

CONFESSION TO A DEAD MAN



Margaret Killjoy • A World of Harrow story set in Penumbra City

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“No, see, you’ve got it all wrong,” Alecti said, laughing a little even though rain water dripped down on her through the leaky carriage roof, even though she couldn’t reach the drops to wipe them off because of her handcuffs, even though the cheap lawman’s carriage hit yet another pothole and her face cracked against the wood of the door. “I didn’t kill that guy. He was dead when I got there.”

“No?”

“Yeah, I mean, I would have killed him. Tried to, even. Just missed my chance.”

The man sitting on the bench opposite of her just stared, waiting for her to say more. He was wiry. So was his beard. He was nearly enveloped by his

thick wool overcoat, but a hint of his pale gold uniform snuck out near his collar. Alecti could just make out the insignia on his lapel—a sword crossed with a shepherd’s crook.

“It’s a cute name,” Alecti said. “I’ll give you that.”

“What?”

“The King’s Boy’s and Girl’s Club. It’s a cute name. Like, you’re just a bunch of bootlicking murderous cops. Was the irony intentional? When you came up with the name?”

“I don’t know,” the man said. “It was before my time. Maybe. That’s not what matters.”

“What matters?” Alecti asked. Blood was starting to trickle down from her right nostril. It tickled.

“What happened tonight is what matters,” the man said. “If you didn’t kill the Reverend, who did? Tell us what you know, we’ll let you walk.”

“Oh, honey,” Alecti said, “I don’t like when you lie to me.”

“Who says I’m lying?” the man asked. “If you didn’t kill him, we’ll just hold you at Hazard long enough to get everything sorted, let you go.”

“The only thing we agree on,” Alecti said, licking her blood off her upper lip, “is that you’re going to let me go.” The road sounds changed, from mud and gravel to cobble, and Alecti looked out the tiny window. She couldn’t make anything out through the rain and grime, but she knew they must have made it to Penumbra North. At this snail’s pace, it was another thirty or forty minutes before they reached Hazard Penitentiary. Alecti and her friends didn’t spend much time in Penumbra North.

“Where the streets are made out of street and the people are made out of misplaced loyalty,” she said aloud.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me what happened,” the cop said again.

“Yeah, fine,” she said. No reason not to. Besides, she’d missed her therapy appointment that week because her therapist Joan had been on a bender with that squatter from the South Docks, the Doggirl. What was his name? Doggirls all had stupid names like Wrench or Carborateur or Petunia or whatever. Petunia, that was it. Had a nice bike. Didn’t even explode

very often, so he claimed. He was cute. Couldn't blame Joan for missing the session. "Yeah, fine, I'll tell you what happened. But only because I'm going to kill you."

...

So it started like every good evening does, at a party thrown by the anarchists. The fun anarchists, of course, the Erreni. Not the boring anarchists, the Corsorians. Or those, you know, don't-call-us-anarchist anarchists from the North Docks who are even more boring, the Industrial Workers of Harrow. It started at a party.

It was a good party. Mostly on a rooftop, one of those weird theaters in the shadow of Triumph Tower, so you've got the sunset coming pretty through the ash haze over the factories and you've got the stupid glow from the stupid silver city which I do not like admitting is pretty. Some of the Clackers were up from their warrens trying out those bulbs you run electric through and they glow all handsome and light the evening up and

most of them don't even explode. There was a troupe over from the Dead Quarter doing a pantomime, plus half an orchestra over from the Outs with their heirloom cellos and shit.

So I'm having a good time, because I love all of that shit. I love the shitty mushroom beer that's all we've got to drink because your god's dumb war got the farms all blown up and Athe forbid he bother importing some barley. I love the potluck snacks everyone brings. Who knew you could fry a rat in so much oil that it tastes good, who knew you could grow hot peppers on the top of Triumph Tower where a little bit more sun peeks in.

You know what I love most of all about those parties though? I love that we fucking have fun, despite how hard you and your immortal bag of dicks of a boss god try to make us suffer. I love that we still have music even if we barely have food. I love when you fail to take things like that away from us.

I know what you're gonna say to that. You're not trying to make us suffer. You're trying to, what, bring us all back into His grace, so we can win the war, rebuild the farms, and go back to living boring lives of quiet mediocrity like we supposedly had like seventy years ago, right? Get

people trusting that money will feed us instead of us feeding each other however we can. Return the flock to the fold. Well, you've got to get a new metaphor, because there are no flocks of sheep anywhere anymore. They all got slaughtered for food ten years ago and all their fields have been bombed to shit for half my life.

But anyway, the party. Party good.

That's not the part you want to hear about, I guess. Who am I to deny your last wishes?

You want to hear about the Reverend Lamin Hend the XIV. You wanna hear about who it was who decided his ear would look better with an itty-bitty teeny-tiny spike stuck into it till it hit the brain. I mean, let's be honest lots of us would have decided that. But you wanna hear about the guy who actually pulled it off. Who wasn't me.

So at the party, I'm there with my friends. Malice, she was a marine before she went AWOL. Kept her armor, and her trauma. Pretty useful in a fight. Which is good because she gets us in a lot of them. Sanny, the rat king, god they're weird. Most people who use they/them pronouns use

them singularly, right? Sanny uses them plural. Athe has the royal we, since he's a godking, says "we do not approve of you lot having fun with the one and only life you have on this planet" and "we are not amused by your mockery" and all of that, right? Sanny uses the uh, the vermin "we." When you talk about Sanny, you're talking about the human kid buried under all those rats but you're talking about the rats too. Love Sanny.

And Losa was there of course. Honestly I'm not so sure about Losa. Are we even friends anymore? We hang out together, sure. Do crimes. But we haven't talked in ages, not like, really talked.

God, you know, it really feels good to just get to open up about this stuff. Say all the stuff that usually just lives inside my head. I really appreciate that. I appreciate you. I just want you to know that. You're going to be inside a kind of living nightmare soon enough, which you deserve because you're trying to lock me up in a cage, but I just want you to know that you're appreciated as a person even if not as a cop.

Losa is a patchworker. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, back-alley surgeon who flays corpses and mixes up fungal paste and

sews the skin of dead people onto living people in order to heal wounds. You're thinking a scary bitch with a scalpel who doesn't think a thing about ripping the bones out of living people.

You're thinking right! Losa is a scary bitch who does all of those things. Also a hell of a dice player, and a good cook, and would you believe it or not an honest-to-Athe vegetarian. And we really did used to be close. I was at all three of her weddings and the four resultant funerals. But after that time in the basement of that club fighting all those giant centipedes, you know, it just hasn't been the same. Plus I think she's jealous of how close I've gotten with Malice. Or maybe it's the other way around.

So the four of us are at this party and I'm just trying to have a good time but Malice is all "we need a mission let's do a mission" and Losa is kissing up to her about it so she's like "yes, look at me, I'm Losa, and I will temporarily pretend like I share your ethical framework and worldview in order to get closer to you and drive a wedge between you and Alecti" or at least that's what I assume she said, because suddenly she wants a mission too.

Guys, can't the mission sometimes just be get drunk and maybe high and maybe just maybe Athe forbid get laid? No, no, no. It's time to do crimes for the good of humanity or whatever. I look at Sanny but they're just feeding bits of mushroom to those rats and their eyes started spinning and they whispered "whatever happens, we're in."

So that's how I knew I wasn't going to get laid at the party, because every single one of those bitches would have died a thousand times over if it weren't for my spooky ass saving them with a well-timed curse or a jaunt into the Ether.

We find a guy with the Erreni who knows everyone. I guess that's repetitive. All the Erreni know everyone. We find a guy, he's cute but I'm not allowed to see if he's down to fuck because we've got work to do for some dumb reason, and he says there's this... elbow guard. I know you know what I'm talking about, I know you care more about that fucking thing than you do about the life of poor dear Reverend Lamin Hend the nine-hundred-and-fiftieth of his name or whatever. I know that's why you followed us.

Anyway, the cute guy, he tells us, and everyone else at the party besides, about this elbow guard. Holy to the Outsiders. Ancient. Made out of granite and quartz in the ceremonial style. Let's see if I got this chain of events right. Lamin had this tenant, old Outsider lady who'd gotten tired of sleeping in a crypt in the Dead Quarter and had tried to do things proper and get a room in North Penumbra. Only now that there's no money and everything is favors and reputation and shit, Mr Hend doesn't really like unprestigious guests so he got it into his head that she owed him something, so he marches into her house and picks up the most valuable thing he sees, like the prick that he is. The elbow guard. He takes it to the Esteemed to see what it's worth, only I think a Skip saw that go down, and now the whole city knows. They especially know about how there's an inscription the damn thing and half of it is written in that language Outside and half of it is written in whatever the fuck weird language related to Old Penumbra that no one can read that's scrawled across the whole undercity. So... valuable. To lots of people.

So first, yeah, the idea is we're just gonna steal the damn thing. Get it back to the Outsiders where it belongs. It's the right thing to do. And sure none of us would mind that they'd be grateful and maybe let us use their gunsmithies sometimes.

Then Losa though, see she grew up on the streets mostly, because her mom was from Penumbra North, she's like a fourth-generation patchworker. You see where I'm going with this? You remember when your little King's Boy's and Girl's Club rounded up the patchworkers, called them unholy, drove them out of your territory? What was that, ten years ago? When, you know, Losa was ten? Well, guess who her mom's landlord had been, guess who had told you all about Losa's mom in the first place?

Lamin Hend the fucking Fourteenth. Sorry, Reverend Lamin Hend the fucking Fourteenth.

He ain't so revered as his title implies, not by most of the city.

Losa says her bit about what happened to her and what do you know, half the party has stories about this guy. Hired some thugs—not you, other thugs—to blow up a pie shop run by the Lords of the New Order that was

competing with one he had interest in. Ain't too good to the people he hires, either—it was one of those thugs he'd hired who was at the party, turns out Hend tossed him to the Lords as soon as it was convenient. His friends rescued him.

Funny thing, about friends.

It's nice to have friends.

Anyway.

More and more people saying this shit. He's a bad landlord, a shitty boss, awful to the people he fucks, just not a redeeming bone in that man's body. So pretty quick we go from let's rob this guy to let's kill this guy, you know how that goes, and a couple of Doggirls are around with their bikes, one of em even has a sidecar, and they figure what the hell why not go for a joyride or I guess a killride up to Penumbra North, find this guy's house, swap around his insides and his outsides, grab the stolen elbow guard, wham bam thank you ma'am all in a good night's work.

Nope.

You fucks are on the prowl. Good thing the Doggirls are smarter than you lot, avoid your patrols like six times. We stop in an alley by the canal, hop on up to the second floor balcony, the door was wide open. How the hell Malice climbs in all that powered armor, dragging a goddammed boiler, the world will never know. I swear to Athe I've never seen her strength fail her.

And here's where it gets good, right? Here's where you start to care?

The damn man is already dead. Looks like he's sleeping except there's blood on the pillow. I know a thing or two about a thing or two and while everyone else is just like "what the fuck happened here?" I can tell them that like...

Okay bear with me.

You know the world is made up of three worlds, right? I know Athe tries to keep you in the dark on basic cosmology. But three worlds. Form a triangle. We live on the Material. Then there's the Ether, which is where I guess you could call them angels live. Then the Rot, where, you know, demons. We touch both other planes and each of those other planes

touches ours and the other one. A triangle. It's not your dumb hell-earth-heaven linear hierarchy—you've been lied to. So us humans live on the Material, right? But we're made out of stuff that transfers from one to the other. What you call your higher soul and your lower soul, which are dumb words for it. I say it's Agape and Thelema and maybe those are dumb words for it too, who knows. When you die your stuff moves on. Agape does the circle clockwise, heads over to the Ether till it heads over to the Rot till it heads on back to the Material. Thelema goes counterclockwise, over to the Rot, then the Ether, back to here. You get the idea.

What's this got to do with ear spikes?

See back before your fucking godkings ascended, people here knew a thing or two about the planes and more people than just us weirdos could communicate across those borders, and those people, whose name is lost to use probably forever—in my society, the Hermetic Order of Nothing, we call them the Forgotten people. Which yeah I know isn't super original but it's descriptive I guess. Those people, the Forgotten people, they used to kill people by jamming spikes into their ears. That's my point.

It's kind of classy, isn't it? Not much mess. Didn't even wake the guy up. You should try it sometime. Well, not you. You shouldn't, you're a cop. You shouldn't kill people. Or exist. I'd say "or quit your job and find new friends" but it's too late for that.

So there we are, and I'm trying to explain Agape and Thelema to everyone and they're kind of ignoring me because everyone does when I talk about that stuff, and Malice is looking through the guy's bedroom and it's like a dumb goddammed museum in there, complete with stolen artifacts behind glass with plaques. A rusty old sabre from Kirik, a Rothean prayer book, and, oh, get this, a human skull labeled as having once belonged to a "chieftain of Sor." Can you believe it?

Now you're just staring at me. You don't get it.

Sor doesn't have chieftains. Never did. The whole country is built on a plateau no one was able to reach until the godking Sor lifted his people up with his mighty magic or whatever. Come on. Their whole religion is based on that. How do you not know that? Sor is even friends with Athe right now, you should know that.

And there's a glass case where the elbow guard should be, but of course it's empty because someone stole it, probably whoever ear spiked our good friend, and of course the plaque is just a handwritten piece of paper because there hadn't been enough time to find an engraver. It says "elbow guard, probably important."

We're all having a laugh about the chieftain skull until a rat runs in and looks up at Sanny and Sanny looks down at the rat and they turn to us and tell us that people are on their way, a lot of people. That's the good thing about having a swarm of rats at your command.

"What kind of people?" Losa asks.

"They don't know, they're fucking rats," Sanny says, only Sanny probably didn't curse when they said it. "We should get the fuck out of here though." Again, without the "fuck" probably.

It's hard not to cuss when I'm in your shitty fucking carriage, do you people not know how to fix a roof? You keep it shitty just so that your "guests" have it worse? But you have it worse too, you asshole. You're just making the fucking world worse. God I can't wait to get out of here and

kill you, my nose is fucking bleeding and I can't see shit and my hands are cramping.

Anyway so we fuck off, right? Back out the window. The Doggirls who drove us there are gone. I guess they saw which way the wind was blowing and those bikers like some of us alright but not enough to fight off the cops and risk getting killed or sent to Hazard. That's how we figure, whoever's coming, it's probably you all.

Malice wants to stay and shoot you all with her bolt thrower, which sounds like a reasonable plan to me, but Sanny and Losa don't like it, so we break into the empty house next door and lay low. Sure enough, it's you and your buds who show up. You probably remember this part. You go in, search the house, find the body.

Me, what I do, is I make sure my friends are keeping watch, and I pull out the candles and the incense and the chalk and the charcoal and I get myself a circle drawn up on the wood floor in the empty house, and I tie a silk rope around my waist, and I project myself into the Ether. Or to be more accurate, some portion of my Agape crosses over while my body stays put,

and I'm walking around like a ghost, through walls and shit, tethered to my body by that rope. I pop over next door and guess whose essence is still lingering, not dissolved yet into the Ether proper?

The Reverend Lamin Hend the fucking Fourteenth, that's whose. It's funny, cause that's how I know you were one of the Kingsmen who showed up, because I was in the room with you while you were investigating.

Good eye, finding that feather on the ground, by the way. We'd missed that.

Lamin is standing there looking all angelic and blissed out like every other dead prick, and he seems surprised I can see him. Asks if I'm an angel, sent to help usher him into heaven for his lifetime of good deeds.

So I look at him, and... I've never claimed to be an honest girl. Well, I mean, I've claimed it, but it's never been true. I look at him and I say "Yup. That's me. Seraphic as hell. Just need to tie up some loose ends, get everything sorted with your paperwork. Tell me, in your own words, how you died."

He tells me his story, which wasn't too long. He went to bed same as normal, then woke up feeling something weird, flicked his eyes open. Saw a man, gaunt and aged, leaning over him. Pale skin, like the Lampreymen. Then he caught just a moment's glance, saw some horror the likes of which he'd never dreamed. Some kind of taxidermy bird gone wrong, six feet tall, feathered, beaked, eyes everywhere across his body.

"What was it?" he asked, like I had all the answers.

I did, this time, though. And I wanted to be a dick to him and make something up but I thought, you know what, this guy's soul or whatever is about to disintegrate into the Ether and he's never going to experience anything, ever again. And it looks like I've got a soft spot for folks who are already dead, or like in your case, basically already dead.

So I tell him.

And this is what you want to know too. You and Lamin you've got a lot in common.

I tell him that he's describing a demon. Sort of. I'm telling him, he saw a Goeticist above him. You think us Occultists are rare and scary, those of

us who fuck with the Ether? Oh then you'll love the Goeticists. They fuck with the Rot. I tell Lamin Hend that this guy built a mannequin out of dead animals and ripped open a portal to the Rot and let a bit of that weird shit that lives there into the Material to animate his little death puppet. Which means he likely made some kind of deal. Like, you serve me for a week, then you're free to go do whatever you want in the Material. Which means the city is in for some bad luck soon cause that fucking thing is still out there.

And that's your fault, you know that?

People you claim to protect are gonna die.

Anyway, he tells me about the Goeticist, and I tell him thanks buddy, and you'll be whisked off soon enough, don't worry about the slow disintegration of what's left of your mind, all part of the process. I don't tell him about the angels that are gonna be eating his soul same as maggots eat a corpse, I just pop back over to my body.

Losa and Malice are playing dice, Sanny is talking to their rats... I guess you could say talking to themselves? I tell them what's up, and Sanny says weird dead bird creature, rats can track that. Off we go.

And you know where we went, because you tracked us. Athe only knows how. You bastards are good at tracking people, I'll give you that.

All the way through Penumbra South, around Triumph Plaza, down to the South Docks. The rain picked up and didn't help our mood and it took us half the night to get where we were going. To a little rundown shack up against a pier, with some muttering inside.

So we're all set to kick in the door, I've got a bomb out and everything, cigarette lit in the holder in my mouth, when Malice says "you guys, I don't think this is how we should approach the situation."

If Malice doesn't think direct physical confrontation is the best solution, that means it really isn't the right solution, because she solves almost everything with violence. So we scoot on over to the dark under the pier, and back out comes the candles and the chalk and the rope, and I'm off into the Ether for the second time that night. You know how tiring that is? Whatever.

Hop on into the shack. There's the guy, there's the demon. They're talking. Demons talk weird. Imagine like eight people talking at once

saying almost the same thing but not quite. But the core of it is pretty banal. The Goeticist is a spy for Hirn. Is gonna sell them the elbow guard. That's it. Then the demon says "there's someone outside" and the two rush out the door and I turn around to rush back into my body but I don't make it even through the wall before I black out, and guess where I wake up?

Here. With you.

...

Alecti was silent for a while after telling her story, waiting for the lawman to say something, or react in any way. He didn't.

A fear came over her, for the first time. She was certain that, whatever else, her friends were out there in the city looking for her, tracking the carriage. They would call in some favors, and any minute now, a crew on Dogswheels were going to roll up, engines roaring, and Malice was going to use that big gun of hers to set her free.

She just thought it would have happened by now. She hadn't figured she'd reach the end of the story.

The cop must have been able to see her confidence drain away, because a smile slowly worked its way across his face.

She couldn't give up. Not on her friends.

Yeah, they'd let her get captured in the first place. But they must have been busy, dealing with the spy and his demon.

Any minute now.

She sighed, leaned her head against the window as rain dropped down on her cheek. Next time, she was going to the party alone and the only call to adventure she was going to answer was the adventure of getting laid.

Or maybe, and she knew she was getting real desperate and sad when her mind went into this, the darkest of corners... maybe she should ask Losa back out. Yeah they hadn't been good for each other, but who ever was?

"Given up, then?" the lawman finally asked.

She sat upright and glared.

The carriage slowed to a halt. "Looks like we're here," he said.

Then, blessedly, a foot-long steel bolt shot right through the sidewall of the carriage and impaled the man through the chest, pinning him to the far wall.

Blood came to his mouth, dripping into his gray beard, and he looked down with surprise and horror.

A scream broke through sudden and shocking silence. Alecti had heard that scream before. That was the scream of a man covered in rats. Then the scream stopped, replaced with a gurgling. That was the noise of a throat cut with a scalpel. The driver.

“You do love me,” Alecti said, as the door to the carriage was wrenched off its hinges.

“What?” Malice asked, tossing the steel door aside. Losa and Sanny peered in from behind her.

“I said ‘what took you so long?’” Alecti lied.

“Oh,” Malice said, looking genuinely contrite. “The demon and the spy slowed us down. They got away, too, with the elbow guard.”

Losa stepped into the carriage, pulled out a scalpel, and picked the handcuffs open.

“Thank you,” Alecti whispered into Losa’s ear, where the other’s couldn’t hear it. “Fuck, I was so scared.”

“Me too,” Losa whispered. “All I could think was what if I never saw you again. I’m so sorry we let them get you.”

They met eyes for half a moment, then drifted away.

“Alright you dumb bitches,” Alecti said, standing up, glancing over quickly at the still-dying cop on the bench across from her, “let’s go steal back an artifact.”





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