



CITY OF DEVILS



JUSTIN ROBINSON

IT'S A DEVIL OF A JOB...

I waited until I stopped shaking, got into my car, and drove very carefully down into Hollywood. I had gone without sleep before, of course, but I had gotten to that age where it wasn't a trivial matter anymore. Still, had to warn the robot and the crawling eye that the gremlin was going to kill them.

And then hate the fact I lived in a world where such a sentence was said with a straight face.



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Mr. Blank

***CITY
OF
DEVILS***

JUSTIN ROBINSON



Candlemark & Gleam

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For Lauri.

I'm so glad those evil eye charms
didn't work on you.

ONE

The man knocking on the outside of my office window had the head of a fly. I sighed. Not another one.

I wanted to shoo him away, but I didn't have a newspaper big enough. Were they even scared of newspaper? I'd have to check with the human-only apothecary on Alameda. The human flies were supposed to be pretty strong, just like their insect brethren, but I'd never arm-wrestled one. Better to be careful. Just in case. I dug the insecticide sprayer out of the desk, finding it under more wolfsbane than any man should ever have to see in his lifetime, and turned back around. He was still there, stuck to the glass, plainly visible even through the venetian blinds. One of his legs was a fly leg. Must make getting around fun.

I waggled the sprayer at him, making sure those big red compound eyes saw it. He licked the window with that horrible tongue thing. I cringed. Was that really necessary? I opened up the window next to him and got a whiff of whatever he'd had

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for breakfast. Sweaty garbage, judging by the smell.

“What?”

“Bzzzz. Bzzz.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Bzzz! BZZZ!”

“I don’t... uh... I don’t speak... fly.” Why didn’t they understand that? They were still newish; I couldn’t remember them showing up before about six months ago. I wondered what had spawned them—pretty sure no one was keen to take the credit on that one. Safe bet it was a brainiac or mad scientist fiddling with something or other. Still, you’d think the human flies would have figured out that no one understood buzzing, no matter how slow or loud it got.

I could almost see him sigh. He was in a shirt and tie, wearing a pair of slacks with one leg torn off at the thigh to reveal a skinny greenish insect leg covered in stiff hairs, all topped off with a lab coat. Of course he was wearing a lab coat. He was probably with JPL or some other outfit. All the human flies seemed to be.

“Bzzz.”

“Yeah.”

Wings like cellophane unfolded from his shoulders and he jumped off the window into the sky over Flower Street, nearly slamming into a witch speeding along on her broom. She almost lost her cat, catching the little black-and-white fella by the scruff of its neck and shouting something decidedly unladylike.

Just another traffic snarl in the former City of Angels.

It was the tail end of a lousy summer day, with the desert sun baking us like cookies. I had already sweated through my undershirt and was getting some nice rings under my armpits, and this stupid bowtie was starting to feel like a piece of

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spaghetti wrapped around my neck. The rickety little fan on the top of the filing cabinet wasn't doing much more than floating the ribbons threaded through its tines. Even that was taking more effort than it should've; the ribbons moved sluggishly through the soupy air. It would have been nice to chalk the whole shebang up to hell finally coming to earth, but the fact of the matter was, this was typical of summer in Los Angeles. Just another windless day spent cowering under the punishing heat, and wishing every public swimming pool in town wasn't monsters-only.

I leaned the insect sprayer against the leg of the desk and collapsed into my chair. There *was* a desk under there somewhere. Under the files and papers, and that little corner of the actual blotter. I don't even know why I had a blotter; either my secretary bought it under the sweetly misguided sense I'd use it, or else the thing came with the office. Two filing cabinets were shoved against one wall, vomiting up paper; my private investigator's license hung, framed, on the other. Across from me sat two more chairs for clients. The office was so cramped that anyone in them would have to scoot forward if the door opened.

I saw my secretary's shadow on the frosted glass, eclipsing my name, a second before she poked her head in. "Mr. Moss? You have a client." Last names when there were clients. We had to look professional.

I peered at my watch before remembering it no longer told time. "It's a little late, isn't it?" I jerked a finger at the sun setting over my shoulder and hoped I wasn't gesturing at another human fly crawling on the window.

She squinted past me, her eyes enormous behind her goggles—which wasn't too unexpected, since they contained seawater. Something about her eyes; she couldn't see properly

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in air. One time she had come in to work with a tiny fish swimming around in there and was horribly embarrassed when I pointed it out. Didn't stop her from eating it, though. "We're still open."

I sighed again. "Send him in, Miss Sargasso."

"Her," she corrected.

"Well, then, kick her the hell out."

"What?" Her eyebrows, which were little blackish green fins, shot up.

"I'm joking, Miss Sargasso. Send her in."

My secretary, Miss Serendipity Sargasso, gave me a nervous smile. On her, that was a little terrifying, since her mouth was stuffed with razor-sharp teeth—rows upon rows of the bastards, too. As long as she kept that thing shut, she was just your standard blue woman with pretty yellow stripes, and webbed hands and presumably feet to match. Open it, though, and she could give you some serious second thoughts about nearly anything. Nice quality in a secretary; pretty on the outside, yet intimidating when you needed the extra security.

She poked her head out into the reception area and I heard her slightly muffled voice say, "Mr. Moss will see you now."

The woman who came through the door was clearly not the kind that heard "no" very often. She was almost six feet of imposing ice queen, platinum blonde hair in a series of immaculate rolls, and an outfit that didn't just say money, it screamed it loudly, repeatedly, and directly into my face.

I'd seen this movie before. Femme fatale saunters into a private dick's office on gams taller than he is, offers a job, and pretty soon the dick is in dutch up to his eyeballs. As a matter of fact, not only had I seen the movie, but it starred the woman presently looking at me like I was a talking badger. It's why she wore that face around town; it was the one that made her famous.

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I popped up out of my chair, scampered around the side of the desk, and banged my knee.

“Ow! Son of a—hi, I’m Nick Moss.”

She looked down at me imperiously. “Imogen Verity.”

I knew that already, but it was still kind of impressive to hear spoken out loud by the star herself.

“Miss Ver—is it Mrs.? I feel like it should be... I’m Nick Moss.”

“You already said that.”

“Did I? Oh, well, sit down,” I gestured at one of the chairs and quickly cleared it off, sticking the files on top of the cabinet in front of the fan. Not like it was doing that much for anyone. I ran back around my desk and hit my other knee. They’d have matching bruises now, so that was something. I successfully bit off the yelp of pain.

“How can I help you?”

“You’re a private investigator.” Her voice was smooth and powerful, like good scotch with a gasoline chaser.

“Yes, I know.” I pointed at the license on the wall.

She didn’t look. “Mind if I smoke?”

“No, no, of course not.” I reached into my jacket for my lighter, but only found a rosary and a vial of quicksilver. I tried the other side, near the mirror and the gold coin with a picture of Queen Victoria on it. There it was. I flicked open the cover, caught the flame, and held it out. She had already expertly removed a slim cigarette from a silver case and was holding it to cherry lips. A single puff and she had it going.

I fished the pack of cigarettes from my jacket and shook one out. I didn’t technically smoke yet. They’d given us each a carton before dumping us out over France, but I never got the hang of it. I always ended up trading the things for chocolate bars. Still, it was expected of me to smoke, being a private dick

and all, so I gave it a good faith try. Took three attempts to get the damn thing to light and I had to swallow two coughing fits, but at least I looked the part, clicking the lighter shut and leaning back.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I know your movies, of course. I, uh, I really like the one where you were, you know, a kid.” I coughed loudly. “Excuse me.”

She flashed her canines, delicately resting her cigarette on the ashtray. She sat straight up, shook her hair out just a bit, and then it happened. Her features ran like melting wax, her head shrinking while the liquid flesh poised like frozen waves over the bare skull. When the skull had stopped changing, the flesh came back up, layering blood vessels, muscle, and, finally, skin and even hair. The platinum blonde ice queen was gone, replaced by the little girl from *Marion*. She was sitting in Imogen Verity’s expensive, and now gigantic, outfit. The cigarette ruined the image even more, especially when she plucked it from the ashtray, took a long pull, and exhaled a stream of smoke.

“That’s the one,” I said, trying to keep the quaver from my voice. The sight of the little girl in the chair made me suddenly self-conscious. Even though she was smoking, and in point of fact wasn’t a little girl at all, I wanted to stub out my cigarette and tell her to get back to school. Or at least hide her from Constable Gisbourne, who had to be nearby.

“It’s always lovely to meet a fan,” she said in a little-girl voice, setting the cigarette back in the ashtray.

Her features ran again, dripping off the skull before dripping back up, and she was Sister Mary Olaf from *The Hills of St. Verence*. The iconic scar where the Nazi put out her eye was a dead giveaway. The nun took a drag on the cigarette, because it was apparently important to Imogen Verity that all beloved

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icons of innocence be sullied in my office.

“Oh. I had forgotten you were her, too.”

She cut me off with another shift and she was the ice queen again. I managed to fumble the cigarette right out of my mouth and onto the floor, where I did my best to crush it surreptitiously. The constant shifting was pretty much guaranteed to get under my skin. Not that appearance was the most important thing, but it felt like you were talking to a different person every minute or so. Doppelgangers are tough to get used to. Make great actors, though.

“I can show you my identification if you like,” she said.

“That’s not... well, you know, for paperwork purposes... no, that’s not necessary.” I stopped, wondering what I was supposed to say to Imogen Verity, the woman who won an Oscar for playing the nun that thirty seconds ago was sitting in the chair across my desk. “Miss Verity, it’s obviously an honor to meet you. You probably raised the tenor of the building by a whole... um... scale, I guess. But why are you here?”

She tapped some ash off the end of her cigarette. “I need a detective.”

“So I understand, but what I’m trying to get at here is that there are other detectives in this city. Monsters, I mean. Last time I checked, I’m literally the only human detective in all of Los Angeles.”

“Your humanity doesn’t concern me.”

“I don’t quite know how to take that.”

“Take it as a paying job.”

“I could do that.”

“I knew you were human before I arrived. My agent informed me when he recommended you.”

“Recommen—who’s your agent?”

“Vlad Bathory. You probably remember him better as...”

she paused, trying to summon the name from beneath studied monster contempt for their early human existences. “Richard Brower?”

“Oh, yeah. I remember Dick.” His folks had hired me to find him when he had gone missing after a petting party. I found him a week later sleeping the days away in a mausoleum in Hollywood. That was a little over a year ago. Nice to hear the kid had a career to go along with the blood thirst and cross phobia. “How’s he doing?”

She ignored the question in that practiced way only the very rich have mastered. “He informed me that you specialize in missing persons.”

“Well, yes. But I *am* still human, and you’re, uh, you’re not. And it does beg the question.”

“Get to the point, Mr. Moss.”

“A werewolf.”

“What, here?” She glanced around, more curious than scared.

“No, I mean you can afford one of the werewolf PIs. There’s Baskerville, Gevaudan... I hear good things.”

“I’ve never seen a man so intent on advertising his competition.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Miss Verity, I’m flattered. But you can afford a monster. Someone more... more attuned to the problems facing other monsters. Like yourself.”

“I have my reasons, Mr. Moss. You are a missing persons specialist, are you not?”

I nodded. “Yes, yes I am. That’s ninety percent of what I do here. But, um... the person sitting there, where you are now, is usually human. And she’s usually crying. And her husband would be sitting there.” I pointed to the empty chair. “They’d tell me about how Susie or Timmy or whoever went missing

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one night after a party that ran too late, and they'd hire me to find them. And nine times out of ten, the happy ending is that little Susie likes being a fish girl now."

"But still, you find missing persons?"

"Well, yes. They're not always still technically persons, but sure." I paused, meaning to search her baby blues, but found her far too pretty to actually look at. She was a little like the sun, and thus best appreciated in peripheral vision, so instead I began the long and arduous task of lighting another cigarette. "I take it you've misplaced someone?"

"My husband."

"And he's another doppelganger?"

"He's a mummy."

"Oh, it's a mixed marriage."

She nodded. "My husband is a city councilman. Juba II."

Never heard of him. "Sure."

She was the tiniest bit shakier now, her breath hissing slightly through her teeth. I couldn't tell if this was actual nerves or if a literal Oscar-winning actress was playing a part just for me. Those eyes were too blue, her skin too fair and smooth. She even smelled like Chanel rather than cigarette smoke. Of course, she *was* a shapeshifter. She could look and sound and even smell however she wanted. If I were a doppelganger, I'd make myself taller. And less hairy.

To cover the silence and the fact that I had already gotten lost in thought, I said, "Mrs. II—"

"Miss Verity, please. I prefer my rebirth name."

"Miss Verity, tell me what happened."

She nodded again, concentrating on the wispy thread of smoke slowly rising to the ceiling. "Last night, my husband got home after dark, which is normal. He's been working hard lately and is under a lot of stress. I had returned an hour

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earlier. At any rate, by the time my husband arrived home, our maid was preparing dinner. My husband went upstairs to his study, which is, again, normal. When our maid rang the bell, I came down to the dining room, but he didn't. I sent her up to find out where he was. She told me he wasn't there. We searched the house top to bottom. He was gone."

"Under a lot of stress for what reason?"

"He's looking to run for mayor soon."

I noted that down. "On the night in question, what did you do next?"

"I called the police."

"You were sure something was the matter?"

She nodded. "My husband, for all his faults, is not one to leave suddenly, especially after he has come home for the day."

"What did the police say?" I was honestly curious. You don't really get monsters going missing. Humans, sure, all the time. Call the cops, and after a little cursory sniffing around, they'll tell you that your—wife, husband, child, parent, what have you—was out after dark and what happened was totally aboveboard. With a monster... who would want to kidnap one of them? If that was even what had happened.

"They dismissed me. Called me hysterical. Until one of them found a little bit of sand on the windowsill, that is."

"Your husband was wounded?"

Her answer was a tiny sob, instantly blocked off by an immaculately gloved hand. I didn't know whether to applaud or offer a tissue. I almost did both.

"Was there a trail?"

"Not that they found."

I thought it over. "Miss Verity, if this is a homicide or a kidnapping and you already called the LAPD, there's really not much left for me to do. I mean, I can make a citizen's arrest,

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but I can't interfere with their investigation in any way."

"No, Mr. Moss, you don't understand. They think *I* did it."

"Did you?"

"No!"

"I have to ask, you know, for legal..." I took a drag on the cigarette to cover and ended up coughing.

"That is precisely why I have to hire you, and only you, Mr. Moss. My husband has connections to law enforcement, given his job. It could be... complicated. Now, with the police suspecting me, I need someone with no links to them at all. And I need someone who will keep this quiet."

"Then I'm your man. So, what do you think happened to him?"

"I don't know," she said. "He might have run off and accidentally cut himself on a nail. I really don't know. That's why I wanted to hire a professional."

"Why would he do that? Run off, I mean."

"My husband is having an affair."

"That... um... that speaks to motive."

She glared at me through the gray web of smoke. "I had nothing to do with my husband's disappearance, Mr. Moss. If I had, would I be here?"

"Well, yes, actually. I'm human, sort of the perfect patsy, when you think about it, and... you know what, never mind, I shouldn't be giving you..." I cleared my throat. "Please, go on."

She gave me another dubious look. "I bear no ill will towards my husband, Mr. Moss. Our marriage is really more out of convenience for both of us. He gets a glamorous movie star for his arm. I get respectability and an aura of fidelity. He was considerate enough to keep his affair discreet, and so there was no problem. But him running off with whoever she is, that *is* a problem. And if he was, in fact, kidnapped or hurt in some

way..." She trailed off, finding some comfort in her rapidly shrinking cigarette.

"I... uh... I see. Do you know who with?"

"Aria Enchantee. A phantom, as you probably could have guessed. She works at Visionary Pictures much of the time, composing movie scores."

"That's your place of employment too, correct?"

"Yes." Visionary was as big a studio as Pyramid or RKO.

"You've caught them together?"

"Oh, heavens no. I said he was discreet."

I waited for her to elaborate. When she kept smoking and staring at the ceiling, I had to prompt her. "Why do you suspect Miss Enchantee?"

"He spends entirely too much time at the studio. Visiting when he doesn't have to."

"Maybe he wants to see his wife?"

She let out a brittle laugh.

"All right. But this is a movie studio we're talking about. There have to be more people there than just Miss Enchantee."

"True. Though she is the one I see him talking to more than anyone else."

"Your husband is a politician. Could be he's just shoring up a vote? How can you be so certain it's an affair?"

She reached into her handbag. There was no awkward rummaging, just a single, graceful movement. She removed something and put it on the pile of papers in front of me. I picked it up. It was a matchbook, glossy black with a silver snake coiled up as some kind of logo. Opening it, I found several matches were missing.

"I take it your husband doesn't smoke."

"He's a mummy, Mr. Moss."

"Oh, right. I guess that would be a little like a gremlin

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taking up sunbathing.”

She paused, and I couldn't tell if she was sore with me or not.

I coughed. “Go on.”

“That isn't the only one I've found. Every now and then, one will be in his pocket. The maid found the first one and after that, I asked her to keep her eyes peeled.”

“Do you know what this logo means?”

“I was hoping you might know. I assume it's for some sort of club or hotel. Where they would meet.”

I turned it over in my hand. “I'd agree with your assumption, but I can't say for certain. I'm not a member of any... that is, my kind is not the most welcome...”

“I understand, Mr. Moss.”

“Well, if he has, in fact, run off with his paramour, he'd take something with him. Clothes, sundries, money. Was anything missing from your house?”

“There was a packed suitcase.”

“Missing?”

“No. It was still in the room.”

“So he packed a suitcase and left without it?”

“Apparently.”

“That's odd, isn't it?”

“I thought so, but I'm not the detective here.”

I sighed. “Have you checked your accounts?”

“There is nothing missing.”

“You're certain of that?”

She nodded again.

“Well, he definitely wouldn't have left without the other woman. Has Miss Enchantee disappeared?”

“I don't know. When she's not at Visionary, she's usually downtown at the Ophelia.”

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The Ophelia was a new opera house. Very big, very grand, and very much outside of my price and interest range.

“Was there a note?”

She shook her head.

“Did you receive any telephone calls? Even if it was just heavy breathing or a hang-up?”

“No, nothing like that.”

I stared into space, trying to put the pieces together into something that vaguely resembled anything, really. Kidnapping, disappearance, murder. Nothing. A packed bag, but it stayed behind. A little blood—well, sand—but no one heard anything downstairs. And no calls for ransom.

Sounded like City Councilman Juba II had vanished into thin air. Of course, I wasn't about to tell her that. She needed hope, and I needed money.

“I can look into it if you like. I charge te—fifteen dollars a day, plus expenses.”

“That is more than fair. How do you usually begin these investigations?”

“I try to reconstruct the missing person's day, starting from where they disappeared and working backwards.”

“So you'll want to see our home, then?”

“Yes, Miss Verity. I'll need to poke around there. And then I'd like to talk to Miss Enchantee.”

“Very well, we can leave now.”

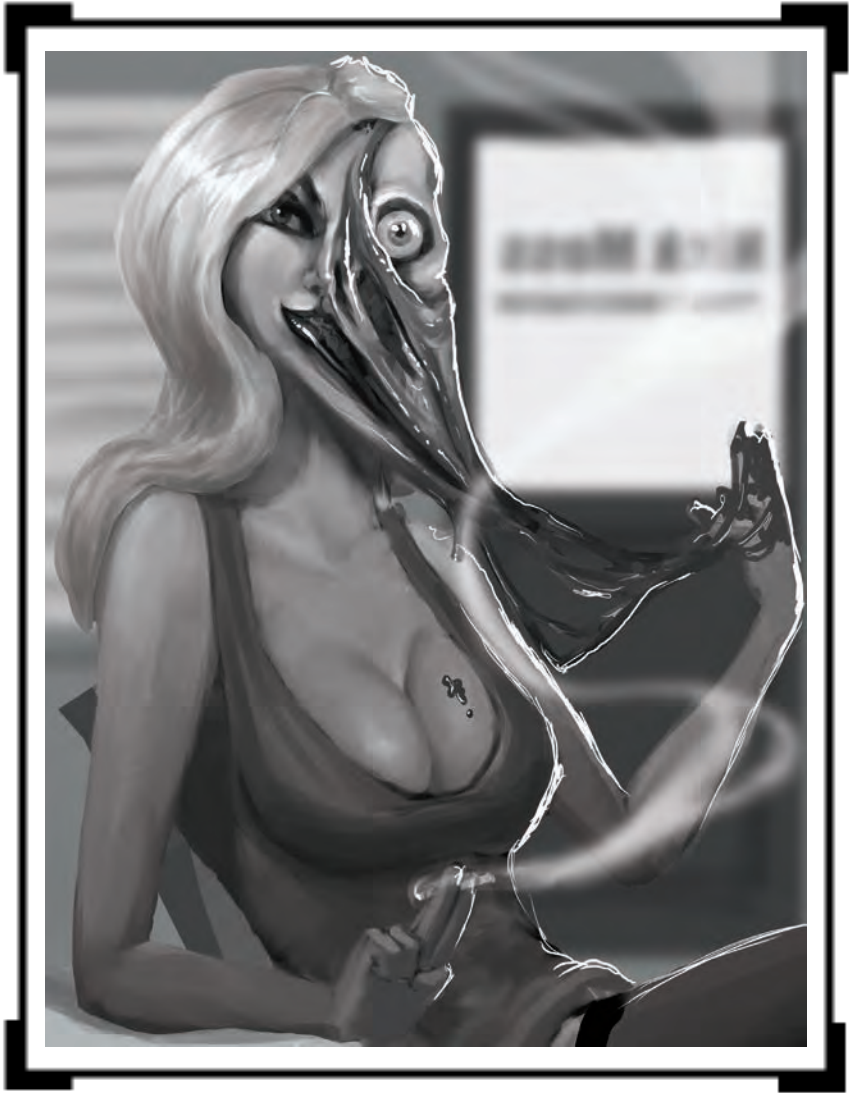
I nodded to the setting sun behind me. “No, Miss Verity, we can't. I'll see you tomorrow, first thing.”

She looked disappointed.

“That's the problem with hiring a human dick, ma'am.”

There was a long silence while we stared at each other.

Finally, I said quietly, “It's just a figure of speech.”



Imogen Verity

TWO

My new client left as elegantly as she arrived, and as soon as she was out the door, I grabbed my stuff. A quick goodbye to Miss Sargasso later, I was down the stairs and on the street. Thankfully, I owned a car, an old Ford coupe that ran better than I had a right to expect. Traffic was always bad near dusk, as the city's human residents hurried home and the monsters came out for a night of hunting. Streetcars were stuffed with people, wires buzzing with every bump.

I drove into Watts, a little suburban neighborhood south of Downtown. Small houses, but cheap and in reasonably good repair. Plus, they still sold to humans here.

My street was quiet, a relatively wide avenue bordered by these little one-story numbers. Palm trees, of course, because it was Los Angeles. Mostly families on my street, with a couple of bachelors, plus Miss O'Herlihy, our neighborhood spinster. The men worked on assembly lines, or on streetcars, or as garbage men, or as janitors. The women, if they worked at all, were

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waitresses, with the occasional telephone operator and nurse for the human-only hospital in Boyle Heights thrown in. They thought I had the most glamorous job in the neighborhood, since they didn't know the actual specifics of the thing.

I pulled in right as the sky was turning from gold to red. Magic hour, they used to call it. Now it was the last minute you could get anything done. Across the street, Mr. Schroeder glanced up at the sky, stopped watering his rose bushes about halfway down the row and turned off the hose, not even bothering to coil it up. Mrs. Hammond called her boys in from riding bikes. All up and down the street, doors slammed. Locks thumped. Shutters closed. Charms swayed on their hooks. Clumps of herbs were placed on windowsills.

Just another night in the City of Devils.

I pulled into my driveway, waving to Will Hammond as he hung the crosses on his doors. He threw me a salute. Inside joke. While I was jumping out of a C-47 with the rest of the 101st, Will was driving a truck, since back then they wouldn't let Negroes hold guns. Of course, that stopped mattering once the fella next to you on the streetcar could turn into a bat. Or, more accurately, it stopped mattering to those of us who couldn't.

"Cutting it a little close, Nick?"

"Late client. My regards to the wife."

"This weekend, we're still fixing up Mrs. Mendoza's roof?"

"I'll bring the suds." Since her husband turned, Irene Mendoza didn't have anyone to help out with that kind of thing. And she had a blob that had been dissolving the shingles on the southeast corner of her house for about a month.

A quick once-over on the house said everything was more or less in place. Rose bushes flowering nicely under the windows. Crosses and mirrors at regular intervals. Wolfsbane

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at the corners, along with bundles of feathers. I lit the torches hanging from the little sconces on my porch. Then I got the allward from the spice rack in the kitchen and touched up the ring around the house. It smelled weird. Hardly surprising, considering all the stuff that went into the rusty brown powder.

Going back inside, I replaced the allward on the rack. Time was, something like that would've held actual spices. Now there was powdered silver, garlic, dried blood, salt—well, all right, salt might have been there before. But probably not to scare away zombies.

The sun was still going down when the first of the cars squealed to a stop down the street. A man in a suit got out. Normal, until you saw the angry line of stitches across his head and the greenish tinge to his skin. He leaned against his car, staring at Don and Camille Webber's place. Headlights at the top of the street said more were coming. And there were shapes wheeling overhead in the deepening gloom.

Time to close up shop.

I shut the door. Locked it twice. Windows, too, and the back door. It was illegal for them to come in without an invitation, but better safe than sorry, right? The house was a fortress now. All that remained was to wait out another night. I leaned against the barricaded door and sighed. From the couch, the cat took one look at me and yowled.

“Same to you, buddy.”

It wandered into the other room, twitching its tail contemptuously.

I went into my small kitchen and made dinner, such as it was. A bologna sandwich with a little bit of potato salad on the side from the block party last Saturday, with a bottle of cheap beer. I sat at the cheap Formica table in my kitchen, listening to the nightly choir start up. Beer and bologna. This is what

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happens when you don't get married when you had the chance.

The scratching on the window over the sink didn't come until near the last bite. Bald head, big eyes, mouth full of sharp buckteeth. He was burping out little screeches. Batboy. Although I think they preferred the term "nosferatu." Who cares? I didn't much like getting called "meatstick," but it didn't stop every cop in the city from flinging it in my direction. And besides, I wasn't going to call the batboy anything, since there was no way he was going to get in. I put the dishes in the sink, showed him my middle finger, and got another beer out of the fridge on my way to the living room.

"Nick! Nick, you in there?"

Of course I was. This was getting really annoying.

I headed for the front door and peered out through the little porthole window, already knowing what I would find.

All along my street, monsters surrounded houses, slunk over rooftops, prowled through shadows. Looking for a way in, a way to entice the people inside to come out. Every monster shied from the things put out to baffle them. Zombies recoiled from the lines of salt, meat golems held their hands up to shield their faces from firey torches, vampires hissed at the crosses, witches hid from evil eye charms, werewolves bayed at sprigs of wolfsbane. There was even a crawling eye slithering over Miss O'Herlihy's roof. Didn't see those too often, since they were mostly uptown kinds of monsters. It hit something, and the bunch of tentacles coming out of the back swirled away as it glowered at whatever it was. Probably a sand trap. Good for you, Miss O'Herlihy.

This was what you got from that Fair Game Law. I mean, sure, people could walk down the street all nice and safe in daylight, but nighttime was a goddamn free-for-all. Plus, security was expensive, and this was all out of pocket. Not like

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monsters were going to vote for tax subsidies to protect the people they wanted to turn.

“Nick! Hey, Nick!”

The thing calling me was a pumpkinhead. About seven feet tall and dressed in a rather nice business suit, complete with a jaunty pocket square. What skin was showing was green and gnarled like a vine, with little thorns dotting the surface. His head was an actual grinning jack-o-lantern, complete with flames lighting the triangles of his eyes and nose, and the jagged line of his mouth. Of course, this was the nice form. His name was Sam Haine. “Nick! It’s me.”

“Sam.”

“How are you doing?” He sounded almost nervous.

“Can’t complain.” I took a pull on the beer.

A headless horseman thundered down the street and jumped over Will Hammond’s Packard, the hooves of his spectral charger kicking up sparks on the car’s roof. Poor Will. That’s a new paint job right there.

“Why don’t you take down that line of chicken blood?”

The line was flaking, but it still ringed the house. I was going to have to replace it before the week was out, assuming it didn’t rain. Never knew how folks managed it in Florida.

“I don’t see myself doing that.”

“Clean it up, I come in, I have a beer.” He smelled like Halloween, even through the door.

“What was I, born yesterday? You don’t want a beer. You want to turn me.”

“Being a pumpkinhead is great.”

“Your *head* is a *pumpkin*!”

He touched the orange rind of his face self-consciously. “It doesn’t feel any different. Other than the wind inside your head.”

JUSTIN ROBINSON

“Wind inside your... I’m not letting you in, Sam.”

“Have a heart, Nick.”

“Have a non-windy head, Sam!”

At that moment, the batboy loped to the front of the house, probably hoping I hadn’t put the guano out there. He screeched loudly and leapt for the door, but never really got the chance to land. Sam reached out, his body growing three times its size, skin turning green-brown, a massive viney tail exploding from his pants like the worst incontinence in history, and grabbed the batboy, slamming him down onto my lawn. The thorns on his arms were now the size of kitchen knives. “Find your own,” he growled, the flames licking out from his jagged pumpkin grin. The stench of burned pumpkin wafted off of him, like Thanksgiving gone horribly wrong. The nosferatu screeched and nodded, scampering off as soon as Sam let him up.

Sam changed back to his less-threatening form, inspecting the parts of his suit the change had shredded. “You see what I do for you?”

“Pull the other one. It’s got bells on.” I paused, looking out at the chaos on Juniper Street. “What do you want, Sam?”

He followed my gaze to where a killer robot sparked and smoked on the Morenos’ lawn, having tripped Hernando’s elaborate electrical trap. Sam turned back and tried to smile, but he was trying it with no lips and a mouth full of sharp pumpkin teeth. Ruined the effect. “You. To be a pumpkinhead.”

“Not going to happen.”

“Nick,” he said, “I know two things: vengeance and my specialty line of jams and jellies. And I think you would be an asset to both pursuits.”

“Jams and... I don’t cook, Sam. I had a bologna sandwich tonight. And some potato salad that I’m pretty sure went bad yesterday.” I held my belly and let out a fragrant belch.

CITY OF DEVILS

“Yeah, but the vengeance! Look, someone comes by my pumpkin patch...”

“Which is where, exactly?”

“San Berdoo.”

“So you, what, commute every night?”

“I’m not here every—it doesn’t matter.” He took a deep breath, making the candleflame in his mouth flicker. Behind him on Mr. Yamamoto’s lawn, a brainiac was doing doughnuts in his weird little cart. The brain bounced around in its bubbling green liquid while the arc guns threw sparks over the grass. We’d have to reseed that. “Someone who has been wronged comes to my pumpkin patch and invokes me, and I go—” Sam embellished with a couple gestures, “—extract vengeance. Pound of flesh, eye for an eye, that kind of thing. I’m bulletproof. I can lift a car. Don’t you think that would make your job easier?”

“I’m not the car-lifting type.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Go home, Sam.” I walked away from the door.

Sam called after me, “See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, Sam.”

I hauled myself to bed, drew the shades in the face of a gremlin with enormous white muttonchops, and got some sleep.

I had work to do in the morning.