

I guess this is where I say no one under 18 admitted without parent or guardian. If you are under 18 hit the back button. Thanx. (Actually this section is pretty tame, all ages welcome.)

The Worst Xian: Installment XI
The Post War Years

"So, what do you guys do?"

The girl's shock of blonde bangs slipped from behind her ear, catching on one of the studs set above her eyebrow. She pushed it back, securing it behind the intertwined rows of silver hoops that ran from the top to the bottom of her ears on both sides. The hoops started off as small ornate circlets at the top and grew to be almost the size of a silver dollar in diameter at the lobe.

"He's a reporter," I announced pointing at Dan.

"He's a murderer," Dan announced pointing at me. "But we both hold down day-ish jobs at the Post, so don't let it frighten you."

I burst out laughing.

Dan and I had been drinking and bonding all night. We had decided to hit every shitty bar we could find in Baltimore, though there seemed to be no end of shitty bars. Several drinks ago, we found ourselves in a dark basement establishment filled with p-beaters.

Each of the clientele seemed to be more painted, pierced, and modified than the last. They reminded me of the crowd I ran with back in college, only exaggerated by a power of ten. Most of us had a number of tattoos and piercings, but none really went for recreational surgical modifications.

The girl, standing next to Dan, was modestly modified by Beat standards. The tattoos on her skull shimmered. On her temples, the heads of two gold and red flecked Chinese dragons peaked over her ears. Their tails intertwined at the back of her skull and twisted together as they meandered down her neck ending between her shoulder blades.

Over her breasts another pairing of dragons twisted and tore at each other. Skeletal, tribal, snake-like beasts, their holographic movements alluded to something lewd occurring beneath the thin stretch of Syntek pulled across her breasts.

I looked at her electric pearl bangs and realized I had already forgotten her name. She seemed about the age I that was in school, only a few years younger than I am now. She seemed to have vitality, an urgent, exuberant strength, everyone here did. Even those sitting in the darkest corners, pretending that they wanted to be left alone seemed alive and untamed. In two words and a hyphen: fucking-cool. They were the ultra-hip, the demographers dream. I envied them. Somewhere inside I wanted to be one of them. To be counted as one of them, but I had not even had my piercings re-done after getting out.

I was amazed the beautiful creature was even speaking with us. Undoubtedly, that had more to do with Dan's social skills than my own.

My last drink had begun to sit badly in my stomach. Cheap fucking gin.

Not even twenty-five years old and already over the hill. If I could not keep down rail gin then how much longer until I became the crotchety old man grumbling "kids today" to himself while walking down the street.

"Wash-Post, huh. So you guys slumming it up here or what?"

Dan, in his best/worst *Bawmer* accent announced, with great flourish, that we were researching a story. The tragic and comic misadventures of two tragically un-hip men exploring the seedy underbelly of

Baltimore in search of *uber-hottee* girlfriends in order to improve their social status back home. Unable to find anyone more suited to the task than ourselves, we were forced to test our objectivity as journalists and undertake the task ourselves.

"Why Baltimore? Why not the seedy under-tummy of DC?"

"Because," Dan continued, "if we were to fail in DC, it would doubtless get back to the newsroom, where we would be teased mercilessly by our peers. Here we can fail miserably and most likely get away with it."

"The life of a journalist is seldom glamorous," he added slugging back a kamikaze.

She laughed, rubbing at a tattoo on the recently shaved side of her head, its colors swam under the pressure. The last several rounds of gin seemed to be catching up with me all at once. I just stared at the swirling orange and gold of the design, it was mesmerizing. Ripples and shimmers swam across in time with the Pulse Beat music. The sound emanated from nearly every flat surface. It felt like it was syncing itself to the beat of my heart, but I knew the opposite was true. The long bass waves, carefully sculpted and generated to control physiology.

The music was loud. It had to be to overcome the din of a hundred and fifty different conversations, as well as the dampening caused by almost twice as many bodies. It seemed unlikely that so many people would legally be allowed in the tiny confines of the monochrome space. Judging by the number of tables and free space I guessed even half the present crowd would be considered a fire hazard.

The place breathed. It inhaled life and air, oxygen and energy. It exhaled the scent of beer and flesh, stale cigarettes and old sex.

"Shade!"

"Huh?"

Dan was poking me roughly in the shoulder. "She wants to know who you killed."

I leaned close in, halfway over Dan, so that they could both hear me over the beats.

"I once killed a man just for snoring." Dan shook his head at my flat attempt at humor. Undaunted I continued, this time without the comedic improvisation. "But Dan is talking about some Separatists I aced in the Balkans. Nothing much. Just a message from Uncle Sam reminding them if they want an independent nation they better get down and lick our boots first."

The girl blinked, her silver eye shadow sparkling in the light emitted from the bar top.

"Of course I was subsequently kicked out for being a lousy soldier. I mean..." I stopped to drain the gin from my glass. It burned in my throat and twisted in my gut. "I mean, is that gratitude or what?" I took the kamikaze that Dan had ordered for himself and drank it. "I mean, hey, I go out of my way to break every moral conviction that has ever been instilled in me. Every conviction against fighting, let alone killing, and they have the nerve to say that I am a danger to others and myself. Fuck! I thought I was supposed to be."

Dan's hands pushed against my shoulders, forcing me back into my seat. I pushed back. Around the corners of my vision things started to haze to black, my jaw ached like hell. Dan held fast, his fingers locked onto my collarbone.

"Whoah there, cowpoke. I don't think the nice lady was expecting a treatise on world affairs and politics. Besides you work in style, leave the ranting to the folks in OpEd."

My body went slack. I slumped my weight squarely on the stool beneath me.

"Barkeep, another round for us." I shouted trying to play off the incident. The girl had inched her chair several centimeters to one side, placing the bulk of Dan between her and I. I shrugged my shoulders in the best attempt at an apology that I could muster at the moment.

"And anything pretty pretty here wants." Dan added pointing at the girl. He had obviously also forgotten her name. Despite that, the two of them had begun chatting each other up in a fairly intense manner.

Dan leaned against the bar as they talked. With him in his suit and her mostly in skin cloth and lax, they looked like some sort of post nuclear war sitcom. Mad Max meets leave it to Beaver.

She seemed unable to resist Dan's humor. She laughed at every joke. Her smile, sharpened eyeteeth and all, was infectious. A kind of rocket fuel on the open flame of his wit. If they were not married by the end of the night, there would at least be one more of us on the 'Lev back to DC.

I turned my back on them, ostensibly to give them time alone, but more to get away from the progressively saccharine scene. The scene around me was a mob of black skin cloth under lax jackets. Though synthetics seemed to be the *depeche mode* some of the older, slightly scarier, crowd wore actual leather, cracked, worn and paint flecked. Crumbling buildings in a future of man made flesh and flash.

I thought of Poppy and the clubs I used to know back home. Zoe. Only two more days until she would arrive. And Karen...

I always have to think about Karen, don't I. You know she always laughed at the way I drank. Sort of lopsided, out of the side of my mouth. Man, Lord.

Karen was in my mind, her devilish smile my rocket fuel. The sound of her giggle whenever she did something dumb, tickled in my memory. Her constant feigning of innocence counterpoint to her devious nature. A five foot terror. The defender of my honor. IT was her that extracted a toll from those whom my own pacifist leanings kept me from striking.

God, I am such a waste of DNA. All of evolution has brought us here, to this moment. A staggering drunk, drugged in a mass of half naked, fucking cave fish. Blind, fucking fish lost in an ocean. Just fucking lost. Maybe a lucky few will find the way back to the cave, back to safety. But the rest of us are just lost. Damned. Fuck life. Damned to a cheap grope in a dirty bar bathroom, or...

The room wavered. Black melting into black. People's eyes disappearing into shadowed sockets. The crowd of mater deteriorating into spirits from Sheol. Shadows, with the substance of a bats whisper. My eyes hurt, dry, tired, burning. I looked at the crowd again, and there he was.

Slipping from the spaces in between the lack of time and too much space, he moved unnoticed. He seemed more solid than anything I had ever seen, yet breathed smoke. His black glass body of some nether spirit winding its way unnoticed through the over-crowded bar. Without knowing what they were doing people made way for him, stepping aside to retrieve something or move in on someone as he approached. Nothing blocked his path as my world rotated towards him. A ram horned beast stood before me casting his shark grin and voided eyes.

"Why do you still do this shit?"

His hand reached out. Long, lean fingers resembling nothing but bone and claw, but exuding the strength of a blacksmith, lifted toward me. My diaphragm seemed to collapse, as my entire body tried to recoil. Sweat pricked the back of my neck in hot needles as his dead cold had reached into my coat.

My eyes darted left. Dan and Pretty-Pretty were inches away from one another, moments from contact. Everyone in the room seemed to be looking the other way, for just this instance.

Retrieved, his hand blossomed. My pocket full of pills spread against the space-like velvet void that was his palm. A pharmaceutical companies' product shot of a galaxy of pills, tabs, and derms.

"The instructions say not to mix these things with alcohol, but you keep doing this to us." His voice was soft despite the cold sharp look of his cracked obsidian tongue. It echoed the same disappointment I had seen in the eyes of my comrades that day, with the pistol in the troop carrier.

"Get on with it man. Face it, you were never a soldier."

A hand touched my shoulder. I turned as the world exploded into The Bass Beat Twins song *Ridicule*. Dan's hand was groping blindly for my shoulder, his face too busy locking eyes with the Pretty-Pretty.

"Shade!" He finally managed

"Yeah, what?" I had stammered. I could not help but to try and look for the hallucination. The bone cold touch of his hand still lingered in me.

"When do you want to head home?"

"Anytime."

Everything seemed to recede from my grasp.