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The Ninth Circle

Alex Bell

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Extract

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My name is Gabriel. There – I have a name. So there's no need to be afraid. But I wish I could remember … something more. Seven days ago I opened my eyes and stared at the kitchen floorboards stretching out before me – worn old floorboards that were stained with someone else's blood. And when I tried to lift my head, I found that my face was glued to the floor where the blood had dried there, sticking to my skin.

I'm only writing this down now because I – ah – don't want to forget it all again. If a man doesn't know who he is, he might cease to be a person altogether. I mean, he might just sort of … *fade* … right out of existence. So I'm making a record here in this journal. It's the sensible thing to do. I'm being rational; you see that I am being calm about this. I am not afraid. What good would fear be?

When I at last managed to get to my feet, the room tilted and the air went thin. I staggered, almost fell back down again. My tongue felt like sandpaper in my mouth, my lips were dry and cracked and my head was throbbing. I stumbled from the kitchen, half in a daze, wandering from room to room trying to get my bearings.

The apartment was small and shabby: just a kitchen, bathroom, lounge and small bedroom. The carpets were worn and drab and the wallpaper was threadbare and virtually peeling from the walls. But the furnishings and other possessions were clearly of high

quality. The wine and clothes, the many books, the classical music collection, the fine artwork …

I walked into the bedroom and sat down on the double bed. The sheets were crumpled as if they had been slept in, but the apartment was deserted. And completely silent. I sat there, staring at the wall, and it occurred to me that perhaps I was dead. It seemed a sensible explanation. This place couldn't be real. Obviously, I wasn't real either. Real people knew their names. This didn't worry me at first. In fact, I felt I could sit there for ever on the bed, untroubled by this surreal experience, half expecting it to fade away like some vaguely worrying dream.

But slowly noise began to filter through to me. The noise of traffic passing by outside somewhere. I got up and crossed to the window, drew up the blind and looked out, flinching instinctively at the brightness of the sun and shielding my eyes with my hand. I was about six floors up in a large apartment block. There was a main road not far away, and the noise from it had clearly been there all along. Now that I was listening, I could also hear people on the pavement below and the odd door opening and closing within the building. There was life, after all. This was not what came afterwards. Craning my head and squinting against the light, I could see that I was on the top floor. A city glinted dully below and around me. From my window I could see the Danube and the Chain Link Bridge. I think it must have been these landmarks that made a name suddenly come into my mind – Budapest.

I turned, frowning, from the window. Was I Hungarian? What language did I speak? What language was I thinking in right now? I searched my empty mind desperately for memories that weren't there, feeling more and more alarmed by the second.

'I don't know,' someone said hoarsely, and I yelled in fright and spun around, looking for whoever else was in the room with me.

I saw him at once, standing only a few paces away in a doorway that led to another room. About thirty years old – his hair was black, his face was hollow and his eyes were horribly sunken. There was at least a couple of days' growth of stubble on his chin. But what immediately caught my attention was the black bruise

on the side of his head, stretching halfway down his face. And the blood that had dried a rusty red-brown, crusted to his skin and in trickles down his neck, staining his creased white shirt. He was visibly shocked at the sight of me.

'Who are you?' I demanded, shakily, trying to conceal my fear.

But he spoke at the exact same time, the exact same words, and I realised then that this was not another person and it was not a doorway. It was just my reflection in the full-length mirror. I stared, incredulous for a moment, amazed that the sight of him – *me* – did not cause even the faintest spark of recognition. It was like I had never seen that man before in my life. I crept cautiously closer to the mirror, tapping the glass with my fingertips to make sure.

I turned my head to one side and then moved it sharply back as if half-expecting to catch the reflection out; but after peering into the mirror from every angle for some minutes, I had to admit that the stranger looking back at me really wasn't a stranger at all. Or at least he shouldn't have been.

'Who are you?' I asked again softly, but the reflection stared back at me, equally mystified.

I was speaking English. Was I English, then? Yes, probably. This was good. I was getting more answers all the time. I would probably remember everything any second now. My reflection grinned at the thought, startling me into taking a hasty step back, for the smile made him look a little menacing. My eyes went back to the bruise on his temple, and for the first time I became aware of the blood beating painfully in my head, this incessant thumping … Jesus Christ, it was unbearable. How could I have failed to notice it before?

I walked into the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet in there and found a bottle of aspirin. My shaking hands fumbled with the lid, but finally I managed to take two of the pills, wincing as they scratched painfully at my dry throat. Automatically, I turned on the rusty shower tap over the bath, and then stood underneath the hot water for a while. But when I raised my hand to push my hair out of my eyes, my fingers came back into my

field of vision with blood on them, and I yelled in alarm and somehow managed to slip over in the bath, jarring my already sore shoulders and back. It was only then I realised I'd forgotten to take off my clothes and that a soaking shirt was clinging to my back, and the trousers were equally ruined.

Stiffly, I got back to my feet, stripped off my sodden clothes and dropped them into the bath. I turned off the shower, wiped the steamed up mirror with a towel and carefully examined my face. The water from the shower had knocked the scab on my temple, causing it to bleed a little, but already it seemed to have stopped.

I opened the cabinet over the mirror once again and found a comb and a razor, which I grabbed at eagerly. Clean-shaven and with my wet hair combed back, I felt I was starting to look a little more normal. At least I could look at myself without feeling quite so alarmed. I was tall, and now that my clothes were gone I could see the toned muscles of my body. With my height, athletic build and dark hair I could be handsome. I should be handsome. And yet somehow I feel I'm not. There is something about my face – about the look in my eyes – that seems wrong even to me. I look … cold, somehow.

When I returned to the bedroom and examined the expensive clothes in the wardrobe and in the drawers, I found they were all my size and, for the first time, it occurred to me that – perhaps – this was where I lived. Perhaps these things all belonged to me. Perhaps this was home.

Clean and freshly clothed, I walked back to the desk I had seen in the living room. There was a piece of paper folded on top of it, and when I picked it up I saw that it was a tenancy agreement leasing this apartment to a Mr Gabriel Antaeus. My first thought was that I must find some way of contacting him. He must know who I am; after all, I seemed to be in his home. But then I paused and it occurred to me that – perhaps – I myself was Gabriel Antaeus. This was my apartment. I was living here. I examined the signature on the document, picked up a nearby pen and decided to see if I could copy it. But as soon as I put pen to paper, the signature was

curling out beneath my fist, an exact replica of the original, as if my hand instinctively remembered even if I did not.

'Gabriel Antaeus,' I muttered. The name was strange and unfamiliar in my mouth.

I put the pen down and walked back to the kitchen. And that was when I noticed the cardboard box, carefully placed in the middle of the small kitchen table. It was full of money. There must have been at least a hundred thousand pounds' worth of Hungarian forints wrapped up in a plastic bag inside the box. I sat staring at the money for a while, my fingers drumming on the tabletop. It was a lot of cash to be just left there … on the kitchen table like that.

This apartment looked like it was my home – but I couldn't remember it. I couldn't remember me. I got up and walked to the spot where I had been lying. There was a shelf on the ground nearby, one corner of which was stained with blood. And there was a chair positioned by the wall next to a row of already installed shelves. I had been trying to put up shelves. That must have been it. Somehow, I had lost my grip on this top shelf, it had swung forwards and hit me on the head, and I had fallen from the chair and knocked myself out. Yes! Yes, yes, yes! And now I was suffering from some kind of temporary amnesia. It was that simple. It was as gloriously simple as that. Just a stupid, stupid accident.

'Gabriel Antaeus,' I said again. It was definitely an English accent.

I suppose I should have phoned someone. The police, or the British embassy, or a hospital … I wanted to. I wanted to find someone who could help me. But there was a hundred thousand pounds' worth of Hungarian forints on my kitchen table. Would they believe that I couldn't remember stealing it? For that seemed the most plausible explanation, even to me. And I did not want to go to prison.

I found this journal in a drawer beside my bed. It was empty but for my name, which I'd written on the inside cover. I don't know why I started writing everything down like this. I suppose I'm just scared of forgetting it all again. And I don't know who else to tell.