

UNCLE MERL'S BAR & GRILL
Chapter VIII
Hammer of the Witches, or the '69 Mets:
Either way—*YOU GOTTA BELIEVE!*
By
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Doc and I sat there in a stunned silence for about ten minutes. Every once in a while, one of us would shakily grab for the JD and just paste the sucker down. "It's okay!" Doc blurted on an exhale. "It's okay! As long as we sit here and keep drinking till sun up, it'll be okay! They can't enter an abode without being invited. It's four AM in down neck Newark, and it's cold out." Doc swung for the hooch twice before he caught it and killed the last remaining shot, leaving us only a couple of pitchers to last us until sunrise. "Nobody's left on the street to come in, and there isn't anyone left in here who has a home to go to. It's a hard and fast rule with them—no invitation, they can't come in! It's foolproof! It's gonna be okay! It's..."

"*Ohhh, maaannn!* Look who's here!" Doc and I froze instantly. There was a voice from the bar door—and I knew that voice! I had once stopped Jonsey from arresting it in front of the library on States Street for trying to give the statue of General Washington's horse a nuggy in a brown-acid-induced burst of patriotism. The voice turned towards us!

"Doc! Chas! When j'you guys get here? C'mon in baby, I want'cha ta meet two *reeeaaally* off-the-planet guys!"

"I guess it isn't foolproof," I mumbled.

“Fool proof, yes! Imbecile proof? No! Back to plan A! If that evil bitch sits down at this table, I'll give her a 'bad hair day' she'll never forget!” Doc dropped the bottle of Holy Water down hard, in plain sight.

In the dimness of the bar, objects lost their definition. I could see Doc straining to get a good look at our adversary. From where I sat, I figured she was somewhere over my left shoulder, off in the corner. But Doc should have had a clean view. “Hey, Doc,” I whispered, “Doc, where is she?”

“Try not to be obvious, but she's directly behind you!”

I was cool. I was calm. I was pretending to adjust my necktie and twisted my head further around than the kid in “The Exorcist”! I was shocked and horrified by what I saw. “Holy Smokes, Doc! That ain't a vampire, that's a troll!”

“Na-na-nah! That's nine-fingers Dora, Merl's new waitress. To her right, her right!”

I twisted again. Off in the corner sat a petite woman no taller than five-one or five-two. She had shoulder length brown hair, impeccably coiffured. Her fingernails were brightly polished and decorated with either satanic symbols or her initials. She wore a white T-shirt with the word “Sushi” and some Japanese lettering emblazoned across her chest in red and black lettering.

“Oh, swell!” I said. “A Jewish Princess of Darkness! Well, stuff the crucifixes!”

“Where have you been the last two hundred years? Crucifixes, Stars of David, hell, even the damned TV guide! It's the conviction of the holder that scare's 'em, not the symbol!”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot! I...”

"So wads hap'nin!" It was crazy Al. "Man, I ain't seen you two guys since the las' time the Grateful Dead was in town! Wow! I saw them twice, down at Newark Stadium!"

"Al, they've *never* held a concert at Newark Stadium! Ever since the Newark Eagles moved out, the only events held there are high school football games or—"

"Jees, then I wonder who I saw there? An' I paid a scalper fifty bucks a pop for those tickets. But they were great seats!"

"Al, forget it, sid' down and shut up!" Doc's eyes were glued to the dark corner and he was talking to Crazy Al out the opposite side of his mouth. "Where did she find you? Did she..."

"Ahhh... Pasadena? No, can't be! Listen ta me! Pasadena. I know, I know. Wait! Let me think, let me..."

"Al, come back to us! This is import..."

"I KNOW! I remember! I went out and popped for a whole friggin' quart of rainbow sunshine and some real, real good Jamaican! Woooow! Good stuff! I got a pound of it in my trunk!"

"Al, stop! Did she touch you? Did you..."

"Who?"

"THE GIRL YOU...came in with! Her!" Doc was trying to maintain his composure, but was rapidly losing it.

"Who?" He turned towards where Doc was looking. "WOOOOW! Wada piece a... OH, HER!" I recognized the grin immediately! Al's face lit up like a pumpkin on Halloween.

"Oh boy! We're doomed!" I gasped.

"EEEYYYYEEE—don't think so!" Doc blurted out. I turned quickly in my seat.

There in the corner, our quarry was staring at the ball game on the TV screen, her eyes blinking rapidly. She was weaving a circle with her upper torso, as if she was ready to lose her balance and spin off the chair.

The Boston team was at bat in the bottom of the ninth, down 3/1. Jim Abbot was hurling a four-hitter for the Bronx Bombers—that was really a surprise, as he had been traded six years ago! With two outs and two on and no balls and two strikes on a guy hitting .210, the batter swung at a pitch so far out of the strike zone it had a different zip code than the stadium. BWAAAMMM! The baseball was still on the rise as it flew up and over the green monster and out of the park! Yanks lose, 4/3!

"Jesus, Doc," I said in amazement, "I didn't think that guy could hit like that!"

"He can't! He's been dead for a year and a half now!" wailed Doc. "I don't know how, but *SHE* did that!"

"Ha!" she exclaimed, slamming her palms on the tabletop to steady herself, but her head was still bobbing up and down. In scant seconds she was fixated on the iridescent neon Budweiser Beer clock on the wall next to her, mumbling "*ooohhh*", "*wow*" and "*neeeaaattt!*" at regular intervals, I looked in astonishment at Boreese. Doc was as wide-eyed as a newborn babe, and just shrugged. "Ga'damn if I know what she's doing!"

We watched for a couple of minutes. Vampira was putting on quite a show. It was starting to be entertaining! Then as quickly as it came, it left. Her chin dropped to her chest and stayed there for a second or two, then her face rose to meet our stares.

When her eyes contacted with Boreese, the old boy actually bounced in his seat! She lifted slowly from her stool and moved cautiously towards us. It reminded me of a wounded tiger I had seen in an old Sabu movie once. Crazy Al was beginning to grin again and I could tell Doc was starting to panic. She was about two feet away from our table when she stopped. Her shoulders started to haunch back, the way a cat preparing to scratch at a ball of yarn might. I was certain Doc and I were 'goners'.

"Don't even think about it! I'll put one 'cross your lips! By the time yo' head stops rollin', it'll cost your body twelf dollars and niney-fi cents to mail it a postcard!" Uncle Merl had stepped between her and us and was leering at her, angrily! "Of all the gin-joints in all the world, you gotta walk into mine? Get outa here, bitch!"

She hung there for a moment, unsure. I guess she thought it was a better idea not to mess with old Merlin. I'd seen the old boy lit before, like when the '69 Mets won the pennant, but I'd never seen him like that! I don't know which was scarier, Merl's attitude or his reference to *Casablanca!*

Her shoulders dropped. She shot Uncle Merl an indignant look. I was certain that she was going to say something to him, but I think she realized how close to sun up we were getting. When she was nearly out the door she stopped and turned.

"Nhhiight, Al," she purred. "See you tomorrow night." And that was it! Gone! Sweet as pie! If 'Craze' could have grinned any wider, he could have cleaned behind his ears and brushed his teeth in the same motion.

"Ahh, why don't I jus' freshen those drinks a' yours." Merl was looking at Doc. The last episode had raised the speed limit from 60 to 90 miles an hour and my boss's shaking had risen equitably. I was the one that needed a drink! Doc needed sedation!

"Tha, thanks Merl," Doc barely managed to spit out. "Thanks—for everything!"

"Yeah, well... you gotta watch them, ahhh, hookers!"

"Yeah, hookers." Doc echoed the old man.

"Wad the hell are you guys talking about? That, she...that wasn't no hooker!"

Crazy Al was genuinely offended. "Man, you guys are no fun any more! I'm gonna cop a leak and go home! Uh, bummer!" And with an air of indignation, Al stepped off towards the ladies room.

"Ya know," I said as we watched Al walk past the toilets and straight out the door, "It's a good thing he's not wearing a three piece suit. He probably would have walked into the men's room and pulled out his tie! God is he lost!"

"He's not lost yet!" Doc grunted into his refilled shot glass. "But if we don't come up with some answers by nightfall..." He pounded his glass of Butzh down. We could tell by the rising glow in the small window in Merl's front door that sunrise had finally broken. "Finish up," he said, "we'll grab a couple of hours sleep, hit the library and then we've got to go see Jonsey."

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"Let's see. Mmmmm... *The Book of Shadows*. Nah. That's just a lot of bad poetry. "*Black Art, White Witch Hunter*... nope."

I sat in the big swivel chair in front of Doc's desk as he weaseled his way over the archaic library. The old geezer was on a tear, leveling whole shelves of ancient literature and books of Letters with one heave. "Could this be it? *Demons, Devils and*

Dominican Friars, ahh... no! Where the hell is it?" And another pile of books bit the dust!

I knew better than to get in the way. What I didn't know was why he wasn't thumbing his way through *Memphis After Midnight* by Nefri of Cairo, which he often referred to as 'THE BOOK'. Great text in its own way. Not much of a plot but it told you what to do when the plot opened up! Okay, the book was three millennia old, but it was comprehensive for the basics!

"Gees, could I have loaned it to... Ahhh, here! *MALLEUS MALLEFICARUM!* By Friars Institor and Springer! This is a first copy! 1486 AD—bad year for witches!"

"Witches?"

"Yup! Never would have figured it out if it weren't for that homer in the bottom of the ninth! This is one for the book! Here, start reading."

"Doc, you know I don't read Latin! They threw me out of the Altar Boys!"

"The PC, Charley. It's on file. The title translates as 'Hammer of the Witches'. It's the first intellectual approach to witchcraft. Had a great impact on the world. Anywhere from a quarter-million to *nine* million people went to their deaths between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries because of it—the records are a little loose for the period—and most of those deaths can be traced right back to those two Friars, one way or another. See, when the Inquisition got rolling, oh, 1233, witchery was kind of lumped in with general heretical acts. By 1486 when our boys did their book, it was out of hand!"

"Wow! Look at this! Removing spells for blindness, deafness... this is a regular little 'how to' book for witch hunters!"

“Oh, yeah! And most of it's right on the money! Identifying curses, how to accuse a witch, when torturing was beneficial. They only made one mistake.”

“What was that?”

“They refuted witches as a natural phenomenon. They thought witchcraft was unnatural.”

“You mean it *is* natural?”

Doc booted me out of his armchair with a shrug and plopped down into it. We hadn't caught any sleep yet and it was starting to show. I moved off to a couch as he swiveled around towards me. “Charley, there's three common types of witchcraft. The first type is ancient and kind of generic, basic nature and fertility worship. The witch is an embodiment of a totem animal ‘go-betweening’ to the gods on behalf of the coven. Then it branches out and splits into shades, Black Magic, White Magic, American League or National. With type two, you get a lot of chanting, folk magic, black masses, white masses, covens, Bohemians, Cub fans... generally harmless ‘social-fringe’ types—all trying to do the same thing only from opposite points of view. All trying to control nature. Speaking of which...” Boreese fumbled around through his desk drawers. I was expecting some sort of phylactery or talisman. He pulled out the next best thing—a bottle of Southern Comfort and two glasses. “Covens, broomsticks, Halloween stuff! Polite Magic. These are the witches you see riding sidesaddle on their brooms. In terms of Catholicism and later on Protestantism, these beliefs—and for the most part that's all they are—seem unnatural.”

“Yeah, I guess praying to a fertility goddess would seem kind of unnatural to a couple of monks.”

“Monks? Try the Pope! The problem was that as far as the Inquisition was concerned, there was no difference between simple folk witchery—what we just talked about—and a most unnatural natural phenomenon. It was also a great way to stop a powerfully-minded woman cold in her tracts, Joan of Arc most notably. Be that as it may, there's the third type of “truly uncommon” witchcraft that mankind doesn't even want to talk about! Atramentous witchcraft—wherein the witch learns his or her power from demonic or in some cases satanic sources—is rare, but it does exist. Most likely our two Friars experienced only the after effects and attributed it to folk witchery. Bad mistake!”

“So where does this leave us?”

“We're screwed, big time! On one hand, we're dealing with a vampire of the first order, and on the other hand, a witch of the Third type! Which sort of explains all the sex.”

“It does?”

“It does! What I can't figure out though, is how it all got jumbled together—or how the Boston Red Sox figure into all this! Somehow I can't see her as a loyal fan of the ‘Splendid Splinter’!”

“You think Ted Williams is important?”

“He was to Boston! He was their second chance to have Babe Ruth back in the line up. Call it a hunch, but I've got a feeling the Boston line up is all going to start hitting like Ted Williams! Homer after homer, right over the old green monster. I also can't figure out what that butterfly dance she did with the Budweiser clock was all about

either! That was a whole new thing for me. Don't get comfortable; we gotta get hold of Jonsey. I hate to admit it, but we may need his help."