

YOUR OWN FATE

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YOUR OWN FATE

BY

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Midnight Fire Media

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CHAPTER ONE

SIX DAYS IN THE CITY OF ANGELS

Hot bitter air. The city's sour scent of exhaust and dust. For a moment he covered his mouth and nose, before he once again realized it was no use.

They had waited the entire day and started growing impatient. Eyes locked on to the worn-down building began swelling in the light from the setting Sun. It had been early morning when they had crawled through the sewer to their present position, a leftover, unused pipe, where it seemed to them, incredibly enough, as if it smelled even worse than the path they had taken below the ground.

– He isn't coming, said the man staring exasperated through the binoculars.

– He hasn't shown up *yet*, that's for sure, the other man said, visibly frustrated. – We have people on all sides. The old plans show that the sewer does not pass under the building. If he's using subterranean access he must have used a lot of time and resources at extending the stinking shit, and additionally paid off several public servants.

– He *does* have major resources at his command, the woman, Lieutenant Janet Caldwell, pointed out eagerly, grudgingly. – Whether he shows up or not, there's abnormally high activity inside. If we can't get the big fish we'll be able to put major dents in his operation.

There was a minor break, virtually a vacuum. All three of them looked at the fourth person present, a man in modest, close to worn clothing. He seemed relaxed, and if they didn't know better, they would have believed he was bored.

– He will be here, he said dryly. They wondered once again, over the language, the accent and strange depths. – He doesn't hide. He never does.

– The way you talk it sounds like you believe he would have come even if he had known we were here, Caldwell said, unable to hide her irritation.

– He isn't that crazy, the other one replied wondering. – But he would have made his presence known, in some way or another.

She was about to give an angry reply when the man with the binoculars grabbed her shoulder.

– A car is approaching, he said with audible excitement in his voice. – It's just the driver inside. I think it is him.

– It is him.

That was the man with worn clothes again. They realized, astounded that they didn't doubt his words.

– In an open car, the man with the binoculars cried incredulous, almost too loud. – By damn, who does he think he is?

Zahn didn't need binoculars. He didn't even have to open his eyes to see the demonic smile of the man behind the wheel. Suddenly he had trouble breathing. During the three years he had rarely been any closer than this.

– I saw your mother today.

It had started like that, an innocent, casual remark. *Do you know what? I saw your mother today.* There had been blue skies that day. No dark clouds. Not the slightest signs of any. But then someone had snapped their fingers and his life had fallen apart. He started sweating. It had been white hot all day, but he hadn't been sweating, not a drop. He had always been able to take heat well. Always.

The driver stopped the car softly and supremely relaxed. He left the car without closing the door and without a worry in the world he walked off. They saw the dark storage facilities devour him. In spite of this, he seemed to crouch above it, like a giant.

I've got you now. You won't get away this time.

– Give the signal. Don't just sit there, damn it. HURRY UP

Nobody voiced a protest. They didn't dare. He suddenly looked quite insane.

I can see and feel him, and know he can see and feel me...

Hot bitter air. The city's sweet scent of exhaust and dust. Howling sirens. Long lines of patrol cars. Red and blue blinking lights. Heavily armed and well-armed figures dressed in blue flowed out of reinforced vehicles. It didn't take many minutes until the entire area, the very air itself seemed to be filled with red and blue lights, and sirens. An impressive display of what the city's official and semi-official police force could muster, a major display of power. The men and women looked uncertain at each other. They had expected heavy fire. Even armor-penetrating rockets hadn't been excluded during the pre-operational briefing. Everybody had been offered extra bonuses and the chance of pulling out, something that was close to unprecedented. Timothy Joyce had, during the time he had spent in Los Angeles made quite an impression on the city's governing elite. In fact they had been so shaken that everybody from higher to lower circles of influence had joined forces to take him out.

Patrol cars surrounded the deserted factory area in two tight circles. A not inconsiderable number of uniformed people accessed the sewers. Choppers covered the air from a safe distance, but ready to move. Perhaps there had been larger united operations in LAPD history, but it wasn't very likely.

– I want to be among the first inside, Jeremy Zahn said intensively, speaking his characteristic London dialect, with a voice, a behavior bordering on hysteria.

The international accent almost disappeared. He was already inside the walls, in the midst of the smoke, bullets and blood, like he had been for a long time. The sounds and sights and scents of past, present and future battles tore at his senses.

– That won't happen, Captain Lasko sniffed. – Forget it, pal! We're responsible for your safety. There will be tons of paperwork to take care of if you should croak.

And you don't want anyone else to take the credit, «pal». Zahn held back the sarcastic, hateful charge.

They stood on what was seen as a safe distance away. Zahn wasn't so sure about that, but it didn't really matter.

A six-door car with dark windows rolled up to them, close to silent, at least compared to the noise coming from the surroundings. Police Chief Arnold Springsteen enjoyed luxury.

He opened the door himself, and departed from the car, an impressive figure, with a powerful build, towering over everybody. The growing potbelly was the only thing diminishing the general impression.

– Everything's set here, sir, Lasko reported respectfully. – We've kept the building under constant surveillance and no one, I repeat, no one has left. Not a fly, not a goddamn microbe. To keep an eye on the place through a microscope is just about the only thing we haven't done, sir. Joyce - and his gang - is still in there. We've got them right where we want them, sir.

– I want to join the first line of attackers, sir, Zahn almost shouted.

– That's out of the...

– Oh, let him do it, Captain. Springsteen stopped the Captain's angry exclamation with an indifferent gesture. – He has followed his prey for three long years, all over the globe. He's entitled. There's no lack of people to do the paperwork, if necessary.

Zahn ignored them. He had already started dressing up in the protective gear and choosing weapons. One could say one thing about the LAPD: they had no lack of ordnance. All claims that the United States' police force was short on people and suffered from a supply shortage were

obviously based on misinformation. The British policeman felt he could pick and choose. He had always been interested in weapons and could hardly contain his excitement. He limited himself to an upgraded M-16A2, with an M-305 rocket launcher, and also grabbed a Magnum 44' automatic... still among the best assault weapons available.

He was led through the many blockades, to the frontline. The coal black humor was evident in every look he met. The common policemen looked at him with scornful, cruel eyes. He was perceived, right or wrong, as one of the brass, and one of the brass wasn't stupid enough to join the cannon fodder. Zahn was surprised how integrated the hierarchy was everywhere. All the places he had visited on his hunt for Timothy Joyce. The entire world.

Sergeant Flynn met him with a sharp, but not hostile look.

– I've been told you only have observer status, he said, very direct, – but I will ask you anyway: How do you wanna do this?

– Head on, Zahn said with a rough voice. – Crush everybody in our way. I prefer that Joyce is captured alive, but the creeps worshipping him you may take out at will.

– A man after my heart. Flynn bowed. The others laughed good-humored and viciously – My thoughts exactly. Incidentally, that's also my orders.

– *The dance begins.* They heard Lasko's voice through the radio. Shortly after that they also heard it through the giant speakers: – TIMOTHY JOYCE, YOU'RE UNDER ARREST. YOU AND YOUR ACCOMPLISHES HAVE ONE MINUTE TO LEAVE THE BUILDING WITH YOUR HANDS ABOVE YOUR HEAD. ANY FAILURE TO OBEY THAT COMMAND WILL BE SEEN AS AN AGGRESSIVE ACT AGAINST US.

There was no answer, none whatsoever. Lasko glanced at his watch. He did so several times. Someone fairly close by giggled. Lasko glared to all sides in an attempt to catch the potentially unfortunate officer.

It turned quiet. As quiet as it could be in a major city. The deadline passed without any noticeable reaction from those inside the building.

Then Lasko gave the signal, the go-ahead, and in the next fifty minutes it was impossible to have a conversation in close proximity to the storm's eye.

The police fired rockets and bullets from all sides, and after the hail of bullets and explosions followed a barrage of attackers, charging forward like ants attacking a hostile hill.

Zahn's right side hit the wall. He made it just in time, before the bullets started flying from the inside. The rain hit several patrolmen. Grenades

fired by those defending the fortress blew up even more. Satan! He had told Springsteen and the entire hierarchy repeatedly the last twenty-four hours to bring in units from the army, all the SWAT-teams, Special Forces, anything available, told them that to fight Timothy Joyce could be compared to that of challenging a small army. He was no ordinary crook... or drug lord, but something far more dangerous. Zahn still didn't know what he was or what made the man tick, even after three years. Zahn wanted to. The admission came easily, like a guilty pleasure. He knew he understood Timothy Joyce better than any other human being, but it wasn't enough. He had studied the man in detail, all accessible material, but it wasn't enough.

Understanding shouldn't be a problem. Such men were hardly difficult to understand. But Joyce was. And Zahn worried. And that, in turn worried him more.

He fired one of the grenades in the launcher. The moment the explosion rocked the enemy stronghold inside he threw himself forward. The attackers charged into the building from all sides. Zahn shot a woman stumbling from behind a ruined cover. Several of her comrades in arms returned the fire or attempted to take cover. They were mowed down. The bloodthirsty excitement he had learned to know the last three years rose in him. Up to this point it had been fleeting, passing every time he had believed he had the prey in his net, before it had once more slipped away. But this time... Tonight even Timothy Joyce fought an overwhelming, superior force. His servants could be as loyal and well armed as humanly possible, but they couldn't number more than one tenth of the well-prepared attack force. One saw it clearly. They fought with a fanatical zeal Zahn never would understand, but they fought with their backs to the wall. It was a bloodbath. Policemen and women died left and right, front, center and behind. Zahn had prepared for it. It was inevitable. But it was worth it. Joyce had to be stopped.

Stopped!

An officer was hit and pushed Zahn with him when he fell. The large body rested on him and pushed him down. He pushed it off without exerting himself. A man fired at him, but missed, and hit a person further behind. Zahn killed him with one single shot in the head.

– You shoot damn well, the sergeant cried in acknowledgement, in a brief break behind a cover.

He ignored the sergeant. He knew how good he was, how good he had been forced to become, to get this far, to this night, this moment, what would come soon, any time now. He tasted the expectation in his mouth, letting it linger a second or two longer.

It cracked loud everywhere, like an eternal rolling stereo thundering in his ears. Dulled explosions on the opposite side of the building. Sharp, blinding on this one. He wanted to be at the opposite side, too, wanted to be everywhere Timothy Joyce might be.

And that could be anywhere.

– Let’s get to the roof. I don’t want him to get near a chopper.

Flynn nodded eagerly and signaled his men.

Followed by Flynn and four more Zahn started up the stairs. They met surprisingly little resistance. The bloodbath continued below, in an inferno of fire and pain. Death cries rose with the smoke and the heated air. Zahn knew shots were being fired, but he didn’t hear them anymore. He left it behind, left that, too, behind.

A man appeared at the top of the stairs, and fired a lethal salvo. The rain of bullets hit Flynn and two others. Zahn leaned half outside the banister and fired as fast as he could at the indistinct figure. Lines of blood rose from the man’s back and neck, and the man vanished from sight. Zahn advanced further with a gun in each hand. The two cops still breathing hesitatingly followed him.

The man lay dead right by the stairs. Glassy eyes stared at the ceiling. Zahn saw no one else. Except for the three standing and the dead the big room was empty, totally robbed of furniture, robbed of everything. On the walls there were woven carpets. Genuine Turkish style, Zahn noted. The bare walls were dark wood. The room seemed very luxurious... if one disregarded the missing furniture. All the emptiness screamed to be filled... by something.

– What the fuck is this? One of the policemen exclaimed nonplussed.

– It isn’t shit, Zahn replied sharply. – Joyce is quite simply a raving lunatic. There is hardly any reason to what he’s doing. Not to well-adapted, normal people. He’s garbage, and should be treated thus.

Both nodded darkly. When one of them spoke it could just as well be the other. Zahn didn’t recall if it was he who had spoken earlier, and didn’t care.

– The way I see it even the worst punishment available is insufficient in his case.

Joyce and his army had indeed made quite an impact in LA and among members of the city’s proud police force.

On the opposite wall, about twenty steps ahead there were two closed doors, the only details interrupting the walls’ conformity. The two dressed in blue looked uncertain at each other.

– Let’s go, Zahn said in the commanding voice.

The voice of authority had spoken. They followed him and imitated his strolling, devil-may-care walk.

They reached the wall easily enough.

He is in there somewhere. I can feel him. His cruelty, his deep felt contempt for everything human.

Zahn signaled to the officer in front to open the closest door. A slight hesitation and the man in blue obeyed. It was just a closet. There was a man with a machinegun in it. He made Swiss cheese of the officer. The already dead body was thrown backwards. Zahn stood there with weight evenly split on his feet, and filled the man in the closet with lead.

– You're one cold son of a bitch, the surviving officer exclaimed.

Zahn shrugged. What did he care about the dead? The body behind them was just another victim, another scalp in Timothy Joyce' belt. The Englishman shook his head, more than a bit annoyed, and went right ahead and kicked open the other door. He jumped inside, rolled across the floor, jumped to his feet with his weapon ready to fire, everything in one, fluid move. Nobody else here, nobody but the last representative of the Los Angeles Police Department in his close proximity. This room was an exact replica of the previous... except for the single door on the opposite side.

The best tactic would probably have been for the two of them to close in on it from opposite sides, but Zahn was sick and tired of following the star of reason. The volcanic rage building second by second didn't allow any form of hesitation. Ten steps from the door he fired a murderous salvo, looking forward very much to hearing the scream of pain from inside. That was stupid. He should have known better, *known better, known better*

There was a sound of metal against metal, a symphony in lead and steel. The bullets ricocheted almost straight back, missed Zahn and hit the police officer several times. He fell on his knees first, before falling forward, as he slowly stopped breathing. Zahn stood there paralyzed.

– You Satan, he said in a low voice.

– You Satan, he repeated louder.

He charged forward and kicked at the door. It stood just as unmovable. Naturally. He writhed in pain, and managed just about to hold onto his weapons.

Two steps forward, close to the wall. He pushed down the handle and pushed open the metal plate. The door slid open. No trouble. A hail of bullets heated the air where he could have been standing... if he had been stupid enough. The bullets whined harmlessly through the other door, back through the previous chamber. He threw away the machinegun,

clutched the automag in both hands, threw himself around the corner, and fired an intense salvo at the gunman inside.

He hit a machinegun on a tripod, just as it fired again. The bullets hit the ceiling, the wall, the floor. The inanimate thing lay there, smoking and snarling.

The third chamber was exactly like the first two, except for it having no doors. There was one single opening, a further twenty steps away. Everything turned black. For a brief moment he imagined there was a huge poster on the other wall, saying

WELCOME

and he sensed the rage and the insanity driving him turn even more rooted. He pushed on.

The illusion faded. He circled into a dark hall with all senses, with his entire being charged and ready. A small, scornful voice he had so far ignored told him that Joyce, if he had wanted to, could have killed him a long time ago. The madman had certainly had sufficient opportunity. Zahn wrote it off as luck. And luck did not last. Fate, or the chain of coincidences giving the illusion of fate, could absolutely remain on your side for a while, but then - suddenly - every moment of luck returned to you, like a fist in the face. He shook his head, shook himself awake, ready and dangerous. He could be just as deadly as Joyce. He had to be. If he wasn't, he had to become so. The endgame was near. He sensed it in every neural pathway, every synapse inside.

A lit room waited at the end of the corridor, beyond a line of darkened, well-equipped offices. Just before he reached it there was a staircase leading further up. He chose the room first. It took time. Caution around every corner took time. Eventually he stood at the center of a room resembling an office. There was a desk and a chair slightly away from the wall, a TV and a DVD-player in a rack. A digital recorder four, close to five steps away from the desk. Joyce had a funny taste in decorations, but it was proven he had a funny taste for most things. He wasn't here either. Not physically. He was here.

Zahn heard noises from the floor above from a person who didn't bother being quiet or hiding. Zahn ran straight up the stairs, the taste of blood strong in his mouth. He had always thought it was an exaggerated, figurative way of speech, but now he did taste it, tasted it like hunger. He had chased his prey for three years. They had been near each other just a few times during that time, and Joyce had always had the advantage. This

time was different. The trap, the fox trap had snapped close, and the prey waited in pain to be picked up.

The noise, the death down below seemed like something distant, unimportant now.

Now, this was what he called an office. It seemed to rise up around him, instead of him rising up to it. Not so big as the halls he had rushed through on his way here, but spacious. Persian carpets wall to wall. Bookshelves filled with hardback books. Two luxurious desks, deep chairs, even elegant stools. Heavy curtains. For quite some time now, he had pointed his gun at the man behind one of the desks.

– Now, this is what I call an office, Timothy Joyce said. – Welcome, Jeremy. You took your time. Is your taste in offices truly so different from mine? Since you have used such a long time getting here, that you have only reluctantly come here, I mean? Perhaps you would've preferred staying below and admired the decorations there?

– You're under arrest, Zahn snarled. – One wrong move, and I'll shoot you like a dog.

The burning need to pull the trigger almost overwhelmed him, but he kept himself in check.

– I can assure you of one thing, Jeremy. Joyce kept his hands flat on the desk as he rose from the chair, and kept them still when he started moving around the room. – Whatever you are, you're no dog.

– The attack force will be here soon, Zahn spoke in a hateful voice, – I can assure you, you won't get away. A snowball in hell has better odds than you.

– It will cost them time, effort and personnel to fight their way through my troops. We've got time, more than enough to speak about those things foremost on our mind.

Zahn changed his grip on the gun. He had clutched it so hard that his hands hurt.

– We've got nothing to talk about.

– Oh, come on, Jeremy. Don't insult us both with obvious lies. We both know you wouldn't be here, if you didn't want to talk. You want to *know*. We're not so different as you like to think. Of course not. Of course you'll want to know. For what other reason would you follow me all over the globe the last three years?

Zahn attempted not to meet the other's eyes, but like the other times he was pulled into them. And he couldn't look away.

– You're a criminal and a murderer, you belong behind bars, in the electric chair, and I will make sure you receive whatever punishment

society may decide for you, even though no punishment will be harsh enough.

He changed position on the floor, and lowered the gun to his hips. It didn't matter. He kept Joyce just as well covered, could take him out just as easily.

The laughter echoed through the room, throughout the building. Zahn heard the echo. Everything seemed to pause for a moment.

– If I am such a criminal, such a murderer, and I'm not saying I'm not, why, then, have I let you live all this time? You must admit that I've had plenty of opportunities to rid myself of such a nuisance like you?

– Why? He forced himself to say it.

– Because you're an interesting nuisance, Jeremy. You amuse me. Therefore I let you live.

– Seems like you have fucked up royally, then. Saliva and poison flowed from Zahn's mouth. – The nuisance proved itself to be more trouble than you could handle.

– Heh, heh, it's certainly natural for you to think that way... But the confident aura surrounding you, is that fake, I wonder. I believe it is. It must have dawned on you that whoever is controlling our confrontations it isn't you?

Joyce picked a cigar from the biggest box on the table and lit it slowly, clearly enjoying himself. His eyes never left Jeremy.

– I told you you're amusing. That can be a lie, of course. Everything I've ever told you about my operations and my goals might be lies.

– I don't give a shit about your game. From now on you can play monopoly on death row.

– Mmmm, game, yes, of course it is a game, what isn't? Let me ask you a question then, my dear opponent...

– This is insane, Zahn mumbled.

A beyond insane bloodbath of a battle raged downstairs and they stood here, and had a conversation? He wished for the forces to come blazing. He wanted them to come *now*.

– That label, like all others, is a matter of viewpoint, Joyce said pleasantly. – It has no bearing in the real world. I'm assuming that you, as an intelligent being, can support that conclusion.

– Has it struck you that we're playing out the confrontation in... yeah, let's say an old James Bond movie? The super-villain thinks he holds all the cards and calmly explains the plot to the triumphant hero. The question is, naturally, who is the cliché and who is the reality.

– What do you expect to achieve? Zahn wanted so much to pull the trigger, pull, pull, pull, and never stop. – You must realize that the game is over.

It sounded so desperate, so pathetic.

– «The game is over, Blofeldt», Joyce cackled. – Right before Bond dies in a hail of bullets.

Jeremy felt like a boy again. The teacher asked triumphantly about today's lesson, and he was unable to speak.

– Back to my original question... Are you convinced I don't hold any cards, some you want to call?

Jeremy Zahn sensed the white-hot rage return. It always did when the sense of hopelessness was at its worst. He could hardly contain himself, stopping himself from charging the enemy.

– Where is Gwen? He almost shouted. – What have you done to her? You Satan, SATAN!

– The question, grammatically speaking is rather what *did* I do to her, but let that rest. To reply to your inaccurate question; as you have realized long ago, I did nothing to Gwen. I'm not doing anything. Gwen is here of her own free will, because she realized who she was, what she sees as important in life, what truly counts.

– You're lying... YOU'RE LYING

– She's here, she can tell you everything. You can hear everything from her mouth. What do you say, you little nuisance?

– H-here?

– Here, Joyce confirmed. – Don't be such a total hypocrite and pretend this is a surprise to you. You knew she would be in the line of fire, and you didn't care. That's typical for you.

The wave of distance and unreality kept growing in Zahn's line of sight. It threatened to devour him.

– I forgive you.

He heard the pleasant, well-known modulated voice, as if from far away. He hadn't heard her enter.

The weapon in his hand pointed at her, of its own volition, at the face he hardly recognized. It turned back and forth between the two targets, until he once more lowered it. She laughed softly.

Joyce spoke, and his words cut to the bone.

– Do you know what I told her before your timely arrival? «Say exactly what's on your mind». I knew what she would say anyway. I remember it well.

– What are you fucking TALKING about? Jeremy shouted.

Gwen spoke, and her words were soft like flower petals.

– I know you told the cops that everybody here, except Timothy, should be shot on sight. All the bugs.

– How do you KNOW? He screamed at her. – How can you know?

– A big, terrible bird told me, she replied soft and hard simultaneously. – What does it matter? You would've let them kill me, Jeremy. You've become that big and hard. And that's why I forgive you. Because you're about to grow up...

Joyce threw the cigar in his face. An attack that didn't just draw advantage of the fire Joyce had cultivated for minutes, but hit with such force in his temple that it made him dizzy. A kick and the gun flew from his hand. He struck out with his other hand and hit Joyce so hard that the other man flew across the room. Joyce dried the blood from his jaw, and rose with a satisfied grin.

– Not bad, he praised his opponent. – Can it be you don't know your own strength?

At the edge of his vision Zahn saw Gwen pick up the gun. She whistled while removing the clip, and then she threw it elegantly down the stairs.

– What... do you expect to achieve? Zahn wondered nonplussed. He turned to Gwen. – They're coming for you. You can kill me, and it won't serve you shit. YOU... you're just as guilty as him. You'll burn by his side.

– Poor Jeremy. She shook her head. – So little you understand, so little you know about yourself.

Jeremy threw himself at Joyce, snarling like a wild animal. They rolled over the floor. He struck and struck the enemy with fists heavy as sledgehammers. At some point he lost his body armor, and he hardly noticed. The fact that it fell off, totally ruined didn't surprise him, and even that realization failed to shock him. He kept pounding his opponent, hitting Timothy Joyce so hard, harder than he had ever hit anybody before, kicked anybody before, in a murderous attack beyond belief.

Joyce slapped him, pushed him away like he was a kid. Zahn landed hard, shook his head and fought his way up again. Joyce waited for him. Zahn feinted an attack and kicked out, fast as lightning with his left foot at the other's head. Joyce avoided it with a patronizing smile. If not for his bloody and swollen face one might have misunderstood, and believed he took a Sunday stroll. Zahn struck out again. Missed. And again. Missed again. Joyce grabbed him, lifted him up with one hand, and held him there. A cruel hit in the belly emptied his lungs of air. The other man shook him like a rag doll.

– You don't have a chance in the world, Joyce thundered. – I know you'll see the light soon. I know. But you still need a lesson or two.

He threw Zahn through the air, across the room. Jeremy heard bones break. The soft carpet seemed to embrace him. First the carpet on the wall, then on the floor. How could Joyce be so strong? He wasn't that much taller, that much bigger. Jeremy felt a deep despair and shame. *I should've been dead. Why can't you just kill me?* Joyce kicked him. With his right foot. With his left foot. With his right foot again. Zahn raised his right arm in a desperate attempt to defend himself. Joyce kicked it at the wall. Tiny, desperate cries turned to one big scream. Joyce bent down. Strike followed strike, and it never seemed to end. Zahn didn't understand how he could still be alive, far less be more or less conscious. He gasped and sobbed in frustration and pain, and dull, distant joy while the beating kept going on and on and on.

Zahn lay on the floor. Through pain, through mist he saw the two co-conspirators bend down over him.

– I'll never join you, the beaten to a pulp heap spat. – Never, you ass...
Another strike.

– That statement isn't wrong, the large man commented, in yet another cryptic proclamation.

Like he always did, like he always was, a riddle, a devil in human form.

– You won't get away. To speak with the mouth filled with blood and skin demanded an impossible effort. Zahn didn't care. He had passed the stage, now, when such things mattered. – They'll take you and destroy you. He who laughs last, laughs best. Heh, heh.

A fist shot forward. Jeremy's head and neck were pulled up.

– You have great confidence in yourself and your place in the world. That's both a very right and very wrong observation.

Jeremy laughed and laughed. He was unable to stop.

– You're just an inflated ego, he laughed. – You're so crazy that you'll keep believe in your own infallibility when you sit on death row.

He stared defiant up into Joyce' terrible face, waited for death to come. The laughter faded, until it vanished completely. Didn't the face he knew so well, even better than his own... change? Didn't the wounds vanish as he watched? He was delirious. It was impossible, of course. But it seemed far less swollen to his foggy, crystal clear vision. Joyce smiled.

– You know I'll get away. It was a statement, very calm, but with a wrath Zahn never could have imagined. – You're shit under my heel, Jeremy, but you know that. I will quite simply walk out of here, and no one will stop me. Nobody can. Say it, Jeremy. Confession is good for the soul, everybody knows that. Say it. You'll feel better afterwards, I guarantee it.

The conviction came abruptly, like another blow to the head, with an uncomprehending expression in the wide open eyes.

– You’ll get away.

Jeremy started crying, and something was released within him. The crying shook his body, and pain haunted him.

Another pull, and the enormous face above him filled his entire vision. His eyes widened further. He gasped and stopped breathing. For minutes, eternities, he died. The eyes above him... *They changed color.* He saw it as clear as if he should have observed it in full daylight, close up. The forehead seemed to expand. Just a moment, before once more returning to normal. He wanted to shake his head in shock. He didn’t have the energy. Joyce smiled, let go and rose. Eyes that had been green continued being blue. Jeremy shook and shook his head. Everything whirled indistinct in front of him. He had to be seriously injured, far more so than he was willing to admit. Everything whirled and turned indistinct, so terribly distinct. He hadn’t seen Gwen for so long, and he still didn’t. She wasn’t really here.

– Not much longer, now, she said huskily. He drowned in the promise of her eyes. – Then we may be united once more.

– How can you live with him? He asked with a tortured voice. – How can you? How can you?

– You’re torturing yourself so, my Lord and Master. She patted his hair.

– Don’t. Relax. Rest your troubled mind. It’s time to sleep, to sleep and dream....

He felt sick in his contempt. She seemed so wild and crazy, a caricature of the woman he had known and loved. She would pay. She would

Just then Joyce kicked him in the head and everything turned black.

A moment or an eternity, while he was drifting in and out of consciousness, he heard them, he saw them.

– They’re coming, my love.

She stood on her toes and kissed Joyce on the lips.

– We still got time, he said relaxed. He smiled pleasantly to Jeremy. – Au revoir, old boy. I’m ready to start the great work. There are just a few things that need to be done first.

He saw them, saw them disappear in a light in the air. He saw them wave to him, and leave the room. He heard them walk down the stairs, no, he heard steps ascend the stairs, trampling feet sounding too loud on the soft carpet. He attempted to scream, but couldn’t produce the slightest sound.

Men and women in police uniforms rushed up the stairs and spread out everywhere. His vision was filled with the sight of uniforms. They stumbled around, kicked open doors to all rooms, all closets.

– I’ve found our observer. One man knelt down while speaking in a radio and checked out the beaten body. – He looks like shit, but doesn’t seem fatally wounded. Bring a stretcher anyway. Better safe than sorry, right.

– The room by the bookshelf, he said hoarsely. – I saw them walk in there. Joyce and... a woman.

Several officers looked at each other.

– There is no one there, now, one stated. – Not that it matters. If Timothy Joyce really is in the building there is no way he’ll get away.

– He’ll get away...

He saw them glance at each other. It didn’t matter. Nothing did.

Quite a while passed before they finally arrived with the stretcher. By then they had long since searched the building several times. It seemed like they had carried off absolutely everybody else, before they took care of him. Zahn sensed a bitter taste in his mouth. What if he had been critically wounded, goddamn it?

They carried him down the stairs, back the same way he had come with firespitting weapons so very long ago. How strange, he watched the patterns in the ceiling with perfect clarity. The scent, the stinking sweat, the stink of blood everywhere, of blood and death and life appeared to him with perfect clarity. He registered everything, but couldn’t influence anything. This was nothing new. This was the way it had always worked or not, for him. He had always showed great skill in demonstrating zero influence.

Jeremy Zahn fell, through the halls, down the final stairs, to one of the central halls, where the bodies rested in heaps.

Springsteen and Lasko waited outside, where the ambulances ran back and forth, left and arrived at an increasing number and speed. They said a few encouraging words every time another carcass was thrown into the hearse. A sign from the Chief, and Zahn’s carriers stopped before the two.

– I see you made it, he grumbled. – That’s good.

– What happened? Lasko asked.

Zahn opened and closed his eyes once.

– There was a bunch... coming at me from all sides. Joyce was there. I saw him...

– We haven’t seen shit of him, Lasko complained, clearly nervous and very out of it. – People are still looking. They’ll find him, just wait and see.

- Can he have escaped in a chopper? Zahn wondered tired.
- No choppers have departed where we haven't had complete control.
- He may have disguised himself and dressed like a cop...
- We're checking everybody leaving the area, and I mean everybody.

Not a mouse gets out without security clearance.

- The bodies, too? The wounded?

- Now, you listen here... Lasko abruptly turned very red upstairs.

Springsteen stopped him with a hand. He turned towards the man on the stretcher.

– Some pal you've got. Good for you we have independent reports and photographic evidence of his presence. Otherwise you could have been in trouble, see?

He's not my friend, Zahn wanted to shout. He didn't have the strength.

– Instead it looks like you're the ones in trouble. Zahn managed a scornful grin. – Timothy Joyce is doing target practice on Los Angeles' finest - and walks away afterwards. Can you imagine the headlines tomorrow?

I can.

And he enjoyed himself so much that it hurt.

They threw him into the ambulance, fairly brutal. The door slammed shut. Two nurses, one female and one male started examining him in a professional, detached manner. Sirens filled the night. He stared at the ceiling. They injected him with painkillers. Icy pain was dulled in a distant mist. The pain didn't go away, but was just displaced. He didn't feel the pressure of the fabric below on his skin anymore. The world was a black hole. He didn't tailspin into it. He was there already. Sirens filled the night in the city of angels.