



the Nomo Killings

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by T.R. Maxus

“The ouroboros must crave pain most of all.
Why else would it continue to devour itself?” ~ *Anonymous*

The Professor

Not exactly Buckingham Palace, Detective Holmes thought as he drove up the long, crescent-shaped, gravel driveway. The old house on the hill, which according to Google Earth was the only building in a three-mile radius, had a certain rustic, European charm. Holmes had never visited any of the Nordic countries, but he imagined this is what a middle-class family might have built in the Norwegian countryside a hundred years ago. A single, narrow, rectangular box covered front to back in long vertical planks of dark, weathered timber. Two small four-paneled square windows and a wide front door were all that adorned the strange building's façade. The towering and formidable wall of old Dawn Redwoods in the back made the place look like a backwoods dollhouse from a Tim Burton film.

As Holmes rounded the last curve, he saw that the high, gabled roof ran the length of the house, which he estimated to be around 25 yards. If it weren't for the quaint picket fence enclosing the sizeable yard, the dilapidated swing set, and the six pentagonal windows jutting out of the long roof, he would've guessed the structure was a barn. Not exactly the type of dwelling he'd expected would house a psychology professor from Oxford.

The tires of the unmarked Dodge Charger slowed to a halt with the same crunching sound that echoed inside a person's head when chewing cereal. Holmes grinned at the thought, then frowned when he realized he'd forgotten to eat breakfast this morning. His stomach groaned, as if to protest and scorn his absentmindedness. Perhaps the professor would offer him tea and crumpets; whatever the hell a crumpet was. He chuckled as he pulled the thin file that Officer Mazzini had handed him two hours ago. It had been a strange encounter, partly because neither Holmes nor any of the other detectives had requested information on Professor Leto. But also because Mazzini's normally stolid composure had been replaced by an unsettling and bossy urgency. The lanky nerd had appeared suddenly and urged him to meet with the professor to discuss the Nomo Killer.

“I’m not working the Nomo case,” Holmes had said, trying to return the file Mazzini had practically shoved into his hands.

“No one here is,” Mazzini said in a hushed, urgent whisper. “But we should be. One of the murders occurred in our jurisdiction! Old Jed Guinness. He’d been accused of kidnapping and child molestation, but the DA dropped it for lack of evidence. Remember that gory mess? Nomo left his signature clear as a bell on that one. The case is still unsolved. But we can change that. You can change that. And this person here,” he said, tapping the folder, “can offer some valuable insight. This professor has been studying Nomo: his victims, tactics, the dearth of forensic evidence, and so on. The FBI hasn’t done shit – and you know perfectly well why they won’t. Someone else needs to step in now. The visiting academic can help.”

“Help what, Vickie?” Holmes asked with a mischievous grin.

“Don’t call me Vickie, you pretentious prick,” Mazzini growled.

The seriousness of the normally emotionless officer surprised Holmes. At that moment, the skinny punk resembled a twenty-something mad scientist: unkempt, wild black curls, big, intense green eyes, thin stretched lips revealing straight pearly whites, and uncharacteristically direct eye contact.

“My name is Victor,” Mazzini said, his voice firm and measured. “If that’s too many syllables for your dull wit, then Vic or Officer Mazzini will do.”

“Okay, okay,” Holmes said in mock surrender. “Take it easy there, Pocket Protector.”

Mazzini shook his head. “It’s tragic what steroids and barbells will do to you poor, vapid gym junkies. Shrinks the head you think with and the one on your shoulders.”

Holmes’ face went red and his muscles tensed.

“Whoops,” Mazzini said, trying to look serious. “Too close to home?”

“You watch yourself, Toothpick. In a hundred years technobrain like you may very well inherit the earth. But for now, evolution still favors the big, strong guy with the large gun and a short temper.”

“You don’t mind if I wait till after lunch to quiver in fear, do you?”

Holmes glared as images of a beaten and bloody officer penetrated his thoughts.

After a moment, Mazzini held up his hands in surrender, took a deep breath and pointed at the folder. “Look, the ball is already rolling on this. At first the professor was reluctant to meet with you. That was until I explained your *interest* in Nomo’s choice of victims.”

“What do you mean...*interest*?” Holmes replied suspiciously.

Mazzini shrugged. “I’m familiar with your unorthodox and not-entirely-sanctioned sideline investigations into some of the seedy, reprehensible perps in Pennsylvania who have never been successfully convicted. I assembled the research on most of them, remember? Not exactly bedtime reading material. I know you’ve been digging, Holmes.”

“That’s my job, Mazzini,” Holmes shot back defensively. “To investigate.”

“Yes, Holmes. When you’re *instructed* to do so. But we both know those files I researched for you have only gotten thicker, while your pursuit of the aforementioned wicked ones seems to be strangely stalled. Why is that, I wonder?”

“A man is innocent until prov—”

“Yes, I know!” Mazzini interjected. “I understand how the legal system works. Or *doesn't* sometimes. My point is, you have the files and the experience with these types of people and the professor has researched the Nomo Killer. If you don't tap into that resource, someone else is bound to. And little Hayden Holmes will be left standing on the sidelines. Again.”

Holmes ignored the jibe. Maybe there was something here worth considering, he thought. If this professor was hot on Nomo's trail, perhaps there was a chance he could be the one to catch the elusive killer.

“Look,” Mazzini said, glancing around cautiously, “the address is on a sticky note in the file. It's a house about 40 minutes outside of town. Our venerable academic leaves town tomorrow, so I suggest you get moving.” Before Holmes could protest, Mazzini took a step closer and quietly added, “No one has made any progress on the Nomo case. And no one will without real research and analysis. We both know the FBI won't allocate the resources. Why? Because secretly, they like Nomo. They just have to maintain the *appearance* of an investigation. That's all. Let the psycho keep cleaning up the garbage. Who cares, right?”

Seeing Holmes' skeptical expression, Mazzini continued, “Don't believe me? I have it from a reliable internal source that on July 1 the FBI is going to assign a single liaison to work the case with the multitude of authorities in the jurisdictions where the murders took place. Do you understand? In less than two weeks the FBI is going to effectively walk away from the Nomo investigation and leave it to dozens of understaffed, under-experienced, Buford T. Justices. I'm telling you Holmes, this is an opportunity you can't afford to pass up. Especially given your shitty arrest record of late.”

“Fuck you, Mazzini!” Holmes growled.

Instead of flinching or taking a step back, Officer Mazzini just cocked his head and stared at the detective like a psychologist studying a patient. For reasons Holmes couldn't quite explain, ole Vickie's expression made him uneasy. His anger and indignation quickly faded, replaced by confusion and agitation. Tiny alarm bells were going off in the back of his mind, though he didn't know why.

“Deep inside, in the dark places you don't talk about, I think you really want to be the hero, Holmes,” Mazzini said, locking eyes with the detective. “You've clearly got something to prove. Detective Hayden Holmes: the protector of both the good and the wicked. Ah, the glory of it! I'm sure even the idea of trumping the FBI will give you a hard-on...once you take five seconds to actually think about it.” Shaking his head, Mazzini put his hands in the air, frowned resignedly and declared, “You know what? If this is over your head, I'll just give the file to Detective Pitezal. I'm sure he can handle it.”

Mazzini reached for the file, but Holmes retracted the folder and put a hand on the young tech's chest. “Like I said before, fuck you, Mazzini. And while we're at it, fuck Pitezal, too. He's an asshole. Kind of like you're becoming.”

Holmes wasn't sure which was more unsettling – Mazzini's bizarre behavior or the lightening-fast change in his expression. The anxious, serious scowl was replaced in an instant with an odd, almost creepy grin of unmistakably smug satisfaction.

"I told the professor you'd be there by noon." Mazzini gave him a friendly cuff on the shoulder and added, "I knew I was right about you, Holmes." The officer leaned in and whispered, "I just knew it."

Before Holmes could utter the phrase, "Have you been sniffing the white candy from the evidence locker?" Mazzini pivoted and swiftly vanished around a corner. Holmes stared dumbstruck at the limp folder in his hands, unsure what to make of it all.

Gazing up now at the odd country house, Holmes shook his head. What the hell was he doing here? He had more important things to do than have afternoon tea with a boring, pompous, British bookworm. "Professor Leto," he murmured. Maybe he'll look like Jared Leto had as a crazy old man in that weird-ass *Nobody* movie Grover made him watch. Two hours of his life he'd never get back.

"Screw it, I'm here," he groaned. "Let's go see what Mr. Nobody can tell me about Mr. Nomo."

Folder in hand, Detective Holmes stepped out of the Charger and shut the door. His stomach growled again as his polished black leather Berluti's made that same crunching sound on his way up the gravel path toward the front door. In that moment the sun ducked behind a foreboding dark storm cloud he thought resembled a frightened child curled up in a ball. The sudden drop in light and temperature made the once quaint, odd country house seem ominous and desolate. "Don't be such a chicken shit," he muttered to himself.

Straightening his tie and blazer, Holmes ascended the five steps, paused on the narrow porch, then knocked firmly on the thick wood door. Inside he could hear the distinct, hollow rapping of hard-soled shoes on elevated wood floors. He glanced up in time to notice words inscribed on a board of polished redwood mounted above the door. The unfamiliar words seemed to flow gracefully with the dark and tan swirling tree rings, as if the two were dancing.

When the door opened he was surprised to see an attractive woman in a black business skirt suit and red satin blouse. Short hair the color of coffee grounds appeared both styled and chaotic, reminiscent of Halle Berry's mop in the movie *Swordfish*. Black high heel pumps served to bring her eyes level with his. The moment before they'd made eye contact, she'd noticed his upward glance.

"Do you read Latin, Detective?" she asked casually, her British accent reminding him of a deadly villainess in a Bond movie.

"Uh, no, ma'am. I'm afraid Latin isn't real popular in the South."

"Especially rural Mississippi, I'd wager," she suggested with a coy grin.

"Yes, ma'am. Union, Mississippi to be exact. How did you know that?"

"You mean besides the subtle southern drawl you try desperately to suppress?"

"If you say so," he replied self-consciously.

"Well, if memory serves, Union is part of the infamous Neshoba County."

“Infamous?”

“Why, yes. The Mississippi Burning murders.” The woman flashed a radiant, embarrassed smile. “Forgive me, Detective. I’m a cinephile and history buff. You’ll find me almost anywhere the two intersect.”

He cocked an eyebrow but decided not to pursue the subject. Instead, he pointed to the inscription and asked, “You said this is Latin?”

She nodded. “Indeed. The owners of this house recently affixed it to the door. It’s symbolic.”

“What does it say?”

“It reads ‘*mortem alicui persolvere.*’ I suppose it could be interpreted as *paying out justice.* A concept of paramount interest to someone in your line of work, I should think.”

Holmes opened his mouth to ask exactly what justice the owners were seeking, when the woman abruptly gasped and threw up her hands. “Where on earth are my manners?” she exclaimed. “Please, do come in, Detective.” Stepping aside, she motioned for him to enter.

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ve come to see Professor Leto. Is he here?”

“It’s pronounced *leetow*...long E. Unlike the drummer Shannon Leto – short E. Leetow,” she said again, exaggerating the pronunciation.

“Okay. Professor Leto, then. Is he here?”

Closing the door behind him, the woman said seriously, “Oh, I’m afraid *he* is not. You see, Professor Leto has been dead for nearly a decade now. He died of hemorrhagic fever in South America.” Seeing his confusion, her expression softened – her grin betraying a subtle playfulness. “Professor Polus Leto was my father. He taught pathology at Cambridge. My name is Phoebe Leto. I’m Professor of Criminal Psychology at the University of Manchester. Well, that’s usually where you’d find me. I’m currently on an extended sabbatical.” Professor Leto flashed an amused smile. “Apparently Sergeant Mazzini failed to mention I was a woman.”

“Officer,” he corrected.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Mazzini is a regular officer, specializing in data analysis, surveillance and research. He’s an IT nerd. And yes, ma’am, he did forget to mention that little nugget.”

“My apologies, Detective. For the mistake and for the minor ruse. Female professors often get a little haughty when someone sees our name and title and assumes we’re a man. Especially those of us who had to earn our degrees under the academic shadows of our fathers.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“Nonsense, Detective. An honest mistake.” She looked at him askance, checked her watch, then commented, “Forgive me for being so bold, Detective, but you look a bit peckish. I was just about to have a snack. Would you care to join me?”

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” he started to say.

“Oh tosh, don’t be silly,” she said dismissively. “Please come in and sit down.” She gestured to a plain, oblong wooden table just beyond the living room.

“Thank you,” Holmes said. As he walked slowly behind her, he glanced around and immediately noticed the house’s cavernous layout. The front door opened to a large, sparsely furnished living room. Two plain couches draped in a dull, rusty red fabric and a low wooden coffee table were all that separated the living area from the dining room and kitchen. All three areas reminded him of something you might see in an old spaghetti western – the home of the innocent, hardworking frontier folk. The more he saw, the more the analogy fit. The floors, walls and ceiling were all made of wood planks. Holmes thought it looked like someone had torn down a mile of weathered fencing, cleaned it up as best they could, then used the material to build a house. The only modern technology was a microwave, range and oven, dishwasher, a single-door refrigerator, and several antique floor lamps – all of it at least twenty years old. No televisions, stereos, or computers of any kind could be seen. Not a single digital display from an alarm clock, thermostat, or coffee maker could be found. The interior was outfitted to accommodate only the most basic of modern needs.

He also noted the absence of personal items. There were no family photographs, knick-knacks or crafts, old newspapers or magazines, or even a welcome mat by the door. No hats, coats, or shoes could be seen. The interior was spartan, but functional. Holmes thought he saw a few faint, rectangular places on the walls where pictures may have once hung, but he couldn’t be sure. Regardless, there was nothing inviting or cheery in sight. Rural Airbnb, charm not included.

Toward the rear of the house Holmes spotted three closed doors and guessed they led to bedrooms and a bathroom. Glancing up, he saw the high roof was supported by thick, hand-hewn timbers running the length of the structure. As he looked around, he suddenly wondered if the Old West he’d seen in movies and on TV had ever existed in Pennsylvania. One thing was certain, a sharply dressed English psychology professor looked more out of place in this old barn than a well-dressed police detective.

“Pull up a chair,” Professor Leto said, working busily in the kitchen.

“Thank you.” Holmes placed the file face down on the bare wooden table and sat down.

“Your man Mazzini showed a lot of interest in my research on the Nomo Killer,” Professor Leto said over her shoulder.

“Did he?” Holmes replied absently, still examining the home’s oddly severe interior. Several moments passed before he realized she was staring at him.

“You’re not very mysterious are you, Detective?” she mused.

“Excuse me?”

“Your befuddled expression and rather conspicuous inspection of this old farmhouse suggests you’re trying to reconcile the erudite Limey with her anachronistic surroundings. I expected you to be a tad more surreptitious in your surveillance.”

Holmes tried to mask his surprise by saying, “I thought it would be more polite than asking what a nice girl like you is doing in a place like this.”

“On the contrary, I prefer we be a tad more direct with one another...if you don’t mind.”

Holmes nodded his assent and asked, “Why are you in this pastoral shoebox dressed like you’re about to lecture at Harvard, Professor Leto? Is that direct enough?”

Professor Leto smiled, revealing a row of perfect white teeth. “That’s more like it.” She turned from the counter and carried a plastic tray to the table. Holmes was surprised to see two glass bottles of Coke, a large bowl full of tortilla chips and a smaller bowl filled with salsa. The enticing aroma of the chips reached his nose before the tray hit the table.

Holmes looked quizzically at his host, who grinned and shrugged. She pulled out the chair next to his, sat down, reached for one of the sodas and explained, “Years ago, I fell in love with Mexican food. Spicy, salty, crunchy, and laden with a variety of legumes, savory cheeses and vegetables I’d never had growing up. After all, the U.K. isn’t exactly known for its cuisine. The only spice we got was from the Ruby Murray in the Indian food.”

“Come again?”

“Curry. We call it Ruby Murray, though I’m not quite sure why, exactly.” She rolled her eyes. “Professor or not, some habits are rather difficult to break. But I digress. The spice palate of Mexican food is entirely unique. The variety, the textures, the different levels of heat. This spice,” she said, pointing at the bowl of chunky salsa, “is truly exquisite.”

Holmes nodded in agreement. Despite the oddness of the day so far – including Mazzini’s strange behavior, the isolated farmhouse lost in time, and the attractive, but equally peculiar Professor Leto – his appetite reached peak intensity at the sight of the chips and salsa. Overwhelmed by his hunger, Holmes shelved his concerns for the moment, deciding that good police work was nearly impossible on an empty stomach. Following the lead of his host, Holmes dove headlong into the food and drink. Questions and answers would come soon enough.