

Colour of Guilt by Gisa Klönne

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Part 1

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return
thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed
be the name of the LORD.

Job 1:21

Wednesday, February 22

The air is cooler in the park and it's darker too. A comfortable, encompassing darkness that nearly blots out the silhouettes of the trees. He strides towards the church, rising before him, bathed in golden light. Is he really alone? Of course, at this hour. The ringing in his ears begins to recede, and he's breathing easier. No more music, no more boisterous crowds. The only sound is the soft scuffle of the soles of his shoes on the sidewalk. There's something surreal about the sound, almost as if it has nothing to do with his own footsteps. It was too much, he thinks. One too many. I shouldn't have drunk that last beer. I should have been thinking about tomorrow and the next day and my appointment calendar.

Drumbeats, muted and slow, drone through the air from the south side of the city heralding the end of the Carnival season. The hours after midnight, the time of reckoning, when crazed revelers again take to the streets, ripping straw effigies from the bar facades, accusing them of provoking all of the sins committed during the days of revelry. Then they are burned in a centuries-old ritual that he will never really understand. He finds it unjustifiable and barbaric. And still, he stops for a moment, listening to the drumming, almost imagining that he is hearing an echo of his own footsteps. An echo that is growing faster, louder. An echo that is coming closer, much too close.

And then the sudden pain, overwhelming, explosive, forcing him to his knees, robbing him of all physical strength. He falls, rolls, powerless to defend himself. His head slams against the pavement with bone-crushing force, thundering, pounding. He tries to cry out, tries to fight back, to no avail.

Breathe. He must continue breathing. He tries but the croaking sound coming from his own body is terrifying. His tongue is numb and tastes of blood. What has happened? Something... someone is here, bending over him... not a person, not a face. A shadow... and still, this paralyzing pain.

Please, I don't want to... He can't talk, can't move, needs all of his remaining strength just to gasp for air. Time passes... or is he frozen in time? How long has it been? Seconds? Minutes? He can't remember. He can still see the church, blurred but shining. He blinks as an image enters into his conscience... a play castle, with knights and a drawbridge, his most beloved toy as a young boy. There were castle walls and dungeons and towers almost like those he's lying under. The pain is ebbing now and the one who caused it is standing over him, a giant shadow. It raises something into the air, gleaming, pointed.

Please... he still can't move. Now he's seeing images of the house he grew up in, can taste the cocoa his mother served as he played knights with his friends. He can feel her soft and beautiful hand ruffling his hair.

He yearns to take her hand, wants only to immerse himself in her fragrance, to lose himself. But now the drums are beating again, reverberating in his breast, pounding ever louder. Darkness falls, heavy. This can't be true, he thinks. This can't be happening to me. But the pain holds fast, the drumming continues to throb and the shadow seems to be flying in front of the church, coming at him now at a blistering speed, and the pain explodes.

Dear God, he thinks. Mother. I want to live.

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The flashing blue light of a patrol car shimmers over the church. To the right, a spotlight illuminate the crime scene, aiding in the search for clues. The criminal forensic detectives move like ants behind the police barricade, as if silently obeying a nameless choreography, replayed in giant shadows on the church façade. Beyond the spotlights, the park is cloaked in darkness, protected from prying eyes on the street by a high stone Wall, a place of peace and beauty in the midst of the city. The perfect place for a murder.

"We've found a witness." Ralf Meuser, recently promoted to detective sergeant, hastens toward Manni.

"Where?" Manni looks up, scanning his surrounding.

"In the ambulance."

"Is he injured?"

"Nothing serious."

"Can he talk?"

"Sure, but..."

They wave their IDs at a medic. The witness, Erwin Bloch is a red-nosed retiree wearing a sailor's beret, and reeking of schnaps, an anchor painted onto his right cheek.

"I'm detective sergeant Korzilius." Manni stoops to look him in the eye. "So what did you see?"

Bloch stares at him blankly as if trying to make sense of the question.

"He appeared all of a sudden," Bloch babbles.

"Who?"

"The Knight."

"The Knight?"

"The one with the sword."

"A knight with a sword. Okay. What happened then?"

"I don't know," Bloch sighed. "I fell down. It was so dark. My leg hurts."

"Take down the details," says Manni, and hurries towards the church, ignoring his partner's protests.

"A Priest." Forensic detective Karin Munzinger stops Manni in his tracks, providing him with latex gloves and plastic covers for his shoes. He quickly slips into the protective gear, stretching the latex over gnarled knuckles. A sailor, a knight and now a priest. Perhaps this victim too was only wearing a Carnival costume. Manni follows the forensic expert to the side entrance of the church, watching as his own shadow springs from the sandstone façade. Saint Pantaleon is one of the many Roman Catholic cathedrals in Cologne and is surely a holy place for those who pay heed to such things. Sacred icons perhaps, or rare treasures, or even mortal remains encased in golden sarcophagi. Manni glances up at the towers. A few years ago a woman had been raped so brutally that she

almost died of her injuries. It happened in the park right across from the church. The rapist was never brought to justice.

Shadow fighting - Kata. And suddenly his mind is flooded with images of this Karate form, in which one fights against an unseen opponent. Unless some kind of miracle transpires, Manni will be missing his training sessions for the foreseeable future. He ducks under the plastic police barrier and tries to concentrate on the crime scene that lies before him. Another spotlight has been brought in, highlighting the victim's body. He's clothed in a black Soutane, typical of Catholic priests and is lying on the sidewalk directly in front of the side entrance to the church. He's about 50 years old with grey hair. Well-groomed. His eyes are wide-open, staring at the sky, his arms stretched as if administering last rights, or perhaps even seeking to embrace the person who dispatched him to the great beyond.

Manni squats down to get a better look. The victim has lost blood. Lots of it. His Soutane is soaking in it and a thick pool stains the sidewalk. Most of it appears to emanate from a chest wound. No sign of a murder weapon.

"Shit," says Manni. Whoever committed this crime also left a message on the steps of the church, red and glistening. Manni bends lower, taking a whiff of the letters. It's some kind of paint, not blood. But that doesn't make it any better.

"Mur-de-rer," reads Karin Munzinger, sounding out the single word written on the steps. "But that can't... you don't really think that applies to the victim?"

Manni shrugs his shoulders as he stands up. "At any rate it doesn't seem to be a coincidence."

"Maybe it's a psychopath with a vendetta against the Catholic Church." Ralph Meuser stands next to Manni now, the harsh light making him look even paler and thinner than usual.

"Take it easy, Ralf. We don't even know if our candidate is really a priest."

Meuser bends down and feels the fabric of the victim's clothing. "The soutane doesn't seem like a Carnival costume. His biretta looks like the real thing too."

"His what?"

"His cap." Meuser points toward a black clump of material at the other edge of the steps. It reminds Manni of the tea cozies his grandmother used.

"Anybody can buy clothes."

"As far as I know, Priests must show their credentials to obtain the real thing."

Credentials. A good idea. Manni carefully searches the victim's pockets. Some bills, small change, a rosary and keys. No identification. That would be too much to ask. He takes the key and tries it in the door of the side portal. It doesn't fit. Of course. The lights and shadows in the park make a dramatic display as an ambulance turns onto the street, rotating blue lights adding to the light show.

Like an apparition, Ekaterina Petrova emerges from those lights. She appears smaller than usual, probably because she's not wearing her usual high heels. Her silver eye shadowing glistens like ice, her coal black eyes scanning the crime scene, slowly fixating on the corpse, a simple nod of the head acknowledging those still living. The ambulance had reached the street, it's siren starting to wail.

"Ralf, you know where they're headed, right?" asked Manni. Meuser replies with a nod. "Did you get a better description of the knight?"

"Bloch just said he was gray...like a shadow."

He's an amateur, thought Manni, and wishes for a second that Judith Krieger were here. At least she could perform a decent interrogation. But Judith is officially "out of order," recovering both physically and psychologically after her recent brush with death. And she'd ruffled a lot of feathers within the police department as well.

"The witness is under shock. His leg is broken. We have his identification..." Meuser blathers on, as if seeking to burnish his reputation.

Petrova crosses herself and kneels next to the victim, her hands gliding almost lovingly over his body.

After some moments she voices her initial finding. "He was stabbed," she says. "With great force and a very long blade."

"The murder weapon is a sword," answers Meuser, almost enthusiastically. "Then the witness is correct, the prime suspect is a knight..."

"How long has he been dead?" asks Manni, knowing that this oft-repeated question can almost never be answered in a

precise enough way to be helpful. Still, miracles do occur every now and then, even though you can't rely on them.

"About four hours," replies Petrova, peering at a thermometer.

"The hour of revenge," whispers Meuser.

"What?"

"Midnight. As Ash Wednesday begins. When the effigies are burned to absolve us of our sins."

"But this one wasn't burned," replies Manni. His thoughts turn for a second to Sonja, out and about in the city, dressed in her vibrant blue-green and very sheer mermaid costume, surely having the time of her life, flirting shamelessly with all of the men out looking for some quick pleasure.

"No, he wasn't burned but he was murdered at exactly the last moment of Carnival. Look how he's been positioned. Like Jesus on the cross..."

Petrova lifts the head, observing a wound at the back of the skull.

"He was beaten," offers Manni.

"Might have happened when he fell to the sidewalk. It's fresh at any rate," The Russian-born coroner softly lies the head back down on the pavement and begins to scrutinize the victim's hands and arms. "It doesn't look like he sustained any injuries trying to defend himself. From what I can see here at least."

"The murderer acted quickly." Manni tries to re-create the crime. "He surprised his victim, rammed a sword or knife into his chest..."

"The victim was lying on his back when he was stabbed," interrupted Petrova. "The way the blood has flowed out, I'm positive of that."

"So he fell and was knocked out."

The coroner moves the victim's head back and forth. "Not necessarily."

"He must have been unconscious. Self-defense is a reflex. Even a Priest won't just lie there and allow himself to be killed."

"His eyes were open," replies Meuser. "As if he was looking his murderer in the eye."

"Then why didn't he defend himself?"

"Maybe he was in shock. Maybe he knew the killer."

Murderer. Manni stares at the message painted on the church steps. This means trouble, he thinks. Pressure. Hysteria. Complications, especially if the victim turns out to be an actual Catholic Priest. He checks his watch. Almost 5AM and still no sign of daylight. Something is stirring just outside the police cordon, and someone calls out. Manni turns and needs a moment to register what his eyes are seeing. No, it is no optical illusion. It is a procession of Nuns, dressed in black habits with white headdress. They come to a standstill and observe the crime scene, silently and dignified as if coming to offer comfort.