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Gene

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CYCLADES IN THE UNDERWORLD

I remember the day I died.

The details are a fog now. A haze distinct enough only for the nightmare. I remember the scything sounds of metal on metal, the shrill creation of bloody carnage upon a canvas. The bloodlust. The rivulets of sweat running down the channels of my arms. Dirt and animal fat smeared in a marble glaze. The smell of burning flesh. Like strips of rancid swine all crackling and spitting on a split wood fire. Juices oozing. Blood flowing like wine. The human animal makes a fine sacrifice.

They said the horse had worked. I do not know why I remember that. The horse had worked. But that was the way it was. I remember I killed, with my own hands. One I ran through as quickly as one might sneeze and on instinct guard the nose. I remember I took one man's face in my hands as though to caress him and instead gouged out his eyes with my thumbs, until they were sunk deep up to the knuckle. I do not remember if he screamed. I suppose he must have. It's all a blur now. All part of that carnival of terror that ended with my belly sliced clean, and my bowels spilling out like the flowering ribbons of a child's toy.

I remember I was at the top of another blow when the dull thump of a side swipe caught me unguarded, and away flew my hand. End over end. Tumbling in the dust, my bloody fingers still grasping my sword.

What happened next I do not know. The details are a fog now. A haze distinct enough only for the nightmares. Perhaps it is for the best. The horror I witnessed I do not wish to remember, though I know that I met evil that day and was not man enough to stop it.

I returned in time for the darkness, pulled back by much tugging at my clothing. Perhaps they assumed I was carrion. My moaning soon put paid to that. I was dragged through the streets, and loaded on to something, I know not what.

Later there was dripping. An occasional splattering of filthy water caught up in snatches by the feeble flame of cavern fires. I lay, slipping in and out of my stupor for I know not how long. Only she would know. That wild-haired bitch with her hungry eyes and need to see me choke. Wafting the smoke of her strange concoctions, holding me fast so that I could not look away, but was forced to consume her vile magicks.

She perused my innards as though I were a prophecy. As though the meats of my self could tell the future. I do not know what she saw, for there was no future here. I was beyond restoration. But she smeared me in honey nonetheless and patched me with cloth. She fed me berries and brews and the strips of bark and forced every morsel down my withered throat. She recited her incantations and as the flames began to dance, as the cavern began to swim, she hitched up her garments and exposed the thick black hair of her moistened furrow. She squatted down on me, and, much to my surprise, had more control over my parts than I. She writhed and cursed and spat at me to deliver to her my seed. She struck at me with balled fists. And all the while the flames and smoke of the fires rose up around her, a crescendo to her wild hair and her hungry eyes. Until at last I released into her what she sought.

And when she was satisfied she snuffed out the fires and left me to squalor and starvation. And as I lay there, my nostrils filled with the rotting, bilious stench of my dying carcass, she led him in and claimed she had saved me for him. He took up his blade and drove it into my temple.

And as I died I looked deep into those hungry eyes and knew.

I remember the day I died. It was the day I bore witness to my own conception.

My name is Cyclades. And this is my story.

NEW YORK CITY

He stabbed the first visitor at precisely 10.23. They determined this later when they pulled the time code from the security tape.

It happened like this: he wandered into the Great Hall wearing a plain grey sweatshirt, harmless looking, a regular guy. He passed through the metal detector without tripping the alarm. He loitered under the imposing glass domes of the entrance hall for ten minutes. Didn't take a map from the help desk. Didn't ask for directions.

He watched the staff change the flowers, a continuing donation from Lila Acheson Wallace, for almost three minutes, made a move towards the staircase up to the next floor, changed his mind, turned left away from the stairs, and walking the thirty or so feet towards the Greek sculpture exhibit, never stopping to pay the voluntary entrance fee at either of the two booths, entered the Belfer Court looking – lost. Though not like a tourist. This was something else.

This was when he started to weep.

Not a sudden outburst. If it had been, perhaps one of the blue-blazered attendants might have come to assist him, realizing something was wrong. Instead he made his way over to the *Cubiculum from Boscoreale* – frescoed walls and a mosaic floor assembled as a room from a Roman villa – where

Mrs Margaret Holland (a history teacher from Scarsdale High School who was at the museum as part of a group) remarked, he looked like that boy at her last school who'd smoked all that crack in the student library.

She knew enough to get out of his way.

At the *Grand Sepulchral Vase* over on the right he traced his finger over the pictures of the prone black corpses depicted on its terracotta surface. He touched a number of other objects until he reached the middle of the court.

Surrounded on all sides by marble statues of gods and kings, the young man's attention was drawn to the figure in the centre – *Volneratus Deficiens*, the Wounded Warrior, a depiction of Protesilaos, destined to become the first Greek to die at the battle of Troy, but shown here raising his spear arm, preparing to kill.

Lauren Bergen, a 21-year-old Art History major from NYU, explained that she had been making sketches of the Wounded Warrior when the man suddenly appeared by her side and spoke to the statue. Puzzled, she asked him if he was familiar with the work. He replied that he was not familiar with the work but familiar with the man.

At this point, Lauren Bergen decided to leave the Belfer Court.

It was as she did so, and as the man tried to follow her, that he appeared to notice the special exhibitions gallery through the doorway under the sign: *The Greek Achievement*. Inside, artefacts from the Trojan War to the first Olympic Games had been placed on display in celebration of this summer's games. Hoplons, spears, pots, bowls, coins. But it was the swords that interested him the most.

The swords and the skulls.

Lauren Bergen said that she wished she had never struck up conversation with the man. Perhaps then he wouldn't have done what he did next.

*

At 10.23, the young man picked a three-thousand year old bronze short sword off the museum wall and in the same movement slashed the arm of Richard Scott, the only other visitor in the room. In seconds he had hacked down the room's attendant, and the attendant from the next room who attempted to intervene, both blows of practised ease. The sword seemed still solid and sharp. There was a lot of blood.

Swinging the bronze sword above his head, he brought the ancient weapon crashing down on display case number 43. Inside were a helmet and broken skull.

His hand studded with glass fragments and running rivers of red, he reached inside the case and plucked out the objects.

And then, just as suddenly as his fury had erupted, he began to hyperventilate. The security tape later showed the confusion written across his face as he studied the bleached white human bone and then collapsed in a heap.

For several minutes he remained on the floor, ranting in a language nobody could understand.

He pressed the skull to his chest.

And he wept.

NORTH

The mid-August morning was hot and oppressive, an asphyxiating New York broiler that left the air thick and charged, drenched with the naked fumes of the gasoline and diesel engines crawling down Fifth Avenue like sweat.

Parked behind three oily Scarsdale school buses idling at the sidewalk, North chewed over Bruder's report. He marked up the doer's location on a tattered blue and white museum ground plan before peeling it off the hood of his dark blue motor-pool Impala.

'When does ESU get here?' he asked.

The Emergency Service Unit was the NYPD's tactical branch. Negotiators and SWAT. As a catching detective from the Fourth Precinct, North didn't work hostage – they must be short-handed.

Patrolman Don Bruder's swollen features, about three minutes short of heat stroke, bulged with agitation as the chaos on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art continued to unfold relentlessly. Patrolmen were marshalling the public out the exits. Morbid crowds of tourists pooled around the hot-dog vendors and picture sellers. And though he could hear more sirens trying to squeeze out of the 86th Street Transverse just a block away, so far only two squad cars had made it here ahead of North.

It was now 10.41.

'It's your call,' Bruder replied.

'*You're* the first officer on the scene. Did you put a call in for ESU or not?' North asked sharply, throwing open the trunk.

'Central didn't tell you?'

'Tell me what?' North fished his heavy body armour out and secured the fastenings over his sweat-soaked T-shirt.

'Ah, Jesus,' Bruder trembled. 'ESU's your call.'

'Why?'

' 'Cos the mope's asking for you by name.'

North slammed the trunk shut. Cold sweat beaded down his clammy forehead. He could feel the black city grime thick on the back of his neck as he shook his head.

'Asking for me?'

'Detective James North. That's what he keeps saying. Think maybe you pissed someone off?'

North marvelled at the understatement. 'I'm a cop,' he said. 'Listen, call up Central Park, tell them to get their asses in gear and send more guys to quarantine this area,' he ordered. 'You locked down inside?'

Bruder thumbed at the crowds still fighting each other to exit the building. 'You kidding me? There's over three thousand people in there, and a little kid trapped with this nut. They said it could take up to half an hour just to empty out.'

North watched as a couple of Met staffers were helped out by paramedics to the only FDNY EMS ambulance to breach the midtown gridlock. One held a blood-soaked cloth to his face. Another had a T-shirt wrapped around his hand.

If he's touched that kid . . .

North reached to check his piece but the cloud crossing Don Bruder's face spoke for him. 'I wouldn't want to be you right now.'

'Trust me, we all want to be someone else.'

'Central gave the order: no gunfire inside the museum.'

North was stunned. 'Excuse me?'

'Someone called up the Mayor's office. Said they'd made a three-thousand year old donation to the exhibit. Next thing I know, dispatcher's coming back with the order it's worth more than whoever goes in there.'

North didn't answer. He checked the action then holstered his Glock 21 .45. Eight rounds. Hollow point. All cops knew a full metal jacket pierced the target and went in and out. But a hollow point opened up inside like a lead flower. Its damage was vicious; its stopping power absolute. And there was no risk it would emerge from its target to hit anyone unfortunate enough to be standing right behind. The gun was going in.

'I didn't see you do that.'

North didn't care. 'Anything else you want to tell me?'

'Yeah,' the young uniform said as he surveyed the steps up towards the imposing columns of the vast imperious stone building. 'We found the little kid's mom.'

'Matthew Hennessey,' she kept saying over and over. 'Matthew Hennessey.' But it was just one of a jumble of names that were swimming around inside North's head. Amos Arreilamo, Louis Rosario – he put Louis away for burglary. Was he out already? Michael Francis Duffy was in for double homicide. No way he was out. What about Denni? She looked like Dennichola Martinez's wife. He nailed Denni for grand larceny.

The trouble with being a catching detective was they put you where they needed a pair of hands most. He could know the guy in the museum for any number of reasons, from racketeering to jay-walking.

'Do you hear me?' she was saying in utter desperation. 'Do you hear what I'm telling you?'

North lied and said that he did.

'He has asthma,' she sobbed, her hands shaking, tears staining her cheeks, proving that the five-dollar make-up she was wearing didn't like the wet. She clawed at her Costco clothes, that were old but otherwise immaculate. This woman knew how to make money stretch.

She had another kid with her. A little girl in a pale yellow cotton dress. There was no father around.

'Mrs Hennessey,' North said gently. 'Is he a good kid?' She wasn't listening. She was freaked. 'Mrs Hennessey. Your son, what's his name?'

'I told you, Matthew. His name is Matthew.'

Jesus Christ, North, get a grip. 'How old is he?'

'Eleven.' Her eyes were wandering.

North had to steer her attention away from the situation. He touched her arm. 'Mrs Hennessey, listen to me. All right? Look . . . look at me.' North was all confidence as she made eye contact. 'We're gonna get your son out of there, okay? But I'm gonna need your help.'

She nodded that she understood.

'You said he has asthma. Is he on medication?'

'His inhaler. He has a plastic inhaler.'

'What triggers it? Does he have panic attacks?'

'No. No, it's medical.'

Well, that's something. 'Does he have it with him?'

It was a simple question but one this distressed mother just couldn't answer. She was shaking again, incapable of a coherent response. She tugged at her faded blonde hair tied up in the back, held in place by a ribbon. She couldn't have been more than a few years older than North. Mid-thirties at a push, even though the faint trace of burst blood vessels around her nose suggested otherwise.

'He put it in her purse . . .' the daughter offered. 'He hates carrying it around. It makes him look goofy.'

North turned his attention back on the mother. 'Do you have it?'

She fished around indecisively in her crammed purse until she came up with the small blue plastic device. She handed it over to North. The label on the pre-loaded canister read: Albuterol.

North recognized it immediately. His sister's kid used Albuterol. But this canister was empty and way past its use by date. North smiled, he hoped reassuringly. Little Matty didn't have asthma at all. He was playing his mom, for reasons known only to himself.

'I'll make sure he gets this.'

The sweltering, grease-slicked orange clouds were pregnant with the promise of rain, but North didn't believe them. He would go on sweating.

Heat did strange things to a man's head. Could make him boil to the point of irrational, make him lash out without fear of consequence. Heat interfered with a man's ability to reason.

North had two choices as he entered the museum against the heavy tide of panic-stricken visitors still surging down the main staircase trying to get out: he could either have the air conditioning turned way up and hope the perp came to his senses or shut it down and let the heat go to work on him. Make him sluggish, easier to apprehend but dangerously unpredictable.

How to pacify a hornet?

'What's he doing now?' North joined the next uniform, huddled behind one of the ticket booths.

'Sharpening his sword.'

'Ah, Jesus.' North peered around the corner to take a closer look but there was nothing to see. Instead he could hear what sounded like a stone, slowly, very slowly, being run down the length of an ancient blade.

'Where is he?'

The cop pointed to a side gallery. 'He keeps moving in and out of there. There's an exit the other side.'

North checked the museum plan. He felt the muscles in his jaw flex in frustration. There weren't enough cops, there were still too many visitors. He tucked the map away with dismay. 'This is too fluid.'

At the other end of the Belfer Court a lone uniform directed the confused visitors emerging from the café and the Americas exhibit to head down the stairs, past the coat room and out the 81st Street exit. He had his back to the court. He had no other option. There were no internal doors to lock down, no bars that had magically appeared. The museum prided itself on freedom of access.

The perp had to change his mind just once about where he wanted to be and this whole situation would be turned on its ear.

The sharpening continued. A tangy smell of metal drifted from the side gallery. 'He been doing this long?'

'About ten minutes. The museum people said it's a genuine sword from Troy.'

North had to think. 'Upstate?'

'Ancient Greece.'

Oh. 'Guess it's worth a lot of money.'

Bruder came up beside him. 'Not any more.'

North sized up the exits. 'Has he made a move on the kid?'

'I don't even think he knows he's there.'

But North had no doubt. 'Trust me,' he said. 'He knows.'

Bruder didn't like all this waiting around. His fingertips were white from gripping his radio. 'So what's the deal on ESU? Do I put in the call?'

North chewed it over. ESU would be the primary response if the situation were not contained. But it was, for now. Hostage situations in the city averaged around a hundred a year. The NYPD Hostage Negotiation Team had a ninety per cent success rate talking the desperate, the suicidal and the crazed out of acting on their unfathomable impulses. It wasn't for nothing that they had 'Talk to Me' emblazoned on their equipment.

'Put in a call for HNT,' North ordered. But no sooner had he said it when the situation began to spiral. The crowd at the far end began to surge past the lone uniform and spill out into the court, right where North didn't want them – right through the hostage situation.

North didn't think. 'Get back!' he yelled, running at them. 'Go back!' Before he knew it he was in the middle of the court. The visitors were bewildered. They dithered. North waved them away desperately.

Back by the ticket booths, Bruder and his partner were forced to direct the sea of visitors streaming down the staircase, away from the situation and out the exits.

'Get away!' North pleaded.

And that was when the first girl saw the perp standing just a few feet inside the Special Exhibitions Gallery and screamed.

At around five feet ten inches, maybe a hundred and forty pounds, with close-cropped, light-coloured hair, he stood with his back to his audience, his arms clearly splattered with thick, dark red blood.

The visitors hurried back the way they had come but already the stranger was turning on North.

He was younger by more than a couple of years. He was maybe twenty-five, twenty-six. North worked out but this guy looked like an athlete. He was going to be quick and agile.

North marvelled at his own stupidity. Guess they were right. Guess seven years really was the shelf life of a New York cop.

He clutched the blue inhaler tightly in reflex and tried to work out his next move. He was in the doer's domain now.

And North didn't know him at all.