

NIUN MI TEMA

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*Honoré Lechasseur and Emily Blandish created by*

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A high mournful voice filled the room, the words rendered incomprehensible by Harris' lack of Italian, but the emotion unmistakable. The voice sang of grief, and heartbreak, and loss. The tape on the reel-to-reel machine said it was Verdi, but Harris thought the song could easily have been written for the scene before him.

A candle on the table danced in the breeze. It was a tall, thick church candle, but it had been burning for a while now and was little more than a stump. A small stream of melted wax had fallen from the flame and spilt onto the table, where it had cooled and hardened. One edge touched a plate with a cold, half-eaten dinner on it. Another edge had pooled around the woman's hand, mingling with her blood.

Harris took out his gold pocket watch and slowly, deliberately began to wind it. Behind him, on tape, the tenor sang on.

The woman was young, perhaps twenty-five, perhaps as much as thirty but definitely no more. She was dressed in a delicate silk dress that went down from neck to knee: it flattered her figure, something he suspected she had known. She was also dead, lying face down in her own blood, the back of her head crushed almost beyond recognition. A bloody pestle and mortar lay on the floor behind her, a circle of chalk drawn around it.

Harris slipped his watch back into his pocket.

He shook his head sadly, and left.

It had rained as he'd walked down the streets, a half-hearted drizzle that nonetheless had managed to soak his tweed suit through his raincoat. He regretted leaving his hat at home. He regretted his job, and the things it made him see and do. He couldn't get the song out of his head, nor the flickering of the candlelight.

It wasn't a long walk into Shoreditch, and soon he was heading up the wet granite steps that led to the police station. The desk sergeant looked up from his paperwork and eye-balled Harris.

Harris didn't react, except to pull out his pocket watch, winding it again as he walked by. He knew that most of his colleagues called him "tic-toc" behind his back because of his habit of constantly winding and rewinding his watch, but so far none had dared to call him it to his face. The moment one did, he would know that what small measure of respect he had earned had evaporated, and that his career was over.

‘Detective Inspector Harris?’ the desk sergeant said. ‘There are two people waiting for you in your office.’

Harris nodded, slipping his watch back into his pocket.

‘Thank you,’ he said, without stopping.

Most of the CID offices were on the second floor, mere seconds away from the Chief Inspector’s offices, as befitted officers of their influence and importance. DI Michael “Tic-Toc” Harris’ offices were on the ground floor, through the open courtyard and near the stables. Not that he minded, most days: he knew that his continued existence in the Metropolitan Police depended primarily on his invisibility. Some days, he just wanted to get to his office without having to skirt round shit.

There were, as the desk sergeant had said, two people waiting for him in his office. The woman was dark haired and elfin, demurely dressed for winter except for the men’s boots she wore. She had sat herself in the chair, waiting patiently for Harris to arrive. Her companion was a large black man with a trench coat and trilby, pacing up and down behind her. Both turned to him as he entered the office.

Harris nodded to both, and took his coat off.

‘Thank you for coming so quickly,’ he said.

‘Our pleasure, Inspector,’ the young woman replied.

Harris went over to his desk and opened the top drawer: a dusty green bottle and a shot glass were pulled out and set on the desk. He looked questioningly at his guests, but both shook their heads. With a shrug, he poured himself a single shot of the thick aniseed liqueur and knocked it back.

The bottle and the glass went back into the drawer.

‘A woman was murdered this evening,’ Harris said flatly. ‘We haven’t got any idea why.’

The woman looked saddened. The man’s face grew dark.

‘We can’t keep doing this, Harris,’ he growled. ‘How many is it now? Five?’

Harris didn’t even need to count.

‘The body on the railroad track, the couple in the Serpentine, and the suicide,’ he said, not catching the black man’s eyes. ‘Four.’

The black man glared for a moment.

‘Come on, Emily,’ he said roughly.

The young woman didn’t move.

‘Honoré is right, Inspector,’ she said instead. ‘There’s only so many times a jury is going to believe that we just happened to be the only eye witnesses to an unsolved murder. We agreed that the last time was the last.’

Harris nodded.

‘We did,’ he agreed. ‘Yes.’

She nodded, sympathetically, and began to rise.

‘But,’ he said.

Emily and Honoré both looked at him. He felt the need for another drink, or failing that to take his watch from his pocket and wind it. He did neither. He simply told the truth.

‘We have the man who did it in custody. Her young feller. He’s confessed: we won’t have any trouble getting a conviction.’

Emily looked up at Honoré.

‘Then why –’ Honoré said.

‘This isn’t for a jury,’ Harris said softly. ‘This is for me.’

The cells were only a short walk from Harris’ office – another demonstration of the esteem the Metropolitan Police held him in – and only slightly larger. They were the original Victorian cells, designed with the prisoner’s maximum discomfort in mind. There was talk of replacing them with something more akin to the modern sensibilities, but the country was still trying to pull itself out of its post-war depression and the money just wasn’t available.

The young man was alone in his cell, which was something: if he’d been taken on a Saturday night, he’d be sharing his cell with a bevy of drunken navvies and this would be much more difficult. As it was, he’d had to persuade the duty sergeant to turn a blind eye to two visitors not going down in the log. At least it was Johnny Williamson: he hadn’t cared who they were, so long as he got his cut.

‘This is him,’ Harris said, hovering back by the door. ‘Oscar Flitch.’

Flitch looked up at them dully.

‘Who are you?’ he said. His voice was flat and dead. ‘I’ve already told you: I did it. What do you want now?’

Harris looked at him. He was little more than a boy, twenty if he was a day. All dolled up to look like a gentleman, except somewhere along the line it

had gone wrong: his suit was torn, his shirt front hanging loose from his trousers. One of his suspenders had snapped, and his trousers hung a little lopsided if he stood. There was blood on the shirt, and on his hands. Her blood.

‘I spoke to your neighbours, Oscar,’ Harris said. ‘About you, and Emma. They couldn’t believe it: did their best to convince me you were Romeo and Juliet and Anthony and Cleopatra all rolled into one. Loves young dream, never so much as a raised word. I want to know what happened, Oscar. I want to know why.’

Fritch looked at him with dead eyes. He didn’t say anything, just shook his head slowly. Harris felt his heart fall.

‘Okay,’ he said to Honoré. ‘Do your stuff.’

Fritch looked up at the big black American moving in his direction, and for a moment Harris saw the first flash of emotion in his eyes. He wasn’t surprised: Honoré was big, and an ex-soldier to boot. There couldn’t be a man on God’s green Earth that would feel a little flutter if they saw *that* making a bee-line for them.

‘The name’s Honoré,’ he said, a slight edge to his voice suggesting he’d still rather be somewhere else. ‘I’m not going to hurt you. I’m a Time Sensitive.’

‘What’s that meant to mean?’ Fritch spat, trying to edge away.

‘It means I can see your past, and your future. It means,’ Honoré said, fixing Fritch with an almost sympathetic glare, ‘that I can tell the Inspector why you did what you did. But it would be much simpler if you did.’



Fritch looked back towards Harris.

‘What is this?’ he said.

Harris looked away. By his side, Emily took the opportunity to speak:

‘The truth,’ she said earnestly.

Honoré looked down at the little boy on the chair. His face didn’t change. It never did. But somehow, Harris could feel that the ex-soldier wasn’t there with them any more. His eyes weren’t quite looking at Fritch, instead somehow looking through him. Into him.

‘You went to work in the morning,’ Honoré intoned. Fritch looked up at him, still trying to work out if this was for real or not. ‘A little late, but not so much that your boss noticed. You were laughing with your friends. Nothing important. You had your lunch. You . . . you went home early, on the tram. There was a GI . . . a cripple, begging. You gave him a shilling.’

Fritch’s eyes were widening now. He’d realised.

‘Get him away from me,’ he cried out, but no-one moved.

‘You went to see her. Like you’d arranged,’ Honoré continued, his eyes completely glazed over now. ‘She had dinner ready. You put on a record. And then . . . and then . . .’

Honoré’s eyes closed. For a moment there was silence in the cell. Harris thought he could hear the beat of Emily’s heart, the slow tic-toc of his pocket watch. Then Honoré let out a breath, and Fritch began quietly to sob. Harris took a step forward.

‘Damn it!’ Honoré spat. He didn’t turn around.

‘What?’ Emily asked softly.

Honoré rubbed his eyes, still not turning around.

‘There’s nothing,’ he said quietly. ‘He just went home, put the tape on, and killed her. He didn’t even say anything.’

Harris felt his heart sink. So that was that: the mystery would have to remain a mystery. All he could do was hope that Fritch felt compelled to put his side of the story at his trial, to save his own skin. Looking at him, Harris knew the boy wouldn’t. He’d been broken by what he’d done, Harris had seen it in his eyes when he’d confessed. He wanted the gallows for it. God knew he’d get it, too.

Harris sighed.

‘Alright,’ he said, reaching for his watch. ‘It was worth a –’

‘Wait,’ Emily said, quietly.

Harris looked at her. She was pursing her lips and looking up at Honoré with a look that said she expected him to say what she had on her mind before she had to. Honoré scowled, and shook his head almost imperceptibly.

‘The Inspector has helped us often enough,’ Emily said firmly. ‘We owe him this time.’

‘There’s nothing we can do,’ Honoré repeated slowly. ‘And you don’t care about Harris. You just want to know what happened.’

‘Don’t you?’

Harris coughed, politely.

‘What,’ he said firmly, ‘are we talking about?’

Honoré started to speak, but Emily interrupted him, stepping forward

and resting a hand on Harris' arm.

'Honoré isn't the only one with a gift,' she said. 'I'm a Time Channeller.'

Harris looked at her. She looked back, as if she expected the words to mean something to him. They didn't.

'If we work together,' she said, instead, 'I can travel back with Honoré. He navigates. I travel.'

Harris looked to Honoré, but the big American had turned away.

'We can go back,' Emily said, nodding gently. 'We can find out why.'

'Please,' Fritch said quietly. 'What is this?'

Harris shook his head:

'I don't know,' he answered.

'The truth,' Honoré growled, reluctantly.

Harris pulled his watch from his pocket and began to wind it, his tension starting to relax. He looked up at Emily and Honoré, and wondered just how they'd found each other. But he nodded as well, and watched as they turned to face Fritch. The boy looked up at them, like he couldn't decide whether to laugh or expect a beating. Honoré's eyes glazed again, and his hand reached for Emily's, finding it easily.

Harris blinked, and then they were gone.

Fritch looked around him, his eyes wide.

'Where are they?' he demanded. 'What is this? What have they done?'

'What they said they would, I suppose,' Harris said.

'That's impossible!'

Harris kept winding his pocket watch, letting his jacket fall open a little

for just the briefest of moments. He was wearing a thin white shirt underneath, thin enough to see the colour of his skin through. Fritch looked up at him, open mouthed. He couldn't quite understand what he was seeing, poor kid: but it had taken Harris a good while too.

'The world's a stranger place than you'd be willing to accept,' he said softly.

Harris continued to wind his eighteenth century pocket watch. As the cogs in the watch turned, the cogs in his clockwork heart turned with them, keeping it beating for another few hours. Under his thin shirt, the metal glistened as the cogs turned.

'Believe me,' DI Michael "tic toc" Harris said, softly.

Olivia Rice knew she wasn't one of nature's greatest triumphs. Oh there was nothing wrong with her, as such, but nor was there anything that you'd particular pick out as particularly well done or attractive. She didn't mind, had never felt particularly one way or the other about it. It was just the way things were, and that was just so.

She didn't feel any envy that the elfin policewoman at her door had dark almond-shaped eyes that many men would have longed to stare into. She was comfortable with her own muddy brown eyes, and the man they had gotten her.

'Is Oscar alright?' she asked. She had a sudden, lurching flash of her love lying bloodied in a hospital bed. 'Please say he is.'

The Negro policeman spoke softly. His eyes too had a gentle soulful quality to them: they complemented his companion's, somehow.

'He's fine.' The policeman said. 'At work as normal.'

Olivia's heart began to settle, and she smiled.

'Oh thank goodness,' she sighed.

'It's you we're worried about,' said the little policewoman.

'Me?'

'We had reports of a disturbance here,' the Negro said, interrupting his partner. 'A fight. Between you and Mr Fritch.'

Of all the things he could have said, this was the one thing she hadn't been expecting. It was all she could do not to laugh.

'A fight? Oscar and me?'

The two policemen didn't share her amusement. Well, perhaps so: they must come across couples who fought every day. Some that might even lie about it. But if they had never come across a couple like her and Oscar, then it was high time they did, if only for the sake of their faith in humanity.

'Inspectors,' she said solemnly. 'Oscar and I don't fight. I assure you.'

She smiled as warmly as she could manage, but the Negro policeman was quite ready to believe. He leaned in, fixing her again with those beautiful soft eyes. Poor soul: what must he have been through to doubt her so?

'There's nothing,' he breathed, 'that Mr Fritch might know to make him mean you harm?'

She returned his gaze as firmly as she could.

'Inspector,' she said firmly. 'My Oscar would never hurt me.'

There was a moment, a pause. The Negro Inspector looked for a moment as if he was going to say something else, but didn't and the whole world held its breath waiting for it.

'Alright then,' he said.

The world smiled, reassured.

'All the same,' the little policewoman said suddenly, 'it might be best if you stayed somewhere else tonight.'

'Emily,' hissed the Negro.

The policewoman didn't even look at him, just kept her eyes fixed on Olivia. For a moment, she had the silly idea that the woman was trying to hypnotise her.

'It's her decision, Honoré.'

The Negro glowered behind her.

'You know we can't,' he stumbled for a moment before recovering. 'Can't ask her to do that. We can't make her decisions for her.'

Olivia took a step back. She was a friendly woman, willing to take people as she found them: if two people came to her door and told her they were plain clothed policemen, she'd probably believe them. Even if she'd never seen a Negro policeman before, even one who didn't speak with an American accent and have long stringy hair. She was trusting, there was nothing wrong with that. But she wasn't stupid.

'I think I'd like you to leave now,' Olivia said, firmly.

The Negro held up his hands.

'That's ok. We didn't mean to scare you. We're going.'

‘But –‘

‘Emily!’

And then they were gone.

Oscar Fritch was having a good day. A lucky day: he’d left his grubby little apartment late that morning because the landlord still hadn’t fixed the hot water and he’d had to heat enough water for a bath on the stove . . . and yet somehow Old Cough Drop hadn’t been around to catch him and force him to make the time up at the close of business. Which was not only a minor miracle, but meant that he might still have a chance of convincing the supervisor that he’d actually made it in early so he could duck out in time to meet ‘Livia on time.

‘You lucky sod,’ Max had laughed. ‘If Old Cough Drop wasn’t slipping it to Angie at the butty shop . . .’

‘Nah,’ Benny had chipped in. ‘She can’t stand the smell of those bloody frog sweets neither. He’s away with Mrs Bancroft on Hancock Street.’

‘Don’t be soft!’

‘Got to be that Benny’s right, Max,’ Oscar laughed along with them, and pulled on his overcoat. ‘Cough Drop’s smiling: he’d only to that if he’s ruining someone else’s life.’

They laughed at that, good and hard.

His job, for all that he pretended to dislike it, wasn’t so bad. Like most kids his age, he’d suddenly found he’d pretty much had his choice of career

when he'd got out of school, after the war. He hadn't particularly decided to end up on the shop floor, and if he'd thought about it properly rather than following Max and Benny blindly he might have picked something more exciting. But he was with his friends, and could forget about it when he took the coat off, and how many others could say that?

And it gave him the money to treat 'Livia like she deserved, like the notes he'd left her last night. When he went round to hers tonight, they'd be having a steak supper and a bottle of wine all paid for by him. Then later he'd be able to have a bath without heating the water on the stove first . . . and if he really was lucky, he might even convince 'Livia to join him.

'God will you look at the smile on that?' Benny nudged Max.

They both looked over at Oscar and feigned disgust.

'That's what young love'll do to you,' Max sighed. 'Rot your brains and empty your wallet.'

Oscar smiled sweetly at Max, and held two fingers up in the air.

None of them noticed the large black man and the little elfin girl stood watching them from the factory gates. It wouldn't matter if they did: Oscar had never seen them before in his life, and if they were staring at him so intently, there was nothing they could do to spoil his lucky, lucky day.

It was nearly dark by the time Olivia managed to actually serve dinner: she'd never cooked anything more upmarket than egg and chips before, and had had to follow a recipe in pinpoint detail before she even had the nerve to



turn the gas on. But she'd managed it, even the brandy sauce to go with it: she felt proud of herself. She felt happy.

She set the plates down on the table and lit the candle, still smiling.

'Why don't you put some music on?' she said.

Oscar didn't answer, but moments later the music started. She recognised it, vaguely. Some opera Oscar had bought around a few weeks back. He was a lovely lad, perfect for her in so many ways, but he had absolutely no idea about creating a romantic mood.

'Not this, Oscar,' she laughed. 'Something a bit more –'

There was nothing after that.

Oscar Fritch sat alone in his cell, staring down at the floor.

There was a small electric crackle, and then Oscar Fritch sat in his cell with Honoré and Emily. None of them said anything about their arrival: Honoré and Emily were used to it, and life held no more surprises for Fritch. He looked up at them blankly, and then back down at the floor.

'Is Harris here?' Honoré asked.

Fritch shook his head slowly.

'It's gone midnight,' he answered.

Emily glared up at Honoré, as if this was his fault entirely. He wasn't in the mood for her jokes, however, and simply stood hovering over Fritch like the Angel of Death in a trench coat. Instead, she turned to the prisoner, resting a gentle hand on his shoulder.

‘Is there anything you need?’ she asked him kindly.

A pause.

‘Did you find out?’ Oscar Fritch asked them.

The cell held its breath. Emily looked up at Honoré, and yet he hesitated. She scowled at him, and his hand found its way out of his trench coat pocket. There was something held tightly in his fist that he held out to Fritch. For a moment, the young boy just looked at the hand, and didn’t move.

‘We found it in her apartment,’ Emily said softly.

‘We guess you did, too,’ Honoré added.

Fritch held out his hand, and Honoré dropped something into it. Oscar looked at it for a moment, and then started to cry.

Oscar Fritch could smell the steaks cooking, hear the crackle of them in the pan as his ‘Livia tried her best to cook them right even though she really didn’t have a clue. She did it for him, had insisted, because she loved him and wanted to take care of him. Because she loved him.

He looked down at the ashtray and thought what a fool he’d been.

The sound of spitting in the kitchen stopped, and a moment later ‘Livia appeared carrying two plates of what looked to be the perfect dinner. His ‘Livia, she smiled at him as she passed him by. He didn’t smile back, but she didn’t wait to see. He kept his eyes on the ashtray as his mind raced and whirled, trying to come up with some other reason.

‘Why don’t you put some music on?’ she said.

He was surprised to find a small knot of intense anger burning in the pit of his stomach. Music, it said, oh yes music. Suddenly he knew exactly what he had to do, what music *she* deserved. He reached for the reel-to-reel and put it on. *Niun mi tema*, he thought to himself coldly, looking at the half-sucked cough drop and its wrapper sitting there accusingly. Specially imported, he knew, over from France.

‘Not this, Oscar,’ she laughed. ‘Something a bit more –’

And then it all went dark.