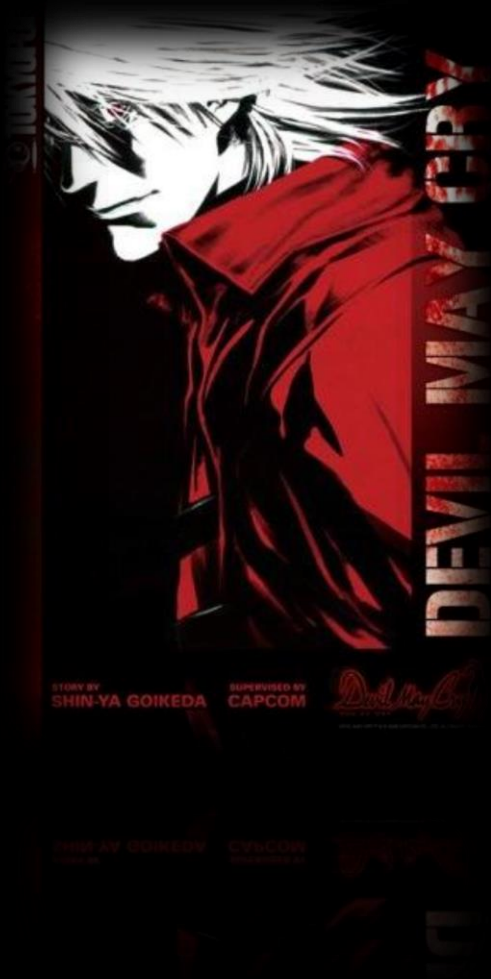


Shin ya Goikeda



DEVIL MAY CRY

VOLUME 1

COMPOSED AND PROVIDED BY

Adelle Marie Rulli

VERGIL

The Original Devil May Cry

The Real Devil May Cry Unleashed

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Phase 1

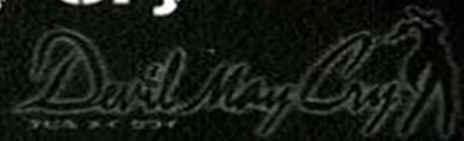
Part 1



Devil May Cry

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Humming neon lights and glittering raindrops aren't enough to stave off the inky night. Blackness always envelops the city. Only the rising sun unveils the familiar world. This unrelenting cycle of light and dark grinds on, just as it has for millennia.

But there are things that remain hidden even in the light of day. Inhuman vapors come from the tangle of sun-cast shadows. And at night, those shadows merge with the darkness, and the creatures that dwell there are temporarily released.

No one can pull back this curtain between worlds and see things as they truly are. No one, except for one man...

"It's over, Tony!" Denvers shifted his weight, trying to cut an imposing figure but settling for "in charge". He eyed Tony Redgrave, who stood at the far end of the alley.

His prey had a penchant for flamboyance, cloaking his red leather coat in enough silver ornamentation to deck out more than one Christmas tree. The charms and the talisman jangled as Tony turned to face him. "Again? I'm so tired of this schtick. Change the channel, Mad Dog."

Denvers bristled. This was, in fact, the ninety-ninth time he had gone after Tony. Any ordinary gangster would have

stopped by the fifth. Tenth, tops. But Denvers was nothing if not tenacious-he'd earned his street name for a reason.

He bared his teeth. "I've got forty men. And every one of them is armed with military-issue stain-makers. Today, you're gonna die."

Denvers involuntarily glanced up toward the thick shadows that lined the alley's rooftops. Forty armed thugs. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel. "You've got brass ones, I'll give you that." He smirked. "You always manage to pull through. But I bet you've never had to eat this much lead. Ready to die?"

The alley was still. Denvers shifted his weight again, uncomfortable with the tension. He could feel sweat beading on his brow, and hoped the thugs on the rooftops didn't notice.

"Sorry, were you talking to me?" Tony pretended to stifle a yawn. "I haven't had much sleep. Can we make this quick?"

"You bastard!" Denvers yelled. He glowered at Tony. What is wrong with this guy? He either has nerves of steel or a mental condition. Either way, Denvers had had enough. "You arrogant punk!" "Chill out, Mad Dog. You might burst something".

"Just die!" Denvers pulled his trigger, and forty thugs followed suit. Hundreds of bullets volleyed toward Tony, kicking up a dust cloud that soon swallowed the alley.

The guns sputtered out a few seconds later. Denvers smacked his lips as his men lowered their spent weapons.

"Maybe that shower woke you up." He cackled. Tony emerged from the dust, brushing off his jacket. "Didn't I just say let's make this quick?"

Denvers found the clank of the jewelry more annoying than the witty banter. He sucked in a lungful of air, getting ready to bellow.

Suddenly, he heard the clatter of empty weapons falling to the ground. One by one, his men backed away. "What the hell? Do your job!" he screeched. Someone shouted, "No way!"

"I pay you, you bastards! What's the big idea?" Denvers wrapped his sausage-like fingers around the Mauser that hung at his considerable waist. Fresh sweat pooled everywhere. Why does it always turn out like this?

Nobody could've survived that much lead. So why were his men lying in bloody heaps on the ground? Denvers gripped his pistol. Ninety-eight times. And now, yet again, he was poised to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

Red and silver flashed from the end of the alley, near the bodies of over half of his men. The talismans jangled, and another thug sprawled on the pile. Denver's remaining men approached the dust cloud cautiously, wary of friendly fire.

Denver had no such compunction. "Like hell I'm going to lose this time!" He aimed at the melee and pulled the trigger. The Mauser roared, and one of his men collapsed.

"Crap!" Denver again, squeezing off another round whenever he heard the metallic chimes of Tony's jacket. Sweat poured off his forehead, blurring his vision. But Denver didn't care. Aim for the jangle. Aim for the noise!

Silver flickered at the edge of his vision-Tony's hair was as ostentatious as the rest of his gear. I've got you now. We aren't doing this a hundredth time.

Denver fired three bullets in succession, leaving a final round in the chamber. His eyes darted around anxiously. "Have you gone to hell yet?" There was no answer.

A light breeze dissipated the veil of smoke. Forty bodies lay soaked in red, but Denver couldn't see a hint of silver. He stepped carefully through the corpses, looking for Tony. He must have hit him. Had to, at that range. Find the body, go home, and knock back a few drinks to celebrate.

His confidence returned. He could practically taste the celebratory cold beer running down his throat. Then something caught his eye.

"Wha-?" Denvers felt the pit of his stomach grow cold. His mouth opened and closed like a fish's as his eyes registered the lithe figure standing alone in the alley. Silver charms clinked as Tony strode forward.

"What are you trying to say, Mad Dog?" A gust of wind pushed the last of the dust out of the alley, brushing a strand of silver hair out of Tony's face. "If you need help completing a simple sentence, maybe you should go back to grade school."

He doesn't have a scratch on him! His red coat was a different story, though. It was riddled with holes. Tony held his giant sword in front of him like it was a shield. "You freak!" Denvers spat out.

Tony was nonplussed. "You were aiming for the jackpot. I wouldn't expect anything less from a former Olympic sharpshooter. Too bad you've gone soft." "Shut up!" Denvers snarled. He gestured with his Mauser. "I've still got bullets left, you butt-monkey." Tony lowered his sword, further enraging Denvers. "Good of you. Mark of a true professional."

Rage chased away the last of Denvers' fear. He tightened his finger around the trigger. "I'm gonna shut your arrogant hole for good. If you've got anything else to say, now's the time. Think of it as a last request."

"I'm so sick of hearing that," Tony said. "Must be like the ninety-seventh time now." "Shut the hell up!" Denvers pulled the trigger. The two were so close that even a blind man couldn't miss. Denvers watched as the bullet tore through his adversary's face. "I did it!"

Tony chuckled. "Oh. Really?" Denvers stared, agape. Somehow, Tony was unscathed. He pressed the tip of his sword against Denvers' throat. How is that even possible? Denvers had seen the bullet peirce the other man's skull. He's not human.

"Looks like I win again," the silver-haired devil crowed. "You're out of your league, pal." Tony took the Mauser before sheathing his blade. "Nice piece. It's a bootleg, though. A real Mauser would have a manufacturer's mark here." Tony traced a line on the gun. "Oh well, I'll take it anyway. See you later, Mad Dog!"

Tony spun on his heels and marched off, leaving Denvers wobbling, speechless, and totally dumbfounded. He turned at the end of the alley. "I almost forgot," Tony eased out of his

ragged coat, "take this to Gail's shop and ask her to make me a new one. And don't forget to tip her."

"Crap! Why the hell do I have to be his errand boy?" Denvers skulked down the sidewalk, bitter. It was almost morning, soon the sun would rise, and skulking would become more difficult. (Denvers didn't want to run into anyone he knew.)

He sneezed as he darted from building to building. "Dammit. First a defeat, and now a cold!" Denvers sidled onto a road that led out of town. It wouldn't do to be seen in this state. Luckily, the banks of the former Dob River were devoid of people. He pulled a grubby handkerchief out of his pocket and trumpeted loudly.

The windpicked up. Maybe it was the sweat, or maybe it was his fear of Tony-either way, Denvers shivered. He slipped into the remains of the red coat but the patchwork of holes did little to warm him. I'd be better off throwing it away, Denvers reflected. More than paying for repairs! But he had come this far. Might as well go the distance.

Still, a little break can't hurt, he thought. Denvers sat down and crossed his legs. Ninety-nine times. "My reputation's kaput". Tony had drifted into town two years ago, making short work of the underworld. Denvers wasn't the only gangster to feel the heat. Drug dealers, arms dealers, human

organ dealers, illegal surgeons. Anyone working for the mafia and its rivals had found themselves on the wrong end of Tony's talismans.

Tony had rejected their overtures for peace. Any other mercenary would have taken the money, no questions asked. But not Tony. He did whatever he wanted, ignoring the local power structure. Gangs who opposed him were utterly crushed, and with each defeat Tony's reputation grew.

Even worse, he'd started a trend. Other mercenaries cut ties with the underworld bosses, making their own bids for independance. It put the reputations of people like Denvers on the line, men who had come to power the old-fashioned way. Tony was threatening his entire way of life.

And so Denvers had decided to do something about it. Ninety-nine times now. There wouldn't be a hundredth. Denvers knew that. He had used up the last of his goodwill to find backing for this most recent attempt, hatching a meticulous plan and persuading old bosses to lend him money, muscle, and gear for the attack. Striking out had left Denvers with no friends and nowhere else to go. He had to keep his head down now. This wasn't a loss a man could just walk away from."Dammit, I'm screwed."

Suddenly, a voice cried out. "DAAANNNTREE!" Denvers lunged for his holster but came up empty, as Tony had taken the Mauser. Damn!

"DAAANNNTREE!" The voice grew louder, echoing up the riverbed. Denvers' eyes darted around. "DAAANNNTREE!" Denvers spun around wildly. "DAAANNNTREE!" The heavy clouds turned black and the sky grew darker.

How is that possible? It's nearly dawn...No, it isn't the sky...It was everything, as the whole world was being subtly rearranged into an unknown shape.


"DAAANNNTREE!" Denvers' fear grew more and more primal, his thoughts tumbling into feral abandon. Even if he'd had the Mauser, he wouldn't have been able to operate it.

"DAAANNNTREE!" The eerie voices were nearly upon him, but Denvers couldn't see them in the blackness.

Suddenly, Denvers heard footsteps beside him. He whirled anxiously. "Who's there?" He was oddly comforted by the possibility that he wasn't alone. Maybe it was Tony.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

And then he saw it-a scythe, slicing toward him. Slowly, his vision bled away. He felt something tearing into his flesh. Denvers tried to shout for help, but his voice didn't work anymore. Nothing worked anymore-nothing but his nerve



endings, transmitting endless pain as he was hacked into bits. Denvers screamed silently.

Finally, day broke. But on the chapped embankment, Denvers' body was nowhere to be found

Phase 1

Part 2

Bobby's Cellar was unlikely to win any awards. Any drunk who managed to locate the dive in its obscure downtown back alley would think twice about going inside after clapping eyes on Bobby's warning, which was nailed on the door: "Go home, take a dump, and sleep it off."

But, of course, he meant only after braving the smell of garbage, downing a few beers, and maybe scarfing a meal at his little establishment. Low prices and unsavory hours kept the punters coming. Constant brawls and the occasional gunshot sometimes sent them right back out.

Bobby's cellar wasn't for the faint of heart.

A few straggling patrons staggered out of the bar as the sun peeked over the horizon. Bobby scrubbed the countertops, sporting his customers and scowl. Anyone still left after sunrise was bound to be a good-for-nothing. But one of them stood out more than the others. He looked deceptively young, but his silver hair gave the game away.

"I heard about, Tony. You and Mad Dog were at it again." Grue took a slug of gin and rocked his chair back on two legs. Like most mercenaries, his lined face looked older than

its years. But his imposing body was still in top condition.
"Didn't I tell you to stay away from Denvers?"

"You know what they say." Tony shrugged. "I'm not just a lady's man. I'm a man's man."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. I thought gunfights without profit weren't your thing?"

Tony knocked back his whiskey. "I was bored. It passed the time." He frowned. "He ruined my favorite coat."

"Is that why you're wearing that getup? It doesn't suit you." Grue chuckled, but it sounded more like a death rattle.

"Can it, will ya? I can't help it." Tony wore a bland jacket, at odds with the cool image he usually tried to project. He looked more like an embarrassing uncle than a master mercenary.

"Just get something else to wear soon. You look like you're at a funeral. Just seeing you walk around in that thing makes me depressed."

"I'm not wearing it because I like it," Tony protested.

"There are plenty of superstitious guys in this business. Black's not a very popular color." Grue whipped out a cheap cigarette and lit it up.

Tony waved his hand irritably.

"Gee, am I bothering you?" Grue asked sarcastically.

"I only do alcohol. Do you like destroying your lungs?"

"About as much as you like devastating your liver." Grue laughed. "You think like a kid. Someone like Denvers is gonna take advantage of that one of these days." He stubbed out his cigarette. If there was one thing Grue couldn't stand, it was a smartass.

"Say what you want," Tony murmured dismissively. "By the way, there's something I wanna ask you about."

"If its money, the answer is no."

"I haven't said anything yet!"

"I know what you're gonna say before you say it. Do you know how much I've lent you already?" Grue had moved on to a mug of the cheapest beer he'd ever tasted. It was bitterer than the hops it was made from, and Grue had become something of a local legend for being the only person brave enough to tuck it back.

Tony cocked his head. "Come on, that's the skunky beer talking. I heard you had some money saved up. How about it?"

Grue slapped a coin on the table. "I've got three daughters. You think they leave anything left over for savings? All I've

got is enough for the slop. I'm broke." He tossed the coin at Tony.

That's what Tony was waiting for. "I owe you one. I'll pay you back soon."

"I won't hold my breath," Grue growled. "But I'll be waiting." He pushed back from the table and stood up, revealing the large Python hanging from his waist. "I heard that Enzo is coming tonight. Be sure to show your face. Don't forget."

"I won't."

Grue managed a half-hearted wave on his way out. Tony lifted his glass in reply.

Tony ambled onto the street a few minutes later, blinking in the sunshine. He preferred the night and normally would have slept in his hideout until the evening. But his encounter with Denvers left him energized. Might as well take care of some errands, he reasoned.

He made his way to a shabby downtown office. The building was plastered with signs for money lending and public services. Tony found an emergency stairwell and crept up the ramshackle steps.

Goldstein's Shop had a simple sign that instructed customers to go through the rickety door off one of the staircase's landings.

Tony turned the doorknob, "I'm coming in, old lady! You here?" The door swung forward. "You haven't kicked the bucket, have you?"

"You're an annoying little brat, you know that?" Nell Goldstein shuffled into view, carrying a gun frame. "How many times have I told you to knock before coming in?"

The shop was dark-windowless, lit by a dull lamp. Goldstein turned back to her table and continued sorting through gun parts. "Just when I thought I'd finally have a day of peace and quiet."

She had refined her name as a gunsmith. Those in the know called her the ".45 Caliber Artist" on account of her skill. But the years had worn some of the tread from the tires, and now she spent her days sprucing up weapons made by other people. She may have looked like Methuselah's grandmother, but she could juice up a squirt gun until it could take out an elephant.

"You're the only person in the world who could get away with calling me and old lady," she rasped, shooting a pointed

glance at his silver hair. "I wonder what your parents must look like."

Tony smiled kindly. He pointed to a gold plate on the wall that read .45 Caliber Warks. "When are you going to fix that plate? Even a kid wouldn't make a spelling mistake like that."

"Tosh. It's always been like that. I don't mind." And anyway, those days are over, she reflected.

"You don't mind because those old eyes of yours can't read letters properly anymore," Tony teased.

"Why don't you tell me what you're doing here before I decide to wash your mouth out with soap?"



Tony set the bootlegged Mauser on the table in front of Goldstein. "I've got another gun. Can you take a look at it for me?"

"Again? How many guns is it this month?"

"I dunno. I don't really think about it."

"I'm not your personal gunsmith," Goldstein objected. But she picked the gun up anyway, examining its contours through a magnifying glass. She handled the Mauser like it was her own child.

"Well? Is it usable?"

Goldstein regarded Tony above the rim of her bifocals. "Yes. But used by whom? It's not fit for you. The HSC is a magnificent weapon, but it's not something for shooting wildly like some kind of idiot."

Tony rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, I was coming to that. You know that P08 you gave me? It sort of crapped out on me."

Goldstein put a hand to her temple with mock weariness. "Give me a break! I put a lot of time and energy into that Luger."

She was constantly improving guns for Tony, but he would invariably wear them out by trying to match the lightning output of a machine gun. It was difficult to find parts that could withstand that kind of stress. "You know, most normal people can't pull a trigger that many times in a second. I had to virtually rebuild the weapon from the ground up to make it possible."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I only come to you, old lady."

"I want you to know what a pain in the ass you are," Goldstein muttered. "Geez." She continued to study the Mauser, mentally reconfiguring it for superior performance. She'd been dealing with Tony ever since he had arrived in the city. This was old hat by now.

"I'll have to strip down the frame," she fretted. "Even then, the cost for parts alone wouldn't be worth it. Forget about it." Time and money meant some weapons got tossed instead of improved.

"Don't say that! Come on, old lady. A mercenary without a gun just wouldn't look right."

"Since when did anyone care what a mercenary looked like?" Goldstein huffed. She deposited the Mauser in a desk drawer. "It's going to take a while. I want half the cash up front. Got it?"

"Sure. No complaints here!" Tony beamed like a kid on Christmas.

Goldstein frowned. That smile makes him impossible to dislike, in spite of the ridiculous jobs he always requests.

"Anyway, Enzo is coming tonight, so you won't have to worry about money." He winked.

"I won't be holding my breath."

Tony tsked. "Oh, come on! Have some faith for once. All that doubting is going to age you...skin like an old Bible."

"Shut your trap!" Goldstein shooed Tony out of her shop. "I'm tired of idiots without any manners. Geez."

After he had gone, she turned back to the table and studied the parts arrayed in front of her. Five pieces had to be completed before she turned in.

So tired.

Goldstein reached for a picture lying face down on the corner. The photograph captured a boy with chestnut hair and a smile, sitting beside a dog that seemed to tower over him. A picture from the heartland.

Her eyes drifted down to the heavy gun clasped to the boy's hand.

"I love Mommy" was scribbled in crayon.

The boy looked an awful lot like Tony.

Phase 1

Part 3

Being a mercenary made it tough to get respect. Outsiders saw them as little better than criminals, while the underworld considered them untrustworthy. Most jobs were those even career thugs passed up. But things were changing ever since Tony had come on the scene. The mercenaries' influence was growing. The better ones could afford to be choosy, employing agents to find the capers that suited their style.

Tony stood out even among the hardest characters. He didn't build himself up or curry favor with the local bosses. He simply spent two years taking precisely the jobs he wanted and making sure that they got done. His attitude rubbed some people the wrong way, but Tony was quick to deal with those who got out of line. Since coming to the city, he had single-handedly disposed of two venerable mafia families and created a cottage industry in sending assassins to the hospital.

Tony's success had spurred a number of competing mercenaries to form a loose guild based out of Bobby's Cellar. They met there each night to look out for work and line their wallets.

"Here, here! I got a job worth two hundred dollars. Anyone who's interested, get your ass over here."

"Anyone lookin' for a fight, over here!"

"The only thing you need is to be able to shoot a gun! This way!"

"Dangerous job-two thousand dollars! Daredevils, gather here!"

The usual chorus weltered up from Bobby's Cellar moments after the open sign buzzed to life. Agents and middlemen jockeyed for contractors, relying on words or fists to land a mercenary for the night. The higher the reward, the fewer words and the more fists.

Sometimes the middlemen would pursue a specific mercenary instead of advertising the job. The nature of the industry meant that only those contractors with real power climbed up the ladder, and notorious mercenaries rarely had to look for work.

Bobby swung a rag across the bar; whether this made the counter cleaner or dirtier was anyone's guess.

"Business is booming tonight. There's never a slump."

Bobby's stomach had long ago hoisted a white flag in the war against gravity. He wore it like it was an apron. "I work and work and yet stay penniless. Makes me jealous."

Tony was perched at the bar, still wearing drab black. "You eat everything you earn," he quipped. "Save the daydreams for naptime." He was shoveling mouthfuls of ice cream into his craw, hoping the chill would balance out the tang of out-of-season strawberries. He had no need to join the throng of vying for gigs.

"How about you tell me that after you outgrow kiddy desserts?"

"Shut up. Sundaes are good." Tony spooned another glob into his mouth. Ice cream and sauce stained his face like clown makeup. He would have stood out against the mercenaries in the background even without the shock of silver hair.

"Always the same." A short man sidled up to the bar beside Tony. "You're the first and last person I'll never know who eats that crap in a filthy hole like this."

Enzo Ferino was the best informant in the neighborhood. His stature was an asset in the business-most bullets whizzed over his head.

Enzo smirked. "I've got something for you. Get me a drink."

"Bobby, make something for shortstop here."

Bobby sat a strawberry sundae on the counter. Enzo was incensed. "You idiot! What kind of person gets this when you ask for a drink?"

"Sorry about that. But Bobby's no idiot. Nothing beats these sundaes." Tony slid the dish in front of himself.

Enzo fished some papers from his bag, disgusted. "If you eat those your whole life, you're gonna turn into a pig."

"Already with the sweet talk?" Tony grumbled. "I need some time to rest my belly before I can satisfy you!"

"You're gonna become like Bobby if you don't walk that thing off. Now, read this." Enzo handed the file to Tony, whose eyes widened.

"You're kidding me! Two hundred thousand dollars? In one night?"

"Idiot!" Enzo hissed. "Keep it down! The others will notice!" But it was unlikely-a personal brawl at the other end of the bar had evolved into a rumble. He'd probably need a bullhorn for anyone but Enzo to hear him. "You're not an amateur. Respect my rules or find yourself a new middleman."

Tony shrugged.

Enzo shook his head and continued. "This is what I came to offer you. The pay is amazing and it'll be a testimony to your skill."

"You might be overestimating me. What's the job?"

Enzo pulled out another sheaf of papers. "This client is a South American mafia leader who's being targeted by the law and is facing ruin. He wants someone to smuggle him out of the country before he's caught."

"I'm guessing it won't be a simple escape."

"What do you expect? This guy is a black-hearted bastard. His organization traffics drugs. He's made a boatload of money, and a lot of people want a slice."

Tony considered this. "So not only do I have to get him." He tossed the papers back to Enzo. "Bobby-gin and tonic. Make it strong."

"Enzo bunched his hands into exasperated fists."Hey, what gives? You're not interested?" Enzo had never been able to predict Tony's moods. The mercenary seemed to take jobs on a whim, and once he passed on a caper there was no going back. The money didn't ever make a difference. "Think about it. Come on, its two hundred thousand dollars! This isn't chump change we're talking about here."

"Thanks but no thanks." Tony sipped his drink, and then narrowed his eyes. He tapped at one of the documents. A blurry photo held a familiar face. "Is this the guy? I think I beat this guy up a while back."

"You think it's a trap? Fine, two hundred thousand dollars, my friend. You can't not be interested."

Tony rolled his eyes. Someone had obviously paid Enzo a fat deposit. The little man had probably already promised Tony's services.

The mercenary wasn't put off by thoughts of a trap. But he'd always selected his capers based on three simple criteria:

First, that he was interested in the content.

Second, that there was no unnecessary bloodshed.

Finally, and most importantly, that he felt an intuitive...something about it.

Whether or not it was a trap was irrelevant. But this job probably couldn't be done without killing someone.

"I'm not really keen on it," he said at last.

Enzo leaned in conspiratorially. "What kind of pro says crap like that? Do it, Tony. Come on!" Enzo might be an unappealing pig of a man, but when he sets his mind on it, he transformed into an unstoppable juggernaut. Tony knew

he'd see Enzo's pleading face in his dreams for weeks if he turned this gig down.

He started out the sound of another voice.

"It's okay Enzo. I'll persuade Tony for you."

Tony glanced up. Grue's crossed arms looked like cradled hams.

Enzo recoiled. "Please don't hurt me! I've got a weak heart. Honest!"

"That's a new line. I'll remember that one." Grue's arrival had attracted a small crowd. "Nobody doubts your skill as a middleman. You can lay off already. Tony'll do it."

Tony watched as Enzo's frown hiked into a triumphant smile.

"I'm only a middleman on the side. First and foremost, I'm an informant. Get your facts straight."

Enzo beamed at Tony. He knew Grue would convince him to accept the job, but decided to play along.

"Whether Tony takes it or not, it's only my style to give up before I had my say."

Grue sighed. "I said he'll do it. But..."

"I get you." Enzo winked. "You want in on the job. Well, I'll leave it to the pair of you. I've got some things to share with other people. Give me a shout if you need anything."

"Okay, okay. Get out of here." Grue brushed Enzo away.

Tony leveled his gaze at Grue. "Impeccable timing. Did you arrange this with Enzo?"

"Don't be stupid. If I'd taken the trouble to do that, I'd never have included an upstart like you."

"True enough. I take it back."

"It doesn't matter. I'm only here to scrounge." Tony knew Grue was only half-serious. Many of the other mercenaries looked down on Grue for allying with Tony on his big jobs. The bolder fighters called him Scrounger, after a dog picking up table scraps.

Tony didn't see the problem in working together, but Grue had a sensitive streak. "Come on, you didn't come here just looking for pity, did you? Anyway, have my drink."

Grue waved aside the glass and ordered his usual swill.

"You should lighten up. Someone could take advantage of that attitude fo yours."

"When you get to my age, it's hard to change old habit." Grue tilted his mug and washed away his insecurities. "Anyway, enough about me. What about the job?"

"Something smells fishy. It's pretty obvious I'm being targeted." Tony studied his glass, but didn't drink. The two mercenaries usually kept a distance between alcohol and work. Tony and Grue had built up a mutual respect over a series of joint capers, but they weren't exactly drinking buddies.

He looked over at Grue. "The guy's name was Brown, if I recall correctly. I can take care of him myself."

"Fondo Brown. Someone grassed him up. The feds are breaking up his operation. Brown's high up in the Colloseo family. It's pretty weak as far as mafia goes, but they have inroads to the hallucinogenic drug trade. A lot of people will be gunning for him."

"Now that you mention it, I'm sure I've tangled with some of his crew." Tony shook his head. Petty conflicts cropped up all the time in the line of work. Annoyances, like Denvers. Tony usually forgot about them pretty quickly after taking care of business. But they didn't forget Tony. They always had a habit of popping up to paster him later.

"So we guard Brown. But where do we take him? These documents don't say."

"The jackpot makes up for not knowing the details. The fewer people who know what's happening, the better it'll be for us, man."

Tony grimaced. "That explains the two hundred thousand grand. You're not making the caper sound any more appealing."

"Don't say that. Enzo won't offer us any more work if we cause him to lose face. Besides," Grue lowered his voice to a whisper, "there are cars outside. I don't think we have the option of saying no."

Tony sighed theatrically. "They're desperate. Are they that in love with me? If they've got their hearts set on me, it would be cruel to disappoint them, right? We'll have to accept their date."

Phase 1

Part 4

Moonlight stabbed through the night sky, illuminating a line of cars that crept along a mountain road.

A herd of trucks cocooned a chunky sedan, offering protection to the passenger hidden behind black windows. Thicks shadows huddled together in the exposed truck beds.

"I'm cold," Tony moaned pathetically. He exhaled experimentally, glaring at the fog of breath as if to prove his point. He and Grue were hunkered down on the bed of the final vehicle in the caravan.

"Tough it out," said Grue. "You're not the only one who feels this way."

"Geez!" Tony moved closer to Grue for warmth. "All this effort just to make Enzo look good. You ever feel like you're being used?"

None of the other mercenaries rode with Tony and Grue because, well, they didn't want to die. The rear was always the most dangerous part of the caravan. The chill night air whipped at the two men, who pressed together to feed off each other's body heat.

"Shut up, Tony. If you didn't come with me, Enzo could kiss his reputation as a broker goodbye. And if he can't bring us work, we're the ones who lose out."

They had met Fondo Brown shortly after leaving Bobby's Cellar. A majordomo had handed them fifty thousand dollars in small stamps before bustling them onto the back of the truck. The little man squeezed Tony's hand and pleaded with real tears for him to deliver Brown safely. It was the first time Tony had been hired by a crier.

"I'm surprised Brown didn't remember me," Tony said. "I was expecting a trap. Revenge. I didn't think we'd see waterworks from a grown man."

"Maybe it would make sense if we knew the whole story." Grue narrowed his eyes. "If I'm not mistaken, that town is controlled by the Easterners." He indicated a sparkling hill alongside a vast harbor. The caravan was headed straight to the city.

"So they say." Tony sat up, intrigued. "These idiots are going to cut through rival territory to get to the harbor faster."

It wasn't tremendous as far as getaway plans were concerned. Brown doubtless had a price on his head big enough for a bounty hunter to retire on, and here they were

escorting him through a city packed with people ready to cash in.

"How do you want to handle this, Tony?"

"We've got the deposit." Tony patted the stamps. "Let's do fifty thousand dollars' worth of work and then get the hell out of here."

Grue grinned. "I agree."

"We'll sneak out just before the fighting heats up." Tony was warming to the idea. "I'm not packing much anyway. Just this." He unsheathed the mammoth sword that was never far from his side. The beloved weapon was fine for threats like Denvers, but the Easterners were something else entirely.

Grue stroke the sword for a moment before whipping open his vest. "I've got the Python, and six spare cartridges. Between the two of us, we should be able to get away when the time comes."

The two men stowed their weapons and huddled together to conserve heat. The caravan created a wooded hill and began the final approach toward the city.

Suddenly, the truck lurched. Tony regained his balance and scanned the line of vehicles. A hundred mercenaries blockaded the road, sending the drivers into a panic. A

second militia emerged from the bushes to attack both flanks. Brown either had a mole on the inside or some canny adversaries. Either way, his escort was unlikely to offer much protection.

"These guys know what they're doing."

Tony and Grue sauntered to the edge of the flatbed, peering around the side of the cab at the melee absorbing the front of the caravan.

"What do you think?"

"Fifty thousand dollars' worth of work," Grue reminded. He pulled out the Python and leapt softly onto the pavement. The road was dark aside from the moonlight; they'd have to be careful not to kill each other in the chaos.

"I'm gonna carve my way to Brown," Tony said. "You got my back?"

"Sure, I've only got the six cartridges. Make it quick."

"It won't take more than a moment. Be right back!"

Grue lobbed a warning shot at the nearest cadre to open a path for Tony, who spun his blade like a windmill.

"Out of my way!" Tony howled. "Do you want to die?" Nobody ever actually answered that question, but Tony felt it made him seem more imposing. He batted aside the few

mercenaries who crossed his path with the flat edge of his sword. "Don't make me use the pointy end!"

Tony whacked a mercenary in the stomach and was rewarded with a spray of gastric fluid. Another volley from the Python cleared the next few yards. Tony sprinted toward the sedan that sheltered Brown.

Something was wrong.

Tony looked around, weapon raised. He was surrounded. But the mercenaries weren't in combat stances. Instead, they stood silently, awed by the trail of battered but otherwise unharmed bodies left in Tony's wake. He sauntered over to the nearest thug and looked him up and down. "Did you really wet your pants, or is that just a stain?"

Tony spun around at the sound of a raspy battle cry. "All right, boys!" Brown said to Tony and Grue, his head poking through his car's moon roof. "These bastards aren't so tough after all. Open up!" He had a machine gun in one hand and a bullhorn in the other.

How clichè. Tony made his way back to Grue as the hillside erupted into gunfire. "This is our chance!"

"I know! Let's get out of here!" Grue grabbed Tony by the hand, pulling him toward the tangle of undergrowth at the

side of the road. The two men tromped through the muddy battlefield and vanished into the night.

The last of the smoke cleared an hour later.

Brown's men had launched a blistering counter attack in the lull created by Tony's show of force. But in the end, numbers won out. Brown's lifeless body was one of dozens strewn across the asphalt, his blood mingling with that of his enemies.

He clutched a pair of spent machine guns but seemed to have misplaced his head.

Tony surveyed the scene coolly. "What a pitiful sight. I'll never get used to this part." He pointed at the grisly stump between Brown's shoulders. "You only need the head to claim the reward. What a cruel world."

"We're in no position to judge," said Grue. "But anyway, here we are." The two men had retreated to the safety of a nearby ridge and waited for the battle to wind down. Both were happy to be considered cowards if only money was at stake. Abandoning a job under overwhelming odds was the mercenary way.

"Now we know why Brown set aside old grudges and came to you," Grue muttered. "He must have been desperate."

"I don't want to hear that crap," Tony spat out. But Grue knew he was lying.

Tony was one of a rare breed among mercenaries, willing to deal out death, but lamenting that it was necessary. He especially hated other mercenaries discovering this emotional side to him. It was this aspect that attracted Grue to Tony in the first place. He liked working with someone who showed glimpses of a philosophical streak from time to time.

And then it happened.

One of the corpses rose to its feet. It was definitely a corpse. Its head was burst open like a pomegranate and its left arm was missing entirely. Even so, the body moved fluidly, like a dancer.

"Tony," Grue had seen too much in his years as a mercenary to be fazed by the horrors encountering on his missions. But he was quivering, barely able to mouth his friend's name.

"Tony!"

But it was too late. The corpse silently sprang into the air, lunging toward Tony with his remaining arm outstretched. The thing had grown inhuman talons. Tony had his back to the creature. His sword was still sheathed. Grue looked on with wide eyes, rooted to the spot.

"Like I'd lose my head to anything chicken enough to attack me from behind." Tony scoffed. He seized the corpse by the arm, spinning it around. "You're all the same. Watch a horror movie and get some tips. Geez!" Tony balled his first and plunged it into what remained of the thing's face. He pounced again and again, landing a blistering series of blows that would have shattered solid oak.

Tony's fist sped into a blur, beating out a sickening tattoo. Eventually he broke through the beast's jaw with an uppercut that sent its head snapping back. But Tony still had his viselike grip on the corpse's arm. He pulled the body back like a punching bag and bent it over his knee. A series of pops told Grue that Tony had snapped the creature's spine. Tony threw the corpse to the ground and sank a heavy boot deep into the remains of its head.

This is probably the first time in human history someone axe-kicked a corpse, Tony thought.

A brittle wheeze escaped the body's mouth. Tony still held the thing's arm, which was no longer attached to its body. The thing's skull was crushed beyond recognition. A steady flow of blood streamed down the ruined face like the tears of a wailing man.



"All my enemies end up crying and begging for forgiveness," Tony said. "Even if they were devils." A cool smile drifted across his face.

Grue suddenly realized he had been frozen in shock the entire time.

Tony whipped out a pair of crude, bootlegged Berettas and began spitting out fire. He pulled the triggers at inhuman speed, loosening dozens of bullets into the corpse until at last his chambers were empty. The monstrosity was now nothing more than a pile of raw meat.

Grue stared, mouth agape. But only Tony could see the beast's soul slip out of the bloody pulp and into the night sky with an inaudible howl.

Tony holstered the guns, which had become so hot they were smoking. He smirked, "Jackpot."

Suddenly, Grue yelped out a warning. "Behind you!"

Tony spun around. All around the flaming wreckage, corpses were rising from the pavement. Hundreds of thugs, each killed in the battle between Brown and his attackers. The ghastly creature now appeared united in one thing-their hatred for Tony.

They began making their way to the silver-haired warrior, their hollow eye sockets harboring sinister red glows that trained on Tony like lasers.

Tony responded the only way he knew how, "Come on, then!" He beckoned them with his right hand, a defiant grin etched on his face.

Grue remained frozen in place. The world had stopped making sense. But Tony seemed to thrive in this surreal environment. A dark passion blazed in Tony, the likes of which few besides Grue had ever seen.

"Bring it on!" Tony cackled maniacally. "I'll send each and every one of you back to hell!" He plunged his sword into the road in front of him and crossed the Beretta over his chest. It was the perfect pose. The calm before the storm.

The first of the corpses stepped closer and Tony widened his grin.

A familiar voice pulled Grue out of his stupor.

"Grue! It's all over."

How much time has passed? Grue wondered.

"I wasn't sure if you were still alive, Grue. I was just gonna leave you here" if you had croaked.

Sensation washed over Grue-his sight and hearing rushed back to normal levels. His muscles felt stiff as stones. "Don't be so dramatic. Do you really think I'd be silly enough to die and leave my daughters behind?"

Grue knocked back Tony's outstretched hand and rose to his feet. His heart was still pounding. Cold sweat drenched his armpits and back. But his pride forced him to teeter on his

own two feet. He looked at Tony out of the corner of his eye. "Did I have a bad dream or something? What the hell was that?"

"Who knows?" said Tony, waving a hand dismissively. "I'm not into the occult. If you want to know, ask a priest."

Tony's nonchalance stamped the last vestiges of shock out of Grue's system. He knew that Tony was unbeatable. A flawless partner. As long as he stuck with Tony, everything would be okay.

"Come on, let's go home. Jessica's probably waiting for you."

"Yeah, she's probably got dinner ready." Grue smiled with anticipation. "You want to come?"

"Sounds good. Has your girl already learned to cook?"

"Don't be stupid, Jessica's already fifteen. She cooks better than all the restaurants in this neighborhood..." Grue trailer off, staring at Tony's feet.

"What are you looking at? I don't need that kind of attention from men." Tony narrowed his eyes jokingly.

"Shut up. It's your boots."

"What, these? They're nice, huh? Custom ordered." Tony glanced down at his feet. "My boots!"

"Yeah, they're no good anymore."

Tony was crestfallen. The once-sturdy boots were now stained with blood. One of the heels was missing; no doubt a victim of his spectacular axe kick. "This sucks!" he wailed. "I just took out a loan, too!"

"It's okay. You'll just have to take the next job offer that comes along," Grue said.

"Damn. And just when I finally got a date with Claire. Do you know how many months it took me to get her to agree?"

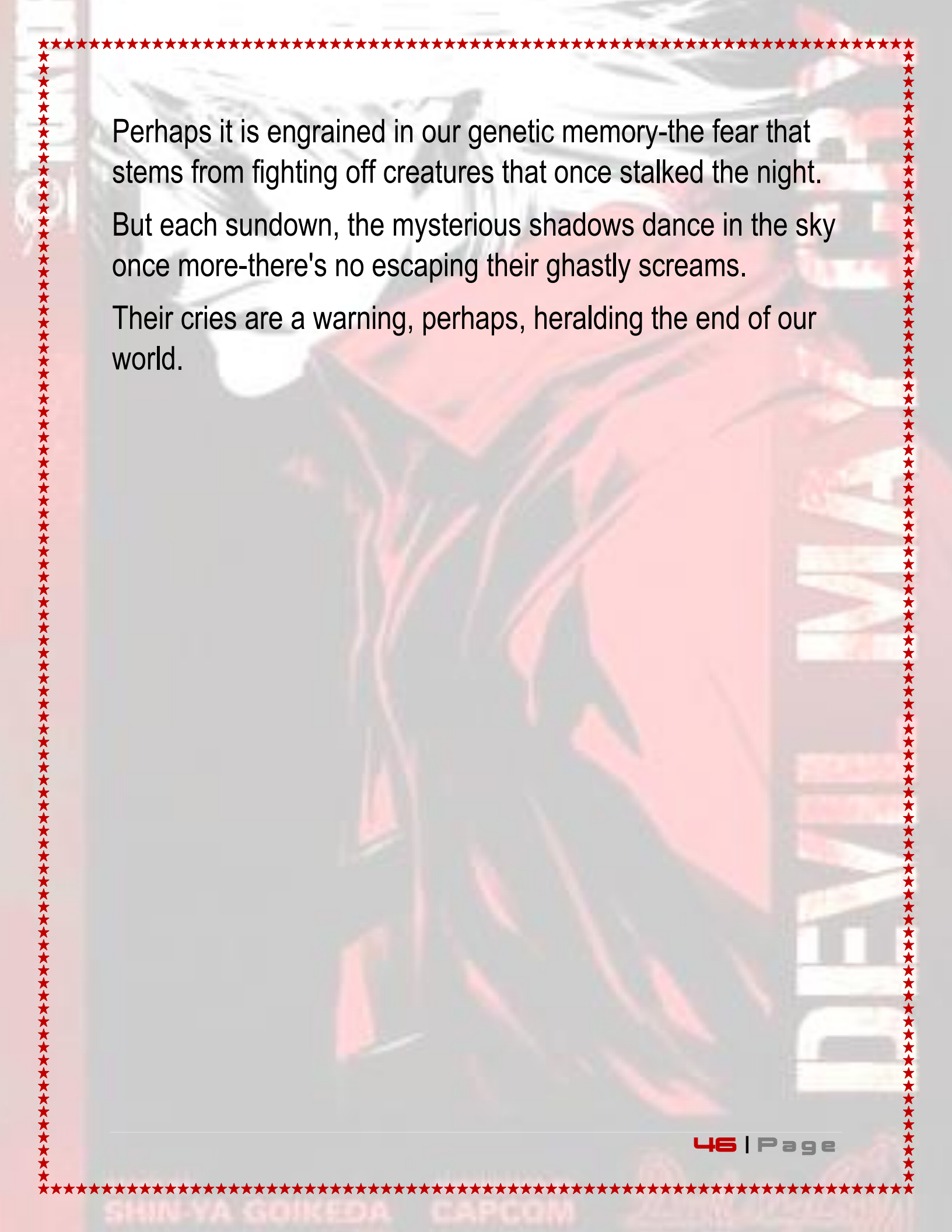
"Looks like you'll have to wait a little longer before you cash in those stamps." Grue slapped Tony on the back. His hearty laughter pushed the nightmarish scene he had witnessed out of his mind.

There are drunkards who see sinister shadows dancing in the night.

Needless to say, no one believes them. But each time the day cycles into night, the number of witnesses to the sinister shadows grow.

Although everyone laughs at the rumors about demons, doubts remain.

People instinctively fear the darkness.



Perhaps it is engrained in our genetic memory-the fear that stems from fighting off creatures that once stalked the night. But each sundown, the mysterious shadows dance in the sky once more-there's no escaping their ghastly screams. Their cries are a warning, perhaps, heralding the end of our world.

Phase 2

Part 1

"Hey! Don't just gobble it all up, Tony! There's plenty of seconds!"

An affronted shriek erupted from across the small table. Jessica had the officious nature of an oldest child, tempered by the innocence of her fifteen years. Her plump cheeks and chestnut curls reminded Tony of her father.

"But, Princess, I'm starving!" Tony yelled back. "I paid for the groceries. Keep bringing them out! I can eat everything you've got!"

"I'm gonna eat, too!" squealed Tiki, perched on Tony's leg. Nesty gurgled with delight on his other knee.

Grue watched the unfolding scene with horror. Tony had already scarfed down seven plates of doria. His youngest two daughters followed Tony's example, stuffing themselves silly while bouncing on Tony's knees.

"Tiki! Stop making a mess. Come help me out a little," Jessica cried. But her sister was having none of it.

"I'm eating with Tony!"

"Abba goo!" Nesty concurred.

Tony looked at Tiki with mock reproach. "When you have a man of my caliber, shouldn't you help out?" He turned his attention to Nesty, who was trying to scale his head. "My hair isn't for eating!"

Grue tried to mask his smile. "Hey, you're eating my portion!"

"I'm the guest here," Tony shot back. "Don't be so mean! Okay, Nesty. Open up!" He spooned some doria into her mouth.

"What about me?" wailed Tiki. "Feed me!"

"Good grief." Grue sank his head into his hands. "Every single time you come over, this place turns into a madhouse, Tony."

Jessica brought her father a steaming mug of coffee. She was a plain girl, but seemed to know how to make people feel at ease. "Everyone loves Tony," she pointed out.

"Everyone?" Grue smiled at his daughter coyly, one eyebrow raised. "I thought your cheeks were looking rosy this evening."

"I..." Jessica was mortified. "Don't say such stupid things." She set the mug down and fled into the safety of the kitchen to finish the next batch of doria.

The dining room's bustle eventually faded when the younger girls rushed off to do whatever young girls do. Jessica carried a pile of dishes into the kitchen. Tony and Grue moved into the living room and slumped into a pair of old leather chairs.

"Damn," said Tony. "Does eating dinner always have to be such a production?"

"They see you as one of them. You're just a kid at heart."

Tony sighed. "Give me a break. But it's good. Jessica's cooking isn't completely repulsive. And I like being here."

"As long as you like it here, that's the important thing." Grue lit a cigarette, fanning the smoke away from Tony. "It's hard for Jessica. She should be out there playing with her friends, but since my wife passed away, she's had to step in and run the household. I can't thank her enough."

"And in our business, you can't just go around shopping for another wife."

Grue drew close to his friend, smiling mischievously. "That was why I had something to ask you."

Tony blinked. "Hey! I'm not the marrying kind."

"Shut up and listen. I was just thinking that if you have some time, maybe you can take Jessica to the movies or something."

Tony bolted upright in bewilderment. "What? Me?"

"Yes, you. She really seems to like you, you know."

"A date? With a kid? I didn't know paying you back for dinner would be so involved."

Grue backed up. "Don't get me wrong. You get any ideas about touching her and I'll kill you myself."

"Don't worry. I can't imagine calling you Dad any time soon."

The two men burst into laughter.

The evening was a brief stab at normalcy. For Tony, who had no family, this was the closest he got to finding out what those small moments were all about.

"Hey, boys! Is anybody working tonight?"

A familiar voice rang out above the bustle of Bobby's Cellar a few minutes after midnight. The assembled throng craned around to see who might be offering a gig.

Enzo stood in the entrance, smiling smugly. "Don't look so cross. You might scare me into heading home."

He felt the collective gazes grow cold as he pushed his way toward the bar. It was only natural for a Thursday. Enzo was a Tuesday man. Bobby had an unspoken slot for agents, a daily rotation that ensured each middleman got a fair crack at

the action. The shuffle also kept the work on offer fresh; each agent had his own specialty and client roster.

As one of the bar's oldest customers, Enzo knew better than most what happened to those who broke the rules.

"It's Thursday," Bobby grumbled, pushing a fresh glass in front of Enzo. "You can't just come in here whenever you want, you know. What are you drinking? Maybe I'll let you off just this once."

Enzo blanched, aware he had overstepped his bounds. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he blustered. "I didn't come here on business. I just wanted to introduce you to someone." Enzo twisted around and waved toward the front of the bar. "Hey, come on in!"

He swiveled back to face Bobby. "An old buddy asked me to introduce him to you, and I couldn't turn him down. He wants me to make sure that this guy fits right in." Enzo might have been a tiny weasel of a man, but his unusual sense of obligation was part of what built up his impressive reputation among mercenaries and the underworld. "This guy used to be a bounty hunter. I think he wants to prove himself as a mercenary. Something like that. Anyway, here he is now."

A tall figure had entered the bar.

The newcomer was oddly androgynous, slime like a woman but extremely muscular. His dark green suit, unusually stylish for a mercenary, offset by a strange sword. But his head was odder still, wrapped entirely in bandages. His eyes peered out through the gaps in the cloths that concealed his features.

A hush fell over the crowd.

"This is Gilver," Enzo told Bobby, raising his voice to make sure that everyone heard him. "I'm told he's a guy, but who can tell for sure through all those bandages? Anyway, he's not talking."



Gilver gave a curt bow with the formal precision of a gentleman.

The atmosphere in Bobby's Cellar changed indelibly. All eyes were fixed on the stranger. Hands grasped weapons beneath the tables. Enzo darted his eyes from table to table, aware that the slightest faux pas could end in violence. It had happened before, more often than not.

Gilver took advantage of the lull to survey the room. His face was inscrutable behind the bandages, but the tilt of his head projected a confident calm.

Finally, he spoke. "I ask one thing."

The atmosphere somehow grew chillier, frowns dropping into snarls.

"I want to take on the strongest man here." Gilver paused to let the words sink in before swiftly unsheathing his sword—a single-edged blade of Eastern design. The weapon's beauty and rarity were probably lost on most of the onlookers.

"Let my actions be my resume. What do you say?" Gilver swung his sword slowly across the room, picking out individual mercenaries. The tension mounted, but no one stepped forward. Gilver continued his scan of the bar, finally settling on Tony. The silver-haired man was too busy gnawing away at a chicken thigh to notice him. "You." Gilver gestured toward Tony. "I've got the feeling you're the strongest guy here."

Tony casually tossed the thigh aside and wiped the back of his mouth. "I'm in the middle of dinner. Think it over, newbie."

Gilver cocked his head to one side. "Oh. Pardon me." Suddenly, his sword hissed down and cleaved the chicken

thigh Tony had discarded. He indicated the two pieces. "It should be easier to eat like that."

Tony stood up slowly. "Hey now, that's pretty good."

The men between them dove into the crowd of mercenaries lining Bobby's Cellar.

Tony grinned nonchalantly. "It's about time somebody decent with a sword showed up. I'm gonna enjoy this. Make sure you don't hold back any. I don't want you to make excuses when you lose."

Tony pulled his massive sword free from its sheath. Gilver gripped his own hilt with his other hand, moving with relaxed grace. Both of them knew that a single step forward would bring them within striking distance. But Gilver masterfully commanded the empty space with his sword, putting Tony at a disadvantage.

The Cellar itself seemed to swell with pressure. Tony imagined that everyone in the room had sweaty palms, and he suppressed the urge to giggle.

And then Gilver struck.

"Hyaa!" The bandaged stranger darted ahead with incredible speed, closing the gap between the two warriors in an instant.

Tony blinked with astonishment. Superhuman.

He realized that he alone had eyes capable of tracking Gilver's movements. To most of the occupants of Bobby's Cellar, Gilver must move so quickly that he doesn't appear to move at all.

Tony breezily knocked aside the tip of the oncoming sword. "Too easy, newbie."

He slashed his sword toward the ceiling, connecting with Gilver's blade and sending it flying backward.

"Gonna go home crying to Mommy now?" Tony brushed his sword up against the bandages, confident of victory.

"I seem to have underestimated you," Gilver allowed. "I apologize. However..." Gilver launched himself in the air, arcing backward. A wiry leg shot out toward Tony's wrist, sending his sword to the floor with a clatter.

Gilver landed on his feet and stood before Tony. "Now we're even. But it's not over yet." Gilver exploded into a frenzy of kicks and punches, each delivered with a precision Tony had never before encountered. It was all he could do to ward off the blows. Each glancing impact contained enough raw fury to warn that a direct hit would shatter bones.

"Hey, you're pretty good, newbie." But Tony's voice lacked its characteristically sarcastic tone.

The mercenaries watched as Gilver drove Tony backward across the bar, step by step. Finally, he landed a clean hit. After two decoy high kicks to the head, he planted a toe in Tony's lower gut. Tony reflexively tightened his abdominal muscles and crossed his arms to guard himself, but it was too late.

"Argh!" Tony flew back and tumbled clumsily along the floor, crashing into a table leg. The impact upturned a jug of beer, which showered over his silver hair. "You bastard! That's some kick you've got there."

"That makes up for my earlier defeat. Shall we settle this?"

Tony stood up, drenched in stale alcohol. The two combatants squared off at a respectable distance.

That's when everyone else in the room suddenly realized that neither man had been fighting at full force. Their exchanges had been more for show than anything else, avoiding vital areas. The mercenaries instinctively recognized that things would be different now and collectively slunk deeper into the corners.

Tony's glib wit had disappeared. He narrowed his eyes to take in Gilver, whose lean arms rippled with muscles. He was definitely capable of doing serious damage.

Enzo pressed farther back in his chair, hoping to put as much distance between himself and his contacts as possible. But the movement sent a whiskey glass crashing to the floor.

The sound shattered the silence.

Tony and Gilver threw themselves at each other. Tony dodged an incoming fist and countered with a swift uppercut, dancing like a boxer in zero gravity.

Gilver easily sidestepped the blow and jumped over a low sweep kick with a sneer. But it was a decoy. Tony pummeled his opponent's face with a devastating series of punches that should have felled a mule.

Gilver took the hits straight on and buried a short hook in Tony's stomach. The two men broke off, catching their breath. Suddenly, each lunged for their weapons scattered on the floor.

"Too slow!" Crowed Gilver.

"We'll see!" Tony shot back.

The two blades collided between them, sending off a shower of sparks. Tony and Gilver were equally matched. Their

instruments clinked and clanged ferociously, but neither warrior could gain ground. The deadlock only hiked the tension in Bobby's Cellar.

"Back off!" Tony feigned a low kick and both men jumped apart, breathing heavily. The duel had been shorter than the brawl, but it had consumed each other's strength.

"As I expected, you've made it this far." Gilver nodded curtly.

"You said it. You're pretty good for a newbie." Tony knew there was only one thing left to do. A contest that couldn't be settled by fists or swords could be solved by guns. Tony could see from the twitch of Gilver's hand that his opponent had reached the same conclusion.

But then a voice rang out that made everyone in the room jump. "Okay, okay! Let's stop this." Bobby himself had clambered atop his bar and had his hands on his hips. "If you mess up my bar any more, I'm gonna have to ban you."

Bobby pointed at Tony and Gilver as if they were recalcitrant schoolchildren. "Fists, okay. Swords, fine. Guns? No way."

A wave of relief washed over the assembled mercenaries. Bobby made his way through the crowd, dragging something behind him.

"I think we're having a change of plans," Tony said to Gilver. He indicated Bobby with a raised eyebrow.

After a moment, Bobby finally made it to the nearest table. He had been wrestling with an enormous frosted keg, which he maneuvered onto the tabletop with a grunt.

Slamming two glasses next to the keg, Bobby stomped back toward the bar. "There's only one other way to prove who's a better man," he said without looking over his shoulder.

Tony and Gilver stared at the keg and then each other.

Finally, Tony threw himself into an empty chair. He slumped in silence for a moment, looking like a deflated balloon.

Gilver was puzzled, "What are you doing? Do you forfeit?"

"Don't be stupid." But it was clear that Gilver didn't know what was going on. "The rules have changed."

Tony poured two glasses of clear liquid and gestured for Gilver to sit down across from him.

Drinking challenges had settled countless disputes throughout history. They were also a great way to get free booze. But Tony wasn't in the mood.

"I'll tell you this," he muttered. "I'd like nothing more than to settle this with our fists."

Phrase 2

Part 2

"Scoundrels! What do we do in this Cellar?" Bobby had clambered back on his bar and had his hands in the air, like a ringleader.

"Drink!" everyone shouted.

"So how do we settle things here?" Bobby asked.

"Booze!"

"Booze? I got an ocean of the stuff!" Bobby sneered. "What do you want?"

"Bobby's vodka!"

The roomful of mercenaries roared their approval. Gilver stood in front of the table, still none the wiser. His opponent was sitting opposite him with a glass in hand. People guided Gilver into a chair and a glass found its way in front of him.

"Hey, newbie." Tony grunted. "A word of advice. Drink as if you want to die. If you don't, you really will die." Someone poured vodka into the two glasses.

"Ready you bastards?" Bobby hollered. "Go!"

A chorus of gunshot rang out, and Tony slugged back his glass with a sour face.

Gilver manipulated a slit in the bandages covering his mouth, and followed suit. He felt the fiery liquid tumble down his throat and wanted to vomit.

Before he knew what was happening, a gaggle of mercenaries forced a funnel into his mouth and began to pour endless waves of vodka into it. Gilver's consciousness didn't hold out for long. He fell backward and passed out.

The mercenaries kept going anyway. Eventually, vodka began pouring out of Gilver's mouth and spreading across the floor. The smell was enough to knock out an elephant.

"How's that, newbie?" Tony said.

Someone in the crowd tried to help Gilver up, but his unconscious body proved unwieldy. He crashed back to the floor like a puppet with severed strings, face down and limbs akimbo.

Tony stoically emptied his twentieth glass. The crowd began to cheer him on.

"Tony! You're the strongest!"

"Ha! Knocking back a few glasses doesn't mean you're strong!"

Surrounded by reckless hooting, Tony flung his glass away.
"Don't be asses. I'm doin' the whole keg!" he proclaimed.

"Do it! Do it!" The jeers and cheers grew louder.

Tony grasped the half-empty barrel with both hands, tilting it back so that a steady river of vodka flowed into his welcoming mouth. He drained the keg amid the rousing cheers, letting it crash to the ground once it emptied. An enormous bout of applause erupted from the crowd.

Tony raised his right arm like a victorious boxer. "Hey, Bobby! That's my win, right?"

"Sure," Bobby shot back. "I haven't seen you go all out like that in a long time. Even so..." He indicated Gilver, who was now snoring, prostrate on the floor.

Bobby couldn't close until he woke up. But there were benefits to having passed-out customers. He began rooting through Gilver's pockets. "Loser pays."

Eventually, Bobby produced an overstuffed wallet and a jewel-encrusted watch. "Hey! This guy's loaded! There's more than enough here to pay for the booze and bar repairs."

The revelation sent the assembled throng into a hyena-like frenzy. A middleman grabbed the watch and made a beeline

for the nearest pawnshop. Everyone else became energized by the notion of free drinks.

"Drinks are on the newbie!"

"All right! Tonight's a lucky night! Bobby, keep them drinks coming!"

"If there's not enough money, sell off his clothes!"

"We can pawn that sword too!"

Tony shrugged, remembering his own initiation into the mercenary world. "I knew it would turn out like this." When it had been his turn, he was fleeced after a narrow defeat and left penniless for nearly a month.

"I'm heading home now," he announced to nobody in particular. "Do whatever you want." Tony staggered into the night, but no one in the hollering crowd paid him any attention.

The chill night air rushed around Tony as he tottered down an empty back alley near Bobby's Cellar. He drank, but his binges were few and far between, so Tony was fairly certain that he was drunk. At first he wondered why the alley wobbled like the sea, but then he realized that it was

perfectly still and he was the one wobbling. He also kept tripping on the bottom of his own coat.

Like a million other drunks before him, Tony decided to swear off alcohol-at least until the next time. He started humming a jaunty little number, putting a swagger in his wobble that made his movements look like a wind-up toy's. He had completely forgotten about his match with Gilver and was lost in the moment.

A cool breeze lashed out like a tendril and whipped across his face, breaking his reverie. Tony's muscle memory sprang into action and he crouched into a combat stance without thinking about it. But the alley was empty.

Too empty, Tony thought. He sensed danger, but was unable to identify a threat. The empty street offered no clues. Tony gripped a Beretta M92F in one hand and a Colt Government in the other. His sword was handy in close combat, but guns were always best against the unknown.

The wind puffed the clouds across the moon, veiling the alley in darkness. It's like something out of a cheap horror novel. Tony flicked the safety on his pistols, scanning the area.

A flicker of doubt raced across his mind. What if bullets don't work on these enemies? But he soon dismissed it; Tony rarely had time for fear.

He crossed his arms and assumed an imposing stance. The last of his drunkenness ebbed away as adrenaline flooded his system.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

Tony's ears pricked up.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

So it wasn't his imagination.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

Where's that voice coming from?

"DAAANNNTREE!"

It wasn't just a voice. It was a malignant aural presence, cold and inhuman. A faint rustling fluttered up and down the alley. Tony tensed.

Suddenly, something wiggled in the darkness. Tony began to make out a humanoid figure in the gloom.

"I've been waiting for you bastards." Tony squeezed both triggers, loosening a volley of bullets.

An inhuman scream rang out in response. The bullets had cut a swathe in the darkness, which in turn seemed to produce more and more figures.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

The shapes moved closer, revealing glittering scythes.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

Now Tony could make out skull-like faces.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

Tony gripped his guns tighter and fired off a fresh barrage. He knew the clips would soon be empty, but at least he was making some progress at thinning out the advancing forms. Tony carefully controlled each weapon to prevent them from recoiling upward after each round. The alcohol might not have been entirely stamped out of his system, but he was far from truly impaired.

But Tony had forgotten one thing. One tiny yet crucial detail. He was still using bootlegged guns.

Kaching!

One of the pistols jammed. The bullets in the Government locked up, rendering the weapon useless. The Beretta was still spitting out violence, but shoddy materials meant it was on the verge of crapping out.

Tony hurled both guns in the direction of the advancing shadows and grabbed his massive sword.

"Come on! Who wants to get cut in half?"

The weapon felt heavier than usual. Tony wrote it off to the vodka, but he had the sinking suspicion it was something else.

He hacked and slashed his way through the darkness, sparks flying where sword met scythe. The otherworldly forms were unable to withstand his frontal assault.

"I don't know what you want, but if you've got a problem with me, stop sending your minions and deal with me directly!"

Each swing of the sword began generating unsettling visions in the back of Tony's mind-a woman sprawled on the ground and covered in blood-a small child clinging to her body, crying. "Mommy."

"Mommy!"

Tony renewed his attack, enraged. He was no longer a helpless child. He had the power to kill; he had somehow lost the ability to cry.

He carved through the shadowy crowd. Eventually, the last of his foes fell. Tony felt his rage smolder deep inside. He held his sword out, scanning the alley. But it was as empty as when he had entered it, save for the scattered ashes of his mysteriously vanquished opponents.

The air hung heavy around him.

"Are you there?" Tony swept his gaze around the alley.
"Come out!"

Suddenly, a voice rang out. "TOOONNNYYYY!"

This cry was so different from the one that kicked off the
melee.

A smile broke across Tony's face. "This is the hundredth
time, you know."

A single man stood in front of him, legs apart. He wore a
familiar coat, which was ragged with holes. The man's body
was coated with blood. His head sat uneasily atop a severed
neck, held in place by a narrow strip of skin and muscle. It
was a strange shadow of a man...a man Tony knew well.

"Does even the devil hate me so much that he sent you to
rag on me, Denvers?"

"TOOONNNYYYY!" The thing that had once been Denvers
groaned hoarsely.

Sympathy flickered across Tony's eyes. He rarely showed
emotion for the dead, but Denvers had been a colleague in
an industry without many opportunities for relationships. The
shameful sight in front of him was too horrible even for
someone who had tried to kill Tony ninety-nine times.

But Tony knew that whatever faced him now wasn't really
Denvers. He resorted to sarcasm to dull his emotions. "Your
face is an improvement, but still painful to look at. Come
here; I'll fix it up for you!"

He readied his sword.

The thing that had once been Denver raised its arms and
launched itself at Tony. The silver talismans dotting the red
coat jangled.

"My favorite coat doesn't suit you." Tony swirled his sword
twice, remaining stationary but for a flick of a wrist. Both of
Denver's arms plopped on the ground. They wriggled like
snakes.

"TOOONNNYYY!" Denver bared the remainder of his teeth
and sprung forward. His coattails screamed behind him,
jewelry clanking.

Tony calmly decapitated him.

"My hundredth victory," he muttered. "Farewell."

The headless body stumbled forward through sheer
momentum and finally collapsed on the ground.

The atmosphere snapped back to normality as surely if
someone had flicked a switch. A gust of wind blew the last of
the clouds away from the moon, driving shadows further

down the alley. Denvers' transformed corpse was all that remained of the uncanny episode.

"You can keep the coat." Tony wiped the blood from his sword and stalked down the alley. Before long, the adrenaline wore off.

Tony headed home with unsteady steps.

Phase 2

Part 3

"Mommy. Mommy...Hey, Mommy!"

The young child shook the body of his fallen mother, but she had already breathed her last. The boy didn't understand.

"Mommy"

A warm pool of blood spread out from her motionless body.

The boy cried hysterically. Tears and snot flowed down his face and his silver hair fluttered as he shuddered. "Mom!"

Tony opened his eyes.

He was in a strange bed. His clothes were neatly stacked beside the pillow. His massive sword leaned against the foot of the bed. He had no idea where he was.

A woman's voice spoke softly. "The rumors were true, then. What a surprise."

Tony rolled his head to the right and saw a familiar figure lying beside him. She was smoking a long cigarette. The scent of menthol soothed him.

"Claire told me about it," the woman continued. "But I couldn't be sure until I'd seen it for myself."

The woman was the receptionist at a pool hall that Tony often visited. He recognized her soft face but couldn't remember her name. Why are we in bed together? Tony had never been interested in her. While attractive in her own way, she just wasn't his type.

The woman exhaled a stream of smoke. "I thought I'd picked up something good. I'm disappointed you turned out to be a momma's boy."

"What are you talking about? Where am I?" Tony felt jarred by his nightmare. He was numb and disoriented, but refused to let any emotions show on his face.

"This is my room," the woman said. "You must know it. Second floor of the shop."

"Why would I know that?"

Tony waved away the smoke, annoyed now. He stood up and paced the room. The warrior was stark naked, aside from a large half-globe amulet hanging around his neck.

He crossed to the window and pulled back a dirty curtain. It was still dark outside.

"What time is it?" he demanded.

"Don't take that tone with me, mamma's boy." The woman blew another stream of smoke, taking in Tony's firm back side. "You should thank me for picking you up!"

"Stop calling me that!"

"Well, it's the truth, isn't it? You get to spend the night with a beautiful woman, but all you can manage is 'Mommy' this and 'Mommy' that. You're an idiot."

"It's none of your business," Tony snapped. He turned his back on her again.

But the woman had clearly gotten to him. Tony didn't find women distasteful. In fact, there were dozens of girls he had his eyes on in this town alone. But he never dated for any significant length of time.

Tony absent-mindedly fiddled with his amulet. His mother had given it to him just before her untimely death. It was his only memento of her.

"What a waste." The woman moaned. "I find you passed out on the side of the road and drag you back here, and you won't even let me have some fun."

"Picked me up? What do you mean?"

The question sparked something in Tony, and he suddenly realized he was missing entire chunks of memory of the

previous night. He recalled fighting Denvers shortly after winning the drinking match with Gilver, but his memory went dark after that. Bobby's vodka must have been stronger than he'd thought. "I'm lucky to have escaped unscathed," he muttered. But the woman overheard him.

"It's not like you did much! I dragged you all the way here from a gutter. It was hard work!"

"Sorry, sorry." He raised a hand to placate the woman. "Thank you."



He had no fear against human enemies, but the creatures he fought last night were another story. Tony wasn't sure he would triumph over them in other circumstances.

His mother's death played out behind his eyelids again. It was one of the prime reasons he had chosen the dangerous path of a mercenary, honing his body and mind.

Tony suddenly became aware that the woman's lips were moving.

"Hey!" She didn't look pleased. "Pay attention when people are talking to you!"

Tony knew the situation could get ugly if the woman realized he didn't know her name.

"No, really, thank you. If it wasn't for you, I would've caught a cold." Tony liked to think he was as artful at gender politics as he was at shooting. But in fact, he knew he was terrible at the subtle diplomacy required with women. Tony caught sight of his clothes and decided to change the subject.

"Thanks for washing my clothes." He examined the garments and noticed that traces of blood remained visible. "You're a lifesaver. I can't walk home naked!"

Tony started to get dressed, but the woman leapt behind him and launched into a bear hug. Her strength surprised him.

"Hey, can't I get dressed?"

"I went to a lot of effort to get you here. You're just going to leave without thanking me?"

"I already said thank you."

"Don't embarrass me," the woman shrieked.

Tony suppressed a sigh.

To reiterate, he didn't find women distasteful. Tony had no trouble seducing women with whispered words of adoration. But unless he was betting on a particular filly, he was disinterested in the race. Moreover, he disliked people as demanding as his rescuer, no matter their looks.

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't be my best. I drank myself silly last night."

Tony broke free of the woman's grasp and quickly threw his clothes on. He rolled his coat into a ball under one arm and grabbed his sword.

The woman began vomiting out a string of abuse. "You ungrateful bastard! How dare you treat me like this? Get out of here! I don't care what happens to you anymore! You can rot on the street for all I care!"

The lines were always the same. He could easily guess what's coming next.

"This whole town is going to know you call for your mommy in your sleep! You'll be ashamed to show your face in public!"

Predictable. These women are all the same. A little variety wouldn't kill them.

Tony shrugged his shoulders and left the room without saying a word. The curses degenerated into sobs and eventually petered out as he got to the street. The woman's neighbors peered through their windows to see what the disturbance was all about.

Tony knew that the gossip mill would be in full force in a few hours, no matter what the woman said. But he didn't care.

He set off toward his place as the sun peeked over the surrounding buildings. He tried to grasp at snatches of his memory.

The only things firm in the mind were Denvers' animated corpse and his dead mother's face.

"Tony, I heard that you made Kerry cry."

Tony knew he'd hear questions as soon as he ventured back to Bobby's Cellar. He had slept the day away, crawling out of bed shortly before dusk and setting off for his favorite watering hole.

The mercenaries turned in unison to hear Tony's response.

"Tell us more," urged a mercenary named Ecole. He was a small and mousy man who was past his prime as a fighter.

But his deep knowledge of the law made him useful in the underworld. Ecole also traded on gossip; dirt on Tony was worth something.

"Back in my day, I was quite popular with the ladies," Ecole continued. "I could never have given a beautiful doll like Kerry the cold shoulder."

"I don't give a crap," Tony said flatly.

"That's no good, Tony!" Ecole pushed a chair toward his subject and gestured for Tony to sit. "Okay, you're taking the night off and we're going to talk about women." He offered a cask of rum to Tony, who held his head in his hands. "As long as I've got this we can talk until dawn!"

"Stop it!" Tony brushed him off angrily. The other mercenaries were doubled over with laughter, but Tony didn't care. "I came here to look for work. I've got a loan to pay off. I just wrecked my favorite boots and jacket that's worth more than any of you are. And I've gotta cough up the cash for some new guns."

"A new coat? That's just like you."

Tony smiled at the interruption. Grue strode forward, his face grim.

"What's the matter, Grue?" Tony was grateful at the chance to escape from Ecole's inquisition.

"Denvers' body had turned up, and his friends aren't happy."

Tony stared blankly. There would be no mistaking that the corpse, missing head or no.

"He was wearing your coat," Grue said pointedly. "He was cut in half." The words rang out through the bar as the mercenaries soaked up the information. Scarcely a second passed before the whispers erupted.

"Did he kill him?"

"That Mad Dog bastard."

"Hey, hey. Even with all that backup of his?"

"So the Oz Club is gunning for me." A hush fell over Bobby's Cellar at the sound of Tony's voice.

The Oz Club was comprised of former underworld members. They paid a fee to participate in human hunting expeditions to avenge other members' deaths. The first person to produce the target's head would claim the full reward. Membership in the Oz Club was the only reason "Mad Dog" Denvers had lived so long. Tony had deliberately spared him on ninety-nine previous occasions to avoid the club's wrath.

"That's right," affirmed Grue. "They're probably on their way here now. I'm not sure you even want to know the price on your head. Lots of people will be after a jackpot that large."

Pretty much everyone in the underworld held a grudge against Tony, so the club wouldn't have any problems gathering participants for the hunt. They usually attacked without warning, and negotiation was impossible. He would never be able to counter the price on his head, whatever its size.

Tony mentally kicked himself for forgetting about Denver's backup. He knew nobody would believe him if he claimed that Denver was already dead when he decapitated the corpse.

"I don't know what happened," Grue said. "But you should lay low for a while." Grue wasn't just worried about Tony; anybody around him would be pulled into the hunt. He had to put some distance between his friend and himself, for his daughters' sake.

"I know." Tony sighed. "I'll go take a nap somewhere until the heat dies down."

"That's for the best. It's too bad about your debt, though."

The bar was silent as the crowd took in Tony's situation. Everyone knew they could be drawn into the hunt just by

being in the same room. Half of the mercenaries were worried about a surprise strike on Bobby's Cellar. The other half were contemplating taking out Tony themselves and claiming the prize.

"What a mess." Tony shrugged and headed toward the door.

Grue chewed on his lip as his friend moved away. His shoulders slumped in resignation and he jogged after Tony.

"If you don't have anywhere to go, you can hide at my place," he whispered. "I can shelter you in the underground storeroom."

Tony put a hand on Grue's shoulder. "Thanks, but I'll pass. Hiding in a corner isn't my style." He turned to leave and found himself face to face with Gilver.

The stranger appeared the worse for wear even under his bandages, as if the previous night's alcoholic combat had drained his vitality.

Tony leaned in close. "Hey, newbie. The work I was going to take...it's yours if you want it."

Gilver cocked his head surprised.

"Don't worry. Think of it as an apology for last night."

But most of the people there knew it wasn't an apology. Tony only took pricey jobs, which in turn meant risky jobs. Such assignments were in no way a favor to Gilver.

Tony waved to the assembled crowd. "Later, everyone. After this blows over, treat me to a drink, yeah?"

He darted out of Bobby's Cellar and disappeared. Gilver watched Tony go with a strange, contemplative look in his eyes.

Phase 2

Part 4

Tony felt the presence of a pursuer right after he left Bobby's Cellar.

The tracker had masked himself well, but not enough to escape Tony's killer instinct. It was a mistake common to those who entered the underworld, either because they were used to battle, or they were overconfident in their ability.

Tony raced through his options, betraying no sign that he was on to his pursuer. He could stop and quickly turn, attacking his second shadow with a lethal blow to the throat. He could crush the guy's head, preventing a tiring fight.

Tony continued on his way.

He needed time to strike at the Oz Club and take out its leader before they could organize and return the favor. It was an unprecedented course of action, and Tony knew his enemies were unlikely to expect him to go on the offensive. But unlike an actual club, his adversaries had no headquarters or public face. He would have to run into a knowledgeable foe and beat the information out of him. I might as well start with the closest clue, he thought.

Tony quickened his pace. Suddenly, he whirled around, catching his follower unawares. The first thing he noticed was that this person wasn't alone. The second thing he noticed was that both stalkers were barely out of childhood.

"I've got something that I want to ask you," he announced.

The two boys yelped and pulled their triggers. But they were too inexperienced to hit their target even from that close range. Tony lashed out, sprawling one to the pavement with a kick that sent teeth flying. The other youth emptied the rest of his clip, but he wasn't quick enough to tag Tony.

The boy ran out of bullets. A stream of bile trickled down his chin as Tony kicked him hard in the stomach.

"Didn't you hear me? I just want you to answer a question," Tony said. He looked down at his prey with a smile. "I might look cool, but I'm actually really clumsy. I can't promise not to break your spine if I kick you again."

The wind kicked up the tails of his new coat, which licked the air like red flame. Tony knew the boy would see him as a bloodstained devil. He might even wet his pants.

"Who ordered you to hunt me down?"

The youth answered with a quivering voice, telling Tony the name of his superior.

A few hours later, Tony stood on a downtown corner. He had worked his way through another score of would-be assassins before discovering where the Oz Club had last assembled. He found himself in an upscale business district, staring at a marble bank. It was the middle of the night and the streets were empty. Tony had left Bobby's Cellar six hours previously.

The bank looked normal. But Tony could smell the unmistakable scents of blood, smoke, and metal. Nothing could mask the stench of death.

But there was something more. A dark, unnatural presence tingled along Tony's nervous system. The rotten atmosphere had no earthly origin, but Tony sensed it all the same. He unsheathed his sword.

"Strange place to meet," he said lightheartedly, trying to draw out anyone lurking in the darkness. It was then that he heard the voice.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

It was the same voice he'd heard before. It scratched across his mind like nails on a chalkboard. Tony kicked off the ground and shot into the air. He twisted around and smashed through the locked entrance to the bank with a single blow.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

The uncanny voice rang inside the building. Tony ran forward, sword raised. He didn't spare a moment to examine his surroundings.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

The voice followed him deeper into the bank. Tony bolted up the escalator, inexplicably drawn toward a room on the upper floor.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

The voice got louder. Tony felt the darkness around him grow more oppressive with each heartbeat. His keen eyes were playing tricks on him, revealing sinister faces in the darkness. The air grew increasingly viscous, as though he were wading in caramel. It became harder and harder to move.

Tony sensed that he was no longer in the bank...or at least that the bank was no longer in the realm of humanity. Every shadow became harsh and demonic.

Tony felt his breath grow heavier. His strength ebbed. The escalator stretched out in front of him; it looked like it would go on forever.

Suddenly, he found himself at the top, facing a simple fire exit. He sensed that the upper echelon of the Oz Club waited behind the door.

The smell of fresh blood spilled from the door, which radiated a dark aura.

Tony summoned the strength to kick open the door and began windmilling his sword. He struck out blindly, hoping to hit something, anything. He heard an unearthly voice cry out and knew that he had made contact.

But it wasn't a person.

Tony realized he was facing an animated shadow, a creature so dark that light seemed to fall into it. He sensed it had been watching him climb the escalator.

"You don't belong here, you demon bastards!" Tony growled.

The shadow swooped toward Tony, brandishing a scythe. It was wrapped in darkness like a phantom. The creature attacked with a blistering fury.

Tony sidestepped the attacker and smashed the shadow's face with a right hook. "Too slow!" He swung a knee into the creature's belly and followed up with a roundhouse kick.

Although the demon appeared incorporeal, its face betrayed agony. The other shadows in the room suddenly froze, as if astonished that Tony's attack had proved effective.

"That's all you've got, is it? Bring it on!" Tony gestured for the remaining shadows to attack him. He might have the shape of a mere man, but his cold strength rivaled any demons.

"What's the matter? Scared? Fine. I'll come to you!"

Tony danced around the room with blinding footwork, dicing his way through the blackness. One by one, the shadows fell, driven back to the netherworld. Tony moved so quickly that the creatures had no time to flee or even counter. They returned to oblivion with unearthly wails.

"Hate him!"

"The family of the night defeated so easily!"

"Help us!"

"Good, scream!" Tony shrieked. "Scream some more! Scream louder! Cry, you bastards!" He continued his savage attack, felling the demons like trees. He was so enraged that he failed to notice the carpet of human corpses beneath him. In a calmer mood, he might have recognized the bodies as prominent members of the Oz Club.

If he had noticed, the oblivious question of who had murdered them might have crossed his mind. But thoughts of his mission had been completely subsumed by fury.

Something is wrong.

The animated corpses he had encountered with Grue...

The shapeless black shadows that had appeared with Denver's body...

And now, fully formed enemies that had transformed the bank into a demon world...

Something is beginning to consume the human world. Tony was too far gone to feel fear. Instead, something inside him seemed to revel in the vile observation. He lashed out in ecstasy, killing several demons with a single right kick.

"I'm not finished yet!"

Tony spun in midair, stabbing his heel into a number of demons simultaneously. They evaporated into black dust. He repeated the strategy throughout the room, obliterating his opponents.

In the end, Tony stood alone, breathing heavily. The shadows that had threatened to overcome him were gone.

Less than a minute had passed since Tony entered the bank...

Tony stood immobile for what seemed like hours.

"Magnificent."

He snapped out of his trance at the sound of the voice.

"Who is it?" He whirled to face the newcomer, and recognized the telltale bandages instantly. "What are you doing here, newbie?"

"Work," Gilver said. "Don't worry about me."

He was as elegant and formal as before; his sword was coated in fresh blood.

He had moved so quietly that even Tony hadn't detected his presence. "Enzo hired me to look into the Oz Club. It seems he was going to ask you to do it."

"And you took it on because I was their target?"

"You were the one who asked me to. Don't you remember?"

Tony found Gilver's confidence disconcerting. The stranger had proven his skill in Bobby's Cellar, but it was somehow more than that. There was something else backing his self-assurance.

"Maybe. I don't have much confidence in my memory." Tony finally relaxed enough to scan the room. The lifeless bodies of a number of old men littered the floor.

The death toll totaled thirteen.

"This doesn't look like demon activity," Tony said, rolling one of the corpses onto its back. A red cavity had been dug where the heart should have been. "But it's too macabre to be a human's."

"Indeed." Gilver observed the room without saying anything else.

"What a sadistic way to kill. Tearing out their hearts." Tony's eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Gilver's blood-coated sword. "This was you."

Gilver shrugged off Tony's accusing stare. "I wasn't hired to do this. You've got the wrong man."

"Really," murmured Tony, shaking his head. The deaths were brutal, but at least nobody was after him anymore. Things have a way of working out in the end. But the shadows troubled him.

"How much did you see?" Tony let the question crawl out, giving Gilver time to digest every word. Did he witness the battle? Does he know about the demons? How much of the skirmish was in my head?

"All of it," Gilver replied evenly.

"Even me kicking demon ass?"

"If they really were demons. Yes."

"And you weren't scared? You must have balls of steel."

Tony went quiet, staring at Gilver as if daring the man to challenge him. They traded cold looks.

Finally, Tony broke away. "I admire your guts, newbie," he said. "Even Grue wet his pants when those guys first showed up. But you kept your cool. That's something."

"It doesn't mean I didn't feel fear," Gilver conceded. "The right amount of fear means life. Too much fear means death. Am I wrong?"

"You're exactly right." Tony patted Gilver on the back. It was a rare display of friendship, especially for another mercenary.

"Come on, newbie. Let's unwind with some drinks."

"If you're thinking of vodka again, I'll pass. I still have a headache from the last time."

Tony laughed.

Phase 3

A brief moment of peace makes people relax, possibly more than they should.

It's kinda like a drug. People can't live under constant stress.

But a drug's effects are only temporary.

Tension builds beneath the surface.

A distortion forms in the last place people would expect, resulting in suffering.

The inhuman shadows have not disappeared from the night, nor from the darkness.

They hide, and sharpen their claws, watching for their opportunity.

We must never forget this.

Phase 3

Part 1

A number of weeks passed without anything of note happening.

Tony hadn't seen any sign of the shadows since that night at the Oz Club bank. He tried to push the battle out of his mind, resuming his mercenary life and picking up odd jobs.

But something had changed, something subtle, deep in the background of the ordinary world.

It was even evident in Bobby's Cellar.

"Hey, nitwits. I've come to bless you with work. Show me a little respect."

It was a typical evening at the bar. Enzo was the first middleman to show up, surprising a regular crowd that was more used to him sauntering in well after midnight.

"First thing's first. I got a job for Gilver!" The bandaged mercenary had collected a number of nominated jobs in the days since the Oz Club incident. Reports of his courage and skill filtered up through the underworld to those with the fattest wallets, and men of his caliber were always in demand for jobs. More importantly, Gilver never said no.

Enzo beckoned Gilver over. "They want you to team up tonight. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all." Gilver took the documents.

Enzo preferred giving assignments to Gilver. He was silent and professional, whereas working with Tony meant unnecessary quips and constant needling. By contrast, everyone seemed to like Gilver.

"Your partner is also by request," Enzo murmured, indicating Tony.

"Nice," Tony piped up. "I'll take it. I haven't been short on cash since hooking up with bandage-boy here."

Requests for the pair had been nonstop. Tony had more enemies than friends, but business was business. He and Gilver had unrivaled talents, and as a team they were nigh unstoppable. Enzo gave them increasingly dangerous jobs, yet they triumphed every time, raking in larger and larger rewards.

The other regulars at Bobby's Cellar found this turn of events rather unfortunate.

"Those two again? Throw us some scraps every once in a while!"

"Business is terrible!"

"Hurry up and give us some work! Those two aren't the only mercenaries, you know?"

The heckling was always directed at Tony. The other mercenaries loved Gilver, because he would treat the bar to free rounds after every job. He always insisted he had nothing else to spend the extra money on. He might be putting the other men out of work, but every cloud had a silver lining-and these clouds were lined with booze.

Enzo eventually doled out his roster of jobs, replaced by other middlemen newly arrived at the Cellar. Tony slunk back to his regular seat, trading off between a glass of gin and a strawberry sundae.

Only he had noticed one subtle change.

The voice making fun of him for dripping ice cream everywhere was gone.

The voice chiming in with jokes as Tony told stories to Bobby or Enzo was gone.

The voice ordering the skunky beer at the bottom of the menu was gone.

The man with the old-fashioned Python strapped to his hip, the man a little too old to still be a mercenary, had stopped showing up at the Cellar a few days ago.

And nobody-not even Tony-knew where Grue had gone.

"Here we go, sorry to keep ya. I'm pretty happy with the result."

Nell Goldstein had completely refashioned the bootleg Mauser Tony had taken from Denvers, adding so many components that any normal man would scarcely be able to keep a grip on it. The little old woman had found a similar gun at a pawnshop and presented this alongside the Mauser. It too had been doctored, modified to be a better companion piece. She caressed the weapon with a silk cloth.

It was nearly four in the morning, but Goldstein never closed when Tony had a job on the boil. He had stayed at Bobby's Cellar for a while before heading over to the shop.

Tony picked up the guns and kissed each like a beloved pet. "I couldn't wait to get my hands on these beauties," he said, beaming. "It'd be a little silly for me to go to work unarmed."

"I've got a fair amount of cartridges, too. You'll need to use those, because typical reloads won't work after what I've done to the grips. You can use regular bullets if you want, but scale back on the gunpowder if you're planning on blazing away like a madman."

Tony pointed at himself with mock indignation. "Why would I do anything like that? Since you custom made it, I'll trust it,

old lady." He winked at Goldstein before tossing off a series of action poses, weapons in hand to test the weight.

Suddenly, he dropped to the floor to avoid an imaginary barrage of gunfire, responding with a blistering counterattack. The guns had been modified to fit Tony's aggressive style and were now exceptionally heavy, but he didn't mind. He waved the weapons gracefully through the air, tracing a lethal path that would have given him numerous targets in an actual combat situation. Finally, he rolled back up to his feet.

"I like them," he decided. "You did a good job."

Goldstein looked at him reproachfully, like a teacher lecturing an errant pupil. "Lay off the firing. I redesigned the gun, but it won't last long the way you use it."

"Have some faith."

"You can use that line once you've earned it," Goldstein snapped.

Tony smiled, Goldstein was the only person who could get away with bossing him around. He felt especially lenient with her when she gave him new toys.

He tossed a wad of bills on the table. "Here you go. See ya later!"

"Not so fast."

Tony stopped in his tracks, perplexed. He turned to find Goldstein smiling mischievously. "What the hell do you want now? You're giving me the creeps."

"You didn't think those guns were finished, did you, ya moron?"

"What do you mean, you old windbag?"

"Exactly what I said. First of all, you have to get used to using them properly."

Tony reckoned she must have been teasing him. "I get it, lady. I'm gonna take these anyway."

"Okay. But..." Goldstein was suddenly serious. "I've been debating whether to tell you this or not. It's not very nice."

"What? You're worrying me."

"It's about that fellow you've started hanging around with."

Tony tensed.

"I understand Enzo brought him along on this job. But not even Enzo knows who he is or where he came from."

"Gilver." Tony frowned. "We call him the Invisible Man."

"Word through the grapevine is that some idiot thought he'd make a few bucks by figuring out who was beneath those bandages. The guy had run up some debts and needed them

paid off pretty quickly. He came here to sell a gun to get some cash to help his investigation."

Goldstein regarded Tony. It was unlike him to not have drifted off with boredom this far into a conversation. His brow was furrowed and his left ear twitched nervously. Goldstein knew the signs of someone with something to hide.

"Go on," Tony urged quietly.

"Last night, he showed up. Dead. He had been sliced open from shoulder to hip."

"So what?"

"That's where my story ends. But who would have done just a thing? To die like that..."

"I think I know what you're trying to say." Tony sighed. There were a lot of swordsmen in town, but only one had skill approaching his own. Gilver. More importantly, if this information had reached Tony, then it had reached everyone else in the underworld. Which meant that it was probably exaggerated to the point of uselessness.

"There are a lot of people who don't want others to know their past," Goldstein said pointedly. "But I've never known anyone so heartless as to murder those snooping around just to keep their history concealed."

"You're right," Tony conceded.

He left the shop without another word.

Goldstein watched him disappear into the stairwell. "Take care, Tony. The only one who knows what will happen in the end is God, right?"

That afternoon, Goldstein received a second visitor. The man wore a nicely tailored suit and obscured his face with bandages.

"You're a strange one," Goldstein said curtly. She was short with everyone, but those familiar with her would have detected an edge to her voice.

"I want to place an order for a gun."



Gilver took a seat at the table and stared at Goldstein dispassionately. She regularly dealt with unsavory characters, but this time she couldn't suppress a chill. "I've got all sorts of guns," she said. "What are you looking for?"

"Something that can hit several targets at the same time would be perfect." Gilver indicated a shotgun mounted on the wall. "Something like that." Goldstein had modified the double-barreled weapons so that it could load up to ten shots at once. It was one of the few weapons she had developed that wasn't a pistol.

"That thing was made to shoot bears, not people. The aim is atrocious. You basically have to press the barrel right against the target."

"That's fine. How much do you want for it?"

"It's not for sale. I only sell pistols." Goldstein returned to fiddling with some components she had been working on. She had a prickly reputation, only selling weapons to those who took her fancy rather than those who offered enough cash.

"I'll choose my own price." Gilver scattered a number of bills on the desk and reached for the shotgun.

"Don't force it! It's sturdy, but you can't just go swinging it around like a club."

"Fine." Gilver stoically ripped the mounting brace, sending plaster chunks flying. "I'll remove it later." He examined the weapon in front of a stunned Goldstein. "I don't know much about guns, but even I can tell this is a finely crafted piece."

You seem to have great skill." Gilver removed the oilpaper that had been crammed into the moveable parts and bolts.

Goldstein was taken aback. Gilver had certainly seemed uncomfortable with guns at first. But his examination grew nimbler as time wore on, as if he was absorbing information from the firearm itself.

"I like it. I'll take it." Gilver slipped the shotgun in his pocket and made his way to the door.

Goldstein sifted through the bills on the table. "Hey, wait a second. You've given me too much."

"Keep it. I have no use for money."

"Well, let me ask you one thing. What in the hell do you plan on shooting?"

Gilver stopped in his tracks, his back to Goldstein.

"Something that takes the shape of a man but isn't one." He left the shop without looking back.

Goldstein watched him go, stifling a gasp. She was less surprised with what he said than with the shape his shadow threw on the dimly lit wall.

It didn't look anything like a shadow of a neat, suited man. It looked more like a knight in a suit of armor.

Goldstein felt her heart race like a piston.

Phase 3

Part 2

Tony was deep in thought after he left Goldstein's shop. He wandered the pre-dawn streets wordlessly, his collar turned to help combat the chill.

He knew few people would consider him quiet or thoughtful, but they didn't know his true nature. He arrived at a narrow alley leading to his home and paused. Normally he'd have gone straight to bed and slept like a rock during the daylight hours. But he wasn't remotely tired.

His new guns were heavy at his sides, itching to be handled. He felt an unidentified anxiety and wondered whether it was related to the night at the Oz Club bank.

Did I dispose of the demons for good? Why haven't I been attacked since that day?

The sound of a footfall snapped Tony back to reality. He spun around instinctively, whipping out the pistols and aiming them at the newcomer. His weapons were ready to fire a moment before the figure had drawn his own.

Tony's eyes widened and he froze.

His opponent was an older man holding a sleek Python. It was a face he knew better than any other.

"Grue!"

His friend cracked a thin smile. "Put the gun down. You know I don't have a chance against you."

Tony holstered his weapon and grabbed Grue by the shoulders, choking back emotion. "Where the hell have you been? What's going on? You're not going to tell me you've quit, are you?"

"Do you really think I'm the kind of guy who'd quit so easily, Tony?" But his reply was lifeless, hollow.

Tony shook him violently. "What happened? We've been together for so long! Why did you just disappear without a word?"

"Don't get excited, Tony." Grue's voice was flat and empty. "I had my own problems."

Grue looked off into the distance, avoiding his friend's eyes.

This only further irritated Tony. "Well, what is it? Did you even consider what I'd do if you just vanished?"

"When did you get so worried about what happened to other people?"

"Of course I was worried! Anything could have happened!" Tony released Grue, embarrassed.

Grue grinned like a knowing parent and lit a cigarette. The smoke made Tony feel nostalgic.

When Grue spoke, his tone was gentle but the words were harsh. "This isn't a friendship. We're just colleagues. That's all."

Tony stood there, speechless.

"We can't work together forever. Both you and I have to move forward."

This cold, logical statement cut Tony deeply. As a mercenary, he knew Grue's words had merit. But the two men were friends. Nobody was closer to Tony than Grue. But the man's voice was clipped, like a father regretfully cutting the apron strings.

"Don't feel bad for worrying about me. You have your things to handle. I have problems of my own."

"I understand that, but-"

"Then stop asking me questions," Grue snapped. "Let's leave it at that. Don't make this awkward." He stubbed out his cigarette and turned away from Tony. "I've got a job to do. I'm gonna go."

Tony stepped forward, choosing his words carefully. "I want you to tell me what happened. Or do you not trust me?"

Grue stood in silence for several minutes. Finally, he spoke.
"If you don't walk away, I will."

Suddenly, it all clicked into place. Tony frowned. "An
assassination job?"

It was a sharp, short question. Grue's chilled silence was an
eloquent reply in and of itself. His broad shoulders sagged
under the weight of his emotions. Like Tony, he did not enjoy
killing others.

"I'll tell you this," he finally allowed. "I owe you my life. Until I
pay that debt, don't go running off."

Tony spat. "I'll keep that in mind."

"I hate leaving debts open."

In the east, the sun began stabbing at the sky, chasing away
the shroud of darkness around them. Soft colors painted a
tender picture altogether unfitting for an underworld
encounter.

Tony sighed. "When you finish, come back, Grue. There's a
mountain of jobs I need your help with."

"You're too loyal to your partners," Grue said. "You'll end up
with less work. Besides..." His voice trailed off as he turned
to face Tony. There seemed to be a sadness in his smile,

painful emotions were etched deep in the wrinkles of his forehead.

Tony didn't say anything. Any words he said would be gibberish. The two men traded long looks as the seconds ticked by.

Finally, Grue managed to finish his sentence. "You best hurry up and forget a scrounger like me. Maybe our paths have already separated." Grue turned and disappeared into the city.

Don't forget me, Grue. I don't hate you.

Tony plunged his hands into his pockets and walked in the opposite direction.

Grue stalked toward the underground mall with heavy footsteps.

An assassination job?

Tony's words lay heavy on his heart.

I'm a scrounger and grave robber, sure, but not a cut-throat. Grue had never taken on work as an assassin, no matter how tight his bank account was or how loud the other mercenaries' heckles got.

Arriving at the mall, Grue nipped into an air duct. He produced a gun from his pocket. It wasn't his beloved

Python, but rather a Walther PPK fitted with a large silencer. Grue had repeatedly tested the gun prior to undertaking the mission, and now it was virtually an extension of his right arm. There was no way he could miss anything within shooting range.

Damn, it's times like these that I really want a smoke.

He'd been hired to kill the host of a drug party scheduled to convene in the underground shopping center. The guy was practically a kid, but he was rumored to have reneged on a massive load and plotted an overseas escape. The party was supposed to generate enough funds to underwrite his flight.

But none of that interested Grue. All he wanted was the money for this job.

He needed it for Jessica. His daughter's condition grew worse and worse as the time went on. Grue simply wanted to complete the job and race back to Jessica with the money for her treatment. He had pawned everything away to gather the cash, and totally debased himself, even becoming an assassin.

The wait would have felt long even if the target had shown up on time. Which he didn't.

Grue wasn't worried about the job, but fretting about Jessica made him impatient.

Young people finally showed up at the party site, mingling, scoping out the drug situation. The chemical of choice that night wasn't very potent among addicts, but new users would quickly find themselves too high to function properly. Grue surveyed the scene from the air duct, twisted inside the metal frame as he tightly gripped the PPK.

The host finally appeared a few hours later, carried into the party with a series of loud cheers. He exuded a recklessness of youth, oblivious to the loaded weapon aimed directly for his head.

Forgive me, punk.

Grue was strangely calm. He irritation disappeared as his mind focused on the task at hand. He slipped on a pair of night vision goggles and peered through the sight of the PPK. He aimed directly at the roof of the laughing boy's mouth.

The shot made barely any noise at all.

The bullet entered the kid's open mouth, destroying his upper jaw, sending fragments deep into his brain. It was an instantaneous irrevocable death.

The boy's body crashed to the floor, momentarily lost beneath the bustle of the party. The other revelers didn't notice, or else thought he was putting on a performance.

Grue dumped the PPK in the air duct and started backing his way out. Once someone noticed the body, the party would erupt into chaos. He wouldn't be able to combat an enraged mob, even if the party goers themselves posed no real threat.

He was nearly out of sight when the scream came.

"Aieeee!"

The dull crump of electronic music stopped, and Grue knew everyone was staring at the body. But he wasn't prepared for what happened next.

The boy should have died instantly when Grue had sniped him. But somehow his body stood up. A dim red light glowed in his empty eye sockets. The corpse was bellowing, unable to articulate without its missing jaw.

"AURRRUUU!"

Suddenly, the unholy wail was joined by another terrifying shriek. The girl closest to the body had plucked out her own eyes, gobbling them into her mouth. Twin fires appeared in the vacant holes of her eye sockets.

No one tried to run. Perhaps they were trapped in the hazy stupor of their drugged-up brains.

"AURRRUUU!"

The ghoulish transformation spread like an infection, each party goer ripping out their own eyes or gouging away at a neighbor's. They ate the bloody orbs, howling as the dull red glow appeared in their sockets.



And then Grue saw the shadows.

The black shapes floated over the partiers' heads, undulating with the wild frenzy of the crowd. A figure emerged from the center of the darkness, black and sinister. It had two hands and two feet like a man, but its face was far from human. A reptilian mouth bared ominous fangs.

Grue lay rooted to the spot.

The black lizard-demon was joined by others, which leapt upon the howling corpses and devoured them one by one. The creatures' bodies were coated red as blood sprayed the room.

"DAAANNNTEEE!"

Grue's eyes widened. He had heard the same word coming from the mouths of the undead corpses he and Tony had encountered on the roadway.

"DAAANNNTEEE!"

The chilling calls grew louder. The party was now completely overrun with vermillion lizard-demons, climbing over a carpet of lifeless flesh. The creatures had turned the room into a charnel house in a matter of seconds.

A silky voice rose above the cries. "What a pleasant sight. It saves me the trouble of a summoning."

Something heavy slammed into the air duct, knocking it to the ground. Grue spilled out of the exposed end, rolling into the center of the room. He caught sight of the lizards and froze. But a moment later, his shock was replaced by pain. Grue flexed and realized he had dislocated his right shoulder in the fall.

Grue clenched his teeth and reached for his beloved Python. "Hold it right there. Don't make it harder than it has to be." The cold voice was matched by a cold blade now at Grue's throat.

Grue allowed his gaze to drift across the length of the sword and up the arm of his captor. The man's face was swaddled in familiar bandages. "You!"

Gilver didn't move. "Tony's partners, old and new. What are the odds?"

"What are you doing here?" Grue indicated the lizard-demons. "What the hell are those?"

Gilver increased the pressure on his sword, causing Grue to wince in pain. "Darkness," he finally said. "A crowd, unwittingly dancing to tribal rhythms. A ceremony so secret that even the participants were ignorant of their true part. A blood offering." The bandaged man surveyed the room as if willing each lizard creature to stop howling.

A sepulchral silence fell across the room.

"To think that everything has come together this easily," he said. "Humanity was born a race of our slaves." Gilver pressed harder on his weapon, and a thin stream of blood rolled down Grue's neck. "Inhabiting the corpses taxes our strength and limits our numbers. But soon we will be able to migrate to this plane in our own prepared bodies."

Blackness began enroaching on Grue's peripheral vision, but he willed himself to stay conscious.


"Tony Redgrave is a skilled warrior. But not even he can withstand our combined might."

Grue snapped to attention at the sound of his friend's name; his system flushed with adrenaline. The mottled lizards resumed their chanting.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

Gilver spoke without sympathy. "You're the last one, Grue. A pity that body of yours is too old to offer as a sacrifice."

Grue returned Gilver's dispassionate stare, seeing his own reflection in his captor's eyes. He bit his cheek to stifle the pain from his damaged right arm, which was even now



inching toward the pin of a grenade that hung from his munitions belt.

Grue let his mind flicker back over his beautiful daughters' faces and Tony's brilliant smile.

Goodbye.

A moment passed.

And then an inferno raged through the abattoir. The courageous last stand of a washed-up mercenary was commemorated in flame.

Phase 3

Part 3

The earth continued to cut its elliptical path through space. Its inhabitants went about their business much as before, oblivious to the subtle changes that were taking hold each day.

The mercenaries at Bobby's Cellar were more oblivious than most. The fighters had little care for the world around them, unless they were paid to take an interest. Trading stories and squabbling over job offers proved too compelling for the hungry warriors, and so discussion of Grue was absent as the man himself.

A stout middleman was handing out jobs from his perch atop a table. "Gilver is the most popular guy tonight! Too bad he's only got one body. The rest of you hyenas better listen if you want his leftovers!"

Gilver had been requested for fifteen of the sixteen jobs on offer, but his usual habit of buying rounds ensured that the other mercenaries weren't buying for his blood. Everyone was also aware that a single man couldn't handle that many jobs in a night-even one of Gilver's caliber.

"Gilver! Where are you?" The middleman whipped his head around until he located his prized client, "Pick the one you want. I'll divvy up the rest of the other guys."

Gilver strode across to the middleman and glanced through the folders. The bandages covering his face seemed to have also migrated to his hands, so that now no flesh was visible at all. He looked like a mummy.

Tony and Enzo had hunkered down in a dim corner, watching the daily ritual unfold like anthropologists in the field. The agent had lost his role as star middleman and was happy to complain about it to anyone who would listen. That meant Tony more often than not.

"How is this a fair distribution?" he moaned. "Think about it."

"Stop whining," Tony said blandly. "Real men don't fuss over little things." But Enzo hadn't built up his business without learning to read body language, and he knew Tony was just as irritated. The silver-haired warrior continued slurping down a strawberry sundae, feigning indifference.

"Just look at yourself. I can't take you seriously!" Enzo sniffed.

Tony wiped the clownish smear of ice cream from his mouth.

"To think the day would come when some nobody gets to hand out jobs instead of me," bellowed Enzo, returning to his favorite theme. "Speaking of which, you should be out there getting half of those jobs."

"I'll wind up paired with Gilver anyway," Tony predicted.

"That's not the same thing."

"Adversity breeds character. Besides, it gets boring always being top dog. This way I'll appreciate it more when this fad winds down and I'm first pick again." Tony looked over at Gilver, who was hoisting his sword theatrically. The new middleman pointed in his direction.

"Gilver's partner is Tony again! Y'all better sharpen your skills and catch up to these two, or pretty soon you'll be out on the street living like bums!"

Tony grinned at Enzo. "See? I did nothing and still work came to me. This is how real men do things." Tony swept across the Cellar toward Gilver, his coat trailing behind him.

Enzo considered the mercenary's words for a moment and then leapt from his chair. "Hey! Tony! Wait a second! Wait for me! What about me? Hey!"

Even Tony was surprised by the devastation he had wrought.

The mercenary stood amid a pile of dead mafiosi. The surviving soldiers slipped and slid on the bloody ground, eyes wide at the sight of Tony and his dripping hands. The mafia had unleashed dozens of infantry, but none of them were adept at melee tussles.

Tony had neutralized the soldiers by washing the combat zone with liquid gunpowder-anyone who fired a shot would ignite an inferno that would consume them all. He was in his element, literally punching through the ranks with ease. But the mafiosi-renowned for their marksmanship-were useless without their weapons.

It was like shooting fish in a barrel. Blind fish. Blind fish in a coma.

"Come on, I don't have all day!" Tony gestured to the remaining soldiers, who were advancing uncertainly. Each footfall produced a squelching noise that echoed through the warehouse.

The gunpowder meant that Tony couldn't use his sword. The clash of metal on metal might spark a conflagration. But he was strong enough to tear limbs off his opponents, or plunge his fists deep into an enemy's stomach and rip out their spine. Tony thought that was something disgusting.

"I said come on," Tony said, mustering his most theatrical growl. "If you can't hear me, maybe I should come to you?" He stepped forward, sending the soldiers scurrying in the opposite direction.

A wave of realization washed over the gangsters. They would never be able to take him on without weapons, no matter how many of them rushed him at once.

Finally, someone in the back broke ranks and fled. It was the trigger. Within moments, the mafiosi were hoofing it away from the mercenary.

"It's barely worth the effort." Tony sighed. He casually shoved one of the retreating soldiers, who crashed to the ground in a panic. The remaining men darted toward the doorway like a school of fish avoiding a predator.

Tony had been expecting this.

"Argh!"

The three men at the front of the fleeing pack screamed in unison, watching with astonishment as their intestines slipped out of their bellies and onto the ground. A bandaged man with a moist sword had slashed the trio as they passed the threshold.

The mafiosi at the back of the flock hadn't realized they were trapped and continued to push at their peers in the front. But the effort simply threw more soldiers into the path of Gilver's blade. Realization slowly dawned on the survivors.

Tony and Gilver had cornered the soldiers in a pincer movement, the silver-haired warrior pummeling from the back and Gilver slicing from the front.

The bandaged man swung his katana lightly, severing four heads with a single stroke. Gilver tore through the victims as though they were made of wet paper, advancing into the warehouse. Before long, the last of the mafiosi died.

Gilver wove a trail of bloody footprints as he approached Tony. He had continued to use his weapon inside the warehouse despite Tony's gunpowder trap, confident that he could avoid sparking a fire.

"You took them all out?" Tony asked. He didn't bother to hide the disgust on his face.

"That was the order." Gilver wiped the blood from his blade with the detached serenity of a psychopath. "They came here, so I had to kill them."

But Tony wasn't listening. He stared at the glistening carnage around them, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Did you hear?"

"Yeah. Fifty people. And only a sword, too! It was a massacre."

"It's about time a real mercenary came here to show some of these guys how it's done."

The patrons of underworld bars rarely stopped talking about Gilver, but the mafiosi massacre was already becoming the stuff of legend. The bandaged enigma had already generated a reputation for accepting any job put before him. His kill rate was unparalleled, and he was armed only with a sword, to boot.

"That's how it was in the old days."

"Before we all got influenced by Tony. 'Unnecessary killing isn't cool.' Who did he think he was, our big brother?"

Gilver's skyrocketing reputation was in large part a reaction to Tony, who had revolutionized the freelance underworld by popularizing mercy. His success had shamed those who enjoyed violence and death, but nobody was confident enough to take him on.

The mercenaries had taken to Gilver immediately, gleeful for a return to the days of wanton destruction. The mysterious newcomer slaughtered without regard for taboos or self-

restrant, which inspired certain professional killers who considered their work more like a hobby.

"Must be rough, Tony. Not only is Gilver swiping your business but he's becoming one of those types you hate." Enzo handed Tony a fresh beer. (For a change, the two men were hunkered down at one of Bobby's competitors'.)

"Let me just say this," Enzo continued, ignoring Tony's sullen face. "Just because you're no longer top dog doesn't mean you can't drink."

Tony nursed the drink glumly. Instead of his typical strawberry sundae or gin, he had oredered a golden beverage made from cheap, rotting hops. It was Grue's drink of choice.

He missed his old partner.

"If I'd seen it coming, maybe I would've changed fields along with Grue," Tony muttered.

Enzo tossed a marinated octopus into his wide mouth and spoke while he chewed. "Grue, huh? I've heard rumors about him recently. Apparently his older daughter was hospitalized. The treatment was so outrageously expensive that he's been taking on some ugly work to pay the bills."

Tony whipped his head around to look at the agent.

"Jessica? What's wrong with her?"

"I have no idea. But neither do the doctors, from what I hear. She seems to be hallucinating about demons or something...Tony? Hey Tony!"

Tony had erupted at the mention of demons, kicking his stool away. His face had contorted into a mask of fury.

"Hey, Tony! Calm down, man. Don't get so worked up."

"Where is she? What hospital was she taken to?"

"What does it matter? There's nothing you can do any-"

Tony's arm whipped out and lifted Enzo into the air. "Just tell me, Enzo. I'm running out of patience."

"Okay, okay! I'll tell you! Put me down already!"

Phase 3

Part 4

The sanatorium had been built beyond the city limits to prevent the madness inside its walls from leaking over to the outside world.

Figures. Tony stood in front of a huge wrought iron gate, behind which lay a suitably gothic building that looked more like a fortress than a hospital. The hulking building was dark and still, a dead husk of a structure.

Tony couldn't shake the feeling that something malevolent was going on. He hadn't seen any signs of life since leaving the city, and now the sanatorium was devoid of any bustle typical of such facilities.

He sniffed the air and recognized the same stench he had smelled at the bank and his hundredth fight with Denvers before that. The unmistakable odor of decay and corruption.

"I'll let myself in," Tony quipped to no one in particular.

He cleaved the heavy gate from its hinges with a single swing of his sword. The sound may as well have been a starter pistol. Shadows instantly kicked up through the soil and flew toward him, wailing their familiar refrain.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

The creatures were neither corpses nor shadows. The demons had garnered enough strength to manifest as flesh and blood. They were sickening parodies of human forms.

Tony had been expecting something like this. He flashed his teeth in a manical grin. "I've been wanting to see you, demons!" He arced his sword toward the nearest beast, severing its torso.

"Come on! I dare you to lay a finger on me!"

His sword whirled frantically, dicing a demon that had approached from behind. The remaining creatures quickly adapted to Tony's techniques and attacked en masse.

But Tony had anticipated this, too.

He let his sword clatter to the ground and whipped out his guns.

"Show me what you've got!" Tony unleashed a torrent of bullets into the throng of advancing demons, startled by the speed at which his clips emptied. Goldstein had modified the pistols to be faster than machine guns and impossibly accurate. Demon after demon fell to Tony's ceaseless barrage. Three seconds after he dropped his sword, the last of the creatures toppled to the ground.

He holstered the smoking guns and leant down to pick up his sword.

Instead, he stumbled to his knees. What is this? Tony's head began to spin, and he could feel the bile rising in his throat. A chill raced up his spine. He fell backward onto his haunches, assailed by an unearthly illness. The nausea was so overpowering he could scarcely think straight.

He recalled passing out shortly after defeating Denver's animated corpse. And then at the Oz Club, slogging up the escalator as if wading through molasses. The air around the hospital was thick with a supernatural malevolence. The common thread was obvious.

Each case occurred at a nexus between the normal world and the demon realm. An ordinary human would never have been able to survive the uncanny conditions created by the interjection of that cancerous reality. That was why the sanatorium seemed so hollow.

The closer I get to the demon world, the weaker I become. Tony hauled himself up by the hilt of his sword. I'll always be at a disadvantage.

The silver-haired mercenary concentrated, pushing the illness away. This wasn't going to be easy.

Tony kicked the hospital door in and disappeared into the darkness.

It had only taken ten minutes for Tony to find himself completely enveloped in the demon world. The creatures that had met him at the gate were clearly some kind of lesser demons, easily disposed of. But the beasts that attacked him now were completely different. They were stronger and cleverer, employing weapons and strategy that kept Tony battling for his life.

The assaults constantly caught him off guard. Blades randomly ejected from walls and floors. Flaming cyclones chased friend and foe alike. Even the demons themselves were armed, taking swipes with long scythes.

Tony dodged and parried, yet still suffered a number of direct hits. But finally he annihilated his attackers and paused for breath. The dizziness and nausea dissipated, replaced by exhaustion. Tony found it difficult to lift his sword. His spent pistols were little more than dead weights. He realized with a start that if he sat down, he probably wouldn't have the energy to stand back up.

Tony figured he was becoming more and more ensnared in the demons' encroaching reality.

He abandoned his guns and used his sword as a crutch, hobbling toward a flight of stairs. He had already carved his way

through the upper floors, but Jessica was nowhere to be found. That left the basement, but Tony had been putting that off until last. The lower levels seemed thick with death, exerting a silent gravity.

This must be the nexus. The stairs descended into an inky void. Tony was shocked to find himself nearly turning back. But familiar chestnut curls spelled spilled across his mind and he remembered Jessica's innocent laughter.

I could really go for some of that lousy doria Jessica makes right about now.

Tony hefted his sword and stumbled down the stairs. A hot wind shot out of the darkness. Yet Tony felt stronger with each step. Adrenaline coursed through his system as his body rejuvenated. By the time two statues came alive and attacked him, he was nearly his old self again.

"Stop bugging me!" Tony easily shattered one of the animated stone giants with a roundhouse kick. It exploded into a hail of rocks.

The second statue proved to be a bit more nimble.

Tony's sword was useless.

The statue easily dodged Tony's kicks, vomiting a shower of sharp pebbles. Tony felt his newfound strength begin to ebb under the assault. He batted aside an incoming volley with his sword, but the action was too much and his arms finally gave out.

The animated statue attacked with increased ferocity. Tony was too tired to dodge the stone missiles. The barrage forced him to the ground, his ribs cracking, squeezing the air from his lungs.

Tony rolled into a hole in the floor made by the statues when they had broken free of their pedestals. His chest was on fire, rising and falling with quick jabs of breath. Tony knelt, gathering energy like a coiled spring.

Suddenly, he rocketed out of the hole and ran toward the golem at full strength. The statue renewed its deadly hail, but Tony willed himself to dodge the rocks until he was almost upon it. He vaulted over the giant and planted two sharp kicks to the back of its head.

The effort cost too much. Tony botched his landing and crumpled into a heap on the floor. But his face broke out into a huge grin. "Didn't see that one coming, did you?"

The statue fell to its knees before crumbling away altogether.

"Bye-bye, big guy."

Tony paused to recover his breath. The lack of an audience afforded him a rare moment of honesty. His ironic smile and theatrical red coat were mere props, protective masks, to put his enemies on the defensive and himself at ease. Ordinarily, he would boast about recovering quickly, but Tony discovered he was actually regaining his energy faster than usual. His breathing returned to normal and the flashes of pain in his chest subsided.

"I can't keep the princess waiting," he muttered. Tony hauled himself to his feet and stepped toward the darkness. His nerves reacted wildly with each step, as if urging him to pull back. It was the same presence he had felt before, the suffocating otherness that manifested at the Oz Club. But the intensity was a higher level of magnitude altogether. The atmosphere took on an oppressive, almost physical quality. The molasses-like sluggishness of the escalator returned.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

Tony reacted instinctively to the call, launching himself toward the darkness with his sword outstretched. A fraction of a second later, something slammed with a lethal force into the spot where he had stood.

Tony spun around to take in his new opponent. "A mask? Are you kidding me?"

It was literally a mask, wooden and primitive. The elongated faceplate was as long as Tony's sword. It sliced through the rugged basement walls with ease and boomeranged back toward the silver-haired mercenary.

Tony leapt aside as the painted mask flew past. He pursued it into the darkness, which eventually unfolded into an enormous hall.

"The last level, huh? A bit excessive if you ask me."

The wall was bare, save for a giant knotted tree. Its thick trunk punched through the stone ceiling in a desperate scrabble for the sky. A screeching monkey ran along the length of the one branch, clutching the wooden mask.

Tony narrowed his eyes. Not a real monkey. The unholy creature radiated despair. But even more shocking was the tree itself. A thick lower branch had been carved into an exquisite statue, its face twisted with pain.

Tony recognized the likeness at once. Jessica.

It wasn't a statue at all, he realized. It was Jessica, ensnared by eldritch forces and reshaped into a mockery of life. Tony erupted into a blind rage.

The monkey sensed the change in him. It donned the wooden mask and flung itself at Tony with blinding speed.

It never stood a chance.

Tony slaughtered the creature within moments, its black blood spraying over his red coat. Tony didn't care. He raced back to the living statue, frantic.

"Princess!"

The thing that had once been Jessica twitched, regarding Tony with wooden eyes that somehow sprouted tears. A familiar voice wheezed strange sounds for a moment, unable to form words through the pain. The tree grew larger with each anguished movement, its black aura radiating farther. Jessica's suffering had become the plant's uncanny heartbeat.

Tony knew the tree was the root of the demon sickness he had felt at the Oz Club and in the alley with Denvers. No, it's more than that. It's a bridgehead.

"That's right. The tree is growing a path between our worlds."

Tony spun around at the sound of the voice, which seemed to have read his mind. He found himself face to face with the monkey creature. It waddled before him unharmed.

"Your scratches do not bother me," the demon said, as if lecturing a slow child. Its visage was hidden behind the wooden mask. "The tree grows by feeding on human despair. A single child was all it took to enter this world."

"Shut up!" Tony shook with fury. "You did this..."

"It doesn't end here. We will do this to everyone you know." The demon fired off a staccato laugh. "You always hurt the ones you love. What could drive someone to despair more than their own family?"

Tony sliced through the monkey with his blade. Black juices sprayed on him and Jessica. She screamed out in pain. The demon cackled.

"My blood is poisonous to your kind." It sneered. "No human has ever endured the anguish she is experiencing now."

Tony watched with horror as the demon's wound closed up. The monkey bellowed a series of sinister laughs, swelling his body

with each breath. Within moments it was the size of the statues Tony had faced earlier.

The creature smashed its fists into the ground. Tony fought to steady himself from the shock. "Maybe your despair will feed the tree instead," the monkey hissed.

"Maybe." Tony regarded the beast coolly. "Or maybe I'll cut you down and put an end to Jessica's suffering."

"Your weapons are useless against m-"

The demon choked into stunned silence as it noticed its arms sail across the hall. Tony had effortlessly severed the limbs with a single stroke. The cut was so clean that the blood had yet to spill forth. Tony flicked his wrist and brought his sword straight down on the beast's center.

The mask clattered to the floor in halves. A moment later, the monkey split in two. Blood and organs erupted from the wound.

"Impossible! You were on the verge of death!" The demon's black poison began eating away at its body.

"You were less effort than a fart." Tony casually decapitated the monkey. Its head rolled along the floor eyeing its own crippled body.

"Remember our proud name. We are-"

"I don't give a shit." Tony stomped on the animated head, smashing it like a melon. His cold sneer was more demonic than anything else in this hellish dimension. But his face quickly melted as he turned toward Jessica, sympathy and fear driving away the rage.

"Does it hurt, Jessica?"

There was no reply.

The tiny hands that once made doria were now gnarled roots. Her flesh had solidified into wood. The bell-like clarity of her voice had been replaced by faltering whimpers. But her unchanging eyes remained fixed on Tony. He couldn't stand her tears.

The tree pulsed with life, its black aura pushing out farther with each breath. It would only be a day or two until the demons' reality overwrote the city. No normal human would survive the palpable atmosphere.

Tony gripped his sword tightly. "I'm going to end the pain, okay, Princess?"

The statement had none of the characteristic sarcasm.

Tony shut his eyes and swung his sword.

Several hours later, the sanatorium bustled with life.

Hundreds of people from the city had noticed the old building raging with fire, and they made the trip outside the city walls to watch firefighters struggle with the blaze.

Tony stood among the onlookers, a stony expression on his face.

Phase 4

Softly but surely, fear grips the population.

No one knows of Grue's horrific death in the underground mall or Tony's adventure beneath the sanatorium, but stories of malevolent shadows start to spread all the same.

An increasing number of people quicken their pace as evening falls, each of them aware of the darkness blotting out the stars, and the unspoken presence in the shadows. No one knows what is happening, but everyone can sense something strange.

Fear leads inexorably to rumor.

Rumor feeds on fear, coalescing into a wave of terrified speculation.

Phase 4

Part 1

"All the people who get involved with Tony meet with a sticky end."

No one could say for certain where this latest rumor had originated. But the story fanned fears throughout the underworld, gaining credibility as mercenary's swapped embroidered tales of Tony's past exploits. It wasn't long before every dive with one foot on the wrong side of the law was rife with gossip about him.

Bobby's Cellar was no exception.

"Our Tony, huh?"

"Ever notice how the scab Grue just disappeared? I heard he got involved with Tony and that was that."

"You know they never found a single body in that hospital fire."

"That place had been hacked apart. The cops said the cuts matched his sword exactly."

"Now that you mention it, Mad Dog Denvers disappeared after he got mixed up with Tony."

"Remember Kerry? After Tony dumped her, she slit open her wrists."

Underworld types were a cowardly, superstitious lot. If something sinister was on the wind, it had to reek of Tony. Every mercenary in every bar in the city agreed.

"Well, that's how it is, Tony. I don't personally have anything against you, but..."

"Don't worry about it, Bobby. It's only natural that the other guys are going to be superstitious. Nothing we can do about it."

Tony had just arrived and was talking to Bobby at the entrance to the bar. The sun set and there was a merry feeling flowing out from Bobby's Cellar. But the proprietor had spotted Tony just before he had come through the door and hurried out to meet him.

"It's more than just the rumors. Gilver's reputation as a cutthroat just keeps growing. All the old troublemakers throw their weight around thanks to him. I'm mopping up blood every day now." Bobby's sickly pallor reflected his fatigue.

"They think you're a coward, Tony. You walk in there, someone's gonna pick a fight with you."

"Bobby, you got the wrong idea. All I want is a strawberry sundae. I haven't had one for a while." Tony waved brusquely and set off down the alley. His stomach gurgled with hunger.

He had used up most of his savings opening bank accounts for Grue's two remaining daughters. The rest had been spent replacing his beloved red coat. But the rumors had been taking their toll. Night after night, agents and middlemen passed him over for work. Now his wallet was as empty as his stomach.

Tony set off towards Goldstein's place. She always had time for him, even if she didn't like to show it.

The rumbling of his stomach was a pathetic soundtrack scoring his journey.

Gilver passed Tony on his way to the Cellar.

He radiated vitality and health, despite the bandages that covered his face. Gilver had become such a fixture in the local underworld scene that the mercenaries scarcely noticed

the rags anymore. He swept into the bar with an elegant confidence.

"Everyone's here?" As ever, he was a man of few words. The men gathered responded enthusiastically.

"This is almost all of us."

The usual mercenaries and middlemen were clustered around Gilver, who had smoothly taken the reins as the Cellar's leader. The auction system employed by the absent Enzo had been replaced by a free-for-all grab for any jobs Gilver decided he didn't want. The slender warrior took the lion's share of work, leaving the rest of the mercenaries to fight over the scraps.

"Tonight I have prepared a plan."

A buzz broke out among the crowd. Gilver rarely spoke more than was necessary. He gestured for the lights to be dimmed and then surveyed his audience.

"Gentlemen, if you have a god to pray to, pray to him now. If you have a god to implore, implore him now. From now on, this will be your grave and become a world for us who are not human," Gilver said calmly and quietly.

A hush fell over the Cellar.

"I don't have any grudges against you gentlemen. But unfortunately, you are acquainted with Tony Redgrave." Gilver stabbed his sword into the floor. As if by design, the Cellar split open. Cracks raced along the walls and ceiling, bleeding an unearthly light. The mercenaries glanced around in wonder, confused.

Demons poured out of the cracks and immediately threw themselves on the crowd. It only took a moment for instinct to kick in.

"Run!"

"Don't come any closer!"

"No!"

In ordinary circumstances, the men would have fought to the death. But each was overrun with a primordial fear that quickly gave way to blind panic. The warriors found themselves rooted to the spot, just as Grue had been twice before.

Those who still had eyes noticed something unusual about Gilver. The demons avoided him in favor of the other mercenaries. He levitated over the crowd, gazing down over the scene with a contemptuous gaze.

"You all have jobs tonight." Gilver's voice took on an unnatural quality that boomed through the Cellar. "You will fuse with my brothers. I will need many pawns to deal with the man who calls himself Tony. You will play an important role-"

A gunshot rang out. It was all the impetus the mercenaries needed to break free of their fear. The surviving men whipped out their weapons and converged on Gilver.

The effort was fruitless. The demons renewed their attack, dining on the survivors.

"You have good spirit," Gilver said. "That strength will make you excellent demon hosts."

The mercenaries raged futilely against the demon horde. Gunshots and battle cries turned into terrified screams as the shadowy hosts overcame the thugs, until finally the Cellar was silent.

Gilver's sword hummed with dark energy. "What delicious despair. I can feel myself swelling with power." The bandaged man radiated an aura of decay.

One by one, the fallen mercenaries rose and stoof at attention. The animated corpses punched their fists in the air and howled a familiar cry.

"Good. We have replaced the pieces we lost at the underground mall." Gilver smiled behind the rags. "Now we can play."

"This sandwich is disgusting! My tongue is trying to jump out of my mouth."

"You want to sponge off me and complain about it at the same time? Shut your piehole. If the food's not good enough, you can leave your money on the table and take a hike!"

Tony and Goldstein had the routine down to an art. They both knew he would keep chomping on the sandwich anyway, grateful for a bite to eat. And she wouldn't kick him out, no matter how loudly he moaned.

"This isn't a cafeteria. Have you been barred from Bobby's Cellar again?"

"I'll say this for my own sake." Tony wagged a finger disapprovingly. "You won't live much longer eating such cheap bread and bad ham. That would end in tragedy, so I'm gonna take care of it for you. You should be thanking me."

The repartee heated up as Tony lined his stomach, his charm pushing forward as his hunger dissolved. He washed

down the last of the sandwich with a slosh of coffee and broke into a huge smile.

"This has practically been the worst night ever. Nothing in the bank and I've got to have dinner with a lady so old she was tattooed by da Vinci."

"That's enough of that." Goldstein removed her glasses to rub the bridge of her nose. She had been working on something when Tony came in-he'd seen it hiding beneath a flap of crimson felt as he walked into the shop. It looked too large to be a gun.

"I've heard you've been getting a bad rap recently. What's that all about?" she asked. "Bobby said you started that hospital fire?"

"That rumor made its way all the way here? It's true. Long story short, stuff happened."

"That's why you lost those guns I put all my heart and soul into making for you?"

Embarrassment crept across Tony's face. "I'm really sorry about that. My body got so heavy that I just dropped anything that was weighing me down."

"So why were you there? A girl?"

"Oh, come on!" Tony snapped. He didn't want to talk about Jessica.

"Don't worry about the rumors. They always run their course in the end. Anyway, you've been pushing yourself too hard lately." Goldstein gazed at Tony with steely eyes. "There's something else I meant to talk to you about. That bandaged man, Gilver. He's dangerous."

"Is that so?"

"I've seen his shadow-I don't think he's human."

"Even if that's true, I don't mind. As far as partners go, he's the best." Tony wondered if the old woman had any booze she might be willing to share. "More importantly, about my next guns..."

"Ugh," Goldstein threw up her hands in disgust. "I'm through with you. Why should I be making weapons for a cold-hearted guy who drops the product of my blood, sweat, and tears into a fire?"

"You're breaking my heart."

"You asked for it. Now let me get back to my work." Goldstein slipped a monocle over one eye and turned back to her desk.

The curt dismissal intrigued Tony. "Whatcha working on, old lady?"

"Nothing to do with cold-hearted people. Go on, get out of here."

Tony was dying to know what was under the cloth, but he knew he wouldn't be able to badger anything out of Goldstein. "It's okay. You'll tell me eventually. I'll be back later. Take care of yourself."

Tony stood up and adjusted his jacket. A moment later he was gone.

Goldstein puzzled away over her work in silence.

Neither could sense the disaster drawing ever closer to the shop.

Phase 4

Part 2

The scream echoing through the city had a different edge than usual.

Tony had been heading to one of his typical haunts in hopes of persuading the barman to raise his tab limit, when he heard the explosion. An office building several blocks behind him burst into flames.

Somehow, he knew at once that it was Goldstein's shop.

Tony retraced his steps at full speed. Onlookers had already arrived on the scene. He pushed his way through the chaos. "Outta my way! Coming through!"

Tony flung the gawkers aside as he shouldered through the mob. But by the time he had cleared the crowd it was too late. The entire building was engulfed in flames.

"Old lady..."

Tony clenched his fists, willing himself not to get emotional in front of the onlookers.

A sign fluttered to the ground in front of him. It was a basic rectangle, bearing the inscription Goldstein's Shop.

Tony scanned the scene. There was no way he was going to just stand there and do nothing.

He spied a fire hose flapping around out of the corner of his eye. Someone had turned it on but lost control, and now it was spraying water everywhere. Tony dived toward the hose and wrestled it into submission. He doused himself with water. I guess I'm going to ruin another coat.

Soaked through, Tony dashed inside the building. The crowd cheered him on, mistaking the red coat for a fireman's jacket. He sprinted up the flaming staircase.

"Hang on, old lady! You can't die until you've paid for a new jacket!"

"Old lady! Are you still alive?"

Tony barreled through the blackened remains of the door. To his astonishment, Goldstein sat at her workbench as though nothing unusual was happening.

Her left eye squinted to hold a monocle in place as she rubbed a cloth over her current project.

"What are you doing? There's a fire!"

"A fire isn't anything to get worked up over. You young people are so skittish." Goldstein raised her head to look at Tony. He

had never seen her wear such a serious expression before.
"You got here just in time. I'll have you put the finishing touches on it."

"What part of 'fire' did you not understand?"

"It's okay. Come over here, Tony."

"Old lady!"

"Did you not hear what I said? Come over here, Tony." The tenor of her voice shocked Tony into compliance. He drifted over to her as if under a spell. "That's right. You're a good boy."

The fire raged hotter around them. Flames began to creep dangerously close to Goldstein's workbench. Tony knew if they didn't get out of there they would suffer oxygen deprivation before burning to death.

But Goldstein's calm tones overpowered his flight instinct.
"Finish setting this up. With your own hands."

Tony regarded the object before him. It was the thing Goldstein had been working on earlier, still wrapped in a red cloth. "What is that?"

"Remove the cloth and look at it with your own eyes, Tony."

"Okay," Tony obeyed.

The fabric hid two chunks of metal, one ebony and one ivory in color. They scintillated in the firelight.

"It's your weapons. Made only for you, Tony Redgrave. No one else in the whole world has anything like this pair of pistols."

The pistols were identical, forged from glimmering metal. Tony picked one up, completely forgetting the fire. "My guns?"

The weapons were inordinately heavy. Matching engravings traced their way across the polished surfaces; By .45 Art Works-For Tony Redgrave.

Goldstein watched Tony examine the weapons with maternal affliction. "Do you understand, Tony? These children are yours; they were made only for you."

"Old lady..." Tony clicked the clip into place. He turned away from Goldstein to hide the tears welling in his eyes.

"It's my best work. My masterpieces. I put the old logo on it."

"It's spelled wrong," he insisted out of habit.

Goldstein placed her hands on Tony's drooping shoulders. "You need to finish them, Tony. Once you assemble them, they will truly be yours."

She had laid each part, one by one, on a tray on the table, like a row of obsidian jewels. "You've disassembled weapons for cleaning, right? That's the gist of it. Just do it in reverse."

"Okay. I understand." The tray was practically weightless. Holding the pistols made him feel awake as if for the first time. He slide various components into place, admiring the craftsmanship each step of the way. The virgin mouth of the gun, unsullied by gunpowder soot; the magnificent, unworn grip; the cartridge that snapped smoothly into place-each item seemed drawn to its correct location.

The two guns were taking shape in Tony's hands. He was in a trance now, unaware of Goldstein or the shop or the orange flames dancing around them.

He held the modified grip in his right hand; it had clearly been designed with a rapid firing speed in mind. The trigger guard had been carefully tailored to ensure there would be no hindrance to finger movement. The sight had been worn off to minimize weight. The cartridge had a fast-release mechanism enabling ammo changes on the fly. It was a weapon built for unleashing a blizzard of bullets.

The other gun was somewhat different. Its grip was designed for his left hand, textured for assurance rather than firing speed. The barrel was slimmer than its counterpart, designed for precise marksmanship. It was clearly intended to complement the other gun.

Finally, Tony was done. The pistols were large and ungainly but had an intrinsic elegance. They seemed to belong in his hands.

"These children are all yours now. It was worth pouring everything into this final work."

"Old lady?"

Goldstein braced herself on the edge of the table, breathing heavily amid the smoke. "I must be old. I already feel so faint."

By the time Tony figured out what was happening, it was too late. Goldstein slumped to the ground.

"Old lady! Hey!"

Tony snapped out of his trance and scooped the old woman into his arms.



It was then that he saw the deep slash across her back. Her entire left side was coated with red blood. He knew there was no way to save her; it was a miracle that she had held out long enough to give him his guns.

"It's a little warm in here," Goldstein whispered. Her eyes were shut. The pair sat in the center of a wild conflagration. Tony knew it would become a crematorium if they didn't leave.

"Open your eyes! Answer me! Say something!" Tony shook Goldstein frantically. Her body grew cold and her breathing had become shallow gasps.

"You can't kick the bucket like this! I've got more work for you to do!"

"Rock? Is that you? You came back to me."

Tony froze. Goldstein had opened her eyes, but they had already lost their light. He couldn't tell whether she was still conscious or not.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Your mommy..."

"Old lady..."

But Goldstein's mind was elsewhere. She seemed to think Tony was someone else. She weakly caressed his face. The contact was strange yet familiar, like a mother's hand.

"Your mommy is already...so...this, back..." Goldstein was trying to say something, but she didn't have the strength. Her bloody hand slid to her chest.

"What do you mean? Old lady?"

Suddenly, Tony noticed that Goldstein was clutching something in her other hand. It was the picture she kept on her desk. Tony had seen it many times-a photograph of a smiling young boy, holding a gun one hand and petting a dog with the other.

"This...your mommy...I have to give it back to you."

Goldstein lost her strength and the frame tumbled to the floor.
Tony held her quietly, straining to listen to her hollow voice.

"Was another...Tony...that child...?"

Tony's eyes widened at the sound of his name. Goldstein fought to get her words out, every breath an agony.

"A lot like you...a good kid. Please...Tony...look after him..."

"Old lady!"

But Goldstein could no longer hear him. Her body went limp in Tony's arms, a serene smile etched on her face. The .45 Caliber Artist had passed into heaven amid the hellish inferno of her beloved shop.

"Goodbye, old lady." Tony said softly, placing Goldstein on the ground. He knew she had seen the visage of her son in his face as she died, and the thought reassured him. "I'm sorry that I teased you. I didn't mean any of it. Give me a break, yeah?"

Something inside Tony was breaking free.

"I'm a big crybaby, just like Grue said. You two were soft on me, so I can't help it."

Subtle emotions bloomed inside his mind.

"I'm sorry I lied to you...I forgot who I was."

Tony stood, grasping the new weapons Goldstein had given him.

"I forgot who I was for a very long time."

The fire raging around him echoed the turmoil inside, old layers of personality and childhood flaking away under the burning transformation.

Goldstein's body merged into the image of Tony's mother on the day she died. Eva had given her life protecting him. The past and present blended into a seamless vision, and Tony was unable to distinguish between them. He heard a familiar voice whisper over the crackling flames.

Hide that name. Blind yourself to it and run away.

After his mother's death, Tony had become obsessed with an old sword left behind by his father. His younger self had deliriously clutched the weapon out of fear and loneliness. And eventually the sword had spoken to him.

"And so I hid my name and lived as Tony Redgrave up until now," Tony said aloud. "I deceived them, so that I could gain the power to fight them as equals."

Had the sword really talked to him? Was it a supernatural ploy by the servants of the demon king? Had they toyed with him as a child, until he was ready to play their games?

"I did gain the power. I honed my skills and have defeated every demon to cross my path."

The fire gusted, blowing ash and cinder around Tony like a whirlwind. His silver hair flapped madly in the breeze. He closed his eyes.

"Now is the time. I will take my true name."

Thunder boomed outside, a clarion call announcing a hellish downpour of rain. The shower poured through the crumbled rooftop. It hissed into steam where it clashed with the flames. The combination of water and fire created a thick mist, which enveloped Tony. But he didn't care. Instead, he toyed with his new guns. He spun the weapons around as he did a martial dance, balancing and flexing until at last the pistols were nothing more than a natural extension of his body. He reached the apex of his dance and retreated to his trademark pose. Crossing the guns across his chest, Tony opened his eyes.

"I am..."

A peel of thunder roared across the sky as the rain kicked up. The fire licked upward as if challenging the torrents of water.

An unearthly chorus climaxed. "DAAANNNTREE!"

"Jackpot!" Dante spun around and fired his new weapons at something moving within the flames.

"Dante! The son of a traitor!"

"Dante! The one who hinders our ambition!"

Dante fired volley after volley into the fire, dousing the flames with his bullets. He had sensed the presence of demons and realized the creatures had disguised themselves in the shape and color of the inferno.

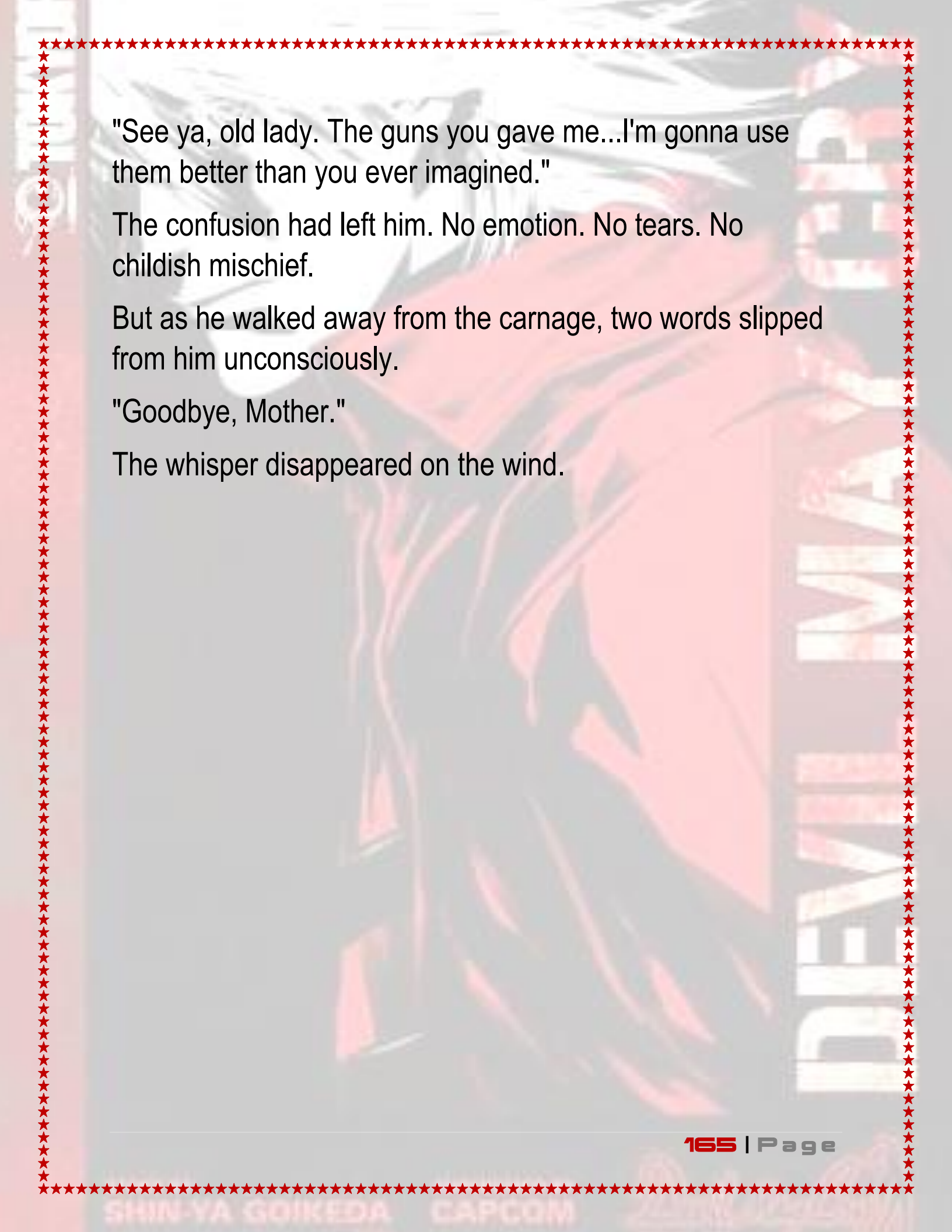
"Persistent little bastards, aren't you? Is that all you've got? Bring me someone stronger."

Dante blew away the last of the fire-creatures and flamboyantly jammed his guns into the leather holsters at his sides. He looked skyward. "I know you're listening!"

Black rain clouds blotted out the sky, but he sensed a strange, searching eyes overhead. "I'm gonna find you demons and send you straight back to hell! Me! Devil hunter Dante!"

Thunder boomed, and Dante smiled defiantly.

Dante had glowered at the sky until the rain finally doused the fire and the clouds rolled away. Goldstein's passage had enabled Dante to throw away "Tony" and regain his true name.



"See ya, old lady. The guns you gave me...I'm gonna use them better than you ever imagined."

The confusion had left him. No emotion. No tears. No childish mischief.

But as he walked away from the carnage, two words slipped from him unconsciously.

"Goodbye, Mother."

The whisper disappeared on the wind.

Phase 4

Part 3

Dante walked alone through the slumbering city, the burnt-down office building behind him. The size of the crowd watching the fire had swollen, but he took no notice.

A number of observers took in his crimson coat and silver hair. Surely it was Tony? But Tony was gone. The new figure had a different demeanor, and edge that silenced the onlookers.

Dante allowed himself to be drawn through the city to his destination. His feet traced out a path through the alleys and byways, taking him far from the crowds and traffic. But he knew he was not alone. The foul odor of rotting meat penetrated his nostrils.

"You don't have to hold back. Come out!"

Dante stilled, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. He stood motionless for several moments and waited.

Finally, the edges of the shadows began wavering uncertainly. Dark creatures encircled him silently-headless human forms.

"Good. You look strong. I wouldn't enjoy this if it was too easy." Echoes of Tony's brazen personality remained in Dante.

The demons waited until the last of their number was in place.
The completed circle issued a deafening wail.

"DAAANNNTREE!"

Dante gave a lopsided grin. "Yeah, I kept you waiting. But I'll answer for you now. Dante is here."

He pulled the massive sword from its scabbard on his back. Something in the darkness made the weapon look even larger than it was. The skull design on its hilt seemed to gloat ominously.

"This sword was caged, along with my real name." Dante thought back to his father's weapon, calling out to him as a child. The pieces snapped into place. "But now he'll be released."

The sword bellowed and groaned, enlarging until it was half the size of Dante himself. The double-edged blade looked capable of cleaving a cow in two, but weighed next to nothing.

"Who wants to be the first to find out how many of my skills have been revived?"

The demons murmured evilly. Dante was grossly outnumbered. Time stretched thin.

"I guess I'll have to bring it to you!" Dante launched himself into the mass of demons, hacking with superhuman speed and precision. Black blood sprayed indiscriminately as he pressed

his attack, he was overwhelmed by the infernal stretch of the creatures' own world.

Dante sliced his way through one edge of the circle.

"Come on, get serious. This isn't a warm-up." Dante lashed out to his right and disemboweled a handful of demons. His attacks were so fast and devastating that the beasts were unable to land a single blow.

He cut through the horde, mowing down his opponents easily. "I haven't even broken a sweat!"

The demons faltered at his overwhelming strength. The creatures that fed on human despair began to feel despair themselves. The inhuman beasts tried desperately to widen the distance between themselves and Dante, but his massive sword easily crossed the gap.

"What's the matter?" Dante gave a playful wink that sent a few of the more skittish demons dashing to the back of the ranks.

"Running away already?"

He darted forward and struck down the retreating shadows.

"Who's next?" He flashed a dark, lusty grin.

The only response was a strange mewing from the back of the crowd. One by one, it spread to the other demons, who threw back their heads and yelped.

They're crying, Dante realized.

The shadows knew they had no chance before Dante and his eerie sword.

"That's a good sound. I'd listen a little longer, but this world isn't for you," Dante scoffed. "I'll send you back where you belong."

And with that, he threw himself into the fray, slaughtering demons on all sides. It was no longer a fight-it was a massacre.

The creatures turned on Dante, sinking their fangs and claws into the tail of his red coat. But he was too fast for them to make meaningful contact.

Dante leapt into the air and hovered like a ghost. The action seemed to draw the demons into his wake. He whirled like a dervish, dicing the helpless demons into a black paste that splattered over the alley.

Dante settled gently onto the asphalt. Every demon lay dead at his feet, slowly dissolving back into the shadows. He wiped the muck off his sword before returning it to its sheath. "That appetizer's out of the way. I wonder what the main dish will be."

Dante turned his back onto the grisly scene and stalked off down the alley, continuing on his previous path. The familiar passages took on a strange new atmosphere.

It's gotten stronger. The dark aura of the demon world permeated downtown now...the same sickening force that had threatened to overwhelm Dante at the sanatorium.

Its malevolent tendrils had taken root in the buildings and streets, radiating outward from a central point. The oppressive sensation grew stronger as Dante neared its hub. He rounded a corner and stopped, suddenly aware of his destination. "Of course."

A familiar shop sign creaked on its hinges across from him. It was a sign he'd seen hundreds of times, marking out work and play.

Dante stood directly opposite Bobby's Cellar.

The air in the Cellar was freezing cold.

The bar had never felt particularly spacious, but now it appeared cavernous to Dante. The tables were casually laid out as usual, with familiar faces drinking from mugs and glasses. Bobby himself stood behind the counter, drying plates with a damp cloth. Nothing had changed, yet everything was somehow different.

Dante took up his usual position at the counter. "One extra-large strawberry sundae, please."

Bobby continued with his work.

"Bobby? Can you hear me?"

Nobody paid Dante any attention at all.

"I see." Dante slipped a pistol from its holster and aimed at the ceiling. He squeezed the trigger, blowing out a bare light bulb that had been hanging overhead. The explosion sent white plaster cascading across the wooden floorboards.

Everyone in the Cellar turned their heads in unison. Dante recognized the faces. But just barely. Each visage was a twisted mockery, deformed and bloated with decomposition gases. Every single person in the room except Dante was dead.

The corpses hissed a series of greetings in an eerie semblance of speech.

"Tooonnnyyy."

"It hurts."

"The pain, Tony."

"I lost my arms."

"Where is my head?"

"I can't see you, Tony."

Dante felt a cold hand slap his back. He spun around and found Bobby standing behind him. The bar's owner had a

pale, hollow face. His magnificent stomach was sliced open to reveal glistening intestines.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," Bobby croaked. He placed a glass bowl on the table.

"I can't eat this!" Dante swept the bowl aside. It crashed onto the floor, spraying red and white everywhere. But it wasn't the red and white of strawberries and ice cream.

"I didn't order a 'strawbloody' sundae."

Bobby burst into laughter at the quip. The staccato chortle was quickly taken up by the rest of the patrons. It reminded Dante of the time he was heckled by Cole. Everyone in the Cellar had laughed at him then, too. But this time, the teasing was dry and lifeless. The scornful laughter wrenched at the heart; it would have drained the will out of an ordinary man.

"This is all you've got?" Dante took on his usual sarcastic tone. He blasted the room with his most withering stare, willing the animated corpses into silence.

The bodies of his former peers remained quietly in their positions. They were little more than puppets, and Dante was only interested in their master.

"You can come out now, bandage boy." The bar remained unnervingly quiet. "I know you're the one in charge of this party."

A low voice spilled into the room. "I was hoping we could enjoy this a while longer. How vexing." Gilver emerged from the crowd, stepping to the center of the Cellar. "You got here earlier than I expected. Did my men outside not welcome you?"

Dante hopped off his stool and took up a battle stance. "They tried. But their skills weren't quite up to the task."

Gilver sighed. "I assumed you're not pleased with your reception in here, either."

"That's not true. Everyone's become quite handsome, don't you think?"

Only a few short meters separated Dante and Gilver. Everything had changed since the last time they had seen each other a few days earlier. Each man was intensely focused, wary.

"Is there anything you want to ask me, Tony?"

"Sorry, but I threw that name away."

"Is that so? Allow me to rephrase."

The tension between the two warriors was nearly physical. Each syllable jabbed like a blade.

"Do you have any questions, Dante? You have treacherous blood in you."

"Don't be silly. I may look like a scoundrel, but I'm renowned for my loyalty."

"Please, no more of your pathetic objections." Gilver sneered.

The two men whipped out their swords in unison. If either stepped forward a single pace, he would be within the other's striking range.

"Well, there is one thing," Dante finally allowed. "What are you, man? You don't smell like those other things."

"You don't need to know. In any case, I'm going to crush you."

Dante shrugged. "That's a fitting line for a villain."

"Your absurd labels are meaningless." Gilver cackled behind his bandages. "The victor will be called the hero by future generations. Arguing about good and evil is pointless."

"They didn't cover that in school."

Dante and Gilver exchanged glowers, each careful to remain just out of range. The corpses around them collapsed into dust, as if Gilver's psychic hold on them can no longer be maintained while he concentrated on Dante.

"Does this not upset you? All your friends...disappearing one by one?"


"I never had any friends," Dante said coldly, trying not to think about Grue. "I don't care for any."

"I can read your soul like an open book. You might push those worthless emotions away, but you can never fully escape them." Gilver cocked his head. "The one you're experiencing right now is called despair. Limitless despair at having everything around you taken away. Your place in the world. Your friends. Your partner. Your substitute mother."

Dante smiled dryly. "Don't make me laugh. Who's despairing?"

The Cellar grew cold.

"Demons feel no despair," Gilver finally pronounced. "You have our blood coursing through your veins. You're the mongrel half-breed offspring of a human and a demon. And you betrayed our side."



Dante's smile left his face. "That's right. So you know I can't feel something as simple as despair."

Time unfroze.

Dante and Gilver hurled themselves at each other.

Phase 4

Part 4

The battle erupted without warning.

Dante swung his massive sword toward Gilver, who countered with his slim katana. The clash scattered sparks across the Cellar. Each blade danced and connected with super speed, never letting up or allowing the other to approach its wielder.

Gilver had the advantage of a lighter weapon. He maneuvered so deftly it became little more than a silver blur. But Dante easily dodged each thrust, spinning his own blade as though it weighed nothing.

"You've improved, Dante."

"Of course. Did you think I wasn't paying attention all those times we worked together?"

Each man kept a light tone, battling with their pithy remarks as well as their weapons. Whoever broke into emotion first would lose this aspect of their showdown.

Dante spotted an opening and swung his sword around so quickly it nearly parted the molecules of the air itself.



But Gilver danced out of reach at the last moment, evading the lethal blow.

"You swing too wide," Gilver said.

"Say what you like. Just don't cry when it cuts you."

Although Dante was able to counter Gilver's speed and power, the bandaged man had a command of techniques that stretched

far beyond his opponent's ability. Gilver could detect patterns behind Dante's attacks in an instant, enabling him to narrowly avoid every move.

"You're breathing hard. I could dodge this blow with my eyes closed."

"Is that so? You must be pretty good," Gilver said tonelessly.

Dante and Gilver clattered their blades together with the rapid chatter of a machine gun. They were so perfectly matched that the skirmish looked more like an expertly choreographed performance than a battle to the death.

"Just as I expected of you, bandage boy."

"Is that the best insult you can come up with? You really should do something about that poor vocabulary of yours."

Dante could see his insults weren't hurting Gilver. The two men were equally matched. Something would have to tip the balance to one side eventually. Dante had hoped he could needle his opponent off balance. Anything to break the deadlock.

Gilver narrowed his eyes.

"What's on your mind, bandage boy?"

"I'm thinking about your defeated carcass. I read all of your moves in that last exchange."

Dante would ordinarily have responded with a snappy retort. But instead he pulled back slightly. Nobody knew the extension of Gilver's skill better than him.

What is it? What has he seen in me?

He didn't have long to wait.

Gilver spied an opportunity and took it, lunging for Dante. The pair locked swords. It was now a contest of strength. Whoever gave first would almost certainly feel the other's blade. Dante knew his massive weapon was a hindrance at close range.

Gilver knew it was true. "Your weapon is your weakness. You need distance to use it effectively. This is what happens when you spend your career relying on hand-to-hand brawls. You mercenaries can fight, but you can't strategize."

Dante knew it was true. Locking swords effectively halved each man's strength, but Gilver had the slight advantage of forward leverage. Dante in no mood to give Gilver the benefit of seeing him worry.

"You talk a lot, bandage boy. Aren't you being a little overconfident?"

"Like your blade, my own sword is of the demon world. Our metals will not bend through brute force alone."

"How lucky for you. Good thing I've got this trick up my sleeve."

Dante kicked his right leg in the air. It was the same low feint he had used during their first rumble-the night they'd had the vodka.

"I've seen that before. It's useless now." Gilver moved his leg to block.

But Dante had something else in mind. He twisted his knee, shooting his foot toward a fresh target. He landed two quick blows to Vergil's side.

"I guess all that brawling was good for me, after all." His foot lashed out with knifelike sharpness, jabbing Gilver in the chin and solar plexus.

Gilver shuffled backward to fend off the blows.

Dante grinned triumphantly. "Now you're in my territory!"

The distance freed up Dante to use his sword. He spun the blade with dizzying speed, slicing into his opponent. But just as he seemed on the verge of shredding Gilver apart, his sword flung backward with a violent ring.

"Hey! What's happened?" The weapon vibrated in Dante's hand, as if he had struck steel.

"Ha ha ha! Yes. Yes!" Gilver erupted in a rumbling belly laugh.

"You've pretended to be human for too long. I can scarcely believe you forgot such a simple thing. The irony!"

"What's so funny, bandage boy?" The heavy sword had numbed Dante's arms, and he was beginning to get an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"You still don't understand!" Gilver laughed maniacally. "Here, I'll show you."

Gilver tore off his suit.

Dante's eyes widened involuntarily. Sickening black armor covered every last pore of Gilver's flesh. The demon plating chattered like the coruscating shell of a crab.

"That's not fair," Dante pointed out.

"Fair? We're no longer in the human world. This nexus has become complete. Now I can access the full power of the demonic dimension!" Gilver straightened himself. The unnatural armor had grown thicker somehow; a black cape bloomed from his shoulders. Every movement was accompanied by the unearthly grinding of shell and stone.

Dante quickly scanned the Cellar. The walls and ceiling pulsed with sickening decay. Tables and chairs dotted the chamber, but the mundane furniture made a queasy match for the living floor. A moist breeze lapped against him like hot breath. The cloying stench of death was everywhere, alongside the familiar force that had weighed him down at the Oz Club and sanatorium.

"This is your world," he finally said.

"Yes. The demon world is replacing yours. It will spread out from this nexus until finally everything is consumed." Gilver hefted his sword, seemingly recovered from Dante's last attack. "This place is a cancerous blight to incomplete souls like you. Do you know why? Can you feel it instinctually?"

"You tell me." Dante sneered, but he clutched his sword for reassurance. His breathing and heart rate were rising, just like when he descended into the basement below the hospital. He had barely been able to take on Gilver now.

Just holding his sword seemed to sap his strength, and every breath unleashed a new wave of fire into his lungs. Calm down. Calm down. I can't show him weakness.

Dante raised the tip of his sword into the air.

"I might not be able to take you down with one attack," Gilver conceded. "But I wonder if you'll be able to cross blades even three more times."

"Your armor weighs you down," Dante retorted. "I wonder if you'll be able to evade my blows even three more times."

They glared. Time around them ebbed and flowed, marked only by the growing stench of rotting flesh and the palpable crush of the atmosphere. Neither man moved, although both were aware that Dante grew weaker with each passing movement.

The deadlock fell to a simultaneous attack.

The warriors flung themselves to each other, both slashing through the air with their swords. But Dante's blade had changed during the stalemate.

Gilver stared at the weapon with side eyes. "What is that?"

"Its true form. Look at it while you still have sight." Dante's sword chipped away at the scabrous black armor, dancing like a petal on the wind. The sheer ferocity of the blows surprised even Dante. The mammoth sword seemed to move of its own volition.

"Where did you get that thing?" Gilver cried, backpedaling under the blade's fury.

"It's my favorite souvenir from hell, bandage boy." Dante renewed his attack, whacking pulpy chunks off his enemy's armor. The suit appeared to be alive, spraying black liquid with every stab.

Gilver shrunk from the blows, analyzing Dante's attack pattern. Finally, the amazing sword arced through the empty air...Gilver retreated. "I can see through your methods, Dante. Victory will be mine!"

He now easily evaded Dante's thrusts and returned jabs of his own.

"Don't sound so proud for dodging me, once!" Dante pulled his blade across Gilver's path. The two swords crashed together, resounding thunderously. They were in a deadlock once more.

"Do you finally understand the extent of my power here, Dante?"

Dante gave a half-smile. "Not too shabby."

The warriors broke off and swung again, yet again locking swords with a violent clang.

"I can read it, Dante. I know everything that weapon is capable of."

"What? How?" The claim threw Dante off balance.

Gilver drew himself up, confidence flooding his system.

He read this sword-the sword Father gave to me. How can it be so easily read by anyone but me?

Dante was overcome with unbidden memories of his father. Sparda had betrayed and fled the demon world. He took his superior swordsmanship with him, passing on that deadly legacy to his son. Does the demon world have other sword masters, too?

Treacherous doubt sparked in Dante, a hesitant seed easily telegraphed to his opponent. Gilver had sensed the weakness almost before Dante had.

"This is the end, Dante!" Gilver tried a series of quick jabs at Dante, who turned to block him. But it was no good. His father's

rapid attack technique had drained him of strength, and Dante found his timing was completely off.

Gilver swung his blade, knocking Dante's sword from his hand. "And now it's over!" he shrieked.

Dante moved onto the balls of his feet. His sword was too far away and Gilver was too fast. His only chance was to dodge the barrage of thrusts and slices that were just moments away.

The bandaged demon didn't disappoint. He was upon Dante with no warning, flicking his wrist with the colorful style and skill of the true underworld. Downward strokes, upward slashes, amazing thrusts. His blade sang through the air with incredible speed.

Dante danced around the assault, his silver hair whipping madly. His long red coat slapped a martial rhythm with each dodge. He had no time to pull out his pistols, and Gilver was too far away for bare-fisted combat.

"You have nowhere to run. Why don't you give up?" Gilver spoke with the assurance of victory. He was unable to hit Dante, but his strokes were making quick work of the red jacket.

Naturally, Dante thought.

He slowly closed the range between himself and Gilver. He had two options for combat, but reckoned the guns might prove ineffectual against the black armor. The left a straightforward

rumble. If he could grapple the armor, he might have a chance. He pressed forward, risking Gilver's swinging blade to put himself into position.

"I'm not going down without a fight, bandage boy!" Dante sprang forward. The move exposed his spine, but it was his only chance. Gilver struck with ferocity, ripping a deep scarlet trench and continued to sail toward Gilver's legs.

But the demon had already considered the strategy. "So you're going for the grapple. Nice try." Gilver pulled a familiar gun from somewhere in his armor, holding his sword with one hand.

Dante recognized the weapon immediately. "That's the old lady's!"

Gilver unloaded both shells in the shotgun he had taken from Goldstein's shop. "I guess this time I get to be the one to say 'jackpot!'"

The shells ripped through Dante's legs, sending scarlet blossoms into the air. Dante crashed into the ground in front of Gilver and burbled helplessly. The pain was beyond anything he had ever endured. It stabbed through his mind like a hot poker, preventing all coherent thought. Both of his thighs were shredded beyond use. Blood bubbled up from Dante's mouth.

Gilver stood over his prey, enraptured. "That's a splendid sound. Your agonized expression is quite beautiful." He seemed to drink up the suffering.

"Give me...a break...you sadistic freak. You think...a little thing like this-"

Gilver swung the shotgun to Dante's stomach and fired off another round. Dante howled as his gut ruptured and his bowels blew apart. His ribs shattered and drove into his lungs, which quickly filled with blood.

Dante was unable to make a sound beyond the agonized popping of crimson bubbles in his mouth. His silver hair was stained black by his own dark blood.

"Don't leave yet, Dante. I'm not finished with you."

Gilver pressed the muzzle of the shotgun directly against Dante, who was unable to move. Two more gunshots boomed. Dante's shoulders took the bullets point-blank, the bone and muscle ground into an unrecognizable paste.

"How is it? Have you lost your will to fight? How does it feel to roll around like a pathetic worm?" Gilver was drunk with ecstasy.

Dante knew he was as good as dead. His legs and arms were destroyed. He couldn't flee, let alone move his body an inch. The pain wracking every nerve was so intense he could scarcely string together a coherent thought.

Gilver bent down to whisper in Dante's ear. "I've learned two things in the time I've worked as a mercenary. The first was to secure a complete victory, you must overwhelm your enemy with brute force."

Dante discovered his eyes were no longer mobile. He summoned the last of his strength to utter two gasping syllables. "Fuck you."

Gilver kicked Dante, digging an armor-plated toe deep into his belly. Once the screaming subsided, he leaned in again. "The second thing I learned was to keep your real talents concealed, in order to exceed the enemy's expectations. Isn't that your usual trick, Dante?"

Dante gasped for breath.

"I've been able to demonstrate what I've learned. Between you and me, the army I summoned fell somewhat short of my expectations. They weren't able to be here today. A shame they couldn't see this."

Gilver tossed the shotgun and gripped his delicate sword in two hands. "Time to finish this. Though incomplete, you are still one of us. Your wounds will eventually heal. Before that happens..."

Gilver centered his katana above Dante's heart. "If I cut this out, you won't recover, no matter how much demon blood you have in you. Die peacefully, Dante. Your life belongs to me."

Gilver plunged his sword forward. Dante could do nothing but watch with horror as the tip of the blade raced toward him. Time seemed to slow.

The sword sank into Dante's chest, rending his heavy coat as it made its journey toward his heart.

Without warning, the sword struck something hard. The collision pushed the blade to the left, missing Dante's heart.

"What?" Gilver was astonished.

Dante chose that moment to expend the last of his strength. He kicked at the ground with both ankles, sending his legs flying into the air. The momentum pulled his lower body upward until he was briefly balanced upside down on his head. His useless arms dropped to the ground.

Gilver realized that Dante had been gripping his chunky black pistols the whole time. His dead arms fell, pulling the guns out of their upside-down holsters. Dante squeezed both triggers as his hands arced down, unleashing a hail of bullets.

The barrels were just centimeters from Gilver, who flung his hands over his face. The bullets that erupted from Goldstein's final project tore through the air as though they were alive, vengefully seeking out Gilver.

The demon instantly knew he had made a mistake in writing off the guns as useless tools made by human hands. Just before

the bullets tore through it, he knew his black armor would prove useless. The impacts shattered his suit, creating a network of spidery cracks across its surface.

"Impossible!" Gilver howled.

The cracks began to glow.

"Jackpot!" spat Dante.

"But you've lost! I've wo-ugh...Argh!"

Gilver's armor exploded. The bullets chewed away at his exposed body, gouging black holes in his flesh. And then Gilver saw it clearly. Something within the bullets themselves.

He saw a flash of Goldstein's leathery face-of Grue's angry expression. An unnatural fear iced over his mind. Something inside him blew apart, smashing his body into the ceiling. He fell violently back to the ground.

The bullets continued on beyond him, punching through the demonic world's wall.

Gilver's head lolled uselessly. Black fluid gushed from his wounds. The coruscating remains of his armor glittered in pieces on the floor around him.

Something sparkled dimly on Dante's shredded chest.

It was the amulet he never parted with, even when naked. The only keepsake Dante had from his beautiful mother, who was murdered in front of his eyes so long ago.

The amulet had deflected Gilver's sword and saved Dante's life.

You saved me after all, Mommy. I must still be your baby after all.

In pain, Dante slowly turned his head to look at Gilver, who had collapsed, unconscious in front of him. The bandages wrapping the stranger's face slowly unraveled.

Dante saw the shine of silver hair.

He gasped. Gilver's eyes opened, taking in Dante with utter hatred. The bandages had almost completely fallen off, revealing a noble and familiar face.

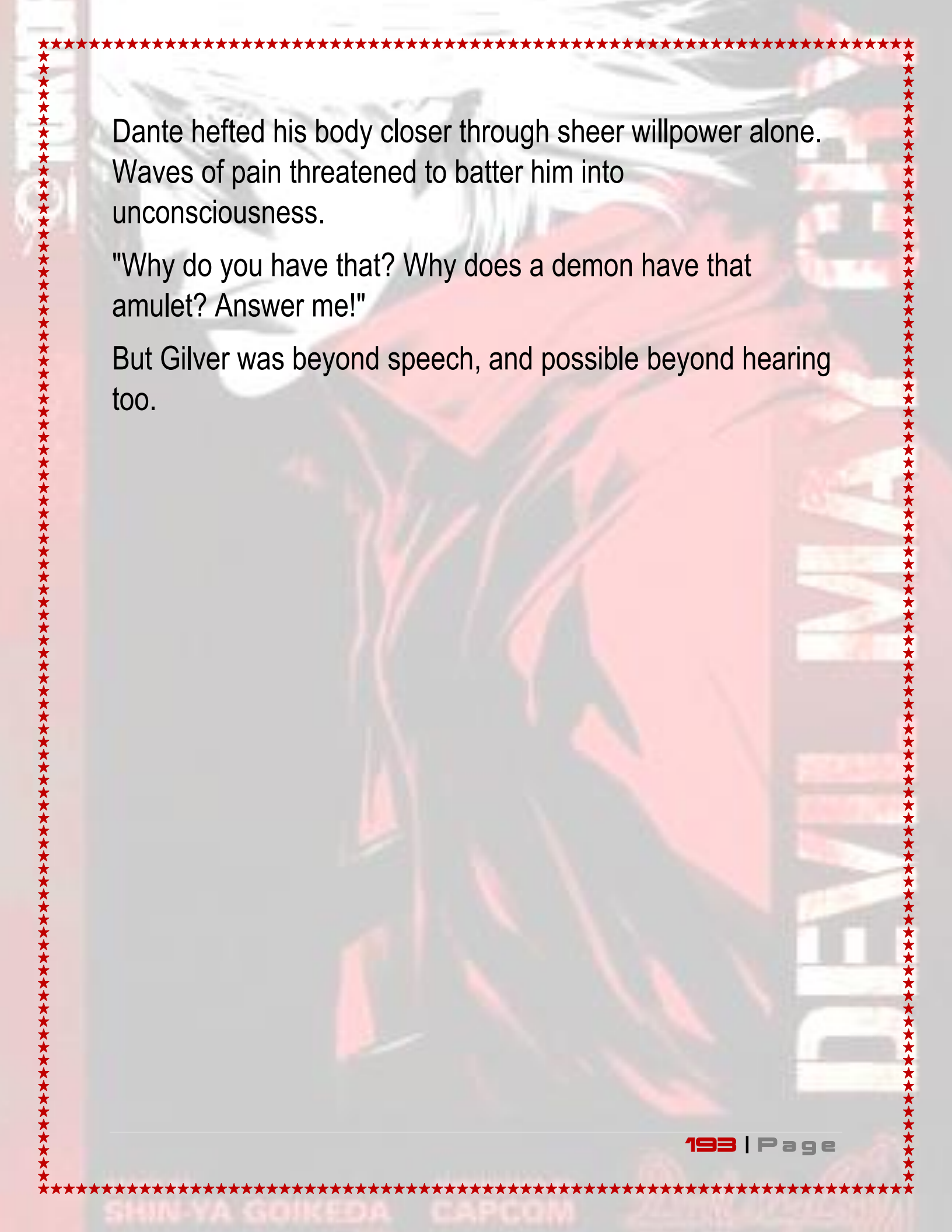
It was like looking into a mirror for Dante.

"What...Why do you have my face?"

Gilver spat blood, unable to speak. His gaze was so full of malevolence that it radiated outward like a physical force, promising revenge.

But Dante was no longer looking at Gilver's face. An amulet had spilled from his foe's shirt. An amulet that matched his own.

"What's going on? Who are you?" he whispered, frightened.



Dante hefted his body closer through sheer willpower alone. Waves of pain threatened to batter him into unconsciousness.

"Why do you have that? Why does a demon have that amulet? Answer me!"

But Gilver was beyond speech, and possible beyond hearing too.



"Say something! Anything! Gilver!"

Dante slid toward Gilver with great effort. But the demon's body began dissipating into the chill air of the Cellar. The bar seemed to transform along with it, slowing and almost imperceptibly slipping free of the demon world's grip, returning to its normal state.

"Wait! Gilver! Who are you?"

Gilver's face remained twisted by hatred even as it evaporated, molecule by molecule.

"Gilver!" he cried desperately.

Sunlight filtered through the holes punched in the wall by Dante's bullets, driving away the last atoms of Gilver's body. The only thing that remained was his elegant sword.

Gilver's name was engraved in the hilt. Dante found himself ripping off his amulet. He stared alternately between the sword and the amulet, a sickening realization settling across his mind.

The amulet had two names inscribed on it.

One was Dante.

The other was Vergil.

The name of his twin brother, who was lost the day his mother had died.

The same face. The same hair color. The same amulet.

Dante dropped both items, letting himself fall back to the floor. The sword, having lost its master, crumbled to dust.

Gilver had been Dante's brother.

Two sides of the same coin.

The impact washed over him, pervading his soul.

"Whoa! What in the world happened to you?"

A familiar voice brought Dante back to reality after he had become lost in his own thoughts. He had no idea how much time had passed.

The sun now shined brightly over the ruins of the Cellar, so he figured that many hours had passed since daybreak. When he reflexively tried to get up, he realized for the first time how much damage he had taken.

Damn, I still haven't fully recovered.

But even so, he was somehow able to pick himself up.

Enzo gawped at Dante with wide eyes.

"Tony! Are you okay? What a stupid question. I can see you're not okay. Are you alive?"

"Hey! Don't shake me so hard. These wounds still smart."

Enzo wouldn't let go. He jostled Dante urgently. "What happened here?"

"Okay, okay. I'll tell you. But first lend me your shoulder. This isn't the place to talk."

Enzo helped Dante to his feet. "Man, it sure is strange to see you all beat up. It's the first time I've ever seen you in this kind of shape, Tony."

"Well, stuff happened. Oh, by the way," Dante leaned heavily on Enzo, "The name Tony is retired. From now on, call me Dante."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you outside. The pub around the corner might be good," Dante said.

"Your treat?"

Bobby's Cellar collapsed the moment both men stepped onto the sidewalk outside, as if it had been waiting for them to exit.

It was the end to an eventful night...

In that instant, the inhuman shadows hid themselves, and before long disappeared from people's memories altogether.

Epilogue

"All I've had today are boring requests. Damn."

Dante had somehow recovered from his wounds, which he didn't seem to find nearly as exciting as the prospect of being able to eat strawberry sundaes once more. He leaned back, his favorite chair propped on two legs and his feet on a wide black desk that he still owed somebody money for.

Dante had buried everything associated with Tony, beginning a fresh life in a new city. He'd finally fulfilled his ambition of having his own office. But his efforts to return to mercenary work had proved less than eventful. Private detective work was terminally dull. Finding lost dogs and misplaced wedding rings did little to get the blood pumping. But background checks and proof of affairs kept the bills paid and the lights turned on.

Dante had tried to spruce up the storefront with a gaudy neon sign and stuffed animals, but somehow the decor lacked unity. Even the pool table he'd purchased had somehow failed to bring in new clients.



Enzo would occasionally send him work. He always had to take it, of course. Dante never abandoned his core philosophy of spending the last penny in his account, which means that he could rarely afford to turn down even bad jobs. Long red coats and silver ornaments were expensive.

The phone chirped out an annoying jingle.

"Devil May Cry...Sorry, we closed at nine."

Dante dropped the receiver into its cradle. The caller didn't have the password required for priority work. Even with his money woes, Dante wasn't in the mood to rescue a kitten or locate an errant teen.

Have all the demons really gone quiet?

He idly cast his mind back to his time as Tony. He had met so many people, fought so many battles, and said goodbye to his dear friends...Now, here he was. Alone.

At least I got these two puppies.

He put his hand on his holsters without thinking.

The chunky black guns had stayed by his side since their birth in the fire at Goldstein's shop. They were his closest friends, and had sent many a living corpse to its grave for a second time.

But Dante refused to be drawn back into the past. He lived a wayward, free life, but had yet to reach his ultimate goal.

Mommy...

He unconsciously fingered the amulet on his chest.

Until he avenged his mother's death, he could not afford to lose a single mission.

Suddenly, the hum of exhaust buzzed outside the window. The sound was too thin for a car. A motorcycle, Dante decided. He peered through the glass door.

A single light approached in the darkness...A beautiful woman sped toward the office on a sleek motorcycle, cutting a path through the air behind her.

Dante broke into a cool smile. Gorgeous women showing up in the middle of the night were never a bad thing. His smile faded a moment later when he realized the rider wasn't braking.

He dove aside just as the biker crashed through the glass door.

Finally! An extraordinary situation.

Dante wandered casually toward the mysterious rider.

"Slow down, babe. Nature calls? It's in the back."

Prologue Of 2nd novel

The bombastic argument on the other side of the door shook the dust from the ancient volumes racked dutifully in the library. Battling voices drew nearer as black feet appeared at the bar of light beneath the door.

"Stop! You don't have permission to go in there!" The first voice had the hollow wheeze of an elderly man. It contrasted sharply with the vibrant tones of the young woman who pushed the door open.

"I have permission to go anywhere," the woman said, waving a permit in the old man's face. "They didn't tell me anything was off limits. Besides, can't you feel something in here? I felt it in the hall. This place has a weird vibe."

The woman brushed a curly strand of red hair aside and pointed at a thick wooden door on the other side of the library. Multiple locks braided the portal, each adorned with charms and incantations. "Whatever it is, it's coming from there. We can't just sit around and wait for something to happen."

"Miss Beryl!" the old man sputtered. Judging by his wardrobe, he was clearly under the impression that high priests were supposed to look like storybook wizards, although she reckoned he couldn't quite pull off the flowing beard. It took him a while to crank out a sentence due to the "whispery wizard" voice he employed. Beryl wasn't impressed.

"Not a single trespasser has entered this vault in more than two thousand years," the old man continued breathily. "Your

reputation precedes you, Miss Beryl. We don't doubt your skills or intuition, but observe."

The priest reached out and stroked one of the charms. A small tuft of smoke crackled into existence at the point of contact, and he quickly withdrew his hand. "The more wicked the person who touches these charms, the stronger the reaction," he explained, sucking on his fingers. "So you can imagine what would happen if a demon messed with one of these locks. Perhaps your fears are groundless. Just this once," he added hastily.

"Fears? Groundless? You really don't get it, do you? The demons I've fought were careful and cunning. They could get around these charms with their eyes closed!" Beryl's eyes widened as she unleashed the tirade.

The old man was appalled. "You meant these charms?"

But Beryl's attentions were elsewhere. She unconsciously fingered her collarbone, tracing along an old scar. The wound pulsed with heat, a sensation that only occurred when she was near the object of her search. Suddenly her instincts kicked in and she shoved the old man aside.

Almost simultaneously, Beryl whipped a huge anti-tank rifle from its cradle on her back.

The high priest found this beyond the pale. "What are you doing? I'm a priest! You can't use violence on a priest!"

"If you want to live, shut up and hide!" she hissed. Beryl gripped the rifle in both hands and swung it around to cover the door. The old man considered his options and galloped out of the library as quickly as he could.

"I'm ready for you. Come on out!" Beryl unleashed a volley at the enchanted portal with a roar. But the silver bullets arced away from their target at the last moment, their trajectories tweaked by a mysterious force. The tiny missiles clattered uselessly to the stone floor.

Beryl had been expecting something like that. She fired another three shots at the door. This time they embedded themselves in the wood.

"Orrruuuuuunnn." An uncanny voice howled from behind the door, which swelled as if sucking in a lungful of air. The movement popped the charms from their moorings. Suddenly, the wood shattered.

The scar on Beryl's collarbone grew hotter.

"Come on out, demon! I know you're there!" Beryl squeezed off a few rounds into the dark hole where the door used to be. The rifle's report echoed from the library's flagstone walls.

Beryl swung the barrel around, looking for a target. Her chest heaved anxiously. Where are you?

Adrenaline washed over her, intensifying the heat in her collarbone. Beryl felt her fighting spirit burn stronger. Heat. Burn.

Suddenly, Beryl flung herself toward the side of the room, rolling into a combat stance. A giant flower of fire bloomed where she had been standing. The rolling flames grew into a white-hot column, linking the floor and ceiling with eldritch energy. It was somehow more than fire—a hellfire from the demon world, the work of magic. Beryl smiled. It was exactly the move she would have made if she were a demon looking for an opening gambit.

"Orrrruuuuunnn."

The blistering stench of decay accompanied the demonic howl. The atmosphere condensed, thick with a soul-crushing something that sought to etch despair into human minds. Beryl willed herself to ignore the mounting fear and caught a lucky break.

"There you are!" She leveled her rifle and shot two more rounds. Silver bullets ripped through the darkness and punched through the black demonic shape she'd spied out of the corner of her eyes.

"Orrruuu-!"

The roar broke off suddenly, replaced by the thunderous clatter of shaking flagstones. The library heaved violently. Beryl wobbled in place uncertainly. The exaggerated vibrations made it hard to think coherently. An unexpected yelp escaped from her lips. She had no place to run.

Beryl clinched her jaw and fell to one knee. The rumbling shook a rain of dust from the rafters, but she managed to catch sight of a dark shape slithering through the rubble. It was close enough to hit with her eyes closed. Beryl brought her rifle to bear and waited for the right moment.

"Orrruuuuuunnn!" The howl tore through the air once more as a tarry mass emerged from the cloud of dust.

"Not today, chief." Beryl unloosed a volley at the beast. An inhuman scream rang out in pain. The shadow was bigger than any man, rolling with malevolent fury. Beryl adjusted her stance and noticed that she had shot off the demon's wings.

The creature regarded her dryly and let out a foul laugh. Its back bubbled with wet flesh, which grew into replacement wings. It had regenerated almost instantaneously.

And then Beryl realized that she was alone. The demon had slunk back into the depths of the earth; the violent tremors must have been the carving of a tunnel. The woman leaned

on her depleted rifle. She could do nothing else but gawp awkwardly.

Beryl let her rifle clatter to the ground and surveyed her surroundings. Not only had the library been utterly destroyed, but so had the temple itself. She couldn't see a single living soul. The wizened priest was either fleet of foot or dead beneath the rubble.

"Looks like you got away again," she muttered. The old scars no longer burned or ached, but failure made her heart heavy. She found herself crying.

But it wasn't the end.

It was just the beginning.