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The Cult of the Red Lotus

by

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Tall and thick, with great paws for hands, Grant Foster was built like a grizzly bear. He took a seat, squeezing himself between the armrests of the office chair.

Phil Morgan, Grant's Editor-in-Chief, cleared his throat. "I'm going to be blunt, Grant," Chief Morgan said. "First, you look like sh—do I smell rum?"

"I accidentally dropped my flask and it spilled all over my pants," Grant said.

"Jesus, man, it's not even nine o'clock." Chief Morgan closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "Look, I have to suspend you."

"Suspend me?" Grant asked. "For what, having a sip to steady myself?"

"For that bullshit you pulled at the Senator's fundraiser. You showed up drunk and harassed him and several of his donors. Again."

"They got something to do with the kidnappings and the Red Lotus Cult! And I got a good tip—a reliable tip—something big is going down real soon."

"Grant, enough! You are suspended until further notice. Be glad you aren't fired."

Leather creaked as Grant twisted the arms of the chair with his big, heavy hands. He glared at Chief Morgan. "What's it going to take?" Grant asked, and pointed to the picture of Chief Morgan, his wife, their daughter, and their brown-haired, brown-eyed teenage son. "Your kid, just like my kid, matches the age and description of those seven missing boys. Is your son number eight?"

Chief's eyebrows lifted and the corners of his mouth twitched. "I didn't know that about your son." He paused and looked at the photo of his family. "The police are investigating the disappearances, not you," he said. "Go home. Sober up. Spend some time with your boy. Who knows how much time you have left with him?"

Grant sat in his car in the parking lot of the Jacksonville Sentinel and polished off the remaining sips of rum in his flask. *Shit, that's it?* He started the engine and noted the time: 9:45 a.m. *Thank God. The store's about to open. "Go home. Sober up." Yeah right.*

David Foster, brown-haired, brown-eyed, fourteen-years old, was positive the white van was following him and Jabin. He spotted it when he got off the bus. It stayed far away, but he saw it. David's dad told him to keep an eye for suspicious behavior, and the cold spot in David's stomach told him that van was suspicious.

"Hey, you think I can hang out at your place?" David asked. Jabin's house was several streets closer than David's.

"Nah, I'm grounded. Such bullshit," Jabin said, and brushed his blonde hair out of his eyes. "Well, see ya tomorrow." Jabin turned the corner. David followed him.

"What're you doing? I said I'm grounded."

"I think we're being followed."

"By who?"

"A white van," David said, and pulled Jabin off the sidewalk and behind a hedge. "Just watch the road."

"No. Let go of me." Jabin pulled away and stepped back onto the sidewalk.

A white van turned the corner onto the street. David crouched low and pushed himself into the hedge. The spiky branches poked and scratched his arms and head. The van drove past David's hiding spot. It crept along the road behind Jabin.

Jabin glanced over his shoulder. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He pressed record, faced the van, and yelled, "Can I help you, asshole?"

The driver, wearing a cheap plastic dog mask, looked at the camera for a second. Then, he sped away.

David stayed hidden in the hedge until Jabin approached.

"Did you see that shit?" Jabin said. "You were right!"

David's mouth went dry and a flash of heat spread across his scalp. "Yeah, I guess I was."

Grant poured himself another rum and coke. His third. Or maybe fourth—didn't matter.

The front door opened, and David entered. Grant met him in the hallway.

"Hey, you," Grant said. "How's my buddy-bear doing?"

David glanced at the glass in his father's hand. His eyes narrowed. "Already?" he asked.

"What?"

"You only call me buddy-bear when you—" David pointed to the glass.

Grant's face tightened. "Jesus, you gonna rag on me too? I can't even fucking enjoy myself in my own damn house, is that it?"

David glared at his father. "I got homework." He turned and bounded up the stairs to the second floor.

"Good," Grant said. "And you can fix your own dinner too. 'Cause I'm not cooking!"

David leaned over the railing above Grant. "Then I guess," David said. "it's a good thing mom taught me to take care of myself. You've never done a fucking thing for me, so why start now?" David stomped into his room and slammed the door.

Grant stormed into the kitchen, chugging the rum and coke. He finished it, dropped the glass into the sink, and grabbed the bottle of rum, unscrewing the cap as he walked into the living room and plopped onto the couch. Thin beams of light from the setting sun shone through the horizontal slats of the blinds.

Grant didn't really get hangovers, but he often did blackout, and sometimes, when he came to, he would find himself in unusual situations. The first time he woke up from a blackout,

he was standing in front of a toilet, peeing, only he hadn't undone his pants. It took him a moment to realize what the warmth running down his leg was. In his college days, he woke up in the middle of a threesome with two sorority girls, with no idea what led up to it. Once, at Mardi Gras, he regained consciousness while making out with a fireman on the back of a firetruck, as the crowd cheered them on. But Grant had never come to during a fistfight before, so tonight was something new.

A man wearing a cheap plastic dragon mask punched Grant in the face. It didn't hurt, so Grant scanned his surroundings. *Nighttime. My living room. So, who's this fucker?* With a sudden burst of speed, Grant rushed forward, catching Dragon-mask off guard. Grant pinned him to the wall in the hallway.

Picture frames rattled. One—a picture of David and his mother, thin and wearing a scarf over her shaved head—fell to the floor and shattered.

Grant ripped the dragon mask off of the intruder. The man beneath had wild eyes, an unkempt beard, and the horrible tooth decay of a frequent methamphetamine user.

"What do you want?" Grant asked.

From upstairs, a scream. *David!*

Meth mouth, with his remaining teeth, bit Grant's arm. Grant cried out and punched him hard in the ear. The man's head snapped to one side. Grant hit him again, this time striking his temple. The man's eyes rolled back. As his body slackened, Grant let him go and the man crumpled to the floor.

From the top of the stairs, David's voice cracked as he screamed, "Dad! Hel—!"

A man, wearing a tiger mask, jumped on Grant's back and wrapped his scrawny arms around Grant's thick neck. Grant grabbed the man's arms and fell backwards to the hardwood

floor. All three hundred pounds of Grant's considerable bulk landed on the man. He let out a long groan and his arms slid off Grant's neck and thudded on the floor.

Two masked figures—a dog and a cat—carried David's limp body down the stairs.

Beneath Grant, Tiger-mask moaned and wheezed as Grant rolled to his knees.

Grant's elbows shook. *Oh no.* He heaved and vomit sprayed onto the floor, splashing all over Tiger-mask.

Dog-mask and Cat-mask rushed David out the front door.

Grant stood with a wobble. Using the wall for balance, he ran to the closet by the front door. From the top shelf, he pulled a Kimber 1911 and an eight round clip out of a shoe box. He put the clip in his mouth and fumbled with the combination trigger lock as he dashed outside.

The two men were loading David into a white van parked on the curb. Cat-mask got in the back with David as Dog-mask jumped into the driver's seat and cranked the engine.

Grant halted halfway across his front lawn and worked on the combination lock. *Focus!*

Cat-mask slammed the van's sliding door.

Tiger-mask, holding his ribs, rushed past Grant. "Wait!" Tiger-mask said.

The van peeled out and took off down the street.

Finally! Grant threw the trigger lock on the ground and ran into the street. He aimed at the van's tire and fired. A puff of debris erupted from the asphalt behind the van.

Tiger-mask, startled by the gunshot, ducked and scurried on all fours on the sidewalk.

The van swerved around a corner and out of sight.

Grant turned his aim on Tiger-mask, who pushed himself to his feet and started to run.

Grant fired, hitting him in the leg.

Tiger-mask grabbed his wound and screamed. Grant was on him in four quick strides. With his great paw of a hand, Grant grabbed a fistful of the man's shirt, and pulled him close.

"Where are they taking him?" Grant asked. "Tell me!"

Tiger-mask wheezed out a laugh. "We're the Devil's truancy officers, bringing all the wicked children back to school."

A flash of word association filled Grant with dread. His early years working the Crime desk at the Sentinel steeped him in the urban legends of the city. Public School Number Seven, legend said, once had a principal who worshipped the Devil. He, along with his fellow cult members, killed nine boys in some sort of demonic ritual at the school. Some even believe they opened a portal to Hell. People referred to the killings as The Red Lotus Murders because of the victims' strange wounds, but, other than hearsay, no evidence existed that they ever happened.

"The Devil's School?" Grant asked and shook Tiger-mask. "Is that what you mean?"

Tiger-mask's laugh turned into a cough. He moaned in pain, then grew quiet.

"Answer me!" Grant said.

"Your son's ding-dong dead, you fucking whale," Tiger-mask said, and giggled softly.

Grant pushed Tiger-mask to the ground and kicked his wounded leg. Tiger-mask wailed and writhed.

Grant dashed to his car. A wave of nausea overtook him. He wobbled, then bent over and vomited. *Fuck, all this physical activity is killing me. At least, this'll help clear my head.* Grant used his shirt to wipe his mouth as he pulled his car door open, plopped into the driver's seat with a grunt, and started the car. The clock on the dash read 9:27 p.m.

Grant drove as fast as he dared. He had a rough idea of where the school was, all the way across town on the Northside, near a highway overpass. *I wish I had visited the place...even if it has been condemned for twenty years. I picked a fine time to leave my phone at home. And what the fuck happened to all the payphones? Christ, I need a drink already.*

Grant took his flask out of the center console. He shook it near his ear. He frowned and shook the flask harder. Angry, he threw the flask onto the passenger seat.

When Grant shut off the car, the clock read 12:51 a.m. *Jesus, this place was a pain in the ass to get to. Fucking nighttime construction.* He wiped a layer of sweat off his brow. His hand trembled against his forehead in an unsteady rhythm. *Not now.* Grant lifted his pistol and looked down the sights. The barrel bobbed and dipped slightly. *I can't tell if this is nerves or withdrawals. Come on, man, get your shit together. David is counting on you.*

All of the streetlights around Public School Number Seven were out, enshrouding the area in inky black gloom. Grant exited his car and crossed the road, searching for a way around the ten-foot-tall barbwire fence.

Grant, his left palm bloody and his pant leg torn open, heard something ahead. *Are those voices?* With every window broken, the second floor opened up to the school's inner courtyard.

A breeze carried an earthy odor of dirt and rotten wood down the hallway. Grant approached one of the windows, slow and quiet, and, using the concrete wall as cover, examined the courtyard below him.

It was shaped like a rectangle and illuminated by starlight. About thirty feet away—the corner closest to Grant—a decades old roof collapse brought a section of the second floor down with it.

In the middle of the courtyard, a perfect nine-pointed star was dug into the dusty black dirt. At each of the star's nine points, tall wooden posts were planted. Nine boys dangled from handcuffs attached by padlocked metal clasps bolted to the wooden posts. *David, he's here!* All of the boys, all in their early teens, all with brown hair and brown eyes, had their arms stretched above their heads, so that their bare chests were pulled taut. A foot above the ground, thick rope bound their legs tight against the post. A strip of silver duct tape covered their mouths, while another strip went under their chins, from one ear to the other, preventing them from opening their mouths to scream.

Grant looked away and focused past the boys, to the area of the courtyard furthest from him, about two hundred feet away. He counted nine people in black hooded cloaks. Each one had their hoods up and Grant only saw deep shadows instead of faces. Some were talking together, but too quiet for their conversation to be discernible. The backs of their cloaks were embellished with nine red circles clustered into a tight group. *Like a lotus pod. Shit, the cult is real!*

Below Grant, a person, no taller than one of the boys, dressed in a red hooded cloak walked into the courtyard. *Jesus, I was right above him.* Grant moved the bulk of his body behind the wall. *Did you hear me up here?* With one wide eye, he peeked past the wall and studied the person in red.

Grant could only see the person from behind. They cradled a brown wooden box no bigger than a shoe box under one arm. In their other hand, they carried a clay bowl filled with a writhing dark liquid. Under the red cloak, their back had a strange hunch, making their shoulders look broad and malformed. *Is it some sort of old lady under there?* Nine black circles, matching the points of the nine-pointed star, embellished the back of their red cloak.

"Congregation!" the person in red said. Their loud, boyish voice reverberated across the courtyard, down the graffitied hallways of the balcony, and across the hair on the back of Grant's neck. *A boy's voice?* Grant shivered.

The cultists in black responded in perfect unison. "Hail, Beelphegor, keeper of the hand!"

The person in red, Beelphegor, placed the clay bowl on the ground as the cultists formed a line. Beelphegor drew a long-bladed dagger from beneath his cloak and placed it next to the bowl, then he pointed to the first cultist in line.

That cultist picked up the bowl and followed Beelphegor to the nearest boy. *Isn't that Chief Morgan's kid?* Beelphegor sang in an unfamiliar language as he walked, stroking his fingers across the top of the box.

What the fuck is going on here? What am I gonna do? Grant sat up and checked to see how many bullets he had left in his clip. *Six shots, and ten of them. Should've bought the extended clip. Too late now.* Grant gauged the distance to Beelphegor. *Wish I'd gone to the range more because I'm not hitting shit from here.* Grant crawled along the second floor, closing the distance between him and the cult members.

Beelphegor finished his song.

Grant stopped and peeked into the courtyard. The sour taste of bile hit his tongue as he watched.

Beelphegor knocked three times on the lid of the brown wooden box and waited.

Something inside the box knocked back. *The hell was that?*

Beelphegor, stood in front of the boy and opened the lid of the box. A hand the color of ashes, with nine long, pointy fingers, reached out of the box. *Is that box some sort of portal to another dimension?* On a thin gray arm, the hand moved forward. The boy wept, his screaming muffled by the duct tape, as the hand caressed his brown hair. The hand spread its fingers wide, blooming like a flower, and stroked the boy's naked chest. It paused just above the boy's navel. Then, it brought all nine fingertips together into a tight cluster and pushed the sharp points into the boy's stomach.

The boy's muffled screaming stopped. The boy's pupils went slack and looked in different directions. His body stiffened, rigid as a mannequin.

Beelphegor said an indecipherable word. *Was that a name?*

The hand drew back, leaving behind a tight cluster of nine shallow holes in a grouping the size of a half dollar. It returned to the box and Beelphegor closed the lid.

The cultist with the bowl reached into the dark liquid and pulled out a glistening black leech. Using his pinky, he placed the leech inside one of the holes. Once the leech attached itself, he withdrew another and inserted it into the next hole, continuing until all nine holes were filled. He put down the bowl, then picked up the long-bladed dagger and walked back to the boy.

Grant put his back to the wall, breathing hard. Tears blurred his vision. He raised the gun. The barrel bobbed and dipped. *The tremors are getting worse. How can I help, if I can't even aim properly?* Grant peered back into the courtyard.

Blood from the boy's neck streamed down his chest and over his stomach. A voice, deep and reedy, like a contrabassoon, erupted from the nine leech-filled holes. The leeches stiffened

and fluttered, like a windsock in a hurricane, with each individual leech creating a different pitch, forming the voice. Blood in the holes vibrated and spattered as the voice spoke.

"What do you seek?" the voice asked.

"I want to be confident and charismatic," the cultist said. "And I want to invent something that will make me very rich and politically powerful."

"What is the invention's purpose?"

"To make all the people who've judged me jealous. To make them all fear me."

"Kiss me and the deal is sealed."

"Everybody, freeze!" Grant said, aiming the gun. *Please don't notice my tremors.* Grant chanced a look at David. *That's right buddy, Daddy's here.*

Beelphegor looked toward Grant and pulled back his hood, revealing the head of a young boy, about fourteen, with brown hair and brown eyes. Beelphegor, the boy, smiled.

"Grant Foster?" the cultist with the dagger said. *I know that voice! Chief Morgan, from the Sentinel. What is he—*

"You must continue," Beelphegor said to Chief Morgan. "Do not disrupt the ritual. Time is of the essence."

Chief Morgan nodded, dropped the dagger, and crouched in front of his deceased son.

Grant fired the gun and the shot hit the dusty black dirt.

"That was a warning shot!" Grant said. "Freeze, now!"

Chief Morgan put his hooded face over the nine bloody holes in the boy's stomach.

"I'm warning you the cops are on the way!" Grant said.

A cultist still in line pulled back his hood and said, "No, they aren't."

Sherriff McCauley?

Chief Morgan stood, wiped the blood from his mouth, and stumbled away like he was drunk.

Beelphegor pointed to the next in line. He sang the otherworldly song, as before, walking over to David, who squealed and writhed, and looked at Grant with wild, fearful eyes.

"Get away from my boy!" Grant said. He aimed, holding his breath, trying to calm his tremors. *I've gotta be careful of David. Only got five shots left.* He fired. A cloud of black dust sprayed into the air near David. *Shit!* He glanced over to the line of cultists—none broke the line. *Like they're all afraid of making the dean angry.*

Beelphegor's singing stopped. He knocked on the lid three times.

The cultist picked up the bowl of leeches and joined Beelphegor in front of David.

Three shots left. Grant fired at Beelphegor.

The cultist with the bowl yelped in pain and dropped to the ground, holding his back.

Beelphegor clicked his tongue. A knock came from the box. Beelphegor smiled and lifted the lid.

Two shots. Grant fired.

Beelphegor's red cloak rippled as the bullet passed right through the thick fabric and into the dirt. *Stop missing, asshole!* The box lid raised and the hand with nine fingers reached out toward David.

*God damn it! Fucking please, let me—*Grant fired.

The box sprang from Beelphegor's hands and landed in the black dirt—lid open. Silver blood from the thrashing hand splattered across Beelphegor's face as he dashed to recover the box. Before he could touch it, the hand grabbed Beelphegor by the throat and threw him to the ground. The hand tore off his red cloak, like it was tissue paper.

Red-feathered wings on Beelphegor's back unfurled and flapped against the dirt, sending dust clouds swirling. *Is that little bastard a demon? Was a demon summoning a being from another dimension?* Beelphegor, now naked, reached for the box. The hand came down and pierced Beelphegor's stomach with all nine of its sharpened fingertips. Beelphegor's body stiffened. The hand pulled him toward the mouth of the box. His lower body withered and flattened and stretched, then the hand pulled what used to be Beelphegor's feet inside the box.

All of the cultists screamed at Grant, but he didn't listen. He ran to the area with the collapsed roof and climbed down.

A tremendous sound, like a thunderclap, rattled the school. Grant slipped and fell hard onto a chunk of concrete. He felt several pops followed by sharp daggers of pain in his chest, then, he landed in the black dirt of the courtyard. He moaned and held his ribs. Each breath brought sharp daggers of pain. Wincing and gasping as he stood, Grant searched for what caused the thunderous sound.

Beelphegor was gone. The air reeked of sulfur and smoke. A low, rising whistle, like a tea pot beginning to boil, emerged from the open box.

All around Grant, dirt and small bits of debris moved toward the box. Moments later, bigger pieces followed. Grant felt the suction tugging on his clothes, his hair.

At the other end of the courtyard, the remaining cultists scattered. Sherriff McCauley pointed at Grant and gestured for the others to follow him, but none did. As the Sherriff moved within a yard of the box, the whistle rose to a shriek as the suction became a powerful vacuum. The Sherriff lost his footing and flew through the air feet first. When he neared the mouth of the box, his body withered, flattened, and stretched into a long piece of human spaghetti, slurped up by the ravenous box.

Some of the cultists fought and trudged against the incredible pull of the vacuum, while weaker cultists crawled on their bellies, clawing at the black dirt. The pull grew stronger and two cultists flew into the air, crashing into one another as they withered and flattened and merged together into a long thin strand.

Bound to wooden posts, the boys' bodies bent and bowed against the vacuum.

Grant, using his immense weight to fight the suction, moved from post to post, making his way across the courtyard to David. Grant untied David's feet. David's body, pulled by the vacuum, snapped into the air, tight as a chalk-line. David screamed as the handcuffs, still attached to the post by the padlocked metal clasp, cut deep into his wrists. Grant grabbed David, pulling him down, shielding David with his wide, heavy body. He hugged David tight and aimed the gun at the padlock. *Last shot. I swear, if I make this, I'll never drink again.*

Grant's legs swept back, sending him facedown onto the ground. The box's suction pulled him across the black dirt of the courtyard. Unlike a number of the thinner cultists, who flew through the air like paper dolls, Grant's heavy frame slowed the speed of his trajectory. He wheezed in agony as he twisted to see the box. A swirl of nebulae set against a field of stars awaited him inside. Something huge moved within. Its tremendous eyeless head turned.

Held by the handcuffs, David screamed in agony as he was pulled taut by the vacuum. The skin around his wrists tore and blood streamed through the air and into the box.

Struggling for purchase, Grant dug the fingers of one hand into the dirt. Still, he drew closer and closer to the opened box, leaving finger sized troughs in the courtyard's black earth. Grant raised the gun and aimed at the box. *Don't miss.* Grant fired.

The bullet struck the box and it rolled end over end. It landed top down—lid closed. The cosmic vacuum ceased.

David dropped hard against the post; his cry muffled by the duct tape. The remaining kidnapped boys whimpered and sobbed as they hung from their posts.

Grant dropped the gun and pushed himself to his feet, fighting the urge to scream as his broken ribs injected fresh daggers of pain into his torso. He stumbled over to David and lifted David's legs, relieving the pressure of the cuffs on David's wrists. "I've got you buddy-bear. I've got you."

Looking past Grant, David's tear-filled eyes went wide. Grant turned.

A cultist, the last one Grant saw, scurried into a dark hallway.

The box was gone. *Shit.*

Grant looked at David, then the rest of the boys. "Don't worry, guys. You're safe now," Grant said, with all the confidence he could muster. *Are they though? Fuck, I need a drink.*