

RADIO

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A Novel

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FRIDAY

6TH JANUARY

1928

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DINNER AND A BITTER DRINK

The evening of my death was supposed to be civil. I assumed the only loss I would risk involved words and ideas. It was an outrage to end the night with the loss of my body.

The tables at L'Embuscade were draped in fine white linen, the chairs filled with stuffed egos. Ours hosted the two most inflated: the Twins, Artemis and Apollo, in their matching ivory and gold splendour. His three-piece, double-breasted ivory affair glistened with gold buttons, a gold silk tie, and gold cuff links. Artemis shimmered in a short, tight dress of ivory sequins arranged in overlapping scale-like semicircles, each rimmed with gold. An homage to her antiquated armour no doubt. Her golden hair was just as short and tight. The Twins were always together, always matching, and always preening over one another. Deviants.

"And who have you brought to our table tonight, you cad?" Artemis's question dripped with poison as the words in turn dripped from her scarlet lips.

"This is Alina, but don't bother with conversation. She speaks neither French nor English." I patted Alina's pale hand. The Slavic barmaid gazed at the Twins with warmth and nodded in an attempt to engage. Hopeless, of course.

"Interesting choice of company, M," said Apollo, his dark blond

goatee blending with his tie as he looked down his nose at her through round, gold-rimmed glasses.

"My company and our business need not mingle, nor is our business hers."

"Wise, I suppose. But why bring her at all?"

"A fine meal deserves good company, Apollo. *That*, I had to bring with me."

"You wound me, Marduk."

"If only."

I sat across from them in my decidedly unflashy umber tweed suit with my date, whose pale pink dress also underwhelmed. The room oozed with chic modern flourishes. Straight lines and moulded glass light fixtures, mirrors and brass, liquor and jazz. I hated much of the jazz at that time. Too damned upbeat. Like whiskey, you could find the good stuff after digging past the plebeian tastes of most.

The menu was merely a prop as I prepared myself for the primary-school lesson I was about to give, again, on population control and subterfuge. We had been over every detail of their imbecilic plan but the rationale of my objections to the Mentium's undertaking somehow failed to find purchase in the minds of my fellow members of the Upper Echelon. It was almost as disappointing as the bastardization of my machine, my radio, and my vision for it.

Tonight was my last attempt at reason. I would do everything in my power to make them understand the world demanded we remain in the shadows. Like the vampires we created, exposing ourselves to the light would be our end. That point was an inarguable truth, but it was not the truth they wanted to hear.

"Garçon!" Apollo's offending word rang through the room and a red-faced waiter strode toward us. Apollo received looks of reproach from a few of the more thoughtful patrons but he was as oblivious to the judgement of the masses as always.

Apollo styled himself a sun god; being served fueled him in the way sunlight fuels a tree. Especially when those serving are

constantly reminded of their place.

The slender waiter arrived in full penguin regalia. Draped towel and thin, waxed moustache, of course.

"Monsieur, you have chosen?"

Apollo cast a glare upon him, a challenge to the penguin to prove himself worthy of the great Apollo and his cherished sister.

I quickly scanned Alina's mind while the Twins played with the waiter then I ordered for us both and the man scurried away. I opted for Dalmore as an aperitif. The whisky was needed to tolerate those two.

The Twins were the self-elected leaders of the Upper Echelon, which in turn led the entirety of the Mentium. They derived their power from each other. Not their *mental* powers, those were gifted to them and to all our kind by some unknown workings of the universe. No, this power sprung from their trust in one another. The rest of those like me — Broadcasters as we now termed our subgroup of humanity — live rather guarded, solitary lives outside of our official Mentium business.

We naturally seek relationships — we're human after all — but we find giving our bodies much easier than giving our trust. The Twins' trust ran deep, affording them a consistent, steadfast ally. Allies equal power and power can tip the scales in one's or rather, a pair's favour.

What they didn't possess were intellects to match their influence. Crafty, yes, capable, of course, but they lacked foresight and an understanding of the consequences of their actions. Just look at the ridiculous religion they created. A child's dream of excess and privilege.

"Come now, M, how can you be so disturbed by these plans?" Artemis, her chin on her hand, clearly bored with the issue. *"This is a return to form, by your own creation no less. We've spent centuries using manipulations just like this."*

"True, but it's been centuries since we've been that heavy-handed. This isn't about blowing the dust off old tricks. We operate in an

entirely different time. A different world.”

“No, just a different you,” said Apollo.

“Change is about more than the physical,” I continued. “More than just our bodies evolve. The minds of the Monos have changed. Our minds and thus our ways *must* adapt too. Showing them monsters and demons then swooping to the rescue isn’t going to work. This isn’t the Middle Ages.”

“They are the cattle they’ve always been,” he said. “Why do you fight us?”

“I simply find the idea of our extinction unsavoury.”

“Oh, do stop being so damned dramatic.” Apollo pinched the bridge of his nose. “Evolution? Extinction? What is that to immortals?”

“A delusion. You’ve killed Mentium yourself. You know full well we’re not immortals.”

“Pedant,” said Artemis.

The drinks arrived, blocking my retort. We ordered food, Apollo with the same venom as before. My Dalmore was gone before Alina had even touched her Aviation. The Twins sipped their Lillet Blancs and eyed me like school children waiting for a lecture.

I obliged. “This plan cannot go forward in its current incarnation. It’s insane to think otherwise. My radio was never meant to be used for something this overt. This blunt.”

“Overt? This is what we do, Old Sport,” Apollo said. “We take what we want and we do so by force. Physical or mental, it’s always been force.” He placed the sculpted ivory mouthpiece of a cigarette holder in his mouth and lit it with a slow drag. The opposing end was of course gold. Always ivory and gold. Always predictable.

“Old Sport? Have you been reading? How very academic of you.” I swirled my empty glass as if a spontaneous refill were possible.

Artemis cut in. “Scott’s book should be required reading for all of us. Gatsby knew what he wanted and through manipulation, *our* brand of manipulation, he got it.”

“You’re proving my point,” I said. “Our manipulations have

been subtle for a millennium, as were Gatsby's. He manipulated the social order and created a suitable environment for his plan. He influenced the right people to do what was advantageous for himself and his goal. What you're suggesting would be more akin to Gatsby walking up to Tom, shooting him in the face, then carting Daisy off over his shoulder."

"As he should have," said Apollo, his attitude sullen. "Gatsby didn't achieve his goal, did he? Had he been a bit more proactive, a bit more, assertive..."

Apollo resembled Fitzgerald but by face alone. They shared a jutting chin, big eyes, and a narrow nose. Apollo's brawny physique and lack of creativity were obvious deviations.

"What you're suggesting," I said, leaning in and placing a finger to my temple, a cue to switch to a purely mental conversation, "Is not assertiveness, it's foolhardy. Times have changed. Look around you. We live in an age of science." We only allowed each other's mental voices in. We knew better than to fully open our minds to each other; far too many cards to conceal.

"Spoken like a scientist," said Artemis, without speaking. She rolled her eyes and sipped her drink in a motion as smooth as ballet.

"And as a scientist I am telling you that inciting mass hysteria under the pretense of godhood is not going to work on the minds of modern Monos. People's first thoughts will fall toward rationality. Toward realism. They'll never believe the words of anyone claiming to be gods."

"We are their gods," said Artemis.

"Were," I broadcasted into the minds of the Twins. To the outside world, our table was silent and Alina's palpable boredom projected that to the surrounding crowd. "We'll all look like fools at best or, more likely, be hunted down as monsters."

"What rationality do you see in them?" asked Artemis, waving her empty glass in the air. "Look what they do to each other. They're still recovering from the last war. Monos believe what we want

them to believe. They always have and always will. They crave the fantastic. The gods of old, back to restore order. They'd be lined up like it was some Chaplin picture. They're hungry for it. They're ripe for this deception. For our return. Look at their art, their music, their literature. They've never stopped loving us."

"You're wrong. They love fragments of what we were. There's no memory of what it was truly like."

Apollo took a long drag from his cigarette and let the smoke flow from his nostrils. "Save your breath. You've already been overruled. The Upper Echelon voted in your absence. It was unanimous, save for you, of course."

"Yemoja and Cernunnos voted with you? Tian?"

"He said unanimous, didn't he?" said Artemis.

"It isn't unanimous unless all vote. No me, no decision."

"We don't see it that way."

I rubbed my face. "Millenia of prior precedence states otherwise. And why did you agree to this dinner if you had no intention of listening?"

"Think of it as a final gesture of goodwill. Besides, public humiliation is always more satisfying, Old Sport." Apollo's laugh escaped his trademark caustic smile.

"Enough of this farce," I switched back to verbal speech. "If you'll excuse me, I need to relieve myself."

"I'm sure you do. Don't worry, we'll babysit your date for you," said Artemis, her gaze that of a constrictor as she eyed Alina.

"Be nice."

"Never."

I strode off toward the WC and descended the spiral staircase. The men's lavatory was empty and I took up temporary residence in one of the stalls, readying myself for business but not in the manner one might assume.

Far from believing my success was inevitable, I planned to increase my odds. Odds matter little if the game's already been played but Alina could still be useful. Information is currency.

I closed my eyes and focused in on my date. My consciousness, a skater on a pond, skimmed from mind to mind until I located hers. Then, I entered.

Alina's mind was ablaze with irritation. I couldn't blame her. She was far from my date. She was a hired hand or, to be accurate, a hired set of senses. My initial plan was to use Alina as my camera and make my own 'talkie' of the Twins' discourse while I was away. This would give me time to dismantle their objections. I'd hoped to be one step closer to stopping them from ruining our livelihood.

Shutting out the distraction of her internal whingeing and whining, I pushed deeper into her mind until I could feel what she felt, see what she saw. And it made my breath catch.

There, in my chair, sat Izzy. His black hair was thick with pomade and a crisp grey suit hugged his lean body. The subtle Shippo design of his red silk tie glistened. Izanagi sat with the poise of a Shogun, a quality I'd admired once.

His presence at dinner was not part of our plan. Why the hell was he there?

"He's been planning it for weeks," he said as my food was laid in front of him by the still shaken waiter. The wood-handled knife for the Twins' shared *côte de bœuf* clattered next to Apollo's hand as the waiter set it down. "He assumed I'd assist him, and to be fair, my acting has been impeccable. And I have helped him in my own way. To the benefit of you and your vision of course."

"Leave us!" Apollo said and the thin penguin waddled off to lick his wounds. Apollo sat fuming, and not just his cigarette. Both hands gripped the edge of the table making his fingers go white.

"Sabotage? Izanagi, he wouldn't dare," said Artemis, her face flushing as she spoke.

"Oh, he would, and did," Izzy said as he stabbed at the steaming *gratin dauphinoise* meant for me. He lifted a hefty bite to his smug little mouth and chewed with relish. "This is M we're talking about. He's drawn up schematics, visited key sites, it's all ready to go. The

great Marduk won't stop until he sees our plan fail."

Our plan? My protégé and accomplice was now in the act of becoming my replacement. I almost admired the play, but my rage wouldn't allow it.

Apollo sat motionless. He stared into the table as if looking for answers. Simpleton. I had premeditated treason. I had prepared for treason. The protocol was clear. What was there to think about?

I willed Alina to focus on the Twins. I'd spent years working alongside Izzy. The last thing I wanted to see in that moment was his conniving face.

The pair sat close, whispering. At first, their focus was on each other — typical — but as their conversation progressed their gaze turned toward Alina. I couldn't make out what was said save for their last sentence.

"He's watching. He's using the girl," said Artemis, her eyes burning and locked with Alina's.

There was no time to react. Apollo's powerful hand slammed down next to his plate and the glint of the steak knife's blade had little time to register before the damage was inflicted.

As the blade slid into Alina's chest, I lingered inside her long enough to see the heads of all the diners in the room begin a slow pivot in the direction of the Twins. The faces wore the blank stare of statues not the mask of shock a normal person would don. Their minds were no longer their own.

I pulled out of her brain and regained my composure. "This won't end well."

The wood veneer of the toilet stall was a prison and I flung open the door, seeking escape. A man in his mid-twenties stood at the sink. The water was running but his hands were at his sides, dripping.

Damn it. I took a tentative step forward. The tap of my shoe against the tile rang out in the now-silent restaurant. His head rolled toward the sound. His face, stone. Just like the patrons above.

I said nothing as I tried to sidestep around him, though my eyes

were trained on his. My motion became a trigger and at the top of his lungs he called out in a booming monotone, "Here! He's here."

The boot knife I always carried was drawn in one practiced motion. I pushed him back with a second. The water pooling in the sink transitioned from clear, to pink, to red as the dying man's body lay across the white porcelain.

The sound of tinkling metal and breaking glass rang from the floor above. I stepped through the open door of the WC to the stairwell. At least twenty people in evening attire crowded around the top armed with silverware and the jagged necks of wine bottles. All with the same lifeless faces. All under the control of the Twins. All awaiting commands. At the head of the mob stood the penguin, a corkscrew between his fingers. At the sight of me, the crowd surged. There was already one dead man that evening and I was prepared to make it a dozen if need be.

"This will be your mess to clean," I yelled into the dining room, shaking my limbs like a fighter before a bout. As the mob reached the bottom of the spiral, I lunged. With quick, precise movements, I set about opening the throats of the first five to descend. The corkscrew caught my cheek as the penguin fell among the bodies that, like branches in a river, formed a temporary dam. The others pushed on, thrusting their makeshift weapons toward me. The blood of the fallen coated their finery.

"You dare betray the Mentium?" Apollo's grandiose voice carried through the room. "You know the consequences. Is your pride worth all this? Make this easy on all of us."

"I'd rather not," I said, dodging a bottle of cognac.

I tried to force my way into the mind of a tall man at the top of the stairs, and caught a fleeting glimpse of the area above. My chances of escape were nil. Everyone had left their tables and flocked toward me. Everyone but my three fellow Broadcasters and my dead camera. They sat, directing their newly-formed army. Whether their goal was to kill or capture me I didn't know. Decorum in our little guild called for my capture but the Twins were a bloodthirsty

pair and I couldn't trust their restraint.

"I am not turning my back on the Mentium," I blurted while ending another two lives to stem the flow of groping, mindless assassins. "I'm turning my back on this idiocy. I'm turning my back on you!"

"*We are the Mentium.*" Artemis spoke the words as if it were a universal truth. I had no more words for them.

I stepped back from the pile of bodies to catch my breath. My situation was hopeless. The Twins had control of every mind in the room.

"Damn it, damn it!" I slashed at a new throat, then another. Then, a moment of clarity. Their control was total within the room but not necessarily outside.

I groped for the thoughts of anyone nearby. Anyone who might have a view of the restaurant. There, walking opposite L'embuscade was a woman huddled beneath an umbrella, and I settled into her head. Through the front facade, I could see the angry crowd within, and what would prove to be my deliverance.

The frigid winter night meant that no outside tables were in place, leaving visible a dark, rectangular patch on the sidewalk. A metal door. A supply room in the basement had an exterior entry point. I was standing in that basement.

Pulling back and focusing again on my own senses, the glint of a brass doorknob flashed below the stairwell. That had to be it.

Once underneath, an accurate kick near the knob sent the door swinging and stale air spilling out. Inside, a single bulb burned, illuminating bags of onions and potatoes piled around the room. Kegs of beer were stacked near the metal supply doors leading outside. A keg became a stool, my arms, battering rams, and with great effort the supply doors opened. I lifted myself out into the night.

Icy rain was a shock compared to the heat inside, and the cold spread as I ran down the slush-piled boulevard. The wind tore at my face, filled my lungs, and they burned as if black with frostbite. Still I ran. Comfort was not in the cards for me that night.

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