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FIRSTBORN

By Michael Natale

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“You smell that, Raf?” The tall black man shook his head in disgust. He squatted next to the little boy, the leather jacket creaking. He wore a thick golden necklace with the words “Bag Man” molded in gold and picked out in diamonds. It swung side to side like a pendulum. He took the dark glasses off and squinted at the boy.

“If you mean the undeniable stench of corruption, then yes.” The elderly man held a silk handkerchief over his nose. The muffled voice that came from beneath his hand sounded vaguely British. The suit he wore was flawless, meticulously tailored. It looked like it had grown around him like a second skin.

The boy and his sister were completely unaware of them. They stacked large wooden blocks, the older girl perhaps ten, and her brother at most five. He built a tower, alternating

red and blue blocks. The blocks were so large they barely fit in his little hand, but he was careful and meticulous with his placement. As he reached out to put another blue block on top of the tower, his hand passed right through Bag Man's leather jacket.

"Shit! How long has it been, Raf?"

The older man sniffed. "Too bloody short. Again."

"Damn straight. Maybe we can get someone else to babysit this one for a while?"

"You know the rules, Bagdial."

Bag Man stood and sighed, slipping his shades back on. "We wait. Verify corruption and then move on."

The girl giggled and knocked over the tower with her foot. Blocks spilled everywhere. The boy held a blue block in his hand, hovering over the empty space where his tower stood moments ago.

"Whoops," Bag Man shook his head at the girl, but she only continued laughing, oblivious.

Faster than should have been possible, the boy pounced on the girl, knocking her backwards. He knelt on her chest, raised the block high, and brought it crashing down on her forehead. She screamed, and the boy struck her again, bringing the corner of it down onto her temple with incredible force.

Two more swift strikes and the girl lay still and silent. His hand methodically rose and fell anyway, blood spraying up with every stroke. After ten or twenty more, the girl's face wasn't recognizable.

The boy climbed off his sister, perfectly calm, his Wiggles t-shirt splattered with blood. He glanced back towards his house, murder plain in his five-year-old eyes. The block in his hand dripped blood onto the grass as he marched towards the house.

The well-groomed man stepped through the bloody corpse of the girl to follow the boy. “Corruption confirmed.”

Shaking his head, Bag Man followed. “Well, no shit, Raphael. Yank it and let’s get out of here.”

The well-groomed man reached inside his suit coat and withdrew a small black box. He traced the pattern of the runes carved into the wood and a moment later, the box sprang open.

The boy stopped as if he heard someone far away call his name. A thin stream of light surrounded his head, but he was unaware of it. The nimbus coalesced into a twisting, serpentine shape that shot toward the box held in Raphael’s hand. It coiled itself inside the box, and when it had left the boy altogether, the box snapped shut.

“Let’s go.” Raphael tucked the small box inside his jacket, and both he and Bag Man turned to leave. “We’ve got to find another one, and we haven’t much time.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. The fate of the world rests in our hands, we have a sacred duty, blah, blah, blah. I’ve heard it all before.”

The boy realized something was in his hand. The blood on the block scared him, and he turned back to his sister’s corpse. Terror filled his eyes. He dropped the block and began screaming for his mother.

Raf and the Bag Man entered the diner on Chandler Street at two in the morning. A dozen heads turned and some of them nodded towards them.

A fat man behind the counter leaned on his hands, bored. He looked up as they entered, scowling. Bag Man scowled right back.

Raphael ignored them, and made his way to an empty booth near the back. As they sat, a tall redhead came over, a cloud of cheap perfume at war with the cigarette smoke pouring out of the Camel in her painted mouth. She wore a thin halter-top and a black leather skirt, torn fishnet stockings covering slender, shapely legs.

Raphael groaned as she approached, but Bag Man lit up. "Adnai? Will you look at that, Raf, she's gone all solid and shit!"

"Its Adia now, Bag Man," the woman took another pull from the cigarette and put a leg up on the booth's seat. "Go ahead, touch it."

"You know very well he can't touch you," Raphael frowned.

Adia laughed and sat next to Bag Man. "Still hanging around with this tight-ass?"

Bag Man shrugged. "What can I do? I try to shake him but he just keeps coming back."

"Very droll, both of you," Raphael was not amused. He withdrew the little wooden box out of his suit coat, and Adia leaned forward, laughing.

"Cut the shit! Already?" She reached for it, and then pulled her hand back as if afraid of being bitten by something. "Is it in there?"

“Damn straight.” Bag Man told her the story of the boy and the block tower’s bloody collapse. Adia laughed when he told her what the boy had done. She had a musical, infectious laugh, and pretty soon Bag Man was laughing right along with her. He was pantomiming the little boy bashing his sister’s brains in with a wooden block, which only made Adia laugh harder.

“Enough!” Raphael’s voice was suddenly hard, and it drew the attention of the others in the diner. Most were turning their heads and only half looking, doing a poor job of hiding their embarrassment for the two. “You two may find this amusing, but we have a job to do Bagdial. I for one do not plan on spending the next thousand years hauling this around.” He indicated the box.

Adia blew smoke in Raphael’s face. “Raf, you need a good lay. Trust me, it does wonders for the attitude. Too bad you’re not a solid, I’d give you a bounce for old times sake.”

“Charming,” Raf sneered, never taking his eyes off the runes on the lid of the strange box.

Aida took another drag. “You should just do what I did with mine.”

Raphael’s looked up then, his face a mask of disapproval. “Yes, I heard. You abandoned your duty and put it in the body of a comatose child. How very sweet.”

Bag Man snorted. “No way! Dammit, Raf, see that? Adia here’s got this shit all figured out!”

Aida pointed at Raphael. “It’s not like your way is working any better these days, Raf.”

Bag Man nodded. “She’s right, Raf. You gotta give her that! It ain’t like our track record these days is...”

“That’s not our fault,” Raphael snapped.

“You know that and I know that,” Aida leaned forward. “But it doesn’t fucking matter. That’s the whole point. Things are going to shit down here, and we’re all by ourselves.”

Bag Man smiled at her. “That’s why you went all corporeal on us, ain’t it?”

“Fuck, yeah,” she leaned back, proud of herself. She slammed a beeper down on the table. “See that? This thing is tied into my little guy’s monitor. He wakes up, I get paged. Otherwise, I’m free to do whatever the fuck I want!” She held up a hand and Bag Man made to high five it, but their hands passed through each other.

Raphael rolled his eyes, and rubbed his temples. “Is that seriously what you want, Bagdial? You want to abandon your sacred duty and become corporeal? Trapped for the remainder of your days in a rotting bag of meat? Relentlessly decaying until your flesh literally rots out from underneath you?”

“Don’t get all righteous on me, Raf. I’m still with you, all the way, you know that. Adia here just makes me laugh is all.”

Adia leaned towards Raphael. “You know once you go corporeal you still have maybe a couple hundred years here, it has something to do with our energies being superior to theirs. You’re completely mortal, but there’s no soul to worry about! When its done, its done. No Heaven, no Hell. I don’t know about you two, but I’m ready for a little action.”

Raphael eyed her suspiciously. “How do you know that?”

She grinned. “People talk, Raf. You hear things on the street.”

“Gotta admit, Raf, that’s a pretty sweet deal. Better than what you and I got in front of us.” Bag Man motioned at the wooden box.

Adia leaned back again, a wolfish smile playing across her blood red lips. “My guy is going to die in that hospital bed eventually, and when he does? Bam! I’m d-o-n-e DONE with this bullshit. Mission accomplished! I’ll be free as a bird, baby, and ready to PARTY!”

Raphael sighed, composing himself. “That’s not how this is supposed to work. Our duty here is rehabilitation, not imprisonment. Innocence is...”

“...the best containment,” Adia finished for him, laughing. “Yeah, I heard that shit, Raf. It’s a load. That might have worked back in the day, but now? No fucking way.”

The fat man from behind the counter sauntered up to the table. He looked at the wooden box on the table, then at Bag Man and Raf. “Fucked things up again?”

Bag Man pointed to the counter. “You get the fuck back behind the bar, Fat Boy! Unless you want to see if I got the juice to toss your flabby ass there?”

The fat man looked at Bag Man, unimpressed. He had the look of a man who once had been powerfully built, but in the twilight of his years had let himself go. “Sit down, ‘Bag Man,’” the man mocked, tossing his greasy rag over his shoulder. “This is my joint, remember? My joint, my rules.”

Raphael was tracing the runes on the box with his thumb, ignoring the three of them. “Yes, please, Bagdial. Sit back down. Tabris made his choice and he has to live with it. The War is over, and he has his sentence to serve, like the rest of them.”

The fat man's palm slammed down onto the table. "Not like the rest of them! I didn't take a side, remember?"

"We remember," Raf said quietly. "Don't we, Bag Man?"

"Yeah I remember standing there with my dick in my hand waiting for this turncoat motherfucker to back me up."

"I told you I wouldn't take sides, and I didn't."

Bag Man snorted a contemptuous laugh. "Yeah, you were the only one of us who didn't make a stand! You ask me, you should've been tossed out with the rest of them ungrateful little bitches."

A groan went up from several patrons around Bag Man and Raphael. They'd started to take notice in the scuffle. Tabris gave voice to their complaints. "Oh, spare me! It's the same sad story every time you two come in here after fucking up *again*. Everyone saw the war coming for like a thousand years before it happened. Everyone! No one did a fucking thing to stop it; everyone just let it happen, including you. I chose to stay out of it, so what?"

Murmurs of angry assent went up around them. Adia slid out of the booth, and backed away to a counter stool a few feet from the booth. "Look, guys, I just went solid last week. You two drop shorts and start comparing yam bags and I'm likely to buy it right here."

Bag Man took a step closer to Tabris. "Let it happen? What the fuck else were we supposed to do? The man says fight, we fight! Period! Some fancy fuck gets a big head, and thinks he's all that, and you *walk away*? Fuck that shit. That ain't how *I* was made, Fat Boy. There ain't no way I'd sit by the sidelines and watch the blood fly."

Tabris had heard this all before. He waved Bag Man off, and returned to his counter.

“Get out. This is my place, and you’re pissing off the other patrons.”

Raphael stood, scooping up his box. “Come on Bagdial. Tabris is right; this is his place, best we leave him to his confinement. I don’t see anyone but Adia here drinking or eating anything though.”

Tabris frowned back at him. “Fuck you, Raf.”

Bag Man left fuming. He muttered all the way out the door about loyalty and betrayal. The diner’s patrons resumed their quiet talks. The diner served no drinks or food. The only clientele this diner would ever see were here already and hardly ever left.

Unless something went wrong, as happened to Raphael and Bagdial earlier today, they rarely had to leave. Most preferred the company of their own anyway. Besides, Angels never needed to eat.

Bag Man and Raphael walked the streets of New York. Bag Man was fuming, spoiling for a fight he knew that he could never have as long as Tabris was corporeal and he was not. “So what the fuck do we do now, Raf?”

Raphael was calm. “We do what we were put here to do.”

“I *know* what we were put here to do, Raf. And we’re fucking it up pretty damn good if you ask me! I say it’s time we ask for another assignment. Maybe one of those ones that...”

“No,” Raphael cut him off. “We look for another one.”

Bag Man stopped in the street. “What do you think about what Adnai said? Why don’t we go find some kid in a coma or some shit like that, and do like she did...”

“I said no.”

Bag Man wasn’t letting it go that easy this time. “Aww, man! Come on! Just think about it! She’s got the right idea, and that jives with what you always say about innocence, right? About it being the best way to keep that shit contained.” He pointed at Raphael’s suit coat pocket where the wooden box was stored.

Raphael’s thin eyebrows shot up. “You do recall that I was one of the Seven, right? This ‘shit’ as you put it happens to be the restless spirit of Lucifer’s General, the bloodiest, most brutal of the Fallen, the...”

“I know who it is, Raf!”

“Then how can you ask me to saddle some poor comatose child with it? Do you honestly think that would go unnoticed?” Raphael looked towards the sky meaningfully.

Bag Man rolled his eyes and they continued walking. “Get over yourself, Raf! Its been two thousand years we been doin’ this shit! I don’t see no tablets or shit from On High droppin’ out of the sky to help us along.”

Raphael was firm, angry. “The Seven are watched. We were chosen! We will be called to return when our missions are completed!”

Bag Man stopped again. “Here’s a news flash!” He cupped his hands and yelled loudly at Raphael, inches from his face. “No one’s watching your every move! No one is helping us! There’s no chariot of fire or motherfucking burning bushes here in Brooklyn, Raf! No one

probably even remembers we're down here doing this shit day and night! Talk about paranoid..."

They walked in silence for a few minutes, and finally Raphael spoke. "The fact is this. Innocence is the best containment. We simply have to find the right one. I will not saddle a comatose soul with this. That is out of the question. A pure soul is what is needed."

Bag Man looked around the city at the seedier elements that prowled the streets at three in the morning. He laughed. "In this day and age? Good luck. I'm not sure that one even exists."

Raphael stopped. "You check the hospitals. I'll go to the shelters and orphanages. We'll meet up back the diner tomorrow night. Otherwise, you know how to find me."

Bag Man sighed. "Alright, Raf. You're the boss." He watched the other man walk away, and shook his head sadly. Raphael was old school, that was a fact. So old school the poor bastard doesn't even know he's been put out to pasture. Bag Man wasn't ready to start grazing just yet, but what could he do?

"Well, well, if it ain't the Bag Man himself!" Bag Man turned towards the darkened alley just as a piece of the night detached itself from the surrounding shadows and formed into the shape of a man.

A tall, thin man dressed in a tuxedo stepped forward. A long yellow scarf was draped around his neck, and he held a black walking cane in one gloved hand.

Bag Man smiled as he recognized the figure. "Lou!" He stepped toward the man and extended a friendly hand. The other grasped it and they shook hands. "How long has it been?"

“Too long,” Lucifer replied. He glanced up the street at Raphael’s barely visible form and winked at Bag Man conspiratorially. “I’m not going to get you in trouble with the boss, am I?” They shared a laugh.

“Him? Nah. We’re working, as usual. He’s taking things way too seriously, as usual.”

Lucifer smiled. “Ah, yes, your ‘mission’. Unjustly imprisoning wayward spirits until they learn the error of their ways.”

“That’s us,” Bag Man laughed.

“Semjaza is yours, isn’t he?”

“Come on, Lou. You know damn well who our cargo is.”

The Morningstar only smiled. “Ah, Bagdial, you were always smarter than Raphael. Yes, I know full well what you keep locked up in that little box. Semjaza was brother in arms, at least to me.”

“You ought to have a talk with your brother then. Last time he was corporeal, he caved in a little girl’s skull.”

Lucifer made a mock frown. “Yes, he tends to do that from time to time. You wouldn’t happen to have that little box with you right now, would you?”

Bag Man looked at Lucifer and saw the hunger in his warm, inviting eyes. *Same old Lou.* He grinned. “Fuck no, you think I’m one of the Seven? Think I can just walk around with a payload like that and not expect to get fucked up?”

Bag Man saw disappointment in the Morningstar’s eyes. Lucifer sighed. “No, I suppose not. Here you are, all alone, and you think I’d get lucky enough to catch you with it on you?”

They shared another laugh.

Lucifer put a hand on Bag Man's shoulder. "Truth is, I've been watching you two for some time. Well, you more than him, but there it is. I had to see for myself the Laurel and Hardy of the Silver City." He laughed, a light and lilting chuckle that sent shivers even up Bag Man's spine. "You do realize there isn't a human living or not yet born that could overwhelm Semjaza's spirit?"

Bag Man blew out a regretful whistle. "I know that, but Raf won't listen. You know Adia, right? She used to be called Adnai? She put hers into some kid in a coma and went solid. At first I thought she was fucked in the head, but..."

"Is that doubt I see on those chiseled features?" Lucifer smiled again, this time showing his teeth.

Bag Man had the grace to be ashamed; he knew it was written all over his face. "All I'm saying is, you listen to her reasons, and it seems like totally the right move."

Lucifer shook his head in agreement. "You know Raf would never go for that."

"No way. He's too proud."

"And they call *me* sinful."

Bag Man grinned. "Not without good reason, Lou."

The Morningstar spread his hands in surrender. "Guilty, as charged. Who do you think put the kid in the coma for Adia?"

“Get the fuck outta here!”

Lucifer made a mock bow, smiling. “I must take full credit, though Adia begged me to do it for her. I have certain abilities here the rest of you don’t possess.”

Bag Man had to laugh. “You really are one ballsy motherfucker, you know that Lou?”

“What can I say? We make opportunities where we can. Follow me.” Lucifer took a few steps down the road. His form blurred, and then vanished.

Curious, Bag Man followed, willing himself to Lucifer’s side. They stood outside St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Bag Man looked up at the towering stone structure and his eyes went wide. He stared at the Dark Angel, suddenly realizing what Lucifer was going to do. “Don’t do it, Lou. You know the shit-storm that will rain down on you if you do.”

“Indeed.” Lucifer smiled and spread his arms wide, walking slowly backwards up the stone steps towards the entrance. “Tell me something, Bag Man. A hundred years ago, could I have done this?” As Lucifer reached the top of the stairs, he spun and phased right through the massive double doors.

Bag Man frowned. “Impossible.”

A moment later, Lucifer phased back out, this time dressed in the blacks of a Catholic priest. “So. What do you think?” He turned his profile to Bag Man and struck a pose. “The collar’s a bit restricting, but otherwise, I think I can make it work.”

Bag Man was stunned. “That’s pretty fucked up! Damn bad luck to even *think* of seeing that shit.”

Lucifer walked down the steps towards him. "You're serving a cause that abandoned you, Bagdial. This," he spread his arms to encompass the cathedral, the city, possibly the entire world, "all of this is nothing more than a failed experiment. He's gone. We've won the war. Sure, He cast my people out of Heaven and left Us to rot here, but We eventually won. This place has been Mine for longer than you'd believe. Every single living thing that breathes air or water on this filthy little planet is Mine. You are *all* My bitches."

Bag Man shook his head. "Lou, you know why The Fallen were put here after the war. You're here because mingling with the Meatbags will help you understand them better. We're here to make sure you don't figure out a way to fuck with them any more than you already have."

Lucifer raised an eyebrow. "And what you do isn't fucking with them?"

"Orders, Lou. You can't keep your people in line, we stuff 'em in a box."

A wicked grin spread across Lucifer's thin lips. "Riiiiight. Do you honestly believe that? You think that imprisoning Semjaza within an innocent Meatbag is somehow serving *your* cause? Trust me, it's an inconvenience at best. Semjaza is relentless."

"He's just a feisty motherfucker, that's all."

"That's why he's one of Mine. How long has he been contained?"

"Since forever."

Lucifer smiled sadly. "Yet *somehow*, I endure. The Inquisition? Mine. The Black Death? Mine. Every war that's ever raged across this angry little planet? Mine again. AIDS, Mussolini, Hitler, nuclear power, cancer, McGriddle sandwiches..."

“Shut the fuck up, really? McGriddles were yours? I told Raf that shit was all you!”

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed dangerously, all sarcasm and humor gone. “Bagdial, we were *Firstborn*. Ordering us to kneel before this flawed, mortal creation was the worst blasphemy conceivable. The Man himself even realized this and eventually turned His back on them. He left all of us – your kind included – stranded here for all eternity. So you see Bag Man, in a very real sense *this* is Hell. Its not just a myth anymore perpetrated by the Meatbag clergy. Those who are smart, like Adia, recognize the absence of His presence. They gravitate towards a power that’s going to step up and fill the vacuum.”

“Right, and you’re saying that would be you.”

Lucifer made a slight, mocking bow. “That would be Me. Adia told me where to find you. She told me how she saw you in the diner with that indecisive cocksucker Tabris. She seems to think you might be looking to move up in the world, if you take my meaning. Get your boots out of this river of shit The Man stuck you in. I have the power to do that for you.”

Bag Man took a step back. “Can’t do it, Lou. We’ve been down this road before. I can’t flip on Raf, I just can’t.” The conviction in his voice was forced, and he could see that Lucifer sensed it too.

But the Morningstar only nodded. “I know, I know, I won’t press you. Too bad, though. I’ve always thought you’d be an asset in assisting with the Return.”

Bag Man spat out a laugh. “Return? Return to...” and then he knew. He couldn’t finish the sentence.

“To Heaven.” The look in Lucifer’s eyes was terrifying.

Bag Man studied Lucifer silently. Lucifer watched him with those ageless eyes that had seen far too much to be innocent. Finally Lucifer spoke.

“Why not return? The gates are wide open, ripe for the plucking. I intend to take up residence there, and resume the duties of its former occupant. I shall be a benign and forgiving God.”

Bag Man scoffed, pointing at Lucifer. “Prince of Lies, remember?”

“It always comes to that, doesn’t it? That bitch and that fucking apple! She takes a bite and suddenly I have a new name. I’ve been saddled with so many names over the eons. I think I like Morningstar the best. I was the brightest and best once.”

“Once.”

Lucifer waved the thought away. “There’s too much bad blood between My people and yours anyway. It would probably be a huge pain in the ass to integrate you.”

“You got that right.” Bag Man looked at his watch. “Man, I really gotta get going. Raf’s gonna have a shit fit if I stand here all night yapping with you.”

Lucifer extended a well-manicured hand. “It was good to see you again. I’m sure we’ll bump into each other down the road.”

“I hope the fuck not,” Bag Man said, laughing, and headed back in the direction of the hospital.

Over the next twenty years, three more hosts were found and rejected as Semjaza's spirit eventually consumed each in turn. There were more brutal murders. More bloody little corpses. Raphael continued to labor on, convinced that his work would be rewarded. He still believed that in the end, he would be allowed to lay his burden at the feet of another, and return home.

The years went on, though, and no word came. Civilization hungered for direction, for help, but no help came. They killed each other by the thousands – the millions even, and there was no word at all for them to look to for hope.

Even Bag Man felt depressed. Fewer and fewer of his kind frequented the diner, and Tabris actually began serving food to mortals. Had to pay the bills, he said, but Bag Man couldn't figure out what bills those might be.

More and more of their kind followed Adia's path, and went solid, abandoning their charges. Eventually, the Fallen that were imprisoned in innocent souls throughout the world began to break free on a regular basis. With no one there to herd them back into confinement, the worst of the Fallen walked freely among the Meatbags.

The Meatbag news would report the latest serial murders with glee; profile the latest terrorist or dictator in living color on the evening news without ever knowing the preternatural spirit that hid beneath the mask of flesh. Crime skyrocketed, and the violent nature of the Meatbags only fueled the fires started by the Firstborn.

Bag Man began to doubt.

He had seen The Dark Angel walk right into St. Patrick's Cathedral, and there was no denying that. Things like that just didn't happen. Lucifer hadn't lied when he boasted that he had abilities on Earth that the other Firstborn did not. But there were still limits. Or at least, there used to be.

Bag Man watched innocent after innocent die brutal, savage deaths at the hands of Semjaza's spirit. Raf refused to stop, refused to give up. He was completely oblivious to the divine absence in his spirit, and had no idea how far Lucifer's influence truly extended into the world of Men.

That was what led them to number 114 Baker Way, Hartford, Connecticut and the murder scene unfolding in the living room.

"Raf," Bag Man sighed, "yank it and lets get the fuck out of this place."

Raphael simply stared at the carnage before him. A little girl, perhaps four years old held a bloody claw hammer in her tiny hand. She was wild eyed and breathing heavy from the labors of murdering her mother.

"They're always so small," Raphael was saying, studying the girl. His face was a mask of sorrow. "You never expect them to snap the way they do. Such ferocity, such strength. After all this time it still takes my breath away."

Bag Man grimaced. "With what she's got penned up inside her, it ain't gonna stop here if we just sit around flapping our gums, now yank it!"

The bloody, broken body lay at her feet, but the girl still looked around for something to crack open with the hammer. The family cat hissed at her and bolted into the girl's bedroom.

A menacing grin widened her chubby cheeks, and she waddled after it, bloody hammer raised like a tiny baseball bat over her shoulder. Raphael just shook his head, his old, tired face a mask of regret and sorrow. Wearily, he reached inside his coat and withdrew the small wooden box.

He didn't open it though, he just turned it over and over in his slender fingers, ignoring the whack-whack-whack of the hammer blows. He was staring at the runes.

"Raf?"

"He's gone, isn't He?"

Whack! Meowww! Whack! Meowwwww!

Bag Man didn't answer. "There's still time, we just have to get him back the box..."

"You know who I mean, Bagdial."

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Bag Man put a hand on the slender man's shoulder. "Lou said that a long time ago. I didn't want to believe him then, but..."

Raphael laughed bitterly. It sounded wrong coming out of his thin, serious lips. He traced the runes with his thumb, but not to open the box. "Do you know what this says?" Raf asked, the angelic script cold and lifeless beneath his thumb.

Bag Man felt embarrassed. "I've never really looked that close, Raf."

Whack! Meow! Crash! Whack! Whackwhack! Meeeoowwww!

"It says, 'No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.'"

Bag Man nodded. "First Book of John, right?"

"Yes."

Whack! Whack! Meow! Crash!

Bag Man touched Raphael on the shoulder, and turned him so he could look him in the eye. "How about this one? 'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.' Same dude, Raf."

Raphael smiled gently. "What wonderful contradictions these creatures are..."

"The dude was seriously confused, Raf. That's my whole point! This guy was walking around with The Big J! Writing down everything He said and shit! If one of the Apostles can go all lawyer-talk on this shit, who says you have to have all the answers all the time? Who are we that we have to be perfect when we ain't getting' any backup from Upstairs?"

"We are Firstborn," Raphael said. He looked at Bag Man with deep regret. "You sound like the Morningstar."

Meow! Whack! Whack!

"Shit. Just let me do it, Raf." Bag Man said. "Just this once is all I'm saying. No reason you have to do this shit all the time. Sit this one out."

Raphael considered. He sighed, and handed the box to Bag Man. Just then, the cat bounded out of the room and flashed past them as it scrambled down the hall. It was unharmed.

The little girl followed, hammer in hand. "Kittykittykittykitty..."

Bag Man traced the runes on the box the way he'd always seen Raphael do it, and the box sprang open. The girl stopped. The hammer fell from her hands as the all too familiar aura surrounded her and began to twist around her body.

Bag Man took a step back. He waited for the stream of spirit to return to the box. A tendril began forming, called by the power of the tiny prison, and began to shoot towards him.

Just before it reached the box, Bag Man reached around Raphael's shoulders, and pushed him forcefully into its path. Raphael gasped as the wisp struck him full in the chest and soaked into him. His ancient face twisted up in agony.

Bag Man leaned in close to get a better grip on him. He whispered in his ear. "I'm sorry, Raf. I just can't do this anymore."

The spirit of Semjaza fully entered Raphael a moment later. Bag Man let him go. Raphael fell like a stone, twitching and convulsing on the floor. The girl screamed, her tiny eyes wide as she saw her mother's body, her face cracked and smashed and leaking blood.

Bag Man crossed the floor in two quick steps and squatted before her. He whipped off his sunglasses, and though she couldn't see him, he put himself squarely between the girl and the corpses. He whispered to her, "Forget, Adrianna."

She collapsed like a rag doll onto the cold kitchen tile, unconscious. She would wake eventually, and remember nothing. Not even her name.

A slow, deliberate clapping began to sound from behind him. He felt the presence there, and stood up just as Lucifer burst into full applause.

“Well done, Bagdial!” Stepping over the body of Adrianna’s mother, Lucifer knelt down to examine Raphael. He still twitched, eyes wide and filled with terror. His mouth was wide as if in a scream, but no sound issued forth. “Hello, Raphael. Nice to see you again.”

Raphael convulsed. Lucifer looked at Bag Man, smiling. “Good, very good. I hadn’t considered this but it makes sense. Sow a tiny seed of doubt, nurture it, and wham! Get him when the first crack in his Faith appears. Brilliant.”

Bag Man was angry. His voice was tight, yet quiet. Calm. Deliberate. Beaten. “Let’s get something straight, Lou. I didn’t do it for you. I did it for me. I’m done with this shit. I want out. Take Semjaza there and do whatever the fuck you want, I don’t care anymore.”

“Oh, I’m going to take him. Make no mistake. In a little while he’ll wake up inside Raphael’s form, and our ancient friend will be no more. Semjaza will hunt among the Meatbags again, and I have you to thank for it.”

“About that,” Bag Man said, sliding his sunglasses back on. “I’m going solid. Going to look up Adia, talk about old times and shit. I’d rather not have to look over my shoulder every day wondering if I’m going to see you there looking to tie up loose ends.”

“You wound me, old friend,” Lucifer said. He stood to face him. “You and I were never enemies, Bagdial. Oh, sure, we were put on opposite sides of the battlefield, but I know that wasn’t your doing. I don’t hold you accountable for that. Shit, at least you *took* a side.”

“No choice, the way I saw it.”

Lucifer winked at him, and chuckled. “See there’s where you’re wrong, but we could debate this for another millennia and still not see eye to eye. As to your concerns, I find myself

in your debt, as it happens. Name your price, and consider it done. I can only assume you want something for this unasked for act of friendship?”

“I don’t want anything.”

Lucifer sniffed. “Everyone wants *something*, Bag Man. Angels or Meatbags, we all *want*.”

“Fine. Just leave me the fuck alone. Say you’ll do that, and I’m out the door.”

Lucifer gave a quick nod. “Very well.” He extended his hand, and this time, Bag Man shook it. “Done.”

“Can you get the cops here after I go for the girl? No reason she has to get caught up in this when he finally wakes up, is there?” He jerked a thumb at Raphael’s now still form.

Lucifer grimaced, pretending embarrassment. “Semjaza will need nourishment when he finishes assimilating Raphael. You aren’t suggesting I feed him the corpse, are you?”

Bag Man let out a long sigh. There was nothing left to do. He shook his head, defeated, and opened the front door. “You’re a fucking piece of work, you know that Lou? I’m outta here.”

“Oh, Bag Man?”

Bagdial stopped in the doorway. He didn’t turn. “Yeah?”

“It took me a very long time, but I got what I wanted, in the end. I always do.”

“Not everything,” Bag Man said. “You didn’t get me.”

“I never wanted you,” Lucifer laughed. “Even now, I know I could never trust you to serve me faithfully. Not like you did Him.”

“Get to the fucking point, Lou.”

“The point is you flipped on Raphael. You murdered him to save yourself. Could there be any greater Sin?”

Bag Man glanced up at the blue sky. “So you want to hear you were right? No Holy Retribution? No Chorus of Archangels descending on my ass from Upstairs?”

Lucifer dismissed that. “No, I already knew I was right. Do you remember what I said to you on the steps of St. Patrick’s Cathedral?”

Bag Man grimaced.

Lucifer laughed. “Say it.”

Bag Man frowned. “Come on, Lou. You won. Can’t you just leave it at that?”

“Saaaaaaaay it,” Lucifer taunted. “Come on, saaaay it, Bag Man, you know its true!”

“Fine.” An exasperated sigh escaped Bag Man’s lips. “I’m your bitch.”

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