

TEN

LUNCH WITH GOD

Jenner's eyes struggled open to view a darkened room. He could tell that it was his flat, and that the curtains in his living room had been drawn, and also that it was still day because of the feeble shaft of grey sunlight that managed to find its way between the gap in the curtains and into the room. His head was dizzy, and pounding a little, and for a moment he could only barely recall standing in front of an open doorway staring at two policemen that morning. It was only then that he remembered those two policemen, and yes, they had been holding him, grasping his arms tightly while he stood in the hallway. He'd not been arrested though, his lying here in his own flat was proof of that.

Jenner sat up on his sofa. Blood rushed to his head with the movement, bludgeoning the inside of his skull with such a brutal force that he had to clamp it with one hand and take hold of the arm of the sofa with the other in order to keep himself conscious. Sickness crawled into his stomach now too, clutching at his innards, twisting them, knotting them. But there was something else though, too, something that nagged at him, a dreaded image that he couldn't quite remember. Something white. Something red.

And then it came in a rush.

The black dog.

Jenner stood up hurriedly and gazed around the room. His head pulsed with blackness almost immediately and he grabbed hold of the sofa again as he stumbled forward a half step. His eyes flickered open quickly, straining through a glutinous sea of pulsing black shapes, but even through them the room seemed empty. He fought to focus on his watch, confirming the time as four thirty five.

“Shit,” he exclaimed aloud.

It was four thirty five.

Montague would be wanting to know where the box was.

Oh my God, he thought. The box.

Jenner started towards the door, his hand still clutching his head as he went, but jerked sideways as he caught sight of the man torn from the shape of the black rabid dog staring back at him from the corner of the room.

As though he had wrapped the very shadows of the room around himself in order to wear them like a cloak, he stood tall and motionless, his unblinking eyes shining brightly out at him from the gloom, his pale face like some kind of theatrical mask. He seemed to regard him in silence as they both stared at one another, but then he took a step forward, partially shrugging off the shadows that seemed to clothe him, and allowed himself to be seen more clearly by the dim light of the room.

“You have finally woken,” the man observed, quietly and simply.

“Yes,” Jenner managed to reply, squinting his eyes through both the ache in his head as well as the murk of the room. “I must... have fallen asleep.”

“Stronger you will soon be,” the man continued. “It

is to be expected. I will not hold such lengthy replenishment against you."

"What... happened?"

"You have done what I thought could not be done. I am grateful. I am in your debt."

Jenner stared at him, his head only slowly beginning to order itself, his thoughts shuffling and uncertain, dark and clouded. He dimly asked him just what that meant.

"You have set me free," the man said plainly, his words measured and equal, monotonous.

"Set you free?" Jenner repeated. "Who are you?"

"Who am I?" the man asked slowly, as though he did not understand the question. "I am Jackel El'a'cree, Master of Kar'mi'shah, Master of the Faraohs."

"Who?"

The man narrowed his eyes at this response, his sight still burning and intense, and Jenner thought he could hear a deep breath of agitation escape him.

"If you do not know who I am," he stated, "then I should deem it necessary to demand your name."

"My name is Jenner Hoard. This is my flat."

"Your flat?"

"Where I live."

"Where you live?" the man's calm had gone, replaced with a temper that was fraying. "By the blessed moon, if you live beneath my sky, then you bow down before me. If you wish for continued existence, then you devote your praise upon my name." He shook his head. "Enough of this. Where are the others? Send for them immediately."

"Look, I don't know who you are -"

"I am Jackel El'a'cree..." the man faltered, and

gazed, open jawed and suddenly bewildered, at the thief who stood feebly before him. His lips then closed and he sniffed at the air. "What year is this?" he asked quietly.

"1999."

His eyes flickered closed as he continued.

"And what country?"

"England."

"Who do you worship now?"

"Worship?"

"Yes, worship."

"You mean personally?"

"Just give me a name, damn you."

"I don't know. Jesus Christ, I guess."

The man then took a shallow, if not altogether happy, breath.

"I see," he said.

The severity of his situation came to him as he stared at the remains of the two dead police officers still lying in his hallway. He stood for a few seconds just simply trying to allocate names to body parts. Here was a skull, and there a rib cage, but amongst the tangled matted mess of their blood-soaked uniforms and black tarnished boots it was difficult to tell much more. Their flesh had seemingly been ripped from the bone, devoured, chewed and wrestled. The cloth of those uniforms and the leather of those boots had been scuffed and ripped as though they had been in some drawn-out battle, the glint of a belt buckle or wristwatch the only thing to brighten the mass through the darkened pulp. Looking at this sight for only a few seconds was enough, however, before

Jenner felt the knot of sickness twist in his stomach once again and he stumbled past and through into the kitchen, retching across the tiled floor in an attempt to reach the sink.

The stench of vomit hung sourly in the air, refusing to leave via the window even after it had been cleared up. Jenner leant against the sink as the early evening air drifted in, chill but grimy from the traffic-busy street below. There were fumes in the air, a sharp tang of diesel mixed with monoxides and other pollutants. It made the air almost too thick to breathe, and it felt as though it was coating his throat and lungs even as he took it in. His eyes played idly across the soot-blackened flats opposite, their windows dark with the city's filth, taller high-rises and office buildings looming grimly above them, encroaching over the city like a living black mass, preparing to swamp them all with a wave of brick and choking dust.

A car horn resounded aggressively along the street below, blaring out its impatience to the knotted snake of metal grinding its way towards the flyover. It shook him from his distant thoughts only briefly, and he became strangely aware of the permanent rumble that always hung over London, no matter where you were in its depths; of lorries, and of cars, of horns and of sirens, all blurred together into a single horrible cacophony, a dull booming din that his ears had long since switched off to - except at obscure times when the din somehow manages to get through. It seemed to blurt out a single sharp point of focus every now and then, as though the city screams to be heard, and no one that lives inside its limits can hear it or do anything about it.

Jenner turned his head slightly and listened to the

silence of his flat, dead and hollow compared to the city's incessant monotone. The man who had called himself Master of Kar'mi'shah had barricaded himself inside Jenner's bedroom since their brief exchange, and Jenner had been left to decipher what few insights this murderer had offered him.

For one, just what did Master of Kar'mi'shah mean? Jenner had sat in the living room gazing out at the Hammersmith streets for a while asking himself that, but of course every other question was just as mystifying and unanswerable as the last. The man called Jackel El'a'cree had told him how he had been imprisoned inside the box he had stolen from the apartment building. He had said that he'd been trapped inside it for centuries. He had also said that whoever had cast him into the box, had been both clever and powerful enough to keep him there as well. And it was shortly after that, with Jenner being unable to understand any of it, that Jackel El'a'cree had withdrawn to his bedroom.

Jenner had heard the din of breaking furniture. He had pounded on the door already wedged fast, and no amount of shouting had brought this intruder out into the open. It had only been as he had wandered back through the flat towards the kitchen that he had stumbled upon the bodies of the police officers again, and set his worries whirling afresh.

He had leant against the kitchen counter for some time after cleaning up his own vomit, gazing out through the window at the rooftops of London, trying to breathe steadily, not daring to return to the hallway, and even thinking once again about the skulker's final words to him, about the evil that walked the same streets as he. But as the sky slowly relinquished the sun to the horizon, and the day began to darken

towards dusk, it became apparent that the bodies, like his guest, were here to stay.

Reluctantly stepping back into the hallway, Jenner glanced down only briefly at the grizzled corpses still entangled on the floor, as he made his way back through to his bedroom once again. Knocking gently against it, he called to Jackel and waited for a reply. When none came, he knocked again.

“I need your help,” Jenner said to the closed door, unsure of what he was saying even as he listened to the dead silence on the other side. “Something has to be done about these two policemen.”

Again there was silence, and Jenner stood waiting for a few minutes hoping that the man would unblock the door and step outside to meet with him. He didn't want to think about what would happen in the meantime if more officers were to arrive on his doorstep only to find their colleagues lying gutted beyond all recognition on the floor. His life would undoubtedly be over, of that he was certain.

Pressing his ear to the door, Jenner listened to the hollowness of the room once again. There was simply nothing to hear. He tried the handle and put his weight to it, but it still would not budge. Exhaling gravely, he trudged back into the living room, perched on the window sill, and settled down to watch the streets carry their freight of commuters home from their offices, from normal life to normal life in the space of one simple and unremarkable day.