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Bzrk

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For Katherine, Jake and Julia

The author wishes to thank two amazing bands,
The Methadones and Shot Baker, for permission to reprint some of their lyrics

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·THE SHADOW GANG·

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BZRK

MICHAEL GRANT



Oh, that way madness lies;
let me shun that.

King Lear

ONE

A girl sat just three chairs down from Noah talking to her hand. To the back of her hand, actually, as she spread her fingers wide. Her fingertips were painted alternately red and gold, but not with fingernail polish, and not strictly on the fingernails. Rather, it looked as if she had used a can of spray paint.

She explained to the back of her hand that she was, "Perfectly all right. Perfectly all right."

Noah thought she might have been pretty, but it was hard to really assess her face or body when his glance was drawn so irresistibly to the rope burn around her neck.

She started screaming when the orderlies came for her. They had to lift her up bodily, one on each rigid arm. Her mother, or perhaps older sister, stood with her hand over her mouth, wept and echoed the girl's own speech.

"It'll be all right," said the sane one.

"I'm perfectly all right!" cried the crazy one.

The girl kicked her chair across the floor, and shot Noah a savage look from eyes edged red.

Noah Cotton. Sixteen years old. He had brown hair that defaulted to bed head without any effort on his part. His lips were full and downturned just a little, as if prepared for sadness. The nose was strong and sharp, a damned-near-perfect nose. But of course it was those blue eyes that drew you in. Where had he gotten eyes that blue? They looked unnatural. Like someone wearing tinted contact lenses. And Noah would turn those bright, unnatural blue eyes on you, and you wouldn't know whether you were looking into profound depths or maybe just into a very crazy place.

Well, if the answer was, "A very crazy place," then he would fit in perfectly with his location, which was the waiting room in the central hall of The Brick.

This place weighed down on him. Maybe it was the history. In the eighteenth century it had been called the Lord Japheth LeMay Asylum for the Incurably Mad. By the mid-nineteenth century that had been softened a bit to become the East London Asylum for the Insane.

Today it was officially called the East London Hospital for the Treatment of Serious Mental Illness.

But no one called it that, at least not outside the facility itself. Out in the world it was called The Brick.

It was a redbrick architectural monstrosity that had grown—metastasized, maybe—over the course of more than two hundred years. It wasn't all brick. Some of the towers and wings

were stone. Some outbuildings were flaking, painted plaster over ancient half-timbered walls. But the massive hall, with its fraternal twin towers, the Bishop and the Rook—one tall and pointed, the other squat and intimidating—were all in soot-encrusted red brick.

Noah was doing his best not to feel the echoes of the mad girl's cries, but the waiting room was about as schizophrenic as many of the patients: ancient oil paintings, a vaguely off-kilter black-and-white tile floor, yellow walls that were probably someone's idea of cheerful, and furniture from a rummage sale. Then, to top it all off, there was the chandelier, which had to have been plundered from some gaudy palace during a long-ago colonial war. It cast a light that was excellent at creating shadows, so that even the space under the chairs looked as if it might be the dark lair of tiny monsters.

Noah was here to visit his brother, Alex. His much older brother, Alex. Age twenty-five, ex-army veteran of Afghanistan, Royal Highland Fusiliers. (Motto: *Nemo Me Impugn Lacessit*—No One Assails Me with Impunity. Or the alternative version—Do Not Fuck with Us or We Will Hurt You.) Shoulders you could break a cinder block on, disciplined, up every morning to run ten kilometers in whatever weather London had on offer.

Alex Cotton, who had earned the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross for basically having balls so big he had taken out three

Hajis in a machine-gun nest while literally carrying a wounded comrade on his back.

And now . . .

Noah's name was called. An attendant, a swaggering thug with fat legs, a Taser in one pocket and a leather-covered sap sticking out of the other, led the way. Past office doorways. Through a reinforced glass and steel security door.

Through a second security door.

Past the control center where bored guards watched flickering screens and discussed sports with their feet up.

Through a third door. This one had to be buzzed open by an attendant on the other side.

And here the screams and wails and sudden shrill, rising cries and gut-wrenching sobs began. The sounds leaked through steel doors of individual rooms: cells, in reality.

Noah didn't want to feel those screams inside himself, but he wasn't armored, he wasn't impervious. Each wild trill of mad laughter made him flinch as if he was being whipped.

A nurse and two scruffy attendants were making their way from door to door. One of the attendants pushed a squeaky cart loaded with little plastic cups, each designated with a code number and containing no fewer than half a dozen and sometimes a baker's dozen brightly colored pills.

The pill crew came to a door, knocked, warned the inmate to stand back, waited, then unlocked and opened the door. One

attendant—no, let's cut the bull, they were guards, turnkeys, screws, but not attendants—went inside with the nurse while the remaining guard stood ready with a Taser.

Noah reached Alex's cell. Number ninety-one.

"Don't worry, he's shackled," the guard said. "Just don't try to touch him. He don't like people touching him." The guard grinned ruefully and shook his head in a way that suggested Noah knew what he meant.

The door opened on a room five feet wide, eight feet deep. The only furnishing was a steel bunk. Fat steel bolts fixed the cot to the cracked tile floor. There was a radio on a high shelf, too high for a person to reach. The BBC was on, soft, some politician being grilled.

Alex Cotton sat on the edge of the bunk. His wrists were handcuffed to steel rings on either end. The effect was to stretch his arms out and limit his ability to move anything but his head.

The ghost of Alex Cotton turned hollow, vacant eyes on his little brother.

Noah couldn't speak for a moment. Because what he wanted to say was, "This is the wrong room. That's not my brother."

Then a low growl that at first sounded as if it might be coming from the radio. An animal sound. Alex Cotton's mouth snapped suddenly, like a shark missing the bait.

"Alex," Noah said. "It's me. It's just me, Noah."

The guttural sound again. Alex's eyes suddenly focused. He

stared at Noah, shook his head as if the vision caused him pain.

Noah made just the slightest move to touch his brother's strained arm. Alex yanked his whole body as far away as he could, which was no more than a few inches. He strained so hard that the handcuffs drew blood.

Noah backed away, held up his hands reassuringly.

"Told you, don't try and touch him, he'll start screaming about his little spiders and shit," the guard said.

"Alex, it's just me. It's Noah."

"Nano nano nano nano," Alex said in a singsong voice, and then giggled. He wiggled his fingertips like he was acting something out.

"Nano? What is that, Alex?" He whispered it, speaking as he would to a frightened child. Gentle.

"Heh heh heh, no. No. No no no nano nano nano. No."

Noah waited until he was done. He refused to look away. This was his brother. What was left of his brother.

"Alex, no one can figure this out. No one can figure out what happened to you. You know what I mean, to have you end up here."

Explain your craziness, crazy man. Tell me what happened to my brother.

"Nano, macro, nano, macro," Alex muttered.

"He says that a lot," the guard offered. "Mostly nano."

"Is this from the war?" Noah asked, ignoring the guard. He

wanted an explanation. None of the doctors had been very convincing. Everyone said it was probably the war, but Alex had been examined for post-traumatic stress when he came home, and everything had seemed fine with him. He and Noah had taken in some sports, gone on a road trip to the Cornish coast for the beach and for some girl Alex knew. His brother had been a little distracted, but that was all. Distracted.

The guard hadn't answered.

"I mean, is it memories and all that?" Noah pressed. "Is that what he goes on about? Afghanistan?"

To his surprise, it was Alex who answered.

"Haji?" Alex laughed a crooked-mouth laugh, like half his face was paralyzed. "Not Haji. Bug Man," Alex said. "The Buuug Man. One, two, three. All dead. Poof!"

"That's pretty good for him," the guard opined approvingly.

And for a few seconds it almost seemed as if the crazy had cleared away. Like Alex was straining to make his mouth say words. His voice went down into a whisper. He nodded, like he was saying, *Pay attention to this; this is important.*

This. Is. Important.

Then he said, "Berserk."

Alex nodded, satisfied with himself, then kept nodding harder and harder, until his whole body was vibrating almost like some kind of seizure. The shackles rattled the bed. The whole cell seemed to vibrate in sympathy.

"Berserk!" Alex said, louder now and louder still until he was shouting it.

"Berserk! Berserk!"

"Jesus," Noah said, hating himself for reacting, for letting his horror show.

"Once he starts on this, it's over for the day," the guard said wearily. He grabbed Noah's arm, not unkindly. "Goes on for hours with this 'Berserk' shite of his."

"Berserk! Berserk!"

Noah let himself be led from the cell.

"Berserk!"

When he heard the door locked behind him, he felt a wave of sickness and relief. But it didn't stop the sound of his mad brother's cries, which followed him down the hallway, drilling holes into Noah's reeling mind.

"Berserk!"

"BERSERK!"

TWO

Stone McLure wasn't model handsome. Not one of those guys who looked pretty. Even though he was just seventeen, Stone wasn't really for girls. He was for women.

Women would look at him and let their eyes slide over his face and those shoulders, because, you know, women don't stare the way men do. They just need a glance. And then, having memorized him with a glance, they would regret their marriage, regret their age, regret their sweatpants and faded Abercrombie T-shirts, regret that they were carrying a plastic bag of groceries in one hand and a twenty-four pack of Pampers in the other.

Stone pulled his earbuds out.

"Where are we stopping first?" he asked his father.

"We'll refuel in San Francisco and pick up a second pilot. Then I have a brief meeting in Hokkaido, and it's on to Singapore." He said it without looking up from his work.

Earbuds back in.

Stone had curly dark hair and eyes like polished green marble with golden threads woven through. He had a brow that seemed

designed by God to mark him as honest, a strong nose, a complexion that had surely never been marred by so much as a freckle, let alone a pimple—what pimple would dare?

He looked a bit like his father, Grey McLure—and most of the world knew Grey's face—but Grey had the signs of weariness and wariness that came with being a billionaire of the better sort. A billionaire who had made his money with science and innovation and in all the ways you'd hope a billionaire would make his money.

They were sitting just a couple of feet apart in the back of a Cessna Citation X, Grey facing aft, Stone facing forward. It was a private jet, yes, but no more ostentatious than was absolutely necessary in a private jet. There was no hot flight attendant in a teasing uniform. No flowing Champagne. None of that. Grey's jet was about business. And his son was learning that business.

Grey was drinking coffee from a mug that said fairly decent dad. See, a mug that said world's best dad would have violated the Grey family's style, which was self-deprecating, wry, and utterly devoted.

Grey was tapping away at his pad and sipping and tapping and frowning a bit from time to time.

Stone was reading a book on his own pad, not maybe paying as much attention as he should, because in his ears were the buds and through them came the raw, hoarse voice of Tony Kovacs.

Being here with my surroundings,
Seeing all I'm looking at,
Evolution winking at me,
My face forms a smile.

Earbuds out.

"So this would be a flight measured more in days than in mere hours," Stone said, and stretched his legs.

"Long flight," his father acknowledged. "You could have spent the time with your grandmother in Maryland."

Stone held up mock-surrender hands. "Did I sound like I was complaining?"

"Your grandmother loves you."

"My grandmother loves painting ceramic figurines of First Ladies."

"Historically accurate figurines," Grey said and grinned. "You could have helped her decorate Abigail Fillmore's bonnet."

Stone pretended to weigh the alternatives. "Abigail's bonnet . . . Singapore girls in formfitting saris. Hmm. Tough one."

Earbuds back in.

Here am I living in it,
Here am I in everything.

His sister, Sadie, had gotten him started on punk, probably thinking he needed something less, well, insipid than what he came up with by following his usual pattern: downloading whatever his friends were listening to. Sadie was like that, one of those people untouched by trend or fashion, comfortable building her own world out of what she liked, from tunes and styles and reads that could be so ancient they were cobwebbed, up through to things so new they barely existed yet. Sometimes it was like she imagined something and conjured it into reality.

Sadie could be a prickly little witch, but at sixteen she was who she was in a way that Stone could not quite equal. Didn't bother him, not really. Stone had a defined role to play. He was the heir, the scion, the eldest. There'd been lots of times he envied Sadie's freedom—man, who wouldn't?—but he was okay with his destiny. Someone had to do it. Might as well be him.

Spent so much of my time thinking,
Feeling like I'm under attack.
Overlooking the reality in front of me,
Wandering down so many paths.

And for his mother, whose ashes had settled into the Atlantic at the midpoint between her native London and her adopted New York.

He looked out of the window, veering his thoughts away from that last image. Not right now, not right now, not that memory.

Stone and his father had taken off from Teterboro and now were flying over the Meadowlands. Down below, a game. Football, American style.

Stone's life had been split more or less evenly between New York and London, so he could appreciate both sets of sport obsession: football and baseball in the States, soccer and cricket in the UK. Still couldn't imagine what anyone saw in hockey, because . . .

Then he remembered.

Earbuds out.

"Hey, isn't Sadie at that game?"

Grey looked up and smiled, a conspiratorial look. "And I'm sure she's loving every minute of it."

Stone laughed. "Yeah. Nothing Sadie likes better than being outside in the cold and part of some big, cheering crowd." He shook his head. "I hope the dude is worth it. Is it that Tony guy I met?"

Grey nodded. "I think highly of his father. Tony himself . . . well, I suppose I could offer Sadie some fatherly advice on that kid."

They both burst out laughing. The idea of Sadie listening to advice from anyone. On any topic. Let alone her love life.

"You're not that brave," Stone teased.

"I'm not that stupid," Grey countered with a look of mock fear. Then, in a softer tone, turning his eyes away, looking out and down, "She's got your mother in her."

Which just veered Stone back to a place he didn't want to go. He nodded and didn't trust his voice to answer. Not even a 'Yeah." Even one syllable could break his voice.

Earbuds in.

Shot Baker was done. Someone else was singing, another song Sadie had put on his playlist. Come to think of it, was there anything on it that Sadie hadn't chosen for him?

Down below, the dome was a huge, oblong cereal bowl filled with eighty thousand Jets fans. The Jets actually had eighty thousand fans this year, because it was early December and damned if they weren't still in contention.

The dome's cover had been drawn back to let fans take advantage of the clear, weak, low-slung sun of fall. The sleet and the cold wind would come soon enough; a last sunny Sunday, even a chilly one, was not to be wasted.

A blimp turned lazily above the dome. It looked like some leisurely version of sperm and egg from up here. The image brought a smile to Stone's lips. He totally had to work that into his next English comp paper. Freak out his teacher with a sudden display of analogy. Or was it simile?

Earbuds out, reluctantly.

"Hey, I see her head. That's her, on the left," Stone said. "End zone." Making conversation so Grey wouldn't think he was upset about the mention of Mom. From this height the tops of heads were a mere suggestion of a dot.

"No," Grey said, "She's closer to midfield."

Like he knew right where she was sitting. Playing along, Stone thought. Although, sometimes it seemed to Stone that their father knew Sadie's every move. They had something, those two.

Sadie and Grey fought—word battles with all kinds of subtext Stone could hear but not understand. Word ninjas, those two. Fortunately Stone had always gotten along with his sister, because he'd be the first to admit he could not throw down in a verbal battle with her. The girl could put a knife right into your ego.

Sometimes it made him jealous that Sadie and their father could yell at each other. He and Grey never did.

The jet banked a sharp left. Like the pilot had read Grey's mind and wanted to give the boss a chance to peer down and make out the top of his daughter's head. Or like—

The turn was too sharp.

Way too sharp, hard and sudden. The right wing was arcing downward.

Stone was pulled against the bulkhead by gravity. The pad fell from his father's lap. Grey's fairly decent dad mug scooted

across the table and toppled over to roll down the aisle.

"What the hell?" Grey demanded.

There was an intercom in Grey's armrest. He punched the button. "Kelly. What's the matter?" Kelly, the pilot. She'd flown the jet for six years. Like a member of the family.

No answer.

"Strap in," Grey told Stone. He stood up, but the g-forces threw him off-balance so that he had to sort of twist around his seat. He fell against a bulkhead and then pushed himself back up and lurched toward the cockpit door, moving like a drunk in a strong wind.

Now the jet was tilting not just to the right but downward. A definite dive. Like way too steep. Through the window Stone saw the field below already closer, and tilted crazily. Big men on a green rectangle seeming somehow to run uphill. He saw the Jumbotron screens showing a replay.

"Kelly!" Grey had reached the cockpit door, barely holding himself up. "Are you okay in there? What's happening?"

Grey rattled the little door handle. The door did not open.

That's when Grey looked back at his son. Their eyes met.

Weird how much a two-second glance could convey. Fear. Sadness. Regret.

Defeat.

Grey banged on the cockpit door. "Open up, Kelly! Open the door!"

Stone unbuckled and lurched to his feet. But the floor was falling away from him. It was as if he couldn't fall fast enough to keep his feet on the floor. Like when a roller coaster crosses that first big crest and suddenly you are gravity's toy. The ceiling came down and hit him. Not hard, but the ceiling had no business hitting him at all.

Stone didn't walk to the cockpit door, he tumbled. He snatched at seat backs and missed, fingers slapping tan leather, feet scooting uselessly on carpet. He plowed hard into his father.

Grey was slamming himself as well as he could against the cockpit door. Yelling. Cursing, which was not something Grey McLure did.

The plane was tilted so sharply now that it was more vertical than horizontal. Stone lay on his back on the carpeted floor and kicked against the cockpit door beneath him, while his father lay pressed against the bulkhead and slammed himself against it.

"Dad! What's happening?"

Stone kicked again and again.

A sudden give. The doorjamb cracked. One more hit would do it.

Stone hauled himself back up, using the seats to climb, like a slippery ladder, then dropped, feet punching out with every bit of power he had to give, and with a sound like a breaking branch the door gave way.

Stone fell through in a tangle with his father. The two of them hit Kelly's seat and crashed into the instrument panel, smashed into the windshield. Pain shot through Stone's knees, his elbow, his shoulder. Didn't matter because now the green field was so near. Zooming up at him.

A flash of Kelly's face, eyes blank, mouth bleeding from hitting the instrument panel, short-cut gray hair matted, staring hard in horror. Staring at something maybe only she could see.

A flash of the stands full of people.

His father flailing, legs tangling, something broken, head hanging the wrong way, too confused to . . .

"Dad!" A sob, not a shout.

Stone pushed himself back from the instrument panel and somehow found the stick with his right hand and pulled hard.

Kelly turned to look at him. Like Stone's action was puzzling to her. Like she was amazed to find him there. With dreamy slowness she reached for the stick.

The three of them tangled together in a heap and the field rushing up at them. So fast.

Way too fast.

And Stone knew it.

But he pulled back on the stick and yelled, "Dad!" for no reason because there wasn't anything Stone could do but look at him with eyes full of horror and so sad; so, so sad.

"Dad!"

The jet began to respond. The nose started to come up. The stadium seats looked like they were falling away, and now the top of the stadium, the upper rim was in view.

And some remote, still-functioning part of Stone's brain realized they were actually inside the stadium. A jet. Inside a bowl. Climbing toward safety.

Faces. Stone could see thousands of faces staring up at him and so close now he could see the expressions of horror and see the eyes and open mouths and drinks being spilled, legs tripping as they tried to run away.

He saw team shirts.

A redheaded kid.

A mother pulling her baby close.

An old guy making the sign of the cross, like he was doing it in slow motion.

"Dad."

Then the jet flipped. Up was down.

The jet was moving very fast. But not quite the speed of sound. Not quite the speed of sound, so the crunch of the aluminium nose hitting bodies and seats and concrete did reach Stone's ears.

But before his brain could register the sound, Stone's honest brow and strong nose and broad shoulders and his brain and ears, too, were smashed to jelly.

Stone was instantly dead, so he did not see that his

father's body was cut in two as it blew through the split side of the cockpit.

He did not see that a section of Grey's shattered-melon head flew clear, bits of gray-and-pink matter falling away, a trail of brain.

A small piece—no bigger than a baby's fist—of one of the great minds of modern times landed in a paper cup of Coors Light and sank into the foam.

Then the explosion.