

FOR ANNIE. A BELATED WEDDING PRESENT.

I LOVE YOU, LITTLE BEAR.



JEFFERSON CARTER  
IN A JOHN WICK NOVEL

# NO LOYAL KNIGHT



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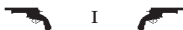
# NO LOYAL KNIGHT PART ONE: RULES





CASE #1

DEAD  
FRIENDS



A dead man sits on the other side of my desk and tells me he needs my help. “You owe me, Jeff,” he says. Problem is, he’s right.

I don’t know what to say, so I say something stupid. “Dave, what can I do?”

“Tell me how long I have.”

I take a good look at him and the rune burned on his forehead, written in the Old Tongue. Magical script. Expensive and illegal. You can get a sawbuck behind bars just saying it. “Tomorrow probably. I don’t know.”

There’s a long sigh. I’ve seen him do it before. He tells me about the boys they sent to his room, how they held him down and put a piece of paper on his forehead. Then, they said words in the Old Tongue and now there’s a mark where the paper was. Maybe tomorrow.

“Can you cure me?”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry Dave. If there’s a cure, nobody in the city knows it.”

“That’s it, then.” He looks at me. He mouths the word. Too scared to say it out loud.

I nod. “Yeah.” Not exactly one of those things you *like* agreeing with. “You could go to the cops.”

“Cops can’t give me what I want and you know it.”

I nod. “Yeah.” Again, not exactly one of those things...

He tells me what he wants while I strap the runegun on. I put my brown jacket over it and get my license. The license I may very well lose by tomorrow, dusk.

A small price to pay for a friend.



We walk down the dirty hall of my apartment building to the elevator. It's working today. I'm not the only one in the building, but I'm the only one on the floor. The shit that happens in my office makes a smell you can't get rid of. Everyone complains something different. This one lady complained about the orchids. There was a big man with a shirt too small, and he told the cops I was brewing hooch. Sergeant Schulson set them straight, with his badge and winning smile. Good old Detective Ben Schulson, who joined the force right when I was quitting. Right when I picked up my private license and went into business for myself.

The elevator objects to our weight, shuddering a little as it starts descending. Dave doesn't notice. Down three floors. I'd suggest taking the stairs, but every time I see grimy little Pock out cold on the stoop I have to drop him a nickel, and I don't have any change today. Pock used to be someone, but he pissed the wrong people off, and now, he's sleeping on the stoop of the second floor, the landlord too scared to move him. He should be. When Pock hit rock bottom, he found a black cat, kissed it, and twisted its head off, saying a few secret words as he did. Now, he gives you that black cat kiss if you don't give him what he wants. I can't risk that today. Not today.

Out the front door, into the city. The gray light of the sun drops down, hot. I take my jacket off and throw it in the back seat. Dave slumps into the passenger side and I find a parking ticket on my windshield. Another one. Three in three days. Pock must know I'm dodging him.

I pull the keys out of my pocket and politely ask my lady to wake up. She does, and sings me a song of diesel and oil. I know it's a cliché, but it's true. They just don't make any like her anymore. She's got curves. She's got a voice, the kind you can only make deep down in your throat. And she knows how to move.

We pull out on Venice and Dave coughs next to me. "You sure we need Jack?" he asks me.

"Can't do this by myself."

"Cashing in favors for me, Carter?" he asks. His smile tries so hard not to be sad. "I'm touched."

Yeah, well some people are worth it. Dave's worth it. Someone smarter than me once said that heroes are cowards, just like everyone else, but their conscience

gets in the way. I saw Dave run through a gunfight with Vincenzis on one side and Doyles on the other, firing bullets that had little or nothing to do with Newton and his rules, just to pick up a little girl screaming and crying. Right in the middle of it. Me, I've got to trick my way around the big guns. Dave, he just runs right in and doesn't even think about getting hit. And now, he's here, right beside me. His blond hair stuck to his wet, pale forehead, his blue eyes sunk deep in dark sockets. His long fingers are fat on the ends, just right for his job. And he's having trouble breathing. He won't tell me that, but he doesn't need to.

A man like Dave makes a lot of enemies in a city like this. But the rune they put on his head isn't easy or cheap, so we've got a place to start. Of course, if we're dealing with *that* kind of muscle, I'm gonna need some of my own. That's why we're going to Jack's place.

I called Jack from the office before we left, let him know we were on our way. He answered the phone in that funny foreign accent of his. I told him what the deal was.

"So you need more than that magic pea shooter of yours this time, eh Carter?"

"Yeah. I need your help."

"Loud, clumsy, crude thing."

"Are you talking about me or the runegun?"

"I'll let you figure that on your own. I'll be ready when you get here."

I hang up the phone and Dave looks at me funny. "Why did you call him?"

"You want me to give you what you want? We need Jack."

"You know what he is."

"So do you," I tell him. Me and Jack, we owe each other a lot of favors. The whole thing is kind of like a game — who can owe the other one more. Or maybe it's who can clear his debt first. I don't know.

"I don't like it," Dave tells me.

"You don't *have* to like it. If you really want what you told me, we need him. That's that."

And so we're standing outside Jack's place. I've been inside once. I never need to go inside again. We drove east, took a turn north, right up into his neighborhood. The hills look down at us, the houses high up there peeking

down. The mist is too low to see the Widow's house. The mist is always too low to see the Widow's house. But the other ones, built on stilts and stones, are full of money and beautiful people. I get a call to go up there every once in a while. I'm discreet, and that's what you want when you need blood cleaned out of your carpet. Especially when it isn't human.

Jack's apartment is in this tall, thin building that looks just like him, sitting straight up on the steep street. A perfect match. I ring the bell, his voice asks if it's me. I tell him it is. He says he'll be right down. I go back to the car, watching the neighborhood walk by.

There's a guy with one of those little black cigarettes. He's not wearing socks, and the make up on those red sores just below his ankle is streaking in this heat. There's a woman walking down toward the shops, her ass a little too wide for the skirt she chose this morning. But, just a little. I see a shirt in a window as she walks by has a tag on it that matches my rent. And then there's the cop who gives me a gander while I wait. Best looking cop I've ever seen. Then again, I don't get down to this part of the city too often. People here have a way of dealing with their own problems. I just drive on by, go straight up the hill, to the folks who've spent all their life counting money, and not one second earning it.

Jack comes out, all thin and pale, his eyes covered with dark glass, his brow hidden by a wide-brimmed hat, two tools to keep the sun off his face. He comes across the street, every step precise, like he's skipping over the cracks. What am I saying? There isn't a crack in sight. Not for miles. Not in the street, and not on Jack. But he's got creases in all the right places. Matching jacket and pants, his shirt silk, his tie blood red. A little gold chain keeps it in place. His belt is leather and gold, and I just don't want to know what kind of hide that leather came from. His shoes glisten as they *clip clip clip* across the street. His nose is long, and his chin is round and smooth. The pomade in his hair, the aftershave on his chin, he's got something else on his wrists. He's just his own little potpourri bag.

"Waking me up in the middle of the morning," he says. Shakes my hand. Even though the gloves, I can feel his skin, ice cold. Then, he looks at Dave, sitting in the car. Dave looks like a ruin. Jack, immaculate Jack, he walks around the car and stands on the sidewalk. The sidewalk gives him half an inch, but he doesn't need it. He looks down at Dave, watches Dave try to push himself up in the seat. Jack sounds sincere when he says, "Mr. Grate. Pleased to meet you. Sorry to hear about your condition."

“I’d rather have my condition than yours,” Dave says. He sounds just as sincere. “Hope the light doesn’t hurt too much.”

I get between them before Jack can do anything. That’s kind of funny. If Jack *really* wanted to hurt him, Dave would be dead before I could even *think* of moving. Jack’s pearl white teeth gleam in the daylight. “If my services are not appreciated here....” He says ‘appreciated’ with a long *sssss* in the middle.

And there’s me, standing between them. Dave, all crumpled in the front seat of my car, trying to be strong, and Jack, a full hand higher than me. More dangerous than anything I’ve ever known.

“Now listen here, the both of you,” I tell them. “Dave, Jack is here on *my* account. He’s not helping you, he’s helping *me*.” That’s when I turn to Jack. “And you. You’re always talking about honor and loyalty and all that crap. Well, here’s an honest man done wrong. You can do something about it, right here and right now, or you can shut up.” Jack hates it when I tell him to shut up.

That puts an end to the bickering. Neither of them apologizes. It almost makes me laugh; if they knew each other better, they’d probably wouldn’t say shit like they just said. That’s the funny thing about ‘if.’ A little word with big shoulders.



We’re in the car now. Jack’s in the backseat. Dave offered him the passenger side, but he shook his head and put a handkerchief over his mouth. “You must be joking,” he says through those perfect teeth. “Your stink is all over that seat. I’ll take the hindmost, if you don’t mind.”

A few miles down the road, Jack’s heard the whole story and the plan. I’m heading down Western, heading for the water, heading for the bay. We see less residential every block, and the factories start taking over the scenery. Pretty soon, we’ll start smelling the sea and hearing the ships. Big black clouds creep up from the factories, swallowing the sky.

“It’s not the Vincenzis,” Jack says. “If it were, you would have heard from me, not three amateurs with a curse.”

“That’s comforting,” Dave says beside me.

“And it isn’t the Doyles, either,” Jack says. “Far too vulgar for them. The curses they use are far more subtle.”

“I agree.” I can see Dave next to me. Already, his skin is almost as pale as Jack’s.

“Then it must have something to do with this disappearance you were talking about earlier. Mr. Pelton, wasn’t it?”

Dave nods.

“Tell us about it,” I say.

The facts are pretty straightforward. Bill Pelton was a security man on the docks. Always working late, always working alone. One night, the morning shift comes in and Bill isn’t there. Dave gets assigned the story. He always gets shit jobs like this; it’s because the guys at The Gazette don’t want him looking anywhere important. He finds out Pelton’s a working stiff who doesn’t drink, doesn’t gamble, doesn’t go for ladies. He’s married with two kids, trying to do the best he can, trying to keep his nose out of the dirty corners of the city. Then, he’s gone. His wife’s got no money coming in to the house and three kids to feed.

“So, I figure he saw something he shouldn’t have,” Dave tells us. “And I start digging.”

What he finds out is there’s more than just one case of Bill Pelton. About twelve people have disappeared in the last three weeks. He gets to talking to the families, putting a few facts together, and *wham!* he’s hit with the curse.

Jack nods. “Yes, I think we can *definitely* rule out the families.”

I make another turn, this time down Sepulveda. “They wouldn’t take a few months to make a dozen people disappear.”

“I know all this,” Dave says. “But what I don’t know is who or why.”

“If they know how to use the curse on you,” Jack starts.

I finish the thought. “Then they know how to use the curse on other people, too.”

Dave shakes his head. “I *don’t* get it,” he says.

Dave’s never had a head for this kind of stuff. He’s too honest. “Dave, what they did to you isn’t cheap. The paper they put on your head isn’t made from mulched trees, it’s made from mulched corpses.”

He shakes his head. “So, we need to go to graveyards and look for body snatchers?”

“How vulgar,” Jack says in the back seat.

I shake my head, pull into a sidestreet. My baby's got a wicked turn on her. I turn her all the way around, start heading north again. "No," I tell Dave. "That would take too long and really wouldn't tell us anything. Besides, there's better places to get bodies than graveyards."

Dave puts his hand on my shoulder. "So, where are we going?"

I pull back on to the street, hit a red light and wait. "The books used to cast your curse are illegal. *Very* illegal. Whoever did this needed to get them from outside the city."

"Which one are you thinking of?" Jack asks.

The light turns green. I push down on the gas and we start moving again.

"I'm thinking of a book Mr. Vincenzi would be very unhappy to see in the city," I tell him. "I don't think he'd ever allow it in. That means it was smuggled in."

Jack smiles. "I think I know who we need to talk to."

I nod. "So do I."



The name above the door reads *Bill's Used Books*, and when I walk in, Bill's all smiles,

"Hey Carter," he says. "How ya doi...."

Then, he sees what I'm bringing in with me.

"Oh *sweet Lord* what the *hell* you bring *that* into my store?" He's pointing at Jack, of course.

Jack just smiles and hangs back by the front door.

"Hey Billy," I say, walking up to the desk. "You know, usually, I'm pretty polite with you. But today, I just don't have the time."

Jack just smiles and closes the door.

The store smells like books. Dusty dry air, not a single drop of moisture anywhere to be found... except in the bottle Billy keeps behind the desk, and that ain't exactly water. The books are old, some older than others. He keeps the *very* old books out of sight, because you never know when one of the Black Boys is gonna come by to make sure you aren't selling the *wrong* kind of books. The kind of books you can go to jail for just *looking at*, let alone selling to others.

Bill is all sweat and shakes now, quaking in his very quiet, very still shop, disturbing dust that hasn't moved in years. His words come out like burps. "What do you need?"

"I need some answers, Billy. About a book. A very specific book. A very *special* book."

Jack just smiles and pulls the shades on the door.

"And so you brought one of *those* in here with you? Carter, you're nuts!"

I take a deep sigh. "You know, usually, he'd need an invitation to be in here. But since Old Man Vinzenci cast the Nocturnum Ritual, folks of his type can go just about anywhere they please."

"Yeah..." Bill's run out of sweat. Now, he's moved on to tears.

Jack just smiles and turns the sign on the door from 'Come In! We're Open!' to 'Sorry! We're Closed!'

"*You* provided Old Man Vincenzi with the Ritual, Billy," I tell him. "Everyone knows that. That's why he lets you stay open. And that's why you're still the only place in the city to get books nobody should have."

"Please don't kill me, Carter. I got a wife. I got kids."

I grab his shirt and pull his fat belly halfway over the desk. His little moustache is full of sweat and snot now. His little lips and fat chin shaking. "Your wife left ten years ago," I tell him, "and took your kids with her. Just after she found out what kind of crap you peddle out of here."

"You can't touch me!" His spittle hits my face. And then, he's got a sudden spark of bravado. "I'm on the Old Man's list!" Like he just remembered. He probably did just remember. Billy doesn't have a whole lot of space in his head for more than one thought at a time. Maybe if he *read* one of these books, things would be different. But things *aren't* different, and so Billy's just what he is. A stupid, cowardly, little fat man.

"The old man's list?" I ask him. He nods quick, telling me all about protection circles and wards and shit he doesn't really understand.

"Maybe," I tell him. "But, that really doesn't bother me, Billy. See, I don't think he'd have too much trouble finding someone else just like you to fill the spot. Maybe someone with a better figure."

He starts blubbing again and stops making sense. I keep talking.

“Someone in town is doing bad things, Billy. Making walking dead men. Now, only a couple of books have the right know-how to teach someone to do that.”

He knows where I’m going. He tries to back up, tries putting as much distance between him and me. I don’t let him go.

“One book in particular, Billy. I think you know the one I’m talking about.”

His crying eyes go wide. Wide with red veins and whites.

“That’s right, Billy. You got someone Von Junzt’s book.”

He almost falls, right there, but I’m holding him up. “No! It wasn’t me! I swear on my mother’s urn it wasn’t me!”

“Come on, Billy. Don’t lie to me. I don’t care that you did it. I just want to know who you sold it to.”

“Carter! You gotta believe me! I’d never even *touch* that book!” His eyes dart over to Jack.

I shake him. “Look at *me*,” I yell in his face. “You look at *me*.” He does what he’s told. “I know you wouldn’t, Billy. Because if Old Man Vincenzi ever found out you brought that book into the city...”

He’s almost screaming. “It wasn’t me, Carter! I fucking swear! Oh *shit piss fuck!*”

“Your momma’s urn know you talk that way, Billy?” He doesn’t get it. They never do. Stop entertaining yourself, Carter. Get the job done.

“Don’t lie to me, Billy,” I tell him. Then, I turn to where Jack’s standing. “I got my friend right over there...”

“Sweet Jesus, Carter! I can’t! If the Old Man ever found out I got that book into town...”

That catches my interest. Billy shouldn’t know what’s *in* the books. “Why?” I ask him.

“All that shit they say that’s in it? Well, it does. It’s got stuff in it. Stuff for... with... with...”

He’s looking over my shoulder again. I turn and look at who he’s looking at. Then, I turn back at Billy.

“Really?” I can feel my smile creeping up on my lips.

“I swear, Carter. I can’t tell you. If I tell you, it’s gonna make it’s way back to the Old Man. And I can’t let that happen.”

Jack’s talking now. “It’s already happened, Mr. Banning,” he says. All focus leaves me and goes right over to him. He’s standing at the door, the sunlight behind him making him a shadow with a halo.

“You know who I am,” he says. “You know for whom I work. You know where my loyalties lie. The least you can do is tell us now to whom you sold the book. At the very least, such a show of integrity will get you a bullet through the brain rather than... well, a visit from *me*.”

Bill looks at Jack, then he looks at me. His lips shake. His eyes shake. There’s a smell coming up from behind the counter, and I’m sure it isn’t his lunch. He starts blubbering again, and between the blubbers, he tells us the whole story.



And we tell it to Dave.

He’s shaking as bad as Billy inside, but the difference is, he’s got no sweat to make. Sooner or later, all his fluids will find their way out in one massive rush. I’ve got to get him out of the car before that happens.

“Ramirez is his name,” Jack tells him. “A small time hood on Mr. Vincenzi’s watch list. He owns a small club on the East Side, and his disparaging remarks about my employer have not gone unheard. He peddles all kinds of nonsense out of there.”

I’m thinking, *East Side? That doesn’t make any sense*. “What’s he doing snatching dock workers down here in Southbay?”

Jack shakes his head and checks his manicure. “I do not know. But I *do* know just asking him won’t get us anywhere.”

Have to agree with that. “Let’s go back to the office. I have to make a couple of phone calls.”

“As do I,” Jack says, putting his note pad and pen back in his jacket.

“Me, too,” Dave says from the passenger seat. We both look at him. “Hey. I’ve got a whole newspaper of reporters. They may not like me, but I’m still one of them.”

I shake my head. “No, Dave. If we let this out, the Old Man will hear about it. And I guarantee you, we’ll never see Ramirez again.”

Jack’s smile flashes. “Wait a minute, Carter. Maybe we *do* want Mr. Vincenzi to hear about it.”

“Why?”

“He’ll send *me*.”

I shake my head again. “No. That leads right back to Billy.”

Dave leans forward, and for a second, I think he’s going to lose it all in the front seat of my car. He recovers after some wet coughs. “So what?” he asks.

I give him a long look. I’m sitting here, watching my friend melt away. He’s lost three fingernails since we went inside. Just fell right out of his fingers.

“I said, ‘So what?’”

I blink. Just realize that he’s talking to me. Keep focus, dammit.

“Back inside the store a few moments ago,” I tell him, “after Billy spilled his guts, I made a promise.” I look at Jack. “So did you.”

Behind the dark glass in front of his eyes, Jack makes a face. “Yes. I suppose I did.”

Dave doesn’t understand. “So?”

“Men in our position can’t afford to break promises, Mr. Grate,” Jack says to him, turning back front, settling in his seat. “It’s against the rules.”

Dave turns to look at Jack in the backseat. “What rules?” Dave’s getting mad now.

“Big rules,” I tell him, trying to pull his attention away from Jack. “Big rules we can’t break.”

“Rules of honor,” Jack says. I’m watching Dave while Jack’s talking. He’s swallowing this like a castor oil pie. So, he says something about it.

Loudly.

“I’m sitting here,” he says, sitting up, finding strength somewhere in the anger that’s festering in his gut. “I’m sitting *here*, turning into a fucking corpse and you two are talking like you just stepped out of a fucking King Arthur story!”

I’ve never heard Dave say ‘fuck’ before. The curse is getting into his brain. We’re behind schedule. I look at Jack to tell him, but I see he’s already figured it out.

“Dave, just sit back, relax and rest. We’re the people you wanted. We’ll get this done for you, all right?”

It takes a second, but Dave’s eyes fade from wild to bewildered. “Yeah,” he says, all soft. “Yeah. I’m sorry. Don’t know why I did that.”

Jack looks at me. Something is different in Dave’s eyes. Something about his voice. Maybe the apology. I don’t think anybody’s ever apologized to him before. I mean, he gets a lot of begging, but no apologies.

“We have less time than we first thought,” Jack tells me. And, for a second, I think I hear something. A quiet, quick noise in my ear. No, it’s gone.

I don’t linger on it. I start up the car. “Then we’d better get moving.”



We’re in the office waiting on a few phone calls. Sick on my couch, Dave’s looking at Jack. His teeth chatter while he talks.

“S—so, how’s it work?” he asks.

“How does *what* work, Mr. Grate?”

Dave isn’t fooled. “You know what I’m talking about.”

Jack smiles. Not the special smile. That comes later. “You mean, a vendetta?”

Dave nods. “Yeah. Tell me.”

“Why in the world would a man in your condition want to know that little secret?”

Dave doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t miss a beat. “Because I want to know as much as I can before I die.”

Jack’s smile turns into a grin. “Well said, Mr. Grate. You’ve earned yourself an explanation, then.” Jack stands up and turns his chair so it’s pointed at Dave. He makes even the littlest things look like ballet. Then, he explains.

“Quite simple, really,” he says. “The family declares a vendetta and sends one man to claim it.”

“J—just one?”

Jack holds up a gloved finger. “Just one. If the assassin (that’s me) accomplishes his task, the vendetta is over.”

“And if he d—doesn’t?”

“The same answer, Mr. Grate. If the assassin fails, the vendetta is null and void.”

“So they send you?”

Jack shakes his head. “No, Mr. Grate. Not so much anymore. There’s a new boy in town they’re very fond of. I believe Carter knows him.”

“Blockhead,” I mutter under my breath.

“The two had a tangle a bit ago. Carter came out on the rough end of it.”

“Sucker punch,” I tell Dave.

A door opens. Everybody looks. It’s the door to my apartment; the one that’s attached to my office. I forgot to lock it. A little girl with green eyes and long, black hair is on the other side of the door. She’s wearing boy’s dungarees, a loose shirt and a baseball cap. Her hair is like silk, wrapped in midnight. Her skin is almond. Her eyes are wide and curious.

“It’s okay, Pearl,” I tell her. “We’re just talking in here.”

She doesn’t say a word, just shuts the door. Dave looks at me, his eyes confused. Jack’s eyes are laughing. Dave’s about to say something, but that’s when the phone rings. All conversation stops and all eyes turn to the phone.



That call gives us more than we wanted to know, leading us straight to the night, when Jack’s smile shines like a star. The shades don’t come off. Not yet.

The phone call tells me Ramirez owns more than just a club in the East Side, he also owns a warehouse in South Bay. That’s where we start.

Night doesn’t creep up on the city. She knows he’s coming, there’s just not a whole lot she can do about it. We use the night to move close to the warehouse. Dave’s not getting any better. His skin looks and feels a whole lot like October leaves. I’m almost afraid to touch him. This is going to be bad, him turning. Normally, you use spells to control the dead. If you don’t, they get rabid and start eating. And they don’t stop eating. Not ever. There’s a word for it. *Gaki*. The hungry dead.

“I’m all right,” he tells me. Jack’s on the fence, breaking the lock with those hands of his. I’m looking at Dave. I’m not convinced. “Trust me,” he says. “I’m ready to see this through.”

I help him. It's tricky now. I can't let his teeth get too close to me. His gums have pulled back, making his mouth look like a trap. I've always had nightmares of my teeth rotting and falling out, and watching Dave's mouth doesn't help.

"The lock's broken," Jack tells us. "Let's go."

We move as fast as we can with Dave. Jack didn't like bringing him with.

"He'll slow us down," he told me in the car as Dave slept in the passenger's seat.

"Yeah. We'll just have to deal with it."

"What do you owe him? What did he do for you?"

I keep quiet and make a turn, giving him the chance to ask me again, to show me he really wants to know. He keeps his mouth shut. Smart man, our Jack.

I pull the car over, lights out, coasting the last bit. We jump out of the car, leaving the doors open. The runegun is heavy at my side, getting heavier. She knows it's almost time.

Looking at the warehouse district, you see it's all made of fences, concrete and rust. There are lights high above us, but only half of them work, making long, tall shadows for us to move through. I can smell the water, hear the waves moving against the land. Everything is damp and covered in salt. The warehouses are old and rusted, the paint peeling, the windows dim and thick. Cheap glass. Nobody needs to see in or out. I'm surprised they put any windows in at all.

The ground between the warehouse and us goes quick. Dave is all but coughing up blood by the time we get there, but he keeps up the pace, and keeps his coughs quiet. Jack does the same magic he pulled on the lock at the gate here at the door and we're inside. Everything's dark, everything's quiet. A small room with a small desk. Another door that takes a moment from us and we're inside.

All we see is old dirty plastic tarps and no light. Jack pushes away the tarps and I pull Dave along behind him. We're on a balcony that rushes all the way around the building. The floor is as treacherous as a siren. Down below us are corpses of tables and chairs. The glass in the windows is old, twisting the moonlight into spangled patterns on the broken floor. The only other light is a single naked bulb, dropping its halo down on a figure sitting in the one chair standing upright. I stop, but Jack doesn't pay it any heed.

"A mannequin," he says. "Look again."

I do. As naked as the light above it, the thing sits in the chair. Its arms rest at its side in contorted angles, its dead stare trying to see something in the darkness.

“To scare the kids, I’d guess,” Jack tells me.

“That makes sense,” Dave says, his hoarse voice only a whisper. “Scared the hell out of me.” He almost laughs. Jack even smiles, just a bit.

We work down to the cellar floor, passing empty rooms all along the way, filled with dust, dirt, moonlight and memories. On second thought, not empty at all. And then there’s the things I *can’t* see. I keep my eyes forward.

Down on the main floor, we find a stairway behind a pile of chairs, spiraling down.

“Someone added this,” I say. “This isn’t part of the building.”

“I knew I brought you for a reason,” Jack smiles. We head down, Dave holding back his coughs as best he can. It’s when we reach the bottom we find what we came for.



About two dozen of them, all with marks on their foreheads to keep them at their assigned tasks. Marks that look a whole lot like the one on Dave’s head. They shamble here and there, their arms and hands full of work. A few are naked. For most, clothes are an afterthought. None of them are wearing shoes, and their feet are covered in oozing wounds that can’t close. Dead flesh can’t heal.

We see them from the bottom of the spiral staircase, hiding there behind it, watching them walk by, their eyes full of milk, their bodies slowly falling apart. I feel Dave’s heart pound fast next to me. He shouldn’t have to see this. Nobody should.

“A walking dead work force,” Jack smiles, sounding like a schoolboy who just figured out long division. “And here I thought I’d seen it all.”

The dead can really only handle one action at a time. That’s what makes this little operation so brilliant. Mass production. Each a cog in a bigger wheel. Each a piece of an undead machine.

I see shovels and picks and spades. Wheelbarrows and dirt. There’s living men down here, too, but only a few. And you can just tell how much they like working next to dead men. We keep to the shadows, and they aren’t looking for anybody living, so they don’t see us.

“What are they doing down here?” Dave asks. I’ve just figured it out myself. From his laughter, I hear Jack’s figured it out, too.

“Subway tunnels.” Jack turns to look at me, his eyes still hidden behind dark glass. “Oh, Carter. You really put your foot in it this time.”

The foremen stay far away from the dead men. But the dead men don’t seem to mind.

“That means city contracts.” Dave coughs out the words as quietly as he can.

I know where they’re going. “It wasn’t the families that sent those men, Davey. It was the city.”

It all makes sense to me now. Somebody high up hires Ramirez. Ramirez gets von Juntz’s book. Dead men work cheap. The subways get done on schedule and under budget. Well, at least under budget. Last I checked, nobody involved in city planning ever cared about time. And dead men have nothing but time.

Dave coughs again, blood and flesh in his teeth. This time, the cough is loud enough for someone to notice. A foreman looks up. I pull out the piece. Jack takes off his shades. He looks at me, the darkness of the tunnels making his face blank. All I see is the silhouette of his face and his eyes, shining as bright as his teeth. Shining like a star.

“You two get to the street,” he tells us. “I’ll take care of this.”

I don’t doubt it. Walking dead men aren’t known for their speed, and they don’t call him Jack Flash for nothing. I pull Dave back, keeping the runegun at eye level, and Jack goes to work. “I’ll bring one of the warm ones back to your office!” he shouts after us. We manage our way back to the ladder, but Dave can barely keep his fingers wrapped around the iron rungs. He has to pause twice, just to catch his balance.

“I don’t—I don’t—know which way is up.”

The brain is a delicate thing. I hear one of the first things to go is your balance. I hope that’s true. That means he’s still got a lot of brain left to lose.

We hit the street and get into the car. I’ve got things in the trunk that could help Jack, and for a second, I’m thinking about grabbing them and running back in. But then Dave coughs again and I remember the promise I made him. So little time left.

I’m thinking now. Ramirez. City planning. Subways.

I don’t know how far this thing goes up.

But, I bet Ramirez does.



Back in my office, Dave's on my office couch, hacking into a bowl. That white porcelain bowl has held most of Dave's blood and a good part of his guts. On the other side of the room, that little girl sits, watching him with her wide eyes.

"Nothing we can do, Pearl," I tell her. She looks up at me, her eyes wet and sad. I kneel down and she hugs me hard. Quiet little Pearl. Right now, all the pain that Dave's got coursing through his system — she can feel it. Right down into her little bones. I look at her, and she knows I feel it, too. And there's nothing either of us can do about it.

There's a knock on the office door. I send Pearl into her room. The door opens, and Jack's back. He's brought a friend.

I look at the friend, his eye bruised shut, his lips broken, his left wrist held at a strange angle. "Hello Donny," I tell him.

He was born Domingo Ramirez. He likes being called "Domino." He hates it when I call him "Donny."

Donny tells me to fuck off.

Jack smacks the back of his head, but doesn't say anything.

"You workin' for the bleeders now, Carter?" he asks me. His accent makes his voice sound soft. His lisp is as thick as his black hair.

I shake my head. "Nope. Working for my friend here." I point over at the office couch. You know him, right? The one you put the curse on."

Donny looks to the bed, and I watch him. Either Donny's been taking acting lessons, or he has no clue who Dave is.

"Never seen him before."

"David Grate. Reporter. Investigating disappearances down on the docks."

Donny shakes his head. "No."

I look at Jack. He's got his shades back on. He frowns.

"Somebody did this to him, Donny. Just like somebody did it to the boys you got downstairs."

“I ain’t got the juice for none of that,” Donny tells me. He isn’t shaking like a fat bookstore owner. He might be telling the truth. Might. He goes on. “You know me, Carter. I ain’t in all that shit. *Mi madre*, she’d kill me.”

I cross my arms, look down at him. “But there you are,” I tell him. “Down there, with all of them. And you did *buy* the book, didn’t you?”

He nods. Guess he doesn’t see any use in lying to me. “Yeah, I bought the book. But I ain’t the one who used it.”

“Who did, Donny?”

He doesn’t answer me. I look at my friend.

“Jack, go throw him back. The control spells they’ve got on the dead boys needs to be refreshed every night. It should be running out about now.” I look back to Ramirez and lean close. “And you know what happens when those control spells fade, don’t you Donny? You know what they start looking for?”

I tap his skull, just so he gets the point. That’s when he starts to get scared.

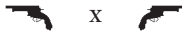
“I tell you the name you want to hear,” he says, “and you gonna run. Trust me, *punta*. This thing I know.”

I smile. “I’ve got notions, Donny. I just want you to confirm them.”

His jaw shakes. He looks at both of us. Then, he says the name. When he tells me, Jack shakes his head, his frown even deeper.

“Thank you, Donny. I suggest you forget all this. In fact...”

I go to the trunk and open it up. The herbs I get make Jack’s face go even paler. By the time I’m done, Dave isn’t the only person Domino won’t remember.



Jack goes home. He’s already got plenty of trouble helping me this far. I owe him big.

“Don’t worry,” he tells me. “I’m sure you’ll find a way to make it even.”

He’s gone, and all that’s left is Dave and me. In two hours, midnight strikes. In two hours, Dave’s mind will go completely, leaving nothing but a rabid dead man.

We’re in the car again, driving. North. To the hills.

“You won’t know what’s happening,” I tell him. “Everything will fade out.”

“You’ll take care of it, won’t you, Jeff?”

I put my hand on his forehead. His dry, cold forehead. “I’ll take care of it.”

A half-hour later, we pull up outside a gate. The spells on the iron are simple to bypass. The idle rich are always overconfident about such things. They hire fancy, flashy amateurs. Fellow celebrities who walk in the same circles. I’ve done security for a few folks up here, and I know what they expect. I know what they’re willing to pay. Our friend inside doesn’t think much of men in my trade, and thinks he can get by with simple runes. Tonight, it’ll cost him.

Dave can barely walk, but somehow, he manages. A moment later, I have a quiet and violent moment with a guard. He’ll live.

The window opens just as pretty as you please, and the safe isn’t too hard to find. Another rune, this one a bit more complicated to say. It takes me five minutes to figure it out. Inside, among the bank notes and other papers, I find a small black book with a broken binding. It creaks when I open it, but the words inside match the description I read about in seminary school.

Von Junzt’s book. Bindings for things not-quite-dead. This should come in all kinds of useful. I find the spell I need and cast it. Just before I do, I look at Dave.

“I’m sorry this is all I can do for you.”

He nods. Smiles. “I wish I could be there to see it.”

That’s our goodbye. Better than most.

I stick the fleshy rune on his forehead, read the words, and my friend is gone.

An hour later, I’m upstairs in the master bedroom, standing in front of a chair. Sitting in the chair is an older man wearing red satin pajamas. His hair is all a mess. What hair he has left. He can’t move because I’ve tied him to the chair, which means I don’t need the runegun anymore. At least, for him. I keep it out anyway.

“Who the hell are you?” he asks me for the fiftieth time.

This time, I give him an answer. “I’m a friend.”

“I don’t know you.”

“I didn’t say I was a friend of yours.” I go to the bedroom door and open it. Dave is standing outside, a piece of flesh on his forehead.

"I'm a friend of his."

The red satin pants turn dark. "What... what is..."

"I'd like you to meet my friend, David Grate."

The old man blinks in the dim light. "The reporter?"

I nod. "The one you had killed."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You should have taken acting lessons with Donny."

He's confused. Too bad for him.

"You're a dead man," he tells me. "Whoever you are."

I shake my head. "No, sir. My friend here. He's dead. You're *going to be* dead. Very soon now."

"You're going to kill me?"

I shake my head again. "No." I push Dave forward until he's standing right in front of the old man, foot to foot, knee to knee. "But in ten minutes, midnight hits. And that holding spell I have on Dave's head, that will fall off." I kneel in close for effect. "And you know what zombies without holding spells go for, don't you?"

I tap his skull, just to make sure he gets the point.

He doesn't know what to say, so he keeps talking in cliches. "You aren't serious."

I step back to the bedroom door and lock it tight with a whisper in the Old Tongue. Nobody's coming through that door until dawn.

On the mantle next to his bed, we can hear the clock *tick tick tick*.

Ten whole minutes.

I watch them both. Dave standing still and the pajama man screaming. I said a few words and made sure no guards can hear us; he'll be screaming louder in a few minutes.

When the clock chimes midnight downstairs in the foyer, I watch the rune on Dave's forehead fall to the ground. Then, I watch what he does to the old man. And when I can't watch my friend anymore, I use the runegun.