

PROVOKER

Volume I of the Abaddon Trilogy
excerpts
a series of novels by Dan Champagne
for promo only

Book I: COLLUSION

01. Wherein this noble narrator picks up the trail, and a new ally.
02. Wherein a fat guy has the worst night of his life, after which a monumental meeting takes place.
03. Wherein bad things get talked over, and it's agreed, there's no "I" in "Team."
04. Wherein nightmares are made real, an enemy is introduced, and he eats someone.
05. Wherein God moves a single chess piece, twice.
06. Wherein we're forced to deal with underground magical Nazis.
07. Wherein enemies meet like friends, and discover some people aren't as smart as they dress.
08. Wherein evil feeds on evil, and good gets caught in the crossfire.
09. Wherein the magical bunker gets busted, and the booty gets incinerated.
10. Wherein I burn a house down, a cult gets torn down, and the Reaper comes around.

Book II: MAYHEM

01. Wherein a bad-ass, sad-sack Frenchman joins the game.
02. Wherein the ranks are replenished, many cops meet their maker, and THE Vampire arises.
03. Wherein comes to light an uncomfortable past involving werewolves and witches.
04. Wherein we're forced to deal with those best never met in a dark alley.
05. Wherein a gumshoe barely escapes being eaten alive. Some other cops? ...not so lucky.
06. Wherein lost lovers are reunited, and fate starts spinning like a top.
07. Wherein is provided another fine example of how nicely evil plays with evil.
08. Wherein evil, with a capital E, reveals its presence.
09. Wherein our 'heroes' get blitzed by the French.
10. Remember back when I tore that cult down? Welcome to Level 2, Player 1.

Book III: CHAOS

01. Wherein black magic and bureaucracy admix.
02. Wherein we see a Prince in Hell, and his warm welcoming.
03. Wherein old secrets are revealed, and an enemy restores his ally.
04. Wherein evil is betrayed, and wherefrom shadows are escaped.
05. Wherein an angel battles a nightmare.
06. Wherein we frighten a gaggle of misguided youth.
07. Wherein the players assemble, battle-ready.
08. Wherein war pales all else.
09. Wherein the gameboard is reset, with a few new players.
10. Wherein just desserts are dished out.

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Dramatis Personæ

Laiel Arturus Brockade: bastard, Son of the Devil, Provoker.
Bessalina Navalov: feral vampire Queen, Dracula's descendant.
The Night Reapers: outlaw motorcycle gang.
Rory Burke: brutal, ruthless gang leader.
Greg 'Tommy' Thompson: educated thug.
Ollie, Tank, Big Mac, Crazy Steve: Night Reapers.
Elle Baylake: the Dream Witch.
Rigoletto: the Nightmare.
Paul Havik: the Dark Druid.
Elaine Cobham: Maiden, Matron, Crone.
Tourille: alabaster Angel of God's Wrath, Earthside.
Sven Von Blutritter: the Clerk, keeper of dark magic.
Krista Cruess: Priestess-Queen to the Unnamed Goddess.
Gaius Laspesa: psychic necromancer.
Indu Dipali Damayanti: fire demigoddess.
The Warlock: Antichrist's left hand, ancient.
The Nachmann Witches: Agnes, Beatrice, Caroline.
The Fuller Werewolves: Ronan, Abigail, Jonathan.
Cupideau Ahmee Etienne: immortal, beheaded French assassin.
Alexis Oliver: necromantic Gypsy witch.
Crispus McBride: the uncommon outlaw, muscle.
Jimbo Givens: the Squire, the Ripper, tech support.
Machinegun Mike: shooter, weapons man.
Max Schreck: *The Vampire*, Dracula's elect.
Hexx 113: spooky travelers, Devil's elect.
Dawson: human switchboard of the supernatural underground.
Benjamin Arlington: gumshoe, serial killer hunter.
Sara: the Bloody Martyr, the wanderer, the key.
The Angelus Cult: watchers of the Angel and the Martyr.
Jason Gabe: the Saint of the Devil, the crafter.
Bolger: infernal scarecrow, gallows construct.
Dorothy Parker: Daughter of the Devil, Imperatrix of Hell.
The Antichrist: First Son of the Devil, The Adversary.
Hemet-aa-Sekhmet: magical, mummified Egyptian cat.
Stanley Poss: field agent, dark enforcer.
Archibald Westphal: occult scientist, nerd.
Matthew St. Claire: CEO, dark magician.
Antiphes: Gadarene Demon of the ritual planck.
Andrew Slade: the fat Apprentice, living grimoire.
Hillary St. Claire: junior occultist, Young Republican.
The Germanenorden Walvater of the Holy Grail.

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## COLLUSION

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Now. I stroll down the sidewalk. Could be any street at night in New York. There's trash everywhere. Homeless people sleeping, dead, or worse. Being who I am, one might think that I would enjoy or even feel at home in a stinking, pustulent, graveyard of lost and evil souls like this city. But I don't feel that way. I hate it. This city is the penultimate city to me. It's the symbol of humanity's failure. I look at this place and think— If people took the natural world and turned it into this contradiction of slums and ivory towers, this island of Heaven and Hell that's paradise for the few and Gehenna for the many, if they turned the rivers, flowers, and forests into this— It proves they could have turned it into anything.

Instead, they turned it into what I am walking through right now.

I know why my Father loves humanity so much. Give people the easy choice of goodness, and the hard choice of evil, and people choose the wrong thing. Always. Satan gives humanity what they want, what they ask for.

I've been watching the war between good and evil, Heaven and Hell, escalate for my entire life. I've watched as moves were made by both sides. Like pieces being positioned on a chessboard.

The war has been going on for a long time. Hourly, it grows more murderous. Each side goes to battle assured of its eventual victory. I haven't chosen a side, yet. Not truly. The only thing I am sure of is that the most certain victors will be death, destruction, and barbarism.

I reach my destination. The building is big. An obviously rat and roach-infested tenement. I see it for what it really is. An incubator of misery.

I stand across the street and watch the building's front door. It's dusk, so I wait for it to become fully dark before I go inside.

I start to walk across the street. That's when I feel an emanation. This is familiar. It's too good to just let it go. I veer off and step into the shadows and rot of an alleyway.

She's scrabbling through god-knows-what. I catch sight of her, and she's beautiful in the way that a torn body is.

We see each other.

Black eyes rimmed with bloodshot. Her hair might have been blonde once. Too filthy to know for sure. My mother's hair was blonde. I smile at the thought. The air currents shift just that little bit and I smell her. She reeks of blood and shit. On her, it's like perfume. She rises to a predatory crouch. She has something wet and roundish clutched in the claws of her left hand. A long, low, hiss escapes her. She probably can't even speak anymore. But I can. Time to see if she can recognize what I am. I say—

“Eef lof suffik ik mandaeus carmena upir.”

She freezes in a dead stop. Good. She doesn't have to die for a second time right now. She bares her teeth, and approaches slowly, fawning. It might be a smile, rat-like teeth stained with rust-colored dried blood, hard to tell. She drops the fresh severed head she's holding with a wet *splat*.

When she gets close I extend my left hand, palm down towards her. She kisses the back with dry lips, then runs her sandpaper tongue along my fingers. She starts to suck with sexual glee, making moaning sounds in the back of her throat. I let her go on 'til she's satisfied. Her mouth is freezing cold.

“Let's go,” I say.

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And there's a woman.

She's towering. Six-and-a-half feet tall. Probably closer to seven. She's wearing a god-form. Easy to tell which one. Her face is contorted and predatory. Six arms. Each holding a sword, axe, spear, dagger... all that pointy medieval shit what kills. Long curved fangs all the way down past her chin. She's naked except for a skirt of human hands, and a belt of skulls. The twisted black avatar of Kali.

Nice tits though.

Parts of the ceiling are torn out. The moon and stars are impossibly bright and huge above. The blood looks black. Crazy silver and red light everywhere. Everyone has moon-shadows. Stretched and gray against the deeper dark all around. Like our spirits are thrown out onto the floor, with the gray evil plain to see.

I might die here. This is some heavy voodoo I'm looking at. The imp gets himself disappeared. Coward. But I don't blame the little bastard.

I point and yell— "GO!" The vampire charges right through the spirit-chains. I see them wrap around her body and snap. I hit the deck as they lash out across the room. One of the men takes it full in the chest. His soul gets ripped out. It's not pretty. All his flesh instantly vaporizes to a fine mist of blood. The mist goes everywhere. It's acidic. And it's on fire. Hot and cold flow. Mixed in infernal agonies. Naked flame dancing through the air.

The room's on fire. The vampire's on fire. I'm on fire.

Greasy black smoke and the smell of burning flesh, alive, dead, and undead, rises.

~ ~ ~

The Night Reapers motorcycle gang came down I-93 from New Hampshire into Massachusetts. It was night and they were coming back from killing a man. This time though, they had good reason. Or at least reason enough for them. And that wasn't hard for them to come by. One more unsolved crime. The kind of thing that Johnny Law knew they had done, but couldn't do anything about.

After all, there was a difference between what you knew, and what you could prove 'Beyond a Reasonable Doubt' in a court of law.

They were doing about ninety down the highway. Rory Burke, the president of the club was in the lead, riding his black Harley Davidson Sturgis. Just behind and on his left hand, was Greg "Tommy" Thompson, the Reapers vice president. He was the smartest guy in the club, and Burke knew it. Tommy had a college degree, in psychology, which he used to figure new ways to scare the shit out of people. Tommy was also the youngest, being only twenty-six. He followed Burke's lead.

Behind them was the club's road-master, Barry Macmullin, the Big Mac. Barry was an awfully big man, and he knew how to use his size when things went south. Which was often for the Reapers. Barry was also a great mechanic, which was especially good for him, he was notorious for crashing his bike, and walking away with a smile. Next to Barry was Michael "Tank" Tanaka, half Chinese, and he looked it.

Tank loved the psychological advantage being Asian gave him, mostly because he was a fifth dan in kenpo karate. He was also totally ruthless. The kind of guy who would kill you dead with his bare hands in three seconds flat, then kick a kitten for the fun of it as he escaped the scene.

Cruising behind the leaders riding a tricked-out mule trike was the gang's sergeant-at-arms, Gene Stephens. "Crazy Steve" was worthy of being called crazy, and not the funny, ha-ha, kind of crazy. The blow-you-up-with-a-homemade-bomb kind of crazy. Gene Stephens was a grizzled old man. Lied about his age to go to Vietnam, and became a combat engineer. He had three tours in and asked for a fourth... and got denied. He was honorably discharged from the army. They spared him the Section 8. But still, he was drummed out for psychological reasons. Gene enjoyed blowing shit up and burning things down a little too much.

Trailing the pack was Andrew Oliver. "Ollie" was the slightly spooky guy in the group. Always high on something, he was the only one of them who'd ever experienced anything supernatural. But no one believed him, so he kept his mouth shut about it. He had a real bad feeling about the shit that was going down. And that feeling was only growing stronger. Ollie's mother was long dead, she died when he was fifteen, but she had been a real gypsy, full-blooded Romany. She had been a fortune teller. She really had 'The Sight.' And she had taught Ollie two things. The first was how to bilk Giorgios out of cash in short cons. The second was how to recognize omens in cards. *Doing it with tarot cards wasn't worth squat*, Ollie thought. *Who ever used them for anything other than telling fortunes?* But she had also taught him what to see in regular playing cards, which were actually older than the tarot, a fact that few people were aware of. More than once Ollie had seen life or death coming at him and the rest of the guys over a hand of poker.

Every one of them wore leather, either a jacket or a vest, bearing the gang's cut. The heraldry was a skull with red eyes and two crossed six-guns below. The Jolly Roger of the road. The top cut read "Night Reapers," the bottom cut read "Massachusetts." Everyone was sporting a One Percenters patch. Crazy Steve also sported a POW/MIA patch.

The One Percenter cut wasn't just for show. The Reapers were true outlaws. They earned by selling guns to other outlaws, the drug trade, and murder-for-hire. Whatever that paid the bills. They weren't picky. They were doing something right. They'd been alive, and stayed out of prison, for twenty years as a functioning organization. Doing crime for a living. For sure, they were on the watch lists for a big bowl's worth of the alphabet soups. FBI, ATF, Interpol, maybe even Homeland Security. They wore it all like a badge of honor. Nothing ever stuck. Burke's leadership and Tommy's smarts always managed to let them walk away from whatever insane shit they pulled. They'd gotten away with what mortal-man-was-not-meant-to-get-out-of. So far.

~ ~ ~

Elle Baylake followed Paul Havik into New York City, three days after Laiel Brockade had left. Elle followed Havik in a drugged, somnambulating daze. She slept eighteen to twenty hours per day, but it was almost never lying down. She had sleepwalked for the first time when she was seven years old.

On that long-ago night, she had serenely left her bed and wandered out into the chill and windy October night. Some would have read very deeply into the fact that it was after midnight, marking it as All Hallows' Eve that first time. The barrier between worlds was at its thinnest as the little girl's bare feet pitter-patted on the cold autumn ground.

That her lifelong somnambulations were first begun at the turn of midnight marking Halloween was not, in fact, unimportant. What was more important though, was that Elle was exactly seven spaces removed in relation to Edgar Cayce. The man who had been dubbed "The Sleeping Prophet." She was the seventh daughter of a seventh son of the realm of dreams. But while Cayce had been a positive influence on the fabric of the sleeping mind, whose inner soul had reached outward, and upward, ever upward in his dreams, Elle was the inverse.

Cayce had reached the pinnacle of dreaming virtue. What he himself had called "The Akashic Knowledge." The nebulous realm of the shared subconscious where all light concentrated through the prism of his sleeping mind and was shaped by the benevolence of his slumbering soul, to reach a state of perfect goodness.

Elle sleepwalked on that Halloween night of her seventh year, and the Pleiades, the cluster of seven stars sometimes called 'The Sisters,' shone down on her from a cold, clear, impersonal sky. The seventh dark star of the constellation opened up to Elle, who stood calm, unmoving, her sleeping mind placid, beatific in her innocence, and ready to receive. The light touching her skin adorned her with a willowy star-shine glow like alabaster under candlelight. But what it did to her outwardly, it worked upon her in reverse, inwardly. The light came down in cascades, washing over her innocent face like liquid. And each moment cast her soul within into deeper recesses of shadow.

She began to wander again, describing odd little circles with her feet, weaving in strange patterns that traced the outlines of ancient spells. The spells she cast in her sleep caused no effect that a woman or man could see with their eyes. But they raised primordial terrors from the underworld of dreams and nightmares, and set them loose upon the Earth. As she wandered, she mumbled prophecies in lost languages, and even if a listener couldn't make any conscious sense of them, they crept past the sentries of the mind, so that even these were terrifying things.

She suddenly stopped where she was. Stood swaying in the middle of the street of the sleepy little town where she lived. Her eyes fluttered then... and they almost opened. But then she gave a sweet little gasp, and settled back in like a child troubled by a nightmare for a moment, who rolls over and finds the peace of their slumbers once again.

Little Elle's true soul came out of her body then. The being simply stepped out of her skin. Transparent as a ghost in an old photograph for those first moments, and then solidifying into shocking, ghastly, reality.

Its name was Rigoletto.

A monster. Chalk-colored skin stretched over a face surmounted by pale yellow eyes. The lips a deep crimson. The mouth opened. The jaws worked. There were teeth. Far, far, too many teeth. All in two straight rows, one above the other. And sharp. Shaped like spikes in a pit. The monster clamped its jaws shut. A loud *CLICK! CLICK! CLICK!* The sound of a thresher striking stones. He was dressed in party-colored motley, and the bells of his head-tails jingled with a music like magic. He held a wooden sword.

The first thing that Rigoletto did, was laugh.

The sound carried, somehow, into the nearby houses. Seven people rose from their beds and killed everyone else inside. The sleeping victims never woke. As knives tore their flesh, they experienced the most ecstatic of dreams. The murderers stumbled from room to room, through shadowed and moonlit hallways, clutching knives in bloody hands, leaving macabre footprints behind them everywhere that they went. When these new disciples of nightmare were finished, they committed suicide. Seven suicides, in seven different ways.

The second thing that Rigoletto did, was glide, silent as a ghost, as immaterial as a dream, through the wall of little Elle's house. There he killed her mother, her father, her younger brother, and her older sister. Elle tagged along the entire time. Sucking her thumb and dragging Bootsie, her favorite teddy bear, with her. After each of the murders, Rigoletto ran his clawed hands over Elle's sleeping form in strange patterns.

A ritual of baptism. Marking her as the Princess of the Night. He loved her dearly.

~ ~ ~

Twenty years ago Paul Havik had been young, naïve, and amoral. He wanted magic. To see it. Know it. Learn

it. Plumb its stygian depths for his own aggrandizement. What he might have to do to achieve it didn't concern him too much. Within a year of beginning his search he had met, and was working for, a 'Left Hand Path' coven.

Laiel Brockade was among them.

Havik hadn't really believed Laiel, at first, when he said that he was the son of the Devil. It wasn't long before Havik's feelings about that began to shift. Laiel had real magic. So didn't the others in the coven. They were all evil. But Laiel Brockade was both more evil and more powerful. Much more.

Havik started out by nearly begging these people to teach him. There were no ready takers. They made overtures. Almost demands. Serve us. Be steadfast and loyal. Follow the guarding doctrine of four— To Know, To Seek, To Serve, and To Keep Silent. Rewards would come.

He served them. Hand and foot. Beck and call. Three years. Worse than a slave. They asked much. Gave little. Often nothing. He lied, stole, and killed for Laiel and the coven.

As time passed, his anger was barely hidden below a facile cover of servility. Finally, the trials outstripped his ability to bear them. He knew the coven would kill him before they let him walk away. He knew their faces. Their names. And many of their secrets, the way that any servant comes to know the inhabitants of the manor.

For two months he planned his escape in secret. And then he disappeared with what he hoped was without a trace.

Oh, how it would have galled him to know that neither Laiel nor anyone else in the coven cared enough about what he knew, or what he had done for them, to come looking for him. Either to bring him back, or to kill him. He was of no consequence to them. A simple tool that they awoke one morning to find gone from the shed. Not missed at all. And easily replaced.

Havik simply assumed that he had escaped so effectively that he had eluded all attempts to find him, that he was hidden, even from their magic. The utter ridiculousness of this assumption never occurred to him.

He set out again. More determined than before to find true power for himself.

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Tourille was standing in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, in Chicago. He had awakened eight days ago, emerging from an endless golden dream of the fields that stretched infinitely in the Greater Realm. He slowly became aware of his surroundings. And realized he was not where he had been when he had last faded into the sleep of blissful dreams.

He must have been slumbering for a very long time.

This was definitely a church. He watched the people file in, daily. Witnessing Mass. Taking communion. Engaging in the sacrament of confession. They lit votive candles. Most of them were black people. He was not surprised by this. Evidence that he had slept a long time. That he had been moved. He thought perhaps that he was in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia.

Tourille found them to be good people. Their hearts were calm. Their spirits mighty with the love of God. He soon recognized further truths. They still struggled under the yoke of oppression. Their whispered prayers were a testament of it. In this, he saw that the world had changed little since last he had been awake. He was sad in his soul for it.

That he could think, see, and hear, meant that there was work for him, pending. He didn't know what it was, but he knew that he would soon come to know it.

His attention soon focused on one of the parishioners of the church. A woman. Maria Emma Goldman. She was a very good woman. The kind that the book referred to as a Child of God. She was rich in spirit, poor in this world. Poverty had only strengthened her. She was awakened to the True Faith. She was shining with the inner Good. He watched her... and learned a great deal.

She had gained a son. Lost a husband. She experienced grief, and mourning. But not bitterness. Her soul was clear, and pure, and hard, like a perfect diamond. She had great love within her. She used it, shared it, freely, and often. She banished hatred and rancor from herself. She blessed, and never cursed. For her, the words of Jesus Christ were the words of a perfect book, etched onto her heart, guiding her hands. Tourille knew that Maria Emma Goldman was not perfect. Who was? But she sought to do good, and avoided evil.

She often knelt before the altar in the church. Tourille heard her hushed prayers. He was abashed in this, who should hear words meant for The Father, except The Father? He knew the way of this. He was being handed all that he needed. Through her prayers he came to know for what purpose he was coming alive again.

Perhaps it was in service to Most High God that he was to help Maria. She was always praying for her son. Goodness, through a lifetime of trying, had become easy for the mother. It did not come easily for her son.

The young man struggled, daily. But mostly, nightly, with the temptations of this new age, that Tourille was

slowly coming to know.

There was crime for pay, and intoxicants abounded, and he heard of the chaotic, reasonless violence that was rampant. Tourille deeply hated all of these things. He began to think that he was being called upon to save the young man.

He soon learned how wrong this thought of his was.

For three nights he stood motionless, waiting in the dimmed confines of the church. He was thinking back. Dwelling upon an event he had been witness to, and the engineer of. He knew that it stretched back centuries from this new time. And was distant from this place that he found himself in. It was when the servants of God called ‘Muslims’ held Spain, in a kingdom called Andalusia. He had felt young then, even though he had been created during the time of primordial fire, in the first days of the First Creation. He had no idea why this time, this place, and this event, came so strikingly into his mind now. It kept coming back to him. Replaying in his mind’s eye, hourly. It seemed to have no bearing on what he was presently experiencing. It was in the south-west of France. In the small town, that later, he had been named from.

~ ~ ~

The Clerk sat in his wheelchair. Hidden deep within the bunker. He had not been outside since he had first been brought to it, in 1950.

His name was Sven Von Blutritter, and he had been born in 1906. He had been too young to fight in the First World War, but his four brothers had not. Only one of them had returned. Blinded by a gas attack. Breathing like he was partially submerged in water.

Sven had grown up and attended university in the years between the two wars. He possessed a strong memory. A fastidious eye for detail. Was talented with figures. These talents lent themselves to organization, and managing timetables. He found work with the government, in the railway authority. As a civil servant he was skilled at ensuring that the trains ran in a timely fashion.

Then, the National Socialist German Workers Party came to power. He didn’t mind Nazism. They restored the social order. Rebuilt the economy. Restored national pride. He wasn’t a very politically-minded individual himself, but his wife Helena was. She adored Hitler. Embraced the Führer myth. Became an ardent Nazi. She raised their children in the ideology of Aryan superiority. He didn’t object. His son’s marks at school improved.

Then, Hitler began rebuilding the military in clear violation of the Versailles Treaty. Sven became a little concerned. But nothing really bad resulted.

Sven was ‘invited’ to join the Nazi Party in 1936. He had no real desire to. But the implications were clear. The government wanted a Party member in the job that he occupied. He acquiesced, immediately. He never discussed his reluctance with Helena. She, and his children, seemed so proud. Joining the Party didn’t really change anything for him. Except later, when there was rationing. His family enjoyed preferential treatment. For a while. Until things got really bad.

So, he went to work. He returned home at night. He ate his meals. He made love to his wife. He slept. Life carried on.

Then, the War started. Everyone had known it was coming. Most people wanted it. In late 1939, he was officially drafted by the Heer, the army. He was made an organizational clerk. He had the same job that he had had as a civilian. But the pay was less. And he, of course, wore a uniform to work now.

In 1940, he was again reassigned. He was dismissed from the military, with honors. And brought into the Allgemeine SS. He was made a military clerk for the railway system. His pay improved. He was invited to official parties.

But, he and his family had to move. He was transferred to a military railway yard on the border of Germany and Poland. Except that it was all Greater Germany now. He was placed in charge of endless invoices and train schedules.

~ ~ ~

A shape appears. Fading into the air at the center of the double circle. Womanly curves. The edge of a form. I speak her name.

“Hep-ta-teez...” She solidifies. Speaking her name was the invitation. It says I know who she is. I am inviting her in. The circle will keep her here. Hopefully.

There is the demon. In all of her shocking reality.

Thirteen feet, from talon down below to top of head. Hair in tight curls. The ancient Greek look. Black and glossy as a raven’s tail feathers. Deep blue luster to it. Copy-paper-white skin. The eyes, black. Empty. Shark’s

eyes. And filled with about as much sympathy. Cracked flesh around the corners. Blood showing in the stigmata slits of it. Mouth like an upside-down 'U.' Lips stained red. And I know how they get that way. They like to bite. They never wash their lips. You put two and two together. So they're the color of wine. She opens her mouth a little. Brass-colored teeth. All in a straight row. And she's got the long and pointy look. Like a row of needles in her mouth. Breasts small. Perfectly shaped. Black nipples. Pointed and sharp as daggers. Wings where her arms should be. Black feathers, edged in brown. She's got 'em spread out. Right to the edge of the circle, on both sides. Thatch of brass-colored hair between legs as thin and willowy as a doe's. Below the knees, she's a predatory bird. Thin and scaled bird-feet, ending in long red talons. Black labia nestled in that brass patch. Thick and bloated. Wet. Flowing down her thighs. Dripping. Falling on the vermin below her. Hissing. Sizzling. Animal screaming. Acidic.

God, she is so beautiful. Powerful. I could stare at her for hours. My dick gets a little hard. I want to fuck her. But it would never work between us. She is taller than me. Chicks never go for guys who are shorter than they are.

She raises a talon up. Something pink on it. Squirming. An infant. Which might surprise you. But it doesn't surprise me. Babies aren't that hard to come by. Humans produce them. And we've had a surplus for a while now...

~ ~ ~

The Cult of the Torn Virgin had its most basic beginnings in an act of love. The act of love occurred many years before the cult was even an idea at all. But without it, the cult would never have been.

It began with a tiny pain in a pregnant woman's belly. Over several days, the pain increased. And then a mother was faced with the most untenable decision that she could have been.

Her own life, or the life of her unborn daughter.

She made the decision without hesitation.

She was a good woman. A Christian woman. To her, the decision was no decision at all. It was choosing life, over murder.

If she had known who her daughter would become, and the things that she would do, she might have taken a coat hanger to her own insides.

Krista Cruess was born strong and healthy, on the day that her mother died. She cried out, kicking and screaming. Her tiny legs strong. Her mother's legs kicked, also. But weakly. They were both trembling. And covered in blood. The one at her beginning, the other at her end.

That's how her life started. And the fun didn't end there.

Baby Krista was shuffled from relative to relative. She finally ended as a ward of the state. There just wasn't any money in the family. Her mother hadn't been well-liked. It was inevitable that charity and kindness would run out.

As she grew up, she was told that she wasn't an orphan. There were no orphanages, and no orphans. There were "Foster Homes," and "Group Homes." And she was "a Ward of the State." But there were orphanages. And orphans. She lived in one. And she was one of them.

As a child, Krista was insular. Withdrawn. This wasn't because of stupidity. She had an average mind. It wasn't from lack of imagination. She fantasized a great deal. It was something else. Something crippling.

She was ugly.

She learned more about what life was really like than any of the other children around her. And she learned it from watching television. From how sharp the line was between the stories we told each other... and the way that we act towards each other.

Reality was not television. Or animated movies. There, ugly people were still somehow attractive. And they always transcended their ugliness. Usually, in a fantastic transformation.

The lie of the duckling and the swan.

She noticed, at too young an age, that attractive actors and actresses always played ugly characters. Tacit effort was put into making them *seem* ugly... early in the story. But later, the ugliness melted away. And there was beauty. Shining skin. Straight white teeth. Strong bodies. Glowing with the shine of health. The transformation achieved.

The other children loved the stories. The stories made them hate Krista. And she hated them back. The underlying implication of it all was clear to her by the time she was ten. She never transformed. Only evil characters *stayed ugly*. If you were really good, and a worthwhile person... you'd transform, and become beautiful.

It was the greatest evil Krista could imagine. A lie. A cruel and evil lie.

And it turned everything in the world upside down. If you were beautiful, and evil, you were the hero of the story called *Life*. If you were good, but ugly, it didn't matter. You were the villain.

That's how Krista Cruess learned what *Truth* was.

~~~

Gaius had plans. Plans that he kept hidden. Krista, and the other members of the cult, would be key players in those plans. He would be the last one at the end. He didn't intend to be the last one at the end of the world. No. He would be the last at THE END.

He would stand, sole witness, watching the last of the stars fade, and twinkle, twinkle, twinkle... go out, one by one. Until the very last sputtered. And then disappeared. He would feel the death-throes of the Creator as He passed into un-creation. He would exit the pitch-dark, silent universe where death reigned, the death of all things, and with that final power of death he would lock the last door behind him. And enter the next universe. There, to become its God.

He needed childish little tantrum-prone Krista Cruess. For now. He needed this new cult of dark power that he had fashioned, and the resources he had gathered in the century of his life. He would bring Krista and their pet cult with him for as far as they could go. For as long as he needed them. As long as they remained useful. He knew that a night would come when he would leave them behind. And at that time, he would do what he had done to all of the others that had trusted him before...

He would concentrate, and summoning the power of his mind, he would take the power of life from them. The moment of their deaths would feed him everything that they had within themselves. Their bodies would be annihilated. He would gain all of their strength and knowledge, in an instant. Making it his own. In a way, they would live forever. As parts of the power of the God of the Next Creation.

He would kill Krista, last. And before he killed her, he would make her watch as he summoned her nameless goddess from the temple by the lake, and make the spirit bow down and worship him. Then he would murder goddess and priestess, alike. Savoring it as their consciousnesses mixed and were devoured by the black oblivion of his mind.

He smiled every time he thought of it.

That sardonic, one-sided smile of his.

~~~

Rigoletto tried to do what he always did. To simply walk through the barrier. He couldn't. The cage stopped him. He grabbed the bars. Strained against them. Tried to bend them with his monstrous strength.

They didn't move. He closed his eyes. Willed himself to disappear and reappear beyond the bars. Nothing happened.

He was trapped.

He went berserk.

He howled. He raged. He foamed at the mouth. He threw his supernatural body at the bars, again and again. He flailed at the cage with his wooden sword.

The pavement cracked where the magical prison was anchored to the ground. But it didn't move.

He could sense the will-worker that had done this to him. He reached with both of his arms through the bars. The inhuman hands grasping, claws clicking... reaching, grasping, clawing at the air. He couldn't reach her. She was far away. Much too far.

Finally, he gave up. He sat down in the center of the cage. Sulking.

The witch had ruined all of his fun.

~~~

The Magician stared into time. Like madness, it spun off into blind eternity. And it took him with it. The curse of eternity stole the years from him. He aged. His life fell away, the horrific draining sapping his strength. He felt himself fall, weightless, as he died.

He saw the Warlock starting to stand. He had felt no magic. No warding spell used to stave off the magic of death that he had called up. It wasn't possible. His enemy should have died, as he was dying. He should be dead...

The Magician's corpse was dry. Dust rose from it as it fell. When it hit the floor, ten thousand years had passed. The last of him faded away, lost on the sudden charnel wind of the magic as it came to rest. There was

nothing. Even the dust from his bones was gone.

~~~

The Warlock's spirit was free of his body. His ghost hovered, being slowly drawn into its dissolution. He folded his hands. Spoke a word. Shaped a thaumaturgic hammer. Used it. He beat on the spirit-chains. Viciously struck the arcane bindings. Again and again.

Finally, they shattered. He was free. His soul rejoined his body. He was standing in the darkened room. Whole. Before him was the death-gate. Still open. The Lord of Death watched him.

The Warlock smiled. Held his hands as if he had something in them. There was nothing there... physically. He showed Menqal what he held. The avatar of Death saw the contract.

The gate closed. Death retreated, denied his promised soul. It had already been paid for.

The Clerk tried to shoot him then.

The echo of the pistol was like a pop-gun sound. Weak. Ineffectual. It was so small in the silence after the roar of the magical duel.

The shot went wild. The Warlock didn't even feel the passing breeze.

The Warlock walked up to the man in the wheelchair.

Extended an empty hand.

The Clerk calmly handed over the gun.

~~~

Indu Dipali Damayanti walked in measured steps from out of the dark. She was calm. Opals and gold sparkled all over her naked body. A few steps behind her was the Warlock, keeping pace.

She hated Ronan. But he *was* her ally. She didn't want him to die. Not yet, at least. Not while he was still useful. He might complain, endlessly, but in the end he always did what his coven-mates wanted him to.

But Dipali didn't really have the time to reflect on any of these things.

The Priest-King had taken notice of them.

It began to float slowly towards them. The silence was rent by the sound of its voice. Like gravel down a mountainside. Deep, and booming.

"...*life...*" it intoned.

Dipali felt a little nervous looking at the undead thing. She got ready to burn it. Then the Warlock stepped in front of her.

"I'll take care of this," he said.

He started speaking a language that Dipali couldn't even recognize.

The undead king instantly stopped.

The two of them conversed.

Dipali smiled. Fairly beaming. No matter how many times it happened, she was always surprised by the depth of his magical knowledge.

He reached out a hand. She sensed magic as he touched her. Suddenly, she could understand what he was saying.

"O, great Priest-King of Ur, whose might and wisdom knows no end, I am here humbled before you, my heart full of joy in service to you, I have set you free of unjust imprisonment here." The Priest-King paused. Then—

"*Sorcerer, thou hast done well. Peace, me, peace, you.*" Its voice was the worst thing that Dipali had ever heard.

"I accept your offer of peace between us, Great King, and hope to please so great a Lord as you." The Warlock bowed his head in reverence.

The form of the Priest-King shimmered, like heat above a highway in summer. Then he was gone.

"Where'd he go?" Dipali asked.

"How should I know?" the Warlock replied. Wearing a playful smile.

"That guy our friend now?" she asked.

"Yes."

"What else did you say to him?"

"Nothing important, he's just pleased to be free."

"What's he gonna do now?" she pressed.

"Nothing good," the Warlock said.

~~~

He comes on. Jack Frost. Old Man Winter. Son of Blast. Norse called him Jokul Frosti. The ancestral memory of the god Ullr. One of the Æsir. He looks like an old man. White and all full of snow. Then like a kid. Then an old crooked-nosed crone. Then like a Viking god. Shifting forms. They always shift.

He flicks past me. Spirit-quick. My soul freezes to the core. The bastard.

“Come on, man, talk to me here...” I say.

“What-do-you-want?” Words like icicles in my ears.

“You owe me,” I say. “For that thing in Finland.” Finland. Ten years ago. A bunch of sorcerers set up shop on a glacier. Doing big-time magical work. Sapping Jack Frost’s power. I showed up. I happened to be in the neighborhood. Put the zap on all of their equipment. About fifty of ‘em froze to death. Jack here got their souls. The price they paid for fucking with him.

“I-owe-YOU?!?” The spirit was being difficult.

“That’s right, buddy,” I call out. “You owe me. I’m calling in the marker.”

I have to turn around. And around, again. He’s flying all over.

“WHAT!?” We’re getting down to it. Finally.

“Back in the world,” I say. “A dragon. Djinn. Kinda guy you hate. Giving me a real pain in my ass. Howzabout you and me go back and cut his fucking heart out. Shove it up his ass. We’ll do it together. We’ll bond over it.”

“Why-should-I-help-you? You-die-the-debt-dies-with-you!” Asshole.

Is he seriously fucking with me like this? Really?

“Not how it works. Rules. Rules! Jackie-boy,” I say. “You owe me. Pay up. Besides, I know how much you hate dragons. Always melting those sculptures that you make. Swans carved out of ice. Really cool snowmen. Shit like that. So, come on.”

I probably shouldn’t be fucking with him. But it’s how you get a rep like the one that I’ve got.

“Very-well! The-dragon! Nothing-more! Then-we-are-FINISHED!”

“Suits me, buddy.”

Now we’ve got a chance here, I think.

I don’t waste any time. Just steel my will. Take the long trip back. See the Earth. Then the house. Burning in the back. Already. Then I slam down into my body. It hurts worse going back in than it did coming out.

If you can believe that.

~ ~ ~

I am pissed.

I look at her.

She looks at me.

And recognizes the threat. She tries to get away. Not quick enough. I hum a little magic ditty. It opens a hole. Straight down. Into the Greater Darkness. The void between the planes. The big empty that fills the spaces between the stars. The Abyss.

She screams.

I love to hear them scream.

Then she gets sucked down. Into the empty black. Sayonara. Have fun wandering the dark oblivion. For all of eternity. Bitch.

Every other evil little spirit in the room saw me do her, nasty. They lose the will to fuck with us. Smart decision.

Burke is spinning around. He knows the gun is no good. Probably makes him feel better to have it anyway. Then I look past Burke. See Gaius’ spirit. It stands up, out of his dead body. Still with that little half-smile.

He has something in his spirit-hands. Little carved box. Inlaid, gold and silver. I know what it is. Don’t need more than a glance. A spirit-chamber. A physical thing. But you make it right, if you know how, you can bring it into the spirit realm. And get it back out again. Carry whatever will fit inside with you as you go.

He opens the lid. And his body dissolves. Clothes collapsing. Suddenly empty. His physical essence rises up. Floating. Swirling. Bright motes of matter, changed to magic. All the elements of life. Everything that’s *him*. Collected up. A tight bundle of roiling Gaius. Drawn into the box.

He closes the lid.

Then he concentrates. I can tell. I can’t sense anything. It’s mentalism. Not magic. But I can tell.

A portal opens. A long tunnel visible through it. He turns to leave. Takes three steps. Then he pauses. Turns back. Looks right at me.

And he winks.
That FUCKING bastard.

~~~

Krista Cruess walked up to what remained of the Night Reapers. She extended a hand to Tank. He reached out to take it.

Then she laughed. A cruel sound. Like the tinkling of chimes in a spring wind. Or maybe like the sound of glass from a broken mirror, falling to the floor. A wave of her hand. Up and away from his. She let the dead have him.

The monsters pounced on Tank. He screamed, as they ate him alive.

Then it was just her and the old man.

Krista didn't need magic to see that he was dying. She thought about just letting him waste away. Then she decided against it. She stood over the old man. Stared down on him for a second.

"I'm going to kill all of your friends," her voice purred. "Just like I killed your women, and the little boy. He screamed and cried." Then she reached down. Took the old man's chin. Raised his face so that he was looking at her. "It was really very pretty."

Crazy Gene Stevens slowly straightened. Still on his knees, his hunched-over body seemed to uncurl. He showed Krista what he had in his hands.

A big jar. With wires attached. Full of liquid.

A napalm bomb.

~~~

Then, the smell of smoke brought him back. The house was going up. Quicker.

Tommy tossed the diamonds and the bag back into the trunk. It was a good-sized steamer. And it wasn't full. There was more treasure scattered around on the floor. He scooped it up with both hands. Not even really looking at it. Tiny silver and gold bars. Paper money. More coins. He kept packing the trunk until it was good and full. Then he slammed down the lid. Sat on it, and worked the latches closed. He'd packed it ass-fat.

He dragged the trunk to the stairs. Favoring his wounded leg. He let it tumble down. It broke the stairs as it did so.

He didn't care how heavy it was.

He didn't care about the risk of getting burned alive.

He wasn't leaving without it.

~~~

"We done with the pants-shitting-terror for tonight?"

"Yeah," I say. "I'm gonna go get drunk."

"Good idea," Burke says. "Then what?"

We all look down the hill. Sirens. Flashing lights.

Decision time. All around.

"After that, I've got more shit to do," I say. "I gotta have a look around. Ask some questions. Do some research. After that, it's game time again. You've got money now. You'll have time to rebuild your gang. If you want, you can go with me. Same deal as before. Same crazy shit. You'll probably both die. But I'd love to have you."

"You want a share of this?" Burke asks me, thumb pointed at the trunk.

"Except for any magic that we find, all the loot goes to the Night Reapers. Now, and in the future."

I wait. Burke slings his rifle over one shoulder. Puts his hands on his hips. Kicks a stone away into the long grass. Looks up at the sky for a second. Then he looks at Tommy. Tommy shrugs. Then nods. Burke exhales. Strong and loud. Looks over at me.

"You're on."

~~~

MAYHEM

~~~

Hands took hold of him. He was forced down onto his knees. His head was put in place, and the beam was

affixed over it. He closed his eyes.

*Mother, I am so sorry, I could not keep my promise to you. All is lost...*

The executioner loosed the rope. The guillotine trembled in its terrible violence. The blade followed its course. Falling onto his neck.

Sudden, shocking, pain. Like a red-hot iron thrust into his throat.

Cupideau's eyes snapped open.

He was falling. But there was only a vague sensation of falling.

Then he landed.

And he saw the geyser of his own blood before it washed over his upturned face. He felt himself shaking with the death-throes. He waited for consciousness to fail, and fade this terrible feeling.

Then, peace came to rest over him.

There was no more pain. Only a thudding in his body, that he realized was his own heartbeat.

*How can I feel my own heart?* His final, bewildered thought.

It stopped. He closed his eyes as the dark curtains swirled down.

It was finished. He was dead.

The executioner waited until the bleeding from the neck stopped. Then he lifted the severed head high. Displayed it for the crowd to see. The mob roared in its approval.

The man turned to throw it onto the body-cart. And he happened to look down at the face.

The eyes opened. And looked at him. The mouth worked. As if speaking.

And he heard its voice.

"Let go of me!" Cupideau shouted.

The executioner dropped the head.

Expecting it to fall to the platform at his feet.

But it did not fall.

Instead, it rose up.

Dripping blood, and hovered there, turning to face the mob.

The most surprising thing was that the crowd fell silent for a few moments.

Then a woman screamed.

~~~

Burke and Tommy weave through the crowd. At home. Their element. Swimming like sharks. In a sea of sharks. Only takes them a minute. They find who they are looking for.

Three bikers. Powwowing at one of the tables. Playing cards. I recognize the game. Pile of cards in the middle. One of them throws down. Hands slap the pile. Hard. The one underneath collects up the cards. Egyptian Rat Screw. Good game.

I give the three at the table the once-over.

These aren't your average bikers. Burke had given me the lowdown before we got here.

Still, they are a surprising sight.

A woman, a black man, and a pale scrawny guy with red hair.

Now, I gotta tell ya, having a woman in your biker gang will earn you lifelong disrespect. Bikers ain't exactly the epitome of feminists. At least I know that much. Having a woman as the leader of your gang, well, that's as good as a death sentence.

A lot of bikers are racists. Especially the outlaws. They stick to their own. Harbor hostility towards anybody else. Everybody gangs up with their own kind. And skin color's a quick spot-check for "your own kind." It isn't nice. But there it is. So, having a black guy in your gang isn't gonna do anything good for your reputation.

That's two really big fucking strikes against their survivability as outlaws, right there.

Then add a weakling, an ex-honors student at Worcester Polytech in Mass. Third strike.

The fact that these three had survived among other outlaws says a lot about them. It speaks volumes. And I am a quick study with the books.

Burke had given me the prep talk on these people. Still, I wasn't ready for what I got when we came face-to-face.

When he told me their boss was a woman, I got images of a bull dyke. All butch, with tattoos. That kinda thing. Pile on top that she was Ollie's sister and I was picturing a drug-wasted biker whore.

Boy, do I get a fucking shock.

Slim. Dark eyes. Skin to go with the peepers. Athletic curves to her. Small in the chest. Roomy in the hips.

Black bandanna on her head. Black belly shirt. Beretta pistol on the table. Near her right hand. As dark and deadly as she is. Stiletto slipped down into the V-neck of her shirt. Right between her firm little titties. And a crystal ball. Small, but exquisite. Hanging from her neck in a corded net. I watch her hands move. Quick. Deft. Hypnotic. A Gypsy. True Romany.

I can smell the necromancy coming off of her. Low on power. But she just has that look. She is skilled. Practiced. I can tell. What she knew how to do, she could do well.

My Watcher hovers closer. It whispers to me what I already know. Then it whispers a lot that I didn't know. Then it goes back to guarding the edge of my circle.

I want her. On my team. In my bed. She has beauty. Style. Magic. When it all comes together in the neat little package of 'Her,' it means one thing— Power.

You fuck with this woman at your peril.

The black guy. He's a big dude. But not the hulking type. Tall. With that long, lean, and lanky muscle. He's wearing a leather vest. And a lot of American Indian jewelry. Bead and bone choker. Arm band with an eagle's feather attached to it. And he has an afro. No, really. The guy has a big afro haircut. Looks like an old-style microphone. No shit. Like from the '70s.

He looks like he's fast. Strong. Burke mentioned that he was the fastest guy he'd ever seen. A panther among men. The beads, feathers, the afro. You'd think people would give him a lot of shit about it. The Mac-10 hanging in front of his belly by a strap probably goes a long way towards keeping it civil. I take a good look.

Black power and white death walking on two legs.

I could figure the other two. The red-haired guy though, I don't get. Burke had told me that he was a genius when it came to transmitters and remote tech. He coulda been sitting in some lab deep underground making six figures a year, easy.

Instead, he's here.

I give him the once-over, too. Up, then down. Red hair, cropped close. Irish pale skin. Wearing ear buds. But they don't have any wires. Gently be-bopping to whatever he's listening to. I don't see any weapons on him. Leather jacket. Black jeans. Biker boots, looking too big for him.

I just can't peg this guy. He'd bear watching.

~~~

The eye of the storm. A coriolis of evil.

I'm stunned. And I mean that. In the literal sense. I can't do anything. Just stare for a few seconds. I'd never actually seen him before. Not with my own eyes. But I recognize him.

Max Schreck.

Max

Fucking

Schreck

MAX SCHRECK

It might as well have been the Bogeyman. The Grim Reaper. The Wicked Witch of the West.

The figure turns in the center of the darkness. Like he's on rollers. Slow. Smooth. He isn't walking. Isn't even touching the ground. One arm slowly extends out. Impossibly long and thin. Claws splayed. Predatory. The shark-eyes. That dread, blank gaze. Fixed on the top of the hill.

On us.

I have to grab my crotch real quick. Squeeze tight. Still, I think a little pee comes out.

Then I realize that Max isn't exactly looking at *us*, so much as he's looking at *her*. Meaning, my vampire.

I don't say anything. I just run. Everyone else takes a look. Then they run with me.

Not my best moment.

But I want to live.

So I get the fuck out of there.

~~~

She rushed headlong into the open jaws of a nightmare, driven by the love she had for her brother.

She came into a dense stand of trees, shadowed recesses, and darker slips, made from the twisted limbs tangled above.

The teeth of the nightmare snapped shut.

She was trapped, worse than an animal in a cage.

She had somewhere passed through a gateway and had not known it. She had moved from the world of daylight supremacy into the nightmare terrain of Hell. There was no explanation for what was before her.

Her brother was hanging in the air.

His toes were pointing down, more than a foot above the snow. His arms were hanging limply at his sides. He was securely held up, suspended by nothing.

His mouth hung open as if his jaw had come unhinged. A low, thin and airy whistle was coming from him. His eyes were wide open, but they had rolled back and nothing showed there but white.

His hair danced in the air as if stirred by a maelstrom, although Beatrice felt no wind at all. It undulated at speed, wild in its contortions, like the boy was underwater.

Then Beatrice saw the Witch.

Towering in her height, taller than a man, and massively fat. Her skin was a pale green, and her eyes were bright yellow. She had a round face with lips so thin and black they were like a knife cut. Her nose was long and sharply pointed, and her hair hung like strands of black yarn, shot with iron-gray. The Witch wore a rusted iron breastplate and a black hat like a man would wear, tall, and conical. The brass buckle at its front was tarnished beyond shining. Her arms were spindly, and as tall as she was, they were too long for her body.

The Witch saw Beatrice at the same instant that Beatrice had seen her.

She tried to run. But it was already too late.

~~~

The Witch's cottage.

Beatrice stood calmly before the infernal monstrosity that was her mentor. The Witch had her back to her, busily working with mortar and pestle. Ready for this night's lesson. And as always, she was talking to herself.

"Now, now, dearie me, where's that hemlock? Ah! Oh, little poppet, poppet, poppet, I'll school ye, sure enough, school ye sound," the Witch mumbled to herself. "Now, my little flower, I'll teach ye to brew a potion that'll enspell a lad or lass to love whom ye will, with a wee death-curse thrown in just for an ample measure of tragedy, the kind of thing that our Master likes, yes He does..."

The Witch turned towards Beatrice, her arms full of magical effluvia.

The green face contorted in surprise. The Witch gasped.

Beatrice was standing too close to her. Much too close.

Only a few inches of space separated them.

Bridging the distance, was a dagger.

Enchanted. Beatrice had made it herself.

Both of her hands clutched the handle.

The blade was buried in the Witch's body.

The yellow eyes stared down at it.

Then the blood began to ooze.

The Witch always used spells to protect herself.

But Beatrice had her own spells now.

Then the fat body of the Witch was falling backwards. Almost rolling. Beatrice followed her down, one hand never letting go of the dagger's handle. She felt its cord-wrapped surface thrumming in her fingers, throbbing, pulsing with the Witch's heartbeat. She felt it weaken, failing as the Witch died.

Beatrice leaned closer to the ugly green face, and spat.

"Now I am the Witch in the Woods."

~~~

Her voice fell to a whisper as she finished the incantation. Then she rudely released him. His body struck the ground just as the first shivers ran through it.

Beatrice hung a silver amulet on a cord around her neck. Then she stood over him and watched. It happened quickly.

He screamed.

And kept on screaming until his voice had gone hoarse with it.

Then his bones started to snap. Each one breaking with a distinct *crack*. Then came the rending sounds of muscle and skin straining, resisting, stretching, breaking.

There was blood in plenty.

And then fur. And claws.

And finally, teeth.

The wolf stood, and opened its eyes.

Jonathan's eyes. But it wasn't Jonathan Fuller any longer.

Now it was a werewolf.

Her werewolf.

The beast was casting about, swinging its head from side to side. Panting through its dripping muzzle. Looking for something to kill and eat. Then it fixed its eyes on Beatrice, sensing the sorcery of the amulet that she wore. Unable, maybe unwilling, to attack her.

It opened wide its deadly maw and let loose a supernaturally powerful roar.

Not quite the baying of a wolf, not quite the bellow of a man.

The sound possessed all the worst qualities of both. It was dark, and furious. An unveiled threat, full of deadly promise.

It paced the edges of the circle moving with all the subdued menace of a caged monster. It was imprisoned by the magic. Beatrice watched its huge gray form, her eyes full of wonder and glee.

It was beautiful the way that the moonlight shone on its wet fur.

Then she stood in front of it. Took its head in her hands, her palms resting on each side of its face. She crouched and gazed steadily into the monster's moon-maddened eyes.

The beast stared at the silver amulet that she wore.

"Now, Jonathan, let me tell you what you are going to do..."

~~~

I head straight to my destination. A really fucking big palace. And sucking up the real estate here means a lot. There are some Cthulhu-monster kind of bullshitters at the front gate. Guards. They're big. They're scary. They're powerful. I walk right by them.

*No, I don't have an appointment. Yes, I will kill you if you try to stop me.*

They don't try. So far, so good.

Down some hallways. Up some stairs. I reach the throne room. And walk in like I'm supposed to be there.

Two giant thrones. Different, but equal. I'm here to play a goddess off against a god. Husband and wife. Watch how I work this.

My Dad would be proud.

The two of them manifest.

Nergal, Babylonian God of the Dead.

Ereshkigal. Wife to Nergal. And also a ruler of the dead. But... she's the only one that can make law, and pass judgment in their shared kingdom.

He's what you would expect. A skeleton, fifty feet tall. Black and red snakes coming out of his eye sockets. His wife's a different story. The form she chooses gives me confidence.

The Dark Seductress. All black dress and glittering diamonds. Lotsa cleavage. She seduced him a long time ago. Dragged his ass down to Esagila. The Land of No Return. He tried to leave. She threatened to unleash the dead back onto the world. Fucked him over, real hard. They've been here ever since.

He's pissed. Hissing. He cuts loose on me. Seven demigods, the Sebitti. He sends them after me. They're bad news. They help him cull mankind. And now, they wanna 'cull' me.

But I've got my moments. And I take them for all they're worth.

"Is this how you treat a Prince of Hell come to make you an offering?" It's hard not to sound nervous. But I'm pulling it off. I think.

*"You trespass,"* he intones. *"You answer. With your life."*

He isn't fucking around with me. Hopefully, she will. Here goes.

"I wasn't FUCKING talking to YOU... ASSHOLE!" I shout at him.

She stands up. Good sign. Ereshkigal. All sex, death, and glory. A true goddess. I resist the urge to fall on my knees in front of her. We're all royalty here, after all.

*"SPEAK,"* she says to me. *"Palaver. I will listen."* Good.

I like Babylonians. Direct. Straight to the point.

"I hand over one of my mortal enemies. Body and soul. Open the path of commerce. Between me and you. What do you say?"

In this place, I've got no breath to hold. But if I did, I'd be holding it now.

*"Not yours..."* she whispers. *"Not yours to give."* The sound of her voice... did I do that? Because I sure as hell



hope so.

“Like fuck it’s not,” I say. “I’m a Prince of Hell. If I wanna drag some shithead down to the underworld and shove a thousand demons up his ass, I’m gonna do it. Just for kicks. Same rules apply if I wanna sell him to you. Who’s gonna stop me? God? If an angel or two shows up and *tries* to stop me, all I’m gonna be thinking about is how attractive their heads are gonna look on a coupla spikes.”

She gasps. Puts a hand over her breast. Gasps again.

This is going better than I thought it would.

It suddenly occurs to me how crazy what I’m doing actually is.

I’m going off the deep end here.

Well, that’s how you get a rep as a crazy badass, not to be trifled with.

You do crazy shit. Like this.

“*Agree...*” she breathes.

Just like that.

Ask, and ye shall receive. No shit.

“How’s this gonna work?” I ask her. Her husband is fuming. I don’t care. Kind of a ‘My Dad can beat up your Dad’ sorta thing.

“*Show him to me... Bring me to him...*”

Shit. I know what that means. I get ready for it.

“Let’s go.”

And just like that, she’s on me. Then in me. She’s touching me. On the inside. Intimately. I like it. A lot. I look at Nergal. He looks at me. Obvious as to what’s going on.

His wife is fucking me. In a spiritual sense. Right in front of him. And it isn’t my first time to do this sort of dance.

I smile, and wave at him. The big spooky dicklicker.

Then I start the long walk back. With her inside of me.

~~~

A shape. Behind the bars. It comes hulking out of the dark. An arm. Big. Muscular. Tats all down it. Through the bars. Around the cop’s neck. And he’s pinned. Just like that. He drops the gun.

I get a good look at Machinegun Mike.

Shaved head. Military close. Dark complexion. Busting out beefcake with the muscles. Looks like he’s carved from granite. Stone-cold killer in two wars. I take a good gander at his face. Over the poor, doomed, cop’s shoulder.

It isn’t right.

It’s a pleasant face. A happy face. A good face. The kind of face that you can trust. I almost think he’s wearing somebody else’s. A mix-up on God’s factory floor. Some angel slipped up when they were passing out the faces and smiles. And speaking of the smile he’s wearing... it just doesn’t match what he’s doing. It’s just too damned *nice*.

~~~

We travel elsewhere. Far in time, and distant in space.

We observe a world, a mirror of our own. Cast in reflective similarities, but the mirror bears shadows. For us, magic gave way before science. The wand was dropped, and the motherboard was taken up.

But in this far time and place, the opposite occurred.

Magic was what became preminent. Witches and sorcerers reigned in tyranny. For millennia, they developed increasingly powerful magic. Their hubris was monolithic. It seemed that there was nothing they could not achieve through their magic. This state of being persisted for an age.

They found their doom, entering into it at the gate of their hubris, and from its luminous, burning, celestial palace, they would be greatly blessed.

The witches and sorcerers gathered their materials. In preparation for the grand spell. They ruined their world in doing it, driving the people into destitution. The magic called for sacrifice. So they killed a multitude on the shores of the sea until the water was like wine.

When the moment came, they did not hesitate. They summoned the spirit from some dim realm beyond, using their star as the gateway.

Catastrophe was instantaneous.

The spirit's laughter echoed impossibly through the void of space, from one end of the universe to the other. It doubled as it rebounded, the supernatural sound taking on a life of its own.

Distant, so distant, was our planet. Our primitive ancestors stared at the sky when the sound reached them. Fear and confusion were supreme, but one, bolder than the rest, wiped mango juice from his chin and listened to the sound. He remembered what he had heard that day, and mimicking it later, found that it had the power to inflict mishap, and even kill.

He was the first sorcerer among our kind.

The evil spirit that they had summoned set foot in our universe and into the heart of a star. The insurmountable nature of its malevolence could not be contained. The physical laws of our realm were insufficient for such a thing. The warping of matter, energy, space, and time caused by its presence became infinite, within moments. The speed of its thoughts became equally infinite, and with this, the creature occupied all points of our reality, concurrently.

For an insane moment it was all things, in all places, and possessed all knowledge.

Due to this, it came face to face with the Creator.

Luridly naked in its malevolence, it stood before God. And it was afraid. For the first time, it experienced fear. It needed to escape the searing *oppositeness* of this presence. This 'Good' that could so easily blast away its own essential Evil.

But they were, the both of them, everywhere at once.

The monster did the only thing that it could do in order to escape. It willingly limited itself. It compressed itself into a lesser form, and fled from the light. Fled back to its point of origin.

Now, less than infinite, but still mighty, the spirit came fully into its being. It adapted to the order of this new place that it had found itself in. It had its genesis while hiding in the core of a star. But the burning energy of that distant sun strained against what it contained.

On the planet below, all eyes stared at the sun.

They saw it bulge, becoming impossibly lopsided.

Then it exploded.

A nova-flash of nuclear fire. And with it came a wave of less than physical, malignant, energy. Reality, for a thousand light years all around, was scoured, not just of life, but of all things that form the basis of what is known.

Life, and matter, time, and even space itself, were reduced to less than nothing by the blast.

Every living soul on the nearby planet was bodily vaporized, in an instant.

But time itself was breaking down. They felt their bodies, minds, and souls, first corrupted by the immensity of the evil energy that they were awash in. Then, as time dwindled, the specks of its cosmic dust settling into oblivion around them, they felt that they were disintegrating.

They experienced the suffering of this death for what was, subjectively, many millions of years.

There were a few that experienced a kind of survival.

Their corrupted essences were left hanging in the void after the event.

One hundred and thirteen specks, lost in the dark.

They had become the embodiment of what they had experienced. The death-cry of every member of their race, sounded out as they died in the midst of a sorcerous apocalypse, persisted in them.

The monster looked upon what it had caused, and found it good.

A good start.

It saw the one hundred and thirteen, and in its way, it loved them.

It blessed them, and then, it gathered them to itself.

The great, dark spirit set out. It had a far distance to travel.

When it had been everywhere, and known everything, it had seen other living beings. They were like its one hundred and thirteen children, before it had changed them.

The others had heard the sound of its laughter, and at least one of them had taken an interest.

The light from the destruction of the star that it had hidden in went before it. The light reached the destination several thousand years before the evil spirit and its one hundred and thirteen did.

Three wise men, Magi, saw the light of that dying sun. They were unaware of its origin, but somehow, they knew that it had immense significance. They followed where it led, and gave gifts, and did acts of worship before the one born beneath its light.

They did not know that although the light had led them to the one that they beheld in glory, it had its origin in the birth of that child's opposite.

~~~

A sudden blaze of energy came from above.

One hundred and thirteen beams of consuming darkness split reality from sky to earth. One hundred and thirteen of those gathered experienced an apocalypse of the spirit as the essential 'Them' was scoured away by the hellish power.

Then Genesis, as new souls descended and occupied their bodies.

The momentarily empty shells were filled.

The death of what they had been, and the renewed life of what they had become, happened so quickly that their bodies didn't even have time to fall.

Those that were unchosen were far more fortunate. They simply died.

The black beams of the nothingness which the spirits had traveled down cut the other bodies apart. They were pierced, bisected, sliced into ribbons. Wherever the beams of the utterdark passed, flesh and bone were separated. The bodies opened under the assault, the blood flowed, organs and brain matter came out in a rich wash, all of it bursting across the pavement.

It was finished, in an instant.

The face had disappeared into the endless dark.

The one hundred and thirteen looked around themselves, blinking. They were unsteady on their feet. Gravity. After so long a time spent in their travels, *gravity*, once again. They possessed bodies again. They held their new hands up in front of their eyes, turning them forward and back. They looked at everything around them with the wonder of children.

Alive! Again! Alive!

Then sensation flooded back in. They recognized it. Pain. Their bodies ached. Their throats were parched, they felt cracked, like leather left in the sun too long. There was a weakening suffering felt deep in their guts.

They had traveled far. They were tired, and hungry.

They ate what was there. Dropping down, they grabbed up the remains. They tore muscle from bone with their teeth. Greedily devouring the refuse of the dead scattered around them. Chewing voraciously, they gladly shared the choicest bits with each other. They found hearts, livers, and kidneys to be good. But the best parts were the faces, groins, and hands. They whetted dry throats by falling on their hands and knees to lap up the blood.

The feast was short.

~~~

Now.

Right fucking now.

No. I amend. Yesterday, is what I meant to say.

*Fucking yesterday.*

As in, that's when I needed answers.

Lemme give ya the quick rundown on where I'm at, life-situation wise.

I'm trying to hunt up one of the most powerful arcane artifacts on Earth. Every shit-kicking witch, warlock, coven, sorcerer and magician wants it, too. As of late, I've pulled theft, murder, destruction, and more than my fair share of mayhem.

Right.

Add to the list perfidy, and general unpleasantness.

And I've got a shitload of unpaid parking tickets.

So, the law's on the lookout for me.

Killed a bunch of people. Burned down a couple of buildings.

It's getting loud. Even for me.

I've got Max Schreck dogging every move that I make.

The most powerful vampire in the world. I tell a lie.

Max isn't a vampire. He's a force of nature.

*A force of FUCKING nature.*

Can't kill him. Can't negotiate with him.

Probably can't even slow him down.

It's got something to do with my vampire chickie. I don't wanna give her up. I'm a stubborn bastard like that. Means that I've gotta figure something out. And quick. Because I can't operate in this condition.

The short form— I've got everybody and their dirty old uncle up my FUCKIN' ass.

But... there is an upside.

I've got magic. And I'm connected up better than a switchboard. Especially when it comes to the supernatural underground. I'm the Devil's son. The real deal. And that comes with a pretty good benefits package. I've got a crew on my side. A finer bunch of psychotic hardcases you will have a difficult time finding. Quick to kill. Slow at dying. Good with their trade. That trade being crime and chaos. And they're even better at getting away with it than they are at doing it. Plus, let's not forget my pet vampire. The one that I aim to keep.

Yep, when we roll in, hell has most definitely come home to roost.

I get a hard-on thinking of the magnitude of villainy that we can get up to when we put our minds to it. It's sublimating. Seriously.

But right now, I'm on a mission.

Goals, kids. Agendas. Epic quests.

Alla that crap.

I gotta get clear of Max before I can make any forward progress. Gotta find out why he's after my vampire-girl. I'm betting that she knows something about it. Not consciously. No. But somewhere in her undead, magic-pickled brain. She's got the clues. And I need 'em.

Somewhere in her past. In those memories. There's something.

And that's the problem.

How to find out.

~~~

Hexx 113.

Where in the fuck do I start?

These fuckin' people... I swear.

Listen, I been creepin' around in the dark for a good long time now. I've dealt with demons. Face to face. I've seen ghosts. Evil gods. Things Man Was Not Meant To Know... well, I know that shit. I'm weird. I'm dark. I wear a lot of black. I even wear my sunglasses after sunset, sometimes. I'm so spooky, I shit bats. Trust me, I know from scary and fucked-up.

But Hexx 113. These people take the cake. I mean, the whole *freaking* birthday cake of the Prince of Darkness. Candles, frosting, and all.

I'm pretty much never afraid of anything. But these people make even *me* a little nervous. And that counts.

~~~

This guy that I'm calling, he has a sort of magical shop.

I say 'shop' in the broadest possible sense of the word. There's no storefront. So give up on your dreams of window shopping and browsing for magical doodads.

If he's willing to deal with you, he gives you a phone number. You're instructed to call only on certain days, and only at certain times. If he decides to answer you, you deal. If not, tough luck.

So, you talk to him.

It's simple. You tell him what you're after. He names his price. There's no negotiation. If you can come up with your end of it, you let him know. He tells you where to go to deliver. You show up alone, or not at all. You show up with anybody else in tow, you never see him again.

If it's all copacetic, the goods exchange hands. In both directions.

You're probably thinking right about now, 'What an asshole! He won't haggle over price. He doesn't always answer when his customers call. AND, you have to go when and where he tells you to for pick up.'

All of that's true.

What's ALSO true, is this guy's reputation. And that is— He can get it for you. Maybe not as quick as you'd like. But he's a hundred and ten percent reliable.

Fresh corpses to fatten up your zombie hoard? How many dozens do you need? Angel's feathers? You want just a couple, or should I bring a whole wing? Elvis' magical blue suede shoes? You need a specific size, or just what I've got laying around? Houdini's severed head? Whoa, that's a special order, can't get that out to you before middle of next week.

Let me set you straight on this. If Dawson (and yeah, that's the only name that I know him by) is willing to deal with you, it's a privilege. You protect that privilege.

Anyone that even tries to fuck him over gets a *very* bad rep in the supernatural underground. I've never heard

of anyone trying to double-cross him and succeeding at it.

The bad feeling engendered by fucking with Dawson is *so* bad, in fact, that often someone steps up and ‘volunteers’ to take care of the problem for him. And by that, I mean they murder the idiot that tried it.

I’ve done volunteer service for Dawson myself. Twice.

Don’t get me wrong here, you know me. My motives were (almost) entirely selfish. It got me in good with the man.

And he doesn’t just sell merchandise. He also brokers information...

...and that’s why I need him right about now.

~ ~ ~

This one was different.

Ben had taken down two others.

The first was in Florida, when he had first become a detective. The second was in Boston, almost ten years later. Those had been reasonably straightforward.

Abnormal psychology.

Sadism.

An inner world of fantasy, involving torture, and death.

They had an image of a victim in their minds. They hunted until they found a person who closely matched that image. They observed. They lured the victim in. Cornered them, captured them.

And then they acted out their fantasy.

Serial killers weren’t hard to catch because their victims weren’t chosen randomly. In truth, the victims only *seemed* to be picked randomly. But they weren’t. Not at all. They were carefully chosen by the murderer. Because they fit the killer’s image of a victim within their fantasy.

Once you had figured out the killer’s profile for a victim, you could start to reason like the killer. Determine the places that they were likely to use as hunting grounds. You could guess at their habits. The kinds of places that they would frequent. What kinds of clothes that they wore. The type of car they were likely to be driving. And more.

And if you guessed right about enough of those things...

You could catch them.

Or kill them, if it came to that.

Serial killers were hard to catch because the murders that they committed lacked the usual motives. The killer only rarely had more than a superficial connection to their victim. Often, there was no connection at all. They usually didn’t kill for money. At least not for more money than the victim had on them. They didn’t kill out of personally provoked jealousy. They didn’t kill out of rage from a wrong done to them by the victim.

They killed to satisfy their fantasies, and their urge to kill.

But the feelings always came back.

But this one was different.

He (and he reminded himself that it *could* be a woman, that it was unlikely, statistically, but possible) couldn’t even classify this one as a killer, yet. They had no proof that he had killed anyone.

They had only found blood.

A lot of blood.

In a lot of different places.

They found it old and dried to a brick-red color.

It seemed obvious. They were being taunted. It was blood from the same young woman. They had it tested every time that they found it. And they had found it in a slow, meandering trail from the outskirts of Chicago all the way to Boston. They theorized that perhaps he had her secured in a vehicle of some kind. And was keeping her alive. Bleeding her, again and again.

They knew that she was alive. Blood that came out of a dead body tested differently. They would have known if she was dead. Or if she had died anywhere along the trail of blood that they had found.

And that was what was different about this one.

For most serial killers, the death of the victim was a release. Catharsis. They needed it. It relieved the internal pressures of their own twisted desires.

But this one...

Torturing the victim.

Taunting the police.

These things seemed to be the catharsis.

Which meant that he would keep her alive, indefinitely. Bleeding her. Planting the blood. Repeating the torment. His victim suspended in the psychological torture of the anticipation of death.

He didn't like to think about it.

Or what was otherwise likely happening to her.

~~~

The photographer couldn't move. He felt like his feet had sunk into the cement. What he was witnessing seemed so unreal. It seemed more like a painting than real life. Bosch meets Dali, on acid. He had wanted to be a painter, but there just wasn't any talent in him for it. So photography had served his artistic dreams. And those dreams, all of those desires, seemed to have served only one purpose.

To bring him here. Now. To photograph *this*.

The lighting was bad.

The subjects were moving, fast.

He started taking pictures.

Cold, clean, skill working.

His mind was focused.

He had this.

~~~

Sara was dying of starvation. Weakness settling like a pall over her entire body. It was absurd of her to think that the forest could somehow save her. It couldn't.

It could only provide a place for her to die.

And perhaps, that was the intended destination of her wearying journey.

Death.

To die.

Alone.

In a dark and distant place.

She stared at the line of trees. The snow-draped limbs had begun to sparkle in the light of the rising moon. The dark, in drifts beneath the eaves. Seeing this, her spirit became strong. It was like when the angel had touched her, but less. She would have run, but there was no strength left for that.

She kept on. All that she could hear was the sound of her own breath coming. There was no pain. She had gone numb with the cold. Then she reached the edge of the trees. She looked into the darkness there with no fear.

And then she fell.

Collapsing. Hovering on the bleak and tidal shores of unconsciousness. She wouldn't allow herself to pass over. Not yet.

She opened her eyes. Saw a hand. Her own hand. It was white against the black that she was wearing. The same color as the snow that it was half buried in. She willed it to move. And it did. But she couldn't feel it. Couldn't feel anything. Then she willed her legs to move. Then her entire body.

She crawled. Pain awoke in the agony of the ten feet that she moved.

Then she was in the cold, forgiving dark.

She sank down. Let the hungry dark within her meet the dark oblivion coming from outside of her.

And she was gone.

~~~

Sara raised her eyes and looked up, into salvation.

The angel was there.

Brilliant in his alabaster. Luminous beneath the light of the moon. A radiance so pure that no sickly yellow light could taint it. He towered. Immense in stature, and immense in another way that defied description. He was so much more *there* than everything else surrounding him. He was like a photograph cut out along his edges and then laid down on top of a crude drawing.

The angel *was*, and everything else *wasn't*.

He dwarfed reality with his presence. All else was crude, and simple, when seen beside the stonework of God.

His face was boyish in its roundness. Inspiring in the serenity of its expression. A holy beatification captured in such transcendence, to see it, the masters of the renaissance would burn their pallets for despair.

His eyes were featureless curves of white stone. The shimmering alabaster was alight with the expression of many lives. A being having never sought wholeness, for he had been created whole. Lacking nothing to make it perfect.

His gaze falling on her was a perfect sun in this dark place, making a perfect day, for that sun would never set.

She didn't dare to blink. She couldn't move. She wouldn't look away from him. Fear opened up within her heart, a yawning chasm with teeth, in the bottom of her soul. She was afraid that if he escaped her sight, he would be gone. Like some cruel illusion evaporating in the weak light of this world.

Then the angel moved. Silence. No sound at all as he slowly raised one hand. His smooth features formed an expression of simple surprise. That one hand coming up to cover the 'O' of his mouth. It was such a human thing to see him do. Childlike. Seeing it made him real to her in a way that disintegrated the rest of reality around him. Just gone. Like dust and dry leaves swept away by a strong wind.

Only him.

Only her.

The perfection of a universe where only they existed, together.

They rushed to each other.

Joined in an embrace that drew love from the top of their beings and down through them into the Earth itself. They were aglow with it.

Would that the Earth could accept such love, and through itself spread that love to all, filling the lacking that is most severe, for lacking this love, all lack that thing which would make them perfect.

~~~

Here's me, wondering... What the *fuck* happened? I'm on the defensive. Got the big meanies comin' at me. I'm talkin' outta the shadows here.

I get it. No, really, *I get it*. I'm dealing with some serious juju here. Even for a guy like me.

Fucking Abaddon Scroll.

The rolled-up newspaper of the Apocalypse. First thing in the morning, step out onto your front porch. 'What's this?' Oh! Morning edition, headlines—

'The End of the Fucking World'

No shit. That's the Abaddon Scroll. Get the picture?

Hope ya do. 'Cuz the literal parade of Satanists, witches, vampires, and all other supernatural-shit-you-ain't-never-heard-of that are trying to hunt it up just keeps on comin' at me.

Did I happen to mention that I'm marching in that parade, too? That's right, kiddies. Me. The son of the Devil. Erstwhile biker gang hang-around. Vampire and all-over undead lover. The fearless fucking black magic man, himself.

Problems. I got 'em, piled high. And I mean, *sky* fucking high. It's a great big teetering tower of bullshit. Really swaying in the wind. Ready to fall over and fucking bury me. Alive, to boot.

~~~

Then the horror began, in earnest.

Two hands took hold of the crumbling edges of the hole in the wall.

Fingers as thin as bone, and the same bleached color. Claws, a virulent yellow, edged in black. And the fingers were impossibly, inhumanly, long.

Then there was movement there. A mobile, dark form.

As silent as shadows cast across the ground, and as foreboding as the final night of the world.

The form bent low and thrust its head in, the face coming into view.

A bald head, the scalp utterly hairless, and glaringly white. The ears, long and protruding, tapering to inhuman points, the hollows of them filled with sparse, tufted, hairs. The mouth was twisted, grotesque, and teeth, long and pointed like a rat's issued out and down past the lower lip.

The eyes, the monster's eyes...

Without any magic at all, they hypnotized. Seized the gaze, and held it there. Inhuman, so far beyond being inhuman. The hollows around them were the gray of charcoal, burned for too long. The eyes themselves were white expanses of emptiness. But in the center of each of them was a single, stygian point of black.

And these told of the alien intelligence, the menace and horrors harbored behind those eyes.

The Warlock saw, and knew, in an instant.

MAX SCHRECK

And he knew that if any of them were to survive this encounter they must bring down every ounce of evil power that they had to bear against the thing that they faced.

And they must get away.

War with Max Schreck meant death. Escape meant life. The Warlock knew Max. Had known him in the past when he had been a servant to a great master, serving as the coachman to the mightiest of the vampires.

“JASON! RUN!!!” the Warlock bellowed.

Then the stench coming off the vampire hit them.

Turned graveyard dirt. Blood. Entrails left open to the sun too long. Roses.

The smell, if not the Warlock’s words, snapped the young man from his stupor. He leaped up, and ran for it. Past the stairs. Into the kitchen, heading for the house’s back door.

Max’s head moved. Agonizing in its slow, inhuman motion.

The vampire glared up at the Warlock.

~~~

The vampire turned towards the source of the fiery assault.

He almost couldn’t remember what pain felt like.

But the fire was hurting him.

The pain offended him. Deeply.

He stared at the body of the short, curvy woman.

Felt the power as it emanated from her. He wanted her blood.

Needed to consume her the way that she was trying to consume him.

~~~

Here’s the short-form talk-up on the currents– I recently put the thumbscrews to some sorcerous douchebags who were ghosting me and my pals. Turned Big Max loose on the pack of assholes (Remember that? Admit it, you had fun watching me ass-fuck those deserving pricks). I nearly killed the lot of ‘em. Stole a bunch of their shit, too.

And I burned down their house.

That’s always good for a laugh.

That’s where the roller coaster ride went a little off the tracks. See, we sifted through all their goodies. And I mean, we turned the place upside down. Burke even made Tommy rifle their garbage cans. The guy ended up with a banana peel stuck to the side of his face. No lie. And in doing so, I came to a disturbing little revelation.

These people are some major players in the game.

Wait... it gets worse.

I have no fucking idea who they are.

And worse than *that*.

I know that not all of them were home when I hit their house.

And worstiest of all.

I’m pretty sure that they have the Abaddon Scroll.

Shitting in your lace panties yet?

‘Cuz I am.

~~~

I draw the stone blade over my palm, sprinkle the cinnamon in, add rose petals, drop the cross into the center.

I slap my palm down on the Witch in the Wood. *SMACK!*

She starts talking again, and that settles the issue.

“*Voices...voices...I hear voices...*”

“What are they saying?” I ask her gently.

“...*don’t understand...*”

That’s good. If she doesn’t jive to what she’s hearing, that means it’s probably what I want to hear.

“That doesn’t matter,” I say. “Think about the kid, living, and tell me what you hear.”

“*Three...three...three...*”

Shit. Three. But she said it three times.

I gotta tell ya, this could be going a lot smoother.

“Three what?” I’m not asking anymore. Now, I’m demanding.



“*Three seals...*” she whispers. OK, I get it.

The Scroll has three seals. I gotta break the seals.

“Right, how do I break the seals?” Tense. Like my balls just crawled up into my belly.

“*Blood...of a martyr...*”

Wow. THAT’S a what-the-fuck kind of moment for me.

“What else? The second seal,” I blurt out.

“*Heart...of the opener’s...most ardent love...*”

Oh Christ. That’s some seriously bad and sick fucking news to be hearing. It’s like my heart stops when I hear it. I wait it out.

“*Heart...of the opener’s...most dire enemy...*”

And THAT’S a pretty tall order right there.

Then the shit hits the fan in a major way. The blue light is moving. The light from the mystically burning holy water. It’s drawn up. Surrounding her wooden form. Then it’s pantomiming her spirit. Her soul. She’s moving like a ghost now. The light is moving. And both me and Tommy see it.

She’s offering me the basket. Holding it out at arm’s length. Towards me.

My end of the deal.

I slap the cross. *SPLAT!* of the half-dried blood there. Rose petals fly. The stench of the ruined cinnamon hits the air. I hit the wood so hard and fast that my hand is bruised. Badly.

But it ends the magic, in an instant. The light goes out. It’s just twisted wood at the base of a tree again. I got what I wanted. So fuck all of this.

~~~

The Warlock looked over the others.

Indu Dipali Damayanti. Possessed by the dark-aspect of the spirit of Agni, the Vedic God of Fire. A living being of infernal flame. She stood near him, naked. Wearing nothing except for a fortune in gold and opals. There was not a flicker from the jewelry in the deep gray of the dim light. The shadows of the illumination here reflected nothing. It threw off no shadows but itself. It emanated from no visible source. It was purely magical. Still, the gray played generously over the roll and curve of her nakedness.

The Warlock smiled. A small smile. The lines and angles of the place slid the darker emotions around. Coiled them, like a serpent ready to strike. It amplified even his own cooled lusts. He let his eyes fondle her, and wondered if she too were feeling the same apprehension that he was.

If so, she, like he himself, showed no outward sign of it.

The Warlock’s face remained calm, but his eyes moved. Tracking. They came to rest. And narrowed the slightest bit.

Ronan Fuller. A werewolf. Man and monster, merged. His human skin looked so... normal. But beneath it lurked abomination. Cursed. Violent. Insane. A *true* monster. Figuratively, as well as literally. Ronan had exploded into his power.

Now at one with the chaos of the inner beast, he had become focused. A supernatural predator hiding inside of a man.

Within him was harbored a wildness, thick with the hunting wolf.

And wolves must eat.

The Warlock decided that Ronan would bear watching.

The Warlock’s dark eyes tracked farther.

They settled on Jason Gabe.

The youngest of the Clutch of Strix. Until recently, the young man’s presence in the Master’s inner circle had been inexplicable to the Warlock. He lacked physical strength, and his mind harbored no profoundly discerning intellect. He didn’t have wealth, or earthly influence of any kind. He had no power at all, either mundane, or supernatural. He was an outcast.

A homosexual.

He had been disowned by his family, misunderstood by others, and disdained, even threatened, by not but a few more.

The Warlock had never questioned the Master’s will. He had always treated Jason with respect, and even as an equal. A coven-mate. He scolded himself for it now. He had lacked insight, had been unable to perceive the thing that his Master had.

But now he had seen it clearly.

Jason Gabe was possessed of concealed qualities of character that were seldom seen by others. But when those hidden things were brought out, they made him formidable. Certainly, the Warlock mused, ‘formidable’ was too small of a word to describe the towering will and intrepid action that he had witnessed emanating from the young man.

In Jason Gabe, the Master had chosen well.

Then there was Agnes Nachmann.

She was a jewel of true value taken from the veritable dung-heap of her former coven. She had been murdered. After which the Master had resurrected her to life, vigorous life.

She was a witch in a line of longstanding tradition of witchery. She had practiced her dark craft for nearly ninety years before her death. And now her powers had been redoubled along with the restoration of her life.

Power, cunning, and heartfelt loyalty for her new Master were all contained within this unassuming, elderly woman. Now her sprightly step and smooth movements matched the devilry of the black magic that she used.

What a sharp and fateful tool that the Master had taken up in Agnes Nachmann.

The Warlock’s eyes flitted away.

In the background, lurking like a pair of dark spirits, were Dorothy Parker and Bolger.

The woman was small in stature. Elfin in appearance. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. She always dressed conservatively. Her friends called her Dot, and the name fit her. Her manner was friendly, and she had an easy, winning smile.

A sheep’s skin drawn perfectly around this wolfish, cruel, sorceress.

Within her was not the slightest natural affection for others. Hers was a soul with an utter void of pity or mercy. This was no surprise, for the Warlock knew a thing that few others suspected.

Privileged, prized knowledge...

Dot was the Master’s half sister. An Imperatrix of Hell.

One of the Devil’s children.

As such, her sorcerous talent was profound, and her sinister energy deeply seated in her heart. And more, the Warlock knew that she would serve as the snare to entrap this most recent, and troublesome, of enemies.

Bolger roamed the dim near his mistress. The scarecrow had been rebuilt. The construct was a terrifying thing of magic. A chimerical murderer in the animate form of a thing that a child might make on an autumn afternoon. Its face was a caricature of bemused happiness. All of burlap and surmounted by the dead button-eyes. A thing roughly hewn of discarded and sewn clothes hung on a nailed wooden frame, stuffed with fall leaves. Infused with Dot’s hexes. A semi-alive embodiment of its creator’s inner self.

Bolger was full of hate. A merciless, shrewd killer. And he was not simply a magical robot. No, not at all. The thing had a definite personality of its own. It enjoyed causing fear, and inflicting pain.

The Warlock had witnessed it dancing in alien, depraved joy in the fields at night.

He had seen it standing utterly still, appearing lifeless, so that it could catch the blackbirds that came to roost upon its head. Bolger then proceeded to torture the birds to death. He plucked out their feathers, and pried a nail from his own wooden skeleton, and applied the rusty iron spike to the birds’ eyes.

He had watched the way in which the scarecrow’s body had trembled, and shaken, as it performed these sadistic barbarities. The Warlock had seen the strange spasms more than once before he had come to realize what they actually were.

Bolger was laughing.

What the scarecrow did when it caught a child in its nail-pierced wooden hands did not bear mentioning.

The Warlock had decided that he liked Bolger.

~~~

Three bullets. Right through me.

Surprised that I’m not dead?

I bring to your attention: Devil’s son. I’m pretty hard to kill. I don’t rely so much on the usual life-support apparatus. Blood, heart, lungs, etc. My body is powered (mostly) by infernal magic.

Yee-HAW!

But I’m in pain. A SHITLOAD.

I’m on the ground. Bleeding. Like I’ve sprung a dozen leaks. I’m tough, sure, but I ain’t unkillable. And I’m pretty sure that I don’t need to educate you...

That this is *really bad*.

And it’s that fucking French assassin. Cupideau Etienne.

Surprised that I know him? Well, I don't know him. I know *of* him.

Immortal, ex-mercenary turned master arcane assassin. Oh yeah, his mom was a witch. A powerful one. So I'm about to get ex'ed out by a frog mama's boy.

I've heard enough about him and his body of 'work' to know how truly fucked I am right now.

Y'know, if I wasn't about to die in a spectacular, bloody way, I'd take this as a compliment.

~~~

Cupideau knew her for a vampire the moment that he saw her.

Merde... he thought, *they're insane as well as evil, to keep such a thing.*

He reached instinctively for a ring and a talisman. Advanced two steps, ready to extinguish the cold, undead fire of this new threat. She stepped forward at the same time, and they were both suddenly within the ring of illumination coming down from one of the streetlights.

Man and vampire faced one another.

Cupideau saw her.

It was *her*.

Her!

She was really before him. He had known, somehow, deep within the very core of his soul, that he would someday see her. But that had in no way prepared him for the actual experience of beholding her for the first time.

He saw her, and he knew such hope— that elated, uplifted, all that was good within him. She was the crown of a life long lived in loneliness. Hardship overcome. Faith rewarded.

And prophecy fulfilled.

She was the woman from his long-repeated dream.

And he saw that she saw him, as well. She was as paralyzed as he was.

Even seen through the pale cloud of her vampirism, she was beautiful. The color of her hair, the shape of her eyes, the suggestion of the complexion of her skin in life, all of these were cascading waterfalls of experience for him to be drenched in.

But the waters were pooled, and deep, and they threatened to drown his heart.

The sight of her strengthened him. He was not drowned by it, but buoyed up. She brought life back in, filling the barren, thorn-edged spaces within him.

And then the moment had passed. The elasticity of time snapped back into place in a blaze of automatic weapons-fire.

~~~

As soon as the shit hit the fan, I knew that everything was FUCKED.

I just didn't know how bad.

I look at the guy right in front of me. He looks at me.

His facial expression screams: I KNOW YOU'RE FUCKING US OVER!

It's not that I would hesitate to do so, it's just that in this case, I wasn't.

No way to explain it. To convince him. No time.

The five of them back away, drawing down as they do. And it isn't just guns, I see a wand. And a green orb.

Shit. Not good.

Just because they'd come to buy magic doodads doesn't mean they didn't already have some.

~~~

The demon takes form. It's tall, and then it's beyond tall. Seven and a half feet. Towering, statuesque, and naked. Its arms stretched up above its head, the fingers laced together, back arched. The thing's dark hair is whipping, and the body is lithe, all athletic curves, pert breasts, red nipples, and cream-colored skin.

The demon turns its head. Looking.

At me.

A succubus.

I even recognize this particular slut. Meridiana. She's pretty high up on the demonic totem pole. And that's when my intuition gives me the truth of this. The sorceress might have summoned her, but she isn't the one calling the shots. She is Meridiana's servant.

For a second, I consider trying to cut a deal with the demoness. Succubus to Devil's son. It could work. Then I decide it would be more fun just to kick her ass.

The street's an inferno. Full of my devil-fire. The sorceress stays safe inside her circle. She knows what to do. If she moves, the balefire might get in.

The succubus steps out. Walks right through the fire.

It can't hurt her, of course.

I get ready to choke a bitch.

~~~

The Deadlands.

There are shadows. LOTS of shadows. Little death-angels flying around, ferrying souls. Back and forth they go. Up and down, too. They look at me warily. And well they should. They just saw me open a death-gate without needing a high magic ritual.

Oh yeah, even the cherubs of demise are getting a little nervous.

And I'm not done fucking around yet. Not by half.

I reach out, with both hands, my fingers like a cage. And a cage it is, because I snag two of the little flying bastards, nice and neat. They fight. They struggle. They try to tear out my immortal soul. The most powerful trick that they know.

But that's no good. Because I haven't got one. Not in the traditional sense.

"*Son of Perdition, you dare!*" one of them says, wispy, hollow little voice, full of echoes. I'm not impressed.

"Oh, I dare a whole lot fucking more than that!" I counter.

"*Release... our... brothers...*" a chorus of voices from all around. Cute.

"NO!" I shout in my best petulant child's voice.

"*Release...*" they start, but I bust in with my singsong voice—

"You already said thAAAAat!"

They go silent. Waiting.

"This is how it's gonna work," I say. "There's lotsa death down there where I am, so two of you are gonna go back with me and shift the deathwinds onto the two fuckers that are shooting at me. After that, I'll let your brothers go. If you don't do it, I drop these two off in the bowels of Hell, get it?"

I wait. Nobody says anything. So I shake my hands. The two I've got captured rattle around inside. It punctuates my point.

"...agreed..."

And just like that, I've blackmailed a couple of death-angels into doing some killing for me.

~~~

It happens fast. A split second, and what wasn't there, *is* there.

It's the psycho party clown.

Right, they know we're up here. That's a sure thing now. None of us waste any time. Soon as the clown appears, we start the violence.

Tommy does a little two-step that gets him real close. Up comes his hand with one of his revolvers. Shiny steel, right up to Bozo's head. *Boom* goes the gun.

I don't think the clown gives a shit. Because it completely ignores the gunshot.

Suddenly the jester has got a little wooden sword in its hand. And just like that, it stabs Alexis, low and hard. But the foxy little magic minx is quick. She was already backing up, so the wood passes through her thigh instead of spilling out her soft lower belly.

Crispus punches the clown, and man, is it a beautiful thing to see. The guy's like a panther, footwork like a drumbeat. The hit is solid to the head. There's enough nitro in it to drop a bull moose. It turns the clown's head around. And I mean, a-ROUND, completely. The fucker's head does a three-sixty. Then the monster is laughing.

That just cranks up the creep factor.

Imagine a bunch of little kids, like when they go all giggly. I mean, when they're gasping hysterical. Throw a chainsaw sound on top of that. Finish it off with a buncha live mice being rolled around in ground glass. *That's* what the clown laughing sounds like.

Yeah, fun time in *Pee Wee's* fucking *Playhouse*.

Lexi's backing away, hobbled, and bleeding. I'm doing the same, just not so much with the bleeding and hobbled part. Burke's moving forward, and so's Jimbo.

These men. They're crazy to die. They just rush in.

Jimbo's got a long, thin-bladed knife. I recognize the type. British commando knife. He gives it to the clown.

Punches it in, deep, and low in the body. The clown doesn't scream, or bleed. Doesn't even flinch. What it *does* do, is kick Jim in the balls. It's a blur, and he's on the ground, dropping the knife, both hands cupping his jewels.

The clown has the wooden sword, held up high, and ready to come down.

Burke tackles the thing. Tommy grabs a leg. Then it's confusion. All bright colors, leather jackets, calloused fists, claws, and black boots. Then blood. Drops of red coming out from under the tussle. Thin little rivers of it.

Screaming, pain, damage, and eating.

~~~

A hand falls on my shoulder. I turn. Burke. With the rest of the walking wounded with him. All hands clamped over stab wounds and bullet holes. I take a look at the faces that are looking at me.

They don't wanna die.

I don't wanna die.

So I do something desperate.

I walk away. Ignoring the "Hey, Laiel!" and the "What the Fuck?"

I stoop down to get to work. Start by tracing a clumsy and crooked circle on the ground. I use my own blood to do it, because, hey, there's plenty of it all over me. Then I step into the center of the circle. I call my Watcher, and take the spirit-shard into myself. I slip it right back into place in my soul.

Now I'm at my full power. Maximum wattage.

I'm also undead until dawn, which will make this easier.

I look beyond. Beyond this pale illusion that we call reality. Seeing what's really there. The echoes of the decans, the words of power that God spoke when He created everything. All that exists is an interplay of the energy of the decans. Everything. Matter. Energy. Space. Time. Even concepts. It all emanates from the power of the decans. If you can see, and influence the decans, you can rearrange the mixtures. Redesign reality, move and alter things across dimensionalities, like time and space.

You can do magic.

Like what I'm doing now.

But it starts with *seeing*.

And what I'm looking at right now are the pathways between all the worlds and realms. There are a thousand doors that lead to where I want to go. All of them are locked. All of them are guarded.

But I can get in.

I find the door that I want, and bring it into focus inside the circle with me. Next, I get the key. Fish it out from within my own soul, because that's the safest place that I know of for storing something like it. It's a good little magic trick, using your own soul as a strongbox. My Dad taught me that one (sort of).

I unlock the door, and take a step back.

There's a hovering oval of unreality where I was just standing. Deep reds and flat black. Smells are coming out. Sulfur, brimstone, and the smell of *everything*, but burned. Sounds, too. Shrieking. Jangling metal, like chains shaking. A grinding stone-on-stone sound.

"The fuck is that?!" Burke exclaims.

~~~

CHAOS

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They had experimented using the objects that the ghosts were (for whatever reason) attached to. Of course they had used the Field Agents, and some of them had been injured or killed when they had inadvertently triggered an attack from the spirits they were attempting to control.

St. Claire turned his attention back to the Golgotha Room.

His eyes slid over the forms of the violent and persistent souls.

They'd had astounding success here.

They had engineered control of the dead, and placed that awesome supernatural power into the hands of a cadre of trained thieves and killers. That might seem to be an unwise thing to have done, but it was considered that the Field Agents, as they had been named, had no other knowledge or understanding of the supernatural beyond what they had learned here. They were living people who could be controlled, and killed, easily, by those whose knowledge and experience exceeded their own.

People like the coven of witches and warlocks that served as the Corporation's board of directors. The coven

that Matthew St. Claire was the leader of.

He, in turn, answered to the greatest of masters, *The Master*...

The Antichrist.

The corporate espionage was child's play. They stole corporate secrets and sold them to the competitors. They also destroyed facilities and research materials, and even assassinated personnel. EBXCOM produced nothing itself. It offered its mercenary services to other corporations, and they made a great deal of money in doing so.

But the money was not the purpose of all of this.

The purpose was what Matthew St. Claire was looking down upon right now.

The Golgotha Room.

This new Place of the Skull, where were held in thrall these forlorn, evil, and deadly spirits of the murdered. It was the most dangerous place anywhere upon the Earth for a mortal to enter.

Anyone that entered that room without supernatural protection would be bereft of their life within moments.

And *that* was the true purpose for the existence of this place.

~~~

I get the pain and panic under control. It takes me a few seconds, but I manage it.

Barely.

Now I'm looking around, sorting things out.

Bringing it all back into focus.

The Earth. The Abaddon Scroll. Paul Havik.

Boston, the streets littered with bodies. Downtown in ruins. Buildings, demolished. Fires, wasting even more of the real estate. And the angel of death sitting back with a bucket of popcorn (extra butter), presiding over it all, until it comes time to collect.

But we escaped. Dodged the black-robed, scythe-wielding debt collector, and escaped.

Into Hell.

Doesn't sound like much of an escape, does it? Gets me thinking of some things I've had thrown at me in the past. Shit about frying pans, and fires, and which way is the wrong direction to go.

It mighta been good advice, once upon a time. Don't matter nohow to me. I've never been a guy for taking good advice. Not to heart, at least. Can't recall when I ever have.

I recover myself just enough to take a look around. I haven't been downstairs in years (and yeah, some people call Hell 'downstairs').

I try not to have any thoughts. I just let the place work its way into me. I let Hell just pour in through all of my senses. It gets down inside, under my skin.

The sky is deep red, edged in black on the horizon. No sun. No moon. No stars. Just that sad, crimson sky up above. There's light coming down from it in the same angry color. It coats everything in blood-shadows.

I hold my hands up, and just look at them.

It's like being inside a bottle made of red glass. Close. Oppressive. I watch the crimson light and shadow slide over my skin.

No. It's not really like being caught inside of red glass. It's like being covered in blood. My own, as well as others. A warm second skin with a tingle of freezing cold coming from just on the other side of it. But I'm inside of it, warm, and well.

The garment of Hell's light fits me better than my own skin.

My eyes trace the sky.

This isn't the Earth. No. This sky doesn't bend above the just and unjust alike. It's a sky fashioned in form to receive the bleak gazes of the damned. To cover and comfort demons. To serve as the roof over the fortress-prison of my Father, the Devil.

I see pillars of thick smoke trailing here and there. Twisting and greasy wisps staining the already stained. They're moving. There's a wind, cold, and forbidding. The tendrils of smoke are gently undulating, moving counter to the wind's direction.

All of our cherished laws of perspective, motion, and even of sense and reason are challenged, beaten, and made away with in this place.

A sky designed to crush the hopes of the hopeful, to drive the sane mad, and to comfort evil.

~~~

Time and space.

The Earth, and Hell.

Separated by the space between heartbeats. Existing apart, between the ticks of the clock. And the space between those realms existing outside of normal reality, and flowing with magic. The space of a non-space.

Matter, energy, space, time, all of these, destroyed, created, constructed, and torn down, all in that non-time time that rests between actualities.

A moment there can stretch into an eternity. An eternity can condense into a moment. Then it all explodes, defeated. But snapping back again from the enforcement of order imposed upon it from without. Reverting to the chaos from which it came.

Leaving behind that which had intruded upon it.

The intrusion— From the Earth.

The deposit— A woman, and a cat.

The woman in graceful repose, the cat in a slipshod sprawl.

But this was no living woman, nor any living cat.

Hemet—aa—Sekhmet righted her undead body. Twisted her mummified head with its golden mask and emerald eyes back to true. Then she ran in a quick little circle. All around the ring of rocks that they had been dropped into.

Smells. Many smells. She smelled her mistress, and the man. The other sorcerer, the one that her mistress was fond of. She smelled the others, too. And there was blood on the ground.

A lot of blood.

Hemet went to Bess, and pawed at the vampire. The woman became animate. Seeming to unwind out of herself, and uncoil upward. She remained crouched, predatory. Up on the tips of her toes and the points of her claws, her limbs splayed wide apart.

She was supine, lithe and ready, with a continuous, high-pitched, tea-kettle hiss coming from her.

Hemet backed away, her whiskers twirling, her tail flicking. She raised her front left paw, ready to cast her magic. To escape.

The cat's jeweled eyes looked down.

There was a body on the ground. One of her mistress's servants. The pale one, with fire-colored hair. Sekhmet regretted that he was dead. Her mistress had seemed to like him.

And there was the vampire, bristling in red rage above the remains.

Savage. Feral.

Laiel had discovered a great deal about her.

His guesses and assumptions had been correct.

What happened next, proved it.

~ ~ ~

Yeah, I'm pretty fucked.

Here I am. In Hell. On my knees, perched in a cart. Real nice. Looks like the kind of deal they used to use to drag some poor bastard off to hang him, or have his head chopped off.

Guess they picked the right kind of cart to put me in. Assholes.

Didn't bother with chaining me up. Why would they? I've already got a cursed arrow sticking outta my chest. With the point resting right against my heart, I'm paralyzed. Can't use any magic, either. This kind of curse is awful nasty. And I mean that. It's awful, and nasty, at the same time. The kinda thing that I might come up with myself.

Y'see, the way this one works, it puts a pretty hefty curse on me when the arrow gets pulled out. Twists fate up like a pretzel. And the curse isn't set, it will have something to do with whoever pulls the arrow out of me. The only safe way to withdraw it is if I'm dead.

Yeah. I'm sure I ain't gotta educate you, demons are FUCKING ASSHOLES.

Got the Reapers marching in a chain-gang. The demons bound them up real nice. Slave-collars and all. Black cast-iron. Like punching donut holes in a buncha frying pans. Gonna leave some nasty bruises behind when they come off. And after I went and healed them up all nice. Demons are also very inconsiderate. But you figured that out already, right?

They tossed Lexi in the cart with me. She's not dead. At least, I'm pretty sure she's not. She's paralyzed, at the very least, from the venom offa those black FUCKING snakes.

I'm gonna kill those things. I swear. Twist 'em around backwards. Make them eat their own tails until they disappear. Something like that...

The Reapers are trooping along, hands shackled, and then another chain from collar to collar so that they are linked up in a marching line, front to back. Burke's in the lead. Bruised, wounded. But he's got his head held up high. Will unbroken. A man made out of the same stuff as the chains he's bound in. A cast-iron spirit. Fierce, and relentless.

He's being led to his (very gory) death in Hell itself, and he still won't give up. He won't ever give in. I admire the bastard. For all the good it does, still, I admire him.

Tommy's in the middle, cradling his pierced arms. The Cambion pulled out the arrows and gave 'em a twist while he did it. The way Tommy yelled, it sounded like they hurt more coming out than they did going in. He looks kind of dazed. Maybe he's hoping this is all just a nightmare. Maybe he's given up. Can't say for sure. But I'm feeling for him. That I can say, honestly.

See? I've got a heart. It's a cold black stone, but it's there.

Crispus McBride, bringing up the rear. He's got the look of a man who's on the verge of losing it. I mean REALLY losing it. He keeps cursing at the demons. It's colorful stuff. They keep beating on him in reply. Every time they put the fist and boot to him he stumbles and almost falls. That almost takes Burke and Tommy down as well.

At the rate this is going he'll be dead, and I mean soon. Way before we reach that ritual planck. Maybe that's what he's counting on. Die down here before they can do to him whatever it is they've got planned for him up there. If so, it's a good plan. But then again, maybe he's just enraged.

Either way, planned or not, if he dies before we get up there, he wins.

Jimbo's dead. My loyal squire, for all of about five minutes. That's what hurts the most. Not the arrow, with its motherfucking point against my heart. Not the thought of my impending, painful, death. It's that they slit the throat of the one guy ready to truly throw in his lot with me.

Don't get me wrong, it's less about him being dead, less about me liking the guy, and more about the fact that they killed my servant. Pride. Heard a rumor once about it being a sin.

That fucking Gadarene.

~~~

I close the book, slowly.

A neat little *thump* as the cover shuts.

I feel sobered. Maybe even... pensive. It's a lot to think about. Just *knowing* feels heavy. But my mind is still. Maybe it's mild shock, who can say? I know I can't.

What I can say, is that this little reading has confirmed an apocryphal story that I heard years ago. I remember that when I first heard it, I thought it was unlikely, but a good story, anyway. Here it is again, truth, stranger than fiction. And less expected.

Lemme clue you in.

I heard tell a long time ago that our good buddy Niccolò Machiavelli, y'know, *The Prince*, THAT GUY, who, rumor has it, really didn't like religion too much, took a dare. Said dare coming from one of his friends. Story goes that the dare went a little something like this— 'OK, so you don't believe in magic, and you doubt the existence of God and the Devil. Great. I happen to have this book of spells, and whatta ya know, here's a spell that purports to summon the Devil. I dare you to try it out.'

Well, Machiavelli tried the spell.

And the Devil showed up.

In a variant of the story, Machiavelli's pal was a witness to the spell. And the first thing that my Dad did when he appeared was eat that guy. At least he died knowing he'd put one over on ol' Machiavelli.

Now, was the spell really good for summoning the Devil, or did my Dad just show up because it was the amusing thing to have happen?

Your guess is as good as anyone's, but I'm leaning towards 'amusing.'

Either way, Machiavelli must have been shitting in his pantaloons. Because that's the usual reaction of mortal sorcerers the first time they successfully call up a demon, much less, y'know, THE DEVIL.

Guess what happened between Old Scratch and Niccolò?

They had a conversation.

Now, details are scarce as to the exact content, but in the end, the Devil cut a deal with Machiavelli. He'd let Machiavelli see all of the written plans and philosophy of Hell, and Machiavelli could write about it on Earth... But he wasn't allowed to admit where it came from, or mention demons, Hell, or the Devil.

Explains a lot, doesn't it?

Because for me, having just read that small part of the chronicle, that story is confirmed. Machiavelli *did* get a lot of his philosophy about power and ‘princes’ from Hell.

Probably explains why *The Prince* has always been one of my favorite books.

~ ~ ~

Havik had tried to kill Laiel Brockade. He realized now how foolish that had been to attempt. His plan had been good. He had lured the man into a clever trap. His allies had been stronger than he’d counted on them to be. But that hadn’t been the true flaw in his plan. No. That had lain within he himself. In his hubris. He had overestimated his own power, and underestimated the power of his enemy.

Laiel’s footsoldiers had been strong. He had expected thugs with guns. Ruthless killers. They had been those things, but they were more. They had been practiced, even expert. They had shown that they were a step beyond accomplished in employing the art of chaos.

They had been unshaken under magical assault, and furious in their actions. They had not scattered beneath the barrage of his attack as he had expected them to. They had taken the appearance of flight momentarily, but that had been a deception. They had fallen back, regrouped, and counter-attacked.

Faced with sorcerous annihilation they had not fled for their lives. They had faced their own extinction, and attacked it. And they would always attack, these beloved sons and daughters of the Furies. They punished the self-cursing who dared to come against their master.

The weapons that they had carried... he had NOT been expecting that. Guns, yes, but military weapons? No, certainly not. Faced with attack from above they had retreated, gained a high vantage point, and used missiles against him. *Missiles*.

He was stunned at the thought of it.

They had nearly killed Elle. Wonderful, evil little Elle Baylake, his constant companion, his powerful ally with her soul-demon, Rigoletto.

He had not seen the nightmare. Not in days. Not since her wounding.

He recalled the angry hiss of the missile as he watched it coming, helpless. The way that it had soared through the sky, turning, spinning, and twisting. Its impact. The way that the building had shuddered under his feet. The sickening vibration of the explosion felt in his groin.

There had been a tempest of smoke. His body had been awash in fire. His clothes were shredded by it, and his flesh torn. Blood had poured from his nose and ears. He had been laid low.

He had continued his magical assault on his knees, in shame. The shame had ignited his anger. And the anger had driven him to unleash a devastating conflagration of the storm against the object of his ire.

Laiel Brockade.

But the sorcerer had somehow escaped.

~ ~ ~

She found her voice at last and whispered a single, echoing word.

“...Rigoletto...”

The word seemed to grow as its echo rebounded from the walls. It joined itself, empowered by her sorcery. Loose and free it traveled about the room, clear as the tone of a bell struck hard with a hammer. Coming from a whisper it became a shriek, and then the shriek whistled in a hysteria of sound.

The darkness that she stood within stretched out, distended, as if she were casting a long shadow like a spotlight shined behind her. Her shadow was thrown down directly in front of her. The dark shape of it stood out sharply, a perfect, lightless reflection of her form cut from the abyss, and laid at her feet.

The shadow’s shape distorted, and moved, becoming something grotesque. It flowed with liquid animation. Then the purple light of her halo moved as well. It sheathed her naked body. It held there for a moment, and then it separated from her. Her body tensed and her head fell back as the light left her, as if she were in ecstasy, or torment.

The darkness at her feet rose up in reply to the light.

Light and darkness merged amid the ring and jangle of many tiny bells.

Colors came in, absorbing the light, and solidifying the darkness. And there stood the hellion of dreams. The fiend of discord. The fury of nightmares. The monster. Elle Baylake’s sleeping soul separated from her body, free to roam once again, murdering and spreading terror.

Pavor Nocturnus.

Rigoletto.

~ ~ ~

He had told Ben about the spell that his mother had placed over him, and the vague but sharp despair that he had lived with. Knowing that he could never fulfill his mother's last wishes for him and restore his family. That the resurrection that she had foreseen was an impossibility, that he could only survive.

But now... this. He had seen her, the woman from his dream.

She was a vampire.

A companion of Laiel Brockade, the Devil's son, a man that he had been sent to kill.

Fate had handed him such a twisted skein that he despaired of ever unraveling it.

But he would try.

"Our next move," Cupideau began, "is to do a most audacious and dangerous thing."

"Sounds like us," Ben said. Cupideau lifted his head and smiled at his friend. "Fill me in," Ben added.

Cupideau did.

~ ~ ~

To him, it was like the burnt-in afterimage of a gun flash in the dark. It lingered, and the angel felt it. That part of him that had been awakened and built up by the hope and love of Sara was moved by this.

Alternately, and simultaneously with that feeling, the part of him that was the Wrath of God was enraged.

Even after three days, an acid haze still hung in the air, suspended over the detritus of the lightning-blasted scene. The bodies had been removed, but Tourille could see the ghost-forms of the lost hovering around the dread battlefield. They were many, too many, far too many.

The aura of the place was almost overwhelming to the angel. It was like a smell. It reeked of something that had once been vital and alive, but was now burned to bitter ashes. It smelled to the angel of human sacrifices, of bodies immolated in the terebinths, and of the fear that drenched the inquisitor's chambers. It smelled of hate.

All of this raised a question, dragged it up through the pain, the sorrow, the loss, and the hate that he sensed here. It pulled the question up from the wounded depths of the corrupted ground and held it out shockingly bathed in the light to ask—

Why?

Why had the Spirit of God arisen within him to cause him to travel so far a distance? To cause his feet to tread upon this wasted battleground days after his presence here might have impacted any of this? He had arrived too late to save anyone, or to punish the ones that had wrought this.

Why?

He was overcome by the simple and eternal question. He was finally broken, standing there within the calmed aftermath of so much death, unable to affect it in any way. He walked to the very center of the destruction and stood at the heart of the remains, towering over the epicenter of the becalmed storm of death amid the leavings of the departed souls.

He turned his alabaster eyes up to the sky, and raised his impotent stone fists.

Tourille stood there, heedless of who might see him. He quietly wept in his whisper-thin voice, crying out, with great heaving sobs wracking his silent stone body. He gave way to bitter tears without shame. His soundless scream of echoing rage rolled through the night's invisible ethers. And what was both seen and unseen of the tragedy became unsettled in the presence of the divine bestirred.

~ ~ ~

With a final burst of power, Tourille tore Rigoletto apart.

The nightmare let out a shriek, bursting with agony and terror. Then the shadows and night-spirit of its body came apart in the hands of the angel. The body fell away in two pieces and there was a sound like ice cracking and the howling of many cats, and in the back of it lurked the sound of cloth torn by unkind hands.

All of the bodies and viscera that Rigoletto had eaten in the past exploded forth when he was rent asunder. The meat, bones, flesh and organs came out of him as fresh as when he had consumed them. They burst forth in a sickening flood, bloody, glistening, and smelling of excrement and opened guts. The air was swamped with all the vile scents of torment, murder, and torture. The whole of it spread over the icy ground in a wide circle with the angel of God's Wrath at the center. A torrent of blood flowed out with them, and Tourille was covered by it all.

The two parts of Rigoletto's body never reached the ground. Instead, they dissolved into a hundred currents of nightmare emanations, thin and black. These escaped, moving along the ground like evil ebony serpents in smoky tendrils.

The wisps of nightmare-essence traveled far, seeking out distant victims and possessed them so that the night was disturbed far and wide by the anguished cries of peaceful dreamers suddenly plunged into terror-filled internal landscapes.

Some of the victims arose from their beds, and somnambulating, committed crimes of murder and suicide. Even in dissolution, Rigoletto plagued the nighttime world with pain and death.

There stood Tourille, having regained his feet, gore-splattered and caught within a frozen mist, towering at the center of a street transformed into a slaughterhouse floor. God's angel stood, aghast, amid the sad and horrifying remains of the many victims of the supernatural murderer.

The emanations of the murdered and consumed flesh screamed into the air all around.

~~~

It was a woman, but she was unlike any earthly thing that Tourille had seen before.

She was floating with her toes barely touching the ground. She had the appearance of nakedness, but her body was sheathed in darkness of a pure and impenetrable density. She seemed a living, animate embodiment of the Abyss. Her arms moved in strange fluid patterns, and her head glided in slow rolling motions as if she saw and heard many things that were not there. She seemed to swim in the air of the night with languid, nearly hypnotic movements.

The angel could sense that she was both asleep and awake at the same time.

Tourille beheld Elle Baylake, and he knew her for the spiritless monster-spawning sorceress that she was. She was one who had divided her soul from her body and corrupted it to nightmare form. Her purpose was nothing except evil.

He wanted to kill her, to tear her body into pieces with his stone hands and spare the Earth from suffering her presence any longer. As an angel, he knew her for his eternal enemy.

He also knew that she was able to kill him with her magic, and could do so easily. She could reduce him to specks of dust with her mastery of dreams and nightmares.

Tourille was afraid, and fear was a thing that he seldom experienced. He was afraid for himself, and for Sara. Wrested from him, she was out there beyond the dark and the icy mist that trapped him, at the mercy of the companion of the Dream-Witch that now threatened him.

He couldn't flee. Even if he were doomed to die, he had to try and save her. He couldn't live without his love now that he had found her, and she had touched his heart.

So the angel faced the Sorceress of Nightmares.

~~~

Magic is not an exact science.

But I tell a lie.

The truth is, magic isn't any kind of science at all. Some call it an "Art." I don't know from art, but I'll tell ya, casting ain't easy. Despite how I sometimes make it look.

And I've gotta admit at this point (if you hadn't already noticed, that is), that I'm a world class fuck-up. You heard me right. I. Am. A. Total. Fuck. Up.

You might have been thinking that I had it all under control. And you'd be right. I *did*.

Sure, my quick escape from impending death by magical electrocution was NOT well planned, and sure, me and mine were getting our asses kicked for a while back there in Hell. At first. But you might have sat up and taken notice of how handily that I turned all of that around.

By the end of it I had those Gadarenes by the balls, by the FUCKING BALLS. And it was a death-grip.

Then right at the end, I fucked it up. Oh yeah, did I fuck that up. Now you're probably saying— 'But Laiel! Say it ain't so! You were doing so well. How did you mess that up?' Well, I'll tell ya how.

Here goes... See, I did a real good job of commandeering everything the demons had. Yep, I walked right in, pirated up all their loot and all their magic. Even got me a good little apprentice out of the ass-fucking that I handed them.

So you're right to be wondering how in the hell I fucked that up.

Ah, this is kind of embarrassing. That's the truth, because what I did was so fucking stupid of me that it's embarrassing to talk about it.

When I used the planar circle to come back, I just asked to go to "The Earth."

I didn't specify, exactly, where it was that I wanted to go.

Yeah. I'm THAT stupid.

Now you know why Dad didn't pick me to be the Antichrist, the one and only Prince of Darkness.

But then there's luck, and I've got a lot of both kinds, the good and the bad. And usually it's hard to tell whether or not any single event is coming off the good or bad side, at least at first. This was one of those times.

Where we ended up was some of column A and some of column B.

Lemme give you a quick study to facilitate some understanding as to the why-for of this. Magic has a lot to do with desire. The will, and focusing the will. So when I failed to ask to go anyplace more specific than 'The Earth,' the magic simply zeroed in on my will and responded to that.

My meaning— Where we landed wasn't really random. The magic read my will, what had been dwelling in my mind as of late especially, and like called to like.

That's why we got dumped into a barrel of rotten apples the way that we did. The only thing to be done with rotten apples is to make applesauce. That's fine, I like applesauce. And the Night Reapers like to smash and squash things.

So that's my story, and I'm sticking to it. I'm an idiot, and I fucked up.

But once again, I managed to turn it around.

I now return you to your regularly scheduled mayhem.

~~~

"Just tell me one thing here, Laiel," his voice sounds a little like he's pleading with me. "Tell me the big white angel of The Lord ain't coming after us."

"And if you say *uhh*, I'll cave in your fuckin' skull," Burke says.

"Umm..." I say.

That's it. Crispus loses it.

"Oh, FUCK!" the man's practically roaring. "Now we got an angel of God gunning for us? And he's white! The motherfucker is WHITE! He's whiter than Minute Rice!"

"He's alabaster, actually," I say, meekly.

"You mean, like the stone?" Lexi asks.

"Yeah," I answer.

"What?" Mikey says, sounding confused. "Is he a statue or something?"

"Yeah," I reply, "pretty much."

"OK," Burke cuts in. He sounds, and looks, stern. He's got it together. Back in control. "Give us the tell on the angel, and the rest of you, quit it with the panic. We got witches, magic, demons, and everything else we're dealing with now, so don't get rattled just because this particular boogeyman came from upstairs, instead a down."

"Bound to happen, anyway," Jimbo says. "We're running around with the Devil's own, we were likely to come up against the other side, sooner or later." My faithful squire.

"Right," Burke says.

"Sure," Mikey agrees.

"I figure I owe the Old Man On Top a black eye for all I've been through," Lexi says solemnly. Then she smiles. "I sure would enjoy cutting down one of His boys."

She's talking about killing an angel and wearing one helluva smile while doing it. I want to kiss her like she's the incestuous sister that I never had.

"Yeah, I dig your groove, sister," Crispus says, with a deep chuckle. He's got his will back in place. "And the bastard's white, so I think I might enjoy this."

"Black power," Mikey says.

"White death," Crispus replies. They high-five.

Jimbo snaps his fingers. "Is he an angel *of* anything? Y'know, how there's the Angel of Death, and stuff like that?"

I was hoping nobody was going to ask me that. It's like my Dad is dropping his trousers and taking a big ol' dump right now. On my face.

"Yeah, he's an angel *of* something," I say.

"What?" Lexi asks.

"God's Wrath," I say quietly.

Burke just drops his head, shaking it back and forth.

"Omifuckengod," he intones.

~~~

The Scroll of Abaddon is somewhere inside, and I mean to have it.

Funny thing. I'm getting that prickly backa-the-neck feeling like when awesome and overwhelming forces are aligning against me, just out of sight. But I'm not gonna run. Nuh-uh. No way. Gonna play out the hand no matter which way the cards turn. Got me a good little cadre of killers in tow. Burke, a man of iron and fire. Tommy, quick and ruthless and just smart enough to be more than a little dangerous. Lexi, magic and a knife in the dark, tiptoeing quiet and deadly like a kitty-cat in her stiletto heels. Crispus, a neck-breaker as strong in his heart as he is in his arms. The panther walking on two legs. Mikey, the master of weapons, a true soldier of chaos, calm and at home with a thousand bullets in the air.

And then there's Jimbo. What can I say? If ya haven't caught on by now, lemme clue you in. Our Jim died in Hell, and was resurrected there, too. He was killed by one of the Ripper's knives. You heard me right. And that little magic hat-trick of alive, dead, alive, saddled Jimbo with some extra baggage. He's got the Ripper's soul bottled up inside him. I'm sure you can catch my drift when I say that this sort of thing isn't all that uncommon when you play around with magic, spirits, and murder weapons. Possession is inevitable, in one form or another.

But you've gotta admit, we had some pretty rotten luck there. Come on, we've got a resurrected Ripper in tow, tucked in the deep dark depths of one of our buddies.

And yeah, it is sort of my fault.

I know, I get it, it wasn't *directly* my fault that Jim got possessed by the Ripper. But y'see, it sort of is. I could have been more careful with all the magic that we were dealing with. I *should* have been more careful. But I wasn't. I was too focused on what I wanted, what I was trying to do, to put much thought into what was happening, big-picture style.

One thing's for sure, this whole Ripper-Jim thing is gonna end in ashes soaked in tears. Count on it. But until then, it just might be fun.

~~~

#### WEREWOLF

That one thought burned a hole in my brain. And then I ran. I'm not ashamed of it. Wanna live through a fight with a werewolf? Rule 1: Don't fight a werewolf. Lacking that, put some distance between you and it. That's your only realistic chance. So I took mine, and ran like the bastard that I am.

Lost track of the others in just a few seconds. Can't say that I was honestly *trying* to keep track of them. Doesn't seem much like they were trying to stick with me, either. Can't say I blame them. When the werewolf came down, it became every man for himself. In an instant.

We all got clotheslined by the shit-storm. It's probably gonna take me down too, anytime now.

Truer words were never spoken, because I ran right into it.

Felt the emanations from the magic, just a moment too late.

And with that, I was in it, knee-deep. Fucked pretty good, too. Helluva start to my night.

~~~

"Omigod, the Bogeyman's back!" Mikey cried out in a voice that was trembling with terror.

Ronan rounded on the vampire, his feet were placed wide and his head was low. A deep and rumbling growl started at the root of his tail, gained power in his lower belly, fell deeper in his upper chest, and was ground to bloody meat through his gnashing teeth.

The sound of it emerged into the still air, the essence of menace.

Max Schreck made no sound. There was only the whipping of his shroud of rags waxing mad amid the fell winds coming from within him. He simply gazed at the wolf. The hangman's face stared through the twin nooses of his pale eyes.

The two monsters faced one another. The predator and the spectre of death, both the eaters of life.

Max showed his contempt for the presence of the men. He reached out with one arm which just kept moving. It grew longer and longer, longer than Max's height. He was reaching for Machinegun Mike, and his head never turned as he reached for the man, nor did the corpse-eyes ever leave the wolf.

Mikey tried to scramble away, and the other Reapers did too, instinctively, as if they were the ones that the hand of death was reaching for. Then there was a flicking motion, an almost insect-like reflexive motion in the vampire's wrist.

Mike wasn't quick enough, he was struck by the hand of the vampire. It looked like such a small thing, but the man's body flew. The way that he was propelled told of the awesome impact of the blow.

Burke saw Mikey take the hit. The blur of the vampire's hand, the way that Mike's body moved while he was

airborne, the way that he twisted with his limbs limp and flailing. It was a rag doll of movement. Not the way a live body moved. *Mikey was dead*, Burke thought. He *had* to be dead.

~~~

Ripper-Jim crossed the hands over the chest and patted him on the head.

The seated man was still weakly moving. Slowly bleeding out from his lanced kidneys. It was the falling action of the completed performance.

Time to sign his work.

He rooted around and quickly found what he was looking for. A canteen. He emptied it, and then filled it with what he needed. Then he hoisted himself up and out, surprised at how easy it was.

He jumped down from the tank, noticing a massacre of bodies that lay strewn in the street nearby. He gazed at it for long moments, admiring the work of a fellow artist.

Then he was off again.

He found a wall, and with a flourish, he signed his work.

*Dear Sirs,  
I've had to wate a whil  
But now I'm haf back  
From HELL  
Signed,  
Mr. Lusk  
P.S. Catch me if you can!*

~~~

Too late.

Alexis blazes away. Two-gun mojo. Pennies and nails nullify the evil old bitch's spells. Lexi's standing good and firm with solid ground under her now. No more with the slippery metal death-cauldron. Good old terra firma.

Bullets punch holes in black cloth. The flying spell takes the witch. Her back slams hard against the alley wall. Her head's thrown back and her mouth is open. She's trembling, flinching, shaking, as the shots tear her up.

Then her chin falls to rest on her chest. Her eyes close.

I feel the emanations of her magic wink out, along with her life.

She peels away from the wall and plummets.

Me and Lexi dodge, I go right and she goes left.

SPLAT! A hundred-and-change pounds of dead witch.

Lexi puts three more bullets into the corpse.

Then she drops the clip and reloads.

"I think you got her," I say.

~~~

Paul Havik let his eyes roam over what was before him. The battlefield of the emerging age. Elle hovered near, a shard of pure nightmare in the form of a woman. Her body was cloaked in plutonian night, and the tools of magic emerged from her, crafted from dream-terrors. Her movements were slow and strange as she floated, as if she swam in liquid of some sort, alien, and unseen.

She had become lost in the sheer inhumanity of her inner dreamscape.

She had become nightmares, and in her a new goddess had been born.

Rigoletto was near. The monster skipped along like a child at play, describing strange patterns in its grotesque dance. He was the insane and unholy spirit of Mistress Nightmare, and he was hungry. Ready to kill, and be gluttoned.

Paul Havik gathered his power within himself. He ached to use his magic, to kill, and release souls. This night would stand as a signpost marking how he had entered this place, the deeds done, and how he would pass by.

It was a waypoint on his path of destruction.

One place along the way to his final rest, where he would at last have calm in a dead universe, where all of the voices outside of himself had been forced to silence. Forced so by passing through the gates of death.

And then the tumult inside him would cease, and he could at last put aside treason, and grudge, and envy. He

would sit alone, no storm within, or storm without, a final and empty god, ruling for an endless eternity of meaningless time over a final and empty universe.

This night he would stand in the Second Golgotha, hold the Scroll of Abaddon, cut the throat of the Martyr, drink her life, and unleash the Destroying Angel.

Time to begin.

~~~

Cupideau had seen her, and lost her once again. Now he drove away the bitter reaches of his heart and joined in ardent pursuit.

Pulse pounding and body aching, driven by his most deeply held desires, he moved. He was driving his supernatural athleticism to the extremity of its limits. He ran, rolled, dodged, and leaped. He had become a machine, fueled by the knowledge that his destiny had finally come within the range of his grasp.

He was a man possessed by the fulfillment of a promise cast in blood and magic. A promise made to the woman that he loved most, to find the woman that he would come to love with equal fire. A promise to restore to life what had been torn down during the time of a murderous revolution, centuries ago.

Acrid smoke stung his eyes. He rushed through fire in the urgency of his flight. His clothes were ablaze for a moment and his flesh was scorched. He rolled through the rubble, smothering the agonizing flames. He earned bruises and cuts for his velocity. He continued on.

He didn't know where Ben had gone. He hoped he was with Laiel. Then he experienced an immediate and vague sense of wonder at such a thought. Insanity, hoping that his trusted friend was in the company of one of the Devil's sons. Insane, but sensible. Laiel could be Ben's only chance to survive this. Or, the quickest vehicle for the sacrifice of his friend's life.

Cupideau banished such thoughts.

~~~

The assassin straightened, flicking the undead filth off of his blade.

Then his body stiffened. A new sound had intruded. He spun, both blades out, held high and crossed. The double-handed guard of the hawk ready to strike with blows diving down from on-high.

Light clapping, followed by a tittering and happily tinkling laughter like chimes. A girlish giggle.

Cupideau Etienne and Bessalina Navalov beheld one another.

Face to face, and for the first time seeing each other for what each was to the other.

The immortal man's face softened, and the blades disappeared from his hands.

She looked different from that first time that he had seen her. Gone was the feral cast to her features. She was a vampire, certainly, but the living woman that he loved, that he was fated to come to a full and faithful affection for, shone through.

It was that inner woman that he saw in the expression of her face now.

The light of life, the ever-gold glow of love was casting sparks in the gaze of her eyes, and it was directed at him.

In that moment they were laid bare, soulfully, each before the other. They each saw the torments that had touched the other for so many long years. He felt foolish, for in his narrow view, the woman in his dream had seemed dead, having passed away beneath the weighted blade of the guillotine, or else cut down by the mowing scythe of time. And that had been an affliction to him.

He had lost faith, and hope, when he should have trusted. He was immortal, but he had fallen prey to the doubts and fears that plague all men, as surely as she had fallen to undeath.

But now, here, amid a background of conflict, they were both at peace.

~~~

Tommy was too stunned by what he had just done, and seen, to move.

Then his head tilted as he looked up.

His gaze met the eyes of the Arch-Vampire.

Max stooped low, staring back.

Tommy tried his best winning smile.

Max did not return the expression.

Tommy scrambled backwards. Too late, as a huge pale hand closed around his torso, a cage of undead claws. The vampire lifted him from the ground.

Tommy threw his head back, his eyes were closed, and he was screaming.

~~~

Mikey could hear the shouting, and the gunfire. He felt the way that the ground trembled through his back and into the rest of his body. It made him shudder, and that made the wounds scream. There were flashes of red across his brain.

He was dying, and he knew it. He'd seen enough guys die in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then on the streets with the gang. He knew what it looked like, and had a pretty good idea what it felt like, too. He was scared, but calm. He'd been expecting death for a long time, and he'd already seen Hell. It didn't seem so bad.

Still, he didn't want to die. He liked living. But it was coming.

He was starting to feel numb, and cold. It was coming quicker now. He was hoping that he'd slip away into the big, quiet, dark before his brothers came back.

His vision started to get spotty, and then dim.

*Here it comes...* he thought.

What the hell. He'd done some amazing things in his life. Even killed a werewolf. How many soldiers could say that? He was ready, and he wasn't even afraid anymore.

~~~

The magic St. Claire unleashed was mad in the terrifying immensity of its scope. Twelve gates of the Kingdom of Heaven had been opened, the ways between the Earth and the four sacred cities, by a mortal man, a servant of the Devil. It was a free passage between the world of solid matter and the world of spirit. A seizure, and misuse of Divine Power.

Mankind is capable of this, and until The Day comes, no servant of God will stop it.

Free Will. If the angels raise their hand against the magicians, the rightness of authority is ruined.

None of the angels came through any of the opened gates. They stood with their faces carefully blank, and not a single hand moved among them. Their hearts boiled with the eagerness of ardent desire, and their ears strained, listening, breaking with their waiting. They awaited The Call, the sounding of the most clear bell, that single, solemn tolling, and the clear knowledge of what it meant— The Hour Is Sounded.

But no call came, and no bell tolled. The Day had not yet come.

Then their fallen brothers and sisters rushed past them, in glee, coming through the opened gates in great numbers. Demons. They came as invisible spirits rushing from the realm of the invisible, and speeding to the place of flesh and sensation, evil dancing across the heads of so many pins.

The angels stood aghast.

They were helpless to do anything as they witnessed insurmountable evil flow down into their Master's Creation.

The magic had opened paths between flesh and spirit.

Next, came the elements.

~~~

A silent and massive form loomed behind the man suddenly.

Hellish fire reflected off glittering alabaster spirit-stone, made all the more pure in its gleaming whiteness by the impurity of the light which shined upon it. The heart driven by love had come, inflamed by what it beheld, and impelled to Wrath by the Will that had been fashioned within it.

The angels required no breath to live, but the ones that watched from above gasped when they saw the action of their Earth-banished brother. He had been shut out of Heaven from The Beginning, but here, his faith and perseverance were rewarded.

He could do what they could not.

An unyielding stone hand covered the top of Matthew St. Claire's head. Alabaster fingers flexed, and the eyes burst beneath their touch. But the hand stopped short of crushing the skull it held. Instead, blinded and bleeding, the man's body was lifted into the air. He was screaming, the words of magical power that he had meant to speak were lost in his agony.

The angel reached around to the front of his body, placing his fingers just below the sternum, feeling the panicked beating of life there. The stone hand rested there for a moment, gently, and then it reached inside, pulling down. The angel felt the warm gushing of blood over his cold stone hand as the man's legs kicked, and then shot out in a down-pointing 'V.'



The angel held the body high, for all to see.

“Let evil behold,” Tourille whispered, although no evil soul heard him speak.

~~~

Havik draws a really big knife. The sharp and shiny kind. I whisper my words of power over Burke. I pull the energy of all the decans in, from Agchonion to Tepsisem, the entire sphere of the magical zodiac. It’s a powerful warding spell. I place it in my left hand, and then through that onto Burke. It must burn like the worst bastard of a sunburn, but the man doesn’t even flinch.

“Time to get my pound of flesh,” Burke snarls, and then he rushes Havik.

The blades are moving too quickly to see clearly. They’re darting like birds in the dark. The two men’s bodies are like shadows dancing on a wall. It’s so fast. A thicket of blades. A second, and there’s already blood in the air, and hitting the ground.

Havik’s fighting left-handed. I don’t remember him as a lefty. I can’t tell whose blood it is, or who’s bleeding the worst. I get ready to come into it on Burke’s side, but I don’t get the chance.

There’s laughter suddenly ringing all around. In front of me. Then to the side. And then behind. The laughter is insane, inhuman, and magical. I’m trapped by it.

It’s penetrating my mind. Forcing chaos against the order of my thoughts. Breaking down my ability to do... anything.

I have to end this before Burke gets ended.

~~~

There’s a soul-cord connecting them. It’s invisible in the waking world, but here, within the confines of my mind, I can see it. And with these dream-crafted golden scissors, dreamed into being by a master dreamer, I can cut it.

It’s a thin, silvery line between the two of them. A narrow target, but inside of my own mind I’m very fast, and these scissors are *really* sharp.

*SNIP!* and the line snaps back. I grab it fast with my free hand. Then I watch the Jester’s reaction.

His face. It’s pain. Surprise. Maybe even hopelessness. He’s been separated from her. *Truly separated.* He’s dying, and he knows it. He might survive, might be able to continue to exist if he can get outside and draw in the free-roaming power of nightmares out there in Yetzirah.

He tries.

I drop and reach out at the same time. I watch the arcing slide of the business end of the scissors in my hand. Watch as the twin golden razors snap closed. I see the living nightmare collapse, his foot severed at the ankle.

*Got him!*

He starts to fade, slowly. He’s shrieking, lost to the oblivion that’s sometimes called the Erasmus, the Void of Unbeing.

The Dream-Witch doesn’t like the way that this is going. She tries to get away, but she can’t. I’m holding the other end of her soul-cord. She makes for the window but I jerk her back. Then I stare hard, and with a split second’s concentration, I close the window.

She’s trapped in here now, with me...

...and this pair of scissors.

~~~

It goes on for nearly an hour while I float in the air, drifting on the sweet tides of the chaos that I’ve let loose. They bring prisoners to me and execute them at my feet. The bodies pile up. If it never ends, I wouldn’t mind.

Well, it ends.

A hand grabs me from behind. Cold and hard, with a grip like stone. I get turned around.

It *is* stone. I’m staring into an alabaster face. An angel’s face.

And boy, is he *angry*.

“Son of Perdition...” he hisses at me. It’s a whisper. And I remember, he’s blessed by God with silence. He can’t speak above a whisper. Not that it matters at the moment. I don’t figure he’s gonna try and talk me to death here. Nope. He’s gonna squeeze, my head will go *POP!* Or else he’ll just rip me apart.

Figure I’ll try and get in one good one just before he kills me.

Death by angel. It makes sense, I suppose.

I put everything I’ve got into my left hand, the hand of my Father’s Path. I concentrate all of my built-up

power there. Then I reach up and grab his hand with it, the one that's around my neck. Then I give him all the devilish might that I have within me.

"Fuck you, Whitey," I manage to squeak out as I do it. Crispus would be so proud of me.

~~~

Hell.

The eternal darkness was broken by the dull glow of cast-iron heated to a flat red. The air was laced with the distant sound of the wailing of the damned and the ringing of infernal hammers. Winds howled, at first dry and hot, and then suddenly damp and cold. There were the smells of burnt flesh, and hot metal, and worse things.

It was a high place used for rituals with a vista of damnable plains, glowing crevasses, and distant mountains that rose in burning perdition. All of it resting beneath a starless sky made of the red void.

A large table sat there, much longer than it was wide. It was made of a heavy gray stone, and the chairs around it were the same. They were cruel and unforgiving to the body that sat there.

The table was covered in books of magic, but other kinds as well. The histories of Hell, and its philosophy. Treatises on the nature of demons, and angels. Profound truths were laid bare there upon the cold gray stone.

Andrew Slade sat at the table alone, studying. He was the apprentice of Laiel Brockade now, and he had quickly become an avid student. An insatiable hunger for knowledge had been awakened within him, and with it had come an equal desire for power.

Power and hate, for his hatred had grown in proportion to the magic that he unlocked.

He didn't hate the demons despite the fact that they obviously hated him. He rather liked them.

No, his hate was directed at the people he had left behind on Earth. He hated them for how they had treated him. He hated the other kids from his old school. He was a fat kid, and a geek, and not even one of the smart geeks. He'd suffered the cruelty of adolescence at their hands. But now, the wheel had turned. He was amazed at the works of evil magic that he could already perform.

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The door to the conference room burst open and the two guards that flanked it snapped to taut military attention. A man entered with two aides in tow. He had a thick manila folder tucked under one arm of his dark green uniform.

Silence quickly settled over the room.

They all recognized this man. But now he wore the five-star cluster of the rank of General of the Army. It was a rank reserved strictly for wartime use. It saw use only in the most extreme of wars.

There had not been a General of the Army since Omar Bradley in 1950.

The new General of the Army continued walking, looking neither left nor right. He reached the head of the table and turned smartly, facing the assembled men and women. He dropped the folder on top of the table, and pictures spilled out of it. They were all scenes of the aftermath of Miami. He leaned down over the table, supported by both hands with his arms spread wide and his head thrust forward. When he spoke, his words were slow and deliberate.

"Gentlemen, a magical war has begun upon the Earth."

The tempest of sound that followed paled the previous storm of words.

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Cupideau stood upon ancestral land.

He was the only surviving member of his family, and he didn't own the land, but still, it *was* ancestral land. And the ritual that he had used called for it to be performed on ancestral land. So he had gathered all of the materials required, which had not been an easy thing to do, and traveled to the spot, and performed the magic, as proscribed.

The ritual had summoned demons. Many demons.

He had not known that it would do that.

He could have dispatched the demons that had risen up from the spell. He was well-armed with weapons, and with magic, and he was one of the greatest assassins to have ever lived. Truly, a legend in his own time.

But he was in no mood to toy with the footsoldiers of the Devil, so he had hidden himself as the demons had begun to appear. And he had remained hidden as they tore off into the night seeking what mischief they could make.

## PROVOKER by Dan Champagne

Volume I of the Abaddon Trilogy.

Books I/II/III: COLLUSION, MAYHEM, CHAOS.

The Scroll of Abaddon (which summons the Destroying Angel who begets the Biblical Apocalypse) has been found, and every vile creature man has ever nightmared of, or (d)evolved into, start creeping out of the shadows, seeking to annihilate one another until a sole victor alone clutches the power of Armageddon in their twisted, evil grasp. All desiring to plunder, subjugate, mutilate, or otherwise demolish Creation itself.

But before that can happen.. Laiel Brockade, Son of Perdition, must be killed. He has proven himself a serious and deadly contender in the preternatural arena. Armed with the Devil's Luck, some powerful sorcery, a posse of psychotic killers, and his feral pet vampire to protect him as he, too, quests for the ultimate magical doodad of destruction. Partly, just so, just maybe, Dad will approve. It ain't easy living in the ever-shadow of his Big Brother, the Antichrist, especially when regarded as the screw-up of the family. Deserved? Probably. Immolating all upon the Earth and up in Heaven by instigating 'The End Times' might just earn Laiel the redemption he so desires.. in Hell.

Sons and Daughter of Satan: check. Ruthless biker outlaws: check. Vampires and werewolves: feasting, feuding. Sexy ladies, tight/little/no clothing, kicking arse: you betcha. Angels, demons, faeries, gods: yep. Zombies: sorta. Witches, warlocks, ghosts, ghouls: lurking. Magic: abound. Deception, conspiracy, treachery, murder, horror: everywhere. Treasure: for the taking, by force. Cops and robbers: getting slaughtered. Evil: incarnate. General public: unawares, previously. F-bombs dropped: all over the place. An epic Trilogy wherein the fate of existence itself hangs in precarious balance: How else?

Genres: Occult & Supernatural, Horror, Action & Adventure, Sub/Urban Fantasy,  
Humor/Satire, Philosophy, Religion, War, Pre/Post-Apocalyptic.

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Further Reading:  
Nocturnal Whispers: Volume I  
Seducer: Alliance. Volume II:I  
Seducer: Escalation. Volume II:II  
Seducer: Insurgence. Volume II:III  
Nocturnal Whispers: Volume II