

## Hellblazer

John Constantine's teeth chattered, loud enough to catch the attention of the man standing next to him.

"If you're feeling cold you can always wait in the car," the Brigadier said.

"Don't worry squire," Constantine replied, taking a final drag on his Silk Cut before flicking it away, "it's going to get hotter very soon."

They stood in a car park, John Constantine wearing his tan trench coat, buttoned against the chill. His blonde hair was unkempt. In contrast the other man appeared the very model of respectability. The Brigadier, who had made a point of not giving his name, stood resplendent in his green uniform, all regimental insignia removed save for the red beret identifying him an officer of the Corps of Royal Military Police. Constantine wondered why he had left it on if he was so insistent on secrecy, he thought it defeated the point. He turned and looked at the scene before him, preparing himself for the show he must put on.

Two soldiers, in black combat gear, busied about the car park. In the middle of the tarmac was a white van. The two soldiers, automatic weapons slung across their backs, poured salt from large bags onto the ground, creating a circle almost 30 feet in diameter around the van. Several unmarked cars waited at the edge of the car park, trapping the van in their headlights.

"So remind me, why did you insist on doing it here?" Constantine asked. "I mean, this place looks like a dogging hotspot." The Brigadier peered at the magician from the corner of his eye.

"This kind of operation cannot be sanctioned on military property, Mister Constantine. There are too many legal ramifications;" he paused, disgusted by his paltry explanation; "our usual contact gave you a very high recommendation, I do hope you live up to it." Constantine only half heard the officer, his voice faded from hearing, replaced by a song; a low ululating at the very bottom of his perception that no-one else seemed to notice.

Just then the van started rocking on its suspension, impacts from something within knocking it from side to side. The salt-pouring soldiers paused and gave hesitant stares before continuing.

This was not Constantine's idea of meaningful work, not what he regarded as a proper use of his talents. But they were paying him good money; fantastic money considering

the effort required; but jobs like this always made him feel cheap. However it had helped his ego that the British Army had swallowed its pride and sought him out. Two weeks ago a Lieutenant with the Royal Engineers serving in Helmland Province in Northern Afghanistan suffered an apparent nervous breakdown. It was so complete that the decision was made to discharge the Lieutenant and send him back to England. Upon touching down in the UK he was rushed to a private mental hospital for a full psychological examination. There were some who believed the poor soldier was faking. However, it was clear after only a few hours that this was not only a genuine psychotic episode, but something much more serious.

There was a loud bang in the silence, all eyes snapped to the van as it rocked on its wheels. Constantine took a step forward, crossed the powder white line, and approached it. Another crash rang out as the van shuddered against a heavy impact, hard enough to buckle the side. John Constantine felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“Come on, lets have a look at you,” he said under his breath. He peered into the dark windows, cupping his hands to the glass, trying to block out the headlights.

Something snarled and ran face first at the doors, striking with such ferocity that they buckled, causing Constantine to jump back. He stared at the occupant, a shaven-headed squaddie barking and scrabbling at the window like a rabid dog. His eyes, wild and full of hate, glowed red like flame. His skin was pale, glistening with sweat that gently steamed as it started to evaporate. Blood gushed from the soldiers’ mouth, staining his teeth and chest. For a moment the two locked eyes, sizing each other up, then the soldier started thrashing and hurling himself against the walls of the van once more.

John Constantine smiled. A Djinn. Here in cold, wet, autumnal England. Such a thing was a rarity to say the least. The poor soldier had somehow managed to find himself possessed by a Djinn, a considerably angry one at that. Now, two weeks down the line, the top brass at the MoD had finally decided to take the matter seriously.

The Brigadier joined Constantine and stared at the demented soldier, who’s raving face once again appeared, feral, at the window. As he growled droplets of blood and saliva spattered the glass.

“What’s he done to himself? That’s a fresh wound.”

“I ain’t a doctor,” Constantine replied, “but it looks like he’s bitten off his own tongue.”

“Poor bugger,” the Brigadier said. “Still, he’s lucky he’s not American.”

“Why? Apart from the obvious, I mean.”

“This happened to a few US Marines in Baghdad just after the invasion. How they deal with it is to turn them over to the CIA who shoot them in the head to get the bloody things out. I like to think we owe our boys better than that.”

Constantine shrugged. If the British Army took its cue from the Americans then he would not have a job tonight. He placed a hand on the van, the metal was warm to the touch.

“We need to get started.”

The Brigadier turned and barked at his men, bidding them to hurry up. As he did, Constantine could not help looking into the windows. It was singing again; the Djinn inside the meat; a hateful song full of frustration and anger. The poor bastard it was wearing would have been deafened from the instant it had entered him. The soldiers completed the circle. They dumped the empty bags on the ground and took up a defensive posture close to the Brigadier. Constantine looked at the circle, giving an exaggerated nod of approval.

“Well done lads,” he said flatly. “This magic circle was designed by John Dee in the 1500s to contain the demon Choronzon. But you don’t want to be standing inside when this bastard kicks off.” For a moment the two soldiers just stood there, silent in non-comprehension, then they looked down and realised they were standing just over the salt line. They took a step back.

“Well done boys,” Constantine said. He turned to the Brigadier. “So you just want me to pull the thing out of him, yeah? Put it in a different bottle?”

“Yes,” the Brigadier replied. “If that’s not too difficult.”

“Then give me the bag and leave the circle.” The Brigadier stared for a moment, and then shrugged the bergen from his shoulder and offered it.

“Last word,” intoned the Brigadier, not letting go as the magician took it. “Don’t cock this up.”

Constantine stared at him, then pulled the bergen out of his grasp. The Brigadier strode off, leaving the magician all alone, locked in a salt cage with the screaming Djinn.

Constantine put the bag on the floor and removed two items; a glass bottle with a stopper tied to the neck, and a plastic thermos.

He carefully put the bottle on the ground for the moment and unscrewed the lid from the thermos. Inside, warm as body temperature, was a thick dark liquid that looked black in the semi-circle of headlights. Constantine looked up to the van and saw the ghastly face of the soldier staring at him from the other side of the glass. It gaped open the soldier’s mouth in a mocking, tongueless sneer.

“Smell that mate?”

The soldier's face pressed up against the glass as it tried to get out. Wisps of steam emanated from its skin, filling the cramped space with a thin layer of mist. Constantine tipped the flask, allowing some of it to pour on the ground at his feet. The liquid was red, blood red, blood from dead Afghans, probably Taliban tribesman. John Constantine did not know where the Brigadier had got it, just that it was necessary for his performance.

"You know, to bind a Djinn you have to know its name," he said to the Brigadier and his men. "But I don't. And I can't ask the poor Lieutenant here if he knows," he gestured to the face that started again to thrash and flail. It howled from its borrowed throat. "But I once got shown this trick by a Guru from Delhi," he quickly splashed the window several times with the blood, emptying the flask and staining the glass. "Course, he lived in Brixton. Owned a small takeaway just down from the Academy. Did really nice naan bread as I remember." As he spoke he could feel the excitement creep into him, the buzz, the anticipation, the rush of what he was about to do. He closed his eyes and stretched back his head, clicking the vertebrae in his neck.

"Save the theatre for your usual council-estate clientele!" the Brigadier called from his side of the salt, eyes darting nervously to the van. His apprehension pleased Constantine.

"Djinns hate humans," he continued. "They view us as inferior, pests to be kicked or exploited." The thing roared in the van, roared and shook, punishing the doors that now strained against the lock. It wanted out. "But this one went and got itself stuck inside a man, and now it's lost, halfway round the bloody world. I'd say it's afraid." Constantine picked up the bottle and dipped its rim into the blood puddle at his feet. "Pissed off doesn't even come into it." He turned and held out the bottle to the soldier, showing the blood that now ringed the rim like a red halo. The screaming intensified.

"I'm hoping I can draw it out, shine a light in the darkness for it to follow," he said. The van was almost full of steam, condensation misting the windows. The broken face erupted from the steam and impacted hard on the glass, shattering it into a spider web. The Brigadier reached for his sidearm, reassured by its touch.

"Come on," Constantine called as he removed a cigarette and lighter from his coat pocket, squatting down on his haunches six feet from the doors. He put the cigarette between his lips and lit it with his free hand. He took a few puffs, then a deep drag, savouring the cool blue smoke. The screaming reached an ear-splitting pitch, so loud that the Brigadier and his men covered their ears, and then everything went dark. A night black curtain descended as the headlights encircling them faded to nothing.

“Stop digging your heels in!” Constantine shouted, though the Djinn ignored him and banged against the door, hard enough to pop one of the hinges, and then again and again, a murderous tattoo. “You have to leave him now! Playtime’s over!”

Another hinge broke under the impacts.

“Get in the bottle!” Constantine took the freshly lit cigarette and touched the burning end to the bottle’s rim, extinguishing it in the blood with a sharp hiss. A blinding flash within the van and a painfully loud scream. The doors burst open, a flood of steam billowed out like a waterfall. Constantine flew backward, kicked by an invisible boot, and landed on the tarmac almost across the salt boundary.

And then, just as abruptly, everything was quiet.

The silence lasted no longer than the pause between two heartbeats, but to the Brigadier it seemed unending. Then the lights came back on, lifting the veil of darkness. The shroud of mist diffused. The soldier, full of destructive rage this past fortnight, was now still, silent as he lay on the cold ground where he had burst from the doors. The Brigadier saw the magician lying ten feet away, clutching his hands to his stomach. At first he too was quiet, but he issued a low groan and rolled over onto his back. The Brigadier ran across the line towards him, his men following.

“Constantine! Constantine, are you alright?” the Brigadier dropped to his knees beside him. The magician coughed and opened his eyes. “Well? Did you get it out of him?”

“Told you, didn’t I? Piece of piss.” He held up the bottle, stopper now firmly in place. It was full of cloudy smoke, swirling inside the glass prison like a hurricane seen from space. Constantine took a deep breath and tried to stand.

The Brigadier helped him. “Do you need a medic?”

“Nah, I’m fine, I just need to get me breath back,” he replied, wiping his eyes with his free hand. “I make it seem easy, but something like that takes quite a bit of effort.” He turned and looked at the van. One soldier was checking the squaddie’s pulse, the other training his weapon on the prone figure. Constantine smiled.

“He should be fine now. But I’d get him to a doctor if I were you. He’ll come round soon, and I’ll expect he’ll want to know where his tongue’s gone.” The Brigadier turned and barked fresh orders. They hauled the body back into the van. One got in with him, while the second closed the doors as best he could. He then ran to the front and got in, starting the engine, letting it idle as the ring of cars behind them coughed into life. The Brigadier turned and looked at Constantine.

“Thank you for your assistance this evening, John,” he said formally, “but I must remind you that you are still bound by the Official Secrets Act.”

“I know, I know,” Constantine replied dismissively, “I was never here, you were never here. None of this ever happened. That about right?”

“Spot on.” The Brigadier reached into one of his many pockets and took out a small brown envelope.

“As agreed, for your trouble.” Constantine accepted it, stuffing it straight inside his coat. “Aren’t you going to count it?”

Constantine picked up the bergen and handed it back to the Brigadier. “Nah, mate. I trust you. I don’t need to be a mind reader to know that after what you’ve just seen you wouldn’t rip me off.”

The Brigadier smiled. “True. And we might have call for you in the future. This kind of situation is becoming more common.” Constantine smiled ironically and was about to respond, but the Brigadier kept on speaking. “Which is why I’m going to have to ask for that.” He pointed to the bottle.

“I don’t think so,” Constantine replied, his grip tightening on it.

“I insist. You’ve been well paid. There is a distinct possibility of repeat work. Don’t spoil it by being a little shit.” He put his hand on the handgun in the holster at his waist.

Constantine sighed and held it out, the Brigadier took it and smiled. “That’s very sensible of you,” he said, letting go of his weapon. He turned and started to walk towards the van. Constantine called after him.

“I wouldn’t open that if I were you! Will you be able to bring it to heel?”

The Brigadier ignored him. He climbed into the van’s passenger side, slamming the door on Constantine’s protests. The van gunned its engine and drove off, breaking the salt circle with its heavy tires. It rumbled out of the car park and into the night, followed by the convoy of unmarked cars. The magician scowled after them as they drove away, their red taillights pinpricks in the darkness. Constantine closed his eyes.

“A Djinn,” he said through gritted teeth, “is smokeless fire you prick!” He doubled over, clutching both hands to his chest and let out a cry. Sweat prickled his skin, and in his eyes a small orange spark started to glow and the hate-filled chorus rang out in his mind.

“I knew they’d do that,” he said, stumbling to his knees. “Never trust a man in uniform...” He reached into his coat pocket, retrieving his packet of Silk Cut. With hands trembling he opened it, spilling the contents, then plucked one from the tarmac. The song reverberated inside his skull, threatening to burst his eardrums and push out his eyes.

“Change the record mate,” said he, putting the cigarette to his lips, “it’s getting old.” He pictured the singer inside him, trying to burn his soul, and then exhaled. All the rage and hate and panic breathed out of him, and the cigarette ignited on its own. No smoke came from the glowing cherry, just the faintest hint of the Djinn. John Constantine, his eyes no longer glowing, got to his unsteady feet, and held out the cigarette as it burned. “No,” he said to it, his voice firm, “I can’t let you go. You’re too bloody dangerous.” The cigarette flared angrily, combusting half its length in a vicious tirade.

“You wouldn’t have liked it with them,” he said, gesturing after the Brigadier, “they’d have made you their pet. It’s better this way, this is a nasty old world, you’re better off out of it.”

The cigarette flared again, the song becoming a dirge, pitiful, pleading.

“You’ve got nothing I want mate, nothing at all.”

The cigarette sputtered, burnt now almost to the butt, a final desperate offer. The magician chuckled.

“I don’t think so. My name’s John Constantine. I’m the one who steps from the shadows, all trench coat and arrogance. I’ll drive your demons away, kick ‘em in the bollocks and spit on them when they’re down, leaving only a nod and a wink and a wisecrack. I walk my path alone... because, let’s be honest, who’d be crazy enough to walk it with me?” And before the fire could touch his fingers he dropped the butt to the tarmac and brought his shoe down upon it, extinguishing the smokeless flame forever.

“See you around.”