

A LEGITIMATE OBLIGATION

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I

The rain started just as my cab from LAX dropped me off. The sun had gone down an hour ago, and the bright lights of the City of Angels in the distance painted the smog and the clouds overhead with their sickly glow. Except for the earthquakes, I thought, this place wasn't any different from Jersey or New York City. Sure, it was brighter and the people were richer, but it was no less a sinkhole for selfish, stuck-up bastards who wanted to make names for themselves and feel like they're on top of the world. It was just the kind of place the Devil would go to sit back and laugh at the world he'd created.

That ain't to say that this house the cab dropped me off at was any great shakes. It was a yellow split-level place in a suburb outlying LA proper. It had a tiny lawn of tall, weedy grass, and it was crammed in between two other places just like it. I pulled down the brim of my hat,

turned up my jacket's collar and headed for the porch. I rang the doorbell. There was no awning or anything, so I just stood there getting drenched until the light finally came on. When it did, the door opened a few inches and half a face appeared in the gap. It was a woman, about forty or so years old with black hair and blue eyes. She looked up at me, chewing on her bottom lip.

"You Sylvia Spheener from New Jersey?" I asked her over the rain. It was really loud, coming right down on my hat like it was. "Formerly Sylvia Macellaio?"

"Yes," Sylvia said, narrowing her eyes. "Who are you?"

"Harvey," I said automatically, even though it was only half true.

"Harvey who?"

"That ain't important. How 'bout letting me in before I catch pneumonia?"

Granted, I don't look like much, even on the best of days, so it didn't surprise me that Sylvia hesitated. My bodyin's about thirty pounds overweight, my shoulders slump, and the suit under my jacket hadn't been cleaned or pressed even before I'd boarded my cross-country flight to LA earlier that day. Add in the fact that I was getting pissed and the weather was shitty, and you could say I was asking a lot of her.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want to talk to you about your daughter," I said. "Your brother Sal sent me."

"Sal? What does he—"

"Let me in," I growled, "and I'll tell you all about it."

The suspicion on her face turned entirely to confusion, but she finally got out of my way. I pushed the door open and followed her up the steps into her living room. I draped my sopping-wet coat over the banister rail and set down my bag but kept my hat and black plastic sunglasses on. Cold water rolled down the back of my collar, but better that than dealing with the look on Sylvia's face if I took the hat and glasses off. She could already see some of the scar on my forehead—the scar from the nine-millimeter bullet that'd punched a hole in my skull—but I didn't want to give her the whole thing to gawk at.



"Do you want to sit down?" Sylvia said, backing halfway into her kitchen while I stood at the head of the stairs. "Want some tea or anything?"

"Tea? Do I look like a faggot to you?"

Sylvia flinched. "Coffee? I have that."

"Yeah, coffee. That's better."

I followed her into the kitchen. It was small and dingy, and dirty dishes cluttered the table. Crusty pots and pans crowded each other on the counter, and the sink was packed corner-to-corner with more of the same. The floor looked like it hadn't been swept in about a month. It made me sick just looking at it. Why can't people take care of what they have? Fucking apes.

"So you're here about Sharon, you say?" Sylvia said as she poured water into the electric coffeemaker and pressed a button. "What do you know about my daughter?"

"For starters, I know she's gone missing," I said. "I know you've been to the police, but they think she ran away. Just looking at you, I can tell you're pretty desperate because you don't think anybody's going to help you. Yeah?"

Sylvia's eyes went blank, and her mouth peeled open. "How do you know that?"

There were two answers I could have given her right then. One might have made her mine right there on the spot. It might have forged a bond between us that nobody could have broken. The other thing was the truth, though, so I went with that. Like I was going to forge an unbreakable bond with this disgusting slob.... No thanks. I got standards.

"Sal told me," I said. "In Jersey."

Sylvia's eyes went from confused to ice cold as the realization dawned on her. "You're one of Sal's goons."

"I wouldn't say that," I said. I didn't add *if I were you*.

"So how does Sal know about Sharon?" Sylvia demanded. "I haven't talked to him since his son's first communion ten years ago. Has that rat been spying on me?"

"Calm down," I said. "Your brother's got connections. He's a powerful man with a lot of friends. I know you know this."

"Yeah," Sylvia said. "Part of why I moved out here was to get away from those 'friends' of his. But I guess I can't. Just when I thought I was out, they pull me—"

"Oh, just pour the fucking coffee," I snapped. "Jesus Christ Almighty."

I felt a guilty little jolt for that, but the outburst did the trick. Sylvia shut her mouth, poured me a cup of coffee and sat back down. I took a sip from my mug, and the steam fogged up my sunglasses.

"So who *has* been spying on me for Sal?" Sylvia asked.

"You?"

"Fuck no," I said. "Sal didn't even know I was alive two days ago."

"So who?"

"I didn't ask, and I don't care. All he told me was he's got eyes on you, making sure you're safe so far from home. He wants to know you're staying out of trouble."

"That sanctimonious jerk," Sylvia hissed.

I shrugged. I'd met Sal—who was I to argue?

"It don't matter how he knows. He just does. And since you didn't call to ask him for help, he wanted me to fly out here and look out for you."

Sylvia snorted and set her mug down hard on the table. Coffee slopped out over her fingers. "That prick calls *this* looking out for me?" she said. "What's he know from staying out of trouble?"

"That ain't my department, lady." I set my own mug of coffee down. It was awful. Too bitter. "I'm just telling you what Sal told me."

"And doing what he told you to do."

"No," I said. "I told you I don't work for him. I'm only doing him a favor to square an old debt. I told him I'd do this thing for him to keep him off my back. That's it."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"Just like that?"

I was about to give this bitch Ebola, I swear.

"Yeah, lady, just like that." I took a deep breath and unclenched my fists.

"So you want some help or not?"

Sylvia clenched her jaw, but I saw her hand trembling as she wiped her fingers on the tablecloth. I could tell



how much it was hurting her not knowing where her daughter was. I could feel desperation and worry eating away at her from the inside. If she didn't have an ulcer the size of Shea Stadium dissolving her stomach lining, I was Jimmy Stewart.

Sure enough, Sylvia's shoulders slumped, and she let out a deep breath through gritted teeth. Her lip started shaking and her eyes misted. Her real feelings were starting to show through her bitchy façade. It was about time.

"You're right, I do need help," she said, sniffing and trying to swallow down a sob.

"I didn't mean to snipe at you. Please, I just don't know what else to do. My Sharon's been gone so long, and nobody will help me find her."

The whine in her voice reached out and tried to touch something buried deep inside me—a notion so deeply ingrained that people might call it instinct. It tried to tell me that people in pain deserve some kind of help, no matter who they were. But I'd grown up a lot since the last time I agreed with that load of bullshit. People didn't deserve a damned thing—they brought their pain on themselves. They always had. Hell, the scar on my forehead and my fucked-up right eye was proof enough of that. But I had a job to do, so I kept after her.

"Tell me about it then," I said. "What do you need?"

"I need my Sharon back," Sylvia said, pulling herself together at last. "If that's why you came, then please help me. I don't care who sent you, really."

In spite of all this lady's pain, I actually smiled then. If she knew anything about anything, she'd know better than to say that. But that was her problem, not mine.



After I had everything I needed from Sylvia, I took a cab to downtown LA. I was betting that hotel rooms were cheap in the vicinity, and that people probably wouldn't be lining up to get in any time soon. Three days of riots and a decent earthquake had set off a wave of paranoid hysteria here that was only now dying down. To hear the newscasters tell it, people had just gone ape-shit—worse than

Rodney King and Watts put together. They'd been out of their minds looting, fighting and wrecking everything they could get their hands on. Sure, it was all pretty tame compared to some of the shit I'd seen and done during the war, but for everyday people, it was fucking insane.

And now, after the dust had settled and the rebuilding had begun, people were seriously freaked out. Hardly anybody was hanging out on the street, and the ones who were scurried around like rats. Even the color-coded gangbangers scattered like crows whenever they heard a car coming, in case it was a wagon full of cops looking to crack some more heads.

In fact, the cops and the National Guard were the only ones out in force with any confidence. They marched around in armed packs like they were holy infantrymen. They looked like they were patrolling a war zone, but the way they fidgeted and twitched at the shadows showed they were just as scared as everybody else. They weren't out there to make the citizens feel safe, they just wanted to make sure everybody was too scared to try anything stupid.

First the federal government pussies sniffing up everybody's ass at the airport, and now this. I swear, this world was going to hell fast enough without people like me running around, thank you very much.

Anyhow, the cab dropped me off at a hotel close to the site of the riots, and I got myself a room up on the top floor. The stairway smelled like vomit and my room smelled like old sex, but the building wasn't in danger of collapse. Hell, the TV worked, the water worked, and I didn't have a crackhead squatter curled up in the corner—I counted myself lucky. I stripped off my suit and headed into the bathroom for a shower. While the water was getting hot, I took a good long look in the mirror. Of course, that ended up being a depressing mistake, and I shook my head. I couldn't believe how saggy, pasty and useless this body of mine was. It was a disgrace.

"You're a flabby sack of shit, Harvey," I said as steam started to rise behind me. "You know that? Fucking pathetic."



II

One of the locals started in on me first thing next morning. No sooner had I stepped out the front door of my hotel than I found this tall, skinny blond guy in a shiny black three-piece suit standing right in front of me. He was holding a lacquered cane next to his hip like a sword and wearing a long topcoat across his shoulders like a cape. We looked at each other, and I could tell he'd been in the war just like I had. Looked like he'd done a little better for himself coming back than I had, though. Even better, he looked like he was about to start preaching the virtues of starting a whole new life by picking up where I'd left off so long ago. *Great*, I thought. *Here we go.*

"Greetings," he said, wearing this slick smile I wanted to put my foot through. He was smiling like I was his new best friend. "You aren't from here originally, are you?"

Oh, and he was a fucking rocket scientist too.

"Of course not," he went on. "How long have you been back?"

"Who's asking?"

"I am called Daniel Mardero, but my name is Bedaliel. I am an Elohim of the Second House, which Michael named Asharu. I am an emissary of Nazathor, Princess of Majestic Liberation. And you are..."

"Busy," I told him. "But you can call me Harvey if you got to keep talking, Mandrake."

I walked around the guy to the curb and tried to hail a cab. Two seconds later, I heard him clear his throat and walk back over to me. He got right beside me and took my elbow. I resisted the urge to do the obvious thing.

"It's *Mardero*," he said. "And I already know exactly who you're looking for. I know the place he revealed himself, as well as where he was last seen. I know what they showed on the news and what was cut out. I've established many connections in this community, and I can help—"

"You don't know shit, pal," I said, jerking my arm loose. "Not about me or who I'm looking for. It ain't even who you think, so piss off."

"Then you're not trying to find the Morni—"

"Nope," I said, waving down a cab at last. "But even if I was, I wouldn't want help. If I did, I'd have brought it with me."

"Very well," Mardero said, obviously pissed but too classy to say so. "Good luck to you on your own then."

"Yeah, whatever."

I turned my back on him as the cab finally pulled up to the curb and threw grimy water onto the sidewalk. It drenched my shoes and should have gotten Mardero's too, but he was gone by the time the cab stopped.

Good riddance, I thought.

Spread the word that I don't want to be bothered. I got work to do.



During the cab ride, I forgot about Mardero for a while and thought about what Sylvia'd told me the night before. Apparently, she and her husband had met in some acting school in New York, where they'd gotten married. They moved to LA to be movie stars after graduation, but the only roles they were good enough for were janitor and secretary. About a year later, they settled down, bought a tiny house together and had Sharon.

Flash forward fifteen years and a day, now here we were. Sylvia and her husband, Jimmy, were split up but not legally divorced. Sharon worked a part-time job at a local library for pocket money. She lived at the house with her mother for a while, then crashed at her pop's apartment on his couch until the stench of his booze drove her out again. She repeated this pattern as necessary, pulling her dad out of the gutter and cleaning him off when he drank too much, then heading back to wade through Sylvia's mess and soak up the old lady's bitterness.

Right after the so-called Devil's Night Riots, though, Sylvia got scared because Sharon was with Jimmy who lives real close to all the action. She calls to check on the two of them, only to find out Sharon isn't there. Hasn't been for a while, either. Sylvia freaks out and calls the school and the library, but Sharon hasn't been to either place since before the last time Jimmy saw her. The cops look around town and check the hospitals and the



morgues, but Sharon never turns up. Since they got more important things to do, they generously write Sharon off as a runaway and promise to call in if Sharon ever happens to turn up.

The kid's probably under a hundred tons of concrete somewhere, but it's *possible* she just ran off. She could definitely do a lot worse than ditching her pig mother and drunk father. She'd probably be better off on her own, provided she wasn't just so much hamburger by now. If it were up to me, I wouldn't even have been looking for her. Trouble was, of course, it wasn't up to me. Once word had gotten to Sal back in Jersey that his baby sister's kid had disappeared, he'd suddenly turned into heroic big brother. And considering the fact that I both made Sal uncomfortable and owed him a favor, I was the perfect candidate for this little cross-country jaunt. He wanted me out of his face for a while so he could figure out what to do about me.

Fine, whatever. I know how the game works. So here I was on the wrong side of the country looking for some runaway—who was probably dead—for some crooked gangster I don't even like, out in the middle of this urban hell on earth. I bet the Devil would just be laughing his damned head off if he could see me. That prick.

Anyhow, it was cheerful thoughts such as this that kept me company as I took a cab through late-morning rush traffic to the apartment of one Jimmy Sphener—Sylvia's estranged husband and Sharon's father. He was the last person I knew who'd seen Sharon alive, so he was the only lead I had. Unfortunately, according to Sylvia, he was a wastrel, killing himself as slow as he knew how with booze and cigarettes. Plus, he hadn't even seemed to realize his own daughter had run away and was probably lying facedown under a pile of rubble. I couldn't help but think how this wasn't likely to go well for Jimmy without some kind of miracle.



Meeting Jimmy face to face didn't improve his chances much. The second I saw him, this ugly worm coiled in my guts and dug in barbed claws. I got this feeling like I was going to start spewing my guts up and not be able to stop

until I passed out or choked on my own puke. God, hardcore drunks make me sick.

Lucky for him, though, Jimmy didn't give me a good reason to just snap his neck right there and put him out of our misery. I found him in this little third-floor walk-up, trying to fight down a hangover with instant coffee, Advil and a half shot of the same hooch that'd done him in the night before. As it turned out, Sylvia had called him this morning and told him to be expecting me, so he'd dragged himself out of bed to make himself presentable. Have to give a guy credit for trying, I guess.

He invited me in and mumbled something about the couch while he shuffled around trying to tidy the place up some. His eyes were bloodshot and I could smell stomach acid on his breath, but he'd showered and his hair was combed like a civilized person's. He talked in that sort of heavy whisper a hangover victim gets after an all-nighter, but he wasn't slurring, and he didn't have that pleading whine a lot of drunks get the morning after.

We talked for a long time, going over basically the same ground I'd been over with Sylvia the night before. He talked about how proud he was of his little girl, but I could see how sad he was too. He felt sorry for her for having to spend so much time with her slob mother but having no one but him to retreat to. He said he could tell she pitied him, but she was too young to know that her pity only made him drink more. I hadn't asked him for his fucking life sob story, but I could sympathize with the bastard on one level. I knew about feeling sorry for a bright kid with a bright future because her pop was a worthless bum. That'd been my story, too, before one of Sal's guys had shot me in the head.

Once Jimmy got all that out of his system, he finally told me what I'd come looking for about when Sharon had disappeared. He told me Sharon had started coming home later and later from the library, that she wasn't spending as much time doing homework before bed anymore and how her grades had slipped as a result. Jimmy hadn't had the guts to punish her, but he'd had



enough sense to go snooping around in her room one day while she was gone.

"So what'd you find?" I asked. "Diary about some boy she was screwing?"

"No," Jimmy said. "Drugs. I found a bag of marijuana and a foil packet of LSD in a shoebox in her closet."

"No shit?" I said. "Where'd she get it from?"

"That's what I wanted to know. I put it here on the coffee table when she got home that afternoon and talked to her about it. I didn't even drink that day. We just talked about where she got the drugs and how long she'd been using them."

Father of the fucking year. "And?"

"She met the kid she got it from at the library. He was some college guy who came in every once in a while to talk to her and hang out. They started going out last year."

"Wait, this was last year when Sharon would have been fourteen?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"And this guy would have been... what... nineteen?" Jimmy nodded.

"Are you out of your mind letting a nineteen-year-old even *look* at your fourteen-year-old daughter?"

"Hey, I didn't know this was going on, remember?" Jimmy said. Now that whine was starting to come out. "Besides, it's only like five years' difference. If they were in their twenties or thirties, it wouldn't even matter."

"Yeah? How about this: When this guy got his driver's license, Sharon was eleven. When he went to his senior prom, she was twelve. Does it matter yet?"

"Okay," Jimmy said, wincing as I got louder. "You're right. I didn't do my best thinking when Sharon was around."

"No shit. So this college punk's dating your high school daughter and giving her drugs, and you finally found out about it. What'd you say to her then?"

"I didn't have the right to say much of anything, did I?" Jimmy muttered. "I've been between jobs, and I've been drinking more than usual. The weekend before this happened, Sharon'd had to haul me up off the bathroom floor and clean my own puke off me. All *she* had was

some acid and a dime bag of pot stashed in her closet. What could I really say?"

"How about, 'Quit taking drugs, drop your fuckhead dealer boyfriend and do your fucking homework' for starters? She's only fifteen years old, for Christ's sake."

There was that jolt again, but it was easier to ignore this time.

"I know," Jimmy moaned, looking at the floor. "I tried to talk to her about it again after that, I really did. I worked my courage up for it right before the big earthquake. Before Sharon left for work the last night I saw her, I told her we had to talk when she got back. I didn't hear from her again after that. I figured she'd just dodged back to her mothers 'til I let it drop."

"You didn't even call?" Jimmy hung his head. "Even after the earthquake and the *three fucking days of riots*? What about when your wife called the cops? Did you bring up any of this stuff to them?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I told them she left here mad the last night I saw her. I didn't tell them about the drugs or where she got them, or even who she got them from. I couldn't tell the cops or Sylvia about any of it. I didn't want them thinking about Sharon that way. Or me. Besides, they checked all the hospitals and morgues and she never turned up. She probably just ran off for a while to clear her head. Everything'll be all right. She just needs time."

"What she *needed* was somebody smacking some sense into her when she started acting like a JD," I said. "You're her fucking father, Jimmy. You were supposed to be taking care of her so she didn't end up running off to 'clear her head' in the first place. Instead, your fucking *brother-in-law's* got to send me all the way across the fucking country to find her because you can't be bothered to worry. You didn't even try to stop her, you bag of shit."

Red heat bloomed on Jimmy's face for a second, but I could tell it was more shame than outrage.

"You're right," he said in this flat, hollow voice. He slumped in his chair just like Sylvia had. "You're right."



I didn't do enough. I never did. And now Sharon's... Oh God, I should have done something."

"Damn right you should have, Jimmy," I said. "So now you're going to help me. We understand each other?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Good. Now tell me what you know about this boyfriend of Sharon's, and I'll go see what he knows about her running off. If you're lucky, she just ran to him and she's been too scared to leave since the quake and the riots. If you're lucky, she ain't just a smear on the sidewalk somewhere."

"Yeah," Jimmy said without much hope.

"So what's his name?"

"It's Ellis, she said. She didn't give me his last name or tell me where he lives, though. That's the most she ever talked about him. I was going to make her tell me more when she got home, but... I swear, if she'd told me anything else about him, I'd have been out there myself, asking questions, trying to find him."

"That's bullshit, Jimmy, and I ought to break your jaw for saying it. But, I won't. I know a local guy with some connections, so I'm going to get his help tracking this 'Ellis' down instead. That's how lucky you are."

"You will?" Jimmy said. The light through the blinds caught his eyes, and I could see little tears swelling up. Each one was full of all the shame and guilt he felt for letting his daughter disappear, and his relief that the search wasn't over yet. "Really? Honest to God you will? I'm so sorry. I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't bother, you fucking waste," I said, standing and grabbing my coat. "I'm not bringing Sharon back here if I find her. You had your chance to take care of her, but you're the reason she's gone. I want you to remember that for as long as you've got left."

Jimmy's mouth was really working now, and his eyes were red and puffy. One of his tears broke free and rolled down his cheek.

"But she's my daughter," he sputtered.

"You don't deserve a daughter!" I roared, surprising myself with how angry I was.

Jimmy didn't answer that, but I didn't really expect him to. He just put his head in his hands and started sobbing quietly to himself. He knew I was right, and I knew he knew because I'd been in this position myself less than a week ago. Before everything had changed.

"Damn it, look at me, Jimmy!" I said, grabbing him by the hair and lifting him to his feet in front of me. His eyes and mouth sprung open, but before he could say anything, I took off my sunglasses and hat. Jimmy glared at me then jumped when he saw my scar and the red mess of my right eye. All the fight went out of him then, when our gazes locked.

"Did you think I was just going to leave, you puke?" I growled, glaring at him with eyes that must have looked like windows straight into Hell. "No way, you son of a bitch. You don't get to just drink away your self-pity this time. You wasted the grace God gave you, and now your marker's up. It's time to pay, Jimmy, and I'm here to collect."



I felt a little better when I left Jimmy's place, but not much. Sure, I felt stronger and a lot more self-righteous than when I'd shown up, but now I was hungry. I got in the first cab I saw and had it take me to this fast food joint I'd noticed on the way over. It mostly served foil-wrapped heart attacks, but it was advertising some kind of new grilled-chicken salad, too. My stomach was curling up on itself demanding a double cheese-burger with bacon (kind of like a kid throwing a tantrum), but I had to quit eating those things. It was garbage like that that'd turned my body into the disgusting, greasy dough ball it was, and I decided to change all that after getting shot in the head. So instead of what I wanted, I had a fag lunch and a big glass of water to wash it down.

After that, I went back to my hotel to put out a call to my "local guy with some connections." I took a deep breath, steeled myself for what I had to do next and headed for the roof.

The view from on top of my building sucked. I was only a few stories up, surrounded by other squat buildings that all looked like they were just hunkered down and ready to ride out another quake. The roof itself wasn't all that



spectacular either. It had an alcove leading back down to the steps, a couple big AC units, and about as much junk and broken glass as I figured the city let the place get away with leaving out. A two- or three-foot parapet ran around the edge, which really only kept the wind from blowing any of the trash off onto the street. Real classy.

I walked over to the edge and put a foot up on it, looking out over the city with the wind in my face. I took a deep breath, let the wind build for a second, and then started whispering.

"Bedaliel," I said. "I decided I need your help after all. Meet me on the roof of the hotel you met me at this morning. We need to talk."

I stopped there and let the words float away, not even giving Bedaliel a chance to respond. He'd know who sent the message by the sound of my voice, and if I knew guys like him, he'd show up just to rub my face in the fact that I needed help. Sure enough, it wasn't fifteen minutes later when I heard him touch down behind me in the center of the roof. I turned around to greet him, hoping to catch a glimpse of the way he really looked, but he was just Daniel Mardero by the time I laid eyes on him. He strolled toward me with his cane tucked under his arm, his expensive shoes crunching over the broken glass and grit. His topcoat was still draped over his shoulders like a damn cape, and he was smiling like an asshole again.

"What do you want?" I asked him, right when he opened his mouth.

Mardero blinked, thrown entirely off stride. "I beg your pardon," he stammered. "It was you who initiated contact with me. You requested my assistance."

"I know," I said. "I ain't stupid. But I figure if you're going to help me, you're going to want something in return. So what is it? I don't like to chitchat. What's your price?"

"Oh, I hadn't even thought about that," Mardero said. "Not every act of cooperation necessarily needs to have a price attached."

"Bullshit," I told him. "If that's true, I wouldn't even be here. And I'm pretty sure that since I told you to stick it in your ear this morning you're not feeling generous. So just name your price and get it over with. I don't have all day."

Mardero looked like he might protest again, but he decided to spare me. His eyes took on this appraising glare, then he just smiled. He took his cane out from under his arm and planted it next to his foot. "Your name," he said. "That's all I want for now."

Bastard.

"Harvey," I grumbled. "Just like I told you before. Harvey Ciullo."

"No, sir," Mardero said, cocking an eyebrow. "You know better than that. I want *your* name. As much of it as I gave you of mine in good faith."

I shook my head, but only in irritation. I hate telling people my real name, especially people from the war. Doing that opens me up to them, makes them think I'm their Goddamned friend or something. Basically turns them into major pains in my ass. The only person I willingly told it to is my little daughter back in Jersey, but even she knows better than to say it lightly. I made her swear on her dead mother not to.

But then again, all things considered, it wasn't the worst thing Mardero could have asked. It wasn't like he wanted me to do something for him right then. Besides, this guy's help would finish up this job a hell of a lot faster so I could get back to my little girl. I might as well.

"Fine," I said. "It's Hasmed."

Judging by the way Mardero's eyes widened and how he almost took a big step back, he'd apparently heard of me. Good. If he knew about half the stuff I did during the war, he knew I wasn't somebody to fuck around with. He pulled himself together pretty quick, but it took him just long enough to do it that I was pretty sure we understood one another.

"I see," he said. "I'll remember that. Now, what kind of help can I offer?"

"I'm looking for somebody."

"Of course. The Morningstar. You aren't the first, and none have yet been successful in their search, but an aggregate collection of evid—"

"Uh-uh," I said. "Not him. I'm looking for a kid named Ellis. I don't know his last name."



"Let me... that is... 'Ellis,' you said?" Mardero stammered, apparently stunned that I *still* wasn't looking for Lucifer. "Do you happen to know the name he used during the war? That would be most—"

"It ain't like that," I said. "He wasn't in the war. He's just a kid. Nineteen years old. Pushes drugs around the local library where he probably lives." I gave him Jimmy Sphener's address, figuring that would narrow it down some.

"I don't understand. What's so special about him?"

"None of your damn business," I said. "But I can't go back home to Jersey" til after I find him, so the sooner you get on that, the better."

"And that's all the assistance you require? Just enough to find this young man. This... human?"

So help me...

"Yeah, that's it, pal. So find a guy who knows a guy and find out what I want to know. You said you were established around here, right?"

"I am," Mardero said. "It's just that... You see, I don't understand something."

I just looked at him, thinking of the best place to stuff that cane of his.

"Why *aren't* you interested in finding Lucifer?" Mardero asked. "Everyone else I've spoken to is obsessed by the search, yet you aren't. Why?"

"Because what's the fucking point?" I said. "I could tell that bastard wasn't anywhere near here the second I got off the plane. He already ran off and hid from the mess he started—just like he always does—so he can go fuck himself for all I care. I've got responsibilities to take care of. So quit jerking me around and just help me like I asked."

"Very well," Mardero said, dropping his gaze. "I'll question my sources about the boy you want and contact you later."

"Good," I said. "Thanks." That wasn't too much like pulling teeth. "You know how to reach me."

"I do now."

Mardero turned to leave then, but he hesitated. He looked windward into the sky then back at me out of the corners of his eyes.

"What?" I snapped.

"Harvey," he said. "No... Hasmed. Please believe that our search for the Morningstar *isn't* pointless. Don't you realize what it would mean if we found him? It would mean that the war never really ended."

At that, I just threw my head back and laughed—I couldn't help it. It was a deep, ugly sound from beneath all the fat and meat and bone I was stuck in, retching up from inside the oldest part of me.

"No, it wouldn't, you dipshit," I said between barks. "The war is over, and probably nobody knows it better than your Morningstar. It ended a long time ago, and we *lost*. Now these dirty, ignorant apes are all that's left of what we were fighting for. The sooner you realize that and start looking for something useful to do, the better."

Mardero didn't have anything to say to that, but I knew I hadn't gotten through to him. You can't get through to true believers like him, no matter how much sense you have on your side. But frankly, I didn't care. I had what I wanted from him now. I was one step closer to getting back home to my little girl, and that was all that mattered.

III

Mardero came through for me as the sun was going down that same day, just hours after he'd finally taken off from the roof to get back to chasing Lucifer's shadow. The wind carried his voice from wherever the hell he was, telling me he'd tracked my Ellis down through a chain of dealers and suppliers. He gave me the address of where the kid lived, told me how to find it, and then wished me luck. I thanked him to get rid of him, then headed out to pay Ellis a visit. I left my hat on the bed and kept my glasses folded up in my shirt pocket.

Mardero's directions to Ellis's neighborhood were pretty clear, and it took me no time to find it. In fact, it wasn't even ten blocks from Jimmy Sphener's place, which made it all the more pathetic that that drunk didn't know where his daughter had gone. It was a rundown string of houses just



out of Glock range of the projects. I guess it looked worse than it might have otherwise because of the quake and the riots, but it probably wasn't all that different than usual. There was garbage and broken glass everywhere, and the pavement was a black-veined ruin. The beetle-husk of a burned-out car sat upside-down in front of one building, and all kinds of detritus lay in the gutters. And just like everywhere else I'd been in the city, nobody was on the street now that the sun was going down. That was good.

The house Ellis was supposedly in was right in the middle of the block. Every window of the place was broken out and covered with thick sheets of gray plastic, but I could see lights on inside and hear loud music throbbing. Maybe a party was going on. Lucky fucking me. I smashed the front door open, and a hard wind blew in all around me. A couple skinny, strung-out bums looked up at me through wide yellow eyes, but nobody said anything. I asked the one closest to me where Ellis was, and he pointed upstairs. They were waiting on him to finish with his girlfriend, the bum told me, so they could get their party on. Some shit like that.

So I headed for the steps, and the wind went with me, knocking aside empty baggies and fast food wrappers. Couple of condom wrappers, too. This place was a regular bachelor pad, right down to the obligatory filth. Behold the glory.

There weren't many rooms to choose from at the top of the stairs, so I headed for what looked like the master bedroom in the back. The music was coming from that direction, and now that I was up here, I could hear the thumping and creaking symphony of Ellis "finishing with his girlfriend." I strolled down the hall, took a deep breath, cracked my neck a couple times and pushed the door open.

I was greeted by the unpleasant sight of a thick, muscled ass pumping up and down between two scrawny spread legs on a rickety bed in the middle of the room. The room was dank and noisome, and it was lit by a pair of black light bulbs in novelty lamps. The bedsprings were groaning and screeching, and the headboard was smacking the wall, but I could only barely hear that over

the music. I closed the door behind me, walked over to the cheap-ass radio and turned the music off. The sound disappeared with a palpable force, and the creaking, thumping and grunting from the bed stopped just as quickly. I crossed my arms and waited for the inevitable.

"Who the fuck...?" the owner of the muscled ass demanded as he sat on the bed and turned around. He probably thought it was one of the junkies from downstairs grown impatient.

When he saw me, though, he disentangled himself from the girl underneath him and got between me and her. He was a tall, muscular son of a bitch with no hair on his head and a barbwire tattoo around his neck. His eyes and skin glowed faintly in the black light, as did his slimy condom.

"You're Ellis, right?" I said. "I been looking for you."

"Who the fuck are you?" he snarled at me, gnashing his teeth like he was going to bite me. "How'd you get in here?"

"The wind blew your door open," I said, still perfectly calm.

"Get the fuck out," he said, coming toward me. I couldn't help but notice how his cock was ticking in time with his racing heart. He obviously wasn't scared of me yet.

I wasn't scared of him either. I planted my feet and looked over at his bed. The girl there lay limp like a half-empty blowup doll. Her underwear dangled from one ankle, and she still had her bra on. It had a little pink flower in the center that glowed in the black light. "Is that Sharon Spheener, Ellis? I been looking for her, too. More than you, actually."

"You leave her alone, crackhead," the kid said, taking another step toward me and actually pointing a finger in my face. "Get your ass back downstairs and wait your turn."

Ellis will never know how close he came to total disaster by saying that. I took it entirely the wrong way at first, and it was only the instant I stood there in abject shock that gave me time to realize he was talking about drugs, not Sharon. He still thought—or maybe just hoped—I was a customer.

"Sorry," I said, resisting the urge to snap the kid's finger off with my teeth anyway. "She's coming with me, kid."



Ellis was fast, I'll give him that. He drove a big, hard fist right into my paunch, blowing the wind out of me and knocking me back an inch. "The fuck she is, man. She's my girl, and you ain't touch—"

The next thing Ellis knew, he was up against the wall. I'd grabbed his wrists, twisted one of them around the wrong way then hit him right under the throat with the heel of my hand. He staggered, and I slammed him backward and held him in place by the neck with my right hand. From the angle we were at, the black light shone full on my face. The hole in my forehead glared like a blind third eye, and my bloody, ruined right eye bulged out farther than the left. As close as I was to him, I knew Ellis could see a little bit of who I'd been during the war and that he didn't like it. He was lucky he only saw so little, especially after that "wait your turn" crack.

"Let me go," he choked, grabbing my forearm in weak desperation. His eyes were rolling like a panicked horse's. "Sharon—"

"How long has she been here, Ellis?" I asked. "Since the riots? Her mother's been worried sick."

Ellis didn't answer me. He still thought he could get loose. He lashed out with a kick that buried his heel pretty deep in my right thigh, missing my crotch by about an inch. I flinched, then stepped in that much closer, tightened my grip on his throat and grabbed his cock in my other hand. I squeezed it almost as hard as I could and bent it downward sharply. That took the rest of the fight out of Ellis for the moment.

"I'll break this thing off and feed it to you if you do that again," I said. I'd done worse to guys twice his size in the war without thinking twice about it. "Do we understand each other?"

Ellis whimpered. I took that for consent.

"Great. Now here's what you're going to do. You're going to go down your steps and out your front door. You're never going to come anywhere near this girl again, and if you know what's good for you, you're going to stop giving drugs to high school kids. I say again, do we understand each other?"

When I got no answer, I squeezed harder with my right hand and twisted with my left. Ellis gasped and started crying, but he nodded, so I let him go.

"Now get the fuck out of here," I said.

Coughing and holding his raw throat, Ellis did as he was told. I heard his big feet pounding down the hall and the steps, then I heard some surprised shouts downstairs. Apparently, he'd stirred up his patient customers on his way out.

When he was gone, I turned off the black lights and flicked on the actual light switch. With the overhead on, I went and looked down at the little girl on the bed. She was paler and thinner than she'd been in any of the pictures I'd seen of her at Sylvia's place, but she was clearly Sharon Sphener. Her black hair was greasy and lank, and purple circles hung beneath her eyes. The insides of her elbows were spotted with needle tracks, showing me she'd long since graduated past LSD and dime bags. The worst part, though, was the look on her face. Her eyes were only half open, and her expression was this empty mask. There was dried blood in one of her nostrils, and her lips were thin, bloodless lines. It didn't look like she'd been beaten or raped—at least lately—but she was used up and broken in spirit just the same. I looked down at her, thinking about my own precious little girl back home, and it occurred to me just how lucky Ellis was that I hadn't seen this first.

"Sharon," I said, quietly. "Can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes a little wider and looked up at me.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Harvey. I've been looking for you, Sharon."

"Where's Ellis? Wasn't he here?"

"He's gone. You ain't seeing him anymore."

"Why?" she whined, still half out of it. "We're going to get married. He can't just leave."

"Like hell," I said.

Sharon tried to argue and look upset, but it didn't last too long. She was still pretty wiped out from the drugs and God only knew what else. I smoothed her hair with my fingers.

"What's wrong with your face?" she asked after a long silence. "Your eye looks weird. And your forehead."



"Bullet," I said. "Somebody shot me in the head. Almost killed me."

"Why?"

"Migraine."

"Okay," she said as if that made perfect sense. "My stomach hurts. I think I'm going to throw up."

"I know, sweetheart," I said. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Ellis made me try some things," she said in a tiny, hollow voice. "Lots of things. He said I'd like it."

"It's okay, Sharon," I said. "That's all over with now."

"Am I dead? Did I OD?"

"No."

"But you got shot.... We're both dead, aren't we?"

"You ain't dead," I said. "You're on your way home."

"Are you a policeman?"

"No, I'm an—"

I don't know why, but I almost told her the truth then. What was true a long time ago, anyway, back before the war. Luckily, though, I caught myself and just shook my head. There was no point in telling her. I'd just be wasting my breath.

"I'm just here to take care of you."

Sharon's eyes slipped shut again, and she reminded me so much of my own daughter right then. So helpless and trusting. It was sad in a way to think that I would do anything in the world to look after my little girl, but neither one of this girl's parents could do the same. It just didn't make any sense to me that people could create a life that depended on them so utterly yet not dedicate themselves body, mind and soul to taking care of it. It was just one more reason the world was going to hell.

When Sharon lay still, I brushed back her sweaty hair and felt the amber-colored haze behind her eyes. It repulsed me yet tried to pull me closer and infect me with Sharon's nascent addiction. I let her go and shook my head. She'd ruined herself coming here. Everything that had made her who she was and filled her with the spark of life was covered in a layer of slime so thick it was choking her to death. That instinct buried deep inside me bubbled up again, and this time I couldn't force it

back down like I had at Jimmy's place. Sharon looked so pitiful and broken... how could I look at her and not do something? Besides, there was Sal back home to think about. More importantly, there was Tina. I wouldn't be able to look at my precious little Tina again if I didn't do something.

So I put a warm hand on Sharon's forehead, smoothed her hair back and leaned over her. "Don't worry, Sharon," I whispered. "Everything's going to be okay. You're going home now."

When I felt Sharon nod weakly, still clinging to consciousness, I touched her hair one last time then did what I had to do. I held the back of her head with my right hand and used my left to hold her nose and mouth shut. She smelled it coming—I hadn't had chance to wash the slime off my palm—but she was too weak to fight me off. She squeezed my arm and reached up like she wanted to touch my face, but there wasn't a thing on earth she could do. She jerked, then squirmed, and then trembled, then just lay still with me pressing her down into the wrinkled, grimy sheets where I'd found her.

By degrees, her muscles relaxed until all that lay on the bed was an empty mud doll that nobody but me had known how to treat right. When I was finished, I sat back on my heels then let go of Sharon's mouth and nose. Her last breath—an echo of the first divine breath that had given her life—slid out from deep insider her, and I watched it dissipate. I sat there for a long time waiting for someone to come and collect it, to take that breath back where it came from, but nobody did. No old enemies. No old friends.

I don't know why I was surprised... I guess I just figured that even a pathetic little girl like Sharon deserved better in death than she'd had in life. But that wasn't up to me. Nothing I did or said was going to change the fact that God doesn't care like He's supposed to about these people He created. Nothing's going to change the fact that these people don't care about each other like they're supposed to. So fuck it. Why should I care? Because God and Lucifer both said I ought to? Fuck them, too. They could both go to Hell and take this ruin of a world with them. There's



only one thing in all this wreckage I cared about, and she was all the way across the country wondering when her daddy was coming home.

So it was time I got back there, I figured. I'd done just about everything I was obligated to do out here to keep Sal happy. All I had left to do was take Sharon's body back to her mother's place and give Sylvia the bad news. Tell her that there wasn't anything I could do and make sure she knew that if she'd swallowed her pride and called her big brother for help sooner, her little girl would still be alive right now. Not that it would teach Sylvia anything to hear that, but it would leave her in the proper state of mind. It was better than she deserved anyway, considering she wasn't a good enough mother—or even a good enough person—to keep her own daughter safe at home where she belonged.

All that was really beside the point. All that mattered was that I had to get home. My little girl was waiting for her daddy to come back to her, and no force in Heaven or Hell was going to stop me.

