

Zed

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Chapter 1

HER NAME? ZED. AGE? Eleven, twelve, maybe thirteen – it wasn't like she was getting three square a day and multivitamins. She was small, four-foot nothing: thin, grubby, but with a thrust to her chin which told you, as you saw her beetling down the hall towards you – *best step aside*. Most people were fairly certain Zed was female. Her soft features and long lashes were contrasted by grey uniform coveralls, slick and shiny from constant wear. The hair was the deciding factor, because it fell, wildly uneven, to shoulder length. Once a year, Zed assaulted it with her knife, hacking it back above her ears. She had a habit of tilting her head down and staring up at people from under her bangs. She just showed up one day – no relations, no history. No one knew much about her, and those who did never passed it on. People didn't gossip about her, at least not more than once, because if she caught them she'd stick her knife point somewhere soft on them and ask, "Got anything more to say, Chuckles?" which, invariably, they didn't.

Yes, she fit right in with the Tower.

THE TOWER, AN UNPAINTED concrete tenement block twenty storeys high with basements and sub-basements below. Twenty storeys of long hallways with ancient whitewash and carpets laid down from the war. Which war that might be was a subject of heated hallway controversy. At each end of the hall ran concrete stairs, unpainted and unventilated, winding back and forth, up and down. They were cob-webbed, grimed, half-lit, urine-scented, and suspiciously sticky. Still, a majority of the tenants used them, unless they were suicidal enough, or drunk, or stoned or oblivious enough to take the elevators. Not that anyone had died ... yet. But both elevators did have a tendency to groan a little. One of them, when going to the top floors, would shake and stop before letting out a moan of tearing metal. Then, without warning, it would drop a few inches and you prayed and clutched each other. The lights would go out and it'd drop a bit more. But after a while the lights would flick on and the elevator would start again, shrieking as it shuddered up the shaft. So when the doors did open, you didn't mind so much that it had missed the 17th floor by over two feet and you had to climb up to get out. In the Tower, this elevator was known as "Lucky," or "the good'n."

The other elevator, "Jimmy," was named after the inaugural suicide of the building, a mythic figure who had jumped into the empty shaft and now resided in the elevator that occupied it. This was why, some of the time, the elevator would take you where you wanted to go without a fuss. It was also why, at other times, it would close the doors and send you up and up, say, to maybe floor 18 and then right down, to the 4th floor: up to 17, down to 11, up to 16, down to 2, all the while never obeying a single pushed button including the emergency stop and never once opening the doors. Once aboard, the only way out was if someone on the outside pushed the elevator button. Then, like a diabolic amusement ride, one passenger would be let out for another to come in before it started all over again. Everyone avoided "Jimmy" after the unfortunate incident when a 2 a.m. drunk was stuck inside for over an hour, screaming his lungs out.

At one time the Tower may have had a real name, like "Highland

Heights” or “Viewside Towers,” but that was back before the downtown drifted away, leaving the empty lots and shells of buildings behind like trash after a picnic.

If you had a choice, you lived somewhere else. Otherwise, welcome home.

ON THIS MORNING ZED stood before the main entrance, those two great sunken glass doors, and looked up. The top of the building was wrapped in a shroud of early morning mist. A crescendo of yowls had drawn Zed’s attention upwards and now, accelerating toward her through the mist, came a writhing, wailing bundle of cat, its claws extended. Watching the way the air rippled its fur, Zed recognized the cat as Valerie’s, “Val” of the 19th floor. Zed saw the cat often as it waited, curled on Val’s doorstep. This was because Val lived within the grip of two moods: the first sent her roaming the halls, aggressively horny, in search of a screaming fuck; the other left her curled on the floor in a three-day crying jag petting a cat desperately trying to escape.

While the earth is patient, gravity is not. The cat accelerated, the ground remained.

Zed, no stranger to bloodstains, edged backwards, stepping out of the splash radius.

The cat hit with a wet thud, its head twisted back, mouth gaping. The flight was over. Zed shrugged. She’d check that out later, but now, with the building just waking up, it was time to do the rounds. Time to get to business.

Hammer, the building’s security guard, with his bulging forehead of bone and flat top, leaned against the door. He looked down at the colourful addition to the sidewalk. “Cat,” he rumbled with his stick-on-gravel voice. Zed nodded. “Outside building.” Zed nodded again. “Not my jurisdiction,” he said, with a low coughing sound. Zed looked at Hammer’s throat, wondering if the volume of words had choked him. It

was when he turned that she saw the quake of his shoulders. Hammer was laughing. Zed followed him as he returned to his concrete room, its 180-degree slit holes built just like a real bunker.

Hammer handed her a dog-eared paperback mystery. “Done,” he told her. “Mafia book.” Zed put the book into her satchel, a heavy, green sack with a shoulder strap. Hammer watched her, his stubby grey hair matching his pressed shirt.

“Mafia,” Zed confirmed. Speaking as little as possible became a habit when talking to Hammer.

“Mystery,” he shrugged. He rubbed his nose and looked at her. “Good kid.” He leaned forward and indicated with one finger that she should do likewise. “Afternoon,” he said softly. “The power.” He drew a finger across his throat.

Then he leaned back with the start of a smile. “Info,” he nodded. “Two books.”

She held up one finger.

He shook his head.

“So the power’s off overnight?”

“Maybe.”

“Off overnight, two, if it lasts until dark, one.”

Hammer grunted, agreeing. His gaze drifted past her and Zed turned to see the first of the can-men coming into the lobby, ready for the day’s search for all things metal.

“Out,” Hammer barked at Zed, but she was already gone.

Zed had slipped through a dusty-grey steel door and now stood at one of the junctions of the inter-hallways. These hallways, snaking in and around the main floor, were the alternate highways connecting the elevators with the outside, the storage rooms to the water tanks, and the garbage bins to the parking garages.

She stood, extending her senses. She absorbed the plinks of warming metal doors and the stench of dried piss and vomit. Where to head first? She felt the hairs on her cheek catch a puff of air and the smell of sour bile and turned cheese caught in her nostrils. Someone was in the

garbage bins and she wanted to see who.

One of the prebuilt luxuries of the Tower was the garbage chute system: four hatches for each floor into which bags of garbage disappeared. But like any magic trick, there was a functional underbelly: four industrial garbage bins sitting in a square on ground level under four matching holes in the concrete ceiling. Every few seconds, like expectant subway tunnels, a deep rattling would grow from one of the openings. This indicated that a bounding, hurling, and hopefully-bagged mass of garbage was approaching. After a loud metallic twang, a high-spinning, high-speed sack of previous personal property would arrive. Of course, not all bags or all trajectories are equal. The occasional bag of garbage exploding right out of the hole like a shrapnel grenade just added to the excitement, not to mention the smell.

Zed's nose, when she stood on tiptoe, only just reached the lip of the bins. Who'd be digging this early? "Dan?" Was that a rattle she heard in the back bins?

"Dan!" Nothing but another series of rattles.

"*Rat!*" she finally bellowed. A brown head popped up from the farthest bin.

"Damn it, girl," he said. "Don't you know not to bother me at work? I tell you, I have had about fucking enough...." But whatever he had enough of was silenced as a bag of garbage flew out from above, clipping him on the head. He and the garbage dropped from view.

Zed waited. She assumed he'd recover from the "freefaller," the silent but deadly bag of garbage and the main hazard to dumpster diving. Zed wasn't in a rescuing mood.

She heard a low moan and a rustling sound. Then silence. Then more rustling. "Get up, you cabbage-fucker!" she told the back dumpsters. "Hump the hampers later. I've got things to do."

A hand shot triumphantly into the air holding a piece of metal. "Fork," a rasping voice declared. Rat's body followed his arm upright and he hoisted a burlap sack onto his shoulder.

"Hup!" Rat called as he somersaulted into the next bin. With a

swimming slither he poked his head over the edge, pushing the fork into Zed's face. "Fucking treasure from fucking heaven." They both considered the treasure with its two bent tines. "Spoons oftener," Rat added, "but forks better."

"So what ya got?" Zed looked up at a face grimed so brown it was like poured gravy. Rat's beard and hair were a mare's nest of rotting garbage, bits of recent meals and wandering maggots.

"Fork!" Rat smiled his black stumps.

"Know that, what else ya got, Dan?"

"I like that, when you call me Dan, not Rat like them others. Fuckers. Treat me like an animal, like some fucking animal!" His spittle flew in all directions, some hitting Zed on the forehead. She decided not to wipe it off just then.

"Just like yesterday," Rat declared. "I'm out in the morning scrounging a new dump from some townie car in that lot across the street, like there's no garbage pickup for the fucking townies, and there's a newbie who didn't know who's King Rat on this pile." Rat nodded slowly and pointed to his chest so Zed would not misunderstand to whom he was referring. "So I'm showing this newbie the way of the world and all, and just as I'm administering a final ear bite, for good measure you know, cuz you can't really get at their ears till they're already down, and what do I see? A fucking gawk shop from a townie doing a drive-by with the kiddies. Those little porkers, faces up at the window like I'm a wildlife fucking safari. I tell you, those townies, those fucking, fucking townies...." Rat's eyes were bulging and his words choked into a growl.

"Ain't I a human being?" Zed nodded. "Ain't I a stand up citizen? Do I drink in the morning? Am I some sex nutter, a panter, or some kind of druggie?" He pointed his fork at Zed. "Am I?"

"You don't shoot up?" Rat was well-known for his periodic heroin abuse, putting heroic quantities into his veins. Strangely, all it seemed to do was make Rat more ... well, more Rat.

"Well, a bit of horse now and then, what's that?"

"And grass?"

“Well, who doesn’t take a puff now and then, end of a hard day?” He stared at Zed, the whites of his eyes standing stark against the rest of his face.

“A real stand-up,” she assured him. “So what you got, eh?”

Rat blinked a few times, scratched his head; a maggot fell out. “Picked it up this morning....” He rummaged through his bag, then held out a toaster oven, dented and doorless.

Zed looked it over. “Got a door?”

He searched the bag further, pulled one out, and handed it over. “What you got today?”

Zed gave him a coy glance. “Cookies.”

“Cookies! Fresh cookies!” Rat bounced up and down, singing the word “cookies.” “How many you got?” he asked, thrusting his face towards her.

As intimidating as it was having Rat thrust himself upon you, Zed didn’t get to be Zed by being pushed around. “Six.”

“Six, just six.” It came out as a whine. “That’s not enough. Ten or no toaster.”

“Seven and you throw in the fork.”

“I thought you only had six, you fucker!” Rat yelled. Zed raised an eyebrow and turned to go.

“I’m sorry,” he cringed. “I’m sorry.” His eyes flicked from side to side before settling on her. “Nine.”

“Eight, or I’m outta here.”

Rat handed over the fork, and Zed eased two wrapped waxpaper packages out of her bag and handed them to Rat. Rat danced off into the underground parkade singing his cookie song. Zed kept her hand on the satchel, covering the other four individually wrapped cookies until he had gone.

With the toaster under one arm and the fork and door stowed in the satchel, the next stop was Gears’, the local fixer, builder, and all-around gearhead of the building. At this time of day he was most likely at his workshop in the sub-parkade. Walking down the short corridor

to outside, Zed walked around to the main entrance. She passed two human bottom feeders fighting over the cat carcass, entered the lobby, gave Hammer's eyes peering from the cement slit a wave, and then into the stairwell. This particular stairwell was the living and hiding place of Eric, one of the building's "panthers." Eric was the least restrained of the panthers and attacked anyone or anything smaller than himself, trying for a poke. Zed was reasonably sure that he was out this morning. Reasonably. Still, beyond the knife in her pocket, the pin hidden round her ear, the steel in her boots, and the spiked kneepads, Zed had her defences.

Descending a level, Zed walked across the parking lot dotted with abandoned vehicles, flat tires, and cracked glass. She walked up to a large sliding door marked B-1 and gave three sharp raps.

When the door opened, the first thing that spilled out was the musical scream of a husky alto, accompanied by guitar and bass. The second was a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke and then came Gears, with dilated eyes and a smile from Alpha Centari. Gears was a massive man, six-foot-four with long, blond Nordic hair and an upper body to match. He waved her in, then disappeared through the curtain of car bumpers, swaying gently above car batteries, copper tubing, and any and all assorted pieces of metal. The woman's voice shrunk from shriek to sub-vocal. Gears reappeared.

"Listening to *Ferron*: Now that lady, she knows where the wild is at." He looked down at Zed through one eye and gave her the peace sign. "But I guess the question is," he tilted his head, "where are you at?"

Zed held up the toaster and door.

"Aha. You wish that the blind could see and the lame could walk. I know about that, I. When I was in California, I was at this 'school'" – Gears' hands made air quotations – "for helping those behind get ahead, teaching to empower, but I tell you..."

Zed let her eyes drift. Whenever Gears went off into one of his stories, it was best to find something else to do until it came to its conclusion. She examined the stack of hubcaps next to her. Gears had quite a

few and Rat found some too, but Zed never traded for them. She could never think of their practical use.

“...so I asked him, are we teaching to succeed or teaching to fail and that’s when we both decided it was time for me to look at new opportunities. So I hear you.” Gears took the toaster and the door. Zed took out a hand-rolled paper and gave it to him. “The requisite offering, beautiful,” Gears said, taking the joint and putting it on a workbench. “Tomorrow, all ready.” He turned and disappeared behind the curtain of bumpers. Zed let herself out.

NEXT STOP, COUNTESSA.

For Martin Luther King it was Mobile, Alabama; Calcutta had Mother Teresa, and in the Tower there was Countessa. Countessa gained followers not by her morality, but rather by this simple formula: where people are poor and desperate, those who give hope become important. And Countessa sold hope: personalized, divided into half-hour segments, and mixed with a little old-fashioned listening. Countessa was old school, sometimes very old school. She did palms and dreams, runes and divinations, astrology, the cards, tea leaves, and white magic. If you wanted to see the future, the dead, or the unspoken past, and were willing to pay the price, you went to Countessa.

Zed stopped in the gloom outside the glass bead curtain which served Countessa for a door. In the same way no one had seen Countessa’s original door, no one had ever seen the lights around Countessa’s doorway shine. Zed smiled. Those who sell secrets are in the business to buy information, and Zed was in the mood to sell.

“Come in, little friend.” Countessa’s rich contralto cut through Zed’s thoughts.

As Zed pushed the beads aside and groped for the chair in the single candlelight, she dearly wished she knew how Countessa always figured out it was her.

“Powerful visions,” Countessa told her, “visions of you down with the animals, covered in rats.”

“Yeah, I’ve been to see Rat, but I think that vision might have come off the security cam or maybe smelling some of the Rat’s stench still on me.”

“There are many kinds of visions,” Countessa conceded. “Yet you have something for me.”

“Another pigeon,” Zed joked about the one she had supplied, no questions asked, last year.

Countessa didn’t respond to jokes. Her hands, the only part of her seen by anyone, sat in the light, folded on the table.

“All right, I’m selling info, but straight pure dope,” Zed told her. “Price, ten candles.”

“Candles, girl? What use are candles but lights in the darkness?”

Zed’s heart sank; perhaps she had nothing to trade after all. But Zed didn’t scrape a living by giving freebies or folding up and blowing away. She could bluff with the best.

After a minute Countessa asked, “Individual or collective, specific or general?”

Well, Zed definitely wasn’t going to answer those questions. “If you can use the info, then give me the ten. Use it once and it’s five. Anything else and it’s on the house. You call it, no?”

Countessa’s hands withdrew into the darkness, leaving Zed staring at the candle’s flame. She calculated how much she could make if she ever got a look at the Countessa’s face, or better yet, learned her history. But that was all info pipe dreams. The next time she looked at the table, Countessa’s hands were back with ten stubby candles lined up.

“Power outage this afternoon. Last till dark, minimum.”

“Mmm ... candles indeed.” There was a soft chuckle. “I should have read the bones, but never mind.” Her rings glittered as Countessa pushed all ten candles across the table.

Zed packed them away with a smile. Nothing is as fun as winning.

“Be wary, little one,” the Countessa said suddenly. “I do see things,

and for you I see a long road. Be wary of your enemies and friends both.”

Zed packed the last candle away, then looked up grinning. “What? Friends, enemies? I’m a free trader. I got neither.”

Countessa pulled her hands back into the darkness. “Never mind then, I say only what I see. Water’s at the door. And tell Jenny to come in.”

Zed shook her head, rose and went to the door. Stooping, she picked up a gallon jug of water with each hand.

“Later,” she told Countessa and then she was gone, leaving only the tinkling of the glass beads in her wake.

JENNY, A POCK-FACED WOMAN with nibbled ears and a bobbing parakeet on her shoulder, waited in the hall.

“In.” Zed hooked her thumb toward the door. “She told me.”

Jenny’s face lit up. “She always knows.”

“Yeah, yeah, she always knows.”

Zed worked up the stairs to the 7th floor, set the containers down in front of 712, and knocked.

A tiny, grey-haired sprite of a woman opened the door. “Hello? Hello? Who’s come a-knocking on my door?” Her Welsh-Irish singsong died out as she spotted Zed. “Ah! It’s my ray a’ sunshine come, and look at all that water you’ve been carrying.

“Ach!” Ivy threw up her hands. “And where are my manners? Come in, come in, and bring all that lovely water with you, why don’t ya. We’ll have a cuppa. Not that I mind a little carrying, but with my water gone and my bones all aching...”

Zed put the two gallons of water on the kitchen counter. Ivy grabbed the bottles as she bustled around the kitchen making tea.

“Been seeing that Professor fellow today?” Ivy asked. Zed shook her head. Ivy laughed. “I wore on him yesterday, let me tell you. Aye, down

in the mail room I was, looking through my good little mail slot when that tall rod of a man, him reading all the time, mind, comes round the corner, calm as you please and walks right on top of me. Well what do you think a' that? Not a word he said, not a word a-tall.

"I told him then. Up his eye I looks, 'An egghead you are, to be sure, but you've got no sense. No sense!'" Ivy gave a laugh. "I rounded him off, him and his book. I tells him, 'You may have your learning, but I'll tell you what I learned, me with no mother or father, is to treat people right.'" Ivy shook her head and gave another laugh. "But him, I respect him, mind, I do, he got smarts. But that poor Valerie, with her cat smashed up like the fine china and her already a bit twp." Ivy tapped her forehead with a forefinger.

"I've seen it before," she told Zed. "I can tell by that look in the eye. In my day, back in the valleys, used to see it growing in the women, them whose husbands never came out of the mines. One lass, a friend 'o mine, she was, and her husband, they were all set to move down to the city, work in the town like, when the news came he'd been killed in the mines. O' that knocked that on its head, to be sure, gone doolally within a week she had. Sad, that."

The water whistled and Ivy went, making the tea: a bit of water in the pot, a vigorous swill, then out it goes with good boiling water to replace it. "Here, have a cuppa and some Welsh cakes. Cuppa never hurt no one." Ivy poured and they sat drinking their tea.

"So where are you off to?" Ivy asked.

"Luc."

"Luc." Ivy threw up her hands. "O' Luc, o' that Luc, he's a sly one, mind, him with his suit and glances and the things he's done round here, the books I could write on him, I tell you." Ivy pointed a finger at Zed. "You keep shy of that one, but if you do deal with him, put it to him like he was one of the city folk, or he'll be all over you, him being so slick."

Ivy laughed at herself. "O' I'm a bad one, talking up a man like that behind him so."

Zed had finished her tea and Welsh cakes. The deal done, she stood to go.

“Up, down, up, down, you’re like one of them Mexican jumping beans.” Ivy laughed while she wrapped up Welsh cakes in wax paper. “Take these, take these.” She pushed them at Zed.

As Zed packed them away, Ivy’s hand touched her cheek. “Aye, you’re all right, you’re all right.”

For no reason Zed could think of, certainly for no *good* reason, she found herself holding out two of her candles to Ivy. “Keep these close.”

“What’s this?” Ivy studied the candles. “What’s this? What do you be knowing?”

Zed didn’t respond, simply put the candles in Ivy’s palm and slipped out.

Next stop: Luc’s. His corner office was on the eleventh floor, right in the middle of the building or, as he put it, “where heaven and hell meet.”

At the eighth floor she paused, the light tripping of footsteps on the stairs above making her look up. Soon, the sandy-haired, flushed baby face of the Father appeared, framed by his friendly red sweater and black slacks. “Jesus, Joseph, and Mary!” he cried out in an unfamiliar tone as he looked down at her. “What’s with the wee ones? Never in Mass and never at service, tsk!” He bounded down the stairs to join her.

“Lo, Father. Something wrong with your throat?”

“No, nothing is wrong with my throat, thank you very much.” He gave her a puppy-dog look. “I will take that as a fervent rejection of my attempts at being Irish.”

“You sound all normal now, Father.”

“Yes, and may I remind you for the three millionth and last time that I am not a Catholic. I am a Methodist with a slant towards self-determinist interdenominationalism. So again, not a priest, not a Father. Why don’t you just try calling me Gary.”

Zed looked at the Father’s face; late thirties but still with youthful

exuberance. Why couldn't he understand that here, names were who you are, not who you wanted to be?

"Where ya going, Father?"

"Zed, I thought I just explained. Hey, Zed, how would you like it if I called you ... Chris, for example?"

"No. I'm Zed."

"Yes, but I could call you Chris, couldn't I?"

"But I'm Zed."

The Father looked at Zed's determined face and sighed, "Yes, you're Zed and I'm ... whatever."

"Father," Zed reminded him.

"Father," he agreed.

"Who ya seeing today?" Zed asked again because for some inexplicable reason the Father gave away info for free.

He cocked his head and regarded her before speaking. "Burl, Sandi, and Valerie."

Zed thought a moment, "Drink, drugs, and depression."

"Recovering alcoholic, glue addiction, and ... depression," Father corrected.

"I got info for trade," she told him.

"What's it get me?"

"Time. Effort."

"Okay," Father agreed. "I'll owe you one, what is it?"

"You owe me six already!"

"Hey, I'm good for it. Didn't I get those books for you?"

"Yeah, *Christian books*, which don't trade."

"Seven all right? I owe you seven, so tell me already."

"Burl didn't cash his welfare check till day before yesterday."

"Wonderful, wonderful. He made it three days!" Father's face lit with triumph. "Drunk now?"

"Singing!" she assured him.

Father frowned as he did the calculations. "I think maybe tomorrow morn will incline his heart to repentance." He gave Zed a wink. "I feel

strong about Burl; he's going to beat it. Soon, soon he'll pass that corner and have it beat."

Zed gave a one-shoulder shrug. "Yeah, whatever." She edged past him on the stairwell.

"Off to Sandi then," Father told her. "Stay clean, stay safe, and keep to the right, my child. It always pays in the end."

"What does it pay?" Zed asked.

"Oh no," said the Father, shaking a finger at Zed as he started off down the stairs. "I'm not falling for that one again." His feet pitter-pattered downward. "I owe you." He called back up.

"I know!" She yelled down the stairwell, "Seven!" There was no response. Zed sighed. Typical.

LUC'S OFFICE WAS ON THE building's front right corner, the door guarded by Luc's two henchmen: Stu and Barry. Zed pushed her way through the crowd of the stoned, the waiting, and the bored in order to reach the door.

"Hey, Barry," she called, taking the mystery paperback from her satchel. "Wanna book?"

Barry turned and inspired in Zed's mind the word he inspired in all who looked upon him: crooked. It wasn't just the one shoulder higher than the other, nor was it the strangely bent nose or the leaning teeth of his leery smile. No, there was something more, or perhaps less, about him which said that there was more muskrat to Barry than just his wispy moustache. He reached out and plucked Hammer's cast-off book from Zed.

Barry's fingers rubbed the book up and down while he fixed his eyes on Zed. "Used," he told her finally, "piece of crap, one cigarette."

"Okay." Barry smiled, whistling in and out between his teeth as he handed her the cig. She tucked it behind her ear and strolled past him to see Luc.

Luc was leaning back at his desk, listening to Steve, one of the Tower's many heroin addicts. "Just a little smack, man, anything," Steve pleaded, his hands twining around each other like coiled snakes.

Luc gave him a beautiful white smile, opening his large hands in compassion. "You know I would do anything for a gentleman such as yourself, but I have" – he touched his white Panama hat – "what shall we call them ... overheads. My friend, you have to work with me. What have you got, CDs, DVDs, cigs, a TV, what?"

Steve was almost crying, his ravaged cheeks twitching. "Man, I got nothing, all six of us just got a mattress, I got nothing."

"Then it looks like we are at an impasse, my friend."

"A what?"

"Well, as you have nothing to offer..." Luc drifted off and looked at the junkie writhing on the chair with a smile. "But," he said slowly, "if you were willing to be a bit beholden, I might be able to help you."

Steve leaned toward Luc eagerly. "All right, man! What's the stuff, where do I get it? You want me to do a pick-up, right? That the deal?"

"Um, no. Let me spell it out to you. I have decided, for no reason whatsoever, to give you some of my product. Not because I like you, not because I owe you, and not because I care. That okay with you?"

"For nothing?" Steve looked at Luc and then around the room. "You're going to give me some H for nothing?"

Luc just gave him the beatific smile.

Zed looked at Steve, who was so close to losing it he didn't know if he was up or down. She remembered when Steve moved in three months ago. He had looked a lot younger then. Sometimes he'd play his guitar in the lobby. He'd given her a Megadeth t-shirt. It was a good t-shirt.

"Give me some H," Zed said, pulling the cigarette from behind her ear and two packs more from her satchel.

Luc looked over at her, surprised. His eyes crinkled, and Zed couldn't tell if he was amused or annoyed. "Of course."

He swept the cigarettes off the table and pulled out a small bag of white powder. He looked at the bag and at Zed, put it back and took

out a slightly larger bag of powder and pushed it across the desk. Zed pushed it in front of Steve. "Take it and get out."

Steve looked from the bag to Luc and back. He reached out for the bag. "Sorry, man."

"Come back anytime," Luc told him with sincere warmth. Steve fled through the door.

"Get over here." Luc nodded at a chair beside him.

Zed sat down.

"You queered my deal," he said sternly. "In front of me." He repeated it: "In front of me."

"Old debts," Zed said.

Luc leaned back in his leather chair, smoothed the front of his silk shirt, and cocked an eyebrow at Zed. "What are you here for?"

"I need a joint."

Luc clucked his tongue. "So young, so many habits."

Stu cleared his throat. They both looked to the door. "Boss, Howard is here to make an appointment."

"My child, do you mind?" Luc asked her. "It's not as if I have anything to hide, but some of my clients find it ... discomfiting to have a young female listening to their sexual arrangements." He frowned, thinking. "On the other hand, a few might find it quite stimulating." He fished a card out of the desk. "Hmm, Howard ... definitely discomfiting. Off you go then."

Zed rolled her eyes and hopped out of the chair. Outside the door, Howard, an overweight middle-aged man from the 9th floor, was nervously wiping his glasses. She pointed with her thumb. "In."

He scurried by, smelling of sweat and onions.

"Hey, that's my job," Stu protested, before going back to combing his blond hair.

Zed amused herself by watching Barry trying to sell the mystery paperback to one of the potheads in the hall.

"How much is it?" asked the pothead holding the book in his hand.

"Six cigs," said Barry. Then, as the pothead looked up, "No, I meant

ten, yeah, ten.” He looked into the pothead’s face, which was losing interest. “No, no, eight, yeah, eight.” His eyes twitched and danced.

“Fuck, Barry, make up your mind.”

“Eight, yeah, eight.”

The pothead slowly shook his head and handed it back, then turned and slouched forward to his group.

“You want it, it’s five,” Barry shouted, blinking and twitching.

“Hey, Barry, what time is it?” Zed called out. She loved doing this.

Barry abandoned the pothead and squinted at her. “Why do you want to know?”

“What time is it?”

“How much will you pay, three cigs, what?”

Zed laughed. Barry didn’t even have a watch.

The door opened and Zed heard Luc say, “She will be with you tomorrow at two o’clock, friend,” as Howard left.

Zed re-entered.

Luc was putting a thin stack of bills into his desk drawer. “Stu!”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Please go chat up Mr. Andrews on the 13th. His payment is delayed.”

Stu smiled. “Sure thing, Boss.”

Zed was looking at the drawer closing on the money. “What do you do with all the money?” she asked.

Luc looked at her askance. “Now that, my darling, is a truly rude question.”

Zed waited with an equally rude expression on her face.

Luc gave a little shrug. “Truth? It just disappears.”

Zed kept waiting.

Luc held up his hands. “No, it is the truth, a little here, a little there, a little missionary work like Steve, and soon enough, it is all gone. But,” he held up a finger and took a noble pose, “I do not do this for the money, not old Luc. I do it for the same reason I live up here, cuz I love the people.”

“Like the Father does?”

Luc shook his head. “Ah ... no, not exactly the same. See, I love the people just as they are, not like old high and mighty. He never really seems happy, does he? Always working against what people are. Me, I’m happy. You’re happy. Everybody’s happy.”

“Cept Val,” Zed reminded. “Father’s visiting her.”

Luc perked up. “Going round to see Valerie, eh?”

“Shit!” Zed kicked herself for letting it slip out. “So what’s that info worth to you?”

“Sorry,” Luc grinned. “If it’s laid, it’s played. Val and Father ... that could change things.” He stood and went to the wall and pulled on two handles hanging near the ceiling. Two blackboards dropped down, one filled with a checkerboard pattern and the other with columns.

“What’s that?”

“That, my little pixie?” Luc answered distantly as he moved about adjusting the numbers in the columns. “The current tote on dear Valerie. To the left,” he waved at the checkerboard, “the pool on her, and here,” he ran a finger across the columns, “the odds on means and method.”

“Means and methods of what?”

“Why, her suicide, dear one, her imminent suicide. Poor Valerie.” He looked down in sombre reflection. “Never a very well person,” he said, tapping his head with his forefinger at the word “well.” “Seems that most days her life just isn’t worth living and now, on top of it all ... the loss of poor kitty.” He pulled a sad face. “She just can’t cope with the world anymore. Time to unite with old fluffy.”

“You sure?”

“Oh, yes.” He bared his straight razor teeth. “Oh, yes.”

“When?”

“Don’t know, child,” Luc said. “That’s why it’s called gambling.” He laughed. “I’m betting heavily on tonight. But not if the good Father changes that. I really must have a chat with him.”

“No!” Zed cried. “Not a beating.”

“My child, I am speaking literally. I just want to talk.” He panto-

mimed talking with his hands, then frowned at her. “My, you sure are flighty, what’s wired you up?” He considered her. “Speed? Doubtful. Sugar? Perhaps. Caffeine? Almost certainly.” He pointed a finger at her. “You’ve just come from that Welsh woman.”

“You’re not as impressive as Countessa.”

Luc sniffed as if responding was beneath him. “So, am I a drop-in centre now? Lay a bet, do business, or be gone.”

“A joint?”

“Clean forgot.” He rolled the boards back up and sat down at his desk. He took a single joint from a drawer and placed it on the table. “What do you have today?”

“Info, worth more than that,” she nodded toward the joint. “Worth two and a sawbuck.”

“Sawbuck? A sawbuck? Since when are you calling twenties a sawbuck?”

Zed shrugged. “BB called it that. So, you in or out?”

“Neither. Why don’t you just tell me and I’ll pay you what it’s worth.”

Zed smiled.

“Fine, in. But one joint and a five, or ‘fin’ if you want to persist in slang.”

Zed mouthed ‘fin’ a few times. “Naw, but how’s this, two joints and I tell you the ‘what,’ then we deal for the when, how, and why.”

Luc sighed. “Fine.”

Zed coughed and extended a hand.

Luc opened the desk, added another joint to the one on the top, and pushed them over. “A little trust would be nice.”

They both laughed.

“Power outage, whole building,” Zed said.

Luc sat up even straighter. “When?”

“Thirty bucks.”

“I thought it was twenty?”

“That was the package deal,” Zed told him. “Separate it and it’s more.”

“Figures.” Luc pulled out a roll and peeled off a twenty and a ten.

“This afternoon, maybe all night. Hammer knows.”

Luc smiled. “Thank you, my dear, cheap at twice the price.” Zed muttered a curse while Luc sang out, “Barry!”

Barry shambled in.

“Barry, find the Father, keep him distracted until the lights go out, then help him lose his way.”

“The lights?”

“Just do it.”

Barry shrugged, and after a glare at Zed, slid off down the hall.

Luc opened a drawer and removed a stack of bills, then rose from the chair and went to the rack by the door to put on his steel-blue silk jacket. “I’m kicking you out,” he told Zed. “I have to go speak to the power man. By the by,” he told Zed, “if you want to see the show, be here by six o’clock. The matinee: Valerie crying; main feature: the final act!”

Zed nodded, picked up her joints, and traipsed off.