

Noh Masks

Tales from The City #1

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The First Shard

If you are reading this, it is assumed that you have already descended to the depths of *The City* and have returned to the surface, now more curious—or confused—than before. Fear not, all will be revealed. The third and final act in the saga is massive though, and its approaching conclusion has sped up time and increased entropy to a point where the storyline has shattered.

The shards have spread far and wide and must be collected in order to view the final image.

Tales from The City is a series of individual stories, clues to something bigger. At first, they may appear as enigmas, unconnected and out of order. However, they introduce new characters and settings vital to the grand finale. Luckily, they have splintered into somewhat self-contained pieces, which I hope are entertaining in themselves, while still drawing you further into the larger mystery of The Labyrinth.

Each month, I plan to release a new shard. These clues of short fiction are free.

If you enjoy these free puzzle pieces, I would appreciate any of the following support:

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1.

“Do you think it’s real?”

“Of course.” The buggy rocked, but Franz’s eyes remained fixed on Joseph. “Don’t you?”

The officer in training resisted an immediate answer. That pleased Franz.

After a soft inhale, Joseph spoke: “I think all avenues must be considered; although, some explanations are far more *eccentric* than others.”

Franz let the pause between them grow. Finally, he asked, “Then why did you apply to the *Ahnenerbe*?”

Joseph mirrored the previous pause. Then, “I received an *Einsatzmedaille Gefecht* after the war. Ghost team. By 1928, I was digging ditches like a commoner. Ran into an old mate passing through Dresden; he told me about a security position with the Reich. I enjoyed it for a few years, but I no longer want to be on the front lines. Too old. That’s when he invited me to apply. *Ahnenerbe*, the most elite and discreet operatives, or so he claimed.”

“And a whole lot more.” Franz kept his eyes soft but wise. Leaning in, he said, “To be one of the elites, you must no longer think like the masses. Never presume you know what is possible in this universe. Otherwise, you will be blind to the truth.”

The younger man bowed his head.

The buggy swayed into a turn, then began slowing.

“Your goal is to observe everything. Watch their eyes for which words make them twitch. Measure the anxiety in their voice. Tonight will go one of two ways. Decide how you would handle what arises and why. But regardless, remain stoic and silent. Simply observe.”

The man nodded, and the buggy came to a stop. The two men exited, stepping over puddles in the cobblestone. Clouds of steamy breath, visible in the pale moonlight, traveled before them to the theatre house. Dishveled figures huddled around a trash fire a few yards away. Beyond the

occasional shattered glass or grunting, it was relatively quiet. Franz ignored the distractions. Instead, he eyed Joseph, trying to read his expression and infer what he thought of this first assignment.

“A little chaos is always necessary to maintain order.” Franz led them past the window booth with a ‘closed’ sign. Below, it said ‘Next Showing: *Wirrwarr* 17:00.’ “Certain people, certain places, they’re useful until they’re not. For now, as long as the animals are more concerned about beating each other, they tend to forget about us.”

They reached the door and Franz knocked. Thirty seconds passed and he knocked again, almost pounding. A square cutout in the door opened and a bearded man filled the space.

“Can’t you read? We’re closed.”

“Not to us,” Franz stated.

The doorman glanced down at their uniforms. Franz knew the poor lighting made identification difficult, but he had a feeling the man would not take any chances.

The doorman’s chops smacked, dry, struggling to get the words out. “The pass?”

“Get Jakub.”

The man frowned, dared a longer look, then he closed the door and footsteps departed.

Franz smirked at Joseph. “Can’t let ’em forget us too long.”

They waited the next few minutes in silence. Then Jakub Woźniak opened the door.

“I paid already,” the theatre owner said. “What do you want?”

“That’s no way to treat your friends.” Franz looked over Jakub’s shoulder toward the auditorium entrance. “You don’t *sound* closed.”

“Private event. You approved.” Jakub straightened his posture, but his beady rat-eyes shook with fear.

“More of the sexy dancing girls? Perhaps something more risqué...?”

“No women tonight. Just...” Jakub softened his features, shrugging with a smile. “Just a little Eastern culture. Nothing outside the bound-

aries of our discussion last year—and of course, I include it in the pay-outs,” he added quickly.

“Of course, you do.” Franz kept his smile unreadable, benign or deadly was up to Jakub to decide. “Word on the street is you found a new act for your private events. He wouldn’t be performing tonight, would he?”

“Who?” The word was barely audible, as if Jakub’s vocal cords were rebelling, and Franz suppressed a grin.

“They call him the ‘meat magician.’” Franz’s voice softened to a whisper. “They say he’s a necromancer.”

Jakub’s laugh mingled with a grimace. “Madness if they believe that. It does bring out the wallets though. You will be quite pleased with this month’s take—”

“We’d like to meet him. Tonight.”

Jakub fumbled with his pocket watch. Franz would ask Joseph later what he believed the theatre owner was thinking as he stalled.

“Well, let’s see...” Jakub chewed his upper lip. “About forty-five minutes and he’ll be going on stage.”

“Wonderful.” Franz beamed; though he would have had fun if Jakub had tried evasion first. “I look forward to judging for myself if there is merit to the claims.”

“It’s supposed to be an after-hours secret. But we get a lot of patrons by word of mouth. He’s quite the illusionist. It isn’t more than that though,” Jakub whispered as they reached the entrance to the auditorium.

“You know how the trick is done?” Franz asked.

“No.”

Franz saw Joseph almost speak. The sound of drums and flute swelled as Jakub opened the theatre door. Then it receded as they moved down the aisle. Franz saw a robed, masked figure doing a solo dance off the stage as the music ended.

“End of act four,” Jakub whispered to them. “Final act next. Then the magician.”

The small theatre was empty except for ten or so men spread out between the rows and aisles. Smoke collected like clouds. The three of them sat and within a few minutes, the band began chanting and playing again. Act five had begun.

2.

Jakub's entire body remained tense after sitting. Feet planted in such a way that he could leap from his seat at a moment's notice. He was never quite sure what the runes on the men's lapels signified. And had no idea why they were taking such an interest in his theatre tonight. Was he in trouble for hiring Nigel and Adra?

Bastards! Danzig was supposed to be a free city, but each year that freedom seemed to be slipping further away. Most days he managed to feel kingly still—at least when these new factions who had allowed his version of guignol to thrive weren't knocking on his door. The scum of the city adored him, and Jakub feared no man.

Franz was not a man though. He wasn't even a bastard really. He was a monster. And Jakub had to assume that his silent companion was also a monster. Both equally capable of plunging a knife into his chest as easily as if it were butter.

They sat near the front of the stage and Jakub wondered if the other patrons knew who the visitors were. Could they smell the two monsters? Real monsters didn't smell like swamps and dragon's breath anymore. They carried the scent of shoe polish and aftershave. Sharp clothes instead of claws.

Adra entered from stage left. Jakub didn't care much for Noh performances. The music felt disjointed. The chants creepy. Tonight, sitting with the monsters made the atmosphere even more jarring. Adra moved across the stage, her Noh mask, a demonic face tilted to the crowd. Her garb flashing red, black, and gold, under the wild hair of the mask. Jakub could feel Franz's stare on him, but he refused to look. He was mentally stitching together the last three months, making sure of his story.

Rationally, Jakub knew he shouldn't be anxious. He'd done nothing wrong. But it was hard to be rational when dealing with monsters. The aftershave filled his nose. If death had an antecedent smell, surely it was this.

“Quite the departure from last we spoke. What is this Japanese?”

“Noh theatre.” *Tell no lies*, Jakub thought. It felt safer somehow. For now. “I don’t care for it much, but it came with the magician.”

“Where did you find him?”

“Travelling circus a few ago months near Sztum. I always shop the carnie acts.”

The being that obscured Adra continued to dance while the musicians chanted the poetry of madness. Despite his dislike of the art form, Jakub wanted the performance to last forever. Same as with the excitement that had come with the 1920s. But nothing lasts forever, and eventually, Adra turned the other side of the mask to the crowd and began moving toward the stage exit.

“Family of freaks?”

“No. Stage partners is all. Looking out for each other in a crooked world.”

The lights remained dim after the performance ended.

“I miss the dancing girls,” Franz said.

“They don’t like working the same stage as the magician.”

Franz smiled. “Let me guess. They think it’s real?”

“I don’t know what anyone thinks. I just collect the money.”

“But *you* don’t believe it’s real?”

“Impossible.” Jakub shook his head as the curtain parted.

The theatre had remained quiet after the Noh performance, but there had been whisperings. Now, all sound was silenced save for the creaking wheels as a figure in a black cossack pushed a wooden cart onto the stage. His face was also obscured. But instead of a Noh mask, he wore a plague-doctor mask and hat.

Stepping into the spotlight, the meat magician stopped and presented the wooden top of his cart to the audience. On the left of the cart top was a caged chicken. On his right, a mortar and pestle. It wasn’t visible from their seats, but Jakub knew there was a dark green paste inside. The

dizzying smell it produced the first—and last—time he watched was not detectable over the monsters' stench, though he wished it were.

Anything to mask the feeling they stirred inside him.

The magician lifted a strip of paper with black writing across it. Then he lit it on fire and dropped it into the bowl. When it extinguished, he mixed the ashes into the paste. After setting the bowl aside, the man removed the chicken from the cage. Every squawk and flap of its wings echoed in the silent room. A cleaver that wasn't quite visible before was raised, and a collective groan from the old theatre seats rose as the crowd leaned forward.

The man pressed the chicken against the wood table. It clucked and squirmed in futile resistance. Jakub looked away. At the *thunk* of steel against neckbone and wood, the crowd flinched in unison.

On the stage, the magician applied the green paste to the severed stump. He then lifted the headless spasmodic chicken under the beak of his mask and whispered into the bloody opening of its neck. The bird went lifeless. He placed the severed chicken head back onto the stump. While holding it in place with one hand, he stuck a needle with thread through the skin with his other and began stitching the head back to the body.

Once the head was reattached, the beak was manually opened, and the magician placed the last of the green paste inside. He blew into the dead bird's mouth. For an instant, everything remained motionless, then a tremor went through the feathers.

The magician let go and the chicken lifted itself on wobbly legs, faltering several times, before finding some balance. Its wings beat arrhythmically and it attempted a squawk. The result was a high pitched, broken cluck, that was more akin to crushed cartilage vibrating against each other than a chicken.

"Jesus Christ," someone whispered.

Someone else was laughing softly. Or crying.

Franz remained staring at the spot of blood left after the magician disappeared behind the curtain.

The house lights came on, but the retreat of darkness did little to change the shock and curiosity of the crowd.

“We must speak with him,” Franz said.

“Sure. I can arrange something.”

“Tonight.”

It wasn't a question.

Sorry, Nigel, Jakub thought. He still had no idea where this would ultimately go. He could only play his role and hope it would be over soon and that he could remain unscathed.

“You were amazing,” Adra said, adjusting the damp cloth over Nigel's forehead as he leaned back on the sofa.

His eyes were closed, and the cool touch chased away the headache. In the absence of the throbbing, he enjoyed her massage of his neck and shoulders. Then her lips were at his ear, kissing, nibbling.

“You know I have no energy after a ritual,” Nigel said, sitting up and opening his eyes.

“A girl can try.” Her sly lips curled on the right.

“I wish you wouldn't.” Nigel took the washcloth from his forehead. “Pisses me right off that I can't perform after ritual, but we need the money.”

“I'm sorry,” she said, stepping back from the couch. “It's just...been so long.”

Nigel looked toward the bedroom, which was created by a partition of high dressers and stage props rather than by true walls in the theatre's attic. “Get Benji ready for bed. Then I'd like to discuss—”

Knock, knock, knock.

Nigel's head jerked toward the door. Adra's eyes went wide. Nigel pointed to the bedroom and put a finger to his lips. Adra understood

and raised from the couch as quiet as possible. Then she crept to the bedroom.

“It’s late, Jakub,” Nigel called through the closed door in English. He knew the man understood, even if he preferred Polish. “I need my rest. Let us chat tomorrow.”

The sound of a key clicking registered through the small room.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Nigel said, standing as the door opened.

“Sorry, old chap.” Jakub attempted a sympathetic laugh. “But these gentlemen were insistent.”

Two men clad in black suits walked past Jakub. Their attire well pressed, ringing of statesmen, yet they were not the police or other government agency Nigel was familiar with.

“I’ll be in my office if you need me.” With that, he left, closing the door behind him.

“An American in Gdańsk,” the taller German said, his English better than most. “This is getting stranger all the time.”

“I have my papers,” Nigel said, not bothering to correct his lineage.

“We’re way past permits now.” The German walked over to the armchair and took a seat.

“What have I done wrong?”

“Please.” The German took a seat, gesturing to the sofa. “I am Franz Richter. And this is Joseph Fuchs.” The man’s companion walked over and stood beside the armchair. “Where’s your Japanese friend?”

Since their meeting, Nigel had never been fond of Jakub’s tact. However, the theatre owner protected his investments. And Nigel knew he was valuable. Jakub had gotten Adra, he and Benji forged papers, housed them at an affordable rate, made sure no one took advantage of them for being foreigners. For Jakub to leave him to these wolves without so much as warning meant these men were far more dangerous than any beast they had encountered in the ghettos outside Gdańsk—or Danzig as the German insisted. Even in his energetically depleted state, Nigel could sense

the violence beneath their smiling veneers. But he also believed there was another layer to this if he could remain fearless. Opportunity perhaps.

“Not Japanese.”

“Does it matter?” Franz said. “Where is he?”

“*She* is sleeping inside.”

“She?”

“Does it matter? I assume your business is with me.”

“And yet you have no idea.”

“You saw my act?”

“Yes. Quite impressive.”

“Then I have an idea what you want. And I should inform you I don’t come cheap. However, I am willing to relocate for the right price.”

“You assume we wish to hire you?”

“That’s what everyone wants,” Nigel said, taking a seat on the sofa finally. “Or they want to know how the trick is done. Jakub didn’t care; he offered me—us—refuge here... Except for tonight.”

“Well, we are not your average fans,” Franz said. “So, how do you coax life back into the dead?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets.”

“Never say never.” Franz took off his gloves and removed a roll of bills. “First. Is it an illusion?”

The cash excited Nigel. It fanned the flame of opportunity. Perhaps Jakub let these men in because they were worth impressing.

“Everything is an illusion,” Nigel said. “But the ritual is quite real.”

“Where is the chicken now?”

“Disposed of.”

“But you could reproduce such magick on demand?”

“To an extent. I need time to recover after a performance,” Nigel said.

Franz removed a large bill from the roll and held it up.

Nigel clenched his teeth but stood and leaned over to accept it.

“I represent an organization of thinkers, philosophizers, spiritualists,” Franz said. “They’re all looking for pieces of a grand puzzle. I think

your *ritual* will be of much interest to them. Your job will be answering their questions, not showmanship.” He tucked the remaining bills back into his coat pocket. “But it pays much better than these carnival gigs.”

“I thought you didn’t *want* to hire me?”

“Employment with the *Ahnenerbe* is not a job as much as it is a passion. A quest. You will be paid to explore your craft, provided your contributions remain valuable to the puzzle,” Franz said. “Will your wife be accompanying you?”

“Friend,” Nigel stated coolly. “And no. I’m flying solo from now on.”

“Then it’s settled.” Franz rose from their armchair. “Pack your bags tonight. We shall pick you up at high noon tomorrow. I’ll organize a demonstration for my associates in Wewelsburg.”

3.

After they left, Nigel collapsed on the chair basking, in the moment of relief before his mind filled with confusion. In one regard it was exactly what he'd been waiting for. Curious venture capitalists, wealthy occultists, government programs, he been praying for anyone who could fund his obsession so he could spend less time performing and more time studying and with Adra. Each year they gained more ground in the endeavor, but Nigel could see the swing of the pendulum in this part of Europe. These were not they type of men he could involve her with. Nor his son.

Nigel sensed eyes peering around the wooden chest of the cordoned bedroom.

"You can come out now," he said.

Adra walked out with his son Benji. "Who were they?"

"Opportunity, I think." Nigel looked at Benji, beckoned him to the sofa, and took him by the hands. "Remember planning for a time when I had to go away?"

The boy nodded.

"Tonight is our crossroad," Nigel said to them both. "Our ticket to complete freedom. These men do not know about Benji though and assume you are merely a friend who travels with me. I must go alone and you both must execute our plan; I don't think it's safe here for much longer. Once I leave, wait three days before abandoning the theatre. Stick to the protocol, and I'll make arrangements with Jakub to help."

"Three days?"

"I don't think they know about the books or bones either. Only the resurrection. You must safeguard the artifacts like never before, and I want there to be no connection to me and either of you. The more time between our departures the better. These are not men to trifle with; if they can find the information themselves in those books, I become worthless to them."

Her face turned pale, and he could see the fabric of Benji's shirt twist in her grasp. Nigel was pleased to see her fear over his safety. It confirmed her loyalty to the pledge they swore.

"The bigger the risk, the greater the reward," Nigel said, then turned to the boy and gave him a pat forward. "Go on now. Do as we planned."

Benji looked up to Adra who mustered a smile and then he returned to the makeshift bedroom.

Nigel stood and took Adra in his arms once Benji was gone. "Pack it all up. Put him to bed, then come back out here. My spirit has been lifted."

Nigel winked, then kissed her, and sent her after his son. He sat again to gather his thoughts. It wouldn't take long to pack. All that truly mattered were the artifacts. He considered again if this was the right decision. They'd been at Jakub's Petite Guignol—as he called it—for the past four months, and this was the first legitimate offer he'd received. It would be foolish not to accept.

The knock at the door seized his heart.

"Now what?" he muttered, heading to the door without much thought other than Jakub would want to apologize—or try to weasel in on some of the money Nigel would be offered by the Germans. Nigel wanted to get this interaction with Jakub over quickly. If he was going to be stuck working in Wewelsburg for an undisclosed amount of time, he wanted a good send off from Adra.

"Huh?" Nigel said to the man upon opening the attic door. "Who are you?"

"We need to talk." The man wore a hat pulled low and a popped jacket collar obscured his face in shadow, but his speech was distinctly American.

Nigel went to close the door, but the man blocked it with his boot and raised a gun.

"Please, you've got the wrong man."

"I'm certain I don't, Nigel."

Icy fear snaked through his body. Nigel looked over his shoulder to the improvised bedroom. He took a breath, then pursed his lips and moved from the door. “How do you know my name?”

“Been tracking you a long time.” The man eased himself inside and closed the door. “People don’t take kindly to someone who pawns their equipment and runs off with the money.”

He knows about Iraqi.

“They tried to kill me.” Nigel’s voice fought against his dry mouth and was barely a whisper. “When I escaped, I had to flee—”

“Give me what you took from the cave.”

Nigel could not rationalize outcomes in the face of the gun’s barrel. What was best? Lying? Honesty? He didn’t want to die yet. Not when he was so close to understanding.

“There’s nothing left from the cave. I sold everything. That’s why I work here—”

“Bullshit. You didn’t sell the scrolls that taught you what I saw on stage tonight. That’s how I was sure it was you.”

Nigel swallowed a lump in his throat.

“You saw those men who left? They want to pay me for the knowledge. I can return to the cave, continue the expedition. With security this time—Ahmed and his people really did try to kill me. But this time whatever I find can be yours. Forget the Germans...”

“You burned that bridge with my employer already. Besides, I have a feeling you aren’t going to be seeing those Germans again.” The man gestured to the bedroom with the gun. “Let’s search for those artifacts, yeah?”

Nigel’s head was hot and fuzzy. He was walking slowly, trying to balance and decide what to do. This could be the end of everything. Nigel paused at the threshold between the rooms. The lamp was on inside the bedroom, but he heard no sound.

“Move.”

This time when the man waved the gun, Nigel made a decision. He went to swipe it. Instead of wrestling the gun free or knocking it away, it was more of a collision of flesh that most likely cracked joints in his hand, but Nigel didn't feel it. There was only the explosion of air and then searing pain.

“Fuck!” The gunman looked down at the magician, his ears ringing. “Dammit.”

Four years of his life were bleeding to death on the floor. He got down on his knees. “This is your fault,” he told the dying man.

Nigel's response was a groan and dribble of blood. His breath sounded watery.

Finding Nigel Blake had become more important than simply halting the domino effect of his dark magick. The gunman had wanted to interrogate him still.

Rather than end Nigel's misery with a kill shot, the gunman stepped over the bleeding body. He had time to search the bedroom himself. The theatre owner was tied up in his office, the Germans were dead, and this was not the type of neighborhood to report gunshots.

Entering the bedroom area, his revolver raised. A woman in a light-colored *kaftan* was shaking in the corner.

“Relax,” the gunman said. “What happened back there was an accident.”

The woman was unresponsive.

The man lowered the gun. “What's your name?”

The blast was followed by muted sounds, as if someone had thrown a heavy blanket over his ears and started shouting. The man hit the ground but had difficulty seeing anything. His equilibrium was gone. His face was on fire; so was his chest.

Adra bit down on her palm and screamed with the shotgun blast, shutting her eyes as the man in the brown suit fell. She opened them to groans of pain from Benji. Her mind urged her to check on the boy, but her body was paralyzed by the puddle of red seeping into the bedroom from just outside the entrance.

Forcing her lids shut, she was able to pivot from the spot and see Benji rolling on the ground beside the shotgun, his face a mush of blood from the butt's recoil. Adra started toward him, and screamed again as the gunman on the ground shifted in the goop of flesh and blood that had been his face. The revolver was still in his hand, moving upward. She crushed his forearm under her foot and snatched the gun.

The man cried out; the half of his mouth peppered in buckshot split further. Then he made a finger-gun with his index and thumb, bringing it up under his split chin, miming to pull the trigger.

Adra vomited in her mouth. This bastard had taken Nigel and she wanted him dead. But guns were foreign to her, she had never killed anyone, and already tears were blurring her vision. Pushing her revulsion away, she stepped around the dying man and cleaned up Benji's busted nose and lip.

"Finish packing now."

A moment of acknowledgement passed silently between their eyes and then Benji did as he was told. He knew to only pack their clothes. Nigel wasn't coming.

She stripped the bed and returned to the gunman. He was motionless and Adra wasn't sure if she was happy or wanted him to suffer more. She threw the bedsheet over him, then returned to the bed to get her case hidden under the frame.

Adra took the face of Kagekiyo from the small set of Noh masks in the protective wooden case. She crossed the room and saw Nigel just outside the 'doorway,' eyes open, mouth open, lungs and heart burst open from lead. She closed her eyes. Kissed his cooling lips and placed the

mask on him. Benji didn't need to see his father's face. That made it too real.

"It's you and me now," she told the boy. "Forever and ever. Swear?"

"Forever," Benji said, taking her hand in a pledge. "I swear."

They stole away in the night, heading for port.

The end...
Until the next shard is discovered.

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