

## Suffer and Covet

The New York City streets were like a rotting plum, lovely, shiny and sweet in the most important parts, but the deeper you went the worse it got. Farther down those endless pavements were grime-filled dumpsters, dripping with the fetid remains of dinners filled with bitter silence, broken belongings ripped and stained beyond any recognition. Past the old men grieving for their pasts in the company of the sweetest liquors and under dilapidated buildings left abandoned by all but the dregs of the city's backwashed denizens were the heart and soul of the rotting putrefaction, run by brothers Leiden and Begheran.

The two siblings were demons, foul beyond the belief of any human mind. They drew sadistic joy from watching the men and women they took under their black, reptilian wings run themselves to ruin through any number of sinful acts, and New York was a ripe feeding ground for those who wished they could be anything but themselves, and sought out deals with the devil.

*Deals with the devil.* I thought to myself as I tripped down an empty alleyway. Darkness pervaded the space, pushing me towards the unmarked door at the end. *The end.* I thought. *It has to come soon.* I knocked once, twice, feeling the minutes stretch by me as I watched them. Those minutes jumped and rolled past, they had somewhere to go. *Somewhere to go. I don't have anywhere.* Finally the creaking door opened to me, untouched by anyone on the other side. It led immediately to a flight of stairs, nothing visible at the bottom through the pitch black air. As I walked down, the sudden sensation of descending into Hell grabbed hold of me. It did every time.

Soon I could see nothing. The flight of stairs kept going down, down, down. This is how they get most people in the first. Humans can't stand going and not being able to see what's in front or behind. But you have to keep walking. If you stop, they'll come. *They'll come, but not for me, not for me. They didn't get me here.* I was the bravest, or so I thought at the time. In reality, I was the most idiotic.

“Enter.” A voice echoed, both in my mind and in my ears, deafening me. I was on the stairs, and then I wasn’t. This was how it always went, always went. Repetition is another way they get you. I was then in a hallway, lined by identical doors, lit with red omnipresent light. Who wouldn’t turn back now? Who would keep walking, a grin on their face, believing themselves pulling a fast one over the brothers? Me, that’s who.

I was at the fourth door on the right when I reached out and grasped the handle. It burned with poisonous heat, flaring molten yellow at my touch. Despite the toxic pain, my face remained relaxed, dead. Nonexistent emotion was drilled into you from the start of your contract. I entered the next room, looking about me as if seeing flames licking at running water and rivers of smoking souls was an everyday experience. Of course, in here it was. Inwardly, I screamed and pulled at my shackles. But contracts are binding, no matter who you make them with.

“You, you?” A voice broke through the sounds of fire crackling. An old woman appeared at my side, cackling. “Come to see them, have you? Appointment time? You’d better hold up your end of the bargain!” I kept walking, leaving her laughing and wretched wheezing behind. Her voice, though, followed me through the next rooms. *You’d better, you’d better! Better what? Better ask for help? My vow of silence will not allow! Better back out? Impossible! Deals with devils, deals with demons...*

There was the final door, the door that, so many years ago, I walked through cocky and arrogant, not knowing what would become of me. But believing, believing. *Belief is what killed us, but belief could have saved us.* It was the same for all as it was for me. And through the entryway I walked, just as I did the first day. Once again, I was greeted with the demons, just as I had been the first day.

“Leiden, Begheran.” I inclined my head to each of them as they sat watching me. Like great, mutant gargoyles they hunched, twisted and wrinkled gray skin looking as if they were carved from the stones the people used to build the Tower of Babel. Wings protruded from their backs, the ridges of their bone structure visible all

around them. The evil beings were each symbolic of their own favored sin, Leiden of suffering and Bergheran of coveting. The two brothers ran their own operation. Whether they had been set there by the big man, or went rogue, I never knew. With demonics it was hard to tell.

“Burke- come in. We have been expecting you.” Leiden’s voice grated on me, but nonexistent emotion continued to win out. I could still hear the reverberating cackles of the old woman.

“Indeed. We had hoped you would come sooner, our strongest one. You by far have procured the most signatures in recent months. Why such a long period of silence?” Bergheran stared at me, calculating, unblinking. His speech was slightly altered, as if he had come from a foreign land and learned English as a second language. I could imagine flint striking stone in his mind, alighting a flame of suspicion. Unneeded, of course. I was their best. I would never betray them. *Not that I can even try! Let him be suspicious, let him rip the contract, set me free!*

“I have been working on a tricky assignment. The Lorre girl was not an easy deal, as was expected. However, it has been done. I expect you to see her within the week.” From inside my coat I drew a folded up piece of paper and handed it to the brothers. They snatched it up, staring greedily at the loopy signature at the bottom. *Another name. Another condemnation. Another five pound weight added to my soul’s scales. I bet they’ll soon break from the pressure.*

“Excellent, excellent.” Leiden left Bergheran examining the page, and pulled a folder out of thin air. “We have another one for you. James Mitchell, 52. Currently residing on a bus bench two blocks from here. He should be done within the hour, with you on the case.” The collection of paper was handed to me. Usually that was my cue to leave, but I had a question.

“Done within the hour? Leiden, I haven’t had a job that simple in a year. Why don’t you give this to a grunt?” Before Leiden could answer, Bergheran jumped in with a glowering stare.

“Because, you idiot, this one is important. He was once high up in Moord’s place. He’s since gone senile, but we need to get him down here and try for some information on what they’re doing over there.” *Ah yes, Moord is in the City of Sin. Murder is his favorite, favorite.* I knew what ‘trying’ for information entailed, and I had no desire to be a part of it. Turning, I left the company of Leiden and Bergheran.

Through the fire, in the hallway, up the stairs I walked, ignoring everything around me, lost in thought. Out the final doorway and back into the pungent streets of the city, screeching cars and buses in the distance. Navigating through the dark labyrinth of NYC had become second-nature to me, and I set off to the bus stop at a leisurely pace. James Mitchell didn’t know it, but he was going to soon make the deal of his life. *The deal for his life. What am I getting him into? What will I get out of this? The chance to live another day, another month? What am I worth anymore?* Everything, I am worth everything. To them.

It took no time at all to get to the bus stop Mitchell was laying on. At first glance he could have been a bundle of rags on the bench. His filthy skin blended in nearly perfectly to the crusty world around him. I sat on the bench, silent for a moment. I had no desire to touch him. Mitchell, however, solved the problem by jerking upright, snorting and spluttering.

“Wh- what? Who’re you?” James Mitchell looked significantly older than his age of 52, sporting a gray frizzled beard and wild eyes.

“You can call me Burke. I’ve come to make a proposition.”

“Proposition, eh?” The man narrowed his eyes at me, dirty fingers pulling at the frayed threads of his coat. “I don’t know if I like no propositions.”

“Have no worries, sir. This will be beneficial to you, certainly. My employers can give to you something you wish for, very much. All in return for nothing but to visit them every now and then. Pop in, maybe run a little errand.” Mitchell still was suspicious, I could tell, but his lagging mind was taken with the idea of getting something he wanted.

“Is that what you’re doin’ now? Runnin’ them errands?”

“Indeed.” I answered smoothly. *Indeed, getting them another slave to sign, and a back to break!* “It’s quite easy, and I am one of their best, you see. I was picked up just like you, and I have gone far under their care. Not all errands will be of this sort, of course. Mine is a select job, and most will go out and do other things.” The man across from me appeared lost in thought, muttering to himself. Not as senile as senile could go, but certainly some stage of it. Suddenly he burst out with a question, speaking louder.

“ So how do I talk with these employers? Do they need email, card, cause I don’t got none of-” I interrupted him.

“No, not any of that. All you must do is sign.” I pulled out from within my coat a blank piece of paper, and an old ballpoint pen. I tapped the paper once with the pen, and stripes of ink began tracing their way across the page, writing out the terms and conditions. Mitchell watched with widening, fearful eyes, and with a shaking hand pulled out a half-empty bottle of searing liquid and took a swig. He resurfaced as the line was drawn for where he would sign. I looked expectantly at him, holding out the pen and paper to him.

“Oh, no, no, I remember! Your tricks, I hate them! I don’t want- you can’t-” With shaking words Mitch started half speaking nonsense, truly afraid. I reached out a hand a put it on his arm, focusing on calm, compliance. The feeling radiated out through my hand and into him, and his breathing deepened.

“There are no tricks here, friend. Just a little signature...” With unfocused eyes James took the pen and traced a messy signature along the line. The ink glowed golden, then darkened. The deal was struck. I got up quickly, and the old man leaned back onto his bench, watching the sky in a bemused manner. Without a word, I turned my back on him.

*Turned away, ashamed of what I did. Ashamed! Another tick on the checklist, soul number 2766! A pawn of the devil, striking his deals, cleaning his own demon*

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*messes. Remember when I was free, free to walk and talk? I am nothing but a coward, a teller of half-truths, a -*

I never knew what I was next, for, distracted, I had stepped onto the street and into the path of an oncoming car. I saw bright headlights, heard a horn and a scream - my own? - and then all was black.

Moral of this story? Never sell your soul to the devil.