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Playing Kazoo:

Scales

by

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1.

Kalamazoo. Say it. What does it make you think of? Rolling hills covered in trees as thick as time, maybe. A mist-covered valley or two, filled with busy industry, perhaps. If you're particularly imaginative, you might think it sounds like something out of a fairy tale, with monsters and heroes. And you'd be right. Kalamazoo has trees hidden away in it that remember the arrival of the first dark-skinned Americans. Businesses fill the valleys the town was built in, but not everyone is ready, or able, to see places like the Forgotten Bar, stuck between real Kalamazoo and imagined Kalamazoo. And the city is something out of fairy tales. It has the monsters, and a few heroes, like any fairy tale. But mostly it has the blood. Because Kalamazoo is an old story, from when fairy tales were there to warn people of the things that'd happen to you if you didn't do what you were supposed to. Kalamazoo is a reminder that, no matter what people think, the old things in woods, with their sharpened teeth and bloodied claws, are still out there. Some of them might have put on human faces, but they still want nothing more than to pull you off of the trail and into the darkness, so they could suck your skin hollow, and wear it until they find another victim.

Don't get me wrong. Lots of people like Kalamazoo, myself included, once upon a time. It has a lot to recommend itself: two very good colleges, many great coffee-shops, various festivals over the summer, and an amazing night-life; Western Michigan, Zevon's Warren, Ribfest, and wherever there's free beer being my respective favorites on that list. If you're lucky, you'll live in the town all your life, and that's all you'll see of it. Because what most travel brochures don't mention is that Kalamazoo is also one of the biggest playgrounds for supernatural things in existence. If enough people worshipped, feared, or just plain believed in it, it'd made its way through town at one point. This means more ghosts than you could shake a

Ouija board at, assorted supernatural critters and beings taking up residence in just about every nook, cranny, and sewer, and booming sales in New Age paraphernalia. It was probably one of the idiot New Agers that gave Kalamazoo the nickname Kazoo. Their kind like things quick and easy, preferably with incense.

Just don't ask me why the city is the way it is. It's not something I like thinking about for too long. There are worse things in the world than the monsters in the dark. Kalamazoo's founding is one of them.

My name's Roger. Don't worry about my last name. It's only important to me. What is important is that I'm Kalamazoo Detective, a sort of supernatural peacekeeper and straightener of mystical messes. I try to keep the city, and sometimes its people if I get lucky, safe from the old things that everybody thinks, and hopes, are gone. Sometimes, though, cases come up that surprise even me. Like helping a god die.

In my seven years as Kalamazoo's Detective, I'd seen and done just about every kind of random sci-fi/fantasy cliché you could think of. Some bored or lonely god trying to end the world? Loki tried it last week. Indra a month before that. Vampires? Nice little community of them on the local college campus. Their leader and his girlfriend are pals of mine. Time travelers? Got one of them that hangs out at the coffee shop just down the street from my office. He's not always the most stable of guys, but he's all right when he's sober. And don't get me started on the damn faeries in Bronson Park.

Assisted deicide, on the other hand, was something else. I'd killed a few gods, of course. Part of the job. But I'd never helped one go willingly.

The goddess Vesta had come to me to find a dignified way to end her life. Her Vestal Virgins long gone, most of her worshippers dead for centuries, and her function as goddess of the

hearth and home made irrelevant in the modern world, she was seeking a way out that was as quiet and as peaceful as herself. Normally, I disliked gods and their haughty attitudes toward humans. Name a bad trait, and most likely any random god would have it. But not Vesta. Her quiet strength was always enough. The one time that I'd run into her before, she seemed more like the cool, unmarried aunt everyone had who let you get away with anything, but you were never rude enough to try because you didn't want to disappoint her.

And now I had to find a way to kill her. She'd asked me to meet her in Bronson Park to talk about the situation. Bronson Park, with five churches on three of its sides, the Crypt of the Future some fifty feet below the ground, and the Church of the Lost Moon hidden in the clouds a few hundred feet up, would have qualified as the most sacred location in the city if it weren't for the small Faerie mound in its northwest corner. It didn't necessarily profane the park, but it definitely dirtied the place up.

We were sitting by the park's drained water fountain. The hideous thing always made me think of a garbage scow, with its unnecessary tower of concrete jutting up like a rudder from behind its pock-marked, rectangular basin. The layer of coins littering the basin in the warmer months only added to the effect. But, ugly as it was, it marked the location of Kalamazoo's first home, which made it the ideal place for us to meet.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I asked, shoving my hands in my trench coat's pockets to keep from fidgeting and revealing my discomfort at the whole situation. "You've probably got enough power left to last a few more centuries before you fade out. And you don't have enough believers left to come back if you change your mind."

Since Rome had fallen, Vesta had been considerably lacking in the belief department, and for a god belief was the name of the game. The more followers they had, and the stronger those

followers believed in them, the stronger the god became. With enough belief fueling them, gods could do whatever miracle you name. Water into wine? Simple. Raze a city? You got it. Resurrection? It was a biggie, but not impossible.

A warm, late autumn breeze, ruined by the burning chemical smell of the paper mill to the east, blew a lock of Vesta's long, black hair into her face. Silver streaked it in a few places. She brushed it away and smiled at me. Dimples appeared in her olive colored cheeks. For just a moment, I had that warm ball of pride in my chest that you get when you're a kid and your mom tells you that you did a great job on something.

"I was in Charlotte, North Carolina, a few months ago, Roger. Have you been there?"

"No. Never really had a reason to."

"It's nice. You should go sometime. Personally, I love the South. They still know how important family is there. There's always someone who'll invite you over to talk about their kin over some iced tea or lemonade."

"Sounds perfect for you."

"It is. But it won't last much longer. Internet, satellite TV, and all of that will see to that."

"I don't know about that," I said.

"I do. It's important to know your time, Roger. And mine's up."

The simple honesty in her voice, along with its obvious pain, convinced me more than the words could. I took a hand out my pocket and rested it on one of hers. "I wish the other gods had your sense. Give me a day. Do what you need to, talk to whoever you need to, and then meet me at Bronson Hospital in two hours."

I got up and started walking away.

“Thank you,” she said to me.

I turned, trying not to show any emotion that might upset her. Her constant smile nearly cracked my neutral expression, nearly made me show how guilty the whole situation was making me feel. The smile made her face, which appeared middle-aged, but in fact had never appeared anything but, look so trusting and sure of its purpose. I was reminded for a moment of the final scene from *Of Mice and Men*.

I returned the smile with a warmth that the years as Detective had taught me to fake. “I’m just doing my job,” I told her. I turned and walked away without looking back.

“Poor Detective,” a voice gargled at me from the fountain’s drains as I left. “Gets to kill another god, and he’s all weepy about it. Grow a spine, boy.”

“Shut up, River,” I said without stopping.

The spirit of the Kalamazoo River and I had never gotten along. Like many water spirits, it hated humanity for polluting the hell out of it, which meant that it was almost always on the side of anything trying to kill us all off. For my part, I hated it for turning my shower water into sludge on a regular basis more than anything else.

As I left the park, laughter like an asphyxiating child followed me.

Which worried me. The river in a good mood never meant anything good. For me or for humanity in general.

* * * *

There are any number of ways to kill a god. They ranged from the overly theatric, with destined weapons, heroes of virtue, and whatever other Wagnerian theme you might think of, to the very basic blunt object to the head. Oh, the blunt object would probably have to be made of silver or some other holy or unholy material, but it all boiled down to an old-fashioned beating.

Gods don't go quietly. Too in love with the idea that the world can't go on without them, even if it's done so just fine for centuries, in some cases millennia. Which was why Vesta's willing death would have to require something special. Something fitting for a goddess of the family.

The next day, I took Vesta to Bronson Hospital's neo-natal room. Babies lay on blue and pink blankets, some sleeping with their thumbs in their mouths, others with little balled up fists waving back and forth as they cried for their mothers, or possibly to return to the warmth they'd recently been separated from. Each one's bed was numbered.

We watched this from the other side of a huge, plastic window for a moment. For that moment, my cynical little heart felt a surge of hope for the future. I quickly reminded it why we were there, though, and it went back to beating with contempt for the world, daring it to come in there and do something about it.

"Thank you," Vesta told me.

"Just doing my job, dear. Before you go, do you want to tell me what really happened to convince you it's your time? Hate for you to go out on a lie."

I'd had time to think over what Vesta was asking me and why. Sure, it was possible that she really was that pessimistic about the future of the family, but I doubted it. Gods never told the truth when a lie worked so much better. In Vesta's case, I was inclined to believe she was doing it out of some form of motherly need to protect me from a harsh truth, but still...

"I was walking through a neighborhood when John waved me over, saying it was too hot for a pretty lady to be walking around."

Vesta touched my forehead. A moment of vertigo and I was in her memory, standing next to her.

“Where is everybody today?” Vesta asked John, the elderly man sitting across from her in a white suit.

They were at a blue table with a glass top on John’s daughter’s front porch. Looking around, Vesta could see several other houses, all with empty front porches and neatly trimmed, empty yards.

John’s hand shook a little as he picked up his glass of iced tea and took a drink, causing the screened in porch to temporarily sound like a craps table. “Inside,” he said as he shakily put the glass down. “Out of the heat. Pansies.”

She smiled at this, bringing out the laugh lines that decorated her middle-aged face.

“You probably don’t remember this, but back in my time, a day like this wouldn’t of been nothing. We’d of been out playing or picnicking or what have you. Little heat like this weren’t nothing.”

Vesta pointed to one of the grey strands of hair in her black hair. “Hey, I’ve earned these. I remember.”

“Pretty young thing like you?” he asked, a lop-sided smile coming to his face. “You’re what, thirty-five? Forty?”

Vesta picked up her lemonade. “I’m a little older than that, but I appreciate the compliment,” she said before taking a sip.

“Do you remember the sixties?” John asked.

Vesta nodded.

“Awful times,” John went on. “Damn hippies everywhere. Even Janice,” he nodded toward the house, “burned her bra for some fool reason. Once the sixties hit, it all went to hell.”

“They weren’t that bad. People were starting to do what made them happy instead of what they thought they had to do.”

He waved her off with a frail hand. “Bah. They learned to be layabouts who didn’t know what a good day’s work was. Not like in the fifties. We all worked then, and everything was good. Our kids listened to us and loved us.”

Vesta’s voice sounded from somewhere in my head. “I felt a bit of belief coming from John and decided to try and draw out more. It had become so hard to know when I’d find more...”

“What do you mean?” the Vesta at the table asked John.

His face softened as he remembered. “Every night, they begged for a story and a kiss from me. And every afternoon they’d run to the door and hug my legs when I got home.”

“Sounds nice.”

“I’d give anything for that again,” he said quietly.

A voice came from the house. “Papa? Where are you?” It was a little girl’s.

John looked quickly over to the house, which had changed from his daughter’s white two-story to a brown single level. “Janice?”

“Papa, you’re home!” the little girl shouted. There was the sound of small, quick steps on linoleum.

John stood as fast as his old body would let him. “I’m home, honey.” He shuffled to the screen door.

Vesta watched, and basked in the flow of belief that was coming from him, redirecting it into maintaining the illusion.

“The belief wasn’t in me, as such,” she said from off-stage, “but in one of the things that I embodied. It wasn’t terribly powerful, just enough to remind me of how diminished I’d become since the glory years, when hundreds of thousands of people had believed in me.”

Vesta looked at the houses across the street.

“I thought, ‘Charlotte has over a million people in it. I could do something like this on a larger scale, going neighborhood to neighborhood, gaining belief as I go. I might even be able to become stronger than I’d been before.’”

She glanced at John, tears running down his face as he stood wrapped in the illusion she had created, and she stopped.

“I’d become like the other gods for a moment, greedy and concerned only with my survival. I’d hurt John without caring what it did to him.”

Vesta looked down in shame. “John, come sit back down.”

He did so mechanically.

“Wipe your tears and forget what just happened.”

He did.

She looked up, faking a smile. “It happens to everybody. Kids have to grow up. Everything has to end some time.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said as they picked up the earlier conversation without him knowing they’d ever left it. “But it’s tough. Those were good times.”

“That’s what grandkids are for. You get to play with them, and then get rid of them when they get on your nerves. Or so I’m told.”

John chuckled. “You got that right.”

They sat quietly for a moment.

“Well, I’ve got to get going, John,” Vesta said as she stood. “It’s been nice chatting with you.”

He stood up slowly. “Where’re you off to in such a rush? Still plenty of daylight left.”

She smiled apologetically. “I know, but I just realized I’ve got to head up to Kalamazoo to talk to a friend and take care of some business.”

“That’s that place up in Michigan, ain’t it?”

“Yeah. How do you know about it?”

John started shuffling, vaguely dancing. “The song. I’ve got a gaaal, in Kalamazoo zoo zoo.” He sang the last part.

Vesta laughed loudly, putting her hand in front of her mouth. She went over to John and hugged him. “You take care.”

He hugged her back. “You too. Come back so I can tell you about how the wife and I met.”

“I’d love that,” she said truthfully, then followed it up with a lie. “I’ll be back soon.”

They let go of each other.

“Can’t wait,” he said.

The vision ended.

“Family isn’t about using each other like that,” she said, the same look of shame on her face. “It’s about helping each other.”

As much as I hate being drawn into visions without warning, I just didn’t have the heart to be my normal, surly self at her. Instead, I put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right. You did the right thing.”

She managed a smile that I almost believed. “Thanks.”

“Any last words?”

“Watch out for snakes.”

My confusion must have shown on my face, because she laughed at me, covering her mouth with a hand to hide the genuine smile that appeared at my expense.

“Interesting last words. Don’t think they’re the one I would’ve gone with, but they are memorable, I suppose.”

“I know you’re not that dense, Roger. It’s a prophecy.”

I rolled my eyes. Prophecies always annoyed the piss out of me. Usually, they only made sense after the event they predicted, making them pretty worthless. “Could you be a little more specific?”

“Nope. Sorry. It doesn’t work that way.”

I sighed, then gently told her, “All right. Pick a baby and tell me what it’s home is like.”

Serious now, Vesta pointed at one. “Number three has only one parent now. Her dad was killed last week when the driver of a car lost control and jumped the sidewalk. She’ll grow up in a house filled with sadness because her mother won’t be able to get over his death.”

“Will she be happy?” I prompted.

Vesta shook her head. “No. Her mother just sees her as a reminder of her husband.”

“Fix it. Give her the knowledge that someone out there loves her, and that she’ll find them.”

Vesta nodded. A little more of her hair lightened to grey, and I noticed some small wrinkles appearing around her eyes.

“Pick another.”

We did this for two more babies, giving them something to hope for, to hold on to, to keep in their hearts despite whatever their home lives told them. By the fourth, Vesta could barely stand as osteoporosis hunched her over and old age weakened her legs.

We'd also acquired a young couple ooing and ahing at their baby.

"Which one's yours?" the new mother asked, smiling.

"None of them," I replied. "I'm just here to help my friend die."

"Number twelve is ours," she pointed to a sleeping baby in a pink blanket, ignoring what I said.

Gotta love new parents. The only thing in their world is their precious darling. Not that it mattered much. The average person's mind was about as capable of accepting the supernatural as my ex-girlfriend was of admitting that she was wrong. Sure, it was theoretically possible, but the likelihood of it came close to nil. Their minds just weren't wired that way. Probably for the best. I sure as hell wish I didn't have to live with half of the things I've seen.

I got back to work.

"Pick another," I said, knowing that we were almost finished, and hating myself for what I was causing to happen, in spite of what small good it would bring.

"Number eighteen has a family that loves him, but he won't get to see them."

"Why not?" I asked, looking at the little boy.

The baby stopped moving.

"Because he just stopped breathing." With that, Vesta disappeared, causing the few pieces of jewelry she'd been wearing to fall tinkling to the floor, and her clothes to crumple into a pile.

I watched as the boy in bed number eighteen started wailing and shaking his fists at the world.

“Leave it to the Romans to come up with a better god,” I said, shaking my head a little.

“Where’d your mother go?” the new father asked, looking everywhere but the floor.

“Home,” I said, letting some hope slip into my voice.

After a minute, I turned and walked away, leaving the clothes behind me. One more death on my conscience in the name of my job and Kalamazoo. Just another day as Detective.

* * * *

2.

There’ve been a few things I’ve killed or destroyed in my stint as Detective that I still wasn’t really comfortable with. If there’s a Hell, I’m going to it for what I did to Lorna, Lady of the Ephemeral Citadel. Killing her took a little of the light out of the world. But I consider offing Nergal, a Sumerian god of death turned demon, and the first god I killed, as one of the high points in my career.

The second summer that I’d been Detective was a little hotter than usual. Michigan heat may not be as wet as, say, the tropics, but it was still more than capable of reaching a level of humidity that made you feel like you were swimming through the air. A cool breeze would tease me for a moment with the hope of relief from the heat, but then it’d died just as fast as it appeared, probably drowned.

It was also a slow summer. Only the occasional ghost popped up needing my help, and absolutely no gods had strolled into town. These days, that’d worry me, but back then I thought of it as a vacation. Until the diseases started hitting the city. One week it was measles on the north side, with no fatalities. The next, malaria in the student ghetto, with eight dead. And then

the one that tipped me off: a spate of the plague broke out in the upper middle-class neighborhood near Asylum Tower, one of Kalamazoo's most visible landmarks, killing twelve. Nothing screams a god cooking up something nasty like the plague, especially near something prominent. It's so basic a god move that I knew about it even then.

So I headed toward Asylum Tower. I normally avoided the place because it gave me what felt like a sinus headache in my soul, not to mention all of the screaming, but the plague popping up over there made it seem like the most logical place to start looking for whoever was in town causing trouble. In theory, Asylum Tower was just a bricked over water tower sitting dead center in the Kalamazoo Psychiatric Hospital. This didn't explain why the thing looked more like the last remnant of a castle than a water tower, though. You had to wait for nighttime to see that. At night, if you had my ability to see ghosts, the thing lit up like an electric ice cream cone topped with crazy. The true purpose of Asylum Tower's design, and its placement on the highest point in the city, was to contain the spirits of the crazy people that had died in the city over the years. And there'd been a lot of crazy people. Enough that all I could normally make out was a haze of blue spiritual energy, rather than individual ghosts. Their screams got through, though. Each and every one, tearing into my mind like sewing needles, scraping it away sliver by sliver.

To this day, one of my biggest worries is that the thing will eventually soak up one ghost too many and pop. I don't know what'll happen then, but I figure it'll be bad on the spiritual equivalent of a nuclear bomb going off.

I drove down Oakland Drive, bracing myself for the pain. Nothing happened. As I got closer to the tower, nothing continued to happen. I wanted to just thank whatever that the tower had taken care of itself, but even back then I had enough sense to know better. That much dead

energy doesn't just go away. It either explodes in horrible ways, like what happened to that little piece of Hell called the Folded Woods, or something, usually a god, taps into it to do something horrible. Like what Nergal was planning.

I pulled up next to the tower. It still looked the same, tan bricks wrapping around it, mushrooming up at the top, the occasional arrow slit the only thing interrupting its surface. A pointed, copper top, tarnished green, juttied up from the tower, with windows looking out to each compass point.

Like an amateur, I got out of my car, the red Sunbird I drive to this day, in just a blue T-shirt, jean shorts, and sandals. I figured it was just too damn hot to wear my trench coat, meaning I wasn't prepared to face a persistent girl scout, let alone a god.

"I like the fat clouds," a voice said from behind me.

I turned around and then up. A sagging bald man loomed behind me, filling a space that had been empty only moments ago. He looked like he might have been a bull of a man once upon a time, but had let most of his muscle waste away, leaving empty folds of skin. His darker complexion made me think he was Arabic, but I couldn't say for sure. He had on a green polo shirt and jeans, both a couple of sizes too big for him. The outfit seemed like a uniform of some kind, but didn't have any identifying marks, so I couldn't tell if he worked there, lived there, or was just visiting. He didn't exactly scream crazy, but the way he just stared at the obese storm clouds making their way across the sky, watching their swirls like it was the best thing this side of Broadway, made me inclined to lean towards patient status for him.

"You don't say," I replied neutrally. I knew better than to say anything that might upset the rather large, potential mental patient.

He looked at me, his brown eyes bright now. “Don’t worry, Detective. I’m not crazy. I just get sucked up in the clouds sometimes. Part of the job.” His gaze drifted back up to the clouds, then fell once again to me.

I sighed. “You’re a god.”

“Observant. I see why you got the job.”

“So, what’s the master plan here?” I asked, ignoring the jab. Gods are worse than comic book villains when it comes to explaining the supposed genius of what they’ve done. Makes the weak ones feel like players again for a minute.

“Master plan?” A deep laugh, loud as thunder, found its way out of him. “You think that I’m the one who is causing the sicknesses? Three thousand years ago, nobody would have made that mistake. Now, we all look alike to you.”

Even then my patience for indulging in gods’ ruminations on how far they’d fallen was minimal. After all, you’d never catch me bitching about only living for three thousand years instead of the fifty or so I’d probably wind up with. “All right, I give up. Who are you, and what’s your shtick?”

He puffed up his chest enough that he almost fit his shirt. “I am Ishkur, Lord of Storms.”

Poor Ishkur. Mesopotamian god of storms with a heart as big and full as his laughter. One of the last of his tribe to survive. I still miss him, three years after his death. And I still blame myself a little for what happened to him in the War of Storms. Mostly, though, I blame that bastard Damballa, since he’d been the one who’d actually killed him. But that was another two years away yet.

“Maybe back in the day you were. What about now?”

This deflated him some. “Head custodian of the Kalamazoo Psychiatric Hospital. There may not be as much prestige in the title, but there is still honor to be found.”

“I bet you empty the garbage cans like a pro.”

One of Ishkur’s large hands darted out faster than I could see and grabbed me by the throat. He started squeezing. “Watch yourself, Detective. I may not be able to level cities anymore, but I’m still more than capable of strangling a smartass.”

“Sorry,” I croaked. “The heat’s making me cranky.”

He let me loose. “I understand. I’m doing what I can about it, but my control of the weather is limited these days.”

“You’re rolling in that storm up there?”

“Yes. Part of Nergal’s strength comes from the sun. Hiding it might weaken him enough for us to stop him.”

“And Nergal would be?”

“King of the Underworld, Lord of War, Master of Pestilence and Madness.”

“Ah, he’s one of your people.”

Ishkur nodded. “We’re family.”

“So, do you want me to sit this one out?” I tried not to sound too hopeful. “Let you keep it in the family?”

“No, this will take both of us. Nergal has grown very powerful in the past month.”

I looked at the tower. “He’s using the ghosts trapped in there for something, isn’t he?”

“Yes. He’s drawn them into himself and is using their strength to spread disease and madness, so that he can draw more spirits to himself.”

“And gain more power to repeat the cycle.” I sighed. “It can never be spreading peace and love or something like that with you people, can it? Fine. We’ll wait until your clouds move in, then go after him.”

The air temperature went up about fifty degrees behind me. Just as I was about to turn, Ishkur gave me a hard push. “Get to your car!”

I managed to keep my balance as I windmilled away from him, but just barely. Heat like I’d never felt flashed down my back, and the acrid smell of singed T-shirt filled the air. I risked a look back.

Ishkur, clothes smoldering, had his arms wrapped around what looked for the world like empty, shimmering air. Another god, in other words, invisible. Up until then, I’d only run into one other thing that I couldn’t see, the poltergeist that lived in my office. I’d just assumed that gods, like ghosts, couldn’t hide from me. Not the best time to find out I was wrong.

I made it to my car, slammed the door behind myself, and began rolling up the window.

“No!” Ishkur shouted. “Leave it down and turn on the air conditioning.”

I had no idea what he was up to, but wasn’t about to argue with the only thing keeping the angry heat haze from crisping me. I turned on the car, and cranked up the air.

Whatever was in Ishkur’s bear hug didn’t seem to like what was going on, because it began to jerk him in all directions. But Ishkur was stronger, if barely. Slowly, black wisps of smoke wafting off of him, he pulled it towards the car, leaving a trail of burnt grass behind him.

A small breeze picked up in my car, pushing the cool air outside, toward Ishkur and the heated air. As soon as the air hit it, the thing in his arms began screeching loud enough to make my eyes water, forcing me to cover my ears. The breeze grew stronger, funneling more cool air out. The screeching grew louder, then stopped, like someone switching off a particularly awful

radio. A red, vaguely human thing with the head of a vulture appeared in his arms, dead. Boils and pock-marks covered its naked body all the way down to its clawed feet, making it look almost lizard-like.

“Fever spirit,” Ishkur spat as he threw the dead monster to the ground. “Horrible things. Powerful, but not much against cool temperatures. Nergal’s getting strong if he can make these again.”

I looked away from him and the burnt holes in his clothing that were giving me way more of a view of the god than I wanted.

“What? Don’t tell me that a little nudity bothers you.”

“A little, no. But, not to give you a big head, that’s a lot of nudity.”

“I am a god.”

I turned back to him, making sure to look at his face. “Part of the job?”

He began taking off the remains of his clothes. “The only perk that lasts.”

“I really didn’t need to know that. Let’s get this over with.”

Made of thick, wooden slats, painted green and set in a deep, roofed entry, the entrance to Asylum Tower looked more like a mini portcullis than a door. The visible entrance, anyway. The entrance we wanted, one that only a few people could see, was on the other side.

Whoever designed Asylum Tower had had more than a little skill with necromancy, not to mention a morbid sense of humor. I put it down as a side effect of having to endure the Victorian Age. Human bones of all shapes and sizes, browned to match the brickwork of the building, had been formed into two columns that went up about twelve feet. Twin grotesques, coiled serpents with grinning human heads, eyed us from on top of them. I couldn’t be sure, but they looked like they were in different poses than the last time I’d been there. Set between the

columns, the ribcage of something large enough that I'd rather not think about it formed the door. Carved into the door and every bone of the columns were the arcane lines and squiggles of binding sigils. A humid breeze reeking of sickness and rotten meat blew out from the darkness behind the door in regular intervals, reminding me way too much of the breath of something carnivorous.

"I'm not sure I want to go in there," I said.

"You're right to be wary, but not afraid. You are Kalamazoo's Detective, after all."

Ishkur said it with such faith and confidence in my abilities that I almost let myself believe him. Almost.

"Which means what, exactly?"

"I'm a god of storms, so I bring the rain. You are Kalamazoo's Detective, so you protect your city. It's what we do."

"Fine. Doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

"Try being a god of storms for a desert culture that relies on irrigation, and then you can complain."

"Point taken."

We walked up to the rib cage door. The stench of rot went up a few notches to garbage dump level.

"How do-," I began, but before I could finish, the door opened on its own. I expected creaking hinges. Hell, I wanted creaking hinges. They would've shown that the real world had some kind of effect there. But the door opened silently, reminding me that I'd left the real world behind some time ago.

Which has always been my biggest problem with being Detective. The gods, demons, and other monsters will probably kill me one day, but that's out there, somewhere in the future. In the here and now, I'm stuck between the mundane, ordinary world where people are still coming to terms with things like global warming, and the hyper-real world where I have to come to terms with things like invisible doors that may or may not eat me. In that situation, you can either go crazy or just accept it and move on. But that kind of acceptance has a price, too.

Ishkur strode forward, not at all concerned. "Nergal is waiting for us."

"Great," I said, following him. "So nice to have the evil death god know we're coming."

Weak, yellow light like that of a fever dream appeared from everywhere as we entered the tower, revealing a stone staircase that spiraled up through a corridor just wide enough for Ishkur to walk through. A stifling humidity added to the effect, covering my body in a grimy layer of sweat before I'd gotten more than three feet in. More sigils, glowing a soft silver, covered every stone in the corridor. The steps looked freshly carved, making me wonder if anyone had ever actually used them, or if Nergal, Ishkur, and I were the only ones stupid enough in the past hundred odd years to climb them and mess with whatever sat waiting for us at the top.

Not surprisingly, the rib door closed behind me, sealing us in.

"You do know how to get us out of here, don't you?" I asked Ishkur.

"Ah, optimism," was the only thing he said as he climbed the steps.

"Wait, you're not expecting to get out of here?"

No reply came.

"Get your naked ass back here," I said, following after him. "How do we get out of here?"

"We go up," he said from around the corner.

The stairway spiraled up and up, almost further than my out of shape body would let me climb. Ishkur stayed quiet the rest of the way to the top. And, while I had to stop, panting, outside of the thick, wooden door that sat at the top, he seemed to have hardly noticed the climb.

“You’re very out of shape for a Detective,” he said after a moment.

I caught my breath, then managed, “Didn’t the last Detective die of a heart attack? How healthy was he?”

“Considering that he was eighty at the time, very.”

I decided to change the subject from my physical inadequacies. “So what’s the plan here? Just go in and ask Nergal politely to stop it? I’m not exactly loaded for a fight.”

“I’d really prefer it if you came in and consulted me, instead of talking behind my back,” a voice like burning paper said into my soul.

The door swung open, revealing an old fashioned operating theatre about the size of a hockey stadium. Row upon row of wooden chairs, interspersed with four aisles, circled down to a large central stage, upon which Nergal had placed a throne made of something I couldn’t quite identify. It seemed to be covered in pale leather, and had fan of singed bone spears sticking out from its back rest. He’d placed it so that it faced the entrance to the auditorium.

I know what you’re thinking. No matter how big a water tower is, it couldn’t possibly be that big. Funny thing about Kalamazoo: it’s like a big piece of origami, except instead of using paper to make a carp, or whatever awful shape the city would be, it uses reality. The city’s so damn full of folded space that it’s probably a dozen times the size that any map shows it to be. Reality is just more pliable here.

“Please, come in,” Nergal said from his throne. “I was beginning to feel ignored.”

Nergal hadn't even bothered to put on a human form. The naked thing sitting below resembled a person only in passing. It had two arms, two legs, and a body, but beyond that it looked more like what something that had caught a glance of a human a few centuries back remembered of them. The limbs, muscled to the point of seeming immobility, were too long for the square body, and ended in hands and feet with fingers and toes of random length. The skin color constantly shifted through the spectrum of human shades, going from black to red to yellow to white in random patches. A smooth area occupied its groin. And, perched atop the entire mess, sat a red lion's head, complete with a flowing mane that rippled in a non-existent breeze.

It hurt my brain just to look at him. Somehow, he'd managed to shove all of the spiritual energy of Asylum Tower into his body, and it was setting my 'gift' off like a fire alarm.

Ishkur began walking to the stage. I hesitated, but followed, figuring that Nergal had let us get this far, so he probably wasn't going to just kill us at the door. That'd ruin his chance to brag.

"You've looked better," Ishkur told Nergal when we reached the bottom.

A laugh of sorts came out of the lion's mouth. "I could say the same thing for you, Ishkur. You used to be a mountain of a thing. Even Heracles was afraid of you. Now you're just skin and bone."

The throne kept pulling my attention toward it for some reason. Then I figured it out. It pulsed in spots like a living thing.

"Ah, I see you've noticed my throne, Detective," Nergal said to me, snapping my attention back to him. "I think his name was Terry before I remodeled him into something more useful. Do you like it?"

This callous lack of concern for life wasn't new to me, even at that point in my career. But I hadn't come to expect it yet, making it equally horrible each time I saw it. It took a few years, but I eventually learned to not let it affect me so much. Hard to be Detective if the nasty things out there know they can get a rise out of you by killing or maiming people. And dangerous, because then they'll just kill and maim all the more.

"I'm going to kill you," I said, not even trying to hide my disgust. "You know that, don't you?"

Up until then, I'd only killed two things, a vampire and a doppelganger, and those only in self-defense. But Nergal, treating human souls as nothing more than fuel for his need for power and killing just to gain more power, was a level of evil that I hadn't run into yet. Later, I'd learn he was small potatoes, but at that moment he was the most evil thing in my world, and he needed to be destroyed.

"Really?" Nergal asked. "Hm. Well, I might as well give up now, I guess."

What looked like boils began sprouting on my inner thighs.

"Or not. Have a little Black Death, Detective."

"Enough," Ishkur said. "You will stop this. Now."

Nergal looked at him, scowling. His skin color began changing at a slightly faster pace. His muscles bulged and squirmed, like he had a litter of kittens under his skin trying to escape. "Or what? You'll beat me to death? You had to cheat to handle the fever spirit I sent down to say hi. Used to be, you'd just whip up a cold wind without batting an eye to kill one of those things. Face it, Ishkur, you're out of shape, and I'm getting back in my prime. In a month or two, I'll be a contender again."

“Maybe,” I said to him through a pain that seemed to cover my entire body. “But I doubt it.”

His skin flashed through its different colors so fast that it all blended into a greyish color. Fingers and toes shrank and grew randomly. “I’ve driven twenty new souls mad and drawn them to me in the past week,” he nearly shouted. “I’ll draw forty next week. Soon, I’ll have every soul in this town.”

Thunder sounded outside the tower.

“Is the sun gone yet?” I asked Ishkur.

“Yes,” he said.

“Good. Go punch the bad guy in the...,” I fell to my knees and vomited up more blood than I thought I had in my body.

“Problems, Detective?” Nergal asked, smiling, revealing teeth large enough to rip through me without much trouble. “I think the last time I killed a city’s protector was in Alexandria. Must’ve been two thousand years ago. He was much more experienced than you, of course. But still. I’ve missed it.”

A screaming face pressed against Nergal’s chest from inside of him, distending the skin as it tried to escape, then disappeared, causing the god to let out a roar like someone strangling a tomcat.

Ishkur didn’t hesitate. He strode up to Nergal and punched him dead center in the chest.

“Stop!” Nergal screamed, but didn’t move. “I can share this strength with you, cousin. You could be yourself again. You could win the war that’s brewing.”

Ishkur drew back his arm. “No.”

“Then think of your friend over there. Kill me, and the spirits that I’m holding will rip his soul to shreds before he gets two steps.” Two more faces tried to push their way out of his chest. He snarled, but still didn’t move.

Ishkur paused and looked to me.

“Do it,” I croaked out. I’d managed to figure out that Nergal had a problem. “He can’t move. It’s taking everything to control the energy.”

Ishkur’s fist came down again, opening a small cut in Nergal’s chest. Ghostly fingers wiggled out of the opening, then began to pull it wider. This must have completely destroyed his concentration, because, from my vantage point on the floor, I could see bulges appearing over every inch of skin as hands pushed out from his calves, faces pressed out of his shoulders, and feet kicked at his thighs, stretching him to nearly twice his size. Cuts ripped across his body as hundreds, probably thousands, of insane spirits tried to break out.

Half human shrieking filled the room. The fact that some of it was coming from Nergal brought a small smile to my face.

Ishkur reached under my arms and pulled me to my feet.

“You need to leave now,” he shouted in my ear.

“No,” I said. Or at least hoped I’d said. Real and unreal were getting harder to tell apart as something warm and soft seemed to wrap itself around my brain. “Promised I’d kill him.”

“The spirits are doing a good job of that, Detective.”

I shrugged him off, almost falling again in the process. “Don’t care.”

Pain flared brighter in every part of my body, and a few parts of my soul, with each step I took towards Nergal’s disintegrating form. A few ghosts, only vaguely human with rolling eyes, naked, skeletal bodies, and clawed hands, had managed to work themselves partway out of his

body and were pulling him apart. They reached for me, but pulled back, either recognizing me as Kalamazoo's Detective, or as someone who'd be joining them pretty soon without any of their help.

"At least I get to take you with me, Detective," Nergal growled when I reached him.

"Like the old days. That almost makes this worth it."

Without really looking where, I punched him, and continued to punch him, feeling bones crunch, a few of them mine, until everything went dark.

I woke up lying on the lawn outside of the tower, soaked in rain, naked, and plague-free. Pain like a shard of glass being shoved up my soul's nose hit me. I wasn't sure which of these things worried me the most.

"You're lucky," Ishkur said from off to my left. "The disease almost got you."

"Did you throw me out one of the windows?" I asked without moving. "I feel like the losing side of an angry mob."

"The spirits did, but you'll be fine in a few days. If I hadn't gotten you into the rain, though, you'd be stuck in the tower with the others."

Somewhere, I found the strength to turn my head to the tower. A blue glow surrounded it. At least that explained my aching soul.

"The crazies threw me out?"

He shrugged. "Maybe they believed that they owed you."

"Not that I'm complaining, but how did the rain heal me? And why am I naked? You old time gods have a thing for that?"

"I brought it here, so it's holy. And you're naked because it needed to wash you completely."

“If this is going to happen all the time, I want a new job,” I said, letting my head fall back to the wet ground.

* * * *

3.

As I drove up West Main later that night with a cold, November rain pummeling my car, I was less than happy with Kalamazoo. The sight off to my right didn't help to endear the town to me, either. Several bad places existed in Kalamazoo. Only natural, I suppose, when you got things setting up shop that'd been scaring the hell out of people for the better part of recorded history. OP Avenue's Wight Halls, Bronson Park's Folded Woods, and Time's End, to name just a few of the places that gave me the occasional nightmare. The massive cemetery sitting across from Kalamazoo College was another one. Built on enough rolling hills to make it look like it was either about to explode or give birth to something I'd rather not think about, it tended to be the focus of every cult wanting to make a name for itself. The Cult of Cleaver, for instance, who worshipped fifties sitcoms as glimpses into the golden land. One they felt the occasional need to usher in. I didn't know why the cemetery drew darkness to it, and as far as I could tell from their records, none of the other Detectives did either, but it was there. As usual, I put it out of mind and I focused again on the occasional glimpse of road the wipers were providing.

“Thanks,” I said as the visibility temporarily disappeared behind a shimmer of water. It made me well aware of my current lack of anything resembling rainwear. My grey trench coat didn't fit in the all-weather category anymore, that was for damn sure. Threadbare and fraying at the hem from seven years of abuse, it barely even counted as clothing.

“Couldn’t have started five minutes earlier, when I could’ve grabbed an umbrella, could you?”

I focused on my current, and only, employer, who lived down one of the myriad side streets just past the top of West Main Hill, which may as well have been part of the Himalayas the way my Sunbird was struggling to climb it. She was having a small problem with her ex-husband that she wanted me to take care of. The fact that he was dead made him a little more ex than usual, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle, and hadn’t been handling all week.

I was tired on a level rarely seen by man. Cokeheads would have probably shaken their heads at me and told me to get some sleep. The thing with Vesta had turned out to be just the start of a busy day, and the continuation of a hard week involving Fimbulwinter almost starting, and me helping more ghosts than usual move along to wherever ghosts went to next. Late fall always brought more ghosts hanging on for some reason. Smell of burning leaves getting people all sentimental and not wanting to get on with their afterlives, maybe.

I pulled into the driveway of a small, white house that matched the address I’d taken down. I hoped it was the right address, at any rate. I’d been in the middle of a nap, and had been half-asleep when the woman, whose name I still couldn’t remember, had called me, so the potential did exist that it was wrong.

I turned off the engine and waited a few minutes in the hopes that the current sheeting of rain would end. When it didn’t, I huddled down into my trench coat as best as I could, got out of the Sunbird, and dashed to the house’s front door amid a string of profanities. It took several hard knocks on the door before a plump, middle-aged woman with her brownish hair in a bun and wearing a blue dress opened it. I barged past her, not even bothering to introduce myself.

“Excuse me,” she said as I shoved by, shaking off water. “Who are you?”

“You called and woke me up,” I said, still trying vainly to dry myself. “If you don’t know, then we’ve both got problems.”

“Oh, you’re that Roger guy. The spiritualist.”

I stopped flapping my coat and moved toward the woman with more speed than most people would’ve given my less than athletic form credit for, making her back away a step. I pointed a shaking, calloused finger at her. Hopefully she assumed it was from anger and not from the cold rain. “Never call me that. Spiritualists are people with crystal balls, horrible smelling incense, and bad gypsy accents. Most couldn’t hear a ghost talking to them if it had a megaphone to their ear.”

I regained control of myself and spouted my standard lie, with a decent amount of indignation thrown in. “I am an investigator who, occasionally, investigates the supernatural.”

Calling this a lie was, technically, an understatement along the lines of saying the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs was just big. Because of my ‘gift’ for seeing ghosts and my job as Detective, supernatural cases were actually drawn to me like frat boys to drunk blondes. Originally the lie had bothered me some, but I figured out pretty fast that I could charge more by making my clients think that they were the exception rather than the rule, and had adjusted my morality.

“Sorry,” the woman stammered.

I unzipped my still dripping coat and shoved it at her. “It’s all right. Common mistake. Just don’t make it again.”

Something that had been poking at the edge of my mind finally made its way through, and I got around to looking at the room I was in. It was, I assumed, the living room. A couch the same sickly red as rotting strawberries sat next to me, and, as I scanned the room, I saw the

awful red theme spread across the room like an infection in a recliner, another couch across from the first one, and an area rug one shade less ugly sitting under it all. A mid-sized TV sat in a fake oak entertainment center across from the recliner. All of this led me to wonder why anyone would want to live in such a debacle of bad taste, let alone come back to haunt it. And given my complete lack of anything resembling good taste, as shown by the horror that was my apartment, the fact that I recognized the decorating miasma around me was saying something.

“I...shouldn’t have a problem getting your ex to move on,” I finally said, managing to break out of the beating being perpetrated on my already crippled sense of good taste by the room.

She came out of the kitchen, where she’d put my coat. “Thank you. Henry was bad enough to live with when he was alive, but now...moving my things around and giving me goosebumps and chills. You should’ve seen what he wrote on my mirror when I was in the shower.”

“I understand. I’d be pretty pissed off if the ghost of my ex suddenly showed up at my place.” I suppressed the urge to shudder at this thought. Luckily, Andrea would sooner haunt a dump than my apartment after the way our last conversation had ended. Not that there were actually all that many differences between a dump and my apartment, but the fact did remain.

I looked around the room some more before finally just calling out, “Henry! Get down here. I’m not going to look all over hell for you. It’s been a rough week, and I’m tired.”

The woman, whose name I still couldn’t remember, but probably began with an m, or maybe an n, stepped closer to me. “Does that work? I thought you’d have to say some spell or something to get him to appear. Or at least leave the entry-way.”

I shrugged. I'd learned a long time ago that the simplest ways were usually the best. "It's always worth a try. No need to make things harder than they have to be."

To the room, I said, "I'm serious, Henry. I know ways to put you in a urinal cake for eternity. Don't make me do this the hard way."

"What's a urinal cake?" she asked.

Being a man, this question always took me by surprise. Urinal cakes were just part of my life in the same way that tampons were part of a woman's. Of course, what I knew about feminine hygiene products could just about fill the fortune in a fortune cookie, so, as annoying as the question was at times, I was inclined to cut the woman some slack for asking it.

"Little pink thing they put in the urinals in men's rooms to cover up the smell," I told her.

I kept a couple of them on me at all times just in case, pissed off ghosts being a sort of occupational hazard. Great things, urinal cakes. Soft enough to be carved on, embarrassing enough that no ghost wanted to be stuck in one. The ritual was simple enough, too. Just a basic summoning, really, with the urinal cake acting like a mini summoning circle. All they needed to go off was for me to say the name of whoever I wanted to stick in them.

"Oh. Could we do that instead of getting him to leave?" she whispered to me with a bit more hope than I thought healthy.

I was about to say something to her along the lines of putting her in a toilet seat if she wasn't quiet, when the hairs on my arms stood up. A pudgy man in a powder blue suit appeared in front of me with a slightly embarrassed expression. A very disconcerting look for a bluish-purple face with blotches of black.

"About damn time," I said to Henry's ghost.

“Sorry,” the ghost said, looking down at his shoes, exposing me to a poorly combed over bald spot.

“Is he here?” the woman asked, whipping her head back and forth in the vain hopes of catching a glimpse of Henry.

“Yeah, he’s here.” I looked at the woman. “You actually married this guy?”

Henry looked up. “Hey,” he started to say, but the woman cut him off.

“I was young and didn’t know any better.” The answer had the ring of repetition to it.

I figured any comment I could make she’d already heard, so I just looked back at the ghost. “All right, Henry, why are you here, and what do I need to do to get you to leave?”

“Well, the urinal cake threat was a good start,” Henry said in a nasally voice. “I only wanted to have some fun.”

“Fun’s over. It’s time to leave.”

Henry dropped his gaze to his shoes and squirmed a bit. It was hard to tell through the blotchy discoloration, but I’m pretty sure he was blushing under all that dead.

I looked up to whatever god was currently laughing at me. “You don’t know how to leave, do you?”

The ghost shook his head without looking up.

“Great.”

The woman’s eyes got wide. “Henry you get out of my house this instant! I divorced you for a reason!”

Henry started fading out in embarrassment.

“Wait, Henry,” I told him, knowing he wasn’t leaving for good. I looked at the woman with all of the annoyance I could muster, which was considerable, given my day. “Do you think you can do this?”

The woman just shook her head.

“Then be quiet.”

I looked back at Henry, who was solid once more. “All right, Henry, I want you to get every thought out of your head. Something tells me you can do that without much of a problem. Now, I want you to think about leaving. Not just leaving the house, but the world. Focus on that thought.”

Henry closed his eyes, and then he was gone.

The lack of any kind of special effects when I did this with a ghost always made me wonder if I was doing this part right. A small part of me even worried that, somewhere in the universe, was a group of really confused ghosts saying, “This is *not* what I thought Heaven was going to be like.” But I tended to ignore it.

“All right,” I said to the woman, “that’ll be two-hundred dollars.”

“That’s it?”

“What, you expected fireworks and angels? That’s it.”

“He’s gone and won’t come back?” the woman asked as she went through the living room and into the kitchen to get my money and coat.

“No. If he does somehow find his way back, give me a call and I’ll come take care of him the hard way.” I’d only had to do that once with a really tenacious rich guy who’d somehow made his way back from wherever he’d been. Couldn’t stand to be separated from his stuff. The exorcism did a good job of convincing him otherwise.

“Could you really have put him into a urinal cake?” she asked from the kitchen.

“Yes, but I’m guessing that he would’ve been a waste of a perfectly good sanitizer.”

She came out of the kitchen with my coat and a check. “You know, you really aren’t what I was expecting.”

“Yeah,” I said, taking them, “and I would have preferred it if you were twenty with red hair, but what are we going to do?”

I put my coat on and opened the door. It was still raining like the clouds were trying to get rid of their surplus inventory to make room for winter snow. I swore at the rain again and darted out to my car.

4.

I was sitting at stop sign, tapping the steering wheel, trying to figure out if I needed a coffee or a drink, when I noticed the utburd crawling down the sidewalk. One windshield wiper swish there was nothing there, and the next a blue and naked little girl, her umbilical cord still attached.

Pitiful and nasty, things, utburds. Powered by rage, they’re the ghosts of children that were murdered by their parents, and usually only stick around so that they can kill the parent they think is responsible for their death. Luckily, it was rare that I had to deal with one, but when I did it usually left me feeling the need for a drink for the next week. They never moved on easily, which meant that I was forced to do things that I’d rather not to something that looked like a kid.

Another utburd, also a girl, materialized. This one was about three years old, wearing a dirty set of overalls and had a partially collapsed skull. She carefully lifted the younger one up, then looked at me with pale eyes. The windshield wiper swished by her, and she was gone.

“Ah damn. Suzie’s back.” I sighed. “This day just keeps getting better and better.”

Little Suzie was only technically an utburd. She’d been out with the family for a drive back in the eighties and died when some asshole ran a red light and T-boned the family car. Her father was driving, though, so her ghost stuck around to get revenge. Must’ve been pretty pissed when she found out he’d died in the accident, making it kind of tough for her to kill him. Since then, she’d decided to stay around and help any other utburds that popped up to kill whoever they were after.

I’d been meaning to take care of Suzie for the past few years, but had managed to keep finding excuses not to. On the one hand, she and her playmates were just kids, and really weren’t to blame for what had happened to them. On the other hand, though, they were powerful spirits of vengeance that just wanted to kill people. The fact that the people they were after most likely deserved it wasn’t really my call.

I put on my turn signal and headed west.

* * * *

Less than ten minutes later, I was standing outside of Kiddy-Time Day Care. Well, the remains of it, anyway. Kiddy-Time had been forced to close down about ten years back when some disturbing rumors had popped up about things that the staff members were doing with the kids in the basement. Most of the rumors, mainly the sexual ones, weren’t true, but some of the others, the ones involving demon worship, were, giving the place the feeling of a spiritual

sewage dump, making my soul feel like it was coated in oil every time I passed by. Made it the perfect haunt for ghosts with nothing but anger to keep them going.

I stared at the crumbling, one-story building, getting up the courage to go in. I've seen, and done, some pretty nasty things in my career as Detective, but not much matched Kiddy-Time for sheer wrongness. It almost passed the cemetery in that department. The building's yellow paint, probably bright and cheerful in its prime, had chipped and faded to a color closer to a jaundice victim's skin. And, somehow, the two windows framing the entrance were still intact, bright and clear, shiny like the eyes of the dying. The orange half-light of the street lamps didn't help, either. It just made the place seem even more unreal, like some sort of fever dream.

Probably the worst thing, though, was the playground surrounding the house. Glistening metal equipment that should have turned brown with rust and shiny plastic swings that should have rotted away into unrecognizability sat on cracked, dead earth. Whether this was Suzie's fault or from whatever the daycare's staff had done, I couldn't say, but not much is as unnatural as an undead playground.

Except maybe an undead playground filled with about twenty dead children at night. As I watched, the ghosts of children ranging from newborn to probably six began appearing on the equipment. Most weren't visibly damaged, but a few made it difficult for even me to look at. I expected to see adults with knife wounds or charred bodies, but not children.

The kids went through the motions of playing on the equipment, but none of the babies giggled as older kids pushed them on the swings, no one smiled on the way down the slide, and none of the kids on the merry-go-round so much as laughed.

"This is way above my pay grade," I said under my breath.

At least the rain had let up for the moment.

“Hi, Detective,” a girl said to me from about waist level.

I put on my best smile and looked down.

“Hi, Suzie. Some nice friends you’ve got there.”

She shrugged. “They’re ok.”

“Just ok?”

“Yeah. They’re always asking me what to do next. I don’t like it. I’m just a kid. I don’t want to be in charge.”

I slipped my right hand into one of my trench coat’s pockets. “I hope that’s not a job offer, because I’ve already got one.”

“But after we kill you, you won’t be Detective anymore,” she said reasonably, “and you can take care of us forever, and I won’t be in charge anymore.”

I glanced up at the playground. All of the kids had stopped what they were doing and were staring at me.

I looked back down at Suzie.

“True, but I’m not ready to die just yet. Sorry kid.”

“But if we kill you now, the snakes won’t eat you.”

That got my attention. First Vesta, now Suzie. I was beginning to feel like the only one in town who didn’t know about them.

“What snakes, Suzie?” I asked in my most kid-friendly voice.

“The walking ones.” Suzie held out her hands like they were claws and started stomping around making hissing noises.

I had a hunch about this, but hoped I was wrong.

“Suzie, were these snakes really tall?” I held my hand up at about seven feet. “Looked kind of like people?”

She stopped playing walking snake and looked at me. “They don’t like you. They told us to kill you. Said they’d eat us if we didn’t.”

“That doesn’t sound very nice.”

“It’s not. We loved Jimmy, and one of them ate him to prove they weren’t lying.” The sidewalk cracked under her. “And it’s your fault.”

“Settle down, Suzie.”

“I hate you!” she shouted and jumped at me, hands outstretched.

“Susan Marie Hollings,” I said just before her hands reached my throat.

Suzie disappeared.

I pulled a twitching, pink urinal cake out of my pocket. A faint circle lined with various mystic symbols decorated it, making it look like a magical hockey puck.

A twinge of antiseptic began to lace the air.

“You need a time out, little girl,” I told Suzie in her new home.

The ground shook, reminding me of two things. One, the small army of dead children now walking, crawling, and toddling towards me, rage contorting their faces into things that were only passingly human. And two, the reason why utburds were so dangerous. The way they killed their victims was to sit on the person’s chest, growing heavier and heavier, until they crushed them. I’d seen the body of one guy whose dead son had come back for him. Looked like a five hundred pound weight had been dropped on him from twenty feet up. Even the bed I’d found him in was broken.

I searched one of my trench coat's left pockets for something to use against them. All I found was a small bezoar and a saint's pinky bone, both of which were completely useless against ghosts. Having nowhere near enough urinal cakes on me to handle that many ghosts, I did the only responsible thing I could do. I ran for my car.

The ground continued shaking as the utburds marched slowly after me. In the distance, I heard a car alarm go off from the vibrations, then another, and another, until electronic wails and beeps filled the air.

I opened the passenger's side door on my Sunbird and jumped in, slamming the door shut behind me. I then yanked the tape off of the car's broken glove compartment and began rooting through the collection of random objects that I'd tossed in there over the years.

By the time I'd finally found what I was looking for, the stub of a poorly rolled cigar, the kids were at my door. A few at the front of the horde tried to just walk through it and bounced off. I smiled. A few years back, I'd cornered Papa Legba, the voodoo god of comings and goings, into sealing my car off from anything I didn't want entering it. The look of surprise that flashed through their anger gave me a brief surge of hope that I might make it out of this one. Then the larger ones began lifting the smaller ones up and onto the roof. I knew the wards that Papa Legba had put up could take the spiritual weight, but I wasn't so sure that the car could take the physical weight.

The roof groaned in answer to my question.

I pushed in the cigarette lighter and watched as more utburds were boosted onto the roof.

What seemed like an eternity passed until the lighter popped out. I grabbed it and lit my cigar as fast as I could, making sure not to inhale any of the green smoke that began billowing out from it.

The reaction of the utburds was immediate. The ones old enough to speak said things like, “Ew, gross!” and, “Sick!” and backed away. The utbards on the roof crawled off and thudded onto the ground with as much speed as their short legs could give them, most of them crying.

One of the paradoxes of ghosts that I’d probably never understand was that, despite having no need to breathe, they had a heightened sense of smell. Especially strong smells could keep even the most determined of spirits away. And my cigars had a smell strong enough to melt nosehairs.

I took a moment to calm down, then opened my car’s door and stepped out.

The kids had formed up, with the taller ones lined up in front of the smaller ones. Most of them were pinching their noses to keep the smell of my cigar out. It didn’t seem to be working, though, because as I moved forward, they moved back.

“Give us Suzie back!” a boy with no visible wounds demanded.

“You’re not exactly in a position to be giving me orders, kid.”

He smiled in that way that smart-assed kids who think they know everything do.

“That’s what you think.”

He began stomping on the ground in the ‘shave and a haircut’ rhythm. The others soon picked it up, shaking the ground again and causing the daycare’s windows to rattle in time.

I was about to tell them to knock it off when I felt something move just below the daycare. And not the standard arm hair tingling of nearby ghosts. This was something else. This was the feeling a mouse gets just before an owl rips it into the air. The feeling that cavemen got when the sun went down and the wolves started rustling in the forest just beyond the firelight.

A demon.

I'd had encounters with demons before. Generally, I got along with them, since they had an honesty to them that gods usually didn't. They were evil and out to steal your soul, but at least you knew where you stood with a demon. Gods had more of a penchant for mystery than most demons, and you could never really tell if they were trying to help or hinder you. You could always count on a demon to be trying to hinder you. And that kind of duplicitous honesty was something I could respect.

Most of them, anyway. There were a few, less civilized demons left over from older, more primal times that couldn't care less about souls or anything so esoteric. They simply wanted everything dead. This one felt like the kill everything variety.

I thought about making a break for my car, but the thing would probably just follow me and wait for me to get out.

The daycare darkened, as if it and the piece of reality that it occupied were fading from the world. A wolf about the size of a pony with black, matted fur strode out of the dark, its gaze fixed firmly on me. As it got closer, I could see that it had a snake's tail. Something in my genes told me to run and not look back. I ignored it, but just barely.

"You're not scaring me with the whole snake-wolf thing, you know," I lied. "So put on your human face."

It laughed and my soul flinched. The utburds wavered like images on a bad TV.

"Detective," it growled. "So nice to finally meet you."

"Wish I could say the same. What's your name?"

It sat among the utburds. Occasionally, its tail would twitch. "And why should I tell you that?"

I forced out a smile. “Professional courtesy?”

It laughed again, making me regret the joke. “No.”

I reached into a pocket and pulled out the saint’s pinky bone and pointed it at the demon. “Fine, we’ll do this the old way. By the power of Saint Lazarus, I command you to tell me your name.”

It cocked its head as if thinking. “The painter? You couldn’t even muster up a respectable saint to confront me with? I should eat your soul just for that.”

“Heaven forbid if I’ve offended you. I wasn’t exactly planning on fighting a demon tonight. Now, name?”

It sighed. “Amon.”

“Any relation to the god?”

“No.”

I knew it was a bad idea to poke the horrific source of evil, but I couldn’t resist. It wasn’t like it could kill me twice. “Never heard of you.”

It stood and bared its teeth. “I am Amon, demon of rage, Marquis of Hell, commander of forty-four legions. I have devoured the souls of emperors.”

“You and every other demon.”

Which was true. Hell gave out the title of marquis like it was candy on Halloween and legions like farms gave out kittens.

I was on the ground without even seeing Amon move. His teeth, remarkably white, were less than an inch from my face. A smell of sulfur mixed with the metallic scent of congealed blood engulfed me, bringing tears to my eyes. I like to think it was the smell, anyway.

“You are fortunate, Detective, that your services are needed elsewhere. If you were not ending the world soon...”

And he was back among the utburds.

“Now leave,” Amon told me as I got up. “Kill humanity for me.”

Some people might be worried when a demon seems so certain that they’re going to bring about the end of the world. I’ll admit that I was a little concerned, but not overly. Ever since taking over as Kalamazoo’s Detective, I’d prevented the end of the world at least twenty times. Some form of apocalypse was about to happen, or predicted to happen, or destined to happen at least twice a year, sometimes three times. My causing it was a unique twist, but still not enough to make my boots shake.

“Amon,” the boy who’d summoned him whined. “Kill him. He’s got Suzie.”

The demon looked at the boy, then promptly bit his head off.

“You’d better hope I do end it,” I said to the demon. “Because if I don’t, I’m coming back here to knock you back to Hell.”

He turned and walked back to the daycare center, unconcerned. After a long glare at me, the utburds faded away, one by one.

5.

I stood outside the door to my ground floor apartment, under the stairs and just out of the way of the occasional spray of rain that the wind tried to shower me with, mentally preparing myself for what waited inside. Finally, I opened the door.

Words like squalid and filthy would start a person on the road to a proper adjective to describe my apartment, but they’d fall far short. Stepping up to the hyphenated adjective, like

pig-sty and cess-pool, you'd be getting a little closer. In the end, the best word you'd probably be able to come up with would be funky. Rancid milk, my God what is that smell and which pile of things is it coming from sort of funky. But it was necessary. The smell was the only way I knew of to keep all but the most desperate of ghosts out of my apartment.

“Dammit,” I swore as I stepped into the apartment, shaking the water off of myself.

I'd only been half awake when I'd left to take care of my client's problem, causing me to leave the closet door near the apartment's entrance open. It's nearness to the front door meant that it was a little less rank than the rest of the apartment, so instead of being greeted by the white, metal door, I was greeted by the corpse of a woman, purple-faced, swollen-tongued, and bulging-eyed, hanging from the metal rod by a white sheet. The crimson stripper outfit, essentially a ruffled bra and panties, lent an unexpected level of grotesqueness to the body. It was like finding a semi-naked woman's corpse in your giant bachelor party cake instead of a semi-naked sexy woman.

Not that it was worse than anything else I'd seen. I'd once seen a demon pull itself together out of corpse parts so rotted they were almost liquid, and on that scale dead strippers barely made a blip.

“I'm not impressed,” I said, taking down a coat hanger and then putting my trench coat next to the corpse.

I rubbed my eyes, desperately trying to keep them open. They got the message, but left the distinct impression that I'd only gotten a reprieve and they'd be trying to close up shop again soon.

“You know,” I said to the hanging corpse, “I'd really appreciate it if this could wait until later. I'm in serious need of sleep.”

I figured it'd be hard for me to cause the end of the world from my bed.

The woman obstinately continued to hang there.

I shrugged and closed the apartment and closet doors. Taking big, deliberate steps in order to avoid tripping over some of the larger piles of assorted things on the floor that the darkness was hiding, I headed to my bedroom.

I almost made it when I heard a hoarse, female voice nearby say, "Please, help me."

I dropped my head and slowly put my foot on the floor, resigning myself to a long, sleepless night. I lifted the foot again experimentally to make sure the floor would give it back while I figured out what to do about the woman. It came up with some effort.

I turned around to face the general area of darkness that it felt like she was in.

"I'm going to take a shot in the dark here," I winced internally at this unintended pun, "and guess that you didn't commit suicide."

"Someone killed me," she said quietly, as if afraid that her murderer would hear.

"And, because it can never be that simple, you don't know who did it."

Crying was my only answer.

After sighing heavily at what I knew would be my lost night's sleep, I started walking to the living room, tripping over a couple of small piles of garbage or clothes, I couldn't quite tell which. Eventually, I found a lamp and turned it on. The woman stood two feet away from me, tears trickling sideways over waxen flesh. Her broken neck made her head lie at an odd angle on her shoulder, giving her the impression of an eternally perplexed zombie. I turned the light off.

"Could you fix that, please?" I said flatly. "I'm not going to talk to you looking like that."

She began crying harder. "How?" she asked miserably between sobs.

I'll be the first to admit that I'm an ass. I'll gladly be cruel and heartless to just about anyone and anything, living, dead, or otherwise, that I feel the need to be cruel and heartless to, and the night was turning into the kind that would put most of the planet into that category. But I do have one fatal, for my job anyway, vulnerability: women crying. Especially pretty ones. I always chalked it up to bad genes, if just for my own peace of mind. Normally this wasn't a problem, since most ghosts were about as attractive as road kill, and even fewer of the people who had problems with them were much better. I had a hunch, though...

"Rule number one: Being dead's mostly a mental thing. Just think of how you usually look, and you'll look like that."

I waited a moment. "Ready for the light?"

"I think so."

I turned on the light and my suspicions were confirmed. In place of the hanged woman was a pretty stripper in a skin-tight, red leather outfit that left just enough to the imagination to be provocative. I was a little surprised that she was only pretty, as opposed to the beautiful or, more frequently, trashy that I expected strippers to be, and a little alarmed. I could deal with beautiful women. I just ignored them, like they tended to ignore me, or acted like an ass towards them. Whichever was appropriate for the situation. Pretty women offered another challenge altogether. They were, theoretically, in my league, so I'd sometimes forget myself and act human towards them. And, with shoulder-length blonde hair, and a roundish face dominated by a slightly crooked nose, she was definitely pretty.

She clapped her hands together and jumped up a few inches in delight, causing her pert little breasts to jiggle some. "It worked!" She spun around and looked at herself. "I'm me again!"

“No, you’re part of you,” I said, trying to maintain my professional detachment in the face of extreme odds and perky body parts. “The rest of you is either still hanging somewhere, or waiting to be autopsied right now.”

The woman deflated a little and began to fade. “I’m sorry.”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop with the pity attempts for a moment. If you want my help, you need to stay here all the way and not try to play me like one of your johns.”

Her eyes got wide and she strode up to me, getting more and more solid all the while. She tried to slap me with one of her intangible hands, nearly losing her balance and tumbling into me when her hand went through me.

I smiled, enjoying the show the same way I did every other time a ghost tried to hit me. The entertainment was worth the icy sensation her hand brought with it. “Rule number two: You can’t touch things. The only thing that keeps you from sinking into the center of the planet is that you’re used to not falling through the ground.” This wasn’t entirely true, but I really didn’t feel the need to go into too much detail for someone who’d hopefully be leaving soon.

“Anything else?” she said, regaining her balance rather quickly. Her job experience, I figured.

“I’ll tell you as things come up. Fresh out of ‘So You’re A Ghost’ brochures at the moment.”

I sighed. “Might as well get this started. What’s the last thing you remember?”

I doubted that this would get me any information I needed, but you never know. Usually, the answer amounted to something like, ‘I was doing something, then I woke up dead.’ If the universe was feeling especially hateful towards me, they woke up dead in my apartment. Took

me four years to figure out that this was because whatever in Kalamazoo picked me to be its Detective was sending them to me.

She thought for a moment. “I was at work. Then everything went dark, and I woke up in your closet.”

“Of course. What’s the date?” I needed to know how long she’d been dead. It’d let me know if I was going to have to deal with cops wherever she’d died, and if I’d have to pull some strings to eventually see the body.

“November third,” she said with some annoyance. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Today’s the tenth, almost the eleventh, technically. You’ve been gone for a while.”

I held up a hand. “And no, before you ask, I don’t know why it took you a week to materialize.”

I rubbed my eyes again. I was going to need coffee soon if I expected to stay awake for this. “Does the last place you remember being have coffee? You may not have noticed it, but I’m pretty damned tired to be investigating wrongful deaths.”

Anger crossed her face again, but she contained herself. “Sorry if my death inconvenienced you.”

“Apology accepted. So does it?”

“The View? Yeah.”

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. A small groan escaped from me. “Great. A tittie bar. You couldn’t just get killed in the parking lot, or an alley, like everyone else.”

“I don’t need this,” she said, and turned to walk out.

“I really don’t either, but it looks like we’re stuck together.”

She kept walking and I sighed as an unexpected sense of duty tugged at my mind. “All right, I’m sorry, come back. Besides, where would you go?”

She stopped, but didn’t turn around as she said, “I’d find someone who could help me,” so I got to see her nice, well-toned ass. I stood up in an attempt to wake up some, and to stop staring at the dead woman’s ass. I wasn’t that desperate yet.

“I doubt it. As far as I know, or care, I’m the best there is in this town. Even if there was someone else, they’d never go with you to a tittie bar to check things out.”

She turned around. “Why not? Are you guys all gay?”

There was a moment of silence as I contemplated finding a urinal cake. “No. No we’re not. Well, aside from San Francisco’s Queen. But the point is neither are most ghosts. So, if you can see what I can see, strip clubs are probably the most disturbing places in the world to go to next to hospitals. And they’re even worse if you’re a female ghost. Means you get to get groped by some pretty messed up looking guys.”

Her eyes grew wide again, this time in fear. “They can’t...rape me or anything, can they?”

“As a matter of fact they can.” I saw that she was about to cry again, so I hurriedly said, “Which is why you need to go as you looked a few minutes ago. That should keep most of them back.”

“What about the ones it doesn’t?”

I smiled. “I’ll take care of them.”

“Okay, and how am I supposed to get there? I’ll just fall through the car.”

“No, you won’t,” I said as I walked over to the closet to get my coat back out. “Old habits, like riding in cars and walking on the ground, die hard.”

I took out the coat. “Now, if the question and answer session has come to an end, I’d like to get this nastiness over with as soon as possible.”

6.

The Nice View was a squattish, white building that had the good sense of humor to be just half a block away from a Christian Life center. You could wave to one from the parking lot of the other. A few cars occupied the View’s parking lot, along with one battered and rusted van that the dead girl told me acted as the mobile closet for one of the more popular strippers. Aside from the security guard and the milling throng of dead men, the parking lot was unoccupied.

“Why are there so many of them here?” the girl asked, staring out of her window.

“Well, think about it: you’re a guy, and you can suddenly go wherever you want without anyone seeing you’re there. You’re not going to hang about some place boring like a graveyard or your old house. You’re going to go the strip club. Which is why we need something to keep them out of our way.”

Before leaving home, I’d remembered to reprovision my trench coat with a few knick-knacks that I figured would come in handy. Naturally, this included my favorite form of ghost repellent. I pulled the fresh cigar, nearly the size of a toilet paper tube, from one a pocket and, after several attempts, lit it. Greenish smoke that looked more like a special effect from a B movie than anything that was meant to be inhaled came rolling out as I blew air through it.

She cringed back from the horrid stench that suddenly filled the car and wrinkled her nose. “How can you smoke something that smells like that? Is there a dead rat wrapped in the leaves?”

I opened my door through a man in a blue hospital gown. The ghost turned to me and was about to tell me to watch what I was doing, but caught a whiff of the cigar's smoke and quickly backed away.

"I don't smoke it. I'd probably die if I inhaled one of these things. But they're great for wading through a crowd of horny dead guys. Vampires, too, actually." I studied the cigar for a moment. "Never thought about the rat thing, though. Guess it's possible."

"Are they even legal?"

"Not in the U. S. Now, put on your game face." I got out of the Sunbird and shut the door. A pair of ghosts that were walking toward me, one blue from asphyxiation, the other red from who knows what, immediately changed direction when I waved the cigar in their vicinity.

The girl, back to her former broken-necked self, stepped through the car door and stood up.

I went to the back of the car and waited for her. "Do your best to ignore the smell and stick close to me and you'll be fine."

Slowly, we made our way through the mass of dead men. I blew the occasional cloud of smoke out in front of us to act as a barrier/bulldozer to get ghosts out of our way. A few got brave, but a faceful of a smell that'd make a septic tank seem fragrant was always able to convince them to back off. Pretty soon, we reached the doors. The security guard, who could only be distinguished from the dead by his lack of any fatal disfigurements, seemed unable to take his eyes off of me and the cloud of foulness that preceded us.

I held up the cigar to the man. "Want one?"

"No thanks," the security guard said through clenched teeth as he fought bravely not to throw up, "I'm fine."

“Suit yourself,” I said with a shrug. I opened a door with my free hand just in time to be blasted by the opening chords of ‘Dr. Feelgood’.

“Jainey’s on!” the dead woman said happily, losing herself and reverting to her natural, stripper ensemble. She ran ahead of me to see her friend on stage, roughly pushing through a few ghosts with surprising ease.

I sighed and looked at the security guard. “Dead people. They never do what you tell ‘em to.”

I went in before the security guard could come up with a reply and walked up to the counter to pay. “Hey, gay door guy,” I said to the tall man in a coatless tuxedo behind the counter. “How’s business tonight?”

“I’m not gay,” he said like it was some sort of mantra he’d picked up with the payroll form for his job. “Why do you people always think that?”

“Just trying to be conversational.” I blew some smoke at him. Most of it dropped to the counter and rolled off, but enough made it to him to have its desired effect.

He backed up a step. “Whatever. It’s twelve dollars.”

I paid him. “So how’s business?” More smoke threatened the man’s lungs.

The cashier backed up some more and, seeing that the man with the nasty cigar wasn’t going to leave until he answered the question, said, “It’s bad. Now can you please take that awful cigar of yours and go watch the naked women?”

“Sure. Is...,” I stopped as I realized that I didn’t know my client’s name. Twice in one night. I made mental note to try and keep my callousness a little more selective in the future.

“Is the cute girl in red leather working tonight? She’s about this tall,” I put my hand up to eye level, “blonde hair, goes about to her shoulders.”

“You just described about a quarter of the women working here, man.” The cashier motioned with his thumb towards the main area. “Why don’t you go in and look for yourself.”

I turned and started walking away, but stopped before I got too far. A horrible thought crossed my mind.

“Is Andrea working tonight?” I asked without turning around

“I think so,” the cashier said quickly, hoping to get me and my cigar away from him as soon as possible.

“Dammit,” I muttered and stalked into the main room. “I hate this job.”

I grabbed a cup of coffee from Gimp Suit, the bartender, his eyes wide and pleading.

“Sorry, nothing I can do to help you,” I told the man in the suit. “Shouldn’t have broken the deal.”

The Nice View had a rather unique way of dealing with designated drivers who reneged and drank. Somehow, somewhere, someone with a particularly nasty sense of humor had cursed a black leather gimp suit so that it would envelope and possess whoever broke a deal with it. In this case, free non-alcoholic drinks for a designated driver as long as they didn’t drink liquor. The minute they did, though, the suit would come after them. They’d be trapped in it, forced to give it a body, forced to tend bar for the Nice View, and forced to see every stripper who paraded across the stage, but unable to do anything about it until someone else broke the deal and took their place.

I looked over the crowd as I downed my coffee. The living Tuesday crowd at the View was small. A pair of old men that I took to be professors of some sort by their tweed jackets sat at a table close to the stage and just left of the central aisle. Four migrant workers were at the stage, enjoying a stripper who was down to just her white lacy panties, her artificially round

breasts that reminded me of mini beach balls just out of their reach. One of them occasionally brought his cup of coke under the counter and surreptitiously poured some liquor into it out of a small, banged up, silver flask. The manager saw this, but pretended not to notice, the large roll of ones sitting in front of the day-laborers convincing him not to. A kid with dreadlocks and a goatee, who I put at no more than twenty, was sitting back in a corner watching the show by himself.

The living-impaired crowd was everywhere: on the stage dancing with the stripper, beside the stage, sitting in the chairs, on the tables, on the counter, and anywhere else they could fit. A few spectral women were there enjoying the show, too. They were sitting in a small group, causing me to shake my head at my continued run of bad luck. The more intimidatingly butch ones were towards the edge of it, keeping men at a respectable distance with the occasional glare.

I put the empty cup on the bar and made my way to my client, who was currently stuck just past the doorway because of the mob of the dead. They parted as soon as my cigar's stench oozed its way to them.

"You've got to stay near me," I told her through the din of Vince Neil singing about drugs and their dangers. "I can't protect you if you wander off."

I surveyed the candidates, both living and dead, for conversation prospects, and, as big of a pain in my ass as they tended to be, decided to go with the group of lesbians. They seemed the least driven by the habit of hormones. And I was pretty sure that I recognized one of them.

When we started towards the group, the stripper's ghost swept her hand through my shoulder, just missing my heart, in an attempt to stop me. "Wait! We aren't going to talk to ... them are we?" She looked wide-eyed at the group of women.

I suppressed a shiver from the coldness of her hand passing through me and looked at her. “First off, what’s your name?”

She moved back a half-step, sensing something bad coming. “April,” she said, her voice meek.

“Good. Well, April, don’t put your icy little hand through my body again. I’m not in the mood to risk a heart attack tonight, especially not for a karma job.” Heart attack was a bit of an exaggeration, but I was trying to make the point that a cold swipe through the chest wasn’t the most comfortable thing in the world.

“A what?”

“A karma job. Pro bono work. A freebie. And any job that makes me come here better pay off high in the good karma department.” I mumbled the last as I stalked off towards the women, waving dismissively at the confused looks of the two professors, who had turned to watch as I had my angry conversation with the air.

“And yes, we’re going to talk to them. Get over it.” I picked up an ashtray as I was walking and put out the cigar. I put the stub, a little less than half of the cigar, in a side pocket of my coat and tossed the ashtray on another table, sending it through a heavy-set guy in a hospital gown.

The guy started to get off of the table and move for me, swearing along the way, but a ghost next to him held him back. The man holding him back shook his head and said, “Don’t. It’s the Detective.”

The heavy-set guy put his hands up and sat back down, murmuring apologies.

I didn’t pay much attention to this, too focused on what I was doing.

When I got to my destination, all eyes were on me.

“Ladies,” I said expansively, with the biggest smile I could manage to fake. “How are you this lovely evening?”

“We’ll be a lot better when you leave, dick,” a husky female voice said from the right side of the table. “Although we just saw your ex’s stage act about ten minutes ago, so that’s a plus.”

I’d been consciously avoiding looking at that side of the table, wanting to let my ‘friend’ get in whatever barb she wanted to first. Doing so usually made her more amiable to my questions.

I looked over now, still smiling. “Taylor. How’s my favorite example of just how wrong the church is doing tonight?”

It’d long been a running joke among dead homosexuals that they’d finally gotten to show the world that homosexuality was a person’s nature, and not a choice, and there was no one to see. Except for me, of course, and no church was in the mood to listen to ‘a rude little man who claimed to talk to dead people,’ as one priest had once said to me.

Taylor liked to over-indulge in altering her appearance now that she was dead. The form she presented was petite, with long, blonde hair and moderately good looks. I, though, knew how she’d really looked in life, having gotten curious one time after catching a glimpse of her in her ‘true’ ghost form. Taylor hadn’t been overly attractive. The best word to describe her would have been plain. She was thin in a bony sort of way, with stringy, dish-water blond hair that always looked dirty. Knowing this secret had helped me to coerce her into helping me a few times over the years. Letting her insult me a bit allowed her to save face.

“Better once you and your dead tart get out of here,” she said. “Did hanging out with dead people finally get to you, Roger? Gone necro on us?”

There were a few laughs at the table.

“Jealous that she doesn’t swing your way?”

“I’m sure if I toss her a few singles she would.” There was a round of open laughter at the table. “Isn’t that right, April?”

“Shut up, you nasty dyke!” April shouted at Taylor, moving toward her.

Two women who would have been able to beat me senseless had they been alive moved over to intercept her. April stopped as soon as they did.

“Teach your dead whore some manners, Roger, or she’s going to get a beating that it’ll take her decades to come back from,” Taylor said

I motioned for April to move back. Reluctantly, she did. “The dead whore, I mean April, is the reason I’m here, Taylor. I wanted to talk to you about her.”

Taylor shrugged. “She’s dead, she’s a whore, what else do you need to know?”

I sighed. “I don’t have time for this shit, Taylor,” I said flatly. “Over-compensate for a bad life some other time. I’m tired, working for free, and I’m in a gods damned strip club. You know how pissy that makes me.”

“Ask a Blood-hound. I heard one of them saw part of what happened,” she said dismissively. “Other than that, I can’t help you. Any other asinine questions?”

I thought about asking if she was the husband or the wife in her relationships, just to piss her off, but thought better of it. I really wasn’t that big of an ass, and knew I’d regret it later. Mainly due to the large group of angry, dead lesbians that would be haunting me for the weeks to come. “No, I think that just about fills my quota of abuse for this part of the evening. Thanks.”

“Uh-oh, Rick’s coming over,” April said, looking to my right.

Taylor smirked. “That’s what you get for arguing with yourself.” The table laughed again.

I turned to face the approaching manager and suppressed a smile. The man obviously lived under the mistaken impression that size equaled toughness, leading to a stiff-armed strut in imitation of a body builder’s walk. Unlike a body builder, however, the manager only had mid-sized arms with undefined muscles, and a beer belly that preceded him by several inches. The thinning mullet only added to my amusement. I put him at about \$20.

“Is there a problem, buddy?” Rick attempted a growl, but his nasally voice made it sound more like hay fever.

“None at all.” I put my left hand in my pants pocket. “Just talking to some dead people.” I pulled out a twenty. “Mind if I continue?”

Rick looked at the money, then back to me. He grabbed the bill and tucked it away faster than my eyes could follow. “As long as you’re quiet about it. Don’t bother the other customers.”

I smiled. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Then, just as Rick was turning to leave, “Nasty what happened to April. Heard there was blood all over.” Not that I knew there was blood, of course. It was just a good thing to tack on to a murder. He’d either correct me if I was wrong, or go along with it if I was right.

Rick stopped and turned back. “It happens sometimes with strippers once the looks start going.”

“You bastard!” April shouted. “My looks weren’t going!”

She took a swipe at Rick and he shuddered in the middle of saying, “We’ll get another.”

“How sensitive of you,” I said with no humor.

“Piss off, nut job.” He turned, and this time I let him walk away.

Over my shoulder, I said, “She’s feisty, Taylor. Too bad she’s straight.”

April looked like she wanted to hit me, but held back.

“Good move,” I said as I moved away from the table.

“Where are we going now?” April asked, joining me.

“The bathroom. We have to talk to whatever Blood-hounds happen to be here.”

“We’re going to talk to a dog?” She seemed less than convinced that I was serious.

“I wish. Dogs are at least sane, and if they aren’t you can shoot them. The Blood-hounds are a group of ghosts that like the smell of blood. The worst ones get off on death, and the smells that the body gives off during it. I have to shoo ‘em away from my apartment occasionally.” I shook my head. “This is just pushing all of my buttons. Thanks for a fun evening.”

“It’s not fun for me, either,” April pouted. “You think I like being dead?”

“You’re going to have to pretend to in a minute. The Blood-hounds like to hang out in the women’s restroom, so you’ll need to get one of them to come out to talk to me.”

“Why do they hang out in the...oh.”

“Yeah, and they like the dressing room, too. And not for the naked bodies.”

April shivered as the thought of what had been secretly watching, and smelling, her fully hit her. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’re dead,” I said as we turned the corner and went down the four stairs to the bathrooms. “It’s just a habit. You don’t have a body to be sick with.”

Before I could brief April about what she needed to do, a male scream echoed out of the women’s bathroom. Several dead men came rushing out, knocking April out of their way and

nearly freezing me to death as they went through me. My hand went instinctively to my coat pocket to pull out the cigar. It froze there when the final ghost loped through the door.

April screamed.

Anything can become a ghost. It just needs sufficient cause to do so. There are stories everywhere of phantom dogs, tigers, and even the headless, ghost chicken that killed Francis Bacon. They were really rare, but I'd even heard a story or two from people I trusted talking about phantom dinosaurs. Human ghosts are just more numerous because they tend to have more reason to stick around than an animal. But there were other things that were around and gone a long time before people had even evolved past rat-like things.

What walked out of the door resembled a human if it'd been crossed with a komodo dragon. Rust colored scales covered the creature's body, except for the stomach, where the scales faded to tan. Large, black eyes were set in an elongated face reminiscent of a gila monster. Each hand and foot had three digits ending in claws long enough to gut a person without much trouble. It towered a good three feet over my head. It shifted its gaze to me and said in a voice that didn't seem made to say it, "Detective."

The lizard-man speaking shook me out of staring at the thing. "A naga," I growled as I pulled out the cigar. A lighter materialized in my other hand and I began puffing.

The naga reacted almost immediately, swinging at me with its left hand. I fell back, just about literally as my feet hit the steps behind me, causing me to stumble. It tried to move forward to take another swipe at me, but couldn't push past my cigar's smoke.

"Soon, Detective," the naga rasped before leaping through the wall across from the bathroom door.

"What the hell was that?" April shouted, terrified.

I blew as much smoke as I could in the direction the naga had disappeared. “Bad news on a level that I didn’t expect to be playing on tonight.”

Dammit. I’d hoped that whatever had visited Suzie and her friends was something else. Something slightly less homicidal. Admittedly, this included pretty much everything in existence, but still.

Screams started to filter back from the main area. I went into the men’s room to avoid the onslaught of dead people that were sure to come stampeding out shortly. Predictably, there were no ghosts in there. April stayed close behind.

“All right,” I said and winced.

I looked in one of the bathroom’s mirrors. Three, thin lines of blood ran down my cheek.

“It hurt you,” April marveled.

“I noticed.”

“How did it hurt you?”

“Lots more practice at being dead than most ghosts.” It’d been a few years since a ghost had managed to physically hurt me. Come to think of it, it’d been a naga that time, too. A couple of them had figured out how to use sympathetic magik and hospital waste to make people kill themselves. Nasty week.

“All right,” I said again, this time in what I hoped was a nice tone, with subtle menace underlying it and perhaps a touch of very displeased. “I want all of the cards on the table. What the hell have you gotten me involved in?”

“Nothing!” she protested. “I was killed. I want to know who did it. I’ve never seen that...thing before.”

“Did you do drugs? Prostitution? Gamble? Anything that might have gotten you involved in something illegal or odd?”

“No, nothing. I just danced.”

“Nagas don’t appear where people just dance, hon. If one of those bastards is here, then there’s something going on.”

I took a drag from the cigar without thinking and started hacking. “And I don’t want to be there when it goes down,” I said through tears.

“What is a naga?” April asked. “Is it some sort of monster?” Her eyes darted back and forth several times. “Are there more of them? Is it going to eat me? Is it…”

I blew some smoke in her face and she backed up. “Stop it. All you need to know is that they’re evil bastards who hate everything that’s alive, especially humans. They’ve been dead for eons, and they’ve got all that built up anger to vent. They usually do it by trying to end the world.”

“They? Are there a lot of these things?”

I shook my head. “Gods no. Only a few of ‘em are around. Maybe fifty. The problem is, they usually avoid this city like it was genital herpes, or dead flies, or whatever bothers big lizards, because all of the other supernatural shit that’s usually hanging around hates them as much as they hate us. If they’re here, we’ve got bigger problems than you being dead.”

April put her hands on her hips. “Says who?”

“Says the guy who can help you.”

April seemed to want to argue the point, but her hands dropped to her side after some thought.

“On a cheery note, though, I think that your death and Godzilla showing up are probably connected, so I’m going to keep looking into what happened to you.”

She brightened some.

I pointed at her with the cigar. “But if you’re involved in this somehow, you’re going to be spending a few years in a urinal cake in this restroom enjoying some golden showers.” I then pointed to one of the urinals.

This made April wilt some more, and made me feel slightly better. If I couldn’t get back at the universe for messing with me on such a regular basis, I’d at least vent some of my frustrations on its latest attempt.

She started crying.

I began whistling ‘Piano Man’ quietly in an attempt to ignore her.

“Wh-what are you whistling?” April said through sobs.

I stopped. Listening to Billy Joel was one of my guilty pleasures; one that I did not want to get around. “Nothing,” I said, and started whistling ‘Dr. Feelgood’.

“I know I’ve heard it before...”

“Can you stay in one mode for bit?” I said a little harsher than I’d intended. “First you’re a sad dead girl, then you’re an okay dead girl, then you’re a sad dead girl again, and now you’re a curious dead girl. Make up your mind.”

“I hate you!” April shouted, then ran through the bathroom door.

“Yeah, well, maybe the naga’ll eat you and I can go to sleep,” I said under my breath without any real feeling.

After a moment, I sighed, opened the door, and left. I went up the stairs slowly and stopped at the top. I peeked around the corner. As I did so, ‘Enter Sandman’ blasted from the

speakers and a woman dressed in suggestive satin pajamas took the stage. No ghosts, naga or human, were evident in the small amount of area I could see. Which didn't mean there weren't any. Ghosts were better than car keys at hiding, and I could just sense a knot of them in the changing room by the stage that probably hadn't heard the naga.

As stealthily as I could manage, I stepped out and walked to the main room, puffing out generous quantities of green smoke as I went. Once I got there, the only people I saw were living ones. Some of the tenseness the naga's visit had given me went away.

I let some of the smoke clear from in front of me, and then scanned the room more closely. In the left corner, sitting at a lap-dance couch next to the strippers' changing room, I saw April crying into her hands.

"Dammit," I said quietly. "I hate dead women. Dead men never get all weepy."

Putting my free hand in my coat pocket, I made my way over to April. I thought about putting out the cigar on the way over, but decided against it. We'd be talking pretty close to the changing room, and I wanted to be able to ward off any Blood Hounds that might've heard us.

"Stop crying," I told her as softly as I could with Metallica pounding its way through my body.

"No," April said without looking up. "I'm tired of you bossing me around and being mean to me."

I looked to the changing room a little nervously. I wasn't terribly worried about the Blood Hounds, but their tendency to be unpredictable could be a slight problem. Besides, I wanted to take them by surprise, not vice-versa.

Swallowing my pride, and forcing down as much of the irritation I was currently feeling as I could, I admitted, "I might have been a little hard on you back there."

She kept crying.

“Gods dammit...” I stopped and took a deep breath. “We need to get on with this show. Caffeine’s only going to keep me awake and chipper for so long.”

April finally looked up at me. “Then go. You can do this without me.”

“Noo,” I said slowly. “No I can’t. This whole thing is mostly just to get you to move on. And me back into bed.”

“What about the lizard-thing?”

I ran my fingers through my still wet hair, annoyed at where I saw this going. “Yeah, there is that.”

“So, you need me to stick around for something besides your sleep.”

“All right, all right. I get the point. I’ll try to be nicer.”

“Try?”

I narrowed my eyes and puffed out some smoke. “Don’t press your luck.”

“Gotcha.”

April wiped her eyes and stood up. “So, what now?”

“Now you go in there and get one of them to say his first and last name.” I pulled out a pink, mildly fragrant urinal cake. “Once I’ve got that, I’ll take care of the rest.”

“How do I do that?”

“I don’t know. That’s your job. But I strongly suggest that you get out of there immediately after he says it. They won’t be too happy with what’s going to happen.”

“What’re you going to do?”

I held up the urinal cake. “Give one lucky contestant a luxurious new home. Now get going before they decide they’ve had enough fun tonight.”

April waited until the current stripper's routine was over so the music wouldn't drown out her conversation, then slowly walked through the lavender curtain that separated the dressing room from the club. As she did so, I began chanting in low tones, listening as best as I could to the conversation that had started.

"Who the hell are you?" came a young, male voice.

The next voice was low, grating, and drew out each word an extra syllable or two. "Noo sscennt onn herr. Shhe iss dead. Ignorre herr."

I smiled. It was not the kind of smile that was contagious, bringing joy wherever it went and lightening spirits. This was the smile of a sadist in a room alone with a bag full of puppies for a full hour. The kind of smile that brought out other smiles as a defensive measure meant to hide the fact that someone had just wet themselves in fear of it.

I recognized the voice, and knew the owner of it quite well. In fact, I'd been waiting a long time for a chance to put the voice's owner someplace uncomfortable for an amount of time that's usually only used by geologists.

"Oops, I'm sorry," came April's voice. It had the innocent tone of air-headedness that has gotten more than one man to think with the wrong head. "I didn't know you guys were in here."

"Get out of here you scentless little twat." An older man's voice. "We don't need your bland smelling pussy in here. There's barely enough of the live stuff for the rest of us to breathe."

"But..." she started sobbing, "all I wanted was to know what's going on. I just woke up here, and nobody can see me! So I came back here to talk to the other girls, and they still couldn't see me!"

“Aw, jeez, I’m sorry lady,” said the older man. “I didn’t mean to make you cry or nothin’. It’s just...”

“Idiot. Sstop talkingg to herr.”

“But, Bloodscent, she’s that chick that...”

“I ssaïd shut up, youu moron,” Bloodscent shouted. “Shhee iss...”

But Bloodscent didn’t get to finish his sentence. I finished the incantation by saying, “Floyd Aaron Kramer.”

The urinal cake’s inscription glowed white briefly. It shook some.

“Ah ah, Floyd. You’re not getting away from me this time.”

Shouting erupted from at least three men after I said the name. April came running out, followed by four men who stopped in their tracks when they got a whiff of the putrid smoke I’d started puffing out.

They were fairly standard ghosts: pale, slightly blotchy, and wearing the suits they were buried in. Except for the one on the left end. He was a nasty piece of work with most of his left side gone. Torn away, if the tattered flesh along the edges was any indication.

“Come on, boys,” I said, clenching my teeth on the cigar. “Try me.”

The one on the left looked like he wanted to, but his more complete friend next to him held him back.

“It’s the Detective. Just let it go.” I could tell by the voice that this was the older man who had called April a twat.

I smiled and decided to push it just a bit. “Listen to your friend, Righty, and go back to smelling lady’s underwear.”

The torn up man made as if he was going to go after me, but the older man held him back again.

Finally, the torn up man flipped me off and said, “Fuck you,” before turning around with the others and hobbling back into the dressing room.

I turned and started walking toward April, who was waiting for me by the main room’s exit, when an all-too-familiar, female voice shouted, “Roger,” behind me.

“Shit,” I said aloud, but low enough that the music drowned it out.

“I thought you didn’t like coming here, or was that just a lie?”

I took the cigar out of my mouth and turned back to face her. Andrea hadn’t changed much since leaving me a few months back. She still kept her long, black hair pulled back in twin pony-tails, lending her already young appearance more of a school-girl look. She played up this image by dressing in a plaid, short skirt reminiscent of a Catholic school outfit, which she wore without the top, letting her naturally perky breasts see, and be seen by, the world. I’d felt them enough times to be able to attest to their authenticity. In spite of myself, my penis stirred to see what the commotion was about.

“Trust me, it’s not because I want to be. I’m on a case,” I said, trying to look her in the eyes as I spoke. As nonchalantly as I could, I slipped Floyd’s new home into a pocket.

Andrea sighed and rolled her eyes. “A real one, or an imaginary one?”

Andrea had never believed in my ‘gift’ of seeing ghosts. She’d always considered my ghost cases excuses to be out until all hours, doing anything other than what I’d told her I was doing. This mistrust, along with the obscenity that was my apartment, eventually led to our break up.

“They’re all real, hon. Don’t know why you could never understand that.”

“So who’s your ‘client’?” she asked with a condescending smile.

“Funny you should ask. She used to work here. Her stage name was April.”

Andrea narrowed her eyes and slapped me. Hard. “That’s sick, and you’re an ass for saying something like that.” She crossed her arms, hiding her breasts, much to my penis’s disappointment.

“If you say so, but it’s the truth,” I said, rubbing my cheek. “I came home and found her ghost hanging in my closet not too long ago. And, since I’m such a nice guy, I decided to help her with her problem.”

“Which is?”

“Find out who killed her so she can move on. And, unfortunately, she died here. So here I am.”

“What do you get out of it?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

Andrea glared at me.

“Seriously. I get the knowledge of a job well done, and some sleep. The sleep being the main reason I’m doing this.”

“Now I know you’re lying. You never do charity work.”

I ran my fingers through my hair as I thought of another way to approach this. “All right. If it helps, think of it this way: I’m investigating April’s death because I know it hasn’t been solved by the cops, and helping them might get me on their good side.”

Andrea put her hands on her hips, letting me see her breasts once again. Grudgingly, she told me, “They’re saying it was a suicide, but we all know better.”

“Why’s that?” I encouraged.

“She’s been too happy lately,” Andrea caught herself, realizing she’d spoken in the present tense. “I mean, she was.”

I smiled, trying to be reassuring. “It’s okay. It’s normal. Why was she so happy?”

“She had some guy she was seeing.” Andrea looked around the room. “I thought I saw him in here earlier, but I guess not.”

I looked around and saw that only the migrant workers were still there. “What did he look like?”

“He’s a young guy, kind of cute. Nothing special, really, but she liked him.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Chip, I think.”

“Did you get a last name?”

“Yeah, it was something real common. Jones. That was it.”

That was more than I’d expected. When dealing with supernatural matters, names didn’t usually just fall into my lap. Except for the names of gods. Damned things did everything but mail out circulars.

“Was there anything weird about how she died?” I asked.

“There was blood all over the place, even though she’d been hung.”

Which indicated a ritual of some sort. The kind of blood would tell me more about who or what it was for. Which meant more running around, unless Floyd knew something about it.

I decided I’d probably exhausted all of the questions she could, or would, answer, so I said, “Thanks, hon. So far you’ve been the highlight of my evening.”

Andrea crossed her arms again. “I’m not sleeping with you, Roger, so don’t think being nice to me is going to get me in bed.”

“Damn,” I swore half-heartedly. “Can’t blame a guy for trying. Guess I’ll just leave, then. Have a good night, Andrea.”

“Is April really here?” she asked me as I turned to leave.

“Actually, she’s over by the DJ booth,” I said over my shoulder. “But yeah, she’s here.”

“Tell her...tell her I’m sorry,” she said, but quickly added, “If she’s really there.”

“I will. It was good seeing you again. And thanks for not asking about the urinal cake or the cigar.”

“One of the things I learned when I was with you was to not ask about things like that. Take care, Roger.”

I walked over to April. “Let’s go.”

“How do you know Andrea?” April asked as we headed towards the entrance.

“Ex-girl-friend. She says she’s sorry about what happened, by the way.”

“That’s sweet of her.”

“Oddly enough, yeah it is.”

We stopped when we got outside. News of the naga must’ve spread, because the parking lot was empty. I started laughing, almost enjoying myself, and earning a glare from the security guard.

“What’s so funny?” April asked me.

I turned my laughing down to a light chuckle and removed the urinal cake from my pocket. “‘Bloodscent’ here.”

The urinal cake shook violently, but I managed to hold onto it.

April shivered a little. “You wouldn’t laugh if you’d seen that guy. He was freaky looking.”

“Oh, I bet he was. Floyd always had a rather macabre twist to his imagination. Isn’t that right, Floyd?”

The urinal cake stopped shaking, seemingly sulking.

“See, Floyd here and I go back a little bit. I once caught him watching my girl-friend at the time, not Andrea, and me having sex. Seems he’d followed me back to her place from the View after I’d been there working a case. He decided to stay and was getting off on the smell.”

April wrinkled her nose at this. “That’s so...eww.”

“Yeah, I thought so, too. I couldn’t do much, though until I found out his name. And by then he’d disappeared from the local scene, so I couldn’t do anything.” I held the urinal cake up. “Until tonight.”

“So, something good has happened because of me,” April said.

I looked at her sharply, then finally smiled after a few moments. “I guess so. But it’s not nearly enough to make up for all of the shit I’m betting is going to happen before we figure out what happened to you.”

We started walking to the Sunbird.

“Can he talk in there?” April asked.

“No. I’ll have to whip out the Ouiji board to get any answers out of him.”

April started to ask something, but caught herself. Instead she just said, “Whatever works, I guess.”

I grinned. “Now you’re getting it.”

I cleared off the remains of... something from my coffee table and set a taped and glued together Ouiji board on it. Sitting on edge, so it could roll wherever it wanted, was Floyd's urinal cake. It sat perfectly still as Floyd continued sulking.

"Why don't you get a new board?" asked April from next to me on the couch.

"Sentimental value," I replied absently.

Then, to Floyd, "Listen up, Floyd. Unless you want to spend the rest of eternity locked in a safe-deposit box with a dead fish, you'd better help us."

Floyd rolled around the board, spelling out, "F-U-Q."

"I don't get it," April said, trying to figure the word out.

"Sound it out." I picked up Floyd. "I'm going to convince our fresh-smelling friend to help us. I'll be right back."

I left for the bathroom, leaving April still trying to guess what Floyd had spelled.

A few minutes later, I came back, smiling, with the dripping urinal cake. April was sitting with her arms crossed and an annoyed look on her face.

"I figured out what he spelled," April pouted.

"Good for you. There are cookies in the kitchen. Meanwhile, I just had one of the most satisfying experiences I've had in recent memory."

I set Floyd back on the Ouiji board and sat down.

April looked at the urinal cake with disgust. "You washed it off, didn't you?"

"You think I'm going to carry around something soaked in urine if I don't have to?"

"Just checking."

"So, Floyd, are you ready to help yet?" I asked.

Floyd rolled to the 'NO' space, leaving a trail of water behind himself.

I shook my head. “Floyd, I know you don’t enjoy these smells, and I can keep going. I had a big bowl of chili earlier today that still isn’t sitting well, not to mention whatever’s hiding in my apartment. Now, help us and I’ll just toss you in the nearest men’s room. The binding will wear off after awhile. Or don’t, and I’ll set you downwind of the paper mill after I’ve had my fun tonight, and we’ll try again later.”

Floyd rocked back and forth as if trying to decide. Finally, he rolled slowly over to ‘YES’.

“Good boy, Floyd. I knew we could count on you.”

I leaned forward. “Now, first off, do you know who killed my client here?”

Floyd stayed on ‘YES’.

“Who?”

Floyd spelled out, “N-A-G-A-S.”

I sat back. “Damn. It’s times like these I wish I believed in gods.”

“But, they’re just ghosts,” April said slowly, trying to see if there was anything she wasn’t getting. “How can they hurt people?”

“Possession,” I told her. “They take over someone’s body and make them do what they want. It’s hard to do, though, unless the person is willing. But I can’t think of anybody dumb enough to let a naga rent their body for an evening of stripper murdering.”

There were a few other nasty possibilities that I really didn’t like considering. Like taking over a person’s body completely by evicting his soul. Eviction was the permanent form of possession. It took a lot to do, though, since there are few things stronger in the universe than a soul’s link to its body, but it wasn’t impossible. Especially if there were several nagas working together.

Another unsettling option was that they'd squatted in a dead body. One of the worst things I'd ever seen was a dead body occupied by a ghost that just refused to give up the flesh. He had to keep it fresh by eating living tissue almost constantly. Preferably human. The apartment he was living in, and I use the term living in its loosest form, made an abattoir seem like a perfumery. Rotting scraps of meat and organs were scattered throughout the place, attracting rats and bugs, putrefying in sickening waves of heat and stench. And the body itself looked like a man-shaped leather sack full of squirming puppies trying to nuzzle their way out. I think I took sleeping pills for a week after that one.

"Who was it, Floyd?" I asked the urinal cake. "Who's our naga riding around in?"

Floyd spelled out, "D-O-N-T (pause) K-N-O-W."

"Bullshit. You were probably there watching and smelling it all. I'd bet that if you could've, you would've creamed your drawers."

Floyd rolled over to 'NO', and then spelled out, "G-O-T (pause) H-E-R-E (pause) T-O-D-A-Y (pause) H-E-A-R-D (pause) S-T-O-R-Y."

"Who from?"

"J-I-M-M-Y."

"That lying piece of dead trash? I wouldn't trust Jimmy as far as I could toss the car he's in. I thought you were smarter than that, Floyd. You'll have to do better than him as your source."

"The car he's in?" April asked.

"Pissed off the wrong people. Got put in a trunk and turned into a cube of metal," I said.

"Stay focused."

To Floyd I said, "What about it? Have any better proof?"

Floyd rolled over to 'NO'.

"Damn."

Picking up on my frustration, April asked, "What do we do now?"

I sighed. "Now we go see Beth and Mama Rosa. And if they tell me there are gods involved in this mess, I'm going to be seriously pissed."

"I thought you didn't believe in gods?"

"I don't. It just encourages them. But that doesn't mean they don't exist."

"So there's no one looking after us?"

"Nope. It's just us."

I got up, saying to myself as I walked away, "Bastards have almost blown up the world more times than I can count."

Before I got five feet from the couch, though, I turned, walked back to the coffee table, and picked up Floyd. "You're coming too. Don't need you rolling off somewhere I don't want you."

I put Floyd in a trench coat pocket before I put it on.

"All right, let's go see Mama Rosa."

April stood up. "Will she be up this late?"

I laughed with no real humor. "She's a reincarnated fortune-teller. She's probably expecting us."

9.

My first experience with Mama Rosa hadn't been a pleasant one. A case involving dead bums and vampires had found its way to me in early spring, less than two months after I'd had

the Detective job foisted off on me by Tony, the previous Detective, and only a month after my girlfriend at the time, Delilah, had broken up with me because of it. After two nights of being haunted by the pale ghosts of ten bums, since I hadn't learned the secret of stink keeping out ghosts yet, I finally accepted the case. I did it as much to get my mind off of my own problems as to get rid of the ghosts, who had a habit of singing old showtunes off-key in the wee hours before dawn.

Being inexperienced, and still pretty depressed, I didn't get very far very fast. Finally, when the number of ghostly bums reached thirteen, and they started putting on an all dead bum version of *The Wiz* in my bedroom, I cracked.

"Stoppit!" I shouted as I sat up in my bed. My eyes by this point were red enough to be seen in the dark, and my spotty facial hair was long enough to make people wonder about lycanthropy when I was out and about at night.

The bums stopped in the middle of singing 'Move on Down the Road' and looked at me.

"Find the things that killed us, Detective, and we will," said one of them with three layers of army jackets with enough holes to really only be called one jacket. "It's that easy."

"How?" I asked. "I've looked everywhere I can think of, and I still can't find a thing."

"That's not our fault," the apparent spokesbum said to me. "Do your job, and we'll leave."

"A little help would be appreciated. I'm sorry that you're dead, but keeping me up till all hours being theatrical at me isn't going to help things. I could use something to go on other than vampires doing you in."

"Go talk to Mama Rosa, then."

“Who’s Mama Rosa?” I asked with the creeping feeling that it would be a female bum of some sort who might expect... favors from me.

The bums all laughed. The spokesbum waved them into quiet with an arthritic hand.

“You’re Kalamazoo’s Detective, and you don’t know who Mama Rosa is? That’s disturbing. She used to help the other Detective out a lot.”

“How do you know that?”

“You don’t live on the streets of Kalamazoo for long without learning what goes on here and how to avoid it.”

I sighed. “All right. How can she help?”

“She’s a fortune teller. She lives over on Nelson.”

“You want me to go to a fortune-teller for help?” The sarcasm in my voice was thick enough to bury a small child. “What’s she going to do, look into her crystal ball and tell me where the vamps are?”

“We really don’t care what you do, or what she does, as long as you find out who killed us.”

I sighed. “Fine, I’ll go see her first thing in the...,” I looked at my alarm clock’s glowing red numbers, which said 4:15, “afternoon.”

The bums picked up singing where they’d left off.

“Fine!” I growled, throwing the sheets off of myself and getting out of bed. “I’ll go now.”

I threw on some clothes in the dark, hoping that they matched, but not really caring too much, and stormed out of my apartment. I slammed the door behind myself and, taking the steps two at a time, went to my brand-new, for me anyway, Sunbird.

The ghosts filed out of my apartment to tag along, but I wasn't about to have the mendicant theater troupe of the dead dogging my heels. I rolled down the window and stuck my head out. "There's not enough room in here for all of you. I'll take one of you with me, but that's it. I'm not a dead bum taxi, or hearse, or whatever."

The bums talked amongst themselves for a bit. Eventually, they decided to let the spokesbum go with me. He walked over to the Sunbird and phased into the passenger seat.

I started the car and backed out.

"What's your name?" I asked as we started out. I hadn't yet learned the skill of being coldly indifferent towards my clients.

"Old Terry," the spokesbum said.

I looked at Old Terry. "You don't look that old. Maybe, what, fifty?"

"In bum years, that's ancient. The only bum older than me is Laughing Frank, over on Sprinkle, and that's just because he gets himself into the hospitals every winter with the flu."

"Nice," I said flatly. "So, not that I want them to, but why haven't the vamps eaten Frank yet? Seems to me like he'd be an easy meal."

Old Terry shrugged. "Beats me. Maybe he's too stringy."

I chuckled despite myself. "Maybe old people taste bad to them. Like medicine, or something."

Old Terry looked at me. "We didn't take medicine, except whatever booze we could afford."

"Sorry, I didn't think about that," I said uncomfortably.

"Pff. What *do* you think about?" the bum asked. "It sure as hell isn't helping us."

"That's bullshit, old man. I've been doing my best to help all of you out."

“*That’s* bullshit. You haven’t done squat to help us. You’ve just looked around in a few spots and gone home. How’s that helping?”

I was getting flustered at this point. “I said I’m doing my best. If that’s not good enough, then go find another guy who can see ghosts and get him to help you. I just started, my girl-friend broke up with me, and I’m not even getting paid for this shit.”

“Not my problem. You’re the Detective, so do your job. Work out your personal problems on your own time.”

“How is 4:30 in the morning *not* my own time?”

Old Terry ignored me. “And as for money, think of this as earning some good karma. And it looks like you could use as much as you can get if you’ve been like this all your life.”

“Great, a karma job. This better be my last one, because karma doesn’t pay my bills.”

We drove in silence for a little while as I thought this over. Then something that had been bothering me some popped back into my head. “You don’t talk like most of the bums I’ve met. You sound...”

“Intelligent?” Old Terry said smiling.

“Well...yeah, I guess that’s as good a word as any to use.”

“I haven’t been a bum all my life. Not many of us have. A long time ago, I was a professor at U of M. I taught history there for, oh, fifteen years, I guess.”

“Sorry. What happened?”

“My wife and daughter got killed in a car accident.” He paused, trying to gather himself. “After that, I just didn’t care anymore. You can guess the rest. I drank too much too often, got fired, lost everything, started living on the streets. Made a living by donating blood and begging for money, then got killed by a vampire.”

“Do you think that the blood donations have anything to do with your death?”

“Finding out that’s part of your job, Detective,” Old Terry said. “My job is to haunt you until you find out who killed my friends and me.”

“Well, do you at least know if any of your dead buddies back at my place donated at the same place? I just figured I’d ask the obvious. You know, vamps and blood.”

“Probably. We all tended to roam in the same general area.”

“Hmm. I’ll check that out tomorrow. I hadn’t thought about the whole blood donations thing until you mentioned it. Didn’t know bums could donate blood.”

“Only if we sober up for a few days. We can even donate sperm, if we clean up, too. We have a suit that we all share for when we go in.”

I shuddered involuntarily at the thought of bum sperm donors. Although, at the time, donating bodily fluids was quickly looking like a viable source of income for me the way my finances were going.

I turned onto Nelson. “So, on a slightly less creepy note, where does Mama Rosa live?”

Old Terry looked down the road and pointed. “The house down there with the lights on.”

I drove slowly to the small, grey house that the bum had pointed to and pulled into its driveway. I got out and walked up to the front door with Old Terry in tow, opened it, and knocked on the wooden, inner door. A young woman wearing jeans and a blue blouse opened it.

Later, I’d find out that Beth had everything I looked for in a woman and more. Her hair was long, thick, and red. Her face and body were not quite beautiful, but that half-step away from it that made her seem attainable. The kind of beauty that flaws only accented. She was also very well aware of what went on in the city. Probably, and I’d never admit this to her,

more so than I was. Her knowledge of the city's supernatural events had gotten me, and Kalamazoo, out of more than one debacle.

The 'and more' part, though, was one of the reasons she and I had never actually gotten together as anything more than associates. The 'and more' consisted of Mama Rosa.

Of course, our relationship didn't exactly start out great.

"You don't look like a Mama Rosa," I told her.

"That's because I'm not. I'm Beth, her assistant. And you're late. You should've been here weeks ago."

I smiled. "I thought Mama Rosa was a fortune-teller. Didn't she see that coming?"

Beth narrowed her eyes. "Yes, she did. What I meant was that, if you were smart, you should've been here weeks ago."

"Just show me Mama Rosa."

She stepped aside and Old Terry and I walked in. I sat in a blue rocker/recliner next to the door. Old Terry stood in the little end-table next to the chair.

"Sit over there," Beth told me as she closed the door. She pointed to a beige love seat on the opposite side of the room, separated from the chair by a small, glass coffee table.

"Why?"

"Because I said so, and if you don't do what I say, you don't get to see Mama Rosa."

Grumbling, I went to the love seat and sat down. Old Terry followed and sat next to me.

Beth sat in the chair I'd just vacated. "So, you're the new Detective. I think I liked Tony better."

"Good for you. I'm so glad. Now, if you're finished insulting me, I'd like to see Mama Rosa."

Beth cocked her head as if listening to something far away. She nodded. "All right."

She looked down momentarily and then, slowly, brought her eyes up. As she did so, the skin on her face seemed to just let go of her skull and sag into wrinkles. Crow's feet appeared under her eyes. "Evening, Detective," she said in an old woman's worn down voice. "Been meaning to ask you over for some time now to meet you."

She glanced at Old Terry. "Who's your friend?"

"You can see him?" I asked, excited enough to ignore her metamorphosis for the moment. "No one else can see them."

She laughed. "Course I can see him. Why wouldn't I? Mama Rosa's been 'round long enough to see his kind without any problem."

"Wait, you're Mama Rosa?" I asked. "I thought you said you're name's Beth."

"It is. Let's just say that Beth and Mama Rosa are a team, and keep it at that for now."

Before I could ask anything else about how a person gets to be a team, Mama Rosa looked at Old Terry. "And who might you be, sir?" she asked politely.

"They call me Old Terry, ma'am."

"He been like this all night?"

Old Terry nodded. "He's been like this for the past few days. He keeps complaining about not being able to help us because he's new."

"That's no excuse," Mama Rosa said. "But you do need to give him some time. Being new to the job and all, it'll take him a bit longer than Tony."

"That's what I keep telling them," I said, gesturing at Old Terry. "They won't listen, though. They won't even let me get a good night's sleep."

“You and your boys been haunting him?” Mama Rosa asked Old Terry in the annoyed tone all grandmothers have been able to use since the beginning of time.

Old Terry looked down and gave a meek nod.

“Well, stop it. He can’t help you if he ain’t had enough sleep.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Old Terry said quietly.

“Thank you,” I said.

Mama Rosa shot a glance at me. “And you.” She pointed at me, her finger shaking slightly. “Stop your bitching and do your job, boy. Tony wasn’t that good when he started out neither, so don’t go getting all mad that you’re having problems.”

“How can I do my job if I don’t even know how to do it?” I asked her. “It’s not like he left an instruction book. He just told me where his office was, that I could use his files, and that he was leaving. Oh, and not to kick out the poltergeist. He didn’t even talk about you, not even in his files.”

Mama Rosa smiled. “Good. He wasn’t supposed to.”

“Then how was I supposed to be here weeks ago?”

“By walking ‘round your city and getting to know her. If you’d spent half the time looking ‘round that you have whining ‘bout yourself, you’d been here to see Mama Rosa long time back.”

And with that little comment she pretty much shot down any kind of excuse I could’ve come up with for having not met her. So I just gave in and asked, “Can you help me out a little? Old Terry says that you’re a fortune-teller of some kind.”

Mama Rosa seemed to consider this. “That’s a fair thing to say, I guess. But I don’t need to be no fortune-teller to tell you what you gotta do. Go talk to the vampires over on campus and

get them to tell you what's going on. They won't want to, but that just means you gotta persuade them a bit."

"What, am I supposed to wave a cross at them? I'm an atheist."

"Don't matter none. That stuff don't work against them anyway. You gotta use your mind to help you get one up on them, to show them that you know what you're doing."

"But I don't know what I'm doing," I said.

"And that's why we're going with you to help you out some."

I raised an eyebrow. "No offense, but how is a young woman coming with me going to help?"

"Because it's not just you and a young woman. Mama Rosa's going to be there, too. And she knows how to handle vampires."

"That's reassuring," I said without a hint of enthusiasm. "An old, dead woman in a young woman's head is going to help me. Yay."

"This old, dead woman's forgotten more'n you ever knew," Mama Rosa scolded as she stood, her hand on her hunched back as if it were hurting her. "Now, get off your hiney and let's get moving. We ain't got much time left 'til sun-up."

I looked at Old Terry, who just shrugged and said, "Couldn't hurt."

"Not you, anyway," I replied as I got up.

"Come on, talk later," she told me in Beth's young voice, her face young again.

"You're back? I can hardly keep from shouting with joy."

"Just get going so I can get back here and go to bed."

Old Terry and I walked outside. Beth came out after us, carrying a small purse. She locked the door behind her.

“Where are we off to?” I asked. “The cemetery?”

Beth just looked at me. “Did you even look at the files that Tony left you?”

I shifted back and forth on my feet. “Most of them. I kind of figured vampires were self-explanatory and skipped that file.”

“You’re an idiot. Get in the car, and I’ll explain some stuff to you as we head for Western’s campus.”

“Vampire college students?” I asked as I opened the passenger door.

Turned out she was right, of course. About the vampires, not the idiot part. One of the local vampires had been doing some unapproved snacking. The solution to the whole thing wound up being as easy as bringing the situation to the attention of the other vampires and letting them deal with it. Then I went back to my apartment and told the bums what had happened. As soon as they heard the end of the story, they all disappeared to whatever there was for each of them after death.

Beth and Mama Rosa became an important resource for me as Kalamazoo’s Detective after that. And after seven years of working with them through things like pushing back the start of Fimbulwinter, dealing with the nightmare that the vampire situation eventually turned into, and finding a suitable retirement home for the Metatron, we’d become about as close as I was willing to get to anyone anymore.

10.

The rain was once again coming down in full force.

“Is it just me, or does it look like someone’s just dumping buckets of water on us?” April marveled as we pulled to a stop in front of Beth’s house.

I glared at her. About half-way there, I'd realized that I'd forgotten an umbrella. "Says the woman that rain just passes through."

I looked at the house. Light could be seen glowing behind a shade that blocked out the large picture window.

"Really going to be pissed if some god's in on this," I mumbled again.

I got out of the Sunbird and dashed to the door, swearing the whole way. The door was already opening as I reached it, so I just darted inside, overshooting the doormat and sliding another foot across the well waxed floor when I tried to stop. I flung out my arms and managed to steady myself before my feet went out from under me.

"That was graceful," Beth said from behind me.

"Screw you, Beth," I said, turning to face her. "It's late, I haven't gotten any sleep, I had to go to the View, and my caffeine buzz is wearing off. I'm not in the mood."

"Then go home, get some sleep, and come back in the morning if you're going to act like that," Beth said, meaning every word. "I don't care if the world is ending. You're not going to talk to me like that."

I ran my fingers through my hair to get some of the water out of it. "Sorry. It's just been a rough day."

"That's better."

"Nice outfit, by the way," I said, referring to the pink and white cotton nightgown she was wearing.

Beth looked down and ran her hands over herself. "What's wrong with my nightgown?"

I smiled lasciviously. "Nothing. I just wanted to see you touch yourself like that."

She came over to me and smacked me hard in the face, smiling. "Ass," she said gently.

April walked through the door just as Beth did this. “Is there anybody you’re not a bastard to?”

I looked at her, rubbing my face. “Not as far as you know.”

“He’s especially rude to women he thinks are cute.”

“She can see me?” April asked.

“No, to both comments,” I said. “Beth’s just mad that I won’t go out with her because of the old lady living in her head.”

“And I’m just used to him coming over with invisible friends.”

“Better than listening to voices in my head,” I replied.

April looked at Beth. “Is she crazy?”

“That was funny the first twenty times,” Beth said to me. “Can’t you think of anything new?”

“You’ve got an eighty year old woman in there with you,” I said back to her. “Nothing is new to you.”

Beth’s smile grew at this. “It’s good to see you, Roger. Now, take your coat off,” she said softly. “We’ve got a lot to talk about. I’ll go get the tea.”

“Dammit.” Tea meant it was serious.

I took my coat off as Beth went into the kitchen and set it on the floor, next to the door, so the water that had soaked through it could puddle off some place easily cleanable. The living room was a decent size. She’d had to replace all of her old furniture since the Fimbulwinter incident, after the Fenrir wolf had found its way into her house and destroyed almost everything in the living room. The large, blue area rug was there mostly to hide the claw marks it’d left on the wooden floor. She’d fit two couches, one blue and one vaguely beige with prints of water

mill scenes all over it, on opposite walls. A matching blue chair sat next to the blue couch and across from a large, oaken trunk with several locks on it. A semi-circle coffee table occupied the center of all of the furniture. I sat in the chair.

April looked around the room. “Where should I sit?”

I began flexing my fingers to get out some of the stiffness that the cold rain had put in them. “The blue couch. Mama Rosa likes to be on the other side of the table.”

April walked over to the couch and sat. “So what’s her deal? And why do you keep calling her Beth and Mama Rosa? I mean, which one is she?”

“Both. Mama Rosa died about a hundred years ago and came back as Beth. Beth remembered her past life about ten years ago, and Mama Rosa came with the memories. She’s basically a thirty year old woman with an eighty year old woman in her head. And together they’re the only real fortune tellers in the tri-state area outside of gods and the Water Street Oracle. If there’s something big and horrible going on, she’ll know about it.”

April stood up. “Then why didn’t we go to her first?” She gestured harshly toward the kitchen. The seriousness of the motion was completely destroyed because it caused her breasts to jiggle wonderfully. “Why’d we go to the View and go through all of that other shit if we could’ve just come here?”

“Cause, darling, he couldn’t,” came an old, scratchy voice from the kitchen’s doorway. “Roger knows better’n to come bugging Mama Rosa ‘bout every little thing. It just wouldn’t do.”

April looked and saw Beth standing there carrying a tray with two cups and a teapot. She was hunched slightly and looked small. Her face had become sagged and wrinkled. Mama Rosa shuffled slowly into the room and set the tray on the empty coffee-table.

“Evening, Mama Rosa,” I said to her as she carefully sat down, as if the rain was bothering her arthritis. “How’ve you been?”

“Can’t complain none,” Mama Rosa poured a cup of tea. “Don’t mean I stay quiet, though,” she finished, smiling, and filled the other cup.

I looked to April. “And before you ask, yes she can see you, and no I don’t know how she can and Beth can’t.”

“Beth was right,” Mama Rosa said as she picked up her cup. “She is a cute one.”

I reached forward and picked up my cup. “And she’s also a dead stripper. Cute just isn’t enough for a relationship in this instance, I’m afraid.”

“That is a problem.”

Mama Rosa took a sip of her tea. “How’d she die?”

“Well, she appeared to me hanging, but Andrea said there was a lot of blood, so I’m not really sure yet.” I sipped my tea. “I’m leaning towards hanging, with the blood being from something else.”

Mama Rosa nodded. “That sounds ‘bout right.”

“And the nagas are involved somehow. I thought you could help me with how and why.”

“She was hung. Ain’t no doubt ‘bout that. Ghosts gotta show up how they was killed. You know that.”

“Yeah, I do. I was just hoping that maybe it was more of a trend than a rule.”

We both drank our tea in silence for a moment.

April couldn’t take it anymore. “Whose blood was it? What’s going on?”

I yawned and rubbed my eyes with my free hand. “Not whose, what’s. Probably a chicken’s blood. Looks like we’ve got some voodoo going on.”

“You mean the thing with zombies and dolls with pins in them?”

I nodded.

“No and yes, Roger,” Mama Rosa said. “It’s voodoo, but it wasn’t chicken’s blood. It was snake’s.”

I nearly threw my cup on the floor, but caught myself. “Damballa’s here? I thought he couldn’t come back for a hundred years after the shit he pulled in the War of Storms.”

“Them naga’s have been busy critters of late. They helped him get ‘round the banishment.”

“I really find it hard to believe that Damballa’s stupid enough to deal with the nagas just for that. A hundred years is nothing for a god, especially one as old as Damballa.”

“That’s just it, hon. They are giving him something else, but we haven’t heard what it is. And we don’t know just what they’re getting out of the deal.”

“Dammit,” I almost shouted. “That would explain Vesta’s warning. Dammit. I really didn’t want to deal with any gods on this one. Especially voodoo gods. Now I’ve got to burn my hair and nail clippings, and actually use something other than the smell to keep things out of my apartment.”

“Is this Damballa guy really that bad?” April asked, a little worry creeping into her voice.

There were a lot of answers to this question. As far as gods went, he was one of the quieter ones, only doing annoying or horrible things occasionally. He’d even helped me out some back when a nest of ghoul’s had decided to move into the big cemetery across from Kalamazoo College. He had some of the loas he controlled possess a few bodies and fight back

against the ghouls, scaring them out of the area. He'd also killed Ishkur for Set, though, which was what had gotten him banished.

I finally opted for, "He's sort of a snake god, and about as bright sometimes if you ask most of the other gods. I kind of have my doubts on that, though," I replied. "Of course, if he had any brains, I'd like to think that Damballa would be able to stay out of about half of the problems he gets into. He probably feels some connection to the nagas, knowing him."

My eyes widened. "And he usually hangs out with Baron Samedi."

The worry in April's voice was replaced by confusion. "Is he some guy from England?"

Baron Samedi and I had a less antagonistic relationship than the ones I had with other gods. He was actually a fun guy, if you could get over his death aspect. Which was the reason we'd first met. A series of women were turning up dead who'd all gone home with the same guy the night before they'd died. They were young enough that natural causes didn't seem right, but nothing else pointed to murder. Turns out, Samedi had been seducing the customers and prostitutes of local gang bangers. And an unfortunate side effect of sex with him was death. As much as I wanted to be pissed at him, he'd charmed me into seeing the harm the women had caused themselves and others, then took me out for a night of drinking. "Welcoming de new Detective," as he said in his vaguely Caribbean accent.

"He's the alcoholic voodoo god of death and dancing. Likes rum, smokes, and sex more than just about anything."

"Cept maybe causing trouble," Mama Rosa added. "And the bigger the trouble, the more he likes it."

"Luckily, Samedi's pretty easy to find," I said. "You just have to find the bar with the best rum in town."

April looked at a small, yellow clock on the wall. “But it’s 1:45. All of the places to drink are almost closed now.”

I shook my head. “Not all of them. I know a guy down on Wheaton that has an after hours going most nights, and his favorite drink is straight rum.”

“And he don’t like you none after last time,” Mama Rosa said calmly.

I glared at her. “Hey, that’s not exactly a story we need to be sharing right now.”

“What’d he do?” April asked Mama Rosa.

“Got drunk and had a ghost possess some poor girl.”

“Who had been dick-teasing me the whole night,” I said in my defense.

“And then had the ghost make the girl take off all her clothes in front of everybody.”

“Yeah, Ron didn’t like that too much,” I admitted. “Turns out she was a friend of his. Said he’d cut my head off and use my skull to hold his used condoms. Not that I blame him, I guess. That was pretty bad even by my standards.”

“And you want to go visit this guy’s place?” April asked.

“About as much as I wanted to go to the View, but I don’t see another option.”

“You know what you’re gonna do if Baron Samedi’s there, hon?” Mama Rosa asked in a tone that said she was asking the question more out of habit than actual curiosity.

“Offer him some of that top-shelf rum you’ve got back in the kitchen.”

Mama Rosa’s looks hardened. “And what makes you think Mama Rosa’s gonna just give you some of her tonic?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

“It might help stop the end of the world?” I tried.

“It’s gonna take more than that, boy. Mama Rosa’s seen twenty ends of the world, not counting her end, and she’s still here.”

“Does the world almost end a lot?” April asked.

I shrugged. “It depends on the time of year. Winter seems to be the end of the world season around here. This one started earlier this week, and doesn’t look to be slowing down. Last season the end of the world nearly happened twice, but it almost happened four times the season before that.”

I asked Mama Rosa, “What do you want for your ‘tonic’?”

Mama Rosa’s eyes gleamed. “A date.”

Through some reserve of will that I didn’t really think I had, I managed to keep a calm exterior while screaming in terror on the inside. “Won’t Beth be kind of pissed at you for using her body like that?”

Mama Rosa chuckled. “It’s not for me, it’s for her. It’s mighty hard to meet the right kind of people doing this sort of thing. And Mama Rosa thinks you two are perfect for each other. And don’t think Mama Rosa don’t know what you’re thinking, ‘cause Beth is thinking the same thing. You wouldn’t believe the names she’s calling me in here.”

April started laughing.

“I think I liked you better as sad dead girl,” I said to her coldly.

April kept laughing. “Oh go for it. How many girls are actually going to go out with as big of an ass as you?”

It was Mama Rosa’s turn to start laughing. “Too bad she’s dead, hon. She’s got spunk.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I grumbled as I stood up. “Just go get the damn rum. I’ll do it.”

Mama Rosa clapped her hands and got up. “Wonderful. Beth will bring it out to you. Hopefully we’ll be seeing you soon.”

Mama Rosa's posture changed, going from her slightly slouched over stance to Beth's fully upright stance. Her skin tightened on her face, then reddened. "Damn her! Why does she have to do that?"

"I think it's her weird way of showing how much she likes us," I said more as a guess than an actual answer. I knew the old woman well enough to realize that she could've just done this because it amused her.

"Well, next time she can just get us a card," Beth said as she stormed into the kitchen.

There was the sound of a cabinet opening and then being slammed shut. A moment later, Beth returned with an unlabeled bottle of amber liquid. As she got closer with it, I could sense it like I did ghosts. Distilled spirits, made with the ghosts of sugar cane and gods knew what else.

She shoved the bottle at me. "Here. Now go save the world so we can get this nightmare over." I took the warm bottle from her. "And if Damballa really is behind all of this, tell him I'm going to find him and bind his spirit in a garter snake and keep it in a terrarium for my next three lives."

I went over to my coat and picked it up, letting most of the water trickle off of it before putting it on. "Take a number. I'm going to put him in a plumbing snake and donate it to a local rest area to clean out their toilets."

April stood up and went over to me.

"Head out to the car," I said to her. "I'll be there in just a second."

When she'd left, I said to Beth, "You might want to go some place safer than here. You're probably pretty high on their list of people to get."

“No higher than you,” she replied. “Be careful out there. Especially with Samedi. He acts like an idiot at times, but he’s damn clever. If you give him half a chance, he’ll kill you. Or worse.”

“I know. Don’t worry. I’ve gotten through shit like this before, I’ll do it this time, too.”

I gave Beth a small smile. “Why is it that we can’t be social to each other in front of other people, even dead ones?”

Beth returned the smile. “Just not in our natures, I guess. And it’s hard to change your nature.”

“I guess.”

I opened the door. The rain had stopped. “I’ll see you soon.”

“You better. I don’t want you dying owing me anything. Even some silly date.”

After I stepped outside, Beth closed the door. I walked slowly to the Sunbird and opened the door. I set the rum in the backseat, started the car and drove.

“Enjoy what you heard?” I finally asked April.

She gave me a look of innocence that would make a newborn look like Chuck Manson.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I know that you were listening in on us from outside,” I said in a controlled tone. “I can sense where you are, in case you hadn’t noticed. Part of my ‘gift’.”

“You can sense me, but you couldn’t sense the big lizard in the bathroom back at the View?”

“Too many ghosts to pick any one out. And don’t change the subject.”

“Okay, so what if I did?” April asked defensively. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that I need you to do exactly what I say when I tell you to do something. There are worse things out there than death, and I’m not real eager to experience any of them.”

April crossed her arms and frowned. “You’re just pissed that I know you’ve got a girlfriend.”

I gave her a look that caused her to sink down, literally, in her seat. “She’s not my girlfriend, understand?”

“Whatever,” April said quietly. “You love her.”

“Which is why she’s not my girlfriend. Girlfriends either get killed because of you, or get you killed.”

April rose back up in her seat. “Beth’s a big girl. I think she can take care of herself.”

“I thought that about Erin, my girlfriend before Andrea, too,” I said in a slightly subdued tone.

“Oh,” April said, thinking she’d just made a huge mistake. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Don’t go getting all weepy on my again. She’s not dead. Turns out I wish she was, but she isn’t. She came close, though, when some dumb schmuck summoned a duke of Hell in her apartment complex’s basement about four years ago.”

I turned off of West Main and onto Solon. “Not that that’s always a bad thing, but this jerk-off didn’t know how to contain the thing, so it went on a small rampage. Luckily we had a date that night, so I was around to take care of it. If I hadn’t been there, though, the complex would’ve been a smoking crater.”

The night had started off quietly enough. I'd just finished helping a little old dead lady move on to the after-life, and was on my way up to Erin's second floor apartment, silently thanking whatever higher powers that listened to me that the old woman had been the only ghost to bother me that day, when I'd heard the scream from the laundry room.

"I've gotta stop thinking happy thoughts," I said aloud.

I looked in the direction of the laundry room, looked up towards Erin's apartment, then back. "I could just ignore this. It might just be a mugging. Nothing ghostly or at all supernatural. Could just be a rat."

The laundry room's window exploded outwards, a cloud of yellowish smoke right on the heels of the flying glass.

"Big rats." I took a deep breath, smelling the vaguely rank stench of rotten eggs. "From Hell."

I sighed and dropped my chin to my chest. "Is it too much to ask for a night off?" I asked the city in general as I started walking towards the Sunbird.

I went around to the car's trunk and opened it. A little, red tackle box sat next to the spare tire. I opened it and took out a piece of chalk and a small vial containing thick, amber liquid. I swished it around a bit to loosen it up. After patting one of my trench coat's pockets to make sure it still contained a urinal cake, I closed the trunk.

A roar that I heard more in my soul than my ears came out of the laundry room, setting my insides to vibrating for a moment.

As I began walking towards the laundry room, a guy, I guessed him to be twenty at the oldest, wearing a black T-shirt and black jeans ran across the parking lot to the other apartment building across from Erin's. "Even his hair's black. Cute."

The sound of shattering timbers and falling furniture came from the apartment above the laundry room. An entertainment center, complete with TV, VCR, and DVD player, shot through the apartment's sliding glass window and landed on someone's blue Cavalier. A car alarm tried to go off, but quickly gave up, going from a shrill screech to a dull moan, and then to nothing.

Wanting to get out of furniture throwing range, I continued on my way to the laundry room with a little more urgency. I strode down the steps two at a time to the laundry room's door and went in. An ugly recliner the color of dish mold lay shattered into several pieces on the floor next to a dented dryer. Plaster and wood littered the rest of the room. Carpeting dangled from a large hole in the ceiling.

I nudged the chair with my foot. "At least that thing's dead. Can't be too bad of a demon if it destroys ugly furniture."

I wandered over to the remains of a summoning circle done in red chalk on the floor. Knocked over black candles surrounded it, and melted wax was flung all about the area. A quick examination of the circle told me what he'd been trying to do. And where he'd messed up.

"He tried to summon a duke of Hell. The kid's ambitious, I'll give him that. Doesn't make up for being an idiot Goth boy, though"

I filled in the parts the kid had missed and dribbled blood from the vial around the circle. "Get down here, dammit," I said up to the hole in the ceiling. "I haven't got all night."

The demon, an eight-foot tall, unicorn-headed monstrosity, appeared in the circle in a flash of light. It promptly started roaring at me and clawing at the air in front of it, obscenely large muscles rolling under its blotchy, black skin.

"My circle can hold you, so don't even try it."

I hopped up onto a washing machine to sit. “Now then, tell me exactly why I shouldn’t bind you into a urinal cake at the free clinic for the next decade. And put on a human form. I’m not some little Goth punk you can scare by looking hideous.”

The demon stopped making noises. A human form clothed in a black suit with red accents replaced the demon form with no transition, making my eyes water a little. I pinched the bridge of my nose and shook my head to clear it.

“I’ve never understood why you guys feel the need to show up as the most hideous thing you can imagine.”

“It is part of what is expected.” The demon smiled, its yellow teeth out of place on an overly handsome face. “We do have an image to maintain, after all.”

“And stop with the cheap theatrics. Just tell me who you are so I can get rid of you.”

“Do you not recognize me, Detective?”

I looked at it more closely. “Aguares? Don’t tell me you’re answering summons now.”

Aguares shrugged. “You seem to think I had a choice.”

“Last I saw of you, you’d disappeared after eating the jackass who’d bound you in a beer stein so he could poison people. Which I’d freed you from, by the way.”

“I have not forgotten the favor I owe you,” Aguares said icily, literally causing the temperature to drop in the room.

“Yeah, well, subtlety was never one of my strong points. Go home without remodeling any more of this place and we’ll call it even.”

“You would deny me the soul of the child that summoned me so rudely?”

I scratched my head. “Well, here’s the thing, I can’t let you kill people just because their etiquette is lacking. Even if I agree that it’d teach him a valuable lesson.”

“I must have vengeance.”

“Give him gas, or hemorrhoids, or something. What’d he want from you? Use that.”

“He wanted to be a singer.”

“There you go. Take his voice away, or give him Tourette’s. Something. I don’t know, you’re the demon, you think of something appropriate.”

“And then we shall be even?”

I nodded. “Curse the kid, get out of town, and we’re square.”

“Agreed.”

I jumped down from the washer. “Great. No offense, but I hope I never see you again.”

I started to leave and the demon cleared its throat. I turned.

“The circle?” Aguares asked impatiently.

“Oh, yeah. You’re free to leave.”

The demon flashed out of existence.

I looked at my watch. I should have been at Erin’s ten minutes earlier. “Great. Like our relationship isn’t strained enough as it is.”

Once in the parking lot, the scream I’d heard earlier echoed to me, this time coming from one of the second story apartments across the parking lot. The roar sounded again, and there was silence.

I shook my head and hoped the demon hadn’t found some way to trick me and kill the kid.

“Can’t win ‘em all. Maybe some time in Hell will do him good.”

I saw Erin standing on her balcony, glaring down at me as I approached the stairs. “I wonder if it’s too late to get Aguares to take me with him.”

The next day I found out that he did kill the idiot that'd summoned him. Ripped his throat out, literally taking his voice. I thought about tracking Aguares down and calling him on going against my orders until I thought about it using demon logic. Technically, the blood loss was what killed the guy, not Aguares. Demon logic's funny that way.

12.

The light on West Michigan Avenue and Solon turned red just as I got to it. "Now, unless you want to end up food or entertainment for something awful, you need to do exactly what I tell you. Especially when dealing with Baron Samedi. He's a god of death, so he can make you do stuff unless you're ready for him."

"Can he hurt you, too?"

"Yeah, but he probably won't try to. He'll try to use you to hurt me."

The light turned green and I drove.

"How? I can't really do anything to you."

"That you know of," I corrected. "Trust me, you can, and he'll know how to make you do it."

"So, what do I do?"

"Stay in the car. I don't care if you think Jesus is out there telling you he's got free grape juice and fish sandwiches for everybody. I need you to stay here."

We drove on in silence until I turned on to Wheaton, one of the few remaining brick streets in Kalamazoo. And with the Sunbird's shocks being less than outstanding, I could feel each and every one that it passed over. A string of profanities broke the silence.

Once we slowed down and pulled up to the curb, April said, “How many languages did you just swear in?”

“Eight. You pick up some pretty interesting stuff doing this.”

I got out of the Sunbird. “Remember: stay in the car.”

“I will, I will. God, I’m not stupid.”

I gave her a look that said I was unconvinced as I grabbed the bottle of rum and put it in my right pocket. I shut the door and began walking towards the house, only slipping once on the rain-slicked bricks.

A look to my left, down Davis Street as I passed it, brought out a shudder. Streetlamps lined the street, their orange light throwing everything into the kind of stark relief that you usually only saw in black and white movies. Or black and orange, in this case. Except for a few houses down, where even the light didn’t seem brave, or stupid, enough to go. I’d seen it enough times in the daylight to fill in the hole it made in the city night. A two-story house with chipped and faded blue paint squatted in the darkness. Broken chains dangling from the small porch’s overhang moved lazily in the wind, perhaps in memory of the swing that had been there. Long dead bushes, planted by the house’s overly hopeful former owner, almost covered the gap under the porch just big enough to let in the occasional small child who didn’t know better than to go exploring under it.

“And the Evil House is asleep tonight.”

I kept walking. Ron’s house was another old-two story that sat on the corner of Wheaton and Merrill. About a year earlier, he’d gotten ahold of me to come and take care of a ghost that was haunting the upstairs. It was a simple unfinished business haunting, so I was able to get it to move on pretty quickly. After that, he’d started inviting me to his after-hours parties. Until the

incident with the possessed girl, anyway. I missed the parties, if just because of the free liquor and drunk college girls.

A rosy glow emanated from the first floor window on the house's Wheaton side due to a pink blanket covering its interior to help keep the sound of the music inside from reaching neighbors on the outside who might be tempted to call the police. Nobody was standing on the porch smoking, which was odd considering how many people were most likely there. If the large line of cars along the two roads Ron's house sat on were any indicator, the party was fairly packed.

I walked up the porch steps to the screen door, opened it, and opened the front door. Despite the chill in the wet air, I felt a warmth begin to tendrill its way through my body, starting at my groin. I took my last breath of fresh air and just went inside, slamming the door before too much of the loud, unintelligible music that was playing could escape.

"Ah, damn," I mumbled, mostly out of habit because nothing short of shouting at the top of my lungs could be heard at the moment.

I'd expected a good amount of drunk people, dancing, and general partying. They were normal for any party that picked up where the bars had left off and was playing host to a god like Samedi. I hadn't, however, expected to walk into a muggy house full of people dressed for the tropics. Which is to say either not dressed at all, or close enough to being nude to make no difference.

Men and women were groping, kissing, caressing, and sexing each other on the large staircase in front of me, on the floor of the living room to my left, on the couches in there, and pretty much on every flat, or at least straight, surface they could find.

This copious amount of exposed flesh and the balmy temperature made me want to take my trench-coat off and join in, to find a willing partner and just have a good time. It was like the heat, both atmospheric and physical, and hard, heavy beat of the music were whispering to the animal part of my brain, telling me to enjoy myself. To forget what I was doing for a while and relax. I deserved it, after all. Perhaps sidle up to the trim, redhead who looked so lonely with only one partner.

I very nearly did, too, but that dickish little bit of my mind that hated being told what to do prevented me long enough so I could think about what was going on.

In spite of the sweat that was beginning to trickle down my back I managed a smile. “You’re not getting me that easily, Samedi.”

I picked my way through the naked and semi-naked bodies, stopping occasionally to admire a particularly interesting or novel performance, then moving on. After slowly threading my way through the sun room next to the living room, I made it to the kitchen. As I knew I would, I found Baron Samedi there, a bottle of rum in one hand and a perky woman a lovely shade of caramel in the other. A black walking stick with a silver skull on the top and a sharp, silver tip on the bottom leaned against the shelves behind him.

I always had to wonder what the average person saw in Baron Samedi. Goths and other assorted Mardi Gras types being attracted to him I could understand, but how an ordinary person could fail to be at least somewhat worried about a six-foot two-inch, pale black man dressed in tails, a top-hat, no shoes or shirt, and carrying a black walking stick was beyond me.

At least the music wasn’t as pounding in the kitchen.

“What is that piss-water you’re drinking, Samedi?” I asked as good-naturedly as I could manage.

Samedi smiled hugely when he saw me, revealing more of his teeth than was humanly possible. “Roger me friend,” he said in an odd Caribbean accent. “What are you doing here?”

“Sweating my balls off because I know better than to take off even my coat when I’m around you.”

Samedi laughed. “Don’t be blaming me for your little problems.” His eyes darted down to my crotch at the word little.

“Hey, I might not be a god, but that doesn’t mean I’m not well-hung.”

“Then feel free to join in,” the god said, making then sound like den.

I shook my head. “Can’t. Much as I’d like to, and believe me I would, I’m on the clock.”

Samedi took a large swig from his bottle. “Suit yourself, but don’t be coming here an’ ruining things for the rest of us.” Things became tings on his tongue.

“Looks like you’re almost out of rum,” I observed.

“There’s plenty more where this one came from.” Samedi winked. “Made sure of that meself.”

I looked to the woman Samedi had his arm around. “Would you mind letting us talk alone for awhile?” My cold, professional tone combining with the amount of sweat currently dripping down my face created an image that said this was not actually a question.

Samedi let her go and his formerly good-humored expression hardened, his skin pulling tighter to his skull and his eyes sinking into their sockets. “Why’d you do that? She was going to be my entertainment for the night.”

“She seemed like too nice a girl to wind up dead in the morning,” I said flatly.

Samedi finished off his bottle. “Says you. I’ll have you know that she’s a drug runner for her boyfriend. She’s part of why half the people in this area are hooked on ecstasy and cocaine.”

“We’ve had this conversation. That doesn’t make her evil, and you know it. And she’s in my town, so she’s under my protection. Besides, I’ve got this to help make it up to you.”

I pulled Mama Rosa’s rum out of my pocket and Samedi’s features returned to human. His eyes widened in delight and desire.

“Maybe I was wrong ‘bout you, Roger. You’re okay.” Samedi reached for the bottle, and I put it back in my pocket.

“Not so fast. First you’ve got to do two things for me.”

“Don’t forget who I am, Detective. I’m thinking it’s best if you don’t do that again. I don’t take kindly to being teased.”

“I’m not teasing. I’ll give you the bottle as soon as you do two favors for me. The first of which is to come outside to talk. I think my ass cheeks are stuck together from this damned heat of yours.”

Samedi thought my proposal over. “Fair enough.”

I led the way to the kitchen door, opened it, and we went out onto a small porch there. Samedi closed the door behind himself.

“What’s the other thing you’re wanting?”

“I want to know what the hell you and Damballa are up to with the nagas.”

Samedi seemed surprised by this. “Is that all?” He laughed. “An’ here I thought it was something serious.”

“Oh, you know me,” I said conversationally. “I’m always making mountains out of mole-hills.”

“Specially here. All I did for them was to let one reincarnate as a human, in exchange for a bit of their belief.”

I didn't see the point in this, but it still worried me. Nagas never did anything that wasn't planned out to their best interests. They weren't known to play well with others. And their hatred of humans made it even stranger that one would reincarnate as a human. “What about Damballa? What did he do?”

“I don't know, and I don't rightly care. What he does is his business. Now, give me the rum.”

“Where's he at?”

“You said two things. That would be three.”

“Dammit,” I said under my breath. I took out the rum and handed it to Samedi.

Samedi opened the bottle and smelled it. His eyes closed for a moment. “This is some good shit you've got here, Detective. It's old, and it's made of things I'm betting you don't want to know 'bout.”

“You're probably right,” I said, still thinking over what I'd just learned and the amateur mistake I'd made.

Samedi took a sip and held it in his mouth, savoring it before finally swallowing it. “Some day, when you owe me one, I'm gonna get you to tell me where you got this. Humans shouldn't be having this type of drink. Maybe I'll tell you where Damballa is for it?”

“I'll take your word on the rum. And I'd rather find Damballa myself. You can bet you'll never have one over on me.”

“We'll see, Detective,” he said, smiling. “We'll see.”

“Are you sure that’s all they wanted?” I asked, not wanting to let this subject die before I understood it better.

“That’s all.”

I shook my head. “I don’t get it, but something about this is just bad.”

I pulled my sweat-soaked shirt from my body. “And you should know better than to deal with them. You know what they do.”

“It seemed harmless enough. Plus it got rid of one of the horrible things, putting it in a human. Maybe we’ll get lucky an’ he’ll end up in Hell when he dies.”

“Maybe. I just don’t see why you do this shit, Samedi. You and Damballa both. Even for a little belief. You know it’s just going to end badly.”

Samedi shrugged. “We’re gods. It’s what we do. Any little thing we can do to get some belief, we’re gonna do. Even if it’s gonna cause the world to end. ‘Specially if it’s gonna do that. The more spectacular the event, the more belief there is. An’ the more belief there is, the more we are.”

“Pretty sick,” I said without much feeling. “One of these days, you’re going to do something that people like me aren’t going to be able to prevent, and the world really is going to end.”

Samedi gave his inhuman smile again. “Never. I have faith in you folks. No matter how bad I screw up, you’re always gonna be there to stop it.”

“I hope so. I’d hate to end up like the nagas.”

I walked down the porch’s steps, stopping at the bottom. “By the way, where’s Ron? I didn’t see him in there.”

Samedi took another slow sip of his rum. When he was finished, he replied, “In his bedroom with two guys, having the time of his life I imagine.”

I smiled, genuinely amused for possibly the first time that evening. “If I survive this, Ron and I are going to have a rather long conversation about inviting me to these parties again. Have a good night, Baron.”

“You too, Detective. Good luck saving the world. Least make sure she lasts the night.”

* * * *

As I walked back to the Sunbird, I glanced towards the Evil House. April’s ghostly form, back in its just-dead appearance, was making its way slowly down the sidewalk.

I dropped my head so that my chin hit my chest. “I should just let her get eaten by the Evil House.”

I debated this for about five seconds, but finally decided it’d be bad for my reputation if one of my client’s got herself eaten, no matter how much easier it’d make my night. I walked as quickly as my sleep-deprived body would allow, slowing down to keep pace when I reached her.

“I suppose you’re in some sort of trance,” I started, casually, “and can’t resist going down there because you GOT OUT OF MY CAR.”

Not that shouting at her would do any actual good, but it did make me feel a lot better.

I took out the remains of my rancid cigar and lit it. When it was good and fired up, I sucked in smoke until I couldn’t hold in anymore. I dropped the cigar on the ground and covered my ears. Then I blew the smoke in her face.

April’s previously dull eyes instantly turned red, and she changed back to her stripper body. She screamed loud enough that dogs miles around began barking madly and a few babies started wailing in fear.

When she was finished, I removed my hands from my ears, stubbed the cigar out on the ground, and put it in a pocket. “Next time stay in the damned car,” I said and turned around. I started walking back to the Sunbird.

“What was that?” April asked as she followed me, terrified without quite knowing why.

“It was just the Evil House trying to eat your soul. Think of it as a black hole for ghosts.”

April began walking quicker. “What’s it do?”

“Same thing any black hole does. It sucks things down into it forever. If you’d stayed in the car, this whole situation could’ve been avoided. And thanks for waking it up, by the way.”

April looked over her shoulder briefly. “How does a house wake up?”

I opened the Sunbird’s driver’s side door and got in, closing it behind myself. When April had walked through her door and sat down, I said, “Normally it doesn’t, but that one has something in it.”

None of Kalamazoo’s past Detectives had any idea just what the Evil House had in it, or why it acted the way it did. Or, if they did, they didn’t write the information down anywhere that I’d found it. All any of us knew for sure was that it was evil, and that it though ghosts were tasty. Admitting that you know nothing about something as big and scary as the Evil House is never a good move in my business, though.

I started the Sunbird. “Let’s talk about this somewhere else.”

We drove down Wheaton and I turned onto Merrill. As we passed Ron’s house, I gave it a longing look. “I’m really starting to hate this job,” I said quietly, shaking my head.

“Why’s that?” April asked.

I just glared at her.

“Right. Silly question.”

“I would’ve said stupid.”

April ignored this. “Where are we going now?” she asked as we headed towards Howard Street.

We’d gotten to the intersection of Howard and Oakland, giving me a clear view of Asylum Tower.

“Well?” April asked.

“Shh.”

Then, after a moment, “Do you hear that?”

She looked around, worried. “Hear what?”

“That’s my point. The Tower’s over there. We should be hearing screams this close to it. There are hundreds of insane ghosts trapped in that thing. The only time they’re not gibbering away is when something’s seriously wrong.”

A car behind me honked. I looked at the green light and started forward.

“All right,” I started, annoyance tingeing my voice “we’re going to the Fountain. It might know what’s going on.”

“It’s not something else that can eat me, is it?”

“No. It’s an oracle, of sorts. It’s easier to just show you.”

“Is it like a wishing well?” April said excitedly, thinking she had started catching on a bit more.

I thought on this. The Fountain was the occasional home to the spirit of the Kalamazoo River. It and I had a long history that boiled down to seeing which of us could piss the other one off the most. Usually this involved it giving me just enough information and misdirection to nearly get killed, pissing me off. I always survived, pissing it off. It’d only helped me once

without openly trying to get me killed. In the War of Storms, Indra tried to flood the region, which would have destroyed the Kalamazoo River as an individual, so it needed me as much as I needed it. We both agreed to never discuss the temporary truce with anyone.

Considering all of this, the idea of it being anything like a wishing well was something like asking if a dolphin was like a shark. Yeah, they looked similar, and you might be able to play with both, but the games rarely ended the same.

“No. It doesn’t grant wishes, it swears like a sailor, and lies as much as it tells you the truth about whatever you ask it.”

“Sort of like you?” April said with a completely straight face.

I narrowed my eyes. “Never compare me to the Fountain. It’s an evil bastard that gets its jollies by being rude to everything. I’m a fairly good bastard who just doesn’t like people. There’s a difference.”

April rolled her eyes. “If you say so.”

I yawned. “Maybe we should go to Steak ‘n’ Shake first.”

“Oh God. What’s at Steak ‘n’ Shake?” She had that now all-too-common feeling of dread in her voice that everyone gets if they’re around me long enough. Not that I blamed them.

“Coffee and food. If I’m going to keep at this, I need a little bit of both,” I said, covering my mouth as another yawn made its way out.

“You mean there’s nothing weird or scary there?”

“I never said that. There are people just out of the bars, college students, and other assorted night people, all of which can be pretty weird and scary. And, in case you’ve forgotten Miss Dead U.S.A., you fall into the weird and scary category yourself.”

April blushed a little and looked away. “It’s hard to get used to it,” she said in the direction of her window.

“I’ve noticed. People not used to being dead are about half of my business, and my karma jobs.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about ruining your night.”

“You should be. But don’t worry about it too much. I was pissed at first, but now I’m just tired and grumpy. If you didn’t show up, I’m sure Beth would’ve called and woke me up.”

April looked to me. “So you don’t hate me?” she asked with a touch of hope in her voice.

“No more than I hate the rest of the world.”

13.

Steak ‘n’ Shake was surprisingly deserted, with only a handful of customers, and one over-weight ghost standing in the grill inhaling the smell of cooking burgers. The two waitresses on duty were sitting in one of the red booths discussing their current lack of boyfriends.

I’d ordered a burger with fries and a black coffee. I was still waiting for the burger.

“Why didn’t we just go to the coffee shop down by Ron’s?” April asked. “It was a lot closer than this place.”

“Because it’s a coffee house, not a coffee shop. I don’t need coffees, I need coffee. And my cholesterol level was getting dangerously close to normal. Nothing they have is anywhere near greasy enough to fix that.”

“So, you want to die,” she said in the tone of the health conscious lecturing the artery-hardened heathen.

I shrugged. “Assuming that I survive tonight. Based on what I’ve heard of a Detective’s life, I seriously doubt that I’ll make it to old age anyway, so I try to get what I can out of life. For me, this includes greasy burgers.”

“Is it really that bad?”

I drank some of my coffee. “Sometimes. Usually it’s just routine hauntings, or infestations by some of the dumber supernatural critters. Every once in a while, though, some god, demi-god, or primeval force starts feeling ignored or bored, so it gets the urge to draw some attention to itself.”

“How about the nagas?”

“They’re kind of a unique case. They show up occasionally, try to wipe out humanity because they’re still pissed about being dead, and then disappear. They never make deals with humans or human gods. They think we’re less than them. Which is why this whole thing with them, Samedi, and Damballa has me worried so much. Reincarnating nagas is an entirely new situation, as far as I know.”

The waitress, an older blond, set my plate down. “Anything else?” she asked quickly, her eyes darting back and forth twice between me and the ‘empty’ seat across from me.

“Yes, could I get a diet Coke for my friend?” I asked. It’d been a long night, and I was up for some entertainment.

The waitress, Theresa by her name-tag, looked at April’s seat.

April waved.

“Would your... friend be okay with diet Pepsi?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I looked at April. “Are you okay with diet Pepsi?”

April thought about this for a moment. “You know, I’m already dead, so I might as well just get a Mountain Dew.”

I nodded. “Good point.”

Then to Theresa, “Did you get that?”

I had to admit that she was managing to stay pretty professional in the face of all of this.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear what he said. Could you repeat it?”

I smiled internally. People always assumed I was with a guy. Even when I was with one, though, I still pretended it was a woman just so I could play with whoever I was messing with.

Externally, a look of disbelief appeared on my face. “He? How can you think this gorgeous woman is a man? I mean, look at her. What man would dress like that?” I motioned to April, who was still in her stripper gear.

“No, of course not. I’m sorry, sir.” She looked at April’s seat. “Ma’am.”

“Miss,” I corrected.

“Miss,” she said automatically.

April started laughing.

“*She* said that she wants a Mountain Dew,” I said, sounding a bit offended.

“Of course. That’s what I thought she said.”

“That’s all,” I said to Theresa.

“I’ll have that over to you in just a moment.”

“Thank you.”

“You really are a dick,” April told me.

“Yeah, but she was a good sport, so I’ll leave her a decent tip. It’s not her fault she can’t admit it when she’s wrong. She’s only human.”

“And you’re not?”

“Unfortunately, I am. Luckily for me, though, I’m a poor example of a human being.”

I put some ketchup on my burger, and was about to eat it when Theresa brought April her drink.

“Here you are, sir,” she said to me.

“Thank you.”

Theresa hurried away before I could ask her for anything else.

“What did that baron guy say?” April asked as I took my first bite.

“That he’s an idiot, basically, but I already knew that,” I answered through a mouthful of food. “He and Damballa helped the nagas with something. He reincarnated one, but he wouldn’t tell me what Damballa did or got out of it, which really worries me.”

“Why? You said he was just the god of snakes. How’s that dangerous?”

“He’s also the father of all loas, so he’s got some power over spirits and ghosts. These two aspects should make him a good candidate for helping us with the nagas, but he’s always stayed out of it.”

I took another bite of my burger.

“Why doesn’t he help?” April asked.

“I really don’t know. Damballa’s old, even for gods, so his reasoning’s a little hard to follow most of the time. He was a strong god in Africa before voodoo came around, and voodoo gave him the chance to become a serious power. Not as big of a player as Yahweh or Kali, but close.”

“He’s not all scary looking, like a giant snake, is he?” April shuddered.

I thought about what to say here. Damballa, like most gods, could appear in whatever form he wanted, and, like most gods, he had his favorite shapes, one of them being an albino snake about the size of a large house. I opted for a half-truth.

“No, he usually shows up as a bald, black man with black eyes. He speaks very slowly and deliberately. Some of the gods think it’s because he’s stupid, but I’ve heard of him coming up with some pretty amazing things. I’m more inclined to believe he’s one of those rare types of gods, a smart one.”

“I thought gods were supposed to be super-smart, or something,” April said. “That’s what they say in church, anyway.”

“Good P. R.,” I said with a smile. “They’re smart, but only because they’re old. Even then, though, most are only a little brighter than your average person since they tend to have problems thinking outside of their function. Which is extremely good, because it means that they can be beaten by an above average person like me.”

“You make it sound like we’re playing a game.”

I finished off my coffee. “That’s what they think it is, so I’ve got to. It’s the best way to stop whatever they’re doing.”

“Sounds kind of childish.”

I looked over to Theresa and held my cup up. “You’ll get no argument from me.”

Theresa came over and refilled my coffee. I decided to be nice and let her leave without a comment.

I blew on it a bit. “The hardest part of the game is figuring out who’s playing and what it takes to keep them from winning.”

“Well, we already know who’s playing, right? There’s the baron guy, Damballa, and the nagas. Now we just need to figure out what they want,” April looked down and added quietly, “and why they killed me.”

“Don’t worry. I’m here, and I’m the best there is at my job.”

“You’re the only one there is at your job,” April said flatly.

I waved her off with my right hand. “Technicalities.”

Before I could reply, a familiar voice slurred at me, “Roger! Where you been? We been looking all over for you.”

I put my fingers to my temple and shook my head slightly. “Dammit, Jakobar,” I murmured.

April’s eyes and nostrils widened as the smell of sweat and liquor, mostly vodka, judging by the odor of rotten potatoes, crept over us. I blinked rapidly as my eyes began watering. The burger in my stomach threatened to make a return visit.

From what I knew of him, Jakobar had seen better days. Better centuries, actually. Somewhere back in the mists of time he’d been a player. Not a god or anything actually supernatural, but a time traveler. No one still around knew what had happened to turn him into a staggering bum who smelled like he lived in a landfill, but we all had our guesses, most associated with what was in his case. Rumors ranged from the head of his dead wife to some sort of doomsday weapon. The theory that’d been in vogue since I began as Detective was that he was the last survivor of Atlantis, and that he was carrying around a book, or scroll, or something that told everything about its secrets. The only reason I knew anything about him was that the ghost of his future self occasionally showed up to get me to keep him from dying. Apparently, the smell didn’t bother it because it’d lived with it for so long. I never figured out

how the whole situation was possible. It's usually better not to ask too many questions when it comes to time travel.

Jakobar sat on top of April, carefully setting a battered, metallic case on the floor as he did so, oblivious to the fact that it was taking up most of the aisle. April shot out of him as fast as her lithe legs could carry her and stood next to me.

"Roger!" he nearly shouted through a ratty, red beard that looked to have its own ecosystem, probably an extension of the one in his greasy, brown hair. "We been looking all over for you. You gotta help us."

"Who is that?" she asked.

I leaned back, out of the direct influence of his breath. "Do me a favor and don't talk during this," I said quietly. "I'll be able to get us out of here faster if you don't ask me questions."

To Jakobar, I said, "I'm a little busy helping a client right now, Jakobar."

His yellowed eyes looked around. "A dead one? She from the future, too? She know what's going to happen?"

"Yes, a dead one. No, she doesn't know. So can we do this some other time?"

He shook his head and slapped his hands on the table. "No, can't wait. He's back. He's following us again. Trying to make us crazy."

I sighed. "Are you haunting yourself again?"

"Yes! Yes, he's back. Says we're all dead."

"I'm feeling okay," I told him. "Tired, but otherwise I'm healthy."

"We are too! Though my stomach hurts and my heartburn is bad. He says it's too much liquor," Jakobar nodded to the case, "that I should sober up for a decade or two. Maybe."

I looked at the case. I could think of several critters that'd fit in there, though not many that would've been helpful enough to point out the health risks of alcoholism.

Interesting as this small insight into Jakobar was, though, I had places to be. "What did he tell you, exactly?"

"We're dead tomorrow. All of us. The Detective failed. Helped the nagas kill our souls. Except for mine." He leaned uncomfortably close to me. "I came back here to warn me."

"Was he any more helpful than that, or was he just cryptic at you?"

Jakobar shrank in on himself a little. "No, that's all. He didn't know any more. Was busy running back here."

"That's not real useful," I said.

"Sorry."

"It's all right. Go somewhere safe 'til this is over. And you're friend's right. Sober up for a while. That way, if this happens again, you'll be more helpful to yourself."

I honestly didn't know if what I'd just said made any real sense, but Jakobar seemed to understand it. He smiled and got up, swaying a bit. "Yes. I will. Then we can pay more attention."

He picked up the case and wandered out, telling it that he was done drinking.

"You don't believe him, do you?" April asked once Jakobar had taken his smell far enough away. "He's nuts."

I stood and tossed down the tip. "I don't know. I learned a while back not to totally discount crazy. And I've talked to his ghost enough times to know he's more on the ball than what he seems."

"His ghost?"

“Long story. Let’s get back to work.”

When we went out to the Sunbird, a group of four pale college students were just getting out of a white Grand Am. They looked me over as if deciding something. I smiled politely at them, then reached into my pocket and pulled the cigar out some. They wrinkled their noses and went in the restaurant.

“Somebody really needs to do something about all these damned vampires around here lately,” I said in their direction, knowing perfectly well that they could still hear me, even from inside of the restaurant.

“There are vampires in Kalamazoo?” April asked as she ghosted into the passenger seat.

I unlocked my door, opened it, and got inside. “Yeah. Only a few, though. Aaron manages to keep them from getting out of hand.”

“Is he the head vampire, like in ‘Lost Boys’?”

I started the Sunbird up. “Sort of. It’s better to say he’s their king. But we don’t have time for that story.”

“Are there werewolves and other things like that?”

“No such thing as lycanthropes. At least, not that I’ve seen.”

“What about...” April thought for a moment, “...mummies?”

“Are you going to ask me questions the whole way to the Fountain?”

April shrugged. “Why not? There’s nothing else to do.”

“How about because it’s annoying? Does that work for you?”

“Nope,” she answered, unperturbed by my subtle hint that she should stop talking.

I sighed. “I hate this job.”

* * * *

The Fountain was a pool-size, rectangular fountain occupying most of the area between Sprau Tower, Miller Auditorium, and Dalton Hall on Western Michigan University's campus. I'd never heard of an official name for it. It was currently empty for the winter save for a few puddles from the rain, some dead leaves, and various forms of garbage that had gathered in it. The half-light of the area changed its normally neutral blue to a decidedly more sinister shade, one very close to that of a drowning victim's skin.

"There's nothing here," April observed.

"Yes and no," I said. "It's empty of water, but it's full of something else."

"Magic?"

"And bullshit, usually. The old bastard that lives here is about as trustworthy as your average crack-head, but he's right more often than he's lying to you, so he's worth talking to."

I got up on the fountain's edge, facing the ten story, Lego block looking Sprau Tower. "Oh great and knowledgeable Sue," I began, mockingly, "appear before us mere mortals and share your wisdom."

"His name's Sue?" April asked, not sure whether to believe me or not.

"Kind of."

I waited a moment in silence. "Dammit Sue, I said the words, now get you cranky ass out here."

"I want the girl to say them," a voice like cracking ice said from the fountain.

"What? Screw you, you old leech. This is serious."

The voice cackled. "Then you better hurry. And she has to use my full name."

"Fine, whatever," I said irritably. "Have it your way."

I motioned for April to step up next to me. “Do you remember what I said?” I asked after she’d joined me.

She nodded. “I think so.”

“Good. Just say that, and we can get this show moving.”

“What’s his full name?”

“Kalamazoo.”

“He’s named after the city?”

I shook my head. “No, he’s the spirit of the Kalamazoo River and why I don’t go swimming anywhere in lower Michigan anymore. For some reason he likes to hang out here. Personally, I think it’s because he likes ogling the women that sit on the edge of the fountain.”

“Jealous?” the voice in the fountain asked me.

I pointedly didn’t answer.

April cleared her throat. “Oh great and knowledgeable Kalamazoo, appear before us mere mortals and share your wisdom.”

The nine jets of water in the fountain’s center turned on all at once, spraying water fifteen feet in the air. Gradually, the water collecting in the fountain’s blue basin gathered into one area and rose, shaping itself into a generally human form as it did so. As soon as it took a fully human shape, specific features appeared until a twenty foot tall, naked old man resolved itself.

“What do you want?” it asked at last.

“For you to shape some clothes for yourself, for starters,” I said, trying not to look below the old man’s watery waist. It wasn’t as frightening as most naked old people are, but it wasn’t much better, either.

“I don’t hear your lady-friend complaining,” the Kalamazoo River said with a proud smile and a little shake of its hips.

I looked at her. April was just staring. “I don’t think its out of admiration. Looks more like shock to me.”

The smile wavered. “Fine.”

The river’s surface shimmered, and its naked body was replaced by one with a pair of Bermuda shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and a straw hat. “Better?”

My burger stopped threatening to make a return visit. “Much, thank you.”

“Thanks,” April managed.

“Now, what do you want?” it repeated. “I’ve got better things to do than talk to you two.”

“We want to know where Damballa is hiding,” I said.

“Ah, so you’ve found out about that,” the river said, straightening its straw hat. “I guess it was only a matter of time.”

I saw no need to expose how late in the game I was entering, so I said, “Yeah, I’ve known about it for a while now.”

The river cackled a bit more. It wagged a finger at me. “Don’t lie to a liar, boy. If you’d known about this sooner than probably yesterday, you would’ve been here before now.”

“Or I just don’t like talking to you, Old Man River, so I didn’t want to come see you unless I had to.”

It pointed at me. “Either way, you need me, so show respect.”

“Give me a reason to, and I will. Now, where the hell’s Damballa so I can get out of here.”

“I’d tell you,” the river spirit said smiling, “but the gentleman behind you may have a problem with that.”

April and I turned. I recognized the college kid standing behind us from earlier in the evening, but knew it was better not to let on. He was no more than twenty, wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a leather jacket. He had a goatee and dreads. And something I couldn’t quite identify for a moment.

“The reincarnated naga?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” the kid said. “And you’re this Roger guy I keep hearin’ about, right?”

I nodded. “And I’m willing to bet you already know April.” I motioned to her with my head.

The kid looked right at her. “She’s the stripper we killed the other night. So?”

“So she’s not too happy about it. She looked me up. Late at night, I might add, when I was just about to go to sleep. So now I’m not too happy about it.”

“Poor baby,” the river said from behind me.

“Shut up, Sue,” I said over my shoulder. “I’m not too happy with you right now, either, piss stream.”

“And I’m not too happy with you and your race,” it replied in a voice of anger that only most gods can manage. “Dumping chemicals and waste and garbage in me. It’ll be a relief to be rid of all of you.”

“Except for our skater snake here?” I asked.

“And any others that...”

“Shut up, river,” the kid ordered.

“Are you going to let him talk to you like that?” I asked the river without taking my eyes off of the kid.

“If it gets rid of you, I’ll get down on my knees and give him a blow job.”

The kid visibly shuddered at this notion.

“I’d pay to see that,” I said to no one in particular.

April stared at me. “That’s gross.”

I shrugged. “I’ve seen worse. Tijuana is great for that.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” April said with a look of disgust.

“Who gave you the fancy new body?” I asked the kid. “I don’t recognize the handiwork, so I’m guessing someone who’s on the way out. Am I close?”

“He was until he signed up with us. Not that it’ll matter to you in a few minutes, but Glykon made my body.” The kid made a show of looking himself over. “Did a good job, too. For a human god.”

“Never heard of him,” I admitted. “But I do like the dreads. Gives you that pot-head look that’s all the rage today.”

“Whatever, dead man. I’ve heard all about your attitude. It ain’t gonna save you here, bro.”

“Anyway. Is this going to be a chase scene?” I asked the kid. “Because it’s late, and I’d like to get it going if it’s going to be.”

“Only if you’re dumb enough to run.”

Two nagas, one the browns of the one I’d run into earlier that evening, the other deep black with a grey stomach, leapt out of the kid to stand on either side of him. “Kill him. Then eat his soul.”

I didn't see them fully appear. April and I were already running the two hundred or so yards to the circle drive where the Sunbird was parked. It wasn't necessary for me to turn to see what was after me. I could feel them coming. I could also sense that April was falling behind.

"Dammit, you're dead," I shouted. "You can run faster than that."

She began to catch up. Unfortunately, so did the nagas. I could tell that they were going to over-take us before we reached the Sunbird, so I reached into my pocket and pulled out Floyd.

"Sorry, Floyd," I said as I rubbed my fingernail over part of the inscription, breaking the binding spell. "I really was going to let you go at a better time, but if it comes down to you or me, it's gotta be you."

I threw Floyd behind me. When the urinal cake landed, the ghost of Floyd, scrawny with greasy, black hair, appeared. He looked around just in time to see the nagas leap on him and tear him to shreds, which they quickly devoured. He got out a quick, "You basta..."

I ran around the Sunbird, opened the door and started it up, leaving my door open just long enough to let April slip past my car's wards. I peeled out as soon as she got in, the force of the forward momentum closing the door for me. The nagas were still following.

"Give it up," I said, watching them in the mirror as I pulled away.

A yellow Fiero in the parking lot we were passing started up and began driving toward us. It was on the other side of a grassy divider, and paid no attention to this technicality as it barreled over it, missing the Sunbird by inches.

"You've got to be kidding," I said as this happened.

We hurtled down the curving road leading to West Michigan Avenue, the Sunbird's tires screaming the entire time. I narrowly avoided a red and white Ranger as we ran the stop sign and turned onto the road.

“Where are we going?” April screamed.

“Hell if I know. I’m just trying to keep us...me alive.”

We ran the light, thankfully devoid of traffic, and continued down West Michigan. The Fiero pulled up beside us quickly, its driver, a woman whose features I couldn’t make out in the dark, pointing a small pistol at me. I slowed and turned down a side-street. The other car sped past, then made a sharp, loud U-turn.

“We’ll try to hide out in one of the condo buildings back here,” I said. “With luck she’ll pass right by us.”

“Don’t you have a gun?” April asked. “Just shoot her if she comes by.”

“I do, but I’d rather not. I don’t need any more ghosts hanging around me, thanks.”

“What if you’re the ghost?”

“Good point.”

We pulled into the far parking lot of a condo complex. I turned the engine off and ducked down. I reached over into the glove compartment and pulled out a shiny .38.

“I’ve only fired this thing a couple of times, so I don’t expect it to save me.”

Within two minutes, the sound of a Fiero’s engine could be heard behind the Sunbird.

“How the hell did she find us so fast?” I thought aloud.

It pulled to a stop behind us, blocking the Sunbird in. A door opened and closed.

Footsteps approached.

I sighed. “Might as well get this over with.”

I threw my door open and jumped out, pulling the gun’s trigger as I did. This would have been more impressive if the safety hadn’t still been on.

“Fuck!” I screamed as I ran to the front of the Sunbird and crouched down, only just getting out of the way of a bullet.

“We always thought you more impressive, Detective,” the woman said in a voice that, despite its dry harshness, I immediately recognized.

“And I thought you lizards were at least a little more original than this,” I said back. I flicked the safety off.

“Hello, spirit,” the woman said to April. “Stay. I will take care of you soon.”

April screamed. Understandable, given that the woman shooting at me was her, or, more specifically, her possessed body.

I peeked over the Sunbird’s hood and shot twice, missing both times and shattering the driver’s door’s window. I ducked back down.

“Poor Detective. He can not even fire a gun. I can, though.” She shot twice into the Sunbird’s hood. The bullets came out inches from my head.

“Quit putting holes in my damn car!” I shouted. “I don’t have the money to get this thing fixed.”

Footsteps came to the front of the car. I scooted around to the other side.

“You will not care soon.”

Lights began coming on in windows.

“Jump into the body,” I told April through the Sunbird’s door.

“What?” she said, still in shock from seeing her own body walking around without her in it.

“Just do it! I don’t have time to argue with you!”

A door to one of the near condos opened and a man in a blue bathrobe stepped out with a shotgun.

“What the hell’s going on out here?” he shouted.

April’s body shot him once in the head. His body fell down, leaving a fairly startled ghost standing where it had been.

I half-stood, shot twice, missing both times, and crouched down again.

“Do it or people are going to die,” I shouted at April.

April looked at her body for a moment and then ran at it. The body didn’t see her coming in time and tried to step to the side too late. April caught it full in the chest.

The body screamed and dropped its gun.

I stood. April’s body was shaking violently, causing the spirit controlling it to lose enough control that the head fell to the side on its broken neck.

I walked slowly to the once pretty, but now purple and slightly desiccated, body. “It was a good idea to use whichever of you is in April’s body to find us,” I said, “but really stupid to actually come after us in it. Or has it been so long since you’ve had a body that you’ve forgotten that her spirit would try to kick out whatever was in the body if she jumped in it?”

I shot out April’s body’s knees, causing it to fall to the ground. I crouched down next to it. “Now, I’m going to be nice and let you out of this body. But not for a bit.”

I went to the Sunbird’s trunk and opened it, then came back, picked up April’s body, and tossed it in, next to some jumper cables, a spare tire, and a red tool box.

“All right, April. You can come out now.”

April’s ghost sat up and walked over to me. I closed the trunk as her body tried to sit up. It began beating on trunk.

“Is it going to ghost out?” April asked.

“No. Possessing a dead body’s great for getting physical again, but it sucks if you want to go back to being a ghost. You have to bind yourself to it, and the only way to break the binding is to destroy the heart.”

“Don’t worry, though” I said through the trunk, “I’ll let you out in about ten minutes.”

“You’re going to let that...thing go?” April asked, disgusted by the notion. “It stole my body, and you’re just going to let it go?”

“Trust me,” I said with a smile as I walked over to the Fiero.

The inside of the car had the lived in feel to it that I expected from strippers and salesmen. Judging by the red purse and pile of multicolored lacey things in the backseat, not to mention the lea hanging from the rearview mirror, stripper seemed most likely.

“Shouldn’t we leave? I mean, won’t there be cops and stuff soon?”

I stepped back from the Fiero with the purse. “It’ll take a while for them to get here.”

I walked to my car, rummaging through the purse as I did so. Eventually, I pulled out April’s I.D., then tossed the purse in the passenger’s seat and got in, closing the door behind myself. “We can go now. I just wanted to grab your purse real quick. No need to connect you with this.”

“Thank you,” she said, getting in and sitting on the purse. “I didn’t think you cared that much.”

“Don’t get all misty-eyed on me...,” I looked at her I.D. “Sara Marie Goode. Nice name, by the way. Much better than your stripper name.”

“Hey!”

“Just curious about the real name of the person I’m working for.”

“I’d better not end up in a urinal cake,” April warned with some fear in her voice.

“Or what? You’ll hang around in my closet again?” I started the car and drove up on the sidewalk to get out. “Don’t worry. As long as you don’t do anything to piss me off too badly you should be urinal cake free.”

* * * *

“I’m willing to bet you know where we are,” I said through the Sunbird’s trunk approximately five minutes later.

“I will kill you when you open this lid,” April’s body said.

“You’ll try, I don’t doubt that. But I know something you don’t.”

I opened the trunk and shot April’s body in the elbows. “I know when I’m going to open the trunk.”

April’s body lunged at me, trying to bite me. I dodged it without too much effort.

“Now, if you’ll look to your right, you’ll see the Evil House.” I motioned to it. “So named because it’s about the most terrifying thing in this city, next to a little Thai place I know in the mall.”

This was a bit of an exaggeration. If I had to be brutally honest, my office was the most terrifying place in the city. Over the years, the various Detectives had gathered a truly impressive collection of awful things that they couldn’t, or wouldn’t, destroy. The Throne of Brigid, God’s Dictionary, and the Seed of Kalamazoo, to name just a few of the things that made me hate going there.

I pointed my gun at the body’s heart. “Any last words?”

“I will come back from Sraatsa,” April’s body said. “I will kill you, Detective.”

“If that’s giant lizard-thing Hell, then I seriously doubt it.” I shot the body in its heart. It fell back into the trunk with a satisfying thump.

A naga, red with a tan stomach, sat up from the body. It hissed and drew its arm back as if to claw out my throat, but stopped and lowered it. Slowly, its face slack and eyes empty, it got out of the trunk and walked into the Evil House.

I closed the Sunbird’s trunk, then got in and drove away as fast as I could.

“Was that revenge enough for you?” I asked April after we were driving.

“Will it suffer in there?”

“Beats me. One can always hope.”

“What about my body?” April asked.

“I was going to molest it a bit, and then make a mask out of the skin.”

Nothing but stunned silence came from April.

“Relax,” I said, smiling. “I’m kidding. We’re going to make a stop at my office, and then we’ll take it over to the cemetery across from Kalamazoo College and toss it on a new grave. It’ll be found in the morning and buried sometime after the cops have had their investigation into the theft and defilement of your body.”

As much as I hated actually going to that cemetery, it was convenient for body disposal. Kalamazoo’s chief of police, a guy named Carlson, and I had a deal, one that he’d had with the previous Detective: any bodies that I found in relation to my job, I’d dump there, then call him and let him know what happened. Gave the families some closure, and kept me out of jail.

April looked at the back seat as if she could see through it to her body. “It was horrible in there. So cold and stiff, like I’d been frozen.”

“Well, your body has been dead for a while. What’d you expect?”

“And I saw what they did to it to keep it...up.”

“Killed and ate bums, right?” I guessed as I turned onto Lovell Street. “Kind of standard practice for animated corpses to keep them fresh.”

“After they...” April trailed off.

“Seduced them,” I finished. “I guess they killed and ate desperate, mostly blind bums.”

“Would you shut up!” she yelled at me. “You’re talking about my body!”

“Which nearly killed me, shot several holes in my car, and killed some poor schlub who probably didn’t do much worth living for, let alone dying for. If you weren’t here, I’d probably burn the damn thing out of principle.”

“Principle?” April asked, getting angrier. “What principles do you even have?”

“The ‘you don’t shoot at me and my car and continue existing in one piece’ principle.”

April put her hands up and shook her head. “Let me out.”

“You’re a ghost. Just stand up,” I said, getting tired once again of her whining. I was used to some whining from the recently dead, but this was getting tedious.

“Fine, I will. And I’ll find someone else to help me.”

I winked at her. “Good luck with that, hon. The nearest person that does what I do is in Detroit. Better get walking.”

April sat back in the seat and crossed her arms, pouting.

The rest of the trip was pleasantly quiet.

“I’ve got to warn you, my office is a bit of a mess,” I told April as we stood in front of the office’s smoked glass door. “It’s got a poltergeist in it that refuses to leave things where they are.”

April, still upset about her body, didn’t even look at me. “It can’t be any worse than your apartment,” she said with little emotion.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you.”

I unlocked the door, opened it, and turned on the lights. The office had two desks, both of which were buried under enough books, papers, and files to recreate a small, deciduous forest. Great tottering pillars of paper rose up from parts of the room like someone had attempted to create a model of Stonehenge out of paperwork. Across from the door, nearly hidden by two overflowing bookcases, was the only window outside. Dusty shades covered it, possibly because the string to raise them was behind one of the bookcases. There was a closed, wooden door on the wall to our left.

We stepped in.

Curious in spite of herself, April looked around the room. “What’s that?” she asked, looking at the door.

“Bathroom. Now shush. Something’s wrong. There are usually papers moving around, but everything’s quiet.”

The sound of a toilet flushing came from the bathroom and the door opened. The man who walked out had to duck slightly to keep from hitting his bald head on the door-frame. Empty, black eyes looked at me from a smiling face. He adjusted the jacket of a red suit so immaculately tailored that it looked closer to being another layer of skin than clothing.

“I anticipated you earlier,” he said in a deep, smooth voice that you’d expect to be coming from an especially obsequious waiter rather than a god.

April hid behind me. I just shook my head tiredly. “Morning, Damballa. Y’know, I don’t even know why I bother locking the door. It’s not like it keeps anyone out.”

Damballa walked casually across the room, his tall, thin frame making him look like a particularly well-dressed giraffe striding through off-white and manila colored trees.

“That’s close enough. What do you want?”

Damballa shrugged and spread his hands in front of him. “To see how you are. It has been some time.”

“That’s what happens when you get banished.”

“A small thing. Curses have loopholes, however. It is the nature of magik to allow an escape clause. I found it. But I would not expect a spiritualist to understand.”

“Detective, Snake Boy,” I said casually, not wanting to show any sign of weakness to Damballa. “I’ve even got the trench coat to prove it.”

“As you say.” Then, as if it were an after-thought, “You killed Vesta today.”

“Yeah, imagine that, a god with sense. Unlike most of your kind, she knew when her time was up.”

I’d apparently struck a nerve of some sort with this comment, because anger flashed for just a second across Damballa’s face, making it elongate slightly and begin to grow scaly. It quickly reverted to human. “Do not put me together with your gods. I am not one of them.”

“They aren’t my gods. If I were making them, they’d be a lot smarter. They wouldn’t try to end the world, for instance.”

Damballa smiled hugely, showing his overly white, pointed teeth. “You think that is what I am doing? No, I am remaking it. It will be paradise again.”

“Paradise for who? Humans, or big lizards?”

“For all of my worshippers.”

“Well, four of your worshippers just tried to send me on to paradise. Mind explaining that one?”

“They were merely having fun. You are not to be hurt. They know that.”

I stepped aside from the doorway. “Their fun got a man killed, and my car’s window shot out.”

“But you were not hurt.”

“Not from lack of them trying.” I motioned to the door. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need to work on stopping whatever it is you’ve got going. And, if I’m very lucky, killing you.”

“Of course. We must be true to our natures. But you will fail. You will even help me before this is over.”

“Like hell I will.”

Damballa strode to the door and stopped. He looked at me, then seemed to look through me. “I hope to see you both again, later this morning.”

I nodded to the door. “I think that can be arranged. Which would you rather be turned into after I skin you, a pair of boots or a briefcase?”

“Until later.” Damballa left, whistling a tune that I couldn’t identify.

I shut the door. “Well, that was fun.”

April stepped around in front of me. “Fun? How was that fun? I couldn’t even move!”

“Damballa can do that to ghosts. It’s one of his things. But yeah, I know what you mean. Most gods I would’ve kept talking, but he’s something else. Especially with that little invitation at the end.”

“Do you think he meant it?”

I thought for a moment. “Yeah, I do. He probably wants me there to gloat when he does whatever it is he’s doing. I only wish I knew how I’m supposed to help. It’d give me more of an idea of how to stop it.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s the chance that if I just leave him be his end of the world scheme won’t work. Jakobar’s warning earlier, and something a little demon dog told me, make me think Damballa might actually need me there to pull off his ritual. Unfortunately, I can’t take that risk.”

“Why didn’t you just stick him in a urinal cake or something like you and Beth were saying you would?”

“That was what we in the business call ‘talking shit’. Damballa’s way too strong for us to do that to him. Plus I’d need his true name. Most gods are so old and have gone through so many names down the years that it’s just about impossible to find their first one.”

A stack of papers rose off of the desk nearest us and moved itself to the other desk.

April’s eyes widened. “What just did that?”

I walked over to the spot the papers had previously occupied and examined it. A manila folder labeled ‘Damballa’ sat there. “I told you earlier: the office has a poltergeist. Luckily it seems more aware than the average poltergeist. Sometimes it’s even helpful.”

“Why can’t I see it?”

“Because it’s a poltergeist, not a ghost. It never had a body, so it doesn’t manifest one like ghosts.”

I picked up the folder and opened it. I leafed through several handwritten pages, some yellowed with age, the ink eating through the paper.

“What’s that?”

“All the information Kalamazoo’s Detectives put together on Damballa. Goes back over a century.”

“Why were all of the Detectives men?” April asked, noticing the poor handwriting that each Detective seemed to have. “Except that newer one.”

“That newer one is mine.”

April smiled. “You have girlie handwriting.”

“I have elegant handwriting,” I said defensively. “There’s a difference. And I don’t know why all of the Detectives have been men. Maybe the thing that picks us for the job just likes handsome guys.”

I saw that April was about to say something. “Shut up.”

“I wasn’t going to…”

“Yes, you were.” I closed the file. “We can look at this later. For now, let’s find out who or what the hell Glykon is.”

April wrinkled her nose. “Are you going to use some ugly looking book written in blood on human skin?”

“You’ve been watching way too many horror movies.”

I went to the other side of the desk I was standing by and pulled open one of its drawers. After digging through several books that had been shoved in it, I finally pulled out a white,

paperback one. “Those moldering old things are for amateurs who’re more worried about the look of the thing. They work and all, but I’ll take a modern reference book any day. A lot less risk of losing your soul.”

I quickly found the ‘G’ section and turned to Glykon.

“Huh.”

April came over to me and looked over my shoulder. “Who’s Asklepiós?”

“Well, apparently he’s an earlier version of Glykon. I always thought he was just a washed up god of healing who panhandled at the coffee shop down the street.”

I flipped back in the book and looked up Asklepiós. “That explains it. He used to be a snake god of some kind. Probably why he was okay with working with Damballa.”

I tossed the book back in the drawer, then went over to the other desk and opened one of its drawers. A tangle of charms, runes, daggers, and various holy and unholy symbols filled it. Carefully, I picked through it until I found what I needed.

“I never like using this thing,” I said, holding up a dagger with a six inch obsidian blade that glinted brightly in the office’s light. “I always feel dirty.”

“It’s a knife,” April said without much enthusiasm.

“Actually, it’s a very sharp dagger. More importantly for us, it’s a symbol of death and big, gaping wounds. Makes it a good opposite of healing, and therefore perfect for threatening a god of healing with. You ready?”

“To do what? Pick on a bum that used to be a god?”

“Pretty much.”

* * * *

If I were a betting man, I would've bet that Asklepiós, or Glykon, or whatever he was calling himself now, still had some kick left in him. Creating a body and memories for the naga was proof of that. Not that anybody could tell by looking at him. We found him where I'd expected to, at Zevon's Warren, the coffee shop just down the street from my office.

Zevon's Warren occupied a special place in Kalamazoo's secret history, depending upon who you listened to. Jakobar, in his more lucid moments, swore that it was piece of his native timeline. Tapestry, the Animated Man, would tell stories about the secret inks that'd been used to illustrate its walls and give it protection from everything short of the sun going supernova. The files of the Detectives just called it by its other name, The Grey Man's Retreat, and said it was the only truly neutral territory in Kalamazoo. I'd never run into anyone calling himself the Grey Man, but I could attest to the last story, having seen things sharing a cup of coffee behind its brick walls that, everywhere else, tried to kill each other on sight.

"Spare some change, mister?" Asklepiós said through blackened teeth.

"No, not tonight," I told him.

Asklepiós had seen better days. At least, I hoped he had. The layers of rotting and filthy clothes that he wore looked older than me, and gave the impression that he'd just kept adding more pieces as others disintegrated. Poultices for his clothing, I guessed. And for a god of healing, he was looking less than healthy. Rotted teeth, yellow eyes, and greasy hair were not terms I'd ever expected to use to describe a god of health.

"And stop with the mister thing, Asklepiós. You know who I am and why I'm here."

He cackled, then pulled a bottle out from somewhere and took a swig. "Snakes!" he shouted.

“Yeah, snakes,” I said, hoping he wasn’t talking about a hallucination. “Look, I need you to focus past the lighter fluid you’re drinking and talk to me for a second. Can you do that for me?”

“This is pointless,” April complained, hugging herself. “Just threaten him with the knife so we can get out of here. He’s creeping me out.”

“Pretty,” Asklepiós said, looking at her.

“And dead,” I said. “Damballa had her killed for some reason.”

His eyes shot back to me. “Dan-aido-hwedo?”

The word sounded familiar, but it took a moment to click that I’d seen it in the file on Damballa. It was his African name. “Yeah. Him. You did a job for him. Made a body for a naga. Remember?”

“For belief!” he shouted. He danced in a circle, repeating the phrase loudly.

I grabbed his shoulders once he was facing me again. His clothes were warm to the touch, and the smell had an oily life of its own that threatened to fill my lungs and take up permanent residence. “Yeah. Why’d he want it?”

“For belief!” he shouted again. He tried to spin away, but I held on tight.

“We got that. You’re getting belief out of it. How, though?”

Asklepiós cackled some more and shook his head. “No, no. Dan-aido-hwedo said no. Can’t tell.”

I sighed. “All right, I tried the nice way.”

I let go of him and pulled the dagger out. His reaction was instantaneous. Faster than any human could, he scuttled back from me. He wasn’t looking where he was going, though, and ran into the coffee shop’s wall with a solid thud.

“Safe here!”

I ran up to him while he was figuring out what had happened and put the knife to his throat. “You’re only safe inside. Outside, you’re fair game. And, for what it’s worth, I really didn’t want to do this this way. You seem like a harmless enough guy.”

He squirmed a bit as the skin near the dagger began to redden. “Hurts!”

“Then answer my questions, and I’ll stop. It’s that simple. And sober up, while you’re at it. I know you’ve got enough power left in you to do that at least.”

Asklepiós nodded. I stepped back, but kept the dagger in plain sight.

The god’s clothing began to pulse slowly. The skin that I could see grew pale, and a milky film spread over his eyes.

“What’s he doing?” April asked.

“Healing himself,” I replied. “He’s shedding his skin.”

A split appeared down the center of his scalp. He reached up to it and pulled, revealing clean, pale white skin beneath. Slowly, a bald, naked, Greek man emerged as he shuffled off everything that he’d been.

“Wow,” April said. I wasn’t sure if she was marveling at his penis, his muscular physique, or the regeneration.

“Detective,” Asklepiós said as he stepped out of the pile of skin and clothes, his skin darkening to its natural hue. “I do not appreciate being threatened.”

“And I don’t like being treated like I’m some kind of amateur, so we’re even.”

“What do you want?”

“To know what the hell’s going on.”

“You already know that. Your world is going to end tonight.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Do I have to point the knife at you? What’s going on?”

“Dan-aido-awedo, Damballa to you, is going to bring back the nagas, replacing your race. He promised me worship in a new pantheon if I aided him.”

“How?”

Asklepiós shook his head. “I do not know.”

“You couldn’t just admit you’d had a good run and go out like Vesta, could you?”

The god looked away.

“Yeah, you should be ashamed. You’re a god of healing, and you’re helping to kill off all of humanity.”

He turned and glared at me. “You have…”

“No idea what it’s like? No right to judge you?” I stepped closer to him. “I have every right. It’s my race you’re trying to kill off, remember?”

I dropped the dagger at his feet and turned to leave. “Do the right thing,” I said as I walked away.

“That was pretty harsh,” April said from just behind me. “The guy was just trying to stay alive.”

And, with that, April confirmed a few suspicions.

“Him trying to stay alive resulted in you getting killed by the nagas, remember?”

“Oh. Yeah,” she said, anger appearing in her voice.

“Anyway, let’s go take care of your body. No need to cart it around all night.”

* * * *

“I love cemeteries,” I said after tossing April’s earthly remains onto the muddy, freshly filled grave of Betty Williamson, 1908-2007, 2008-2010, May she find peace at last. I wiped my

hands on my coat. “They’re always so quiet, especially this late at night. No people, no ghosts, no gods, no nothing.”

“I was always afraid of cemeteries when I was alive,” April said, slightly embarrassed. “I thought they were haunted.”

I gave a short laugh. “What ghost in its right, or even wrong, mind wants to hang about in a cemetery? Especially one like this.”

“You just said you love cemeteries.”

“I do, but that doesn’t make this one any less creepy. It’s just too...rolling to be a cemetery.”

“So you’re saying you’re prejudiced toward hilly cemeteries.”

“Just this one.”

We started walking down one of the paths, back to the Sunbird.

April looked back over her shoulder. “There is one other bad thing about cemeteries.”

“What’s that?”

A pair of headlights came on behind us, followed quickly by flashing lights and a siren chirp.

I dropped my head and put my hands up. “Damned cops.”

“Put your hands on your head and turn around slowly,” a young man’s voice said through a speaker. I didn’t recognize it.

I did as I was told.

A police officer got out of the black cruiser and approached me. I couldn’t make out his features until he stepped closer.

“You’re new, aren’t you?” I asked the young officer. I looked down and read the man’s name-tag. “Officer Hendricks.”

Officer Hendricks began patting me down. “Do you get arrested often, sir?”

“Not anymore. What am I being arrested for?”

“Do you realize that you’re trespassing?”

Fortunately I’d had enough foresight to put my gun in the Sunbird’s glove compartment, so, other than a small pocketknife that smelled vaguely of urinal cakes, there was nothing really to be found on me. Officer Hendricks held on to the pocketknife after removing it from my pocket, giving me further indication as to where the next few hours of my evening were going to be spent.

“It was the only time I had free on my calendar,” I said casually after he was through.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about the body lying back there, would you sir?”

‘Shit,’ I swore mentally.

I tried to look surprised. “There’s a body?”

“Yes, sir. And since you’re the only one around, I’m afraid that I’m going to have to ask you to come along with me.” Officer Hendricks reached for his cuffs.

“I don’t suppose me telling you that you’re making a horrible mistake will help?” I tried.

“No, sir,” he said flatly.

I sighed. “That’s what I thought.”

I knew the drill well enough to not resist. Soon, I was sitting, handcuffed, in the back of the cruiser and on my way downtown, swearing to myself the whole way. April, naturally, accompanied me.

* * * *

The concrete cell I'd been tossed in was filled with the stench of ammonia, urine, and drunk people. It was also filled with, despite my request for an empty cell, people of various sizes, shapes, and degrees of cleanliness. Luckily, none of them recognized me.

"I liked it when you told him that you didn't want a free call because it was past his mom's bed-time," April teased.

"Every cop knows that I get my own cell when I'm here," I said quietly behind my hand as I faked rubbing my nose. "It makes my stay a lot easier on them."

"Why's that?"

"Because I usually have a 'guest' with me. And looking like I'm talking to myself upsets some of the more...eccentric inmates."

I scanned the blue cell for ghosts. Seeing none, I relaxed a bit. "At least Bob's not here," I whispered.

"Who?"

"An old friend from my Ace days."

I held up my hand to stop any more questions.

After about ten minutes, an older, balding officer with a slight paunch came to the cell.

"Roger Freeman," he called out. Freeman wasn't my real last name, but it was good enough for all of my IDs.

I stepped up to the bars. "That's me."

"You're being moved to your own cell." He unlocked the cell door. "Follow me, please."

"'Bout damn time," I said under my breath as I left the cell.

When we were out of sight of the other inmates, I asked, “How’s it going, Tim? It’s been a while.”

Tim shrugged. “Can’t complain. Wife’s still getting on me about working nights. She thinks I should try and get on first shift so we can spend our nights together.”

“Which is exactly why you work third shift.”

“Right.” He unlocked a small cell and I walked in. It was closed behind me.

“Get Carlson in here as soon as you can, Tim,” I said with all seriousness. “Things are pretty bad tonight.”

“I’ll try, but he’s started turning the ringer off on his phone this late at night.”

“Dammit, I need out.”

Tim had been working with the Kalamazoo police long enough to know that I rarely did anything illegal without good cause. He didn’t always understand the exact reasoning behind what I did, but he’d heard a few of the stories, and believed enough of them to not question ones he didn’t.

“I’ll send a cruiser over to wake him up. You owe me one, Roger.”

“Yeah, yeah. If we’re still all here tomorrow, we’ll work something out.”

Tim walked away.

“So, what’s going on now, Ace?” a man’s voice said from behind me.

“As if this night wasn’t bad enough,” I said as I turned around. “And stop calling me Ace, Bob. Nobody’s called me that in eight years.”

The man standing at the back of my cell could be best described as looking like a giant penis. His large, bald head that lacked any facial hair was the main reason for this, but his overweight body added to the effect, making it look like one huge testicle was hanging under his

head. A kind of friend from high school, Bob's death during the War of Storms was my fault, and the only reason I didn't toss his soul in a urinal cake and forget about it.

April instinctually moved closer to me.

"Sorry, Ace. Old habits are hard to break." Bob looked over to April and leered. "I see you're doing okay for yourself. She's hot."

"Bob, shut up. I'm not that desperate for a woman yet."

"Who is this?" April asked from over my shoulder.

"This is my old friend, for lack of a better word, Bob. If you looked up moral turpitude in the dictionary, you'd see his picture. He'd sell his grandmother for the right price. Other than that, he's an idiot, but not too horrible of a guy."

"She was worth \$18.20, back then," Bob said. "I bet I could get more for her now, though."

"She's dead, Bob."

"So?"

"You're sick, you know that don't you," I said.

"Can't be sick. I'm dead."

I went to a cot and sat down, refusing to be his straight man for the evening. April followed closely.

"Hey Ace, did you tell her about Delilah yet?" Bob asked.

"Why the hell would I tell her about Delilah?" I said, knowing full well that I was going to have to tell April the story. "And don't call me Ace."

"He used to date the Anti-Christ," Bob told April.

"I thought you were straight," April said to me.

“I am. The Anti-Christ’s a woman named Delilah. Pretty nice, too. And she’s not really the Anti-Christ. There’s no such thing. She’s just Jesus’s cousin, or half-sister, or whatever. It’s hard to describe with that family. We still talk sometimes.”

“It was funny. The Anti-Christ dating the Anti-Christ,” Bob said.

“I never did get to beat the shit out of you for calling me the Anti-Christ, Bob,” I told him. “Just be happy I don’t have my pocketknife.”

“Why did he call you that?” April asked.

“Because I became an atheist and started having severe problems with hard-core religious people back when I was 23. Seeing the occasional ghost will do that to a person. So Bob started calling me the Anti-Christ, and it got abbreviated to Ace after a while. Took me three years to get people to stop calling me that.”

“How’d you two meet?”

“That’s a pretty long story,” I said, trying to not have to tell it. It wasn’t that it was painful or anything, as much as it reminded me of a few regrets that I preferred not to think about.

“We’ve got time, Ace,” Bob said. “Or I can tell it.”

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s fine.”

I rubbed my eyes. “I could be using this time to sleep.”

I thought for a moment about where to begin. “This was back before I started seeing ghosts on a regular basis. I could still occasionally see them, but not like I can now. It was kind of like having a TV station in my head that the reception went in and out on. And I sure as hell hadn’t run into any gods. I’d gone to a party that my friend Jim was throwing.”

* * * *

The house already reeked of smoke from four or five different types of cigarettes and cigars, and spilled beer stench was beginning to form. The smell of sweat and too many people had yet to make its appearance, but I was sure that it was on its way.

“Bullshit!” I heard a familiar voice shout from the kitchen. “There’s no way in hell you’ll ever get me to believe that you don’t drink anymore you lying bastard.”

I made my way to the voice’s source, wading through the crowd slowly, trying to squeeze my way through small openings in it as they presented themselves, feeling the occasional hand on me in odd spots.

“Hey!” I jumped when I saw that the last hand belonged to a tall, well-built guy wearing a yellow, hoodie with USMC on it. “Watch the hand. I’m not that kind of guy.”

The possible ROTC student looked down at me and actually blushed. “Sorry. I was reaching for her.” He nodded towards the well-endowed blonde next to me.

“Well, practice your marksmanship then.” I continued on, mumbling under my breath about rotzis.

In the kitchen, I saw a small clearing around Bob and another guy that I recognized as Jim’s friend Barry. I really didn’t know him other than the two or three times that I’d seen him at Jim’s parties, and even then it was usually after we’d both been drinking heavily, so I didn’t really expect him to remember me. Barry was just a little taller than Bob, but he was trying very hard to be intimidating with those three or four extra inches.

“Barry!” I shouted as soon as I was close enough.

Barry turned and surprised me by saying, “Ace! Is it true Bob’s not drinking anymore?”

I pushed my way through the last couple of feet. “Yeah. He says he’s found God, or something.”

Barry looked at Bob. “What? My ass. He’s probably just found some ultra-Christian chick that he’s trying to score with.”

“It’s worse,” I continued talking as if Bob was not there. “He listened to Brother Sean.”

Barry cuffed Bob on the back of the head. “You are stupid, fat boy. I’m as Christian as the next guy,” Barry looked at me, “unless the next guy is you, Ace. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“But those boys take it too far. That whole ‘masturbation is sinful’ thing could give a guy a complex. You know what they say: ‘90% of all men have done it, and the other 10% are lying.’”

Bob finally spoke up. “They’re trying to save your souls, guys.”

“And this whole drinking is bad for you thing,” Barry continued, still ignoring Bob.

“Research shows that a little alcohol a day helps prevent heart attacks.”

“I’ve heard that,” I said, trying to sound thoughtful, but the sarcasm came through quite clearly. “And, y’know, I haven’t had any alcohol in a long time. I think I need to get caught up.”

I went over to the refrigerator and opened it. I pulled out two of the Killian’s that I’d brought and shut the door.

“Maybe we haven’t tried the right incentive,” I said as I returned to Bob and Barry.

“What have you been using?” Barry asked.

“Natural Light and Milwaukee’s Best, if I remember correctly.”

Barry shuddered. “Bad incentive. I bet that Killian’s there would do it, though.”

I twisted the top off of one, then the other. “I bet you’re right. I happen to know that Bob likes Killian’s almost as much as I do.” I turned to Bob and offered one of my beers to him.

“Everything in moderation, Bob,” I said. “You can have one.”

Bob licked his lips and gently took the beer. “Just one.”

I smiled. I knew Bob well enough to know that there was no such thing as just one.

Soon, Bob would be drunk and hitting on everything that moved. With a sense of having made the world right again, I began to look for Jim, who I’d lost shortly after the party started.

Jim had promised me a surprise, and I wanted to see what it was. He swore that it wasn’t like the last one: a greased pig dressed up like Samantha, my ex-girlfriend, who he absolutely hated. I wasn’t sure whether to believe him or not, but I was just curious enough to check it out.

I found him in the basement talking to a woman who I would’ve put in the top five of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen. And this was saying a lot. I’d spent several years working in restaurants, so I’d seen more than my fair share of beautiful women, both as customers and as fellow employees. Her coppery red hair, obviously dyed, but dyed well, and her dark complexion instantly set my heart jiving to a faster beat, one close to Miles Davis on his fast tempo days. Her outfit was nothing special, just faded jeans and a sweater, neither being overly tight, but they didn’t have to be. She had an aura about her that made her sexy the same way some people are just goofy looking for no special reason. My penis woke up some to see what the commotion was about.

Jim saw me and waved me over. He was smiling. I knew it was because my mouth was open slightly, but didn’t really care.

‘If this is Jim’s surprise for me,’ I thought, ‘then I’m going to kiss him. Sometime. Not tonight, but sometime.’

When I got to them, Jim introduced us. “Ace, this is Delilah. Delilah, Ace.”

Delilah switched her glass, which I could tell only had pop, to her right hand and reached out with her left. I shook it. She had a strong grip for a woman, but her hand was soft. She didn't look all that strong, but I was more concerned with other things.

"I was just telling Delilah that you and she have some things in common," Jim said to me.

He waved a hand in front of my face. I looked over to him. "Huh?"

"I said, you and Delilah have some things in common."

I came back to myself some. "Really? Like what? You're left-handed, too, but I hope that it's more than that. Please tell me it's more than that."

"Down, Ace," Jim put his hand on my shoulder. "If you promise to be nice to the cute lady, and speak a little more intelligently, I'll leave you two alone."

"I'm sure he will," Delilah said in a voice you could slide off of if it were covering your bed.

I, through a heroic, possibly even Herculean, effort of will managed to muster my mind back to something resembling control. "I'll be okay. Go make sure Bob's drinking. I got him started."

"Really? Good job. I'll go finish him off. You two have fun." Jim left with a smile that told me that the best surprise was yet to come.

"Ace isn't your real name, is it," Delilah told me.

I tried to deflect what I knew would be an extremely awkward situation if she found out what my nickname stood for. I really didn't want to scare her off or offend her. "No, it's short for something kind of offensive."

"Anti-Christ?"

“Look, it’s not like it sounds,” I started to stutter out, but she laughed. Her laugh was a quiet thing, yet it had all the strength of her handshake. I was beginning to get the impression that this was a woman who did everything with all of her heart, or not at all. I was starting to feel somewhat unworthy.

“Don’t worry. I like it.”

My mind threw a gear.

She leaned in close to me. “Would you like to hear a secret?”

I nodded.

“I’m the Anti-Christ, too. Technically, anyway, but only because I’m Jesus’s cousin. I’m not really evil, or anything.”

This allowed me to shift into a familiar gear, carefully bypassing the currently thrown one. “Uh-huh. Well, thanks for talking to me, but I can go someplace else to be made fun of.”

She straightened. “I can prove it, if you want.”

Despite myself, and because my other head really wanted to give her a chance, I asked, “How? By showing me the three sixes tattooed on your scalp?”

Something dangerous flashed in her eyes. It was only for a moment, but I caught it and began to believe her. “Be fair, Ace. You know as well as I do that John was some loony who ate too many mushrooms and frogs in the desert.”

“You were there, I take it?”

“Actually, I’m younger than you.”

I relaxed some with this admission. At least she didn’t think she was as old as Jesus.

“But you wanted proof. Okay, then how about if I turn your beer into water? It’s kind of a silly trick, I know, and it’s been done, but I think it’ll do.”

I handed her my beer. “Go for it.”

Delilah swirled the beer inside around for a few seconds, then handed the bottle back to me. “Try it.”

I smelled the bottle. It still smelled of beer, but that didn’t prove much. I took a sip.

After some thought I finally said, “Well, at least that explains why I saw that succubus yesterday.”

Delilah looked at me, confused. “Succubus?”

“My ex.”

She smiled and I felt myself growing harder. ‘Dammit, how does she do that?’ I thought.

“Ah. I understand.”

I tried to maneuver my quickly enlarging member into a more comfortable position by reaching into my pocket and adjusting it. This, of course, was only a little more subtle than reaching down the front of my pants, but it had the desired affect. Delilah’s smile widened at my attempts, dazzling me further and speeding up the growth.

“Now that I’m suitably embarrassed, what brings you to this neck of the universe?”

After taking a sip of her pop, she replied, “Mom wanted me to get out and see some of the world. She says I should experience as much of life as possible.”

This, quite naturally, piqued my curiosity. After all, what kind of woman did Satan go for? Redheads seemed a safe bet, given Delilah’s choice of hair color, but one never knew. Maybe Satan was the redhead of the family. “Who’s your mom?”

“God’s opposite, silly. Who’d you think? I am the Anti-Christ, after all.”

“Lucifer’s...”

“Not Lucifer,” Delilah corrected. “That’s one of the names the Romans gave the planet Venus. And before you say it, not Satan either. That’s a type of angel. Her real name’s a little tough to pronounce, though, so she usually goes by Sophia.”

Seeing that I was very anxious to finish asking my question, she said, “Anyway, you were saying Sophia’s...?”

“...a woman? I always thought that he was...”

“A man?” she finished. “Of course you did. The church could never give anyone with that much influence the face of a woman. Not even Sophia. The only reason they kept Mary as a woman was because they had no choice, what with the whole ban on homosexuality thing.”

I just stood there, not knowing what to say. The sounds of the party had disappeared, buried behind the noise of my thoughts. It made sense, after all. The opposite of a male god would be a female one, but a patriarchy would naturally assume that the most powerful evil being would be male, females being the weaker beings that they were seen as. It was the first in a long series of revelations that I’d eventually encounter in my future career as Detective.

“Jim tells me that you aren’t seeing anyone right now,” Delilah said, changing the subject to something a little more mundane.

I roused myself from my reveries. “Nope. Free as a bird.”

“What about this Samantha chick he was telling me about?”

“Succubus, remember?”

“Right.”

“You know I don’t really call myself the Anti-Christ,” I said to clear up any rumors Jim might’ve told her.

“Jim told me some of it. Care to fill me in on the rest?”

“I have a... gift I guess you would call it,” I started. “It lets me see ghosts sometimes. They tell me things every once in a while. Things about the way the world really is.”

“So you decided to become an atheist because of what they said.”

I nodded. “Among other reasons.”

She sighed and I had a hard time keeping my eyes on her face. “I don’t know what to tell you about with the ghosts. You’ll have to figure that out for yourself. I’ve seen enough strange stuff to believe you, though, so don’t think it’s because of that. Just make sure you remember that they used to be people, so they lie just as much as a living person does.”

My heart beat a little faster. She was the first person that I’d told about my ‘gift’ that I didn’t have to convince, and it was refreshing.

“But that’s enough about that. Show me this Bob that everyone’s been talking about.

The rest of the evening was spent sober, for Delilah and me, at least.

As anti-romantic as it may be, we didn’t end up sleeping together, Delilah making it clear that she was not the kind of girl, Anti-Christ or not, to sleep with someone that she’d just met. We did agree to see each other soon, though, and exchanged phone numbers. Unlike most exchanges along these lines, we both fully intended to call each other.

* * * *

“That’s such a sweet story!” April said in a goofy, true-love-is-grand voice.

“How the hell is that sweet?” I growled. “I met the Anti-Christ at a party.”

“Ace is right,” Bob agreed. “It is a pretty messed up story. If I hadn’t met Delilah, I wouldn’t even believe it.”

“That and the whole being a ghost thing,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, and that. Dude, she was hot, too. You shouldn’t have broken up with her.”

“You think I didn’t want to stay with her? My ‘gift’ started working full time, which meant that I did, too. I didn’t figure any of the rules out until it had royally screwed up my relationship with her.”

“You’re sounding all bitter again, Ace,” Bob said.

“Yeah,” April agreed. “Calm down a bit.”

“Screw you both,” I said angrily. “You’re dead, so your problems with the world are just about nil. I never even got to graduate from college. My ‘gift’ more or less saw to that.”

“So, why are you still around?” April asked Bob, ignoring me as I ranted.

“I don’t know. Just didn’t feel like leaving.”

“I’ll tell you why,” I said loud enough to interrupt them. “See, there are three basic kinds of ghosts: ones that are here because they don’t know they’re dead, ones with unfinished business, and ones that don’t want to move on for some reason. You’re in the unfinished business category,” I nodded to April. “Fat boy here was just too lazy to move on. He saw the light, walked towards it, and decided he needed a nap.”

“So, where is Delilah now?” April asked, ignoring what I’d just said.

I thought for a moment. “Last time I heard, she was hanging out with some guy in San Francisco. But that was about two years ago, so she could be anywhere by now.”

“Want me to find her for you?” Bob asked.

I narrowed my eyes. “That would involve a lot of walking, Bob. Why do you want to do that?”

Bob shrugged. “I just figured that maybe she could help with this whole Hell-on-Earth thing that’s going on.”

My mind stopped for a second. Finally, I managed, “What Hell-on-Earth thing, Bob?”

“The one the nagas are doing. Y’know, getting all of the nagas out of naga Hell.”

“You are so going into a urinal cake you dead, fat bastard,” I said evenly. “Why in the name of every god in this town didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“Dude, no offense, but your apartment stinks. I’m not going in there unless I have to.”

I stood up and started pacing, running a hand through my hair. “The end of the world didn’t seem important enough?”

Bob, finally realizing he’d screwed up big, stood up and started inching his way towards a wall. “I’m dead, Ace. The end of the world doesn’t mean much to me, man.”

I stopped pacing and glared at him. Through clenched teeth, I said, “Go. Find. Delilah. Or. I. Feed. You. To. The. Evil. House. Slowly.”

Bob ran through the wall.

I went over to the spot on the wall Bob had passed through and kicked it until my foot hurt. Then I used the other foot.

“I hate dead people,” I finally said to the universe in general.

“Except for me,” April supplied hopefully.

“No, I pretty much hate you, too. I’m in that non-specific rage phase of tiredness and frustration currently. If you’re dead, I’m not too pleased with you.”

I sat back down on the cot. “Screw it. I’m taking a nap. Don’t bother me.”

I’d just laid down when I heard a resonant, man’s voice say, “That better not include me, Roger, after having one of my men wake me up at five in the morning.”

I groaned. “At least you’ve gotten some sleep, Carlson,” I said, not getting up.

“That’s your fault, from what I’m hearing. What did you do to that poor girl’s body?”

I decided it would best to at least be polite to the man I'd woken up this late, so I sat up. "Shot it several times after it put two holes in my car, killed a guy, and made me shoot out one of my windows. It's lucky I didn't put it in a septic tank to rot."

Carlson, a middle aged Black man with the slight paunch and greying hair to prove it, took out his keys and used one to open my cell door. He'd probably just gotten up, but you couldn't tell it by looking at him. Clean shaven, neatly dressed in a dark blue, button-up shirt and matching tie, he had a vigor to him that belied the early hour. I'd always kind of wondered if Carlson was human or something else, but I didn't have the heart to ask him. We've all got our secrets, after all.

"Anything I should know about?" he asked.

I stood up. Carlson knew a surprising amount of what was going on in his town, I'd found out over the years. I'd also learned to play pretty straight with the man. "Not unless you know how to keep the ghosts of seven foot tall lizard people from somehow opening a gate to Hell."

"Can't say I do."

"Didn't think so. My advice to you on this whole matter is to go home and tell your wife you love her like it was the last time. Because it might be."

"That bad?" Carlson asked.

"Remember the time we found Jormangandr in the sewers?"

"Yeah," Carlson said slowly.

"That's fun compared to this."

"Who's that?" April asked.

"Big Viking serpent thing. Kills Thor on Viking doomsday," I said quickly.

“Friend in there with you?” Carlson asked.

“The ghost that used to own the body I shot up. I’ll tell you the story later, hopefully.

Can I go save the world now?”

Carlson stepped out of the doorway. “Be my guest. But you owe me for waking me up.”

“Yeah, yeah. Get in line,” I said as I walked out of the cell. “I’m tempted to let the world end just so I don’t have to pay back all of the favors I’m going to owe after tonight.”

“Who do you owe?” Carlson asked, escorting me out of the cell block.

“Mama Rosa.”

He grinned. “You must have been desperate to need a favor from her.”

I shrugged. “It’s not too bad. I just have to take Beth out on a date.”

Carlson raised an eyebrow. “The Beth whose body she’s in? You do know what a date with that woman would involve, don’t you?”

“Aside from possibly the weirdest menage a trois in existence?”

“Maybe, but it can’t be any freakier than me and the Fates.”

“Even the old one?” I asked, moderately frightened of the answer. Though, I had to admit, he went up a little in my esteem if that adventure was anywhere near true.

“It’s sort of a package deal with them,” Carlson said. “It was back in my young days, before I met Brianna. I’ll tell you about it some day.”

I smiled. “Can’t wait. I never thought you to be the wild and crazy type, Carlson.”

The chief chuckled. “You’d be surprised some of the things your predecessor and I did.”

“Yeah, well, he was in a pretty big hurry to move on when he finally got the chance, so he didn’t tell me a whole lot about his past. He just told me where his files were, said good-bye, and headed off into the light.”

Carlson stopped at the door to the parking lot. “Tony was a good guy, Roger. You would’ve liked him.”

“I keep hearing that. Some day I’ll have to get Mama Rosa to try and contact him and see what he didn’t tell me.”

I put out my hand, and Carlson shook it. “Good luck,” the chief said.

“Thanks. I’m pretty sure I’m going to need it.”

“I had your car towed here when I heard you’d been arrested. I’ll make sure to hide the fact that we found Miss Goode’s purse in it, by the way. You’re getting sloppy, Roger.”

“Shit,” I swore loudly and stomped on the floor with my left foot, causing it to throb some from the earlier kicking I’d given the wall. “Thanks. I owe you another one. I was going to drop it off at my place, but I guess I forgot.”

“It’s all right. You’re tired. Just make sure you save the world, huh?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“And you said something about someone getting killed?”

“Yeah.” I told him where the naga had shot the guy with a fatal case of curious. “I’d be pretty surprised if no one called it in considering all the noise we made.”

“I’ll send someone over, just in case. Good luck, Roger.”

“Thanks. I’m probably going to need it.”

* * * *

“Why did he let you out?” April asked once we were back on the road.

“Carlson’s a good guy,” I replied. “He knows what’s really going on in this town. And I got his mother to tell me where she hid the key to her safety deposit box for him.”

“Oh. So, where to now?” April asked.

“Back to my apartment for another urinal cake and some supplies. Then I’m going to talk to Samedi again. Along the way I’ll decide if I should kill his drunk ass for helping this thing along.”

At the corner of Academy and Park, I realized that I’d made a mistake and gotten turned around. Bronson Park, surrounded on three sides by five churches, not to mention the Crypt of the Future some fifty feet under it and the Church of the Lost Moon hidden about a hundred feet up, was coming up on our right.

“Damn,” I said as I accelerated in an attempt to get past it.

“What?” April asked, confused and looking around for danger.

“Get down. We’re going past the park.”

But I was too late. A large, brass-plated motorcycle, red on one side and yellow on the other, roared out in front of the Sunbird, causing me to stomp on my brakes to not run into it.

I stuck my head out of the broken window and yelled, “Hey! Get that damned thing out of the road!”

The rider, who was wearing red chaps and a yellow jacket, flipped open the clear visor of his red and yellow helmet and looked down his green nose at me. “You were told not to be here at this time, human. Why should I let you pass alive?”

“Damned faeries,” I grumbled.

To the rider I said, “I’ve gotta save the world.”

“Which one?” the rider asked calmly.

“Mine. I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about yours.”

“Watch your mouth, human. I don’t suffer insults.”

“Too bad.” I said. “Who are you, anyway?”

“I am part of the king’s guard. Highway combat division and gate guardian. I was given specific orders to kill you on sight if you resisted arrest at all.”

“So Richtor’s still pissed at me. Interesting,” I said under my breath.

To the guard, I said, “Just let me go, and we can both say that none of this happened. I get to save the world, and you don’t have to fill out all of that paperwork. Both of us make out on it.”

“I can’t do that. You know this. I have to take you to my superior.”

I looked to the pinkish night sky in annoyance. “All right. Let me park my car, and I’ll come with you. Let’s get this shit over with.”

I drove a short distance the wrong way down South Street and parked backwards in one of the metered spots.

“Stay here,” I told April. “I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.”

“Is he really a faerie?” April asked, watching the guard as he sat about ten feet away from the Sunbird, waiting for me.

“Yep. They’re nothing special. They come from a dimension right next to ours. It’s really hard to get there these days, normally, but some asshole made a faerie mound on the edge of the park.” I pointed to a small hill near the park’s northwest corner, surrounded by six different types of trees.

April looked at me, an expression of awe on her face. “Have you been there?”

“Faerie? Once, but not by choice. I was on a case. My investigation is part of why their current king is pissed at me.”

“What did you do?”

I smiled lasciviously. “Let’s just say I’m partial to green women and leave it at that.”

I got out of the Sunbird and walked along the sidewalk towards the mound. The guard kept pace with me. Once I'd gotten as far as the sidewalk would take me, I took a deep breath and stepped into the park. I stopped at the edge of the ring of trees. Never enter faerie rings of any kind. Gives the green bastards power over you. "I'm not going in there. You'll have to bring your boss out."

The guard nodded. "As you like. We shall return momentarily."

I knew full well that the guard meant momentarily to me. My one experience in Faerie had taught me to pay closer attention to folklore. If I had, I would've learned that time passes differently there. For every day I'd been there, three had passed back in my world. From what I'd heard from other people, though, I'd gotten off lucky because the rate wasn't constant, and could accelerate or decelerate at random. One ghost told me that he'd stumbled into Faerie for just a day, and ten years had passed on Earth. The shock that his body had sustained when time caught up to him had caused him to die.

The guard walked to the mound and a crack of light slid part-way to the top. It then split into four more cracks, revealing a double door. When it had opened all the way, he walked in. Almost immediately a man wearing a yellow leather jacket and red leather pants strode out. A silver stag was sewn onto the jacket's right breast. This faerie's features were hard, like that of a seasoned general, but he was still more handsome than most human models. There were several streaks of white in his shoulder-length, black hair.

I got uncomfortable, despite knowing it was probably just a glamour of some kind making him look that way. Most likely, the guy was wrinkled and old. Being aware of the illusion, though, didn't make it any easier to look at.

“It surprises me that you would come here, Detective,” the elder faerie said from the other side of the invisible line I had stopped at. “I thought you were smarter than that. Did I give you too much credit?”

“Funny. Who are you?”

“Ah. I apologize. Let me take down my glamour.” The faerie pressed the silver stag, revealing a slightly shorter faerie with a crooked nose and a scar across his forehead. “Better?”

I smiled. “Andreas. How the hell did you make it to head of the gate guard?”

“Judicious use of poison.”

I guessed the most obvious poison to a faerie. “Iron?”

A brief stay in a faerie jail cell talking to an imprisoned faerie physician had taught me a few things about his race. Faeries had a deadly weakness to iron, similar to that of humans and plutonium, except that a faerie had to touch the iron. It was also why they were green, as opposed to pink like us. Their blood was copper-based instead of iron-based like a human’s.

“Yes. An iron knife to the heart of my predecessor. No one actually cared, though. His inability to bring you back after...deflowering, shall we say, Richtor’s daughter left him with few allies.”

I filled in the blanks. “So, you’re saying that I inadvertently opened the way for you to promote yourself, and, therefore, you feel like you owe me a small favor. That about sum it up?”

Andreas gave a tight smile. “In not so many words, yes.”

“Which means that you’re going to let me go, right?”

“No, it means that I will petition the king to use the quickest means of killing you that he has at his disposal.”

“How nice,” I said flatly.

“I would prefer to not go the way of my predecessor.”

Then something clicked in my head. “You used a glamour of some kind to get me to come here.”

“I would never do such a thing, Detective. That would be dishonorable.”

My visit to Faerie had also taught me some of their twisted honor code. It was similar to the one most presidents used. “Unless your underling on the motorcycle did it. Then you could deny any knowledge of it.”

“If that is true, then he shall be disciplined,” Andreas said without much emotion. “But, the fact remains that I am under orders to bring you in.”

I sighed. “I understand. But you might want to let me go anyway.”

“Do tell.”

“The nagas are up to something nasty. I’m not sure what yet, but it could spill over into Faerie if I can’t stop it. Something about replacing humanity with nagas.”

“Truly,” Andreas said, sounding unconvinced. “And how do you know this?”

“I’ve had a few run-ins with them tonight. And the ghost in my car,” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder, “was killed by them.”

Andreas looked into the car. I wasn’t sure if faeries could see ghosts, but I was willing to risk it.

The faerie must not have been convinced by what he saw, because he said, “How am I to know that you’re not lying? A human ghost is not proof of what you’re saying.”

“I’m not lying to you. You helped me out of a tough spot once, so I’m being honest with you.”

“And it gets you a stay of execution,” Andreas finished.

I shrugged. “A happy coincidence.”

“Other than your word, I don’t see why I should believe what you’re saying.”

I thought for a minute, trying to find something that I could use. Nothing came to mind, so I started grasping at straws. “Do you know the gods Baron Samedi, or Damballa? You might know Damballa as Dan-aido-awedo.”

Andreas’s eyes grew wide and he stepped back a pace. “The Lord of Sraatsa still exists in your world?”

Not wanting to show my ignorance, I just said, “Unfortunately.”

“I will order all gates closed immediately in case you’re not successful. But don’t think that this is over. You will be executed for what you did.” Andreas turned and began walking away.

“Not if I can help it,” I said to his rapidly retreating back.

The faerie didn’t even slow down.

“Wait, how do you know about Damballa?” I shouted to him.

Andreas stopped, but did not turn around. “His worshippers invaded my realm eight millennia ago. We beat them back, but lost nearly half of our world’s population. If he still exists in your world, and he is trying to bring back his followers, then my people must arm for war.”

He started walking again.

“How did you beat them?” I asked.

But Andreas just kept walking until he disappeared into the mound. The doors slowly closed behind him and sealed.

“Glad that’s over with,” I said, talking in an attempt to deal with what I’d just heard, as I moved back to the car.

“Is everything okay now?” April asked once I was back in the Sunbird.

“Not even close,” I said and started off again.

We made it a few blocks to Lovell Street. I was forced to stop just before it intersected with Davis as a large group of nagas in, I assumed, leather armor of some kind, walked out on to it and faced us. Which was new. I’d never seen nagas manifest armor of any kind. It made sense, I guess. They’d had a civilization of some kind, after all. Still, when ancient evil spirits do something new, it’s time to worry.

“Dammit, I just want to go home!” I said loudly. “Can’t everybody just leave me alone for ten freaking minutes?”

The full impact of what was going on then registered in my tired mind.

“This is bad,” I said slowly. “They’ve never gotten together like that before.”

I looked in my rear-view and started backing up, but stopped when another group of nagas, dressed similarly to the others, walked out of the parking lot of an apartment complex and faced us.

“Looks like they’re all here,” I said to myself.

“What’re we going to do?” April said, terrified.

“Play a game of chicken.”

I revved the Sunbird’s engine a couple of times and took a piece of chalk out of a trench coat pocket.

The nagas in front of us, understanding what I was doing, crouched down, getting ready to charge.

I punched it, the tires squawking some.

The nagas screamed something impossible for humans to repeat, and ran at us.

April screamed and I flipped the nagas the bird as I crashed right into them, sending their weightless bodies flying in all directions. I kept going, running two lights in the process, and didn't stop until we were a mile or so away.

"Stupid things," I said, smiling.

"What just happened?" April asked, positive that she should be dead again.

"Do you know what a ward is?"

April shook her head.

"It's like a force field that keeps out ghosts. I've got one on my car. It's a bit beaten up from tonight, but it looks like it's still there. They're easy to get through if you know how, and my broken window makes for a big hole in it, but the front part is still intact. We were moving fast, so I wasn't too worried, but still. If they'd managed to get to my side, we would've been dead. Again, in your case."

"How can I get any deader?"

"Don't worry about it. Let's just get what I need and get this night over with."

"When do you think Bob will get back with Delilah?" April asked after we'd been driving for a minute.

"Never. The stupid bastard's probably already either forgotten what he's doing or lost. I just did it to get rid of him before I figured out a way to send him to Hell. We're pretty much on our own."

"Why'd you and Delilah break up, anyway?" April asked.

"The job."

April narrowed her eyes. “I’ve been around you for one night, and I can’t stand you. It had to be more than that.”

I sighed. “It’d be nice if it was, but no. I’m pretty sure that the day I got chosen by the city to replace the last Detective, she knew she was going to leave me. I wish I’d known.”

15.

Delilah and I were walking around Bronson Park one Thursday in February about eight years ago. A bitterly cold wind whipped up occasionally, throwing snow and ice particles in our faces and causing Delilah’s long, thick, coppery hair to flow out behind her. It was still one of my favorite images of her. Aside from her naked, of course, but that kind of went without saying.

It was around noon, and one of that rarest of Michigan phenomenon: a sunny winter day, Michigan’s skies turning slate grey from November until late March. If the Vikings had to put up with this type of weather, it was no wonder they went out looting and pillaging. I’d have invaded England too if it meant some sunlight. The sun just made the snow on the ground blinding, and did little to make anyone out and about warm, but it’d been so long since I’d seen it that I didn’t see a reason to complain.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and not from the cold. I recognized the sensation from the few times over the years that I’d encountered ghosts. I kept walking, hoping it’d go away. After a few dozen feet of it following me, it became pretty obvious that I was going to have to actually talk to it, so I stopped and turned to face the spirit.

“What?” I asked it, annoyed at it for interrupting my day.

Delilah turned.

The ghost, a short, bald man wearing a brown suit, stopped.

“Calm down,” said the dead man. “I’m here to give you a job.”

This was a new experience for me. Usually ghosts just acted creepy or angry about being dead when I ran into them. They’d never shown up with job opportunities.

“What if I don’t want it?” I asked, suspicious of anyone giving me anything, especially dead guys.

Delilah looked hard at the ghost. “Tony? Is that you?”

Tony smiled. “Yeah, it’s me. Heart attack,” he said, anticipating her next question. “I guess smoking really can punch your ticket.”

I looked at her. “You can see ghosts, too?”

“She’s Sophia’s daughter, kid. What do you think?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked, ignoring the ghost for the moment.

Delilah shrugged. “It never came up.”

I’d learned early on to never argue these kinds of answers, so I dropped it and turned back to Tony. “How do you know who she is?”

“It’s my job. Or was until about ten minutes ago. I was the city’s Detective.”

Delilah’s eyes widened. “No! He’s not going to do it, Tony. You can’t make him.”

Tony motioned for her to stop. “First off, I’m not picking him, the city is. If it were up to me, nobody’d be doing this. I’m just playing Jacob Marley in this drama and warning him of the ghosts to come. Secondly, he doesn’t have a choice.”

Confused as to exactly what I was being picked for, but pretty sure it was about as good as being picked to tell Hitler his ideas were a little extreme, I asked, “What the hell are you two talking about? Picked for what?”

Tony smiled sadly. “Congratulations, kid. You’ve been chosen by the powers that be, mainly be dicks, to be Kalamazoo’s new Detective, effective immediately. Any psychic abilities you have are now fully up and running, your office is over there,” Tony pointed vaguely northeast. “Delilah will show you where. And your life is now officially gone. Have fun, don’t kick out the poltergeist.”

“What?” I asked.

“Ah, the tradition of excellence continues. I reacted the same way.” Tony’s tone became serious. “Can the poltergeist stay in the office?”

This last part seemed especially important to the ghost, so I agreed to it with a nod, being a little too confused to really say much of anything else.

Tony clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Great. They key’s under the mat, my body’s lying on the floor of the office near the bathroom. Officer Carlson knows what to do with it. Have fun.”

Tony then spread his arms wide and melodramatically said, “Hark! A great, white light. I think I shall go into it.”

He disappeared.

“Tony, you ass, get back here!” Delilah shouted loudly enough for half of the people in the park to stop and stare at her.

“Fuck,” she muttered.

“What just happened?” I asked.

“I hate this town,” Delilah grumbled as she started walking across the park. “I knew I should’ve gotten you to move.”

I followed her. “Delilah, tell me what’s going on.”

She did, at least what she knew. Two months later, we'd broken up.

* * * *

“I still don't know why the city picked me to be its Detective, or even why I'm a Detective and not a Protector, like in Detroit.”

April shrugged. “It looks like you're doing an okay job. The city's still here, and the world hasn't ended or anything yet.”

“Thanks,” I said a little uncomfortably. I wasn't used to receiving compliments, and I wasn't exactly sure how to handle one.

I felt the odd need to return the compliment. “You've caught on to the whole being dead thing a lot faster than most ghosts. I'm impressed.”

“Um, thanks.”

The rest of the mercifully short drive was spent in an awkward silence.

* * * *

When we pulled into my parking spot, I told April, “Stay here. I'll only be a minute.”

“Not a problem. Bob's right, that place stinks.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said as I got out of the Sunbird.

Once inside, I made sure to turn on the light so as to prevent tripping, falling, and killing myself on a pile of something. I ran to my bathroom, a meticulously clean contradiction to the rest of my apartment. I made sure to scrub it down at least twice a week too keep out anything that might try and wander in from the living room. When it came to a choice between ghosts and bathroom born diseases, I always chose ghosts. At any rate, not that many thought to appear there.

I grabbed a pair of pre-carved urinal cakes and a large, silver ankh out of the medicine cabinet. The ankh had cost me more than my car, but it'd also saved my life more times than I cared to count. Each time I'd smacked something with it had had a cost, though, as the permanent tarnish discoloring its surface illustrated. Silver was great for beating around most supernatural things, but it also tended to absorb a bit of their essence, especially the evil part of it. It was why I only used it in extreme cases.

Next, I went to the living room and dug out the phone from underneath a pile of old pizza boxes. I dialed Beth's number, growing more impatient with each ring. After four of them, the answering machine picked up, and Beth's voice said, "I'm not in, leave a message. Unless this is Roger, in which case we know, and you need to get a move on it. They've probably got me by now and are just about ready." Then a beep.

I hung up the phone. "Damn."

I calmed myself for a moment, not wanting April to see how upset I was, and then walked out to the Sunbird.

"Get everything?" April asked when I'd gotten in the car.

"Yeah. We've got another stop to make before we go see Samedi, though."

"Where?"

"Beth's place. I think we've got a meeting set up."

"With Beth, or with Mama Rosa?"

"Neither," I said and left it at that.

* * * *

I will say that the trap the nagas had set for me looked pretty good from the outside. They'd left Beth's living room light on to make it seem like she was still there, and the only car

in the driveway was hers. The kid must have parked whatever he'd driven there some ways down the street, or maybe even in the parking lot of the convenience store at the end of the street. I could probably work out which one it was if I'd really wanted to, but didn't see the need. I couldn't sense any ghosts nearby, but if they were hiding in the kid's body that didn't really mean much. The front door, open a crack, spoiled the set up a bit, but not much. I might have even fallen for it if I hadn't called first.

"Stay here. I've got a trap to walk into," I said.

April asked the logical question of, "Why are you walking into a trap? That's kind of stupid, isn't it?"

"Not if I know it's a trap," I said as I got out of the car. "Hopefully I can get some information out of this."

I walked up to the door and knocked on it.

It opened all the way, revealing the kid from earlier that evening.

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting too long," I told him.

"Nope. You're right on time. Come on in." The kid stepped back to let me in.

I walked in and the kid shut the door behind me.

"You know we're going to kill you, right?" the kid asked me.

It looked like somebody hadn't gotten Damballa's message to leave me alive. "I know you're going to try, but I really doubt you'll do it, kid," I said as I walked into the kitchen and started opening cupboards.

"Don't call me kid. My name's Eric Roland."

"Hey, kid," I shouted back into the living room, "she didn't happen to tell you where Mama Rosa kept her rum, did she?"

The kid came into the kitchen. “What the hell are you doing? I just said that we’re going to kill you.”

“And I said that I doubt it, which means I need some rum for later,” I told him as calmly as my nerves would let me. There wasn’t much doubt that I was in danger, but I wasn’t about to show some kid how nervous I was, either. “Look in the refrigerator for me, would you?”

He walked up to me and began shouting. “Don’t you get it? We’re going to kill you, open the door to Sraatsa, and then kill off all of your race. You and all of the other hairless apes on this planet will be *dead*. And you can’t stop it.”

I moved a bottle of whiskey aside in the cupboard I was looking through. “Ah, found it.” I looked at him. “All of us, huh?”

“Yes,” he said with a smile.

“You, too?”

His smile flickered for an instant. “I’m not human.”

“Really?” I reached out and pinched the kid. I knew this was pushing my luck, but I couldn’t resist myself. “You feel human to me.”

He slapped my hand away. “Only my body’s human. My soul is naga.”

“Was,” I corrected. “Funny thing about reincarnation. Whatever you reincarnate as, your soul becomes. If I believed in reincarnation, which I don’t because I think once through this pit is enough, and I died right now and came back as a cat, my soul would be a cat’s soul. Same goes for you, which makes you one hundred percent human.”

“You’re lying,” the kid said with some uncertainty.

I began walking back to the front door. “Am I? Ask your friends in your head. They know I’m telling the truth. If they’ll tell you after all of the lies they’ve been feeding you.”

I opened the front door and ran to the Sunbird, leaving the kid standing there talking to himself. I managed to be in the car and driving away in less than ten seconds.

“I hate kids,” I said once we were away. “But I love how stupid they are sometimes.”

“He seemed pretty smart when we saw him by the fountain,” April said a little defensively.

“Hey now, don’t go rooting for the bad guys. The ghosts helping him are smart. He, on the other hand, is just some punk kid with delusions of grandeur.”

A glance in the rearview showed me that no one was following us.

“He’s been keeping us going all night,” she point out.

“True, but that’s just because I was playing catch up. Now we go on the offensive.”

* * * *

“Looks like everybody’s still here,” I said, noting all of the cars that remained parked on both roads near Ron’s house, a good number of them sporting little orange ticket envelopes under their wiper blades. “Which means Samedi’s still here, too.”

I saw April’s eyes start to drift in the direction of the Evil House. “How about you come with me this time. With the gaping hole in my car’s protection, I don’t want to risk the Evil House eating you while I’m gone.”

“Huh?” April looked at me without really seeing.

I sighed and took out the ankh. “I should’ve thought of this earlier.”

I tapped April on the shoulder with it. There was a small flash of light, and she jumped like a cattle prod had just poked her.

“Ow, fuck!” she screamed. “What the hell is that?”

“A taser for dead things,” I said with a slight smile. “It’s a combination of the silver and

the ankh symbol. A mystically pure metal in the shape of the symbol of life are the Wonder Twins of dead thing kryptonite.”

“Next time just use the cigar,” April whined, rubbing her shoulder. “That hurt.”

“Yeah, well, it’s close to being plutonium for gods of death like Samedi. It’s a little more forceful than I normally like to be, but it’s pretty late in the game.” I put it back in a trench-coat pocket.

I got out of the Sunbird. “Let’s go.”

We walked up to the front door and went in.

Sleeping people in various degrees of nudity were spread out everywhere we walked.

“Did you walk through here with your eyes closed earlier?” April asked, smiling.

“That could have caused some problems. But, yeah, it was tough to get through here without at least staying for a quickie.”

“Is that Roger I hear in there?” Samedi said from the next room, replacing his th’s with d’s.

We walked in and found him sitting on the ledge of a picture window. A pale, naked woman was slumped against his shoulder.

Samedi smiled when he saw us. “Roger! How nice it is to see you again. Excuse me for a moment, and I’ll clear you a place to sit.”

He gently picked up the woman and laid her on the floor among some other partiers.

“Much better. Now, please sit, and introduce me to your lovely companion.”

“Far be it from me to refuse a request from Baron Samedi.” I sat down.

Samedi laughed. “I know that tone. You’re wanting something from me.”

“Yeah, and it’s something pretty big. But first, this is my client, April. She was murdered by the naga you reincarnated.”

Samedi nodded to April, who had remained standing. “My apologies, my dear. If I had known that so beautiful of a woman would be harmed, I never would have let that lizard become a man.”

“It’s not your fault,” April said, obviously taken in by Samedi’s Prince Charming routine.

I let the chance to tell Samedi it was his fault go by. “About what I need to know…”

“It’ll cost you,” Samedi said, looking at April. “That one,” he nodded to the body on the floor, “barely entertained me for an hour.”

“She’s not for sale.”

April went rigid and started walking toward Samedi. “And who are you to keep me from taking her?” There was still humor in Samedi’s voice, but a darker tone had been added to it, as if he was challenging me to try something.

“You know, I was going to try and do this the nice way,” I pulled out the ankh, “but if you insist on being a dick, I guess I’ll just have to be the guy with the big fucking ankh.”

The god tried to get up, but I touched the ankh to Samedi’s leg before he could. There was a dull flash and Samedi sat back down. April stopped moving.

“You do not know what you do.” Samedi’s voice had become deeper, and seemed to be inside of my skull as well as outside. The god’s features, thin to begin with, were now gaunt, as if his skin was just there to hide his bones.

“I know exactly what I do,” I said harshly back to him. “And, while I appreciate you not telling the lizards about the whole reincarnation thing, I’d appreciate it more if you’d just tell me

what I need to know so I can save the world and go to sleep. I even brought you some more of that rum to show I'm not a complete bastard."

I carefully fished the rum out of my coat, not moving my eyes or the ankh a millimeter from Samedi. I handed the bottle to the god, who grabbed it.

Samedi uncorked the bottle and took a sip, savoring it as best he could. Some of the humanity returned to him. "I won't kill you, Roger, but don't think we're even."

"Fair enough," I said with a nod. "Now, I need to know where there's a gateway to naga-Hell around here, and how to get to it."

Samedi laughed. "So that's what that ol' snake is up to. Can't say I like it, but good for him."

"Yes, he is," Roger said. "He's trying to bring back his old worshippers. And it's my guess that there are enough nagas in naga-Hell to make up for any he'd lose by killing off all of us humans, so he's okay with wiping us out. Which means you'd lose all of your worshippers, and you'd die pretty quick."

"Gods don't die quick, Detective. It takes us millennia. Eons sometimes if you're strong enough. But it is a problem."

Samedi took another sip of his rum. "And, in answer to your other questions, there's a gateway under the cemetery by the college. You know, the one with the hills."

I shuttered internally. "Yeah, I know it. Figures. So, how do I get to it?"

Samedi smiled his overly large smile. "The entrance, she's under the Evil House. Plain as day."

“Oh, better and better.” I shook my head. “I just can’t wait for this. I finally get to get eaten by the house. I always figured that it was a gateway to Hell, I just didn’t know it was big lizard Hell.”

I got up, keeping my ankh out, but lowering it to my side. I looked at April, who was still stiff. “As much as I enjoy her like this, could you let her go in a minute so I can get this over with?”

“Let me have her, Roger. I could clothe her in this one’s flesh for the rest of the night.” Samedi pointed to the body on the floor. “It would be a shame to lose one so pretty to that place.”

“She’s already lost, Baron. Before you let her go, though, I do have another favor to ask you for.”

“You’re getting bold, Roger.”

“Fear of the world ending does that to a guy. I need you to follow these directions for me,” I took out a pen and piece of paper, then scribbled some instructions on it. I handed the note to Samedi. “To the letter. Don’t screw this up.”

The Baron took it from me. “I’m not a messenger boy. Why should I do this for you?”

“Just read the damn thing, and you’ll understand.”

He looked it over. “You serious about this?”

“You bet your drunk ass I am.”

Samedi laughed. “Your balls musta grown about ten inches tonight to do this.”

“You do what you’ve gotta,” I said. “Will you do that for me?”

He thought it over. “Yes, if just for the entertainment I’m sure it will make.”

“Thanks. You’ve got some pretty big ones yourself to agree to that. Now, if you could let her go?”

April relaxed and looked around. “What just happened?”

“The Baron was kind enough to answer some questions for me. And now we’re leaving.”

I nodded to Samedi. “Thanks, Baron. If I live through this, I’ll try and set you up with the person I get that rum from.”

Baron Samedi remained seated. “Good luck, Roger. If just so I can get more of this.” He waved the bottle a little.

I smiled. “Damned alcoholic gods.”

* * * *

We left Ron’s house and went to the Sunbird. I grabbed my gun and a spare clip out of the glove compartment.

“You never know,” I said to April, slamming the passenger side door. I slipped the gun and clip into my trench coat.

I decided to walk the hundred or so yards down Davis Street to the Evil House. Halfway there, April zoned out.

“Well, you made it further than I thought you would,” I said to her.

We got to the Evil House without a problem. April kept going and walked through the front door, but I stopped at the bottom of the three rotted steps that went up to its porch and looked the place over. It was still just as run-down looking as I remembered, with peeling paint, boarded up windows, and layer of filth. And it still radiated an undefined sense of dread that made me want to turn around. Of course, I now knew that the sense of dread was coming from a

gateway to naga-Hell, which made the dread closer to terror. I reached into my pocket and held onto the ankh.

“Might as well get this over with.”

I crept my way up the stairs, trying not to put too much of my weight on any of them. Falling through the steps and breaking something seemed like a pretty embarrassing way to start things off. Eventually, I made it to the porch. A jiggle of the handle showed me that the door was locked.

“Naturally,” I muttered.

I took out my gun. “No time for subtlety.”

I stood back and shot the door. The first bullet hit the door-frame, sending chunks of dry-rotted wood everywhere. The second hit the door itself, putting a good sized hole in it. And, finally, the third one hit the knob, knocking it out of the door. I kicked the door open and walked in.

Red light with no apparent source filled the hallway. Seemed Damballa was feeling a bit dramatic. It showed a set of narrow stairs on my right that led up to the second floor and darkness. What was probably a living room at some point lay ahead of me, amply lit.

“At least he’s a helpful destroyer of worlds,” I said as I walked into the living room. The only things occupying it anymore were a few scraps of newspaper and an odd stain.

More light seeped out from behind a cheap wooden door to my right. A Master lock hung from it.

“Dammit, doesn’t anybody trust people anymore?” I asked who, or what, ever might be listening in on me.

It only took me two shots to hit the lock.

I opened the door and saw rough-carved, wooden stairs set into the dirt the basement had been dug out of. At the bottom, I turned and walked slowly through the small area before the basement opened up.

“The boiler. Why didn’t I think of that?”

A soft, reddish-yellow glow emanated from the inside of the boiler’s remains, coming out of empty rivet-holes, cracks, and the broken open front quarter of it. I could just make out stone, spiral stairs in the center of it from where I stood.

I walked up to them and looked down. The steps were taller than normal, apparently made for nagas rather than humans. Despite the color of the light, a cold breeze blew out of the hole.

“I’m stupid,” I said half seriously. “Of course big lizard Hell is cold.”

I began to awkwardly descend the steps, keeping my hands in my pockets, one on the gun, the other on the ankh. I estimated that the stairs went down at least a hundred yards into the ground before stopping at a stone arch with carvings I could only assume were nagaese, nagalish, nagaic, or whatever nagas called their language.

“If that says ‘Abandon All Hope, etc.,’ I’m inclined to agree.”

The ankh had started to warm up in my hand, something it only did when something evil on the level of a god was nearby. I took it out for a moment and noted its bluish glow.

“Welcome to the realm of damned nagas,” I said as I walked forward and passed under the arch. A tingle passed over my skin that caused my hair to stand on end and my testicles to retract almost into my stomach. Kind of like when the air conditioning kicks on, only it was more of a spiritual change of atmosphere indicating that I’d passed into an underworld. “Please

check your baggage at the big stone arch, and if you're wearing anything made of snake or alligator skin, you're screwed."

The corridor I walked down was made of carved stone, with a life-size naga carved every five feet or so in a state of pain, anger, or constipation. I couldn't tell which. One seemed to be wrapped in barbed wire, another had the jaws of something big clamped on its midsection, another was nailed to the wall. They continued on like this for some distance, curving with the passage, becoming more and more torturous, eventually culminating in various forms of dismemberment. Finally, the corridor opened up into a hemispherical room the size of a school's gymnasium. A pool of placid water sat in its center, looking for all the world like a swimming pool or watering hole. A doorway opened up on the other side of the room, directly opposite where I stood.

'Dammit,' I thought, knowing full well what this was.

I inched around the edge of the room, watching each step, trying not to make any noise on the smooth floor. I'd almost made it to the other door when a stone slab dropped down, blocking my way.

I lowered my head, said shit, and turned around. A ghostly naga with larger than normal claws and teeth stood there, looking down at me, possibly with contempt. It's hard to read facial expressions on nagas. They're too different from humans. Normally, I wouldn't have been too worried about a ghost, even one as intimidating as this one, doing me much harm. But I was in a land of the dead now, which meant that ghosts were very solid, and, in the case of this one, very dangerous.

"Sras to ahsra so," it said to me in a tone that told me I was right in assuming contempt.

“Let me guess. You’re the guardian of Naga Hell, and you either want a blood sacrifice, or fifty cents for the toll,” I said.

It repeated its earlier statement, louder this time.

“Look, shouting’s not gonna help me understand,” I told it calmly. “Guess the whole shouting at foreigners thing is kind of universal.”

The thought of pulling out my ankh and smacking the guardian occurred to me, but I knew that if I did that the door would stay closed. So, I began to rifle through my pockets, looking for something useful. After rediscovering ten bucks I thought I’d lost, a quarter roll, and the saint’s pinky, I found a spare lighter. An idea popped into my head.

Guardian spirits fall into two categories: strong and dumb, like Cerberus, or smart and fast like most sphinxes. Both kinds will more than likely eat you if you give them half a reason, but they also come with the inclination to let you go if you’re sufficiently clever. Naturally, the strong, dumb ones were easier to be clever at. Tall and gruesome looked to be in that category.

“You know,” I told the guardian, “it’s mighty cold in here.”

I held myself and shivered to demonstrate the meaning.

The guardian said nothing.

I took out my lighter and lit it.

The guardian squatted down to get a closer look and sniffed a couple of times.

I took my thumb off of the gas, causing the flame to extinguish.

It growled at me, exposing its teeth further, and giving me the opportunity to notice a second row of teeth that I hadn’t seen earlier.

“All right, here’s the deal. I’ll give you this,” I pointed at the lighter and then the guardian, “and you let me through the door.” I pointed at myself and then the door.

The guardian seemed to consider this for a moment. It then grabbed the lighter and the door slid open.

“Thanks,” I said as I left the guardian behind, flicking the lighter on and off.

This corridor didn't have any decorations, just naked, black stone scored with thousands of claw marks, like countless nagas had been dragged through them unwillingly. It went fairly straight for a few hundred yards, the ever-present glow still emanating from somewhere I couldn't identify. I'd been around enough, though, to know better than to ask too many questions about little things like that. The answers tended to involve things like sacrificed children, or, on one occasion, the siphoned off spiritual energy of Apollo. That debacle was why the Hidden Gardens of the Gyre were now the Hidden Gardens of Dust.

Eventually, after going from straight to several twists and turns, the corridor opened up into a massive cavern. Plants I'd never seen before filled it, bushes and ferns covering the floor, and trees sprouting up and over the low growers, their tops disappearing into the mists obscuring the ceiling. With so much lush greenery, the scene looked almost tropical, but, if anything, this cavern was colder than the first one. And the only thing I smelled was stale, wet air, confirming that everything there was only a ghost.

Sounds filled it, as well. The ghost plants and the cold didn't overly concern me, but the sounds did. They were from large, most likely hungry, animals.

“Ah, dammit,” I said and backed into the corridor enough so that nothing huge could fit in it.

“Damballa, I'm going to kick your scaly ass for this!” I shouted into the cavern.

Everything in it went quiet.

I lowered my head. “I am so stupid sometimes.”

I sighed, raised my head, took out the remains of my cigar and lit it with my spare lighter. You only have to nearly get killed by a horde of ghostly bikers once from lack of lighter fluid to start carrying a spare one. Once I had a truly big, acrid cloud of nastiness around myself, I put the lighter away and took out the ankh again.

Walking forward, ghost plants wilting at every step, I said, "Might as well get this over with."

The first attack came quickly. A small pack of velociraptors attempted to sneak up on me, but found it impossible due to the rapidly growing swath of obliterated ghost plants that surrounded and followed me. They did eventually get up the nerve to try and jump me, but by the time they got close enough to hurt me, they'd gotten a lungful of my cigar smoke and were forced to run.

I laughed. "I hated your movies, by the way," I said as they left, growling their frustrations all the way.

A loud crashing sound came from my left, accompanied by a louder roar. The ground shook in even tremors. I started to run, knowing that there was a good chance I'd be dead before the dinosaur chasing me even needed to lean down to my level and be affected by the smoke.

About a hundred yards ahead of me was the corridor. Naturally, it was sealed.

"Damn. Leave it to the nagas to use a damned tyrannosaurus as their physical test," I said as I stopped.

I quickly turned and started running back to the corridor I'd just come out of. I risked a glance behind me. A head that looked about the size of a small car appeared through foliage. Its scales, most likely olive green when the thing had been alive, looked closer to the color of pickle juice now. It stopped, sniffed the air, and looked my way, staring at me for a moment like I was

the last bit of meat on the planet. Something it'd probably know a little about. It roared, showing off machete length teeth, probably just for effect, and came at me.

Puffing, wheezing, and swearing, I made it to the corridor just as the tyrannosaur reached me. It snapped and roared, trying to push its head into the narrow hallway, as I stood there getting my breath back.

After a couple minutes, I said, "Shut up," and walked up to it, just out of its reach. I smacked it on the nose with the ankh and said, "Bad lizard. Go away."

It jumped back with a scream of sorts and stood there, not quite sure what to do.

"Nobody's ever done that, have they?" I shouted out from the safety of the corridor. "Well, they should have. Bad lizard! No dinner!"

Hearing the tone of my voice, and possibly sensing what it meant, the tyrannosaur roared again and tried to get at me one more time. And I smacked it on the nose one more time.

"Stupid freaking lizard. Go away so I can get this over with and get to bed."

It jumped back with another scream and, this time, left.

"It's a good thing Samedi didn't come with me," I said as I moved on. "He'd want one of these things as a pet."

I followed the path I'd made earlier to the door, which was now open with yellow light oozing out of it. Twenty yards away from the opening, the tyrannosaur crashed out of the tree at a full sprint. I didn't even waste time swearing. I just ran as fast as my out of shape legs would carry me, making the door just as the tyrannosaur chomped at me, missing me by inches.

I turned, weighing the benefits of actually trying to destroy the thing, eventually deciding that I didn't have the time. The return trip, assuming there would be one, was a different story.

"I'll come back for you."

This corridor was made entirely out of amber, backlit by gods knew what. Trapped in the walls, the ceiling, and the floor, were the bodies of countless nagas of various colorations, going further and further back into the amber, one upon another, until I couldn't make anything out. I walked up to one for a closer inspection and its eyes darted to me, focusing on me with all the built up rage that eons of imprisonment generates. Understandably, I jumped back.

“Looks like I'm in their version of the ninth circle of Hell. Glad Dante never saw this.”

I trudged on through the corridor, countless eyes burning into me, for what seemed like forever. Finally, I reached a cavern so deep and wide that I couldn't see the other side. The ceiling was hidden in blackness, but a dim, yellow glow rose up from somewhere below me, reminding me vaguely of the bait an angler fish used to lure in its dinners. A path went off to the left, becoming stone and slanting downward along the edge of the cavern. Further along it, I could just make out April.

“Good, the dinosaurs didn't eat her,” I said and started walking.

I tried to figure out about how far my little journey through the suburbs of naga-Hell had taken me and decided that I was in the right place. I shook my head. “I'd really hoped I wouldn't see the underside of a cemetery for a few more years.”

A loud growl came from somewhere below me, followed by a flash of yellow light, then silence.

I walked a little faster to catch up with April. By the time I did, I could make out most of what we were walking towards.

The ground below was completely flat and featureless except for a three-story tall crystal that looked like it was made out of the same amber that I'd seen in the corridor. Surrounding it were, as far as I could tell, every naga ghost in existence, which amounted to about fifty.

Wrapped around the crystal in near endless coils probably fifteen feet thick was an ivory colored snake.

“Damballa,” I said under my breath. “Guess I should have brought a bigger urinal cake.”

I looked for the kid and Beth, but couldn't see them.

“SOON, MY FAITHFUL, YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS SHALL BE FREED!”

Damballa said in a voice that shook the cavern.

The nagas started hissing and roaring.

Damballa looked up at me with a head the size of a freight engine. “AS SOON AS THE SPIRITUALIST ARRIVES.”

I stopped. “Listen, dammit, I'm not a spiritualist. And I'll be down there in my own sweet time. Don't get your panties in a bunch.”

April stopped and turned to look at me. “Don't talk to him like that! He's going to fix the world.”

“About time you stopped acting like you were all doped up,” I said. “You know, if you wanted me down here so bad you should've just asked instead of messing around with me like this.”

April, who was about to say something else, broke off as if I'd just stolen her thunder.

“Yes, I knew you were working for them. There's more than one kind of snake. At first I hoped it was just coincidence that the kid was your boy-friend. My fault for forgetting there's no such thing as coincidence, I guess. I knew that you were working together, though, when the nagas and that kid were able to find me so quickly. But I didn't figure it out completely until you stuck around after we found out how you'd died. You appeared in my closet asking me to

find out who killed you, so you should've moved on when we did, but you stayed. So, I realized that they must've been using you to trace me somehow. It clicked when I grabbed your purse and looked at your license. They used your true name to keep track of your movements and mine. A good idea, I might add."

I shouted to Damballa, "What did you promise her, Old Snake? A new body? Eternal youth?"

"BOTH. AND WHEN MY FOLLOWERS ARE FREE, SHE SHALL HAVE THEM."

"And then you'll kill her again," I said so that only April could hear.

"He won't do that," she protested. "He's a good god."

"Bullshit," I said. "I know gods, and that's exactly how they think."

I shooed her forward when she just stared at me, trying to figure out a come back. After she was a good five feet ahead, I started chanting under my breath.

"YOU ARE THE LAST COMPONENT OF OUR RITUAL, SPIRITUALIST. THREE BRIDGES BETWEEN DEATH: THE ONE WHO SPEAKS WITH THE DEAD, THE ONE WITH THE TWO SOULS AS ONE AND THE ONE WHO WEARS A NEW SKIN WILL ALLOW MY CHILDREN TO FINALLY RETURN TO THIS WORLD AND RECLAIM IT."

I ignored Damballa and kept chanting.

"BEFORE THE ASTEROID WAS BROUGHT, MY FOLLOWERS RULED THIS WORLD. IF NOT FOR THAT, THEN THEY WOULD BE OUT AMONG THE STARS BY NOW, SPREADING MY WORSHIP WHEREVER THEY WENT. IF NOT FOR THAT, FAERIE WOULD BE OURS AS WELL. WE HAVE BEEN DENIED OUR BIRTHRIGHT FOR FAR TOO LONG."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Brought?"

Then it clicked. I laughed and shook my head. “You were trying to generate more belief for yourself by causing the end of the world. But there was no one there to stop it, was there?”

If he heard me, he didn’t acknowledge it. I resumed my chanting.

“AFTER THE GREAT DEATH, I SLEPT FOR MILLENIA UNTIL SENTIENT LIFE THAT COULD WORSHIP AND BELIEVE IN ME FINALLY RETURNED, SUCH AS IT WAS. YOU HAIRLESS MONKEYS HAVE NOWHERE NEAR THE SPIRIT OF MY CHILDREN. EVEN THOSE SENT TO SRAATSA ARE BETTER THAN YOUR KIND.”

We reached the bottom of the cavern and began heading toward the crystal. The nagas in our path moved aside as we passed.

I finished my chanting and looked up at Damballa. “I’m sorry, were you saying something? I was thinking about this snake-skin belt I saw on sale in the mall the other day, and how much it looked like you.”

“YOUR BARBS MEAN LITTLE TO ME, SPIRITUALIST. SOON, YOU WILL BE GONE. BUT, IF IT HELPS, THINK OF IT AS AVOIDING THE RUSH.”

“Oh ha fucking ha,” I said. “Like I haven’t heard that one before...”

As we neared the crystal, I could see Beth and the kid strapped to it at ground level. Next to Beth, I could make out another set of straps that looked like they were just about my size.

“So, am I supposed to strap myself in, or what?” I asked April.

“No,” she replied. “Our lord will place them upon you.”

“How nice of him.”

“About time you got here,” Beth shouted to me.

“What, you thought I was just going to leave you here to have all of the fun by yourself?”

I said back to her. “Besides, I couldn’t stand you up on our date.”

“Some date. Next time I get to pick where we go.”

“So, you’re saying you’d go out with me again?” I asked with a touch of seriousness.

“If you save the world, I’d be more than happy to go out with you again.”

I looked up at Damballa, then at the gathered throng of nagas. “You don’t impress easily, do you?”

“Gotta work if you want to go out with me.”

I sighed. “I guess it’s worth it.”

I looked up to Damballa, who was watching me. “Hey, are we going to be sacrificed? I’m just curious.”

“YES. THEN YOUR SPIRITS WILL ENTER THE CRYSTAL AND BRIDGE THE REALMS OF THE DEAD AND THE LIVING.”

“Really? Great, that’s what I thought.” I pulled out my gun and shot at the kid, killing him with the second shot.

“FOOLISH. HE WAS GOING TO DIE ANYWAY. HIS DEATH MEANS LITTLE TO ME.”

“Uh-huh,” I said as I pulled a urinal cake out of my other pocket.

As soon as the kid’s ghost appeared, I finished my chant with the kid’s name. The ghost was promptly sucked into the urinal cake I held.

“No!” April screamed.

I ran up to Beth and started undoing the straps around her wrists.

“How was that?” I asked her.

“Not bad. Now, how are we supposed to get out of her without Damballa killing us and just breaking that kid’s new home?”

“I’m working on it.”

I looked up, expecting something. After two seconds of not seeing it, I said, “How about we run really fast for a while?”

Beth didn’t bother to answer as we dashed for the path out. The nagas, apparently still under the impression that they couldn’t hurt us, just stood there.

“PATHETIC. IT IS NO GREAT DIFFICULTY FOR ME TO CATCH YOU.”

Damballa moved for us. Despite his monstrous size, he was on us with incredible speed.

“Anytime now, Samedi,” I said as the snake came up on us.

“Damballa, my brother,” came Baron Samedi’s voice from the darkness above us. “This game is over.”

Damballa stopped. “YES, ‘BROTHER’, IT IS. AND I AM ABOUT TO WIN IT.

“STOP THEM, MY CHILDREN, WHILE I ATTEND TO THIS GODLING WHO WOULD DENY US.”

“You think I would come here all alone?” Samedi asked. He laughed. “The drink has not affected me that much, Brother.”

A flood of ghosts rolled down the path in front of Beth and I, with Taylor and her group of women at the lead. Even Jakobar’s ghost had come along for the fight. From above, Baron Samedi dropped on top of Damballa’s head and started riding it like a bucking bronco. Occasionally, there was the flash of something metallic that I couldn’t make out.

“Go,” I told Beth. “Get to the corridor, and you should be safe.”

“I don’t think so! I’m done playing damsel in distress. I’m staying here with you to beat these things down.”

I ducked as a naga took a swipe at me. “I’m pretty short of effective weapons. All I’ve got left are my ankh and my gun. What are you going to use?”

Beth gave a nearby naga a solid punch just below its stomach. It screamed and fell down, clutching itself.

“In case you haven’t noticed, these things are physical here. And, unlike you, I know where to hit them and make it count,” Beth said.

“Well, Rosa does, anyway,” she corrected.

“Then here, you take the ankh and I’ll take the gun.” I tossed the ankh to her.

“Just make sure you point it away from me,” Beth told me as she nailed another naga with the ankh, causing a small flash of light.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“You owe me one for this, dick,” Taylor shouted over to me.

I shot wildly at a naga, hitting the one behind it in the shoulder. “I wish people would stop telling me that,” I shouted back. “I’m saving the damned world, after all. Have a heart.”

The fighting continued. Shortly, it became obvious that the ghosts that Samedi brought were not going to win it.

“This isn’t working,” I said to Beth as we fought side by side. “For every one of them we take down, they take down three of ours.”

“Why aren’t all of these ghosts being sucked into the crystal?” Beth asked me. “You know as well as I do that that’s where they’ve been going. If we can get it to do its job again, this fight will be over pretty damn fast.”

I looked over to the crystal. Damballa, as much as he was bucking and rolling in an attempt to get Samedi off of himself, still had his tail wrapped around part of it.

“It’s Damballa. Somehow he’s blocking the effect by holding onto the crystal,” I said.
“We’ve got to get him off the crystal.”

We started running toward the crystal. Any naga that got in their way either got shot by me, or clubbed by Beth. Once there, we were faced with another problem.

“How do we get him off?” Beth asked.

“I’m fresh out of grease, so I suggest we just beat on him until he gets the idea,” I said.

“Leave him alone!” April shouted from behind us.

“Y’know,” I started as I turned, “I’m just about sick of you.”

“And I’m sick of you always bitching,” April said with a sneer. “I hate this, and I want to go to sleep, and this sucks. Why don’t you just shut the hell up?”

“I’ve been saying that for years,” Beth muttered.

“We are on the same side, right?” I asked Beth.

“Well, screw you,” April continued as if neither of us had said anything. “Now I can just kill you and finally get you out of my life.”

April ran at me. I stepped aside just as she got to me, causing her to run into Damballa. The force of her collision caused her to stumble backwards and fall.

“Life? You still can’t get it through your head that you’re dead, can you?” I said down to her.

I bent down and picked the still dazed ghost up. “Hit her on the head with the ankh, Beth.”

“A please would be nice,” she said as she clocked April on her left cheek with a blow that would have snapped her neck if she hadn’t already been dead. A large, ankh-shaped burn was left on her face after the flash.

“Please, and thank you,” I told her. “Now, about Damballa...”

I turned back to the god and emptied my clip into the huge piece of his tail to no effect. After I was finished, Beth started beating on it with the ankh. With every flash, Damballa shuddered, until finally his grip loosened.

Behind us, silence erupted.

We both turned around and saw every ghost frozen in place. Slowly, the nagas started moving forward and entering the crystal. The human ghosts remained where they were.

“You had Samedi do something to the people, didn’t you?” Beth asked.

“Hey, give me some credit. I’m tired and grumpy, but that doesn’t mean I want all of the people who were nice enough to fight the big lizards to wind up in naga-Hell with them. He told them to stop doing whatever they were doing and go home if the crystal tried to call to them. And, since he’s a human god, they’re listening to him instead of it.”

I bent down and dragged April to the crystal. “I do want her in there, though.” As soon as her head touched the crystal, her body disappeared. Looking into it, I could see her falling into its depths, her body limp.

“She’s not going to be happy when she wakes up,” I said. “Hopefully it’ll teach her to not make deals with gods.”

Damballa clutched the crystal again, and Beth smacked him again.

“Remind me not to piss you off too seriously,” she told me.

“NO! STOP, MY CHILDREN! DO NOT GO!”

But, specifically designed to imprison them, the crystal’s call to the nagas was stronger than the god’s order. We stood aside to let the nagas shamble their way to the crystal, and the

human ghosts shamble their way out of the cavern. Every time Damballa tried to get a grip on it again, Beth hit him and Samedi beat him in the head.

Once they were all in, I said, "It's time we get out of here. I'm not sure if Samedi can beat him or not after all of the naga belief Damballa's been sucking up down here."

"Good point," Beth agreed.

We began to run. As soon as we were on the path up, I yelled, "Keep him busy until we get out of the cavern, Samedi!"

"You best be hurrying, then. I can't fight him all the day," Samedi shouted back.

"YOU WILL DIE TONIGHT. ALL OF YOU. I WILL EAT YOUR SOULS AND LET THEM DIGEST FOR CENTURIES."

"He's such a sweet talker," I said as I ran. "Makes you wonder why there isn't a Mrs. Big Ugly Snake God."

"Shut up and run faster," Beth told me.

When we reached the tunnel entrance, I heard Samedi shout, "He's all yours, Detective!"

The ground began shaking. I didn't need to look back to know that Damballa was chasing us at top speed.

"The tunnel should slow him down," I said to Beth. I was beginning to get winded already. "That'll give us time to at least get to the ghost jungle."

"And then what?"

"Hopefully the dinosaurs jump on him while we get away. They're there to protect this place, so they attack anything that comes through," I said. "They attacked you, didn't they?"

Beth shook her head. "No. The nagas that had me knew a word that let them get through."

“Swell. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and Damballa’ll be too pissed to remember it.”

The crashing behind us got closer.

“And I might be the king of Faerie,” I said under my breath.

We broke out into the jungle and leapt to the left side of the tunnel’s opening as Damballa dove for us. There was a loud snap as his mouth closed on empty air. The roars of several dinosaurs came from the jungle.

“Follow the edge of the cave,” I told Beth. I was almost wheezing now. “We’ll try to circle around to the other tunnel. We might be able to get to it before he finds us.”

We ran as fast as my exhausted body would allow.

“YOU CANNOT HIDE FROM ME! I WILL FIND YOU AND CONSUME YOU, SPIRITUALIST!”

Apparently, my luck changed, because Damballa roared in pain, then said, “PATHETIC CREATURES. YOU ARE NOTHING BUT APPETIZERS FOR ME.”

There were several more roars from the dinosaur ghosts, interspersed with the loud snap of Damballa’s jaws. We got to the tunnel’s opening just in time to see him wrap his mouth around the tyrannosaur and begin to swallow it.

“Damn,” I said.

“It’ll keep him busy. Come on, we’ve got to keep moving,” Beth said desperately.

But that wasn’t what I was swearing about. I’d just seen our chance to beat Damballa.

I guessed we were about half-way to the guardian when Damballa started smashing his way through the tunnel behind us.

“I...hope...the guardian...puts up a...better fight...than the dinosaurs,” I gasped, clutching the developing cramp in my side.

“I’m getting you a gym membership if we make it out of this,” Beth said to me as she tried to not pull too far ahead. “You shouldn’t be this out of shape.”

“I’d rather...have the big snake...eat me.”

We made it to the guardian’s chamber with Damballa not twenty feet behind us.

The guardian, who was currently sitting down on the pool and playing with my old lighter, looked up at us and growled. He stood up, then stepped down from the pool when Damballa came into view.

“Go get ‘im,” I wheezed at the guardian as we went to the right along the chamber’s edge.

Damballa shot out of the tunnel like he was a snake in a joke can of peanut brittle and head-butted the guardian. It clawed at Damballa’s right eye, blinding him on that side. The god screamed.

“ROHRONS, YOUR GUARDIAN WILL SOON BE JOINING YOU IN WHATEVER HELL YOU ARE IN.”

This seemed to enrage the guardian, who began tearing into the blinded eye even more. Damballa shook his head to no effect. The last thing I saw as we entered the final leg of tunnels was Damballa beating the guardian against the chamber’s walls.

“We’re almost out, Roger,” Beth said. “Come on.”

Somehow, from the depths of whatever I had where my soul had left its dear Roger letter, I managed to get enough strength to go the last, little bit to the Evil House’s cellar. Once there, though, I stumbled over to a shallow alcove with torn papers scattered about it and stopped.

“What are you doing?” Beth nearly screamed. “He’ll be here any time!”

“I...know. Come over here. We...need to stay here and fight. There...isn't enough space...for him to move much. It's our...only chance.”

“What are we going to fight him with? All we've got is the ankh.” She held it up to me.

I shook my head. “Samedi's cane is...stuck in his head. We can use...it to kill him. It's a god's weapon.”

The ground rumbled and shook.

“YOU CANNOT ESCAPE ME, SPIRITUALIST!” came from the stairway.

Beth walked over to me. “You'd better be right.”

“Or what?” I said with a smile. “You'll kill me?”

We only had to wait a minute. Damballa shattered the remains of the furnace and went through the first floor of the Evil House.

I shook my head. “I called him smart once, didn't I?”

“We're down here, asshole!” I shouted to the ceiling.

Slowly, Damballa pulled himself back down into the basement until he was looking at us with his good eye. Samedi's cane was sticking out of his head just above the missing eye.

“GODS WILL SHAKE WHEN THEY HEAR ABOUT HOW YOU WILL SOON SUFFER.”

I jumped forward, grabbed the cane, and moved off to Damballa's right. The god hissed and swung around to try and follow me. Beth walloped him in the side when he did so, and he turned back to her.

I held the cane up to the height of Damballa's eye. “Hey, scaly, over here.”

When the god turned upon hearing the focus of his rage, the force of his own momentum drove the cane through the gouged out eye and into his brain. It also knocked me hard into the basement wall, causing everything to go black.

16.

The first thing I saw was a bright light.

“I’m finally dead, aren’t I?” Part of me was kind of happy at the prospect. I’d had just about enough of giant snake gods chasing me down to eat me.

“No, you’re not that lucky,” Beth said from my right side.

The world came into a little more focus and I realized that I was in a hospital room. The bright light I was seeing was sunlight coming in through the windows behind Beth.

“You know, you almost look like an angel with all the light coming from behind you,” I said to her.

She smiled. “But it takes more than that to fool you, right?”

“Damn straight. I’m the guy who saved the world. Again. With almost no sleep, and for no money.”

“With a lot of help,” Beth added.

I tried to laugh, but my ribs hurt too much. I managed an ‘ouch’.

“That hit from Damballa bruised your ribs, and your back is the second biggest bruise I’ve ever seen, so don’t try anything strenuous soon.”

I tried to laugh again, winced at the pain, and swore. “You know me better than that. The most strenuous thing I try to do is leap a pile of garbage in my apartment.”

“You do know that you could just burn really strong incense to keep the ghosts out, don’t you?”

“What, and ruin the atmosphere I’ve got going in there?” I said. “Besides, I couldn’t evict all of those critters that are living in there now.”

“You didn’t know, did you.”

“No,” I said quietly. “Guess I’ll just have to get a new apartment and let the landlord clean out that one. Hope he brings a flame-thrower.”

“This isn’t our date, by the way.”

“Damn,” I said with fake anger.

Gingerly, I sat up in bed. Beth tried not to look concerned and, for the most part, was successful. For the first time, I saw that I was only wearing a blue hospital gown.

“I’m mostly naked here, aren’t I?” I asked once I was sitting up all the way.

“Mostly,” she replied. “Don’t worry, I didn’t look.”

“But you were tempted,” I teased.

“Out of morbid curiosity.”

“How long was I out?”

“Just a couple of days. The doctor said he was amazed that you were even still alive with all of the crap he found floating in your system when he did your blood-work.”

I shrugged, then gasped at the stabbing pain. “We all have to die of something. I figure I might as well die of bad eating.”

“Damballa almost took that little dream away. You were lucky.”

“Luck my ass. There’s a reason I don’t exercise: Fat makes a better shock absorber than muscle.”

“Whatever.”

“At least I finally got to catch up on my sleep.”

“I never took you to be an optimist,” Beth said. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“It’ll wear off. I’ll be back to my old bitter and cynical self in no time.”

“I can’t wait,” she said flatly.

“So, what happened to Damballa?” I asked, ignoring the last comment. “I can’t imagine his body just disappearing. And it’s gotta be damn hard to hide a snake the size of most buildings.”

“Samedi took care of it. Some god thing, I guess. He said he’d save you enough skin to make a pair of boots, and that you were even if he could keep the body.”

“Bullshit. If he keeps the body, he owes me, and I’m going to tell him the next time I see his rum-soaked ass. It’s not every day that a god dies.”

I looked around the room. “Are my clothes in that closet?” I asked, pointing to a door.

“That’s the bathroom. Your clothes are over there,” Beth pointed to another door.

“Can you get my trench coat? I seem to be bed-ridden.”

“This is the only time you get to play that card with me,” Beth said as she got up.

She opened the door, took out my trench coat, and brought it over to me.

“Thanks,” I said as he looked through its pockets.

“Here he is.” I pulled out Chip’s urinal cake.

“Our snake in college kid’s clothing, right?”

“Yeah. He’s going to be experiencing things shortly that the Chinese don’t have hells for.”

Chip shook weakly.

“And I want my ankh back, by the way,” I told Beth.

“It’s in the Sunbird’s glove compartment.”

“Well take it out and put it somewhere safe. I don’t have a window, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Relax,” Beth said. “It’s safe.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What did you do to my car?”

She smiled. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Eight hours later, I was deemed well enough, physically, to leave the hospital. My doctor still wasn’t sure that he should let me go, muttering something about angioplasty, but he let me out anyway. With Beth’s help, I hobbled out to the Sunbird. Sitting in it’s passenger’s seat was the guardian, playing with its lighter.

I bent down as best as I could and looked through where the driver’s side window should have been. “What is he doing here?”

“Funny thing. Damballa just beat him up and left him for dead, or whatever he would be. Turns out he was just knocked out.”

I straightened up and looked across the Sunbird’s roof to Beth. “And he wound up in my car how?”

Beth leaned on the roof. “Damballa destroyed his pool, and Samedi and a bunch of other death gods are sealing up the entrance to Sraatsa, so he doesn’t have a home or a place to guard.”

“So you thought that he could be the guardian of my car? Wouldn’t a car alarm be better? I mean, he’s...interesting and all, but I don’t want to have to give him a lighter every time I want a friend of mine to ride along with me.”

“I’ll let you work that out with him.”

“How?” I asked. “He doesn’t speak English.”

Beth started walking away. “You’ll figure something out.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, wait,” I called after her. “Can you see him?”

“No,” she said back to me. “He’s a ghost up here.”

I sighed. “Great. My own pet guardian ghost.”

I opened the door and got in, slamming it behind myself. The guardian looked at me and growled.

“Oh shut up,” I told him. “Play with your lighter.”

Epilogue

Beth and I sat at a table in a dimly lit corner of the restaurant. The smell of garlic drifted through the air and permeated everything.

“Is there a reason you wanted to go to an Italian restaurant?” Beth, who was dressed in a black, strapless dress that revealed more of her skin than I’d ever seen, asked me.

“Because there is no chance of work interfering with us here,” I replied. I was wearing a grey, button-up shirt and black slacks. “The garlic will keep away everything except...”

“Roger!” a familiar, godly voice shouted across the dining room.

I looked down and put my fingers on my temple. “I really hate him sometimes.”

“We’re off the clock,” Beth yelled back at Samedi. “Come back tomorrow.”

“Don’t tell anyone I said this, but I think of you two as gods. And gods, we’re never off the clock.”

“Would you stop shouting and get over here?” I yelled over to Samedi, who was leisurely making his way over.

Samedi pulled out a chair when he reached our table and sat. “I haven’t seen you two since the nastiness with my brother. I was concerned.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’d be a first.”

The god clutched where his heart would have been if he were human. “You hurt me, Detective. I’ve always had nothing but your best interest in my heart.”

“You don’t have a heart,” Beth said flatly.

“Ah, but if I did, it would have your best interest in it.”

“We’re in the middle of a date here, Samedi,” I said. “Could you just cut to the chase and tell us what you want?”

“Of course. I wanted to know where you got that wonderful rum you gave me. You said that you would tell me who was giving it to you.”

“That was before you carved up Damballa for steak.”

“I gave you a lovely pair of boots that I had made from his skin. They’ll never wear out.”

“They’re cowboy boots!” I shouted.

Beth laughed, trying unsuccessfully to hide it behind her hand.

I pointed a finger at her. “Don’t encourage him.”

“She’s a beautiful woman, Detective, who knows a good pair of boots when she sees one.”

“And who isn’t affected by lusty gods,” Beth added.

“Go away, Samedi,” I told him. “I don’t owe you anything, and you know it.”

“You can’t blame me for trying, can you?”

I shook my head. “No, but I’m about to. Now get.”

“I don’t know. They seem to have a wonderful selection of wine in here.”

“Boy, if you don’ git on outta here, I’m gonna tell these two how to put you in a bottle an’ toss you into Lake Michigan,” Mama Rosa said to Samedi.

“You don’t know how to, old woman,” the god told her.

“You’re cute as all hell, but don’t tempt me, child.”

Samedi considered this for about two seconds, then stood up and bowed slightly. “Enjoy your date, my friends. I will see you soon enough.”

“Gods I hope not,” I said, smiling.

Samedi walked away, but before he could get far, I said to him, “Thanks for your help with Damballa. You didn’t have to, but you did anyway. I appreciate it. Tell the ghosts, too. Hell, I might even leave Taylor alone for a while for helping out on this one.”

The god turned and gave a deep bow. “You are most welcome, Detective, and I will.” He turned back around and left.

“You know he probably did it just to get Damballa’s body to make steaks out of it, don’t you?” Beth asked.

“Yeah, but I’m inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, if just for today. Apparently I’m a lot more chipper when I’m rested.”

“Roger?” a voice I hadn’t heard in years said from where Samedi had just left, causing my heart and stomach to switch places.

I turned. “Delilah?”