Urban Fantasy

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, December 2016

Various Authors

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### Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, December 2016

Harry Dresden by The Gryph

We didn't have a genre as our monthly theme for quite a while, so this time we want you to write us a nice, little story.
This means that your story should take mainly place in a city. Any city, any time? No. To make it a bit more specific, we'd like you to stay on our world (with added supernatural elements of course) and in contemporary times (+/- 50 years). Having an story take place in ancient Rome or in Minas Tirith has its own appeal but would be a totally different theme in our opinion.

Voluntary restriction and/or inspirational spark: Since it's January and the new year has just begun, the story should be about changes, the MC restarting or changing their lives.

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*
[http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(jan-2017)-urban-fantasy/(jan-2017)-urban-fantasy-submission-thread/](http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/%28jan-2017%29-urban-fantasy/%28jan-2017%29-urban-fantasy-submission-thread/)

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# Demon-X



*Hi there. My name’s Xerxes and I’m a demon.*

*Well, only half-demon, as the rest of my Hell-denziens keep reminding me.*

*You’ve probably never heard of me. I didn’t even get a footnote mention alongside the seventy-two in the Ars Goetia.*

*The lack of respect means I never get the good jobs. The interesting ones. Do I get to string the priest upside down above his alter? No. I’m the one, left behind, holding open the sanctuary portal, ensuring everyone returns to Hell in a timely fashion.*

*But not today. They’d finally let me come along, deeper into the city, beyond just the portal room. Why? They needed someone to hold a stupid door.*

*My existence, folks.*

The sound of screeching tires, and a white ’73 convertible Ford Mustang peeled around the corner. Its wheels bumped up over the sidewalk, headlights sprawling across the alley walls, and blasted a pile of trash into the air as it slid to a stop.

I flinched, covering my eyes from the glare and scattering debris.

Furcas popped up out of the driver’s seat, sitting on the headrest, arms in the air, “Let’s go, Pink! I don’t want to sit in Purgs for seven years and seven days because you two are slow-mo.”

Like most demons, Furcas wore dark sunglasses, even in this early morning darkness. The extra tint did nothing to obscure a demon’s night vision, but they effectively hid our orange pupils from the world of man. If anything made Furcas stand out, it was his long, gray beard and black leather vest. He looked like one of those old rock stars from the ‘80s. But ten thousand years older.

“Don’t just stand there staring, Pinkie. Where’s Croke? Sun’s coming up in an hour, and we gotta blaze.”

I hated the nicknames. Pink. Pinker. Pinkleton. Hated my half-breed heritage. Hated the thought of an eternal life cursed by it.

“He’s coming,” I replied. “He’s finishing up his thing with that singer.”

Crokel *really* enjoyed torturing humans. He always took the form of an angel, glowing and glorious, so when he started carving, strewing organs all over the room, people tended to freak out. Which, of course, was his favorite part. That’s usually when he’d start in with the booming voice, all talking in twisty riddles. Bringing to bear the gravitas to make your mortal Shakespeare seem a chipmunk.

“Mighty Baal. Seriously?” Furcas slid back into the seat, leaned his head back, and revved the engine. “It’s amazing that Red don’t spend more time cooling his heels than he does.”

The downside of Crokel’s bloody pursuits? All his pompous dedication to his craft usually meant Crokel was the last one out the door. Which was why he wanted me along. Making wards against hunters following us.

I had drawn runes over the back exit from the club so that no human could cross it. Well, technically they could, it would just set them on fire. Instantly. From the inside, out.

We were just waiting on Crokel to finish with his little indulgence and then we’d be off to our sunrise safehouse. In the meantime, I stood there. Like usual. Still waiting, just holding a different door.

Minutes ticked by.

I verged on re-entering the club to see if something went wrong. Maybe Hunters had appeared. Maybe the bartender had found a shotgun filled with rock salt and exorcised him.

Crokel finally strode across my glyphs and paused to strike his favorite pose on the sidewalk, fists on hips, face leering skyward.

I sighed.

“Ah, Xerxes, the heavens weep at my artistry, their jealously ringing like the bells of St. Mary’s.” His wings unfurled, feathers glittering in the harsh streetlamp spotlight.

“Did you leave him on the bar?” I longed to help.

“Can we talk about it on the way?” Furcas revved the engine again. “I’d like to be back tomorrow night. I’ve got a date with a stripper over on Westlake.”

Motorcycles thundered up the alley. A gang of Demon Hunters burst from the same direction Furcas had just come. They must have tracked him.

A shotgun blast split the air and rock salt shattered the Mustang’s tail light.

“Get in! Let’s go!”

Crokel dove into the passenger seat and, without waiting for me, Furcas stomped the gas. I sprinted ten strides and leapt, landing on the trunk, and clung to the retracted ragtop. We spun off, shredding around corners, and flying through the city streets.

Night streamed by, but Furcas couldn’t lose the Hunters. While his skill behind the wheel was supernatural, the bikers were good. And, they knew the turf.

Along a straightaway, a motorcycle roared up next to us, and the driver aimed his shotgun at our rear tire.

*BLAM*

Shredded bits of rubber sprayed through the air. We lost traction and gouged the trolley tracks. The Mustang spun, caught an edge, and flipped sideways.

The car rolled, side-over-side, hurtling, and flung the three of us free. In the air, to the pavement, crashing into a store display. The Mustang rocked to a stop, perched on its side.

I sat up from where I’d bounced against the outer wall of Macy’s. A bit groggy, but otherwise fine. Being a Half-Demon had its privileges. While I didn’t heal as quickly as the full-breeds, I could still jump from the top of the Sears Tower and walk to dinner without being late. But, man, that would hurt.

I scanned to find the others. Crokel had destroyed a display of maternity dresses when he’d flown through its window. He tottered to his feet, and shook off the tinkling shards. Furcas lay a dozen feet from the car. He sat up and frowned at the wreckage. His beautiful car sat behind him, an ugly wall made from broken axels and a mangled transmission.

Four bikes, engines roaring, hurtled toward us. The Hunters.

Rather than stop, the lead biker dropped his ride on its side, throwing a shower of sparks behind him, and slid straight at Furcas.

The Demon growled. He lifted his arms and flames poured out of his hands, streaming at the oncoming motorcycle.

The hunter, mostly protected from the hellfire behind his sliding bike, didn’t flinch as he swung around a long-barreled, fat caliber handgun.

A sharp crack, the blue steel pistol jumped, and Furcas’s brains painted the oil pan. The rest of Furcas’ corpse wavered, then exploded into a million motes.

*Silver bullets. Shit.*

I glanced over at Crokel. He was trapped in the display, flinging shards of Demonbone at two of the bikers. They crouched behind their motorcycles, firing blind over the seats. Crokel had killed one already. His body lay on the sidewalk, pooling blood.

A hunter clipped the demon with a blast of rock salt, paralyzing Crokel a moment. The other human rolled to the side and leveled his cold iron crossbow at Crokel.

Twang. Thunk. Demon dust.

I blinked. It was only me now. I went to stand, but Mr. Silver Bullets strode up to me, fearless in his black leathers. His monster pistol held easy at his side.

Baal forgive my incompetence. My first mortal world mission and I was already on my way to purgatory for seven years and seven days. I closed my eyes and cringed.

Boom.

Ow. That hurt. Right in the heart. But it was strange. Turning to dust didn’t really feel any different than getting shot with lead bullets. In fact, I felt my form healing. Had he run out of silver?

I cracked an eye and peeked at the hunter. He was inching backwards, staring at his weapon. He leveled it again.

Boom, boom, boom.

“Ow, damn you,” I shouted at him. “Knock it off.” The holes closed, and one of the bullets pushed its way out of my chest. I caught it.

Silver.

Silver hadn’t destroyed my mortal body? What in the nine hells?

And then, I had it. My human half.

Humans weren’t allergic to silver or salt. Demons couldn’t be killed by standard means. Turned out, I had taken the best from each breed. I never knew. Was never tested. Everyone simply assumed weakness because of my human half.

I grinned. Wide and demonic.

Then, I casually tore that hunter in half.



The little motel room was cramped and dark, lit by the only working lamp.

Charlie, laying on the bed, sharpened his cold iron machete and watched the 11 o’clock news. Frank sat at the tiny desk and loaded salt rock into shotgun shells. That left Father William perched over the nightstand, chanting under his breath, blessing canteens of water.

The room’s door exploded. Literally exploded. And a dark figure loomed in the hole.

“Hi there.” The voice was almost jovial. “My name’s Xerxes, but these days, most Hunters call me Demon-X. You may have heard of me.”

The demon stepped across the salt barrier and into the room.

“I’m kinda famous.”

# The Esper's Tears

Her name is Yuri.
It's a boy's name, but she loves it. It was given to her by the man–the first thing she owned that no one could take away, and the first man Yuri had met with more ability than her. He'd taken her off the streets, cared for her, taught her to rein in her powers, and lots of new skills.

He'd turned her world upside down.

*Your imagination is your limit Yuri*, he'd say, *if you want a necklace of water, make it so, if you want the drops to fall to the sky, make their up into down!* And he was right. The man had always been right–and nice, and not scared of her.

Now the man is dead, and Yuri is on a rampage.

•••

'Status report, unit one, report!'

'Quit it, Randall! They're dead.'

'If that explosion was that bastard Svarenko taking them down with him, how come the chief and Bart just went off the radar? What the fuck is going on?!'

'Use your senses, heck, use your *eyes*! That's another esper!'

The soldiers risk a glance over their ragged cover, to the body floating fifteen metres up, silhouetted by crackling plasma and a cloud of orbiting debris.

'Oh man, this wasn't in the mission briefing!'

•••

Before she had a name, in the nettle-infested ditch of the Past she never thought she would climb out of, Yuri had been Alone, with-a-capital-A.
Too different to belong with the curb-squatting, glue-sniffing urchins she shared the streets with, too powerful to risk attracting the adults' attention, she'd spent years roaming the city, its many wonders locked behind cold glass, often leaving her feeling like it was her who was trapped in a vitrine, and the rest of the world rolling by, an endless show of things for her to see and desire but never own, lest she steal or got lucky at the bottom of some bin.

She'd used her powers sparingly: while other destitute kids chased down the likewise destitute cats and sent them hurling toward clothes lines, aiming at new jeans and hoping they'd claw them and fall back down together, she could will the clothes to her. She could part the garbage without sullying her hands, she stayed dry under the rain, and could reach any roof for the best hiding spots.
But not much more, for the three kids she'd known who'd had a shred of power in them had all disappeared-the girl with the red curls, the boy who stole pastries though the windows, and Vanya's baby brother from the south church orphanage–*gone*.

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Her powers are melting reality around her, churning pockets of matter bubbling and fizzing out of existence. Gravity is a mess, with Yuri as the eye of a typhoon of psychic energy and tears. Her eyes well, their water rising, each bat of her lashes sending the salty drops to swirl above her head.
Even through the blur she can see the ruins under her feet of the home the man had made for them. *A hiding spot from all the world's troubles*, he'd called it. *Your new home.* Blown away now in twenty chunks of dust by the attack of twenty cowards.

She prods for the twelve survivors, their weak esper minds struggling against hers.

There is no one to stop her, no one to save the men from her.

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They had come in the quiet of the night.

The man had been dozing, the book he'd been reading to her resting on his chin. She'd delicately brushed his silver-blond hair from his brow and daydreamed of a future in which she dared to call him papa. Or da. Anything to reflect the love that had grown to bursting inside her. In her fantasy he'd smile and laugh and make her fly, high on the wind.
They'd sensed the approaching threat simultaneously, heads snapping up, dreams discarded, alerted by the the soldiers' foul fear, the collective mass of their doubts, and the unrepressed waves of their own ability.

'Yuri, these men are psychics, espers like you and me.'

'But not strong like us.'

'No but they can work together, it makes them dangerous. Do you remember what I told you?'

'There's only twenty...'

'Yuri!'

'Yes but can't I stay with you? I know I–'

'No buts. They're only after me, and they can't find out about you.'

It used to be that no one knew or cared. Before the man, she'd not even been 'Yuri', just another freak kid that all the others made great efforts to avoid. Now in this person's eyes she had positive value. She mattered.
The gears of her powerful mind tripped and grind at the thought of losing him.

'Do you remember?'

•••

A soldier steps forward, anonymous behind his kevlar vest and balaclava, spearheading a mental attack. It ricochets on her shields with a spark.
Yuri knows she cannot alter any creature with an opposing will, so she traps him in a bubble of vacuum. Fighting him over the air, heat, pressure. The man pushes back, but he lacks her intimate knowledge of coldness, hunger, the void you feel in absence of all things, the negation of life.
When the soldier dies, she collapses the bubble with him in it, and terror shimmers in the eleven reminding minds.

Things are as she wills them, and she wills them *dead*, like the man, *gone*, like the man, never to be seen again, heard again, felt again, *like the man!*

•••

'I got blood on my hands.'

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She'd left running, on foot and empty-handed, all the new things the man had gotten her, an urchin dream's made true, left behind in her rush to obey his orders to stay hidden and undetectable.
She'd stopped when the explosion behind her took away all awarness of him.
He'd sacrificed himself to protect her.

Anger rose like magma in her throat.

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'I'm a wanted man.'

•••

There is nothing to stop Yuri from annihilating the soldiers.
She has no greater understanding of what the man's wishes might have been, in sending her away, what hopes he'd entertained for her well-being, what morals he'd planed to instil in her. She was raised in the streets, where the most brutal of materialism applies, and death attains its most complete form: it makes no sense to think for the dead or wonder about their opinion or wishes.
They are dead.

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'Do you understand?'

•••

'Please, oh fuck, please!'

The final soldier flails helplessly on his back, crushed by a pressure he cannot shake off.
She steps through the mist of blood she turned his last teammate into. Everything went so fast, he cannot think, not with her animosity rubbing his mind raw.
He sees a girl-shaped mass of hate, the edges of her being growing fuzzier, her eyes pits of light, her fluttering pink pyjamas the most human thing about her. Her aura seems to bend the moonlight in a million colours that hurt the eye, sending arcing fingers of deadly thunder groping the air for something to curl around.
In despair he pitches all he has to free himself, to inch away from the weight that vows to merge him with the cracking concrete.

•••

'It's not what I want for you.'

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She steps forward, mindless, lost in her rage, completing the task she set herself, ready to lose that last bit of purpose to her life.

'Oi, Yuri!'

Two large hands slap the sides of her face, crashing right through her shields, ringing her ears.

'What the hell are you doing, didn't I tell you to run away?'

It's the man, come out of thin air. Everything stops, roaring silence blanketing them: the surviving soldier, the man who ought to be dead, and the girl who looks just like a ragged ten years-old about to cry her eyes out.

The man looks around, his hands never leaving Yuri's face.

'Sheesh, no wonder they didn't follow me, and I'm barely back in time... Couldn't you trust me Yuri? Do you think I'd have left you alone like that, if I couldn't fight these punks? Ah, don't cry now–'

He picks her up, cradling her spindly body in his arms and shoulder. She curls there to sob, to turn back into the child she's hardly begun to learn how to be.

'I'm sorry kid. I should have told you the whole plan,' he murmurs in her hair, patting her head, 'I should have trusted you more too. I won't leave you again.'

He turns to the soldier who has not yet dared twitch a muscle.

'What's your name, you lucky idiot?'

'Haaah–Randall!'

'You go back home, Randall. Bag whatever is left of your friends and give it to Marlow, or whoever runs the CIA these days,' the man bends forward, his eyes blazing white hot, 'you tell him that Vitomir Svarenko says hi, and to leave my daughter and I alone.'

# The Chase

 Detective “Tiny” Kekoa pulled into the small driveway and put his Jeep in neutral. He let the engine idle a minute before turning the key, his grandfather’s voice in his head. Don’t ever leave your girl running hot. You treat her right, she’ll be with you ‘til you die. A small smile split the man’s lips. His grandfather would always give a conspiratorial wink when he’d say this, and it wasn’t until years later that Tiny had realized his grandfather was speaking about more than cars.

As Tiny’s solid bulk stepped down from the vehicle, another officer exited the small house and walked towards him. “What do we have, sergeant?”

Sergeant Sekioka replied, “Lone male, older ‘n sin, sir. Don’t see how he’s our man, but if he is, he ain’t going nowhere.”

Tiny raised his eyebrow, knowing he couldn’t have been wrong, but suddenly second-guessing himself. “The man’s a magician when it comes to theft. Don’t care what he looks like, I know this is him.”

Sekioka shrugged. “You’re in charge, sir. Anyway, don’t think he’s gonna be a problem too much longer. He’s coughing up blood, and there’s already a fair amount on the sheets. Ambulance has been called, but it’s rush hour. Waikiki traffic’s a bitch.”

Tiny grunted as he moved towards the house. As soon as he entered, he was met by another officer, Keniki Leinani, who stopped him with a small hand. She looked at him, shaking her head as she spoke, “He said he’d confess, but only to you, and only alone.” She paused, reading his face and knowing his answer, “I don’t like it, but I know you don’t care. He’s in the bedroom, that way.” She made a small gesture towards the back of the house.

He smiled a controlled smile, then walked past her. As he moved back towards the bedroom, he saw a number of unique items he recognized—from pictures only, before they had been stolen. Other than the priceless artifacts, he could have been inside any of the small, indigenous homes that remained scattered throughout Waikiki. The homes, the people, remained, ignoring the growing Haole hellhole that had grown around them.

Tiny entered the bedroom, noted the two officers that were there watching the bedridden man. He nodded his head—Take off—and a moment later he was alone with the man. “Aloha Joe… it seems the chase is at its end.”

The man raised his head—bald and covered in age spots—to look at Tiny. “Ah, Detective Kekoa—“ A coughing fit wracked Aloha Joe’s body; blood and phlegm sprayed out over the once-white sheets. A second wave of coughs hit before the man could get it under control enough to continue, “The Warrior has come, ready to end our game.”

The doubts that had shadowed this moment in Tiny’s head disappeared as soon as the man opened his mouth to speak. After more than eleven years of chasing Aloha Joe, he had his man. “All games gotta end, Joe.” He moved towards a chair—the only other furnishing in the room aside from the bed—and sat down, savoring the moment. “Bein’ honest, it took a lot longer than I was expecting. You led me all over the island—a merry little chase.”

Joe’s chuckle quickly turned into another fit of coughing. ”It’s probably not even worth arresting me. I’m doing quite well at dying right here.” Joe’s head sank back into the pillow with a sigh. “I don’t suppose you’ve got a cigarette on you?”

“Sorry, no. Never picked up the habit.” Tiny shifted in the chair, keeping alert just in case Joe tried one final trick. He still couldn’t believe how rough the man looked. He was expecting a much younger man, though truth be told, the man was thin as a stick, which gave each of his features a hollow, aged look. There comes an assumed familiarity when you’ve chased someone as long as he had, even though he had never met Aloha Joe. Finally being confronted with Joe in person—it was kind of a let down.

“Damn shame, there. Though I guess they **will** kill you.” Joe inhaled a slow breath before he continued, the occasional cough punctuating his speech, “I guess we should get down to business, then. I understand my rights, don’t waste what time I’ve got left reading me those. My name is—“

“Sorry, Joe, gotta do this by the book, just in case you ain’t as bad off as you seem.” Tiny removed his notepad as he read the man his rights, watching Joe the entire time. The man barely stirred except to acknowledge he understood. Tiny half-expected Joe to button up, but that didn’t happen. As Tiny clicked his pen, Joe began.

“My name is Joe Embritch, also known as Aloha Joe. I was stationed at Pearl Harbor before the war, aboard the mighty ship USS Arizona. I was one of the few survivors of the initial attack on Pearl. That moment caused me to reevaluate my priorities. After I got out, I stayed on-island, deciding to live my life how I wanted. With that in mind, I turned to a life of crime.” A series of coughs interrupted him, more blood sprayed from his mouth.

“Joe,” Tiny began after Joe had stopped coughing, “It’s a nice story an’ all, but you ain’t got the time to tell it all to me.”

“Ah, Warrior, this moment has been eleven years in the making. Do you really expect either one of us to not savor it?”

Tiny caught some hint of something in the statement, but couldn’t pin it down. Agitated, he gruffly replied, “I’ll savor it after you’re done—dead or in prison, either way works for me.”

“So be it. Then let’s begin in earnest.” Joe raised his head, smiling at Tiny. “I think you’re in for a surprise or two.”

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 By the time Tiny exited the bedroom, he could hear thunderous booms in the distance. He walked outside into darkness occasionally lit by a series of firework. Friday evenings. Tiny shook his head, silently cursing the tourists that had turned his little island into a show for their enjoyment. He walked past Keniki without saying a word, intent on getting to his Jeep.

Her following shout caused him to turn around, “That’s it? You’re just gonna walk past and not say a word?”

“He’s gone—dead,” he clarified, forestalling the follow-on question. “But, I’ve got all my notes from his confession, which he signed, just to add insult to injury, I’m sure. Hope the bastard rots in Hell.”

“Then, is tonight a celebration?” she asked. Tiny thought there might be more than one question being asked.

“Not tonight, but soon. I’ve still got the paperwork to file, and I want this completely closed before I celebrate. It’s been too long of a chase to celebrate prematurely.” Tiny turned back to his Jeep and opened the door. He stopped with a leg still out. “I’ll definitely let you know when it’s time to celebrate.”

-

 Tiny stood outside in the dark. The fireworks had ceased some hours earlier, and he was left alone in near-silence—only the wind, waves, and the insects could be heard. He pulled a newly purchased pack of cigarettes from his pocket and selected one. He pinched off the filter before he put it to his lips, dropping the filter carelessly to the ground. With a snap of his fingers and a single word, the tip of the cigarette flared up briefly before settling into a crimson glow. He could feel the magic pull at the body’s energy, sapping a minute amount compared to what remained.

He took a pull, savoring the flavor of the tobacco, then exhaled smoke into the night. The cigarette was quickly gone and also flicked off into the night, and laughter began to bubble up from Tiny’s chest. The big man burst into a raucous laughter, enjoying the moment for the first time in months. He continued laughing until he was interrupted by a prickling that ran over his entire body.

Tiny rolled his shoulders and shifted his body until the prickling subsided, comfortable once again. “That’s the problem with new bodies,” he said, to no one in particular. “You’ve always got to break them in. They really… itch… the soul.”

He turned back towards his new home, looking over the well-manicured landscaping and the bright blue exterior, visible in the light of the full moon. Tiny had done quite well for himself. Inhaling the sea air one final time, he walked back into the house. It was time to settle in.

# Hungry Waters

Under the shy crescent of a waning moon, the young girl dressed only in her finest clothes approached the bridge with solemn ceremonial purpose. This time she wasn’t just going to peer over, she was going to do it. The metal steps clanged after each pelt of her heeled boots, she kept her eyes straight ahead, head held high.

Like many others, Keira had fallen between the cracks in society, singled out for ridicule throughout childhood then perennially ignored in adulthood. She’d had been left a shell, the pain had gone, but the joy had withered. Then, quite suddenly, hope had bowed out of its last fight.

She’d been left with nothing. Some people feel happy, others feel angry, the downtrodden feel sorrow, but she felt nothing. Nothing at all. It had been that way for years, the void of feelings had followed her wherever she went, whatever she did.

Taking hold of the rails she climbed up in one swift practised move and held onto the lamppost for balance. She looked down at the black inky water full of stains and hidden things not wanting to be found.

Feeling nothing at all she dared herself to lean over, further than she’d ever done before. The wind crushed her hair against her face, her eyes watered with sting.

“What you doing here miss?”

“Don’t waste your time trying to talk me down. I mean to go through with it this time.”

“You’re going to jump?” the short and slight man clapped his hands together, “exciting.” He grinned from ear to ear and jumped up and down.

Keira held tight to the lamp post and surveyed her last scene, a dark desolate sky with ballooning clouds. To her left was a decaying city with crumbling walls and empty shops.

“Do you think you’ll hit the rocks and splatter your gunk, or just sink straight down to the bottom?” he’d taken a sly step closer to her whilst waiting for an answer, hoping for a little glimpse into her perverted world.

“Don’t come any closer,” she warned staring him down with tired uncompromising eyes.

“It’s okay I don’t need to be any closer to help you jump. I’m happy for you to take all the glory in your magnificent death.” He moved away from her and peered over the edge waving to the water, “Do you think you’ll freeze or drown first?”

“I don’t care.”

“What are your family going to say at your funeral? Any achievements or adventures to speak of or was it all just for nothing?”

“Stop talking or I’ll jump.”

“Of course, you’ll jump,” he said with bite, his narrowed eyes showing menace, ”You wouldn’t want to anger Ersie now, would you?”

Keira spun around and almost slipped as her left foot slipped off the rail. She grabbed the lamp post tighter waiting for the vertigo to quieten. “Who’s Ersie?”

The young man grinned, “You don’t know Ersie? Well you’re about to meet her. She’s the sea witch who guards this stretch of water. She’s been watching you for a long time. We know this isn’t the first time you’ve stepped up and tried to jump. Only now we’re here to help you do it. She likes your eyes, she really wants them but most of all, she wants your soul.”

Keira shook her head in disbelief this man was even crazier than her. Why wasn’t he trying to jump? “I don’t want to be someone’s pet.”

Keira jumped down almost landing in the puddle near the man which seemed to drip upwards. She was careful to step away from it, to not even look at it. Even under the orange glow of light it was as black as the water below.

The man looked down he seemed nervous and then shot her a mischievous smile, “seeing as you’re wanting to die anyway would you mind doing me a favour?”

“A favour? Like what?”

“Just a kiss,” he asked tilting his head baring his black and green teeth causing Keira to shudder. His shoes tinkled with dripping water that fed the puddle beside him.

“A kiss? No,” Keira began to back away as the man’s expression turned sour. He lunged forward and grabbed her shoulders, roughly forcing his cold rubbery lips against hers.

As he held her in a locked embrace her mind was flooded with beating stars, deep green woodland glens, hollow hills, crystal caves, hawks, strange warriors dripping in goad and lastly, the face of a beautiful and ghastly woman with dark blue skin. She had hollow black eyes and hair that swirled around her in her vision the woman smiled beckoning her to come down, deep down.

“What are you?” Keira pleaded as she fell to the floor as he finally let her go.

“I’ve never kissed a mortal woman before, never been this high up,” he brushed his fingers over his lips and giggled, “can’t believe you’re not dead yet.”

Keira began to get up and did up her jacket against the cold, “I don’t want to die, I just want to go home to bed.”

The man shrugged his shoulders, “but she’s seen you now, she wants you. She’ll be angry.”

“Leave me alone,” Keira hissed like an alley cat startling the man long enough for her to turn and run. He came in quick pursuit but went no further than the bridge. Keira never looked back and ran all the way though the dirty streets of the city until she found hers.

There, on the last home stretch when her house came into view, she leaned back against a wall to catch her breath. Needing to compose herself before she returned home to mum and dad. It wasn’t so late in the day, tomorrow morning was going to bring her a new day.

She was going to break free of the monotony, first thing she was going to do tomorrow was to empty her savings and just go somewhere, anywhere. But first she wanted to lay her head down on her soft pillows and dream of all the things to come. The coldness from the water had seeped deep into her bones, tired and weary they needed a long rest.

She was just about to do all those things when her ears caught the sound of tinkling water and a feeling of fear welled up inside. A drain began to fill up and flood the road, quickly forming a large black sticky puddle that dripped upwards, full of death and secrets.

Even if she was an Olympic athlete she would have not been able to make it across in one jump. She was going to have to step into it to get home.

Her left foot went first, down into the water which instantly congealed around her boot like tar. She put down her right and set her thighs to action by swinging with all her might. A hot sweat broke upon the surface of her forehead and her muscles burned with determination. Ten more steps to go but the puddle was still growing, still deepening. Her house seemed a lot closer now, she had almost made it. Almost.

The last thing she saw was the blue face of Ersie rise to the surface, beautifully ghastly even with her black hollow eyes. Waiting in the deepest part to grab Shannon’s boot pulling her down into the puddle’s bottomless depths.

# Eternal Payment

It is an odd feeling getting beat up by a troll. Emotionally, I mean. Physically it's still a kick in the teeth, and I'm no slouch. It's just that when you're actually standing there and this big – smelly – gray – smelly – hulking – smelly – witless – did I mention smelly (I mean I don't even know what kind of dead fish, skunk fat, and giraffe ass combo that is, but wow) monster is bearing down on you, what would you be thinking about?

I can tell you, that at least in my experience, it aint what's on TV later. It's more along the lines of “Why the hell did I take this job?” I knew the answer, of course. I owed the wrong guy a favor and now I got to stand here and try my hardest not to die too soon because junior is still trying to make good on his escape.

The troll had already trashed the office outside the safe room. They were looking for something they could use to bash the reinforced door in. Me being the lucky idiot who stayed out of said safe room as a distraction got to be the lottery winner in tonight's “What's on the menu?” episode.

The trolls could probably get through the door quickly enough. That's when I drew the short straw. Keep the door secure until help arrives. Got it.

There were three trolls that came a knockin'. The one that stood before me now hunched over and drooled on the tile floor. He stared at me with a hungry, stupid, and once again, smelly grin. “Here I am. My name is Jonathan and I'll be your dinner this evening.” Sarcasm in the face of dismemberment, that's just typical. This is why my brain doesn't take my mouth out for walks or nice steak dinners.

“You. You need to open the metal door. Open it now.” the troll growled stupidly at me.

“You.” I mocked, “You need to go kick rocks. Kick rocks now.” I growled stupidly back. My response went over about as well as you'd think. It took the loud warty idiot about four seconds to actually process what I said. It's expression changed from confusion, to realization, and then finally, to anger. He snarled at me and reached to his side.

I figured out what he was doing about a half a millisecond before the chair started flying toward my skull. I ducked it easily enough. There was some distance between us after all. The troll hurled another chair at me. Finally, he let out a bellow and charged. I had been playing for time. Every second we weren't actively fighting was a second that I was still breathing and hoping that backup would show up soon.

Why did I agree to this again? Oh, yeah. Favor. “Damn.” I said and reflexively winced; angels, even disgraced ones aren't supposed to curse. Let me back up a second here. When I say “disgraced”, what I really mean is “dis-GRACE-ed.” Sorry, got side-tracked again.

The troll charged and I pulled out my revolver from the leather strap it hung in inside my jacket. I looked quickly into the cylinder and saw a light blue glow. Thumbing back the hammer I fired into the troll's center of mass. One thing to know about trolls, they hit like a truck and if you want to physically hurt them, you're going to have to hit like that too.

I didn't have that kind of strength, but what little magic I maintained after my “going away party” as I liked to call it, went into crafting several special bullets. They were *my* proverbial truck and one of them flew right at that chair-throwing peabrain's chest. It pained me to use the bullet. That round was one of only a handful I had left. They were my lifeline back into the good graces of the lads upstairs. Once again, graces with a capital “G”.

The round, as expected, hit the brute right in the center of his heaving lungs. Immediately acid started eating away at his flesh and sinew. One point Jonathan. The bad news is even with all the screaming he was doing, his momentum didn't diminish.

His weight slammed me to the floor. He continued to scream and writhe on the floor of the office. “Not good. This is very not good.” I said rapidly as I tried to push the grunt off me. That magic acid would work on me just as much as him. I don't want it on me. No, thank you.

Peabrain sat up and the pressure on my chest lessened immensely. My diaphragm expanded to breath again and I scrambled back on my elbows to get away from the acid. He took a nasty side swipe with his inch-wide claws. They missed, but barely. I kicked up with my boot and it connected with his nose. Crunch. “Yes.” I thought.

The troll howled again in agony. “C'mon acid, work faster.” I said through gritted teeth. A fist the size of a dinner plate slammed down where my head had been. It was a blind swing through bleary eyes and I dodged it easily. I jumped to my feet.

I was unscathed. Cool. The troll on the ground would not be getting up. That acid would bind it in pain until it's organs were eaten away. One down. I let out a small cheer. Okay, it was more of me turning to the beast on the ground and curb-stomping his face a few times, but hey, what's the problem with a little celebration, right?

A malevolent snarl from the door cut my curb-stomp-fest short. Oh, yeah. There were three trolls weren't there? Just peachy. How had I forgotten that again? I really am the worst angel ever.

The second troll was just as predicable. It charged just like the last one did, but I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't have the time. This particular troll was more of a green booger color than the last one, but just as strong. He grabbed me around the waist and threw me headlong into the metal door.

My head rang like a tuning fork as I stumbled to my feet. The third troll stalked into the office. I know that the sin that got my wings clipped was gambling. I love me some dice rolling. I love me some dice rolling so much that I got in deep. It was as bad a run of luck as anything. “Kinda like right now” I thought.

I stepped to one side and crouched behind a cubicle wall; my face already starting to swell from headbutting the safe room door. Oh, and by the way... OW! The sounds of clawed feet shuffling around the office slowly became clearer. Now what?

I still had managed to hold onto my revolver. Lucky stars. I had five more rounds in the weapon. Only one of those was another of my special bullets. I'd loathe to fire it. They were dwindling rapidly.

I gritted my teeth and stood back up and looked over the waist-high wall. Both trolls were very close, but were approaching from opposite directions. Why is it they learned tactics NOW? I fired three barks of my revolver at the troll on the left. At least two of them went straight through him and splattered the wall of windows behind him with thick red blood. The glass was bullet-proof and spider web cracks danced on it's surface. The troll fell back into a desk and crushed it to splinters.

I had one more round before the last-ditch effort bullet. The revolver was a special make and fired a special caliber round. It had worked well on the beast. His green flesh stained red. It would have probably worked well on the final one had I been able to spin around fast enough.

The claws slashed down and I felt my back split like a fillet-of-Jonathan. I crumpled to the floor and my vision clouded up with pain. I touched the bracelet on my right wrist to my forehead and I felt the inscription's magic knit up the gash on my back. I was just about to flip over and give this jerk the last two pieces of my mind when a heavy fist came down and everything went dark.

“That's quite a story, Jonathan.” the man said. He looked down at a clipboard and wrote something on the paper he held.

“Every bit of it's true. Doesn't that count for something?” I asked.

“Yes. It counts for something. The young man did get away. One favor down, four more to go. I'm sending you back.”

“Oh, C'mon! I earned at least-” I started to say, but a white flash cut me off. I woke up in pain on the floor.

# Gaia's Child

One gloomy, cloud-covered day in the small town of Callahan, a tree sprite leapt out in front of Auntie Yolanda. It chittered angrily in treespeak, waving twig arms like an orchestra conductor. It obviously had some urgent need, a warning of some cosmic event that might shatter the world.

Auntie Yolanda rolled her eyes and walked right past it.

She was too old for this sort of nonsense. She was pushing sixty now, battered mentally and physically by years of conflict. She didn't fancy fighting an oil bogle today, or a mirror bogle, or any bogle, really.

The sprite wobbled after her, legs flailing like thin stilts. It stood to her knees, and no one else could see it — at least, no one without Gaia's blessing — but Auntie Yolanda was certain it would give up soon. How it had managed to keep a single thought in its head for even this long spoke of its urgency.

The sprite still followed when she reached her modest little home, or not *her* home, precisely. It was a pleasant single-story with a decently maintained lawn and a picket fence. This was a common house available to all who served Gaia, but Auntie Yolanda was currently its only occupant.

She had come to Callahan to get away from the endless war between Gaia and the bogles who plagued Gaia's children. She had come to end her years playing Bingo, and watching returns, and feeding stray cats. An ordinary life for an ordinary woman.

Yet Auntie Yolanda was not ordinary, and this sprite sensed that. It whooshed into the home like a falling leaf. It wouldn't stop chittering, and eventually, Auntie Yolanda knew, she would have to do something about that.

She put a kettle on the stove. She sat and read today's paper as the tree sprite wobbled about on her table, relating harrowing tales. Once the kettle whistled, Auntie Yolanda poured herself some tea, flavored it with honey, and sat on the worn orange couch. The cushions were covered in cat hair.

"All right, all right," Auntie Yolanda said, soothingly. "I'm listening, little one. What's the emergency?"

The chittering began again, and this time, Auntie Yolanda *listened*. She tuned out the sounds of the real world and listened for the world beneath it, the secret world that existed beneath what everyone else could see. She nodded, and grimaced, and took one more sip of her honeyed tea.

"Well," Auntie Yolanda said. "That certainly is an emergency."

The tree sprite chittered something snarky at her.

"Settle down, little one." Auntie Yolanda sipped her tea. "Just let me finish this cup."

They had time. She would call a taxi, because Callahan was big for a small town.

The taxi arrived twenty minutes later, long after her tea was done. The cabbie, a large man with a big smile, greeted her with a wave and a "How's your day been?" Auntie Yolanda offered only a token pleasantry before stating her destination and staring out the window.

The tree sprite hopped in beside her — it was a surprisingly single-minded little thing — and they drove across town to Sadie Parker's sagging white rancher. It was one of several houses off Service Road 80, a path untraveled by most. It was closer to nature than any house in Callahan, which explained things.

"This the place?" her cabbie asked.

"Yes." Auntie Yolanda paid the man.

"Your granddaughter live here?" Apparently, this particularly cabbie enjoyed awkward conversations.

"No." Auntie Yolanda stepped out into the cold and drizzle. "Have a safe trip home, young man."

She stood on the lawn until he drove off. Only then did she walk toward the run-down rancher, tree sprite dogging her heels. She climbed the creaky, peeling steps. She knocked on the battered front door.

Floors creaked, and then the door opened a crack. A frazzled woman who looked to be in her mid-thirties peeked past the door chain. "Yes?"

The tree sprite whooshed in through the door crack, chittering happily and bouncing around the room. It had a strong attachment to this place, Auntie Yolanda saw now. A strong attachment to this little girl.

Auntie Yolanda smiled and breathed out Gaia's breath. "Your daughter is very sick."

Sadie Parker's mother stiffened with Auntie Yolanda said that, but only for a moment. Gaia's breath was a powerful relaxant. Soon enough, the younger woman unchained her door and invited Auntie Yolanda inside.

"I'm Jessica," Jessica Parker said, in a way that implied she wasn't quite awake just now. "And yes, poor Sadie has been ill for the past few weeks. We're saving for a doctor visit."

"Is she in her room now?" Auntie Yolanda asked.

"She's sleeping."

"I'd like to see her."

"Okay." Jessica led her down the hall with slightly drunken steps.

The tree sprite knew the way, obviously, yet it hesitated outside Sadie Parker's door. It bounced from stilt leg to stilt leg, chittering angrily. A bogle drunk off a child's energy would be sluggish in the daytime, unlikely to stir for a tasty tree sprite, but the tree sprite couldn't be sure of that. The fact that it would wander this close to its primary predator told Auntie Yolanda just how much it loved Sadie Parker.

"Could you get me a glass of water, dear?" Auntie Yolanda asked.

"Of course," Jessica said. They both waited.

"Now, if you don't mind."

"Yes." Jessica turned slowly. "I'll see if I can find some ice."

Auntie Yolanda took a moment to center herself before bracing what waited inside. She traced the tiny ley lines stitched into her wrinkled palms with her thumbs. She traced glyphs of protection on her heart, mind, and loins. She stepped into the darkened bedroom and wrinkled her nose at the stench.

Normal people couldn't smell a bogle, but women like her couldn't stop smelling them. Its stench was an ancient stench, like pitch bubbling in a methane swamp. Sadie Parker's eight-year-old form breathed fitfully in her little bed, covers pulled to her chin. Her eyes twitched, and sweat rolled down her brow.

Auntie Yolanda stood silently and let her eyes adjust. Once the room was twilight, she swept its length for possibilities. It was obvious the Parkers didn't have much, but what they had, they spent on their daughter. Stuffed animals had no wood in them, so those were out. The xylophone had wood, but not enough, and though the desk and chair seemed perfect, those were too obvious for a crafty bogle.

Her eyes fixed on the wooden monkey atop Sadie's tall bookshelf, a battered representation of See No Evil. Hear and Speak were missing. It was likely Sadie found the monkey while walking, or riding her bike, or in her backyard. That was how bogles entered a home, as innocuous objects discovered by chance.

Its hateful mind shrieked into hers before Auntie Yolanda could glyph anything.

She gasped as the bogle's unexpected attack tore open her surface thoughts. It wriggled about inside her head, lashing out madly at memories of Auntie Yolanda's own daughter, and her dead husband, and her parents and friends. It, too, could smell Gaia's blessing, and that smell made it vengeful and mean.

Auntie Yolanda took a step as her head pounded. She took another as her palms bled. She felt her heart slow and her lungs swell, but she kept walking. This old body still had a few years of fight left.

She fell to her knees at the bookshelf, glaring at See No Evil. The boggle taunted and tormented her, just out of reach. She pulled herself up with a trembling arm. She stretched out one hand as the bogle chewed on her good memories, polluting, corrupting, distorting.

One of her bleeding fingers glowed green. When she touched the wooden monkey, it vanished with a hellish shriek. The smell vanished.

Auntie Yolanda collapsed against the bookshelf, sucking in deep breaths. So much for pushing sixty. She felt at least seventy now. Maybe seventy-two.

Jessica Parker entered the room and gasped. She hurried over, water in hand. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, dear." Auntie Yolanda glanced at Sadie Parker, who breathed evenly in her bed. "I'd like that water now, if you don't mind."

Jessica handed it to her. Auntie Yolanda drank. When she was done, she handed the empty glass back and watched the tree sprite climb into bed with the little girl it loved.

"Sadie will be fine now," Auntie Yolanda told Jessica.

"Really?" Jessica didn't question that, because you didn't question things while in a dream.

"When she tells you about the little sprites who live here," Auntie Yolanda said, "believe her."

"How did you..." Jessica blinked. "How do you know about her imaginary friends?"

"They aren't imaginary," Auntie Yolanda said, "any more than I am. When Sadie turns fourteen, send her to 10 Roanake Way, across town. I'll be waiting. I'll teach her everything."

"All right," Jessica said.

From the bed, Sadie Parker's tree sprite chittered encouragement.

THE END

# Weird Shit

LA. The City of Angels. More than 4 million souls call this city home and they all have a story to tell. This is mine.

I was born without a shadow. It’s not something that I noticed until another kid pointed it out to me one day. I never gave it another thought until one hot summer day.

I was walking home and the pavement was hot enough to fry an egg on, if anyone had an egg to waste, which in my neighbourhood no one did. I stopped to cool down in the shade of a tree, and once I’d left it thought how good it would be if I could carry its shade around with me. Suddenly I had my very own personal shade to keep some of the sun off my head the entire way home. From that day forward whenever I wanted a shadow for any reason whatsoever I could call them.

Unsurprisingly with a talent like that I became a P.I. My name’s Gabriel (yeah, just like the angel), although I prefer Gabe. Having shadows at my command makes me a successful P.I. I can find things and people better than anyone else with my largely unnoticed buddies. Of course it also seems to bring me what I refer to as ‘weird shit’ cases. I have an entire section in my filing cabinet devoted to them. X-Files has got nothing on me, baby.

It was late in July, it was hotter than hell outside and business was slow. I was playing cards with a bored shadow and wondering how I was going to make next month’s rent when she walked into my office.

The shadow made itself scarce and I swept the cards into an open drawer.

“Mr Wood?” she drawled in a voice like warm honey.

“Gabe,” I acknowledged her, and took the opportunity to examine her without making it look like I was sizing her up, it’s a P.I thing. She was a looker, classy, tall, blonde, legs that went on for days. Her outfit was pure Rodeo Drive, not Walmart. She was a long way from home.

“I just walked in,” she said motioning at the door, “it wasn’t locked and there’s no…”

“Receptionist,” I finished for her. “I don’t have one. How can I help you Ms…”

“Mills, and its Mrs,” she looked at the empty chair on the other side of my desk that I use for clients. I don’t get many walk ins, most of my business is done over the phone, the internet, at a client’s house or a neutral bar or diner of their choosing.

“Coffee?” I asked, waving my hand at my battered machine.

Her face twisted with distaste and she refused. Good move on her part. The coffee is terrible.

“I’ll cut to the chase Mr Wood. I need you to find out if my husband is cheating on me. He’s been acting strangely for the last three months.”

“Define strange.”

“Moody, jumpy, he has private conversations that I know aren’t work related, he’s out at odd hours, especially now when there’s a full moon. He’s been that way ever since our gardener was found dead.”

“Excuse me? Your gardener was found dead?”

“Yes, poor Carlos. They think he was on his way to work, and it looked like he had been mauled by a pack of wild dogs…”

I did vaguely remember hearing something about it. It was being viewed as suspicious, because LA is just crawling with packs of murderous wild dogs.

“Michael barely knew Carlos, but he took the death very hard.”

“Michael Mills?” I asked. “You’re married to Michael Mason Mills?”

The blonde nodded.

Michael Mason Mills III, also known as Triple M, was one of the priciest attorneys in town. I suddenly realised why, despite having a lot of money and being able to afford better than me, Mrs Beverley Mills had turned up at my doorstep. I was cheap, but I was also largely unknown to anyone in her circles. I still had to ask.

“Why me?”

“You helped find Desdemona’s missing jewellery.”

I remembered that case. It was in my weird shit file. It was nice jewellery, what no one else knew was that the damned stuff was cursed. I barely got out with my life, but she did pay well.

Long story short was that Beverley Mills agreed to my terms and conditions, paid my retainer upfront from a wad of bills that could have choked a horse, which she pulled with blithe unconcern from her Louis Vuitton handbag.

The shadows did their thing, and before long I was parked out near the Hollywood sign on a cloudy night looking for a cheating lawyer, to see if I could produce a ‘money shot’ that would give Beverley Mills grounds for divorce and access to his substantial fortune. At the very least she’d get the Beverley Hills mansion. Yeah, that’s right Beverley Mills from Beverley Hills, it made me laugh, too.

I didn’t have long to wait. The clouds blotted out the moon, and I worried. I hate it when I don’t have access to the shadows. They don’t have physical forms, but they can still be handy in a fight. I felt the reassuring bulge of my pistol in the shoulder holster. A late model BMW cruised up and rolled to a stop. That had to be Triple M. Yep, there he was, sharp tailored suit that if anything cost even more than the one his wife had worn into my office.

He looked around, as if he was scanning for any onlookers, I was hidden safely in my car with a good long range telephoto lens. Then he took off all his clothes, tossed them into the car and dropped to all fours. What the fuck?

The clouds uncovered the moon and a shadow floated down next to me, it pointed urgently at the sign, and from around the D, a lady approached. She was younger than Mrs Mills, but also a knockout. Clearly Triple M had a type.

“Who’s a good boy?” she cooed at the lawyer on all fours. He looked up, barked once and then let his tongue roll out like a dog. Even if there was absolutely nothing supernatural about this case it was going into the weird shit file.

After hotshot lawyer licked the newcomer’s hand, she threw off all her clothing and then things got really strange. Right in front of my disbelieving eyes, she threw her head back, howled at the moon and turned into a wolf. As I madly snapped shots of the transformation, all the pieces fell into place.

She was a werewolf. So many things made sense to me now. Triple M’s behaviour, the reason why a background check had shown him taking on some unusual clients, the strange death of Carlos the gardener. I didn’t know how the lady wolf had done it, but she and her pack had the lawyer believing he was a werewolf and were using it to their advantage. I’d come here to get the guy divorced, but now I was going to try and save his life.

The wolf easily knocked Triple M to the ground, he rolled over onto his back and meekly submitted to her, she nipped him sharply on the side and he flopped over onto his front, she raked her claws down his back. I jumped out of the car, the wolf leapt off Michael Mills’ prostrate form and growled at me, hackles raised. I was in deep shit now. Yes, I had a gun, but I hadn’t been expecting a werewolf and didn’t have silver bullets loaded.

She leapt without warning. Two shadows swooped in from either side and both surprised and disoriented her. The clouds scudded across the moon again and banished the shadows. I got off one shot, which I think went wide, then the moon reappeared over the Hollywood sign. I called to the shadow of one of the L’s. As it closed in on the she wolf, she panicked and took off. I chased her away with a couple more shots. She didn’t know my bullets weren’t silver.

Triple M took some convincing before I made him see he wasn’t a werewolf and to put his clothes back on. I explained the whole thing to him over a cup of coffee in a nearby diner. Wolf lady had mickyed him somehow and given him a powerful hallucinogenic. Her pack had killed Carlos to make the well-heeled lawyer think he’d done it, and then they had him in their pockets. He paid me well to not tell his wife what had been happening, and I cautioned him to stop playing the field. Once I informed some friendly members of the LAPD about the wolves activity he was going to have some fun explaining some of his recent client base.

Yep, this one is going to the top of the weird shit file.

# PLAGUE DOCTOR OF VENICE

“The hell is-a that thing?” said Mario, pointing his gondola oar towards the creature walking the Lido shore. It looked human, only its head and shoulders had melted into its body, creating a bizarre mushroom form.

“That’s what I’m here to find out,” said the fiery haired vixen who’d hired him.

They observed the creature march straight into a tree, bounce back, spin fully around, and continue on in the opposite direction. It eventually hit a wall, bounced away, another spin, and shuffled on back towards the tree.

“As goomba as you can get,” said she, half-giggling.

Mario gave her a questioning eye. “What’s-a goomba?”

She shrugged. “Just an old saying.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Only if you let them bump into you.”

Although Mario didn’t intend to leave the water, he was still inclined to turn back to Venice. The newspapers reported the Lido di Venezia had been quarantined due to an unusual outbreak, but he’d merely thought it a new strain of flu. Nothing mentioned fungal zombies. How widespread was this? The Lido was a seven-mile sandbar home to near twenty-thousand residents. He cringed to wild visions of serene Venice drowning beneath a wave of mindless mushroom flesh-blobs.

His oar struck something spongy. He peered down into the lagoon and almost fell in. One of the cursed things was floating face up, treading water, staring at him through cross-eyes sunk between its former breasts!

“Looks cute,” she said. “In a malevolent mutant way.”

“That-a does it!” cried Mario. “Let’s-a go… back to Venice!”

“Don’t even think about it,” she said, getting up to snatch the oar. “I’ll knock you overboard if I have to.”

“Listen lady--”

“The name’s Daisy. Daisy Flower. But don’t be fooled; I’m as delicate of a petal as a pumice is smooth. Now are you going to get me to Poveglia, or are you going to take a dip with our gormless friend over there?”

“Poveglia? The plague island?”

“The one shaped like a giant parasite, that’s right.”

“You think-a this is the Black Death?”

“In a way. The Black Death never actually hit Venice despite what history claims. It was used as an excuse to cover up experiments on the locals. A loony doctor was exposing them to Q-pah--a pathogen unique to this island--looking to make super soldiers to win the thirty-year war.”

Mario came over faint. Cover-ups? Medieval bio-warfare…? Freaking goombas!?

He shivered as the fabled island of death appeared on the horizon. Its soils were supposedly seeded with the bones of the diseased. The tower of a former church, once turned lighthouse, rose from the overgrowth like a chimney. A miasma hung about the tip of its spire.

As they floated around to the island’s south side, the ancient asylum came into view, encased in a cage of scaffolding, its empty windows void and lifeless.

Mario’s gape dropped another inch when Daisy pulled a crossbow from her backpack and began prepping a bolt. “You’re-a no tourist, are you?”

“No kidding, sweetie.”

“What are you planning?”

“To stop the latest psycho-bastard hell-bent on playing plague doctor, duh.” She craned her neck to the island.

“Pull into that pier, would you.”

Mario guided the gondola towards the plank platform.

“Ease up,” said Daisy. “They’ve let loose the welcome crew.”

Mario almost dropped his oar on seeing five melted men shambling towards them from the trees. “What do we do?” he stuttered.

“Just hold,” said Daisy, calm as clouds.

They did, and one by one the malevolent minions walked straight off the edge of the pier and plopped into the lagoon.

“Super soldiers, huh?” said Mario.

“The project was a failure. That’s why--”

A shriek akin to a witch’s cackle struck Mario with symptoms of pneumonia. There, on the cross of the old church tower, clung a man in a long navy hooded robe, face covered by a beige mask with crystal eyes and a beak like that of a vulture. In his free hand he carried a short cane capped with a sickly green gem, which he waved like a glorified wand.

Daisy pointed her crossbow at him, but before she could fire, a pair of winged-shells had swooped down and lifted her straight off the boat!

While cowering, Mario watched through one eye as what he could only describe as flying turtles flew Daisy beyond the tower. He winced as her shrill cry of his name echoed faintly overhead, and when he looked again the plague doctor was gone.

Common sense told Mario to leave her to this morbid fate. Alas, unlike his jealous brother, a heroic tendon stretched taught in his heart; he just couldn’t leave a damsel to distress. Hating himself, he took the gondola to the pier.

A flagless pole stood outside the church tower. Mario thought nothing of this odd erection--no less than the box of fireworks beside it. Discerning nothing of importance in the area, he was about to head on to the building when he noticed a large cylinder protruding horizontally from the hillside. A closer inspection revealed it to be hollow, large enough to walk through.

“I’m-a no plumber,” he uttered to himself. “But this-a don’t look like no sewer pipe.”

Barely ten steps in, a lone bat glided down in a deep U towards Mario. He should have ducked--he knew this--but on reflex he jumped and the bat hit him clean in the face. He fell into a retreat, the bat flapping wildly on his nose, and by the time it had flown off he was back at the pipe entrance.

Shaken, Mario turned to leave, only to come face to face with a goomba. The thing’s sudden appearance shocked him so much that he jumped anew, but in his turning momentum, haplessly flung himself onto the depressed head of the mushroom being. The lack of bone structure seemingly extended beyond just the head and the whole being collapsed beneath his weight, becoming a pair of walking legs carrying a wide-eyed staring pizza.

“Any more of this and I’m-a gonna lose my last life!” Mario lamented.

An echoing shriek made him cringe. “I’m-a coming, Daisy,” he said, hurrying on.

The darkness made the pipe seem deeper than it was, and not far in it opened up into a tall dome shaped chamber.

“Do you plan to infect me?” said Daisy from a cage at the far end.

“No, my pretty,” answered the plague doctor from a table of vials nearby. “Human biology is incompatible with Q-pah. That was the failing of my predecessors. The virus has its greatest effect with reptiles.”

“Then why have you brought me here?”

“For dinner, of course.”

“I will never date you!”

The beak of the doctor’s mask sunk in a duality of sadness and sadism. A deep growl spilled forth… but not from him.

It was then that Mario noticed a second tunnel beyond iron bars on the other side of the chamber, one at least three times as tall as that he’d come in by. And something big and spiky lurked beyond. A scaly claw gripped a bar and brought him to whimper.

“Who’s there?” screeched the doctor.

“It’s-a me. Mario,” he said, honestly, stepping out.

Daisy face-palmed.

“Fool!” cried the doctor, rushing to a big button by the bars. He struck it, and the barrier started to raise.

“Behold his magnificence. Behold his glory!”

“Wowser,” said Daisy as the scaly snout protruded from the shadows.

“Mama mia,” cried Mario when the monster stamped out into the chamber beneath a shell covered in spikes the size of gateposts. The creature rose up on its hind legs and roared, shaking grime off the ceiling.

“What do I do?” Mario implored from Daisy.

“I don’t know! Try pulling that lever to your right.”

“Surely it cannot-a be that easy!”

“Do you have a better idea?!”

He didn’t, so he grabbed the shaft.

“No!” screeched the doctor. “Don’t pull that--”

Too late.

As the lever snapped into place the floor shuddered and split down the middle, opening apart. The beast was so focused on Mario that he didn’t notice until the floor before his feet disappeared. It wavered on the edge of the ever-expanding hole, eventually falling into the abyss. But as it plummeted, a rogue claw clipped the doctor to take him too, and the villain’s screams slowly faded away into the depths, ending in a distant splosh.

“Yahoo!” Mario exclaimed. “I did it!”

“Goomba!” screamed Daisy.

Before Mario could take in the warning, one of the mushroom mutants walked straight into his back, knocking him down into the hole. And as he fell to his doom, the only thing that ran through his head was: “Where-a the f… did that-a come from!?”

# A Sliver of the Sky



A black paw flicked from the shadows and swatted my candle, snuffing out the flame, and spilling wax on a ten-thousand-dollar rug. "Stop that, Py," I said. The wax hardened into another strata of trial-and-error. Teaching myself witchcraft had been a very slow business.

I righted the candle, but as soon as I flicked the lighter, Pywacket pounced on the summoning circle again. I scooped up the annoying cat and tossed her out of the room. As I yanked the study door closed, Py let out a weird yowl and dashed down the hall.

Something walked across my grave.

Yes, I know. I live at the height of the Empire State building in my father's thirty-million-dollar skyscraper condominium, eighty floors from balcony to blacktop. The closest cemetery is a thousand feet down and ten blocks over. Still.

I followed Py into the living room. She was pawing at something on the other side of the thick floor-to-ceiling glass wall that kept us from falling out into the midnight sky above Manhattan. "You are ridiculous, cat." My so-called familiar was frantically chasing a moth.

The endless nightscape beyond the glass drew my eyes. You've seen those photographs of Manhattan at night, like the entire galaxy is laid out at your feet. From our building you can see everything, day and night: the iconic towers, the bridges, the broad avenues, the Hudson. We had an unobstructed view across to the East River until another skyscraper went up right across the street from us. Now we had an unobstructed view that way of partially-finished glass sheathing, open girders, and construction cranes.

Something moved on that building; my eyes caught on it five floors down. Pale, multi-limbed, nearly invisible unless you're a witch. A goddamned jibber, and it wasn't alone. A whole line of the things was crawling up the side of the unfinished skyscraper. I hadn't seen that many since a hunting pack found me practicing spells in the clock tower at college. My father forked out millions to make the four-alarm fire thing go away.

I ran to the kitchen to check on the "insurance policy" I kept in a sealed cookie jar on the top shelf of the walk-in pantry. A piece of masking tape stretched across it with the words "Gillian's Stuff - Do Not Touch". I tilted the jar and the Marble rolled across the bottom, sounding its telltale, queasy music. Still working.

But if the Marble was protecting me and jibbers were still on the way, then someone else was using magic up here in my sliver of the sky.

We kept a telescope in a corner for guests to enjoy the view. It resembled something you'd expect from a retired sea captain, but was actually a powerful electronic device you could mount on the International Space Station. I swung the scope around to the unfinished building and spoke a quick spell of finding, feeling the power leave me.

I still might have missed her except for the glowing end of a cigarette. I zoomed in tight.

The woman dangled her legs off the ledge of an unfinished floor a little higher than ours. My pulse pounded in my throat just looking at her. It's one thing to live up here behind the glass; another to sit right out on the edge of the empty. She must have been using a spell to keep warm in the freezing air; all she wore were hiking boots, shorts, and a blue t-shirt. She had some kind of long, wrapped bundle strapped to her back. I looked without the telescope, crossing my eyes, which is the best way to see magic. Power evanesced all around her. No wonder the jibbers were hunting.

"What do you call a witch on a skyscraper using magic without any protection, Py?" The cat didn't answer. "An idiot, that's what." Someday, I'd find a real familiar, not this little stray that shadowed me home from Central Park. "What is she doing, anyway, sightseeing?"

I needed to do something. I didn't know many witches - a Jamaican taxi driver; the creepy Romanian who sold me the Marble; an annoying woman who worked at the public library. There weren't many of us left in New York, what with all the jibbers. Crowd a few million people together, and you get thousands of the things. It's one of the reasons witches usually live far away, in moors, forests, swamps - or spectacularly high condominiums. So when you're in the city, you shouldn't turn your back on a witch in need.

The hunters were slowly gathering below the woman. They like to wait until they're all in place. I only had a few minutes to think of something.

I didn't know what to do. The Marble blinded the spirit world any magic within a hundred-foot radius, but that wouldn't help my skyscraper-climbing friend. If I'd known a spell to drive the things away, I'd have used it myself.

Py stared at me. Warn her, the green eyes said. Yeah. I could try that.

I rifled through the grimoire for a spell I half-remembered. I'm always amazed at what witches of the past figured out before electricity displaced our ancient technology of the soul. I found it, or close enough, and when I read what I needed, I laughed. "Here's a job for you, cat".

Of course, I had to catch the moth myself, luring it with a flashlight to one of the panels we could open up for fresh air. I spoke the incantation over the trembling creature, whispered my message, and more power rushed out. This needed to work the first time. No witch has unlimited power.

The little insect fluttered out into the frigid night. Across the gap, the mass of jibbers clung to the building just feet below the woman. The pressure of their power hit me. The witch must have sensed it too. She glanced around. I went back to the telescope. Her head turned; she stared at my building, through the glass wall, straight into my eyes. Then she looked away, her attention drawn to something else.

The moth landed on her shoulder. She brushed it away.

A jibber scuttled up right beside the woman, its claws opening and closing.

The moth hovered in front of her and released my words into her ear. "Fellow witch," they said. "There are jibbers, witch-hungry spirits, right below you. Run." It was all I could do.

She froze, then *moved*. She jumped straight up, grabbed the beam over her head, and pulled herself up to the next floor. The jibbers moved too, surging upward, each one crawling over its fellows. Above them, the woman pulled the long object off her back and tossed the wrapping away. She slipped it between her legs and jumped off the building. "Christ!" I screamed.

A shape zoomed up from below, a black shadow slashing the night. A broom. She was riding a broom. I couldn't believe it. "Look at her, Py!" I cheered. Then I saw the grotesque shape clinging to the bristles of the broom.

The broom turned back toward me. It moved too fast, and I couldn't tell what was happening. There was a struggle. The witch blew past, and the shape of a jibber tumbled through the air, spinning, and catching a claw on the open sill of my window.

A jibber was inside the protection cast by the Marble. It would smell me. It would send for the others, and there wasn't a handy clock tower to burn down this time.

Knife-like fingers reached around the glass, and ozone filled the room, prickling my nose. My heart stuttered. I turned in panic, and a black blur streaked past. Pywacket struck the jibber right in it's horrible face. They tumbled back out the window and fell together, into the dark.

My so-called familiar. My little stray.

I dropped to my knees and took a ragged breath. I was freezing, but I didn't even have the strength to close the window.

Py jumped back through window an hour later. They say true familiars have nine lives.

# The Squid Priest

The Doctor had been stealing people into the sewers for years now, turning them into abominations. It was like those puppy mills you used to hear about in the news. Except the breed of choice in this case tended to be a lot less cute and a lot more ghastly.

The information on the Doctor's latest little baddy was pretty scarce. Reports with the words "deadly" and "ugly" were so overused that they held little weight with me these days. But the FBI had attached more than a few missing persons to this creature and that's when I, Cassius Torn, was brought in to take care of the problem.

I'm what you would call one of the last remaining vestiges of an older time in which bad things freely walked the streets at night under the cover of darkness. With some exaggeration, I'm a so-called expert in combating those particular monsters that pop up in your tales of lore and superstition; the very same that were once considered truth only to be later refuted by science and rational thought.

Rational thought to the dogs, I say. When you've seen what I've seen you stop pretending that the laws of nature actually mean something.

Evolution doesn't explain how a postal worker in Maine mutated over the course of days and ended up biting off the heads of his most unlucky customers. A happily married man with three kids and a pooch named Ringo, Darren Porter was the object of a nation-wide special cases manhunt; which is another way of the FBI saying that it was my job to find this perp and put an end to him by any means necessary.

Ultimately, and most unfortunately for a rancher in South Carolina, I found him biting off the heads of cattle, trying to satiate his need with bovines instead of humans. After an unsettling conversation and a sneaky dose of chloroform, I brought him in, and it turns out Darren just needed a little "guidance" and a daily dose of oxyphorusin-B. He actually ended up being a fairly rational person.

Well mostly. Now he's my partner.

"Ugh yuck. What's that shitty smell?"

"It's literally shit that you're smelling, Darren," I replied, wrinkling my nose. "Mind you, this particular stretch of sewer is a bit more foul than most. I wonder why that is."

Darren sighed, but it came out like a wet gurgle.

See, biting off heads requires a few bodily modifications, all of them upsetting. His neck was as thick as a tire rim, his stomach three times the size of any human alive, and where his Adam's apple should have been was another mouth that, when it opened, made him look like a Pez dispenser. In fact, I was looking for a suitable time to start calling him Pez for short, but Darren was still a little touchy about his mutation.

"Mind shining the light over here?"

He lumbered his huge frame beside me and revealed what had us both almost throwing up the bologna sandwiches I'd packed for the road.

"Well won't you look at the size of that. Wow," I said, staring down at the largest piece of shit I'd ever laid eyes on. It was roughly the size of human head, and I laughed to myself, wondering whether Darren was feeling the urge.

"Whatever made that must be the size of a bear," he said, taking a few steps back. "I hate bears. Once when Terri, the kids and I were in Yellowstone –."

"Twice the size of bear," I said, cutting him off. The less he talked about his family the better. He wasn't going back to Maine. "And it's fresh too."

I checked my hip and ran my finger down the spined holster carrying my thin row of silver throwing knives. I acknowledged the reassuring presence of my double-edged sword at my back. The creature was close.

"Ready yourself. No idea what to expect here. The Doctor's been churning out some pretty strange creations as of late. Let's go."

We waded into a deeper stretch of sewer water, and as the cold mush slip over my boots I cursed out loud.

"Stay your tongue!"

"Huh?" I said, turning back at Darren. He shrugged, and then his buggy eyes grew three sizes.

I could vaguely see the silhouette of something in the distance. I snatched the light from my partner's hand and shined it down the tunnel.

"Holy shit."

Ten or more feet tall, it leaned over with a creepy hunch as it waded through the sewage. Its arms were almost as long as its body, splashing in the grimy water beside it as it approached, and its white face was stretched as if pulled tight to invoke a sense of horror. And it worked too. It was like a cross between Gumby and the Grim Reaper.

Strangest of all was its dress. It wore a priest's robe, and from its neck hung a giant golden cross that it held firmly in one hand, ready and loaded to repel the world of its demons. The irony was that the only demon that needed any repelling was this one. I had most the other ones in check.

"Cassius Torn, your sins number among the worst," it bellowed, swinging its golden cross in the glow of the flashlight. "Murder, thievery, adultery, and the neglect of thine father and thine mother. You shall atone for your sins."

"Hmm, pretty accurate actually."

"Darren Porter. Murder. Failing to honor the day of the Sabbath. You too shall atone for your sins. Prepare for death."

"You don't rest on Sundays? What kind of monster are you?" I said to Darren coyly, trying to mask the fact that I was scared shitless.

"Oh that . . . that's just . . ." The big man gagged and, really, I couldn't blame him.

The Squid Priest, as we came to eventually call it, disrobed and an entire nest of snake-like tentacles erupted from its midsection, replacing the legs the Doctor must have sawed off.

"Back, back, back!" I screamed as the tentacles shot from the water. But Darren didn't need telling. The bastard was already twenty meters down the tunnel.

They pulled me backward and then slammed me into the festering water. The tentacles had a hold of my left arm and both of my legs, but the Squid Priest made the mistake of leaving my right arm free. I pulled my sword from its sheath and with a circular cut I lopped off three of its tentacled limbs. It wailed and I saw the water ripple as they retreated. I got back to my feet, threw back my duster and pulled out four throwing knives, holding them between each of my fingers. With the flick of my wrist, the first knife cut through the air and clanked off its golden cross. Shitluck.

"God protects me, sinner," it roared, clutching its cross to its chest. It howled like a thousand demons. Now I'd gone and pissed it off.

I pulled my hand back, tried to steady my feet on the slimy surface below the water, and let the final four knives fly. The tentacles erupted from the water, intercepting two of them. Another flew just right of its head, and the final dagger connected and. . .

"What the –?"

It rang of the cross yet again. No one had luck *that* bad. Was there really divine intervention at work here?

I should have postponed my contemplation on the existence of God, for it only took a moment's slip for the tentacles to wrap around my body and roll me into a slimy sausage roll. With my free arm I swung my sword wildly, but there was no power behind the strikes. The Squid Priest pulled me toward its writhing body, and I positioned my sword to run it through with the momentum. But as soon as I got within a few feet, something unseen ripped it from my grasp and it struck the cross in its middle before clattering into the muck.

It really would have been nice to die a believer. The cross was magnetic.

"Atonement has come!" it said, and before I could protest a tentacle ran down the back of my throat and kept going. I squirmed and felt my gag reflex trying to work, but I was done for. It was going to tear apart my insides.

Just as my eyes began to bulge out their sockets, the tentacle went limp and slipped out of my esophagus, covered in stomach acid. I hacked and puked, and when I looked up there was Darren, head flipped open and chomping on what remained of the Squid Priest's head.

"You sly, chicken-shit bastard," I said, staring at a heavenly beam of light shining through an open sewer lid. Darren had slipped in behind and took down the monster in one gulp. He smacked his second set of lips, reattached his neck and grinned. "Not bad, Pez. Not bad."

END

# Dead Men's Diets

It started out like any other night in Swansea.

He was leaning against a wall when I found him. Tucked between the skips round the back of the clubs. From a distance he could have been anyone. Just another sorry soul who'd partied a little too hard. Wind Street's full of that type. But someone trained would spot the signs. The soft moaning. The shuffling of his feet. The hole in his skull that oozed grey matter.

When he turned to me and coughed up a significant portion of his own stomach, it would have been obvious to anyone that he was the zombie we were looking for. He stared at me with the quizzical expression that only someone with half a face missing can manage.

I drew my weapon, ready for him to charge. "I have a Taser," I warned him. Not much chance it would work, but worth a try. He'd lost too much brain to make sense of the words. He was losing even more as I watched.

Sure enough, despite my warning, he took a step forward. "Last warning," I said, as he took another. Then another. He was gaining speed.

"Taser!" I called out, and pulled the trigger. The two lines arced out, hitting the zombie in the chest - in fact, one went some way into his chest. The familiar click-click-click sounded off as electricity surged down the cables. The zombie jerked and twitched at the other end, his reanimated nervous system vulnerable to such a shock. Flesh crisped and blackened. He toppled, dead for a second time, into the vomit and broken glass of the alleyway.

"Great," I muttered. "Now he's filthy and bleeding as well as dead."

There was no way I could get a partially shredded corpse back to HQ on my own, so I pulled out my phone and called for help. Text came back soon: 4 mins out. I sighed, crouched by the body and retrieved my Taser cables.

It was clearly going to be one of those nights.

\*

"What'd you do to this one, Will?" Colin asked me as the two aides dropped the zombie onto the autopsy slab.

I shrugged. "Taser."

"Taser?" Colin shook his head. "We're not going to get anything from him now, are we? Couldn't you have just shot him a few times? Usually does the trick. And it leaves the brain intact," he added pointedly.

"Much as I'd like to help you," I replied, "I've had my gun privileges revoked.

"What? How come?"

"Remember that weretiger I shot in Cardiff last month?"

Colin nodded.

"Turns out it was a housecat. A massive, striped housecat, but a housecat nonetheless." I rubbed my chin. "Owner threatened to sue unless I was punished. So - " I finished by indicating the Taser at my hip.

"Ridiculous," said Colin. I nodded in agreement, and then he set to work on the body. There wasn't much work to be done in that regard, and he was capable of doing the necessities himself, so while I waited I busied myself with examining the various objects around Colin's morgue.

Row after row of preserved organs from any number of supernaturals lined the walls. Jars of pixie wings and fairy scales. The stuffed and labelled body of a stillborn werewolf pup rested in a half-open crate. An arac's lungs dominated the north wall. I was happy to see that exhibit in so prominent a place. Had taken me a fair bit of legwork to kill the thing.

"Got something," said Colin, pulling my attention back to the slab.

"What is it?" I asked.

He offered me a handful of innards. "Take a look."

I stepped back. "I'm not touching it. That's disgusting."

Colin rolled his eyes. "Seriously? You'll crawl through goblin-infested sewers, but you won't touch something that all humans have inside them?"

"Inside, Colin. Inside," I hissed. "I am perfectly happy to breathe, doesn't mean I want to go around fondling people's lungs."

"Actually it's a stomach," said Colin, not at all helpfully. With his spare hand he pulled something out of the reeking organ. "At least take a look at this."

I grimaced and accepted his offering. It was a ring. Small, silver and studded with a single clear gemstone. A cheap engagement ring, perhaps. "Reckon he ate someone?" I asked, though I was already forming a rather different opinion.

Colin shook his head. "No finger with it." He pointed at the ring. "Probably someone put that in him on purpose. Seen stuff like that before. Good quality rings will do well in the current market."

Suspicions confirmed then. "Someone's using zombies as smuggling mules."

Colin nodded. "Certainly looks that way."

"He have anything else on him? Some way to identify the buyer?"

"Buyer could be anyone for a little thing like that. I'll keep rummaging through, but it looks that was all his cargo." Colin shrugged. "Poor bloke didn't even have a wallet. Just some cash in the pocket and a takeaway menu."

"Keep looking then." I turned to leave. "I'll be at my desk if - " I stopped, struck by something he'd said. "Colin," I asked, "did you say he had a takeaway menu?"

\*

Dai's Dive was one of the most notorious kebab joints in Swansea. Multiple accusations of health violations, a food hygiene rating of 1, rumours it was staffed by illegal immigrants. The place was a mess. It didn't even do chips.

Until now though, it had never been a matter for us. No matter how bad food was, it didn't merit the involvement of the Department of Supernature. But with a menu from the Dive found on a smuggler's zombie, Dai was about to feel the full wrath of the Department's Swansea Branch.

\*

A small bell tinkled gently as I entered. It all looked ordinary enough. Dirty tiled floor. Bent plastic chairs attached to lopsided tables. No CCTV. Behind the counter was a towering drinks cooler, and several rotating slabs of greasy meat, tended to by a greasier man.

"Hello, Dai," I said.

"I'm Mike," he replied. "Dai were me dad."

I nodded. "I see." A quick glance over Mike's shoulder revealed the presence of several men in the kitchen. Far more than such a small, poorly-maintained kebab shop would need to run it.

"Busy night?" I asked.

Mike shrugged. "Not yet." He waved a meat fork at me. "Gotta wait 'til the drunks come out. Then it'll turn."

I pretended to study the menu as he spoke, trying to get a better look at the kitchen staff. "What do you recommend?" I asked, craning my neck. I could discern at least four individuals in the other room. All moving slowly. Shuffling, I would have said. Looked like I'd come to the right place.

"It's all good," Mike answered, lying through the gaps in his teeth. "Do you a special if you want?"

"How about," I said, reaching into my pocket, "you show me what's going on in the kitchen." I pulled out my ID, set it on the counter.

Mike squinted at the tiny lettering. "Got a warrant?" he asked. In the reflection of the drinks cooler I saw him moving his hand under the counter. Weapon? I wondered. Or alarm?

"No warrant," I admitted. "Just a Taser." To demonstrate my point, I pulled it from its holster and fired at Mike's chest. He jiggled a bit before collapsing to the floor. I moved to his side of the counter and checked his pulse. He was alive, and disturbingly greasier to the touch than I'd feared. There was going to be a lot of paperwork after this one.

In retrospect, this is probably why the up-aboves revoked my gun privileges.

Reloading the cables of my Taser, I entered the kitchen. I'm pretty sure that what I saw next scarred me for life.

\*

I don't know what I expected - maybe a well-organised smuggling group, or surgeons implanting valuables into newly resurrected cadavers - but what I got was something else entirely.

Zombies.

Preparing food.

I choked back bile.

There were five in total, all holding various implements of the cook's trade. Knives, forks, rolling pins. All covered in flakes of dead skin. One of the zombies was preparing pizza bases, mixing in an alarming quantity of his own drool as he ponderously went about his task.

These weren't smugglers, I realised. This was a resurrected labour force. The cheapest you could get. So stupid they'd do anything you told them. Probably stupid enough to try eating jewellery to sate their unnatural appetites too. No wonder nobody ate here unless they were drunk. These docile zombies were no threat to me, so I put away my Taser and pulled out my mobile. I called HQ, asked for a cleanup team, and did my best not to think about food.

The case was wrapped up quickly and away from the public eye, but I haven't gone near a kebab shop since.

# Troll's End

There are internet trolls all over. The café’s full of them. But you take your work seriously, a brave artist of man’s newest art form. You hang your bag over a shoulder, heavy with your laptop and snacks, and prepare to depart your Troll’s Den. It will be a fun night, and you giggle with the thrill of coming pain. You step outside. The streetlights are all out in the deep winter cold and dark of the city.

Your front door should slam shut behind you but does not. In that flickering moment of mild surprise, a firm grip settles onto your shoulder like a lifelong burden you forgot you were carrying. Your heels thump over the threshold as you are hauled back inside like a child’s plaything. The door thuds closed. The hall is darker now.

Your bag is ripped from you and sent careening down the hall. A hand snakes over your shoulder to your neck. Sharp-nailed fingers grasp your throat. They lift, forcing your head up and back. You can see nothing but the shadowed ceiling. A thin voice, wet with working lips, breathes across your ear with a scent like rotting meat. “Hmm. No. Hm-hmm? Stay. Time for lessons. Yes. For memories.”

Tingling fear dimples your skin. You raise your arms, but the fingers tighten, and faint crunches in your windpipe bring tears to your eyes, wide with terror now and roving the edges of your vision.

“Shh. Hmm. It talked. I, ah, listened. Yes. Did it think no one heard? Hmm? I heard it. Yes.”

“Who-,” you gasp, but the fingers inflict more pain.

“Shhh,” giggles the voice. “Turns. It had its turn. Many turns. Hmm? Yes. Many whispers in many ears. Yes. Ah, it must remember. So it can know. Hurtfuls it made. So many. I listened. Ah, and I heard them. And I waited for the master. Hmm.”

“What mast-”

With sudden strength, the hands lift you by the head and neck. Your feet leave the floor. There is a quick series of painful pops in your neck. The grip shakes you as your legs bicycle in the air.

“Shhh!” the voice rasps in your ear. The hands slam you into a dingy wall. The impact knocks the air from your lungs. Your toes thump into the plaster.

“Lisssten,” coos the voice. A hand grasps a fistful of hair, and you hang by your hair as it forces your face harder into the wall. Your breath whistles through your cruelly bent nose.

The voice drops deep, far deeper than a human’s. “Polly Barton. Lisa Thompson. Marcus Weller,” it chants, picking up speed. “Jimmy Kincaid. Shane Douglas. Sharon Schwinabart.” On and on the voice mutters name after name after name, never pausing for breath, as though it had been inhaling all your life, waiting for this moment. Each name summons a ghostly face in your mind, tinged with someone else’s pain. Some of your prey you recall immediately. Others take longer: Jimmy’s face wafts up from childhood, Sharon’s from your university days. All of them distraught. Because of you.

Tears ooze from your clenched eyes. With each vision you feel their aching hurts inside; meaningless fun then. But not now. Despair, loneliness, and sadness engulf you from some. Your cheeks burn with embarrassment and soul-crushing shame from others. Others make your jaw clench with rage so hard your teeth grind loud enough to hear.

“Yes. Hmm. It was busy, busy. Many hurtfuls. Hmm? I remember. Always. Now it remembers. Yes.” Something grasps your clothing and slowly rips it from your back like a child peeling a grape. Buttons rap against the floor while the fabric tears harshly against your skin. The pressure against the wall does not relent, but the hand lowers you. You scream as your face scrapes down the wall.

“Shhh! So many hurtfuls. Ah. So little time. Hmm?”

A hand grasps one shoe and rips it off, then the other. Each time, your legs pop in the hips from the force of it. Your nakedness complete, the cold air brings deep, spasming shivers.

“LepperKhan96. Dominos4U. Allison McAllister, Dublindrummer,” the voice drones, forcing your face hard against the wall with each name. You see pained faces, framed in darkness and lit by computer screen light, glistening with tears. Though you have never seen them, you recognize each of your discarded playthings: the ones you hurt; the ones you isolated; the ones you teased. You shudder with the damage and pain that seeps from their faces, slick with tears or blank with the shock and suffering your cleverness engineered. The gay girl you outed. The lonely boy you told to hang himself, twisting slowly in a dark closet. The ones you shamed.

The voice goes on and on while your breath bubbles through snot or blood oozing from your nose. Sharp nails scrape against the back of your neck and seize the gold chain. The necklace snaps. A gray, mottled fist with coarsely chewed black nails dangles your crucifix in front of you, then drops it. The sound is lost behind the names.

After an eternity, the voice stops. Needle teeth bite through your ear, but your numbed body does not react. A stinging tongue licks the wound. Blood and saliva run down your neck, drip onto your naked shoulder.

“Yes. It recalls now. Hmm? It knows what comes. Ah. It does. I can smell it.”

With horror, you notice your thighs, legs, and feet are slick with warm urine, already turning cold. You smell the tang of it and moan into the wall.

“Shhh!” the voice says. “It must wait, as I waited. Hmm? For the master. Yes. Does it have questions? Does it wish to beg?”

The hand lifts you up, turns you slowly around.

Through your tear-streaked vision, you behold a hulking, man-shaped thing. Cloudy, pitch-black flames roil over a glistening, leathery hide that undulates as slabs of muscle shift and writhe beneath. It holds you with one of its six massive arms. The head is smooth and long, like a dolphin’s. It has no eyes. Jagged teeth, like chips of obsidian, line the long, narrow jaw. Broad wings of absolute darkness hang over you, blocking all light.

The word “why” sputters from your mouth, but a thick-knuckled hand slaps it away.

“Because the God demands. Hmm? Vengeance is His. Yes. But he gives it, ah, to the master. But the master does not give it to us. No. Hmm. No, never.” The creature lifts you to its face and begins the litany of names again.

It is worse than before. The emotions tear through you like an arctic wind. You sob as you hang, as stiff with terror as a child’s doll.

“Not ready. No. Hmm? Not ready for the master. No. The hurtfuls should show on the outside. Yes.” A finger is pressed slowly to your forehead, bringing agony of a kind you’ve never known. Icy fire races across your twitching flesh. Every muscle contracts at once. Your face feels like a creature stapled to a door.

“Ahh. Jimmy’s pain. Hmm?” the creature purrs as he shakes you in the air. Your body convulses. “The poison was for rats. But, ah, it worked. Hmm? Yes. He didn’t know it would hurt. But you knew. Hmm? Yes. You knew he would suffer. But you pushed him. And, ah, he was just the first.” The creature draws you closer still. A gray-purple tongue like an eel slides out and licks the bloody snot from under your nose as you gasp and writhe.

“We have so many more. Hmm? So many hurtfuls to remember. Lisa’s. Yes.”

You recall Lisa drowning in her car in a river after another of her melancholies. A weakling wretch, you called her.

“Slow and cold. Hmm? Slow and cold and alone in the wet darkness. Yes. But Polly burned. Yes. And for even longer. Very strong in the body. But, ah, weak in the spirit. Weak enough for you, hmm?”

Your bowels loose themselves. The creature leans down, and a broad grin of jagged black teeth gapes at your handiwork.

“Yes!” it giggles, shaking you. “Now the hurtful shows.”

It drops you onto the floor. Limp as a dead fish, you sprawl in your own filth as the creature’s arms wave in twisting circles. A green-tinted haze fills the room, blocking out the cheap light fixture in what had been your home, your Troll’s Den as you called it.

“Now the master will see you. Hmm? Now you will learn justice and vengeance. And, ah, a great many things.”

Somewhere in the haze, you sense there is a new path, one leading away, treading a narrow way between the reality of things that are and the horror of what shall be. It drags you by your hair in a direction that defies everything you’ve ever heard about the world.

# The Boy Who Spoke Dakota

Anthony swerved around a rock and rolled down a short drop, savoring the freedom of aloneness. He stood, cranking the pedals of his mountain bike, and charged up a steep slope before carefully riding over a fallen log. He loved the trails at Theodore Wirth Park and completed another three circuits before pulling off in the grassy lot at the south end of the course.

“It went that way!” shouted a boy somewhere behind him. Anthony did not wait to see what was going on; he clipped back in and sped into the woods.

Clamping his fingers around the handlebars, he dropped to a lower gear and powered through the course. He focused on the angles of the turns, the burn in his muscles, the momentum of the hills. He danced.

Approaching the last little uphill before the end of the loop, a blue blur darted in front of him. He braked hard and jerked his right ankle, unclipping. He teetered dangerously to the left, and then shifted the front wheel to tip him to the right. Balance stabilized, he glanced up the hill before him and sighed. He would have to walk it. After unclipping his left pedal and putting his foot down, he swung his right leg behind him and dismounted.

Three kids bolted from the trees, crossing the mountain biking path. One of them hit Anthony’s front wheel.

“Hey!” he yelled. “Watch it!” Nobody looked back.

Walking his bike up the hill, he could hear them yapping.

“Did you get a picture?”

“I can’t believe how blue it is!”

“Is it slimy?”

“Help! Please, help me!” At that, Anthony looked up. That wasn’t English.

He mounted his bike and reluctantly rode toward the noise. A boy with the stature of a hockey player had his arms wrapped around a blue creature. It looked like an octopus, blobby with lots of limbs that could propel it forward. It squirmed in the boy’s grip, and Anthony watched as a round hole appeared in the side. A mouth. “Please, help!”

Was that thing really speaking Dakota?

Before Anthony knew what he was doing, he found himself saying, “Stop.”

“Why?” He recognized that voice. His neighbor, Ashley, stood with her arms crossed.

“He’s upset.”

“How do you know? Maybe it likes being held, like a cat.”

“He told me. He’s speaking Dakota.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows animals can’t talk. Not even Native American languages.” *What a know-it-all.* Mom said Ashley was jealous that he could speak two languages. Anthony said that if that was true and Ashley was as smart as she thought she was, she should just learn another language. Mom didn’t like that.

“Ashley, let him go.” She pulled out her phone, probably taking pictures. He gripped his handlebars so tightly they dug into the tendons of his hands.

Then Ashley shrugged, putting her phone away. “Come on guys.” She stalked off. The hockey player put the creature down, surprisingly gently, and then followed.

The creature had eyes on the top of its head, and he watched the kids until he couldn’t see them any more. Then it turned to Anthony.

“Thank you,” he said, again in Dakota.

“No big deal.”

The creature seemed to accept that, but he made no move to leave.

“Are you hurt?” asked Anthony.

The creature seemed to turn a darker shade of blue. “No.” Were his eyes watering? “I’m lost,” he sobbed.

Anthony put his hands out, trying to make calming gestures. “Where do you need to go?”

“Bde Maka Ska.”

“The lake?”

The creature nodded.

“That’s kind of far away.”

“I know.” Tears streamed out of the creature’s eyes.

It felt like somebody had taken a hex wrench to Anthony's heart and twisted. “I know how to get there.”

The creature sniffled and wiped his eyes with a tentacle. “You do?”

“Yes. You follow the bike path and head south.” He pointed toward Bde Maka Ska.

The creature’s gaze followed Anthony’s arm. “What if I get lost again?” he said, quavering.

Anthony hesitated. His legs ached and his stomach grumbled. He leaned over his handlebars, watching the creature. Eventually, it turned toward the bike path, raising half of its tentacles, preparing to move.

Anthony read reluctance in every slow-moving tentacle, each lurch of the body.

“Alright, I’ll take you there.” The creature’s eyes stood straight up and it spun around faster than Anthony would have believed possible. It windmilled toward Anthony, reached its tentacles up around the frame of the mountain bike and hung underneath the top bar. It looked like a sloth from the pictures Anthony had seen of the Amazon.

“Watch out for the gears,” he warned.

He clipped his left foot in and forced the pedal down. No wonder the hockey player had grabbed the creature; it was heavy. They lumbered across the grassy lot until they hit pavement.

The riding became easier, but remained slow. A mountain bike did not make for fast riding, especially when weighed down by a lump of an animal. The creature stayed quiet. When they rode over I-394, the blue ball shrank to half his size. Anthony took Kenwood Parkway to the trails over by Cedar Lake, and merged onto the Greenway. As he rode, he tried to process the fact that an animal spoke to him in Dakota. How much truth was there to his grandmother’s stories?

When they arrived at Bde Maka Ska, Anthony rode his bike as close to the water’s edge as he could without riding in.

“Thank you so much!” The creature leaped off the bike, straight into the water. He made a small splash, and Anthony watched a wave of ripples, like the trail of a muskrat, head towards the heart of Bde Maka Ska.

He leaned on his handlebars, staring until the water grew still. Eyeing the sinking sun, he mounted his bike, bemoaning the pain in his sit bones. It would be a slow ride home. He followed the bike path as it wound away from the lakes and back toward the Greenway. As he merged onto the bike path, he looked toward the canal connecting Bde Maka Ska to Lake of the Isles and saw Minnie, the lake monster. It was a sculpture the city rotated between the lakes during the summer. It looked like a plesiosaur, or the Loch Ness monster.

The park system had put her out early this year, it seemed. Then she dipped her head down.

Anthony missed the turn onto the greenway, barreling down the running path toward the canal. He barely unclipped in time to avoid crashing into the water.

“My name is Minnie,” said the plesiosaur, speaking Dakota. “Who are you?”

“Anthony.” He continued staring.

“Hoghen says you brought him home,” she said, nodding to a little blue ball floating alongside Minnie.

“Is that his name?”

Minnie scolded Hoghen. “Didn’t you introduce yourself?” Hoghen trembled.

Minnie sighed, turning to Anthony. “I’m sorry about his behavior. He’s young, and few speak Dakota any more. People scare him.” Anthony gritted his teeth, thinking of Ashley and her friends. “Can I give you anything for your trouble?”

Surprised by the question, Anthony said, “No.” Minnie looked him in the eye, challenging him to change his mind.

Hoghen bumped into her. She looked down at him, then swiftly dove below the surface. Hoghen followed.

Anthony watched the water settle, unable to muster the energy to leave. He took a deep breath, but as he kicked a pedal up, the creatures surfaced. Hoghen propelled himself to the water’s edge and clambered up the shore carrying a small glass bottle. Minnie, her head level with Anthony’s, spoke. “I can’t do as much as I used to. Algae taint the water. But I can still do something.”

Anthony took the vial from Hoghen, peering at its blue green interior. Then he reached for the wooden stopper.

“It’s not for you.”

Confused, he looked at Minnie.

“It’s for the other kids,” she explained. “You accepted Hoghen; they did not. A few drops of this will weaken their preconceptions and open them to new ideas.” Minnie hung her head. “It does not always work as you expect, so be careful.” Anthony took his hand off the top of the bottle and carefully placed it in his pocket. Hoghen scrambled back into the water, snuggling up to Minnie. She looked down at Hoghen but spoke to Anthony.

“You are welcome to visit any time. Spending time with people would be good for Hoghen.”

# Service with a Smile

*The Ventum Toribus Circle, 43 Blackgate Lane. Find your cure there.*

Jake Woodcastle looked at the address written on the small scrap of paper and shivered. A gust of wind buffeted into him, sending his coat-tails billowing in the breeze. For a brief moment, Jake swore he could hear someone giggle in his ear, but a quick look showed there was no-one on the street around.

He quickened his pace.

It had been 5 days now. 5 days since it started.

At first it was a few minor incidents, barely noticeable in the grand scheme of things. A pen came apart in his hand, spilling ink on his shirt. A jogger accidentally ran into him. He stubbed his toe on an old dresser. Unfortunate yes, but nothing to worry about too much.

Then things started getting worse.

A waiter carrying scalding hot coffee tripped and almost severely burnt him. His car lost control out of nowhere, nearly sending him careening off a bridge. A fire burnt his workplace to the ground. And those were just the more obvious incidents.

At this point, Jake was beginning to get unsettled. One near-death accident was one thing, but so many? In such a short period of time? That had to be more than mere coincidence, right?

That was when the truly strange things started happening.

Giggling laughter heard from empty rooms. Blood-like substances pouring from the faucet. Handprints appearing on his bedroom walls. And the nightmares… Jake hadn’t slept for days. He couldn’t risk it. Not with what he’d seen.

Jake had searched everywhere for a solution to his woes. Occult books, spiritual mediums, back-alley magic stores, Google. Hell, he was desperate enough to try searching on Bing. Nothing he found helped. There was nothing but fruitless rumours, scam artists and frauds to be found.

Well, almost.

As luck would have it, he stumbled across one person who posted a story about the exact sorts of things happening to them. Right down the vivid descriptions of the nightmares he suffered every night. He was told that the curse was one that would kill him within a week. However, the person managed to find a cure by visiting the abode of a mysterious exorcist.

That was the address Jake was heading to now. His final hope. His last chance. The one thing he was putting all his faith in, that he prayed would be able to save him...

Which is why he was disappointed when he turned onto Blackgate Lane... to find a single ordinary coffee shop.

No occult store. No exorcist's lair. Just a clean, pleasant-looking coffee shop.

Jake cursed under his breath. Either his directions were wrong or he’d been misled once again. He could only pray it was the former, but if his directions were indeed incorrect, he wasn’t sure how he could find the correct house he was looking for.

As it was, there was only one choice of action. Go into the coffee shop and ask for directions. And possibly get a mocha while he was at it.

“Good afternoon!” The waitress said with a beaming smile. “Can I get your order?”

"Yes, can I get a Caramel Mocha?" Jake said, walking casually up to the counter.

"Right away, sir." The waitress said, typing the order into her till. "Anything else?"

“Actually, now that you mention it, I was wanting to ask about something...” Jake said hesitantly. “Do you know the…” He pulled out the scrap of paper. “…Ventum Toribus Circle? I was told it was around here?”

“The Circle? Of course I know it.” The waitress snorted. “That’s this shop. You’re standing in it.”

Jake blinked. “Eh?”

“Yeah, the shop’s full name is the Ventum Toribus Coffee Circle.” The waitress explained. “Although we also do a range of sandwiches and scones if you’re interested.”

“O-Oh…” Jake felt his heart sink. “I guess I got misled then…”

“Misled?” The waitress tilted her head. “Misled how?”

“Well, it’s a funny thing.” Jake said with a bitter chuckle. “I was told that this was a place I could get an exorcism done.”

“Exorcisms?” The waitress said. “Oh no, you weren’t misled at all then. We do those as well.”

“…I’m sorry?”

“Yeah, we run it as a side business here.” The waitress explained, pulling out a pentacle necklace from beneath her shirt. “Exorcism doesn’t tend to bring in much money these days, so we opened the coffee shop to help make ends meet.”

“You seriously do exorcisms here?” Jake gripped the counter so hard he was worried it might crack. “I will pay whatever you want if you can help me. Please!”

The waitress looked him up and down. Then she took off her apron and waved Jake over to a small side room, near the back.

“Hey Kevin!” She shouted to a burly registrar in the kitchen. “Watch the counter for me! I’ve got someone who needs our ‘special’ services.”

“Gotcha.” Kevin said. “Try not to curse anyone this time, Sam.”

“Ah, that was one time, you big dolt.” The waitress, Sam, rolled her eyes. She gestured at Jake. “Come on, I don’t have all day.”

She opened the door to reveal a storeroom packed to brim with various supernatural knick-knacks. Crystal balls, magical circles, books with garish covers and artefacts that seemed ancient and brimming with potential power.

Sam casually walked past each of these and took a seat on a mottled old chair. “Okay, bub. Tell me exactly what’s been bothering you and I’ll see if I can help.”

As Jake went into a full explanation of everything that had happened to him the last few days, the way he’d been terrorised and nearly killed, Sam’s smile slowly faded into a pensive frown.

“Okay, it sounds like a fairly basic curse.” She said. “I should be able to remove that easily enough. But I’m a bit hesitant to do so at the moment.”

“Wha-Why not?” Jake spluttered.

“Because if I do, there’s a decent chance someone might just put it back.” Sam explained. “See, these kinds of curse don’t come out of nowhere, they need someone to place them. Tell me, before these accidents started happening to you, did you receive any threatening notes in the mail? Or maybe someone drew something on your back? A old crazy witch perhaps?”

“No.” Jake shook his head. “Nothing like that. I can’t imagine anyone who’d want me dead like that, let alone anyone who knows any kind of dark magic.”

Sam scratched her chin. Then a thought clearly struck her. “Say, do you have email on your phone?”

Jake’s brow furrowed. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Pass it here for a second.”

Jake hesitantly passed over his mobile to the waitress/exorcist. Sam quickly switched it on and dove into Jake’s inbox, skimming through a few sections until she found what she was clearly looking for.

“Ah! Here you go!” She said, passing the phone back. “It was hidden in your spam folder.”

Jake frowned and looked down at the screen. The email Sam had highlighted looked like one of those annoying chain letters he had seen every so often.

Beware! If you receive this message, you must send it on to five other people or else you will be cursed! If you do not, the spirits of damned will haunt you for 7 days with bad luck and haunted dreams before they finally kill you! The only way to avoid this fate is to send this email on to five other people before time runs out!

“...I got cursed by a *freaking chain letter?!*”

Sam shrugged. “Happens more often than you might think.”

Jake felt his eye twitch. “But you can fix it, right?”

“Sure.” Sam said, reaching out a hand. “Give me the phone back.”

Jake did so. Sam pressed a few buttons, fiddled around with something for a few minutes and passed the phone back once more.

“There. Done.” She said. “Curse is gone.”

“Really?” Jake blinked. “That was fast. What did you do?”

“Sent the email on to five other people.” Sam said bluntly. “I could’ve done the full exorcism, but it’s just a lot cheaper and easier this way. Exorcisms tend to be fairly violent.”

“But… what about the five people you sent it to?”

“They've been dead for years.” Sam said. “I severely doubt they'll mind being a little cursed as well.”

“So… it’s done.” Jake said, feeling numb. “I’m finally safe.”

“Indeed you are.” Sam smiled and clasped her hands. “Now, is there anything else you need from us?”

Jake felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his chest. “No. That’s all.” He gave a relieved smile. “Thank you so so much for this, by the way. If there’s anything I can do to repay you, anything at all…”

Sam let out a low chuckle. “Well, there is one thing…

**Cafe Reviews: The Ventum Toribus Coffee Circle.**

J. Woodcastle

Five stars! Excellent atmosphere and helpful staff! The Caramel Mocha’s are terrible though…

# Knights and Magic

There was something strange about Morgan Knight. A detail everyone agreed was...unsettling. If only they knew.

Morgan shouldered on her coat and clasped on her necklace, closing the battered door behind her before entering into another snowy night in West Side Chicago. Despite the area, the woman walked with confidence. Head high and shoulders back as she passed by a group of youths, out far too late in such an area to be up to any good. Yet not one so much as glanced her way. As if Knight was nothing more than another shadow of the alley in which they huddled. The red dots of light from their cigarette butts glowed in their fingers as they spoke, voices quiet. Hushed. Tense.

Humans were so oblivious, but even they seemed able to feel something. Energy tingled in the air, growing, rushing across skin like a living breeze. It was always there, the magic, but it seemed restless. Agitated. It was as if it knew what she had planned. She smiled to herself as she passed the group, wondering how much they could sense with their mortal minds.

Walking into a large abandoned and cluttered warehouse a few minutes later, she saw Mordred already waiting and sitting on an old crate near the southern corner. Pale light from a streetlamp crept in through a window to show hair dark as her own, but all tight curls instead of waves.

“You’re late, mother. By…” He paused. Looked at his wrist. “Oh. At least twenty minutes. Weren’t you the one always stressing the importance of punctuality?”

“I’m also the one who brought you back from the edge of death, so I’d think you’d be grateful.”

“If memory serves, that wouldn’t have been necessary if you hadn’t had me playing pawn. Sorry if I still seem a bit sore about that." He shrugged. "But that’s the past. I don't suppose you're still going under that ridiculous name? Le Fey isn’t the most inconspicuous, but you could’ve chosen something more fitting. After all, it's like you once said. Knights don’t-”

“Mordred.” Her grey pierced into his blue, but the glare had no effect other to prompt a humorless laugh. He cocked an eyebrow, looking more amused than insulted at the interruption. Realizing he was trying to push her Morgan reigned in her agitation. Barely.

“Not the time? After all these years of silence. Not even a note. It’s only natural to want to catch up.” He smiled and leaned forward, infuriatingly at ease. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure of crawling out of my hole this evening?”

“Merlin shows himself. Tonight, if all worked as planned. I’ve grown stronger, but not enough to defeat him alone.”

“Ah, and why do you think I’d help? Some last piece of loyalty? If that’s what you think I’ll be leaving.” He started to get up, but she blocked him.

“First reason. It was my magic that linked us when you were healed. If I die, neither knows what will happen. Second. Merlin has likely sensed you’ve arrived. If I don’t die, but he leaves and word gets out that you still live, you will be hunted down. So you’ll help. Because there’s no other option.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“You have my attention.”

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Merlin felt more than saw the barrier go up, blocking him as he stepped beyond the entryway. The assault began immediately.

A gout of flame shot towards him, but he was prepared for the trick and the energy was absorbed by a brooch on his cloak, which brightened as the attack dissipated.

Morgana stood, mere paces away. Remnants of flame still dancing on her fingertips. He regarded her stoically.

“Where is he?”

She smiled without an answer, and then the witch was moving.

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The entire scene descended into chaos within moments. A dance of the elements, brightening the room with flashes of lighting; chilling the air with ice; scorching skin with the heat of flames.

As the two longtime enemies clashed, Mordred watched from the safety of the shadows with unveiled admiration. Even in the midst of dueling, Mordred could feel the warlock’s senses reaching, searching for his hidden presence. But Merlin wouldn’t find him. Though nowhere near as powerful as a full blooded warlock, Mordred had his tricks. So he would stay in the shadows and help destroy the barriers, but that was all the help he would provide.

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It was becoming a long fight. At least seven minutes. Yet as time dragged on, Mordred had still not stepped out from the shadows, but instead he had begun to create obstacles and distractions. Sending glass, wood, and even a few chair legs flying towards Merlin, varying their number, position and homing in even when his target was moving They weren’t strong, but they didn’t have to be to weaken his enchantment, and he couldn’t shoot them all down without opening his back to his more powerful opponent. Slowly but surely he felt his defenses crumbling away.

Morgan scored yet another hit, and he could feel his skin almost bubbling as intense flame superheated the air around him and blurred his vision.

He attempted a return strike, but the attack was deflected, sending the lighting into a crate across the room, which exploded in a shower of splinters. He let loose another attack, one with a wider range, and the pendant around Morgan’s neck glowed with a dark ruby light as she stumbled back a step. The smallest of cracks appeared in its center, as with his own jeweled broach, though she had been hit far fewer times. Merlin filed away the information, and a plan began to form. He’d have to move quickly when the time came, and there’d only be one shot.

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Mordred whispered under his breath and thrusted out his hand, sending more trash sailing towards their target. They flew in from various directions, and while three were shot down, two came through. At last a bright flash of light erupted from Merlin as his last shield fell, and a wave of energy sent the warlock soaring back, landing only seven feet from where he hid.

Mordred drew further back into the shadows and ducked behind a storage crate. He could hear his mother’s laughter echoing through the room. Morgan’s footsteps sounded on the cement floor, then they stopped.

Sneaking a glance, he saw that Merlin still had not risen. Laying on his side as his Morgan stood over him, lip bleeding and cloak singed, the figure looked nothing like the enemy he and his mother had clashed with so many times in the past.

Morgan had began chanting, tendrils of darkness snaking from her fingers and curling around her fallen enemy. Her wounds began healing, while Merlin’s prone form seemed to wither.

“Warlock or not, you’re getting old,” she taunted. “I, however am still young. It’s time I got rid of you, and when Arthur returns from Avalon there will be no one left to protect him…”

It was then that he realized what was happening. The most taboo spell. She was absorbing his power; his connection to Magic.

She was stealing his soul.

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Morgan could feel him resisting. Fighting the draining force taking hold, but her will was stronger, and she hardly registered her son as he emerged. Enraptured with the terrified expression of the wizard now convulsing at her feet, she did not see the movements of Merlin’s fingers forming subtle signs at his side. She didn’t see anything.

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Yet Mordred did see, and almost shouted a warning. Then he stopped and tilted his head in thought before slowly backing away. Already Merlin’s spell was starting to take effect. A rebound. Clever last move.

Individual tendrils of darkness slowly moved from his body towards his assailant, and by the time Morgan realized what was happening it was too late. Her pendent broke, but unlike Merlin, she did not fly across the room. Only screamed, stuck in place without a way to end her spell. The darkness would not stop until its work was done. Through the pain, he watched as a determined sneer formed on her face, the darkness was pushed back, before inching forward once more. It would be a final battle of wills, but no matter the winner Mordred would claim victory.

Morgan turned to him with a pleading expression, but he only smiled and watched her fall as the barrier fell with her. He felt was no pity. Mordred pulled an object from his pocket and threw it down. Then, with a whispered word, he was gone. The last thing Morgan heard was the caw of a crow echoing through the night. Then the building exploded.

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Mordred looked into the mirror and pulled at a wrinkle that hadn’t been there the day before. Now that their link was severed his magic weakened, and he was aging again. It appeared his mother’s death did have an effect. Knights didn’t have magic after all.

# The Rules

The clop of steps stirred me. High heels hitting the marble outside my office. Or maybe hooves.

I opened my eyes and found myself staring at the floor next to the door, my hand holding a bottle of whiskey I had opened after my day job. It was half-empty now. Dealing with the normies, humans, by day was bad, but I just couldn’t handle the super naturals or non-humans, supnats for short, at night without a little encouragement. This time, however, I had lifted my spirits a bit too high.

The steps stopped; there was a knock. I opened my mouth to answer, but only a burp found the exit—by the smell, it had been searching for one for a while now. But the sound was affirmative enough for the person, or thing, outside to open the door.

“Hello?” a honeyed voice called.

Hooves it was.

I raised my eyes from the doorstep. And it might have been the booze, but apart from those hooves… the tail and small horns, the red skin and yellow eyes, she was ALL woman.

I flopped on my back; fixed my tie. “Hello”, I said, tossing the bottle away.

The creature—Daemon?—was startled, spotting me only now. “Oh...” She brushed her blonde curls behind her ear. “James Hadley? The private detective?”

“At your service.” I jumped up but had to clutch the doorjamb to stay erect. I fumbled my fedora from a coat rack and put it on to tip it. “Come in, miss...”

“Caprine. Lilian Caprine”, she said, stepping in. The smile she shot told me she was over her initial shock. Perhaps the shock hadn’t even been real—you could never quite tell with supnats… or women.

I helped her out of her overcoat, revealing her dress—something between cheeky and flirty in length. The velvety black fabric, tightly imitating the curves of her maroon body, made it hard not to stare.

I played it cool. “Um...”

Real cool.

“Take a... seat, miss Caprine.”

“Lily.” The wink she shot told me I was in trouble.

“Lily...”

I lingered on the word and her perfume—curiously rose, not lily—dropping her coat on the floor as she sauntered past me and took a seat.

My own shuffle around my desk was surprisingly stable. “How can I help, miss… Lily?”

The girl's human friend, Bobby, had gone missing with a valuable family heirloom of hers, a golden pendant with a ruby inlay. She told that Bobby had left to Coalton last night and hadn’t returned. Her concern—whether for the man or the jewel—seemed genuine, but it was difficult to tell. I pretended to take notes while trying to decipher her act which ranged from distraught to flirty—sometimes in a single sentence. I suggested that her ‘friend’ might have just run off, but she asserted Bobby’s loyalty… and his assumed demise.

Her story was over; I wasn’t compliant.

She stood up and leaned over the desk. “Please, help me.” She drew closer.

It was very hard not to be compliant…

…but I managed to resist her. Kind of.

“Hold on, toots!” I said, putting my finger on her dark, luscious lips. “I’ll take the job, but the payment will be cash.”

I’m not a bad looking fellow, though perhaps past my prime, but young women—supnats or normies—throwing themselves at me was rare: It never happened.

“I have five rules, one of them not to kiss magical beings.”

She was all about shooting facial expression, it seemed, and now a faux frown was her ammo of choice. “Aw, couldn’t you bend it just once? Or remove it?”

“I only remove a rule when replacing it with a more important one. And I never bend them.”

“Shame”, she said, strolling to the door. She picked up her coat with deliberate tardiness while looking at me over her shoulder. Then she left.

In hindsight, I should have taken the kiss: It’s not like she would have killed me before the job was done.

My office was about halfway between the City and Coalton. The place once known for its mines and factories, was a ghost town now, inhabited only by supnats and lowlifes—those two groups having a large crossover. I took a bus: Driving in my condition would have been reckless, and taking a car to Coalton at night was a sure way to lose its tires, engine, or even soul if it had one. Hardly any normie outside knew what really went on in there.

I walked around, asking ‘people’ discreetly about Bobby—time consuming endeavour and often an expensive one. This time the cost was all my cash… and my shoes and socks: Gnomes are strange. I usually kept extra boots in my car—though not for this reason—but because getting them wasn’t a viable option timewise and I now had no money to buy a pair, I had to make do with scavenged plastic bags wrapped around my feet.

The address the little guy had given me was for a place hidden in a maze of buildings and back streets. I felt uneasy, first about the validity of the info, then about a red, pulsing glow coming from a distant gateway. I scuttled onwards in the gloom, trying not to step on the broken bottles riddled on the ground, and despite of my raising fear, or because of it, I found myself thinking for a word that had the flair of *serendipitous* but the opposite meaning. That distraction marked the end to my somewhat stealthy approach as I inadvertently bumped into a ramshackle bicycle which fell with a sound equal in effect to a fart in a yoga class: Everyone nearby was fully aware of my presence, and I wished I wasn’t there.

After a painful dash to the gateway, I pulled a sawed-off shotgun from under my trench coat. One barrel had rock salt in it, the other a silver alloy buckshot. I didn’t like guns, but as a normie dealing with supnats I had to be prepared for everything.

The red light was calling me to the courtyard beyond the gateway and, at the same time, pushing me away. It was magical all right. I scanned the area, but apart from a dried-out fountain it seemed clear. I inched forward.

Then I saw it: A bald, muscular man, resembling the description of Bobby, lay behind the fountain, face down in his own, coagulated blood. He had the pendant in his hand. It was pulsing red.

“Oy!”

I shot towards the sound. Both barrels. I was on edge.

Burst of laughter came from the building I had shot. A door opened and a short figure holding a knife stepped out. It was the gnome.

“Be a pal and pick up the bauble? I need another normie blood sacrifice to be able to use it.” He twirled the blade.

“What?”

“Ye heard me, boyo.” He kicked some glass shards with his boot, smiling. “It’s not like you can run.”

I looked at my plastic covered feet.

Not unlucky, just tricked.

I grabbed the pendant and ran, but crashing against the bicycle for a second time was too significant to ignore. Serendipitous? Its tires were flat, but riding it beat running on glass. I could hear how the tap of tiny steps started to fall behind.

But as I cycled along the many alleys, I realized how out off shape I was. Years, sitting behind a desk or on stakeouts, had killed the athlete in me. I was wheezing, slowing down. And the little bastard was gaining on me.

I reached one of Coalton’s main roads just as the gnome jumped at me. I swerved, unlike the car that hit us. There was no screaming, no sirens, only a dead supnat and a busted bicycle. And me, laying on the road, holding the pendant.

I stole my money back from the corpse and took a cab to my office. Lily was already there.

“Did you get it?” she asked.

So much for her friend.

“You all right?”

Did my disheveled appearance evoke real concern?

Poppycock!

I sat down and took a bottle from a drawer. “There’s your trinket”, I said, throwing the pendant on the desk in front of her.

Smiling, she took a hammer from her handbag and smashed the jewel. I spat my whiskey.

Lily blew a curl off her face. “There.” Then she put the hammer on the table along with a wad of bills. “Thanks, handsome. That was the only relic those nasty gnomes could have used against me.”

When I managed to close my jaw, she was already at the door. “Hold on, toots!” I strode to her. She was shooting raised eyebrows and a cocked head. I ran my fingers through her blonde locks and dipped her into a kiss.

“What about your rule?” she asked, flustered.

“New rule to replace it: Never deal with gnomes!”

# Crossroads

I believe someone living on the road constantly restart their lives with one finality: freedom. Freedom in various forms that was somehow lost or subtracted at some point, whether they know it or not. They want to prove to themselves that they really changed, recovered, or to simply leave something behind. To never look back, and if they do, it’s to say ‘never again’.

That’s what I must do.

“Roberto, you son of a bitch,” Captain Fábio’s pushes me. “You fooled the government, but not me. One misstep and I off you, understand?”

“Just want a new beginning, sir.”

We enter Bangu. If you ever get arrested in Rio, don’t do it in summer. The zombies in Walking Dead look livelier than the guards. The doors and walls appear to be melting.

I count twelve men inside a cell for four. I can see the Cristo Redentor from here, his back towards us.

“He may exist, pal, but he never looked *this* way,” someone says.

Here even Lucifer, full of himself and boasting of hell would be just one more eating tainted, pulled out of trash food, tasting his own medicine in summer and shivering in the rough cement coughing with pneumonia in winter.

War isn’t hell, prison is. You don’t know allies from enemies. Who to trust. Here and in life the game is different. More cruel perhaps, as some who claim to be helping actually want you to sink deeper. Trusting is like gambling.

Night comes. Sleep is a serious matter with so many people clumped together. Snoring and farts causes deaths.

Tomorrow I’m allowed in the library, my old refuge, surprisingly well stocked. I check old favorites, missing even more pages. Some use it for drugs, others really keep them.

Books have that effect. We all carry in our pockets and in our memories bits of philosophy, fragments of poetry, quotations from the scriptures, epic fantasies, that in times of doubt, fear or danger speak to us in their own way, each page a bandage wrapping wounds inflicted by the sharp edges of life.

Marcos calls me to his drug boss pavilion. Cable TV, intimate visits and new blood being initiated in the faction. Prisons are excellent schools to teach the magical art of crime and Bangu is Rio’s very own Hogwarts.

Marcos hugs me. “Thought they had you, Berto. How you doing?”

“Will get a conditional tomorrow.”

“The studio has a new star. Carla and the German will be there.”

The “studio” is an internal joke. Before crime we tried music. Funk, samba, rap. We sucked. Now whoever pisses us off visits the studio to sing like a soprano.

Tomorrow I visit my shack in the hill. The gasoline cans are secure. It’s so hot I wonder how every wooden shack here isn’t on fire. People nod as I walk.

I no longer see fame as something good. I wish I was unknown, that nobody knew my powers, no police or government after me. But I was young. Wanted respect from other men and to impress the women.

After all, you live in a place where cats and dogs are not pets, but concorrence for food. An entire life hoping and dreaming to only wake up at the end. To live a little like a king or forever like a sheep? My examples of victory were all in the corners of the city carrying .38 revolvers or at the top of the hill with golden AK-47s.

Then one discovers they can teleport, read minds or become invisible. Now they want to hold the world in their hands like Citizen Kane.

Take a kid who is fatherless, motherless, or both, someone eager to please, to belong and looks for someone to respect. Some incentive and they become your most loyal and violent members. Your Kingsguard.

I read tales with magical words and phrases. A clever allegory. Figuring out someone’s needs and wants, what makes them tick and then manipulate it with the right words at the right times until someone willingly and happily does your every bidding… *that’s* the most powerful magic.

History shows us true wizards in that regard. Marcos was no different. Here he’s the Billboard hit, the myth, the legend, in the hill he has Chief of State honors. He’s the hero, the mirror, the dream and hope of the kids.

Speaking of magic, I’m a criminal Super Mario. I create portals as long as I have two magic circles linking them just like his pipes, with some distance limits. I could kidnap princesses, but kidnapping is a mess. Calls too much attention. Better to just get in, rob stuff and get out.

Also… big show at Maracanã? Flamengo and Fluminense playing? No problem.

I meet Captain Fábio at a cliff by the sea to assure everything is well. For years my powers helped kill a lot of his men. When I offered my abilities to the government he tilted.

Why someone with magic chooses to be a cop, of all things? Pitiful wage, poor respect, family always worried about that phone call, susceptible to every whim of politicians…

The government actually benefits from our faction. We keep criminals in line better than the police. And politicians say all is peaceful. But this is Rio. The peace dove took two shots in the chest long ago. Here even God wears body armor and walks surrounded and protected by ten armed angels.

I draw a circle at the edge of the cliffs.

At night I go to Copacabana. Here I stared entire nights at the stars and made the moon listen to my ramblings. I brought lovers here and muddied these sands with our sweat and with tears when alone. My footsteps are imprinted here; pieces of me are in every sand grain, wave and breeze, and will forever remain here like bloodstains on a rock.

“Hey.”

I jump and Carla laughs. Never got used to this. But I’m glad to see her. If she wasn’t the faction’s assassin she would easily be a Carnival muse.

“Marcos knows about your deal, if you didn’t suspect already. For our past, I’m warning you to run away.”

“Can’t. Doesn’t matter where I run, I won’t be left alone. Only one way to put everything behind and start anew. You know it. Join me.”

“Run away.” She disappears, only footprints appearing in the sand.

At morning I’m at the studio with Carla and the German. She can’t look at me, but the German is smiling, the motherfucker. He was my best friend after Marcos.

He looks like a Johnny Bravo who never skipped leg day. Also unusual here in the hill, the kind of pale person who never gets tanned, only burn so much they almost bubble.

I open a portal and run inside, carefully sidestepping. The German rushes through and falls down the cliff. Even with the roar of waves crashing against rocks I hear bones cracking. He doesn’t move. I wonder if the waves will carry him to Copacabana or even to Ipanema. Would be bad for tourism, but what do I care?

I return. “Carla, you know I’m right.”

Invisibility is fucking creepy. She could shoot her Magnum from anywhere or slit my throat. The fact I’m still alive gives me hope she listens.

Iron touches my back. “You’re right,” she whispers at my ear.

We understand each other very well. I push my body back, grab her arm and take the Magnum away. She stares at me, afraid. I shoot thrice. The sound hurts.

A crowd gathered outside. I walk to the gas post, grab a can and set the “studio” on fire. Nobody tries anything. I look at the Cristo Redentor and I could swear the damn statue turned its face away.

I return to Bangu and Marcos’ two bodyguards escort me. They already know what happened. Sensing my tension, a hand touches my back to calm me. It works.

“Kill him.”

Two shots drop them dead right away. A third hits Marcos in the guts.

“Goddamnit… they said you killed her.” Carla snorts. “I see…” He coughs blood.

I bring gasoline cans through the portal to my shack and start another fire. I love fire.

“What are you doing?”

“They’ll believe we just killed each other. Yes, they will investigate a little, shrug, say ‘good riddance’, and by the end of the day we will just be numbers in a statistic.” I look at Carla. “And that’s how we will truly be free.”

We leave. From the hill we watch smoke rising. Inmates and the police fighting in the yards and rooftops.

DNA, dental identification, that’s for foreign movies. No such database here.

This time no criminal organization, no ostentation. Just us two, discreetly enriching ourselves, always on the road, never looking back. One day we may even settle somewhere.

The Cristo Redentor faces us with a stern look. I smile at the irony that it’s me who now turn away.

# All I want is peace

"What in the hell happened to you're eye, Brian." His Mom screeched. Her voice was like a shovel on concrete.

Brian touched his eye, felt the tender swollen skin around it, and winched from the pain.

" Who did this?"

Brian opened his mouth, ready to take his mother on a magical journey of lies.

But today, was not the day.

"Don't even think about it Brian. I swear if You tell me one more lie, I'll have the nanny beat you."

The nanny hovered into the room right on cue.

" Did you call for me Madame? The bulky robot asked.

Its appearance was similar to a large metal block with slender metal arms, legs, and another smaller block for a head. The standard nanny bot. Brian's family had found this older model on Amazon. And a drone had dropped it at their door.

"No Nanny, I'm just fine. Though, Steven might need his skinny ass beaten.

" He is rather troublesome, madame. Call me if you require my services ".

Said the bot, in a stale human voice , as it rode off to perform its programmed duties.

"Now, would you like a beating or are you going to tell me the truth."

The truth is.... " Brian began.

"Brian I swear!"

" Ok. Ok." He gave in, beatings weren't fun.

" Theres this Boy at my school. Big boy. Bigest of all the boys at my school."

Brian hesitated.

"Out with it. And stop stalling." There was a glimmer in her eyes, that let Brian know she was deadly serious.

" He wanted my lunch money. "

" Well, Did you give it to him."

"Yes."

Surprise showed on his mother's normally sober face. And she began to tap her short manicured finger nails against the table she sat at, as she spoke.

" So, you gave this boy your lunch money. Then what?"

"He punched me." Brian told her, shame highlighted his rosey cheeks as he spoke.

"Well. what happened after you punched him."

"I didn't punch him."

His mother looked appalled.

" You didn't... And why not? Did they gang up on you?"

"No mother."

"So you just allowed that little twerp to beat you...are you even my child."

"Yes!" Brian cried out.

"I'm sorry mother, Please dont be mad." He begged.

" How can I not be mad, Brian. You're weak. You're suppose to be the embodiment of our family name. But constantly you show Sympathy for those weaker then you. To let someone inferior beat you." She had her finger pressed to Brian's forehead and proded there while she spoke.

"Unforgivableable." She declared

"Yet. you are my son and the first born child. So regrettably, I must forgive you."

This did not sit well with her, and that was always a bad thing.

"But Brian, only if you destroy this boy. Nothing else will suffice."

"But mother I can't !"

She shoved him back with her finger.

"You can, you will, and that is final."

Brian's walk to school wasn't a trip he'd been looking forward to. In fact he had dreaded the moment since the confrontation with his mom yesterday evening. Steven would find him. And there would be trouble, end of story.

He had come prepared for battle today. He wore a breathing mask and black gloves. Brian had breathing nose plugs, which would have been better. But the mask gave off a more dangerous appearance.

Tilting his head back as he walked so he could get a glimpse of the sky, brian saw that it had its usual red hue with a nice film of black smog . There would be no rain today it seemed, for there was not a trace of a cloud in the sky.

Unrestrained pollution and magic had taken there toll on the atmosphere. And now there was only a matter of time before the world become baren and dead.

Steven was there waiting outside of school with three other boys, all seemed hard and tough.

" Looky here guys, the king has returned." All the boys laughed.

Steven jumped off the hood of his classic 2017 Ford F-150 and headed Brian's way.

"You lose you're breather or something, mask face." Steven pressed his body up against Brian, towering over the him like a giant. He squinted down at him, inspecting. You know something, dweeb. That mask would probably be scary on someone esle, just not on a weakling like you."

He bent his face down closer to Brian's.

"Did you bring my money ,dweeb or did you want another pounding like last time. I beg you to pick the second choice. Its always the more interesting of the two. Atleast to me, that is."

Brian just stood there and stared.

His mother had commanded him to destroy Steven, and he had set his mind to doing just that. But now that he was face to face with the bully that terrorizes the entire school. All he felt was piety and sorrow for the boy. Steven was big there was no doubt about that but he was weak. Slow of the mind, wasted potential in the body, and no heart.

"Are you deaf or just dumb, dweeb." Steven said, mushing Brian's head back.

You don't wanna answer huh...in that case how about I pound you take your money then pound you again." Joy registered on Steven' face as he pictured beating the crap out of Brian.

" You can have my lunch money. I just dont want anymore trouble, Steven." Brian quietly said.

His mother was right. Sympathy crippled him. Yet in the end Brian could only be who he was, and that was a weakling, just like Steven. And thats why he pietied him. They were the same, atleast on the inside. Just two Self-conscious little boys.

" Its too late now, dweeb. You had you're chance to do this the easy way. Now I get to pound you. And oh how delightful it will be." His breath misted in the air. Steven had activated his crystal. A freezing crystal it seemed, but from how warm Brian felt and they were so close meant that it wasnt a very powerful crystal. But the neither the crystal nor the user had to be powerful in order to inflict damage. And the ball of ice Steven had surround his hand with was definitely going to leave a mark.

"STOP!" a high pitch wail rang out.

A tall, skinny girl tried to force her way through the other boys. Her will was strong but her might, not quite yet. She tried to struggle but the boys ganged up on her and pinned her down to the ground.

Steven jumped up and down like, a school girl, pumping his fist in the air in glee.

" This is fantastic! I'm a genius."

There was that same gleam in Steven's eyes that Brian saw in his mother's, when something bad was about to happen.

"Dont you even think about it." Brian hissed through gritted teeth. DONT YOU DARE, LAY A HAND ON MY SISTER!"

"Oh, I'm a do alot more then lay a hand on her Dweep. But I can show you better than I can tell you." The bully's breath misted in the air again as he spoke. And then he attacked.

Brian knew what was coming and blocked the first blow with his left arm. The ice cold fist smashed into his skinny frail arm and Brian bite his lip in order to suppress the cry that tried to escape from between them. Steven smirked in his face as he activated the second property of his crystal.

"Shit." Brian mumbed.

Ice crystals began to form and creep up his arm ,freezing everything intill they covered him fully.

Steven had already turned away and started toward his sister.

" Don't worry Brian the ice won't impair your vision. You'll see all of the wonderful things we're going to do with you're, dear sister. But don't worry. She'll Love it.

"Damn." Brian thought.

"I tried, I swear it."

The ice melted away from Brian and evaporated within an instance.

" I swore, that I would change." Brian's body grew as he spoke. "I swore this to the women I had loved. But people like you, and my damn mother force the rage out of me."

His skin cracked and reddened as he grew and horns sprouted from his brow, three feet long, and curved at the ends.

"There can be no change in a world like this. A world that craves violence and nurtures hate." The demon that was Brian said, his voice boomed.

"But my eyes are opened now. My wish of change can still be realized. Once I cleanse this world of people like, you."

Brian smiled. " Yes, that is it. "

He extened his arm out, towards the boys who stood there petrified. Flames engulfed steven's fragile human body first.

" Die weaklings."