ragowski said, struggling to make the syllable.

“Because I can.”

Ragowski coughed, and in the midst of the hacking lost his breath. He tried to recover it but his throat was blocked. HE dropped to his knees, and the impact was sufficient to burst the fragile panel of his skin so that veins of worms fell from his anatomy, listtering the ground around him. Mustering the last of his will, he lifted his head to defy his destroyer with his stare, but before he could do so his eyes dropped back into his sockets, his nose and mouth following quickly after, so that in seconds

his face had gone entirely, leaving only the bone brimming with the Cenobite's descendants.

There was a shrill shriek behind him, and he turned pleased he'd finally got a cry out of that Kottlove, only to find that in preoccupation with Ragowski's demolition he had missed the only pregnancy she'd ever taken to its full term. The shriek had not come from her however. She was dead, slumped on her back, killed by the trauma of the infants' birth. As for the thing he had caused to be made in her, it lay in a puddle of its own gretid? fluids making the shriek he'd taken to be its mothers' voice. No, not it. The thing was female, and virtually human, at a glance.

"Deal with it Lili,"

"That?" She said, glaring at the infant with a mixture of superstition and revulsion.... "I couldn't."

"You can and you will. Make yourself useful, Lili. Give me a reason to let you live."

She overcame her revulsion with impressive speed and knelt in between Elizabeth's legs to attend to the child. It fell uncannily silent as soon as it was touched.

"It's a girl." Lili said. "I need a knife for the cord."

The Cenobite selected a blade from his belt and handed it down to Lili. Then he surveyed the mausoleum.

"Very Jacobean," he murmured to himself appreciatively. It was indeed a comprehensive spectacle. The Potash sprawled gaping at the door. Heyadat's head and mutilated carcass still swaying slightly as it hung from the Fisherman's hook, the blood that spread from one wall of the mausoleum to the threshold of the open door on the other littered with what the hocks had let slip as they departed, two of his beringed fingers and the pitiful scrap of his penis the only pieces recognizable. Ragowski had collapsed into little more than mess of bones and worms by now, and the worms, disrespectful guests that they were, had already begun to desert his

remains in search of another feast. The first of the departees had already found pieces of Heyadat in one direction, and the corpse of Elizabeth Kottlove in the other.

All of which brought his gaze back to Lili Soffia, who had severed his daughters umbilical cord and tied it off, then found her mother's blouse, mercifully unstained, and wrapped her in it. But she contained to make a noise like an angry bired.

“She's hungry, Lili.”

“Well I can't...”

“Milk is milk. The child doesn't care about the state of its supplies.”

“But look—“

The Cenobite stepped towards Lili and snatched his daughter out of her arms, holding onto one end of silk swaddling and letting the child unroll high above Elizabeth's corpse.

Lili let out a little cry of concern for the infant's safety, but she needn't have concerned herself. The baby had dug her claws deep into the blouse, and clung there, looking straight up her Father, issuing a reptilian hiss as she did so.

"Drink and eat," he instructed her. "But first. The woman behind you..."

The infant turned and looked directly back at Lili, her cornea were as black as her fathers' entire eyes.

"Will take care of you for a while. At least until you're fully grown. Her name is Lily Saffro. Respect her, or be prepared for the consequence when I see you again. Do you understand me?"

The infant returned its gaze to its father, mewling as it did so.

"Does she have a name?" Lili said.

"She can take her mother's middle name: Marianna."

He shook the fabric to which the creature clung, and Marianna fell upon her mother's corpse, lying for less than half a second where she'd fallen and then getting

up onto all fours and making her erring way to her Elizabeth's left breast. She kneaded her hands, which already uncommonly long fingers for an infant so young, against the cooling flesh, to get the flow started. Then she began to suckle.

“She will be fully grown within a year, and impossible to control if you have not beaten some real fear into her while she's still vulnerable. Beat her bloody without reason. Break her bones. They'll mend. My lawyer Mr. Yazdani will make a contract with you and promise a secure house, and people to help you with her. He'll also take care of money. Break her fingers, by all means, but also educate her. Yazdani will arrange tutors. Give her access to your library, and the libraries of Pattash, Heyadat, Felixson and her mother.”

“I thought your Order would want those.”

“We have collected tens of thousands of books already. I doubt there's anything of any significance on the shelves of these friends of yours.”

“They weren't friends. Magicians are too competitive.”

“So there’s none you mourn?”

“I’m not much for mourning,” she said. “Magic was my bliss, and I went where it lead. And here am I, a midwife.”

She looked up from Marianna’s gluttony.

“You’ll have your hands in me as soon as I give her back to you, won’t you?”

“No. I will shed no more magicians’ blood. When I take Marianna from you, you’ll never see me again. The massacre is over. Now if I were you I’d go look in Pottaski’s car, see if he doesn’t keep some g bondage tools there. He was a passionate follower of de Sade’s.”

“He was?”

“Oh yes. Strict as a nun with his devotions.. Ate only excrement through Lent.”

“Stop! You’ll make me puke!”

“She stands in a charmed-house and begs me not to speak of a bowl of hot shit and a spoon.”

“Please,” she said.

The Cenobite smiled.

“Strange flower, the Lili,” he said. “Are you going to search for something to bind the child or will trust to its benign nature to keep it from harming you?”

Lili looked down at the baby. The breast Marianna had first drunk from was a withered purse, and she was feeding noisily from the other.

“You have perhaps five minutes, until she empties this breast, and another five while she digs into the body looking for more. And finding none, will eat what she finds.”

“She’ll eat her own mother?”

“The soft pieces at least. The stuff that goes down easily. Oh you don’t have to worry, she won’t be eating her turds.”

Lili backed away from the child, who was already growing. Her body was easily twice as large as it had been at birth, and there was black hair sprouting on her scalp, getting longer and lusher by the second. Lili went through Pottaski's pockets and found his keys. By the time she'd located them, and stood up again, Marianna was doing exactly as her father had predicted. With the second breast emptied she was tearing Elizabeth's torso open, the cracking of her breast-bone echoing around the mausoleum.

"I'd be quick if I were you," the Cenobite said, not looking at Lili but staring down at the blood-spattered child with something vaguely akin to fatherly pride.

Out in clean cool air, Pottaski's keys jingling in her hands, her mind raced through the options available to her. She could simply take Pottaski's car, or her own, and drive away, make some account of the night's horrors so that the authorities would be prepared for the Cenobite and his Order, if they attempted to appear in the human world and wield the massive powers they now possessed., But who were those

authorities, now that every wielder of magical power that she had met or heard of was dead? Would they hear her respectfully if she went to the civil authorities? No they let her into St. Peters' to tell all she knew to the Pope? No. They would put her in a mad-house, most likely, where the Cenobite or his worshippers amongst the mad would finish her. Perhaps it was best to simply do the job for them, right now.

Get in the car and drive and drive until she found a high road that fell away a few hundred feet, to be certain there was no chance of her survival. But no. She'd raise her, as Felixson had raised Ragowski; soul and flesh locked together in a ghastly vision of what the damn-fool Christians thought a happy vision of Resurrection; spirit and body raised as one from the overburdened earth. Where was the joy in that? The solace? To have this flesh again, for all eternity? Oh no, no no. She wanted to be free of the aching panel of meat in which she woke every morning. Nor was there any version of herself along the way that she would have happily lived in. They were all just different cells in the same unforgiving prison.

Her only hope lay with the Cenobite, bitter though it was to admit it. If she did as he instructed her, and delivered his daughter to him disciplined and respectful, then perhaps he would cut the Gordian knot that tied spirit to Flesh, and she could go on her way, wherever.

She opened the trunk of Pottaski's car, and was not surprised to discover that the Cenobite had been correct. There was not one but two suitcases in the trunk. She unlocked them, and found a trove of Sadean artifacts. A dildo, meticulously wrapped with barbed wire, an array of surgical equipment from which she took a couple of the heftier blades, an electric cattle prod which would be a useful teaching device, a leather head mask with only two holes in it, for the nostrils, which she took, and another made of hammered iron, this with a narrow slit at the mouth, to secure its bolts, which she also took. Much of the rest of it was not useful. She found one whip that looked as though it might be effective if wielded by an expert, which she most assuredly was not. She tipped the redundant stuff out of the layer of two suitcases,

and was in the process of loading her chosen implements into when she heard the first tentative chirping of a bird, somewhere in the renewable year tree which stood close by. Seconds later, another bird ventured a few notes of cautious music; and then a third and fourth. The first of morning was not far off.

As she headed back to the mausoleum with the rattling suitcase, carrying the two marks for the Cenobites' assessment, she heard other voices, even less welcome than the dawn chimes, the chatter of the cemetery's staff come to clear its paths and neaten its lawns before the first of the day's interments began.

"There are people here already." She said to the Cenobite when she got back, gasping for breath, into the slaughterhouse, which was not as an orchid-house with the heat that the magicians had relinquished in death.

"And my fingerprints, all over Pottaski's car, and my footprints in the blood—"

“Calm, Lili. The men are here to erase every last sign of our meeting.

Hand=picked by Yazdani. When you left, go by the West gate. There will be a car waiting for you and Marianna. Do as you are bidden, without question.”

“How will I—?”

“Patience. Every one of Mother’s Hell’s children who recognize me as their Patriarch wear a ring on their left hand.”

“A marriage ring?”

“Of course. Just as the high sons of Rome wear rings to signify their (?) to their church. Here is yours.

She set down the suitcase and offered him her open palm.

“No no,” he said, turning her hand over and slipping the ring onto her finger.

“It belonged to Little Boots, Caesar Coligalen, a man reprehensively sinned against by the invention of history. Men need their villains, you see, as I know to my cost. But there will come a time when history is rewritten by those it hushed with

execution and it will tell a very different tale. Think of that, if it pleases you, in the coming months. It will be a living hell controlling my daughter as she grows to adulthood. To tell you otherwise would be an unforgivable lie. But when it seems she will drive you insane with her protean ways remember you are enduring the agonies of a new world in the making.”

“The ring...”

“Gives you absolutely authority over the many who will make themselves available to you. The control and education will not fall to you. Only the choices.”

“Yes but the ring...”

“What about it?”

“Why does it fit so well?”

“Why would it not? I had it adjusted to fit your finger.”

“But everything was so chaotic. You can’t tell me you knew you’d put a demon child in Elizabeth, and made me it’s keeper?”

Well I can, but it seems you would not be predisposed to believe me. So I will let it lie. Sufficient that the ring fits.”

“And the others. The ones who’ll help me?”

“They were copies of the same ring. I could only ask that even in demanding times you treat them courteously. However unpleasant the labour, we should never stoop to incivility.”

He took the metal mask from Lili’s hand.

“Throw the other one away. She’d have it in shreds in a heart-beat.” Then, in a harsher tone. *“Get up Marianna. Your father has a present for you.”*

Five

It was a little after dawn when they left the mausoleum, the naked girl, who by then looked about six or so, seven by the time they reached the West Gate and got into the black sedan car with the darkened windows that awaited them there. The driver introduced himself as Polk. He wore one of the rings, and he treated Lili in a gentlemanly manner that was the first sign since this terrible night had begun of some reminder of more civil world. He did not ask her anything about the girl, or the metal mask her father had put on her telling her as he had done so that whoever put it on she should think of it being his desire that she wear it, his hands that placed it over her head, his fingers that secured the padlock and pocketed the key. And most importantly of all, his will, and his alone, that dictated how long she would stay in it. In response to these questions, the Cenobite had instructed her in the simplest rules of language: if she understood, she should say *yes*, if not, then no.

She said:

“Yes,” And then, after a moment, “Of course I understand.”

The Cenobite had taken a scalpel from his belt and slashed her cheek open from ear to chin, being sure to catch her mouth, both upper and lower lips. She did not weep or cry out.

“Again,” he said, *“I ask for a yes or a no. Do you understand me?”*

“Yes.”

“Do you further understand why you will wear that scar for the rest of your life?”

She paused. Blood ran down her body, which was full of tremors and tics as the unnatural speed of her growth continued. Perhaps it was for that reason that the scalpel cut, though long and deep, did not bleed as copiously as it would have done had been a natural child.

Finally, she said:

“Yes.”

“Good. Now, turn round. Face Mama Lili.”

She took a chance and turned her head just an inch or two, back towards her father.

“You have a question?”

“Yes.”

“Speak.”

“She’s not my Mama.”

“No. You ate your Mama’s heart. And kidneys, and much else besides.”

“Yes.”

“So Mama Lili will be to you what your true mother would have been. And understand me Marianna, though you are my only child, and when you are grown, I will teach you many things, if you ever touch this woman-the merest flick of your

hand, the tiniest scratch-I will take up my scalpel again and I will cut your throat with it and never think of you again.”

“Yes?”

“What’s the question in your voice?”

“You could do that to me?”

“Could and will.”

“Yes.”

“Now look at Mama Lili, as I asked you.”

Now the girl sat beside Lili at the back of the car, and it seemed every time Lili glanced over at her the girls’ body had undergone new development. It was painful, she supposed, for now and then, while her anatomy was undergoing a particularly violent growth spasm Lili would hear her make a sound of pain muted because it came through gritted teeth.

“Would you do me the kindness of having a copy made of this key?” Lili said to Polk, passing the key to the padlock over to him. The child had suddenly grown very still at her side.

“Of course,” Polk said. How soon do you need them back?”

“Her father said she’s to wear this for twenty-four hours. So, perhaps if I could have the original by the end of the day that way I can unlock her a little after dawn tomorrow.”

“And the copy?”

“You keep it, Polk. I have a terrible way of losing things.”

By the time they reached the house where she and the girl would live until her father came for her, Marianna had breasts.

Part Two

One

Twenty years earlier, Harry D'Amour had turned twenty-three in New Orleans. No here he was in the same city, which had taken terrible wounds from hurricanes and human greed...but celebrating his had somehow survived them all, drinking in the same bar on Bourbon Street, twenty-four years later. There was music being played by a jazz quintet led by the same trumpet-player, vocalist and all-round good time guy, Mississippi Moses, and there were one-night love affairs happening on the little dance floor just as there had been almost a quarter of a century before. He'd danced then, with a beautiful girl who claimed to be one of Mississippi Moses' daughters, and that if they wanted to do something bad tonight-Harry remembered perfectly the way she'd smiled as she said *bad*, the promise in it, that had made him crazy to have her. And have her he had, tasted the h'or d'oeuvres, up in a little room above the bar, where her Papa's music could be heard loud and clear coming up from below. That should have warned him right there that this was a family affair, and that men who have daughters also have sons. But all the blood had gone South once he

had his hand up her dress, and his tongue in her mouth, and then, oh the moist heat of her as he slid a finger into her pussy— two of her brothers had come in at that moment, opening the door she made a pantomime of looking, and played out a scene they probably performed a dozen times nightly, telling him their lovely little sister was a virgin, and that there wasn't a man in the place who would testify they'd ever seen him if they dragged his Yankee carcass to a certain tree hid behind a wall in a certain garden, where the noose was already waiting, 'cause it got to use so often nobody ever troubled themselves to take it down!

“That’s the last dance you’ll ever do in New Orleans,” the shorter of the two, who was wearing a silver vest over his white shirt, the effect of which was to make his skin look even darker.

Harry had paid up, of course. Emptied his wallet and his pockets and almost lost his best Sunday shoes to the taller brother, except that they were two big for him. In some unspoken way the size of Harry’s feet had saved him from the thrashing

they'd promised to finish up with, just so he'd remember never to hit on any more black virgins. They'd tossed his shoe back at him and left the door open so he could make his escape, the lighter for a few hundred bucks but otherwise unharmed.

Now he was back at the same spot at the bar where he'd sat half a lifetime before and set his eyes on Mississippi Moses' daughter. There was a mirror behind the bar, and despite the number of glasses of bourbon he'd downed, his reflection refused to blur. He'd never been handsome, his features littered with little asymmetricalities that gave him a lop-sided charm, as Caz, his tattooist back in New York had once remarked. But lately his eyes had taken on a distrustful cast, even when, as now, he was looking at his own reflection, and there was a downward tug at either end of his mouth, that was the consequence of too many unwelcome messages delivered by unlovely messengers.

Notes from the dead, subpoena from infernal courts, invoices for the services of a furnace keeper who would burn anything for a price, no questions asked, and a

Brooklyn exterminator who did a lucrative side-line in the cleaning of houses infested with white flea, which lived parasitically on the ectoplasmic sheddings of ghosts.

God knows he'd never wanted a life in which such occurrences were unremarkable. But that was what had happened in the years since he'd last sat here. He'd tried to begin an ordinary life, a life without the mysteries and secret terrors he'd encountered as a boy. The law seemed to offer a solid bastion against such unwelcome presences, and so—lacking the smarts of the verbal dexterity required of a good lawyer—he'd become a member of New York's finest. At first the trick seemed to work. Once he was out on the streets, his days filled with problems that reared from the banal to the brutal and back again in every minute of every hour, he found it relatively easy to put to the back of his mind the itching presence—the itch, he called it—of things that stood beyond the reach of cops and laws and the guns that enforced those laws. But to be willfully blind, as he had chosen to be, inevitably took its toll. There wasn't a day in his working life which didn't call for a quick lie or two or three

from his partner, a amicable family man affectionately known as 'Scummy'

Schomburg. The name was well-earned.

Besotted as he was by his five children ("the last four were accidents")

Scummy's mind was never out of the gutter, and it meant they spent a lot of night-

work circling the same squalid streets were the hookers plied their trade until

Scummy had found someone to arrest and let go again once he'd had a nice long

blow-job in an alley or a door-way.

"Another tequila?" the bartender asked Harry.

"No, I'm good." He said. He's been thinking of that night, that last night with

Scummy. He needed to get out of here and put the memory behind him.

But the bartender was filling two shot glasses for him anyway.

"These are paid for?" he said.

"Who by?"

He shrugged. "I pour. You drink."

Harry glanced around the short bar looking for his benefactor. Most of the tables were occupied but he could see nobody looking his way. Several couples were up and dancing to Moses' moody rendition of "*Dancing in the Dark*," which Harry had always thought of as a love-song about death.

"Till this time ends,

We're dancing in the dark,

And it soon ends,

And we will face the music together,

Dancing in the dark,

Dancing in the dark..."

He downed the first of the shots, and as the sting of it hit his throat he was back in the car down on 11th street waiting for Scummy to get his rocks off down the

steps into the shadows below street level where his catch for the night, resigned to the price of her liberty, had taken him.

And then the itch, damn it, stronger than usual. He watched from the car scanning the almost deserted street for some clue to the whereabouts of whatever was inspiring the Itch. Was there something under the flickering lamp on the other side of the street; something that moved with serpentine grace, like a cross between a panther and an anaconda. No. It turned away, rippling as it slid off between the buildings in pursuit of other prey. Then what about the thing that looked uncannily like a goat, tethered to a fire hydrant body way down the block behind him. It was misdemeanor, interfering with access to a New York Fire Department Hydrant, should he want an excuse to announce his uncharitable presence?

Yeah, why not? Besides what kind of fucked up whacko left a goat tied on a frigging fire hydrant at two in the morning.

He took out his gun and got out of the vehicle as noisily as possible.

“All right, Scummy, buckle up. We’re outta here.”

“I ain’t...I ain’t...oh Lord that’s good...”

“Did you hear me, officer? Move.”

“One minute Harry...just one...oh yeah...oh yeah baby, all the way...all the way...”

Harry kept his eyes on the goat, which was standing across the street at a door that had not been open one minute before. Lights burned within, like blue candle flames, rising and falling. Harry’s Itch became unbearable. He went to the corner of the alley where he could vaguely make sense of Scummy leaning against the wall, his head back, while the hooker showed him all the tricks she’d learned between her Daddy’s legs. She wanted the guy to shoot his load so she could spit and go. There was something about this she didn’t like, and it wasn’t the cop’s lack of hygiene.

“Scummy?!”

“I heard you...”

“Now, man!”

“Just one more minute.”

“Fuck you, Scummy. *Now!*”

Harry had glanced back at the goat, then at the open door. The blue flames were out in the air hovering like fire-flies. They were lighting the way for something, his gut told him; he didn't know what, but it gave him the Itch something fierce, and he didn't want to still be here when it finally did show itself.

“You've had your minute Scummy...”

“You put me off your stride!”

“Then put it back in your pants, partner, right now, I said *right now* and you on the floor *get up*. He moved down the stairs as he spoke, uplifting his gaze between the doorway and that fucking goat, and the two figures at the bottom of the stairs.

“I said zip up, Scummy.”

“She’s so good,” he said. “She’s better than my brother-in-law.” He chuckled to himself and somehow the chuckle just got Harry crazy. He went down the remaining stairs, losing sight of both the light attended doorway and the goat in the process and caught hold of the shoulder of Scummy’s jacket. He pulled Scummy away, the girl dropping forward onto her hands as he was hauled away.

“What’s going on?” she demanded loudly. “Does this mean you’re booking me?”

“Shut the fuck up and keep your head down,” Harry whispered. “You’re not getting booked. But if I ever see you on this block again.”

There was a wretched shrieking from the goat at that moment, which was silenced suddenly.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Harry said.

“What was that?”

“A goat.”

“You’re kidding. I didn’t see no goat. What’s a goat—”

“Scummy?”

“Yeah?”

“On three we’re going to make a run for the car, okay?”

“O....kay. But—”

“There is no but, Scummy. You look at the car and you keep looking at the car’
til you’re in and we’re away. Anything else and we’re dead men.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so. Now come on.”

“The zipper’s stuck.”

“Forget the fucking zipper. Nobody’s going to be looking at your dick, I
promise you that. Now move.”

Harry smelt the taste of blood; his nose taking in the metallic tang of it that
went straight to the back of his throat. The goat had been only partially slaughtered;

its murderer a man in a chain mail apron who held the terrified animal between his legs, its head pulled back to make the partial throat cut gape. Blood came out of it in spurts, like water from a faulty faucet. And standing with his back to Harry, the fire-fly lights that still sauced attendance upon him, was the man Harry hadn't wanted to see.

He had the sleeves of his black shirt rolled up to above the elbow, and he was vigorously washing his hands in the goat's sporadic spurts of blood. Harry glanced at Scummy, who stood now reached the top of the stairs, and contrary to Harry's instruction was staring with incredulity at the little domestic tableau half a block away.

Harry transferred his gun from right hand to his left, and used the right to aim a harmless blow at the side of Scummy's head. It was an error. The man stopped washing instantly, and pulling the clean white towel over the slaughterers' shoulder began to wipe the blood off his hands. The slaughterer put the goat out its misery

with one twist of its head, and let the corpse drop into the gutter. Then the man, done with drying his hands, threw the bloodied towel down on the goats' corpse and turned to face the two officers.

Scummy shat his pants, noisily. Then he did what Harry had asked him to do in the first place, which was make a dash for the car. Harry should have done the same, but he'd always had more curiosity that was good for him. He looked at his adversary. The creature's face was a smear of grey matter, from which some crude sculpture had thumbed and pinched the rudiments of a face. But it wasn't that which had terrified Scummy into soiling himself. It was the way his mouth opened, as it did now, for Harry's benefit, gaping impossibly wide, and dark, as though it might swallow the world whole if it was given the opportunity.

It had come at Harry the next moment, racing at him with his mouth already wide enough to swallow his head. Harry fired at him, and every bullet struck the bastard's body, but it did nothing to slow the beast. He stood his ground, destined to

put a hole in the middle of the creature's brow, but as he fired the beast veered to its left, off the sidewalk into the street.

Scummy was in the patrol car and taking off, leaving Harry to his own devices.

"Scummy! Watch out!" Harry yelled.

His warning went unheeded above the squeal of the car as Scummy took off down the street. The beast raced in reckless pursuit, raising its blood stained hands above its head as it did so.

They grew brighter as he gathered speed, like embers stirred into a blaze by a high wind. Sparks flew off them as their temperature rose, their red heat turning white. Scummy had put the siren on, hoping perhaps to dissuade the beast from continuing its pursuit, but the trick seemed to work the other way, inspiring the creature to pick up its speed in the hope of catching up with the siren's song. Scummy drove at suicide speed, and might have escaped his pursuer had he not side-swiped a pile of garbage heaped head-high in the gutter and onto the sidewalk. The garbage

toppled onto the car, and more disastrously into Scummy's path. He tried to weave around it, but there was too much of it blocking his way. There was only one solution left to him. Seeing the beast coming at him from behind he put the car with reverse, gunned it with his foot on the brake 'til the tires smoked, then took his foot off the brake and backed up at speed, slamming straight into the beast. It was thrown over the top of the car, but its blazing hands caught hold of the roof, its fingers curling into the metal.

It took the creature six seconds to get to Scummy. Five to tear a hole open in the roof, and one to reach in and grab him. Harry had already sent the whore on her way, telling her not to look back. Then he'd given chase, coming round the corner in time to see the beast reach in and grab hold of Scummy. He caught fire instantly. But he'd opened the door in the seconds that the roof was being opened and now, his shoulders, where the beast had touched him were burning, and the flames licking at his neck, he threw himself out of the car.

“Harry?” he yelled.

“*Here!*” Harry yelled, running across the deserted street towards Scummy as he stumbled away from the vehicle.

The creature was still besotted by the siren, it seemed, because it made no attempt to follow Scummy. It had slipped down into the drivers’ seat, its cries of inhuman delight loud enough to be audible above the sirens. Harry had already called for police back up, and-guessing there’d be somebody hurt in the chase-for an ambulance too. As long as the demon stayed in the car he had a chance of bringing both him and Scummy out of this. Back up was four minutes away, the dispatcher told him as he threw Scummy down on the wet street, pulled of his jacket and beat the flames down with it. They had burned through to his skin-Harry could smell it cooking. His senses instantly mistook the smell for that of the Sunday joint at home, and his shameful mouth salivated. But the flames went out more quickly than he’d feared.

“I hear help coming, Scummy.”

“Then get me the fuck off the floor.”

“You’re burned. Stay down.”

“Oh yeah you’d love that fucking picture wouldn’t you . Harry D’Amour stands proud, and Scummy is down in the dirt. No it’s not happening that way. Help me up or I’ll do it myself.”

He meant it. In the moment of Harry’s indecision he rolled onto his side, cursing ripely and would have tried to rise had Harry not said:

“I got you,” and pulled him to his feet.

“What are we going to tell ‘em?” Scummy asked as Harry stepped back from him. His shoulders were smoking, and bright dots of fire still crawled around the edges of his burned shirt.

“Well Inspector it was like this: I didn’t want Scummy to have to rush through his blow-job, so—”

“Fuck off, D’Amour. What are we going to say?”

“I was checking some suspicious activity, and you saw someone running, that thing—” He stabbed his finger in the direction of the patrol car where the beast was still working out how to get the vehicle to move—“came out of nowhere and chased you down.”

“Crazy fucking thing. What is it, Harry? It’s not human, right?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Harry said. “Anyway, it’s their problem now.”

Three patrol cars, sirens wailing, came round the corner and spewed a reassuring roster of familiar faces.

“Where’s the fucking ambulance?” Harry wanted to know.

“Walking wounded are you, Scummy?” Kassovitz said.

“He’s a fucking hero is what he is.” Harry snapped. “He’s getting a medal for what he’s just done.”

“Which was?”

Before Harry could reply he felt a bloom of warmth against his back, and then there were pieces of burning car flying past him, and all the men were throwing themselves to the ground. Harry did the same, dropping down onto the wet asphalt as shards peppered his shirt. One of them fell on the back of his hand, branding him, and as he swatted it off he caught sight of Scummy, the only man still standing in the midst of all this chaos.

“Get down Schomburg!” Harry yelled.

Scummy didn't move. He was staring at the blaze, a little smile on his face as if he was taking pleasure in the destruction of his wonder.

“There's a time and a place, Scummy!” Harry yelled to him. “And this isn't it!”

He got to his feet and started to run towards Scummy, who was still staring at the fire as though it had him hypnotized. He'd taken a couple of strides when there was another eruption of flame behind him, and more pieces of the car flew. He ducked, but he didn't stop moving towards Scummy, who was hit in the belly by a

small piece of burning car, but didn't so much as blink. Harry's curiosity was too strong to be denied. What the hell was so fascinating about a burning car? He looked over his shoulder, and had his answer.

There, sitting in the burning front seat, only fleetingly visible through the black smoke and dark orange flame that rose around it, was the demon. It was naked now, having lost its clothes to the fire, but otherwise it appeared to be unharmed.

"Scummy?" Harry said, looking back at his partner. "I don't think you should be looking at him."

It was always in the looking, he knew; he'd learned that back in St. Dominic's. The bad stuff started the moment you looked and didn't look away, no, *couldn't* look away. And that was Scummy's problem right now. He did the only thing under the circumstances, he veered to his left and interrupted Scummy's line of vision. Scummy blinked, and for a second or two looked completely disoriented. Then his eyes focused on Harry.

“Jesus wept,” he said.

Harry didn't get a chance to reply. Something cold and sharp stabbed the back of his neck, and the instant it did so the strength went out of his legs. He leaned forward and put his hands on his knees, drawing a deep breath as he did so. The ice-pick in his neck had already melted away, and his legs recovered from their weakness by the time he took his third breath. He knew from where and whom the sting had come. He stood up, his legs still shaky but reliable enough, and turned, gun in hand, to do his best to take the sonofabitch out. What chance a man with a badge and a gun had against a demon sitting contentedly in a burning car was probably not a question with a happy answer, of course. But he'd find out quickly enough.

The demon was hidden by the smoke, but its hand was in view, palm out. It was not the hand of a normal human being. It had two thumbs, one on either side, and in the centre of this unsettling symmetry was a triangle that threw out a pulsing brightness, tinged with the subtlest blue. The brightness intensified with each throb,

Harry saw, until the triangle spat forth a needle of light. Harry knew at the instant that this was a sibling to the thing that had struck him in the back of the neck. But he had not been its target, he now realized. The target been Scummy. And now here came another, aiming for the same target. Luckily it was no bullet; now a bolt shot from a bolt. It came at a leisurely pace, as though it was taking in the sights as it approached.

Harry started to move towards Scummy, with the intention of knocking him out of the way. But as he did so he realized that he had misunderstood the sloth of the spat needle. It was moving at such an indulgent speed because for the length of its flight everything in its vicinity was slowed to the same dreamy pace. The smoke and flames rising from the car did so with luxuriant sloth, and from it his hand, palm still partially lifted, and the triangle upon it pulsing again in case another needle was needed-came the demon, its massive penis unsheathing itself as it ticked to full erection, the hair around its base burning, so that the rod seemed to rise up out of a

tangled shrubbery of flame. The demon was happy; there could little doubt of that. If his erection wasn't proof of that then the smile on his face was: a wide, movie-star smile on its pock-marked and pie-bald face.

A thought, slow and slick as an eel in molasses, moved through Harry's head. He chased it down, determined to have hold of it. This was an important thought, he knew, if he could only get a hold of the damned thing. He reached, closed his hands on the muscle of it, and made it confess itself.

"The first needle wasn't for you, dummy," the thought said, "You just got in its way. It was for Scummy."

He let the eel drop back into the filth of his mind, and started to move at dream speed to intercept the second needle. On heart-beat quicker, and he might have done it, but the needle flew past his eyes, mocking him with its proximity, and all he could do was watch it slide past him and head towards Scummy. He also saw it coming, and stared at it with that same half-smile of welcome Harry had seen on his

face from the beginning. It struck him in the middle of his forehead, and broke on impact, its pieces not dropping directly down off its targets' face as Harry would have assumed it would do, but breaking to left and right of his brow and dropping instead on his burned shoulders. The message(?) the fragments sent were not for Scummy's burns however, they were for the smoking remains of hair. Or most precisely for the tiny bright dots that crawled along the ragged edges of its weave. They heard their order, and acted upon instantly, leaping up like fleas of fire from the collar to Scummy's daft-happy face. As they struck him his head caught fire, from his Adam's apple to the bald spot he'd been forever been combing the surrounding hair over, presenting the results to Harry with the same question:

“Does it show Harry? Does it show? Well does it?”

Even now with the second shot fired from the demon's hand having found its target and the flames enveloping Scummy's head-time did not return to its proper speed. It continued to unravel at the same lazy rhythm, obliging Harry to watch the

flames at work on his partner's flesh. His skin grew redder and redder in the blaze, shiny beads of fat appearing from the pores and basting it as they ran down over his face. It rapidly became unrecognizable, his scalp burned bald, his cheeks and brow swelling up until his eyes were slits, his mouth gaping until his tongue a torch lighting the cave of his throat.

Harry half-turned to throw a plea back towards the demon.

"Please don't do this to him!" he meant to say, and more besides, but the words came out as an idiot slur.

He could see that the demon had got out of the vehicle however, and was walking towards him. Again, Harry tried to shape an entreaty, but the words ran together as they had before incomprehensible. Even so, the demon knew what he was trying to express, he knew. How could he not? It was playing a monstrous game. It was almost beside him now, Harry didn't move, though God knows the soles of his feet were twitching with readiness.

“Spit.” The demon said, putting the cup of his palm six inches from his mouth.

Harry did his best to summon up a wad of spittle, but it wasn't much.

“You can do better than that,” the demon said.

It was true. The list of the things he couldn't do could fill a Bible twice over, but when it came to spitting, he was golden. And he was damned if he couldn't summon a good wad right here and now, especially if it gave him some leverage with the demon. He went deep, and summoned up the good ripe stuff from every pocket of his throat and mouth; gathered it, rolled it, and then went back and pulled in another round of sweet wet glory from the places only a real expert would have thought to look. And then he spat it with into the demon's palm. It was a nice piece of work, no question. Thick, but not gross; moist, but not watery. A few bubbles; nothing excessive but enough to catch the light and give it a hint of showmanship. The demon was well pleased, to judge by the smile on his face. Harry tried to talk again, but the same pathetic noise came out. He got the demon's attention however, and as soon as

the sonofabitch looked at him Harry pointed to his throat. The demon made a tiny motion with his free hand, Harry didn't waste a breath. He just started talking, the words making sense now.

“Okay, you got your spit. And there's plenty more where that came from. Put the fire out. Come on, I'm begging you. Scummy never did a thing to you. Please. Jesus, what do I need to say? Tell me what I need to say, or sign, or promise. Whatever it is, I'll do it.”

“Here's what you do,” the demon said.

“What? *What?*”

“You watch.” The creature said, putting the hand into which Harry had spat his geniles(?) on his erection. He did so with loving care, skinning back the copious folds of his foreskin to be sure the purple head was entirely wetted.

“Not me,” he said, “Him. Scummy. You and me, we watch him burn.”

As he spoke he began to work the vein coursed rod, with long leisurely strokes.

“Go on. Watch him. Oh my God in Heaven but that is good.”

His eyes rolled up beneath his lids as his pleasure mounted. Harry tried to reach for his gun, but the curse of sloth was upon him again, even worse now that the demon was in no hurry to be done with this bliss. Reluctantly Harry turned his slow gaze back towards Scummy. The basted meat of his face was starting to blacken now, the swelled skin cracking open, and curling back from the fire-dried muscle beneath. His eyes had boiled in their sockets and spilled out as a white froth, bubbling as it ran down the sides of his face.

“Oh God forgive me, Scummy. God fucking forgive me.”

“Oh yeah’-the demon gasped, ‘That’s it, say it again—”

“Say what? God forgive me?”

“Ohh yeah you dirty mouthed fuuuck!”

The demon unloaded his copious load so that it landed several feet beyond Scummy, where it struck the head of an officer with his nose to the dirt. He looked up, and he saw the perpetrator standing proud. Harry watched the man's face, waiting for the guy to push himself up off the dirt in a righteous fury. But no. There was a line in everybody's head which if crossed, erased everything that lay on the far side of it. And the demon was standing over that line, safe from harm. He knew it too, the bastard.

"See I don't exist for most of these poor witless slobs," he said in a matter-of-fact. "And frankly, D'Amour, it's better for you and the slobs both that it stays that way."

"Oh yeah, why's that?"

"Because I got lots of friends and relations on the other side and the moment they miss and come looking for me they're going to realize that they cross over too, and it'll be a bad time, Harry, when they figure that out because *me* in, all kinds of

other shit sees me crossing over and they think we're going to follow, yeah, we're going to pick up every last weapon need and we're just going to go over after him and cause as much chaos as we can, and believe me when I tell you what's a whole lot of chaos. Even though right now you think I'm the worst, most sick-minded fuck in hell, I am nothing beside your man Pinhead or the fucking Fortuners in his Order. Now they are bad."

"Oh and you're an angel, are you, besides your little obsession with fire?"

"Now you're getting it," the demon replied.

"So put him out."

"Not yet."

"Why in Christ's name not?"

"Because you haven't done as I asked you to, Officer D'Amour."

"Oh fuck. And what was that?"

"You really don't remember, do you?"

Harry shook his head.

“Stand beside me and watch him burn. That’s all I asked. It’s not much when it comes down to it, is it? Just the two of us, watching.”

“All right,” Harry replied, “I’m here. Beside you, like you wanted. And I’m watching, okay?”

“Are you really watching?”

“Yes. Christ Almighty,” Harry said, “You want me to prove it? Right now his left ear is pretty much gone, except for the hole in his skull and a few curls of gristle. He can’t see us, because his eyes have gone, and he can’t hear us because his ears have gone, and he won’t be making any more crude remarks about women because his tongue’s been burned up.”

“But he doesn’t know any of that, Harry,” the demon said. “In what’s left of his brain he’s dreaming of fucking some girl.”

“Oh yeah?”

“For sure. Look.” The demon pointed down at the front of Scummy’s pants where the evidence for it’s claim was plain to see.

“Any more Doubting Thomas’s in the vicinity?” the demon demanded.

He took his eyes of Scummy and D’Amour and he walked amongst the officers, all of whom still lay with their faces to the ground.

“You men stink,” he said, “Some of you have been shitting in your pants, haven’t you? *Well, haven’t you?*”

There were murmurs of admission here and there.

“That’s good. I’d do the same thing if I were in your underwear. Watching your friend Scummy burn.”

He stood beside one of the men.

“You, darkie. What’s your name?”

“I’m nobody’s darkie.”

“You want to stand up and say that, darkie? You might just have time before the fire makes you *real* black.”

Harry and Tom knew one another only a little, and yet uncannily well. They both had fierce tempers, and weren't always good at controlling them. But right now he closed his eyes for a moment and willed Tom to let this one go, however angry he felt. *It's not worth it*, he said in his mind, hoping against hope that somehow the message would bridge the space between them, and Tom would let the bastard demon have his worthless moment of insults and intimidation. He started hard at Tom as he repeated the mantra. *It's not worth it. Let it go. It's not worth it. Let it go. It's not—*

“You fucking stop that!” Tom yelled. He raised his head from the street and pointed up at the demon. “You hear me?”

“What we wailing about, Nigger Tom?”

“Oh fuck you.” Tom said, pressing himself up off the street.

“*Don't*,” Harry thought. “*It's not him, Tom. It's not him!*”

Tom paused in his ascent to shake his head violently, like a swimmer with water in his ears. Then he paused, bent over to listening for any further voices in his head. Harry paused too, afraid that one more word in Tom's head would have him up and confronting the enemy, but that his silence was potentially just as dangerous. Before he chose between lousy options, Tom's rage chose for him. He had his gun out and he was telling the demon to pull his hands behind his head.

"Going to do a full body search?" the demon said, swinging his penis, which was still half hard, back and forth so it slapped him against his flesh, left and right.

"And you can fucking stop that too." Tom said.

Then to the others, "Get your noses out of the shit, for fuck's sake. It's just one guy. Get up I said!"

"Don't!" Harry yelled.

"What's your problem, D'Amour?"

"He'll kill you, Tom."

“Oh yeah. Well maybe I’m not going to kneel down and let him choke me. Is that what you were doing, Harry?”

“Oh Christ—”

“I said right from the start you were a fucking perv.”

Harry wasn’t listening now. He was watching the demon’s eyes. It wasn’t looking at Tom. It was looking at Scummy’s head. The fire had eaten all was edible, leaving a black smoking skull where Scummy’s face had hung, and round the collar of his shirt those motes of fire, still crawling, still crawling—

—then, flying.

“Throw down your gun and run, Tom!” Harry yelled.

“You fuckin’ crazy”

“You want to die like Scummy?”

“What’s he talkin’ about?” Tom said. The demon said nothing, though Tom was pointing his gun at the creature’s head. Then he asked the question again, with the demon’s other head as his target.

“He’ right and he’s wrong,” the demon said.

“Just fucking run, Tom.”

“Shut up, D’Amour.”

“He’s right, you’re going to burn. But not like Scummy. He felt nothing.

Whereas you’ll...’He paused, watching as a mote of flame grazed the side of the officer’s neck... “...feel everything.”

Two bright lines of fire raced around the officer’s neck, left and right, and met at his Adam’s apple. As they met the air around Tom’s head began to shiver and shimmer as a wave of heat rose up around it. In the instant before the heat reached his eyes Tom fired and the demon’s pride and joy blew apart like a long balloon filled with blood. By the time the ragged plum of its head hit the street Tom Benedict had

started to scream. It would last, for a little short of nineteen minutes, while the firefighters exhausted every tool in their arsenal to put out the flames. The medics who pumped pain-killers into him were no more successful at extinguishing his agencies. All they could do, along with Harry, was watch the man burn.

Four

Harry woke towards noon. The streets were gratifyingly quiet. All he heard was a bell, calling the faithful to a Sunday Mass. He ordered up some coffee and juice, which came while he was showering. The day was already humid, and by the time he'd dried himself he'd already started work on a new sweat. As he sipped his coffee,

strong and sweet, he watched the people in the street two floors below. The only pair in any hurry were a couple of tourists with a map; everyone else was going about their business at a nice mellow speed, pacing themselves for the long hot day and the long hot night that would follow it.

The phone rang. It was Norma.

“Are you checking up on me?” he said, smiling.

“Much good that would do me. You’re too good a liar these days, Harry.”

“You taught me everything I know.”

“I daresay I did. How was your birthday celebration?”

“I got drunk...”

“Big surprise.”

“...and I got to thinking about Tom.”

“Oh Lord, Harry. What did I tell you about leaving that shit alone?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Well it’ll do you no good, chewin’ over the past. What’s done is done. The good and the bad both. So leave it alone.”

“I try, Norma, God knows...but it keeps coming back. Not just Tom and Scummy, but stuff from my school days.”

“What stuff?”

“The usual stuff.”

“While you were at school?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you went to St. Dominic’s.”

“I did. I was there for five years.”

“And what happened to you? Was it really the usual stuff?”

“With twists, yeah.”

“You amaze me, Harry.”

“I doubt that somehow. Look, I’ve got to get going. I want to deal with this bit of business and get out of this city.”

“After all these years, you’re still keeping secrets from me.”

“They’re not important, Norma.”

“You swear.”

“I swear.”

“You lie like a rug, Harry D’Amour.”

“And don’t forget you got me into this one, so if I come up missing in the next twenty-four hours...”

“It’ll be my fault. Yeah, I know. What happened at Saint Dominic’s, Harry?”

“Got to go, Norma.”

“Harry—”

—

One of these days, he thought later as he walked to the house, he thought on the convention again. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing to tell the whole sad fucked-up story of him and Jack Mobley, and the oak, (?), and that damn box, that Lament Configuration, which opened doors to Hell. Maybe. Right now he had simpler business, all begun, as he'd said on the phone, by Norma.

Norma Paine, black, blind, and seventy-three, fond of expensive brandy and cheap cigars, had sat in her favorite chair by the window of her Ninth floor apartment and talked to the dead, twelve hours a day. She was like a social service for the recently deceased: somehow if someone was dead and lost in New York, the found their way, sooner or later, to Norma. Some nights there were phantoms lined up half a block or more, sometimes just a dozen or so. And now and then, for no particular reason, she would be inundated with needy phantoms, and she would have to turn all hundred and three televisions in her apartment on, all playing relatively low, but tuned to different channels, a new Babel of cooking shows, game shows, soap operas,

news reports, weather reports, scandal, tragedy and banality which had the useful effect of driving them away.

It wasn't often Norma's counseling of the recently dead overlapped with Harry's life as a private investigator. But there were always exceptions. Nathan Good had been one such case. Good by name, good by nature; that was how he'd styled his life. A family man with five kids to raise and more than enough money to do so, thanks to his fees as a lawyer, good investments, and a deep-seated faith in the generosity of the Lord God, who took best care of those who cared best about Him. At least, so he had thought, until in the middle of the day a week ago somebody has snatched his brief-case from him, and run. Nathan made a second religion out of he's and his family's health. He didn't smoke or drink, he only ate steak once a month, when the company principals lunched together, and worked out for an hour four days a week after work. None of which stopped him from being felled by a massive heart attack just as he came within snatching distance of the felon.

Good was dead, and death was bad. Not just because he'd left Phyllis alone to raise five kids in their seven million dollar mansion or that he wouldn't get to write his book about life and the law which he'd been resolving to for every New Year's Eve for the past decade. No the really bad thing about Good being dead was Dupont Street. Sooner or later, though he'd been obsessively careful, somebody— either his wife going through the drawers in his desk, which she'd have to force open, or one of his partners dutifully tidying up the work he'd left unfinished, could find reference to number sixty-eight, Dupont Street in New Orleans, and recently tracking down the owner of the house at this address, discover it was him. And then, oh God in Heaven, please don't let this happen to me, I don't deserve this, you know I don't, and then they would go down to Louisiana to find out what the big mystery was, and they'd find out. And everything Nathan had hoped to come to pass upon his death (this forty years later than the death he'd been erroneously given) —the tears and laughter memorial service, the handing out of lavish regrets that assured his name would be on

several law libraries and scholarships. And most important, the reverence with which his unsullied name would be mentioned for generations to come—all these would be lost.

Well, Nathan Good wasn't about to take this lying down. Once he figured out the way the system worked on the Other Side he began to do just that: Work it. And very soon he'd had jumped a very long line and in the presence of the woman he had been assured would solve his problems.

“You're Norma Paine?” He said. “Why do you have so many televisions? You're blind?”

“And you're rude. So if you don't want to find out why I have so many damn televisions, as if it is any of your business, Mister Coming in here like he's got money in his pocket, when he don't even have pockets no more.”

“You see me?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Naked?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“There’s no need to be offensive. I was only

shitchristfuckingbitchHellasndGodalmighty—”

“There’s no need to be offensive.”

“Goodbye, now. Send in the next—”

“No wait! Wait! Fuckingshitchristshitshitshit! I’m sorry! All right? Please.

Don’t send me away. I’m just...”

“Dead.”

“What?”

“That’s what you are. Dead. And nothing your money used to buy can change

that. If you want to join the end of the line again—”

“It was actually you I strictly need to speak to.”

“Well what the fuck are you doing wastin’ my damn time?” Norma got up from her chair and walked straight at Good. “There’s a trick my momma taught me, once she knew I had the gift. It’s called Ghost Pushing.” She shoved Nathan in the middle of the chest. He stumbled backwards. “Two more of those and you’re gone.” She shoved again. “Make that one. And if you ever—”

“D’Amour.”

“What about him?”

“You know him.”

“I might.”

“I need him to do a job for me. Money is no consequence.”

“That, I believe, is your problem.”

“I have a house in New Orleans.”

“Go on.”

“I did a lot of entertaining for a very select group of...”

“Of?”

“Ladies.”

“Who did not come with their husbands?”

“No.”

“But left with more money than they came with?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll see what they can do. No promises. But he’s a man of great many talents, my Harry, and I love him dearly. So you’d better not cheat him in any way shape or form because if you do I will push you so damn hard.”

“I won’t. I wouldn’t. I was a nice human being. I really was.”

“God save one nice human being. Come back tomorrow. I’ll see what I can do.”

Five

All of which had brought Harry, on this brutally humid afternoon, to what he had dubbed Nathan Good's House of Sin. It wasn't much to look at from the outside. Just a wrought iron door in a twelve foot wall with the number in blue and white ceramic tile with the plaster beside it. Nathan had been in no condition to supply the keys, but Harry had never had any trouble with locks. He had the gate open in under ten seconds and walking up the uneven paving path that was bordered on either side by pots of various shapes and sizes, the mingled fragrance of blossoms as intense as a dozen shattered perfume bottles. Nobody had been there to take care of the Good's little garden in a long time, Harry noticed. The ground was shiny with decayed petals, and many of the species in the pots had perished for want of attention. That was

strange, a man as organized as Nathan Good would surely have made arrangements to keep his garden looking nice and neat, even when he wasn't there to view it. So what had happened to the gardener?

Four strides further, to the front door, and he had his answer. There were thirty or forty fetishes nailed there, and a thick line of dried blood across the threshold. No doubt what message that was sending out. It was sealing up whatever was in the house, locking in away where it could do no harm. Harry cursed quietly, and turned his back on the prison door, wandering back down the path a little way as he took out his mobile phone and dialed Norma. She picked up after one ring, which Harry had never known her to do in the forty-five years they'd known each other.

"I had a funny feeling it was going to be you," she said.

"I'm at the house. Somebody sealed the door."

"You mean you can't get in?"

"No, I can get in. But they locked something in there, Norma."

“Oh, I see.”

“He didn’t make any mention of anything like that, I presume?”

“Come on Harry, I would have told you.”

“Weird. Unless it got in after he left.”

“You should stay away, Harry, until I get to talk to him again.”

“No, I’ll put my head in: See what Caz’s tattoos tell me.”

“You be careful.”

“Always.”

He lingered in the garden for another couple of minutes, firing up a cheap cigar he’d bought the night before, then went back to the door. Another easy lock. As he stepped over the ragged line of blood, a shudder rose through his body, jumping like a frog between lily-pads from one tattoo to another, zig-zagging up Harry’s body in a warning game that went off like a firework on the design Caz had just finished putting on Harry’s chest, the light blazing outwards through the design.

“Okay, Harry.” He said quietly, “You got your warning. What now? You’re going to have to come back here sometime and get the damn job done. Might as well be now as tomorrow.” He thought on this a while, as the firework continued to explode on his chest, its light beginning to dwindle.

“Nice work, Caz.” he said, and stepped inside.

It wasn’t a big place. They’d been built as slave quarters, these sorry French quarter houses, or so he’d read in the hotel guide book. And places with that deep old misery in their bones were bound to attract the wrong kind of tenant; the kind that put the fear of the devil in its people and you’ve got them making up fetishes. He’d encountered household spirits like that plenty of times over the year, and they were all bark and no bite, usually. Hopefully this would be one of them.

“All bark, no bite.” Harry said as he closed the fetish laden door behind him.

He took it as a kind of mantra as he started through the house: “All bark, no bite. All bark, no bite. All bark, no bite. All bark, no bite. All bark, no bite. All bark, no bite. All bark—”

There was a cold patch over the bottom of the stairs, a sure sign of a presence from the Other Side. He didn't attempt to outrun it, or spit (?)one a dozen versions "Get thee the fuck out of my way." Listening, he stood still in the cold air, his breath forming a cloud at his lips, while the entity circled him and circled him again, until on the third circuit it stopped with impressive ease beneath the surface of Harry's skin, contorting its motion, which was not, as he'd first thought, describing a circle, but rather a spiral, which finally found its way to his heart, which is grazed with cool enquiry. Harry had grown by experience not to be intimidated by such encounters. He had defenses against such spirits if one were to turn nasty on him, but it rarely happened. Usually the spirit did as this one now did, returning via the spirally route that it had entered, and leaving.

He waited a few seconds, to see if there were other curious presences here, who would also want to inspect him. But nobody came, so after a minute or so he started up the narrow stairs. There had been nothing on the few below which had

indicated what the house had been used for, but as he reached the top of the stairs, he quickly realized that the upper was a whole different story. There was a marble statue on the floor beside the first of the three bedrooms of a satyr in a state of extreme arousal, the lewd mischief of his intent wonderfully caught by the sculptor. Mr. Good, it turned out, had quite an eye for erotic antiques. On one wall of the first bedroom was an arrangement of Chinese fans spread to display the elaborately choreographed orgies that decorated each one. The lamps beside the four pictures on the walls, whether in the bedroom or in the hallway between were all words of erotica, none even faintly discreet. It was all heterosexual, but there were fetishes of all kinds on view. Harry wasn't much for art, especially this antique stuff. It was too old to be sexy, somehow; he could never put far from his heart the knowledge that whoever had posed for, or at least inspired, these artists were dead.

He took a quick look in the middle bedroom, which had a sling hanging from the ceiling with a wall covered from to ceiling with whips, canes, oversized dildos, and other Sadean bric-a-brac.

“I can see your point, my friend.” Harry muttered to an imaginary Nathan Good. “This isn’t something you’d want your wife to be finding. But Christ, man, there’s a lot of it. I’m going to need a truck to cart this away.”

He turned on the light to illuminate the third bedroom, expecting it be the most decadently appointed of all three, but it was a model of decorum. No Persian carpets here, the boards polished, but bare. Nor were there drapes at the windows. The glass had simply been blackened out. The walls were painted a uniform dark grey, and were undecorated. Harry’s tattoos gave off a warning twitch as he stepped over the threshold. He’d come to be able to interpret the subtle differences in the signals over the years. This warning was a blinking amber light. Magic’s been done

here, the twitches told him, but nothing recently, nothing that should make Harry turn around and head for the street.

Was this some error of ceremonies performed here by the spirit who'd investigated him at the bottom of the stairs? Harry didn't think so. The room was set up for magic with its bare boards and its blanked out windows. It was a stage on which Nathan Good had apparently been playing some very private pieces of theater.

There was one oddity in the rooms construction which Harry had noticed the moment he stepped over the threshold; the right hand window was placed too close to the corner of the room, which either meant that the architect had done a lousy job, or the room had been truncated at a later stage. The offending wall put up to create a very narrow fourth room. He ran his hands over the wall, looking for some way in.

The shade of grey that Good had painted the room in was misleading, especially in the light from the naked bulbs. Harry had difficulty focusing his eyes on the wall, the grey simply receded and receded, denying his eyes purchase. But he knew he was

onto something. The tattoo on the wrist of his left hand, the Sigil of the Journeyman, was throbbing. He took his right hand off the wall, and let his left do the work, trying his best to get out of its way with any conscious intention.

He got down on his haunches to let it slide to floor level running along the wall until it found a place where there was a quarter inch gap between the base of the wall and the floor. A second later it was climbing the wall again, like a bloodhound closing in on its target, gathering speed. Harry still couldn't see any sign of a door in the ambiguities of the grey, but he trusted the sigil and his hand more than he did his eyes right now; they knew their business. The mark in the sigil was getting steadily quicker, until at a place about two thirds of the way up the wall it became an unbroken signal.

Harry pressed his hand against the spot. There was a barely audible click, then he was obliged to step back as the door in the wall swung open, it's well hidden, and well oiled hinges, virtually silent.

Mr. Nathan Good had apparently got more to hide than the extensive collection of toys in the sling room. The owner of The Good Christian had been dabbling where Christian good or bad, are ill-advised to go.

The fourth room had a single bare bulb to illuminate it, like the third. But whereas the light in the third had illuminated a bare room, here the light fell on all manner of secret things. One wall was given over to books, the scent of their antiquity one of two perfumes that hung in the narrow space, the other being that of incense. Harry's years at St. Dominic's had taught him to abominate that smell. He had only to get a whiff of the stuff and old bad things came out of hiding at the bank of his head: The fathers each with their own little fortunes and temptations, and the boys who learned from them, hard to participate and punish with the same ineffable smile.

"All bark, no bite." He said to himself, memories back into the darkness, and concentrating on assessing the contents of the shelves. First, the books. He scanned

them quickly. Most of them were familiar to him: They were necessary volumes in any practicing The Twelve Volumes of Ernst, paperbacks magician's library, Magic in Theory and Practice, The Collected Griep, several facsimile editions of the teachings of Gerard Carravasco. Then there were some very rare things. Two thin volumes, then other unnamed, describing Thelemic markings, the so-called Carapace Derivations, which had undoubtedly driven more inept practitioners to self-slaughter than anything else on these well stocked shelves. And there were the real jewels of the collection. Books many had heard of but never seen, much less plucked off a shelf and leafed through. The Frey-Kistiandt Dialogues, with their notorious descent into the language of the Knotted Crown, a grimoire that reputedly only existed in an edition of one (which he was holding in his hand), which was found in the ashes of the Yedlin, the child genius of Florence, burned on one of the Savannah's purges. Harry's insatiable curiosity could not lessen the temptation to put the legend to the

test. He raised the open book to his face and breathed deep. Yes, it smelled of old, old fire.

He saw Sammy's face, with his eyes spilling from their sockets as they burned, and closed the book quickly. He'd seen more than enough of Good's collection; now what he had to do was figure out a way to get the house cleaned out, as the dead man had requested. But the contents of the fourth room had put a twist on things. He needed to talk to Norma about Good's secret library, and get advice on how best to handle such a volatile collection. And there was also the question of whether his employer had expected him even to find these books. The sense that Harry had taken from the conversation with Norma was that Good was simply a man with a secret sex-life that he didn't want his wife to find out about. But the secret room was a revelation of a different kind; and it needed pondering. For one thing the books on these shelves were priceless. Did Good want them all put in a heap and burned? Even if that was his instructions Harry was already sheafing(?) through the volumes in his

head, making a rough list of the five or six titles he'd save from the conflagration and quietly sell in a few months. He'd split the proceeds with Norma and nobody ever need know.

He was scanning the shelves again, looking for anything special he'd left off his list of money-makers. As he did so something sitting behind a row of pamphlets caught his eye. Secrets within secrets within secrets, Harry thought. This guy was a puzzle box. It was a puzzle box, hidden away behind the pamphlets. Not just any kind of puzzle box either. This was one he knew. He remembered instantly, without even thinking how it felt to have it in his hand. The way the etched surface responded to his fingertips, putting out little changes that made you feel warm all the way down in your gut, so warm and so full of good feelings that all you wanted to do was to go to some show of pleasure again. Except that touching the surface wouldn't supply your needs a second time, so you had to start to solve the puzzle in the hope that there'd be more instant bliss to be had inside.

Harry went down on his haunches to take a better look at the thing. He knew there were many versions of the box, the lament configuration around the mold. Some, like this one, lay dormant on collector's shelves, waiting for some curious innocent to pick it up and discover its seductions; but most were quickly back in the flow of life again, sitting innocently in a thrift store or neighing down loose papers on a desk, waiting for the right inquisitive fingers to pick it up. The fact that many of the puzzle-solvers were innocents was of no interest to the demons who came once the box had been opened. A soul was a soul; the more innocent the better.

And still— knowing all this—Harry could not quite bring himself to leave the box there on the shelf untouched. The last time he'd had a configuration in his hand he'd been twelve. All he wanted to do now, he reasoned to himself, was hold this identical box and see how different it felt in a man's hand; see, perhaps, how effective the little pleasure jolts were after thirty five years. They'd been a revelation to the repressed little Catholic boy he'd been thirty five years ago. But it would probably

feel like nothing now, he told himself. That was worth putting to the test, wasn't it?

One little thrill ride for old time's sake, then he'd put it right back on the shelf—in

fact he'd time himself. Yes, that's what he'd do. Ten seconds, no, that wasn't long

enough, twenty, yes, twenty seconds would be fine. Then it would go back on the

shelf whether it had permitted a thrill or not.

“Twenty seconds.” He said aloud. “That's all you're getting, just so we understand one another.”

Then he reached out and picked the box off the shelf.

The instant he held it, time contracted, closing up years between Harry the Boy, and Harry the Man. He turned the box over with the same fascination as ever; the same curiosity, the same need to understand what the real mysteries of the world looked like. The hidden things that held sway over people's souls when all the pontificating was over, and the Amens said.

There it was, that first little spark of pleasure running up through his fingers and into his system. For a few tantalizing moments all was well with the world; he was perfectly content in his imperfect body, though his knees ached and his back ached and he hadn't woken with a morning woodie in three, four years. Right now, none of that mattered. Even the past, even St. Dominic and its horrors seemed inconsequential now. It was all part of a huge pattern, the good and the bad both. Like the sides of a puzzle box, once you looked on it for a while, and you got the sides properly aligned. Suddenly the pattern made miraculous sense and—and what? His thoughts faltered. He tried to grab hold of it again, and while he vainly tried to grasp it his fingers moved over the side of the box, seeking out another fix of bliss and understanding. He knew the mechanism well, despite the decades since he'd last touched one of the boxes. The many times had he woken from his dreams in which he'd been doing exactly what he was doing now, feeling his way around the box with a strange kind of tenderness. And then, just as his fingers were about to reach the

pressure point that began the solving to the puzzle, he felt a brushing of cold air against his face, which woke him from his reverie of remembrance. He threw the box down as he got to his feet. The spirit was there again, moving around him, warning him about this place and its secrets.

“I know,” he said. “I know.” Though he had no idea whether the spirit understood what he was saying.

But there was no doubting the energy that possessed it; the way it swept around and around him, sometimes threading its gentle soul through his hands and arms, as if to pull him away, if it only had the strength.

“Nothing’s going to happen.” He said, looking down at the box on the floor.
“I’d only just begun the puzzle.”

He had barely finished speaking when his words were proved wrong. The narrow room began to crack, and somewhere, far off, a bell began to sound.

“Oh, Jesus,” Harry murmured, “What have I done?”

Despite the silent entreaties of the spirit, and his own common sense, he could never bring himself to retreat. Not yet, at least. There was a dangerous current in his nature, always had been, that needed to see things with his own eyes, witness them, whatever the danger involved with doing so. Back at St. Dominic's he'd handled the puzzle box, and later, in the company of his co-conspirator in the watching game, Danny Loft, he met for a short indelible time the demon Danny had called Pinhead. But what he had never seen, and never truly understood, was how the demon came from Hell and walked in the human world. He'd thought of that a lot over the years, trying to figure out the way it worked.

Now, perhaps, he was going to get a chance to see for himself, and he wasn't about to turn his back on the opportunity. After all, the house was no maze. All he had to do, once he'd seen how the process worked, was to do as the spirit was urging him: turn around, and head back along the passageway, down the stairs and out into

the open air. He could be in the street in less than a minute, once he'd paid his debt to his curiosity.

Just to reassure the invisible companion that he wasn't planning to throw himself at the feet of the creature that could be awaiting his cue step onto the human stage, he took two backward steps, until he was one step away from exiting the fourth room entirely. He knew from his research, after the trauma of St. Dominic's, what kind of entity this was: A member of an Order, dedicated to the harvesting of human souls, who were put to every kind of torment in pursuit of nothing other than the cold pleasure to be had in the giving of torment. He was a Cenobite.

On the ground where he'd dropped it, the box continued to solve itself, independent of any human manipulation, its motions reassuringly elegant, as it systematically aligned the intricate golden designs, making images that consistently seemed about to take a finished form only to pursue some other verifications of its

symmetry and its beauty. Still the spirit did not give up on Harry, however reluctant he showed himself to be.

“I just want to see how the demons get from over there to over here.” He said to his guardian, knowing even as he spoke that it wasn’t the complete truth. Just as the box had called up his memories, so did the imminent arrival of the Cenobite.

“I’m a demon to some, an angel to others,” he’d told Harry those many years ago, and though almost everything Harry had witnessed of the creature at work had been bloody, demonic stuff, he’d seen in the eyes of the man who’d brought the Cenobite through from the other side, the passion of the man who had more than pain as a god to his devotions. Was there really an angel hidden behind the Cenobite’s mutilated face? He’d never stopped wondering.

The creaking and cracking in the walls of the room were escalating. Books toppled from the shelves, and littered the floor around the puzzle-box, which now, in one final proof of it’s maker’s genius, opened like a golden flower, unleashing a

column of light which looked half-solid in the dusty air. All the noise in the walls ceased, instantly. Harry waited, ready to make a hasty departure once he'd had a glimpse, a tiny glimpse, of the world on the other side. A single sharp sound, like a hammer blow, came from the far end of the room, and a narrow line of cold blue light appeared there, stretching from ceiling to floor. In a world where the rules of reason applied, any crack in this end of the room would open onto empty air; it was the missing portion of the same wall that carried the blanked out windows. But any such rules were irrelevant now. A new book of possibilities had been opened.

Caz's handiwork was going crazy, both the tattoos designed to alert Harry to the presence of the enemy, as Caz referred to all of Harry's adversaries, and those that Caz had created himself, knitting together sigils and talismans from every kind of culture to help ward off attacks, were throbbing and twitching and telling him to turn around and head for the stairs. But Harry had his eyes on the opening door, or rather it was what was in view beyond it. There was no sign of the Cenobite, just an

oppressive layer of grey-brown cloud. Mystified, Harry did the stupid thing, the thing he'd howl at someone for doing if he was watching them in a movie. But it didn't seem stupid to him at that moment; indeed it seemed a clear, logical choice. The demon wasn't in sight, so Harry wasn't in any immediate danger. And there was something to be learned here; a glimpse of the world from which this enemy came. He stepped over the box, which no longer sent up its signal beam, and through the fallen books to the end of the narrow room.

There was a wasteland in front of him, over which the oppressive sky lay like a filthy blanket, a rotted mattress. It looked like a war zone; patterns of old streets still visible in between heaps of rubble. And here and there entire buildings miraculously saved from the general destruction everywhere, tires burned, the smoke that rose from them emitted black or sickly yellow. Some of the tires burned in the interior of blackened buildings, others were not at ground level but beneath it rising from places in the landscape that resembled huge cankers, the earth around them separating,

rivulets of sluggish black fluid, some of it carrying a freight of burning debris, emerging from the mounds and winding away across the landscape, until they were carried by a crack in the wounded ground, or fed into a distant pool, where many burning forms floated.

Harry was no good at self-deception. He knew damn well what was there, floating in the rivulets and pools. He knew because they were moving, they were alive. They were human. And watching them, even from this great distance, brought back with horrible clarity the image of Sammy's face wrapped in fire, his mouth wide open as he inhaled the cremating air, and Harry's curiosity lost its edge. He's seen enough, more than enough, to know that this was a place he would be glad never to see again. After this glimpse, Hell would no longer be a collage of chaotic pictures he'd seen in medieval manuscripts, or etchings to accompany Dante's *Inferno*: It would be that plague-infested landscape where the burning damned floated on rivers of putrescence, and there was neither comfort nor safety nor hope in any direction.

He took a step back from the edge, and as he did so dropped his gaze. In his entire stupefied appetite to take in the entire landscape of Hell he had missed a very important particular. He was standing on the top step of a step flight, and climbing it, his lightless eyes fixed upon the idiot sight-seer at the top was the Cenobite. He was not alone. A naked thing that had once been a man, but was in the process of losing his humanity to some kind of infernal hybrid was ascending the flight ahead of the Cenobite, its face entirely reconfigured, having been bisected and the two halves hammered apart by a wedge of what looked like rusting iron, what had been a man's head with something vaguely reptilian. His eyes bulged as though the presence of the crude surgery was pushing them out from behind; the only continuity between the two halves a hole cut roughly in the wedge, that made a mouth of grotesque width, the metal teased up with hooks at either end of the opening, which held the bisected mouth so that it was permanently gaped. How any human being's anatomy, much less his sanity, could have survived such vicious reconstruction was beyond

comprehension. But survive he had, and with his entire body also sliced and shaved and hammered and threaded, he loped up the stairs with distressing ease, as though this was a condition for which he had been born.

Harry took a hurried backward step, as the Cenobite unleashed his beast. The things sprang up the steps, as Harry stumbled backwards through the books that had fallen from the shelves. He leaned up and reached around the back of the bookcase, offering up a quick prayer that they were not screwed to the wall. He was in luck, the two bookcases were free standing. As the bisected beast reached the top of the flight, turning its ghastly head to the right as to fix Harry in its gaze, Harry hauled the laden bookcase away from the wall. Unfortunately, it had been intelligently stacked, the largest heaviest books on the bottom shelves, anchoring it. It rocked, but didn't fall.

"Take him, Felixson!" The Cenobite commanded from below.

The detective in Harry's besieged brain clutched at the name, and filed it away for later examination. Assuming, of course, there would be a later. By rights the beast

should have thrown Harry to the ground by now, and be tearing out his throat, but a curious delicacy had overcome him at the sight of the books scattered underfoot, and it peered at them with the unalleged delight of a bibliophile shining his chameleon eyes. He looked at them first with his left eye, then with his right, while a hand, reconfigured by the same bellows furnace and blacksmith surgeon who'd marked his head, reached down and lovingly picked over the fallen books.

The creatures pause gave Harry the time he needed. He put all his strength he had into trying to topple the bookshelf a second time, and it began to go, the books starting to slide forward as he pushed it away from the wall adding their own shifted weight to his sweat. The bookshelf teetered, and then fell. Felix was still too engrossed with the books on the floor that he wasn't aware of what was happening until the shelves began to drop a rain of books on him. Then, with surprising speed, he pushed himself back, and if he'd been a couple of seconds faster he would have avoided it completely. But it caught him, head and shoulders at least, trapping him

beneath a heap of books shelves that had carried them, blocking the Cenobite's way, at least for a short while.

Harry didn't kid himself that he'd done more than gain himself a few seconds, however. Felixson was already thrashing furiously beneath the weight of the bookshelves and their contents, unleashing a wholly inhuman noise from his patchwork mouth as he did so. Harry backed up until he was on the other side of the bookshelf, and quickly began to pull the larger volumes off the bottom two shelves, tossing them on top of the shelf which held Felixson, adding to the weight the creature had to shift to free himself. Then, once the bottom shelves were cleared, he pulled on the remaining bookshelf, and as it began to topple made a dash through the door.

As he did so he saw a familiar figure rising into view. The head with its scars and nails and soul-piercing eyes; the torso with its metal and leather chest plate,

intertwined with its flayed flesh, the belt and its vicious collection of instruments and the long black skirts of its vestments.

“Don’t bother to run, D’Amour. There’s no where to go,” he said, at the sound of his voice with its acutely precise and effortless condescension in every syllable—

Harry was twelve again, and standing in front of the Cenobite for the first time in his life, hot urine running down his legs and darkening his grey pants, his first long pants, that he’d been proud to wear because they signified that he wasn’t a kid anymore. Except that he was; then and now. In the presence of this thing he would always be reduced to an infantile state, his body graceless, his mind chaotic.

Even now, hearing the Cenobite speak he lost the clarity of mind he’d possessed seconds before, and sacrificed some of the precious time he’d gained pulling down the shelves lingering on the threshold between the fourth room and third. It was his ally in the cold air who woke him from his stupefied state, pressing its icy presence against his face.

“I’m going,” he said.

It was a mistake, speaking to it aloud, even two or three little syllables. The Cenobite was too clever to let signs like that go unnoticed.

“You have an ally,” he said, “I’m ashamed of you, D’Amour, mixing with niggers, alive or dead. Don’t you know they’re the filth of the earth?”

Harry knew it was an idiot’s game to get into any kind of exchange with the enemy, but he couldn’t let this detestable filth go unchallenged.

“You’re so fucking old, aren’t you? Old and slow and stupid—”

Somewhere in the middle of the list he was making —old, slow and stupid— the Cenobite spat a hook in his direction, with a rattling chain coming after it. Here, finally, his history did him some good. He remembered all too well how they moved, and he was out through the door and slamming it before the hook could reach him.

The third room was bigger than it had seemed minutes before; the door to the passageway, though open, was not open wide enough for him to be able to slip

through it without wasting time. And once he had a hook in you —just some miserable little hook— it was over; you were lost.

He heard it coming, the hook whining as it flew in his direction. But he wasn't the hook's target, it was the door it wanted, and the hook and chain threw themselves against it with considerable force. The door slammed shut, and the hook snaked down to the handle, wrapping the chain around it several times. As it was doing so, Harry attempted to pull the door open, and succeeded in getting it open a few, maybe eighteen inches, before he felt a sharp pain in his neck, and a rush of wet heat which divided at his shoulder, running down over his back, the rest over his chest. Even with the hook in him, he continued to try and haul the door open, gritting his teeth against the pain that would come when he tore himself free of the hook.

But he first the two chains had already outwitted him. Harry wrapped its length around the handle it threw its barbed hook out towards the right of the door, slamming the door in the process, and then burying itself in the plaster. Loosing a

stream of profanities, Harry pulled on the door, but the hook in his shoulder dug in a little deeper, and then the chain to which it was attached tightened, and he was hauled away from the door and any hope of escape.

Behind him, he heard the sound of the bookshelves cracking and splintering in the fourth room as some powerful force moved them aside. The, the Cenobite, speaking to Felixson: "Take anything we don't have. Though that can't be much. And hurry. I won't be long with Mr. D'Amour."

Harry turned, and waited, the blood still running hot from his pierced shoulder. He could smell the air of the other world as it came in through the door he'd opened. Damn his curiosity. When would he ever learn? In his head he heard Norma answer that question in her two and a half packs a day and a bottle of brandy voice: "If you haven't learned by now, then I'm guessing you never will."

There was a din of splintering wood as some force in the fourth room shoved the book-shelves aside. Harry did his best to wipe the pain off his face, but it was

pretty much a lost cause, the hook just hurt too much. His body was shaking and clammy—sweaty. In short, this was not the way he wanted to face the Cenobite after all these years, but he didn't have any choice in the matter. The noise of the way being cleared died away and then ceased. Harry held his pained breath for a moment and listened. He could hear the Cenobite's foot fall as he approached the door, punctuated now and then by the creak of the old boards where an ago the slaves had curled up and slept weeping, all this accompanied by the soft hiss of the Cenobite's vestments as the hem grazed the floor.

So much had been done here over the years by overseers, then many years later by the hypocritical Nathan Good, with his Christian participations and his secret sacraments to the Fallen One; and now by the agent of that same Fallen One, coming to catch the soul of a careless, curious man.

He began to speak before he entered the room.

“Do yourself a favor, D’Amour.” He said, *“Get down on your knees and be ready to abase yourself. There is only one way out of this, D’Amour.”*

Finally, he stepped into view. *“And it’s with me, isn’t that what you were so curious about?”*

He crossed the threshold between the fourth room and the third. *“I told you to kneel.”*

The Cenobite made a tiny gesture with its left hand and another hook and chain came through the door, this one weaving over the boards like a snake, then suddenly leaping at D’Amour’s chest. Harry felt the design of interwoven talismans Caz had inked on his chest convulse and the hook was thrown back with such force that it slammed against the wall beside the door between rooms, the hook buried in the plaster.

“Impressive.” The Cenobite said, *“What have you been learning?”*

“Just enough to stay ignorant and stubborn.”

“That’s not how I remember you at all, D’Amour. I thought I was going to be able to make a good apprentice out of you, I really did. You were very promising material, with all your rage against the Fathers. I would have educated you a lot more carefully than they did, believe me.”

“And how would I have ended up?” Harry said, “Like that poor shit collecting up books for you, so messed up his own mother wouldn’t recognize him.”

“Felixson is quite content with his condition, believe me. It’s much preferable to the fate of some of his associates.”

“What was he? A lawyer?”

“No, D’Amour. He was a magician. And, in the world’s eyes at least, a very powerful one. But he had no strength where it counts.”

“And where’s that?”

“As if you didn’t know.” The Cenobite raised his fist and laid it against his chest. *“In his soul, in the secret place we keep the ineffable portion of ourselves.”*

“You talk like you still have yours.”

“What makes you think I don’t?” The Cenobite said. He took two steps in Harry’s direction. Harry prepared himself for the worst. But if the Cenobite had an execution planned, the conversation had apparently granted Harry a temporary reprieve, because the demon walked towards the blanked out windows, still talking. And despite the agony of the hook in his shoulder, Harry did his best to keep up the illusion of a casual exchange.

“Is it so hard for you to see the past the marks my Order put upon me, to the thing I am beneath?”

“And what’s that?” Harry said.

“A man, D’Amour. A man not too very different from yourself in many ways. Drawn to the darkness, which had been waiting for me, I think, since the day I was conceived. Patiently lying across my path, knowing that sooner or later I would find it.”

Here was a tone he'd never heard from The Cenobite before; this curious claim to innocence. He, who had tempted and taken victims in their thousands over the years, presenting himself as a simple traveler caught by a trap laid for him lifetimes ago.

“So what’s your point?” Harry said. “If we’re both just people who had an appointment with darkness, and there was no way we could avoid it, why is it you work for Hell, and I don’t?”

“In other words, why am I an unholy thing that any loving Christ-e-an would want put down like a rabid dog, while you are very personification of the good man who walks in dark places offering his help to the tempted and tortured?”

“If you want to put it that way.” Harry said, cautiously.

“Is that how you think of us?”

“How I think?” I thought you were talking about what loving Christ-e-ans thought. That’s how you said it, isn’t it? Christ-e-ans? I thought it was what they thought we were.”

“It’s one and the same surely. Aren’t you a loving Christ-e-an? After all that schooling in the testaments...”

“No,” Harry said. “I’m not a loving anything, any longer. Especially one of you fucking Christ-e-ans. That place was a second Hell. All those kindly fathers teaching their boys how to get down and suck their fucking cocks. Believe me, that and worse, and the gentle stuff. It got a lot worse than that.” Harry’s voice had dropped to a slow crawl over gravel. “Everything I ever learned about injustice, and hated, and the need to take our revenge sometimes, and not be ashamed of liking it when new do, I learned in that hope-forsaken, love-forgotten, God-kissing, shit-hole. If there’s any decency left in heaven then that place should have been fallen into a very large hole and covered up.”

"I'm sorry to disappoint you..."

"Still standing, huh? Lessel? Tell me he hanged himself."

"He's the principal there now. I was with him only last week, assessing the new pupils. There's some very promising boys. So much more anger in them now, than in your day."

"Oh we were angry. We just didn't show it. We didn't dare. They had so many ways to hurt us."

"Is there any wonder I always felt so comfortable there?" The Cenobite replied. He had pulled away a little of the painted board which covered the windows and was looking out. *"I must come back here, when I have time to watch. Hedonists are such easy prey. I just need to leave a few of the configurations lying around, and wait for the fish to come circling."*

"Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. Matthew. Four nineteen."

“So the righteous father Lessel left his mark on you in more ways than one.”

“I guess he did. Remember me to him, will you?”

“Oh you’ll see him soon enough. I’ve ordered a grave dug for him, which will fill with diarrhea from the shite house every hour or so. So he’ll drown ; not a pleasant death. And then the shite will drain off with the ground, eating away some ground beneath him as it goes. When he takes a breath again, as he will because he’s marked for the wheel—”

“What do you mean, marked for the wheel?”

“He can die ten thousand times, ten times ten thousand –and he’ll still wake up, to suffer and die again only for him there’ll be one difference. The grave he’s in will be deeper, and his hopes of climbing out of it, up those shite—slimy walls, even more remote. He’ll still try. He’ll pray down there in that grave. Pray in a loud voice in the hope that Heaven will hear him, and he’ll confess every sin he ever sinned, and beg the Lord God to have mercy on him and pluck him out of this place so he can

make amends to those he sinned against. And while he's begging and bargaining the diarrhea will start to flow again, and flow and flow, until it fills his creaming mouth and drowns him."

"And so on—"

"And so on, world without an end. So you see, that's one piece of business that you'll leave unfinished."

"There are plenty of others."

"Oh, I'm sure. But I won't be letting you finish them."

"Why not? What use am I to you?"

"You don't know?" The Cenobite said, looking back at Harry from the window. The bare bulb cast but a single shadow of each of the nails hammered into his head. The rigor of the arrangement was strangely calming.

"I guess I got in Hell's way a lot over the years. They probably don't like that very much."

“What ‘They’ would you be talking about?”

“You tell me. I just hear rumors about whose in charge down there.” He was beginning to feel light headed from the steady loss of blood from the wound, but he didn’t want the Cenobite to start thinking he was weakening. The longer he talked, he reasoned, the more likely the Cenobite would come to see how irrelevant Harry was; just a minor player in a game which he had never truly understood.

“I’ve heard a lot of talk of The Regime,” he said. “So I guess they’re the one’s I’ve pissed off.”

“The Regime is virtually dead. What little authority it had is being eaten away, day by day, hour by hour. There’s some who say the leader of my order will offer us a form of spiritual government, at least until all the wars between the factions have been extinguished and their leaders publicly executed to dissuade anyone from repeating the error. But that won’t happen.”

“Why not?”

"I just know it won't. Now, I think it's time we went, don't you? Felixson, are you finished?" The creature in the doorway had a little panel of books under his arm.

"Done," the creature somehow managed to say.

"Then we shall depart. This room stinks."

"Yeah?" said Harry, "What of?"

"Women, bad magic and stupidity." He turned to the door back into the fourth room. *"You look after him, Felixson, he's all yours."*

"I take care," Felixson said.

He moved into the room, so as to let his master pass. And as he did so he stood up, and Harry finally had some sense of the human being Felixson had been. His sloping shoulders, his pigeon chest, his shriveled cock, his stick-thin legs. The little collection of books under his arm fitted him well. Despite the labors of Hell's dungeons, he was still recognizably a bibliophile, stooped over from pouring over his books.

“No trouble.” He said to D’Amour. “I bite.”

He made what was very possibly the most grotesque attempt to smile that Harry had ever witnessed. The Cenobite was at the door now, and paused there for a moment to glance back at Harry.

“Don’t let the librarian act fool you, D’Amour. He’ll take your arm off if you resist him.”

As if to lend weight to the observation Felixson opened his mouth, and watching it Harry realized he’d underestimated the sophistication of the surgeon-blacksmith who toyed with Felixson’s anatomy. As his mouth gaped wider and wider, the metal portion drew back its rusted lips, and showed an array of metal gleaming teeth, not one of which showed a hair of rust. They were pointed razors, every one, and their exposure made librarian’s stoop seem like a disguise for the creature it had revealed itself to be.

“I get it.” Harry said.

“Chain,” Felixson said, reaching out and grabbing the chain to which Harry was attached. The Cenobite made another of those tiny gestures, and then stepped out of sight. The tension had instantly gone out of the chain, relinquishing control of it to Felixson. He closed his mouth, very slowly, the rusted metal sliding back over his pristine teeth. Then he jerked the chain. The pain was sudden and brutal. Harry let out a shout which echoed strangely around the little room.

“Knees!” Felixson said.

“Are we going—”

“Knees!”

He pulled again, much harder than the first time. Harry heard his flesh tearing. And the scream came out of him before he had a chance to hold it in.

The Cenobite hadn't lied. However bookish Felixson might have looked, he'd spent enough time in the company of his inquisitional master to know how to dole out pain; and more unfortunately, how to take pleasure in the doing.

With the Cenobite gone —away down the steps by now, most likely— Felixson wanted to have himself some fun, and nothing sets fire to the finder of human cruelty than the helplessness of the victim. Felixson began by doing what all torturers do who know the craft. He got mileage out of simply telling Harry, in his crude, broken matted fashion, arranged, as though some vital connection in his head had been severed during his reconfiguring.

“Don't, can kill. Use but plenty. Ha? *Ha!*” It seemed to like the sound of its own misbegotten laugh, because it repeated the sound over and over. “*Ha! Ha! Ha!* *Ha!*” And as it barked the noise it swung Harry around on the hook. Harry could not keep silent.

“Stop! God, please, just fucking stop!”

“Ha!”

“I’m begging you!”

“Ha! Ha!”

Suddenly Felixson let the chain go and Harry stumbled back and slammed against the wall. His legs gave out beneath him, and he slid down the wall, vaguely aware from the slick feeling of his shirt against the plaster that he was leaving a bloody stain to mark his collapse. He was in danger of passing out, he knew, and that could be inviting Felixson to do something a damn sight more serious than swinging Harry around on the end of a chain. Harry let his body slump forward, feigning a loss of consciousness while he got blood back up into his skull to feed his stoned brain. But after blissful seconds of respite Felixson jerked on the chain again.

“Oh no, D’Amour. Not fool me, not ever. I been right there where you lying.

And I not fool. Get to you up, uh? He gave me my own to hurt you.”

Harry heard nothing, and raised his head to see that Felixson was not making empty boasts. The Cenobite had indeed given him his own means of torment. They were emerging from the fourth room even now, serpent chains with hooks for hands weaving over the uneven boards with vile intentionality in their motion, as though they had brains in their curved steely heads.

“You don’t need to—” Harry began to say, giving the wall a second coat of blood as he repeated the motion in the opposite direction. “I’ll go with you. There’s no need for any of this.”

“Oh no need no. But good to do. Good to witness!”

The word had a strange resonance; as though Felixson seeing Harry’s pain had some religious significance.

The first of the hook headed chains rose up beside Felixson, its head at the level of the middle of his thigh, apparently waiting for instructions. The others came seconds later, rising up with the same readiness to do harm. Harry had not stopped

attempting to get Felixson to understand that there was no need for this, but the Cenobite's creature had no more use for the appeals of mercy than its owner. It was here to do hurt for no better reason than it could. It has the oldest reason in the world to do harm, Harry suspected, and it was hard-wired into the circuitry of his species, and into the derivatives of the species, like the Cenobite and this monstrous thing. To have power over another to the point of being able to arbitrarily cause suffering and anguish was a kind of bliss that surfaced whenever the right circumstances arose. And no amount of education or love or lessons in empathy could ever make it go away.

Felixson pointed towards Harry, speaking incomprehensibly first, to the hook. It came at Harry an instant later and dug into his groin, cutting through tender flesh and pressing its point out in a second spot: two wounds for the price of one.

Harry yelled, "Please, you got me—"

Another hook came at him, and caught his groin in the opposite.

“Good now.” Felixson said. “Only one need more hook hook and you never make baby.”

As the sense of what Felixson said had just said sank in, Harry’s attention was drawn to the door out into the passageway. It was shaking violently, as though several members of a football team were taking turns to shake it or throw themselves at it.

“What noise is this?”

“I don’t...have a fucking....clue.” Harry gasped. His head was getting light again; the image of the shaking door eaten away at the corners by

The door wasn’t going to hold much longer against the battering it was taking. The wood around the hinges and the lock were cracking now, throwing off flakes of paint and pieces of splintered wood.

“Who is there?” Felixson said, for once putting the words in the right order. “I kill De Mour, if you come in. Will certain do.” He gave a murmured instruction to a

third of his attendant hooks, this one considerably larger than its predecessors. “Tell so, D’Amour.”

“Tell so what?”

“They try come one more minute this—” He ran an affectionate palm down over the lethal curve of the hook. “Tell them stop.”

It was Harry’s best guess that whatever was on the other side of the door was not about to stop because of anything he said, so he did as his tormentor requested.

“He doesn’t want you in here!” He said, his voice shockingly weak. He sounded like an exhausted child. “He says you should go away. Oh JesusfuckingChrist, Felixson.” This last exclamation came because the butcher’s hook was coming at him like a slothful cobra, its head held high as it wove towards Harry’s crotch. A panicky collage of sexual images broke through his terror —masturbating behind the gym at St. Dominic’s with Piper and Freddie; the girl, was it Janet or Janice, he’d fucked with on the overnight bus to New York, that first visit; the demon

smith Jago, with his harem in New Jersey, jail-bait every one of them, and all somebody's daughter, even when they were on their knees rimming Jago as he talked, bargaining with Harry for the price of some information; and the widows who'd come to his office, and the weeping adulteresses who were happy to sin a little more if Harry could drop his hourly rate. All of this and a hundred other memories ran through his head as the instrument of his unmaning idled its weaving way towards him.

And then, without warning, it ceased its leisurely approach, and struck. Harry wasn't about to let it unman him without a fight. He waited until the hook was a couple of inches from the front of his pants, betting everything he had on the chance that it would pause there a moment, to figure out how to tear D'Amour open most painfully. In that moment of hesitation, Harry reached down and grabbed the hook with his right hand, and the chain just behind the hook with his left. The chain instantly started to thrash wildly to free itself of Harry's grip.

“Stupid!” Felixson yelled. “You make worse all it does you!”

“Shut the fuck up!” Harry yelled at Felixson. *“Fucking ass-licking cretin!”*

“Kill him!” Felixson yelled to the serpent chains. “Beg make him! Go on!” He took a pause to prepare his words. “I. Want. To. Hear. Him. Beg!”

Harry continued to struggle with the chain; his sweaty hands steadily losing their grip on the blood-encrusted metal. A few seconds more and it would be in him, curling through his shit-hole to plough a wound like a monstrous **woman(?)** where his fear shrunk cock and balls had been.

In desperation he let out a stream-of-consciousness prayer:

“Mothergoddessjesus—or anybody out there listening right now. I’ve fucked so many times I can’t count. But I’ll make good, I swear, whatever put in front of me I’ll eat it, I’ll lick the plate only please don’t let this hook tear me open and leave me with a pussy filled with shit. Please FUCK will somebody give me...”

It was still **borrowing(?)** on the opposite wall when the door finally succumbed to those who wanted to be inside. The lock flew off, and the door was thrown aside, slamming so hard against the wall that large cobs of plaster were coming down. He felt a blast of icy air break against his face. The ghost he'd encountered at the bottom of the stairs was with him again. But his time she wasn't alone, Harry thought. The cold was much more intense than it had been before.

Unfortunately, the opening of the door had not distracted the butcher's hook from its ambitions. It still intended to gorge out Harry's groin, and even Harry's white-knuckled grip could not prevent the chain from pushing closer to him by increments. Harry felt the cold presence of a spirit moving around his hand, its coolness welcome. The room had become a sweat-box since he'd first entered, though it wasn't until now, as the spirit entered him again, as tenderly as before; spiraling downstairs through his system as it had done before. The cooling presence refreshed his weary body, and put strength back into his sinews. He pushed the serpent chain

away from his groin a good six inches, and then made a very risky move. He threw the thing to the ground, and put hook beneath his heel.

It was far from happy with this new arrangement. Even trapped beneath Harry's weight it still tried to slide itself out. It was only a matter of seconds before it succeeded. The hooks on his groin were now bleeding copiously, and whatever was left of his strength would be gone very soon. But the ghost's presence calmed and comforted him. He was no longer alone in this battle. He had allies; he just couldn't see them. Felixson's eyes, however, had swelled up, and had swelled up, and he lay his head first on his left shoulder, then on his right, moving around on the spot as attempted to assess the strength of the enemy.

As he did so he talked to them. "Out now all. I get bad. You think not so? Wrong! Wrong! I catch you. Like worms!"

He reeled around, snatching up at the spirits, muttering curses or incantations, or both, as he tried to catch hold of just one of the phantoms swirling around the

room. With the summoner's will redirected, the chains lost their will to act. The chain that had brought the butcher's hook so close to desexing Harry now dropped to the ground, and very cautiously, Harry let the hook go. It slipped out of his hand and dropped amongst the coils of chain. The other three chains had also lost their will to harm—at least until Felixson was finished with his ghost hunting- and they hung loosely against his body, their sheer weight enough to open Harry's wounds still further.

The light headedness has returned, and this time he was sickeningly afraid that he wouldn't be able to hold onto consciousness. He had help inside, however; the spirit wove through his body like balm, and though the pain—was not diminished, the spirit coaxed him away from it, into some chamber of his soul where he had never been before. It was numinous, this place, and filled with little games to enchant his pain-wearied eyes. The Frompe L'oeil painting on one of the walls was of number seventy-nine, Sousa street, the house in New Jersey where he'd been born, a month

and a half premature, his mother knocked to the ground with a backward swipe from the man she'd made the damn fool mistake of marrying. And there he was now, in the painting, waving from the upstairs window. And his mother, God bless her loving heart, coming out onto the front step of number seventy-nine and smiling, making a tentative little wave before running back into the house.

“Mom...” he murmured, wishing she could just stay a moment longer, but the ghost was showing him something else now: an image that had come into his dreams every night of his life that he could remember. A red balloon, shinier and bigger than any balloon he'd ever seen before, floating in front of him. It didn't have a string attached for him to grab a hold of, but that had never stopped him, night after night, dream after dream, of trying to catch hold of it. Just once, he'd tell the balloon in his dreams, just once let me catch up with you. But it never happened; and it wasn't going to happen now.

The presence inside him seemed to speak. He heard it say: "Be ready. This will be bad."

And as he felt that final syllable reverberating in him, the balmy dream was gone, and he was back in the room with Felixson, who seemed to have gone half crazy. He had some invisible thing pinned against the opposite wall, and was tearing at it. In its agony the victim was releasing a high-pitched shrieking.

"Now, tell you then," Felixson said. "Tell you all dead here how you feels to have my magician's fingers in your eyes. Tell you them! And tell you them, I, Felixson order they out of this home. Never be again in hell's business! Hear? Tell you then!" He twisted his fingers in the empty air and the rose an octave.

"I no hear tell you them!" Felixson said.

Though Harry couldn't see the phantoms, he could feel them, and their agitation. The whole room seemed to be vibrating, the old boards threw themselves

back and forth across the room in their fury, opening new cracks in the plaster every time they struck the wall.

Harry couldn't keep count of them, they moved too quickly, too chaotically, but there was no doubt that their plaster breaking was more than incidental. They were working to pull the room. There were more of them in the passageway he saw, throwing themselves back and forth like the ghosts in the room, but with much more speed and violence in the narrow passageway.

As he watched they dislodged several pieces of ceiling plaster, and in the clouds of dust that rose from the floor when they fell he seemed to see the ghosts, or at least creaking as the ethereal forces here tested the limits of the room's structure. Cracks appeared in the ceiling, zig-zaging across the plaster. The bare bulb swung back and forth, making Felixson's shadow cavort. Still, there were other shadows, those of the phantoms, moving around the room, and their hunger to destroy this

place was palpable. Then the trail of their motion, as they used their will, their rage, their hunger to see this place of anguish and agony brought down.

Felixson was still torturing the phantom he had against the wall, apparently obsessed with getting the thing to obey him. He didn't even seem to notice—or if he noticed he didn't care—that the place was being steadily demolished around him.

Harry had meanwhile taken the business of freeing himself into his own hands, tearing a hole in his pants so that he could gingerly remove one of the two hooks in his groin. The barbs were designed to make any attempt at extraction likely only to worsen the wound, slicing through hitherto unharmed tissue on its way out. It was sticky, sickly work, and Harry's shaking hands didn't make it any easier, but after three or four minutes he had the hook, with its trophies of muscle strands, out of his groin. He let it drop from his fingers and threw back his reeling head, hoping to draw a breath of clean air. But there was none to be had. Plaster dust was filling the room like a white fog. It could not, however, conceal him from Felixson, who had

grown bored with his tormenting of the phantom and had turned his gaze back at

Harry.

“What fuck you think you do now, huh? What fuck you think?”

As he crossed the room he stooped to pick up the chains attached to the hooks still in Harry.

“Make you hurt, yes! Ha! The first chain went to his groin, and he pulled so hard on it, Harry screamed.

“Hurt! Hurt! Hurt!”

He reached for the second chain, but as he did so the plaster dust was swept aside by a phantom, its descent mirrored by a second phantom coming from the opposite direction, and intersecting at the chain. Clearly in the world of phantoms, one and one made more than two. The chain, struck at the precise spot where the ghosts crossed, blew apart, leaving a length of perhaps eighteen inches of chain still dangling from the hook. Felixson was unprepared for this eventuality. He cursed

brutally, then wiping from his right eye the blow that had now formed a wound in his brow opened up by a chain—he struggled to catch hold of the second chain, the one that Harry had just put Harry on the hook. Two more phantoms converged not only on the chain but on the hand that held it. This time it was Felixson's hand that emptied first, fragments of flesh, bone and metal blowing outwards, the chain it held exploding into shards at the same time. Harry was free.

Whether Harry's liberation was the signal for a sudden escalation in the assault upon the house or whether it would have happened anyway, and Harry had been left chained up, the destruction of the slave quarters now began. The whole place rocked as the phantoms working on the floor below shook its foundations. The bulb in the middle of the room flared with unnatural brightness, and went out.

Harry had no idea of where the door to the passageway led, nor indeed if the passageway was still standing. If he hadn't given his soul over to the ghost inside him he would have perished, and quickly. But the phantom knew the way out. It led

Harry over the rippling floorboards, until the welcome sights of the door's framework appeared in the blinding dust.

He was perhaps two strides from the door when the first tattoo Caz has given him, a warning sigil in the middle of his back sent out a pulse that spread throughout Harry's body. He swung round, in time to throw himself out of the way of Felixson, whose metal lips were drawn back to expose his flesh-shredding teeth, his eyes protruding more than ever, fat with hunger and blood. It was the ghost that flung Harry aside, and saved his life. Felixson's jaws snapped in the air where Harry's head had been two seconds before, and the momentum of the lunge carried him forward, slamming into the wall beside the door.

Harry didn't give Felixson an opportunity to go after him a second time. He was out through the door and into the passageway. The ghosts were in a crazed state, tossing themselves back and forth in the narrow space. They slammed into the walls like invisible hammers. The plaster had been cleared off by now, exposing wooden

slats beneath. There was a din of destruction from the other end of passageway, which suggested the stairs were being taken apart with the same gust as the walls, but the dust and the darkness conspired to limit Harry's sight to a foot in front of his face, no more. He had no choice but to risk it. Meanwhile, the floorboards groaned and twisted, spitting out the nails that had held them in place. Harry ventured over them as fast as he dared, past the sling room, which was now a solid wall of choking dust, and on over the cavorting boards. The wooden slats were succumbing to the strikes of the hammer-bodied spirits even more quickly than the plaster. Harry crossed his arms in front of his face to protect it from the splinters that pierced the air, so that he was walking blind.

Again, the presence he was hosting saved his skin, speaking in the blood that thundered in Harry's ears

"Back! Back!"

Harry responded instantly, retreating two steps, then three, until he was back at the doorway of the first bedroom.

“Back!” The blood thundered again.

He obeyed it, retreating into the gray haze of the room. Seconds later Felixson charged past him, his mouth vast, and from it a solid howl emerging, which suddenly dropped away.

“Stairs gone.” Harry said. “Fuck. Now what?”

There was no question what ambition the ghosts had for the house. They intended to demolish it. He had no idea of how many were actually at work on the demolition, but the noise seemed to be coming from all directions, suggesting they intended to do this quickly, then depart. No doubt they wanted as few witnesses to what was going on as possible, No doubt the destruction had already drawn a crowd, though hopefully the violence with which the house was coming apart would dissuade any foolhardy adventurers to step inside. So whatever reasons were

eventually proffered for why the place came apart in such a fashion, nobody would be able to claim they witnessed what Harry was witnessing.

The question that remained was this: Would he live to tell the tale? The stairs were gone, and something about the way Felixson's howl had diminished told Harry's instincts that the hole that had opened up where the stairs had been let on to a simple foundation. There was a void beneath the house, into which the Cenobite's familiar(?) had been dispatched. And it was deep, very deep. And there was no way they would ever be able to climb out of it, or rather when, the house folded up and fell, with him in it.

He had to get out. Never mind how many knees he broke in the process; never mind that it might put him in a wheelchair for the rest of his natural span. Anything was preferable to that long, long fall into the darkness on which Nathan Good's house of Sin was built. Anything, anything.

The fear gave him something that would have looked like courage from the outside. He left the bedroom, and returned along the passageway leaping with a kind of faith he had not known he possessed until now that said:

“You will not die here. This is not the time. This is not the place. Jump. Your feet know where they are going. Turn your body, get your mind out of its way.”

He obeyed the instruction by the most banal of means: He tried to imagine all possible configurations of bodies and acts the sling in the second bedroom would have facilitated. The trick worked. In his mind's eye he played out a little speeded up film which three women and a man, himself, twenty years ago, ran through the pages of D'Amour's Kama Sutra, and while the more he distracted his consciousness, his body and his instinct did their work, carrying him along the passageway even as it collapsed beneath him, the boards digging away into the blackness over which he was leaping.

By the time he reached the third room, the plaster dust almost cleared, sucked away by emptiness below. The room which had once existed beneath the boards, had been entirely demolished. There was only a single unreliable patchwork of boards left between Harry and the hole. But at least now he had a clear view of his target: The window. Trusting his feel to know their business he crossed the room without incident. There was a ledge perhaps four floorboards inside in front of the window, but it didn't look as though it was going to be there for long. The boards had already lost most of their nails. Harry started to pull at the black out fabric which had been secured to the window. It had been nailed to the frame by an obsessive, but had been done several years before, Harry guessed, because the fabric, though thick, had begun to rot through after several summers of extreme humidity, and when he pulled at it, the material tore like paper. The light of the outside would come flooding into the room. It wasn't direct sunlight, but it was bright nonetheless, and welcome.

Harry peered out of the window. It was a long way down, and there was nothing on either side of the window, a drain pipe would have been adequate, a fire escape that would have made a climb down plausible. But no, he was going to have to. He pulled on it hoping to raise it, but it was sealed shut, so he turned around and tore up one of the floorboards, making his ledge even narrower. As he turned back towards the window with his weapon, he caught sight of something from the corner of his eye, and glanced back to see that he was no longer alone in the room.

Battered, bloody and covered in dust, his metal teeth bared, his eyes narrowed to slits of fury, the Cenobite's rabid dog Felixson started to pick a solid route across the room towards him. Far though Felixson had surely fallen, he had climbed his way back up, to finish the bloody business between them.

Six

Harry stood to the left of the window, the boards beneath his feet rattling, and smashed the glass with one blow, following it up with several smaller blows to clear the broken glass around the window so that he could climb through without slashing a major artery. The whole house was in its last stages of its' life now, announcing its imminent collapse with a series of shudderings, accompanied by creaks, crackings and guttural growls from whatever was left of the wall's foundations. Harry, who'd worked alone for so long that he had a crazy man's propensity for talking to himself, kept up a quiet running conversation as the situation steadily worsened:

“You've done some dumb things, you know, but this? This is the fucking dumbest—”

He felt the cold, reassuring presence of at least one, and perhaps many phantoms around him, cooling the sweat from his face.

“Any help you can offer...” He said as he started to clamor out the window, “would be greatly appreciated.” He was keeping his eyes on Felixson as he climbed, but he’d failed to take account of Felixson’s reconfigured anatomy. The creature came at him suddenly, the boards it had sprung from, splintering as he leapt. Harry dropped the wood he’d used to break the window with and put all his effort into getting out. There were people down there now, coming from the front of the house. Harry caught a few fragments of the things they were yelling; something about him breaking his neck, something about getting a ladder, something about getting a mattress, and despite the suggestions, nobody moving to help in case they missed the moment when Harry jumped. It wasn’t just around his head he felt the nearness of the phantom. He felt the presence of the one inside too, wrapping around his heart, comforting him, strengthening him.

“Jump,” He seemed to hear it telling him. “Nothing to fear. *Jump.*”

“Nothing to fear?” He muttered to himself. “If there was only time. Fuck! If there was only fucking time!” And so saying, he pulled up his other leg over the window. Two seconds later he could have jumped, had he been free to do so. But Felixson wasn’t about to lose his prey. With one last bound he cleared the chasm between them, and caught hold of Harry’s leg, digging his fingers, their strength enhanced by more of the merciless fusing of metal and flesh, deep into Harry’s thigh.

He didn’t waste the pain by voicing it. He turned into action, shaking his leg violently in the hope of dislodging his attacker. But Felixson wasn’t going to let go.

“All right then, fuckhead.” Harry said. “You can damn well come with me.”

And with that he threw himself out of the window.

Felixson held onto Harry as far as the window ledge, then he lost his nerve, and let go. Harry felt cold air wrap around him as he fell, and though it didn’t stop his descent, still it was slowed. And as his fall unwrapped him from the embrace of the

first ghost a second was already wrapping him up again, and after the second a third, and a fourth and fifth.

The spectators were astonished at what they were witnessing. One of them called for a camera, another started to pray, begging for some sign that this was the work of heaven. And still Harry fell, and still the phantoms wrapped him around, slowing his descent. So much that for a few seconds, when he was perhaps seven or eight feet of the ground, his fall ceased completely, and he hung in the air, held in the cold embrace of the dead. Then gravity took hold of him again; and his descent began afresh until he was finally gently deposited on the glass-littered ground.

None of the spectators approached him. They formed a ragged circle around him, watching him with a mingling of fascination and fear.

“How you do that, mister?” A young girl asked him. “Are you some kinda magician?”

“No.” Harry said as he got up off the ground. The circle widened; nobody wanted to get too close to him. “I was being helped by some friends of mine.”

“I didn’t see nobody.” The girl replied.

“That’s because they’re ghosts.”

The circle suddenly got wider and looser, only the girl stood her ground. “You best come with me,” she said.

“I need to go to a hospital. I’m all banged up.”

“No. I suppose to bring you.”

“Bring me where?”

The girl gave furtive looks to the right and left. “I can’t say with folks listening. I’m Cecilia. And you’re Harry, right?”

“Yeah.”

“See? I knew you was the right one. You gotta come. It ain’t safe around here. And don’t worry about your cuts and shit. My auntie’s got medicine for that. Come on, I swear I ain’t no devil’s child.”

“I didn’t say you were—”

“You was looking at me real strange.”

“I’m just cautious, that’s all. You can’t be too careful.”

“Ain’t the truth, though. My Auntie has been saying over and over that you’d be coming.”

“Me?”

“Harry De More.”

“D’Amour. Like French for love.”

“Mister,” Cecilia said. “Now is you coming or not? Cause if you got to give me a good reason or I’ll get whapped.”

Before Harry could reply the house gave up a long growl of surrender, and then collapsed, folding up and dropping down through what was left of the structure, the walls flying apart in places, in others entire sections of wedged brick toppling in mounds.

It happened with astonishing speed, the entire structure dropping away into the earth in less than a minute, its collapse releasing a dense grey-brown cloud of dust.

“Come on, Harry.” Cecilia said, tugging on his arm. “Let’s go before people start asking stupid questions.”

The cloud gave them the ideal cover. “Just don’t go too fast.” Harry told Cecilia. “My fucking leg’s killing me.”

“Auntie will fix that real quick.”

“Oh wait.” Harry stopped, his head going up to his chest. His guardian phantom, its protection work done, was sliding out of him, and he felt a subtle sense of loss.

“You okay?” said Cecilia.

“I was wrong about ghosts.” He said as they picked up his hobbling pace. “I never liked them, ‘til today.”

“They saved your ass?”

“Big time.”

“So you have to figure out a way to thank ‘em.”

“I guess I do.”

“Auntie says that’s the only way the world works properly: If you say please and thank you.”

“Is that right? Well, this is going to have to be one hell of a big thank you, because I should either have broken every bone in my body or be in Hell.”

“In Hell?”

“Yeah...” Harry said, glancing back at the cloud of dust as it continued to rise up from the hole into which the house had disappeared. It seemed the doorway the

box had opened onto the infernal landscape had disappeared, closed by the Cenobite most probably, leaving Felixson on this side somewhere. He would have to remember that. Felixson was unfinished business.

“Boy, you sure are a mess.” Cecilia said, once she’d used her knowledge of the city to put as much distance as possible between them and the hole where Nathan Good’s house had stood. “Auntie said you’d look like one of them saints in her books, all covered in wounds and blood and she wasn’t kidding.”

“This auntie of yours seems to know a lot.”

“That’s what I always say to her, but she says what she knows will keep her out of Hell, but it won’t get her into Heaven.”

“Well what will get her into Heaven?”

“I ain’t suppose to say.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Promise you won’t tell her?”

“I promise.”

“Helping you.”

“Helping me—”

“—is what’s going to get Auntie into Heaven. But you don’t say nothing or I’ll get whapped.”

“You got it,” Harry said. Was it just a delirium brought on by pain and fatigue or was his world(?), which had always acted a little stranger in his vicinity that it seemed to others, getting significantly weirder.

“Damn right.” The girl beside him said, though he hadn’t uttered a word.

PART THREE:

A GATHERING OF FORCES

One

Without Cecilia for company Harry wouldn't have made it very far, the pain in his three wounds was thankfully remote —he knew he did it, he just didn't care— but he'd lost a great deal of blood, and his legs were so weak he was astonished they

were even working. Dimly, through the chaos of unedited thoughts that played through his head, he realized the twelve year old at his side was giving him some help with his diminished strength. Every now and again, when the fatigue threatened to overtake him completely, she would casually reach up to him and catch hold of his hand for a little while, and what had seemed impossible a few moments before, such as taking another step became a little easier.

“Much... further...?” He asked her, when they’d left the Quarter and crossed a wide highway with a very different neighborhood. Here the houses were elegantly aged, like those in the quarter, they were simply old, the paint on their boards peeled away to uneven wood grey with age beneath.

Was it a game his exhausted consciousness was inventing, or was it really ten minutes since he’d asked her that she finally replied that no, they were very near?

One more turned corner brought them onto a street of larger houses than those they

had passed just minutes before, with generous verandas running all the way round the houses. Even here, however, the houses were in pitiful decay, many uninhabitable.

“That’s my Auntie’s house,” Cecilia said, pointing to a house that was by no means in the best of shape, but was clearly occupied. There were children’s toys on the steps, which Cecilia moved out of Harry’s path as he climbed, and the smell of baking coming from the kitchen.

The front door was open.

“Go on in.” Cecilia said. Then shouting into the house as she followed after D’amour.

“We’re here, Auntie!”

The television was on in one of the downstairs rooms, a Spanish language soap opera playing loudly, while two women, also speaking Spanish, argued with escalating furor.

Upstairs, a baby was crying. Cecilia put her head near the door and brought the argument to a halt.

“Solomon’s crying,” she said. You’d better figure out which of you is gonna get him quiet, because I got someone here for Auntie, and he needs rest. “No, no. You stay right there, I ain’t having you stare at him. I mean it. “Where’s Auntie.”

“Don’t know. I think maybe—”

“I was upstairs,” said a soft, warm voice from behind them. Harry turned, his giddiness almost overwhelming him, but again Cecilia’s hand briefly caught hold of his hand and this time he definitely felt the change of strength and clarity. She passed to him. His grateful eyes focused on the middle-aged black woman, pale blue dressing gown, a cup in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

“Oh my stars,” she said. “You’re a mess. Cecilia, why don’t you take Mr. D’Amour up to the little bedroom at the back? We’ll get you fix up don’t you worry. Angela? Will you stop watching that damn television and fetch me my fixing kit?”

Right now, Angela!” One woman emerged from the room with the television. She was very clearly Cecilia’s older sister, by no more than five years, and judging by the size of her she was very close to being a mother.

“Its twins.” Cecilia said, answering Harry’s unspoken question, “That’s why she’s so big. Both girls, which is a mercy. Angela, wait a minute. What you got in your hand?”

“Nothing, Bessie. Leave me alone.”

“You got my cigarettes.”

“I wasn’t going to smoke none.”

“Well then you won’t mind giving them back to me, will you?”

“Just one, come on, Auntie. One miserable cigarette.”

“Mr. D’Amour?” Bessie said.

Harry, who’d been watching all this in a dreamy state, looked back at the woman on the stairs.

“You go upstairs and lie down. Angela, give Mr. D’Amour the cigarettes.”

Angela scowled, but did not protest any further. She handed the pack of cigarettes over to Harry, and headed off as Bessie had instructed her. Harry and Cecilia waited at the bottom of the stairs until Bessie came down. She took a minute to assess Harry’s state.

“Are you sure I shouldn’t go to a hospital?”

“And what are you going to tell them? And tell the police when they come knocking, asking if you’re the same man who was seen at Nathan Good’s house? You’ll mend just fine, Mr. D’Amour. I’ll make sure of that. And I won’t be asking you any damn fool questions because I already know the answers.”

“You’re like Norma.”

“Oh, the high and mighty Miss Paine? We talk, but usually through intermediaries, being as she thinks I once stole her man, she’s refused to speak to me directly ever since.”

“When was this?”

“Early Jurassic,” Bessie said. “Now are you still thinking you want to call a cab and drive to the hospital?”

“No.” Harry said.

“Good decision. Take him up, Ceci. Make him comfortable.”

For Harry to ascend the stairs was very much like being put under by an anesthesiologist, and told to count back from ten. You get to eight, perhaps even seven, and then you're out. With Ceci leading, Harry began to climb the stairs, determined to reach the top without passing out. After the fourth step, he remembered nothing.

—

There were no dreams in the beginning. He slept, pacified by scents and songs, and in a comfortable darkness, began to heal. About thirty-six hours after arriving at Bessie's house he woke and took some nourishment.

"This is Bessie's special soup," Cecilia had told him, with a smile. "You'll have sweet dreams now."

Later Harry remembered nothing about being fed the soup by Ceci, nor their one-sided conversation. But the promise Ceci had made about the dreams was entirely true. Once he dreamt he woke in the room, and got out of bed to find that he was completely naked. His body was still bruised and raw, but the two hooks had been taken out and the wounds, including the place where his third hook had pierced him, were covered in some gummy dark stuff. His bladder was full, and he needed to go to the bathroom as a matter of some urgency. He looked around the room for a door, but there was none, so he just started to piss where he stood.

The moment his urine hit the floor it darkened, the spreading over the floor in all directions, and when it reached the wall climbing them carrying the stain of darkness up to the ceiling, which it then invaded with some appetite. He could still see the corners of the room, and the faint presence of the floor-boards, but stars were now being born in the darkness. He'd emptied his bladder by now, but it seemed that he'd pissed out the universe, or a good portion thereof, because he was standing on an immensity filled with life making stuff.

Clouds of starry brightness passed under him, and over, shedding pin-prick suns as they moved. And what seemed to be empty darkness between those vast pools and spirals of light his eyes, *my witnesses*, he thought as he watched—saw more than empty space. They saw flecks and motes and seeds drifting through the darkness, like plankton floating in the soup of a vast blank ocean. Some of them transformed as they went, swelling, cracking, blossoming as the tides carried them on towards an ordained

but unknown collision with the blessed mysterious dirt that was waiting for them, somewhere.

“All this from a full bladder,” he murmured.

“What did he say?” came another voice, Bessie’s voice, and in a heart-beat the cosmic room where he been standing folded up around him and was in bed again, looking out through his barely opened eyes at Bessie, who was standing by the door, smoking.

“It was something about his bladder.”

“What’s he doing talking about his bladder?”

“I guess I wasn’t attending to him as I should have been. It looked like he was out cold, so I went down to get a piece of peach cobbler—”

“The last piece,” said somebody else in the hallway. “Bessie, can I have a word?”

Bessie stepped out of the room, leaving Ceci with Harry. “Can you hear me, Harry. Are you awake?”

Harry made a tiny shake of his head.

“Very funny,” Ceci said. “Well do you remember getting up and out of bed and peeing on the floor?”

It was hard to speak with his throat so dry, but he kept it short: “Pissing stars.”

“What?”

“He was pissing stars,” Bessie said, as she came back in. “Which is perfectly possible for all I know.”

“Well it sure ain’t stars I just mopped up.” Ceci remarked.

“That’s quite enough, Ceci. You can go now and fetch me a little gin and water.”

“You don’t drink gin.”

“No, but Harry’s visitor does. Now hurry girl. You ain’t got all day. Oh, and bring up my cigarettes. I counted ‘em, so don’t be stealin’ none.”

“Harry watched Ceci as she went to the door, pausing before stepping through, as if preparing for what she was going to encounter on the other side. Harry caught a glimpse of something through the half-open door, but it wasn’t his visitor. It was something he only saw in his dreams, his red balloon, floating in the air out there, as shiny-wet and amorphous as ever.

“Am I dreaming this?” He said to Bessie.

“That’s entirely your decision,” She said in a wholly practical manner, as though the choice was between soup and salad. “Do you feel like you could sit up a little while? You have a visitor.”

“Sure.” Harry said.

The small action of pulling himself up into a sitting position hurt more than he had anticipated. By the time he was half sitting, supported by pillows, he was sweaty

with pain. He distracted himself from it by looking again for the red balloon, but it had gone.

There was somebody in the doorway, however. What little light there was out there ran over and around the figure as through attempting to make up for its lack of brightness with speed. Up and around a soft, feminine face, down over the mass of jewelry that hung at the visitor's neck, and down further, to the lush folds of her dress.

"Is she coming in?"

"Do you invite her?" Bessie asked him.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I invite her."

"Then I accept." Said the voice of his visitor. It wasn't as softy feminine as he'd expected. But then neither was the owner of the voice. Yes, it was a beautiful face, as

the glimpse the light had afforded Harry had suggested: high cheek bones, huge, dark eyes, lips that looked carved, they were perfect. But there was something about the height of the visitor, who stood fully a foot and a half taller than Bessie, and the clothes, which were brightly colored and voluminous, concealing the fine shape of her body. She didn't look or sound like a man in drag: Nothing so crude. But there was an inexplicable ambiguity about her.

“This is Coanthagnita, Harry,” Bessie said, she's been a friend of mine and my father since... well, I don't rightly know it's rude to talk about a lady's age.’

“I'm no lady.” Coanthagnita said. “As I'm sure your patient is very aware. Yes?”

Harry shrugged. “It's not important.”

Coanthagnita, smiled, an abundant smile, which felt like a benediction. “Very smooth, Mr. D'Amour. I'm impressed. And it makes me all the more eager to help you.”

“Okay,” Harry said.

“May I sit?”

“Help yourself.”

Bessie, who wore the anxious look of a hostess who was afraid she hadn't made enough food for the guests, hurried to pick up a chair and set it at the bottom of the bed.

“Closer than that, if you please.” Coanthagita, said, with a little chill in her voice. “I'm not going to bite him. If he weren't your guest, well than that would be an entirely different matter. I would be surely tempted to eat the eyes out of your head.”

She smiled, her eyes gleaming with mischief. “But I'm not here to talk about treats.”

She stopped, and without turning, said: “I believe I would also take a little rum in a cup.” Bessie had just silently been handed her rum by Cecilia. “And Mr. D'Amour will also partake.”

“Thanks, but—”

“You will partake, Mr. D’Amour, not for the nourishment offered by the liquor, but for some helpful herbs that I will add to it. Please take that look of doubt off your face, Mr. D’Amour, I have no intention of poisoning you. My only wish is to get you back up and out of my city as quickly as possible. New Orleans has endured a great deal in its time, and I don’t want to add your continued presence to its list of woes.”

“That’s harsh.” Harry remarked.

“It’s not you who’s a problem, Mr. D’Amour, it’s those who come after you. The tail of your camel, as it were. They’re a bad lot, and they stir up trouble. The home you were exploring—”

“I was actually investigating. I’m a private investigator.”

“If you were that and only that, Mr. D’Amour, I doubt we would be sitting here.”

“Which would have been my loss.” Harry said.

The compliment seemed to catch Coanthagnita off guard. She looked down at her immaculately manicured hands for a moment. "Where is that rum?" she said, with feigned irritation.

"Ceci, the liquor!" Bessie called.

"I'm coming. What a fuss for a few shots of rum. Here they are."

"Well take them in." Bessie said.

Ceci dropped her voice to a whisper, which was answered in whispers by Bessie.

Coanthagnita raised her voice and there was more of a masculine severity in it now.

"Cecilia! You bring those cups in here right now or so help me girl you will wake up tomorrow morning with something growing between your legs you don't want. I can do that. Ask your Auntie."

Apparently Bessie confirmed the threat, because Ceci came in a few seconds later, her eyes downcast. She was shaking with fear.

“You can set my cup down on the bedside table, if you’d be so kind,”

Coanthagnita said. Her voice had lost every trace of its masculinity, and as if in compensation for showing one extreme of her nature, she had gone to the opposite pole, sounding now like a breathy southern belle, the voice of a woman with much weaker constitution than Coanthagnita. That was all a performance, Harry saw, both male and female. The creature called Coanthagnita was playing a game of hide and seek with its gender, having no other purpose, it seemed, but to have some fun.

“You give me a nice, civilized kiss.” It said to Ceci, “and I’ll forget you thinking all those bad thoughts about me. And don’t try to deny it girl, you’re an open book to me.”

“I’m sorry. I just...”

“Spit it out.”

“I don’t know what you are.”

“I’m a spirit, just like you girl. No more nor less. And it don’t matter to spirits whether they got little cunt-holes and titties, or balls and a pee-pee. A spirit is a spirit. The rest is just masks, honey, like at Mardi Gras. You put one on, you take it off, you put on another. It’s no big mystery, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Kisses.”

Coanthagnita offered her cheeks, delicately, and Ceci lay a little kiss on each.

Then the creature’s voice coarsened and darkened.

“You missed one.”

This time it offered up its lips and as Ceci put her mouth on Coanthagnita’s mouth, the creature’s tongue darted between Ceci’s lips and took a long moment to enjoy the violation.

“My, you are sweet.” It said, when it had let Ceci go. “I am going to have to find myself a love-child like you, to introduce into the ways of the flesh.”

“You look a little judgmental, Mr. D’Amour. If I were you I’d lose that look real quick, ‘cause I know too much about your business to have you taking the high moral ground.”

“I wasn’t being judgmental. I was just surprised.”

“Should I take that as an apology?”

“If you’d like.”

“Well thank you. I shall. Here, hold this.”

It passed the cup to Harry and reached in the folds of the robe it was wearing and brought out a small pouch that looked to be made of very old suede, entirely painted with symbols. Harry was familiar with some of them; they were sigils of the voodoo religion.

“Now will you just raise that cup of mine, for me? Yes, just like that, in both hands, like you were offering it up. I can see you have a feel for these things. But then of course you made an early start, didn’t you?”

“Did I?”

“The way I heard it, you met the Hell-Priest when you were twelve. Or have I been misinformed?” As she spoke she loosened the draw-string of the pouch, and emptied its contents, which was an ochre powder, into the rum.

“You call him a Hell-Priest.” Harry said.

“Well that’s what he is. He’s got his religion, which doesn’t suit us, and you’ve got yours, which doesn’t suit him. Angels and devils, always at each other’s throats. Like men and women. Warring one moment, loving the next.”

“I don’t think angels and devils ever do any loving.”

“I beg to differ, Mr. D’Amour. I myself officiated at a marriage between one of Heaven’s legion, and one of Hell’s, and believe me, there was a great passion there. It ended badly, but that’s nothing new. Now just mix that up with your finger, Mr. D’Amour. I’d do it myself but I’m never be sure where my hands have been.” The creature caught Harry’s eye as it spoke, and they both smiled. He put his finger into

the cup, which had a very generous measure of spirits in it, and mixed the liquor with Coanthagnita's powder.

"May I ask what it is you're giving me to drink?"

"Certainly you may, but I'd only lie to you, so why bother? Just have faith in the mystery, and drink."

"You could be poisoning me."

"That would be a very stupid move on my part."

"Why?"

"Because you have journeys to take. Sights to see. And if I were to poison you, which would be very easy, I agree, and have Bessie's butcher cut you up and fed you to the alligators, there'd be no consequences. You'd just have disappeared. But there would be absences, Mr. D'Amour, you would not be on certain roads, journeying. You would not be standing before certain sights, witnessing. And that would change the way things are intended to be, however badly many of those things will end."

“Are you reading my future now?”

“No, no. I don’t believe in prophecy. Anyone who tells you they can read your future is talking bullshit. But it seems to me death follows very close on your heels.

Where you go, there’s a mess to clean up when you leave. Well, that’s not happening in my city. I just want to get you well and send you on your way. So, drink up!”

Harry lifted his cup to his lips. It smelled like freshly turned earth and molasses, with a remote undercurrent of rum. He tried to get it down in one swallow, but it took two.”

“Disgusting,” he said.

“Here.” Coanthagnita replied, passing the other cup of rum over to him, “wash it down with this.”

Harry was happy to oblige.

“You sleep for a few hours. That and the medicine will quicken the healing. You’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

“And then—” Harry said, “I’ll be on my way, out of your city. Don’t worry. I’ll be... I’ll be...” The words to finish the sentence wouldn’t come. His tongue was suddenly immobile.

“No need to talk.” Coanthagnita said. “We had nothing more to say anyhow.” The creature rose with a regal dignity. “Goodnight and good bye, Mr. D’Amour. Travel safely.”

Seven

She had not even turned away from the bed, and his eyes closed. The world passed out of sight, and he slept. He had no sense of how long he was asleep; only that when he woke it was suddenly, and that the room was completely dark.

He carefully tested the truth of Coanthagnita's boasts, and found that she'd been quite right: The drug had indeed done wonders for his injuries. They didn't hurt at all, which was miraculous given how deep they'd been. He sat up, and climbed into bed. He was completely naked. What had happened to his clothes? They'd been torn, filthy and blood-stained, but they were all he had. He stumbled towards the place where he remembered the door had been, and having found it searched the wall for the light switch. There was none, however; at least none he could find. He located the door handle, however, and opened the door. There was a low cool light out in the passage, though it seemed it had no clear source. It seemed to simply be in the air.

"Bessie?" he called. "Are you there? I just want to know where my clothes are.

Bessie? My clothes?"

He walked a little way down the passage, and saw ahead of him what looked to be a toy theater, no more than eighteen inches tall, set on the floor. Had Ceci been playing here, and left it? Somehow he couldn't imagine Cecilia being much interested

in a cardboard cut theater, but then there were probably other kids here he hadn't heard or seen.

He called out again for Bessie, but the house was quiet and still all around him. No, not entirely still. Now that he looked down at the theater again he saw that a draft from somewhere had blown the small two-dimensional actors on the stage away, and it was denuding the theater of its paper curtains, and of the painted proscenium and with its baroque filigree, and its little orchestra. All of it, blown off into the darkness leaving only the naked structure of the stage itself: A rectangular box without walls, and on the stage, now that the rest of it had blown away, a single actor still in place.

Was it a trick of the light or was this one different from the others? It was more like a human doll than the rest of the cast. Was this a piece of Coanthagnita's voodoo handiwork, he wondered. A doll that could have been standing in the middle of an empty stage? And if so, what the hell did it mean? There were no pins in the

doll, at least that he could see. He went down on his haunches and looked over the toy more closely.

Oh wait. The figure, roughly hewn from wood, with some grey hair stuck on its head was no longer standing. It was crouching, as he was crouching, its head lowered, as his was lowered, in order to see, yes, a tiny naked box of a theater, on the stage of which Harry could just make out the miniscule figure of a crouching man, his head lowered.

“Huh,” he said, very quietly.

His tattoos were getting itchy. He reached over his shoulder to the ink-work on the back of his neck. His action emulated in its crude way by the little him on the stage. What would happen, he wondered, if he were to reach in and pick himself up out of the theater? Would some vast hand reach down and—

No. Ridiculous. Even so, he glanced up at the ceiling, just in case there was indeed a larger him up there looking back and up, at a still larger version, also looking

up and back. But there was nothing above him but darkness. He returned his gaze to the toy. Something had changed in the little time he'd had his eyes elsewhere. The same draft that had taken away the other actors had blown several pieces of stuff into the vicinity of the stage. They looked like the kind of cobs of hair and detritus that he'd pulled out of the plug-hole in his shower when the dirty water started to back up, but they didn't lie on the floor. They were up, high up, on limbs as thin as hairs, and moving around the stage with predatory grace, coming closer as they circled. There were three of them. One, the largest, was directly in front of him.

He stood up, not bothering to confirm that his carved self had done the same thing, and he looked out into the darkness beyond the limits of the stage. Something was there, just beyond the reach of his vision. And if there was one, there were probably three. As below, so above.

A barrage of questions came into his head at the same time: was he dreaming? Or, more likely, having some fever-vision brought by his wounded state and the

medicine he'd been fed to heal it? And if this was simply a dream-vision, did he have anything to fear from the presences that stalked him?

It was Caz's work that gave him the answer to this last question. If there was no jeopardy here then why were his tattoos spasming so wildly?

No doubt about it: He was in trouble. The dream state was no less perilous than the waking state; in many ways more so. With all the gaudy distractions of the world stripped away, the players had nothing but one another to fix their attentions upon.

There was a terrible clarity in dreams like this; the clarity of a primal condition.

There was no hope of subterfuge, of hiding from the enemy amongst the masks of daily life. There was only the soul and its stalkers.

He had learned a trick many years before that was perhaps applicable now. A friend of his, one Father Hess, had owned a parrot called Fredrica, to which he had been devoted, despite the fact that his hands were always scarred with the bird's proof of her possession. "The trick," Hess once said to Harry, "is if I really think she's

going to do some damage is to not to try and pull away. That only makes her bite down more. No, I push my finger —if its my finger she's got— deeper into her grip. She lets go immediately.”

Harry put an image of Hess' parrot, her vivid colors a glorious antidote to the darkness and all it concealed, in his mind's eye. And then he walked off the stage to meet his adversary face to face.

Eight

A stench came to meet him from the darkness, unmistakable, that of human remains. A common trick, but not without its power, even against a seasoned warrior like Harry. The smell wasn't just repugnant, it was also a distracting reminder of rooms he'd stood in, trenches he'd uncovered, where the dead lay in corruption, their skins barely containing the maggot motion they were home to now.

He would not be turned from his course, however. He kept walking towards the clot of filth, comforted, in his naked, weaponless state, by the energy that leapt from one of Caz's tattoos to another and another, lines of protective power that reminded him of the skin in which he walked, which marked the dangerous perimeter between the tender meat of him and the hard, sharp world. Sometimes it was better to go naked than not; and this was one of those times. He had no idea why he felt so certain this was the case, but it didn't matter. The certainty was all.

"Where are you?" he said to the enemy. "Come on. Show yourself."

He sensed motion in the darkness, but he couldn't find the form of the thing.

"What's the problem?" he said. "Have you got something to be ashamed of?"

That did it. There was a flash of light in the ground beneath the beast, then a few seconds of darkness, followed by a series of brighter flashes, their stinging light showing Harry just enough of the enemy to see that the clot of shower-drain crap had not been too poor a sketch of the thing itself. It was nothing remotely human; its

body, an emaciated length of yellow-white flesh infected with clusters of black sores.

Its numerous legs were many jointed, and as fine as needles. It turned one end of its

sickly body towards Harry, and there was a large man there, entirely surrounded by

white pustules the size of fists. One burst as it turned to Harry and another wave of

stench came at him, stronger than ever, now that he was so close to the beast. A mass

of long hairs appeared from its throat, and cohesing to form a primitive tongue they

started cleaning the fluid from the remains of the pustule and took it back into its

mouth. As it closed its jaws to swallow the filth, Harry caught a glimpse of a long

narrow eye amongst the crop of pustules, its black slit was presently fixed upon him.

He didn't look to see if there was a second eye, or a third. He returned the beast's

unblinking stare with one of his own. While he stared he kept the image of Hess'

parrot in the forefront of his mind, its verdant green, its rejoicing yellows and reds

defending his mind from any attempt at invasion.

But none came. The beast continued its meticulous consumption of the pus, sending two or three hairs up to take any dregs. At no point did it take its eyes off Harry, however, and after perhaps a minute and a half of exchanging stares with the thing, the tattoos on his back and left and right shoulders alerted him to the reason. The other two were closing in. He smelled a new foulness from one of them, this time more feral than fleshy, and as he willed himself not to puke he caught a sudden motion from the corner of his eye.

He tore his gaze away from the shit in the long eye of the first beast in time to throw himself forward and out of the path of a second. He had only a brief blurred vision of the thing, but there was no doubting its intentions. Its mouth was open wide, with its tongue hairs extended, and long enough to brush Harry's shoulders as he got out of the beast's way. In his mind's eye he saw Hess' parrot start into flight, but unable to rise up on its clipped wings, and failing, her colors a muddled blur. And then he was hitting the ground hard, and for the first time since waking into this

vision, he felt the wounds from the Hell Priest's hooks, and his healed skin broke open.

He rolled onto his back, his hand going up to the deep wound in his shoulder, the blood spilling against the side of his face and running into his ear. He had fallen, of course, in front of the beast he'd been locking eyes with. Now its head, which was larger than Harry had guessed it to be, three or four times the size of his own head, the long filthy hair that had sprouted from behind the pustules falling forward, a few of the longer of them scratching his body like tiny claws. Its eye was no longer meeting Harry's. It was scanning his sprawled, wounded body. And as it did so it lifted one of its thin legs and with a sudden burst of speed brought it down, puncturing the skin in the middle of Harry's forehead, and pressing hard enough to warn him that it could, should it chose, pierce his skull with ease. He took the warning, and ceased moving, except to slowly offer up his open palms to signal his surrender.

The other two beasts came into view now, inching their grotesquely large heads in to study him. The third was less infected with pustules than the others, and its lashless eyes were visible, the spikes of their cornea roving over Caz's talismans. If there was anything remotely like a human expression on its misbegotten face, it was puzzlement. It seemed to look at Harry like a fisherman who'd trawled up something he was not familiar with, and was trying to make sense of what he saw. And felt too, for even though Harry had registered his surrender, Caz's designs were not cowed. When the third beast ventured to touch the first of sigils protecting Harry's heart with one of its legs, the ink flickered an air of energy at it. A minor retort to be sure, but enough to make the third beast intensify its scrutiny.

And then, apparently more irritated by the response than its crude features betrayed, it pressed its needle foot on the lower portion of Harry's abdomen and proceeded to press. His skin broke, the sting of which was inconsequential compared to the pain from his loosening wounds. But the beast had only just begun to work its

leg around, making the hole larger, and studying Harry's face, watching to see how he would respond to his work. Through a deep-seated and long-matured resistance to giving the enemy any satisfaction in its hurting work, Harry couldn't help the sweat that beaded on his skin, nor bite back his grunts of pain.

He closed his eyes, willing Hess' parrot back into his mind's eye, but there was something else there, which demanded his attention, an iron sky moved over a wilderness of ochre dust and barbed trees, from the black limbs of which sprung blossoms as bright as little fires, the mind lifting veils of dust from the ground, and through them somebody approached. Harry studied the dust cloud, looking for some sign as to the identity of the approaching figure, but the pain in his abdomen demanded his reluctant return into the company of his tormentors. The third beast was working its piercing limb in ever greater circles. Though Harry couldn't see the wound, he knew his blood was running down the sides of his body. In desperation he

began to bargain, though he had only one thing to offer them in his present condition, and that was the promise that he'd already made to Coanthagnita.

“I get it,” he said. “You don't want me here. I'm meddling in voodoo business, right? And I don't belong. But just... please... give me a break and let me go. You will never see my sorry ass again. I swear.”

It was an empty gesture, he knew. What did it matter if he promised to make himself scarce when they could simply put him out of the game right here and now? But it seemed to give them pause for thought. Or at least something did. The third beast stopped making a hole in his abdomen, and raised its head, no longer interested in studying his agony. And now the other two followed suit, their bodies stiffening, their heads all turned in the same direction, like animals alerted to the scent of something threatening in the wind. Harry closed his eyes again, and to his astonishment found Hess' parrot returned to her perch in his mind's eye. Only this time he didn't have her entire body in view, just her round, yellow eye, its pupil

dilating as it came into view. And then, he voice, the clarion cry that Hess had unwittingly taught her by spitting it out in frustration behind closed doors.

“Jesus wept. Jesus wept! Jesus wept!”

And her pupil opened wide again, and the expanse of yellow dissolved into the dusty landscape. He was back in the wilderness, the wind blowing harder than ever, the dust clouds obscuring the sky. He looked for the figure he'd seen striding towards him when he'd last been there. He studied the billowing dust, and saw him, a dark smudge in the yellow cloud, almost erased on occasion, but always coming back into view. And Harry saw his error now. It wasn't a man, it was a young woman, dressed in jeans and a baggy t-shirt, and at her side a dog, a large black and red-gold mongrel, who glanced up at her mistress as they advanced over the desiccated earth. As they passed by one of the black barbed shrubs several blossoms tore themselves free of the branches and came to illuminate their way, three of them swooping close to the ground, another four or five circling just above the young human's head. Their

brightness threw her eyes into shadow, but now and then she would glance up at them, and he saw how blue her eyes were, and how black her lashes. He saw too, the determined line of her mouth, which had no patience for sensuality. She was perhaps twenty, perhaps less, but there was something in her stride, and in the absence of any trace of joy, or room for it, in her face, that made Harry think she had seen more than joy could live remembering, and prosper. The dog barked now, sounding an alarm, and the young woman quickened her pace. The fire blossoms weaving around her, those close to the ground rising up, those above swooping down, igniting brightness through the dust.

Pain called Harry back into the company of his tormentors, the third beast driving its limb deep into the wound it had opened. It had murderous intentions, no doubt of that, and it was hurrying to get it done, glancing down at Harry for a moment then looking up again. Though the same urgency had seized the other two they weren't certain apparently what direction their enemies were coming from. In

its agitation the first had forgotten Harry completely, and had accidentally shifted the leg with which had pierced the skin of his forehead. It still rested on his brow, but lightly, and when Harry cautiously moved his head the piercing limb slid off onto the ground. The beast didn't even look down to see what had happened. It was too concerned with the imminence of its enemies.

Harry raised his head and reached down to grab hold of the limb in his abdomen with both hands. Its owner was also distracted at that moment, allowing Harry the little mercy of pulling the needle out of his stomach before it pierced his innards. But the beast wasn't so negligent in its lethal duties as its sibling. It looked down at Harry, its cornea speeding back and forth along the length of its eyes, a sign perhaps of its disturbed state. But it wasn't so distracted as not to want the job it had begun on Harry finished, and it began to push the needle back towards the sizable wound it had worked open, pushing hard to get the job finished quickly. Its limb was scaly and dry above the blood-line, which gave Harry some traction. And for all its

size the creature had poor equilibrium, balanced as it was like a hair-clot ballerina on its many points. It moved around in an ungainly attempt to put fresh force behind the killing limb, and found a position that allowed it to counter Harry's attempt to get out from under it, pressing down towards the wound with such power that if Harry were to lose grip of it now, the point would pin him to the ground.

He closed his eyes, looking for a bright benediction from Hess' parrot, but its brilliant eye with its **distant** iris had gone. So too had the girl and her dog. There was only blind dust now, filling his vision. He had been abandoned, it seemed. Left to the beasts. He opened his eyes again, to find that all three of his tormentors were looking in the same direction, up into the darkness. And into Harry's view came the subject of their scrutiny. A burning blossom; plucked from the same bushes he'd seen in his vision within a vision, and now here, not pressed by any wind but moving under its own volition. What better **prey** of that than what they did next, circling above the heads of the beasts, tempting two of them to rise up on all but two or three of their

legs, which they used to attempt to stab it, and bring it down. It danced around their jabs, however, confounding them with its delicate maneuvers; even shedding a tempting petal for them to stab at, which promptly evaporated in a shimmer of yellow-white flame.

A moment of stillness and silence. Then the dog began to bark. Harry was forgotten; all the beasts' attention was fixed upon the sound of the dog. The girl's voice came soon after, calling to her companion.

“Wait up, Sienna! Wait! Good girl. Good girl!”

There was an eerie slow motion panic amongst the beasts, as though they were moving in water, their long hair lifting, their bodies twisting upon themselves like unearthed worms, their legs seeming to have contradictory instructions. It would have been funny if Harry had never set eyes upon them before; never smelled the stench of their pus, or felt the insistence of their cruelty. He got to his feet, his body running with sweat and blood, while Caz's tattoos all pulsed as one, their drumming

reminding his disordered anatomy of calmer, kinder times. He might survive this with a little luck, he dared to think.

“You!” the woman shouted from the darkness, “Tattoos!”

Harry declined to answer shout with shout, for fear of reawakening the interest of the beasts. He simply nodded in the direction from which the woman’s voice had come, to signal that he’d heard her.

“Run! Run away from my voice! Run ‘til you wake!”

Harry needed no second instruction. He turned his back on the voice, ducking low to avoid one of the three whose panicky motion brought its gaze in his direction, and ran. He had not ducked low enough. He felt a sharp pain in his back, and glanced over his shoulder to see that the third beast had shaken off the lethargy of fear that had caught it, and was coming in pursuit of him. There were several soft, popping sounds, and seconds later another pull of the death-pit stench overtook him, turning the air through which he ran into a choking soup. It stung his eyes and his sinuses, so

that tears ran down his cheeks. But worse, it put the pictures back in his head. The mortuary of failures he had filed away, and without his inviting it his mind threw its own pierced carcass down amongst the rest. He saw himself with terrible clarity, dropping down into the dirt, his mouth slack, his eyes wide and blind saw circles of black rot spread over him, with slit yolks of maggots, spilling out.

The vision was so vivid that it was all he could see: The dead and him amongst them, corrupted into commonality. No faces now, just the same grinning lipless bone, and here there patches of dried skin to which snags of hair adhered. Why run, the pit buzzed, when this is waiting in all directions? And look, you don't even know which of these is you. It's as if you never lived, D'Amour, the pit said. The words were like weights on his exhausted body. What little hope he'd had now flickered out.

And then, the dog began to bark. The sound was like a loving blow to Harry's failing spirit. It shook the pit from his mind's eye, and he rose up out of the miasma, or at least seemed to, and seeming was enough right now. The barking grew louder,

and the volume took him up and up, not just out of the pit and the stench but out of his body, so that when he looked down he seemed to see the bare box theater where all this had begun, and the tiny actor, dotted in ink and wounds, running out of the darkness into the silvery light of the stage. He didn't waste time watching to see how close the enemy was behind him. He lifted his dream-sight away from the little box to see what he could see from this new elevation.

A landscape spread in all directions, dark in places, lit in others by some source-less luminescence that he'd met in the hall. Other dream-scapes, were they, conjured by other dreamers, or more of his own visions, separated by great expanses of uncharted territory? No sooner had he shaped the question than the vision proffered a reply. Trails of light began to dart from one place of light to another, connecting the dots in some grand design that spread from a half a hundred hubs, their speed and their beauty, but most of all their purposefulness, an abstracted antidote to the vile particulars of the death-pit.

If there was some revelation to come when the grand design was completed, Harry was denied sight of it. While the trails of light were still proliferating, he felt the energy that had carried him up here retreating, and all too quickly he was back in his body. But he came back strengthened by his glimpse of the landscape, which he held in his head as he ran, refusing to give the death-pit entry. The dog continued to bark, somewhere behind him, an angry barking now. There were shrill noises from the beasts too, suggesting that the mongrel had made it her business to attack them.

“Be careful.” He muttered to her as he ran. “They were more lethal than they looked.”

Even though he had nothing in pursuit of him now he still pushed his legs to their limits, and just as he was beginning to think he’s somehow missed his destination, he fell, and reaching out to break his fall, his hands found something solid in the darkness, to which he clung as his legs gave way under him. There was a confusing moment when he tried to push himself up again so as to continue the run

and instead felt a light come in through almost closed eyes. He opened them. He was clinging to the board at the bottom of the bed. There was light, sunlight, coming through a crack in the drapes, just enough to show him the room where he'd been visited by Coanthagnita.

He pulled himself up off the carpet, and turned to look back down the passageway. The air there still carried its freight of subtle silver light, and by it he saw the box without sides, where his little drama had begun to play out.

As he stared at it he heard Bessie's voice as she climbed the stairs.

"Mr. D'Amour? Are you all right, Mr. D'Amour?"

She came into view now, as she **gained** the top of the stairs, and the last vestiges of his dream-vision went out like blown candle flames, leaving him looking down a passageway at the figure of Bessie.

“I thought I heard you fall.” She said, making a very determined attempt to keep her gaze fixed on her face. He reached over the bed-board and uprooted a sheet, which he draped around his waist.

“Sorry.” He said.

“No harm done.” Bessie said. “I was getting a little concerned about you to be honest. I was thinking about calling on Coanthagnita and finding out whether it was right that you were so agitated in your sleep. Thrashing around the way you were and crying out.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Not very long. Five and a half hours. Maybe six. It looks as though you lost your old wounds and gained a new one.” Her hand went up to her forehead, and Harry touched his. There was a small wound where the first beast had pinned his head down.

“Huh.” He said. “If I’ve got that then I’ve probably also got…” he looked down. He didn’t need to touch his belly to confirm that he also had the second wound. A sizeable patch of blood had already soaked through from the other side.

“You’ve got some more mending to do, apparently.” Bessie said. “Maybe I should get Coanthagnita to send over some more of her powder.”

“No offense, Bessie, but I’ll be fine with some peroxide and some gauze to put a patch over the hole in my belly.”

“Is it a big hole?”

“It’ll mend.” Harry said. “I’m sure I’ve got enough of Coanthagnita’s medicine in my system to fix me up real quick.” He touched the place where the Hell Priest’s hook had punctured his shoulder. There was a crust of dried blood, which came off with just a quick rub. Underneath was a scar, but the wound itself had healed completely.

“She’s good.” Harry said. “Thank you for everything, Bessie.”

“You’re not going to tell me how you came by those wounds?”

“Nah. It’s over and done with. If I could just get peroxide and my clothes, I’ll get out of your house and out of this city.”

Nine

His system did indeed contain a measure of Coanthagnita's medicine. When, perhaps twenty minutes later he sat at the edge of the bath, his feet inside, and poured peroxide over his belly wound (while cupping his dick and balls with his other hand to keep them out of the way from the stinging fluid), he discerned that the hole in his lower abdomen was already half-healed, and the two wounds in his groin were pale scar tissue.

"Powerful medicine," he said to his reflection as he appraised the mark on his forehead. There was nothing to do with that but clean it up a little and let it finish closing. There'd be a scar there too, but he didn't mind. He knew already what a few people who knowledgeable in the business of visions could say: That the scar marked the spot where his third eye, seer of spirit and revelation, was positioned. They'd say the scar was prophetic. As for the rest of his face, that was a testament all his own. Every day the battle for his scalp belonged more clearly to the grey, while the thin furrows of his frown deepened and the leaden sacks beneath his eyes grew heavier.

His long war was taking its toll. It was difficult to remember the face he'd had twenty years before, when he could still make an entrance into a room and garner some appreciative glances from the women. Now he was going grey on grey; a state of near invisibility which left his ego shredded, even though it probably made his job as a detective a little easier. It was a damn high price to pay, and he was sick of it. He was never again going to be the good looking guy with the mysterious smile that certain ladies had found so easy to fall for, but at least he could slow his free-fall.

The war could go on without him, probably forever. The struggle between the forces of light and life and those of death and chaos and darkness build into the patterns of their eternal presence the foundations upon which the most powerful systems of human control were raised. As long as there were sun and shadow, joy and despair, there would be Christs and Anti-Christs, and men like him, marked for reasons beyond his comprehension for the clammy business of walking between worlds. In the world, but not of it, at least not entirely. Drawn over and over to the

borderlands where the walls of banality people built against their fears fell into disrepair, and damn fool folks like Harry stumbled over the rubble. Why? To answer questions about the meaning of things that he had never properly formulated? There was some of that. But mainly it was because his life had no purpose if he didn't go; that in those dark, unmapped places where the things that fear had conjured to conjure fear went about the unholy business of feeding appetites only hurt could satisfy.

It wasn't a surprise to him to find that his face was a grim sight. But it was a surprise that he was alive to be looking at it, given how often circumstances or stubbornness had induced him to face the adversaries. It had started ambitiously, though it had not been his choice to do so, facing the Hell-Priest and his puzzle box, in the company of Jack Weeks, the closest he'd had to a friend in St. Dominic's. After school there'd been a respite of a few years, when he'd willfully ignored the attempts of forces on both sides of the divide to number him amongst their ranks. Then there'd

been his time as a cop, and the horror show that had brought it to an end, and after that however hard he tried to stay within the throw of humanity's fire he was never quite clever enough to read the signs in the air or the dirt at his feet that would have warned him to *turn around, turn around*, and in a heart beat he'd be back on the wrong side of the rubble, facing limitless dark.

"You know what?" he said to his reflection, "Fuck this. Enough. No. I mean it. Enough. I can't do this anymore. Can't. Won't. This is it. Game over."

"Are you all right in there?" Bessie said.

"Yeah. I'm fine. I'm just talking to myself."

"I found an old shirt and a pair of pants that my brother left here when I kicked him out."

"What about mine?"

"I burned them, Harry. They were a filthy mess. And before you ask the change and the keys and the matchbook are on top of the clothes which are right

outside the door. I don't want to be unsociable or nothing, but I got to kick you out in a few minutes. It's not that I don't trust you. I think you're probably a good man. But these days you can't be too careful. So I'd like to have you on your way before I leave."

"Give me five minutes."

"Oh, no need to rush. Ten's fine."

He tried to offer Bessie some money for her many kindnesses, but of course she wouldn't take a cent, and Harry knew that to press her would only cause discomfort, so he made his thanks, gave Bessie his card, and one for Coanthagnita, just in case they were ever in need of a detective.

"I thought I heard you sayin' you were giving it all up." Bessie said.

“And I am. But if you ever needed help, I’d be happy to come out of retirement.”

“I think it’s a good idea, Mr. D’Amour. I can see you’ve been hit hard over the years. But I should tell you Coanthagnita seemed to think you weren’t quite done.”

“No?”

“Or more likely something wasn’t quite done with you.”

“Oh shit.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Is she ever wrong?”

“I wish I could say yes.”

“But no.”

“No. Tread carefully, Mr. D’Amour. A man like you moves a step, things listen.”

Harry glanced down at his feet. In the instant it took him to look down and up again, Bessie closed the door.

Ten

The Monastery of Cenobitical Order was a large walled compound built seven hundred years ago and more on a damned-made hill of stone and cement, which could only be entered by one route, a narrow stairway that was carefully watched by the monastery guards. It had been built during a time of imminent civil war, with factions of demons in constant skirmishes. The head of the Cenobitical Order, his identity known only to the eight who had raised him from their number into that High Office, had decided that for the greater good of the Order, he would use a tiny part of the vast wealth they had accrued to build a fortress-sanctuary, where his

priests would be safe from the volatile politics of Hell. The fortress had been built to the most rigorous of standards, its polished grey walls unscaleable. And as the years had passed, and the Cenobites were less and less in the streets of the city Lucifer had designed and built, called by some, Pandemonium, but named Pyratha by its architect, the stories about what went on behind the sleek black walls of the fortress proliferated, and the countless demons and damned alike who glanced its way every hour all had favorite stories about the excesses of its occupants. In the vast shantytown called Fike's Trench, where the damned who did service in the mansions, temples and streets of Pyratha retired to sleep and eat awhile (and yes, copulate, and if they were lucky, produce an infant or two that could be sold at the abattoir or worse), the stories of the fortress and the monstrous things that went on there were exchanged like currency, growing ever more elaborate. It was an understandable comfort to the damned, who lived with so much terror and atrocity in their daily lives that there be a place where things were even worse; where they could look and

tell themselves they had reason to be thankful; reason, even, to hope to silently repeat whatever they could remember of prayers; to scratch on rocks, or draw with shit and ash scenes, even faces, that they had once taken joy in.

“Once you forget, you’re forgotten.” Was the common wisdom amongst the damned. So each man, woman and child nurtured thanks that they were not amongst the victims of the fortress, where the unspeakable devices of the Order would scour even the most treasured of memories. And in this fashion, living in excrement and exhaustion, their bodies barely nourished, their spirits unfed, but holding onto a touchstone memory and to the almost happy thought that others suffered more than they, the damned something approximating a life.

All this had come as a shock to Felixson. In life he'd spent much of the fortune his workings in magic had earned him (what he'd liked to refer to as his *will*-gotten gains) on art, always buying privately because the paintings he collected moved, when they moved at all, outside the sniffing range of the museum hounds. All the pictures he'd owned had related in some way to Hell. A Tintoretto of Lucifer falling, his wings torn off him and falling after him. A sheaf of preparatory studies by Lucca Signorelli for his fresca of The Damned in Hell, a book of horrors which he'd purchased because its unknown creator had found a way to make the meditations of each hour turn on sin and punishment. None of the works he's owned, nor indeed the masterpieces by Bosch, Menling and Fra Angelica or the remnants of the old, which in turn were built in and upon the remnants of what the architect himself had put there, so that no two hills, nor two streets, nor two houses looked the same. Weaving through the city ran its Tiber, the river Mashad, crossed six places by the bridges that had been built with the city, and in which he'd tried several times to steal from their

museums using magic, only to find that somebody wise to such possibilities had protected them with blood markings of their own, had failed to create anything that even remotely resembled the truth. He stood now at the bottom of the steps that lead up to the fortress gate, the ground behind him and ahead of him another five hundred yards the last resting place of numberless bodies used to breaking point by the Order, then thrown over the walls to be eaten, stripped of their fleshy parts and excreted by the vast white-skinned, pink-eyed snakes called mattanats that nested in the death-ripe earth around the fortress.

Beyond the bodies, through the swarms of flies and mosquitoes that were everywhere in Hell, Felixson could see the elegant symmetry of Pyratha, with its eight hills—One better than Rome, the architect boasted—the shapes of which were crammed with buildings of countless styles and sizes, the new built in and permanent structures, built and used by the damned. Columns of smoke rose from the numerous locations around the city, where fires raged, their commonest cause the current craze

amongst the demonic citizens of the City of the Eight Hills, soul-burning. Felixson knew nothing of its rules, if it had any, or why the game was even played. The Hell-Priest had referred to it in passing on one occasion, and spoke of it with the profound contempt of a creature who thought of every occupant of Pyratha as a sub-species, their mindless hedonism matched only by their lavish stupidity. The city that Lucifer had built to outdo Rome had fallen, as Rome had fallen, into decadence and self-indulgence, the regime too concerned with its own internal struggles to cleanse the city of its filth, and return it to the state in which Lucifer had left it upon his passing.

That had been another shock to Felixson, finding that the angel cast down from Heaven for his rebellious ways, no longer ruled in Hell. He had died the only way angels, whether fallen or not, can ever die: by his own hand. Felixson had heard several versions of how Lucifer had killed himself, all of them designed, it seemed, to make something grand and tragic of the great architect's death; to make him mythic. But Felixson wasn't fooled. That the Fallen Star of Morning, the Apostate, the Prince

of the Pit had stooped to suicide was proof of his fundamental weakness, as far as Felixson was concerned. He kept this opinion, as he did with all his opinions, to himself. He was lucky to be alive, he knew, and still able to think for himself. Sooner or later an escape route would present itself, and when it did he'd take it, and be gone. Return to earth, change his name and his face, and renounce magic for the rest of his days.

Until he found that living without power wasn't the nightmare he'd expected it to be. He had been amongst the accomplished and ambitious magicians in the world, but holding onto that position had used up great resources of energy, will and time. The integration of his soul, which complex business had first drawn him into the mysteries of his craft, had been neglected entirely. It was only now, as a slave to a demon, that he was free again, free to begin the long journey of self within self the getting of magic had distracted him from. The terror-stricken state in which he'd

lived at the start had passed; he knew that he was shit, and that the tiniest infraction of the Hell-Priest's rules would be the end of him.

So he listened and he obeyed, dropping down onto his hands and knees at his lord's word, and never, even while standing, looking at the Cenobite's face or even at the back of his head. He had twice been given over to the other Hell-Priests to do some minor service and on both occasions, even though he had done as he was told, he had brutally been abused, on the second occasion to the point of collapse. He'd lain bleeding on the dusty ground outside his abuser's cell, barely holding onto consciousness, until his lord had come to find him, and had heard the two Hell-Priests arguing in several languages: Latin on occasion, then switching into French, and with Spanish and Portuguese. He understood none of what they said, but he knew he was the subject of the conversation.

On the way back to his lord's cell, following two strides behind him, head bowed, blood dripping from his nose onto his Hessian **clout** which was all he wore, he heard the Cenobite speak quietly to himself. He spoke in what sounded to Felixson like a polyglot language: Latin or French mixed with something that might have been Arabic. But there was no mistaking the cold fury in his tone, nor, though Felixson would have been hard pressed to explain why he felt this, did he leave any doubt that his lord had a cure for his rage.

—

Now, many days later— though there was no day or night here, no moon, sun or stars- most of Felixson's wounds had healed, and he waited at the bottom of the steps, where he always waited when his lord left the fortress, for his lord's return. He glimpsed the long procession now, as it slowly made its way through the city, heard

the wailing of the pipe-children, and the funeral beat of the drummers; saw the totems—four of them nine feet tall, and the fifth being born by hook-backed damned, and striding behind a hundred Hell-Priests, each of them reconfigured by the Order's genius with flesh and bone. The front of the procession had emerged from the city limits now, and was on the straight road that would bring them to the place where Felixson waited.

Overhead, a constant presence, but one that went unremarked upon or even glanced up at, was what Felixson after much thought had decided was a stone the size of a small moon, its motion only detectable if as now he had time to fix his eyes on a particular fissure **mistrop**, and then track its progress over the City of the Eight Hills. His moods seemed to change, Felixson had observed, depending on what part of vast surface was above them. At times, when what appeared to be mountains of black rock moved into view and slowly passed, inverted, over the city it seemed to Felixson a man on the tallest tower of the highest hills could have reached up and touched the

summit with his fingertips. **Scree** made of shed black rock regularly accrued on the slopes of these mountains, and fell in lethal rains which crept across the landscape from the fog shrouded wilderness that lay beyond what Felixson had arbitrarily decided was the eastern edge of the city. It was only when the magic was directly above Pyratha that the landscape overhead, the stone rains came in their full fury, beating into dust and rubble many of the newer buildings on the south and southeastern **fringes** of the city, which Felixson was able to watch from the roof of the block of cells where his lord slept and meditated. By contrast with this wholesale demolition the buildings there had been part of the architect's grand design, seemed inviolate whether they were the grandiose mansions and palaces in the heart of the city or the immense structures, some spare and classical, some elaborately gothic, that crowned each of the hills. The devil had protected his visionary city, it seemed, using whatever powers he'd been allowed to keep when he was thrown from the presence of his creator.

Felixson took his eyes off the slow rolling of the moon, and returned his gaze to the approaching procession. A wind had sprung up, or rather *the* wind, for there was only one, and blew from Felixson's North-North-West always cold and smelling of the only thing welcome than the smells of rot and burnt blood that were perpetually in the air: a void, stripped of all absence, vast and lonely and dark. It was the raw stuff of insanity, that empty wind, at least to Felixson, terrifying, than the tools of slaughter, however crazed and cruel their designer. Now, as the wind grew in strength gust by gust, it caught the black ceremonial robes of the Hell-Priests, and unfurled the thirty foot flags of oiled human skin so that they snaked and snapped high above the heads of the Cenobites, the holes where their eyes and mouths had been looking to Felixson as though they were still staring wide-eyed with disbelief at the sight of the flying knives, still screaming as the skin was expertly stripped from the muscle. It caught the scent of the incense too, smoking the censers set in the lower halves of the heads of the damned women, so that the smoke exited their

mouths, nostrils and scooped out eye-sockets, but left them with their brains intact, fully comprehending their condition. There living censers came into the monastery on occasion, their breasts cut off, their vulvas closed with fire. Felixson had enjoyed countless women in his life, bringing them to bed with charm if he could, with money if charisma failed him, and with magic as a last resort. He had loved the laughter of women, the complexity of women, and always, of course, their beauty. So far of the sights Hell had shown him so far it was the incense burners —when they were finished with their duties in this procession would retire to a round house built on stilts above the mud and the nest of maltanats, where they lived some unimaginable life.

It was one of Hell's favorite desires, to turn what had once been a self-willed man or woman into an object, or part of one. The Cenobitical way of adhering such functionality was surgical, others in the city used fire, wheels and liquid lead to marry their victims to the objects they used during their daily lives. The damned were

crucified as if a St. Andrew's cross to the wheels of demon's chariots, as evidence of their rider's wealth. They were the object of sport with machetes, the rules of which were commonly designed to keep the damned from dying too quickly. Felixson didn't know what death in hell meant, nor would he have risked his blessed condition by opening his mouth and asking the question. Whatever questions he might have had, he kept to himself, assuming that if he served his lord well, and showed no interest in anything but his lord's welfare, then he might one day get answers. But there was no urgency. Felixson had been a patient man in the world, and applied now all the tricks he learned over the years to preserve him his calm. So far, it had served him well.

He'd been told by another of his lowly caste, a white southern called Archie Dial who was enslaved to one of the many black Hell-Priests, that in the years he had served his lord in the fortress he had witnessed many damned attempt to serve that motherfucker Pinhead, as Archie had called him, and having failed after a matter of hours, perhaps sometimes a day, had been punished for their mistakes. They would be

slaughtered slowly, Archie had said, with the hooks and the chains which were the motherfucker pinhead's unique methodology.

"He'd never go far to do it, either." Dial had told Felixson. "I'd go by the pinhead's cell just to see if there was something new to look at. He'd have 'em on the roof of that little cell house of his, their pussies or their dick and balls cut out for some reason."

"That's a little mystery I can solve for you." Felixson had replied. "He keeps them in huge jars in the cell next door to his."

"Pickled in formaldehyde?"

"Nothing so crude. He has them in some fluid that preserves them perfectly. I was always a great admirer of the vulva, in all its countless configurations. I'd be beside those jars and make up a different story for each one."

"He lets you do that?"

"I sleep there, amongst the jars. I make up stories instead of counting sheep."

“Jesus Christ!” Dial had said, throwing his gaze at the stone sky. “Thank you! Thank you!”

“What are you thanking Jesus for? I was telling you, not him.”

Dial grinned, his eyes gleaming. “No, you don’t understand. Thinking about all those pussies has given me my first erection since I died.” He had kissed Felixson on the lips. “I’ve got to go somewhere private and look at it. I owe you one, Felixson.”

—

The conversation, though cut short by Archie Dial’s abrupt departure, had made Felixson even more fastidious in his dealing with his lord, never letting any remark, however off-hand, go by without being scoured for some concealed instruction,

determined not to give his owner even the smallest of reasons to dispatch him. As long as there were books to be studied, and judgments made as to the originality of their contents—most books were plagiarized from older volumes, which were in turn stolen from still older books or manuscripts—Felixson knew he showed some practical use. And as long as that held true he was relatively immune from the kind of experiments on living tissue that delivered its subjects back into the narrow streets of the fortress with their hair turned white in half a hundred days, their dreams, their prayers, their memories scrubbed from their skulls by the obsessive cleanliness of their Cenobite surgeon.

But his defense against the scalpels and their wielders would not protect him forever, he knew. He had meticulously catalogued the collection of books that had been piled in the three large rooms, hidden beneath the Hell-Priest's cell and the unoccupied cell beside it. There were a lot of editions of the same book, some clearly preferable because of their condition, or better still because of the pithy margin notes

that had been made by a previous owner. He had known many of these men and women, at least well enough to exchange a respectful nod. All dead now, of course, victims of the Hell-Priest's machinations. Then, in very much smaller numbers, were books that had belonged to the defining personalities of magic. Aleister Crowley, of course, his notations on Casablanca's Book of the Fallen as witty and anarchic Wilde. A journal describing his Golden Dawn workings written in scratchy hand by W.B. Yeats, and two others belonging to Lillian Caramalis, spiced up with careful drawings of the sex magic rituals she'd persuaded nine of her many lovers into, two of them men, the rest women. The veil these markings had drawn aside had shown them scenes so overwhelming that every one of the nine was dead by their own hand or in a mad house within a year.

There were stories like this attached to many of the valuable books in the lord's secret library. But there was also a great deal of dross.

“When you’re finished we’ll have a book burning.” His lord had said to Felixson. “Invite my brethren to swell the numbers of books to want burned, no questions asked.”

“May I speak?” Felixson asked.

“One question.”

“Are you forbidden to possess any books at all?”

“There are three books we are allowed to keep for our meditations. Two are manuals on torture which I’ve read from cover to cover so many times I could recite them for you. The other is a comprehensive, but banal, listing of our Order.”

“What would happen to you if they knew about the secret library?”

“One question.” The Hell-Priest replied. “But as you asked; it would not go well for me. Nor, indeed, for you, who facilitated organization. So don’t try and blackmail with what little you know. I would murder you in a heart beat and find myself somebody who was loyal *and* learned.”

“I’m loyal, lord. I swear. And I’ll ask no more questions. I’m—”

“Enough. Just be careful to never give me room to doubt you, because I will act upon my doubt so swiftly you won’t have time to beg or pray. Do you understand? A single yes or no will suffice.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

—

So the books were burned, three miles from the southeastern limits of Pyratha. As he’d consigned each volume to the flames Felixson had made a severely conservative calculation of what the collection they were burning would have earned

if they'd offered them for sale in the clandestine market for specialty volumes as these, the twin hubs of which were London and New York. The figure he came up with was a little shy of three billion dollars.

A lot of the books were works of charlatans like Caliosto, the Mantle Twins, the Count of Saint German, Pico dell Miradula, Woodcrast of Sicily and Yeas DeRopp, men who had been very successful in their time, and fooled many of Europe's most beautiful women out of their fortunes and their silks with the promise of miracles, but whose books were, often copies that had belonged to the defrauders themselves, were pitched into the flames. On occasion the destruction of a book liberated some creature the owner had left to guard its pages, and who emerged briefly now, as moaning blurs of faces that shimmered in the heat as they rose and fled away into the darkness.

This culling of the works of cheats and charlatans left the Hell-Priest with a library of formidable power. One hundred and twenty three volumes (*one, two,*

three, surely no accident) which taken together represented a repository on the subject of magic without parallel. To what purpose his lord would put the knowledge to be gleaned from these books was of course not a subject he cared to share. But there was a streak of pure destructiveness in Felixson that wanted to be there to witness the event. It would be like the end of the world.

—

The bell in the fortress tower, which was called Summoner (that same bell that these had opened Lemonhand's configuration heard tolling far off), was now ringing to welcome back the brothers and sisters of the Order to the fortress. Felixson knelt in the mud, his head bowed so that it touched the ground, as the procession

started up the steps to the fortress gate. Nor did he lift his head from the dirt, but extended his arm, with the missive he was carrying, in front of him.

He remained in that position for a long time, making a litany of his bruises and scrapes as he did so, reminding himself in the midst of his list-making how badly his fellow magicians had suffered that day in the mausoleum. Yes, he suffered. But at least he was alive to do so, and still nurturing the hope that one day he would escape his enslavement.

“What is this?” his lord said. “You may raise your head out of the dirt, magician.”

Gratefully, Felixson did so, pushing himself up with his right hand and proffering the missive in his left. His lord had stepped out of the procession to speak to Felixson, and the Cenobites continued to make their way past him, their various states of reconfigured flesh still an astonishment to Felixson. He did not allow his gaze to wander from his lord’s face for more than an instant, however. His lord was the

center of his life; everything else—his own comfort, the fullness of his belly—was irrelevant.

“I am called to the Chamber of the Unconsumed.” The Cenobite said, staring down at the letter in his hand with what Felixson thought was an expression of subtle bewilderment on his face. “Now.”

He glanced at Felixson.

“Follow,” he said, and turning to his right, strode back the way he’d come, against the direction of the other members of his Order, towards the city.

Part Three

One

Harry came back to a rainy grey New York. The way he liked it. His apartment was chaotic, the kitchen littered with beer cans and boxes of Chinese food that had turned into little eco-systems of mold; but he left it all for another day. All he wanted was sleep, but this time without the dreams. He dropped his suitcase outside his bedroom door, took off his jacket and shoes as he staggered to the bed, and dropped down onto it. He was in the process of pulling up the cover when sleep overwhelmed him, and he sank into its depths unresisting. He got only once in the next twenty-four hours, and that was to empty his bladder.

On occasion the sound of the telephone would bring him to the surface of sleep, trailing dreams of streets he did not know, with a sky the color of stone looming above them, but for all their emptiness there was something almost that

intrigued him, because he would sink back into his dream-state to find them still waiting. Finally, he done all the sleeping he would need to do for a while. He dragged himself out of bed, and into the bathroom.

“Guano.” He said to himself when he’d shown himself his tongue. Then:

“Coffee kills guano.”

It was one of the few essentials in his refrigerator, the others being sugar and beer. There were more eco-systems flourishing on various leftovers on the lower shelves, but he’d do something about that later. For now he just needed the sugar and coffee. He washed out the coffee jug, filled it with clean water, poured it in the coffee maker, which he’d already loaded with coffee, and while he waited washed out his bigger mug.

It was while he was waiting for sufficient coffee to fill his mug to drip through that he thought about his wounds. He unbuttoned his rumpled shirt. The scar on his lower belly was like a little crater, but it didn’t hurt, and when he went back into the

bathroom to shower he realized his third eye scar had closed up so well that he'd not even noticed it during his assessment of his figure.

An hour later—coffeed, showered, shaved, and dressed in clean clothes—he was out on the street, heading towards his office on 43rd street. The city rain-storm had gone, and the city sparkled. His mood was good, even optimistic, which was rare. With luck, there'd be some thoroughly undemanding cases awaiting him, something that could earn him a little quick cash. It was all very well being led into the mysteries of supernatural, but when a case literally went to Hell it usually left with the bills unpaid. What he needed right now was a couple of quick, lucrative adultery cases, maybe a bit of insurance fraud, just to stop the bank sending him demanding letters.

Still, there was pleasure to be had in knowing what he knew about the city's secret life, things that the expensive beauties who gave him **vain** looks if they caught his admiring gaze—or the high-octane executives with their three hundred dollar

haircuts—would live and die, never knowing. There were other cities around the world. —Rome, certainly, London and Paris, of course, Moscow and Bangkok—where the rites and places where they were performed, were more ancient than Harry's New York could boast. But there was no where in the world that had such a concentration of supernatural activity. It was everywhere, this unending war between those who made it their business to sow discord and despair. They were at work in billionaire penthouses, overlooking Central Park, and basement sex clubs in the meat packing district. Some of them labored with obsessive energy behind the sober facades of brownstones on the East Side while others wove through the crowds on Fifth Avenue, the dementia of reason so powerful it blinded all but the small children and the mad to their presence.

Born under an unkind star Harry might well have been numbered amongst the mad, the dark he knew, his knowledge of the dark side of the world taken for proof of his insanity. But he'd learned back in St. Dominic's, at the tender age of

twelve, of speaking too loudly about what they rest of humanity had no wish to concede that they knew. Better to shut up, however tempting it was to try and push people past their denial; to make them share the vision.

It helped, of course, to have a circle, of like minded friends. Harry had Norma and Caz. There'd been others along the way, starting with Tom Osbourne at St. Dom's, but some had skipped out of sight; like Father Hess, who had died at the hands of the adversary (that had been Hess' catch-all term for those he stood against); some had simply given up the exhausting work of seeing and had surrendered to the blind consensus.

He thought of them as he walked. There were a few names he couldn't recall any longer. No big surprise. He's always been lousy with names. But he'd still have them on his old rolodex at the office or in his two overfilled address books in the—

In mid thought he was struck by a man who came at him from the opposite direction, pausing for the briefest of moments to grunt something, before dodging

around Harry and heading off down the street. It was only when he'd gone from sight that Harry made sense of the grunt.

“Not here,” he'd said, and felt against his palm the scrap of paper the man had pushed into his hand.

He took the advice and walked on, curiosity speeding his step. He turned a corner onto a quieter street, not planning a particular route, just wondering where he was being watched from, and who by, that the messenger should warn him the way he had. He checked the reflection in the windows on the opposite side of the street, to see if anyone had followed him, but he saw nobody. He kept walking, the paper crumpled up in his left fist. About two thirds of the way down the block was a florist's store called Eden & Co. He went in, taking the opportunity to glance back down the street. If he was being followed it was not, his ink and his instinct told him, by any of the half dozen people who were walking in his direction.

It was a long time since he'd had any occasion to step into a flower store. The air was cool, moist and heavy with the mingled perfumes of dozens of blossoms. A middle-aged man with a immaculately trimmed moustache that followed the line of his mouth like a third lip, appeared from the back of the store and asked Harry if he was looking for anything in particular.

No, just looking." Harry said.

"Do you need some guidance?"

"No. Its okay, I'll just—"

"Look."

"Yes."

"Call me when you've decided."

"I'll do that."

The man with the perfect moustache stepped through a beaded curtain at the back of the shop and immediately started up a conversation in Portuguese which

Harry's arrival had apparently disrupted, because no sooner had the man begun that a woman came back at him speaking twice as fast and in an obvious rage. The man shushed her in Portuguese: "We have a customer out there! Keep your voice down! You open your mouth, and I lose money!" He changed over to English to press home his point, "Just be quiet! I won't have you scaring away any more customers!"

"You see," the woman said. "Always you say the same. I scare them. I scare them. If I'm so bad, why you stay with me? Huh? Maybe you wish I was dead instead—"

"No. Please." In Portuguese: "I wouldn't want that. Lord God in Heaven, how many times do I have to tell you that I love you?"

"Not enough." She said, her voice thick with the threat of tears. In Portuguese: "You never tell me enough."

While this heated conversation went on Harry wandered around the store, looking up now and again to see if there was anyone watching from the street.

Finally, having convinced himself that he was not being spied upon, he opened his fist and smoothed out the piece of paper. Whatever was scrawled on it was a blur without his reading spectacles. He could usually get through a day without any need of them, but this was not one of those days. Whatever distance he held the paper from his eyes, at arm's length, or virtually touching his nose, he could not get the words to focus. He patted his jacket and found that for once he had the damn things on him. He pulled them out of his inside pocket and put them on. Even then he had to move the paper back and forth until its scrawled message came clear.

"This is from Norma," It said. "Don't go to my apartment. It's bad. I'm in the basement of the old place. Come at 3am. If you itch, walk away."

"A message?" a woman said.

Harry looked up. The woman had come from the back of the store while he'd been reading and re-reading the note supposedly dictated by Norma. He barely had time to bite back the *"Christ!"* he almost muttered at the sight of her. Three fourths of

her face was a rigid mass of smeared and indented scar tissue, the remaining quarter—her left eye and brow above it—plus the elaborately coiffed wig, which was a mass of curls —only seeming to make the erasure of the left of her face, seem even crueler. Her nose was reduced to two round holes, her right eye and mouth were shorn of lashes and lips. Harry fixed his attention on her left eye and stumbled over his reply, which was simply a repeating of her question.

“Yes,” she said glancing down at the scrap of paper in his hand. “You want this with the flowers?”

“Oh no, no.” He quickly pocketed the message, and glanced around the store. Maybe he’d take something to Norma tonight, why not?

“What smells really good?”

“Smells good?”

“Yeah, not real strong, just, you know, good.”

“For a lady you’re bringing?”

“For a lady, yes.”

“I think maybe tuber rose.” She went to one of the vases and selected a broom.

“You smell?”

“Oh. Oh sure. Yeah. That’s good. So give me a dozen of those.”

The woman was pleased, and Harry was happy to have pleased her, though it was a small thing set beside the life she had been handed. But there was power “in a little kindness and courtesies” he knew. Inconsequential of themselves, their sum was significant. And so what of he felt a little odd walking away from the store ten minutes later with a bunch of flowers in his hand? There were many worse ways to feel out of place, as the woman he’d left smiling in the store could have testified.

Two

Harry took the note, and his puzzlement over its contents, along with a fierce hunger to Cherrington's, a bar which he'd found the first day he'd come to New York, and had eaten at practically every day he was in the city since. It was old-fashioned

food served with a minimum of fuss, and they knew him so well that he only had to slide into his corner and give a little nod to Phyllis and there'd be a large bourbon, no ice, on his table within sixty seconds, usually half that.

“You're looking good, Phyllis.”

“I'm retiring.”

“What? When?”

“End of next week. I'm going to have a little party on Friday evening, just for the staff and a few regulars. You in town?”

“If I am, I'll be here.”

“It's a tuna on rye, right?”

“Right. Where are you retiring to?”

“Home to Sacramento...”

She seemed to want to say more than this, but then decide against it. Harry studied her in the moment of indecision, her eyes downcast. She was probably in her

mid-sixties, which meant she'd been edging towards forty when Harry first found the place, and her in it. Forty-something to sixty-something was a lot of life, a lot of chances come, gone and never coming round again.

“Are you okay?” Harry said.

“Yeah, yeah. I'm not going home to die or nothing. I just can't take this city any longer. I don't sleep nights. I'm weary.”

“You don't look it.”

“I thought guys like you had to be good liars.” She headed away from the table, saving Harry from fumbling for a reply. “I'll be right back with your tuna melt.”

Then, over her shoulder, “Them flowers sure smell sweet.”

Harry settled back into the corner of the booth and pulled out the note again.

It wasn't like Norma to be melodramatic, he knew. Up there, in what was unequivocally the most haunted apartment in the city she'd held advice sessions for the recently dead for three decades and more, hearing stories of violent death by

those who'd just experienced them, murder victims, suicides, people killed crossing the street or dropped in their tracks by something dropped from a window. If anyone could have honestly claimed to have heard it all before, it was Norma. So what was it that had made her leave her ghosts and televisions and her kitchen where she knew the location of everything, down to the last teaspoon?

He looked at the clock above the bar. It was six-thirty-two. Another eight hours. He couldn't wait that long. He downed his bourbon, called over to Phyllis that he'd be taking his sandwich with him, and waited just another minute or two for her to bring it to him, in an old-fashioned paper bag the way he liked it instead of those damn-fool Styrofoam boxes.

"Will you put his on my tab?"

"Where's the fire?"

"I've got to get someplace faster than I thought." He tucked a hundred dollar bill in her hand.

“What’s this for?”

“It’s for you.” Harry said, already turning towards the door. “In case I don’t make it next Friday.”

“You said you would.”

“And I will, if I’m here. But if I’m not, get drunk on that for me, will you?”

—

“Fuck this three in the morning crap.” Harry muttered to himself as he waved down a cab. He got in, gave the cross-streets to the driver, and settled back to eat his tuna on rye. He took out half of the over-filed sandwich and got one good bite. Then the driver said:

“You no eat in my cab.”

“Since when?”

“Since sign.” The man said, his attention too galvanized by the thrill of weaving to hit every pot-hole in the street to look around. “You see sign?”

“Yes, I see sign.” Harry said, taking a second bite while digging in the bag for a napkin to wipe mayonnaise from around his mouth.

“You no eat! Cab smell of bad American food.” The driver insisted. “Make everybody fat.”

“Oh, so it’s for the good of my health, is it?” Harry said, taking a third bite.

“What do you mean? Good of health?”

“I mean, you don’t want me to eat because I’ll get fat.”

“Yes, fat. Fat! All Americans are fat!”

“It’s different in your country, is it?”

My country, my country, what do you say my country? I live here. I am American.”

“But not fat.”

“No. Not fat. I not eat bad food.”

Harry finished the sandwich as the cab hit a succession of pot-holes. “Okay.

Let’s make peace.”

“Make piss? No make piss in car. See sign.”

“No piss. Peace. Make peace. Be friends. I finish my sandwich later. You get us
to 13th and 9th alive. How’s that?”

“No piss?”

“No piss. No fart. No nothing. Okay?”

“Okay.”

There was a short silence. Then the driver said: “It say no fart on sign? I never
knew that. Huh.”

—

The corner of 13th and 9th was not Harry's true destination. That lay two and a half blocks further down in what had been a well-kept building which had housed lawyers, doctors and psychiatrists. It was in the waiting room of one of the latter, one Dr. Krackomberger, that Harry had met Norma Paine. He'd been taken off active duty after the events at —————. His version of things was radically different from everybody else's, and Krackomberger, in a courteous but insistent fashion, kept pressing Harry on the details of what he imagined he'd seen. And Harry would go through it all again, moment by moment, foiling Krackomberger's attempt to catch Harry out with some inconsistency from telling to telling.

By the time the number of repetitions was in double figures Harry was out of patience with the game.

"This getting us nowhere." He said.

"I would agree."

“You just make me go over the same horrible stuff, time after time. If I had my way I wouldn’t be here, but I guess until you sign me off as fit, they’re not going to put me on active duty again.”

“And is that what you want?”

“Of course it’s what I want!” The volume of his voice rising. Dr.

Krackomberger looked over at his small collection of china figurines, all arranged on a shelf to his left. They seemed to be a source of comfort for him. Whenever the scenes Harry was describing were exceptionally violent—though he’d heard it all before, many times—his eyes went to the figurines with their pretty pastel dresses and their permanent carefree smiles. “You love those things, don’t you?”

“My Dresden figurines? Well they’re certainly lovely. But that doesn’t mean that I... love them.”

“Well for something you don’t love you sure do spend a hell of a lot of time staring at the fucking things.”

Krackomberger reddened a little.

“At times of anxiety one goes to things that please the eye. That perhaps comfort us with their familiarity.”

“And you’re anxious when I’m talking about what happened because...?”

The doctor paused for several seconds before answering, staring at the two figurines in the center of his collection, a young man playing a violin to a young lady sitting on a sofa. They were ugly to Harry’s eye: prettified to the point of banality.

Finally the doctor said: “It comes down to this, in the end. Your version of what happened that day is preposterous. In less serious circumstances I’d call it laughable.”

“Oh you would, would you?”

“Yes, Mr. D’Amour. I would.”

“So all this time I’ve been pouring my fucking heart out to you—”

“Sit down, Mr. D’Amour.”

“Don’t interrupt me. I don’t interrupt you. All this time, when you’ve just made me go over and over it, you were having a quiet giggle inside, were you?”

“I didn’t say- Please, Mr. D’Amour, sit down, or I shall be obliged to have you forcibly—”

“All right. I’m sitting. Okay? Is that okay?”

“That’s certainly better. But if you feel the need to get up again, then I suggest you simply leave my office.”

“And if I do, what will you put on my papers?”

“Unfit for service due to extreme delusional states, almost certainly brought on by the trauma of the incident. Nobody is calling you crazy, Mr. D’Amour. I just need to give your superiors an honest assessment of your condition.”

“Extreme delusional states...” Harry said softly.

“People respond to the kind of pressure you’ve had to endure in very different ways. You seem to have created a kind of personal mythology to contain the whole terrible experience, to make sense of it, even those—”

He was interrupted by a series of crashes from the next room, where Krackomberger’s secretary sat.

“It’s not me!” a woman’s voice—not that of the secretary—said. “I’m just sitting here.”

The doctor got up, making a mumbled apology to Harry, and opened the door. As he did so several magazines came sailing past him and landed on the Persian carpet in the doctor’s office where they flapped around like birds. Now the hairs on the back of Harry’s neck were standing on end. Whatever was wrong next door it wasn’t just an irate patient, his gut told him. This was something altogether stranger. He took a deep breath, and got up and followed Krackomberger through to the waiting room. Even as he did so the doctor retreated, stumbling over his own feet in his haste.

“What’s going on?” Harry said.

Krackomberger looked at him, his face drained of blood, his expression crazed.

“Did you do this?” he said to Harry.

“Is it some kind of practical joke?”

“No.” said the woman in the waiting room. She had the high cheek bones and the lavish mouth of a woman who had once been a classic beauty. But life had marked her deeply, etching her black skin with frown marks and grooves around her downturned mouth. Her eyes were milky white. She plainly couldn’t see Harry, but as soon as he emerged from the doctor’s office, he felt her gaze upon him, like the softest of winds blowing against his face, his face, his hands, then back to his face again. All the while something in the room was having a fine time of it, overturning chairs, sweeping half the contents of the secretary’s desk onto the floor. “No, it isn’t his fault.” The woman said. She picked up her stick and doing her best to conceal the pain this simple act gave her, she got up.

“I’m Norma Paine,” she said.

“I’m Harry D’Amour.”

“Not the same D’Amour who was involved in that mess in New Jersey?”

“Yeah. That’s me.”

“Well, whatever he tried to tell you about what you saw or didn’t see, just agree with him.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because people like him have a vested interest in silencing people like us. We rock the boat, you see?”

“Is that what you’re doing right now?” Harry said.

The pictures were coming off the walls, one by one. Not simply falling but being lifted off by their hooks, as if by invisible hands, then thrown down so violently the glass shattered.

“I’m not doing this.” Norma said. “One of my clients is here—”

“Clients.”

“I talk to the dead, Mr. D’Amour. And this particular fellow doesn’t feel as though I’m paying enough attention.”

“So why are you seeing the doctor?”

“I’m not. The guy who’s doing all the damage—”

She was interrupted by Krackomberger. His face was beet red. “Stop this right now,” He said to Norma. “You’re destroying—”

“I’m not the unruly element here, doctor. That’s your brother.”

“Impossible.”

“Milton Karckomberger, yes?”

“Milton is dead.”

“Well of course he’s dead.” Norma snapped, “Would I be talking to him if he was alive?”

The doctor looked utterly bewildered by this piece of logic.

“I think she talks to the dead is what she’s saying,” Harry put in.

“I’m not speaking Swahili,” Norma said. “I don’t need an interpreter.”

“I was just trying to help.”

“Well, don’t. I’ve already got an imbecile on my hands, I don’t need another.

You men! So damn certain of yourselves. Listen Shelly—”

“My name is Martin,” the doctor said.

“But your brother told me to call you Shelly, because that’s your middle name and not many people know that. Is it true?”

“Yes, but you could have found that out any number of ways.”

“All right,” said Norma. Then seemingly addressing somebody in the doctor’s office. “I tried my best, Walter. If he doesn’t want to hear—”

“Hear what?” said Krackomberger.

“Forget it.” Said Norma, turning her back on the doctor. “I need a brandy. Mr. D’Amour, would you like to join me in a little toast to the idiocy of psychiatrists?”

“Oh yes. I would happily drink to that.”

“Walter.” Norma said, “I think you should leave your brother alone. You’re frightening innocent people.”

She was speaking, Harry supposed, of the receptionist, who had taken refuge under the desk when the pictures started to drop, and hadn’t emerged since.

“Wait,” Krackomberger said as they headed for the door. “You’re blind, aren’t you?”

“You noticed.”

“So how can you possibly see my brother?”

“I don’t have any idea. I only know I can. The dead are invisible to you but perfectly clear to me.”

“You can see my brother right now?”

Norma turned back and stared into the office. “Yes, he’s lying on your couch.”

“What’s he doing?”

“You really want to know?”

“I asked you, didn’t I?”

“He’s masturbating vigorously.”

“Jesus, it’s him. The dirty minded little scumbag!”

“He says he wants to know how many of your patients you’ve fucked on your couch?”

“Not me!” the doctor replied, with a tone of high righteousness.

“Your brother seems to disagree.” Norma said, “but he promises to keep his mouth shut if...” she paused, listening, “if you’d give the Dresden to Lizzie, the way your mother intended.”

The beet red face of just two or three minutes before, had drained of all color.

Indeed Krackomberger looked as though he might pass out.

“I think you should sit down.” Harry said, pulling the receptionist’s chair from behind the desk. “Breathe slowly. Deep inhalation. What’s the young lady’s name?”

“Sharon.” Krackomberger said, his voice barely audible.

“Sharon, will you get some water for the doctor? You can come out from under there. Nothing’s going to happen.”

Sharon wasn’t moving, however.

“There’s bottled water in the little fridge in the doctor’s office.”

“You don’t happen to keep any brandy on the premises, do you?”

“No.” Sharon said.

“Yes.” Said Krackomberger. “There’s a small bottle of brandy behind the third and fourth volumes of Whitehead’s “Disorders of the Modern Mind” to the left of the fridge, four shelves up.

“Well this is getting more civilized by the moment.”

“Mrs. Musser will be here in five minutes for her appointment.”

“Oh god, oh god. This is crazy!”

“Sharon.” Harry said. “Please get out from under that damn desk.”

“Has the thing gone?”

“That thing,” said Harry, “is actually Doctor Krackonberger’s brother and he’s still here. But he’s no danger to you or anyone, is he Norma?” He glanced over at Norma, who had her head slightly cocked. Harry knew from past experience what the posture meant: She was listening to the fifth person there, the one invisible to all eyes but hers.

“What’s he saying?”

“That he’ll behave himself. He just needs to discuss some things with his brother.”

“But first, Mrs. Musser,” Dr. Krackomberger said. “Sharon, call down to Chapple at the front door. Tell him to apologize to Mrs. Musser, but I’m very, very sick and it’s very, very contagious. Tell her you’ll call her tomorrow to set a new appointment. Profuse apologies, etc.”

Sharon picked up the phone. As she dialed, Harry said: "Have you got some kind of sign for the door?"

Sharon opened the top drawer of her desk. "Office closed?" She said.

"Perfect."

Harry hung the sign on the door, then closed and locked it. Sharon put down the phone.

"Just in time." She said to the doctor. "Mrs. Musser was just getting out of her limo."

"Enough of the damn chit-chat," Norma said. "I have a line of needy souls waiting to talk to me—"

"That's not my problem." Doctor Krankomberger remarked.

"No. You just have one. And if I leave, and he stays here, then he's going to turn your life upside-down. Believe me, I've seen it happen. Death makes anarchists of the strangest people.

“Walter isn’t an anarchist.”

“Well go and tell him.”

“Is he still jerking off on my beautiful sofa?”

“No. He’s sitting on that old leather chair in the corner. So, go on, open the conversation. When he answers, I’ll tell you what he says—”

“Word for word?”

“Word for word.”

—

From that chance encounter the friendship of Harry and Norma had begun.

And like much that happens by chance, this collision of souls could not have seemed more to the purpose of both. Harry had been doubting his sanity in recent weeks, the fuel for that fire supplied by Doctor Krackomberger. Now Norma came into his life,

talking to the supernatural as if it was the most commonplace phenomena, something that was happening across the city every moment of everyday. It was she who had first said—when he unburdened himself of what he’s seen the day of the deaths—that she believed every word of it, and that she knew men and women around the city who could tell stories of their own that were evidence of the same otherness, present in the daily and indeed rightly, life of New York.

“Most people here had the ability to see these things knocked out of their heads by the time they’re five. You have to say goodbye to your secret friends, and the people who walk down the street without their feet touching the ground—that was something I saw a lot of as a little girl. I called them the Floatin’ Folks. But my mama would whup me so hard whenever I talked about them that I learned to shut up.”

“So you weren’t born blind?”

“Oh no, I had the use of my eyes until around the time I started my monthlies.

And I got sick, real sick, and nobody could figure it out. Maybe if mama could have afforded a fancy doctor, I would have been fixed up. But I got such a fever on me it felt like I was roasting on a spit. It lasted a good long while too, so that I think my mama figured I'd die. Still she was a woman of several faiths. She'd go to mass on a Sunday morning and that night cut off a liver of a chicken, for the old gods. Didn't see no contradiction in it, either.”

“Smart woman.”

“Norma smiled. “You think so?”

“Sure. You want as many gods on your side as possible, don't you?”

“Something tells me you were born for this, Harry.”

“This, being—”

“Walking between worlds. Between the seen and the unseen. The demonic and the angelic. The living and the dead.”

“I don’t want to get mixed up with all that.” Harry said. “I just want a regular life.”

“Oh, I think you’ll get bored with that very quickly. Anyway at this point it’s not your decision. All you can do is go with the flow.”

“And where’s it going to take me?”

“Believe me, some damn strange places, to meet some damn strange people,”

She smiled, mischievously. “You can’t even imagine, Harry. What most people see?

It’s nothing. Shadows on the wall of a cave, like the Greek guy said.”

“Plato.”

“You read his stuff?”

“Christ, No. I got told this story about the shadows on the wall by this philosopher from Yale. He’d just been killed by his wife, who he’d found him in bed with one of the young men he taught.”

“Plato would have approved.”

“Was he a... you know...?”

“He was queer, yeah. At least I think so. Anyway, the fire.”

“Well that’s pretty much all I remember. We were standing with our backs to the fire looking at the shadows dancing on the wall, and we think—at the least most people think—that the shadows are real. Because it never occurs to them to look behind them.”

“Well I’d hate to argue with a smarty-pants like Plato, but if all I get to see when I look over my shoulder is more of what I saw the day that ————— died, I’ll stick with the shadows, thank you very much.”

“I don’t think it’s a question of choice, Harry. It’s what you were born to do.”

“Is that really how you think about your life? You were born and it had already been written in some fucking huge book that on a particular day in one particular year little Norma Paine would catch a fever and go blind?”

“I don’t know if it’s in a book or written on some angel’s ass, I just know it’s part of a plan and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

It was an argument they would visit and revisit over the years, Harry’s certainty that he was a self-willed creature seldom wavering, and Norma’s faith in their predestined places in some grand design equally solid. There was a day when the two of them didn’t talk, often to seek out one another’s help on something that was happening in their corner of the world; Harry needing the wisdom of one of Norma’s phantom visitors to help him solve a case; Norma sending Harry out as her eyes and ears, to check on the truth of some pieces of information one of the dead had shared with her. It was a partnership, and like all partnerships it had its good days and its bad, its skirmishes and its battles, when hard words were often said on both sides, then there’d be twenty-four hours that they didn’t talk, but it was very seldom more than that. One or other of them would always break the silence before it got bitter, and they’d make peace, for all the world like a couple of unlikely lovers.

He was in sight of the building now. Lord, but it had changed! The windows were either boarded up or broken, the doors chained and padlocked. There'd been a fire at some point, which had gutted a good third of the place, and scorch marks blackening the façade above the burned out windows. It was a sad sight. But more significantly, it was a troubling one. Why would Norma leave the comfort of her apartment for this god forsaken corner of nowhere?

All the doors were severely locked and bolted, but Harry's solution to such a problem was always old-fashioned brute strength. He chose one of the boarded up doors, and pulling out his trusty crowbar, he levered off several of the boards. It was a noisy, messy business, and if there'd been any kind of security guarding the building, as several prominently placed signs announced that there were, men and dogs would have certainly come running. But he was left to his own devices; and within five minutes of beginning his sweaty labor he had denuded the door of its boards, and forced the lock.

“Nice work.” He told the crowbar, and stepped inside.

Three

The chief power of decency is its erasing of particulars. Everything that had distinguished the modestly elegant lobby in which Harry now stood—the deco sweep of the design on the mirrors, which had been etched in the tile underfoot, and the shape of the lighting fixtures—had been destroyed. Whether the destruction had resulted from a crude attempt to take up the tiles for resale, and bring down the mirror and light fixtures intact for the same purpose, or whether the place simply had been smashed by a bunch of drugged up vandals with nothing better to do, the result was the same: chaos and debris in place of order and purpose. A representation, in short, of the war that raged above and below Harry's existence, the defining conflict of life itself, at least as he understood it: do you prosper and love in a world of order and beauty, or slaughter and perish in rubble and shit?

Norma had told him countless times not to try and interpret every sign he stumbled on as being a clue to the great mystery in which he had become embroiled, but he couldn't help himself. If she was right and everything was indeed part of some grand design then the smallest thing had significance.

He walked through the litter and glass shards and tile shards to the stairs. Then he began to ascend. Apparently there were easier ways into the building than breaking down one of the doors as he had, because the sharp smell of human urine and the duller stink of feces grew stronger as he climbed. People used this place, as a toilet yes, but probably to sleep in too. He brought the crowbar out again, just in case he came face to face with a bad-tempered tenants. The good news was how very unaroused his tattoos were. Not an itch, not a spasm. Apparently Norma had made a smart choice for a bolt hole. Not the most salubrious of surroundings, but if it kept her hidden from the adversary and its agents, then it at least had that to recommend it.

The offices of Dr. Krackomberger had been suite 212, he thought, though his memory was hazy on the subject. Unlike the tiles down below the plush beige carpeting that had covered the passageway had been rolled up and removed, leaving just the bare boards. With every second or third step Harry took one of them creaked; and no one was as sharp eared as Norma. She knew he was coming, he didn't have the slightest doubt of that. He got to the door of Doctor Krackomberger's office, and tried the handle, expecting it to be locked. But no. The door opened and he was faced with yet another spectacle of vandalism. Somebody had taken a sledgehammer to the walls, it seemed.

He chanced a word. "Norma?"

Then several words. "Norma? It's Harry. I got your message. I know I'm early, but... are you here?"

He went through into Krackomberger's office. The books that had lined the walls had not been taken, though they'd all been stripped from the shelves, and a pile

of them used to make a fire in the middle of the room. Harry squatted beside the fire and tested the ashes. They were completely cold. Mystified, Harry took a peek inside Kracomberger's private bathroom, but it was completely trashed as everywhere else. Norma was not here. Nor, his instincts told him, had she been here. He caught sight of himself in the mirror above the sink and was reassured to see that the gaunt, sickly D'Amour who'd been ministered to by Coanthagnita had been replaced by a healthier version. He wasn't quite his old self: his hair was starting to recede and what was left was looking a lot greyer, but given how close he'd come to losing his life in New Orleans he didn't look too damn bad. It was only when he was about to turn away from his reflection when he saw the arrow, pointing down, which was scrawled on the glass. It was made with white paint, and recently. One of the droplets that had run down the mirror had pooled on the tile behind the faucets. He pressed through the acrylic skin and found liquid paint beneath.

So what does the arrow mean? Harry asked his reflection. Go down? But where to? Oh wait... I know what's down there.

—

The Members only club that had once occupied the basement of the building had been designed for New Yorkers with more outré tastes than they could satisfy at the sex-emporiums which had once run along 8th avenue and 42nd street. Harry had glimpsed it in operation many years before because he'd been hired by the owner, one Howard Torregrossa, to do some detective work regarding his wife. Despite the fact Torregrossa ran an establishment dedicated to hedonism of every stripe, he was a deeply conservative man in his personal life, and was genuinely distressed when he began to suspect his wife's infidelities.

Harry had done his investigations, and about three weeks later had brought the incriminating photographs of Mrs. Torregrossa to the grieving spouse in a large manila envelope. As Torregrossa had requested, he'd sent his assistant J.J. Fingerman, to take Harry down into the club and get him a drink and give him a quick tour of the premises. It was quite an eye opener, bondage, whipping, caning, water sports, the club offered a smorgasboard of perversities, practiced by men and women, most of them dressed in costumes that announced their particular proclivities. A fifty year old man whom Harry knew as the mayor's right-hand-man was tottering around on stiletto heels in a frilly French maid's outfit; a woman who organized celebrity fund raisers for the homeless and the destitute, was crawling around naked with a dildo impaled in her behind, from which hung a tail of black horse hair. On the main stage one of the most successful writers of Broadway musicals was tied to a chair having the flesh of his scrotum spread out and nailed to a piece of wood by a young woman

dressed as a nun. To judge by the state of his arousal the procedure was bliss. Harry returned with J.J. Fingerman and ordered a double bourbon.

“Got you a little hot and bothered, did we?” J.J. remarked.

Harry drank the double bourbon and asked for another. The bartender glanced at Fingerman.

“Whatever the man wants,” Fingerman said. “It’s all on the boss’ tab.”

Eventually they had to go back to speak with Mr. Torregrossa but his office door was locked from the inside. Harry had a very bad feeling now, and rather than wait for the keys to be located. He and Fingerman kicked the door open. The cuckolded husband lay sprawled over his desk, where the photographs Harry had taken of Mrs. Torregrossa in her various liaisons were spread, splattered with the blood, bone fragments and brain matter that had emptied in all directions when he’d put his gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

The party was over. The pleasure seekers below were hurriedly told to stop their whipping and their binding and their games with candle wax and nails, and leave in an orderly fashion, unless they wanted to be interviewed by the police. Harry was watching from the stairs as they picked up their coats, briefcases and purses, and prepared to head out into the night. The division between the rich, powerful players and those who had neither influence or affluence had instantly reasserted itself. Filthy rich women who had been gratefully licking the toe-jam from the feet of a brutish masters now pushed them, their coat collars raised, to get out to their chauffeured limousines, while men who'd been weeping with anger and gratitude at the flogging they were receiving from young women, now looked through their mistresses as though they were invisible.

Harry had learned a lot that night, a matter seen graphically played out, things he's always known about, what fantasy and desire could drive people to do, and how close, in certain circumstances, pain and pleasure were. But that had been last time

those games were played in that particular place. Through there wasn't a great deal of publicity about the death of Torregrossa, the very fact that the club's patrons had been ushered out of the private theater frustrated, the last act of their personal dramas unplayed, and worse, with the imminent arrival of the authorities and all the recognition that would have accompanied their presence, meant that few of that night's customers would have come again, and Torregrossa's manager knew it. He had to shut the place down after Torregrossa's death, 'out of respect' he'd said. The place had never reopened.

Harry found a cluster of light switched at the top of the stairs and flicked them on. Only two of them worked, one turning on a light directly over Harry's head, which spilled down the black-painted stairs, the other turning on a light in the booth where guests had paid their entrance fee and got themselves a key for a little changing room where they could shed their public skins and unpack their collars or their whips.

Harry cautiously headed down the stairs. There were small twitches and a flutter of activity in one of Harry's tattoos: the loose ritual necklace that Caz had dubbed his Scrimshaw Ring, which didn't hang close to his neck but was arranged so that its twenty-seven pieces of intricately carved and decorated whale-bone seemed to sit halfway between his shoulder and the curve of his neck, and kept that same distance at front and back. While many of Caz's tattoos were talismans, and made no pretense to solidity, the Scrimshaw Ring had been so meticulously rendered in the troupe l'oeil style, the shadow beneath it so dense that it made the necklace appear to stand proud of Harry's skin.

Its function was relatively simple: It alerted Harry to the presence of ghosts. But given that the spirits of the dead were everywhere, some in states of panic or agitation, others simply taking the air after the suffocations of death, the Scrimshaw ring discriminated nicely, and did not alert Harry's presence to any revenant except those that posed some possible threat.

Apparently there was one such ghost—at least one—in Harry’s immediate vicinity now. He paused at the bottom of the stairs, contemplating the very real possibility that this was a trap; a ghost hired by the powers he’d confronted and embarrassed in New Orleans. But if they wanted revenge why send a few phantoms? They could frighten the unwitting, to be sure, but Harry was scarcely that. A little spook show wasn’t going to leave him trembling. He took out his flash-light and turned the beam on the room in front of him. The club seemed to have been left in the very state it had been in when Torregrossa put a bullet through his brain. The bar was still intact, the bottles of hard liquor still lined up, waiting for a thirsty customer. Harry heard the glasses stacked underneath the bar start to tinkle, as one of the ghosts started its performance. When he ignored the noise and continued his advance the spirit threw several of the short glasses into the air. They were then pitched down onto the bar with such violence that a few of the flying shards hit Harry. He didn’t respond to the display. He just made his way on past the bar and into the big room

with the St. Andrew's cross set on the stage, where whip-wielders could show off their expertise. Harry ran his light around the room, looking for some sign of the presence here. He stepped up onto the stage, and as he did there was a noise off to the right. He swung his flash light in the direction of the sound. The wall had an array of canes, paddles and whips hung on it, maybe fifty instruments in all. One of the paddles had just been unhooked and taken down, and now another followed it, and then a cane, then several canes, then the whips, then several whips, a few of the lighter items simply dropped to the floor the heavier ones pitched in Harry's direction. One of the heavy wooden paddles hit his knee, hard.

“Ah, fuck this!” he said, and instead of backing off from the haunted objects he walked straight into their assault.

“I'm not remotely intimidated by whoever you are, but if you go on throwing around more fucking things I will spit out a cylllogizic that'll make you wish you never died.”

He'd no sooner voiced this threat than one of the biggest whips on display was pulled down off the wall and drawn back, in preparation for a strike.

"Don't." Harry said.

His warning went disregarded. The phantom wielding the whip was either very lucky or new its business. With the first strike it caught Harry's cheek, a sharp sting that made his eye water.

"You stupid dick-head," he muttered. "You asked for it." He started to speak the cyllogizic which was one of the first he'd ever learned:

"E vutta quathakai,

Nom-not, nom-netha,

E, vuttu quathaakai,

Antibethis—"

He was barely two thirds through the utterance, but it was already revealing the presences here. They looked like shadows thrown up on steam, their edges

evaporating, their features scrawled on the air like a sideways artist working on the rain. There were three of them: All men.

“Stop please now the cylogizic,” one of them said.

“Give me one reason why I should.”

“We were only following orders.”

“That angle hasn’t worked since Nuremberg.” Harry said. “But since you brought it up, *who’s* orders?”

The phantoms exchanged panicky looks.

“Mine, Harry.” Said a leathery voice from the darkness of the next room.

“Norma?”

“Don’t torment them. They were only trying to protect me.”

“All right,” Harry said to the phantasms. “I guess you get a reprieve.”

“Stay at your posts.” Norma said, “He could have been followed.”

“I wasn’t followed.” Harry said as he walked into the back room.

“But you could have been. And better safer than sorry.”

Harry tried the light switch, and the wall mounted lights, the bulbs red so as to flatter the nakedness of the customers of those skins of leather or rubber they'd put on for the night.

Norma was standing in the middle of the room, leaning on a stick, her hair, grey going to white, unpinned for the first time in all the years Harry had known her, her face, though still possessed of the elegant beauty and power of her bones, was slack with exhaustion. Only her eyes had motion in them, the colorless pupils appearing to watch a tennis match between two absolutely equal players, left to right, right to left, left to right, right to left, the ball never once fumbled.

“What in God's name are you doing down here, Norma?”

“I'll tell you if you sit and listen for a moment. Give me your arm. My legs aren't as good anymore.”

“They’re not being helped by the damp down here, Norma. You should be more careful at your age.”

“We’re neither of us is as young as we used to be,” Norma said as she led Harry through to what had been the room where the players only went when they were in the mood for some extreme games. “I can’t do this much longer, Harry. I’m too damn tired.”

“You wouldn’t be too damn tired if you were sleeping in your own bed.” Harry said, looking at the old mattress laid on the floor, with a few blankets to keep her warm.

“If it was in my own bed now I’d be dead, Harry. If not today then tomorrow or the day after.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I had a vision from Louie Fast.”

“I thought he mover to Bangkok.”

“He moved back. Took up his old business.”

“Prophetics?”

“Don’t seem so contemptuous.”

“You’re not hiding yourself down here because of something Louis Fast told you, are you?”

Norma tapped her cane ahead of her until she located one of the establishment’s chairs, with their scarlet and glitter plastic seats. She sat down, letting out a long sigh.

“If it had just been Louie telling me I had some bad times coming I wouldn’t have listened, Harry. But it wasn’t. I’ve had warnings from some of my clients, and they all say the same kind of purge is underway. First the magicians, now—”

“Wait. Back up. What happened to the magicians?”

“Dead. Or disappeared. Every serious practitioner, anyone with any real credibility—”

Which is how many?"

"I doubt it's more than a hundred, once you picked out the phonies and the fakers. But that left a lot of powerful people—"

"Who must have put up a fight."

"Oh, there's no doubt that they did that, according to my sources."

"Who are?"

"I can't tell you, Harry. I assured these people that I'd preserve their anonymity. But they're unimpeachable, believe me. And frankly there's another reason why I'm holed up in this filthy place. I'm afraid that if some agent of the adversary caught up with me, and put my feet to the fire, I'd end up naming names."

Her face drew itself into a knot of anguish. "I'd never forgive myself if I got murdered, because I couldn't hold my tongue." Tears escaped from the corners of her eyes. It was the first time he'd ever see Norma weep and it was immensely distressing.

Harry's stomach convulsed, and he was about to put his arms around her when she

said: “In case you’re thinking it, don’t get sentimental on me, because I don’t need any of that nonsense. Never did. Never will.”

She wiped away the tears with the heels of her hands. “I’m not very proud of myself right now.”

“Because of a few tears?”

“Christ no,” she said, her mouth down-turned. “Because I ran. Because I’m hiding away in this damn place. I just couldn’t think of anywhere else to go. And I couldn’t get a hold of you—”

“I was having some problems in New Orleans.”

“Problems with what?”

“Nothing important.” Harry said. “I’m here. I’m alive and kicking, so lets deal with getting you out of this place. Who helped you get in, by the way?”

“That kid from the liquor store who delivers my brandy.”

“What made you trust him?”

“I don’t know. Just a feeling. That’s all there is in the end, isn’t it?”

“Less talk of The End, if you don’t mind.” D’Amour said.

“Oh come on, Harry. You’re a lot more sensitive to this stuff than you own up to. I know.” She fixed him with her sightless eyes, and wagged her finger like a school ma’am. “You think I’m fooled by all your imitation of a private investigator?”

“It’s not an imitation.’

“It’s not what you are.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“How the hell should I know? Whatever it is, Harry, it’s going to become clear very soon.”

“Another of your feelings?”

“You can work them.”

“I’m not working anything. I’m just fed up with signs, talismans and things I can’t quite make sense of.’

“Go on.”

“That’s it.”

“No. There’s more.”

“Just some stuff in New Orleans. Voodoo medicine and dreams that didn’t seem like dreams.”

“What of?”

“There was a girl and a dog—”

“Wait—” Norma said, “You know, maybe I shouldn’t have asked you.”

“Nobody’s going to be putting your feet to the fire, Norma. I’ll take care of you.”

“I know you will, Harry. I know. Even so, better not to tell me. It’s safer for everyone.”

“Louie Fast has a lot to answer for.” Harry muttered.

“It was a bunch of people beside Louie. Dead folks. Some of them, why? I just trust them more, I guess.”

“Death isn’t sainthood, Harry. The dead lie when it suits them, like everybody else. But not about this. For one thing, it was the same message, more or less, from everybody, whether they were living or dead.”

“And what was the message?”

“Well... it came down to this: that there’s roads open that should be closed and there’s something coming down one of those roads, or perhaps all of them, there was some vagueness there, that means me and a whole lot of other people harm. So I’d better not be anywhere these things can find me when they arrive.”

There was a long silence and Harry finally said: “That’s it?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you say? There was some vagueness?” Harry let out a long irritated breath. “Some fucking vagueness? It’s like the prophecies of frigging Nostradamus: It could mean a thousand things, or, if you want my guess, Sweet Fuck All!”

“Well, yes, it’s open to a lot of interpretations, and if that if I heard it from Louis Fast alone, I’d be just as cynical as you. But there’s others who say the same thing. And then there’s me.”

“What about you?”

“You know how I never dream? I just turn on the televisions really loud to tell the ghosts that the **store** is closed for a while, and I get into my grandmother’s bed, the one with the brass knobs on it, and I just fall asleep where I fall. I used to sleep naked but I gave that up. Not enough flesh left on my bones to keep me warm. I just black out for a few hours, and if I’m dreaming I certainly never remember it. Until the nightmare I had. Fuck. I swear that straightened every hair on my head.”

“Oh, come on, Norma. You’re hair looks fine.”

“That’s because it isn’t mine, dummy!” Norma said, and grabbed a hold of fistful of her miniature curls and pulled the wig off her head. Her hair was grey and white and barely longer than a marine’s first cut. “Not a pretty sight, is it?” She said.

“No.” Harry had to admit. “No, it isn’t”

“Every hair on my head. Straight. Not a kink, not a curl. And all because of this fucking dream.”

“So tell me.”

“Why bother?” Norma said with a certain calmness. “You think I’m just a crazy old bitch who doesn’t know hell from her ass hole! Well, you know what, Maurice Harold D’Amour—”

“How did you know my name is Maurice?”

“Shut up, I’m venting-“

“Sorry.”

“If you don’t fucking believe me there’s nothing much I can do, is there?” She threw the wig at Harry, who caught it. “Here. Keep this in memory of me.”

“The dream, Norma—”

“I’m not telling you. You’re just another imbecile.”

“Oh come on now, Norma. I may be a prick—”

“You are!”

“I may be a bit on the arrogant side—“

“A bit?”

“—but never once, never once, have I ever doubted something you were telling me. When you had that plague of an albino salamander coming up through the sinks and out of the floorboards, who came to exterminate them?”

“You did.”

“And that damned doll you sent that talked in tongues, remember? Who stopped it raping your little Georgie?”

“Poor dog was never the same after that. I swear to this day he jumped over the balcony of his own free will, not knowing what he was doing. Poor Georgie.

Maybe that’s what I need, another dog.”

“My point is—”

“I know, Harry. You cleaned up every piece of him, and organized the cremation.”

“Actually I have a confession to make. It wasn’t Georgie in that little coffin that went to the furnace. Remember how I insisted on going to watch it burn? That’s because—”

“The doll was in it.”

“Did you always know?”

“Not ‘til now. What happened to Georgie?”

“I buried him under a tree in Central Park. I figured he’d be happy there.”

“And the doll?”

“I had her cremated. Then I paid the guys to go have a cigarette while I watched. They have this viewing window.”

“What happened?”

“It was nasty. Thrashed around in that fire with her plastic face all melted except for its eyes, and the lacey white dress going up in flames. Then the pink turned black and stopped screaming, but there was this one bright blue eye that kept running around, even though wasn’t even recognizably human any more. Just like some twisted mess of burned plastic with this one twitching eye in it. Christ! I’d put all that shit out of my head, or at least I thought I had.” He wiped his clammy hands on his coat. “Where’s the brandy?”

“I’m out.”

“Norma, this is me. Where’s the fucking brandy?”

“Far side of the bed behind the bible in Braille.”

“I didn’t know you read the bible?”

“I don’t. It’s just the only book big enough to hide the bottle!”

Harry took a deep swig of the liquor, then another.

“Okay,” he said. “Here’s what I’m going to do. First, I’m going out to buy a couple of bottles of brandy for you. And some food. I know, I know, you don’t want food. You survived for years on brandy and cigarettes. But, honey, you’ve got to eat!”

“Brandy contains all five food groups. I read it someplace.”

“—And then I’m going to find a better place for you to hide out, if you insist on doing so, where you won’t be sleeping on a damp floor with rats running over your feet. Not to mention what’s been done on that mattress. You can’t see the stains, Norma, but believe me, there’s a lot of them, in a variety of colors—”

“Norma raised her hand. “All right,” she said. “You’ve made your point. “I swear Harry, you could sell ice to Eskimos.”

“I’m going to get your brandy and some food. Are your ghosts still in the vicinity, or did I scare them off?”

“No. One of them went for reinforcements. They’re all around you right now,

Harry. In fact, you turn your head in profile—”

“What?”

“Indulge me.”

Harry did as he was instructed. “Well there you are, in all your glory!”

Delighted by what she was seeing.

“Am I supposed to be understanding any of this?” Harry said.

“It’s just me getting a good look at your face.”

“But you can’t see my face.”

“But I can see all the ghosts in the room, except the ones you’re standing in front of. All these years and I never had a solid mass of ghosts and you in the same room. You’ve got a big nose, Harry.”

“Thank you, I think.”

“Well you know what they say about men with big noses.”

“Can we move on?”

“Are you embarrassed?”

“No, just want to get you out of here. Somewhere warm. Somewhere safe.

Then you and you and your dead friends can talk about my penile dimensions to your heart’s content.”

“I’m perfectly safe here, Harry.”

“I got in easily enough. And not the time you told me to come. I could have been anybody.”

“All the spirits here know you; they’ve guarded my building for years, so they’ve seen you come and go hundreds of times.”

“By your building you mean your apartment.”

“No, I mean the whole building. I own it.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I am not. I’ve had a lot of generous donations over the years, from the relatives of folks who passed over, and got some sign that I was taking to their loved ones, which of course is always reassuring. On a couple of occasions the deceased actually paid me themselves.”

“How?”

“Oh, telling me the whereabouts of their missing fortunes, and inviting me to help myself. You’d be astonished to see how many of the sophisticated men and women don’t trust banks. So they put their fortunes in safes and bury them. One very famous Greek ship-owner came to me after his death and said he’d left nothing to his children, who were all greedy, selfish weasels, nor to any of his six wives while he was alive. No, he wanted money to found a home for abused animals in Detroit, and if I arranged this for him I could have ten per cent of what I and my little team of treasure hunters would find beneath a sundial on a tiny island in the Aegean. I know it sounds absurdly baroque. But there people lived into pampered old age, the people

around them waiting for them to die. They had time to plan their plans. To find a nameless little island, dig a vault there to fill with their wealth, then put a sun dial on top.”

“God, what a risk.” Harry said. “Suppose there’d been no after-life? No Norma Paine to help them redistribute their wealth?”

“I think the one’s who make arrangements like those were like you, Harry. They knew something about the world *after* this one, *behind* this one, and they were happy to trust their money to an after life. And I did best by them.”

“For which you were amply rewarded?”

Norma gave the closest Harry had seen to a coy smile.

“Are we talking millions here?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “I put it mostly into real estate. I own a hotel in South Beach, a block of law offices within sight of the Capital, I’m told.”

“You’ve visited any of them?”

“No interest in it really.” She replied. “I had plenty in my life. Ghosts, brandy and you.”

“Why tell me now?”

“Just in case I don’t have time to tell you later.”

“You believe these holy-assed prophecies?”

She nodded. “May I have a glass of brandy?” Harry retrieved her tumbler from beside the bed and began to pour, urged by a “be generous” from Norma. As he handed it over she said: “There’s been so many times I’ve wanted to tell you my financial situation over the years but I was always afraid it would somehow unbalance things between us. And I didn’t want to risk that, Harry. You know how important you are to me.”

“And you to me. Without you—”

“You don’t need to say anymore.”

“No, let me just say it once. And then it’s said. I’d be in an insane asylum if it weren’t for you. Or on death row. Or dead. Most likely dead. I’m glad you’re rich, but it doesn’t change anything between us.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. So now before we go on with our conversation, do you have any more startling revelations up your sleeve? No? All right, so we’re going to relocate you. Somewhere just as safe as this place. More so.”

“You have a place in mind?”

“No. I’m going to speak to the man who does. And then come back for you. All right?”

“Fine. I’m going to send a spirit called Flanagan with you. He’s putting his hand on your left shoulder, Harry.”

“Okay.” Harry brought his right up to his left shoulder, and perhaps it was simply auto-suggestion but he felt a subtle tingling in his fingers, as though they were interlaced with Flanagan’s.

“I’m pleased to meet you Flanagan.” Harry said.

“He says, likewise,” Norma said.

“You know if you’re sending him with me for my protection, I’m alright on my own. I look both ways when I cross the road, and I don’t eat candy between meals.”

“Don’t be facetious, Harry. Flanagan is too ethereal too be much use to you in a brawl.”

“So he’s with me to warn you?”

“Exactly. If he feels things out there are smelling bad, he’ll give me a heads up.”

“Good. We’ll be quick. Hopefully by the end of the night we can have you
someplace more comfortable than this.”

“But *safe*, Harry. It’s got to be safe.”

“Open roads and things coming down open roads—”

“Go on, mock me.”

“I’m not mocking you—well, I am a little bit—and before you ask, yes, I’ll be
sure to come back with a few bottles of brandy.” He emptied his glass and set it down.

“That was good. I’ll see you very soon.”

As he gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek she caught hold of his hand. “Lord,
but you’re clammy, Harry. Are you sickening for something?”

“No. I just don’t like seeing you in this rat hole. It turns my stomach.”

“I’ve been in worse places.”

“Well I’m going to find you something a bit more lush. Don’t you worry.”

Now it was she who did the kissing, laying her lips on the back of Harry's hand.

"Why are you so good to me?"

"As if you didn't know."

"Indulge me."

"Because there is nobody in the world who means more to me than you. And that's no indulgence. It's the plain truth."

She smiled against his hand. "Thank you," she said, letting go of him.

"The pleasure's entirely mine. I'll see you in a little while."

Four

Felixson had never been further from the Fortress of the Order than the bottom step where he'd waited with the message. But its contents had been some kind of summons apparently, of great significance, because without seeking the comments of the Archbishop, he had broken rank and was now striding back towards the city, telling Felixson to follow.

He had heard a great deal about the city during his time serving the Hell-Priest. Very little of the information was contradictory, which led Felixson to believe he was probably hearing things that were more or less true. Hell was in a state of escalating chaos, the regime's hold slipping away. There had been times, Felixson was told, in which the regime regularly staged triumphal marches, in which the seven generals who had founded the regime stood on the high balcony of the Ministry of Defense and reviewed their troops who marched past them in the tens of thousands, their grey uniforms immaculate, their marching style, from which the goose-step had

derived, flawless. As each battalion came abreast of the generals their heads would make a snap turn and they'd all salute their overlords.

But there had been no marches or parades for a very long time now, and the generals had only made one other public appearance, which all the citizens were instructed to attend, in which General Phi, whose lineage went back to the Descent, and whose flesh had the mottled appearance called in the language of the angels, "*solmoan jah n'fin hemna*," meaning approximately "marked by the finger prints of the creator." In that speech, according to Felixson's sources, General Phi had told the immense crowd of demons and the damned that he and the other generals would be occupied in the months to come with a thorough analysis of the armed forces, with the intention of rooting out dissidents, many of whom had already been discovered at the highest level. Then he made a little gesture with his gloved hand, and the immense flag behind him, with its golden circle against black, fell away to reveal the other six generals hanged by the neck.

From now on, General Phi, had proclaimed, that—he pointed over at the naked corpses—two of them *solmoan jah n'fin hemna* like himself, the others from a weaker adulterated lineage, and yelled into the microphone: “These were my comrades. One, as you know, was my own brother. I took no pleasure signing their death warrants. But they were traitors and thieves. Instead of planning for the future of our glorious city, they watched it decline, and spent your taxes on building themselves private palaces. It will take a long time to root out every single **anomorph**ic in the plot, but I am here seeking your mandate to the regime of all corruption. I promise you that should you give me your yea I would be like a tide of fire, confiscating all properties and assets these six thieves took and return them to you. I will make a coliseum three times the size of Rome’s. And there, when I have executed the thousands who were part of this conspiracy, I will make such a spectacle of their deaths for your pleasure, in your coliseum, all of which will be paid for by me, out of love for you, who are the beating heart of this great city.”

He had taken a half step away from the microphone at this point, and with his head ever so slightly bowed he had opened his arms, presenting himself to them for judgment. The “yea” that the crowd loosed shook loose tiles from the roofs of homes half a mile away.

All that happened at least four and as many as seven years ago, depending on which of the sources had told Felixson the story. But there was no argument that the events, which came to be dubbed Gallow’s Day, had indeed taken place. Nor was there any doubt as to what had occurred subsequently: a steady unknitting of the most precious of Hell’s conditions: Order. It had been Lucifer’s genius as a leader, a visionary and as architect that had raised him from the unpromising dirt with which he and his fellow rebels had been cast as a city of splendor and symmetry. But like any elaborate mechanism the city needed constant attention, and in this regard it was in great measure or victim of its own success. Word of its glories drew infernals from distant provinces, to confirm with their own eyes what rumor had relayed. Some

went home and spread the word, others simply stayed, finding whatever meager work they could get. When the houses were full, they slept in the parks. When the parks were full, they slept on the sidewalks. When the sidewalks were full, they slept in the gutters.

Meanwhile in the guts of the city, where Lucifer had so carefully plotted the waterways and the sewage system; the heating for public baths and the supply of gas to the lamps which burned constantly in the perpetual gloom of the underworld, the labor of cleaning and restoration was not being attended to. Having made his masterwork in defiance of God and Rome, Lucifer had left the city and gone into retreat, leaving detailed manuals on the up-keep of every part of his creation. But his lieutenants, though they had been lectured by Lucifer on every detail of their civic duties, had been spoiled by Paradise, where they had never needed to concern themselves with the messy practicalities of how things functioned. Now, despite the lectures and the manuals on the solution to every conceivable problem, the

lieutenants did not once turn their thoughts from the tasting of all the fruits that had been forbidden them in the Other Plane, and thus the one problem that Lucifer had not thought to address—the steady deterioration through neglect of all the systems that made the city run with such apparent ease—invisibly ate at the innards of his Great Work.

The tunnels did not go directly unexamined, but like all undesirable duties in the shadow of the stare, the study of the tunnels and the repairing of their condition fell to the damned. They were powerless, of course, without direct orders from their keepers, but they hid their lack of power and hope from themselves in the way so many of them had in life, by creating bureaucracies of numbing complexity, like games that had no purpose but to distant their players from their own purposelessness. So the steady erosion of the city's systems were reported, and elaborately written up, and were filed away in repositories filled to their ceiling with such reports.

When all this had been described to Felixson it had answered a question that had troubled him since he'd first become familiar with the notion of Hell. The punishments and torments that thousands of artists had painted over the centuries could not have been going on endlessly, surely. Which begged the question: what were the damned doing when they weren't being flayed, gutted, eaten and shat out, again? Now he had his answer: They formed committees and awarded each other meaningless titles so that they all knew where they stood in the hierarchy, and this little madness kept at bay the greater madness which reduced to incoherent idiocy that could not turn a blind eye to their fine condition.

And it also explained why the city Lucifer had built to celebrate his genius was no longer the glamorous place it had once been. Even seeing it from the distance it had been clear to Felixson that the city was in disrepair. Twice he had borrowed the Hell-Priest's sighting glass and used it to take a closer look at the city. There was no doubting it's architect's vision: the wide streets were lined with buildings that drew

their inspiration from classical roots were everywhere enhanced and transformed by Lucifer's genius. On one hill stood a ring of six sleek towers from the top of which sprang massive arcs of white marble, meeting to form a semi-solid dome. On another stood a family of buildings that resembled a vast astrolabe, the central structure throwing of long-legged viaducts that led to the ring of causeways that marked the orbit of the next building, and so on, in seven ever-widening circles.

But these, and the countless other expressions of architectural ambitions, eloquence and wit that were all prey to the same disease, neglect. The air that moved sluggishly in the shadow of the stone carried a black snow of **scents** that originated in the fires that burned, apparently unchecked in various places around the city, and were lent a still more caustic edge by the bitter breaths of the infernals and their hybrid offspring. When he veered and brought the smell of the city towards the fortress the Cenobites remained in their cells, where prayer and the burning of scented oils could keep them from the corruption of the stench.

For those damned like Felixson, however, who served the Hell-Priests, there was no retiring from the air. It stung the linings of his nostrils and made his nose bleed and his head throb. On particularly bad days it made his skin itch furiously, and sometimes it even seemed to infect his mind, which became sluggish and stupefied.

This then was the air which daily ate at the noble houses and the immense civic buildings of the city. It was little wonder then that the facades were pock marked and diseased; the soaring pillars cracked like old bones, the towers, their pinnacles often lost in the grey green layer of dirty air that squatted the entire city when there was no wind to move it, so badly scarred and gnawed that they no longer looked sound. And indeed they weren't. Twice, while observing the city from the fortress walls with a borrowed sighting, Felixson had chanced to witness the capitulation of a portion of Lucifer's masterwork. Once he had heard of a room of destruction as he climbed the steps to the viewing platform and focused the sighting in time to see the last portion of a tower topple in a column of dust and smoke. On

the other occasion he'd witnessed the whole thing. One of the tallest and most elaborately decorated towers in the city, which stood in splendid solitude on one of the summits, its windows running from its first floor until they were just shy of the tower's top, where they connected to form a crown of glass. Felixson had studied the building repeatedly, hoping to discern its function, and had just turned the sighting in its direction when there was a crack so sharp and loud it echoed off the walls of the fortress, and up to the stone sky. A fissure had appeared in the tower, rising up and out of the ground and twisting around the column. One of the windows shattered, raining shards of brightly colored glass on the crowd of infernals exiting the tower. A second echoing crack, and another fissure, starting on the far side of the tower but twisting around the structure to meet the first, their convergence bringing about the capitulation of the whole structure, which culled like a stone wave as it toppled, leaving a plume of dust in the air behind it. When it struck the ground large pieces rolled down the steep incline and into the streets below, bringing down structure

after structure before the weight of the debris slowed and finally stopped the destruction.

This then was the city to which Felixson and the Hell-Priest were making their way: a vast and still glorious, even in the corrupted state, testament to the will of the Son of Morning.

Five

“I am summoned to the Chamber of the Unconsumed.” The Cenobite told Felixson as the straight road from the fortress brought them into the mud and shit streets of Mithratter, the shanty-town where the most lowly and despised hybrids of demons and the damned lived in squalor. “Things will change for me after this.” He went on, and then said no more. Felixson was left to turn these last seven words over

and over, analyzing the near monotone in which the Hell-Priest had spoken in hope of discovering whether he expected the changes to be good or bad.

It wasn't lost on Felixson that despite his master's reputation in the Order was that of a soul purified by self-denial and self punishment, the Hell-Priest's systematic slaughter of the magicians and his theft of their knowledge very probably had marked him as a criminal, even heretical. Was that the significance of those seven words?

That his master was on his way to judgment, and did not expect it to end well? If so, he went with remarkable calm, nothing in his voice or manner suggested that he was in any way fearful of what lay at the end of this journey.

They passed through the shanty town with comparative ease, and of their approach having clearly preceded them and driven into hiding many of the hybrids. They knew what the Order did if in only vague terms, and if they had any doubts all they had to do was take one look at the Hell-Priest's pierced skull, and at the array of tools that hung from his belt.

After the filth of Mithratter the comparatively clean streets of the city, wide and in places planted with some species of tree that needed no sunlight to survive, their black trunks and branches and even the dark blue leaves that sprang from them gnarled and twisted, as though every inch of their growth had been born in convulsion. There were no cars on the streets, but there were bicycles, sedan chairs and rickshaws, even a few carriages drawn by horses that had almost completely transparent skin and fleshless heads so flat and wide, their eyes set either edge of these expanses of bone, that they resembled manta rays set upon the bodies of horses. Having placed a long period in the hushed and claustrophobic cells and of the passageways of the fortress, able to see the city for a few stolen minutes now and then, it gave Felixson a sense of something vaguely resembling contentment to be given so much to see.

Up close to the buildings they hurried past seemed even more impressive than they had through the telescopic lens of the sighting. Their facades were decorated

with what looked like scenes of Lucifer's personal mythologies, intricately rendered as **bus-relig**. The figures were designed to be contained within a rigorous square format which brought to Felixson's mind the decorations he'd seen on the temples of Incas and Aztecs. There was every kind of activity pictured in these decorations. War, yes, graphically depicted, but also, equally graphically, love-making of every kind, and scenes of celebration. In most cases these decoration tablets were used sparingly: a single line of them around a door or ascending like a ladder from sidewalk to roof. But once in a while the architect had forsaken understatement, and used the squares like pieces of a jigsaw, that made sense when the building they covered was seen from a distance. One such masterwork covered the entire frontage of a large villa, set back some distance from the street, and raised up on an incline planted with more shrubbery and grass that had no need of sunlight. All the plant life here, from the tallest of the trees along the boulevard to every blade of grass shared the same convulsive appearance, and the same strange colorations. There was no green in any

of them, now—with a noteworthy exceptions—were the colors of the trunks, stalks, leaves and blossoms remotely natural. The blossoms were certainly abundant, the branches of the trees along the Boulevard bending low beneath the weight of them.

But there was nothing wholesome or healthy about them. They either looked toxic or opened with the appearance of their own decay already unfolding on their unfolding petals.

Insects gathered in excited clouds around the blossoms. Flies, not bees, drawn by the scent of fecal matter that the blossoms secreted. All this—the people, the carvings, the blossoms and their devotees—was just a tiny part of what Felixson's senses took in as he walked the streets behind his master. If he'd had his way he would have lingered in fifty places, a hundred, just to watch the comings and goings. But here, as in Mithratter, word of the Cenobite's appearance went before him, and at each intersection, even the busiest traffic was held up by demons in dark purple

uniforms, who were the closest the city had to a police force, so that the Cenobite could make his way through the city undelayed by a single citizen.

There was no sign that this preferential treatment was resented amongst the population. Indeed most of them either made signs of devotion, touching navel, breast-bone, and the middle brow before inclining their heads, while officers went down on their knees to demonstrate their veneration. It wasn't just hybrids or demons who dropped to the ground, so did many of the damned, some earning thrashings from their overseers for the delay they were causing, but enduring them so that they could show their commitment.

“Strange,” Felixson thought. *“What did this man with a head full of nails, who made not one concession to their presence, mean to them that would suffer cracked ribs and bloodied heads for the chance to pay their respects to him?”*

He had no answers, nor did he think the Hell-Priest would have had any either, had Felixson had the courage to ask.

Pointing up to the summit of a hall, "*There.*" The Hell-Priest said, pointing at ten or twelve buildings topped with the architect's favorite elements, a dome. The building had a number of distinguishing absences. One, the decorative squares that lent pleasurable energy to the most mundane of facades; the other windows. Even the door, to which they were now climbing towards, ascending a broad flight of steps whose scale was the nearest this building came to **dravura**, was simply that: a featureless door in a featureless room. As they came to within three steps of the summit, the door opened, though there was nobody visible doing the job.

"Are you coming in with me?" The Cenobite asked Felixson.

"Yes, please."

"If you feel like you are going to lose control of either your bladder or your bowels, get out and get down the stairs. Do not, I repeat do not, endanger exchange with your frailties. Just stay in the shadows, and listen and learn. This is a place of law under the Regime."

There was the tiniest tremor in the Hell-Priest's hand, Felixson noticed; and seeing that he saw the Cenobite cast his lightless eyes up at the stone spectacle of the miles high above them, then said:

"I am not immune to fear." He said softly, *"I'm glad of it, to be honest."*

Glad to be afraid?"

"It means my humanity has not been entirely erased." He remarked, still studying the infinitesimal motion of the stone sky, *"And believe it or not, that gives me comfort."*

"I believe you."

He took his eyes off the sky and looked directly at the sometimes magician.

"I am here to be judged, and if the judgment goes against me, I want you to destroy every one of my endeavors. Do you understand?"

"Even work of your own?" Felixson said, appalled. *"Master? Your journals?"*

“Especially those. Don’t succumb to sentiment, Felixson. You hear? Don’t keep so much as a single page of my theorizing. I have all I need up here.” He tapped his temple with a broken and poorly reset forefinger of his right hand. *“Nothing of significance will be lost. Trust me.”*

“I’ll obey to the letter.”

“I know you will.”

The Cenobite stepped in, with Felixson following. Felixson looked back over his shoulder two or three times.

“If you’re waiting for the door to close,” he said in a near whisper, *“Don’t bother. I’ve rusted its hinges. My guess is that nobody will be fixing it while I debate with the Unconsumed. That’s your exit should you need it. No more talk now.”* He said. *“Keep your distance.”*

He did as he was instructed. He didn’t entertain the notion for a moment that the door was being held open for his own safety; the Cenobite simply wanted to be

certain his slave could get out and back to the fortress to destroy the only remaining evidence before the regime's forces could get there. Even so, he still left for the possibility that behind the living mask of scarred and pierced flesh there was the remains of a man; and that man wanted Felixson to escape unharmed.

The interior of the Palace of the Unconsumed was just as devoid of features inside as it was out. Infernal bureaucrats in grey suits, tailored to accommodate whatever physical defect the damned lived with. One, with a ring of football sized tumors growing out of his back, had his suit neatly encircling each of the tumors. Some wore fabric hoods that reduced their expressions to two small eye-holes and a horizontal rectangle for their mouths. There were sigils sewn into the fabric, their significance outside Felixson's field of knowledge. More than once they passed the hooded demons whose heads had drenched the hoods with their suppurations, so that the fabric clung to the sufferer's face, giving mistresses an unwelcome clue to the grotesqueness beneath.

These drab passages were lit with large bare bulbs, the light they gave off never entirely solid, but flickering—no, fluttering—as though some source of light was alive inside. Indeed in the quietest of the passageways it was possible to hear the softest of tappings from the bulbs, panicked ways brushing against their glass prisons. After turning the corners of the passageways six times—every one of them committed to memory by Felixson—they came out into a place of startling splendor. Felixson had assumed the entire building was a hive of featureless corridors, but he was wrong. The interior was an open space, with a metal column perhaps ten feet wide running all the way up from the ground to the flat ceiling, which presumably left an enormous chamber at the top of the building with the dome as a roof.

“There?” said Felixson looking up.

“There,” came the reply.

Six

The ascent to the Chamber of the Unconsumed was via a wide staircase that spiraled up the core column of the building, each of the metal steps simply welded to the core. But, even here, in this elegant construct, the infernal touch had been neglected. Each of the steps was set not at ninety degree to the core, but at a ninety seven, or a hundred, or a hundred and five, each one different than the one before, but all sending out the same irrelevant message: that nothing was certain here, nothing was safe. There was no railing to break the slide should someone lose their footing; just step after step designed to make the ascent as vertiginous as possible. The Cenobite was defiant. Rather than climb the stair close to the column, where he could at least enjoy the illusion of safety, he ascended close to the open end of the step, as if daring fate to take its due –sometimes, when the preceding step had been crafted so as to incline precipitously, ascending to the next step took a considerable length of stride yet somehow the Hell-Priest managed to make the ascent with effortless

dignity, leaving Felixson to follow behind clinging to the core, which being made of brick and concrete supplied a plentitude of finger holds to allow Felixson the illusion of safety. Meanwhile, as the slave crept upwards, step on fretful step, his master strode up in defiance of every trick the architect had built into its design. It was an impressive performance and foolish as it was Felixson could not help but feel certain perverse pride in the fact that this was his master who demonstrated such fearlessness, and was pleased to see that it had attracted a large number of spectators who were visible between the steps, the details of their expressions impossible to read from such a height but the focus of their attentions not in doubt.

If the Hell-Priest saw that he had an audience —and how could he not?— he did nothing to concede the fate. Felixson knew, however, what was happening at that moment, and it quickened his heart to think of it. This ascent would be added to the sum of lore and legend that the High Priest trailed, whether he was the Bogey-Man Pinhead or a Cenobite tempting souls with a puzzle box. And he —August Felixson, a

sometime magician, now a nobody—had been here; was here, right now, living the legendary moment! If the stair beneath him had failed then, so that he fell to his death, he would have had no complaint.

But it did not fail. He continued to climb, keeping his eyes off the space between the steps, and instead watching the wall, and his hands upon the wall. Belatedly, he started to count the stairs. They climbed another eighty-nine before the Hell-Priest said:

“Wait.”

Felixson stopped, his right foot one step higher than his left. The Cenobite continued to climb though he was no longer playing dare with gravity, but came into the middle of the stairs. Just before he disappeared from sight, he said:

“When you get in there the closer you are to invisibility the more chance there is of you getting out.”

Felixson paused until his master was completely out of sight, and only then did he start to ascend again.

There was a door, more than twice Felixson's height, at the top of the stairs. The Cenobite had already stepped through it. There was no guard—at least none visible—at the threshold. Felixson went on after the Cenobite, keeping his head inclined, but it was so far that he couldn't see something of the chamber into which his master had led him. It occupied the entire dome at the top of the tower, which surely made it two hundred feet high at its apex, though it was difficult to judge with any accuracy with his head bowed. The floor was white marble and was icy cold beneath the soles of his feet, and though he did his best to keep from making a sound, the dome picked up every tiny hint of sound and lobbed its echoes back and forth across the dome, before adding them in the reservoir of murmurs and steps and quiet sobbing that ran like a gutter around the furthest edge of the floor.

“Far enough,” somebody said.

The Hell-Priest stopped in his tracks. Felixson did the same, and even though he had been given no order he went down on his knees where he stood, keeping his head inclined. Apparently his presence was beneath the notice of the speaker, presumably the Unconsumed.

“Do you know why you have been summoned here, Cenobite?”

“No.”

“None?”

“No.”

“Come closer. Let me better see your face.”

Felixson felt a twinge of separation as the Cenobite walked towards the center of the chamber. There was a single source of light there, which though it wasn't constant threw back a clean shadow of the Cenobite's figure. He looked up, and as he did so he lost the comforting cool of the shadow. A breath-cremating heat came at him from the center of the dome. In place there—the only object in the circular room

was a chair; yet one so far beyond the dimensions of a piece of ordinary furniture as to better deserve the word throne. It was made of solid blocks of metal, nine or ten inches thick: one slab for the high back, one for each arm, one for the seat and a fifth running parallel with the arm slabs but set beneath the seat. And now the vibrating pipe around which the spiraling staircase they had ascended made sense. It was supplying flammable gases which blazed from six long wide vents, one on every side of the throne and two directly beneath it. They burned with sapphire flames which intensified to an aching white, flecked with red motes at their cores. They rose high above the back of the flame, which was itself easily ten feet tall, and drew together, braiding themselves into a single blazing column. The heat inside the dome would have been lethal had the dome not been pierced with several concentric rings of holes, housing powerful fans to extract excess heat. Elsewhere the domes interior was polished white marble. But here, directly above the throne, was scorched black.

As far as the throne itself, it was virtually white hot, and sitting in it, his pose formal, was the creature whose indifference to the blaze had given him his name. Whatever color his skin had originally been his body was now blackened by heat, his vestments and his shoes, if he'd ever worn them, and his staff of office, if he'd ever carried one, burned away. His hair had been burned away from his head, face and body, but the rest of him, his skin, flesh, and bone, were unaffected by the volcanic heat in which he sat.

The Cenobite had taken the Unconsumed at his word, and approached within perhaps six strides of the throne. Either the members of the Order had some natural immunity to the heat or—

“Magic, Cenobite.”

“Nothing of significance.”

“There's no such thing as an insignificant heresy.” The Unconsumed replied.

His voice sounded like the flame: steady and clean, but for those motes of scarlet. “I

found the book amongst the belongings of a soul I recently harvested. Are you ashamed of your labours on behalf of hell, Cenobite?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Then since when did you harvest? You *damn*, Cenobite. You trap human souls and you damn them to share our misery. To them their lives on earth are what heaven was to us.”

“My... my apologizes to you, Lord.”

Felixson was not quite familiar with the nuances of the Cenobite’s manner. He seldom stumbled as he just had. It meant simply that whatever followed—in this case, his apology—carried no weight. Nor was the Unconsumed convinced.

“Prove the truth of your conviction.” He said.

“Anything.” The Cenobite replied.

“Let the veil that cools you go, burn with me a while.”

“I’ll be cremated.”

“Very possibly.”

“Is this an execution, then? Or are you simple asking me to stage my own suicide?”

“Either. Both.”

“I hadn’t come prepared to die.”

“I asked you to burn with me a while,” the Unconsumed said. “Just a little suffering. I thought all of your order had de Sade by heart.”

“I was never a devotee.” The Hell-Priest replied.

“You surprise me. Didn’t he write somewhere that the greatest pleasures were aversions overcome?”

“And what if he did?”

“You plainly have an aversion to fire. So do as the divine Marquis suggests: Let your aversion have its way with you. Perhaps there’s pleasure here you haven’t

explored. And that is your order's claim, isn't it? That you're explorers going where no one else dares, in search of experience?"

The Cenobite nodded. The Unconsumed, his argument carried, settled back in the **comfortless** throne and watched. The Cenobite spoke the unveiling calculation.

The effect was instantaneous. His vestments began to smolder, and the nails in his head began to glow. A dull red, at first, but quickly brightening. The Cenobite started to inhale but drawing the air in as far as his mouth was agony enough. If he pulled such heat down into his body he'd surely cook his lungs. There were pulses of darkness at the corners of his eyes, now spreading with each beat of his heart. He only had a few moments of consciousness left. But he had time to concede the truth in the Marquis' maxim. There was a pleasure here, in extremis; the bliss of losing his flesh to the fire. Relinquishing it, finally... *No*. He couldn't give into this bliss. He had plans laid, decades in the creating, and he was too close to seeing them realized to abandon them for death and revelation by fire.

His thoughts fumbled for the words to reinstate his protection from the heat. It was just five words. He didn't even need to speak them. Simply bringing them to mind in the right order. It was no great intellectual challenge. But he was stupefied by the heat and its seductions. The page that lay unmarked in his mind's eye, awaiting the words, had a brown stain of heat spreading from its center; once it caught fire, he'd be lost.

It was Felixson who shook the Hell-Priest from his fire-fugue state. He let out a shout from the edge of the dome, and in the same instant as his remembering Felixson, the words appeared in his mind's eye. He used them, and instantly that heat that was passing off the Unconsumed ceased to do so; while the heat that had brought the Hell-Priest close to the point of no return was calling up and at him. The effect wasn't instantaneous. Even though the furnace of the throne had not cremated the Cenobite it had done damage to his flesh. But there were healing equations for such emergencies, and he uttered not one, but three of them. That way there'd be a

measure of competition between them, each trying to outdo the others in the care that it provided his summoner. In the space of a few seconds he delivered out of the mind-numbing fire, while the healing entities that he'd summoned worked to draw every last mote of unnatural heat of his body. He addressed one of them in his thoughts. "The nails in my head?"

"What about them?"

"Has the heat melted them or twisted them out of me?"

"Neither."

"And my face?"

"It will mend. You'll shed several times, but be patient. And thankful."

"For what? You?"

"No. For whatever woke you from your fugue. A few seconds longer and there would have been no hope of recovering you."

This exchange of thoughts lasted no more than three seconds. But the Unconsumed was observant.

“How dare you converse with any other entity in my presence? You add insult to failure, Cenobite.”

“Failure?”

“Yes, of course. *You*. Why else would you be here? Failure! *Your* failure!” He suddenly stood up. The design of the throne and the enveloping flames had concealed the demon’s height. He was fully a foot and a half taller than the Cenobite.

“There were certain members of the regime who spoke of their high hopes for you. You had knowledge of the world second to none, they said. I decided to consult your record. You’ve certainly made some impressive catches with your puzzle box, but in the last twenty years you have repeatedly brought souls down with you. There are also places where the record is incomplete, which your abbot had no explanation for. But he agreed with me that it had been tampered with.”

There he stopped for a moment and walked away from the throne. A portion of the fire came with him, enveloping his nakedness and rising high above his head.

“Are you accusing me of tampering with the records?”

“Why? Should I be?”

The Cenobite shook his head. “I have no reason to lie to my superiors. Over the years I’ve reported truthfully on my failures and my successes. Lately, it’s true, I’ve had some notable failures: It began with Kristy Cotton. She defied me, repeatedly.

“But you got your hands on her eventually.”

“If that’s what the record states, the record is wrong. I failed to catch her soul. And after that there were minor captures, but nothing significant.”

“Really.” The Unconsumed walked off across the chamber, rubbing his palms together, like a cold man trying to keep warm. Then he opened his hands again, and lightly blew on his open palms. Flakes of blazing brightness flew from his palms and rose up in a delicate cloud. He stared up at them, his expression quizzical.

“There,” he said, pointing to a mote of fire that had repeatedly separated from the other ones. “And there.” Another separatist. “And there. And there.” He fell silent now, just starrng up at the ascending fires, there little lives being pinched out one by one. He kept studying them, however, reading them, the Hell Priest guessed, like a man divining from a sky in which the stars were being extinguished. He still kept watching as he spoke.

“You have lied to me.”

“I admitted my failure.”

“I couldn’t care less about what you’ve a mind to admit.” The Unconsumed replied. “I trust the motes, not you.”

There were only a few flakes left, and they seemed to be destined to rise a little higher and then die, as the rest had done. But no, without any sign or word from the Cenobite they came together to form a loose ring, which circled between the Unconsumed and the Cenobite. As the speed of the circling increased, they were

extinguished, until there was just a single survivor, who dropped down towards the Hell-Priest's head. He didn't give it a chance to reach his tender scalp. He caught it and extinguished it.

"That was a pretty show," the Hell Priest said, "did it have a purpose?"

"Merely to confirm my suspicions."

"Of me."

"Who else, priest? Your little damned here, crouching in the corner, terrified that I'll set a flame on him? Of course its you."

"I've done nothing, except fail. And I swear when I return to my duties—"

"This man, D'Amour," the Unconsumed went on, as though the Cenobite hadn't even spoken. "Had you heard of him before the debacle in New Orleans?"

"Of course. He has a considerable reputation amongst the demons who work New York. He's broken a lot of heads. Killed more than his share."

"So you were attempting to deliver his head, so to speak."

“No, literally.” The Hell Priest replied. “I would have brought his head to the regime—”

“But things didn’t happen the way you’d planned.”

“He had allies.”

“Human?”

“Some of them. Some not. Some I believe operate within our own ranks.”

“In your order?”

“Yes.”

“Please speak clearly, Priest.”

“Yes. He has informants within my order.”

“Then why did you not come to me with this information?”

It wasn’t the Unconsumed who spoke but a fourth presence in the chamber.

The Abbott Gris, made his way at processional speed across the chamber. He carried his staff of the office, which was fashioned after a shepherd’s crook and he repeatedly

slammed it down on the marble as he approached —five, six, seven slams—the echoes bouncing back and forth in a diminishing sound. Before they'd die away completely the Abbott was talking again.

“You are part of this order, priest. Answerable to its laws. The business with D'Amour smells of some petty vendetta. Is that what's been going on?”

“No, your Grace, it's absolutely not. My only desire was to remove from our dealings an irritation. There was vanity in this, my lords. This, I confess. I wanted to put the man's head before you, as a tribute.”

“And in the hope, no doubt, of obtaining high office, with your gift.”

“I would have rejected it, had it been offered.”

“You talk like a lawyer, priest.” The Unconsumed said.

“My loyalty is to my order, always.”

“Then why have you worked in secret to murder a great number of magicians?” the Bishop said, “none of whom have ever been named by me or any in my entourage as potential victims.”

“I thought—”

“*You thought!*” The bishop said, slamming his crozier down again. “Since when was a Cenobite given the freedom to *think?* You work within the system, priest, or you don’t work at all.”

“What do you mean: not work at all?”

“You’re out!” the bishop said. “Ex-communicated, as of this moment. I have the paperwork here.”

“What am I to do, if I am renounced by the order?”

“Personally,” the bishop said. “I would have you executed, you wretched piece of shit. But the final judgment lies with the Unconsumed—”

“—And I see no punishment in execution. A moment, and its over. So the regime’s judgment is this. You will go back to your cell and collect up whatever personal belongings you have. All files, all books, are hereby confiscated. Then you will be taken by one of my staff, who will accompany you everywhere until I am satisfied that you are working in your new role.”

“Which is?”

“You will be the traveling judge of the shanty town of Mithratter, moving from case to case—”

“And living?”

“In whatever shack your damned can find for you. I have no interest in talking about your comfort. What you must understand is this. You have earned clemency because I think you can bring order to the Shanties. It will take you a while—but I do expect you to bleed the poison out of that place. If you fail, I’ll simply burn down the place and throw you onto the fire.”

“Thank you for your merciful judgment, my lord.” The Hell-Priest said, inclining his head. Then, turning towards the Abbott he again inclined his head: “It was not my intention to bring shame on the order. I only wanted to achieve something that would gain your attention.”

“This is not a good time for personal ambition, priest. Be grateful you didn’t pay the ultimate price. And do your work well for now on, because you will be watched. Who knows, if fifty years of service in Mithratter, I may decide to invite you back into the fortress.”

“Thank you. That is most considerate.”

“You can go. Be at work in Mithratter in three hours. You have a lot of work to do amongst the damned.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. Lords, again my thanks. I won’t fail you.”

“There’s a very quick consequence if you do so.” The Abbott said, with a little smile.

Again the Cenobite bowed to both judges. Then he turned and headed for the door, which Felixson was pulling open. They did not speak to one another. They exited the chamber and began the long descent.

Seven

Caz was never open for business before noon, but there was a buzzer hidden in a niche in the brickwork beside the door, which Harry only use in emergencies. He used it now. There was some static on the intercom and then, Caz's growl:

"Who is this?"

"D'Amour. Let me in. Big trouble."

Twenty minutes later he was sitting on Caz's overstuffed sofa which occupied fully a quarter of his living room. Another significant fragment was taken up by books, his place in them marked. His subjects of interest could scarcely have been more eclectic. Forensic pathology, the life of Herman Melville, the Franco-Prussian war, Mexican folklore, Pasolini's murder, Mapplethorpe's self-portraits, the prisons of Louisiana. And on and on, the towers of books looking like a bird's eye view of the

city. Harry knew the etiquette of the books. You could pick something out of the stacks and flicker through it, but it had to go back in the same place. You could even borrow them, but the price of a late return was so sickeningly god-awful that he couldn't bring himself to even put it into words.

There was a nice irony in this Gothic warning. First that of all the men Harry had ever called his friend, Caz was easily the most intimidating. He stood six foot five and his body was a mass of tattooed muscle, all of it done in Japan by the master who'd taught Cazo. He wore a coat of ink and color, that stopped at his neck, wrists and ankles, its designs a compendium of classic Japanese subjects. On his back a samurai in close combat with a demon in a rain lashed bamboo grove. Two dragons ascending his legs, their tongues interwoven as they wrapped around the length of his dick. He was bald and clean shaven, and had anyone caught sight of him coming out of a bar at two in the morning, shirtless and sweaty, they would have stepped out onto the street rather than get in his way on the sidewalk.

But one look past the decorated mass of the man, a glance at his face or rather the size of his hands, and a very different story. Cazo found some of source of amusement everywhere. There was scarcely ever a time when he wasn't smiling or laughing out loud, the one significant exception being that portion of his day he spent putting on pictures and works on other people's bodies.

He was finishing up one of the simpler of those duties—the inking of a name— when Harry came in. The job was done, the customer satisfied. He paid the price and headed out into the night.

“You look serious, man.” Cazo said. “Never like to see that look on *anyone's* face, but especially yours. What's going on?”

“I need a few minutes.”

“You can have all night. I'm done.” He went to the door, closed it, flipped the sign, bolted the door and switched off the neon sign that simply said: “*Skin Art.*”

“Don't you keep that on?”

“Yeah. But...” He shrugged. “Just something about your look, man. Less advertising the better. You want something to drink or liquor?”

“Liquor.”

They drank the good scotch in the little office behind the store, and Harry told him everything so far, every damn bit of it, sometimes, because he felt the need to his guts, reaching back to his earlier encounters with the dark stuff that was out there tonight, as always, prowling the streets looking for ripe souls to pluck.

“I’m just about to give this all up,” he said to Cazo. “The shit in New Orleans really left me drained and I figured I just don’t need this shit any longer. I’ve done what I can do. And then this thing with Norma. I mean, I’ve seen that old broad frightened before —maybe twice—but never like this. Never hiding herself in some filthy shit-hole because she’s afraid of what’s going to come for her.”

“Well, we can get her out of there tonight, if you’d like. We can bring her here.”

“They’re watching here, for sure.”

“They must be keeping their distance then.” Cazo said, “because I haven’t had a twinge.” He turned his palms over, where two of his synthesized alarm sigils had been inked by an ex-lover of his in Virginia.

“I haven’t felt anything either. But that just might mean that they’re getting smarter, Caz. Maybe they’re running some interference signal, to block our alarms.

They’re not stupid.”

“And neither are we.” Cazo said. We’ll get her somewhere safe, somewhere—” he paused, a Cazoian grin appearing on his face. “—in Brooklyn.”

“Okay. Why Brooklyn?”

“I fell in love last week. With a priest. Don’t ask. His name is John Dunbar, Father John. The place is huge. It used to be an office block and the church put some money into allowing John to do some remodeling. You’ll like John.”

“He’s a keeper?”

“Well, I’d like him to be, but Mother Church has prior claim. I’m not going to push. I always push. That’s my big mistake, over and over. I’m just going to let John decide whether he can love me and be a good Catholic.”

“Is he going to be okay with...”

“Harry’s Hell and Damnation Show? I don’t think we need to mess up his head with all that, do we?”

“Yes, Caz. I think we do.”

“Full disclosure.”

“Right. He’s got to know what the deal is, in case things go to shit.”

“You’re right. Okay. I’m going to go over there now and talk him through this. See that he’s okay about it. Then we’ll figure out how to do it. You think they’ve got a lot of their kind looking for Norma right now?”

Harry shrugged. “No idea. I can’t even figure out why they’d choose now. I mean, she’s been in that same apartment doing her thing all these years, and there was never any trouble from the pit. So why now?”

“I don’t think it’s her,” Cazo said, “I think it’s you.”

“Me, what?”

“You’re the reason they want to get at her.”

“No.” Harry said. “If they wanted me they’d come to me. Christ knows, they do it often enough.”

“And fail, Harry.”

—

Caz went off to Brooklyn, and Harry returned to spend the rest of the night with Norma, stopping by his apartment to pick up cleanish sheets and pillows, and to

a deli for food and more brandy. The cab driver was a in a less than reassuring state of mind.

“I not like it out tonight. Sometimes I go I think is no better to drive my cab in the city night—time.”

“But not tonight, huh?”

“No. tonight. Not last night either.”

“You had trouble with drunks or—”

“Its not drunks! Drunks I kick out. Out, I tell you and if they say no fare I saw

I no want your fare. Out my cab!”

“And out they get?”

“Never tell twice.”

“Good for you.”

“Yes. The man laughed hard, as if he was new to the phrase.

“Yes! Good for me!”

The conversation lapsed a while. Then Harry, against his better judgment, picked up the thread of conversation that had been left behind.

“So if it’s not drunks, what’s wrong with tonight?”

The driver was silent. Harry thought perhaps he hadn’t understood, and was going to let the matter lie. Then he answered.

“You have dreams?” he said.

“Sure.”

“You have bad dreams?”

“Oh sure.”

You know in bad dreams there is times I think I see nothing bad I hear nothing bad but something is still bad. Very bad.”

“Oh yeah, I know those dreams.”

“Is like that tonight.”

He came back to the sex-club to find Norma in conversation with a ghost she introduced to Harry as “Nails” McNeil, who had not come in search of Norma, but had wandered in to reacquaint himself with his favorite stomping ground.

“His big thing was to get crucified at the summer and winter solstices.” Norma told Harry. “And then have the woman torment him. He said it was the best time of his life. Nothing better.”

Norma listened while the invisible presence added something to this. “He says you should try it, Harry. A crucifixion and a good blow job. Heaven on Earth.”

“I think that’s pretty much a conversation stopper.” Harry said. “I’m going to settle down for a couple hours of sleep on the stage next door. Scene of many of your finest hours no doubt, Mr. McNeil?”

“He says: Sweet Dreams.”

“I’ll do my best. There’s food here, Norma, and a pillow and some brandy.”

“Oh my stars, Harry. You needn’t have gone through so much trouble. And you don’t need to stay. I’m perfectly fine.”

“Indulge me.”

Norma smiled. “We’ll keep our chatting down,” she said.

Here was a first, Harry thought, as he tossed the pillow down on the stage.

Sleeping beneath a cross on boards that had no doubt seen their share of bodily fluids.

There was probably something significant about his position between the two, he thought vaguely, but he was too damn tired to get very far with his thoughts. Sleep overcame him very quickly, though despite “Nails” McNeil’s goodnight wishes, his

dream—in the singular—was not sweet. He passed the dazed hours dreaming he was in the back of the cab that had brought him here, only the familiar streets of New York were now a near wasteland, and his driver; far from ignorant of what was pursuing them, simply said over and over, “Don’t look back or I kick you out.”

Eight

The Hell-Priest returned to the fortress without a word, Felixson following behind. Only when they got to the steps and began to climb did he say:

“I have some work to do before we leave. It will be your duty to collect up the small journals and make your way to that stand of trees off to our left a mile or so.

You can look. Can you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Take food and water. And wait there. I will come for you presently.”

There were six or seven steps of silence. Then the Hell-Priest said:

“Impressive, Felixson.”

“What?”

“You asked no questions.”

—

They separated once they were inside the gates, Felixson about the business he'd already been instructed on, and the Hell-Priest on something else entirely.

Under ideal circumstances he would have had things happen at little more leisurely a pace than he'd now be obliged to accept. But he was ready, perfectly ready. There had been so many years of preparation, it was a relief to finally have the grim business before him underway, even if the conditions weren't ideal.

All of what he was about to do depending on having the magic, of course. That had been the key to this endeavor from the beginning. And it was no small pleasure to him to discover that most of his fellow Cenobites, if the subject of magic and its efficacy were to be brought up in conversation, had nothing but contempt for it. That made what he was about to do all the more ironic.

He went directly to the row of anonymous buildings called the Channel houses that ran along the wall on the far edge of the fortress, where the slope on which it stood fell away. To compensate the gradient the wall on that side was twice

as high as at the front, the top of it crammed with iron spikes that pointed in, out and up. These were in turn covered with barbs that had snared hundreds of birds, many of them caught in the process of picking at earlier victims; here and there amongst the iron and the bones a few recent captives, fluttering manically for a few seconds, then settling again to gather their strength for another attempt.

Whether the Channel houses had once actually functioned as nobody knew any longer, many of them were completely empty, some repositories of chain mail aprons and gloves which had been used for vivisections of the damned which the pious Abbott had actually called for, as a means of unwinding the damned of the Order's power. Such displays had fallen into disrepute under the present Abbott, however, who had preached a less visceral approach to the Order's civic activities, and the blood-gummed equipment had been tossed into three of the Channel houses, and left to the flies. Even they, having fed and bred several generations there, had exhausted the usefulness of the stuff, and gone.

Nobody now came there, except the Hell-Priest, and even he had only come twice: Once to elect a hiding place for his own contribution to the Order's tradition of torment, the other to actually hide them away.

It had been the sight of the birds on top of the wall that had inspired the simple but elegant solution of how he could bring the news he had spent many months of study in refining to its recipients. Using the only book in his secret library which did not concern magic, "*Senbazuru Orikata*" or "*How to Fold One Thousand Cranes*," the oldest known volume on the art of origami, and with the lethal knowledge he had culled from the rest of his researches, he had gone about his secret work with an eagerness he had not remembered feeling for a better part of a human lifetime.

Now, as he entered Channel House Six, where his labors lay sleeping, he felt that eagerness again, chastened by the knowledge that there would not be time or opportunity to do this again, so he could not afford error. Since he'd first brought his

secret work here the Order had swelled in number; a circumstance he had planned for. Now he had to fold their identities into his flock, which would not take more than a few minutes with brush and ink called Cindered Scale. As he walked, he listened for any sound besides that of dying birds; a whisper, a footfall, any sign that he was being sought. But inscribing the Execution Writs on the extra papers he'd folded and left unmarked for this very situation was finished without any interruption. He put the papers with the others, and as he did so a feeling almost utterly foreign to him insinuated itself into his thoughts. Puzzled, he struggled to name it. What was it?

He made a hushed grunt of recognition when the answer came. It was doubt. Of all things, that; and of all times, this; 'Strange', he murmured, as unempathetic where his own anguish and unease were unconcerned as he was with any of his quarry. He wasn't doubting the efficacy of the working he was about to engage in: He

was certain it would more than suffice. Nor was he doubting its mode of delivery. So what was it that troubled him?

He stared down into the cage of folded paper while he puzzled over his doubt. And all at once it came clear. The doubt was rooted in the simple certainty that once the magic he had labored over in this room became unleashed to go about its business, there was no turning back. The world he had known was about to change out of all recognition, and in the time that followed that change he would have to add with his instinct, not his intellect. There wouldn't be time for reasoned decisions, taken in a meditative state in a silent room. He was unleashing chaos, and the doubt was simply reminding him of the fact. Saying: Are you ready for the apocalypse?

He heard the question in his head, but he answered it with his lips.

“Yes,” he said, with a smile so subtle it would not have been noticed, had he had any company in Channel House Six.

With the doubt defined and replied to, he went on with his work, picking up the cage and taking it to the door, which he opened, setting the cage down on the threshold. For safety's sake he took a gutting knife from his belt, so that he was prepared in the unlikely event that he would be interrupted here. Then he spoke the words, which were African in origin, and had taken him some time to master, punctuated as they were with grunts and little expulsions of breath. Of all the magicians he'd visited on his journey of education and murder, it was Thomas T'hele, he was the man who had taught him those potent syllables, he'd come closest to letting live, and as he spoke the words he felt a little twinge of regret for Thomas's dispatch. Well, it was all done now. The Hell Priest's education over, his educator dead, and the words he taught spoken.

The Hell-Priest watched the cage. T'hele had warned that sometimes the incantation required a second and even a third repetition, so he was drawing breath to repeat the syllables when there was a slight shift in the heap of folded paper. It was

followed almost immediately by another movement, and another, the urge to live spreading through the occupants of the cage. In less than a minute every piece of origami was alive, flapping their paper heads. The only sound they were capable of making was the one they were making now: paper rubbing against paper, fold against fold. They knew what they'd been made to emulate. They fluttered against the bars in their hunger for release.

The Hell Priest had no intention of releasing them all at once. That risked attention being drawn to their source. He opened the cage and let less than ten of them go out. They hopped around on their folded feet, stretching their wings as they did so. Then, as though by mutual consent, they all beat their paper wings and rose up above the Channel houses. Three of them landed on the roof of Channel House Six, cocking their heads to stare back down at their caged brethren. The remainder, having circled the Channel house once to orient themselves, then flew off. The three who

came to perch on the gutters followed seconds later. The spectacle of the first few departing had driven the hundred or so still in the cage into a frenzy.

“All right, all right...” the Hell Priest said to them, “Your turns coming. Just calm down, or you’ll tear something.”

If they understood him they choose not to take any notice. They flapped and fought and repeatedly flung themselves against the bars, so that despite the weight of the iron cage and their own frailty, they still managed to make the cage shake. He opened the door a couple of inches and let another dozen out, latching the door again watch what his second group would do. As he’d suspected not one of them wasted time perching on the Channel house roof, as the three of the first group did. They all flew up immediately, circling around to orient themselves, before going their various ways. There was a cold, hard wind blowing, and he glanced up at his folded birds looked like scraps of paper that had blown in from the chaotic sheets of the city. But a

look that lasted any longer than a glance would discover a puzzlement. The scraps were not in thrall to any wind. They were flying in different directions.

He decided to give caution to the wind, and let all of the other birds have their freedom. He pulled the cage door off its simple hinges, and then as the birds fought to get out, he turned the cage on its back. The maneuver gave him a few moments respite, as the birds dropped back into a chaotic heap. He grabbed the sides of the doorway and pulled. The cage was strong but the Hell-Priest was a lot stronger. The bars broke where they were welded to the framework of the cage, and he pulled the front of it away, standing clear as the paper flock rose up in a chaotic tangle of folded and folded beaks. Within the incantation he had spoken over them they would have been neither alive or able to fly. But given that they had both gifts, they played the part with zeal, a few of them landing on the floor a little distance from the cage, some on the heaps of discarded butcher's aprons and gloves. But none languished for long. They had work to do, and they were eager to do it. They rose up after a few seconds

and hopped or fluttered to the doorway, from whence they set off. The whole business, from his tearing open the cage to liberate the birds, to the departure of the last of them, had taken perhaps five minutes.

He didn't wait in the Channel House, but headed out at a brisk walk so as to be seen in the busier paths that ran between the blocks of cells. In doing so he wasn't providing himself with an alibi: none of those who saw him there would be alive to testify to the fact in a little while. He was only concerned that the presence of the birds had been noted by somebody; one even caught perhaps. But no. Through time he glanced up and saw his handiwork perched at a window, about to enter, and another passing low over the roof on its way to its own destination, their presence seemed not to have been noticed by his brothers and sisters.

He was wonderfully alive in those glorious minutes of anticipation: his blood raced in his veins, it quickened his senses. He smelled sour wine on the breath of one he passed, and now another, the scent of incense that was burned in churches of

earth, and from the face of third, whose skull was pierced through from the side with seven fine needles, the unmistakable smell of purification. This sight was equally sharpened and he climbed the steps to the wall above the gate to look across at the city. The usual fires were burning here and there, and on the second closest bridge a violent crash between the Regime's guard, in their black and silver uniforms, and an unruly mass of citizens who were forcing the guard's retreat by simple superiority of numbers. Home-made fire bombs were lobbed amongst the guards, and emptied in balls of orange flame, the victims dowsing the fire by throwing themselves off the bridge into the water. But the fire was immune to its oldest enemy; the burning men would dive deep to extinguish the flames only to surface and instantaneously reignite. He could hear the burning guards shrieking as they were consumed.

And then, a cry from much closer; from the cell blocks behind him. Even before it dies away there were another two, and almost immediately three of four more. None were cries of pain, of course. These were souls who had lived in a state of

self-elected agony so as to earn a place within the Order, and the execution which the Hell Priest had composed was designed for efficiency. Once the victim came within reach of the Writ's baleful influence they had eight or nine heart beats left to them, each one weaker than its predecessor. So the shouts he heard were of disbelief and rage, but none of them lasted very long.

There was panic amongst those who worked for the dying and the dead, however; the damned who, like Felixson, had served their priests in any way they were called upon to do so. Now their masters and mistresses were falling down, their mouths frothing, and their slaves were crying out to seek help only to find that the same thing was happening in every other cell.

The Hell-Priest walked the pathways between the cell-blocks looking left and right, but only fleetingly. His fellow priests lay where they had fallen, some at the threshold, as if they'd been trying to catch a deeper breath of air, others visible only an outstretched limb seen through a half-closed door. What they had in common,

these many dead, was blood, which had been expelled from their bodies with convulsive force, just as the Hell Priest had planned in his drawing up the Writs. The death spasms he had willed upon them were of his own invention, and only plausible because the laws of magic were doing to the body what nature could not. It reconfigured in a matter of seconds the organization of their innards, so that their bodies became blood-filled vessels from which half of the priest's blood would be disgorged in two, or at most three, convulsions.

Three times as he walked around the cell-blocks did he confront victims. On the first occasion somebody caught at the hem of his vestments, and he looked down to see a human with whom he had worked several times in the collecting of souls. She was in extremis, the blood she had **gouted** literally passing over the lip of the threshold. He pulled his robes from her weakening grasp, and moved more quickly. The second time he heard someone call from a cell he was passing and saw, leaning

against the wall a foot or so from the door, a corpulent brother who he had never liked, nor been liked in his turn.

“I saw you once,” the Priest inside the cell said, “Folding a paper. Something you did since childhood, you said.”

“You’re mistaking me for somebody else.” The Hell Priest said.

“No, you! *It was you!*” He was raising his voice as he became more certain of his accusations, and rather than encourage him to shout still louder by moving on, the Hell Priest stepped into the man’s cell. Perhaps because of the great weight of his body the execution writ had not yet taken affect, although it was there on the floor, having unfolded itself.

“Murderer.” The brother said. This time he didn’t shout his accusation, though he clearly wished to. His face had grown suddenly pale, and there were loud noises from his innards. Death was seconds away. The Hell Priest said:

“I have done nothing,” and started to back away from the man. As he did so two things happened simultaneously: the man reached out and caught tight hold of the front of the Hell Priest’s vestments and he convulsed, his obese body disgorging a stream of hot blood. It hit the Hell Priest face full on, the force of it stinging. The Hell Priest reached up and broke the other priest’s fingers to get him to let go of the vestments, but before he could liberate himself a second convulsion, more powerful than the first, the blow hitting his face, neck and chest and abdomen as the dying man slid down the wall. His grip on his murderer weakened, and finally gave out. The Hell Priest turned his back on the man and went back out into the turmoil, his bloodied condition no bad disguise.

He’d seen more than enough. It was time to move away from here, out to make his rendezvous with Felixson. But as he came in sight of the fortress gates, one of which was open a little way, he heard a command.

“Stand still, Priest.”

He did as he was commanded and looking off to his right saw the Abbott, being pushed on a two-wheeled vehicle on which he lay, just shy of upright, attended to by physicians who administered to him from left and right. Behind his back the Abbott had commonly been called the Lizard, a nickname he's earned from the countless scales of polished silver, each set with a jewel, the pins on their undersides hammered into every visible inch of the Abbott's flesh, and assumed to cover his entire body. The jewels had been done for the vividness of their colors, their purity, crowning the lumps of silver crammed so close together that nothing of the Abbott's skin was visible. Whether he had been thin to the point of emaciation before being decorated with such glorious cruelty, or whether living in a scaly skin of silver and gems had withered his appetite to almost nothing, the Hell Priest didn't know.

Whatever the reason the bizarre consequence was made stranger by the great spillage of blood down the lizard's chin, and out the front of his exquisitely decorated robes.

Blood still trickled from the corner of his mouth, and having negotiated their way

between the scales of metal and gems dripped from his chair. More came when he spoke, but he didn't care. He had survived the torment that had left all of his Unholy Divines dead, except for himself, and this other, standing before him.

He studied the Hell Priest, his golden eyes ringed with small scales set with sapphires, giving away no clue to his thoughts. Finally he said:

“Are you immune to this sickness that has taken us?”

“Not immune,” the Hell Priest said, “my belly is twisted up.”

“Is that your blood on you? Its not, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Liar. LIAR!” He pushed his attendants away from him, left and right, and steps off the device that brought him here, coming at the Hell Priest with startling speed. “You did this! You murdered my Order!” The jewels flickered with color, as though they have trapped light inside themselves, to show off their brilliance when the moment came. Rubies and sapphires and emeralds concealing completely the

rotting, suppurating body beneath. “Confess it, priest. Save yourself the stink of your own flesh burning.”

“I confess nothing.” The high priest said.

“Then arrest him! Guards! Arrest this man! And summon the inquisitors from—”

His orders were silenced by the Hell Priest’s hand over his throat. The Priest lifted him up, which was no small feat, the weight of silver and jewelry added to the Abbott’s body weight, was substantial. Still, he lifted him and pressed him against one of the cell block walls, and with his free hand he scraped at the Abbott’s decorations, digging his fingers beneath the silver and jewels, and tearing them away. The Abbott’s flesh was soft with rot beneath, like soap left in water, and when the priest began to remove the carapace it came away readily. In a matter of seconds he had exposed half of the Abbott’s face. It was a pitiful sight. The flesh barely adhering to the bone. Still there was no fear in the Abbott’s eyes. He drew breath enough through

the priest's strangle hold to say, "You're not the only one with magic to wield. I am alive because of the workings I prepared many years ago. You can kill me, but if you do, I will take you with me."

He stared unblinking at the Hell Priest as he declared his immunity, and the Hell Priest knew it was true; he could feel the connection the Abbott had forged between them, if he threw the Abbott down into death, then he went too.

"There is much I could do short of death," the Hell-Priest said.

"True. And the longer you take to do it, the closer the inquisitors will get. So indulge yourself. You'll find it hard to get a scream from me."

The Hell Priest shook his head. "I'll take you another day," and let go of the Abbott, who slid to the ground amongst the cobs of jewels and pus that had been scraped off his face.

The gate was no more than a dozen strides from where the Hell Priest stood, but during his exchange with the Lizard, guards appeared from all directions.

“I want him taken alive.” The Abbott growled. “I want the inquisitors to have him.”

“What can they possibly do to a man who has made pleasure out of pain?” the Hell Priest remarked.

“Wait and find out.”

The Hell Priest seemed to genuinely consider the proposition, though this, like so much of the exchange between them, was a performance. “No,” he finally said. “I don’t think I will.”

And then, biting down hard on the ball of the thumb on his right hand, he drew out a little of his own blood and spat it with force into the palm of his left hand, where he had carefully inscribed an incantation of considerable potency, writing it in Martyr’s Stain, which was tiresomely elaborate to make, but had the advantage of remaining as sharp and clear as it had been when first written for as long as it took for the incantation to do its work. As now, for instance. The spat blood brought the

incantation to the boil, and turning once in a full circle, his palm presented to the guards.

They responded instantly to the instruction inscribed on the Hell Priest's hand. Their weapons fell from their fingers as their bodies gave way to mutiny. Their bowels and bladders voided. Their legs grew weak, they could no longer hold them up, and down they went, dropping into their own filth, the noises that escaped them guttural now, as their tongues swelled in their mouths. The only individual exempt from the effects of the instruction was the Abbott, of course, who batted it away with the casual backward swipe of his hand. The instruction flew back towards the front gate, and blew it apart, the pieces violent enough to blow holes in the other door, while flinging it against the wall so hard that a number of the bricks that framed the door were dislodged and came down amongst the bodies of the guards sprawled there.

“Surrender your dank little soul,” The Abbott told him. His voice had gained a measure of its former strength. “There’s no way out, up or down, so forget whoever you were, forget whatever you did. None of that matters any more.”

“Is that right?” he said, keeping his plan in mind as he replied, raising his palm against his Adversary. The gesture was pure bluff; every particle of power that had resided in the instruction had been exhausted.

But it seemed the Abbott had no way of ascertaining this, because he kept his eyes on the High Priest’s palm as he said:

“How many have you killed?”

“All of them. Give or take a few that had the good fortune to be away from the fortress today. I had planned it for a feast day, when we’d all be gathered to hear your words of wisdom, but circumstances demanded I change my plans.”

“The Unconsumed judged against you?”

“Yes.”

“And this is your idea of revenge against him?”

“No no no. I simply wanted to bring an end to a corrupted system. To silence the hypocrisies forever.”

“The Regime will find you and punish you for this.”

“They can try.”

“They will succeed. They have the faith of the people. You will fall to them sooner or later.”

“You sound almost troubled on my behalf.”

“Do I? The truth is, I don’t know what I feel. I liked very few of the dead, so it’s hard to mourn them. But I liked you even less, so I will take some pleasure in watching your execution. I imagine it will be very long.”

“I imagine it will.”

As this conversation continued the Hell-Priest had backed away, stepping over the corpses of the Abbott's entourage, so that by now he was standing with his back to the open gate.

"Where will you go?"

"Now you don't imagine for a moment that I will tell you that, do you?"

"I only meant that I could help you. I have friends in positions of influence both in this city and hidden away in the wilderness."

"You'll pardon me if I decline your generosity."

"You think I'll lay a trap for you?"

"Of course."

"I told you that what you've done today is absolutely for my own purpose?"

And that your being free—both in the city and out of it—is also—"

"Absolutely to your purpose."

"Yes."

“I would be bound to ask what purpose?”

“And I would be bound to reply that the less you know the less you can tell should they catch up with you.”

The Hell Priest lowered his head. The Abbott responded to the gesture with the tiniest of nods. Then the Hell Priest turned and would have exited already but that:

“They’re coming already.”

“Word spreads fast.”

“Were you just keeping me here with chat?”

“Absolutely not.”

The Hell-Priest studied the façade before him. The motionless encrustations of silver and gems removed even the subtlest signs of feeling. He had no idea whatsoever whether the Abbott was an ally in this or his enemy. All he could do was judge by the man’s actions.

“Leave and bolt the gate,” the Abbott told one of the half a dozen guards who had appeared since the massacre of their fellows. “And you—” he pointed to one standing close to the Hell-Priest, clearly prepared to dispatch him if the order came.

“This is—as of this moment—our good friend and ally. *No harm must come to him.*

Do you understand this? No harm must come to him. Take him out by Spitetit Gate.

Go with him as far as he requires of you. Hurry now. And the rest of you, listen: you have not seen this priest, do you understand? If any word of his presence ever spreads beyond we few then I will personally take *all* of you to oblivion and back so many times that the void will seem kinder than your mother’s tit. Now set about arranging the bodies. If any has fallen in an undignified fashion, correct it.”

The guard accompanying the Hell Priest said nothing; he simply led the way through the cell blocks to a corner of the fortress he had never had the occasion to come. There was a curious lassitude about the damned who labored here, the explanation for which became clear when he let his curiosity outweigh the urgency of his departure, and stepped into one of the buildings where five of the damned squatted against a wall, passing between them a clay pipe giving off the sheer tang of marijuana. They were cooks apparently, the work of preparation they'd been doing inside the building, which was one huge kitchen, ceased when it became known that most of their customers would be dined on rather than diners. Indeed that observation was the only one that he heard from the cooks as they smoked.

“No flies, eh? They've got better places to eat.”

The closer the guard brought him to the Spiteling Gate the more grateful for that small mercy the Hell Priest became. This, though he had never heard of it much less visited it until now, was the gate through which all the detritus—discarded food,

a breast, a penis or nose hacked off in the presence of a torturing, a bucket of feces, from the trough in the purgatorial rooms—was brought to be added to the common dump outside the gate. There were flies here still, in the thousands, fighting with the starving damned for any edible morsel, raw or cooked, eaten or not, that could be swallowed without the gorge rising in the knowledge of its history. For three, perhaps four seconds the Hell Priest went through the list of those to whom he'd describe this place, only to remember with the next moment, that he'd murdered every last one of them.

Nine

Harry circled through the same dream God knows how many times, and finally defied the driver's instruction —*Don't look out. I kick you out*— and looked

by. This dream skipped a few seconds. The cab had now been brought to a halt, and the driver had gotten out and caught hold of Harry's arm.

"I charge you no fee!" he was saying as he pulled on Harry's arm. "I just need you to get out."

"But there's nothing back there, for Christ's sake. I don't know why you're so damn stirred up. There's nothing there."

But now the driver had hauled him out of the cab.

"Where are we?" he said, surveying the heaps of stinking debris around. There were some untouched buildings down the street in both directions, but none he recognized even vaguely.

The driver, meanwhile, having slammed the door he'd opened to haul Harry out, now returned to his driver's seat, and was about to get in when Harry said:

"What the fuck were you expecting me to see? Because whatever it was, it ain't there now."

The driver crossed himself, three times in lightening time, muttering a prayer as he did so. And then, with one foot in his cab, he did exactly what he'd been ordering Harry not to do: he glanced back over his shoulder, down the rubble-strewn street.

“Why you tell me shit?” he said to Harry, the question posed less in anger than disappointment.

“But there's nothing...”

Harry didn't finish. He had caught sight of a dark shape reflected in the driver's eye. He couldn't make sense of it, and he certainly had no intention of turning around. But his dream gave him what he wanted: the cab driver's eye suddenly filled his sight like a shiny prophet, and he saw in clearer detail the thing that put the other man in such a state of fear. It moved like a bestial machine, which advanced by shedding the shape it had worn the previous moment, the shed skin

emptying into white flame which threw it forward and initiated the next transformation.

“Jesus.” Said the driver, eyes wide. “Now you see it too.”

“I don’t—”

“Yes, you do.” He grabbed hold of Harry, his grip irresistible in this dream-state.

“Come on, D’Amour.” He said.

“How do you know my name?”

“Everybody knows your name. You are the one who makes deals with the devil.”

“Fuck you.”

“See, look! He’s coming for you right now! *Look, D’Amour! Look!*”

He was facing the beast-machine now: its shadow fell over him, like ice water.

He raised his head, preparing himself the best he could for the sight of it.

“Harry.”

A woman now?

“Harry, there’s people outside.”

Norma. It was Norma.

The driver and the dream let him go. He opened his eyes, and sat up. Norma was at the edge of the stage.

“Harry? Are you awake?”

“I am now, yeah. How did you find me?”

“I followed your snoring. There’s somebody trying to get in, Harry.”

“Are they still trying?”

“No. They tried once and then left. But Nails says they haven’t gone far.”

“How many of them?”

“Three. What do you want to do?”

“First things first. I want to empty my bladder. What time is it?”

“It just got dark according to Nail.”

“Fuck. I slept twelve hours.”

“At least.”

“No wonder the urgent need of... Where is it?”

“Past my little nest and down the passageway to the right.”

“We’ve got to be ready to make a quick exit, Norma. Is there anything you need me to pick up for you?”

“I’ll take that pillow you gave me.”

“Okay.”

Harry clenched his pelvic muscles and headed for relief.

“Oh, and Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“The brandy.”

“I was going to bring it anyway.” Harry hollered back.

“A little closer still to release, and:

“Harry?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s a bag with all of my bits and pieces.”

“I’ll bring it, Norma. Now will you let me take a leak before I give the floor a taste of the old days?”

—

He came back with the pillow, the bag and the brandy.

“You want a drop before you go outside?”

“Not on an empty stomach,” Harry replied. Then after a moment: “Ah, what the fuck.”

He took a hit off the bottle, handed it back to Norma, and made his way to the front door. The alcohol had quite a kick with nothing to soak it up, and he all but lost his footing on the darkened stairs as he ascended. But he got to the top without breaking any bones, slid the bolts aside, and opened the right hand door. There was no way to do it quietly, it grated over the accrual of debris as he opened it. Nails, he assumed, had come with him, and he addressed his invisible companion as he climbed up the garbage strewn steps to street level.

“I’m not getting any twitches on my tattoos, which is a good sign. But if something goes wrong—Nails, get back to Norma and get her out the back way. The fire exit had chains on it, but I broke them last night, figuring you’d have your pals watching the alley. So you just get going with her, don’t wait for me. I can look after myself and I’ll find you wherever you end up, all right? I hope to god you heard that. She’s precious, Nails. There’s never been anyone more precious than her, okay? Not in this life. So you take loving care.”

He was at the top of the steps now, and rather than loiter outside the hideaway he wandered to the intersection, checking in all directions. It was a little after six-thirty, and the traffic was heavy. There were bars and fancy restaurants opening up in what had been shabby massage parlors and clubs like Cellblock 28. Meanwhile the round the clock labors of the meat district continued, a stone's throw from these fancy joints that boasted that they served one hundred and ninety-one martinis, or restaurants where everything from hors-d'oeuvres to dessert was cooked with vodka. The city's tolerance for yesterday's hip was shorter than ever.

He idled around the block, pausing to light up the stub of his cigar, which—contrary to the connoisseurs who wouldn't touch anything that had been near a flame—was nicely pungent after a couple of hours of been smoked, then tenderly put out, and smoked for another two, then extinguished. Now it was ripe as an old sock, and nurturing it into life gave Harry the perfect excuse for lingering here and there, and assessing the state of the street. There were ghosts here, his tattoos told him.

They were useful for raising the alarm, but not much else, at least in Harry's experience. He got to the end of the far side of the block, and pulled on his cigar only to find that it had conveniently died on him again. He took out one of the dozen or so books of matches he had in his jacket pocket, tore one match off, struck it and set fire to the whole book to give himself a nice hot flame to re-ignite his stinker. As he bent his head to the task, his peripheral vision caught sight of two men approaching him from the north end of the block. One was a small guy, the other had a foot and a half on him, and was bald.

Caz. That was who Nails had seen outside, more than likely. Harry drew on his cigar to get a good fragrant cloud going. Then he glanced in the direction of Caz and his companion, but doing nothing that could be construed as a signal. Then, turning his back on them, he retraced his path around the building, waiting until Caz and company had turned the corner, at which point he headed back down the garbage littered steps and waited. Only when they reached the top of the flight and

began their descent did he go inside, and wait for them to follow. Harry had met Caz's friend before, but her name then had been Victor, now it was Valerie, which fact she offered up to Harry in a breathy, nearly convincing impersonation of her new gender.

"I brought her along in case we had some problems."

"Just because I bought myself a pussy and a nice pair of tits doesn't mean I don't still break necks with two fingers."

"Well that's good to know." Harry said.

"She's got an apartment she'll let us have for as long as we need it."

"Anything for Norma," Valerie said. "She was the one who finally gave me the balls to have them cut off."

Harry laughed. "You've been waiting for the opportunity to say that, haven't you?"

"Damn right."

“So let’s get her moved, shall we?” Caz said. “I’ve got my Volkswagen van parked on 9th. Shall I just bring it around?”

“Yeah. We’ll be up here by the time....” He stopped. Then quietly said:

“Damn.”

“Visitors?”

“Something. I just felt a twitch in the ink. But it’s gone. It could have been something passing over. You never know in this damn city. Anyhow, it’s gone for now. Let’s just get the lady out of this shit hole. Five minutes, Cazo?”

“Five’ll do it.”

“Lana, come with me, will you?”

“I’d follow you anywhere.”

Harry negotiated his way back through the dimly lit maze with Lana right behind him.

“Did they, actually, you know, nail people to that?” she said as they came to the stage where Harry had slept, and the cross above it.

“Oh yeah.”

“See, to me that’s weird.”

“And I’m sure they’d—”

“—say exactly the same thing about my operation?”

“Yes.”

“It’s whatever floats your boat, right?”

“As long as it doesn’t frighten the horses.”

“They had horses in here?”

“No, it’s just a phrase.”

“Because you’ve got to draw the line somewhere, and—”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” Norma said as they came into her room. “What did you bring him for?”

“He said he was a friend of yours,” Lana said.

“I’m talking about you, Bruce.”

“I’m not Bruce anymore. I took your advice. At least I’m going to.”

“In seventy-one days.” Harry prompted.

“You remembered. You’re really sweet. He’s really sweet.”

Harry could see the look of bemusement on Norma’s face.

“There’s an apartment next to his—”

“Hers.”

“—Where you can stay until things settle down a little.”

“I’m fine here.”

“No, Norma. This place is not secure, and there’s no way I can make it secure.

Besides, there’s so much filth down here. I’m not going to let you get sick. A lot of

people depend on you. So you’re going to Brooklyn.”

Harry paused, expecting Norma to come back at him with some other objection, but she was just smiling slightly.

“What’s so funny?” Harry said.

“Nothing’s funny. Just nice to have somebody taking care of me. Ready to bully me around for my own good.”

“So you’re going to let me take you over to Brooklyn?”

“Yes.”

“No argument?”

“No.” She was still smiling.

“”Then let’s get the show on the road.”

Ten

Felixson was waiting at the edge of the forest where the Hell Priest had instructed to be.

“I didn’t see you coming, master.”

“Good. That means nobody at the fortress saw me either.”

“The Lagomarsino Self-Erasure?”

“Yes.”

“I could never get it perfect. There’s always a faint ghosting. But you—”

The bell in the fortress tower was ringing; and others in the city now also tolled. A hastily assembled group of high-born demons either mounted on **noons** or on carriages, were making their way up to the fortress, and in their wake came a crowd of citizens to see the carriage.

The Hell Priest looked up at the fortress. There was some confusion around the gates; an arrangement, he guessed, about whether they should be left open for the dignitaries or closed against the hoi-polloi. It was a consequence of what he'd done that he'd not foreseen. The Order had always jealously preserved its privileged state, executing outside the gates anyone who had violated the law and entered without triple signed permission papers. But it would be impossible to seal the fortress and its secrets off from prying eyes now; there were too many corpses that would need to be attended to, too much blood to clean up. And with the Abbott in the state of mental instability in which he'd been left there was a single authority in the fortress. In time there'd be a few absentee Cenobites returning, having escaped the slaughter, and the infighting would begin. But for now there had just been a few confused guards at the gates, and inside, the dead priests, the damned who'd served them and no doubt a swelling congregation of flies.

The Hell-Priest would have happily lingered where he was standing right now and watched how the farce would develop, but had more urgent business. He had laid his plans for the hours following the massacre meticulously, leaving an ample measure of un-allotted time to accommodate those elements, which he could not possibly predict. He had the instincts of an accountant: accuracy and consistency of method and tireless attention to details were his preoccupations. The subjects to which he applied these disciplines were amongst the most volatile in the scheme of human affairs: temptation, sin, all manner of acts against nature. It stood to reason then, when the arena in which he laboured was soaked with the lettings of hurt and slaughter, that he had been surviving its seductions and brutalities by treating at all like a vast calculation. And that was how he had to continue from this point on, though the game he would be playing would be far more complex than any of the slights of soul he'd been toying with for the last many years. He was not only the

tempter in the game ahead, but also the temptee; he would be playing with both sides of the table, the shadow of his window.

“The bells have stopped,” he said to Felixson.

“Is there significance in that?”

“If there is, I don’t know it, so it is a matter of indifference to me.”

“They will search for us, won’t they.”

“Yes, I would hope so. But they will not find us until I am ready.”

He raised his hand, indicating that Felixson should stop, which he did. The Hell Priest then took a further three strides, which brought him a barbed thicket, its gnarled branches so intricately intertwined that it looked as solid as a wall. He reached with both hands for it and as he did so, he said:

“I here now shed the first blood, that my enemy will shed the last, even though my enemy be the world entire, and its shedding be the end.” Then he thrust his hands into the knotted thicket, the barbs tearing open the flesh, and having

pushed in as deep as his wrists, he grasped the tangled branches and pulled them hard. There were several small flashes of white light from the severed branches, and they spread outwards in all directions. The sap was boiled away in an instant, while the wood and bark turned grey-white. The Hell Priest pulled again, and this time the whole wall capitulated a cloud of ash rising in front of him. Even before it began its descent he was striding through with Felixson, still carrying three purloined books, following after.

The thicket wall wasn't one bush deep, but ten or more, each of which went to ash and steam ahead of him, until finally they came to a grove as secure as a bank vault.

"My secret cell." The Hell Priest said, "Lay the books in the corner." He turned and lay his gorged hands on the devouring fire, extinguishing it instantly.

"You can still formulate Umezawa's Axioms?" the Cenobite said.

"For your hands? Yes, of course."

“Do it. But first take out Solakion’s Second.”

“Any particular place?”

“Here,” the Hell Priest said, pointing to the air in front of him.

“My error, master. I meant any place in Solakion?”

“It knows.”

Felixson caught a flicker of the old excitement, the way he’d felt a lifetime ago, when he’d felt his first addictive rush of imminent magic. He forgot his aching body, his humiliation, his grief. Fondly, he picked Solakion’s Book of Numeric Instructions to the Order of the Real, and put it in front of his master. When he let go of the slender book it remained in the air, opening and flipping to a place the Hell Priest apparently had already marked. There was a tantalizing energy in the air. The thicket shifted minutely so that its barbs caught the light falling in narrow shafts between the throttling branches overhead.

“The Axiom.” The Cenobite reminded him.

“Water or oil?”

“Water, of course. Lukewarm, just to wash the blood away.

Felixson, who’d been forbidden to utter a word of magic since he’d indentured to the Hell Priest, spoke the simple words of Umezama’s Axiom like a gourmet tasting a great Vichyoisse after weeks of unleavened bread and stale water. Twenty-nine syllables, over all too soon. But the water came out of the air to his master’s right like a faucet turned on, the Hell Priest washed the blood from the wounds made by the barbs.

“Now you can wash your own hands— and your face while you’re at it.”

“Thank you. Could I exploit your generosity and ask to bathe my whole head?”

“Yes, but quickly.”

He did so, walking through his library of baptism paintings as he wetted his itching scalp. The water disappeared into the nowhere of its origin, and the little ritual, which the Hell Priest had barely noticed but had meant a great deal to

Felixson, was over. When he looked up again the Hell Priest cut with his nail two pages from Solakion's Numeric Instructions, and was folding the second one, the first already folded. Two portions of each paper floated in the vicinity of the hook, torn off to make the rectangular sheets into squares.

More birds? Felixson wondered, and indulged the momentary nonsense that the Hell Priest intended to kill them both. By the time he'd put that foolishness out of his head the second folding was done. The Hell Priest plucked the slips of paper into the book and closed it.

"Put it away."

As Felixson obeyed he realized with a little thrill of pleasure that his master no longer had need of the sublime Solakian's wisdom; only the particular weight of the paper on which the Numerics had been printed.

They were moving away from him now, very slowly, and then like two moons they proceeded to circle him, one clock-wise, the other counter clock-wise, and out a finger further. It wasn't just their motion that put Felixson in mind of moons: it was also the way they had been folded. For though he had seen the last portion of his master's work with the second sheet he was surprised now to see that all the cunning of an origami master had been used, perversely, to fold the sheets so that they looked as though they'd simply been scrunched into very tiny balls. As he watched them slowly, smoothly circling their maker, it occurred to Felixson that somehow the Hell Priest had made them even smaller than the paper, however tightly it might have been compressed, could possibly be. There were only so many times any piece of paper, however large, however onion skin thin, could be folded, wasn't that so?

But he'd somehow defied this law of limitation, not once but twice, so that he had the satellites circling him that were sheets of folded space in paper envelopes.

Eleven

There was a goodly number of signs that something small, but of substantial consequence was about to happen in New York or one of the five boroughs tonight.

For those with the sense to read the signs, or hear them, or smell them, they were everywhere. In the subtle elegance of the steam that rose from the manholes on several avenues, and the pattern of gasoline spilled from every automobile collision that involved a fatality. In the din of tens of thousands of birds circling over the trees in Central Park where every other night they would be sleeping and silent at this hour; in the prayers the homeless souls muttered as they lay concealed for safety's sake where the garbage was foulest. And in the wind the smell of burning hair, or human grease burned black, or of something more sickening still disguised behind the fragrance of frankincense and myrrh.

The churches stayed open through the night hours for those in need of a place to calm their hearts, saw more souls come to take something from the careless streets than they would surely see in half a year. Nor was there any pattern to these men and women, black and white, shoeless and well-heeled, unless it was the fact that tonight they all wished they could cut from their mind's configuration the part that knew—

had always known, since infancy—that the great wound of the world was deepening, day on day, and they had no choice but feel the hurt as if it was their own; which of course in part it was.

—

The trip to Brooklyn had been eventless so far. They'd taken Canal Street, and crossed the Manhattan Bridge.

“We're heading for Underhill Avenue,” Lana said as Caz brought them over the bridge onto Flatbush avenue. “Left on Fifth Avenue, then right and right.”

“It's quiet tonight,” Harry observed.

“Too darn quiet, for my liking.” Caz drawled.

“Was that Lee Marvin?”

“John Wayne.”

“Same difference.”

“Absolutely not,” Harry said. “John Wayne always played John Wayne.

Whereas Lee Marvin always played Lee Marvin.”

“I saw John Wayne.” Norma said.

“He came to see you after he died?”

“No. I don’t get movie stars, unless they’re doing something on Broadway in a last desperate attempt at legitimacy—”

“Is this how you talk to them?” Caz said.

“Oh yeah. I don’t beat around the bush. I mean why? They’re dead.”

“The last reviews are in.” Lana said.

“Do people read their obituaries?” Harry said to Norma. “I realize you don’t do surveys, but you must have got some idea over the years.”

“I tell people not to, if they haven’t already. If they have that’s probably why they’re bothering me. Obits can be a bitch, especially if they’ve been written by friends of the deceased.”

“Revenge best eaten cold,” Caz put in.

“But what’s worse,” Harry said. “Making half a page in The Times, however bitchy, or what we’ll get?”

“Nothing at all,” said Norma, “Suits me fine.”

“Speak for yourself.” Lana remarked, “I intend to get a full page with two pictures, before and after, and —

“Stop.” Said Harry.

“Well that’s rude.”

“Not you, Lana. The van.”

“Why? What?”

“Will you just stop?”

Caz put on the brakes. Harry rolled down the window and looked into the rear view mirror, studying what he saw there as he murmured: “What are they doing here?”

“Who?” said Norma.

“The girl and her dog.” He looked back at Lana. “Are we close to your place?”

“Another mile or so.”

“Okay. Wait then, will you?”

Caz shrugged. “Whatever the boss-man wants.”

“You shouldn’t do that.” Norma said, “Calling him boss-man. He’ll end up believing it.”

Harry closed his door and looked around. “Man, it’s quiet out here. I mean *really* quiet.”

Sienna’s tail began to wag furiously at the sight of Harry. She glanced up at Rebekkah, who nodded, and Sienna bounded down the sidewalk to greet him. He

went down on his haunches but she came at him so hard he was knocked on his butt.

She slathered his face with licks and sniffings.

“Well hello to you too, crazy dog. And to you.” He said to Rebekkah, who was still ten yards away, giving five percent of her attention to Harry and Sienna, and devoting the rest to looking all around. At the empty street, where the only other vehicle besides Caz’s van were abandoned and stripped of all but their paint job, at the houses, also abandoned—not a single light burning in any of them.

“This isn’t a coincidence.” Harry said.

“No.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well that makes two of us. I just go where my dreams tell me to go.”

“Do they supply you with the air fare too?”

“Money comes. Never the same way twice. Sienna, let Harry get up. His face is all clean now. You should feel honored by the way, she bites most men.”

“We’ll I’ve got a blind medium, a gay genius and a pre-op transsexual in the van. Who’s she going to gnaw?”

“Nobody—“

“Oh that’s—”

“—Because we’re not getting in the van?”

“Why not? We’ve got to get Norma—”

He stopped. Every single drop of ink in his veins unleashed a shout. It was like a kick in his belly. His breath went out of him, and instead of getting up he dropped back onto the ground, closing his eyes to make some sense of what he was feeling. Dimly he heard Caz yelling to him to get up, get up, Norma says we’ve got to get out of here... Then Caz was kneeling beside him asking him what was wrong.

“You’re fucking ink is having a primal scream,” he said.

“Well get yourself up. Is this dog pissed off at me or somebody else?”

“Somebody else.”

“Caz... Rebekkah. And Sienna, her pissed off dog.” He took a deep breath and got to his feet in one sudden easy motion.”

“I thought maybe you were hurting.”

“It’s not hurt. It was just the shock of it.”

“We’ve got to get you to Lana’s, or at least to a place where there’s people.”

“No.” said Rebekkah. “It happens here.”

“What happens?”

“Where we intersected.”

“What happens?”

The young woman had closed her eyes.

“Hell.”

—

Felixson was in awe. He'd seen plenty of workings more spectacular than this single astrolabe of demon and origami. But to feel the power that simply was generating, that was worthy of his wonderment. The thicket grove was in the transforming grip of the energies, and its brambles suddenly pliant and swaying like thorny seaweed in the grip of a furious tide, its knots solved. But it was the origami satellites, those insignificant papers of Solakion's Numerics, that were moving in the most impressive of fashions, their orbits no longer repeated circlings of their creator, but describing instead ever faster and more elaborate maneuvers moving themselves in a long ovoid orbits and then suddenly coming in so tight they would have stuck the Hell Priest had they made the tiniest movement in their flight.

As they circled, their speed increasing exponentially, the balls of paper brightened, like embers woken by a wind, and shed bright maggots of fire that were swept out of orbit to float in the churning grove. They didn't drift for very long. New currents and counter-currents were being created in the turmoil of the circling

papers, and the tiny scrawls of fire became instigators of their own wild orbits, the traffic proliferating as spark bred spark, hundreds becoming thousands, some close to cleaving the Hell Priest's head that the shadows of the pins thrown up upon his face sped like a wall of one-handed clocks. He was the only thing not moving, Felixson saw; he preserved a godlike stillness in the midst of elaborating microcosm that surrounded him, its reflection giving the illusion of life to the Hell Priest's black, pitiless eyes.

Seconds before it happened Felixson could feel the old feeling in his stomach and balls, the feeling that meant the working he was doing—or in this case, witnessing—was about to erupt from theory into reality. He held his breath, the significance of the maneuvers he was watching now so far beyond the rudimentary state of his own magic skills that he had no idea of the consequence it would have.

And then the collisions began. First just a few maggots of fire slipping out their orbit and striking a mote coming in the opposite direction. And those motes thrown

into a third orbit striking others as they did so moving them out of orbit into the path of others coming in the opposite direction, that in turn caused five, ten, twenty collisions, each caused another five, ten, twenty until there was no part of the system the Hell Priest had created that was not coming unknitted. Apparently this too was part of his working's design, because he moved not a muscle nor spoke a syllable to restore order to the system's escalating decay. He wasn't entirely still now, however. More than once he turned a second or two before a particularly vivid sequence of collisions began to watch the beauty of their escalating destruction which filled his eyes with light.

The entire grove was shaking with each collision now. Felixson could hear them, like extremely distant fireworks, boom upon boom. He could no longer see the thicket: there was fire striking fire in every direction. He glanced back up at his master's face and to his astonishment saw there an expression he'd never seen before: a smile. It was so **fenuous** that only a man like Felixson, who'd learned for his own

safety to read the subtlest nuances of his master's face, would have recognized it as such. But it was there. And Felixson, who had discerned in his devotion to the Cenobite a strain of masochism that had left him more profoundly content, living in the ever present fear of his master's displeasure, than he had ever been. So content indeed that it occurred to him now, watching the emptiness grow in scale, that if his master was done with him, as he might well be, and the dance of dissolution was going to pluck him up very soon, he would be taken into the fire. What greater purpose for the worthless flesh and bone of him than to supply flesh fuel for the blaze that his master had lit? He would give himself up, he decided; get to his feet and walk into the circling fires. But the powers loose in the grove were too strong for him. When he tried to get up he was knocked down off balance by a series of blows.

“Stay where you are.” The Hell Priest said. “And cover your face.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Felixson covered his face with his hands, but his curiosity had the better of him. He peered up between his fingers. The spectacle of collisions continued to escalate, and their cumulative effect, Felixson saw, was to ever more quickly reduce the number of motes and scrawls which he'd watched proliferate. No, not reduce, transform. Each impact turned the visible forms fragments so tiny they were simply blossoming clouds of brightness, which were sliced up as their swelling forms strayed into the speeding paths of remaining motes and of the dust of earlier collisions, some portions of the clouds torn off to fly clockwise, and wide, some anti-clockwise, and so close to the creator that now the traffic struck him regularly.

The tiny, ineffable smile had not left his face, he saw. Indeed it grew a tiny bit clearer, he saw, as he lifted his arms into the pose of the triumphantly crucified. The response for the energies was instantaneous. They wrapped themselves around his arms, and around his fingers, drawing the dwindling number of motes into collision with his person.

Something was imminent, Felixson knew, and he probably should obey his master and look away. But he couldn't bring himself to do so. He just kept watching.

Twelve

Caz had parked the van at the side of the street, though there was neither sight nor sound of traffic in either direction, and had got out. He reached beneath the seat

and pulled out a piece of rolled carpeting, which he laid on the sidewalk, and crouching down, unrolled it. Then he called to Harry.

“You want something?”

Harry glanced at the selection of knives and other lethal tools which were laid out on the two foot long piece of thread bare carpet. The longest was a much scratched and nicked machete, which Harry had had need of once before, and selection of six other blades, the longest a substantial hunting knife, the smallest a small knife he'd been given by a butcher he'd dated, for valentine's day.

“I don't think we're going to have any trouble from the folks around here, Caz, because there aren't any. The place is deserted.”

“There's a reason, Mr. D'Amour.”

“Introductions, Harry?”

“Yes, of course. This is Rebekkah and her sublime hound Sienna. Rebekkah, this is the most notorious homo in New York, Arnie Cazarino; he’s also a very good friend.”

“So you told Harry there was a reason the place is empty.”

“Yes. This. What’s happening now. Or whatever’s about to happen.”

“I don’t follow.” Caz said.

“Don’t be dense,” Norma remarked as she was escorted from the van by Lana,

“She’s saying there’s something about to happen here. Something significant.

Something ordinary people knew they didn’t want to be around.”

“I’m sorry for being dense, but why here?”

“Well, why do you think?”

“If I knew I wouldn’t be asking,” Caz replied, a little testily.

“No, he’s right. I don’t get it either.” Lana said to Norma. “And I’m not dense, just so we understand one another.”

“It’s going to happen here because we’re here, right now. Our paths intersected.”

“Did you come expecting to meet me?” Harry asked Rebekkah.

“No, but she did.” Rebekkah said, glancing down at Sienna, who was busily sniffing around the newcomers. She was particularly interested in Lana’s crotch which despite the tightness of her jeans showed no signs whatsoever of the presence of cock and balls. Lana wasn’t entirely happy with Sienna’s curiosity but she couldn’t do much about it without drawing further attention to the mysteries of her crotch.

“I still don’t understand how us being here right now would drive out a whole street full of people.”

“Maybe its better you don’t know.” Norma said.

“Come on,” Caz said, “Are we in some deep shit here, because if we are, we should get Lana, the dog and anyone else who wants to go out of here.”

“Sienna’s not going anywhere.” Rebekkah said. “Believe me, you need her here. And to answer the question, the place is empty because the deep shit we’re in has been splattered in all directions, if you mind me going with metaphors, and one place it went is backwards—”

“In time?” said Caz.

“In time. Fucking with the dreams of people who lived here, making them sick and weak and frightened.”

“So they all left.” Caz said, his voice a monotone.

“Not everybody was frightened off,” Rebekkah said, “There’s still some lights here and there.”

“Well why don’t we just move our butts and get away from here, so whatever happens doesn’t fuck with us?”

“It’s happening here because we’re here.” Rebekkah said.

“All of us?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know. Certainly she demanded to be here.”

“The dog?”

“Yes. The dog.”

“You know I’ve heard about as much crazy talk as is healthy for a young impressionable pre-op transsexual to hear. So, you know what? I’m going to leave Grandma Moses right here and just walk away from this little gathering of insane folk. Call me when cuckoo season’s over, Caz.”

“Just so you know Little Lana,” Norma said. “I do not appreciate being called Grandma Moses.”

“She was a painter—”

“I know who the fuck she was.” Norma snapped.

“Sorry I spoke.” Caz said, as he backed away down the sidewalk, raising his hands, palms out, in a little parody of surrender, which of course went unseen by Norma.

He got five or six steps when something happened that stopped him in his tracks.

“What the hell was that?” Lana said. “Did you make that happen?”

“No,” said D’Amour. “If your going Lana, make it quick.”

“What did happen?” Caz said. “It wasn’t an earthquake. It was the air. Like a convulsion in the air.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t take off and leave whatever’s going to happen to happen?” Caz said, “Or at least watch from the far end of the street?”

“You should do that, Caz. Take Norma and Lana and drive the fuck away from here.”

“And leave you and her and—Jesus, what’s the dog doing?”

She had crossed the street while they’d been talking and was sniffing the street then the air, then the street again and the air again. Her hackles stood up like a

porcupine's quills, and she muttered to her, little growls and grunts and sounds that sounded as though they were ended with a question mark.

"Forget the dog, Caz. Just go."

"I'm staying. Lana can drive Norma."

"Norma can speak for herself, thank you very much."

"So you want to stay," Harry said. "Fine. I was just giving you the option."

"You were trying to deny a blind old woman some excitement, is what you were doing."

"So stay. Fine. Caz, give her a machete."

"For real?"

"Christ no."

"I need something to defend myself with."

"Why? What's happening here?"

"Oh, wow. Somebody finally asked." Rebekkah remarked sourly.

“You have some answers?”

“There’s going to be a breach point here. Something in another **pale** wants access to this place.”

“I still don’t see why we don’t just go.” Caz said.

“It’s going to happen here, whether we run or not. If we run there’s more chance of blood-letting. Lana has the right idea. She knows she’s not part of this so she’s just walking away.”

She pointed at Caz. “I think you should do the same, and take—”

“If she means me—”

“I do.”

“I’m Norma.”

“Well you should go too.”

“Is she a friend of yours, Harry?”

“Not exactly. I met her... in New Orleans.”

“Well, I don’t like her. And I don’t trust her. You’ve got some motives, missy.”

“Well I wouldn’t be alone in that, would I?”

“And what’s that suppose to mean?”

“Norma, listen to me—”

“Make it quick.” Rebekkah said.

“Will you shut up? I’m listening to my friend Harry.”

“You should go, Norma.”

“Fuck you. Just because I’m blind I’m a liability? I know more...dead

people...” She let the thought go and picked up another. “I just realized there aren’t any ghosts here.” She half turned, face to the sky. Then, after a few seconds: “Not a one. Now I’m getting scared.”

Caz smiled and shook his head, catching Harry’s eye as he did so. “No ghosts and Norma’s scared,” he said.

“It’s not natural.” Norma said. “The dead are everywhere. Except cemeteries, of course. The same thing that frightened the living away from here frightened the dead too. Lord, how bad could this be?”

—

The Hell-Priest felt the foreignness of the smile at his face, and he pleased in it. There would be much ahead that was strange, he knew; much that would challenge his cautious nature. That part of him had given him good service in the twenty-two years of preparation that had brought him to this moment: years which his every private thought or deed had been heretical, the merest of them enough to earn him a half century of living burial, while the worst of them? He doubted there was any provision in even the most secret books of Cenobite Law that provided for a

penalty to be paid by one such as himself who had summarily murdered ninety-six or ninety-seven percent of the Order's members.

Which act, of course, had been preparatory work on his part. Of all those who would act against his interests in the days to come—and indeed in the decades that followed, when the bloody labors of these days were long over and his true ambition had become manifest, it was his own brethren, the fiends of the Abyss, whose opposition he had most respected, and therefore needed to quickly gift to worms.

Their deaths did not entirely ensure their silence, of course: Cenobites could return as ghosts, so he'd heard demons of lower castes attest. He frankly doubted the likelihood of this; the condition in which he and his brothers and sisters had died felt like an end-state, their bodies pressed to the limit of habitability, their hope of salvation as remote as that of their flesh ever regaining its painless innocence. Surely if there were such entities as Cenobite ghosts he would have been able to imagine himself as one.

But he could not. However, this last grand plan came to an end—in failure or in his

apotheosis—it was the last thing he would do or be. There was no sublime spirit state waiting beyond the last of this material self. The only thing that would outlast his flesh and memories would be a skull pierced with pins.

This notion did not trouble him, for one simple reason. His plan would not end in failure. He had already dealt with the greatest threats to his possible success, his own Order. The rest of hell's inhabitants were divided, houses of warring demons all of whom trailed centuries of atrocities against one another that assured their continued hatred for one another. There would perhaps be a foolhardy survivor of his Order who came after him, but with the knowledge from the magicians, there was nothing a few Cenobites could do to even slow, much less stop, his progress towards his destination! His smile grew broader still at the thought of it—

—

“What’s that noise?” Caz said. It had suddenly begun all around them, not one sound but many. Harry turned to the spot, listening for the source. “It’s the houses,” he said.

Loose windows were rattling against their frames, locked doors vibrating as though to tear themselves open. Loose tiles on the roofs were shaken free and slid down, smashing on the ground below. While from inside the houses came the noise of innumerable domestic objects dancing to the same summons. There was an escalating din of objects falling and smashing—crockery, bottles, lamps, mirrors—as though each house was being vandalized at the same time.

The sound of destruction had obviously spread beyond the point where Lana had been walking, because it had turned her around. Now she was running back toward the others, letting out shrill shrieks every two or three strides, and a window

close to her slammed and smashed, or the loose boards of a fence spat out their nails and dropped onto the sidewalk.

“What’s going on?” she demanded, focusing her fury, which was fueled by her panic, at Caz. “I trusted you, lover-boy.” She said. “It’s just a little favor, you said! No big deal, you said!”

A window blew in close by, then another, and another.

“Last chance for a weapon.” Caz said.

“You got a gun for me?” Norma asked.

“No guns, Norma.” Harry said.

“Please. Then how about a big knife.”

“Give her a big knife, Caz.”

Before Caz could make a selection for Norma, Rebekkah picked up the machete.

“Are you sure?” Caz began. She looked at him. He smiled, “Good choice.”

And still the loosed energies on the streets took their fill on the houses, blowing some of the windows in and some out, as though there was something almost tidal about the rising powers. The street lights went out now, all at once. Caz put a knife into Harry's hand.

"Your tattoos—"

"Berserk."

"You have any idea?"

"None I like."

And then, in the darkness, a voice they hadn't heard in a while. Sienna began barking, long solid howls, that steadily rose in pitch as she gave forth to a lightless sky.

Thirteen

“Be ready,” the Hell-Priest said to Felixson, “Follow where I walk.”

“Can I ask—?”

“I’m going to fetch a testimonium, to take full account of what will happen when I reach my destination. Someone who knows me a little... Understands me... a little.”

The entire grove was in a bewildering complex motion, the air around the Hell-Priest a cosmos of mote-freighted paths, so elaborately intertwined that in places they formed knots through which the traffic of light fragments continued to flow.

Only the two folded fires from which all these motes had come remained whole, moving at such speed and burning with such brightness that the twin rings of their courses were visible, each dripping a little below the other for half its course and riding a little above for the other half. It was mesmeric; Felixson stared at the sight barely blinking. He had watched this universe born from his master's hands, then watched it multiply its material, and spread it to the limits of the ground, and set everything in intricate motion. His master's instructions that he be ready could only mean that the life-cycle of this universe was near its end.

He felt the moment coming a few seconds before it arrived. His face grew heavy, his eyes and teeth aching. Blood ran freely from his nostrils, his tongue too leaden to lick it from his lips. This pain did not go unrewarded, however. His throbbing eyes saw two originating forms with a glacial clarity, their speed no longer an abortion to his comprehension of their exquisite intricacy; each fold his master had made now available to his sight, even those concealed behind compressed layers of

paper and fire. He could see too that both of his master's creations had made subtle adjustments in their paths, and now they were making their last circuit. This time they would meet.

He had barely shaped that thought when it happened, the two burning forms colliding directly in front of the Hell-Priest. The scale of the consequences were out of all proportion to the fact that these two small bright forms had struck. A shock wave spread from the spot in all directions, its force pressing the bright dust away from the collision, creating in the process an expanding sphere of steadily more concentrated matter.

"Get inside," The Hell-Priest said to Felixson, who had retreated into the softened thicket as a safe place to watch the events unfold. But he trusted his master, and immediately did as he was instructed, moving out of the thicket, still crouched over, and stepping through the wall of collected motes. It was quick, but it wasn't pleasant. The hair on his head and body was seared off. The clothes he made himself

in a pitiful attempt at propriety burned to grey ash in a second, adding fire to cleanse his groin. He now looked like a child down there, he thought, his manhood reduced to a nub, his balls tight against his body. But he was safe inside the still expanding sphere, and close to his master. That being so, the shrunken state of his manhood mattered little to him, nor his nakedness.

“Stand up, Felixson. One yard behind me to my right. We are in a moment of suspended time, which will not hold for very long because the Machattca-Santos Imperative in front of me has a very strong influence, and is already compiling my formal Abeyance. Quickly then. As of this moment until I rescind the liberty you may once again have use of your skills.” He quickly scrawled in the air, leaving a few black characters in front of him. Then he copied each one away with the back of his hand, starting at the top. “I’m unlocking the restraints I put on your memory.”

“I didn’t know—”

“—That there was something couldn’t remember? Of course not. Even now, you have only a small part of what you knew restored. Use it sparingly, and in my service, and I will give you more, by increments.”

A narrow door had suddenly opened in Felixson’s head, each one a book, its contents a piece of his power. The knowledge brought with it a consequence with a long history: he was suddenly ashamed of his infantile state, his hairless groin and the inadequate genitals humiliating. He would cover himself as soon as he has an opportunity. But for now he put the problem of his nakedness aside and returned his attentions to his master.

“The gift is most welcome, master—”

“Remember that.”

“Of course. A gift—”

“Not the gift. *Master*. Remember that Felixson. Forget it for an instant and I will only take back access to your memories. I’ll wipe you clean. You won’t remember to crouch when you shit.’

“I understand.”

“Then step through so I can fetch my witness. It should all be over in less than sixty seconds. Place your left hand *lightly* on my right shoulder. Do not grip me. As soon as we cross over, break contact and use what I returned to you to keep any interference from preventing my taking the witness.”

“I could have honed my skills if you’d given me—”

“You couldn’t have carried the knowledge of what I was going to do without letting it slip even if I had taken out your tongue and sewn up your mouth. My deceased brethren would have smelt the hope in your sweat, and cut open your thoughts until they had everything. Your ignorance kept you safe, believe me. Or

don't, its nothing to me. Enough. Your hand, on my shoulder. And watch; every detail. The future will want you to know."

Trembling, his body fermenting fearful agitation and idiot joy, his mind filled with doors opening and closing in howling winds that had sprung up from compass points he could not even name. And in those winds came words and phrases arbitrarily loosed from the remembered pages, and snagged in the folds of his nakedness, or simply pressed against his cheek, his chest, his belly, his thigh.

The originators were colliding now, and initiating the final phrase of this whole sequence. Felixson had thought the paper fine comets were about as bright as anything could get. But the eruptions of blazing energy that exploded from the collision place were brighter by orders of magnitude. So bright indeed that Felixson had to avert his eyes, and shielding his face with right hand he studied what he could see of his master's voice at this oblique angle. He wasn't smiling now; Felixson was fairly certain of that. Indeed there were signs that suggested that even he was taken

aback by the scale of this eruption. And for what? Why begin this endeavor that had been so many years in the making with a show of such extreme, and possibly unpredictable, pyrotechnics.

Felixson figured out the answer by simply examining the question. This was the first act of events that should they ever end would be recounted for as long as there were tellers of tales. And in lieu of the witness the Hell-Priest was going to find, it would fall to him to offer an account of what he'd seen so far.

"Watch," the Cenobite had said, *"Every detail."* And then the remark from which Felixson took the greatest comfort: *"The future will want to know."* He took great comfort from those words. How much better might the Hell-Priest be persuaded to treat him now that he wasn't simply a naked runt of a man, but had witnessed a part of his master's journey towards his apotheosis. Nor was it just any part, it was the beginning he'd witnessed, the striking of a spark that was going to blossom, if he

judged the priest's nature and ambition correctly—into the conflagrations that would change the shape of hell forever.

His speculations ceased there, as the Hell-Priest turned his head fractionally in Felixson's direction.

“I will spare your nakedness.” He murmured and for the first time since Felixson had left the mausoleum he felt the happy weight of cloth upon his back, and covering his loins and legs. It was little more than peasant garb, pole brown, the fabric coarsely woven, the shoes stout and stiff, but putting a layer of protection between the tender soles of his feet with whatever he walked upon, a luxury if such lavishness he wanted to weep for gratitude.

There was no time, however, for even a word of thanks. The Hell-Priest was walking towards the ignited air, and Felixson followed, step for step. The brightness divided around them, but not without leaving traces of its energies all around, which as they advanced broke against their faces. The effect upon Felixson was not unlike

that of the first snort of very pure cocaine. The heart quickening, the skin suddenly hot, the senses more alert. The sudden rush of confidence was there too, and it made Felixson want to pick up the pace of their advance, eager to see what lay on the other side of this bright passage, and who.

The Hell-Priest had access to a world of witnesses. He would surely choose a theologian or metaphysician, somebody with at least some vague grasp of the mythology that would then need to be radically reassessed once they set eyes on the reality. Felixson looked forward to seeing how the chosen one would respond when they were confronted with the truth behind the great mass of human endeavor—the labor of pacts and parties, playwrights, actors and story-tellers lit by night fires—in service of telling the universal story of what awaited sinners on the other side of life.

Felixson saw a sliver of that other place now, the place where he'd done his time behind the face of a magic-man. A dark street, by night, some figures, retreating from the spot they were appearing. He was disappointed. This wasn't the way he'd

expected it to be; not at all. Somehow he'd assumed the Hell-Priest would have found the way prepared for him, but then as the light, through which they walked, spilled out onto the squalid street he saw the wisdom of his master's methodology. There was more than one witness here, and all who saw this visitation would make their own account of it. The Hell-Priest was beginning to climb to his time state with a spectacle to the beginnings of which, he, Felixson, had born witness, and which now, spilling onto some unremarkable street, announced what would surely be the defining attribute of the journey henceforth.

He had not only silenced his fellow members of the Order in the fortress; he had marked an end to their self-abnegation, their devotion to punishment and pain and laws ancient and immutable. Felixson had been told that even the modest introduction of Lennanhand's puzzle box into the catalogue of tools that were available for the temptation of humanity had been vociferously opposed by many members of the Order, who saw its gilded prettification as evidence of decadence. If

their spirits had watched the game of creation that the Hell-Priest had played in the Order to open up this passage, saw now the doors of lights which had opened in full view of human eyes, they would not only be vengeful, morally repulsed.

They were almost at the end of their passage now, two more steps and the Hell-Priest was standing on wet asphalt, another two and Felixson had joined him. It wasn't the sight of the street and the dark houses that pricked Felixson's memory most deeply, however; it was the smell of the city air, and of the sidewalks, wetted by a thin drizzle which was still falling. A feeling of intense loss overwhelmed him for a moment, thinking of his once-charmed life, of love and magic and friends. All dead, all of it, and them, dead. If he hadn't quickly governed himself tears would have blinded him, which would have made the sequence of events that followed even more incomprehensible than it proved.

It was difficult, after the blaze of the passage, to make much more than rudimentary sense of the scene into which he and his master had stepped. Lightless

street, lightless houses, lightless sky. And some figures, more visible because they were illuminated by a wash of brightness by the fire-framed door.

A young woman caught his eye first, her loveliness a welcome respite from the innumerable forms that ugliness took in the place behind him. But there was no hint of welcome on her face; anything but. Her gaze was fixed on the Cenobite, of course, and while she watched him her lips moved, though he could not catch a word of what she was saying.

“D’Amour!” the Hell-Priest called, his voice, though never loud, easily heard.

“Where are you? Show yourself!”

Felixson searched the musk for the man his master was summoning. There was a tall, broken-nosed fellow who seemed to be holding back a blind black woman who wanted to approach the Hell-Priest. Like the girl there was no hint of welcome in her expression; she had curses on her lips, no doubt of that. There was another figure,

further off—it was hard to see at such a distance whether it was a man or woman—who looked into the brightness with a face that seemed cleansed of all feeling.

And then, from the darkness off to their left, much closer to the doorway than any of the others, walked a man with a face that showed the marks of life lived hard; scarred on his cheek and brow and jaw-bone, and across his throat two scars, twin attempts to kill him. But Felixson had only a moment to scan the man's scars, because the man's eyes demanded his attention, and they would not be denied. He seemed to look at both the Hell-Priest and Felixson at the same time, and the sum of the contempt, no, the unalloyed hatred, that was in his gaze was beyond any emotion—love, ecstasy, rage—that Felixson had ever seen in human eyes.

“Not your usual style, Pinhead.” D'Amour said.

The Hell-Priest ignored the slur.

“I have begun my sublime labor.”

“Am I supposed to applaud? Because I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“It will become apparent, to you more than anyone.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I have chosen you as my witness.”

“Your what?”

“Don’t sully the moment with this performance, D’Amour. It’s beneath you. I have brought an end to my Order, so as to begin an endeavor I have been planning for half of your lifetime, and I have given great thought over to the choice of the eyes that could witness, the intellect that could interpret and the memory that would preserve the events that will unfold from this moment on.”

“And you chose me.” Harry said.

“Yes.”

“Trust me I’m not trying to sully anything. Right now I’m just trying to make sense of this. Why the fuck, when you have—” he threw a ragged gesture out towards the beyond darkened street, “—when you have all of the *intellec*ts out there to choose from, who could maybe, just *maybe*, make sense of what your sublime labor is all about, why would you come looking for me?”

“Because Hell has made you its business, or you have made Hell yours, or both; and though —yes— I could find countless minds more agile than yours, more sophisticated, more—”

“Yes, I get the picture.”

“Let me be plain. I despise you with all the venom that your heart nurtures for me. And this choosing, made despite my hatred for you and all the pitiful delusions of redemption you carry, was hard for me. But that was what made it right. I would be excused nothing by a witness such as you; nothing. Indeed you could seek out even the tiniest sign of frailty, and magnify it in your final testament.”

“My final testament?”

“Yes. You won’t simply witness what is going to unfold in Hell from this point outwards. You will make a testament of it—wherein my acts and my philosophies will be recounted. They will be my Gospels, my Scarlet Gospels, and I will forbid you nothing in their chapters and verses, as long as it is observed truth, however far from my ideal of myself I fall.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but you’ve got the wrong guy. I’m no writer.”

“You won’t write a word. Your job is to witness. To see and remember. That’s all I’m asking of you. To see and remember. Later you will tell the entire story to whomever I choose to turn your witnessing into Gospel truth. You will have been set back down on the very place you now stand, changed perhaps by your immediate past—by the sights you will see and the revelations you will have watched uncovered—but so amply rewarded by the several millions of dollars that will be transferred into your account immediately.”

“How many millions?”

“Are we bartering?”

“Perhaps.”

“Name the number.”

“One hundred million dollars.”

The Cenobite showed not so much as one hint of unease when presented with the number.

“I accept your terms. Do you accept mine?”

“Don’t do this, Harry.” Said the blind black woman, reaching out to D’Amour.

She started towards him but the broken-nose thug caught hold of her arm, gently restraining her. He couldn’t restrain her tongue, however.

“You know how these deals always end up. *Always*. It’s a trick, Harry. Think about it.”

“I am, Norma.”

The name registered with Felixson. This was Norma Paine, the Ghost Woman, to whom the lost and broken-souled dead came for comfort and directions. Now he knew where they were: New York, or close by. He had heard it said many times that the Paine woman never left her apartment: the dead came to her. So what was she doing away from her place of work, in the company of D'Amour and the rest? Risking the Hell-Priest's fury, he dared to take a step closer to his master. Paine and D'Amour were still talking.

“Forgive me my presumption.” Felixson said.

The Hell-Priest was feeling generous apparently, or at least wanted to put a show of benevolence on to encourage his chosen witness to take up his duties. He turned his head towards Felixson, though his eyes remained on the shabby figure of D'Amour.

“What?” he murmured, barely moving his lips.

Felixson learned the lesson fast. When he replied, he too spoke with the words unreadable.

“This is a trap.”

“Impossible. How could they have known?”

“Then why are they here?”

“What *here* is that?” the Cenobite replied, not raising the volume of his voice, but no longer troubling to conceal his words. “We caught them in an empty street?”

“Exactly. But this is New York, isn’t it?”

“Brooklyn.”

“So, why the darkness? Why no people except these few with D’amour? And the blind woman, yes, but do you know who she is?”

“Of course.”

“They knew we would be here...”

“Step away from me. And take your hand off my shoulder. Your fears offend me.”

“I’m not afraid. Only wary.”

“Step away. And do not speak again until this business is done!”

“Problem with the staff?” D’Amour said, “Can’t get the damned these days?”

“There are a ten thousand waiting for every one who does not share the vision.”

“Then take one of them instead of me.”

“You’re the exception that proves the rule, D’Amour. Come with me now and save these innocents the cost of being associated with you.”

“If you really think you can count on me as your witness, then I’ll go.”

“Harry, no!” Norma yelled.

“It’s for the best, Norma.”

“How very clear-headed of you.” The Hell-Priest observed, not without a trace of surprise in his voice.

“Ok, let’s do it.”

The Cenobite stood aside.

“I always did want to see Hell,” Harry said. “Just once.” And without risking a last minute loss of courage by making a farewell to Norma and the others, he walked through the fire-framed door.

Fourteen

He'd taken two steps, his blood thundering in his ears, when he heard the only voice behind him that would make him—that *did* make him—turn around and look the way he'd come.

Sienna had suddenly begun to bark with agitation and alarm, the noise she was making sufficient to insure that he halted and looked back. He could see nothing.

However, the blaze of flames interwoven around the door was so bright that it made the dark street beyond inscrutable. No matter. The dog's call was a summons and he responded to it immediately. He was back in the street in three strides, astonished to see how quickly the scene he'd left had changed.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Norma seemed to be the chief cause of the sudden chaos. She had shaken herself free of Caz's hold and was making her way towards the door in pursuit of Harry. The Cenobite had clearly been prepared to throw some significant harm her way, because his hands which he was withdrawing to his chest,

forced to retreat by Sienna's harming, were literally dripping with the toxins which he had intended for her.

It was shocking to see how the demon was responding to the dog, his mouth open a little way and drawn down at the corners, his black eyes closed to slits, the furrows distorting the perfect geometry of his scars and the pins that marked each intersection. Was it something as simple as fear in Pinhead's face, Harry wondered. Surely not; not with poisons running from his hands so potent that they were dissolving the asphalt where they fell?

"Who owns this thing?" the Cenobite said.

"She owns herself." Rebekkah replied.

"If she's not out of my sight in five seconds I will kill everyone here, including D'Amour." The demonic expression didn't lose any of its violence as he spoke; if anything it grew more intense, the muscles in his face twitching.

"Maybe you should call her off, Rebekkah." Harry said.

“I told him, she owns herself.”

Harry looked at Sienna. She was bent low, almost as if she was stalking the Cenobite, her eyes fixed on him and just as black. Her lips were curled quivering back from her teeth and mottled gums. A thread and pearl of drool hung from her chin.

“Back away, girl. Please. For me.”

There was a long moment when all that happened was that the saliva thread grew longer, and the thought was in Harry’s head that this was where it ended. And then, as though her expression of near-rabidity had been a mask of fog, which she simply inhaled, all hint of Sienna’s ferocity vanished, her body relinquished its stalking pose and she turned away from the Cenobite, Harry and the door, eclipsed by the darkness with uncanny speed.

“Satisfied?” Harry said, stepping away from the door to stand in precisely the spot where Sienna had been standing.

He watched Pinhead starring down at his hands, which were soaking up the poison that had apparently oozed from his pores.

“That’s quite a skill.”

“Flattery, D’Amour?”

“No, it’s true. I’ve heard a lot about you but never that. Or anything like it.”

“You’re digging.”

“Yeah.”

“Just ask.”

“First I killed for knowledge.”

“All those dead magicians.”

“Yes.”

“Your handiwork.”

“Every one. Except, of course, the three suicides.”

“Kennedy, Messovi, and Yang.”

“Good. I made the right choice.”

“So now you have a lot of tricks up your sleeve.”

“So many, D’amour. Even you would be impressed.”

“You said first.”

“Yes. First I killed for knowledge.”

“Then?”

“Then I killed for freedom.”

“The Order.”

“It went so easily. I was astonished. Even a little disappointed. Where does the dog come from?”

“I don’t know. Is that the end of the killing?”

“Of course not. How can you not know? A thing like that.” A subtle echo of the venomous grimace which had possessed his face came there again. “If you truly don’t know—”

“I don’t. Look at me. You know the truth about a man’s face, don’t you?”

The Cenobite nodded, assessing Harry’s features with his gaze. “Ignorance.” He said after a moment. The ghost grimace faded from his face.

“You were telling me...”

“...Yes...” the Cenobite said quietly, he looked confounded, the memory of the dog having distracted him.

“You said you had killed for knowledge. Then for freedom. But there was more to do.”

“Oh yes.” The confusion retreated, as the grimace had done. The calm symmetry of nail and scar was re-established. “Now,” he said. “I will kill for absolute power.”

“In Hell.”

“In Hell. I have no ambitions for any other place than that. When I own its throne, the regime overthrown, the clans in my service, I will have all I could ever

want. And it is this rise you will witness, D'Amour. There is nothing I will keep you from seeing, nothing I will prevent you from knowing, even into the deepest secret part of me."

"You don't need to convince me again. I've already agreed."

"Your life is mine then, until I have risen to that high place to which we will climb together."

"Yes."

"And you will obey my instructions until you are dismissed as my witness."

"I didn't agreed to that."

"But you must, D'Amour."

"I've said I'll be your witness. And I will. But I'm not your servant."

"So much pride, D'Amour."

"So much ambition, demon."

"Kill the dog."

“What?”

“Then we can go. Kill the dog.”

“What?”

“It carries a power to unmake the order of your world, D’Amour.”

“I doubt that.”

“Now perhaps you should meet my eyes, D’Amour. There’s no lie in them. Kill the dog, and let’s be on our way.”

“All right! All right!” Harry said, raising his voice. He reached into his jacket and took the Colt out of its well-worn leather holster. “Rebekkah?” he yelled, turning his back on the demon, “you heard what old Pinhead said, he don’t like the dog, so I gotta do like he asks and put her out of her misery.” He put a little country twang into his speech.

“Rebekkah, honey,” he said, “I’ll make it quick I promise.”

It was Caz who stepped into his line of vision, however, not Rebekkah.

“Are you out of your mind, D’Amour?” he said.

Harry, his back to Pinhead, winked at Caz but said:

“A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. You’d better go fetch that damn hound. Go on.” Caz didn’t move. Harry fired at the ground between Caz’s feet.

“I said get the damn dog!” he yelled, firing at the same spot a second time.

Caz moved as the second shot bounced back and forth between houses, telling Harry to eat demon shit and die. The din of shots and shouts caused a series of events to erupt around Harry.

Sienna started barking again, off to his left, but when he looked in her direction it wasn’t the dog who was barking, it was Rebekkah, standing at the limit of the light cast by the door, uttering the sound of Sienna’s voice with chilling veracity.

“Where is she?” Harry yelled.

Rebekkah just kept on barking.

“Better be quick, D’Amour,” Pinhead said, “I can find another witness.”

Then, out of the darkness, Lana's voice, stripped of any pretense of femininity.

"Get the fuck away from me!" he demanded. "Go on! I got nothing to do with this.

Get the fuck away!"

He was yelling at Sienna, who had for reasons known only to her sought Lana out and was shepherding her, with little growls and pushes, back towards the heart of all the activity, though she risked her life in venturing into the light.

"Shoot the thing, D'Amour." Pinhead said, the utterance thick with venom.

Wisely, Sienna made it hard, weaving back and forth behind Lana.

"This fucking bitch!" Lana snarled. She was no more than four or five steps from the fire-licked door, where she had no intention of being shepherded, even by a snapping dog. She pulled the knife she'd picked up from Caz's cache and turned, slashing at Sienna, though in doing so she drew another step closer to the doorway. Sienna circled wide around Lana to avoid the blade, and in so doing came too close to

the blazing threshold for a thing sprung from such a tainted genius as the Hell-Priest could endure.

Fifteen

It was as though the dog, in getting so close to the door, had reached back through the blaze and down the passage to the originating forces, to those pieces of origami that the Hell-Priest had set in motion, and reaching them had somehow spoiled the accuracy of one of their many folds. The flames around the door suddenly

lost the parity of their brightness, tainted by the darker colors, as though something was being buried alive, its boiling blood darkening the blaze. Pieces of its fire-withered stuff tumbled from the walls of conflagration, sending up columns of black-grey smoke which eclipsed the flames. It began at the far end of the passageway where Sienna's influence on the originators had initiated this sporadic decay.

The passageway repeatedly convulsed, as if to clear itself of these impediments, and with each convulsion some small measure of flame was extinguished, and the pathway between Hell and the world. Harry yelled to Sienna to get away from the door, but she wasn't quite finished with Lana. She suddenly picked up her pace, easily out-maneuvering her quarry, and ripped his thigh, just above his right knee. He loosed a stream of obscenities, swinging at the dog, but failing to wound her.

It wasn't Lana, however, she needed to be protecting herself from. It was Pinhead. During the last chaotic minute or so he had retreated into the shadows where the light from the door did not spill, and there was whispering forth the poison

that had sunk away into his hands. Now it was oozing from his pores again, pin-point beads quickly spilling until they ran, covering his hands completely and crawling up over the intricately stitched leather of his vestments.

Harry didn't hesitate. He walked towards the Cenobite, firing as he did so. He didn't bother wasting bullets in the torso—even minor demons could take a lot of lead and not be slowed by it—instead he aimed for the head. If he would take the bastard fuck's eyes, he thought. He leveled the Colt and fired. The bullet entered the Cenobite's cheek an inch below the left eye, and the force of it jerked back his head. He didn't lift it again, which offered Harry a clear shot at the creature's throat, which he took. It opened a hole in the middle of his throat, and air whistled out.

From behind him Harry heard Norma yelling: "Let go of me! Harry? Where are you? Make him let go!"

Harry glanced back to see that Pinhead's accomplice had grabbed hold of Norma's hair and had a crescent bladed knife, like a small scythe, pressed to the lower

portion of her abdomen. By the crazed look in his eyes, and the vicious way he pushed the point of the weapon into her it was clear that he would happily eviscerate her. Rebekkah was making a slow move towards him, apparently unnoticed.

Then a stinging in his sinuses —the stench of Pinhead’s venom— and Harry looked back just as the demon’s head dropped forward again, dark blood running from the cheek wound and following the lines of the scars, down, across, down, across, until the drops fell from his jaw. The blood held Harry’s gaze for a long moment, and in it the power accruing in his adversary’s hands reached critical mass. A few stinging flecks of the venom broke loose ahead of the greater mass, and burned Harry’s gun-hand. He dropped his gaze to see that the black oily filth had entirely covered the demon’s arms to the elbows, and that he was pointing his hands directly at Harry. Ten muzzles, no escape.

He tried again, twice, but it wasn’t the bullets that saved him from death, it was the sound of barking. The demon responded to the sound of the dog with a speed

that would have made Pavlov proud. He turned, scanning the darkness, Harry momentarily forgotten. He seemed to see his quarry too, because the matter around his hands and arms instantly started to churn and slide and boil. The demon spoke to it, a short sound, and a narrow stream of the filth went from the middle finger of his left hand.

Harry saw Sienna now, running, and still barking, apparently indifferent to the fact that she was only making it easier for the demon to target her. The poison did not strike her, though it would have done so had she not put in a sudden burst of speed. Harry took a cautious step to his left, which brought him a little way behind the demon. His move went unnoticed. Pinhead's entire attention was focused upon the dog. Even so Harry continued to move slowly, taking off his jacket and as he did so taking a second step to his left. As he did so Pinhead unleashed another burst of his murderous mud, though this time Harry could not see where it went because he was behind the demon now. But Sienna continued to bark, so he'd missed.

Harry was determined not to give the bastard a third try. He wrapped his jacket vary roughly around his hands, and then –with no time to formulate a clear plan, he came round and caught hold of the demon’s arm. Pinhead let out a cry that had a measure of fury in it, but was mostly repugnance and outrage. The thought flashed through Harry’s mind like sweet lightning. The demon had lived uncontaminated, unviolated by the proximity, and certainly in touch, of the despised humanity, and his rush of revulsion momentarily gave Harry the advantage. He used it. Before the demon could entirely govern his will Harry pressed the demon’s arm towards the ground between them. The churning filth continued to erupt from the creature’s fingers, the asphalt it struck cracking and scattering fragments in all directions.

Of course the demon had a remedy for this, his other hand, which he had so far chosen to leave hanging at his side, continuing to gather power. Now he lifted it, his gaze sliding towards Harry as he did so, and directing at Harry—with both his

hands committed to the increasingly difficult task of holding down the demon's left arm, Harry had no defense against the second weapon, the demon's right arm, which Pinhead lifted, seeming to take pleasure in taking his time to do so. One quick glance over at the other arm showed Harry the mass of boiling filth, that had swollen Pinhead's forearm to twice the size of the other. His arm was pointed, of course, directly at Harry.

“One last chance, D'Amour. Kill the dog and come with me. Be my witness. Or die now and I'll kill anyway.”

Harry was no actor, but he knew what power there was in a simple look, if he could be carried off with sufficient feigned sincerity. He let a frown nick his brow, as though he was puzzling over the choice of death or damnation. He took his eyes off the enemy completely, starring absently into space for a few dangerous seconds. He was peripherally aware that the other players in this drama were out standing still

doing nothing, but he didn't dare focus his gaze on any one of them for fear of drawing the demon's fire in their direction.

"Make up your mind while you still have one, D'Amour."

Harry made a tiny nod of his head and did the only thing his present situation allowed him, besides compliance with the demon. Using the arm he still held for purchase, he wrenched the creature round towards him, but with such violence and suddenness that the flow of filth that would have executed Harry had it hit him, instead it was spat off into the dark street. It hit Caz's van, the metal shrieking as it was torn open, the muck apparently throwing itself around inside the vehicle, causing as much damage as it could. Ten seconds later the gas tank exploded in a fat blossom of yellow and orange fire. There apparently was something combustible in Pinhead's killing muck, because the flame instantly came back at the demon, its spitting brightness braised with the filth. It came with incredible speed, faster than the demon could summon up the words to extinguish it, and as it came at

his hand it threw off a bright note which ignited the same flammable stuff in the much which was still pouring from the arm that Harry had been gripping. He was letting go of the remnants of his jacket, which was all but eaten away, when the fire consumed it and the burst of searing energy struck him so hard he was thrown to the ground.

None of this presented the least danger to Pinhead, Harry knew. What was a little fire, or even a bullet in the face, to one who lived in pain, and for pain: its endurer and devotee. He was used to being an infernal master of ceremonies, in charge of everything. But this whole endeavor, which had begun with such precision, had become chaotic, and it unnerved him.

Now the dog was coming back out of the darkness, barking furiously. There was the light of another sky in her eyes, a bright day that would soon see storms. The demon had not been there that day, under that sky, but his soul knew it; knew the crime, knew the punishment, and though he had no idea of how that light got into

the eyes of a flea-bitten mongrel it was there, *it was there*, and its presence made his innards knot with such a vehemence it was all he could do not to have the pain bend him double. In all the wastes of Hell, in the pits where only the demented, and one such as himself dared to go witness the abominations there, he had never witnessed anything that caught hold of his gut and twisted it the way the light of that ancient sky caught hold. He hated the mystery of all the things that soured his life, mystery was the worst. It was the profoundest enemy of order, and order was his beloved, his soul sealed to it as the groom is sealed to that of his bride. His loathing of mystery was that of a man who wants only to keep his beloved from harm.

But this animal, was mystery incarnate. It wasn't only in her bright sky hawked eyes but in the smell of her, and in the luster of her fur, and in the way she moved even; everything about her told him she was a vessel for something that he would have to go to war with, if he failed to kill her. She was baring her gums with each bark as she came at him. He tried to put her out of his head and concentrate his

efforts on disciplining the killing force he'd called up in his arms and hands. It wasn't any part of his training as a Genobite. It was something he learned from the most obscure magical treatises he'd possession of, the Tresstree Vinculum, and he had been sure he'd mastered it. But there was an instability in the summoned matter that the treatise had made no mention of, once a taunting element had been introduced into the flaw—D'Amour's filthy presence into the left hand, the fire with the right—the equations were thrown off. In calmer circumstances he would have quickly scanned the contaminants, but the confusion of the moment, with the dog closing on him, and his defenses against its assault compromised, he had no chance but to retreat.

He took three quick backward steps towards the threshold, looking for Felixson as he did so. To his credit the magician had done exactly as instructed. He'd taken hold of the blind woman, who he'd judged to be the likeliest source of trouble on this field of battle, and seemed at the same time to have driven the other male, a brutish thing, to his knees with some incantation. At some point Felixson had clearly

forced his adversary's face into the filth leaving his cheeks and brow besmirched but now the man was not only upright, he was forcibly resisting. His body was twitching with the effort it took to pull himself up, but he was seconds from breaking the chains of Felixson's will. There was nothing to do but go, and leave D'Amour. But given how he knew the attachment between D'Amour and the blind woman were, something could still be recovered from this sickening chaos.

"Felixson! Away! Bring the blind bitch with you."

"What about—"

"Away, I said! Now!"

The Magician was quick to obey, pulling Norma towards the burning door.

She fought furiously, punching Felixson over and over, but none of her blows were powerful enough to make him release her.

Caz meanwhile got to his feet, freed from Felixson's hold, and immediately went in pursuit of Norma. But Felixson had gained the door by now and in a few

strides he and his captive were through it and gone from sight, leaving the demon on the threshold.

Harry had by now also got up off the ground, though his short exposure to Pinhead's toxic secretion had left him sickened and unsteady. He had taken but a step towards the door when he realized that Sienna had broken off her pursuit of the demon. Her hackles were still raised like porcupine quills, her foam flecked lips curled back for teeth and gums, but she was barking away from him. What little Harry knew about her made him respectful of her opinion. He did the same. So, he saw, did Caz.

The demon didn't even look at them. He was solely concerned to be rid of the filth he had brandished so inelegantly. He spoke at lightning speed a row of syllables, and even before he'd finished the dark matter began to drop from his hands and arms. As he sloughed it off he continued to step back through the door and into to the bright passageway beyond.

The matter he was ridding himself of still had the capacity for harm. As the last of it dropped to the ground, forming a seething puddle large enough to drown a man in, it went from the threshold. It extended its shape as it did so, until it resembled a large black snake, which would have been barely visible but for the smoke that rose from the asphalt it passed over.

“I think the cops have finally come to take a look,” Caz said.

Harry looked away from the door, where Pinhead was turning his back on the world, and glanced down the street. There was indeed a patrol car, its lights flashing, its siren whooping, at the intersection.

“He’s waiting for back up.” Harry said.

After a long period of silence Lana spoke: They’re not going to arrest our asses are they? Because got outstanding warrants for you know... stuff.”

“Outstanding warrants?” Caz said, “Look! Look, Lana, look! We’re standing in front of flaming fucking doorway to-to—”

“Hell?” Harry prompted.

“—Hell. And all you can do is worry about your outstanding warrants?”

“I don’t see no door,” Lana said, “and you can’t make me see no door, okay?”

At that moment Sienna, who had been stalking the snake, chose a spot a foot or so behind the beginning of the thing, and bit down. For a few seconds nothing happened. Then the whole length of matter began to convulse, sweating its toxins out onto the street in its throes, the hiss of scorched asphalt lending the serpent voice. Sienna’s furious growling was audible above the hissing, and in her fury to be done with the thing she shook it violently. All at once, every spasm in the creature ceased, and a signal went out from the place where Sienna’s frothy jaws were buried in the matter. It undid the crude anatomy of the thing in a heartbeat. The matter flew apart, clots and cobs of it reaching the houses on both sides of the street, and catching Rebekkah, Caz and Lana. But there was no villainy left in the stuff. It was less troubling now than mud, its substance dissolving in the air, and quickly gone.

Fifteen

Harry's attention had strayed from the door for just a few seconds—glancing first at the patrol car then at Sienna's destruction of the matter—but in that little time

the flames from which the door was formed had already started to diminish. He had no time for considered decisions; he had to cut.

“I’m going after them.”

“Of course.” Rebekkah said.

Of course. Their paths had intersected here—where the street lamps were all dead, and the houses deserted—not because this spot was one of great significance, but because their intersection made it so. Hell had come for Harry on this street, and failing to catch him had taken Norma instead. Now he would go after her, and he would not go alone. Sienna, fresh from her kill, bounded past him as he crossed the threshold, and moments later Rebekkah overtook him too, calling after her dog to slow down, slow down. Was there laughter in her voice? There was. She was chasing her dog down the devil’s throat and laughing as she went, as though this was the game of all games.

He heard Caz yell something behind him, but he didn't dare risk looking back, with the flames gathering around him and the passage through becoming harder and harder to see. Another two, three strides and he drew a breath that was denser, no dirtier, than the breath that had preceded it, and two strides later he ran into what felt like cloths just hauled from a pail of hot water and shit and pressed against his face and thrust down his throat as though to smother him. His momentum faltered, his heart hammering as he tried to keep panic from overcoming him. It was the greatest of his terrors, smothering, and he was sorely tempted to retreat a step, or two or three, back into the air of the world. But Caz was at his shoulder now, at the other, to his astonishment, Lana.

“Fuck. Me.” She said.

“There's the worst smell I—“ She stopped, her hand grabbing Harry's arm.

“Breathe, honey.” She told him. “You can't hold your fucking breath forever.”

The remark, its source and its simplicity, broke the hold the panic had over him. He breathed, the stale, stinking air making his lungs labor for their fill. Still any air was better than none.

“Thank you,” he said to Lana.

“Have we got far to go?” she said to him. “Because I think the cops are on the move.”

“Just be sure,” Harry said to Lana, feeling a sudden responsibility which hadn’t been in his head seconds before. “I know you don’t want to face the cops, but we’re going to Hell, Lana.”

She cocked her head. “You’re shitting me.”

“I wish I were. But this is the place of passage between our world and his.”

“The guy with the nails in his face.”

“Yeah. He’s a demon. We’re going to a palace of demons.”

“Huh.” She looked back the way they’d come. “Cops, demons, cops, demons. If I go back,” she looked at Caz, “Am I on my own? Are you going to go with him, lover boy?”

“Yeah.”

“Well that’s it then. I’d rather be with some real men in Hell than on my own in a cell, trying to explain...”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“No saying I didn’t warn you.”

“Fuck off, Harold. I said I’m sure. Now can we move our asses?”

No more was said. A few yards further, and the sound of the sirens faded completely. The flames around the door were almost out, and with their brightness diminished it was easier to see what looked like a forest ahead. They made their way towards it without looking back. A kind of madness was judged to have been in the

air that night in Brooklyn. How else, the following day, when the officers were making their reports, and the television news reporters were interviewing those few folks who had stayed in their houses throughout the whole bizarre sequence of events. None of them made reliable witnesses, for the very reason that they had kept them in their houses rather than escaping the street like everybody else: they were either old, their hushed, uncertain voices and wandering gazes making it easy to dismiss their accounts of what they'd seen from the darkened houses. The same was true of the other who stayed on the street: the sick. Who was going to believe the testimony of a few drug-addled folks who were too weak to get out of the way of trouble?

There had been trouble on the street, no doubt of that. The burned out van, the scorch marks on the asphalt, and the reports of the officers who'd come upon the scene as its bizzarrities were flickering out, but who had all seen what now looked like a burning door and some people walking through it. By the time they actually

reached the place, however, the door had gone. "It had burned away," one of the officers had written in his report. "But there were no ashes or embers left behind, which was strange. There were some marks on the ground, but nothing like you'd expect to see after a big door had been burned. The ground wasn't even warm. We searched the whole street looking for the people we had all seen, but there was nobody in the vicinity except for a few residents who were not talking much sense."

That, in sum, was the only conclusion anybody could reach on the subject: That none of it made much sense. There were several drops of blood found on the street, but owing to some confusion at the testing laboratory the results were mislaid. As they represented the sole sign that any kind of crime had been committed that night, and they had been completely lost, it was easy for the authorities to simply close the books on the whole matter and move on to more pressing issues. It had its own blistering infernos to stoke and its own Satans to vote into high office, it had no need of the real thing.

PART FOUR

One

From the first, Hell surprised them. They stepped out to the other side of the place of passage into a far from unpleasant place: a grove in a forest of antediluvian trees, their branches so weighed down with age, that a small child could have picked the large dark-purple skinned fruit simply by reaching up. Nobody had harvested them, however, and they littered the ground, the sickly stink of their corruption one part of the stew of smells that had added its own particular horror to the oppressive stink that had stopped Harry in his tracks as he'd passed from the world into Hell.

“Jeez,” Lana said, “I thought the roaches in my apartment were big.” She was looking down at the brown-black insects that had distant family relation to the common cockroach, but were perhaps six times larger, and covered the ground at the base of the trees, devouring the food that had fallen there. The sound of their brittle bodies rubbing against one another, and of their busy mouth parts devouring the fruit, filled the grove.

“Did anybody see where Pinhead went?”

“Is that his real name?” Lana said, “Pinhead?”

“No. Its just me being insulting. Not just me. A lot of people he’s fucked with.”

“Is he some kind of big noise in Hell?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said impatiently. “I’m sure he thinks so. I just want to get Norma back and fuck off out of here.”

“How?” said Caz.

The door through which they’d come had burned itself off by now.

“Well find another way out. Sienna will do it. Won’t you, baby?”

The dog looked up from her systematic slaughter of the roaches around her feet; picking them up, crunching them once, then spitting them out.

“But first you have to show where Norma went, yes?”

“Don’t you have to give her something to sniff, so she knows what she’s tracking?”

“I just told her.” Rebekkah said.

Sienna made one last ambitious attack on the roaches, just moving through their seething numbers and biting down on as many as she could.

“Leave them.” Rebekkah said, “We need to find Norma.”

“What about the fruit?” Caz asked. “You think it’s edible? I’m damn hungry.”

“I wouldn’t eat anything here if I could avoid it.”

“I gotta eat something.”

“Yeah. I can hear your stomach. So we’ll figure something out. But not some fruit that giant cockroaches are crazy about.”

“Are we done discussing his stomach?” Rebekkah said.

“Hey lady, I can’t help being hungry.”

“Don’t do that.” Rebekkah said, turning on Caz, her neck reddening with fury.

“Don’t hey lady me ever. Ever.”

Caz looked at her with complete incomprehension, opening his arms, palms up, in a gesture that was part shrug, part surrender.

“Or that.” Rebekkah said.

“Enough.” Harry said.

“No.” Rebekkah replied, “I’ll tell you when I’m done. Just because I’m here doesn’t mean I want to be here, and I know she’s got her reasons”—she glanced at Sienna, who was sniffing the air—“and all I can do is go with her. That’s my job, and I’m grateful. But there’s more important stuff for her to be, a whole lot more important than this, going after some old lady—”

“She’s not just some old lady.”

“I haven’t finished.”

“Her name’s Norma Paine and she—”

“I know what she does, I’ve heard the stories.”

“Well Christ, you just have everything all sorted it, don’t you?” Harry yelled, flecks of spittle flying with his words. “So why don’t you tell me why she brought you to us?”

“It was my doing. I just saw her in a dream once.”

“Are we talking about the dog here?”

“You keep out of this.” Rebekkah said. “You’re here by accident.”

“According to who?”

“This is such a fuck up.” Lana said. “We’ve been here two minutes and we’re fighting—”

“I’m not fighting.” Harry said.

“Sure sounds like it to me.”

“Well you can’t always trust first impressions.”

“Was that at me?” Lana said.

“No—”

“It was, wasn’t it?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Harry roared.

“Typical!” Rebekkah remarked. “You raise your voice and we’re supposed to...” She stopped. They all stopped. There was a very low pitched vibration coming from somewhere. It made their heads ache. Rebekkah looked down at its source. Sienna had come into their midst unnoticed. “You were right from the start, D’Amour.” Rebekkah conceded. All trace of accusation had been scoured from her voice. “Enough.”

“I’m sorry, dog.” Caz said.

Rebekkah made a small smile, nodding.

“Yeah. Same goes for me.” Harry said.

There was a short silence. Then Lana said: “I don’t really do the talking to dogs thing. Sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for.”

“Oh, I got plenty. But that’s a whole new conversation.”

“I think she’s a little happier now.” Rebekkah said. Sienna’s shaking growl had died away, and with a little glance in Rebekkah’s direction she went over to Lana, who offered her hand. Sienna nuzzled Lana’s palm, sniffing at the creases.

“You think she’s reading my fortune?” Lana said. The final syllable barely out of her mouth, when Sienna lifted her wet nose out of Lana’s hand and bit the heel of her hand. It was a deep bite and it brought a shriek from Lana. She attempted to pull her hand out of Sienna’s mouth, which she succeeded in doing, but only at the price of having Sienna’s teeth gouge her deeply. It was a nasty wound. When Caz caught hold of Lana, whose face was grey and clammy, and persuaded her to raise her hand and keep it raised so the blood could drain, the blood coursed down her arm, soaking her blouse in the process.

“I’m going to faint.” Lana said.

“No, you’re not.” Caz instructed her, “Don’t look at your hand. Look at me.”

He shrugged off his battered leather vest and pulled off his black t-shirt.

“I’d be more... distracted... if you took your trousers off too.”

Caz threw her an indulgent smile, as he tore his t-shirt up into bandage width strips. “I’ll have all of this out of sight in just a few seconds,” he promised Lana.

“You’re going to be fine.”

“Don’t lie. I’m going to be disfigured, aren’t I?”

“Maybe some small scars, but nothing anyone will notice.”

“That’s the hand I use for—”

“Yes?”

“You know.”

“No. I don’t.” Caz said, doing his best to get the wound bound tightly enough to stop the flow of blood.

“Don’t say you’ve forgotten our last weekend together?”

Sienna, meanwhile, had retreated to Rebekkah's side, occasionally glancing back through the trees.

"What the hell possessed her to do that?" Harry asked Rebekkah, who shook her head.

"Has she done it before?" Harry said.

"Once or twice. She always has her reasons."

"But of course you have no idea what her reasons might be."

"You think I'm lying."

"Frankly I don't know what to think any more." Harry replied.

Rebekkah looked at D'Amour, her gaze intimidating in its intensity. "Well then we're in the same boat, D'Amour, because I have no better grasp of why we're here than you. Besides, of course, getting the old lady—shit, I'm sorry—Norma, besides getting Norma back. But that street back there, it knew, I mean the ground

beneath our feet knew, that something of consequence was going to happen there. It wasn't just the street that knew. So did the people, and they got out."

"Hey, Harry," Caz said, "Could we maybe stop the metaphysical bullshit for a minute and concentrate on Lana? The dog made a real mess of her hand. She needs a doctor. Tetanus injections. Some fresh water wouldn't hurt. And I'm not the only one who's hungry."

"Okay." Harry said. "We'll find somebody to—"

"Wait." Lana said. She was leaning against a tree, her head back. She tried to lick her lips, but she didn't have to spit. "I want to go back. I don't care about the cops. I want to go back right now. So come on, who's got the matches to light the magic door?"

"It doesn't work like that." Harry said. "I wish it did. I'd send you back in a heart-beat, but I can't."

“You there. Lana said to Rebekkah, wiping a black trail of mascara and tears from her cheek with her good hand. “You own the fucking hell hound. You got some way of getting me out of here?”

Rebekkah met Lana’s accusatory gaze unblinking. “I’m not a miracle worker.”

“Big surprise, what the fuck are you?”

“A pilgrim,” Rebekkah said, not missing a beat.

“Translation, please.” Lana snapped back.

“I’m on a journey—”

“Oh Christ.”

“—we all are. Even you. Maybe especially you.” Lana just stared at her, confounded. “Sienna doesn’t normally bite people. She chose to do it. And she chose you. I know you won’t believe me right now, but it’s a kind of gift.”

“Gift? She nearly bit off half my hand.”

“You’ll see.”

“Well I don’t know who is the crazier bitch, you or your dog.”

“She’s not my dog.”

“Whose is she then? Oh no, I get this... She’s another fucking pilgrim, isn’t she?”

Rebekkah nodded.

“Crazy.” Lana snarled.

There was silence for several seconds, at least amongst the two and four legged occupants of the grove. The roaches and millipedes continued their seething sibilation amongst the decaying vomit.

Finally, Harry said: “At the risk of stating the obvious, this isn’t going to be easy. For any of us. Norma has a lot of friends amongst the dead—”

“Lucky for her.” Lana remarked.

“Just shut up for one minute, will you?” Caz said.

“—and one of them, probably many of them, will know ways to get back to the world. So when we find Norma, we’ll find our way home.”

“I feel better already.” Lana said, deliberately enunciating the words in Caz’s face, in case he missed her defiance of his instruction.

“Which way then?” Harry said.

“The little bitch knows,” Rebekkah said, smiling down at Sienna, “and where the little bitch goes, the big bitch follows. We’re ready, whenever you are.”

The dog headed off between the trees.

“Not too fast.” Rebekkah said, “We don’t want to lose anybody.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Lana remarked, and even Caz had to laugh.

Two: Norma sees Hell

Norma had sat what she judged to be many hours now in a darkness within a darkness. For the first time in her life her blindness oppressed her; she longed to be cured of it: to be able to see the demon and its human underling with the breath of a man with an ulcerous stomach. Of course her blindness had never been as hard to endure as those of others, whose fortitude in their sightlessness was beyond her power to comprehend. She, the grateful recipient of powers she had never understood what she'd dare to earn, was after all not truly blind. Though the world as sighted people saw it was a closed book to her, she saw what they could not: the presence of phantoms, everywhere, their faces, ripe with need and unspent passion, trailing their hunger like pollen from flowers that were past their hour but refused to wither and disappear. It had been until now more than adequate compensation for whatever

spectacles she'd been denied. After all, what sight was more demanding, more protean, more comforting, even in anguish, than the human face? She had envied the sighted millions who walked the streets below her apartment nothing, as long as she had her ghosts.

But there were no ghosts here; nor even that dusty whispering she knew was a sign of their presence, however remote.

“You are alone,” said the demon.

She had not heard him come in. She didn't like that. Usually she knew in her bones when some other than the human was nearby. But his time, he was quiet. And he stank. God Almighty, he stank! It was another gift of her sightlessness, this sensitivity to the nuances of smell, and this man—and that he was, at most; she smelled it clearly. Whatever he had to done to elevate himself in the ranks of the regime, whatever mutilations he had allowed them to perform on him, or that he had performed on himself, they could not erase what he was born as. Still, layered over

the smell of his humanity there was so much less which spoke more complicated stories. This was a man who trafficked with demons, of course; their countless kinds of bitterness were all over him. So was blood, though not in gross sense, as of the overpowering scent off a butcher's apron. Whiffs of it came off whatever instruments of hurt hung from his waist, but most of it was old. And then there were countless smells, some of which he could name—incense, books, sweat, and far, far more which she had no name for.

He had spoken to her scarcely at all, except to remind her, if she did not already know, that he was an expert in the provision of suffering, and that if she did anything to irritate him she would instantly have first-hand knowledge of his wisdom, and when her nerve-endings and her sanity had given up, and only then, would she be granted animal death.

So she had not moved. She'd stayed in the darkness within the darkness and done her best to reach out past the horrors to some comforting memory, the face of a

happy revenant perhaps, whom she'd directed to the place where his loved ones would be; or the fine, happy times she'd had with Harry and a bottle of brandy, reminiscing about some shared craziness. But for some reason the memories gave her no pleasure now, there was a stone in her stomach, and it weighed her down, stopped her from flying off into the past.

She was glad, therefore, that he'd finally condescended to come back into her presence, with his bitter scents and sweet scents. She was saved from boredom, at least.

"D'amour has come after you," he said. "Along with a pitiful group of misfits, and a dog. You inspire loyalty in the strangest places."

Norma didn't reply. She judged him as the kind of guy who wanted an audience, not a conversation.

"You managed to empty your bowels in the corner there, I see, how very resourceful of you. Most of my prisoners simply befoul themselves. I think I should

tell you in the interests of efficiency—that I have made it my business over the last several years to educate myself in the art of Mageia. I am a Karcist without equal, and it has allowed me to dispatch of almost all the members of my Order. Yes, my own Cenobites, sisters and brothers, gone. I am about a greater labour now, and I'm going to let D'Amour catch up with us, so that I may be rid of you, and I'll have him as a Witness, the way I planned.”

“Witness to what?” she said quietly.

“What did I tell you as I brought you over? What did I say?”

“Ask no questions.”

“But you're the kind who doesn't learn, aren't you?” He approached her, grabbing hold of her bony shoulder and hauling her to her feet. “Not until its beaten into you.”

“What? No. It was just something that slipped out. I'm a stupid, old woman and I take it all back.”

“Old you are. And brittle. As I’m about to remind you. And as for your womanhood, well, that’s between you and your dessicated cunt and I have no interest in continuing the issue one way or the other. But stupid? Oh no...no... that you are not. And that’s why I must tell you before we begin that I do this only in the interest of our better understanding one another, and it is my intention that when I am finished with you, with this, you will not be raising that formidable intelligence against me. I am rising step by step to a higher place. And this will be the last time, the very last, in which I allow my flesh to be in contact with the flesh of something so much less than me. So I shall make it memorable, for both of us.”

She had been holding herself in readiness for his first blow for too long, and while he’d maundered on her muscles lost their preparedness. When he hit her in the stomach, as he did now, the blow bent her double. There she stayed, grasping for air, while he went at her face with a left then a right, then another left, each blow a loud, stupefying sound in her head. There was a moments hiatus, then he came back at her

physically unbending her by seizing hold of her shoulders and lifting her up as he threw her against the wall. Again the breath went from her, and her legs, which were feeling increasingly numb, threatened to fold up beneath her.

“Oh no.” he said, as she began to slide, “you stay standing.” He put his right hand around her throat to hold her head up, and with his left proceeded to punch her over and over, blows to her liver, her heart, her kidneys, to her breasts, to her gut, to her sex, and then up to her heart again, twice, three times, and down through the same already tender, aching placers: kidneys, liver, breasts, guts, sex, never delivering one blow when two would give him more pleasure, nor two when three would be better still.

And it was pleasure he was feeling. Even now, when she was barely holding onto consciousness, some part of her that could never relinquish study heard the little exhalations of contentment when he stood back for a moment; or felt his smile as he looked up at the tears and anguish on her face. Nor did he stop looking at her, as he

went through his list of targets. He stared at her. She felt the stare like a subtle pressure upon her face, and knowing then he was perusing her she pulled together every thread of strength in her soul and she brought then up behind her face to deny him the satisfaction of seeing her suffering. She closed her mouth and coaxed the threads into turning up the corners of her lips into a Gioronda smile. Her eyes she also closed, slowly lowering her lids to conceal from him her frailty. There would be no more tears now; nor shouts of pain. The threads had sewed the expression in place. It was a mask. Whatever she truly felt was hidden behind it, unreachable.

After another thirty seconds of assault he seemed to finally comprehend that he was not going to get any satisfaction from watching her face. He released the clamp of his hand from her neck, and she slid down the wall, her legs folding up beneath her.

“He’s coming after you, of course,” said the demon. “So I’m going to get my witness after all, in exchange for you. That’s the only reason I will not kick you to

death...” He put his booted foot against her shoulder, and she toppled over. “... where you lie. But—” One vicious kick to her body, cracking ribs. “—I can’t help—” Another to her throat, which really tested the strength of her mask. It held, however. “—taking people—” Knowing what was coming next she tried to get her hand up to her face to protect but she wasn’t fast enough. His boot got there first, one straight kick to the face, blood bursting from her nose, “—to—” another kick at her face, and now, finally she felt a darkness within a darkness coming to fetch her, and she was grateful for its imminence. The demon rased his foot and brought the boot down hard on the side of her head. It was the last thing she felt.

Oh Christ, she thought, not dead! I can't be dead! I've so much left unfinished!

But then if she wasn't dead, why was she hovering nine or ten feet above the place where her body lay against the wall? The demon —what did Harry call him? Dick face? Pin face? *Pin head?* That was it. He was backing away from her, his breathing ragged. It had taken no little effort for the old man to brutalize her the way he had. Having stepped away he changed his mind and approached her again, kicking her hands away from her face. He'd made a real mess of her, no doubt about that, but she was very pleased to see that her enigmatic smile was still in place, defying him. There was a sliver of satisfaction in that, no question, however hard the rest of the news was.

The demon —she found it impossible to think of him as Pinhead. That was a schoolyard insult, or the name of a pitiful freak of nature, it did not belong to the monster standing over her now, his body shaking with excitement from the beating he had just delivered—the demon retreated a few more steps, still looking at what his brutality had achieved, and then reluctantly withdrew his gaze and turned his

attention to the little weasel of a man who had just entered the room, and was lingering by the door. She knew without need to hear his voice that this was the creature who'd first caught hold of her on the street in Brooklyn, whispering all manner of obscene threats into her ear to keep her from resisting his hold on her. He was more pitiful to look at than she'd imagined, a wizened gray thing, dressed like a peasant. And yet on his face—even now, after what he'd done to her, hauling her here—she saw the remains of what surely once been a man possessed of luminous intelligence. He had laughed much once, and pondered deeply too, to judge from the frown marks on his brow and the lines left by old laughter on his cheeks.

As she studied him she felt herself plucked away from the room where her murdered body lay and off, through a maze of rooms, so beautiful, even with the plaster rotted and falling away from the walls, and the decaying mirrors with their flaking gold leaf frames. Here and there, as she made her departure, she caught sight of the remains of places where others like herself, prisoners of circumstance, had been

tortured. The remains of one such victim lay with his legs in the fire place, where a fierce fire had burned, consuming his legs somewhere above the knee. He had died recently. There were flies on him, but his eyes were still open, and his mouth, wide, wide, as though he'd tried to scream until his heart gave out.

She saw his ghost, hanging in the air looking down at his agonized remains.

The sight of him gave her comfort. She didn't understand this place, but assuming she survived the beating the demon had delivered she could learn from its ghost. They knew a lot, the dead. How many times had she said to Harry they were the world's greatest untapped resource? It was true. All they'd seen, all they'd suffered, all they'd triumphed over, lost to a world in need of wisdom. And why? Because, at a certain point in the evolution of the species a profound superstition had been sewn into the human heart that had made the dead sources of terror, not enlightenment. Angelic work, she guessed; Heaven's army was instructed by its commander in chief to keep the human population in a state of passive stupefaction. Any road to knowledge had

to be closed off, in case difficult questions were asked, not by obscure theologians by ordinary men and women. So heavenly messengers, to whom grieving souls access the world raised their voices begging for some little proof that death was not the end, but that life and the love that was life's light went on, went on after the horrors had had their way, those very messengers became part of the company to make to make a horror of death, and turned the dead into brutish, vengeful furies from whom humanity should flee for sanity's sake.

The message worked its mischief. Instead of being allowed to comfort humanity's collective soul, the dead became the source of countless tales of terror, while the phantoms that were their spirits made manifest were shunned and abominated, until over the generations mankind simply taught itself a willful blindness, and Norma knew what a loss there was in this. Her own life had been immeasurably enriched by the dead. How much does pain and madness, how much of the human rage and appetite for war and its atrocities might have been soothed away

by the certain knowledge that the three score years and ten of our biblical span were not the full sum of things, but rather a thumb nail sketch for glorious, limitless work.

Norma had only ever shared her thoughts on this with one living person, her Harry. But she had listened countless times to ghosts unburdening themselves of their anguish at being unseen, unable to comfort their loved ones by simply saying: "I'm here. I'm right beside you." Death, she had come to realize, was a site of two mirrored griefs: that of the blind living, who believed they'd lost their loved ones forever, the other of the sighted dead, who suffered beside them, but could not offer a syllable of comfort.

It wasn't chiefly the labor of demons that turned the lie into a certainty; it was the establishment that profited from a populus in constant used salve for their anguish, the Church. Pope after Pope negotiated with its supposed enemy to keep their millions of believers in states of capitulation and terror, from childhood to their

death bed. Money to buy prayer, money to buy forgiveness, money to buy salvation, it was all contributed more easily when the griever's palms were slick with sweat.

These thoughts passed the time as her spirit moved through the immensity of the house—no, palace—to which the demon had brought her. The face that had plucked her out of her body and was drawing her now, helpless to resist, finally brought her out of the great house through a hole in the roof. She had assumed that at some point her sight would desert her. But it did not. As the house fell away beneath her, she was granted a bird's eye view of the wilderness through which the Cenobite and Felixson, her captor, had brought her. She hadn't expected infernal regions to resemble anything that the poets and painters and story-tellers around the world evoked over the years. But she was still astonished that they had fallen so far short of what her spirit's eyes now saw. The sky contained neither sun, or stars, which was predictable enough. But what it did contain—a stone the size of a small planet which surely reached above the immense panorama spread before her. It provided nothing

as simple as day or night. Its surface was scarred, but also pierced in what amounted to thousands of places, many no bigger than a fist, the largest big enough to engulf a house. They were ragged, whatever the size and threw off fissures like lightning bolts, through which the same brightness poured. The effect upon the landscape was uncanny; the shafts of light emanating from the rock no more than rule-straight rivulets in places, in others like unleashed dams—changed size and shape in response to the curvature of the stone, and moved over the terrain in a host of shapes. Straggling constellations where the smaller holes spilled there light, and ragged islands of brightness from the larger, while in between existed a state of murky twilight.

This was scarcely a promising environment, but still, it found a way to grow, even prosper. On the slopes of the hills beneath her long white grass swayed in some infernal wind, and here and there bushes grew, the branches barbed and knuckley but bearing small colorless flowers. Where was this journey taking her? Did it even have

a destination, or was she simply loosed from her body to wander? Wait! Was this what ghosts felt like when they came to her apartment? Was she dead? Funny, she didn't feel dead, but then wasn't that the most common thing she heard from her visitors?

Her spirit began to sink towards the ground, and in a few seconds she was moving above the level of the white grass. Some distance ahead of her was a small forest, its trees, though large, clearly the parent for the barbed shrubs. The canopy of upper branches was intricately knotted, except for perhaps thirty or forty wild branches that had freed themselves and grew like sticks of black lightning. Large black birds perched on several, or fought with beaks and claws for some particularly choice spot. She was so distracted by the sight of their feuding that she didn't notice the people emerging from the darkness beneath the trees until she was almost in their midst.

Three

Sienna had been leading the way, but now, when they were barely out of the forest, she turned and went back to Rebekkah, barking as she did so.

“She sounds happy,” Caz said.

“She is.” Rebekkah replied, “there’s somebody here. She’s watching them.”

Sienna was indeed tracking the presence of some invisible presence, her initial burst of barking silenced was what got Rebekkah’s attention. Now she headed towards Lana.

“Cazyoukeepthatmotyherfuckingdogawayfromme,” Lana said. “Caz?”

“You’re all right.” Caz said, standing between Lana and Sienna, “Go on, girl.

Leave the freaky lady alone.”

“Did you say freaky lady?”

“I’m not saying I think you’re a freak. I’m saying maybe you confuse the dog and that’s why he bit you.”

“That’s not why.” Rebekkah said.

“Could you call her off?” Caz said.

He’d gawn down on his knees and was trying to distract Sienna’s attention, but it wasn’t working.

“She’s not going to hurt you.” Rebekkah said to Lana. “She’s just trying to reassure you.”

“I’m fine. I don’t need reassurance, okay? I’m—” she topped, abruptly changing from anger to bewilderment. “...what?” she said softly. She lifted her bitten hand. Fresh blood was running from underneath the bandages. “Damn you...” she said, in the same soft voice. “Harry?”

“I’m right here.” Harry said.

“...I think I’m dead... what? Get out!” Lana said, shaking her head. “Did you hear me? I said *no*... bitch. That’s not happening.”

“Don’t fight it, Lana.” Rebekkah said.

“What’s going on?” Caz wanted to know. “If somebody’s messing with Lana, then stop it, whoever you are.”

“Norma.” Lana said.

“Norma?”

“Yes it’s me. I don’t know—” the words ceased as Lana shook her head again, determined to dislodge her unwelcome guest.

“Caz, can you just get her to let Norma speak?”

Caz replied with a doubtful look, but he turned to Lana and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Get off me—” she snapped, stepping back out of his grip, “—I don’t want this bitch for company.”

“She won’t stay long.” Rebekkah said.

“Says who?”

“Trust me. Just let her say what she needs too say.”

“It’s my fucking mouth.”

“Yeah, and very foul it is too.”

“Oh like you never swallowed.”

“I’m sorry?” Rebekkah said, striding past Caz. “What did you say?”

“I said, like you—” Rebekkah’s fist came at her so fast she had no chance to avoid it. She went down sprawling in the albino grass.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Caz said.

“Sienna chose her. She bit her so your lady-boy could help us. Maybe it was a bad choice, but it’s done.”

Harry knelt in the grass beside Lana. “Norma? Are you still there?”

Lana’s eyes were closed, her face cleansed of emotion. Harry tried again.

“Norma?”

This time there was a response. Lana opened her mouth, and tried to wet her lips, but there wasn’t significant moisture on her tongue.

“I could use a drink.” she said.

“What’s your poison?”

“Brandy, Harry, brandy.’

“It is you.”

“Yeah, it’s me.” I don’t know why the fuck I get into her, but I’m here. Until she throws me out.”

“I’m sorry to ask, but—”

“Am I dead?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have any idea. I mean, I should be dead. That bastard just finished beating the living shit out of me.”

“The Cenobite? Hands on?”

“Hands, feet. Last thing I remember he was stomping on my head.”

“I’ll fucking kill him.”

“It s lovely thought, Harry. Thank you. But it’s not going to be easy. He’s not your ordinary sadomasochistic from Hell any longer. He’s got power. And plans.”

“Plans to do what?”

“If I knew I’d tell you. And if I find out I’ll—shit, I think that’s it for now,

Harry. I gotta go.”

“Lana trying to kick you out?”

“No...”

“What then?”

“I guess my body’s wondering where the hell my mind went.”

“So you’re not dead?”

“Apparently not.”

“Do you know where your body is?”

“Some big building. Looks like it was really fancy back in the day. But it’s falling apart.”

“Are you in the city?”

“No. just some ruins, but no city. Listen to me, Harry. I don’t want anyone down here on my account. I’m not afraid of dying—”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, Harry. Listen to me. He’s too strong. Whatever you think you’ve got up your sleeve isn’t going to be enough.”

“I’m not going to leave you down here, Norma. Whatever happens I’m going to—”

Lana’s eyes opened, and there was a moment of confusion on her face; then cleared, and Lana said: “What am I doing lying down here? Oh yeah. Oh fuck yeah. I remember,” she grabbed hold of Harry’s arm. “Help me up.”

“You did well, Lana. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For letting Norma through.”

“Don’t try to sweet talk me, D’Amour. I don’t trust a thing any man says.”

“How about two men?” Caz said, going down on his haunches on the other side of Lana’s body to Harry. “I don’t have any better idea of why this is happening to you than you do. We’re along for the ride—”

“Some fucking ride.” She started to sit up; and both Caz and Harry lent a hand.

“Well...” she said, with a fluttering of her eyes that had more than a little Blanch

DuBois in it, “... I suppose if I get this kind of attention whenever I let that old

woman get in my head. Just as long as she doesn’t plan on being a permanent tenant.”

“She won’t, believe me.”

“Is she dead? She is, isn’t she?”

“No.”

Lana assessed Harry’s face for a few seconds. Then she looked at Caz.

“Is she? Because that’s what was freaking me out, having a dead person in here with me.”

“She’s not dead, Lana.”

“But there might be a time when she will be,” Rebekkah said. “And she’s still going to need to get through.”

Lana looked up at Rebekkah through her heavily mascared lashes. “You. You.”

“Not now.” Caz said. “Please.”

Lana put on a theatrical brightness. “Oh, no. You’re quite right, Casanova. This isn’t the time. This isn’t the place.”

The brightness faded. She stared back up at Rebekkah. “But it’ll come, right when you’re not expecting it. And I’m telling you—”

“Lana—”

“Shut up, Caz. The bitch is speaking.” She focused on Rebekkah again. “I’m speaking. I learned to fight from being brought up in a house full of men, except for me and my mother. And there wasn’t a day when I didn’t have to defend my rights to

be who I was inside, on the street or in my own house. So you take it from me, sister,

I know how to fight real dirty. You're in trouble."

"You and your little dog, too." Caz said.

Lana punched his arm, "Don't you be mocking me."

"Well listen to yourself, Lana. Take it from me sister? I never heard you call anyone sister in my life, man or woman. Now get up off your ass."

"Help me." Caz stood up, shaking his head. Lana turned to Harry. "Will you give a hand?"

"Sure."

"See? That's all I was asking for." Lana said to Caz once Harry had helped her to her feet. "No big deal. No big drama."

"So, no more threats either." Caz said.

"That's between her and me." Lana said.

"It might help if you apologized." Caz said to Rebekkah.

“I did what was necessary. But okay, if it gets us moving. I’m sorry.” Then after a beat: “Sister.”

Harry caught the confused look on Lana’s face when Rebekkah called her sister; she didn’t know whether she was having her insult returned or whether she was being accepted in the club.

“So where now?” Caz said.

“Sienna knows.”

The dog was already several yards away from them, looking back, waiting for the company of humans to follow. After a little time they did so.

—

Norma woke into a place of pain. Her head, her stomach, her back, her legs; she could feel every blow.

“Get her to her feet, magician. And hurry. We have business in the city.”

“In the city...” Felixson murmured to himself.

“Yes. I must face the Regime sooner or later. Better sooner, while they’re still arguing amongst themselves. Now get her up. And follow. If she won’t walk, then carry her.”

Norma got a whiff of Felixson’s foul breath to add to her discomforts. He was leaning in close to her face, muttering to himself.

“I’m damned sorry if I’m going to carry you. Yes, you, I know you’re listening to me. So I’m going to make life a little easier for the both of us. I can’t heal you—I don’t have that much power—but I can certainly you an epoidiatic opiate, which will put the pain out of sight and mind for a while.”

“Will it...take... my wits away too?” Norma murmured through the blood in her mouth.

“What do you care if it does? It’ll dull you a little. But you’ll still be able to plot against us, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Us, now is it? How romantic.”

“You take what you’re given. I have him. You have me. Be grateful. A lot of men in my position wouldn’t risk this.” He glanced away for a moment, just to confirm that his epoidia weren’t being witnessed. Then he began muttering the incantation under his breath as he pressed his hands lightly over her body. He was good, she had to give him that. She felt the opiate spreading through her body, its warmth removing all trace of pain.

“Better?” he said.

“Oh my Jesus, yes.”

“Well just remember to moan and sob every now and then. I don’t want the boss-man getting suspicious.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll give him a show.”

“Get up, will you?” Felixson said loudly, grabbing Norma’s arm and pulling her to her feet. Norma let out a ragged series of cries and curses, but the fact was she felt better than she had in years. So what if the epoidia were only covering up the problem? She would happily live in this opiated state for a long, long time. Felixson had gone now, and she heard him talking in whispers to the Cenobite. She followed the sound of his voice, closing the distance between them for safety’s sake. In his way, Felixson had been right, they were all obliged to take what they were given. He had the Hell-Priest’s protection at least while the demon had use for him, and she had Felixson watching over her, for whatever that was worth. Next time she had a moment alone with him, she’d get him to teach her the epoidia he’d used, so she could give herself another fix of it when this wore off.

Then she turned her thoughts to her Harry and his little gang of harrowers. Caz, she knew, of course, though she had not known that he was so good-looking; but the girl and the dog were fresh additions to his circle, and the confused creature through whom she'd been speaking had surely had a whole other story to tell. Even though Norma had been inside of her host for only a minute or so, she'd had time to register the strange but far from unpleasant sensation of having a presence between her legs. She was no great judge, but she suspected the man called Lana had more than his share of manhood, which made it all the odder that he was dressed like a woman. Well, everyone had their own way of making sense of their own lives; Norma had learned from her years of talking with the dead. If prayer and pulpit didn't calm the circling mind, people invented their own rituals, spiced often with something willfully shameful, a crossing of boundaries that further enhanced the ritual.

“What are you thinking, woman?”

The question came from the Cenobite.

“I’m not. I’m just nursing my wounds.”

“Why nurse wounds you can’t feel?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Please don’t. Bad liars embarrass me. I know what he did. You needn’t soil yourself Felixson, I wouldn’t have given you leave to use your powers if I hadn’t expected you to do so. Just never think, either of you, that I am not with you, even when you are not in sight.”

“No, Lord...” Felixson said, his voice thinned with fear.

“Now that the truth is out you can stop that wretched hobbling,” the Cenobite said, “and Felixson, take hold of her arm. We are within a quarter mile of the city, look how convenient, creeping in from the wastes. That will have people off the streets, and in their homes, if homes they have, or down in the tunnels. Better sit in soiled sewage for a day than risk the fog.”

“What do they bring?” Felixson asked.

“As I understand it there’s seldom two fogs alike, but this is your fog, isn’t it?”

Norma said.

Felixson, who had taken her arm as the Hell-Priest had instructed, gave her a sharp shake to silence her. It didn’t work.

“It is, isn’t it?”

Yes. It’s mine.”

“So as you summoned it, do you get to choose its freight?”

“Stop shaking her, Felixson. When I get tired of her questions she’ll have the wit to know when to shut up. No, Ms. Paine, I don’t have a choice in what the fog brings. All I can do is speed its coming, so as to confound my enemies.”

“Does it carry plague?”

“Sometimes. And sometimes insects, sometimes tiny serpents, fine as hairs and ten feet long or more. In their billions they’ll come, hanging in the clammy fog, then

finishing their way into the houses, through cracks, under a door that wasn't quite sealed with hot black wax. They used to say of your native country always something new in Africa. It's the same with the wastes."

"Felixson? You'd been hiding your heritage all this time. Apparently, you're a white negro. Unless—" she directed the rest of her remarks at the Hell-Priest, "—you were talking to me."

"Was I mistaken?"

"I was never in Africa. So, yes."

"Your parents?"

"I didn't know them. Apparently they had no need of a blind baby. I was left at the step of a church. They were good Christian folks. You would have hated them."

"Now you're the one making assumptions. I have enjoyed the company of many a Christian sinner, even if they haven't enjoyed mine. Were you much loved as a child?"

“I don’t entirely remember.”

“I thought we agreed earlier that lying was not your strong suit.”

“Did we? Yes. Yes we did. And no... I was not much loved as a child.”

“Because you discovered one day that you were not sighted that didn’t mean
you couldn’t see.”

“Oh, I saw. Right from the beginning I saw.”

“It just wasn’t the good Christians who were raising you you were seeing.”

“Right.”

“They were seeing the living—”

“And I was seeing the dead.”

“That must have been hard for you.”

“Sight is sight. You don’t complain about the view if the alternative is
darkness. Anyway, to me they were just people. A bit less trivial than regular folks,
you know? They just figured out, most of them—”

“—that they’d lived lives they weren’t happy with or proud of or ready to leave.”

Norma made an exclamation of surprise. “That’s pretty much it,” she said, “how did you know?”

“Because we both see them in the same state, more or less. You on one side of the divide, me on the other. As you said, sight is sight. And despair is despair, whether its’ breaking the heart or living on the dead.

Norma was impressed by the old sadist’s little speech. Perhaps, though she took pleasure in their being connections between the Hell-Priest and her, it would play out in her favour. She’d heard once from one of her many televisions a hostage who’d escaped a lengthy capture by slowly working to make her captor see her as a human being, with feelings and memories, instead of a bargaining chip. Maybe the Hell-Priest had started the process himself, in the exchange they’d just had. Would the fact that he’d made a connection between the two of them stay his hand, and

boot, were he tempted to brutalize again? She could but hope. For now, she let her subject alone. He was altogether too astute a creature to be manipulated in any way. He would instantly sense a false note in her conversation, and what little good work had been done would be erased.

Besides, she had more urgent concerns.

“Felixson?”

“Lord?”

“Do you have incantation that can seal you and your prisoner off from anything that might become lodged in your eyes or ears, or under your fingernails?”

“Let me think, I suppose, yes...yes, I could seal us in. But for how long?”

“Until we reach the regime’s headquarters, the old temple.”

“We’d need air then.”

“Yes, you will. Once we are in the fog there will be no clean air to breathe until we’ve breached the Regime’s defenses and are inside the temple, which may take us an hour or more, depending how busy the streets are.”

“I thought you said everybody would go to their houses?” Norma said.

“The citizens are demons, and most of them have houses to go to, if they’re quick. And some take the damned in as servants, and will protect them. But there will be many damned and demons, both—who will not reach safety fast enough. And they’ll be caught.”

“Is it a disease in the fog?” Felixson said.

“No.”

“What them, may I ask?”

“Seeds.” The Cenobite replied. “It is a plague of seeds.”

“I don’t understand. Why should—”

“Just do like the man said,” Norma interjected. “We got to be getting close now.”

“Another ten yards and we’ll be in the fog. So do as the lady requests Felixson. We can stand here a moment and listen to the screams.”

The muting effect of the fog, and the fact that until now they had been in conversation, had kept Norma from hearing what she now heard: the raw noise of creatures—whether damned or demons she could not tell—in the grip of terror and panic.

The noise made Felixson nervous.

“I wish I had my books. My signals and Steigerwald, or my little blue grimoire—”

“You’ve got a good memory—”

“I just wish they’d stop making that god-awful noise—”

“Forget the noise. Think about your magic. You were a high master.

Everybody used to tell me how brilliant you were.”

“My Lord’s right,” Felixson said, “You are a bad liar.”

“I’m not going to wait forever.” The Cenobite said. “You’re coming with me whether protected or not.”

Felixson sounded close to tears now. “I’ve got bits and pieces, but nothing that hangs together.”

“Christ, that smell.” Norma said.

“It’s me.” Felixson said. “I always pass gas when I’m nervous.”

“Fire away, then. Be my guest. Let the pressure out. Clear your mind.”

“Listen to yourself, woman.”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“There’s no help you can furnish, unless you can fetch for me my signals and—signals and—I can’t remember the name of my book. My mind’s going. It is. I knew it would sooner or later.”

“Are you telling me you can’t do anything to protect us from this fog?”

“God knows I’ve held on longer than most. Watching the other magicians go, one by one, that would have been enough for weaker men. And then this place—”

“I’m taking that at: Yes, Norma. I’m useless.”

“I am. Useless.” He replied almost conversationally.

“Then shut up, will you? We’ll talk about where you left your copy of Spitman and Sperm later. Now I have to talk to your Lord.”

She pressed the magician aside. Though it was a while since she’d heard the Hell-Priest speak she had no problem fixing his position. The force of his presence superceded any need for senses.

“Shall I hold my breath asking you what you already know we need, or will you just make the decision and we’ll live or die by it. I have to say, if we die, it’s a damn waste.”

“Of what exactly?”

“Of mind. Of humanity.”

“I have no use for either.”

“Then why did you drag us along after you, slowing you down? You could have put me out of my misery back in that house. You had my head right under your boot.”

He turned to look at her, she knew, and for the first time—how had she missed this until now? Had he been concealing it? She saw a gossamer image of him in the darkness.

“You’re a little bit dead,” she said. Perhaps it wasn’t the smartest thing to say under the circumstances, but she’d never been one to govern her tongue. A bad liar

she was, but she could tell a mean truth when the moment was right. And so why not now? While the surprise was still genuine? How much worse could things get than this, with her asking the demon that had nearly kicked her to death a couple of hours ago for help, and in the process speaking his secret?

“That’s the first time I’ve heard my condition described that way,” he said,

“What made you say such a thing?”

“I can see you. A little. You’re not clear, the way the dead were back in New York. You’re a ghost of a ghost?”

“Is this intended to comfort me?”

“No. It’s just plain and simple. No more lies. They’re a waste of breath, and I don’t have much of that left.”

“But you’d like a little longer?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Why? You know there’s a life to come, and you won’t be suffering for loving company there, given your many kindnesses to the dead.”

“I think I’ve got a few miles left in my old flesh and bones, just to feel the world the old-fashioned way.”

“And?”

“That’s it.”

“I thought you said no lies.”

“I haven’t spoken a word of lie.”

“There are also lies of exclusion, are there not?”

Norma shrugged.

“All right, I’ll tell you. I want to see my Harry again, in the flesh. Say my goodbyes.”

“Well at least you understand that should you see him it will be one final time.

In the flesh or out of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want him to be my witness. And once he’s seen all that is about to take place, he will be changed. The man you know will no longer exist. He will thereafter be a living book, recounting the glories of my apotheosis.”

“Somebody’s planning on making you a god? That’s quite an honour.”

“Now you’re playing.”

“A little.”

“You know better.”

Nobody ever gave you a damn thing. You’ve always had to take.”

“Yes.”

“Pleasure—”

“Pain—”

“I was getting to that.”

“You do understand. Huh.”

“Story of my life. If you wait for people to give you what you deserve you end up standing around empty handed. I know. I’ve missed a lot of good parties for naut of being asked.”

“Consider your request granted, Miss. Paine.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We’re safe. The fog won’t touch us.”

“Thank you.”

She felt his scrutiny abandon her, as he turned away. Felixson pushed past her.

“I know what you’re trying to do.” He whispered. “But that’s not going to happen, that’s my Lord. My *Saviour*. You understand me? Now get behind me and grab hold of my shoulder. If we get separated he won’t wait. He’ll leave you behind.”

“I’ll be sure to hold on then,” Norma said.

They took five steps, and on the sixth, the fog encircled them.

Four: The City

Just as the glory of Mussolini's fascist regime had been that it finally made the trains run on time, the regime's gift to the populous of Hell seemed to lie in its proliferation of signage. There were signs—or more often, the posts and support for the sign, but actual information—where even the most piddling trail divided. If Sienna could read (and Harry did not discount the possibility) she did not bother to look up at the signs, nor put her nose to the ground like a bloodhound. She knew where she was taking them.

“The city.” Caz said.

“Where?”

“On that sign, Harry.”

“God, my eyes... I can barely see the sign, never mind the contents on it.”

“Well there's an arrow, and the word city.”

“I guess that's where we're heading then.”

“Good. I fucking hate the country,” Lana said. She glanced around in disgust at the landscape, the trees and shrubs black, the grass, where it grew at all—white, the dirt it grew in blacker even than the knotted branches of the trees.

Sienna had stopped now, however, and was standing alert, her ears pricked. Her human companions listened too. For the first time Harry heard the remote rumble of the turning sky. Was that what the dog was listening to? No, no; there was something closer, something more urgent.

“Screams...” Caz muttered.

“We are in Hell.” Lana remarked.

“She’s right.” Harry said, “Why are we surprised?”

Caz climbed up to the top of the slope where Sienna, who’d led the steady ascent, still stood.

“Jesus,” he said.

Sienna looked up at him.

“You sure that’s the only way?” he said, returning her gaze. “Because that’s...big.”

Lana had climbed up to join Caz, making sure she had him between her and Sienna. “Look at the damn smog.”

“I don’t think its smog.” Rebekkah said.

“Well, I used to live in LA, okay, and we used to call that shit smog.”

“It’s clearing pretty quickly,” Caz said.

“Where’s it going?” Lana asked.

“The place it came from.”

“Look, are you going to have some pissy damn remark to put me down every time I open my god damn mouth? Because I don’t appreciate that. It’s not like I want to be blood sisters or nothing, but I’m getting tired of your mysterious know-all with the spooky dog routine, okay?”

Harry had still not climbed the last few strides to the top of the slope. He'd been running on empty for a long time now. It wasn't just his belly that was empty. It was something marrow-deep; a profound fatigue that only made the prospect of climbing any further difficult but that bled away all the dregs of curiosity about whatever was visible from the top. Perhaps there was a revelation waiting for him here, somewhere; a face, a cry, a conversation that would stir him from this lethargy, but he doubted it. He drew in a deep breath and climbed to join the others.

Caz was right. The city, even dark-shrouded in fog as it was, looked vast, its buildings a lot more elegant and grandiose than Harry expected. He didn't need to look very far for a point of reference. This was Hell's Rome, with its pale stone domes, and its pillared plazas. Rather than compete with Rome's five hills, Lucifer had chosen to build his city on a single hill, two thirds of which rose gently, allowing him to display tier upon tier of immaculate buildings. At this distance Harry's best judge of scale were the trees that had been carefully positioned to set off their knotted

darkness the polished beauty of the buildings around which they grew. They were dwarfed, however, by even the most modest of buildings on the slope. Lucifer had been a visionary, no doubt of that. Many thousands of years before El Duce had raised his vast stone monuments to his autocracy, Lucifer had outdone him by orders of magnitude. There was nothing in Rome—nothing in any of the greatest cities in the world—that could hope to compare with the glories that the devil had brought into being here. Some had the simple authority of size: fifty storey high buildings the facades of which were not disfigured by so much as a single window. It was a testament to the scale of the architect's achievement that one of these several black buildings had behind it, and no higher up the slope, a statue, the head and shoulders which easily cleared the top of the building. In the matter of the statue's aesthetics the devil had once again been a visionary. Whereas the statues of Rome—they were portraits of men of power who'd ruled that city, or of Christian icons—took great trouble to create living portraits in stone and bronze, the statues here were puzzles;

some only vaguely recognizable as human, others seeming to freeze the blur of motion: a stone photograph of a being in the throes of ecstasies. And everywhere, the laws of physics were casually deified: an immense building was held a hundred feet in the air or more by the two steep rows of steps at the front and the back; a trio of pyramids, their squares intricately inscribed, were built so as to seem caught by a seismic jolt that had thrown two of them into the air, and left the third supporting them by only the slenderest of means, corner to corner, edge to edge. As Harry was watching this particular exhibition of architectural bravura appear from the receding fog, a passage of light thrown down from the wheeling stone caught the acrobats in its blaze, throwing the shadow sides into the darkness. Harry held his breath, forbade his eyes to blink, determined to take in every last moment of this frozen spectacle lent motion by retreating fog and advancing light. There were not many compensations for the hours of the journeys he took, but when, as now, they came, they were like

nothing that the commonplace could—the world of the herd and as the late Father Hess had called it—could ever have shown him.

He drank the sight down, grateful for its beauty, yes, but more perhaps for its absurdity. Was it possible the angel had fashioned this thing had done so with a smile on his face? It put one on Harry's face to think so.

“Is it the way you thought it would be?” Rebekkah had asked him.

“You mean Hell?”

“I meant the city, but sure... Hell too.”

“I got so many versions over the years, from so many unreliable sources, I gave up trying to imagine what it was really like. I guess maybe some of the demons I got my hands on did talk about the city, now I think of it. But nothing like this...” As he spoke a narrow corridor of light moved over the city from the far side of the hill, illuminating a band of buildings from the monolithic structures close to the summit down to the high walls that marked the limits of the city proper, and over a portion of

the mass of tents and crude shacks and animals that formed a chaotic fringe around the city limits. Of either damned and demons there was no sign, at least outside the walls. Having been given ample warning by the cries emerging from the city streets, the pariahs and the parasites had found refuge under blankets and in sealed up tents.

It was apparent, however, now that the fog had almost completely cleared, that a lot of those citizens who'd been within the city walls when the fog appeared had either failed to find their way home fast enough, or had no home to go to, and had been unable to secure safe haven underground before the fog was upon them.

"Who's got the best eyes?" Harry said. "It's not me. I can see people on the streets but they're a blur."

"They're probably better staying that way," said Caz. "I can't figure out much detail either, but what I can see looks pretty grim."

"What happened?"

“Looks like something in the fog drove them crazy. They’re running around—” he shook his head, “they’re beating their heads against the walls, some of them, like they want to bash their brains out. Oh god, there’s a guy there... oh god...”

“Are they human beings? I mean, the damned?”

“A few of them.” Rebekkah said. “But most of them look to me like demons, a few hybrids, but mostly demons. I mean, listen. Human beings can’t make noises like that.”

It was true. The cacophony, which was getting louder, not dying away, was a sickening thought—befouling stew of noise that was beyond the capabilities of the human lungs and throat. It was in part bestial—the bellowing of a large animal in extreme terror and pain, but the near-death-shrieks were mingled with the noises that sounded like an engine or machine in the final phase of self-destruction, its gears shredding its motors shrieking as they tore themselves apart.

It was a sound that would not be forgotten by the dog and her four followers who stood listening to it as the shifting wind carried it away for a little time and then, with sudden shocking force, brought it back into their direction. Rebekkah was shaking, Harry saw. She went down on her haunches beside Sienna, and buried her face in the thick ruff of fur around Sienna's neck.

"This is more like Hell," Harry said. "It was beginning to disappoint me."

"Don't put that out there, Harry. We don't need anymore than we've already got. Or... maybe you do. Christ, you do." He looked at Harry, who was squinting to try and get a clearer view of what was happening.

"You just want to get down there, don't you?" Caz said.

"I want it over with."

"Is that it?"

"What else could there be?"

“Stop looking at the atrocities for two fucking seconds, Harry. This is me, Caz.

I’m right here.” His voice was rising as the ghastly combination of sounds from below

fuelled his agitation. He caught hold of Harry’s shirt, “Hey, will you look at me?”

“What’s got you so needy all of a sudden, Caz?”

“I don’t want to be here.”

“Let go of my shirt, Caz.”

“I’ll fucking lose it.”

“No you won’t. Let go of my shirt.” Harry looked at him, finally. “Please.”

He looked at his hand, as though he didn’t even know how it got there. “Hey, shit. Sorry.” He let go of Harry’s shirt, releasing gently, then laying his palm on the creases. “Stirs things up. Dirty, shitty things.”

“And they’re not even trying.” Harry said.

“What do you mean?”

“The noise that’s messing with all of us. Look at Lana.”

Lana had dropped down onto the ground, her arms crossed over the top of her head as though to hold in her sanity.

“Should I—”

“Leave her. Let her deal with it her way, at least for now.”

“What were you saying? I can’t keep my thoughts in order.”

“I was saying this noise is driving us all a little crazy and we’re not even being targeted.”

“So what would it be like if we we’re targeted?”

“Right. You say this stirs up some shit in your head?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the one they always know they can get you with. If they can get past who you are—if they make you let go of your intentions, your faith—even if it’s just in yourself, and reach in the past the civilized human being I know you are, they can

get back similar stuff, reptilian stuff, and stir it up so hard it starts to rise, squirming

its way up into the human places, and the secret sacred places—”

“I don’t have any of those.”

“Bullshit. They hide high, like the shit hides low. That’s why we thank

heavens in the sky, and Hell’s a sewer buried deep. You’ve got divinity, Caz. It’s in

your art, it’s in your intellect, it’s in your capacity to love.”

“In sex too?”

“I’m afraid sex belongs to both. High and low. That’s why it’s such a challenge.

But listen to me Caz, because who knows when we’ll get another chance to do this.

All the passion and the smarts and the love you put into your work I’m wearing, the

way you were thinking when you were working on me, balancing the aesthetics with

the purpose of the thing, you remember all of that?”

“Of course.”

“And hold on to it. Give it a name.”

“Inky fingers.”

“Ha. So if you hear me say Inky fingers—”

“It’s a shout out. I’m right there thinking of you. I can smell the ink, the sweat,
the alcoholic swab.’

“And you’re thinking?”

“That I’m making a piece of art to help you win a war. And I’m proud and
happy and I don’t need anybody to tell me what I’m worth. I know this is what I was
born to do.”

“All that in four syllables.”

“That and a lot more. All good.”

“The shit can’t get to it, Caz. You’re connected upwards. The shit and the
things in the shit are going to try to call you down. And my guess is they’ll use sex to
do it.”

“My weakest point?”

“It’s everybody’s weakest point.” Harry said. “We’re wired to want it, however dangerous it is to get it. Just be careful.”

“Inky fingers.”

“Inky fingers.”

“I’m just going to try and get Lana back into the game.”

“If you get a moment, try and talk to her about what you were just saying. You know her better. You know how to phrase it.”

“I’ll do what I can.” He said. Harry’s stare was so intense that Caz had no choice but to meet it. “Bullshit answer, right? Don’t worry. I’ll take care of her.”

“I know.”

He watched Caz go down on his haunches beside Lana, then looked away.

Rebekkah still had her face in Sienna’s ruff. Harry sat down in the long grass a yard from them.

“That was good, what you said.” Rebekkah remarked. “You surprise me, D’Amour.”

“Is that good?”

“Yes, it’s good. I had a lot of reports about you that weren’t very flattering.”

“Oh? Such as?”

“We don’t have to.”

“We should. Once, and then never again. This is going to strip our souls bare, isn’t it?”

“What, going into the city?”

“Is that where we’re going?”

“That’s where Norma is. The demon. Is he a friend of yours?”

“Is that what you heard? That I made friends with demons?”

“Yes, of course. You were working both sides was the thing I heard most often. Juggling heaven and hell.”

“As if that were possible.”

Rebekkah finally looked around at him. “Oh, I think you could do it.” She said.

There was neither warmth or antipathy in he voice.

“What’s Sienna’s story?”

The dog, hearing he name, looked round at Harry, and lazily wagged her tail.

Unable to suppress the surprise in he voice: “She likes you.” Rebekkah said,

“I’m sure it you really want to know she’ll find the time to tell you. She knows all

about juggling heaven and hell, don’t you baby?” Rebekkah went back to the comfort

of the dog’s deep fur. “But you better not let any harm come to her. You hear me?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Bullshit answer.”

“If you were paying attention.”

“I don’t know you. I’m trying to work out how we fit together. Why we’re

here.” Rebekkah smothered Sienna’s coppery flank. “If she knows she’s not telling.

Maybe you'll have more luck." She glanced back at D'Amour for a moment, her face

fierce. "I don't see why you would, but—"

"I had a dream about you."

"Oh."

"You don't sound surprised."

"I'd be surprised if you hadn't. When she's on her way she announces herself.

Dreams are the gentlest way."

"Why would she not be gentle?"

Rebekkah laughed into the dog's fur, a little girl's laughter, sensitive and shy.

"You don't have the first idea, do you?"

"What the fuck's so funny?"

"You. D'Amour the Demon Hunter. The man who brought down Lazy Susan."

"Let's get this straight, once and for all. Will you stop giggling just for a moment? You can laugh yourself sick when I'm done."

Sienna was no longer wagging her tail. She'd heard the anger in Harry's voice, and she was growling now: just a low moaning in her throat.

"Shh. Shh." Rebekkah said, patting her. "It's okay. He's not a bad man."

The growling and the giggling ceased. Sienna returned her gaze to the city.

"For the record. I am not a demon hunter. It's a stupid name and a stupid idea.

Yes, I did have a face off with a demon called Lazy Susan. She'd killed a friend of mine—a very good friend of mine, Father Hess—many years before, and I wanted to bring her down. I got the chance and I did it. I'd love to tell you that I had some fancy plan, but it was more luck than anything. I would have been perfectly happy being a cop, but no that got fucked up the agencies of the Regime. So I went over to being a detective keeping my head down and my nose clean."

"You see, that's what you have in common with my baby. She likes to keep her nose clean, don't you?"

"Okay, I'm done. That's my life. For what its worth."

“Ah...” Rebekkah breathed the sounds into the dog’s fur. “That’s the big question, isn’t it? What is your life worth? What was it Lazy Susan said to you?”

“You already know, I guess.”

“Yes. I know.”

“So why don’t you tell me?”

“I am you and you are love, and love’s what makes the world go round.”

“Where the hell did you learn that?”

“The same place you first met us, in your dreams.”

“You were digging though—”

“No need to dig. It came to find us. All the puzzles in your life came to find us, like we’d have the answers. Us. A girl and her dog? I mean, what do we know?”

“Well, then, that’s two sizable questions we’ve got isn’t it? What am I worth?

And what do you know?”

Apparently Rebekkah assumed the conversation had reached its end here, because without further word she kissed the place where she had been muzzling Sienna and got to her feet.

Caz, meanwhile, had somehow coaxed Lana to her feet. She still had her back to the city, however.

“I don’t want to go down there. And none of you can make me.”

“We wouldn’t want to.” Caz replied.

There was a raw chorus of birds overhead. The noise was coming from the longer of two species of winged creatures that were circling above the city. They had congregated with remarkable speed, attracted either by the promising din of agonies from the streets, or by the smell, which only now became apparent, as the four dull-nosed humans smelled what Sienna had been inhaling and analyzing in her intricate fashion for several minutes. The smell was complicated. There was the twinge of

blood in it, but also the fragrance of old incense, and another smell which was impossible to fix and for that reason more tantalizing than the others.

Standing on the summit, tasting its mystery, his thoughts still stirred up by the exchange of enigmas (it could scarcely have been called a conversation) he'd just had with Rebekkah, and the even more enigmatic exchange he'd had with Sienna, he just stared down at the mingled glories and grotesqueness of the city. The self he'd left five strides behind him, the Harry that was running on empty, might resurface in another five strides. He was any less exhausted than he'd been, any less in need of a ten-year vacation in Hawaii; him, a hut and a fishing pole. But if he was going to get there then he was going to have to finish this grim journey first, and now at least he had a little of the old curiosity surfacing in him to give him some momentum. Grim as he knew the sights of the city were going to be, he could feel some of the old urgency to see the unseeable; and to answer, perhaps in the seeing, perhaps further still along the way, the answers to the questions he now had circling in his head.

“Are we ready?” he said.

Sienna didn't wait for a reply. She headed off down the slope towards the city,
knowing her humans were bound to follow.

Five: The Regime

Being in the fog had very little impression on Norma. The Hell-Priest had done as she had asked him, and whatever protection he was using to seal himself off from the fog's effects he had extended to her. She heard, all too clearly, however, the ghastly noises behind made by those who had been subjected to the fog's influence. Some were simply noises made by a creature in pain, others begging more articulately for help, some even calling for their doctor by name. Most pitiful of all were those who—upon seeing the Hell-priest's imposing figure emerge from the muck—

requested him with as much civility as they could muster, that he please put them out of their misery.

Suddenly, Felixson began to shout.

“They’re getting in my mouth, and in my eyes! Oh god in heaven, no!”

“Wait.” Norma said, she picked up her speed, until instinct told her she was very close to the demon.

“Lord?”

“Yes, I know Felixson.”

“Why are you not protecting him but you are me?”

“Because you asked and he didn’t”

“I’m sure he assumed—”

“Well he was wrong.”

She sensed the face of the Cenobite’s gaze upon her, as she stopped and turned to face her. “He should have thrown himself upon my mercy, as you did.”

“Then I beg your mercy a second time, on his behalf.”

“Are you sure you want to assume such a debt to me? The magician means nothing to you, does he?”

“Yes, he does. He hid my pains from myself.”

“That was scarcely altruistic. He simply didn’t want to have to carry you.”

“I know. I knew even when he was doing it. But still, he did it.”

“And now you want to save him from his own error?”

“Yes.”

“He’s already got seeds on him and in him.”

“I realize that.”

“It won’t be pretty.”

“I don’t need to look at it.”

“True. Felixson?”

There was an answering sound from the magician, but it did not resemble a word.

“He’s already too far gone.” The Hell-Priest said.

Norma reeled around at Felixson.

“Speak!” she said. “Felixson, listen to me! Your Lord called your name! Answer him.” She took a step in the man’s direction, her arms extended. The fingers of her right hand came in contact with him first. Was that his face? It was rough and sticky.

“Can you hear me Felixson”

She got a grunt by way of reply.

“Then speak to the Priest. Call him *Lord*.”

She heard the pitiful palate sounds indicated his attempt to do just that.

“Go on...” she said. “It’s just one syllable, for Christ’s sake. *Lord*, Felixson. Say lord, and maybe he’ll help you.”

Finally, after several more wretched attempts, he achieved a rough semblance of the word.

“I think that’s as good as your going to get.” Norma said to the Hell-Priest.

“Will you please grant him your protection? He’d ask for it if he could, but right now—”

“Believe me I can see why he can’t make a more articulate reply. And if you could see it you might reconsider this kindness of yours .He won’t thank you for it.”

“He’s in pain. Listen to him.”

“I’ll protect him from further exposure if that’s what you wish—”

“It is.”

“It’s done. But I won’t undo the consequences of his error in taking my sanctuary for granted. He will have to live with that. Now, no more delays. If you fall behind I will not wait.”

So saying, he turned again, left the blind woman and the infected man behind her to follow. In truth it wasn't difficult for Norma to keep up, despite her age and sightlessness. Whatever protection working he had thrown over her seemed to lend her body strength, and she followed in his wake without undue effort. She assumed the same was true for Felixson, but all she heard from behind her were guttural sounds, occasionally punctuated by cries of pain.

"If it hurts so badly," Norma said, "Do for yourself what you did for me. Hide it away, at least until we can find you some help."

He wasn't so far gone that he couldn't make sense of this because just a few seconds later she heard him reciting, albeit with some difficulty, the opiating syllables he'd spoken over her own body. There was another short passage of time when he neither spoke nor moaned. Finally, he said: "That's a little better."

Though the pain had gone from his voice he still sounded as though he was speaking with his mouth full.

“What happened?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yes I do.”

“Then I choose not to tell you. Just be grateful, for once, that your eyes don’t work. Nor just because of me. You saved me, for which my thanks. There are others out there—they came out of the fog every now and then—the condition of them...”

“Seeds.” He said.

“Seeds, yeah. Who’d have thought?”

That was his last remark on the subject. His last on any subject, for that matter, until they reached the gates of the regime’s stronghold.

—

It was called the Bastion of Tyath now, though it had gone by many names before that, sometimes a temple sacred to the ruling despot, sometimes his or her palace. But however the interior of Bastion changed to suit the metaphysical or potential ambition of its occupants, the exterior remained unaltered. It was grey, it was huge, and it was windowless: an uncompromising tower of stone the blocks of which had been so precisely measured and chiseled that it was virtually impossible, unless you had your face to the Bastion wall, to discover where one stone ended and another began. Many legends had accrued around it, chiefly regarding its creation, the most popular, and probably the likeliest this: that it had been the first building raised in the vicinity, its architect and sole mason an Ur-demon called Niathak, who had built it to protect his human wife, a woman called Jacqueline, who was pregnant with a quintet of hybrids—the first fruit of the mating between the sublime angelic, fallen or not, and the ridiculous humans. All had survived. Father, mother, children:

and from their five dynasties had descended increasingly contaminated bloodlines and swelling lists of vendettas fuelled by the scale of what was at stake now, as Hell's infernal machinery moved ever deeper the veins of human perversity, and assembled a library of armies that man had delivered upon his like without the least murmur of encouragement from the occupants of the Bastion. Of the eight members of the present Regime, only five were in the Bastion tonight, their enthusiastic leader General Augustine Pentathiyea, an unrepentant lover of war and its rapturous cruelties, sat in the high backed chair where the regime's true authority, Cathaz Niakopa usually was seated.

The others in the room—Ezakium Suth, Arc Andrakiatus, Doorm Lachsis Hagbek and Josephine L'thi—were not able to conceal their agitation so effectively as Pentathiyea.

“If Niokate were here—” Suth began “—we would have this situation under control by now.”

“It is under control.” Pentathiyea replied. He wore his hair long, as did all of the members of the Regime; its great a sign of their aristocratic state. Pentathiyea’s hair was grey, his purple-black brow ritually scarred with three downward cuts, that had been coaxed, with repeated cutting, stand proof of his forehead, each the thickness of a finger. They gave him an expression of perpetual fury, though his voice was measured and calm. “This priest who is apparently coming to our gates presents no threat to us.”

“He murdered all but a few of his fellow priests,” Andrakiatus reminded him. She was standing against the far wall of the chamber, her waist-long white hair unkempt, her eyes closed as her detached gaze searched the fog outside the Bastion, looking for the felon. “We should have him arrested and summarily executed.”

“A trial would be better.” Hajbok opined. “Something showy to distract the populus.”

“For what?” said Josephine L’thi, who was by several centuries the oldest here, though he did much to conceal the fact, his hair dyed an unnatural intense black, his brows plucked, his skin white where it wasn’t rouged.

“From the fact that we’re losing control,” Hajbok replied. “Isn’t it time we were honest? If not now, when?”

“Go on” Said Ezekium Suth, she pulling a chair some distance from the table and sat down to light up an overfilled cigarette.

“There is no more,” Hajbok said to her.

“So if we made a real example of the Cenobite,” L’thi replied. “A long public trial followed by some form of crucifixion, we’d have back the love of our citizens?”

“We didn’t bring down Chemachiis-” Pentathiyea said.

“*Emperor* Chemachiis—” L’thi reminded him.

Pentathiyea stated with contempt, “Emperor. If we’d left him in power another day he would have announced him the reincarnation of Lucifer, I swear.”

“More than likely.” Ezekion remarked.

“Oh, but he looked very fine didn’t he, in those preposterous robes—”

“And the crown.” L’thi put in, “Don’t forget that triple-tiered crown of his.”

“You see that pleased the people,” Ezekium said, exhaling smoke with her words. “Not the trail particularly—”

“But the execution.” Pentahiyea said.

“Exactly.”

“If any of you are interested,” Arc Andrakiatus said, “our enemy approached the gates. And he has followers.”

“Cenobites?”

“No a blind woman and what looks to be another human. This one failed to get out of the fog by the looks of him.”

“How many troops?”

“That’s it.”

Pentathiyea laughed. “He’s crazy then, has the fog cleared?”

“Entirely.”

“Hajbok, will you lead a party out to take them?”

“Gladly.”

“Ezekium, You should tell the unconsumed what we’re doing. We’re not seeking his permission—”

“I understand.”

“And invite him to the trial.”

“He won’t come.”

“He came to the Emperor’s trial. And to the burning. I remember clearly, when the flames started to make Chemachiis’ flesh blacken, how he looked at the Unconsumed, standing in flame untouched, and oh, the envy on Chemachiis’ face. Then, of course, he started screaming.”

“Ah, the screaming,” said Hajbok, His tone verging on the sentimental. And the gold in his crown melting and running over his face.”

“The crowd went wild.”

“They won’t do that for a murdering Cenobite.” Ezekium remarked.

“Perhaps not, but if we were to keep the dead priest on ice—aren’t there a hundred of them out there? And then on the day of the murderer’s executions we burned them, crucified upside down, as he will be, that would make quite a spectacle, I’d imagine.”

“We burnt the whole order who had treasonous ambitions according to the evidence we will uncover tomorrow, when our pinheaded prisoner points us to it. We will be appalled to discover that behind their fortress walls they were planning the overthrow of our regime.”

“It’s a fine story, Augustine,” said Joseph L’thi. “But doesn’t it leave the Cenobite outside looking like our savior?”

“Oh it would if he turned the evidence over to us. But he didn’t. He murdered his fellow priests so as to take the power entirely for himself.”

“So we have every reason to burn them all, dead and alive alike.” Said Hajbok, “I like that.”

“It would be useful if we could round up the few who weren’t in the fortress when the massacre took place, just to give the proceedings a little more vigor.”

“I have another small sophistication to suggest.”

“Yes?”

“The inverted crucifixion has merits for obvious reasons, but puts an end to things very quickly. Once his brains are cooked, the rest is just flame and flesh.”

“Do you have a solution?”

“As it happens, I do. I have devised a metal blanket, which has a lining which will be filled with ice. Eventually, of course, the ice will melt, and the fire will have

its way, but I've repeated the experiment eleven times now, using men, women and even infants, just to be certain my calculations were consistent."

"And?"

Doctor Hagbok allowed himself a barely perceptible smile. "He'll be fully conscious while the skin is burned off him; while his muscle fries in his own juices. Indeed I believe before we judiciously arrange the fuel for the fire so that he isn't smothered by the smoke, which is an easy death, but cremated systematically, his ligaments shattering as they've cooked, drawing him up onto a pugilistic pose, or at least attempts to do so, but is hindered by the chains that I specifically bound him with to prevent the posture, obliging his bones to crack..."

"You've been thinking about this quite a lot, Augustine." Ezekium said.

"A man has to have dreams."

"But until a few minutes ago you didn't even know we had the bastard at the gates?"

“It was only a matter of time before somebody challenged us, wasn’t it? Just as we challenged the Emperor; and he murdered his brother before him, and so on, and so on. The difference is this. The Cenobite won’t carry the day. He is one, and we are—”

“—Fewer than we should be.” Andakiatus said. “Hasn’t anybody wondered why our glorious leader isn’t here today? Absent without explanation on the very day that a killing fog comes out of the wastes, and that... that *thing* out there, with his face of nails, comes to pay a visit?”

“What are you accusing him of?”

“Who? The Niakapo or the Cenobite?”

“Our leader.”

“I’m accusing him of being dead, most likely.”

“Never.”

“And Quellat, and probably Hithmoniom too, all the missing without explanation on this, of all days? Of course they dead! The creature outside made his business to murder them. It seems to have made quite a career of it.”

There was heavy silence in the dark walled chamber.

“She’s right.” Said Pentathiyea. “And we all know it, so we may as well admit it.”

“There was a rumor going around that one of the Order was a murdering magician.” Hajbok said.

“I heard that too,” said L’thi.

“We should have done something about it,” the doctor went on, “Instead of locking ourselves away ion here indulging our appetites.”

“Which reminds me—”Pentathiyea said, rising from his chair. His deep crimson robes fell in folds around his huge chest and even larger belly. “— I have pleasures awaiting m. Are you joining me, Ezekium? L’thi? Are you coming?”

“I’ll join you when the infantry have this rogue Cenobite in the anbliette,”

Ezekium Suth said.

“I’ll come with you Josephine L’thi replied. She also rose from her seat, working her hand slightly against her breast as she did so. “Are these the twelve you had trapped in the wasteland?”

“Yes. It’s a family: father, mother, children.”

“How little?”

“Oh, I think you’ll find a couple of them young enough to suit your tastes,”

Josephine. “I think the youngest of them is about seven.”

“This isn’t right.” Arc Andrakiatus complained. “Using them now, when some of us hear the call of duty.”

“Well save the father for you,” said Andry, “don’t you fret. We won’t lay a finger on him, will we Josephine?”

“Not a finger.”

“So you come down and join us, when you’ve finished fretting over this incompetent Cenobite. There’s plenty for everybody.”

“Tears...” said the doctor.

“Whose tears?” Pentathiyea wanted to know.

“The burning priests. They should be arranged in rising tiers, with our friend outside crucified on top. I only wish there were a little life in the rest of them—“

“You can always rig the cadavers with little packets of gunpowder.”

Andrakiatu put in, “that’ll get the body’s jerking around once the flames reach them.

Maybe put a bigger charge in the heads, so that they—“He made the sound of

something blowing apart, “—splatter. Skull fragments and brain matter in all

directions.”

“That’ll be a crowd pleaser,” L’thi said.

“Forget the crowd.” Pentathiyea said. “If you’re really going to go to all the trouble, then I want a box with the perfect view. And one of the pretty things downstairs, to pleasure me beneath my robes while I watch. The old Tiberian trick.”

“It can be arranged.” L’thi said.

“Make sure it is, Jojo.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Well aren’t we high and mighty and full of our importance then? As you wish, Josephine. Take your pleasures as you will. They won’t last forever, nothing does.”

“Our Regime will stand for a thousand years,” she replied, “as Niakapo used to say.”

“So he did, so he did.” Pentathiyea agreed. “But where is he today, barely eight years later?”

He didn't want for a reply, even supposing L'thi or anyone else in the chamber would have had one to offer. He made his way out, calling back to colleagues from the passageway: "If anything of significance happens, you all know where to find me."

Six: Pieces, as of a Puzzle

Just about the time Augustine Pentalthiyea was leaving the Regime's council chamber, with Josephine L'thi following after, and the Cenobite who had been one of the subjects of their conversation, causing three triple locked iron gates that sealed the Bastion off from street to be thrown upon, their locks like shattered ice, the other members of this drama, led by Sienna, were entering the city by Janker's Gate. There were watch-towers to the left and right of the gate, with machine guns mounted, but the towers were deserted, and the right hand gate open, though they had to step over a guard, his arms and a portion of his head missing, to get inside.

Janker's Gate offered them the least impressive first view of the city, lying as it did close to the river (which the harrowers had crossed via a solid iron bridge), and therefore occupied chiefly by those whose business was the river. Fishermen and their servants damned, boat wrights and their servants; and then, beside these blameless professions, those who worked the river for different reasons. The demons labored to keep alive for the longest time who the two thousand and twelve damned

buried up to their chins in the mud flats a quarter mile on down to the river,
powerless to protect themselves from the thoughtless birds that stalked the flats
looking for worms and leeches, and finding easier nourishment amongst the hissing
seeds, took off the faces of the damned peck by peck, eyes, tongue, noses, nerves, until
the short beaked birds could get no further, and left the infernal relations of the
heron and the ibis to dig through the empty sockets to reach the brain, and piece by
tender piece, slowly forgave the damned with death.

But none of the workers, fishermen or torturers, were on the street that led
from Janker's Gate. There was plenty of blood, however, to mark their recent
presence; the cobbles shiny—black with it, and the air filled with the fat doxy flies
that wove around as though intoxicated. They weren't the only life form feasting
here. On the walls, where there were numerous bursts of blood, creatures that had
the shape and gait of crabs had emerged from between the bricks and had gathered
around these stains, their busy little mouthparts busily scooping up bits of blood.

“Is this what the fog did to people?” Caz said.

Rebekkah turned and glared at him, her finger going to her lips. Only now did he see that Sienna was in a highly agitated state, her knuckles raised, her whole head dropped down and slowly moving from left to right and back again.

Lana was meanwhile doing her best to keep the blood-lazy flies from landing on her, but they seemed immune to her flailings and settled in her hair and on her face. As for Harry, he was simply starrng on up the street toward the larger and more architecturally ambitious buildings that were visible beyond the modest two story dwellings of the neighborhood around the gate.

“D’Amour?” Rebekkah whispered.

Harry was irritated to be called away from his tower-watching.

“What?”

“We’ve got to stay together,” she said.

The observation had barely left her mouth then the large patch of light that had been illuminating the area around Janker's Gate since they had stepped through it moved off as the great stone rolled on its way, plunging them into an unwelcome murk, and at the same time two figures appeared from the alleyway behind Sienna and Rebekkah. One of them caught hold of Lana, who despite her diminutive stature was perfectly able to deal with her attacker. A blow to the throat, a kick to his lower belly, and as he bent double an uppercut to his chin and he was down, sprawled on the cobbles. The other stranger went down on his knees beside his companion, and for the first time Harry got a look at their condition. They were both demons, he saw, well-fed and well-muscled, dressed only in baggy trousers held up by the ornately decorated belts that younger demons seemed to favor, their prehensile tails emerging from a small slit in the back. Around each of their necks were several lengths of leather or cord, each of which bore some keepsake. In all of these regards they resembled most of the demons belonging to minor orders that they had encountered.

But the seeds had worked a change in them, and it was not pretty. At the corners of their mouths and eyes, in the folds of their arms, or between their fingers—wherever, in short, a seed had chanced to lodge—it had germinated not by producing some hellish plant but by taking its cue from the spot in which it had been planted and growing a new life-form that was ordained by the place of origin. The seed lodged between the fingers had brought forth a crop of new fingers, which spread down both sides of the planted hand, and which all possessed their own beckoning life. The seeds beside the demon's mouth had created new mouths, that gaped in his cheek and his neck. All these bizzarrities were humbled, however by the work the seeds lodged in his left eye had done, multiplying the number of eyeballs so that from his brow, and his temple and from his cheek were bunches of wet, white lidless eyeballs, their yellowish cornea dissected up down, and sideways.

The same multiplication of fleshy forms occurred wherever the seeds had lodged. Fold upon fold upon fold, at armpit and elbow, tumorous growths multiplying

around the mouth they impersonated, and creating fans of skin stretched over bone where a seed had adhered to the sweat on a demon's back. Plainly the configuration caused considerable anguish; the mutinous matter of muscle and bone giving the torturers a taste of true hopelessness.

The demon on the ground was thrashing so wildly in his agonies that it was impossible to see what unwelcome transformation had been visited upon him, but whatever it was it drew the attention of the flies, who darkened still further the air above him. There they waited, circling impatiently until the hundreds who were already drinking his juices had taken their fill, and left the groaning table making room for a fresh appetite.

He reached out suddenly and caught hold of Caz's ankle, his many jointed fingers easily locking around it. Despite the demon's agony—or perhaps because of it—the grip was vice-like, and in his efforts to free himself, Caz lost his balance and fell back hard on the bloody cobbles. The maddened demon crawled up his body, the

flies his motion had disturbed a ragged, shifting cloud around him. He was a big-bellied creature, and his weight was easily sufficient to pin Caz to the ground.

“Harry?” Caz yelled.

“Yeah, I’m working on it.” Harry replied. “Where’s that damned machete?”

“Lana had it”

“Give it to me!”

He’d no sooner spoken than the other demon—perhaps dimly sensing that it was about to be opposed—came at Harry and caught hold of his throat. As it dug its fingers deep into the flesh around Harry’s windpipe, Lana tripped over the machete. He took a swipe at his adversary, and buried the blade in the creature’s side. Shock and pain made the thing loosen its throat-hold, and Harry pulled away. The face before him was still transforming, as the seeds continued to offer proof of their fecundity. The bunch of eyes was still swelling, the mouths spreading down the creature’s neck and out its chest. They were all gaping and all by some elaborate

reconfiguring of the demon's internal anatomy, possessed of health enough to loose a chorus of screams and pleas.

Harry granted the thing the only mercy he had to hand. He swung the machete through the 180 degree arc and sliced through a third of the demon's neck before it stuck into the creature's vertebrae. He worked the blade free, hot blood gushing from the massive wound, and swung at the demon's head a second time, hoping for mercy's sake to deliver the coup de grace.

But there was too much crazed life in the creature, and moved as Harry struck out at it. The machete cut through the burgeoning bunch of black and yellow eyes, and cut deep into the demon's skull. Thirty eyeballs or more dropped from the severed bunch and rolled around Harry's feet. The demon's mouths were letting out a single sound now: a sustained funereal note. Harry took it as a sign that the creature was readying itself for death, and the thought put power into his third swing. It went, more by accident than intention, where the second blow had gone, and took off the

top half of the adversary's head. The demon lurched, and the severed portion slid off and hit the ground, several eyes popping as it stuck. The rest of pitiful thing staggered for a moment or two, then keeled over.

Harry wasn't watching it. He was hacking at the neck of the demon who was on top of Caz. It seemed not to feel the blows Harry was delivering, either because it was obsessed with the business of killing Caz or because its diseased condition had rotted its neural system. Whichever the reason, it did nothing to avoid the machete's blows, the eighth of which severed the head from the neck. Harry had caught hold of the demon's long black hair three strikes before, so that the creature's head swung from his fist as the rest of the corpse slumped on Caz. He took a deep breath as the weight of him allowed and pushed himself from the ground, so that the obese corpse rolled off him. Then, grasping, he pushed himself up into a sitting position, where he paused to wipe some of the blood that had sprayed and splashed on him—though he did little more than leave finger marks traced in the blood; then he got to his feet.

“Thank you, man.” He said to Harry. “I thought I was dead for sure.”

“Nobody’s dying on this trip,” Harry said. “Understood? Lana? Rebekkah?”

We’re going to get through this—”

Lana was staring down at the corpse of the first demon Harry had brought down. “Do they all look like this?” She said. “Too many eyes. All those mouths?”

“No. I think that’s what the fog did. Don’t ask me how. But it might end up being to our advantage, if we can move quickly. I think these two were caught outside when the fog came, and it did this to them.”

“Or something it carried.” Rebekkah said.

“Right.”

“Sienna’s ready.”

“Good. Then let’s get going.”

“We’re not going to get much further without something to eat.” Lana said.

“And drink. And you and Caz need to wash that blood off you, or you’re going to be covered in flies.”

“She’s right.” Rebekkah said.

“So what, we should knock on the nearest door and ask for help?”

“No. We’ll look for a house that has been left open. We’ll find one. Lana, Harry, you work the left side of the street, Caz and me will watch the right.”

They proceeded up the shallow incline that led from Janker’s Gate, Sienna keeping her focus on the way ahead, the others looking for some abandoned house. They were being watched every step of the way, Harry knew. Not only could he feel it—that itch at the back of the neck which was a sure sign they were being watched—but there were more obvious signs too. Doors that had been opened a slit were closed sharply when his gaze chanced their way; blinds or drapes were dropped back into place. Now and then they heard voices from inside the houses: arguments

and sometimes, sometimes what might have been demonic prayers, offered up in the hope of salvation.

“This isn’t how it’s supposed to be....” Harry murmured as he walked.

“What isn’t?”

“Hell, Caz. I mean Christ, they’re scared of us.”

“Maybe,” Rebekkah said softly. “And maybe there just waiting to be sure the last of the fog is gone before they come out and face us.”

“Then I’m going to keep this ugly son of a bitch’s head for a while, just so they know what we’ve been up to.”

There was wisdom in his instinct to advertise his skills as executioner. At every intersection they crossed they glimpsed figures skipping out of sight into doorways or alleys; a few were even spying on them from the rooftops; risking whatever was left of their lives as they stalked the dog and her followers. They could not do so in silence, it seemed; a kind of madness had overtaken them, and they

couldn't keep themselves from letting out strange wild cries from their high perches, silhouetted against the ceaseless motion of the sky.

"If anybody had doubt that we were here," Harry said, "They don't now."

"Fucking freaks." Lana said. Then, targeting one of the stalkers in particular, a female demon who was parading a gross surfeit of breast: "Yeah, you!" Lana yelled up at her. "You're a fucking freak! You hear me?"

As Lana threw her question up towards the many breasted demon the tile beneath the creature slid from its place, the timing so perfect that it seemed as though it was Lana's doing. The creature let out a shrill cry, and slid down the roof, her feet, with the force of her descending body behind them, kicking the tiles as they struck the roof again.

"Now look what you've done." Caz said, meaning to make light of it.

"I didn't mean to." Lana said. She was deadly serious.

"You didn't—"

“I did! Jesus Christ—”

The demon’s scream cut off anything she might have said. The creature tried to grab hold of the eaves in one last desperate attempt to save herself but she was too heavy for the eaves to bear her weight. They broke and she fell backwards, still holding two pieces in her hands as she descended. She held onto them, all the way down, and still had them in her hands when she hit the ground, three stories below—its coherence already compromised by the transfiguration it had undergone from head to buttocks, which fast became visible when just a few seconds after impact, she got to her feet, and turning, she began to shamle towards the group. As she did so she opened her mouth unnaturally wide, and she let out a sound that had nothing of the animal in it, nor anything human. As it echoed off the walls she unleashed the sound a second time and a third, the echoes multiplying.

She stopped approaching the dog and her four humans once she’d uttered the third cry, standing in the street perhaps thirty yards from them while echoes died

away. For a few moments the only sound, besides the ever present mumble of the sky-stone, was the slap of blood from the split in her back, swelling the dark pool around her feet.

And then, from somewhere near, the sound of feet on stone, running. And from another direction, a short cry that was a sibling to the shout she has loosed. No, not a shout: a summons. And in response Harry and the others heard sounds coming from every direction. Cries that were their own summons, punctuated by mad-house noises—shrieks and sobbing and joyless laughter all waking imitations of their own, so that within the space of a minute or less the city was no longer silent, but filled with this cacophony, steadily closing on the intersection where the trespassers stood.

Seven: Decadence

“Listen to that.” Felixson said.

“I hear it.” Norma replied.

They stumbled together up the ninety-one steps took them to the door of the Regime’s sanctuary, and it was there now that they waited, ordered by the Hell-Priest to avert their gazes, blind and sighted alike, while he gained entrance. The noise had risen up while they did so.

“I used to live in Los Angeles,” Felixson said, “Up off Coldwater Canyon. At night sometimes you’d hear yipping of a coyote, then a whole chorus of them joining in as they came to share the kill.”

“Share the kill?”

“You know, some overfed Beverly Hills pussycat had got horny and gone out—”

“Looking for some pussy.”

“Now how did you know I was going to say that?”

“It’s a gift. Go on.”

“Well that’s it. The noise out there just reminded me of those damned coyotes, howling with happiness because they were going to get full bellies.”

“You ever heard demons make that noise before?”

“No.”

“Nothing remotely like it?”

“No.”

“So what... does that tell you?”

Felixson said nothing.

“Did you hear me?”

“Christ woman, I’m standing two feet from you. Yes, I heard you. I just can’t think of anything to say that…”

“What?”

“...no, it’s just…”

“Say it.”

“All right, but don’t laugh.” He took a deep breath. “You ask what the noise tells me and I don’t want to say that you deserve better than... than the way it’s going to be.”

“Don’t break your heart over it.”

“I killed my heart for magic, years ago. At least I thought I did. But I guess I missed a bit; just enough to hurt now. Not for me. For you.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s’ your friends—the ones who came after you—being taken by the coyotes.”

“No.” Norma said softly.

“Don’t feel bad. It’s probably better this way. For them, I mean.”

“I don’t see how.”

“Well I don’t pretend to understand much about this place. But I’m good at listening, and amongst all the people he murdered at the fortress—”

“He can hear you remember.”

“I know. It doesn’t matter. He likes the truth. And that’s all this is. Amongst all those Hell Priests he murdered, there was only one subject of conversation I ever heard.”

“And what was that?”

“The end. Of everything. At least everything they cared about.”

“Meaning themselves.”

“No, no. I can see why you’d think that but you’ve got them wrong there.

They weren’t much interested in themselves or each other. They only wanted this to go on.”

“*This*, meaning Hell?”

“The Human Illusion. That’s the only name I ever heard them use. Les etre humain illusion. O humano ilusao. But whatever it was that they meant by that they hated the idea that it was all going to come to an end.”

“Why did they even think it would happen?”

“Because I was in their dreams, Norma Paine, telling them the unpalatable truth. And behind their eyelids when they blinked.

Norma’s visual grasp of the Cenobite’s dead presence was clear enough that she could fix his position, several yards away from her, with one hand raised, his palm flat against the door.

“The Regime’s assassins are getting the same visions right now. Can you hear them sobbing on the other side of the door?”

She could, now that she paid closer attention. It was more than simple sobbing that escaped them. There was terror dissolved in their tears.

“What are they afraid of?” she said. “They must have seen everything surely. The worst, the very worst.”

“Never the void.” The Cenobite replied. “Better a world of bone and blood and screaming that never ceases than darkness and silence.”

“I beg to differ.” Norma said.

“Each to their own.” The Hell Priest replied. “For now it’s to my purpose that they are like lost children in there, waiting for me to come inside and show them the way.”

A voice rose above the sobs now, its owner doing its best to sound sure of its sanity. “Who is that? What do you want?”

“I heard you have troubles, friend.”

“No troubles here.”

“Is that so? Then I was misinformed and I’ll waste no more of your time. Be well.”

“Wait—”

Another voice now, raw with weeping.

“What is it?” the Hell Priest demanded, irritably. “I have urgent business.”

“Don’t go.” Said the weeper.

“Why not? You have no need of me, according to your comrade.”

“He was wrong—”

“Indeed.”

“—We are under siege.”

“I find that hard to believe.” The Hell Priest said. “I am standing outside your door and have but two companions with me. What kind of siege is that?”

“It’s not you!”

“Stop telling him,” the first man said. “We don’t even know who he is.”

“I’m the Cenobite you call Pinhead behind my back.”

“And the others?”

“A blind woman and a crippled magician. But this is academic. You have no siege, therefore you have no need of help.”

“They’re in here already,” the weeper said.

“Who?”

“Can’t tell. It’s so dark in here. But they’re everywhere.”

“Will you shut up?” said the first of the pair. “We don’t need to be telling our business to some murdering priest.”

“My reputation precedes me.”

“You’re stupid, coming here. The Regime has plans for you and you won’t like them.”

“Be quiet you shithead. Let him in.”

“I agree!” said another voice, his assent taken up by half a dozen others.

“Turn off the Denials, Kafde,” said the man who had been weeping, “And let the Priest in.”

“Once he’s in—”

“Enough,” the recovered weeper said. There was a sound of ragged motion and then the thump of somebody being thrown against the door. It was apparently the demon called Kafde, because seconds later he said:

“Don’t you—”

He never finished his sentence. In place of words came the whistle of breath from a sliced wind-pipe, and the sound of his body sliding down the door.

“Messata. Get this carcass out of the way while I turn off the Denials. Are you still there?”

“You’re addressing me?” the Cenobite said. “Yes, I’m still here.”

“Step away from the threshold, sir. Two steps is enough.” He waited. “Have you done so?”

“Yes.”

Norma smelled the unmistakable bitterness of death-magic coming off the door.

“Would that have killed me?” she said to the Cenobite.

The creature left his place two steps back from the door, and came to join Norma and Felixson, whose teeth had started to chatter uncomfortably.

“The Regime will have devices throughout the sanctuary for protecting themselves from interlopers such as me. So we must—Christ’s blood, Felixson, can you not stop that din?”

Felixson started to make a nod of reply, but it dissolve in spittle and chatteringings.

“Enough, then.” The Hell Priest said. “You can keep all the rest of your deformities but leperous mouth I will heal.”

Norma saw the phantom figure move out, though of course she would not see see the man he touched. She saw a shadow pass down the Hell Priest’s arm and then heard Felixson let out a sob. He grabbed fierce hold of Norma’s arm as he did so, and she felt spasms passing through his body, wracking him. Then the sob became a sigh, and the fingers digging into her arm relaxed until he let go of her completely.

“Thank you, Lord.” He murmured.

“It was scarcely altruistic,” the Cenobite replied. “I simply couldn’t endure another moment of that monkey chatter. I trust you’re still in pain?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I didn’t want you to imagine your sins had been forgiven. Ah, I think the door is finally being unlocked.”

“Why did you not simply batter it down?” Felixson said.

“Because there are some markings I could not oppose, strong as I am. The Denials at this Threshold were laid by Lucifer himself. It was wiser to have the door opened to us because we can help those inside.” If there was some worry intended, the Cenobite’s tone betrayed no sign of it. But then perhaps he was also playing for an audience on the other side of the threshold.

“Be careful,” said the demon who had slit his opponents throat. “They are everywhere, these monsters. Please come in, come in. I am Eban Zieth, and—”

“Lock the door, commander.” The Cenobite said. “And have your battalion stand along the wall there.”

“Wait. I can’t just let you—”

“You want the enemy subdued, yes, before they get your masters?”

“Of course.”

“You’ve had the courage to open the door to me. Now have the courage to let me do my work.”

“I don’t see why—”

“—Your soldiers need to be lined up against the wall?”

“Yes.”

“Because what is not them is *other*, Eban. And the other must be dealt with quickly, before it gets any deeper in your- Ah, you see how quickly it moves?”

“What?”

“The shadow? You didn’t see it?”

“The shadows! There!”

“I saw it!” said another of the company, his voice infected by the very tone the Cenobite was using.

“What’s your name?”

The man looked to his commander, who simply shrugged: “Tell him!”

“Choyem Pardo.”

“Be quick then! Go down the passageway—”

“I see it now!” said another of the men.

“There! It’s there!” yelled a third.

“Pardo! Take this man—” he pointed to the guard who’d just spoken. “—and guard the end of the corridor?”

“With what?”

The Cenobite reached into his robe and took out of its folds a Lemankand Configuration.

“Here,” he said.

“What is that?” the commander said.

“A weapon. I have several.” He took out another three and passed them amongst the soldiers.

“What do they do?” one of them asked.

“It will become apparent.” The Hell Priest replied. “Now, please, commander, against the walls.”

The commander didn't even need to give the order. In the short time since entering the Cenobite had caught the men in his net with such efficiency; they were ready to respond to his every instruction. Up against the wall they went, passing the boxes back and forth between them. One of the men had already solved part of the puzzle: the box was already playing its seductive little song.

The commander was in no measure happy with the way things were going.

"This isn't right," he growled.

"Leave them, commander, please. They're quite safe. Take me to those you answer to."

"I answer to the Regime."

"Then take me to them."

"Do you have some prior arrangement to be here? Because I was not notified—

”

“If you need some confirmation, take me up to one of the watch-towers. I’ll show you what’s going on out there.”

“It was just a fog.”

“It was the beginning of the end.” The Cenobite said. “And if you wish to waste precious minutes, while I prove it to you, get climbing. The sooner I show you, the sooner—”

“No. I understand.”

“You see that?”

“Yes!” He sounded pitifully relieved. “I saw it! A great shadow!”

One of the soldiers laughed as the puzzle proceeded to solve itself, opening like a mechanical flower, its sharp petals gold and black, spreading and spreading in defiance of the physics, the more elaborate forms larger than a box of such size could logically contain.

“Keep that down!” the commander snapped.

“They’re only happy because they’re safe now.” The Cenobite replied.

“Is that so?”

“Do you have children, commander?”

They had passed through the gauntlet of soldiers and turned a corner into a much larger space, walls, floors and ceilings constructed of the same blue-grey metal. Along its quarter mile length nine alcoves were let into either walls, six feet wide or wider. Each contained a statue carved of black marble.

“These are exceptional, if I may say so.” The Cenobite remarked.

They stood fully thirty feet high, and each, if viewed back and forth across the wide, immaculate space down which the commander was leading them each represented a reconfiguring of the one before, the violence of the reconfiguration escalating, so that by the time the twelfth was in view nothing that might have been commonly thought of the human remained.

“What do they represent?” Felixson dared ask.

The commander merely shrugged, but the Hell Priest had an answer.

“The soul devouring itself in despair. I have seen this very thing. Not at such a scale, of course, but these are works of meticulous realism.”

Again the commander shrugged. But Felixson was intrigued.

“Where?” he said.

“Oh now think, magic-man. Where’s the one place I could see such a sight as this? The one certain place?”

Felixson chewed on the question, but could not solve the puzzle.

“In your mirror.” Norma said.

“And again it is the blind woman who sees the most clearly.” The Cenobite replied.

“You saw something like that in your mirror?”

It was Norma who replied. “No, not like that. *That*. All souls, being a portion of one, are the same. *And when the soul eateth of itself, it is a great and rare spectacle*

that may only be witnessed by the devourer, whose eye will become clearer, and whose appetite will become keener with each portion of that which all things in one he partaketh.”

“Well, there’s some pretty words.” The Cenobite said.

“Are they wrong?” Norma said.

“No. Who taught—”

“Silence.” The commander said.

“—You this wisdom?”

“Did you not—”

“Because it’s the first time I have heard it spoken, and yet I believed it written down—”

“My men are screaming.”

“Of course they are, commander. You can’t hold the other off forever. And yet I believed it written down in one place only.”

“You did this, Hell Priest.”

“No commander, the honor of this massacre is entirely yours. I would not relieve you of a single drop of blood that was yours by right.”

The Commander drew his sword and put it to his enemy’s throat. The Hell Priest raised his chin a little to make it easier for the commander to position the point.

“What is the other?”

“It doesn’t exist.”

“What is the other?”

“It’s here with you right now.”

“Not you?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“It doesn’t exist.”

“What is it, priest?”

“It’s here with you right now?”

The Commander pressed his sword into the Cenobite’s throat, deep enough for a bead of blood to form beneath the blade and run down the Cenobite’s neck.

“I hate riddles, Pinhead. That’s what they call you, isn’t it? Speak sensibly, or I will take off your Pinhead.”

He was still forming his last syllable when the Hell Priest reached up, caught hold of the blade at his throat, and twisted it once, with such suddenness and violence that one of the bones in his arm audibly snapped. He dropped the sword. The priest approached him, arms raised, and caught hold of the commander around the neck. It was not a stranglehold, it was something closer to an embrace, though in the same moment of catching hold of him he turned the man around, so they were both facing the last of the great statues that lined the walkway.

“You are not the Other?” he said quietly. “Are you?”

“No.”

“Any you are here, yes?”

“Yes.”

“But listen...” Now he truly did play the lover, or close enough, whispering something into the ear and mind of his captive that neither Felixson nor Norma heard. Before his tormentor had finished the commander began to tremble in the Cenobite’s grip.

“And now you will be other.” The Hell Priest said, and stepped away from him, leaving just one hand, his left, tenderly touching the side of the man’s face.

“Do you understand now?”

“Yes.”

“When you were yourself, did the other exist?”

“No.”

“And now?”

“Please don’t let it...”

“And now?” He let his hand drop from the side of his face. “And now?” he said again.

“The other is here?”

“And who is the other?”

“I am.”

“Prove it.”

“No, Lord. I beg you. Don’t let me—”

His words became a cry as the seizure caught unforgiving hold of his body, every part of him twisting and twisting. His head started to turn, testing the strength of his spine. His arms had met together behind his back, his fingers knotting, cracking. Gasping sobs escaped him, punctuated with little snatches of entreaty.

“—Please—Lord—My God—only you, Lord—”

The Cenobite studied the commander's agonies for a time, and then he lifted his leg hard and put it back against the side of the demon's head.

"You did not lose control of your bladder and bowels."

"No."

"That would be shameful, wouldn't it?"

"It would, please don't—"

"You pricked my throat, commander. The blood still runs from the place."

"Forgive me, Lord."

"If I am your Lord, commander, what are you?"

"Whatever you want me to be."

"Such as?"

"Your lady. Your dog. Your fool. Your commander."

"Well said. I am as of this moment resolved to trust you. What is your name demon?"

“Yeo Hawrathia.”

“Live then, Yeo Hawrathia.” The Hell Priest said. “And serve me.” He lifted his hand off the commander’s head. There was no sign of a seizure this time, however.

“Just know, commander, how close behind you the other walks.”

Hawrathia turned, and met the Hell Priest’s scrutiny, offering his own unblinkable stare like a book where the truth of his new devotion might be read. The Hell Priest did so for several seconds. Then he said:

“I see no lie in you, commander. Yet I wonder how you could change your allegiance so quickly.”

“I haven’t. I was only waiting, doing my duty as a soldier must, until the power of whom my allegiance has lain since birth came into view.”

“Since birth say you?”

“Since birth.”

The Cenobite nodded. “I’ve seen all I need to see. You may blink.”

“Thank you.”

“Were you in command of all the soldiers guarding the Regime?”

“Yes.”

“Do you not find it strange then that the soldiers at the door began to cry out several minutes ago and yet none of your officers dispatched a party to investigate this noise?”

“The fog caught many of them, and I instructed that those infected should be taken down to the interrogation rooms and beheaded. Their corpses should be then carried to the furnace and burned. There was some dissention amongst the ranks as to the wisdom of the judgment. I was obliged to personally silence the dissenters, eleven in all. Those I trusted I divide into two parties. One to guard the front door—”

“You left the other doors unguarded?”

“There are no other doors.”

“Well that simplifies things. And the other party?”

“I dispatched to the meditation room, where I had previously escorted the members of the Regime.”

“Ezekium Siuth, Joseph L’Thi, Arc Andrakiatus, Cathaz Niakapo, Lachesi Hajbek and Augustine Pentathiyea. Is that the sum of them?”

“It would be if they were all here. Cthaz Niakapo was delayed in business at the fissures, however. At least that was the message conveyed. Now I think of it I believe she knew your visit was imminent, and found an excuse to absent herself.”

“Do you have any allies amongst the rest?”

“Yes, she and Andrakiatus are close.”

“Then I leave you to make his death gratuitously violent, his genitals stuffed into his mouth and a dagger buried to the hilt in his anus!”

“Done and done.”

“Then we’ll see if rage unseats her cooler judgment. I’m only puzzled that if Andrakiatus was her friend, she didn’t take him with her.”

“I believe he thinks you as inconsequential.”

The Cenobite made a tiny nod, then: “The chamber they are in, how far from here?”

The commander pointed at the door at the end of the concourse. “Through that door, there are five more chambers we must pass through.”

“How many in each?”

“None until the last. Then there are one hundred and seventy-nine men lined shoulder to shoulder around the Meditation Room.”

“Loyal to you.”

“They were, but by now...”

“The place has been watching us, yes? The air itself is a spy.”

“And the ground we walk on.”

“So your hundred and seventy-nine men know we are coming, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will go ahead and put a contagion amongst them. You, commander, will find a safe place for my fellow travelers, Theodore Felixson and Norma Paine. When they are secure, come to the meditation room. I’ll leave Andrakiatus untouched so his body’s in virgin state when you do your work. If Niakapo has ten percent of the intellect she is reputed to have then she will know the moment she looks at his remains how he was slaughtered.”

“Understood.”

“Now sheath your sword, Commander, and once you’ve put Miss Paine and Mr. Felixson out of harm’s way, follow me to the mediation room.”

“Yes, sir.” The commander replied, saluting.

“You can dispose with that military formality, Commander, at least with me. I walk on blood and bones, but I see only souls.”

“You see souls?” said the Commander.

“Of course, the rest is a human illusion.”

Eight: Meditations

Harry might have taken some comfort at that moment from the Hell Priest's belief that all but the soul was a human illusion, but there was nothing in their present circumstances that looked illusionary. The street at the intersection where he, Caz, Rebekkah, Lana and Sienna stood, each of the humans staring down a different street, but all seeing the same unwelcome sight: the monstrosly transformed citizens of this unholy city were coming at them. The terrible multiplicities that had sprung up from the places where the seeds had lodged rendered each one a horror unto itself and all—whatever part had been infected—had stripped themselves completely

naked, as if to facilitate new growths. Nor was this an idle hope. Their transformed anatomies brought forth their own strange blossoms, flesh-petalled, blood-sopped, and from them loosed fresh generations of seeds.

“What now?” said Caz.

“Follow the dog,” Harry replied. “She knows what she’s doing.” He looked at Rebekkah, “Doesn’t she?”

“She knows.”

Sienna was already on the move again, keeping to the same street, even though it was easily the most crowded of the four directions.

“Keep right behind her.” Rebekkah said. “That’s the only safe place.”

“And what makes it safe, exactly?” Caz said.

“She does.” Lana replied, with a “don’t be dumb” glance back at him.

Harry saw the principle of it, but he didn’t like the odds. It wasn’t only the creatures on the street they had to contend with, it was those who were on the roofs,

and clambering down the facades of the houses, careless of their safety; and others appearing from the houses, untainted by the seeds, but apparently eager to join the mob or lynch-party, whatever it was, to let the prospect of laying their bodies open to the transforming anguish of the seeds keep them safe behind locked doors. The seeds seemed to sense the presence of naked furrows, and converged upon the innocents as soon as they started down the half dozen white marbled steps that took them from their front doors down to the sidewalk.

Now Sienna and her harrowers had all too clear a vision of the seeds at work—new victims convulsing as the seeds swelled and burst, spitting the juices of their monstrous fecundity in all directions, the flesh they had wetted instantly casting out nets of ripe red veins which were moments later nurturing the creation of new multiplicities. The second generation was more confident than the first, and more ambitious; the forms that they brought into being weren't simply siblings of the anatomy where they'd landed, they were aberrant and fantasicated. A seed that

lodged between two fingers brought a hundred digits of more into being, spreading up the victim's arm; an eye didn't simply resemble its same, it grew to the size of two pulsing fists, recumbent in a bed of blood and pus.

And again, as with their predecessors, the urgent need to be naked, to expose every niche and fold to seeding, so that in the space of a minute or two the number of adversaries had trebled, the newly infested still shrieking as wave upon wave of agony overtook them.

Strangest of all amongst the new recruits to this unspeakable regiment were the demonic children, freed from the constraints of hearth and home, their bodies, for all apparent vulnerability, more eager even than those of their parents to reinvent themselves. They wanted to be new species, Harry thought: the seeding providing the perfect reason to unleash every heretical thought the day could make flesh. Even as their parents reached the limits of their disorder, their children were overtaking them, giving their bodies to the grand experiment with an abandon their elders had

tried in their flesh too long to share. Hence the boy with thirty arms or more reaching out from their roots in his back, or the adolescent girl who sex had split her all the way up to her breast bone, its wet wings undulating as it opened to invite the world to do its worst; or the infant even, seeded into its mother's arms, and riding the saddles of her milk fed breasts, its hand a blistered ball swelled to three times or more its natural size, so that it eclipsed its mother's face completely. As for its limbs, they had quadrupled in number, and became in the process little more than bone and sinew, their joints defying nature and turned backwards to embrace the mother's body like the many-jointed legs of a spider. When she did not bear him forward speedily enough the infant would raise the sharpened bone where its hands had been and jabbed her bleeding spine to urge her on. There was nothing of pity here; nor needless to say, of love; simply the unrelenting hurt and horror of tomorrow's hell being born on the bed of glass and nails where yesterday's hell was in the long, messy process of dying.

Two thoughts came onto Harry's head as he followed Sienna with the swelling mass of creatures ahead of them. Both were very simple, one was: This is suicidal. The other, which was far crazier than the first, was this: I trust the dog. She knows something I don't. Maybe a lot of things I don't. And for better or worse he could think of no preferable leader in this escalating insanity than the one with the wet nose and the tail. Whatever price he ended up paying for this damned fool escapade—and he was by no means certain it was as foolish as it seemed at a casual glance; no more foolish than, say, gathering some fishermen and a tax inspector and a few other lost souls together and suggesting they try to change the shape of the world forever—it would be worth the adventure, wouldn't it? It would mark his life out as having had a sense of the ridiculous, if nothing more. He had been the man who'd followed a dog against the hordes of hell, and never once asked why the fuck he was doing it.

Except he knew. It struck him clean and clear as he ran: he knew why he was chasing this dog. Faith. Of all the absurdities to have seized his despairing soul, it was

the swindle he'd railed against countless times over the years, the catch-all that every bible thumping snake-oil salesman pulled out when all the rest of his ventures were finally making sense to him now. He was following the dog because he had faith in the dog; nothing more sophisticated than that. There was nothing to explain, nothing to justify. It was what it was: incredible and absurd.

If they came out the other side of all this, he thought, he would talk Rebekkah into arranging an audience with the animal; perhaps in that dream place where they all first met. And he'd ask her some of the questions that were burning in his head—and he was in the process of forming this thought when he became aware that Sienna had looked back at him—though he neither saw nor heard a word—the thought, “*I’ll be there*” had come into being. Already she was looking away, but it didn’t matter. She’d heard and she’d responded. The time would come. And that, for now, would have to be enough.

Besides, they had other problems. The street was blocked from one side of the other with occupants of the New Hell, twitching, shrieking, reciting lullabies and strings of obscenities, squatting to shit, their eyes turned up so only the whites showed in the bliss of defecation, then mindlessly treading in their own turds as they advanced again. Some had made crude weapons for themselves but few had any need for them. The second generation of seeds had war on its mind; and there was no part of the anatomies of demons or damned the seeds could not put to war-mongering purpose.

And yet Sienna continued to walk towards them, leading her pack. Her hackles had risen now, and her head had dropped down. Though Harry couldn't see the expression on her face, he knew her lips had withdrawn quivering from her teeth and gums. Then, for no particular reason that Harry could understand, she barked once. Rebekkah knew what this signifier, however.

“Stop. All of us. *Harry?* Did you hear me? She's telling us to stop.”

“She isn’t stopping.” Harry called back over his shoulder.

“No, but she wants us to. Harry! Harry? Will you listen for once in your life?”

Harry wasn’t listening. He had all his focus on the hoping to god she had some dog plan to get them out of this, or they were dead meat. The demons were starting to edge down the street to the right and left of them, plainly intending to cut them off from any help from the other three.

Apparently Sienna had now realized that this was the case, because she stopped, and turned on the spot, taking a moment as she did so to meet Harry’s gaze. There was a mischievous complicity in her eyes, as though the two of them knew a joke that nobody else knew, which was bewildering for Harry, who’d seldom felt himself as utterly useless and empty a vessel as he did at that moment. But there was nothing to be done, nowhere to go. The circle of the enemy was around them, complete, and from every direction came the sounds of remade anatomies: the net of seething serpents nesting where a colon had been coiled; the hiss of spittle spilled

from a torso infested with gaping mouths; the whine of steam escaping through a cracked skull, as the brain inside was cooked in its own juices.

What now? Harry wanted to say to Sienna. You got us here, and you looked so damn confident while you were doing it, but *what now?*

As if by way of reply to the unspoken question the dog sat down and raising one of her back legs, proceeded to casually scratch behind her ear.

“Got a flea?” Harry said.

Indeed she did. Her paw dislodged it from its niche with her third scratch. He saw it, fat with her blood, kicked into the air and then drop down, towards one of the demons, the boy whose back was arrayed with arms. It landed on his naked foot and bounced off again. The brevity of the contact counted for nothing. The boy’s response could not have been stronger had his lower half been in the jaws of a crocodile. He shrieked, retreating on one foot, while raising the other for closer inspection. There was a mark, Harry saw, where the flea had landed briefly; a cross, its arms of equal

length, and growing exponentially, one of its arms spreading down the side of the shrieking, hopping kid's foot. He lost his balance, and went down sprawling amongst his comrades.

The woman onto whose leg the flea had jumped did not respond with the same shrieks of pain and panic. Instead she bent down to examine the flea. As she did so her mind somehow dialed down the speed of the scene so that every detail registered with uncanny clarity: the "flea" and the cross spreading from it, like the handiwork of four invisible tattooists, staining her skin. Then, the flea leapt up at the woman's face. Harry's eyes remained on the cross, however, which continued to spread. And as it did so the flesh at the center of the cross began to fold back upon itself, four ways, exposing the shiny wet muscle beneath.

"Some flea." He said to himself, and his lazy gaze slid back towards the boy, or rather towards his foot. The process was more advanced there. His skin was retreating

with great precision, the square growing, its symmetry spoiled only by the blood that was spilling over as the patch of exposed flesh grew steadily larger.

The woman was standing up now, the place on her leg where the flea had landed forgotten. The process Harry had just watched at work on the boy's foot was happening on her cheek, where the flea had left its mark. But the speed at which the square was growing had increased five-fold or more, her face all but stripped of skin, her blood-matted hair hanging on the drapes of her scalp. Only now did she start to scream, as did another woman standing close by her: the flea's next victim, Harry guessed. As for the rest of the mob, they were distracted for the moment from the slaughter of man and dog by the sight of so great a harm being done by so small a thing as a flea. But the reprieve would not last long, Harry knew. And when they rekindled their fury it would be all the more destructive for what they had witnessed in the interim.

He caught the fear as it flew, and put it out of its misery. Wasn't he the same man who'd found a place in him where faith sat? It was there still, wasn't it?

Sienna had finished scratching behind her ear. She got to her feet, and made a short growl, then two longer ones, and another short. To Harry it sounded, absurd as the thought was, as though she was speaking in code. Not to him; and certainly not to their adversaries. No, she was talking to something or somebody very close to her.

Harry felt a sting of envy that this invisible other had such effortless access to the mystery at Sienna's heart and he did not. Ashamed of himself, he silenced the thought.

He had barely done so when the answer to his question made themselves visible. They crawled up out of Sienna's coarse grey-brown fur, fat with blood. This time she wasn't going to have to scratch around to dislodge them. The parasites were offering themselves. The dog circled on herself, sniffing the air, and while she did so, Harry glanced at the mob. Some of them were still watching the systematic skinning

of Sienna's first three victims, but some had retrieved their thoughts from that bloody scene, and were once again preparing to commit murder. They were chiefly pointing their spears and stares in Sienna's direction, some of them muttering to themselves as they did so, talking up their courage.

But she had a genius for blind-siding the enemy, and it didn't fail her now. She waited, her fur appearing to be several shades darker thanks to the presence of fleas.

And then, there rose from the boy who'd first been bitten, a shriek of undiluted anguish which drew the attention of almost everyone in the circle surrounding Sienna and Harry, the dog seized the moment. She shook herself, as though she'd just leapt out of icy water, the motion beginning at her head and passing through the flea-infested ruff behind her head, then on, down her body, a shimmering motion that threw the fleas off in all directions.

Harry had no hope of dodging them. There were too many. He felt one strike his brow above his left eye, another hit his ear, and a third and fourth his arm. But the

fleas apparently had no quarrel with his flesh. They didn't linger where they struck, but jumped off another direction, leaving no mark on his arm, and he assumed, his face.

There were none amongst the demons who were granted the same immunity. They all went down before the fleas, women and children dying as violently as the men; falling to the ground with their bodies spasming, reaching with desperation to catch hold of the killing mote, but never far enough to seize the enemy at its work. In a short time there were dying demons lying everywhere, two, three deep in places, sprawled over one another. None of them were dead, yet; even the fleas first victim was still screaming, his noise now from the effort of unleashing his cries. It was increasingly difficult to make any sense of the chaos underfoot: it was just a mass of bodies in the process of self-skinning, with pools of blood rising between them.

Sienna had hauled herself up out of this swamp and was standing at the corpse of an obese demon, surveying the surviving members of the lynch-mob. Its members

were still swelling as the din of the dying brought both demons and damned to the spot, some of them having only recently been seeded, to judge by their appearance; succumbing to curiosity perhaps and leaving their barricaded houses. The rest were catalogues of multiplicities. Whichever of these states they were in, they responded to the sight of what Sienna had caused in the same way. They stopped and stared at the scene, trying to make sense of it, their eyes returning with puzzlement and suspicion to Sienna, who was standing at the top of a mound of bodies. She answered their scrutiny with a warning growl, slowly surveying the mob as she did so. They didn't retreat, nor did they make any attempt to approach.

Harry glance back at Rebekkah, Lana and Caz. "Ready?" he said.

"I can't wade through all that." Lana said.

"If you don't, you'll be left behind." Rebekkah remarked. "Move yourself, girl.

It's just a little blood."

She caught hold of Lana's arm. "Come on."

Muttering something in Portuguese, Lana went with her, with Caz bringing up the rear. Once Lana and Rebekkah were a few sliding steps away, Harry moved on, and without needing to look back to check on the welfare of her pack, Sienna leapt down off the torso of bright yellow fat where she'd been standing. Her sudden movement caused a few stumbling retreats amongst the mob. But most of them simply watched her, some of the demons plainly puzzled by the nature of the force they had in their midst. What was there, inside the illusion of mere doghood, which lent her such power?

It was a question Harry was asking himself too, as he stumbled over the mass of bodies Sienna's fleas had brought down. Many of them still had some measure of life in them, the skinning process still underway. There was strength enough in the demons to reach up and snatch hold of Harry's trouser leg, and raising its head from a pool of blood to have its say.

“You don’t know what you’re dealing with,” it growled. The skin of its face was being folded back as it spoke, uncovering the twitching wet muscle beneath.

“Just the same old demonic shit.” Harry replied, reaching down to free himself from the creature’s shiny black talons.

“Not us, you fool.” The creature said, as the skinning line crossed the half-way point. Its lidless left eye stared up at him from a socket filling with blood. “The dog. You’re a fool, following that!” Harry separated the fabric of his trouser from the talons. The creature, having put its dying energies into trying to lift its head, now let it drop back, the blood swelling in the socket. “Down and down...” it muttered, “That’s where he’s going. Down... and...”

The nonsense stopped there, the lidless eye lost its life. Damn fool demon, Harry thought as he moved on; Couldn’t even tell the difference between a dog and a bitch.

He had just three more bodies to get over, and then he was down on the solid street. Somehow Lana had overtaken Rebekkah in her haste to get to the other side of the mass of bodies. Rebekkah and Caz were just moments behind her.

“Now what?” Caz said, surveying the mob.

“Ignore them.” Rebekkah said. “They won’t come after us. They’ve seen what she can do.”

“I didn’t see it. What did she do? She couldn’t have killed all those—

“Demons,” Harry prompted. “Well, she did.”

“How?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Rebekkah said. “What she does and how she does it is her business. We should be grateful she’s here to protect us or we’d be hanging upside down from the streetlamps by now, having our eyes eaten out.”

That image silenced Lana’s inquiries.

“We should stay close behind her.” Harry said. “I don’t want us to get separated again. Especially now that we’ve made ourselves popular.”

“Are demons always as fucked up as these poor sons of bitches?” Caz asked as he scanned the twitching, sobbing, seeping grotesques who were still watching from a respectful distance.

“No, this is all the work of the seeds. And the seeds came in the fog. Which in turn arrived just before Pinhead came into the city. This is all his handiwork.”

“He won’t have many friends left then.”

“He doesn’t care.” Rebekkah said. “He’s got nothing to lose now. He’s got as much working power as he could squeeze from the magicians back in your world, D’Amour, and now he’s come back here, and before you ask me why, I don’t know. Obviously it’s not a plan that that his order was going to be part of, but that’s no great surprise.”

“Meaning...?”

“This is hell. They don’t hang the ten commandments above their bed here. The Regime has held on to power by brute force. And it will lose it by the same means.”

“To Pinhead?”

“Why do you call him that absurd name?” He’s not a cartoon. He was a man once, just like you —or near enough. And the loss of *one* soul, even one as corrupted as his, is something to be mourned. It’s a piece of the picture lost. And somebody will have to find it again before we can all know glory.”

“I didn’t follow the last bit.” Harry said.

“As you wish.” Rebekkah replied, as though his lack of comprehension was willful. “Meanwhile, could you just call him something other than Pinhead? The Hell Priest, for instance.”

“The Hell Priest?” Harry said, “Sure, whatever. As long as we bring him down I don’t care what the fuck we call him.”

Sienna had finally led them clear of the mob, though a few zealots continued to follow them, loosing involuntary shouts or jabberings when the spirit moved them. Eventually even these creatures were overcome by the frantic workings of the seeds on their anatomies. Two of them simply keeled over and fell dead on the sidewalk, while another—loosing one last despairing shriek—seemed to implode, its bone and sinew overburdened by the transformations that the seeds had wrought.

Finally, they were alone on the street. The last shreds of fog had cleared away, and for the first time they could see all the way down to the end of the street, and to the dour black marble building that stood there.

Without exchanging looks or words they made their way towards it.

Nine: In the House of Bozah

They had perhaps halved the distance between the encounter with the mob
and the gates of the Regime's palace when Lana said:

“Once we get in there, we’re not going to be eating or drinking or taking a break to answer the call of nature, are we?” She didn’t wait for her question to be answered. “Personally, I think we should do all of that now.”

“Where are you suggesting we go?” Caz said.

“I counted five houses with wide open doors on the last block. I figure if you’re in a place like this, with all sorts of crazies in the streets, an open door means somebody’s not home. They picked up and ran. Or they went out to see what was going on and the seeds got them. It doesn’t matter. What matters is getting some food in our stomachs—”

“And some drink,” said Caz. “She’s right.”

“And I want to wash this disgusting shit and blood and God only knows what else off me, because I’m sick of being followed by flies.”

“If you’re going to do it—” Rebekkah began.

“Oh I’m doing it,” Lana replied. “You can go on without me if you want to—”

“We’re not getting separated again.” Harry said.

“Then let’s just do it. There! There’s a door wide open, and it looks like a fancy bit of property. See, they even have their name above the door: House of Bozah. So if there is anybody inside, it’ll be a lighter breed of demon.”

“Lana, listen to yourself.”

“I am. I’m tuned to Radio Lana night and day. And I know, I sound like a snobby little bitch. That’s because I am.” She was already heading in the direction of the open door.

“She’s right about the food and drink,” Rebekkah conceded, “And if we’re going to do this we should do it together.” She called Sienna to her side. “Just a quick diversion,” she explained. “I’ll find you something to eat.”

Suddenly entranced, her tail wagging furiously, Sienna banded past her pack, including Lana, to be the first over the threshold and into the house.

Lana's assessment of the house hadn't been too far off the mark. It did indeed have an air of elegance about it, with a wide sweep of a staircase, and carpets, furniture, mirrors and paintings that look liked vestiges of a lost nobility. But whatever wealth had sustained it had apparently been frittered away, because the house itself was in an advanced state of dilapidation, the plaster coming down off the walls and ceilings in cobs, the paintwork peeling, the air thick and stinking with every kind of foulness. The solitary occupant of the house was a very elderly and decrepit female demon, whom Caz discovered sitting in a chair before a pitiful fire, wearing an old-fashioned night-dress, and a thread bare shawl. Her face had perhaps once been fearsome, like so many faces in the paintings, warrior-demons pictured on the backs of reptile horses; or the warriors overfed progeny, dressed in their black mass best, standing proudly amongst litters of dead doves. But age had ceased any power to intimidate from the creature; and were it not for the twin rows of thorn

sharp teeth, and the patchwork of purple stains on her skin, she might have been any abandoned old woman, sitting in front of a dying fire.

“Belathane, we’ve have you been?” The woman demanded. She beckoned to Caz, narrowing her black eyes. “Is that you, Belathane? I can’t get warm for the life of me. Will you put some coals on the fire for me?”

“Sure.” Caz said.

“That’s a good boy. Lordin’ fire, you’ve grown.”

Caz knelt beside the unswept hearth and transferred a dozen pieces of coal from the battered brass coal shuttle to the fire.

“You were always my favorite you know, little worm?”

“Was I?”

“You still are, even if... even if you don’t sound as you used to sound. Come here, let Namnan give you kisses.”

“I’ll come back later.” Caz said, getting up.

The old woman's arm was off her lap and her stubby figured, bony little hand locked around his wrist in a heartbeat.

"Don't take that tone with me. You know what Nannan likes. It's about all I've got left to look forward to. So get down on your knees, child—"

"I'm not a child." Caz said.

"Now, don't sulk, little worm—"

"And I'm not your little worm." The old woman rose from her chair, her voice ascending as she did, until it was a shrill shriek.

"So what in the name of the three cunted Jakafat are you?" She was up and out of her chair now, her grip so fierce Caz couldn't rest himself free. He could only back away from her, pulling her after him. In her rage the ragged purple patches on her skin darkened pulse by pulse until they were almost black, their patterns lending even features as exhausted as her own, a hint of the formidable strength in her ancient, monstrous line.

“On your knees, little worm. Nannan wants her fillet licked! Go on, get down and lick the fillet!”

From the doorway, Harry said: “I think you’re asking the wrong little worm. This one’s a sodomite.”

The old demon let go of Caz as though he’d just caught fire.

“A sodomite in the house of Bozah! *Never!* You—”She shrieked imperiously, pointing at Harry—“Take him into the yard and hang him naked by his feet from the triguetra tree. Legs wide apart so there’s room to work! Then fetch my son Belathane, or if not he, then another, there are plenty—”

“I’ve had enough of this!” Harry said. He grabbed hold of the creature’s arm to force its grip from around Caz’s wrist, but she wasn’t going to give in so easily.

“Nannan wants her fillet licked!” she said again. “You can do it for me.” She reached down and started to hoist up the filthy folds of her nightgown. “You want to see Nannan’s fillet!”

“Fuck no!” Harry said. “What in Christ’s name made you come in here, Caz?”

“She just looked like a little old lady sitting by a dying fire. I felt sorry for her.”

“Don’t she’s one of the old families, judging by these fancy portraits.”

“Back to Lucifer, may his name be always honoured.” The demon said.

“There’s Bozahs who fell with him, so don’t come in here—”

Let him go!” Harry yelled.

“No. Never! *Never!*”

The dark purple patches on her face and the exposed parts of her body began to give off something that was either smoke or dust, which clung close to her skin as it climbed towards her head, which it encircled, eclipsing her frail, aged features with something entirely stronger. Three forked horns formed on the curve of her brow, twisting around one another like mating snakes. Her eyes and nose disappeared completely allowing her mouth to grow obscenely large, the twin rows of teeth pointing out now, strings of yellow white fluid spilling between them.

She could still manage to shape words, however.

“Nannan wants her fillet licked,” she said. “And one of you is going to do it!”

Harry took out his gun and put it to the demon’s wrist.

“Let go.”

“Lick me.”

He fired. The mouth grew a tooth-lined tunnel, as she unleashed a shriek that shook plaster dust down from the cracks in the ceiling. She let go of Caz, who got a push in his chest from Harry.

“Out!” he yelled.

The demon’s wrist was blown open, but her Bozah blood had given her no predilection for retreat. Instead she went after her wounder, shrieking obscenities. Harry lifted his booted foot and kicked her hard in the bony spot between the empty pouches of her breasts. She stumbled backwards, knocking over her chair until she

ended up in the grate amongst the coals Caz had lain for her. Her nightgown caught fire instantly, sickly yellow-green flames engulfing her.

She didn't stay in the grate for long. With a nimbleness that belied her years she leapt from the fire, scattering burning coals across the carpet. The air from her burning clothes raised her gossamer fire hair above her head, where it caught fire, so that she ran at him with flames leaping fully two feet higher than her scalp. Harry didn't linger to study the spectacle. He fired at the demon as he retreated to the door, slamming before he could reach through. There was no key. And of course in seconds Nannan was on the other side of the door, her din incoherent much of the time, but sometimes descending from a shriek to become an outpouring so esoteric even Harry didn't know what she was saying much of the time. Meanwhile, Nannan battered herself against the door, rattling it so violently it took all of Harry's strength to keep it closed.

“What the fuck were you thinking, Caz?” Harry said when a shame-faced Caz reappeared. He was eating what might have passed for a surrealist sandwich, the bread blue-black with layers of stupied meat or cheese, one of which gave off a rising trail of jaundiced smoke.

“This is better than it looks.” He said.

“That wouldn’t be difficult.” Harry replied.

“Sorry about the old lady.” He shoved the remains of his sandwich into his capacious mouth, and then, talking through his food he told D’Amour he’d take over holding the door while Harry went to get some nourishment himself. Harry took Caz up on the offer and instructing to ‘yell Blue Murder’ if Nannan got close to escaping. Then Harry went looking for the kitchen, and found Rebekkah and Lana working quite happily side by side, raiding the cupboards and the massive refrigerator, packing up anything that looked nourishing or thirst-quenching. As they did so they ate their way through their sandwiches.

“Where’s Sienna?” Harry asked.

“Guarding the front door.” Rebekkah told him.

“Has she been fed?”

“I’ve just finished putting a plate together for her. And some water.”

“Ten minutes at the most, then we’ve got to get out of here. Caz is holding a door closed—”

“We heard,” said Lana.

“Next time you work in the kitchen, D’Amour.” Rebekkah said, not looking up.

“No problem.” Harry said, and taking the plate and bowl he went back to the front door.

“Here, hound dog.” He said, setting the food and drink down close to the front door. Tail wagging, Sienna went to eat, and Harry sat in the warm spot she’d made on the doorstep, his gun in full view, in case anyone on the street became overly curious.

Nobody did. There was scarcely anybody on the street, and those who did appear were too concerned with their own business to even look at the house of Bozah.

By the time Sienna had finished her meal and drunk her water, her pack had cleaned the blood off their boots, hands and faces, used the toilet facilities, which were surprisingly squalid for a house of such elegance, and even found a few tools—a hammer for Rebekkah, a bizarre silver corkscrew which could be turned on and off for Lana—to be used as weapons if the situation required it.

When they stepped out onto the street again the wind had risen considerably, raising clouds of dirt and litter, and when it gusted with particular vehemence opening and closing doors along the street. A badly constricted chimney was toppled from a roof half a block closer to the Regime's headquarters, the sliding bricks bringing down slates and eaves with them. The wind brought clouds, too, grey shreds like dirty clothes, torn between the roofs of Primordium and the ever-grinding stone.

Some, pressed down into the streets, raced before the wind at the level of the eaves, like childhood ghosts.

They put their heads down against the stinging bluster and moved on towards their destruction wondering what new surprises the street had in store for them.

None was the answer. They grew closer to the unguarded gates of the monolithic structure without further challenge.

“Look at that.” Harry said. “They left the front door open for us.”

“Before we go in,” Caz said. “Do we have any kind of plan?”

“I think its straight forward.” Harry said. “Sienna, Rebekkah and me will deal with the demons. You Caz, and Lana can grab Norma and get her out of there. Pick her up, Caz, and carry her. We’re not here to save every soul in hell, even if we could. We’re here for one person, Norma. I know we’ve seen some stuff we’d like to have answers to, but we could go crazy trying to think ourselves into Lucifer’s head.”

“Is he in there?” Lana said.

“Who?”

“You called him Lucifer, but that’s the same as Satan, right? Or the Devil. So is the devil in that place? Is that who we’ve got to deal with to get that old lady out?”

“I don’t know what’s in there.” Harry confessed.

“But it’s not the Devil.” Rebekkah replied.

“You sound very sure.”

“I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“Lucifer’s dead, D’Amour.”

“What?”

“He’s been gone a thousand years and more. Killed him, they said, out of sheer boredom. But who knows with these things, the truth of it. The point is, he left without a successor. Hell’s been in turmoil and deterioration ever since. Most of the laws the great architect left behind him are showing there age, but every time

somebody steps up to take the power themselves some other faction rises up to undo them.”

“But for now the Regime holds the power.”

“Yeah, it’s been doing quite well, too. They get the trains running on time.

And they’ve reintroduced Hell’s version of Circus Maximillus which is obscenely popular with the people.”

“Feeding Christians to lions?”

“They don’t have things as commonplace doing the devouring. These things are bred for the hurt they can cause. They despise a shut door at the circus, believe me.”

They had finally reached the gates of the black block that was the enemy’s stronghold.

“The doors open.” Lana said. “And Sienna smells blood.”

“Why do you say that?”

“No particular reason. I watched her sniffing, and the next minute the thought was in my head, clear as day: *she’s smelling blood.*”

“Your instincts are right, Lana. If you hear something like that, *clear* like that, tell us, will you? I won’t always be around. I think that’s why she bit you, to make the connection between her and you stronger.”

“Where are you going?”

Rebekkah shook her head as she followed the dog between the gates and toward the Regime’s monolith.

Ten

There was much to discern inside, of course. Little that had been recently done. The bodies that blocked the passage just inside the front door were already the feeding place and the breeding place of Hell's green-gold flies, the largest of which were ten times the size of humble equivalent in the solidities. And their offspring were correspondingly eager; some of these bodies were already pulsing masses of larval life, devouring what they'd been born into with monstrous appetite.

There were more bodies in the various chambers of the bastion they passed through. Some looked as though they'd been hacking at one another, others that they'd simply been casually murdered by somebody passing by. There were a few who were still faintly alive, but they were all too far gone to answer any question that might have been put to them.

"Somebody told me once," Rebekkah said, "there's a place on the top level where you can get a view of the whole surrounding area."

"Like an old-fashioned diorama?" Caz said. "I want to see this. What about you, Harry?"

"You know what? I'm so fucking dead-beat, all I want to do is sit down, lay my head against the wall and sleep."

"Then I'll stay." Caz said. "You can't sleep without a guard."

"I think he's already got himself a guard." Rebekkah said, nodding toward Sienna, who had sat down at Harry's side.

“So you’ll be right here when we get back. We’ll be a half an hour, no more. If you have any trouble—”

“I’ll be fine. If I can just get thirty minutes of sleep I’ll be a lot livelier.” He slid down the wall close to the spot where Sienna was sitting. “The truth is, I’m too old for this fucking game.”

“Just yell if—”

“I’ll yell, she’ll bark. Between the two of us they’ll be able to hear us back in Brooklyn. Now go. I’m wasting good sleeping time with all this gabbing.”

Rebekkah had already crossed to the narrow staircase cut out of the black marble, and now began her ascent, with Lana and Caz following after. Harry listened to the play of their footfalls echoes, his eyelids succumbing to a welcome heaviness. His eyes fluttered for a moment and then closed.

It was no dream that was waiting for him on the other side, it was a vision. It had a clarity, an immediacy, an urgency, that marked it as the stuff of a vision. The

stuff was dust-yellow overhead, and the earth beneath him was the same colour, dry and cracked. He was on a hill, he saw, and for some reason he was crouching down, afraid, apparently, to lift his head too high.

There was a crowd coming up the hill. He could see the eager cretins running ahead, looking back, looking back, and the sounds of whips and moans, and the keening of women. He glanced back up the hill, to the spot where the procession would eventually lead. There was practically bare; though now, as a dark cloud moved over the sun, and its absented glare showed the hill top more clearly, he saw there were human remains scattered in the grey grass: a spine, a missing head and pelvis. Some ribs, picked clean by the wild dogs that owned the hill once the sun went down.

There's going to be a storm, he thought. He knew the storm was still far very far off, but he was strangely receptive to the messages it was sending out ahead of itself: the metallic song of lightning that would strike for hours was already on his

tongue; the thunder grey sky already oppressed him, making a lie of the brightness of the hill, and his blood was stirred by the same hand that curdled the air, and made his heart quicken.

“Sienna!”

He answered the call immediately, and was running up through the dusty bones and sickly grass when he realized why his point of view was so low here: he was not here as Harry D’Amour, he was here as the dog. She was playing lost to him; her tongue the lightning taster; her blood stirred into life by the writer of storms and dogs. The dog had come to the foot of a richly robed man who spoke to her with what was perhaps an English accent. He was doing his best to be stern, but he loved Sienna too much for him to speak a word that was not softened by his affection.

“I want you to keep back, girl, stay right where you are right now. Yes, yes, I know there’s lots of smells in the air, but its not a good place to be, Sienna. Once I’ve done my business here—” As he spoke of his business he brought from the robes of

his toga a simple chalice, of the kind that went on freight on his ships. She'd been on with him on some of those voyages, she now allowed her occupying spirit to recall: to England, yes to England, to Cornwall where her master Joseph owned two mines. Green and moist, that England; the wind of the channel crisp and clean. Not like this hot, dusty, filthy place. She whined a little. "I know, girl, I know. There's something in the air isn't there? Well that's as it should be. Something terrible is going to happen here. You're a dog. It wouldn't occur to you to do something as vile as this on your own. But we're not as civilized as dogs, Sienna. Today—" He looked down the hill, and when he spoke again the sight he'd seen had taken all the music from his voice.

"—we're witnessing a crime that I believe will change the world. We were sent a peace-maker by the creator. His own son, they saw. This man here, the one with the crown of thorns on his head: that's him, the Son of God himself."

She was looking and listening, trying to understand all she was being told by her master, and fit it with the scene in front of her. How could this ragged shawl of

blood and tears and tangled black hair, this barely living, whip-marked, broken thing
be the Son of God who made all things? But Joseph seemed to read her doubts;
confirming the identity of the suffering man.

“That’s him. The Christ, they call him. And he is allowing it to happen, they
say, as some kind of lesson. I don’t entirely understand it, but that’s me. I never could
get my head around priest-talk. I’m better with numbers and ships. That’s my
strength, so to speak. Numbers and ships.”

Hearing her master chatter to himself in this uncharacteristic fashion, earned
him a glance from Sienna. He was sick to his stomach, she saw. Big beads of sweat
were sitting like ticks all over his face, getting fat under that dead-eyed sky. He was
looking at the Christ, but flinching as he did so, as though he were barely able to
stand the sight of the ribbons of flayed flesh that hung from the man’s back, or the
blood running from his thorn-pierced brow into his eyes, or how he stumbled as the
Roman soldiers drove him before them, and every sharp stone conspired to open flesh

wounds on his knees and shins and hands and elbows. Sienna was surprised to see the beloved Joseph so distressed. The Romans were good at making a spectacle out of a commonplace thing. Give them stone and a few months, they'd make a straight road. Give them someone to kill and a little time to work out the details and they'd come up with something memorable. They'd seen countless places where the Romans had left proof of their abilities; the human remains often pitifully alive after several days of exposure. But nothing they'd seen, not the mothers-to-be left lying like slashed wine skins, not the young man who'd been sodomized and slaughtered with the same efficiency, and left propped up on broken spears; none of that had troubled Joseph at all. But this little cruelty being performed at the top of a dusty hill in the middle of nowhere important, to a man who wasn't a king or the son of a king, this had his hands trembling, and a smell coming off him that she had never smelt before—

Harry's eyes flickered, and for a moment the vision Sienna had granted him of Golgotha, the Places of Skulls, was extinguished.

He was sitting in the Regime's Bastion again, his head tilted forward, his chin against his upper chest. Sienna was sitting exactly where she'd been when he fell asleep, but her head was up, her ears pricked. Something or somebody had just caught her attention. Harry listened along with her, hoping to catch a hint of whatever she was listening for. The bastion was as quiet as only a place filled with so much death could be. He could hear water dripping in one of the passageways; and further off what sounded like the panicked battering of a trapped bird, beating its hollow bones and their freight of feathers against a window, or a reflection of sky on marble. But then, after a minute or more of listening, he heard a third sound. Something was burning in the bastion: a hard, strong flame. He attended to it closely, trying to locate the sound, but it was so even that after listening for another full minute, attending closely to every nuance of the sound, his grasp on it became slippery, and he was left finally with nothing to grasp onto. He glanced over at the dog. Her ears were no longer pricked, her thoughts apparently drifted from the sound. Harry let his own

thoughts do the same. His eye-lids closed. There was no fluttering this time, no confused interval between the moment he let go of the waking world and the vision flooding in to take its place.

Time had passed. The sun was higher. The storm was closer. The Christ lay up on the cross, nailed and naked except the bare essentials of men, crosses and sky.

Everything about the scene confounded Harry's expectations. The chaos of the scene: soldiers wiping the blood of their breastplates with rags, two more emptying their bladders against a rock; children were everywhere, naked and dusty, squealing, laughing, indifferent to whatever was going on above the level of their eyes; and for a wandering brat, two wandering mongrels, and for every two dogs, a dozen birds, some on the ground fighting over some unpromising bones, most circling lazily over the barbarities below, waiting for their moment. Nobody, not even the weeping women, seemed to comprehend that anything of significance was happening here.

Harry had led Sienna's gaze twice around the hill top, weaving the children, the women, the dogs and the Romans, then sliding skyward to take in the birds, but until now he had avoided the sight that would indeed, as Joseph predicted earlier, change the world. Finally, however, he summoned sufficient courage to face the sight: the execution scene which would hang in great cathedrals, and around the necks of millions of believers the world over; the execution scene which would bless the doomed endeavors of soldiers, explorers, the millions of nameless believers who followed them in the name of God and glory, and died and were buried in pits that made no conciliation to the beauty of this one, or the noble nature of that; nor put any value on the land where they lay except to say that it would not thereafter be allowed run wild nor become a place where trees might be planted and be fruitful. There would only be a cairn of stones or a slab of concrete to scour the spot of natural ambition. But he'd long avoided looking at that terrible signature until now, afraid the sight of it would somehow overwhelm him; that he'd loose a shout tear, the sky

gape to show where the eye of the true visionary here. He couldn't avoid the sight forever, though. Finally, he drew deep of the hill's stench, and turned the dog's eyes up upon the Man of Sorrows. Again, all expectation was defied. The cross did not stand up neatly, nor was the figure upon it inspiring in its suffering state. Cross and man were one wretched construction, knotted and lifted up, the base of the cross slid into a hole dug close to the sturdy half-trunk of a tree which had once perhaps offered some shade and solace in this cemetery. But the Romans, seeing how it might serve a better purpose, had hacked off its branches and dug the dirt slot for the crosses, as they came and went. Always looking to be practical with their labors, the men of the 1st infantry had made a crucifixion site that managed to reduce by a small measure the back-wrenching, hernia-popping sweat of getting a grown man lifted up high and horribly, where his pitiless last few hours could usefully dissuade any other aspirant messiahs in the region from treading in the feet of Christ had trod. That was a bad path, see? See where it led for this poor sun-crazed son of nobody? See how he

regrets his delusions with every attempt he makes to draw a shiver of breath up into his broken body, even though his shoulders have dislocated, so he can't push his chest clear of the cross by means of his arms, and what precious little intake he manages to suck up is used by the time he's done drawing it in, and the whole panicked writhing on his wounded feet to catch a tiny piece of air begins again.

Why doesn't he just die? Harry thinks; die and be gathered up into the mystery that had let him fall between its fingers thirty-three years before? Maybe it had explanations for this torment. Maybe it could see into the future, and show him what Christ's death would mean down the mellenia; how it would beat, taint, poison, exalt, transom, obsess, damn and indemnify the world. Or perhaps the man on the cross knows what he's doing in these last brutal hours. He knows that with each fresh posture he can find, he inspires the thousand altar pieces, ten thousand desexings in his righteous name. see, how I suffer? How I fight for breath? How careless I am of my flesh? I'm hanging here, to burn these lessons into you. The suffering, the

fighting, the contempt for self-love or for beauty that rises from anything but scornful things, broken things, gardens lost and dreams gone with them...

Somehow in the process of watching the ghastly sight above him, Harry had let his guard down, and the Christ had opened his eyes—no more than pale slits in the thorn crown shadowed heat—and fixed him with an anguished gaze, pulling him close, so that there was nothing in Harry's sight now but the shadows, and his eyes open in the shadows, regarding him, judging him.

Closer.

The Christ said, or thought; the distinction was irrelevant. All that mattered was the need that Harry be closer to the suffering presence; so close perhaps that he was no longer outside that head, pierced with so many barbs—wait, who else did he—

Closer.

Wait, I said. I was trying to make a connection there; maybe it was something important.

There is no time left for waiting, the Christ told him, for thinking, for making connections. I'm dying. Die with me and you'll have life eternal; die without me and you die alone, always. To the end of the world you will be dying alone, over and over.

That's brutal.

"Think how it is," the Christ said. "I don't ask for your doubts or your shame. I just want you *here*, where I am; *safe*, where I am, and all the doubts and the shame and the questions and the connections will fade away into nothing. And you'll live in my presence until the end of the world. Do you want something more than that?"

Yes.

The Christ was silent in his disdain.

I want the time to—oh, I know. It's alright. I made the connection now.

Well?

There's another who's been in the back of my head and I couldn't think who it was, but I've remembered now.

"What about the other?"

His head is pierced, like yours. Not with thorns but with nails.

How he must suffer.

You think so?

I'm certain so. Have him come to me. I could bring him into the circle of my suffering ones in an instant.

He has done terrible things.

At whose behest?

He used to serve the Sevil, but I think now he does it for his own purposes.

Can you understand that? Doing evil for a purpose.

It's no stranger than doing good for no purpose, is it?"

Again, the disdainful silence.

Well is it?

Well is it?

The question was spoke too loudly for the intimacy of the confessional, and Harry down from his sacred conference, registering as he descended that the sun was now directly overhead, aligned—though not as neatly as an obsessive would have wished, owing to the crooked of the cross and of the still more crooked messiah nailed upon it—and with that alignment causing an uncanny change in the air. It darkened from noon to the imminent night in an instant, the sun still shone down on the Man of Sorrows, but its light was far from kind. It seemed to pierce the broken body, rendering its entire interior visible to the naked eye, its rays differentiated, so that they resembled thousands of needle fine spears, that glorified the particulars of every part through which they passed, concealing nothing in the name of modesty or dignity: there was no part of his body, however, wounded and torn out of joint it was,

however withered its manhood, and pebble hard the excrement in his gut, that the piercing light did not find reason to glorify.

It was the first time in his life that an image of the Christ had appeared in his soul, and held him, as much in sadness as its terrible frailty as its wonder at the transfigured state which revealed that frailty. He felt a strange tenderness towards the man in that moment; a foolish desire to keep him from harm. He still had that thought in his head when the vision went out, and for the second time he was exiled from Golgotha.

Eleven

This time there was no doubt that there was another presence nearby. He could see it, or rather the reflection of its reflection, coming back off the flawless marble. A figure walking in flame. This could only be the sound that he and Sienna had heard during his last exile, the distant roar that faded into ambience was now much closer, though, how much was dangerously ambiguous; the reflections were misleading. The entity was certainly close enough for its voice to be heard.

“Naikapo?” it called. “Suth? Andrakiatus? L’Thi? God’s tits, is there nobody there?”

“I am.”

A hard, female voice.

“Ezekium Suth.”

“Yes.”

“Joseph L’Thi is dead. So is Lachesi Hajbek. The Hell Priest killed them.”

“But not you. Why not?”

“I know my way around the bastion, I—”

“Hid.”

“Yes. When I saw there was nothing to be done against the thing. It has a great deal of power now.”

“Yes.”

“Did you...? Was it you...”

“Idea? Gift? No, Suth, it was not my idea to raise a minor tempter and give him the power to destroy his own order, or to call a fog off the wastes that has spread a sickness through the streets of Primadium from which the city will never recover. Or to come here and murder your battalions, and send you—the so called protectors of this city—into hiding like frightened moons. No, this has happened because none of us has been paying close enough attention. We’ve been too concerned with infringements on our own little domains. Notice I consider myself just as culpable as you and the Order, who should have known this creature was working at some bigger

business than netting a larger catch of souls. He has gone fishing for Hell itself, Suth! I don't know how he intends to go from here, but if his recent past is anything to judge by, I'd say he has this planned to the bitter end. It can only be a matter of time before he comes after me, and then who knows?"

"I think I know..." said a third voice.

"Who is that?" the Unconsumed demanded. "Show yourself."

"Augustine Pentathiyea."

"I said show yourself."

"I can't get any closer to you. I'm in the hole. He broke my legs and threw me down here."

"Are you alone?"

"No, Andakiatus is here with me. At least, his body is here."

"Where's his head?"

"The Cenobite cut it off and took it with him."

“Took it where?”

“I don’t... I don’t know... Andrakiatus has some knowledge that the Cenobite needed, and took the head, alive—”

“More magic.” The Unconsumed said, his voice ripe with contempt.

“Poor Andakiatus.” Said Suth, “to be denied your body, but remain alive, and in the hands of such a fiend.”

“Don’t be naïve, Suth.” The Unconsumed said. “If your poor Andakiatus was truly just a victim in this, he’d be in the hole with his legs broken, left to bleed to death.”

“Is somebody coming for me?” Pentathiyea said, his voice significantly weaker than it had been when he had last spoke. “Suth?”

“We have business here, Augustine. Wait a while.”

“My legs... *I’m bleeding to death!* Very well, Ezekium, I confess: I was never persuaded by your arguments, so I never voted for you. But everything has changed.

Are you listening to me, Ezekium. Everything has changed. It's not a coincidence that all this happened when Cathaz Niakapo, our leader, our inspirer, was absent."

"What are you—"

"He's right." Said the Unconsumed. "Of course, of course. Niakapo's absence is significant."

"He's dead?"

"No, not dead." Said Pentathiyea. "He's part of it. He's waiting out there somewhere, wherever they're going—"

"We have to raise an army." Pentathiyea said. "Put all your past difference aside and prepare a force that can bring down this... creature... before he advances his plans any further."

"Your bellicose nature is refreshing, Pentathiyea. This is no time to waste a good war-monger. Suth, fetch him out of there. Aren't there any survivors to help you?"

“There are some soldiers, wounded but alive.”

“So fetch him out, give him morphine.”

“Thank you, Lord.” Pentathiyea said. “Suth? Is Hajbek still alive?”

“I lost sight of him in the confusion, why?”

“The bones of my legs are beyond mending. They have to be taken off. Hajbek does that work better than any. I want it done, and done quickly. So we may take back what this upstart priest has stolen out from under us.”

“*Lachesis Hajbek!*” the Unconsumed shouted. “Doctor? Your services are required. If you’re still alive—”

“I am.”

“Miracle upon miracle! This place doesn’t want for hiding places.”

“I have three soldiers with me. They saved my life.”

“So now you can save Augustine Pentathiyea. And you, Suth, will take me to your viewing place—where we can perhaps see where the enemy was headed.”

Even before the Unconsumed had finished giving his directions to Ezekium Suth, Harry was up, and heading away from the chamber where the Unconsumed's reflections were gathered. Relying on his instincts to take him to Caz, Lana and Rebekkah. Sienna overtook him, making a game of it by weaving back and forth in front of him then dropping behind for a couple of yards before scooting between his legs to take the lead. There was a lesson in this, Harry knew, even in something as inconsequential as this. She was showing him how to find some little joy here, while there was still joy to be had, and the time to have it. Should he have one thought he was overanalyzing the dog's motives, he had only to once catch her eye and all doubt disappeared. The dog was smiling as she ran.

She escorted Harry up a series of increasingly round staircases, which he took comfort in knowing were surely not the official means of access to the top of the bastion, and as such presented a plausible escape route.

His breath was coming quick and raw by the time they reached the top, his head full of his heart's noise. But there was no moment to let the hammering of his heart slow down—Sienna was already leading him on, the route by no means simple. It was a labyrinth up here, Harry quickly realized, and without Sienna he would quickly have become lost in it. But after three or four minutes of turning and turning, the echoes of their footfalls treading on the heels of the originals, she brought them to a place where the air was less stale, and the echoes looser. They turned one last corner and Caz was standing there with a knife in each hand.

“It’s me. It’s us.”

“Shit, Harry.”

“We’ve all got to get out of here. The Unconsumed is coming up to see the lay of the land, and I don’t think we’re ready to be face to face with him.”

“Do we have one minute?” Rebekkah said. “I want you to see something.” She led him to the center of a chamber where there was a narrow screen perhaps six feet across.

“What am I looking at?” Harry said.

“Anything you want to,” Lana said. “Christ I wish I could have one of these back home. I’d never leave the house. See, you use these two controls to direct the eye—”

“That’s what we’ve called him.” Caz said. “Eric the Eye. Show him Mantlerod street, Lana.”

Lana’s quick fingers manipulated the controls. The view on the screen sped over blurred landscapes, which Lana’s gaze was reading with uncanny speed.

“You’ve passed it.” Rebekkah said.

“No, I haven’t.” Lana said, calmly.

“She knows what she’s doing.” Caz told Rebekkah.

“All..those..wasted..hours.. playing my brother’s fucking games. Finally it comes in... useful.”

She stepped back from the controls. Mantlerod street was on the screen. Specifically, the intersection where they’d been trapped.

“What the hell’s going on there?”

“We think it’s been turned into some kind of religious site.” Rebekkah said.

“See how they’ve arranged all of the bodies? And those floating blue flames. There’s hundreds of them.”

“You’re right. It does look like some fucked up altarpiece. What about the Hell Priest? Any track on him?”

“We had him for a while.” Caz said.

“Norma still with him?”

“Yep.”

“And okay?”

“She looked it. He picked up a few of the Regime’s soldiers. One of them’s huge. Must be six, seven easily. And he’s carrying her on his back.”

“And the magician, Felixson?”

“Yeah, he’s still following his master.”

“And the Hell Priest’s got another companion now. A head. One of the Regime, I’d guess.”

“He’s carrying a head with him?”

“Actually one of the soldiers is doing the carrying. But a couple of times we saw him hand it back to the Cenobite.”

“To do what?”

“Tell him, Lana.”

“I got up really close on them, because they were standing still. And I could see his lips moving.”

“You’re talking about the head.”

“Yes.”

“So it’s conscious?”

“Oh yeah, it’s in some kind of crazy state. His eyes all rolling around. But when the Hell Priest has the head in his hands he seems to settle down. He listens real careful. Then you can see him thinking things through before he answers.”

“Where are they now?”

“We lost sight of them. Anyways, I thought we were supposed to be—”

“Just look, real quick.”

“Sienna?” Rebekkah said, “You listen for us. Come tell me when the man on fire gets close.”

“There’s no way she understands all that.” Lana said.

“You’re wrong,” Harry said, with a forcefulness that would bring no contradiction. “She’s smarter than you and me put together. Now, will you show me where you lost sight of them?”

Lana threw Harry a less than friendly look, but did as he requested, turning the controls.

“Okay,” she said. “This is the back of the building, where they came out. They had their first little tete a tete—that’s a French joke if anybody cares—right here, at the back gate. Then he did a little hand thing, and the gates came off their hainges and he led his disciples off a ways. You can see there’s this weird light in the ground.

“Something buried. And rotted.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. You want us to take a shovel down there and dig around? I’m sure the Regime’s had plenty of interrogations end up with nothing but a body to bury. You get enough dead demons rotting in the ground, and that’s the result.

Phosphoresent decay.”

Sienna loosed a little growl.

“We gotta go?” Harry said.

“I’d make it quick.” Rebekkah replied.

“There’s not much more to see.” Lana said. “Pinhead stopped here for another conversation with the head, and then they changed direction, and instead of walking directly away from the bastion, they made a bit of a change, off to the left. Look, you can see their footprints in the dirt, and there’s some blood drops there too.”

Sienna growled a little more loudly, and retreated, walking backwards, from the wide staircase on top of which she’d been seated.

“All right,” Rebekkah said, softly. “Time to be gone.”

“One thing.” Harry said to her, pointing at the darkness on the screen, which had apparently swallowed up the Hell Priest and his followers. “Any idea what’s off in that direction?”

“It’s Terra Incognita, according to any map of Hell I’ve ever seen. There’s either nothing there at all, or there’s something that you’d be better keeping away from.”

“And your guess is?”

“The same as yours, Harry.” Rebekkah said. “There hasn’t been a step this Hell Priest hasn’t taken that hasn’t shown evidence of meticulous, obsessive planning.” She and Harry stared into the circle, which showed them only the death-rot phosphorous sliding away into the darkness. And then, suddenly, a lightning flash –tantalizingly brief- which illuminated a thunderhead the size of a small continent, very far off, and threw into silhouette ruins that lay scattered across the horizon; the remains of what might have been ziggurats, their height measured in miles and parts thereof.

“Did you—?”

“I saw.” Rebekkah replied. “Now *move!*”

Caz had already ushered Lana away from her new plaything and down the backstairs. Harry took one last look at the darkness on the screen, and was rewarded with a series of lightning flashes, which illuminated for just a few seconds longer the ruin-strewn landscape into which the Hell Priest and his strange entourage had gone.

This desire to recover Norma from the hands of the enemy had not faltered. He would get her back, safe and whole, even though it very much looked as though he was being led to the ends of Hell in order to do so. But the flickering mystery on the screen he could not entirely put from his thoughts another motive. His adversary carefully conceived a vast plan; one that had brought about the deaths of most of the western world's magicians along with those of the Hell Priest's own order, and then gone on to spread sickness through Primadium from which it would most likely never recover. In effect, he had declared war on those who had controlled Hell. But if his intention was indeed as the Unconsumed had suggested, to fish for Hell itself, then why, when his control over it had seemed so close to being complete and unchallenged, had he taken off to the wilderness?

“What have you gone looking for?” Harry murmured to the screen. And then, having asked this question, he twisted the controls arbitrarily, so as to make the Unconsumed's task of tracing the miscreant just a little more difficult.

That done, he retreated to the top of the stairway. He had cut his escape very fine. No sooner had he gained the top stair that a wave of heat filled the viewing dome, followed seconds later by the appearance of the source. Harry caught only the briefest glimpse of the entity, its flames risen several feet above its skull; then Rebekkah had hold of his arm and was pulling him away down the flight.

—

They didn't immediately exit the bastion. First, while they knew the Unconsumed was holding court up above, they found fresh water to drink, and Caz went looking for a source of some better weapons than they had so far found. He came back with a collection of belts bristling with knives, all ornately decorated, but clearly more than show-pieces.

"Take your pick." Caz said, tossing the booty down on the table.

“Haven’t we done this once?” Rebekkah said.

“We’re trading up.” Caz replied.

“These are demon’s knives,” Lana said. “Who knows what kind of curses they’ve got on them.”

“All the better.” Rebekkah said, sorting through the belts and weapons with a rare show of passion. “My enemy’s enemy is my friend, right? Even when it comes to curses.”

“But we don’t—”

Rebekkah didn’t give her time to finish. “Nobody’s forcing them on you.” She said. She had made her choice, and was buckling up. “We need all the help we can get. Curses, prayers, what does it matter?” She drew out one of the knives which sprouted a second, third and forth blade once it was out of its scabbard, intersecting the first so as to create an eight pointed star. “There comes a point when the work of the devil is the work of God and vice versa. It’s not for us to do the judging. All we

can do is work with what we're given." She threw Harry a sideways glance. "I owe you an apology, D'Amour."

"What for?"

"For what I thought you were. For not understanding how much messier it gets when you're fighting for your life and your soul and a bunch of other lives and souls too."

"It doesn't—"

"Let me say it all," she went on, "Then maybe we can forget about it."

"Go on."

"I never wanted to help you. I wanted to stay out of human business for a while. It was Sienna you brought to you in New Orleans. She was the one who saw what was coming, or some piece of it, and she knew you'd be at the heart of the war."

"Which war is that exactly?"

"This one."

“This is a war?”

“It’s about to become one.”

“Aren’t most of the armies already dead?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Primordium’s full of corpses. And the Hell Priest killed most of his own order.”

“A tiny number, in all. Primordium’s occupied by the families of old money. I doubt there’s a single creature there who would actually fight. They’re officers. And they’ll still be officers, however freakish they may look. It’ll be a return to the old days, where you wore your grotesqueness as proof of your corruption.”

“So where are these armies?”

“Everywhere but here. There are tribes of demons in the wastelands, ten thousand strong, each with their own secrets, their own taboos, their own allegiances.

The Rabbarei, the Orashori, the Mazakites and the Pumathak... I don’t remember

more than a few of the names. And for every tribe in the wastelands, there's another ten tribes in the old quarries and the mines. Some of them apparently pure bred—"

"Meaning?"

"They still have something angelic in their nature. Some of the old purity. Of course they've paid a price over the years, keeping their bodies from temptation, living in holes talking to the skins they shed the day before." She shook her head.

"They've got to be crazy by now. But that won't make them less dangerous when it comes to the fight."

"I don't see why they'd even be interested in rousing themselves." Caz said.

"Maybe because this smells like the end of things."

"To who?"

"To her, for me," said Rebekkah, glancing at Sienna.

"Okay, I know you love the dog, and she's certainly saved our skins, but she's still just a dog, Rebekkah. I don't see why her opinion is important."

“Trust me, it is.” Harry said. “The dog knows shit we can’t even... well, just trust me, okay?”

Caz shrugged. “Okay. I trust you. If the dog says something apocalyptic is going down then that’s what’s happening. What’s going to happen?” he said to Rebekkah. “We’re going to see a war, and it’ll bring this whole damn place down with it?”

“More or less.” Rebekkah replied.

“Except we’re not just spectators. We’re half the reason this is going to happen.”

“And Pinhead’s the other half?”

She nodded.

“Except he’s going to find himself an army out there wherever he’s gone. He is, isn’t he?”

“Probably.”

“And we’re just... us.”

“It’ll all come clear,” Rebekkah said, “if we just get on with what we came here to do.”

“Get Norma back.” Harry said.

“Right. The rest will take care of itself, and I don’t pretend to know how.”

“You think any of this food’s edible?” Lana said. “Sorry to bring the conversation down to the ground, but there’s jars of what looks like preserves. And bread.”

“Have you opened any of the jars?” Harry said.

“No, the lids are on too tight.” Lana said, trying another.

“There,” Caz said, “let me have a go.” He fought the lid until all the veins in his temples stood proud.

“Give it to me.” Lana said, claiming it from Caz. Predictably, she opened it on her first attempt. “Before you say it, I know you loosened it for me.” She sniffed at the contents. “Pickled meat.’ She said. “Human meat.”

“Oh fuck.”

“Here.” Rebekkah said, handing the jar back to Lana. She refused to even touch it, her face a portrait of revulsion. “Harry, will you find a plate? Sienna will have it.”

Harry stared hard at Rebekkah, waiting for her to crack a smile. But no.

“Call it reciprocal cannibalism.” She said. “Eat, for you eat of my flesh.”

Harry pulled a piece of choice china off a shelf: its rim decorated with the Regime’s symbol. Then he found a fork and watched while Rebekkah set the dinner plate down in front of Sienna, who was already thumping her tail against one of the cupboards in eager anticipation of her treat, and dug out the chunks of meat, which

were in an oily red sauce, scraping the jar until it was absolutely empty. Sienna didn't set to eating until she had a nod from Rebekkah.

"Go on, girl."

"I think I'm going to puke." Lana said, as Sienna ate.

"It's just meat." Rebekkah said.

"But it could be me."

"Well, it isn't. And if it was, you wouldn't care anyway, so let it go."

"She bit me." Lana said, still determined to squeeze the drama out of this. "God knows what infections she's given me."

"More likely the other way around." Rebekkah snapped back.

"Fucking cannibal dog."

"All right, let's leave this subject to another time and place, shall we?" Harry said. "Caz, have you found anything that looks safe to consume?"

“There’s something with absinthe on the bottle.” He sniffed it. “Christ, that is strong.”

“Bring it.”

“There’s two bottles.”

“Bring ‘em both.”

“There’s two and a half loaves of bread here, but they’ve got mold on them.”

“It’s feversaith bread.” Rebekkah told him. “It’s meant to be moldy.”

“Is it going to kill us?”

“No, it might make you crazy for a little while, but how much crazier can we get doing what we’re doing?”

“You would have left Norma to die, wouldn’t you?”

“Rebekkah frowned. “Oh, god in heaven, no. Don’t get me wrong. I think we’re doing the right thing. It’s just crazy, but then the right thing usually is, isn’t it?”

“So we take the loaves.” Caz said.

“Any fishes while you’re at it?” Harry joked.

“Nobody eats fish in Hell.” Rebekkah said. “It’s poison to a demon’s palate.”

“Why?”

“Too close to God.” Rebekkah said matter-of-factly. “What are we going to carry all this in?”

“We’ll find something on the way out,” Harry said. “One of the soldiers must have something we can use.”

“Oh great.” Lana said. “We steal from the dead for something to put our wacky bread and wine in. If you think I’m going to let a drop of that stuff or a piece of that crap past my lips—”

“All the more for us.” Caz said.

“You know I used to think you were a really nice human being,” Lana said sourly. “But you’re just as fucked up as all the rest of your friends. Christ, I wish I could tap my heels together three times and be so far from here—”

Well, you can't." Rebekkah said. "You're here and you're here for a reason. Don't ask me what it is because I don't know, but believe me, you're not here by accident. None of us are." She stared down at Sienna, who was licking the last drops of human gravy off her plate. "It'll come clear, eventually. Perhaps only at the very end. But we'll get our glimpse."

The observation, with its grim undertone —'Perhaps at the very end'— silenced them all. As was so often the case it was Sienna who got them going again. She went over to Caz, and raised her head to sniff at the loaf in his hand. Then, she trotted to the door, correctly assuming her human disciples would follow.

Twelve

Caz was right about finding something to carry the absinthe and the two and a half loaves amongst the dead: a knapsack which had its own treasure trove of demonic contraband in it, including a box of Cuban cigars with a dozen still untouched; a much abused copy of a pornographic magazine called Saxl, the contents of which were drawings of obsessive elaboration, a crazed marriage of Escher, de Sade and the contents of a catalogue of farmyard equipment. There was a map, too, much folded and refolded, and a litter of items that the dead soldier had carried for a purpose that could never be known. Several small stones with weapons meticulously painted on them; a folded photograph of St. Mark's Square in Venice, with two figures standing somewhat self-consciously side by side; a small black book, its onion leaf pages entirely blank; some coins, a bullet and a three-inch tall puppet, made of impressed and loosely jointed tin attached by a loose spring to a wooden rod, so that it could be made to dance. Caz jettisoned nothing; simply put it all back into the knapsack with the absinthe and the loaves, and shouldered it. Sienna led them out of

the building, by the back door, inhaling the traces of the Hell Priest, Norma and the rest just once, at the gates, then leading them off into unknown territory.

Harry glance back at the Bastion just once.

“I guess the unconsumed is probably watching us the way we watched the Hell Priest,” he said.

“I don’t think we’re important enough for him to spend time watching us.”

Rebekkah commented. “He’s got a war to wage.”

“Who is he?” Lana said.

“Just another demon.” Harry replied. “They come in all shapes and sizes.”

“I heard things about him.” Rebekkah said.

“You hear a lot.” Lana remarked. “You sure you’re not one of them?”

“I am. I’ve got demon blood in me on my mother’s side. Her grandmother was full blown Orashoi. Don’t look at me like that. It’s not as though you’re exactly normal.”

“Being a pre-op tranny is one thing. I mean it’s a condition. You get therapy for it and an operation.”

“And you think there aren’t hundreds of thousands of hybrids seeing therapists every day, trying to figure out why they feel different? Why they have such insane dreams, and wake up speaking in tongues?”

Lana looked suddenly sick. “I had a boyfriend, Vince Mayberry—I used to call him Guttermouth because of the things he’d say in his sleep, the bits of English were beyond filthy, and the rest was... Well, I didn’t know what it was but I wrote some of the words down and I showed them to this guy I knew who taught languages at the University. He said he couldn’t be sure but it was probably Latin, and some Arabic and I don’t know, there were maybe twelve languages in all, the words were nastier than the things you could think of to say.”

“So your boyfriend, too. Vince was probably a lot closer to being a pure bred than I am.” Rebekkah replied.

“Jesus, and he was such a good fuck too.”

“That’s why.”

“Stop.” Lana protested. She threw a venomous look at Caz. “You’re to blame for all of this. Bringing the old lady to my place.”

“Lana, if I’d have known what I was getting you into—”

“And you slept with Vince, didn’t you?”

“Oh come on.” Caz protested. “This isn’t the time.”

“Didn’t you.”

“Yes.”

“Fuck.”

“Twice. But that was years after you’d kicked him out for being a guttermouth.” He paused, frowning, then grunted as a memory came back. “The second time we got together he stayed overnight. And that was the night, sleeping beside guttermouth, when I dreamt the design that I inked on the middle of your

back, Harry. God, I'd forgotten that. I woke up, and Vince was talking his crazy talk in his sleep, and I had that image in my head, right here!" Caz tapped the middle of his forehead. "I got up and drew it out exactly as I'd dreamt it, on the inside cover of that book about Gettysburg—"

"I've still got it." Harry said.

"Then I went back to bed and guttermouth was still talking his crazy talk." He looked at Rebekkah. "What was that about?"

"Has the tattoo worked for you?" Rebekkah asked Harry.

"Big time. It's saved my life over and over."

"So Caz dreamt it as self-defense. Sleeping beside a hybrid, and conjuring it up to protect himself. Then he passed the protection on."

The conversation went on from there in the same random manner, everyone contributing something to the mix, an account of something commonplace—a love affair, a betrayal—connecting to another revelation about Hell's presence in the

texture of ordinary life. There was no human existence, it seemed, that was not troubled by the demonic. Angels, it seemed, were rarer presences.

“No chance of any help down here then?” Caz said.

“From Angels?” Harry replied. “I doubt it. I never had any help from that direction.” His gaze went to Sienna as he spoke, and he thought of the unfinished vision she’d granted him: the dusty bone-strewn hill, the crosses raised against a sky that was suddenly dark, despite the high noon sun; threads of light piercing the broken body of the Christ as the end approached. “I say never, but who knows? Maybe I had help I didn’t even know about.” He glanced over at Rebekkah, looking for some clue on her face, some sign that she had answers to the mysteries that were not only a part of this journey, but had shaped his life all the way along. She wasn’t giving anything away, however. Perhaps he’s have more luck if he could talk to her alone, somewhere down the road.

Then out of the blue, Lana said:

“What other things?”

She got quizzical looks from Harry and Caz, but it was Rebekkah she directed the question at.

“Back before we started talking about Guttermouth you said you’d heard other things about the guy on fire.”

“Did I?”

“She’s right.” Harry said. “You did.”

Rebekkah waved the reminder away.

“It was nothing of importance.” She said. “A power like the Unconsumed attracts a lot of talk. Most of it nonsense.” She was working hard to sound dismissive, but Harry wouldn’t let the remark go so easily.

“Nonsense like what?”

“Come on, Harry. Nonsense is nonsense. Why are we even talking about this?”

“Because you let something slip, and Lana remembered. If it’s just nonsense, spit it out. We’ll have a laugh and forget about it.”

Rebekkah chewed on her thumbnail for a few seconds, then she said: “You said demons come in all shapes and sizes, and you’re right, they do. There’s hundreds of tribes, thousands perhaps. But there’s only one Unconsumed. And he’s on the records of Hell right back to the beginning. He was here with Lucifer. And, according to these stories, and that’s all they are; there’s no evidence that any of this is true—he helped build Primordium. Lucifer was the architect, the Unconsumed was the mason.”

“He did it on his own?” Caz asked.

“No, he had an array of fallen angels to do the grunt work. But he was the furnace. He was the quarrier. He laid the foundations, he forged the girders, he hammered out the spikes and he poured the city’s bells, all hundred and nineteen of them.”

“So if any of this is true,” Harry said. “And I know it’s just a story, and there’s no evidence, etc. —but if it was, then the Unconsumed is the last connection with the rebellion.”

“He’s seen God.” Caz said, his voice stripped of all inflection.

“Yes.” Rebekkah said. “He’s seen God.”

“And the Hell Priest?”

“Knows the story? Of course. I’m sure he knows a lot more about it than I do.

About whether it’s true or not. And that would tend to make me believe it isn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because if it were—if the Unconsumed had once been in the presence of the Creator, been amongst the most loved, most powerful messengers—then even in his fallen state, he would be a formidable opponent. And while I don’t believe the Hell Priest is sane by any human definition of the word, nor do I think he’s suicidally crazy. I think he loves himself far too much to put himself in harm’s way. So I’m

bound to conclude that he knows the stories aren't true, and for all his walking in fire the Unconsumed is still just another demon, and can be brought down."

"Nicely argued." Caz said.

They walked for a while in silence. Lightning flickered at the horizon, but there was no attendant thunder.

"There is another possibility." Harry said quietly.

"Which is?" said Rebekkah.

"That the Unconsumed is the real thing, and he's going to raise an army against the Hell Priest the likes of which haven't been since the rebellion. Which would be suicide, as you said, unless there's something out there..." he pointed ahead of them. "That will even up the odds. Maybe he's got his own army waiting in the wings. It's not impossible."

There was a brighter burst of lightning now, that spread through the cloud layer in their direction, some of the arcs clawing at the sky. The great stone

reciprocated by spitting its own cords of lightning from the fissures and holes on its surface, their scale escalating until the whole visible surface of the stone was seething with energy, its brightness sufficient to illuminate the landscape around them.

It wasn't as deserted as it seemed. There was a litter of what looked to be abandoned machinery to the left and right of them. Vast wheels and mammoth coils of chain; toppled structures that had certainly been many stories high, their purpose impossible to fathom. With increasing frequency, lightning struck downward, and danced an incandescent tarantella over the metal structures, throwing off showers of sparks in places which in turn started fires amongst some of the wooden portions of the devices. There were soon several of these conflagrations raging, the smoke they sent up steadily thickening the air. It was no longer possible to see the sky through the brilliance of the lightning, it still broke through the clouds and smoke, its shuttering blazes only intensifying the turmoil. Finally, the sky, having been unleashing its lightning in silence for three or four minutes, spoke out its thunder;

peal upon peal, reach roll rising to drown out the one before. The reverberations made the ground shake, and that motion in turn caused several of the pieces of machinery to topple, their massive remains breaking into pieces of the smallest which was still the size of a house.

“Keep your eyes on Sienna!” Rebekkah yelled over the mounting din of thunder and destruction. Sienna had picked up her speed, her quick walk becoming a trot which in turn became a run as the scale of the event continued to escalate around them. Her sense of direction remained unerring, however, despite the chaos. Though she was twice obliged to make a detour to avoid pieces of wreckage that came down their path, throwing off massive pieces of timber and sheared metal as they did so, she quickly reoriented herself on the other side and picked up her pace again within a few strides.

Harry was at the back of the party, not so as to fight or rear guard, but because the pace of the pursuit was too much for him. His lungs blazed in his chest, his head

thumped to the crazed speed of his heart, his feet were a fool's feet, threatening to throw him down in the dirt with every other step. Lana was several strides ahead of him, the gap between them steadily widening, but he focused his attention as best he could on the back of her head, and followed after her. The noise was one indistinguishable roar now, the lightning, smoke and dust a blinding blur.

He knew suddenly that he wasn't going to make it. His legs were so weak that they couldn't carry him any further; he wasn't even sure he wanted them to try. He was only going to slow the rest of them down, and put them in harm's way. But he couldn't just stop. He had to catch up with Caz and tell him to go on without him. He's catch up later, when he'd recovered his strength, and put out the fire in his lungs. He bullied his body into one last furious spurt of speed, and propelled himself forward, passing Lana on her left hard side. He could see Caz just a few strides ahead of him now, but he didn't have the same spare breath to call his name, or the last reserves of strength to catch up with him. The roar and the blaze and the motion of

the ground beneath his stumbling feet were a single unendurable assault by now.

Drained of strength, he stumbled two or three more steps then relinquished himself to gravity. He fell into the grey dirt, and his consciousness seemed to flicker out, taking with it the noise of fire and thunder.

“Harry?”

But no. He heard Caz quite clearly. It was only the sound of destruction which had been erased. He opened his eyes. Caz was crouching beside him.

“You picked a fine time to fall on your ass.” He said. He spoke quietly; almost a whisper.

“My legs have given up on me.”

“No problem, we can rest now.”

Harry pushed himself up out of the dirt, and turned to eye the heavens. He could still see the stone turning overhead, though there was a thin layer of cloud and muting the sight.

“What happened to the lightning?”

“Who knows? One minute we could barely see one another, and the next this.”

Harry hauled his aching body into the sitting position, and surveyed the surrounding landscape. The vast machines had gone as had the grey dust in which they had lain, replaced by a gentle incline of small pebbles, which bounded a body of dark water. Rebekkah had rolled up her jeans to her knees and was wading, while Sienna stood at the very edge of the water and growled at the lispings waves as they broke against the stones. Lana was sitting a few yards from Harry, pulling out a hunk of the feversaith bread. She had a bottle of absinthe by her side.

“What happened, Caz?”

“Apparently Sienna led us through a door without any of us realizing it. Look.”

He pointed back towards the top of the incline, where there was a fracture in the air.

“That’s what we came through.” There were flickers of lightning at the far end of the passageway between the two landscapes.

“I don’t get it.” Harry said. “I thought we’d find something significant at the end of all this. Where the Hell did Pinhead go?”

“Take another look.” Caz said.

“Where?”

“Out there.” He nodded in the direction of the water.

Harry drew his thumb and forefinger back and forth across his closed eyes to clear away the dust, then pressed hard to see if he could get a fresh flow of blood going, to sharpen his sight. When he opened his eyes again he stared out over the water.

“Okay, what am I looking at?”

“Well, what can you see?”

“Rebekkah wading.”

“Look farther, a lot farther...and higher.”

“There’s mist, that’s what’s giving us some light.”

“Beyond the mist, Harry. A lot farther, a lot higher.”

Harry’s knotted expression suddenly slackened.

“You see it now?” Caz said.

“I see it. God in heaven, I see it.”

PART FIVE

One

With Caz's assistance Harry hauled himself to his feet, and defying his legs to give out from under him a second time he started down the slope of the beach, his eyes still fixed on what lay beyond the veil of mist. They had left behind them the

kind of sights that the reports of Hell might have prepared them for—Primordium's insanities, the plague-winds off the wastelands, the secrets and horrors of the Bastion—and been led into a mystery within a mystery. There was no sound of weeping here, nor shrieks, nor pleas for mercy, only the sound of the small waves breaking on the stones, and sometimes the cries of birds as they headed over the dark expanse of water.

There was only one visible destination for them out there, the sight of which got Harry up on his aching legs, and stumbling down the beach. Though there was ugly darkness over the lake, there was a shape that rose out of the lake that was still darker than the surrounding sky. Though there was no detail visible, no way to judge how far from the shore this place lay, its silhouette suggested two things: the first, that its enormity beggared anything they had in Hell hitherto, and the second that it was not a natural foundation of rock. It had two distinct, but symmetrical towers, rising up from a structure which appeared to have numerous spired buttresses

supporting either wall, their own silhouettes elaborate, suggesting that they were intricately decorated.

“It looks like the cathedral at Chartes. “Harry said to Caz.

“Or Notre Dame,” said Rebekkah, from her place ten yards out.

“Any sign of lights?”

“I thought I saw something when I was first wading out here, but it could have been my eyes playing tricks. The water’s cold, and there’s fish in it, I can feel them brushing my legs.”

“That’s where he’s gone, isn’t it?”

Rebekkah glanced back at Sienna. “She certainly thinks so.”

“How the Hell do we get out there?”

“I guess we swim.” Caz said. “Lana? Can you swim? Lana? Where the Hell did Lana go? She was sitting eating bread.” The loaf of bread was on the pebbles beside the knapsack from which Lana had taken it. The absinthe, however, was gone.

“Lana!” Caz yelled.

Harry listened for some faint echo of the syllables off the building, but heard nothing. Caz called again, and this time there was a response. It wasn't an echo, it was a high pitched yammering, which immediately turned into a chaotic clamor of sounds, yelps, whoops and undulating yowls. There was no doubt as to its place of origin, it was coming from around the bend of the beach. Sienna started to bark furiously, looking at Rebekkah, then towards the sound, then back at Rebekkah again.

“Wait, girl.” Rebekkah told her. “We'll all go together.” She walked back to the beach, and slipped her shoes on.

“Have we got trouble?” Rebekkah yelled to Harry.

“You mean my ink? It went crazy when we first got into Primordium, then it all calmed down. I guess it is smart enough to figure out that we were surrounded by the enemy, so it dialed itself down. And I'm not getting anything new now.”

They started in the direction of the curve in the beach, knives in hand. There was a fire burning just out of sight, sparks were drifting out over the water.

“I think we should put our blades away.” Harry said. “And try doing this peacefully. Especially if they’ve got Lana.”

They had barely sheathed their knives than a woman came into view, preceded by a school of skipping pebbles. She wasn’t a demon, no doubt of that, but she was squat, no more than three and a half feet tall, and her bald head virtually fetal in its shape and relative proportion to her body. She was naked, but caked from head to foot with white dust. She stopped as soon as she saw Sienna and her accomplices, but her wide smile, which she’d had on her face when she first appeared, didn’t falter.

“Bathate ka juiissimo?” She said, and then again: “juiissimo? juiissimo?”

Harry glanced down at Sienna to see how she was responding to the woman in white and the accompanying cacophony. She was wagging her tail for the first time since they’d entered Hell.

“We don’t speak your language.” Caz said. “Do you understand? I don’t know what Juiissimo means.”

“Vebba ka, vebba ka juiissimo.”

There was a fresh patter of pebbles from behind the woman, and a warm brightness that spilled down the beach. Several large balls of what looked like braided fire moved into view, hovering two or three feet above the beach, and then as they came abreast of the woman, rising up together in one sweeping motion and hanging in a loose circle above the beach. As they ascended the cacophony died away, the silence broken only by the breaking of the waves.

“Look at those lanterns. Beautiful, aren’t they?”

The speaker was Lana, who had just come into view around the curve of the beach. She brought an entourage with her, a company of perhaps thirty male and female demons, some of whom were strangely proportioned as the woman who’d first appeared, others who were larger than Caz, and heavily muscled. All were naked,

except for some caking white pigment, which they had slathered on their dreadlocked hair so that the locks were semi-solid. Lana, it should be added, was not walking with the tribe, she was being carried, much to her undisguised delight, on a kind of bed strewn with pillows, where she lay semi-recumbent in queenly bliss. There were four of the most powerfully built each baring a corner of the bed up.

“What’s all this about?” Harry said.

“I guess they knew I was coming.” Lana replied. “They had everything ready. I think I’m Jississimo.”

Her uttering of the word brought it forth from every single one of the tribe.

“Jisssiiiiisssiiisissiiiiiiimo...”

“All right.” Lana said. “You can put me down. Down!” She pointed to the beach, and the bed-bearers instantly obeyed, lowering her to the pebbles. She clambered to the edge of the bed and swung her legs over. Before her feet could touch the pebbles however there was a rush of volunteers to lay themselves down in front

of her. “No, no, no! I don’t want to walk on you. Please!” She threw a look of theatrical astonishment at Harry, Caz and Rebekkah. “They started this the moment they laid eyes on me. No, no, get up, please!” The volunteers didn’t move. “Where’s Fujik?”

“Here is! Here is!” said a female who, though over five feet tall still bore signs of the fetal qualities that were in the face of the dwarfish woman who’d first appeared. She was old, her breasts hanging almost flat against her body, her dreadlocks almost long enough to graze the ground. She presented herself at Lana’s bedside smiling helplessly, as though her joy was presently unbounded. Lana returned the smile as she spoke:

“Will you ask these people to get up?”

“Lana not walking?”

“Lana walking, yes. But not on people. I walk like my friends—” she pointed to Harry. “See?”

“This your friend?”

“Yes, all of them, very good friends.”

“We know they come with you. This seen many long times. But they not the same like you. They not Jississimo.”

The word went round again, spoken more quietly now, almost reverently.

“Well they may not be Jississimo,” Lana replied, “but they are friends of mine.

And they have to be treated well.”

“Like you?” said Fujik.

“Well, you don’t have to go overboard.” Lana said, casting a shy smile in the direction of the others. “But, yeah, you look after them. We’ve all come a long way.

We’re hungry and thirsty and tired.”

“Don’t forget Sienna.” Rebekkah reminded her.

“Oh yeah, Fujik, the dog. She’s also my friend. You understand.”

“She sleeps with us all the time.” Rebekkah said.

“I understand.” Fujik said. She looked at Rebekkah. “You think we maybe take your dog and cook her for dinner? Never. We only eat fish from the lake. That’s why we live so long.” She looked at Sienna. “Hey, bitch hound, you say nice to your friend Fujik?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Rebekkah said.

“Why no? she’s happy dog.”

“Yeah, but she has fleas.” Rebekkah said, somewhat lamely.

“Me too have fleas.” Fujik replied, grinning broadly. “They do no hurt.” She offered an open palm to Sienna. “You come smell me?”

“Sienna.” Rebekkah said.

The warning in her voice could not have been clearer, but Sienna ignored it. Tail wagging furiously, her head dropped in welcome, she went to the proffered hand, and without pausing to sniff it, she let Fujik’s fingers seek out the sweet spot behind her ears.

“There.” Said the old lady, her dreadlocks swaying as she wagged her head from side to side in pleasure. “Two happy bitches, eh? You and me?”

Rebekkah looked at Harry, perplexed.

“Can I ask you something?” Harry said to Fujik. “I’m Harry, by the way—”

“Harry D’Amour.” Said one of the younger women standing behind Fujik.

“The Witness.”

“The what?”

“The Shadowheart who came before you, with your blind friend and the head of some potentate, he said you would be coming after him, and that you were to be the Witness.”

“I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“But you are D’Amour?”

“Yes.”

“Then no doubt the rest will come clear,” said somebody else, standing towards the back of the company, his voice was as clear and confident as the others in the tribe. Their thoughts, Harry sensed were drawn from a common well of consciousness.

“You know something about me perhaps?” he said, returning his gaze to Fujik and Sienna. “I’m a demon hunter. Not by choice, but—”

“We have so far traced a hundred and seventy-one demons you have put down,” remarked yet another member of the tribe, a younger creature who for no apparent reason boasted a noteworthy erection, which he casually toyed with as he spoke. “You are a slaughterer of the demonkind, Mister D’Amour.”

“If you’re waiting for an apology—” Harry began.

The remark ran an eruption of laughter from the assembly.

“War is war.” One of them remarked. “You kill as many as you can to keep them from coming after you.”

“Then you’ve had wars?” Harry said.

“Not here, close to the one who sleeps. This is holy ground. We would not soil blood here.”

“What about the fish?” Caz asked.

“We offer the heads and tails of the fish to the one who sleeps.” Fujik said, “so that he may forgive us our trespasses against this holy place.”

“Is he Jississimo?” Harry said.

There was more laughter.

“I think you got the job as tribal comedian.” Caz remarked.

“Jississimo is the name of all things that are not one but many.” The younger woman, who’d called Harry the Witness, replied. “And all such things are troubled by the one who sleeps, and are holy, as he is holy.”

“Did you hear that?” Lana remarked. “I am holy.”

“She’s not many.” Rebekkah protested mildly. “She’s just two.”

Fujik shook her head. “No, no, no. You wrong. Two is the start of many.” She grinned at Lana. “He is she is it is everything.”

The **felitwairs** phrase earned a round of appreciative whoops and hollerings from the crowd, and was here and there shouted out again:

“He is she is it is everything!”

“I don’t get it.” Lana said.

“They’re saying you could be anything you wanted to be.” Caz told her.

“I just want to be a woman.”

“I know, but I think they believe that once you opened the door to change, there’s no stopping it. That’s Jississimo. Change without limit.”

“He says well.” The young woman said, a silvery sheen of enthusiasm sliding over her lightless eyes. “What your name?”

“Caz.”

“I Ganzicatti.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“You all come with us now.” Fujik said. “We eat and drink and maybe you want to sleep?”

“Sleep,” Harry said. “Now there’s an idea.”

Two

Norma had done her best to create a rough map in her mind, tracing the journey she’d taken in the company of the Cenobite, Felixson, and the few soldiers the Hell Priest had conscripted from amongst the survivors of the massacre at the

Bastion. Though the chance of ever making the return journey seemed more remote by the mile, she still held onto the tender hope that she might find a way back, and if she did she was going to need signposts.

She had one reason to hold onto her optimism: Harry. The Hell Priest had sensed his proximity in the Bastion.

“My witness is here,” he’d said, and when she asked who he meant by this he’d said; “D’amour, of course. Who better to see my apotheosis? I would stay and let him see you for a moment, just to keep the carrot fresh, so to speak—”

“I’m not a fucking carrot.”

“I’m sure you’ve been called worse. But we can’t stay.”

“Why not? All right, I’m a carrot. Just let him see me.”

“There isn’t time. I have an enemy in this place.”

“You? Have an enemy? You astonish me.”

It hadn't been the Hell Priest who put a name to his enemy. It was one of the soldiers, who'd muttered fearfully as what sounded like a roaring furnace echoed through the building:

“...the Unconsumed...”

Apparently this was not an enemy the Hell Priest was ready to face off against yet, even in his much empowered state. They had left the Bastion immediately, with one of the soldiers carrying Norma on his back. She still had enough powers of persuasion to get her mount, whose name was Knotchyea, to quietly describe to her the territory they passed through once they were beyond the Bastion. It seemed to be a promising arrangement from the start, with Knotchyea describing with a soldier's unadorned vocabulary the ruins of what had presumably been the Fingers of Primordium, but his simple eloquence quickly faltered once they got beyond the last of Primordium's streets and out with the wasteland itself. There was nothing for him to describe now, except emptiness.

“Are we not on a road of some kind?” Norma asked him.

Knotchyea lowered his voice to keep his reply from reaching the Hell Priest’s ears, though he scarcely needed to, the constant moan of the wind concealed it well enough.

“The only road we’re following is the one in the Lord Tempter’s head. And if he loses his way we’re all dead.”

“He can’t. If ever a soul knew its way it’s his. Not that I take much comfort from that. He’s taking us someplace I’m sure none of us want to be.”

“But you don’t know where?”

“All I ever heard about the wastes was that sooner or later they fold up into nothing and if you don’t turn back you go with it. All gone to nothing.”

This silenced the conversation for a long while and when Knotchyea started to talk again it was because finally there was a change in the view. Now, however, what he was seeing wasn’t so easy to describe, and he fumbled for words. There were huge

pieces of wreckage, he said, strewn across the desert; the remains of machines the likes of which he had never seen before. To his soldiers eye it looked as though a war had been fought here, though he freely admitted he could see no killing purpose to which these vast toppled devices could have been put. And if the demons who might have died when they when they fell, or causing there destruction, he could see not even the smallest sign. Not so much as a bone underfoot.

“Do demons have ghosts?” Norma asked him.

“Of course.” Knotchyea replied. “There’s always some who won’t let go of who they were.”

“If this had been a battlefield, you’d expect there to be some ghosts wandering around.”

“Perhaps they are.”

“I think I’d know if there were.” Norma replied. “Ghosts and I have a way of crossing paths. And I don’t sense them here. Not one. So either this is a battlefield where all the dead went to a contented rest, or else it wasn’t a battlefield at all.”

“Then I have no more ideas,” The soldier said plainly.

Despite Norma’s encouragement, the descriptions grew steadily sparser on a few occasions when a device of no particular scale or elaboration came into view,

Knotchyea

would break his silence. But riding on his shoulders, her arms wrapped around his neck, it wasn’t hard for Norma to read the signals that were rising off the soldier’s body. His skin was getting more clammy, his pulse quickening; his breath too. He was afraid. Norma knew better than to impune his masculinity by attempting to reassure him. She just held on and kept her peace. The wind rose for a time, its gusts so strong they would have thrown Norma over if she’d been on her own. Felixson was twice thrown to the ground, and begged his master for a chance to be carried like Norma

for a while. The wind snatched away the Hell Priest's reply, if he'd ever offered any, but Felixson didn't get his ride.

And then, as the rising velocity of the wind started to cause Knotchyea to stagger, the storm died away completely. There was no slow diminishing of the force. One moment they were being struck by gust upon gust, the next the wind seemed to have died away completely.

"What happened? Where are we?" Norma whispered to Knotchyea. The sound of her own voice gave her some answer to the mystery. The wind hadn't suddenly stopped blowing, they had simply stepped out of it, into what sounded, to judge by the noise of their feet and her words, like some kind of passageway, the walls of which corrupted the sounds, stretching them or slicing them into slivers.

"The wasteland's gone," he said. "The stories are true. It's all folding up around us, and we're going to get folded up in it." He started to turn around, his breath coming in panicky gasps.

“Don’t you dare.” Norma said, catching hold of one of his ears, and twisting it as hard as she could. It was the kind of thing an irritated parent might do to a troublesome child, and perhaps for that reason it gained the soldier’s attention. He stopped in mid-turn.

“That hurts,” he said.

“Good. It’s supposed to. Now listen to me, I don’t know you from a hole in the ground, but there’s been enough bloodshed already without adding your body to the heap.

“It’s going to fold—”

“No, it’s not. Wherever he’s taking us, soldier, it is not oblivion. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Well, well.” The Hell Priest remarked, from quite a distance ahead. “I am astonished. If there were a humbler creature no doubt I would be humbled. She’s right of course, soldier. I know our destination. I haven’t come so far and risked so

much to deliver us into oblivion. Follow me, soldier. You won't be disappointed. I have made this journey in my head ten thousand times and believe me, I have such sights to show you."

There was nothing either grandiose or threatening in any of this. He presented it as a simple statement of fact. There were wonders ahead, and the soldier would be a fool to turn his back on them.

"We are very close," he went on. "In a few strides you will be walking on stones, and there will be a great expanse of water before you; and you will have answers to questions you have never dared to ask. Such questions! And oh God in heaven..." his voice dropped very low "...such answers!"

The words cut through Knotchyea's panic. He turned back into the direction of the promised destination, and picked up his stride again. It was just as the Hell Priest had promised. Another thirty or forty yards in the passageway and its confines opened up.

“A beach?” Norma said to Knotchyea.

“Yes, and a lake, just like he said.”

“Can you see the far side?”

There was a long pause. Finally, Knotchyea said: “I can see something out there, but it’s so big I’m not sure... maybe it’s in the clouds. That must be it. Clouds.”

“Set her down, soldier.” The Hell Priest said. “The beach isn’t very comfortable, but you won’t have to sit there long.”

Once again the Hell Priest was right on both counts. The pebbles were indeed extremely uncomfortable beneath Norma’s bony behind. But within a few minutes of sitting down there was a sound of running feet, off to her right, and shouts of what surely was adoration from those who were approaching. Knotchyea had walked off, leaving Norma to interpret what happened next by the sound alone, which she was used to doing. She guessed that perhaps ten or so demons had come along the beach to pay their respects to the Hell Priest. She heard several dropping down onto the

pebbles , whether kneeling or lying she couldn't tell, to demonstrate their reverence, their shouts subdued now to sibilant whispers. Only one voice rose above the worshipful mutterings; that of an old woman who addressed the High Priest in a language Norma had no knowledge of.

“Avocitar, lazle, lasle, matta zu, exaterriat, Kamkai jute, kamkai thanama jute, oruti fashalda. Zu, Avocitar?”

“Ether psiatyr.” The Hell Priest replied.

“Summatum solt, Avocitar.” The woman said. And then, apparently addressing those who were still kneeling or lying on stones. “Pattu! Pattu!”

“Pick up your baggage, soldier.” The Hell Priest said. “The Azeel are prepared for our arrival. There's food and drink and somewhere to lay your heads.”

It was welcome news to Norma and to Knotchyea too. As soon as he hoisted her onto his back he said: “I need to sleep.” Then more quietly, “even if it is amongst those freaks.”

Norma waited until the trek along the beach was underway and she heard the sound of feet on the pebbles to cover her questions before she said: “What do you mean by freaks?”

“They’re inbred. Filthy, crazy; they shouldn’t be allowed to breed. It’s immoral. When we get some order back I’m going to bring a squad out here and clean this up.”

“They’re demons, yes?”

“Yes, what’s your point?”

“It’s just strange to hear the disgust in your voice.”

“If you could see them. Misshapen heads too big, bodies too small. And all of them naked. I thought the Azeel were a great people. But now I know the truth. I see they must be stomped out.”

“So you know who they are.”

“Of course, they were the first generation after the fall; the sons and daughters of those who had been cast down with our lord Lucifer, who went in Heaven. They built Primordium. And then, when it was finished, and our lord Lucifer pronounced it good, they went with him to their own land, which he had made for them as reward for their labors. And having gone into their secret country, they were not seen again, or so I always thought. They had a paradise, made for them by our Lord—“

“Speaking of your lord—”

“Be careful. He is our father.”

“I’m not trying to be disrespectful. I just have a question.”

“Speak.” Knotchyea replied, though there was no missing the warning, even in a single syllable.

“I just wondered where he is. Does he have his own secret country?”

“He’s been gone many, many generations. And before you ask, I do not know where it is. It is not my place to ask nor is it my right to know. The Lord of Lords is with us every moment, and in every place.”

“Even now?”

“In every moment, in every place.” The soldier replied, curtly. “Now unless you want to walk from here, let this subject sleep.”

“What subject?”

“The Lord of... Lords.” Light dawned somewhere in the middle of his answer.

“Oh, a humor.”

“Joke. We call it a joke.”

“Huh.”

“I hear drums.”

“Yes. There is drumming.”

“Nothing you could march to.”

“I’ve never liked to march. It’s for children playing at being soldiers.”

“What did you like to do?”

“The executions,” Knotchyea replied promptly. “They were clean. You know your duty, plain and simple. And—”

“All right. I get the idea. Let’s change the subject.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.” She replied. “And if that doesn’t suit you, then put me down and I’ll damn well walk.”

“No. I’ll carry you. It gives me something to think about.”

They walked along the beach in what Norma assumed to be quite a procession: the Azeel leading, letting out triumphant hollerings as they did so, and the Hell Priest with his little entourage following behind.

—

What followed next became something of a pleasant blur for Norma. They came to what was apparently the Azeel's village, and she was laid down on a pile of blankets, their weave sweetly perfumed. A fire was burning not far off, and occasionally the smoke veered in her direction, but there was somebody kneeling close to her who wafted the stinging smoke away. She was so comfortable, and so very weary, that it was all she could do to keep her eyes open. Finally she succumbed to the temptation, and let her eyes close. A few seconds later, Felixson was shaking her awake.

"Come on, Norma." He said, his voice slightly slurred. "You got to eat something. It's good fish, believe me. And I don't even like fish."

"I want to sleep, for a while."

"You've been asleep three hours already. Eat some food and drink."

“Three hours?” she said, only managing to keep her eyes by a mighty effort of will. She reached out and touched Felixson’s face. “What are you smiling about?”

“I think the worst is over.” Felixson replied. “These Azeel, they’re treating us like royalty. Especially you-kno-who.”

“The soldier said they were all freaks. Inbred, he said.”

“He’s right about that. They’ve kept the tribe going by breeding with one another, no question. But as far as I understand it they have some law about never leaving the beach, in case their Lord calls them to work.”

“And who’s their Lord?”

“I didn’t ask. It seemed like they took it for granted that I’d know, so I just listened. Oh here comes fresh plates of food for you. Sit up.” Norma pushed herself into a sitting position.

“You wish eat now?” said her waiter. “Here is soup. And the meat of hiroto fish.”

“Can you get her something to drink?” Felixson said.

“I have brought her a cup of Aradine. Is very good.”

“Can I have water first?”

“Of course. I fetch.”

“You don’t want your Aradine?”

“Meaning you want it?”

“Well I wouldn’t want it to go to waste. It burns going down, but it certainly hits the spot.”

“Of course they could just be fattening us up for their own dinner.” Norma said.

She had spoken without realizing that the tribesman supplying her with food and drink was within earshot. But he replied to her observation with disarming honesty.

“Sometimes when the Quanto rises in the lake, and we can’t take out the boats for fear of it, we send a raiding party to Primordium to bring back damned souls. And we honour them with songs and prayers and then we slaughter them and give the blood to children and to the old, and cook the meat.”

“And it tastes just like chicken, right?” Norma said.

“What’s chicken?” The Azeel replied.

“Never mind. The point is the fishing’s good right now, yes?”

“Of course. Even the fish want to see the great Cenobite. They throw themselves out of the lake, just to have a look at him. The children pick them up.” He laughed, genuinely pleased with the notion. “I make humor when I speak so. Is not time. We make special prayer, because we know that the priest is coming soon, and we hope for good catch. And oh, such fish! Never we find such fish in our nets. One female, she is as big as I am, and full of eggs. So here is your water.”

He very gently placed a bowl in her hands. He was trembling.

“You’re not afraid of me, surely.”

“Please, drink.”

“No, you tell me first. Why are you shanking?”

“I was happy with the way of things.” The Azeel replied. “My children, my wife.”

“Is she your sister by any chance?”

“No. I am cousin with her only. But many marry sisters or brothers. We know it makes sickness in the babies, but we are the Lord’s masons, we cannot mingle our blood with lesser tribes. If we do how will the Lord know us when he comes back?”

Norma took a tentative sip of the water, which was cool and refreshing. So she put all thoughts of being doped up in preparation for a throat-slitting out of her head and drank, draining the bowl. Then she picked up where the conversation had left off.

“Who is this Lord of yours?”

Here Felixson intervened: “Why don’t you just eat your fish, Norma?”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot!” Norma said. “I asked a simple question.”

“But still I cannot answer you. Please do not have offense at me. I am not having the words to tell you what you want to know. It’s better you wait until you are with him, when everything will be clear to you.”

“So we’re going to see him, this Lord?”

“Yes, of course. We have to build ceremonial boats, to carry the Cenobite and you who accompany him across the lake.”

“So there’s another country on the other side?” Felixson said.

“There is... no other side.” The Azeel replied.

“There’s got to be. I mean, you called it a lake, didn’t you? A lake has all land around it.”

“Not this lake. This lake has only one shore.”

While Felixson kept up his questions Norma felt out for the food set before her, and started to eat. The fish was indeed delicious, its flakes buttery, and after just a couple of bites Norma had the plate up to her chin, to shorten the distance between the food and her mouth. As she ate Felixson continued to ask questions of the Azeel.

“All right,” he said, “So it’s a lake with only one shore. But if that’s the case, where are we going on your boats?”

“To the island.” The Azeel replied.

“I didn’t see any island out there.” Felixson said.

“The mist is thicker at some hours than at others. But if you want I show you where it is.”

“Sure. Why not?”

“You want more aradine, lady?”

“I’ll take a sip.”

“I finished hers off.” Felixson said. “Can I get another cup? Or better, a bottle of the stuff?”

“Is my pleasure.”

Norma waited until the demon gone to get more Azeelian moonshine before she said to Felixson: “I’d be careful with that stuff. Even if they’re not planning on eating us, they’re still demons.”

“I know, I know... but if we’re all going to die we might as well party for a while before the axe falls.”

“What makes you think we’re going to die?”

“We’re almost at the end of the road, Norma. Whatever use we have been to our glorious Lord Pinhead it’s almost over. Which means that he’ll leave us to either try and find out way back, and I think our chances of doing that are remote, or he decides that the fewer witnesses there are who he was before he becomes what he’s about to become the better.”

“In which case he’ll kill us all.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe I’ll have a swig of the gutrot.”

“Like I say—”

“—it burns going down? Yeah, I heard you. Give me some.”

“Here. I’ll put some in the bowl you had your water in.” he paused, and guided the bowl to Norma’s hands. Never to do things by halves she took a throatful. It was indeed fire-water. Her blind eyes filled with tears, which tumbled down her cheeks.

“Swallow it, for Christ’s sake.”

She did so, feeling the warmth as it made its way down her esophagus and into her stomach. There its warmth spread, instantly inducing a welcome sense of well-being. She smiled.

“That better?” Felixson wanted to know.

“A lot better.” Norma replied. She already felt a little light headed, but not so much that she couldn’t barely form a coherent question.

“What’s the Hell Priest doing?” She finally asked.

“Right now holding court with a bunch of Azeel, laying plans for getting us out onto the lake.”

“What’s he want us out there for?”

“Beats me. But I’m not about to say no to him. Like he said he has—”

“Such sights to show us. Yeah, I know.”

“I’d put the avadine down for a while if I were you.”

“I sound drunk?”

“Big time.”

“Funny, I don’t feel it. Except, I’m getting tired again.”

“Then put your head down and have another siesta. I’m going to. See you later.”

“Can I get one more shot of the avadine?” she said, but she was too late.

Felixson was either too far off to hear her, or—more likely, she thought—he was feeling too covetous of the contents of his bottle to share so much as another drop.

She upended the bowl at her lips, and eked out a few tantalizing trickles. Then she lay down, her brain performing acrobatics inside her skull, and waited for sleep to come and find her. It arrived in less than ten seconds, the empty bowl dropping from her fingers and rolling away.

—

Despite her exhaustion she didn't sleep deeply. Her mind would graze the surface of a dream, like a bird swooping to take a fish from placid water, but she failed over and over, her mind too anxious about the waking world for her to commit herself to plunge just a little deeper, and bring up something nourishing. She was too

close to consciousness indeed that she formed this critique as she slept, and finally, realizing that she's not getting any rest, she simply told herself to wake up and did so.

Others around the fire had given themselves over more freely to the solace of sleep. She could hear Knotchyea snoring off to her right, and Felixson having what seemed to be a dreamed argument with his master, while further away somewhere on the other side of the fire one of their hosts was singing an Azeelian version of Danny Boy, the words incomprehensible but the melody exactly the same. It was a song that never failed to touch her; and as above, so below. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. She let them come, strangely grateful for them. She lifted her arm up to wipe the tears off her cheeks, and in the process of doing so sleep overtook her again. This time she didn't wake and when she did it was because Felixson was gently shaking her.

"Breakfast." He was saying to her.

"More fish?"

“No. Something like pancakes. And there’s honey.”

“Honey?”

She sat up. “Real honey?”

“It tastes like it.”

He put the plate into her hand, and she ate.

“You should eat it all, even if you’re full.” Felixson advised. “I’ve been asking around and the word is that it’s going to be tough once we leave the beach.”

“Remind me where we’re going.”

“If I knew I’d tell you. There’s an island out there apparently, but I can’t see it.

It’s too dark. But that’s where we’re headed.”

“I don’t suppose anybody knows why we’re going out there?”

“If they do they’re keeping it to themselves.”

“I don’t suppose these people have bathrooms, do they?”

“You know what? They do. And they’re cleaner than most of the restrooms I ever had to step into. You need to go now, or you’re going to miss the boat. I should say boats.”

“How many?”

“Four of them. All covered.”

“With what?”

“A head at the front, then three wings running the whole length of each side of each boat, fifteen feet or so. Every barb and vain of every feather, perfectly carved. And then everything painted. Every wing has the whole spectrum on it. I never saw anything so beautiful in my life beyond, Norma. I almost want to say seeing them makes up for what we’ve had to go through to get here.”

“Are you crazy? I don’t care if they look like the Sistine fucking Chapel.”

“Maybe... you should moderate your language a little.”

“What the fuck for?” Norma said. “What’s going on with you?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Felixson said softly. “Something’s reaching out for us. It knows we’re here and it wants us to be with it.”

The Azeel had started chanting now, the words of their chant no more comprehensible than their version of *Danny Boy*, but its rhythmic power, building phrase upon phrase, changed with obsessive devotion. The chant turned Norma’s thoughts to pulp; she couldn’t hold two thoughts together. Luckily, Knotchyea was there to help her, coaxing her to her feet and then guiding her down the incline to the shore. The pebbles, crazed by too much activity, were slipping in all directions, adding their own permission to the Azeel’s escalating chants.

“There are three boats,” he said to her. “And apparently they’re putting you in the middle one.”

“When you say boats, what kind of boats are you talking about? Besides the fact that they’ve got angels carved all over them.”

“All those wings?” Norma said. That’s angelic anatomy. I thought you would know that, Felixson.”

“I knew. It was just unexpected is all. Angels carved on boats in Hell. I mean, be fair. It’s not the first connection you’d make is it?”

“Maybe the edge of Hell is closer to Heaven than we think.” Knotchyea said.

Norma chuckled. “You’re not all muscles and executions, are you?” she said.

“Aren’t I?” he said, sounding faintly disappointed or confused by the observation; perhaps both.

“Push anything hard enough and it starts to resemble the opposite.”

“Of course; interesting notion.” Felixson said. “Of course you can pull it apart at the seams in two seconds, but that’s not your game right now, is it?”

“Why must everybody always have a game?” Norma replied.

“Because we’ve got to have something to cling onto, haven’t we? Or it’s all just one long fall. And speaking for myself if I thought that was all there was I’d have put a bullet in my brain a long time ago.”

“They need you to go to the boat, Norma.” Knotchyea said. “Can I go with her?” he asked somebody and was given the answer he wanted. “I can sit in front of you.”

“I’ll sit behind,” said Felixson. “That is, if you can bear my company a little longer. It’ll all be over soon enough.”

“Do you have to sound so apocalyptic?”

“How else should I sound? We’re at the end of the world, literally.”

“I’m just here for the view. I’ll be heading back home as soon as the hostilities begin.”

“And you’ll be heading home to what, exactly? No ghost is ever going to come near you after this. You stink of Hell. And of course there’ll be a price on your head.

If you get out of Hell alive there'll be bounty hunters who'll be very interested in tracking you down."

"Please lady, let me put you in the boat." Knotchyea said. He lifted Norma up and gently deposited her on her wooden seat. She reached out to the left and right of her, running her fingers over the carved wings they were indeed, as Felixson had described, exquisitely carved. The boat, however, did not feel particularly stable. Even though they were in the shallows it rolled alarmingly whenever anyone got on board.

"Where's the Hell Priest?" She leaned forward to ask Knotchyea.

"In the first boat. They carved him a kind of throne."

"Lucky him."

The old woman who had first spoken to them addressed them again:

"When you go, I start big chant on the beach, to conceal any noise you make from Quoato."

The name brought barely audible rumblings from the Azeel who were in the boats; desperate little prayers, Norma guessed, to keep whatever Quoato was away.

“And you—” the woman went on, “—not say a word until you get to the Last Place. Quoato hears.”

The observation was echoed in whispers by the whole assembly.

“Quoato hears. Quoato hears. Quoato hears.”

The woman said, “So be wise. Be silent and be safe. And we staying will make sure a noise that Quoato will dive deep, so that it doesn’t have to hear.” There was a little laughter amongst those in the boats, which died away almost immediately as the boats were pushed off from the shore, their hulls scraping on stones for a few seconds before the grated free. Then those who had the oars—one of which was Knotchyea—began to paddle, and if the strength of the wind against Norma’s face was anything to judge by, they were skimming through the water at a tremendous pace. Norma’s fears that the boats would work were entirely forgotten; the forward momentum of the

vessel she was in prevented any lateral motion. She could hear the bow of the boat behind them cutting the water, and very occasionally the sound of one of the oars striking one of the waves from the boat in front, but otherwise the first portion of the journey, which took perhaps half an hour, went without incident. Soon after, however, Norma felt a sudden drop in temperature, and her skin began to crawl with goose flesh. She could feel it pressing against her face, and chilling her lungs when she next drew breath. The speed of the boats didn't slow at all, however; they continued on their almost silent path through the water, sometimes bringing them out of a patch of mist for a few teasing moments of warmth, only to plunge back into the cold before Norma could stop her teeth from chattering. The noise she was making was loud enough for one of her fellow passengers to pass forward a piece of canvas which Felixson draped around Norma's shoulders. He'd been wrong, she thought as she did her best to subdue her chattering teeth; it wasn't Hell she'd leave this journey smelling of, it was fish.

Finally the mist began to thin a little, and then, suddenly, it was gone, every last scrap and shred. Something was now in view, something that made most of the occupants of the boats forget the instruction they'd been given on the beach. They let out exclamations of disbelief and terror, or the way Norma had heard babies cry in the night sometimes; an anguished weeping, beyond all hope of comfort or safety.

“What is it?” She said, half turning to Felixson. He was panicking, his breaths quick and shallow. “Tell me!” Norma said. “What are you seeing? What are you seeing?”

Three

Harry had eaten and drunk his fill; fish bread, honey, water, and yes, even a sip of Azeelian moonshine.

“I’ll take first watch,” Caz said. “You sleep. I’ll wake you in what, four hours?”

“Then you’d take another four? No, we can’t let them get that far ahead of us.”

“From what I was told by Murmuzian—”

Caz nodded towards the young Azeel on the other side of the fire. With his head dropped forward, his dreadlocks hung straight down, but he looked up at Caz from parted shadows with something more than curiosity.

“—the Hell Priest had men give him stuff to perform rituals all around whatever’s out there.”

“Did he know and wasn’t telling, or-“

Caz glanced over at Murmuzian. “No, he was ready to open up.” He said. “He didn’t like the Hell Priest. Not a lot of Azeel do. But Surraban, the old lady, she’d been seeing his approach in dreams, apparently, and he’s been telling her how he wanted things prepared, so they had to go out raids to Primordium, stealing what they needed. They weren’t always successful. A lot of Azeelians got killed; including one Murmuzian was very close with. So he’s ready to help give the Hell Priest as much grief as possible, if we’ll accept the help.

“What can he do for us?”

“He says there are sacred papers about whatever’s out there.”

“Like what?”

“He doesn’t now, he’s never seen them. He just knows Surraban ordered them hidden before the Hell Priest arrived and he left without them.”

“If he can get his hands on them without causing trouble.”

“He says he can.”

“What the fuck have you done to him, Caz? He hasn’t taken his eyes off of you.”

“We were just talking,” Caz replied lightly. “You take a few hours of sleep. I’ll tell Rebekkah and Lana they should do the same.”

“No need to tell me,” Rebekkah said. The men looked back. She was standing a couple of yards behind them.

“How long have you been standing there for?”

“Not long.”

She took a step towards them and went down on her haunches.

“Did you hear Caz talk about these sacred papers?” Harry asked her.

“Yes. And what you said makes sense. If he can get them without making enemies, we should have them. But we can’t afford to stir up any trouble here.”

“I know.” Caz said.

“And I’m not sure you should be so eager to fuck your friend Murmuzian.”

“Why? Did you want to go first?” Caz replied.

“No he’s all yours.” Rebekkah replied. “Just remember, the Azeel may be very welcoming, but they’re still demons. They’d slit our throats in a heart beat if it suited them.” She shrugged. “Just telling you the unpalatable truth, Caz.”

“Not Murmuzian,” Caz replied.

“Oh, he’s different, is he? And this is based on what, five minutes of conversation? Ten?”

“Long enough.” Caz said.

Rebekkah looked at Harry. “Aren’t you going to say something?”

“About what?”

Rebekkah’s lips curled with contempt. “He wants to couple with that thing.”

She looked back at Caz. “Just because they’re treating us with a little civility, doesn’t change what they are. They’re filth. Poison. You play in the dirt with that—”

She threw a sickened glance toward Murmuzian. “—and you’ll never be clean again.”

“Are you done?” Caz said.

He didn’t give Rebekkah a chance to reply. “because I think I’m done listening. I don’t give a shit what you think. I’ll take my pleasure where and with whoever I want.”

Rebekkah stared at him with silent contempt.

“Do we understand one another?” Caz replied.

She said nothing. She simply got up and walked away.

“She’s a strange one.” Caz said. “If Karen was here—”

“Karen?”

“She’s a lesbian I’m inking.” She’d take one look at Rebekkah and say: All she needs is a woman to pin her down and fuck her silly.”

“I don’t think that’s Rebekkah’s problem.”

“Well whatever it is, as long as she keeps it out of my business we’ll be fine. I’ll see you later. I’m going to go back and talk to Murmuzian. You sleep. I’ll wake you in a few hours.”

Harry nodded, and watched while Caz got up and skirted the fire. The demon got up, reaching out to take Caz’s arm, and escorting away from the firelight; even before the darkness had entirely enveloped them, Harry’s lids became heavy and sleep over came him.

He woke suddenly, feeling a breath on his face. Sienna was leaning over him.

“What is it?” he said.

He got up, the fire had burned down considerably, but it still offered enough light for him to see the sleeping figures around the edge of the fire. There was no sign of trouble. Even the sleepers seemed to be perfectly placid in their slumbers. Even so Sienna had business with Harry. She turned from him and began to make her way around and between the sleepers, glancing back at D’Amour to be sure he was following. He was. She led him down the beach to a place where the firelight barely reached, and sat down.

Only then did he understand what all this was about. She’d brought him here to share the vision that had been interrupted at the Bastion, and she was determined not to be interrupted again. Before he’d even sat down the presence of her mind on his, and everything around him filtered out of sight, and he was back on that dusty

hill, with the sun at noon, and unclouded, but shedding no light. It was the things on

Golgotha—

whether rocks, or bones, or mourners, or soldiers, or the three men suffering on their crosses, that seeped the faintly jaundiced light that illuminated the hill-top. As before,

Harry was inside Sienna's head, watching the scene from her point of view. She was

standing close to the bearded man who'd summoned her to his side, and she could

smell his emotions as clearly as the scent of a flower or a piece of rotting meat. He

was sick with sorrow, and with dread. He clenched so tightly the short stem of the

chalice he'd brought out of his robe that his knuckles were white. As Harry watched

him he felt the influence of Sienna's emotions. This was a man she loved, no question

of that; and at this moment she also feared for him.

“You stay here, girl.” He said, not looking down at her as he spoke, but keeping his gaze fixed on Christ. “If I get into trouble you run. You hear me? You

run!”

This said, he left her sitting amongst the bones and approached the centurions who'd been overseeing the Crucifixions. The Roman was in the midst of conversation with two of his men, his back turned to both the scene of the execution and to Joseph. The soldiers were plainly disconcerted by the strangeness of the light, but their Captain was refusing to show any sign of intimidation, talking more loudly than the hush on the hill demanded; even getting his frightened subordinates to laugh at some remark he made, though it was plain they were in no mood for humor. Finally he deigned to turn and speak to Sienna's master who put on an impressive show of subservience for the Roman's benefit. After a short exchange Joseph brought a piece of paper out of his robes, and gave it to the Roman. The officer ordered the supplicant to step out of his immediate vicinity while he read the document, throwing some observation which was apparently about Joseph's smell back at his soldiers. Their laughter was even less believable now that it had been a few minutes before; and with reason. The sun was now virtually black, as it might have appeared during an eclipse,

except of course that the moon had not obscured it, while the surrounding sky coiled and seethed. As for the landscape below, it offered no greater measure of hope than the darkness above. The vision of Christ's light-filled anatomy which Harry had witnessed before the cord between present and past had been severed was now extinguished. There was still just a breath of life left in the body, however. Raising his head, he looked up at the black star at his zenith, and his lips moved. Harry was too far from the cross to hear what he said, but he knew his gospels well enough to know what they reported the Man of Sorrows had said:

“It is finished.”

Clearly Joseph was heard the words, because a fresh agitation entered his manner. He looked back at the group of women close to the base of the cross. One of them was so overcome with grief she lost consciousness, and was only kept from dropping into the blood-drenched dirt by two of the women close by. Harry glanced at the women for a second or two and then back at Joseph, who was fumbling in his

robes. The Roman officer was a lot more adept at accepting bribes than Joseph was at proffering them. He reached towards Joseph, took the purse from him and slipped it out of sight in one smooth motion. Then, giving a casual nod to the centurions who were preventing anyone from approaching the crosses, he turned back to resume his talk with the other soldiers. The darkness that had veiled the sun now retreated, and the sky no longer seethed. In a matter of a few moments the hill was bright once more, and the heat of the sun beating down. The officer's word had been enough to allow Joseph access to the base of the cross. He went quickly, with the air of a man who had a mission that made him fearful, but was too important to be left undone. He knelt down in front of the cross, and he uttered a few words of what Harry assumed was prayer. Then he took the lid off the chalice which he was carrying and he held it in both hands between the feet of Christ, where the blood that issued from many of the wounds in his body, even those that ran from his thorn-pierced brow, flowed together and dripped so quickly it was almost a constant flow.

While Joseph continued to collect the blood the officer broke off from conversation, and ignoring Joseph spoke to the centurion who'd been guarding the cross. The soldier nodded, and raised his spear, pressing the point to the side of Christ's corpse, to be sure that the man was indeed dead. Fresh blood flowed from the place as soon as the soldier withdrew his spear, and it ran freely down Christ's body. Joseph quickly got up on his knees and lifted the chalice as high as he was able, to finish his task. It was quickly done. With the chalice filled, Joseph placed the lid on it and took three steps back from the cross, her head bowed reverentially.

Then, turning, he went back to the officer. Joseph had even addressed him, the man cast a contemptuous glance up at the man on the cross, and then with one dismissive wave turned his back on Joseph, the crucified man, and the kneeling women. It was to the women that Joseph now went, doing his best to talk to them despite their anguished state. One of their number went back down the hill a little

way and spoke to two men who duly followed her back up to join the small assembly.

Clearly arrangements were being made for the deposition of the body.

A feigned normality had replaced the apocalyptic darkness that had cloaked the hilltop minutes before. Now those on-lookers who had come simply to gape at the spectacle of death spoke more loudly than they had, and when they laughed, and they often did, their laughter had no truth in it. As for the material world—the rocks, the bones scattered in the dust, the grey grass—it too unnaturally sharp, as though the fabric of reality was actively attempting to compensate for its violation. A hidden gust of wind came up from behind the crosses, hard enough to make them shift and creak. It snatched from the hands of the women the veils they had pressed to their faces, and raised clouds of pale, ochre dust. Though it, Harry saw Joseph approaching. He was carrying the chalice which had been a commonplace object minutes before, but was now transfigured. It had become a thing of legend: the Holy Grail.

“You guard this well, girl.” Joseph said as he set the chalice down. And in that instant Golgotha was gone.

Four

The dust, rising in the mind, the women’s veils caught and carried off, the creaking crosses and their morbid freight: all of it had gone. And in its place, a large room where candles were lit, and fire blazed in the grate, while rain lashed against the window. Sienna was sitting a comfortable distance from the fire, while her master stood at the window, gazing out at the rain.

“Will it never cease?” he said.

“If our English weather depresses you so much, Joseph,” said another man, who was sitting at the table, pouring over a selection of pieces of stone. “Then you should go back to Jerusalem and leave me to take care of the **muies**. These new samples look very promising, I must say. I think there’s a lot of tin to be had out of Colby Deep.”

“Tin...” Joseph muttered.

“Yes, tin, Joseph. I don’t see why you sound so contemptuous. It’s made you a rich man. Without the mines you could not afford your trips to see the cruelties out east.”

“I don’t go to see cruelties, Jack.”

“No, no, you go for the good of your soul, I know.”

Joseph turned from the window, and Harry got a look at his face. A number had obviously passed since the days of the crucifixion. Joseph’s beard was fuller than ever, and really white, while his face was deeply etched, especially the bridge of his

nose, where a knot of lines left proof of some great puzzlement that had haunted his days since Golgotha. In other regards, clearly the years had been bountiful. He was finely dressed, and had clearly not wanted for a good dinner every night in the intervening years.

“I meant no offense.” Jack said hurriedly, seeing the fierce look on his friend’s face. “I know how much these Christian revelries mean to you—”

“Reveries?” Joseph said, his voice rising in volume. “Do you not listen to a word I say? There are no revelries in the Holy Land. There are massacres and atrocities. The followers of Christ—and I’m one of them, Jack, don’t forget that one—are everywhere oppressed and murdered. Twice, when I was found in the vicinity of our gathering places I have denied my faith rather than be taken into custody. Do you know how that makes me feel?”

“Yes.” The other replied, staring past Joseph at the rain on the window.

“Unworthy of your Saviour’s love.”

“Yes.”

“Unclean.”

“Yes.”

Joseph’s voice sounded like gravel being rolled around in a pot.

“I don’t deserve the warmth of this house. I should give it away to the poor—”

“Oh look, if you’re of a mind to give the place away think of me first. Seven children and another on the way.”

“Maybe you should leave your wife alone awhile.” Joseph said, unsmiling.

Jack pushed back his chair and stood up. “I’m your friend, Joseph.” He said. “I choose to take no offense at that remark.” His tone was as chilly as Joseph’s had been.

“But you’re in Cornwall, Joseph.” He went on. “And people here don’t take to newcomers even if they shut their mouths and keep to themselves. So if you want us to have workers at the mines who aren’t cursing your name then perhaps you should stop making judgments about other people’s lives.”

Joseph stared at Jack, the knot at the bridge of his nose tightening. “You don’t understand any of what I’ve just told you, do you Jack?”

“Of course I understand it. You met some extraordinary fellow out there, and he died a wretched death.”

“Yes...” Joseph said very quietly. “...but it’s not the death that matters, Jack. Don’t you see?” He returned his gaze to the garden beyond the watery glass. He made a tiny shake of his head.

“I thought maybe of all people, Jack, you’d be the one who’d see how things have to change. The world has been darkening around us, day on day. And I believe this man I saw crucified who his enemies and half of his friends thought was just some kind of Jewish magician, was born to drive that darkness off, so that we can have reason to hope—”

“You have all the reason in the world to hope,” Jack protested, “You have your wealth, you have the power to speak to men of high office, you have children to

follow on after you. Not that I think you are in danger of dying, Joseph. I never knew a healthier man. If you want the truth—and let's be honest I'm the only one who's going to tell you the truth, everyone else is either too scared or too damn respectful of you—and I say if you want the truth you should stop troubling yourself with troubles none of us can solve and go back to doing what you do best. Making money.”

The advice got no response from Joseph, not even a grunt, which infuriated Jack. His mouth tightened and his face grew red.

“Are you attending to a word I say?”

There was still no response from Joseph. With mounting fury Jack crossed the room, and plucking the key out of its hiding place on the top of Joseph's special cupboard, he put it in the lock and turned it. Joseph was entirely too preoccupied with his thoughts to notice what was going on. But Sienna did. She got up from her place by the door and began to walk towards Jack, a warning growl in her throat.

“It’s all right, girl.” Jack said. “I know what I’m doing.” He opened the cupboard door and reached inside. Sienna’s growl became louder, but Jack had known her since puppyhood, and he had no fear of her. He just went on with what he was doing, picking up his one-sided conversation with Joseph as he did so.

“You know what started it all, Joseph?” He had brought something out of the cupboard covered with a simply square of undyed linen. It didn’t take any great detective skills on Harry’s part to figure out what was underneath.

“I think you’ve turned into an idol-worshipper, my friend,” Jack went on, plainly striving to keep his tone light and inoffensive. “But instead of having a statue of a little god on your shelf you’ve got this damn thing.” He pulled the piece of linen away, unveiling the chalice.

As soon as it came into view Sienna ceased her growling. Harry knew why. He was suffused with the same feeling that had silenced Sienna: reverence, yes, but more a profound sense of anticipation. The presence of the cup, or rather of its contents,

had ignited imminence in the stale air of that closed room, which fire had in turn kindled the same miraculous feelings in both the dog and her occupying spirit. A surge of simple joy rose up in Harry, so strong that it drowned out any question he might have had about the why or how of it. If he'd had his own eyes, he would wept, his heart was so filled.

Sienna, however, was not so distracted by bliss that she forgot her duty to its provider. She began to bark loudly, her alarm finally stirring Joseph from his meditations at the window. Jack didn't notice, he was too concerned about being bitten by Sienna, who was curling back her lips with every bark.

It was only then that Joseph shouted out: "In the name of God what are you doing?"

Jack looked back towards the window. He turned too suddenly, and the lid of the chalice slid off. He attempted to snatch hold of it before it fell to the ground, and as he did so the chalice tipped in his hand. Blood spilled over the lip. Harry had

witnessed before scenes that had a sickening sluggishness to them. Always terrible events; as though time was already laden with grief about to happen. And it was like that now. He had the luxury of watching the blood he'd seen running from the feet of Christ appearing again, this time at the lip of the chalice where Joseph had collected it. And as the little ball of blood swelled, until it had too much weight behind it to hang on the cups lip but began its lazy descent towards the ground he was struck by a second wave of the imminence which he'd felt when Jack had brought the chalice out of the cupboard. The blood continued its narrow stream possessing some part of the light that Harry had seen suffusing Christ's anatomy in this moment. It threw darts of gilded light out across the room, their brilliance out of all proportion to the slender rivulet from which they sprang.

The blood hit the ground now, and Harry, possessed of Sienna's sense, smelt it's every nuance. Not just the coppery tang he'd smelt before, but the appetizing meatiness of it, its savory richness. Sienna was moving towards the place where the

blood had fallen, her nose dropped so that it almost grazed the ground. Jack had meanwhile recovered himself, and righted the cup so that it no longer spilled. But there was still a small pool surrounded by scattered droplets on the tile and Sienna was nearly upon it.

From some far off place Harry heard Joseph calling to Sienna, forbidding her to go near the blood. But Harry felt the summons of the blood with the same measure of the power that it exercised over Sienna, and he had no other desire in his head at that moment but to answer those summons. He felt and shared Sienna's quickened heart; and the flood of saliva in her mouth. Her tongue was already hanging out, her head inches from the pool. Again, Harry heard Joseph's voice, shrill with alarm, but it didn't matter. Nothing Sienna's master could say to her would stop her doing what she was about to do, and in the process making possible the fact of Harry's presence here, watching through her eyes the beginning of a two thousand year life. She was at the blood now, and without hesitation she proceeded to lap it up. The instant that her

body began to ingest it a crowd of fragments and images came at Harry, no two connected in any fashion he could hope to understand in the fury of their assault. A stone, carved with incomprehensible signs; a sky, etched with falling stars; a ram, caught in a thicket, thrashing to free himself; a woman sitting astride a man, both naked, riding him mercilessly, as a brutal rainstorm turned the ground to mud around them. And then, slivers of atrocity: bodies, hanging, hundreds of them, gutted from the branches of a vast tree, its roots blazing blood-red in the black earth; sweating priest driving a blade into the chest of a youth splayed over an altar, the steps of which were barely visible for the bodies of the preceding victims. A pregnant woman and the baby she nursed being stoned to death by a mob whose youngest members were no older than six, the stained ground and pock-marked wall against which the woman stood shelterless, evidence of this being a place where such executions were common. There were rival humans, thankfully growing quickly by the moment, so

that he could barely make sense of one stomach curdling excess before another eclipsed it.

And then, somewhere in the midst of this unspeakable assault the atrocities passed away and visions that filled Harry's mind's eyes with such speed were no longer terrible, but were visions seen so briefly that he could focus upon only the tiniest fragment, even though he knew they existed, those fragments, in monumental places. He saw the perfect silver circle of a fish's eye as the creature swam in a swarming sea; a sole dandelion in a vast expanse of grass and wild flowers striped of its seeds by a gust of late summer wind; a single thorn pressed deep into the brow of the Man of Sorrows as he hung upon the cross—and as Christ's blood ran from the round of woven crown producing a flower, which swelled into a bud and burst its flower in the time it took to read these words.

“D’Amour? What are you doing?” The question, proffered from somewhere beyond the visions, would have extinguished them completely if Harry had not held

on to them tenaciously, swelling his sum of snatched glories in the process. He moved in a herd of gazelles, their bright black eyes respecting the round white sun; he was born thread thin onto a nest of snakes, hundreds of siblings, none any longer than him, but all eager to be nourished and out in the world about their serpentine business; he was a woman, spilling her waters on the ground, and twins coming in the stained fluid, the impact of the bodies on the ground was sufficient to strike breath into them, so that they could give voice.

There was so much else besides—fragments of fragments, shards of shards—overloading his dreaming senses. But they were receding now, and he was not unhappy at the fact. The jigsaw bones of his skull seemed to creak at the fluid freight of visions swilling around behind his eyes. Morsels from their high table where divinity sat, and scraps flicked from the beats who ate what more fastidious palates would not touch—the spine, the genitals, the gut seasoned with excrement. But recovering these memories would have to take a more propitious moment. The event

that had summoned him here— Jack’s accident and Sienna’s drinking of Christ’s blood— was over. She licked the tile clean.

As for the cup, Joseph had gently taken from Jack’s trembling hand and replaced its lid. Also he was putting it back in the cupboard, his every motion measured, ritualistic. Finally he picked up the linen square that Jack had dropped and placed it back over the chalice. Then he carefully closed the cupboard door and locked it, removing the key and putting it back in the very place from which Jack had taken it.

At a glance it seemed that all was as it had been before Joseph’s calamitous error. The rain was still running down the glass, and the gusting wind made the window rattle in its frame. The fire still blazed and snagged in the hearth, its light spilling into the room. But this was an illusion, of course, Everything had changed. The blood of Christ was running through Sienna’s veins (and very soon filling the

bodies of the fleas that fed on her) and nothing in her world, or Harry's, would ever be the same again.

Five

In the span of his life, which had been to date, far longer than any human life, the Hell Priest had witnessed a great deal that would have cracked lesser minds wide open like fumbled eggs. Continents in remote dimensions which had been entirely a single species of mottle shelled creatures the size of road kill mongrels, their only food one another, or if pressed to it, the excremental remains of the same. And worse, of course, there was always worse—just as it seemed the remorseless creatures of the anti-Eden had unmade beauty as many ways of matter could endure his pilgrimages in the service of the Order could bring him to another place where some abomination that was barely distinguishable from the fetid mind at the water's edge would show itself. And then it drank something even less like a creature shaped by a loving hand lurched from the water and took the thing by its ragged throat and dragged it away to its death.

All this then to say that the Hell Priest was no stranger to the abhorrent, but did he feel that he had any fellowship with them whatsoever, and most certainly never considered the possibility that they were another by the same power. And yet, now that he was in the place where he'd longed to be for many years, the place that had conjured in his mind's eye waking dream upon waking dream—why did he find himself nostalgic for the presence of those corrupted beasts who had only earned him contempt in earlier times? He knew the answer, though there wasn't a living soul in Hell or out of it whom he would have confessed the truth, which was simply this:

That now he was finally here in the unholy of unholies, where he had ached for too long to be, he was afraid. He had good reason. He was standing in the darkness of an edifice so secret, so vast, so complex that there was nothing on earth, even in those most guarded of chambers of the Vatican which had been built by men of such genius they defied the laws of physics, and were vastly larger on the inside than on the out, had any hope of comparison with the place where the Hell Priest now stood. The

island upon which the structure had been built was called Yapora Yariziac (literally, the Last of All Possibilities), and the name was no lie. Through the waters of the lake had curled placidly upon the beach, by some exquisite illusion that concealed the secrets of the lake's deeper waters, there was no sound audible from the beach of the waters that sprang up from the lake's depths beyond the throw of sight, and empowering the waters, drove them against the great rock which Lucifer had raised his masterwork. They raced past the island in a frenzy that could not be seen from the inside, the lightless immensity of the building, but it could nevertheless be felt in the bedrock beneath the Cenobite's feet. He had come here to stand in the last testament to the Archfiend's genius for many reasons, but one above all others. He had expected to feel Lucifer's presence in him, filling up the void in him, and in so doing showing him the secret shape of his soul.

But now that he was here at the end of his journey with so many betrayals and blood-lettings marking his path, and he found himself assailed with doubts. Suppose

all his hopes of revelation were confounded? Suppose the Archfiend's majesty had not

left any mark on this place for the Cenobite to draw power and understanding from?

He'd read somewhere that the makers of Chartres Cathedral, the masons and the

carvers of the great façade had not chiseled their names onto the finished work out of

an act of humanity before the Creator in whose name the cathedral had been raised.

Was it possible, he wondered now, if Lucifer had done something similar? Actively

erasing the echoes of his presence which surely should have been everywhere in the

place?

The thought engendered a feeling he had not experienced in centuries: pain.

He was suddenly agonizingly aware of the nails that had been hammered into his

skull, their points pressing into the clotted jelly of his brain. He had always

understood that this portion of his anatomy, being nerveless, could not give him pain.

But he felt it now: bleak, meaningless, stupefying pain.

“This isn’t right...” he said. There was no echo off the walls of the edifice; they had consumed his words just as they had his hope.

He felt something stirring in his belly, then rising through his tormented body, growing in force as it ascended. He had cultivated an ironic distance from his own despair over the years but it would not put out of sight again. He repeated himself: “This isn’t right,” only this time the words escaped him as furious shout.

It won no echo from the walls, which fact was not lost on the Hell Priest. But he didn’t linger with the puzzle. His frustration would not indulge it. The ascending sound broke from him as a raw, rancid howl, which the creature he’d been when he crossed the threshold into the Devil’s darkness would not have been himself capable of making. It was a shameful unleashing; a confession of hurt, of weakness, of a broken state. And yet he couldn’t quiet it; the feeling that he was voicing could not be governed. The agony of his pierced skull and the fury it induced stripping him of any lingering ability, or even desire, to recover his equilibrium. All he could do was be a

vessel for this monstrous sound. Let it come, through it cracked the bones of his head
wide open to make itself more mouths. Let it come, let it come, let it come.

—

Harry woke from England with tears in his face. Tears he woke knowing that
Sienna would have gratefully shed had she not been a dog: tears of shame that she
drank the spilled blood and of the consequences of having done so. He was wiping the
wetness from his face with the heel of his hand when the last of the vision's
distracting power died away and he realized what it was that had woken him back to
the shore.

Somebody out of the darkness of the lake was howling, shrieking, screaming all these orders of sound condensed in one indivisible utterance. Sienna was racing down the beach, barking as she went, while Rebekkah was coming away from the fire, calling to Harry:

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Do you know what that unholy is?”

Rebekkah shook her head. “Maybe the Azeel know.”

“Murmuzian’s never heard it before.” Caz said. He and the demon were walking down towards Harry barefoot, a single blanket wrapped around both of them. It was large, but not large enough to conceal the fact that the lovers were naked beneath. Caz had his right arm wrapped around Murmuzian’s shoulder, while Murmuzian had lightly wrapped his tail around his partner’s leg, it’s bifurcated tip stroking his foot.

“This noise I never hear before.” Muziminan said.

“But now you think its Pinhead making that racket?” Harry said.

Murmuzian looked at Caz, confounded. “What is racket? Please to say?”

“That’s racket.” Caz said, crooking his head towards the lake.

“Means ugly noise.” Murmuzian said, smiling.

“That’s right,” Harry said. “But why? If that really *is* him...” he paused for a few seconds to attend to the sound again. “... what would make him puke up a sound like that?”

“You got me beat.” Caz said.

The Hell Priest’s anguished clamor was now starting to die away, and eventually fell silent. But that didn’t alter the effect it had upon the Azeel. A dozen or more members of the tribe had assembled close to the fire, with Surraban at its heart. She wqas talking very fast, her words punctuated with a complex series of hand motions; the middle finger of her left hand tracing signs in her palm of her right, or simple inscribing shapes in the air, which invisible trails ignited where they had

crossed: tiny bursts of purple-blue light that hung in the air in front of her like a burgeoning constellation. She had her audience rapt, so it was all the stranger that she should suddenly turn and point a finger at Murmuzian.

“You! Whore-Boy!” She yelled, with surprising vigor in her voice. “You come away! We’ve enough trouble without you raising your tail for some toxic Christian!”

Murmuzian drew away from Caz, letting the blanket slide off his body as he did so. There was a satyrically curved erection pulsing as it rose from his groin to tap his navel.

“Are we enemies, they and us?” he said.

“Shut your foolish mouth, whore-boy, and come here.”

“I’ll come when I’m ready, bitch-bag!”

His response won some poorly stifled guffaws from several of the males in Surraban’s vicinity, but she unleashed a torrent of Azzellian at them, pointing at Murmuzian as she did so. There was no ambiguity in any in any of this. They were

being instructed to fetch the erring Murmuzian, and bring him back into the bosom of the tribe.

Three of the demons immediately moved to obey Surraban's orders, but Caz and Harry stopped in front of Murmuzian.

"He's not going with you, lady. Unless he wants to."

Caz glanced back at Murmuzian, who shook his head.

"No, he's staying here. So you stay over there and we'll stay over here—"

"And nothing will get done," said Rebekkah, breaking through from behind the men to address Surraban directly. "They all respect you for your wisdom, so I'm perfectly ready to believe that you're indeed a wise woman. This little dispute about what Murmuzian may or may not have done—"

"Oh I did it!" Murmuzian said, lobbing his boasts over Rebekkah's head so they landed at Surraban's feet. "Three times!"

"Thank you." Rebekkah said.

“And I liked it!”

“All right, Muz—”

“I liked him too! Very much!” He grinned and leaned out to lay a wet kiss on Caz’s mouth. “He’s not my enemy. He’s not your either. Our enemy’s out there making that crazy damn noise.”

“Are you done?” Rebekkah said.

“Yeah I’m done.”

“It so happens he’s right,” Rebekkah said, taking a tentative step back towards Surraban and the tribe around her. “We didn’t come here because we have any argument with you. All you’ve shown us is kindness. And if you want us to leave now, and just get on with your fishing and firemaking and your story-telling then I completely understand that. You have every right to do exactly that. But I don’t think the thing in there is going to let you go on with your gentle life for very much longer.”

“Why you say this?” Surraban demanded, stepping clear of her tribe as Rebekkah had stood clear of hers. “You know nothing about how things are tomorrow.”

“Neither do you or you wouldn’t still be here.”

“You want to frighten us? We are Azeel. No frighten Azeel.”

“I know that.” Rebekkah said. “You’re brave people, and you have a proud history. Who else in Hell could say that they built the Devil’s own palace? All we’re asking you to do is give us a boat, and we’ll row over there ourselves. You don’t need—”

“Palace?” Surraban said with a wide, tight-lipped grin.

“Yes. Lucifer’s Palace. His great sanctuary.”

“That’s what you think it is?”

“What else could it be?”

And now the lips parted, and Surraban's bright teeth became visible as her laughter deepened.

"Why does she find it so funny?" Caz said to Murmuzian.

"Because it's not a palace."

"What is it then?"

"Perhaps you should ask the one inside. We've never been allowed to look, you see. The story goes that just before the final spire was to be put in the palace Lucifer came to view this momentous event. And there was great joy amongst all our kin because they had built the largest most beautiful edifice on earth or in hell. It is nineteen times bigger than Chartres Cathedral, which was built many years later with one of our own tribe working beside the Master Architect."

"The story, Murmuzian." Caz said.

“Ok, just that he took the spire off the one who was going to set it in place, and he drove the spike through them, then flew up to the highest point, and set the spire in place with the Azeel still on it.”

“Dead.”

“Alive. For seven hundred years. So the stories say.” He planted a second, sadder kiss on Caz’s cheek. “It’s best if I go back with them. Your business is too weighty that I should make it weightier still.”

Caz caught his hand for an instant but neither held on. As he crossed the empty slope of pebbles between the two factions, Surraban growled.

“Sensible.” It was Harry who spoke now, though he had no idea he was going to do so. “Some of us have come a long way to get to this place, even though we didn’t know what it is or how we will face creature who built it. Perhaps one of us will live to come back and tell the tale. But if not—if you have to invent something about why

we went in and didn't come out, don't make us seem very hateful and stupid." He paused. "No, stupid is fine. I'll own up to stupid."

"We won't be talking about you," Surraban said, "Trust it that I say. Nothing of you except perhaps when somebody mentions Murmuzian's scars. And the absence of his tail. Which I shall, of course, eat."

"You wouldn't if you knew how I pleased him with it." Murmuzian said.

The old lady loosed a roar of disgust and fury, and swiped at Murmuzian with her stick. She not only missed her target but lost the weapon. The stick rolled down the sloping pebbles, but before it could come to a halt Sienna had it in her teeth.

"Who's dog is that?" Surraban demanded. She pointed her crooked crone finger at Rebekkah. "You it is! You own the dog!"

"Nobody owns Sienna. She's a free dog."

"She be a dead dog real quick if she not bring my stick to me."

"She doesn't understand," Rebekkah said.

“Then she’s a stupid dog, and I will eat her stupid brains off the same plate as the whore-boy’s tail!”

None of this impressed Sienna. She had dragged the stick which was just a little too long for her to hold in her mouth without it clear of the ground, down to the beach, and was not in the shallows with it, having already taught it, so it seemed, a short repertoire of tricks. She had it standing on one end, turning like a showgirl, while a small system of wet pebbles circled in the opposite direction. Watching this surreal little performance Harry could not help but remember the remark Joseph had made about Jesus’ enemies and only his friends had thought he was a Jewish magician. Perhaps the assessment hadn’t been completely wide of the mark. Perhaps there’d been enough of the showmen in Christ for him to use a trick or two to work up a crowd.

Surraban was never happy seeing her rod of office being used in this less than respectful fashion. She let out a stream of guttural sounds that were surely Azeelic

curses. They had no effect on Sienna. She did, however, send out a less than subtle message to the enemy, by letting out a little growl and short barks which set the stick moving three times faster than before. The shallow water in which the old woman's stick stood jolted and jumped and seconds later a new circling system rose from the water, ten times longer than the first. Easily half of these new orbiting bodies were not even pebbles. They were stones, their angular shapes smoothed by being repeatedly rolled in the shallow waters close to the shore.

Throughout this escalation, Sienna kept up the pretense that this was all just a harmless game, wagging her tail and running around her carousel of stones and stick, barking. It was an illusion she'd kept up for more than two thousand years, if account of her life that Harry was piecing together in his head was correct. She was hiding memories, dreams and the DNA of Christ himself behind the façade of a commonplace dog. It was no small freight to be carrying, given the effects such knowledge would have on the Western World if it were to be made public. Whatever

stones the great systems of the church and state chose to use as their bedrock, some of it would surely be cracked by unfortunate detail encode in her blood or in the memories of a life that could not have been as perfect as that required by God whilst still being the flawless man the church required of him. She was capable of doing more harm to the church with her little body of truth than all its many enemies put together. In certain circles Harry was sure she'd be welcomed as a rough draft for the Anti-Christ. Who was he to say: perhaps she was. Of all the sour knowledge he'd had to swallow of late, the thing that was uppermost in his mind right now was the simplest. Nothing was for certain. Not in its roots. Not in its flowering and its' coming into ripeness, and never, never in its decay.

He watched the dog who was possibly the Anti-Christ run in the water, barking at the little cosmos of stick and stones she'd created and a curious sense of liberation rose up in him.

“What the Hell?” he muttered, grinning. He knew how preposterous it was to be standing so close to the void, the air filled with the stink of vast, soon to be incandescent powers, decayed and decaying, volatile, world-destroying blossoms and yet be smiling like a kid at a playground, pockets stuffed with bills. But he had brought himself here, with insatiable curiosity for things an ordinary man born of ordinary parents like him had no business getting near. And worse, with a hunger in him to try and do a bit of good in these betrayed spaces that gaped like wounds on the shadowy body of the species. But as he said: What the Hell? He’s taken the journey, for better or for worse, and now here he was close to a destination, astounding as that was, and God had come dressed in snout and tail, and Lucifer was not far away, so there were going to be some fine fireworks if it didn’t rain. And sure there was a better than good chance that he’d never see the light of day again; but he’d had his fill of skies anyway, so there was no great tragedy in that. Just as long as he got a glimpse

of how the scene might look when all things ended, then the glimpse would be enough to salve the sting of his own little passing.

A fresh burst of venomous Azeelis, splattered with bits of pidgin English, was enough to stir him out of his meditation. The dangerous spectacle in the shallows hadn't intimidated Surraban into silence. If anything it had simply wound up the force of her fury.

"Neyat, Neyat!" she said, pointing at Sienna's magnificent creation. "Az tho ranmusuta? Ki! As tho, whore-boy and sodimittica? Ur remeph, nos tro fyr, nostro fyr!"

Whatever this last word was meant it seemed to do the trick. There was a sudden outburst of righteous rage from several of the young Azeel males.

Caz took out his knife. "Oh, here we go." He said wearily. "Same old. Same old." He stepped past Rebekkah into the space between the two factions. "Well, fuck

you all.” He said quietly. “No but you wouldn’t let me would you? You might start enjoying it.”

“Nostrofy?” said a voice close to his shoulder. Murmuzian, of course.

“Fuck Nostrofy. What does it mean?”

“Means very clean. To the bone.”

“That’s clean. And the dirt is us is it?”

“Worse than dirt.”

“Excrement.” Surraban said, making certain she pronounced each syllable clearly.

There was another outburst from the demons: “Nostrofy, Nostrofy!”

And shouting they came towards Caz and Murmuzian, five, six, seven of them, tails raised up above their heads, blood tears of elation coursing down their cheeks, splashing their bantam chests.

They raised their stone headed clubs as they picked up speed, roaring the call to cleansing as they advanced.

“NOSTROFYR!”

As the closest of them came in striking distance of his targets, Murmuzian stepped around Caz and would have opened his throat had something not thrown him back out of Murmuzian’s range. He dropped backwards onto the pebbles, his club falling from his grip and rolling down the beach. For a moment everybody, even the rest of the dead demon’s comrades, stopped in mid-stride, mid-shout, mid-breath, their gazes going to the face of the corpse. His eyes were still open, his pupils rolled upwards, as if puzzled by the absence of his eyebrows and everything above them: his skull, his brain, all sheared off and carried away up the beach, some of it sizzling in the embers of the fire.

Perhaps inevitably it was Surraban who broke the silence.

“M’dem, chide-eze? M’dem?”

“She’s asking them if they’re afraid.” Murmuzian said.

Surraban went on: “Only one whore-boy and this gameti soddmane.”

“And me.” Said Rebekkah. “And her.”

She pointed down towards Sienna, and it became clear what happened to the dead demon. Sienna’s carousel was no longer **working**: the stones were hanging in the air, trembling ever so slightly, all in readiness to be dispatched, at a simple thought for Sienna, to take down another of the enemy.

“Now,” said Rebekkah. “Shall we stop all this stupidity? We need a boat to get us over to the place that you took the Hell Priest. Maybe some of you have enough courage to come with us, and stand against him, because if you don’t he’ll come here one day and wipe you out. That’s the way he thinks. He’s already destroyed his own order, so they wouldn’t get in his way. He’ll do the same to you the moment he steps back onto this beach.”

Surraban's response to this was to hawk up a wad of phlegm, and spit on the stones. Then she turned her back on the Rebekkah and the others, and headed back towards the beach pausing only to nudge the corpse with the side of her foot. Then she went back to the fire and sat down in front of it, her back to everything and everybody on the beach below.

"Well?" said Rebekkah, scanning the young men who'd been ready to kill Caz and Murmuzian a minute or two before. "Which of you are going to get us a boat?"

Six

The name of the head that the Hell Priest had brought out of Bastion was U'uaya Z'firki, and she had communicated with the Devil on all matters that were of any significance for generations. She alone had known the codes that allowed access to this inner sanctum, or so the Cenobite had heard her claims when she'd come to

the fortress to report on some matter that she'd taken to Lucifer on behalf of the Order. She was the go-between, the broker, the only demon outside his own circle—who stayed, according to her, in his immediate vicinity at all times—whom he trusted. The origins of this were ancient and obscure and essentially irrelevant: she and she alone had had access to the Great Fallen One, and if anybody needed his authority on some matter then they had been obliged to make their approach to U'Uaya Z'Friki. She had enjoyed the power this bestowed on her, no question. She'd sit in her vast chamber in the Bastion, its walls lined with paintings she'd collected from Popes and Reich-founders for the promise of a good word with the Satanic ear, and allow a trickle of grateful petitioners into her presence to ask her if she would intervene in some matter, and in the process of making their request, mentioning some gift they had brought to sweeten her mood. When the Hell Priest had come for her, and told her that he would be executing her, but using his magic to keep her alive she had made no attempt to defend herself or protest the cruelty of his

judgment. She had lived too long by the rules that were just as cruel. All she asked to do, while she still had her hands, was to touch the Bernini bronze of David, having slain Goliath, which was, she had said, her greatest joy.

Once she'd done so she took her beheading without complaint.

"Where is he, Z'fiki?" the Hell Priest said.

"Are you done with your howling then?"

The Hell Priest had set her down on the marble floor, and had lit a very small black flame fire beside her. When he'd first lit it—before he'd come to realize the terrible emptiness here—he'd been anxious not to offend the great architect so had lit the humblest of fires. Now, with a whispered word the black flames swelled ten-fold, the sudden heat bringing a cry of complaint from the head of U'uaya Z'firki.

"You're burning me!"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Don't you care?"

“Why should I? You’re no use to me. And you of all people know how that little game works. You do something for me, give me a little gift, show a little kindness, and maybe I’ll do something in return.”

“Turn down the fire. I beg you. I’ll tell you whatever you need to know.”

“But there’s a problem, right there. You could have told me a thousand things on the way here, couldn’t you? *Couldn’t you?*”

“Yes. Yes!”

“But you didn’t.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I was afraid. I thought if I told you the truth you’d have no further need for me.”

“About Lucifer.”

“I’m listening.”

“And all those years I claimed I’d been meeting with him, I hadn’t.”

“You never saw him at all?”

“Twice only. In the name of sacrilege, Lord, these flames are hot.”

“They’re meant to be. Now go on. You saw him twice, you said.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me when and what passed between you.”

“I met him once when his palace was very close to being finished. It had taken two hundred and ninety-seven years to build.”

“Really.”

“He wanted it to be nineteen times the size of the cathedral at Chartres.

Nineteen times more glorious. And bigger to the same degree.”

“Nineteen times the size of Chartres?”

“Yes.”

“Was he intending to assemble half of Hell there?”

No. He told me that first time that he intended to retire to a state of seclusion, so that he could solve the great problem.”

“Which was what?”

“How we could get home. Not just him, all of us. He wanted all of us to return to the City of God. But he knew it wouldn’t be easy. He said he would just have to think about it, long and hard. But he told me he was certain there was a way, if he could have the space and the silence to think about it. To solve it.”

“And you believed him?”

“I did. I still do.”

“So he is here.”

“Yes, he’s here. Of course, he’s here.”

“Why would I not sense him then, when I stepped inside.”

U’uaya Z’Friki didn’t answer. She simply moaned.

“I asked you a question.”

“Lord, the flames,” she said, “Please, I beg you in mercy’s name turn them down just a little. It’s hard to think when my brains are cooking.”

The Cenobite made a subtle motion with his hand and the dark flames diminished somewhat. Z’Friiki was grateful for small measures.

“Thank you, Lord. Your kindness is limitless.”

“No it isn’t. And nor is my patience. So answer my question. Why could I not sense his presence when I came in here?”

“Because he built the Palace to protect his person from every kind of scrutiny. God himself could not find Lucifer in this place if the Fallen One came to hide from him.”

“The more I hear of Lucifer the more I hunger to meet him. You said you met him twice. When was the second occasion?”

“Twelve or thirteen years after the completion of the palace. He summoned me with a number of other demons who had been amongst the most high. He told us

that he would not be seeing them again for many years. The challenge of finding his way back into the City of God was more intractable than he'd imagined. It had been his belief, he told us, that God only wished to punish us for a little time, before allowing us a return into his presence having learned the lesson of how much pain separation from our creator brought. But the ineffable labyrinth God had made was designed, he said, to keep us from *ever* coming back. I remember even now how his voice became as he told us how we had to strain to catch the words. We had been cast down in perpetuity, he said, and the only hope we had –and it was a frail hope at best, but it was all that was left for us- was for him to try and put himself in God's head, and by so doing, come to understand the design of the labyrinth, and solve it. Then we would go back the humblest of penitents, lay down and lay open our breasts so he could tread upon our hearts if that was his will. But hoping that we would be forgiven."

"What did the others have to say about all of this?"

“What could they say? Lucifer’s intellect blazed a thousand times brighter than ours. If this was the only way he knew for us to return into the Blessed Place then we had no other course than the one he laid before us. We knew how to be patient. If this took a thousand or ten thousand years, if in the end we would be forgiven our trespasses.”

“And what was your place in all of this?”

“He chose me to be the messenger. I would come here to report on how things went amongst the fallen, and in turn I would bring news back from Lucifer if there was news to bring. Sometimes there was. Sometimes he got a little closer to solving the puzzle of how to get back into the City of God. But mostly all we could report was failure.”

“And this went on for how many years?”

“One thousand, six hundred and nineteen.”

“But after that second you never saw him again?”

“No. Sometimes there would be written messages for me, written in, he said, in his blood, and signed in his fluid hand. And sometimes he would speak to me from one of the stairways, hidden in the shadows. Or on a few occasions he sent one of his acolytes with a message. But I never saw him in the flesh.”

“But you know that he’s here.”

“Of course.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“I have faith.”

“Faith. That’s all that I have to rely upon? Your faith.”

“If that won’t suit you, Lord then think instead of the sense of it. If he’s not here, then where would he be? Not out there in the wasteland. Not in Primordium.”

“Maybe he found a back way to Heaven and simply didn’t tell you. Maybe all these years you’ve been speaking to smoke and mirrors.”

“No!” the head shouted. “Never! *Never!*”

There was such violence in her outburst that she lost her balance, and toppled over into the fire. The flames leapt out and over her like starved animals, igniting her hair in an instant. Z'firiki's words decayed into a shriek.

The Hell Priest reached down into the halo of black flame that surrounded the demon's head and lifted her up, so that for the first time since the moment of her beheading they were looking eye to eye. The flames were already starting to devour the flesh of her face.

"Out?" he said to her.

She wasn't so deranged by terror that she didn't know what he was saying to her.

"Yes! Yes! Out!"

He blew, lightly, as at a tiny candle the flames were extinguished instantly. Smoke drifted from her head while the flecks of sooty flesh and clumps of burnt hair fell from the side of her scalp that had been razed. She hung from his fist like the

most abject of trophies, her eyes averted so as not to see his revulsion. Or worse, his pity.

“You were talking about faith,” said the Hell Priest.

U’uaya Z’firki made a faint, trembling smile. “Now you have me hoping that he isn’t here after all,” she said. “To have him see me... like this...”

“I could make you whole again with a few words.”

“Would you do that for me?” she said, her eyes returning to him. “There would be nothing I would not do for you, I swear. He’s here somewhere, I know he is. We could find him together...”

“After all these years not seeing him,” the Hell Priest said, “And you’re still love-sick at the thought of him—”

“No.”

“—coming here decade after decade, century and century, always hoping you’d find him waiting for you the next time, or the time after that. Did he know?”

“Will you make me whole again? I don’t want him to see me like this.”

“I asked you a question.”

“Yes he knew. Of course he knew. We were lovers. I wasn’t the only one, of course. I never imagined for a moment that I was. Or that I’d ever be the only one. He liked men too much for one thing, and I could never give him that. But I was happy with what we had, little as it was, and he told the last time I saw him, that I would have to be very patient, but I told him that was great hardship as long as I knew...”

she looked down and a tear welled beneath her left eye, which had been caught by the black flame, and left without lashes. “...as long as I knew we would have a reunion, I was willing to wait ten thousand years.” She blinked the tears away, so that she could look at the Hell Priest with clear eyes.

“Will you make me whole?” she said. “Let him see me as I was, please.”

“Look at you. I always imagined you in the Regime were all as hard as stone. But all you’ve talked about is faith and love.” He gently shook her head from side to side.

“What an absurd, weak, ugly thing you are. He will be appalled at the sight of you.”

“Then heal me, please, Lord. Please.”

“And give you hands to carry a knife, or feet to carry you away from me? No. No, I don’t think I’ll do that.”

Z’firki’s response was to open her mouth and using all the vocal power the Hell Priest had granted her when he’d preserved her head from death, she let loose a cry consisting of three syllables:

“Lucifer!”

The sound of her voice came back from a great distance, and she heard the first echo Z’Firki unleashed a second shout:

“V’hetha naiter o, theamoa! Zy, theamoa! U’uaya Z’Firki, theamoa!”

The words echoed strangely in the darkness, the echoes from one wall coming to meet the echoes off the wall opposite, and doing so with unnatural accuracy, so that it seemed there was not one voice crying out, but two.

“V’hetha Naitero, theanoa!” They cried, and before they could go any further the two had become four, their volume diminished not at all by the distance they were traveling. *“Zy, theanoa!”*

In fact the reverse was true; each voice in this swelling chorus was getting louder as the echoes multiplied.

“What have you done?” the Hell Priest demanded.

“Heal me, and I’ll undo it.”

The Hell Priest gripped U’uaya with both hands now, shaking the wretched remains in his frustration, his fingers digging deep into her charred and supporting scalp. “Tell me, damn you!”

“I was waking the sleepers,” the woman replied.

“What sleepers?”

“That will become apparent.” U’uaya said. “Very soon.”

“All right.” The Hell Priest said. “Enough of your games.” He dropped the head to the ground, where it rolled close to the black flame fire.

“Too hot?” The Hell Priest said to Z’Firki, and without waiting for her to start wailing he kicked her head off into the darkness, getting his toe up under it as he did so, lifting it into the air. It hit the floor some distance away, and then rolled to a halt.

“That’s what love gets you.” Norma remarked quietly. “A swift kick and your history.”

“Keep you opinions to yourself in this sacred place.” The Hell Priest said.

“Lord?” Knotchyea murmured.

“Yes, I hear it too. Some mechanism beneath the floor.”

“And the walls—”

“Yes?” he listened. “Yes, there too.”

“This place means to murder us.” Knotchyea said.

“If it wanted to do that it would have already done so. This is something else.”

“She called Lucifer’s name.” Norma said. “Perhaps the place is preparing itself for his arrival.”

The Hell Priest made no reply to this, which was answer in itself.

—

The Azeel had brought three boats down from the top of the beach, and carried them down to the water. Each was big enough to carry five or six people.

Murmuzian introduced four members of his family, brother and sister, Nevarvi and

Tanti, to Caz and Rebekkah and Harry. They would all be in the middle boat,

Murmuzian said.

“Does that suit you?” he wanted to know.

“Only if there’s room for Sienna.” Rebekkah replied. “You want to take the dog.”

“Christ yes, we want to take the dog.” Harry said, aware for the first time how unthinkingly he used Christ’s name, evoking him without thinking about it. He deliberately repeated what he said, without the evocation, just to remind himself:

“Yes, we want to take the dog.”

Caz, ever sensitive to nuances, gave him a puzzled look.

“Later, Harry said to him quietly.”

Of course if you like her in the boat with you, so she goes.”

“We do.” Rebekkah said.

“What about the other two boats?” Caz said. “Whose going in those? Don’t tell me you’ve got Surraban for company?”

“No, she would cut her own throat first. She will stay here and pray that she is able to hear our death screams.”

“Taking it for granted that we’ll die.”

“Of course.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“You think we’ll die too?”

“Yes.” Muximian said. “But that’s not the worst death can bring.”

“Separation.” Caz said quietly.

Murmuzian stared down at the stones at his feet, then at the boats, then finally looked up and met Caz’s gaze.

“Yes.” He said, “that would be a new Hell.”

“No,” said Harry, “It’s the oldest. And probably the worst.”

Nobody spoke up to contradict the observation.

“Shall we get going then?” Harry said finally.

“We never heard who was going to go in the other two boats.” Rebekkah said.

“Behind no, rescuers,” Murmuzian said, “in case our boat overturn in the fury of the lake.”

“It doesn’t look very furious.” Rebekkah said.

“Not now, maybe. But if a big shoal of hiroto fish surround the boat or if woad squid come up from their hives then it’s like the lake goes crazy. Boats turn over—”

he snapped his fingers. “—like this!”

“Ok, so we might need rescuers.” Harry said. “But what about them?” He nodded towards the first boat, which was being pushed off from the shore with no less than nine passengers. Four of them were young, barely adolescents. They knelt in two rows of two at the front of the boat, their heads down. Behind them was a much

older Azeel, a male who looked as though he had a few years on Surraban. He too knelt, his head inclined. Behind him were four strong young demons with oars.

“What are they doing?” Harry said.

“We have to hope they will do nothing at all.” Murmuzian replied. The end of his tail was flicking back and forth like a cat. “But if there has to be blood in the water then it will be theirs not ours, you understand?”

“I understand, but I don’t want it happening.”

“I know. And I expect your saying this. Please do not kick a stink. This is the way it has to be or the boats will never leave shore.’

Harry shrugged. “Your beach, your boats, your rules.” He said. “I guess I’ve got no choice in the matter.”

“Is right. No choice. This or swim.” He cracked a smile, clearly very pleased with himself for having made a rudimentary joke.

“I’ll take the boat.” Harry said.

Caz, Harry, Rebekkah and Sienna got into the boat, with Murmuzian taking the oars on one side and his brother Nezarvi taking them on the other. By the time they had been pushed clear, the boat behind them had been loaded up and was also being pushed away from the beach.

In a matter of just a few rhythmical strokes of the oars the three boats were out in the vast darkness of the lake. Harry glanced back over his shoulder. The beach was already little more than a sliver of flickering light, diminishing with every stroke of the oars.

There followed a period of curious peacefulness, the only sounds those of the oars dipping into the water and lifting again, dipping, lifting, dipping, lifting and the soft hiss of boats cutting through the lightless water. Harry studied the darkness into which they were heading intently, looking for their place of destination. There were immense thunderheads over the lake, or so his eyes seemed to tell him one moment; and the next they didn't seem to be clouds at all, but a structure that rose up with

such ambition that its topmost spires could only be inches from the stone sky. But his architectural interpretation of the forms he saw was no more reliable than any other.

No sooner had he grasped the solid structure than that too melted away into nothing.

Finally he turned to Murmuzian and asked the question:

“Where are we going?”

“To his palace. His masterpiece. His sanctuary.”

“And when we get there?”

“When we get there we fall on our knees and put our hands to the ground, and beg him to let us come into his presence.”

“And supposing he doesn’t want us there?”

“We’ll never know. He’ll tread on our heads and that’ll be the end of it.”

“Hush.” Said Rebekkah.

All conversation ceased. The oarsmen raised their oars, responding to the intensity of that one syllable.

And in the hush they heard what Rebekkah had heard: the slow, aching grind of vast wheels, as though some mechanism machine, not used in many hundreds of years, was lifting its head from the sleep and proceeding to move an ancient body.

The source of the sounds was impossible to fix; it seemed to be coming from everywhere ahead of them. Harry narrowed his eyes, trying to make a better sense of the mysterious form in the clouds, and every few seconds he'd catch a glimpse of it, but he didn't pretend to himself that he had any sense of the size of its scale of shape.

"Very still." Murmuzian murmured. The boats were rocking a little now, as some disturbance rising from the depths curved the waters to slap against the hulls of the boats.

Caz snuck a look in his demon-lover's direction.

"Fish or squid?" he murmured.

Murmuzian's expression told all; it was neither. He spontaneously reached out and caught hold of Caz's hand, gripping it tight.

—

The noise inside the great building was continuing to get louder. Knotchyea had to shout to be heard over it. Even then the Hell Priest claimed not to hear what was said the first time. Knotchyea tried again:

“The old woman!”

“What about her?”

“Perhaps I should take her out of here.”

“Why would you want to do that? Unless of course it is you who wants to go and you’re using her as an excuse.”

Now it was Knotchyea who replied as though he’d not heard most of what the Hell Priest said.

“Shall I go then?” he said.

“Do as you please!” the Hell Priest yelled. “You won’t get very far.”

Turning his back on the soldier he bent down and plunged his hands into the black flames. They gave up their negativity at his touch and blazed white, then incandescent. He clenched his fist around two parts of the flame and lifted them off the ground, leaving nothing, not even embers, at his feet. Then he pressed his hands together, working the fire as though it were clay, pressing it between his palms then closing his hands around it completely, so that for a few seconds he plunged the interior of the cathedral into total darkness, only to open a few slits between his fingers through which narrow shafts of light sprang in all directions. He examined it briefly and then went to work again, intensifying the brightness as he pressed the fire together with renewed force, making it even smaller and more intense in the process. Finally, he was satisfied, and he casually tossed the ball brightness into the air. It rose with uncanny speed, which increased the higher it climbed, up, up into the vastly

darkness overhead. Finally it stuck to the ceiling of the cathedral, though it had risen so high that it was barely more than a dot of light when it did so. The impact, however, unleashed the light in all directions, a thousand bright dots swarming over the ceiling in all directions, tracing as they did so the series of immense vaults that spread in four directions from the spot where the light had struck. It lit, as it did so, not only the massive surfaces of the vaults themselves but also the sub-structures tied them together.

“Fuck and fuck and fuck me dead.” Knotchyea murmured. “That’s a long way up.”

The dots of light were proliferating, bursting whenever they struck something and dividing into a dozen or more seeds of light, which went on their own paths of revelation, some racing ahead to illuminate the next vault and its anatomy, some advancing to the cathedral walls, and dropping down like blazing veils, others descending the pillars, which numbered in the hundreds. They were built of naked

brick, into which unnumerable forms had been set. Some forged from iron and steel, some chiseled from white marble, the smallest were the size of a man or woman, the longest easily ten times bigger, but still dwarfed by the scale of the pillars. And just as it had uncovered the secret anatomy of the vaulted ceiling, so the fire revealed what lay beside the pillars and the walls. Here was the source of the sound that the Hell Priest had heard. The brick of the pillars and the dressed stone of the walls concealed what looked to the Hell Priest like a machine, though created by a soul that had passed eternities in the presence of God Almighty would have been capable of creating so strange and glorious a thing. It was forged from fog and steel, its fly-wheels disappearing on their outward swing into the darkness where moths the size of eagles beat their wings to dust, or bled their colors into limitless design, which slid away to meet its reflection some razor horizon.

And all of this in its beauty and complexity was just the sliver of a sliver, a tiny portion of the overwhelming spectacle that the machine presented. The revelation

meanwhile continued its downward motion, spilling translucence across the floor, and then proceeding to make visible the structures beneath the cathedral. This apparatus below was even more titanic in scale than the **machine** in the walls and pillars. Massive six engines, each identical in design, were arranged beneath the building, connected by dozens of cables in which spirals of liquid light raced in both directions. It was powered by energies up and down out of the chamber that lay at the limits of the unveiling light: a many sided form deep, deep in the rock, which clouds of energy who size defied even the Hell Priest's grasp of immensities bloomed and burst and threw out a surge of power that made his blood comply with its elaborate rhythms.

All this was enough to feed a hungry eye for years, and not know its sum, but the Hell Priest's wandering gaze found amongst the spectacle a sight that rendered every other one of the previous sights inconsequential. There, set in the middle of the

conflagration that fed these engines, was a window chamber, linked to the world outside the furnace by a passageway. The Hell Priest smiled.

“There you are.” He said.

Seven

The bright, reverberating lights that the Hell Priest had thrown up against the vaulted ceiling and had since made its revelatory way down the walls now passed underground, revealing as it had to the Hell Priest the marvelous complexity of the

structure upon which the magnificence of the cathedral was set. He saw the light flickering in the veins of the sub-structure, and the mysterious motions that constantly informed the mechanism that churned and fluttered below.

“Look.” Rebekah said very quietly, directing Harry’s attention to the lightless chamber that hung in the nuclear device where the energies that drove this stupendous system were sourced.

“One way in, one way out.” Harry said

“And look who’s paying a visit.”

It took Harry a minute or more, his eyes far from accustomed to reading the constantly shifting interior, before he finally found and focused upon the Adversary.

The Hell Priest was descending a long flight of stairs which led to the corridor that sewed the sealed chamber. It was clear to Harry, and surely also to the Genobite that the mechanism below the steps was designed to deconstruct them in a heart beat, and

drop anyone upon them into a narrow fissure of bedrock that fell away and away, its narrowness unchanging, until finally distance and darkness erased it from sight.

The Hell Priest had come to the bottom of the flight of steps now, and began his approach to the portion of the passageway which was sealed off from human eyes. As he did so his step slowed, and just a stride or two from the darkened passageway he stopped and lowered his head in a simple gesture of reverence. He remained in that position for several seconds, then, raising his hand and lightly wiping the corners of his mouth with his middle finger and thumb he strode over the threshold and out of sight.

“Harry...” Caz said.

“So now we know where the Devil is.”

“Forget the Devil for a minute, we got a bigger problem.”

Harry reluctantly removed his gaze from the passageway into which his enemy had gone, and turned to Caz.

“What?” he said.

It was Murmuzian who replied, directing Harry’s scrutiny over the side of the boat.

“The lights in the cathedral...” he said “They stirred up.”

Harry was looking down into the water now, the light that had begun above was now spilling into the water from the sub-structure of the cathedral. It’s brightness had stirred into a gigantic form.

“The Quoato?” Harry murmured.

“Yes.” Muzinian replied.

The creature didn’t look like a fish. It resembled instead an enormous millipede, its knotted innards visible through a translucent carapace. Even as Harry was staring down at it the creature raised its complicated head and stared back at him. His head seemed at first no more than further scales such as it had along its entire body. Except that they were completely opaque. The featureless face regarded

Harry—or at least he imagined he felt his regard—and then, after a minute or more of fruitless study the shields reacted and revealed the face of the creature. It was hunger, of course; perhaps twenty feet from brow to chin, but there was humanity there, even in so vast a form. His eyes were deep set, but there was a ring of milky whiteness around the black horizontal slit which was focusing on him now. Its nose was not unlike that of a bat, flattened and gaping, but its mouth was completely human, wide yes, but far from expansive. Even now, it seemed to make something very like a smile, uncovering as it did so twin rows of acidic blue teeth. And as it smiled the dark slits of its pupils opened in a heart-beat, driving every last brightness out. It started to ascend, peristaltic waves passing through its anatomy to legs and right so its myriad legs moved with maximum efficiency, being its enormous body (to which at present Harry could see no end) up towards the surface.

As it ascended he realized how wrong he'd been about his judgment of the depth of the water. Unused to staring into water so clear he had assumed the Quato

was relatively close to the surface. He was wrong. It was deep: very deep, and the water so unlimited that Harry had no sense of how truly enormous this entity was.

The upper two segments were easily the size of a quarter of an eighteen wheeler, and yet for all its scale it moved with extraordinary grace, the motion of its legs and the sinuous sweep of its body almost mesmerizing.

It was Caz's voice that stirred Harry from its hypnotic state.

"What are you doing?" he shouted, getting Harry to his feet as he did so.

"Down, Cazi, please." Murizian said. The boat was already rocking violently from side to side.

"Then make them stop!" Caz yelled. He was pointing to the first of three boats.

Harry followed Caz's accusing finger and saw to his horror that the old man sitting behind the youths in the first of the boats had got to his feet, the youth in front of him was already standing, his head thrown back, presenting his throat.

"Stop, you crazy fucker—"

“Cazi!”

“Tell him, Murizian. Tell him this isn’t right.’

“We have to placate the Quoato—”

“You’re not listening to me. Make. Him. Stop.”

Caz had hot his own knife out of its sheath, and lifted it, the blade between his fingers.

“He’s dead in three seconds, Murizian. Tell him. Two seconds—”

Harry walked up and snatched the knife out of Caz’s hand. Caz swung around.

“Fuck you, Harry. Give me my knife, before—”

There was a splash from the bow of the first boat, and Harry, along with Caz, looked down into the water. The youth’s corpse was already sinking quickly, thanks to the weight around his feet. The blood pulsed from the expert cut the old man had made; and there were tiny twitches in the right leg, though they ceased before the body sank out of sight behind the veil of blood.

“Fucking murderer!” Caz yelled.

“Has to do!” Murizian said.

“Fucking savages!”

“No, you don’t see Cazi—”

“Don’t Cazi me. He just killed—”

“It was a sacrifice.” Rebekkah said. “Sit down and give your thanks.”

“Thanks.”

“To him.” Rebekkah said, nodding down at the bloody water. “And to them.”

She looked at the other two blindfolded sacrifices. “Who are going the same way.”

“No way. This isn’t going to happen. Harry? Harry! What are you looking at?”

“Have you sent the size of that fucker?”

“I don’t care. Give me my knife back, Harry!”

“Can’t do that, Caz.” Harry said. “This isn’t a very nice game to be playing but we got no choice.”

“They’re killing kids, Harry.”

“Yeah, it’s fucked, but—”

“What’s got into you? You could never have—”

“Maybe I’m just—”

“Putting up with some killing—”

“—too tired of *losing all the FUCKING TIME!*”

The echo of his shout came back to meet him from the walls of the building on one island, though they only heard the last two syllables.

“Well if this is the price to pay of winning—” he yelled back at Harry.

He stopped mid-thought, and turned back towards the first boat, which was a matter of yards away from the shore. The executioner got the third and last of his sacrificial victims to her feet, raising his knife as he did so.”

Caz yelled for him to stop and moved to the bow of the middle boat, throwing himself into the water. His noise had drawn the executioner’s attention for a moment.

There was a hurried exchange between several of the oarsmen, who in their moment of indecision gave Caz time to swim between the boats and pull himself along its length.

The turbulence around the boat was increasingly choppy, as the Quoato's rising bulk pressed a frenzied body of water ahead of it. Through the blood stained water ahead of it, Harry saw the vast form unhook to its first half dozen barbs from the rocks beneath the surface and lean back to suck the first two corpses into its marrow. It took a good deal of the bloodied water down with them, giving those in the boats a terrifying view of its scale and proximity. The Quoato was meanwhile shifting the clusters of lidless eyes that protruded from its head of bone and scale from the boat to another. Its mouth, having swallowed the two sacrifices and their blood, was now open and ready for its third.

Caz, meanwhile, had hauled himself into up into the first boat, which rocked violently as he did so, and would have flipped over if the oarsmen, experts in the

handling of the boats, had not quickly redistributed their weight so as to recover it's equilibrium. Two of the Azeel continued to paddle towards the shore, which lay perhaps half a minute ahead, but the Quoato could apparently count because it continued to look up, its head rising like that of a mesmerized cobra, waiting for the third portion of the sacrifice.

It could have been fed too, had Caz been just a few seconds slower. But he caught hold of the sacrificer's knife hard as he raised and jerked it back. The bone cracked and Caz claimed the knife from his hand then nudged him sideways, over the edge of the boat. Though he was no more than two or three floundering strokes from safety he didn't attempt to save himself. He simply let his water-logged robes carry him down towards the massive head of the Quoato.

The creature wasn't interested in him, however. It continued to ascend, its eyes in all of their vile profusion fixed upon the boats which it knew contained its third offering. Caz had inspired the Azeel who were still rowing to redouble their

efforts, and as soon as they came within a short distance of the shore he leapt out of the boat and hauled it up onto the beach.

“Out! Out!” he yelled. “Everybody!”

He grabbed hold of the third sacrifice, who hadn't moved an inch through all of this, and pulled off her blindfold, then lifted her up, put her over his shoulder and carried her to the shore. There was good reason for haste. The waters just beyond the shore were swelling like a belly fat with water, foaming in the frenzy. The third boat was upended, and all the Azeel upon it thrown into the turmoil, but for the second boat the eruption of water was a blessing, its force sufficient to drive the fragile vessel all the way out of the water and up onto the shore.

Harry stumbled out of the boat and up the beach moving between the various survivors to get a clear view of the mountain he'd seen from the Azeel encampment.

There was still heavy mist enveloping its slopes, however: he could get only the vaguest sense of the mountain's structure, and no sight whatsoever of the palace and

cathedral that Lucifer had built in the name of his own glory. He could only hope that wherever he was Norma was still safe with him, if such a thing as safety were possible in the company of a creature so steeped in cruelty.

Behind him he heard a fresh burst of shouts and snatched prayers. He turned from the mountain to see that those who'd been in the third boat were not scrambling onto the shore, while behind them the Quoato breached.

There wasn't much that could still shake or surprise Harry, but here was something, to be sure: the sight of the Quoato's massive snout rising up out of the deep water pushing a great bulk of water ahead of it. Unlike a whale, which breaches only to fall back into the water again, the Quoato's legs held onto the rock wall that dropped down from the limit of the beach, and could control itself perfectly well. It waited until all the foaming water had fallen away, then it lowered its huge head and fixed its gaze on the figures who were still emerging from the water.

Harry took off his jacket, and as he did so, casually walked in Caz's direction.

"Here," he said, proffering the jacket, "Have her put this on."

"Oh, you changed your mind did you?" Caz said. "Very convenient." The girl was watching Caz, waiting for some sign from her Saviour. "Take it." He said to her, nodding at the jacket.

"No! No! Naijat is for the Quoato! For the Quoato!" She looked out at the creature, which had by now raised perhaps fourteen or fifteen feet of its length from the water, including one of its many jointed, shiny black legs, which ended in a hooked pincer. There were certainly plenty of potential victims within easy reach. But it wasn't nourishment it was looking for. It was the third of its sacrifices.

The subject of search was now dressed in Harry's jacket, and was being escorted by Mumizian from the beach and into the mist that concealed the slopes of the mountain from sight. In a matter of seconds Naijat and Mumizian disappeared to have had two-thirds its placating meal. It moved back and forth along the beach, its

massive mouth-parts forming something that might have been words, but seemed as indecipherable to any of the Azeel as they were to Harry, Rebekah or Caz. The only attempt to communicate with it was made by the acolyte who had been attending on the priest who'd been doing the slaughtering. Now, unwrapping his own killing blade, which was identical as his master's, though not so intricately engraved, he stumbled down over the water slickened stones and called to the creature, the language he addressed it in a sibilant whispering, which went on for a considerable time while the creature raised a second claw onto the stones, its gazes, such as they could be read, seeming to be fixed upon the acolyte as he whispered on. Finally, it seemed, he said all he had to say, signaling the end of his speech with a subtle inclination of his head.

The instant he did so the creature began thrashing back and forth, frustrated to have been denied the full price of forbearance. It dragged at the steeply backed stones with its pincer claws, but they weren't much to its purpose. It couldn't get

the grasp on the stones to haul itself up in pursuit of its missing meal. The stones simply slid off down the slope of the beach, its huge limbs moving in such numbers that the entire beach began to move, and avalanche of rounded stones that waved its way toward the water. The young acolyte was its first victim. The sliding stones carried him down the slope and into the water. He didn't attempt to protest his fate. He let circumstance claim him down to the cold lake and immediately out of sight. Several of the more sluggish Azeel from the third boat slid down the beach the same way, unable to resist the force of the sliding stones.

The Quoato made no attempt to take the young men or women in place of his sacrifice. It scanned the beach for ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, dragging down giant mounds of stones as it did so. But at last it seemed to realize that it had been cheated of a third of its toll, and had no way for the present of regaining it. All it could do was rake at the stones and utter a low, low growl that was not so much a sound as an ache in the bones of the heads of the survivors, some of whom were more profoundly

affected than others—dark blood, almost black, running from their noses, eyes and ears splashing on the stones.

Blinded by pain, two of the Azeel from the third boat walked back down the blood slickened stones, and into the water, where they sank from view. The deaths did nothing to placate the beast, however. It was interested in only one piece of living meat, after another twenty minutes of scouring the chaotic beach it gave up—it uttered one last sound which actually caused the skulls of the surviving Azel to fracture, their faces blowing off like masks, revealing the balls of nerve and blood in which its lidless eyes stared out, (2499) of sanity. Then, having caused all the death and pain it could, at least for now, it sank away into the lake, leaving a detritus of corpses and blood-flecked foam to mark the place where it had disappeared from sight.

Eight

There was a long confused period following the Quoato's departure in which the survivors either sat in silence, some with their heads in their hands, some staring up at the mist-shrouded sky. Two of the Azeel were distracting themselves from thinking too hard about what they had just endured by picking up a handful of stones and placing them over the two-naked faced of Quoato's most recent victims: small cairns to conceal their stripped muscle and their blood filled sockets in which their white eyes appeared to float. There was very little sound from anyone. Certainly no tears; just the occasional muttered prayer from one of the demons, accompanied by their ritual touching of lips, navel and anus.

Rebekah found Caz sitting high up the beach, his face like an ice-storm. She went to him, with Sienna trotting beside.

"That was good, what you did." She said.

He shook his head. “Christ, I want to be anywhere, anywhere in the fucking world but here right now.”

“What did you expect, some big adventure?”

Caz looked up at her, the storm intensifying. “You don’t know anything more about me than I know about you, so why say that? I might look like a man who spends time in the gym rather than meditating, but appearances are deceptive. If I had to guess, I’d say that you and Sienna....” He reached out and kneaded the ruff of fur behind the dog’s head. She growl-murmured, blissful. “—know quite a bit about deception.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’ve head of gaydar?”

Rebekah stifled a laugh. “No.”

“It’s ok to laugh. It’s funny. But you know what, nine times out of ten it works. It’s just instinct. One member of the tribe recognizing another.”

“I’m not gay if that’s what you’re leading up to.” Rebekah said. “I’d probably be a damn sight happier if I was.”

“No. I didn’t think you were. But I do think you and your dog have been doing a lot of ‘playing with the truth’ so that melody gets to close to what’s really going on with her. And with you.”

“Me?” she shrugged dismissively, “I’m not important. Really, I’m not. I just get the honor of being with Sienna for a few years, till it’s time to move on.”

“Meaning she dies?”

“No, I do the dying, she goes on. And on. And on. World without end.”

“This isn’t some joke.”

“I am embarrassed to admit that I have almost no sense of humor. I would have made a very good nun in a silent order. I don’t laugh. I don’t talk much. And I gave up sex when the love of my life... well, you can fill in the painful bits. Now instead of being a nun I do the next best thing. I look after her.”

“And she’ll out-live you?”

“She’ll out-live us all.”

“Why? How? She looks like an ordinary dog.”

“Yes...” Rebekah said, elongating the syllable and letting it trail away. Caz’s

question remained unanswered.

“She isn’t.” Caz said.

“No.”

“And the reason she isn’t?”

“Aren’t things I can talk to you about.”

“Why Harry but not me?”

“Where did Harry come into this?”

“He knows her secrets, whatever they are.”

Rebekah stared hard at the stones. “Yes, he probably does. But it wasn’t from
me.”

“So who else knows?”

“Sienna.”

“But she’s—”

“Don’t even say it.”

“What was I going to say?”

“*Just a dog.* Or something equally dumb. Obviously she’s not just a dog. What she did back in Primordium would be proof of that, if it was the only thing. But she’d led us, hasn’t she? Without her we’d just be a bunch of lost people.

“But why Harry. Why did she tell Harry and not me?”

“What does it matter?”

“It’s made him different, she’s turned him into a Harry that I don’t recognize.

That argument on the boat, with him letting the sacrifices go in—the old Harry would never have done that. He might have made a fuck up of it but he would have tried to save everybody. Especially the three that had been prepared for execution. In

the old days they would have been the first people out of the boats and onto the beach.”

“We wouldn’t have got to the beach if the Quoato hadn’t been appeased.”

“Well we’ll never know what was the right thing to do now will we? What would Sienna have done?”

“Rebbekah. You’ll have to ask her yourself.”

Caz laughed.

“Where did she go, by the way?”

“Last time I saw her she was wandering off after Harry, who headed into the mist.”

“I’d better find her.”

“Before you do, will you put a good word with her for me? I want to understand what all this is about and nobody knows what’s going on better than she does, right?”

“I’ll talk to her. No promises. But I’ll certainly talk to her.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that. Christ, if I’d known I’d known I was going to end up asking favors from a dog...”

“Why *end up*?”

“I don’t know. Just a feeling I suppose. We’re not getting out of here alive.

This is Hell. You come down here, you stay down here.”

“You’ve never heard of the Harrowing, Caz?”

Murmizian had wandered over to Caz, and took his hand.

“You look very serious.”

“I’m learning about the Harrowing.”

“I wasn’t born. But it was real. It happened.”

“I believe you. I just don’t know what it actually was.”

“It was in the time between Christ’s crucifixion and Good Friday and his Resurrection two days later. He went down into Hell and walked amongst the

damned, and set so many free, tens of thousands. It was the first and only amnesty

Hell has ever known.”

“What did Lucifer do?”

“He chose to stay here, planning his cathedral. I think he believed that once Christ ascended, he, Luther, would be given sovereignty over mankind. So he played his cards very close to his chest, not wanting to get into a messy exchange with Christ. Something he’d regret later. He was a better politician than that. He kept his distance, and bore the hammering in silence.

“So people do get out.”

“Yes. Under very particular circumstances.”

That was all Caz needed to hear.

“We’re getting out,” he said, and kissed Murmizian. “All of us! All of us!”

—

Harry could hear Caz shouting down below on the beach but he couldn't hear what his friend was saying, not that at the moment it particularly mattered to him. He was shaking, barely controlling his bodily functions. The reason? Moments before, as he'd scrambled up over the curiously configured rocks, a gust of bitter wind, widow's wind, blew out of the oblivion over the island, and for a few moments it cleared away the mist that clung so tenaciously to the mountain and to the cathedral the devil had built on its summit. Except that there was an error in that assumption, the realization of which had left Harry in his trembling state.

There was no mountain. The massive form that the wind had briefly uncovered was Lucifer's masterwork, from the obsessively decorated stones upon which he was presently standing to the highest of spires whose numbers defied his confounded wits to count. He knew very little about architecture but enough to know

that Lucifer's labors here had later inspired a whole architecture of the living world and their own Gothic creations. He'd been in some of them, on his travels around Europe. In the cathedral of Santa Eulalia in Barcelona, in Bourdeaux Cathedral, and of course Chartres Cathedral, where he'd once taken sanctuary having just killed in the blizzard-blinded streets a demon which had been seducing the infants of Chartres to their deaths with nursery songs.

But none of those buildings, vast and ambitious and elaborate though they were, held a candle to the mountain sized structure which the break in the mist had shown him. Buttress upon buttress, spire upon spire, the cathedral rose with an arrogance that only a creature systematically confident of its powers would have dared dream, much less make real. He thought back to the vast age-ravaged devices that had littered the route here. They weren't the remnants of war-machines, as he had assumed. They were what was left of the devices of Piranesian scale that had been built to quarry the stones and carry them where the masons could work the raw

rock and prepare it for its place in the immense design. Even with the powers of a fallen angel at his disposal, the creation of the cathedral must have been a challenge. To take the raw material of his fellow fallen angels—and of other generations of demons had come from the fallen's seductions and rapes—and turn them, by force of will and intellect, into the kind of quarries, masons, foundation layers and spire raisers that would have been required to create this structure, must have tested Lucifer's wits and ambition to their limits. But somehow it had been done.

"Caz," he yelled. "Caz, where are you?"

"Down here!"

"Get up here quickly. Bring Rebekah. And I mean quickly, Caz!"

"Where are you?"

"Just follow my voice, Caz. But be quick!"

There was no sound from below for several seconds, the time Harry used to study the sheer walls, supported by a myriad of flying buttresses, their surfaces so

intricately decorated that they seemed to be barely an inch of stone that the masons' invention had not elaborated.

“Here you are!”

Harry turned to find Rebekah emerging from the mist that lingered close to the beach.

“I thought it was a mountain—” Harry said.

“You thought what was a mountain? Caz asked him, emerging at Rebekah's side.

“This. What were standing on. I thought the island had one great big mountain on it and Lucifer had built his cathedral on the top.”

“Yeah, so?”

“I was wrong. Look! Look up quickly before the mist moves in again and covers everything up.”

Rebekah and Caz followed Harry's gaze up as far as the mist would let them see.

"It doesn't have any windows," was Rebekah's first observation.

It was an obvious absence, now that she pointed it out, but Harry had been too astonished by the sheer scale of the spectacle to have registered the fact. Now that he did, however, he saw how the look made the structure appear still larger, without windows offering some rudimentary sense of scale.

"So now," said Caz. "The question is: does it have a door?"

Part Six: Indivisible

One

Harry's concern that the mist would quickly return to conceal the cathedral again before the wind had uncovered more than the glimpse he'd seen was well founded; or so at first it seemed. Caz passed the word to Murmizian that they all should spread out and look for a way into the cathedral, and while the search got underway the wind dropped and the concealment began again. But the lull in the gusts was brief, and when the wind began to rise again it was with new strength and urgency, gust mounting on gust to find them and then clear completely every scrap of murky air that had veiled the Devils' masterwork. The glimpse that Harry, Rebekah and Caz had caught sight of minutes before had not even hinted at the true scale of the structure; its breath-snatching ambition. It occurred to Harry as he made his way around to the side of the cathedral that faced the shore that if ever a thing cried out to the maker of its maker: *"Look what I've done, father! Aren't you proud?"* then it was this overwhelming creation.

The question, he assumed, had remained unanswered.

As he came around the front of the cathedral, the placid waters of the lake were once more briefly stirred up as the Quoato rolled and raised one of its segmented legs out of the water, its pincer audibly snapping as the creature moved on around the island, a reminder of its lethal presence. Harry turned his attention from the lake to the cathedral, walking along the front of the building with Caz shadowing him.

“There’s no door on this end.” Harry said, turning to Caz. “Am I right?”

“None that I see.” Caz replied. “Is it possible he’d hide the door?”

“This is the Devil’s handiwork, Caz. Anything is possible.”

“I’ll make another pass, then,” he said. He clambered up over the low wall that ran between the buttresses, which were carved like intertwined roots. The them was taken up in the buttresses themselves, Harry saw, which were carved in the likeness of immense trees, lending the carvers every freedom to cover the stonework with

detail, from the nests of snakes and fantastically beasts that had been put between the convoluted roots, to the insects that swarmed on the carved trunk, and the intricate tracing of branches, twenty or thirty feet above Harry's head, where the buttresses soared up to support the blinded walls. They made the return journey along the side of the cathedral facing the shore with Caz looking for any sign of a door concealed by the intricacy of the designs, which were, he repeated to Harry, covering the back of the buttresses too.

"They must have been crazy," Caz said. "The work they put into all this detail.

And nobody would ever see it."

"I don't think that was the point," Harry said.

"Then why?"

"I don't know... maybe it's because it's a world all his own and it had to be real all the way around otherwise it would have been just a piece of fakery. The truth is, Caz, I'm way out of my depth here. I've read about every book I could get my hands

on; I've been with Norma when spirits came through who claimed they'd just escaped Hell. But I don't remember a single reference to this place. The Azeel, the lake, that fucking beast of doom there, this place: none of them appear in any book or any map I ever laid eyes upon, any never any talk of it from Norma's visitors. Which is damn strange. Why go to all the sweat of building a place like this and then keeping it a secret?"

Caz came to the end of the wall. "No door."

Harry looked up at the heights of the façade, which were still far from being cleared up by the mist. "Maybe there's some opening up there," he said, half to himself, "Though how the fuck do you get up there to look—"

"D'Amour! D'Amour!"

"That's Murmizian."

"I see him." said Harry.

The demon was sprinting along the beach, his tail held high with excitement.

“What’s happened?” Caz called to him.

“Murmizian yelled a one word reply: “Door!”

—

Against all reason, the entrance to the cathedral was at the other end of the building; the doors themselves fifteen feet high, and made of dark, weathered timber studded with row upon row of nails whose heads were in the form of pyramids. But the doors themselves were half the size of the seven stone arches, an arch within an arch, within an arch, with the amount of detail carved into the stone inversely proportional to the diminishing space they had available. Some of the images were apparently of significance to the Azeel, two thirds of the demons simply fled. The

rest, including Murmizian, went down on their knees and began to offer up streams of rapidly recited prayers in their tribal tongue.

Harry's tattoos were having their own response to the proximity of the door. Harry repeatedly responded with warning spasms during his first hours in Hell, they had exhausted their signal. But now, as he stood before this immense portal, his gaze tracking back and forth over the flow of designs on the arches, he felt the tattoos twitch faintly, announcing their revival.

"I know, I know," he murmured to them. Their motion was certainly subdued, given how close to the great enemy he surely stood, though perhaps that was once evidence of his body's wearied state than the degree of danger he was in. Whichever it was, their warnings would not change anything. He hadn't gone in a search of a door only to falter at the threshold.

"How do we do this?" he said to Rebekah and Caz. "We shouldn't all go in. Let me take a look around first—"

“No.” Rebekah said. “If you go I go. And Sienna. Caz has to get some of those runaways back here.”

“I don’t want to chase after fucking runaways.”

“No, but she’s right.” Harry said. “If we do have problems in there we’re going to need as much help as we can get. Have Murmizian talk to them. Tell them if we’ll find a way back to the mainland together. Maybe find something inside we can use as a raft.”

“Some hope,” he said, “with that damn thing circling around.”

“I got hope.” Harry said, glancing back at Rebekah and Caz as he did so. “What the fuck else have we got? Are you coming, Reb?”

She nodded and Harry turned the iron handle, putting his shoulder to the door as he did so. It wasn’t locked, but it was very heavy.

“Hey muscles.” Harry called back to Caz. “Before you go—”

Caz added his own strength to the push, and the door opened, grinding to dust the detritus the void winds had blown beneath it. Once Caz had got the door moving it opened readily enough and Sienna was through the gap as soon as it was wide enough.

“Hey, girl!” Rebekah said, following after the dog. “You come back here.”

“You sure you don’t want me and Murmizian with you right now?”

“Of course, Caz. But if we get in trouble in there—”

“I can’t guarantee I’ll persuade any of the others.”

“I know. Do what you can do, and bring as many back as will come. Oh yeah, and stay as far from the water—”

He nodded towards the lake and Caz turned to see the Quoato breaching and rolling, raising a series of shiny-wet barbs into the air and bringing them down again with a slam.

“It’s pissed.” Harry said.

“We’ll be careful.”

“And quick.”

“And quick.”

Harry turned away and was crossing the threshold when he stopped and looked back.

“All these years. “he said to Caz. “All the versions of the Fallen One I’ve seen or heard tell of. They can’t all be true.”

“Maybe none of them are.” Caz said. “Have you thought about that?”

“Oh sure. They call him the Father of Lies. Maybe he’s the biggest lie of the lot.”

“Get in there and start looking.’ Caz said, laying his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“But don’t go too far. I want to be with you when you lay eyes on the Big Fuck Himself.”

Harry grinned. “Go,” he said.

And before Caz had a chance to do as Harry had said, he slipped through the partially open door in pursuit of Sienna and Rebekah.

Two

Harry took three or four steps away from the threshold and stood, waiting for his eyes to make sense of what the interior contained. It was clear from those first moments what it did not contain. Whatever it might have resembled from the outside it was clear that this was *not* built as a place in which worshippers might have once

come to show their devotions to Lucifer. There were no pews; not anywhere for their devotees to kneel. What he could see filled his vision in all directions, from the floor a yard where he stood to the vaulted ceilings held up by twin rows of pillars whose girth would have dwarfed a mature redwood. But precisely what it was that his eyes were witnessing was difficult to comprehend.

Everything that was not essential to the structure itself—the stone—the paved floor, the titanic pillars, the ribbing of the vaults and the intricate stonework between them looked spectral, its transparent state allowing him to see through to the layers in all directions. The entire interior seemed to have been filled with the work of hundreds of ambitious scaffolders whose labors defied every law of physics. Skeletal towers rose from floor to ceiling in half a thousand places, lending one another solidarity with networks of rods crisscrossed between them. In some places ladders ran up to the heights, while others there were zig-zag stairways that connected tower to tower. And just as he flattered himself that he was getting some grip of the general

design it threw out some startling surprises. In one place the scaffolders seemed to have been possessed by traumatic spiders, creating a huge vertical web which strove for elegance but repeatedly lost in to chaos; in another the creators had made were ceaselessly turning spirals, some bearing steps, others bristling with barbs. And through all this phantasmic interior moved the strangest of these creations: the forms that resembled skeletal humans of gigantic crystalline life-forms, or of vast translucent shells, turning over and over as they moved, some majestic in processions, others with solitary grace, revolving as they went.

The sound of the Cathedral's hidden machines had long since died away, and with the door barely open behind him Harry heard neither wind or water from the outside. As the forms and devices that filled the cathedral, they were silent, which added immeasurably to their mystery. He stood watching them for along time, both mesmerized and vaguely disappointed. He had rehearsed in head countless times where the palace where the adversary had made his infernal bed might look like, but

nothing had seen so far sat comfortably with his expectations. His experience of Hell's work on earth had always been physical: the demonic soul—if such existed—knew the nature of physical being, and only that. It was libidinous and gluttonous, it was obsessed with the pursuit of sensation. He had supposed that if he got close to the Devil he would find that philosophy **unit** large: that where the Devil sat all the excesses of the flesh would be there to accompany him. But this display of vast forms did not suggest a hotbed of debauchery and sin. Peaceful, even beautiful in its way. But where the Devil belonged in this world of veils and dream was hard to fathom.

“Harry?”

He followed the sound of Rebekah's shout and saw her perhaps a hundred feet above him, following Sienna through the maze of scaffolding.

“How did you get up there?” he called to her.

“Just go to the staircase to the right,” she replied. Her words were completely clear but there was no echo off them.

Harry did as she instructed, testing the translucent step beneath his foot and finding it completely solid. Then he began to climb.

—

“Here you wait,” the Hell Priest had said to Knotchyea and Norma. “I want to be alone with him.”

“You’re welcome.” Norma said.

“Your beloved D’Amour isn’t far behind you’ll be pleased to know. He’s every bit as tenacious as his reputation promised. I chose well.”

“For what?”

“As my witness,” the Hell Priest replied. “As the one who’ll carry word of my Apotheosis to the world.”

“Do you think the world gives a damn?”

Knotchyea shook her. “Don’t be so damn disrespectful.”

“No. Let her be. She’s ignorant and afraid. She doesn’t like being brought down into the earth with us. It makes her fearful.” He came a little closer to Norma.

“You can take comfort,” he said, “its’ been a long journey, but it’s almost over. And though I have little expectation of your surviving, D’Amour will not be in any danger. Quite the reverse. Quite the reverse, I will preserve him from against any harm, so that he can give a full account of what he sees.”

“Lord?”

“Yes, soldier?”

“Lucifer is close by, yes?”

“Yes. Why he should have made a chamber for himself so deep confounds me, but I believe he’s waiting for me on the other side of that door.”

“Then if it pleases you, I will go back up into the Cathedral and wait for you there.”

“You too soldier? Afraid?” Knotchyea didn’t reply.

“Speak!”

“Yes, lord. My soul trembles at the prospect of laying eyes on such as he.”

“But you did not tremble when you saw me.”

“No, Lord...” Knotchyea said. It was clear from his uncertain tone that he knew he was walking on egg-shells. “...but when I first saw you in the Bastion I had no idea of your power, Lord, your strength of will, your vision.”

“And now?”

“Now I do. And... I know that the lord Lucifer will see you in all that I did not. With one look, he’ll see it all.”

“And when he looks at you?”

Knotchyea's voice began to crack as he spoke: "He'll see...nothing... of any worth. A snail in a shell. One crack beneath... beneath his heel..."

"Knotchyea." The Hell Priest said, his voice warming. "Thank you. Thank you."

"Lord?"

"I had forgotten."

"Forgotten."

"How great and terrible he is. Ha! What a sweet gift your fear is. You've refreshed my palate with your stumbling words and the sweat on your lip. Soldier Knotchyea is afraid. And why? Because we are outside the chamber of the one who said No to God, and was thrown down. Yes? Is that why? But he didn't let his despised state unmake him. He built his own world, where he could be God. And you have lived in that world, Knotchyea, and prospered. Have you not?"

"...yes."

“So now you have the opportunity to kneel at the feet of the Lord who made your life possible. And you give him your thanks. And promise him your undying devotion. Well, do you not?”

“I do, Lord.”

“And yet given that opportunity, what do you try to do?”

Knotchyea was close to weeping now, fear of what lay on the other side of the door mixed up with the guilt the Hell Priest had effortlessly awoken in him. “I want to do what’s right...” he said. “...but I’m not ready to see him, I’m not strong enough.”

“Let him be the judge of your strength,” the Hell Priest said. “You have to do nothing but stand and wait. Perhaps I will have no reason even to call you into his presence. But do not think of abandoning your duty, which is to wait here with your prisoner until you’re given contrary instructions. Could I be any clearer than that?”

“No, Lord. You could not.”

“Good.”

So saying, the Cenobite turned his back on Knotchyea and faced the door. As with everything else in the extravagant construction, the door was decorated. A craftsman had carved hundreds of lines hieroglyphics into the wood, their significance beyond comprehension of the Hell Priest, which did not please him. He'd educated himself in the most ancient and obscure languages; in the semiotics of creatures that barely functioned in the immaterial world, much less that of the solid. Even so, a brief scanning of the tiny characters was enough to confirm that the language before him was none that he'd ever seen before. The lesson was plain. However knowledgeable he might have made himself in readiness for this meeting with God's most beloved angel, they could never be complete readiness, or anything close to it. The contents of all the libraries in the history of the world would not be preparation enough for the encounter before him.

He exhaled lightly, and as he did so put onto his face the expression of humility that had protected rigorously for a decade or more. It had felt utterly alien to

his physiognomy at the beginning, and it still did. He was not a creature made for subservience. But he had heard countless stories over the years about how little it took to raise the Devil's ire. He was not about to make that mistake.

Face fixed, he gripped the handle and turned it. The door responded instantly, though not by opening. A flicker ran back and forth along the minute rows of characters. Here and there, however, glyphs briefly blazed, as though they had caught fire. Some code was at work here, the Hell Priest guessed; letters sacrificed to the flame chosen for some purpose that was beyond his comprehension. The scanning of the lines continued all the way to the bottom of the door, and ceased.

The Hell Priest waited, concealing his impatience with difficulty. Seconds passed, which became minutes. The door did not move. The Hell Priest was very seldom lost for words or action, but he was now. Phantom images of events that had brought him to this place and time rose up in his mind's eye, assembling in all their bespattered splendor. The magician's covered in their penthouses or their hovels,

every one of them spitting out curses as the Cenobite's hooks raked their flesh, and bent their bones against nature's intention. All but a few gave up their secrets before being granted a quick dispatch for their compliance. And then, soaking up the flow of their severed arteries and provided barrels that spilled through these assembling memories, the secret sanctuaries of thaumaturgies; the ceremonial manuscripts and sacred folios, gained in past generations by the same brutalities that the Hell Priest had just perpetrated upon their last owners. He saw fragments of the pyrics on the staine and yellowed pages. The Naming of the Ur-forces; the rites of incantation and banishment, the laws and hierarchies and conjurations that he had taken by heart, one after another, and when he was done consigned every copy of the book in question to the furnace in the depths of the fortress, so that the only possessor of the knowledge the volume contained was him.

And all the time, slaughtering and consuming and moving on, he'd nurtured the vision of what it would be like when he had learned all there was to learn, and

was ready to meet the Fallen One, and offer himself to the service of greatness. Here he was, ready; brimming with knowledge and ambition, soaked in murder from scalp to sole.

But the door would not open.

The door would not—

—He raised his hands without even being aware he was doing so, unleashing a sound that was the death-cries of all those who'd perished so that he might be here. The raised hands closed into fists, and the fists came down upon that intricate, incomprehensible door, carrying in them and behind them the implacable force of knowledge that aspired to deific heights. The sound they made when they struck the door was not that of flesh against wood. It was a sound of seismic proportions, opening fissures in the walls and floors, and bringing slabs of marble down from the ceiling. Knotchyea did not disobey his Lord's instruction. He stood his ground,

striking out at a piece of marble that would have killed Norma had his blow not shattered it.

“If I may...” he said, putting his arm over and drawing her close to him.

“What’s happening?” she wanted to know.

Before Knotchyea could reply the Hell Priest fists came down upon the door a second time, the violence of the blow escalating the damage that the first had done.

There was a fissure in the ground a yard or more wide, crossing the chamber from beside the sealed door to the stairs, which it ascended veering from wall to wall. The Hell Priest didn’t turn back to assess the damage he’d done: all that mattered to him was the door was still closed in his face. He paused for a moment to scrutinize the timbers, looking for the merest scratch or crack to indicate that his assault was having some effect. But the door was unscathed.

He put his shoulder to it, his entire anatomy—which had been until this confrontation modestly made—swelling with the furies that were running riot in his

body. His robes of office, made stiff and brittle by the air in countless rooms where he had tempted and tortured, split in places; and where they were cross-laced with his own flesh they tore new wounds, spilling his own blood right down his vestments. He put his hands into the rivulets but the blood wasn't coming fast enough to suit his enraged state so he tore at his chest where his muscle was skinned and kept from ever healing over by his meticulous scouring of the surface. Now he went at those ancient wounds with disfiguring vehemence, tearing away the vestments to fully expose his chest, where every vein stood proud of the muscle, as though presenting themselves to pleasure. He pulled away the shreds of leather and tissue that hung over his belt and selected two of his short bladed knives, tools he favored for intimate work on particularly defiant individuals.

Now he turned them on himself, using the hooked blade to flick open the veins, and the straight are to simply stab the muscle, then drag the blade up and out before stabbing himself again. It was the labor of less than a minute to get the blood

leaping from his body. He put his hands beneath the flow, and bathed them in it.

Then, while his veins were still gushing, he raised his scarlet fists and slammed them against the door, just as he had done the first time. But this time the door didn't remain unmoved before him. The blood initiated a new and extremely rapid scanning of the lines of the tiny hieroglyphics, and every one of them was combustible.

The Hell Priest wasn't studying the response his assault was having. He simply continued to beat the tattoo upon the door, the blood spurting from his chest catching his hands as he slammed them against the wood, over and over and over. Powerful though he was, his strength wasn't limitless. By degrees of blows their power and finally, sobbing for breath, the blood pooling around his feet, he let his hands drop to his sides and stared at the closed door, its glyphs still burning like embers in a high wind. Finally his breathing became less hectic; and he turned his back on the door, his hooded eyes idly tracing the cracked marble around his feet.

And then, from behind him, the sound as of a hundred dice being rolled. He turned and saw that the fiery glyphs were in motion, flipping over and over, the fire blazing brighter with every turn. The blood was no longer pouring out of his self-inflicted wounds. It had done all that it could do in his service. Now his body had sealed itself. But parts of the pool of the blood around his feet were on the move. In a dozen places the blood had formed separate streams, that were making their way towards the door. They weren't swelling purposefully. Starting in the bottom right hand corner of the door, flowing the indecipherable text backwards if it had been in English, the glyphs briefly burned white hot and were then consumed, and after the other. Right to left, until a line was covered, the right to left again, and again, the speed of the consumption quickening, so that the fourth line was burned away twice as fast as the first, the ninth twice that of the fourth.

The door was opening, after its unique fashion, the burning hieroglyphs giving off smoke not leaving even the subtlest trace of ash. His inquisitive blood was across

the threshold before he was, and continued to draw from the pool around him to fuel its advancing rivulets.

The Hell Priest took a moment to assess himself as the door continued to rise. This was not the condition he'd anticipated his being in when he confronted the Arch Fiend—his upper torso was a mass of wounds and blood, his vestments hanging in tatters, the blades he'd used to start the flow discarded. Seeing them at his feet he decided to disarm himself completely, and unhooked every last instrument of torture that hung from his belt, tossing them into the blood. Like any torturer worth his notoriety he'd always kept a few choice devices hidden in his robes. Now he pulled them out, and let them drop amongst the rest of his instruments.

The door had meanwhile continued to escalate its conflagration so that he had but half a minute to wait before the chamber was revealed to him. Already he felt waves of cold air coming against his face and body, and bitter fragrance stung his sinuses. He turned over in his head the possibility of announcing his presence

somehow, but nothing he could conceive of to say sounding anything but bathetic in such momentous circumstances, so he elected to remain silent. He did not doubt that the power awaiting him inside knew all that he needed to know about his visitor.

Better to keep a respectful silence, the Cenobite decided, and speak only when he was spoken to.

The last line of the glyphs was consumed now, and the door was open. He waited, thinking perhaps the Devil would offer some words of invitation. But none was forthcoming. Finally, he took the initiative and stepped over the threshold and into the chamber. It was, he saw immediately, almost as wide and long as the cathedral from which they had descended, though the apex of the chamber was no more than fifteen or sixteen feet high. The light sconces in the chamber were in the floor itself; thousands of finger high flames that sprang from invisible sconces in the marble, and burned with a sepulchral chill. Their light illuminated a chamber the designs and contents of which bore no resemblance to either the grandioeloquence of

the cathedral's exterior or the spectacle of half made things that had filled the interior from flagstones to domes. This massive space was occupied by what appeared to be a single engine, pulleys and pistons, cylinders and crankshafts humming in complex configurations over the ceiling, then dropping down to feed into devices that had once clearly been in a delirium of motion. Though the parts had still the shining clarity of well-serviced machines, there was no sign of their having been in motion recently. The pistons were polished but not oiled, and the ground beneath the pipes and the mysterious devices they entered into was dry. There was not so much as a single stain where a drop of fluid had seeped from a joint in need of tightening, or from a crack in one of the iron and glass receptacles the size of balled up human being which were part of the machinery in a number of places, like parts of an ancient astrolabe: frozen satellites circling a dead sun.

What purpose any of this was as inscrutable to the Hell Priest as the lines of hieroglyphics at the door. But it wasn't difficult to orient himself in this chamber. He

simply followed the parts of the engine as they became larger and therefore, he assumed, of more significance.

The theory presented just one problem. The further he ventured from the door—and thus the closer he came, to the creator of all this silent machinery, the more often its mechanisms became so large they blocked his way completely, and five times he had to investigate until he found a fresh path through. By the time he'd done so he was often very far from his projected route, and he was obliged to do something he hated to do in order to move forward: depend on his instinct. It didn't come naturally for him to do so, but he had no other choice. He had come into a labyrinth, and he was so deep in its coils that any hope he might have had of finding the way he'd come was a lost cause. Not that he cared about retreat. There was nothing back there—in the life he'd lived to get him this far—that he cared a jot about. There was no life back there, no pleasure that he would want to taste again. All that his life had led to was this maze and the creature waiting at its heart.

The great machine continued to become more elaborate, as he advanced, and in some areas he looked up to see that hundreds of conduits were descending from other parts of its structure which not only ran up to the ceiling but through it, and up into secondary engines that straddled the coffered vaults that formed the sub-structure of the Cathedral's numerous domes. It was this fact more than any other that suggested the Hell Priest was getting close to his destination. Now with every turn he took he only had to look up to see that the complex shapes had been cut out of the marble to gain access to the cunningly constructed pipes, so as to have the looseness of sleeping serpents, and the capillaries of glass globes linked by short lengths of tubes no thicker than a finger that dropped in their many hundreds from the cathedral ceiling, wound around one another in their lazy descents. As for the devices which they fed into, their design had become steadily more hermetic as the Hell Priest had advanced. Now there was nothing left in their gleaming beauty that spoke of any recognizable function. He was in a world which had been built by an

intellect so very far beyond his own that all he could do was hope to learn what mysteries these engines had been designed to solve.

He stopped for a moment or two, just to savor the pleasure that presently suffused him. His Lord was near. He felt it in his marrow, and in the tips of his fingers. He put off running again for a little while longer, taking the time to look up and study the way the ducts leading down from the supplementary engines that were set in the heights of the cathedral converged, the multitudes of beaded pipes and pristine tubes, draining together—or so his limited vision suggested, no more than ten yards from where he stood. Had he ever learned the pyric that allowed its wielder to pass unharmed through solid matter he would have walked directly to the part of the convergence, where surely his host waited, watching remotely no doubt, to see if the trespasser could prove himself worthy of an audience by getting to the heart of the quieted engine. What would happen then, when he finally reached the throne of his Lord, he could not help but wonder. Would a whispered word from the creator set

the immense engine into motion, and he be rewarded for his tenacity and his ruthlessness by being shown the Devil's engine work and perform its purpose?

He fixed his eyes on the converging arteries and picking up his pace made way towards the spot above which they collected. A turn, another turn and yet another: the labyrinth teased him with its wiles even now, when he was so close.

“Lord...” he murmured. “I... I'm here for you.... Show yourself...”

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when he turned a corner and the journey was at an end. He was standing in front of a great throne, upon which sat Lucifer himself.

Two

Caz and Murmizian had moved quickly down the length of the cathedral, the few words that passed between them lover's talk, promising each other that they would find a way to be together, should they survive the events that were unfolding around them.

“You’ll take me back to your world, yes?” Murmizian said.

“If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what I want.”

“Then its’ agreed.”

The demon caught hold of Caz's hand as they ran.

"We'll not be separated," he said. "I won't allow—"

Caz stopped running, and gently put his hand to Murmizian's mouth to hush him. They were still some distance from the back of the cathedral, but Caz could see three of Murmizian's fellow tribesmen on the shore looking back towards the mainland. It wasn't their presence which had brought him to a halt, however; it was the sight that was the subject of their scrutiny.

There were lights flickering in the darkness beyond the shore; several dozen burning the cold blue flame of Hell. More cautiously now, Caz and Murmizian started to walk on towards the shore where the three Azeel were standing. With every stride they took the number swelled, the dozens quickly hundreds, the hundreds just as quickly thousands.

They weren't silent. Besides the sound of their feet, and these the animals some of these demons were mounted upon, there was talk, though it was extremely

subdued for a multitude of such scale. There was relevance in their hush. They knew what structures they were looking up at across the lake. They knew who'd built it, and they knew too that its architect was still in residence. But now, from somewhere at the very back of the horde, came a voice that was not afraid to be heard.

“My brother and sisters, you do me honor, to come here in such numbers. And I promise you—I promise you all—” the speaker came into view now, raised up on a platform which was being carried by a crowd of his followers. There was a burning chair set on the platform, and immersed in its flames:

“The Unconsumed.” Murmizian said. “Now that’s interesting. What’s he here for?”

“—when our work here is done,” the creature in fire said. “And the creature that has taken refuge in this most sacred of places, is brought out and punished as his sins against the equilibrium of state are paid for with the unknitting of his body and soul, then we will begin to make our world over, from the beginning.” He continued

his rallying speech as he was borne through the assembled multitude. “It will be as though the ancient errors were never made; as though this was the first and only world and we the chosen people. Why should we not believe such a thing? I hear no news of angels any more. Perhaps they hung too high for their health—” there was laughter now from amongst the Unconsumed’s audience. “—and died for want of air and sin.” The laughter came again, louder than ever. “Which leaves the human world ours for the taking.” The laughter was almost instantly replaced by a spreading torrent of exhilaration. The Unconsumed didn’t silence it with more words of his own. He let the torrent continue for several minutes. Finally, he said: “First we must remove the despoiler from Lucifer’s place of meditation, and I will make my personal apologies to him, if he wishes to hear them. Make a bridge of your backs so I may lead an arrest party over to the island. Be quick now. The Cenobite is insane, but powerful. I want him taken quickly, and dispatched.’

“I think we’ve heard more than enough.” Caz said. “We need to get the old lady and fuck off out of here, even if it means swimming.”

“With the Quoato in the water?”

“Maybe he’ll be too distracted by all the demon meat available. I’m sorry.

Present company excepted.”

“No you can call me demon meat anytime.” Murmizian replied, with a wide, filthy grin.

“Later.” Caz said. “Right now—”

“Back the way we came.”

—

The structure that Harry had mentally dubbed “the scaffolding” in the interior of the cathedral was even more bewildering to explore than it was to make sense of

with his eyes. The structure's translucence wasn't annulled just because he set foot on it. The only way forward was to set his sights on Sienna and Rebekah and make his way towards them without contemplating the mysteries of what exactly was underneath his feet, and how reliable it was, if at all.

The closer he came to them, the clearer Sienna's intentions were. She was leading them to a place where high above the cathedral floor the walkways, the staircases, and the ethereal threads that ran between them seemed to loosely converge. Sienna was staring straight down from what looked like a very precarious promontory to study what was going on directly below her. Harry ventured a little closer to her, so as to get a better view of what was drawing her attention. His peripheral vision put Rebekah off to his extreme right.

"What's so interesting down there?" Harry asked her.

"I don't know, but whatever it is it's giving off more psychic heat than God's holy furnace."

“I don’t want to know where you came by that turn of phrase.” Harry said.

“Just in case—”

“It’s real?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s the thing, isn’t it, Harry.”

“What thing would that be?”

“What you, me and Sienna all know.”

“And what’s that exactly.”

“That it’s all real, Harry.”

“I don’t see what the fuck that’s got to do with anything right now.”

“It means the Devil’s down there and the blood of Christ runs in the veins of my dog. And whatever happens from now on its’ all part of something so big we’ll never see it all. So do I sound like a crazy woman?”

“Sure. But I’m not going to hold that against you.”

She laughed, but she was interrupted by a sound far below. It was the Hell Priest's voice, and he was unleashing a sound of fury and pain and frustration. The likes of which Harry had never heard in his life before. On and on it went for nearly a minute or more.

"Was that Pinhead?" Harry said when the sound had finally died into silence.

Rebekah nodded.

"I think he must have finally found the object of his obsession." She said.

"Sienna! Fuck, Sienna! What are you doing? Wait!"

The sound of the Hell Priest's cry had got the dog, leaping fearlessly from stairway to stairway in order to get down to the ground as fast as possible.

"Are you coming?" Rebekah asked Harry.

"Damn right I am."

They began their own descents, starting at different points but quickly drew closer as the stairways down which they were descending at breakneck speed were all

part of some convergence, which formed a narrowing wall which they could not have ascended again even if they wished to. They were in the grip of greater authority now, and they could only turn themselves over to its care, and hope it was benign.

Sienna had reached the cathedral floor first, followed shortly after by Rebekah and Harry. The ground that had appeared so stable when they had been looking down at them from a great height was not stable at all. Something had broken the marble wide open just twenty yards from where they'd landed, and cracks spread in all directions, some of them zig-zagging under the eight feet of the three trespassers.

Sienna had her nose to the crack and was sniffing at it. For the first time since Harry had known Sienna her hackles rose, and her snuffles ceased, to be replaced by a gut-deep-growl.

There was another sound audible besides the growl: the whip cracks that accompanied the spread of the fractures in the marble. Catching Rebekah's eye, Harry pointed to the places where whatever was going on underground had opened up the

sizeable holes in the floor. She gave him a warning look, which he acknowledged with a nod. Then he very cautiously began to make his way towards the holes.

Rebekah's unease had been well-founded. The fractured slabs he was walking over moved beneath his weight like pieces of ice on a splintered winter pond. Several times he halted for a few seconds, assessed his situation, and moved off left or right rather than risk the direct route, and more than he had his caution validated, seeing a portion of his rejected route give way and a block of marble of which he might very well have been standing tip sideways and drop away into the catacombs or whatever else lay beneath the cathedral's floor. They fell from sight and shattered noisily below, their removal making the remaining ground in that area even more hazardous.

It occurred to Harry as he advanced that if all this had happened a year ago, before the righteous had really seized hold of him and his appetite had gone to nothing, that all two hundred and eighty-nine pounds of him would have already been down below under a heap of dirt and debris. Was it possible that his repugnance

for food had been part of his unconscious preparation for the journey that had brought him to this place, where every absent pound of fat improved his chances of surviving. Even so, his situation was precarious. He took off his jacket, which with keys, wallet and all else it contained was probably worth a few more pounds and gingerly laid it down; then took off his shoes, and set them beside his jacket. Then he began to advance across the treacherous ground again. The slabs still tilted and creaking, threatening to give way beneath him at any moment. But one of the smaller holes he peered through on his way showed him a welcome sight. Norma was down there, sitting at the bottom of a flight of stairs, surrounded by marble. She looked pitifully frail and exhausted, but what was important was that she was still alive.

He turned back to look at Rebekah, and with some simple mouthing and pointing down into the bowels of the place he got his message across. She made no move to follow after him, however. Her place was with Sienna, who was still fixated on the same place in the ground where she'd been sniffing at earlier. Whatever the

object of her fascination was, apparently it lay directly beneath the spot where she was standing guard, and she had no intention of relinquishing her position for fear her quarry could slip away.

Harry gave Rebekah a nod and a smile, and then turned back, intending to continue his advance. But the ground had other plans for him. Before he could take so much as a single step the fractured slab on which he stood cracked in two pieces, which tipped up. He had neither speed nor the agility to leap off them to a less dangerous spot. He had just enough time to call Norma's name before he slid between the two pieces of marble. He raised his arm to protect his skull from the debris that all was coming down with him. By the vehement sting of marble dust filling his eyes, sharp as glass shards beneath his lids. He didn't even register the fact that he'd landed, without any broken bones, for several seconds. When he did, however, he called Norma's name again and crawled away from the place where he'd fallen, his tears

brimming with tears. They kept coming, steadily washing away the motes of marble out of his eyes.

“Harry?” Norma said.

“I’m here,” he told her.

“Oh my stars! It is you! I didn’t believe it, but it is!”

Harry wiped the mud of dust and tears from his face with the heels of his hands and shook his head to clear his eyes of dirt and water, then he looked up at Norma. She was doing her best to pull herself to her feet, but she didn’t have the strength in her.

“Stay where you are.”

“Where’s Knotchyea? Knotchyea, are you there?”

From the dusty shadows higher up the flight of stairs stepped the tallest, broadest demon Harry had ever laid eyes upon. “Knotchyea, this is the man I told you about.” Norma said. “And Harry, this is Knotchyea. I wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t

carried me most of the way. I'd just be another pile of bones back there somewhere."

She paused for a moment, waiting for either the detective or the soldier to break the silence. When neither did she said: "There will be no argument between you two. I forbid it. You hear me? In the name of whatever affection you feel for me put away your old **eruorites** and be my protectors. Will you do that for an old lady who hasn't got much longer to live."

"Norma..."

"I mean it, Harry. All that's holding me together now is curiosity. I want to know what his Satanic Majesty actually looks like. So I want a full report."

"And you'll get one. I promise. Pinhead by the way—"

"His Lordship gained entrance to Lucifer's chamber."

Harry turned to take in the evidence of what the Cenobite had done to get into the heart of the underworld.

"Didn't have a key then." He said.

Norma giggled.

“Is there humour in this?”

“Not much, I grant you.” Harry conceded. “But better a little than nothing at all. How long has he been in there?”

“I’ve lost rack of time, Harry.” Norma said. “Sometimes I think I must be dreaming all this...”

“No, you’re awake. We’ll do our dreaming when we’re someplace safe, a long way from here.”

“If you think you can still get back, Harry.”

“Norma, my dear, I swear we’re all getting out that wants to—”

He was interrupted by the voice of the Hell Priest coming through the shattered door.

“Do I hear my witness?”

D'Amour dropped his voice to a whisper. "Knotchyea, get Norma back upstairs. Rebekah's up there. And the dog, so go."

"Answer my question if you please. Do I hear my witness?"

"Yes." Harry called back. "As a matter of fact you do."

"Enter, witness. I'm in the company of Lucifer himself. You should look him in the eye at least once in your godforsaken life, don't you think?"

"I suppose I should."

"So, what are you waiting for? There's no trap here. Just the end of a very long journey, for all of us."

Three

On the floor above Rebekah listened to whatever snatches of the exchange she could make sense of. It was relatively easy to comprehend the Hell Priest's voice, but

Harry's replies were dimmer. Nevertheless the broad strokes of what was going to happen were clear enough: Harry was entering the chamber below the spot where Sienna still sniffed at the cracked marble, in order to meet the Devil face to face.

There was a sliver of Rebekah that envied Harry the imminent confrontation. To say, or simply to know, that you had looked the Evil One in the eye, and lived to tell the tale (assuming, of course, that you did), was no small thing. Far from the sighting of the Evil Incarnate would it be possible to construct a vision of its antithesis? In short, to imagine God?

"Is that crazy?" she said to Sienna. "It is, isn't it? It's crazy." Sienna looked up at her. Their years together had made them familiar with every nuance on one another's face, but right now the expression in Sienna's eyes was hard to read.

"Do you want to go down there?" Rebekah asked her. "If you're staying up here just for me, don't. We'll go together. I mean, this is why, isn't it? Because of what's down there?"

Now an expression appeared on Sienna's face that Rebekah didn't understand: puzzlement. Something about what was going on in there didn't fit with her expectations, at least that was Rebekah's best guess.

"So are we going down?" Sienna's reply was to come away from the crack where she'd had her nose, and went over to Rebekah, who'd dropped down on her haunches and worked her fingers into the ruff behind the dog's head. Sienna made barely audible grunts of appreciation.

"We're going to get out of this alive, aren't we?" Rebekah said to her as she rubbed.

Sienna's response was to lazily close her eyes. "Oh, that's not good." Rebekah murmured, putting her face into the dog's fur and inhaling its warm, wholesome scent. "I don't want to be separated, you hear me? So if it's me whose going to be doing the dying I'll stick around. I promise." She kissed her. "And if it's you—"

"Rebekah!"

She murmured, "I love you." into Sienna's fur. Then she stood up and turned to face Caz, who was winding his way through the forest of phantom forms that thronged the interior. Murmizian came after him, attempting to grab hold of Caz's arm, his face full of terrors.

"Be careful where you step!" Rebekah said to Caz. "The ground's not too safe."

"Where's Harry?"

"He had a summons from the Hell Priest."

"A summons to do what?"

"Be a witness."

"A witness to what?"

"Whatever's going on down there."

"That's where he went?"

Rebekah nodded. "And for some reason Sienna doesn't have any desire to go down there herself."

“Is she spooked?”

“Her? No. She’s seen worse than you or I’ll ever see and lived to wag her tail.”

Caz grinned appreciatively. “Keep the bad jokes coming. We’re going to need them.”

“Why’s that?”

“There’s an army out there...of how many, Murmizian? *Murmizian?*”

The demon wasn’t listening to a word Caz was saying. He had dropped down into a fearful ball beside Caz, his long fingers curled into the folds of Caz’s filthy jeans. “What the fuck are you doing down there?” Caz demanded. Murmizian didn’t reply. Caz reached down with one hand and hauled the demon back onto his feet.

“That’s undignified, my friend.”

He kissed the demon on the lips. “Let’s not surrender at the first sight of any army.”

“Who’s leading them?”

“The Unconsumed.” Murrizian replied. He’s here for Pinhead.”

“And we don’t want to be in the middle of that. We just need to get the old lady—”

“I am neither old, nor a lady, Clarence,” said Norma, emerging from the stairway that led down into the chambers beneath the cathedral. She laughed. “By Jesus, Caz, I may be blind but I’m still damn glad to see you.” She opened up her arms. “Come here. Give me a hug.”

Caz had barely taken two steps towards her when there were a series of more loud cracks, and several more slabs of marble fractured, most of them in Caz’s vicinity.

“Is the ground folding up beneath us?” Norma said.

“Any minute. We need to separate. Is there any other way out of her other than the front door?”

“We haven’t looked.” Rebekah said.

“There’s got to be some other way. And the floor’ll be stronger close to the wall. Take Norma, Murmizian. I’m too heavy for my own good.”

Murmizian did as Caz instructed, and cautiously led Norma away from the hazardous ground. By the time they’d reached the nearest of the pillars the floor was solid beneath their feet.

There was noise from outside the Cathedral now; the sound of the Unconsumed’s demonic army on the stones of the shore.

“Come on, Sienna.” Rebekah said to the dog, who still had her nose to the same crack. “You’ve smelt all there is to smell down there.” She started to cross the precarious ground. “Come *on*.” She said. Sienna backed up from her sniffings, plainly irritated to be called away from such pressing business. Then she did as Rebekah had instructed, and trotted after her to join Murziminan and Norma.

Now Caz had the floor to himself, and a better chance of crossing to safety. He didn’t hesitate: the sound of the army approaching seemed to be coming from both

sides of the cathedral as the size of the Unconsumed's forces swelled. Glancing towards the open door every now and then, knowing that any minute he would be sharing this ground with a great weight of unholy flesh, he started to edge towards safer ground.

He was perhaps a third of the distance when there was a shout from the chamber beneath his feet.

"Well, witness?" the Hell Priest yelled, his voice thick with fury, *"Do you see?"*

"Yes." Harry replied quietly. "There's not much chance of missing it is there?"

He had followed the pulsing tattoos through the maze of technology that was laid out in the cast underground chamber, until he'd finally come to the place where he stood now, the Hell Priest in front of him, and in front of the Hell Priest, seated on a marble throne, the Lord of Hell himself, the Satan, Lord of Lies and the Fallen

Angel. His robes were white, his skin a mass of purple blotches and yellow stains. His eyes were open, but they saw nothing.

“Dead,” the Hell Priest said. “Do you see, witness? Dead!”

The Hell Priest stepped aside to allow Harry a clearer look at the scene in front of them.

“Approach him...” the Hell Priest said, “...take a moment to see him in all his glory.”

Harry did as he was instructed. It was, after all, a once in a lifetime experience. And as he studied the body the body it became apparent that the throne in which the Devil sat was, for all its fine carving, was nothing more than an elaborate death chair. The machinery through which Harry had found his way all led to this fatal throne, where it had activated a fan of spear length blades, arranged like the feathers of a peacocks tail. They had entered the Devil from left, right and directly below him, exiting him in perfect symmetry. The blades were close to one another, and so

immaculately positioned, that a total of seventeen emerged from his head alone, their bright array forming a gruesome halo which stood seven or eight inches clear of his skull. Blood ran down over the Devil's face from the seventeen wounds and dried into a purple stain in the curls of his pale blond hair, and down over his high domed unlined brow, and almost Slavic features, his cheek bones high, his nose aquiline, and his mouth serene and sensual in equal measure. It was slightly open, as though he might have loosed a sigh as the suicide machine drove its armory of weapons into him, their positions so immaculately calculated that seventeen which had crisscrossed in his head must have sliced his cortex to slivers.

There were mirrored arrangements of blades all around his body, entering through slits in the marble throne, to pass through his body and emerge the opposite side, the mirrored rows bright, narrow spear heads seeming to surround his body with signs of glorification. There was blood from these many wounds too, of course, which

had soaked into his once pristine robes, the stains a brighter purple in the whiteness of the weave.

“How long...” Harry murmured.

“Who knows?” the Hell Priest replied. “A thousand days, a thousand years.

The flesh of an angel doesn’t decay.”

“How did you know?”

“I didn’t until now.” The Hell Priest replied. “This is as much a revelation to me as it is to you. Though for me rather more bitter.”

“What were you expecting? If I may ask.”

“Ask? Yes, of course. You’re my witness after all. I am relying upon you to make a full and true repeat of all that has happened, and all that *will* happen from this moment on. You ask me what I was expecting? Greatness, in a word. A mind that had turned on itself over the centuries, and gave in search of the divinity of itself.”

“Why?”

“Why would I expect that?”

“No, why would the Devil go searching for divinity?”

“Because he had seen it, and known it, and been its most beloved. And surely the only thing you would want for, if you had a world of your own, as he did, and access to every pleasure that flesh and mind could invent, as he did, is to know God again.”

“And being unable to see him face to face—”

“—I thought he’d do what any creature possessed of his powers would do; I thought he’d seek out the maker’s mark inside himself, and take comfort in its presence. But instead... this.”

“Why so many devices just to kill himself?”

“Because the Lord God is a vengeful god, and it would not suit him to have his most mutinous of all angels escape heaven’s judgment by taking his own life. This is conjecture of course, but how else to explain this machine, but that it is was made by

one who had been sentenced to life, and was determined to overthrow that judgment?”

“Why not just cut his own throat?”

“Because it would not have killed him. He was an angel. He was beyond death.

Except... that it seems he found some way to trick his way past immortality.” As he spoke the Hell Priest stepped onto the dias and around the side of the throne. “Get out your notebook, witness. You should be writing down the details. How will you remember if you don’t?”

“I’ve got a good memory, don’t worry. This isn’t something I’m going to forget.

But I’ll write it all down when I get a hold of my notebook again. It’s in my jacket, which is—” he glanced at the ceiling, “—up there.”

In the seconds that his eyes were averted the Hell Priest reached out and seized hold of the end of one of the spears that transfixing Lucifer’s corpse. There was a short sound made by numberless voices, and Harry looked back at the Hell Priest to

see him defiantly holding on to the end of the spear, which was attached by means of a cable or cord two inches thick to the same defense mechanism that had come into play with the shout, and there was a release of energies through the Hell Priest body that threw him around violently. A second shout now, ten times the violence of the first. The force of the energies passing through the spear commensurately larger.

This time the Hell Priest could not hold on. He was thrown backwards, off the dias and through the entrails of the machine. He had not left the thrown without a keepsake, however. He'd held onto the spear long enough to have it slide all the way out of the corpse. He lost his grip on it as he was pitched across the floor, and it ended up no more than a couple of yards from where Harry was standing. He stepped a little nearer to it, and went down on his aching haunches to look at it more closely.

Whatever metal it was forged from it had qualities Harry had not seen in any other metal. There was a railing irridescence in its substance, which when it had caught

Harry's gaze drew him into a place which already seemed limitless; as though somehow the angel had caught and sealed a length of infinitude with the spear.

Now the vast engines that filled the chamber beneath the Cathedral in all directions made some sense to Harry. He'd seen evidence of almost every kind of magical working with which he was familiar in the labyrinth's devices. Ancient icons of primal magic inscribed on devices made of white gold, and shaped to suggest the sexual anatomies of men and women; the alchemical devices—retorts and vats and smoking stone—interwoven into the far sleeker devices, a boiling vat of vivid forms—none nameable but all familiar—set on a spiral of blue flame; the diagrams etched into a device of polished silver, which were designed—if his memory served—to open doors where there were none. There were more, of course, countless numbers, most of which he'd barely glimpsed. But if what he'd seen on his way through the cathedral's underworld was in any way representative of what immense chamber contained, then Lucifer empowered his grand act of defiance by drawing

together pieces of every magical system that humanity, in its hunger for revelation, had created, and made himself his own executioner, thus bypassing the will of the maker.

All this filled his head in a matter of seconds, during which time the Hell Priest had risen from where the blow from the throne had pitched him, and was coming back at it, moving with glacial ease, his hands raised in front of him, motes of shiny darkness pouring from his palms and from the open wound in his chest, and now—as he came within a stride of the dias—from his eyes. Polished black pearl tears that stemmed from his face and swelled the rolling waves of motes that followed him.

Only on the very last—as he stepped up onto the dias in one stride, did the Hell Priest's face betray the fury that was fuelling this counter-assault. He was a creature that held his dignity very high, and the blow from the throne, in casually swatting him away, had violated that dignity. Now he was reaching for the throne, despite the power it had just demonstrated, and without hesitation repeated his crime

by pulling out a second spear. There was another discharge of energy as he did so, but this time he was ready for it. The black motes that continued to grow in number around and behind him broke like a wave around his head and their dark surf met the force that had emptied from the throne with its own hunger, moving through it like a fervent revolutionary, transforming it as it went. The Hell Priest was already moving onto the third spear, and the fourth, his face lit from below by the arcs of power leaping from the throne and busting against his body. If he felt them he made no sign of the fact. He just went on his business of undoing the death chairs lethal mechanism, one transfixing spear after another. On occasion he separated the serpentine pipe from the handle of the spear into which it fed, releasing a rush of acidic gases, on others he simply pulled the blades out of the Devil's corpse, and cast them aside, one upon another, until the dias on which Lucifer sat enthroned on a nest of metallic snakes, forged of alloys unknown to humanity.

The fact that the task for which it had been created was being undone was not lost on the great engine. When a fragment burst of power, loosened from the Hell Priest's furious assault the devices they came reach of the energies drew into them their intricacies, rousing them into life. Filaments began to brighten, flames flattened beneath retorts, mechanisms started to speak to each in their own particular languages, ticking, —rhythmic exhalations, something loosing a ceaseless moan. Lucifer's masterpiece, his fantasia in self-slaughter, was defying the creator's philosophy and was bringing itself back to life.

If the Hell Priest knew what his labors had initiated he mad no sign of the fact. His focus was entirely upon the freeing of Lucifer's body, blade by blade. It was demanding labor—sweat ran down his face, its rivulets, mingled with those of the blood from his chest, darkening as it slid past him, transformed by the forces that surged around the Hell Priest, so that everything that came from him—like the sweat—or else were thrown into his orbit by chance, were all changed in their

proximity to him; adding to the size of the mustering thunderhead of black pearls that churned impatiently behind and above him, waiting for his instructions.

He glanced back over his left hand shoulder and whispered to the assembled darkness, which drew itself closer to him; an anxious ally determined to catch every order that he gave them.

Harry dutifully witnessed everything that transpired, his head awash with questions. Was this strange figure steadily slumping lower in his suicide seat as the blades which had held him were removed truly the adversary, Evil Incarnate, the Fallen One, the Satan? For all the bizzarrities of his appearance he looked pitifully human sitting there. The notion that this creature might have once been God's best-beloved seemed ludicrous, an urban legend spread by drunken angels. And yet he'd witnessed plenty of evidence of Lucifer's preternatural grasp of occult systems—their codes, their sigils, their consequences—to be certain that the creature in the throne, drooping, as each weapon that had transfixed it was withdrawn, was something more

than he seemed, to look at him now. Whether the thing was Lucifer, Harry tended now to doubt. But he'd been wrong before.

Meanwhile the subject of the Hell Priest's whispered conversation with the assembled darkness became apparent, as streams of it ran underneath the throne and began the process of removing the spears that had entered the dead demon from below. The Cenobite was meanwhile pulling blades from the other side of the corpse, effortlessly transforming the surges of power that flowed from the throne into dark droplets that swelled the thunderhead behind him. Finally, he stood back from the throne and the corpse shrugged upon it.

"It is finished." He said, then to Harry. "You saw it all?"

"Yes, of course. I don't understand. Is something supposed to happen now?"

"Were you thinking he'd open his eyes and say thank you?"

"No." the Cenobite replied. "There's nothing I want from this miserable corpse but the clothes off its back."

For a moment Harry assumed the Cenobite was joking, but he wasn't. He whispered again to his attendant darkness, and motes of it flew from him like bullets; striking Lucifer's body. For such tiny forms they possessed uncanny amounts of power. They caught hold of the corpse, and raised it up off the throne, hanging it upon their hovering presence, its arms outstretched. The allusion to the scene at Golgotha was not lost on Harry, even the way the Devil's head fell forward put in his mind the Man of Sorrows.

While he hung there, a hundred of the motes or more swarmed over his body, the stitches that made a whole of the vestment's many pieces. They came apart effortlessly, revealing behind their sumptuous folds evidence of Lucifer's true nature. His entire body was encased in armor wrought from dark metal through which color ran as on the surface of spilled gasoline, each portion of the armor immaculately decorated with designs that ran up and around Lucifer's entire body.

For all its exquisite appearance, of course, it had failed in the duty for which it had been forged and hammered: protecting its wearer. Rather than take it off, which would have presented one less challenge to the suicide chair, Lucifer had heated the armor as though it presented no greater challenge than the fabric from which his vestments were woven: which indeed had proved the case.

But the Hell Priest wanted it, nevertheless. This time he had no need to instruct his creatures. They knew his will. While Lucifer's body hung before the killing seat the armor was removed from his body, piece by piece.

"I wasn't born with the perfect anatomy of an angel," the Cenobite said to Harry. "Few of us are."

"As you say, D'Amour. Few of us are. So you may wish to stand back a little distance, while I make preparation for wearing what only Lucifer was to wear."

Harry wasn't entirely certain why he was being warned but he paid attention. He backed away three strides, which met with a little shake of the head from the

demon. Harry retreated two further steps, by which time the Hell Priest was past caring how far Harry had gone. He had brought a knife out of a long pocket down his left thigh. It was nothing like the other instruments of torture he'd worn on his belt. For one thing, it was a much bigger blade, and for another it had never been used.

The Cenobite quickly righted that wrong. He started to slash at what was left of his black vestments, so that they fell away in a foul heap of blood stained fabric and leather. He was a patchwork of scars and abrasions, his body resembling—absurd as it seemed—the wall of a cell where countless crazed, raging souls had been incarcerated over its time, and all left on the wall of his body marks of their presence there: scratches, designs, numbers, faces, there wasn't an inch of the Cenobite's nakedness that did not come from some piece of testament.

"I am to witness this, too?" D'Amour said.

"Everything." Came the reply. "Every demeaning detail. I never spared anyone, why should I be spared? Let them know what years of service to abomination

do to flesh.” He raised a knife. He shaved an inch, perhaps and inch and a half of the already skinned muscle of his chest away. It curled before his blade, the layer of pulpy fat dark yellow, the muscle beneath grey thanks to his blood-letting. Realizing half way through that the cut was not going to be deep enough to expose the bone, he left off and went for a second slice which did expose his sternum and a portion of his ribs. Hey too had been subjected to the questionable horror of being scratched and inscribed in the same fashion as his skin. How that had been achieved was something Harry was neither equipped not instructed to answer. This was to witness, pure and simple.

And witness he did, as the Hell Priest continued to saw through the flesh of his chest and on down to his abdomen, opening fresh areas of bleeding muscle as he did so. At his navel he cut the slice off and it dropped to the ground in front of him, splashing the blood around his feet.

Without question the surgery was as agonizing to him as it would have been to Harry. Beads of sweat stood out on the Hell Priest's face gathering in the grooves of his scars. His body was a mass of tremors, but his voice betrayed no frailty when he spoke: "I have become too used to my swollen flesh." He said to D'Amour. "Its time to be rid of it."

He took the knife to the fold of excess flesh at his hip, and cut off a large piece, which was entirely fat. It had barely hit the ground and he was cutting at the place again, digging deeply into the flesh behind the wound he'd already made and using both hands on the knife to make certain the blade kept its course. He came back to the precious cut a full two inches deeper, and was rewarded with the sight of blood coming down the side of his shin. Once he'd turned the corner of his hip he paused, his breathing hard and raw, sweat running freely from the places where his scars carried it to his jaw-line. He glanced at Harry in this brief respite, and Harry was disturbed by what he saw in his enemy's eyes. In the extremity of the Hell Priest's

pain, he had neglected to seal off his eyes, and for a few seconds, before the milky stain spread from the corners, he saw the vulnerable, agonized humanity which that darkness concealed.

“You did not witness that,” the Cenobite said, as soon as the darkness had eclipsed the tender human being thing he had once been.

“Witness what?” said Harry, playing along.

The Cenobite made a hard-won smile, the looked towards the now naked Lucifer. Unlike the Devil’s vestments, which had been dragged at his feet like so much dirty linen, each piece of armor now hung in the air an arm’s length from that portion of the body from which it had been armored. To Harry’s eye there was a formal beauty in this, the corpse and its armor was entirely static, but making tiny connections as the air moved around them, shifting them.

Meanwhile the creature that would be king continued to make new adjustments to his own flesh, so as to fit the Devil’s suit. First a slice off his other hip,

down to the red meat. Then up to his arms, slicing away the flesh at the back of his upper arms, passing the knife from left to right and back again, cutting effortlessly with either. The area around his feet looked like the floor of a butcher's store now, cobs and slices of fatty meat scattered everywhere.

Finally, he was satisfied. He let the knife drop amongst the scraps and hackings, and opened his arms, mirroring the position of the Man of Sorrows.

“Good,” he said. Then, after a moment, “It’s time to get dressed for war.”

Four

The Unconsumed’s assembly of demons entered the cathedral with a mingling of veneration and terror. The fog that had concealed most of the building from the outside had left them unprepared for the scale of what awaited them inside. In

response, some were so overwhelmed they lost all control over their bodily functions; others dropped to their knees or fell face down on the slabs, inciting prayers in countless tongues, some simply repeating the same simple entreaty over and over.

Even the Unconsumed, his bearer's having set him them all, Norma with Knotchyea, her soldier-saviour, as she'd dubbed him, Caz with Murmizian, and herself bringing up the rear. She had her own riffs on some powerful defensive pyrics, which she was quite ready to unleash if the enemy got too close.

But she needn't have worried. The last thing on the mind of this imminent force of demons was a few human fugitives. Sienna brought her human charges to one of the smaller side chapels, and they gratefully settled there for a while, watching the number of demons entering the cathedral continue to swell, the presence of those at the door forcing the pace of the demons who had first entered, which they didn't welcome. They were afraid, and had no desire to be pressed on into this mysterious place, with translucent towers and spiraling staircases, against their wills. But such

was the size and curiosity of the crowd passing from behind that they could only advance before it, and while they advanced let out cries of protest, which were only audible above the murmurs of the assembled masses as incoherent shouts, and were ignored.

Only the Unconsumed was able to carve his way through the crowd without meeting resistance, and he was in the process of doing so when those who had first come into the Cathedral, and were at the head of the crowd, reached in the middle of the structure, where the violence from below had cracked the marble slabs and opened holes in the floor. Their collective weight was more than the compromised slabs could support. There was a series of cracking sounds, as the fissures spread across the floor in all directions, then dropped away beneath those demons who were forced to venture over this uncertain ground. The din of their cries was plenty loud enough to draw the attention of the Unconsumed. The master demon raised his arms, and two blazing spirals of light erupted from his hands, rising into the air a dozen yards above

his head, where they burst like a vast parasol of iridescent fire, their ribs speeding on past the raw-edged circle of light to burst against the pillars or the walls, whichever they encountered first.

The blaze quickly silenced most of the crowd, but it left unrebuked and unhushed the swelling numbers at the beach, who were being pressured from behind by yet more of the Unconsumed's shapeless army, who were still streaming over the living bridge, and onto the island. The consequences for those already crowding the beach weren't welcome; many had to walk in the shallows of the lake, obliged to venture further and further out as the mass of people increased. The Quoato was perfectly aware of their situation. It rose to the surface now and then, rolling over sideways as it did so, its protruding eye showing an arc of white as it scanned the hors d'oeuvre stumbling through the water. Inside, of course, there was no knowledge of the mounting chaos on the beaches. The freshly silenced crowd listened attentively to the words of their leaders: "*Please,*" the Unconsumed said, his voice carrying around

the interior, *“Let us all remember that this is a holy place. There is a power here greater than any below Heaven, and we owe our lives and our devotion to that power. Who do I speak of? Will you whisper his name in gratitude for all he has made?”*

There was an uncomfortable moment before the first whispers began: *“Lucifer, Lord Lucifer.”*

“We thank you, Lord.”

“We will serve you, Lord.”

“Yes, serve you.”

“We will follow you, Lord.”

“Yes, follow you.”

“We will die for you if that is your will.”

“Yes, die for you.”

—

“Listen to them.” The Hell Priest said. “Rubble. Frightened rubble.”

He was standing in front of the throne where the corpse of Lucifer had been casually discarded once its armour had been entirely stripped from it. That armor now clad the Hell Priest from chin to sole. He had made very accurate assessments of the work his knife had been required to do, and the fit was immaculate. His freshly lean torso and limbs made him look more imposing than ever.

As for the armour itself it had been exquisitely designed that when the Hell Priest put on the armor it seemed to flow over and around him, the designs upon the chest and limbs equally protean, so that they presented a limitless bestiary which shifted with every tiny movement the Hell Priest made. Now and then Harry would catch in the changing forms a glimpse of something that might have been the subject

for a piece by Cal, and it occurred to him that the Cenobite and he were both decorated now, the witnessed and witnesser, both defended against harm by suits of images.

As for the black pearl motes that had done the work of dismantling the old power and dressing the new, they were now above the Hell Priest's head, laid out in an enormous circle, one pearl deep and fully eight or nine feet across. They were in motion, circling more stately and majestic with alternating rings moving clockwise and anti-clockwise. They shed a spectral light upon their progenitor, who in turn cast his eyes upon Harry, opening his armored fists and presenting palms like a magician who had just performed some particularly impressive sleight-of-hand.

"It could have been made for me," he said, allowing a smile to haunt his face for a moment. "And you witnessed everything, D'Amour. I saw you, doing it. Not once did you look away."

"Of course not."

“I’m impressed. I can see that I chose well.”

“Will you let Norma go now?”

“Norma...?” the Hell Priest said.

“The blind old lady.”

“Ah, yes. Norma.”

“I’ve said I will be your witness and I will. Just let her and the others go back.

I’ll stay here with you, and witness.”

The Hell Priest considered this for a moment. “What’s to stop you from turning your back on me the moment she’s gone?”

“Because being your witness is all I have left to be.”

Harry had turned that reply over many times when he’d rehearsed this conversation. It would either carry the day, or else lose it for him.

The Hell Priest considered this reply for a long while. Finally, he said:

“You’re right, D’Amour. I’m all you’ve got, aren’t I?”

Harry nodded. He was woefully close to the truth.

The demon thought the matter a while longer.

“I’m tempted to be merciful,” he said. “And let the old woman go. But I think she’s safer in the custody of my soldier than she would be in this rubble.”

“There are others—”

“Yes. I know. I had reports on them all. You’re queer friend, Caz, and some slut you picked up along the way who brought her damn dog! Really, D’Amour. You used to work alone. Now you trail all these lost creatures. As though you could ever do anything for them.”

“Maybe I can’t, but you could. Just let them go.”

“When everything is in place, as I wish it to be,” said the Hell Priest, “then they can go. Don’t look so grim, D’Amour. You’re doing all you can, and if there’s any justice—in the world or out of it—then you will surely be rewarded.”

“I don’t care about—”

“I know, I know. You want to save the weak ones. The old lady, the girl with the stained soul. Even her mutt of a dog. You’d like to see them away from here, am I right?”

“Of course.”

“And they will be away, just as you wish, as soon as I have ordered the rubble overhead.” Harry opened his mouth to respond to this, but the Hell Priest made a small motion in the air, as though erasing before they were even spoken the words he was about to speak. “No, none of this. Go back upstairs, D’Amour.”

“No more witnessing?”

“There’s nothing left to see down here. But there’s plenty above. And a lot more to come, trust me.”

“How in Christ’s name do I find my way back?”

“In *Christ’s* name?”

“It was a turn of phrase.” Harry said wearily.

The Hell Priest spat into the palm of his left hand and reaching out put his hand into the contrary spiral flows of motes. The spittle was instantly snatched from his palm and the motes that carried broke free of the spiral flow, forming a planetary system of their own, with six of the motes forged into a sun at its center.

“Here, Witness.” The Cenobite said. “A piece of my will to lead you and watch over you. But be warned, I can see you through the eye of that sun. You try to leave with your Witnessing unfinished and—”

“You don’t have to threaten me. I’m not going to leave. Why would I? Everything else after this is just existence.”

“Then follow the sun. It’ll get you out of here, and keep the demon trash up there out of your way.”

“Then what?”

“Wait. Rest your eyes. There are sights ahead. And I would not wish you to miss a single one.”

—

Harry was happy to turn his back on the dias and all it held: the throne, the sprawled corpse of Lucifer, the blood, the fat flesh and the Hell Priest in his usurped armor. He gladly followed the system with its circling planets through the labyrinth of machines, some of which were now operating, others were still inert, the route so complex he knew he'd never have found his way back without help.

With the problem of the labyrinth solved by his guide, he could concentrate on trying to make sense of what he heard from above. It seemed that the demons who were inside the Cathedral (and there were many; their weight made the stones of the ceiling grind against one another, sending down a fiery hail of dust) were virtually silent, while those demons Harry judged to be outside, on the beach, were unleashing

a vicious din of screeches and bellows, howls and yelps and caterwaulings. What was going on up there?

There was another sound, audible even over the noise from that of the demons, that was a lot more difficult to make sense of, at least at first. A series of drummings that had no real rhythm, but came and went first from one side of the cathedral vaults and then the other. It was only when—after hearing one—that he heard the sound of splashing and screams, and solved the mystery. The drumming he was hearing was the sound of the Quoato's myriad limbs on the substructure of the cathedral. And then, when it surfaced, taking one of the demons on the beach down with it.

The Quoato! God in heaven, how many hurdles were they going to have to clear if they were to get out of this place alive? All he could do was cling to what little hope he had left, and follow his guide, not wasting his time with fretful speculations.

In fact, he had no more time to worry about getting through the demons or past the Quoato. His guiding sun brought him to the bottom of the flight of steps.

“Nice work.” He murmured to his guide.

The sun heard the proffered compliment, and burned brighter by way of response, speeding in motion around Harry for five, six, seven circuits, then abruptly stopping, directly in front of Harry. There it did one final slow, slow tumble, and each of the motes in the system took its cue from the sun, and blazed a little brighter. Then, as if to say: “You know your way from here,” the system glided out of Harry’s path, and took instead a position close to his left shoulder. He could feel the pulsing power it gave out, and took comfort from it, despite its source. He had long ago lost his way in the moral morass of Hell’s coils. Yes, the Hell Priest was responsible for the anguish and agony of hundreds, probably thousands of human beings; and if there were any justice in the world he would have been summarily executed for his crimes by higher agencies than Harry. Certainly there would have been a time when he

would never have considered accepting the aid of a creature like the Hell Priest, knowing as he did how much blood the hands that offered that help had spilled. But time and experience had made a pragmatist of him. If he needed help, he would take it, and not worry too much about the niceties. He had work to do—at least always had—and if doing his work meant taking a lift from somebody whose trunk was loaded with death and flies, then so be it. His job—as far as he understood it—was to watch over his little corner of the cosmos—and the people who came and went through it—and make it a little safer, a little less chaotic, than when he'd found it. Sometimes, in service of that modest intention, he would have to deal with people who had blood under their fingernails. So be it, sometimes he would have to go down in the bowels of sin, but again, so be it. Just as long as he never lost faith in the simple idea of making the world a little better than he found it, he could play poker with demons, and still keep his soul.

The familiar chapter of thoughts passed through his head as he climbed the stairs, preparing himself as best he could for what lay at the top. As long as he kept his focus fixed upon getting Norma and Caz and Rebekah out of here, with Sienna, of course, he wouldn't go far wrong. But he had to be quick; they all had to be out of this damn place before the Great Pretender downstairs called him to play Witness again.

There was one last turn on the stairwell, and perhaps a dozen steps left to the top. But such was the size of the assembly that many of the weaker members of the congregation had been executed by the press of the crowd, and pushed down the stairs, where they had no sight of whatever was going on above. Several had sustained some injury in the crush and were sitting on stairs nursing broken arms or bloodied heads; others seemed closer to death, and lay on the stairs barely moving, obliging Harry to step over them as he ascended. He was now just four or five steps from the top, and the stairs were densely occupied, but the presence of the guide at Harry's

shoulder drew respectful looks from those who were in his path, and they stepped aside allowing him access to the top of the flight, and into the great mass of assembled demons who filled the cathedral to capacity.

Five

At the wall of the cathedral, saved from being crumbled by the great mass of demons who had followed the Unconsumed, by the presence of both Knotchyea and Sienna, who was ruthlessly defending her little space, Norma and Rebekah watched as the idol of this great crowd—who were by appearance and number members of every conceivable order of demon—as he spoke to them about why they had been swindled and manipulated over the years.

“I fought for you, brothers and sisters,” he said. He was still lifted up high by a corps of his admirers, so that everybody in the cathedral could see him. “When you

were taxed, and every cup of marrow you brought to your table was snatched away again, and a great portion of it taken before it was returned, I protested, I wept for you, and begged that your agonies be heard and attended to, or I said to all of them, and it hurts me to speak ill of those who died, but the truth be told..." he paused, surveying his congregation. "Do you want the truth told? Well?" he said, he had dropped his voice low to a whisper that nevertheless carried with unnatural force across the Cathedral, the proof of its reach in the power of the reply, which came from all directions.

"Yes...yes..." the crowd said.

"Then I will tell you, because in the end, like all conspiracies, the answer comes down to one."

The word ran murmuring through the huge interior. "One? One?"

"Yes, one. A criminal who is at the heart of your miseries, all your suffering. A fiend who passed himself off as a minor tempter of souls, all the while laying his plans

against the serenity of the state. Is there chaos in your streets? He put it there. Is there nothing to buy at your butchers but bone and gristle? That's because he sells all the finest meat to humankind, who have a taste for themselves that he has nurtured over the years. You will know his face when you lay eyes upon him!"

"Show us!" came a call from somewhere near the door. It was instantly taken up on all sides.

"Show us! Show us! Show us!"

The Unconsumed raised his fire wreathed arms. Flames emptied into the air, illuminating the interior from one end to the other. Harry, of course, was in the midst of this brouhaha. Its effect was uncanny. He could feel the rage and hunger of the crowd as it surged around him, a dry current overwhelmed him if he hadn't had the protection of the Hell Priest's gift, which staged a modest Big Bang, and threw its planets out, away from the sun, which took up a new position directly in front of Harry, within grasping distance if he'd had any mind to grasp it, and about level with

his heart. There it hung, while the planets and their moons arrayed themselves around him at the same level as the sun. The instant that they had all settled into position the effect upon him of the currents summarily ceased. He walked through the crowd untouched.

But useful as this immunity was, it only solved part of the problem. The other part: where was he to start looking for Rebekah and the little clan? He'd left them close to the middle of the cathedral, where the Unconsumed was preaching, so it was that direction he drifted, keeping his head low and his eyes sharp. And while he walked he did his best to make some mental contact with either Rebekah or Sienna. The latter was more likely to be successful, he guessed. After all, the dog had been able to get in his head successfully enough. With any luck, she'd left the channel open, and those of his thoughts addressed to her would find her.

“What’s is it, girl?” Rebekah said, dropping down onto her haunches beside Sienna. The dog’s eye view of the ground was like being lost in a forest of shuttering trees. But there was something in that forest that Sienna wanted to go to. She was letting out little whining signs that Rebekah had come to recognize as Sienna’s way of drawing her attention to something.

“What’s wrong with her?” Norma said. “Why is she making that whining noise?”

“She wants me to go with her.”

“So go.”

“And leave you here?”

“I’m not going anywhere don’t you worry. And I’ve got a soldier-boy to look after me.”

“Will you do that Knotchyea?”

“I’ll stay with her.” Knotchyea said. “Sure. But if this crowd gets really crazy—
”

“Then keep your heads down and wait for us to come back.” Rebekah said.

“And we will come back, Norma. Have you got that?”

“You don’t have to make a convert of me, honey.” Norma said. “I’ll wait for you til Doomsday. Which may be with us sooner than we anticipated.”

Rebekah offered no riposte on this. She just told Norma she’d be back as soon as possible, and headed off in pursuit of Sienna, who, as always, was threading her way through the crowd with not so much as a single backward glance, simply assuming that whatever cord connected girl and dog was not going to be severed by anything, and even if Rebekah lost sight of Sienna for a moments they’d always find one another again sooner or later.

Except that this time was different. There was a change instantly in the air which made Rebekah afraid for her loved ones. And the man on fire in the middle of

the Cathedral was the composer of that insanity, conducting his Great Work, written for ten thousand voices.

“Show us!” they were demanding over and over again, *“Show us! Show us!*

Show us!”

The Unconsumed sent up another plume of flame; this one blazing brighter than those that had preceded it, its color venomous, the light it shed on the upturned faces of the demons illuminating in each evidence of their worst attributes. Their mouths too wide, then teeth, either infantile or bestial, their eyes tiny darts of malice or simply offering up wide, idiot stares. There were not two faces the same in the many thousands which were illuminated. Each was grotesquely perfected by their revealing light, their ambitions gorged with their joyless faces, and burning in their crazed eyes.

The flame the Unconsumed had sent up had virtually silenced the mob *inside* the cathedral, though those outside the entrance continued to bellow and howl.

“Forget them.” The Unconsumed said. “They’ll have their moment, when I chose and not before. But now, you have asked me to show you the felon who masterminded the many crimes against you. And so you shall. I sent six members of my personal guard to shackle him and bring him here for your judgment.” He threw another flame into the air above his head, where it hung for a moment before plunging back past him, past the platform on which he stood, and down through the gasping marble slabs and onto the secret space below.

Taking his time, so as to squeeze as much drama as possible from the situation, he turned and took a step back from the edge of his platform.

“Here, comrades, is the felon. The thief. The destroyer.”

The flames he had thrown below now came back up out of the underground in a swarm of smaller flames, that circled the tableau which the Unconsumed had conjured forth. At its heat, of course, was the prisoner, the Cenobite, driven down to his knees by the four colossal arresting officers that the Unconsumed had sent down

to fetch him. In one hand they held each one of the chains attached to the collar around their prisoner's neck, which were each equipped with foot-long spikes which were cunningly arranged so as to form a kind of separate cell for the Hell Priest's head, its bars pressing into the flesh between his lines of pins. In their other hand they held white hot spikes, their pointed ends directed at their prisoner.

The appearance of the notorious Cenobite, reduced to such a state of helpless capitulation brought whispered expressions of awe from all quarters, but they fell away when the Unconsumed began to address the crowd again:

“So now you see him. The thing which had filled your hearts with so much terror. See him as he really should be seen, shackled and kneeling, awaiting your judgment. A trial or an execution? Which is your pleasure, comrades? Just say the word.”

The word came: the same four syllables from every mouth, repeated and repeated: *“Execution! Execution! Execution!”*

If there was any voice raised in support of judicial process, none was audible.

The crowd made its opinion perfectly clear.

“Execution!”

It was even easier for Harry to move through the crowd once it started to chant for execution. He moved between the vengeful demons unnoticed, the ring of tiny planets that surrounded him keeping a perfect buffer-zone between him and the surrounding crowd. Stride by stride he approached the place where the prisoner waited on his knees, faint currents of iridescence passing through the armor which Harry had seen him suited in. It fitted perfectly and initiated its malleability so well that the arresting officers the Unconsumed had sent to fetch him, had assumed the armor *was* his skin, and had left it untouched. As for the unconsumed—who would certainly have sent he difference in the prisoners appearance, had he looked—he was entirely too concerned with stirring his congregation up into a state of murderous frenzy to study the Hell Priest for a moment, intoxicated by the cries of the crowd—

“Execution!”

“Execution!”

“EXECUTION!”

—he simply swayed to the rhythm of their demand, pitching bursts of flame high into the air above the dias with each repetition. And all the while, as the crowd chanted, and the Unconsumed swayed, Harry got a lit bit closer to the dias, keeping his eyes on the Hell Priest every step of the way. The prisoner showed no sign of being curious of his altered state. He simply stared blankly out at the empty air above the heads of the crowd, with not a flicker of comprehension in his eyes. What had they done to him, Harry found himself wondering. Was there some force in the fire which the Unconsumed wielded so casually that could subdue a will as irresistible as the Hell Priest? So it seemed. Harry was no more than half a dozen strides from the dias now and there was nothing in the Hell Priest’s appearance that suggested there was anything left of the creature it had—

Wait.

The demon's eyes flicked a few degrees, and found Harry, locking upon him.

For a moment he feared that the Hell Priest meant to make Harry's death the first of the coming many, but no. While its stare was fixing him he heard, or thought it seemed, the Hell Priest's familiar instruction.

"Witness me."

By way of reply Harry offered a barely perceptible nod.

"Good," the Hell Priest said, *"then you and yours are safe."*

"The dog..." Harry murmured.

"Yes, the dog will be protected."

"And what about Murmizian and Caz?"

"The sodomites? Yes, all protected, you have my word. Just witness me."

Harry made an infinitesimal nod. The Hell Priest did nothing; but nor did he need to. Harry trusted him. Though the creature had committed atrocities, and was in

this sickly clan numbered amongst the worst of the worst, his word was still good.

Such paradoxes did more to describe the present state of Hell than a thousand pictures of wastelands and abandoned torture chambers.

While this inaudible exchange between Harry and the Hell Priest had been going on the Unconsumed had escalated his inflammatory talk about the prisoner.

“I know, brothers and sisters, you want to see justice done, yes?”

“Yes!” came the roaring reply from every corner of the Cathedral.

The Unconsumed raised his right hand into the air above his head, and closed his fist against the flames that licked his palm. They were solid in a heart-beat, forming a grip from which a white flame climbed, cohesing as it did so to form a blade that was designed to cut *uncleanly* its prodigious length barbed and nicked and grooved so that instead of dispatching its victims, (or more correctly, *victim*) for sword was created for the agonizing dispatch of one soul only. With a single merciful stroke, it would tear and mangle and shred before it had delivered the *coup de grace*.

“*See?*” the Unconsumed declared when the sound was entirely finished. “*See what you have made?*” he walked around the limits of the dias, exhibiting the still-smoking weapon to the multitude. “*Is that not a fine cruel thing I hold before you?*”

A roar of approval rose from the crowd, which steadily grew in volume as he completed his circuit of the dias, and stood over the Hell Priest. His captors had forced him forward, presenting his defenseless neck to the blade of the Unconsumed. The old chant began again, with fresh venom.

“Execution! Execution! *Execution!*”

Harry studied the Hell Priest’s face, looking for some sign of his intentions. But his face was blank, his eyes glazed. The Unconsumed raised his left hand to silence the crowd. They obeyed him instantly. One moment the vast interior was filled with shouts, the next it was pin-drop quiet. The Unconsumed raised the sword, a flicker of white flame leaping along its edge. Word of what was about to happen had

apparently spread through the masses on the beach, because they too were silent, listening to the sword to fall and the Hell Priest's head to roll.

A gust of wind blew in from across the lake, smelling of the void; of all the absented things, of nameless, wounded purposeless things. The gust claimed the Unconsumed's attention for an instant, and in that instant the Hell Priest raised his head, his gaze grazing Harry's as he threw off the four demons that were holding him. They were pitched into the crowd, one of them falling close to Harry.

Despite the incredible density of the bodies, the crowd still managed to clear a space around, and up on the dias the Hell Priest rose and turned to face his executioner.

"I'm not," he said. "ready yet to die."

The Unconsumed ignored the instruction, and swung the sword at the Hell Priest, who raised his armored hand and grasped the burning blade. Sparks of white flame spurted from between the Hell Priest's fingers, and he laughed, as though this

were the finest sport he'd had in a long time. And while he laughed, and held the blazing sword in his grip, he took time to cast gestures out toward the demons whom had allowed, for theater's sake, to drag him up out of the tomb and prepare for execution.

Serpentine chains, hook-headed, came weaving between the feet of the spectators, striking with razor edge anyone fool enough to block their way. The four condemned knew with the appearance of the first hook what horrors would inevitable follow, and each attempted to outrun the judgment. But the Hell Priest knew his game better than breathing. Whether his victims fell to their knees and begged salvation, as one did, or tried to outrun the pursuing hooks, as did two more, or simple attempted to go against his enemy as he would any other, with sword and dagger, as did the fourth, all were lost. The hooks found their eyes, their mouths, shit-holes, their bellies, and finding them, they dug deep and tore hard, so that the four demons were reduced in a matter of seconds to thrashing incomprehensible knots of

spasming muscle. They made their sounds still, protesting their suffering state, but anything remotely resembling words were beyond them now. The stomach of one had been hooked and hauled up through his throat, the face of another was emerging from between his butt-hole like a prodigious bowel movement. Their anatomies could not sustain such violent disfigurements. They tore, their bodies opening like over-ripe fruit, spilling their contents as they did so.

Harry stepped away from the horror in front of him, and returned his gaze to the warring figures on the dias. The Hell Priest still had hold of the Unconsumed's fire-edged sword and was bending it back towards its wielder, a trial of strength in which he was steadily gaining the upper hand. He suddenly put all his weight behind the moment, and with a quick twist he had freed the blade from the Unconssumed's grip. He'd half expected it to give up its solidity as soon as he alone had his grip on it. But no, the blade's existence remained intact. Even though its creator had relinquished it. He swung it back and forth again to get the heft of the thing. It felt

good, having a sword to wield and a battle to wage. There'd be no more petty little games with trick boxes, no more wasted meaningless temptations.

He rose up, the armour feeling good around his body, not like a carapace, hard and brittle, but flowing with him and through him, its power given over to him, wed to him, til death do them part. He was a force unto himself, beyond the reach of any living thing; and though the years that had brought him to this moment had been filled with the most painful of suffering purposeless, it had been worth the agony in order to bring him to this glorious, heart leaping moment, when Lucifer's armor shot strength into every place where the monkish life he'd lived had left weakness, and bliss into the muscles he'd hacked at in order to make himself fit the armor.

Lords Below and Above, what joy! He'd never felt his flesh and mind and soul in one world like this, a single system, scoured of contradiction; every thought and action, every action another thought. He hadn't lived until this moment. And now that he had it he would never give it up.

He saw the Unconsumed from the corner of his eye, his arms raised above his head. Two more swords were been etched out of the incandescent air above the demon's fists, streams of raw laval stuff dropping from their blazing lengths and spreading over the dias. The Hell Priest had no fear of walking on liquid fire, not wearing Lucifer's armor. He leapt towards the Unconsumed, the armor lending his every motion a grace and an ease he had never known before. He was in front of his enemy in three fire-splattering strides, aiming a side swipe at his belly which the other only avoided by the fireness of a flame. He came back at the Hell Priest with his sword slicing the air like twin threshers. The Hell Priest was in no mood to retreat, he stood his ground, striking out each of the enemy's swords in turn, the force of his blows enough to slow his adversary's approach a little. But the gusts of wind raised by the threshing swords suddenly caused the flames between the opponents to riser up like a blazing wall, and the Unconsumed seized the advantage, coming through the fire with his swords spinning.

The Hell Priest raised his own blade to protect his head, and the Unconsumed's left handed sword struck it, the impact spitting out serpentine lightning bolts, which flew out across the heads of the assembled demons, striking stone dead those stupid enough to reach up and try to grab them. With the Hell Priest's blade locked against one of his own the Unconsumed used the other to strike at his adversary's exposed chest. Surges of power broke over the Hell Priest's armor from the point of impact, their brightness melting into the armor's tidal influence, its strength stolen and added to the armor's sum. The Hell Priest felt the increase of his strength, and instantly acted on the knowledge, he took his sword in a two-fisted grip, and raced at the Unconsumed, loosing a roar of pleasure. The Unconsumed raised his left handed blade to ward off the Priest's attack but his sword shattered as soon as it was struck, the metal shards going to flakes of fire as they were strewn.

To escape a second strike he leapt up towards his seat, his presence carrying it to release a wall of fire which it passed over the creature amid the mirage of its face, carved from the fire, and immense, into the air high above the dias.

“You see the enemy, soldiers? This is that destroyer of who I have spoken, who will bring you all to dust if you do not act against him now. Trust me! I have seen visions of what he will do, if he is not brought down, now, here. Will you do that, warriors? Will you save Hall from this destroyer, before he unmakes me?”

The flames decayed with flutterings, which died into darkness, leaving the air empty. Meanwhile, on the dias below, the Hell Priest came at the throne with his sword slashing left and right.

“Visions, now, is it?” he said as he approached the burning seat.

“I’ve seen your ambitions, priest.” The Unconsumed replied.

“Oh really? And how does it all end? Have you seen that too?”

“Glimpses. Enough to be sure you must put out of life now, before you spread your plague.”

“Somebody was teasing you,” the Hell Priest said, walking through the flames towards the chair where the Unconsumed stood. “Giving you glimpses, but not the thing entire. “He jabbed at the fire which was now spiraling around the chair, a solid wall braided with flame, writhing as it rose, “You have no idea of what I will do, now he is reborn in me.”

The illusion of the Unconsumed’s face appeared in the fire, and spiraled around the chair, a second following when the first was losing coherence, a third following upon the second, each picking up the words so that no fragment of sense was sacrificed.

“Oh so you’re reborn, is that it? And the armour you wear?”

“A gift.”

“From—”

“You know who. Or are you afraid to say his name? Lucifer. The armor wear is a gift from Lucifer, who is reborn in me. Henceforth I will take upon my own shoulders the duties and powers that were his. My authority will be absolute, as was his. My word law, as was his. And it will be my intention to remake this state in the image of my dreams for it, as was his.”

Now he again took the sword in a two-handed grip, and he drove it into the spiraling flame, cutting through it as though a length of heavy fabric, the sundered edges made no attempt to reknit themselves. They fell away as he raised his blade from the horizontal of his first thrust to the vertical, which opened a gaping wound in the flame, through which the Unconsumed could be seen, a fire within a fire, except that his own was curiously muted, all color drained from it, all motion reduced to a sickly smear.

“I see you.” The Hell Priest murmured to his enemy. He casually slashed at the wounded spiral to left and right, opening new fluttering cuts in the flame, the scraps

folded effortlessly into the impenetrable flux of the Devil's armor, each new meal of fire fattening the seams of incandescence in the armor's fantastically anatomized anatomy. The armor had ingested so much fire by now that there were blinding bright hot spots moving over its perpetually churning surface.

The Unconsumed continued amid the wounding, throwing up fresh screens of fire behind which he could dodge the Priest's attacks, but it was not a game he could play forever. Snatching a moment of respite he summoned a flame directly beneath him, a straight blue-white flame on which he could safely stand, raising himself ten, twelve feet above the priest. From there he addressed his minions.

"Soldiers! This is your hour! I have brought you to your enemy, and I have confounded him with games and blinded him with fire. *Now it falls to you!* You must take him out of this sacred place, and tear him to pieces! Don't listen to his promises. They're all lies. His threats the same. Lies! He's afraid of you! Don't you see that? You have righteousness on your side and he has nothing. *Nothing!* He came here only to

steal from our lord Lucifer, hallowed by his name, in his place of meditation. Look at him! Is that a priest's garb? No! it is stolen from our Lord Lucifer. And I believe our lord would be bountiful in his thankfulness were you to tear it from that vile thief's back" —as he spoke waves of brilliance ascended the column on which he stood, each freight of brightness intensifying the blaze beneath the Unconsumed's feet. "—and having left him naked, slaughter with your hands! Then return what he has stolen to he who made of Hell a better paradise. *Will you do that?*"

As the crowd roared its almighty *yea*, the Unconsumed drove the point of his blade into the flagration between feet. It instantly refracted the light in a blazing show that spat incandescence out across the length and breadth of the cathedral.

The *Yea* became stronger, as the beams exploded against the stone walls, blowing ragged holes in them none less than ten feet across, many twice that.

"*Come on in!*" the Unconsumed yelled, his voice possessed of a magnitude that carried his words to the hordes cramming the beach around the building, and indeed

to the Quoato, who in celebration of this violence breached at the shoreline and scooped up a throatful of demons before slamming its jaws closed and dropping out of sight so skillfully that the waters closed over it with barely a ripple to mark the place.

Inside Harry saw things rapidly escalating towards insanity as the tens of thousands of demons who'd been denied access seethed in through the ruptured walls, their bony backs all pressed together resembling a stream of cockroaches seething as they climbed over one another, then fallen once they were over the edge of the hole, and dropping into the morass of those who'd climbed up out onto the ledge and fallen over the other side ahead of them.

However this was going to end, it wasn't going to be good, Harry knew. This mad flood of invading demons, filling up a space that was not meant to hold more than a fraction of the crowd; their rage fuelled by a visionary hunger to be at the heart of the baptism that they had glimpsed in their dreams all their lives. *Yea!* They

had screamed, Yea! To the blood and light and Yea! To martyrdom, if that was to be the price of their presence here.

Harry scanned the vast arena, hoping for some sign, however rudimentary, to help him decide which direction to go to find Rebekah and Caz and Murmizian: but there was just the same chaos wherever he looked, surges and eruptions of demons, many of them ascending the ambiguous scheme of stairways and slithering across the ladder walkways a quarter mile above his head, while others, all possessing muscular reptilian tails, climbed up the sleek marble pillars in their many hundreds, to access the state of things from a safer height.

But there was a lot of anger and frustration in the crowd, and it needed release. Harry heard the popping of guns from several directions; saw two pillars climbers picked off clean, and dropped into the crowd, then a slew of bullets hitting one of the high bridges, shattering the structure so that it came crashing down, striking other walkways and bridges as it descended, a knotty mass of ladders, rope

and bodies that fell upon the crowd. The mood was becoming more violent by the minute. Everybody around Harry seemed to be shouting at somebody or something, possessed of a collective dementia. In some places he could hear chanting taken up, in other demons who still had vestigial wings were pressing their bodies into flight, though the longest of them lasted ten seconds and all ended in quick descents. A few, caught up by the spreading frenzy, were losing themselves to transformation, heads opening like steaming flowers, their interiors rank and toxic, sprouting might-fiend snouts or foot-long spiraling horns that were arranged upon their heads like absurd homages to the Hell Priest's nails. One that Harry saw through the crowd had the handles of long bladed knives emerging from their chests, and walked amongst its brethren presenting itself like a living armory. There were other weapons changing hands for hard cash, from antiquated Smith and Wessons to guns that had yet to be seeded in the human imagination, sacks of milky white fluid hanging like watermelons from the backs of the purveyors, their heads become living muzzles,

writhing around like tentacles of a hungry octopus. And all this just a fraction of what one man was witnessing as he passed through the crowd.

Harry was in the act of respectfully ungluing one to the tentacles from off the side of his face when he felt something brush his legs. He looked down.

“Sienna?”

The tentacle needed no further manipulations. It was snatched away by its host body in an instant, and gone.

Harry went down on his haunches (the air was fetid lower down, the stench of demonic flatulence and unwashed genitals mingled with the smell of whatever they'd walked in and over and through to get here: mostly death, or the scrapings of it) and there was the welcome sight of Sienna, wagged her tail with happiness, even in such surroundings.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked her.

She panted off through the crowd with her nose, then looked back at him.

“You lead, lady.” Harry said. “Trust me, I’ll be right behind you.”

Six

Up on the dias the Hell Priest, though he had a great deal claiming his attention, sensed the moment when his Witness’ back was turned to him, and made a mental note, when the time came for judgment, this betrayal by D’Amour, when he had a chamber the size of a small nation to witness, and his patron at the heart of everything, fighting for possession of the world the lord Lucifer had built—

—the dead Lucifer. There was a sight that would bring an end to the spiraling insanity that had been set in motion by the Unconsumed. Let them have proof that the great Lord was not mediating below: let them see for themselves. He called up a

piece of shamanic magic he'd learned from a man who had claimed, just before the Hell Priest had cut his throat, to have made curses and love syrups for Catherine the Great. This was a simpler piece. It was called *A Waking in the House of Which Heard by All as to be in that House Present Except the Dead*. The Unconsumed did not stumble as he conjured. He had lifted out of the crowd four creatures who were apparently his generals, for they were uniformed in excremental brown and silver, guns and knives hanging from their belts. But they responded the instant that the Hell Priest spoke, as did everybody in the chamber, though he spoke without any of his adversary's rhetorical flourishes. His voice was intimate, and indeed retained his intimacy, which made it all the more distressing given the numbers of souls to which it was being addressed.

The first addressee, however, was but a single man.

“You disappoint me, D'Amour. You made an oath, didn't you? Didn't you swear that you'd be my witness. And yet I look and there you are—”

Harry looked back over his shoulder towards the dias. The Hell Priest was indeed looking directly at him.

“—with your back turned to me.” Harry turned, instinctively opening his arms to make some gesture of apology, but the Hell Priest had already looked away.

“Too late for excuses.” The Hell Priest went on. “This is where the road divides, isn’t it?”

“What road?” somebody in the crowd shouted out.

“Easy answer.” The Hell Priest said. He pointed at the Unconsumed and his generals. “His: the blood and war road. Mine: the remaking of Hell as a paradise only angels remember.”

“Is that what you are?” somebody remarked. “Fuck me, I thought we had another Pope down here.”

“Pope?”

“Oh yeah, you get lovely armour with a Pope.”

“I am not a Pope.”

“What the fuck are you then?”

“He’s the fancy pants Cenobite—”

“Pinhead!” Somebody yelled from behind him.

The Hell Priest turned and threw a gesture at the heckler. For all his Luciferian armor and his blazing sword he hadn’t lost his skill with the old tricks, the ones that had brought him notoriety. There was a hook through the heckler’s throat, and using the chain to which it was attached he snatched the demon out of the crowd and reeled him in, so that he hovered perhaps ten feet above the demon’s heads. There was much ribald talk amongst those he was closest to, but not directly beneath the victim, directed at those who were.

“I’d be careful if I was you. When old Pinhead gets going that poor fucker’s going to shit like he never had a chance to shit in his life before.”

There was an eruption of raw laughter from the spreading audience that was watching the victim as he hung, hooked by the throat in the air.

“What’s your name?”

The demon who was a mottled thing of pasty yellows and dirty greens, its paler hairless chest and abdomen covered with small pocket rapidly filled and emptied with some dark fluid, shook his head, his panic seemed to quicken the speed of the increase of the fluid sacs and the size of which they swelled.

“I asked you a simple question.” The creature attempted a reply this time by gesturing towards his throat.

“Ah, the hook is stopping you from speaking.”

The creature was only half way through his second nod when the Cenobite summoned six other hooks (they seemed simply to appear, as though the air had folded itself open, allowing the hooked chains access from the some other plane, where all his aquisitional tools were waiting), and these six took him by the hands,

feet and the sides of the demons torso, pulling him as tight as his anatomy allowed.

Only then was the hook in his throat removed, dark blood running between the sacs

from the wound, and he finally spoke his name. "I'm Niathadamas Teper—"

"Are you indeed."

"Of the House of Teper. My father—"

"—will recognize you when your friends deliver what is left of you back to him. And what for? For a word. Two miserable syllables, spoken to get a cheap laugh.

That's all it was wasn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Lord. Please... in the name... of your greatness... I just want to... serve you... please... Lord, forgive me... *one word*."

"I hear your pain Niathadamas Teper, of the House of Teper. But it could be louder, couldn't it?"

"No, my father owns a great house. He'd give you one for a palace, I'm sure... Or... or... build...."

“Build?”

“Yes, I could...”

“You could build.”

“Yes, for you, my lord, I would build such a palace as tall as Hell as ever seen.”

“What with?”

“Oh, I have money—”

“No. You should be building this house with your bare hands.”

“Yes, I should. You’re right, I should.”

“And that will never happen.”

“Why not? I’m strong. I’m—”

He didn’t finish. The tension on the chains to his hands suddenly increased, and the hooks that were driven through the base of the creature’s hands were steadily dragged out, gouging their route through the palms from the top of the wrist to the divide between his middle and fourth fingers. He didn’t scream and weep like a

common creature. He demonstrated his agony in a way unique to his kind, by filling the sacs in his torso until they burst. And when they did, it was a lot more powerful than screaming one voice. The stinging fluid rained down on the crowd below, so that fifty throats gave out a scream with every fresh eruption. The Hell Priest tired of the game very quickly. He called up enough hooks and chains to take the creature apart in one merciful gesture.

Then he picked up his speech where he'd left off, talking about being at a place where the road divides.

“Do you want to see what the Fruit Fallen looks like now? Your glorious leader has been talking about him hidden away in some deep chamber, meditating on the nature of sin. It's lies—every word of it—and he knows it's lies. I'll show you the angel Lucifer. You can see him for yourself, right now!”

He threw a gesture of force on the ground, which opened beneath him. He descended for no more than a few seconds, and then he rose into view again, with

Lucifer's corpse held in one hand. It was a pitiful sight, hanging from the Hell Priest's grip, a sack of broken bones, with a grainy grey face clipped from the book of atrocities, eyes sunk in, mouth gaping, nose crushed against his face so it was little more than two holes.

"This—" the Hell Priest said, his voice once again the raw intimate whisper that was audible to who were assembled there. "—is your sometime Lord." He rose off the dias as he spoke, climbing effortlessly through the thickening soup of stale and sour that was the air, until he was perhaps twenty feet above the blaze. There he turned. "Do you see now? He isn't in meditations, contrary to the opinion of others. He's dead. He knew something greater was coming—and he was happy to let go of life." To give some weight to the remark he let go of the corpse, which tumbled back down the flame-licked dias, through the hole the Hell Priest had used for his descent, and out of sight.

“So make your minds up. This is where the road divides. There’ll be no more chances to make changes after this.” The Unconsumed had taken the opportunity presented by his rival’s elevation to depart, but not without giving the Hell Priest a powerful lesson of what lay ahead. As he moved away through the crowd the demons who were already a part of his army came to attention, saluting with a raised fist, then forming into platoons; this call to arms passing through the crowd, and demonstrating as it spread down the length of the chamber the scale of the army, the Unconsumed had assembled, long before these events. Not only assembled, it seemed, but trained and readied for the moment when the believers would be called up out of the chaos, and set to perform a very simple duty: to slaughter any non-believer in the vicinity. As the Hell Priest had said: here they were divided. And there was no clearer proof of that than the process of division that surged through the crowd now, a group of demons saluting and instantly turning on those in their vicinity who had failed to do so, even though they may have been leaning on the other’s shoulder a moment

before. There was nothing subtle or sophisticated about the attacks; most of the soldiers had simply pulled their gutting knives or their machetes out of pouches in their trousers, or their skins, and set to work.

“So,” the Unconsumed said, seated on a new altar that his creatures had built for him, “the road divides.” He was moving further down the Cathedral, his altar fiercely guarded, keep any harm from coming to the Unconsumed, who sat in a bright new fire, surveying with satisfaction the purge that his soldiers had begun.

The Hell Priest had anticipated some minor dissent to his rise from amongst the population, but he had not foreseen anything of this magnitude. This was an organized counter-offensive, its architect the unlikely figure of the Unconsumed. But then, who was to say which was the unlikelier? The contender seated on his throne of flames, or himself, who'd hacked his body near to bone so as to fit into his purloined armor.

The answer was simple. The likeliest contender was the one who could take the enemy army off the field in the most efficient fashion.

The Hell Priest thought on this for a moment, while he watched the slaughter and counter-slaughter below. Demons were handy, whatever form they came in. they could take a lot of hackings with a machete, they could lose a limb, part of a face, and still come back fighting, so despite the fact that the Unconsumed's troops were trained and armored they couldn't purge the opposing force—which was largely undecided in its true allegiances at present anyway, it simply didn't take well to being attacked—as clearly as they would have liked. They'd cut a neighbor down only to find that he rose up behind them, despite the machete cut that had separated the two halves of his brain, and continued to attack. Still, the Unconsumed's makeshift army had done sufficient basic training to hold its ranks, however chaotic the turmoil around them became. And in there, in those marks, that the Hell Priest saw a chance to come back at the enemy with some comprehensive slaughter.

It would take a large measure of the magical resources he'd assembled over the years murdering the magicians: all the power of his will spread in and out over the immensity of the cathedral, so that the damage he did was as quick and extensive as possible.

He looked up at the shimmering construct of forms that mazed the air above the heads of the warring demons. There was so much raw material to choose from; he was spoiled for choice. He slowly turned through three hundred and sixty degrees, marking with the tiniest of gestures those lengths of matter he judged best to his purpose.

Sienna brought Harry to the wall of the cathedral, where much to his pleasure, he found Caz and Murmizian, and the most welcome sight of all —Norma, were gathered, along with the soldier in the uniform of the Bastion, one Knotchyea.

“Amazing hound!” Harry said, going down on his haunches and staring into Sienna's eyes. He wanted to be greeted by something more than a benign canine stare,

wanted to catch a glimpse of the soul that had shown Golgotha with the Man of Sorrows in his last moments, and then transfigured, a body of translucence and light. But that other Sienna was in hiding, eclipsed by the plain gaze of a dog happy to be fussed over. It was a clever place to hide, he thought, you could do so much good, and yet pass it off as the work of a very resourceful dog. But she wasn't kidding Harry, not anymore.

“I know you're in there—” he whispered, his head close to her, “—and whoever you are, whatever you are, thank you. Now, will you just help us get out of here alive? Or is that too much to ask?”

He stood up, and the first eyes he met, no, that he was drawn to—were those of Rebekah. She had been standing too far away from Sienna to have possibly caught the words he'd whispered to the dog, but he knew, looking at her, that she heard everything. And she made the tiniest shake of her head in answer to his request;

telling him what he had known in his heart long before he had met her gaze: that not everyone was going to rise up alive from Hell's tentacles.

He had only the briefest of moments to register this grim reply. Then Caz said:

“Holy Christ.”

And he turned, to begin witnessing anew, not in service of the Hell Priest, but in the hope of finding a way out of this madness before it all fell down on their heads.

Seven

Occasionally, after all these years, there were still sights to astonish Harry, or to appall him, or sometimes, as now, both. The Hell Priest, his armor still releasing beams of captured light as he turned, and stopped, and turned again, orchestrating a new phase of these atrocities. He had plucked ten or so lengths of scaffolding, none

less than ten yards long, from out of the high air, Harry guessed, and by means of one of the innumerable workings the Hell Priest had taken possession of during his decades of theft, he now turned their insubstantial stuff into hard, unforgiving matter. It was metal, Harry supposed, a supposition he had confirmed minutes later, as the chosen lengths turned erratically, began to grow hotter and brighter at either end, sparks blazing down seconds later, as the Hell Priest hammered out his will upon them, sharpening them. Little of nothing of this was noticed by the Unconsumed's legions or the hordes that were engaged in slaughtering below. The lengths of metal continued their spectacular revolutions, red hot becoming white, the Hell Priest's hammerings gathering speed, blue smoke rising up, showers of sparks falling.

And then, with astonishing suddenness, he was done with his forging, and without pausing between forge and field the Hell Priest caused the two ended spears to drop out of the air, swooping down over the battleground to strike targets he had clearly been assessing for a while. Only now, as the spears grazed their heads, did the

demons comprehend their jeopardy, and for the Hell Priest's chosen victims it was too late. The very adversaries that had been the first sign that the Unconsumed had an army—the lines forming out of a chaotic horde—now marked that army's greater frailty. The Hell Priest's spears ran through them all, like pieces of meat on a spit, and one filled end to end he ordered them off the battlefield, the spears rising towards the cathedral's vaulted ceilings. Such was the size of the structure, and the distracted condition of the crowd, that surprisingly little of what the Hell Priest was doing had drawn much attention, and he had already prepared second and third flights of spears, all heated and hammered by will like their predecessors, and was about to select a fourth, when he chanced to look down at the Unconsumed. The creature's eyes were not on him, he sensed, nor were they on his soldiers, shrieking on their spits. He was studying something else—

He turned. There was a triangular casket being borne towards him from behind. It was small for him, of course, but that's what the legion with ropes and

hammers was here to do. They would break him and break him and keep hammering him until he could be stuffed into the box and the lid could be put on. He opened his arms to them, smiling, and then the next instant threw himself at them. He was weaponless, but that scarcely mattered. He was making now in Luciferian armor, he knew its business. Two bursts of incandescence from the armor put blades in either hand; and then proceeded to cut down the demons with rope and hammers, a single flame enough to slide straight into the enemy's body and doing its worst from the inside out. It only emerged again when it was ready to slash the sac of the victim's open, at which point its contents poured out in red and white abundance, dropping on the heads of those warring below. The addition of further butchery was scarcely noticed, the cathedral floor was now two or three corpses deep, and still the masses who had been kept astride, their anger steadily stoked, piled in, bringing fresh venom, fresh appetite for massacre.

The Hell Priest watched as the last of the enemy's assassins was dropped out of its skin. The only remaining piece still laying in the air was the triangular coffin.

“So this was your master plan, was it?” the Hell Priest said. “Break my bones and nail me up in a Drowny House, then let me ferment for a couple of decades to see what you could siphon off.” He turned around to face the enemy. “As the saying goes, Hell would freeze over before you get me into one of those.”

“Stranger things have happened.” The Unconsumed replied.

As they exchanged stares another of the Hell Priest's spits—this one easily the longest so far, carrying twenty-two members of his enemy's legions on not one but two bars, welded together as they were hammered into points. The Hell Priest no longer needed to use any portion of his will in the task of spitting the enemy. He had bred off a separate mind, exclusively preoccupied with keeping everything running along as its master. Mind who have wished, and here and adding its own sophistications to the basic template. Hence the two great lengths of metal, melted

together. There were others. One portion of the now vast theater of cruelty which hung below the exquisitely decorated vaulted ceilings was given over entirely to those spears that had entered their quarry between their legs, skewering their bowels, upper intestine, lungs, throat and brain before breaking out of the top of their heads.

Ever the aesthetic, even in such harried circumstances, the skewer mind, stuck the next victim from above, driving the spear through thought to breath, to food, to shit, and out again; then reversing the process for the third victim, who were foot to foot with the second, and so on, in a scissor pattern, down the length of the spear. There were nine such spears, the shortest carrying four victims, the longest fourteen, and again, for no other reason than the prettiness of the thing, the skewer mind had curled up the end of the skewer to prevent the array of victims from sliding off, then set them on end turning. They looked, the thought, like grotesque advertisements for—

The thought lost focus, as another rose to take its place. D'Amour! Where was D'Amour? He had only to think of his Witness and his eyes went directly to the place where D'Amour was standing. He was some distance away from his ragged gang of harrowers, who were hiding close to the wall. But D'Amour could never take refuge, not when there was something to see, and in the seeing, learn. He couldn't resist being a Witness.

No, that isn't right. He wasn't *a* Witness, he was *the* Witness. The one and only. Why else, when he'd sought the man out, quite arbitrarily, as now, he'd found D'Amour staring up at him, his curiosity as unblemished by certainty as ever.

Then Hell Priest lay his voice upon the narrow band of air that would deliver his whisper to Harry's ear.

"There you are." he said.

"It's true, what you were thinking," Harry murmured.

"Oh, and what is that?"

“You want your first decree of the Emperor of all Hell to be creating a Sadean
Pleasure Park.”

“Why would I get such an absurd thought from, in the middle of a massacre?”

“You looked up the demons turning on the vertical spears, and you thought
they’d make a wonderful advertisements for—”

“—for?”

“A pleasure dome, built between the earth and Hell—”

“Yes!”

“And you the eternal sybarite—”

“—Demon to some—”

“Angel to others.”

“Yes! Lord in heaven, yes! There is a sudden mighty joy in me D’Amour. Did
you put in there?”

“No. I swear. The joys all yours.”

“How? Where does it come from? Now I have it how do I feed it to keep it healthy? Ah— listen to me. In this monstrous place, talking of my joy as though it were a potted plant.”

“And me, seeing you up there in the armor of a fallen angel, your machination causing blood to rain on our heads.”

“I didn’t begin this, Witness. If you remember no other thing please for my soul’s sake remember that.’

“So you’ve finally decided you own a soul. I seem to remember that being in doubt at some point.”

“Isn’t doubt a soul’s business? And joy?”

“Time and time again. And yes, this is strange. Unquestioningly the oddest conversation I have ever had.”

“There is stranger to come, I think.”

“Meanwhile, the massacre continues, is that the idea? Two sides, more or less equal in strength, cutting one another down until there’s not a toe alive to kick another toe?” He chuckled at the image.

“You have peculiar wit, D’Amour. It smacks of the English, which is never healthy. I see nothing funny about the idea of one man’s toe—”

“Disembodied. The toe’s all that’s left.”

“Yes, I get that, D’Amour. I’m not without imagination when it comes to what the body can provide by way of pleasure and pain. I see one toe in a wasteland of viscera and bone, kicking another.”

Harry chuckled again. “I think its’ better when you tell it. No, really. The fact that your soul is slightly bemused just gives the gag a little extra oomph.”

Having exhausted the subject of toes, souls, massacres and joy they fell silent, the din of death from all around and softened to a dull murmur.

Finally, Harry said:

“What now?”

“Slaughter and more slaughter, till the Unconsumed’s army is wiped out.”

“And then?”

“As if you didn’t know...”

“I don’t,” Harry protested.

“I take charge of Hell, and do as he would have done—”

“He, being?”

“Lucifer. To build a new Hell, that will teach the populace the old ways.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Oh you won’t be around to see its consequences. I’ll harvest your mind for all that you’ve witnessed and put you out of your misery.”

“You mean kill me?”

“Only if that’s what you want. You prefer to be a tabula rasa, your pages all wiped clean, fed and clothed and sat by the window all day to watch the people go

by, I can arrange that too, for the great duty you have done me, witnessing my climb to my apotheosis.”

“Let me get this right, just so I understand the terms. It’s either dying as soon as you’re done with me or leaving me alive, but with nothing left to think with, because you’ve—what did you say—harvested my mind?”

“I know, I know. Neither option seems wonderfully promising, but you have to think beyond yourself, D’Amour. You have to be content with the service you will have done the generations who will come after you, supplying them with your accounts of how I came to power. A true and unbiased account, drawn out of your own head. You don’t have to choose now. Just be my witness and perhaps—no promises, but perhaps—I’ll find a way to get some of your friends back to the world once the slaughters are over and the corpses counted.”

It was a far from perfect deal, but it was the only one Harry was going to get. The line between himself and the Hell Priest was summarily severed, and the howls

and sobs of the massacre flooded in to replace the intimacy of the Hell Priest's voice.

He focused his attention on the demon and found him still looking at Harry, holding his gaze for a few moments before turning to the business of the battle.

Harry didn't take his eyes off the priest. He knew what slender hope Norma and the others had lay in his playing the reliable witness, and the Hell Priest keeping them from harm in return. He knew that even if the Cenobite had sworn to hold good to his promise every beloved thing he owned, his own power included, his words weren't worth the breath that bore them. Like the fallen angel whose armor he wore, he was a Father of Lies; weren't all tempters? So even while he kept his gaze fixed on the Hell Priest, who had returned to his place on the dias to mastermind the escalation in the brutalities against the army of the Unconsumed, Harry wracked his brains to figure out what the other options were available to him. His mind was overtraded, exhausted, and circled on itself, unable to find its way out of the series of traps into which they had been led: the cathedral, the island, the world beyond the

wastelands, even Hell itself. Each a trap unto itself. It was a long way home from here, was all he could think. A long, long way.

Eight

His despairing meditations were interrupted by something pushing against his calf. He took his eyes off the Hell Priest and looked down. Sienna was standing between his legs looking up at him. He recognized the look, it was her “I know every thought you’re thinking” look, and he was inclined to believe it.

“What can I do?” he said to her. “This is all going to come down on our heads—”

“Not just the building.” Rebekah had said. She had appeared at his side, and was staring up at the spitted demons, the spears they were lifted on now numbering in the hundreds.

“What do you mean?” Harry said.

“Just one of my old apocalyptic dreams.”

Harry was watching the Unconsumed, who was apparently in the process of creating new orders of officers amongst his ranks, conferring immunity and fire upon them at the same time.

“Well, if it’s something I should know—”

“If it looks like it might happen, I’ll give you the heads up. But right now, it’s not me who wants your attention.

He looked back at Sienna.

“What is it?”

By way of reply, she slipped away from Harry and into the battling demons, glancing back at Harry to be sure he was following her. He was, of course. So was Rebekah. They followed Sienna out of the backwaters of the battle and into the open field, where they were clambering over not one level of corpses, but two or three. She moved very swiftly now, constantly assessing the ground ahead, and changing direction in a heartbeat, her instinct brilliantly anticipating moments when empty terrain suddenly became contested, and demon was slaughtering demon. In some places they still fought with weapons, but in most they were fighting with hands and teeth, the issues of blood, bile and fecal matter mingled into a steaming soup of nauseating dirt, which in many cases left factions so coated in the filth as to be indistinguishable. Even so, they went at one another as if an insanity, ages in the fermenting, had been loosed, and it wouldn't be satisfied with labors until the cathedral was a morgue from one end to the other.

Sienna had sniffed out her destination: a place hidden amongst the corpses where the violence of the battle had opened up one of the many cracks in the floor to offer them easy access to the tomb below. For the first time Harry hesitated.

“We don’t need to go back down there,” he said. “there’s nothing.”

Sienna was already clambering down over the rubble and into the hole, looking back at Harry and Rebekah with impatience.

“Okay.” Harry said. “I guess we do need to go back down there.” Sienna turned away to continue her descent. Harry and Rebekah dutifully followed.

It wasn’t anything like the mysterious maze that Harry and Caz had explored mere hours before. Now its machinery was in ruins, and the floor was littered with debris from the fractured ceiling. What illumination there was came in big flashes, like lightning, making the muted roar of battle overhead sound like one everlasting roll of thunder. As ever, Sienna knew where she was going, dodging and weaving through the chaos with her nose to the ground.

“What’s she up to?” Harry wondered aloud.

“I usually have a clue,” Rebekah said. “But this time she’s got me beat. I don’t know what she’s up to.”

There was a particularly violent series of eruptions from above at that point, and a rain of dry dirt, followed by a series of loud cracks as the fractures in the marble spread, releasing seven slabs of stone, one of which missed Harry because the ever present Sienna turned and barked at him with such naked ferocity that he retreated two or three steps, just enough to save his life.

“Good job, baby.” Rebekah said.

“Yeah. You had me fooled for a minute there. I thought you were going to take off my hand.”

Sienna wagged her tail and offered a canine smile by way of comfort. Two more slabs came down around them in those few seconds.

“We can’t go back any further, baby.” Rebekah said. “What’s the use anyhow?”

Sienna waited until the curtain of dust dropped away. Then she began to tentatively climb over the broken slabs of marble. The dust continued to settle, cleaning the air. And finally Harry and Rebekah had sight of what the dog had brought them to: the corpse of Lucifer, lying spiraled where the Hell Priest had tossed it when he'd finished stripping it of its glorious armor.

She could not have brought them to a more dangerous spot. This was where the first fractures in the cathedral floor had formed, the floor was a network of cracks overhead, where it had not fallen away completely, given them an all too intimate view of the violence around the dias. Blood poured down through the cracks here and there in viscous rivulets, and the groans of the dying buried beneath the dead were audible in the stone.

Sienna had gone to the body of Lucifer, and was making a sound Harry had never heard her make before, the high repetitive whine of a dog locked outside a

door. She pushed at the head of the corpse with her nose, as if maybe she could nudge it back to life again.

“You’re not going to have much there,” Harry said. “He’s well dead.”

Sienna looked up from the corpse, her gaze settling on Rebekah. She stared at the girl, unblinking. There was no more whining. Just this intense stare.

Rebekah didn’t reply. At least to Harry. To Sienna she said:

“I’m not going to do that. You know I’m not, so why are you even asking? No!”

she made an attempt to turn from Sienna, but there seemed to be some force preventing her from doing so.

“What’s going on?” Harry said. “Rebekah.”

“Yes...”

“Look at me. Take your eyes off the dog—”

“It’s all right. She doesn’t mean any harm. She’s going to find a solution and she thinks she’s got one. But I’m not—” she broke off, and when she started to speak

again it was to the dog, not to Harry. “No, no, no. you’ll just make things a thousand times worse.” There was a pause, then she replied, apparently to a counterargument made by the dog. “Yes, it could be—” apparently she was interrupted. “And I’ve—” and again. “if you just let me finish—”

This time when she stopped speaking, she did so because the dog was no longer looking at her. She was looking at Harry.

Immediately Rebekah began to protest. “Oh no, dog. No you don’t. you leave him out of this. It’s not his business—”

“What’s not my business?”

Rebekah took her fierce gaze off Sienna and turned it on Harry. “Don’t ask, Harry. That way you don’t get—”

The sound of Rebekah’s voice abruptly disappeared, as though a wire had been pulled, and Harry felt a peculiar pressure at the back of his skull. Rebekah was shaking her head now, as though she knew she was no longer making contact

verbally. She caught hold of Harry's arm, and attempted to turn him back the way they'd come, but she wasn't strong enough to force him to do what he had no intention of doing. He knew what the pressure at the back of his head was. It was Sienna, trying to get in through a closed door.

"It's open," Harry murmured. "Just push."

He could feel the panic of Rebekah's response even though he couldn't hear her words. Just one glance at her face told the whole story: her expression a mingling of frustration and fury, her eyes fat with tears. Harry looked away. He had a visitor, and she was trying to make herself heard in his head. It wasn't a question of volume—he could hear clearly enough. But he couldn't make sense of what she was saying to him. He listened very carefully, pressing his wits to analyze every syllable. She was saying (thinking) the same thing to him, over and over, that much at least was evident. But the more he put his intellect to the task of translation the less like words the sounds he was hearing in his head sounded. There was a simple lesson in

that, now that he thought of it. If his analysis simply made the problem worse then maybe the trick was to let go of his intellectual pretensions completely and simply listen.

The instant he stopped analyzing, the words started to become clear. Tempting as it was to **prime** the quarry now that he had it close, he resisted, and continued to let the words clarify themselves in their own time. There was still a great deal of incomprehensible sound between the words, but some of the elements were becoming clear. Blood had to be shed, she said, and he should not be afraid because it was the only way.

“Blood?” he murmured.

She put an image into his head. Golgotha, under the stormy sky. Then another, of her master Joseph, kneeling at the foot of the cross, gathering blood in the chalice. Then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth, gathering speed as their numbers grew. The chalice spilling. The blood on the floor. Her POV of her own snout as she smelt it and

lapped it up. And then, at such speed, he could barely make sense of the assault of images. A blurring light, filled with a face that was one face, or one face that was many; a burial place, with mourning women at the tombs—was this a vision of Christ's burial?—then one of the tombs being opened, and the foul stench of death in the darkness, the shroud lifted away from the body lying in a place hollowed in the wall. Rot had already begun to work at the face of the young man who lay there. Flies had laid eggs in the crevice of his eyes, and in his nostrils, the maggots crooked at his flesh where it was more vulnerable. Another flurry of images, some so brief Harry wasn't even sure that he'd interpreted it properly. A swarm of flies surrounded him, heavy with eggs. Then just a single fly, that flew so close to him he seemed to see that it had a human head; a face, Harry's face, pasted absurdly over its twitchy fly-face; and then the absurdity was gone, and for several seconds there was nothing but buzzing darkness, until a spot of blood appeared against the blackness, then another and another, flowing together, driving the darkness back before a spreading pool of

scarlet, while nearby women continued to kneel and sob, telling heaven how unfair it was that so good a man as Lazarus be taken from them.

Lazarus! Harry had barely had time to register what he'd witnessed than the scarlet tide drained away through the middle of his vision and he was in the tomb again, only the dead man was no longer inert, but rising up from what was to have been his last resting place, the rotted corners of his eyes healed, the maggots gone to motes of dust, which he brushed away as he got to his feet.

From inside the tomb the keening had turned into the noise of jubilation from the women. But Harry only heard it for a moment. Then it died away, and was back beneath the floor of the cathedral, still exhaling the same breath he'd been letting go when the visions began. Now, however, he could hear the voice clearly. She was inside the door of his head, talking to him with shaken sentences.

I have the blood of the Man of Sorrows in me. It gives life. You understand?

Yes of course." He replied in his thoughts. *"You showed me Lazarus.*

His memory, not mine.

You have all his memories?

The dog was silent.

Do you? I mean, have you seen the face of God?

Still, silence.

Come on, tell me. Have you seen the face of God? I want to know what it looks like. I used to be able to imagine it, but—

I'll tell you what I've seen," the dog replied. "But first you have to do something for me.

What?

Cut me, D'Amour. Let the Man of Sorrows bleed out of me.

Why?"

I just showed you why. And you've figured it out already, so it's a waste of time playing ignorant. I'm in your head, D'Amour, remember? You know what work we have before us.

You want me to raise the Devil from the dead.

Of course.

Why?

Better the Devil you know, D'Amour. Certainly the Morningstar, who knew the laws of heaven and respected them. Oh, he had his armies, certainly, and he marched them up and down the lengths of Hell 'til their boots wore out, but he never took them above. Never once. But this Hell Priest has no respect for what was agreed. He wants the world, D'Amour, and it isn't his to have. It belongs to humankind. You have been given government over it, and change of all that it contains.

And a very fucked up job we've done," Harry replied. "Maybe a change of leadership wouldn't be such a lousy idea.

Have you really fallen so far?

Fallen?

Out of love with yourself? With your kind? Yes, your species befouls itself, and sheds blood in its own garden, but isn't it learning...?

Not that I've seen.

Maybe a little.

There would be no learning under the Hell Priest. Not even a little. It would be a government of inquisitional severity. He would be a new Savonarola. Except that he'd have his own army of demons, and the ear of every nation of generals and despots. He would make an end to the world within a year, just by letting you play your cruelest games.

What makes you so sure that's what he's going to do?

I've been listening in to the demons on the wire for a very long time, and there's been times before I thought your garden was about to be invaded. The Unconsumed talked about it for a while. About how weak you are. How unprepared. And he's right. You're so busy fighting over God and earth that you don't talk about something rising up from below to take the Throne of the World.

Harry didn't reply now. His thoughts were muddled, scattered. He couldn't deny much of what Sienna had said to him, but still the thought of—

Pick up a sharp piece of marble, Harry. Go on. You can do it. Go on.

I do not want to hurt you, he replied. There, at least, was a clear thought.

I know. You're a good man and you don't like to see blood flow. But his is borrowed blood, Harry. Christ has been in me, and in my fleas and ticks, for two thousand years. That's a long life I've had. I'm not complaining. The blood has work to do. It needs to move on. It needs to obey the will of the man who shed it.

You're saying this is Christ's will?

No, I'm saying that if I'm wrong, the blood will choose another path. I have no idea what the will of Christ is in this or any other matter. I have simply been a living vessel for his blood, and I now know that it is time to let it flow. Let it go about its business, whatever that is.

D'Amour stared at Sienna for ten, fifteen seconds, and she stared back. The noise from above was even louder than it had been when they'd first got down here: a relentless roar of death cries and destruction. Harry let his eyes drop towards the littered ground, scanning for a piece of marble sharp enough to make a quick job of it.

"Forget it, Harry." Rebekah said. "I know how persuasive she can be, but I'm not going to let you harm her."

"Suppose she's right."

"Suppose she isn't. then you've just spilled the living Grail into the dirt."

"God in Heaven!" Harry yelled.

Oh you won't get any help there, Sienna said with a soft smile in her voice.

Just do what you will, Harry. There's no error here, except to do nothing. To let this

go on without trying to—

“Witness!”

“Your master calls.” Rebekah said.

“He's not—”

“Witness?”

“Yes...I'm here...”

“What are you doing down there, fool? There's so much more to see up here.

Come on.” Harry glanced back at Sienna. “*Come on!*” a dark blue thread of energy, its cone flickering as though it were wrapped around a thunderhead, dropped into view and wrapped itself around Harry's arm and neck, then hoisted him up and out of the tomb, depositing him on the dias beside the Hell Priest. His calm manner, which was

the only way Harry had ever seen him before, had gone. In its place was an agitated, feverish creature, his pale flesh painted in all colors of fire.

“What were you doing down there?” he said. “There’s nothing there worth a moment of your precious time. Look. This is what you should be witnessing.” He slowly turned on the spot, presenting the panorama of slaughter and torment to Harry as an artist might their handiwork, pointing out how crowded with the spitted enemy the air beneath the vaulted ceilings had become, and how high the piles of corpses were heaped. Finally, he directed Harry’s attention to the burning Pretender on his makeshift throne.

“He looks confident, doesn’t he?”

Harry had never fully understood the trick of interpreting the Unconsumed’s mood, when his features were perpetually seared by flame. But he went along with the Hell Priest’s interpretation of his enemy’s state of mind.

“He *is* protected, of course, by those six loyal members of his personal guard. They’ve been with him for years. Even the youngest, whose name is Aphetatai—he’s the one directly to his master’s left—has been serving the Unconsumed for six and a half years.”

“How do you know so much about the enemy’s private guard?”

“Didn’t I tell you that I have been putting this master plan together for centuries? I didn’t exaggerate. I’ve done my researches. I’ve murdered the magicians who might one day, when I take my place on... on...”

“The Throne of the World.”

“Does such a Throne exist?”

“No, I can’t imagine it does.”

“But I shall have one built.” He smiled. “There’s a little thread of genius in you, D’Amour. One world, one throne. Perfect.” He paused, still smiling. “Where was I?”

“As a guess you were telling me that you’d put the Unconsumed’s private guard –in place yourself. It took a long time, I imagine, or a lot of careful secret work, influencing the enemy’s counsel in dreams...”

“Lord, but you know me well.” The Hell Priest replied. His smile faded as he continued to speak. “Nobody has known me as you do.”

“Does that please you?”

“I don’t know yet. Right now I tend towards discomfort, even at your sanctity.”

“My error.” Harry said, averting his eyes from the Hell Priest.

“No, no. I brought you here as my witness, and there are times when you have to witness, and there are times when the thing you are witnessing should certainly be me. Look at me, D’Amour.”

“I don’t want to offend—”

“I order you to *look at me*. Good. Take your fill. One day, when you witnessings are harvested for the education of my worshippers, this moment of doubt should be there amongst the thousand certainties.”

“So was I right?”

“About the guards who surround the Unconsumed? Yes, every one of them is loyal to me, even the Unconsumed’s own son, who guards his back.”

“You turned his son against him?”

“He was the easiest. He hates his father for certain unpaternal liberties taken when the son was just a child. The others came slowly; and when I made a bad choice, as I did twice, I quickly had to stage a convincing accident to be rid of the error. But I’m as patient as a rock of circumstance requires it. And if the reward is great enough.”

“And what is the reward exactly?”

“What better moment than now to have it?” the Hell Priest said. “See how his followers abase themselves before his pathetic little altar? How they reach out for a gift of fire from his hand to theirs? He is so very certain of himself, isn’t he? Blind with self-adulation? And nothing in his little sphere to spoil his bliss.” The Hell Priest spoke a series of one syllable words, and as he did so D’Amour saw a subtle change in the holy language of the demons surrounding the Unconsumed. The Hell Priest paused and said:

“Will it be now?”

“Will what be now?”

“Yes it will. It will be now.” He dropped his voice to a whisper, and spoke for perhaps ten seconds. By the eighth the guards were turning inwards to face the Unconsumed. He instantly knew something was amiss, and raised his hand to summon a weapon into it. But the guards had studied him, over their time of service to him; they had seen every fiery trick up his sleeve, and they had no intention of

letting him use any of them. Shouting something which was impossible to hear over the noise of the battle, the son came at his father with a sword in his right hand and a dagger in his left. He took off his father's arm just above the elbow, and drove his sword through it for good measure. Then he came at the Unconsumed with his dagger. Before he could find a place to stick it, the father vomited up a series of fire he had apparently not made his guards immune to. The blast of flame was pure white as it issued from the Unconsumed's mouth but completely translucent by the time it burned off the son's helmet. The father paused a moment there, as though to offer his son a chance to recant his attempt at patricide.

The son began to babble immediately. But nothing it said in the three seconds his father granted him was impressive enough to serve him a stay of execution. The white fire came again, though with less force, so that the father had the pleasure of watching his son's skin blister and bubble, the liquefied fat running off down his uniform, before the screaming features blackened and lost all that was recognizable.

In taking those few private moments with his son, the Unconsumed had left himself open to attack from the rest of the assassins. And they took the opportunity, in a rushed and panicky fashion, eager to get the job done as quickly as possible. The Unconsumed had four blades in his back by the time he turned to face his betrayers, and twice that number of wounds, the severest a strike at the back of the neck which had clearly been intended to take off his head, and might have done so had he not reached over with his remaining hand and seized the blade as it cut into his flesh, melting it in an instant.

“Assassins!” he roared, the flame from his severed arm taking the form of a monstrous scythe. It was every bit as powerful as its iron equivalent. It took the legs out from two of his enemies, and bisected a third at his waist.

But there was something more terrible than the Unconsumed fiery scythe driving the assassins: fear of failure and its consequences from the Hell Priest. While the Unconsumed used his scythe to deface and butcher the two men whose legs he’s

sliced off, one of the four who'd so far survived this massacre came at him from behind and with one clean stroke sheared off the scythe arm at the shoulder. The Unconsumed reeled around to face his mutilator, only to meet all four living assassins, who came at him without restraint—slicing, hacking, gutting, piercing—their assaults so rapid that the lethal conflagrations stoked in the Unconsumed's marrow, fires that would have made ash of his assassins in a heartbeat, were never unleashed. Twice only, by pure accident, one of his blades pierced a reservoir of purest hell-fire, and on the second occasion the eruption ran along the wounder's blade and took him in its teeth, reducing him to a toner of blackened sticks, which collapsed upon itself.

But that was the last of his shows of power. After that it was just a graceless joyless unmaking, the thing on its knees, the thing dropping onto one surviving arm, and then down onto its elbow, and then down onto its side, barely distinguishable from the furnace litter of burning legs, and two pieces of his own arm, also burning,

and from everything now a greasy black smoke rising up, which smelt to Harry, when the smoke reached him, of a burning dumpster.

“And so it ends.” The Hell Priest said, inclining his head respectfully to the men who had done his dirty work for him; and his nod returned by the four survivors. “Or rather: now it begins.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning *witness*. And all will be apparent.”

Nine

“That smell,” Norma said. “Can anyone else smell that disgusting—”

“Yes, of course, it’s coming from—”

“I’ve smelt it in dreams—”

“It’s demon flesh going up in flames—” said Murmizian, looking nauseated.

“—in my dreams, there’s always somebody there to tell me what it means.”

“And what does it mean?” Caz said, not absolutely sure he wanted to know the answer.

“The Apocalypse.” Norma said, “The end of the world.”

“Oh nice.” Said Caz.

“I’m just telling you.’

“And what’s it like?” said Knotchyea.

“I don’t know. I always woke myself before it starts. But this smell... this is how it always begins.’

“So you think it’s starting now?”

Norma shrugged. "Could be," she said. "Of course it also could be that I'm just a crazy old lady. I'm just telling you what I know."

"I'm going to fetch Harry and Rebekah," said Caz. "We need to get out of here."

"I saw D'Amour going underground," Knotchyea said, "but now he's out again."

"Where?"

Knotchyea pushed forward through the wounded who were still stabbing at one another. Caz followed him until they had a clear view of the dias in the middle of the Cathedral. "There." Knotchyea said.

Harry was standing beside the Hell Priest on the dias, staring down the length of the cathedral towards the place where the remains of the Unconsumed burned, along with the corpses of four of his private guard.

“I’ve got to get to Harry.” Caz said. “Warn him. You get back and escort Norma to the door.”

“What about—”

“—the other sodomite?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s behind you.”

Knotchyea turned. Murmuzian was indeed approaching from behind.

“You shouldn’t do that, creeping up on people.”

“I wasn’t creeping.” Murmuzian scowled.

“Well, creature, whatever it was you were doing, you shouldn’t do it. People might get the idea you were coming after them with lewd intent.”

Murmuzian smirked. “Sorry, Knotchyea. I got no lewd intent, at least where you’re concerned.”

“Huh. Well keep it that way. I’ll be waiting at the door with the old lady.

Thoroughly embarrassed, he backed away a few steps, and then turned around and headed back to Norma.

“Straights.” Murmizian said.

“Harry’s up there with the Hell Priest. We’ve got to get him away before—”

Caz stopped in mid-sentence, his attention claimed by the sight of the Hell Priest rising up off the dias, until he stood upon the air perhaps ten yards above Harry’s head.

When he spoke, as he now did, he didn’t strain for attention. As ever, he spoke quietly, as though he stood at the shoulder of every living, and indeed dying, soul in the cathedral.

“I have had a vision these many years,” he said, “That when I had readied myself in every way I knew how, I would lead a great army up out of this abyss we have suffered for the sins of the Fallen One, bound in darkness because he was bound

in darkness, our lives anguish and lamentation because his was anguish and lamentation. Enough!”

“With request, lord—” said an anxious voice out of the stilled field “—but even if every one of us was to march in your great army, we would be walking beside the great numbers of the enemy. They have more ways of making war than of making jiggy-jiggy.” The colloquial term for sex, dropped in at the end of such a serious speech, drew ripples of laughter.

Even the Hell Priest smiled. “It’s time, of course, if we were entering the overworld as an invading army. But we are not. We have no guns, no bombs, no tanks.”

“So, how—”

The Hell Priest raised his head to silence the questioner.

“You think I would come this far—with so much blood spilled—and not have answers for such questions? You forget what you are! You’re humanity’s nightmares—made flesh. The sight of you in their world will bring half of them to their knees!”

“What about the other half,” another voice said.

“The other half is waiting for us to come. Says secret prayers, night after night, inviting the apocalypse. They are out of love with the life they have. They want new Overlords, to give them new lives.”

“So we’re the answer to their prayers?”

“We are, brother, we are. And once we’ve had their Presidents and potentates, we will dispossess them of anything that might be used against us: their bombs, their huns. We’ll bring it all down here and let the void have it. We will not need such toys. Nor will we need to labor for our sustenance, or sweat to lay a road. I have collected—” he tapped his brow— “in here, all the great workings that once belonged to the magicians of the overworld. They did not surrender them lightly, believe me.

Many fought me bitterly. I was not impatient. I knew this day would come in the fullness of time, and my duty was to come to you on that day with every power our adversaries had ever owned in my head, every inkling, every strategy, to the smallest conjuration. Sometimes I had to wait until my enemies were on their death beds. Then I would come back and bargain with them. The things that dying men and women gave me in exchange for another sunrise. Another two. Another breath. Another two.” He smiled. “With the knowledge I own I could kill the world ten thousand times and raise it again ten thousand more times and never once repeat the trick. So now, the road divides. I have pieces of this magic to give those who will come with me. Who will be the first?”

The response for the crowd was like the sound of some vast animal, roaring as it woke. The Hell Priest rose higher as the roar swelled, and from his eyes loosed dart upon streaming dart of darkness, each of which found a different target amongst the roaring crowd.

On the platform below D'Amour watched the darts that fell closest to him take their effect. It was plain that the Hell Priest was not choosing his targets arbitrarily. The darkness pierced those who rose up most aggressively to voice their approbation and whose forms were the most nakedly raw stuff of humankind's night terrors. The gift they received divided upon contact with their flesh, its multiplying strands binding their limbs and torsos, mapping their heads, blinding them, smothering them, and then, as the recipient's responses became more frenzied, suddenly melting into the bodies they were binding. So doing they bequeathed to their elected bodies a protean capacity, which was instantly called into play by the appetite for invention that the gifts had armored. Tidal ridges called through the torsos of one, while from the bald skull of another clumps of foot long metallic cactus spines grew in a thought's length, spitting lightning together.

The sight was a relief to D'Amour, removing as it all doubt from the equation. Sienna's fears were completely justified. And in the absence of any other solution to

the problem the one which she presented him would have to do. He glanced back up at the Hell Priest, who was still wholly concerned with delivering his benedictions to the worthy. Harry didn't waste any more time. He went back to the hole in the platform, and eased his way back down over the marble into the tomb.

Sienna was waiting for him.

"Now you see." she said in his thoughts.

"You were right." He replied.

"So what now?"

"You know what decision I've made already." Harry silently replied. *"Should I get his body out of the rubble?"*

"It would be easier that way." The dog said. *"We've got to be quick."*

"What's going on up there?" Rebekah said.

“Help me, will you?” he clambered over the rubble and took hold of Lucifer’s hairless head, raising it up out of the debris. Then he got his hand under Lucifer’s arm, and he pulled.

“Why are you touching him?” Rebekah said.

“Ask your dog.”

“No, no, no. That’s not happening. Sienna—” she fell silent, so as to pick up the debate in thought. Plainly she wasn’t yet convinced by Sienna’s arguments, which left Harry to drag Lucifer over the rubble and down to the ground. The corpse wasn’t heavy, but the job of moving it left Harry breathless. His muscles weren’t just aching, they were spasming from exhaustion and lack of sleep and nourishment.

“D’Amour...”

Harry looked up at Rebekah. There were tears on her face.

“I understand, and you must do it. But... I can’t help you.”

Harry nodded. Rebekah kneeled in front of her beloved Sienna, and kissed her face. Sienna licked the tears from her cheek. Whatever goodbyes they exchanged in thoughts, Harry was happy not to hear them. He waited, eyes to the ground, using the time to surrepticiously look for a piece of marble that would serve the imminent business.

Then, in his head, Sienna's soft voice.

"Shall we get on with this?"

Harry looked up, and caught sight of Rebekah walking away, losing herself in the maze of Lucifer's suicide device. Having gone to such trouble to kill him, Harry thought, he was not going to be a happy ressurectee.

"All the better." Sienna remarked. "We want him angry. Angry is good."

Harry nodded. "So as you said, let's get on with this. How do we do it?"

"I have no more idea than you, the bloods ready. I can feel its impatience."

Harry picked up the two pieces of marble he'd selected by eye.

“So... your throat?”

“My throat.”

She padded over to the Devil, and sat down close to his head.

“Are you really as calm as you seem?”

“Just ready. That’s all. I told Rebekah, I’ve lived too long, mourned too many masters and mistresses, yes, and their children and their children’s children. My only regret is that I won’t see the consequences of what we’re about to do.”

“You’ll get word of it in the fields—”

“What fields are those?”

Harry stared down at the two pieces of marble he was holding, relying on his instinct, he chose, and dropped the other one.

“What fields, D’Amour?”

“I don’t know. I just thought of you and the afterlife, and the image of fields came into my head—”

“Dogs don’t get an afterlife, D’Amour.”

“Who told you that?”

“I don’t remember. Somebody important. Somebody I believed.”

Harry stepped around the dog. She raised her head, presenting her throat. He

cut.

Part Six: Lucifer Rising

One

The blood knew its business. Though it spurted from the dog's throat messily, splashing on the floor, the droplets quickly congregated in a simple pool, which swelled with every fresh spurt. Sienna made no sound, either of pain or relief. But after five or six spurts her head dropped forward, her eyes rolling beneath their lids. A fit of tremors went through her body, then ceased, then began again more violently. Her front legs could no longer hold her up, and she collapsed. Her blood continued to flow from her, but her pulse was weakening rapidly now. Her eyes flickered, her back leg spasmed, once, twice; then she was gone. Rebekah sensed the exact moment of Sienna's passing. Harry had heard her sob, somewhere far off. Grief, he had almost forgotten it. Stone in the belly, stone in the throat, stone in the head

and heart, which was its inescapable presence. It could not be vomited up. It could not be spat or even wept away. It could only be eroded, if time was on your side.

The sound of her sorrow was curiously inspiring. The work here had to be finished well, finished completely, whatever the cost to himself and those with him he loved. If this failed, and the Hell Priest marched his army out into the world, then such a night of grief would descend upon humanity that he doubted it could ever lift its eyes again. Enough of waiting. He grabbed hold of Lucifer's body, one hand beneath his chin and the other under his armpit, and hauled it over to the ground towards the blood.

Was it just the weakness in his arms or was the body growing heavier? No; it wasn't an illusion. The nearer to the blood he brought the corpse, the more its weight climbed. Such was the Devils' anathema to Christ that even his dead flesh resisted being brought back near to the spreading pool. He combined to have a lead weight of

emaciated flesh, but his arm muscles were twitching with exhaustion. “Come on, you son of a bitch.” He said to the corpse and to himself, “Move!”

He had barely spoken when the voice of the Hell Priest, as uncannily intimate as ever, said: “Witness? I don’t see you? Where are you? *Witness!* Show yourself!”

Harry cursed and pulled up the leaden corpse, the summons lending his muscles on last burst of strength. The body conceded to his demands, and shifted, its head finally sliding into the pool of blood. The contact gave off a shock, throwing Harry back on his tail bone. Any pain he felt was forgotten, his attention claimed entirely by what he now witnessed. Forsaking his passivity the blood leapt up over the corpses head, and moved in eager rivulets down the naked body, flowing the shallow courses between the ribs, down the divide of its abdomen and the groove of its groin. From these trails the clotted blood spread in all directions, darkening the flesh it moved through, transforming its withered condition as it advanced. The

muscles flittered and twitched as they swelled, the limbs convulsing as life invaded them.

At his shoulder the Hell Priest again demanded to know his whereabouts.

“Show yourself, D’Amour. *Don’t make me come looking for you. D’Amour!*”

D’Amour!”

Reluctantly Harry took his eyes off the resurrection, and started to scramble back up the marble.

“I’m here.” he yelled, his arms raised, palms up. He could see the Hell Priest now, descending from his position. And he could see and feel the change that had been brought about in the Cathedral in the little time he’d been below. The battle was effectively over. The Hell Priest’s newly baptized overlords were already organizing the demons in their vicinity to get about new business. Each had selected small guards from amongst the healthy, who were going amongst the bodies and finishing off the wounded, without apparent consideration of their allegiance. After the din of the

battle the Cathedral was much quieted, the only agitated sound that of a wounded demon protesting its execution. Such complaints were quickly cut short however as those making them were quickly put to death.

“Where did you disappear to?” the Hell Priest demanded as he descended to Harry’s level.

“The platform...” Harry said, pretending to be so impressed by the sight of the Hell Priest’s assembling army that he could not take his eyes off it. “...it cracked under me. I fell, that’s all. I didn’t miss much. You know, you’ve got a lot of soldiers here, but you’re not going to take the world with them.”

“Of course not. This is just the beginning. Hell is vast, D’Amour. It’s wide and deep. There are orders of demons residing in a Hell beneath this, and more deeper still. And I will call them into my service.”

“You seem very sure.”

“That they’ll follow when I call? Of course they will. I’m offering them the fulfillment of a long cherished dream: to spit in the creator’s eye by taking the world given to humankind, and raping it, despoiling it.”

“What happens to us?”

“What always happens when a great power takes possession of a world that belonged to its inferiors. Your species will be striped of its authority. I’ll take a lesson from Pol Pot, and purge the doctors and the teacher’s fruit. Of course all the intellectuals will go next, along with the priests and the artists. Anyone who can offer healing of hope. You’ll see how quickly it all comes tumbling down.”

“What happens to the presidents and the generals?”

“Oh, they stay. I give them a long, long leash and let them do their worst. It would be a pity to let all those warheads go to waste, wouldn’t it? Two-thirds of your species will be dead by the end, if not sooner.”

As he spoke Harry caught light of something moving, rising, from the corner of his eye, but he didn't dare shift his gaze for fear of alerting the Hell Priest.

“And you'll have a chance to witness it all, the Hell Priest went on, of course that's only if your sanity holds. Who knows when something as fragile as—”

The demon stopped, his eyes flickering back and forth with distressing rapidity. Harry took the chance to look away, and see what he'd glimpsed, or thought he'd glimpsed, from the corner of his eye. There was a veil of shadow emanating from the cracked platform and the fractured ground beyond it. It rose **sincrouslly** into the air behind the Hell Priest, some portions of it climbing faster than others, shedding a darkening dust as they did so. The sight had not been missed by the demons in the Cathedral.

Superstitious murmurs replaced their confident shouts, as the shadow curtain continued to climb. Its shed dust spread the message up and down the cathedral. The flames of torched gathered were extinguished; while even the larger fires, those that

had begun against the corpses and were starting to consume them, were steadily dampened down, the smoke of their dying adding to the sum of shadows that thickened the air.

“What’s happening?” the Hell Priest murmured.

Harry shrugged. “I’m just here to witness.”

“I hope for your sake that’s the case, D’Amour. Because if your hand is in this somehow, I will cut it off, do you understand? And that will be the least of my punishments.”

Harry made no attempt at further self-defense. He was turning slowly on the spot, studying the way the shadows were overtaking the Cathedral. They rose all the way to the ceiling, enveloping the spitted demons who still suffered up there, and spread to either wall, until there was nothing to illuminate the interior except for the last embers of the dying fire.

And then even they were gone, and the Cathedral was a night within a night from end to end. Most of the demons, assuming this was the work of the Hell Priest, kept their silence. But a few voiced their doubts.

“Lord, speak to us!” one called.

And another: “Is this a test of our faith?”

“I have faith, lord.”

“We all have faith.”

“Take it away, lord. It blinds us!”

And then, just as the cries from the crowd started to swell in number, they abruptly ceased.

“This was your doing.” Harry heard the Hell Priest murmur to him in the darkness. *“You will pay such a price, little man—”*

He stopped. There was a flicker of lightning in the darkness behind the platform, which illuminated the boiling heat of the cloud. After a brief respite the

flashes came again, and again, and on the third occasion they illuminated the figure of Lucifer, standing naked in the air. He caught hold of the lightning bolt as it struck again, and it convulsed in his grip like an infuriated snake, throwing off new bolts in its frenzy, which spiraled around the floating body throwing off jagged limbs of energy.

D'Amour had of course been obliged to leave the tomb before Lucifer had finished his self-creation. But now he saw the body complete, and it was an extraordinary sight. Lucifer's anatomy was human, but there were subtle changes to his proportions that lent it an extreme eloquence entirely of its own. His limbs were long, as was his neck and nose, his brow uncommonly broad, and untouched by a single groove of doubt. His genitals were of uncommon size, his eyes of uncommon blue, his skin of uncommon paleness. His hair was cropped so close to his skull it was barely visible, but it seemed to have a luminescence of its own, as did the faint growth of hair on his face and neck, and the hair that spread over his chest and belly, and

grew lushly at his groin. When he finally spoke light emerged from his throat, and illuminated the cloud of fog on which his words were carried.

“I am Lucifer,” He said, spreading his arms out to his sides, to present himself.

“Who was the best-beloved of the Lord God Jehovah. But I was thrown down out of the loving presence of my creator—because I was too proud and too ambitious. He meant to punish me with his absence, which was so great a punishment my soul could not endure it, though I tried. The grief was too great. I wanted an end to the life my maker had given me. I wanted to be gone forever from being and knowing, which are the pieces of suffering. So I died from this life, with a device designed to deny my maker with the power of creation. I was free. Laid to rest by my own hand in a tomb beneath a cathedral I had built at the edge of Hell...” his voice softened as he spoke about his freedom, dying away until it was barely audible. And then, rising steeply out of that hush, a roar of fury:

*“BUT DEATH IS DENIED ME! I WAKE NAKED, IN THE SQUALOR OF MY
RUINED TOMB! AND IN MY SANCTUARY, WHERE I WAS TO PASS A WAY THE
AGES IN THE ARMS OF SILENCE, I FIND YOU STINKING OF MADNESS AND
MURDER, WALLOWING IN BLOOD RAGE—DESPOILING MY PLACE OF
OBLIVION.”*

All this had been unleashed at the same heart-shaking volume. But the creature had barely begun to ascend the ladder of energies he was capable of unleashing. After all he was the Morningstar, the Prince of Hell, the Great Wicked One: nobody in his vicinity at that moment truly knew what powers he had at his disposal. When he spoke again his voice was not so loud, but syllables resonated in the bones of Harry’s skull as he heard them.

“Why am I naked?” the Fallen One said. *“Where is the armor which I was wearing when I died? You!”* he pointed down at D’Amour. *“Where is it?”* he shouted down at D’Amour as he spoke.

“If you know, tell me, don’t make me cruel.”

“It was taken...” D’Amour said. After the resonant sound that had emerged from Lucifer, his own voice sounded pitifully thin.

“By you?”

“No.” Harry said.

“Did you have a hand in my resurrection?”

Harry was hesitant to reply, fearful of the consequences. But Lucifer was plainly not going to be content with his silence.

“Did you or did you not?” he demanded, dropping down as he spoke until he was standing on the platform. He was easily eight inches taller than Harry’s six foot frame.

“Yes. It was my doing.” Harry said. “I take full responsibility for it.”

“How did you do it then?”

Harry was beyond dissembling. Whatever the consequences it was time for the **unfigueed** truth.

“You were raised by the blood of Christ, which was collected at Golgotha, upon the day of his crucifixion.”

A terrible clarity came onto the Adversary’s exquisite face as he took his eyes off Harry and looked down at his body. He turned over his hands to watch his pulse ticking at his wrists, then down at his groin, where in three momentous pulses his cock went from an inert state to a full erection.

“The blood of Christ is filling this?” the Devil said, smiling now as he admired his erection. *“Well?”* he said. *“Is it or is it not the blood of the Redeemer in here?”*

“It is.”

The Devil’s smile turned into a grin. *“This is almost worth being brought back from the dead to see.”*

“It pleases you?” said a voice from the darkened air.

“Yes, it pleases me.” Lucifer replied. *“Who speaks? Show yourself.”*

“It was all in service—”

“SHOW YOURSELF, OR MUST I—” Lucifer didn’t even wait to finish his threat. He raised his hand and made a snatching motion, which instantly plucked away the concealing shadows. The Hell Priest stood revealed, hovering in the air a few yards away from the place on the platform where Lucifer was standing.

“Now I see why I am naked.”

Two

“You were dead, Lord.” The Hell Priest said. *“I saw no harm—”*

“—In stripping my corpse.”

“—In showing my devotion—”

“—by tossing my corpse in the dirt like a dead dog—”

“No, Lord, never. This is for you, this is all for you.”

“It’s folly to lie to the Prince of Lies.” Lucifer replied. He stepped into the air as he spoke, reaching for the Hell Priest as he did so. But the armor that he’d once worn had new allegiances now, and it responded to Lucifer’s approach by unleashing cords of light that unwove themselves as they struck the enemy, spreading a net of bright energies over his body. Those on his face surrounded his mouth, forcing it as wide as possible, leaving the Hell Priest his hand and unleashing one last cord of brightness which entered his gaping mouth, filling it. Only now did Lucifer struggle against the restraining energies, all the while attempting to vomit up the choking presence in his throat.

“Are you seeing all this, Witness?” the Hell Priest asked Harry.

“Of course.”

He caught hold of the cord that had entered Lucifer's mouth. *"This is an old trick from my days with chains and hooks."* He said to D'Amour. *"One pull and I'll drag his innards through his mouth. So much for your attempt to raise the Prince of Darkness."* So saying he pulled on the cord that was choking Lucifer. The Devil's body convulsed as he did so. The Hell Priest pulled again, harder now, but the promised disemboweling in his throat failed to occur.

The Hell Priest wrapped the cord around his hand several times, so as to get a better grip.

"You didn't want life anyway." He said to Lucifer as the cord between them shortened, and he got closer to the Prince of Hell. *"Your time is over, and you it."* He dropped his voice to a murmur that went unheard by the thousands watching the battle, but was not lost on D'amour. *"It's time to die, and I promise there will be no resurrections after this. All I ask is that you die here, at my hands. Give me this little victory in exchange for everlasting oblivion. Yes?"*

The Hell Priest had reeled his captive in until they were no more than a foot apart. Lucifer still continued to convulse, his body attempting to disgorge the piece in his throat and guts; his eyes narrowed to slits by the pain, tears spilling down the sides of his face.

“*Yes?*” the Hell Priest said again, eager to have a reply to his offer.

He got it. Lucifer’s spasms suddenly ceased, and he spewed out the presence in his throat and belly, discharging it with such a force that it broke into numberless motes as it struck the armor protecting the Hell Priest’s head.

“*No.*” he said, when his throat was clear. “*I shan’t want your oblivion, demon.*”

All I want from you is answers.” He started to pull at the net of energy that had fixed at his body. He was distracted for a few seconds, but that was all the Hell Priest needed. He uttered an order, and the shadowy air folded up around him, removing him from Lucifer’s sight.

“He’s quick, this thief.” Lucifer said, turning to scrutinize D’Amour. *“But he leaves you behind, what kind of brother is that?”*

“Brother?” Harry said. “His lip curling. “That filth isn’t my brother.”

“My error.” Lucifer replied. *“You went to such trouble to bring him harm I assumed you must be brothers. What are you then? You’re too old to be his catamite and too young to be his oracle.”*

“I was his witness.”

“Ah.”

“Not by choice, believe me.”

“Kneel.”

“Is this going to hurt?”

“Why should that matter to me? I intend to sup at the table of your memories so as to know better what new world this is? Whether it hurts or not is your business. Did I not tell you to kneel?”

Harry took his eyes off the Devil and yelled out into the seething darkness which had eclipsed the Hell Priest. "Hey! Where did you go? You cowardly fuck, this is your mess. You come clean before something really messy happens. To me."

"Kneel." The Devil said. Harry felt the irresistible hands on his shoulders, forcing him down onto his knees.

Harry went on shouting. "Where are you, you Cenobitical son of a bitch?"

"The creature who stripped me is a Cenobite?"

"Was. The order doesn't exist any longer. He murdered them all."

"Is this the only blood on his hands?"

"Fuck no. he slaughtered every magician of consequence amongst my kind so he could have their books and the content of their brains."

"So he has power, this Hell Priest?"

"Yes."

"Let me take your memories then. And we'll be finished."

“There’s nothing worth having in there,” Harry said, striking the side of his head with the heel of his hand. “It’s just confusion. You don’t want anything from in here.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that.” Lucifer said, reaching out with one long-fingered hand to grasp Harry’s skull. But before the made contact there was motion in the darkness beyond the platform, and the sound of a great mass of demons assembling on every side.

“The past can wait. I’ll find you later, D’Amour. For now—”

“Can I get up?”

“No. Drop your head and cover it with your hands. I have a vested interest in keeping you alive.”

Harry did as the Devil ordered, but slowly, witnessing all he could, not for Lucifer’s sake, or that of the Hell Priest, for his own. He saw the Devil bring his hands up to his face, his palms covering his eyes. But through the cracks between his

fingers, Harry saw the furnace in the Devil's head had become a blaze of white fire.

Seconds later, Lucifer dropped his hands from his face and the blaze went out of him.

It cut the darkness open effortlessly, and then the divided portions folded back on an

immense theater, revealing a cast of demons. The Hell Priest had worked quickly to

speed their education, so that they would be ready to confront Lucifer. They were

still in the process of evolving now, their bodies mutating in the pitiless glare of the

Devil's gaze; eyes swelling and spilling over their sockets like a boiling pot, jaws

configuring themselves so that they took on the appearance of the mouths of insects

or crabs, the flesh of their torsos becoming scaly or spiny, or simply shed altogether to

reveal a living anatomy beneath. Each one was being reinvented in accordance with

some unfathomable law: this one gaining wings, the one beside watching its flanks

gape and sprout multi-jointed limbs like that of a spider.

The echoes of this spectacle weren't lost on Harry. In this riotous confusion of filched parts, fused to bodies that had once been loosely human in appearance were

echoes of the Hellscape of Bosch and Breughel, the 'old guard' who had died out long before Harry was even born. Now those teeming, lawless, grotesques were reinvented in their limitless profusion, the rivers of transformation spreading through the crowd, its inventions proliferating as they traveled.

Lucifer looked genuinely repulsed at the sight, and toward his gaze and around and around again, looking for some portion of these murderous masses that were not already subject to his devolution. But the Hell Priest had been careful to spread the contagion in all directions. Lucifer would find no allies here. Nor, in his newly resurrected state was he ready to take the Hell Priest's army on, even though their state of reconfiguration they were undoubtedly more vulnerable than they would be when the change was complete.

He laid his hand on Harry's shoulder. "*Come.*" He said. "*This is not company I care to keep.*"

The weight of Lucifer's hand grew lighter, and as it did so he felt a pulling at him from above; tugging at his innards, at his groin, at the roof of his mouth. Lucifer was rising off the platform and he was bringing Harry with him, that tenuous contact between hand and shoulder enough to authorize his release from the claim of gravity. Below the transforming demons were surging onto the platform from all sides, and one, running up the spine of another launched himself into the air to pull the enemy back into the arms of the waiting horde. He caught hold of one of Harry's ankles, his finger lined with barbs digging through Harry's flesh to the bone. Harry loosed a howl of pain which drew Lucifer's gaze toward the demon hanging below.

Rather than simply striking out at the enemy with a word, Lucifer chose instead to let Harry lead the ascent, while he descended, touching D'Amour at all times, until he was at Harry's knees. Then, without a word of threat, he reached down and took hold of the hand that was still tearing holes in Harry's ankle. Lucifer had no sooner made contact than the demon's grip was withdrawn from Harry's ankle

and with one tender touch Lucifer snatched the pain away, and let it go. Then he took the enemy by the shoulder, much as he had Harry, and the pain ascended again, passing Harry as they ascended at arms' length more. The demon was clearly uneasy, despite the kindly dealings he'd been so far shown. He jabbered away, trying to convince Lucifer that all he'd wanted to do when he grabbed hold of Harry's ankle was get closer to:

“—you, who are everything to me. My great grandfather, his Kaispen Reichtir, told me how it was when you were first thrown down; and how after all the beauty of heaven this underworld had seemed so dark and harsh that many of the angels immediately petitioned to go up against heaven one last time, deliberately putting themselves in the way of an angel's sword, so as to have this wretched business of life over and done with, as simply as possible. But it was you, Lucifer, you who talked the rest of us out of our suicides. You said we could make our own world in the belly of

the earth—it would be the Un-Heaven and you would be the Anti-God— you remember?”

“Is that what you were planning to do with the Hell Priest?” Lucifer tossed back, his tone dangerously light. “Is he the new anti-god?” it wasn’t easy to read the expression from the demon’s face from Harry’s angle, but he could see the nervous ticks in his torso and calves.

“Nobody could stand in your shoes, Lord.” The demon replied.

“How reassuring.” Lucifer replied, his words scoured of irony, but somehow all the more ironic for the fact. The demon was simply happy to have pleased Lucifer.

“Then who are you loyal to?” Lucifer said.

“You, of course.”

“Then you wouldn’t be opposed to carrying a message for some of your demon friends down there.”

“Down there?” the demon took a quick, fearful, glance at the chaotic scene below. The transformations of his fellow rebels continued to hammer out the imperfections in old anatomies, and bring forth new forms of limb and head and eye and truth. It didn’t look like a place of glorious revelation; it looked as though the escapes of a mad-house were playing with flesh devolving drugs in the ruins of an abbattair.

“I don’t know who my friends are any longer,” the demon said flatly. Studying the utter confusion below Harry could see why. The experiment in transformation that the Hell Priest had chosen, not carelessly, a few of his leaders to undergo was no longer a selective process, limited in numbers who would be evolved by the Hell Priest’s judgments. But the Hell Priest had gone, and his power to organize this rabble had gone with him, leaving the horde with a monstrous power in their midst. They had quickly caught on to the fact the blood and body of one of their number who’d been granted this benediction by the Hell Priest was an easy way to spread its

influence. You eat, you drink, and nothing's ever the same again. Like many messages passed in haste, the details of the transforming power that was unleashed quickly coarsened, becoming crude and careless. Its deterioration was spread up by the addictive attractions of his protean state, which brought with it, at least for a few seconds when the drug first took hold of the user, a lulling euphoria... So back and back the uncaptured horde below went, devouring whatever scrap of transformative flesh or blood licked from the befouled floor in order to initiate another change. Needless to say, such squalid fragments of power failed to create anything cogent as they worked their transformations. Many of the demons stumbling and shrieking below were like patients who had escaped the operating table with the surgeon's work uncompleted. Loops of intestine hanging out of slit bellies, skulls had been opened like bone flowers, and left in that vulnerable state. And yet for every three of these pitiful creatures there were others that had been fully transformed before the passing of their lord, and Harry watched as they attempted to bring some order to the

pandemonium below. Those with wings—their magnificence undeniable—skimmed the tumult, striking down those amongst the hordes who had tipped over the madness. Such summary executions immediately calmed the chaos in the vicinity, and the executions circled over the spot, skimming the heads of those who'd been chastened by what they'd seen, and taking charge of them.

“There is the makings of a formidable force below us.” Lucifer said. *“But we shall have better.”* The Devil turned his attention to the demon he had in his grip. *“You go find your leader, wherever he is, and raise him up. Tell him my army will come against his before the hour is out, and we shall see which claims the day.”*

“You have no army.” The demon said, “And the Unconsumed is dead.”

“Wrong and wrong,” replied Lucifer, and he pointed down to the confusion below. “There’s your glorious leader.”

Harry could see the Unconsumed too, lying against one of the pillars, his form still sheathed in flames, though much diminished, his presence unnoticed. Lucifer

pressed the heel of his hand against the other's chin, pushing the demon's head back.

Then he seemed to spit light a dart of brightness into the demon's throat, which

instantly made the creature convulse violently, loosing as it did so a single sob of

pleasure and pain.

“Go to your Lord,” Lucifer said. “Pass on to him what I have passed on to you, and be quick or it will devour you. You don't have the capacity to contain what you have been given, so be rid of it quickly.”

Lucifer let go of him. He started to fall backwards, but the Devil blessed his descent with a benediction that slowed the demon's fall, allowing him to tumble backwards slowly, slowly, his trajectory changing as he descended, so that his fall would be in front of the pillar where the Unconsumed lay ignored. Harry didn't witness what happened after that. Lucifer was already carrying them upwards again, drawing a curtain of darkness between their ascending figures and the chaos below.

Three

Caz, and Murmizian and Norma had reached the front door, where Harry had instructed them to wait, with relative ease. And in one detail at last they were lucky, Murmizian's sensitive demonic nose had smelt the whereabouts of food as they wove their way through the battlefield, and had followed the scent to the bag which he claimed from the corpse. They were too hungry and thirsty to be concerned with the niceties of the food's origins; they just dug through the contents and divided up whatever looked edible. Caz made sure the lion's share went to Norma, who gratefully consumed all that he put into her hands: the salted meat, the unleavened bread, two healthy swigs from a bottle of *gavous*, a pungent wine that tasted like vinegar laced with licorice. The nourishment lent energy to their weary limbs and

they reached the door without incident. The view back down the cathedral was grim: a wasteland of corpses upon which the battle between those who still had faith in the Unconsumed, and those whose allegiance was to Lucifer raged with unassayed ferocity.

“What the hell happened to Rebekah and Sienna?” Caz remarked aloud.

“She’s dead.” Norma said. “The dog, I mean. I felt her pass at least half an hour ago.”

“You’re sure?” Murmizian said.

“Of course. She came to find us as she moved out.”

“Out where?” said Caz.

“That part I can’t answer.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Oh, I have my ideas. We all do, I guess. But I don’t know whether they’re right or wrong.”

“Well we know there’s a Hell—” Caz said.

“—so it follows there must be a heaven?”

“Yeah.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But his place isn’t exactly what we expected.”

“It was better at the beginning.” Murmizian said. “I had a book about it when I was a child.”

“You had a book about Hell?” said Caz.

“It was mostly pictures. It was when I was very little. Hell was all terror and magnificence.”

“Is that what the book said?”

“No, that was my great grandfather, he was also called Murmizian, and he was told by *his* great grandfather, and back and back, until one of them actually *saw* it for themselves. Terror and—”

“—magnificence...” Caz said softly.

“Yeah.”

“Like that.”

He directed his demon-lover’s attention up to the shrouded heights of the Cathedral. Harry had not been the only witness at work on this trial. So had Caz, but his reporting had been for Norma, for who he attempted to evoke every significant sight along the way.

“What is it?” she asked him, eager as ever. “What are you seeing?”

“Harry and Lucifer had ascended together—”

“Yes.”

“—And that there was some kind of black cloud that covered up the whole top third of the Cathedral.”

“So much?”

“I’d say so. It’s hard to judge. He covered up all the demons the Hell Priest had put on spits.”

“All of them?”

“Every last one, hidden away.”

“Until—”

“Don’t rush me, Norma... I don’t know yet. Something’s happening up there.

The clouds are rolling back, and these are shafts of light pouring down.”

“What kind of light?”

“Well it’s not sunlight, that’s for sure.”

“I didn’t imagine it would be.”

“It’s white with veins of purple and blue in it. And its twisting as it comes down, like its trying to tie knots in itself.’ Caz’s description was accompanied by a sound which had its origins way up above the battlefield. No chorus of throats remotely human could have produced such a sound, nor sustained it so effortlessly. It caused a ragged tide of gooseflesh to pass up and over Caz’s head, it gave him an erection so sudden and so fierce he had to quickly ease it into a more comfortable

position in his trousers. The same had happened to Murmizian but he didn't seem to care that his arousal had tented the front of his trousers. He just caught hold off Caz's hand and placed on his erection. Caz held on, as though it was the only certainty in the overwhelming confusion.

"Is that all?" Norma remarked, still waiting for Caz to provide some description of whatever was happening in front of them

At that instant the cleft darkness spat forth an embarrassment of riches.

"They're coming out again."

"Harry and the Devil."

"I can't see Harry but I can see Lucifer and...fuck..." his voice trailed off into silence.

"What are you going seeing for God's sake?"

"Lucifer. He's coming down out of the clouds. And he's changed, completely."

"What about Harry? What did he do with Harry?"

—

Lucifer had in fact done nothing to Harry, except to stand him on solid air close to the ceiling while he got about his work. For a creature that had not been raised from death for more than a few minutes, he was extraordinarily focused on his labors. It was the hundreds of spitted victims that Lucifer had come to view. He moved amongst them effortlessly, his merest glance to left then right sufficient to initiate their liberation. The timbers which had passed through them decayed in an instant, and the wounds they had caused made well, the pierced innards forming first, then sealed with muscle and skin. There was as much disbelief amongst the saved as there were sobs of gratitude. Who was this miracle-worker, who came amongst them

without so much as a robe to cover his nakedness? Finally, somebody in the ranks of the saved dared to say: "Lucifer!"

To which the Fallen One looked around acknowledging his re-baptism with a nod. There was instantly a great surge of cries. Both from those already healed and from those awaiting the savior's glance: a joyous noise which would have been certainly heard below had the din of war-making not drowned it out.

Lucifer seemed to gain fresh impetus from his naming. He rose, his hands held shoulder high, and open palmed before him, like a surgeon preparing to take up a scalpel. When he was sufficiently elevated to see the whole suffering multitude, he opened his arms and his will went from him in waves. The spits, both horizontal and vertical, rotted and went to nothing, the wounds were healed and closed, leaving neither bruise nor scar. The stink of blood, shit and suffering was cleansed in a matter of moments.

But that was only the beginning of the work Lucifer had risen up to perform.

Speaking with the same uncanny intimacy that the Hell Priest had used, his voice little more than a whisper at the shoulders of all assembled above the shadow of the curtain, he said: *"I am indeed that angel Lucifer. I was dead by my own hand. But risen up again in glory. And I ask you all, who I have saved from torment, will you be my soldiers and follow me, so that together we may strike down the enemy below? This Hell is mine and I will have it again, with your help. What answers have you?"*

They came immediately; whispers from all directions: yes and yes and yes and yes. Lucifer smiled.

"You please me." He lowered his head which had sprouted since his resurrection a lush covering of black hair, currents of gold and scarlet moved through it, and quickening, spilled down his back and along his arms, which he stretched out towards his waiting volunteers.

“Let me give to each of you something that will arm you for your struggle.

Though we are not angels we can still burn brighter than that upstart priest and his

*filthy legions.”*The twin currents were passing down his body now, crossing as they

flamed from left and right, and burning with particular brightness where they

crossed, down the middle of his body, blazing at his groin, while the engine of his

gender stood, seeping motes of his fire.

He closed his arms once to touch his hands to the brightness at the brightness

above his breastbone. He made the briefest of contacts, then he flung his arms open

and the blaze flew from him, leaping from one demon to the next, describing a

pattern that left its route as a bright pattern in the dark air. It struck each of the

demons, male and female alike in the same place, the breastbone, and instantly began

the making them over in a style more befitting to soldiers in the army of Lucifer

Arisen. Nor did the intensity lose any measure of its power as it moved on, but gave

equally to the first and to the last. That is not to say that the changes that it wrought

in every anatomy it touched were the same. Quite the reverse, none of the grand works of transmutation would end up resembling any other. Yes, many grew wings, and yes many found the bone and meat of their heads rearranged to accommodate arrays of teeth that made them distant relations of crocodiles or sharks, and yes scales proliferated on some, bright as layered gold. But each was its own creature.

Nobody saw this more clearly than Harry, whose witnessing skills were more valuable now than ever. The genius of transfiguring fire was everywhere in view, playing with the newly healed bodies in the most radical ways, yet changing their blood with such ecstasy that pain became pleasure. How else to explain the sobs of tearful laughter from one whose rib-cage was sprouting another double rack of bone, these curved outwards, the topmost six feet long, the lowest barely twice the length of the originating rib-wings, of a sort. They had no feathers, but then none of the wings invented here related their owner to birds. They had smoke for wings, fire for wings, scraps of skin pulled tight on geometric kites of bone for wings. The same

invention was to be witnessed everywhere, and after the grim, sickening excuses of the battlefield, which had come close to overwhelming Harry, this boot-camp for the warriors of Lucifer's light infantry was beguiling, enchanting, envy-making.

"Why can't I—?" Harry began.

Lucifer shot him a sharp, silencing look, which cut Harry short. But an instant later, Lucifer regretted his severity. He turned to Harry:

"I know all the miracles seem boundless. But believe me, they are not. Nor am I not infinitely beneficent. So if you want wings and a sword in your hand to try and cut the legs from under the Cenobite, I'll give them to you now, right here. But that's all there is, you understand? Nothing is limitless. Even the gratitude of a resurrected soul." He raised his hand, "What's is to be, D'Amour?"

Harry heard a sob of bliss from somebody nearby, it was a heart-beat from inviting Lucifer to give whatever he had. But the words caught in his throat, and he replied—more out of confusion than any clarity of thought—with a shaken head.

“Good call.” Lucifer replied, and without further word moved on hurriedly to give private orders to a group of legionnaires, as he’d already done several times.

There were six legions in total, each consisting of perhaps two hundred demons, give or take a few. It was by any means a large army, but all were armed and armored, the shining breastplate worn by every one of the warriors, male or female, the same design: Lucifer’s face, stylized and eloquently beaten out so as to work until one eloquent design both the breastbone and a blade, its tip the tip of the Devil’s nose, its pommel positioned in the middle of Lucifer’s brow like a third eye.

The transformation the devil had wrought was astonishing. What had been a Hell within a Hell when Lucifer and Harry had ascended into it was now filled with an almost beautiful radiance, as the light from the demon’s glance struck the breastplate of another, which in turn struck a third, and so on, a dance of fires and reflections where there had been only shit, blood and suffering.

“Stay close.” Lucifer said to Harry, “and you will not fall.’ Then to his legions:

“Hell is ours! Let us take it!”

This was no whisper; this was a battle-cry answered by joyous roar and a clashing of arms against armor. Then Lucifer was plunging down, head first, golden spears in either hand. Harry followed in his wake. The last thing he registered, as they plunged into the cloud of darkness that had hidden Lucifer’s work from view, that all of the warriors in his army, only Lucifer was naked.

Four

The sheer scale of the slaughter inside the cathedral—the fact that when enough corpses had been dragged away from the door, and a few more of the waiting thousands entered to join the battle, they had to wade through a streaming river of blood to do so—did nothing to mellow the viciousness with which they had fought. Most took sides almost immediately. This wasn't about politics, it was about the pleasure of doing harm for harm's sake. Some had not even come for that, but were here to pick over the corpses for anything of value. And more than a few had come to do what would be overlooked as commonplace on a battlefield in Hell, rape the

wounded, the limbless, the partially disemboweled—or to simply sodomize the dead, digging through the heaps of corpses to find the coldest.

In the midst of these atrocities, the Hell Priest stood contemplating his next move, he was protected in his vulnerable state by two circles, the outer of which made up by eighteen warrior demons he'd selected as his personal elite from observing their pitiless dealings on the bloodied field, the inner a wall of enraptured air he conjured to corrupt completely any incomprehensible clue to what lay within.

He had a great deal to think about, and not much time to decide upon a forward path. As was ever the nature of ambitious endeavors, certain elements that he had not predicted had appeared to test his tenacity, and his invention. Chief amongst them, of course, the reappearance of the Fallen One himself, very much alive, despite the fact that he had made a pilgrimage here several years before, and seen with his own eyes that Lucifer had taken his own life. And when he'd stripped the armor from the suicide corpse's head it had shown even the most rudimentary sign that there was

still life in its substance. No. Lucifer had come back from the dead by some means that was presently a complete puzzlement; and his resurrection was of such significance that the Hell Priest did not doubt for a moment that next means would have other consequences, few likely to be in his favor. Hence his snatched attempt at solving the mystery, before circumstance played any other wild cards.

But his baser instincts would have no trick with mediations. They shook him from his contemplation, his bowels spasming. All right, he told himself, you've got my attention, now what do I do? The answers were already there in his head, he simply was afraid of their consequences, in short, the wisdom of his bowels instructed, he needed to dig deep and access the kind of raw elemental power that his long years of study and murder had given his access: the ur-stuff, the workings so ancient and so crude that they could only be summoned into him if the earth was blood-red beneath his feet and the stench of death was spicing the air.

As now, as here, the bowel-voices reminded him.

“Yes, he told himself irritably, I don’t need a lesson—”

“Then why the hesitation?” came the testy reply.

“Maybe I could catch him in one of the Lemahand’s boxes? He had built one to catch the Devil. It was the last one he made—”

“No boxes,” the voice of his excrement growling. “That was another life, priest, when there was still time for temptation. But you brought all that down. You slaughtered all the civilized smart ones first, because they were the ones who’d figure you out. It’s the killers and the grave-digger!”

It was a technique he’d learned from Pol Pot, who had brought his beloved Camodia to its knees by leading the Khynest Rage to slaughter every man and woman who might be considered an intellectual. They asked too many questions, Pot had said, by way of explanation, and they confuse good, simple people.

It seemed to the Hell Priest that there was no great wisdom in this. Pot would have understood in a heartbeat why he’d purged the magicians once they had given

over their most precious knowledge, and the grimoires in which this knowledge was set down. He had made himself the one and only possessor of occult knowledge, simply by systemically murdering any one who might have opposed his right to that title. Not that knowledge needed to be used, his guts told him. This was the moment in battle in which to be that fermenting knowledge and steep himself with it. *“But be quick about it, his bowels demanded. Lucifer is somewhere amongst those you spitted.”*

The Hell Priest raised his head for the first time since entering his twice protected circle, and looked towards the ceiling, the sight confounding spell did not corrupt the vision of those looking out. The Hell Priest could see the layer of refused sight quite clearly. *“He’s hidden them from me, he thought, faintly irritated at being denied anything on such a day as this. Why? What’s he doing?”*

He stared at the tapestry of shadows a minute or so, willing himself into the weave so that he could at least open up a little spy-hole to peer through. Lucifer’s

conjunction, however, despite the fact that it had been made without drawing the least attention to itself, was water-tight. With time, he could certainly solve it, magic and mathematics, which existed as a single subject in his head had always been his first love. But there was no time now for the bliss of calculation. The ripe stink of fear and feces that bowels had sweated out still lingered in his sinuses. It was not a warning to ignore.

Assuming that Lucifer that was now woken from death was as powerful as the stories about him suggested, then the Hell Priest knew he had trouble on his hands, and it did no good to deny it. But then perhaps the same portion of his soul had known all along that the prizes he was planning to win weren't gained with the illusions and slights of hand; or even the more sophisticated jigger-pokery like Lemahand's configuration. Cleverly designed though it was, it wasn't worth a damn in the face off against the Fallen One, even if years he'd spent laying cold in the tomb had stiffened his joints.

No, if he was going to go up against Lucifer face to face, then he'd need a much older, much more volatile form of magic at his disposal, the kind one in every thousand or so magicians he'd tortured for their knowledge over the years admitted to their understanding. It went by many names—it was the eighth engine, it was the Prior Ride, or Hear²⁴—but its essential nature was not particularly complex—what this most occult knowledge offered was a route by which the mage could cheat the constraints of time and reach back—only with the mind, some said, others disagreed and claimed they'd taken the trips physically—into the pre-divine state of matter. Before Gods, who made men, or men who made gods, before Devils and Hells and Heavens, a breath drawn there, a thought shaped by its surrounding presence, a word carved in its virgin state, could empower the taken of their breath, the possessor of that thought, the speaker of that word, beyond all other forms of magic.

And the Hell Priest knew the words by which he could remove himself to that place. The journey there often the breath, the thought, the word and the journey

back so swift that a traveler returned in the same instant he departed. Except, of course, that the engine that proceeded God was in him now, in every fiber in every cell and there were no rules available to instruct him in how to wield or what perhaps more accurately possessed him. All the stories of those who'd wielded the engine and lived to tell the tale were anecdotal; but they agreed on one thing, which was this: if you were at war, and your only agenda was to win, then the prior ride was the weapon of choice. Nothing else came close.

The code to let him in was twenty-one syllables, *Uz Yah I Al AK Ki Ut Tu Ut Tu Jeh Maz Az A Yah Neh Ark Bej Ee Ut Tu*. Did “*Uz Yah I Al AK Ki Ut Tu Ut Tu Jeh Maz Az A Yah Neh Ark Bej Ee Ut Tu*” have any meaning? The Hell Priest had not the slightest idea, but he had good reason to believe in the veracity of what he was being presented with. The four magicians who had owned up—though only under great physical duress—to test their knowledge of the engine, had set down the forty seven letters in precisely the same order, though none could be persuaded, even though

death was the consequence of their referral, to speak the syllables. He had finally killed all four out of a mingling of mercy and frustration. But he had kept the syllables by heart thereafter, in readiness for a conflict that instinct instructed him could be resolved with their use.

This was that conflict, surely. What greater adversary would he ever stand against but the Prince of Light and Lies himself, the Conundrum Incarnate. But where was he? Was it possible that he had declined to put his strength at the service of whoever had resurrected him, and slipped away? He made an infinitesimal smile, musing on the irony of this. Then the smile fell away, as a radiance that he had not seen since heaven knows was spilled from somewhere overhead. He didn't look up immediately, but counted to ten, reaching eight before he threw back his head of pins to let the luminescence flood upon him. The light bringer was overhead clearing the darkness with one strike of his hand and unleashing shapes of gold and parent-gold, which in turn ignited all that was combustible in the dirty air, sending each mote

down as a tiny spiraling comet to exalt the columns of light between which the sometimes angel descended in his naked glory. His hair was so long it now streamed behind him like a mane; his eyes were so black that they spilled twin beams of darkness, that raked the heaps of corpses and around the spot where the Elite stood in their outer circle, protecting motionlessly the second circle. It's powers to confound the eyes of commonplace creatures had no over-resurrected angels. Lucifer swopped down upon the hive of corrupted vision where the Hell Priest stood, drawing back his spear-bearing arm as he did so.

It was Harry, still traveling in Lucifer's wake, who defied his new master and yelled down:

"Hey Pinhead!"

The call got the Hell Priest's attention. He threw his head back and seeing the descending figure, and his spear, began to move out of Lucifer's way. But Harry's insulting had come too late. Though he avoided the spear entering his skull and

passing down through his body Lucifer threw it and accurately enough for it to enter the demon where the breast plate joined his shoulder piece, and sank through the enemy's body until it exited at his thigh, though it failed to pierce the armor there, merely forcing it away from his leg as it emerged.

The Hell Priest did his best to stifle the cry of pain, but it came anyway, spilling between his clenched teeth. He tried to move out of his meditation zone before the Prince of Hell was upon him, but it was agonizing business, with a portion of the spear at least four feet long running through his body. Pale blood, like milk, tinged a sour blood, spurted from the divide where the armor that covered his thigh and knee divided the armor that protected his shin. He gasped a word of release, and the inner circle of mirages evaporated, giving the outer circle, his elite, a clear view of what was happening to their lord. They came to his aid immediately, three of them catching him as he stumbled backwards, while two more came from the other side and closed ranks in front of him.

Lucifer had armed himself with a sword and a second spear, and swooped down upon the Elite, lopping off the head of one and slicing open the throat of another. Then summarily stabbing the remaining pair with his spear. As his bare souls touched the ground the surviving members of the Elite came at him from all directions. But his own legion were landing now, and they threw themselves into the battle with an abandon born of the fact that they knew their creator had reconfigured their healed anatomies to make them objects of unalloyed ferocity, not so much soldiers as killing machines, their nails and teeth razors, their manes entwined with hundred of venomous barbs, the stench of their sweat asphyxiating, the pus in the cultivated clusters of sores around their groins strong enough to eat through almost anything. When they took wounds, as they almost immediately did, they were indifferent to them, after all they'd suffered at the hands of the Hell Priest. The sight and smell of their own blood only made them more impassioned, and with good reason. As Lucifer had healed and reconfigured them, preparing for the battle ahead

he had made it clear that it was not being fought for the petty possession of a piece of terrain, and it certainly wasn't being fought for love or envy. This was to decide the face of Hell from this moment on. The old ways were over, hiding in the darkness, eyes forever turned heavenward, sighing for what was lost. There was a new goal, Lucifer had told them; once he glimpse reading the thoughts of the man who'd been instrumental in raising him from the dead: the world in the head of Harry D'Amour. There was prime, vulnerable real estate up there, no longer protected by angelic forces, who had been called away to other frontiers many years before and other wars mankind's only enemy was itself right now. And mesmerized by nightmares of ever greater self-destruction it tried out its shallow, clammy life, killing the world it had been made **steward** over species by species, acre by acre, all in the name of meat and money and power.

Fired up with Lucifer's vision of reclaiming the overworld in the name of righteousness, the warriors who descended with Lucifer from the heights were

beyond the reach of any serious harm from the squalid beasts who served the Hell Priest. Any minor wounds they sustained knitted themselves together again. Without need of tending, thanks to the instructions Lucifer had given their bodies, the larger ones could be endured without incapacitating the wounded warrior. In short, they were an invincible force, and they quickly cut a swath through the Hell Priest's rabble, laying the enemy low with such efficiency that in seconds a message warning of this new order of assassins had passed up and down the length of the cathedral.

For many of the Hell Priest's ragged mercenaries it was one piece of bad news too many. They'd entered this battle with raw appetite and rage fuelling them, and the freedom to act out their foulest, cruelest dreams of atrocity—the kind of dreams Hell had once been notorious for making reality; but which of late had been frowned upon by the atrocities; as though monstrous thoughts were somehow inappropriate for occupants of the pit. But the demons who'd been first to answer the Unconsumed's cry for blood had brought with them reminders of old wars and

inquisitions, infernal machines of every shape and size, piercers, pokers, poison, and acids in reservoirs designed specifically to invade the intimate chambers of the body, and release their homicidal fluid there. But though there had been some brutal business done by these devices, they were not designed for use on a battlefield, and in the chaos of bodies broken, and bodies bleeding, they were soon buried by butchery, after that the joy started to go out of the whole endeavor and when Lucifer's troops swooped down from overhead and causing as they sliced the darkness open with their bright hands, memories of what deeds the holy forefathers of these unholy remnants had done. The first of the desertions, none of these soldiers had taken oaths of allegiance, but their exiting from the battlefield was a bad sign, and its influence quickly spread. Some, looking for friends, and finding them amongst the dead, only unnerved those who were still taking pleasure from the brawl when they gave voice to their grief.

But the battle was far from over. Even as his loyal Elite bore his body away from the meditation zone and the direct line of attack from above, the Hell Priest uttered the summoning syllables of the Eigne Engine:

“Uz...Yah...I...Al...Ak...Ki...Ur...Tu...Ut...Tut...Jeh...Maz...Az...A...Yah
...Neh...Ank...Bej...Ee..Ut..Tu.’

The soldiers who were attending upon him took little notice of his utterances, assuming they were evidence of delirium. But barely had the flow of sounds come to a halt than untouched the spear that had been transfixing the priest’s body began to shake.

“Lift me!” the Hell Priest ordered, “Above your heads. But first, you—” he summoned the youngest of his attendants to him, and took off Lucifer’s armoured gloves, passing them over to the soldier. “Put that on, quickly. And now, to my face, that I may bless them.” The youth did as he was instructed, though his face and body ran with sweat of terror.

“Be calm. You won’t be hurt. I need you to take off the skin armor where the spear exits my body, yes?”

“Yes...”

“You have Lucifer’s gloves and you have my blessing upon them. But be quick. I’ve begun a great working, and my body wishes to be clear of the spear before it begins. The shin guard! That’s all you need to touch.”

“My hands feel strange, like they don’t belong to me.”

“Don’t be frightened, boy. What’s your name?”

“Uzirek.”

“So, Uzirek, you just do as I tell you. No harm will come to you. I swear on my soul. *Now do it, boy!*”

The sudden rise in the volume of the Hell Priest’s voice galvanized Uzirek. He reached down and seized the shin guard, which was rattling violently as the spear head shook against it. Then he pulled the guard away from his Lord’s skin. His hands

had been lent authority over the gloves. The guard came off without Uzirek exercising any great effort. A heart-beat later the spear slid down through the Hell Priest's body, moving so fast that the youth would have had no choice of stepping out of its path, and caught him in the middle of the throat, throwing him backwards out of the meditation zone and over the dead that lay around until he eventually struck a heap of bodies which the impact of his striking them caused to topple over, with Uzirek, the spear still sticking out of his throat by five feet or so, lying mingled with the corpses.

The Hell Priest paid the youth's fate no mind. Any thoughts that he'd sworn on his soul that Uzirek would be quite safe were forgotten. He had other priorities, infinitely more pressing. He had been able to lift up above the heads of his Elite, as he'd requested, and there he lay some instruction in his blood had told him to, until the power in Uz Yah I Al AK Ki Ut Tu Ut Tu Jeh Maz Az A Yah Neh Ark Bej Ee Ut Tu rose up: that ancient word, its presence not visible to the eyes of his surviving

Elite but its stench quite apparent. It was the stink of life and death rolled into one monstrous river of sentient grease, where the secrets of the world's beginning and no doubt the secrets of its end were circling together in the same irresistible liquor. All planet-killing plagues were here, circling in the dirt; and no doubt their antidote too, were anyone patient enough to track down in such toxic populous of insanities, and sicknesses, and here was what the Hell Priest wanted, the winding course of the something silvery bright that summoned his figures into its booth. He didn't deny his instincts, but sank his hand wrist deep in the muck.

Instantly the muck responded, not only snaking up over him, but narrowing its painless way into his flesh and bone and marrow so that its swampy substance took possession of him. It was only when it rose up his spine and started to pump its potent stuff into this head that he felt a spasm of unease. To have this primal power in his limbs and heart and belly was one thing, to have it in his mind, where he had always ruled unchallenged, refusing to indulge in even the most modest of mind-altering

stuffs (liquor, tobacco) in order to keep his thoughts untainted, was not so welcome.

The fluid seemed to sense his momentary resistance, and before he could protest any further it flooded his head.

He let out a single shout, And his body—still held aloft by his Elite—stiffened. Without exchanging a word the Elite let their hands drop away from his body. He had no further need of them. He hung in the air where their hands had left him, and for a few seconds his body simply spasmed, its fingers tapping on the air. And then the taps and tics and the spasms ceased. There was a pause of several seconds, then the Hell Priest started to slowly rise up into the horizontal position. As he did so the perfect symmetry of his scarified face was destroyed by the creation of new veins, as the syllables summoned levels of power his anatomy had not been designed to contain into his body. It not only forged new veins for his face, but it surged through the muscles behind Lucifer's armour, making them swell until the structure creaked with the presence from his burgeoning body beneath.

All of this—from the speaking of the syllables to his new position, standing in the air—had taken mere seconds, during which time the descending Lucifer dispatched with casual ease any of those from the Hell Priest’s Elite who came against him. He wasn’t content to separate a head from a neck; he slashed at his adversaries with such speed and violence that the bodies were barely recognizable as such by the time the pieces were scattered. He had slaughtered three of the surviving Elite and was about to go to work on a fourth when the Hell Priest said:

“You’re arguments’ with me, not with them.”

Lucifer put his foot in the chest of the demon he’d been fighting, and kicked him well clear of the Meditation zone so as to concentrate his attentions on the true enemy. He rose up off the blood soaked ground, until he was face to face with the Hell Priest.

“Anything to say?”

The Hell Priest shook his head, and into his open hands sprang two curved blades, gifts of will. Then he pitched himself at the sometimes Prince of Hell, and both unleashed their unrepentant furies.

Five

Harry doubted very much that the Hell Priest cared or even remembered his sometime witness now. The battle against Lucifer consumed his attentions entirely. By some oversight Harry's ability to defy the laws of gravity were still his to toy with, and he used them to remove himself as quickly as possible from the site where the naked Lucifer was locked blades to blades with the thief who now wore his armor. The swords they wielded were not the only weapons at their disposal, of course.

Lucifer's eyes, skin and breath and sweat were all instruments of power in their own right, while the Hell Priest's syllable-summoned energies surged through the design of the armor, spitting thorny cords of black lightning that wrapped around Lucifer's limbs tearing grievous open wounds.

"D'Amour! Over here!"

Harry followed the sound of Caz's voice as best he could through the din of the battle, but it was a shrill shout from Norma that got him searching in the right direction. Caz and Murnizian had both armed themselves with weapons from the fallen, and they stood with Norma between them, ready to defend her should the occasion arise. Harry made an inelegant landing on a pile of corpses close to the others, then got to his feet, stumbling.

"No harm done to any of you?" he said.

"Apart from being so damn hungry I could eat one of these damn things."

Norma said, nudging a corpse underfoot.

“There’s got to be food somewhere here.” Harry said. “You can’t fight wars on an empty stomach.’

“Is that what this is then?” Caz said. “Because I lost my way trying to figure out who was fighting and why a long time back.”

“I don’t think any of these idiots know why they’re fighting either.” Harry replied. “They’re in a killing frenzy and they don’t care what they’re hacking at as long as it bleeds.”

“I’m afraid we had to do a little hacking ourselves.” Caz said.

“In defense of our lives.” Norma pointed out. “We wouldn’t be having this convention if you two hadn’t done what you did.’

“How are you doing?” Harry asked Murmizian. The answer was plain: not well. The blood-soaked machetes he held in front of him rattled against one another, his hands were shaking so badly.

“I just want to get out of this place.”

“I couldn’t agreed more.” Harry said. “But we’re missing Rebekah.”

“She went on her way and she didn’t want us coming after her.” Norma said.

“I think she went to say goodbye to the dog again. I tried to tell her that she’d see the dog again, in some heaven or other, but she didn’t sound much comforted by that. She said: if hell can be thrown into chaos like this, who says heavens any more certain? Sure, Harry, this is all a killing frenzy, but it’ll change Hell and damnation forever.” She turned her sightless eyes up beneath her lids as she mused on this.

“None of which would have happened—”

“Don’t say that.” Harry protested.

“Say what? What am I going to say?”

“That none of this would have happened if I hadn’t come down here to find you.”

“Well that’s true, isn’t it? Who knows how this will look when the dust is settled? Maybe your Pinhead will be the King of Hell. Why not?”

“Do you have to debate this here?” Murmizian said. “It’s only a matter of time before one of us gets cuts up.”

“He’s right,” Harry said. “I’m going to go back and find Rebekah. The rest of you should get out of here. Wait on the shore awhile. If I don’t come back—”

“Don’t talk crap.” Caz said. “We’ll go together, and Murmizian can stay with Norma on the beach.”

“I don’t need a caretaker, for god’s sake.” Norma said.

“Listen to me, for once. There’s a lot of crazy demons with swords running around. So you should have one of your own, or you’re going to get into a mess. Will you take her Murmizian?”

“Of course, we won’t go far from the door.”

“Hopefully we’ll find Rebekah quickly, or she’ll find us.”

The parted without any further words, Murmizian leading Norma off through the litter of corpses towards the front door, Caz lingering a moment to watch them go.

“Question,” he said.

“What?”

“Would there be Hell to pay if I took Murmizian out of here with me when this is all over?”

“Hell’s already been paid,” Harry replied. “Too many damn times. Of course you can take him.”

Caz smiled. “Good, so let’s get this business finished and we’ll fuck off home.”

—

The Battlefield had changed in nature several times, from its early eruption of almost carnival mayhem to the wanton slaughter that had followed upon the killing of the Unconsumed and this, as new eager slaughterers got in to replace the dead, and increasingly chaotic state of affairs, in which the battle was being waged by demons who neither knew nor cared whose side they were on.

Now the blood letting had entered what was surely the final phase, in which the focus was on the two figures circling each other high above the heads of their armies, each collision of their weapons throwing off layers of blazing air. It was still an astonishment to Harry, seeing the creature who he'd taken for a minor tempter in the infernal pantheon, so transformed by the fruit of his crimes—his murders, his thefts—that now he was meeting in battle, as if his equal, Lucifer himself. They exchanged no words —neither taunts or boasts. They simply clashed and circled and clashed and circled again. Each possessed, it seemed, of an unequivocal desire to

eradicate the other; to hack from him life with such ferocity it would be as though he never existed.

And as above, so below. The warring sides no longer whooped and hollered while they fought, as though energies had to go to the business of erasing the enemy. This new-found focus had pared down to a core of maybe thirty demons who still fought; the rest, either because they'd sustained some weakening wound, or had simply lost the stomach for the battle, had fled or fallen.

Even the complaints and entreaties of the dying (demons, like humankind, more often than not called for their mothers in the end), had diminished; almost gone. The reason was not hard to fathom. The waves of energy released from the clash of Lucifer and the Hell Priest was one blow more than most of them could take. Now there were just a few survivors at far corners of the cathedral, where the euthanizing waves did not break, and even they were growing steadily weaker as their blood and breath seeped away. The immense space, which had but a few hours

before been empty and pristine, was now a decaying slaughterhouse, with the two forces of immeasurable power battling above the corpses. Unnoticed, Harry and Caz made their way towards the fractured ground from which Lucifer had risen up.

“There’s somebody down there.” Caz said as they clambered over the corpses that surrounded the hole.

Harry’s weary eyes could make out nothing. “Is it Rebekah?”

“No.”

“Dying demons then?”

“Let’s hope.”

Caz pulled one of the bodies away from the lip of the fissure, to get a more solid footing on the marble which was slick with grease and blood. There was a curious sweetness in the air that bloomed from below: could it be the scent of flowers?

“You smell that, Harry?” Caz said. He got no reply, and glanced back over his shoulder to see that Harry’s attention was fixed upon the battling lords overhead.

“Look away, Harry.”

His advice came a moment too late. The Hell Priest caught sight of D’Amour.

“Witness.”

“Fuck.” Caz murmured.

Without looking at him, Harry gave Caz a hefty shove. “Go.” He said. Caz was already on his way, thrown off balance from Harry’s push, he dropped out of sight into Lucifer’s suicide chamber, leaving D’Amour above to deal with the needs of his sometime master.

It was indeed the scent of flowers that Caz smelled from below. But when he got down there, into the patchy darkness where Lucifer's death bed was overturned, and the body of Sienna not far from it, half-concealed by the shadows, there it quickly faded from air, replaced by a much fouler stench. It was the corpses that were stinking, it was the demons who had retreated into the deepest shadows as soon as he appeared. In the protean manner of their kind, it seemed they had reconfigured their anatomies so that they resembled emaciated monkeys; their cheeks hollow, their sockets so deeply scooped there was barely a glint off their eyeballs. Only their teeth, exposed by black lips drawn back above and below, were bright, and they snapped and ran with foamy spittle as the demons let out a incomprehensible stream of shrieks and bits of words, run together with the chattering of their teeth.

There were no more than seven or eight of them, Caz guessed. If he could pick them off one by one, or two at a time, he could probably deal with them, but

they showed no appetite for violence. Quite the reverse. Once the initial chorus of warning noises was over, their din died down, and quite suddenly stopped completely. There was a cue for this sudden silence: the appearance, weaving between the inert columns of the suicide machine, of Rebekah.

Her presence here was not a shock, but her appearance was. She had opened her blouse and torn the t-shirt she'd been wearing beneath, letting both fall down exposing her breasts. Her hair, which had always been tied up in a rough fashion, was now hanging loosely at her shoulders, her face completely cleansed of expression, and all the more beautiful for the fact. Caz had never been sexually interested in women, not even sexually curious. But now, watching Rebekah slowly approach the place where he stood, her breasts and hair moving in rhythm with her step, he felt something stirring in his belly that was more than cool aesthetic admiration.

“Caz...” she said, dreamily. “...what are you doing here?”

“I came to fetch you. Everybody else is ready to go.”

“It was kind of you.” She said softly, “to think of me. But I won’t be going.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “There comes a time when reasons aren’t important.”

“You’re not staying to be with the dog, are you?”

“Not to *stay*, no.” she replied, meeting Caz’s gaze. “But I’m not quite finished here.” She continued to stare at him, silently challenging him to defy her unspoken will and remain underground. But Caz’s curiosity was too strong. For most of the time he’d been in the Cathedral circumstances had obliged him to stay on the edge of things, keeping Norma safe. Now, finally, he had a taste of the mystery at the heart of this entire journey, and no amount of staring from Rebekah was going to drive him away.

Finally, she said:

“Do you understand how the world works, Caz?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean magic, blood, sacrifice; what it takes to create, what it takes to destroy. The whole damn thing.”

“No, not remotely. Why, do you?”

She shook her head.

“I just have to go with my instincts, then,” she said, “yes?”

“What are you up to?”

“I don’t know exactly. Something to keep the worst from happening, I guess.”

She finally unlocked her eyes from his and looked up through the fractured ceiling at the battle that continued to rage overhead. Light flooded through the fissures where the two embattled powers met.

“How long do I have?” she asked him.

“How long till what?”

“Until one of them kills the other?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t look too closely.”

“Can you look now?”

“Sure. I’ll make my best guess.”

“It’s been guesswork from the start. She said, smiling for the first time since they’d crossed down. Perhaps even the first time in Caz’s presence.

“Something funny?”

“Just that here’s me asking you how the world works, and now I’m thinking probably it’s the same with everything.”

“Guesswork.”

“Guesswork.”

“No laws. No rules. Everybody scrawled and smeared and half-forgotten and re-invented.”

The smile stayed in place as she spoke. “Guess after guess, miles deep, ages old. Nobody really certain of anything.” She paused. “Will you look for me?”

“Of course.”

He began to turn away from her, then looked back: "There's a few stray demons down here."

"I know. There just curious. Hanging around waiting to see what happens next. Same as us."

Grinning, Caz returned to his scramble up and over the rubble. Energy broke against his face like a bitter wave, receding for a few seconds then coming back at him, again and again.

Once more the situation above had changed. The air had become thicker; it buzzed, its particles dancing. Was this just in his head, he wondered, or had the relentless trading of blows initiated the decay of reality's order? He looked back down into the suicide chamber. Everything below seemed perfectly in order. When he returned his gaze to the scene overhead, however, its decay had advanced a little further, the strokes, jabs and sparks of color becoming more and more abstracted.

He would not allow his eyes to escape their duty however. He forced them into seeing the scene above him as he knew it was: Lucifer and the Hell Priest still locked in battle, though it was clear from the slow strikes of their weapons, and the way their heads hung down between each strike of blade against blade, that they were fighting with the very last resources of energy they owned.

The same was true for the few members of their armies who were still trying to carry the day. There were no more than six or seven warriors on either side, and to judge by the wretched way they fought they too were in the grip of the visual decay that Caz was witnessing. One by one they lost control of their lacerated bodies, and dropped to join the dead and dying heaped below. Caz didn't watch their death-throes, his gaze returned to the Hell Priest, who had begun to utter what sounded like a cross between a chant and an equation: numbers and words intertwined. As he spoke he moved with startling speed around his enemy, avoiding Lucifer's blade and dropping down as he did so, until he was standing on the bodies. The combination of

words and numbers he was giving voice to was working some abnormal change in the dead and the dying. The process of decay seemed to have quickened in their flesh; their muscle was seething as though flies had taken it for their laying-place.

He cast his sword away, though Lucifer was circling above him, prepared to swoop and deliver the killing stroke. Then he stretched his arms out in front of him, palms down, and lifted his hands up to his chest. Whatever life-in-death he had seeded in the killing fields on which he stood, he now summoned them to him. The blood splattered robes he wore rose around him, as though a great change of mind was rising from below, its force so strong that it tore the fabric in places. Caz had no doubt that the Hell Priest was taking pleasure in the energies surging through him. He laughed as they came into him, raising his hands to his face and holding them mere inches from the nails that decorated his features, so that arcs of force left from flesh to metal, its strength multiplying as it passed back and forth.

At his feet the dead were all a-jittery, as the Hell Priest's litanies and equations drew back every last bit of demonic force from them. It made a furnace of his body, in which the bones blazed brightest. They were protean in their frenzied state, Caz saw.

The skull into which the nails had been driven softened in the heat, and the incandescent motes of its insolid stuff rose up, as if to crown him in blinding fever.

His innards were a holocaust of their own, his organs liquefying in the feverish cage of his ribs, and loosing their own fiery forms. Some serpentine, some piscine, some simply rivulets of abstracted flesh, which spilled from the confines of his anatomy. He bathed in them as they flooded out of him, and his body seemed to feed upon itself its own blazing substance.

He was all motion now, white vestments rippling and swelling, energies arcing from head to head. The marrow pouring from his cracked bones, and rising around him as though he were being ruptured in flames fuelled by his own body, the heat making every part of his anatomy dance in its own transforming fire. Even so he was

still spilling the sequences of syllables and numerals that had initiated the working.

The corpses beneath him twitching and rolling in response to instruction, but they did not escalate for very much longer. Suddenly, the sequence of words and numbers reached a point of no return, and the blazing transfigurations in the Hell Priest's body became a single rushing motion, each bright strand of ligament momentarily clear to Caz, as a soul, stolen from the heap of corpses on which the Hell Priest had prepared his last show of empowerment. Then he was rising towards Lucifer, who was still making the same sword strokes he'd been making when Caz had looked among as though all Caz had witnessed in Lucifer's body had taken just a moment, unnoticed by the enemy.

Lucifer saw him now, however, and ran the edges of his blades together, so that cords of lightning leapt from them. Then he turned in the air, and descended towards the Hell Priest. He had no chance to strike, however, as he dropped towards his enemy, the Hell Priest reached up with the limbs of fire and caught hold of

Lucifer by the neck. Lucifer stabbed at him from left and right, but his body was no longer susceptible to such assaults. Tongues of white fire emptied from the furnace to the entrails, knotting themselves around Lucifer's sword and up around his hands and arms. Lucifer let out a bellow of rage, and struggled to free himself, but his enemy's protean body spat fresh cords of flame that caught him by his neck and genitals, spreading him in a rack of white-hot flesh.

Lucifer made one more attempt to press the points of his swords towards the priest, shifting their target from torso to head. The Hell Priest responded by bending Lucifer's arms behind his back on themselves, grinding their joints to bloody dust, and cracking the bones in a dozen places. The swords fell from Lucifer's hands, and the priest summarily snapped every finger in his hand, to be certain they would never pick up another weapon.

Caz watched the tableaux hanging in the air above him in breathless anticipation of Lucifer's reprisal. But none came. Instead his body dropped in the

arms of the enemy, all computation drained out of it. To Caz's eye there was something sexual about the gift Lucifer had made of his body, as though he was offering up it broken length for some final act of violation.

"Is this the end then?" the Hell Priest wanted to know.

If Lucifer had any answer, he was beyond giving it in words. All he could do was raise his heavy head with painful sloth to meet the Hell Priest's gaze. Then he made a tiny nod.

Yes, this is the end.

"I'll make it quick," the Hell Priest replied, "Trust me, I know how to kill."

As he spoke a host of fiery forms sprang from his body, some little more threads of incandescence, which wove between one another in their thousands, as they leapt a dozen feet clear of his body before turning and speeding back toward their victim, others like the multi-jointed limbs of insects in fire and barbed with flame.

Caz's trance upon the spectacle alone had been so intense that he had noticed nothing else. But the voice close to his shoulder was recognizable even before he turned to look.

"I thought you were up there somewhere," he said to Harry. "Being his witness."

"I can see better from here." Harry remarked. His voice was like gravel being poured down a rusted chute. And his face, when Caz took his eyes off the sight above and glanced at him, had a frailty, almost a translucency about it, as though Caz could have punctured his skin if he'd stared too hard.

Harry read all that Caz was feeling in an instant.

"This fucking business takes its toll, doesn't it?" he said.

"Well if you ever hear me talking about another trip like this you have my permission to lock me in my apartment until the insanity passes."

"Done. Now—"

His next remark went unsaid, silenced by a moan from Lucifer.

Caz and Harry looked back up at the imminent execution. There were even more piercing extractions from the Hell Priest's body now, all swaying in the same tide as they awaited the instruction to deliver the *coup de grace*.

Lucifer seemed unwary of their presence. He no longer strained forward to address his executioner, but let his head sway back, his eyes rolled up beneath his fluttering lids, while further diminishing in volume, escaped his open mouth. With the battle won, and the coup de grace his to deliver when he chose the Hell Priest stood on the air between Lucifer's legs and surveyed the angelic form before him.

"Will you stop that wretched noise?" he said.

Lucifer continued to moan.

"All right then." The Hell Priest said. "Enough." He closed his eyes for a moment, his lips moving, as though he was offering up a silent prayer. Then, as he

opened his eyes, the weapons of execution that he'd called up out of his own flesh—
from the finest thread to the most brutal barb—flew at Lucifer.

No part of his body was exempt from the assault. The largest of the Hell Priest's weapons punched its way through Lucifer's chest, and writhing wildly burst out between the scars on his back where his wings had once been rooted; a host of smaller weapons adding their own hurts to those his shattered arms and hands had suffered. Some of the assaults were too accurate not to be directed by the Hell Priest's will. One that struck his adam's apple; three that flew between his teeth with unerring accuracy, and another that pinned his tongue to his lower lip. And most agonizing of all, the scalpel headed dart that punctured the sighted sac of his left eye, its bloodied fluids spilling down his face.

Lucifer spasmed and writhed as the first weapons pierced him, but the more that he was struck the less he responded, so that soon he wasn't moving at all.

Wounded in perhaps a half a thousand places, he lay still at Lucifer's feet. The assault

had not been without its price. The Hell Priest was left sweating and breathless. But it didn't take him long to recover his energies.

He scanned the Cathedral, which was still lit by the energies this struggle had loosed, which shifted around over the ceiling. For all the slaughter that had gone on here, there were plenty of survivors. Many wore wounds that would have killed a mortal man, saved from dying of shock by their demonic roots, but there were plenty who had survived the battle with barely a scratch. All eyes were on the Hell Priest, as he stood triumphant over his enemy. Cords of energy that had spilled from his anatomy to bring Lucifer down hanging slackly from his body, still connecting the two. The Hell Priest let that hang there, proof to all who had their eyes on him that he had indeed been the author of Lucifer's second fall.

Then, spreading his arms, he said:

"I know that many of you brought ancient enormities into this place. You had scores to settle, and you came here not because you cared who sat on the throne of

Hell, but because you wanted to murder some enemy under the cover of battle.”

There were plenty of guilty glances exchanged here, and one or two even made to speak in their defense, but the Hell Priest had more to say. *“Whatever you did here, for whatever reason, does not matter anymore. Put your vendettas away, forget the past and follow me out. Who amongst you call me lord, and follow me out of this place to do a better, terrible work? To build a new Hell?”*

The silent seconds passed. And then a great cry of affirmation rose from every direction.

“I! I! I!”

Caz glanced at Harry. He wasn't playing the Hell Priest's witness anymore. His head had dropped, and he was staring blankly at the rubble to which he clung.

Caz grabbed his arm. “Come on, let's get the fuck out of here, Harry.”

Harry didn't respond. He was mouthing the words his Adversary had just used.

“ . . . a New Hell. . . “

“Fuck him, Harry. We came to get Norma, remember?”

The mention of Norma stirred Harry from his despair for a moment. He looked up at Caz.

“Where is she?”

“She should be at the door with Murmizian. Are you coming?”

Harry nodded, and together they scrambled over the shattered marble and down in to the canyons of corpses. They weren't out of the Hell Priest's sight, however.

“Witness? Where are you going?”

Harry gave Caz a little push in the direction of the door, then turned one last time to face his summoner.

Seven

“I’ve seen all there is to see,” Harry said, looking up at the Hell Priest.

“You’ve scarcely begun.”

“Well, I’ve seen all I want to see, how’s that?”

“Not good enough, D’Amour. Not after all that you’ve done to bring me down.

You think I don’t know you had your hand in this”—He kicked Lucifer’s body—

“pathetic”—and another kick—*“Christ-infected”*—and another—*“Self-pitying piece*

of the Good Lord’s excrement—”

The excrement reached out and caught hold of the Hell Priest’s foot.

“Enough,” he said.

For a moment the Hell Priest simply stared down at his adversary in disbelief, then he began to struggle to free himself.

But Lucifer, despite his injuries, had no intention of letting him go. He reached up with his other arm, which had acquired in its shattered state the uncanny fluidity of a tentacle, and seized the vestments he’d once lain down to die in. With his grip on them secured, he lifted himself up.

“Christ-infected, am I?” he said in a murmur that was still audible to those below. *“The Good Lord’s excrement, am I?”*

By now he had let go of the Hell Priest, and stood face to face with him, his body still pierced in countless places, blood running freely from his wounds, gathering in rivulets which coursed down his legs and dripped from his feet. Seeing it pour forth, Harry remembered with shattering vividness his vision of Golgotha: the storm clouds rising up behind the crosses, and Joseph with his cup, kneeling at his work.

Then the vision passed, erased by the sound of the Hell Priest’s scream. Lucifer had driven his hands into the Hell Priest’s abdomen, and had taken hold of his guts. The weapons the Cenobite’s body had produced to bring the Devil down withered now, as the Hell Priest recalled energies that had fuelled them, in the hope of putting up some defense against Lucifer. But the Devil had him in his grasp now, and he

wasn't about to let his wounder go. He reached still deeper with the body of the Hell Priest, taunting him as he did so.

“Spit out some magic, fool. Come on, you've got workings by the thousand in your head. There's got to be plenty to banish the likes of me. I'm just a fallen thing, a broken thing”—he dragged a length of gut out of the Hell Priest's belly, and pulled it in repeatedly, uncoiling the demon's entrails. “And stop that wretched din. I thought you liked pain.” He let go of the gut, leaving the loop to fall between the Hell Priest's feet. “Why would you have these—” he ran his bloody broken fingers over the nails in the demon's head—“with you of it wasn't for the pleasure of the pain?” He selected one of the nails from the creature's cheek and with a little persuasion worked it out. Fully half of the nail's length had been buried in the Cenobite's bone and muscle.

“How did that feel?” Lucifer asked him. The Hell Priest was too stricken to reply, so Lucifer dropped the nail and chose another, working it free and dragging it,

then moving on to a third and forth. Blood ran down the grid of scum that covered the Cenobite's face. He was no longer screaming. Whatever agony he'd felt as his entrails had been torn from him was inconsequential compared to the defacing he was now enduring. Lucifer was plucking the nails out randomly, his pace quickening.

"Stop it, please," the Hell Priest begged him.

"They're only nails, fool."

"So stop."

"Does this really hurt you so much?"

"It's"

"Go on."

The Hell Priest shook his head. Lucifer replied by plucking another nail, and another and another. Desperate to stop him, the Cenobite began his confession again.

"It's who I am."

Lucifer paused to look at the nail he's just pulled out of the Cenobite's face.

"This? This is you?"

"You mock me."

"That's because you're ridiculous. There. If it's so important to you, have it back." He tore away the collar of the vestments, and drove the nail into his throat, hammering it all the way in with the heel of his hand.

The Hell Priest reached up to Lucifer's face, and would surely have put out his unwounded eye if he'd had the chance, but Lucifer was too quick to lose the advantage. He batted the Hell Priest's hands away.

"You had your moment," he said. *"And now it's gone and it won't come again."*

Say your prayers, child. It's time for bed."

And then he was on the Hell Priest, the calm, cultured face he'd presented suddenly erased, and something crazed in its place battered in the meat before it and began to tear at it.

“We’ve seen enough now, Harry,” Caz said. “Are you listening to me?”

“It’s almost over.”

“No, Harry. This is Hell. It’s never over. Are you coming or not?”

“I can see what’s happening, Caz. Can you see what’s—”

Caz let out a growl of irritation, and caught hold of Harry, forcibly turning him away from whatever was going on overhead.

“You came here for Norma, Harry. Remember? We all came to get her out. And if we’re quick we can get out of here before one of those crazy fucks finally get the upper hand and the Apocalypse breaks out. But enough of the witnessing.” He shook Harry. “Are you listening to me?”

“Yes. Enough.”

“Of the witnessing.”

“Good. Good.” Caz hazarded a smile. “Are we going then?”

“Yeah. I guess we are.”

“Don’t look back, Harry.”

“That’s the trick, isn’t it?”

“It’s the best I can figure right now.”

“Okay.”

Together they started out towards the door, as they’d been doing before the Hell Priest had called his witness back. This time there was no call. There was noise, certainly: shouts from demons watching the final struggle of the Hell Priest and Devil; moans unintended from the dying; and other sounds that perhaps emanated from Lucifer’s attack on the Cenobite: the tearing of fabric and of flesh; the breaking of bones.

But the further behind they left the struggle the more confident Caz became of Harry’s desire to be out of this damn place once and for all. He kept his hand on Harry’s shoulder, just in case he should be summoned again, but they clambered up and over the last heap of bodies and came in sight of the door.

There were still demons lingering around the threshold, apparently uncertain of whether they should venture in or not. Harry and Caz wove their way between the loiterers and out into the open air.

The lake was a bit more placid than it had been when Harry and his cohorts had first ventured around the cathedral, and the Quoato had been turning the waters white in its frenzy. The sight of the dark lake and the starless sky above it were wonderfully soothing after the slaughterhouse scenes they'd left behind them. Harry walked towards the water's edge, and stood staring out at the tabula rasa before him.

Caz, meanwhile, had found Norma and Murmuzian. They were sitting in the shadow of the enormous doorjamb, the demon with his back against the stone and his arms wrapped around the old lady, who sat between his legs. She looked so frail sitting there, and so diminished. Even when she heard Caz's voice, and the news that Harry was out of the cathedral too, unharmed, she managed the smallest of smiles, nothing more.

“We have to get this lady to a comfortable place, where she can eat and use her head,” Murmuzian said.

“You have a suggestion?” Caz said.

“Somewhere away from here would be a good start.”

“Agreed. I’ll get Harry. We need to get moving.”

“It’s better if I carry her, I think.” Murmuzian said. “Are you all right with that?” he asked Norma.

“Anywhere but here,” she said, as though she were a couple of exchanges behind.

“We all agreed about that, lady,” Murmuzian said gently. “I was only asking about carrying you.”

“What about it?”

“Is that all right?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because he’s a demon,” Caz said.

“Oh, I’m too old to care about shit like that,” Norma said. “Somebody’s gonna have to carry me because I’m way past walking.”

“There’s your answer,” Caz said. “I’ll be back.”

He left Norma and Murmuzian in the shadows and turned around to look for Harry. It was harder to find him now because, in the short time Caz had been talking to Norma and Murmuzian, a larger number of survivors had decided to retreat from the Cathedral, many with blood streaming from their wounds, and still carrying a knife or a sword to defend themselves if the need arose. But there was little belligerence amongst the exiting crowd. They were too anxious to be out of the cathedral—away from whatever was now happening inside—to be picking fights with one another. Caz pressed his way between them, heading back towards the spot at the shoreline where he’d left Harry, but unable to keep his curiosity from tempting

him to look over the heads of the crowd, most of whom were shorter than he was, to catch a glimpse of whatever was causing this ragged exodus.

He'd seen the interior of the cathedral undergo a host of changes in the time that he'd been under its roof. From the hushed, almost reverent vastness he'd first entered it had become a place of battle, which in its turn had steadily become more barbaric, until it had been literally impossible to find a yard of ground that did not run with blood. And now? Now some fresh transformation seemed imminent. The battle between Lucifer and the Cenobite was over. There was no sign of the Hell Priest. He had apparently joined the thousands of others who lay dead on the floor. But Lucifer was another story. He had shed the weapons that the Hell Priest had conjured to pierce him, and hung—naked still, and covered in wounds—in the air where the two had fought, his arms spread wide. His face—even though Caz was only seeing him from a distance—was beautiful, his long hair lifted from around his head by some tender wind, his smile beautiful, his eyes blazing.

“I was an angel once,” he said, gazing at the demons watching his below. *“And I had such wings! Oh, such wings!”* As he spoke a mirage of the blazing wings he’d owned were imprinted on the air on either side of it. He had a wingspan of twenty feet or more, his wings arrayed with immense eyes, painted on the air in red and black, their pupils a luminous blue.

“But they are just a memory now,” he said, the conjured spectacle decaying, the rotting eyes collapsing into emptiness. *“And I am left with a pain I cannot endure. Do you hear me? DO YOU HEAR ME!”*

The repetition of his question was painfully loud, and its echoes didn’t diminish as they crossed the cathedral, but seemed instead to swell in volume. The building, for all the pillars and buttresses that supported its immensity, shook as the Fallen One’s voice grew louder. Stone dust fell in fine dry rains from fractures his voice was opening in the vaulted roof, and there was noise from the basement too, the escalating growl of stone grinding on stone.

“I was finished with my life,” the Devil said, “—finished with this Hell I built.

I was dead, and happy. But it seems I cannot be certain of death until I bring all of this down on our heads, and there is no Hell to call me back.”

He turned in the air, addressing the demons below who watched him with such adoring gazes. This was Lucifer, Lord of Lords; and in their awe and reverence they seemed not to understand, or perhaps believe, what he was telling them. Still circling, he put his message in the simplest form:

“Hell is finished. You understand? If you have other places to go, then go while you can, because there will be nothing left when I am done. Neither above nor below. You hear me? NEITHER ABOVE NOR BELOW.”

Finally his warning began to cut through the idolatry that had every demon below him in thrall, and some of them began to look around for their nearest escape route. Caz quietly cursed himself for wasting precious time watching Lucifer, and

turned away from the door to look for Harry. He didn't need to look far. Harry was standing a couple of yards behind him.

"You done watching?" he asked Caz.

"Are you?"

"Yeah, I'm done."

"I found Murmuzian and Norma. They're waiting for us over there."

"Well there's nothing to stay here for but the end of the world," Harry said.

"So we go?"

"Indeed we do."

Eight

By the time Harry and Caz had found Murmuzian and Norma, and the quartet began their return journey down the side of the cathedral, all of Lucifer's audience had grasped the profound seriousness of their situation, and were getting out by any means available. The windows were being smashed, and demons were struggling out in their panic, throwing themselves down at the rocky beach with abandon, simply grateful to be out of the building before the shock waves Lucifer's syllables were unleashing brought the place down. There were fissures in the walls now, rising from the ground like black lightning, the flying buttresses crumbling as the connecting stonework fractured and fell away, the capitulation of each buttress putting the central structure in even greater risk of complete collapse upon itself.

"What happens when we get off the island?" Caz said as they went. "How do we get back home?"

Harry threw him a despairing glance. "I don't have a fucking clue. I always assumed we'd have Sienna."

“There’s more than one way out of Hell, surely,” Norma said.

“There are many,” Murmuzian said. “Snake-holes I’ve heard them called.”

“And they lead out to the world?” Caz said.

“Of course, yes. The world. Where else?”

“Do you know where the nearest snake-hole is?”

“I never went to it, because of the stories Surraban told about demons being snatched away and murdered if they got near it. But she knows.”

“I wonder where she is now?”

“We’ll find her,” Murmuzian said with quiet confidence. “And I’ll try to have her tell where the snake-hole is.”

They were almost two miles of the way down the side of the cathedral now, and the exodus from the cathedral was a chaotic flood of frightened demons, many of them, in their haste to be away from the failing building—and even and even more urgently from the creature inside—were running through the shallows of the lake, so

as to avoid the crowded beach. It was only a matter of time before their plunging through the water drew the attention of the Quoato. It surfaced suddenly, in a great explosion of foaming water, and seemingly dislocating its lower jaw so that it protruded far further than the upper, it easily scooped up twenty demons in one pass. Then it threw back its head tossing its catch down its black throat and plunging into the lake again only to surface less than a minute later to do the same thing further down the beach, closer to the front door.

Its appearance did little to dissuade many of the crowd from running out into the water almost immediately, preferring to risk being taken by the beast than to be anywhere near the cathedral. Their frenzy was understandable. The roof was beginning to collapse now, churning up dust which was illuminated by a flickering blue light from within.

There was one piece of good news for Harry. And the others when they finally reached the far end of the cathedral: a makeshift bridge had been constructed by the

army of the Unconsumed, which made crossing back to the beach very much easier for them than having to fight for a boat. It wasn't an elaborate structure, and the volume of departing traffic it was having to bear was already causing it to collapse in places, but with Caz using his size to drive a path for the other through the crowd they reached the safety of the beach without incident.

“We'll go back to the village,” Murmuzian said, “and find Suraban.”

:Maybe you should go without us,” Harry said. “She wasn't a great fan of ours.”

“She doesn't like anybody. Except me, a little. So maybe it's best I go on my own to ask her about the snake-holes, yes?”

“Yes.”

“What about Mama Norma? Shall you go too?”

“No, honey. You set me down someplace and I'll take care of myself 'til you come back, yes?”

“Okay. I’ll bring stuff to eat and drink, yes?”

“That would be very much appreciated, sweet one,” Norma said. “I’m so parched. . . .”

They found a place up off the beach under the shelter of what looked to have been a small copse in better days; now reduced to little more than a few desiccated, leafless trees.

“We’ll wait here for you,” Harry told Murmuzian.

“And if you don’t come back in an hour or so I’m going to come looking for you,” Caz said. “I don’t trust that woman.”

Murmuzian headed off along the beach towards the little settlement, the fires of which had since died away with little more than embers. While Caz did his best to make Norma comfortable on the uneven ground, Harry wandered back out of the trees to watch the spectacle of the cathedral’s destruction. More of its roof had by now collapsed inward, and the walls were rapidly coming down too, falling outward

to expose the mock battlefield within. Lucifer was still standing in the air over the spectacle of corpses, cold light flickered through the rising veils of dust emanating from his skin. It spilled out over the trembling walls and across the blank sheets of water to the left and right of the island and out beyond it to the blind horizon.

“What are you thinking?” Caz wanted to know.

“Just whether he’s good for his boasts,” Harry replied.

“Well, he doesn’t seem much interested in taking down these people.”

“It didn’t sound like that was what he had in mind, did it?”

“He said something about Hell being finished.”

“He said more than that, Caz,” Harry reminded him. “He said there’d be nothing left when he was finished. Neither above nor below.”

“I don’t see how anybody could do that.”

“Lucifer made the place,” Harry said.

“So he could bring it down?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“All the more reason we get out of here as fast as we can.” Caz looked along the beach. “I lost sight of Murmuzian. I guess he must be sitting down somewhere trying to get some help from that old bitch.”

“Question.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you planning to bring him along?”

“It crossed my mind.”

“I thought so.”

“Why?”

“Just wondering . . . how the future’s going to look. For all of us.”

“If there is one.”

“Oh, there’ll be one, Caz. We haven’t come this far to die on a beach . . .”

“Where are you going?”

“Just wandering a little closer to the water to get a better view of what he’s up to. My eyes are so damn tired I can barely keep them in focus.”

“Don’t blame your eyes. He’s hard to keep a fix on. There’s a pulse of energy in him, Harry. And it’s getting stronger.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Harry said. “And maybe we’ll have some news from—”

Caz smiled, “—My demon lover?”

“Exactly.”

Leaving Caz’s laughter behind him, Harry plunged into the flow of demons still laboring up the beach, their breaths raw and foul. Not a one of them paid him the least notice; they simply wanted to put as much distance between themselves and whatever was about to happen behind them. The Cathedral’s demolition continued, though it had slowed now that its walls were, in several places, little more than heaps of rubble.

With his eyes fixed on the source of light—Lucifer, of course—he took little notice of the crowd through which he was passing, until suddenly there was somebody blocking his way, who was not a common demon, fleeing in panic.

“Witness.”

The Hell Priest was there in front of him, the condition of his body so ragged, and his face so utterly devoid of its former symmetry and elegance that unless he had spoken, Harry would have passed him by unnoticed. Now they stood face to face as the crowd turned past them, on up the beach and away into the darkness.

“Ya don’t look good,” Harry said.

“You didn’t watch to the end, did you?”

“To the end . . .”

“You didn’t witness my fall.”

“No,” Harry said. “You don’t have to worry about that. I won’t be talking about how he finally beat you, because you’re right, I didn’t see it.”

“So you broke your oath to me.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, demon. I witnessed everything but that. What do you care if I missed—”

“An oath is an oath,” the Hell Priest replied. He raised his left hand to his face, whispering something.

“What did you say?” Harry asked him.

The words weren’t for him, however. They ignited in the cage of the Hell Priest’s fingers.

“Still more conjuring tricks?” Harry said. “I’d have thought you’d have sworn off them by now. They’re bad for your health. I’ll see you around, demon.”

So saying, he moved to the right of the demon so as to be able to see the ruins of the Cathedral again, and took two, perhaps three steps down the beach. But the Hell Priest touched his shoulders, and against his will he felt himself spin around.

“You won’t be seeing me, D’Amour.” The Hell Priest said.

“Oh well—” Harry began to say. Then the hand containing the whispered spell came up in front of his face, and the fingers opened, loosing the power it contained.

“See me and remember.” The Hell Priest said.

“Remember what?”

“Sight.”

Harry eyes began to prick.

“Christ. What have you done?” His heart quickened not beating but hammering. And with each hammer-blow the pricking got worse, as though white-hot pins were being steadily pressed into his eyes. He tried to blink but his lids refused to close. The Hell Priest had turned to watch him, his own eyes catching a gleam of the cold blue light that Lucifer was emanating. As the pain increased darkness crept in from around the edge of Harry’s sight.

“Look your last, Witness.”

Harry reached out and made contact with the Hell Priest's cold, wet body. His fingers found something to hook themselves under, though whether it was torn flesh or a portion of the Hell Priest's stolen vestments he didn't know or care.

"Don't do this to me," D'Amour said. "Please, God in Heaven, what more do you want from me? Don't do this. I need my eyes. I'm a detective."

"You should have thought about that before you turned your back on your duties as a Witness."

"I'm sorry. My fuck up."

"Yes."

"But its not like you're dead, is it? I'll stay as your witness for as long as you want. Just don't take my eyes away." He tucked like a child on whatever his fingers were looped beneath. Please, I'm begging you."

"That's good to hear." The Hell Priest said. *"But it's too late. I fell and you weren't there to witness it. How could I ever trust you again?"*

The darkness was encroaching at ever greater speed, that Harry could now no longer take in the Hell Priest's face in a single glance, but needed to scan it through the iris that was closing his vision down. He could see nothing in the demon's face that suggested there was any reprieve to be had. There was only the cold light reflected off the Fallen One in his eyes. The rest, what had once been a kind of perfection, was ruin.

"I wouldn't complain, D'Amour. You'll have reason to be grateful to me soon enough." The Hell Priest started to turn away, dislodging Harry's fingers as he did so. As soon as Harry lost sight of the blue gleam in the demon's eyes he was utterly disoriented, lost in a diminishing world on shadowy forms, one of which was that of his blinder. If he lost contact with the Hell Priest now then all was lost; he needed another chance, just one more, to promise the Hell Priest whatever he wanted in exchange for undoing the conjuration that was pricking at Harry's sight. He reached out for a figure who was moving in front of him, begging him to *please wait*. His

fingers snagged the creature's back and he knew instantly that this was not the Hell Priest. This one was warm and dry. He withdrew his hand and his panic called up the lost child in him, seizing his heart so hard he seemed about to burst.

Now that the Hell Priest had abandoned him, the hold his conjuration had on Harry's eyelids was loosed, and he blinked freely, causing tears down his cheeks. They soothed the agony in his eyes, but did nothing to turn back the closing down of his sight. He stopped to subdue his terror long enough to think clearly about what to do in the seconds he had before his sight was sealed up completely. It wasn't hard to fathom. There was only one safe place for him right now: back up the beach with Caz and Norma.

His sight had closed down to a pin-prick, but it wasn't difficult to figure out which direction he needed to be going: the same way as the demonic hoard in which he was just another stupefied animal. He let himself be born along by the multitude, the fact that his final sights were the vague dark forms of demons was not lost on him.

This has been your life, said some cold steady voice in him apparently immune to the terror that had confounded the rest of his thoughts. You have wandered amongst evil things, seized by a sickly intoxication that had allured him to play the role of hero, while all the time he'd been indulging an addiction. This wretched clarity was more than he could bear. Why now, of all times, did his brain choose to make each a damning judgment? Was it just a secondary conjuration that the Hell Priest had seeded in him? However the thought had gotten into his head it had nowhere else to go once it had damned him for his sickening self-indulgence. It just became a loop that now receded behind his terror.

Blind! He was blind! Every last pin drop of sight had gone. And all he could rely upon now was the direction of the bodies fleeing around him, and the hope that he would be seen by Caz or Norma once he got within stumbling distance from the top of the beach. He had to be sure not to allow the crowd to carry him too far. If he slipped past the place where Caz and Norma had taken refuge without being seen,

and got lost on the dark road back towards Primordium then he'd be utterly lost. So he had to go slowly, slowly, judging as best he could the angle of the stony beach beneath his feet. It got suddenly steep just before it ceased to be beach at all and just became wilderness.

He knew it couldn't be much further. A few more steps at best. He started to resist being driven along by the surrounding crowd, which earned him plenty of shoves and demands to get out of the way. He felt the urgency in the demons that were streaming past him. Something of significance was going on behind them all; some change in the look of the Fallen One that had put this fresh frenzy into the crowd. It seemed he could feel it. There were gusts of energy pushing against his back and neck, their strength escalating. Afraid he was going to be carried off the beach against his will if the urgency in the crowd grew any stronger, he turned to his left and started to make his way across the flow of demons to what he hoped would eventually be open beach. Then if necessary he'd wait until the exodus had slowed or

stopped, when hopefully Caz would spot him. It would have been difficult enough making his way out of the panicked crowd if he'd been sighted, but in his blind state it was brutal and bruising. Twice he was stuck so hard by the flow of the traffic that he fell to his knees, and the second time he couldn't get to his feet without being knocked down again. The breath was kicked out of him over and over, and it was all he could do to keep his exhausted frame from collapsing.

But he forced himself onwards, no longer certain that he was still leading towards the edge of the throng or crawling even more deeply into its heart. For once, he had a sliver of luck. One of the demons in whose path he had crawled cursed him ripely and picked him up by his belt and his hair and threw him out of the way. He landed hard but clear of the crowd, the right side of his face cut open as he slid over the sharp, loose stones and came to a halt. He rolled over onto his back, and for two minutes or more he didn't move. He just lay there with his eyes wide open, but with nothing but unsullied darkness in view.

Part 7

Neither Above Nor Below

Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?

Or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down?

Canst thou put an (sic) hook into his nose?

Or bore his jaw through with a thorn?

Will he make many supplications into thee?

Will he speak soft words unto thee?

Will he make a covenant with thee?

Wilt thou take him for a servant for ever?

Job 41: 1-4

One

The noise of the demons' chaotic departure became more ragged after a time, as what had been a solid flow diminished. The wounded came now, many gasping for breath as they did their best to climb the beach, often moaning with pain, some weeping quietly. Harry lost track of time as he lay there on the stones, the side of his face stinging from the wounds he'd sustained when he'd landed. The heart-thrashing terror that had sieged him as the Hell Priests' conjuration

had pricked out his sight had now left him. He didn't yet know how he would deal with a life so radically changed, but at least he would have an experienced mentor in Norma, no small comfort.

And perhaps in time this thing that had laid upon him by magic could somehow be undone by the same means, though given how comprehensively the Hell Priest had destroyed the great wielders of magic in his pursuit of the power to take Hell for himself it might be hard to find a survivor. But nothing was impossible. His life until now was proof of that, littered as it had been with orders of souls and states of existence that had forced him to congenially reassess his beliefs about the world. So much of it was out of sight to the uninquiring eye. It had taken Norma's tutelage to make him look with a questioning gaze at all that surrounded him, searching for mysteries' that were not only hiding in secret places, but walked on the sunlit Avenues of the city, in plain sight. He was suddenly seized by a profound yearning for New York, where even as a blind

man, he'd be able to walk with confidence, his feet so familiar with many of its streets that they would find their way for him.

The desire to be gone from this wretched, wounding place and back on familiar streets was so powerful that it spurred him to his feet, and gave strength to his voice.

“Caz!” he yelled. “Where are you? Norma! Murmuzian! Can anybody hear me?”

He turned slowly on the spot as he called out their names again.

“Norma! Caz! Murmuzian! Where the hell are you? I'm lost!”

“You don't have to yell—”

“Caz!”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“What do you mean where? Right....here....” his voice lost music and momentum as Harry swung clumsily around and showed his face to his friend.

“Christ, Harry. What in God’s name...?”

“The fucker blinded me, Caz. Pinhead, I mean.”

“I know who you mean. He came by to say his farewells to me and...me and...and Norma.”

“He did something.”

“Yes.”

“To her?”

“Yes.”

“No! Fuck no!”

“She’s still alive, but Christ she’s a mess Harry.”

“Why didn’t—”

“I couldn’t move. He’d thrown some fucking words in my face and I was down for the count. I hate all this fucking magic shit. All I could do was watch while he...”

“What?”

“Nothing sophisticated. Nothing thousands of husbands aren’t doing to their wives every fucking Saturday... Except she’s only skin and bones anyway.”

“He beat her?”

“Kicked her mostly. Then pulled her to her feet without touching her and beat on her a while, then dropped again, and kicked her some more.”

“I’ll kill him Caz. I swear, I’ll rip out his fucking heart.”

“But not today, Harry.”

“No. Maybe not. But someday!”

“He said you’d be coming back soon. Then he said something about you being grateful.”

“Yeah. Because now I’m blind I don’t have to see what he’s done to her.

Where is she, Caz?”

“I’ll take you. But Harry...” he caught hold of Harry’s arm.

“What?”

“Let the anger go. She doesn’t need that. Not now. I know there’s some stuff she needs to talk to you about, and she’s only willing to talk to you. Nobody else.”

“Okay.”

“So I’ll bring you to her then make myself scarce. I won’t be far off. If you need me you just have to yell.”

“All right. I’m ready. I just don’t have a fucking idea which direction we’re going in. Will you...?”

Caz discretely put his hand beneath Harry’s elbow.

“How’s that?”

“Yeah.”

“We’re going to turn to the right, Harry. Now we’ve just got to go up to the beach. It’s level for a few yards and then...”

“It gets steep suddenly. I remember!”

“Just don’t take it too fast or you’ll go down and you’ll take me with you.”

“Don’t worry.”

After three or four increasingly confident steps, Caz said: ‘You don’t seem very...I mean, you’re much calmer than I’d be if somebody had just made me blind.’

“I wasn’t calm when it happened.”

“I should have come to look for you after you’d been away awhile.”

“Don’t blame yourself. I’ve had a fucking charmed life for nearly thirty years. The number of times I should have been the one in the body bag, but somehow always unharmed. A few broken bones. Never anything serious. Norma

used to say I had an angel looking out for me. She said she'd see it sometimes when I came to visit her. But I guess it had other business today." He took a deep, wracking breath. "I'm still alive," he said. "Which is something. I get to fight another day."

"Stop talking for a minute."

"We're at the steep bit?"

"Another half step."

"Okay."

"There!"

"I got it." Harry said, fearlessly climbing the slope even though the loose stones were sliding away beneath his boots.

"Slowly—"

"How much further?"

"Two, three strides then it starts to level off again."

“Can you see Norma?”

“Yeah. She’s lying where I left her.”

“Is she...you know...is she okay?”

“You mean still breathing? Yeah, she’s still breathing. I knew she wouldn’t
let go ‘til I brought you back to her.”

“If I call to her...?”

“She’ll hear you. It’s just a few more steps.”

“Norma. It’s Harry.”

The old lady murmured something.

“Didn’t catch that,” Harry said quietly to Caz.

“She just said she was afraid something had happened to you.”

“No, I’m fine.” Harry replied with less than convincing brightness.

“He found you too.” Norma said immediately.

“Lie still...” Caz instructed her.

“What did he do? Tell me, Harry. No lies. Just tell me. What did he do?”

“I’ll come sit by you.” Harry said, “And I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me now, for Christ’s sake,” Norma said.

“He blinded me.”

“How?”

“Does it matter?”

“Maybe.”

“He didn’t dig out my eyes with a knife if that’s what you want to know.

He used some working.”

“So you’re not hurting?”

“No.”

“Well that’s something.”

“But you are aren’t you? Caz told me he—”

“Don’t waste your breath Harry. He’s just excrement.”

“All right.”

“But there’s other stuff we do need to talk about. Just you and me.”

“If I sit down here will I be right next to her?”

“Just take a half-step over to your left,” Caz said. “Good. Now how do you want to sit?”

“On my ass, Caz, the same way I’ve always sat. I can do that on my own.”

“Yeah, of course you can. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

He took his hand off Harry’s elbow and stepped back to allow Harry to settle down into a cross-legged position. Norma immediately reached up and found his face as easily as she would have if she’d been sighted. She stroked his unshaven cheek.

“Okay kids,” Caz said, “I’m going back out to the beach to watch for Murmuzian. If he’s not back in ten minutes I might just leave you two to talk and go look for him.”

“Go now if you want to,” Harry said. “We’ll be fine. Right, Norma?”

“...sure...”

“No, I think I’ll give him a little longer.”

“I’m so.....damn thirsty...” Norma said, the shaping of each word clearly a hardship.

“We’ll find you some water.” Caz said.

“Something stronger would be....more welcome,” Norma said. “And don’t...be waiting too long. I’m parched.”

“That bad, huh? Caz said. All right, I’ll go look for Murmuzian right now, just as long as you’re—”

“We’re fine Caz,” Henry said. You should go look for Murmuzian. We’ll still be here when you get back.”

“Yeah I know. Just yell if—”

“They’ll hear me in Detroit if there’s a problem,” Harry said. Two beats.

Finally Harry said: ‘Caz?’

“Yeah.”

“Will you please fuck off?”

Harry heard the grin in Caz’s voice as he said: ‘I’m gone.’ Then his feet were crunching on the stones, his retreat still sluggish, until finally he seemed to commit himself to the separation, and went racing off along the beach.

“Finally.”

“He just loves you, Harry.”

“I know.”

“Did you ever—”

“Norma?”

“Just a simple question. People are complicated.”

“Are they?”

“Oh God in Heaven are they ever. Of course a lot of the time they’re putting on faces, at least when they’re alive. But once they’re dead, you know, they stop all that nonsense. So you’ll get to see the truth. And it’s so much more rich and strange than you’d ever guess from having looked at their masks.”

She was no longer speaking in the raw, hesitant fashion she had been using when Harry first got to her. Now she talked in an urgent whisper.

“I’ve left all the instructions with George Embessan.”

“What instructions?”

For what happens once I’m gone. Which will be very soon.”

“Norma, you’re not going—”

“Yes I am, Harry, and you do neither of us any favours by wasting time with platitudes. My body’s meat, pure and simple. And decays it decays, over time. All Pinhead did was hasten me towards my exit, for which I am not ungrateful, to be honest. I need to die awhile. Get my appetite for life back before

I choose new parents, and set back into the game with all that I've learned hidden away at the back of my soul. It's going to be quite a life next time round, knowing all that I know.

"I wish I could be with you."

"You will be, honey. You will."

"No doubt?"

"Would I lie to you?" she said with genuine indignation. We'll be together. Different faces, same souls. So don't grieve. Just take up where I fell off."

"You mean helping the dead find their way?"

"Damn right."

"And you knew it'd be me?"

"No, I didn't know that. That's a complete revelation."

"I can't help the dead, Norma. I know nothing. Less than nothing."

“You knew enough to get down into Hell and save my sorry soul.”

“And look what a fuck up I made of it.”

“You think this is a fuck-up?”

“Of course it is,” Harry said.

“Rebekah’s dead. Sienna’s dead. You’re beaten to a pulp by that bastard demon. And he’s still out there somewhere! He can start all over again if he wants to. He’s still got his magic, he’s still—”

“Harry. Harry,” She soothed him, stroking his face. “Listen to me. Things are never the way they seem. You did what you thought you should because you’re a good man. You came down into Hell to find me. Into Hell, Harry. There aren’t many people who’d do that for their own mothers, never mind someone like me, old, blind, and half-crazy.”

“You’re not—”

“Listen to me. It wasn’t about me in the end. It was never about me.

Never. I was just the bait.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either, if it’s any comfort. But think about it. Think of how things have changed down here, because you choose to come looking for me.”

“So somebody set all this up. Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, I’m not saying that.”

“But you said you were bait. And that means there was fisherman, doesn’t it?”

Norma took a long moment to think this through before she replied.

“We’re all in it together, Harry. We’re all pieces of fisherman. I know that sounds like a bullshit answer, but you’ll see, when you start to work with the dead. Everyone’s complicit. Even the most innocent little kiddies. Even babies who live a day, an hour, they still have a hand in things, even their own deaths. I

know that's very hard for you to get your head around right now, but if there's any one piece of understanding that I could leave with you, it's this."

"Wait now. You're saying we've all got a hand in things then what about what you're doing now."

"Dying, you mean?"

"Leaving me, I mean. Just when I need you more than ever."

"I'll be with you more than ever, Harry. I just won't be flesh and blood. I'm tired of being solid. I need to spread out a little. I need to let go of these old bones and find me some new ones. Not right away. When the urge takes me."

She paused, and Harry heard her make a half-suppressed grunt of pain as she shifted her bruised body.

"You hurting?" he said.

"I'm fine," she said, "You don't need to worry about me. I'm fine. It's everybody else who's fucked up." She laughed lightly. "It isn't really funny," she

went on, still laughing, “The world-soul is crazy-sick, Harry, crazy-sick. And if we don’t get to the root of its pain, and burn it out, everything you did down here will have been for nothing.”

“What do you mean, everything I did down here? I did nothing except stand and witness.”

“You’re not thinking. If you hadn’t come down here after me, and followed the demon and me across half of Hell, and raised Lucifer—”

“That wasn’t me. That was Rebekah and Sienna.”

“But who brought them down here? And how did they get to be the way they are—”

“Were.”

“Are, Harry. *Are*. They haven’t been unmade just because their bodies gave out.”

“Even the dog?”

“Of course.”

“She showed me how she came to be the way she was.”

“The hill outside Jerusalem? Yes, she showed me too. Joseph of Arimathea and his cup. The Grail, filled to the brim. It’s no wonder following me down here caused such a furor when you consider the company you kept.”

“It was news to me. I had hardly believe even now.”

“Oh, believe it. There’s more consequences to come, of course.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know exactly. But I do know that you can’t wake up a power like Lucifer and not get more than you bargained for.”

“Is there something I should be doing?”

“I...I don’t know.” Norma said, her reply tinged with an unsettling remoteness. It’s not my business what you...what you do...It’ll all, become...apparent.”

“You don’t sound too good, Norma. Maybe I should call for Caz.”

She reached out and gripped his arm, seizing it with an accuracy and a strength that astonished him.

“No.” she said. Just. Just. Us.”

“Whatever you say.” Harry told her.

“I’m....hap...I’m happy....just us....”

“You really are happy?” Harry said. Though he tried to keep the doubt from his voice he couldn’t do it.

“Of...course...”Norma replied, her voice so frail now that Harry had to hold his breath to catch what she was saying.

“Worlds...with...in....worlds.”

With each syllable her voice grew weaker and weaker.

“For...ever...and....” She didn’t have the strength to say forever a second time. The phrase trailed off as the breath which had carried it ceased with a

barely audible click in her throat. He didn't need to speak her name and have his call go unanswered to know that she'd taken her leave.

He reached out tentatively in hope of finding her face, so as to close her eyes and to his surprise his fingers found her cheek with the same uncanny accuracy he's seen her demonstrate countless times. For some reason the image of what he was doing appeared in his mind's eye, fixed like a painting: Attempting to Close the Eyes of A Blind Woman After Death. It was easier than he'd feared it would be. Her eyelids obeyed the slightest touch of his fingertips, and closed.

"I love you, Norma." He said. "Did I ever say that to you? Fuck. Did I?"

Two

Lucifer, once the most beloved angel in that incandescent Dimension that mortal men called Heaven, exiled from its glories and its powers by his Creator, thrown into a place of rock and darkness where, in defiance of his Creator's torments, he'd made a second Heaven or at least attempted to, which mortal men had come to call Hell, hung still above the center of his Cathedral, and planned, for the second time, his farewell to life. He wouldn't make the same mistakes this time as he had the first. There'd be no Cathedral this time, to serve as a place of

pilgrimage for those who wished to meditate on the injustice and tragedy of his story. Nor would the Underworld be populated with the bastard children of the damned and their tormentors, the latter rebels like himself, thrown down from Heaven for conspiring with him to rule from the Beatiful Throne.

The product of such unions were brutal things, with obsessions and addictions seething in their skulls. They had bred with aberrant ease, each succeeding generation shedding more of their angelic roots, until they seemed a species unto themselves in which every deviant idea Nature had shipped into the life-forms of ocean, swamp or sewer were celebrated, diseases treated like the finest jewelry, tumors extolled, maimed limbs paraded.

Lucifer had made no attempt to change the unnatural **wistay** of Hell. Any attempt he might have made to keep his dominion from descending with a state of limitless depravity and contagion was bound to fail, thus furthering his humiliation. So he had laid plans for suicide; plans that would take two

centuries to be fully realized, given that they included the construction of the Cathedral on Lake Joatha, and the very secret creation of his auto-execution device in the Chapel of Release, which was the name he used for the Basement when he spoke of it to the three fellow rebels—Beshamathia, Renegeth and Zupathathat—whom he'd elected to work with him. He had arranged to pay for their labours with the only thing they wanted: death; a gift only he, who had been an angel of the highest order, could provide for them. He had not cheated them. They'd died by his hand the day the device that would take his own life was finished.

But while Beshanathia, Regeneth and Zupathatnat had been consumed in fires Lucifer had tenderly nurtured to erase them utterly, so that none would discover their remains and despoil them, Lucifer's body had remained whole. It had not been planned that way. The machine had been designed to first cremate Lucifer's body and then initiate its own demise, destroying itself with such

violence that anyone who came upon the remains would never be able to make sense of who had died here, or why.

But the auto-execution device had apparently balked at the notion of erasing itself. Some primitive urge to preserve itself was alive in its system—which given that it had been engineered by sophisticated angels—was infinitely more sophisticated a device than any human mind in those early centuries of the first millennium could have possibly imagined, much less brought into being. It had enough of a mind forming in its unfathomable mechanisms to know that living had possibilities; death had none. So it would live, it decided. And given that it had witnessed the efficient beheadings of Beshanathia, Renegeth and Zupathanat (the last a little less tidy than the first two, but still over after three hacks and a quick manual twist and tug), and that it had driven nineteen darts, narrow as a baby's finger, with its creator in an order and configuration that had been calculated to bring death to its sacrificed flesh, piercing its bones to their

glorious marrow, and poisoning the body with the toxins in which their lengths were anointed.

And there Lucifer had lain in dreamless death for almost one thousand four hundred years until the blood of the Christ, Hell's first harrower, had invaded sweet oblivion and thrust him back into unwelcome life. He didn't have a complete grasp of the policies behind his resurrection. Nor in truth did he much care. All that mattered to him was that once and for all the world he had created, ending forever the idiot games of power, and the blood-shed that inevitably sprang from such games, the evidence for which lay below him, despoiling the place of beauty he had raised to die in.

"Enough," he murmured to himself. And then, raising his voice to a bellow that could be heard at the furthest reaches of Hell:

"I HAVE HAD ENOUGH!"

—

The shout caused the stones on the beach to leap up as if in terror, then drop and rattle down the incline towards the lake, whose surface was also stirred into agitated motion. Caz had just reached the Azeel's encampment when Lucifer unleashed his shout, and the noise brought Surraban out of one of the shacks. She had a knife in her hand, and her hair was in disarray, as though she'd been interrupted in the middle of something.

"What you do here?" she demanded, her huge silvery eyes darting back and forth between Caz and Lucifer.

"Where's Murmuzian?"

"No your business, little man. You go die someplace."

"I don't think so," Caz said, the opportunity to start towards her as she looked away towards Lucifer.

She sensed his approach without looking directly at him, but miscalculated how quickly he would reach her, because instead of going around the fire he leapt it. The embers spread too far for him to make a clean jump, and when his landing kicked up a burst of yellow white sparks, which served to distract the old demoness long enough for him to deflect her knife-bearing hand. Her response was to spit full-force in his face, the saliva stinging his skin and burning his eyes so viciously that his sight was instantly blurred by tears. Now it was Surraban who had the advantage, and she took it without hesitation. Her first cut sliced up across Caz's chest, her second came back down across his belly. Before she could wound him a third time he retreated clumsily into the dying fire, turning up the red-hot embers hidden beneath the ashes. He smelt the stink of his old boots cooking, and felt the heat on his soles, but he wasn't going to stumble back out into the path of Surraban's knife, so instead he kicked the embers in what he guessed to be her direction. It was. She loosed a stream of

curses, evidence, he hoped, that she'd been driven back by the embers, though the smoke from the fire and the spittles sting denied him confirmation. He dropped his head and leapt from the embers, grateful for the wave of cool air that met him.

He took two unhindered steps before she came at him again, but this time he caught a glimpse of her approach from the corner of his eye, and dropped down to avoid the swing of her blade. Then he threw himself at her, the tears clearing from his eyes as he did so. He grabbed her by neck and knife-arm, shaking the latter 'til she released her knife, then releasing her arm and putting both hands to her neck.

“Where's Murmuzian?”

“Why you care?”

“He's coming with me.”

“Where you go?”

“None of your damn business.” The wounds she’d given him hurt, and the pain fueled his rage.

“I think I’m just going to kill you,” he said, half meaning it, “and throw you in the fire then find him myself. Yeah, yeah. That’s the easiest, isn’t it?”

“You crazy!”

“Damn right,” he said tightening his hold on her throat.

Her strong bony fingers pulled at his hands, desperately trying to loosen his grip. But the half of him which truly intended to strangle the life from her had him pressing his thumbs side by side against her wind-pipe. She started to make a nasty rattling gasp, and her hands lost their strength and slid away from his. His sanity prevailed at that moment. He let go of her completely and she dropped to the ground, using the first available breath to begin cursing him again.

He picked up her knife, and tucked it through his belt, then, rubbing his eyes to clear them of the last tears, he went to the shack. There was a small fire

burning inside, the smoke vented through a hole in the middle of the roof, and by its light he saw Murmuzian, kneeling with his back to the fire, staring at the blank wall. His hands were crossed behind him, as though they were tied, though they weren't.

Caz went to him. "It's okay, it's only me," he said. A shudder passed through Murmuzian's body by way of response, and he made a muted wordless sound. Caz went down on his haunches, with his back against the shack wall, and looked at his demon lover's face. Murmuzian's eyes were wide and his mouth closed tight. He stared straight ahead of him, his gaze not shifting in Caz's direction for an instant.

"Murmuzian, we've got to get going. Lucifer's going to do something messy, I can feel it, and I don't want us to be here when he does."

Murmuzian made the same wordless noise he'd made before, wriggling as if to face himself. Caz grasped what was going now: the old woman had him

mesmerized into thinking he was bound and gagged, maybe blindfolded too. He moved his open palm back and forth in front of Murmuzian's eyes. He didn't blink.

"You're not tied up, baby," Caz said. "She's just got you believing you are. And you're not gagged either. Are you hearing me?"

Again, the muted noise from behind sealed lips.

"It's a trick, that's all. Some stupid bit of witchery. I'm right here. Look at me. There's nothing on the wall worth staring at, is there?"

He glanced at the wall directly in front of Murmuzian as he spoke and saw that it was not blank, as he'd first thought. There was a quartet of hieroglyphs, arranged so close to one another that they almost touched, scratched on the antiquated sheet of metal from which the wall was made. Murmuzian's eyes were fixed upon them.

“Ha.” Caz said. He put his hand to his chest wound, and wetted his palm with blood. Then he wiped it over the hieroglyphs, effectively erasing them.

Murmuzian’s release was instantaneous. The ropes that he’d believed were binding his wrists, and the gag and blindfold all lost their grip on his imagination.

He looked round at Caz, his face blazing adoration.

“You came for me.”

“Of course.”

“I thought she was going to eat my heart.”

“Why did you think that?”

“Because she told me that was what she was going to do. Where is she?”

“Out by the fire. Are you ready to run?”

Murmuzian got to his feet. “I’m a little numb but I’ll be fine once I get moving.”

Caz led the way to the shack and out. The air was tinged with smoke tinged with some kind of sickly sweetness.

“More of Surraban’s work,” Caz remarked.

She’d gone from the spot where she’d dropped to the ground, but she wasn’t far off, Caz was certain. She was in the smoke somewhere, her solidity half-dissolved so as to better conceal herself. Caz studied the dirty air, looking for some sign of her, but he could see none.

“Let’s confuse her,” he said to Murmuzian. “You head off in that direction, I’ll go the opposite way.”

“No,” Murmuzian said sweetly. “We go together.”

“It’s...”

“Together.”

He had hold of Caz’s hand and he plainly wasn’t going to let go.

“Which way?” said Caz. “Left of the fire or right?”

“Neither,” Murmuzian replied.

He didn't say anything more. He simply pointed to the corner of the shack. Caz looked puzzled. Murmuzian just kept pointing. Caz took his advice and headed to the corner of the shack, and then, at Murmuzian's urging, slipped down the side and round the back. There was no smoke here. Just lightless beach, sloping gently towards the water. Now Caz saw the wisdom of Murmuzian's plan. Why waste precious minutes facing Surraban's manipulations when time was of the essence? Better to slip away while she was waiting for them in the smoke.

They made their way almost to the water's edge before turning left and making their way back to the makeshift bridge and the cathedral, where Lucifer still hung up high and incandescent, like a blue lantern fashioned in the shape of a man with wide-spread arms. Though he had not spoken since his shout, there was a sound in the air which Caz didn't doubt originated with the Fallen One: not one sound but half a hundred buzzing, humming, rattling, hissing, searing,

sobbing...all woven into a single fabric which swooped and billowed vast and rippling over the beach, some portions unmade into little more than the glistening threads like some hungry spider's trap, in other dense enough to form clots of solid sound through which Caz and Murmuzian had to press their way.

As they went they exchanged accounts of what had happened to and in front of each in the absence of the other. Neither had any good news to proffer. Caz told Murmuzian awhat the Hell Priest had done to Harry and Norma, though of course he did not know the worst of it yet, while Murmuzian described Surraban's enticing him into a mesmerized state, her incantation followed by apocalyptic prophecies.

"This world is paper in fire," she said. "Paper in fire."

"No doubt," said Caz. "The sooner we're out of here, what's left of us, the better."

The noise that filled the air with its complexities was getting louder. The stones on the beach were responding to it by rattling together, adding their own growling percussion to the general din. Caz kept his eye on Lucifer as they headed back to Harry and Norma. The sounds were the Devil's work, no doubt of that. Indeed as they came within a few yards of the corpse, and began to climb back up, the beach towards it Lucifer moved for the first time away from his place above the Cathedral ruins, and out, over the rubble of the right hand wall and the narrow beach beyond it, until he had the waters of the lake beneath him, which the light that emanated from him illuminated, and which his presence was stirring up into a wide circling motion, a vortex which made the waters frenzied and foamy.

Now Lucifer was still again, hanging over the centre of this vortex and staring down into it. His light did not simply illuminate the busy waters beneath

him. It also spilled upwards, catching the corroded surface of the sky stone overhead.

“She moves more slowly.” Murmuzian said. He had stopped halfway up the beach to study Hell’s heavens.

“Well let’s not waste time figuring out why.” Caz said.

Murmuzian looked out towards Lucifer and studied him standing out there between the vortex and the slowing stone.

“You’re right Caz....”he said quietly, as though the Devil might hear him, even at such a distance and in the midst of such commotion. “We’ve got to go.”

He backed up the beach as he spoke, his gaze still fixed on the enemy. It wasn’t until he heard Caz say: “Norma’s dead,” that he looked away from the lake and back at the melancholy tableau at the fringe of the trees. Harry blind, Norma dead, Caz’s face drained of blood and hope.

“Murmuzian?” Harry said. “I’m right here. You said there were snake holes, yes?”

“Yes.”

“They lead back to the world?”

“That’s what I always heard. I don’t know for sure.”

“We’ll take our chances. Yes, Caz?”

“Damn right,” Caz said.

“So find us one.” Harry said.

“They’re not always safe,” Murmuzian warned. “They collapse on themselves.”

“We don’t have much choice.” Harry said. “Something’s going to happen here, very soon. I feel it in my gut. And we don’t want to be here when it happens, right?”

“Right.” Murmuzian said.

“So find us a snake hole and let’s get moving.”

Murmuzian headed off between the trees, swallowed up by darkness in a few strides.

“What’s Lucifer doing?” Harry asked Caz.

“He’s not in the ruins any longer he’s over the lake.”

“I figured that. I can hear the water going crazy.”

“Yeah, it’s...” he stopped.

“What?” said Harry.

“He’s rising up. Fast. And the -----’s coming up after him. Riding the Vortex. Jesus...”

The words to describe what he was seeing failed him. It was too immense a spectacle: the circling waters in a foaming frenzy, the massive serpentine form of the ----- rising out of the vortex empowered by its spiraling energies, the light from Lucifer’s body growing brighter as he climbed the air, with the -----

barely behind him. The creature was defying the limitations of its anatomy with this flight, but Lucifer had it hooked by some invisible barb, and drew it up from above just as the waters cast it skyward from below.

Harry stared sightlessly at the water doing his best to make sense of all the commotion.

“Caz?”

“I’m here.”

“What the fuck’s going on?”

“Sorry, I ran out of words.”

“Try again, Caz. I want to *see*.”

“The -----’s the size of ten trains, I swear. And it’s following him.”

“Lucifer.”

“Yeah.”

“Going where?”

“Up. Out of the lake and up.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. But whatever the reason—”

“—it’s not good.”

“No way in Hell.”

Three

Lucifer, the Fallen One, the star of morning, had lived and died in his underworld beneath a hated sky. God had set that stone in the heavens above his prison kingdom as a stone might be rolled in front of a tomb, to seal in the dead’s corruption so that it could never befoul the world. He, of course, God’s once

most-beloved angel, was the soul that Lord had intended to remind of his corrupted state with the presence of the stone, and it had worked flawlessly. Though he had created hundreds of snake-holes by which he could skip out of Hell to cause mischief amongst God's idiot children, humankind, he was always reminded, upon returning to his kingdom, that in God's eyes all that he had achieved in Hell—it's fine cities and its straight highways, its sewage systems and its places of meditation, where Hell Priests studied and wrote learned pieces on the matter of Good and Evil—were no more significant than the seething of maggots in a dead man's flesh. All he had to do was look up in order to be reminded. The stone had always been there. And Lucifer had come to hate it with all the fury and venom in his head, heart and soul, which was no small sum.

Now, finally, he had a chance to strike out at the stone, his strength fuelled by the blood of the Christ. The ——— was still rising up out of the vortex, its body far vaster than he had anticipated. Yet he drew it up without

effort, though it roared its displeasure at being ejected from its natural habitat, its breath stinking of the dead meat in its entrails. It wanted Lucifer in its belly more than anything its hungry eyes had ever settled on, and for that reason alone it didn't fight to free itself from the hold he had on it. Soon it would catch up with him and swallow him whole. He was so close; just a tiny distance beyond its gaping maw. Any moment it would have him. It belched again, to make the meat sicken with the stench, and fall into its throat.

But no. Lucifer kept rising, and the ——— came after him, coil upon coil, thrown skyward from the vortex a thousand feet below.

On the beach Caz watched the spectacle in silence.

“Jesus, man.” Harry said, “Tell me what you’re seeing. At least the bones.”

“Lucifer’s heading up. And the ———’s following him. The lake’s still spitting it out. It’s like there’s no end to the thing. And the speed its going, fuck, it’s suicidal.”

“Any sign of Murmuzian?” Harry asked.

“No. He went off with into the trees.”

“We should be ready to go the moment he—”

“Caz!”

“That’s him.”

“Has he found—”

“There’s three snake-holes drilled close to one another on the other side
of—”

“Yes, he’s found—”

“I heard him. Let’s move.”

“What about Norma?”

“I don’t want to leave her.”

“I can carry her but it won’t be very dignified.”

“She won’t—”

Harry stopped in mid-sentence not because he was drowned out by the commotion, but because at that moment all the commotion, those layers of sound which had steadily escalated as Lucifer prepared to start the waters spinning — now ceased. Even the roar of the vortex became remote. The hush lasted two, three, four heartbeats. Then came a single boom which started some distance away and then reverberated across the heavens.

Caz was bending to pick up Norma when the sound came.

“What was that?” Harry wanted to know.

Caz went back out to the edge of the trees to get a clearer view of the sky.

“The ————— ”

“What about it?”

“It hit the sky.”

“You mean the stone?”

“The stone, yeah. It hit hard. I can see a crack opening up. More than one.
A lot more. Fuck. There’s cracks spreading over the whole damn rock.”

“And where’s Lucifer?” Harry wanted to know.

“I don’t see him. No wait. There he is. He’s right up against the stone
letting that light of his run in the cracks. It’s forcing them open.”

“And the ——?”

“It’s got its teeth in the rock and its holding on. Christ, this is so crazy. I
wish you could—” He stopped himself. “Shit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I got the picture,” Harry said.

“He’s going to crack the sky open.” Murmuzian said.

He was breathless from his frantic search for snake-holes, the smell of his
demon sweat bitter sweet.

“Are we going?” he wanted to know, “or are we staying to watch?”

“We’re going.” Caz said. “Right Harry?”

“I seen all I want to see.” Harry replied unsmiling.

“So let’s get gone,” Murmuzian said.

“You get Harry over to the snake-holes,” Caz said. “I’ll follow on with Norma.”

There was a fresh fusillade of noise from overhead as new cracks opened in the stone, spreading from the fissures that were already gaping in the surface. A litter of fragments dropped from the cracks, seeming inconsequential for the first few seconds of their descent, but rapidly revealing their true immensity. It wasn’t only their size that was deceptive; so was their course. The relation between the fracturing stone above and the lay of the land below was misleading. Shards of stone that seemed certain to fall on the beach near if not directly upon them fell many miles back, somewhere in the vicinity of Primordium, or thereabouts, while pieces that seemed destined to land a long way off came down in the water close to the shore. The largest of these slivers—a piece of rock the

size of a dozen houses or more— hit the water a hundred yards out from the shore, the impact sufficient to throw up a plume of water that would have beggared the Cathedral for height, if the building had still been standing.

The drizzle of falling shards was rapidly becoming a deluge, as Lucifer's inquiring light pressed deeper into the fractured surface of the stone, breaking off more and more pieces. One slab, easily big enough to have scattered the little corpse landed on the beach where Caz and Harry had been standing moments before, the thud of its landing sufficient to make every tree sway from its roots on up to its topmost branch, shaking down leaves as they did so.

Caz had draped Norma's corpse over his left shoulder, and was now following Harry, who was in turn following the sound of Murmuzian's voice, out across the inland edge of the trees and into a landscape of piled obsidian boulders, to the sum of which the deteriorating heavens were delivering down their own sum of new stones, that shattered with loud cracks as they struck the obsidian.

The shrapnel that sped off in all directions from these bits were lethal, ricocheting off the black boulders like bullets. Heads down, Harry and Caz followed Murmuzian as he wove between the boulders.

“How far?” Caz wanted to know.

“We got a way to go.”

“What’s the problem?” Harry said.

“It’s coming down any minute.”

“I hear it already.”

“That’s just bits hitting the boulders. I mean the whole damn sky.”

“He’s going to flatten Hell?”

“That looks like the plan.”

On the heels of Caz’s reply came three monstrous cracks, louder by magnitudes than anything that had preceded them. They echoed back and forth between earth and sky, their volume not diminishing with each echo but instead

becoming still louder, echoes of echoes of echoes soon so numerous they made an almost solid sound.

“Here it comes!” Caz yelled to Harry and Murmuzian.

Despite the danger from the flying fragments, Caz stood up and threw back his head so as to at least see the immense spectacle clearly, for a few seconds. Lucifer’s assaults had finally risen the stone, breaking it into pieces that were still monumental in their fractured state. To Caz’s eyes the cataclysm seemed to be happening in slow motion, the vast pieces sliding apart with a lazy elegance.

“Which one?” Harry yelled to Caz.

Caz pulled his reluctant eyes off the sky and glanced in Harry’s direction.

He was on his haunches six or seven strides away, reaching out to investigate the empty air in front of him.

“If I fuck up—”

“It’s on me,” Harry said. “Just do it, and be quick.”

Caz didn’t wait to see. He was too hungry for another glimpse of the dying sky. The pieces were falling faster now, preceded by a hail of stones monsoonal in its ferocity.

“Caz!” Murmuzian was right beside him, pulling on Caz’s arm. “We go now, Caz,” he said. “No more time to look.”

As Murmuzian pulled Caz towards the snake hole a massive block of shed stone struck one of the obsidian boulders nearby, where it shattered, throwing immense pieces in all directions. From the corner of his eye Caz saw one of the shards coming at them, and started to shout a warning, but before he could speak Murmuzian pulled him towards a cleft between two boulders. Abruptly, the dark, roaring landscape, its’ splintered sky falling, was gone, and they were in another place entirely, where only smears of light, speeding across their path, or over the uneven ground they stood on, offered and clue to their location.

“This is a snake-hole?” Caz said.

“Never been in one ‘til now.” Murmuzian replied. “Just played at the
whats’ it called, where it is not in nor out.”

“The threshold,” Harry said.

“Yes. Threshold.”

“There you are.” Caz said. “It’s hard to make sense of what’s where.”

“If its’ anything like doorways I’ve used you just have to head on through
it and hope it doesn’t dump you in the middle of the Atlantic.”

“What’s an Atlanti?” Murmuzian wanted to know.

“Don’t worry about it.” Caz said, “We’ll be fine. Won’t we Harry?”

“Sure,” Harry shrugged. “Why not? We’re going to step out into Times
Square and it’ll all have been a dream. Don’t get your hopes up,” Harry said.

“Now will somebody point in the right direction?”

“I’m here.” Murmuzian said. “We’ll all go together.”

“For better or worse, eh?” Harry said.

His remark was punctuated by one almighty crash from the other side of the threshold, as the remains of the stone dropped out of the sky over Hell, crushing the infernal landscape beneath its bulk. The reverberations leapt the threshold and dispersed their energies through the broken ground, further agitating the light that continued to cavort in the walls that rose to such heights they seemed to converge. The noise and its attendant vibrations dropped off quickly into silence and stillness.

“Goodnight Hell.” Harry said.

Four

The snake-hole didn't deliver them into the icy waters of the Atlantic. But nor did it set them down on a quiet New York sidewalk, where they could have readily found a way to transport Norma's corpse back to her apartment. No, the snake-hole was exquisitely arbitrary. It first offered Caz a tantalizing glimpse of a city street (not New York perhaps, but civilization nevertheless) it did not let them exit there however. He had barely reported the street to Harry than a shoal of lights blazed by, erasing the reassuring sight.

"I guess that wasn't our stop, Harry." Caz said, trying to keep his tone from sounding either exhausted or discouraged. Whatever desperation he presently felt

it was nothing, he was sure, beside the thoughts circling in the darkness of

Harry's head.

“We've got another stop coming up.”

It was a far less reassuring scene than the city street that had preceded it: a landscape of black rock and unsullied snow, its drifts being stirred into blinding white veils by a relentless wind.

“If this is our stop we're fucked.” Caz said quietly.

It wasn't. Once again they had barely glimpsed the scene when it was erased by the same shoal of lights. A little time passed while they walked on down the snake-hole in silence. Murmuzian had taken the lead now, with Harry's right hand lightly laid on his left shoulder, just to keep Harry from falling as he walked on the uneven ground Caz brought up the rear, with Norma's body over his shoulder.

The third landscape at least looked warmer than the one preceding it. An American highway, to judge by the signs, running through a desert landscape. Murmuzian described it to Harry who said: "If that's our stop we're going to have some walking to do."

It was indeed their stop. This time no blazing brightness slid by to erase the scene; instead the ground of the snake-hole threw a length of its light-streaked darkness out into the yellow-orange dust at the side of the highway.

"Not quite a red carpet," Caz said, "But it does the job."

"Out! Quickly!" Harry said. "Before it changes its mind."

Murmuzian brought Harry out into the heat of a desert noon. Caz followed, with Norma, glancing back at the snake-hole as he stepped off its light-smear ground to find that there was nothing behind him but empty air, shimmering with heat.

"Gone," he said.

“What’s gone?” Murmuzian replied.

“Your snake hole.”

“It’s still there,” the demon replied. He came to stand beside Caz. “There’s a distortion in the air.”

“I don’t see it?”

“Here’s one edge,” Murmuzian said. He took a stride to his right. “And here’s the other. Do you see it?”

“Yeah, I see it now you paint it out. But Christ, that is so fucking subtle.”

“Well of course,” said Murmuzian, “They weren’t made for human kind. They’re strictly for demonic use.”

He peered down the length of the highway, which ran without so much as a one degree accommodation down its entire visible length.

“There’s a building a few miles away, in that direction.” Murmuzian said.

“I don’t see it, Muzza.” Caz told him.

“Well it’s there, believe me.”

“Is it a garage of a house?”

“What does it matter Caz? Muzza’s telling us that’s the only place in sight— then we don’t have much choice do we?”

“We could wait for some traffic. Get somebody to pick us up.”

“Yeah, I’d like to meet the driver who’d stop to pick up a demon, a blind man caked with blood, and a third guy carrying a body.”

“I guess I have a little more faith in people.”

“Well, hey, let’s walk towards the building Muzza saw and thumb for a lift while we’re doing it. That way we won’t waste time.”

With the plan agreed upon, they started down the straight highway, with Muzza doing the thumb, despite the bizarrry of his appearance, especially out in the bright sun, which magnified every colour that was encoded in his iridescent skin. Gleams of crimson and purple, of sunflower yellow and the orange of

embers blown back into flame. He was wearing little more than a jockstrap, its over-brimming state proof of his gender. But there was a happy ambiguity in the way that he held himself; a hint of the seductive feminine in his lazy walk, and in the way his flawless black hair, which fell all the way down his back, swayed to the confident rhythm of his stride. And to add the final touch of utter strangeness, the demon's tail, its skin even more intensely iridescent than the rest of his body, rose up and out from its root at the base of his back, and lent its own mesmerizing dance to the spectacle called 'Murmuzian walking.'

A car and two trucks came by going in their direction, and all three slowed down more than a little take a good look at Murmuzian. But having looked they moved on, kicking up choking clouds of yellowish dust as they speeded away. Caz could still not see the building that Muzza had seen down the highway, but the heat of the day had climbed since they'd stepped out of the snake-hole, and the distance was little more than a shimmering abstraction.

“How far from here if we have to walk it?” Harry asked Caz.

“I can’t see clearly enough, Harry. It can’t be more than another hour, can it?”

“You tell me.” Harry replied.

As Caz attempted to figure out an answer, he heard the sound of gospel music blaring from a car radio, and glanced over his shoulder to see a very large black sedan with a foot tall crucifix serving as a hood ornament coming on down the highway. No hope there, he thought, and returned his gaze to the ground in front of him. Norma’s body had seemed so very light when he’d first shouldered it; skin and bones. But he was a lot weaker now, and though he moved her body from his left shoulder to his right, and back again, and sometimes, to ease up on his shoulders, he simply carried her draped over his arms, there was no real relief. He had no intention of laying the body down, not when he had no real notion of their whereabouts. He would never forgive himself if any harm were to come to

Norma's remains just because he'd neglected them for a moment. So he trudged on, focusing his diminishing energies on the piece of ground ahead of him, where he would presently set down his foot. Then on to the next piece of terrain, indistinguishable from the previous piece except in one vital regard. It brought him closer to the end of this insane journey to Hell and back; closer to his tiny store at 11th and Hudson, and the smell of the inks and the prospect of another breathing canvas standing naked before him, shaking, some of them, with happy anticipation of the adventure ahead. Oh, to be there now! To crack a beer—no, fuck the beers—he'd pick up a couple of bottles of Jim Beam and pour it into his mis-matched coffee mugs.

Then somebody—hopefully Harry—would find the right words for the moment, to honour the crazy and the lost and the damned. Then he'd tip back his head and the mug and that golden whiskey would slip down his throat, and for a few golden moments everything would be well with the world.

“Are you folks looking for a ride?” said the driver of the black stretch limousine. Caz looked up at him.

“Please God, yes.”

“You’d better ask the fare. The assistant to His Majesty Lord Reverend Kutchaver is the guy with the little head and the big spectacles. His name’s Welsford. And I believe he must be some kind of saint to put up with His Majesty!”

“Welsford?” Caz said.

A young pale-skinned bespectacled man in a short sleeved white shirt and a narrow black tie opened the passenger door and got out.

“Somebody said Welsford?”

“Me,” said Caz.

“Well your timing was impeccable. The Reverend Kutchaver wants you to accept his invitation and step in out of this monstrous heat.”

“Welfsford?” said the voice from the interior. “I’ve only just offered.”

“And we happily accept,” Harry replied, “But I should tell you that one of number is dead.”

“I did point that out to the Reverend but—”

“I have no fear,” came a voice from the back of the car, “of one of our beloved sisters was gone to meet her Maker. Hallelujah! This is a day for Thanksgiving. Bring her in and make her comfortable.”

Caz labored to get into the limousine with Norma’s body, while preserving the dignity of the attempt, but it was hard work single-handed, and very plainly the Reverend Kutchaver, who was sitting in the far corner of the back seat, a very large white man in his late fifties, dressed in a very expensive suit, had no intention of offering any physical assistance.

“Can you friend not help you?” he suggested.

“Harry’s blind, I’m afraid.”

“Oh Lord, oh Lord,” the Reverend said, “You are mightily afflicted.”

With Norma’s corpse half-laid, half-sitting opposite the Reverend, and Harry guided to the long seat that ran down the length of the limousine, Caz got out to allow Murmuzian into the vehicle. Only then did he get in himself, and seating himself beside Norma, closed the door.

“We’re all aboard.”

Kutchaver and his assistant were inevitably staring at Murmuzian who did his best not to encourage questions by simply staring at the floor of the limo.

“If you could just drop us off at some place where we can make arrangements to get back to New York.”

“New York?” said the Reverend’s assistant. “You are a long way from home.”

“Where are we?” said Harry.

“In South Dakota. The Reverend is due at a church in Montgomery in—”

he consulted his watch—“one hour and twenty-two minutes.”

“Then if its’ alright with you we’ll travel with you to Montgomery,” Caz said, “And make our arrangements from there.”

The assistant glanced nervously at Kutchaver who seemed not to have even heard Caz’s proposal. He was staring with intense fascination at Murmuzian.

“Is that alright with you, Reverend?” the assistant asked his boss.

“What?”

“If they come with us to Montgomery.”

“Montgomery...” Kutchaver said vaguely.

“Is that a yes or a no?”

The Reverend didn’t reply to the question, his attention remained riveted at the silent presence of Murmuzian. Finally he said, with an almost tender intimacy in his voice. “And you, brother,” he said, “What is your story?”

Murmuzian didn't reply, he just went on staring at his naked feet. The Reverend, however, was not going to be satisfied with silence.

"It must have been hard to be born a freak," he said. "Did your Momma not want anything to do with you, when she saw how you looked? Poor woman. I can only imagine her despair. But God always has a purpose, however difficult it may be for us to understand it."

"Does he?" said Murmuzian, still not looking up.

"Of course, child. Of course. Whatever sins you have committed he invites you to lay them down and accept his forgiveness and his protection. You know— oh Lord in Heaven I see the reason clearly, thank you Lord—"

"What are you talking about?" Murmuzian said.

"Let it go." Harry advised.

Murmuzian might have done so had the Reverend not kept up the hard-sell.

“I have a meeting in Montgomery tonight, and thanks be to the Lord he delivers you into my care, so that you can confess your sins and be absolved of them in front of my congregation.”

Murmuzian finally looked up and fixed his gaze on the Reverend.

“I’m not a sinner,” he said.

“We are all sinners.”

“Speak for yourself.”

The Reverend refused to be thrown off by Murmuzian’s responses however. He kept going as though nothing he’d said had been contradicted.

“What road to damnation were you on, brother, when you realized your error? Were you too much in love with the beauty of your hair? Shall I cut it off for you and burn it? Or is it your soul you love too much?”

“I don’t love myself,” Murmuzian replied quietly. “Him I love.”

He pointed at Caz, who smiled and said: ‘love.’

“You’re sure?”

“I was never so sure of anything in my life.”

The Reverend’s appalled gaze slid back and forth between the lovers.

“Do you know how you will be punished in Hell for what you are confessing here?”

“There is no Hell.” Harry said quietly.

“Oh but that there is,” the Reverend replied. “I have had many visions of that place. I have witnessed its furnaces. I have counted its chimneys. I have watched damned sodomites like you”— he pointed at Caz. “And you”—. Now at Murmuzian —“ driven by demons whose faces were foul beyond words.”

“Really?” Harry said. “Beyond words.”

“I swear by the blood of Christ.”

“Do they look like me?”

“Muzza...” Caz said softly.

“I just want to find out how real his visions are,” Murmuzian said, innocently. He slide off his seat and dropped to his knees in front of the Reverend, who protested softly: “Brother, please get up. Wait until we get to the meeting before you start confessing your sins.”

“I’m not confessing anything.” Murmuzian replied. “I just want to show what a demon looks like.”

There was scrabbling sound from Murmuzian’s face.

“What is he doing?” the assistant said, his voice laced with panic.

“Do they look like this?” Murmuzian said, his voice becoming rawer with each syllable.

“Oh Christ in Heaven help me,” the Reverend cried out. He tried to press the great mass of his body against the seat in a desperate attempt to retreat even an inch from the abomination in front of him. “Lord, I swear I will never sin again, however sorely I am tempted!”

“Is everything okay back there?” the driver called to his passengers.

“No.” the assistant answered, his voice shrill, “You need to stop the car.”

“We’re tight for time.”

“I said stop the car!”

The driver dutifully eased the vehicle over to the side of the empty highway and got out, slamming his door, then walking the length of the vehicle to open the Reverend’s door. He found Murmuzian still on his knees in front of the Reverend, the monstrous face he’d shown Kutchaver apparently concealed again.

“What’s the problem, Reverend.”

“Get them out! All of them, including the dead one! They’ve been sent from Hell to torment me.”

“I doubt that, Reverend. But if that’s what you want. Everybody out.”

“In New York,” Murmuzian said.

“What?”

“We’ll get out in New York.”

“No, no, that’s not happening. This here’s the Reverend’s ride, and he’s going to Montgomery, and then onto—I forget where the hell comes next. But New York? No. You need to find yourselves a different ride.”

Caz had already ducked out of the limousine on the assistants’ side, and had come around the back of the car.

“Or a different driver,” he said.

He had not emerged from Hell unarmed. The knife he was brandishing had a ten-inch blade and was caked with blood. The driver’s response was quick and unequivocal.

“Take the car. Just don’t hurt me, okay? I got five kids. No wife but five fucking kids. You want to see? I got pictures.” He reached into his jacket. Caz prodded the back of his hand with the point of his knife.

“I’m sure you’re an excellent breeder,” Caz said. “I don’t need pictures of the kids. I just need you to help the Reverend out of the car.”

“Out?”

“Yeah. Out. Ask the Reverend if he’d prefer to see the Devil again or have you help him out of the car?”

The Reverend didn’t need a repetition of Caz’s question. He had the answer already.

“Get me the fuck out of this car. It’s not going to New York. It’s going to Hell, and I don’t want to be riding in it.” He stuck out his fat-fingered hand, which was overly bejeweled for a man who proselytized so passionately for the virtues of porosity.

“Come on, Jimmy or Julius or whatever the fuck your name is.”

“Frederick. You weren’t even close.”

“All right, Frederick. My mistake. I promise you your tip will be more than generous, Christ, man, you can have every damn dollar I’m carrying—*just get me the fuck out of this car.*”

Please don’t take the Saviour’s name in vain, Reverend. I find it offensive. Now, you swing round so you’re sitting on the edge of the seat. Now, grab my wrist—”

“Why your”—

“Just do it, will you? Sir? That’s good see how simple that was? Now, on the count of three I’m going to pull out the seat until I’ve got you up and I need you to reach out with your free hand, that’s it, your left hand, and grab the top of the door, or you’ll just fall back onto the seat again. So on three. Ready?”

The Reverend nodded, this modest motion sufficient to strew beads of sweat around him. Frederick wasted no time. He counted out the numbers and on three he heaved the Reverend up out of his seat.

“Grab...the door,” he gasped.

The Reverend reached up and might have caught hold of the door if Caz hadn't found his hand first, and supplementing Frederick's strength hauled all 307 pounds of Reverend Kutchaver up out of the considerable depression he's made in the limo seat. Once they had the worst of the work done, he let go of his half of the burden, and Caz took the hint and did the same. The Reverend loosed a shrill shout and went down on his hands and knees in the litter of the rock shards at the edge of the highway.

“Welsford, you idiot. Where are you? Welsford, I fell down and I can't get up. *Welsford*. I will fire you, do you hear me, and make sure that no man of God will hire you if you live to be a hundred and fucking fifty.”

Welsford had willfully dawdled as he'd answered his employers' summons. The expression of blissful mischief on his face enough to make Caz laugh out loud.

“What’s so very amusing?” the Reverend demanded of Caz as Welsford fussed over him, brushing dirt from his suit with short little strokes of his hand.

“Stop it, stop it; you little faggot—”

Welsford froze. His hand was in mid-stroke, still making contact with the Reverend. Welsford removed it. As he did so he allowed his pinkie finger to lift its head and sniff the air.

“No big surprise there I’m sure,” Welsford said. “Though they would be surprised—all those people who talk about us behind our backs—to know that I am not a dingy queen who’s just dying to suck the Big Black Reverend’s weiner. No. I just love you for the things you say. Used to say. Oh I am bored with the anguish of it already. I mean, I’ve rehearsed every version. Especially this one. So....” He looked at Caz.... “I have a very good relationship with motels all over the country, thanks to my time with the good Reverend. I can get very good rates for the living, with breakfast thrown in. The dead lady will probably have to pass

the night away in the limo, but I would make it my business every night to lay her out on the floor, on a comforter of course, with bags of ice beneath her, to keep her sweet.”

“And for all this—” Harry said, “you require?”

“To put as many miles as possible between me and *that*—” He threw a nod in the Reverend’s direction, “as is humanly possible. No. I exaggerate. New York would be perfect. I’ve never been. Is it depraved?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Fuck....*yes!*”

“Then we’ll find you some!”

“Have you something special planned for the vehicle when you get there?”

the driver said, “Cause if not I’ll drive you and that way I won’t need to report a missing Limousine. This is a messy story. I mean, the blind guy, the dead old lady,

the demon, and the Tattoo King all in the same limo as the man they call Mister Jesus.”

“You’re kidding,” said Caz. This is the *real* T.V. Mister Jesus, the man who dials Home to Heaven and all that other crap? *Fuck*. Fuck Fuck Fuck. I believe in synchronicity. It’s too bloody perfect. Mister Jesus!”

“Is there a joke?” the Reverend wanted to k now.

“There is no joke. There’s just a punch line.”

“Which is?”

“You.”

“What?”

“It’s you, mate. You’re the punch-line. I mean, come on. Of all the limousines to come barreling down the highway with us waiting to be picked up...Mister Jesus himself. How crazy is that?”

“Either crazy or inevitable.” Harry said.

“Meaning.”

“Just that.”

“Okay,” said Caz. “So who’s driving?”

“I know the car,” Frederick said. “I’ll drive ‘til I get sleepy. Then you?”

“Sure. And Mr. Welsford?”

“Jamie.”

“Jamie, you’ll do the map-reading?”

“Don’t you dare abandon me,” the Reverend raged, “After all I’ve done for you.”

“You got your money’s worth,” Welsford said. “And I’d keep quiet about the details if I were you. There’s so much crap you don’t want me to go talking about.”

The Reverend began to curse Jamie Welsford in the most disgusting language, a spewing out of vitriol which once started seemed limitless. He was

still unleashing it when everyone had got back into the car, and Frederick drove off, leaving Mister Jesus in the South Dakota dust.

Five

Lucifer lay under a great weight of shattered stone, his body so loved by his creator, and so exquisitely knitted that it had remained whole beneath the fall of Hell's Heaven. The voices that stirred him from his comatose state were not human. They spoke in the fluting voices of his own tribe, of angels, through their debate, which he understood perfectly well despite the passage of centuries, was scarcely evidence that they were messengers of love.

“We should have been here to see this, Bathraiat. Somebody should have been keeping an eye on things and raised the alarm the moment the stone became unstable. I would have wanted a seat up front for this! Can you imagine the panic, and the screaming and the praying—”

“Demons don't pray, Thakai!”

“Of course they pray.”

“You're really a cretin, aren't you? Who the fuck would they pray to?”

“They had a leader. Some rebel. Shite! I don’t remember his name. You know me and names. He was a dick-head and everybody says so. And old Bitch Tits kicked him down here. He started some rebellion. Oh fuck you, Barthraiat, you know who I mean.”

“Lucifer.”

“That’s the one. Lucifer. They prayed to Lucifer.”

“Why?”

“Because didn’t he build this place? He did, didn’t he?”

“Who the fuck knows after all this time? Or cares, come to that.”

“I care.”

“You *care*? About somebody other than yourself? What kind of shite is that?”

“I’m not saying I care as in tears-and-lamentation care. I care that the fuckwit who had this come to pass—and it’s a big job. It took time—I’m saying

whoever that selfish fuckwit was he could have told a few friends and we all could have been sitting on the sidelines watching the slaughter, like civilized creatures. Instead we were standing around doing nothing in a state of bliss which is all very fine but— ”

“Shut up, will you?”

“I can have every —”

“Brother, *quiet*. You see what I see?”

“Blood and rock and—”

“— a dead human female.”

“Where?”

“Right there.”

“Lord above. And so young.”

The conversation ceased now, as the angels attention turned to practicalities.

Lucifer drew a deep breath, and the massive stone that pressed down on his body loosed a single loud crack as it split from end to end.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Oh come on, Bathraiat. Nobody’s going to see us. Everybody’s dead.

That’s why we’ve both got erections.”

“I want to turn her over.”

“Pervert.”

“It’s not about her hole. It’s her eyes.”

“Eyes are holes.”

“But you don’t fuck them.”

“I do.”

“Eye-holes?”

“Sure.”

“Well let me go first and then you can roll her back over and—”

“God. In. Heaven.”

“What?”

“We have company.”

The two angels looked up at Lucifer. Their natures were not capable of shame. What could perfect beings such as they ever have to be ashamed of? But their instincts, however coarsened by lack of use they were, told them this was no ordinary demon.

“It’s him.” Bathraiat said. “It’s Lucifer.”

“*That?* That’s him? He looks so —”

“Shut up, brother.” Bathraiat hissed. “Be best if you kept your opinions to yourself.”

“Why? Because of him? You’re not afraid of him are you? Fuck, you are, aren’t you. Look, you lost your —”

“Keep your opinions to yourself.”

“You know what? Fuck you.” Thakai said. “And her. You can have her, eyes and arse an’ all. And especially fuck you, Lucifer Almighty. We were having a fine time ‘til you showed up.”

Having said all he had on his mind, the angel started to turn his back on everything, but one word uttered by Lucifer — ‘Don’t.’ — was enough to stop the angel in mid-motion.

“What?” said Thakai.

“You are numbered amongst the dead, angel.” Lucifer replied. “Did you not know that?”

Thakai looked puzzled. “I haven’t been in any battle. So how can I be —”

“Dead.”

Lucifer’s reply wasn’t a question, it was a plain statement of fact. And the angel’s response was instantly worth the state of his being to Lucifer’s statement, as though his sudden devotion to the Fallen one was so overwhelming that he

couldn't bear to appear between what his Lord had stated as the truth and the facts in the matter. So thinking, the angel smiled in blissful adoration, and ceased.

The energies from which he had been nurtured, inheriting their willfulness and their lusts and their escalating confusions immediately began to vacate his brief being and go in search of new pastures to seed. The light in the warm flesh of his muscles flickered out, and the strength in Him perished at the same time. He curled in upon himself, his head becoming elongated and shrinking as he collapsed upon himself. If there was any pain in his demise, he let out no complaint. The vortex tightened and kept tightening until he had gone into completely, and it into itself, leaving empty air, and the other miscreant, whose skin was subtly imprinted with what looked like eyes, delineated in red with black irises.

"It's boring, day after day," the creature said. "I get to feeling that anything is preferable to an unrelieved state of bliss."

“Anything?”

“Yes. Even being —” he stopped, deliberately providing the executioner with his cue.

“Dead.” Lucifer said.

The other angel nodded, and curling upon himself, was unmade.

—

Lucifer climbed up into the tallest pinnacle of sky-stone and did his best to assess his wherabouts. But it was by no means easy. The deluge of fractured stone had effectively flattened every last topographical detail that might have helped him to work out where he was, and in which direction he had hope of making an unseen departure. He had no desire to find any others here he might discarder

numbered amongst the dead, as he had the two angels. He just wanted anonymity for a while; to sit in a quiet place and try to figure out what the unwanted resurrection that had been gifted to him signified.

But first he needed to get up and out of Hell's wasteland without drawing any further attention to himself. The number of angelic presences here was growing; he saw them stepping down out of the darkness all around him, eager to witness the ruins of Hell.

He took advantage of their morbidity, plotting a path of departure that would keep him away from the gristly sites which drew the angels' clammy attentions, and instead took him away through narrow cracks between the heaped stones. Once he'd put some distance between himself and the worst of it all, it was easy. He found a robe which was large enough for him to envelop himself, and keep the light in his flesh from attracting the gazes of the curious,

and without further ensnares (?) with his fellow angels he made his way up out of Hell, and into the world of men.

—

D'Amour sat in darkness. Whatever the time of day or night, darkness. Being blind in Hell had seemed scarcely real, but once he got back into New York, back into his apartment, and later his office, he began to comprehend how merciless the Hell Priest's final curse on him had been. He had lived with his eyes, existed in the eternal present. How he had to rely upon memory to find his way around his world, and memory took him out of the present and forced him to constantly be casting his mind back to the past. Damn the past! He'd never liked looking back, even when it was good things he was looking back on. He

wanted the now; to have work to do, and problems to solve. Over the next three weeks Caz was his life-line to sanity. They went to Harry's office together and ran through the jobs that had still been outstanding when he'd taken off in pursuit of Norma. There were a couple that Harry felt he'd virtually wrapped up, and would be able to do so with Caz to give him some help. But most of the jobs were simply not feasible, pursued in his blind state. He made the calls to all the clients in question, explaining that he had met with an accident and was unable to finish the job he'd accepted. Where there were advanced fees, he promised to return them.

"It feels like I just died," he said to Caz when he'd finished.

"Well you didn't —"

"—and I should be very grateful."

"Yeah."

“What do you want to do now? Start going through the files to figure out what you want to keep? You need to get out of the office by the end of next week.”

“I should have kept it another month.”

“And paid for it how?”

“All right, all right: I get it. Empty the office. Take my name off the door.

Give back the keys and go home!”

“That’s about it.”

He reached out and grabbed for the bottle of Scotch on his desk.

“Did you move my Scotch?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“You were slurring talking to your clients.”

“They’re not my problem any more, Caz, so hand over the fucking Scotch.”

“Why don’t we just go get something to put in our stomachs besides more Scotch?”

“Vodka. A good brandy, I like a good brandy. You know who I learned about brandy from?”

“Norma.”

“Yeah. That woman could drink all day and all night, just sitting in that chair, talking to the dead. I knew her —Jesus, it was twenty-three years, maybe twenty-four—and I don’t think I ever saw her eat.”

“Well you’re not Norma. You need food, Harry.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You must be.”

“I’m fine, Caz. Really. You go home. How’s the demon-lover by the way?”

“Obsessed with television. Mainly cartoons.”

“He’s young. He’ll grow out of it. Nobody’s made any stupid remarks about him?”

“No, but it’s only a matter of time. I think sooner or later we’re going to have to think about relocating.”

“San Francisco. Where a man and his demon can walk hand in hand.”

“We could do worse.”

—

Caz left, and Harry sat in the darkness, the window open a crack, and listened to the flux of the traffic, as the lights changed at the intersection. The

afternoon was slipping away; the passage of blue sky visible between the buildings would be steadily darkening. The traffic would be even heavier now, as the flow was swollen by people heading home, or out for dinner, their heads still buzzing with what the day had brought. Sure, work could be a pain in the ass, but it was purpose, and what was a life, any life, *his life*, without purpose.

“Nothing...” he muttered to himself, and uncorking the Scotch put the bottle to his lips. As he did so a glimmer of light appeared at the corner of his eye. He lowered the bottle, his heart suddenly beating quick time. He’d *seen* something. His sight wasn’t extinguished.

Very slowly, so as not to upset whatever healing was going on in his head, he turned towards whatever was coming back into view.

“Norma?”

“Harry.”

She looked healthy, more like the Norma Paine Harry had first met. Her body wasn't insubstantial, like some cheap Hollywood phantom. She was perfectly solid. But it was she and only she that had come into view.

"I can see you."

"And I hope to Christ I look a damn sight better than that sack of bones I died in."

"You do."

"Is that all I get? I come all this way to see you and—"

"All this way from where?"

"That's between me and...the Architect of my New Accommodations.

But I'm very comfortable where I am now. It was worth waiting for. And maybe doing a few good works along the way."

"Am I understanding this properly? What you did when you were alive has made your next life—"

“Heavenly.” Norma prompted. “Not in the literal sense, thank God. I’m still playing the human game, Harry. Just different rules. And I’m sorry you were disappointed seeing me —”

“It wasn’t *you* that I was disappointed with.”

“No, I know. You thought for a moment there you’d get your sight back.”

“Yeah.”

“And it was just me.”

“I didn’t mean to be rude, Norma. I’m just—”

“—getting thoroughly stewed, because this is the end of the world as you know it.”

“Yeah, well, that’s right, isn’t it?”

“Are you asking me of all people if you have a legitimate reason to drink?”

Breathing is a legitimate reason to drink, Harry. Go on. Drink up. Yeah, that’s it.

If you do the job properly you’ll never have to buy another bottle of Scotch, I

swear. People are very generous I found. More than you'd think. And the dead have a way of nudging the living, especially when they're related. They whisper so quickly it's like a thought.

“Go give a blind man called Harry D'Amour a bottle of single malt. You'll never have to—”

“Wait!”

“—buy another bottle—”

“Norma! I said wait.”

“—of liquor—”

“You said job.”

“Did I?”

“Right after you said I should drink up.”

“I just assumed—”

“What job?”

“Mine, Harry.”

“Oh no, no, I couldn’t—”

“Well somebody’s got to do it Harry. It’s important work.”

“There must be others doing it besides you.”

“Of course. But I had a few special tips of my own which I want to pass on. You know do’s and donts when you’re dealing with the recently deceased. I don’t want to miss the chance to pass along things I learned, you know, to my successor.”

“Well you must have had somebody in mind.”

“Yes, of course: you. Of course, I thought I’d be dying of natural causes at a hundred and one. That’s the age my mother died. And my grandmother. So I was pretty damn certain I’d go at the same age, by which time I would have taught you all my little tricks, you know, for getting the dead to move on. And you’d just take over.”

“When were you going to share all this with me?” Harry asked her, tapping the open bottle against his chair as he did so.

“When you got to be sixty-five or so.”

“Really.”

“I figured you’d be ready for a job which was a bit easier on your bones than some of the things you’ve got involved with.”

“Seldom by choice.” Harry said, taking a quick hit of the Scotch. “I would have been perfectly happy just being a detective. I didn’t ask for any of the metaphysical stuff.”

“That’s exactly the point, Harry.”

“How? Exactly?”

“Just like you said, you didn’t choose. The job chose you. Same thing here. You didn’t choose to be blind—”

“Christ no.”

“—and I didn’t chose to be dead.”

“Oh that’s very neat, very tricky. But no Norma.”

“No, what?”

“You can’t play the Death Norma. Not with me. Anyone else but me. We can’t both know too much about the second Moment, Death isn’t terrible. The fear of it? Yes, that’s vile. All fear is. But Death. Puh!”

“You’re missing the point, Harry. I’m talking about saving people who were kicked off into the Hereafter a little too suddenly and they’re wandering around half crazy, trying to figure out what in the name of sweet Jesus they’re supposed to do now. And you’re their only hope. You take away the fear. Maybe not all of it, but enough to make a difference.

“It’s not something I can picture myself doing, Norma. I don’t want to be sitting in your old—”

“You wouldn’t be sitting in my old apartment. You’d be in the penthouse, which has a panoramic view of the city.”

“Much use that’d be.”

“You’d see them from a distance. Your clients. And they’ll find you more easily. I should have moved up there long ago, I’ve owned it for years.”

“How the hell did you get the money to buy a penthouse?”

“I got a lot of money given me over the years, Harry. All from relatives of dead folks I helped, who heard what I’d done for their family members, and wanted to say thank you. Almost all of the rest of the money is invested but you do what you want with it. I passed it all down the line to you.”

“Now I feel like a shit.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re being so generous, and I’d like to say yes, but I just can’t see myself sitting all night in a chair redirecting the dead.”

“You think it’s too easy? You’d get bored.”

“No, I think exactly the opposite. I’d crack, because it’s too damn hard. I’ve seen you completely worn down by other people’s anguish. All that human misery, and you up to your neck in it.”

“Just try it. See if you could just hold the fort for a year or two, ‘til I find a replacement for you. You might find that all those little boxes you’ve got at the back of your head, where you’ve locked away the very dark stuff—”

“How do you know about my boxes?”

“You told me all about them when we’d both had too much brandy, a long time ago. Why, did you toss them out?”

“No, I still got the boxes. And plenty of room to put really bad shit away where I never need to look at it again. So, I guess, if I were to do this—”

“Think about it then, Harry. And while you’re thinking open up your blinds and look down.”

“I don’t need to look at the street.”

“Just do it for me. Please.”

Harry turned his chair around, and stood up, reaching with uncertain fingers for the cords of the antiquated Venetian blinds, which were knotted and truculent even when he’d had eyes to help him separate them. Today he was lucky. His fingers found the right cords and he started to hoist the blinds up. As he did so Norma said:

“I popped your ghost-sight cherry when I came in here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you weren’t ready to see the dead so they stayed out of sight.

Until I got here and you looked straight at me, no problem. That ill have changed a lot of things for you.”

“Such as?”

“Take a look.”

Harry gave up tugging on the cords, and reached down to lift the blinds with his hand. He looked down at the street, as Norma had requested.

“They’re everywhere.”

“Of course.”

“Most of them just walking along like regular folks.”

“That’s because that’s what they are, Harry. Regular folks, doing their damndest to have a Second Moment that was worth the pain of living for.”

“Whoa, there’s one guy just taken off, being thrown around by the wind. Except there isn’t any!”

“There is for him.”

“What’s his problem? Oh, there’s another...Blowing in the opposite direction. Oh fuck, and there are five of them just sitting high up—”

“Does it matter what it is? A roof, a window-ledge, a bill-board?”

“Why would that matter? No, I’m trying to figure out what they’re arguing about? God, mainly, yeah? I mean they’re probably wondering why they haven’t been given instructions.”

“Why’s that?”

“Three dead middle-aged, middle-class, middle-brow types like them, they took orders all their lives. At work, from bosses and spouses. Oh shit, one of them’s losing his grip. The wind’s got him. He doesn’t look happy,” Harry raised his window six or seven inches, and squatted down in front of it.”

“I can hear him, Norma. Oh God, listen to him! *Do* something will you? Please.”

“You’ll take the penthouse?”

“Is that a bribe?”

“Harry. Shame on you for even thinking it. I’m only doing what any good person would do, if they had the means. Taking away the fear.”

The window-frame rattled for a moment then it opened wide, and as the glass stopped shaking Norma stood her spirit on the wind that had thrown the window up, and was out, moving with uncanny ease through the darkness of Harry’s living world, out towards the helpless phantom. The moment her hand touched his shoulder his chaotic flight became calmer, and within thirty seconds they were descending to street level together, with the ease of friends walking down familiar stairs.

Norma didn’t come to visit Harry again that night. She knew him so well. All she’d needed to do was put the thoughts in Harry’s head, just as she had. His own spirit would do the rest; the deathless Harry, joined to the world, wouldn’t let him turn his back on the chance to drive out some fear. He’d say yes to it full of doubts, but yes he would say.

Six

The stone sky had broken into three massive parts as far as the Hell Priest could discern. Their **milenius** were laced with innumerable fractures, which instantly began to open up, shedding pebbles no larger than a hand and slabs big enough to be minor moons. Mingled amongst the detrituins—even in its final seconds—close to the lake, where it had hoped to find sanctuary, were the remains of the ————. It had lived a legendary span even before Lucifer walked the landscape he'd been given from end to end, and had stood on the shores of the lake, and called the creature forth. Now those countless years had caught up with it, and its corpse was rotting with monstrous speed, the stink of it mingling with the smell of rotted squid and that of rotting goat.

The stench of purification sickened him so much that he forced his bruised and cracked body to pick up its pace, and deliver him up over the ridge of broken stone that marked one of the major divisions in the stone. Once he reached the top he was not only free of the stink, but had an expanse of virtually flat stone ahead of him, which would make the journey easier.

He was traveling over the remains of the city, he sensed; his instinct confirmed when he came upon a split in the rock, which was barely a crack at one end and yawned to the distance of perhaps a quarter mile at the other. He walked towards the narrow end of the fissure while peering down into its depths. There wasn't enough light, even for one whose eyes were as sensitive as his, to make out anything below; at least not until several planes of yellow flame burst from the crevice and illuminated the rubble littered below. Here were the rich demon's houses in the city: Sackville Street, Waterlee Street, the Crawley Crescent, with its perfect sweep of white marble houses that had once faced out

towards an ancient stand of Thriasacat trees to which legend attached the notion that should they ever ail, then the city would also ail. And should they die, so then would the city. There was proof, lying crushed at the bottom of the fissure, and lit by the same fire that had first illuminated the depths. He could see several Thriasacat branches, stripped of foliage and split, the sweet swell of their sap all that had survived of them.

The Hell Priest was not for the most part superstitious, but there were a few cases that crossed the boundaries of his distrust and had become a profound part of his understanding of the world. The legend of the Thriasacat Trees; fates being tied to that of the city itself was one such case; and had here been proved true. Strange to say—given that he'd witnessed the stone falling, and known nothing beneath it could have survived—he had held on to the remote idea that the stand of Thriasacat Trees would have escaped by some miracle. But no. The sky had killed everything.

And he had done this. Without his ambitious **rise** there would have been no need to raise Lucifer against him. And if Lucifer had stayed asleep in death, there would still be a stone in the sky. So this was of his making, this silence, this death. Perhaps, he thought as he went, it was what he had wanted all along. Yes, yes it was. Of course it was!

By the time he came to the edge of the great block of stone which covered the city, he could see the vague outline of his destination, the fortress, which stood, scarcely entire (blocks of sky, crumplings from the edge of the huge portion of the stone, had brought down perhaps a third of it) but still recognizable. If he was lucky, he would find his own cell intact. It would make things so much easier if that proved the case.

Just as Norma had known, Harry said yes to taking on Norma's job, and within five days of the conversation in his office he was installed in what Caz described to him as a perfect place to live, even without the views. He and Murmuzian spent two days bringing all the working televisions up from Norma's apartment, and arranging them in the single room which formed the upper level of the duplex. All this was expedited by her lawyer, Jeffrey Font, whom Harry had never met, but Norma had insisted he always carry, because in her words: 'he's been instructed to deal with any problems that might arise because of the work I do, and ask no questions.' Font was black, bald and, in Caz's description to Harry, 'was better dressed than anyone he'd ever met.'

It was not absolutely true that he asked no questions, but they were simple enquiries about how soon Harry wanted to move into the penthouse, and whether he needed somebody to help him clear out his office. He organized for

his sister to come over and clean Norma up a little before her body was discreetly removed to a mortuary and hence, as quickly as possible, to cremation.

“Shall we all agree that she died in her sleep, of any number of maladies that come along in old age?”

“Agreed,” said Harry

“Not that anybody’s ever going to ask you.”

“She had all this set up then?”

“Yes, more or less. She specifies in her will that the penthouse duplex is to go to you, Mr. D’Amour, and most of the money she had in the bank goes to you too, which will make you a millionaire several times over.”

“Where did she get that kind of money?”

“Do you want me to tell you?” Font replied, “Or just leave it a mystery?”

“I’m over the mystery game,” Harry said, “I’d like to know.”

“Well, she had two sources of income. One was this building, which her father owned — Norma said he won it in a poker game, but I don’t know how reliable that is — and because the building has a certain reputation, there’s a lot of people who are willing to pay a high price to rent a place here. Of course you pay staff to take care of the building, and Norma was very insistent that the high standards be maintained.”

“Of course.”

“And her other source of income was of course her visitors. The dead were often very grateful for her help. And several of them found ways to channel considerable sums of money to Norma, by way of family. I think if people really knew how much influence the dead have on the living they’d be astonished.

Well, Mr. D’Amour, I’ll have papers for you to sign by Friday noon.

“Shall I come by your office?”

“I wouldn’t inconvenience you in any way, with your new circumstances.”

“You can say it, Mr. Font.”

“Yes, of course. With your blindness things must be a little difficult.”

“I can still get into a cab and get out again.”

“Of course, of course. Come by the office then, noon on Friday.”

“I’ll be there.”

—

While the Cenobite trekked the remains of Hell, days passing uncounted as he forced his body on, though with every step he took the prospect of taking just one more, never mind the thousands beyond that if he wanted to reach the

fortress, became harder to think about, and Harry slowly came to peace with the idea that his task in life was indeed intended to be that of a man who helped the lost dead to find their road to redemption, Lucifer came up into the world, his light turned down so that it only glimmered in his eyes and throat, and with an unerring sense of how the lines of power were laid, and which was best to follow if he wanted to get into the heart of the human story, the way he had so often in the early days. And the lines converged, somewhere in the Dakotas, where he'd lingered for two days to sit in on the trial of a man who'd murdered several children in the region, and partaken of their flesh. There was nothing new about the spectacle. The parents of the dead children sitting in the court, pouring out wordless venom towards the deceased as in his madness he sought to defend himself, slabs of undigested legal jargon emptying suddenly into what Lucifer thought beautiful expressions of his pursuit of bliss through the ingesting of innocence. Outside the courthouse demonstrators threw makeshift nooses over

the branches of the sycamores that grew amid the square. Lucifer skipped unnoticed through the crowd, pausing to look up at the churning trees, their boughs creaking in the gusting wind, which snatched away fall's early deaths.

Then he on his way again, following the flow of energies that seeped up out of the ground. He knew already what city awaited him at the end of his journey. He'd seen its name many times in the newspapers he plucked out of trash cans, or out from under the arm of some human being. New York, it was called, and all that he'd read about it made it seem the greatest city in the known world; somewhere he could linger awhile, and taste the times. For long distances, he walked, because the line did not lie beside a highway. When it did he never waited long for a ride. A woman, driving alone picked him up when he was still three hundred miles from his destination. She said her name was Alice Morrow. They talked a little, of nothing significant, then lapsed into silence. Ten minutes passed. Then Alice said:

“I had a night-light when I was little, which I kept beside my bed to make sure the Bogey-Man didn’t get me. Your eyes have the same light in them. I swear.”

They stopped at a motel for one night, Alice paying for his room and for food. He ate pizza. Thereafter, it would be all he ever ate. In the night, he lay naked on his bed, and waited for her. She did not come immediately, but after two hours she knocked at his door and said something about wanting to see his eyes in the dark. Alice and he had sexual **congress** six times before dawn, and by the fifth she was in love with him. In the middle of the next day she asked him if he had a place to stay in New York, and when he told her no she seemed happy, as if this confirmed the rightness of what she felt.

They arrived in New York at one in the morning; the city an astonishment to Lucifer. Alice checked them into a hotel, promising that tomorrow she would take him out and buy him some good clothes. The long

drive had exhausted her, but sleep would not come. She went to his room, where he was waiting; twin night-lights flickering in his head.

“Who are you?” she asked him.

“Nobody yet,” he replied very quietly.

—

The Cenobite was climbing the steps to the fortress, which were littered with pieces of stone, but passable, when a shock wave passed through the air and ground. He turned to see bright bursts of gold and scarlet flame spouting from the fissures in the stone that had demolished the city, the force of the eruptions sufficient to make the fissures gape, which unleashed still greater torrents of fire.

He watched for a little time and returned to his climb, his long thin shadow, thrown by fires, preceding him to the top step. He was two steps shy of reaching the top himself when a second shock-wave, much more violent than the first shock, which had announced the beginning of the spectacle behind him. This one, he knew, even before he turned to witness the scene for himself, marked its conclusion. The tremors didn't die away. They steadily became more powerful.

Very cautiously the Cenobite took a backward step, while keeping his eyes on the flame. The vista of stone, smoke and tremors were changing in nature, the shocks giving way to tidal motions that had the scale of tsunamis.

The second backward step, which brought the Hell Priest to the end of his ascent, also brought a wave that threw him off his feet, the cracked slab of the threshold dropping away beneath him into the trough of the wave, making his fall all the longer. The bones of his face cracked in a dozen places, and then sudden rush of pain, which had been such a reliable source of pleasure in years

long lost, was now only agony. His system rebelled. His body was marked by its own tsunamis, driving deep into the cankerous pit of its stomach, and deeper still, into its gut, where rot turned to shards of stone. It was as if his body was attempting to turn itself inside out, as it dug for a greater hold upon its own gut. He loosed a sound that was part belch, part sob — and then vomited, a rush of blood that was nearly black and as thick s phlegm ——— propelled against the stone. Through the noise of its splattering he heard a far deeper sound, and some fraction of him that was able, even in the midst of this violent decay, to assess circumstances with detachment thought: *that's the end beginning, and I can't even raise my broken head to be its witness. There's only me. And I don't see it*

—

—*oh, the fraction murmured to itself, you're unwitnessed too. All this cruelty heaped upon my undeserving shoulders, and it will be as though it never happened.*

His body continued its brutal convulsions, but he thought through it. That one sight of consequence, his own torment, came and went unwitnessed was no reason to throw all hope of order aside, and give was to the rule of a blank slate.

The violence of his vomiting left him powerless to control his body, his buttered face so distrusted by his scream that his lips tore like wet paper. There was nothing left in him now except his last poor hope of willing his eyes to open, so he might look and see whatever final vision Hell had for him.

He drew every last mote of will from the furrows of his collapsing body and gathered them, and turned them to a single purpose.

"I want to open my eyes." He ordered himself. *"One last time, I WANT TO SEE."*

Reluctantly, his body obeyed him. He unstuck his lids, sealed with his grey glue of his dissolving flesh, and focused his eyes on whatever was in front of

them. It was edge of the threshold that first sharp. He demanded of his eyes that they look further, beyond the steps he climbed, further, further —

Finally, he had the whole panorama in view: the flames emptying to higher a point than ever, as the motion in the ground put new stresses on the stone.

He had been watching, *witnessing*, for just a few seconds, when the tidal shifts in the ground abruptly ceased, the thunderings that accompanied them ceasing at the same instant.

The Hell Priest's pulse quickened in anticipation of whatever lay on the far side of this silence. It came soon enough. A simple sound, as of some immense blow struck in the tormented ground. It caused the pieces of the stone that had crushed the city to be lifted off their bed of rubble, their vast weight effortlessly thrown up by the power unleashed in that single blow. At the top of their ascent they seemed to pause for a beat. Then they dropped, their magnitude so great that

the ground upon which the city had been raised simply cracked as the stones, bearing the city's remains beneath him, started its descent, the fires found the motherload of whatever fuel had fed them, and geysers of flame leapt so high they would have licked the sky if it had still been there.

The burst of light illuminated the cataclysm below with brutal clarity. But there was nothing down there left to witness. Just the stones falling away with the abyss. The Cenobite looked at the fire instead, and in that instant the fire looked back at him.

He had been witnessed. It was enough. His eyelids closed, buckled, the bone so fragile it shattered under his little weight as he dropped to the bloody threshold. His last breath had already left him. Now life did the same.

—

Besides Norma's impressive television collection the only other items Harry had inherited from Norma's apartment were the many talismans and charms that she accrued doing during her years as New York's Queen of the Dead, almost all of them sent to her, most with simple notes from the living thanking her for the help that she had given to a spouse, or a sibling, or most distressing of all, a child. Sometimes words of thanks were accompanied by an explanation of how the dead had given their loved ones instructions concerning these gifts. Most often they came in dreams, from which the receiver often woke with what they'd just experienced perfectly remembered, and possessed of an unshakable certainty that it was entirely real; sometimes the instruction came in séances, sometimes — though rarely — in waking visitations from the departed.

As it had been Harry who had read the letters to Norma, he was profoundly respectful of how much love and gratitude had been poured into the gifts.

They were charged with all the power of those feelings, making them potent protectors. Not a single one was discarded; even the smallest and simplest of gifts, a drawing a six-year-old girl had made on the day before her death, a collage, glued on cardboard, in which a black and white picture of a street was displayed with tiny fragments of colour, meticulously torn from a magazine; a painted clay sculpture of a naked man with a gold halo and silver sword, driving his blade into a blue serpent with a human face and a forked orange tongue.

Murmuzian had declared his deep-seated antipathy towards the talismans when Caz had first brought him to Norma's apartment, saves of finger-long thorns erupting from his body, cutting through his skin.

"I guess there's some things you can't change," he said as he retreated into the hallway.

“I wouldn’t want you to,” Caz said. He reached up to unhook the talisman above the door, then paused to look at his lover again. “Am I really safe from you?” he asked.

“I don’t know, are you?”

“Thank Christ you didn’t say yes,” Caz replied, grinning.

—

With so much to be moved from Harry’s apartment and office, Caz knew the task would take several weeks if it was to be left to Murmuzian and himself. So he talked it over with Harry and asked if he could bring some extra muscle to get the job done quickly, so that he could open up his store again and start

earning some money. Harry had no problem with this; he only asked that Caz be the one to box up and carry the contents of the two deep bottom drawers to right and left of his chair.

“What have you got in there that’s so special.”

“Just a few keep-sakes, you know. Souvenirs from various scrapes I got into. I don’t want anybody but you to deal with all the stuff in those drawers, okay? Now you’ve got some people in mind to help with the move?”

“Yeah. There’s a young woman you met when I was working on a large design on her back.”

“The piece with the Samurai and the Demon?”

“That’s the one.”

“She had a long fancy name.”

“She’s a long fancy lady: Sarah Dequincey Ferrell.”

“Will she come?”

“I haven’t asked her yet. Then there’s a couple of my....my....”

“Fuck buddies?”

“Ex-fuck buddies.”

“Really? So Murmuzian’s made an honest man of you?”

“Nineteen days and counting.”

“How did you figure out nineteen days? How long were we in Hell?”

“It’s all guesswork,” Caz said, “But five days, six days.”

“That long?”

“You think a lot less?”

“I don’t really know,” Harry said. “Sometimes I think the whole damn thing went by in a heart-beat. Other times I think we’re still there.”

“What?”

“And all this is some dream we’ve all taken refuge in.”

“No,” Caz said. “Absolutely not. I know when I’m dreaming, and I’m not.

Why the hell are you tormenting yourself with these damn-fool ideas Harry?”

“I’ll tell you why. I didn’t realize til I lost my eyes that I used the real world like a rock, to tie my head to.”

Caz chuckled. “Nice image, Harry.”

“Well, it’s right. I don’t have the same grip on reality, Caz. It’s chaos in here.” He tapped his temple.

“I think the sooner we get you in Norma’s chair, working again—”

“It won’t be the same.”

“Of course it won’t. It’s a completely different gig. But you can still do what you do best, which is helping people. Do you want us to set the Big Room up for tonight?”

“No! No. Really, no. I want all my stuff here first. That’s not crazy is it?”

“No, Harry,” Caz said, putting his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Once and for all. You are not, have never, nor ever will be, crazy. A little on the chaotic side, sure. But not crazy.”

“Okay.”

“Can we get back to business?”

“Your fuck buddies.”

“Yeah. Armando Fernandez and Ryan Campbell; very trustworthy, both of them. I’ve got work on all three of them, and I always feel I know people better after I’ve got a piece on them.”

“So bring them in. Let’s get this move over, so I can go sit in Norma’s chair, and....and....you know...”

“Begin.”

“Yeah.”

—

The night before the big move was to get underway, Caz took Sarah, Armando, and Ryan out to his favorite bar, which was a two-room dive populated by lavishly beautiful Puerto Rican transvestites and their pool-playing, hard-drinking boyfriends. In such an atmosphere, he hoped, the things he'd be talking to Sarah, Armando and Ryan about might seem, perhaps, a little less outlandish. He didn't intend to tell them about the journey to Hell and back, that begged too many questions. He simply wanted to alert them to the fact that the life of his best friend Harry had been repeatedly troubled by supernatural forces, and that they would be handling photographs, drawings, and reports about events that had been both obscenely violent and brutally sexual, sometimes in the same act.

Armando started to rub the crucifix around his thumb. "It is all safe?" he said.

"Safe how?"

"Well I was always taught that you have a photograph of a bad thing then you have a piece of that thing."

"Most of the time you'll just be moving boxes, Armando, and you won't even know what's in them."

"Are they sealed? You know, taped up. These boxes."

"No, but that's a quick fix. I'll tape up the ones you'll be carrying. Is that okay."

"Yes, of course it's okay," Ryan replied. "They're just old photographs, Mandy. Of course if your crucifix starts to spin and the little man on it talks dirty we'll leave that box for you, Caz."

“Wait, wait, wait!” Sarah protested, “Before you go hiding away all the good stuff I need to see it. I don’t care how filthy and degrading to women men or donkeys it is. I want to see all of it.”

“You don’t mean that,” Armando said. “It’s bad for you.”

“Oh now I *know* I’m on to something tasty. *It’s bad for you!*” That’s always a good sign. Well, Caz? I’ll work twice as hard—”

“You don’t have to do that. If you want to see some of the pictures, I don’t see why not. Just don’t blame me if some of them mess with your head.”

“Mess away!” Sarah said, “I’m ready to get my head messed with. I’ve been ten years since I was the Acid Queen of Brooklyn Heights.”

The conversation dissolved into laughter which Caz even nudged Armando into sharing. The evening had been such a success that the following morning felt like cruel and unusual punishment, so Caz suggested that the work be postponed for a day, and that they should begin at nine tomorrow.

“Make it ten-thirty and you have a deal,” said Ryan.

“How about ten? No takers. Okay, ten-thirty.”

Despite the number of tequila shots they'd all consumed at the bar, Caz didn't take lightly his responsibilities to Armando. Harry had said once that little if anything was as personal as a man's fears. They had to be respected. He was surprised, once he took a close look at the rooms with Armando's eyes, so to speak, to see how many extremely distressing pictures were lying in plain sight. Even Sarah, with all her curiosity, would not find any of these images edifying. They were artless reports of an abomination. Nothing less; but certainly nothing more.

He brought all the problematic material into Harry's office, and when Sarah arrived with Armando, and Ryan half an hour later, he put them to work in the storeroom next door, with the duty of packing up in boxes everything on the cluttered shelves and in the cabinets. The room was L-shaped, with the

portion that wasn't visible from the office abandoned to chaos by Harry several years before. Most of it, Harry had admitted to Caz, was boxes of old office supplies, which he'd intended for his secretary back in the day when he'd still believed his life was going to be a painless lucrative round of divorce cases and insurance investigations.

They worked with the door between the two room open a crack, but there was very little conversation. Sarah, Armando and Ryan were working up a sweat in the L-shaped room, shifting boxes that were indeed packed with office supplies that told their own melancholy story. Only one item was slipped through to Caz.

"Take a look at this. There's nine or ten boxes of them," Sarah said, passing Caz a Christmas card. If there was any sadder proof of Harry's high hopes for his business it was this slickly painted card with an innocuous painting of pine-trees and snow by moonlight, and inside a printed message wishing the recipient: 'The

Best Christmas 'til Next Christmas! Seasons' Greetings from the D'Amour

Detective Agency.'

Caz laughed. "He never sent me one of these."

"What's the joke?"

Caz turned. Harry was opening the door.

"Hey, Harry. What brings you down here?"

"The joke?"

"Just talking about Christmas," Caz replied, a little lamely. He put the card down on Harry's desk. "It wasn't important."

"Everybody okay?"

"Yeah. You're all okay in there?"

Sarah opened the door. "We're sweaty and dusty and ready for something to eat, but we're getting through it."

“Shall I order Chinese? Or there’s a good Thai place a few blocks over that delivers? Or pizza?”

“I vote Thai food.” Armando yelled through from the storage room.

“Thai’s fine with me,” Sarah said. “Will you get some Thai beer. We’ve got powerful thirsts.”

“Not a problem,” Harry said. “Is the phone still in the same place?”

“You want to sit down and do it?”

“No, Caz. Standing’s fine. I’m blind, not crippled.”

Harry made a confident move towards the desk, avoiding with uncanny ease the heaped up files that littered his path. He got to his chair, and sank down in it.

“You know this is a damn comfortable chair. Will you put it by the window for me, Caz?”

“You mean in the Big Room? In place of Norma’s chair?”

“Yeah.”

“Done.”

Harry slid the chair towards his desk and picked up the phone, dialing the number from memory.

“I’m just going to order a bunch of things they do really well. Is that okay?”

“Ryan doesn’t like stuff too spicy,” Armando said. “Right, Ryan?”

There was a grunt from Ryan.

“Are you okay back there, Ryan?”

“Yeah. Just...concentrating.”

“On what?”

“Pad Thai and beer. Oh, and Coconut Milk Soup. Nothing too spicy.”

“Already noted,” Harry said. “Damn.” He put the phone down. “Dialed the wrong number.”

He pulled the phone over so it was right in front of him, and ran his fingers over the buttons. “Why the hell did I do that?”

“Did you come over to eat with us?”

Harry just shook his head. “I just had a bad feeling.”

“About?”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re all fine.”

“Just hungry,” Sarah remarked.

“I’m dialing as fast as I —”

He stopped.

“You need me to check the number?” Caz said.

“Listen,” Harry murmured. “You hear that?”

“What?”

“That tinkling music.” Harry stood up, dropping the receiver on the desk beside the phone. “You don’t hear it, Caz?” He was moving around the other side

of the desk towards the stockroom door, kicking over several piles of paperwork in his haste. Sarah opened the door as wide as she could, squashing the garbage behind it against the wall.

“Be careful,” she said to Harry. “The floor’s covered —”

Too late. Harry’s foot caught on one of the boxes and he stumbled forward, dropping onto his hands and knees in the litter of Christmas cards that had spilled from the he’d kicked.

“Oh God, Harry,” Sarah said, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

He reached out to his right, memory guiding his fingers to the handle of the top drawer of the much dented filing cabinet. The drawer was unlocked, however, and empty. It slid out, and Harry would have hit the floor a second time if Sarah hadn’t thrown her weight against the drawer and slammed it closed.

There was still a moment, while Harry regained his equilibrium. The music was

still playing; the sticky-sweet little cycle of melody quickening like a madhouse waltz.

“Where’s Ryan?” Harry said.

“He’s right here,” Armando told him. Armando was talking from the corner of the room, Harry guessed, a vantage point from which he could have both Harry and Ryan in view. The far end of the room was the most chaotic. Four black plastic garbage bags, disgorged notes without files and files without notes; discarded cameras had been thrown in a box along with hundreds of rolls of exposed but undeveloped film. And buried behind all this chaos, a few items that Harry had felt obliged to hang on to, but hadn’t wanted to think about every day because they had unpleasant associations; toxic souvenirs of his journeys to the end of the world and his wits.

He quietly cursed himself for not having go this thoughts sufficiently focused as to have realized the danger that was buried amongst the trash here. A

scalpel he'd confiscated from a demon who'd caused mischief by passing itself off as a cut-prive plastic surgeon; some keepsakes from a demonic casino he had closed. And of course the box. Lemandhand's infernal masterpiece; a puzzle box, of immense intricacy, its solving by human hand a means to open a doorway to Hell.

Harry had cautiously found his way around the corner now. The music that the box was producing was to enrapture the man who was in the midst of opening it.

"Ryan?" he said. "I know what you've found I'm sure it's fun to play with but you need to put it down. It's not yours, Ryan."

Ryan actually spoke up now, in defense of his ownership.

"I found it amongst the trash. We would throw it into a dumpster with all the other crap. You don't want it and it knows. That's why it jumped into my hands. I swear —"

“I believe you,” Harry said as calmly as he could. “But it’s still my property, Ryan.”

“You heard Harry,” Caz said. He’d come to the spot just behind Harry’s left shoulder where he’d reliably been throughout the march through Hell.

“Don’t make this more difficult than it needs to be,” Caz went on. “Just hand over the fucking box. It’s his.”

“I don’t see his name on it.” Ryan replied. “There’s something like hieroglyphics —”

“It’s Tenfelssprache.” Harry said.

“What the fuck’s that?”

“It’s German. The guy who decided it all was a man in Hamburg. He’s dead now. But he named the code before he died.”

“Tenfelssprache.” Caz said.

“Devilspeak.”

“Oh nice.”

“And what does it say?”

“Give me the box back and I’ll tell you.”

“No.” Ryan said matter-of-factly. “A few little lights came out like fireflies.

There’s going to be more; a lot more.”

“Ryan, listen to yourself,” Caz said. He gripped on Harry’s shoulder for a moment as he spoke, signaling that he was about to make a move. “How could you know anything like that?”

“Maybe I know more Tenfelssprache than you thought.”

“Bullshit.” Caz moved suddenly and Harry heard a scuffle, then a pained shot from Ryan, and the source of the lunatic melody dropped to the floor and rolled away from the struggle, ending up close to Harry’s feet.

He dropped down onto his haunches, his clammy-palmed hands locating it instantly. As he picked it up, Ryan yelled:

“That’s mine you thieving fuck!”

“Get back, Harry!” Caz yelled.

Harry turned, but Ryan reached out and grabbed his arm, his fingernails digging deeply enough through shirt and skin to make Harry bleed. He pulled away, Ryan’s nails gorging him in the process, and stumbled in what he hoped was the right direction.

“Armando?”

“No, he’s gone,” Sarah said. “Soon as you said Tuffelsprink or whatever it was. Where do you want to go?”

“Into the office.” It was only four steps to the door; five and they were through it. Behind them Ryan was still cursing Harry but he put it out of his head, and concentrated on the matter in hand. The puzzle no longer needed human agency in its solving. It was doing that for itself, opening in Harry’s hands as he walked with it, its tune scratching at the back of his skull to get in there and

cause some trouble the way it had with Ryan. It had got the little door of curved bone open back there, just a crack, and Harry felt the stream of Tenfelssprache that had made Ryan crazy wind its way into his head. At its root were the remnants of angelic speech, which had risen into music when their passions were fired. But the words had been poisoned, the music corrupted. What was coursing into Harry's head was sewer filth, scummy with plague and despair. He wanted it out.

“Desk?” he said to Sarah.

“I’m still cleaning it.”

“One sweep, Sarah. Just to clear it all off. Quickly!”

Sarah caught the urgency in Harry's voice, and she did as he'd said, sweeping whatever papers and photographs Caz had been organizing back into the chaos underfoot. The noise quickened Harry's ear. He heard the sound of Armando fervently praying outside in the hallway:

“dejada solo. Inspirado con esta confianz a, nostros giramos a usted, la

Virgen, O de Virgels, nvestra Madre—”(that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided. Inspired with this confidence, we turn to you, O Virgin of virgins, our Mother—”)

And from every corner of the room, and from the boards beneath the threadbare carpet, a ragged litany growls and creaks as the fabric of the old building was tested by the mechanisms that the solving of the puzzle had activated. Somewhere in the no names’ land between crawl-space and dream-space, where the brute simplicity of brick and timber lost faith in itself, and another law slid over the threshold.

Harry carefully set the box down on his old desk. He’d spent much of his adult life behind it, too much time wasted puzzling over the twin mysteries of cruelty and grace. Now all that was old news. The only puzzle left that mattered

had finished solving itself, right there on his desk. The music had slowed again, the pitch dropping to a guttural mutter.

What happened next was candy for the sighted, but it drew an admiring:

“Fuck, look at that,” from Sarah.

“What?”

“Light, coming out of the top of the puzzle. Going straight up. And bright.

Fuck.”

“Look away.”

“As if. Oh...wait no.....it’s dropping. The light’s dropping.”

“Keep clear of it.”

“It’s nowhere near either of us. It’s sliding down onto the wall where your big map of New York is pinned up. Now its stopped.”

“Describe it.”

“It’s just a long narrow line of light. One end at the bottom of the wall, the other—”

“Six feet up.”

“A bit higher maybe. What **is** this?”

“A door. Open just a crack.”

“I see it,” Sarah said. “Look at that.”

“Caz!”

“I’m right here,” Caz said. He was at the door between the rooms.

“Have you got Ryan?”

“More or less.”

“So get him out of here. Everybody out.”

“I want to watch.”

“Trust me, you don’t.”

“What’s going on?” Caz said.

“Hell. Coming, ready or not.”

“No, fuck this. We did our time.”

“I don’t think it works like that.”

“Sarah, take Ryan. I’m staying here with Harry.”

“No.”

“For fuck’s sake Harry, *you’re blind*. You’ve got to accept some help, or it’s going to be over before it’s begun.”

Two, three, four beats without a reply from Harry. Finally he said:

“Stay then. You take Ryan, Sarah.”

“She’s already taken him, Harry. It’s just you, me and the door.”

“What’s going on through there?”

“The light’s dying away. It got really bright for a few seconds and now just fading. Maybe you stopped it before it got going?”

“No, Caz. It’s just dark on the other side, that’s all.”

“Fuck.”

The solid structure of the room didn't greet the door's defiant appearance in its midst without complaint. Bricks, forced askew to accommodate the trespassing door, had cracked from top to bottom, and now ground their broken halves together. Black lightning fractures crossed the ceiling and zig-zagged down the walls, flakes of paint shed from overhead flickering as they fell.

A gust of wind, befouled by the stench of rot, blew in from Hell, and caught the door as it came, throwing it open. The room complained vehemently having to suddenly make room for the entire door, the walls shaking in their fury, particularly the map wall, where the cracks were an inch wide around the doorframe. Timbers creaked and splintered as the comforting geometry of the real was recalculated by the supernatural; brick dust, ground into a fine red haze, filled up the room, the gusts from the other side making it curl and eddy.

“What can you see through the door, Caz.”

“Not much. I’m going to go to the threshold, is that okay? I’m not going to get thrown back in, I mean?”

“Honestly?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t have a fucking clue.”

“Shouldn’t there be a bell? I remember you telling me what those kids the Hell Priest took said when you took them back. When the puzzle was solved, and the door started to open, there was a bell. Tolling.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Like a funeral bell, right?”

“Right.”

He lifted his head back and slowly exhaled.

“No bells in hell?” he said quietly. “Huh.” He felt his way around the side of his desk, moving cautiously over the littered floor. When he got to the corner of the desk he paused for a moment then turned and reached back to pick up the

puzzle box. He didn't handle it with reverence now, which fact it recognized. It let out a shrill shriek, the sound so sudden Harry almost dropped the thing. It modulated immediately; the shriek becoming sobbing of an infant, its hurt so deep, it could barely catch its breath.

“Caz?”

“I'm right here.”

“Where's right here.”

“Three steps, Harry. Yeah, that's it. Two. One. Okay. There's a stone step a couple of inches ahead of you. That's the threshold.”

Harry tapped the step with the toe of his boot. Then he casually tossed the configuration down onto the step. The box rolled over a couple of times and then stopped, its anguished mewling dying away. Harry faced the blustering wind.

Lucifer's country smelt of death and disease. He didn't need his sight to evoke the wasteland that lay beyond the threshold-stone. There were no appeals, no

judgments, no prayers and entreaties, no shrieks as the law took its portion. Just the occasional buzz of a **cawian** fly, looking for somewhere to lay her eggs, and the remote rumble of thunder from storm clouds pregnant with poison rain.

“At least we were there at the end.” Harry said. “That’s something.”

“It would be if we could talk about it.”

“You can talk about it,” Harry replied. “People will just think you’re crazy.” He chuckled. “Don’t worry. I got used to it years ago.”

“Any idea what to do about this fucking door?”

“Just one. You used to be a football player right?”

“I never told you that. How’d you—”

“Kick the box.”

“What?”

“The box, Caz. Kick it as far as you can.”

Harry felt Caz's grin of pleasure. "You want to give a bit of room?"

Harry backed up a couple of steps. "All right?" It's all yours."

He didn't witness Caz's kick of course, but he felt and heard it. The wush of air as Caz ran past him, the sound of his boot connecting with the puzzle box, and a barely contained yelp from Caz, who growled to Harry:

"That fucking did *not* want to be kicked."

"But you kicked it anyway?"

"That I did," Caz said, smiling in his words.

"How far did it go?"

"Honestly? It was kind of hard to judge. Like you said, it's dark out there. I got some height on it and —"

The tremors started again in mid-sentence, the room started to shake again, drizzles of paint flakes and brick dust beginning afresh.

“Is the door closing?”

“Fuck yes. It is indeed closing! How did you know to do that?”

“What do you think?”

“Wild guess.”

“You know me so well.”

“Harry, it’s so cool, seeing the door closing. I wish you could see it.”

“Oh don’t you worry, Caz.” Harry said, throwing back his head, his eyes

tight shut: “I’m seeing it.”

—

It was the easiest trick in the world for Lucifer to make money in New York. A thousand wallets slipped out of pockets of men whose eyes he had caught produced sufficient funds for Alice to make investments days later, produced sizeable profits, which were in turn invested and in turn produced even more massive numbers. Alice did all the trading, and looked after the millions the man she was obsessed with had earned. She bought them a much larger apartment, at his request: one with a view not of the city but of the river and the open sky.

Lucifer came and went, telling her freely of what he'd done in his absence. The women he'd seduced and pleased, the men he'd seduced and pleased; even the children he'd introduced to carnality when his taste ran in that direction. Alice had sworn to him she would never give him cause to grow tired of her; never question his actions, nor demand to know more about him than he had already told her. But she quickly showed signs of possessiveness. Why did he have to go away for days and nights on end? Did he have another life; another

woman, another apartment? He told her his life was his own, and that he had no interest in giving it away to anyone. She started to bargain with him through her tears: what did he want her to do for him in exchange for his honesty, for his love? He told her flatly that there was only one thing in her gift which he wanted: an end to all her absurdities: her questions, her bargains, her professions of love.

“Absurd?” she said. “How could you say that? How could you be so hurtful?” She wiped her mascara stained tears from her face with the heels of her hand. “I never loved anybody—ever, *ever*—until I met you. We understood one another right from the beginning. Remember how you said you’d showed your heart to me and that you’d never done that before?”

“I lied.”

“But—”

“I lied, Alice. I showed you what you wanted to see.”

“That wasn’t —?”

“The real me?” He smiled. “No.”

“You swore to me —”

“My word is worth nothing, Alice. My love is worth nothing. Why?

Because I am worth nothing.” He went to the window, which over-looked the

Park. It would be twilight soon. “I’m going out,” he said.

“We’re not done talking.”

“Talk then. I’ll hear it all when I get back.”

“How?”

“I’ll listen to the air, Alice. It’s all there. Every word we’ve said. Every
thing we’ve done.”

He reached out and touched her as he spoke.

“Every lie. Every kiss.”

His touch passed on to her his power to harvest the past from invisible fields. She saw their ghost forms moving everywhere around her; heard their talk, their laughter.

“Here we are, Alice.” Lucifer said, “You can watch us forever —”

“Who are you?” she said to him.

If he answered her she didn't hear the reply. He was talking to her from so many other times, speaking the lie of love to her over and over, and it was hard not to stay in the dreaming past with him instead of hunting for the hurt of the here and now. But she forced herself to do it.

“I'm not your night-light, Alice,” she heard him say.

She looked in the direction of his voice. Was that him moving to the bedroom naked? No. Just a piece of time's past.

“I'm all that you lit your light to drive away,” he said.

She heard the apartment door open.

“No,” she said. “You can’t.”

“Stay and watch the show. Enjoy it. The effect will wear off in a few minutes and you’ll never have sight of any of this again.”

“Wait, please! I’m sorry I asked you what you are. I don’t care.”

“Good.”

“Don’t leave me. I won’t ever —”

The door closed. Alice tried to brush the visions aside so as to clear her sight and quicken her pursuit. But by the time she had got to the front door and out into the hallway he had gone. He’d hated the elevator, so undoubtedly he’d taken the stairs. She summoned the elevator, certain she could still outpace him to the lobby; talk to him calmly; tell him she didn’t care if he wasn’t her night-light. Didn’t care if he was the Devil himself, just as long as he could give him her love. And so what if he didn’t love her back. She had love enough for two.

Belikoff, the doorman, was standing watching the traffic on 5th when she emerged from the elevator.

“Oh you just missed him, Miss. Morrow.” Belikoff said. “HE must have needed a good walk. He went through the traffic and hopped over the park wall.”

—

He'd be nobody's night-light after this; nor anybody's fear made flesh. For all that happened to humankind during his death, nothing of any significance had changed. He would be grey hereafter, barely visible in the shimmer of human heat. Sometimes, if curiosity caught hold of him, he would read their lives off their breath. But that was as close as he would get. And when he tired of them, as he should, he would find a patch of earth where nobody came, and dig a hole to

lie in, and cover himself in dirt, and do all that he could to unmake the memory that his Creator, in his cruelty, had made flawless.

—

Harry tentatively threaded between the towers of televisions, which he had turned off two hours ago, as it began to get dark, and found his way to the chair in front of the window that faced the river, setting a bottle of single malt on the floor beside him. Harry had been given at his request a meticulous description of the view spread before him by Caz, but before he could bring it into his mind's something bright moved left to right across what would once have been his field of vision. It had barely passed from view than a seconds' blur of

light came after it. This time Harry followed it with his spirit-sight, to the corner of the room and then losing it as it turned the corner, leaving for his study only the beads of luminosity its passage shed. No matter. Even as they fell from sight, instinct drew his gaze back over to the left as a shoal of bright forms burst into view, weaving between one another as they came, weaving their flight slaving in front of Harry's chair so that they could scrutinize him with their glistening eyes, and in the process allowing him to have sight of them. They were the dead of course, some still wearing their fatalities like ragged insignia on their bright anatomies, others, their killing traumas perhaps internal, unmarked; but all dead, all ghosts. And lost, he assumed, or else why were they wandering the night-sky in this sad procession, and why had their wanderings brought them to him?

Norma had given him two-five hour long lessons on how to deal with his deceased visitors when they came.

“And they will come,” she’d said, “You can be certain of that. Because the last thing I do before I take myself off on my own journey is go amongst the lost dead and tell them where to find help.”

She’d done her work well. Now the responsibility was his. Very slowly, so as not to cause any panic amongst the ghosts, he got up out of his chair. It was six steps to the window. He took five, still moving cautiously. Then he stopped and reached out with his right hand, laying it on the cold glass.

“My name’s Harry,” he said, hoping his words would be audible to them.

“I’m here to help you, if you have questions and to direct you if you’re lost. I can’t guarantee that I’ll have answers for every question. I’m new at this job. But I will do my damndest, sorry, my best, I’ll do my best to get your problems solved so you can go on your way. So, please, come in —”

The invitation was barely out of his mouth than the entire shoal came at the window, the suddenness of their approach sending Harry stumbling back

towards his chair. They flew through the glass and into the room, their presence instantly chilling the air by several degrees. Then they circled the room, picking up speed with each circuit, dividing around Harry as they swept by him. Norma had warned him he might find the first couple of nights a little raucous, until word got round that he was the real thing, but she hadn't advised him on how to deal with such situations. No matter; Harry had corralled demons in his time.

“Alright!” he yelled. “You’ve seen the room! Now all of you get the hell out of here! I mean it! I want this room completely cleared! Do you hear me? I said *completely cleared!*”

The shoal divided now, as those who were instantly intimidated by Harry’s orders fled for the open air, leaving three of four trouble-makers to keep circling, deliberately clipping him as they flew past him.

“If you don’t get out right now, “ Harry said, “Nobody gets a word of advice from me. You understand? I don’t care how fucked-up your death was or

how lost you feel. I'll keep everything I know to myself. You listening because I mean every word. You have five seconds to get the fuck out of here! One. Two —

”

On two the phantoms slowed their flight, exchanging glances that Harry couldn't interpret—

“Three.”

—and then turned, faces to Harry's window—

“Four.”

—and flew directly at the glass, and through it —

“Five.”

—out into the night-air.

The fracas had not gone unnoticed; far from it. There were spirits converging on the Big Room from every compass point. A few came in the company of other wanderers, but most were solitaries.

“Okay.” Harry said quietly. “A hit of Scotch then I get going.”

He returned to his chair, picked up the bottle of whisky, opened it and put it to his lips, pausing for a second or two in sweet anticipation, then taking a good-sized hit. There are worse things I could do with my life, he thought as he set the bottle down.

As he turned to look at the window he caught sight of the moist distressing of his visitors he'd yet witnessed. A woman, with a child at her side, a boy he thought, he couldn't be sure, the crowd eclipsed them too quickly. He sat down and surveyed the many faces before him. How many were there now? Forty? Fifty? He wouldn't get through them all tonight. A lot of them would have to wait until tomorrow night, by which time, of course, word would have spread, and there'd be plenty of new wanderers. No wonder Norma had been so covetous of her brandy; and so happy to have her televisions on hand, to give her some time to herself.

There was hectic motion in the crowd, and a child — surely the boy he'd seen with the woman at his side; yes, there she was, trying to dissuade him from pressing his face against the glass. It slipped through, of course, much to the kid's puzzlement.

"Come on in." Harry said.

"What about my Aunt Anna? She's very well-behaved."

"She can come too."

He waved the woman in, following the boy. She was shaking. Funny, he'd never imagined ghosts did that.

"Hello, Anna." He said.

"Hello, Mr..."

"D'Amour."

"See," the boy said to his Aunt, "It's French for love, like I said."

“I lost my faith for a little while out there. I didn’t think there was anybody going to help us.”

“And there is.”

“Yes.” The woman said, almost smiling, “There is.”