

A RAYTHE REIGN PUBLICATION

BOOK ONE

THE ARTIFACT

THE BODYGUARD

1



THE JOB

X. Aratare

J.M. Darcy

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MY
NAME IS
DETECTIVE
SEAN
HARDING.



—AND
I AM
OBSESSED.



A
DRUG,
THE POWDER,
HAS COME
TO WINTER
HAVEN.



IF
I DON'T
FIND OUT
WHERE IT'S
COMING
FROM OR
WHO'S
SELLING
IT...



EXCUSE
ME, I'M
LOOKING
FOR DR.
VOSTOK.



SIGH~

YOUR
NAME,
PLEASE?

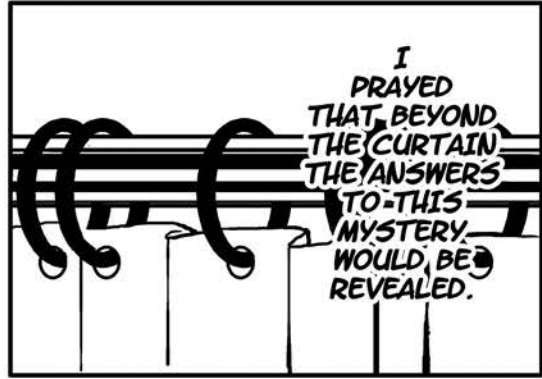


DETECTIVE
SEAN
HARDING.

DR.
VOSTOK
CALLED ME
IN TO SEE A
USER OF THE
POWDER THAT
SURVIVED.



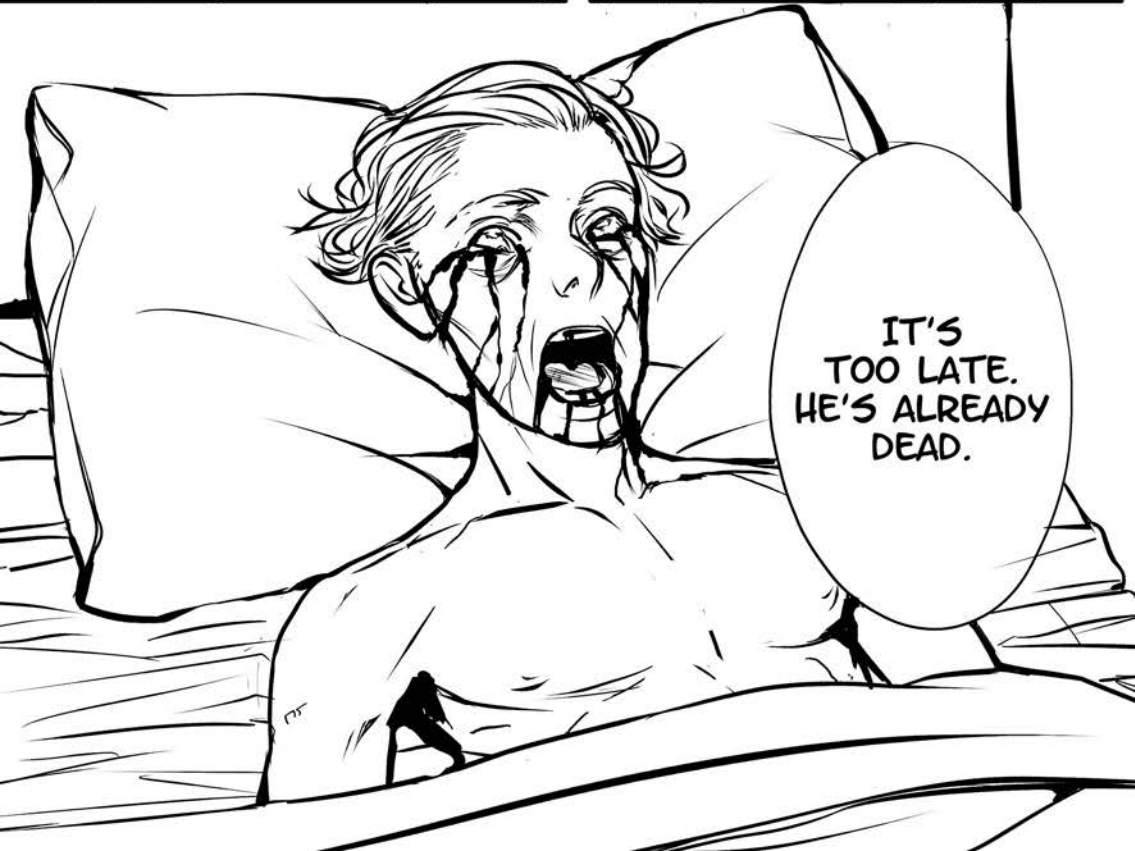
I
PRAYED
THAT, BEYOND
THE CURTAIN
THE ANSWERS
TO THIS
MYSTERY
WOULD BE
REVEALED.

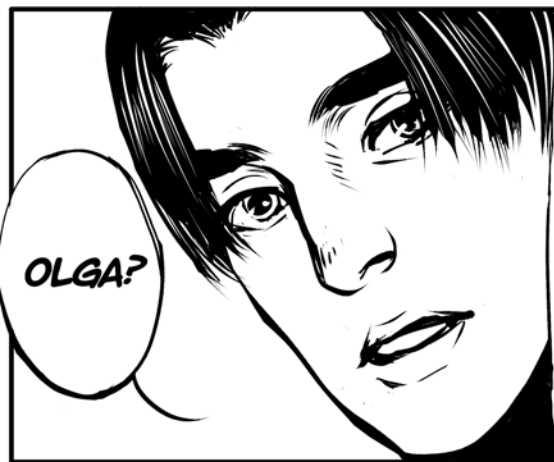
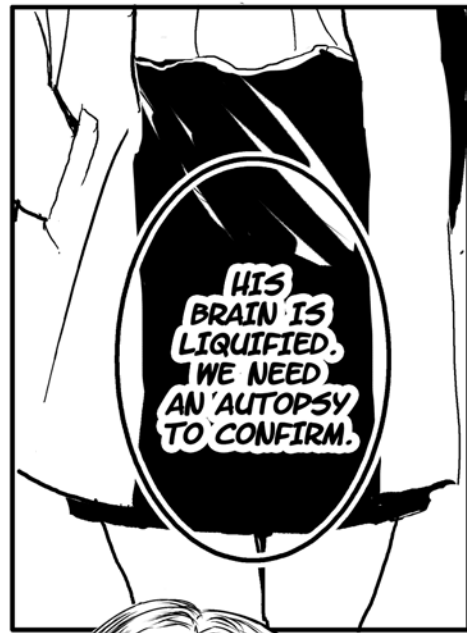


CHRIST...!



IT'S
TOO LATE.
HE'S ALREADY
DEAD.





HE
DIED
MOMENTS
AFTER I
CALLED
YOU.

SO
THERE'S
NO NEED
FOR THE
GUILT ON
YOUR FACE,
SEAN.

HE
TOOK THE
POWDER JUST
ONCE. THIS
WAS THE
RESULT.

ANY
ID ON
HIM?

NO...
HE DIDN'T
EVEN HAVE
ON SHOES...

OR
A SHIRT
WHEN HE
WANDERED
INTO THE
ER.

DID
HE SAY
WHO SOLD
THE DRUG,
OLGA?

HE
WOULD
ONLY SPEAK
OF WHAT IT
SHOWED
HIM.



SO,
IT'S
BACK TO
SQUARE
ONE, HUH?



SIGH~

OLGA,
HE WAS
EXPERIENCING
ONLY HALLUCI-
NATIONS,
RIGHT?



MM...



HE
COULDN'T
HAVE BEEN
SEEING
WHAT HE
CLAIMED HE
SAW. THAT
WOULD BE
IMPOSSIBLE.

WHAT
IS IT?
YOU LOOK
UNNERVED.

UNNERVED?

I
SUPPOSE
I AM.

I'VE
NEVER
SEEN YOU
THIS WAY,
OLGA.

THE
DRUG ISN'T
LIKE ANY
THING I'VE
SEEN,
SEAN.

IF
YOU HAD
HEARD WHAT
HE SAID...

HE
SAID I
SHOULD
THINK OF
REALITY
LIKE A
MATRYOSHKA
DOLL.





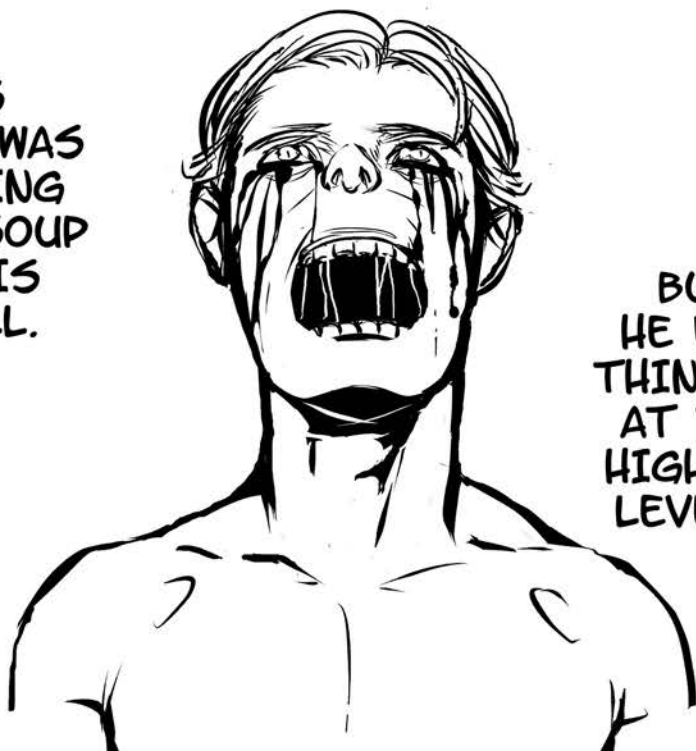
MAYBE
BECAUSE I
AM RUSSIAN,
IT WOULD
HAVE
SIGNIFICANCE.

IMAGINE
THE OUTER-
MOST DOOR
AS THE
WORLD WE
KNOW.
THIS IS
THE REALITY
WE SEE.

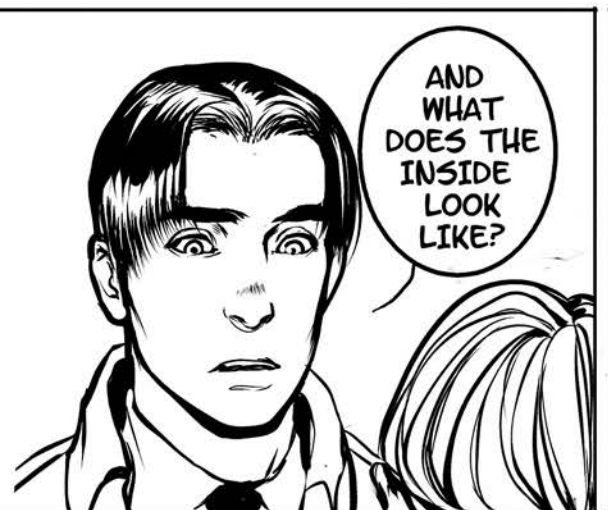
THE
POWDER
HAS THE
ABILITY TO
PULL THE
DOLL APART
AND SHOW
US WHAT'S
INSIDE.



HIS
BRAIN WAS
TURNING
INTO SOUP
IN HIS
SKULL.



BUT
HE WAS
THINKING
AT THE
HIGHEST
LEVELS.



AND WHAT DOES THE INSIDE LOOK LIKE?



BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIBLE.



OLGA, WHAT DO YOU FIND?



THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE.

BUT KNOWING WHO WE'RE SHARING ALL OF THIS WITH...

YOU'LL
WISH



WE
WERE.



CHAPTER 1 END

A MEMORY DARKLY

Warning: Dubious Consent! But that's the way it always is with Branish ...

“I have to admit that I’m surprised,” Railon Karides, the man Dane Gareis believed was simply a private investigator, said. “I didn’t think that Dane Gareis would trust someone so quickly. Not even *your* Sean Harding.”

Mine. Yes, Sean is mine. Even part of him admits it.

“You *hoped* he wouldn’t, you mean. Your obsession with Dane Gareis is a *waste*. He’ll never respond to you like he does to Sean, no matter how many dirty pictures of Sean you bring him.” Michael Branish looked at the back of Railon’s head as he said this. “It is an interesting way to woo someone, I’ll give you that. I’m wondering though about the efficacy of giving your love naked pictures of another man.”

Railon was staring out of the floor to ceiling windows at the glittering expanse of night-gilded Winter Haven. Branish stretched out his long, powerful legs in front of him as he leaned back in the leather executive’s chair. They both had a great view of Gareis Industries. He could see the light on in Sean’s new bedroom in Dane’s penthouse. Not that he needed light or even his eyes to see anymore. The Ash of the Gods - - or as the locals erroneously called it, the Powder -- had given him many gifts. He could *see, speak, even touch* Sean any time he wanted, no matter how far away physically he was from the man. The Ash connected him and Sean on a spiritual level like it did all the Chosen.

Couldn’t call it the Ash on the street though or those idiot Ydrath would have realized that their precious religious drug was being sold to non-believers. But I needed the money to bring about this brand new world they’ve raved about for millennia. Money was necessary to silence some mouths and open others. They should be thanking me. But they are either dilettantes or mindless zealots. They don’t understand the what is needed. But I do.

Railon turned his head to face Branish. The center of the scar on his cheek glowed in the low light. The Ash had caused that, too. “Won’t you give Dane to me in the end though, sir? After all, you won’t want Sean holding out hope that he can be with Dane when he’s back in your possession again.”

“Holding out hope?” Branish’s baritone voice rumbled and a slow smile curled his lips. “That might be useful actually. Sean likes to play the *hero*. I believe he would do anything to keep Dane safe, which would include keeping you away from the young man.”

Railon's expression remained obsequious, but Branish saw his hands slightly curl into fists. Branish hid the smile that wanted to break out. Railon didn't want his precious Dane in anyone's hands but his. The thought of Dane being withheld from him was undoubtedly unbearable.

What he doesn't understand is that he's more like John Tully, the man who kidnapped, raped and tortured Dane ten years ago, than Sean. Dane will loathe and fear him while Railon will try to play his twisted version of Romeo until Railon kills Dane in a fit of rage when he's rejected one time too many. His actions are all so predictable.

"What's the next step, sir?" Railon asked. "You now have Sean working for Dane and the God is already stirring."

"We're going to let our Ydrath *friends* do the heavy lifting for now. Sean will slowly learn the truth and that's the best way to get him on our side," Branish said.

"Is that why you didn't just fake his death, like your own, on the sting?" Railon asked. "He could have been yours all these years instead of free and out in the world searching for me."

Branish shifted his bull-like body in the chair. The Ash had not gifted Railon with the gift of foresight like it had him. It had shown him the future and the narrow, twisting path he had to walk in order to make Sean his forever and to rule the world. Ironically, there were many paths to world dominion, but to have both world dominion and Sean? There was only *one*.

"It wasn't the right time to take him as my own," Branish said simply. Railon nodded after a moment as if he understood, but Branish doubted he did. "And besides, Railon, you've enjoyed being chased. How many false trails have you set up for him to follow all these years?"

Railon smiled in an oily manner. "There was some amusement in it. Shall I continue to shadow Sean?"

"Yes, but only to keep him safe. No more games, Railon. I shall be in charge of those," Branish said with a chuckle, but then his slate-colored eyes became hard and stony. "I don't want the Ydrath to harm him in their *zeal* to release the God."

"I understand, sir." Railon gave Branish a stiff bow and glided out of the room.

Branish continued to stare out the window towards Sean's new home. His eyes remained open, but became unseeing as he delved back into his memories. His favorite memory actually. The night of the Lustov Radek bust when he had taken Sean for the first and only time.

The first of many times to come if I play the fates right.

Branish had watched Sean as he had been brought into the police station with the young whore Jamie's blood still thick and tacky on his clothes. The haunted look in Sean's eyes told Branish that the strong man