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the
damnation game

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

The Damnation Game

by

Clive Barker

Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,

From chance, and death, and mutability.

-SHELLY, Prometheus Unbound

Part One

TERRA INCOGNITA

Hell is the place of those who have denied;

They find there what they planted and what dug.

A Lake of Spaces, and a Wood of Nothing,

And wander there and drift, and never cease

Wailing for substance.

-W.B. YEATS, The Hour Glass

I Providence

1

The air was electric the day the thief crossed the city, certain that tonight, after so many weeks of frustration, he would finally locate the card-player. It was not an easy journey. Eighty-five percent of Warsaw had been leveled, either by the months of mortar bombardment that had preceded the Russian liberation of the city, or by the program of demolition the Nazis had undertaken before their retreat. Several sectors were virtually impassable by vehicle. Mountains of rubble-still nurturing the dead life bulbs ready to sprout as the spring weather warmed-clogged the streets. Even in the more accessible districts the once-elegant facades swooned dangerously, their foundations growling.

But after almost three months of plying his trade here, the thief had become used to navigating this urban wilderness. Indeed, he took pleasure in its desolate splendor: its perspectives tinged lilac by the dust that still settled from the stratosphere, its squares and parkways so unnaturally silent; the sense he had, trespassing here, that this was what the end of the world would be like. By day there were even a few landmarks remaining-forlorn signposts that would be dismantled in time-by which the traveler could chart his route. The gas works beside the Poniatowski Bridge was still recognizable as was the zoo on the other side of the river; the clock-tower of Central Station showed its head though the clock had long since disappeared; these and a handful of other pockmarked tributes to Warsaw's civic beauty survived, their trembling presence poignant, even to the thief.

This wasn't his home. He had no home, nor had for a decade. He was a nomad and a scavenger and for a short space Warsaw offered sufficient pickings to keep him here. Soon, when he'd recovered his energies depleted in his recent wanderings, it would be time to move on. But while the first signs of spring murmured in the air he lingered here, enjoying the freedom of the city.

There were hazards certainly, but then where were there not for a man of his profession? And the war years had polished his powers of self-preservation to such brilliance that little intimidated him. He was safer here than the true citizens of Warsaw, the few bewildered survivors of the holocaust who were gradually beginning to filter back into the city, looking for lost homes, lost faces. They scabbled in the wreckage or stood on street corners listening to the dirge of the river, and waited for the Russians to round them up in the name of Karl Marx. New barricades were being established every day. The military were slowly but systematically reclaiming some order from the confusion, dividing and subdividing the city as they would, in time, the entire country. The curfews and the checkpoints did little to hobble the thief, however. In the lining of his well-cut coat he kept identification papers of every kind-some forged, most stolen-one of which would be suitable for whatever situation arose. What they lacked in credibility he made up for with repartee and cigarettes, both of which he possessed in abundance. They were all a man needed-in that city, in that year-to feel like the lord of his creation.

And such creation! No need here for either appetite or curiosity to go unsatisfied. The profoundest secrets of body and spirit were available to anyone with the itch to see. Games were made of them. Only the previous week the thief had heard tell of a young man who played the ancient game of cups and ball (now you see it, now you don't) but substituted, with insanity's wit, three buckets and a baby's head.

That was the least of it; the infant was dead, and the dead don't suffer. There were, however, other pastimes available for hire in the city, delights that used the living as their raw material. For those with the craving and the price of entry, a traffic in human flesh had begun. The occupying army, no longer distracted by battle, had discovered sex again, and there was profit in it. Half a loaf of bread could purchase one of the refugee girls-many so young they scarcely had breasts to knead-to be used and reused in the covering darkness, their complaints unheard or silenced by a bayonet when they lost their charm. Such casual homicide was overlooked in a city where tens of thousands had died. For a few weeks-between one regime and the next-anything was possible: no act found culpable, no depravity taboo.

A boys' brothel had been opened in the Zoliborz District. Here, in an underground salon hung with salvaged paintings, one could choose from chicks of six or seven up, all fetchingly slimmed by malnutrition and tight as any connoisseur could wish. It was very popular with the officer class, but too expensive, the thief had heard it muttered, for the noncommissioned ranks. Lenin's tenets of equal choice for all did not stretch, it seemed, to pederasty.

Sport, of a kind, was more cheaply available. Dogfights were a particularly popular attraction this season. Homeless curs, returning to the city to pick at the meat of their masters, were trapped, fed to fighting strength and then pitted against each other to the death. It was an appalling spectacle, but the love of betting took the thief to the fights again and again. He'd made a tidy profit one night by putting his money on a runty but cunning terrier who'd bested a dog three times its size by chewing off its opponent's testicles.

And if, after a time, your taste for dogs or boys or women palled, there were more esoteric entertainments available.

In a crude amphitheater dug from the debris of the Bastion of Holy Mary the thief had seen an anonymous actor single-handedly perform Goethe's Faust, Parts One and Two. Though the thief's German was far from perfect, the performance had made a lasting impression. The story was familiar enough for him to follow the action-the pact with Mephisto, the debates, the conjuring tricks, and then, as the promised damnation approached, despair and terrors. Much of the argument was indecipherable, but the actor's possession by his twin roles-one moment Tempter, the next Tempted-was so impressive the thief left with his belly churning.

Two days later he had gone back to see the play again, or at least to speak to the actor. But there were to be no encores. The performer's enthusiasm for Goethe had been interpreted as pro-Nazi propaganda; the thief found him hanging, joy decayed, from a telegraph pole. He was naked. His balls had been eaten at and his eyes taken out by birds; his torso was riddled with bullet holes. The sight pacified the thief. He saw it as proof that the confused feelings the actor had aroused were iniquitous; if this was the state to which his art had brought him the man had clearly been a scoundrel and a sham. His mouth gaped, but the birds had taken his tongue as well as his eyes. No loss.

Besides, there were far more rewarding diversions. The women the thief could take or leave, and the boys were not to his taste, but the gambling he loved, and always had. So it was back to the dogfights to chance his fortunes on a mongrel. If not there, then to some barrack-room dice game, or in desperation-betting with a bored sentry on the speed of a passing cloud. The method and the circumstance scarcely concerned him: he cared only to gamble. Since his adolescence it had been his one true vice; it was the indulgence he had become a thief to fund. Before the war he'd played in casinos across Europe; chemin de fer was his game, though he was not averse to roulette. Now he looked back at those years through the veil war had drawn across them, and remembered the contes as he remembered dreams on waking: as something irretrievable, and slipping further away with every breath.

That sense of loss changed, however, when he heard about the cardplayer-Mamoulian, they called him-who, it was said, never lost a game, and who came and went in this deceitful city like a creature who was not, perhaps, even real.

But then, after Mamoulian, everything changed.

So much was rumor; and so much of that rumor not even rooted in truth. Simply lies told by bored soldiers. The military mind, the thief had discovered, was capable of inventions more baroque than a poet's, and more lethal. So when he heard tell of a master cardsharp who appeared out of no where and challenged every would-be gambler to a game and unfailingly won, he suspected the story to be just that: a story.

But something about the way this apocryphal tale lingered confounded expectation. It didn't fade away to be replaced by some yet more ludicrous romance. It appeared repeatedly-in the conversation of the men at the dogfights; in gossip, in graffiti. What was more, though the names changed the salient facts were the same from one account to the next. The thief began to suspect there was truth in the story after all. Perhaps there was a brilliant gambler operating somewhere in the city. Not perfect, invulnerable, of course; no one was that. But the man, if he existed, was certainly something special. Talk of him was always conducted with a caution that was like reverence; soldiers who claimed to have seen him play spoke of his elegance, his almost hypnotic calm. When they talked of Mamoulian, they were peasants speaking of nobility, and the thief-never one to concede the superiority of another man-added a zeal to unseat this king to his reasons for seeking the card-player out.

But beyond the general picture he garnered from the grapevine, there were few specifics. He knew that he would have to find and interrogate a man who had actually faced this paragon across a gaming table before he could really begin to separate truth from speculation.

It took two weeks to find such a man. His name was Konstantin Vasiliev, a second lieutenant who, it was said, had lost everything he had playing against Mamoulian. The Russian was broad as a bull; the thief felt dwarfed by him. But while some big men nurture spirits expansive enough to fill their anatomies, Vasiliev seemed almost empty. If he had ever possessed such virility, it was now gone. Left in the husk was a frail and fidgety child.

It took an hour of coaxing, the best part of a bottle of black-market vodka and half a pack of cigarettes to get Vasiliev to answer with more than a monosyllable, but when the disclosures came they came gushingly, the confessions of a man on the verge of total breakdown. There was self-pity in his talk, and anger too; but mostly there was the stench of dread. Vasiliev was a man in mortal terror. The thief was mightily impressed: not by the tears or the desperation, but by the fact that Mamoulian, this faceless card-player, had broken the giant sitting across the floor from him. Under the guise of consolation and friendly advice he proceeded to pump the Russian for every sliver of information he could provide, looking all the time for some significant detail to make flesh and blood of the chime he was investigating.

"You say he wins without fail?"

"Always."

"So what's his method? How does he cheat?"

Vasiliev looked up from his contemplation of the bare boards of the floor.

"Cheat?" he said, incredulously. "He doesn't cheat. I've played cards all my life, with the best and the worst. I've seen every trick a man can pull. And I tell you now, he was clean."

"The luckiest player gets defeated once in a while. The laws of chance--"

A look of innocent amusement crossed Vasiliev's face, and for a moment the thief glimpsed the man who'd occupied this fortress before his fall from sanity.

"The laws of chance are nothing to him. Don't you see? He isn't like you or me. How could a man always win without having some power over the cards?"

"You believe that?"

Vasiliev shrugged, and slumped again. "To him," he said, almost contemplative in his utter dismay, "winning is beauty. It is like life itself."

The vacant eyes returned to tracing the rough grain of the floorboards as the thief somersaulted the words over in his head: "Winning is beauty. It is like life itself." It was strange talk, and made him uneasy. Before he could work his way into its meaning, however, Vasiliev was leaning closer to him, his breath fearful, his vast hand catching hold of the thief's sleeve as he spoke.

"I've put in for a transfer, did they tell you that? I'll be away from here in a few days, and nobody'll be any the wiser. I'm getting medals when I get home. That's why they're transferring me: because I'm a hero, and heroes get what they ask for. Then I'll be gone, and he'll never find me."

"Why would he want to?"

The hand on the sleeve fisted; Vasiliev pulled the thief in toward him. "I owe him the shirt off my back," he said. "If I stay, he'll have me killed. He's killed others, him and his comrades."

"He's not alone?" said the thief. He had pictured the card-player as being a man without associates; made him, in fact, in his own image.

Vasiliev blew his nose into his hand, and leaned back in the chair. It creaked under his bulk.

"Who knows what's true or false in this place, eh?" he said, eyes swimming. "I mean, if I told you he had dead men with him, would you believe me?" He answered his own question with a shake of his head. "No. You'd think I was mad . . ."

Once, the thief thought, this man had been capable of certainty; of action; perhaps even of heroism. Now all that noble stuff had been siphoned off: the champion was reduced to a sniveling rascal blabbering nonsense. He inwardly applauded the brilliance of Mamoulia's victory. He had always hated heroes.

"One last question-" he began.

"You want to know where you can find him."

"Yes."

The Russian stared at the ball of his thumb, sighing deeply. This was all so wearisome.

"What do you gain if you play him?" he asked, and again returned his own answer. "Only humiliation. Perhaps death."

The thief stood up. "Then you don't know where he is?" he said, making to pocket the half-empty packet of cigarettes that lay on the table between them.

"Wait." Vasiliev reached for the pack before it slid out of sight. "Wait."

The thief placed the cigarettes back on the table, and Vasiliev covered them with his own proprietorial hand. He looked up at his interrogator as he spoke.

"The last time I heard, he was north of here. Up by Muranowski Square. You know it?"

~~The thief nodded. It was not a region he relished visiting, but he knew it. "And how do I find him once I get there?" he asked.~~

The Russian looked perplexed by the question.

"I don't even know what he looks like," the thief said, trying to make Vasiliev understand.

"You won't need to find him," Vasiliev replied, understanding all too well. "If he wants you to play, he'll find you."

The next night, the first of many such nights, the thief had gone looking for the card-player. Though it was by now April, the weather was still bitter that year. He'd come back to his room in the partially demolished hotel he occupied numb with cold, frustration and though he scarcely admitted it even to himself-fear. The region around Muranowski Square was a hell within a hell. Many of the bomb craters here let on to the sewers; the stench out of them was unmistakable. Others, used as fire pits to cremate executed citizens, still flared intermittently when a flame found a belly swollen with gas, or a pool of human fat. Every step taken in this new-found land was an adventure, even to the thief. Death in its forms multitudinous, waited everywhere. Sitting on the edge of a crater, warming its feet in the flames; standing, lunatic, amongst the refuse; at laughing play in a garden of bone and shrapnel.

Fear notwithstanding, he'd returned to the district on several occasions; but the card-player eluded him. And with every failed attempt, with every journey that ended in defeat, the thief became more preoccupied with the pursuit. In his mind this faceless gambler began to take on something of the force of legend. Just to see the man in the flesh, to verify his physical existence in the same world that he, the thief, occupied, became an article of faith. A means, God help him, by which he could ratify his own existence.

After a week and a half of fruitless searching, he went back to find Vasiliev. The Russian was dead. His body, throat slit from ear to ear, had been found the previous day, floating facedown in one of the sewers the Army was clearing in Wola. He was not alone. There had been three other bodies with him, all slaughtered in a similar fashion, all set alight and burning like fire ships as they drifted down the tunnel on a river of excrement. One of the soldiers who had been in the sewer when the flotilla appeared told the thief that the bodies had seemed to float in the darkness. For a breathless moment it had been like the steady approach of angels.

Then, of course, the horror. Extinguishing the burning corpses, their hair, their backs; then turning them over, and the face of Vasiliev, caught in the beam of a flashlight, carrying a look of wonder, like a child in awe of some lethal conjuror.

His transfer papers had arrived that same afternoon.

In fact the papers seemed to have been the cause of an administrative error that had closed Vasiliev's tragedy on a comic note. The bodies, once identified, had been buried in Warsaw, except for Second Lieutenant Vasiliev, whose war record demanded less cursory treatment. Plans were afoot to transport the body back to Mother Russia, where he would be buried with state honors in his hometown. But somebody, alighting upon the transfer papers, had taken them to apply to Vasiliev dead, not Vasiliev living. Mysteriously, the body disappeared. Nobody would admit responsibility: the corpse had simply been shipped out to some new posting.

Vasiliev's death merely served to intensify the thief's curiosity. Mamoulian's arrogance fascinated him. Here was a scavenger, a man who made a living off the weakness of others, who had yet grown so insolent with success that he dared to murder-or have murdered on his behalf-those who crossed him. The thief became jittery with anticipation. In his dreams, when he was able to sleep, he wandered in Muranowski Square. It was filled with a fog like a living thing, which promised at any moment to divide and reveal the card-player. He was like a man in love.

Tonight, the ceiling of squalid cloud above Europe had broken: blue, albeit pale, had spread over his head, wider and wider. Now, toward evening, the sky was absolutely clear above him. In the southwest, vast cumulus, their cauliflower heads tinted ochre and gold, were fattening with thunder, but the thought of their anger only excited him. Tonight, the air was electric, and he would find the car player, he was sure. He had been sure since he woke that morning.

As evening began to fall he went north toward the square, scarcely thinking of where he was going, the route was so familiar to him. He walked through two checkpoints without being challenged, the confidence in his step password enough. Tonight he was inevitable. His place here, breathing the scented, lilac air, stars glimmering at his zenith, was unassailable. He felt static run in the hairs on the back of his hand, and smiled. He saw a man, something unrecognizable in his arms, screaming at the window, and smiled. Not far away, the Vistula, gross with rain and melt-water, roared toward the sea. He was no less irresistible.

The gold went out of the cumulus; the lucid blue darkened toward night.

As he was about to come into Muranowski Square something flickered in front of him, a twist of wind scooted past him, and the air was suddenly full of white confetti. Impossible, surely, that there was a wedding taking place here? One of the whirling fragments lodged on his eyelash, and he plucked it off. It wasn't confetti at all: it was a petal. He pressed it between thumb and forefinger. Its scent of oil spilled from the fractured tissue.

In search of the source, he walked on a little way, and rounding the corner into the square itself discovered the ghost of a tree, prodigious with blossom, hanging in the air. It seemed unrooted, its snow-head lit by starlight, its trunk shadowy. He held his breath, shocked by this beauty, and walked toward it as he might have approached a wild animal, cautious in case it took fright. Something turned his stomach over. It wasn't awe of the blossom, or even the remnants of the joy he'd felt walking here. That was slipping away. A different sensation gripped him here in the square.

He was a man so used to atrocities that he had long counted himself unblanchable. So why did he stand now a few feet away from the tree, his fingernails, meticulously kept, pressed into his palms with anxiety, defying the umbrella of flowers to unveil its worst? There was nothing to fear here. Just petals in the air, shadow on the ground. And still he breathed shallowly, hoping against hope that his fright was baseless.

Come on, he thought, if you've got something to show me, I'm waiting.

At his silent invitation two things happened. Behind him a guttural voice asked: "Who are you in Polish. Distracted for the merest heartbeat by surprise, his eyes lost focus on the tree, and in the instant a figure dislodged itself from beneath the blossom-weighted branches and slouched momentarily, into the starlight. In the cheating murk the thief wasn't certain what he saw: a discarded face looking blankly in his direction perhaps, hair seared off. A scabby carcass, wide as a bull's head, gripped by Vasiliev's vast hands.

All or nothing of this; and already the figure was retiring into hiding beyond the tree, its wounded head brushing the branches as it went. A drizzle of petals fluttered onto its charcoal shoulders.

"Did you hear me?" said the voice at his back. The thief didn't turn. He went on staring at the tree, narrowing his eyes, attempting to separate substance from illusion. But the man, whoever he was, had gone. It could not have been the Russian, of course; reason proclaimed against it. Vasiliev was dead, found with his face down in the filth of a sewer. His body was probably already on its way to some far-flung outpost of the Russian empire. He wasn't here; he couldn't be here. But the thief felt an urgent need to pursue the stranger nevertheless, just to tap his shoulder, to have him turn round, to look into his face and verify that it was not Konstantin. Too late already; the questioner behind him had taken fierce hold of his arm, and was demanding an answer. The branches of the tree had stopped shaking, the petals had stopped falling, the man was away.

Sighing, the thief turned to his interrogator.

The figure in front of him was smiling a welcome. It was a woman, despite the rasp of the voice. She was dressed in oversized trousers, tied with a rope, but otherwise naked. Her head was shaved; her toenails were lacquered. All this he took in with senses heightened from the shock of the tree, and from the pleasure of her nudity. The sheened globes of her breasts were perfect. He felt his fists opening, the palms tingling to touch them. But perhaps his appraisal of the body was too frank. He glanced back up at her face to see if she was still smiling. She was; but his gaze lingered on her face this time, and he realized that what he'd taken to be a smile was a permanent fixture. Her lips had been sliced off, exposing gums and teeth. There were ghastly scars on her cheeks, the remains of wounds that had severed the tendons and induced a rictus that teased her mouth open. Her look appalled him.

"You want . . . ?" she began.

Want? he thought, his eyes flicking back to the breasts. Her casual nudity aroused him, despite the mutilation of her face. He was disgusted with the idea of taking her-to kiss that lipless mouth with more than orgasm was worth-and yet if she offered he'd accept, and damn the disgust.

"You want . . . ?" she began again, in that slurred hybrid of a voice, neither male nor female. It was difficult for her to shape and expel words without the aid of lips. She got the rest of the question out, however. "You want the cards?"

He'd missed the point entirely. She had no interest in him, sexual or otherwise. She was simply messenger. Mamoulia was here. Within spitting distance, probably. Perhaps watching him even now.

But the confusion of emotions in him blurred the elation he should have felt at this moment. Instead of triumph, he grappled with a headful of contrary images: blossom, breasts, darkness; the burned man's face, turning too briefly toward him; lust, fear; a single star appearing from a flank of a cloud. Hardly thinking of what he was saying, he replied:

"Yes. I want the cards."

She nodded, turned away from him, and started past the tree, its branches still rocking where the man who was not Vasiliev had touched them, and crossed the square. He followed. It was possible to forget this go-between's face while looking at the grace of her barefooted steps. She didn't seem to care what she trod on. Not once did she falter, despite the glass, brick and shrapnel underfoot.

She led him across to the remains of a large house on the opposite side of the square. Its ravaged exterior, once impressive, still stood; there was even a doorway in it, though no door. Through it, the light of a bonfire flickered. Rubble from the interior spilled through the doorway and blocked the lower half, obliging both woman and thief to duck down and scramble up into the house itself. In the gloom the sleeve of his coat snagged on something; the cloth tore. She didn't turn to see if he was hurt, though he cursed audibly. She simply led on over the mounds of brick and fallen roof timbers while he stumbled after her, feeling ridiculously clumsy. By the light of the bonfire he could see the size of the interior; this had once been a fine house. There was little time for study, however. The woman was past the fire now, and climbing toward a staircase. He followed, sweating. The fire spat; he glanced around at it, and glimpsed somebody on the far side, keeping out of sight behind the flames. Even as he watched, the fire keeper threw more tinder down, and a constellation of livid specks was thrown up against the sky.

The woman was climbing the stairs. He hurried after her, his shadow-thrown by the fire-huge on the wall. She was at the top of the stairs when he was halfway up, and now she was slipping through the second doorway and gone. He followed on as quickly as he could, and turned through the doorway after her.

The firelight only found its way fitfully into the room he'd stepped into, and he could scarcely make anything out at first.

"Close the door," somebody asked. It took him a few beats to realize that the request was being made of him. He half-turned, fumbled for the handle, found that there was none, and pushed the door closed on aching hinges.

That done, he looked back into the room. The woman was standing two or three yards in front of him, her perpetually amused face looking at him, the smile a gray sickle.

"Your coat," she said, and stretched out her hands to help him shoulder it off. Once done, she stepped out of his eyeline, and the object of his long search came into view.

It was not Mamoulia, however, that took his eye at first. It was the carved wooden altar piece set against the wall behind him, a Gothic masterwork which blazed, even in the gloom, with gold and scarlet and blue. Spoils of war, the thief thought; so that's what the bastard does with his fortune. Now he looked at the figure in front of the triptych. A single wick, immersed in oil, guttered smokily on the table at which he sat. The illumination it threw up on to the card-player's face was bright but unstable.

"So, Pilgrim," the man said, "you found me. Finally."

"You found me, surely," the thief replied; it had been as Vasiliev had predicted.

"You fancy a game or two, I hear. Is that right?"

"Why not?" He tried to sound as nonchalant as possible, though his heart was beating a double tattoo in his chest. Coming into the card-player's presence, he felt pitifully unprepared. Sweat glued his hair to his forehead; there was brick dust on his hands and muck under his nails: I must look, he squirmed, like the thief I am.

By contrast, Mamoulia was a picture of propriety. There was nothing in the sober clothes—the black tie, the gray suit—that suggested a profiteer: he appeared, this legend, like a stockbroker. His face, like his dress, was unrepentantly plain, its taut and finely etched skin waxen by the charmless candle flame. He looked sixty or thereabouts, cheeks slightly hollowed, nose large, aristocratic; brow wide and high. His hair had receded to the back of his skull; what remained was feathery and white. But there was neither frailty nor fatigue in his posture. He sat upright in his chair, and his agile hands fanned and gathered a pack of cards with loving familiarity. Only his eyes belonged to the thief's dream of him. No stockbroker ever had such naked eyes. Such glacial, unforgiving eyes.

"I hoped you'd come, Pilgrim. Sooner or later," he said. His English was without inflection.

"Am I late?" the thief asked, half-joking.

Mamoulian laid the cards down. He seemed to take the inquiry quite seriously. "We'll see." He paused before saying, "You know, of course, that I play for very high stakes."

"I heard."

"If you wish to withdraw now, before we go any further, I would perfectly understand." The little speech was made without a trace of irony.

"Don't you want me to play?"

Mamoulian pressed his thin, dry lips together and frowned. "On the contrary," he said, "I very much want you to play."

There was a flicker—was there not?—of pathos there. The thief wasn't sure if it was a slip of the tongue, or the subtlest of theatrics. "But I am not sympathetic . . ." he went on, "to those who do not pay their debts."

"You mean the lieutenant," the thief chanced.

Mamoulian stared at him. "I know no lieutenant," he said flatly. "I know only gamblers, like myself. A few are good, most are not. They all come here to test their mettle, as you have."

He had picked up the pack again, and it was moving in his hands as if the cards were alive. Fifty-two moths fluttering in the queasy light, each one marked a little differently from the last. They were almost indecently beautiful; their glossy faces the most unflawed thing the thief had set eyes on in months.

"I want to play," he said, defying the hypnotic passage of cards.

"Then sit down, Pilgrim," Mamoulian said, as though the question had never been at issue.

Almost soundlessly the woman had set a chair behind him. As he sat down, the thief met Mamoulian's gaze. Was there anything in those joyless eyes that intended him harm? No, nothing. There was nothing there to fear.

Murmuring his thanks for the invitation, he unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt and folded the

sleeves back in preparation for play.

After a time, the game began.

Part Two

ASYLUM

The Devil is by no means the worst that there is; I would rather have dealings with him than with many a human being. He honours his agreements much more promptly than many a swindler on Earth. To be true, when payment is due he comes on the dot; just as twelve strikes, fetches his soul and goes off home to Hell like a good Devil. He's just a businessman as is right and proper.

J.N. NESTROY, Hollenangst

After serving six years of his sentence at Wandsworth, Marty Strauss was used to waiting. He waited to wash and shave himself every morning; he waited to eat, he waited to defecate; he waited for freedom. So much waiting. It was all part of the punishment, of course; as was the interview he'd been summoned to this dreary afternoon. But while the waiting had come to seem easy, the interview never had. He loathed the bureaucratic spotlight: the Parole File bulging with the Discipline Report, the Home Circumstance Reports, the Psychiatric Evaluations; the way every few months you stood stripped in front of some uncivil servant while he told you what a foul thing you were. It hurt him so much he knew he'd never be healed of it; never forget the hot rooms filled with insinuation and dashed hopes. He'd dream them forever.

"Come in, Strauss."

The room hadn't changed since he'd last been here; only become staler. The man on the opposite side of the table hadn't changed either. His name was Somervale, and there were any number of prisoners in Wandsworth who nightly said prayers for his pulverization. Today he was not alone behind the plastic-topped table.

"Sit down, Strauss."

Marty glanced across at Somervale's associate. He was no prison officer. His suit was too tasteful, his fingernails too well-manicured. He looked to be in late middle-age, solidly built, and his nose was slightly crooked, as if it had once been broken and then imperfectly reset. Somervale offered the introduction:

"Strauss. This is Mr. Toy . . ."

"Hello," Marty said.

The tanned face returned his gaze; it was a look of frank appraisal.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Toy said.

His scrutiny was more than casual curiosity, though what-thought Marty-was there to see? A man with time on his hands, and on his face; a body grown sluggish with too much bad food and too little exercise; an ineptly trimmed mustache; a pair of eyes glazed with boredom. Marty knew every detail of his own appearance. He wasn't worth a second glance any longer. And yet the bright blue eyes

stared on, apparently fascinated.

"I think we should get down to business," Toy said to Somervale. He put his hands palm down on the tabletop. "How much have you told Mr. Strauss?"

Mr. Strauss. The prefix was an almost forgotten courtesy.

"I've told him nothing," Somervale replied.

"Then we should begin at the beginning," Toy said. He leaned back in his chair, hands still on the table.

"As you like," said Somervale, clearly gearing himself up for a substantial speech. "Mr. Toy-" he began.

But he got no further before his guest broke in.

"If I may?" said Toy, "perhaps I can best summarize the situation."

"Whatever suits," said Somervale. He fumbled in his jacket pocket for a cigarette, barely masking his chagrin. Toy ignored him. The off-center face continued to look across at Marty.

"My employer-" Toy began "-is a man by the name of Joseph Whitehead. I don't know if that means anything to you?" He didn't wait for a reply, but went on. "If you haven't heard of him, you're doubtless familiar with the Whitehead Corporation, which he founded. It's one of the large pharmaceutical empires in Europe-"

The name rang a faint bell in Marty's head, and it had some scandalous association. But it was tantalizingly vague, and he had no time to puzzle it through, because Toy was in full flight.

"-Although Mr. Whitehead is now in his late sixties, he still keeps control of the corporation. He's a self-made man, you understand, and he's dedicated his life to its creation. He chooses, however, not to be as visible as he once was-"

A front-page photograph suddenly developed in Strauss' head. A man with his hand up against the glare of a flashbulb; a private moment snatched by some lurking paparazzo for public consumption.

"-He shuns publicity almost completely, and since his wife's death he has little taste for the social arena-"

Sharing the unwelcome attention Strauss remembered a woman whose beauty astonished, even by the unflattering light. The wife of whom Toy spoke, perhaps.

"-Instead he chooses to mastermind his corporation out of the spotlight, concerning himself in his leisure hours with social issues. Among them, overcrowding in prisons, and the deterioration of the prison service generally."

The last remark was undoubtedly barbed, and found Somervale with deadly accuracy. He ground out his half-smoked cigarette in the tinfoil ashtray, throwing the other man a sour glance.

"When the time came to engage a new personal bodyguard-" Toy continued, "-it was Mr. Whitehead's decision to seek a suitable candidate amongst men coming up for parole rather than going through the usual agencies. "

He can't mean me, Strauss thought. The idea was too fine to tease himself with, and too ludicrous. And yet if that wasn't it, why was Toy here, why all the palaver?

"He's looking for a man who is nearing the end of his sentence. One who deserves, in both his own and my own estimation, to have an opportunity to be reintroduced into society with a job behind him, and some self-esteem to go with it. Your case was drawn to my attention, Martin. I may call you Martin?"

"Usually it's Marty."

"Fine. Marty it is. Frankly, I don't want to raise your hopes. I'm interviewing several other candidates in addition to yourself, and of course at the end of the day I may find that none are suitable. At this juncture I simply want to ascertain whether you would be interested in such an option were it to be made available to you."

Marty began to smile. Not outwardly, but inside, where Somervale couldn't get at it.

"Do you understand what I'm asking?"

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