

## Walk in the Park...

Ghost Dog fixed the necromancer with a feral stare. He could smell the black magic on him. Slowly, he slid his glass halfway across the table. The necromancer smiled affably, refilled the shaman's glass with whiskey, and then topped off the other two glasses on the table. Macphail's single malt, it was the good stuff. The scent of it alone was intoxicating. The war had dragged on for a generation. Simple pleasures were often in short supply. The shaman took his time draining the glass again while the necromancer pulled out a pack of smokes and lit one. Ghost Dog could smell the Turkish tobacco; it was lighter than most American brands.

These days, almost nothing was what it seemed. The shaman watched as the necromancer lit another of the Samsun cigarette's off his and passed it to the kid sitting next to him. The necromancer wasn't much to look at really. Big through the shoulders, dark gray suit, heavy raincoat, and close cropped hair. His face lightly scarred with pockmarks, he carried a little extra weight. The kid was something else entirely.

Not more than eighteen, he was tall and cadaverous wearing a long coat over a Dead Warlocks "Anarchy" tee shirt, leather pants, and snakeskin boots. A wide, low-crowned hat cast his face in perpetual shadow. He took the offered smoke in long, broke-nailed fingers. A long drag lent infernal light chasing shadows.

It was no gift.

Ghost Dog had the sight. He could see through the veil. See things for what they were. And, thing he was. Under the hat, in the smoke's light, black corpse hair fell lank framing the kid's face. His flesh was pallid and parchment thin, stretched too tight. Showing sharp, uneven teeth, he ginned as the shaman looked him over. In the dark recesses beneath the hat, swamp light flickered in his eyes.

"Smoking is bad for you," the shaman growled flatly.

"So are bullets," the thing replied and leaned back still grinning. There was no threat to it. There was no need. If a corpse could talk, the sound of its

voice would have been an improvement.

The man in the suit leaned forward and filled the shaman's glass again. "Mr. McDougal thought you might be able to help us."

"McDougal is an asshole."

"I am not sure anyone would disagree," the man continued, "but, he was adamant that you would be able guide us."

"What do you want?" Ghost Dog snapped. One eye still on the kid, he noticed a bone rosary wrapped around his wrist, the cross hanging upside down.

"Well," the man started, sipping his whiskey and taking a drag, "we have an arrangement with Mr. McDougal particular to his rather specialized services."

"Crystals," the shaman interjected. "You're after spirit crystals."

"Yes," the man went on unflustered. He spent the last eight years in the 6th Battalion of the 66th Military Intelligence Brigade stationed over in Istanbul working for the ConFed. "More specifically, we need one bound."

"With an earth spirit," Ghost Dog finished.

"Yes," the man continued, "and we can pay--"

"I don't want your money."

The military man leaned back and took a long drag on his smoke. The kid reached forward seemingly uninterested and took the bottle to refill his glass. His fingernails looked like he clawed his way out of a grave.

"I am sure we can come to some sort of mutually beneficial agreement," the man began again.

"Three crystals."

"I am not sure I fully--"

"Bring me three crystals," the shaman growled. "I bind one for you. Keep the other two."

"We don't have the crystals," the man said. "That is why we came to see you."

"You'll have to go get them then," the shaman grinned wolfishly, "won't you."

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Jesse "Jester" Gaunt rolled a cigarette from the pouch he kept in his pocket. Standing on the sidewalk of 116th Street, he took in the Canaan. It had been a Baptist church once. Now its arched facade was worn and grimy, hung with Christmas lights. A pair of unfriendly looking trolls armed with Browning Automatic Rifles guarded the door.

"Did you get a look at him," Jester said with a wry grin, the irony lost on him as he rolled a second smoke and passed it to the necromancer.

Now wearing his fedora and raincoat against the persistent drizzle, Ezekiel Harrow lit the smoke, took a drag, and coughed into the back of his hand. He much preferred the Samsun.

"I did," Harrow replied. The kid knew what he looked like. How he handled it was another question. "I have never seen a gnoll before."

"Where would you?"

"Quite right I suppose," Harrow said. "We best get moving."

"After you," Jester replied, extending his arm without much flourish. He was all sinewy muscle like gristle.

They started walking east and then went left on 7th Avenue. Harrow scanned the dark streets and decrepit buildings that loomed around them. Gaunt walked along uncaring.

The world was dying. As the war dragged on, after a generation, everything had gone to shit. No one seemed to notice. People dragged themselves through the endless gray decaying landscape of their lives like ghosts. The rain made the street smell like decay or a wet dog; a dead one. It wouldn't be right to say nothing changed. Nothing got better or newer. It was the same, like seeing a whore on the same street corner, but ten years later and worse for the wear. The war had sucked the life out of everything, the economy, the country, and finally, when the United States lost California, the people.

Around that time, the hard working decent people of this neighborhood had been grindingly driven out by the worst our kind had to offer. Years

ago, the city gave up on this place and built a wall. Then they cut the power. Now people in the know called it Goblintown.

The buildings were ramshackle shells of what they once were; lit by candles, oil lamps, and torches. The light in the broken windows glowered like the empty eye sockets of a skull. After a few blocks, they turned right on West 113th Street. Not long after, they came to the park.

Park was a strong term these days. That was what it used to be back in the day. Now it was an overgrown tangle of trees and decades of neglect.

"Let's hope we find what we need here," Harrow said.

"Don't want to go to church, captain," Gaunt said sarcastically, always a smart ass.

"No, not really," he said, unabashedly.

"Chicken," Gaunt grinned and headed down the ancient overgrown path that led from the street into the depths of the park.

Shaking his head, Harrow followed. His eyes scanned the dark. Not like a fighting man, more a trained observer. After about fifty yards, the path forked and they stayed to the right. The shaman's instructions had been clear. As he promised, after about another fifty yards, they came upon a dark still pond. It had stopped raining, but the sky was heavy with clouds. The surface of the pool a dark mirror. The path continued north along the pond, but here turned to an old bridge that crossed to the other side.

"Best get to it," Gaunt said, lighting up again. He stood near the foot of the bridge watching with little interest.

"Why don't you put that out," Harrow said in a hushed tone. "We don't want to attract any attention."

"Nope."

With a muttered curse, Harrow moved carefully under the bridge at the edge of the pond. From his pocket, he pulled out a chisel covered with sigils. Slaine McDougal was a talismonger. He loaned it to them apparently knowing it would come to this in the end.

He took a deep breath and opened his senses to the aether. Slowly, the edge of his perception faded.

The world seemed a blur as the elemental forces of nature revealed themselves blending with what most would call reality. He could feel the old stone of the bridge aching, the tangle of the trees moaning, and the deep stillness of the water. He knelt down by the water's edge and stared into the mirror like surface. He pushed back his hat to regard the man looking back at him. He reached out slowly towards his reflection. The water seemed to stir.

Harrow traced his fingers through the water swirling away his own visage and scanned under the bridge. He felt something else. Where the underside of the bridge's arch met the moss-covered stones of the pond's shore maybe half a dozen finger-length smoky crystals clustered. He could feel their deep connection to the aetheric realm. He moved over, crouched down pulling a small hammer out of his other coat pocket, and went to work. Well-educated, he had never worked with tools like this and was lucky to come away with two of the crystals, the rest broken.

Harrow emerged from under the bridge. Gaunt smoking where he left him.

"I only got--"

"We've got company," Gaunt said flatly. His eyes narrowed slightly looking across the bridge over Harrow's shoulder. The big man turned around slowly. A woman in a sleek black leather long coat was walking towards them across the bridge. Her hands in her pockets. As if on cue, the clouds parted just enough for moonlight to stab down and give them a better look at her. She had waist length hair, black as night, and was impossibly pale.

"What have we here," she said with quiet authority, stopping halfway across the bridge. "A pair of thieves."

"We are not thieves," Harrow retorted. His eyes narrowed as he used the sight. She didn't change much, but her eyes took a feral, yellow cast. Politeness aside, one could never guess her age. Somehow, she felt old, really old.

She leaned on the bridge's decrepit railing, "What are you then?"

"We were--"

"Out for a stroll," she finished.

"There are more in the woods," Gaunt hissed, low as he could. He wasn't sure how many, but they were sneaky and close.

"We don't want any trouble," Harrow said, his hands held out at his side in a gesture of peace.

"We rarely get what we want," she stated, standing up straight. The tension in the air seemed to crackle as goblins slipped from the woods on both sides of the pond. They were decked in slick black leathers and had grease guns.

"Easy now," Harrow cautioned, turning slowly to take in the goblins behind him on this side of the pond. "I am sure we can work something out.

"Can we," she wondered aloud. "Pray, what could you possibly offer me?"

Jester Gaunt looked over his shoulder, the rolled smoke hanging from his desiccated lips, and stared down on one of the goblins. He wasn't a lot of things and he didn't negotiate. He was only one thing. A gunslinger.

Before the goblins could twitch, he had his guns out. Pulled from oiled leather shoulder holsters under his long coat. A pair of retrofitted army revolvers he got from his father who was a gunslinger before him. On the right, he shot the yellow-eyed goblin prick - who was staring and pointing a grease gun at him - between the eyes. His pal caught a heavy .45 caliber bullet in the throat and went down choking on his own blood. On the left, across the pond he took one in the chest sending him crashing back into the trees learning a hard lesson about cavitation. The fourth shot was a clean miss blowing a branch off one of the trees.

The two remaining goblins on Gaunt's side of the bridge took cover in the trees and let rip with their grease guns missing wildly as they stared down the muzzle of Gaunt's gun. Harrow ducked for cover back under the bridge, pulling a Colt .45 from under his coat, as bullets fired from the other side of the pond ripped into the shoreline; one drilled through his overcoat narrowly missing. On the right, one of the gobs leaned too far out from behind the tree and got shot square in the chest. He dropped like a rag doll. Jester put a round into the tree where the other goblin was hiding. On the left, firing across the pond

again, he got one square in the shoulder; he went down screaming and thrashing. The last shot found nothing but darkness. Jester Gaunt wasn't much about defense; he was more about throwing as much hot lead as possible so that everybody else got dead or didn't want to party anymore.

From under the bridge, Harrow couldn't see the gunslinger anymore, but still had a clear view of the goblins on the other side of the pond. Due to the angle, they had a clear shot at him. He just kept moving as fire from the grease guns tore fist sized chunks out of the underside of the bridge. He got around the other side out of the goblin's line of fire and pressed himself hard against the side of the dilapidated bridge, breathing hard. That's when he saw them. Another band of grease gunners in the trees on the other side of the pond to the right of the bridge rather than the left where the first group took cover. Bad to worse. It happened too fast for him to count shots, but it was only a matter of heartbeats before the gunslinger's six shooters ran dry. Without the roar of the army revolvers to keep the goblin's attention, he was dead.

The remaining gob on Jester's side of the pond ducked low and scrambled behind another tree moving away from the gunslinger. He was sly and quick, but not nearly fast enough to keep from getting shot in the back. The code saved him. If you caught a bullet from Jester Gaunt, you got shot in the face, not the back. Two left on the other side of the pond as far as he could tell. He unloaded two shots at each of them. One thumped into a tree, but the other three found their mark and the goblins went down. He was empty, but the hammers never fell on a spent chamber. A gunslinger knew when he was out.

With no idea how many gobs were left on the other side and four leveling grease guns his way from across the pond, Harrow had to move and breaking for the trees was a bad option. Only one place to go. He took one step away from the bridge so he could see the top, see her. His eyes fixed on the deep gloom shrouding the bridge. At once, he let the shadows draw him in as he opened his mind to the aether. It was as if he is standing on a precipice, the shadow yawning before him, beckoning. He answered its call and stepped forward. The goblins opened fire, but

the necromancer was gone and their grease guns gnashed at shadows.

A burning infernal chill ran through Harrow as he emerged from the gloom on top of the bridge, right behind her. He leveled the .45 at the back of her head.

"Call them off."

"Impressive," she stated flatly, slowly turning around; her hands in the pockets of her long black leather coat. It was sleek and fit her like a glove.

"I don't want to shoot you."

"I know," she replied, almost sickly sweet. Up close, he could feel her. She was ancient, pale as moonlight. All he saw was her eyes. Feral, yellow, depthless. It was far too late.

Gaunt started reloading his revolvers, feeding them one round after another from his gun belt. The gob on his side thought about it for a second and then fled into the night. Later, he would pay dearly for leaving his mistress.

She moved closer to Harrow as he lowered the gun. Very close, almost touching. "You will pay for this," she said, he could feel the words on his lips.

"I didn't want this..."

"Your friend shot first."

"He always does..."

She smirked; her teeth were sharp, but still perfect. Her hand came up slowly, her nails long, black-mirrored, sharp as razors. All he could see was her eyes. There was nothing else. Her nails traced lightly down the side of this face. She leaned closer. A long, languid kiss, like that of an unforgiven lover.

After what seemed an eternity, she stepped back slowly lighting one of his Turkish cigarettes. Exhaling a long slow drag.

"There will be a blood price when I ask it," she said in the low tone of one who is obeyed without question. "Until then, don't come back."

She flicked an ash off the smoke and walked away.

Ever so slowly, Ezekiel Harrow collected himself and holstered his pistol. Gaunt was leaning against a tree, arms folded, waiting.

“Didn’t know you had a date, captain,” he said, as Harrow approached.

“I...”

“I think she’s sweet on you.”

“What the f—”

“I don’t like guns,” he started, “pointed at me.” He finished with a predatory grin.

“We need to go,” he said, his tone hard. Harrow knew the conversation went nowhere and the clock was ticking.

“To the church.”

“No, we need to get out of here.”

“Job’s not finished,” the gunslinger said flatly.

“She warned me—”

“Don’t like to be told what to do either,” the tone of Gaunt’s voice never changed much. Like the sound of a rusted coffin lid opening didn’t change much.

Harrow started walking. Back up the path through the dark tangle of trees the way they had come.

“If your new girlfriend wanted us dead,” Gaunt said as he trailed behind rolling a smoke, “we would be dead.”

“Any idea who that was?”

“Yeah,” the gunslinger lit the smoke. He liked to screw with the ex-military man often enough, but right now he needed him to play along. Even the gunslinger didn’t want to go to the church alone. “Krushia, queen of the Nocturne.”

“Nocturne?”

Jesse Gaunt grew up in Gotham, spent his whole life here, most of it in Yonkers. Only recently, after his father died, did he really come into the know. “Big goblin gang; got a pretty good sized turf here.”

“Is the church in their territory?”

“Nope,” the gunslinger guessed, it was the right answer in the moment.

“You sure about this?”

“Nope,” another corpse-smile, “that ever mattered before...”

“I suppose not.”

They emerged back out onto the hollowed out streets of Goblintown on West 113th Street.

“We need to get moving,” the captain said, taking longer strides. For one who lived and died by the speed of the gun, Jester never seemed to hurry.

Two blocks down, they turned north under the 7th Avenue Bypass. The massive bridge diverted traffic over the Containment Zone. They moved like shadows in the dark through the Stygian gloom. After midnight, ten blocks later, they turned along West 123rd Street near the wall coming along side an old ruined church. Unlike the Canaan, it was wrapped in darkness. Not a light to be seen; nothing stirred here. The once tan stone of the church was stained and weary. A few dozen arched windows, the glass long broken, darkly regarded the street unkindly.

They stopped across the street in front of a few abandoned brownstones. Apparently, the real estate around the church wasn’t in demand; even in Goblintown. There were two doors on this side. The one on the left was an empty yawning hole, the door long gone. The one on the right, behind a low wall, was mostly intact; a double door with heavy iron hinges.

“That was probably the rectory,” Harrow suggested, as it was furthest from the church proper. Opening himself to the aether, he scanned the church. Just at the edge of his perception, the doors that still stood held a gnawing taint. As if, they were somehow in a deeper darkness. “You sure about this,” he asked again.

“What could go wrong?” The gunslinger started across the street. “Which way?”

“Doors to the right,” the captain exhaled slowly and followed. Jester lazily jumped the low wall and slowly tested door. Harrow winced as it creaked mercilessly.

“You first, magic man,” the gunslinger pushed the door open enough for Harrow to slip through. Harrow cast a long glance back at the street, pulled his forty-five and went in. Sadly, he knew he had the best chance of finding what they were after. A pair of broken windows above the door allowed in just enough moonlight for Harrow to see the empty

hallway in front of him. He pulled a military surplus flashlight from the deep pocket of his raincoat, the beam stabbed weakly into the gloom.

There was an empty doorway to the left with a hallway not long after. Another doorway to the right likely led to the church proper. At the end of this hallway, Harrow could see a flight of stairs leading down. The sight of the stairwell clawed at his gut. He started forward, trying to slow his breathing. His heart pounded in his chest. He could feel malevolence growing with each step. The way of the necromancer was not for the faint of heart.

At the top of the stairwell, the flashlight revealed nothing. He used the sight. The beam of the flashlight seemed to fade away replaced by a pale, sickly blue glow that seemed to coil at the bottom of the stairs. He could smell death magic. "Down here," he said, steadily; all things considered.

Harrow moved slowly down the stairs reaching the bottom. The gunslinger followed, reliant on the light of the flashlight to pierce the dark. Whether the sight did Harrow any favors would be a matter of opinion; some things are better-left unseen. A rusted iron gate lay broken and useless at the foot of the stairs. A vaulted chamber opened before them.

It seemed empty at first until the light swept across the shutters on the walls and the floor. Each engraved stone a memorial fronting a niche where the dead lay. There were four larger ones on the floor. He could feel, more than see, the death spirits lurking here. There was something else. Death spirits weren't uncommon in a place like this, that wasn't it. They were mournful, like most he had seen. There was something else, something... hateful.

Not wanting to waste any time, he focused on finding the crystals they were after and did, in the far corner, clustered against the wall. He shined the light on them. "Over there," he said and handed the flashlight to Gaunt. After the gunslinger took it, Harrow moved hurriedly across the crypt to the other side holstering his pistol. He knelt down by the clutch of crystals, took out the tools, and got to work. They only needed one more, but it would be stupid to go through all of this and not get as many as he could. He tried to take his time. Gaunt moved halfway across to the center of the chamber and held

the light so the necromancer could work.

He fared a little better than before, breaking one and pocketing two of the spirit crystals. He might be able to get a few more. Just maybe, this was going to be worth it after all.

Jester watched. Even as fast as he was, he was far too late. A thing of pure darkness rose up out of nothing behind the captain, a shadow in the stab of light. A warning died on his lips as an overwhelming dread filled the crypt. It washed over Harrow in a nauseating wave as he half turned. He threw up his arms as the shadow touched him. He was consumed by its burning hatred for the light of living things. He couldn't breathe, let alone scream, as his heart was shriven by the chill of the grave.

Left with no choice, Gaunt drew one of the revolvers with his free hand and fired. The heavy .45 caliber bullet passed harmlessly through the shadow and shattered against the wall. It turned on the gunslinger leaving the stricken form of Ezekiel Harrow slumped in the corner. Gaunt fired again - uselessly - as the shadow bore down on him. It seemed to coalesce in the weak light of the old flashlight. Faster even than the gunslinger, its shadowy coils wrapped around his throat. He dropped the revolver and light clawing at nothing. In that moment, they were one; true nature laid raw and open.

Gaunt gasped falling to his knees as the shadow released him. For the first time, the weight of his tainted soul bore full upon him. Even the dark did not want him...

