

The Curse is Alive

Excerpt from "Case of the Cursed Cathedral"

I knew too well how dangerous and rough a place the City of Light could be to require a caution from a coddled cleric. My thoughts had drifted back to my life before as I whiled away the time en route to the Cathedral of the Son. The Corpse sat silently beside me; his fingers working with slow exactitude over a leather-bound volume of lore. I ignored our driver's sulfurous curses and dropped my gaze to my gloved hands where they rested upon twill trousers. Traffic filled the streets and Skyways, and caused our driver's ungentle hands to work the wheel as though he captained a tugboat. The Winter Rain had added a thin layer of ice to the City's congested streets and an icy mist hung in the air.

I allowed my mind to drift over Father Rule's words. I also had knowledge of much of the City's lowest level, Zero, but had earned the right to know it. Unlike Rule who walked with the dubious protection of his priest's collar; I had traveled those shadowy streets with no more than a junkie's addiction for company. I had survived. My parents claimed kinship with old country roots and the stifling protection of European Catholicism. Myself, having been raised a Catholic, and having hated the process, claimed a firm distaste for the covenant and forms and most especially the church's many lieutenants. There were things in my ancient past, yes, now ancient, that I could see as partial motivators—factors at least that led to the downward trend and

resulting strike upon the bottom of life from which the Corpse later carried me. I did not care for the words of priests.

But these things had happened long ago, and I was not about to work them like a crying blanket before my employer. He was dead, after all, and how could the long ago sufferings of a boy matter. It no longer did to me. My many excesses in life had long ago exorcised those demons; but I was not above carrying a grudge. And as they say, a grudge is a thing best carried alone if one wants to avoid civil war.

I fell from my reverie when the actions of the Corpse drew my eye. He appeared to be trying to brush at something that was upon his arm. It was a minor affectation of my employer's that I had never felt the liberty to ask him about. The Corpse would upon occasion find something, a shape or shadow that he then attempted to remove or dislodge with actions of his hands and general body language. Only Stone's intense emotional solidity hid the degree of his disgust and apprehension. At such times he was heard to mutter to himself, almost reassuringly. It was my notion that he had developed a minor case of morbid dementia. It was a nervous dissonance that afflicted the newly dead and occasionally resurfaced with more advanced cases of death. The Corpse never spoke to me of it, but others among his peers described minor bouts of hallucination in which the subconscious, unable to accept the living-dead status, provoked sightings of maggots and rotten flesh, where there was nothing of the kind. I generously turned my eyes away, unwilling to cause the Corpse the embarrassment that acknowledgement of the affectation might.

"Pachs," the Corpse whispered, I believed to calm himself and break the spell of dementia. "The Cathedral of the Son to which we now travel has a dark past."

"Truly?" I asked, anxious to assist the Corpse in his reclamation.

"Yes." He shifted away from me in his seat, half-turning to the window. I could make out his pale reflection there. "When Father Rule mentioned the Cathedral of the Son and the sect that resides there, my memory was provoked. So much so, that I was compelled to make a quick study of the microfilm files I keep."

Indeed the Corpse had archived a fair-sized library of newspaper and magazine stories.

"I believe the line of questioning was prompted when Rule referred to Father Menander as the leader of the Brothers of Innocence 'now'." The Corpse raised a hand to the inside of the taxi door. "I could not help but wonder what happened to his predecessor, since death no

longer takes the living and the dead are not consigned to the grave. I wondered whether the former leader of the Brothers left of his own accord.”

“And what did you find?” I asked. As always, the Corpse had managed to enflame my own curiosity.

“There was a former leader of the brotherhood named Father James. He is missing.” My employer’s head dipped. He took a loud breath of air. “Or rather, most of him is. He is presumed dead.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, Stone.” I resisted the urge to rest a palm upon his forearm.

“Six months ago he disappeared. An Authority investigation discovered evidence of blood and tissue in the church garden that matched Father James’. His body was never recovered.”

“Remarkable!” I could feel the first evidence of gooseflesh appear upon my arms.

“What is more remarkable is the fact that Father James’ disappearance was not remarkable, nor unique. The two leaders before him met with unfortunate ends. One, Father Orwell, burned to death in a freak accident while preparing for a celebration of Christmas Mass. Another was crushed when a stone lintel fell on him from a part of the Cathedral that was undergoing renovation. In both cases the afflicted were too badly damaged to enjoy even the remotest positive of living death and so were consigned to the landfill.” The Corpse rubbed his arm quickly, and I realized it was the very spot from which he had formerly been trying to shoo something away.

“That is truly remarkable,” I said, my mind searching for explanation. “Then this Cathedral of the Son, it is cursed.”

“So it would seem.” The Corpse suddenly perked up and leaning forward peered over our driver’s shoulder. “Indeed, this curse seems to have been enacted again.”