

EXALTED VS WORLD OF DARKNESS

EVERYBODY HAPPY AS
THE DEAD COME HOME

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January

WE WERE DOING a gig in the Rat's Nest the first time I saw Andrew Parker.

It wasn't the name over the door, you understand. That was Moody's Blues. But all the local bands called it the Rat's Nest, on account of what the green room in the back looked like: couches ripped all to shit, leaking stuffing everywhere; cigarette burns on the carpet; weird tufts hanging down from between the ceiling tiles that you wanted to think were old bits of tape and paper but probably were some kind of toxic mold.

Didn't matter, doesn't matter. We weren't in the back, we were up on stage: me, Jess, Mike crouched behind the drums, Bill, and Patti with the microphone. We were already pretty well into the set, having worked through our couple of original songs to – if I'm being honest – indifferent response, but that just freed us up to do what we were known for: take any and all requests.

We were about halfway through some new Rise Against song and we hit a lull in the middle where all I had to do was hold a couple of notes while Bill took over with his backup guitar. I took the time to watch Patti lean into the mic. She used to have this incredible goddamned growl and in our early days we played around it, but she hadn't sounded like that in a couple of years now. I didn't know if she *couldn't* anymore, or just didn't want to, and frankly never wanted to ask. She was happier these days, and for me, that was worth taking a hit in vocal quality. Besides, there was something else there now, or at least I thought so: she could still hold a note just as well as ever, but now in this cracked contralto that sounded like an angel finding out God wasn't real on a sustained note.

Anyway, there she was, leaning into it, me with almost nothing to do, scanning the crowd during the breather:

"And for your sweat you'll be rewarded

They told us every day,

There's a land of milk and honey

And it's not that far away.

But the finish line kept moving,

And the promises wore thin,

And the smoke on the horizon

Was the burning promised land."

He was sitting by himself in the back, a drink untouched on the table in front of him, sticking out like a sore thumb from everyone else in the crowd: A man in a white suit with a pink tie, his face almost the same color as the suit, with hair like straw down past his ears. I couldn't see his eyes then – he was wearing a fucking hat indoors – but I think I assumed he was some kind of albino. He saw me see him and tilted his head, which gave me the weirdest chill.

Then it was time for me to go back to work (*“And this place used to be somewhere but they sold it out from under us”*), and I forgot about him. We finished the song, some asshole called for “Free Bird,” so we gave him “Free Bird,” nine solid minutes of it, and by the time I finished wetting my throat and looked around again, the weird white guy in the white suit was gone.

February

SECOND TIME WE were playing at the Last Roundup, second set of the night. Borndown was on before us. They're nice lads, except for Toby Pritchard, who thinks he's the second coming of Bill Bruford, and is more like the second coming of Billy Corgan. Complete knob.

Anyway, we got out on stage and started working through our original bits – again, to polite attention and applause but not much more – when I spotted him sitting right up in front of the stage. Same white suit, same weird pale face, but this time he had his hat on the table next to his full drink and I could see he was watching me and only me. *Fucking creep*, I figured, and made a little note in my head to walk back to my bike with Jess, who is a beef mountain. Otherwise, I shut it out. Creeps happen.

Then we opened the floor to requests, and Mr. White Suit raised his hand. I silently willed Patti to look past him, but something weird happened. It was like the whole room narrowed down to just his hand, hovering there in the dark. I felt it, and so did Patti, because she leaned down over him. “What’s your poison, mate?”

The man spoke in a dry, almost featureless voice. “You know Metallica?”

Patti looked around the room. “I think everyone’s at least heard of ‘em, mate.” Chuckles around the room.

“Can you do ‘Blackened?’” he asked.

I should point out that most people who listen to music at a club aren’t cunts. If you ask for requests, you mostly get back people’s favorite songs, or something they think would sound good with the kind of noise you’re making. But there are always the ones who show up with an urge to be difficult, and ask for some God-awful thing like “Through the Fire and Flames” or “Cliffs of Dover.” Something where you need three hands or a trained spider working the frets to really nail it.

Or, of course, one of me. Patti glanced over at me. I looked right back at White Suit, and by way of reply, walked down part of Andrew W.K.’s “Ready to Die.” A few people in the crowd picked up the lyrics that go with that particular progression (*We shoot without a gun / We’ll take on anyone / It’s really nothing new / It’s just something we like to do*) and laughed or clapped.

“All right,” Patti said, and took a drink. “Blackened” wasn’t really a good match for her vocals, but fuck it: the gauntlet had been cast down, I’d picked it up, and she had my back. We swung into it: nuclear war, the eradication of humanity, complete destruction of the earth, all played out across six strings. It was at least an interesting choice, I thought. Usually if someone was going to be a cunt with Metallica, they went for Master of Puppets, which is pure speed torture. This was a lot more intricate, constantly shifting time and tempo, and while it’s not a personal favorite, it at least kept me awake. The others struggled – Mike in particular took a hot second to get the hang of the snare coming in on the upbeat – but we got through it.

White Suit clapped in precise measure with the rest of the room. I arched sweat off my forehead, someone called for “Ruby Soho,” and we got on with it.

White Suit was waiting in the hall as I walked out toward the parking lot. Jess was already gone – I'd forgotten all about asking him for an escort – so I braced for whatever was coming. The man took his hat off. "Layla Church?"

"Don't think I owe any collections agencies anything right now, mate. You'll excuse me."

"My name is Andrew Parker," he said, as though we were having a conversation rather than me trying to brush past him and get out the door. "I'd like a moment of your time, if you don't mind. I have a proposition."

I looked back at him. His eyes were blue, not albino-pink, and almost glassy. My first impression was that he was on something. "Not that kind of gal, sorry."

"A business proposition. A *musical* proposition."

I paused, thinking. There was another band on stage now. There were still plenty of people in the club. If this turned weird, all I had to do was yell. "Should have opened with that. We can talk in the lounge."

So he perched on an old folding chair while I sat down on the Roundup's hideous orange-and-green couch. "Music is my passion," Parker said.

"You might be lost then," I said, lighting up a Sterling and watching him flinch. At the time, I thought he was just over-concerned with what other people did with their bodies, but now, thinking back, I think he didn't like the lighter popping up that little flame all of a sudden. "This ain't the Royal Albert Hall."

He shook his head. "Anyone can hear what everyone else is listening to. That bores me."

"So what are you, then," I asked, "some kind of talent scout? You see us play a set and now we're ready for the big time?"

"God, no. I'm not with a record label or anything of the sort, although I certainly have connections that would be of use to anyone working from gig to gig." He drew out his wallet, opened it, and produced two of the new £50 notes, the reddish ones with Alan Turing on them, and laid them on a little round table between us.

I didn't reach for them. Turing did what people expected of him, and look how that turned out for him. "What's that for?" I asked.

"Get out your guitar," Parker said. "I want to hear you play."

I got set back up and backed myself onto a stool. I've never much cared to play sitting in a chair if I could help it. "Okay. What am I playing?"

"Whatever you want. Play what's in your heart."

I walked through the first thirty seconds of "Sweet Child o' Mine," then looked up and saw Parker looking at me with eyes like dead glass. Doll eyes. I realized then that he wasn't on anything: this was him. He was someone who had to remind himself to blink. I stopped.

"That's the song in your heart?" he asked. "A child's first guitar lesson?"

“Yeah, I always dreamed of making a hundred pounds without working for it.” He didn’t so much as crack a smile. No sense of humor. In a flash, I sensed he was the sort who would stand up and let me have the two £50 notes, and the price of my disappointing him would simply be that I never saw him again, and it occurred to me that maybe I was about to fuck up a real opportunity for the lot of us. “Nah,” I said, clearing my throat, “nah, just making sure everything’s in order. Tuned and all. Let me see.”

Suddenly I was nervous, which pissed me off, so I set my fingers to the strings and let them surprise me. What I heard them offer up was a little tune that had been running around my head for a few weeks off and on now: undeveloped, tricky, with lots of shifting progression. I thought it sounded like something Keith Emerson might have done if he’d ever gotten over himself and played the guitar, instead of insisting on trying to make a keyboard sound like one. It had been well less than half-finished in my head, but now that I was playing it there was no stopping, so I improvised, trying to pull together something more coherent than a noodling, go-nowhere guitar jam. I looked at Turing’s face on the notes – Christ, what a shitty apology. Thanks for saving the Union for us! Sorry about humiliating you, castrating you, and hounding you to death for not loving the way the Tories approve of, but hey, seventy years on, we’ll square it by putting you on the fifty right before we plow its value into the fucking pavement by way of Brexit.

I realized I had shifted into a heavy, angry riff without losing any of the earlier complexity, that my fingers were blurring on the machine, and that if I took even a moment to consider what I was playing that I was going to fuck it up, so I followed the sound for another twenty seconds until I saw a way to wind it down and tie it all off, and then I unslung the guitar and grabbed both Alan Turings and stuffed them into my jacket. “There,” I said. “I bloody earned that.”

“Yes,” Parker said, “you did. Let me call some people.”

March

WE WERE SITTING outside of Nando's, two feet from freezing-cold rain, sharing a peri-peri chicken platter. As usual, Bill and Patti had argued it down to *hot* from *extra hot*, which was my preference and, if I'm being honest, which I knew would be more like group suicide than a shared meal for everyone else at the table, so I didn't fight too hard. I forget how it happened, but somehow the subject of Andrew Parker came up.

"Don't like him," Jess pronounced. "Don't trust him, don't like him."

I'll confess it: I can be a fucking dunce sometimes, because I bristled. "Ain't he come through for us?"

Nobody disagreed. Since I did my little improv performance for Andrew, Unlawful Carnal Acts went from struggling to see our next booking from our current one to having gig after gig after gig land in our laps. It seemed like everyone on the circuit thought we had something worth looking at: we were going to run out of places to play at this rate.

"Yeah," Bill finally admitted, "but I think that's just by accident, Lay. He only talks to *you*."

Only a right cunt would accuse a mate of jealousy to his face, so I ate my chicken instead. But I was thinking it. Because, like I said, I can be stupid.

April

WE WERE RIDING in a cab over to Camden, talking about guitars, when I realized I hadn't spoken to any of my mates outside of showing up for gigs in... Jesus Christ, a week? Longer? I started counting the days.

Andrew didn't notice me disconnect from the conversation. He'd been talking about Lead Belly's guitar – a unique twelve-string device, strung B to B rather than E to E, among other features – and his desire to own it; or rather, the sheer financial irresponsibility of ever acting on that desire. “Kurt Cobain wanted to buy that guitar,” he said, “and he could never justify the expense. It would seem almost vulgar, I think, to acquire something that a talent like that wanted but could never have, don't you think? And almost an insult; I quite liked Cobain.”

I didn't know how old Andrew Parker was – who the fuck asks? – but would have guessed he was in his early thirties. This wasn't the first time he'd spoken as though he had some personal experience of the music of yesteryear; as on all the previous occasions, I dismissed it, because I had bigger concerns. Eleven days. I hadn't so much as called up to see what was going on with anyone I knew in eleven days.

“So,” Andrew said, “imagine my delight when I learned of this fellow in Wisconsin who has a business creating perfect replicas of classic instruments. He's already done one Lead Belly recreation that I know of, and–”

I shifted on the seat, broke in. “Where *are* we going?”

“Camden.”

“Yeah, no shit, but where in Camden?”

Parker's teeth were the same color as his cheeks and his coat. “That's a surprise.”

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The surprise turned out to be the goddamned Electric Ballroom. The crowd was eclectic enough that I didn't look out of place, if only because it's almost impossible *to* look out of place there. As we headed upstairs, I saw a woman with the same weird, pale complexion as Andrew shoot a glare at him from one of the bars on the far side of the club. It was like a laser, cutting through the crowd and the noise and everything else. He returned it with a curled lip.

Wait a second, I thought, who was that standing there talking to her? “Was that fucking Mick Jagger?”

Parker sniffed. “As I said when we met, there are some sounds anyone can listen to.”

The act that night was a band called the Ladybones and if I'm being honest, they were really fucking good. The lead singer put me in mind of Gibby Haynes: he could up-shift from a smoky drawl to a shriek like an engine tearing itself apart in a matter of seconds, maintaining perfect pitch control every step of the way. I found my fingers tapping the railing.

“Christ,” I said when they wrapped, “what a show.”

“Yes,” Parker said.

It wasn't the first time he'd taken me to a venue, but on each previous occasion, we'd managed a booking there not long after. I couldn't credit that here. "This place seems a bit much for Unlawful Carnal Acts, though, don't you think?"

"Yes," he said again, which, even though it was the sane response, left me feeling like I'd been splashed in the face with ice water. "Come with me. I want you to meet the band."

I followed. I am not a cocktail party sort of girl. I am not, in point of fact, a get-to-know-you sort of person at all, so it felt excruciatingly awkward when Andrew pushed his way backstage – the way people got out of the way made me seriously re-evaluate just how much of a VIP he had to be – and made his introductions. He guided us through topics, taking a while to get around to lightly talking up my guitar work, which I sure as hell hadn't had any intention of bringing up.

"You play lead?" the Ladybones singer asked.

"I torture the strings a bit."

He laughed. "Yeah? What's your outfit?"

There are worse moments in life than naming your band to another local professional only to get a totally blank look back, but most of them happen in a dentist's chair. I braced myself. "I play with Unlawful Carnal Acts."

The drummer snapped his fingers. "I think I caught them last month at Ain't Nothin' But."

"Yeah?" the singer asked, tilting his head.

"Yeah." The drummer gave a nod – some private signal of approval passed – and the friendliness in the room crept up a notch.

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Later, sitting in the back booth of a late-night café, I asked him: "So what was that?"

Andrew dropped his knuckles against the table, making the coffee in the cup he hadn't touched since it arrived ripple: knock, knock. "Opportunity."

I felt a flush mounting up my neck. "It felt more like a fucking playdate."

He ignored that. He usually did, when I showed my teeth. "Ladybones is having, let's say *difficulties* with their lead guitarist. Not to put too fine a point on it, the man is an uncontrollable drunk, which may be excused in a musician if it does not interfere with actually showing up to dates, but beyond a certain point..."

"That's a shame for them," I began, when he cut me off.

"I saw your fingers beating out the tempo: they suit your tastes perfectly. And their *ideas*, Layla. If you want a challenge to really sink your teeth into—"

"I already have a band."

Those dusty blue eyes landed on me, flat and dismayed. It had been a long time since I noticed how creepy they were. "May we speak plainly?"

“Yeah,” I said, hitching up my jacket. “I think we’d better.”

“Mike Crosby could easily be replaced with a drum machine. Bill VanderMeer can’t keep up with you as either backup or rhythm guitar. Jess Rosenthal has a good ear that is unfortunately wedded to fingers like sausages. You have real talent... no, let me be honest: genius. The kind of talent Hendrix had. Your friends... don’t.”

“Yeah?” I asked, overhead fluorescents shining in my eyes. There was a lump in my throat. I spoke past it. “And Patti? Tell me about her.”

“Nobody’s pining for another Culture Club right now.”

I laughed, honestly relieved. I’d been afraid – just a second ago, I’d really been afraid – that this was going to be hard. But no, he’d just made it easy. “Go buy that Lead Belly replica and fuck yourself with it, Andy.”

A few moments passed in which Andrew Parker didn’t move, didn’t breathe. “People don’t tell me no, Miss Church.”

“Wow. That’s not the press-quote for every rapey asshole in the business or anything. Bye.” I started to rise.

He didn’t give me time to scream. I barely saw him move: just a brief impression of something pale and black-eyed coming around the table, mouth cranked all the way open like a shark, and then I was pressed to the corner of the booth, lifted up on waves of fire. They were pain, I distantly knew that, pain in my neck, but they didn’t feel like pain in the moment. I felt my back arching into him, this creepy son of a bitch who was *eating me*, my hands making fists in his coat like – shit, I don’t like to think of what it was like. Nobody should be able to make you feel like that while they’re killing you.

Then, suddenly, he wasn’t. He was standing above me, patting his mouth with a paper napkin, which instantly showed through in several red spots. Woozy, I reached up and touched my neck. It took a couple of tries. I expected to feel a wet ragged crater, maybe bone, but the only irregularity was two bumpy scabs.

Andrew was breathing hard. I realized it was the first time I’d ever actually *seen* him breathe. He wasn’t as pale as usual either. “No,” he said. “No, not like that. You want to be nobody? Fine. Be nobody. Goodbye, Layla Church.”

I stayed in that booth until the sun came up, ordering cup after cup of coffee. I don’t think I even startled the waitress when I started to laugh; you work an all-night restaurant, I guess you see it all. But around five in the morning, in spite of the terror, it struck me funny, it struck me really funny: somehow on top of out-of-control climate change and Brexit and another swing into a fucking austerity economy, *somehow*, on top of *all that*, we also had vampires.

I guess it was that or scream, and they’d have kicked me out into the dark for screaming.

May

HOME IS WHERE nobody believes you when you lie and tell them you're okay.

I didn't tell the rest of the band we'd lost our patron, much less *how* we'd lost our patron, but they figured the first one pretty fast, and they had their ideas on the second.

Mike was the one that finally tried to broach it while he, Patti, and I were sitting at a bus stop, waiting for the Godawful heat and humidity to tail off as the sun set. Not that I liked the sight of sunsets anymore. I guess he noticed me shooting looks up and down the street as the shadows got longer, and cleared his throat. "You know, Lay, if you want to talk about it—"

"What?" I'd been thinking about my bike, which was developing something fucked in the carburetor. Then I noticed he and Patti had sat down flanking me on either side, and I looked at Mike and realized where he was going, and my only desire in the world became to head him off before he got there.

My first instinct had been to get the band back together and shit had that ever been a mistake. It turns out you can't play it cool when you're down three pints of blood. It turns out, in fact, that just crawling back to your flat and draining off a whole carton of orange juice is pretty heroic in those circumstances, but I was born stupid so I gave it a shot, and everyone got to see me looking half-dead with a scarf around my neck in the middle of spring. So now here was Mike, saying: "I mean, if you ever need to talk about what happened with that fucking prick, you know—"

"Nothing *happened*," I said, which wasn't true, but how the fuck do you even get into it?

Mike exchanged a glance with Patti and I wanted to die. "Right," he said. "You know it ain't on you, yeah?"

"Please, Satan, give me strength. I didn't get raped, Mike. Okay? Please relax."

Mike, who had screwed up all his courage to have this talk, had no idea where to go after that, poor lad. Patti stepped in to save him: "Yeah, okay," she said, "but also if you don't got nothing to talk about, we're still around, you know?"

"Yeah. Yeah, okay." How do you tell your friends vampires are real and you've been playing gigs for one?

June

THAT TURNED OUT to be an academic question. We sure as hell weren't playing gigs for vampires anymore. We were barely playing them at all. I knew after I told Parker to go pound sand that the magic touch was going to dry up, but it was more than that. Half the people who'd known and – I thought – liked us before we...fuck it, before *I* got involved with Parker, they lost our numbers. I couldn't even get a whiff of what poison he'd poured into the water for us, but we all felt the effects. No openings; no call-backs; not what we're looking for right now; all the old greatest hits, back to back to back.

Fuck it. We started out on our own. We always dealt with it before.

July

IT TURNS OUT a three-month dry spell is the point where the creditors start getting cranky. Jess was back working in his uncle's garage, which is at least better than the rest of us were doing. It turned out none of us squirreled away that brief windfall when London couldn't get enough of us for a rainy day. Bill finally sprung for a replacement for that absolute piece of shit Volvo his dad gave him when he was a teenager; I don't know how he's going to keep up payments, and he may not either. Me and Mike, we both had backed-up bills to pay.

Patti was back to couch surfing with friends, which I have to admit worried me. London was a cold, mean place at the best of times, and these were far from the best of times for Patti or anyone like her.

August

PATTI MOVED BACK in with her folks, which was the signal for me that shit had gone too far. We've had two bookings in the past month.

Fine, I decided. I got us into this mess; I'll get us out. I sent word around, very careful-like so it wouldn't get back to the others, looking for Andrew. He wants me to tapdance on the fucking moon, I'll do it if it spares Patti from having to spend one more minute around her fucking dad.

September

TWO GIGS IN six weeks. Patti showed up to our last one in an old pair of slacks and a workshirt. Did her parents throw her clothes out, everything but what she left in the closet in her room back when she first moved out? I didn't quite have the nerve to say anything, but I can guess. I can guess a lot of things.

Things aren't getting better, and it feels like the only way they could get worse is if the gigs dried up entirely, which for financial purposes they may as well have. How long can one asshole hold a grudge?

Speaking of, all of my feelers came back with nada. As far as the lower-echelon London club scene is concerned, there's no such thing as Andrew Parker.

October

I GOT THE call at eleven o' clock, which is no goddamn time to be asleep when you're in my line of work, but then, I'm hardly *in* my line of work anymore, so there I was, stone cold out with my phone on my chest when it woke me up.

I stared at it for a second, bleary with sleep, then took the call. "Mike, hey. What's up?"

"Layla. Hey." He sounded like someone had lit a fire in him and burned up everything inside: nothing left now but ashes.

I sat up, knuckling crud out of my eyes. "Hey. You all right?"

"I'm all right. Or, I guess I'm not, I don't know." A pause. "Patti's gone."

My stomach did a thing. "She booked it out of that hellhole? She need somewhere to crash?"

"Gone, Lay. Pills."

I didn't say anything for a while.

"You still there?" Mike finally asked.

"Yeah." That didn't seem adequate. I added: "Fuck." That didn't seem right, either, but I was out of words.

"Me and Bill are going to head over to her folks' place in the morning. Do you want us to bring you along?"

"Why?" I asked. "Do you need help throwing the molotovs, or salting the earth after?"

†

Going to the funeral was a mistake. You know who sets up funerals? Whoever can pay for them. I rented a dress and everything: didn't even look like myself. Patti would have hated it. I thought about her voice all through the service, that new voice she built for herself, like a wounded angel. Partly I did it because I knew I had to fix it in my memory now, on account of I was never going to hear it again. Partly it was to keep from going over the casket every time the priest called her Patrick.

Being dead means they get to kick you when you're down just as much as they want. Never die: that's the lesson, I guess. So how come Andrew Parker's the only one who gets to learn it?

How do you kill a vampire if you can't even find him?

November

ANSWER: YOU DON'T.

I can still just about afford a library card, since those are free. My flat's stacked with all kinds of weird shit about the occult now so you can hardly move around in it, not that there was much room beforehand, and I don't know that any of it has told me anything useful since none of it agrees on anything. And since, more to the point, I still can't get anyone else to confirm there's any such thing as an Andrew Parker in the London musical scene.

So, that's me then: sitting on a safety pylon, looking across the Thames at the great hideous mass of the O2 Arena on the other side of the river, which looks like some kind of huge beast pierced with spears by the city lights. Sitting here, freezing my ass off, and working my way through a sixer of Carlsberg. The glass bottles look and taste like a leprechaun pissed in them. That's where Layla Church's story ends. And where it begins.

I finish off a bottle, wind my arm back, and scale it out into the river, where it sinks with a wholly unsatisfying splash. Everything is wholly unsatisfying these days. But – I blink and focus – the water isn't subsiding. This is the Thames: I shouldn't have gotten more than a *plink*, there and gone. The waters are frothing, heaving...boiling? Steam rises from the river in a plume, a spreading fan. Colors erupt within it, like peacock feathers, and for a moment I forget to breathe.

Then the steam parts, and my teeth catch a scream between them. Something descends from the water, air, the steam linking them. It's humanoid, but not at all human. It has a beak like a bird, and fur like an ape, and terrible cruel talons. It's burning white and green and scarlet, very real flames that are eating their way through its muscles, and I realize it is dying.

Then it lands on the thin verge of concrete between me and the water, very physically real. At least as real as vampires. It vocalizes something. I hear it with my ears, but understand it with my heart: "*I seek the Empress...*"

In my defense for everything that comes next, I am very drunk. "Yeah, mate?" I squint at the dying...demon? It looks like a demon. "Rumor has she's in Buckingham Palace, and God's s'posed to save her. You don't look much like Him." It occurs to me, belatedly, that I should probably break one of these bottles so I have something to defend myself with instead of cracking fucking jokes.

It seizes me by the shoulders then, its grip making the leather of my jacket hiss. "*The pinnacle of Heaven stands empty!*" it croaks. "*The Rising Kings seek a throne!*"

I don't say anything. What the fuck do you say to that?

The thing looks into my eyes, looks into *me*, and it doesn't have eyes of its own anymore, it has two emerald pits a hundred thousand years deep. I can't read what's in them, but I sense the horror of it...and the power. A vampire in a diner is nothing next to this. It croaks, and I realize it's laughing at me. "*I have come in vain. You are no king, but a worm.*"

I surprise us both by spitting in its face, grasping its wrists – immediate, incredible pain in both hands – and prying its talons off of me. I don't let go, even though I'm pretty sure my palms are cooking. I

force it down to its knees. The words come from somewhere: “You don’t get to look down at me, you half-dead, burning piece of shit.”

It laughs again. “*When have you ever burned, to speak so?*”

I remember my guitar: the heft of it, the sound of it, but most of all, that deep scratch I put in the body like an idiot getting it into an elevator one time. You can’t see the scratch, because Patti slapped a sticker over it the same night: Popeye the Sailor in black and white, saying *I yam what I yam and that’s all what I yam*. “Every single day of my life.”

It looks at me again, really *looks* at me, and says: “*What would you do with a gift of fire, mortal – of real fire?*”

“Burn everything that wants burning,” I growl.

“*Dost thou then accept the power to order worlds, and to end them? Dost–*”

“Shut the fuck up,” I husk into the smell of my own burning skin, “and give me my turn.”

“*THEN LET IT BE SO,*” tolls a voice like an iron bell, *not* that of the demon, as it unravels into bands of brass and viscid flesh and topples me into the river.

December

I AM DREAMING: In my dreams, row upon row of men who sell children are locked into iron cages. The bars of the cages are heated, and then their sides are drawn together until flesh splits and bones crack. The men beg for mercy, and receive exactly as much as they have shown.

†

I am dreaming: In my dreams, I see the billionaires – all of them, without exception, every last one to have ever lived – cast into a cauldron of the rendered fat and boiling grease of all the gluttons that have come before them. I see devils section their flanks and cheeks, their thighs and bellies, and char them in their own juices. Once they are dissolved, they are reborn to experience it again.

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I am dreaming: In my dreams, the rapists of the world are castrated again and again. In my dreams, those who assert themselves through violence fall forever into a meshwork of spinning blades. In my dreams, those who got ahead and then pulled the ladder up behind them wander a supersonic desert where sand and metal flays away everything they have and everything they are.

They are good dreams.

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In my dreams there is a wheel, turning from days of bliss and eras of glory toward a nadir, a shadow: an age of darkness and horror for which there are no words. In my dreams, Heaven is empty and no one watches over the world as the jackals walk on two legs and learn to wear suits. No one stops them from burning the sky and gorging themselves on the Earth's bounty until they are fit to burst, laughing at the starvation around them. There is no justice: only us, and the horror of what we do to ourselves. Evil is never punished. In my dreams some of these creatures, these worms, these pieces of shit crawl through the rotten boards of the universe and learn to grasp the power of the infinite. They grow fangs. They learn magic. They dream their own dreams. They dream my dream: of the empty throne, of a vacant Heaven, and of a chair they might sit upon. They pull themselves toward it, hand over hand.

My dreams end. It is time to go to work.

†

If you run from wild dogs, they will chase you. Nobody told Dhita that, but by the time the three drunken university lads have pursued her down to the waterfront, she's figured it out. They're hooting as they descend the embankment. One of them lobs a bottle: it misses her, bursts like a bomb against a safety pylon.

"Where you going, sweetheart?" one of them calls.

"We just wanted to have a chat," another one says.

"Nobody wants you here, you Paki bitch," the third declares.

Dhita explodes: "I'm not even Pakistani, you drunk bastards."

They pause for just a moment upon hearing that. Two of the lads look at one another. "Same difference, innit?" one of them suggests.

"Sright," the other agrees. They finish making their way down the slope.

Dhita doesn't think this is her night, and it's really hard to blame her. These men, if you want to call them that, have just run a chase and their blood is up. She tried to use her phone to summon help, but dropped it on the sidewalk a block and a half back. And now her heels are up against thin air, with only the oily, polluted, gurgling waters of the Thames behind her. When the fine upstanding young citizens before her grow still and silent, she can't understand why at first. She doesn't see the poisoned emerald radiance spreading through the waters, heralding some rising deep-sea predator. She doesn't see me break the surface and stand upon the water behind her, weighing the souls before me and finding three of them wanting. She doesn't know yet (though they'll all find out in a second) that I can now move as fast as a cyclone and break bones like kindling.

I hear Patti in my head, Patti's voice like an unraveling angel, covering an old pop song:

We are no monsters, we're moral people

And yet we have the strength to do this.

"What the fuck?" university lad #3, whose name is Reggie Bartram, asks.

"It must be Christmas," I say, stepping onto the shore. I'm among them less than a second later. All of us chose violence tonight, but it soon turns out I'm a lot better at it.