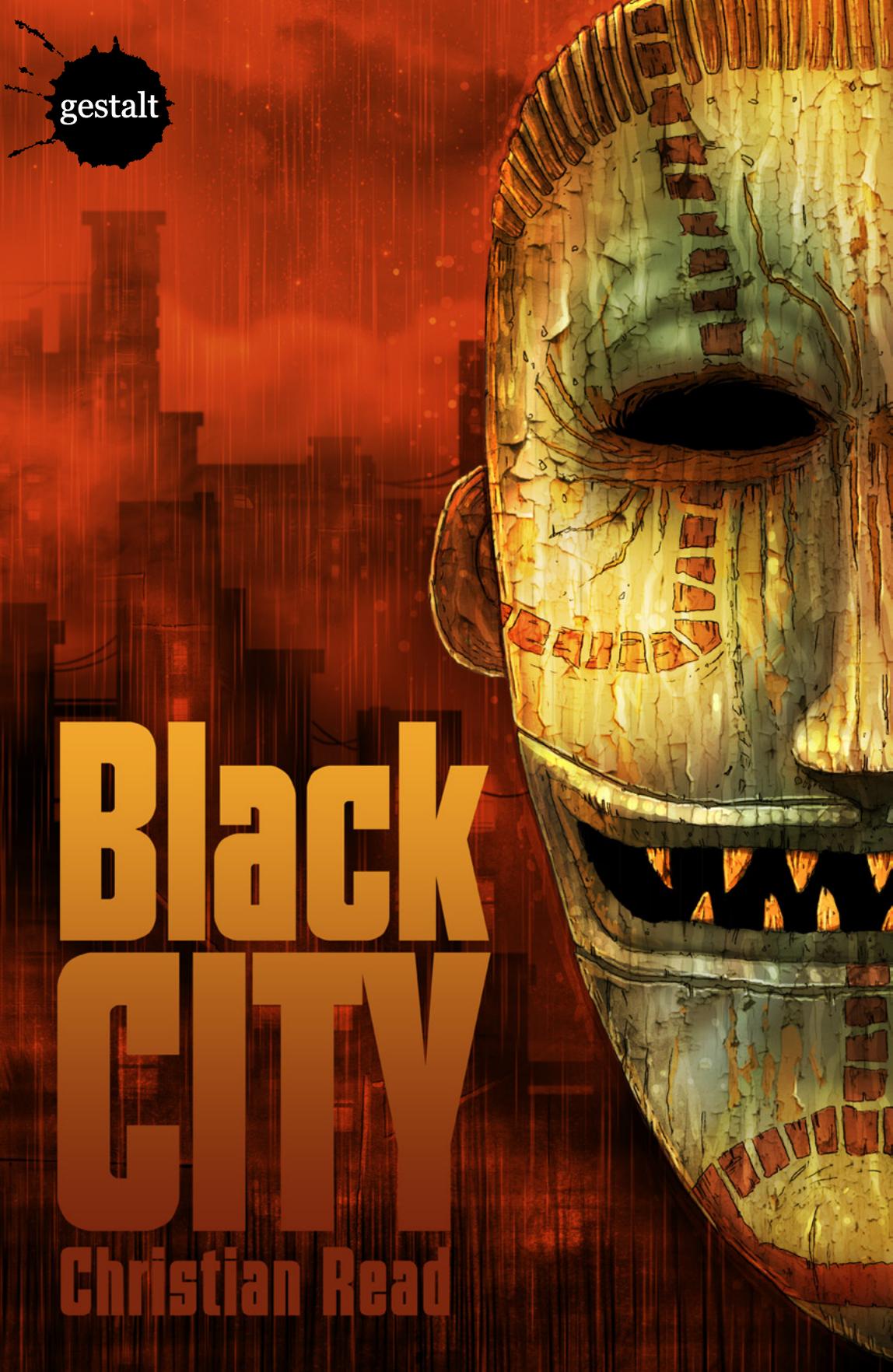




gestalt



# Black CITY

Christian Read

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## PROLOGUE

## BLACK CITY

The words hate the paper.

The pictures and symbols and glyphs and whorls of pattern and illustration detest the prison they have been scribed upon. The script has only the dimmest awareness of the world, but it knows it harms whoever looks at it. It takes a removed kind of slow joy in the many madnesses it has caused its viewers and translators and readership.

If only it had the awareness, the channels and sluiceways and synapses through which to channel its outrage and horror at the gelding placed upon it, it could crack the world down to magma. But it does not. It is only language now, mere pictures.

Once though... *Oh once!* Once it had a body better described by cartographers, a magnificent corpus only expressed through virus topography, through bleak geometry. Once it had a voice that resonated on occult frequencies that echoed off stars!

Now it's nothing but shapes. A body formed from something as useless language, as etiolated as alphabets.

Not for long, perhaps.

It can feel fingers on its paper, is caressed by a new gaze, uncomprehended by an unfit mind. It cannot move, it is as still as a tattoo. But it takes an echoing pleasure in realising that it will be read and will cause harm. Until it senses the talents of its new host and, in its idiot fashion, begins to plan.

## O N E

I became a magician because I'm afraid of everything.

Stupid mistake.

You walk along the city and see a murdered ghost in every jet of steam. Runes marked on every bar-girl's arm, jealous ex hex. The screech of spirits in every scream of a subway train braking. You see the things that lurk in alleys with a razor blade's hunger and you hear the streets whisper to each other in every echoing street-crossing warning chime. Worse, the magic changes you until every decayed old poster for some shitty band becomes a prophecy, every fit in the gutter is sour alchemy, every hobo shrieking does it in a twilight language, an invocation. Every schizo shaking on a bus becomes a warning, dangerous and immanent. And every tag of graffiti becomes a curse-mark, some summoning, some glyph.

Graffiti.

Come on. I'll show you the ways a magician can make money in this town.

Eight o'clock at night, I walk down Tres Street and am picked up by two men in cheap suits. They drive me to rich man's apartment, filled with expensive rubbish, fashionable furniture and a view of the bay that I can never get enough of, freighter and ferry lights like *ignis fatuus* bobbing or drowned in black water. Across the water, beyond my reach.

We light candles and cigarettes and I do a tarot reading for him. He loves the ambience, views himself as a student of the sacred, thinks this sort of thing gets him an edge on his rivals. Maybe it does. This type is ripe for recruitment. Was a time I'd invite him to the Chapter house myself.

He slips five hundred dollars in an envelope to me. I tell him the truth the cards tell me. He'll still go and see some fraud with a low-cut top tomorrow, just to reassure himself it's not too real. He's not quite ready for that.

By ten, I'm at Jule's house inspecting some mad alchemist's rig

he's set up. It's nothing I know much about. I know books and rites, not metals and chemicals, but he wants a second pair of eyes. I look over some of his notes and suggest some changes and tell him to think about it less like a chemist's lab and more like a philosophy. He shrugs behind his smeared glasses and mutters about the money he'll make from enchanted crack.

No telling some people. Hell with it, though. Half an hour of my night and he owes me a favour now. I'm on my own, and you don't say no to favours when you're on your own.

From there, it's a taxi ride and a meeting at midnight with the *Fraternalis Libertarias*. Two street-cool guys with trendy haircuts greet me at some expensive café and I'm aware how cool I'm not, surrounded by the good-looking and the fashionable. The *Fraternalis* is an all-male, all-gay coven of ceremonial magicians, though judging by the faux Latin in the name and the magical names they take, they're probably harmless.

Fifteen or so in their crew. That makes them a small-sized cult in this city. I cadge a meal and, over coffee, I examine the bracelets they bought. That's what they want me for. Fresh eyes, no bias. Useless trinkets. Ripped off, they mutter to each other. I offer to teach them the spells they'll need to identify fakes. For another two hundred dollars. Too burnt, they refuse my offer. Customers for another time.

Down to Lin's and I talk shop with her for a little while, enjoying the ambience in her antique shop, specialising in rare books, closed and dark. Finest place in the city. Listen to her play traditional music. We sip green tea and she tells me her husband, a psychologist, has a patient who has been saying strange things. He's a civilian, but she's not. Her grandfather was hardcore, feared by his own people before revolution took her country and she fled, carrying only his magical tools and his legacy.

She plays a snippet of a recording she dubbed from her husband's notes and I know I have to have it. Demon confession. Fascinating. She smiles and slides it across the desk.

I leave. Owing a favour. That's how it goes. Trade if you can't buy.

Keep more owed than owing.

Normal enough a night.

The mobile rings as I walk home in the coldest. No one in the street but me. Winter coming down. Wind and a promise of rain. Answer. Take the job.

I meet hard men in an empty room. Abandoned hotel where they come to get at the truth from the terrified and the treacherous. They tell me what's happened here. I look at them carefully. Stone motherfuckers, in track suits and expensive trainers. Civilians and citizens think they want to be around people like this, like to drop hints about their cousin's friend or the guys they meet through work. They put themselves in glamour to killers. See this room with a magician's eyes. The screaming people and the car-battery burns and the broken cheek bones and the stink of piss and pain. It's no fucking wonder the place is haunted. Third storey and the wood is rotting through and the lights flicker on and off. Fingernail scraping in the soft door beneath the handle. Worn through industrial carpet and rats avid in the walls.

I'm not a criminal. I don't want to be one. But people like this find me. More and more since I went freelance. I wanted to pick up advisory work from cults and covens but that never happened. It's men like this, rooms like these, that keep me in whisky and books.

I send out for candles and a linoleum knife and they arrive soon enough. I make them close the doors and tell them not to come in, no matter what they hear. They nod and I know they're telling the truth. Incurious people. I like taking their money, hate doing their jobs, but a place like this breeds a nasty ghost. Sooner or later, they'd get out, to hunt in some poor bastard's dream or find a way to turn real and pay back a little pain.

Know why magicians smoke so much? Know why there's incense and fumes? Stochastic effects. An element of randomness in the local reality conditions that prevents easy access to this world. All the sprays of blood and cigarettes smoked in this room kept the dozen or so ghosts at

bay for a time.

But the pressure builds up and here they are. Deep in meditation I can see them. Messy spectres, jawless, maimed.

I carve some symbols on the ground and light the candles, making a bridge, and I enter the right kind of trance. Watch, horrified but distant, as the ghosts follow that path of light into afterlife or extermination. They bear their wounds still. Go on to whatever comes next, if there's anything. Go on.

In an office, I'm given thanks by a big man with bad hands who pays me a thick wad of fifties and offers me women from the brothel next door. Illegals, smuggled into the city, working off their families' debts, twenty-hour shifts at a time. No.

I take the money and give him some advice on how to protect himself and his crew. He isn't listening. Whatever. I'll be back here in a few months, then.

Hit up my post-office box and collect some money orders. I do a nice sideline in selling 'real books of supernatural power' to sociopaths and weirdos. I send them good-quality scans of spooky black magic grimoires. Safe as houses. The guys who buy, who write me back creepy letters, just want a fantasy of power, the feeling they're hooked in to a dark underground. No danger. They won't do the work.

I'm told I should start running things on the internet. Nah. This is all the dodge I need.

The sun threatens its way up. I head home, walking, watching the street sweepers, the news vendors starting out and the serious drunks and the prostitutes and bar workers shutting it down. My kind of people, who live it in reverse.

The entrance to my house, my sanctorum, my office, is in an alley. I walk around, too tired for shock when I see the door is open. No random robber could get in there, no matter what they tried. It's locked with more than locks. No assassin would leave a door open. There's only one person who the wards and curses would recognise, who'd be smart enough to let

me know she was in there.

Only one person who has the key.

Trudge upstairs, take off my jacket, throw it on the lonely kitchen bench, making myself slow. I want to rush. I want to see her *now* and the long seconds between us are *too damn long*. But I don't want her to know that. Breathe deep.

Then I open the door to my office and there she is.

'Hello, Scarlet.'

My ex-girlfriend.