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BOOK TWO: "OVERT-KILL"

(based on characters and situations created by Todd McFarlane)

adapted by

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PROLOGUE: (THE GIANT)

The building exploded.

A force equal to one hundred sticks of dynamite going off at once cut off the structure's legs. The foundation was pulverized and steel girders were blasted out of their footings. For an instant the building hung suspended in the air before its walls swayed, then crumpled under their own weight. Finally, like a house of cards falling in upon itself, the structure collapsed to earth. A dust cloud peppered with pebbles and concrete shrapnel rose to swallow the building whole.

At the same time every window within five blocks of the explosion shattered. For half a mile all around, the earth shook as if a quake had hit Palermo, Sicily's

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capital. Houses trembled and a number of sidewalks and roadways buckled. Except for the 1947 eruptions of Mount Etna on Sicily's eastern coast, the explosion instantly qualified as the worst local disaster in the island's history.

Local time was 9:07 A.M. The number of casualties: 0.

The explosion's objective had not been slaughter but to teach a lesson. Every shop and office in Palermo's business district had been warned an hour before the blast. The business target, Zio Johnno's International, had just enough time to pack up its files and boxes and clear out.

After that all anyone could do was watch from a safe distance.

The police knew sending a bomb squad into the building would do no good. Sicily was the birthplace of the Mafia, and, today, when the mob wanted a job done like this they didn't rely on any bomb.

Killing the building would serve the Mafia's purpose. Zio Johnno's, which had refused for years to associate itself with gangsters, now knew they had no choice but to cave in and cooperate or receive more of the same.

Either way the decision was Zio Johnno's. But it was the Sicilian government's decision whether or not to allow such terrorism to continue on their island, and their answer was, "No. Not without a fight." So the Sicilian government requested help from the Italian government across the Strait of Messina, and the *Repubblica Italiana* in turn contacted the United Nations for military assistance.

United Nation forces arrived in time to see the building die. Seconds later, as the dust and debris began to clear, they watched in disbelief as a man, or something that looked and walked like a man, strolled out of the rubble.

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"My God," one of the U.N. soldiers said in a raw whisper as he watched the figure step out of the dust cloud, "he's huge!"

Huge was an understatement. This was a giant, seven feet tall and almost as wide. Everything about him looked out of proportion, as if he had been put together with bits of other people's bodies. The giant wore stainless-steel gray armor with turquoise-colored shoulder guards, wristbands, ringlets, and trunks. A silver belt clasped by a golden chain girded his waist. Four golden discs contrasted with a six-inch-wide band of silver trim spanning across his chest, and he wore polished silver boots on his blunt legs. The only exposed part of the giant's thick body was what appeared to be an exactly round head, although not even this could be called normal. A square device with antenna replaced his right ear, and instead of a left eye he had a round red disc inset in a golden donut. Both of these devices were attached to the giant's bald head by metallic straps. The man's left eye (crowned by a bushy thick black brow), aquiline nose, thin lips, and firm chin and jaw were brutal and hard.

"What do we do, commander?" a second U.N. soldier asked.

The commander's answer was to jam his rifle's butt against his shoulder and bellow, "Fire!"

Bullets filled the air as the giant covered his head with his arms. Like metallic wasps the bullets buzzed faster than the eye could follow, only to flatten or ricochet off the colossal man's armor.

"Now what?" the second soldier asked.

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It was the giant who answered him this time. In a voice as deep and ominous as a kettle drum pounded from the bottom of a black cavern, the Mafia enforcer named Overt-Kill suggested the servicemen "Try running."

But Overt-Kill jumped before the U.N. forces could take the hint. As quick as lightning he closed the distance between himself and the soldiers. He landed with a THUD! and the impact ~~that~~ knocked the forces off their feet to the cracked pavement. They lay helpless and dazed around the giant, who roared with laughter until he heard someone behind him shout, "Take aim!"

Overt-Kill swerved around. What he saw almost started him laughing again. Instead, he barked, "Get out of here before I get mad."

A block away was a small detachment of specially-trained soldiers that had accompanied the U.N. forces to Sicily. These men, familiar with Overt-Kill's reputation as a force to be reckoned with, had brought along a laser cannon the size of a school bus to deal with the giant in case conventional methods failed. The cannon, cataloged as the "KP-211AF4 Special," was better known in military circles by its nickname, "The Silver God," a weapon capable of levelling out a small city.

Don't sound right

Give these dummies credit, they came prepared, Overt-Kill thought as he prepared to react. *But not prepared enough.*

As the Silver God's batteries swiftly charged to full-firing strength with a tooth-rattling *HUUMMMMM*, Overt-Kill jumped again. He pounced on the laser cannon and ripped it to shreds before the soldiers could fire.

By the time the servicemen regrouped, Overt-Kill was long gone. His mission had been accomplished when the building was destroyed. Routing the U.N. forces

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and taking out the Silver God had been bonuses, appreciated but afterschool activities all the same. There was nothing left to do now but go back to base and wait for new orders from his boss, Don Bartino.

Overt-Kill did not care where he was sent next. Only when. He loved his job as the Mafia's foremost enforcer and always looked forward to his next mission the moment the last one was completed. Following Don Bartino's orders was what he lived for, while the lull between jobs was as dull as death.

There was no way for Overt-Kill to know, but there would be no long lull before his next orders arrived from Don Bartino. Events were taking place that would force the Mafia to send him to New York City soon. Very soon.

CHAPTER ONE: (FRIENDS & FAMILY)

Queens, New York.

The man standing across the street from the Teddy Bear Daycare Center watched as a little girl, not quite a year and a half old, sprinted towards her mother. Woman and child were both beautiful, with rich caramel complexions and devastating big brown eyes, the toddler the mirror image of the parent. The man blinked back tears at the sight. In his previous life the mother, Wanda Blake, had been his wife. And, in another life, the girl, Cyan, might have been his daughter.

"Mama!" Cyan shouted, rushing into her mother's arms. "Mama! Mama!"

~~"What? What? What? Sweetie!"~~ Wanda's smile was glorious as she held her squirming, giggling child. "Were you a good girl for Mrs. Palmer?"

"No!"

Pam Palmer, Teddy Bear's supervisor, disagreed. "Don't listen to her, Wanda. She's always a good girl. If I had more kids like her at this daycare it'd sure make my life a whole lot simpler."

Cyan hugged Wanda and whispered, "Miss mama," into the woman's ear.

"I missed you, too, silly goose," Wanda whispered back before telling Palmer, "Yeah, we're very lucky. Cyan's been such a good baby for us, although, to tell

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the truth, when I found out I was pregnant, I'd have taken anything that came my way."

"Well, they say a happy baby is the proof of good parents. If that's true, you've both been great parents so far, you and Terry."

The man across the street decided to walk away. It was summer, the weather was hot, but he had on a trench coat and broad-brimmed hat. He pulled up the collar of his coat and tugged down on the front of his hat to hide his face from passerby. For the past three weeks the man had come here each weekday afternoon just to watch Wanda pick up Cyan. If he wanted to go on doing this he couldn't let a neighbor notice that he was wearing a sable and white mask that covered his entire head. It might make a stranger think that he was a danger to the children at the daycare, and nothing could be further from the truth.

His name was Al Simmons, and he was, in spite of everything that had happened to him lately, a good man. In the past he had been a Marine and then a special agent for a secret American government task force. He had also been a husband, faithful to and in love with Wanda ~~Blake~~. He was so in love with her that, after he was killed under circumstances he could not remember, Simmons seized the chance to return from the grave when a demon-lord named Malebolgia offered it to him.

All Simmons had wanted was to see Wanda again, and Malebolgia granted his wish. Sort of. Malebolgia resurrected Simmons five years after the man died, more than enough time for Wanda to remarry. Her new husband was Terry Fitzgerald, Simmons' best friend at the task force. Terry was also Cyan's father, which hurt because Simmons had wanted a baby when he was alive, almost as much as Wanda.

When Simmons was alive the doctors had told Wanda that she was incapable of conceiving a child, but five years later she and Terry had prove the doctors wrong. Wanda's body hadn't been the problem. It was Simmons'.

And speaking of Simmons' body, cheating death had put some wear and tear on it. Malebolgia had forgot to preserve Simmons' corpse during the half decade Simmons was dead. The result: Simmons' face and body were not a pretty sight.

Malebolgia didn't stop there. He also changed Simmons' fingers into claws and replaced the man's eyes with sockets of green eldritch energy. The demon-lord had done all this because he thought Simmons had potential. Malebolgia wanted Simmons to become a general in his expanding army of darkness, lost souls and monsters the demon-lord was assembling to attack Heaven on Armageddon Day. It was an offer Simmons was not anxious to accept.

For now, however, Simmons was cursed to roam the earth to pay for his wish. The demon-lord provided Simmons with the crimson and sable costume of a hellspawn--or "Spawn"--to wear, and imbued him with tremendous powers.

Tremendous, but not limitless.

With these powers Simmons could reduce a skyscraper into ashes. He could change his appearance (a trick he had used once to talk to Wanda in the guise of a blonde man working for the SPCA). He could even heal terrible injuries. But primarily his powers sustained his life.

Malebolgia didn't care how Simmons used these powers. Or how often. That was up to Simmons. When the powers were spent, however, Simmons would die a second and final time. He could not die before then, no matter how bad he may ever be harmed. But, when the powers were gone, his soul would return to the

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Malebolge, the eighth level of Hades, and become the demon-lord's permanent property.

Coming to Teddy Bear helped Simmons cope with everything that had happened to him. It also gave him something to look forward to during the week. When he watched Wanda and Cyan he forgot about his worries. During these precious moments he could pretend that he had never died, never accepted Malebolgia's offer, and that these were his wife and daughter. After three weeks he had gotten so good at pretending that this fantasy almost seemed real...until Wanda got in her car and took Cyan home.

Simmons normally waited until Wanda's tail lights disappeared around the corner before leaving. But, after hearing Terry's name, he decided to pack it up early. He couldn't pretend anymore today.

Thankfully there was always tomorrow.

Cyan did not fall asleep until 9:30 that night.

"Do you want me to put her to bed?" Terry asked.

"No," said Wanda, the child asleep in her lap. "I can do it."

There is no down-time in the Fitzgerald home from the moment Wanda picks Cyan up from daycare to whenever the girl goes to sleep. Both parents long ago learned that a toddler is a living pinball equipped with its own Dolby sound system. Most evenings Wanda and Terry run out of energy before their child does, and some evenings Cyan's endless running, bumping, chattering, pleading, and crying wears on their nerves. But every night Cyan falls asleep and the little monster instantly turns into a little angel. A sleeping healthy baby is the most

perfect thing on earth, and when Cyan falls asleep the sight is a balm to Wanda's frayed nerves.

In the nursery the mother laid Cyan in the crib. The sleeping girl moans, something not right, until Wanda puts a toy kitty, Fritz, in Cyan's arms. All is well then as the child stuffs a thumb in her mouth and rolls over on her side. Wanda pulled the blankets up to Cyan's chin, the central air keeping the nursery cool.

"She's something else," Terry said from the doorway.

"I think so."

Terry came in and put an arm around his wife's shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"I'll be all right once I lay down and unwind for a couple of minutes."

"Me, too, but that isn't what I mean. I was talking about those nightmares you were having last month. Have they gone away?"

He felt Wanda tense. She took a deep breath but her body stayed tense.

"Yes." She sounded short.

"I'm sorry if I hit a nerve..."

"You didn't. I'm sorry." Wanda took another deep breath and relaxed. She leaned back into Terry. "I haven't had a nightmare in almost a month. But..."

"But' what?"

"But sometimes...it almost feels as if Al is watching. As if he is very close. I don't always feel that way. Just...sometimes."

"Is that bad?"

"No. Not really. Sometimes it's comforting."

"He was a good guy, Wanda. I miss him. And, if there's any way he can be looking out for you, Cyan, and me, I'm sure he's doing it. I suppose if we must have a guardian angel, I can't think of a better one than Al. Can you?"

She smiled, shook her head, and kissed Terry on the cheek. "I love you."

"Ditto. Now come on. I'll help you pick up her toys then rub your feet."

"Ooooh, did I say I love you?"

"Yes." They started to leave the nursery. "And I love you, ~~Wanda~~. You and Cyan, you're my family. You're everything to me. I just want you to know that. Know that you two can always count on me."

"I do. So does our rugrat." At the doorway Wanda paused to turn on the nightlight and look at sleeping Cyan one more time. "Dream well tonight, my sweetheart." She followed Terry out to the living room, closing the door behind her.

Brooklyn is next door to Queens, but its Red Hook district is a whole different world than the one Terry Fitzgerald and Wanda Blake live in.

The Red Hook ghetto is a bad part of Brooklyn. People live here only when they have no other place to go. Its neighborhoods are neglected by City Hall and its streets are unsafe even for the police after the sun goes down.

On Chelsea Street, across from some old dockside warehouses, stands an abandoned tumble-down church. People who have lived in Red Hook all their lives swear the place has been empty since evil men practiced black magic and committed human sacrifices inside the church during the 1930s. More than a few of these folks believe the church is haunted. And, more and more often during the

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past three weeks, some of Red Hook's homeless residents have claimed to have heard the ghost.

Truth to tell, the church is not haunted. It is Al Simmons' home. Except for some birds and stray animals, he has been its sole resident since returning to earth.

Simmons had been keeping to himself, but even a hellspawn gets lonely after awhile. The past few nights he had put on his hat and coat and strayed outside the church to visit his vagrant neighbors. He had watched how, each evening as the sun went down, they built community fires inside emptied oil drums or rusty trash barrels. When the flames were burning bright, the homeless would while away the dark hours passing a bottle of cheap wine and swapping exaggerated stories.

Simmons only wanted to be near people again. Nothing more. So he was careful to stay at the edge of the light. This made the vagrants nervous until they realized Simmons meant them no harm. After that they began to accept his presence. Soon they started asking him questions from the fire, a few of which he answered from the shadows.

"What's yer name?" was the first question.

He told them: "You can call me AL."

"That yer real name or do ya jes like Paul Simon?"

"It's my real name, yes."

Tonight, one of the men shouted, "Yo! AL! Why you always standing by yourself? We diseased or somethin'?"

Another man: "C'mon, man. We ain't here to getcha. We're jes here. We don't care what yer runnin' from!"

A third member of the chorus: "We all got secrets. But it don't do ya no good to keep rehashing the past. *Survivin'*, that's what we're about."

The first man stood and moved from the fire towards Simmons. "That's right. And, in the meantime, we can give each other company. Fer most of us, that's all we got. We don't care where ya been or how ya got there. We jes don't want ya to be afraid of us."

Simmons didn't know what to say. These were the first kind words he had heard from a stranger since he died, and this was an invitation of a sort he thought he would never hear again.

"Fair enough," he finally said. Simmons stepped into the light beside the first man, taking off his hat and coat.

Everyone around the fire reacted.

They stared at his mask and green eyes. They gawked at his costume with its spikes, spooky chains, and skulls. They gaped at his blood red cape with its Dracula collar.

"Still want me to join you?" Simmons asked, heart beating like morse code against his chest.

"Well, I'll be!" someone laughed. "A Youngblood bum! Don't that beat all! I'd say we're movin' up in the world, wouldn't you, guys?"

The laughter was contagious. And Simmons didn't mind it was directed at him. He assumed it meant the invitation was still open.

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When the laughing passed Simmons sat down with the vagrants. "Gentlemen," he said, Wanda and Cyan on his mind, "if you don't mind, I'd like to share a story with you."

CHAPTER TWO: (DEATH IS A BUM DEAL)

Late one night two weeks later a dark green Cadillac turned into an alley in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant district. People hanging out near and in the alley cleared out when they saw it. Even without the TWIST 12 personal license plates any New Yorker worth his salt recognized the car as one of Tony Twist's elite Caddies. When one of these mean green machines arrived in the neighborhood on an errand, anyone with the sense to want to stay healthy and happy knew it was wise to make themselves scarce.

The driver parked the Caddy and he and a passenger wasted no time getting out. Both men were tall with broad shoulders and wore Italian silk suits. The blonde driver, Dick Brunow, dressed in black like Steven Segal, while the ruddy dark-haired passenger, Tommy Fick, wore a white jacket, tan slacks, and designer sunglasses with mirrored lenses.

"You here, Freddy?" Brunow asked the alley. His voice was sour with disgust as he crinkled his nose, the reek of rotting banana peels, leftover Alpo, and God knew what else making him wish he was anywhere else.

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"What's'a'matter?" Fick smirked. "Your nose too good to smell nothin' but Lafayette Street garbage?"

"Don't be a snob." Brunow's eyes swept the alley like a periscope. "Freddy? You'd better be here and you'd better get out here on the double if you know what's good for you. Know what I mean?"

Sounds behind Brunow and Fick--a metallic *click* followed by three *flicks*--got their attention. They spun, drew .45 automatics from shoulder holsters, and aimed. The noise came from a shadow beside a dumpster overflowing with garbage at the rear of the alley. There were three more *flicks*, each followed by a blue and white spark.

"Freddy!" Brunow snarled as he lowered his automatic. "I ought to shoot you right now."

"Don't do that!" cackled a voice from the shadow. "If you do that, you won't learn nuthin'!"

Only after Fick lowered his automatic too did Freddy Bristow come out of the shadow, flicking his trademark cigarette lighter every step of the way. The lighter was out of butane, not that it mattered. It had been busted for years, but that didn't prevent Freddy, a third-rate grifter with long unwashed hair, a shabby green mechanic's shirt, and oily blue jeans, from striking its flint wheel over and over again with a calloused thumb out of nervous habit.

"Why don't'cha get rid of that hunk of junk?" Brunow asked. "Buy yourself a lighter that works."

"Maybe I will. Chances are I'll have the coin to buy one from Tiffany's if I want pretty soon. What I know is worth mucho bucks."

"I hope so for your sake. Mr. Twist personal said for us to meet you, Freddy, so you'd better not disappoint us. Know what I mean?"

"Sure I know," Freddy giggled. "But do you know what Mr. Twist would pay to know who whacked Dominic Rinaldi?"

Brunow and Fick swapped dumb expressions. Neither had expected to stumble over this information tonight.

Five weeks earlier Dominic Rinaldi, his bodyguard/chauffeur Tony, and a book maker had been murdered in East New York. All three were members of the Capuchin Mafia family. The night before their murders Carlos Giamotti, a hitman with the Spang Mafia family, had been murdered and his body thrown out of his Park Avenue penthouse. All four bodies had had their hearts snatched from their chests and crammed into their mouths.

Both Mafia families suspected the other of wanting to start a war. And if it hadn't been for Tony Twist there would have been one. Twist was a gangland war veteran who had seen enough killings to know that these four weren't the handiwork of the Capuchins or the Spangs. More importantly, his informants in the New York Police Department were warning Twist that the commissioner's Organized Crime Task Force had been put in charge of investigating the homicides. The O.C.T.F. knew as well as Twist that a gangland war tended to make gangsters nervous, careless, and sloppy. The task force was hoping that, if there was a war, they could take advantage of the situation to collar some major league Mafiosi caught doing the wrong thing at the wrong time.

That was a situation Tony Twist preferred to avoid. Twist was the Big Apple's godfather. His sole superior was Don Bartino, the Mafia's number one man

who lived in Sicily. This was why, when Twist told the dons of the Capuchin and the Spang families that there would be no war, there was no war. "It will take time, but I will root out the psychopath responsible for the murder of your people," Twist promised. And, when it came to his ^{own} word, Twist's word was gold. It had to be if he was going to maintain order among violent men.

"Okay, Freddy," Brunow said, "who whacked Dominic?"

The grifter flicked his lighter like crazy and grinned like the Devil. "Dude doesn't give out his whole name. Just goes by 'Al.' But you'll know him if you ever see him. Wears a weird outfit all the time. Kinda corny."

"What kinda outfit, Freddy?"

"Like a Youngblood. With a long red cape."

Fick snorted. "Why didn't we think of that? It'd take a Youngblood to do that kinda damage to Dominic and the others."

"You may be right," Brunow agreed, then asked Freddy, "Where do we find this big bad Youngblood?"

"Hey, we gotta make a deal, ya guys! First I get what I want, then I give you want you want."

"Cut the cute stuff, Freddy! Are you forgettin' who we work for? Just tell us what we want to know."

Brunow sounded serious. As serious as ^{the} ~~the~~ looked, both men gripping their automatics tight in their hands. Freddy gulped.

"Okay," he said, voice shaking. "Okay. I trust you fellas." He flicked his lighter faster. "The dude shows up every night over on the docks in Red Hook."

"The Red Hook wharves?" Fick asked. "The man lives dangerously."

"I guess. Well, the homeless dudes around there like him and he seems to like them. Don't ask me why. Can't even tell you why he hangs around with those stinking bums. Their kind make me sick. All I know is he hangs there, like I said, and he shouldn't be hard to spot. He really stands out from the crowd. Know what I mean?"

"Sure, Freddy, we know," Brunow said. "You did swell. This news is going to make the boss very, very happy."

Brunow smiled. So did Fick. Freddy looked at both, stopped flicking his lighter, and sheepishly smiled back.

"So we got a deal?" Freddy asked.

The gangsters dropped their smiles and fired their automatics. Brunow drilled Freddy through the forehead and Fick shot Freddy in the heart.

The body collapsed and twitched for a few moments on the alley floor.

Brunow snatched the busted lighter from Freddy's hand and flung it in the dumpster at the rear of the alley. "About time somebody did that," he commented to Fick. "Let's go tell the boss about the Youngblood."

An hour later the gangsters were reporting to Tony Twist in the godfather's office on the top floor of a private building in Little Italy.

"You boys sure you heard Bristow right?" Twist asked as he sat behind his desk, the man indulging in his favorite habit, chewing on a minted toothpick.

"Positive, boss," Brunow insisted. "And Freddy sounded like he was on the level. I think this is worth checkin' out."

Twist humphed, nodded his head, then glanced around his office, a chamber that would have been the pride of any old Hollywood studio mogul. The room was too big, its furniture too impressive, and its decorations too gaudy, which fit Twist's personality to a tee.

He was a local boy born dirt poor but who had made good when he was made by Bartino himself before the Mafia chief returned to Sicily twenty years earlier. Squat, beefy, ugly, and nasty like a pit bull, Twist got his start running numbers then was promoted to breaking legs before Bartino noticed his potential. Under the big man's tutelage Twist grew into a crafty, dedicated mobster with the guts to sacrifice anything or anyone for the Mafia's benefit. This dedication paid off ten years after he was made when Bartino put Twist in charge of the mob's New York City operations. Soon after Bartino made Twist his number one boy in the United States. It was a one-of-a-kind crime position. One with deadly secrets and responsibilities. But Twist flourished in his job, and at the same time enjoyed its considerable perks, prestige, and power.

"A Youngblood, huh?" Twist mused out loud. "Makes a weird kind of sense."

"That's what we figured," Brunow said. "Only thing is, we don't know for sure if it is a Youngblood or some psycho hobo who gets off dressing like one."

"You're right, Dickie. We've got to make sure, but we've got to be careful. Whoever killed Dominic and the others is dangerous. Anyone who can inflict the kind of injury he did can't be taken lightly."

The men standing in front of Twist's desk didn't argue.

"So this is what I need you two to do. Find Bristow's Youngblood and talk to him, but do so on the quiet. You know the dons are thirsty for results about this

matter. I don't want to get their hopes up if it turns out Bristow was blowing smoke. You must make sure we have the right man. Understand?"

"Yes, boss," Brunow said.

Fick nodded.

"If he isn't our man, kill him. If he is, see that he suffers before you kill him. Either way, don't let me down, or you'll answer to me."

"Sure thing," Brunow gulped. He and Fick knew better than most what happened to people who didn't do what Tony Twist told them to do. "However you want it. You can count on us. Anything else, boss?"

Twist took another glance around his office. An evil idea made him smile, his grin as hard as a car grill.

"Yes, come to think of it. If Bristow's Youngblood is our man, bring me *his* heart when you're through with him. It's the least he owes me after what he did to poor Dominic."

TWIST 12 spent the next two nights cruising Red Hook's wharves looking for Freddy's Youngblood. All they found was a whole lot of nothing.

"Mr. Twist ain't gonna like this," Brunow said.

Fick just grunted.

They had assumed before they started that there were a lot of wharves along Upper New York Bay. But no one had warned them that there were over a thousand! Worse, each wharf seemed to have its own party of bums hanging out on it. And it didn't help that the homeless scattered like pigeons from a cat whenever they spotted the green Caddy with the distinctive license plates.

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"Swell," Brunow complained. "This is gettin' us nowhere fast!"

"Hey, people know to hit the bricks when they see one of Mr. Twist's cars. Maybe we ought to ditch the Caddy, go boost some junker, and start over again."

Brunow wanted to say, "Forget that," before he glimpsed a sleeping man huddled in a warehouse doorway out of the corner of his eye and got an idea.

The driver parked, opened his door, and slid out. Before Fick could react, Brunow jogged to the warehouse and shot the sleeping man to death.

Fick couldn't believe it. *"What'd'ya do that for?"*

"Why d'ya think, stupid?" Brunow climbed back in the car and drove away. "Let's wait a little before poppin' another one. We need to keep the bodies close but not too close."

"What are you all of a sudden? A serial killer?"

"Relax! Nobody's gonna cry over a dead bum...except maybe our sicko Youngblood. Know what I mean?"

"No."

"If this nut-case cares enough about the dregs of society to hang out with them, then maybe he won't like it if we start eliminatin' a few of his buddies."

Now Fick understood. "And maybe he'll follow the bodies back to us, where we'll be waitin' to nab him."

"We'll make sure of it. We'll leave a trail even a blind man can follow. We'll kill a couple of bums tonight, a couple more tomorrow, and so on until the caped dude shows. Then we'll make him wish his mother never met his father. Know what I mean?"

News of the killings reached Chelsea Street the next night. No one knew the first man to die, but one of Simmons' new friends, Kansas ~~City~~ ^{City} Joe Hale, was familiar with the second victim.

"Guy's name was Ray Peters," Hale told the group gathered around the fire. "Used to be a research engineer. That was before his wife died and he hit the bottle. He's got a pretty daughter somewhere. Laura's her name, I think. Anyways, far as I know Ray never did anybody ~~any~~ ^{no} wrong."

Copy Another member of the group, a mountain of a man known as Bobby the Bohemian, spoke up. "Heard there's already been a killin' tonight. Tramp named Phil Walker. Guess he sometimes got a little weird, shouted at people who weren't there, but he wasn't dangerous or anything. Liked to visit the Big Apple in the summer, but spent the rest of the year ridin' the rails down south."

"It just don't make no sense!" Hale shouted. "Why kill people like that? They didn't have no money! They weren't botherin' anyone! And why kill so many so fast? ~~Three dead so far in two nights!~~"

Simmons thought ~~those~~ ^{these} good questions. He asked the group, "These dead men. Did they know each other? Hang out together?"

As far as anyone knew the answer to both questions was no.

"You said Walker was a tramp from down south. What about Peters? Was he local or did he knock around like Walker?"

Hale knew for certain that Peters had been born, educated, and lived his whole life in New York City.

"All right. No connection there. How about the killer? Has anyone seen him? Have any witnesses seen the shootings?"

of the guys

"No," Bobby said, then started to add, "but..."

"'But' what?"

"Well, word's out how one of Mr. Twist's Caddies was hangin' around the wharves last night. Now it's back tonight. Don't know why they'd wanna shoot vagrants, but the Caddy's lookin' fer somebody, fer sure."

"Whose 'Mr. Twist'?"

The group briefed Simmons on Tony Twist.

"I see." If the murders were Mafia related, then the shootings made a terrible kind of sense, especially after Simmons recalled the Giamotti and Rinaldi murders.

Simmons knew those murders had been committed by one of Malebolgia's most bloodthirsty demons, the Violator. The murders had cost the Violator, however, because they had been committed without Malebolgia's approval. Malebolgia had sent the Violator to earth to keep watch on the demon-lord's newest hellspawn, Simmons, not mutilate souls that already belonged to Malebolgia. For failing to follow orders Malebolgia punished the Violator by stripping the demon of its magical powers and exiling it on earth in a human form.

Unfortunately the Mafia didn't know any of this, nor would the mob believe it if they did. They had no reason to suspect the killer was anything but human. A powerful human, but human nonetheless. If the mob had heard about the strange man who dressed like a Youngblood living in Red Hook, it was more than possible that they suspected he could be their killer.

"I think Twist's men are the ones shooting your friends," said Simmons. "And I think I know why."

Jones -- 25

That got the group's attention. "Why?" they demanded.

"Twist's goons are hunting for me. And they're going to keep on killing you people until they draw me out."

"My God, Al," Bobby moaned. "Why are they after you?"

"I'll explain later. Right now I need to stop them before anyone else is murdered. Does anybody know where I can find that green Cadillac?"

Handwritten: 2nd killed

Brunow was getting worried. It was obvious from the scarcity of homeless that news of what he and Fick were up to had spread throughout Red Hook. Not that Brunow cared if he ever saw another hobo or wino the rest of his days. But without dead bums their trail would grow cold, and Twist was getting impatient for them to find the Youngblood.

"Over there, Dickie." Fick pointed to a lost soul curled up and passed out in an alley beside a pile of rags.

"About time." Brunow parked. "Come on."

The men got out of the Caddy, walked into the alley, and stopped in front of the bum.

"Excuse me, loser," Brunow said as he knelt down and pulled out his automatic. "May I have a word with you?"

The homeless man stirred. "Huh?"

Brunow shoved the automatic against the homeless man's temple. He was pulling the trigger when the pile of rags next to the bum shifted, stirred, and, impossibly, stood.

Jones -- 26

"Shoot, Dickie!" Fick hollered as he grabbed for his own automatic. "It's him! He suckered us!"

Startled, Brunow aimed his .45 at the monstrous man in the red cape, forgetting all about the bum. Kansas City Joe ~~Hale~~ ^{K.C.} took advantage and dashed out of the alley. When ~~Hale~~ ^{Joe} agreed to help Al find Twist's men, he had never imagined things would get this hairy. Next time he would think twice before he volunteered to be alligator bait.

Back in the alley Simmons went into action, reacting the way he had been trained during his days in the service and the task force.

He ducked as two bullets scorched the air over his head. Bits and pieces of brick spat from the wall behind him, hitting all three men like hail. Simmons swept Fick's legs out from under the gangster. He ~~socked~~ ^{punched} Brunow as hard as he could in the middle of the chest. Brunow coughed as every ounce of air was compressed from his lungs. Simmons kicked, punched, ducked gunfire, and punched again.

Ten seconds after the first shots were fired both of Twist's men were disarmed, Fick stretched out at Simmons' feet and Brunow's throat clutched in his hand.

"Been looking for me?" Simmons asked as he squeezed.

Brunow's ~~"Yes"~~ ^{YEAH} was less a word and more a gag.

"You can forget it if you're thinking I killed those mobsters last month. It wasn't me. Go tell Mr. Twist that and tell him to leave the vagrants of Red Hook alone. They're under my protection."

"I...I can't...do that! He'll...kill me! We've...got orders! Can't...disobey!"

Jones -- 27

"I'm crying. After killing three people just to get at me you both deserve whatever you get. Now go tell Twist he doesn't know who he's messing with. That he has no reason to mess with me. Tell him if he doesn't back off he's going to get hurt. The choice is his."

Simmons dropped Brunow. He twirled, his cape swirled around him, and then Simmons was gone.

Brunow's legs failed him. The gangster plopped on his butt beside his unconscious friend, rubbing his throat and shaking like a cold, wet dog. The attack had happened so fast! One second he had everything under control, and the next his life was over. There was no question he and Fick had to report to Twist. Running away would not save them. No one escaped the Mafia for long. All Brunow could do was pray the boss might forgive them.

"I don't think Mr. Twist ~~isn't~~^{is} going to like this," Brunow whispered to himself. "He isn't going to like this at all."

