

" It snowed black on Friday, Lily. Just like you said it would.

And I couldn't help but smile, somehow, wandering through the chaos and the rubble. Didn't think it would end like this. Screams and smoke and weeping babies. Funny way to go, for a place like this. "

Lily was gone before he woke up. And then it started. Red circles all around. The end of everything. Now all that's left is a bottle of bourbon and a set of broken memories. The dominos are all lined up, waiting for that final push. The Red Circle Hymn is here. Everyone must take up verse and sing.

Bruno Masse, aka Raven, breaks new ground in this short tale of apocalyptic 'noir'. A blend of anarchist ethos and nihilistic prose, overcast with stark depictions of crumbling urbania.

The Red Circle Hymn

Apocalyptic Noir

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You said cities will fall Cities will fall Have no regrets In spite of it all

- Jennifer Charles

It snowed black on Friday, Lily. Just like you said it would.

And I couldn't help but smile, somehow, wandering through the chaos and the rubble. Didn't think it would end like this. Screams and smoke and weeping babies. Funny way to go, for a place like this. All blaze and fireworks. "Like a carnival," you said, "a great fucken carnival, with clowns and jitters and candied apples, sweet to the very brutal end."

You and your twisted sense of humor. Can't say I blame you, though, the way they came from all sides, the way they turned us all in and out. I mean, they had it coming for sure. Motherfuckers. But to end it like *this*, centuries rolling round the drain, circling the very brink, it was insulting really, you'd think it would go on forever. But then it didn't. One day, it all just got sucked down into the dark – a great thundering *slurp* and there you go.

One pull and out of sight. Just like you said.

And all the while I roamed these bleeding streets, these crumbling visions of any other future, instantly darkened by the great advent, that final tug, and there I knew the Red Circle Hymn welcomed aeons of deadened peace.

The Red Circle Hymn, Lily.

It snowed black on Friday.

I couldn't help but smile.

You were gone by the time I woke. Your side still warm. White light shining through the roller blind. Heavy scent on the pillow, perfume and detergent and sweat, and I remembered your tears the night before. We'd hit the bourbon hard, you wanted to celebrate. I was just happy to see you smile. But then it turned ugly, *real ugly*, some bit about the end of days, and vengeance, and how I should understand how important that was. And you were blaming me, Lily, you said I didn't get it... and you were right.

We must have dozed off at some point. Can't remember how the argument stopped. It probably went on without me. Last I remember was the red sun looming over the high-rise horizon: a burning ball of indifference in the urban skyline. That was Wednesday morning.

Never told me what we were celebrating.

When I managed to get out of bed and out on the balcony there was something odd about the air but I was too shit-faced to notice. There were no kids playing in the alley, Mrs. Stevenson nowhere on the porch and some weird-ass newsfeed coming across the cheap plaster wall to the other flat.

I remembered you saying everything went through - there was no going back we just had to face the day. "The moment of truth," you called it, "after thousands of years of deceit and domestication. One single moment of truth. No more hiding." You laughed, then. But that grin faded when you saw I couldn't catch on. You got so angry. I just wanted you to be happy, but that wasn't enough and I guess I know that now.

Something about a circle and the way everything connects even if you don't see it, like a great fucking domino set, all set up. "Doesn't matter if the dominos don't *know* they're lined up," you blurted out, "there's no stopping it, once you get it going, it just goes *on*, you know, but the *music* is what's important, the sound it makes. This is the pattern of life revealed solely upon death. The Circle Hymn."

And I guess I got upset then, too. Wasn't just the booze. I envied that, the way you talked about that circle thing you were so passionate, so alive. If only you could have felt that way for me, or because of me.

Why did you leave, Lily? I didn't take it seriously, you know, none of it. I had no idea. If only you'd shown me. But you couldn't.

I had to see for myself.

It was late, then, well into the night by the time I got down the lobby. Late for work, as usual – pawnshop peddling, graveyard shift. Rotten bottom of a dead-end barrel.

But there was no one down there - I mean, not a fucking soul. Papers lay everywhere, random junk littered the already disfigured carpet. There was this feed again, it was coming from a radio unit on the security desk. Screeching. Something about emergency personnel and civilians and some such. Standard PR shit.

I couldn't give a fuck.

By the time I got through the doorway all I could hear were screams and sirens, howling in the night.

Screams and sirens.

My blood started to boil, across my veins and up to my head – still reeling from that bourbon smash. My hands started to shake.

Before me lay the sickly-spawned metropolis, cast into a whirl of dismay. A large crowd had gathered upon the boulevard. Stark faces in the orange streetglow. At their feet lay black silhouettes: humps of soft flesh bent at impossible angles. Streaks of dried blood on concrete.

On the corner, an ambulance stood deserted, headlights still on. Stained sheets hung from the rear opening. No sign of the paramedics.

Sirens were getting nearer. Screams rose down the hood. Twin police cars suddenly roared across the intersection, red and blue lights reflecting on skyscraper façade. For sure, the pigs weren't headed *here*.

If anything, they were getting away.

Where did you go, Lily?

None of it made sense, the riots, the blood, the smoke... the wails of agony, rising higher and higher into the night, pools of inner depth drained over the artificial landscape, like colors melding over canvas. Meaningless and present.

It was too much.

Had to leave, too. Couldn't stand there so I ran – I was scared and I wanted to see you, just hold you. I wanted to be there.

The streets flittered at an alarming speed. I was going fast as I could. The echoes were coming and

going, dead quiet and then lashing out from all sides. The city was having a nightmare. Feverish.

Banners rolled down high windows spelled "Repent". Homeless huddled together, prostrate in dark corners. Children gaped soundlessly from poorly lit doorways. Women stared at the sky, weeping.

They saw me, you know, just looked as I ran by, like cattle grazing in a field. Was-I out of reach? There had to be hope, still. They should have been running.

I only stopped to catch my breath. Reached for my phone. *Out of service*. Might have known. Sweat oozing down my neck. Wasn't much of a jogger.

A faint *click* caught my attention. Two corners down rose the marble stairs of the World Trade Office. This one suit sat there, lighting a cigarette with a silver butane lighter. Young guy, round my age. Taken a different path. Briefcase cracked open, papers cascading down the stairs like a waterfall.

I walked towards him, already limping from the strain. "Hey, man," I started, "the fuck's going down?"

The suit wouldn't answer. Didn't even move. I got up to his side and lowered my voice. "It's ok, calm down, I just want to know what's happening, that's all."

That clean-shaven, gel-haired icon of a man just stared blankly into nothing. Sinews real tense. Jaw locked. Temples pulsating.

"Who are you?" he suddenly spat out, more a statement than a question. "You're nobody."

Then I saw this next-gen taser gun in the briefcase. I froze. What had he done? What had he *seen*? "Ok, man, I don't want any trouble, I'm just gonna leave, ok?" I started backing up. The suit sat still. I was headed down the stairs when I noticed the sprawled papers read "Terrorist Attacks - Security Directives" in bold print.

"They want us to stay in," the other guy hissed through clenched teeth. "Keep us tight."

"But why," I asked, dumbfounded.

"Chaos. Chaos all over. From the docks to the suburbs. Highways blocked. Airways jammed. Total grid lock. At first the bodycount was just standard shit, you know, random fuck up. Hell, even some promise in that, you know, opportunities. But then it skyrocketed. Nothing anyone's ever seen. Coming from all sides. No stopping it. Worldwide, man, world fucken wide." He was shaking. "That's no terrorist attack. But it can't be a coincidence."

"But then what..."

"Goddamn Centaurians!" he blurted out. "Get in your head and make you to do stuff, just to fuck with you, you know? Just for show, cause they can blow it up to shit, man, anytime they want. Little sadists. Don't want to get their hands dirty. Sending our own to do their work. But not me, no -" he reached for his briefcase, "I got *prepared*, see? Clean, bro. Gotta make sure you're *clean*."

I turned tail and ran, that exact second. Flew down the marble stairs like a fucken rat. Didn't want to stick around. Thought he was gonna fry me, Lily. In the back.

Didn't. Fucker must have been saving charges. Sounds like something a suit would do.

I fucking hate suits.

But he must have been right about something. People were told to stay inside. Lock themselves up. Turn places into prisons. And it's funny, you know, because that's what you said would happen the second this city went south.

And I was just thinking about that, Lily, about the way we talked about it, the stuff you said the night before.

But then I lost my trail.

I had come to Union Square. And there in the opening were graffiti, freshly done in every direction. And as I walked alone in the Square I began to shiver. Wailing sirens and cries of despair echoed from the recesses of this great metropolis, burning rage festered in its bowels and the great beast was going mad, I could sense it crawling under my skin.

There were *circles*, Lily.

Great red circles.

You were crying when we first met. All the way back in that pub, one plastic glass of wine in front of you, lined by three crumpled napkins. The neon light so dim, but I swore I could see tears in your eyes, and you know, Lily, I just couldn't bear it. So much pain in this world and you, looking so sad. It didn't seem fair. I guess nothing ever was.

You kissed me first. Wasn't expecting that. Hell, I just wanted to listen, hoping you could find... something. Release, a friendly face to talk to. A shoulder to cry on, maybe.

But you kissed me and you didn't want to quit, and that's why I didn't stop you. And it's weird, thinking back on it, the way you always seemed to know what you wanted, even when you were weeping all alone at the end of some stupid dive in the middle of nowhere. You never were miserable, Lily.

Asked me if I felt it, too, the way this world was rotten to the core and we were just slaves to the system - not to nature, mind you - but to culture, and just getting farther away from the essence of things, each and every year, just slipping away to the only logical outcome.

Every time we were together we'd joke about that, how it didn't make any sense, this modern life, no matter how you looked at it, from any angle it was obvious... School was shit and church was worse and work was constantly fucking us over. And we hated them all, these fucken bosses and landlords and preachers and politicians. All different faces of Authority – that fucken plague upon the Earth and that the bloody racket had gone on for ten thousand years. Yeah, all so fucken obvious, it was everywhere and in everything, anyone could see it and they could see it all the time, like us.

So how come things always got worse?

It made you so fucking angry, every time you heard about it, or saw it, or felt it. New laws, more species going extinct, corporations ass-raping human rights on a daily fucken basis and getting away with it. We hated the jobs we worked and the people we worked for and the things we needed to buy with the money. And they were all in league with it, everyone in power, everyone important. "It's the only way to get ahead in this world," you said, "use, abuse and exploit, there's no other way. People will love you for it." And you specially hated those who tried to do things differently: left-winged activists, social democrats, lobbyists, mainstream environmentalists. You said they missed the point, and even worse, they made people believe you could actually change the system, that the system was even fucking *changeable*.

That was the biggest joke of them all.

Every time we met we came to the same conclusions, we'd laugh about it. It felt good to just say it out loud. Get it out. But in the end nothing ever changed and we didn't know why. Least, I didn't have a clue.

But you figured it out, somewhere along the way. Said I had to look at the big picture. Dig deeper. It started getting weird, then.

And I lost you.

You were always talking about hope, about the end of things. "Hope is mediacy," you kept repeating over and over. "And chaos is the truest form of freedom." But I had no idea what that meant. You lent me all these books and they were boring as shit. They were just words. They were vital to you, but not to me. It's you that was important.

And as I stood in the empty Square I remembered, then, that note in your bag I'd seen once – it had fallen down the chair where you'd put it and I'd glanced at it, quickly. It was a gnarled and greasy receipt, but you'd drawn that on the backside. Over and over again.

"You out your mind, *boy*?" said Bossman Ron across the steel-grated door to the pawnshop. He was aiming a .44 lever-action shotgun in my general direction. Wouldn't have kept insisting down the barrel of a gun better fitted for drill mining, but as chance would have it, most of my job was inventory, and so I *knew* we didn't stock any shells for that fucking thing. Ron's sun-streaked face was contorted in some atrocious expression, muscles knotted around his mouth in a twisted pout. "I's down you right where you stand!", he insisted.

"It's me, man, Jesus, calm the fuck down will you?" But Bossman didn't recon. His demented stare just pierced through me. I could tell he was seeing someone, rather something else there altogether.

He flinched. "Is you alright, but is you, really?" Spastic squints leering at me – an unnerving gesture.

"Well, I'm late, am-I? Ain't that a fucken clue?" Please, you fucking idiot, please help me.

At which he seemed to relax a bit, left ear twitching - possible sign of relapse. Some hoarse chuckle escaped his throat, a painful attempt at laughter.

"Eh, you always some little pissant, boy. I can tell you not a case o'crazies like them others fuckos around back, crackin' around, tryin' t'steal all my *shit*."

"Hell no," I sighed with relief, "now please lemme in. Fucken insane out here."

With that, Ron unlocked the door and closed it quick behind me. The place had a rancid smell, old sweat and deep-fry. The merch had been clunked all over the counters, mitts and baseballs and bootleg VCDs. Pornmag collections and game cartridges. Iceskates and jackknives.

"D'ya hear it, boyo, this fucking rapture?" He went to the rear window, looking out suspiciously, then picked up an opened can of pop and drained it.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I don't get it, man. They talked about terrorist attacks. Some loonie fuck in a suit told me it was aliens, man. *Fucking aliens*!" I thought about sitting but it just seemed safer to stand. "That's a good one", jeered Ron, snorting in amusement. "Yea, green goblins yon just kookin' in yer noggin, I'd be fucking damned. Nah –" he got dead serious then, "it's the government, boy, high-up centralstate spooks just pulling strings, they've got it all under raps but I've cracked their code, ye know. I see how they move."

"Come on, man," just more non-sense, "that's even crazier shit right there. I mean, who..."

"Not who, you twat, they!"

The Bossman's arms started flaying about as he tried to explain, and all the while I kept eyeing that veering shotgun, just going over the details in my head making sure the thing couldn't possibly be loaded.

"A shiny fail-safe plan, boy, means they've voted all this Mary-Joseph crap cause some other pencil-pushing shit didn't pan out. They planted the Semtex. Hardwire. A bang and is all down, boy. They pumped the VX in the subways. Whole transportation fucked. A clean mil dead. They built the virus, jerked it off on some bumhole. Rabid sick. They coded that fucken self-morph fuck worm that shut down the grid. Mah own till's fucken kablunk, dear sir boy. And then, then..." some mad look in his eyes, I swear, "they gave all this heat to these fanatic freaks and went ahead and gave 'em names, names, boy! A whole fucking grocery list with a blank fuck check and some live fuck rounds. They -"

"What, what..." What!? "You're saying all these things are going on, *right now*?" Holy shit, the man was worse than I thought.

"A plan B, boy, ain't not a plan C. I see how they move. Ain't not pretty like me. That how it is, and is how it stays, boy. Grannies prayin' to the Baby Jesus now. Me, I'm goin' down with mah ship, *see*?" He bade me look around his palace of trash.

"But that's... I mean, this is just too goddamn big. Remember that saying? It's gotta be false info, Boss. Or at least part of it. Fabrication."

Ron didn't believe me. "Those aren't not assumptions, boy. Just think, who else has the manpower and the tech to pull that kinda hail and brimstone clusterfuck? And why would they tell us to lock-in? Fucking mongrels, don't they know it's the *fastest way to die*?"

I was dumb struck. This was a fucking nightmare. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't find the way. I -

"Oy, now, settle down, boy." Ron was patting me on the back. His breath stank of cheese crisps and caramel. "We's not lettin' you get in the harm's way, won't we? You just *visualize*, ok? Now, I'm be back proper before you know, right? Ain't nothing be scared."

"What?" I nearly chocked. "You said you were staying! You know, sinking with the ship and all?"

"Aye, I'll be doing that down-a-sinking, thank you so much kind sir, just now that yer here I's has some errands to run, you know?"

This couldn't be real.

"What the fuck!? You're going back out?"

Errands. Fuck no. That lying sack of pus was going after his ex-wife, for sure. Now that his precious store lay inside relative margins of safety, other priorities came to mind. Old scores to settle. New muscled arguments.

Poor woman. Hoped he wouldn't find her.

"Boy," he started. Holy shit, there we go. "you are late as usual for your night shift at this here establishment, and I am the sole owning proprietor of this fucking establishment, and since you here work for me as acting counter-boy, you will stop that un-business-like mouthing-off and help me find ammo for this, my risk facilitator. Or you would prefer I fired your whiny ass in the literary meaning sense of the term, back out to the alley and the scum filth lyin' there?"

Motherfucker. My heart skipped a beat. I was trembling with rage. Now that's a boss for you, never forget the rank of command, right? *Fuckwit*. But anger wouldn't do. Fear followed in. He was gonna leave me here. Fastest way to die, he said.

Right.

"Sure, Ron, out you go, in I stay. But I know for a fact we don't stock shells for that. Best leave it here, take the 9mm and go."

His face lit up like a Christmas tree. Everything was going Ron today. Chances are she was already dead. But Bossman here didn't spare the expanse, oh no, he was a man of principle.

"Ok, I leave. You take this," he handed the shotgun over. "Don't worry also, blackouts keep hitting them sectors at random. Just make sure *nobody* gets in, ok now?"

And as howls of anguish rose into the night, so did Bossman Ron set out on the big town.

On the counter was a bottle of Wild Turkey.

My stomach turned.

I'd barricaded myself inside the store room. Pushed a huge metal stockshelf against the door and ground down against the wall with a teetering flashlight. I feasted on frozen burritos and iced tea. Arms around my knees. Shivering all over. Hugging myself for warmth. Pupils dilated. Pulse erratic. A textbook panic attack. Breathe in, breathe out. You're gonna be fine. You're gonna be ok.

What would you say to me now, Lily?

You know, I could actually sense it then, I could feel it all over. The blood, the smoke, the revolution. The frailty, the power. As the walls tumble down so all things come within reach. Just like I could reach you, back then, when you were close and you buried your lips against my neck. When you held me. That surreal sensation of lust and belonging, of kinship and right. The vast array of heights I didn't even conceive until they were mine. And then utterly gone.

I could feel it.

Red circles burning the world.

But I couldn't understand.

Breathe in, breathe out.

So what, Lily? If everything is connected, like you said, and we're all just domino pieces, through death hymns or circles or what fucking ever, what was my place, then? How did I fit in to your charade of push and shove and hide and seek?

Why couldn't you love me?

Because I'm falling, Lily, I'm falling like the piece you said I was, and before I hit rock bottom I'm gonna shove something else real fucken hard, but I'd like to know before I do, just who the fuck pushed the first piece and why. Odds are I'm going under soon, and I don't want to die ignorant.

You're gonna be ok. You're gonna be fine.

Come back to me, Lily.

You said we'd be together, at the end of it all, we laughed about it but you meant every word, I know you

did. We knew the perfect spot to just lie there and wait for it, watch it all, savor the whole fucken fiasco: Primus Imperium Tower, highest in the city. Ninetyfour glorious stories up, home of the *fine fleur* of industrial society.

But you left.

Then bodies were piling up all around, hundreds and thousands and millions. Every hour someone tried to break in the shop and I could hear the chains and the lock and the steel and the repeated assaults on that metal contraption. Out there ringed machine gun rattle, explosions of varying caliber. Civil war was just a cuter word for shitstorm.

One night you told me chaos was not to be feared, but embraced. That in anyway it could only bring back what lay dormant inside us, even though we thought new situations were rising, these were just the release of clenched potential. Eventually, through the destruction and the confusion that must logically follow edifices of slavery, our very origins would reactivate.

And there was beauty in that, you argued. We could finally become what we were. "It'll snow black on the day of the end," you'd say, "as ashes of the old world rise up to the skies and spread down, evenly upon the earth. And as death leads to mourning, so will suffering fade to revelry, and those who survive must inherently know such bliss as was before symbols bound us to exist as mediate beings – *indirect animals*."

Only words, Lily.

Meanwhile I lay on the broken tiles of the store room and braced myself for the worse. Images kept crawling up my mind, insistent. I would never be rid of that. And with me the world had changed at last. The Red Circle Hymn was here. Everyone must take up verse and sing.

And as I pondered the death of Civilization, my eyes started to close, heavy with fatigue. Thoughts drifted aimlessly, from meaning to nothingness, purpose to peace. But before my gaze finally shut, through blurred veils of slumber did flickering light reveal a faded yellow cardboard box tucked under the lower shelf of the last storage unit, all crumbled and covered in dust.

It spelled .44 sabot slugs in faded black print.

White noise woke me shortly before noon. The pawnshop TVs chanting random snow screech in sync. I went out the storeroom, shotgun blazing, safety off, fully loaded. A futile gesture. There was no one out there, just a slant of pale light creeping through turquoise blinds. The locks held tight.

In a whirl I packed everything I could, more junk food, soda cans, lighters, the bottle of bourbon and a pair of sunglasses. There was no cash in the register: Bossman Ron had retired.

Felt ill. Too much sugar, not enough sleep. The smell blowing in the air vent was difficult to describe, let alone inhale. Hastened off and out.

When I got to the street the landscape had taken a turn for the worse. It unraveled before my weary eyes, this wounded scenery bathed in sunrays, a portrait of luminous agony.

Cars wrecked into trucks, trucks wrecked into walls. Blood spattered upon concrete. Myriad small fires simmering against broken metal, shrunk from the night's mayhem. Pavement cracked like mirrors. Rancid fumes blew from the sewers.

People ran aloof, looking over their shoulders, some snarling like beasts, some whimpering to themselves, dragging their feet. Errand suits and coveralls and pajamas and uniforms. They all went in opposite directions, there and back again, lost and afraid.

And I walked amongst them.

Red circles shone on every surface, spray-painted on the walls and lampposts and mailboxes. Etched into plastic, carved into wood, lathed with ink. A dusty wind carried twirls of white square papers, same round figure, same crimson hue.

And overhead, beyond the canopy of towers, antennas and skyscrapers flew hordes of pigeon in eddies, and every now and then one fell down completely, knifing through deep heaven blue to crash upon the ground.

Metropolis was now stage to tragedy. Alarms ringed out dissonant. Burning barricades blocked the main arteries. Doorways boarded up. Empty bullet casings tinkering underfoot.

Here and there, bodies lay scattered across the macadam, no few of them in uniform – disarmed, evidently. Shadows fell from high windows. Dying screams snuffled by cries of anguish. And with them, the smell, the death-stench, quailing into nostrils with the midday heat and the spread of rotting fluids.

And I couldn't help but smile, somehow, wandering through the chaos and the rubble. Didn't think it would end like this. Screams and smoke and weeping babies. Funny way to go, for a place like this. I kept to the alleys, steered clear of the subway. If Bossman was right, there were infected and fanatics and neural-ill roaming about, the entire Net was dissolved and not one place – virtual, material or symbolic – was spared from change.

Silent, tired, lone – I made my lowly way in a world undone. I was headed for the perfect spot, *our spot*, you know, the one we talked about, all the way up on the Imperium rooftop. I knew you'd be there, Lily, waiting for me at last. Then we could see it all unfurl, together.

You always said security would fry us the second we stepped foot, but I had my doubts, cause when *it* started I bet they really wouldn't give a fuck who popped up, if it was me or Lincoln or Chairman Mao. These rent-acops had wives and cars and children and shit. After all, I was just a nobody, right?

Wrong. My insignificance didn't weigh in the matter. Should have known.

When I broke through the courtyard and climbed over the iron crowd control barrage, piles of rotting diseased simply lay there, sprawled out every which way. Swarms of flies feasting on the disemboweled. Must have been a hundred corpses out there. The way they went, seemed like they were storming the tower, looking for shelter.

Or vengeance.

Slowly I tread the soiled asphalt, trekking through this morbid hurdle. The stairs were thick with dead. I climbed the flight of polished granite and walked through the ivory columns of the Imperium tower. The modified glass doors had been shattered, shards of crystal grey lining the entryway. From the looks of it, security had sallied forth, held their ground for some time and were either overwhelmed or beat in retreat. Strategic or forced. Couldn't tell.

The lobby interior had been ransacked. White leather couches overturned, sculptures thrown down, walls riddled with bullet holes. Baked blood on persian rug. The main fountain, adorned with the statue of Jupiter, spouted pink water over floating corpses.

I heard the mechanism too late. Rotating hydraulics. When I looked up it was there, slightly over the reception desk: an automated gun turret. Security cameras would have every angle on me now. Biometrics scanning my bone structure for the most plausible file match. Would they find any?

A metallic hiss filled the rank atmosphere.

"Hold it, sonny!"

But there was something wrong with the sound. It was broken, modulated by analog imbalance. Coms must have been damaged.

"This is SecChief Osmond. You are trespassing over private property." *Fuck.* "Vacate the premises at once. In compliance with order 503-B of the Public Security Protocol, the use of lethal deterrents has been authorized to ensure the protection of key personnel."

The turret was pointed straight in my direction. A single side-LED gleamed yellow. But it was flickering.

The failing voice continued. A tone that hinted on weariness or perhaps even compassion ringed out the filters.

"These are live rounds, son. Get out now."

Something didn't add up. Wasn't like mercs to talk first. Least, not when public relations were not an issue. Must have been a reason. *Gotta get to Lily*, I thought. *Buy some time*. "Tell me, Osmond," I yelled out to whatever mics were planted in the place, "how many men you got up there? I'm thinking your crew got kinda thin when they realized there was no payday next week, eh?"

A moment of silence ensued. Then blunt distorted underruns popped up from the speakers. The voice came back, this time definitely concerned.

"Listen, kiddo. Can't let you in. You might be compromised. Help is on it's way, when they come we'll do whatever we can to help you and your family, ok? But we can't take the risk right now. Please, just run off. I'm sorry."

I stepped a foot to my right. The turret took a whole second to catch up. The LED was bleeping out increasingly.

SecChief became insistent.

"Please, son, leave while you still can."

Suddenly the LED turned bright red. I lunged myself out of the way and straight toward the reception desk. Then the round-barreled machine gun opened fire, arching out behind me, sending splashes of water into the air, followed by spurts of congealed blood and wrecked pieces of tile.

I jumped over the reception desk and into the turret's blind spot. The machine started moving frantically, wincing left and right, hydraulics failing, response broken.

Now on the other side I could see half a dozen security screens, all streaked with static. They showed room images, hallways, even side streets, and flipped away at random. I tried navigating the board but the input was offline. For a second there I swore I could see a large conference room where at least twenty suits were hauled up, checking their phones, looking out the windows.

Executives in perfect health.

Then all the screens tilted at once and there shone a single red circle, right in the fucking middle. That's it. The worm must have eaten through.

Surveillance was down.

I was almost there, Lily. Almost by your side. Would you wait for me, I wondered. Oh, Lily, please wait for me.

Put two and two together and realized the motherfuckers were holed up somewhere waiting for evac. Could be no different. Help wasn't coming on foot, that much was fairly fucking obvious. Now with the weapons system all monkeyshit they'd take action soon, make for the roof and wait for the choppers on location. But that was *our spot*, Lily. I don't know how you got up there but once they'd found out they'd shoot first and thank God later, then you'd be making it down a hell of a lot faster than you came up.

Alright. I'm coming, Lily. I'm coming.

Took a while finding the keys to the utility elevator. No time to crawl up a hundred levels. Tore down a floor plan. Found a dead super's set, pried it from his bloodstained belt and made for the backrooms. Backup sodium lights beamed from steel-grated corners. They cast a sick green hue over the bare concrete hallways that led there.

Twin blast doors clinked open and I went in. The thing was still running. Punched in the top floor and

waited while the box was winched up the spine of Imperium Tower.

Hold fast, Lily. Soon we'll be together.

The power must have gone out around the 81st floor. Wasn't expecting that. Had to improv: punch the ceiling hatch over, crawl up the tunnel to 82nd and pry the doors open. When I came out of there, dusty as fuck, I found myself on a deserted office level, gasping.

I was running out of time.

The way I figured, Osmond'd likely split security twofold, one for personnel protection and one for me. Then again, chances were they might chicken out and just rush the lot to the rooftop. Wouldn't have much data now. Difficult call to make.

Either way I had to make fast.

The emergency staircase was just around the bend to the next hallway. I ran as quick I could but my strength was slipping away. I'd spent the last two days fasting and running about. Legs felt like wet rags under me. Vision blurred by sweat. Never mind. *Go on*.

85th.

86th.

I went up and up the stairs, rounding about, breath hoarse, desperate pants stifling out of crackled lips.

92nd.

93rd.

Fresh, cool air was gulfing down the staircase, and for a second there I saw myself over that rooftop, conquering the world, waltzing with you, my Lily, my one –

The first bullet ricocheted on the steel railing in a flurry of sparks, stopped me dead in my tracks. The second bounced off concrete and chipped off a whole chunk before I could spin round. The third went in and out my side. Never saw it coming. Forced back in shock then saw the door to the 93rd ajar, one rent-a-cop in the opening, clean-cut and leering straight at me. Chevrons all over. Before I hit the wall I blasted loose, shot down the staircase, yanked the lever and crushed that trigger once more.

The man had double-backed across the opening but the sabot slugs punched through the door like butter and sunk fast into flesh. I heard his screams as I braced my knees on the recoil.

Osmond was down.

Didn't even blink. Adrenaline filled my blood black and I fucken flew down the stairs and out into the hallway where three more men were desperately holding up a bloody retch in uniform. Fuckers wouldn't let go. Unloaded in their direction and sent gushes of crimson flesh spurting across the walls. They all fell down in a mass of loose carcasses. More screams echoed down the hallway and so I climbed over the retches and out to a vast expanse of offices, cubicles and designer furniture.

Tens of suits were running here and there, ties flying about, briefcases and mobiles rebounding off carpet. These were human: runny make-up, toupees askew, sweat-stained shirts. Contorted faces in fluorescent light.

Pangs of sheer agony pulsed through my right side, sending waves of nausea to my stomach. Vertigo spliced my vision. My knees were quivering and my hands were shaking and I was seeing *red* – these fuckers had gone too far and I couldn't hold back. They were everywhere, they were always there. Wouldn't stop. Wouldn't let go. I couldn't... they'd just...

Not now, Lily. Not now.

Like quails they scattered before my wake, still I pushed forward, shooting off peons, drilling holes into cubicle walls, sending splatters of blood on kitten pics and fax machines. They all fled and flittered down the way. Like cattle they herded 'twixt twin hardwood doors into a vast opening.

The conference room.

And as they fell over themselves to reach the safety of that one great hall I abruptly ran out of ammo. Kept on clacking the lever but no shots came out, as though frozen in frenzy.

And I could see them all, in there, thirty more business men and women or so, aging, hand-tailored and scared to death.

Three of them were already fumbling through wallets to throw cash out on the table. Final sales pitch.

In the meantime, the wound in my side was bleeding profusely. Struck in a swoon the world was reeling, mixed with computers and desks and slug holes.

Oh, Lily.

I got down to one convulsive hump I'd shot in the spine and tore out one piece of his thousand-dollar suit. Stuck the thing halfway down the Wild Turkey, put the cork back on and went out to the meet the chairmen of the board.

They were all there, survivors in spite of everything. Must have been holed up some time now, in this fucken ivory tower. Ghosts of power-play. Reduced to this. Baffled, frantic. Humans without a clue. "Wasn't you," I chocked, laughing. I was starting to see. "Couldn't pull *that* off, motherfuckers. You're not the Circle."

Some shook their heads, blurting out words I couldn't make out. More cash was thrown on the table. Always the deal breakers, these corporate swine.

Spitting blood, I lit the rag.

Sixty wrinkled eyes widened instantly. Without delay I simply swung the bottle unto the room, and it shattered instantly, spewing flames across the mahogany table and out upon the chairs and curtains.

Screams gnarled out hoarse throats, snuffed out as I closed the twin doors and barred the handles with the shotgun. And I laughed and laughed.

"Not you, dumb fucks. Never were."

And as I limped away their cries rose up higher and higher as the fires roared on, until they were commingled together – the heat and the suffering, the old and the new.

So I hobbled away, bleeding and weaponless, slowly coming to that final opening at the end of history. And all of a sudden it *hit* me, Lily, I understood everything. I got it at last. The Red Circle Hymn. The chaos. The destruction – all of it.

And I just smiled, Lily.

I smiled.

It snowed black on Friday.

Just like you said it would.

Now I'm kneeling on the edge of the world, the Primus Imperium rooftop, with its glorious winds and a bird's eye view over burning metropolis, just like we planned, Lily. Just like we always planned.

Explosions keep hitting the bowels of this maze and I can see them, I can see this world breaking down on itself, the motions under movements and the wheels cycling in on themselves, projectiles sent by forces, hurling to the walls raised thousands of years ago by a caste of cruel fools. And with the accumulated strength does the odious creation finally fall. Rallying the species to its own means was the only way that could happen, and I know that now.

The burning fires send rancid ashes into the perfect sky, and the specks flit slowly down, floating on hot winds nourished by the infinite strength of rebellion.

Black snow falls on us all from above – signal of deliverance, freedom from authority, unfettering from the age-old system of symbols that kept us from ourselves and each other.

There's just so much blood, now. It's in and out and everywhere around me, and I feel so weak. Fucken hurts. Fucker shot me good. Can't hold on much longer. Does it even matter, love? Does anything matter, anymore?

They're coming, I can see them in the distance. Three black copters, high military, flying straight in this direction, as the very flames I've set are now roaring up to my post. Evac. They're soaring right to the Imperium to salvage the elite, the *crème de la crème*, but they don't know. It's over, Lily.

Ah! The world is no more!

Laughing, I see the choppers suddenly veer into the emptiness and sway back and forth as their engines begin to fail. And then they are struck. Like ravens they each plummet from the sky, one by one – black plumes so beautiful against the crimson dusk, falling for evermore, plunging down to the burning mess of the primitive future.

Oh, Lily!

I saw the red circles you'd drawn on these pieces of paper, and then you'd held me tight, so lovingly, and I forgot everything. We'd kissed. You smelled of summer rain, then. Oh, Lily...

"There's billions of us," you whispered to me, "waiters and clerks and teachers and people all across the Earth, whose pain and hatred for slavery are constantly inflamed. Our hope of peace with this artificial world is dying, we are coming to the ineluctable conclusion. With each disillusionment, with each fragment we lose to culture, we get closer to rupture. Our fall will be grandiose. Complete and utter chaos. Some don't know the words and can't explain how they feel. Others know the words and simply don't know what to do. Mutilated existence is like an infection, just there beneath the veneer of reified abstractions. We can feel it growing. Soon we'll start and we won't be able to stop, cause our very natures compel us to go forward. They could have stopped this. Each and everyone of these fuckers could have stayed our hand, if they'd just given up that greed, that power. But they didn't. They won't. We'll stop it, then. All of us. Just waiting for that time, you know, that rallying cry. But the Red Circle Hymn will come, and when it does, this entire world will fall: three days of Revolution will wipe out ten thousand years of Civilization."

Oh, Lily. If only you were here now. I finally understand. You were never the *answer*, love.

You were just the question.

And I see, now, the domino pieces, the inconceivable movements of chaos twirling ever different – I see how you moved.

You were already falling when I met you. These tears, they were you, keeling over. And then you pushed me, Lily, so I went forth, yet another wayward projectile in the rebellion. You sent me here. You knew I'd be armed. You knew the elite would swarm the Imperium, bracing for escape. All of us, just aligned to that end, to the end of the world.

We were never meant to see each other again.

And I see *them*, now, the flames getting higher, the smoke, the black snow. And I see the pieces, falling, crushing each other, here and there and all over this world, tumbling over themselves... they're falling, Lily, we're all falling...

Freedom at last. I love you, Lily. I love you.