



House of Mystery #2
various

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Foreword

**House of Mystery Issue II:
Doorway to Nightmare**
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Its Halloween night. Outside, the sky is black, save for one light: the Full Moon. And despite feeling the need to stay safe and warm within your home, you decide to take a walk outside.

A fog covers the streets; a breeze touches the trees and makes fallen leaves dance. And all in all you walk, stalking the footsteps of feet that haven't touched these streets in so long. As long as you feel the need for treats...you keep walking.

With a mind so loaded with thoughts you find that you've been wandering the roads for a long time...so long that you've lost your way...that is, until you find a gate that leads to a graying property, a sea of dead leaves and trees and drudgery and misery, until you just find a grand gothic house...A House of Mystery...

You can't stop moving, and whether you're a fool or just in the mood for tricks, you reach the front door...And step inside...

*And make a final
fatal
mistake...*

Once inside a gale force wails, moving you inside while the doors shut behind you. The walls scream with life and agony, while hands drag you through a room of hags who read threads, and bedded sinners brag about the heads they've taken, the souls they've turned red, and the cold, cold touch of the dead. And all they whisper is 'The Door, The Door,' ...

And finally you've reach this dreaded door, this dreaded taunt you can't ignore, you bones shakes more than ever before and the more and more you try to get a

way...the more it pulls you through...

*Through the murky grime of the human soul...
Through the place that burns but feels so cold...
Through the horrid bitterness that humanity shares,
It takes you quick, to a place far and near ...
It takes you there ...
Through the **Doorway to Nightmare**...*

"Ah, you've arrived! We were expecting you." His voice is like Vincent Price's. His eyes hold a gleam of some unknown happiness. He is still grinning so widely. "You've strayed off the path, haven't you? Well you won't be able to go anywhere anytime soon, I'm sure of that. If you go out in the fog you'll be wandering forever! But I have the remedy..."

He walks to a drawer and pulls out a large, dusty book. It's a wonder that it doesn't fall apart in his hands: you wonder how old it is. He blows the dust off the cover and takes a seat in a chair.

The gargoyle is suddenly by your side, and it scares you. It grabs your arms and drags you, and you close your eyes hoping that it won't eat you. When you open them again, you are sitting in a chair that has been dragged to be across from the man.

"Don't be so scared, chum, though I know Gregory is a bit intimidating. Do you like the name Gregory? I named him myself. Gargoyle names should always start with 'G', don't you agree. I'm Cain, by the way."

You nod. It's the only thing you know how to do right now.

"Are you up for a story? How about nine? We have plenty of time, trust me. You'll enjoy this, you will." He smiles again. A chill runs down your spine. Damn his Vincent Price voice.

"Here collected are nine stories featuring faces that may be familiar or unfamiliar to you... I took this book from Lucien, hopefully he won't notice...that cretin...anyways, these stories were written by dreamers who do not know that they

have been seeing the scenes of real lives...of heroes, villains, and all the things in between...Hope you enjoy..."

You sit back. A chill runs down your spine.

Damn his Vincent Price voice.

Chapter 1

Soultaker

*"Ah, this is written by one **Charlie Wilkins**, a founding member and long contributor to one of those spider web places or such...oh right, thank you, websites I mean..., he was the first human in a few hundred years to find the path to this house and now others can't help but find their way here...*

*Anyways, he wrote a book called **House of Mystery**, bringing together other writers and dreamers like himself, and later conceived another House of Mystery... the very book we are reading right now. This is the first of three of his stories. Enjoy!"*

"Soultaker"

Whispers in the night. Metal grinding on wood. It ran, ragged through the woods, a demon in form of flesh. She chased it, of course, the stench of blood and brimstone fresh in the air, an easy trail for someone to follow. Foliage was torn, footsteps thick and heavy on the wet muddy floor. It moved like an animal, four limbs all with claws that could tear through steel like paper, fangs that could clean bite of a head within seconds. It was fast too. But with the gash in its mortal form's hind leg, it was moving slow. In the dull light of the moon above, black ichor sparkled visible up ahead. She was close. Then the trail ended. Strange. She slowed up to a walk, and listened. There was no birds song, no

crickets chirping... It was close.

She could nearly smell it.

Her eyes widened, and she looked up, and the silence was pierced as it dove down from the trees above. Her arm was torn open, and she cried out, but kept her composure, bringing her sword up and preventing its teeth from removing her head from her shoulders. It gnashed and roared, but the sword was jammed in its mouth, and she was able to gain leverage and kick upwards, sending the hell-beast stumbling backwards.

“Come on then, you ugly bastard, come on!”

It howled at her, and she motioned to her left, and it dove forward, but she shifted her weight to her left and sliced down the blade on its face, cutting deep into its flesh and scraping bone. It swatted at her, and she flew back, cursing herself. She was being too emotional. Pull back. She squatted, and watched as the beast nuzzled its wound with a clawed hand. The wound bled black. It stank of death. Like rotting corpses. It looked her deep in the eye. Those eyes. Like red pits. Its skin was a squalid grey, patches of fur lining its joints. Strange. She didn't blink. It didn't blink. And then it pounced at her, clawed hands reaching toward her. She rolled back, hit the ground hard, and jammed up her sword. The demon screamed. The physical shell evaporated into nothingness, and the demon's essence transformed to air, only to be sucked inside the blade that vanquished it.

Tatsu Yamashiro lowered her katana. She watched as the blade glistened in the moonlight. Another soul to keep the others company inside the weapon. She wiped the black blood of the steel, and then sheathed the weapon. She could return home now. Until the next demon crossed paths with her...

Chapter 2

The Price is Too High

“Did you enjoy that one? Great. Now here’s another writer, Jay A., better known as Arcalian to some in his lifetime. He was the very first contributor to this very book. Not only will you enjoy this, but you’ll find two people who most wouldn’t expect to see together... two people who you shouldn’t ever have to meet...”

"The Price is Too High"

He was the avatar of temptation. The incarnation of the deal-maker. When a soul could be bought, he was the aspect of evil there to make the purchase. His was the name rendered from the number of the beast. He was Neron.

At the moment he was most concerned with that foolish Baron Winter, and the inconvenience that was Blue Devil. But he had many concerns throughout the realms, and many ways of gaining an advantage.

And there was an opportunity that he felt he could take advantage of. Something that might tip the balance not only in his favor, but in the favor of the Planes of Evil as a whole.

There were beings, he knew, that were neither angels nor demons. Beings who were not about power or control, but stability, focus, regulation. Beings neither good nor evil in themselves, but simply aspects of reality. They were sometimes called the Immanent Ones; they referred to

themselves as the Endless. There were seven of them, and regardless of time or place they did their duties, in their own way.

As he sat on his throne in the fiery darkness, he contemplated the weakness that had developed amongst the Endless, in the past four centuries. One of their number had abandoned his responsibilities, and refused to allow the powers to pass to someone else. There was nothing Neron could do about that... unless one of the Endless gave him permission to do so, as their agent in the matter. And he was fairly confident he knew which one would be amenable to such an offer.

He stood from his throne and took his more human aspect; slicked back blonde hair, glowing green eyes, green armor. Not that it would impress or appease the being he wished to see, but protocol was important in situations like this. Even where the youngest of the Endless was concerned.

He stepped down from his throne, faced leftwards, and closed his eyes. He took a step forward, and vanished from that realm.

Madness. Obscurity. Impossibility. Lateral thinking. Drunken stupor. Fever dreams... Neron wandered through the collective subconscious, through a string of mortal minds, searching for the path. Not a way in, no; his potential client would not simply let him barge into her realm, and if he somehow managed to do so, that would only earn him her anger and disfavor. Galling as it was, he needed to request an audience. And while he felt the presence of her will in all these minds, the handprint of her involvement, he did not sense her direct attention, her avatar.

At last, he found her on the streets of Istanbul. A drunken man was shuddering in an alley, eyes closed. To mortal eyes that's all there was, a drunken fool in the throes of affliction. But to Neron's eyes...

She was floating above his head, giggling and laughing, gently dancing above him, her dainty feet dancing on air just above his head. In a very really sense, she was dancing in his mind.

Her hair changed by the second. Now blonde, now redhead, now plaid, now silver, now pinstripe gold-on-blue... it changed and shifted even as Neron watched. It slipped away from her head, leaving her completely bald; then new green and orange strands of hair began to sprout.

Her eyes were mismatched; one green, one blue. At least they did not change. Neron was many things, but one of the things he was was a creature of order and rules, and her chaotic nature disquieted him. Not that he would ever show it, of course.

Her body was that of a young child, though of course she was ageless beyond all reason. Her mind was something of a child's as well, albeit a child who knew many terrible secrets that no young soul should ever know.

She wore a jacket three sizes too big for her; it came down almost to her ankles.

Then she spoke; she was speaking to the mortal, or more accurately to the mortal's mind. Her voice was wavery and changed tone and pitch on each word; it sounded like a piano out of tune. "*YeS, tHaT's It... .. ThInK aBoUt ALL tHe PrEtTy BuTtErFlies... .*"

There was more in the same vein. Neron waited patiently; while he would like nothing better than to interrupt her and get down to business, such would not put her into an agreeable frame of mind.

She had noticed him, of course; her senses, while somewhat skewed, were more than powerful enough for that. Eventually, she looked up. "*Hi... .WhAt Do YoU wAnT, mIsTeR nAsTy?*"

"Greetings, Delirium, Lady of Madness. I would speak with you on matters that concern us both."

She cocked her head. "*BoTh Of Us? LiKe WhAt?*"

"There is something I may be able to do for you. In return you might assist me."

She eyed him suspiciously. "*I kNoW hOw DeAlS wIth yOu WoRk. AnD*

bEsIdEs, YoU cAn'T hAvE mY uH... ..sOuL-tHiNgY."

This was not a refusal; she was telling him she could not give him her essence in the way a mortal could give up a soul. He bowed slightly. "I know this. But there are other things you might give me."

She looked thoughtful... .then started to spin around and make silly birdsong noises. Neron rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. He was patient, and Immortal. But Delirium could try the patience of anyone.

Then she began to hum. But it was a thoughtful hum, rather than just abstract noise. Finally, Delirium said, "*If WeRe gOnNa TaLk AbOuT tHiS, i WoULD rAtHeR dO iT iN mY rEaLm."*

"Certainly," Neron agreed. It would, he knew, put her more at ease. Plus, by agreeing to the bargain in her own place of power, it would be more binding on her.

She gestured, and they vanished in a swirl of light.

The drunkard she had been working on blinked in puzzlement and looked around, fully awake and sober.

Delirium's realm.

It was not one of the Lower Planes, but Neron felt it could serve as such for those in the grip of her power. Colors swirled everywhere, some of them not part of the normal spectrum as humans perceived it; random objects floated by, and from time to time you could see the hallucinations and madness of humans and other beings throughout the cosmos.

Delirium sat down by the broken sundial in the center of her realm and blinked curiously at him. "*So. uM. WhaT dO yOu WaNt FrOm Me?"*

"As you know I make deals. The deal I would offer you... .is to bring your brother back."

Delirium froze. Literally. Her hair stopped moving and changing. All the colors stopped moving everywhere in her realm. And across the cosmos, a thousand million people in the throes of madness, or drunkenness, or hallucination or fever dreams or shock, froze with her.

The pause seemed to last an eternity. Finally, in a small voice, Delirium said, "*YoU CaN't MaKe HiM cOmE bAcK.*"

"If you agree to the deal, I can. If one member of the Endless contracts with me, that grants me the power to influence another." As well as the power to do a number of other things, of course. But he did not say that to her. She was crazy, but no fool.

"Um... ..WhAt Do YoU WaNt?"

He grinned toothily. There was no need to lie; why lie when a lie would not be believed, and the truth would serve just as well? "As you pointed out earlier, you cannot give me your essence. But it would serve my needs nicely to have... .influence... .over the Endless."

All of Delirium's hair fell out and both her eyes turned ice blue. She stared at him for a long time. Not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

And Neron, for all his power and dark history, cringed back. He could not control that movement. And perhaps it was just as well. Vulnerability might serve better than arrogance for his needs.

Finally, she said, "*WoULDn'T dEsIrE bE, uM, bEtTeR fOr YoU?*"

Neron's mouth twisted. "Desire's actions often serve our needs nicely. But it has consistently refused to make pact with us. It values it's independence."

Delirium made a thoughtful humming noise again, but this time there was an angry buzzing, like that of a hornet, mixed in.

Finally she said, "*LeT mE tHiNk AbOuT iT fOr A sEcOnD.*"

"Of course," he agreed, bowing.

There was a pause, and around him Delirium's realm swam back into multicolored life again. Her hair grew out once more, but this time it was mostly black, with the occasional thread of purple. Neron had a sinking feeling that this would not turn out well.

Delirium wrapped her hands around her knees, and rocked back and forth, humming thoughtfully.

Neron waited. Time passed. Not much of it, but more than he was comfortable with. An hour? A day? It was hard to keep track of time in her realm.

Finally, she stood up and stared at him. Her eyes were mismatched again, but her expression was intense.

He stood very still, looking back.

Her answer was... .

"NO."

As she said the word her realm turned to ice and suddenly her face filled his vision. All her madness and bitterness were there for his immortal mind to perceive in that moment, and he recoiled.

He turned to flee, to look away from that terrible face. As he turned, she forcibly expelled him from her realm, and invoked her power upon him.

As Neron was sent tumbling into the cosmos, he was forced to relive his Fall from Grace. Of being outcast with the Morningstar and all the others from the Silver City, so long ago, before time as mortals understood the concept began.

He screamed. He thrashed. He wailed. He howled, lost in his own madness.

Down he fell, down, down down.

Neron was out of his mind for a period of more than a month and a half. When he finally came to, he was back in his own lower plane, face down before his own throne. He had lost his human form and his true nature was revealed in terrible shape.

He heard lesser demons laughing at him.

He stood up, and the laughing stopped.

But he was not satisfied. He thrashed out his limbs in anger and fury, and a shockwave of his infernal power slashed through the realm, and the lesser powers wailed in pain and agony instead.

"Yes, very impressive," a voice said behind him.

Neron froze; he knew that voice.

"I would advise against plotting revenge against my sister for this," the voice said. It was female, and the tone was cheerful, conversational. But he understood the threat all the same. "Just a friendly reminder; your office is not written in stone, even amongst your peers. Nor does it have to be filled by you."

He did not look around. He knew what he would see. He had no wish to see the second oldest member of the Endless at that moment.

"We take care of our own. The Endless are of one voice on this matter, even Desire. Be warned."

He said nothing for a long time, but the presence behind him remained. Finally, he said, "I understand."

"Good," Death said cheerfully, and then she was gone.

Neron slowly walked to his chair, resumed his human form, and sat down. He tried not to let his body shake. He tried not to show fear or weakness. He knew two things; first, that his position of power would be consistently challenged for some time after this. Second—and this was much more galling—the only reason he had not been destroyed and his power usurped while he lay there was because Delirium had willed it so.

He sat silently for some time.

Perhaps for the time being he should focus his attention on Baron Winter and Blue Devil.

For the time being.

Hell was unusually quiet for a time after that.

Chapter 3

Endless Lives

*“Interesting, was it not? Now we have a dreamer named **Masoud House**...a man who travels as a **Crow** in his dreams...wonder how Matthew takes to him...Anyways, here is his tale of three immortals of another kind...”*

"Endless Lives"

A man stepped out of a busy Opal City street and started down an avenue full of townhouses and shops. Even though it was only a few minutes to midnight the city was very much alive: jubilant jazz music played all over, Halloween Parties graced private clubs and public sidewalks, and lanterns and decorations were strung up all over the town. Walking quickly past a group of night owls, he scanned the ground in front of him until he found a small black circle that had been marked onto the sidewalk.

“Okay... how does this go?” he thought aloud, taking out a compass and placing both feet onto the circle. “Moonlight, trace my steps!” A white light began to glow under the soles of his feet, though only he could see it. He began to move: each step he took left a trace of silver light in his wake. “One step north; five steps west; twenty feet southwest...” Passersby laughed as they went along, believing the man to be just another Halloween drunk: he ignored them, following his directions to a tee. “Two steps northwest; five feet east; three steps northeast; six steps north...and now to cross the street...” He turned southwest, jogging across the street and narrowly outrunning a speeding Volkswagen Beetle.

Continuing straight led him right into a small alleyway. "And ten feet in, turn right; knock on the thirteenth brick up from the ground..." he said as he crouched a little, using his fingers to count each brick one by one until he found his target. He knocked: the light that had followed his steps had drawn a sigil that led to where he was, and now it locked, flashing upwards and running along the wall to the brick.

"And finally..."

He drew in a large breath, and with his best deep voice said **"FE-FI-FO-FUM, I SMELL THE BLOOD OF AN ENGLISHMAN!"**

The wall began to rumble as dust blew out. Bricks shifted until a black void the size of a doorway opened up before him. The man looked out of both ends of the alley, and finding himself alone, stepped through.

All of a sudden he stepped out into a large living room. It was full of items that dated from the 19th century and on, and even a few items from before that. All of the furniture and decorations were black: the walls, the floor, and the ceiling were also black. The only exceptions were three ivory-handle wine glasses that were sitting on a black wooden coffee table.

Next to the coffee table were three black seats, two of which were occupied. The first was occupied by a serious looking man dressed in an olive turtleneck and matching slacks. His hair was a dark auburn color, with a streak of white going up the middle. His name was Jason Blood. The other was dressed all in black, much like his abode: he wore a three-piece suit, shades, and had a black top hat resting on the top of the cane in his hands. He was Richard Swift, though he was better known in this century as The Shade.

The two rose to greet him with strong handshakes. "My, my, my... if isn't Mr. Gadling himself," Shade said. "Hope you enjoyed the password I sent you."

"Nevermind him, Blood said. "He's got a warped sense of humor. He's

just mad that there tends to be more English immortals than American ones...”

“Oh ha-ha,” Shade said sarcastically.

“Anyways, you’re late as usual, Hob.” Blood said with a smirk.

Hob smiled. He ran a hand through his thick, shaggy, chocolate-colored hair. “Remember that I haven’t been ‘Hob Gadling’ since around the 17th century. I’m Robbin Gallows now,” he said with a wink and a smirk.

“With your beard growing thick again I think you’re as close to being ‘Hob’ than ever before,” Blood replied.

“And if you ever grow your hair out to your shoulders I can call you Jason again,” Hob remarked. Blood snorted. Hob brought a hand up and rubbed his chin. “Though I suppose it’s been a while since I shaved it... I remember a time when letting your beard grow was a sign of manhood and ruggedness. The men of this decade seems to like shaving off their hair with their ‘Gilletes’ and their ‘Norelcos’.”

The three took a seat. “I’m glad you made it. We haven’t touched the wine yet: I was beginning to think we’d watch the wine reach its centennial before you arrived here,” The Shade said as Blood began to open the wine. “Haven’t you got anything older, Jason?” Shade asked turning to Blood. “I feel like we’ll be arrested for this less-than-a-hundred year old jailbait.”

Hob and Blood laughed; Blood popped the cork of the wine bottle. “It’s tough to hold onto anything for a long time when you’re occasionally the target of both heroes and villains...”

The Shade nodded solemnly with a feint smile. “I suppose I can relate.”

“Why don’t you put them into storage like I told you?” Hob asked. “Or find one of the millions of magic types like yourselves who can put them into some pocket dimension or some such.”

Blood shrugged. “I suppose I enjoy having my possessions nearby even if they may only be temporary. I’ve grown used to having things for a

short amount of time. What's priceless now may not be later, and what's not priceless now may be so later. Besides," he said, sipping his wine. "If the owner of my storage became incapacitated, I'd have no way of conjuring my possessions."

"I guess I understand that," Hob replied. "I'm probably going to be connected to you hocus-pocus types for the rest of my long life but I'll never get what you can do. I barely could get that sigil to the gateway spell. Why couldn't we do something like that Potter kid and step through an invisible platform?"

"You read those books?" The Shade said with a laugh. "Why I think our Gadling's gone mad!"

"Sue me. I didn't know how to read well until the end of the 15th century. I prefer the simply stuff," he said with a smile. "I actually only saw the movies though...I find that after meeting Shakespeare, hell even before he was 'Shakespeare', I prefer the classics. But I always try to support the creativity and imagination that is born out of England."

"How supportive you are," The Shade quipped. "If only the Queen knew of your love for your homeland."

"The creativity of my homeland is what inspired me to think outside the box—it's what made me immortal like you two blokes."

"Oh that's right..." Blood said. "What's the story again? You posed a philosophical statement which awakened your immortality: that people only die because they accept that inevitability as their only outcome in life. You challenged that train of thought and in doing so ended your mortality and perpetuated your youth."

Hob chuckled. "For a long time I thought was all it was. But I later realized, after about two hundred or more years, that I was just in the right place at the right time."

The Shade grinned. "I always forget that part."

"What's that mean?" Hob said.

“That I tend to always forget how the so-called Endless granted you immortality.”

Hob frowned. “How many times do I have to tell you they exist? I’m not talented enough to create all of this. If it wasn’t for Dream and his sister, Death, I’d—“

“Ha! Death is a woman no less! Under the reaper’s clothes is stockings and a garter belt!”

Hob ignored the Shade. "If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here. I was talking aloud in a bar at the same time that the two had decided to walk our world, and apparently they were talking about life and death and mortality. They happened to walk by me and overhear my philosophy, and Dream, who I'd later call my friend, talked Death into granting me immortality on my own terms. I may only lose my longevity when-

“When you are tired of living and finally wish to give in and die. Yes, we’ve heard this tale before,” Shade said. “Why do we immortals love to retell our tales so often? Is it so we won’ forget it? Anyway, it feels like a nice little fabricated fairy tale. ‘A man faces immortality, and even with the horrors of a long life, he decides to embrace the changes, the ups and downs of life, and go on stronger and wiser’. No offense, Hob, but I think you may indeed have a future in the writing industry. J.K. Rowling, move over!”

“So you have read the books,” Hob quipped. Shade sent him a dirty look.

Jason shook his head. “When are you going to believe that the Endless are real? I have studied them for quite some time: especially a certain book on Earth that scholars believe is tied to the Book that is chained to the arm of Destiny, the eldest of the Endless. Anything is possible: we live in a world of uncertainty, after all. We live in a world, well a universe, where Gods walk the earth, divine beings speak to mortals, and Biblical beings take action on the mortal plane.”

“Because, Jason,” Shade started, “I can believe in so-called deities,

divinity, and angels and demons: half of them tend to be immortals like ourselves who have too much power to remember their once-mortal beginnings. But” he said, taking a little more of his wine, “seven anthropomorphic beings that are the metaphysical entities of human words that all happen to start with ‘D’? Oh—and their tagline! ‘Even the youngest of the Endless is older than the eldest being’! Seems a bit imaginary to me.”

“Is it as far-fetched as Olympian Gods who represent concepts like love and war? Yet, through Wonder Woman, we see that they do indeed exist.” Blood said matter-of-factly.

“I just find it hard to believe that these Endless are so revered and yet so little is known about them. It seems all mystique; no substance. It’s all too nicely crafted without any proof. Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair and Delirium: so alliterative, don’t you think? Something’s wrong.”

Blood shook his head. “Hob, don’t let him get to you. Don’t forget he’s young; he’s barely making two hundred. He’ll come around in another century or so when he’s seen some more of the world.”

“Whatever,” Shade said, placing his glass down. “That’s another thing,” he said leaning towards the other two men, “almost all immortals, besides the ones with the inflated egos, admit that while they have an indefinite lifespan they are still susceptible to death that results from some kind of particular harm, though perhaps not as easily harmed as others. Sure you have some like the supposed ‘Resurrection Man’ who cannot be killed—some kind of alien thing—but for the most part we all know we may die. Hell, even Dorian Gray was almost impervious—that is until he saw his portrait. But then you have these ‘Endless’ characters who apparently, like their name suggests, have no end!”

Hob nodded. “Yes and no. So far as I know, I have picked up from my conversations with Dream that they can be killed—though with an extreme, cosmic plan. From what I’ve gathered, Despair, one of the younger of the Endless siblings, has already died...”

“But then how is there one now? How are they ‘endless’ if they can be killed, no matter how difficult it may be?” Blood asked.

“Exactly!” Shade added.

“I believe she was replaced...like...cosmically replaced by the universe with another being by some kind of extreme predestined design, or fate, or mere coincidence. But the way it happens is amazing: somehow they transfer their essence to the next person. That person will know their duties upon ascendance, and retain some of those memories, though their personality may be slightly different. “

“And what of Destruction?” Blood asked. “You mentioned him in the past. You mentioned how he left his post and his duty: why didn’t the universe replace him?”

“I’m glad you’re beginning to see the holes in the story,” the Shade said.

“Wait—“ Hob said, putting up a hand in protest, “Destruction is another matter. He did indeed leave his post: he could neither slow nor halt the process of destruction, and it began to eat at him. The process of destruction is inevitable: it is a fundamental metaphysical force of perpetual life and death. It is because of this force that everything deconstructs back into a form of energy, and through this, everything from alchemy to reincarnation is possible. But he didn’t have the heart to continue the regulation of these events. He abandoned his realm and his role.

“I’m not quite sure why he wasn’t replaced; Dream and his other siblings don’t like to dwell on the status of their brother for too long without getting distressed or agitated. “

“Amazing that such ‘high’ beings can be so... human,” Shade murmured to no one in particular.

“One more question,” Blood said. The Shade made a long sigh as he turned away to stare at a Picasso painting he had stolen. Blood ignored him.

“What of Delight? Shade named seven Endless members, but I remember hearing a rumor of an Endless called Delight. She was supposed to be the youngest of them all.”

Hob shrugged. “Wow...I’m not really sure...so far as I know the

youngest is Delirium. Unless..."

The Shade made a large sigh again. "I tire of this talk."

"And I tire of your childishness," Blood said with a grimace overtaking his face. "It seems to me that you are ignoring the possibilities because of simple stubbornness or simple jealousy."

"Jealousy? I'm above jealousy, Jason. Skeptical is all I am."

"We've been around, Richard. Things begin to make less sense the older you get. Trust me, I wouldn't have believed half of the things I know now when I was less than a hundred—"

"Please. This 'youthful' nonsense is really beginning to bug me. I may be younger than you both, but I am well learned enough to understand my surroundings." His lips tightened. "Do not treat me like a child," he hissed.

"Don't forget the number one weakness for immortals are the seven deadly sins, Richard." Blood said. "I suggest you appreciate our wisdom; we gained it at the cost of foolish mistakes."

"Please, Jason."

"Pride is a hard thing to overcome: it has been the downfall of many an immortal," Blood continued. "Who knows how great an angel Lucifer Morningstar would have been if he hadn't fallen due to his pride? Or how successful a world leader Vandal Savage would have been to the ancient world if he had learned from his mistakes? Or—"

"Don't feed me this holier-than-thou garbage!" The Shade said scowling.

"Take it easy Swift," Hob said. "He's just telling you things you need to hear."

"That I need to hear? That I need to hear? Don't think that I've forgotten your pasts! I'm not the only 'once-villain' here. Or have you conveniently forgotten your own sins as the centuries pass by?"

Blood and Hob began to speak in protest, but Shade cut them off. "Don't pretend to forget what circumstances bind your alter-ego to your soul," he said to Blood. "And don't think I don't know about your importance in the slave trade," Shade said to Hob. "Just because you're dating a Trinidadian woman now doesn't absolve the things you did to her Caribbean ancestors!"

"How dare you!" Blood said. Hob jumped out of his seat, staring down at the Shade.

"And what makes you so grand? To think that we're being hassled by a murderer and thief! Just because you've grown a conscience doesn't make you a hero!" Hob added.

"At least my crimes generally had a greater purpose!" Shade said, coming to the edge of his seat and staring straight up at Hob. "What was either of yours? Wars that have been twisted by grand legends of mystic quests and swords-in-the-stone and an enslavement that has affected the well-being of a race for centuries on!"

The three men all turned away, staring at anything that would allow them to avoid each other's eyes. Anger burned in them as tension filled the air. Hob sat and began to play with his empty wine glass; the Shade, sat back, crossed his legs, putting a hand on his chin and the other on his arm rest; Blood sat back and grimaced, looking at his shoes.

After a few moments of silence, Blood sipped his wine bitterly and placed his empty glass onto the coffee table. He cleared his throat and glanced from Hob to the Shade. "And here's the biggest problem of immortality," he said somberly, "a longer life gives the opportunity for more mistakes and memories that one would wish to forget forevermore." He looked down at his empty glass again. "And perhaps being reminded of these wrongs is exactly what keeps us following a more righteous past so that we will never repeat those dreaded mistakes again."

Silence.

After another moment, the Shade spoke. "Must you always be so... poetic?"

Blood coughed out a laugh. "I could kill you with a poem."

The Shade smirked. "I could kill you by turning the light switch off."

Hob grinned. "I could kill you both when you go to sleep..."

"By calling to you precious Dream of the Endless?" The Shade asked.

"No," Hob said. "But I sure as hell have a knife and it cuts fairly damn well."

The three looked at each other darkly for a few seconds, and then suddenly began to grin and laugh uncontrollably. The three rose and came together in a huddle. "I'm sorry," The Shade said.

"Me too," Hob added.

"I, too," Blood added.

The three separated. "I guess I should go...I have research to attend to...things have been a bit busy for me lately..." Blood said.

"And I have some business of my own to attend to...and Marisol would kill me if I didn't come home tonight..." Hob said.

"And..uh...I suppose I should meet up with the Knights..."

The two guests gathered their belongings and made their way to the door. The Shade opened it, revealing a black void that would lead the two back to the places where they had entered the gateway from. "Same time next year?"

"As always," Blood said.

"This time I'll pick the place," Hob said. The Shade nodded.

They all looked at each other once more. "One more toast," Hob said, coming back into the room. He shuffled past the two, pouring wine into their glasses and bringing them to the other two. He raised his own up. "Here's to learning from our mistakes," he said.

"And to becoming better than we were yesterday," The Shade added.

The two looked to Blood, who took a moment to think, and then smiled.

"And here's to living endless lives."

Chapter 4

You Get What You Wish For

“Pleasant I suppose...And on we go! Bored yet? Better not be. Gregory gets a little confused when he sees sleeping people...to him, there is no difference between sleeping prey and dead prey!

*Just kidding! Well our next author is another Jay, **Jay Zirron**. He has spent much of his time researching a certain Atlantean Sorcerer and now he has been gifted with a vision of a teenaged boy named Freddie who has been given a choice...”*

“You Get What You Wish For”

Freddie was looking at his baseball cards and realized that one of his cards was stuck in an old looking book. He pulled the book out and didn't recognize the language that was written so he turned the page and saw a picture of a wizard. He never really recognized the book before so he decided to go ahead close it when it started to glow and pulled away from him and floated on the air.

Freddie opened his eyes in amazement as he saw the wizard look at him from the page that he had opened to and he began to speak soft tones that he couldn't hear but finally the wizard stepped out from the pages and into his bedroom. “You've awakened me from centuries of slumber.”

Freddie shook his head. "I didn't know I could do that, I am so sorry!" Freddie was just a teenager so he could be excitable.

"No, I don't wish for you to be sorry, I am gratified to be freed of the Book of Magic." He clasped his hands together and bowed before him. "I am Arion, I was once the protector of Atlantis, how may I serve you?"

"Serve..." Freddie stuttered. "Serve me?"

"Yes you have opened the Book of Magic and summoned to this corporeal realm." Arion nodded. His cape on his back was whisking the floor as he turned around and looked out the window of the apartment he stayed in. "Where are we?"

"Gotham City... holy Moses." Freddie said. "My friends are never going to believe this!"

Arion raised an eyebrow and turned around and chastised him. "No one can know that I am here or you will lose your rights over the Book of Magic!"

"But you just said you would serve me!!" Freddie exclaimed back.

"Yes, I did, but you're the only one I can serve. I cannot have more than one master... it is forbidden."

"Oh." Freddie sighed. "I get it. This is a trick right?"

"No tricks." Arion looked at him. "What is it you wish for?"

"Well, I want to be something special for Halloween." Freddie put a finger to his lower lip as he thought about it. "I want to be a superhero!"

Arion raised an eyebrow at this thought. "Halloween..." He openly pondered the boy's wish. "What sort of superhero do you wish to be?"

"I don't know.. maybe Batman! Or Superman!"

"I am afraid that I do not know who they are... in fact you've not told me your name." Arion responded to him.

“Oh I am Freddie!” He stood up. “I want to be able to fly around and defeat great monsters!” He almost screamed his response to Arion.

“Fly around and defeat monsters, eh?” Arion raised an eyebrow again and then he raised both hands and they both glowed as he shot some powerful bolts of magic at the young boy. He grew in stature and muscular build. He contained a sword by his side and wore chainmail armour with the sign of the Knights Templar on his chest. “Sir Freddie of Gotham, I anoint you the protector of the gates Purgatory... from Hence forth you will call on my name and be transformed into the Knight Avenger.”

“Far out!” Freddie in his grown up voice screamed. “I get to fight monsters!”

“Your charge is not an easy one, young warrior, but you must be able to defend the innocent and take charge when there is no one else.” Arion nodded, “But be warned if you stray from this duty then you lose the power that I have granted you and all your wishes will flee.”

“Oh I won’t, I promise you that!” Freddie yelled as he looked at the wizard, “But how do I get back to my normal self?” He saw the wizard retreat back into the pages of the Book of Magic.

“You can never go back unless you forsake your duties..” Arion turned to him as he saw the Knight Avenger slump his shoulders a bit.

“A superhero is supposed to have a secret identity!! It’s in all the comic books!”

Arion shook his head as he sighed. “So you wish to be your normal self again?”

“Yes, but I want to be the super hero too!” Freddie exclaimed.

“One or neither.” Arion raised his hands and then transformed the Knight Avenger back into the young boy as he descended back into the pages of the Book of Magic.

"Golly!" Freddie yelled as he stamped his feet. "Some wizard you are!" In his haste he picked up the book and opened his window where his apartment was in projects in Gotham City. He threw the book out the window and as the book fell out the window a bright purple light blew open the book's covers as a mighty purple dragon appeared in its place. The dragon spoke to the boy. "You've chosen to forsake your treat... so you will no longer be able to command the Book of Magic." The dragon flew away as people were gathered around below and they looked up at Freddie's window. No one could believe what he or she had just seen.

Freddie saw a talisman seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Freddie picked up the talisman which contained a pentagram with dark circles of a sardonic nature. "What the blazes is this..."

Suddenly a flash of red light appeared as what appeared to be a Devil with a pitchfork appeared before the boy. "You chose not to accept the gift of the Book of Magic, but..." The Devil figure laughed for a moment. "I have a deal for you.... For your soul." He broke out into laughter as the Devil came closer to the boy and made them both disappear into nothing but smoke filled in the room.

There was suddenly a knock on Freddie's door. "It's time for dinner, Freddie!!" The voice of his mom yelled. She opened the door and saw a skull with a red cloak that was over the rest of the form. The skull talked to her.

"Hi mom!" Freddie's voice spoke from the skull. His mom's eyes went into the back of her head as she fainted. Freddie shrugged as he walked past his corporeal mother and into the darkness. His pact with the devil made... and every Halloween he would come back and collect the soul of the most wretched and guide them to Hell.

As he walked away... a soul gripping laughter reverberated across the city. The darkness of Halloween spread... as Freddie's dark mission had begun...

Chapter 5

Hunted

*"Now there's an ending we can all enjoy. Now we've returned to the **crow-dreamer**, yes we have. Here's a tale that should get your heart beating..."*

"Hunted"

She was running.

Running fast and running hard. Running to live. Running to see the next day.

They were behind her. Chasing her in a Romanian field in the dark of the night, far away from anyone who could ever help her. Far away from any escape. If they had their way tonight she would die in this field like meat.

The pack of them shouted taunts at her; they screamed obscenities as they glided along the air and came close enough to breathe on her neck. She wondered why they hadn't tried to bite her yet. But she didn't care. As long as she made it out alive and pure.

She leapt over fences with ease. She sprinted down football-sized fields. She moved and twisted and spun through trees. She ran through puddles and leapt over holes. She ran to live.

She came upon a house; a farmhouse in the distance. It was black and gray and just plain old; but it was her only chance to see one more day.

She had a second wind as she put all of her will into running for the house. She felt like Bambi: running to escape a bloody end. The men behind her were like cheetahs in the wild: chasing her on and on and on, putting off the kill to tire her out and make her easier to catch. To play with their food. But they were worse than feline predators: they were vampires. They not only wanted her for food, but they lusted after her blood, her body, and her sanity. They wildly laughed at her attempt to protect herself through the weak shelter before them. They belittled her struggle to get away, trying to break down her will.

But she continued on, fast and stronger than before.

Finally she reached the house. She slid inside, falling into a bail of hay. She stumbled trying to get up, her boots suddenly too large and cumbersome. She got to the doors and slammed them shut. She was safe now.

BAMM-BAMM!

Their fists slammed against the doors: the doors were stronger than they seemed. She backed up further into the farmhouse, coming into the center. Fists banged against all the walls of the house. They got louder as the vampires slammed harder and harder, reaching a crescendo of ear-splitting pounds that caused her to cover her ears.

And then it was all over.

Silence.

Endless silence that was almost as bad as the banging itself because it begged the question: had they left or were they trying to give her false security? She decided it was best to stay within.

Suddenly a cool wind blew. The breeze swept over her as she wrapped her arms around herself. She looked above her. There were holes in the roof.

A mist poured into the farmhouse through the cracks in the wall and the ceiling; she knew that it could only be the vampires. She backed herself into a corner as the mist fell to the floor and started to substantiate into a group of five men: each with their own style of clothing and punk hair

styles.

The leader of the bunch stepped up, dressed in a mixture of dark, warm colors, heavily contrasting her black clothes. "So ve hav cot the leetle minx," he said with a grin. "Yuu hav evaded us for such a long time. I thought ve would miss dee-ner tonight, but it looks like I'm vrong..."

He and the others came closer to her as she continued to inch back as much as possible, gaining as much space as she could until she had no more. She fell backwards, her hands behind her, as she pushed herself into the corner as much as it would let her. The leader came within inches of her face; a long smile stretched across his face. He took a long sniff of her, his eyes closed, taking in her perfume and the smell of blood under her skin. He licked his lips and stared into her eyes. "So my love...any last vords before ve make you our entrée?"

She scowled. All of a sudden she moved, quicker than even they could see: in a split-second there was a shotgun under the chin of the leader. His eyes opened wide as she smiled a grim smile. "*Bon appetite.*"

She fired the gun. Blood and brain matter sprayed out onto the vampires behind her victim. She kicked the leader off of her, sending the body in the direction of one of the lackeys. He stumbled to catch the body, and as he did, another shot fired from her gun and took his head as well.

She turned the gun to the others and began to fire, but it was too late: they turned to mist and tried to glide towards her. She punched the wall behind her. The entire corner shook and then quickly began to rotate as gas exploded out of the walls. Her platform came outside into the cold night, separating her from the chaos inside the house.

She put on a gas mask and banged the wall of the platform she had just come off of. In moments the vampires followed it out to come right where she wanted them.

They remained in mist form, but they were moving much slower and were in clear pain. One turned back to his physical form but began to choke hysterically. "Vh—vhat you do to us?"

She grunted. “Wondering why you’re moving so slow and why you can’t breathe so well?” she said with a slightly eastern European accent. “That’s Radon and Xenon in the air: two of the heaviest noble gases on the periodic table of elements. Radon particularly is very dangerous: it’s causes lung cancer in humans and damages the insides pretty bad. It may not kill you since you may not need air to live—being that you’re dead—but it will tear you up a bit from the inside.”

“Y-y-you bu-bitch!”

The vampire in physical form fell to the ground grasping at his throat. The other two began to run off. She walked to the farmhouse and pressed a series of codes into a hidden control panel.

Immediately the outer walls of the old house shifted, revealing something mechanical and advanced within. In a minute an entire panel of generators had appeared from within the old reinforced walls. The vampires had made a good amount of distance: but they wouldn’t escape this.

The light came out full force: it missed the grounded vampire but caught the fleeing duo in its magnificent solar spotlight. They screamed in agony as they burned to ashes.

She turned off the generators. She walked over to the vampire on the ground, looking down at him as he choked and coughed up blood. Blood that wasn’t even his. The essence of another. The life waters of their body. She scowled with an extreme hatred in her eyes. He looked up at her with fear in his.

“Wha—who are you?”

“You want to know who I am? I suppose I have you at a disadvantage. I already know who you are,” she said, kneeling so that her gas mask was within inches of his face. “You are the scum of the dark side. You are predators of the weak. You are the killers of innocents and the rapists of purity. You want to know who I am?”

She stood, pacing around his body as he squirmed and convulsed below

her. "You want to know who I am? I am a little girl who watched her family picked off by you parasites. I'm a young woman who grew up in fear as your kind preached its superiority in my homeland. I'm a woman who was chosen to be a plaything for your masters. But not anymore," she said, stopping in front of him.

"I'm the descendent of a long line of hunters: you may call me Vanessa Van Helsing. And tonight, I am your death."

She pulled out a gun: a customized semi-automatic pistol that had various things added onto it. "No—" he said, coughing up blood, "please, no!"

She pointed the gun down at her foe, her victim, and tore off her gas mask. "There's a change coming; a storm. A storm that will tear your precious society to pieces. And I will be at the eye of that storm, at its heart, destroying everything that makes you safe and superior. I will bring the strength back to the people. I will become your bogeyman."

"No—please no—"

A shot fired in the dark of the night. Then another. Then another, and another, and another, until her rage was gone. Five shots to the head, forming the sign of the cross.

She walked away. A tune went off: it was her cell phone.

"Hello?"

"Good going Helsing."

"My work is done...for tonight."

"Why didn't you off them a long time ago with the generators? When they were outside the house together?"

"..."

"You could've been bitten."

“It wouldn’t matter. As long as they were killed. You know I will continue until each of those bastards are killed by my bullets or my blades.”

The voice was silent on the other end for a brief moment. Then she heard a sigh and a chuckle. “Fine. What next Vampire Hunter Vee?”

Vanessa shook her head. “I need a cigarette.”

“Like hell you do. Where to next?”

She paused for a moment. She looked at the body behind her, and then to the sky above her. An image drifted in her mind of her grandfather. She thought of the millions of vampires in the world, and where most of them had congregated to. “I know exactly where we’re going,” she said with a firm resolve.

“Where to?”

“America...”

To be continued...

Chapter 6

In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida

"Oh the killing! I loved those parts! On to the next..."

Here we have another Wilkins classic, one based on a troubled, troubled man... "

"Doctor Occult in In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" (Doctor Occult #2.5)

"You're mine."

He turned over in his bed, thoughts and dreams flittering through his mind. He thought of his wife, his friends, his old adventures and the woes and troubles that his life had become. He thought about the Shade, about Xanadu, the vampires that taunted him and the lives he struggled to save. He was wasting his time.

He awakened with a start. He always struggled to sleep nowadays. An hour of restless slumber interrupted by dreams and nightmares. Mostly nightmares these days. He didn't know why he bothered sleeping anymore. It just tired him out.

"Hrm," he grumbled, looking at his hand. Strange. Nowadays his hands were worn. Pale. Old. But his flesh was full and red, his finger nails well kept. His fingers weren't shaking. He turned over his hands and examined his palms. Weird. His scars were no longer there. He looked

around the room. "Huh?" It wasn't his small box room in the House of Mystery, but a lavish chamber, familiar some what to the darker corners of his memories. "This isn't..."

"Richard?" He looked over to the other side of the bed, and his eyes opened wide. "Can't sleep?" He stumbled out of the bed, taking the crimson, silken sheets with him. He scrambled back, feet pushing him across the floor in a panic. He gasped, his breathing quick and shallow as his eyes processed the woman in front of him.

"Nuh. Nuh. Not. Nuh. Nuh. Not possible. Possible," he muttered, trying to push his way through the wall, but finding it impossible to escape this vision in front of him.

"What's wrong honey?" inquired Rose Psychic, as she stepped out of the bed and approached her husband slowly, her gown drifting behind her in the wind whistling through the open window. "What's wrong?"

"Yuh. Yuh. No. Can't. Can't. Ah." He pressed his face against the wall, tears streaming down his face. His finger scratched against the wallpaper, plaster and paint arching beneath his nails. He sobbed. "You're dead. Dead. Died. God. Oh God. Don't do this. Don't please don't do this to me."

She took his head and began to stroke his thick black hair, whispering into his ear. "You're here, Richard. I'm alive. It was a dream. A nightmare. We're together."

"Ruh Rose," he turned to her, and rested his forehead against hers, his hands stroking her cheeks frantically. "Here. Real. Oh. Oh God."

He kissed her roughly, and she pushed him back, confused. "Oh, honey, I feel it. I feel the sadness inside you. It was a bad one, wasn't it? A nightmare," she kissed him back and pushed him to the ground before climbing on top of him, pushing her hands against his chest. "I'm here. You can feel me in here." She rested her hand above his heart. "In your chest. Our heartbeats as one."

He wiped the tears from his eyes, and pulled her down toward him. "You're alive."

"You saw CC? How is he?"

"As good as could be expected. He was the one who called me up to sort out that succubus infestation in Vegas. For a guy blessed with the Wisdom of Solomon, his knowledge of demon lore is sorely lacking."

"Wouldn't he be a prize catch for that kind of creature?"

He started toward his seat at the table, and then turned back to her. "Out of all of us, he is the purest. A pure soul. Damn, what a catch he'd be, ha!" He sat down.

"Fried or scrambled?"

"Excuse me?" He picked up his paper, but before opening the pages, looked at his wife, standing by the pantry.

He looked up. "Fried."

"I knew you'd say that. Don't know why I ask."

"Because, my love, you care," he replied with a wink.

He sipped his coffee. She turned to him from the stove, and smiled. "How do you feel?"

He thought about the question, and then nodded slowly. "Better."

Silence fell on the room. Fat popped and crackled in the frying pan. "Oh, that reminds me! When you were taking care of that mess in Vegas, Zatarra called and said that he was going to be over later with his daughter," reminded Rose, as she placed fried eggs and bacon on two plates. "he wants to talk to you about... A house?"

He looked up from his coffee. "Hrm?"

"Yeah, that's what I said," she replied as she cut her egg in half, and

watched as the yolk ran over her bacon. The kitchen fell silent as she took a bite from her food. "What was the dream?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he replied, as he took another sip from his coffee. "It was a dream. Doesn't matter."

Rose sighed heavily. "Don't pull that on me Richard. You were a mess last night. You've not been like that for months."

"Sorry." He looked at her for a moment, then glanced down at his food. "You were dead. I made a mistake and you were torn away from me spiritually and physically, taken to a place I couldn't reach you. I had a monster put inside me. And I kept failing. Failing at everything. I can't deal with that."

"You don't have to. I'm here." She climbed out of her seat and walked over to the other side of the table, and then crouched down beside him, and took his hand. "All that? A lie. That's not you. Never will be." She kissed his fingers, and then stood back up. "Now go shave. Your jaw is like sand paper. Don't know what I was thinking last night, but I'm not kissing that mess again."

He laughed, and then kissed her forehead. "Alright sir."

"Sir'?" She shook her head. "Make your own breakfast tomorrow."

He paused. "Tell you what. Tonight, I'll make you dinner."

"No magic?"

He smiled, and then walked back over to her, placing his fingers elbow her chin. "No magic." He turned back around and then started walking once more. "Till afterwards."

"Hahah!"

The basin was full of hot water before he even arrived in the room. The advantages of being a master magician. He removed his dressing

gown and hung it on the door, and then applied some shaving foam. He looked at the water, beads dripping from the tap, and watched as the circles fluttered outward on impact. He placed his finger between the ripples and then looked at his reflection.

"Give it to me. Give it all to me."

He nearly screamed. His face was a mess, blood and blackness dripping from wounds all over. His eye was swollen, there were bites on his neck, and his other eye was bloodied. His fist slammed into the surface hard, the mirror shattering and shards falling into the hot water. Blood rolled down his knuckles.

"I get it," he grunted, as he watched the water turn crimson as his blood mixed with the mirror shards. "God damn."

"Richard?" He turned, his wife, his one true love, Rose Psychic, standing there so beautiful in the doorway. "What's wrong?"

"Not going to work." He gritted his teeth, and then began to chant beneath his breath. He centred his being. He felt hands grab his arms.

"What are you doing? Is it the dream? It wasn't real! This is! We're together! We're here!" He felt a hand on his chest. "Right here! Forever intertwined." The hand's grip tightened. His chest exploded with pain. "Together. Forever."

"You're not here," he whispered, a burning sensation rushing up his limbs. He could almost swear that his skin was blistering and burning. "You're. Not. Here."

"You're right. I burn in hell in place of the demon that exists in your soul. We traded places because you had a moment of weakness. Burning for eternity like a whore."

His eyes opened wide.

Something was straddling him, pits for eyes and a mouth that contained thousands of teeth. Its finger nails, its talons, dug into his flesh, blood rushed down his limbs. He twitched, a feeling in his chest that felt like a

well of darkness aching at his being. *"Give it to me, you bastard. Give it to me right now."*

It arched its back, leaning back and screaming. Richard Occult gasped, and realised where he was. Las Vegas. He looked around. His shirt was torn open. His trenchcoat ripped to shreds and littering the dark warehouse floor around him. *"Yes..."*

"No." He slammed his fingers into her chest, between the dead lumps of flesh that resembled breasts. It shrieked, so loud that Occult's hair actually flew back, and he started pushing. *"Give it back to me."*

The succubus began to writhe where it sat, old, withered skin beginning to peel of bone and wasted muscle. *"Oh, no... Please... I gave you what you want..."*

"MINE." Occult wrenched out his hand, a rotting piece of meat clasped between his digits. He squeezed the decaying heart between his fingers, black ooze dribbling down his wrist and forearm. The succubus suddenly froze rigid, and then with one great effort, Occult pulled back his arm and swung forward hard, and on impact the succubus exploded into dust, leaving him lying in a mess on the cold stone floor. He fell back, and groaned, his every fibre aching. *"God. Damn."* He pulled his trousers up, and replaced his belt, and then stumbled to his feet. *"God damn."* He doubled over and fell to his knees, unable to hold back the tears. *"Rose..."*

The Pale Ones

*"You like? I like. And you're sure to like this tale as well. Meet **Don**, a writer whose astral form doesn't travel the world...but through time. Look at his dreams of the past...and enjoy."*

"The Pale Ones"

The woods had always welcomed them in the past. The comforting canopy of leaves, lush and deep green turning to a glorious cacophony of colors as the seasons marched by, all this was like a roof to the world for the two courageous men now penetrating the depths. The trees, some large and powerful with age, others wiry and slender with youth, were like friends to the two Pocomtuc braves. The river sliced through the land like an artery feeding the body of the valley, and it was all one grand house of the world for their tribe.

The Swift River Valley, as it would come to be known centuries later, provided deer, and rabbits, and fish when the hunt was on, and gave rich soil for the grain when the growing times came. The two men slipped with equal ease through the thick underbrush and over felled trees whose time had passed and under heavy branches that held the skies above them. And in all their people's time, these woods were home, welcoming and comforting them all.

But that had changed. Slowly, imperceptibly at first, the woods, the entire valley had become less welcoming. Things seen moving behind the tree line. Things rested along banks of tranquil rivers and streams. Things pressed into the ground and left taint behind. The valley was

turning away from them, from the Pocomtuc, and it left the people uneasy, and it forced them to retreat. They tried to unearth the truth. Warriors entered the valley, armed with tomahawk and bow. Could it be invading tribes, such as their enemies the Mohawks? Could it be some form of new beast that had migrated into the land? Had they angered the spirits of the Swift River?

Few warriors returned, and those few who did had only one description.

“Pale Ones.”

Chief Nani-Quaben called upon his advisers for answers, and the medicine man named Blood-of-Thunder gave the answer. He was descended from the great chieftain and shaman Bright-Sky-After-Storm, Arak, the son of Thunder; and it was this blood that made him very skilled in understanding the spirit world. He had gone into the valley with his pipe and special tobacco, his medicine bag and his knowledge, and then come back three days later.

“There is a great migration of foreign spirits to our valley, squatting in our home and lands,” he announced to his people. “I have seen them with the special sight offered by my pipe smoke, but it also gave me a sense to the solution for our difficulties. There are two of the spirits that lead them, a chieftain and his female. It is these that our warriors called Pale Ones for the silver that erupts from their heads, and the milkeness of their forms. I know of weapons that can allow our braves to destroy these Pale Ones, and will set about getting them. You, o chieftain, must find two to wield these weapons. One should be our best archer, and the other are fiercest with the tomahawk.”

With that, Blood-of-Thunder departed the valley and the lands of the Pocomtuc, as the contests were begun under Nani-Quaben's watchful gaze. And so it was that when Blood-of-Thunder returned from his trek, Pa-jackok and Motega were presented to him, and to the whole of the Pocomtuc, as the champions of the tribes.

“Motega, to you I give this quiver of arrows,” Blood-of-Thunder said, passing the soft leather quiver filled with a dozen beautifully crafted

projectiles. He then turned to face Pajackok with a proud smile. "And it is fitting to pass to you this tomahawk, cousin Thunder," the medicine man said. The weapon was ornate, laden with totems and symbols, the soapstone head slender but strong. It was a pipe tomahawk, a weapon when wielded in battle, but Pajackok immediately noticed that in peace, it was a pipe, and he was given a small pouch of his cousin's own special tobacco. "Should you need extra guidance in the pursuit of the Pale Ones, smoke this and listen to what you hear," Blood-of-Thunder stated sagely.

The people of the Pocomtuc then cheered their heroes, and a great feast was offered up, to praise the two brave young men, and to give offerings and prayers to the Great Spirit and his servitors, for help in the coming battle.

"Cousin, these weapons," Pajackok started to ask the medicine man, as he held the tomahawk out, and Motega held out one of the arrows, "are stained in blood. And I feel a chill when my hands run over it, as if I were standing over my own grave. What are these weapons?"

"Their creation is lost in ancient times," Blood-of-Thunder recited, as he tried to comfort the concerns of the two men, the celebrations continuing out in the circles of firelight away from where they spoke. "But they are seen as gifts for all the First People, passed down to us from the Great Spirit in order to protect ourselves from alien spirits, that would seek to despoil our homelands. When a need arises for them, a shaman seeks them out, following dreams and signs to the elder who currently possesses them, and brings them back for strong, young braves such as yourselves. You will use them to dispatch the alien spirits in our valley, and then I will keep them safe until the next elder needs them."

The two nodded and returned to the celebration, and left Blood-of-Thunder to his own thoughts, that rumbled in his mind like the storms he was named after.

So it was on the next morning that the two warriors entered the valley, armed with their relics of war, penetrating the place that was their home once, but now seemed strange, tainted, hostile. The trees no longer seemed to be a roof, but instead loomed over them. Colors seemed to be duller, shadows deeper, and voices wafted like smoke in the warm late-

summer air.

"Is this really our home now?" Motega asked as he parted tall grasses and passed into a small meadow, watching birds dart away at his arrival. "Don't you feel it? Nothing's the way it should be. Maybe... maybe this isn't meant to be our place anymore."

"Don't be foolish, my friend," Pajackok said in a strong, firm voice, a steadying hand clasped on Motega's shoulder. "We will not be driven from the lands that have been in our care for generations. Since great Arak himself brought the remnants of his people to this valley, it has been in the care of the Pocomtuc. Would you abandon it so easily?" He hefted the tomahawk in his hand, smiling faintly at the balance and heft of the weapon, the way it sat in his palm like it was born to his hand. "Would the Great Spirit have provided us these means of defending our people and this land if we were meant to be chased away? I will not be chased off by ghosts, no matter how much silver fire erupts from their heads."

Motega nodded, still not so confident, but unwilling to let his people down. And so they pressed on deeper, letting the forest surround them, the aura envelope them. As the blanket of stars above blanketed the Sun, they made camp, a small fire and sturdy lean-to and ate at dried meat from their supplies. They were wary of eating the animals of the valley until the Pale Ones were driven off, and so they ate the dried foods they carried in with them.

"We should smoke the pipe," Pajackok said as he cradled the tomahawk in his hands. "We need directions, guidance toward these ghostly chieftains."

"Agreed," Motega said with a nod, glancing at the weapon. They lit the tobacco, taking deep puffs and watching the soft green color of the smoke drift up into the sky, writhing around their heads.

"You must find the Womb." Each of the men heard the voice, somewhere in the dark night, not far at all from where they sat and smoked. "There will I be cleansed, and the Valley claimed and things begin anew."

The two men looked around, hearts racing and eyes wide. Motega was fearful of the sound, and tried to glance out into the forest, but the dark was an impenetrable wall that sealed off the small bubble of light from their fire, and trapped them in the small patch of land.

Pajackok smiled down at his tomahawk though, knowing the voice was speaking true, knowing the voice would lead them to the Womb, if he just listened to it in their travels when the morning arrived. The encroaching darkness didn't disturb him. He smiled, completely oblivious to what Motega continually saw from the barest corners of his vision. The dark wall hid the menace well, and Motega clutched his bow for the entire night of uneasy sleep. But Pajackok slept deep, slept well, comforted by visions of the Pale Ones dying under his heroic attack.

As the dark turned to gray, as if slate now covered the sky, the braves were jolted away by a roaring, rumbling beast the likes of which they'd never known. It was a fearsome thing, large and lumbering, tearing through the woods. Its roar was bellowing and deep, eyes ablaze with bright fiery light that tore through the remnant darkness and fell on Motega and Pajackok. Despite their surprise and fear, the warriors leaped to their feet, and returned the attack. Motega loosed an arrow on the strange tucked length of leg that seemed to undulate and press the beast forward, while Pajackok hurtled himself onto the body of the beast. It was larger than any animal, standing taller and by far bulkier than the even the mighty moose, and as Pajackok brought the tomahawk down on it, he found its skin as hard and unyielding as rock. The arrow struck deep as the tomahawk was rammed hard between the fiercely lit eyes of the monster until at last, it shuddered and shrieked a death cry and fell silent.

The two warriors fell back, sweating and trembling and supporting each other in their terror. They watched the hideous monstrosity apparently sink back into the nether realm it was spawned from as they retreated from the scene of the battle.

"It was horrible, Pajackok! What sort of terrors lie ahead of us? What sort of abominations are these Pale Ones summoning?" Motega asked as the pair swiftly broke down their camp.

"I don't know, my friend, but we have guidance. We will follow the trail of this monster, and the voice of the pipe and we will dispatch the enemy before more of their foul creations taint our valley," Pajackok swore, and swiftly darted into the wood, ready for more battle.

Motega stopped only long enough to seek out the arrow he'd fired, but wherever the beast had gone to, it had apparently taken the shaft with it, and Motega cursed it quietly before racing to catch up with his friend.

Throughout the long day the two warriors continued their hunt, Pajackok driven with ever-greater fury and determination, choosing to eat as he traveled while Motega continued to feel the haunted land loom ever closer, staring, plotting, hating, too distracted to notice the look of zeal that started to light the eyes of his life-long friend.

The evening again drew its shade over the sunny blue day, and the hunters again lit their fire and ate their dried foods then smoked their pipe for guidance. This time though, Motega decided that cowardly or not, he could not stand to hear that voice without a body again. No, he pretended to smoke the pipe and pretended to hear the words of guidance, but instead remained clear-minded and alert and staring into the depths of the hostile forest.

Pajackok breathed deep of the greenish smoke, and smiled as he felt the words caress him. They cared for him like a long-lost parent, filled with wisdom and guidance. Tomorrow you will find the Womb. Tomorrow you will face your enemy. Tomorrow, blood will be spilled and make the world clean. You will make me proud, mighty brave.

There was no beast this next morning, no rude awakening of the two warriors. Motega had slept hard however, tossing and turning, left with nagging doubts combined with a certainty they were watched. Pajackok was refreshed, though. He slept deep, rousing in the morning to stretch his limbs, break the camp and march out quickly, excited at the prospect of the final battle to save his people's valley.

"Look at this!" Motega called out, pointing to tracks in the soft earth.

“Footprints. Two-footed, like us. But never have I seen footprints like this.”

Pajackok knelt and stared at the horrible mimicry of human tracks. Bipedal for sure, one tall, over six feet in height perhaps, the other shorter, by at least five inches. He nodded gravely at Motega, eyes ablaze with fervor for the blood of these beasts.

“No toes, just rounded off at the end. And look at the heel, how unnatural the line in the center of the foot. It is a mockery of our natural bodies, Motega my friend.”

“A mockery. They try to shame and taunt us now,” Motega grumbled angrily, hands trembling with fear. “What sort of monsters are these?”

“We shall know when we confront them. This time, this day, we will have our reckoning!” Pajackok pursued the tracks without hesitation, Motega racing to catch up again after scrabbling to collect his own gear.

Late into the day their pursuit went, relentless, driven, Pajackok never slowing, forcing Motega to keep pace. The bright blue of day again started to fade into the purple veil of evening, and Motega felt his friend's arms across his chest, holding him fast.

“There!” the warrior declared in a hushed, excited voice. “There, the light, do you see it? Our foes!”

Motega nodded, as he crouched in the brush. Slowly, carefully, he drew one of his arrows and nocked. He raised the weapon up to aim, taking careful note of the milky-white bodies some distance away. Two of them, one looked like a man, the other like a woman, both crowned in silver, both with balls of flame in their hands, lighting the area up around them in a pale, unearthly glow. As he focused his aim on the larger, the male, he couldn't help but notice that its companion held the arrowhead he'd fired earlier. His face grew dark with fury, arms taut in firing position, barely containing him to wait for his old friend's signal.

“Now!” Pajackok barked harshly, followed by a wailing cry that sliced through the air and silence. He charged down the short slope and into the clearing, as he heard the whistling of his companion's arrow. The

Pale Ones whirled to face them, the fiery light of their hands catching Pajackok in the eyes and causing him to falter.

“Aggh!” The arrow pierced the male's shoulder, and it clutched at its wound, dark eyes on the pale face wide with shock. The female seemed equally stunned, as Motega quickly drew and released a second arrow. She was prepared though, and she dove at the dazzled Pajackok, the arrow missing for Motega was not prepared for a woman to enter battle with a warrior of the Pocomtuc. It was then that he saw she held his other arrowheads, but he couldn't figure out how.

There they are, his mind reeled in shock. Nine more in my quiver, how could she have them all?

The Pale One brought the palm of flame down and cracked it against Pajackok's arm, making him cry in pain and stumble, the tomahawk dropping to the ground. He lashed out blindly in fury, catching his enemy in the side of her head with the back of his fist. She whirled away from the blow, as Motega and the other Pale One each charged toward the battle field now, to support their respective companions.

The male seemed to scream out something, but no sound came from that hideous, pallid face, dark eyes now wide with fury as it came to grapple with Pajackok, who howled his own defiance and threw himself into the battle. They clutched, spirit to flesh, sinew and muscle colliding in a brutal confrontation.

The female was pulling herself to her feet as Motega fired another arrow at her. She leaped back, her light now catching the archer's eyes and caused the shot to go wild. As he pulled back to nock another arrow, Motega heard thunder rip through the battle. He spun around to see a third Pale One, another male, this one helmeted, though his dark eyes showed fear. Thunder rang out from his clutched fists, and lightning spat from those fingers, and Motega tried to dive for cover from the strange assault. He felt the arrows fly from his quiver as he cried out in anger. He could sense the betrayal, his weapons abandoning him, the shafts turning treacherously against him in the war and he cried out in fear, anger, despair.

“Pajackok!” Motega cried out, as he helplessly watched the female Pale

One run to the two grapplers.

Pajackok had gained the upper hand on the wounded male, and had brought it down onto his back, powerful hands locked on the silver-haired spirit's throat in a death-grip, eyes ablaze with delighted bloodlust. But the woman, she found the head of the tomahawk, she clutched it in one hand, and the arrowheads in her other and brought the stained, ancient, soapstone weapons cracking down onto the back of the warrior's head. Motega cringed and cried out as he heard the flat, wet crack silence the battlefield. He stared in horror as he watched his friend slump to the earthen floor of the forest, a limp, lifeless doll as blood flooded from the back of his head.

He raced across the scene of the battle, tears streaming down his cheeks as he ignored his enemies to rescue his childhood friend. He rolled Pajackok over and clutched him tightly to him and begged his oldest, dearest friend to answer him, to speak to him. The light was fading from those dark brown eyes, but they caught Motega's stricken gaze one last time.

"It is... home," Pajackok gasped with a twisted, haunted smile. "We... we did it... I'm sorry, my friend, but blood will start..the cycle."

Motega realized what he meant, and quickly looked around but could find no signs of the Pale Ones now. Had the weapons done their deed? Were they somehow exiled by his friend's death? Is that what the weapons had meant? If so, then why the apology?

At that moment, 350 years away...

King Faraday took the large flat soapstone, so new, so smooth, and yet lightly stained with what seemed to be blood, and crept up to the remaining angry ghost. "Return to your eternal rest," he grunted in a demanding, angry voice as he brought the rock down on the spirit's head, smashing it and causing the second of the two foes to vanish into the darkening night. He then dropped to his knees, the fiery pain in his shoulder at last causing him go dizzy and pale from exertion.

"Faraday?" Argent St. Cloud asked as she crouched next to the injured secret agent, and wrapped an arm protectively over his shoulder. Her flowing silver hair framed a smooth alabaster face, round and currently filled with concern. "That ghost-shot, it looked bad. Are you going to be okay?"

The silver-haired secret agent looked at her and gave a grim grin. "Oh yeah, I'll be fine. Not the first time I've been shot by a ghost."

"Return to your eternal rest'? I didn't think you G-man types spoke like that?" The police officer walked over to the flat rock, and picked it up in his hands. He turned it over in disbelief as he inspected it carefully, noting the unbroken whole of its surface, the clean smooth surface with not a single marking or stain to be found. "How do twelve arrowheads and one tomahawk turn into this?" he asked.

King Faraday returned to his feet, leaning on the slim woman, who demonstrated more strength than her looks might indicate. "It's something a colleague of mine says when he does exorcisms. Figured it couldn't hurt to put it in, Chief Parker." He looked at the police chief of Greenwich, Massachusetts with mounting respect. For a hick, backwoods cop, Thomas Parker had proven remarkably adaptable to the extremely bizarre, even absurd story that brought himself and his friend Argent to the Quabbin Reservoir Project. And Chief Parker had quickly proven equally adept at helping the pair navigate these backwoods, and hunting down the angry spirits of Native Americans, and their assaults to stop the project. He had enough respect for the officer now, that he wished he could give him an answer to the other question. Instead, he just let silence take hold of the scene.

"Well, let's just get you back to town, and I'll get his locked up..." Parker was interrupted suddenly, as Argent and King watched the rock slip from the cop's steady, strong grip and plunge into a nearby river. "What the dickens?" He immediately knelt and reached into the rushing waters, and into the muck of the river bed. "It's... it's gone. Gone!" Thomas Parker stared in disbelief at the empty patch of river floor, as the other two moved up behind him. "What the dickens is going on here? It's like that rock wanted to get away. Rocks don't escape, do they?"

"I've found, Chief Parker, that on the Danger Trail, they do," Argent St.

Cloud answered, giving the rattled police officer a steady hand on his shoulder. "Come on."

The three of them stood up and started the long slow hike back to the roads and their vehicles. "What's up for you now, Chief? Now that your town, this whole valley, is going away?" Argent asked him in her silky-soft voice, curious for their new companion.

"Well, no more Danger Trail for me, whatever the hell that's supposed to be," Parker chuckled. "I'm heading out of New England. Got a job offer out west, actually. Small town in Kansas. Sounds pretty good, sounds like a good place to settle down, raise a family."

"Yes it does," King answered with a nod of his head. "It does indeed."

Chapter 8

More Atrocities

"Now we've returned to our great discoverer, Mr. Wilkins. I wonder if he'll be around in time to hear his own story? He occasionally comes to visit us, you see... Here is a tale where we find a story that takes place far, far away from here... In a galaxy far, far away... Oh, I've made a funny, did you get it? No? Eh, you're no fun. Just listen I suppose..."

"More Atrocities"

"Oh Gods, oh Gods," whispered Vash Naran as his craft bucked and screamed out of control. The controls shook as he grappled to slow his descent toward the strange planet below, the surface blanketed in shadow and darkness. "Come on, come on..." His ship suddenly pierced the thick blanket of blackness that covered the surface, and it collided with a large metallic structure, and then streaked across strange constructs, until it came to a stop in a thick swamp. Vash looked around, his eyes moving frantically. "Alive. Yes, I'm alive, good, yes." He wiped his brow, damp with sweat, and then looked himself over. No injuries visible.

"Where am I?" He checked his star-maps. His monitor blinked up, and showed his location in the sector. He was in the middle of space. Well, that was wrong. He was on solid ground, right? A planet. Or planetoid. A satellite. There was air! His readings told him that. He was in the middle of space on a rock that didn't exist that was habitable.

The front of the ship was covered in black ooze, obscuring the outside surroundings to his eye. He would have to climb out and discover his

location. He began typing at the controls, and started a diagnostic program that would repair his systems. He took a flash-beam, a laser-blaster, and a survival pack. And then he headed outside.

It was strange. He was in the middle of a desolate swamp, the murky, oily waters belching strange gases as he stood atop his craft. He immediately worried that his ship would start sinking at any moment, but he realised that the strange liquid below wasn't at all deep, just... Thick. It'd be safe. The sky was still dark, above him a black maelstrom of cloud that every now and then crackled with lightning. He was lucky he wasn't a dead man, by the looks of it. One bolt of lightning hitting him up there would have fried his systems and electrified his metallic craft. He would have been barbecued inside and out within moments. So it seems his luck went from bad to semi-alright in mere seconds.

He'd been travelling from Tesla, the industrial market world, to Apollo, his home, when his ship was caught up in a gravity wave. He had been dragged through space for hours, not knowing where he'd end up, but knowing that the effects would pass soon enough. Just as he was spat out of the wave, the ship was struck by some kind of weird meteor strike that came from nowhere, and then he was headed for this place. This dead world. He remembered flashes of where he had flown through. What he had struck. A city. Must have been. He looked over his ship, checking for damage, and then arched an eyebrow as he found something caught between two panels of protective shielding. "What the hells?" He reached for it, gripped it between two gloved hands, and yanked it free. In the dark light, it was like a rod of some sort. But he pulled his flash-beam from his belt and examined it more thoroughly. He suddenly realised what he was holding. "Gah!" He dropped the bone back to the surface of his ship, and it bounced from the shielding and into the swamp. What had he struck on his way down? He looked across the swamp, toward the impact point, and saw a flicker of light in the dank distance. Civilisation? Maybe. "Gods," he whispered. He was not a brave man, but he was by no means a coward. He was renowned in his town-sector for being a curious one (his uncle even saying his curiosity would get him killed one day, which he didn't at all like!), for being the one who would always volunteer to head to Tesla for supplies... With a deep breathe, the stagnant stink of the oily liquid below him rising into

his nostrils, he climbed down into the swamp. He sank some what, nearly panicked, but the sinking ended almost as soon as it began, and he was up to his shins in the murky waste. With an ounce of effort, he trudged forward.

There was little plant life. And what little plant life there was, it was dead. Rotting. He reached the bank of the swamp, and then turned. His ship's outer lights flickered on and off. He checked a device on his belt, and smiled. His positioning system was still operational. He wouldn't lose his ship any time soon. With that feeling of relief, he continued his exploration. He was caked in the ooze, his boots thick with it. He could clean them off in the ship, but right now, he couldn't do anything about it. What he wouldn't give for a pair of the hover-boots that were currently the hottest trend on Tesla. But alas, he couldn't afford them, and even if he could, his parents wouldn't let him buy them. He trudged onwards, toward the flickering light. His flash-beam led the way, and his laser-blaster holster was gripped tightly by his spare hand. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled up against his safety suit.

"Hello, visitor," he span around, his laser-blaster drawn. "No need to be afraid, it's only me." From between dead trees and shadow, emerged a figure. The man speaking was old. Ancient. Hunched over and with long white hair resting on his back, just above his buttocks. He wore animal pelts. But not from any kind of animal Vash had ever seen. "Only me." He spoke with a drawl, each word leaving his lips like a serpent. "Only me." A strange whisper. It did nothing to reassure Vash.

"W-Who are you?" whispered Vash in reply.

"I am Keeper," bowed the strange man with a mumble. "You are a visitor to my home."

"An accident," replied Vash. "A gravity wave and then... I don't know what happened. I just want to leave."

"So soon," snarled the man, with a wink and a smile, "So soon after you

got here." He crept forward, Vash didn't lower his weapon. "Don't be afraid, friend, I'm not going to hurt you."

"Where are we? What is this place?"

"Home," replied the man. He fawned over Vash, his long finger nails scratching over the safety suit as he examined it. "Beautiful. Beautiful."

"Get off me!" barked Vash, pointing to his blaster. "I'll use it!"

Keeper cowered in surprise, and then peered a glistening eye out at Vash. "Why? Why would you hurt your friend Keeper?" He shook his head. "You looked lost. I come to see if you need help. My eccentricities. You have to understand. So long on this place. Not many visitors. None. Alone." He hobbled away. "Nevermind. G'journey, friend."

Vash shuddered, and holstered his weapon. This poor, lonely, mad hermit, left alone on a strange world? Maybe. There was no need for rudeness. "Wait, Gods, sorry, I'm just. Lost. I'm not supposed to be here."

Keeper halted. "Of course you're not." He turned. "No one is. This is a dead place. Dead cities made of bone and flesh litter this continent, I know it, I have been all over. Over the seas, I know not what resides there."

"I hit something when I landed, there was bone in my ship's outer shielding... Are you telling me I hit a building? A building made of bone?"

"I show you," winked Keeper, as he began to hobble forward toward where Vash was headed.

"I heard a story once," started Keeper, as he led the way through the dead jungle. "About a world between blinks. Accessible only by celestial beings. Dead to the outside."

"Oh?" replied Vash. He was humouring the man. The ancient little person with his strange ramblings. "Really?"

"The place was a prison. Demons resided within. You had to travel over a gravity well to get there. An inescapable prison for those physically damned here. Fifty two continents containing the death-spawn of the universe. The demons of the systems consigned to a perpetual imprisonment on the dead surface."

"Who told you the story?"

"I can't remember," answered Keeper. "But it doesn't matter."

"What was the place called?"

"Hmm?"

"The place... What was it called?"

"Ysmault."

It was a beautiful sight, thought Vash. A sick, beautiful sight. Entire structures made of animal bone, high in the sky, impossibly built. An example of architecture from a mind that prefers madness to sanity. "How is this possible?"

"When you are left alone for so long, you get bored. You'll try... Anything," whispered Keeper. Vash didn't acknowledge his words, something else piquing his interest. His curiosity getting the better of him. He didn't notice Keeper eye up his laser-blaster. Or lick his lips at the sight of the flash-beam.

Vash squatted over, and brushed away a layer of dirt. "What's this?"

"I don't know, tell me," replied Keeper, as he crept forward.

"Like... An engraving in the stone. What does it say?"

Vash was so hypnotised by the engraving, the calcified structures all around him, that he didn't notice Keeper's hand wander into a small

satchel to his side, made of animal skin. "I had to do something with the remains."

Vash span around, confused, "What?"

Keeper dove at him, his long finger nails pressed against the young pilot's face. Vash screamed, but suddenly gagged as Keeper threw a handful of black ooze at his mouth. Keeper pressed this sudden advantage, and pressed a strange, ancient little device to his young captive's head. "Time for me to go." He pulled the trigger, and a bright blast of light filled the area, reflecting off bones and flashing against storm ridden clouds.

Vash gasped awake. His ship floated without aim in deep space. He regained control in seconds, and then looked around, and gained his bearings. He ran a hand through his hair, and smiled. "Thank God."

Boop! Boop!

A transmission suddenly blinked online on his monitors: <Vash Naran? Respond.>

"It's me," he answered in reply.

<This is Apollo Command Post Beta; we lost contact with you over the past six hours. What happened?>

"I was caught in a gravity wave and then... I don't know what happened. Must have knocked my systems offline." He looked over to the airlock. Boots caked in muck stared at him. He smiled. "Heading home now. Home."

<You have the supplies?>

He looked back to the storage compartment behind him. "Yes. Fully stocked."

<Good journey, Vash. Out.>

"Out."

Keeper gasped awake. He screamed in pain. "Gods! Gods... Ahh!" He looked at his hands, and didn't stop screaming. They weren't his own. "What? No! No!" He clambered up, his every joint yelling at him to stop. Pain. Pain. Hurt. Lay down. Die. Die, please, just die. Let us rest. He limped toward the swamp, and then fell to his knees on arrival on the edge of the ooze. "My ship. No. No. What... Oh, Gods, the old man. He... He... " He turned, and then tore through the jungle, like a man possessed. He arrived back at the spot he awoke in, and then began to claw at the dirt, over the engraving that he had been reading before. "What. Where? Where am I? No. No. Can't be. Can't be happening."

Vash's eyes, not his own, opened wide. The word, carved into stone by finger nails. "Ysmault."

End

Chapter 9

Mercy

"And finally, one last tale from our ever-sleeping crow dreamer...Thank God..."

"Mercy"

An eerie breeze coursed through the alleyways of Hub City as it touched Elijah Morris and sent tingles down his spine. As chilly as it was outside, he found himself sweating; he put a hand to his back and found that his sweatshirt was moist. He looked behind him, wondering if anything laid in the shadows ready to pounce on him. Just an adrenaline rush is all it is... he thought to himself. But even with his weak reassurance he found himself hastily moving his unsteady feet, rushing to leave his brief solace.

As he started to run, he looked at his arm and almost fainted. On his arm, just below his elbow was a tattoo that resembled a feline skull surrounded by crescent moons and triangles. It began to burn, the black ink lighting up like the end of a cigarette. The mark is glowing!

"Shit, shit!"

He pressed his palm over the mark, hoping that the pain would go away. It didn't.

"Shit!"

He continued to run, gritting his teeth and stumbling out of the alley into a larger street. Several blocks down he spotted a church with open doors. Maybe I'll be safe there, Elijah thought. A few minutes later he was tripping over the steps into the holy building.

The inside of the church was warm and bright compared to the cold, dark night outside. He knew he had hit the jackpot coming in here. They're not allowed in here, he thought positively. Still, he didn't like being in the open-you never know who's watching and what could happen. He decided to run into a nearby confessional.

He slid open the door and crashed into the seat, breathing hard and wiping the sweat from his brow. He shook off his coat, throwing it to the side, and peeked at his forearm. The tattoo's crescent moons and triangles had begun to move somehow: his jaw hung open as he watched fiery ink dancing over his skin, rotating in a circle. The skull within had begun to move as if breathing; Elijah felt himself staring into it, awed by its horror, feeling the mark burning hotter and hotter.

"Hello?"

Elijah jumped out of his seat in surprise, bumping his head against the confessional wall and falling on his side. "Jesus Christ!"

"I am not he, but I am his representative on Earth." On the other side a screen slid, revealing the adjoining booth and a man in shadows who Elijah could only assume was a priest. He chuckled; his voice was warm, comforting and youthful, and yet still had an edge of authority. "Welcome. How may I serve you tonight?"

Elijah began to calm down, taking longer breaths, and putting a hand to his chest in relief. "Father, I need your help. I am a man of sin!"

"Humanity is born to sin: only through faith and choice can one come closer to God, our Almighty Father."

Elijah shook his head. "You don't understand. I could die tonight! I need to be saved immediately!"

The Father stayed silent for a moment, then whispered. "Anyone may die at any moment. Do you wish to repent? To be forgiven?"

"I want to do anything that will keep me from going to hell!"

"But are you sorry for your sins? Repentance is not a light matter."

Elijah's brows furrowed. "Look Father, I don't have time to confess all of my mistakes. I need to do a faster, express version. Can't you do a little holy-water or something? Light some incense? Anything?"

The Father paused for a moment. "So are you not in any way sorry for your transgressions?"

Elijah sat up. "What? Look Father, I don't have time to do one of those Christmas stories. Right now I am in serious danger and I need your help."

"It's interesting how much you insist on my help... Yet you didn't need my help to commit murder tonight."

Elijah's jaw dropped.

"What? H-how did—"

"You've sinned a lot in the last few days, haven't you? Two nights ago you shot your own friends thinking you'd get a bigger portion of the money you stole from a fundraiser for cancer at your son's school."

"Wait a mi—"

"You didn't need my help yesterday when you sold your soul to that demon... just to escape the authorities...or when you tried to pass that curse onto your own elderly mother, thankfully unsuccessfully. How could you even attempt such a thing?"

Elijah stared into the shadows of the adjoining booth. A face slowly came to the screen. The face was off-white, and the mouth was twisted in a

scowl of rage. "You didn't need my help when you sacrificed your only daughter a few hours ago."

Elijah choked. The man continued.

"An innocent little girl, lost forevermore because her pathetic excuse of a father wanted to escape the fate he made for himself."

Elijah kicked open the confessional door and stumbled out of the booth. He tripped over toward the church doors, crashing into the nearby pews, falling over his feet, sweating profusely. But as he neared the two large church doors, a wind pushed him backwards as the doors slammed shut. He shook his head, panting; behind him was a large roar that echoed throughout the church. He brought himself up slowly, dreading what was behind him.

He turned, finding the doors to the confessional booth that was next to his flung wide open: a wind was pushing out from it as a gale force blew throughout the pews and hymnals nearby. The "priest" stepped out from the booth, shadows somehow covering him despite the bright lights all around them. But even with the darkness around his face, Elijah could tell that the man was staring right into his eyes.

Suddenly, a blinding white flash exploded from the once-priest: when Elijah could see again, the priest had transformed into something wholly new. He was clothed in a gold armor, a helmet, and baggy leggings that were lined and highlighted with black and silver colors; his chest plate was black, and in the center was a gold symbol, lined with white, of what most resembled an angel; from his back, large ivory wings had emerged. His face was surrounded by a minor glow, contrasting his pale, off-white skin. His hair was gray, and his eyes were a fierce pupil-less crimson.

Elijah found himself breathing even harder than before. "Who...what are you?"

When he spoke, his voice still retained its youthful warmth, but the edge of authority had grown stronger and more commanding. "I am an angel: I have been called many names in my eons of existence; but I am generally known as Zauriel. But that is not as important as who you are. You,

Elijah, are a sinner of the worst kind.”

In the palm of his hand a ball of light glowed momentarily: it grew and solidified until it became a sword.

Elijah fell on his back as the angel stepped closer and closer to him. “But you can’t kill me just for being a sinner! There are sinners all over the world. Even you s-said that we’re born into sin!”

The angel paused, looking down at Elijah as one would an ant. A bitter scowl lined his face. “You’re right. I can’t kill you for being a sinner—even one such as horrible as you. Your judgment should await you when you meet you maker.”

Elijah smiled. “Y-yes, thank you, thank yo—”

“But,” the angel interrupted, “you are not only a sinner. You sold your soul to a demon. Normally we’d wait for the Pit to come after you but you have made a grave mistake. The demon you made a deal with was Scisiel, a former angel of gateways and passages...And through your haste, foolish deal he saw the opportunity to create an avatar on Earth that he could turn into a doorway for all of the most fiendish creations of demonkind. Had you repented with true regret of your sins and a pure need to be forgiven with the love of our Lord, I may have saved you in a more peaceful fashion. But now you’ve closed that option, and your very existence threatens the existence of humankind: you could be the end to all of your breathen! And I can’t allow that to be.”

Zauriel slowly walked towards Elijah, his sword gripped tightly in his hand. Elijah put up his hands in protest. “But you’re an angel! You’re supposed to be a being of mercy!”

Zauriel came upon the frail man before him. “I have been many things during my eons of lifetime. I have been a singer at the throne of our All-father; I have been an observer of the nature and science of the universe; I have been a watcher of humanity; and I have been a guardian of it. I was the guardian of your daughter, Mr. Morris, until her untimely death. Something that has pained me and questioned my faith in humanity.”

Elijah shook his head, tears falling from his eyes. “Oh god, I didn’t know, I didn’t know—”

“I have always been an angel of mercy, Elijah Morris. But for you” the angel said, flames igniting his sword and turning it into a burning blade, “I am angel of death.”

Elijah put up his hands as the angel brought the fiery sword up into the air. His crimson eyes were ablaze with some more than anger and grief: fury.

“May the Lord have mercy upon you.”

The End?

He slams the book shut. *"Well I've think I've had quite enough of those dreadful stories...And it is almost morning. Did you enjoy the tales? They weren't all bad I suppose, don't you—"*

"Cuh-cuh-Cain?"

You turn around. You can't tell where the voice came from until a plump head sticks itself out of a doorway behind you. A short, chubby man slowly walks in wearing a purple suit. His hair is similar to Cain's, but shorter, sleeker, and black. He puts a finger to his chin as he begins to speak again. *"Suh-suh-sorry to dis-tu-turb you, Cain, buh-buh-buh—"*

"You're annoying me Abel..."

You turn around to look back at Cain. Where he had seemed content moments ago, now he seemed angry and growing angrier still.

"Buh-buh-buh-buh—"

"I hate when you stutter you twit..."

You turn to look back at Abel. You could have sworn he was dry before, but suddenly he is covered in sweat. *"Suh-suh-sorry Cuh-Cain, I cuh-can't help it—"*

"Oh, but I can..." Cain says ominously.

You turn back to Cain. You jump in fear as you see him suddenly standing and holding a rather long knife in his hands. He is breathing hard and fast, and walking slowly towards you and Abel.

"Nuh-nuh-no cuh-Cain...duh-don't, puh-please—"

"What I hate is that once you get started, you don't stop. Stutter-stutter-stutter. God, I wish it would stop! God I wish it would end. And you know what Abel?"

"Wha-wha-what, cuh-Cain?"

"I know how to make it silent in here. I know how to make it stop." Cain was grinning again...but if he was smiling devilishly before, now he was far

beyond that...you could almost imagine he was the devil himself.

“Nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-no cuh-cuh-cuh-cuh-cuh—”

“Let’s end it, shall we brother?”

Suddenly Cain jumped. You freeze, throwing your hands up in the unlikely event that flesh will stop steel...and for a moment you believe you have, until you here screams and a violent wet sound behind you.

You turn to find Cain viciously stabbing his brother. Abel didn’t even try to run; even now he has ended his protests and accepted his fate. And that angers you and fills you full of a righteousness you didn’t know you have. You jumped out of your seat and tackle Cain, knocking him off of Abel, knocking the knife out of his hand, and punching him in the face. But you’re too late: Abel is already dead.

You sit in a pool of Abel’s blood, looking at your bloodstained hands. “What kind of terror is this?” you say.

“Oh—that is the least of your terrors my friend.”

You turn to find Cain rising from the floor. There is a look in his eye: fear. “I’ve knocked the knife out of your hands. You can’t harm me!” You say.

“I don’t have to...”

Cain’s hair parts even further than before, revealing a mark on his forehead that you couldn’t see before. “*Didn’t you read the Bible? Don’t you know our story? I was branded...branded with a mark made by God himself...*”

You shake your head. Your body begins to ache all over. Your skin tingles and your hair feels like it’s on fire.

“Didn’t you read the book?” Cain shouted. A wind swept through the room, shaking the furniture and knocking items that were perched on the shelves and counter space. “*Didn’t you read what my mark means? You should have left us alone; it is part of my contract with our lord Dream that I can kill my brother.*”

You hear a sound that you can barely hear with your stomach squeezing so tightly. You see out of the corner of your eye that Abel is rising! He shakes his head as his wounds heal, stumbling to his feet. "Wha-what's guh-going...oh God," he says.

"You should have left us alone!" Cain shouted as your nails begin to arch inwards, drawing blood. *"Didn't you know? Anyone who harms me will suffer a fate seven times worse than death! You should have known!"*

Your bones begin to tremble as your muscles convulse and try to tear themselves out of your body. Your eyes begin to pulse with a painful tone. *"May God have mercy on you...or what is left of you..."*

A crow perches on a tree outside and caws three times.

Damn his Vincent Price voice.

Plop!

The End... For Now

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If you enjoyed these stories, you can find more tales of your favorite DC heroes at DC2 Universe

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From the same author on Feedbooks

House of Mystery #1 (2006)

Happy Halloween! DC2 Universe presents a collection of ten tales featuring your favorite horror and supernatural characters such as Doctor Occult, The Phantom Stranger and many more!

Detective Comics Annual #1 (2006)

The explosive second year of Bat-titles starts here with three exciting tales written by the new creative teams on Batman & Detective Comics:

"Wings on Fire"

With Gotham City barely recovered from the Crisis, Firefly arrives to burn it down! Who is Firefly? And even more importantly, what is his connection to up and coming crime boss Oswald Cobblepot?

"Gotham Nights"

Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson are invited to the Gotham Hyde Civic Center during it's grand reopening after the Apokolips War. Bruce is hoping for a quiet evening and a chance to improve his image but when new and old faces alike make an appearance and a deadly threat is uncovered, you know it's not going down without a hitch!

"For Love and Money"

Get inside the heads of two very different members of the GCPD in this back-up tale featuring James Gordon and Harvey Bullock.

DC2 Showcase Holiday Special (2006)

Seasons greetings from the DC2!

Take a peek at several tales that span across the DC2 universe this holiday season. It's a time for celebrating with family & friends, spreading good cheer, and maybe a few surprises along the way!

Crisis: The Apokolips Imperative (2006)

This is it! The collected first mega-event to rock the DC2 Universe as the eternal struggle between The New Gods and the forces of Darkseid comes to Earth!

DC2 Showcase #1 (2006)

The classic anthology title that started the silver age makes its DC2 debut. Showcase kicks off DC2's second sensational year with four brand new tales from every corner of the DC2 universe:

Mechanical Dreams: Part 1 (of 3)

Written by: Legacy:

A familiar character makes their DC2 debut with a tale that reveals his traumatic origin. Find out who it is in part one of a three-part tale.

Batman: Curfew

Written by: Kevin Hill:

When three young boys are caught out after dark, they discover that their only hope of rescue from the horrors of Gotham City lie in the hands of the modern myth, the Batman!

Blue Devil: Hollywood Nights: Part 1 (of 3)

Written by: John Elbe:

A soap star, a reality TV actress wannabe, and a script doctor, all share a house in West Beverly Hills with Daniel Patrick Cassidy, a special effects/stuntman who is about to accept the role that will change his life forever on the new movie, Blue Devil.

Superman: Obituary: Part 1 (of 3)

Written by: Julian Balrup:

After the recent grueling battle that was Crisis, Superman begins to evaluate his life and decides to take it upon himself to write his own Obituary. Writing as Clark Kent, he chronicles key moments in his life that shaped him to become the hero that we know him to be.

DC2 Showcase #2 (2006)

The new DC2 anthology series continues...

Mechanical Dreams: Part 2 (of 3)

Written by: Robert Harding

The DC2 introduction of Victor Stone continues. His life has been turned upside down as the mechanical dream turns into a nightmare!

Rip Hunter Lives!

Written by: Charlie Wilkins

One man travels alone in the time stream, all but lost to the world, until he's dragged into something that even he doesn't understand on the outskirts of eternity itself! Meet the new Rip Hunter as he meets the old Linear Men... Pulp action at it's finest!

Blue Devil: Hollywood Nights: Part 2 (of 3)

Written by: John Elbe

Daniel Cassidy's life appears to be looking up when he has two beautiful women fighting over him and Blue Devil the movie is back in production. But, a freak accident on the set reveals how far someone is willing to go to get a movie made in Hollywood. Will Cassidy pay for it with his soul?

Superman: Obituary: Part 2 (of 3)

Written by: Julian Balrup

Clark has had a trial by fire, now he has a brush with the skies. Clark begins to decide how he wants to use his powers. He wonders should he use them to be mankind's savior or its ruler...

DC2 Special #3: A Very DC2 Christmas (2007)

The staff of DC2 come together again to give you a little taste of the holiday spirit in several stories that run the gamut of emotions. Join us as we give you our Christmas present.

DC2 Showcase #3 (2007)

The conclusion to Showcase volume one is finally here!

Mechanical Dreams: Part 3 (of 3)

Written by: Robert Harding

His life has been turned upside down by those closest to him but now he realizes what he has been made into and what will come next. As a great terror spreads through Vic Stone's life, he must decide what path to take and more critically, whose side will he join. This is the end of the beginning. Welcome Vic Stone, to the DC2.

Blue Devil: Hollywood Nights: Part 3 (of 3)

Written by: John Elbe

After being blasted with supernatural energy Dan Cassidy is trapped in the Blue Devil suit. He is now in the battle of his life on the movie set as the cameras film everything. When it's over his life will be changed forever. Will he be able to embrace his destiny when he discovers the truth about why he has become Blue Devil?

House of Mystery #3 (2008)

Happy Halloween! DC2 Universe presents a collection of six tales featuring your favorite horror and supernatural characters such as Deadman, The Phantom Stranger and many more!

DC2 Special #4: DC2 Holiday Special (2008)

DC2 Special #4: DC2 Holiday Special.

Spend some time with the both writers and artists of the DC2 & DC3 as they celebrate Christmas with several heartwarming tales... and one tale starring Ambush Bug.

If this doesn't put you in the holiday spirit, then your name must be Scrooge!

House of Mystery #4 (2009)

Happy Halloween! DC2 Universe presents a collection of four tales featuring your favorite horror and supernatural characters such as Man-Bat, The Phantom Stranger and many more!

DC2 Special #5: Another DC2 Christmas Special (2009)

Join the staff of DC2 as we celebrate another year of holiday cheer with several short stories and vignettes that will take you from a certain farm house in Kansas all the way to the very halls of the DC2 offices in New York City.

Weird Western Spectacular #1 (2010)

To commemorate the new Jonah Hex film, a stable of the writers for DC2 joined together to create not just a celebration of everyone's favorite ugly as sin bounty hunter but a plethora of Old West heroes and heroines as well.

DC2 Special #6: The Naughty and Nice List (2010)

DC2 presents our annual holiday special featuring tales that span the DC2 Universe proper as well as our DC3 multiverse and Elseworlds. Enjoy and Happy Holidays!

DC2 Special #7: The Ghosts of Christmases Past (2011)

DC2 Special: The Ghosts of Christmases Past.

Join the writers and artists of the DC2 comics fanfiction community in celebrating the holidays with this collection of superhero tales that explore the joys of the season.



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