

Witness: Part one

A 51 Greenrose Avenue Story

Written by Dylan Whitehall

The plaza rose before Kane, a monolith of concrete standing imperiously against the coastal winds. Balconies littered its four faces, their bannisters adorned with layers of snow that glistened in the moonlight. Blinking, sunken eyes, hundreds of them - watching Kane. The snow was almost a festive touch, he thought as he stared up at Greenrose's impossible figure, even in a place like a dead zone. The holiday spirit did not shake him. Kane manoeuvred through the block's straits, coat buffeting in the steady snowfall, and emerged from an alley by one of Greenrose's many entrances. Smoke and fog lapped the borders of the courtyard between it and Kane, languidly eddying off to consume the rest of the city.

He approached the door, two thick slabs of metal sealed shut, and pointlessly tried the sensor. Nothing. Not even the groan of electronics as they trivially whir to ding at him. The system was completely dead. 'What were you expecting, Gladden?' his own voice, metallically muttering through the respirator strapped to his face, almost came as shock to him as it echoed through the open air.

With a sigh, Kane raised his omnitool - a lower end model strapped to his hand like a brace - and flicked one of its shoddy switches. The exposed innards of the device sputtered to life, panels and wires shifting to lift up a small torch head above his knuckle. Kane pressed another button and a blue flame erupted from the mouth of the torch, whipping wild shadows against the door. He clenched his augmented hand into a tight fist to protect his fingers and grant him some accuracy as he began to work on the door. Starting with the top, he drove the flame between the gap and slowly worked his way down, the metal hissing and spitting sparks at him as it melted into oozing streaks. Warmth flooded the parts of his face that were exposed, pleasantly thawing it from the bitter frost. Stray sparks ricocheted onto his skin, but even those white hot stings came as a relief to his numb body.

As if to deter him, the icy winds picked up while Kane worked; carrying debris, balls of ice and the might of winter itself, they furiously crashed against his back. The courtyard was alive with terrible howling - echoes of the city - but those portentous wails fell on deaf ears. *The ghost of Christmas past, present, future and whatever the hell else couldn't turn me*

away, Kane defiantly thought into the night. He was here to do a job, one he insisted on seeing through to its end.

Hunched over, Kane finally reached the bottom of the door and shut off the torch - fierce vestiges of heat fading from his hand. Molten metal, like liquid fire, dribbled down the jagged edges of the door's slit and sizzled in the snow by Kane's feet. He dipped a hand into his coat and pulled out his pry bar, a sleek tool rusted from other. . .inquisitive intrusions. For leverage, he jammed the bar into the gap he had carved out and wrapped his modified hand around the grip. Phantom strength - spawned from the brace - suddenly rushed into his fingers, pulling his muscles taut with furious power. Kane pushed on the bar and the door let out a low whine as it slowly slid open, revealing the void within.

He put away the bar and stared into the dark, the stub of his missing left ring finger throbbing painfully. He ran his thumb over the scarred tissue, feeling out the etches and bumps, a habit that had long since evolved into a sobering exercise. *Why am I here?* A wordless question he asked to no-one but himself and yet he still expected an answer from. . .somewhere. He had broken into dusty dens and unearthed forgotten corners of the world for clients before, any investigator worth their money would. But to travel into the rotten heart of a dead zone was a line not even the most dedicated worker could imagine crossing.

And yet, here he was, staring down another of those hidden cavities, though one that was worse than forgotten. It was dead. A churned up corpse defiled with spectral strings to mimic the living in a pointless act. The wind howled and harshly swept across Kane's face, a final warning. He ignored it and stepped into the darkness.

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The razer edge of Kane's torch sliced through the dark, illuminating the hallway that stretched out before him. The light caught a thin smog rolling through the hall like a midnight coastal fog; its puffy tendrils tinged a pastel yellow. Through the sickly veil Kane could make out graffiti plastered on the

sleek metal walls and mountainous piles of rubbish cluttered outside apartment doors. Everywhere he stepped some form of debris crumpled beneath his boot.

He kicked a pram out of the way, its aged wheels creaking as it rolled into the dark, and took a breath. It came through his mask as a tinny wheeze and left the lingering taste of garlic in his mouth. The air in here was no safer to breathe than the fog stalking the courtyard outside. To make the night a little more bearable, Kane decided that he needed to find a way to get the filtration system back online. ‘If it hasn’t gone completely to shit,’ he grumbled aloud to himself.

Kane’s presence roused the building from a deep slumber, the way a dusty old house begrudgingly greets its new inhabitants. Distant pipes hissed, empty rooms bristled against icy drafts and the creaking of inner walls snuck up on Kane, nipping at his ears. Halls like veins, they spanned the length of the complex, new blood surging through them for the first time in years.

Kane stopped routinely to check his map of the building’s layout lest he find himself lost within the labyrinth of apartments. Fortunately, the ground floor was nowhere near as dense as what awaited him on the upper levels. The commercial district was close, he deduced while squinting at the faded map. Only a few more turns to go.

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The central market was a husk. Withered stalls that had long since been gutted of their wares cluttered the main floor. The tenacious smog from the apartments weaved between their alleys, sniffing out the few scraps that remained. Among the graveyard, lifeless lights dangled from ramshackle signs like old discarded bones.

As he descended the stairs into the market, Kane imagined what it looked like a decade ago: garish neon lights blooming over the heads of bustling crowds, a raucous cacophony of noise thundering up as far as the penthouse apartment while residents and merchants alike haggled over prices. That was all now a far off image, the commotion reduced to whispery hisses that Kane could almost hear slithering through the complex.

Anywhere else, the investigator might have preferred the market's current state, even in such dilapidated conditions. Forgotten buildings were like a veteran's scars or rusted artefacts. There was a history to them, one that Kane could infer in the peace and silence of solitude. But Greenrose was different. Walking through Greenrose did not feel like exploring a relic of the past. Walking through Greenrose felt like sloshing through the decaying bowels of a beast long dead. The stench of everything that it had churned up in its life, sickeningly clinging to Kane's skin. Yet, he was unsure if that was merely a notion spawned from his deep intimacy with the building.

He tread through the market until he was standing at its shrivelled heart, surrounded by broken odds and ends, strange trinkets and rotten waste. None of which interested him. He searched the floor for a few minutes, kicking about rubbish to clear a space, until he uncovered a stain beneath a dusty piece of cardboard. It was a muddy splatter, faded but stubbornly ingrained into the concrete. When Kane focused his light on it, a brick red tinge was extracted, like an old wine preserved after all these years.

Kane had seen a number of upsetting sights over the course of his career. He remembers, when he was still a baby faced constable, being on the scene of a domestic disturbance after being called in during one of his first patrols. A girl, no older than fifteen, was screaming on her doorstep while a paramedic tried to calm her down. The bridge of her nose had been cracked open, blanketing her face with a crimson veil, and her teeth smashed into a liquidy mess. All courtesy of her father's forehead. Yet he managed, like the good copper that he was. A few years after that there was the accident on Blakers Street. The paint of that image had yet to dry too. The red paste strung within that crumple heap of metal acting as a relentless reminder of the fragility of his ilk.

But standing here, staring at the dried - impossible - blood stain beneath his feet, Kane's composure started to crack. His stomach roiled fiercer than any ocean and his throat burned with the sting of putrid bile. His vision began to blur into a haze and his head thrummed with painful pulses.

He slid the cardboard back over the stain to stop that torrent from spilling out. Chest heaving, he closed his eyes and tried to catch his breath. This wasn't the time for that. It never was.

When he opened his eyes Kane was gazing up at the fathomless maw above. Oriented in a square spanning the borders of the market, the complex's other upper levels were tightly stacked on top of another to an impossible height. It gave Kane a sense of vertigo as he stared up into that expanse, feeling as if he could fall into it at any minute.

Something jolted him out of his trance. Pin prick lights, on one of the middle floors, gleamed in the dark like pairs of eyes caught in the moonlight, wolfishly staring back at him.

There was still a modicum of life rattling around the building after all. But Kane would have to see that after finding the maintenance shaft.