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The Demi-Monde: Winter

Written by Rod Rees

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The Demi-Monde: Winter

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Quercus

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Demi-Monde (noun)

1. a subclass of society whose members embrace a decadent lifestyle and evince loose morals;
2. a shadow world where the norms of civilised behaviour have been abandoned;
3. a MMP simulation platformed on the ABBA quantum computer and utilising ParaDigm Cyber-Research's Total Reality User Envelopment technology to recreate in a wholly realistic cyber-milieu the threat-ambiance and no-warning aspects of a hi-intensity, deep-density, urban Asymmetric Warfare Environment;
4. hell.

Prologue

The Demi-Monde: 37th Day of Winter, 1004

Norma ran. Picked up her skirts and ran as she had never run in her life. Ran as though the hounds of hell were at her heels.

Fuck it . . . the hounds of hell were *at her heels.*

And as she ran she heard a crackle of gunfire behind her, the sound of the shots ricocheting through the night-silent streets of London. The gunfire told her that Mata Hari and her Suffer-O-Gettes had kept their word. They had tried to delay those SS bastards for as long as they could. Suffer-O-Gettes died hard.

Run, Norma, run! Mata Hari had screamed at her as Clement's SS-Ordo Templi Aryanis thugs had smashed down the pub's door. And she *had* run. She couldn't – wouldn't – let the SS catch her.

Mad, evil bastards.

But she was running blind.

Snow-blind.

The snow was so thick that she could barely see a dozen strides in front of her, snow that the icy wind was whipping into her eyes, making them water with pain.

Angrily Norma shook her head, ordering herself to ignore the pain, ignore the cold, ignore the frosted numbness crawling along her fingers and her toes, ignore the protests of her mutinous body. Ordered herself to ignore everything but the need

to put as much distance between herself and the animals chasing her as was humanly possible.

She had to forget everything but the need to run. Forget that duplicitous, scheming, treacherous, underhand, slimy son of a bitch Burlesque Bandstand.

Bastard.

She ran until her heart pounded in her chest, until her legs throbbed with pain, until her lungs felt as though they were on fire. She ran hard, keeping, as best she could, to the ruts in the road left by the rubber-covered wheels of a steamer, desperately trying not to leave tracks in the freshly fallen snow. Tracks they could follow.

The sound of a hunting horn echoed behind her . . . maybe only a few streets behind her. The SS had shaken off the Suffer-O-Gettes. Now the Daemon Hunt was on in earnest.

Run, Norma, run!

Yes, now she was sure she could hear them. She could hear the smash of the gang's hobnailed boots snapping through the tight streets and along the narrow alleys that made up the Rookeries. She could hear the bellowed shouts of that hideous, hideous man – boy, rather – Archie Clement and the screams of his pack of Blood Hounders as he flogged them in pursuit.

The leather soles of her boots skidded on cobbles patinaed by a slick coating of snow, sending her tumbling into the fetid gutter, sending her sliding on her knees and on her outspread hands. The pain as the stones ripped through her skin was excruciating, but driven by adrenalin and the knowledge of the fate that awaited her if she was captured, without even pausing to inspect the damage to her body she rose to her feet and began to hobble on, sobbing with pain, desperation and terror.

Get a grip, Norma.

This was no time for weakness. Not now she was cut. Cuts seeped blood. The Hounders would just love that. It'd drive them crazy . . . blood-crazy. Now they'd have her spoor for sure.

As though in reply she heard the mournful howl of a Hounder as it picked up the scent of her blood.

Run. Don't give up.

Maybe the snow would cover her tracks . . . cover her blood trail.

Please, please, snow harder.

She slowed at the corner of the street, trying to get her bearings, trying to catch her breath. For a gasping instant she looked around to check the street signs. So near: she was only three blocks away from the Thames . . . from freedom. Just another couple of hundred yards along the backstreets shadowing Regent Street and she'd be out of the Rookeries. Just three more blocks and she'd be able to see the Awful Tower.

Her breath was shorter now, her body rippling, trembling uncontrollably with cold and exhaustion. There was another eddy of wind and she felt the sleet cut across her face, felt the cold scythe through the thin cotton of her blouse. She had never been so cold in all her life. When she had made her escape from the Prancing Pig there hadn't been time to search for a coat or a hat or a pair of gloves.

There had just been time to run.

If she didn't get out of the snow soon she'd be finished. Frozen to death.

Concentrate.

This wasn't a computer game. Not any more. She wasn't just a player. Not any more. Now she was one of the Kept. Now she was a Demi-Mondian.

Damn it all, concentrate, Norma. Die in the Demi-Monde and you die in the Real World.

Another plaintive howl from a Hounder. They were getting closer.

She pushed herself forward, slipped on the icy cobbles and caromed painfully against a wall, tearing the shoulder of her blouse and scraping skin from her arm.

Ignore it.

But she couldn't. The pain and the cold and the tiredness overcame her desperation. She did her best to keep moving but she was spent.

Now all she had the strength to do was limp as fast as she was able towards the sanctuary of the French Sector. Just get to the Pons Fabricius . . . once across the Thames she'd be in Paris, only minutes away from the Portal.

Please God . . .

She could smell the river, that sweet, sickly stew of ships, slaves and sewage. So close. And it was snowing even harder now. Wonderful, glorious snow, snow that would cover her tracks.

Still the thought nagged at her that this was all nonsense. This couldn't – shouldn't – be happening. It seemed impossible for her to have been caught up in such a terrifying surreality . . . in such a terrifying *reality*. Yeah, the Demi-Monde was real all right. Too fucking real. The pain she was feeling was real. The cold was real. The fear was real.

As she stumbled along she threw a glance over her shoulder, peering into the dark, snow-shrouded streets of the Rookeries. She couldn't hear her pursuers any more. Maybe she'd lost them? Maybe they'd abandoned the chase? Maybe her young legs had outrun theirs?

Fat chance.

They never gave up. No one wanted to go back to Crowley and tell him they'd failed. Even Clement was scared of Crowley.

No, they would hunt her down like the pack of rabid dogs they were. And she knew she wouldn't be able to go much further. She was finished, defeated by the cold. She had to find somewhere to hide.

Looking around she saw, ten feet on from where she was standing, the entrance to a narrow alleyway, an alleyway without street lights, its darkness so complete that no one, not even Clement would be able to find her in there. Maybe he wouldn't even *want* to follow her in there. No one knew what was hidden in the shadows of the Demi-Monde, the shadows hiding the horrible things that crept out of the Hub.

Terrific.

Norma limped painfully towards the beckoning darkness and dodged down the black, rancid alley. Skirting along the twisted tenement walls that crowded in on her – trying to ignore the unspeakable things that scuttled about in the shadows – Norma found a dark doorway that offered a semblance of safety.

Hidden there, she stood for a moment bent over, hands on knees, trying to catch her breath, trying to pant new energy into her cold, aching body, all the time trying to still her sobbing, trying to stay quiet. She had to remain quiet.

Please don't let them hear me.

Norma shook her head, trying to clear it. This was wrong . . . what she was feeling . . . what she was enduring . . . wrong. She was an eighteen-year-old girl and this, she kept reminding herself, was just a computer simulation. Eighteen-year-old girls didn't get hurt or feel pain and panic in make-believe worlds. Even make-believe worlds as made-believable as the Demi-Monde.

You didn't feel fear playing a computer game, not horrible gut-wrenching, stomach-churning fear like this. It was wrong.

Totally, totally wrong. If what they – they? – were putting her through was deliberate, it was sadistic.

Bastards.

She looked around. It was pitch-dark, the only illumination provided by the light seeping out from behind a half-open door at the end of the cobbled alley, the light spilling onto the facing wall to show the graffiti crawling over the scarred brickwork.

The only Good nuJu is a Dead nuJu

Welcome to the Demi-Monde.

She tried to relax. The alley was a good place to hide. Except . . . except that it was a dead end. She was trapped. She felt the bilious taste of panic rising up in her throat. Her head swam and she thought she would faint from cold, exhaustion and sheer unadulterated terror. Maybe she was ill. What did the Prof call it . . . ill-ucinating?

Ill-ucinating.

A condition caused by the confusion of Realities, often experienced by inveterate players of hyper-realistic computer simulations such as the Demi-Monde. The Prof had a lot to answer for.

Bastard.

When she told her father what she'd been through there'd be hell to pay. He'd go ballistic. The cyber-torturing of his daughter wasn't something the President of the United States would be big on. The things she'd tell her father when she got back.

If she got back.

She heard the scrape of boot heels on cobbles. She pressed back into the darkness, hardly daring to breathe, motionless apart from the shivers of cold rippling over her flesh. She clenched her jaw tight shut, trying to stop her teeth chattering.

A shout, the voice hard and merciless but at the same time childish . . . Clement's voice. She should have known Clement would be the one leading the hunt. Lunatic he might be but he was smarter than all of them. It would be his Hounders who had followed the bloody tracks she'd left in her wake.

Hounders: horrible, horrible things.

She could hear orders being shouted, could hear the snapped replies from Clement's SS troopers. She hated the SS. The SS were the most fanatical of the fanatical. They never questioned orders. They were the true believers. They were the ones charged with the protection of the ForthRight's black soul and of enforcing the perverted creed of UnFunDaMentalism. They were the ones responsible for safeguarding the Demi-Monde from Daemons . . . Daemons like Norma.

She heard an urgent and heated conversation coming to her from around the corner of the alleyway. Maybe they'd lost her? Maybe the snow had come in the nick of time? She edged her head out of her doorway, trying to make out what was being said. The conversation stopped, only the whimpering of a Hounder signalling that Clement's hunting party was still nearby. The silence seemed oppressive . . . threatening. Her body was taut with panic: she was ready to run again. Run for her life.

Run where?

The pain as the cane lashed across her knee was indescribable; it smashed up through her body, paralysing her in shock.

Norma had never imagined that the human body could have so much suffering inflicted upon it. The pain was so bad that she didn't even scream or cry out: she was stunned into a gagging silence, her eyes bleeding tears of agony, her right leg twitching in numbed torment. Her ruined knee buckled and she sank to the cobbles.

She must have blacked out. When she came to, she found herself lying in a pool of icy water. A dozen or so men moved to circle her, their shadowed faces peering down. She felt all hope drain out of her: even in the Demi-Monde the two men who stood at the front of the pack were known as the hardest and the cruellest of them all.

Singularities.

They were men without pity, without conscience and without remorse. Men who could laugh even as they slaughtered the innocent and the helpless: psychopaths.

Bastards.

Evil, evil bastards.

Norma knew the two men who stood over her. Su Xiaoxiao had warned her about them when she had first entered the Demi-Monde. Told her to avoid them. Told her they represented the more dangerous of the Dupes that populated this cyber-world, warned her that Matthew Hopkins was Clement's creature and Clement was, in turn, the unthinking disciple of His Holiness Comrade Crowley.

Automatically, instinctively, the would-be politician cowering inside Norma's bruised and bloodied body studied the two men. She'd always been fascinated by psychopaths, the most fatally flawed of men, whose souls were blistered and hardened by hatred and wickedness, and it was this fascination that Crowley had used as bait to lure her into the Demi-Monde. But it was one thing to read textbooks and write papers on the genesis, on the diagnosis and on the treatment of psychotics: it was quite another to look such evil full in the face. Their eyes were empty, crystal-cold and shark-black. They were eyes that contained no humanity and no forgiveness.

Dolls' eyes.

Suddenly one of the Blood Hounders sprang at Norma, the

beast obviously incensed by the smell of blood coming from her tattered knees. Clement beat at the creature with the leather switch he carried. 'Back, damn your eyes, you spawn of Loki,' he snarled, thrashing the Hounder until the pain of the whipping exceeded the creature's bloodlust and it cowered back. 'You,' he growled at the Hounder's handler, 'hold the thing fast or by ABBA ah'll knout you to ribbons and rip out your eyes.'

Terrified by the venom in the boy's voice, the handler hauled on the rope tethered to the Hounder's collar and pulled the hideous creature away from Norma. She hated Hounders. Half-man, half-animal, they were the obscene creation of Archie Clement who had abducted perfumiers from the Quartier Chaud, and by blinding and deafening them, by ripping out their tongues and chopping off their fingers, he had removed all their senses but one: their sense of smell. Then he had stoked their bloodlust to a frenzy. The result was that these monsters could smell a single drop of blood at a hundred yards. Clement used Hounders to track Daemons. Daemons like Norma.

Clement stepped forward to stand over her as she lay shivering on the cobbles.

Little Archie Clement, who in the Real World had ridden for the Confederacy under Bloody Bill Anderson, who had fallen into the habit of scalping all the men, women and children he murdered as he rampaged through the South, and who was friend and partner in crime to Jesse James.

Even if she hadn't been forewarned by Su Xiaoxiao that his boyishness and his wide-eyed innocence masked a spirit so twisted and bent that he could hardly be called human, she would have known to avoid him. Yes . . . though small, almost frail-looking, Clement had such a hateful aura about him that even the ferocious Beria was careful in his presence.

Clement took off his peaked cap and wiped his brow with his sleeve. It still shocked Norma how real Demi-Mondians were; how flawlessly these Dupes had been rendered. No, that wasn't right: it was the very fact that they *weren't* flawless that made them so perfect. Little things . . . like the mud-flecked slush that splattered the black of the boy's uniform; how down-at-heel his boots were; how spittle sprayed from his mouth whenever he spoke; and how wonderfully contrived was his sweet, noxious body odour that perfumed the still air of the Demi-Monde, an odour that reeked of Solution, tobacco and a negligent attitude to washing.

The perverted genius of the Demi-Monde was in the detail. Loki was in the detail. ABBA was in the detail.

And ABBA was God in the Demi-Monde.

Clement smiled down at Norma, a smile that displayed his tobacco-blackened teeth and sucked all the hope out of her soul. He gave her an exploratory prod with the toe of his boot. 'You best examine the wench real careful, Witchfinder,' he ordered in his piping, adolescent voice. 'Ah need to be certain sure that she is who we think she is. Far as ah can see she ain't sporting horns or a tail, like ah'm told Daemons are wont to do. So test her close, Witchfinder: ah'll have no mistakes on mah watch.'

Matthew Hopkins – the Witchfinder – used his cane to point to the Celtic cross Norma had tattooed on her shoulder. 'See, Comrade Colonel, she wears Loki's Mark and that is as sure a sign as any that she be a witch. And note how she has coloured her hair black and made many strange and unholy perforations in her face. Only those in thrall to Loki mutilate themselves in such a Lilithian way.' He stooped down beside Norma and taking her chin roughly in his callused fingers turned her face towards the light.

'And look you too, Comrade Colonel, Sir, she openly flaunts

her other-worldliness with the profane baubles she wears.' The Witchfinder wrenched off the 'I Blood' necklace Norma was wearing, sending the glass beads skittering over the frost-hard cobbles.

The Witchfinder chuckled. 'Indeed . . . 'tis the Daemon, Comrade Colonel: that I can say with all assurance. The Daemon disports itself in the form of the wench I saw in the Prancing Pig not yet an hour ago when she did dance in a most lewd and lascivious manner, in flagrant disregard of the teachings of UnFunDaMentalism.' He ran a hand through Norma's hair, his thick, filthy fingers fondling her scalp in a truly repulsive manner. 'You're right though, Comrade Colonel Clement, Sir: the Daemon has no horns. But that don't signify, these Daemons being masters and mistresses of deceit.' He moved his hand down to her knee and began to slide her skirt up over her legs. He looked up at Clement, and licked his lips. 'Shall I examine this creature of Loki to see if it possesses a tail, Comrade Colonel?'

Please God, don't let him touch me.

Clement gave an embarrassed laugh. Like many men in the ForthRight he was awkward around women: UnFunDa-Mentalism wasn't big on promoting caring, loving relationships between men and women. 'Ah think you oughtta give that a go by, Witchfinder. You start delving under them calicos there's no telling what you might find snapping at your fingers.'

'As you will, Comrade Colonel, but see she seeps blood from the wounds on her knees. Only Daemons from the blackest depths of Hel can do that.'

Clement studied the cuts for a moment then slowly raised his gaze until his mad eyes were staring straight into Norma's. 'Got you, ain't we, Daemon? You led me and mah crew a merry dance, so you did.' He gave her another kick. 'But Daemon

though you be, you couldn't bamboozle Colonel Archie Clement.'

Norma glared courageously back. Weakness and fearfulness were not virtues celebrated in the Demi-Monde: here strength, courage and viciousness were vital talents in the everyday task of surviving. But her play-acting had little effect on Clement: all she saw staring back at her was insanity. The man was certifiably nuts.

'See there, Comrade Colonel,' observed the Witchfinder, 'how this Daemon declines to lower her gaze as a respectable female should. And see how she openly flaunts her charms and her female allure. She seeks to beguile us, to lead our thoughts to the carnal and to the unholy. Is it not so, Comrade Colonel?'

'Sure is, Witchfinder, sure is. Church tells us that these here Daemons are real mischievous, them being sent to the Demi-Monde by Loki to torment and tempt us poor souls who labour to do ABBA's work.' Clement pointed to Norma's ruined knees. 'Know this, Daemon, despite your cunning form and your saucy smile, your body betrays you. Ah knows you for the trickster you is, a lickspittle to that most insidious of masters, Loki.' He paused to spit a wad of tobacco into the gutter. 'But even with your devilish arts and your seductive wiles, you couldn't outsmart Archie Clement. No, Sirree; battling the forces of Loki is the sacred responsibility of me and mah boys in the SS, the Soldiers of Spiritualism. You should know ABBA has commanded us to use all our strength to uproot from the Demi-Monde the pernicious arts of sorcery and malefice invented by Loki and propagated by Daemons such as you.'

The Witchfinder came to stand beside Clement. Hopkins had obviously enjoyed the hunt; his tight black SS uniform was stained with sweat and excitement. 'I trust you will remember my assistance in the capturing of the Daemon, Colonel Clement,

Sir, when you speak with His Holiness Comrade Crowley. 'Twas my agent, Burlesque Bandstand, who sent us word of her manifestation.'

'Sure will, Witchfinder, this was a mighty smart piece of work.' Clement took a swig from a silver flask he conjured from a pocket in his coat. 'And ah don't doubt that you'll be rewarded mighty well. His Holiness ain't one to be miserly when it comes to paying for a job well done.' He offered the flask to the Witchfinder. 'Here, try a shot of Solution to put some warmth back in your bones.'

The Witchfinder took a long pull on the flask. 'My reward shall be the destruction of the Daemons who torment the ForthRight, and those foul and HerEtical Sisters of Suffer-O-Gettism who serve the witch Jeanne Dark.' He made the sign of the Valknut – the sign of the three interlocked triangles that was the symbol of the Party, of the ForthRight and of UnFunDaMentalism – across his chest to ward off the evil evoked by pronouncing Dark's name. 'That and the destruction of those conniving vermin, the nuJus and the damnable Shade zadniks who call themselves Blood Brothers.'

Norma shivered, but not through cold. There was something fanatical in the way Hopkins talked. His hatred of anybody he did not perceive to be white or male bordered on mania. No wonder the racist, sexist son of a bitch had risen so far and so fast in the Party.

UnFunDaMentalism celebrated hatred.

Clement pulled his cloak tight around his slim shoulders; he was obviously beginning to feel the cold. 'Well, enough of this jawing, Witchfinder, let's be away with this Daemon before any of her ilk come a-galloping to her rescue. The Red Gold pumping in her veins is worth a wonderment of Blood Money. She'd make a grand prize for the Zulus or the Chinks.'

'It might be better to finish her now,' said the Witchfinder quietly.

Once again Archie Clement hawked and spat into the gutter. 'No, Witchfinder, ah have been ordered by His Holiness Comrade Crowley to return with the Daemon alive, so best we be away before the crows start to circle. Chances are that witch Mata Hari will be all of a lather to rescue the Daemon.'

The Witchfinder saluted. 'As you will, Comrade Colonel, Sir.' He turned and stabbed a grimy finger towards two of his men. 'You there, take up the Daemon, and be sharp about it. And shut your ears to her blabbing. This one is a temptress, adept in the Lilithian skills that ensnare the hearts and minds of the unwary and of the weak.' The Witchfinder paused as though struck by a thought. 'Indeed, it may be best if the Daemon was rendered dumb.' He stepped forward; Norma saw him twirl his cane in the air and slam the knobbled handle hard against the side of her head. She felt a searing pain, then everything went black.