

# WILD CARDS II: ACES HIGH

EDITED BY  
GEORGE R. R. MARTIN





WILD CARDS II



---

# ACES HIGH



Edited by

**George R. R. Martin**



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
New York

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you without Digital Rights Management software (DRM) applied so that you can enjoy reading it on your personal devices. This e-book is for your personal use only. You may not print or post this e-book, or make this e-book publicly available in any way. You may not copy, reproduce or upload this e-book, other than to read it on one of your personal devices.

**Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: [us.macmillanusa.com/piracy](http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy).**

---

For Chip Wideman, Jim Moore, Gail Gerstner-Miller, and Parris, the secret aces  
without whom the wild card might never have been played

---

## Editor's Note

*Wild Cards* is a work of fiction set in a completely imaginary world whose history parallels our own. Names, characters, places, and incidents depicted in *Wild Cards* are fictitious or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or real persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The works contained in this anthology are works of fiction; any writings referred to within these works are themselves fictional, and there is no intent to depict actual writers or to imply that any such persons have ever actually written or published the fictional essays, articles, or other works referred to in the works of fiction comprising this anthology.

---

## Contents

Title Page

Dedication

Editor's Note

1979

Pennies from Hell

1985

Jube: One

Unto the Sixth Generation

Jube: Two

Ashes to Ashes

Unto the Sixth Generation

Unto the Sixth Generation

Jube: Three

1986

If Looks Could Kill

Jube: Four

Unto the Sixth Generation

Winter's Chill

Jube: Five

Relative Difficulties

With a Little Help from His Friends

Jube: Six

By Lost Ways

Mr. Koyama's Comet

Half Past Dead

Jube: Seven

Copyright Acknowledgments

Copyright

---

**1979**



---

# Pennies from Hell

by Lewis Shiner

**THERE WERE MAYBE A** dozen of them. Fortunato couldn't be sure exactly because they kept moving, trying to circle behind him. Two or three had knives, the rest had sawed-off pool cues, crowbars, antennas, anything that would hurt. They were hard to tell apart. Jeans, black leather jackets, long slicked-back hair. At least three of them matched the vague description Chrysalis had given him.

"I'm looking for somebody called Gizmo," Fortunato said. They wanted to herd him away from the bridge, but they didn't want to physically push him yet. To his left the brick path led uphill into the Cloisters. The entire park was empty, had been empty for two weeks now, since the gangs had moved in.

"Hey, Gizmo," one of them said. "What do you say to the man?"

That one, with the thin lips and bloodshot eyes. Fortunato locked eyes with the kid nearest to him. "Take off," Fortunato said. The kid backed away, uncertain. Fortunato looked at the next one. "You too. Get out of here." This one was weaker; he turned and ran.

That was all he had time for. A pool cue came slicing for his head. Fortunato slowed time and took the cue, used it to knock away the nearest knife. He breathed in and things sped up again.

Now they were all getting nervous. "Go," he said, and three more ran, including the one called Gizmo. He sprinted downhill, toward the 193rd Street entrance. Fortunato threw the pool cue and another switchblade and ran after him.

They were running downhill. Fortunato felt himself getting tired, and let out a burst of energy that lifted him off the path and sent him sailing through the air. The kid fell under him and rolled headfirst. Something crunched in the kid's spine and both his legs jerked at once. Then he was dead.

"Christ," Fortunato breathed, brushing dead October leaves from his clothes. The cops had doubled patrols around the park, though they were afraid to come in. They'd tried it once, and it had cost them two men to chase the kids away. The next day the kids were back again. But there were cops watching and for something like this they'd be willing to run in and pick up a body.

He dumped the kid's pockets, and there it was—a copper coin the size of a fifty-cent piece, red with drying blood. For ten years he'd had Chrysalis and a few others watching for them, and last night she'd seen the kid drop one at the Crystal Palace.

There was no wallet, nothing else that had any meaning. Fortunato palmed the coin and sprinted for the subway entrance.



“Yes, I remember this,” Hiram said, picking the coin up with a corner of his napkin. “It’s been awhile.”

“It was 1969,” Fortunato said. “Ten years ago.” Hiram nodded and cleared his throat. Fortunato didn’t need magic to know that the fat man was uncomfortable. Fortunato’s open black shirt and leather jacket weren’t really up to the dress code here. Aces High looked out over the city from the observation deck of the Empire State Building, and the prices were as steep as the view.

Then there was the fact that he’d brought along his latest acquisition, a dark blonde named Caroline who went for five hundred a night. She was small, not quite delicate, with a childlike face and a body that invited speculation. She wore skintight jeans and a pink silk blouse with a couple extra buttons undone. Whenever she moved, so did Hiram. She seemed to enjoy watching him sweat.

“The thing is, that’s not the coin I showed you before. It’s another one.”

“Remarkable. It’s hard to believe that you could come across two of them in this good condition.”

“I think you could put that a little stronger. That coin came off a kid from one of those gangs that’s been trashing the Cloisters. He was carrying it loose in his pocket. The first one came off a kid that was messing with the occult.”

It was still hard for him to talk about. The kid had murdered three of Fortunato’s geishas, cut them up in a pentagram for some twisted reason that he still hadn’t figured out. He’d gone on with his life, training his women, learning about the Tantric power the wild card virus had given him, but otherwise keeping to himself.

And, when it got to bothering him, he would spend a day or a week following one of the loose ends the killer had left behind. The coin. The last word he’d said, “TIAMAT.” The residual energies from something else that had been in the dead boy’s loft, a presence that Fortunato had never been able to trace.

“You’re saying there’s something supernatural about them,” Hiram said. His eyes shifted to watch Caroline as she stretched languorously in her chair.

“I just want you to take another look.”

“Well,” Hiram said. Around them the luncheon crowd made small noises with their forks and glasses and talked so quietly they sounded like distant water. “As I’m sure I said before, it *appears* to be a mint 1794 American penny, stamped from a hand-cut die. They could have been stolen from a museum or a coin shop or a private...” His voice trailed off. “Mmmmm. Have a look at this.”

He held the coin out and pointed with a fleshy little finger, not quite touching the surface. “See the bottom of this wreath, here? It should be a bow. But instead it’s something sort of shapeless and awful looking.”

Fortunato stared at the coin and for a half-second felt like he was falling. The leaves of the wreath turned into tentacles, the ends of the ribbon opened like a beak, the loops of the bow became shapeless flesh, full of too many eyes. Fortunato had seen it before, in a book on Sumerian mythology. The

caption underneath had read “TIAMAT.”

“You all right?” Caroline asked.

“I’ll be okay. Go on,” he said to Hiram.

“My instinct would be to say they’re forgeries. But who would forge a penny? And why not take the trouble to age them, at least a little? They look like they’d been stamped out yesterday.”

“They weren’t, if that matters. The auras of both of them show a lot of use. I’d say they were at least a hundred years old, probably closer to two hundred.”

Hiram pushed the ends of his fingers together. “All I can do is send you to somebody who might be able to give you more help. Her name is Eileen Carter. She runs a small museum out on Long Island. We used to, um, correspond. Numismatics, you know. She’s written a couple of books on occult history, local stuff like that. He wrote an address in a little notebook and tore out the page.

Fortunato took the paper and stood up. “I appreciate it.”

“Listen, do you think...” He licked his lips. “Do you think it would be safe for a regular person to own one of those?”

“Like, say, a collector?” Caroline asked.

Hiram looked down. “When you’re finished with them I’d pay.”

“When this is over,” Fortunato said, “if we’re all still around, you’re welcome to them.”



Eileen Carter was in her late thirties, with flecks of gray in her brown hair. She looked up at Fortunato through squared off glasses, then glanced over at Caroline. She smiled.

Fortunato spent most of his time with women. Even as beautiful as she was, Caroline was insecure, jealous, prone to irrational dieting or makeup. Eileen was something different. She seemed no more than a little amused by Caroline’s looks. And as for Fortunato—a half-Japanese black man in leather, his forehead swollen courtesy of the wild card virus—she didn’t seem to find anything unusual about him at all.

“Have you got the coin with you?” she asked. She looked right into his eyes when she talked to him. He was tired of women who looked like models. This one had a crooked nose, freckles, and about a dozen extra pounds. Most of all he liked her eyes. They were incandescent green and had smile lines in the corners.

He put the penny on the counter, tails up.

She bent over to look at it, touching the bridge of her glasses with one finger. She was wearing a green flannel shirt; the freckles ran down as far as Fortunato could see. Her hair smelled clean and sweet.

“Can I ask where you got this?”

“It’s kind of a long story,” Fortunato said. “I’m a friend of Hiram Worchester. He’ll vouch for me if that’ll help.”

“It’s good enough. What do you want to know?”

“Hiram said it was maybe a forgery.”

“Just a second.” She took a book off the wall behind her. She moved in sudden bursts of energy giving herself completely to whatever she was doing. She opened the book on the counter and flipped through the pages. “Here,” she said. She studied the back of the coin intently for a few seconds, biting on her lower lip. Her lips were small and strong and mobile. He found himself wondering what would be like to kiss her.

“That one,” she said. “Yes, it’s a forgery. It’s called a Balsam penny. Named after ‘Black John Balsam, it says. He minted them up in the Catskills around the turn of the nineteenth century.” She looked up at Fortunato. “The name rings a bell, but I can’t say why.”

“‘Black John’?”

She shrugged, smiled again. “Can I hang on to this? Just for a few days? I might be able to find something else for you.”

“All right.” Fortunato could hear the ocean from where they were and it made things seem a little less dire. He gave her his business card, the one with just his name and phone number on it. On the way out she smiled and waved at Caroline, but Caroline acted like she didn’t see it.

On the train back to the city Caroline said, “You want to fuck her, don’t you?”

Fortunato smiled and didn’t answer her.

“I swear to God,” she said. Fortunato could hear Houston in her voice again. It was the first time in weeks. “An overweight, broken-down old schoolmarm.”

He knew better than to say anything. He was overreacting, he knew. Part of it was probably just pheromones, some kind of sexual chemistry that he’d understood a long time before he learned the scientific basis for it. But he’d felt comfortable with her, something that hadn’t happened very often since the wild card had changed him. She’d seemed to have no self-consciousness at all.

Stop it, he thought. You’re acting like a teenager.

Caroline, under control again, put a hand on his thigh. “When we get home,” she said, “I’m going to fuck her right out of your mind.”



“Fortunato?”

He switched the phone to his left hand and looked at the clock. Nine A.M. “Uh huh.”

“This is Eileen Carter. You left a coin with me last week?”

He sat up, suddenly awake. Caroline turned over and buried her head under a pillow. “I haven’t forgotten. How are you doing?”

“I may be on to something. How would you feel about a trip to the country?”



She picked him up in her VW Rabbit and they drove to Shandaken, a small town in the Catskills. He dressed as simply as he could, Levi’s and a dark shirt and an old sport coat. But he couldn’t hide his

ancestry or the mark the virus had left on him.

They parked in an asphalt lot in front of a white clapboard church. They were barely out of the car before the church door opened and an old woman came out. She wore a cheap navy double-breasted pantsuit and a scarf over her head. She looked Fortunato up and down for a while, but finally stuck out her hand. "Amy Fairborn. You would be the people from the city."

Eileen finished the introductions and the old woman nodded. "The grave's over here," she said.

The stone was a plain marble rectangle, outside the churchyard's white picket fence and well away from the other graves. The inscription read, "John Joseph Balsam. Died 1809. May He Burn In Hell."

The wind snapped at Fortunato's coat and blew faint traces of Eileen's perfume at him. "It's a hell of a story," Amy Fairborn said. "Nobody knows anymore how much of it's true. Balsam was supposed to be a witch of some sort, lived up in the hills. First anybody heard of him was in the 1790s. Nobody knows where he came from, other than Europe somewhere. Same old story. Foreigner, lives off himself, gets blamed for everything. Cows give sour milk or somebody has a miscarriage, they make it his fault."

Fortunato nodded. He felt like a foreigner himself, at the moment. He couldn't see anything but trees and mountains anywhere he looked, except off to the right where the church held the top of the hill like a fort. He felt exposed, vulnerable. Nature was something that should have a city around it.

"One day the sheriff's daughter over to Kingston came up missing," Fairborn said. "That would be the beginning of August, 1809. Lammastide. They broke in Balsam's house and found the girl stretched out naked on an altar." The woman showed her teeth. "That's what the story says. Balsam was got up in some kind of weird outfit and a mask. Had a knife the size of your arm. Sure as hell he was going to carve her up."

"What kind of outfit?" Fortunato asked.

"Monk's robes. And a dog mask, they say. Well, you can guess the rest. They strung him up, burned the house, salted the ground, knocked trees over in the road that led up there."

Fortunato took out one of the pennies; Eileen still had the other one. "This is supposed to be called a Balsam penny. Does that mean anything to you?"

"I got three or four more like it at the house. They wash up out of his grave every now and again. 'What goes down must come up,' my husband used to say. He buried a good many of these folks."

"They put the pennies in his grave?" Fortunato asked.

"All they could find. When they fired the house they turned up a keg of 'em in the root cellar. You see how red it looks? Supposed to be from a high iron content or some such. Folks at the time said they put human blood in the copper. Anyways, the coins disappeared out of the sheriff's office. Most people thought Balsam's wife and kid made off with 'em."

"He had a family?" Eileen asked.

"Nobody saw too much of either of 'em, but yeah, he had a wife and a little boy. Lit off for the big city after the hanging, at least as far as anybody knows."



As they drove back through the Catskills he got Eileen to talk a little about herself. She'd been born in Manhattan, gotten a BFA from Columbia in the late sixties, dabbled in political activism and social work and come out of it with the usual complaints. "The system never changed fast enough for me, I just sort of escaped into history. You know? When you read history you can see how it all comes out."

"Why occult history?"

"I don't believe in it, if that's what you mean. You're laughing. Why are you laughing at me?"

"In a minute. Go on."

"It's a challenge, that's all. Regular historians don't take it seriously. It's wide open, there's so much fascinating stuff that's never been properly documented. The Hashishin, the Qabalah, Davy Home, Crowley." She looked over at him. "Come on. Let me in on the joke."

"You never asked about me. Which was nice. But you have to know that I have the virus. The wild card."

"Yes."

"It gave me a lot of power. Astral projection, telepathy, heightened awareness. But the only way you can direct it, make it work, is through Tantric magic. It has something to do with energizing the spirit—"

"Kundalini."

"Yes."

"You're talking about real Tantric magic. Intromission. Menstrual blood. The whole bit."

"That's right. That's the wild card part of it."

"There's more?"

"There's what I do for a living. I'm a procurer. A pimp. I run a string of call girls that go for as much as a thousand dollars a night. Have I got you nervous yet?"

"No. Maybe a little." She gave him another sideways glance. "This is probably a stupid thing to say. You don't fit my image of a pimp."

"I don't much like the name. But I don't run away from it either. My women aren't just hookers. My mother was Japanese and she trains them as geishas. A lot of them have PhDs. None of them are junkies and when they're tired of the Life they move into some other part of the organization."

"You make it sound very moral."

She was ready to disapprove, but Fortunato wouldn't let himself back away. "No," he said. "You've read Crowley. He had no use for ordinary morality, and neither do I. 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.' The more I learn, the more I realize that everything is there, in that one phrase. It's as much a threat as a promise."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I like you and I'm attracted to you and that's not necessarily a good thing for you. I don't want you to get hurt."

She put both hands on the wheel and watched the road. "I can take care of myself," she said.

You should have kept your mouth shut, he told himself, but he knew that wasn't true. Better

drive her off now, before he got any more involved.

A few minutes later she broke the silence. "I don't know whether I should tell you this or not. I took that coin around to a couple of places. Occult bookstores, magic shops, that sort of thing. Just to see what I could turn up. I met a guy named Clarke at the Miskatonic Bookstore. He seemed really interested."

"What'd you tell him?"

"I said it was my father's. I said I was curious about it. He started asking me questions like was I interested in the occult, had I ever had any paranormal experiences, that kind of thing. It was pretty easy to feed him what he wanted to hear."

"And?"

"And he wants me to meet some people." A few seconds later she said, "You've gone quiet on me again."

"I don't think you should go. This stuff is dangerous. Maybe you don't believe in the occult. The thing is, the wild card changed everything. People's fantasies and beliefs can turn real now. And they can hurt you. Kill you."

She shook her head. "It's always the same story. But never any proof. You can argue with me all the way back to New York City, and it's not going to convince me. Unless I see it with my own eyes, I just can't take it seriously."

"Suit yourself," Fortunato said. He released his astral body and shot ahead of the car. He stood on the roadway and let himself become visible just as the car was on him. Through the windshield he could see Eileen's eyes go wide. Next to her his physical body sat with a mindless stare. Eileen screamed and the brakes howled and he let himself snap back into the car. They were skidding toward the trees and Fortunato reached over to steer them out of it. The car died and rolled onto the shoulder.

"What ... what..."

"I'm sorry," he said. He didn't manage a lot of conviction.

"It was *you* there in the road!" Her hands still held the wheel and tremors shook her arms.

"It was just ... a demonstration."

"A demonstration? You scared me to death!"

"It wasn't anything. You understand? Nothing. We're talking about some kind of cult that's a couple of hundred years old and makes human sacrifices. At the least. It could be worse, a hell of a lot worse. I can't be responsible for you getting involved."

She started the car and pulled onto the road. It was a quarter of an hour later, back on I-87, before she said, "You're not quite human anymore, are you? That you could scare me that badly. Even though you say you're interested in me. That's what you were trying to warn me about."

"Yes," he said. Her voice was different, more detached. He waited for her to say something else but instead she just nodded and put a Mozart tape in the stereo.



He thought that would be the end of it. Instead, a week later, she called and asked if he could meet her for lunch at Aces High.

He was waiting at the table when she came in. She would never, he knew, look like a fashion model or like one of his geishas. But he liked the way she made the most of what she had: narrow gray flannel skirt, white cotton blouse, navy cardigan, amber beads, and a wide tortoiseshell band for her hair. No visible makeup except for mascara and a little lip gloss.

Fortunato got up to hold her chair and nearly bumped into Hiram. There was an awkward pause. Finally she held out her hand and Hiram bent over it, hesitated just a little too long, and then bowed away. Fortunato stared after him for a second or two. He wanted Eileen to say something about Hiram but she didn't take the hint. "It's good to see you," he said.

"It's good to see you too."

"In spite of ... what happened last time?"

"What, is that an apology?" The smile again.

"No," he said. "Though I really am sorry. I'm sorry I got you into this. I'm sorry I couldn't have met you some other way. I'm sorry we have this ugly business between us every time we see each other."

"So am I."

"And I'm afraid for you. I'm up against something like I've never seen before. There's this ... thing, this conspiracy, this cult, whatever it is, out there. And I can't find anything out about it." The waiter brought menus and water in crystal goblets. Fortunato nodded him away.

"I've been to see Clarke," Fortunato said. "I asked him some questions, mentioned TIAMAT, and all I got were blank looks. He wasn't faking it. I looked in his brain." He took a breath. "He had no memory of you."

"That's impossible," Eileen said. She shook her head. "It's so strange to see you sitting there talking about reading his mind. There's got to be some kind of mistake, that's all. You're sure?"

Fortunato could see her aura clearly. She was telling the truth. "I'm sure," he said.

"I saw Clarke last night and I can promise you he remembered me. He took me to meet some people. They're members of the cult, or society, or whatever it is. The coins are some kind of recognition thing."

"Did you get their names, or addresses, anything like that?"

She shook her head. "I'd know them again. One of them was called Roman. Very good looking, almost too good looking, if you know what I mean. The other one was very ordinary. Harry, I think his name was."

"Does the group have a name?"

"They haven't mentioned one." She glanced at the menu as the waiter came back. "The veal medallions, I think. And a glass of the chablis."

Fortunato ordered insalata composta and a Beck's.

"But I did learn some other things," she said. "I've been trying to trace Balsam's wife and son."



mean, they are a couple of loose ends in the story. First I tried the usual detective routine, birth and death and marriage records. No dice. Then I tried to find occult connections. Do you know the *Abramelin Review*?”

“No.”

“It’s a sort of *Reader’s Guide* to occult publications. And that’s where the Balsam family turned up. There’s a Marc Balsam that’s published at least a dozen articles in the last few years. Most of them were in a magazine called *Nectanebus*. Does that ring any bells?”

Fortunato shook his head. “A demon or something? It sounds like I should know it, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“It’s a good bet he’s involved with the same society that Clarke is.”

“Because of the coins.”

“Exactly.”

“What about those kid gangs that have been running wild up at the Cloisters? I took a coin off one of those kids. Can you see any possible connection?”

“Not yet. The articles might help, but the magazine’s pretty obscure. I haven’t been able to turn up any copies of it.”

The food arrived. Over lunch she finally mentioned Hiram. “Fifteen years ago he was more attractive than you might think. A little hefty, but very charming. Knew how to dress, what to say. And of course he always knew fantastic restaurants.”

“What happened? Or is it any of my business?”

“I don’t know. What ever happens between people? I think most of it was that he was too self-conscious about his weight. Now it’s me that’s self-conscious all the time.”

“You shouldn’t be, you know. You look great. You could have any man you wanted.”

“You don’t have to flirt with me. I mean, you have all this sexual power and charisma and everything, but I don’t like the idea of your using it on me. Manipulating me.”

“I’m not trying to manipulate you,” Fortunato said. “If it looks like I’m interested in you, it’s because I’m interested in you.”

“Are you always this intense?”

“Yeah. I guess I am. I look over at you and you’re smiling all the time. It drives me crazy.”

“I’ll try to stop.”

“Don’t.”

He’d come on too strong, he realized. She set her silverware neatly on her plate and dropped her folded napkin next to it. Fortunato pushed the rest of his salad away. Suddenly something bubbled up in his mind.

“What did you say the name of the journal was? Where Balsam was publishing?”

She got a folded scrap of paper out of her purse. “*Nectanebus*. Why?”

Fortunato signaled for the check. “Listen. Can you come back to my apartment? No funny business. This is important.”

“I suppose.”

The waiter bowed and looked at Eileen. “Mr. Worchester is ... unavoidably detained. But he asked me to tell you that your lunch is compliments of the house.”

“Thank him for me,” Eileen said. “Tell him ... just tell him thank you.”



Caroline was still asleep when they got to the apartment. She made a point of leaving the bedroom door open while she walked naked to the bathroom, then sat on the edge of the bed and slowly put her clothes on, starting with stockings and a garter belt.

Fortunato ignored her, sorting through the stacks of books that had grown to fill an entire wall of the front room. Either she'd learn to control her jealousy or she'd find another line of work.

Eileen smiled at her as she clomped out on her four-inch heels. “She’s beautiful,” she said.

“So are you.”

“Don’t start.”

“You brought it up.” He handed her Budge’s *Egyptian Magic*. “There you go. Nectanebus.”

“... famous as a magician and a sage, and he was deeply learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.”

“This is coming together. Remember Black John’s dog mask? I’m wondering if Balsam’s cult isn’t the Egyptian Freemasons.”

“Oh my god. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I’m thinking that the name Balsam could be an Americanization of Balsamo.”

“As in Guiseppe Balsamo of Palermo,” Eileen said. She sat down hard on the couch.

“Better known to the world,” Fortunato said, “as Count Cagliostro.”



Fortunato pulled up a chair across from her and sat with his elbows on his knees. “The Inquisition arrested him when?”

“Around 1790, wasn’t it? They put him in some kind of dungeon. But his body was never found.”

“He’s supposed to be connected with the Illuminati. Suppose they broke him out of jail and smuggled him to America.”

“Where he shows up as Black John Balsam, the local weirdo. But what was he up to? Why the coins? And the human sacrifice? Cagliostro was a fraud, a con man. All he ever wanted was the good life. Murder just doesn’t sound like his style.”

Fortunato handed her Daraul’s *Witches and Sorcerers*. “Let’s find out. Unless you’ve got something better to do?”



“England,” Eileen said. “1777. That’s when it happened. He got inducted into the Masons on Apr

twelfth, in Soho. After that Masonry takes over his life. He invents the Egyptian Freemasons as some kind of higher order, starts giving away money, inducting every high-ranking Mason he can.”

“So what brought all that on?”

“Supposedly he took some kind of tour of the English countryside and came back from it a—quote—changed man—endquote. His magic powers increased. He went from an adventurer to a genuine mystic.”

“Okay,” Fortunato said. “Now listen to this. This is Tolstoy on Freemasonry: ‘The first and chief object of our order ... is the preservation and handing-on to posterity of a certain important mystery ... a mystery on which perhaps the fate of mankind depends.’”

“This is starting to scare the hell out of me,” Eileen said.

“There’s one more piece. The thing that’s on the back of the Balsam penny is a Sumerian deity called TIAMAT. It’s what Lovecraft took Cthulu from. Some kind of huge, shapeless monster from beyond the stars. Lovecraft supposedly got his mythology from his father’s secret papers. Lovecraft’s father was a Mason.”

“So you think that’s what it’s all about. This TIAMAT thing.”

“Put it together,” Fortunato said. “Suppose the Masonic secret has something to do with controlling TIAMAT. Cagliostro learns the secret. His brother Masons won’t use their knowledge for evil, so Cagliostro forms his own order, for his own ends.”

“To bring this thing to Earth.”

“Yes,” Fortunato said. “To bring it to Earth.”

Eileen had finally stopped smiling.



It had gotten dark while they talked. The night was cold and clear and Fortunato could see stars through the skylight in the front room. He wished he could shut them out.

“It’s late,” Eileen said. “I have to go.”

He hadn’t thought of her leaving. The day’s work had left him full of nervous energy, the thrill of the hunt. Her mind excited him and he wanted her to open up to him—her secrets, her emotions, her body. “Stay,” he said, careful not to use his powers, not to make it a command. “Please.” His stomach felt cold when he asked.

She got up, put on the sweater she’d left on the arm of the couch. “I have to ... digest all this,” she said. “There’s just been too much happening at once. I’m sorry.” She wouldn’t look at him. “I need more time.”

“I’ll walk you down to Eighth Avenue,” he said. “You can catch a cab there.”

Cold seemed to radiate out of the stars, a kind of hatred for life itself. He hunched his shoulders and put his hand deep in his pockets. A few seconds later he felt Eileen’s arm around his waist and he held her close as they walked.

They stopped at the corner of Eighth and 19th and a cab pulled up almost immediately. “Don’t say

it," Eileen told him. "I'll be careful."

Fortunato's throat was too tight for him to talk if he'd wanted to. He put a hand behind her neck and kissed her. Her lips were so gentle that he had started to turn away before he realized how good they felt. He turned back and she was still standing there. He kissed her again, harder, and she swayed toward him for a second and then pulled away.

"I'll call you," she said.

He watched the cab until it turned the corner and disappeared.



The police woke him at seven the next morning.

"We've got a dead kid in the morgue," the first cop said. "Somebody broke his neck up at the Cloisters about a week ago. You know anything about it?"

Fortunato shook his head. He stood by the door, holding his robe closed with one hand. If the cops came in they would see the pentagram painted on the hardwood floor, the human skull on the coffee table, the bookcase, the joints on the coffee table.

"Some of his pals say they saw you there," the second cop said.

Fortunato locked eyes with him. "I wasn't there," he said. "You want to believe that."

The second cop nodded and the first one started to reach for his gun. "No," Fortunato said. The first cop didn't manage to look away in time. "You believe it too. I wasn't there. I'm clean."

"Clean," the first cop said.

"Go now," Fortunato said, and they left.

He sat on the couch, hands shaking. They would be back. Or more likely they'd send someone from the Jokertown division who wouldn't be affected by his powers.

He wouldn't be getting back to sleep. Not that he'd been sleeping that well anyway. His dream had been full of tentacled things as large as the moon, blocking the sky, swallowing the city.

It suddenly occurred to him that the apartment was empty. He couldn't remember the last time he'd spent the night alone. He almost picked up the phone to call Caroline. It was only a reflex and he fought it off. What he wanted was to be with Eileen.



Two days later she called again. In those two days he'd been to her museum in Long Island twice, in his astral form. He'd hovered across the room, invisible to her, just watching. He'd have gone more often, stayed longer, but he was taking too much pleasure in it.

"It's Eileen," she said. "They want to initiate me."

It was three-thirty in the afternoon. Caroline was at Berlitz, learning Japanese. She hadn't been around much lately.

"You went back," he said.

"I had to. We've been over this."

“When is it?”

“Tonight. I’m supposed to be there at eleven. It’s this old church in Jokertown.”

“Can I see you?”

“I guess so. I could come over if you want.”

“Please. As soon as you can.”

He sat by the window and watched until her car pulled up. He buzzed the door for her and then waited for her on the landing. She walked ahead of him into the apartment and turned around. He didn’t know what to expect from her. He closed the door and she held out her hands. He put his arm around her and she turned her face up to him. He kissed her and then he kissed her again. Her arm went around his neck and tightened.

“I want you,” he said.

“I want you too.”

“Come to bed.”

“I want to. But I can’t. It’s ... it’s just a lousy idea. It’s been a long time for me. I can’t just climb into bed with you and perform all kinds of weird Tantric sex acts. It’s not what I want. You can’t even come, for crissake!”

He combed through her hair with his fingers. “All right.” He held her awhile longer, then let her go. “Do you want anything? A drink?”

“Some coffee, if you have any.”

He put water on the stove and ground a handful of beans watching her over the breakfast bar. “What I can’t understand,” he said, “is why I can’t get anything from these people’s minds.”

“You don’t think I’m making all this up?”

“I know you’re not,” Fortunato said. “I could tell if you were lying.”

She shook her head. “You take a lot of getting used to.”

“Some things are more important than social niceties.” The water boiled. Fortunato made two cups and took them to the couch.

“If they’re as big as you think they are,” Eileen said, “they’re bound to have aces working with them. Somebody who could set up blocks for them, blocks against other people with mental powers.”

“I guess.”

She drank a little of the coffee. “I met Balsam this afternoon. We all got together at the bookstore.”

“What’s he like?”

“Smooth. He looked like a banker or something. Three-piece suit, glasses. But tanned, like he plays a lot of tennis on weekends.”

“What did he say?”

“They finally mentioned the word ‘Mason.’ Like it was the last test, to see if it would freak me out. Then Balsam gave me a history lesson. How the Scottish and York Rite Masons were just offshoots of the Speculative Masons, and that they only went back to the eighteenth century.”

Fortunato nodded. "That's all true."

"Then he started talking about Solomon, and how the architect of his temple was actually a Egyptian. That Masonry started with Solomon, and all the other rites had lost the original meaning. But they say they've still got it. Just like you figured."

"I have to go with you tonight."

"There's no way you could get in. Not even if you disguised yourself. They'd know you."

"I could send my astral body. I could still see and hear everything."

"If somebody else came here in their astral body, could you see them?"

"Of course."

"Well? It's a hell of a chance to take, isn't it?"

"All right, okay."

"It has to be just me. There's no other way."

"Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless I went inside you," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"The power is in my sperm. If you were carrying—"

"Oh, come on," she said. "Of all the lame excuses to get somebody into bed..." She stared at him. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"You can't go in there alone. Not just because of the danger. Because you can't do enough by yourself. You can't read their minds. I can."

"Even if you're just—hitching a ride?"

Fortunato nodded.

"Oh God," she said. "This is—there's so many reasons not to—I'm having my period, for one thing."

"So much the better."

She grabbed her left wrist and held it close to her chest. "I told myself if I ever went to bed with a man again—and I said *if*—it would have to be romantic. Candlelight and flowers and everything. And look at me."

Fortunato knelt in front of her and gently moved her hands away. "Eileen," he said. "I love you."

"That's easy for you to say. I'm sure you mean it and everything, but I'm also sure you say it a lot of the time. There's only two men I've ever said it to in my life, and one of them was my father."

"I'm not talking about how you feel. I'm not talking about forever. I'm talking about me, right now. And I love you." He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom.

It was cold in there and her teeth started to chatter. Fortunato lit the gas heater and sat down next to her on the bed. She took his right hand in both of hers and held it to her mouth. He kissed her and she felt her respond, almost against her will. He took his clothes off and pulled the covers over the two of them and began to unbutton her blouse. Her breasts were large and soft, the nipples tightening under

his tongue as he kissed them.

“Wait,” she said. “I have to ... I have to go to the bathroom.”

When she came back she had taken the rest of her clothes off. She was holding a towel in front of her. “To save your sheets,” she said. There was a smear of blood on the inside of one thigh.

He took the towel away from her. “Don’t worry about the sheets.” She stood naked in front of him. She looked like she was afraid he would send her away. He put his head between her breasts and pulled her toward him.

She got under the covers again and kissed him and her tongue flickered into his mouth. He kissed her shoulders, her breasts, the underside of her chin. Then he rolled onto his hands and knees above her.

“No,” she whispered, “I’m not ready yet...”

He held his penis in one hand and moved the head of it against her labia, slowly, gently, feeling the brittle flesh turn warm and wet. She bit her lower lip, her eyes closed. Slowly he slipped inside her, the friction sending waves of pleasure up his spine.

He kissed her again. He could feel her lips moving against his, mouthing inaudible words. His hands moved up her sides, around her back. He remembered that he was used to making love for hours at a time and the thought amazed him. It was all too intense. He was full of heat and light; he couldn’t contain it all.

“Aren’t you supposed to say something?” Eileen whispered, breathing raggedly around the words. “Some kind of magic spell or something?”

Fortunato kissed her again, his lips tingling like they’d been asleep and were just now coming back to life. “I love you,” he said.

“Oh God,” she said, and started to cry. Tears rolled down into her hair and at the same time her hips moved faster against him. Their bodies were flushed and hot and sweat ran down Fortunato’s chest. Eileen stiffened and kicked. A second later Fortunato’s own brain went white and he fought off ten years of training and let it happen, let the power spurt out of him and into the woman and for an instant he was both of them at once, hermaphroditic and all-encompassing, and he felt himself expand to the ends of the universe in a giant nuclear blaze.

And then he was back in bed with Eileen, feeling her breasts rise and fall under him as she cried.



The only light came from the gas heater. He must have slept. The pillowcase felt like sandpaper against his cheek. It took all his strength to roll over onto his back.

Eileen was putting on her shoes. “It’s almost time,” she said.

“How do you feel?” he said.

“Unbelievable. Strong. Powerful.” She laughed. “I’ve never felt like this.”

He closed his eyes, slid into her mind. He could see himself lying on the bed, skeletal, his dark golden skin disappearing into the shadows, his forehead shrunken to where it blended smoothly in.

his hairless scalp.

---

“And you,” she said. He could feel her voice echoing in her chest. “Are you all right?”

He drifted back to his own body. “Weak,” he said. “But I’ll be okay.”

“Should I ... call somebody for you?”

He knew what she was offering, knew he should agree to it. Caroline, or one of the others, would be the fastest way to get his power back. But it would also weaken his bond to Eileen. “No,” he said.

She finished dressing and bent over to kiss him lingeringly. “Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t thank me.”

“I’d better go.” Her impatience, her strength and vitality were a physical force in the room. He was too distant from it to be jealous of her. Then she was gone, and he slept again.



He watched through Eileen’s eyes as she stood by the front door of the bookstore, waiting for Clark to close up. He could have moved all the way into her mind, but it would have used up what little strength he was slowly getting back. Besides, he was warm and comfortable where he was.

Until the hands grabbed him and shook him awake and he was looking into a pair of gold shielded eyes. “Get your clothes on,” a voice said. “You’re under arrest.”



They gave him a holding cell to himself. It had a gray tile floor and gray-painted cement walls. He squatted in the corner and shivered, too weak to stand. On the wall next to him somebody had scratched a stick figure with a giant dripping prick and balls.

For an hour he’d been unable to concentrate long enough to make contact with Eileen. He was sure Balsam’s Masons had killed her.

He shut his eyes. A cell door banged closed down the hall and brought him back. Concentration goddamn it, he thought.

He was in a long room with a high ceiling. Yellow light flickered off the distant walls from banks of candles. The floor was black-and-white-checkered tile. At the front of the room stood two Doric columns, one on either side, that didn’t quite reach the ceiling. They stood for Solomon’s temple; they were named Boaz and Joachim, the first two Masonic Words.

He didn’t want to take control of Eileen’s body, though he could if it came to that. From what he could tell she was all right. He could feel her excitement, but she wasn’t in pain or even especially afraid.

A man matching Eileen’s description of Balsam stood at the front of the room, on the dais reserved for the Worshipful Master of the Temple. Over his dark suit he wore a white Masonic apron with bright red trim. He wore a tabard like an oversized bib around his neck. It was white too, with a red looped cross in the center. An ankh.

“Who speaks for this woman?” Balsam asked.



---

sample content of Aces High (Wild Cards, Book 2)

- [download 365 Winter Warmer Slow Cooker Recipes: Simply Savory and Delicious 3-Ingredient Meals pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- **[download online Badiou and Philosophy \(Critical Connections\) here](#)**
- [The Monk \(Oxford World's Classics\) online](#)
- **[download online Tropical Birds of Southeast Asia](#)**
  
- <http://transtrade.cz/?ebooks/365-Winter-Warmer-Slow-Cooker-Recipes--Simply-Savory-and-Delicious-3-Ingredient-Meals.pdf>
- <http://bestarthritiscare.com/library/Winter-Warriors--Drenai--Book-8-.pdf>
- <http://transtrade.cz/?ebooks/The-Next-Queen-of-Heaven--A-Novel.pdf>
- <http://test.markblaustein.com/library/Technical-Communication--10th-Edition-.pdf>