

# ***A TOUCH OF VERDIGRIS***

***JUSTIN ROBINSON***



***A CITY OF DEVILS COMPANION STORY***



Candlemark & Gleam

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**M**y brain doesn't work so well anymore.

That might be because, strictly speaking, it's not my brain.

Sure, it's mine *now*. But as for who used to have it? Search me. I'm pretty sure she lived in Los Angeles somewhere, and before that, maybe the Midwest. She had two kids, I think. Girls. You want a name? I don't have it, and I can't really look. Every time I think maybe I should, just to find out for certain, I get another compulsion. The green haze comes down over my eyes, and the next thing I know, I'm hammering some poor phantom's head into the curb.

It's a waste of time anyway. Whoever she was, she's dead now. Her kids probably don't want to meet the monster who's walking around with their dear departed mom's memories rattling around in her noggin. Even if those memories occasionally hijack my body and make me do things without my say-so. No, they're probably better off thinking Mom's some kind of glamorous vampire or politically-connected mummy or powerful witch.

I mean, it'd be as silly as tracking down the woman who used to have my legs.

You might have guessed already, but I'm a meat golem. A woman stitched together from half a dozen corpses and now

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making like a real, living person. *Oh, a meat golem. I hope my son becomes a meat golem. I've always wanted him to have a medical practice.* Sure, who wouldn't? Go into a hospital and it's filled with my kind. Fighting diseases, patching people up, making monsters and humans feel better.

Look closer. Go on, pick any hospital in the City of Angels, even one of the human ones. What do you see?

The meat golem doctors? All men. The women are there too, but we're nurses at best. Sure, lots of people make fun of the way our boys talk. It's all "Fire, bad," here and "Twenty CCs of morphine, good" there. But that's a damn sight better than I can manage. Just a hiss, in case you're wondering. When I'm off work, I carry around some chalk and wear a slate around my neck like a child. It's either that or gesturing.

But I'm not even a nurse. Hell, I can't stand the sight of blood. That's a lot to say for a woman with a line of stitches going up the center of her face, but it's true. When I wake up from beating up some poor phantom, I've got the screaming mimis worse than he does. No, I have other goals—not sure if they're from the brain's original owner or something called from the ether when my creator brought me to life—and medicine ain't one of 'em.

Neither's waitressing, but it pays the bills and I don't see blood. Well, not *every* day.

Besides, Nyx Nocturne pays more than most, and the clientele tip like ogres on payday. Still, I can tell what you're thinking. What is a meat golem with an aversion to blood doing working for a vampire? Miss Nocturne is good about keeping her eating habits to herself, and she prefers to hire meat golems. Don't ask me why. Maybe she likes employees who can't talk back.

Despite the ownership, The Nocturnist's fleet of regulars only has a minority of vampires. Believe it or not, vampires aren't crazy about the nightlife. Too gauche or something. We get all

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types, but you'll see goblins, brainiacs, and even the occasional sidhe before you find one fang.

This Halloween, we've got a bit of everything in attendance. Not that you could tell, what with everyone wearing their human masks.

That included the waitresses. Our normal get-ups were almost like cigarette girls: short skirts, halter tops, big blocky meat golem heels, and some fishnets that clashed pretty badly with our stitches. A whole lot of whistle bait, if you happen to like a touch of verdigris in your skin tone. Tonight, we topped that off with some masks that were supposed to be human, but I was willing to bet that any human who saw one of those smooth-skinned, nearly featureless masks would be more likely to set the wearer on fire than ask her home for dinner.

I shuddered to myself, the tray of champagne flutes playing a tinkling accompaniment. Even the thought was enough for an instinctual response. *Fire, bad* indeed. I steadied myself. No matter how much Miss Nocturne wanted meat golems, that didn't mean she wouldn't fire one for dumping a full tray of champagne. Even on Halloween.

*Especially* on Halloween. One waitress wasn't going to spoil the most important night on a monster's social calendar.

As I came through the kitchen doors, the sounds of The Nocturnist rose in a wave. Applause: the monsters in the seats slapping hands, paws, claws, tentacles, and pedipalps. They were putting them together for the musical stylings of Capriccio Español's Orchestra. Español was a phantom who sang with an accent that was half-Cuban, half-Italian, and all hooley. Still, he was good, and unlike a lot of those other "phantom" bands, this one was almost entirely the on the level. In their pancake makeup, you could hardly tell we had a couple zombies on percussion, and tonight, everyone was in a mask.

It was a little creepy. At every table in the place, monsters

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were wearing masks. Some of them were the expensive ones with real human hair and glass eyes. The ones you got at the boutique mask shops, where they'd take your old photos and get your mask as close as how you used to look as possible. Those monsters who still knew what they once looked like, that is. Or who only had one person to look like, rather than half a dozen.

And boom, there I was, running through a field, chasing after a child. My child? Maybe. A little girl, blonde hair streaming out behind her. Was I a blonde? I couldn't check. These attacks were like a movie, and I was strapped in for the duration. Besides, I knew that no, my hair was black, except of course for that white streak we all get with the lightning. The nightclub was gone and I could feel the wind flapping my dress against my body, the tall grass whipping around my legs. I called out, though what I said would always be a mystery, swallowed up by the angry wind. On the horizon, a line of smoke, and something really, really big stomping through the buildings. Ah. I'd seen this one before. One of those memories my stolen brain liked to put up on the silver screen to confuse me.

I burst through the door of the kitchen. My tray was empty. No, my tray was gone. I leaned heavily on the counter, not sure why I was suddenly so tired. There was a rip in my stockings, showing off a little more greenish-gray skin than usual. The stitching that went between the middle and ring fingers of my right hand had come loose.

"Jane, dear, are you okay?" Jane. That was me. Jane Stitch, if you're wondering.

I looked up into the concerned face of Wyeth Wyrđ, our cook.

I wanted to write *What the hell just happened?* but my slate wasn't on me. Wyeth knew I had blackouts from time to time and she'd agreed not to tell Miss Nocturne about it. I was fairly certain this kind of thing happened to the other girls too, but we

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meat golems are fairly private monsters, so I didn't know for sure. I just nodded at her.

“Where's your mask?”

I touched my face. No mask. I couldn't go out into the club without it or I'd get my walking papers. Where had my mask gone? How could I misplace something like that? I shrugged at Wyeth, unable to explain or ask or do anything helpful, really.

Her brow furrowed into matronly wrinkles. Something about Wyeth just made me want to jump into her arms. Even right then, when I could tell she didn't believe me. Instead, though, she just nodded and went back to stirring her cauldron, making the soup The Nocturnist was famous for. It was a bisque made out of those giant ants that have the run of the Mojave. I swear, a whole year since the Night War ended and we're still cleaning up after the mad scientists.

“You go get yourself cleaned up. If anyone's looking, I'll say you needed to get some air. There should be some more masks in the back.”

I nodded again, since I didn't have a lot of choice on that front; I wasn't going to hiss at Wyeth. I went to the back room where we had a sewing kit with good, medical-grade sutures. You don't employ a gaggle of meat golems without providing a way for us to fix ourselves. After all, how well we're put together depends entirely on our creators. Sure, a bolt of lightning will kill us dead—how's that for irony?—but you'd be surprised at how many simply fall apart due to shoddy workmanship.

I'm very good at sewing. If I ever decide to make a kid for myself, that little—well, full-sized, but a girl can be poetic—fella will be tough as a panzer. I've popped nearly every stitch in my body since I was created, and believe me, resewing them has made me a lot more durable. It also gave me a closer look at my hand.

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My knuckles were scraped, the flesh a little tattered. I knew what that meant, and the industrial chemicals I had instead of blood ran cold.

I went back into the kitchen, forgetting about the sewing kit. That'd be out for the next girl who sliced herself open on a broken glass. I grabbed Wyeth.

“What? What’s wrong, dear?”

I pointed to the door, then to the door into the back room, then to the door in the alley, and I shrugged.

Wyeth got it. “You were in and out. You did go into the alley briefly.”

I shrugged again.

“I don’t know, a few minutes? I have to watch the soup. If it goes bad, everyone inside will turn bright green.” She paused. “Sorry, dear. On *you*, green is a lovely color.”

I ignored that. I had bigger problems, it seemed. What was I doing in the alley? Who had I beaten up?

I cautiously went into the alley, the mournful wail of night traffic on Sunset filtering up through the narrow entranceway. It was dark back here, the only light from the street itself. Not that I needed much to see what was going on. Martians were fairly big, and this one was slumped against the wet brick wall behind the door. His mask, which made him look like a laughing baby, was askew. His lipless face was limp. I was no shamus, but the fist prints on his mug were probably from me.

I took a step down, and there was a crunch. I moved my foot. My heavy heels had crushed one of the Martian’s syringes. Martians were a lot like vampires, but their digestive systems were all messed up. They couldn’t drink blood; instead, they had to hook up their veins to the veins of their meal. This was for that, as near as I could tell. I was no expert, but I’d served Martians more than once and never quite got used to it.



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I squatted down and peered at the motionless gray blob. His tentacles were spread all over the grimy alley. That alone was enough to make me wonder. Martians could die from a single snotty tissue; they avoided alleys like the literal plague. He would've needed a damn good reason for coming out here.

He was dead, though. That meant he wasn't keeping an eye on his surroundings as much as maybe he should have.

Right on cue, right when I had just realized that in all probability, I had just beaten a monster to death, I was somewhere else. In a yard this time. I think it was the back, but I never looked too closely. No, the house was in the corner of my eye. I was out by an orange tree, holding the little girl up as she picked a fat fruit right off the branch. She turned and smiled at me, bigger than the sky.

Darkness. I blinked, because at first that was all I could see. Might as well have thrown a black bag over my head for all the good my eyes were doing. Then I started seeing shapes and paying attention to the smells. I got the array of booze, then the more exotic stuff. The whole plasma for the Martians and the vampires, the garum for the gill men and sirens, and of course the squeaking live rats for the bug-eyed monsters and the clowns. I was in the club's basement, in the storage area.

I was squatting down here too, a mirror image of what I'd done topside. I saw the dead Martian again, and felt the fog rolling in, and heard the laughter of the little girl. I blinked it back, not wanting another trip down Not My Memory Lane. Where was I going to wake up this time? In the club itself? Over another body? I'd blacked out before, but twice in one night was unusual. Maybe I should just get someone to call the cops, turn myself over, and plead to being a meat golem.

That might work if I was some kind of hotshot doctor. Not so much for a cocktail waitress.

I stood up gingerly. That's when I heard something—sounded like a can maybe—clatter across the floor.

I dropped back down. Had I been hiding? I wished I could wring my brain's throat sometimes. Or whatever the equivalent was. Considering what was happening, I might learn the equivalent on the next brainiac who got the wrong sparker.

There was definitely a shape coming through the dark, knocking things over as it went. Couldn't help wondering if it was large and clumsy or just being a jerk. Whatever it was, it was muttering to itself, but that didn't narrow it down much. I heard the snap-hiss of something electrical, and knew then I was in serious trouble.

I said it before, but it bears repeating. We meat golems don't like fire much—I shuddered again, picturing it in convenient torch form—but electricity was *really* bad. One shock to wake us up, another to put us away. It's the power of life and death in one convenient blue bolt. What that sound told me was that whoever was hunting around in this basement was really hunting *me*.

It was up there. Somewhere in the greeby fog of this brain. I knew what happened to that Martian in the alley, and I knew why this goon was trying to fit me for a halo.

I thought maybe I should get a look at him. Try to jog something loose, figure out exactly why he was after me. For all I knew, that'd throw me through another fogbank, but hiding in a cellar wasn't my idea of a good time. I could dimly see the low shelf I was hiding behind, and judging from that muttering, and the persistent buzz worming its way through my spine, I guessed he was one row over. He obviously could see in the dark, which was true of most monsters, so that didn't help me narrow it down much.

I crept to the end of the row, trying my best to keep my shoes from clomping on the floor. I don't know who decided every meat golem needed a couple inches of sole, then a few more in

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the back for ladies, but I'd wring his neck too, someday.

The footsteps on the other side of the shelves paused. I could practically see the monster—still just a nebulous, scaly shape—cocking its head. The muttering cut off, too. That buzzing persisted, though, standing my hair on end and bringing the green fog rolling in at the edge of my vision. I didn't need to black out. Even if seeing that little girl made my insides all gooey, going to her might mean I never came back out.

I scrambled back like a crab as claws skittered on the floor. Still didn't have a clue what was chasing me. When it came around the corner, though, even though it was dark, the thing's silhouette solved that for me. Mostly because I was looking at a giant white pompadour about two feet off the ground. Just about the only other thing I could see was the blue arc of electricity a foot off the ground, and coming closer.

"Jane... caca!" it rasped.

Gremlins. The worst.

I didn't know why the little monster wanted me dead and I couldn't ask him. As though to drive that home, a hiss rose up in my throat and I threw it at him for all the good it would do.

It laughed, or else it started gargling quartz. The arc snapped and hissed at me, like the creature was jabbing it in my direction. Thanks, Pompadour. I see what you have. Would *he* miss it if I were waving the sun at him?

I kept crabbing backward, unable to get to my feet. He was doing that little hop-hobble gremlins do that covers more distance than it should. Whatever he was holding in his hand, surely one of those crazy inventions they were always carrying around, was filling the air with the scent of ozone. Lightning in a bottle.

The sky was nothing but lightning. I was in a city, and I was pretty sure it wasn't Los Angeles. There was nothing remotely natural about any of it. Martian tripods stalked through the

ruined buildings. Someone was crying in my arms. I brushed her hair and looked down into the tear-stained face of the little girl.

A mask. I turned it over in my hands. It was my mask. I recognized it. Though Miss Nocturne bought them by the bundle, there were subtle differences between each one. After all, it would have been unconscionably rude for us to be all in the same masks. The patrons had to be able to pretend we were really as we were. Otherwise, no titillation. No Halloween spirit.

I looked up from where I was. I was standing upstairs, not in Miss Nocturne's office—and believe me, I heaved a sigh of relief about that—but in one of the side rooms she used when entertaining. If that sounds ominous, maybe it should. Considering the kinds of people that frequented The Nocturnist, let's just say that what a girl sees in these rooms, she keeps to herself. Maybe that's why Miss Nocturne hired meat golems.

It was a small dining room, with one-way glass looking down into the club below. There were speakers in the corner, ready to pipe in the Español Orchestra. The room hadn't been prepared for anyone else, and despite the dining room setup, there was no food on the plates or on the table. I guessed, from where I was standing, that my mask had been on the table, right where the plate would have been on one of the ends. Had I been sitting there like a guest?

And what had I done to the gremlin?

I put the mask on. Just in case, I wanted to look like I belonged. I checked around the room and it didn't take me long to find the answer to one question. Whoever had been sitting opposite... me, maybe... had been using a syringe. I picked it up. Meat golems don't leave fingerprints—no oils, no prints—so I wasn't nervous about that. I just wanted to be sure about what I was seeing. I was.

A Martian had been sitting here.

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A Martian had been beaten to death outside. I was reborn at night, but it wasn't *that* night. Call it a coincidence and you can pull the other one. I put the syringe down. Guess I had a gremlin to talk to. He wasn't going to be too keen on that. Maybe I needed a little backup.

I cracked the door as carefully as I could and, when I was satisfied no one was in the hall, went out. The hallway opened up onto a balcony, where I could look down at the crowd. Every monster, no matter how strangely shaped, had a human face, paralyzed into a single expression. I saw it as the little girl in my mind might have and I shuddered, my gaze moving toward the back of the club. That was where Miss Nocturne had her caged wolves—real ones—padding back and forth and watching the patrons hungrily. Vampires, am I right?

I walked quickly back to the kitchen—though even this still had the funerary *clomp clomp* of a meat golem in motion—and opened up the door.

“There you are, dear,” Wyeth Wyrd said to me. “Did you get everything sorted out?”

I pulled the mask off and Wyeth must have seen something in my mismatched eyes.

“Jane, dear? You’re scaring me.”

I nodded emphatically and grabbed her by the arm.

“Ow!”

I loosened my grip, but she was already rubbing at it. She'd bruise. Even I forgot how strong I am a lot of the time. Wyeth followed me, though she was giving me the stinkeye. I opened the door and gestured out into the alley. Wyeth came to the back door and looked.

“That’s a dead Martian,” she said.

I nodded, taking a few steps to the corpse, and pointing at the bruises.

“He’s been beaten to death.”

I nodded again, this time a little more desperate. I hustled her back inside and shut the door. Then I showed her my knuckles.

“You? No.”

I shrugged.

“You?”

I shrugged again.

“You don’t know if you did it or not?”

I pointed to my knuckles and shrugged. I was good at shrugging. I could convey a whole host of emotions with it. This time it was confused agreement.

“How can you not know?” I gave her a look, and she got the idea pretty quick. No way for long explanations unless she got me a pen and paper. “All right, all right. So you don’t remember hurting him, but it stands to reason this doesn’t rule anything out.”

I winced and nodded.

“Scary,” Wyeth said. “Very scary.”

I pointed at her.

“I didn’t do it!”

I shook my head and pointed to her again, then wiggled my fingers.

The kitchen door burst open and another one of the girls clomped in, picking up a fresh tray. She hissed at the both of us, and I got the message. *It’s a full house out there. Get to work.* Well, I have bigger problems, sister.

We waited until she was gone.

“You want me to hex the memories back into you?”

An emphatic nod.

“Afraid not, dear. Hexing meat golems is pretty dangerous, since you are, magically speaking, several different people at the same time.”

*Tell me about it.* The little girl giggled in my memory as the

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fog rolled in. I held it back. This was getting difficult.

My eyes must have grown three sizes because Wyeth's did too, and she yelped excitedly. "You remember something!"

Damn right. I pointed to the floor.

"Feet. Floor. Cellar?"

Nod. Then I did my best impression of a gremlin.

"Gremlin?"

I frowned at her. She got it awful quick.

"You do a really good gremlin," she said, smiling. "Gremlin in the cellar?"

I made a few more gestures, acted scared, and watched understanding rise over Wyeth's face.

"There was a gremlin in the cellar trying to kill you."

I nodded. She clapped her hands. "This is *fun*, Jane. I should introduce you to my coven."

I waved a *later* at her.

"Where is he now?" Wyeth asked.

I stared at her.

"Oh. Of course. Well, if you had a hair from him, I could find him for you."

I thought of that magnificent pompadour the gremlin had been sporting. Never got close enough, to my knowledge. Then again, it's possible I had beaten him to death, too. Although, if I had, he would still be in the cellar. I was going to have to start looking at some bright sides here.

I beckoned Wyeth, who said, "I can't leave the soup!" and opened the door to the cellar. I waited there for a few moments, head cocked, listening for muttering, or the buzzing of electricity. I shuddered again as I pictured it, and the fog once more threatened to engulf me. I could hear nothing. And when I turned on the light, there was no terrified scrabbling into a hiding place. Gremlins were like cockroaches around light. Well, cockroaches

with bazookas, anyway.

I did a cursory check of the cellar. It was empty. No gremlin, no long white hair, nothing. No sign I had even been down there. I ran it through in my head, accounting for the blackouts. Okay, I go into the main room and get sent to wait on the private room where the Martian was sitting. I lose my mask somehow, then beat him to death in the alley out back. Then I end up in the cellar where a gremlin was trying to kill me.

It wasn't my first time coming to with someone getting beaten. Sorry, but it's the truth. It *was* the first time anyone was dead apparently because of me. That was enough to make me wonder. That and the gremlin. Was I a loose end?

Had I suddenly wound up in a detective movie? One of those Nate Accompli pictures, with amnesiac killers and hardboiled shamuses. I didn't like that. Accompli movies never had happy endings. I was fairly certain it was in his contract.

I passed Wyeth, putting the mask back over my face. If that gremlin was anywhere, he was out in the main crowd. I didn't know what he was after, but I was going to find out. I grabbed a tray of champagne and went back out into the club.

The crowd was on its feet, and paws, and tentacles, clapping and howling for Capriccio Español, who was taking his grateful bows. It was a sea of faces, human faces, and I had to ignore the heebie jeebies. Nothing like a human to scare someone. They had hunted us for sport back in the old days, and even though they had been amnestied, you still got the idea they might like to try it again. Of course, they kind of had a point, considering I was made out of six girls, give or take, and none of them would be going home anytime soon.

The stage looked like the drawbridge and portcullis of a large Gothic castle, the edifice of which was painted up on the back wall. This faded into a craggy forest and night sky, leading all the



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way to the door. Real trees, albeit dead and leafless, were planted alongside, and then there were the cages of bats and wolves. You know, for ambience. I secretly thought Miss Nocturne kept them as extra bouncers, just in case Hargoth the Bonechewer was having an off night.

I caught sight of Miss Nocturne, entertaining some of her more important guests. Crime bosses, if you wanted the legal term, and I was going to stay the hell away. She, of course, was enjoying herself, laughing through ruby-red lips and flashing ivory fangs. She wasn't going to like a dead patron in the alley. Not one bit.

And this job paid pretty well.

*Don't worry, Jane, I thought to myself. You can do this. You're not Sam Shade. You're better. He can't rip a car door off its hinges, or fold someone's elbow the wrong way. He just sort of flies around and gets exorcized every other page.*

I scanned the crowd, desperately looking for that little gremlin. Hard to see a two-foot fella, even once you tacked on an extra foot of snow-white hair.

The crowd sat, and Español went right into a Latinized version of "The Night Has a Thousand (Crawling) Eyes." It was one of his best, and of course the crawling eyes in the house all gave an extra smattering of tentacular applause and a few appreciative *aaahs* along the way.

"Over here." I turned, stupidly thinking that someone alerting me to the gremlin. Nope. It was a well-heeled wolfman beckoning me and my tray over. His mask made him look like some fresh-faced college kid, even though his fur was bristling out through the eye and mouth holes.

I set a champagne flute on his table, along with one for the wolfwoman at his side, and moved on. I searched the floor for the gremlin while I distractedly set flutes on any table I passed,

pressing them into any appendages reaching out.

At last I saw it, like a white shark fin cresting over a glimmering sea of tables. Pompadour.

He was heading for the door. I couldn't shout to Hargoth, either. A hiss wouldn't tell anyone anything, except that maybe a high roller decided to get fresh and I had forgotten my manners.

I moved quickly, setting the tray down on a table occupied by a pair of mummies. They called after me, scandalized. I wasn't paying attention. I needed the little gremlin before he left the place—and left me to take the rap on the Martian.

I was clomping pretty loud, but Español was hitting the high notes. Bless that phantom showman. Even the murmurs following me as I pursued the gremlin weren't loud enough to distress anyone.

So Pompadour didn't *hear* me coming. No, he felt it through the floor. Old Jane Stitch, thundering along like a herd of buffalo. He turned, beady red eyes widening behind his mask, a caricature of a shriveled old man. There was no surprise in the laughing, artificial face, but it was there in the eyes. He went for his belt, and I guessed that's where the arc was.

If I moved slow, I was a dead woman.

Fortunately, his nerves deserted him. Something about an enraged meat golem descending on him like a dive bomber. He hobbled back a step, caught the leg of a chair and went sprawling. I was on top of him in a second, one hand closing over his throat, the other grabbing the claw that was reaching for the weapon. A sharp crack and the sound of a gremlin blubbering told me he wasn't going to reach for much else until he got a splint. The whole time, I was hissing like a whole sackful of cats.

“Hargoth!” That was Miss Nocturne. Probably didn't like me roughing up the clientele. I looked around. Every eye in the room was on me, and when that includes crawling eyes, it can

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be a bit intimidating. Hargoth the Bonechewer lumbered in from outside. He was an ogre wrapped in a tailored tux, his ugly mug hidden behind the most average-looking face I'd ever seen. He clutched a spiked club in one mitt, and I knew he'd use that on whoever Miss Nocturne told him to. Meat golems might be strong, but ogres were stronger.

"Jane! Jane, caca!" the gremlin rasped, his useless arm dangling next to him. I wasn't choking him so much as just kind of holding him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Miss Nocturne didn't have to push through the crowd. It parted for her, as always. She fixed me with her golden eyes and waited, like I could tell her something.

I shrugged helplessly, then shook the gremlin. *He'd said Jane! That means something!*

Miss Nocturne frowned. Maybe I appeared lucid, because she said to the room behind her without letting her eyes leave mine, "Someone get her a pencil and paper." She paused. "Now!"

Several employees, including Español's lead cornet player, started looking for the requested items. One of the girls brought them over.

"Explain yourself. And drop the gremlin please."

I obeyed her, and the gremlin fell to the ground to moan in pain. I wrote it out, as much and as discreetly as I could.

Miss Nocturne kept a poker face while she read it, and a poker face on a vampire was basically a Greek statue. "Stealing from the till?" she said lightly.

"No, no!" the gremlin howled.

"Can't have that. Jane, please take this man into the kitchen." Miss Nocturne held up her hands and spoke to the crowd. "Our Jane caught a thief. She apologizes for the disturbance and wishes you all a Happy Halloween."

There was some relieved applause and the three of us went into the kitchen. I didn't miss the nod she threw at a certain table, where a certain crime boss had been sitting. Even from that distance, sidhe gave me the creeps. I didn't want him knowing my name, but it seemed that ship had sailed. At least he never gave the meat golems much of a look. No, the Gobfather liked them soft, innocent, and human.

We took the gremlin into one of the back rooms. The one I'd never been in, and in fact had been told by Wyeth to pretend didn't exist. Then Miss Nocturne told me that the guests could use another tray of champagne. As I left, three goblins that had been sitting with the Gobfather walked past me, muttering in their weird brogue. After that, I did my best to ignore the sounds the gremlin made from behind the door.

Pompadour copped to everything. I found that out later. Those goblins wrung it out of him. The gremlin was there to off the Martian. Something about patents, and he only used me to take the fall because I was the one who brought the Martian his meal upstairs. Yeah, the sight of blood would have kept the fog rolling in, making me the perfect patsy. No idea how he knew about that, but....at least I knew what had happened this time.

Pompadour couldn't talk much after that, even for a gremlin. He said he used something to scramble my brain and keep me all mixed up. He was also the one who beat the Martian to death; used a piston device powered by that same arc he'd tried to kill me with. Yeah... turns out that even when the fog was in, I wasn't as cooperative as Pompadour liked, and I'd turned into a loose end.

Miss Nocturne gave me a stern talking-to, but that was it. She said I should have come to her immediately with the problem and I'd be safe as houses. I was part of the family—sure I was—and nobody comes at one of Nyx Nocturne's girls and gets away with it. That's really what it was: an attack on Miss Nocturne. I

***A CREATURE WAS STIRRING***

was a big green pawn. But then, I was a big green pawn who got to keep her job.

I don't know what happened with the Martian's body, or where the gremlin ended up. I know there were no wolves sniffing around the next day, apart from the ones in the cages. And let me tell you something, those looked pretty well fed.

Just another Halloween at The Nocturnist.