

The Katrina Protocol

Tuesday, August 23, 2005

LONG LIVE LORD ZARYAN!

Mandy had just decided to dump her boyfriend Tom when the first bullet tore the left side off of her face.

“Long live Lord Zaryan!” shouted the killer, enthusiastically.

A bloody flower spread its petals in the afternoon sun while from all around, screams of horror erupted.

Frank Clayton—the killer—next targeted an older man wearing a leather jacket over a blue denim shirt. He had been writing in a spiral notebook and when the first shot rang out, had jumped to his feet with surprising speed for someone his age. The bullet from Frank’s 9mm semi-automatic Glock 19 hit the man twice in the chest. The victim crumpled to the ground, pulling his chair down with him.

The other patrons sitting on the outside terrace of the Starbucks café located at the intersection of St. Charles and Napoleon Avenue in New Orleans’ superb garden district really had only two choices: run into the street, or seek refuge inside the coffee house.

Those who chose to run were, one by one, methodically mowed down by Frank with his semi-automatic Walther P22.

“Long live Lord Zaryan!” repeated the killer every time a victim fell to the ground, dead or soon to be dead.

After he had eliminated all of the *possessed*—the enemies of Lord Zaryan who had fled from his just wrath and were in thrall to the vile Necromancers of the Thirteenth Circle—Frank turned towards the Starbucks entrance.

“Long live Lord Zaryan!” he said again, as he stepped inside the coffee shop. He wanted them to understand that he wasn’t crazy. Yes, it was a dirty job, but someone had to do it, and Lord Zaryan had chosen *him* to execute this sacred mission.

A mother who was shielding her eight-year-old daughter with her own body was his next victim.

Frank stopped to laugh at his own joke. *To execute this sacred mission. Execute! Ha! Ha!* He also had to recharge his Glock.

He then shot a gay couple and a medical student, who had chosen to pay for her school tuition by putting on the Starbucks uniform and serving coffee part-time to idle New Orleans residents from Tuesdays to Fridays.

“Long live Lord Zar...” Frank started to say once again, when suddenly his sense of elation turned to searing pain. More specifically, pain emanating from his right leg.

He looked down and saw a large spot of blood already spreading across his slacks, just above his right thigh.

Half-hidden behind an overturned table, Helen, a 35-year-old teacher who had been waiting for a transfer to Alabama where her family lived, had just shot Frank with her Smith & Wesson Model 10. She fired again.

This time, the 19-year-old, hit directly in the chest, fell.

“Long live...” gurgled Frank as his mouth filled with his own blood. Could Lord Zaryan, his god, abandon him thus? Forsake him so completely? Would the vile Necromancers of the Thirteenth Circle—for he had no doubt that the woman who had just shot him was an emanation of Vrek himself—triumph so unjustly?

At last, a dim light illuminated his clouded mind. He had finally remembered that Lord Zaryan, Vrek and the Necromancers of the Thirteenth Circle were nothing more than characters from the latest PlayStation game, *Armageddon 4*.

“Smoking,” he whispered.

Then he died.

The police eventually arrived, all sirens blaring. The SWATs, wearing their bulletproof vests, tumbled out of their blue vans like a crowd of ants rushing towards a picnic, ready to shoot on sight. But it was all over and there was nothing for them to do other than start collecting the names of the victims—and notify their families.

Overlooking Port-au-Prince, the somewhat faded yet still attractive neighborhood of Pétienville was the residence of choice for those Haitians who sought to escape the summer’s merciless heat.

The rented Land Rover stopped in front of a magnificent villa dating from the mid-19th century, erected on a spectacular spot on the road to Fermathe.

The driver mopped his sweat-drenched forehead. The temperature in the sun was at least 110 degrees. He honked three times, as he had been instructed to do. The old wrought iron gates swung open slowly, jerkily, almost as if a mysterious unseen force was still trying to deny the caller entry.

Inside the villa, the temperature was still hot, but bearable. The visitor stopped for a minute to admire the impregnable view across the bay of Port-au-Prince through the picture windows.

“I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mister Corona,” said the owner of the house, speaking in English with a heavy Haitian accent. He was a mulatto, tall and powerful-looking. His head was round and his shiny, black hair, strangely slick, was combed back from his domed forehead. He wore freshly ironed, lightweight, white clothes.

“*Moi aussi*, Monsieur Legendre,” said his visitor in impeccable Metropolitan French.

“You have brought... what we discussed?” asked Legendre, pointing towards his guest’s leather briefcase. Then, noticing that it was tied to the man’s wrist by a discrete metal chain, he added, “That is... unadvisable. In Haiti, we tell parents to write their children’s names on the soles of their feet, because sometimes, they lose their heads.”

This reference to the *Rats-à-kaka*, armed gangs connected to the Aristide clan who still spread murder and terror in the city, did not appear to impress the visitor.

With quick and efficient gestures, Corona put the briefcase on the table, worked its combination lock and opened it. Inside was a primitive, African-style dagger with a strangely carved ebony handle and an ivory blade. The pommel of the handle resembled a double-axe and was decorated with silver inlays.

“Ah, the Dagger of Hevioso,” whispered Legendre, taking the knife and handling it with the respect one generally reserves for precious religious icons. “My grandfather would be proud to see it once again in the hands of its legitimate owner.”

“Legitimate isn’t quite the way I would put it,” said Corona with a note of irony. “If I believe our archives, your grandfather, the aptly-named ‘Murder’ Legendre, slaughtered an entire village to get his hands on this dagger.” Then, seeing the dark cloud that had come over his host’s face, he hurried to add: “But I’m not here to judge him—or you. Our terms are quite straightforward, Monsieur Legendre. If you do exactly what BlackSpear asks of you, you may keep this dagger—and the other three talismans. That is, if you can get your ‘legitimate’ hands on them.”

“Then you will not be disappointed, Mister Corona. Tell the ones who’ve sent you that, very soon, New Orleans shall be *breathless in silk, lying in the bay of Death.*”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s from a poem by Magloire-Saint-Aude.¹ One of our greatest poets. *Au revoir*, Mister Corona.”

That same night, much farther to the south and east of Port-au-Prince, in the Bahamas, a tropical depression began to form...

¹ Clément Magloire-Sainte-Aude (1912-1971), writer and poet, author of *Dialogue de mes lampes* [Dialogue of my Lamps] and *Tabou* [Taboo] (both 1941). Legendre is quoting the poem *Poison*, included in the former collection.

Thursday, August 25

IN MY BUSINESS, EVERY DEATH IS SUSPECT.

From the Diaries of Hugo Van Helsing

I hadn't set foot in New Orleans for 20 years and yet, I had butterflies in my stomach, just as if it had been yesterday. I felt wretched and miserable and I bet it must have shown on my face, considering the looks I was getting from the other travelers.

The airport seemed larger, roomier than I remembered it to be. Everything was attractive, new and sparkling.

I didn't like it.

I much preferred the old airport, when it was called Moisant. The city had renamed it "Louis Armstrong" in 2001 to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the birth of the man who was arguably its greatest son. Don't get me wrong, I love Armstrong, but I would have been much happier if they hadn't forever linked his name to this modern monstrosity. It was a sinister airport, full of harassed people who trod grudgingly beneath its concrete arches without ever taking notice of each other. It was an already defiled carcass that served as a temple for the tired anonymity that passed for convenience in today's transportation industry.

Next to me, my attorney and trusted ally, Zigor Side, was patiently waiting for our luggage to arrive. Zigor (his first name comes from his Basque ancestors and appropriately means "punishment") looked like the aging hippie he was, somewhat unkempt, in need of a good night's sleep, a cigarette, a cup of coffee and a drink—not necessarily in that order. At least he was in total harmony with our miserable surroundings. Knowing his touching faith in '70s psycho babble, I was certain that, had he been able to read my thoughts, he would have said that my "aura" was full of "negativity."

Wrong!

The best proof was that I had sworn to never again set foot in New Orleans—and yet, here I was.

Zigor believed that good fortune smiled on the bold. He believed in all kinds of rubbish. As far as I was concerned, there were only two kinds of bold: the rich and the dead. The trick was to not end up in the latter category.

I could have stayed in New Orleans and studied with my uncle Ohisver, who wanted nothing more than to groom me to take over the family business, as it were. I could have made money, lots of money probably. And he would have been so proud to have his worthy nephew follow in his footsteps... Hugo Van Helsing, a true Van Helsing to the core...

But fate spins her web without taking into account the mortal wishes of uncles and nephews. Uncle Ohisver was dead, and I was back in New Orleans.

American Airlines was true to its word and our luggage arrived without a glitch. On the curb outside I watched Zigor. Out of respect for my presumed sorrow, no doubt, he remained silent. He had guessed that I wasn't quite ready yet to tackle the consequences of my uncle's death... to deal with the enormity of the tragedy...

The cab driver put the suitcases in the trunk and asked for our destination. A sudden flash of inspiration made me tell him to drop us at the corner of Canal and St. Charles, right in the middle of downtown, just outside the *Vieux Carré*, the French Quarter.

Zigor was surprised. His respect for my privacy hadn't suppressed his professional curiosity. It was quite understandable really. One didn't become one of the country's leading trial lawyers, a member of three State Bars, without being afflicted with a bottomless case of curiosity.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Geographically or philosophically?” I replied dryly.

“Aw, c’mon, Professor, don’t play games with me. You know what I mean. Why aren’t we going to Saint-Amadou?”

“To be honest, I’m not ready to go home yet.”

Zigor nodded; although he looked like an oddball, I knew that was just an impression he liked to give. In reality, he was as smart as they come and a whiz at picking up subtle behavior clues, as the many witnesses he had demolished during cross-examination had learned to their surprise. He had already guessed I was hesitant about returning to Saint-Amadou. That was the name of the Van Helsings’ ancestral home in New Orleans, built by Ithamar Van Helsing, in 1816. It is a house unlike any other and for any Van Helsing, it really is *the* House, with a capital H.

“If you feel too bummed out,” he said, “I can take care of all of your uncle’s funeral arrangements. That’s why I came.”

“No, thanks, that’s not really the problem.”

How could I explain to him what Uncle Ohisver and the House truly meant to me? My favorite uncle... The place where I had spent all my summer holidays when I was a child... The city where I sowed my youthful wild oats—and there were no wilder oats than mine... It was here that I took my first, tentative steps onto the other side of the Inconstant Shore... It was all that, and more that I felt at that moment. We Van Helsings are not like other people and Uncle Ohisver was a second father to me, probably more important than my own father had been. It was he who had educated me, and I don’t mean math, latin or chemistry—I mean the *other* education... The education specially reserved for Van Helsings.

How could I explain to Zigor Side, who had grown up an orphan in Hell’s Kitchen in New York, what it felt like to suddenly lose one’s father, teacher and youth all at the same time?

“What is your problem then?” said Zigor.

Now, he was playing at being a therapist. He could be very good at that, too. I knew he wouldn’t give me a moment’s rest until I satisfied his curiosity. He’s like that, Zigor, and that’s why I pay him the big bucks.

“Uncle Ohisver kept many secrets,” I said. “Dark and powerful secrets...”

Now, he understood, or rather, he thought he understood. In fact, he didn’t understand at all, but that alone would be enough to keep him quiet—at least I thought so.

“Do you think there may be some kind of occult motive behind the Massacre?”

Ah-ha!—the criminologist had now come to take the place of the therapist. The game was afoot!

The “Massacre” was where my uncle had died. The media had coined the name: *The Napoleon Avenue Massacre*. They had been all over it during the last 48 hours. I was astonished they hadn’t yet scraped some of the blood off the pavement to sniff it.

A 19-year-old man, Frank Clayton, had killed 14 people, including my uncle Ohisver, who was his second victim. It had been an insane, mindless slaughter, with no apparent motive, and, sadly, it was the kind of tragedy that was happening with disturbing frequency across America.

I was in New York with Zigor and our friends the Lycaons when I had heard the news. We were discussing our plans to prevent the Clock Company from taking over the Misquamacas Trading Company, which owned every Indian burial site in the Dakotas.

My secretary at Bedlam forwarded the call. That was how I learned that my uncle had just been killed by a lunatic. The policewoman at the other end of the line worked for the New Orleans PD and had been assigned to contact the next of kins. Old Zaka had given her my number when she had gone to Saint-Amadou to give him my uncle’s blood-stained spiral notebook and personal effects.

I was, she said, the twelfth person on her list. A dreadful job. I didn’t envy her.

“Do you think there may be some kind of occult motive behind the Massacre?” Zigor had asked.

I had wondered the same thing myself.

“I don’t think so,” I answered, however, but didn’t volunteer any more details.

The day before I had called Zaka, who was my uncle’s servant, all-purpose handyman and friend. He sounded terribly sad and more than a little bit confused, which was quite understandable considering his age and the circumstances. And it had been a very long time since we’d spoken to each other...

I did not tell Zigor that Zaka had asked me to come at once, urgently—without explaining why.

The cab dropped us at the corner of Canal and St. Charles, as instructed.

I started to breathe in the sweet smells of the *Vieux Carré*—the aroma of Cajun cooking blending with the powerful odors of the flowers that decorate the wrought iron balconies.

We crossed Canal and entered the French Quarter, which should really be called the Creole Quarter, as it doesn’t really look very much like France. Uncle Ohisver had brought me here many times when I was a child. Until that minute, I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed New Orleans.

It was the beginning of the afternoon. The French Quarter was barely awake and only beginning to dream of the night’s festivities. I thought I caught a note or two from a trumpet blaring somewhere, or perhaps I was just imagining—no, *remembering* it. In my head, past and present intermingled, images of my youth freely resurfaced to superimpose themselves with what I saw; nights in jazz clubs, playing a trumpet until sunrise, the girls, some easy, others less so, Mardi-Gras of course, with its intoxicating atmosphere of round-the-clock partying...

“Why?” asked Zigor suddenly, tearing me away from my remembrances of things past.

“Why what?”

“Why did you stop talking to your uncle?”

“We had words.”

“What kind of words?”

He could be worse than a pitbull with a bone. Sometimes, I wondered if one of his Basque ancestors hadn’t served in the Holy Inquisition.

“It’s complicated... My uncle wanted me to follow in his footsteps, like my father... You know my family’s rather unique vocation... But I was at an age when rebellion comes naturally. The notion of a preordained destiny, a life entirely planned for me, was unbearable. And then, there was that nasty business in Cambridge, at the University... *The Whistling Room*... I refused to acknowledge my own responsibilities and blamed my family for the whole thing. I was angry at my father and at Uncle Ohisver, so I quit. I traveled; I went—you know where. I stayed there for six years. After that, my uncle never forgave me. He refused to speak to me. As far as he was concerned, I was dead to him.”

“And yet—what about the Club? It’s something you can be proud of. Your father was proud of you. Did you ever try to tell your uncle about it?”

“No. I never found the time. I did write him a letter once, but he never replied. And then, I got busy... You know what our existence is like...”

“It’s too bad,” he said.

“Yes.”

We turned into Bienville, a small street lined with brightly-colored houses that is charming but not particularly memorable. It was hot and muggy—a storm was brewing—but if one stayed in the shade, the walk was not altogether unpleasant.

“It’s pretty around here,” said Zigor. “Are we there yet?”

“Almost. That’s where we’re going.”

I pointed to a small occult shop, discreet to the point of not even having a painted sign outside it. It was located slightly off the street, set back slightly and sandwiched between two larger houses. There was a small glass window and an entrance hidden behind a dusky red velvet curtain. It was the kind of shop one expects to find in the French Quarter, offering all the easy paraphernalia for the aspiring or amateur occultist: fancy tarot cards sets, crystal balls, amulets, grimoirs, red and black candles, herbs and other less savory ingredients, charms, etc. I had visited shops just like it from Boston to San Francisco.

But we were in New Orleans and, there, even a shop like this one can hold secrets that remain hidden from the average tourist or occasional amateur.

I went in and Zigor followed me.

A young Creole woman in her early twenties stood behind the counter. She was petite and astonishingly beautiful, with eyes black as night and a mop of curly red hair that made her head look as if it was on fire. Some might have thought it came from a bottle; I was sure it didn't.

"Can I help you?" she asked with a spellbinding smile.

Zigor immediately started puffing up like Tex Avery's Wolf when he met Little Red Riding Hood. I realized that if I didn't step in, the girl was going to sell him three-quarters of the store before he knew what hit him.

"We've just received some powder of crushed black lotus," she whispered confidentially, displaying a jar that contained what I could see was ordinary African musk and, in my opinion, not even of the highest grade.

"I'm Professor Hugo Van Helsing," I said, "and I've come to see Marie."

The sharp sound of the glass jar that she had almost dropped onto the counter when she heard my name, reverberated through the store like a cannon shot. Her smile vanished as quickly as had the prospect of a lucrative sale.

"Professor Hugo Van Helsing?"

"Yes. And you are...?"

"Ascension Proudfoot. I'm Oya's latest handmaiden."

"I see. What happened to Patience?"

"Miss Latrelle now practices in Shanghai. She left about five years ago."

"I wish I was a more frequent customer," I said, flashing my brightest smile at her; it was the one most likely to inspire confidence.

She pressed the small button of an electric bell and smiled back.

"As you can see, we've replaced the old brass bell. We're making an effort to move on with the times."

"It mustn't be easy. I know Marie and her aversion to any kind of modernity."

"Well, it did take me three years to persuade her to install this," she admitted, with another endearing smile.

An old Cajun, dressed completely in white, came out of the back room. There was nothing modern about him. He looked like he was a hundred—or more.

"Gaston, would you mind taking these gentlemen to see Oya?" said Ascension.

"*Tout de suite, Mademoiselle.*"

Gaston gestured that we should follow him.

We entered the back room. This was where the real items were kept—and sold from behind the counter. The contents of the jars carefully arranged on the shelves had nothing in common with the tourist crap that was being displayed upfront. I also spotted a few rare books, including an original edition of Doctor Saturday's three-volume *Traité Vaudou*, bound in human flesh. If it was signed, it was worth more than the store itself—Hell, more than the entire block.

"Who's Oya?" asked Zigor.

"It's better if you see for yourself. Besides, we don't have time for me to tell you right now. It wouldn't be polite to keep her waiting."

We walked down into a cellar cluttered with cardboard boxes. The inventory, I supposed. Gaston, with a strength one would never have expected in a centenarian, moved a few boxes out of the way, exposing a brick tunnel barely lit by a meager 60 watt bulb.

The walls were damp, reminding me of the unpleasant fact that New Orleans was, depending on the neighborhood, between ten and 100 inches below sea level.

Some claimed that Jean Lafitte had lived here in 1805; the only person who could verify that rumor was the owner herself, whom we were about to meet.

When we exited the tunnel, we walked up another flight of steps and emerged into a beautiful patio garden, which featured a profusion of sweet-smelling flowers and its own fountain where birds came to drink. It was like a beautiful oasis from out of time, one that I remembered fondly from having spent much time there as a boy.

The combination of the sights, the smells and the twittering of the birds, combined to almost overwhelm my senses. Old memories once buried, yet never forgotten, resurfaced as I tasted the air around me. The years vanished as suddenly as the birds as we crossed the patio. Suddenly, I was transported back to over 30 years earlier. Nothing had changed, except me. *She* was exactly the same.

“Hugo,” she said, gratifying me with one of her enigmatic smiles. “You have become a man.”

She was as beautiful, mysterious, alluring and timeless as ever. She sat in a wicker chair, sipping a mint julep from a silver goblet, leafing through the latest issue of *Vogue*.

Every time I saw her face, the thought came to me that, a long time ago, her jet-black eyes had stared into the jaws of something far worse than Death—and she hadn’t blinked. Time, age and fear had no grasp on Marie Laveau. She was the mistress of all she beheld, but without pride, for pride is a stupid thing. Joy, beauty, grace and humor are what she stood for.