

Flammability, Incorporeal Creatures and a Pony on a stick

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John was the best I'd ever seen with a blowtorch. He wielded it like Da Vinci wielded a god-damn paintbrush. He could do things with it that in many places were certainly illegal and definitely deranged, with the possible exception of Japan.

There was this thing about John and the blue-hot propane flames that bordered - nay, even surpassed - the realm of wonder. If Jesus could come down and visit from Heaven and work with a blowtorch next to John, he'd look like a pyromaniac hobo with a messiah complex and a background in carpentry, while John would just shine with a bright white light from within, turn water into beer and beer into piss with just a *look*. John was just *that* good.

So it was a fucking bummer when I learned that his last words actually were: "Don't be a pussy, oxygen tanks do that hissing sound all the time."

As far as classifying bummers goes, this was a triple-A class bummer, the kind of showstopper that had only been theorised up to John's untimely and gruesome death. The kind of bummer that could make Jim Carey's face flat and emotionless and Bill Clinton

sworn to celibacy. It ranked way far above the A-plus bummer of being recently divorced, fired, being fired upon and being set on fire at the same time.

Which was bad in and of itself, but not as bad as John getting blown up a day before the Job. That was a sad state of affairs that meant I was now a very sorry son of a bitch with a life expectancy that made the term “lifetime warranty” sound like a tasteless practical joke.

So here I was, melting away in a decrepit diner on route 72, at a swampy nowhere with some supposedly native American though actually gibberish name like ‘Alatanoosa’ or ‘Whahananoka’, someplace between Alabama and Tennessee. The coffee tasted like imported dirt, the kind of dirt you read about being very fashionable and exaggeratedly overpriced but at the end of the day, was just dirt. The fried eggs looked like fried eggs, but only in the most rudimentary way: there was an orange bit with some white plastic all around it. I guess my flair for adventure was wearing out so it just sat there, where I happily failed to ingest it.

I really didn’t feel like eating at all. Maybe it was the god-damn heat, the stale humid air

and the fact that about the same time tomorrow, I would be probably looking at the wrong end of more than a couple of gun barrels because I had promised something I couldn't deliver to some very single-minded people with a propensity for shooting, rather than having coffee and biscuits and sympathizing with the bad card life dealt you.

The reason I couldn't deliver was I couldn't do the Job. And I couldn't do the Job without John, because John, the flamboyant blowtorch virtuoso with an unmatched record of ninety-two safes, safe-rooms, and bank vaults, an average time of three point three minutes, clean as a germ-obsessed placebo-munching single old lady right before kidney stone surgery and a no-smoking-on-the-job policy that kept my cigarette budget intact, had gone and killed himself in his brother's-in-law chop shop.

I stopped and asked myself at that point whether that unfortunate death, at such a bad time, right before what would now prove to be the last gig in my career was a sign from God to stop doing what I did best: stealing. In a rare know-thyself moment I reminded myself I wasn't half as good at it as some Wall

Street people, politicians and the let-me-lend-you-your-own-money cutthroats that roamed the street unabashed.

Logic would then imply that if there was going to be any smiting and all that holier-than-thou business, any God with a sense of perspective, morality and justice wouldn't start dishing it out on my end. And in any case, I decided that if God really had something to tell me, he'd better make a really really good point with lots of compelling arguments, like saving my ass pronto. Or at least point me to a direction, show me the road to salvation that preferably led somewhere warm and sandy in the Pacific, along with a couple of Cayman bank accounts, some instantly gratifying plastic surgery and twelve hundred different driving licenses. I'd have thought about asking for another favor but they said that size didn't matter, bank accounts notwithstanding.

Realising how God and reality rarely intertwined, I felt some kind of emotional pressure the likes of which I hadn't experienced since high-school and all the awkward parties. A stress relief mechanism kicked in someplace inside me and I sighed deeply before shout-

ing out an expletive, something eloquent like 'Fuck!'.

That made some heads in the diner turn and raised the attached eyebrows apprehensively. It also gained me the attention of the establishment's chef-du-cuisine, a six-foot-three, two-hundred and fifty pound red-haired, bush-bearded wild-eyed man-like Alabama creature with a meat cleaver, a stained apron and a murderous gleam in his eye. He pointed that cleaver towards my direction and said with a slight snarl "Now yo' better watch that god-damn filthy mouth a yours, 'less you got dental, son."

I think I nodded faintly and muttered "I'm sorry" in an absent-minded fashion before I put ten bucks on the table, got up and left. He probably felt that'd given me a good old fashioned run-down, but I was simply in a hurry.

I looked at my watch, one of the few items I had actually bought with honest money from a winning lottery ticket back when I kept saying to myself that heists were 'a temporary thing'. It was half past ten in the morning, and I had more or less twenty two and a half hours to live. As I looked at the bland green and brown Southern scenery, I noticed a cou-

ple of dogs humping without a care in the world, oblivious to pretty much everything else.

I was about to think something profound about nature and the will of life to survive and continue, when I noticed they both had “stuff” dangling underneath. Even nature had a way of giving me the finger. I looked up into the blighting sun and all I could see was white and red dots for the next ten minutes. I’d left my glasses inside the diner. I said to myself, fuck that, I don’t need sunglasses. I’m Bobby. I’m going to do what it takes, and I sure as hell can do it without sunglasses. In retrospect, that might have been a mistake cause those sunglasses had a history of their own, but it was time for action not remembrance. So I acted on impulse, without pausing to ruminate on the outcome of my actions, and especially what those actions might incur precipitate in relation to my person.

Now, thinking back to that particular moment in time, the moment I decided to act was the moment I kept thinking to myself ‘Bobby, that doesn’t mean shit. John blowing up doesn’t mean shit. You can still do this. You can still get rich, or die trying’, that

must have been the moment that would probably get the most votes in the ‘Most Regrettable Moment in Your Entire Life’ category. It would also get lots of points in the ‘Shit I Wish I Hadn’t Done’ category, but the real winner in that one was calling up Eileen. I’d done mistakes before, but it always amazed me how impossibly fast I regretted calling Eileen on that particular day. I panicked.

I rang her three times before she picked up. When she did, it sounded like she hadn’t talked to a real person in about three years:

“Mmbby? Mmmby Baahow? My Bobby Bear?”

I took little notice that she had been stuffing herself, probably a bad case of munchies.

I said “Yeah, Eileen,” managing to keep my tone of voice even, normal. It really felt like biting the bullet when I said “it’s me, Papa-Bear.” It also made me cringe as the connotations that old term of endearment implied flashed across my mind’s eye. Jesus Christ, not Eileen. What was I doing? Was there no other way? Was this a possible way out or was it just a faster way under?

“Awwww, Papa-Bear.. Is, this really you Bobby? I miss you so much, you know.”

She sounded quite sincere but then again crazy people always do since they do believe you are actually an ursine humanoid, complete with fur, claws, a fluffy tummy, and an unhealthy hunger for honey and Taco Bell.

“Right, Eileen. That’s, me.. Yeah. Papa-waka-bear. Huh..”

The words seemed to be drip-fed to my brain from some sort of mental black hole that spewed forth nothing that made sense. Fortunately that strongly resonated with Eileen’s sense of reality:

“Oh, Papa-waka-bear, so strong and furry and manly..With lots and lots of furry shoulder hair for me to rub and that sweet tummy..Can I see you Bobby? Just this once, I won’t be a bother, really. We don’t need to go boat-pedaling or skating. Just see you, maybe let me rub your tummy. And have sex?”

I closed my eyes and recalled a picture from the past: myself laden with honey from tip to toe, tied to a bed with a Winnie the Pooh plushie wearing a strap-on dildo and Eileen shouting “Rawr! I’m your honeycomb slice, Papa-Bear!”. I decided then and there that I’d have to appeal to whatever core of sanity remained in her mind, or else I could just go

drown myself in a really shallow body of water, like, say, a gutter.

“Listen, Eileen.. We can’t.. I can’t do all that, okay? I wish I could, but..”

That was a lie. That was a lie. That was a lie. I was lying to her, but that’s okay cause she’s crazy.

“Ohh. Why can’t you Papa-Bear? We could have so much fun together! We could ride the tram around the city, and I could feed you cotton candy and berries. Like last time, don’t you remember? Didn’t you have fun? Please, Bobby. Can’t I see you once more? Why did you call me then? Do you really want to hurt me, Bobby?”

Her voice reminded me uncannily of Boy George and that made my eyes hurt just by thinking about it. I felt my stomach knot at the thought of all the things I would have to endure to get on her good side. Or it might have been the coffee-like dirt-brew. I took a deep breath before uttering the words as if they were my last:

“I need to see you Eileen.”

“Oh, Bobby! You really can’t tell how happy that makes me! I feel like leaping outside the window and flying to your arms,

Papa-Bear!”

Oh God, shit no. She was crazy enough to actually pop out the window and crack her head open on the street below.

“No, no, Eileen! Don’t do that honey, no. You gotta wait a couple of hours, I’ll drop by your place. Okay?”

“But whoosy-cooshy-huggy of mine, I’ll be fly to you in a jippy if you just say the word!”

“No, no! Just sit tight, will ya? I’ll bring you chocolate chip cookies, your favorite. Just don’t go anywhere. And Eileen, take your meds, please. You’re still on meds, right?”

“Oh, you mean those horrible pills? They were so bitter and bad for me, unlike you Bobby. No, no, daddy paid off the bad men in white and now I’m home again. Free as a bird. Your little nightingale.”

That was probably wrong. No meds, rampant insanity mixed with nymphomaniac tendencies. And ursine fantasies. For a moment I thought it’d be a better bet to just reason with Falconi, but the fact that the last guy who tried that ended up as hand-made soap bars with Falconi’s signature on it left me with little doubt about where my chances lay. I’d

stick with the looney. At least she seemed to still have this thing for me.

“Okaaaay, Eileen. Now, see Papa-Bear’s in trouble and I need your help. So, make sure you can get a hold of daddy and tell him that you might need that jet of his for a trip. And some pocket money too. Tell him you’re going shopping in New York, okay?”

I listened myself saying all that and momentarily asked myself ‘Are you a bad person for doing this, Bobby?’, and then the answer came guilt-free ‘No, Falconi is a bad person because he wants you dead for something you didn’t even do’. It also helped to think of myself as Papa-Bear and not Bobby Barhoe.

“We’re going shopping? Oh, Papa-Bear I always knew you were so much fun!”

“Yeah, I’m a god-damn roaming circus. So, see you in a couple of hours.”

“Don’t take long, Papa-Bear! I want to squash you in my arms and feel your tummy and tousle your hair and then su-”

Damn you to hell John Staikos, this was all your fault.

“Yeah, yeah, okay Eileen. Anything you like. Bye!”

“Wait, wait!”

“What?”

“Whoopsy-kissy?”

I hesitated just for the tiniest moment and I could almost picture the sad, watery eyes and then the coming onslaught of cries, curses and finely sharpened blades being hurled against me, so I made something like a smooching sound. It might have sounded like a fart, I’m not sure, but she sounded positively satisfied:

“I love you Papa-Bear! I can’t wait to snuggly-wuggly you in my arms and tie you down and -”

“Goodbye!”

I hang up in the nick of time. The ordeal was over for now, but doubts started assaulting me like journalists outside a rehab facility for famous people. Was this my only option? Would she come through? What if she had been waiting for that call, that one call that I might have given her in such a time of extenuating circumstances and dire need, just so I could come running to her for help and then dice me up because I shot the best-man on our wedding day and ran off in her father’s Porsche?

I had to keep reminding myself I wasn’t

the bad person here, even as I strode back into my piece-of-shit Taurus. These were desperate times, and they obviously required insanely desperate measures.

I got back on route 72, heading for Memphis. While the radio waves reeked with country, bluegrass and heart-felt messages to the parishioners to pledge their support to the Church of Latter Day Saints With Semi-Automatic Rifles, I casually gazed outside the window and couldn't help notice that this countryside was so flat and uninteresting that if there was some kind of hell waiting for everyone, this would be it. I was about to start a self-gratifying rant, using phrases like "Good job right there, Bobby", "Sure I can vouch for that sleazeball Mr. Falconi", "Heck no, nothing can go wrong, we're all pros here. Right?" when a big brown legged thing just popped right in front of the Taurus. I applied pressure to the braking pedal and then the laws of physics worked their magic.

Now, despite appearances I'm a fairly well-educated man and I know that Taurus is just a fancy word for bull. I also know that for a car to decelerate from eighty miles-per-hour to zero, it takes a couple hundred

feet, and that's because no-one in his right mind would design a car that could turn its occupants into mush or tarmac jelly (depending on the seat belt arrangement) when they wanted it to stop.

That being said, I wasn't really surprised when the Taurus hit that horse. I wasn't really surprised when the airbag tried to rob me of what looked like my early dying breath. Surprise wasn't achieved even when the car swiveled and landed sideways in a gravelly ditch. It wasn't the fact that I was still in one piece, nor the fact that the horse - had it been given the oral faculty post-mortem - could not say the same for itself.

It was the shaman.

There I was, still trying to decide whether or not I was still alive and with my brain between my ears, when I saw through the hazy smoke and vapor of the smashed front of the car the figure of a lone man, looking directly at me with a deeply sombre gaze, as if I had just killed his horse. He was dressed in a brown leather jacket, crisscrossed leather vest, and soft tan shoes. I'd have wagered he was some kind of a disco enthusiast with a slightly bent sexual orientation, if it wasn't for

the feathery hat and the somewhat austere, manly jaw line. He was the spitting image of some Cherokee. Or Navajo. I didn't know, I just knew they name cars after these kinds of people.

He spoke with a peculiar voice that had the impossible qualities of gravel and running water at the same time:

“Are you hurt?”

I would normally have taken the time to think about faking some injury so I could sue the guy for damages. But under the circumstances, namely that if everything went according to plan I had less than a day to live combined with that this guy's entire estate most probably consisted of a dead horse, a tipi and his grandparents in a convenient ash form, I instinctively opted for the truth. Everything felt connected to the proper slots and I literally (and sadly, figuratively as well) saw no great blinding light at the end of a tunnel.

He came closer, shook open my jammed door and helped me get out of the car. He struck me as neither too old and neither too young, kind of exactly like Ronn Moss.

“Yeah, I think I'm okay. Where did you, ahm.. I mean, the horse just popped out of

nowhere, and..”

“I know, Bobby.”

His words had a strangely calming effect. They oozed serenity. It was like listening to the voice of a loving grandfather, and by loving I don’t mean pedophile. But then it hit me:

How did he know my name?

What did he mean by saying ‘I know’? What did he know? I looked blankly at him, wondering briefly if there was a universal balance being observed right at that moment. My impending doom, and a horse dying in front of Taurus. Could it be that somehow the cosmic forces of life contrived to tell me something? Had some sort of karmic exchange taken place right in front of my eyes? A horse’s life, for my own? An offering, a sacrifice to the powers beyond reach? Was he a holy man? Some sort of shaman? An emissary of fate? Was this the break I so desperately needed?

How did he know my name?

His next words jarred me out of my shocked reverie:

“The plates.”

“Excuse me?”

“Says here on the car plates, ‘BOBBY B’. Isn’t that your name?”

I felt a bit silly, standing right beside him on the side of the road, bending over looking at what must have been horse gut sprayed all over what at some point, had been my Taurus’s radiator.

“I’m sorry, I must’ve been thinking out loud. Well, yeah. Bobby Barhoe.”

He looked at me sideways, somehow failing to mask his feelings disappointment. I couldn’t know if it was my name or the pool of blood oozing from the horse.

“What kind of a name is that, Barhoe? Seriously?”

It was an odd think to ask, but then again I’d just run over his horse so I felt I should indulge the man. It might have also been an unconscious, fool-hardy effort to steer the discussion away from the dead horse.

“I’ve never really given it much thought. It’s just a name, really. I actually think it sounds sturdy, homely. Like, say -”

“Burroughs?”

He furrowed his left eyebrow in a grimace that would have normally required a monocle for full effect. I took a closer look at the

steaming pile of heap that used to be the engine block. From a long experience in messiness, I could tell changing the tires wouldn't work.

"Yeah, kinda like that one. Or Thibodeau. Sounds dependable, right?"

"That doesn't sound sturdy, homely or dependable. That sounds like someone fell down the stairs."

"I think it's a good name. And so is Barhoe, don't mind me saying," I said and sat in front of the dead horse, arms crossed, trying to sound convivial. I must've come across like a prissy twat.

"Well I really don't think so, Bobby," he said and he scratched his head under the feather hat while grinning profusely as if he was enjoying all this immensely.

"I don't want to sound like a total jerk since I seem to have inadvertently fatally injured your horse over there, but you know who I am, while I don't."

I think I pointed lamely to the dead horse and sounded like a total jerk.

"I'm The Sad Son of A Bitch Whose Horse Runneth Over."

“Wow. Really? That’s kind of tragic, isn’t it? Talk about karma, huh?”

“Not really. Just because I’m Alabama it doesn’t mean.. The name’s Steve Johnson.”

After all the pointless discussion about names it felt like I’d been cheated.

“What kind of an Indian is named like that? I mean, seriously?”

“Now look here, I’m tired of this shit. Just because I’m Alabama it doesn’t mean our people live like a hundred and fifty years ago. I went to college. I got into a Greek society, got drunk and wedgied and did all that frat-house shit just because I lacked the necessary maturity and personality like every other post-adolescent American male. And on an athletic scholarship, mind you.”

His name, even though it was as common as the cold, sounded oddly familiar.

“Did you by any chance play football at Kentucky?”

“Track and field, Alabama State. Do I look like I could play football?”

He was about five-foot-ten, a bit on the light side, no more than a hundred and thirty, a hundred and forty pounds. In pygmy football he might’ve been a world champion, but

I don't think there is such a thing as pygmy football. Nor should there be.

"Not really, no."

His back was turned to me, looking at a far part of the sky brimming with timidly approaching dark clouds when he abruptly spun around and said with a beaming smile:

"That doesn't mean I'm not a shaman though."

"It doesn't?"

I suddenly felt the conversation was starting to get a bit light-headed, when he explained:

"Shamanistic rituals form the basis of a hard core of belief in existentialist individualism, a wave breaker of people against the tsunami of pragmatic atavism of today's profit-driven societies. Part of the SSSD manifesto stands for -"

I couldn't resist interrupting the bullshit storm so I told him with a straight face:

"I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with that SS thing. Is it, like, Hitler's SS?"

"What? No, no. It's the Société des Shamans et Sorciers-Docteurs."

The man seemed impervious to sarcasm.

"That's German, isn't it?"

“No, it’s french for the Society of Shamans and Witch Doctors.”

Even though he was probably right, I was pretty convinced that French and German were one and the same.

“So you got your own thing going? Shamanizing? Actually, is that a real word?”

“Well, the internet’s helped a lot, you know? Coming together, feeling the buzz, spreading the word, but what’s -”

One of the few things that I really feared apart from dying gruesomely in the hands (holding sharp instruments of death implied) of Falconi’s goons was being surrounded by miracle workers, televangelists and all sorts of religious yahoo’s that sounded just as coherent and sincere as that church of something where rich, famous, short actors used to go to find out the really real truth.

“Listen, I’m in a bit of a hurry. I really have to get to Memphis, like really soon. Actually I should have been almost half way there by now. So, say you wouldn’t be on your way to Memphis would you? I’d be very grateful -”

“Dead!” he suddenly exclaimed raising his hands as if a switch had been turned on.

“What?”

“My horse is dead.”

“I kind of noticed that. It hasn’t moved since it spewed its - .. What I meant to say was, could you drop me off with your car?”

“I don’t have a car.”

“Your bike?”

“No bike either,” he said, and shook his head.

“Your other horse?” I asked in vain.

“Awatame was my friend and only steed for many years. May he rest in peace,” he said with a genuine sadness that quickly passed over his features as well.

“The horse had a name?”

I felt that was the wrong thing to say but he didn’t seem to be offended. He rather asked me with a slim smile:

“Have you heard of a horse with no name?”

His question had a curious ring to it but I couldn’t quite remember why.

“Look, we could on like this for hours but not today. In about twenty hours or so, give or take, some really pissed off people with very little in the way of ethics considerations concerning the sanctity of human life are going to come looking for me, and my instincts tell me

to run and hide, and they're usually right. You might think I'm pulling your leg here, having killed your horse and so on but -"

He took off his feathery hat and straightened his hair. He said with unnerving casualness:

"Yeah, you vouched for Dempsey, and when he vanished into thin air with thirty million in Falconi's bonds, he gave you another shot - the Veteran's Fund job. Problem is, John Staikos blew up along with his brother's-in-law chop shop, and took the job with him down the sinkhole. You're not a gun-crazed ape so you can't deal with Falconi going in, guns blazing. You are the careful, studied planner who has taken everything into consideration and has mathematically proven you need John to pull off the job. You can't just pretend to do the job and get caught because then Falconi would take care of you in the jail anyhow. You can't find a replacement - no less in such a short notice - because John was the only guy who has cut open a vault like that, ever. You're thinking about flying away with Eileen's help. Maybe hide somewhere in Mexico, or in the Andes. Or maybe someplace real deep in the Amazon."

I watched in stunned silence as flies the size of hummingbirds buzzed around the horse. I managed to ask him with what I believed was a valid question under the circumstances:

“How the fuck do you know all that?”

“I told you, I’m a shaman. I resonate with mother Earth. I communicate with the spirits. I conversed with John, actually. We were drinking buddies back in the college days. He asked me to help a friend in need. So here I am.”

Instincts took over so I couldn’t believe a god-damn thing he was saying so I reverted to what should be the most logical explanation according to my experience as a fund displacement engineer:

“You’re a Fed, right? This is some kind of elaborate setup. You’ve been monitoring me for some time now and you want me to confess, put Falconi behind bars, put me in witness protection. I can see the snipers. Let me tell you, not a chance. Falconi will find a way to kill me. So I’m not buying. Oh, and I don’t know who he is. Or what’s his name. I’m talking man. You got nothing on me.”

I think I had said pretty much everything

I wasn't supposed to say but once more that wouldn't prove to be much of a problem.

"John said you'd be hard to convince. What if I can answer only something the two of you would ever know?"

"You could have gotten to him, tortured him for every little detail. Heck, you might've blown him up just to put a wrench in Falconi's job."

"I guess you're also thinking we didn't land on the moon."

"Of course we landed on the moon, in '53. The landings in '69 were just a cover-up to discredit all the -"

"I get the picture. What if he told you himself? Would that be enough to make you believe?"

"So it's a ruse? He's alive, right? Working with the Feds? Are we still on, Steve? Or should I call you Agent Johnson?"

I smiled smugly and thought I had him nailed right over there. Things looked like they could still turn out OK in the end. Maybe we'd have a cold one at a strip joint, and laugh about it surrounded by well-endowed professional dancers with allergies to any sort of

garment. I couldn't be farther away from reality.

"I'm afraid he's pretty dead. Bought the proverbial farm. But, you're still on."

"We are? How?"

"Like this," Steve said and closed his eyes before he started dancing. At first thought it was part of keeping in par with the whole Indian routine, doing the rain dance and shrieking like a baboon. But the way he tip-toed, spun and jumped into the air, then gracefully landing and doing a pirouette reminded me of soft ballerina's shoes, stockings and New York Times articles on homophobia.

Instinctively I took a couple of steps back watching with increasing horror as Steven pranced around the dead horse with arms extended like paws, and suddenly all I could think of was Michael Jackson and zombies. I was about to break into a hopeless run thinking that nut-jobs usually can't afford snipers until they're elected in office and then I saw John as a bluish, thin apparition seeping out from the horse.

He was wearing goggles over his eyes and had a blow torch in hand; he was looking rather pale which under any circumstances

seemed only natural. I was about to yell ‘Hologram!’ when he uncannily zipped right next to me and said:

“Bobby, my man. The Taurus got totaled, huh? Bummer.”

“John?”

“Where you expecting someone else?”

Needless to say I did the first thing that came to my ape-descendant brain: I tried to poke him with a finger but it went right through. Then I tried not to faint, and I remember I heard Steve say:

“Tell him it’s all true.”

Then John, or his apparition, or his astral projection or whatever it was I was technically talking to said:

“It’s all true.”

“See? I told you,” said Steve and smiled encouragingly while my eyes darted back and forth trying to find some point of reference that would explain all this and keep my brain from melting. That mostly failed. My lips moved but nothing came out of my mouth except perhaps some drool.

“Huh?”

John the Ghost, or John the Apparition, or the Spirit Formerly known as John said:

“Don’t try to understand, at least not now. Steve’s a buddy, so do what he says and he’ll fix us both up. I might actually help you live through it and make it in time for the game on Saturday as well.”

Steve popped a question with a frown:

“Buffalo?”

“Nah, Nicks. So, Bobby. I’m counting on you. I gotta run now, some attendant’s busting my balls, says I parked on a handicapped spot.”

And just like that, before I could breathe in and out, he vanished. I managed to make sounds like words again. Almost.

“Uh. Um. That was John?”

Steve nodded ‘yes’ with his head.

“And he wasn’t fucking with me? You aren’t fucking with me?”

He shook his head in a well-known fashion that in almost any known human culture meant ‘no’. I took a few deep breaths while my mind tried to empty itself. It took a while longer than usual this time around.

“So what did he mean? Why is he counting on me? Can someone else do the job for him? Oh, I get it! Can he possess Falconi, make his head spin around and break

his neck? Or do some of that weird ghost shit, scare him shitless and make him jump off the 41st floor? Was that a ghost? Or a ghoul? I can't tell the difference, you should know that stuff. I mean you can summon the dead, right?"

I think there was a strange gleam of shocked terror when I said that, so Steve sounded a bit apprehensive:

"You're weird. He's neither. He's in an incorporeal form. His spirit still roams the Earth freely and can be called upon, but his soul is trapped in the Parking Lot of Eternity. If he doesn't find the exit soon, he'll be trapped there, forever searching the ticket for his green Honda Accord."

"That piece of crap? Yeah, okay, I just talked with a dead guy. So, how can he help me? Can he do the job in that condition?"

"He can't, he's dead. We have to bring him back. Well, you actually."

"Bring him back from the dead? As in, raise him from the dead? As in, resurrection?"

"Technically, it's not exactly like that. There have been precedents. Lazarus, Jesus. Disney, Elvis. Hitler. It's more like, re-rolling the last dice."

“What, like in a game?”

“Isn’t life but just a game?”

“What’s with all the philosophical questions today? The accident.. The dead horse.. I was badly injured. I’m in a coma. And I’m seeing these visions, and you’re like a spiritual guide but in reality, you’re just a figment of my imagination, a creation of my subconscious mind which is trying to stay alive and-”

And then he suddenly punched me really hard in the face. It made my jaw go numb for like a minute or two, and then I knew that for all intents and purposes this was probably real enough.

“Did you imagine that? I don’t think so. And to get down to business, John really wants that second chance. I mean who wouldn’t? Except maybe people who owed lots of money. But to do that, someone has to vouch for him. If he fails to get that second chance, he and that someone get to serve at the Parking Lot of Eternity as attendants for, well, all Eternity.”

“Is that like a valet service for the dead then?”

“You could say so, yes.”

“So how are you going to do it?”

“Do what?”

“You know, save John. Give him his second chance, save my life, all that.”

“I’m not doing anything like that. You are going to.”

“I am? Maybe you are imagining this?”

He looked at me in a funny way that expertly conveyed the message ‘do you want another punch in the face?’.

“Yeah, I think you’re not imagining it any more than I am. Come to think of it, I’m done for either way, right?”

“The smart money’s on that.”

Falconi would scour the Earth to get me. I’d have a considerably shortened expiration date and the overall idea of growing old and senile around scantily clad teens that didn’t speak a word of English would be thrown out of the window.

I was scared. I was panicked. The instinct of fleeing in the face of insurmountable odds and grave danger overcame my cold, calculating sense of reason, even though I was starting to reconsider the wording ‘reason’. If all that were true, if indeed there was the slightest hope of John coming back from the dead,

and doing the job, what did I have to lose apart from my sanity?

“Okay. I’ll do it. What do I have to do?”

“Collect spirit shards.”

“What, like Zelda or something?”

Steve looked puzzled.

“What’s Zelda? Some new age Zen crap? Because the spirits will be angry if-”

“No, it’s a game on the Nintendo.”

“What’s a Nintendo?”

“The Wii?”

“We what?”

“Forget about Zelda, she’s can be a real bitch anyway. What kind of spirit shards are you talking about?”

“Real spirit shards, from willing souls. I need to perform a certain ritual for each and every soul that is willing to merge a part of it with yours.”

Instincts kicked in so I couldn’t help asking:

“Will that hurt?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t *think* so?”

“I don’t. I haven’t done it before.”

I should have known I’d hear that phrase at some point in the discussion.

“Oh, that’s just classic. I mean, what is this, amateur shaman night ? You haven’t done it before?”

“Have you talked with lots of dead people?”

“Not really, no. Just John back there.”

“Well, that’s because it’s pretty fucking rare. So are spirit shards. Souls are very fickle and rarely accept such a thing.”

“Right. And how are we going to pull that soul-catching off then?”

“I have something in mind. At least someplace we can start.”

“Whatever, I’m game as long I get to keep my head and my balls attached. Do you know how to do your stuff?”

“I’m qualified. I’ve taken classes.”

That sounded at least ridiculous. I’d seen stranger stuff just a couple of minutes earlier but I just spurted the words:

“You can’t be serious. Does it involve dancing like a queer?”

“I am. And if you mean ‘ballet’, it does. We need to act quickly. And you need to get us some transportation. Hitchhiking a ride might do the trick.”

“Why me?”

“You’re the white, respectable-looking guy.”

“I’m a god-damn thief. And I got some Latino blood in me, I’m not all ‘whitey’. I have this thing for salsa and tortillas, someone in the family must’ve been an *hombre*.”

Steve looked at me with a vaguely mixed feeling somewhere between pity and disgust.

“I said respectable-*looking*. Don’t blame me for your society’s prejudice against native Americans.”

“I thought it was your society as well. That you had integrated and so on.”

“That’s just what we tell folks at job interviews. Now, remember I’m only doing this as a favor to John. I’m not sure we can be buddies yet, so remember that too.”

A slightly uneasy silence followed as we both looked onto the street, hunting for a passing ride. At some point I felt like I just had to ask:

“He owes you money, right?”

“Yeah. Two hundred bucks. Said he had some debt he needed to pay off fast.”

“That’s funny, he owed me two hundred bucks.”

Steve looked at me wide-eyed and exclaimed:

“Well, dress me up like Custer and shoot me full of arrows. That’s karma, come a lyin’.”

“Don’t sing that, I hate Culture Club.”

“Don’t sing what? You mean like a choir club?”

* * *

A pair of furry dice hang from the rear mirror. Instead of numbers from one to six though, each face sported an extremely detailed depiction of men engaged in activities of a sexual nature, with *sheep* nonetheless. Steve was looking at the dices with mystified awe, as if he was for the first time in his life, challenged to believe people *could* do such things.

The truck driver’s name was Ivan Kerrilov, and when he spoke he never failed to make me think he had picked up English inside a fishing barrel, talking to tuna who couldn’t read or talk but had learned it themselves using a Chinese electrical appliance manual for textbook. Needless to say, it sounded like garbage.

“You are to each other? To get there?”

I tried to maintain a conversational tone without giving away the fact that I could not understand what the hell Ivan was saying, while Steve kept touching things that one could never know whether or not they had been inserted into orifices regularly as of late. So I tried to reply:

“We are who we are. Together. What does ‘together’ really mean, you know?”

With safety in mind first and without taking his eyes off the road, Ivan took his hand off the wheel and made two little figures with his fingers that first walked casually next to each other, and then one seemed to bend over only to get the index finger of the other hand repeatedly inserted into an imaginary cavity. At first I squinted at the little charade, trying to think what could be going on in Ivan’s stranger-than-fiction-mind. And then I saw his leery smile and rhythmical movement of his pelvis I irreversibly knew he was asking whether or not me and Steve were a ‘thing’. I answered as delicately as appearances and circumstances allowed:

“The fuck no! We’re guys!”

A bump on the road slightly jerked all

three of us. Ivan grinned widely seemingly to purposely reflect almost eighty percent of sunlight directly on to my face with his metal teeth. He constantly made me feel I was in a Bond parody film set with the same supporting cast, only slightly bent.

“So?” asked Steve without provocation and without a care, delving deep into the insides of the truck’s dashboard and assorted interior extra, like the small cupboard in the back and the impossibly tiny WC. I had seen where this kind of talk could lead and I always regretted rising to the bait. I resolved not to be tempted, especially then, and especially in there.

“I’m not doing that. I’m not getting into a discussion about homo-sex with you.”

“Why not? Homo-sex? Who says that?” asked Steve while carefully studying the fine finishing in the beautifully lacquered cupboard doors in the miniscule kitchen area. A smell like vodka permeated the air.

“Look, he’s smiling already! This must be some kind of perverted sexual fantasy coming true, two straight men hitching a hike, arguing about gays and sex between gays and animals and straight men like us.”

A really big truck with a streamlined design overtook us on the left, blaring his horn all the way. At the end of the huge tank he was carrying, the driver had put up a neon sign that said 'HONK IF YOU'RE HUNG LIKE AN ARMADILLO'. Before my brain had time to fully explore the possibilities that such a statement entailed and what it really meant (for instance, what is an armadillo hung like? is it hung like an anteater or other thing beginning with 'a?'), I was reflexively covering up my ears because Ivan had just honked, laughing like an immigrant version of the Woodpecker. On the other hand I noticed Steve was browsing through the mini-bar, which invariably seemed to possess enough alcohol to fire up an amateur rocket. Most of the tiny bottles were empty and the rest of them was emptied around the driver's seat.

"Now see why we should just shut up till Memphis?"

"Ivan says talk. Good for pass time, therapy, hum, no? Like Op-Rah. Spring-er?"

"No thank you, we can have some quality time to talk later, mind you."

I thought that comment had put an end to the discussion, but when Steve sat next

to me holding a mini bottle of Stolichnaya, he asked something that was a very punch-worthy thing to say:

“Haven’t you ever been fingered by a lady?”

Had I the capacity, I would’ve boiled most of the water in my body into steam, turning my eyes into jelly in the process. But as I recall I simply foamed a bit while trying to restrain myself from actually hurting Steve, the curiously-inclined-to-talk-shit-like-that shaman:

“What the fuck kind of a question is that? Are you asking about whether not I’ve ever had a finger inserted up my ass? What the fuck’s wrong with you?”

“Hey, just making some idle conversation. It’s not like I asked if you’re sucking-”

“Now wait just a minute. That’s just sick.”

“What? Why, women do it all the time!”

“Yeah, well, women do that all the time! Not guys!”

“Why not?”

“Because, women are supposed to suck and men to..”

“Blow?”

“Hell no!”

“So you think you’re so much better than women? Is that why you’re degrading them?”

“What kind of - I didn’t say anything degrading, I just said -”

“That they suck. That they’re not as good at you at-”

“What? Good at sucking cock? Is that what you’re saying?”

I noticed Ivan gave me a very strange look that somehow implied sexual tension to arise would be more than welcome on his part. For someone who couldn’t talk a word of proper English, he communicated quite clearly.

“You bet your sweet ass they’re better at sucking cock than I am!” I said and Steve looked at me straight in the eye, paused for a moment and asked with a flat, serious voice, the voice of someone doing a census:

“You think my ass is sweet? As in, lovely-looking? Perhaps, even, hot?”

“Stop saying shit like that.”

“So you’re just not as good at it as you’d like? Is that why you have this weird fascination and keep saying women ain’t -”

“Not as good at.. The hell.. I do not.. Suck.. Cock! Period!”

I made it pretty certain then that the flustered red on my face was not war paint but blood past its boiling point. But Steve just had to try my limits on the subject:

“I knew you were weird, I just didn’t know you hadn’t come out of the closet yet.”

“Come out of the what?” I asked and saw my fist involuntarily punching him in the face. A split second later Steve thought it was time for some kind of psychological evaluation.

“See now that’s typical behavior of repressed sexuality. You have a problem opening up to society as a homosexual man, so you become defensive, try to look like the dominating male figure, while in fact you subconsciously hitched a hike with an outspokenly gay man - in a milk truck no less - and just a moment ago admitted you’re worse at sucking cock than most women. And that’s why you punched me, because in this soul-searching quest you are too confined by your own-”

I punched him again, and this time it had the desired effect. He stopped talking shit and looked at me through half-open wary eyes, probably mindful that some things, and especially things concerning Bobby Barhoe’s manliness were better left unsaid for a good rea-

son that involved jarred bones and bruises.

I was visibly seething with anger. My male pride had been hurt. I almost felt like a proud elk being stripped of its horns, an elephant without a trunk, or a stud without its junk. It also felt like Ivan was eying me creepily, and grinning incongruously to every mention of a word even remotely related to intercourse, like 'milk', 'butter', or 'hoe'. Before abject terror pulled at my instincts and made me leap outside a truck doing eighty, he turned and said to me with an approving tone, proudly waving a badly groomed finger in the air:

"You talk like man. Ivan like that. Sexy, like a man."

I tried not to think of that as a compliment, or even a comment of any kind.

Steve looked slightly miffed, sitting somewhat uncomfortably, nursing his jaw. It looked like the last punch had left him a purple-coloured souvenir. It's only reasonable then that he must've unwillingly disconnected his mouth from his brain when he said:

"I hope you are not developing a thing for me, because I'd have you know I'm not into-"

I was about to punch him a third time in that exact same sweet bruised spot and if God

was a proponent of applied justice, I would have broken his jaw with the added bonus that that would have probably made him shit up for the rest of the ordeal, when I felt something with the apparent magnitude and force of a giant metal claw tugging at my left shoulder. It was Ivan who said:

“Memphis. We here. Look.”

And I turned and saw the sign that said ‘Memphis NEXT EXIT’. I saw the bleak unattractive greenish scenery that reminded me of mosquitoes and moonshine, and I was instantly overcome with agony, because the dreaded moment had arrived. We were about to meet Eileen. Which reminded me then to finish what I had started, and punch Steve in the face. A moment, a grunt and an expletive later he was complaining:

“What the fuck was that for?”

“That’s for starting this shard business with Eileen.”

“A close, intimate relationship. Female softness of heart. She’s the best candidate.”

“You might want to meet her before having an educated opinion first.”

“I’m sure you’re overreacting, just like with the whole homo thing.”

I only had to slightly give him the eye, and he fell silent again, looking the other way. He then said with conviction:

“I’m pretty sure saying she’s crazy and denouncing your relationship is just another way of coping with the fact that you’re a homo-”

I’m not a violent man per se, and it definitely says something for a person when he’s so eager to punch people in the face and break their legs, but in Steve’s case, I would bet he could get the Pope mad enough to beat him to death with a bible. Before there was time to choke him to death, Ivan effectively disarmed me with but a few words of very special meaning:

“So, who is going to pay Ivan by butt-sex now we here?”

I think my genitalia shrunk to microscopic levels instantly, and my anus clenched itself airtight. I looked at Steve in terror and he simply smiled back, impervious to what the words implied for my gender. Impossibly, trying to ignore the inevitable I smiled back as well and thought that staying alive had its good moments, and its rape moments. This looked like a rape moment. And the funny

thing is all I could think of was Nirvana and Kodak.

* * *

Ivan waved his goodbyes as enthusiastically as a little Russian kid who got vodka *and* tickets to a bear fight for Christmas. He was holding a small wad of cash in one hand, and his smile shone with the radiant intensity of the finest soviet dentistry had to offer, which is to say not very much unlike nickel.

“‘Buy’ butt-sex! Jesus, what a horror. I thought he’d rape me and you’d just sit by and watch!”

“Would you have enjoyed that? It’s understandable to have a fear of penetration.”

“Steve. Seriously. I don’t want to hear that kind of bullshit. For the last time, I’m not a homo.”

“Nobody is. Not the first time. You’re just experimenting. I can grok that.”

By that time I had mastered my instincts and even though a proper response would have been a punch in the face and a kick in the nuts, I was content to sigh and get on with the job at hand which seemed a lot more

likely to test my limits than hearing Steve's rants about me being gay.

"Just.. Just ring the bell."

Steve shrugged and rang the bell. We were standing in the front porch of Eileen's house, a three-story typical southern mansion that reeked of money. If I closed my eyes I could almost hear "Ol' man river" and smell the corn. A moment or two passed. Nothing happened while we waited. I was looking at the old, thick wooden door idly. Steve rang the bell once more. Still, the buzz didn't come. So we exchanged a couple of knowing looks and I looked under the door mat while Steve picked up a couple of plant pots and looked underneath. Nothing. No key. Steve said:

"Maybe she popped out for a while."

"'Crazy' Eileen Novorski does not just 'pop out' for a while. Crazy people, at least Eileen-crazy people do not 'pop out'."

"Why?"

"Because she's agoraphobic, among many other things."

Steve's face froze in a blank expression while he was trying to connect the dots. Failing miserably, he asked nonetheless:

“So she’s on a wheelchair?”

“What? No, no. She’s scared of crowds. I thought you went to college.”

“Business major. Minor in arts. Can barely spell my name, actually.”

“I see. Well, something must’ve happened to her.”

“Maybe she’s taking a dump.”

The intercom buzzed right about then and I heard Eileen positively - and quite literally so - mad with excitement:

“Papa-Bear! Is that you suggah?”

“Yeah, honey-bunny, it’s me. Will you open up now, please?”

“Always, my love! Always!”

The intercom spewed some static as she hang up. The door buzzed and I pushed it open. We got inside and a powerful smell assaulted me: the smell of a shitload of money. The large entrance hall was just as I remembered. Stately, sparkling clean, filled with incredibly expensive luxury items chosen solely because of their price tag. There was this wide staircase that led to the upper floors, all marble and carpet. Pretty standard stuff for a cotton mogul like Eileen’s father.

Steve was taking in the scenery, seemingly rather anxious all of the sudden and threw me a look I could only think of as very constipated:

“I’m having this weird feeling,” he said and started searching his pockets.

“You need to go to the bathroom?”

“No, no, that’s not it. There’s something about this place that just doesn’t fit.”

“What do you mean? I know the tiles look all wrong but it’s the tapestry that’s a bit off”

“Not the decor. I actually think what it lacks in finesse, it makes up with a few warm personal touches here and there,” he said while putting on some kind of talisman that looked like a couple of badgers getting it on.

I couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“Really? I actually did some decorating work myself here back in the day. I think it might look better if the panels -”

“Where is everyone? You said her father’s filthy rich. Not a manservant, a helper, or a nurse. A cat litter box right by the entrance, but no cat or hairballs to be seen. See that small table? The vase on it had been moved, but there’s the patina of stale water in it. No one has bothered to change the water. The

ceiling? Take a closer look at that chandelier. Cobwebs. Spun by a genus of spider known as *Zoropsis*, mainly found in the Mediterranean. Not native.”

“I thought you were a business major, not a spider biologist.”

“Arachnologist. It’s a hobby of mine. Never mind that, we’re in danger. This house is tainted.”

His eyes had started to shine with a very unhealthy gleam.

“What the hell are you talking about? Listen, let’s just talk to Eileen and get this over with fast. The clock’s ticking, remember. Where the hell is she anyway?”

And that was when I caught Eileen with the corner of my eye, falling down on me from the floor above, wearing a free-fall jumpsuit, arms outstretched looking like a flying squirrel on drugs, ready to clench me into her death-love-grip. I barely had time to freeze like an idiot at the inane sight of her, so I couldn’t dodge her in time (which would have been an instinctive reaction, no harm intended really). She simply fell right on top of me and we both fell on the floor. I was pretty certain I heard something crack, and while I

tried to breath again, I heard Steven's voice carrying the unmistakable markings of someone on a cocktail of psychedelic drugs:

"Ninja assassins, man! They're everywhere!", he said and took a few steps backwards, his back always facing the wall.

"No, that's Eileen, Steve. Steve, this is Eileen. Eileen, this is Steve," I said catching my breath and made the introductions as best as I could considering I was being smothered in kisses, lying helplessly on my back.

"Papa-Bear! And uncle-bear, too! Do you remember, how we went sky-diving last time? I suited up, and jumped all the way down from the, just for you! Look, I even have a parachute!" she said and pulled the string, causing the parachute slot to pop open with a fizz before starting to slightly ooze out of its bag and on the floor, quite without reason.

"Well, good thing you opened it in time then, right?" I said trying to sound approving, even as I tried to squirm away from her. I took a look at Steve and it seemed like he was starting to develop some sort of real mental issue. He was hugging the wall, mumbling something inaudible and had the look of a wide-eyed deer frozen by a cou-

ple of approaching headlights. I managed to stand back up after a while, Eileen continuously expressing her endearment, handling me like a stuffed animal and calling me 'booby-woompy', 'etch-a-sketchy' and 'orgasmatron two', among other things. Before I could find a way calm her down enough to try and tell her why we were there, Steve finally blew a fuse and lost his marbles as if Eileen's condition was as catchy as the Ebola virus:

"It must burn! Quickly! There's very little time! They're coming!"

For a moment, I thought some real danger had him tripping balls, and peered outside a window.

"Falconi's men?"

"No, the Ninjas!"

I was wrong. I sighed.

"Steve, seriously. Say, let's have a drink. Something stiff. Laced with sedatives?"

"There! Look!"

"What? Where?"

Steve pointed. I looked. He kept pointing, and I kept looking. I couldn't see jack shit. There was nothing there to see other than rich folk stuff.

“Steve, there’s nothing there. I see nothing.”

“Of course! You can’t see Ninjas! That defeats their whole purpose! They’re invisible, didn’t you know?”

I was about to punch him again just as a stop-gap measure, when I saw Eileen had quickly acclimatized herself to the added craziness: she was doing her best ninja impression, with a length of the parachute wrapped around her face as a mask, wielding a three-pronged candle holder like some sort of dagger, dancing around, blinking wildly and generally looking very much unlike a ninja.

I realised I now had two, instead of just one nutcases to handle, and they were helping each other turn me into one of them. I tried to fold Steve back into some kind reality that might not involve invisible ninja assassins. I grabbed him by the shoulders and unglued him from the well, trying to say something that made sense:

“Maybe you ate something bad on the road? That sandwich? Maybe you put some mushrooms in that one, for the taste I’m sure. Or maybe peyote? That’s kind of the same

ain't it? I'm not being judgmental, I'm sure you can handle your addiction."

His face looked like splitting for just a moment. He then blurted:

"No chance! Peyote tastes like rabbit pee, that sandwich tasted like snake dung, I'd know the difference! Or is it the other way around?" he said and Eileen hove into view with an aerial kick that managed to overturn a small *commode* (that's rich-folk lingo for cabinets). It also cost me my meager grip on Steve who just snapped at exactly the wrong moment.

"They're here, man! We got to torch this place! Let me go man!" he said, kicked me in the nuts and ran away while I collapsed in agony, seeing bright spots of many vivid colours and what might have been the faint image of a nun wearing a bikini and shorts. As I lay down on a Persian carpet feeling my balls declare their independence, my gaze unwillingly locked out of focus at what must've been an original Trego, and had this had happened to someone else, I'd find the coincidence quite charming.

Eileen was all over me in the blink of an eye. Her eyes looked watery already and she

shrieked right into my ear with the overtones of a caring nympho:

“Oh, Bobby! Bad uncle-bear kicked you in the naughty bits! I’ll kiss it better, Papa-Bear!”

While it might’ve been a welcome change in pace, I had to gather my wits, so I motioned a definite no while I felt blood circulation slowly return to the aforementioned bits.

I still lay there panting though, unable to fathom how I’d put myself in a situation that involved a crazy woman, a recently acquainted bona fide shaman able to summon spirits in possession of a definitely disturbed mind. It really felt like a balls-to-the-wall moment. I felt Eileen do something really awkward to my hair and then I saw she was tasting it, an all too well-known dominating her features. I knew then I needed to get up, knock some sense into Steve, preferably force-feeding him some of Eileen’s leftover meds that were bound to be found around the house. The developments though, outpaced me, when Steve came into view shouting:

“Don’t just stand there! Grab the woman!”

He looked every bit as mad as a mad scientist of native American heritage would, complete with his feathery hat on and wildly un-

kempt hair. Eileen was still hunched right beside me, tracing the carpet with a finger, probably unable to understand why there were no puddles ripping outwards from the fluffy sea.

“Steve, for god’s sake, will you calm down?”

“No time! I turned on the gas! I’ll torch the fuckers, don’t you worry. All it needs is a sparkle, and this nest of evil will be burned down with a cleansing fire!”

Once more in my life, I felt I was on the forefront of modern psychiatric analysis and treatment. What made things a little different, a bit more urgent and a lot more dangerous than what mental illness professionals faced (more aptly, blabbermouths with a degree and a all-you-can-eat LSD buffet at work). I knew that gas was notoriously known for a tendency to make things explode in flames. So I just used, plain, simple, hard logic to try and put things under control before it was too late. I simply told Steve what I thought of the whole situation:

“Steve, you are one stupid fuck. There are no ninjas, you’re just freaking out on ’shrooms.”

“I’m not freaking on ’shrooms, man. It’s

real, you just can't see them because you aren't attuned. They're really very devious. Don't let that pink suit fool you, man."

I tried to picture such a pink, fiendishly devious ninja for a moment, but thankfully I failed. I tried to make Steve see thing my way:

"Okay, let's just pretend this place needed some cleansing, and you went and turned on the gas in the kitchen. But you didn't disconnect the safeties, did you?"

Steve held up a handful of nuts, bolts and valves that looked very out of place. I kept my cool and asked him without trembling, at least not visibly.

"What about that sparkle Steve? You'd have to light it up somehow, man. You wouldn't be that crazy, say lighting up a match now, would you?"

And then I heard Eileen's syrupy voice coming from the direction of the kitchen:

"Papa-bear? Why didn't you say your tummy was empty? I could've cooked you your favorite, honey apple-pie with salmon and turkey eggs! And you forgot to put some real food along with that tin-foil in the microwave oven, silly Bobby!"

While I tried to make sense of that state-

ment, Steve said the most sensible thing I had heard out of his mouth in quite some time:

“Just run!”

I had this awkward sensation tingling inside my gut. Time seemed to flow much more gently suddenly. And I think I started running like some kind of wild animal that sees the fires approaching, consuming everything, and flees. Only for some inexplicable reason, I wasn't fleeing. I wasn't running outside the house. I ran inside the kitchen, and saw Eileen happily glued in front of the microwave with the tin foil inside, waiting for the clock to reach zero. In the sparse few seconds that I envisaged I had yet to live, I grabbed her by the waist and carried her outside like a brat about to get a thorough beating.

I wasn't paying thorough attention but I believe she was laughing her heart out, flapping her outstretched arms like we were head-showing a very cheap production of *The Valkyrie*.

As I passed through the open door, I could see Steve running in front of me, and realised his athletic scholarship wasn't just some bullshit he'd made up. I saw the courtyard, and

beyond that I could see the path leading to the road, and when I felt this giant hand push me up in the air with an urgency that belied its deadliness, I realised the bird's-eye view is highly overrated and quite unpleasant if one does not possess the ability to land safely.

A fraction of a second later my ears were ravaged by the sound of the explosion that had propelled me and Eileen into the air. I had just enough time to think that it was a really shitty thing to die about a day earlier than you were supposed to, right before my face connected with the dirt horribly and everything went pitch black with a terrible thud.

* * *

When I came to, I opened my eyes tentatively, half-expecting John the ghost to greet me with his car's key-chain in hand, and an endless array of parked SUVs blocking the view to my Taurus, forever and ever. Instead, I was cheerfully greeted by Steve who had conveniently propped me up against an apple tree which looked like it might have been as old as the one that led to the discovery of gravity (a non-trivial force which I could

vividly remember having challenged with little success).

“So, how are you feeling?”

The list of possible answers was easily narrowed to just one:

“Blown away?”

“That seems normal, since you were in fact blown away. Still, you’re in one piece.”

I instinctively went about finding out whether that was indeed the case, and when all the body math checked out I happily concurred that indeed I was wholesome. I actually felt great. I thought it must’ve been a miracle that I hadn’t even broken a single bone. It was a most welcome turn of events, surviving a gas explosion intact. So much in fact that I felt compelled to ask without worry:

“Where’s Eileen?”

And then I saw her lying flat on the ground, her hair curled up around her face, tangled like she had just washed her face. She looked insanely serene, and that pun was not intended. She really looked peaceful. Like in a deep sleep or.. The thought just flashed across my mind like it was being stamped with the words by a really fierce customs officer, and my mouth moved of its own:

“Is she dead?”

And then I heard this really warm and sensual voice coming out of nowhere with crystal clarity, as loud as a thought:

“Right here, Bobby.”

I pride myself in thinking that I have extensive experience with using my eyes to look at things. Nevertheless, I was unable to see Eileen’s lips move, not even by hair’s breadth.

“I’m in here with you, Bobby. Don’t be scared,” I heard her voice in my mind and I knew she was telling the truth.

Steve was putting together some twigs and sticks on a small pile, when he said as if on cue:

“Yeah, it worked. There was this slight side-effect though. It’ll wear off once we’re done.”

What the words implied instantly made my brain sent powerful signals across my body, urging me to go ballistic. Holding my head with one hand I could feel my pulse grow stronger and stronger, to the point where if someone pricked me with a needle I’d probably explode. I heard Eileen’s voice sweet and calming, as if everything was right as pie:

“Don’t worry, Bobby. It’s only temporary. I won’t be a bother, you’ll see.”

Somewhere along my mind there was a battle being fought between the impartial, calculating, cold forces of the logical parts of my brain and the mushy, animal-based subconscious mind that always believed it knew better. Beaten time and again, just this once it had won over and its uproar was translated into words coming out of my mouth:

“Damned if I’ll be, but I believe her.”

Steve looked up to me as if frogs were spewing forth from my mouth and he just blurted:

“I was not ogling your ass when you were unconscious; that’s just something troubled spirits might say when outside their bodies, you know because they’re confused, can’t tell their ass from their elbow usually. I really wasn’t; Cross my heart and hope to die. Indian scout’s honor.”

“You weren’t doing what?” I asked but I never really meant to know anything about what he might’ve been really doing, ever.

I could see the fire trucks and the sheriff’s office had done their part, and had extinguished the fire. The mansion had turned

into a very big piece of charcoal, and we were safely and quite pertinently almost half a mile away, idly sitting under a tree, looking as innocent as any picnickers. The mansion was pretty much far down the road, so there weren't really any bystanders or eye-witnesses, and that only meant it would merely be a matter of minutes until someone noticed us and thought about coming around and start asking questions. Steve was probably on the same train of thought when he said somewhat hesitantly:

“Shouldn't we be, leaving? I mean, I don't think you're exactly on good terms with the boys over there.”

“Even though I should just tie you up on that tree with a five-gallon of gas and a blowtorch and write ‘I LOVE TO WATCH THEM BURN’ on their forehead, I won't. And yeah, you could say I avoid law enforcers like the bubonic plague. Yeah, it's time we make ourselves scarce.”

“What about me?!” I said and knew it wasn't me saying that. I covered my mouth with one hand in shocked surprise, while the other one was on my waist adding to a very feminine body posture which must've looked

very ridiculous and gay, perhaps much to the chagrin of Steve who paused and turned around looking at me like there was overwhelming evidence of something weird going on. He sighed and said:

“Eileen? While he was out, we had a talk. Don’t do that, it’s not polite.”

“You were going to just walk away!”

Steve was motioning slowly with his hands, as if that would calm her down. I was standing there very much like a statue, blinking erratically.

“No we just now decided we should leave. No reason to get upset. We’re going to carry you to..”

He looked at me with a helpless expression. I focused on just one name and curiously enough I was able to say it as well:

“Mama Adele!”

“Mama Adele!” echoed Steve quite unconvincingly with a half-witted smile.

I suddenly could move again as if some invisible cords had just snapped. I flexed my muscles as if they had been brand new again, and then I dutifully proceeded to lift Eileen up and carry her on my shoulder. She was a lithe little thing and she wouldn’t be a bother until

we could get down to the road and maybe hail a cab. Steve looked a bit worried though, so I asked him:

“What’s on your mind?”

“How are we going to walk around carrying her around like that?”

“Oh, that? Just pretend she’s my wife to be.”

“And does that making it okay for her to be unconscious?”

“Sure it does. It’s kind of a tradition around these parts. As the saying goes -”

A grin formed on my mouth and I cocked my head slightly sideways before I said in an exaggerated southern drawl:

“Knock’em down, bag’em up, knock’em up while sheriff’s outta town.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. Besides, I’ve done this before.”

“With whom?”

I sighed and tried to look as bland and blank as possible with little success when I said:

“Eileen.”

“Oh, I see. So there’s quite some past between the two of you.”

“Yeah, you could say that. By the way, what was that shit inside the mansion? What the fuck where you tripping on?”

“Oh, that was just part of the ritual.”

I think I frowned really hard when I heard that, almost trying to connect one eyebrow with the other. I was inclined to ask Steve about his thoughts on the strategy of preemptive strikes in general, colloquially known as ‘shoot first, ask questions later’, and in this particular instance ‘punch first, then punch again’. But somehow I felt it would be a very counterproductive thing to do, at least until this situation with Eileen had been resolved. I’m pretty sure my teeth made a grinding noise when I said:

“You did this on purpose?”

Steve cleared his throat and settled into a calm, even voice. It was what could have passed as the voice of a narrator in a boring documentary about the use of poultry in ballistic forensics. Speaking from experience though, it was just Steve, indirectly admitting he was a huge asshole:

“Part of the ritual involves letting the spirits run wild, and free. Best way to do that, is make you act like yourself, speak with the

heart if you will. Normally, we would have spend weeks together in the wild, hunting, bonding, perhaps bathing naked in ice cold streams, with nothing but the cloudy sky for a roof and our knives for shelter. The light of the stars would have shone in our souls, and our spirits would mingle with the Father Wind, the changer of all things not set in stone. And you would learn to feel the currents of Mother Earth flow within you, all living things as one force, separate but not divided, unique but not alone. And your spirit would be ready then. But because we had to do this real quick, I improvised and nearly killed us all. It worked better than I expected.”

“You’re an asshole, Steve.”

As we reached the side of the road, I saw a sign right across the other side advertising cheap food, strong coffee and liquor, and I quote: ‘fit for pharmaceutical use’. I was genuinely surprised then to see Steve wet his lips with his tongue, and look at me with an expression that verged on what I believe mental health professionals (yeah, the overpaid quacks) call bipolar disorder. The left part of his face was contorted in a jarred grimace, the

kind of mess that happens to your face when you realise you've put yourself into a situation that can only result in abject, petrifying horror or death-of-the-soul (kinda like visiting the in-laws or watching the eight o'clock news).

The other half, his right half, shone with the intensity and brilliance of a miniscule sun, as if the skin was made from the same stuff as the stars (which - technically speaking - is of course true), the same kind of face that an alcoholic makes at the first whiff of anything ending, or beginning with 'ethyl'.

He started then to put his one foot in front of the other, when he stopped and looked at me once more.

"I'm.. I am, a bit thirsty. Parched, actually. Don't you think we deserve a drink? Just a refreshment." he said with a fake hoary voice.

Even though I was carrying Eileen on one shoulder, I managed to kick him in the nuts right about when he was about to cross the street anyhow. I looked at him and saw the universally recognisable, painful expression of a man feeling a little smaller.

"That was for before. You can get a drink when I'm alive, the job is done, and Eileen is

back where she belongs.”

And then I think my left slapped me in the face, probably because I ended that sentence in my mind with “back in her crazy ass” and Eileen was left handed.

“See? You need a drink too, you just won’t admit it. Like the fact that you are actually attracted to members of the same -”

“You’re getting us a ride to Mama Adele’s, and if you try and finish that sentence the way I think you intended to, I’m gonna make sure you’re reminded of that dead horse of yours.”

I think he tried to laugh while on his knees, trying to stand back up, still in pain. He asked:

“You’re just pissed off, I get that. But you need me, and besides; you wouldn’t do that kind of thing.”

“No, I’m just gonna make sure you experience some non-consensual animal sex firsthand.”

He blinked, vacantly staring me, not being able to connect the dots.

“Gonna horse-rape you.”

“Okay..” he said and started looking up and down the road, while I couldn’t wipe the smile of my face because I wasn’t sure it was

me or Eileen who had actually said ‘horse-rape’.

I was getting the impression that Eileen’s spirit was somehow different, yet the same, from ‘Crazy’ Eileen. Just without the craziness. It somehow felt right, kinda made me feel a little bad too. But all in all, I felt quite optimistic even though I had less than twenty hours to live, the spirit of my ex-wife trapped in my body, and rested my hopes on a ghost and a shaman with a drinking problem. Who wouldn’t think to themselves: “How on Earth could ever, things be any worse?”

* * *

Mama Adele had laid out a really delicate tablecloth, the color of blinding white. A small feast had been laid out on the table, and the overpowering smell of freshly baked cornbread filled the small, homely kitchen. Steve was sitting opposite me, hesitant to start eating, constantly flicking his gaze between Mama Adele, me, and his plate. I was playing around with my fork, trying to appear as I was ready to start eating any moment now while in fact I was classifying the pota-

toes on my plate according to size, shape, and complexion (an old habit I inherited while doing time in prison - it really helped with trying to not think about the showers).

Eileen's body was upstairs, comfortably lying in bed. Even though I could use a bit of a nap myself at that point, there was very little precious time to waste, and Mama Adele did not help things by insisting that we sat down and had supper. When she saw Eileen was out cold it seemed as if someone had pulled away the world under her feet. We told her half of the truth: some kind of trouble, the mansion burned to the ground, Eileen knocked unconscious, safe and sound but in need of rest.

She'd known the line of business I was in and that I've had some shady dealings in the past, and that her father wasn't exactly a virgin in the domain of law-breaking, so she knew that whatever it was he had gotten her into, a hospital would be a bad idea.

God bless her soul, she grudgingly took her in, on two conditions nevertheless: one, that we'd sit down, eat supper, have some coffee, a nice long talk and perhaps a couple of beatings. Two, if Eileen didn't wake up soon, she'd put a curse on me so vile, that I'd wish

I'd never been conceived, much less born, and so evil, that'd make the devil and all his minions look like pussies (these were, to my recollection, her exact words).

She had the relevant experience in the ju-ju crafts and all sorts of dead animal parts, as well as all the spunk and the ferocity of a really old black lady that had raised Eileen like she had been her own. Her dry wrinkled face nevertheless sported piercing cougar-like eyes, and if looks could kill, hers would have been a weapon of mass destruction. I noticed she was eying me with just that kind of a look, and while Eileen inside me urged me once more to tell her the truth, before I could open my mouth and speak a single word, she motioned me to stay silent, waving a bony arthritis-swollen finger and saying:

“Robert Eugene Barhoe, you’ve got lots of explaining to do, young man.”

I was about to point out that I was only thirty-three and consequently, according to national averages, not even middle-aged yet, but my cautious instincts got the better of me, and I simply braced myself for the beating which was probably where this would soon end.

“First of all, who is this Indian? I don’t like him one bit. I think he’s a queer. Just wait and see.”

Steve shot me a look of surprise, like a rabbit popping up from his hiding place only to find out the hunting season is still on. He opened his mouth to speak, but Mama Adele still had the advantage and it didn’t look like she was going to give it up anytime soon. She put up one hand with a warning finger that made us pause and watch as she unbuttoned her blouse with the other hand, slowly and decisively.

Normally the sight of a - probably senile - old woman undressing would have been met with urges and pleas to just stop, but this was Mama Adele and I dared not. Steve on the other hand was trying to politely look away, without appearing positively horrified at the thought of seeing any sort of tits that had lost any meaningful function since before the moon landing.

There was no other choice but to look away. Somethings are better left unseen, and this here was a case of things that cannot be unseen. It was primal instinct that made us flinch and shy away from her bare breasts.

A frying pan connected with my head. Mama Adele then said:

“That was because you’re a son of a bitch. And him?” she said pointing an accusing finger at Steve, her breasts juggling and bobbing like an flag made of jello.

“He’s definitely queer. You’d never dare look at my breasts and I’d try and kill you for it, but any real, hot-blooded man, couldn’t help taking a peep at Mama Adele’s tits,” she said and sat upright in her chair, smiling with all the pride a former professional, well sought-after milkmaid could command.

Eileen kept shouting a singular, persistent ‘no’ inside my head, but I found the courage (and made the mistake) to somehow defend Steve from this atrocious show of lack of any sort of reason, and failing horribly when I said:

“He was just trying to be polite! Please, Mama Adele, button up, for God’s sake. What would if he just stared, like some sick rapist?”

Steve me gave a startled look, and I saw his eyes filled with the gleam of mounting horrors, his face broken like a man who knows he’s lost a battle even before it has been fought. Mama Adele was adamant in

her belief and said so with a bang of her hand on the table, her voice craggy but fierce:

“He’d be a devil-worshiping pervert straight from hell! But at least, he’d be a man! This one’s just as gay as Mary Poppins. Believe me, I know. My last husband was gay, and I didn’t know it until our wedding night, God bless his soul.”

“You got married? And then he died?”

I ineffectively tried not to sound as if these two facts were actually somehow connected. Fortunately, Mama Adele seemed too focused on her tale, actually sounding a bit nostalgic:

“Last spring. He avoided my trappings of sweet love like a fly would a spider’s web. Even when I finally cuffed him to the bed, he couldn’t get it up. He wouldn’t even look at my breasts, or say something sweet about my ass. Gay as a peacock. God bless his soul.”

I swallowed with some difficulty. The old woman certainly had been strongly opinionated in the past, having called me a ‘beelzebob’ and a ‘a peck of a cock’ among other less colourful and not as endearing terms. But it looked like she had finally grown really old, and thus, really weird in many ways, to the point that some courts would probably even

deem she had lost her marbles for good. ‘Just like Eileen,’ I said in my mind and quite without expecting to, I picked up the jar of water and unloaded its contents on my head. ‘I’m not crazy!’ she said inside my head, and I could feel her recede to a silent corner at the back of my head, as if she was suddenly holding a grudge against me.

Steve was looking at me as if I had just won a wet T-shirt contest. Perhaps he was trying to make some kind of signal the way his eyes seemed to flicker and roll furiously, but since I wasn’t very fluent in eyeballing lingo, he only managed to roughly convey the general idea of someone constipated.

Mama Adele had buttoned her blouse when she gave me a remarkably constrained look:

“All the heat gotten to you, Bobby?” she said, and tore up a leg off the roast chicken all of the sudden, careful to chew on just the thick, brown and red crusty skin. I replied while acting as if nothing strange had just happened and cut myself some meat off the chest.

“Yeah, well, it’s hotter in hell, right?” I said and Steve kicked himself back into mo-

tion trying to speak with an alarming sense of first-hand knowledge on the subject:

“Funny you should say that, cause actually it’s not as hot as it’s cracked up to be.”

I tried to kick him in the nuts to shut him up before he would say anything to deteriorate the already tenuous atmosphere or broach subjects that would only lead to more questions; I failed though, wildly flailing my leg as if something horrible was chewing on it. Mama Adele’s curiosity was suddenly piqued and she stopped chewing, and started asking the weirdest kind of questions:

“What would you know about hell, queer boy? Last I heard, it’s not just some tourist hotspot, you can just waltz in and out.”

“There are ways to see, hear and feel without being there. One must only be attuned with Mother Earth.”

There was this strange sudden turn in the way they looked at each other. Something had changed; they looked like a couple of gunslingers, carefully measuring each other as if there was going to be blood soon. I leaned back on my chair and unconsciously tried to keep my distance.

“So, you’re Alabama?” said Mama Adele.

“What makes you think I am?” replied Steve with a frown that Dirty Harry would find hard to emulate.

Mama Adele put down the chicken leg, and reached for the large table knife. I watched Steve slowly but deliberately inch his hand to the large fork still stuck on the chicken. Mama Adele said then with an unusual and rather haughtily manner, in a something that sounded very much like gibberish but would prove to be otherwise:

“Ke-tche wake-na la-wonke a-kenai ute-na ke cho-wa demo-na-neka?”

Steve’s eyes went wide before they narrowed to the point of being indistinguishable from a pair of dark-skinned slits. He said then without being able not to sound surprised:

“You speak the Lost Tongue. Ha-tche koi-noi wa-na-neka cho-de?”

“You sound surprised, shaman.”

“You’re not who you say you are. You’re gowa-na-di-tche,” Steve said sounding relieved but rather wary at the same time. His hand was now at the fork.

“Au contraire, little spirit guide. I am Mama Adele. And so much more than you’re able to comprehend,” she said and then I felt

Eileen inside me come to the forefront of my mind and take control of every muscle, fiber and bone on my body. I think I shouted something like ‘the fuck you are bitch’ and then the next few moments turned into what could only be described as a pretty impressive show of how old cutlery can be given new life by putting them to outstanding use as lethal weapons. Plus I was surprised to learn that my body could move like, well, like a god-damn ninja.

Mama Adele lunged at me with the table knife, aiming for a good clear cut of my throat. But everything was suddenly felt like we were underwater: her movement was slow and sluggish, even for an eighty year old woman coming at me for a knife, she moved like she was surrounded by jello. And so was Steve, who had picked the fork up and was bringing it down with quite some force from what I could read in his ridiculously taut face, which looked more and more like his real problem was a bad case of constipation. To make matters worse, the fork was still attached to the chicken.

While my body moved in its own ways, in ways that Eileen was probably to thank for, I

had all the time in the world to think about what had just happened, seeing as everything seemed to move barely a notch faster than a Jewish snail on a Sabbath.

First of all, Mama Adele had this little weird moment of speaking in tongues, along with Steve who maybe had the bigger picture here. Then Eileen's spirit took control of my body at what must've been a very fortuitous time, because I don't think I could have dodged that knife fast enough to maintain the ability to swallow without getting wet *every single time*.

Not only did I dodge that knife, but I actually craned my neck backwards in a graceful move, with the knife missing me by no more than an inch, and then I thrust the table away with my legs. Even as I fell, I saw my hands extending to touch the wall, and leaving my body lying horizontally in mid-air, between the table and the wall, with Mama Adele realising she had missed and giving her knife another swing, only this time she was apparently - and this was a disturbing and painful thought - aiming for my balls.

With the corner of my eye I could see Steve finally realising the chicken was still

hanging by that damnable fork, and he was duly making some very clumsy efforts at separating the two: he looked very miffed about it though, I'll give him that, and even as he swung the fork and the chicken above his head looking like a world-class hammer thrower, I could see he was quite frustrated but also determined to literally, pull it off.

All that sitting back and watching the fight unfold in front of my eyes like a cheap B-rated film, did nothing to hamper what Eileen was doing with my body. We were quite literally two people in one body, so while I craved for some pop-corn and soda to watch the action, Eileen was making the action happen.

It struck me as odd, that while there was this apparent struggle to the death between the three of us, I felt calm and relaxed, as if this was happening to someone else. From a logical standpoint, there was really nothing I could do, so watching and fretting about it wouldn't be of any help.

So I just watched, as Mama Adele ripped my jeans open with her knife right at the seam of the crotch, missing the holiest of holies by a curly hair's breadth. No worries then I thought, and abruptly saw the room

spin, watching the ceiling give its place to the floor and then the ceiling came into view once again, only this time my knee had connected violently with Mama Adele's face and I was surprised to find out there were so many cheap dentures still in the market.

Not only that, but I also put my hands deftly on the floor, kicked out and away hitting her groin, and then before she had time to even breath, I had managed to coil myself like a spring and then use the momentum to snap back upright, putting all the extra energy into a left-handed fist I swear could have knocked out a hippo on a rampage. Unfortunately though, she wasn't a rampaging hippo.

I know I felt her jaw crack and the force should have been enough to snap her neck. It was a killing blow, for sure. Whatever Eileen was doing with my body, and she was doing it extremely well, she didn't mean to just stop Mama Adele: she was trying to kill her outright. The problem was that Adele, or the gowa-na-di-tche as Steve had called her, wasn't on the same page.

The hook sent her reeling off the table, but somehow she used her hands like a fourteen year-old gymnast and turned the punch into a

somersault that send her almost flying across the kitchen and a few feet away into the small living room where the TV was still on, showing a very familiar guy with wiry hair smiling on a beach wearing silly red shorts and surrounded by a plethora of large boobs.

Steve was finally able to pull the fork free of the chicken. When he talked I noticed that his mouth moved and I couldn't hear a thing. I half expected to hear everything slowed down and sounding bad-ass or perhaps like an amateur satanic ritual, just like when your Walkman is running low on batteries. Instead, I heard myself as clear as day:

"You had your chance, bitch. I'm gonna put a whole a new meaning on elderly care," to which Adele replied with a toothless grin, licking her lips with what I'd wish wasn't her real tongue:

"Mama's got a brand new bag o' tricks, bitch," and then she came at us with super-elderly speed, knife in one hand and a very heavy-looking glass vase in the other.

I couldn't see what Steven was doing since I had focused on Adele. I stood there motionless as a stone pillar, and I saw in that same slowed down vision Adele coming closer and

closer at an alarming pace.

A part of me wanted to duck, run, sprint away, make myself scarce, slide under the table and magically disappear, faster than possible, preferably at some point in the past. Another part of me wanted a sawed-off shotgun loaded with some double-aught buckshot, and an itchy trigger finger would be happily supplied by yours truly. I do not consider myself a violent person who believes armed confrontation is the best way to resolve a clash of interests, but seriously, the bitch tried to cut my throat and then my dick. She'd be so full of lead that the she'd become Radioactive's Man best dead buddy, at least until the next reboot.

But I did nothing of the sort. And Eileen seemed to be doing nothing at all, while I could clearly make out the reddish glow in Adele's eyes, as well as the blinding sheen of the knife in her hand, which was certainly pointed the wrong way, and was certainly past the 'I'm just fucking with you' range. Which was a troubling thing, considering that the large, heavy vase had been launched, and the smart money was that my face was the target.

I thought that something had gone horribly wrong in a very small amount of time, and Eileen's spirit had suddenly remembered that it had let some sort of spiritual stove on, and had duly and without warning left everything hanging, without extending the slightest courtesy of returning control of my body to me, or at least killing the screaming bitch first and *then* doing the equivalent of laundry.

As I saw her toothless, gaping maw grinning with the excitement of an easy, assured kill, I also felt my body swiveling to the right from the waist up. I arched my back slightly backwards and saw the vase in all its glory from a very prestigious point of view, flying right past my nose, spilling very tiny droplets of water in its path.

Only a foot away, Adele's hand was already half-way through its downward stabbing motion and the knife wasn't missing. She had actually jumped in the air with bent knees, adding her weight to the force of the stab and presenting a somewhat smaller target. That's what it all looked like from my point of view, but I would be willing to bet the proverbial farm that this whole mess of a fight looked like a cheap parody of '300', with

old ladies instead of Spartan soldiers.

Still, it looked real enough when I suddenly swooped under her arching arm with a superbly fluid motion and punched her straight in the nose with the back of my hand, while with my other arm I blocked her strike and gripped her arm in a vice. It was superbly executed and though I know nothing about martial arts, I instantly knew this would have looked great on Jackie Chan film. There was though, a small mistake that complicated things at the last possible moment and gave Adele a fighting chance, and that was a plain and simple, standard knee-in-the-nuts move.

First of all, I was in pain, and even though Eileen was in control of my body, I could sure as hell feel it reaching every inch of my body, spreading like a wildfire from the groin outwards. Secondly, I had little time to reflect on why or how Eileen's spirit had proven to be so adept at unarmed combat, but I was pretty sure that it had been conditioned in a woman's body because the way I moved left the precious stones quite vulnerable to someone with a cause.

While I reflexively released Adele's arm from my grip with one hand, my other one

reached for my nuts, a reflex that never served any purpose other than leaving one unable to block any kind of hit, unless using one's head counted.

As I started to slowly but surely fall down on my knees in an ironically dangerous example of the saying 'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak', I saw the sinister look on Adele's face and thought that it all felt suddenly very much like game over, with no credits left and all the pocket money gone, forever. I saw Adele's knife hand swooping down from a corner of my eye, going in for my throat once more, not to cut, but to stab.

One of her legs was about to meet my jawline and her free hand was just standing there, looking somewhat left out of the whole action. On a closer inspection, having nothing else to do while my body was unable to save us from a deadly stab and the many others like it that would probably ensue, I noticed her hand had gone slightly limp. And then I saw in great, shining detail a pitched fork squarely stuck between her forehead and an eye that seemed to be incredibly soft and squishy.

The other end of the fork was connected

to Steve's hand, which in turn was thankfully still connected to the rest of Steve. I felt the pain numbing my senses, and the time flow normally once more. I was panting from the exertion feeling too weak to even attempt to get up, while Steve kept uttering the same kind of gibberish from before, the fork in his hand glowing with a bluish, white-hot intensity that seemed definitely wrong.

Adele was now frozen in place, her knife lying on the floor. Steve's veins were jutting out like someone had run a thick cable through them, and he was generally looking very fierce, pissed off and quite certain that Adele was a bad person, seeing how he kept trying to twist the fork deeper into her skull.

A moment later, she threw her hands into the air felt on her lifeless, arthritis-ridden knees, but not before she could speak with a venomous quality that reminded me of snake bites and show-biz journalists:

"Ka-che-tne, ka-weka-te, boy," she said and slumped on the floor, appearing to be, for all intents and purposes, dead as a dodo.

Steven was panting as well, his face marked with the signs of incredible effort but immense relief as well. I felt I could try using

the table as something to use as a standing aid, and did so with moderate success, while the pain receded with each passing moment, turning into a numbing sensation.

There was some silence while Steven pulled up a chair and just sat there, looking at the floor, his long hair in front of his face waving slightly by the wind of his breath. He reached for the inside of his jacket then, brought out his feathery hat, unfolded it and put it on his head all curled up still, looking shoddy and wrecked, as if someone had been carrying it in a pocket this whole time.

He looked at Adele's body with a degree of disdain that could only be comparable that shown towards a pile of dog poo, and said with a gloating roar:

"Who's the queer boy now, bitch?"

I felt the enormous sorrow in Eileen's spirit when she said inside my head:

"Now I remember everything."

Speaking for myself I said:

"What do you mean everything?"

"She means everything, man. Every single thing," replied Steve whose hard gaze fell solely on the old woman's body lying on the

floor, looking inappropriately gruesome with the fork sticking out of her forehead.

“What does that even mean? For starters, what the fuck was that all about?” I said with just the right tone of indignation considering I had almost died. That was the third time that day, and the sun hadn’t even began to set.

“Ask her,” said Steve with a weary voice.

Though thought is advertised as instant, it does take a little time to formulate in a thing as rudimentary as the human brain. In that time, Eileen had already spoken to me, saying the exact same thing.

“Ask him.”

I sighed. I sounded a bit confused, and understandably so I would believe, when I said with the slightest hint of ennui in my voice:

“She says, I should ask you. And you say, I should ask her? Is there possibly a way for you to sort it out and just give me the gist of it when you’re done?”

My eyes caught the mess on the table, and I singled out the single salvageable thing: the chicken. My stomach made all the sounds usually associated with being starved, and then some. I sat down, dug in, and ripped a wing off the chicken. I immediately started

munching away like someone set to enter into the Guinness World Book of Records as the human eating machine.

Then I heard Steve say:

“All right. You know, it’s a bit complicated.”

I sucked the soft bits of flesh still stuck around the bone joints and said after I swallowed and while I reached for the leg:

“I can handle complicated, so long as it’s not trying to stab me.”

Eileen had gone silent inside me, but I could tell she was listening.

“Some of the things, you might not like. Some of it, I’m pretty sure you won’t,” Steve said looking thoughtful.

My stomach was churning like the Atlantic Sea, and I let out a small, rather polite little burp before replying:

“I don’t think personal preference is an option. If it were, I’d taken my chances with Falconi.”

“Right. Where should I begin?” Steve asked rhetorically.

“The start is always a good place,” I replied smartly and smiled encouragingly.

“No, that would be very confusing. I’ll start with something that’s been bothering me for a while.”

“Yeah, well?” I said, and though I had some suspicions, I couldn’t believe it even when I heard it from his own mouth:

“Well. Here goes.. I’m gay,” Steve said with a bright smile, I choked on a chicken bone and almost died, for the fourth time that day.

* * *

I was sipping at some sludge that Steve had made, insisting it was coffee, and though a large array of scientific tests could factually prove he was telling the truth, I could not think of it as anything other than a cup of swamp water with some mud thrown in for flavor. Fortunately for me, he made lousy coffee but perfect Heimlich maneuvers.

We had been talking for the better part of an hour, old Mama Adele still lying on the floor since no-one had bothered to even move it out of the way, just for the sake of appearances and good taste. I’d learned that there was some solid reasoning behind that as well.

Some of the things Steve had said though still didn't fit, so I asked more questions, expecting some kind of answers. You'd be surprised how more often than not, the answers bring about more questions.

"So who turned Eileen into a crazy person?"

"Mama Adele was the agent, that's for sure. But she was just an instrument. A tool. Someone else was behind that. She, it, whatever you want to call the go-wa-na-ditche, was doing it on behalf of someone else, for sure."

"And Eileen is in fact this powerful guardian spirit?"

"Yes, it is clear to me now, as it is painfully clear to her. She's an aka-ne-wha-dhe, a guardian of the spirit-world."

"And you're gay? Really, gay? I mean, like, you're into men?"

Steve sighed and rolled his eyes before answering with some hesitation:

"Yes. I like men. Sexually."

"How come you're not wearing leather and feathery hats and that kind of.. Oh, I see."

He smiled and nodded, twiddling his thumbs with some nervousness. I had to

know so I asked:

“You’re not into me, are you? I mean.. I can’t say this, but do you -”

“Get a hard on when I see your ass?”

“Sweet Jesus and Virgin Mary, don’t say that!”

“I don’t, Bob. I was just messing with your head. Can we get on to the important stuff now? Like why was Eileen caged by that demon?”

“So, you’re saying you’re not gay?”

“I’m saying I don’t have the hots for you, man. Just get past that, and focus, please?”

“Yeah, okay, I can stop thinking about you might have been thinking about my ass.”

“Good. What has Eileen been saying to you?”

“Not much. She’s pretty withdrawn. Feels like she’s in shock. So, she wasn’t really crazy?”

“No, not really crazy. That was just her imprisonment spell. A lock on her spirit. Even someone as powerful as her needs time to realise she had been living under a spell for decades. Played like a puppet, and by none other than the one person she felt cared the

most. Must've been like a back-stab through the heart."

"But she's not really Eileen then either. At least not the Eileen I knew. Hasn't called me papa-bear either since she's been inside me."

"I guess not. Though some of her, the real Eileen, must have been part of that persona that limited her true self, the Eileen you knew and married. It's not something airtight, something deterministic."

"So, whom was I married too for two weeks?"

"Two weeks? That was the entire duration of your marriage. That's not even a honey moon."

"By Las Vegas standards, it's like half a lifetime. Yeah, I know what you're thinking, and this might sound like something a cheap son of a bitch would say, but hear me out. I was young, rash, and adventurous, and had just done this job at a small but profitable motel. I had gate crashed this wild party where anything seems normal enough, and while I was drunk off my mind, mostly on the feeling of success of a job well done, I saw Eileen wearing a silly red hat, painted blue, and wearing a bikini made of less cloth than the

standard handkerchief. I just felt I had to do papa-Smurf before I died, so I used my charm on her and before I knew it, I was wearing a ring, and singing the Smurfs theme, doing 80 in a rented Lincoln convertible headed for Memphis to meet my in-laws.”

“And that’s how you got married? How come you didn’t run off when the drinks wore off the next morning?”

“As I said, I was feeling adventurous, and rash.”

“Her father was pretty loaded, right?”

“Well, yeah. That might’ve played a small part. You know, base human instincts like greed can turn a good man into a shadow of his former self. Plus, at first I found the whole craziness kind of charming. And the sex was awesome. Weird, pretty fucking weird at times, but awesome.”

“And then what happened?”

I slapped myself hard on the face, and went rigid. Then Eileen took over and she didn’t sound very happy about what she could remember, in lucid detail:

“I’ll tell you what happened, mani-chi-kwa, spirit guide of the Alabama. Bobby here, sweet ol’ Bobby, took advantage of my

weakened mental state, and led me to believe he really cared. Like this dead bitch here who had been my captor and jailer for all these mournful years. Let her spirit be carried away to the void, when the time of reckoning comes.”

I placed my hands on the table, and felt Eileen’s anger pulsate through my veins:

“I searched inside this man’s mind and soul, and found out some shred of love for me was true. But his wickedness overcame his better human nature, and wealth blinded him. That was why he took off with whatever he could find in that safe, and why he has to repay me for this act of mine: Bobby Barhoe, I forgive you. I only feel loss and sorrow for the mother that bore this child you call Eileen into this world, for she had a sweet soul, and was an innocent creature. But the father.. The father must burn.”

Steve looked rather concerned and wary suddenly, fearing that a guardian spirit to say such thing was perhaps going to far in the pursuit of justice and spiritual balance. He asked then:

“Surely aka-ne-wha-de, you have been wronged terribly and justice must be served,

and balanced restored. But we killed this demon's host, and you're awakened and free. What good will come of that burning that you speak?"

"Mani-chi-kwa, you are an example to your people and your tribe. But you are but an infant, a small child caught in a terrible wind. I fear I have been too late to wake. I have to thank you, and even Bobby here, for what you started. But do not make the mistake and think of me as a plagued human spirit anymore. I am Aka-ne-wha-de, and I shine brighter on the lonely path each soul must take."

With that being said, I was released from her grip and felt a great burden fall away from me. I tried to talk to her, but I felt nothing. She wasn't there. I sounded a bit panicked when I said to Steve:

"Did you know this would happen?"

"Wild spirits such as hers are fickle, and rarely converse with mortals so candidly. We should be thankful that she shared all that with us."

"But, I don't feel her inside me, at all. Is that normal?"

"I do not know. Perhaps she has returned

to the spirit world. Perhaps she roams.”

“So, what does that mean? Was she serious about burning her father? I mean, Eileen’s father? Novorski, anyhow.”

“I can’t say.”

“So, where does that leave us with the shards? I mean, doesn’t all this count as extra? How many more do we need? How do we get into the after-world?”

“Easy now, Bobby, take a breath. You could be collecting shards from ants, and mice, and even rocks. But then you’d need a lifetime. That’s why I thought your best bet was Eileen, a living, breathing human being, who seemed to love you truly, and freely give her soul. It looks like I was both wrong and right at the same time.”

“How do you mean?”

“The guardian’s spirit saw the good in you, and the ritual I performed allowed her to free herself from her bonds, and find shelter in your body. But her true self lay dormant, and didn’t wake up until she had to face the demon, the gowa-na-di-tche. That was when she realised who she really was, and what had happened to her. It seems that now she might want to do something about set-

ting things right before returning to the spirit-world where she belongs.”

“Alright, that’s cool. That’s her thing, happy to help and all, but where do I stand? I mean, that’s really fucking mind-blowing, guardian spirits, demons, spirit-prisons, Eileen not being crazy, me somewhere amidst all that supernatural mayhem, but Falconi will have my ass, and you know very well that no matter how long and hard I run and hide, my days will be considerably shorter and miserable to the point I’ll likely just show up and let him put me to the ground sooner rather than later. So, I’m asking you? Are we good? Are we still on, like John said? Are we going to get to the damn parking lot, bring John back do the job and get Falconi off my back, or have I almost died four times just for the laughs?”

And right about that time, I saw Eileen, the flesh and blood Eileen, looking like she’d been run over by a truck. She was walking again then, which meant she had woken up, and there was some spirit inside her. I saw Steve reach for a large spoon, idly sitting inside a bowl of gravy and then I heard the sound of Eileen’s laughter, which I was hon-

estly glad to hear:

“Put that down, Steve. It’s me, the Aka-ne-wha-de, you don’t have to make a complete ass of yourself.”

“How can I know you’re not the demon who robbed that flesh once more for himself?”

“Steve I thought you were good at this sort of thing. One, the ‘demon’ as you call him wouldn’t have to wait all this time to get inside this body. And two, which is I’m really surprised you forgot but I’m eager to believe is due to the shock and stress of all this, you killed the host so you send the spirit to the spirit-world, and now he can’t come back unless he’s summoned. Anyone did any summoning while I changed bodies? I wouldn’t think so. I mean come on, no one watches Supernatural? Buffy the Vampire Slayer? You know, that sort of nonsense?”

“You talk funny,” said Steve sounding like a ten-year old boy who wanted to know but feared to ask.

“Yeah, well that’s because before I wanted to feel like Aka-ne-wha-de again? You know, sound bad-ass, really unforgiving, regal, that sort of thing. Plus, I really wanted to make Bobby here know I was serious. The hard-ass

guardian spirit that won't take any bullshit is something to be feared and respected, while Eileen is just, well, Eileen."

"So, how should we address you, great guardian spirit?"

She looked spiteful, youthful and bossy all-in-one. Her face was familiar, but this was a whole new other person.

"First thing, stop sucking up. Second thing. Bobby, are you sorry for what you did to Eileen?"

I kinda hoped that sort of a question wouldn't pop up, but I that's just my string of luck.

"Wha-at? Well, yeah, of course. No, really. I mean, she.. You.. She, I'm pretty sure it was she, meaning another person, well technically the same but-"

"Stop behaving like an ass. Are you sorry?"

I paused for just one moment and said just what really came to mind:

"Yeah. I am. She wasn't that bad. Or that crazy. Maybe she was that crazy, but I shouldn't have taken advantage of her like that. That's just like stealing candy from a baby, and believe me, I've been there, I've

done that, and it's not all it's cracked up to be."

"I'll take that as a yes. You can call me Eileen. I'll call you Steve and Bobby, or whatever I damn well please at the time. Are we cool?"

Me and Steve nodded with some apprehension before I added:

"Yeah, positively, but listen, I'm in a bit of a spot, I'm sure you'll have noticed by now. So could you lend a hand, or should we just be on our way 'cause the clock's ticking and-"

"I don't like that tone. I didn't hear you say 'please'."

"Right, sure. Please?"

She beamed with a smile and said:

"I was going to anyway. We're in this together anyhow. I'll scratch your back and you'll scratch mine. It's only fair."

"So, what do we have to do?"

Her happy face turned into an angry scowl when she said:

"Burn this bitch. The daemon host's body can't return to mother Earth. And then burn my father."

My propensity to see the larger picture and innovate came to the fore when I pro-

posed:

“Do we really need to resort to something that base? Couldn’t we just shoot the poor bastard?”

Steve couldn’t believe I’d suggest such a thing and stabbed me with his eyes.

“No, we need to burn him,” she said and sounded quite adamant about it.

“Why so much hatred, Eileen?” asked Steve trying to straighten out his sorry-looking feathery hat, while I took the opening and popped my own much more pertinent and important question?

“I can think of some reasons, but to tell you the truth I don’t care so much about the sorry son of a bitch. I haven’t killed a man yet, but there’s a first time for everything. How long will that take? I need to be at Topeka tomorrow, and have John ready to go at an epic vault with a blowtorch.”

“I’m fascinated by your willingness Bobby, and though I should be concerned, I think that’s instinct talking. You won’t have to kill anyone. Not a human, at any length. Novorski’s a demon, just like she was,” said Eileen and tasted the sour cream before spitting it out on the floor.

“No shit?” I asked with genuine interest.

“No shit,” she replied as she opened the fridge and rummaged about.

“So, what does that mean?” said Steve, still trying to save what little remained of his feather hat.

“I hope you can help me find out. And I can help you get your friend John back. Isn’t that what you want?” Eileen said, and unscrewed a bottle of iced tea.

“Well, yeah.”

“Don’t just stand there then, burn this thing.”

“What, right here?” I said, feeling awkward.

“Do you want the neighbors to say a few last words?” she said and gave me the eye.

“I guess not.”

“Good. I’ll watch some TV while you go about it. Then we can visit Novorski.”

“Watch TV?” I said, thinking I had simply misheard, and in fact she had said ‘become one with mother earth and all the living spirits’ or something along these lines. Her answer flattened me:

“Yeah, ‘Married with children’ is on.”

I thought that there was something seriously wrong with the world at large at that point, but then again, who was I to judge people, never mind guardian spirits of the after-world no less.

“Never mind. Pretend I didn’t ask. Hey Steve, any ideas on how to torch this thing?”

Steve’s eyes were out of focus, lost somewhere between the TV and Eileen, gazing something far beyond mere mortals eyes. Or it might’ve been that he was just woolgathering. Nevertheless, he managed an answer of sorts:

“Yeah. With something flammable. Like, gasoline. Or maybe bourbon. No, not bourbon.”

“You have a drinking problem, you know that, don’t you?” I said, put a finger in the bowl of sour cream, tasted it, and found out it was delicious.

* * *

Sometimes, the human mind has the propensity to eschew the really important stuff that pass through it, oblivious to the larger picture, indifferent to what’s going on

beyond it's comfort zone. Instead of being troubled by a crisis in the economy and a future without seeming hope, it fiddles with a remote, not being able to choose between American Idol and Hell's Kitchen.

There's a very good explanation for that and it usually has to do with the way these matters are disembodied, intangible and nefarious. What I cannot see and I cannot touch, is probably of no interest to me, and definitely somebody else's problem if it comes to that. And that's why, I couldn't think I had about twelve hours to live. That's why it didn't bother me that I had already almost died four times. Because I couldn't stop staring at Eileen's ass.

I'm not sure whether it was good old fashioned women's intuition or the fact that she was a guardian spirit of the after-world, but she turned around and gave me that knowing look that was definitely meant to silently but effectively convey the general idea of being roasted on a spit, *alive*.

Then I heard this deafening burst of static from the PA that didn't seem to trouble by anyone else but me. I'd bet some good money that the announcer was wearing a Bud base-

ball cup and his actual name was ‘Bubba’. He talked in that giggly, wholesome, isn’t-this-fun kind of way that deserves a punch in the face *and* a kick in the nuts, and the echo from the PA system was pure gold:

“Well, isn’t this fun folks? Now remember, the “Knit that Sucker” contest begins at 9 o’clock, along with the Bellevue Home for the Elderly Cotton-ball Machine Technicians’ ball right by the riverside. Now y’all have some ribs, courtesy of NovoCotton and Co., and definitely don’t miss the “Married my Cousin” event coming right up!”

The Country Cotton Candy fair did not involve any kind of cotton candy whatsoever, despite its name. It mainly involved lots of people consuming large quantities of left-over soon-to-go-bad pork ribs, of whom most were drunk or definitely in the process of becoming so. As a bonus, most of them seemed to be relatives in all sorts of ways that were illegal in twenty-three states. On top of that, a significant percentage of the crowd seemed eager to perpetuate the tradition of keeping things in the family, and was eagerly working on making more relatives in situ, and in public.

We were there because Eileen had made a couple of calls. I thought she would just swoosh about in some sort of tasteless ghost and frighten people out of their minds to get the info we needed, but it seems that in most cases just picking up the phone and lying your ass off to certain people with a straight face works miracles. Some people actually believed we were calling on behalf of the Elvis' Secret Moon Base Society, and a few of them could actually remember having attended one of balls. On the moon.

However, all that bullshit on the phone paid off and we learned that Novorski was sponsoring the fair - a highly prestigious event considering the amount of vomit already visible - and had been scheduled to appear right about midnight, say a couple of words to the gathered crowd and then probably go back to counting cotton balls in his well-guarded warehouse complex, complete with electric fences, a minefield, and a piranha-filled moat, with trained alligators for guards, riding sharks armed with lasers and rocket jets. That last bit of information could not be easily confirmed and was a bit doubtful, seeing as it came from a member of the lo-

cal press, the same one who had insisted that he had attended an Elvis' Secret Moon Base Society ball, on the moon.

The fire at the mansion hadn't been on the news, and his private secretary hadn't said anything about canceling the appearance, though she had sounded very interested hearing about the Midget Awareness program going on in St. Cuthbert's and the annual Ms. Crucifix pageant. It seemed then that plan B was our best choice. Any plan with followed by the letter 'B', usually is preceded by a plan A. Which is to say, the fair wasn't part of the original plan.

I'd popped the obvious idea that maybe Eileen being his daughter and all could just waltz up his office, ring the bell, get inside, say 'Hi Dad' and stab him repeatedly with something sharp until he bled to death. But that wouldn't work because know she'd awakened, she was giving away a spirit aura that anyone properly attuned could see just by looking at her. Even though it sounded a lot like 'I've got this awful headache', and 'I can't do this lying down', she was pretty convincing when she tuned her aura to the visible spectrum as well, and I was surprised to know that

the human eye could actually see all those colours without going blind.

With that idea being unfeasible, Eileen come up with a novel approach to the problem, based around a simple, easy to follow strategy that had proven extremely popular in the past, with the foremost memorable example being the Charge of the Light Brigade: Just barge in his warehouse office, kill him, and burn him with some gasoline or any other flammable material, except perhaps bourbon. It's useful to remember that even though the Light Brigade went down in history as a self-sacrificing act of heroic courage, sadly none of the men involved were available for a comment at the time of their honourable death.

Being a professional thief, one of the job requirements is being able to examine the many minutiae that comprise a plan and make an assessment of the plan's viability and chance of success, based on experience and preferably dependable, current information, taking into consideration the chance of acceptable losses.

Having taken all that into account, and after prolonged and thoughtful deliberation, the idea of barging in Novorski's office could

only be compared to a village of natives in the Amazon waking up one day, and deciding they were the rightful rulers of the entire world, before promptly setting out to conquer everyone else armed with sticks, spears, stones, and the occasional sharp tropical fruit, arguing amongst themselves that the one hiccup in their plan was whether or not their canoes would be able to provide the required logistics support, mainly mangoes and coke leaves.

In other words, it was beyond silly. It was suicidal. So, we'd gone with plan B, which was to kill Novorski - who was in fact a demon, I had to keep reminding myself - right there, at the fair. The where and how remained to be seen. Probably once he had made his little speech. Maybe in some thick bush, while he was taking a pee, or inadvertently while stargazing. We'd have to wing it, and my spider-sense tingled erratically whenever I had to wing things, which had been a lot in the past few hours. So plan B didn't account so much for a plan and ergo wasn't that much better than plan A, but it did not involve sharks, piranhas, trained alligators, lasers, machine gun fire and assaulting what

was in effect, a small fortress.

What it did involve though was somehow getting close enough to Novorski to lure him someplace quiet away from the crowd, doing what had to be done and then burning the host without people getting in the way and asking questions like ‘why are you trying to stab that nice man?’, or hearing the announcer say ‘oh golly, someone’s shot Mr. Novorski in the head! What a show folks, eh? Now, y’all have some of those ribs’. As the saying goes, discretion is the better part of valor. Since my idea of valor was staying in the shadows and creeping silently behind the enemy at his most vulnerable time and spot, that also meant I was a big fan of discretion as well.

It was hot, damp, and dusk had just fallen. The fair was taking place at this large old barge station right by the riverside, where the smell of cotton seed oil mingled with whatever happened to be floating in the river, and the resulting odor was less than agreeable. We were wading through the milling crowds, doing light reconnaissance work, identifying the stage where Novorski would appear, and all the while being careful not to attract un-

wanted attention.

That translated into avoiding the usual hotspots in the gathered crowd, namely blind drinking contests (named so because the winner usually ends up with optic nerve damage), prostitutes (sex workers is a more catchy term, but in Memphis they still call them whores), and alligator fights (popular opinion is that the losing 'gator is turned into women's accessories, but some local news outlets circulated some rather more sinister rumors).

Shorts were the practical attire of choice for women, and since somehow they always looked shorter, and therefore better on women, I had one more reason to stay transfixed on Eileen's behinds as she waded through the crowd, surveying the place and filling in the gaps in the details of our little plan. She turned around suddenly once more and knew I had been focusing my attention on her butt once again. I smiled reflexively without bothering to think this was the new Eileen, and promptly enough I was in a position to try and remember the constellations of the northern hemisphere.

"You go girl!" I heard someone say, and

then I realised that it was Steve who was unfortunately as drunk as a skunk. It seemed like when he said ‘I gotta go pee’, he had actually meant ‘I need to go get drunk as a skunk’, which was perfectly reasonable taking into account that he had a drinking problem (those kind of people are still called alcoholics in Memphis).

If one needed proof of that, all one had to do was take a look at him and notice the shiny, embalmed and thus quite dead skunk he was holding in one hand, the obscenely shaped carrot dangling in front of his nose tied with a red T-string around his head, and last but not least the fact that he had been carrying a ten-gallon beer can strapped on his back, with a regulator valve hanging over his shoulder, wearing nothing other than rubber boots and some boxer shorts sporting the American bald eagle, front and back.

That kinda caught Eileen’s attention and while I certainly wasn’t exactly gaining any points with her, Steve had just lost the whole pot.

“Steve! Where the hell have you been?” asked Eileen turning around and seemingly unable to believe the sight.

“The weirdest thing happened, I swear. While searching the bathroom stalls,”

“There aren’t any,” interjected Eileen, hands folded across her chest, seething with anger.

“Tis, not true, I found a whole stand filled with stacks of cans of piss, so I thought maybe I should give it a go, so I -”

“That was beer, wasn’t it?” I said after having got up, still dusting off my behind.

“Was it? Tasted like rat piss, I think,” said Steve with as much naivete as his face could express wearing a piece of underwear around his head with a dick-shaped carrot tied to it.

“So you’re wasted?”

“What, no, I was just thirsty. And I met these midgets, and we hang out. And they said, you couldn’t drink all that, and I said ‘course I can, I’m a shaman.”

“Midgets?” said Eileen, unable to comprehend, and rightly so because even though she wasn’t herself, she wasn’t mad anymore either.

“Yeah, and then we fought these ninja’s, man. And I killed one, look. Got blood on my skunk.”

“No, don’t do that, not here. Not now, please,” I said and I sighed.

Steve looked at me as if gazing through thick fog, and not being able to see a god-damn thing. He then pointed the skunk towards me and said, apparently confused, wide-eyed and drunk like a wine taster with nowhere to spit:

“Elvis! Man, I love you. Y’know? Not in that way, no. Never. Big fan. Lemme buy you a drink, will ya?”

“I told you he had a drinking problem,” I said and noticed Eileen was looking at Steve with a cold, hard measuring stare, as if deciding whether he should fillet him first or leave the bones on for that extra flavor.

“He’s just the thing we need!”

“I know, you’re right, but please don’t start smiting stuff left and right, just calm down. We’ve got some time until Novorski shows up, no need to get agitated. I’m sure that after a couple of cups of dark coffee and a cold dip in the river he’ll be right as rain before you know it,” I said trying to sound convincing. Hearing the words coming out of my mouth I thought I sounded just like an estate property agent saying to a couple of newlyweds that

the old, haunted house that caught fire back in '89 and is now used as a meth lab by a gang of homicidal junkies is actually a *real steal*.

"Do you really think it'll wear off soon?" she said eying me with half an eye, while Steve was trying to eat the carrot dangling in front of his face, jumping up and down with wild abandon, and naturally meeting little success.

"No, not really," I said sounding rather morose.

"Good," she said smiling, and picking up a caramel-glazed apple from a nearby stand, and motioning me to pay the woman - or man, I wasn't sure - behind it. I rummaged in my pocket, found a fifty-cent, and left it on the stand. I was about to ask Eileen why Steve's drunken stupor was a good thing, when I heard the actually slightly bearded woman behind me say with indignation:

"We don't need no stinkin' negro money. Now git!"

The many ways in which the sentence didn't make sense threatened to bog my brain down in a quest for the unattainable, the knowledge of how people as weird as the duckbill platypus have survived to this day.

Thankfully though, Eileen just pulled me and Steve through the crowd, and said a few moments later:

“He’s gonna be our distraction.”

“What kind of distraction? I don’t understand. Are you talking about that dangling carrot?”

“No. Now pay some attention and stop looking at my ass,” she said and walked us hand-in-hand to a more quiet spot while Steve’s head arched all around him, apparently mindful of all the ninjas.

* * *

Midnight was approaching fast. Eileen had gone to great lengths to explain her idea fully, but somehow I still had my reservations. I always did when things approached the hour of truth, and this was no different a case. It actually was far more important than any job, heist, robbery or con I had pulled off before. She had made it perfectly clear that Novorski, the demon was to be killed and burned, but not before she had a chance to ask a few very important questions.

If we didn't get what we wanted out of Novorski, she had made it perfectly clear that no amounts of spirit shards would open a doorway to the after-world, the Parking Lot of Eternity and John. And that was something that curiously enough had to do with me, not Steve, and definitely not her.

I wasn't sure if she wasn't just playing me to her own ends, but then again I thought Steve had been a fed, which would have meant the FBI's standards were stooping too low, even for the likes of them. Giving her the benefit of the doubt and having no real alternative, I jumped on the wagon and assumed my place, waiting for her signal.

One could have said that things were ticking along with military precision if it wasn't for Steve who was roaming the stands making lewd gestures, not being able to hold his water like a grown-up should, making faces and obscene gestures at passers-by, and generally blending in seamlessly with the rest of the fair-going crowd.

I kept my eyes continuously on him, and part of my job involved keeping tags on him. For the most part though, Eileen had entrusted me with a role that made good use of

my existing set of skills; primarily lying, stealing, and running with the intention of not getting caught under no circumstances whatsoever.

For the better part of about two hours, I had been plying my trade like a pro. First, I tried picking some wallets, but most were devoid of cash, filled with pennies, plastic money, the occasional condom, and the usual NRA member's card. I switched to trying and lift some cash off the various stands, but all I got was some Mexican pesos, some one-dollar bills in half, and monopoly money, which seemed to be legal tender here but wouldn't be any use in the real world.

Had been any other day, I would have called it quits, and gone home to a glass of wine and watch any film at eleven that didn't involve alien sex or Sigourney Weaver. But I had to make it count that night, so I went above and beyond: I raided the money pot of the 'Save the Memphis Armadillo Fund', which also happened to be shaped like a huge armadillo and was placed smack in the middle of the whole fair.

Now, I rarely happen to talk about myself and how great a thief I am, but any profes-

sional in the business would admit it was a damn hard job to pull. And they'd also call me 'an audacious son of a bitch' or in case their vocabulary didn't include the word 'audacious', which is more often than not the case, 'a cheeky bastard'. And that would be the right thing to say, because I did it in plain sight.

It was a basic technique among social engineers (who in Memphis were still known as con-artists), but one that was rarely applicable to the sort of jobs that paid off handsomely. But when the opportunity or the need for some quick cash arose, and the situation allowed for it, robbing people in front of their eyes and acting as if it was perfectly alright to do so worked amazingly well.

All I had to do was grab myself a Cotton Candy Fair T-shirt stamped with the catchy motto 'Now y'all have some ribs' and tape a couple of pieces of paper on my front and back that read 'STAFF', and presto, I was a bona fide fair organiser. All I had to then was walk up to the huge armadillo, lift its bottoms, reach into its innards and grab the plastic box brimming with some real cash, all the while smiling, nodding and waving encourag-

ingly to everyone who happened to venture a look.

I then walked away, and counted the paper money without a care. It took some time but there was a hefty sum involved which proved adequate enough for what Eileen had in mind; and that was making a large, charitable donation to the fair, with the stipulation that the donor had to have a private talk with Mr. Novorski, *in person*.

And that person would be me. Because, naturally, I'm the go-to guy when dealing with demons, evil spirits from the after-world, and all sorts of supernatural stuff that's really bad for personal hygiene. Particularly, I've heard dead bodies go to rot pretty quick and the smell's, well, rotten.

So I had a quick chat with a cheerful old lady who seemed to be the Country Cotton Candy Club's cashier, secretary, president and sole member. When I showed her the money, she had a second or two with herself before shaking my hand as if her life depended on it and assuring me that Mr. Novorski and I could have all the night to ourselves for twenty five thousand dollars, which she wasn't loathe to admit was almost as much as the annual 'Save

the Armadillo' fund raised each year more or less.

It kind of felt like buying the sexual services of a business entrepreneur who had become a male prostitute purely as part of an ongoing market research in an effort to diversify his approach to potential customers, which in fact probably meant that he had a very sick hobby.

It also felt like whatever money people donated each year, the armadillo would still be in need of saving, long past the sun going supernova, and perhaps even after the heat-death of the universe.

Having set the trap, my end of the job was done. All that remained was Novorski's arrival, and then we'd be game.

Steve was participating in a belching contest and though I couldn't hear from that distance, the applause and cheers when his turn came were indicative of his chance at winning. Eileen was also watching albeit from a different angle. She shot me a glance and I shrugged knowingly and smiled. She shook her head and grinned, and I noticed Steve had just stage-dived, still holding his embalmed skunk way up high, as if it were some sort

of tomahawk, an electric guitar, or a combination of both.

Then we heard from the PA, in that familiar, aggravatingly friendly-sounding voice:

“Now y’all put those ribs down, and keep off the hooch jus’ a lil’ while, cause the managers and directors of the Country Cotton Candy fair are proud to welcome our very own benefactor, well-known and loved for his many contributions to the community, Mr. Jeremiah Novorski.”

Nothing much happened, and the usual round of applause and perhaps cheers did not ensue. No-one really seemed to have even acknowledged the announcement, even less so the fact that Novorski had just appeared onto the center stage, prominently featuring right behind the huge, and by now mostly empty, armadillo. That prompted the announcer who had probably been in this kind of a somewhat awkward moment to make a suggestion:

“Now y’all better clap those hands for Mr. Novorski, or the skinny-dippin’ party’s canceled.”

To which suddenly, as if a light bulb had gone off above each person’s head, the crowd responded with a hefty amount of applause,

and a loud cheer. Novorski appeared to smile politely but very thinly so. I'm no expert on demons, spirits, and the like, but I'm pretty sure these sort of events weren't in his job prescription originally, and he loathed every minute of it, especially since it appeared like he was supposed to play the role of the good Samaritan.

Eileen was standing with her back on a weeping willow, pretty much covered by all the low-stooped branches. I could see her features plainly taut with determined fury and a clear purpose in mind. It was one more reason why I was very relieved to not have her inside my mind. There was something about the way she clenched and opened her fists continuously that made me believe that just a glimpse of her mind right at that time would have felt like a floating balloon does in a shitstorm of monumental proportions.

Steve seemed happily enough completely unaware of his surroundings, quite drunk and judging from the very rude body language about to exchange his laminated feathery hat for some sexual favours from what appeared to be a small group of height-challenged people (I believe in Memphis they're still called

midgets). Now, I don't consider myself one of those judgmental pricks but the value for money on that deal seemed horrible, only I couldn't tell which of the involved parties was taking advantage of the other.

As far as I was concerned, Steve was probably having the time of his life, while everything important in my life, mostly the ability to keep breathing, hang by a thread. One could even say I envied him for being so care-free, seeing as the midgets put on his hat and rubbed his belly with cotton seed oil, but they'd be wrong.

Novorski's voice through the PA caught my attention, while most of the crowd kept on about their usual frolicking and lollygagging, and the midgets along with Steve were no exception either. I heard him say in that squeaky voice of his that was just as dreadful as when I had first met him years ago as Eileen's cotton mogul (filthy rich in Memphis terms) father:

"Good evening to y'all, I'm certainly going to enjoy it. I hope everything's going along smoothly, 'cause you know, smooth is fun, up to a point, right? I also hope that Ms. Robinson here, our organizer, has done everything in her power to keep things running along,

like she does every, single, year.. Now, usually you'd hear me say a few things about how important it is to remember to support the local cotton industry, which is to say keep buying everything related to cotton, and especially that worthless cotton seed oil that's only good for gettin' your hands dirty and your rifle clean."

That sounded a bit strange, bad-mouthing his own product. It unfortunately made sense though when he continued after he briefly paused and rearranged his belt:

"But this time, it's a different year all together, so I'd like to take this opportunity to set some things straight. First of all, I'm sick of you people. Don't worry, I'm not talking about Memphis. I'm talking about people, in general. I hate that pestering ability of yours to have hope, even when everything's going to hell like a fast-freight train. Which brings me to the next issue: and that is I'm not who I seem to be at all, and it was about god-damn time things got going, but you won't really mind about that, I've seen to it. Last but not least, Eileen, or whatever you call yourself now, you're in for a shitload of pain, honey. 'Cause you've been a naughty girl and daddy's

real pissed.”

Those last few words in the wrong context could have been interpreted in a slightly perverted way, but when taken face value they kinda got me thinking that plans A and B were both painfully inadequate to deal with Novorski, who seemed aware we were going to be there from the start. And instead of bidding his time, he just literally sprouted wings, grew horns and fangs, a barbed tail, as well as an array of the assorted nasty features usually associated with demons, beelzebubs, balrogs and the armies of hell as portrayed in popular religious fiction. He had turned into the physical form of the demon he really was, and I wasn't sure we could just burn him now.

It was a bit of a laugh actually, realising that all those quaint depictions of evil demons were actually true, but it wasn't as funny when that demon stood twelve feet tall, with an impossibly inhuman but overly developed physique, the stink of rotten eggs and stale blood emanating from him reaching hundreds of feet away, and a very real, shiny, and quite sharp-looking set of serrated bone claws of the sort that make visceral death a most literal notion.

Eileen did not shy away though and stood her ground, looking at the demon with a piercing set of glittering eyes. That meant she wasn't about to start running which would have been my primary, secondary, and tertiary choice (and all subsequent choices, rest assured). She seemed to be grinning, like letting everyone know she was ready to put up a fight right then and there.

That didn't resonate all too well with me, especially seeing that Novorski had turned into a demonic creature weighing probably half a ton, and the ability to kill with a mere slap in the back. Not to mention its breath, which was in urgent need of some mentos (or any other fresh-maker, take your pick, I'm not splitting hairs).

I wanted to help, sure, but I wasn't pretty sure about what I could actually do against something profoundly irrational and monstrous like Novorski, other than bleed profusely in the off chance that he might slip on my own pool of blood, fall on its back, and provide a mildly comedic intermission to the real fight. Because there was bound to be a real fight, and there would be blood. It felt like Mama Adele all over again, the difference

being I felt we were slightly mismatched.

Especially since the crowds kept looking at the demon positively bedazzled, mostly pointing at him without realising what it was they were seeing and quite possibly thinking this was some sort of special event organized by the Memphis Association of Special Effects, which sadly in fact consisted of a twelve-year old boy with a penchant for vampire flicks and half a pint of raspberry syrup in his mom's fridge which happened to look a bit like fake blood, if one looked at it from the right angle, and under the right light.

No-one started to run, scream and shout, or alternatively fall on their knees, pray in despair for deliverance or grovel and offer virgins as sacrifice, both practices being equally probable in succeeding. In fact, I think that the 'Married my cousin' and 'Marty the Memphis Midget is a Mean Mother-you-know-the-rest' events were still going on unabated, judging by the sheer number of beer cans thrown at Novorski-in-demon-form from their respective spots, protesting for Novorski ruining the party.

Steve did more than just bat an eyelid when he saw the demon. He instantly

dropped the beer can he had strapped on his back, threw away the dick-shaped carrot and T-string, and rushed over me, skunk still in hand, while Novorski erupted into an evil uproar of demonic proportions that frankly sounded like someone facing severe stomach trouble. I was idly watching the crowd silently and almost on cue part in half and create a wide path, as Novorski jumped off stage, scaring the - still - living shit out of everyone.

Marty the Midget could be heard, shouting on his own 'Think ya tough? Huh? I'm the Memphis Mean Motherfucker, motherfucker!', followed by shocked gasps from the majority of church-goers who had attended the show in an effort to fight profanity and evil in all its forms, but were somehow still undaunted and even indifferent to the demonic monstrosity that fumed sulfur and sported ember hot eyes that seemed able to peel one's skin by their mere gaze. Perhaps it was because the demon wasn't wearing the customary informative T-shirt based on a tune, like 'Am I evil? Yes I Am', 'This is the Road to Hell', or 'Hell ain't a bad place to be'. Perhaps it was just the fact that these people seemed to act like mind-wiped idiots.

Eileen then shouted something that attracted my attention:

“It’s them! It’s all of them! Their minds have been poisoned!”

“What about them? Who’s ‘them?’” I shouted back while Steve took a ladle off a steamy stew pot still boiling on the “Neil Young & Stew Lovers’ Appreciation Society” stand, fell on all fours and started doing something to the dirt that seemed similar to drawing. His movements and disposition were clear, precise, purposeful. He somehow seemed not just sober, but pumped up. I couldn’t help asking him:

“What the hell are you doing? Aren’t you supposed to be drunk?”

“Drawing. No, well, yeah but not really, no. I’ll explain once this shitstorm’s over, okay?” he said, hurriedly scribbling all sorts of gibberish and weird geometric shapes that frankly looked a lot like something I was fairly certain he had ripped off from Rosemary’s Baby. I thought this was a really bad time for being so nostalgic about a film by Polanski. Eileen interrupted my train of thought with a regal shout, her feet barely touching the ground as she started levitating towards

Novorski with a slow, deliberate pace:

“Their minds have been poisoned! They don’t see the demon for who he really is! They might even turn against us! Stand fast, Alabama mani-chi-kwa, and protect Bobby with your life!”

I would have protested that these folks had very little in the way of brains, ergo minds to poison in the first place, but that thought somehow became something quite irrelevant when I realised Eileen had tasked Steve with protecting *me*, with *his* life.

That did in fact sound somewhat prestigious and certainly made me look like a really important person like all those famous folks who can’t take a leak without someone watching over them in case something bad happens to them, say like a pot plant falling on their heads from a high balcony, or a group of bullets with the intention of using the famous folks as handy inertial dampeners (in Memphis they call that stopping a bullet).

That meant Eileen thought I was some kind of target. And that made me highly uncomfortable, and as was usually the case that sort of thing tended to kick off my run and hide instincts, perhaps the single most use-

ful of the traits passed on from our human hunter-gatherer ancestors (that and the tendency to proliferate sexually - which in Memphis was still called porkin’).

“That’s it, time to split man. We tried, we failed. We can still keep the cash though, right?” I said with the slightest hint of hope to Steve, who had just finished a rough sort of circle on the ground and we were standing smack right in the center of it. Steve looked at me and replied in a very strange way which I didn’t expect or liked at all because it involved *doing absolutely nothing*:

“Whatever you do, don’t do a god-damn thing. Just sit inside this circle on the ground, and no matter what happens, whatever you see and hear, just pretend it isn’t happening. If you don’t do exactly as I say, you will get hurt, die, or worse. Do you understand?”

I nodded my understanding in a perfectly clear fashion that made my neck hurt, and was determined to follow Steve’s advice. Even if every inch of my body wanted to start running on its own, in various mutually exclusively directions, at record-breaking speeds.

My fear was only strengthened when I saw Novorski purposefully stride towards Eileen,

who was silently slightly bobbing up and down in mid-air, radiating a bluish neon light from her skin, as if she'd just come back from a really hardcore rave party where shooting paint *intravenously* instead of just dabbing it on skin was the norm.

The crowd was cheering and yelling boos at the same time, in anticipation of what they perceived to be some sort of UFC match-up the likes of which they had never even thought possible, not very much unlike what a real fight between Mothma and Godzilla would've looked like to a Japanese crowd: Unreal, yet so cool you couldn't resist touching it even if it meant losing a finger to frost-bite. They were stupefied, fatally attracted, and grossly mislead altogether: they threw ripe tomatoes at Eileen who seemed to be putting a lot of effort into resisting the urge to adopt a more vengeful attitude towards bystanders.

Novorski on the other hand had already tramped on a couple of folks unlucky enough to ask for his autograph. He was casually whipping his tail around as if it were some kind of pet making other suffer from its ADHD, and making gestures suggesting lewd

activities that seemed to involve his bifurcated tongue and - thankfully - asexual pelvis.

As some sort of invisible clock ticked away and everyone seemed to be attuned to the dispositions of its hands, I saw Steve had closed his eyes and was repeating the same thing, over and over:

“This was the right ward to draw and I didn’t fuck it up.. This was the right ward to draw and I didn’t fuck it up.. This was the right ward to draw and I didn’t fuck it up..”

That kind of self-assurance led me to believe that Steve might have been the wrong person to assure my safety from this demon or any other threat that involved something more dangerous than a cake fight. My attention was drawn to what sounded like badly-greased chainsaws throttling away at a junk yard:

“Bobby Barhoe will be ours! And you’ll go back to your housekeeping chores!” grunted the demon, who grinned with all the malevolence usually associated with his kind, showing off a couple of tusks that shone sharp like razors. Eileen’s response was immaculately well-thought, original and appropriate for a spirit of her stature:

“Eat shit and die,” she said with a calmness that belied her strength, raised a hand, and out of the clear night sky without a cloud in sight I saw lightning strike at the feet of the demon, with a blinding flash of light and then a sound of cracking air followed by the deep rumbling echo of mountains crashing into the sea that made me think the world was coming apart at the seams.

It was an astonishing show of sheer power and command over nature, an unparalleled tour-de-force that made Eileen look like a heathen goddess of yore, powerful and unforgiving, smiting folks all day long for no apparent reason and them thanking her for it as well. Too bad it didn't actually do anything to Novorski, who appeared to be unscathed through the little wisp of smoke the thunder had left behind. The smile on his grotesque, demonic face had a gleaming quality about it, which implied he was enjoying this immensely. His voice was sticky like tar from a hell-pit:

“That tickles. My turn, princess,” he said and with the speed of world-class sprinter jumping the gun he flung himself towards Eileen with just one flap of his wings and a

giant leap, his arms outstretched and taut, ready to clench her in a swoop of his claws that would leave little to be imagined about what guardian spirit hosts looked like on the inside.

His ferocity was abundantly evident; his supernatural physique left no doubt about the extend of his strength, speed, and agility. He was a demonic machine, bred for bloodletting, destruction and chaos, indeed designed to wreak havoc on human flesh. But there's always flaws in a design, and that fact was remarkably pointed out when Eileen arched her back all the way, hands touching the ground, exactly the moment the demons' claws swept at nothing but air, and then sidestepped him by rolling to the side, avoiding his kicking legs and tail with a motion so graceful and regally syncopated, it reminded me of a cross between Grace Kelly and Nacho Vidal.

As the demon flew past Eileen without being able to hide his aggravation and surprise. He managed to bring himself to a stop after a few yards, and I made the mental note that somehow these things were limited by physical laws as much men as the rest of us. Which was probably a good thing, as long as

they were somehow persuaded to fall from tall cliffs and onto jarred, sharp rocks.

Steve still hadn't opened his eyes, but he had at least stopped reminding me that we the circle around us with all the cursive writing and the weird sex symbols was just a circle and nothing more, and the only thing that stood between us and that thing was Eileen. He did ask though:

"Is she dead? I hope she's not dead."

"No, she's not dead. Have a look yourself. I don't see what the fuss was all about, to tell you the truth. They seem to be keeping it pretty civilised. Couldn't they just do that from the beginning? I mean, what's the danger to protect me from if he's occupied with her? I just don't see it," I said, and when I turned to look around me I immediately knew I had a very big, very stupid mouth, which in Memphis was sometimes called a pie-hole.

"Bobby, I'm not sure why you haven't noticed, but I can hear those snarls and moans, and I can see those mindless people turned into evil zombie undead thralls. Now, if you are refusing to see them, I can marvel at your willpower and I certainly respect it's your prerogative to see things your way, but the fact

remains, there's about at least three hundred zombies coming our way, and all that stands between them and your brain is this warding circle," Steve told me with acute worry in his voice, and the fact that he was wearing shorts with the picture of a bald bird did nothing to reduce the severity of his words. I said the simple truth that dominated my thoughts:

"What can I say? I was watching Eileen. I wasn't prepared for zombie night fever."

"Just stick to what I said. Do nothing. Shut your ears and eyes if you can't stand what your senses are trying to tell you. It should work. If in doubt, it's not happening," he said and closed his eyes once more, this time humming the theme from Rocky.

"It *should* work?" I asked in vain but did not bother to wait for an answer or to press the matter further. What was going on in the background, behind the approaching throng of Memphis folks turned zombie demon thralls, as far as I could tell, was pure mayhem.

Though I didn't have a clear view, I could see fireballs the size of car shooting up in the night sky. Some of the fireballs the size of a car where actually flaming cars, but that was

just a pedantic difference. I also saw lots of lightning, sheets of hail and spikes of ice, flying blocks of stone, as well as giant swirls of water raised from the river and hurled at Novorski. They were swooping, and tilting and turning in the air, with Novorski trying to get his claws on Eileen, while she kept pounding at him with everything nature could provide. Except fire which seemed to be kind of a second home to the demon, seeing as he writhed in red hot and yellow-white flames.

Steve tugged at my jeans at a really inappropriate place, and I thought that being gay and perhaps about to die was in no way a valid reason to try and fondle my private parts. I saw that he was just reaching for me blind, keeping his eyes shut, but mysteriously saying nothing:

“Goddammit Steve I thought you were trying to touch my -”

“Shhhhhh! Listen! Don’t talk! Just listen! Close your eyes, and listen!” he said and acting on his earlier advice, namely to do as he said, I closed my eyes and listened.

And all I could hear was shuffling summer flip-flops across the Memphis soggy river-side ground, interminably coming closer and

closer, their feet meandering at the edge of the circle, their hands outstretched, and quite possibly hungering for brains, or other vital parts. In a rare fit of actually thinking about how things could be worse, I imagined that maybe there existed such a thing as a gay zombie. I didn't dare think about that further. I simply said to Steve with a wavering voice:

"I hear them, Steve, I hear them."

"You do? So I'm not just imagining things! Maybe those ninjas were real as well, then?"

"No Steve, these aren't invisible ninjas. These are zombies, and they're right here. If I reach out my hand, I can touch one," I said in a matter-of-fact manner despite the sheer terror at the thought of touching something that wore flip-flops as if it was a real shoe.

"Yes, yes, I can see those fine, man!"

"I thought you were trying not to look," I said as another fireball erupted in the back-drop, and Eileen flew into view, responding with a flurry of zaps of lightning that made Novorski giggle as if it tickled.

"Well, I peek. But, really, try to hear them, man. Can't you?"

"I can hear Eileen's lightning bolts and mini sheet storms, I can hear Novorski's fire-

balls explode among the trees. I can even hear Marty the Midget still going on about how he once knocked up two twins while sleeping with one of them. What else, do you want me to hear?”

“The ‘choppers man, the ‘choppers..” Steve said, and I heard the feint but characteristic sound of music spreading upstream the river, wading in the night sky. I couldn’t hear any choppers, but after a moment or two, above the snarling throaty sounds of the mindless Memphis denizens that encircled us, I could hear the unmistakable of sound of Wagner’s *Die Valkyrie*, and I suddenly smiled and thought that all this was just a very elaborate film set.

I kind of dismissed that idea when the corn started falling from the sky, horns and other brass instruments blaring in epic fashion.

Thick pellets of corn started shooting out of the sky in wide jets, as if someone was throwing it at us through large hoses. I instantly caught a whiff of garlic, and saw the gathered zombies unable to resist themselves, and opening up their mouths to gulp down as much of it as they could, like a water-starved

man does when it finally rains.

In the background I could see the demon looking surprised, even apprehensive, trying to fly away from Eileen instead of trying to cut her into little pieces like earlier. It was as if he was thinking what was happening was bad for him, and he was trying to escape. I couldn't make a possible connection, until one of the zombies grabbed me by the shoulder and asked me:

"Hey ol' buddy? Mind if get that ladle back? Kinda need it to stir the stew, y'know?"

"Yeah, sure," I replied, completely flabbergasted while Steve started yelling right in my ear:

"It's them! Woo!"

"Who the fuck's them anyway and why is corn falling out of the sky? And for fuck's sake, why Wagner?" I asked, feeling quite irate and definitely believing that some kind of explanation, however illogical or impossible was in order. And as the crowd of former zombies dispersed pretty much in the same way as it had been formed, returning to whatever they had been doing before they were turned into hopefully unwilling minions, I watched as Eileen was nowhere to be seen,

and Novorski had vanished as well, leaving nothing but flaming debris and the occasional cinder of a tree, which weren't that unusual for a Memphis riverside fair on a summer night.

My question wasn't left unanswered for too long, since I suddenly saw the demon form of Novorski being shot through with a couple of harpoon-like sharp things, from which a run of cables seemed to disappear into the night. Not a moment later, the harpoons and the cables flashed electric blue and seemed to sizzle hotter than a melting pot.

Like I had noticed earlier, demons seemed unable to escape the laws of physics, so this one was dropping down fast. The Wagner music was no more when I heard a splash and then the usual hubbub of the crowd which as always, seemed happily oblivious to absolutely everything that had happened, apart from the fact that Marty the Midget had peed his pants, for no apparent reason, and from what I could hear that stirred up some pretty heated debates on whether or not that was legal in the state of Tennessee. Still, there was no sign of Eileen, and that was kind of unsettling. After all, I was only almost knee-deep

in corn because I needed her to help me save my ass.

Steve suddenly cried and pointed to the sky right above us, while I felt the gentle rush of a downwind ruffle my hair:

“Them, man! The Bureau!”

“Feds? But how? I mean.. I’m a dead man,” I said mostly to myself, believing that pretty soon I’d be in custody for felonies committed in fifty-one states (counting the job in Puerto Rico). Once processed and in a federal prison, my life would end abruptly at the hands of one of Falconi’s men. There was no point in running from people who could turn zombies back into regular people by shooting corn at them. Then Steve managed to make me slightly more likely to punch him for mixing thing up:

“Not the feds, man! The Bureau! Look!” he said and sounded positively thrilled about it.

The downwind grew into a real gale, and the stands around us fell over, and some were even carried away, while the few folks who had been sitting behind them, just kept on pretending everything was in place, while I could now feel hot air trying to strip most of

my facial features off my face. I could barely open my eyes but I could still see Steve had done a hell of a job with his teeth, as a constant turbulent flow of hot air was shot on his wide grinning face, his teeth clenched as if glued together and the skin around the mouth fluttering away as if someone was trying to slice jello with a jackhammer.

Then I saw it with my own eyes, and while still unable to explain most of it, the idea that this was actually an elaborate movie set popped back into my mind as the hull of a large blimp became visible as it had just touched the ground, with what resembled a quad of tilting engines coming to rest in an upright position. It looked a lot like the Goodyear blimp, only beefed up, painted jet black, and giving off an aura of being indestructible, even though the damn thing would probably fall right off the sky if a bird with a really pointy beak decided it had issues with it.

Steve was looking relieved, calm, and beaming with enthusiasm. He reminded me of someone who has just had great sex with some twins, followed by a Cuban cigar, a glass of Hennessy, and couldn't wait for the Bay-

watch rerun to start on TV. Then the blimp's cupola door swung open and I saw this tall black fellow pop out, dressed in a black suit, white shirt, black tie, wearing a pair of black glasses coming my way, hands easily visible, his posture cool, and calm, business-like and natural. I was about to ask what the hell this was all about and who the hell these people were, when I saw Steve smile like this was a Kodak moment of pure gold. Then I heard him say just a few dozen feet away from that black-suited guy, pointing at him with a cheesy-looking hand in the shape of a gun, grin as wide as the Panama canal:

“My niggah, Jules!”

The black man in the suit stopped abruptly, and didn't look particularly happy, and definitely not as happy as Steve. In fact he looked like he had been offended somehow, kind of like someone had called his mother an ugly unscrupulous sex worker. He shot Steve a look that said 'don't go there', while he actually said:

“Niggah, please. Do I even know you? What gives you the god-damn right to call a niggah you ain't never even had a threesome with 'niggah', niggah?”

I saw the white of his eyes bristle, as if it somehow shone with his furious anger. I think I cleared my throat before deciding to speak, which was the perfectly wrong thing to do at that exact point:

“If I could just ask a simple -”

“Now who the fuck died and made you king?”

“Wha-at?”

“Wha-at ain’t no king I ever heard of!” he said waving his Magnum .44 around like it was some kind of completely harmless, insignificant object.

“Whaa-aat?”

“Say what again, motherfucker! I dare you, a double-dare you mother- .. Oh, man, shit, I’m sorry. Hey, I’m really sorry, that’s my other job talking. Shit, a niggah can only be so many places at once, right?”

Steve saw the man he had called Jules smiled and seemed to mellow a bit, and took the opportunity to try and set things straight, perhaps making some sense out of all this in the process:

“Well, I know what you mean. See, at one point I was working at this tattoo parlor and-”

“I don’t recall asking you a god-damn thing!” he roared suddenly, pointing the hefty-looking silver-finished Magnum at Steve, who subsequently went silent at once and seemed content to just listen. The man in the suit then seemed to relax a bit. He smiled at me, took my limp hand and shook it saying:

“Jules Caesar, Normal Bureau Agent, at your service. I’m really sorry for the mix-up, I wasn’t briefed extensively. You’ll have to come aboard, as we’re all in a bit of a hurry, aren’t we?”

“Normal Bureau? Not the Feds?”

“No, sir. We’re not in the business of chasing invisible terrorists, thank God. I guess you have some questions, but you will be briefed in the dirigible.”

“You mean that blimp thing? What’s this bureau about? Some kind of men-in-black?”

“What? Shit, no, nothing to do with those alien freaks and cheap-skate postal agents. We’re the ones who keep things normal. You’ll be briefed en route, sir.”

“En route? Listen, where’s Eileen? I need to talk to her.”

“She’s safe with us, sir, already en route.”

“En route the fuck to?”

“Topeka, sir. I believe you need to be in Topeka, is that correct?”

“Well, yeah. And you’re telling me that thing can fly us there in time?”

“You’d be amazed, sir.”

“I’ve seen some pretty weird shit today and I’m pretty tired of seeing amazing things. I’d prefer not to be amazed any longer.”

“Sir, can a rhino dance the waltz?”

“I’ve lost you right there with the waltzing rhino.”

“Well, we sure as hell can make a rhino dance the waltz, sir. Now, please, clock’s ticking and there’s no cure for that. Agent Johnson will ride along.”

“So you do remember?” said Steve who suddenly looked like a kid that had thought no one remembered it was his birthday.

“Shit, niggah. How can I forget? I was just fucking with you, man. Nice job, back there. Hop on,” he said as he led the way towards the blimp, while I kept pace by his side, having given up on my distrustful instincts and eagerly embraced the philosophy best summed up in the phrase ‘got nothing to lose’.

“Well, you got me there, niggah!”

Steve sounded like one of those people who try too hard to be popular with their peers, and only then did I release these two knew each other somehow.

“Niggah, please. Don’t call the Niggah, ‘niggah’, ‘aright? I’m getting itchy trigger fingers here.”

Within moments, we were ushered first inside the blimp. It didn’t look much different than a trailer to be honest, and there were these other guys also in black-suits who motioned us to sit down in two - comfy I’ll admit - chairs. They wore the most expressionless faces I had ever seen, and I half expected them to start doing those pre-flight emergency presentations, wearing life-jackets and showing us how to use an oxygen mask.

But they just sat there like immovable objects, parts of the decoration, rigid and stone-like. Until Jules got on-board and saw them one of them erupt in stomach killing laughter of the kind one cannot voluntarily stop, and soon the other guy followed suit. Jules just looked at them disapprovingly, shook his head and said:

“You two clowns did the whole ‘I’m such a hard-ass I can tow I fucking truck with my

butt-cheeks routine?”

“Yeah, yeah! I mean, the look on this guy’s face..,” one of the suits said and pointed at me, while the other was still trying to stop laughing like a maniac high on laughing gas.

“And you got a bet on it as well? Who’s going to crack first or some shit?” asked Jules with just the right hint of anger-buildup in his voice.

“Like always, man. The standard fifty,” he said, gloating, chewing gum and looking like someone very difficult to genuinely like no matter how many times you went fishing with. Jules seemed to like-minded when he said, tapping that guy’s chest:

“I can make life so difficult for you in the Bureau, you’d be wishing you’d pursued a career as bait for schools of piranhas in the Amazon, or perhaps a target in a shooting range the size of a phone booth. Now you shut it, both of you. And start flying. Did I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the not-so-funny-now-looking guy said and proceeded through a door to what must’ve been the cockpit, while the other guy had finally managed to contain his laughter and closed the door. Within mo-

ments, we were lifting off the ground, and Jules asked me, while eye-balling Steve in a threatening way that perhaps involved non-consensual sex:

“Can I get you anything? Some refreshment, a *drink* perhaps?”

I was about to say I was fine, when after finally having sat down and being able to just let someone else do something for a change, I heard my stomach rumble violently, and realised I hadn’t eaten anything since that morning, and that didn’t even count as a real breakfast humans eat.

Of course, there were are other pressing matters my mind should’ve been occupied with, like ‘Who were these guys? Was Steve working with them? Why? Where was Eileen? Where they telling me the truth? Was this some kind of trap? What did they want of me? What’s with the black glasses at night?’. But it completely disregarded those and filed them under ‘interesting but not pressing’, and instead concerned on getting something to eat. So I said to Jules:

“Is there something like a ham and cheese sandwich?”

He looked like someone who aimed to

please when he replied with an easy question:

“Mayo, mustard or ketchup?”

I settled for some mayo, and when Jules disappeared to some sort of small kitchen, Steve said in a low whisper with an excitement that prompted me to check whether or not he had peed his pants:

“Oh, man, Jules Caesar’s making you a sandwich!”

“Should’ve I asked for a salad?”

“Man, you really have no idea what an honor that is!”

While I did in fact have no knowledge of the honor involved, I was perfectly satisfied with enjoying the sandwich itself when Jules returned with it. Happily gobbling it down, I ventured a fleeting look outside a small window pane, and I was amazed, just as I had been promised: we were flying so fast I could see the lights on the ground below zip past like this was just another freeway, eating away at distance like it was peanuts. I was interrupted by Jules who pulled a chair from a little utilitarian table, sat across me and said:

“Mr. Barhoe. I’ve been asked to do a preliminary briefing. There are some things you must know.”

And then the weirdest shit I've ever heard in my life started pouring out of his mouth, and the worst part of it was he didn't seem to be making it up.

* * *

What Jules told me on those few minutes, made no sense at all. I had questions, lots of them, and he promised that people of a much higher authority than himself could fill me in with the details. All I'd gathered was that there was a war going on. Not on communists, drugs, or terror, but a war with the forces of evil at large. I think I just shrugged, thinking that I didn't really care about that sort of thing as long as it didn't involve me; after all, there's wars going on all over the world all the time. Unfortunately, this specific war somehow did involve me, and perhaps not as surprisingly, Eileen as well.

"It's kinda hard to swallow, I know," he had said with a knowing, almost sympathetic expression on his face. For just the slightest moment, I thought he was referring to the sandwich, but that was just my stomach thinking for me.

I learned Steve had been working for these guys, the Normal Bureau, as an undercover agent taking part in what they called Operation Beetroot. He was positively psyched sitting face-to-face with Jules Caesar, who apparently was some sort of legend in the Bureau. I don't know if that was indeed the case, and what kinds of feats had earned him that sort of recognition, but the look on Steve's face meant he was willing to do anything to get on Jules good books. And I do mean, *anything*.

Somehow all that new information failed to materialise into something useful; for instance, could these guys with all their invisible supersonic helicopters and their oversized zap-guns make Falconi disappear from the face of the Earth, or at least help me open that damn vault without John's help? Hell, I'd even write them a postcard from the after-world if they somehow helped me get in, and then back out.

When I suggested just that, all I'd gotten was two sets of awkward looks, with Jules adding with some hesitation "you'll be briefed by higher echelons". Maybe it wasn't exactly something on their list of top priorities, since

they seemed preoccupied with a lot of weird demonic shit, but it was number one in mine. And I had this very distinct impression that ‘briefed’ actually meant ‘jerked around’.

I heard then a chirping sound from what must’ve been the intercom. A syncopated, synthetic female voice announced:

“Touch down in thirty seconds. Prepare to disembark. Mind the gap. Mind the gap.”

“We’re here. Johnson, wards,” he said, prompting Steve to jump up from his seat like a coil unwinding. He then opened a cabinet of sorts, revealing a large number of what appeared to be very silly hats, the kind the Pope wears. Steve put one on his head, and gave me one as well. I honestly felt we were going to some sort of Halloween party, or maybe one of those extravagant dinner parties held by eccentric rich folks. Jules insisted:

“Just a precaution, Mr. Barhoe. Please, put on the mitre.”

“The what? You mean the hat?”

“These are highly specialized warding devices. They’re a safety measure, and blessed by the Pope himself, hence the mitre.”

“Safety measure against what? Good taste?”

“Demonic entities and incorporeal creatures, sir,” Jules said, and for the first time I detected a very serious and grave tone in his voice. The intercom chirped once more, but this time it was the pilot:

“Anchored, sir! We just got word, we gotta head for Missouri. Another imp infestation.”

Jules pressed the intercom button and replied while pointing a very unfriendly-looking finger at the speaker:

“Don’t you try and keep any as pets like the last time, I’m gonna go medieval on your ass, you hear me?”

“No, sir!” came back the terse, almost frightened reply. He then turned the door handle and let the door slide open. With a quick hand signal, Steve was the first one off. He quickly glanced left and right, as if in some sort of confusion, and gave a thumbs up. Jules then nodded to me, and I got off as well. A warm summer breeze greeted me, and I felt my feet bury themselves in something soft.

The characteristic smell of manure became instantly prominent. Which was to be expected since we had landed on what looked like a cow farm, the fresh cow dung I had

just stepped on being a dead giveaway. The blimp's engines went full throttle a few moments, and it disappeared into the night sky like an imaginary whale, leaving nothing but a faint haze and an imperceptible rustling noise behind it.

Jules urged me to move and I duly complied; he kept right behind me, while Steve lead the way, heading for what appeared to be a nondescript barn. The moon was full, and its light cast a silvery sheen over everything, except perhaps cow dung. A few yards away from the large, half-open barn door, the unmistakable length of a hunting rifle appeared, while the rough edges of a figure that still remained in the shadows could be roughly traced. Steve froze in his tracks and pointed hesitantly at his silly papal hat. The figure took a step forward, revealing himself to be a squat, short, fat old little fellow wearing a farmer's overall and a pair of boots twice his normal size. He shouted then with a voice that sounded like weasels making out in the woods:

“What’s that nigger doing in my farm?”

Jules shouted in response, calmly and clearly, almost spelling out the words:

“Who the fuck you callin’ ‘niggah’, you redneck inbred trailer trash?”

The sudden and violent exchange of insults started and ended right there, when the old man uncocked his rifle and stood at attention, before saluting Jules, who didn’t as much as even look his way. Steve ushered us inside the barn, and before long we were walking in complete darkness.

I heard a knock followed by a dull thump, and then I heard Steve say in poorly concealed agony:

“I’m OK. I’m OK.”

We stopped. Jules distinctive voice echoed inside the spacious barn:

“Stupid redneck motherfucker.”

“I’m a native Indian, sir.”

“Not you, Johnson. That white-trash asshole on sentry duty.”

“That was a sentry?” I asked in disbelief. No one bothered to satisfy my curiosity. Steve was also curious in his own way?

“What about him, sir?”

“What about - Can’t he tell I’m Jules fucking Caesar?”

“We could’ve been fakes sir.”

“Fakes? Why the fuck are we wearing these clown hats for then?”

“Regulations?”

“Fuck that,” Jules said and I heard a clicking noise that soon turned into a whir. Before I knew it, the ground below us was moving, and we were smoothly riding down a shaft on some kind of a platform.

Warm spotlights around the edges of the platform lit up then, while soft hall music started playing. Jules started humming along, and Steve couldn’t resist the urge to do so as well.

“You think you’re a funny guy Johnson?” Jules said, giving off the aura that a positive answer would have been the wrong answer. Steve stopped, lowered his head and kept looking at his feet like a scolded schoolboy, while I was fascinated by the amount of gems hidden away in the various layers of ground, making a mental note to myself to invest heavily in Topeka real estate, provided of course that I’d put all this nasty business behind me soon and live as well.

After a minute or so had passed, and while certainly the illusion of riding a perfectly normal elevator kept my mind adequately numb,

I couldn't help asking Jules:

"Uhm, how deep is this?"

"Quite deep, sir."

"I meant, is this going to take long?"

"We're almost there sir."

"Why do you always build these sort of things underground?"

"I don't follow you, sir."

"Why not build a secret base on a mountain mesa? Or a deserted island? A huge flying base perhaps? Or an enormous ship?"

"Oh, you mean that. Cost, sir."

"You mean this is cheaper?"

"Everything beyond a thousand feet is US property."

"Everything?"

"Even the god-damn dinosaurs, sir."

"Dinosaurs?"

"You'll be briefed about that."

A polite little 'pong' was heard and we came to a very soft stop in front of a dull, plain looking steel door. Jules cleared his throat and said in a very loud and clear fashion:

"What's a niggah gotta do to get some respect around here?"

To which promptly, as if actually responding to his voice, the door opened and revealed an immense well-lit space, with large balconies the size of plazas extruding from the rock, rigid superstructures extending from the ceiling downwards to scary depths, and uncannily curvy gangways crisscrossing like a metal knot. It was perhaps unsurprisingly filled with people wearing the same stupid-looking hats as we were, milling about on foot, Segways, bicycles and even skates. It somehow reminded me of LAX on a bishop's annual convention, only this complex appeared to be a lot bigger. Jules stepped off the platform and showed the way, while Steve said with a proud smile, walking right behind me:

"Bobby my man, welcome to the Rabbit's Nest."

"Is that supposed to sound cool? 'Cause it's a lame name," I said, walking right behind Jules who led the way.

"I know, but don't tell Von Papen," whispered Steve.

"Von who? Why not?"

"Just don't."

"What's he gonna do? Shoot me?" I asked

in a joking manner.

And then I realised Steve didn't answer 'no, of course not, don't be silly, he's not a Nazi or anything like that'. He just gave me a wary look and kept his mouth shut. And then I started feeling nervous again.

* * *

The Rabbit's Nest certainly looked impressive, even though it was in effect nothing more than a really deep and monstrously wide underground well. There were actually buildings sitting atop those balconies, as well as blast-proof doors scattered around the rock walls, large and small. There were all sorts of weird-looking people giving me the eye for no obvious reason, perhaps apart from the fact that I had this very miserable looking face on, feeling groggy, famished, and probably unable to resist the urge to use the bathroom pretty soon as well.

I didn't bother returning those looks, even though I felt I had every right to do so because of the silly hat, which Steve had so many times bothered to correct me on every occasion was called a mitre, and kept remind-

ing me I should definitely not refer to it as a silly hat especially in front of Von Papen whom I was supposed to meet shortly. Something about the whole affair told me it wasn't exactly a social visit.

The name struck me as German; I was corrected once more to learn that he was half Austrian and half German, which further confused me. I couldn't help asking more odd little things that struck me as weird while we kept hopping from balcony to balcony, in a downward spiral ever deeper into the Nest's innards.

Steve filled me in as best as he could, but even he had no clear idea why there weren't any god-damn elevators around this place or why the place had an excessive number of waste baskets that were provocatively empty all the time. He did know though that the floor tiles were a mishmash of colours and types, a genuine mosaic indeed, not because of some flair of artistic design, but because they used dirt-cheap left overs from discounts and sales as a cost-cutting measure.

Jules had kept silent for the entire time, curiously choosing not to participate in my impromptu orientation. I'd noticed he kept

an eye on the both of us, and an especially keen ear on what Steve said, who seemed to think a lot about what he could and couldn't say, choosing his words carefully. That didn't strike me at all as a very friendly work atmosphere. Not only that, but I hadn't seen nor heard of Eileen. When I asked about her Jules gave me a hesitant answer, that she was transferred to a different location for her own safety, but his words had this hollow sound to it.

Now I consider myself a very capable liar, and as such I'm pretty adept at separating the wheat from the chaff; I know when a person is lying out flat, when he's just telling a small lie, and when he's lying like a man in congress does. Jules was talking exactly like that; he wasn't exactly lying technically, but he wasn't telling me everything. What I found somewhat comforting though, was that he acted and talked like he wanted me to know he wasn't telling me everything. And that only helped to tie my brain in a knot, not as large as the proverbial Gordian one, but still definitely a pain.

The further deep down we went, the fewer the people moving about. I could

barely see the actual bottom of the well, but I thought I could glimpse a faint shimmer from below, and at the very center of it, some sort of huge, bulbous shape. I asked Steve then:

“What’s that thing down there? What’s that shimmery thing?”

“That’s the.. lake.” said Steve, who was evidently right about to say something different.

“And what’s that thing in the middle? Some kind of weird gazebo?”

“That’s the.. That’s were we’re going, actually.”

“You folks should really think about installing an elevator or two. I mean, I’m starting to get sore feet. How do you ever get things done around here?”

“What you don’t understand is that this is just a sort of front HQ. Forty eight hours ago, it was sealed tight and quite empty of life, except of course for Von Papen and his personal team. There’s probably a good reason there’s no elevator.” said Steve, shooting a couple of wary glances at Jules, who finally broke his silence and added:

“Mr. Von Papen is the regional commander. Operation Beetroot falls under his juris-

diction, and the Rabbit's Nest is under his direct and absolute control, at every level and aspect. Please remember that when you are talking with him; he can be a difficult man."

"So this is like his own personal underground fortress? Isn't it a bit too much for a federal government organization to allow such leeway with managers and directors? After all, this is a federal government organization, right?"

"One could assume it works like one, and one wouldn't be entirely at fault, but there are certain issues that make the Normal Bureau very special."

"Such as?"

"Mr. Von Papen would be the most qualified person to answer that in full, should he feel you should become aware of that. After all, he created this organization."

"He did? When?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that. Again.."

"..Mr. Von Papen can answer that, if he wants to, that is. Am I right?"

"That is correct, sir."

"So he's the head honcho, I get it. So how deep does this rabbit hole go?"

“Really deep. But you gotta call it Rabbit’s Nest, man. You can talk other shit if you like, but not about the Rabbit’s Nest. You call it Rabbit’s Nest in front of Von Papen, always. Not ‘shithole’, ‘shitwell’, ‘rabbit-pot’, ‘hole-in-the-ground’, ‘sewer’s nest’, or anything other than Rabbit’s Nest. Last guy that was caught doing that fell all the way done from the entrance level to the lake.”

“Did he die?”

“It was an ‘accident’.”

“Look, I’m not sure if you get briefed on things like that, but I’ve heard about accidents myself, and where I come from that’s called murder. Now, I’m not saying I’m shocked to hear things like that, but it’s not exactly something that builds trust, you know? Not to mention I think it’s a bit of a let down to work for someone who can and might kill you on a whim. Believe me, I know. I’ve been there. Which is why I’m here, really.”

Jules stopped, turned around and looked me in the eye with a level, piercing gaze that I knew was the truth, or at least his own very real version of it:

“Mr. Barhoe, some of the things we do around here might be distasteful. Some might

even be considered unethical or just plain wrong from most points of view. But believe me when I say it, that what we are facing will stop at nothing and has no reservations of any kind. We are the first, last, and only line of defense against a full-fledged invasion from Hell itself, sir. How could we face up to the hordes of Satan himself, without an iron discipline? Are you a religious man, Mr. Barhoe?"

"Well, not per se, but if you mean whether or not I believe in an afterlife, you could say I'm becoming one pretty fast, with the express intention of postponing first-hand knowledge of it as much as possible."

"There is a saying: 'The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is The Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee.'"

"Well, what does that mean?"

“It means I’m a bad motherfucker. Am I clear on that, Mr. Barhoe?”

“I believe ‘crystal’ is the word. Can we carry on now?”

“Certainly.”

And so we did, and within a couple of minutes we had finally reached the bottom, where the lake stood. We crossed a rusty, creaky gantry over to what could barely be called a small island but in essence was a rather flat piece of rock right above the surface of what I hoped was just plain water. Occupying the island was, without any exaggeration, a sort of giant blue-white Faberge egg, etched with faint but intricate decorations that from some angles looked like detailed, precise geometric designs and from some other angles like perfectly innocent depictions of Easter bunnies.

It was easily three stories high and as wide as a moon rocket, curiously lit by some sort of inner light, as if it was painted with glow paint. There was this rather large, crude metal door at its base that looked quite out of place, as if someone had put it there as an afterthought, rather by design. Jules led the way and stood in front of the door. He

knocked once, paused, then knocked again three times, the hollow metal banging echoing weakly, while the sound of ripples in the water around us made me want to pee urgently, prompting me to ask Jules:

“I really need to pee. Is there a bathroom in there?”

“You should have said so earlier. You can’t do that now.”

“I’m right about to burst, I’ll just go over there a bit,” I said and started off to take a piss in the lake. Then I heard the rueful sound of a gun cocking, and as instinct would have it I froze in place. Jules sounded impossibly as every bit as polite as a nun on St. Patrick’s day:

“I even hear a zipper fly, you’re gonna have a lethal case of lead poisoning, sir.”

“I can hold it. No need to get itchy fingers. I’m pretty sure you recycle as well,” I said while slowly turning around and showing my hands which were nowhere near my zipper. I saw Steve standing there with an open mouth, apparently even more surprised than I was. He looked as if trying to say something like ‘no’, or ‘fuck’, but that would probably forever remain a mystery. A slit

on the door opened, and a set of eyes appeared, sporting a troubled gaze right under eyebrows so large there could have been a whole lice ecosystem in there, hitherto unknown to man.

The eyes wavered some and then I saw with mounting wariness that they were fixated on me. The next moment, they seemed to smile, a loud clang was heard and the door opened. From inside poured some soft candlelight, and while I waited for Jules to step in and lead the way, he instead showed me in and said in awed overtones:

“Good luck, Mr. Barhoe.”

I looked at Steve who was looking very sombre and thoughtful. He urged me to go inside with a nod, and spoke softly, as if in reverence:

“This is it, Bobby. Make or break.”

I thought that all those words sounded awfully like something someone would say to a soldier about to rush straight on heavy machine gun fire through a minefield, or someone attempting to swim across the Atlantic. It felt like once I stepped through that door, chances were I'd soon end up dead or a bona fide hero. Statistically speaking, the prospect

wasn't very endearing.

I'd lost control over the rapidly changing state of things though, so adhering to the age old principle of going with the flow, I shot a glancing, pretentiously mildly indifferent look at the both of them before saying even as I stepped inside:

"Man, I really gotta piss."

And then I heard the door close behind me with a hollowed-out sound, while my field of vision was filled entirely with a stunning vista of rows upon rows of insanely tall bookcases, well-lit by blindingly opulent chandeliers, their tiny pin-pricks of light magnified by their numbers to a warm summer day, the colorful rainbows around their insignificant little flames blessed with the radiosity of an angelic beam.

It was without doubt the most magnanimous thing I'd ever seen, and even though my analytical mind kept screaming that there was no way in hell all this could ever fit inside that egg-shaped building, the more mushy, animal part of my brain told me that this was an important, inspiring place where I was curiously enough safe.

Then I saw the man - or rather someone

who might have resembled a man somewhat - to whom the huge eyebrows had belonged to: his back was monstrously deformed with a bulbous shape the size of a basketball, and his face looked like whole generations of plastic surgeons had used it for practice. Nevertheless, he was smartly dressed in some sort of brown uniform that sported some weird polished metal insignia like cherubs, skulls, crosses and hearts.

He told me then with an unmistakably British accent:

“Well, cover me in lard and toss me in a pan! Ol’ Bobby Barhoe himself. Great to have you back on board. Big fan, big fan. Name’s Bartholomew Willpotshire, at your service.”

I almost looked behind my back as if he had addressed someone else. It was very odd thing to say, and shaking his extended arm by reflex alone, said rather lamely:

“Charmed. Big fan of what, exactly?”

“Your work, o’ course,” he said and for the first time I thought that someone, even under these perplexing circumstances, actually treated my profession - and my own work in particular, no less - with some sort of respect, even adulation. Which was almost un-

settling if one were to think that thieves were becoming respectable members of society, but then again politicians had always usurped our rightful spot by pretending to be entirely different. Nevertheless that odd remark made me feel like someone famous, which was in and of itself, a uniquely new experience.

“You mean the heists? Well, thanks.. It’s a surprise, really.. I always thought style was key in every job. Glad someone sees that.”

“The.. what? Oh, bugger me, I must’ve jumped the gun a bit there. Never mind that, just thinking aloud. In any case, I’m sure it’ll all get back to you. Eventually,” he said and then muttered something under his breath, looking a bit disappointed.

He then picked up a three-piece candlestick, and lead the way through the bookshelves, straight on ahead:

“Shall we? The Baron has been expecting you for some time. Oh, you can loose the mitre, it’s safe as houses in here.”

I was happy to comply and handed him the silly hat, which I noticed he hadn’t been wearing at all.

“The Baron? Von Papen, you mean? He’s some kind of royalty, too?”

“Among other things and titles, yes. You can address him as Baron, or Excellency.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke on etiquette? ’Cause I’ve got this full bladder that’s about to burst and I can definitely go on this guy’s etiquette, too.”

“That would be insolent, crude and most messy.”

“It’d also be a god-damn relief.”

“Excellent! I think you’ll be just fine in there.”

“You people are weird. Let’s just get on with this, so I can pee,” I said and we started off towards the long end of the improbably huge library of sorts, that seemed almost as large as a small forest, bathed in that warm candlelight, mysteriously clean and dust-free. It kind of got my attention, and I wanted to ask this guy about it, and only then did I realise I hadn’t caught his name:

“I’m sorry, what’s your name again?”

“Bartholomew. You can call me Bart if you like.”

“Alright, so, what’s the deal with this thing?” I asked, waving my arms. “It’s so much bigger in the inside, it’s impossible. I mean, I’ve seen optical illusions, I’ve seen

weird things, but this is just plain wrong. Right?"

"Quite so."

"So, what about it?"

"I wouldn't know about that, really. I just work here."

"What about the uniform?"

"Just that. I'm the butler, sir, and little more than that."

"So you just what, make dinner, press his shirts, dust the library?"

"I do, sir."

"Dust the library?"

"Every day, sir."

"Wow. What an ugly job," I said, looked at him and realised it was almost fitting. "Do you at least have dental?" I asked. Bartholomew smiled, showing perfect, shiny, pearly teeth that could make a blind man see again.

"Excellent dental, sir. We're here," he said, and wrapped his fingers against the door lightly. A sharp and authoritative clear voice came from inside:

"Enter!" the voice said and Bartholomew complied, swinging the large wooden doors open.

We walked inside an incredibly opulent study, decorated with all shades of gold, wood, and granite, with rich evocative tapestries strewn around as well as hanging from the tall walls, amidst various detailed paintings. There was a pervasive scent of cigar in the air, and the room was dominated by a huge sort of display on one side, and of course, the only other man in the room, who I was right to presume, was Von Papen himself. He was dressed in a plain red uniform, with matching black and red breeches, wearing a single but very distinctive button on his collar. He rose from his chair and I saw him squint through his monocle, before grinning and saying to me, sounding exactly like a bad actor trying to do a German accent:

“Herr Barhoe, velkom to ze Kan-inchennest. I trust zat you have a lot of qvestions zat need to be answered, ja?”

* * *

“More strudel, herr Barhoe?” ventured the Baron, even as he cut a hefty slice and put it in his plate.

“No, no, thank you. I’m full,” I said and declined politely, because indeed I had eaten as much as a starving bull. I hadn’t quite expected this sort of reception, especially with what I’d been told up to that point about the Baron. Had I based my expectations solely on the merit of what I’d been led to believe, brutal torture would have been the order of the day, instead of a lavish, gourmet banquet that seemed impossibly exceptional by any standards. It was indeed far better than the usual all-you-can-eat buffet, and definitely a lot more satisfying than Jules’ sandwich.

Bartholomew had laid out everything on a solid, definitely antique wooden table with experienced precision and unusual alacrity and grace, not to be expected from someone looking so ungainly. Not only that, but it appeared he’d actually cooked everything. While my initial reaction upon learning that would have been to search my plate for signs of hair, fallen teeth, and worse, I found the idea childish, since it all tasted, and looked, perfectly fine.

I felt full, and content, I’d left all my cares behind, postponed every thought and notion of the why and how, and had instead focused

on pure enjoyment of the simple things in life: roast phageant with sour berry and cream sauce, a deliciously refreshing sauerkraut, a variety of grilled sausages and lots of other things I couldn't be bothered asking about and rather concentrated on eating. I'd even taken a piss, in what must've been an exact replica of the bathroom of the Queen of England.

It was bliss. The Baron even gave me the luxury, of engaging in nothing more than small-talk about nothing important in particular, like the Colts', the federal budget, or the Republican convention. Unfortunately, the generally unavoidable rule of thumb in the universe was well in effect in the Baron's study as well, and bliss could only have lasted for so long:

"Please, Herr Barhoe, komm, let's sit by ze fireplace. Brandy?"

"I won't say no to that, Baron," I replied and followed him to the fireplace, a delicately crafted marble-lined fireplace, already aflame, the wood inside creaking and cracking as it burned, beautifully. I sat on a very warm and comfortable chair, sporting ivory inlaid arms and green velvet cushions. It

felt like enjoying the afterglow of sex, without any sex. And even as my gaze wandered around the room for a bit, I felt for a moment like I was doing intel work for a job.

Especially when I saw the high-tech display at the far side of the room that looked rather like a map of sorts. Lights and icons blinked on and off, moving, vanishing and appearing as if stuff was happening all the time. The way the display seemed to be made out of thin-air, reminded me of Star Wars holograms, and stupefyingly rich folks with a tendency to spent it on perfectly useless gadgets such as this one. The Baron offered me a glass of rich, full-bodied brandy that didn't require a connoisseur's experience to tell it was the best stuff on Earth. He sat opposite me, cupped his own glass in his hands, drank a mouthful, tasted it thoroughly, swallowed and said:

“Fantastische, ja?”

“You mean the brandy? I'm no expert, but it seems..One of a kind.”

“It is. From my personal vineyards. You were looking at ze screen, ja? Mezmerizing, isn't it?”

“It does have that ‘wow’ factor.”

“Do you realize vat it is vee are actually looking at right now, herr Barhoe?”

“Not really, no.”

“Ze var.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Zee vaarr.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t quite get that.”

“Ze-e va-aarr!” he said, bulging his eyes, and then aiming and shooting with an imaginary sort of rifle, even taking the proper care to imitate the recoil. Somehow it felt this man would have made an awesome air guitarist.

“Oh, the war you mean?”

“Yes, yes. Ze var.”

“I was told somethings that didn’t make much sense, about a war going on. That somehow involved me. And Eileen as well. Where is she, actually?”

“Ah, ja. Ze guardian zpeerit!”

“So you know about that?”

“How could vee not, herr Barhoe? See zat bright white and blue roundel, almost near ze zenter, zurrounded by all ze red and yellow boxes? Zat, is where Eileen is.”

“And what’s she doing there?”

“Fighting, herr Barhoe. As is her duty. As is our duty.”

“I’m not sure we’re on the same page here. You’ve been all too kind, and frankly I wasn’t expecting that, but ever since this demon and spirit business started, all I’m getting is opportunities to get myself killed, and weird stuff going on that no-one explains. Than I’m pushed and shoved this way and that, and all the while, I’m supposed to bring some one back from the dead just to save my own ass from what is arguably the most powerful mobster in the western hemisphere. All’s fine and dandy, but I’ve got problems of my own. I never signed up for all of this, whatever it actually is.”

“Ha ha! Bobby! I’d missed zat air of stubbornness and self-indulgence! You really care about yourself, first and foremost, ja?”

“Well, you make it sound like a man really mean son of a bitch, but yeah. I think my own ass is worth more than anyone else’s, if that’s what you mean. And now that I come to think of it, what do you mean you ‘missed that air’? I don’t recall having met.”

“No! Of course you have no recollection. But vee have met, I can assure you. And you can see for yourself.”

And then he grinned at me, and what I

saw behind that grin was a friendly-looking, jovial, well-mannered, half-Austrian, half-German gentleman that could become the wildest son of a bitch with the flip of a switch. It would have felt very reassuring at that time had I known for certain that we were on the same side. Judging from what I saw on the display next though, it seemed like for some reason or the other, we were like best buddies. But I could've sworn, on pain of anything other than death or excruciating torture involving genitalia, that I had never laid eyes on that man, or any of the other folks on the screen in my life; not even in a supermarket line, or one of those cult films on TV after-hours.

Yet here I was, seeing myself in photos, playing cards with the Baron and the Pope, looking seriously drunk alongside a very healthy, yet still fat, gray-haired Elvis, and naturally it would seem, having birthday cake with the Queen of England. And that was just the people I could recognise: because there were hundreds of photos that I was in, wearing fatigues, those silly hats, examining crates of weird-looking stuff, some in exotic locations, others in what appeared to be labo-

ratory facilities. There were even photos of me jumping off a plane holding something looked like a blob of pus-ridden flesh with stumped tentacles, skiing in the alps carrying a really strange sort of gun and shooting at faint blueish things, that looked eerily familiar like ghosts. To top things off, I saw a photo of me in an astronaut's suit, mock-humping another astronaut, on the moon, with a vast building complex in the background and a couple of things looking astonishingly similar to UFOs right above our hands. I just couldn't believe all that, and even though I was about to start laughing hysterically, especially with that astronaut photo, I simply said what I thought of the matter:

"That's bullshit. I don't know why you're trying so hard, but that's just doctored. Fake. Those are lookalikes. Or made with a computer, I dunno. They can do some seriously good-looking fakes. Ever seen Avatar?"

The Baron smiled knowingly, as if this was exactly what he wanted to hear.

"Vell, zat's exactly vat I wanted to hear from you Bobby. I couldn't expect any less. But it's troo. And, no, zer is no vey for me to really make you beelieve, Bobby. No amount

of documented proof can really, really, convince you of zat matter. Even I brought to you ze truckloads of reports zat cover every operation you have ever done for us, every ghost, ectoplasm, spirit, demon, banshee, skeleton, zombie, balrog and even lowly imp you have banished for once and for all to ze afterverld, it would not be enough. Even if you had a talk vith every one of your clozest colleagues, Jimmy ze Spazz, Voimund of Savoy, Helen Mirrene, Hilderich D'Augnacy. Even if zey cried in front of your very eyes and begged you to believe them, hoping zat some spark of your former life remained alive in you, if not in your mind, zen in your soul, still you wouldn't be convinced. You can never be convinced that you are, in fact, Bobby Barhoe, and zat vee have been friends, ever since zee vaarr."

"I'm sorry, since what?"

"Ze-ee va-aarr, Bobby. Ze zecond world vaarr."

That was just so crazy in so many ways, that I could not help myself any longer, and I started laughing uncontrollably, spilling almost half of the brandy into the fire, which abruptly flamed up and even singed a couple

of hairs off my hand. I only knew because I could smell it. Then I heard the Baron go on, talking mirthlessly as if to himself, while his gaze remained locked on the fire:

“Flammability, my dear Bobby. Ze degree of eazeeness vit vith something burns, or ignites, resulting into fire, or combustion. How fitting, to sit idly by ze fire, while ze vorld hangs by a tread.”

I barely had the capacity to stand upright, but I managed to find the right amount of breath in me to correct the Baron:

“You mean.. Thread?” I asked, and still couldn’t stop laughing.

“Yes. Zat is vat I mean,” he replied with a ever-deepening frown, and pressing another button on his chair, the screen changed back into the map that was on earlier. He continued:

“Zat is a map of ze intrinsic enthalpy field around ze Earth. If you vill, it is a map of n-dimensional mass-energy lambda field entropy-enthalpy distribution,” he said and another burst of laughter shook me.

“You’re you’re just making that kind of shit up, it doesn’t even sound meaningful. I mean -” was all I could say before another fit of

laughter left me without breath. The Baron looked ever more sombre, even as I looked like a complete idiot high on laughing gas:

“I didn’t make zat ‘shit up’, Bobby. You did. And your research. Our, research.”

“My -” I had time enough to say before I started biting my hand and laughing because of the sheer size of it all. I gathered my breath and my wits long enough to say:

“Please, Baron, whoever you really are, stop this. I appreciate it, I really do, but I think I’m about to die of laughing. Don’t go on, please. This whole prank, whatever it is for I can’t understand, but, you’re killing me.”

“Zis is simply ze truth, Bobby. I admit, I wanted ze chance to have dinner together as if vee had never met before, to remind me of zat day in der Adlerness, ven you recognized ze potential in my zeories and offered me a chance to make zem vork. Ven you taught me ze value of cheap scotch, and real kama-raderie. Veen vee dreemt, Bobby. Have you forgotten vat it iz like to dreem?”

I could hear him lost in some kind of crazy talk, the kind old people sometimes are liable to start when there’s little else for them to do other than talk to themselves. But then, as

I wiped the tears of laughter off my eyes, I caught a glimpse of him, and I saw tears of his own welling up in his eyes. That strange image somehow managed to shake me. I stopped laughing just as abruptly as I had began, and he continued:

“Vee dreamt. Vee vorked. Vee succeeded, but at vat a terrible praice, ja? There is danger in ze unknown, and vith danger comes terrible responsibility.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about, again. I’m sorry, Baron, you’re asking to believe we’re friends from World War II. That these ghosts and all that, that I know about that. Now you’re telling me we’re what, responsible as well? Now, I see you’re serious and all that, and shouldn’t have started laughing like that, but seriously, you need help.”

“Zat, indeed I do. Vee all do. Your help, Bobby.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before, but I think perhaps you have the wrong guy. Maybe this is just some long lost twin brother from another time period. Maybe I got framed. Hell, maybe I even got punk’d. I just hopped along all this cause I thought I could do this job for Falconi, and get off the hook, then disappear

for good, maybe get in the banana-growing business some place warm. Now, I'm god-knows how deep underground, listening to an old man's fantasies."

"Let me tell you something. You should.. Vee should have destroy ze gatevey to ze afterworld, ze same one vee created all these years ago, ze same one that cursed you vit life eternal. And zat abduction of yourz.. Immortal, but ztill valnerabull, a victim of Falconi or whatever his real demon name is; brain-washed, fed laiz, your reeal memoriez taken avey."

"Wait! Wait! You're saying I can't die, Falconi is a demon, and I never had a hamster named Peggy Sue?"

"But of course! A demon prince no less, tasked by Satan himself to achieve vat hasn't happened for millenia: deestroy and spoil everyzing zat is good and beautiful on this world, and harvest our souls to serve as his minions, for all Eternity. Ze same demon prince that abducted you while you were figure-zkating in Montreal, wiped your mind vit compressed reruns of Bonanza, and turned you into his unvilling pawn. Ze same one that implanted you vit zhose false memories, and

tricked you into doing his bidding. Ze real reason he wanted you to go into ze afterworld vas to keep you zere, for all eternity, since he cannot take away your life. He could though, trap you into that hellhole forever. And ask yourself if you vill, vat kind of man names its pet hamster like zat?”

“You’re serious? I figure-skate?”

The Baron nodded affirmatively.

“You’re a very rich, eccentric fruitcake that should’ve been locked up many, many years ago.”

“You still don’t beelieve me, zen?”

“As much as I’d believe a talking cow that her milk isn’t radioactive at all.”

The Baron sighed there for a moment, and in a surprisingly fast and fluid move, got a pistol out of his pocket, and shot me. Repeatedly. Until the magazine ran out and I was laying sprawled on the floor. I thought at first that it was a very stupid way to die being caught unawares like that. I felt like a debutante, being seduced by dinner with an old man. My lie-sense hadn’t tingled, I thought this man at least believed what he was saying..

The bullets inside hurt like hell, and they were hot, I can tell you that. I can also tell you

that a few more moments had passed and I wasn't dead yet, or at least I couldn't see any sort of tunnel, or blackness. I wasn't growing cold and I definitely couldn't see my body from above. All I was seeing was the ceiling, which was done in an exquisite rococo style. 'Must've cost him a fortune', I thought, and his smiling face filled my vision.

"I'm very sorry about having to resort to this kind of unseemly behavior, but I thought that perhaps a test would be more convincing. I'm sorry for the shirt, Bobby," the Baron said.

The pain had subsided, and I was only feeling a bit numb where the bullets had hit. I couldn't see any holes, or any blood. But the shirt was ruined. These weren't blanks. I'd been shot with about twenty bullets and all that got me was a mild burning sensation and the irritating thought that I'd been fooled like a pretty innocent, simple-minded young schoolgirl, indeed a rare thing. The Baron proffered his hand to help me up, and I did.

"So.. I can't die? I can't die. Wish I knew that from the start."

"Would you like a moment to sit? It's not everyday someone hears he's immortal, ja?"

"I can cope with immortality, thank you

very much. It involves not dying, so I dig that. So it's true, all that? Everything you said is true? But then.. Steve was working for Falconi?"

"Indeed. Vee knew vee had been infiltrated, and it took sometime too before vee realised. Agent Johnson is being 'debriefed', as vee speak."

"So I was being setup, and I had no way of knowing? What else is fake? What can I remember that's real? And when did all this happen?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"Did you zink zat an organisation of zis size would've been able to lose a man as valuable as you for long?"

"And.. This is so messed up! What's Eileen's part in all this?"

"Eileen vas in fact a mole of our own. A valuable source of intel. A most capable operative."

"And she wasn't crazy?"

"Oh, she vas crazy. Crazy for going along vit such a dangerous plan to uncover ze mole."

“So Steve didn’t know all this? He thought that me and Eileen were..? Maybe that’s why he popped out of nowhere.. Son of a bitch tried to blow up the house, kill her. If I hadn’t gotten her out in time.. Get her off his back. Stick to his plan, get me to the underworld. That was what the deal with the ninjas was all about. And the silly drunken act. Playing me, all along.. I bet the horse was a prop as well. I knew he was gay. The minute he started talking shit, I knew he was -”

“I have only had limited knowledge of vat has happened in zeese last few hours, Bobby, but I can only assume zat vee can only tell vat Steve really knew, and vat he really knows, only after ze ‘debriefing’ is conclvuded.”

“You mean torture?”

“Zat might be a bit harsh, but it could be ze right vord.”

“I’m game. So, I’m this really bad-ass dude, who invented a gateway to the after-world and that made me accidentally immortal, but that kind of backfired, because now Satan’s trying to get hold of that gateway, and I’m the only one who can stop him?”

“Zat is ze gist of it, yes.”

“So, what you’re saying is I don’t have to

go to the after-world to get John the blow-torch specialist back to get Falconi off my back, cause he can't even actually kill me."

"Vell, ja, but zen eizer vey, Falconi vill achieve his purpose and open zat gatevey to zis vorld, and zere shall pull fort myriads of demons and-"

"What's holding him now?"

"Nothing but Eileen and a few brave men."

"You said earlier, she's the bright white-blue roundel over there, surrounded by all those red and yellow boxes?"

"Zat is her, ja."

"Is that like on a scale, or what? I mean, that's a lot of boxes."

"Zat is correct, ja."

"So Eileen's all that stands between them and the gateway?"

"I'm afraid so, Bobby."

"God-dammit people, I leave for one day, and all hell's about to break loose?"

* * *

The after-midnight dinner with the Baron had made me groggy. Jules seemed very ea-

ger to make me some coffee, so I happily obliged him. The way the coffee he made carried over some of his most distinctive features was uncanny; he made some mean, black, coffee.

I had been briefed in super fast ways on what the current tactical situation was: Eileen was holed up around the gateway on the after-world's end. Demons and literally all hells kind of things kept coming at her and a few hand-picked men, wave after wave, time after time. More and more personnel was stacked on this end of the gateway as well, fighting off Falconi and his own mob, a mix of a few summoned demons, wild monsters, and unscrupulous men. They were trying to get to Eileen and the gateway by the backdoor, and open it for the hordes waiting on the other side. It was looking bad, and the only bright side about the situation was that I was immortal. Which, after making sure that there was no catch, like cutting my head off or melting me in hot metal, was pretty cool, and would definitely prove a life-saver; at least for me.

It was the middle of the night, and I was an avid believer that the faster things got done, the faster everything would be back to

normal. Of course, in the Normal Bureau, normal had many meanings, none of which could be found in the vocabulary. Nevertheless, I found it strange that I could've probably walked away right then and there, but I didn't.

I could have walked away, and Falconi couldn't - as Jules would have put it - 'pop caps in my ass'. I could have walked away and all these people with their silly hats, all they could have done was go all wild-eyed and insist that I thought about it once more, and then perhaps cry alone or en masse for the coming Revelation, Armageddon, Rapture, or whatever they wanted to call the huge bitch-slapping that was about to hit home.

But then, I thought, where would that leave me? How could I have lived with my immortal self for aeons afterward, in a barren, molten, putrefied sulfur-ridden landscape, with not another human around, and everyone's soul back in the pits of Hell, building more tar pits, and mountains made of bone, rivers of blood and bile, and the occasional but seemingly necessary, pit full of shit to bathe in. I'd just hate the place, and there even wouldn't be anyone or anything to steal

from. I'd probably end up asking demons for favors of the worse kind, and that somehow seemed like a bad idea from the very start.

So I'd decided I'd go in, use my mind, heart and soul, preferably only figuratively speaking, and destroy the gateway I'd once build myself once and for all, so then the Normal Bureau could go back to policing the odd cult, the couple of occultists that actually got the incantations right, and the occasional stranded demon that had forgotten to dial home. At least that's what Jules told me they used to deal with.

They were scared, actually. The people in that briefing room, with their mitres on and their black suits carried hollowed looks. It was plain in their eyes that they thought their chances, our chances slim. Maybe that was because they understood what we were up against. I, on the other hand, only had a faint idea, and was totally oblivious to what they perceived as a horrific, end-of-days situation. Frankly, I thought they were overreacting, and that things weren't all that bad.

I noticed Jules was looking at me intently. Under the harsh, bright white light in the situation room at first I thought he was just

squinting, but then I noticed everyone was looking at me like they badly needed some prescription glasses. Jules made a hand gesture that I should go on. I had been woolgathering, and I couldn't remember what I was talking about at all, so I asked no one in particular:

“Was I talking just now?”

They all bobbed their heads up and down, and the sight of about two dozens papal mitres shuddering like that was so hilarious I'd thought I'd burst in laughter once more, which would be really bad manners, a detriment to morale, and hurt my stomach muscles like hell. I contained myself barely, and asked them to take those things off:

“Could you, please, for the love of God, take those hats off? I mean, I can't look at those things with a straight face.”

Someone protested:

“But, sir! Regulations clearly state that wards are to be warn at all times!”

“Yeah, well, it's like a bad joke. The real fight's out there, not in here. If things come to that, I'm pretty sure that hat will only have an effect on demons with a sense of humor, which according to you people, aren't exactly

a majority. So, just, I don't know, put them away. You might as well had clown hats on."

"Are you referring to Incantation Device CXR-7A?"

That made me cock my head sideways, as if I wanted to see more clearly whether or not this guy was trying to be funny. He looked too uptight and scared to be any amount of funny at all, so he was being serious, and ironically enough, I found that funny.

"You mean you actually, wear clown hats? Have a designation for them as well?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Alright, I'm new to this but I'm catching up. No hats. Whatsoever. I mean, what kind of an idiot gets these kinds of ideas?"

Jules cleared his throat and said in a low-keyed voice:

"Ahm, that was your idea, sir. With all due respect."

"Me? I must've been dead drunk. Well, that was an entirely other person. Well, not entirely. You know what I mean. Even if it was only yesterday, think of this as a new start. Okay? Wiping the slate clean."

I could see a few grins, and hear the imperceptible yet unmistakable sound of snig-

ger.

“Did I say something funny?”

Jules threw a few threatening glances to certain people in the room and the atmosphere immediately sobered up and dried. It was like he could kill any kind of mood with his gaze. He was most helpful though when he explained:

“That might have sounded funny to some people in here,” he said, still gazing around the room to indicate he knew who he was talking about and disapproved, “because you conclude every briefing with these words.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I guess old habits die last. In my case, not at all,” I said and grinned appreciatively as if I had been talking to myself. Probably from fear of being reprimanded by Jules no one had even so much as twitched a facial muscle.

“It was a joke, okay? You can laugh at jokes if you find them funny. It’s one of those human things we’re supposedly fighting for. I don’t think demons are funny unless you count the horns and the barbed tail.”

Silence ensued. I sighed and said, sounding slightly disappointed:

“That was a joke too. Never mind. The

clock's ticking. Jules, what was I saying earlier?"

Jules looked down on his sheet of paper, cleared his throat and said:

".. and that's why I'll make sure this piece of shit, Steve, gets his gay rights, in the form of a large male animal in heat, preferably a rhino."

"I was talking about that? Aloud?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never mind that for now. Let's get over this before the sun's up and the world over. How is Eileen holding out?"

"It's a pretty tight situation sir. They've progressively gained more ground and right now they're about to get through the installation itself. Commander Eileen believes that at the current rate, our defences will be broken by dawn."

"So, that's like two, maybe three hours, tops, right?"

"That is pretty much correct, sir."

"And what about the home ground on this side of things? Falconi and his cronies are gaining on us?"

"Things on this end aren't as bad. It's a sort of stalemate, but we have committed ev-

everything we can on this, and there are reports Falconi is bringing in more forces: werewolves, lycans, zombies, and perhaps a few attorneys as well.”

“Wait, attorneys? You mean, lawyers, right?”

“Yes, sir?”

“They’re in league with Satan, then?”

“They’ve done it before, sir. They’re unscrupulous people and tend to work for the highest bidder, and Falconi is known to pay handsomely.”

“What are they going to do anyway? Sue us to death?”

“They’ll stop at nothing, sir. They might try that as well.”

“And these lycans you mentioned? Isn’t that another name for werewolves?”

“Not at all, sir. It’s a pretty common misconception, especially since lycans are very able shape-shifters and can transform at will, not only on a full moon. They’re stronger, and more bulky than werewolves, and they urinate while -”

“Don’t give me the details, please. You shoot them with silver bullets and they die, right?”

“Well, no sir. Silver has no effect on them at all. You have to sever their spines to actually kill them.”

“Sever their spines, right, mental note taken. Zombies are easy, right?”

“Well, it depends sir.”

“On what?”

“On their numbers. In overwhelming numbers they can be quite daunting.”

“But they’re as cunning as a dead fox. We’ll mow them down with machine guns. You have machine guns, right?”

“Any type ever manufactured, sir, with all kinds of ammunition: silver armor-piercing bullets, Holy water hollow points, miniature bronze Buddha fragmentation ammo and Qur’an-scripted explosive rounds.”

“Thank God for the second amendment then. We’ll see what we’ll do about those lawyers. Maybe we can avoid killing the poor bastards. I’d hate to kill a man, even someone so inhuman. Do we have a legal department?”

There was some hesitation in his voice, even something faintly akin to embarrassment:

“Yes, sir. They mainly handle PR and lawsuits against our blimps.”

“Lawsuits against the blimps? From who?”

“A well-known tire manufacturer, mostly. And patent trolls.”

“Never mind. Suit them up as well. And keep an eye on them, they might actually find out there’s a law against killing demons in the state of Kansas. Who else do we have?”

“Everyone in this room, sir. Except for Rogers over there who has to keep the xerox machines warm.”

“Why, are they feeling sick?”

“They tend to jam when not in use, sir. Someone has to keep making photocopies of white papers.”

The world was on the brink of turning into a wasteland, and we were discussing the need for xerox machines. It felt uncannily like something that could only be happening in the higher echelons of the armed forces. I had to clarify that, in the hope that it was actually something important for survival:

“You mean, like research stuff?”

“No, sir, actual blank pieces of white paper.”

“Screw that, what do we need all those photocopying machines for?”

Jules instantly looked pale. His face went blank, and he seemed to stutter before he could actually reply:

“Well, I.. I don’t know, sir.”

“Good. Rogers, you’re coming as well. So, what else do we have apart from guns and stuff like that? I mean, do these even work on the other side?”

“Well, there haven’t been many documented cases on the usage of projectiles, sir.”

I found what that implied most unsettling. Were we supposed to punch those things to death?

“You mean you don’t know?”

“It has to do with incorporeality, sir. Simple mass projectiles might not be sufficient against all demonic forms, especially incorporeal ones.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

Unwillingly, and looking a bit flushed, Jules said it plainly:

“We don’t know, sir.”

“What are we supposed to do, then? Smack them until they give up? Scold them off? I thought we were in this paranormal

business. Don't you people have something like those things in the Ghostbusters movies?"

"Seriously sir, that was just a movie."

"Well it worked? There's got to be something? Aren't there any geniuses working here? Lab coats and everything, bad coffee, boring geek small talk while crunching numbers? "

"Well, if you insist sir. There is something of your own design, that might be just the thing you'll need over there."

"You don't say?"

"But it hasn't been tested before. At least, not in realistic conditions."

"Why is that?"

"The last test left the state of British Columbia without electricity for a few hours. It's also highly dangerous, and uses all sorts of as-of-yet fringe science and technology you yourself have been known to say, and I quote 'hell if I know how it works. get it?'."

"Can I carry it?"

"Well, yes, it's man-portable."

"Good, how many shots does one magazine carry?"

"Just the problem, sir. There's only one shot in that equipment. It's designed as an

area-of-effect denial equipment.”

“What does, exactly, deny?”

“Sir, this is a highly technical matter. In fact, you’d be the most qualified to answer these kinds of questions. To put it plainly, it’s like a nuke, only it’s supposed to work in the after-world, while being rather harmless here. Thankfully enough, that part’s true.”

“Good I’m packing that as well. I bet it looks cool, doesn’t it?”

“Well, that depends on what you mean, sir. It’s certainly original.”

“Never mind that, suit up and let’s get over there fast. Sulphur, Nevada was it?”

“In the vicinity, yes. Abandoned copper mine. Sir, if you don’t mind. What do you mean, by ‘suit up’? We are already wearing our suits.”

“What, you mean you actually fight demons and assorted creatures wearing just that?”

“Well, yes sir.”

“No helmets? Kevlar vests? Padding on the legs and shoulders? Any sort of protection or armor whatsoever?”

“Well, we do have the papal mitres,” said Jules, and I found out I couldn’t even bear

the thought of those impossibly weird-looking hats.

“That’s just stupid. Whose idea was that, wearing nothing but those hats for protection against evil? Never mind, I can tell. Have you people seen what these demons look like? They’re twelve feet tall, and they’ve got claws that can cut down a tree in one swoop.”

Jules looked skeptical, and definitely uncomfortable wading in unfamiliar waters:

“What do you propose then sir? We don’t have the kind of equipment you are suggesting.”

“You mean you have machine guns, supersonic blimps, anti-demon ray-guns -”

“You mean convolution matrix field transducers, sir,” Jules corrected me. Maybe my former self knew about these things, but that all sounded like horse-crap to me.

“I mean what I said. That’s what it does, right? Kill demons? Anyway, you’re telling me all you’ve got to wear is the silly hat, and that suit?”

They all nodded appreciatively, as if somehow that sounded reassuring. And these guys were our best bet against hordes of hellish

creatures. What a peachy thought. I kept at it:

“No riot shields? Any kind of police or paramilitary equipment?”

They shook their heads in unison.

“Gloves? Motorcycle helmets? Anything thicker than cloth?”

Still, nothing but a ‘no’.

I couldn’t believe myself when I said it, but it somehow felt like it was the only option left that I just had to explore. I sighed before asking, feeling embarrassed to even consider such a thing:

“Do you.. Do you people have a football team?”

* * *

A sinister-looking red light dominated the large cabin space of the assault team’s helicopter. What was left of the Normal Bureau’s combatants fitted inside two helicopters in all. I was riding alongside Jules and his own hand-picked team. Everyone looked slightly ridiculous in the football jersey’s, especially the women in the team who found the chest plates extremely discomforting and most had

decided to just leave them behind. If it hadn't been for the constant chopping noise of the rotor blades and the grim visage on everyone's faces, the cabin could've been just the setting for an expensive porn film.

As we banked left and right, crisscrossing in the air along with the other extremely modified blackhawk (which as far as I could tell consisted of a relic bible attached to its nose, leather-bound and hand-written by a catholic Saint), it looked almost as if a couple of playful night-birds courting in the sweet, warm summer night. In fact, there was nothing sweet about the night, and as we approached the Gateway station, I felt my stomach turn. It could've been the uneasy flying, it could have been something I ate. For the most part, I didn't want to think it was the shakes, the kind of fear that sometimes took over right before a job. Or so my false memories told me.

It was fear of failing. Like when you're trying to pull that Jenga block without ruining everything, or when you're about to flip that omelette in the frying pan, only in a larger scale. I'd taken things up to that point in my stride, just adapting, reacting, and trying to

see the silver lining. I still didn't feel sure about why I just hadn't given everyone the one-fingered salute (or in some foreign countries, the two-fingered salute - I'm sure a man like Baron Hasso-Ludwig Freiherr von Papen would have gotten the idea right).

Maybe it was the whole absurdity of everything. A part of me thought that this was just too bad to be true, and I just had to believe that it was a very big practical joke, or some kind of huge, honest misunderstanding. Another part of me was definitely awed by the newly discovered fact that I couldn't die. It felt empowering to the point of just wanting to do crazy stuff for fun, like jumping off a plane without a parachute, going lava-boating, shooting yourself from a howitzer, or visiting an Asian country and trying the local cuisine. Of all the above, I was trying my luck against the hordes of Hell.

But as I saw the men and women around me who were probably thinking they might not make it out of this one alive, and that they had made quite possibly the worst career choice in human history, the thought of Eileen just popped into my head out of nowhere, exactly like when you can't remember that guy's

name and it flashes in your mind when you're taking a shit. Was I doing all this, just for Eileen?

I mean, I remembered liking her, and I certainly remembered her anger and passion as a guardian spirit, and the looks she gave me, but it was very far fetched to believe that was going literally through hell for a woman. Not that it wasn't a pretty common phenomenon in the everyday lives of most men, but that was just a metaphor. I just couldn't think it was possible, but it felt right, even if that was the only reason I was about to get knee-deep in demon ichor.

Of course, I had nothing to lose, apart from the rest of the world that made it such an interesting place to live in. I'd get through this alive and that was guaranteed, but there was no guarantee I'd really want to in the end.

I was resting my hand-picked finely sawed-off shotgun on my lap, feeling its comforting weight. It was interesting to note that it had the words 'et ibit in inferno erant' carved on its stock. Jules had told me that it roughly meant 'go to hell and stay there'. I found it quite fitting and picked that one

among a multitude of relics, including - but not limited to - the spear of Longinus, Mjolnir, and other similar stuff I thought belonged to a museum or perhaps a comic book. Seriously, a hammer?

As I traced my hand across the shotgun's stock, and felt the engraved letters, the pilot was heard through the intercom:

"We're in the pipe, five by five, flare in three minutes, stand by to drop, coming in hot," I heard the man say, and I couldn't understand anything other than that something would happen in three minutes. Jules made a hand signal like a circle and everyone around the cabin started checking their stuff. I tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention and had to shout to make myself heard over the noise and vibrations:

"What the hell did he say?"

"We're right on course, he's going to hover over the landing zone and we're going to have to rappel down, because we are going to be under fire."

"I thought we were fighting demons, what kind of fire?"

"Every kind of fire, sir."

“Remind me again, what was the tactical plan?”

“Take down the large bastards, and then start picking out the little scrawny ones, and buy sometime while you go in and extract Eileen before we blow that shit up.”

“Where these my words or yours?”

“Your words, sir.”

“Yup, I think you’re right, I can understand it perfectly. Everyone’s ready then?”

“We’ll see, sir. A-Team, sound off!” Jules said and one by one everyone in the cabin shouted out name, uniform number, and readiness. I thought the uniform numbers would come in handy; I didn’t know any of them by their names so I could just call them by their numbers. And that was probably the extend of help the football gear would provide. I hoped we might get lucky, but then again I tried to think claws like Novorski’s against their flesh. I asked myself what was wrong with me, but I had to at least tell them to feel better for myself. I cupped my hands and had to shout to be heard:

“Don’t get killed! Okay?”

Most of them couldn’t hear me through their helmets, and shook their heads. I gave

it another shot:

“Don’t DIE! Okay?”

“No, sir. No pie!” one of the women shouted back, and I just gave her a thumbs up, sighed and fell silent. I heard the pilot through the intercom once more:

“Thirty seconds to flare, rope in and hang tight!”

Everyone passed their ropes through their carabiners and double-checked their harnesses, while the helicopter started lurching every way possible violently. I thought the pilot’d lost control and we were about to crash, while I saw a bunch of flares go off and light up everything with intense light. The other chopper in the pair did pretty much the same, but as I saw its flares pop away, this huge hand suddenly grabbed its underbelly, and it abruptly disappeared out of my field of view. Jules screamed at the men:

“Safeties off! Go empty on that thing’s ass!”

And then the two men handling each minigun on the side just started shooting, trying to hit whatever kind of demon had grabbed the helicopter out of the sky. I only saw it once more, as the pilot wrestled to gain

altitude or shake that demon off, even while our guys filled the sky with tracer fire, and the folks on the other chopper tried to get off some shots at that thing. Then our own helicopter suddenly pitched up as if a giant pair of reins were suddenly trying to stop us.

As it started to hover above the ground, I could see the gateway's building, a nondescript museum-like construct, a wide staircase leading up to a metal door, inscribed with all sorts of weird shapes and alphabets. Behind that, huge wells from the abandoned copper mine were dug in the earth, almost dried up, like huge shot glasses waiting to be filled. There was mayhem all around us, all kinds of hellish creatures fighting with the Bureau's men and women; some of the fiends and monsters were carrying guns, some wielded rocket launchers, and others were cradling sharp dangerous things like scythes, swords and axes. Mostly axes. Jules screamed like a maniac:

"Go! Go! Go!" and everyone jumped off the chopper, cradling their rope lines with one hand, their weapon in the other one. I hadn't realised it, but I was already tumbling down, and Jules was grabbing me from my

belt. As I felt the softened impact on the sandy ground, I saw our chopper swiftly break off and try to gain height; I also saw the other helicopter that had been struggling with that demon finally succumb to gravity and clumsily fall sideways onto the gateway's building, its screeching sound drawing the attention of everyone for the slightest moment.

We all saw some of the men jump only moments before the chopper became lost in a cloud of concrete and smoke. The demon that had brought it down lay slumped on the ground, and even as I heard Jules rally the team and focus at hooking up with our people inside, I could feel my chest and ears thumping from the ferocious vibrations of wild gunfire. Everyone seemed to have opened fire; I saw everything as though strobe lights were flashing all around me.

Had I been an epileptic, I'm sure I'd have a seizure. Instead, there was this buzzing inside my head, and a terrible feeling of sudden under-pressure, as something like a bazooka round flew right beside my head. As I turned around, trying to see what had caused the sudden panic from trained professionals who supposedly let rip small, con-

trolled bursts, preserving ammo and making each shot count.

Generally when things don't happen in their usual fashion, there's probably some kind of extraordinary reason, that more often than not calls for extraordinary measures. I was looking at a twenty-foot tall extraordinary reason, with all the charm and guile of a pair of outhouses, with four arms as thick as a man's torso, armed with bony blades larger than a broadsword and judging from their shiny sheen, sharper than a scalpel. The panicked response of just starting to shoot on full auto was, if not anything else, quite understandable even though rather underwhelming.

I saw the demon lurch forward, ready to cut half a dozen men in tiny slices. Jules right beside me had gone apeshit gun-crazy, and having emptied his empty Magnum .44 he dumped it on the ground and drew a really keen blade out of a sheath on his back, charging at the demon like a really confused Superbowl samurai fan.

The demon saw him, and grinned. Shying away everything the others threw at him, he turned to face Jules head on, with the most

probable outcome being Jules turning into a cut-away cardboard version of his old self, while the rest of looked in sympathy and complete helplessness.

I thought it couldn't hurt to actually use the damn thing, so I just pointed the shotgun towards the advancing demon, and with the smell of it's sulphur-laden fumes right at my nostrils, I shouted at him, trying not to look at the stock:

"Et.. xzibit in inferno errand!"

The demon paused in his lethal stride, and even Jules stood with both hands holding his sword above his head, right before he was ready to deliver a blow. I must've done something wrong and something right at the same time when I tried to say it right:

"Et, ibit infernum in.. Just go back to hell already!" I screamed and felt the kick of the double-barreled sawed-off shotgun. As I realised I wasn't quite prepared for it, feeling my nuts squeezed beyond their usual design capacity, I reeled from the pain, and through blurry vision I saw the demon take every single buckshot to the face, little writhing blue flames of holiness eating him up from the inside, even as the rest of the guys opened up

fire once more, with Jules timing his blow perfectly, aiming right for the head.

As the demon roared in quite probably excruciating pain for the last time, it fell on its back with its hoofed feet wildly flailing in the air. I think I saw a few smiles, but there was little time for high-fives, since our surprise arrival had attracted the very loving attention of more of Hell's minions, but not very surprisingly from my point of view all I could think of was that I could now never have children.

With a quick glance I saw various imps, lesser demons, and a couple or more of flying demons had broken off their siege of the Gateway building, and were headed our way. Jules offered his hand so I could get up. I grabbed it and even though my balls felt like lead weight I got up and saw a line of men had formed up on our flank, and they were already opening fire against the devilish things coming our way without any care in the world.

Jules was taking opportunity shots with Magnum and at the same time shouted at me, even as I was reloading my own shotgun:

"Sir, we have to keep moving, close the distance between us and the defenders and

get some covering fire!”

“What happened to the plan of cutting down the big ones first?” I asked him and saw he was a bit shaken, not himself. At least not the guy I’d seen in that gleam in his eyes before.

“Sir? I think it’s highly inadvisable under the circumstances, with half the men gone!”

I prided myself in knowing pretty much nothing about fighting, except from when to run like hell. And exactly because of that, I knew this wasn’t the time for running, or taking care not to get shot. This was indeed the make or break. And these men, and the world at large, not me, needed Jules Caesar, not some nice guy in a black suit. So I had to piss him off:

“You mean, you’re scared?”

“What?”

“I said, I can understand it if you’re scared. I mean, you’re not immortal like I am. It’s perfectly understandable if you want to sit back tight while I -”

“Sit back tight? Sit back tight, sir?” he asked, truly in total disbelief and helplessly mounting anger.

“Yeah, you can sit back tight since you’re scared and let the one man who can’t die save your negro ass,” I said, thinking that even among all the chaos and mayhem, calling him ‘negro’ would be the perfect way to get him to be superfly-TNT.

“Niggah, you just ticked off my bad mojo. Ain’t no immortal white boy gonna save my ass and call me ‘negro’, niggah! Stay back, you might get ichor on that jersey.”

“What’s the hell’s an ichor?”

“The shit oozing out of that dead motherfucker’s head. Jones, Johansson, Jonas, on me! The rest of you, pick your targets, and make it count!” Jules said and looked like he was ready to take them all on himself. I took a look at the entrance to the gateway, a few dozen yards away, the bodies of demons and imps strewn all around, a ragged bunch of guys in black suits double-tapping their pistols and rifles, some already up close and personal with wolf-like creatures.

“Jules, you can take care of these things, right?”

“Fucking right I can!” he replied and emptied a clip on a flying demon, ripping its wings apart and putting a volley of bullets right on

its head, which burst in flames, right before the demon crashed on the ground, ichor oozing out of every bullet hole. That was a pretty solid demonstration that in fact he could, so I calmly started walking towards the building's entrance, repeating to myself that I was immortal.

Curiously enough, no one bothered to have a go at a figure that didn't seem at all preoccupied with the ongoing firefight, so I reached the defenders totally unscathed with my football jersey in perfect condition, taking a couple of shots at a few imps that thought that perhaps I was worth biting their teeth into. A woman called out to me, her hair ruffled up but still wearing her sunglasses. She was kneeling down behind a badly chipped marble column, in what must've been the epitome of keeping one's cool:

"Sir, glad to have you!" she shouted and let off a few rounds, the sound of her pistol quickly followed by unearthly shriek. She had just killed something, but I didn't bother to look, staying as cool as the circumstances demanded:

"Can you hold out here?"

"It'll get real up close and personal soon,

sir!” she cried out, while a burst of fire from her teammates must’ve found its target only a few yards away.

”Jules is drawing some of that shit his way, I think he’ll hook up with you sooner or later.”

”Copy that, sir! Good luck!” she shouted over the sound of her pistol blazing away and I thought I saw her grin, while I replied in a curious fit of nonchalance: “I hope I won’t be late for the party!”

Someone knocked rhythmically on the door, and in a moment it opened from the inside. There was this Bureau man with a suit that simply nodded knowingly, and without further ado, went outside, holding a machete and an Uzi. I closed the door behind me, turned all the locks and put its bar into place with some effort. The muffled sounds of the fighting outside could still reach me, but otherwise, I was completely alone inside the gateway’s building.

Surrounded by luxury that itched to be carried away to a getaway car, I followed the main hallway towards a faint, blue shimmering light. Past an archway with all sorts of apocryphal inscriptions carved in a gold plaque, I reached a small circular pool, no

more than a few yards across. I couldn't see any sort of cables, pipes, lasers or the stuff usually associated with weird machinery.

It felt like water-lilies should be floating inside, and little frogs leaping around, catching insects. Hadn't it been for the fighting outside and the ticking clock, I could have just fallen asleep right next to it.

The sole source of light inside that small and otherwise quite plain and empty chamber was this small pool. Small waves flitted across its surface, which was more like a mirror in turmoil, silvery and without depth, very much unlike water. No sound came out of it, just this intense, blueish light and I knew then this was the 'intrinsic field reality horizon' Jules had told me I had to go through.

He should've told me to just take a dip in the pond. I took a deep breath and held it before I jumped inside, shotgun at the ready. For a moment all I could think of was not to shoot the first thing that I saw on the other side. Then everything seemed to disconnect from my mind, from my feet upwards, as if I was very carefully and gradually being sliced. I then saw blinding flashing spots in my eyes, right before complete darkness took me.

The briefings and the charts, the various stuff they had shown me could not have relayed the fact that going through the damnable gateway was like filling your stomach with bricks and sand and then violently vomiting everything through your nose. My head felt like it had already been donated to science and then returned as it hadn't been found useful at all.

I looked around and saw I was in the same chamber, only the pond, the gateway, was curiously enough placed on the ceiling. Everything else seemed exactly the same. I picked up my shotgun and checked my ammo. I also checked the 'device'. It was still strapped on my back, tight and snug as a baby on a back pouch. On the outside, the 'device', looked just like a stick pony toy. The difference being the stick was made of an intricate, super-light alloy, and the head, the pony bit, was like an enlarged, stylized chess piece horse-head made of some kind of crystal, among other more exotic materials.

There was no one around the chamber. I half-expected it to be crawling with demons,

with Bureau men fighting at close quarters. Like, face-to-face close. Or at least someone guarding the gateway. But there was just me in there. I could hear faint sounds from the outside, but it didn't sound like the firefight I'd just left behind, but rather more like a murmur, or kids whining. As I was about to make my way out, and find Eileen, I saw a blueish, translucent form very similar to what John had looked like.

Age-old human instincts and reflexes trained from a fake memory of a lifetime of running from the cops would have made me take a few steps back before running away from a ghost, something universally considered scary, abnormal, and potentially hazardous for sanity. Instead, I just lay there looking almost apathetic as I saw the unmistakable form of Eileen pass through the walls. She looked pissed, and quite incorporeal.

"What the hell took you so long?" she shouted and grabbed me by the wrist. Interestingly enough, she actually pulled me through the wall, and while I saw very tiny amounts of matter flash through my eyes in just a split second, I hadn't realised she could do that, so I was still looking like I had wet

myself when I came over to the other side. Immortal or now, meeting a brick wall from that close was something I hadn't gotten used to, and did not intend to anyway.

A pungent, sick smell with the distinct aroma of sulphur attacked my senses. While I grimaced at the almost insufferable smell, I turned my head around and saw. And then hopelessness grew inside me like beer foam. Just a glimpse, and that made me want to just have a smoke and some idle talk before just lying down and letting everything around me go up in flames. It made me think that perhaps that plaque outside the gateway room actually meant 'abandon hope all ye who enter here'. Because it was a certainly fitting thing to say about that place.

Legions, not hordes or multitudes, but innumerable armies were amassing in front of us, marching slowly but surely in perfectly ordered rows, their flaming scimitars swaying with each step. Great swarms of flying demons circled overhead, monstrously giant things that seemed like locusts made of bone, their cries echoing the agony they could inflict. It was like watching Dante's *Inferno* remade into an epic action movie, which spelled

disaster in so many ways.

The sky wasn't the black night sky I'd left behind, but a sickly orange red that belonged to some alien atmosphere or the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. It seemed both were a reasonable fate if we failed here. Which was a most possible scenario, even if I applied some very creative math alongside certain imaginary power multipliers.

I could see the men and women of the Normal bureau standing their ground. There weren't more than a few hundred at most, nothing but a drop compared to the ocean tide that was about to consume us. Most of them were already engaged in close fighting with what looked like the shock troops of hell, the same kind of demon that I'd killed with my shotgun just a few minutes earlier.

Once every few moments an intense bright white beam would shoot from something that looked like the ghost version of a unicorn on steroids, and incinerate a few of the brutish demons in one go. Large balls flaring with white and blue starlight would shoot up in the sky from what looked like a huge translucent caterpillar bathed in pixie dust, before it exploded raining swaths of cleans-

ing fire among lesser demons and imps riding hellish hounds, burning them into oblivion.

But still, more of them came, in a nightmarish vision of the terror that was to be unleashed. It was hideous. It was unfortunately, quite real. And it was doom, on a monumental scale. I felt I had been cheated. Perhaps if I'd really understood how bad the odds were, I'd just have a last good night's sleep and spend the rest of eternity looking morose, just as I was probably looking when Eileen slapped me hard across the face, without the slightest warning:

"Hey! Hey! Snap out of it!"

"That was totally uncalled for! You could have just nudged me!"

"You simply sat there, frozen stiff. Why are you wearing that football gear? And what's with the pony-on-a-stick?"

"That's just some last minute equipment. Looks pretty bad, right?"

"Blue doesn't suit you, yeah. The pony, well.."

"I meant things over here," I said and saw a fireball explode a few dozen yards away, a gunner team narrowly avoiding it. Eileen said with sudden weariness:

“Awful would be a better word. Cataclysmic, perhaps, would be more suitable.”

“That’s just a fancy word for really bad, right?”

“We’re wasting time Bobby, and there’s precious little of it. But now you’re here, we can turn things around.”

“About that, I’m not so sure. I don’t exactly see the reasoning behind such an optimistic look of events.”

“But surely, with you in the vanguard we can send them all back to hell!”

“Am I supposed to ask them to stop their invasion really nice? Because I don’t think how I can do that.”

“Bobby, you’re immortal! Even these demons can’t touch you!”

“I’m trying to cope with that myself, but I don’t see how I can pick them off one by one. Unless this thing actually works.”

“What thing?”

“The pony.”

“What does it do?”

“I kept asking myself but no-one explained it. For some weird reason, I built it like that myself and it’s supposed to have a nuke-like effect, if it does work in the end.”

“Nuke-like?”

“I said, no-one explained it to me. It’s our best chance anyway. I wouldn’t exactly consider there are many options.”

“And what about the gateway?”

“Blow it up?”

Despite everything, she managed to actually laugh.

“But, that’s impossible!”

“How can it be impossible? There’s nothing impossible about blowing something up, is it? You’ve got explosives right?”

She shook her head wearily, while another volley of beams cut down a group of demons only a few hundred yards away.

“They didn’t tell you everything, did they?”

“What kind of a question is that? If they did, then I’d know everything!”

“It was a rhetorical question! You think the gateway is just a machine?”

“Aren’t we talking about that same pond back in there?”

“That’s just the *doorway* to the after-world, Bobby. A gate is much bigger than a door, isn’t it?”

“How much bigger is it then? Like, say a bigger pool?”

“A lot bigger than a pool,” she said morosely, suddenly looking just as gloomy as I felt once I first saw what we were really up against.

“A small lake? Look, it doesn’t really matter. There’s no way in hell to win this. Let’s fall back while they’re not all over us.”

“You have no idea how this whole thing works, do you? And you actually built it? That’s a laugh.”

“All I know is that it doesn’t involve silly hats. They said I’d know it when I saw it, and that you’d know what to do.”

“They said that? Well, someone must’ve thought you might not go this far if you knew.”

“Know what? I’ve been jerked around so often I get dizzy just by thinking about it. Now I’m immortal, and suddenly I have to fight off the hordes of hell. I keep surprising myself all the time! The only reason I’m doing this is that I seem to be stuck with it.”

“In a very real way, you are stuck with it Bobby. Because, it seems you are the gateway.”

“I don’t understand. You mean, in an abstract kind of way? Like, I’m the guy behind it?”

“No, you are the gateway. Its purpose and function is linked with your soul. It’s what has made you immortal. But that doesn’t mean you can’t die, Bobby.”

“I can? I’m new to this, really, and no-one explains a damn thing in plain English, so it’s _”

“That’s why they wanted to get you here in the after-world, Bobby. That’s why they tried to fool you into coming here. To perform a ritual sacrifice, unlock the gateway and allow them free passage. We kind of forced their hand actually. They’d prefer it if you just waltzed in here all alone.”

“And why did the Bureau convince me to come here?”

“Because, you’re the only one who can destroy it for good!”

“How am I supposed to do that if I can’t remember anything about it?”

“And that’s why Falconi erased your memory! Don’t you see? There was no way to escape his plan, but only to beat them in their

own game! You have to stop them, and find out how to destroy the gateway, Bobby!”

“Which is, how big exactly?”

“You’re standing on it!”

“What, this building?”

“Sulphur, Nevada. Just on the other side of the fence. And a lot less picturesque.”

“The whole town?”

“Yeah, on this side of things, in the after-world, there’s already a network of moats, shaped like a pentagram, with blood, bile and tears running throughout it. We’re sitting right at the center. You can actually see the pillars of fire around you, about three miles out. That’s like candles. Hear that constant murmuring sound that seems to reverberate through everything? Those are the preliminary incantation, Bobby.”

“You mean like in a satanic ritual? Pentagrams, candles, virgins, non-consensual orgies? That’s stuff real?”

“Should you be asking that question when there’s a unicorn that shoots white beams off its horn and a giant caterpillar throwing balls of cleansing fire?”

“Not really, no. So, their plan is to kill all of you, to get to me, either from this side, or

from the normal side of things?”

“Yes, that’s their plan.”

“And then hunt me down, tie me up, and perform a ritual sacrifice that will open up a gateway six miles wide, and pour their hordes onto the face of the earth?”

“I’m afraid so, Bobby.”

“And that would kill me?”

“The sacrifice itself would not, but then you would be rendered mortal again. At least, I think. I’m not sure what Satan’s policy for keeping pets is, but I don’t think he’s a very agreeable master.”

“So much for being immortal. I’m afraid their plan’s working all too well.”

As I uttered these words, I suddenly had a flash of genius or perhaps insanity:

“Which is a very good thing. It’s actually wonderful.”

“If you’re going to be like that you just might walk up there and end it. I can’t really stop you anyway.”

“No, no. It’s great. There will be some tricky timing issues, but we can pull it off, I think.”

“Pull what off?”

“I’ll tell you. And I’ll have to remember how that pony works..”

* * *

I just sat there, with my back against a wall, carrying an improvised flag strapped around my back with a very big - and quite plainly designed - stuck up middle finger. I was trying to look conspicuously nonchalant, what a romantic poet might have in earnest called a ‘mad fool’. On my end, it was simply an idea put into practice, albeit I would’ve been a raving lunatic were I not immortal. Which hadn’t really proven its usefulness, and was about to put to the test, not as a solid battlefield advantage which I’m sure every fighting man would be interested in, but as a way to put my stratagem into action.

As things were, the approaching hordes of Hell weren’t as relentless as I would have hoped in their pursuit of overrunning our position; instead of simply barraging us with hellfire, storming the impromptu trenches and cover positions of what few defenders remained with their halberds, axes, scything claws and gaping maws, they were content to

keep our heads down with occasional shots, and keep everyone busy by assaulting a position with enough force as to press us further inside a smaller perimeter.

It felt like squeezing that very last bit of toothpaste from the tub with your nails. It also meant that they were effectively stalling, waiting for something to happen, or maybe someone to arrive. Maybe they wanted to trap us between the hammer and the anvil first, waiting for Falconi's men to get through the doorway, and make things finally impossible.

A runner had gone back with a message, sharing my plan with Jules. An answer had come back a few minutes later, telling us that the hardest part of their trials was probably over since the lawyers in Falconi's disposal - after having obtained a cease & desist order - were forced to retreat for a recess because of the 'non-government organization' profile of the Normal Bureau. That and a few of Jules well-placed Magnum shots seemed to have put them effectively out of the fight, and only the lycans and werewolves remained alongside Falconi's head-honcho demon lackeys, and they too seemed to be in-fighting

over ‘who is the most bad-ass of them all’.

At least, it seemed we would be safe from a backdoor attack. Which meant I was ready to start running around the various trenches, emplacements, positions, and generally make it painfully obvious and clear as rain, that I was showing them the finger, calling them jackasses, and generally making it well-known that I thought they were nothing more than useless demonic hordes only good for filling up tar pits with tar, and stirring the open-air shit baths.

As the saying goes, if Muhammad can’t go to the mountain, let the mountain come to him. I looked at Eileen, and she gave me a nod and smile. She didn’t say ‘good luck’, but I knew she meant it anyway. I pulled myself out of cover, and started off with a walking pace, waving a hand for everyone to see, smiling casually as if this was a friendly get-together, or perhaps a get-to-know-us-better.

We’d told the guys to hold out a little while longer while I performed my antics, and keep Alice and Bob (the caterpillar and unicorn respectively - I didn’t know at the time that they were such a nice couple) firing away, especially at the hell-bat swarms that seemed

to fill the place with their droppings. The guys knew we were going to draw some attention, but they probably hadn't expected I'd do what I was doing.

As I walked around their positions, the rate of fire dropped substantially, and I invariably saw pretty much everyone give me a weird look, or rather a strange kind of stare. The kind of stare that people give that weird, obscure relative, that no-one really knows intimately, everyone always mixes up with someone else, just can't help pointing at him, comment on his improper attire, and eventually admire him just because he *doesn't seem to care*.

And that was exactly what I was doing, because I just looked like I was talking a walk, without seeming to care, exactly because I didn't, and I didn't because I couldn't die. But that point was lost to all those, friendlies and enemies alike, who saw me climb up to this small improvised parapet made of dirt, kind of like an anthill actually, and shout out of the top of my lungs, extending both arms, facing the general direction of the hordes and giving them the finger in such a pronounced way:

“Eat shit and die!”

I think my voice was carried around by an unusual echo that managed to somehow sideline the ever-mounting hubbub of the chanting that seemed to be coming from what in effect was probably a demonic choir battalion, complete with lecterns-on-wheels drawn by cats. Nothing unusual about them, just plain old cats. Even these mysterious hooded figures seemed to have stopped, and gasped at my taunting show of defiance, and gasped audibly in unison, before silence - a silence that was too complete for comfort - followed.

I grinned smugly and thought that I should've thought about this much earlier, that my commanding presence was such a natural gift that I could exploit in so many ways, and that was just the kind of impression I want to make on the battlefield. And then I saw tens of thousands of the demons roar, growl and howl, wildly flailing their weapons and shouting a mix of obscenities and curses that even though indecipherable in their abyssal tongues, their intended purpose was clear enough.

What kind of impressed me as well, was that I didn't actually have to run around to make my presence felt. I was now the cen-

ter of attention, mostly in a bad way. It was also perplexing to see all these demons suddenly revitalized out of their ordered chaos into acting much more like themselves; I was starting to believe they actually enjoyed being taunted, even in such a basic level as being given the finger (two fingers in Britain, but in Topeka, even in the after-world Topeka - and naturally in Memphis - it's just the one finger).

And then I went a bit overboard quite possibly, seeing the instant success of the finger and accompanying defiant shout, and decided it was time for something that usually I'd consider crass and childish, and certainly not something I'd believe could be taking in place in what could be considered the biblical fight for Armageddon: I turned around, dropped my pants, and showed them their ass. I believe I could see Eileen looking at me, right before she buried her palms in her face.

I heard this man a few feet away, his black suit half torn away, still wearing his broken sunglasses ask me in pure disbelief:

"What, the fuck's, wrong with you?"

Before I had a chance to use the opportunity that question posed to dig deeper inside of me and perhaps give a more in-depth

answer than ‘don’t worry, I can’t die’, I felt my bottom burn up as intensely as it would have had it been immersed in lava, and all the while my senses reported that I was in fact in mid-air, rushing to meet with a concrete wall, while there was this terrible itch across my back.

The next few moments consisted of a jarring feeling of being mushed into a pulp against a concrete wall with a flaming, molten lava rock shot smack on your behind. It wouldn’t have been that bad had my clothing not caught on fire. I pulled myself together and out of the concrete, spent a few seconds to notice that I hadn’t left a stamp on the wall so much as made an impression, and then turned back to the once-more silent crowd of hell’s soldiers who seemed to be craving a proper answer to their flagrant show of lack of manners, shooting someone in the back.

I straightened up the half-broken, half-torn, now flaming one-fingered salutation flag, and yelled, rather inspired:

“My ass, your face, what’s the difference?”

And they just roared enthusiastically, breaking any and all formation; they’d forgotten about rules, they had violated orders, and

they seemed they couldn't care less about being demoted to less-than-imp status, or perhaps turned into horned ants. It seemed that pretty much their minds, their very spirits were indeed focused on one thing: grabbing me.

They rushed with all the speed and terrible force of a tsunami, some even dropping whatever they carried as weapons. Eileen and I exchanged glances and we both instantly knew that we were soon about to find out exactly how solid my plan was. I also knew that both of us tried not to think that it now all rested on a pony on a stick, which no matter how elaborate or technically and scientifically advanced it might actually be, was still shaped like a god-damn pony on a stick.

"They're rushing us from all sides! Fall back! Fall back!" I heard someone say, even as I saw everyone fire off their last bursts, sometimes followed by the ominous sound of a hollow bolt signifying someone's out of ammo. Fireballs started to land all around, as if hell was raining upon us. Every hellish creature that could fly was flapping its wings, of many shapes and sizes, forming into a huge combined swarm that blocked most of the sickly,

orange light in the sky.

I saw the sheer scale of it, and every hair on my body stood up. Seeing them amassed, fighting slowly their way through, forcing us to fall back little by little was demoralising, bleak, and plain ugly. Seeing them rush onwards with wild abandon, lusting for pure chaos to be unleashed among their ranks, was terrifying. It was what the stories about the end of days were always about.

And all I did was wait for Eileen to throw me the pony-on-a-stick and countdown to the last moment before they actually got to me, standing on the exact spot where the very center of the pentagram was, the place where I would be ritually sacrificed, crucified, and generally very probably die should the pony fail to deliver its stated design goal, which was to obliterate the lot of them, and send them to hell.

Right about that time, and while the seconds grew ever longer, but fewer still, as the distance between me and the demons diminished with every bat of the eye, I saw this great shadow cover me, as if a small cloud had picked me out of everyone else.

As everyone around me formed a last

perimeter, a hopeless circle, some grimly pulling out their katanas or heirloom swords with all sorts of blessed rolls and holy seals of papal approval (but thankfully, no silly hats), I saw what had been throwing that shadow over me, and only had enough time to gasp, before it landed right on top of me with tremendous force, using me like some sort of training mattress to halt its fall.

It literally threw me off me my feet and I was thrown a few yards away, my one-fingered salute flag now completely in ruins, but having served its purpose. I shook my head, while the pain from the impact that should have cracked every bone on my body and rendered me nothing more than a rag doll or perhaps a soft crash test dummy, disappeared.

I could still hear the chaos all around, sporadic and quite probably last shots being fired, as well as the surprised gasps the appearance of the demon like a blight falling from the sky had caused among what few men remained standing. I glanced at Eileen who looked tense but determined, her hands glowing with that white-hot intensity that meant she was ready to rumble.

And then I saw what the fuss was all about, because the demon I was looking at was exactly what the term ‘lean, mean, killing machine’ aimed to describe, only not as lean, and definitely more mean than a kid at school eating all the candy from the other kids and calling the girl wearing braces ‘metal-mouthed freak’.

And that was guaranteed by its height of twenty feet, bifurcated barbed tail, red-hot flaming hoofs instead of feet, claws as large as jet engine fan blades, and a devilish smile that said that this one knew he had a natural capacity to instill gaping awe, mind-numbing fear, and send men early to their graves. Not only that, he was definitely one of those fellas who enjoyed spreading death, destruction and despair. He folded his leathery wings and said through a mouth filled with granite teeth and a set of fangs that could have been tusks for all I knew:

“Bobby Barhoe. An audacious little man. Don’t you recognize me, Bobby?”

His voice was like rattling embers. I had the most definite and distinct privilege to not have met such a demon in the few hours in my reinstated career as a demon hunter,

paranormal fighter, and half-assumed, half-proclaimed almost-unwilling protector of every human with a soul (meaning journalists and lawyers were quite possibly exempt). While everyone around me stood warily their ground, knowing full well that this was a distraction my plan had not accounted for, I stood up, dusted off my too-tight-for-comfort football pants, and replied, almost wanting to know the reason behind that question:

“No, thank God, I don’t,” I said, and meant it. I then heard a very familiar, heavy New Jersey accent, with all the nasal qualities and street-wise flair, wiseguy tone, and Italian-bred fluidity of Marco Falconi, saying what I instantly knew was true:

“Who the fuck did ya expect? It’s a me, Mario! You fucking wiseguy, you!” he said in that joking manner mobsters like Falconi used right before they stabbed someone in the back with a screwdriver or choked someone to death with a shoe lace. He was grinning widely, perhaps showing off his capability to choose between swallowing a car whole or chewing it first. Perhaps there was something seriously wrong with his facial muscles, but that wasn’t probable as him just enjoying

himself immensely for once again, ready and willing to mess up everything.

I felt this was probably his idea of settling things his way, having his personal hand in all this plan of his, from start to finish, from the first to the last stroke. He was that kind of a prick, and I'm certain all his charm as Falconi didn't go to waste in his demon form, but was all the more exaggerated. My mind raced with what I should do, while the moment where I'd had to fire up the pony was approaching fast. While I was thinking, others preferred the more direct approach.

Someone from the Bureau men thought it wouldn't hurt to try and cut the demons leg off, even though it was as thick as a tree. Falconi barely looked his way when he simply flicked his wrist and his claws cut him down, not unlike swatting a fly, only much more blood and gore was involved.

That was the exact moment Eileen unleashed a lightning bolt she had been drawing energy for ever since Falconi appeared. The air around me parted with explosive intensity. The after-world around me was lit up with blinding white light that for a moment obscured everything from sight, casting

fierce shadows on anything it touched, and it touched everything. It was hundreds of times stronger than what Bob the unicorn could shoot of its horn. it was the most awesome display of firepower I had ever seen, rivaling nature's and man's most powerful devices.

Nothing normal, alive, or made by man could have withstood that amount of concentrated, focused power. But Falconi was still standing there once the smoke and haze cleared moments later. He was apparently visibly shaken, and of his skin singed as well; his great, dragon-like wings had been reduced to shredded bone and straps of leather.

And all the while, from the corner of my eye I could see innumerable hordes all around us, finally having reached us at a stone's throw, ready to dismember, gore and utterly annihilate everyone. I could even see large, spiked, infernally hot chains, the ones meant to shackle me in place.

Though I had probably gone temporarily deaf from Eileen's thunderbolt, I could hear the incantations again, reaching a climax I had thought would only come a lot later, when everything had already been lost and only I had remained as sad witness and

unwilling executioner of all of creation's last will. But I could hear them now, satanic verse after satanic verse, uttered with that same regurgitating quality those European metal bands preferred.

I could see Eileen almost spent, faint and withering, unable to even stay afloat in her incorporeal body. I could see the last few men and women gathered around me and Falconi, bracing themselves for a last stroke, a last defiant kill, their faces grim but flushed red from the heat of the battle.

And I could definitely see Falconi, looking as smug and confident as ever, slowly pacing his way towards me, ready to gloat about their impending victory and his elevations from a prince to perhaps a spiritual successor of sorts. It was plain for everyone who could spare a look that he felt positively triumphant and totally invincible. There were only a few more moments left before everyone was cut down in a flurry of claws, swords, axes, bullets and hellfire, only a few more moments before the end of everything.

Eileen used whatever little remained in her spirit to throw me the pony she was safely keeping with her until the last moment, which

had just come. I grabbed it with one hand, still looking at Falconi, whose eyes had met only a flick earlier exchanging gazes like messages of hate and defiance, curses, and the odd term of endearment like 'you little fuck'.

And in those eyes, through that gaze that worked as a bridge for a silent communion, a thing only possible between creatures, human or otherwise, that had gazed deep into the fabric of the cosmos, I saw a flare of uncertainty.

It was the fear of something new, it was the sensation that something was amiss, that something had been overlooked, underestimated, forgotten, misplaced. It begun a simple hint of ignorance that turned into an avalanche of fear, uncertainty and doubt with all the rapid alacrity that the demonic synapses of his brain's equivalent could deliver.

In an instant, as I grasped the pony-on-a-stick with eyes closed, searching into my inner self, my most natural basic self to come through, to feel, to remember, dig inside that animal cortex and light up those searchlights of my soul, to really remember, to really think. In that split fraction of less than a second,

where Falconi was tormented by waves of uncertainty, and I was probing my inner self trying to remember what my brain refused to by itself, there was a sweet balance, a cold time of glory for an uncaring universe where everything was possible, and every moment could change everything, for ever, no matter the cost.

And then just when Falconi was reaching to grab that pony out of my stick, I believed I knew, that I remembered. I folded my legs around the stick, clenched my arms around the pony's head, and leaped into the air, shouting as if everyone, living and dead, should hear it, and know it was done:

“Go horsy!”

And then I saw this pink light burst out, and completely cover everything, as if nothing else existed other than pink, ever.

* * *

There was a cup of a mud-like substance Claudia insisted was made of quality hand-picked, freshly roasted, home-grown, pesticide-free coffee beans. I was her boss,

and I insisted it was mud, and not that cheap-skate runny mud they have in Florida and the tropics, the stuff that looks like it was just dirt and water all mixed up together. This looked, felt, and tasted like one-hundred percent frozen, volcanic sludge-like mud with all the physical qualities of cement.

I buzzed her:

“Claudia, this isn’t coffee.. This is -”

“- mud, I know. Why do you keep asking me to make it then?”

“It’s my prerogative, I’m your boss. Now be a good girl and make me a fresh cup, yeah?”

She didn’t reply to that, and I knew she was already hard at it. I had hand-picked her from among the bureau staff because she was one of the few who had finally survived the ordeal, a real good shot, and very keen on voicing her personal opinions, which could be easily discerned from the fact that I could see her through the glass pane, pouring actual dirt from a pot plant into the coffee machine.

I returned to the briefing report laying on my desk, which contained little noteworthy intelligence on the Himalayan incident a few weeks before. There were some dark points

to cover, but there were capable people on it, and I was pretty adamant that they'd get to the bottom of who was behind the resurgence of ghost yetis and bone dragons near McLeod Ganj.

I had been singing paper after paper concerning logistics supplies, administrative reorganization efforts and most notably putting into full effective force the discontinuation of the practice of using those awful papal mitres and other silly hats as warding devices, replacing them with stylish, dependable, and above all perhaps, inconspicuous looking fedoras. Jules had jokingly said that the next thing we knew, we'd be in the music business, doing concerts to save orphans.

Von Papen had visited just the other day, and was quite looking forward to going on vacation to his hunting lodge at Pomerania. Or was it Baden-Essen? He was very elusive about his exact whereabouts, and when I asked him what was his preferred game, he rather mischievously or perhaps confused, answered 'chess'.

Even though he had been very vocative in celebrating the demons' defeat (in a rush of euphoria and wishful thinking he

had exclaimed, among other slightly misdirected comments, that ‘ze Stalinist pigz are finally vanquiwshed!’), he remained prudently alarmed of the fact that even if the gateway had been destroyed (technically speaking, rendered inoperable rather than physically destroyed), there were still demonic operatives lying around. That only enhanced the theory that they still had ways of moving back and forth, and that there was still a very real and valid reason for the Normal Bureau to exist.

I felt a rush of cool, air-conditioned air sweep inside. It was Claudia, who had actually gone ahead and made coffee out of dirt, seemingly quite proud to admit it as well:

“Here’s your daily sludge of mud, my insipid master. Shall I whip myself or will your minions do so after they have their way with me?”

The cup of mud smelled like it was just the right kind of coffee. I momentarily thought that an open mind should always be, well, open, and that perhaps the taste wouldn’t be as disagreeable as the popular opinion held. The phone rang and quite possibly saved me from actually tasting mud; it was Eileen. She

sounded positively and properly pissed:

“Why are you still in the office? Aren’t you on the blimp already?” she said, and the image of being badly charred on a rotating spit with a few lightning bolts flashed across my mind.

“I was just finishing up the last of the paperwork. About the hats mostly. Did you know I issued that directive in September of ’58? I mean, we were doing that for more than fifty years!”

“Aha. I don’t care. You were supposed to be flying by now. Do you want to irritate me?”

I knew she meant extremely agitated or pissed off. That was always a bad thing, even when her eyes didn’t give off lightning sparks. I didn’t have much of a chance or time to mount a poor defense when she continued:

“Just because there are two Bureau blimp’s on stand-by at any one time, it doesn’t mean you should commandeer one whenever you feel like it.”

“Well, I could still make the 8 o’clock flight,” I said trying to save face. I wasn’t even sure there was an 8 o’clock flight for Honolulu out of Colorado.

“Is that Pacific Time or Hawaiian? Hawaii does have its own time zone, you know.”

“It does? No, I think it’s 8 o’clock Mountain Time.”

“Just get on that blimp. Oh, and Bobby?”

“Yeah?”

“We can try that.. That thing, you mentioned you really wanted to do. You know.”

“We can? Wow, you really changed your mind, didn’t you?. You’ll see, it’s just a matter of getting used to it. You’ll like it in the end, as much as I do. Well, gotta go, right?”

“I’ll be by the pool. Bye..”

I was so excited. Me and Eileen had this thing going, now, nothing as serious as a fake marriage yet, but we were having a good time. Going slowly with everything. But that night.. That night was going to special.

We were going night scuba-diving.