

Queen
of
no TOMORROWS

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MATT
MAXWELL

QUEEN OF NO TOMORROWS

by MATT MAXWELL

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All characters and events in this book are fictional.
Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

MATT
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DEDICATION

For my wife Jennifer, who insisted the world would come around.

QUEEN OF NO TOMORROWS

 WAIT TRIED TO BIND THE PAGES, BUT THE BOOK SLIPPED AWAY FROM HER. She cursed and snapped back, steadying herself before pulling the pages tight with a steady draw on the ligature.

Tired. Too tired.

She caught the scent of them once more, sweet vanilla faded into bitter ash. The smell of the pages *suggested* age; the snap and brittle crinkle of the texture fully convinced her. She held before her something older than any living person, if not legitimately ancient. A lost book, stolen back from obscurity by her and her alone.

She flipped the manuscript over to the blank flyleaf. Not precisely blank yet bare of any visible writing. Color and texture blended, imperfect and rough. In the near-absence of content lay the suggestion of it, half-erased scratches of ink faded to lines the color of rust or dried blood. Stare at it long enough and anyone could have been convinced of its importance. Of course it meant something. Of course the obliterated text was crucial. Of course it wasn't a trap that appealed to ego and vanity.

The emperor's new clothes aren't clothes at all. Nobody wants to be shown up as a fool, to admit that they were taken in. So they'll make their own mythology, get tangled up in it rather than admit that there was nothing there.

The suggestive nearly blank worked better than a mind trap. And if it didn't, then the artistry of the frontispiece did. A veil of aggregated eyes, each iris different from the rest, hung in the space between the stars. The vision seemed

to be caught in mid-dissolution, dust and mist wisping away as if no longer allowed to exist. A pair of hands framed it all: human in proportion, though elongated and with palms extended to the viewer. On the right, a perfectly formed but only half-opened eye gazed back from beneath the fingers. On the left lay a mouth, lips parted to show teeth and pulled back at the corners in a smile of chilling indifference.

Cait couldn't have told you where any of this had come from. She'd drawn the work, aged the paper, scented the pages, worked together the whole of it, making the codex real. Nearly . . .

But where it had come from? She could talk about it until exhaustion and not know its origin. She knew, though, that the *Smoking Codex* was her work. Without her, it wouldn't have existed.

She'd copied and forged books before, good enough to fool professors, enemies, and even friends. For a little while at least. Vivian might never speak to her again, and Cait should have known that she'd never stand for forgeries. Cait, however, made copies and fakes and pulled down enough doing it to feel less than bad.

Still, she'd never been brave enough to make one of her own.

Not just a scribe but a creator. Not a copyist but an artist.

Cait stared at the frontispiece, lost in the swirls of dust and matter like a star being torn to vapor, making the border between something and nothing impossible to discern. She stared into it, unable to remember precisely drawing this, but who else could have? Here it lay before her in the pool of light on the desk, strung together by her own hands and made real but driven by an unnamed outside force, one free from the bounds of consciousness or conscience. The *Smoking Codex* was a testament to an unreal god or being willing themself into existence. Cait's fictional provenance for the piece declared it written by the last of the religion's surviving adherents, confessed to an invader who couldn't understand the primal beauty and raw truth but who would be cursed to carry this word back to civilization.

A good story. Who could resist this? Nobody. The same men who paid top dollar for copies of the Darrab Althtaeban surely would pay even more for something that nobody else could possibly claim to own. They thought the having of it conferred power, brought on by mere possession.

It would just take some time to build up the legend. Feed the name around and let the whispering campaign do the hard work for me.

She traced the lines of the fingers on the page before her, counting out the extra joints on one, the extra digits on the other, neither of them quite human.

Maybe too beautiful to let go of so easily.

Then the fear clutched at her. Would it even be accepted? Would it be loved for its own beauty or just lusted after for the promise of ancient power on its pages? It had no reputation, forbidden or otherwise, to fall back upon. That had to be built. And even then, Cait could take no credit for it, a thing that she thought she could get used to but that turned out to be self-delusion. The thought of creation itched in her. She could push that urge away for a time, but it always returned to bite twice as hard as before. Always.

She looked over at the cover on the drying stand. The book it once housed had been scavenged from an estate sale for a tiny fraction of its real value. No collector in their right mind would want such a thing, cracked and ravaged by neglect or moisture or sunlight. Worthless but perfect for conveying age and the authority that came with it. Once covered and the gluing sufficiently distressed to match, the codex would be done. Not even an afternoon's work. Finished.

A part of her shied away at that. If it were done, she'd have to let it go. She would—

The phone's ring shrilled, and Cait started.

I could just go to work and let this drop. They'll call again if it's important.

She grabbed the handset from the green-black plastic phone, splattered with ink and paint so that the numbers on the rotary dial were all but unreadable now.

"What."

"Roja. Roja, it's me."

"When are you going to stop calling me that, Rico?"

"The twelfth of never."

Her hair was only partly red today with bold streaking on black like bright blood over asphalt. It had taken the better part of an afternoon a week ago and who knew how much experimentation on Trace's part to get the colors to do what they did. Cait's boss at the library had turned white with anger at the change, which Trace still laughed at. Nobody saw her down in the stacks or in restoration, just how she liked it. Where it was quiet. No attention.

"It's not all red today." She flipped the cover off the rack and set it over the bound manuscript, checking the fit. "Now what do you want that you finally call after hiding the hell out for a week? I was worried about you."

"I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me." He drew a hesitant breath, fluttering on the line. "Now I want you to sit down. This is big."

"Speaking of big, you gotta come over and pick up these books for this Khan guy, if that's even his real name."

"Well it's sorta about that." His voice became sweet and slippery now. "We've got a new client."

"I don't need new clients, Rico. I need to make sure the ones who are lined up are taken care of. Khan is getting grouchy, and you're supposed to see him in, like, five hours." That was a guess, but lighting a fire under Rico usually gave results.

"I can't go."

Cait took the phone, tapped it on the desk twice, and said, "This thing must be broken. You just said that—"

"I'm sorry, Roja, but I have to tender this."

"Khan knows *you* not me. I've never even talked to him. And what the hell is this other deal you're so wound up about?"

"Just . . . you have to trust me on this one. It's big."

"Trust is saying you'll do a thing, not punk out and leave me doing the sale. Or having to call my goddamn sister to bail me out because you chose to disappear when I really needed you there. You remember that, right?" She regretted saying the words even as they screamed away down the phone line. Too late to take back now.

Rico's dry swallow echoed, "Don't talk about that shit again. It's settled, and you made that call, not me." His voice had dropped to acid and dismissal, and it made her feel three inches tall. "I'm talking about tall dollars here. And they asked for you by name."

"You mean they asked for Rory Soame, and big fat deal, that name is finally getting around."

It had taken long enough. More than a year with a man's name on the letterhead to get replies from book dealers. Who the hell knew how Vivian had done it, especially with her circumstances.

"No, baby. They asked for *you*. Not by name but like they were reading a rap sheet and—"

Cait sat up very straight now, wired to the chair. "Shut up. Nobody knows who the hell I am."

"They did. She did."

“Who the hell are you talking about?” She let slip her anger and irritation at him for weaseling out. He’d always done that when the hammer was about to fall.

There was something else though, anger at the interruption. Things were so close and being held up now by this. Her finger traced one of the eyes, nail biting hard enough to scratch the paper. Another scar for an old page.

“The queen, baby.”

“Who?”

He laughed. It edged up to drunkenness, and Cait bit her tongue at the thoughts that brought. “You’ll have to meet her. This is the big time. Biggest.” Something flared behind his words, a flush of greedy blood.

Cait’s breath sucked in, ragged over her teeth. “Are you high again? You fucking *promised*.”

“Ain’t your business anymore, even if I was,” he said with a sneer. “Remember? Just business. And I brought it up. You should thank me.”

“You son of a bitch!”

“Maybe, but I’m the son of a bitch who’s making us a ton of money.”

“And what about the deal you’re hanging me to dry on? That’s today.”

“That’s *your* today. Your tomorrow is bigger, thanks to me. This deal is going to pull us ten thousand. Maybe more. See, they got that light of the believer in their eyes. They want this bad.”

“Which book? You got a name?” She was trying to pin this down at least. The talk about believers got her nervous. Most everyone in the business picked these books over, like academics and scam artists trying to uncover a new angle. Wasn’t a one of them that really read into it for deeper truth. Until you found those who did, and she’d done everything she could to dodge that crowd.

“They didn’t say, just that only you would have it.”

“You’re being fishy.”

“Sure, Cait. I’m also hungry, you know?” His voice bit. “You’ve been holding our thing back, and I just stepped it out some. I’m doing what you said you wanted. Now quit worrying about it, and let things happen.”

“That’s a terrible plan. And it’s not ours, it’s *mine*. I get the books. Hell, I make them.”

“And they’re worth whatever someone will pay. Why are you taking a shit on my part of this? Without clients, you’re just a collector.” He jabbed the last word.

“Knock it off. I won’t see anyone I don’t know.”

“Then you’ll meet. They’ll contact us later, and I’ll help seal the deal.”

Something nipped at her. She wrote it off as sleeplessness or hunger. She’d been working most of the night, thinking the day hers to sleep away. With that gone, the prospect of being out in the world was just too much.

“Rico,” she started.

“Baby, trust.”

The words were warm and soothing in her ears, imagining his arm around her at the back door of the club. It had been cold that night but not when she had been by him.

“You make it hard to.” Between getting high and the trouble he flirted with, that trust had frayed to threads long ago.

“It’ll pay off. And don’t worry about Khan. He’s a pussycat. Look, these cats want the book. Nothing else. No danger in it. No Tomorrows is just rep and—” He hung there.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. I didn’t say anything.”

“Don’t jerk me around. You said ‘No Tomorrows.’ You just tried to bury it.”

“I said we’ll be fine when this is done.”

She felt sick and laid that at the feet of being up all night, not the name that had dropped. “No. There isn’t ‘fine.’ Not with them. That’s not in your control.”

“Neither is the rain. We’ll talk later, Roja.”

That last word came out sweet, and it had almost always worked on her. It could’ve this time if she let it. That nibbling unease bit down harder as she hung up the phone.

No Tomorrows ran a lot of trouble into downtown and out through Hollywood. Even if their reputation was just paper-thin and overblown, it still ran a shudder through Cait. It wasn’t just the violence of their actions but the creativity and disregard they ran with. They played at something other than mere crime. Every group or gang or whatever you wanted to call them, they had to have a gimmick, an identity. Even if it was just pretend, just pretend magic. But what No Tomorrows pretended to made her think three times about this deal.

And gangs been killing other gangs since before Dad was a kid here. Doesn’t make any sense, but that doesn’t stop it from happening. But they’re not even that. They don’t have a block or a territory. They just roam like smoke and are harder to catch.

The rain outside finally let down. Over the LA basin, the lead-heavy skies dropped rain big as bullets, a monsoonal force capable of washing every street clean as sure as a tuxedo car flicking its searchlight and scattering an alley. No Tomorrows though, they'd stand there and invite the cops to step out.

The smart ones wouldn't.



The sidewalk ahead of her was littered with countless dead worms, dried up and curled into a scattering of epileptic punctuation. The rain drew or drowned them out last night, only to wither up in the sunshine.

Cait looked up without need to shade her eyes as the clouds moved between her and the sun. They closed around it in a slow swarming, feeling like something alive.

The fingers opened again and sunlight poured down on Melrose Drive, and the light beside her at Highland turned green. Cars jumped at the signal, engines roaring in a reflexive frenzy.

Of going nowhere.

Her heels scuffed to a stop on the sidewalk, and she scanned the signage on the store marquees, all different styles, all hovering around readability, but forgoing it for fashion. The facades around her were still bright and clean. Trendy boutiques on this strip often didn't last long enough to get grimy and sun-beaten before going out of business and having something fresher step into the old skin. The neon sign of a shoe store buzzed next to her, glow all but invisible in the daytime, only a faint blue trace around the tube. It sounded like a big insect trapped behind the glass, monotone and tireless.

Cait adjusted the bundle of books under her arm as she reached for the backpack that wasn't there.

Right. Purse. I'm a grownup today.

And while she wasn't a punk any more, she wasn't too far removed.

I'm the featured attraction this afternoon, so dress for the right kind of scrutiny. Let 'em stare. Brains are disengaged while eyes are digging in.

Which was why Cait dressed her best today. She wore a black pencil skirt cut just below the knees, stockings sheer enough to show expectedly pale skin but fading to a pleasant contrast at glancing angles. Her cream-colored blouse fit well enough to be a distraction when she allowed it. Now it was well hidden