

A Chunk of Hell

—a prequel story to *Pitch Dark*—

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"A Chunk of Hell"

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Some men are born in Hell, others are dragged to it. Rick Conner found his way there by accident. It began in the wee hours, in Brooklyn, New York. The Little Caughnawaga neighborhood was home to ironworkers transplanted down south from Canada. They were mostly Iroquois, and they came for the jobs. Whole families migrated to the city. Sometimes only the men would remain, sending their pay back to wives and children living on the reservation, and visiting them when they could. There's a myth about the Iroquois having no fear of heights. Conner doubted it. The men took pride in hiding their fear, acting with warrior spirit, proving themselves day in, day out. That's what put the salt on their meat.

Made life taste good.

It was something Conner appreciated.

He'd spent the night drinking in an Indian bar with a half-French, half-Mohawk named Lucien Deerhouse. They'd met in the Marine Raiders and fought at Bougainville in the Solomon Islands. These days Lucien built Manhattan skyscrapers, walking six-inch beams on high steel in the clouds. He wasn't exactly a talker, and when something important needed to be told, he took even longer getting to it. As the sun readied to light up the Atlantic, Conner waited for another kind of illumination. He wanted to know why his friend had called.

Lucien's Bethlehem Steel hardhat rested on the bar next to a full glass of beer. He drained the glass. Set it back on the mahogany with a loud click.

"Up in Montreal I hear stories."

"What kind of stories, Luc?"

"Sort of thing you been doing since we dropped the bomb on the Japs."

"Missing people?"

Lucien nodded. But there was more.

He needing nudging and Rick obliged.

"I work for hire, cash paid up front, and I'm not cheap," Rick said.

"You look for lost property, not just people?"

"That's right." Rick lit a cigarette and blew out smoke like years of dust. "Old buddy, just tell me what we're talking about. I'll tell *you* if I'm your man."

The ironworker leaned back on his barstool. Seeping smells – yeasty beer, damp bricks, and sawdust – conjured a crowd of men who sweat for their pay. Rick, Lucien, and the bartender were the only three present. The bartender brought out a mop and bucket. He filled the bucket with steaming bleach water and pushed it on squeaky wheels into the bathroom's dimness. The door closed.

Lucien said, "Couple friends of mine are working a thirty-floor apartment job on the Upper West Side, two blocks from Central Park. It's a weird building."

"Weird how?"

"They say the plans make no sense."

"Luc, you could fit what I know about architecture in a thimble and still have room for your thumb."

Lucien shook his head. "It's not technical, nothing like that. The construction – well, it's like there's a building within the building. Running up inside, like a tower." Lucien used his hands to shape a box around his empty beer glass. "No access except from the penthouse. Once the job's done, a tenant could move into any of the other apartments, live there for years, and never stumble on the tower, or even suspect the thing existed. Damn clever when you think about it – the twisting passageways, windowless rooms. A spiral staircase connects them all up, neat and tight. More tricks than a magician's cabinet. The steps lead down to the basement, a sub-basement, and another one under that."

"A *sub* sub-basement?"

"We think it connects to tunnels under the city. Sewers, maybe, or old underground transit rails. Nobody goes down that deep. Funny thing is, we can't find out who did the

foundation work. First day, when my friends arrived on the site, the project was already up to street level.”

“Sounds like your friends might be pulling your leg.”

“They brought me there. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“No kidding?”

“We went at night. Hopped the fence, took a couple of flashlights, and followed the stairs down.”

“What did you see?”

“Bottom of the steps, there’s a gate with a lock on it big as your head. Everything’s wet. The walls thick with slime. We got out because of the rats.”

“Big ones, huh?”

“Never actually saw them. But they were making a racket. The stink. The splashing around. You could hear them rubbing against the walls. Sounded like a team of horses coming for us.”

“But it must’ve been rats.”

“That’s what we said. Rats.”

“What’d you do?”

“We hightailed to the surface, and that’s when they caught us. He did, anyway. He was the only one there. We practically ran into him before we saw him.”

“Night watchman?”

“No, the doctor.”

“I don’t –”

“He’s the owner of the building. A doctor.”

“Oh,” Rick said. “Maybe he can fix this crick in my neck.”

“Not that kind of doctor, he’s a philosopher or something. He’s the one who’s going to be living in the penthouse.”

“Sounds more like a witch doctor.”

Lucien didn’t laugh.

“We figured he’d call the cops. Throw us in jail for trespassing. My buddies would get fired. Even worse, the doc had a pistol strapped to his leg.”

“Did he let you inspect the barrel?”

“He talked to us. Friendly, acting like he didn’t care we were down there snooping around. He brought us over to the watchman’s shack and gave us coffee. Says he can’t sleep,

so he comes to the building at night. He didn't have a radio in there to pass the time, not a magazine, or a dime store novel. Nothing."

"That's all that happened?"

"We talked for about an hour. Then we went home."

"What'd you talk about for an hour?"

"Hypnotism."

"Boy," Conner chuckled, "I never would've guessed that in a million years."

"He asked me if I would call you."

Conner gagged on his last sip of beer.

"Me? How'd he know my name?"

Lucien shrugged. "I don't remember telling it to him. Maybe you got a reputation. He's looking for something that belongs to him, but it's been lost for a long time, far away from here. He thinks this thing is in the city now. Rumors are going around. Other people, rivals of his, are interested."

"And he wants me to find it before they do?"

"You'll have to ask him. Want my opinion? Stay away. But I thought I'd leave the choice with you. He's a rich man."

"I like the sound of that." Rick drummed out a soft rhythm on the bar.

Lucien reached over, put his big calloused hand on Rick's arm, squeezed.

"One of my friends is missing. Nobody's seen him for two weeks."

"Want me to look?"

"No."

Conner was puzzled. "I'll talk to your other friend."

"No, you won't." Lucien let go of him. "They're calling it an accident. He was distracted by his missing pal. Out of sorts, saying strange things to the rest of the crew. The jobsite is temporarily shut down for a safety investigation. They aren't going to find anything. A clear morning, the weather good. Lady across the street saw him from her bedroom window. Said he didn't look down, just walked off the end of the beam. She said he was smiling."

"I'm damned sorry."

Lucien took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket, slid it along the bar.

"That's the doctor's address."

Conner took the paper, read it.

"Dr. Lazlo Belzoni." He frowned. "The doc's got the money to own an apartment building and he's living here?"

“That’s where he finds what he needs.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“You’ll see when you meet him.”

The conversation was over. His friend picked up his hardhat and tucked it under his arm. His gaze found the floor, the walls, the doorway – anything but Rick Conner’s face.

Jungle fighting. Hand-to-hand combat.

Luc pulling a Jap officer with a samurai sword off his back.

Yet Conner had never seen this.

Lucien Deerhouse was scared.

The place was in a slum, no other word for it. The building he was looking for – when he finally found it at the back end of the last weedy lot abutting the river – seemed abandoned. A spiked fence encircled the property. He grasped one of the spikes, felt the pits and rough scabs of rust. A heavy chain coiled around the gate above the latch. The chain was bright, new.

He squinted through the twilight.

Maybe somebody does live in there.

He heard a cough and turned in the direction of the water. Conner wasn’t worried about running into any unsavory denizens of the riverfront. He had a knife hanging in a scabbard between his shoulder blades. His jacket was loose and his hands were quick. He’d killed men before. Not in anger either. And he’d do it again. Rick Conner was a sleek deadly machine, as cool as if his parts were made of oil and gears instead of blood and bone. Action was his gasoline.

The barrier on the river side of the street was wood, most of it missing, probably burned for heat or cook fires. He heard the cough again.

Dry, nearly breathless.

The river didn’t smell like water anymore, but from the things people put into it that they wanted to float away.

He stepped closer to the snaggletooth fence, boards split and cracked.

A low shadow shifted, filling up a hole. Knee-high.

Conner’s eyes locked on it. In two long strides, he stood near enough to kick it backward into the flowing umber sludge.

It was a man.

Conner didn't speak.

Because it was clear he wasn't going to get a response.

The man wasn't dead. Not quite. Not yet. It was impossible to tell his race or age. He was a creature raised from the mud, of the mud. There was no meat on him. His bones were jumbled sticks, unable to stand, but sufficient to crawl. Which is precisely what they did. A knobby head, boiled to the bone, beard dragging – pressed into the gap, staring right at Conner.

Hot glaring eyes. Unblinking. Tears streaked the grime on his cheeks.

The look said *pain*. It said *misery*.

Finally, *I can't look away*.

And neither could Conner.

The man coughed. His toothless mouth muttered silently. Conner didn't know what he wanted. It wasn't food or drink. He was beyond that. He wants me to kill him, Conner thought. He couldn't determine why he thought it, but he knew instantly and deeply, it was true. He's begging me to kill him. Why?

Conner backed off.

The man didn't have the strength to crawl through the fence.

But his eyes – jittery, red-rimmed, and highly alert – followed Conner's every movement. The man's trembling fingers searched his own face. Traced his splayed eyelids, touched his eyeballs.

Conner moved left, then right, then far to the right.

The eyes stayed with him, never closing, never blinking. The man was trying to stop them with his fingers. He poked and prodded with his filthy digits. He coughed, weakly. His hand fell to the soil and dug in. Like polished binocular lenses, the trained eyes of the half-dead mud crawler never left their target.

Behind Conner metal creaked.

The chain was gone. The gate swung wide open.

So they were watching me. *And you distracted me*, Conner thought. But when he looked for the man all he saw was a drag mark in the clay.

Time for my appointment.

Someone waited on the porch. Beckoned in the new darkness with a light.

From the wavering, it was composed of flame.

The servant holding the lamp was a giantess, at least a foot taller than Conner. She wore a fez and a purple tunic, and was surprisingly light on her feet as she led him through a maze of corridors, gliding under interwoven streams of rippling fabric tacked to the ceiling; her broad shoulders parted curtain after curtain of multicolored glass and painted wooden beads. At the terminus, in an octagonal room, the floorboards of which depicted an astronomical nebula, she halted. She ushered him over the threshold but did not cross it herself.

He walked in.

Sweet smoke ghosted from a ball censer hung at eye level.

The giantess motioned to an empty chair, one of only two furnishings in the otherwise barren room. Then she retreated.

Conner listened to the fading clicking of beads.

“I am so delighted you telephoned me. Last night I dreamed you ended this frustrating ordeal. I hope it is prophetic,” said a baritone voice.

Conner hadn’t taken the chair offered to him. He stood in front of a heavily draped window, his back to one of the eight corners of the parlor.

“I don’t encourage unrealistic expectations, Doctor.”

Belzoni reclined on a divan piled with silk cushions. His head was shaven so closely it gleamed. From the eyebrows down, coarse raven hairs grew thick as an enchanted Russian forest. Out of the forest shined two chips of cobalt glass.

“You should!” The doctor laughed. “Come and sit, please.”

Stubby black candles melted in sconces. Luminescent paint used in the galactic floor art interfered with Conner’s depth perception. He sensed each step might take him through the boards into a void. Vertigo made him nauseated.

“I would offer you a drink, but I’m afraid we don’t have any alcohol.”

“I can get a whisky on my way back to the subway. What is it you wanted to talk to me about, Dr. Belzoni?”

“Down to brass tacks, eh?” The doctor had an accent. *Brazz tucks.*

“I got the impression your time was valuable. I know mine is. I’m trying to save some for both of us.” Conner took off his hat and wiped his forehead. They must’ve had the boiler glowing cherry-red in the cellar. The floating waves of incense made it look how it felt – like a steam bath.

“If only we could abolish time, then what would our desires be?”

Belzoni didn't wait for an answer. He sat up and planted his black marching boots firmly on the border of an exploding star.

Conner noticed a holster belted around the doctor's ample waist.

He nodded at the revolver.

"You worried about me?"

Belzoni tutted. "I have enemies, sadly. But I suppose it is a habit formed when I captained a steamboat on the Amazon. You never know when you will meet up with a jaguar." He laced his fingers, flexing his stout arms.

"Or an anaconda," Conner said.

"Exactly," the doctor replied.

"My friend told me you were looking for —"

"A stone box, Mr. Conner. I am looking for a stone box smuggled into New York Harbor last month. It is highly collectible. I paid for the box years ago, though its delivery was . . . incomplete. In short, I was the victim of a confidence game, a grifter. This criminal did not know the significance of the artifact. He assumed it was, like he, a fraud. My exuberance at finding the stone box in such excellent condition after so many hoaxes and false hopes proved my vulnerability. He tricked me into paying him a second time. A much greater sum, of course."

"And you refused?"

"He died prior to the transaction."

"And the box wasn't with him."

"Unfortunately, no." Belzoni made a sour face. "That unforeseen complication led to a series of others, which brings us to the present. I have verified the box currently in question is mine. I am also willing to pay its possessor, a Rhodesian gentleman." Belzoni handed Conner a card with a number written on it.

Conner whistled.

"I have that in cash, available immediately."

"You want me to be your go-between?"

"It's more dangerous than a courier job. The trader who holds the box plans to have an auction, illegal since he is not the true owner, but I won't argue the point. My problem is several other collectors may have resources I do not."

"Looks like you're flush to me."

"I will not risk it." Belzoni leaned into his pillows. "Money is not the only resource I'm talking about. At least a dozen men have been murdered while searching for the whereabouts

of the stone since it was brought ashore. That is why I am willing to pay you half the amount on the card to acquire it for me. I see you are surprised. Don't be. Tell me, what do you know of the occult?"

"You mean like voodoo, tarot cards, reading palms?"

Belzoni scoffed. "More con games. We are beings of spirit as well as flesh and blood. To tap into the mind of man, *there* is a challenge; to erase fear and grow our powers beyond former limits. With the right knowledge and training, the mind muscle, for years contracted into a knot, expands."

"What's in the box?"

The doctor smiled. "What do men dream of when no one is looking?"

Conner heard a grunt from one of the corners. There was someone standing there, silent and motionless until this moment.

"Who's that?"

Without turning, Belzoni answered, "One of my children."

The figure in the shadows was too large to be any child.

"Why can't you deal with the broker yourself? Or send one of your children?"

"There are rules, as in everything."

Conner said, "Pay me the full amount on the card. Half now, or I walk."

"Your money is in a suitcase waiting by the front door." Belzoni seemed satisfied. With himself or the deal, Conner didn't know.

Conner got up from the chair and went over to the person standing in the corner. He grabbed him, pulled him under one of the sconces. The man didn't resist or struggle.

An Indian.

His face cut-up, stitched back together inexpertly, lopsided. Too baggy and too tight. Fat toady eyes. What was wrong with his mouth? (Candlelight flickered; a door opened somewhere in the house.) The top lip was missing, and wet teeth smiled without smiling. The muscles in his face were dead. He stood there like a wax dummy in Madame Tussaud's museum. Luc was right.

It would be better not to look for his friend.

Conner released his grip.

"Find me the stone box, Conner. I can bestow rewards beyond this world's. What other men dream, you shall live," Belzoni said.

Conner backed his way to the room's entrance. The giantess was already there to guide him out. Belzoni rose to his feet. He wagged a finger.

“This smuggler – he is a liar and he is a murderer. Be wary.”

“That I am, Doctor,” Conner said. “That I am.”

Seven days.

Conner tracked him down. It was like following a blood trail in the jungle. Red leaves, and more red leaves. The smell of Death closes around you like a tightening net. Your senses amplify. The edge of this world draws near.

Then you see him. And finish it.

He laughed in his face when Conner told him Belzoni’s offer. “Don’t waste my time, idiot. I won’t even unlock the trunk for that pittance. Now get out.” And then he threatened him. That was fine. But he never should have pulled the gun. It was a cheap move, but it cost him everything.

The Rhodesian smuggler pawed at the blade sticking out of his back. It was an F-S fighting knife, nickel-plated – a nasty beauty. He was having a time with it. Dancing around and knocking over the furniture. A lamp here, a chair there. He fell on top of the trunk and died. That was one itch he’d never scratch.

Conner kicked him to the floor. He returned the dead man’s gun, took the key from his pocket, and opened the trunk.

Well, he hadn’t lied after all.

The stone box.

Conner lifted it, and placed it inside the army duffel he’d brought for just that purpose. He repacked his clothes around it and linked the hook closure.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he said.

The smuggler didn’t argue.

“I’ll need my knife back.”

He did something the dead man couldn’t do with two hands, and then he cleaned the blade on the sap’s Savile Row suit. He put him in the trunk. Locked it. He’d drop the key down a storm drain on his walk to the motel. He pulled the window shades and set the furniture upright.

He stuck his arms through the duffel straps and lit a cigarette.

A curious Conner sat on the edge of his motel bed. His newly acquired stone box lay propped on one of its sides. The nature of the shape made it appear a sharp and crooked thing, offending to the eye – a double pyramid. The surface gleamed evilly. He straddled the foreign relic dug up years ago from the desert and carted out on camelback. He wetted his lips. Beneath the object's surface, figures were trapped in strata resembling translucent black ice. He detected Byzantine markings, hieroglyphs, and odd spirals. Layers floated under layers. So much depth it made him dizzy. He traced his finger along six columns of carvings, an alphabet of daggers. What was it Belzoni had said?

“The mind muscle, for years contracted into a knot, expands . . .”

The mad professor sure could spin tales. He had the eyes for it. Wild, dreamy, arrogant bughouse peepers and that Continental voice of his, all saliva-doused explosives and fricatives. Boy, he could sell it. Meaningless drivel . . . but still.

How many people had died because of this hunk of dry lava?

Conner counted sixteen he'd heard about or witnessed himself.

Another hundred and fifty-four if he added all hands lost aboard the *Kagachi Maru* when it sank, inexplicably, in calm nighttime seas a month ago. The stone box had been in the cargo hold; made it out unscathed according to a swordfisherman who scooped it up from an unoccupied life raft six days later.

And who, come to think of it, was also dead.

One seventy-one.

Conner's head hurt.

He was sweating.

He'd been smoking too much since his arrival. The place smelled like a match factory burned down. Conner opened the window and leaned out, hoping for a breeze. He swung his leg up on the sill and dangled his foot over the fire escape. Indian summer is what he guessed it had to be. Funny he hadn't noticed the heat this morning. Leaves flickered their reds and oranges at him. A rank coolness blew off the river. No sun up in the sky.

Sure was hot in his room though.

Steam floated up from the alley. They were frying the chow mein at a Chinese restaurant next door. He wasn't hungry, but could go for a drink. Maybe at that beer joint around the corner. Knock a few back, relax. Beer was the only thing the Krauts did right.

The walls were thin. He had slept just fine, but he could hear them now, voices murmuring below intelligibility but there nonetheless, like a pulsing beat that almost seemed to be coming not from the other rooms on his floor but from under the floor, under his bed it seemed. Under the stone.

A fluttering at the window.

He turned too slowly to see it. But he felt it . . . them . . . wings . . .

Down in the alley, long low shadows darted through the steam.

Dogs?

They were awfully big mutts, if that's what they were. More like wolves.

He shouldn't have taken the stone.

Those voices he'd heard were coming from inside it.

Conner didn't speak demon. Didn't want to learn, either. He sat there transfixed.

Waiting, watching . . .

What were these things he'd brought on himself?

They couldn't be real. Yet somehow he knew that wasn't going to matter.

When they got to him, they'd be real enough.

The Winged Ones were back in view. Sleek, quick as spilled ink, and larger than any birds he'd seen before. Swooping over the rooftops. Cutting the dusk into parabolas. Getting closer.

And the wolves?

The wolves were climbing straight up the bricks . . .

Conner stuffed the box in the army bag and ran for the door. He slammed it behind him just in time. A heavy weight crashed into the other side. There was a scratching that started at the top of the doorframe and went all the way down . . . a long sound . . . he could imagine great strips of wood peeling away.

It stopped.

He heard a chuff of breath. Frustrated, angry. And something punched the closed door – and kept punching, one blow after another, like two fists, but wider, flatter, and full of claws. Echoes rang in the hall.

Next came a distinct and horrible cracking.

The door splintered.

He had to get out of the hotel.

He took the stairs; at the first landing, he leapt the railing. *Don't trip, brother. Fall down now and you're good as dead.* Losing the box wouldn't save him either. Belzoni was his best option. He had to make it to the doctor. At the bottom of the stairwell, Conner didn't hear anything following him. But he wasn't about to stop and stare. A diamond-shaped porthole cut into the door connected to the hotel lobby. He pressed his face to the glass, scanned the room. Beige carpet, brown couch. An ashtray stand and a floor lamp. On the opposite wall he encountered two eyes staring at him – his own. A mirror. He pushed through.

All quiet.

To his left, the hotel front desk. No one behind it.

Right was a vestibule and beyond that, the street.

Daylight spilled on red and black checkerboard tiles.

People were walking past. Normal people on their way to ordinary places.

He decided to join them. The stone box had finished talking, or maybe he couldn't hear it over the sound of the traffic and his own heartbeat. He walked south with the crowd. Out from under the hotel awning, he let himself glance up. Fuzzed gray shadows soiled the building facades. Every cranny dripped gloom.

"Watch where you're walking, bud!"

Conner skirted around a couple of tipsy red-eyed sailors.

He looked up again.

A silhouette skittered down the concrete.

Did nobody else see it?

Conner picked up his pace. He dodged mothers pushing baby carriages. Shouldered through clogs of businessmen plodding homeward from the office. The sidewalk suddenly felt too narrow. Stepping off a curb, he lost his footing and went to his knees on the broken pavement. In an adjacent alley – among garbage cans and torn newspapers – the huge skulking wolves bounded for him.

Conner ran.

The Winged Ones chased him too. They were using the traffic to camouflage themselves – darting between the cars and trucks. He spotted a jet-black blur tucked under a city bus. Hooked talons snatched at the duffel bag. His jacket ripped. Blood spurted from his elbow, soaked his sleeve.

The subway.

He sprinted down the steps. Turned a corner. More steps. He went down and down. The station office was empty. He didn't have any tokens. He hopped the turnstiles. More stairs, web-cracked and crumbling – he took them. A long arched walkway, so dimly lit he wondered if it was still in use; but he heard a rumble at the other end – a train was approaching the station.

He rushed the platform.

The wood bowed under his weight, soft enough he thought it might break.

He looked in the tunnel for the train.

Sulphurous yellow light gilded the bricks.

The train pulled in. Hissed.

He climbed aboard.

Some trap had sprung and Conner was in it.

He knew that much.

The shadow creatures ran him straight to the pit. Before the subway car left the station, he'd seen them, lined up on the platform: wolves and fliers.

Their mission ended.

He was alone on the train. He searched the cars, back to front, and returned to the rear car again. No conductor. No other passengers. He cupped his hands around his eyes and stared at the receding track. The glass was dirty, scaled with something like mineral salts. Too dark for details. When the car wheels sparked, he caught glimpses like in a lightning flash: standing puddles of water, brick walls coated in layers of iridescent grease, and rats. Plenty of rats.

He picked a seat in the middle car.

Sat down.

Smoked a cigarette. Then another.

The train rolled for what seemed like hours. Conner's wristwatch had stopped. He didn't know when, maybe when he fell in the street. Maybe when the voices in the box started talking again. He took the cursed thing out of the duffel and threw the bag across the car. He put the stone box on the seat beside him. It gave off vibrations, humming like a small electric motor. It might've been the motion of the speeding train, but Conner thought the box moved now and again. Tiny shifts. Smooth little turnings, wobbles; the kind a compass makes.

Orientations.

As the train finally slowed, Conner brushed the ashes from his pants. He grabbed one of the poles and ducked his head to gaze out the windows. Torch flames bent in the train's wind, yet still made things brighter. He wasn't that surprised when the next platform came into view.

Or when he saw who was waiting.

Belzoni rested his hands on his hips, clutching an enormous ring of keys in one of his fists. The gate behind him was open. Conner spied the steps going up, up into what would be the doctor's new building and his cleverly hidden tower.

The brakes wheezed, hissed.

The doors slid haltingly.

Belzoni boarded. He was beaming.

"Excellent job, Mr. Conner. You are as good as your reputation." He noticed the bloodstain on Conner's elbow. "Ah, I will fix you up. I'm not a physician but I can apply a bandage. I have painkillers. You won't feel a thing."

"I'd like to get off this train," Conner said.

The doctor shook his head. "Swallow these." He pressed two black oblong pills into Conner's palm. "I'll have someone bring a dressing later. We have a long journey ahead of us. An amazing journey, as you will soon see. Once in a lifetime for most people. But with a difference in our case. We have roundtrip tickets. Say, you don't look so good. Sit down, relax. I'm sorry if my pets hurt you. But it was necessary. How else could I have brought you here so quickly?"

The train jerked forward a few inches.

Belzoni leaned out over the platform. "Come, my children, all aboard."

Conner saw the scarred Indian in the crowd. The giantess was there too. The silent lot of them blocked his access to the steps, their lines beginning to file in as ordered.

Conner bolted. Knife out. Racing along the subway carriage.

If he made it through to the end of the train, he could jump and run down the tracks.
He'd take his chances with the rats.

He stopped at the end of the car. The door wouldn't budge.

Luc was on the other side. Holding it closed. Eyes like stones.

Killer's eyes.

"Damn you!" Conner shouted.

Saving a man's life doesn't give you the right to steal it back.

He raised the brass butt of his knife to break the glass.

"There is no reason to run," Belzoni said from behind him. "Where would you go?
Where else, Mr. Conner, do you belong?"

Conner slumped against the exit. He left a red streak.

"Think about what you'd be missing," the doctor said. He had his revolver pointed at
Conner's chest. "I'd hate to deprive you by killing you first."

Conner looked at Belzoni, then back at Luc.

A rat climbed up the collar of Luc's shirt and bit his face. Luc didn't blink.

Conner ate the pills.

Belzoni holstered the gun and patted him on the shoulder.

"Good choice."

Conner followed him to their seats.

His body was going numb. He felt encased in an ice block.

Belzoni sat next to him, the stone between them. "You figure out how it works? No? I
will have time to explain."

The train jerked again.

And the doors closed.

Conner tried to speak, but his lips weren't moving.

Belzoni said, "We will meet Them in all their dark glory. I've only read about it in books,
you know? And seen medieval paintings, Bosch and all. And we will bring Them back."

Conner closed his eyes.

The train moved forward, and then like a rollercoaster, down.

4321 Echo Park Ave.
Sauk City, WI 54405

Dear Mr. Caul,

I stumbled upon your story,
A Chunk of Hell, while
skimming through a box of
old pulps I bought at a flea
market. What an incredible
find! I'm in awe. You have gazed
into the abyss and
returned with treasures
unthinkable. Contact me, yes?
And do share.

Your Fervent Fan,
Horus Whiteside



12345 Water Street
Los Angeles, CA 92126

[Click here](#) and sign up to receive two more messages from Dr. Horus Whiteside,
leading into *Pitch Dark*, the new thriller from Steven Sidor...

