



Pennidreadful

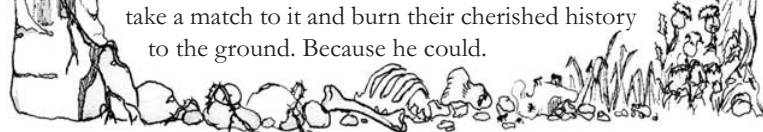
Lorne Dixon

THE SMOKE-TINTED WINDOW ROLLED DOWN. HAJIME Nishimura hadn't seen Vassili since his release but had never forgotten his face, the violence shining behind his eyes. Vassili told him the *first* man he had killed was his father. Hajime believed him. And didn't ask any questions. The only passenger was a cardboard box sealed carefully with packing tape.

They hadn't really kept in touch after Hajime's lawyers got him out, the only correspondence were a couple drunken phone calls and a spare condolence bouquet. Vassili didn't turn his head. "You wait long? Get in back. Don't touch the box."

Hajimi ducked in and closed the door gently behind him. They drove through the mechanical gates and past two small servant cabins that flanked the main house, a remnant of the estate's pre-Civil War history. "Didn't take long for you to rebuild."

"Seizure laws couldn't touch my international investments," Hajime said without his usual pride. His crimes—the ones they could prosecute, anyway—were considered white-collar, victimless crimes. Within six months of release, he had rebuilt his empire, put his probation officer on the payroll, and did his best to forget the two years he had spent as property of the state of Virginia. The house itself was a trophy, a middle finger in the government's face. It had been the home of six Governors throughout its life, and had served as a hospital during the War of Northern Aggression. He had outbid the state historical society for it. Someday he would take a match to it and burn their cherished history to the ground. Because he could.



86 • Pennidreadful

The Cadillac came to a smooth stop and they got out. Vassili carefully retrieved the cardboard box from the passenger seat. Hajime lead the way up the white brick stairs onto the porch, and then inside.

The body was sprawled at the foot of the main staircase. Her slender figure contorted into the shape of a crushed insect, shapely legs bent at impossible angles, head turned much too far. Vassili placed the box down carefully on a corner table. “How long?”

“I didn’t mean for her to fall. She just kept arguing. Just tit-for-tat, everything I said. So I hit her. Hard, I guess. Her heel broke, and she lost her balance, and—”

“Irrelevant.” Vassili said casually. “How long?”

Hajime pulled a small silver flask from his coat pocket and took a quick gulp. “God, maybe forty minutes before I called you. I was scared—shit—I *am* scared. They put my Grandfather in a camp during the Second World War. My dad was in and out of prisons all his life. I did my time. I’m not doing any more.”

Vassili made eye contact with him. After a solid minute, he dropped both hands to his side and turned to the box. He pulled a small pocketknife out of his vest and carefully broke the packing tape’s seal. Once open, he gently pushed aside some crumbled newspapers and lifted out a small glass box. Inside, hanging from the lid, was a small black pod. It seemed to be made of leaves that had been dried and rolled, tight like a cigar.

“What is that?” Hajime asked, the first bit of frightened doubt settling into his voice. He had known Vassili as the man in the cellblock who could procure any item, solve any problem. He had personal faith that Vassili could somehow get him through this ordeal.

“That? She.” Vassili said, with a touch of both love and awe in his voice.

“She?”

He nodded. “Her name is Pennidreadful. At least that’s what she has asked me to call her. I’m sure she has dozens of names. They all do.”

“Pennidreadful? How will this . . . she . . . help us?” Hajime asked. The idea that Vassili had gone completely insane crossed his mind. He watched as the taller man opened the side panel of the glass box and stroked the black pod with one finger.

“Can you hear? She’s purring.” Vassili smiled.

“Christ.” Hajime could feel the alcohol wearing off.

The pod twitched. At first Hajime dismissed it, sure that the motion was caused by Vassili’s finger. But his impression changed when Vassili drew his hand away. The tightly woven black leaves uncurled, revealing themselves as dark, silky wings. The tiny, pale body they exposed was feminine perfection: long slender legs, an athletic flat stomach, and small upturned breasts. Her black lips matched her large eyes, as well as the waterfall of hair, which cascaded down wildly from her head.

“Fuck,” she said.