

# Respite

A novel

By David Benedict

Draft begun 11/1/2009

Finished 11/28/2009

COMPLETE (?)

For NaNoWriMo

## Chapter One – A Vague Feeling

The full moon hung over the city, just like it always did. The lights of the city blotted out the lights of the stars, just like they always did. And Lester Curious came to work at 10pm, just like he always did.

“Heya, Lester, glad to see you. I’ve got a heavy date and I gotta get outta here,” said George, his coworker. Actually, calling him a coworker was a bit grandiose as Lester saw him for all of about five minutes four days a week during the shift change. He always had a heavy date or relatives in town or a party to go to or whatever he could come up with on the spur of the moment.

“Couldja come in a little earlier tomorrow, Les?” George asked. “My mom’s coming in and I gotta get her from the airport.”

That was another thing George always did. Ask Lester to come in early. On the one occasion he did, Lester noticed that George marked down the same clock-out time as he always did even though Lester took over for him a good hour early that day. And then his boss berated him for going over his hours for that week. That was the last time that had happened.

George gathered up his bag and made ready to leave. He always carried that same horrible green rucksack with the brown leather straps that were so old they curled from being put into the buckles. But although the straps were cracked and split with age and abuse, the pack itself faded to a light green that used to be olive, the whole thing still hung together. Which would succumb first? George or his sack? Lester stopped caring about that a while back. In fact, Lester stopped caring about just about everything a while back.

“Seeya, Les...” George called as he strode purposefully out the door. He didn’t look dressed for a hot date, Lester observed silently. Tall, lanky, wearing faded jeans with frayed holes in the knees, a white T-shirt, and an unbuttoned red checked flannel shirt. His brown curly hair was unkempt and would have been considered mussed by most people, although the curls were so naturally tight that most people would also have conceded that there wasn’t much he could have done about it.

He reached the door and opened it, causing the little bell above the frame to jingle his exit, and then stopped. “Don’t forget the new girl is starting tonight, Les,” George reminded him. “The boss said for you to show her the ropes. Bye!” And he stepped out into the chill night air.

“No he didn’t,” Lester muttered to himself. “He said for you to stay late and do it yourself so I could get the freezer restocked.”

He glanced at the clock on the wall. 10:05pm, just like always.

Outside, the darkness fluttered gently. A shadow quietly detached itself from another shadow and slunk furtively along the sidewalk, carefully sidestepping the glow of the street light.

Inside, Lester paid no attention whatsoever. He walked to the back of the store and opened the freezer doors, revealing half-stocked shelves of beer, soda, and what the government allowed them to pass off as fruit juice and spring water. Taking two steps to his right he glanced through the swinging plastic doors into the tiny storeroom where the newly arrived shipment was waiting for him.

“Hello,” it seemed to say. “I’ll be occupying your evening tonight. Would you like a sore back for your trouble, or will a clammy sweat suffice?”

Lester sighed. He’d had this conversation with the stock a thousand times. The first time it had occurred to him, it had been funny to him, but that was fifteen years ago. Fifteen years at this convenience store, the cleverly named “24-hour Grocery”, and in all that time he’d never even said the word “promotion” to any of his bosses. People talked about the turnover rate at stores like this. It wasn’t really a career for anybody except maybe the owner, who was rarely seen actually in the store anymore. It was a way station, a stopover, a first job, or a between-jobs for most people. Even George had only been there a year and that was considered an old-timer. Lester had been there, working the graveyard shift, for fifteen years and had so far seen 57 coworkers and 6 supervisors come and go. The seventh, Taylor, was actively interviewing.

And now a 58<sup>th</sup> was starting tonight. He’d heard her name was Cat, but he didn’t know what it was short for. Nor did he care. Flirtation with coworkers didn’t go very far when you could tell right from the start that they weren’t interested in the job, weren’t interested in staying on the graveyard shift, and weren’t interested in Lester even one little bit. He hadn’t even had to get used to it, it was something he’d grown up with his whole life.

The door jingled.

“Hello,” called a voice. “I’m Cat...I’m supposed to meet someone named Lester here,” she said tentatively.

“I’m back here,” called Lester. He didn’t look up, but he held a small hope that she’d be squat and stocky with strong muscles so he could pawn off the job of moving the stock into the freezer on her. He heard the clicking of her hard soled shoes on the linoleum and decided that his hopes were dashed. The tread wasn’t heavy enough, a conclusion that was borne out when he did finally turn around to face her.

Cat was just slightly shorter than Lester’s 5’ 8” frame with shoulder-length straight black hair. She wore faded black jeans, a black-and-white, horizontal striped shirt, and an ancient grey sweater that looked from its style and condition like it must have been inherited from her grandmother. The word goth sprang to mind along with the word emo. The words lazy and trouble poked their heads in as well just to say hi.

“Hi, I’m Cat. You’re Lester?” she asked, holding out her hand. Lester took it and shook very briefly before letting go, a tingle running up his arm briefly. He glanced at his hand, but shrugged it off. It must have been his imagination.

“Yeah, I’m Lester,” he said, unenthusiastically. Ten years ago he might have found her attractive. These days he knew better. “Supposedly I’m to show you the ropes, as they say. No time like the present.”

An hour later Cat came marching up to the front of the store, sweaty and sore. Lester was just finishing with a customer, the first of the evening.

“That’ll be two dollars and fifteen cents,” Lester was saying. She watched as the man, who was wearing a long brown trenchcoat, reached into his breast pocket and pulled out his wallet, counting out the bills and then providing exact change. “Unless you want to also pay for the stuff in your pockets,” Lester continued.

The man paused. “What?” he said, stiffly.

“The stuff in your pockets,” Lester said calmly.

“Are you accusing me of...”

“Yes.”

“This is outrageous! I want to talk to your supervisor!”

“I’m the most senior staff on site at the moment,” Lester said, still perfectly calmly, “but the first step in the complaint process is for you to prove your innocence by turning out your pockets.”

The man paused for a moment, looked at Lester, glanced to his right and saw Cat standing there, and then made a break for the door. The jingling noise lasted a few extra seconds because of the force with which he’d pushed his way out.

“Hey,” Cat began, but Lester cut her off.

“Let him go.”

“But he’s a shoplifter and he’s still in the parking lot. We can catch him!”

“Cat!” Lester barked. “Rule one of the graveyard shift is that you never chase the shoplifters. He could be carrying a gun and you don’t want to get shot over anything we carry here.”

“I guess you’re right. What did he take anyway?”

“I dunno,” Lester replied, his momentary bout with excitement now over. The same thing every night...

“Wait...if you don’t know what he took, how do you know he took anything at all?”

“He...looked guilty,” Lester said, looking pretty guilty himself.

“Hmph,” Cat said. “Well, I’ve finished restocking the freezer. What now?”

“That was the major chore of the evening. Hope you brought a book.”

Two hours later and Cat had read every magazine in the store, including a brief perusal of some of the adult titles. She told herself that she was no prude, but she had a hard time believing that some of the things people did to each other, or to themselves, in those periodicals were actually pleasurable. Eventually she purchased a book of crosswords at a 20% discount, even though she’d never worked a crossword puzzle in her entire life. After looking at the first few clues she decided that when the night was over she still wouldn’t have worked one, at least not completely.

Lester, meanwhile, had sat at the counter staring off into space for the last half hour. Occasionally he'd twitch his facial muscles in a sudden spasm, but mostly he just stared with an intense concentration that unnerved Cat at...nothing.

The door jingled. A man walked in wearing an overstuffed jacket. Lester jumped, startled, and stared at the man for a moment, a look of puzzlement on his face. The man roamed the aisles briefly, selected a box of latex gloves and a roll of paper towels and made his way back to the counter.

"Bit of cleaning," said the man, softly.

"Of course," said Lester, not taking his eyes off the man. "That'll be nine dollars and twelve cents."

The man reached into the front pocket of his jeans, which looked to be so tight that they must be a size too small, and extracted a wad of grubby cash. He counted out ten dollars and shoved the remainder back in his pants. Lester patiently straightened the bills out, watching the man carefully all the while, and then placed them in the register and scraped out the change, handing it to the man, careful not to touch his hand when he dropped the coins.

"Thank you," said the man, gathering his purchases together and heading for the door. Lester watched him go, then sighed. He frowned, looked thoughtful for a few moments, and then blinked hard.

"Let's go, Cat," he said.

Cat blinked and turned to look at Lester. "Wait...what?" she asked, stunned.

"Come on, we've got to go now," Lester said, putting on his coat.

Cat stood still. "Why?" she asked plaintively. She was confused. Not long ago Lester had chastised her for even suggesting they go chasing the shoplifter and now he was doing a complete about-face. "You said not to chase the shoplifters!" she said, giving voice to her confusion.

"He's not a shoplifter. He's going to kill someone, now come on!" He grabbed Cat by the wrist and dragged her through the door, the bell jingling as they went. He paused briefly, reopened the door, turned the sign in the window to "Closed," shut the door again and locked it, then started off in the direction he'd last seen the man walking.

Cat, released now from Lester's grip, hesitated. But the door was locked. She couldn't go back into the store and waiting here seemed foolish. More foolish than following Lester? She couldn't decide. There seemed to be two options. Either Lester was right and the man they were chasing was a potential killer, which seemed preposterous, or Lester was wrong in which case the worst that could happen was a bit of embarrassment and a potential lawsuit for stalking and harassment. Neither seemed like a good choice. But her third option was to stay at the store and the fourth was to go home and probably get fired.

"Wait, Lester," she said, trying a fifth option, which hadn't seemed to work so far. "Let's go back in the store and talk about this."

"No time to talk," Lester said, pausing about twenty feet away from her. "You can stay there if you want, but I'd advise you come with me." And without another word he turned and stalked away up the hill.

Cat weighed her options again and came to the same conclusions. She supposed, in the end, that she'd better go with him just to keep him from getting hurt...or from hurting anyone himself. Danger to himself and others, wasn't that the phrase the courts used? She was sure she'd be hearing it again all too soon.

"Lester, wait," she called out. He stopped, but didn't turn around, and waited for her to catch up.

"Knew you'd come to your senses, come on."

As they plodded up the hill together, a police car drove slowly past in the other direction. Seated in the driver's position was Detective Scott Renzetti. He'd been circling the same three block radius for the last hour, lost in thought. Lots of guys on the force had lots of different ways of going about thinking about their cases. Some would doodle, others would construct grids of facts, and still others would just meditate. Renzetti went for a drive and allowed his brain to concentrate on all the little things that went into keeping the car on the road while his subconscious worked on the meat of the puzzle he was trying to solve.

Police procedure was a dirty phrase for Renzetti. He followed it just to keep IA off his ass, but it was mostly just for show. The truth was that he'd go to all kinds of obscure lengths to solve a case including, on at least one occasion, consulting a palm reader. It hadn't worked, but he'd given it a try and then later was struck by an unrelated inspiration that actually did lead to the solution he'd been looking for.

He drove with the windows down, his arm hanging out, his cigarette glowing gently in the breeze of the chilled air. Clothed in the stereotypical beige trenchcoat and fedora hat he took no end of kidding from the other guys at the precinct. Something about being a walking cliché. Turning the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Crescent he considered the facts of his current case.

There had been a string of murders within the last six months. The only thing that really tied them together was the time factor and one other common factor. Renzetti had spent an unnatural number of hours poring over facts relating to the victims, the locations in which they were killed and the method used to kill them. So far no pattern had emerged. None. Across town from each other, unrelated by age, sex, race, or any of the other usual demographic data. Killed by poison darts, garrotte, shooting, stabbing, and being pushed off a bridge. That last one had been particularly troubling because first there had been a witness, thus proving that it hadn't been a simple suicide, but also because in each and every case the victim was unidentifiable. That was the common pattern. And even that wasn't that common.

In one case the face had been sanded off, along with the palms and the soles of the feet. Dental records were useless as all the teeth had been pulled and there were no readily identifiable scars or tattoos. In another those features were burned off. And the last two had actually had the entire head, hands, and feet removed. DNA tests hadn't revealed anything useful and the bodies had clearly been moved.

It was obviously the work of a single individual, or group of individuals, but they were being...the phrase "careful to cover their tracks" seemed incredibly insufficient. Fanatical. Obsessive. And willing to spend the time to do it, which made them doubly dangerous.

And then there was the latest wrinkle. The last corpse had had the head removed just above the chin. Just below that line there were two little puncture wounds. Spaced just right to be where a person's canine teeth would be, and right over the jugular vein. The perp was getting a sense of the dramatic, which could be good or bad. Good because it made them careless, but bad because it meant they might step up their activities and more people would die before they were caught.

Renzetti completed his 25<sup>th</sup> circuit and decided to call it a night. As he turned off the route he'd been following he saw two people walking briskly up the hill, arguing with each other. Hadn't he seen them before? Should he stop and make sure they were ok? The last thing he wanted to read about in the papers the next day was a domestic violence incident that had turned deadly. But he was tired and the argument didn't seem that heated, so he took a drag on his cigarette, turned on the radio, and accelerated for home.



“Lester, let’s just go. He’s lost us,” Cat continued to protest.

“Cat, I know how you feel,” Lester returned, “but you have to trust me.”

“Why?! I barely know you! You could be leading me on into the woods to kill me yourself for all I know!”

“And you’re following me. Explain that one.”

Cat fell silent again, partly because she had no adequate response and partly because she was out of breath from the long uphill climb.

“Besides,” Lester continued, “I think he’s right up ahead.”

Cat heard a loud bang followed by a spark of light and the sound of a nearby ricochet.

“Crap,” said Lester. “Quick, over here.”

“He’s shooting at us?!”

“Yep, and now he really is getting away.”

“Let him! Let him!!!” Cat cried.

The steady flap of retreating footsteps was just audible ahead of them, but fading quickly as the shooter put distance between himself and his pursuers.

Lester stood for a moment in that same trancelike state he’d been in at the store just before he’d announced their departure.

“Ok, time to go,” he said, after once again blinking hard.

“Where now?” Cat asked, feeling seriously lost and out of her depth now.

“Now we go back to my place,” said Lester, matter-of-factly.

“Y’know, I hate to sound like a broken record, but no. I’m not going to your place. I’m going home.”

“Fine, but I’m sure he saw us and knows exactly what you look like. You’re scared and you’re bound to do something at least a little stupid.”

“Well, gee, thanks a lot for that vote of confidence,” Cat seethed. “But I think the stupidest thing I could do from this point would be to go anywhere else with you, but it doesn’t compare to the stupidity of going with you in the first place. To hell with the store, I quit.”

And she began to stalk off. Lester watched her go for a few steps and then turned. He had to get back home and couldn’t be bothered with the latest symptom of the high turnover rate at the store. He’d advised her of the risk, offered a safe haven...if she rejected it, what was that to him? Besides. The danger seemed to have passed, at least for the moment. Catching the number 5 bus, he settled into his seat for the ride home. The bus would stop right outside his door in about fifteen minutes.

Cat walked briskly back to the store. She would never have admitted it to Lester, or anyone else for that matter, but she really was scared. Nervous. Not scared. Nervous. She’d parked her car in a lot nearby the store and was anxious to get back there. Yes, anxious, that was a much better word. Certainly not scared or even nervous. Rattled. Even better.

She continued to consult her own internal thesaurus all the way back to the store where she found her car safe and sound. She’d congratulated herself on only jumping at a few stray sounds here and there on the way back. She also congratulated herself for remembering to palm the pocket knife she’d had with her on the way back. No sense in bringing inadequate protection if you weren’t even going to try to use it.

Getting in her car, Cat sighed and started the engine. Back to the want ads. In this economy it had taken her about two months just to find this dead-end job about an hour’s drive away from her apartment. She’d very nearly turned it down on the grounds that it would barely pay for her gas and rent, let alone food, but she decided that there was no point in pride and keeping the wolf from the door only worked if there was a door to keep the wolf from. And she’d figured she could pocket a stray box of crackers or something from time to time. Convenience. That’s what the store was all about, right?

But that was all over now. She had no idea she’d be working with a complete psycho right out of the gate. It took a certain kind of personality to work the night shift and she knew she didn’t have it, but she’d hoped she could work her way up to something more reasonable in due time. Those places were notorious for high turnover.

Putting the car in gear, she drove back to her apartment.

Across the street from the store a shadow detached itself from the wall and slunk silently around the edges of the street lights over to where Cat's car had sat just a moment ago. It idled there briefly before lifting.

## **Chapter Two – Lesson Plans**

The man hunched over his work. He wore a thick wool coat, frayed and ragged around the edges, greying with age and reeking of stale sweat. Fumbling with the unfamiliar equipment, he nevertheless managed to set up the apparatus flawlessly, as if directed by an unseen intelligence. The dark sunglasses obscured a large portion of his face, but had holes cut in the center, allowing him to see out unobscured. His eyes flitted back and forth as he continued his task.

Needle to rubber hose. Rubber hose to pump. Another rubber hose to glass jar. It was nearly complete now. He'd learned it quickly, so much more quickly than he'd expected and certainly more quickly than he'd learned his other lessons. Those were still ongoing. He feared he'd never graduate on to the next level.

Nearby a prone figure stirred, but the ropes around its wrists and ankles held it fast. A low moan escaped and the man turned to glance, paranoid that his preparations might have been rushed and inadequate, but the body remained still, secured in its bonds.

The pump was for emergencies. He had no intention of using it. Didn't the human body have its own pump that was sufficient for this task? A crude muscle, undeserving of the status lauded upon it by mankind. Even in the language it was elevated to a level he couldn't understand. "The heart of the matter." "Affairs of the heart." Associate this lump with love? How had mankind come to this?

The brain, now. The brain was to be revered. The heart did a simple job. Even the other organs had very simple, specific jobs. But the brain had to control all of them, plus act as a storage apparatus, plus regulate all the appetites that made life possible and worth living. Why was the brain not elevated to the levels of the heart? It boggled the mind.

The figure stirred again and once again a soft moan emerged. This time the man did not panic. It was familiar now. He had learned it. His brain had engaged and stored the information, processed it, and it had become a part of him and he would remember it always.

He would help the others learn it. Learn that the brain was the ultimate power on this planet and beyond. Mechanically he completed the final fittings on the apparatus, a complex

system of tubes. The heart had occupied the higher status for far too long. The time of the brain was at hand.

The man advanced slowly on the prisoner who would soon be released from its bondage to the heart. He wielded the needle with shaking hands, steadying the neck which threatened to move in a spasm. The brain did not need the rest of the body and therefore everything below the head must be removed. But first the heart must be deprived of its fuel. He inserted the needle and waited.

Nothing happened. A small trickle began, but did not develop into the flow that was necessary. The man removed the needle and, sweat trickling down his brow and the sides of his face, he aimed again, just slightly above where the other puncture had missed, and thrust again. This time the tube filled with the crimson fluid and began oozing its way along the path. Slowly the jar began to fill. It would take time, but it would happen. The figure moaned again softly, but the man paid it no heed. Separation from the heart would be naturally traumatic. But then the healing would begin. In time he would have an entire tribe of beings that would worship the brain.

His task completed for the time being, the man wandered into another room where a television was on. The sound was off, as it always was. Nothing worth hearing was ever said, and the man himself spoke very little, but he kept it on for illumination as there were no lights in the little hovel that he passed off as his house. It was an abandoned property, condemned by the city, but too expensive to raze. He stole electricity from his neighbors so he could see at night, and to power the pump if it should ever be necessary.

The television showed a man in a uniform at a microphone. Below him was a caption that read "Serial Murderer on Loose."

At the press conference, Detective Scott Renzetti was walking a tightrope. He felt it was very important to let people know that a killer was on the loose, but he didn't want to incite a panic. Letting people know that they had no solid leads, no decent forensic evidence, and no idea when or where the killer might strike next was probably not a good way to keep the peace and calm. So far the reporters weren't helping.

"Detective Renzetti, where has the killer struck so far?"

"Do you think these are hate crimes?"

"Is it true that the police are floundering in this case?"

“I cannot comment on an ongoing investigation. We are merely advising people to remain calm, stay aware of their surroundings, and be careful about going out alone at night. This is good advice to anyone at any time, but we are asking everyone to pay especial attention these days until we have the perpetrator in custody.”

“When will the killer strike again?”

“As in all cases such as this, we hope never. No further questions, please,” and with that Renzetti stepped off the podium and made his way back into the building.

Of course that last part had been a lie. If the killer never struck again, they would have no hope of finding him. The Zodiac Killer at least left cyphers that could theoretically be solved, leading police to him, but Jack the Ripper will forever remain in anonymity and anybody’s guess is merely an educated guess. The proof died with the last victim.

And so the entire press conference had been a ruse, a lie, a swindle, a con game meant to lure the killer back into the open. He’d stopped short of taunting the perp, a time-tested method of getting them to strike quickly and carelessly. That didn’t seem to be the best approach here. This one wasn’t careless and didn’t seem to do anything quickly. The time it would take to disfigure the victims would require a safe haven, but also patience and the ability to work without panicking. No, taunting him wasn’t the answer.

Back at the house, the man switched off the television, plunging the room into near-total darkness. A lone street lamp shone a block away, its feeble light doing little to illuminate the hovel, serving only to cast creepy shadows on the man’s face and the wall behind him. He stood still, but the misshapen shadow cast by his coat seemed to move and writhe subtly in the dim light. He breathed deeply and coughed before striding back into the room to check on the progress of the lesson he was teaching. As he strode over the threshold between rooms he passed by an old green rucksack that he had dumped unceremoniously on the floor earlier in the evening.

### **Chapter Three – Killing the Cat**

Lester arrived at work at 10pm, just like he always did. Except that this time the door was locked. He unlocked it and went inside, the door jingling as he did, where he found a note on the front counter.

*George didn’t make it. Dunno where he is. I left around 9pm – Dave*

Dave Sheridan was the morning guy. He was supposed to leave by 4:30pm, but sometimes stayed later if George was running late. Nine o'clock was a record, though. George was a lot of things, but late to work wasn't one of them unless he was deathly ill. He would never have admitted it, but he lived in fear of losing the job and had always skated by on the ragged edge of disaster by fudging a bit here and a bit there rather than by doing anything major that would attract attention.

Lester began the process of re-opening the store, which included setting out a few things on the counter that they had all agreed should be put away in the event that the store should have to close. "Take a penny, leave a penny" bin, a few packs of cigarettes to act as "impulse buys" and the like. As he was doing so he heard the door jingle behind him.

Turning, he was surprised to see Cat. He turned his back on her.

"Thought you quit," he said indifferently.

"I did," Cat replied. "But I needed to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About getting you some help. Lester, how long have you worked here?"

"Fifteen years, what about it?"

"That's too long," Cat replied. "You're not behaving naturally, and I think working this graveyard shift is getting to you. You need help and I want to help you find it."

Lester turned to face her and regarded her with that blank stare he seemed to get from time to time.

"Yes, I believe you do," he replied eventually. "And you aren't the first. But I'm already seeing a psychologist, so there's no need. Goodbye."

Cat stood where she was, mute at this news. Finally she said, "Lester, I was also curious. Why do you keep acting like you know what I'm feeling?"

There was a pause. "No reason," he finally responded. "Thought you were leaving. If you want the job back you'll have to fill in the application again, although I don't think the boss is going to be too lenient on someone who walked off the job on her first night."

“No, I don’t want the…” Cat began, but then stopped herself. What was she trying to prove? She’d lain awake half the night trying to figure out what had happened.

Lester had acted so strangely, but so many of his hunches had been right. The man who left so quickly did look guilty, maybe he had shoplifted something. And the other man did shoot at them. Or had he? Maybe it was someone else and just a coincidence. But then there was his odd pattern of speech. There was something about the way he said “I know how you feel,” that made you think it wasn’t just sympathy. That maybe it was something else.

She also spent a considerable amount of time trying to figure out why she gave a damn. On those occasions when she was honest with herself, which she was trying to make more frequent, she would admit that she was nosy. Nothing satisfied her more than knowing something that someone else didn’t. It was a form of control for her, and she hadn’t known much control in her lifetime. Adopted as an infant, her parents had been the poster children for overprotectiveness and hadn’t given her much freedom at all.

Lester looked at Cat. “Look,” he began, “this shift ends at eight in the morning. You’d know that if you hadn’t run out last night,” he added, unable to resist the dig. “Come back then and we’ll go somewhere and talk. Somewhere in public,” he finished, noticing the look of resentment and rebellion on her face.

Cat relaxed just a little, although she was still very confused. “Fine,” she managed, and then walked out the door, the bell jingling as she went.

At eight o’clock the next morning Cat returned to find Lester talking to Dave, who was taking the opening shift that day.

“Nah, I haven’t heard from George since the night before,” Lester was saying.

“Dude better have a good excuse,” Dave commented.

“He will,” Lester replied.

“Totally. Seeya around, have a good day’s sleep,” Dave chuckled, before noticing Cat standing nearby. “Hey, I heard you quit.”

“I did. I’m here to see Lester.”

“Oho!” exclaimed Dave. “Well, don’t let me interrupt!” The leer on his face made Cat turn her head in disgust. She’d have given anything to know why men had to be like that all the time. Or at least all the ones she’d known.

“Shut up,” said Lester, unknowingly only making the situation worse. Denials always served as admissions in Dave’s book.

They walked to Cat’s car, opened the doors and got in. Cat started the engine and pulled away.

“Thanks for driving,” Lester began, but Cat cut him off.

“Don’t thank me. Just explain yourself. Do you do this all the time when you’re working by yourself? Does your psychologist know?”

Lester paused a moment. “Let’s back up,” he ventured. “What are you talking about?”

“Look, I knew you were a special kind of nut, but when you said you were seeing someone about it I didn’t worry so much. Now I’m worried. Did Dave notice?”

“Dave doesn’t notice much of anything,” Lester replied. “Now let’s get back to the matter at hand, what are you talking about?”

“Playing dressup is for Halloween, Lester. Now take them out so we can go somewhere and talk, because I am certainly not going to be seen in public with you looking like that. You’re probably just trying to spook me,” she finished with bitterness.

The engine of the car hummed along as they proceeded down the street, Lester staring at Cat.

“Nope, still totally at sea here,” he finally said when it became clear that Cat wasn’t going to elaborate.

“The fake fangs, Lester! Take them out now!”

Slowly Lester reached up and felt inside his mouth. He felt his incisors in the top row and moved his fingers around the edges until he came to his canines, which he discovered were about a half inch longer than he would have expected.

“Hrm,” he mused. “Interesting.”



“Interesting? Lester, I said take them out, now either you do it now or I’m pulling over and you’re getting out right now. I’ve totally had it and I’m not even sure why I’m here anymore playing this stupid fucking game.”

“I’d love to,” Lester said, still feeling the unusual new discovery in his mouth. Long, smooth, and particularly sharp, even for canine teeth. He’d experienced lots of strange things in his life, many of which occurred during his employment at the 24-hour Grocery, but he had to admit that this one was brand new. “Unfortunately I can’t.”

“What, did you use some kind of denture adhesive?” Cat retorted. “I said take ‘em out!”

“And I said I can’t,” Lester shot back, frustrated. He was getting a sinking feeling about what this meant for him and for Cat. How could he possibly explain? He’d been wondering that all night. After he had asked Cat to come back so they could talk, he’d intended to tell her. There was something about her, something about her persistence, that made him feel like she could be trusted with the knowledge he was about to share. Plus, she was still in danger. The killer from last night had seen her and the feeling he had gotten was that he wasn’t the type of guy who would just let things go.

But...the more he thought about it, the less it seemed like a good idea. Why shouldn’t he just let her dump him off at the side of the road? Maybe she’d get lucky and he wouldn’t find her again. Maybe he, Lester, could do something, although that kind of heroism turned his stomach.

He’d had a long talk with his psychologist about it the day after the shooting. He’d taken action that night and then regretted it. Fifteen years of not getting involved had just gone down the drain, but Gwen had assured him that he’d made the right decision. Well, eventually she assured him. She had a rambling way about her that made Lester glad she didn’t get paid by the hour.

It was Gwen who had said that if Cat came back she should be told, and Lester had agreed at the time. Now, though, he was regretting the entire episode. Why should he be a hero? Why should he care? He liked the mundanity of his job, the predictability, and the ability to be around people who were clearly, noticeably inferior to him. Sure, he might be working a dead-end job that most people wouldn’t touch unless it was work there or starve, but he was still better than most of the customers who had to shop there.

“What do you mean, you can’t? This is exactly the kind of thing that I’m getting sick and tired of, Lester!”

He snapped back to reality from his reverie. “We’ve only known each other two days, Cat,” Lester replied calmly. “You must have a remarkably low tolerance.”

“Yeah, actually I do,” Cat snarled, turning a corner and stopping the car. “Now either those stupid things come out of your mouth right now or you get out of my car. What’s it going to be?”

Lester looked at her. This was the moment. If he left now he could be rid of her and get back to his life. Sure there was a killer out there. Sure he now had some evidence that that killer was more dangerous than he’d previously suspected. Sure that meant her blood would technically be on his hands. But that could be said of so many other people through nothing more than his own inaction. Why should this be any different. Because Gwen said so? Gwen said a lot of things. And if he stayed then there’d be lots of explanations, lots of Cat not understanding and saying stupid things like “What are you talking about?” and “You can’t possibly be serious,” and probably even “I don’t believe I’m having this conversation.”

“Well?” Cat said.

Lester sighed. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. Finally he said “Cat, I know you have no reason to, but I need you to trust me. I can’t take the teeth out of my mouth, but I can explain if you’ll take us somewhere where we can talk without being interrupted or overheard. I know you don’t want to go back to my place and I doubt you’ll invite me to yours, but we need somewhere at least semi-private and we need it quickly.”

Cat paused. This was the moment. She could kick him out of the car and never hear from him again. But she’d be obsessed about it for days at a minimum, more likely weeks, and possibly her entire life. How had he known? Why was he so strange? Why did he keep that ridiculous job if he was as perceptive as he claimed to be? And why did she have this nagging feeling that things would never be the same regardless of her decision?

“Fine,” she said at length, putting the car into gear. “I know just the place.”

## **Chapter Four – Making the Grade**

Renzetti closed his book. He’d been re-reading one of his childhood heroes, *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency*, but had decided to put it down as it was depressing him. Douglas Adams’s detective character had been a major influence on his decision to enter the police force with long-term aspirations towards opening his own private investigation

offices, and he often turned to him to seek ideas for how to approach a particularly difficult case. This time, however, the crimes were too gruesome, the methods too inscrutable for him to believe that he'd just luck into it the way Dirk had in the end.

He got up out of his old creaky office chair, turned his desk lamp off, and walked over to the window. The streetlights crept in around the slats of his open blinds casting shadows into the darkened room, making everything look like it was in some kind of bizarre horizontal jail cell. Lighting a cigarette destroyed the effect for a moment as the flame caught the tobacco and he took a long drag.

A drag. That's what this job had become. He'd relished police work before. The excitement of being a rookie cop on the beat, paying his dues directing traffic and canvassing neighborhoods, cutting his teeth on mundane everyday crimes of passion. Mundane and everyday, but needless, he reflected.

And then advancement, promotion, recognition, and decoration. Those had been nice. And then that first big assignment afterwards, the one they give you to see if you really deserved all those nice things they just gave you and those nice words they said about you. He'd passed that test, and all the others since then, with flying colors. Baseball players get to call themselves a success if they achieve their goal a third of the time. Cops have to shoot for more like two thirds, and Renzetti had managed greater than that in terms of arrests and convictions.

Unfortunately there was also what he referred to as the curse of the competent. The better you are at something, the more those around you ratchet up the competition. You get harder cases, sure, and that kept it challenging, but you also got sabotaged. Sometimes he felt like getting this assignment had been a mix of both.

He remembered walking into Sergeant Booth's office that day and seeing the dossier on his desk. Unassuming in its pale green job jacket, it just sat there waiting for him to notice it and comment on it.

"What's that, Sarge?"

"This? It's nothing you want anything to do with, Renzetti, I'll tell you that. Bad business."

"What do you mean?"

“Few deaths in this part of the state. Each one by itself is pretty routine, but some folks think they’re related somehow.”

“You don’t?”

“No, I think they probably are related. There’s a bunch of similarities. But there’s also problems with it. I’m thinking of turning it over to Davis.”

“Why Davis?”

“Well, he’s the best we’ve got, isn’t he?”

Renzetti remembered the pause. As if this had been the moment. “Is he?” he had asked, rising to the bait like a brook trout.

“What, you think you’re up to this case?”

“You think I’m not?”

“Ok, we could go round and round like this forever,” Booth said impatiently. “Are you saying you want the case?”

“I’m saying I’d like to at least take a look at it.”

“Fine,” Booth had said, pushing the dossier across the desk. “It’s yours.”

Renzetti had taken a full 24 hours poring over the details. It intrigued him, but it also baffled him. He feared he was in over his head, but at the same time if he cracked it...he really would be the best. And could the promotion to Sergeant be far behind? Or would he even care? If he solved this one, could he just leapfrog all that bureaucracy and start his own agency right now on the strength of his reputation and acclaim from this one case?

He took another drag of his cigarette. That had been eight months ago. Eight long months, punctuated by eleven more deaths. And with each death there came more pressure, more questions, and yet the number of answers remained constant: zero.

And now there was this new wrinkle.

He crossed back to his desk and turned the lamp back on, sitting down in that wretched, decaying chair that the department was too cheap to replace and that he was too used to to make a fuss over, and picked up the letter.

The man's hand shook as he wrote it, almost as if there was an internal struggle regarding whether he should be writing it at all. But he must! It was all part of the plan. On a human level the war in his mind between the heart and the brain seemed insane. Wasn't it all metaphor? But words describe concepts and concepts were powerful and the wrong power had been on top for too long.

Everything was falling into place. Those two were the key and they didn't even know it. They were the key necessary to turn the lock to open the passage where the final piece of the puzzle lay. All his work thusfar had been leading to this goal and he would not fail now.

The man in the tattered grey coat put down his pen and looked at his handiwork. Legible, but barely. There could be no mistakes. Carefully the letter was folded, despite the resistance that the hands put forth. Could they not see that they were mere flesh and must do as they were told by the brain? A complex chemical reaction takes place, a spark of electricity, and orders were given that must be obeyed! The final crease was put in the paper, which was then slid into the envelope, sealed, and then stamped and addressed.

Renzetti imagined the scene leading up to the mailing. The killer's use of gloves (although there was no residue of such gloves), the sealing of the envelope (licked, but the DNA samples were inconclusive...the initial result identified a man dead for two years), and the journey to the mailbox.

And then the message itself. Two words, each cryptic in their own right, but together with this case doubly so.

“Teach Me.”

So the killer thought he had something to learn. That was something, at least. He may be patient, but at least he didn't think he was God. Letters like this were supposed to be a Godsend. Cases broke on things like this, where the killer finally gets cocky enough to start taunting the police. In many cases there were a few weeks or months of frustration as the killings continue, but in the end this kind of taunting was just another form of carelessness and arrogance that eventually led to a mistake. This letter, though, had the feel of something that was nothing to get excited about. It was just a tease.

Stubbing out the remains of his cigarette, Renzetti turned his lamp back off and got ready to go home. The case would be there in the morning and he could look at it with fresh eyes. Gathering up his belongings, he closed and locked his door.

As his footsteps receded down the echoing hallway, a shadow detached itself from beneath the desk and slid up the sides, covering the letter briefly before dissolving itself into vapor.

## **Chapter Five – More Than a Feeling**

Lester listened to the thump of the strong bass beat and put his head in his hand, his thumb and middle fingers massaging his temples. She couldn't possibly be serious about this. She was mocking him.

“Alright, we're here, now tell me what you need to tell me and make it good,” Cat said loudly over the blaring music.

“First tell me why here,” Lester said, not lifting his eyes. This was the stupidest thing he'd ever seen.

“You said we needed privacy, but I wanted somewhere public. This fits both bills.”

“But a strip club? How could something like this even occur to you?”

“These VIP rooms give you the privacy you want, but are public enough for me to feel safe. What's the problem?”

“The problem is that it's absurd! I didn't even know you could rent these things without hiring one of the dancers!”

“Well, funny you should mention that...” Cat began.

“Oh, no, I said I needed privacy. We are *not* bringing one of them,” he indicated one of the young, scantily clad women, currently hanging upside down by her ankles on a pole, “in here with us.”

“We don't have to. I...” she hesitated.

“Yes?” Lester asked, lifting his head from his hand at last.

“I used to work here, alright?” Cat finished quickly.

Lester paused and looked at her. "I don't believe you," he said at last.

"Gee, thanks," Cat replied, nonplussed. Did he think she didn't look the part? She was vaguely insulted. The truth was that she had worked there, but as a waitress, for about two months before she got tired of being constantly hit on by guys who knew the dancers were out of their league but thought they could settle for the next best thing.

But it was a little white lie. And somehow he'd known. How?

"Alright," she said, unable to contain herself anymore. "Spill it."

Lester braced himself. He'd only told two other people in his lifetime and neither occasion had been a pleasant experience. At least he didn't have a personal stake in it this time. If she didn't believe him then she'd leave and she'd probably die and he could go right on not caring because she'd made her own choice in full possession of all the facts.

"Cat, I'm..."

"Hey!" said the waitress, poking her head into the little room. "Rob says you still have to do the drink minimum." Lester rolled his eyes.

"Ashley, tell Rob to stick it," Cat shot back. The waitress glared at her, knowing she'd be the one to get the blame for this news.

"This is such a mistake," Lester said.

"Coming here is a great idea, you just don't want to admit it," Cat replied.

"No, coming here was another mistake. I'm talking about the reason why we're here in the first place."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's just say that's not the last time you're going to say that phrase tonight. Cat," Lester said, plunging ahead before he lost his nerve or before anything else interrupted him, "I'm an empath."

"What are you talking about?"

“Confusion and anger. That’s what you’re feeling right now.”

“Stop that!”

“Frustration. A touch of panic, but you’re still under control, and I appreciate that.”

“No really, stop it. There’s no such thing as an empath...not really.”

“Cat, there’s more. Most of the things that people think there’s no such thing as really exist. Legends and myths don’t just spring out of nothing, there’s always some basis in fact.”

“I thought most of them sprang out of fear and superstition,” Cat said nervously.

“Superstition exaggerates them, but there is always something to be afraid of.”

How could he explain it to her? For hundreds of years parents had passed down to children through the oral tradition the cautions they needed to survive against a world that held much to fear. This plane of existence was only one of many and, despite humanity’s tendency to have trouble with transitions and their general desire to see everything in extreme terms of black and white, there was lots of grey area where things that might have been alive weren’t quite yet and those things that should have been dead were still animate. Common names had been passed to some of these things, but there were more, occupying every possible niche of existence. Anything that kept you in the state you were in and didn’t transition you to another state was utilized by these, for lack of a better word, creatures. And some didn’t even have names.

The ones that were most familiar were the ones that were most prevalent. Some passed into obscurity. It was a difficult thing to keep up, and so their numbers dwindled as the years passed and humanity learned to deal with them and then, in just a couple of generations, the danger ebbed away. It was like a mass extinction of things that weren’t quite alive to begin with, and that’s when the lies began. With the fear no longer an immediate part of every day life, parents slowly began to decide that there was no need to pass along the old stories. No need to give the warnings. Water it down, make it a legend, and allow them to believe that they had never been real at all.

As time went on people began to believe that there were ‘rational explanations’ for these myths and legends. Fear of the unknown sparked imaginations, they said. Rare medical disorders led to widespread beliefs about some of the formerly more common monsters. What nobody realized was that in those days there was no mass communication. News didn’t travel quickly...sometimes it didn’t travel at all. No internet, no television, no radio,



no books or magazines, and yet somehow nearly every culture on earth has some variation of legend of vampires and shaggy beasts in the wilderness and loathsome things that creep in the shadows.

He tried to explain it the best he could.

“You make it sound terrible,” Cat said.

“It was,” Lester agreed.

“But how do you know all this?”

Lester paused. Was she ready for the next step? Maybe if she met Gwen in person. Not until then. How to get the two of them together?

“I think you should talk to my psychologist,” he finally decided to say.

Cat stared at him. “You come to me with a story like that and you expect me to talk to your psychologist. I think you need more time with him yourself!”

“Her, actually,” Lester corrected her. He felt the resentment radiate off her like a space heater. “I think it would help you understand better.”

“And this still doesn’t explain those damn teeth,” she grouched.

“Ah. Yes. Well, it’s complicated.”

“Simplify it for me.”

“Ok. I’m not just an empath, I’m a metamorphic empath.”

The music thumped its heavy bass beat in the background. In the mirror Lester could see one of the dancers engaging in an activity that would probably get her arrested later since the guy she was with happened to be a cop. He could feel his mix of euphoria stemming from the performance he was getting as well as from the power trip he was on knowing that he had her dead to rights. Lester sometimes wondered which were the worse monsters. The creatures that still roamed the earth or just people themselves.

“Lester, you were right, this is a mistake. I’m leaving. I can drop you off somewhere, but after that I’m going back to looking for a new job and you can have the store and your

creatures and your stories and your psychologist, who I highly recommend you see more of very quickly, and you just keep to yourself and leave me alone.”

“Actually, I can’t do that, Cat,” Lester said, miserably. This had been one of the primary dangers all along. Now that she knew she was in even more danger than before. The knowledge she now had in her head would shine like a beacon to any of the creatures that might be in her vicinity because a seed of doubt had been planted. She could deny it all she wanted, but there would always be that nagging doubt about whether he’d been right.

“Try to stop me,” she countered.

“Cat, a metamorphic empath is a person who doesn’t just feel the emotions of others, but makes them a part of himself. Particularly strong-willed people can have an effect on me that manifests as a physical trait. Even a brief encounter with someone very strong-willed can have an effect that lasts for days, even after the emotions themselves have passed.”

“And?” Cat asked, exasperated.

“These aren’t just any teeth. These are a vampire’s fangs. And the only place they could have come from is the guy we chased the other day.”

“The one who you said was going to kill someone.”

“Yes!”

“Give me one good reason why I should even consider the possibility that this shit is true.”

“Because if I’m right then you are in great danger. He knows you now. And especially after everything I’ve told you today he’ll be looking for you even more. The creatures I talked to you about, especially vampires, are all an endangered species. They don’t like attention, they’re just trying to survive. I haven’t personally seen one in over seven years and I haven’t seen any that are as visible as this one ever. It’s a big deal,” he finished lamely.

Cat thought it over. It was all so implausible, but Lester was not showing any sign of putting her on or having a joke or anything. He seemed totally sincere. How many times had she seen shadows flitting about in darkness that should have been still? Odd feelings at dusk, when the gloaming took hold and made ordinary objects seem sinister and foreboding. Certainly there were things that weren’t fully understood. Couldn’t this be one of them? Or did she just want to believe? Her adoptive parents had been so skeptical of everything.

“Question it all,” they had said, “and then question why you questioned it.”

“I can’t live my life like that,” she’d replied when she was 18, after accepting it her whole life up to that point. They’d taken it like a dagger in the heart. The idea that she needed some kind of solid foundation beyond what empirical evidence dictated was anathema to them. She felt that it fitted in exactly with what they’d been telling her all along. Skepticism was like a religion and she was questioning it.

She’d tried various churches in the months that followed, giving each one its own due time to make its case, hoping and, yes, praying that something would click inside her brain that would allow her to believe, but each one had too many unanswered questions that she couldn’t simply ignore. Her parents’ influence on her had been very great and none of the tenets of those churches really resonated with her. She’d apologized to the various pastors, priests, imams, sisters, mothers, fathers, and other holy authorities for not being able to stick with it and they’d all been very understanding. She’d even apologized to God.

“So, what can I getcha?” asked an unwelcome intruder.

“You can get the hell out, Rob,” Cat replied.

“Hey, I’m doin’ you a favor here,” replied the newcomer, an aging, balding man who nevertheless managed to convey the vigor of manly youth. He was in the best shape of his life, which everyone around him knew because he never missed an opportunity to tell them at length about his conditioning and stamina. Especially the dancers who worked for him. “This room is valuable real estate and you two have monopolized it for over an hour. I’d say get a room if you two weren’t still dressed and sitting three feet apart from each other.”

Lester rolled his eyes. He’d been in a place like this just once before in his life and he hadn’t liked it. The sea of conflicting emotions and the general air of deceit that hung in the air like a fog had kept him from enjoying the physical pleasures he’d gone there for. Not that any crowd of people was that much different overall, but here it was sharper.

“I said pound sand, Rob,” Cat snarled.

“The least you could do is come up with a tip for poor Ashley,” Rob replied doggedly.

“She hasn’t done anything!”

“Which is another point. We have a drink minimum here, in case you forgot. Oh, wait, you did forget that quite often, didn’t you?” Rob replied, looking smug.

“You’re the one who let us in here. You have only yourself to blame.”

Rob frowned. “I’ve got paying customers here who want a little quality time with Drew and Whitney and you’re holding up the works.”

“You know what, you’re absolutely right,” Lester piped up. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“But,” Cat began, but Lester had already stood up and grabbed her by the wrist. He pulled her insistently towards the door.

“Don’t think I’m going to forget you. The next time you two lovebirds come in here you’re going to owe me the cover and double the drink minimum.”

“We’ll remember that, thanks very much, see you next time,” Lester said hurriedly, making a bee line for the main exit.

Back in the room a shadow flitted about the corners, lingering just long enough to see the next party enter before disappearing out the door, hidden by the sharp strobes and smoky interior of the main dance room.

## **Chapter Six – Stalking Poor Boy Blues**

Regis Stubbs stood on the streetcorner picking away at his guitar. It had been a pretty mediocre day so far, and the cold hadn’t helped. He hated busking, but it was the easiest way to supplement his income that he could think of. Although it wasn’t much of a supplement after he got finished paying the city for the performer’s permit. Better than nothing and, on some days anyway, an enjoyable way to pass the time on one of his four days off every week from the restaurant. Part time jobs sucked, especially when you could only find one of them and it wasn’t enough to make ends meet.

He’d been out here all day, starting at 5am to be sure to get the morning rush hour of pedestrian commuters, then an early lunch at 11 so he could be back for the more usual lunch rush. After that he’d picked his way through a few more challenging pieces just to see if he could play them and even an original composition or two, but once the evening rush hour started he faded back into the classics that he was familiar with. Normally this worked well and he could earn as much as \$100 a day, depending on whether he could catch

people in the right frame of mind, but today had been very lackluster. The sky had been a steel grey and people's moods were soured by the threat of overcast. Rain was different, people could deal with rain, and sometimes even got more generous with their tipping as they conjured up some sympathy for the poor schmoe out there in the drench plugging away at his guitar. Overcast skies were just depressing. Rain would not come today, nor tomorrow, but next month would bring snow and even the most determined busker couldn't play in the snow. Your fingers froze. He tried another song as a couple approached.

*I go out walkin'  
After midnight  
Out in the moonlight  
Just like we used to do...*

Things were winding down for the evening. Autumn had given way to winter, no matter what the meteorologists and the calendar said, and the days were significantly shorter already. This time last week it had still been daylight. Now the streetlights were on, but had not yet wrested control from the setting sun which was peeking out from under the general overcast, its weak rays providing pitiful illumination over the scene.

*I'm always walkin'  
After midnight  
searching for you  
I walk for miles  
Along the highway  
Well that's just my way of saying I love you*

The couple passed on by, but Regis kept on singing. You never knew who might be listening around the corner. After several minutes, however, he saw nobody else and decided it was time to pack it in. Only \$25 today, a particularly disappointing total. He could probably make a meal out of it, but he would have to eat at the restaurant and use his discount because he had to make it stretch to help cover rent.

As he packed up his guitar, Regis spotted a man walking down the street. He considered getting his instrument back out, but noticed the man was wearing a shabby grey coat.

*Poor devil's in worse shape than I am*, he thought. He finished fitting the guitar into the case, fastened the catches, and picked it up, humming as he went. Things could be worse, he mused.

*I'm always walkin'  
After midnight  
Searching for you.....*

The room was characteristically dark. The man liked it that way. Maxwell. Was that his name? It was so hard to remember. No. Maxwell was the name of the first recruit. But he wasn't using it anymore, so the man would take it for his own. As payment for services rendered.

Yet another figure lay on the table next to the apparatus. So far the equipment had worked flawlessly. He was very pleased. He took up the needle with shaking hands and thrust at the prone figure just below the jawline. As before, only a trickle oozed into the tubing. Maxwell cursed his personal shortcomings under his breath, removed the needle, concentrated, and thrust again, this time scoring a direct hit at the intended target. He must not allow this to continue. He must focus on his task more carefully in the future.

Returning to his desk he picked up the piece of paper he had prepared earlier in the evening. It was blank, the pressed, bleached wood pulp shone faintly in the dim glow of the street light outside. It was the most reflective surface in the room and Maxwell stared at it intently, its white plane sitting there like a box in the otherwise black room. Could he do it? Could he write his plans upon it merely by projecting them onto the surface with his mind?

As he watched he saw faint lines begin to form on the page. They were there, tracing out his plans, his hopes, his dreams, and the promise that they held for the betterment of this world, and then they were gone. But they were not gone, they were merely hidden. They could be found if the Detective would look for them in the right place. The Detective was very important. He must make the preparations in order for the plan to succeed. Maxwell could not do it on his own, he could only lay the groundwork for one phase. The rest was up to the Detective and the Empath. And the Vampire.

## **Chapter Seven – A Real Drain**

The page was blank. Detective Renzetti held it, inside a plastic bag, and looked at it intently, daring it to be anything but a regular blank piece of paper, especially after all this scrutiny.

“You’re absolutely positive about this,” he said for the tenth time.

“Yes, Detective,” said Dawn. Dawn Weeks was a forensic specialist at the police department. Renzetti had received this piece of paper in the mail in an envelope that bore

his name and address in a shaky script that looked very familiar to everyone involved in the case. A handwriting examination had revealed it to be the same as the person who had written the previous terse note. This one was evidently even more terse than the other one as it seemed to have nothing written on it at all.

She had subjected the page to the usual battery of tests checking for fingerprints, hair and fiber, stray chemicals and pollutants, and anything else that might place the object in terms of time and space. And she had found them.

The fingerprints had been especially exciting, but a check of the computerized database revealed that they belonged to a man who had died in prison last year. There had also been stray fragments of formaldehyde on the page around where the fingerprints had been found, but there were no formaldehyde factories anywhere in the city and a check of the mortuaries in the area had found everyone with a rock-solid alibi. No unusual shipments of the chemical could be found in any records or manifests anywhere. Quantities were all within acceptable levels and were fully accounted for by their owners. It was very vexing.

“There’s no invisible ink or anything on it?” Renzetti asked for the fifth time.

“None,” Dawn replied patiently. “It’s just a regular piece of paper, albeit with a dead man’s fingerprints on it.” She was used to this treatment, not just from Renzetti but from the rest of the force as well. It had nothing to do with her being a woman, but it had everything to do with their mostly being men. Men loved the thrill of discovery, that rush that comes from solving a problem or finding something that had been missing. It was a key reason why men never stopped to ask for directions. It wasn’t stubbornness, it was addiction to a brain chemical that rewarded them for blundering around for hours when the highway was just a right turn instead of a left away.

Her experience was that if you did your work thoroughly and answered patiently then eventually the men would realize that the evidence that would crack the case that they so desperately wanted to be there just wasn’t going to be and then they’d move on to something else. That said, the entire chain of events leading up to her acquisition of this particular piece of evidence gave her the creeps.

It had arrived via courier, which was typical, but the courier hadn’t delivered it until after 6pm and had put it directly into her hands. This despite the fact that couriers weren’t supposed to have direct access to the labs, had to go through reception, and reception never delivered anything received after 6pm until the following morning. She’d been working late that night, catching up on some paperwork at her desk, lit only by a compact fluorescent lamp whose glare had destroyed her night vision. She heard the footsteps in the hallway

outside and then the door opened unexpectedly. She couldn't make out the figure in the doorway who held out the package for her, and for some reason she didn't question them. She merely accepted the slim envelope, signed the required form, and watched the figure retreat back the way it had come.

She couldn't even describe the courier's hand as it passed the object to her.

Renzetti held the paper up to the light for the eighth time. Whenever he did that he thought he could see little bits of lines trying to form up into words on the page, but he couldn't make any of them out. It was like those maddening Magic Eye puzzles where the image was just on the edge of visibility and then you blinked and lost it.

"Well," he said at last, placing the bag carefully on the counter, "let me know if anything else turns up."

"Will do," Dawn replied, taking the bag and filing it carefully. Just touching the thing gave her the creeps. She was glad to have a thick cardboard box between her and it, although lead would be preferable, she mused.

Renzetti stalked out. He was suddenly exhausted and realized he hadn't really slept all that well the last few nights. Going to bed late and getting up early and not really sleeping much in between will take it out of you. Sense of duty and urgency kept him going most of the time, but, he reflected, I'm not doing anyone any good in this condition. A good night's sleep never hurt anybody.

*My bed is calling me...*

## **Chapter Eight – Oh, Say, Can You See**

"It'll help you understand better."

"No, I said I won't do it."

"You're just being stubborn."

"I barely know you, remember?"

"It's not like I'm asking you to walk down a dark alley with me while I'm carrying a knife. I just want you to meet Gwen."



“Who’s Gwen, again?”

“My psychologist.”

“Oh, yes. You said. And what was it I said?”

Lester sighed. “You said ‘no’”.

“That’s right. Repeatedly. I’m beginning to feel led on here, Lester. I don’t want to get caught up in some stupid role playing game or some elaborate con job or anything like that. I want the truth.” Cat didn’t want to admit that she really was being stubborn. It lent credence to Lester’s claims and she wasn’t ready to buy it yet.

“Look, Cat, you’re radiating enough confusion and frustration to attract any other empaths that might be in a five mile radius. Just come meet Gwen and she’ll explain everything.” *Sort of*, he added to himself.

“Other empaths?” she cried, adding panic to the mix. “What other empaths? How many of you are there?”

“There, that’s better. You just admitted something I told you was true.”

Cat cursed under her breath.

“Anger isn’t attractive,” Lester said, only furthering the situation.

“Luckily I’m not trying to attract you,” Cat replied, regaining control. “And you didn’t even answer the question. How many *alleged*,” she dropped the word in like an anvil, “empaths are there?”

“No one really knows. Maybe a couple thousand worldwide. Maybe less.”

Cat drove in silence for a few moments. She was burning more gas on this ridiculous adventure than she could afford, especially since her job had gone up in smoke. She reflected that she could have walked away from this entire crazy situation two days ago and chose to come back of her own accord. Why had she done it? Curiosity wasn’t a satisfactory explanation anymore.

“Lester,” she began hesitantly.

“Cat, don’t make any rash decisions. I can feel the conflict in you.”

“Would you stop that?! Stop sounding like a reject for Yoda’s understudy for two minutes and let me think!”

Lester fell silent. They drove on for several minutes without any clear destination. Cat kept moving because she didn’t know where to go. They passed several other convenience stores, a shopping mall, gas stations, any of which would have been an acceptable place to stop and collect her thoughts, but she bypassed them all, trying to keep her mind occupied with making the car travel down the street without crashing into anything. That top level task allowed her subconscious to work on the other problem she had without obsessing over it.

“Fine, I’ll meet Gwen,” she said at last.

“I knew you would,” Lester ventured with a grin.

“I said stop that,” Cat said calmly. “Now which way do I go?”

“Actually, we’re almost there,” Lester said. “Just keep going for two more lights and make a left into that condo’s parking lot.”

Cat would never have admitted it, but she’d seen the sign for it two blocks away and had been intending to stop there to hash this out with Lester if she hadn’t made a decision by then. The entire thing was like a bad episode of the *Twilight Zone*.

She pulled the car into the lot, parked, and they both got out, Lester being very careful to make sure all the doors were locked.

“What was that for, it’s not that bad of a neighborhood,” Cat asked, but Lester didn’t answer. They went through the glass door at the entrance of the pale brick building and caught the elevator to the 6<sup>th</sup> floor. When the doors opened they turned left, then left again, and then right. Cat knew that it wasn’t really a maze, but the slightly-too-narrow hallways and the twists and turns were making her feel slightly uneasy. Or at least slightly more uneasy than she was already feeling because of meeting someone new in a strange building in a circumstance she didn’t understand. Frankly, she was amazed she was still upright.

They came at last to Unit 667. Cat suppressed the urge to make the obvious joke.

“Neighbor of the Beast,” Lester said, failing to suppress that same urge. He knocked smartly on the wooden door, which had been stained a deep amber color and bore a strange symbol around the peephole that Cat had never seen before. It was a circle with a mesh of wavy lines inside it, almost like a sieve would look.

*Just decoration*, she thought to herself, but she was unconvinced.

They heard the sounds of shuffling on the other side of the door and then a chain was pulled back and a deadbolt opened and finally the lock on the doorknob itself, but the door did not open right away.

“Who is it?” asked a voice from inside.

“You feel fine, Gwen,” Lester responded. “Maybe a bit anxious.”

“Oh, hello, Lester,” Gwen said, opening the door.

Gwen was a very thin, almost skeletal woman with extremely pale skin. Her long, stringy hair was clean, but curled and frizzed, giving her an unkempt appearance. She wore a long tiered sundress with a floral pattern dominated by blues and was barefoot. Turning away from them and returning to the main part of the condo, she selected a recliner from a choice of sofa, kitchen chair, and beanbag chair, and sat down. These items were arranged in a rough circle.

Lester entered the room and sat down on one end of the sofa, which was a dingy white with a pink floral pattern. Cat followed slowly, leaving the door open just in case she had to make a quick getaway, and noticed that the condo was a loft. High ceilings with strange symbols painted on it, few walls or other dividing devices, and mostly a lot of open space.

“Close the door, will you please?” Gwen said kindly. “The cats will get out.”

Cat did so, although she didn’t notice any cats immediately in the room. There was a bedroom where they could have been hiding, though.

“So,” Gwen continued, “how is your father?”

The question was like a knife to the gut for Cat. She couldn’t decide whether to pass out, scream in rage, or just walk out of this absurd situation and never look back. She tempered her reaction by remembering that Gwen had no way of knowing...even Lester had no way

of knowing...and that it was probably just polite conversation, but even so the presumption, the arrogance of the presumption, upset her.

“Which one?” she finally managed.

“You have more than one?” Lester asked.

“I was adopted. And to save time I’ll just go ahead and tell you that I never knew my birth father, or mother for that matter, and my adoptive parents are both dead. And good riddance,” she added attempting to change the subject through sheer shock value.

“I’m very sorry to hear it,” Gwen said, ignoring the obvious hint. “I take it you didn’t get along with them.”

“To say the least,” Cat replied tersely.

“But they loved you enough to take you in, raise you until you came of age,” Gwen persisted.

“If you could call it that,” Cat said. She was right on the edge of walking out. This went so far beyond just polite inquiries into one’s family. “What about your parents?” Cat shot back.

“They are alive and well and living in Peoria,” Gwen said.

“She doesn’t believe you,” Lester said.

“Ok, that’s it, I can’t take it anymore. Gwen, Lester said it was important that I meet you. Well, I’ve met you. And I have to say that I’m not that much richer for the experience. You’re a flake, you’re rude, and you’re obtuse if you couldn’t figure out that I didn’t want to talk about my parents. We’re here because I felt like I should tell you that Lester is acting really weird and as his psychologist I thought you should know that he’s telling people that he’s an empath. That’s not normal and I thought you could help him, but after not even five minutes talking to you I can see that you probably encourage this delusion through some kind of weird new age belief system you have. I’m surprised there aren’t crystals hanging from the ceiling and incense burning, but maybe I’ve caught you at a bad time or during spring cleaning or something. It would be just like you to do spring cleaning in the fall,” she finished, fuming, trying to find something better to end with than that last lame taunt.

Gwen sat there calmly and stared at her.

“Aren’t the water lilies lovely this time of the year?” she asked.

Cat gaped at her. “What are you talking about??”

At this point Lester stepped in. “Cat, there’s a few things you need to know about Gwen before this conversation goes any further.”

“Why am I not surprised? Ok, hit me with your best shot, c’mon, both barrels, let’s hear it.”

“First, she’s not just my psychologist, she’s my sister,” Lester began. “Second, because she’s my sister, she has a bit of that same metamorphic ability that I have, except that in her case she isn’t empathic, she’s psychic.”

“A psychic psychologist,” Cat repeated.

“Yeah. She helped me a lot when I was in high school and didn’t know whether I was experiencing my own teen angst or someone else’s.”

“Ok, go on. I’m not naïve enough to think that’s all.”

“She’s not really here right now,” Lester said. “In fact, she’s hardly ever here.”

“Of course. And where is she?”

“No telling at the moment. We don’t have enough context clues. But even if she were here, it wouldn’t be that much different.”

“And why is that?” Sarcasm dripped from Cat’s words like molasses.

“Because one of her psychic abilities is channeling other spirits. About ten years ago she channeled the spirit of a particularly strong-willed individual.”

“And she took on one of the characteristics of that person, didn’t she?”

“You make fun, but it’s really the truth,” Lester said, with one of the first hints of real impatience that Cat could remember coming from him. “She did indeed take on a characteristic of that person. But spirits don’t have physical traits, so she takes on parts of their minds. In this case a photographic memory.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The next full moon is going to be an interesting time for you,” Gwen offered.

“Oh, hi, Gwen. Nice to see you back,” Lester said.

“Oh, Lester,” Gwen began, but then stopped. “No, not this time. You’d better go,” she said, and then her eyes glazed over. “The shadows lengthen, the hand shakes, and the one to blame no longer walks the earth.”

“Come on, we’d better go,” Lester said. “We can come back later.”

“We just got here, and I still don’t have any answers!” Cat cried.

“Gwen said we had to go, and that means we have to go. We’re taking a huge risk if we don’t.”

“A risk of what?”

“Hearing something we’re not supposed to hear yet.”

And with that Lester once again grabbed Cat by the arm and guided her gently, but firmly, out the door. Once they were on the other side they heard the soft padding of footsteps and then the door was locked, the deadbolt thrown home, and the chain put back on the door.

“Come on, there’s a coffee shop downstairs. I’ll try to explain,” Lester said resignedly.

They started back down the corridor, but the lights flickered briefly. They paused to see if there was an immediate cause that could be determined, but there was none. Shrugging their shoulders the continued on. Neither of them noticed, during that brief interval of artificial dusk, the shadow that crept along the floor and under Gwen’s door.

## **Chapter Nine – History Lesson**

Maxwell leafed through the pages on the table. Each was blank, but each held a vital portion of his plan. He mentally checked them off.

What had happened to the old days? What had caused the mass extinction? Why were they not feared any more as they once had been?

Maxwell remembered a time when things actually existed. They weren't mere fairy stories to tell the children to frighten them at night for the amusement of the adults. They were feary stories, cautionary tales, sound advice about respecting your elders, and none were more elder than some of those that walked the earth in those days. When you outlive your competition, it's supposed to be easier.

But something had happened and they had slowly disappeared and nobody knew the cause. Some just gave up. They were traitors in Maxwell's eyes. Dominion rightfully belonged to the strong and the powerful and at the first sign of a stumbling block they had abdicated it, usurped themselves, and lain down to die. They lacked the will, he mused, staring at another blank sheet and etching his strategy on it with his mind. But I do not lack.

A wolf howled in the distance. Maxwell ignored it, but mentally noted that that was something that used to inspire fear. In some ways it still did. A primal part of the brain still remembered that a howl meant a wolf and a wolf meant teeth. These days it merely meant a chill running down the spine, but there was a time when that sound would have caused the men to reach for their guns and the women to reach for their children. Those days would come again, and that right soon. A howl, a moan, a screech, and a gurgle. Those would be the sounds that would herald the end of humanity's reign and the beginning of a new dark age.

Maxwell had no sense of pleasure or gladness. The only emotions he allowed himself were bitterness, rage, and a cold, calculation. It kept them away. They couldn't stand it and so they avoided him for miles around.

Except Lester. That was a problem for Maxwell. Lester was...if not immune, then certainly tolerant. Gwen could not have asked for a better protector. And then there was Cat.

Was it a coincidence that they had all been in that convenience store together that night? He had stopped in to check on Lester, to get a ... feeling for him, as it were. And there was Cat. She had no idea of her potential, what she could unleash if she knew what she was capable of, what type of influence she had.

Maxwell would have to teach her.

He gathered the papers together and placed them carefully in a folder, which he then stuffed onto a shelf with several other folders. None were labeled, but he knew exactly what was in

each of them. A record of his triumph, nothing more. Intended for others. Because he could never forget the path he had forged to lead to the coming success.

Closing his eyes, Maxwell breathed deeply. The first breath he had allowed himself that day. The muscles used to breathe used too much energy, but the cells needed oxygen to keep themselves going. Just not as much anymore.

## **Chapter Ten – Geneology**

The shadow flitted from corner to corner. The consciousness that resided within cursed its luck. For the last thousand years it had been mostly content to rest. There was so little left for it in this world and it savored the idea that the time would soon be over. One little dalliance, one little ray of ... hope? It could not remember anymore. It had not been so long ago, but the consequences had been severe. And were just now beginning to manifest their true scope.

Pausing, the shadow considered its situation. What obligation did it have to carry this out to its conclusion? Why all this effort, this fretting and worrying and plotting and counterplanning? Why not let Maxwell have his way? It would all be the same. At one time there had been no life on this planet and that time was coming again. What difference did it make how it happened, whether through natural phenomena or unnatural? What difference if it happened tomorrow or a hundred million years from now?

Several people passed by the shadow as it rested on the streetcorner behind a lamppost. They laughed and sang, clearly very drunk. A group of men and women having what appeared to be a very good time. The shadow reached out and touched each of their minds and recoiled.

Treachery. Deceit. Grudges held and revenges planned. Behind the mask of alcohol and the walls of everyday decorum lay a monster to rival anything from the old days. Perhaps the legends were true. Even amongst creatures such as the shadow there were myths and stories of demons who interbred with the humans. Perhaps that's what caused the extinction, but whether it did or not, it only took a brief glimpse into the minds of most humans to make the stories just a little more plausible. You could believe that the demons had done it despite the warnings. You could believe that they had left their mark. And they weren't the only ones, the shadow remembered.

The group moved on and the shadow released their minds. Let them wallow in their own mental pools of filth, it had another errand. The earlier stop at Gwen's had been instructive and useful, but costly as well. It had to find Lester and Cat again before Maxwell did.



Or did it? The uncertainty rose again. What responsibility did it bear towards either of them?

The shadow slid along the sidewalk, darting in and out of the gutter, making its way towards Lester's apartment, hoping they would be there, but continuing to wonder what difference it would make if they weren't.

## **Chapter Eleven – Sleeping Sickness**

The floor was a pool of lava, steaming and stinking of brimstone, the heat welling up and seeking to overwhelm him. The sweat poured out of his pores and he, in his desperation, wondered if there might be enough for him to collect and put out the fire, or at least to drink and slake his thirst. Could you stave off dehydration with your own perspiration? The time was coming when he might have to try to find out, if it wasn't too late.

Renzetti edged along the narrow ledge he was standing on. What had possessed him to think that he could reach the other side of the lava pool? He had seen something over there, something that he knew would give him the answers he needed, but he had to traverse the pit first, and he winced as he felt the rocks begin to crumble beneath his feet. The molten rock was only a few feet away. If he slipped there would be no time to react or to reflect. His life would have to pass before his eyes in the fast lane or not at all.

What had he seen that had made him take such a risk? It had been round and shiny. A crystal ball? But he didn't believe in crystal balls. Did he? He'd always been unorthodox in his methods before. Hadn't he consulted the psychic? The palm reader? Hadn't he had a numerology reading? Of course he believed in crystal balls. Why wouldn't he? And this one was going to show him the face of the murderer.

He closed his eyes and inched a little further along the ledge, feeling the rock with his feet and praying that it would hold just a little longer. Praying? Did he believe in that, too? Why not? Any port in a storm, as they say.

A deep rumbling vibrated the stones beneath his feet and he froze. He felt cold, despite the intense heat from the lava, and he waited for the end. The rocks held and he risked opening his eyes once again, just in time to see a bubble of noxious gas burst forth from the pool beneath him. The scent of sulphur and sulphur dioxide tore into his nasal passages, burning the mucous membranes. He felt himself losing consciousness as his immediate vicinity was robbed of oxygen and his knees sagged. Renzetti scrabbled at the rock, but the face was

sheer and there were no hand holds and in his stupor he felt himself topple forward. The lava raced towards his face, mere inches away...

*Take me down to the Paradise City  
Where the grass is green  
And the girls are pretty  
Oh, won't you please take me home...*

Renzetti awoke to the sounds of Guns N' Roses and had never been so glad to hear them in all his life. Reaching over for the snooze button he noted the time as 6:00am, time to get up. He rolled back over and determined that he was allowed another ten minutes to recover before facing his day, but quickly decided to get up after all because his sheets were soaked and therefore uncomfortably cold. Still shaken from the horrific dream he got up and walked unsteadily to the bathroom where he turned on the water and splashed a cold double handful on his face. He looked at his dripping face in the mirror and breathed heavily.

*Waking up this early should be a crime,* he thought. *But then I'd have to arrest myself.* He shook his head. Early morning logic came slowly and from strange directions. Time to get into the routine.

Systematically he shaved, showered, dressed, and then grabbed breakfast; a cold, untoasted bagel. Grabbing his hat he headed out the door to see what the day would bring.

Speaking of day, it was time to check in with Dawn. He drove quickly to the station and made his way to the lab where he was informed that Dawn wasn't there, which was odd. She was normally very punctual, as many scientists were. Maybe she had car trouble. A quick call to her cell, however, led only to voicemail. Renzetti left a short message and then went back upstairs to his office where he'd started a map with little pins just to appease his boss.

He'd seen cases cracked with such simple tools before. The pins made a pattern, which gave a clue to the killer's identity or range of operations, the police canvassed the area, showed pictures around, and sooner or later someone ratted him out. It had taken Renzetti all of about ten minutes to determine that this wasn't going to happen in this case. The pins were all over the place and, on a hunch, he'd pulled some missing persons and murder cases from nearby cities. There were a lot of unsolved cases out there, each of them having a great deal of difficulty identifying the victims. He'd made a note to contact the other trouble areas, but since there were about a dozen of them spread out over the surrounding five states and no telling how much further it went on from there he'd decided that he'd do it later.

Calling in the FBI at this point would probably have been a good idea, as the crimes had crossed state lines, but for some reason Renzetti couldn't work up the motivation. He would examine the board, examine the facts, and come to the conclusion that the FBI should be involved, and then he would pick up the phone and hear the dial tone and set it right back down. Looking at the phone he thought now would be a good time to try it again, so he went over and picked it up. The handle felt comfortable enough in his hand. He placed it to his ear and heard the dial tone. So far so good. He reached down to the touch tone keypad...and hesitated. It was still the right thing to do. Call them. It's easy. Every part of his body wanted to do it, but instead he placed the phone back on the cradle and walked over to the window.

Pausing, looking out over the city from the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, he wondered what had just happened and whether it had anything to do with the strange dream he'd had the night before. An experiment was called for. Walking back to the phone, he picked it up and dialed the lab. No problem with that. The line was answered on the other end by one of the lab techs who informed him that Dawn was still not in. Yes, they'd called her several times. No, she still wasn't answering. Yes, they'd left messages. Renzetti thanked the tech and hung up.

Two questions answered with a single phone call. He picked up the phone again and attempted to dial the FBI, but again his body rebelled at his instructions and he hung up. He walked back over to the map and searched the pins for his city for some pattern, finding none. He examined them for the state as a whole and found nothing. He scoured the entire region, trying to locate some recurring method, something that would indicate a clue, but the map sat there silently and revealed nothing.

Could the killer really be that smart? Every killer had a pattern, something that drove their actions, but what could it be? He turned and began to stalk out of the room. Some fresh air, that's what he needed. As he reached the door to his office he passed by a wooden book shelf. Renzetti didn't read much, but he kept books on hand as reference material when he was stumped in a case. Occasionally he would pick one up at random and leaf through it hoping for inspiration. It had never worked and he regarded it as a last resort and he wasn't there yet with this case, but as he opened the door and reached for the light switch his eyes fell on a Spanish to English dictionary and a thought struck him.

He glanced back at the map and a second thought struck him. The first was: maybe it's a symbol I don't recognize. The second, and more chilling, was: maybe he's not done with it yet. Renzetti turned out the light and walked out, closing the door behind him.

## **Chapter Twelve – Bean Counter**

Cat and Lester sat across from each other at the small table in the coffee shop. Lester had offered to pay for the drinks and Cat, remembering that she was currently unemployed, accepted. It felt uncomfortably like a date to her, except for the conversation they were having. A real date would be going better than this.

“Tell me one more time,” she said for the third time.

Lester looked at her. “You have to be kidding,” he said at last. “Which part don’t you understand?”

“All of it,” she said, she felt rather calmly under the circumstances.

“Fine,” Lester said, rolling his eyes. “They’re out of vanilla shots.”

“What kind of coffee shop is out of vanilla shots?” she cried a little too loudly. The staff at the counter glared at her for a moment, but returned to their work. They weren’t any happier about it than she was. The shipment had been delayed, but try telling that to a long line of caffeine junkies, a line which ebbed and flowed, but which had been collectively angry pretty much all day long. They were in no mood for a customer screeching it at the top of her lungs right next to them.

“Can we please move past this and talk about something more important,” Lester tried again. He’d been trying to steer the conversation back to Gwen for the last half hour, but Cat’s obsession with her vanilla shot was keeping her from focusing.

“But it’s just so...tasteless without it,” she grouched again.

“It’s also getting cold. Keep complaining and it’ll be cool enough that you can chug it like a shot and you won’t even notice.” Cat made a face at this suggestion.

Lester put his head down on the table. There was a situation of life and death and he hadn’t gotten the information he’d needed from Gwen and now he didn’t know when they could go back and try again. Tomorrow maybe. Maybe not even until the next day. And he hadn’t slept in a while. He had to find a way to get to bed, at least for a little while, so that he would be prepared for the difficult challenges ahead. Gwen never sent you away for fear of revealing something too soon unless it was really major. He didn’t have a clue what it might be, but he had a feeling he wouldn’t like it. Cat’s growing frustration about the coffee was also giving him a headache.

“Cat, let’s go back to my place and forget about the coffee. I need to sleep and I’m sure you do, too, and I’ll be glad to take the couch so you don’t think I’m up to anything.”

Cat snapped out of her obsession about the coffee long enough to shoot an angry look Lester’s way. “I’m not going anywhere with you until I get some answers.”

*Well*, thought Lester, *at least this is progress*. “What would you like to know?” he asked, hoping it would be something non-coffee related.

“What happened up there, let’s start with that one.”

“As I was saying right before she kicked us out, Gwen is a psychic metamorph. She’s taken on the characteristics of one of the spirits she’s channeled in the past.”

“And which characteristic would that be?”

“A photographic memory.”

“So what?”

“People with a true photographic memory have the capacity to store lots of information, but no way to process it. They can appear forgetful even though they have total recall because they have trouble accessing specific memories.”

“Ok, I’ll buy that, but what’s this business about hearing something we’re not supposed to hear yet?”

“In the spirit world time isn’t linear. Everything is all jumbled up, which is one of the reasons why contacting them is so difficult. You have to line the spirit up not just in space but in time as well. They have to be in the room with you and they have to be in the same time as you and that can be tough to arrange.”

“And?” If skepticism had been a physical object, Cat could have clubbed Lester over the head with that single word and he wouldn’t have regained his senses for a week.

“So they’re all over the place. Spirits routinely jump back and forth from the past to the present to the future. From what I’ve heard it’s kind of cool at first, but after a while it gets tedious because they have a very limited control over the process.”

“Ghosts can see the future.”

Lester sighed. "I know you aren't believing it, I can feel the doubt coming from you, but it's the truth. And since Gwen has a photographic memory, every time she channels a spirit she picks up everything it saw. Which means, in a roundabout way, that Gwen can see the future."

Cat screwed up her face for a moment. "I thought all psychics could see the future," she said.

"The word 'psychic' is a generic term to describe several different disciplines," Lester explained. "What you're referring to is a seer, and while all seers are psychic, not all psychics are seers. Some are clairvoyant, some are telepathic, some are pyrokinetic, and so forth. Gwen happened to be a channeler, but she's been turned into a kind of mockup seer because of her metamorphic properties."

"But she can't make sense of it."

"No, she can't. And so sometimes she blurts out things from the future that we're not meant to know yet. It's usually no big deal, but it can be very dangerous."

"I can relate. I can't make any sense of it, either," Cat replied caustically.

Lester rubbed his eyes. He didn't know how much more of this he could stand. He had to change the subject for a few minutes at least.

"I was sorry to hear about your parents," Lester said.

Cat frowned. "Not you, too," she said. "I thought I made it clear upstairs that I didn't want to talk about that."

"We don't have to talk about it," Lester said defensively. "I just wanted to offer my sympathy."

"Well don't bother. My adoptive parents were pricks and my birth parents weren't much better for giving up on me and handing me to those pitiful excuse for guardians. Parenting is supposed to be about nurturing the child, not tearing them down at every opportunity."

"Do you even know their names?"

“No, nor do I want to. I don’t care. I’ve moved on. And I wish you would, too,” she added.

“Fine,” Lester said. They sat there in silence for a few moments. Cat yawned.

“Are you sure you don’t want to head back to my place?” Lester ventured.

Cat didn’t respond right away. She thought about how tired she suddenly was and how far away her apartment was and how she really ought to just leave Lester here and let him get home by himself so she could get away from this entire ridiculous situation. She looked out the windows of the coffee shop and saw people walking around with suits and briefcases. Why couldn’t that be her? Did she really want it to be? Or did she have other plans that she didn’t know about yet? What kind of plan would involve being just above the poverty level all the time and living paycheck to paycheck on those rare occasions when she was even drawing a paycheck? She yawned again. So tired. Maybe just a quick nap at Lester’s place and then she could sneak out. And never see him again. That sounded good.

Lester waited for her reply and sensed the emotions she was emitting. She was weakening on a few points, the doubt was increasing and the frustration was falling. Human emotions were so complex, he mused. He could feel simple emotions from animals sometimes if they were really strong and close by. Contentment, fear, sometimes hunger which manifested as a kind of desperation. Fight or flight, that’s what was most common from an animal. Humans had an entire cocktail of feelings that came and went and swirled like the cream and sugar in the coffee. It could get confusing. Lester had had his ability from an early age and Gwen had certainly helped him condition it so that he could control it without being overwhelmed by strong emotions. But it wasn’t like reading minds. He hadn’t had the nerve to tell Cat yet that the reason why he knew the guy from the store the other day was going to kill someone was because he’d had no emotions at all.

“Fine,” Cat said at last. “But I’m not sleeping in your bed. I’ll take the couch.”

“Whatever,” Lester said, getting up and leaving a generous tip on the table.

They left the coffee shop and got into Cat’s car, driving north. Lester’s apartment was only a short distance away. Just as they pulled into the complex, if they had looked carefully, they might have noticed a shadow skulking away hurriedly, as if racing to get somewhere in time.

## **Chapter Twelve – Yonder Window Breaks**

Dawn woke up and was immediately surprised she'd woken up at all. She remembered very little of the night before, but what she did remember was unpleasant. Those unpleasant memories paled in comparison to the situation she was in currently, however. She felt the ropes digging into her wrists and ankles, and her mind was foggy from some drug. There was no gag and she attempted to cry out, but all that escaped her throat was a dry moan. Her energy was sapped and she couldn't think straight.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement and tried to lift her head for a better view, but her head swam and she fell into darkness again. Some time later, she had no perspective for how long it might have been, she woke again and tried to look around more slowly this time.

The room was utterly dark with only a dim glow from a streetlight penetrating the dirty, grubby windows. There was a stench that made her stomach churn and she was thankful for her hunger for it meant that there was less chance of her throwing up her dinner and having to lie in her own sick. She could hear footsteps nearby, heavy, shambling footsteps across wooden boards. Her face was pressed into the coarse wood telling her that she was in an older building that hadn't been properly kept up. Little things like that might come in handy during an escape attempt.

A fraction of her strength seemed to be returning. She tried crying out again, in case there was a neighbor or passer-by who might hear her and come to her aid, but only that soft, dry moan was audible. Not enough to be heard by anyone outside the room. Trying her bonds again revealed that her seeming return to strength was merely an illusion. She was tied fast and could only wait to see if whatever was affecting her would somehow wear off.

The nearby tread paused and she heard the clatter of glassware and metal utensils. A meal at this hour? But then she realized she had no concept of time. The outside area might be dark, but that left a large segment of night available and no way of knowing when it might be. She strained her ears trying to catch any of the night sounds that might give her a clue as to her whereabouts or the time of night, but she heard nothing definitive. The low, dry moan emanated from her throat again as she twisted once again in her bonds, ineffectually.

The clattering ceased and she heard the heavy footstep of solid boots approach her. She tried to turn her head to get a glimpse of her captor, but she felt dizzy again and put her head down in an attempt to not lose consciousness again. A strong, cold hand was placed on her head, just above her ear and slightly towards the back of her skull, pushing her head down and revealing her neck. The hand shook as it held her down, but its strength was greater than she'd expected. There was a scraping sound and then she felt a sharp stabbing pain in her neck. A few moments passed and the needle was removed from her neck. Her



panic rising, Dawn kicked feebly, but the hand held her head down on the table and she felt the sharp stab a second time. This time, apparently satisfied, the hand released her. She felt light-headed, even moreso than before, and heard the footsteps retreat. Somewhere in the distance a door closed.

### **Chapter Thirteen – Remote Control**

Gwen sat on her couch, staring at nothing, her brain in a constant state of processing all the information it was receiving. She had not slept in the traditional sense in the last six months, although her brain shut down periodically in order to dream and file the latest set of data it had been fed.

She pushed the memory of Lester and Cat's visit to the forefront of her thoughts. When did a prudent warning become a dangerous premonition? Lester had guided them out just in time, she decided. They would find out what they needed to know, but in due time.

Another part of her brain guided her through the spirit world. In her youth this had been difficult, but practice and maturity had made what had once been an insolvable labyrinth into little more than a time-consuming chore. She was seeking spirits who could tell her what might transpire.

Telling the future was always a dicey business, which was why it paid not to have too much information up front. You might count on something happening and then someone brushes someone else on the sleeve, old friends are reunited or a pocket gets picked and suddenly someone is delayed and that event you were expecting doesn't happen for another hour or possibly even not at all. It could be like waiting for Godot...you might spend all day doing it, but the man will never show up and then you missed another opportunity by not being somewhere else.

The misty corridors of the spirit world opened before her unseeing eyes, twisting this way and that, leading to her ultimate destination. The photographic memory helped. She had been this way before. Or one of her past or future selves had been here before. One danger she had not yet faced was the chance of meeting her own spirit. Because of the vagaries of time, she would be present in the spirit world in the future. What would happen if she met herself there? Would she remember? Of course she would. Assuming that doing so wouldn't cause her head to collapse.

Back in her apartment, her body smiled briefly at the notion. Her body rarely reacted any more. It needed neither food nor sleep nor water in great quantities and was slowly withering away. Ultimately all that would be left would be her mind, floating freely,

traveling through time and space at a whim. Physicists had it all wrong. Faster-than-light travel was necessary to fully explore the universe, but it was impossible...for matter and energy. For the mind it was child's play.

There were troubling things on the horizon. As she came closer to her goal she caught glimpses of alternate futures, a very few of which were acceptable for what modern society would call normal, but most of which were very bleak. The earth overrun by various forms of the dark creatures that once roamed the land in such great abundance. In some cases the entire solar system came under their dominion. And in every instance of the triumph of darkness, there stood Maxwell, with Lester at his side. Cat was nowhere to be found in any of these scenarios, but almost certainly either killed, enslaved, or imprisoned. She was certainly too dangerous to Maxwell's plans to be allowed to survive free. Her father remained an enigmatic figure.

Gwen paused in her search. She considered the law of unintended consequences and wondered if she might be getting too involved. Perhaps she should withdraw. She saw no evidence of her own influence in many of the possible futures, both good and bad, and considered the competence of Lester and Cat and Detective Renzetti. Ah, yes, the good Detective. Would that he would leave well enough alone. But he, too, had a part to play.

At last she reached her destination. Back in her apartment some long held but dormant need for hospitality awoke. Her body rose and made its way to the kitchen where it prepared tea and other refreshments for two visitors.

## **Chapter Fourteen – Adaptation**

Lester awoke gradually and rolled over to look at the time. 6:00pm. Too early to get up. He pulled the sheets up over his shoulder and buried the side of his face in the pillow and allowed his mind to wander. Cat needed to believe, and she needed to believe today because they were running out of time for endless conversations about whether what he told her was true or not. There was a sneaking suspicion running through his mind about what the killer might be planning and if he was right then he'd need to work up a plan for what to do about it if they couldn't stop it. Unfortunately he was coming up short on that front and then dozed off again.

He tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable, riding the edge of sleep where the mind is awake but the body isn't ready to go yet. When he checked the time again he was sure hours must have passed, but it was only 6:15pm. He cursed silently and decided to go ahead and get up.

Padding out to the living room of his apartment he saw Cat still asleep on the horrible yellow couch he owned. The fabric was a very coarse weave and uncomfortable to sleep on, but he had given her a thick brown blanket and a sheet and she had doubled them up like a makeshift sleeping bag. Or a burrito, he thought, realizing he was hungry. He wondered if he could make breakfast for himself without disturbing her. Frankly, he was enjoying the time alone without having to argue with her. Maybe some cereal.

Lester crossed to the kitchen cabinets, opened one, and extracted a green plastic bowl which he set on the counter. One of his cats instantly jumped up on the counter, looking at him expectantly. Lester shot the cat a look and put him back down on the floor. He then went to the pantry and got out the box of corn flakes, pouring himself a generous helping and then resealing the box. His other cat jumped up on the counter and stuck his nose in the bowl. Lester calmly put him back down in the floor. It was like a ritual with the three of them. Cat stirred briefly on the couch as Lester reached into the drawer for a spoon and he froze, but she quickly fell back asleep.

Lester paused in his breakfast preparations to look at her. Sleeping humans were the easiest emotions to read and he could often tell more about a person after five minutes of watching them sleep than he could after years of knowing them. Cat's emotions were still a jumble of doubt and confusion, but layered with guilt and loneliness. It took a special kind of person, even in hard economic times, to even apply for the night shift at a convenience store. Lester could see now that she was that kind of person. The kind of person who wasn't going to take shit from anybody and could hold her own against the weirdos who came in there, but also a loner who wouldn't mind the long, tedious hours where nobody came in at all.

Absently he reached up and felt the fangs which still grew from his mouth. Eating the cereal today was going to be a bit different, he decided. With that thought he turned from Cat and made for the refrigerator, removing the milk, and closing the door. He waited exactly five seconds, put the newly arrived cats on the floor, and then opened the carton, drowning the innocent baked flakes heavily before replacing the carton in the refrigerator.

Absentmindedly he crunched his breakfast, contemplating his next move. He longed to get back to Gwen for guidance, but could think of no way to return there without risking a temporal paradox. They'd experienced one just once, and luckily it had been pretty minor, but it had left him with a headache and a sprained wrist that didn't heal for weeks. On this issue he worried that the consequences would be more severe.

Nearby on the couch, Cat dreamed. She found herself flying over a darkened landscape. Small white dots marked the occasional fire, sometimes several in a group, and she fancied she could just make out tiny figures gathered around each one. Small settlements. They

looked so far away that she strained her eyes to try to see them more clearly and was concentrating on them so intently that she nearly didn't see the castle looming before her. She dodged just in time and looked back at it. The crumbling edifice looked like every stereotypically haunted castle that literature had ever produced. Suddenly she found herself in a cloud, a dense, dark, rain-filled cloud and was instantly soaked by the water droplets therein. A rumble of thunder greeted her and then a sharp crack as lightning stabbed out of the cloud down to the castle below.

As she watched, the lightning hit the tallest tower and a swarm of bats emerged from one of the basement doors and, not long after, a shambling figure lurched out of the main entrance. The clouds parted to reveal a full moon and a howl to chill the mind and soul was audible from the landscape below. Smaller figures raced along the landscape, and all of these things began to converge on the countryside with the small fires. The monsters of legend were on their way to feast upon the weak and helpless.

But as they got there, each threat was rebuffed. The bats wheeled and scattered, the lurching figure was stopped in its tracks, and the wolves broke off and headed for the hills. She breathed a sigh of relief, but then noticed two other shadows, indistinct in form, creeping and oozing over the hillsides. And when they reached the campfires they slowly engulfed them. The fires burned, but with their edge and their sparkle gone.

Something was wrong. The sensation of flying was replaced by one of falling, plummeting towards the ground, right into the heart of the oozing shadow, which she knew was waiting for her. She felt eyes upon her and an expectation and a tendril snaked its way up to greet her as she fell to meet it. A panic took her, and she awoke.

"Pleasant dreams?" Lester asked.

Cat glared at him. Her eyes had shot open, she was breathing heavily, and she was drenched in sweat.

"It was a rhetorical question," Lester continued. "You've been tossing and turning for the last ten minutes and you've been scared out of your mind."

"How do you know?" she shot back. This was not her idea of a wake up call. First she has a scary dream and then she has to deal with the smart aleck know it all? No thanks. Lester returned to his cereal, which was beginning to get soggy.

After the initial shock, however, Cat began to calm down. She glanced at Lester, calmly chewing his breakfast, and began to realize that the dream had meant something. The evil

that Lester had described hadn't gone away, it had merely enmeshed itself with humanity. Mesh...now why did that word ring a bell for her? She frowned and tried to remember, but couldn't put her finger on it.

"You want something?" Lester asked. "Cereal, milk, juice?"

"Just some toast, if you have it," Cat said, standing up unsteadily.

"You got it," Lester replied, getting up to find the bread and butter. He put one of the cats back on the floor and opened the tub of margarine.

"Nice cats," Cat said for the sake of conversation.

"Thanks. The grey one is Tom and the orange one is Dick."

"You got a third one hanging around here somewhere," Cat said, smirking.

"No, they're both Hairy," Lester replied without humor.

Cat grinned briefly, but the mirth quickly faded when she realized that that third cat had probably died.

Lester shrugged at her unspoken comment. "It's ok. You can stop feeling sympathetic."

Cat's grin, already on its way out, shifted gears and became a frown. "I told you to cut that out," she said.

"Sorry," Lester said, putting the buttered bread in the toaster oven and turning the dial.

"Lester," Cat began, but then stopped.

Lester made no reply, but tipped his cereal bowl up to drink the last of the milk.

"I need you to tell me more about the ...the way things used to be," she finished lamely.

"What's to tell?" Lester asked. "Once upon a time there were evil things and now there aren't. Well, at least not as many."

"But what happened to them? How many are left?"

“Nobody is really sure,” Lester replied. “But you used to see them everywhere just a few thousand years ago.”

“Says who?”

“Gwen,” Lester said simply. “The near-extinction of these supposedly mythical creatures is a big mystery for the ones that are still left. It’s in all of our best interests to find out how and why it happened.”

“What exactly are we talking about?”

Lester shrugged again. “Vampires, werewolves, succubi, demons, imps, fairies, gnomes, and sprites just for starters. And those are just the ones that could be found in North America. The Asian areas had a whole pantheon of them, too, including an entire subset of water related creatures, including kappas. Some are still hanging in there. Obviously we’ve still got vampires,” he said, indicating his overgrown teeth, “and there’s the odd imp or fairy fluttering around, but succubi went extinct just three years ago. Gnomes haven’t been seen in the wild for about the last ten, although every now and then someone comes up with some other kind of physical evidence.”

“Like what, a pointy hat?” Cat said derisively.

“Not exactly,” Lester said. “Remember, all the stories you’ve ever heard have been majorly watered down by now. Nobody really tells it like it is anymore because they don’t have to. Why scare your kids if there really is nothing to be afraid of in the dark anymore?”

“And what about the rest?”

“Well, the list is kind of long, really, but out of the ones I named, the werewolves are hanging on by a thread. Hunting may have finally gotten them, pelts and all that. Demons disappeared thousands of years ago. One of the first ones to go, actually. That’s one of the bigger mysteries because demons were supposed to be really powerful and cunning.”

“What about all the other fantastic things kids read about? Were they all real? Dragons? Aliens? Zombies?”

“Dragons were domesticated a while back. That’s what komodo dragons are, really. They lost the ability to breathe fire and the ones that had wings didn’t do so well in captivity, so now there’s just the one species. Aliens...your guess is as good as mine. Not really in the same category.”

Lester paused. “There’s no such thing as zombies,” he finished unconvincingly.

“But these things are still dangerous, Lester, why is this such a big secret? If we could convince everyone that some of them still exist then we could get everyone together and wipe them out. Wouldn’t that be good?”

“I’m glad you’re coming around to believing in this stuff,” Lester said, checking to make sure he wasn’t missing anything in her feelings. She seemed sincere. He wondered where the change came from. “There’s a big internal debate among those of us who still know about them. There are those you feel like you do that they should be wiped out, but there are others who feel like they’re an important part of our overall psyche as a species. Would fear still exist without them, is the argument.”

“So what if it didn’t?”

“Can you even imagine a world without any fear at all? Think about it. The fear of death is what enables us to survive. Why do you think there’s a survival instinct in every living creature on this planet today?”

“Um...I don’t know,” Cat admitted.

“Because the ones that didn’t have one didn’t live long enough to reproduce. Those were the ones who stayed out in the open when large predators were nearby or whose curiosity made them jump off the cliff to see what was at the bottom. The ones who feared dying made the necessary adjustments to try to avoid it. And that’s what we’re talking about here. No fear means no fear of dying, which means that every living thing suddenly starts making really bad decisions.”

“But can’t they be controlled?” she asked, grasping at straws.

“Some can. There’s a camp of imps somewhere in Africa, but there’s pressure to shut it down.”

“Why?”

“Because imps are an invasive species. If even one escaped they could outcompete pretty much anything in that area, including the native evil creatures.”

“But if they’re that powerful, why don’t they take over everything now? I don’t understand that.”

“Numbers, basically. They’re all held in check because there aren’t many of them left. They’ve got their own survival instinct.”

Cat tried to take it all in. “So what you’re saying is that even supernatural creatures are subject to natural selection.”

“They’re not really supernatural,” Lester said. “They’ve just gotten that reputation. But yeah, the bottom line is that something happened somewhere along the line and humans were able to adapt to it and a lot of other non-human things weren’t.”

“So what does all of this have to do with us?”

“Well, I had been hoping that Gwen could tell us, but unfortunately it looks like she could tell us a lot more than we needed to know, so we’re actually kind of back to square one. The killer is clearly a vampire, as evidenced by my new dental work, but he’s not like any vampire I’ve ever encountered before.”

“Do we know what he’s been up to lately?”

Lester shrugged. “Killing people, probably. Maybe turning them into vampires, it’s hard to say.”

“Can we turn on the TV and see if it’s on the news? And do you have any aspirin, I’m starting to get a headache.”

Lester crossed over to the coffee table and picked up the remote and tossed it to Cat. Then he went to the pantry to get the aspirin. The cats were nosing around the oven. “Get away from there,” he said, shooing them away. They meowed plaintively at him. “There’s nothing in there you like,” he said.

Cat turned the TV on and tuned to one of the local stations, trying to find the evening news as Lester shook out two aspirin and filled a glass with water. As he brought them over he heard the news anchor giving the report.

“Today marks day twenty three of the reign of terror by the mysterious Phantom Killer,” he began. “I’m Mark Peale.”



“That’s why I can’t stand the local news,” Lester grouched. “It’s all sensationalism. If it had been a real phantom it wouldn’t have killed anybody. They’re pretty neutral.”

Cat ignored him and continued watching the newscast where they were detailing all the deaths that had been attributed to the Phantom Killer and the new rash of missing persons. Originally the bodies had turned up with all of the identifying marks removed, including the head, hands, and feet of the victims. The rest of the body was just dumped. It was ingenious. DNA records weren’t complete enough to use that method for identification reliably and without fingerprints, footprints, facial recognition or dental records it was turning into a real nightmare for the police. Equally mysterious was the lack of blood in each of the bodies and the fact that the rest of the parts never turned up anywhere.

After a while that MO faded away and was replaced by easily identifiable bodies, each drained of all their blood. Two puncture wounds on the neck baffled police.

“Vampire,” Lester said. “Although it’s not like them to kill so frequently and be so careless about it. He must be gorging himself for some reason.”

“Quiet, I’m watching this,” Cat replied.

“In the most recent development,” the newscaster went on, “people are going missing, leaving no trace. While a few of them could be attributed to the normal crime rate, runaways, kidnappings, and other more mundane activities, the number of people who have vanished is too great to be just a coincidence. The police are looking for clues to tie these potential victims to the Phantom Killer, but at this point their greatest lead is that all of the killer’s other activities seem to have ceased. This word from Detective Scott Renzetti.”

The camera cut to stock footage of Renzetti, looking uncomfortable in front of the camera.

“The police are doing all we can to bring this killer to justice.”

“Detective, how many people have been victimized so far?”

“Unofficially we have assigned as many as 200 cases to this individual. Until we have someone in custody, however, and all the facts can be established, it is difficult to be absolutely certain which ones he is responsible for and which ones he isn’t. Investigations are ongoing.”

“Have you ruled out cult activity at all?”

The careful observer to the video might have noticed Renzetti rolling his eyes, but the moment was short lived before he replied, “We haven’t ruled anything out. At this point anything is possible.”

“But 200 victims just in the last two months? Isn’t that a lot for someone who isn’t leaving many clues behind?”

“Yes, it is, but it is not within the realm of the impossible.” A man appeared at Renzetti’s side and handed him a piece of paper, which the detective opened and read. “Pardon me,” Renzetti concluded, and walked hurriedly off.

The stock video ended and cut back to the anchor. “Late this afternoon Detective Renzetti received an anonymous tip. We now go live to the investigation as it unfolds.”

The feed cut to an exterior shot, late evening, outside an apartment complex.

“Here we see Detective Scott Renzetti with a squad of officers preparing to conduct a raid on a suspect’s home,” the on-site reporter said.

“That place looks familiar,” Cat mused absently.

“It should,” Lester said. “It’s this complex.”

One of the cats meowed.

“What now?” Lester cried. “Get away from that oven.”

“What’s that smell, Lester?” Cat asked, suddenly returning to the present.

Lester opened the oven door revealing the gruesome sight of a number of decaying heads, hands, and feet, each stuffed into plastic bags, staring out at them from inside the oven. Lester stared back at them in disbelief and shut the oven door quickly.

“It’s you!” Cat cried in panic.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Lester responded. “You still trust me!”

Cat flinched at this intrusion into her emotions. “I said stop that!”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Lester said, looking around and trying to think. “Why do familiar places always present the greatest problems getting out of?” he muttered.

“Lester Curious,” came a voice over a bullhorn outside. “We know you’re in there,” continued Renzetti. “Come on out!”

“Shit,” Lester swore. A glaze came over his eyes for a moment and he twitched violently once. “There’s about a dozen of them, armed, and they’re all keyed up and nervous.”

“They can join the club,” replied Cat calmly. They weren’t after her.

“If you have Cat in there with you, bring her out with you unharmed!” Renzetti called over the amplifier.

“They think I’m a hostage!” Cat chuckled. She was enjoying seeing Lester be just a little out of control of the situation.

“It’s not funny,” Lester shouted, and then stopped. He closed his eyes for a moment and seemed to be counting under his breath.

“Counting to ten?”

“An empath senses others emotions. I have to keep control over mine so I don’t broadcast them as well. It can set up a feedback loop and then it’s all over for anyone in the vicinity.”

Cat looked nervous. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Lester replied calmly. “I had to spend five years in training trying to learn it and then Gwen conditions me every day to stay in control.”

“Come on out, Lester,” called Renzetti again.

Lester tried to remember everything about the complex. What loopholes were there, where to hide, how to get away. Of course he had an advantage; he could sense the anticipation of the police as they got closer. Right now all he was picking up was a general nervousness. Nobody knew how the situation was going to play out. At last Lester decided on plan of action. It was risky, but not as risky as staying here would be. He ran over to a lamp, turned a dial on a timer connected to it, and then stood up and headed for the door.

“Come on,” Lester said, grabbing Cat by the wrist. She wrenched away, glared at him for a moment, and then followed him out the door.

Lester had a key to his upstairs neighbor’s apartment so he could look after his dog while he was on vacation. Luckily, this was one of those times. They ran upstairs, unlocked the door, and ducked inside.

“We know you’re in there, Lester. We saw you walk by the window a while ago. Now come out or we’re coming in after you,” Renzetti called, the impatience in his voice beginning to show.

Lester and Cat glanced furtively out the windows to see the positions of the officers. At this height they had a better vantage point and could see that the police had the building surrounded, but that they were fairly spread out. If they chose the right route they had a chance. At that moment the timer went off on Lester’s lamp and it turned itself off.

Down below Renzetti swore under his breath. Turning the light out meant he was digging in for a fight. Watching through the window, Lester and Cat could see Renzetti talking into his radio. They took that moment of distraction and ran to the back of the apartment and raised the window in the back, which looked out into a large tree that rose to this height. The first solid branch was several feet away, but with the proper distraction they decided they might make it. And then they got their chance.

Renzetti, fearful that Lester would use the cover of darkness to try to escape, drew a couple of officers into the building to cut off that avenue of escape. Unfortunately it was, of course, already too late as Lester and Cat were already one floor higher than he’d anticipated. As the officers repositioned themselves, Lester and Cat took the chance to leap into the nearby tree. The leaves and branches rustled and Lester cursed the autumn, but the officers on the ground took no notice.

“You jump like a cat,” Lester whispered jokingly. Cat smirked and glanced down, hanging onto the tree a little tighter.

“How are we going to get down?” she whispered back.

Lester glanced around and then began to climb higher.

“What are you doing?” Cat hissed. “The ground is down there!”

Lester silently motioned her to follow and climbed a few more branches. When Cat finally reluctantly followed they were even with the roof of the building. Lester pointed to the officers below.

“When Renzetti sees we’re not really in there he’ll call the rest of them in to look for clues. Sadly, they will find them, but we’ll use that time to make a break for it.”

Cat nodded sadly. She wanted out of the tree as soon as possible, but she didn’t have any other ideas. From inside the building they could hear shouting, followed by silence, and then a loud crash as Lester’s door was broken in.

“I hope they don’t let the cats out,” he muttered. “The last time they got out they had fleas for a month.”

The officers below stirred, listening to their radios, and then made their way into the building shaking their heads.

“Now,” Lester whispered, heading down the tree as silently as possible. Cat followed quickly.

When they reached the bottom, Lester hid behind the trunk for a moment. “The coast is clear,” he finally announced, making his way across the lawn and towards the nearby treeline. About 40 yards ahead there were some sparse woods. If they could make it there then they would have an excellent chance of making their escape. But to where? Cat’s car was no longer an option, Gwen’s apartment might not be safe. Where else could they go and how would they get there?

“There’s a guy over there looking for us,” Lester said, making a sharp turn. “He doesn’t see us yet, but I can feel his anticipation of finding us.”

They stole quickly across the grass, making the treeline just as Renzetti emerged from the building. Had they been any closer, Lester would have felt the anger burning off of him.

## **Chapter Fifteen – Runed Facade**

The building sat silently, menacingly, as if daring any passers-by to stop and look at it. There was faded wood, peeling paint, and dry rot. There was tradition to observe, after all. Rituals get that way for a reason, because in some capacity they actually work. They achieve the goal, even if the goal is merely to make the person performing it feel better.

Maxwell paced within the building. So much to prepare, so much to make sure was perfect. But all the effort would be worth it. A return to the old days. The old days were always better. You could ask any generation and they would all tell you the same thing. More passion, more tradition, more ritual, all of those things which held everything together.

He dipped the brush into the red liquid and traced the design on the floor. He'd done the ceiling earlier, which had been the most difficult part. He'd been looking forward to getting it out of the way, but it had also been a mistake. There had been a lot of dripping and he hadn't had a drop cloth. It was the little things that made the difference between an easy job and a difficult job.

But it would all be worth it.

Pausing in his efforts for a moment, Maxwell allowed himself a moment's reminiscence. He remembered the first time he had died. It had been over a thousand years ago. By then humanity was supposed to have been civilized. The standards by which that civilization had existed was purely academic because there was nothing civilized about that time by modern standards. He had been taken as a sorcerer, a necromancer, and put to death by slow torture.

There had been water and fire, smoke and steam, wood and earth and iron. He shivered with the memory. It had been, of course, unpleasant at the time, but the world that it opened for him had been so expansive that he would do it again without hesitation. In fact he often wondered if there were any way at all to go through it all again just to get that moment of discovery, that moment of pure joy when all troubles fell away and the mysteries were solved and the path became clear.

The spirit has no weight and so he left no impression on the Earth as he wafted away from his mortal prison and began to see the world as it truly was. He saw the evil creatures that ruled the world in secret in those days. They ruled through fear, they ruled through power, and they ruled because it was their right. But by that point the extinction was already in progress. It had begun countless thousands of years before and was proceeding slowly, but inevitably to the conclusion.

What was the common element that united all these creatures that made them so vulnerable to the way the world was changing? Why were so many other creatures unaffected and thriving while these, the powerful were withering? The ones who knew all the answers were dying and he felt powerless to stop it, even in his new enlightened ghostly form.

He would stop it. He would bring them back. He studied them, interviewed a few, and learned all he could from folklore and from the creatures themselves. Many of the ones he had spoken to had given up hope, but that way stemmed from weakness. There was a solution and he would find it.

Maxwell began by setting up preserves where he thought he could better protect the creatures. Designated zones where they would have no interaction with mortals apart from what was absolutely necessary on the assumption that contact with the humans was causing them to die off. A kind of allergic reaction. It hadn't worked and he slowly lost the wraiths. The first extinction he had actually witnessed.

His next step was to try to revive the stories amongst the humans. If they could fear the creatures again then perhaps they could thrive once more. He succeeded here and there was a brief increase in the overall population, but the stories changed and became less fearful. People stopped believing in them and stopped fearing them and the decline began again. Was fear the missing ingredient? But even when faced with their fears and the indisputable proof of their existence the creatures still failed. The banshees were the next to go. Maxwell was inconsolable for years.

Plan after plan, scheme after scheme had all failed to stop the decline, the ruin, the decimation of the overall populations. And then it had struck him. Humans were surviving because they were adapting to changing conditions. The dark creatures, the undead, the fearsome beasts of yore were remaining unchanged. They were doomed and there was nothing he could do for them but prolong their existence for a time. Ultimately they would all fail, and his own existence would eventually be unsustainable because he would be unable to adapt himself. The answer lay in creating a new type of creature that had not previously existed that would be able to dominate the landscape. There were stories about them, just as there were stories about everything that the human imagination could conceive, but they did not actually exist. He would create them. And through them the powerful would regain their rightful place on this world.

Maxwell permitted himself a small smile at this thought. The plan had been formed only a few years ago and he was already so close to achieving his triumph. There were preparations to be made, of course, and obstacles to overcome, but the goal was in sight. He would succeed.

Dipping the brush back into the red liquid, he continued his work. It wouldn't be long now.

## **Chapter Sixteen – Suspected Reflected Detected**

Renzetti was furious. He was livid. And he was a lot of other words that he'd have to consult a thesaurus to come up with.

"How could they get away?" he asked. He'd passed through the raging stage, keeping that all internal. There was no point in yelling at your people forever. They'd never respond favorably to it.

"Are we sure they were in there?" asked one of the junior officers.

"We saw them walk in front of the window. The light went off. How could that happen if they weren't here?" Renzetti asked impatiently.

"We did find the timer on the light," the officer offered.

"Who sets a timer for a light to turn off ten minutes after it's turned on? He obviously adjusted it after he knew we were out there."

"Do you suppose the news coverage was a mistake?"

"Brilliant deduction, Holmes," Renzetti said caustically. He'd been against that from the beginning, but the PR geniuses at the station had insisted that because of the visibility of the case it was important for them to look like they were doing something. The whole city, indeed several cities, were getting a black eye because they hadn't managed to catch the killer yet and they thought that a public arrest would go a long way towards fixing that image, even if it turned out Lester was innocent. A quiet settlement could be made to go away from the public eye, but not doing anything was starting to look bad for them.

"What's the next move, boss?"

"Process the crime scene," Renzetti said.

He watched his men move into action. The evidence seemed pretty damning with the body parts in the oven. He listened to the cats meowing plaintively from the other room. They'd had to shut them in to keep them from escaping and he certainly didn't want them underfoot. Animal control could be called later, but for now he was content to let them just sit in one of the side rooms with the door closed.

The evidence seemed so damning. Why didn't he trust it? Where else could it lead but back to Lester? He picked up a trinket off the coffee table and examined it briefly, but put it



back down. Now was the time to do things by the book and this room hadn't been processed by the forensics folks yet. There was no call to contaminate the crime scene more than it had been already.

Scanning the room he placated himself with a visual examination. The décor was unusual, but not macabre. There were no pentagrams on the walls, no notebooks being kept by a disordered mind, no candles dribbling, no signs of a struggle or other remains apart from the gruesome discovery in the oven. And no tools with which to carry out such an amputation. There were two obvious conclusions. One, he had another base of operations or two, he was innocent and being framed. Renzetti chided himself for silently wishing for the former option to be true. It would be simpler, but he suspected that the latter was more likely.

That raised questions of its own. Who and why were the two biggest ones that sprang to mind. He didn't even know where to start. Finding Lester might be good, but he couldn't blame him for running. It was the only logical choice. The question was how did he do it?

Questions pelted Renzetti's mind one after the other, but answers seemed to be on vacation. He watched as the rest of the team came in to process the room. Carefully photographing everything, checking for fingerprints, collecting minute samples of hair and fibers for later analysis. He knew that every single one of these samples would be compared to the remains in the oven and with what little had been found on the bodies. Those had been scrubbed pretty clean, but a few fragments had been found. Nothing conclusive or even helpful, of course, but all things considered everyone had gotten pretty excited about them nevertheless.

His mind wandered and, unbidden, came to rest on the memory of his dream. Finding the answer would be dangerous, he'd concluded after finally waking up enough to process the memory. But that wasn't news. Any investigation carried a certain amount of risk, ones with murderers even more so, and high profile cases were the most dangerous of all. The danger didn't come from the killer as often as it did from those following the investigation. Some were sympathetic to the killer's cause, if there was one, and others just didn't like the police. More than one cop had been killed in the course of an investigation in his lifetime, but it wasn't talked about much. It was like a jinx.

"What do you want to do now, Detective?" asked the young officer.

Renzetti snapped out of it. "Jones, I think I'm going back to my office. This is going to take hours and I don't believe I'm just going to happen to glance down and see anything relevant. I'll get the reports in the morning."

Officer Jones looked startled. “Are you sure, Detective?” This was completely out of character for Renzetti, who had a reputation on the force for sticking around a crime scene until the bitter end, when the tape was put up and the neighbors shooed away. The general consensus was that he’d either read one too many bad detective comics where the hero really did just happen to see something at random or that he was just crazy. Or both.

Renzetti shook his head. His mind felt cloudy. Why had he been reminded of the danger of his dream? Was something influencing him, making him overly cautious and deterring him from his investigation? But he was tired and fighting wasn’t in him tonight. It would all be there in the morning, right?

“Tec?” asked Jones, looking concerned. “You ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Renzetti lied. He needed to lie. Lie down, that is. Turning from the bewildered Jones, Renzetti staggered to his car. Maybe he’d let his anger get to him and his body was making him pay the price for it.

Getting into his car, Renzetti started the engine and pulled away from the apartment complex, heading for the highway and home. Forget going into the office, he was going home. He revved the engine and sped along the darkened streets, his eyelids feeling heavy and his head drooping forward. A lamppost loomed in front of him and he veered out of the way just in time. The adrenaline rush woke him up briefly, but it’s effects were short lived and he soon found himself with his eyes unfocused and fatigue eating away at his will to stay awake and alert until finally he slumped forward in the seat, losing control of the car.

The vehicle sped along for a few moments before beginning to drift to one side. Just before he would have crashed into the concrete barrier on the side of the interstate a shadow flitted in the corners of the car, rising up and enveloping the steering wheel, righting the car and guiding it onto the curb. Renzetti did not stir as the shadow glided away under the glow of the streetlights and the passing cars.

## **Chapter Seventeen – A Spirited Resistance**

“You realize, of course, that we cannot partake,” said General Roset.

“Of course,” Gwen replied, “but there are certain rituals of politeness and hospitality that should be observed, even if just for the look of the thing.”

“Well, I think it’s a treat and no mistake,” said Ma Schmidt. “Haven’t had a proper cuppa in ages!”

“And you won’t be now,” retorted the General. He was unhappy at having been roped into this meeting, but Gwen had found a way to restrain certain spirits long enough for a polite conversation. Her body reached for the kettle and poured herself a cup.

“Cream and sugar?” she asked.

“Don’t mind if I do, dearie.”

“I’ll pass,” the General said icily.

“Suit yourself,” Gwen said, getting out the sugar tongs and helping herself to two lumps.

“Can we get this over with?” the General asked impatiently.

“Really, there’s no need to be so rude,” Ma replied. Her accent was hard to place, but she’d brought her knitting, or at least the memory of her knitting.

“Tell me about yourselves first,” Gwen said. Her photographic memory had already noted a number of important details about the pair of them including their general demeanor and the things they had brought with them from life. Ma’s knitting, the General’s helmet and medals, Ma’s shawl, and the General’s monocle. Nearly every other feature about them was a shapeless, formless mist but they had kept a degree of structure around the objects and features that they most closely identified with in life.

“Very well,” grumbled the General. “I am General Roset, first Commander of the Ninth Legion in the Interstellar War of 2509. I successfully led the first cyborg troops against the invaders from Vamtransia in the Battle of the Moon.”

“You are not, you old liar,” Ma piped up. “He’s my neighbor from downstairs,” she went on. “Read a bit too many science fiction novels and watched too many war movies,” she finished with a whisper.

The General grumbled, but issued no strong denial.

“I’m Carol Schmidt, but everyone just calls me Ma,” Ma went on.

“I am in desperate need of both of your help,” Gwen announced, cutting to the chase. “My body currently resides in your past, but through my gift of communicating with the spirits I may touch the past, present, and future.”

“Your reputation precedes you, Gwen,” the General replied haughtily. “Gwen the powerful, Gwen the wise. Gwen the incurably nosy.”

Gwen glared at him. “If I must wear the label of nosy in exchange for preserving life as we know it on the planet Earth, then so be it.”

“Gwen the self-important, egotistical, arrogant busybody,” the General said. “How do you like that one?”

“I don’t,” she replied coldly. “But I shall live with it.”

“How can we help?” Ma asked kindly.

“Tell me how things were in your time before your passing.”

“Awful,” the General interjected. “Can we go now?”

“He’s not far off, dearie,” Ma added. “The plague was just terrible.”

“The plague? Plague of what?”

The spirits looked uneasy. “We don’t like to speak of them, even in our current state,” Ma said, gesturing to her incorporeal form. “There are stories, you see, of Them coming to find the ones who got away.”

“Got away?”

“When they kill you, your spirit can’t actually leave and go anywhere. You’re trapped on the plane with them. It was Maxwell’s greatest triumph, creating a new unstoppable creature and repopulating one of the old ones all in one fell swoop,” the General supplied. “The only way out was to...” he paused. “Die some other way,” he finally finished.

“So Maxwell succeeded,” Gwen said.

“In spades,” the General said sarcastically. “He didn’t just succeed, he completely crushed any opposition to his goals. Speaking as a military expert,” he went on, sparing a withering look at Ma, “it was one of the most brilliant strategic plans I’ve ever seen. Well executed as well,” he finished.

Gwen listened to the windy, reedy voices all around her. Other spirits were eavesdropping on their conversation. Could the spirits feel fear? The General and Ma certainly seemed to. She had her suspicions about what could cause such a thing, but she needed proof. This was why she had sought out these spirits in the first place. There were so few from that time period for the very reason that had been outlined to her. She must know. But how to get them to tell her?

“You must have been very brave to take your own lives to escape them,” Gwen offered.

“Some say the brave ones were the ones who stuck it out. Lots of us got called cowards for taking what they called the easy way out,” Ma said, a twinge of shame edging her voice. “I never did like confinement, though, and decided to take some kind of action.”

“Had these creatures ever walked the planet before?”

“Not in living or unliving memory,” the General replied. “It was as though Maxwell conjured them up from nothing. They aren’t like golems or robots or any other form of artificial life. They hold the spirit that used to live inside them and won’t let it go, but the spirits won’t re-enter the bodies. The evil that resides there forces them out with a putrescence that is unbearable.”

“And what about Lester?” asked Gwen.

“Lester? Never heard of him.”

“Wait, I did. They arrested him just after it all happened,” Ma said. “They said he could have stopped it but didn’t. He just sat there and let them do it, too. Like he didn’t care about anything, couldn’t feel anything at all. No remorse, no regret, no guilt, no nothing. Poor dear looked like a real shell of a man.”

There was no point in asking them about Cat. If Lester had reacted that way then Cat was certainly either dead or worse. There was a silence, during which the spirits began to edge away nervously. *They’re really frightened*, Gwen thought. *Who would have suspected that even after death there could be fear this strong.*

Of course there was always fear. She remembered the first time she felt it in one of the dead ones, the abject terror that this particular spirit lived in that it might be reincarnated. Jonas, it was called, and it had lived a full life and had no desire to go back. But its existence as a spirit was marred by the fear that reincarnation might actually be real. Gwen wondered if it was a form of Hell and had asked around informally, but had heard so many theories and

opinions that it was impossible to find any actual proof. Either death did not really reveal all the answers or else death was as individual an experience as life was. In any case she felt that there was nothing more to be gained from keeping the General or Ma here any longer.

“Thank you both for your assistance,” she said.

The General harrumphed and faded back into the background. Ma grinned at her and then did likewise.

Gwen’s body frowned. What was the next move? It seemed an odd question to ask for someone who had just spoken to spirits from the future, but the future was such a fluid concept. She had once despaired because she had seen a future that was very bleak for her and had given up hope because she couldn’t bear to face it, but then when a critical decision had come up she had chosen the hamburger instead of the chicken. And somehow that had made a difference. The thought had occurred to her on a number of occasions that she could ask around and try to find out why it had mattered so much, but in the end she had decided not to. All she knew was that things were much better off than she’d anticipated.

The knowledge that the future could be changed was at once empowering and dispiriting to her. Empowering obviously because it meant she had great influence over the universe, but dispiriting because it meant that there was just as much uncertainty in her, and everyone else’s, life as there ever had been and there always would be. The tiniest action could have profound influence and each decision branched another possible reality off from it. Tracking down exactly which decision was going to have which consequence was a task beyond even her significant powers.

What was it the General had called her? Egotistical. Arrogant. Self-important. Had she seen and influenced the future so much that it had gone to her head? What made her think she could stop Maxwell? What made her think she and Lester and Cat were the only ones who could do so? What made her think they even should? The future that the spirits described was certainly bleak, but did it come to pass because of their actions or because of their inactions? Could doing nothing really be the way out of this future?

Her influence returned to her body, where she immediately began babbling about random objects and events. It was a strange existence. In the spirit world she was powerful and had great influence, but it was all an illusion amongst the dead. She could not interact with the living. Back inside her body she could use that knowledge to great effect, except that her photographic memory and her brain’s inability to correctly process all the data made her

incomprehensible to everyone. Perhaps if she could sleep or dream. She had not dreamed for many years. It had been about ponies.

## **Chapter Eighteen – Wholesale**

The little bell jingled as the door opened. Cat strode into the store and glanced warily at the counter to see who was on duty. Everyone knew Lester, but only a very few knew Cat and so it had been decided that she would go in to get what they needed, which basically amounted to snack food. It was maddening. Neither of them had ever had the police looking for them before, but they had both watched enough cop TV shows and cop movies to know that these days using your credit card or ATM card was a good way to get caught, so they were having to make do with what little cash either of them carried.

That left out the option of any real food, even at a grocery store, and so they had elected to return to the familiar confines of the 24-hour Grocery to stock up on chips, cupcakes, and bottled water. Cat didn't recognize the woman at the counter. They'd only been gone two days so far, but given the amount of loyalty places like this usually showed their employees she was sure that not only had her job been replaced by now but also Lester's. They still didn't know what had happened to George, although with everything going on that seemed an ill omen.

She walked briskly down the aisles, reaching a destination that she knew only too well from having restocked the refrigeration units and pulled two large, cold bottles of water from the wire shelving. Turning, she made her way to the chips where she grabbed two of the biggest bags of potato chips they had. She headed next to the candy, but a quick mental calculation showed her that she had reached the end of their ability to buy supplies. Pausing by the rows of sweet junk food she contemplated trying to subtly put a couple in her pockets, but getting caught shoplifting wasn't going to make her evening any better and so she instead made her way quickly to the front counter, praying that the clerk wouldn't be watching the news on TV to while away the night hours.

As it turned out the woman was a bookworm and was not only not watching the news, but barely looked at Cat as she rang up the purchases, accepted the payment, and made change. Cat wordlessly took the loose coins, gathered up her purchases, and exited quickly before her luck changed. The bell jingled as she left.

She walked quickly up the street about a block where she found Lester exactly where she'd left him, skulking behind some bushes near a brick building.

“Don’t you think you’re attracting more attention to yourself by trying to hide so badly?” she asked as he emerged and began walking with her away from the store.

“Maybe. Doesn’t matter, I could have felt if anybody were nearby.”

Cat rolled her eyes. She was coming to accept Lester’s strange ability, but she still didn’t like his whole Jedi mind trick routine. “We need to think of something,” she said, passing him a bottle and a bag of chips. “This was more expensive than I’d thought. We don’t have much left. Maybe a trip to a vending machine.”

Lester opened the bottle and took a long swig of the refreshing liquid. “How far is it to your apartment?” he asked.

“About an hour by car. Maybe 50 miles. And public transit doesn’t go anywhere near the place.”

“You got anybody you can call for help?”

“Not really. I mean, I have some friends, but none that I’d trust in a situation like this. You?”

“No,” Lester replied. “I might have called George, but it’s a reasonably safe bet that he’s dead now.”

The fell into silence as they walked, each trying to think of a way out of their predicament, some magical next move that would solve all their problems. The silence dragged on.

“We could go back to Gwen’s place,” Cat suggested. She immediately hated herself for doing so.

Lester considered it for a moment. He was at a loss as to where else might even be an option. Surely Gwen had had time to sort out whatever problem she’d had before. It might be safe. “Sure,” he finally offered. “But we need to be careful when we get there. We might have to leave in a hurry.”

“Sure, whatever. But let’s hurry now. I don’t like being on the street knowing that the good guys and the bad guys are both after us.”



They picked up the pace, and Lester dug into his bag of chips. They were a bit too salty for his taste, but he was pretty hungry. He worried about his cats briefly, but he was sure they'd be fine. They could take care of themselves if necessary.

His worry for his cats transformed into a worry for Cat. Would she be ready for what might greet them at Gwen's place? A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing and, even though she hadn't gotten around to telling them, Lester could tell from the way the previous conversation had been going that Cat was about to find out something about her parents that she hadn't known before. He wondered idly what it might be, but he also knew that speculation was pretty useless, especially where Gwen was concerned. You'd expect one thing, get another, and then find out that neither of the possibilities actually had anything to do with what you had been discussing with her two minutes ago. Patience was certainly a virtue when it came to talking to Gwen.

Cat was also a mixed pool of emotions at the moment. A bit of fear, but that was being overpowered by determination and frustration. And something else he couldn't quite identify in amongst all the other turmoil.

"You finding it hard to eat those chips with those teeth?" Cat asked.

"Not really. I get used to the little changes I get off of others pretty quickly."

"Do you get anything else? An urge to drink blood? Turn into a bat? Anything like that?"

"No, not so far." The question annoyed him. Did she think he was some kind of rewritable media, becoming a carbon copy of whatever he had picked up off someone else? That might have actually been useful in this situation, to be able to be in the mind of the killer, but all he got was the teeth. A physical phenomenon, not a psychic link. Strong wills were a mixed blessing for Lester. He was drawn to them like a moth to the flame, but some of the physical symptoms had been fairly unpleasant over the years. He was thankful that he hadn't picked up anything from Cat yet. She was a pretty strong personality.

Lester frowned. Cat was a strong personality. So why hadn't he picked up any physical traits of hers? He made a mental inventory of his body, trying to remember what everything looked like and how many of everything he had and what size it was. The only anomaly he could come up with were his unusually long canines. Vampire fangs. Could the killer be such a strong personality that he was overriding any other changes to his physical appearance?

The metamorphic properties of his empathic abilities hadn't emerged with the rest. He'd been an empath for as long as he could remember, but his body hadn't changed until his early twenties. It was almost as if his body was going through so many other changes by coming into maturity that it didn't have the time or energy for any extraneous adjustments. The first one had been fairly jarring as he suddenly grew hair like there was no tomorrow. Gwen had thought at first that it was a werewolf, but it turned out to just be his PE coach in his final year of college.

As they continued to trudge along, Lester found himself missing his college days. Back then Gwen had been coherent, having not yet channeled Professor Andrei, that bastard with the photographic memory. In the days that followed that event, Gwen had tried hard to get Lester to make peace with the Professor, insisting that it wasn't his fault that he had a strong personality and an ability that imprinted on her, but he couldn't help it. He had to assign blame somewhere because the whole thing seemed so unfair. His beautiful, vibrant sister, who he didn't see how he could live without, began slowly to leave him and there was no cure. He'd compared it to Alzheimer's disease once, but Gwen had really let him have it over that one.

"My ability is a gift that lots of people would love to have!" she'd shouted. "It's inconvenient, yes, and we'll have to make some adjustments, but if I thought the way you did I'd just wallow about in self-pity."

Those sentiments didn't console Lester much. The bottom line was that his sister was never going to be the same. It had started slowly. The odd disjointed statement here and there, followed by an apology and an explanation of absentmindedness. Their friends at the time had expressed their concern, but Gwen had brushed them off and had emotionally blackmailed Lester into doing the same. To their credit, their friends had stuck by them for the most part, but they didn't make an effort to meet new ones and eventually attrition whittled down the number of people they kept in regular contact with to zero. A couple died prematurely, a handful moved away, and others got new jobs that kept them occupied to the point where they had no free time anymore. Gwen hadn't seen anyone apart from Lester and, more recently, Cat in more than ten years.

The bitterness rose in Lester and he quickly squashed it back down. No sense in leaking negative emotions all over the place. But he remembered the strong woman his sister had once been and quietly allowed himself a short burst of anger before asserting control again.

Beside him, Cat was feeling the same kind of trepidation she'd experienced the last time they'd been on their way to Gwen's place, but coming from a different perspective. Was she going to be quizzed on her family history again? Would she be able to control herself

again if it happened? The subject brought up so many bad memories that she had tried so hard to kill. She remembered when she'd told her adoptive parents that she wanted to try to find her biological parents. The whole episode had been surreal. First they had dissuaded her from doing so, claiming that the only logical reason for, as they called it, abandoning a child was because they didn't want to see that child ever again. For such logical people, Cat had been stunned that they would take that attitude. Didn't it ever occur to them that people might make mistakes or change their mind or their situation? Were they afraid they were going to lose her to her real parents? Not an entirely far-fetched anxiety, she reflected, considering that they'd made her life a living hell up to that point with their constant mantra about questioning every single thing in her life.

When she showed no sign of dropping the search, they'd tried to forbid her. She was in her mid-twenties by that time, so they shouldn't have had that kind of influence on her, but she was still living at home with no job and was therefore entirely dependent on them for the basic necessities of life. She also felt emotionally stunted, having never learned to really trust anyone. It occurred to her that most of the events of the last couple of days would not have been possible unless she had some degree of trust in Lester. That thought confused her, because she had no reason to trust him at all, but somehow here she was, walking with an alleged metamorphic empath to his psychic sister's apartment, allegedly pursued by a vampiric serial killer, and on the run from the mundane police. She must trust him on some level.

She saw Gwen's apartment complex looming as they ascended the hill and sighed, bracing herself for the ordeal she felt sure was about to come.

Each lost in their own thoughts, they completely failed to notice the shadow that was tailing them. Nor did they see the glint of the reflection of a rifle barrel emerging from the window of the car on the next street corner.

## **Chapter Nineteen – Shooting Pains**

Maxwell sat huddled in the bucket seats of his car, the rifle cradled in his arms. He'd debated this moment for hours. What a triumph for his plan if he could secure either Cat or Lester for his army. But the chance for failure was too high, the risks too great, and if he did fail in the attempt it could mean the end of everything he had worked for. He had ultimately decided that he would not let pride be his downfall. There would be no confrontation, no discussion, no attempt to turn them to his agenda. He would simply kill them both and be done with it.

Planting the evidence at Lester's apartment had worked perfectly. He'd worked hard to convince the police and the news station that broadcasting the raid live was actually responsible journalism and everyone had played their part as if they'd been given a copy of the script. Being there on site had helped, and knowing Lester's likely reaction, anticipating his method and route of escape. It had all worked so perfectly. Now Lester and Cat were on the run, distracted, hungry, and running out of places to go. The path from the apartment to the store was fairly straightforward, and now they were leading him straight to Gwen.

There would be no messing about with Gwen, either. They did not share his vision and convincing them, in addition to the obvious risks of failure, would be time consuming. His patience had ended some time back. The time was now and he would brook no delay.

All the frustrations, all the failures, all the setbacks. They would all be washed away and he would be redeemed, his visions made into a new reality of fear, loathing, and decay. The powerful would rule once again, and their power would stem from his efforts, his work, his planning, and his dedication. Could anyone ask for a better legacy?

He watched the hill intently. When they had left the store they had started up this hill, so the should come into view shortly. And there they were. They moved steadily up the hill, Maxwell watching their every move. Where was Gwen's apartment? There was only one complex in the immediate area, so he hoped it would be that one. If they passed it by then the next one might be blocks or even miles away. He shifted in his seat, the anxiety making him antsy. He watched them.

They paused. Maxwell rolled down his window. This could be the moment. He cursed his shaking hands as they raised the rifle barrel up to the edge of the window. He would have to use the car door to keep the weapon steady and take his shot. Cat first, then Lester. He waited. They were talking. He needed them to make a move towards the door of the complex. He had to know it was the right place.

Cat and Lester stood there talking for several minutes, although Maxwell could not hear them, and then they each took that deciding step towards the door. Catching his breath from the excitement, Maxwell pulled the trigger.

A flash of darkness filled the field of vision for the gun's sight. He took his eye away from the lens and saw Cat lying on the ground, a pool of shadow surrounding her. So satisfied was he that he nearly cried out in triumph, but the sound died in his throat as he saw Cat stir, Lester help her up, and both of them look around in a panic. The shadow swirled around them. Maxwell put his eye to the sight again and tried to draw a steady aim, but his targets were moving around too much now and his shaking hands would not find them long

enough to take the shot. He pulled the trigger again and fired wildly, hoping against hope that it would be enough, but they flew wide of the mark and suddenly his quarry was running, dodging behind walls and over bushes and then they were gone, trailed by that strange flowing shadow.

Shocked, Maxwell sat in the car for a moment, dazed and undecided about how to proceed. Should he give chase? The urge to do so was strong in him. But no. There was a better plan. The entire charade had been orchestrated to lead him to Gwen, and so to Gwen he must go. With her gone, the plan could not fail. Would they know she was the target? Would they return while he was in the act of eliminating her? So much the better if they did. It would save him the trouble of finding them again later.

Slowly, shakily, he got out of the car and lurched down the hill towards the entrance of the apartment complex. This body was beginning to decay, but soon he would not need it anymore. Just three things left to do. Rifle in hand, he entered the building and began the systematic search that would lead him to the correct rooms. On the sixth floor he found them and kicked in the door. Gwen's body was there, sitting on the couch. Maxwell stepped in and took aim.

## **Chapter Twenty – Hallowed Be Thy Name**

“Lester, I don't know if I'm ready for this,” Cat said as they approached the entrance.

“I know. I can feel the uncertainty you're feeling right now, and I sympathize. Or empathize, as the case may be,” he said. Cat rolled her eyes at the lame joke.

“Can't we put this off?”

“We could,” Lester admitted. “But where do you suggest we go in the meantime? We can't exactly just walk the streets, we'll be recognized. And all of our friends and family are too far away. If you have another idea, I'm all about hearing it.”

Cat paused. She didn't have another idea, she just didn't like this one. It frustrated her. She wasn't quite willing to believe all the way and she was already confused by everything that had happened lately. Talking to a crazy woman about her parents, a conversation she could see coming like an onrushing freight train, wasn't going to help with her confusion. She felt lost at sea and didn't know where to turn next.

“Look, let’s just go in and see what she’s like. If you want you can go to the guest bedroom. We just need to get indoors. We need food and shelter and water. We can get all of those things here and maybe, if we’re lucky, we can get some guidance and information.”

“Fine,” Cat said, after another short pause to gather her courage.

“Good,” Lester said, feeling her courage and feeling encouraged himself. There was another set of emotions nearby as well and he couldn’t place it and it was making him nervous. They started to move towards the entrance.

A shot rang out. A shadow that nobody had noticed that had been lurking nearby suddenly sprang up and enveloped Cat, knocking her to the ground. The bullet passed directly through where she had just been standing and grazed Lester on the forearm. He leapt back in pain and surprise and watched as the shadow pooled around Cat, encircling her as if in a protective stance. He felt a strong emotion of anger and love mixing in that pool. Cat stirred and began to rise, the shadow still flitting about her.

“Run, you fools,” a wispy voice hissed. “Not into the building, make it to the wall over there and then run around behind. Shelter...” it trailed off. A second shot echoed off the nearby buildings, missing them and ricocheting off the concrete sidewalk. More shots followed and Cat and Lester both followed the advice of the mysterious shadow, scurrying away from the scene and taking shelter behind the brick wall briefly before continuing on away from the complex.

“Come on,” cried Lester. “We can’t stay here!”

Cat wordlessly followed him, peeking over her shoulder at the shadow which was now following her closely behind. She felt grateful, but also afraid.

Rather than circling the building, Lester decided to put as much distance between them and the shooter as possible. He knew of an abandoned warehouse not far away and thought they might hide there temporarily, although he hated the idea. When Cat found out he had an alternate form of shelter she was likely to let him have it, even though there had been no rational reason to go there. No food, no water, but a place to collect their thoughts. That’s what she was going to say, he reasoned. Now there was no choice. He turned a corner, dodged a tree limb, and led them onward to the warehouse. The journey took ten minutes and when they arrived they were both out of breath.

“What just happened?” Cat wheezed. Always with the questions, she chided herself. Can’t I be satisfied with what my own eyes tell me even for once?

Immediately that assertion was put to the test as the shadow swirled around them both for a moment before coalescing into a more solid form. Light wove and twined in the darkness until, at last, the shadow stood before them. An aging man in vintage clothing, well-dressed, a long black cape, and black hair streaked with flecks of grey. He smiled at them, revealing long, sharp teeth.

## **Chapter Twenty One – Still Waters Run Deep**

Gwen's body sat on the couch. Her ears heard the oncoming footsteps. Her eyes saw the door kicked in. Her nose smelled the gunpowder from Maxwell's recently fired gun. She did not react as he entered the room and raised the weapon to take aim.

Gwen was not there. Her spirit roamed free, searching for more answers, more guidance, trying to see a future where Maxwell was defeated and Lester and Cat still lived. She also wrestled with her reasons for doing so. What would happen if Maxwell succeeded? Who would know? The world would lie in ruin, but all those who cared about such things would be dead. Could the world not get along without her? And then she felt it. Her body crying out in pain. Gwen raced back to her body and found it bleeding, a wisp of smoke rising from the barrel of Maxwell's rifle and an evil grin upon his face. She watched as he closed the door behind him.

The shots would certainly bring people to investigate, but he no longer cared. His mission was accomplished. His plans were now unstoppable. His body could decay and rot or be imprisoned and still everything would proceed and there was no longer anything Gwen or Lester or Cat could do about it.

Gwen looked at Maxwell, back in her own body at last, making use of her own senses. Her mind reeled with the introduction of all the new memories her spirit had acquired since it was last in residence, but one thought fought its way to the surface.

*This man's body is dead. A spirit is controlling it.*

She knew that if she left her body now she might never return to it. But there was suddenly a chance that she had not previously foreseen and she must try to take advantage of it. Reaching out with her spirit, she attempted to channel the spirit of Maxwell.

Maxwell felt the tug of her powers on his spirit. He resisted, but had been caught unawares and suddenly his spirit was drawn forth from its stolen home and he found himself in the spirit world, faced with Gwen.

“You killed me,” she said, shocked.

Maxwell blinked. This was completely unexpected. “Yes,” he ventured. “I did. Not well enough, evidently.”

Gwen glared at him. “You terrorize my brother and his friend, you kill me, and this doesn’t even include your plans to create those abominations and unleash them on the world.”

“You make it sound so cliché,” Maxwell replied. He hadn’t communicated with anyone directly in many years and was finding it to be a strange experience. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like it before and he wasn’t liking it now. He had to free himself from her grasp.

Gwen’s eyes flared and she snarled. “How are you going to do it?” she asked. “Tell me and perhaps I’ll allow you to return to that shell of a body that you stole.”

Maxwell laughed. “Tell you my plan and then you’ll let me go? If I told you, why would I want to go afterwards? Why wouldn’t I just sit here and let you hold me in your power and allow events to unfold? You behave as though it hasn’t already happened.”

There was a pause. Gwen’s threat had been empty and he had called her bluff. She had no ability to hold him forever, nor any ability to hurt him here.

“I recall being able to do something once upon a time,” Maxwell mused to himself. A moment passed and then Maxwell’s shapeless form congealed into a semblance of a form, a humanoid form wearing what might have been a long trenchcoat. “Ah, it’s coming back to me,” he continued. As Gwen watched, horrified, Maxwell reached a wisp of a hand into the trenchcoat and drew forth a small dagger.

“You can’t do that!” Gwen cried, suddenly afraid. Her righteous anger was draining away from her. Spirits could not bring physical objects with them. She searched her prodigious memory for any recollection of anything like this happening before. She delved deeply into the memories of every spirit she had ever channeled and found no evidence that this was even possible. Maxwell advanced on her spirit with the dagger.

“Your body is dying and now your spirit will die. I wonder which will die first, and whether it will have any effect on your body if your spirit dies while it still lives. Experimentation is a wonderful thing. I wonder if you might become one of us.”



Gwen, eyes wide with panic, looked down at her body, bleeding on the sofa. Maxwell's body stood a short distance away, both bodies immobile while their spirits were otherwise occupied. Glancing up she saw Maxwell's spirit advancing on her with the dagger. Clearly holding Maxwell was not an option, nor was fighting him. She would not allow herself to suffer the fate that the General and Ma had described. Her two best options seemed to be to run, abandoning her body to certain death, or to try to drive Maxwell's spirit back into the body it had come from. She chose both.

Summoning what remained of her channeling powers, Gwen hit Maxwell's spirit with a harsh psychic force designed to push him back to his body. As soon as she had done so, she took flight. Her body, already limp from its wounds, slumped a little more. Its breathing stopped, its heart stilled, its eyes wide, staring at nothing at all.

Maxwell back in his body, blinked. The rifle sagged in his arms and he winced as a sudden pain shot through his torso. The psychic witch had injured him through his spirit! He glanced at his other hand, but his spirit dagger had not made the transition back to the physical world. No matter. He raised the rifle and shot Gwen's body twice more just to be sure.

From a corner of reality, Gwen's spirit watched Maxwell take his revenge and then leave before anyone else showed up. She watched as concerned neighbors called the police who converged on her apartment, examining the crime scene, and taking away her body. She could never return. But the price she paid had been worth it. In the instant that she drove Maxwell away from her, she touched his open mind and drew forth his plans. Her photographic memory had retained the information and her spirit form would allow her to keep it ordered. Now she had only one other task: find a way to convey the information to Lester. If it was not too late.

Gwen's spirit turned to leave just as another man entered the room to examine the crime scene. Detective Renzetti sighed heavily.

## **Chapter Twenty Two – Tall and Dark**

The smile still on his face, the man reached out with both hands. "Ecaterina," he said. "It is so good to be able to greet you for the first time."

Cat stood stunned. She never used her real name. Even her driver's license said 'Cat'. She always had trouble pulling her credit reports because she didn't ever use her real name for anything. The weird had become weirder and she wasn't sure she could take it anymore.

“Don’t go near him, Cat,” Lester warned. “He’s the killer!”

“How can you tell?” Cat asked, dazed.

“Look at his teeth! He’s a vampire!”

“Vampire I may be, but I am not the killer that has dogged you these last few days,” the man said with a hurt look on his face. “My name is Beryx. I have lived for thousands of years. And I have saved your life from the man who tried to shoot you,” he pointed out diplomatically.

Lester paused and considered this. The facts bore up his statement. A shot had been fired, Cat had been saved, and it was because this man, this shadow, had knocked her down out of the line of fire. Vampires were known for their speed, but he didn’t know of any that could fire a bullet and then race ahead of it to save the intended victim.

“Ecaterina, will you not take my hand?” Beryx asked.

Cat stood still. “Why should I? I mean, thanks for saving me and all that, but you’re...you’re a vampire!”

“Indeed,” Beryx said sadly, lowering his arms. “I knew it would be this way. It is why I never approached you before.”

“How long have you been following us?” Lester asked.

“I have been following Ecaterina since she was a small child. You, I did not know of until a few days ago when she began working at your store.”

Cat gasped. “You’ve been following me all this time? Why?”

Now it was Beryx’s turn to pause. “I am not sure I should tell you. You still seem...unprepared.” He turned. “I shall continue to watch over you.”

Cat’s anger flared so quickly and strongly that Lester recoiled under the onslaught. “No. You stop right there. I am so sick and tired of everyone telling me that I’m not ready to hear this or that something bad will happen if I hear that. Secrets! That’s all anybody has anymore are secrets! Well I want some answers and if you think you’re leaving here without giving them to me then you’d better be looking over your own shoulder because I will not have you following me, I’ll be following you!”

There was a ringing silence in the aftermath of her rage, broken only by her heavy breathing as she sought to regain control of her emotions. She could see Lester out of the corner of her eye and knew he was about to say something about getting control of herself, but she silently hoped he wouldn't because it would only make matters worse. She hated being in the dark, she hated not being in control of her emotions like this, but what she hated more was being told to calm down.

"I believe we should all sit down," said Beryx at length. He glanced around the open room they had hidden in and found a broken chair and two wooden boxes. Gathering these up, he sat and bade Lester and Cat to do likewise. Lester sat warily, on the edge of the box, ready to spring back to his feet in a moment. He had never fought a vampire and knew he didn't have the tools to do so. The reality was that they were entirely at his mercy, but a little body language that indicated that you might still be in control of the situation never hurt anybody.

Cat remained standing. Beryx motioned again for her to sit, but she waved him aside. Shrugging, he spoke again. "Many thousands of years ago dark creatures ruled the world from the shadows," he began.

"Yes, I've heard it all before," Cat said impatiently.

"Perhaps some of it, but allow me a short preamble before I come to my point," Beryx said. "As I said, they ruled from the shadows. Parents told their children cautionary tales to warn them against us."

Lester noted the use of the first person plural in Beryx's speech about dark creatures.

"Hoping to extend their dominion, the demons, among the most powerful of us, began to breed with human stock. They were warned," Beryx said, his eyes flashing with the passionate memory. "They were warned that this was going too far," he finished more calmly. "Over time the demon population began to thin. The offspring of their unions with the humans bred with other demons and with each other until at last the power of the demons was watered down and they were indistinguishable from the humans themselves. All that remains today of the demons is a vague tendency towards evil and cruelty that exists in human society."

Cat started to interject, but Beryx raised his hand for silence. "Protest all you wish, I have no proof. But it is still true," he said. "With the power of the demons diminishing, the remaining dark creatures began to fade. You see, fear is in the mind and without the demons' influence on the minds of humanity their fear began to wane. If there is no fear

then there is no power. Our power began to wane with the passing...no," he paused. "The absorption of the demons. They did not pass. They simply became something else."

"What's this got to do with me?" Cat asked.

"I am coming to it," Beryx said patiently. "I have lived, as I said, for thousands of years. I can be patient, and so can you."

Cat frowned and folded her arms.

"The decline was slow," Beryx continued, ignoring her silent protest. "For a time none of us believed it could last. Surely we could work our influence on the minds of humans without the demons. But science progressed and one of our other tactics began to backfire on us. In order to keep the humans from systematically hunting us down as they had done with certain animals, we kept our presence largely secret, revealing ourselves only as often as was absolutely necessary to keep the fear alive. And then science proved we didn't exist. It was that fatal blow that drove many of us, myself included, into a blind panic."

Lester sat silently. He wasn't sure yet whether to trust this vampire. Their emotions were faint, almost non-existent in most cases, but Beryx was emanating a powerful feeling of love towards Cat. He'd saved her life, which wasn't common behavior for a vampire, and now he was sitting here calmly discussing ancient history with them. What was the catch? And was he, Lester, about to be fished in?

"We had warned the demons against breeding with humans, and then suddenly, at our wit's end, we determined that it was our only hope of survival. Dark creatures from around the world tried, with varying degrees of success, to swell their ranks by producing offspring with humans."

"Wait a minute," Lester interjected. "You're a vampire. Can't you just turn other people into vampires? Why would you need to start a breeding program with humans?"

Beryx paused. "A vampire may do so, yes. But the legends of your people have distorted the true nature of a vampire's minions. First, they are like children. They must be nurtured, cared for, and taught the ways of the vampire. And because of our immortality, it takes a very long time for it to happen. We tried this. But the rate of attrition as our power ebbed away was greater than our ability to replenish our numbers. We thought to try a more biological approach."

“If you think for one minute that I’m going to let you breed with me just because you saved my life,” Cat began, but the pained expression on Beryx’s face made her stop. For several moments there was only the sound of passing traffic outside the building. Lester felt grief, sadness, loneliness, and that ever-present feeling of love coming from the vampire. He’d never experienced anything like it before.

“I have watched you your whole life, Ecaterina,” he began, “and knew from that first moment I saw you that I had made a mistake that could never be corrected. A dark creature should not know love or mercy or else he will become something else. This was a part of our downfall. In seeking to breed with humans we not only suffered the same fate as the demons, but many of us could no longer be true to our dark natures. There was no longer anything to fear from us.”

Tears welled unbidden in Cat’s eyes. Lester felt her anger and frustration boiling to the surface, but they were cancelled out like a wave out of phase by her own longing for a family she could belong to. He glanced at her and then at Beryx and suddenly he understood.

“Father?” she choked out.

Beryx nodded and stood up, holding out his arms. Cat rose and rushed to him, falling into his embrace like a starving woman. They held each other for several minutes before parting and returning to their seats, Cat’s eyes glistening. Lester could feel the mixed bag of emotions from her. She wanted her father in her life so much, but he was a vampire. And he had abandoned her.

“Your mother died in childbirth,” Beryx went on. “There were complications due to your altered genetic makeup that her body could not cope with, but you were not a vampire. It was then that I realized my folly and returned to the realm of sanity. This was not our salvation, it might even hasten the inevitable. I never had any other children. Obviously I could not care for you by myself. Only a vampire should have a life of never seeing the sun, never getting to interact with other children. I put you up for adoption...”

“Why did you let me go to those horrible people if you knew what I was?” she sobbed.

Beryx stared at her. “The world was changing. To let you go to parents who would teach you that creatures like me were real would have been irresponsible. You are much better equipped to deal with the world as it is now than you might have been otherwise.”

“Bullshit!” she cried. “Just the last few days have been a living hell for me because I couldn’t accept what was being told to me!”

“That is an accident of circumstance,” Beryx said calmly. “If you had not gone to work at the convenience store you would never have met Lester. Maxwell did not know of your existence before then, but he knows of you now and he knows what power you wield.”

“Who’s Maxwell?” Lester interjected.

“That is the current name of the killer who is stalking you. He has gone by many names throughout the millennia, but Maxwell is what he is calling himself now.”

“And what power do I supposedly wield?” Cat added.

“Maxwell has turned his back on the dark creatures of the world, believing us weak. He has tried for centuries to get us to stand and fight for ourselves, but many of us are not interested anymore. Immortality is not as fun without the perks of power,” he grinned, “and the will to fight for that power has gone out of us for the most part. You, though, Ecaterina, might ‘rally the troops’ as it were. As the child of a vampire you could conceivably wield considerable influence over other dark creatures through the power of persuasion. That frightens Maxwell. And an alliance between yourself and Gwen would be one of his worst nightmares.”

“What’s Gwen got to do with it?”

“Gwen’s power in the spirit world is very great. If you, Ecaterina, could summon the dark creatures to your cause in the physical world and Gwen could harness the power of the spirits then there would be no hope for his plans.”

“And what are his plans?” Lester asked.

“I do not know, but I fear it is already too late,” Beryx said.

Lester frowned. “Wait. He’s afraid of Gwen just by herself, isn’t he? He’d have to be.”

Beryx nodded.

“And we led him straight to her door!” Lester cried, jumping up.

“It is too late. He will have done his work by now. I only revealed myself to you because I could not allow the world to end without meeting my beloved Ecaterina.”

Cat stared at him in disbelief.

### **Chapter Twenty Three – Body Language**

Gwen watched Renzetti enter the room and take a look around. He knew why he'd been called in on this one. What appeared at first to be a typical home invasion or domestic dispute had turned out to be tied inextricably to his current case. He wondered when he'd be able to figure out what the hell was going on.

The victim, one Gwen Curious, was the sister of Lester Curious, the current suspect who Renzetti didn't actually suspect for a minute. The entire thing stank of a frame job, but he had no choice but to bring Lester in, as soon as he found him. The death of his sister was a complication bordering on distraction. There weren't going to be any clues here. He looked down at the body.

Bloody from multiple gunshot wounds it was no wonder she was dead, but the condition of the body led him to believe that she might not have lived much longer in any case. Emaciated, wan, and gaunt were words that sprang immediately to his mind. And there was something else. Bloody.

This was the first victim in this whole bizarre case that had actually died in what might be considered, to a police officer who had to bear up under this kind of thing all the time, a normal fashion. No dismemberment, no blood drain, no strange puncture wounds on the neck, and the body was clearly right here so no disappearance either. What was happening? Killers weren't supposed to change their MO this often.

The forensics team was already on site and collecting the evidence. There happened to be more of it this time than in the past. He found himself wishing that Dawn would be able to examine it herself, but then remembered that Dawn probably wouldn't be examining anything ever again if she didn't turn up soon. How the killer had gotten to her was a big drain on the morale of the department. Cops who weren't in the field were supposed to be safer than the general public. You showed up, you did your job, nobody knew it was you, and you went home at night secure in your anonymous contribution to greasing the wheels of justice.

As Renzetti poked around the room and in his own thoughts, Gwen watched him intently from the spirit world. Could it be this easy? She nudged his mind gently and he turned to the bookcase. She nudged again and he selected a book, seemingly at random, and opened it to the page she suggested.

Blinking, Renzetti stared down at the book in his hands. How had it gotten there? He must be working too hard, he had no memory of picking it up. Closing it, he replaced it on the shelf and turned back to the crime scene.

*How can this be?* Gwen thought. She examined his mind. *I shouldn't be able to do this,* she mused. *He is a living man, but his mind and spirit are open to me.* She dug deeper, peeling back the layers of thought and emotion, stripping his mind down to its barest most primal levels. And there she found it. The path that led to his mind had been forged by something she might not have recognized only a few hours ago. But now it was permanently seared into her memory through her interaction with Maxwell. And here it was again. A tease and a taunt to the police detective who was seeking him out, buried subliminally by a piece of paper that looked blank to the naked eye, but which in fact had buried all the answers to Maxwell's plans in the safest place of all. The mind of a human, which could not possibly comprehend such things.

*Your dreams must have been very strange and frightening lately, Renzetti,* Gwen thought. *But Maxwell has miscalculated. The path blazed by his little game has given me the tool I need to try to prevent this monstrosity.*

"Detective!" a voice cried out. Renzetti turned to look and found Officer Jones racing towards him.

"What is it, Jones?" Renzetti responded, annoyed. His train of thought was getting derailed too easily these days.

"I think," he paused and reconsidered, but then forged on ahead anyway. "I think you should come see this," he finished.

Renzetti stared at the man dumbly, wondering what that could have been all about, and then wandered out of the apartment and took the elevator down to street level. Once there he stared at the situation dumbly again.

Lined up behind a makeshift barricade of squad cars and whatever else happened to be lying around, several police officers were crouched down watching a line of humanoid figures



advancing on them slowly. They shambled, stumbled, moved awkwardly, and from their lips there issued a low, reedy moan.

“What do you make of it, ‘Tec?’” Jones asked in a hushed whisper.

“I don’t know, Jones, but I think to say I don’t like it is a bit of an understatement.”

They all watched as the group got closer. One officer grabbed a bullhorn and called on the group to stop where they were and disperse, but they paid him no heed. They advanced slowly. Any of the officers could easily have run and outdistanced the advancing monstrosities, but none did. They all stood rapt and in awe of this mysterious occurrence.

Again the officer called on the bullhorn for the group to disperse and again they ignored him, now within 25 feet of the squad cars.

“This is dumb,” said one officer, a veteran of thirty years on the force. “I’m going out there.” And with that he drew his truncheon and moved out from behind the barricade, striding purposefully towards the nearest of the figures. As he got nearer he could smell a putrid odor of decay coming from the group and for the first time he felt fear. The figures continued to advance, their eyes wide, and always that low, wheezing, reedy moan.

Summoning the remains of his bravado, the officer, whose name was Smires, said “We ordered you to disperse. Do so now or face the consequences!” He raised his truncheon up in a threatening posture, but neither his words nor his weapon seemed to faze the oncoming group.

“I warned you,” he began.

“No, Smires, stop!” cried Renzetti. He had a bad feeling about this entire situation and Smires had a reputation for having a temper. The last thing he needed was Internal Affairs on his ass.

It was too late, though. Smires swung his nightstick at the leader of the group and struck him solidly in the abdomen. The blow would have rendered most men doubled up in pain, but the figure merely stopped its advance and looked at Smires, who took a step back. Suddenly the figure moved, much faster than anyone would have believed given their previous rate of advance, and seized Smires by the shoulders, drawing his body towards its mouth. Smires had no time to react as he was pulled forward and the creature’s teeth buried themselves in his shoulder. He cried out in pain as a large chunk of flesh was ripped from

his body and swallowed by his attacker, who wasted no time in moving in for another mouthful.

Renzetti and the other officers sat stunned as a third chunk of flesh was torn from Smires's flank. The man had ceased screaming after just a few seconds of the attack, which itself was stunning in its speed and ferocity, presumably going into shock and merciful unconsciousness. Several of the other men drew their firearms.

"What the devil are they?" whispered Jones.

"I don't know," was all that Renzetti could manage, but he, too, was unbuttoning his holster and drawing his weapon as the creature swallowed yet another hunk of flesh. Apparently satisfied with its kill, the monster dropped the remains of the corpse, bleeding and broken, onto the pavement and resumed its forward advance, now slightly behind the others who had not stopped.

An officer, not waiting for orders, opened fire on one of the figures, and others followed suit, each firing into the center of the mass. Small puffs of vaporized blood erupted from the figures, but there was no other noticeable effect. Renzetti, who was not one of those firing, watched the effort, a chill running through his veins. What had the stories said? Aim for the head. He raised his weapon and fired.

The bullet raced towards the creature, the shambling, clumsy form, slow-moving, and plodding. Just before impact the figure's hand moved with stunning speed and caught the projectile, redirecting its energy off to the side.

"That's not possible," Renzetti said in the dead voice of abject panic.

Gwen, watching this entire scene unfold, looked at the attackers from a different perspective and saw the true horror that the police could not. Above each of the walking corpses there was a shade of its former owner. Too disgusted to re-enter the body, but unable to abandon it to true death. As long as those spirits remained then the bodies would protect themselves, and they had been given unnatural speed and endurance by the removal of pain and other physical limitations. Maxwell had done his work well. These creatures had no obvious weakness.

She glanced back down and saw Renzetti standing dumbfounded. The other officers, having wasted all their ammunition trying to gun down the advancing horde, were beginning to give ground, but Renzetti was in a stupor. He saw what the others had not yet noticed, which was the body of Smires beginning to stir. As if the idea of his still being alive after

the brutal attack were not horrific enough, the body began to rise and lurch forward with that same plodding pace and issuing that same low moan.

Gwen realized that Renzetti was her last practical link to the world of the living. Finding another psychic capable of channeling her spirit and convincing that person to do so would take too much time, especially in light of this new threat. It was imperative that Renzetti survive, and yet he stood there in defiance of his own survival instinct. She prodded his mind, but the influence of the oncoming monsters was more powerful than her suggestion to run. She intensified her mental pressure, and still he resisted, almost catatonic. Exerting a tremendous effort she finally got him to blink, which seemed to bring him back to reality. With a creature only five short feet away and advancing, he must run now, and run he did.

Renzetti ran with the same intensity that just a few moments ago he had shown in standing still. His mind was occupied with nothing else but escape. And as he ran he fancied he could hear that reedy, chilling moan echoing off the hillsides all around him.

## **Chapter Twenty Four – Getting A Head**

Maxwell ran along the street, elated at his triumph. Centuries of planning, years of preparation, and always the risk of failure, but he had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Gwen was dead. All that remained was to find Lester and Cat and serve the same justice on them. They could not stop him now, not without Gwen, but there was no sense in leaving anything to chance. Besides, Lester still had a part to play to seal the final victory.

His theories had all been correct. He had shared his idea with only one other throughout history and that one had laughed and called him a fool, but now he was vindicated. Zombies were real and he, Maxwell, had created them. A hybrid form of vampire, ghoul, and demon. The vampires and ghouls were nearly extinct, but he had found enough of their material and hoarded it jealously. All that had remained was the demon and he had found it in the humans. The demons' plan to reassert dominance of dark creatures should never have involved the humans. They were weak and they had weakened themselves by breeding with them, but Maxwell had found those members of humanity in whom the blood of the demons ran purer than the others and had distilled it thrice to remove all trace of the human's influence.

That blood had been the last piece of the puzzle he'd needed. It was all so deliciously sweet. He ran, his body beginning to show definite signs of decay, but he ran anyway. He would not need this body much longer. The days of the dark reign were just beginning and his work was done.

It all centered around the brain. The brain controlled the body. The body needed no heart and no spirit as long as it contained the brain, and the brain must feed. The zombie would therefore protect the brain at all costs. The zombie would feed incessantly and was an ambush predator. There was no need to expend precious energy that the brain could use for better purpose until the prey was within grasp, and then the strike must be quick. A fight would only use that energy further. The prey must be subdued quickly. And then it would rise again as part of the horde and go forth to seek prey of its own.

Eventually humanity and all other forms of life would be removed from the Earth and the zombies would go dormant to reawaken only when more life became available. That is how they would reign supreme. That is how the future would be shaped.

Maxwell stopped. Lester. He must find Lester. Only with his help could the ultimate finality of the plan be reached. Where would Lester be? He concentrated. Lester had been playing the hero all along, therefore he would go where he would think he could be the most help. A concentration of zombies would attract him. And zombies would be attracted to humans.

Maxwell was unused to speaking with his body. But now he realized he must.

“Help!” he cried in a ragged voice. “Over here!”

People nearby turned to look at him.

“They’re coming! Run! Run!” And, so saying, he broke back into a run himself. Others nearby, already in a panic from some of the things they were beginning to hear and see, followed him. He led them like sheep, like the Pied Piper, like the cattle they were. He led them to slaughter.

## **Chapter Twenty Five – The Continuing Story**

“Isn’t there any hope at all?” Lester ventured.

“There is none. Maxwell has called forth a creature that even the darkest of us had thought impossible. It has no weakness, it cannot be stopped. The best we can hope for is that someday they will crumble to dust and life may re-emerge on this planet.”

“Can’t we escape?” Cat asked, trembling.

“There are those who will try. Who knows? Perhaps they will succeed if they can build a craft to take them to another planet before the zombies find them,” Beryx answered.

“I don’t believe you,” Lester said, defiance building in his voice. He paused to regain control. Now was no time to lose control of his emotions.

“Believe what you like, it makes no difference to me. You are inconsequential to me and are here only because Ecaterina has not sent you away. This meeting was for her and me alone. You are not actually welcome here,” Beryx said, his shadow looming a little larger and more menacingly.

“You have to be kidding me,” Lester retorted. “After all we’ve been through trying to track this guy down and now you’re telling me that it’s too late, there’s no hope, and oh, by the way, you’d appreciate it if I just got the hell out and went away?”

“That does seem to be the situation,” Beryx replied smoothly.

“And what about you? Without humans or other animals to feed on, won’t you go hungry?”

Beryx sighed. “You have not clearly grasped the situation, have you? For all your sanctimonious blather about hope and escape and your all-too-human notions of fighting your way to victory against an insurmountable opponant, you haven’t gathered the obvious. I am dying, just as all vampires have died or will be dying. I do not know how many of us are left, perhaps a dozen worldwide. Perhaps fewer. Perhaps,” he said, his teeth on edge, “I am the last of my kind, and my time is running out. We are an endangered species.”

“And that doesn’t make you want to fight to survive?”

“No,” Beryx said simply. “It does not. Our time is over. All we want now is to pass on to whatever plane of existence waits for us. Immortality, Lester, is highly overrated.”

Outside they heard a low moan.

“It begins,” Beryx said. “Those creatures will be here soon and when they come there will be nothing you can do to stop them. You may run if you like, but they do not sleep. You may hide for a time, but they will lay siege to any stronghold you take refuge in. You may fight, but you will lose.”

“So you want us to just roll over and die, is that it?”

“Not at all,” Beryx said. “You should take your own lives now before their dark power consumes you.”

Lester steamed silently for a few moments. Beryx looked at his daughter and wondered why she put up with this mortal. Her mother had been headstrong as well, though.

“Were you responsible for my adoptive parents’ deaths, father?” Cat asked.

Beryx turned to face her. “Yes,” he said. “They had served their purpose. There was nothing left for them to accomplish after raising you. And you have already said they made you unhappy.”

“But they died in a car accident.”

“Yes. I blotted out their vision and that caused the crash.”

“They were my parents,” she whispered.

“They were not.”

“They were there for me!” she shouted suddenly. A rage was building in her that she would not have expected for the two people who she had hated so much. They had made her life a living hell, but they had given her the tools to survive, hadn’t they? They were there for her, weren’t they? They had done their best, hadn’t they? Even if their best had been woefully inadequate.

Beryx shrugged. “Would you have preferred the alternative? Raised by a vampire? Had your mother survived, she would have cared for you. But she did not.”

“I would have preferred you let them live so that I could have my own reckoning with them,” Cat finished, seething.

“Perhaps you will meet them in the afterlife,” Beryx offered, a bit taken aback by her response. He was now reminded even more sharply of her mother. The plan for breeding had originally been one of violence, and Beryx had taken his share of women by force. But though he watched them all carefully, none showed signs of bearing his child. And then, by the oddest chance, he had met a woman who had loved him. He barely knew what that felt like at the time, and now it was not much more than a dim memory, but it had happened and

they had had a child and now that child was grown. The meeting was not going as he'd hoped it would, but he had to admit that it was going the way he should have expected.

Lester watched the argument with a kind of fascination, but he was also distracted by the wheezy moan that was now growing noticeably closer.

"Cat, we have to go. Let this quitter stay if he wants," Lester said.

"No, we will all go," Beryx said. "I have not finished conversing with my daughter. But, as I said, you are only welcome as long as she does not send you away. Ecaterina, shall the two of us go alone?"

"No, like you said, we'll all go," Cat said through gritted teeth. "I don't want to be alone with you."

They all stood and made their way to the exit of the abandoned warehouse. On the horizon Lester thought he could just barely make out a line of shambling, stumbling figures.

## **Chapter Twenty Six – Beat Cop**

Renzetti ran until he thought his lungs would burst. Wheezing slightly and wondering why he didn't work out more often, he sank to the ground and sat on the curb for a few moments, puffing heavily. Between breaths he listened intently for the sound of that accursed moan, but could hear no sign of it. His breathing slowed as he rested and became easier. He had time to think now, but a slight panic still held his mind. There was no immediate danger, and yet he felt compelled to push his body even further than he had already.

He went back over the scene in his head. Smires had been a good cop, if a bit headstrong, and hadn't deserved the fate that had happened to him. Those images would haunt him for the rest of his life which, given the current situation, might not be that much longer. But what really gave him pause was the speed with which the creatures could move. At a distance they were slow and clumsy, but close to they moved faster than the eye could follow. One of them had caught a bullet. They seemed not to feel pain nor fear and they didn't stop. Did they sleep? Renzetti didn't know. He wondered how his other officers had fared and if they had had the good sense to run when he did.

Nearby, in the spirit world, Gwen prodded Renzetti's mind again. There was no time to rest. They had to find Lester. Only Lester would know what to do with the vital information that she had gathered. The question was whether he would have the will to take the action that was necessary. They would never know, though, unless Renzetti got up off

his ass and went looking again. She gave him the spiritual equivalent of a kick, but Renzetti sat where he was, his body unable to move another inch without a bit of rest.

Gwen surrendered to the inevitable for a moment. She would try again soon. In the meantime, she let her spirit wander a bit, looking around to see if there were any other spirits in the area that might prove helpful. All the ones she saw were indistinct and too far away for her to contact. She missed her body. She might have attracted one of them to come closer if she'd actually had one, but as it was she had no bait. Why should any of them talk to her?

Gwen glanced back at Renzetti. He had closed his eyes. No! This was no time to take a nap! She rushed back and concentrated all her remaining influence on his mind to wake him up. His eyes snapped open and he swayed for a moment and then blinked.

Renzetti caught himself nodding off. *Not a good plan*, he thought. *With those things on the loose I can't be caught napping out here in the open.* His legs ached, but with an effort he hauled himself upright. He couldn't run anymore, but he could walk. And based on his previous observations, walking might be fast enough. But which direction?

Gwen risked a moment to rise up and survey the landscape. She could no longer see the material world with the same clarity she used to, but instead saw spirits and ghosts. The zombies were easy to locate as they each had a spirit prisoner with them. She was looking for safe passage and saw that the horde had not yet infected a large segment of the population. Large enough, but not so much that it couldn't be dealt with. Where would Lester be?

She returned to Renzetti's side and set him off in the direction away from the largest concentrations of zombies. Reluctantly he set off, his own slow plod not so different from those that were hunting him, but his due to fatigue rather than decay. He had to find Lester. That was the thought that kept running through his brain. The need to find Lester. Where could he possibly be? A thought struck him.

Renzetti turned and walked in a completely different direction than the one he had been a moment before. Above, Gwen braced herself as she steered him towards a large concentration of imprisoned spirits.

## **Chapter Twenty Seven – Followers**



Maxwell ran on, calling for help in his choking, gurgling voice. It amazed him that people could be so easy to manipulate in certain circumstances. On a streetcorner he might ask a thousand passers by for help in that decaying voice, and none would render aid. But imply that they might be in peril themselves and the humans would follow anyone anywhere. He could hear the moans up ahead. It was only a matter of time.

He turned and saw that a few of the brighter individuals had also heard the moaning and had slowed their pace somewhat. A few were even turning aside. No matter. The majority were still with him and the others would be found and devoured before too much longer. He wondered how long he would have to wait for Lester to come try to play hero.

“Hey, where are you leading us?” called one of the people following closely behind. “I can hear a funny noise up ahead.”

“It’s nothing,” Maxwell rasped. “The wind.”

“Doesn’t sound like the wind to me,” the speaker said, slowing his pace. “Sounds like those walking corpses. I’m not going that way, and neither should anybody else,” he continued, raising his voice. The others in the group all stopped and began muttering to each other. Where were they being led? Who was this man? He looked suspiciously like the others, even though he wasn’t acting like them yet.

Maxwell edged away towards the zombies that he could hear just over the rise. They were coming this way. Just a few moments more.

“I know how to beat them,” he tried. Inspire a glimmer of hope and perhaps the fools would try to fight it out.

“How?” one asked, the troublemaker.

“If you rush at them they get disoriented.”

“That sounds like crap to me. I’m going back home where it’s safe.”

And with that the spell was broken. The group began to quickly dissipate, leaving Maxwell standing there alone with an imploring look on his face. As the last of them left the area, he shrugged. A setback, nothing more. They would all be destroyed in the end. The goal now was to find Lester and another way would present itself. Hundreds of years of planning gives one a patience it is difficult to describe.

Turning, he walked up the hill towards the sound of his creations in the hopes of getting to see their work.

## Chapter Twenty Eight – Convergent Evolution

“We have to find Maxwell,” Lester insisted.

Beryx made no comment, but walked on silently. Cat was similarly quiet, stalking along deep in thought, wallowing in anger and confusion. Who was Beryx to show up all of a sudden and claim he was her father? She’d felt a moment of elation and finally having the possibility of having a family, of having somewhere to belong, but then it had all been dashed away by the revelation that he had taken her previous family away from each other. How many nights had she lain awake hating them, fantasizing about the confrontation and subsequent catharsis that would have followed? How long had she had this parasite eating away at her psyche, dragging her down, obsessing her thoughts? She’d blamed her parents at first, but then she realized that it was their deaths that were bothering her. And now she had the one responsible claiming kinship.

“Are either of you listening to me? We have to find Maxwell!”

“To what end, mortal? To what accomplishment do you seek the one who has sealed your doom? To exact revenge? A typical human sentiment.”

Lester could feel the disdain coming from Beryx and tamped down on his own sentiments. Getting emotional with a vampire was a losing game.

“Well, let’s see,” he began, sarcasm dripping off his words, even though he knew it wouldn’t do any good, “if we walk around here aimlessly then we’re certainly doomed. But if we find Maxwell then we could theoretically learn something and then we only *might* be doomed. Personally, I think some hope is better than no hope.”

“That is because you are ignorant,” Beryx countered dismissively.

“Will the two of you knock it off,” Cat interjected in a deadpan voice. “Your bickering is really getting on my nerves.”

“My apologies, dearest Ecaterina,” Beryx said, stopping and giving a short bow.

“Shut up,” she replied, continuing onward. “Seriously, Lester, what good will it do to find Maxwell? We don’t even know where he might be!”

“Like I said, some hope is better than no hope. And I have an idea of how we might be able to find him.”

“How’s that?”

“You can ask Beryx here. He’s a vampire, he can travel faster than we can.”

“Why would I do such a thing?” Beryx laughed.

“Because your beloved daughter might ask you. What do you say, Cat?”

Cat thought for a moment in silence. If she asked him and he did it, then she would be indebted to him. She had no hold over him or ability to command. She could ask, and then he would either accept or not and if he accepted then she would owe him something in return. To be his daughter. Would she owe him her love? The idea made her uneasy.

“I would not even know where to begin,” Beryx protested.

“I have an idea about that, too. Nobody brings on the end of the world without sticking around to watch. Find concentrations of zombies and he’ll probably be there.”

Beryx made no reply, but turned to look at Cat. Cat stared back at him. Lester could feel her hatred of him and her confusion about what to do. Silently he pled with her to make the right choice and not let her emotions get in the way, but he knew that to speak now would turn her against him. She was feeling very alone at the moment and he could think of nothing to help her with that.

At length she said, “Beryx,” she could not bring herself yet to say ‘father’, “will you help us find Maxwell?”

Beryx did not say anything immediately, but seemed to be thinking it over. Cat wondered if she had made the right choice. In the end, she had agreed with both of them. She felt as if there were no hope, but if finding Maxwell could generate some hope then they had to try. And afterwards she could have the confrontation with her father that she’d always dreamed of. There would be closure. It just wouldn’t be with the father she’d imagined it would be with.

“Well?” she asked. Lester held his breath.

Beryx contorted his face into a look of disgust, but said nothing, and then dissolved himself into a shadow and fled the area. Lester exhaled.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Don’t thank me. Ever since I met you everything has gone to hell.”

Her resentment was so strong that Lester felt cowed and had no response that was adequate. “What do we do now?” he settled for.

“Let’s wait here. I’m tired of walking.”

They sat on the curb, Lester keeping a sharp lookout with eyes and ears. There were no such things as zombies, Gwen had always told him. He realized now that she had lied. She must have, because she could tell the future, couldn’t she? But she was dead now. He could forgive his dead sister’s lies.

The shadow skimmed along the streets searching for the abomination that was Maxwell and the absurdity that he had created. What was it that made humans so self-important? The world wasn’t ending. Their ability to live on it was coming to a close, but the world would go on. If immortality taught anyone anything it was that change is inevitable. Did they think they would last forever? Did they think the Earth was worthless before their arrival and would be just a hunk of rock after their final days?

Adaptation. That’s what humans were good at. They could recognize patterns and make adjustments better than most other creatures on the planet. But weren’t viruses and bacteria almost as good? Hadn’t they been around longer, mutated more often, and proven notoriously difficult to eradicate? Would the zombies someday succumb to a microscopic life form that would somehow mutate to infect them? The world belonged to creatures that nobody could see. It always had, and it always would.

Beryx had been one of those turned by the original vampires. The first ones were genetic mutations, evolved along their own genetic tree. The similarity to humans was coincidental and influenced by their feeding choices. Humans were prey that had blood rich in nutrients. Vampires that looked more like humans could get closer more easily and feed upon them. Therefore, vampires that looked like humans were more likely to survive. And immortality was an illusion, a legend perpetuated to enhance the vampire’s powers.

They were certainly long lived, but not truly immortal. Only the spirits lasted forever, and there was debate about that. The ability to transform their victims into vampires as well was a by-product of that evolutionary tree that had produced them in the first place. All of the originals were long dead now, and Beryx knew his time was coming. He, too, was vulnerable to the zombies, although not so much as Ecaterina and Lester would be. He would have to be cautious.

Up ahead he heard the low moan of his quarry. Would Maxwell be among them? Beryx hoped so. The chase was boring him already.

The shadow zipped through a copse of trees and spied a group of zombies gathered around a shopping mall. Some humans had evidently sought refuge in there. A reasonably smart move. There would be clothing, food, and water available there for some time. But the zombies did not sleep and there was no way to fight and eventually all those resources would be consumed. It was a delay, nothing more.

The shadow prepared to move on when a movement caught its attention. Up on a small hillside just a few yards away from the horde stood a lone figure in a shabby grey coat. The shadow approached cautiously, but there was no mistaking it. He had found Maxwell.

### **Chapter Thirty – Necessary Sacrifices**

Renzetti crouched in the trees near the shopping mall and watched the shadow approach the lone figure on the hillside across the way. The entire scene might have been 200 yards away, a respectably safe distance, but he was still incredibly nervous. He saw the creatures clustered around the front doors and windows of the building and shuddered to think what must be going on inside. Would the people rally together to try to protect themselves or would they fight amongst each other. Given the speed and ferocity with which the creatures moved, it was difficult to see that there would be any significant difference in the long run.

The shadow flitted about and around the figure, who paid it no heed. Who notices shadows at nighttime? But Renzetti had noticed it. It was as if his eyes had been drawn and focused on it by more than mere chance. He shook his head, as if trying to dislodge an insect.

Gwen fell back. He was beginning to notice her presence. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. If he managed to close off that section of his mind that Maxwell had inadvertently opened then all would be lost. But if he welcomed her then it would make her next task all the easier. Seeing Beryx was also something of a mixed blessing. His

presence around Maxwell could only mean that he had met Cat and that she had convinced him to help. That was step one. The next step was convincing him to be more than a scout.

At any rate, it was a safe bet that Lester would be on his way soon. The shadow scurried away, she hoped to fetch the one she needed the most, her brother.

Moving as fast as it dared, the shadow flowed over the landscape. He had to be sure it was Maxwell, despite the risks involved, and he wondered if he had been spotted at the last moment. A thrill of fear ran through the shadow that it had not experienced since its living days and an urgency propelled it along to its destination. If the humans wanted to believe there was hope, where was the harm? They would all end as dust in the end anyway.

Lester and Cat sat on the curb in silence. Suddenly the shadows swirled around them and congealed into the form of Beryx. They stood up immediately.

“I have found him,” Beryx said imperiously. “He is not far away, but there is great danger. There is a horde of zombies that have trapped a group of humans in a nearby building. If the two of you come near them they may be distracted by the easier prey.”

“We’ll have to take that chance,” Lester said, feeling like a cliché from a bad movie. Cat rolled her eyes.

“Let’s go,” she said, starting out in the direction that Beryx had come from.

They walked about five miles along the road, seeing little other activity. A few squirrels and birds went about their business, but no other people or domestic animals were to be seen. The effect was very eerie and silent. They did not talk to each other as they went. There seemed to be nothing to talk about. None of them knew what they would do once they got there.

Lester noticed the green grass blowing in a gentle breeze. *It will all be here after we’ve gone*, he caught himself thinking. *There’s nothing magical about human beings. We are not the ones who will make or break this planet. We’re extremely temporary.* He glanced at Cat who had a fiery determination in her eyes and felt her uncertainty. She was putting on a good front, and might even be fooling Beryx, but he could tell she was afraid of the unknown as much as anything else that might happen.

At last they reached the shopping center. The collective moans of the assembled zombies melded together to form a single, unending sound that simultaneously lulled one to sleep and filled one with fear.

“Where is he?” Lester asked.

Beryx dissolved into shadow for a moment and flitted away, returning just a few seconds later.

“I do not know. He was there when I was here earlier,” he said indicating the little hillside, “but he has gone.”

Lester cursed. Was it going to be like this? A game of cat and mouse with traps lurking behind every corner? Was he leading them on?

“Lester Curious?” a voice called.

Lester spun around and looked into the eyes of Detective Renzetti who was emerging from the cover of the trees. He looked at the man suspiciously. There was something about him that he couldn't place.

“Yes, I'm Lester Curious,” he answered. He knew it might be a mistake. He was wanted by the police, after all, and this guy could either be a cop or might turn him in. Under the circumstances, though, with the zombies less than 400 yards away and with a vampire nearby he thought he might take his chances.

“I'm Detective Scott Renzetti. I've been looking for you.”

Lester swore again. “I don't think this is the right time to try to arrest me,” he began, but Renzetti held up his hand.

“Under normal conditions I would absolutely arrest you for the murders of several people including your sister, Gwen, but...”

“I didn't kill my sister!” he cried involuntarily, perhaps too loudly.

“...but, I happen to think you didn't do it. And I also see that it's three of you against me and I happen to be unarmed at the moment. So we'll let it pass for the time being.”

Lester looked mollified for the moment, but he kept a close eye on Renzetti. What was it about him that seemed so odd to him? He probed the man's feelings and found them to be what he would expect, a little fear, a little determination. There was something else, though, right on the edge of detection.

Above, in the spirit world, Gwen wrestled with Renzetti's mind. It was imperative that she pass the information along to Lester. How to do it? She tried desperately to make him say the words, but he was putting up a resistance.

"So what are you doing here," Cat asked, always trying to get right to the point.

"Probably the same thing you are, looking for the man responsible for this," he indicated the zombie horde that was still pounding slowly, but incessantly, on the doors of the building. "All the evidence pointed to you, Lester, until recently. I don't think you're capable of doing something like this. Although I'll have to confess I'm not sure who is, or even what something like this is."

"It is your downfall, human," Beryx said.

"Can't disagree there," Renzetti replied. "You know something about all this?"

Beryx shrugged. "They are zombies. They were called into being by a ghost who has had many names throughout the centuries, but is currently called Maxwell. They are hungry and they are unstoppable. What else is there to know?"

Gwen raged at the vampire from the spirit world. He wasn't helping! She'd known he was obstinant and stubborn, but surely Cat had asked for his help. He'd gone as far as to lead them all here, but now he was backing down again. It was infuriating.

"Well, there's lots left to know, actually," said Renzetti, "like how to stop them. But let's start with who you are and how you know what you've told us so far."

"He's a vampire who's lived for thousands of years and claims to be my father," Cat said impatiently. "There really isn't time for much more of a detailed explanation because, in case you hadn't noticed, a few of those things are coming this way."

They all turned to look and, sure enough, a couple of the zombies had detached themselves from the group and were advancing in their slow but menacing and inevitable way towards their current location.

"There is no way to stop them," Beryx said.



“So you keep telling us,” Cat snarled. “Look, let’s just run away from them for now. We’re looking for Maxwell, but he’s clearly not here, so let’s just go and discuss this somewhere else!”

A moan issued from the nearby treeline, much closer than anyone had expected. They whirled and looked in the opposite direction and saw five more of the creatures coming towards them. Gwen hadn’t seen the spirits coming, but saw them now and recoiled in horror. She was, of course, safe from the zombies herself, but at this close vantage point she got a terrifying view of the tortuous existence of the spirits that were still bound to the zombies. It was as if they were chained. They could not leave, and that attachment gave the bodies mobility, but at the same time they could not re-enter the bodies. Their loathing of the putrid decaying flesh was evident in their eyes.

“Where’d they come from?” Cat cried.

“I don’t know, but now’s not the time to discuss it, run!” Lester replied.

They turned to run, but found the way blocked by another group of five of the zombies. They were running out of outlets for their escape.

Renzetti grabbed a rock and desperately threw it at the nearest of the zombies, a mere twenty feet away. The creature made no move to deflect it and allowed it to bounce harmlessly off of its body. It continued its advance.

Beryx looked around him. Nearly surrounded by zombies there seemed to be no way out for any of them. Gwen stared at him from the spirit world. *If you turn yourself into a shadow and make your escape, leaving them alone, I will track you down like the dog you are,* she thought. She made another attempt on Renzetti’s mind...there was still time for them to do something if she could just get the information to Lester, but again she was rebuffed. The path was closing. If she couldn’t find a way in, there really was no hope.

Cat wheeled around, looking for any avenue of escape. Renzetti was getting nervous. Once the things got close enough, their terrifying speed precluded any possibility of resisting them in any meaningful way. Beryx looked at Cat. Lester could feel the love radiating off of him. He wondered if Cat would ever be able to understand.

“Goodbye, Ecaterina,” Beryx said. And then he dissolved into shadow.

Gwen screamed, an ethereal act which made no sound, but which even the spirits tied to the zombies recoiled from. A vampire against these zombies wasn’t much help, but it was

better than nothing! How could he just abandon them like that? In her rage she made one last desperate attempt at influencing Renzetti to tell Lester the critical knowledge that might save them, but again he repelled her attack, feeling only a vague sense of remembrance, as if he'd meant to say something but forgotten what it was.

The others stood in shock at the vampire's disappearance. It was as if their one slim hope had just vanished and they began to see what doom truly looked like. The panic of the others overwhelmed Lester and he sank to one knee, fighting to stay conscious.

One of the zombies reached out for Cat, who was just out of arm's length for the monstrosity. And then the zombie stopped. In a lightning move it whirled around and grabbed Beryx who had snuck up behind it and with terrifying speed bit a large chunk out of his throat.

"Run while you can!" Beryx choked out as the zombie took another bite of his dead, vampiric flesh.

Lester summoned what remained of his personal reserves and tried to block out the panic and pain that was all around him. The precious few seconds Beryx had bought them would not last forever and he grasped desperately at the beacon of hope that had been lit in Renzetti's heart upon seeing the zombie turn. Lester grabbed Cat and Renzetti by the wrists and ran by the zombie who could not reach them because it was grasping the still-struggling vampire.

Cat resisted Lester's pull for just a moment, and he could feel the sentiment of not wanting to abandon her father growing in her emotions, but he pulled harder and she gave way. The three of them ran headlong, listening for that tell-tale moan, but otherwise heeding no other noises or obstacles, until the grisly scene was far behind them.

"What happened there?" Renzetti gasped. He hadn't run this much in the last twenty years and his body was telling on him.

"Beryx opened a path for us, now keep running," Lester panted.

Following them closely, Gwen felt a pang of remorse for thinking poorly of Beryx. He had come through for them after all. But would it be enough?

## **Chapter Thirty One – One Hundred Fifty Pounds Per Square Inch**

Maxwell watched the carnage from a safe distance and could barely hide his elation. If Lester had been nearby he would surely have detected it, even though he could not normally detect the emotions of ghosts. How deliciously perfect. The vampire gave his life to buy his family the time they needed to escape. But escape to what? He loved the fact that they thought they had a plan. Their two best assets were now completely taken away from them. Gwen dead, Beryx dead, and soon they would follow. But not too soon. There was an errand to run before victory would be complete.

Cat, Renzetti, and Lester paused to rest for a moment. They listened intently but heard no noises that would give away any approaching zombies.

“What now?” asked Renzetti. “We can’t stay here forever.”

“I don’t know, why does everybody keep asking me that?” Lester shot back. *Calm. Gotta stay calm. Now’s no time to lose it.*

“Because you’re the one who knows about all this supernatural shit!” Cat yelled back. She was in no mood to listen to Lester’s whining. “You’re the damn empath with the psychic sister who channels spirits!”

“And you’re the one with a vampire for a dad!” Lester retorted.

“And we’re all the ones being chased by flesh eating zombies, just to remind you,” Renzetti put in.

Cat and Lester gave it a rest for a few moments, but he could feel the resentment coming off her. He elected not to say anything about it. Gwen, above it all, was on the verge of tears. She had to find a way to tell them, but Renzetti was still blocking her somehow. She could see the path in his mind clearly, and she still had some level of influence over him, but the path was closing and she couldn’t make him say the critical words.

“I think we should keep going,” Renzetti said at length. “We can’t stay here and we might get boxed in again no matter how alert we are.”

“And go where? You wanna hole up in some store like those poor people at the mall? Zombies pounding at the doors, knowing they’re just made of glass and that it’s only a matter of time? Is that your plan?”

“I don’t have a plan, Cat, or Ecaterina, or whatever the hell your name is. I don’t even know what I’m dealing with here. This was a simple damn murder case just a day ago. Ok,

so it wasn't so simple, but it was a damn sight simpler than worrying about the walking dead!"

Lester reeled from the strong emotions. "Stop it, both of you," he cried. "I can't take it anymore. I haven't felt emotions this strong from two people in my whole life. If you're going to ask me to be the expert on all things supernatural then you both have to calm down and let me think!"

There was a pause, the silence broken only by the heavy breathing of the trio as they all tried to catch their breath from their extended running and their emotional outburst.

"We keep moving," Lester said at last. "I don't think it's necessary to run anymore, but Renzetti is right. There isn't an answer for us here and so we need to go where there is one. I don't know where it is, but it isn't likely to come to us. And maybe we'll even find Maxwell."

They all got up, each nursing their own grudges, and Lester sharing them all. He'd never hated his gift more. All his life he'd alternated between feeling empowered and special or dirty and like a voyeur. This insight into other people's lives could be very helpful, but more often than not it only made things more complicated. Cat was the first person he'd told other than Gwen, who had somehow known even before he did, and he'd relished the ability to do so. The fact that he didn't have to hide what he knew anymore was a real revelation for him, like a fresh breeze, and even though she knew he still felt like he had to tread carefully because she resented him and his ability so much. He wished he could just turn it off for a while.

They plodded along an open stretch of countryside for a while, moving into a slightly forested area to try to reach a compromise between decent cover and easy escape routes. As they went Cat's anger turned to sadness. She'd lost yet another parent and another opportunity for closure. She didn't even know how to feel about Beryx anymore. She resented him for abandoning her to her adoptive parents, but she loved him as a member of a family she no longer had. She hated him for allowing himself to be killed, but she loved him for sacrificing himself so she and the others could escape. She needed time to be alone and collect her thoughts, but even that was being denied to her now.

"Hello, Lester," a voice gurgled from up ahead. They all stopped. Looking around, none of them could see the speaker.

"Who's there?" Lester called out. None of the zombies had exhibited an ability to talk so far, but he was very wary in case there were some in the area that might hear him.

“Someone who is looking for you, and who you have been looking for yourself,” the voice said.

Gwen could see from her vantage point that it was Maxwell. She strained at Renzetti’s mind to warn him, but couldn’t tell if he was getting the message. The entire situation was beginning to be maddeningly frustrating and she lashed out mentally at the spirit world in general before remembering to conserve her energy for what was surely going to be necessary very soon.

“Step out and show yourself,” Lester replied to the unseen voice.

“Not just yet,” the voice gurgled.

“Lester,” Renzetti hissed, “I think it’s Maxwell.”

Lester looked at Renzetti. “Are you sure? How do you know?”

“I don’t know,” Renzetti admitted. “But I’ve got a very strong feeling that it’s Maxwell.”

Gwen breathed a sigh of relief. At least something was going right for her today.

“Maxwell,” called Lester. “Is that you?”

There was an intense wheezing heaving of air, which transformed into a heavy cough. It was the most pathetic, and yet menacing laugh any of them had ever heard. “Very good, Lester. Brilliant deduction. No doubt you could tell it was me because you could not sense my presence, just as you could not sense me that night in the store.”

Lester would never have admitted it, but that hadn’t crossed his mind. He was so overwhelmed by the fears of those around him that the lack of emotions from the voice in front of him hadn’t registered. *Be careful what you wish for* he thought, remembering how he had just wished he could turn his ability off.

“Get out here, you coward!” Cat shouted.

“In due time,” Maxwell replied. He would work them into a frenzy. He would manipulate them into doing exactly what he needed them to do in order to seal his victory. There was just one last remaining thing to be done. “Tell me, how is Beryx?”

The taunt in his voice was unmistakable. Cat flew into a frenzy, tearing around the sparsely wooded area looking for Maxwell. "Where are you?" she screamed.

Again, the horrible coughing laughter from Maxwell. It seemed to be coming from all around them. Even Gwen couldn't find an exact location for him.

"Cat, calm down," Lester said, trying to figure out the next move. He knew he couldn't feel Maxwell's emotions. The man was dead, and corpses don't have emotions, but Cat flooding the area with the strong anger she was feeling at the moment wasn't helping him concentrate. There would be other tell-tale signs he might look for. Branches moving, animals scurrying, even a smell of rotting flesh, but his senses were overloaded with Cat's rage.

"Don't you tell me to calm down," she retorted. "I've been cheated out of too much by him! All I wanted was a damn job!" she screamed. The unfairness of it all, the absolute injustice.

"Cat, listen to me. You being in the store with me that night was a coincidence, but you would have gotten involved in all of this anyway. There was no way to avoid it."

"Bullshit," she spat back. Lester shook his head.

Renzetti, unperturbed by Cat's rampage, was quietly scanning the area. There wasn't that much cover. Where could anyone be hiding?

"What's the matter?" Maxwell taunted. "I'm right here."

Renzetti considered the options. There were no thick tree trunks, no large boulders, and no unusually lumpy piles of leaves. The sound seemed to be coming from all around them. He took a few steps forward, scanning the ground with his eyes and brushing the earth with his shoes.

Cat continued to tear around the area, looking behind and under impossibly narrow and small objects in some strange hope that she could overcome their oppressor just by looking everywhere all at once. Striding purposefully over to a thin tree, she stepped in a hole and twisted her ankle. She cried out in pain and sank to the ground.

"Cat are you ok?" Lester asked, rushing over to her side. He knew she wasn't. Pain causes people to give off a certain kind of emotion. There's a trace of panic, frustration, and then a euphoria as the endorphins kick in. "Is it broken?"

“I don’t think so,” she managed. The pain was excruciating, but greater was the knowledge that so far running had been their only real defense from the zombies. And now it was highly unlikely that she would be able to run with any speed. They were sitting ducks.

“Neither of you move,” Renzetti said quietly. “I think I know where he might be.”

Both Cat and Lester resisted the urge to ask ‘where?’ There was something about the urgency in Renzetti’s voice that made them realize that silence was their ally at this moment. Renzetti strode forward a few paces and uncovered another small hole similar to the one Cat had stepped in with his foot. Then he moved a few feet to his right and uncovered another one. Further on, a third. There were small holes all around them in this little section of the brush. From each of them they could hear a very faint chuckling.

“Very good, Detective, I can see why they bestowed that title upon you. Now take the next step,” Maxwell urged.

“He’s nearby,” Renzetti whispered. “There’s all these holes and they must lead to somewhere where he can talk and the sound gets transferred out here.”

“That’s great,” Cat hissed. “But how do we find him? There’s lots of holes, he could be anywhere.”

Renzetti didn’t reply. He merely frowned and looked at the holes in the ground. There ought to be some kind of burrow or mound of earth near each of them that would tell them where they led, but he couldn’t see anything of the sort.

Gwen, looking at the situation from a different perspective, could see that the earth had been tamped down on each of the holes and that they all led to an area off to their left. She debated. She could try testing Renzetti’s mind again to try to influence them in that direction, but without the other knowledge she had to convey then finding Maxwell was of limited use. She didn’t want to risk closing the path any further until she found out how to tell them what they needed to do.

“Here, I’ll make it easy for you,” Maxwell said. And with that he shambled out from behind a tree about 100 yards away. They all whirled at the sound of his voice, which they could now triangulate on. Lester stared at him for a moment and then blinked hard. For a moment he thought he could almost make out an emotion. Anticipation. And a note of fear?

Maxwell steeled himself. This was the moment. He’d been leading up to it for the last thousand years. He alone held the secret of the zombies. He knew of no weakness, but

clever minds might look at the information and discern one that he had somehow overlooked. To believe the zombies to be truly unstoppable was hubris at best. He would not be denied by his own arrogance.

“Hello, Lester,” Maxwell gurgled. His body was beginning to decay. The moment had to come soon.

Lester glared at Maxwell. A new emotion was brewing, one of hatred. He shook his head. Corpses couldn't feel emotions. What was going on? Maxwell stared at him and the feeling of hatred grew.

“Lester, what's happening?” Cat asked. Lester paid her no attention. His focus was on Maxwell.

“Lester, be careful,” Renzetti warned. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he could sense that something unusual was happening to Lester. Gwen stared fascinated. She had never seen anything like it. Maxwell had preserved the spirit of the original inhabitant of the body he was now using. He had molded it, shaped it, conditioned it, and told it lies. The spirit had lain dormant, but Maxwell had woken it up and was now pointing it towards Lester. Clearly the spirit knew that it was dead and was blaming Lester. She could read its intentions. An attack on Lester was coming, but why? Why go to all the trouble of having the body host two spirits?

“What's the matter, Lester? Cat got your tongue? Oh, sorry, no offense.”

Cat rolled her eyes. Lester showed no sign of response. His gaze was still fixed on the oncoming corpse, the feeling of anger and hatred rising in him. The strength of the emotion was one he had seldom felt before. It was intense, focused, and he could feel it beginning to imprint itself on his own emotions. Fighting back was costing him a lot of his personal energy, but he wasn't sure he could keep it up for long. A murderous rage was beginning to take him.

Gwen thought furiously. What possible ends could Maxwell have in mind for such a move? Lester was clearly agitated, so a strong emotion must be coming from the spirit. An invading spirit could never emit emotions, so Maxwell had left the original spirit intact for this specific purpose. He wanted Lester to hate him. He wanted Lester to hate him so much that... and then she realized what was happening and why. She debated within herself. She felt she had important knowledge, but did she have enough? Would they need Maxwell any more after this? The decision had to be now.



Lester opened his mouth and revealed the long vampiric teeth that he still had, a product of his metamorphic abilities.

“Lester, what are you doing?” Cat asked nervously. A low hiss came from Lester, a chilling, primal sound. Inwardly, Maxwell braced himself.

There was no option. Maxwell could yet still be useful in fighting the zombies and he could not be allowed to carry out this part of his plan. Maxwell had done it, Gwen prayed that she could as well. She focused all of her remaining energy on Renzetti, zeroing in on the path into his mind, and said a silent apology to the man as she dove straight towards him.

“Lester, stop!” Renzetti cried, but it was no longer Renzetti. Gwen had taken over his body, shoving his spirit off to the side. There would be time later to determine if she could restore him to control of his own self, but in the meantime she used the man’s legs to sprint to Lester’s side just as he sprang at the corpse that Maxwell had been inhabiting.

Lester opened his mouth wide, threw his arms around the body of his victim, and bit hard at the throat, tearing a wide gash in the flesh, and then, getting a good grip with those horrifyingly sharp teeth, ripped the corpse’s throat out. Blood flew in a wide spray around the area and Lester dove in again for another mouthful of that rotting flesh. Renzetti’s body reached him as he bit for a third time, grasped Lester by the waist, and wrenched him away from Maxwell’s mangled form.

With ragged breaths Lester stood for a moment, heaving from the effort, blood dripping from his mouth down his neck and creating a brilliant red stain on his clothes.

Gwen, looking through Renzetti’s eyes, could not see the spirit world as clearly as she could before, but what she did see terrified her. The body he had inhabited for so long now completely useless, Maxwell’s spirit began to emerge, but along with it was the spirit of the original owner. Without a body to call home, they blended together and then evaporated in a spiritual mist of glowing particles. Maxwell had destroyed himself utterly. He had become part of the background energy of the universe.

Lester collapsed to the ground. Cat hobbled over to him and fell down nearby, the pain in her ankle sharp and searing. Renzetti knelt down beside them both and Gwen spoke.

“Lester, are you alright?” she said.

He made no reply, but sat there panting. At last he looked up into Renzetti’s eyes, blinked hard for a moment, and said “Gwen?”

“Yes, it’s me. I had no choice but to possess the Detective’s body. I may be able to restore him once this is over, but I had to try to stop you.”

Lester looked at the corpse nearby. “I don’t think you managed to do that,” he ventured.

“No, I didn’t, and I hope that a lot of my other actions today will not be similarly in vain.”

“Where is he now?”

“Maxwell has gone beyond our reach,” she said simply. She doubted whether even Lester could understand exactly what had just happened, and certainly not in the short amount of time she had available to explain it to him.

“What now?” he asked, but weakly. So much of what he had tried to do today had failed. It reminded him of why he had gone to work at the convenience store, when he’d given up hope. What had made him try to rekindle it now? What had Maxwell done to him that night? He felt beaten and defeated.

“Now we have to go stop the zombies,” Gwen said through Renzetti’s body.

“And how are we going to do that?” Cat asked violently. “We spent most of the day tracking down Maxwell so we could make him tell us what to do and now you’re telling us he’s gone.”

“He is,” Gwen said patiently. “But I touched his mind before he could carry out this part of his plan. I may know something we can try.”

## **Chapter Thirty Two – Backlash**

“Tell it to me one more time,” Lester said as they trudged back to the shopping center.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to explain it to your satisfaction, Lester,” Gwen replied with Renzetti’s voice.

“Try.”

She sighed. Lester was consumed and obsessed with Maxwell’s disappearance. There were so many more important things, but this is how they’d spent the last hour while walking

back to where they knew there were a concentration of zombies. Maybe he was taking his mind off of what he was about to have to do.

“Maxwell lived a violent life,” she began again. “And since his life ended in violence there was the chance of his spirit living on to haunt you or the area or whatever. But because he had the body’s trapped spirit in there with him, who also died violently, they sort of... cancelled each other out,” she finished lamely. It was such a complex subject and she wasn’t certain she understood it herself. The point was that he was gone.

Lester nodded and seemed to be deep in thought. “And where’s Detective Renzetti now?” he asked.

“He’s still in this body with me,” Gwen replied. “But it’s different than what Maxwell did. Maxwell killed that man, but didn’t allow his spirit to be released. This is more like a simple possession. When I leave, when my work is done, then he should be restored.”

“Should be,” Cat repeated.

“Yes, should be,” Gwen said.

“Nice phrase,” Cat responded.

“I didn’t have time to fully calculate the consequences,” Gwen said hotly. “If I hadn’t then you’d all be sitting around those woods wondering what to do next.”

“Yes, this is a tremendous improvement. Walking right back into the danger zone.”

Gwen rolled her eyes. Cat had become seriously withdrawn and combative since the incident with Maxwell and Lester. It was incomprehensible and maddening and counterproductive. In fact, along with Lester’s constant questioning, the entire walk back had been pretty unbearable. Had it been like this all the time and she just didn’t know because her other body had not been able to process the memories?

She had to admit that being able to talk coherently again was very appealing. Something about the way her spirit was interacting with Renzetti’s body was helping her keep a handle on the photographic memory. Things were being sorted properly for once. Maybe it was that cop brain. Able to keep things in order.

“And when will your work be done?” Cat asked innocently.

“What?” Gwen replied.

“I said, when will your work be done. You said that when your work was done you’d leave. You know, go back to being dead. And then he ‘should be’ restored.”

“Do you have some vested interest in the Detective?” Gwen asked. “I didn’t know you knew him.”

“I don’t,” Cat said. “I’m just not entirely comfortable with the idea that random spirits can just jump into my body at any time and then I might or might not be able to reclaim my own self.”

“First, I’ve already explained that the Detective had a path to his mind opened up for him by Maxwell’s letter to him. He likely thought it would be a humorous joke to play on the man who was trying so hard to catch him. But in any case, without that path I would never have been able to do what I did tonight. Secondly, he’s completely unaware that anything is happening. It’s like being asleep. So even if ‘random spirits’, as you say, were jumping into your body, you’d never know. And it’s not like they’d be the first ones to jump into your body, miss ‘I used to work at the strip club’” Gwen went on nastily. Cat shot her a look, but made no remark. “And thirdly, I have every intention of leaving as soon as possible. Today, with any luck. I’m not in the habit of keeping things that aren’t mine.”

“Maybe not, but I bet you’re enjoying not sounding like a deranged lunatic. Oh, wait, except that you do. Nevermind,” Cat said. She might have gone on, but Lester interrupted.

“Will you two knock it off?” he said with a great deal of exasperation. “You’re both radiating enough petty jealousy you’re liable to bleach the green out of the grass.”

“Jealousy!” Cat exclaimed.

“I said knock it off,” Lester replied quietly. He was trying to think and was finding it very difficult. Gwen hadn’t told them the entirety of the plan yet, just that they had to get back to the biggest concentration of zombies they knew of nearby and the shopping mall was it. It seemed a lot farther walk back than it had been going away from it, but then they had been propelled by the panic of being chased by the creatures and their desire to find Maxwell. This time it was like walking uphill the whole way.

He looked around him. They’d emerged from the woods and were back in what was politely called civilization. There were no other people around. He guessed the word had gotten out. Or else the zombie apocalypse was upon them all and was spreading like wildfire and

the next humanoid figure they saw would be lurching, moaning, and hungry. Buildings rose out of the ground around him, and in his imagination they were suddenly teeming with the walking dead. Every shadow was Beryx come back to life and every rustle of the wind through fabric was the wheeze of Maxwell returned to dog their steps to the end of time.

Beryx's death was particularly troubling. Lester hadn't met many vampires, but he had seen one or two and their power was always startling. Their speed, strength, and cunning were legendary, and here Lester chuckled, remembering that vampires themselves were legendary and wasn't that the whole point? But he had been powerless against the zombies. They had seized him with a speed that he could not have dodged and held him with a grip he could not break. And they killed him. What hope had they? He absentmindedly licked the tips of his sharp vampiric teeth with his tongue. Would that he could have gotten some of Beryx's other powers as well. Not that it would have done him any good.

Lester's thoughts then strayed onto a more immediate concern. His teeth were still long and sharp. That was odd. Beryx was dead. How could he still be exhibiting the morphic resonance of a being that wasn't alive anymore? Could Beryx still be around somewhere? Lester glanced around warily, peering into dark corners and daring the shadows to move unnaturally, but none did. The darkness revealed no secrets to him.

The puzzle nibbled at him for a few moments, but he didn't have long to dwell on it. Up ahead they could hear the awful moaning of the zombies. They crested a hill that looked down into the recess that the mall had been built into and saw that there were more of them now, still gathered around the entrances, which by some miracle had not been reduced to broken glass yet. Kneeling down to make themselves less visible, they considered their options.

"How much protection do you think that glass really is?" Cat asked, in awe of the situation. Lester could feel all the other emotions in her melt away to be replaced by a soul-sucking fear.

"Hard to tell," Gwen replied. "I wouldn't want to stand on the other side of it, though. Certainly not within line-of-sight."

"Ok, we're here, what's the plan?" Lester said. He had a sinking feeling that he was going to be intimately involved in whatever Gwen had in mind.

She told him. Cat and Lester stared at her in disbelief.

"You want us to do what?" he asked.

She explained it to him again, slowly and carefully.

“And that’s going to work?” Cat said in a tone that conveyed her total disbelief.

“Probably,” Gwen said carefully.

“Another nice word,” Cat muttered.

“This is all total speculation, I won’t lie to you,” she said. “But based on what I was able to get out of Maxwell’s mind before he drove me out, this is the only thing I can think of. This was why he wanted you to kill him, Lester. If he’d stayed we could have dug deeper and maybe found another secret or been given some more concrete reason to think this plan will work, but since he’s gone all I’ve got is what I was able to gather in a split second. We’re lucky we have that much,” she added.

Lester stood up and surveyed the landscape. “Do they all have to be close together?” he asked.

“You tell me,” Gwen replied. “How much range do you have?”

“Never done this before, remember, Gwen? Remember how you always told me that this was something I could never allow to happen under any circumstances?”

“Obviously I didn’t think of everything,” was all she said.

“Obviously,” said Cat. “You’re really pulling out the elite words and phrases today.”

“I can usually detect people’s emotions up to about 50 yards, more if it’s a strong feeling,” Lester said, ignoring the bickering that continued to flare up between them.

“They seem to be able to cover about a yard every ten seconds, pretty slow,” Gwen said.

“Slow, but it means I have less than a minute to find out if this is going to work. How will I know when you’ve done your part?”

“You should get a sensation of emotion from them the moment it’s successful.”

“Yeah, but how long will it take you to convince them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Great.” Lester took a deep breath. “Ok, let’s do it.”

Cat rolled her eyes. She didn’t have a better idea, and that made her angry. Everything seemed to be making her angry these days and she didn’t know why. And that made her angry, too.

“Alright. I’m going now. If I’m right then Renzetti should be back with you in just a moment. Cat will have to watch over him in case he doesn’t regain consciousness right away.”

“Sure, not like I have anything better to do.”

“Good luck, Gwen,” Lester said, continuing to ignore her.

“Same to you, little brother,” said Gwen.

“Don’t call me that, especially in that guy’s body,” Lester said, but he was too late. Renzetti’s body slumped to the ground as Gwen’s spirit abandoned the body it had been possessing and flew skyward.

Overhead, Gwen took a moment to regain her senses. The view from the spirit world was different from the living world and she couldn’t afford to make a mistake now. Lester was already inching towards the zombies, trying to get close without any of them seeing or hearing him. Ahead of her she saw the faint glow of the trapped spirits, chained to their bodies. That’s where the moaning came from. The tether that held the spirit to the body allowed a feeling of sensation, and that sensation was agony, but they no longer had control. And so the bodies moaned in constant pain and fear.

She drifted over to them. She could hear the spirits themselves now, all of them emitting a similar moan as their bodies, a few of them tugging at the link between themselves and their bodies trying vainly to sever it, but most hanging their, an indistinct mist with an aura of defeat. They were giving up.

“Hello?” she called as she approached. One of the spirits looked up at her.

“Help us,” it called weakly. “What has happened to us?”

“You are neither alive nor dead,” Gwen answered as sympathetically as she could. “I am here to help you.”

“An angel!” one of the spirits cried. And with that a murmuring broke out amongst the assembled spirits. “An angel, an angel, an angel,” the whisper spread to the group.

“No, you don’t understand,” Gwen said, but the feeling of despair that had surrounded them all was slowly changing to a feeling of hope.

“You will bring us back to life!”

“No, that isn’t in my power. But I am here to help in the only way that I can.”

There was a pause. “You cannot bring us back to life?” one asked plaintively. “Then how can you help us?”

“I can help you die,” she answered. This did not meet with the reaction she had expected. In their agony she had thought that the release of death would be welcomed, but instead there was a feeling of resentment growing. The mutters of hope turned to growls of anger.

“I don’t want to die!” howled one, childishly.

“I’m sorry,” Gwen said, “I truly am. But it is the only way. You are the victims of a monster, a monster who has been destroyed. But he took with him the secrets of his plan and so we must do the best we can with what we have.”

Looking over her shoulder, Gwen could see Lester approaching the mob. They still had not noticed him. She wondered if her distraction of the spirits was buying him any time at all.

“If we die, will we be at peace?” asked one of the spirits.

“Yes. Your body holds you captive now, but if this plan works then you will die a proper death and your spirit will be free to pass into the next world.”

“And then what?”

“That is not for me to say.”

There was a pause. A moment of decision for everyone. Gwen hovered there nervously. If only there were more time she could go and get the General and Ma and use them to help



her convince these poor souls that any chance is better than no chance, but there was no time. Lester was getting closer to the mob. One or two of them were starting to shift slowly away from the doors to the mall and would begin moving in his direction at any time. She must have them convinced by the time they did so or else there would be no time.

“What must we do?” one ventured.

Gwen drew a deep breath. This was it. “You must re-enter your bodies.”

A collective groan and gasp went up from the assembled spirits. Words like horrible, putrid, decaying, stench, monstrosity, and abomination floated over to her ears and there was a stronger muttering of denial and discontent.

“And if we do not?” another asked defiantly.

“Then you will be in torment forever. Your bodies are the walking dead, unstoppable and infectious. Your attacks are fierce and bloody and the corpses you leave in your wake rise to join your ranks, their spirits confined just as yours are.”

“Then we will rule the world?” asked the treacherous voice.

“But at what price?” she cried, silently cursing herself for having to admit that they would, indeed, rule the world. But who would wish such a thing? To rule from a prison?

“Perhaps one we are willing to pay. Death is the ultimate unknown. Here we suffer, it is true, but what potential agonies await us if we die?”

“Or what beauty? People have always feared the unknown. It is where the majority of fear comes from. Even the most terrifying thing can be tamed if you know it, but the unknown is always looked upon with dread and trepidation. The unknown carries great risk, but it is not always fearful. There is anticipation, beauty, and the fulfillment of promises. Yes, you will rule and yes you may choose the devil you know, but you may cost yourself in ways you do not understand. Would you wish this existence on your wives, husbands, sisters, brothers, and children? Because that will be their fate if you do not do as I say!” she finished with a note of command in her voice that she had not known was there. She hoped her desperation and exasperation with them did not come across as well.

Her speech gave them pause. There were whispers, but much of the edge had come off of the sentiment. She looked below and could see Lester still approaching the mob. Two of them had broken off and were about a hundred yards from his position. He was standing

still, his eyes closed, clearly trying to get some sense of emotion from them. With their shambling pace, it was about two minutes until Lester would not be able to escape and then all would be lost.

“This is a very hard thing you ask us to do,” one of the spirits offered. She nodded her understanding, not trusting her voice to reply for fear of betraying her desperation. “But we will try,” the voice finished.

With that, every spirit in the mob turned its attention to the tether that held it to its body, but where previously they had been tugging on them to break them and make their escape, they now pulled with all their might towards their rotting, putrid corpses. One by one they were successful, their moans intensifying as their torment increased for a moment. To live inside that decaying shell was as close to hell as any of them would ever want to come.

Lester opened his eyes. He felt it. It was working. All around him he could feel fear, anger, resentment, impatience, and ... yes, a small amount of hope. They had put their hope in him and in Gwen and now it was time to fulfill that hope. He concentrated.

Nothing happened. He tried again, but still nothing. His lifelong blocks that he had put on himself to keep him from feeling anything at all were not going to go down easily. Another try, but he felt only indifference. What was it to him if the world ended? A world that had always been a trial and a chore for him to live in, a world where nobody understood him and he had no way to make them understand. He could run now, take his own life, be spared the misery of the zombies, and let the world rot.

“Lester! What’s happening?” Cat called out from nearby. He glanced at her. She and Renzetti were stumbling towards him and the zombie horde, which was now advancing in his direction en masse, he supporting her on her injured ankle. And suddenly he felt fear. All they had gone through would be for nothing if he abandoned them now. She had trusted him, she had made an effort, and even though she didn’t truly understand him or herself, she had a measure of perspective that very few other people on earth could boast.

The fear washed over him and he allowed it access to the deepest parts of his mind. He feared losing her, he feared losing Gwen, he feared failure and being viewed as a failure by others. And as he feared all these things he could feel fear building around him. The zombie horde was receiving the fear he was emitting and reflecting it back at him, creating the feedback loop that Gwen had always warned him about. For a split second he almost shut it down out of habit, but then remembered that this was necessary.

The zombies stopped and fell to their knees. The fear in the area flowed into every being. Cat and Renzetti stopped where they were and fell to the ground as well. Smoke began to issue forth from the heads of the corpses as their brains, unable to process the strong looped emotion, started to cook as the synapses fired with increasing intensity. One by one they slumped to the ground and when the last one finally succumbed the loop was ended.

Lester collapsed. He had done it. But what about Cat and Renzetti? He tried to raise his head to look, but dizziness took him and he lapsed into unconsciousness. Just before he blacked out he thought he felt a small sense of gratitude.

### **Chapter Thirty Three – Revelations**

Lester walked in, the door giving its usual annoying jingle, and walked up to the counter. The new guy was there, Charles, just finishing up rearranging the product on the cash counter. Charles was a neat freak and had been getting on Lester's nerves for the entire two days since he'd been back. To Charles, Lester was the new guy just because he hadn't been there the day he was hired, seniority be damned.

"Hey, Lester, I've just straightened this endcap out, try not to mess it up, ok?" he said.

Lester grunted, but otherwise ignored him.

"Guess I'll be heading out then," he said.

"Guess so," Lester replied.

Charles stood there awkwardly for a moment and then hurried off to get his things before leaving for the night. The door jingled his departure. Lester sighed and sat in his accustomed place behind the counter. It was going to be a long night. He was thankful, though, that he'd been allowed his job back. Nobody knew his involvement, but everybody knew there'd been a disturbance and he wasn't the only one to miss a shift. The owner was a bit pissed, but he knew better than to try to rehire a whole staff from scratch and have to retrain everybody all at once. He'd decided to overlook the entire thing in light of recent events and just told himself that even though there'd been a run on supplies at other stores, that just meant he was in a good inventory position right now. After all, everybody else had run out of everything, hadn't they?

The door jingled. Lester looked up and saw Cat for the first time in two days.

“What brings you here?” he asked.

“Been looking for you,” she replied. “You kinda left the hospital without telling anybody.”

“They discharged me, I saw no reason to hang around.”

“You could have called.”

“Why?”

She chose not to answer that question, responding instead with “Renzetti had all the bodies buried. Proper funerals for most of them.”

“Any more been seen running around?”

“No, but a few dead bodies were found in the area. They weren’t all at the mall, you know.”

“I know.”

“I guess your range was greater than you thought.”

“Guess so. The feedback loop probably amplified it. I probably got them all. Worldwide.”

“Impressive,” Cat said with a bit of a giggle and a smile, which faded quickly.

“So why come looking for me?”

“Well, to let you know how things were working out.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Anything else?”

“Well, I was also curious about how Renzetti and I survived when the zombies didn’t.”

“Not sure. Maybe the fact that you were alive, really alive, and your spirits were grounded firmly in your bodies. Tough to say, really.”

There was a pause.

“How are your teeth?” she ventured.

Lester opened his mouth revealing the long, sharp canines that he'd used to kill Maxwell.

"How long are you going to have those?" she asked.

Lester shrugged. "Depends. Probably a few more weeks."

"Even though he's dead?"

"Who?"

"Beryx," she answered. "My father."

"These aren't from him," Lester said. "Took me a while to figure that out, but when he died they should have gone away if they were from him."

"Oh," she said. "Then how many vampires do you know?"

"Just one other one. They're from you, Cat. Or should I say Ecaterina?"

"Just Cat is fine," she answered. "I don't have teeth like that, how can they be from me?"

"You've got it in your blood. You're a strong personality. It's just an accident of DNA that you don't have the actual physical teeth. With the right kind of physical therapy you might grow them, or maybe they'll get longer as you get older, who knows?"

There was a silence for a time that was punctuated by the buzz of the cheap fluorescent lighting in the store.

"Anything else?" Lester asked.

"Um, actually..." Cat began. Lester had been expecting this, but had secretly hoped that she'd come to her senses. "I was wondering if you'd like to go out and talk after you get off work."

"Not really," Lester said brusquely. "I'm pretty tired and the shift just started. Gonna be by myself tonight and I'm gonna want to rest up as soon as I'm done."

"Oh. Um. Sorry I got fired?" she ventured with a sickening grin.

"It's ok," he replied.

“But maybe some other time?”

“No, probably not.”

“Oh. It’s just that... Lester ... I think I love you,” she finally blurted out.

And there it was. The words he’d been dreading to hear, but he’d known were inevitable. And now he’d have to tell her.

“No, you don’t.”

“What?”

“You heard me. You don’t love me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked hotly. “Are you saying you know better than I do how I feel?”

Lester sighed again. “Cat, I’m an empath. Yes, I know exactly how you feel. You feel gratitude, you feel relief, and there’s even a bit of infatuation. But you know what there isn’t? Not even a tiny little bit? Love. Not for me, anyway. There might have been some for Beryx if he’d lived.”

Cat fumed in silence for a moment before turning on her heel and walking out, the door jingling as she went.

Slumping in his chair, Lester knew it wasn’t over. She’d be back. Strong personalities like hers tended to be obsessive. But she really didn’t love him and he needed time to mourn his sister, who he hadn’t heard from at all since the day of the zombie attack.

Nearby, in the spirit world, Gwen watched her brother sympathetically. She couldn’t intervene and wouldn’t even if she could have. This was something he’d have to work out on his own. He’d always hated the entire thing about her psychic abilities and his empathic powers. He’d wanted to be normal and he wasn’t ever going to be and so he retreated into the shadows to try to simulate a normal existence by denying that anything was special about him. She drifted away. A whole new experience was available to her now that she wasn’t tied down by her body and she wasn’t going to spend it watching her brother all the time. Maybe she’d check up on him after a while. But maybe not.

Elsewhere in the world the corpses of the zombies began to decay. Bacteria, insects, and animals assisted with the process, slowly turning the flesh into a putrid liquid which oozed into the earth. The story picked up a life of its own and zombies, which previously had been the domain of movies and the imagination, became part of the folklore that had spawned the vampires and the wraiths and the other dark creatures. Cautionary tales were formulated to warn the populace of the consequences of fear. Lester's name wasn't part of these stories.

The dark creatures continued to decline and eventually went extinct. Their stories remained, but as tales to tell children. All of their advisory capacity was gone along with them and in the coming years their warnings went largely unheeded.

What nobody realized was that the demons had made their plans as well. They knew they would never survive in their current forms and that the only way to ensure long term survival was to change the definition of the word. They had not miscalculated and hastened their own extinction, they had gone into their plan with full knowledge of the consequences. By planting a seed of evil in every human in the world they had ensured that evil would always exist. The humans acted as carriers and so long as they existed the potential was always there for dark creatures to spring into existence. It was the ultimate adaptation. The world was primed for a brand new kind of evolution.

Author's notes:

Well, another year another NaNo. This one started out as a radio play I tried to write several years ago in thirteen parts. Trouble was (and still is, for that matter) that I have virtually no concept of outlining and plotting. I get an idea that really isn't more than a germ and then I run with it thinking I'll be able to fill in the gaps as I go along.

This is the second year out of the last three that I got to the point where I really thought the story was finished about 2000 words before I made the word goal. So there's a ton of padding at the end. Up until the last few dozen pages I was really feeling good about this novel and was proud of the way I'd managed to tie in elements that were in the early chapters and make them relevant in the later chapters without having actually planned that part out in advance. Once the separate characters started meeting up with each other, though, I thought the whole thing just fell apart.

These, as always, are writing exercises for me and so it's unlikely that I'll do any editing. Although I will have to say that this is the first year when I'm actually strongly tempted to try it. I like this idea quite a lot and it just needs a bit of polish to make some of the elements make more sense and tie it all together.

I also need to work on being more descriptive. For someone who is being effectively "paid by the word" I am remarkably terse in some of my descriptions and often found myself wondering what the landscape my characters were in looked like, what time of day it was, and what else might be going on nearby. If I didn't know, then any potential readers certainly won't so I need to get better at that.

Also, midway through this, I discovered I could tie it neatly in with another idea that I had not long ago. So I might write the second part next year. And could even turn it into a trilogy. Maybe.

--  
dB