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A Meeting with Azrael

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A Meeting with Azrael

Author Bio

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A Meeting with Azrael

Aldgate Parish, London 1665

They say we should not venture out after sundown. They are most likely right. I walk with brisk steps down the very middle of the street, a common practice now that the carriages have all gone besides those carrying the dead. My only companions are the ghosts of cries I can hear from neighboring houses, so common to me now as the sound of crickets in the countryside. The red crosses partially covered by the presence of stern-faced watchmen are turned to bloody stains in the darkness. In a perversion of the Hebrews, these sanguinary marks declare damnation rather than salvation to those within.

A faint glow leads me onward even as it is threatened on all sides by the shades of night. It beckons me forward to my destination. Suspicious looks glare at me as I pull open the door, but the barkeep nods at my appearance. The few other occupants loosen the tension of their shoulders like puppets whose strings their master has let slacken. Is that not all we are these days—puppets waiting for our strings to be cut?

Places like this should not be open any more by the express order of the magistrate. However, a few such as these invite in old friends until the imposed curfew. Places of entertainment were to be closed in a late attempt to prevent further spread of the sickness, with the added benefit of forcing citizens to dedicate all of our fleeting time to preparing our immortal souls. Perhaps it was these spiritual contemplations I was attempting to escape, even if only for the space of an hour.

I make my way over to a corner table with a lone occupant some distance away and receive a small glass of ale for a proportionally small coin. I take a swallow as my eyes float over to the occupied chair. The man sitting on its edge is slumped over in a parody of a cat's arched back. Not that anyone saw many cats, or dogs for that matter, these days. They had all been killed. From the dirt that he wears as a second layer of flesh and the sores on his hands, I can guess the man's profession. The empty, starved look in his eyes only confirms my suspicion.

Morbid curiosity and attempting to escape the constant nothingness that had been my sole companion for many months now, drive me to lean down and ask, "How many today?"

"'undreds," he says. His voice is grating as if his mouth is a creaking door finally put into use after having been sealed for years. In the silence that follows, his ponderous head turns at the neck to search in my direction. It gazes, but does not see. As if my question had wound up a music-box, the gravedigger continues to speak. It is a song of death, eternal, unable to be silenced, and determined to be heard.

"We've got carts of 'em. Carts full of 'em. Some wrapped up, some bare as they came into the world. We got all kinds. Sometimes it's one from the street, sometimes it's an 'ouse-full we got to get one by one. You'll find 'em in the damnedest places too. A few I 'ad to crawl to grab—'ad to carry the poor bas-

tards back to the cart. The worst are ‘em ones ‘at been sittin’. The stench is ‘ow you tell. I’ll tell you ‘at cart starts gettin’ real ‘eavy. So damn ‘eavy. Your voice gets raw from calling to bring ‘em out. I still ‘ear that damn bell ringing now, always banging about between my ears.” He points with his stump of a finger to his temple. He takes a pause here to touch some ale to his lips.

I start to hear his bell pounding in my own skull, ringing with the throb of my chest. Under the weight of his eyes, seeing but not seeing and in a way seeing something beyond me, I shiver. It feels as if all the warmth of my body has fled to my head, leaving the rest to suffer in the chill.

“But what really gets you,” he continues, “is the pits. At the start, we never dreamed we could fill ‘em. Looking down in is like staring straight down into ‘ole Lucy’s eyes, into the very stuffing of darkness. Boy were we wrong. These pits, they weren’t deep enough. We toss ‘em in, pack ‘em in, but there’s always more. ‘Times I wonder if we got enough dirt to cover ‘em all.

“Times I wonder if the day will come where I’s all that’s left, me, my cart, and my shovel, burying the world.”

The weight grows heavier, too heavy. I press the heel of my hand over my brow as I examine the sickly yellow in my glass. The chill in my fingers basks in the extreme heat that gathers on the skin of my forehead. I take a sip in an attempt to cool the fire burning in my throat, but it sits angry in my stomach. Fear of retching makes me cover my mouth with the back of my hands, but it is to no avail. I quickly lose the contents of my stomach in the corner.

“Ey that man’s not right!” a voice calls from across the room.

“He isn’t sound!” another takes up. Before I can even collect myself, “plague” is being whispered all about.

“We got to git ‘im outta here or else we’ll all be locked in!” someone else adds. Some immediately flee, fearing being shut up. Those that remain look toward me with a mix of terror and hatred.

“I have no plague,” I manage to say. They are clearly unmoved. I can see by their expressions that I am already condemned and nothing I can say will persuade them otherwise.

“What should we do?” says the barkeep, someone I considered a friend.

“You know me George, you know I’m sound!” He does not look in my direction and does not acknowledge my cry besides a slight grimace that stretches his lips wide.

“I ‘ave my cart,” says the grave-digger. I try to run, but my body is so weakened by my previous episode that I struggle merely to stand. Soon I am taken up on both sides by large hands with strong grips. Before I can even fully grasp the horror of my situation, I am thrust out onto the street and laid upon a stretch of rough wood, hard upon my spine. I am soon wrapped up in a stiff material that I drench in sweat and the hot tears that ravage my cheeks. Something shifts below me as I realize that I am in motion. I scream, but in these times I am simply adding to the dirge of night that is now the anthem of this dying city. No one would dare risk themselves for one who could be infected. No one would risk leaving the safety of their home.

“Hush now, we’re nearly there,” says my captor, the grave-digger. I scream with renewed vigor, even though I know no one will come to my aid. I call out to God and beg with pleas to spare my life.

“Who’d you think sent me?” says the grave-digger with a low, hollow chuckle. Struggling with the cloth, I find myself tightly bound and severely weakened. Could I indeed be infected? I had heard rumors of those poor souls that died in hours from the distemper with no previous sign. Am I one of those souls?

We continue our rocking journey, and my screams fade to whimpers as I begin to process the likely destination to which we head. The ride becomes less wild, but the grave-digger struggles to push me further, alerting me to the fact that we now travel over grass. I have mere minutes to make my escape. I writhe with all my might, but the effort is useless. I am bound so tight that I might as well be chained. The cart begins to slow and with a sickening sensation, I feel the top part of the cart begin to rise.

“I am glad you kept your appointment with me. I cannot be kept waiting, I will always come,” the grave-digger says, but it can scarcely be heard over my cries. I try to push up and keep myself on the cart, but I feel the tilt start to slide me downward. With no limbs free to attempt to stop the pull, my body succumbs without my will’s volition. I look into the pit and begin my descent.

There is a brief moment where I am suspended, both with the living and the dead. This ends and I fall onto something cold and surprisingly stiff. The next thing I am aware of is the stench and I rotate my neck, not wanting to see, but having to see. I make out the shape of a jawbone to the left and just above, a pair of glassy eyes seeing nothing of this world. The grave-digger’s words come back to me, Ole Lucy’s eyes. Cold, soft dirt begins to fall like snow upon me, catching in my wide open mouth and blocking my cries.

“There is no escaping me.” It rings and rings in my ears like a bell. Lord have mercy on my soul.