

Shadow of the Raven: A Cyberpunk Detective Story

By Mike Tam

The rain fell with the steady beat of a funeral march. He was dead, and just when I thought things were going to start making sense, it all went spiraling down into Hell. I looked down at his lifeless form, blood oozing from it like an oil slick staining the asphalt crimson. You've got to be a first-rate fool to believe anything that comes out of the mouth of a serial killer, but then again everything he'd said explained a hell of a lot. Even though I hadn't asked.

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It started two nights ago, one of those cold, wet nights that seems to drive a chill through you faster than a killer's knife in the dark. Music wafted out the door of the Lux as I pulled it open and stepped in out of the rain. John's behind the bar and he waves while Sam's up on stage crooning his songs.

"Gimme a whiskey," I tell John. "Neat."

"You got it boss," he says, already pouring. "So where've you been hiding yourself? Haven't seen you in ages."

"I've been busy," I said, "Working a case. This is the first break I've had all week."

"There were some guys in here looking for you the other night," he says. "Related to your case, maybe?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"They wanted to find you pretty bad."

"You didn't tell them did you?"

"Nah, 'course not."

"Good. I don't need this right now, I've got enough shit on my plate. Who were they?"

"I... think you're about to find out."

A shadow loomed over the bar. "Rick Corbett?" asked a voice behind me.

"That depends who's asking."

"Detective Prendergast, Police. The chief wants to talk to you."

I smirked and finally turned around, sizing up the kid who stood there. "Heh, got a case you boys can't handle, huh?"

"Watch it, skinny. I haven't reached my beating quota for the month yet."

"Stow the threats. The chief wants to see me, he oughta know better than to send some rookie piece of shit like you."

He grabbed a handful of my coat and pulled me to my feet. I pushed him off.

"Easy, kid. I'm walking."

\* \* \*

Chief De Souza looked as awful as ever; 250 pounds of fat, balding fury poured into an ill-fitting shirt and tie, crammed behind a desk on a chair too small for him. He scowled at me as I entered.

“Take a seat, Corbett.”

I sat. “So your boy tells me you want to talk to me real bad.”

“Yeah. And you know why.”

“Tell me anyway.”

He sat there and glared at me for a few seconds.

“We need your help on a case.”

“My help? Now, why would someone like you need *my* help?”

Again, the icy glare.

“C’mon...” I prodded. “You can say it.”

He sighed heavily. “Because you’re the best, alright? Because you spent five years with the Enforcer Corps and because you’ve got all those fancy military-grade **biomods** slotted into that fat head of yours. Happy?”

I nodded. “Alright. Tell me more then.”

“Okay, so there’s this psycho on the loose out there, killing people at random. He’s claimed two women already, carving some weird bird symbol onto their chests. We can’t pin him down. We’re always a few minutes too late. And we can’t figure out his motive. We thought maybe you could give us a hand, spot something we missed.”

I considered it. “Well, you know what I charge.”

De Souza bit his lip. “It’s too much.”

I laughed. “But when have I ever not earned every penny of it?”

“Alright,” he sighed. “I’ll see what I can do. In the meantime, here’s what we’ve got.” He reached a pudgy hand into his desk drawer and pulled out a data disk which he tossed to me.

“I’ll check it out,” I said, getting up to leave.

“Hey, Corbett!” he called out as I reached the door.

“Yeah?”

“How come you don’t work for us, man? We could use a guy like you on the force. What’s with the private eye shit?”

I shook my head. “No thanks. I’ve never been good at being a team player. That’s part of what makes me the best.” And I left.

\* \* \*

The stuff on the disk De Souza gave me was pretty much standard fare; crime scene photos, coroner’s reports and police psychologists’ profiles on the suspect. Nothing really substantial. If I was going to work my magic on this, I’d have to visit the scene itself.

I hopped an air-taxi out to the nearest intersection and walked the rest of the way on foot. The body was gone and the stain on the ground cleaned up but other than that things were more or less exactly like in the photo. Including the cold, the dark and the omnipresent wet. I flipped on all my **Enhanced Sensory Systems** and went to work, combing every inch of the alleyway on every spectrum, every wavelength. I was halfway down the alley when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned to look and thought I caught a glimpse of a shadow darting around a corner.

Then something else caught my attention. It was a message, scrawled in military-grade **photo-deflective ink** on the wall in the darkest part of the alley. It read, “Where brooding Darkness spreads his jealous wings, and the night raven sings.” I didn’t have a clue what it meant. I jacked myself into the **Net** and ran a search for the phrase. Turned out it’s from a poem by John Milton, but that still didn’t tell me anything. I snapped a shot of the message with my **iris-cam** then hailed another cab to take me to the next crime scene.

\* \* \*

The old churchyard was shrouded in mist, gravestones thrusting out of the ground like the teeth of some colossal demon. The church itself had been abandoned for nearly a decade, the crumbling stonework façade a testament to its age. I stepped through the mangled gate and made my way up to the front door where remnants of police tape fluttered in the wind like the last leaves on a dying tree.

Inside was the smell of dust and mold, the silent darkness laden with foreboding. The underlying scent of dried blood also did little to ease my tension. Uprturned pews were scattered all over and dead leaves, old newspapers and other refuse blanketed the floor. I walked over to the altar where, a mere twenty-four hours earlier, the body of a young girl had been left, spread-eagled with the mysterious bird-like logo carved into her chest. I pushed the image out of my head and took a wary look around. Maybe the killer had left another calling card.

I found it scribbled onto the grimy red carpet of the altar. “Ghastly grim and ancient Raven, wandering from the Nightly shore,” it proclaimed, in bold, invisible strokes. Another raven reference. Was that what was being carved into the skin of his victims? I took a snapshot of the message then turned to leave. As I walked out, the wind stirred the bells in the belfry.

\* \* \*

I awoke to the sound of my telephone ringing. The **time chip** in my optic nerve told me it was 3:14:26 in the morning. Hell of a time for a phone call. I groped around for the handset and brought it to my ear.

“This is Corbett. Speak.”

“Greetings, Mr. Corbett,” said a voice like nails on a chalkboard. “Do you know who I am?”

“No. Who is this?”

“You can call me The Raven.”

“Are you the man I should be looking for?”

“Perhaps. Or maybe it is I who ought to be looking for you. I know so much about you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know what you want. You want this to stop. You want to know why. And you want to know who’s responsible.”

“The Raven, I presume.”

He laughed. “You amuse me, Mr. Corbett, but don’t mistake that with being untouchable.”

“What do you want?”

“Oh, there’s nothing I want that you could possibly give me. But I could feel your desire to find me, and here I am offering you the chance to do just that.”

“Are you trying to turn yourself in?”

Again the laugh. “No, no. You mistake my words, Mr. Corbett. I seek you. You see, I know all there is to know about you, but you can’t say the same about me. I’d like to meet you, Mr. Corbett, there are many things I need to tell you.”

This was a new one on me. Usually a criminal runs from you, fast and far until he gets sloppy and you catch him. Why did he want to see me? I figured he was lying and probably just wanted to draw me out into the open so he could kill me, but two could play at that game. If he wanted to meet me, it’d be on my terms.

“Okay,” I said, “Meet me at the Portland Docks tonight, Terminus 4. We’ll talk.”

“I look forward to it, Mr. Corbett,” he said, and he was gone.

\* \* \*

The Portland Docks were my turf. I knew a million back ways in and out. If there was anywhere in this city where I’d undeniably have the upper hand, it was here. Terminus 4 was at the far east end of the pier, enclosed on each side by a wall of shipping containers five or six units high. A pair of cranes towered overhead, illuminating the area with uneven splotches of harsh orange light. I wove my way through the maze of shipping containers and paused before the single metal door inset into the concrete.

I reached under my coat and drew my gun from its holster, the cold heft of it in my hand comforting like a familiar face in a crowd of strangers. I was going for the doorknob when I heard something behind me. I spun around with my gun only to find another one pointed at my face. Standing behind it was a tall, slim man in a long, black coat, face hidden behind a woolen scarf and dark glasses. He wore a hat, black as night with a feather in the brim. The Raven.

“I knew this was a trap,” I said.

He shrugged languidly, his aim not wavering. “No, not exactly. But I figured you would not come unarmed, so I had to take certain... precautions.”

I adopted an equally apathetic manner. “Well in any case, you wanted to talk. So, talk.”

He chuckled, gratingly. “Very well. You strike me as a very persistent man, Mr. Corbett, and I don’t think you’ll give up your pursuit of me very easily. However, I must warn you, you’re in far over your head.”

“How do you figure?”

“You don’t have any idea what’s really going on, have you?”

“You’re a psycho and you’ve been killing innocent people. What’s to understand?”

“Actually, while it may very well be that I have taken leave of my senses, you must believe me when I say this was all for you.”

The bastard was trying to confuse me. “What are you talking about?”  
“I needed to find you. There are certain matters of which you need to be made aware.”

“Such as?”

“Such as just who you are. Take heart, Mr. Corbett. Today shall be a turning point in your life.”

With that, he removed the hat and scarf, revealing a face I knew quite well. It was one I shaved every morning, one who’s teeth I brushed every night before going to bed. I found myself staring into my own eyes and saw the Devil himself reflected there. When he spoke, it was without pretense, in a voice that echoed my own.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Corbett? Cat got your tongue?”

“What are you? Are you my evil twin? My clone?”

He wagged a finger and shook his head slowly. “Tsk, ts, ts. The truest characters of ignorance are vanity, and pride and arrogance,” he said in a voice filled with disappointment. “What makes you think *I’m* the clone?”

And just like that, the world I knew came tumbling down around me.

“You’re lying,” I said, adamantly. “This is impossible. I remember, I have memories.”

“Memories which any skilled neuro-craftsman can forge. Tell me, does the number G2-826 mean anything to you?”

“Yeah, that’s my service number from the Corps.”

“Do you know what G2 stands for? Generation 2. You were the model that came after me. I was the first, you see, but I didn’t quite turn out as planned. I was crafted with the genes of all the finest servicemen and women in the Corps, but all that genetic inbreeding made something go haywire upstairs. Homicidal psychosis, they called it, and they put me away. Then they made you, the protégé. Perfect in every which way. They decided to run an experiment to see if something like you could integrate seamlessly into society. So, they made memories for you, an identity... a life. While I continued to rot away in a cell.”

“So that’s what this is about? You’re jealous of me?”

He laughed. “Not exactly. You see, there comes a time in any experiment where it’s proved its point and the desired outcome has been reached. That’s when it’s time to step back and say, ‘Okay, we’ve done everything we needed to. We can shut down the experiment now.’” He grinned, his mouth a horrible twisted slash of pure madness. “Take heart, *brother*. You were an unqualified success.”

The silence after the gunshot hung in the air almost as loud as the shot itself.

The rain fell with the steady beat of a funeral march. He was dead, and just when I thought things were going to start making sense, it all went spiraling down into Hell. I was The Raven. Or The Raven was me. I didn’t know anymore. It didn’t matter. His hat lay where he’d dropped it. I picked it up. There were a lot of questions swimming around in my head. I wanted answers. Maybe I’d get them... tomorrow.

## Glossary of Bolded Terms

### **Biomods**

Biological Modifications. A generic term for mechanical/technological devices implanted into a subject that gives him or her enhanced capabilities. Several examples of Biomods follow.

### **Enhanced Sensory Systems**

A suite of systems implanted into a subject that enhances sensory perceptions. In this case, they provide night-vision, infra-red and millimeter-wave RADAR capabilities to the eyes. They also enable sub-sonic hearing in the ears and enhance sensitivity of the nose. *(Inspired by Second Life's ability to zoom in on objects and explore them without moving your avatar.)*

### **Photo-deflective Ink**

A special type of writing medium that only reflects light at a user-specified frequency. Thus it appears invisible to anyone who does not have the capabilities of filtering out the other wavelengths, and the message is only read by its intended recipient. This commonly works in conjunction with an individual's Enhanced Sensory Systems and is thus a strictly military technology. *(Inspired by Second Life's capability to conceal information that can only be revealed if someone has the proper inventory item to unlock it.)*

### **Net**

While hardly a novel concept in itself, the Net (Internet) as it appears in this story is accessible through a neural wetware implant. This implant allows a user to instantly access information from a global network, regardless of his or her physical location, and display it on a Heads-Up Display in their eye. *(Inspired by Second Life's capability to access information about the world instantaneously, i.e. view member profiles, find places, locate yourself on the world map, etc.)*

### **Iris-Cam**

Another ocular implant, the iris-cam allows a user to capture images from his or her viewpoint and store them on a piece of removable media for transfer. It is capable of capturing both still images as well as video. Sound-capture is still under development. *(Inspired by Second Life's capability to take a snapshot of your screen minus your avatar and any HUD elements.)*

### **Time Chip**

One of the earliest developed Biomods, the time chip simply displays the current time at the lower left-hand corner of a user's field of vision. Kept accurate by a real-time connection to the nearest atomic clock, the time chip can also switch time zones instantaneously, depending on where the user is at any given time. *(Second Life displays the world time at the top-right corner of the screen, which may or may not correspond to your computer's time.)*