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Grimoire

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Witness here, a burning man.

In every cell, hellfire screams for purity of cause. But he is nearly done... and he wonders about the life he has left behind. What will become of him when the puzzle is complete.

The Dead Man, still feeling the blood coagulating on his right hand, stops in his tracks; refusing for the first time to simply follow the tugging of the leash in the Devil’s hand. He stops in the middle of an intersection, freezing in the wake of tail-lights and cast in high-contrast by onrushing headlights.

“Monica?”

For the first time, the Dead Man’s thoughts stray to the woman. So long drowning himself in blood, he has banished the softness from his heart. What of his Monica?

“All in good time.” The leash tugs, but the Dead Man holds firm.

“Now.” He whispers. He won’t be dissuaded so easily. The headlights draw closer.

A battle of wills, the clash of glacier and earth, resounds in every bone of the Dead Man’s body. Claws sluice through grey matter. Muscles twinge with a thousand tiny cramps as the Devil fights to send the man-who-was back on his way.

Heartbeats now until steel meets flesh and the vessel is broken.

The Devil goes slack and The Dead Man knows that he has won. He obligingly steps out of danger and back onto the pavement, his steps directed toward a new destination... one which does not resonate with bad blood and cordite-sapphire nightmares. But rather something sickly-sweet and perhaps yet grimmer.

“So be it.”
Az walked up the steps toward Raze's room, assured from the lips of Raze's own mother that he was most likely awake and dressed by now. It was never cool to barge into a buddy's room...least of all when said buddy was all sorts of naked. Scarring of the emotional and physical sorts tended to ensue.

As he approached the whitewashed door toward Raze's little sanctum sanctorum, he heard the steady throb of what might be any of a hundred Goth-industrial bands. Nine Inch Nails, most likely; the granddaddy of them all. Raze had it pumped high enough to mean business but not enough to bring down the wrath of Mom.

Az knocked twice, putting a little hearty volume into the quick raps. “Raze, dude?” He waited a few seconds and drew his hand back to knock again when the music stopped and the doorknob, one of those gold lever jobs, dipped toward the floor.

Raze stood framed in the doorway. And he looked much the worse for wear. His features, generally pretty well flushed beneath a layer of cream-white foundation were the color of a three-day-old corpse. Bloodlessly pale even in his natural ten a.m. configuration, further weirdness showed forth in the quick darting of his gaze; as though he waited for some hidden predator to leap from the shadows and seize him by the throat. A quick horror-show fantasy of Raze's ghost lunging from just off-screen and dragging Raze screaming into the room played in Az's head. Spooky shit.

He was dressed in a pair of black cargoes and a black undershirt. That, at least, wasn't too weird. He wasn't wearing pink yet. The room smelled about like it always did, wafting from behind the scarecrow form of Az's best friend; old Dori-tos, dirty socks, a little ganja, and something that Az couldn't quite make out. A sharp tang in the air.

Az cracked a smile. “Hey, dude. You called. I'm here. What's the deal?”

Raze did the quick-glance-around thing, not sparing the space just behind him, reached out and fastened a bony hand on Az's wrist, and drug him inside. The door slammed closed and Raze began to pace. Not like a buzzing Raze on...
placed them against his eyes, digging the heels of his hands into them and groaning. It didn’t take a master in the arts of observation to see the tremor which ran through them.

“Bad?” Az was reduced to monosyllabic responses. “Fucking bad. Like back from the dead, walking around, killing people bad.”

Az shook his head. There was no way Raze could’ve cracked so hard in the two days he’d been out of Az’s sight. Sick, he could believe. But crazy? “Dude, you’re starting to scare me.”

“You’re scared? Oh good! Then, I guess I can be the guy who doesn’t believe now.” Raze twisted his lips into a hideous parody of a relieved grin. “Big load off my mind, believe me.”

Several tensely silent moments ticked by as Raze crouched and began to tear through a pile of dirty laundry with animal ferocity. Black t-shirts and jeans flew in all directions until with a grunt Raze straightened with the familiar ivory-white board and white plastic planchette. “I know it’s sounding pretty crazy, Az. I know it is. But I need you to bear with me. Trust me. I’m not freaking, okay?”

Az said nothing. But nodded his assent.

“He’s been talking to me, Az. He’s been using the board, and I haven’t even been touching it.” The quaver in his voice bore testament to the truth in his words. If nothing else, he certainly believed every syllable.

“How often?”

A heavy sigh spilled from Raze’s lips as he stuffed the board and planchette into his red canvas backpack. “Every night. Just after he does it.”

“Does what?”

“Pulls the trigger, Az. Fuck. Keep up.”

“Right…so after he pulls the trigger he sits down on the other end of the ol’ ghost-phone to touch base with his good buddy Raze?” Az’s voice rose to the same level of bitter acid as Raze’s own. “What part of this isn’t totally fuck-nuts?”

Raze’s eyes described a slow circle of frustration in the air before him. “None of it. Look. Humor me, alright? We’re going to go downstairs and have a look at the paper. If a guy named Zachary Frost wasn’t found with his brains decorating his entryway last night, I’ll burn this thing and we can call it a day. Laugh about it.”

“And if we find it?”

Raze’s lips split into the first genuine grin for two days. “Then you’re coming with me into the darkest pit of hell.”

Sergeant Maslow stared at the screen waiting for any stirring of movement. Minutes ticked by like seconds as the white, blocky numbers rolled onward on fast forward. At precisely 11:58, the door to Interrogation room four had opened and the slim figure of a long-haired man in a black trench coat had entered, pressing himself against the interior wall and producing a heavy-caliber pistol from a hidden pocket of the voluminous coat.

The ensuing scene would have been almost comical if Detective Andrew Lowman were still breathing. Instead, the standoff was grotesque; the banter, silent before the eyes of the internal security monitors, was just the idle flapping of jaws. And when the Detective was lifted from his feet by a man who clearly overmassed by easily fifty pounds and shot, point blank, with the merciless hand-cannon pressed against his chest, Maslow realized that he was gritting his teeth.

The perp hurled Lowman across the room with no more effort than a child tossing a toy which had ceased to be amusing, turning to spare a passing glance at the camera. Maslow froze the image, enhanced it, and printed a copy. Then he started the surveillance tape once more.

Officers, drawn by the sound of the gunshot inside the station burst through the door, weapons at the ready. They scanned the room, immediately spotting their downed comrade and rushing to check vitals and administer CPR.

But none spared a passing glance at the tall, lanky man in the black trench coat. He sidled past them as though they simply did not exist and made his way out into the corridor. No one noticed the killer’s escape.

Sergeant Maslow’s throat went dry.

“Anything, Maslow?” Detective Sanders’ voice came hot upon the heels of the sound of the surveillance room door
swinging wide. He carried two Styrofoam cups of coffee and a pad of paper.

“More questions than answers, sir.”

***

Az had always hated libraries. It was the smell, he decided. Mildew and old people. Dry rot and print toner. And perhaps just the faintest dash of horn-rimmed spectacles. Don’t ask. It’s a smell now.

Raze was sitting at the microfiche machine going over all of the old newspaper articles about the murder of a guy named Dorian Raker, the guy who had bit it in the ghost-house a year earlier. Why the hell the kid couldn’t just use the internet like a sane person, Az had no idea. So he sat there, clicking away at the little button and scrolling through the microfilm for anything that might hint at where the ghoul might strike next.

Y’know so that they could warn the police or something. Raze’s words. Not his.

Az’s job, of course, was to paw through the reference section for anything about the undead. Fun job. Wading through piles of pulp about blood-sucking vampires, undead servitors, and disembodied shriekers was totally Az’s idea of how best to spend a Saturday. Yeah... not.

See, Raze was no longer convinced that Raker was indeed a ghost. At least, not in the chain-rattling Halloween boo sort of sense. Raze had been able to smell Raker, to hear him distinctly, to constantly see him in definite outline. This made him hesitant to call Raker an apparition. Which of course begged the question, just what the hell were they dealing with here?

Enter our hero Az in The Curse of the Odious Chore.

A pile of overturned books lay before him like a patchwork quilt of leather and canvas bindings. The librarian had given him the oddest sort of looks when he had asked for help locating anything which might pertain to the Undead. But she’d helped him find quite the treasure trove. The Vampire Encyclopedia, The Zombie, An Occult Miscellany, Monsters and their Contexts, and twenty or so other books spread over the time-scarred wooden table. Az closed The Dictionary of Superstition and set it down atop the pile with a satisfying thud.

He heaved a sigh. Reaching at random for the next book in the pile, he opened a curiously named volume: Historia Rerum Anglicarum. It didn’t have the faux authenticity of some of the other volumes. No curious gothic script. No gold-leaf. No illuminations obviously printed by modern machinery rather than the practiced finesse of an old-world monk. Instead, this book practically stank of authenticity. Even the paper felt antique.

Az was still perusing when Raze came back, his yellow legal pad covered in his cramped handwriting. He sat down across from Az and laid out his notes, his lips twisted into a grim line.

“Anything?” he whispered across the table.

“Maybe.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Revenants.”

“That’s it?”

“Hang on, geeze.”

Raze sat by, drumming his fingers on a little island of wood in the midst of the torrent of books. Seconds ticked by into minutes. Raze was on the border of clearing his throat meaningfully when Az looked up and turned the book around.

“Read.”

Raze read.

“It would not be easy to believe that the corpses of the dead should sally (I know not by what agency) from their graves, and should wander about to the terror or destruction of the living, and again return to the tomb, which of its own accord spontaneously opened to receive them, did not frequent examples, occurring in our own times, suffice to establish this fact, to the truth of which there is abundant testimony.”

Whoa.

“...issuing, by the handiwork of Satan, from his grave at night-time, and pursued by a pack of dogs with horrible barkings, he wandered through the courts and around the houses while all men made fast their doors, and did not dare to go abroad on any errand whatever from the beginning of the night until the sunrise, for fear of meeting and being beaten
black and blue by this vagrant monster.”

“Sound about right?”

Raze nodded dumbly. He reread the section twice and looked up across the table where Az folded his arms and put on his “Oh yeah, I’m good” face.

“So what the hell are we dealing with?” Raze forgot to whisper.

“Well, if the books are right, our boy is a Revenant.”

Az grimaced at Raze’s volume and continued in low tones, hoping that he’d catch the hint.

“A Revenant?” He didn’t.

“Mmmhmmm. From the French, revenir. To return.”

“Fitting.” Raze took notes on his little yellow legal pad, motioning with his free hand to keep going.

“I saw some stuff in the Dictionary of Superstition and The Vampire Encyclopedia about them. Bad hombrés. Men and women who died under violent circumstances and can’t rest. They come back to avenge themselves when no one else will do their memory justice.”

“So they come back to murder their murderers?” It was sort of poetic, Raze decided.

“Something like that.”

Az grinned sheepishly and waved at the matronly red-haired librarian in horn-rimmed glasses who was frowning dourly at them both. She pressed a skeletal finger to her drawn lips and turned back to stamping books with violent enthusiasm.

“Alright, Az. So he’s a Revenant. How do we stop him?”

“Stop him? We? Fuck man, what happened to the police?”

Raze cocked an incredulous eyebrow. “Police? Sure. ‘Hey, mister Policeman, sir, we think some dead painter with a French name has clawed his way up out of his grave and is coming to kill the people responsible for his wrongful death. Could you maybe look into it for us?’”

Az exhaled loudly through his nose and pressed at the points of dull pain which were springing up beneath the taut skin of his temples. “Point taken.”

“So how do we stop him?”

“We don’t.”

“Come again?”

“We run. People left the area; the country. The books say that Revenants can’t be killed unless they’ve already returned to their graves. Even then, it only stops them from rising again.”

“Why would they rise again?”

“To come for their murderer’s kids.”

Raze shuddered. “Sick stuff, man.”

“Well, there’s a little hope, I guess. They were in The Vampire Encyclopedia because there’s a lot of folklore overlap between revenants and vampires. Cutting out the heart and burning the body are supposed to be effective. Decapitation and burying the head at a crossroad.”

“Garlic? Silver? Sunlight?” Raze was starting to get hopeful.

“No dice. We’re going to get messy if we try and stop him.”

“Great.” Raze finished his note-taking and stuffed the legal pad and pencil into the zippered interior of his backpack.

Then we’re going to get messy.”

***

The Devil leads the Dead Man to the outskirts of town. The West Hills. The gently upswept seat of the modern ruling class. Here, the elite found a home overlooking the common rabble who dug and toiled and sweat for their living. Here, the Devil leads onward toward the Dead Man’s woman. They find her in a quaint Colonial Revival fortress, all triple windows and gables. It stands behind a security gate which the Dead Man has no trouble vaulting. The wrought-iron teeth barely graze the trailing edge of his heavy coat. The dozing security guard in the little gatehouse doesn’t even stir.

“You don’t want to do this, Raker...” The Devil has never sounded like this. It’s voice is harsh and bitter, as though it spoke through a mouthful of alkaline gravel and ash. It’s echo is heavy with pity.

But the Dead Man insists and the Devil tugs on the reins and guides his impatient host toward the rear of the
expansive deck. The sunroom, the Devil corrects as the Dead Man begins to climb. Foot by foot, the distance closes until they peer through the open bedroom window.

And they hear a familiar gasp.

"There she is."

What seems only one is actually two figures lying in the velvet gloom which surrounds the heavy wooden sleigh bed. A passing shaft of argent moonlight, an errant escapee from behind the wispy cloud cover, falls over the writhing forms.

"Drive the knife in, Raker."

Her bare legs encircle his waist as he holds her wrists and nuzzles at her throat. Her back arches beneath him as he quests for her burning core.

"Twist it."

She moans, low and sweet and perfect. It spurs him to greater effort and the pace quickens with the hitching of her breath.

"Why do you do this?"

They roll and she begins to ride him, all liquid grace and syncopation. Her hair falls in an ebony cascade as his hands move to explore every inch of alabaster flesh.

"Come on..."

She turns toward the window and the chill breeze which whips through the room. She has just enough time to register a familiar form just outside. The burn of familiar eyes. It's just long enough to make her blood freeze.

The Dead Man hits the ground with a heart-wrenching thud. He wants to kill. To die. To burn a work of art. To breathe smoke. He wants to break the world and lay waste to everything beautiful and terrible which has ever been or will be.

"It hurts, I know."

The Devil doesn't. The Dead Man is beyond hurt. Hurt is for the enemy.

At night when I'm by the sea, fog rolls in and blinds me and a light rain stings my face. I can't see waters edge or sky's launch but they both extend out enough to touch and become one wall of wailing, shifting, emptying, deepening, awe-inspiring and fear gripping nothing.

I stare straight up and see the sky as if it were a grey shifting ocean too; my eyes tell me it will fall in pillars as round as me and I'll be crushed by as an inescapable death.

All to my front, far to my left and to my right it expands its maw.

"It's only water." But there's so much of it all over and it's so much stronger than me. Wouldn't it be foolish to stand next to something so unreserved?

My legs were not made to swim. My lungs could never hold enough air to suffice its depths. But I can't help but challenge the sea.

It is grander than I can ever be, deeper than I can dive and faster than I can run. I am so afraid of its raw unbridled power that I must challenge it. I have lived to challenge it. I must be dim to traverse its waves and become lost in its landless desert and to fight to keep from being killed just so I can know I am living.

Just so I can triumph my fear, or attempt controlling it. If I lose my life in it then it was chosen to be, regardless this will always be my Goliath.