

THE SIGNING

[If you're a comic book fan, especially of the "indies," this little bon mot will resonate with you. Why did I write it? Well, my nephew turned me on to the title, *Cry for Dawn*, created by artist Joseph Michael Linsner—in my estimation one of the best in the genre—and his then friend, Rob Horan, and I did this as a tongue-in-cheek tribute to Joseph. Later, he and Horan would split over artistic differences, but Horan kept going with Sirius comics and worked with other up-and-coming artists, like Drew Hayes and a kid who went by the name, The Dark One. If you're NOT a comic book fan ... oh, well. – T. H. Pine]

Great! *There's a parking place right in front*, I thought as I pulled into a metered spot right in front of J. C. Comics in Plainfield, NJ. In addition to it being a beautiful July day, this stroke of good fortune had me elated. J. C. had advertized a store signing for today, featuring one of my all-time favorite artists, Joseph Michael Linsner, and I was there to meet him and get some of my more recent stuff signed. I grabbed my bag of goodies and headed into the store.

The mob scene I saw when I went through the front door deflated my buoyant mood somewhat, especially since I had arrived thirty minutes early! People milled around the store, filling the aisles and blocking the shelves. Others tried to form a line in front of the signing table. Because of the crowd, I had trouble finding the end of that line. As I looked around, I noticed JML and Rob Horan over by the door to the rear of the store, talking with Pat, the owner's wife. Joe Senior worked the floor, talking with a gaggle of customers, trying to bring some order to the chaos. I also spotted Joe Junior and two employees, Jeff and Matt, amidst the crowd, helping people where they could, and generally keeping an eye on the merchandise.

The amount and sheer diversity of things the fans had brought with them really impressed me. Aside from the usual books and posters, an eclectic bunch greeted my eyes, clutching their Dawn statues, sketchpads, and assorted memorabilia. All age groups, from pre-teens to aging boomers, filled the store. The dress code varied from conservative to grunge—black leather being very popular.

I heard the door open behind me and I turned to see two figures enter the store, dressed in long, black trench coats and slouch hats. To see bizarre characters at a signing didn't impress me as strange; I had noticed a redheaded woman dressed as Dawn, complete with see-through leotard and red, knee-length boots. I also noticed more than a few tattooed body parts. These two, however, looked sinister to me. I made a mental note to give them a wide berth and keep an eye on them.

When Joe Senior and company sorted things out somewhat, I found myself standing on line much further back than I figured I should have been. The two sinister types stood about four spots in front of me. *That figures*, I thought. *Oh well, at least I'm in sight of the table*. As I stood there, contemplating my place in the line of life, I began to have a distinct feeling of *deja vu* about the Trench Coat Duo. From what little I could see of their faces, I began to feel certain I recognized them from somewhere.

My mind still working on the problem, they got in front of JML and that's when things started to head in a southerly direction. Trench Coat Number One pulled some items from his pocket and threw them on the signing table. They made a metallic "CLUNK" when they landed on the tabletop.

"Recognize these?" he said gruffly.

Joseph looked at the things on the table and then up at his visitor. “No, not really; do you want them signed?”

“*Not really*, huh? You have no idea how much trouble you’ve caused me, do you?”

“I’m sorry, but you have me at a disadvantage. I’m pretty certain we’ve never met. I’m sorry if my work has offended you.”

The man laughed and whipped off his hat. Long, blonde hair fell to his shoulders. “Does *this* jog your memory?” He yelled, spittle flying, bending to bring his face within an inch of Joseph’s.

Joseph’s jaw dropped and, at that second, I recognized the guy—Darian Ashoka! Darian, somehow, somehow, had stepped right off the comic page!

“*Darian?*”

“Yeah, it’s me,” he spat at Joseph. “Didn’t think you’d ever see *me*, did you?”

Joseph remained silently staring at his angry visitor. “You think you’re so smart, drawing your little books, writing your inscrutable, convoluted stories, not once thinking what you were doing to those of us who’re left to face the music!”

While this tableau unfolded before me, I looked down at the table and recognized what Darian had thrown there—the pieces of Lucifer’s halo!

“I’ll bet you thought it was a nice touch having me sail off on that fanciful, sail-driven aircraft carrier. Do you have any idea how many tramp steamer cabins I’ve shared with the roaches and rats trying to get back? *DO YOU?*” Darian had worked himself into a towering rage.

I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Trench Coat Number Two had moved. When I looked up, he held a gun in his hand! I heard gasps and a couple of screams around me and suddenly everyone made a rush for the door. Swept from the table by the crush, on my way back I noticed the gun looked familiar as well. It had odd-looking runes on it. In addition to that, the gun’s owner wore a balaclava under his hat, and his wrists, where they stuck out of his coat sleeves, showed he had wrapped them in leather. *Can it be?* I thought. Another look at his long, dour face and beetled brows confirmed my suspicions—*Lusipher!*

A convenient column interrupted my trip to the door, knocking my head badly, but I continued to watch this scene unfold, while I rubbed the bump on my head; strangely unconcerned for my safety, caught up in the drama of the moment.

Darian put his hand on Luse’s arm, pushing it down. “Not here! We’ll just have to take him with us! If all these people see him killed, he goes from a second-rate artist to an instant martyr!” He let go of Luse’s arm and grabbed the pieces of the broken halo, stuffing them in his coat pocket.

Luse pocketed the gun and grabbed Joseph by the lapels of his shirt, hauling him across the table effortlessly. Joseph tried to struggle, but Luse cold-cocked him and threw him over his shoulder. I wondered how they would be able to get out the door, when Darian drew a broadsword out from under his coat and brandished it about. The crowd parted like the Red Sea.

“Get back, and no one gets hurt!” Luse yelled, pulling the gun from his pocket again. Luse turned, looking back into the store. “Hey Horan!” he yelled. “Tell Drew he’s next. Oh, and tell him to get a spell-checker for that word processor of his!”

Darian, who exited tight behind Luse, stuck his head back in the door. “By the way Rob,” he said. “I’d look over my shoulder, if I were you. Give the Dark One and Crilley my regards. They’re all right!”

I don’t know what possessed me, but, as soon as the two of them left, I cautiously exited and peeked around the corner, hearing the screech of car tires at that second. I saw a big, black sedan with Darian and Luse sitting in it. The driver had a familiar female profile, enshrouded by a mane of startling red hair that covered one eye. And did I see three, dark, mascara teardrops under the other eye? In a couple more seconds, the car turned the next corner and vanished. I can’t be sure, but I thought the rear bumper had a bumper sticker that read

THINGS ONLY HAVE THE POWER THAT YOU GIVE THEM.

Since that fateful day, no one has ever seen or heard from Joseph Michael Linsner. Every so often, a comic comes out with a cover, always unsigned and unaccredited, that bears the unmistakable mark of a Linsner painting. I’ve been collecting them on the off chance that he reappears someday.

Rob Horan and Drew Hayes both moved to parts unknown and still continue to publish under the Sirius label, albeit from behind the scenes. The Dark One has assumed the role of publisher and Mark Crilley that of chief editor. The books Sirius puts out have attained the status of cult favorites and sell like hotcakes. Back issues of Linsner and Hayes titles are a collector’s dream, and consistently hold their value in the price guides. I miss seeing new *Dawn* books though, and *Poison Elves* has lost its edge lately. It’s become a kid’s favorite, right behind the *Sonic* titles. Rumor has it that Image is negotiating to buy Sirius and move their own top titles under the Sirius label.

I still continue to collect my favorite books and only occasionally sell off a duplicate Linsner or Hayes back issue when I need some serious cash. It’s funny how life works sometimes. Every now and then, I stop to look at my autographed Dawn statue, sitting there on my shelf, and contemplate the redhead driving the getaway car. When I continue on my way, I usually have a smile on my face.

As I said—it’s funny how life works sometimes.

T. H. Pine 1/27/98