

Bad-Ass²Faeries

Just Plain Bad



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Way Of The Bone

James Chambers

AMONG NEW YORK'S GRIMY BUILDINGS AND THEIR PATCHWORK OF rooftops spread the telltale flickers and momentary distortions of light that signaled the presence of Gorge's enemies. They gathered in the shadows and quiet places of the city's high perches, forsaking the beauty of the Faerie Kingdoms for this world of coarse landscapes and ugliness. No doubt their spies had spread word that Gorge was gathering magic in the mortal world, and though they couldn't know what he planned when he took the stage tonight, they couldn't let whatever it might be go unanswered. In less than eight hours, Red Gorge would perform the biggest show of their long career.

The most important of Gorge's life since his exile.

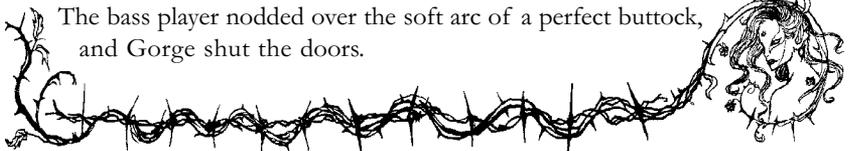
And there's still much to do, thought Gorge.

He turned from the window to where half a dozen unconscious people lay scattered like wilted flowers. Dev, his drummer, was dead to the world, still dressed in his immutable costume of denim and motorcycle boots, entangled with three sleeping women on one of the couches. Empty bottles and mounds of pills peppered the room. Someone had smashed a torchiere lamp through the widescreen television. Gorge opened the first adjoining room. Inside, Roald, his guitarist, sat meditating on the balcony, his bed empty, his room clean.

Gorge retreated. Next door, his bass player, who looked like he hadn't yet slept, entertained a handful of women in bed. Three of them stared at Gorge's naked body with open lust.

"Sound check at four o'clock. If you're late, I'll have your balls," Gorge said. "I fucking mean it, Tank. Don't screw this gig up."

The bass player nodded over the soft arc of a perfect buttock, and Gorge shut the doors.



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He cherished the chaos and abandon these people brought to their celebrations, sweetened so much by their mortality and the very real possibility of dying for a good time. Gorge had known excess before his exile, but it had been bland in comparison, without consequence and therefore cheapened. Here, life was lived on the hard edge of a genuine abyss, and he found it addictive. He'd participated fully for many years, but drugs and alcohol didn't affect him the same way they did the others, and anyway it was the atmosphere of risk and the sense of blind defiance that got him off. This was the way to live: with one's ego and libido unchecked, forever ready to flip the bird at convention.

Back in his room, Gorge opened the curtains and let his skin drink in the midday heat. An old melody from the Faerie Kingdoms flashed through his thoughts, and he sat on the edge of the bed, picked up his guitar, and strummed while he sang the tune in a whisper. He felt a sense of falling into his past, when every day had been a thousand times more glorious than this one, and he had been worshipped, and lived among kings. But the melody Gorge heard perfectly in his mind could not be played as intended here. He put down his guitar and chose that moment to tell himself, as he had every day for more than half a century: *Now I am free.*

Behind him, Delilah uncoiled from the sheets and cupped herself against Gorge's back, wrapping her legs around his waist. Her skin, still damp with sweat from a morning spent in passion, plastered to Gorge. The gnarled knobs of flesh over his scapulae tingled as she cleansed their weeping scar tissue with a moist washcloth from a bowl on the nightstand, and then caressed them with her fingertips and her lips. Electrified with anticipation of tonight's concert, she and Gorge felt more playful and intimate than they had in years.

Delilah hugged him tight, so that her words reached Gorge on the palanquin of her honeyed breath, as she said, "Tell me again about how it was in the Faerie Kingdoms."

Gorge settled against her, caressing the silky tops of her thighs. "Which version do you want today? The paradise I sacrificed for my life here with you, or the gilded cage from which I broke free to save my soul?"

"How do *you* see it today?"

"Today, I see through new eyes. Today it's a delicate fruit rotten at its core, and I will destroy it before it spreads its taint."

"How will you do it?"

"I will find the way, the Way of the Bone."

Delilah glided her tongue over Gorge's neck and slid her hands downward along his chest and abdomen, but he stopped her with a gentle touch.

"You'll keep me here all day if I let you," he said, with a wicked grin. "I've got interviews and a sound check."

Flashing Gorge a luscious pout, Delilah rose and moved to the bathroom. Gorge watched, captivated by her deep, blue-black hair, the shapes and textures of her body, and the sublime way her curves and muscles shifted when she walked. She hadn't aged since he met her more than five decades ago; he'd brought

enough magic with him for that, at least, when he'd been banished here, much more in fact than any of those who'd exiled him had ever suspected.

While Delilah sang in the shower, Gorge dressed in black leather pants, a faded orange Killing Joke T-shirt, and a black jacket. On his way out of the suite, he dialed up the Motörhead playlist on Dev's iPod, cranked the stereo volume to full, and then let the door swing shut as the feverish opening riff of "Ace of Spades" kicked in. Guitars screeched, bass and drums thundered, and then came the shouts of sleeping people blasted awake.

Glancing at himself in the elevator wall mirror, Gorge noticed that he'd forgotten his make-up, and he spent a touch of glamour to get his appearance right. The public never saw Gorge absent black lipstick, eyes circled with kohl, and wild spikes of black hair rising from his hawkish face. His transformation to a human body had dampened his native faerie features, but Gorge emphasized their remnants for an exotic appearance. Today of all days, he needed to be the dangerous rock god to perfection; he wanted the undivided attention of millions. When Red Gorge played Madison Square Garden tonight, their performance would be televised live via satellite around the world, opening a tour that would take them to five continents. It was the first step in the last leg of the journey Gorge had begun before he'd been cast out of the Kingdoms.

Snow, a black man with the build of a professional wrestler, greeted Gorge on the twelfth floor. For ten years, Snow had been Gorge's personal assistant and bodyguard, and he'd also become an excellent sound engineer, helping the band plan their performances.

"They're gathering," said Snow, leading Gorge toward the concierge suite.

"I know. I saw them from the window."

"I counted a couple of dozen. Different types, but mostly blackjack sprites."

"Vicious little attack dogs." Gorge grimaced as he remembered the blood-thirsty blackjack sprites that had chewed his fiery, gossamer wings from his body before they'd left him in iron chains in the desert.

"You've trained me to see them, even when they keep themselves mostly invisible, but there are some I still don't recognize," Snow said.

"A handful from the Choruses are here," Gorge said. "As if they could turn song against *me*. And I sensed a trio of elementals, probably the Winds of Change, but I couldn't get a good fix on them."

"So, how do we play it?"

Gorge held back the wise-ass comment that rose to his lips and placed a reassuring hand on Snow's back. "We stay alert. Take down anyone of them that comes within ten feet, and we do what we've always done—play the fucking show. Let them come. They think I'm weak, that if they punish me long enough, I'll repent, or give up, or die. They have no idea how close I am to destroying them."

Snow opened the concierge suite door, and said, "Just keep your guard up, boss, 'cause me, I got bills to pay."

Gorge laughed then turned his attention to a young man inside, whose face glinted with silver piercings. The man was nervous; Gorge played on it, sizing him

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up with a stony glare, before he flopped onto an easy chair and said, “So, what the fuck do you want to know?”

The man jumped at the sound of Gorge’s voice, then introduced himself as Kenny Choi, editor for *Guitar Gun* magazine. The next thirty minutes passed with a series of questions about everything from Gorge’s early underground recordings to his influences to what he thought about illegal music downloading, and Gorge delivered every rude, indifferent answer he could think of, grinding hard on his punk-inflected image.

“So, uh, *Way of the Bone*, your new album, out last month. The singles, especially the title song, have been burning up the charts, but there’s more to it. It’s kind of a concept album, right?” Kenny said. “What’s the inspiration behind that?”

Gorge grimaced, counted silently to ten, then said, “It’s my fucking life story.”

“Wow. So, like, it’s a metaphor?”

“Yeah, a metaphor.” Gorge slid into his stage voice, and its effect on Kenny was immediate. “About a musician who was the greatest musician who ever lived. I mean, he had, like, headphones plugged directly into the music of the spheres, right? And the music he composed brought tears to the eyes of the dead. His music made virgins tremble. It made royalty melt. And even though he lived in a place where musical talent was a natural gift to nearly everyone, there was no one better than him. So, this guy, he becomes friend to kings and queens, the confidante of emperors and empresses. They even initiate him into the Flock of Eternity, the 1,000 entrusted with all the secrets of the great Kingdoms.”

Gorge kicked his feet up on the coffee table in front of him and sneered. “Except it all turns out to be a steaming load of dog shit.”

He dragged out a pause to let his story breathe in Kenny’s mind before he continued: “Because it was all just a way for these uptight pussies to break him, to keep him in an invisible prison, and make sure he did what they wanted him to do. And when he’d finally had enough, when he spurned their laws and castrating traditions, and pursued the music they’d forbidden, they took him down hard and fast, mutilated him, and cast him off to what they considered Hell. But he only got stronger there. He rose again. He reclaimed his music, and with it came serious fucking magic, and now he’s going to bring darkness down on all Creation.”

“The Way of the Bone?”

“The dark way, the music that makes gods of men.”

“Fucking giving me chills here, man. Tonight’s so gonna rock.”

“I know,” Gorge said, satisfied with the light he’d fired in Kenny’s eyes.

Gorge wanted everyone who heard his story to believe in its meaning if not its facts, even if only subconsciously, so that when they later retold it or wrote it down, they imparted some of their belief to others. Gorge’s tale resonated powerfully with the band’s fans, especially the young, because so many of them sensed that better worlds existed beyond this one, although there was no way for them to ever reach or even perceive them. They were left grappling with anger they couldn’t understand, with rage born of soul-deep frustration and the primal knowledge

that they were unjustly cut off from great glory. They were left only to dream, and Gorge was happy to inspire them. It had taken years to gather so many fans, and tonight, as Red Gorge played *Way of the Bone* live in its entirety, millions would be enrapt in Gorge's story, focused on *his* life, *his* desires. He would gather the power he needed to wedge open the Way of the Bone. His gain would seem small for the effort spent to obtain it, but the power would be of a special type that would enable Gorge to collect more from around the world, until he became unstoppable and could finally, fully open the Way, and bring all the wild, dark, slaving things in the universe right to the fucking doorstep of the Faerie Kingdoms.

Kenny stood. "Thanks for the interview. It was awesome to meet you. I've been a fan for practically my whole life. Your music is the real fucking deal, man."

"No shit. Keep dreaming, Kenny."

"Count on it."

As Kenny pocketed his digital recorder and his notepad and turned toward the door, Gorge spied it: a faint, bronze shimmer along his spine, like a shirt-seam dusted with glitter. Gorge recognized it at once and flew from his chair, shoved Kenny to the floor, and wrenched free the glimmering, semi-invisible thing that had grafted itself to the editor's back. Kenny screamed. The door flew open and Snow barreled in, just as Gorge rose, wrestling a winged lightning bolt. The creature whipped around, trying to fly free, dragging Gorge against the coffee table, but Gorge held tight, squeezing so hard, his knuckles turned white, until the thing gave up, flickered, and became fully visible. The slender creature had a snake's body topped by the miniature torso, arms, and face of a man. Its wings were like white crow's wings, and at the end of its tail dangled a knobby, spiral stinger.

"Holy...shit," Kenny said from the floor.

Snow wrapped a hand around the gun holstered under his jacket. "You okay, boss?"

Gorge nodded. "Look what I've caught."

"A dragon pixie."

"Correct."

"Then we're compromised."

"No, don't you get it? They really don't know what's coming. They sent this pathetic little thing to find out. They're as fucking clueless now as ever. Isn't that right?" Gorge said, looking closer at the dragon pixie. "Don't you know who I am? What I am?"

The pixie trembled, and in a hissing, surprisingly deep voice, it said, "They call you the Death-Singer, black-hearted from the day you were spawned."

"Yes." Gorge smiled, pleased. "And well they should."

"Holy...*shit*," said Kenny. "It's all fucking real? The magic shit? That's so mind-blowing!"

"Snow?" Gorge said.

Snow yanked Kenny to his feet, maneuvered him into the corridor, and said, "See you at the show tonight, kid," before he slammed the door shut. Turning back to Gorge, he asked, "So, what do we do with it?"

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“Do you know, little pixie,” asked Gorge, “what I’m about to accomplish?”

“You think you can open the Way of the Bone from this world, but they’ll stop you,” said the pixie. “She’ll stop you.”

“She? Who?” said Gorge.

Realizing it had said too much, the pixie clamped its lips tight.

“Is it Soniella? I don’t fear Soniella,” said Gorge. “The Flock doesn’t know what’s coming, else they wouldn’t have sent you here to find out. They’d just have killed me outright. But the law is the law, and they sentenced me to exile, not execution.”

The pixie said nothing.

“I know them better than you, little wyrm. There’s nothing more revealing of someone’s nature than being the object of their hatred and subjected to their torture. You’re about to learn that, because I’m only going to let you go after I’ve blinded you, sliced out your tongue, and cut off your hands, so that you can share nothing of what you know with my enemies. You’ll be my message to them, because I’ll leave you your ears, so that when the great destruction arrives on a crashing wave of sound, you may witness it.”

The pixie squealed and thrashed, but Gorge pressed it against the table. It lashed out with its tail, landing its stinger deep in Gorge’s arms several times, but Gorge ignored the wounds, and when Snow handed him a knife, the first thing he sliced away was the pixie’s tail, chopping off its sting with a single blow. The rest went quickly, and soon Gorge released the decimated creature out the window, cleaned up the room, and called for his next interviewer.



They ended the sound check with “Soniella,” Gorge’s ballad for the woman who’d been his lover in the Faerie Kingdoms. Soniella had tricked him into surrendering himself for exile, and the song told of a man betrayed by his true love, who then laments that he can’t find enough hatred in his heart for her. Only Delilah knew the story, so when she stormed backstage during the song, her fury seemed inexplicable to all but Gorge.

Her reaction pained him. He and Delilah were each other’s sanctuary, each the only one the other trusted with their life and soul. In his old existence, Gorge had never known such devotion, but in this world of cruelty and filth, it was essential. He had been cosmically lucky the day Delilah found him chained to rocky ground in Death Valley. He had terrified her, especially when he attacked her friend after mistaking his camera for a weapon, but he’d fascinated her, too. She freed him, gave him water, brought him home to her city, nursed him, and taught him how to *be* in the flesh of dust and ashes, and he took it as a sign that his way was good, and he must continue. If not for Delilah, he’d have shriveled up and dried in the desert sun until he rotted away to dander, blown across the sand.

He found her in his dressing room, drinking beer and scratching a charcoal stick across one of her countless sketchpads.

“I’m sorry,” he said.