

THE CITY

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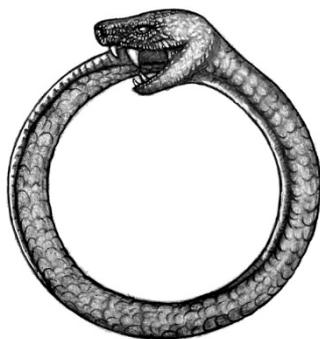
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To Mom

Thanks for your unending love, guidance, and sacrifice.

PART I



I

MAX RECLINED ON a Ming-style bed in the back of Ku's laundry house. Even though most of the building was secretly cordoned off for smoking—leaving little space for an actual laundry business—the room still felt cramped and gloomy. The yellow tar stains on the walls spoke of loss and promised nothing but temporary escape. Mix in the few beds and dilapidated night stands and Ku's was a far cry from the lavish days of the late eighteenth century, when opium smokers were treated with dignity and the rooms offered a glimpse into exotic adventures of the East. Nevertheless, Max didn't mind a little filth. Once the mind drifted away on opium clouds, what difference did it make where the body was?

Beside Max, a young Chinese host prepared a pipe and oil lamp. With his smooth doughy face, Max pegged him for fifteen. His nimble fingers moved with deftness, and Max's eyes were drawn to a point within the hypnotic swirl created by the boy's swift movements. Almost trancing out, Max gazed into the center of those working hands, then *through* the physical matter, until he

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was caught somewhere in the teen's life. Wondering what choices had brought him here, and what would happen if he stayed at a job like this.

It's not easy working certain jobs. Opium host is on that list. It's the kind of job that sucked you in until it ceased to be a job and became a lifestyle. Such transitions always happened in degrees so small they were almost unnoticeable. When you finally realized your mistake, it was too late. Then, much like quicksand, it's best not to fight the inevitable. To struggle would only speed up your demise.

Hopefully the boy would quit the job before it pushed away everything good in his life. Before the smoke damaged his body as it had the walls, aging him prematurely, and before a wake of despair left by the endless stream of lost souls dulled his own ambition and sentenced him to a wasted existence. But as the boy got closer to completion, anticipation of the impending euphoria washed away any further wonder Max had on the boy's future.

"Detective Elliot?"

Max looked up at the well-dressed American, confusion wrinkling into his forehead. "McCloud?"

When the man slipped off his gloves and removed the black bowler hat he became more recognizable, and Max chuckled. "Can't believe they let you in here. If you'd shown up more than five minutes from now, I'd have thought you were a hallucination."

"Yeah. Lucky me." John McCloud scanned the meager room.

Max saw the building's owner, Leo Ku, standing a few feet behind McCloud. His lips were pressed firmly together, head bobbing—a nervous tick Max had noticed on his first visit. "Buy yourself a pipe, John. Loitering makes 'em nervous."

"I know." McCloud's smile was dry. "Took a while to convince him to even let me back here. I need to speak with you, so how about we leave?"

Without missing a beat, the host finished preparing the opium, and Max brought the wooden pipe to his lips, maintaining eye contact with the young criminal investigator of the San Francisco Police Department, a man he'd only met a few times before. The oil lamp below vaporized the opium and he filled his lungs. Max lowered the pipe, breath held; McCloud stared back.

Max released the poisoned air and McCloud's eyes averted from his. A slight sway took hold of his legs and Max enjoyed watching the man's discomfort. Max lowered his voice so Ku couldn't hear. "It must be terrible to witness criminal activity and not be able to do anything about it."

"Can we leave?"

"*You* can leave. I've already paid for this. I'm not leaving till I smoke it all."

McCloud sighed and his uneasy gaze settled on an object under the bed.

"It's a *Himitsu-Bako*, a Japanese puzzle box," Max said. "*Secret box*, to be more precise. I buy a new one every few weeks." Sitting up with all the speed of a turtle, Max slid the box out with the tip of his shoe, then paused before grabbing it. He envisioned two tiny hands wrap around the sides of the box—the fingers slid over the edges, pulling with as much force as such slender digits could muster. Max remembered telling Leigh Anne that force alone would never solve a puzzle box...or any other enigma.

Max kicked the box back into its hiding place and sunk into the bed, the ghostly vision fading. He took a second puff, hoping the opium would block any further memories of his daughter. "Might as well speak on why you're here. This could take a while."

"I'm here because Lieutenant Harris said you were the best homicide detective in San Francisco."

Max's laugh emerged as quiet sighs from his nose. "This dope might be making my body slow, but the mind's still sharp—Harris wouldn't say that."

"Listen, Max," McCloud lowered his voice, "I didn't come here to play games with you. I came because Harris thinks you'll be able to help on a case. Apparently, you're a great detective."

"I wasn't a great *detective*. I was great at solving puzzles, but I don't belong with the department. And even with my talent, Lieutenant Harris knows I don't have what it takes to serve the people of San Francisco." After a third puff, the silent host took the pipe and oil lamp and retreated into the shadows. "So if Harris sent you down here, what did he really say?"

"There's been an incident, similar to..." McCloud paused.

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“Something similar to the...the tragedy six months ago.”

Max opened his mouth but hesitated.

“The circumstances seem linked...perhaps,” McCloud continued. “You must have been great at something once, because Harris feels you’re the right person to take a shot at this one. Put it to rest. His orders were to find whatever rock you were hiding under and kick it over.”

“That sounds more like Harris.”

“It’s at a housing complex just past Broadway. Tenants complained to the superintendent about noise. He called us.” McCloud shifted again. “We...we walked into quite a crime scene. Children were...I’d rather not go into it here.”

Despite the possible link between his family’s tragedy and this new one, Max knew a smile was emerging on his face. After months of non-communication, Harris realized he needed Max to handle these types of cases.

Max’s composure in the face of such extra-brutal murders was mistaken by others as the sign of a great detective. But being a so-called great, dedicated detective wasn’t what had allowed him to succeed in closing the books on heinous crimes where others had failed year after year. It was something else. And Harris knew what it was. “Well, then. You have my interest, McCloud. But before I’ll let you take me from this fine establishment, you need to tell me what Harris *really* said.”

McCloud ceased his uneasy shifting. “Fine.” His look hardened on Max. “He said you were the best, but that you were also the sickest. That none of this bloodshed would make you bat an eye. You would follow the trail anywhere, blend in with scum, and absorb everything in this case if you had to...because you could. No one else on the force would be able to go to the same lengths. And since you have nothing left, you’d be that much more willing to step forward.”

“Thank you.” Max smiled and looked at the young host now working with a new patron. Opium host wasn’t the only profession with heavy hooks waiting to sink into your will. Homicide detective assigned to the grisliest murders in San Francisco had to be somewhere near the top of that list. Max held out his hand. “Well get me the hell out of here, Officer McCloud. We’ve got sights to see.”



The scene outside the tenement complex McCloud brought Max to was painfully familiar to that October night six months ago. Throngs of onlookers flooded the street. And the memory of that night fought through his opium haze and took center stage in Max's mind.

Despite the cold winds that night, Max had sweated heavily as he walked home—the night of *the tragedy*. His perspiration mixed with the cheap perfume that still clung to his body, creating a sickly-sweet aroma. Satisfaction and guilt mixed in his mind about as well as the sweaty perfume. It made his heart pound.

First and last time. That's it, I'm done.

Of all the drama he had expected to incur when he returned home that evening—the accusations from Eve, severing the final shred of her trust and love for him, hiding things from Leigh Anne—Max could not have fathomed what he found at the entrance to his apartment building.

Harris had been there, and a slew of officers questioned the crowd that had gathered. Harris's face and the fact that no one could look him in the eye said it all. Max pushed past Harris despite his supervisor's pleas to wait.

The east wall of his living room was splashed in crimson, the liquid drying in macabre patterns. Only severed arteries left blood stains like that. And arteries took you quick—every beat of your heart pushing you closer to death.

Max saw the remains of his wife next. Eve Elliot couldn't even be described as a corpse. She was a pile on the floor. Some mad hunter or surgeon had taken great care in skinning her like an animal, preserving the flesh with expert incisions. Leaving her sloughed off skin behind, like some ghoulish snake.

"My daughter?"

"We're not sure yet," someone replied.

There was a lot of blood on that wall. Max had hoped it wasn't enough for two people.

Tonight, John McCloud led him through crowds that looked

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almost identical to that night. Two uniformed officers, doing their best to hold back the nosey people, allowed the duo to pass through the front door. Lieutenant Harris and three other officers stood inside the lobby. Harris's face was puffy and stoic as usual. Like his face, his sack suit was too baggy and wrinkled, adding to the impression that he had not slept well in days. "Max, thanks for coming."

Max nodded, taking off his gloves—his fedora and trench coat stayed on. His eyes and jawline no longer felt as slack as they had at the den. The adrenaline of the situation had sobered him up and left him with a different kind of high. It'd been so long, he had forgotten how much he missed the thrill of a new case.

"Consider this reinstatement from your leave." Harris waved him forward and they began up the staircase. "It's bad, Max. Two of our men already lost their dinner."

"Can't wait."

They reached the second-floor landing.

"Neighbors reported screams and loud banging to the landlord. When he finally got around to checking, there was no answer from the tenant. Landlord entered and...well...contacted us immediately. That happened about noon. The homicide team has been poking around all day. Taking shifts while McCloud tracked you down." Harris stopped at a paint-peeled door. The number 213 was etched into a brass plaque screwed into the wood.

"And all this has something to do with Eve and Leigh Anne?"

"Perhaps. All I know is that your place...that was...that was something I've never seen before. I'm sorry that Eve had to go through that. And dammit, I wish we could have found a lead for—"

Max held up a hand. "I know." He pointed to the door. "But what about this?"

"What's behind that door is the only thing that comes close to your place six months ago. And I need to believe they're related. How could the city produce separate lunatics who murder this way?" Harris shook his fat, red face. "I don't know what the hell happened in there or why. But I need you to find out."

Max put his hand on the brass knob, chills down his back reminding him that the last murder and abduction scene he walked into had been his fault.

He pushed away the regret of his infidelity and opened room 213, noting that there were no signs of a forced entry.



The cloying odor of blood filled the room. It was metallic and fresh, but Max knew that the smell would change soon. A putrid twinge was detectable—to a sensitive nose—just under the copper. In less than an hour, the whole apartment would reek of rotten meat if the bodies were not removed.

He stood in front of the door and scanned the barren room. There were no pictures or paintings, not a single plant, nor bookcases or knickknacks in the ten-by-ten-foot living space—only splintered wood and a poor paint job. There was something about the sparseness that told Max it was more than just poverty keeping the room void of personality—maybe a flop house.

The single piece of furniture was a couch, centered a few feet from the far wall. In it was a man. A dead man. His head hung backward over the top of the couch. At first glance, age was indeterminable. What was apparent though was the gaping hole in his chest. The wound tunneled through the dress shirt—stained a dark red—past the flesh and ribcage, to where his heart should have been.

Max moved closer, careful to not step on the patches of carpet still wet from the copious amount of spilt blood from the excavated chest cavity. His eyes moved from the chest to the tilted head. Circling to the back of the couch, Max observed the ashen face—dried blood against a shattered nose. The zygomatic bones forming the eye sockets on both sides of the victim's head looked to be fractured and driven inward, leaving the skin swollen and bruised a dark shade of purple. The eyeballs themselves had bulged slightly from the orbital walls. A watery fluid mixed with blood leaked from the corners of each eye—he assumed a bone shard had ruptured the vitreous chamber of the eyeball.

“So we assume the man knew his attacker...” Max looked at Lieutenant Harris who remained in the doorway. “And we’re thinking this is a botched deal.”

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“Good of a guess as any,” Harris said. “No forced entry, no signs of a struggle—just a sudden attack.” Harris breathed through his mouth. The air was turning worse as they spoke. “Maybe while they sat to negotiate, the attacker stunned him with a blow to the head, then went to work on the chest.”

“Well, that’s some crackerjack work, Lieutenant. Gruesome—and the stealing of a heart does lead to some questions—but it’s nothing your boys can’t figure out. I had a real nice Tuesday going before McCloud stole me away—it is Tuesday, right?”

“Christ, Elliot. I thought you came here to help.”

“I thought this had something to do with my family. Turns out you just want your black sheep back because this is a—”

“They’re in the bedroom.” Harris gestured to the narrow hallway. “It’s a massacre.”

Max turned to the short hallway from the living room. The walls, yellowing from years of no cleaning, were narrow. Their claustrophobic effects added to the ominous tone Harris set. Max passed the bathroom and the smell got worse. He stepped into an eight-by-eight room. Like the entire apartment, the room lacked any character or decoration. This was definitely a squatter’s pad. A hideout. Not a home. The only furniture in this room was three army cots.

The victims were on the cots.

Three young bodies—mutilated sheaths of skin—each laid out on top of a canvas bed. Max’s jaw trembled and he fought to keep it from dropping. The long hair and the height of one of the bodies suggested they were females in their early teens. One of the three young girls—the one most intact—had an iron shackle affixed to her left ankle. Bloated flesh, blood, and tendons soiled the clamp and chains that led to the frame of the cot.

The two other victims were something Max had only seen once before: piles of flesh, the husk of the body.

Eve

Their hair and skin flayed with expertise so that it remained in one connected piece. The removed organs were clumped together under the cots. Similar chains were fitted to the legs of their cots as well. But nothing solid remained within their shackles. The bones were missing entirely.

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Max felt a knot of pain twist in his stomach, and he suddenly wished he was back in Ku's opium den. He didn't need closure; he needed a fresh pipe, a pull of whiskey or even just a new *Himitsu-Bako* puzzle.

Let's just give this a try, he bargained with an unstable mind that threatened to remind him of his fatal shortcomings. *Please. And if it doesn't work, Chinatown isn't going anywhere.*

The promise of future ecstasy was enough to calm the internal craving and suppress the flashes of Eve's empty skin suit and his missing daughter.

Max turned off the feelings associated with the images and clues of the real-world puzzle box and stared into the empty-sockets of the girl-suit, long blonde hair still attached to the skull-less face. Her eyes resided in a pile with the spleen and liver and intestines. Ignoring the immeasurable pain the child must have endured, Max played out scenarios in his mind. He saw the girls as possible kidnap victims of the dead man in the other room; or perhaps they were daughters of the man and chained up by the killer, or maybe daddy was the killer.

After several minutes, Max's trance was broken by Harris, who entered with nose and mouth buried in the crook of his arm. "The man on the couch has been confirmed as Jeffery Poppens. The girls are still unknown. This is the only thing we found." A small leather pouch hung from his fingers.

And the first piece of the puzzle slid into place.

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