

Jason Daniel Myers



Big Trouble In Little Canton

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New Flavors of Euphoria

When I first saw my savior, I was sitting in some wondrous cross between a burlesque house and a bordello. I had been there for hours, and I was still sussing out the strange network of unspoken rules and customs that its employees and patrons followed. In order to get the attention of dancers, men would hold out bills in small denominations, which they would place in the dancers' undergarments, or between their breasts, or thighs, or teeth. If more greenbacks were not forthcoming, the interaction would soon peter out. It was rather like watching people on park benches try to feed squirrels. Squirrels they wanted to have sex with. The squirrels, for their part, did their best to hypnotize the men into believing that they might actually get to have sex, though, in fact, the one ironclad rule seemed to be that no one would get to have sex. An intricate game of chess, with sex on one side, money on the other, and each player attempting to sacrifice as few pieces as possible. After learning just some rules of the game, I longed to play. Unfortunately, I had next to no legal tender. Fortunately, this is the type of game I find it easy to cheat at.

As I said, it was all rather strange. And amusing. And delicious. A fever dream of pulsing music and lights and glitter and lingerie in colors and patterns that were a testament to mankind's infinitely innovative nature. I had a vision of the world as an endless menagerie of new and shiny objects. Morning upon morning to come would be Christmas morning, presents to unwrap, toys to play with. There were new flavors of euphoria awaiting me, ones worlds away from this shabby decadent circus in which girls walked a skillful mesmerizing tightrope between virgin and whore. Museums. Dance halls. Amusement parks. Cathedrals. But I did not rush out the doors in search of these things. After all, it is a fool who hurries through one feast to get to another. And it had been a long time since I'd feasted. I, much like the negligible currency I carried, had been out of circulation for nearly one hundred years.

I had been freed from my imprisonment by an ogre, a sprite, and a gnome. And that is not the strange part. The strange part is that they were Christians. I will not say much about the Fae, or the Other Side, in which I spent my long years of imprisonment, because I myself know but scraps and crumbs about such things. But I do know that the power and influence of the Fae deteriorated in almost direct proportion to the rise of Christianity. It is possible to be a devotee of Christ as well as the Fae, as Harry Houdini, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and, above all, Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, showed. But for the Fae themselves to be Christian....

Well, these were, and it was their Christian charity which had inspired them to free me. Did they know why I had been imprisoned, plucked from what I had thought to be an existence free of enemies with the motive or wherewithal to condemn me to a century of near starvation, and, worse, so much worse, the tedium of total sensory deprivation? No, they did not. They had merely heard whisperings of the wretched creature, and, wanting to try their hands at this new concept of performing selfless acts, they deemed that I was as good a place to start as any. I fell before them, grateful, weeping, unhinged by the possibility of freedom, and offered them my eternal service, if they would will it so. I had been dead. Well, not dead. Worse than dead. Any life I had from then on was owed to their kindness. It was then that they told me about my savior.

Not that savior. Well, they did in fact begin to witness to me on behalf of Christ, but I explained to them that I had already been baptized. I did not tell them that I had been baptized as a member of, among other places, Pentecostal churches, Baptist churches, and a genuinely charming snake-handling community in the Appalachians. I didn't talk about the time I spent shaded by the white tent of a traveling revivalist preacher, or that, unbeknownst to him, I contributed greatly to his success over the course of several weeks. I also did not mention Sufis, shamans, sweat lodges, Kaballah, Samadhi, or that I'm actually pretty skilled at the intricacies of Haitian vodou dance rituals.

My savior, they said, was a woman who had arrived scant weeks before in the realm of the Fae, and, acting with what I could only surmise was a boldness, innocence, and true belief that made her a missionary of the impossible, brought Christianity to a small cadre of Fae, and, ultimately, my salvation from what I had believed to be an eternity of cackling, screeching boredom. These three Fae referred to their prophet only as 'she', and the beatific joy the three displayed as they described her suffused and revived me. They must take me to her, I begged, so that I could begin to pay the debt that could not be repaid. Alas, they did not know where she was, for at this very moment she was making final preparation to leave the realm of the Fae. Not surprisingly, I guess, bringing Heaven to the Fae meant there was Hell to pay. The Royals didn't take kindly to this spiritual incursion, and, unless she planned on becoming a martyr, my savior's work was finished. I asked for drawing materials, and, inspired by their admiring descriptions, began to sketch her. Once they saw what I was doing, they became excited, adding details, correcting mistakes. When it was finished, they were delighted with it, delighted with themselves. I made a gift of it. With the Fae, gifts are not gifts, gifts are bargains, debts and obligations, to be repaid now or millennia from now, and the three were only too happy to give me the gift I hoped for in return: passage from the Other Side, and a friendly finger pointing me the direction I might hope to find my savior in the mortal world.

My new Fae friends sent me to Canton, Ohio. I was fairly familiar with the place. Or I had been. I wandered all over America during the 1890s, sporadically after the turn of the century, and then again during the Roaring 20s, before... well, I don't want to talk about it. Any case, most of my time stateside was spent in New York, Chicago, and in Akron and Massillon, Ohio. During those times, the area was flush with new money. And when it came time to build and furnish their homes, those Ohio captains of industry wanted nothing so much as to return to Europe of old. Gothic, baroque, rococo, Victorian. I developed a reputation for my intimate knowledge of all thing antique and European. My life up until the 1890s – nearly 80 years—was spent almost entirely in Europe. It was a profession which suited me for the moment, and for which, incidentally, my previous associations had well prepared me. Furniture, stained glass, wood carving, sculpture, tapestries, paintings. When I could not find original items, I created fairly authentic period-appropriate reproductions from

scratch (and, very often, from memory). I can do more than sketch, when I've a mind to.

But, at the moment, what I needed was another sketch. I charmed the school-marmish proprietor of an art store out of a few basic supplies, and recreated the drawing of my savior. And I spent the next several hours wandering the streets of Canton, sketch in hand, asking the same question over and over again, like a child whose puppy has run away. It did not matter how long it took, I would find her.

As I was canvassing a number of ancient gentlemen who were but lads the last time I breathed Ohio air, I heard a curious clip-clopping sound. I turned to see a slip of woman, wearing shoes that the Spanish Inquisition and Van Helsing would both have found very useful. Those shoes made up close to 20 percent of her height, and, shoes aside, her proportions seemed to me to genetically improbable. I walked after her, leaving one gentleman in the middle of a meandering sentence.

“Excuse me, Miss,” I said, “I don't mean to trouble you, but—“

She turned around. Her face was painted, ostentatiously, but with considerable skill. The color of her hair, like her measurements, was something unlikely to be found in nature. She smelled faintly of coconut, lavender, and peaches.

No, she had not seen the woman I was looking for. Polite enough, but clearly in a hurry, she strode on. I watched her leave for a moment, the sketch in my hand. Then I followed her. I was getting hungry anyway.

Her name was Shana, she was late for work, and she was a dancer at a place called Gatsby's. By the time we arrived there, she liked me enough to talk me past the tough who played gatekeeper to the club. Gatsby's, in truth, is a dive, but to a weary traveler such as myself, it was an oasis of hospitality, a stately pleasure dome, a wondrous cavern of music and silk and flesh that Aladdin himself might have envied. Within a short time, I was on a first name basis with each young woman in this make-believe harem; no matter that I did not throw money at her as if she were an organ-grinder's monkey. The patrons, and even the employees, were soon having a grand time, their loneliness set aside, the perfunctory illusion of human contact and merriment and flirtation transfiguring into the real thing. Well, beyond the real thing.

I sat, soaking it in, floating on the tides of their euphoria, letting the hours slip past me like stray cats brushing by my ankles on the way to whatever mysterious appointments cats feel they must keep. And I drew.

And then she walked in. My savior. Brown hair. Pale skin. Strong features. Dressed almost primly, you might say, but without self-consciousness. This, I knew, must be predestination, for she no more belonged in here than I belonged in this century. She was upright, innocent without being naïve. Righteous. Notice I did not say self-righteous. Many people easily mistake righteousness for self-righteousness. Those people are often themselves unbearably self-righteous, or simply insecure. I am most assuredly not righteous, but I have spent enough time among those of many faiths to discern the difference between righteousness and ego. Further, her righteousness carried with it an unmistakable power.

She was clearly uncomfortable at even entering such a place, and yet, as I came closer, I observed her talk her way in without paying any entrance fee. It seemed she attended the same church as the mother of the young tough who guarded the entry-way, and she was not above leveraging his embarrassment. There were three other people in her group. The first made it past the bouncer by waving some sort of ticket at him. He was big. Shaved head.

All leather and tattoos and facial hair. He immediately went to the bar. That left two others, both men. One was beyond big. Perhaps a circus strong man. The other was incredibly... well, average. Average build, average height. I watched as they too tried, but unsuccessfully, to talk their way past the bouncer. My savior observed too, uneasily. She had made it past the gate-keeper, but seemed reluctant to venture further unescorted. Seeing my first opportunity to be of some small use to her, I interceded on their behalf.

“It’s all right Tony,” I said to the bouncer. “These are friends of mine. Good people. You might not know it to look at them, but they are.”

The bouncer regarded me for a moment. I was testing the limits of my brief interactions with him. Bad enough that I was broke, but my friends seemed to be as well. He sighed, and waved them through.

The strongman gave me a brief nod, and pushed past me to join the biker in the riding leathers at the bar. That left my savior, and the average man, who both looked at me, perhaps expecting some explanation for my seemingly random kindness.

“Excuse me,” I said, feeling suddenly a bit awed, nervous even, “but this is you, is it not?”

I handed her a drawing in oil crayon I had been putting the finishing touches on. Its style was influenced by that of Russian Ikons. It was, on reflection, a likeness good enough that my question probably seemed ridiculous.

She looked at the drawing, clearly unsettled, and then back at me.

“It is you, of course it is,” I said hurriedly.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “have we met?”

“My apologies. I’ve forgotten myself. My name is Kyle Wynter. And I am your humble servant.” I bowed, and reached my hand forward to take hers, then stopped in mid-motion when I saw that her hands remained at her sides.

She stood there, regarding me. And for a moment, I was completely at a loss.

I realize that I’ve gone this far without talking about my physical appearance. And I would hate for you to misinterpret this omission as a lack of vanity on my part. I am, I am not ashamed to admit, a bit of a dandy. And there was a time when that word was not a slur on one’s character. I wore a pin-stripe suit with a silk jacquard vest, tailored for me in Rome. Purple. Violet, mind you, not lavender. Impeccable, or at least it had been before I, and it, had been put into cold storage for more than 80 years. I probably smelled like an antique shop, which is not an unpleasant smell if that sort of thing is your fancy. My hair is wispy, longish, though not quite to my shoulders, and, in contrast to my style of dress, rather dishabille. The hair, you might say, has a mind of its own. Like a rain forest, there’s no way of taming it, but it does have a savage poetry of its own. My hair, teeth, and fingernails are slightly opalescent. And there’s a bit of that to my skin as well, an almost subliminal shimmer, like the scales on butterfly wings.

I am tall, but too willowy to be imposing. My right eye is violet, and my left eye is green. This property is even more noticeable because my irises, if you thought about it too long, might strike you as being a bit too large. There is a lot about me that is just a bit too.... My fingers a bit too long, a bit too tapered, my lips a bit too thin, my smile a bit too wide, my frame a bit too delicate, my nose and cheekbones a bit too sharp, my hair a bit too... lively.

If you saw a photograph of me, you would be able to enumerate most of these things. I would seem to you be perhaps just odd looking, or perhaps... stretched too thin. A painting of me would not capture such mathematical details. In person, even in repose, you might also decide that I am beyond ordinary, but it would be hard to put your finger on anything in particular. You might find me unsettling, fascinating, troubling, hypnotic. Most find me charming, some very few distrust me on sight. In either case, my presence throws them slightly out of equilibrium, and people off balance are easier to tip in the direction you'd like them to go.

But, at that moment, I was the one struggling for purchase. "As I said, my name is Kyle Wynter, and you are...?"

"Confused."

"I'm... I'm terribly sorry. This... this wasn't how it was supposed to go at all. You're right. Of course you're right. I've been incredibly clumsy. You must think I need the care of an alienist. Please," I said, gesturing to a nearby booth, "allow me to explain."

The three of us sat. I, my savior, and the average man, and I did explain, fumblingly at first, but I am at ease telling a tale, and by the end I had regained my composure. I left out a few details. She seemed to believe that the fact that I had not expired or even aged during my decades of imprisonment had something to do with fae magicks, and I did nothing to disabuse her of that reasonable but incorrect supposition.

I moved to take her hand, and this time she allowed it. "And now, I sincerely beg you the favor of allowing me to stay by your side, so that I can have some hope of repaying you."

I saw the average man raise an eyebrow, and he chuckled a little.

"That's not the type of payment I meant," I said to him, still holding onto her hand. "Not that I'm ruling that out," I said as I kissed her hand, and then looked up at her. "It's only that the lady and I have just met."

Immediately I regretted that. I'd lowered myself in her estimation. Well, that would have happened sooner or later. Birds gotta sing, bee's gotta sting.

Since I still had her hand, I briefly considered drawing up from the well of her soul, but I let her hand slip from mine without doing so. I'd like to say that it was because I decided it was unchivalrous, or that it was beneath me to try something like that on my savior. The truth was, on someone like her, I couldn't be sure that it would work. And if it did work, it probably wouldn't work the way I intended.

She looked at the drawing for a bit, and then pushed it across the table toward me.

"Please," I said, "Keep it." I didn't tell her that, on the table I had been sitting at, there were a dozen drawings of her.

I saw the strongman leave the club. And a few minutes later, he reentered, carrying a young woman, slumped and lolling in the crook of his arms. She was lovely, and dead. Her body glistened in the flash of the club's lights, a broken dragonfly lying like a crushed gem in the midday sun.

"Who is that?"

"His name is Red Parker," my savior replied. "At least I think that's his name."

“No,” I said. “Not him. Her.”

“Who *was* that. Past tense,” said the average man. Let’s call him Daniel Warther, because that’s what he called himself. He sighed, “That’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

Red Parker and the biker headed for the back of the club.

As we watched them disappear into a back room, Daniel added, “We found her at the city dump, after we killed a bunch of mousanthropes.”

“I’m sorry, but mousanthropes?”

Daniel shrugged. “It’s complicated.” It was. Though I had assumed the four of them had had a long association, all had been ignorant of the others’ existence until a few hours earlier. Thrown together by circumstance, they had little in common aside from nearly getting good and dead earlier in the evening. Daniel never did get around to explaining about the mousanthropes.

Red Parker and the biker came up to our table. The strongman no longer held the girl.

“Find out anything?” Daniel asked.

“Not much. Her name was Selena Ontiveros,” the biker answered. His voice was low, and rough, but not particularly loud. If grizzly bears ever decided to learn English, they might speak like him. “She did work here. Got her home address, at least. Talked to the club owner, name a’ Miss Parker.”

Daniel looked at Red. “You two related?”

Red shook his head. “I hope not. She’s a right bitch.” He smiled. “I guess she wasn’t too happy that I dropped a dead stripper onto her desk.”

“My way a thinkin’, she wasn’t upset enough,” the biker added, and headed for the door.

Officer Smiley

When we emerged onto the street, the biker turned slowly, eyes narrowing. He'd barely glanced my way before, and I could tell he'd taken it for granted that three people would follow him out of the club, not four. He inhaled as if about to say something, then simply paused and furrowed his brow. Finally, "Someone wanna help me out here?"

"It's complicated," Daniel said. "But he's a friend."

The strongman cracked his knuckles. "Whose friend? David Bowie's? Prince's?"

"Emily's."

The biker looked at my savior. "How long you known each other?"

"We just met," she replied.

"Right," the biker said, then spat. "Par for the course I guess." He reached out to shake my hand. "I'm Geezer. This is Red."

"Wynter," I said. "Kyle Wynter."

"Hello and goodbye, Mr. Wynter. It's shaping up to be a worse night. If you want to get yourself killed, that's your business. But I don't want someone around who's going to get me killed."

"Yeah," Red added. "We've already got one girl in the band."

Emily rolled her eyes.

"Books. Covers," the average man said.

"What I'm afraid of," Geezer said. He turned to her. "You vouch for him?"

She shrugged.

Red smiled. "That's a ringing endorsement. Take a hike, Little Lord Fauntleroy."

"Wait," she said. "I don't know him from Adam, but he says he wants to help me, and I believe him. I want to find whoever killed that girl, and stop them, and I think we crossed

paths for a reason." She looked at each person as she said, "All of us. The Lord works in mysterious ways."

Red smiled. "If this is God's plan, then he's been smokin' some Virgin Mary Jane."

She winced.

"So what's the next step?" Daniel asked.

"Our wheels include my hog, and a stolen dump truck," Geezer said.

"Geezer thinks we need to dump the truck," Red said.

"When we were in the club, I called a couple a' my buddies," Geezer added. "They'll give us a ride to the girl's place. Miss Parker said she had a roommate. Maybe she knows something."

"Uh, Geezer," Red said, "we've got a slight plot complication."

A vehicle pulled up, and two men in uniform stepped out. Members of the local constabulary, and they zeroed in immediately on Red and Geezer.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about a girl brought into the club earlier," said one cop. "Possibly the victim of an attack."

"No, officer," Red replied. "I haven't heard anything about that."

"That's strange," the second cop said, smiling, "because one of the patrons took a cell phone picture of the fella' that carried her in. This guy look familiar to you?"

"Who can tell with a picture like that? Cell phone pics are lousy anyway."

"It was taken with a 4 mega-pixel camera. I'm pretty sure, once we see it full res, we'll be able to make a very positive I.D." said Officer Smiley. "Your memory got its jogging shorts on yet?"

"Look, man, I just got here. I haven't even been inside yet," Red said.

Officer Smiley turned to Geezer, "What about you, Mr. Clean? You just get here too?"

I watched the two of them try to dissemble, clumsily and, to my way of thinking, needlessly. It seemed like this was heading toward the two of them, and possibly the rest of us, taking a ride in a Black Maria. It felt as though I should intervene. Also, I was getting bored.

"Excuse me gentlemen, I'd like to make a suggestion, if I might," I began cheerfully, "I'm sure it'll be much easier to clear this all up if we all go inside. You can talk to the management, the employees. Besides, the view is much better in there than it is out here."

The first cop looked at Officer Smiley, who shrugged in assent. Red, I believe, would have clocked me right on the spot if he could have. Geezer merely furrowed his brow as he looked at me, trying to figure out what I was up to.

I positioned myself at the back of the group, and as the two cops came through the doors, shepherding their possible suspects in front of them, I clapped my hands simultaneously on the cops' shoulders.

"Gentlemen," I said, "Welcome to paradise."

And I drew up from the wells of their souls.

Officer Smiley shook me off immediately, and the other officer followed suit. It looked for a moment as if Officer Smiley might take my physical contact as an excuse to get a little batting practice in. His smile broadened as he looked at me, a look that was meant to let me know my place. Then he turned to the bouncer and told him to inform the management that they needed to talk.

It took me a moment to figure out what had happened. I could feel the euphoria drifting off the both of them like heather in a breeze-kissed meadow. The first cop's eyes were roving to the dancers, but Officer Smiley ignored them, more and more teeth appearing in his mouth even as his voice remained grave and business-like.... And then I understood. I had made a poor gamble. When I draw up, I draw from what is there. It was possible that Officer Smiley preferred to dip his pen in an entirely different color ink, but there was something more fundamental, and that was that what stoked his bliss was not primarily human contact, but authority. The opportunities to exercise authority for one in his position were frequent, but petty. The chance to take down murder suspects was a rare opportunity he would savor even under normal circumstances, but I had just fueled his power trip with an overdose beyond his wildest pipe dreams.

What can I say? It had *seemed* like a good idea. I couldn't think of any way to communicate that the situation had just gotten much worse, and that it was my fault. I'm not sure I wanted to, even if I could. Blame aside, complicated explanations aside, I don't kiss and tell if I don't have to.

Fortunately, fools rush in where devils dread to tread. We came to a back room, and as Officer Smiley neared the door, Red yanked him through it.

"Get out of here, now!" he yelled, and, grappling with Officer Smiley, he slammed the door, closing them both into the back room.

Geezer started running, and, lowering his shoulder, body-checked the other cop, who fell backward over a table, scattering chairs. I watched as they all beat an unceremonious retreat. I caught the attention of three of the dancers I was particularly friendly with.

"Ladies," I said, gesturing toward the dazed cop, "I believe that man needs a lap dance."

I watched them descend on him like the Brides of Dracula. Then I followed the path of my companions.

Three bikers were outside, revving their engines. The friends Geezer had mentioned. Geezer mounted his own bike. Emily was already on the back of one bike, Daniel on another. I swung onto the last empty spot just as they tore Hades for leather away from the club. If I'd been a second later, I believe they would have left without me. I didn't take it personally. They'd no reason to wait for stragglers, particularly me.

The Girl Next Door

We stood at the entrance to the dead girl's house. It was a split-level, and she lived on the top floor. Geezer's gang idled several houses away.

Geezer looked at me. "You wanna tell me what that was about back there, pretty boy? Hard to make a clean getaway when you're in the back of a strip club."

"Much harder in the back of a police car. And that is where you were headed."

He narrowed his eyes. "Whose side are you on, Mr. Wynter?"

I shrugged. "Mine. Hers. Yours."

He grunted. "In that order."

I tapped the tip of my nose with my index finger.

"Let's give her roommate the bad news," Daniel interjected.

He opened the screen door, about to knock, but the inner door was slightly ajar.

Geezer put out a hand to halt Daniel. "We go in quiet."

"I'll go first," said the average man. He pushed the door open a little more, and then transformed before my eyes into a small winged reptilian creature, no more than two feet in length. If the gremlins that RAF pilots said liked to monkey with their aircraft mechanisms existed, they might well look like the creature I now gaped at.

Emily and Geezer did not react with any particular surprise, so, like them, I followed a few yards behind the creature. Down a long hallway, and into a kitchen. A dim light was on, dim enough that the cockroaches didn't seem to mind it. The refrigerator door was open, and from it emanated a sour smell. Not rotten food, but the byproduct of an advanced civilization in which mold, rust, and mildew had learned to peacefully coexist.

The winged creature crossed the kitchen, while we waited in the eaves of the kitchen doorway, until it came to a second hall. I saw it pause at the first door in the corridor. Closed. And the creature's claws scabbled quietly, ineffectually, at the doorknob.

Well, this is just silly. I strode across the dirty kitchen tile.

"Allow me," I said, and turned the knob.

Behind us, there was an unearthly gurgling shriek. I turned to see something rushing at me from a bathroom across the hallway. It was female, naked, flesh fish-belly pale and bulging like the skin of a slug. The breasts hung pendulous, misshapen. The mouth was too large, the teeth all sharp. A bony hand raked toward me, crooked cutting claws stretched to tear my face.

It happened very fast.

I happen to be very very fast.

I sidestepped, and tried to use its momentum to stun it against the wall. It shook the impact off so easily I might not have even bothered. I evaded a second swipe by throwing myself backwards into the kitchen.

The winged creature grappled onto the slaving ghouls shoulder, and then I saw it, him, Daniel, grow incredibly large, until it looked to me like a cross between a bat and the pterosaurs on display at the New York Museum of Natural History.

As the two creatures shrieked and screamed, struggling with each other, the floor beneath them buckled, cracked, and then gave way. They crashed through to the first floor, a tangle of claws and leathery wings and putrid flesh.

Geezer went to the hole, and leveled a shotgun, but he couldn't get a clear shot.

I saw that he had a Bowie knife tucked into his belt.

"Mind if I borrow this?" I asked. I didn't wait for an answer. The knife in my left hand, I leapt into the breach, gripped the floor with my right hand, and used it to swing myself clear of the monstrous struggle below.

The first floor was abandoned. In even worse shape than the second floor. Even before a ton of teeth and muscle had come crashing down into it.

Daniel's talons got ahold of the slaving creature's shoulders, slamming its head to the floor. Taking the opportunity, I closed in, stabbing downward with the Bowie knife, through the ear, impaling the pale abomination's brainpan against the floor as neatly as an entomologist pins a beetle specimen.

I waited for its death twitches to subside.

They didn't.

The toothed slug wrenched its head free, leaving a good portion of its brain matter behind it.

I retreated, and the reptilian Daniel did the same. I have seen many things, but until then I had never seen one monster backing away in horror from another monster.

It crawled, but it didn't have the strength to pursue us. Instead it turned and punched a hole in the wall.

From above us, Geezer fired both barrels into the creature. It wrenched its hand from the wall, and finally stopped moving. Its dead hand grasped wires. There was the smell of ozone, and smoke.

I looked up at Geezer, who was reloading his shotgun.

"You have this much fun every night?" I asked.

“It is Friday,” he grunted, and closed the breech.

“Well,” Emily interjected, “unless you can gun down an electrical fire, I suggest we leave.”

“Didn’t do what we came here for,” Geezer drawled.

“We came to talk to the girl’s roommate,” she said. “Either she’s not here, or you boys just killed her.”

I retrieved Geezer’s knife.

“Thanks for the loan,” I called to Geezer, and tossed it up to him.

He caught it, and then fumbled with it, cursing like a drunken sailor on shore leave. Then, more politely, he yelled at me, “What the bloody blue balls you do that for?”

“My apologies,” I said, “I didn’t mean to catch you off guard. Did you cut yourself?”

“No, shitdammit, I can handle a blade. You coulda cleaned it off first, though. Smells like a zombie’s nutsack. Hellsuck, I think I got some on me.”

Daniel was back in human form, and he walked out the ground floor front door, chuckling all the way.

I vaulted up and pulled myself back to the second floor, and followed the hallway until I found a bedroom. Posters, make-up, clothing, university textbooks, several electronic implements I could not have guessed the purpose of.

In one drawer, I found an array of Technicolor undergarments to boggle the mind and stir the soul of even the most jaded Don Juan or the most ascetic monk. For long moments, I forgot that I was in a burning house of a dead girl, and supposed to be searching for answers. In this instance though, fortune favored the easily distracted, for buried deep beneath the silks and cottons and furs and ginghams was a notebook of some kind. Diary, journal, address book, class notes, aimless doodles. A bit of each. I was drawn quickly into some angry scribbling about someone she referred to only as “that bitch.”

“Uh, Mr. Wynter,” I heard Geezer call to me from far down the hall, “It’s getting a mite warm in here. I’m gonna make my way calmly to the nearest exit. I suggest you do the same.”

“Be right with you,” I called back. I finished the paragraph I was reading. Then I selected an undergarment whose use of negative space was particularly imaginative, tucked it into the journal to mark my place, and opened one of the bedroom windows to let myself out.



The Candy Shop

Our retinue of bikes roared into an expanse of pavement with an establishment called Phantom Fireworks in its center. The sign letters were white rimmed with purple. The storefront had large purple-painted columns and purple awnings. Looming above it all was a giant cameo-style portrait of what could only be the Phantom in question. Blank white eyes stared down at us from behind a purple death mask framed by a purple hooded cowl. The place managed somehow to be garish and stark at the same time. I liked it immediately. We circled around to a garage entrance in the back. Engines reverberated deafeningly in an enclosed concrete loading dock and then died down.

As Geezer stepped off his bike, he rumbled, “Home sweet home. Don’t track mud onto the carpet.”

There were no carpets. There were, however, several well-worn cushioned chairs and couches, which most of our group immediately made use of. I was still looking around. “Where are the fireworks?”

Geezer looked up from a bottle of beer he was already mostly finished with. “You wanna see the candy shop?”

I did.

Geezer led me through a door into darkness. When the lights went up, it took me a moment to understand what I was seeing.

I couldn’t stop myself from giggling in delight. In this century, not only was every morning Christmas morning, it seemed as though every night was the Fourth of July. Boxes and bags and cartons were festooned with colorful illustrations promising that dragons, phoenixes, mortar explosions, rainbows, comets, aerial dogfights, swarms of butterflies, troops of sparkling fairies, and various forms of space travel were all but one lit fuse away.

“Can we light them?”

Geezer disfavored me with a furrowed brow.

“Some of them. I meant some of them.” I managed that without giggling. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen fireworks.”

“You aren’t from around here, are you? All you gotta do is look up. The whole month of July,

Memorial Day, St. Patrick's Day, hell, even Father's Day. Football Hall of Fame's over that way. Doesn't buy up quite as much fireworks as Disney, but...."

I had wandered into another aisle. After a few seconds, Geezer followed me. "Halloween's coming up. Fireworks then too."

"Based on tonight's leisurely activities, would you lay odds we last that long? Carpe Noctem."

I had the vague impression that Geezer's eyes were on me, but I was running my fingers over red wooden sticks and boxes of magic and explosions of starlight wrapped in thin layers of paper and cardboard. The last time I'd been that engrossed in something was... well, less than an hour earlier when I was rummaging through Selena Ontiveros's boudoir.

I'd almost forgotten that Geezer was there when he muttered, "Holy Moses and his wife's burning bush, if you're a firebug you'd best say so right now, so I can just kick your ass out instead of kicking your head in."

I tried not to let that interruption shake me out of my pleasant reverie. My fingers kept up their inventory while I said, "Strictly speaking, pyromania isn't among my character flaws. I just have an acute appreciation for things that sparkle."

Geezer grunted. "Gemstones, fireworks, strippers."

I finally looked up at him. "Preferably all at the same time."

Geezer regarded me for a long moment. I passed the time imagining that I had a gleam in my eye, and that he was trying to decide how much of it was good humor and how much of it was flat-out insanity.

Finally he shifted his weight and chuckled a low rumbling chuckle. "Look, I can appreciate your enthusiasm. I wouldn't own the place otherwise. This isn't even the good stuff. Once in a while we go out into the boonies, get lit, and put on a show that's illegal in 51 states."

"I'm sorry, but how many states are there now?"

The furrows on Geezer's brow furrowed their brows. "Trying to pull my leg back, or are you really an around the twist cone dipped in batshit?"

"Didn't Emily tell you that I was trapped on the Other Side until just yesterday? I'm still getting my bearings."

"She mentioned something about you being in some sorta fairy prison. Not really my area of expertise. Does it give you amnesia or dementia or somethin'?"

I shook my head. "I was there for a very long time. The last I knew, there were 48 states in the Union."

"Christmas crack whores, you're not kidding, are you? Flag's up there. See for yourself." He pointed to the wall behind the cash register and then started walking toward the back.

"I only count 50."

"It was a joke. You know, like turning it up to 11." He sighed. "No, you don't know, do you? Shitfire, I need another beer." He started walking away again. "Don't break my store, and I promise to take you for a ride in my steam-powered flying automobile."

"What's Disney?" I called out after him.

"You'd love it," he said over his shoulder. "Fireworks, electrical parades, pirate treasure, lovely young princesses with Mary Lou Retton smiles. Everything's shiny."



The door shut behind him. I spent a few minutes looking for a box of matches. When nothing turned up, I pulled Selena's journal out, and sat Indian-style on the counter next to the cash register.

The glass storefront rattled me from my reading. I looked up and saw the strongman, Red, banging at the entrance. I hopped off the counter and walked to the door, but it was locked. I was about to go look for Geezer when the door to the backrooms opened and Geezer came to the front.

"Welcome to the secret lair of the Four Horsemen," Geezer rumbled when he'd gotten the door open.

Red looked at me. "Thanks for your help, Ziggy Stardust. Thanks to you I got arrested."

Geezer cocked his head. "Arrested? How'd you get here so fast?"

Red shrugged. "They just don't make police cruisers like they used to."

We five were gathered in the back room of the fireworks shop. Geezer had evidently dismissed the members of his motorcycle gang while I was catching up on my reading. He sipped a beer as he filled Red in on the evening's activities. I was perched on the couch, leafing through Selena's journal. Daniel sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed. Emily was pacing. Red shoveled hard pretzels into his mouth by the handful from a plastic bag.

In the middle of a mouthful, Red swore. "So you didn't find anything at the whore's house?"

"She was a stripper," Emily corrected.

Red shrugged.

Without opening his eyes, Daniel put in, "Whores have sex for money. Strippers don't have sex, for money."

Red growled. "Thank you, Chief Missing the Point. Which is, her place was a dead end."

"I'd say it was an undead end," Daniel replied.

Red swore again. "I'll undead end you!" He threw a fist-sized pretzel, which whizzed past Daniel's ear and shattered on the wall behind him. Daniel didn't flinch. His eyes were still closed. One corner of his mouth turned into a smirk.

"Hey!" Geezer yelled. "Don't get crumbs on the carpet."

"You're shitting me," Red muttered. "You don't have any carp—"

"Dust pan's that way," Geezer said.

As Red swept, he said, "So, the nasty surprise in the stripper's bathroom. An unwanted pet that just wouldn't flush, or do you think someone left it behind to eat up anyone Scooby Dooing in a Scooby Don't Zone?"

"Maybe it was her ghoulfriend," Daniel said.

Red held the full dustpan over Daniel's head.

"Trash can's thataway," Geezer said.

Red scowled, walked to the trash can, and emptied the dustpan as violently as it is possible to empty a dustpan.

"I don't know." Geezer was peeling the label off of his beer. "My guess: either that thing was

her roommate, or it ate her roommate.”

“Well, according to this,” I said, holding up the journal, “she really didn’t care much for her roommate’s personal hygiene.”

Everyone was looking at me. Even Daniel.

“And just what do you have there, Mr. Wynter?” Geezer drawled.

I caught a salt-encrusted missile with my free hand, halting it before it struck my face. “It’s called a pretzel,” I said, taking a bite. “Ask me a hard one.”

“I don’t goat-sucking believe this,” Red yelled. “First, this walking curio cabinet gets me seized and searched. Then he finds the Secret Diary of Laura Palmer, but doesn’t bother telling anyone. Geezer, I suggest you put down a painter’s tarp, because Mr. Wynter’s about to get blood on your carpet.”

“Wise advice, Geezer,” I said between pretzel crunches. “If the pugilist attempts to take what’s mine, there’s going to be Red all over.”

Daniel’s eyes were closed again. He said, “Finders keepers. Crumbers sweepers.”

Gathering steam, Red began to cross the floor between us, but before he had closed the distance, Emily was standing in his way. Red towered over her, a tornado poised above a willow tree, but Emily’s gaze didn’t waver.

Red huffed, turned away, and started to mutter, “Dear diary, today I left a clue about who might have murdered me, but no one found it because the wack-job who pocketed you was holding out on everyone. Meanwhile, they’re too busy defending my honor as a stripper to wonder what shady intentions the fourth Bronte sister is hiding underneath his zoot suit.”

Emily held out her hand to me, palm up. I gave her the journal, and she began to leaf through the pages. “Don’t lose my place,” I said. “Or my bookmark.” I saw her face redden a little when she came upon it. “If it was my intention to play things close to the vest, I wouldn’t have been reading that in full view. I’m still reading, but so far I haven’t seen anything that I would call a clue. Much of it is class notes. There is some poorly written poetry. Scribbles of random thoughts. Complaints about people, but it’s often hard to discern if the named offender is a classmate, someone associated with Gatsby’s, or neither. Her vernacular and her handwriting are sometimes difficult for me to decipher but, for the most part, her thoughts and daydreams and scribbles aren’t much different from that of any young woman. She has notes about Fermat, Leonardo Da Vinci, Albert Einstein, some archeologists, Nietzsche, Descartes, kings and queens, a 17th century countess, a Russian czar, a British spy, and Thomas Edison. Also, someone she refers to as ‘that bitch’, but whoever ‘that bitch’ is, there’s no indication that Selena was afraid of her.”

Emily regarded me for a moment. “You took this from her room, but you didn’t tell us about it.”

“If I hadn’t found it, it would be ashes. And so far there hasn’t been much to tell.”

“Did you take anything else?”

“Just the bookmark.”

Geezer chuckled.

Emily said, “You’ve been combing through the notebook since we got here?”

I nodded. “You can have it if you’d like, but I’ve got a 40-minute head start.”

Emily handed it back to me, and I began reading where I left off.

“Well,” Geezer said, standing up. “I’m not going to sit here reading over Mr. Wynter’s cold shoulder. Gatsby’s is still open, and the way I see it, we’re burning moonlight. On the off chance that the ghoul next door was specifically meant for us, there’s only one person who knew we were headed there: Miss Parker.”

“No relation,” Red said.

“We’ll take my pick-up. Red and I will sit in the truck and keep an eye on the back alley. Daniel and Emily can take turns watching the front.”

“I’ll talk to the dancers,” Emily said. “Ask them about Selena.”

“Brilliant idea,” Red said. “We’ll send Pollyanna in to chat up the strippers. Maybe they can pray the spray-tan away.”

“Red’s got a point,” Geezer rumbled. “They’re not like to warm up to you, showing up out-ta the blue, asking questions. You don’t look near disreputable enough. Not to mention, if there’s some kinda supernatural shenanigans, you might be dead before Red could bust in the door.”

“Because I’m a woman?”

Daniel said, in a falsetto, “Because you’re a lover, not a fighter.”

Emily sighed. “Putting aside for now the creepy way you phrased it, I guess you’re right.”

I marked my place. “If I may, you’re forgetting the one person who just might be able to walk back into Gatsby’s and have a tete-a-tete with the dancers, without raising suspicion or getting arrested.”

“I like it,” Red said. “Send this tit in to rub tits with the strippers.”

“Language, please,” Emily said.

“Tete is French for head,” Daniel put in. “It means head to head. Not tit to tit. Merdeux!”

“Thanks for the lesson, Pepe Le Pew,” Red said. “What’s French for ‘I’m gonna punch your balls right in the dick?’”

“Boys!” Emily said.

Daniel opened one eye. Red actually looked cowed. He growled and turned away.

Geezer said, “Mr. Wynter, the job’s yours. You’re certainly disreputable.”

“And expendable,” Red said.

“Glad to be of service,” I said. “I’d like to make a quick visit to an old friend, first.”

Geezer raised an eyebrow. “This time a’ night?” I nodded. “Fine. On the way there, Emily can teach you how to use a cell phone.”



Until the Day Break and the Shadows Flee Away

Geezer drove a monstrous metal four-door pick-up truck several generations removed from the wildest imaginings of Henry Ford. It was the size of a tank and the speed of the Bloody Red Baron. I wanted to drive it, but Geezer insisted that I learn how to operate a cell phone instead.

Geezer brought the beast to a grumbling halt across from the Massillon City Cemetery. He regarded me for a moment. "You want to visit an old friend. In a cemetery. At night. Mr. Wynter, if you suck, you'd best say so right now, so we can part ways before I'm obliged to kill you."

I looked back at him. "I'm afraid you're going to have to rephrase."

"Do. You. Drink. Blood."

"No."

"How about this friend of yours?"

I opened the passenger door and stepped out. "He's dead."

"That's not exactly reassuring."

"This won't take long," I said, then closed the door, and walked across the street.

I found the McClymonds family crypt pretty easily. Above the entrance was carved: "UNTIL THE DAY BREAK AND THE SHADOWS FLEE AWAY." The fact that I could read it was due more to memory than to the cloud-shrouded moon. As I walked toward it, despair suddenly clutched at me. In my giddiness at suddenly being loosed on a world full of novelties and delights to explore, I had until now managed to ignore something. Something which suddenly threatened to swallow me. Besides a handful of preternatural exceptions, every friend I had had died and turned to dust during my long imprisonment.

I continued toward the crypt. In stained glass above the door, two torches were crossed. The door itself, copper, was stained green with time. I could remember when it shined new.

I reached the door. There was a heavy chain across it. And a padlock.

I cursed any gods who might be listening. If it's all the same to you, we'll pretend that it was only because of the padlock.

No gods chose to respond by ending my existence. By the time I got back to the truck, I had grown bored of despair.

I explained my problem.

Geezer chuckled. "You just thought you'd waltz into a crypt?"

"In my day, people didn't lock their front doors. They were more interested in bootlegging than grave-robbing."

Red: "Says the grave-robber, without a trace of irony."

Geezer sighed. "I'll get the bolt cutters. And the shotgun."

"What do you need a shotgun for?" Emily asked.

"It's a cemetery. At night."

"Just be careful, butterfingers," Red said. "We don't need a repeat of what happened at the junk yard."

"Can we not talk about that right now?" Geezer growled. "Or ever again?"

I emerged from the crypt.

Geezer eyed me, restless. "You dragged us into a cemetery in the middle of the night to get a walking stick?"

"Is it magic?" Red asked.





“It’s Faberge,” I said.

Geezer growled, “You dragged us into a cemetery in the middle of the night to be art thieves?”

I drew the blade from the shaft. As far as I could see in the moonlight, there was not a speck of rust on it. “I didn’t think my old friend would mind if I borrowed it. Especially since I was the one who gave it to him.”

“Sword cane,” Red breathed. “Nice.”

“If you wanted a weapon,” Geezer said, “you could have just asked.”

I sheathed the blade. “You have one of these?”

“No,” Geezer said, “but I’ve got enough toys to share. And they’d do more damage than that toothpick.”

“A gentleman only needs this to defend himself,” I said. “I was feeling naked without one. And I can walk into Gatsby’s with this, and no one will give me a sideways glance.”

“Not strictly true,” Daniel said, “since no one in this century uses a cane unless they’re on their way to the nursing home.”

“Mr. Wynter’s not too far off the mark, though,” Geezer said, “None of my toys would make it past the bouncer. That one just might.”

I did indeed pass inspection. It was early in the morning by then, and the crowd had thinned out to just a few lonely creatures. Which, I reflected, described me as well. There were a few dancers still around who knew me, and they sweetly introduced me to those of their co-workers I hadn’t yet met. I matched them smile for smile, innuendo for innuendo, but I was on my guard. If someone in the club was paying attention, they could have connected me to the huge man who came in a few hours earlier carrying the fallen beauty, and then left in handcuffs.

I learned nothing particularly useful about Selena. She kept to herself. None of the dancers seemed to dislike her, but none of them seemed to be friends with her either. She came in, did her job, and left.

I had just for a few blessed moments managed to forget the evening’s bloodshed, losing myself in playful conversation with a green-eyed brunette, when the cell phone Emily had loaned me made its silent buzzing.

It signaled that Miss Parker had emerged from the back entrance. I left abruptly. There was no time to say polite goodbyes. Geezer had made it clear that he wouldn’t wait for me if it meant losing the chance to follow Miss Parker.

I think I might have hinted before that I have a slight speed advantage over most of earth’s two-legged inhabitants. Without that advantage, I would certainly have been left to cool my heels at Gatsby’s until dawn.

Which, upon reflection, would have been a much more pleasant way to spend my time.

In any case, I managed to catch up to Geezer’s cherry red monstrosity. I swung myself into the bed of the truck. Daniel was already there, reclining against the cab.

“You’re fast,” he said. He had to speak a bit louder as the truck accelerated and the night air



A new generation...win a gentleman's attitude

washed over us. “Much too fast. You wanna tell me what the hell you are?”

“After you, shape-shifter.”

Daniel said, “The proper term is in Shawnee, and a bit hard to pronounce. We’ll oversimplify it and say I’m a were-odactyl. So, what are you?”

“The technical term?” I smiled. “As far as I know, there isn’t one.”

Daniel regarded me for a long moment. The truck picked up speed again, and the wind rushed loudly in my ears.

Geezer trailed Miss Parker’s vehicle at a discreet distance. She had a motorcycle escort following her. “Off-duty cop on security detail,” Daniel yelled to make himself heard. “Not many people in this town have the luxury of a bodyguard.”

I watched the stars for a while. It was good to see the stars again. It was good to see anything again, but the stars, kindly stars, had not been so inconstant as to fall from the sky while I was away.

I drifted in the stars and the rushing night air. After a while the truck slowed, and I broke from my reverie to look around. We appeared to be in a shopping district. The truck passed huge signs for companies and establishments, the names of which were on the whole unfamiliar to me. I saw a large sign with a name I did recognize: GOODYEAR. The building was small, and so must have been a storefront of some kind, rather than an indication that Frank Seiberling’s heirs had moved their factory south from Akron.

I wondered if I might perhaps find some offshoot of the Seiberling family tree who would know me. A frail old patriarch or matriarch who had been knee-high to a grasshopper the last time Kyle Wynter had stayed a few nights at the Seiberling mansion. Or an ancient husk living on the edge of forever, once a carefree teenager Kyle Wynter had led into some mischief during an otherwise respectable holiday party.

The desire to make that connection, however unlikely, however tenuous, tugged at me, a hook in my heart, a filament of fishing line pulling taught from 20 miles due north. My hand was on the side-panel of the truck. I could simply vault out. Find the Seiberling mansion on foot. Walk the grounds hand in hand with old memories, feel the cool of the garden stonework against my bare feet, dance across the....

I heard Daniel say, “Next stop on our tour, Christie’s Cabaret, the crown jewel of Canton’s classy adult entertainment empire!”

Jazz Hands, Please

Miss Parker's car came to a stop at the building past the Goodyear storefront. The building was two stories, with spare art deco lines connecting false columns. All along the building, arches and columns framed large windows that looked as if they belonged on a mosque or cathedral. Two huge arches, one on top of the other, formed a portico which dwarfed a rounded double-door entrance. Atop the double-doors perched a rounded window half and again as large as the doors.

At first I thought that entirety of the building had been painted a shimmering purple, but as we drove past it, I realized that there had to have been an ingenious system of hidden electrical lights and gels to tinge the building so brightly in the early morning darkness.

Architecturally, it struck me as a bit of child's sandcastle version of a mansion. It was simple, and the building materials, whatever they were, lacked texture and depth. But placed as it was, among drab and boxy storefronts dominated by ugly signage, Christie's Cabaret indeed sparkled like an amethyst in a bucket of sod. Also, it made Gatsby's look like a wharf-front opium den.

I whistled. "Swanky. Can I borrow some money, dad?"

The off-duty police officer pulled into the next parking lot. The red sign proclaimed it to be "Key Bank", but from the outside it looked like every other plain brown box on the street.

"You're not kidding, are you?" Daniel asked.

The truck continued down the street past the bank.

I shrugged. "If I can't tell the difference myself most of the time, you're not like to figure it out, are you?"

Geezer brought the truck to a halt in a parking lot several buildings down the street from Christie's Cabaret.

"This isn't a bachelor party, Kyle. You haven't forgotten about the dead stripper, have you?" Daniel said.

"Of course not," I assured him as I hopped over the tailgate. "But, on the level, I much prefer the live ones."



Emily and Geezer and Red emerged from the truck, debating the logistics and risks of getting to Christie's Cabaret for a closer look.

Daniel joined in the discussion, but I barely heard it. I was thinking of cabarets, all the flavors of cabarets. The last cabaret I had the pleasure of attending was in Chicago, but that was only as a spectator. Long before that I had been part of the Green Balloon in Krakow, a regular at The Cave of the Golden Calf on Heddon street in London, visited the Uberbrettl in Berlin, and penned entertainments for Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol, Le Chat Noir, Folies Bergere, and the Cabaret des Assassins, even occasionally taking the role of conférencier. Next to these rich, intoxicating experiences: the bliss of creation and playing witness to creation, the perfect storm of euphoria caused by the mixture of dancing girls, painters, poets, courtesans, acrobats, singers, demi-monde, and wide-eyed guests... Christie's Cabaret was unlikely to provide entertainments quite so succulent. Nonetheless even the word cabaret tasted like caramel on my tongue, and in the intervening decades since Chicago, those crafting and performing such things must have had time to invent glorious new diversions, fresh drops of heaven I could not imagine.

I found myself strolling toward Christie's Cabaret. I don't precisely remember taking the first step, or the second, or the tenth. It did not occur to me to tell anyone where I was going, because by the time I realized that I was going somewhere, my savior and her friends were out of earshot. I am a creature of whim. I would say that I cannot control myself, but that would imply that I make serious attempts to do so, or that I can imagine a compelling reason to struggle against the mercurial currents of my nature. I found myself singing "Schöner Gigolo, armer Gigolo". Besides that, the only sounds were the hum of electrical lighting, and the tap of my cane on the walkway. I looked up and saw moths bouncing heedlessly against the casing of a street lamp.

I had made it only a few steps into the lot proper belonging to Christie's Cabaret, when I heard from behind me, "Club's closed."

I turned around. It was the off-duty bull. I had clean forgotten about him.

"Are you certain?" I asked. I pointed with my cane. "The pretty lights are on."

"I'm sure."

"That's disappointing." I spread my arms. "You'll color my glad rags sad. Where does an owl go to catch chippies this time of night?"

He sighed. "I don't know what your deal is, slim, but you do not want to be here."

He didn't know what hit him. Or, rather, he wouldn't have known what hit him if I hadn't said, "Hello, Geezer."

As it was, he had time to get his night stick half-way out before Geezer knocked it from his hand. It clattered across the pavement, and he reached to un-holster his heater.

My blade was out of its scabbard and against his throat by the time he'd popped the holster's release snap. "Jazz hands, please, unless you fancy growing a second grin beneath your chin. Lovely, just lovely. Now, if you don't mind, Mr. Jolson, my friend here is going to hold your piece for you."

"I'm not used to holding another man's piece," Geezer said. "So close your eyes and think of New England. Good cop."

"Not smart," the cop said. "You don't want to be here."

Red came up behind the cop and pulled his arms behind his back. “Hey there, jack-wipe, you don’t have the right to remain silent. We need to have a long talk about the boss lady.” Clamping both wrists in one hand, he herded the bull back toward the bank.

“Mr. Wynter,” Geezer growled, “Do I need to get a leash for you?”

I sheathed my blade. “Whatever for? I thought that went swimmingly.”

“If you get me killed, Mr. Wynter, I am going to be severely pissed off.”

I slung my cane over my shoulder and followed Red. “No need to worry on that account. With me around, you’re as safe as a mouse in a malt-heap.”

You Don't Want to Be Here

The cop leaned up against the bank building, sullen. Emily looked down on him. "How can you even put on that uniform without vomiting on yourself? You're supposed to protect people. A girl is dead. Doesn't that matter to you?"

"Look, lady, I already told you, I don't know anything. I just show up for the paycheck, shuttle Miss Parker where she wants to go. I do know that it's better not to know anything."

"Coward," Emily muttered. "It's not your problem that people are disappearing, dying, or worse. Hell is full of people who just looked the other way, just minded their own business, just didn't want to rock the boat. Keep your head down, keep your nose clean, but your hands are dirty. Your hands are red."

He was shaking. "I don't know anything. The only thing I know is that you don't wanna be here. You don't want to be here. That's the truth. I don't want to be here. I just want to go home."

"Give us some straight answers," Geezer said, "and we'll pat you on the head, get you a glass of milk, and send you to bed."

Red punched the wall. Some of the brick crunched and fell away as dust and debris. "Okay, cop, they were the good cops. I'd be the bad cop, but I think in this scenario, you're the bad cop, which means I'll have to be the bad-ass cop. Talk, or start counting your teeth."

"You want me to be afraid? Fine. I'm afraid. You've all clearly escaped from some traveling circus insane asylum, but I can't help you."

"Can't, or won't?"

"It doesn't matter. The only thing I know that could do you any good is that you don't want to be here."

"Don't make me count to three. One."

Red punched the wall.

"Two."

Red cracked his knuckles.

“Three.”

Red hit the cop, and he went out like a light.

“Suck a duck, Red!” Geezer yelled. “No more interrogations for you.”

Red put his thumb and pinky up to his face like a telephone. “Hey, Geezer, it’s your shotgun calling. You’re black. At least I didn’t blow his head off.”

“That was an accident.”

“Oops, terribly sorry. I appear to have gotten some of your brains on you. A little club soda will take that right out.”

Daniel said, “Leave it be, Red. The guy was responsible for Geezer’s dad’s death.”

“He should have been spilling his guts, not his brain-matter. Then maybe we’d actually have a clue what the bloody Hell’s going on, instead of playing here we go round the mulberry bush with Dudley Donut here.” Red slung the unconscious cop over his shoulders like an old carpet.

“Red,” Geezer snarled, “why don’t you help yourself to a big bucket of shut the fuck up?”

“Blow it out your sawed-off, premature ejaculator.” Red started walking away. “I’m gonna toss this into the back of the truck with the rest of the tools.”

Daniel and Emily followed Red. Scowling, Geezer did the same. Presumably, there would be more harsh language, followed by tedious debates about how to proceed.

Now, where was I?

I was making my way across the parking lot toward Christie’s Cabaret. This time I sang a French song, and did the steps that went with it. It is generally intended for inebriated locomotion. Also, it is more fun with friends, but what with all mine being dead, I had to make do.

“il était une bergère qui allait au marché. Elle portait sur sa tête trois pommes dans un panier. Les pommes faisaient rouli rouli, les pommes faisaient rouli roula... Stop! Trois pas en avant, trois pas en arrière. Trois pas sur l’côté, trois pas d’l’aut’ côté.”

Roughly translated:

“There once was a shepherd girl who went to the market. She carried on her head three apples in a basket. The apples went roly-roly, the apples went roly-rola. Stop! Three steps forward, three steps back, three steps to the side, three steps to the other side.”

As you can imagine, this song is not particularly efficient in terms of forward progress. After several verses, I reached the overarching portico and came to a stop before the double-doors. I raised my cane, and was about to rap on the door, when I heard, “Kyle?”

It was my savior.

“My lady.”

“Was this seriously your plan? To go skipping up to the front door, and knock?”

“My plan? No, I wouldn’t call it that. Speaking of plans, shouldn’t you be off formulating one with the rest of the Algonquin Roundtable?”



“Someone has to babysit you. You keep wandering off.”

“Does that mean you’ll be my date for an evening of music, dance, and libations?” I raised my cane towards the door again.

“No.” She grabbed my arm and tugged me away from the door. “It means I’ll help you... how to put it?”

“No need to be coy, I assure you.”

“Case the joint. We’ll start by walking around the building. Peek through the glass. Look for back entrances, open windows, a way to get to the roof.”

I regarded her as she guided me, gently but firmly, away from the door. I could probably get to the roof pretty easily on my own, but she didn’t know that. “Do you really think we’ll find any of those things?”

“No, but it’ll keep you busy until the boys realize where we’re at.”

Along one side of the building there was an enclosed patio. The heavy wood fence enclosing it was approximately ten feet tall. As we approached it, a panel truck rolled into the parking lot. Emily pulled me into the shadows where the patio fence cornered against the building.

There was a company logo on the side of the truck. The paint was flaking, and the metal was scratched and dented, but the electric lighting was strong enough that I could make out “Tlaquepaque” as the truck pulled past us toward the backside of the building.

Emily’s hand tensed on my arm, and I could feel her fingernails through the material of my suit jacket. She whispered, “That’s the same truck that we saw in the junk yard earlier tonight. Earlier tonight. I can’t believe it, it hasn’t even been eight hours. None of us could catch the logo, but that’s the truck that dumped Selena on the ground and drove away like she was just a sack of garbage.”

The sound of the engine died, and Emily began making her way slowly around the patio fencing. I presumed she wanted a chance to get a glimpse at the driver, or whatever cargo the delivery truck might be carrying. She probably didn’t plan to kill the driver on the spot, but she seemed angry enough to.

We didn’t make it more than a few yards however. There were moans coming from behind the fencing, accompanied by a wet slurping sound, and a low hiss that raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

Either someone was having a very good time, or someone was having a decidedly unpleasant time. Either way, I wanted to see what was going on.

To Crack Sky and Skull

The patio fencing was sturdy, with a thick wooden cross-beam at the top. I jumped, caught hold of the cross-beam, and hoisted myself into a perching position atop the fence, quickly and quietly as an alley cat.

There was a dancer, nude from the waist up, and mostly nude from the waist down. In the electric lighting, her skin sparkled with the body make-up of her trade. She knelt before a standing man, his pants unbuckled and low on his waist.

But he was not, strictly speaking, a man. He held the dancer's right arm well above her head, near his mouth. Two fangs were embedded deep in the flesh of her forearm. He was in the act of withdrawing them from her, and he did so slowly, inch by gleaming inch. They were each as long as my pinkie finger, and curved inward. The man had a human face, but these teeth were impossibly long, and his mouth was opened impossibly wide. His gums were abnormally bright and fleshy. As he withdrew from her, his jaw lowered more, the flesh of his cheeks stretching further, his mouth opening enough to accommodate the length of the fangs, which levered inward as if attached to a hinged bone structure hidden behind his lips. It looked almost as if he had swallowed his own teeth, but I suspected that they lay snug against the roof of his mouth, ready to be unsheathed again.

Blood flowed from her wounds, branching in pathways down her arm toward her shoulder. I could see similar puncture wounds on her left shoulder and left hip.

A thick forked tongue flickered from between the man's lips, tasting and retreating with an almost nervous alacrity, lapping the blood flowing down her arm, and probing the fresh punctures.

There is the possibility that this was simply his way of giving her a Yankee dime. It seemed just as likely that he was planning on eating her.

What could I do? I did what any chivalrous gentleman would do. I dropped just behind him and pulled his pants down to his ankles.

He twisted, lashing out at me, and went sprawling to the ground, sending a few chairs scraping across the concrete. He flailed, hissing angrily, a disquieting sound that was like having my nerve endings misted with liquid revulsion. It was a subliminal susurrant that spoke

to a vestigial part of my brain. My ears told me that the hiss was not terribly loud, not far beyond the scope of the real. My mind felt it as the tingling screech of some blood-rusted antediluvian clockwork beast.

I knew that the hiss was not that loud, because it did not drown out the sound of squealing tires and slamming doors just outside the patio fence.

I helped the dancer to her feet. She was groggy. Drugged, anemic, both. I could not be sure.

The creature had found his feet too, and was pulling his pants up. This would have been an excellent opportunity to taunt him with some off-color remark. But I found that I no longer wanted to make him angry. I simply wanted to make a quick getaway.

Doing so would be easy. If I left the blood doll behind.

The hiss occasionally formed itself into muttered words, the most audible of which was “dead.”

Just beyond the fence, I heard Red shout, “Ready or not, here I come.”

I tugged the dancer as far toward one corner as I could.

Wood splintered and tore as Red barreled through the fence. It sounded like a shipwreck.

I saw him slow his forward momentum just enough to alter course toward the hissing man. Chairs and tables skittered away as he plowed through them and into the man.

Behind the man there was a closed door, metal, decorated with two thin windows of opaque glasswork, set into the building: the exit from Christie’s Cabaret to the patio. They collided with it, Red pushing the man before him like a tackling dummy.

The glass shattered, the metal buckled. The man slid to the ground.

For a moment, everything was silent except the idling of Geezer’s truck.

Then two forms appeared behind the door, peering out. The door rattled, but did not budge. The impact had warped it beyond opening.

The two forms began to hiss. Somewhere within the building, more creatures added their voices. And then more again. It was like the slow crescendo of a summer rain storm. Low at first, but building steadily, until the rush of it in your ears become deafening. The primal psychic paresthesia rolled over me like a fogbank.

We ran. It was not a decision. It was not discussed. We ran.

Through the remains of the fence, I saw the off-duty officer sit bolt upright in the bed of Geezer’s truck. He stumbled over the side panel, fell to the ground, and scurried toward the driver’s side.

Emily had seen it too, and was running in his direction.

Geezer was staring wide-eyed at the patio door. Red was shaking his head, as if he had been punched.

I managed to lift the dancer over my shoulder.

The hissing was so deafening that my impulse was to put my hands over my ears, and yet I could still hear the idling of the truck, and the slam of the driver’s side door as the cop slid

into the seat. Even the rip of the clothing on Daniel's upper body as his leathery wings appeared and his head took on its reptilian aspect.

Emily halfway collided with the closed door, pounded on the window twice, and then stepped away as the truck began to back up. The cop swung the truck around, and then it screeched to a halt.

Geezer turned, took in that none of the five of us was driving the truck, and bolted toward it.

By the time it had started moving forward, Emily had got a foot on the hitch and pulled herself over the tailgate.

Daniel flapped his membranous wings, rushing skyward.

On my way to the truck, I passed Geezer, who was sprinting at his top speed. The cop was negotiating his way out of the parking lot to the main thoroughfare.

So was the Tlaquepaque delivery truck. If they were in the employ of the nest of creatures we had disturbed, they were nonetheless not of their kin, for they were also overwhelmed with the need to flee this hissing wrath like animals before a raging forest fire.

In his hurry, the cop cut off the delivery truck, which swerved and collided with a parked car. As I passed by, I could read panic on the passenger's face as the driver concentrated on extricating them.

Fortunately, the dancer was a slip of a thing. As quick as I was, I would not have caught up with Geezer's truck otherwise. Emily did her best to keep the dancer from getting too scraped up as I tumbled her into the truck bed and then clambered after.

As the cop pulled onto the main street, I saw Red reach the driver's side of the delivery truck, pull the driver bodily through the window, and then rip the door open.

Two-legged forms emerged from the double-door main entrance of Christie's Cabaret. The hissing changed tone as they surveyed the chaos in the parking lot.

Geezer could not catch up with his truck. He broke off and ran toward the Key Bank building.

The dancer thrashed around, whimpering, in the grip of fear or fever or drug or trance or some combination thereof.

"There's something wrong with her," I said to Emily.

"You mean besides the fact that some monster has been using her like a chew-toy?"

Emily put both hands on the dancer, closed her eyes, and began speaking in hushed tones.

The girl became calm, her breathing regular. Her eyes, which before had been open but unfocused, closed.

I watched them. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Emily replied. "I simply asked."

The roar of another engine filled my ears. Geezer buzzed up alongside us on the motorcycle the cop had left parked next to the bank building.

Geezer's sawed-off shotgun was in the bed of the truck. I picked it up, and checked to make sure it was loaded. I motioned Geezer closer, and he neared the truck bed on the passenger's side, extending his left hand, his right still on the throttle. I tossed him the shotgun. The bike

fell back for a moment. When it roared forward again, Geezer had steadied the bike, and steadied the shotgun by resting it over his right forearm. He pulled even with the driver's side window, the double-barrel leveled at the cop, an exaggerated friendly smile on his lips.

The truck braked almost immediately. The dancer, Emily and I slid around in the back like fresh produce, getting well bruised in the process. Geezer gave the swerving truck a wide berth. As soon as it screeched to a halt, the door opened, and the officer scrambled out, taking off down the street at a dead run, without so much as glancing over his shoulder.

Geezer brought the bike to idle. "Either of you see what happened to Red?"

Emily stepped on the hitch and jumped down the pavement. "He got into the delivery truck, but I don't know if he ever made it out of the parking lot."

Geezer swore. "I'll go scout for him. You two take our stolen cargo and make like a baby tree." He revved the bike and tore off. Emily's eyes followed the bike until it was out of sight. Then she turned to me. "Do you need help getting her down?"

A pandemonic hiss raked down my brainstem like a claw, gouging furrows as it went. The source was far away, too far away for my ears alone to hear it at first. But whereas before the collective hiss had been a mixture of surprise, confusion, and anger, this was pure shrieking rage drenched in bloodlust. It hissed toward us like a storm cloud of acid rain. A distant thunder of engines was growing louder.

"No time," I muttered. "Just drive."

The truck door had slammed shut before the last syllable left my mouth.

As we accelerated, I leaned back against the cab of the truck, cradling the dancer's head on my lap, feeling the wind whip around me as we attempted to outrun the storm. She was nearly naked, and must have been cold. I shifted to remove my suit jacket and covered her with it. The dancer was still unconscious, or near enough, but she gave a low moan, and shifted into me like a contented kitten seeking warmth. Whatever Emily had done to her, the hissing could not touch her. She still seemed under the influence of some opiate, chemical or supernatural or both. It was as if Emily had removed the disquiet, but not its underlying cause. Her eyes twitched beneath their lids, and a smile touched her lips. Whatever she was dreaming, it was maddeningly pleasant. I could feel the euphoria rising up off of her like steam.

I was hungry. I fed. I breathed her in like petrichor. I drank her up. She was ambrosia. She was a tall glass of lemonade on a summer's noon. She was a dram of la fée verte poured over a sugar cube.

What an opportunistic scavenger you must think me, to snatch such an exquisite morsel from the jaws of her parasitic paramour, only to taste her myself.

What could I say in my defense?

I could tell you that I do not, to use Geezer's parlance, suck. At least not strictly speaking. I could tell you that my teeth are no longer nor sharper than yours. That the only times I've tasted blood have been on those rare occasions when someone's been quick enough or clever enough or persistent enough to give me a good thrashing.

I could tell you that, if I fed from you, it would not be painful. You would probably not even notice that it was happening. I would not even necessarily have to touch you. If I fed long enough, you might afterwards be quite weak, but it would be the exhaustion of tangled

sheets heavy with the scent of a lover, of a full day spent on the amusement rides of Luna Park, of a tango that ended only because the band went home to their beds, of the aftermath of having invited a loa to ride beneath your skin.

I could tell you these things, but none of them would make me less the opportunistic scavenger. Not to mention remorseless. Might as well expect a leopard lacing to ask the permission or pardon of the fresh blooms as it stops to sip from them.

If I drank from the well of your soul, I might simply taste, or drink deep. Either way, I would wipe my lips, well satisfied, and you would probably inquire when I might be by again.

Drinking from the well of the soul. That is how I came to understand it, when I began to understand it. There were none to help me understand it. But if I would help you understand it, I should perhaps be a bit more exact. The components that sustain me, as best as I can put words to them: euphoria, reverie, imagination, inspiration, creation. They need not all be present simultaneously, but when they are, it is an intoxicating, addictive mixture. Those who are the music makers, the dreamers of dreams, they are a garden of delights I cannot help but crave.

Whatever I might be – abomination, freak, unscrupulous leech – I do not go among you coldly, like a thresher set to harvest. For if the lion's share of you are powerless before me, I am as powerless before you. More so. You need me like the sun needs the ivy that climbs trees and walls in a ceaseless attempt to reach the object of its desire. When I drink from the well of your soul, it is not simply consumption, it is an act of worship. The things I enumerated, the things which sustain me, they are one and the same as the things which make my life worth sustaining. The places and people that draw me as surely as the siren draws the pliant sailor: dance halls, concert halls, theaters, cathedrals, carnivals, street performers, thrill-seekers, charismatic visionaries, luminous creatures who drench the old in fresh color or chip away the dull to reveal the extraordinary lurking beneath. My leaves open to these things, seeking escape, release, stimulation, beauty, rejuvenation, awakening, meaning. In this respect, if in no other, I am little different from so many of you.

And there are those of you, the waking dreamers, the sculptors of the unreal, the luminous creatures.... When the trance is upon you, as you recreate the world in your own image, as you dip your quill into the ink well of your soul, I can feel it, a frisson on my skin, that moment of electricity in the air before lightning strikes teased out into minutes, hours, a rhapsodic note held so long that everything else in existence simply falls away. Even if this inspiration will draw you no wealth, no fame, no power, no audience, no admirers, it draws me. You call me, though you know not, you call me, and I come. It draws me, and I draw it in. So many of the elements that nourish me, lain out on one well-set table.

But just then I tasted euphoria, flavored with reverie and imagination. Euphoria is the inspiration and abandon available even to those who believe themselves bereft of powers of invention. And while euphoria can be elusive quarry in waking life, in dreams it wells up more easily. I could not classify or comprehend what magiks both Emily and the hissing man had worked on the dancer, but as I drank from the well of her soul, I understood that both played their part in her vivid dreaming, as did a mind-altering substance of less exotic origins.

She exuded euphoria like perfume, and I breathed it in. I could still perceive the hissing, and the growing roar of engines, a deep prolonged knell that resonated in my chest, chewing up the road between us, but for the moment, whatever shielded the dancer from fear shielded me too. As our pursuers came into view, I watched with awe and fascination, even admiration. Before anything else, I saw the flying shapes, outlines in a firmament now lit bright by

the moon. Angels, I thought, though these angels hissed to crack sky and skull. Three angels harried a demon with huge leathery wings, like an unkindness of ravens chasing a hawk from their territory. Beneath this graceful vicious dance, the juggernaut motorcade rolled toward us, a mechanized amoeba, the pseudopods of a half dozen motorcycles reaching out from its rumbling center: the delivery truck. Hissing figures clung to its top and sides, angry swarming insects.

The monster Daniel roared, and I looked up. It reeled and swooped across the sky and fought the angels, lovely creatures with voices like damnation. Their wings were feathered, elegant, springing from naked torsos, one male, two female, all three more pretty than the dancer huddled up against me. The shape-shifter, scaled and taloned, flapped and clawed and screeched and snapped at its enemies. Only their malefic hissing pierced the illusion that the angels were the righteous heroes of this tableau.

The monster swiped with its talons, and the male angel fell from the sky, denting the top of the beswarmed delivery truck, and then bouncing across it in a tumble of wings and limbs, taking two of the hissing figures with it to the road. One of the motorcycles was unable to avoid the sudden obstacle. The cycle bucked and threw its rider to the pavement.

Two cyclists pulled out far to the front. Geezer was one of them. He aimed his shotgun at the other bike, fired, and the gas tank erupted in a plume of flame.

The delivery truck bore through it and down on us. I heard gunshots in rapid succession, and the delivery truck's windshield spider-webbed in several places at once. The truck swerved momentarily, but kept on coming. Then the windshield shattered outward as a human-sized rag doll smashed partially through it from the inside. Red was in the driver's seat, his right hand on the wheel. His left hand grasped an unconscious figure by the collar. He used the person to batter away at what was left of the windshield until both the glass and the person fell forward onto the street and were swept under the truck carriage.

Another mechanical beast came up alongside the delivery truck, as big as or bigger than Geezer's pick-up, but of a different species entirely. Goldfinch yellow, its windows as black as goldfinch wings. The tires looked like they were made for farm machinery. The license plate read "BELDEN".

One of the hissing things had managed to climb along the body of the delivery truck, and reached in through the driver's side window, clawing at Red's throat. Red struggled frantically with her for a moment before giving the wheel a hard jerk to the right. The delivery truck slammed against the bright yellow tank, pulping her lower half between the two machines, and smearing the dirty white and flawless shiny yellow flanks of both with a livid gash of blood rust.

Very little road separated us now, and I started giggling. If I stood up, I thought, and spit at Red, wind and physics would carry it to a speedy and satisfying landing.

Another of the creatures fought its way across the top of the delivery truck and reached in towards Red. He braked hard. The delivery truck fell back, but his unwary assailant kept chasing us, arcing through the air after us in a stunning ballet of forward momentum before crashing to the pavement just a few yards from the hitch of the pickup truck.

The two big machines fell back a bit, but the motorcycles continued to gain. I idly admired the streamlined design of one bike until I realized that it was getting near enough that I should probably be more concerned about its rider. As I withdrew from the well of the dancer's soul, I was assaulted afresh by the hissing of the creatures which pursued us. The fear

came flooding back, but the euphoria did not wash away. I edged toward the tailgate, and crouched there, unsheathing my blade, keeping it low in the truck bed, out of the biker's line of sight. The biker was helmetless, his blonde hair rippling, his riding outfit as sharp as his ride, as sharp as his teeth as his mouth widened in a grin that threatened to swallow me whole.

He swallowed my sword instead. The bike's speed advantage over the truck did most of my work for me. My abnormal reflexes kept me from losing my blade, my arm, or my balance. Barely.

A hissing angel plummeted to earth. She got her wings under her a few yards from the ground, and managed to make a stumbling landfall. Red changed lanes and plowed her under.

I moved back to check on the dancer. As I crouched, looking down on her, huge wings buffeted the air around me. A hissing angel landed on the truck bed, but it was not, as I had expected, the one remaining of the three who had followed Daniel. It was the one whose late night repast I had interrupted. Whatever the dancer was to him -- prey, mate, both -- he had come to claim what was his. Again, I heard the promise inlaid with hissing: "Dead"

I saw Geezer riding near, and dropped flat to the bed. His shotgun roared, with blood drops to softly echo it, but the hissing angel was only staggered. I rose, standing over the dancer, blade extended.

"Dead," He hissed. "Dead and fucked."

"Maybe," I said. "But I don't come quiet, or cheap." I slashed twice, and the skin of his chest split. There was some blood, but what peeked from beneath it was not red flesh or white bone. As he breathed, something bulged from beneath the skin like flesh beneath torn clothing: a powerful, flexing trunk of muscle, nacreous, mottled a vivid green and yellow.

Each time he attempted to close, I gave him a fresh wound. And for a time, I thought I was having the better of him. He loosed cries of frustration, and his skin tore nicely. Too nicely. I switched from slashes to thrusts, but his true hide was tough, I could not penetrate very deep into it, and my blade was but a thin sting. Most of my attacks were afterthoughts anyway. The balance of my attention and agility was on staying out of his reach. The advantage I had on him, and my chances if he got a hold of me, were as slim as my blade.

After a while, he backed away. His skin hung on him in tatters. "What are you?" he hissed.

"Not dead," I replied.

"Not dead yet." He hissed. "What are you?"

"I'll show you mine, if you show me yours."

He laughed, a long susurrating exhale that rasped at my insides. Then he held up his right forearm. He had led most of his attacks with that hand, and so it was the most ragged. Strips of flesh dangled from his arm. He reached his left hand over and peeled the remaining skin from his right hand, fingernails and all. The wind caught the shredded remains and carried them away from the truck. Beneath the husk were five small tendrils emerging from a flexible limb. The tendrils and limb were sheathed in scales, iridescent green and yellow in irregular hypnotic striations. As I watched, the five tendrils twined into each other, squeezing tight, scale swallowing scale, the boundaries between them evaporating, until the five had become but one tip on a writhing lamellar tentacle.

The tentacle flailed toward me. I shifted my weight, but its reach was longer than I had anticipated, longer than a human arm. It coiled around my neck, pressing me to the truck bed. I kept hold of my blade, and made a series of quick stabs that forced him to keep me held away instead of reeling me in. Instead, he moved toward the dancer, still crushing my windpipe.

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