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Half Blood Blues

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Paris 1940

Chip told us not to go out. Said, don't you boys tempt the devil. But it been one brawl of a night, I tell you, all of us still reeling from the rot - rot was cheap, see, the drink of French peasants, but it stayed like nails in you gut. Didn't even look right, all mossy and black in the bottle. Like drinking swamp water.

See, we lay exhausted in the flat, sheets nailed over the windows. The sunrise so fierce it seeped through the gaps, dropped like cloth on our skin. Couple hours before, we was playing in some back-alley studio, trying to cut a record. A grim little room, more like a closet of ghosts than any joint for music, the cracked heaters lipping steam, empty bottles rolling all over the warped floor. Our cigarettes glowed like small holes in the dark, and that's how I know we wasn't buzzing, Hiero's smoke not moving or nothing. The cig just sitting there in his mouth like he couldn't hear his way clear. Everyone pacing about, listening between takes to the scrabble of rats in the wall. Restless as hell. Could be we wasn't so rotten, but I at least felt off. Too nervous, too crazed, too busy watching the door. Forget the rot. Forget the studio's seclusion. Nothing tore me out of myself. Take after take, I'd play sweating to the end of it only to have Hiero scratch the damn disc, toss it in the trash.

'Just a damn braid of mistakes,' Hiero kept muttering. 'A damn braid of mistakes.'

'We sound like royalty - after the mob got done with em,' said Chip.

Coleman and I ain't said nothing, our heads hanging tiredly.

But Hiero, wiping his horn with a blacked-up handkerchief, he turn and give Chip a look of pure spite. 'Yeah, but, hell. Even at our worst we genius.'

Did that ever stun me, him saying this. For weeks the kid been going on and on about how dreadful we sound. He kept snatching up the discs, scratching the lacquer with a pocket knife, wrecking them. Yelling how there wasn't nothing there. But there was something. Some seed of twisted beauty.

I didn't mean to. But somehow when the kid turned his back I was sliding off my vest, taking the last disc – still delicate, the grooves still new – and folding the fabric round it. I glanced around, nervous, then tucked it into my basscase. The others was packing up their axes.

'Where's that last record at?' said Hiero, frowning. He peered at the trash bin, at the damaged discs all in there.

'It's in there, buck,' I said. 'You didn't want it, did you?'

He give me a sour look. 'Ain't no damn point. We ain't never goin get this right.'

'What you sayin, kid?' said Chip, slurring his words. 'You sayin we should give it up?'

The kid just shrugged.

We lined up the empty bottles along the wall, locked up real quiet, gone our separate routes back to Delilah's flat. Curfew was on and Paris was grim, all clotted shadows and stale air. I made my quiet way along the alleys, dreading the sound of footsteps, till we met up again at the flat. Everyone but Coleman, of course, Coleman who was staying with his lady. We collapsed onto dirty couches under blackout curtains.

I'd set my axe against the wall and it was like I could feel the damn disc just sitting in there, still warm. I felt its presence so intensely it seemed strange the others ain't sensed it too. Its wax holding all that heat like an altar candle.

It was the four of us living here. Delilah, Hieronymus, Chip and me. Couple months before we'd spent the day nailing black sheets across the flat's windows, but damn if that grim sun didn't flood through anyway. The rooms felt too stale to sober up in. We needed to sweat it out in the fresh air, get our heads about us. Ain't been no breeze in weeks. Hiero was draped in his chair, his scrawny legs dangling, when all a sudden he turn to me. His face dark and smooth as eggplant. 'Christ, I feel green. My guts are pure gravy, man.'

'Amen,' I said.

'Man, I got to get me some milk.'

'Amen,' I said again.

We talked like mongrels, see – half-German, half-Baltimore bar slang. Just a few scraps of French between us. Only real language I spoke aside from English was Hochdeutsch. But once I started messing up the words I couldn't straighten nothing out again. Besides, I know Hiero preferred it this way. Kid hailed from the Rhineland, sure, but he got old Baltimore in the blood. Or talked like he did.

He was still young that way. Mimicking.

Something had changed in him lately, though. He ain't hardly et nothing since the Boots descended on the city, been laid up feverish and slack for days on end. And when he come to, there was this new darkness in him I ain't never seen before.

I gave my old axe a quick glance, thinking of the record tucked away in there. It wasn't guilt I felt. Not that exactly.

Hiero sort of half rolled onto the patchy rug. 'Aw, Sid,' he groaned. 'I need milk.'

'In the cupboard, I reckon. We got milk? Chip?'

But Chip, he just open one brown eye like a man half-drowned. His face dark as cinder in this light. Hiero coughed. 'I'm tryin to clean my stomach, not rough it up.' His left eye twitched all high up in the lid, the way you sometimes see the heart of a thin woman beating through her blouse. 'It's milk I need, brother. Cream. That powdered stuff'll rip right through you. Like you shittin sand. Like you a damn hourglass.'

'Aw, it ain't that bad,' I said. 'Ain't nothin open at this hour anyway, kid. You know that. Except maybe the Coup. But that's too damn far.' We lay on in silence a minute. I tossed my arm up over my mouth and man if my skin didn't stink of rancid vinegar – that was the rot, it did that to you.