



**WOLFMAN
CONFIDENTIAL**

JUSTIN ROBINSON

OF ALL THE MONSTERS...

...they could have dressed me up as, why'd it have to be a clown? Okay, sure, some would have been difficult or impossible. But what about a nice vampire? Or even a ghoul? I'd even have settled for a scarecrow's itchy togs. Impersonating a monster was never safe, but a clown? The things they did to their friends, you'd hate to be an enemy.

Moon and Garou insisted I was going in that night. They really wanted their man back. With a lead this flimsy, I had no idea what I was going to do. Other than spend the evening in blinding terror, of course. That was a given.



PRAISE FOR WOLFMAN CONFIDENTIAL

“As with the prior novels in this series, Nick Moss’ assignment [...] is always tied in to [...] schemes and subtexts that further the world-building, deepen Moss’s character, and serve as love letters to Los Angeles’ culture and geography on a par with those of Tim Powers.” —Kate Sherrod, *Skiffy & Fanty*

“Once again, Justin Robinson weaves a complicated tale set in a delightful universe. // As always, his books [...] leave the reader wanting more.” —Ashley Perkins, *Game Vortexer*

“...Robinson brings his deft touch to a story that is at turns delightful and weirdly humorous, yet still manages to offer wry observations on society today.” —John F.D. Taff, Bram Stoker Award-nominated author of *The End in All Beginnings*

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Candlemark & Glean

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For the Owl and the Turtle

ONE

Thursday, October 27, 1955
Afternoon

The ogre looked like a Christmas tree, but instead of ornaments, some joker had hung three cops on his boughs. The star at the top was entirely in my imagination, suggested by the love taps the cop near the ogre's zenith was giving him. I don't even think the gargantuan monster noticed he was being played like a bongo drum in a Cuban orchestra. If you planned on arresting an ogre, you needed to bring something a little heavier than a little salty language and ashwood batons. A bazooka, for starters.

The ogre was big, and I mean big for an ogre. Even hunched over like he was, he was scraping the ceiling. That had to be hell on the patrolman clamped around the ogre's thick neck. Every time the hapless wolfman was mashed against the ceiling, he left behind more scraps of uniform and clumps of brown fur stuck in the panels. Viewed from above, it probably looked like a game of Whack-A-Mole, only the mole was a progressively more dazed wolfman, clearly thinking about the length of time he had before he could retire. All three cops—wolfmen, like ninety percent of the force—were

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wearing the wolf on the outside. Man-shaped, but covered in ropy muscle and thick fur, with underbites crammed full of sharp teeth and hair trigger tempers to boot, they were unholy terrors. To everyone but ogres.

And anybody with wolfsbane or silver bullets.

This ogre looked like he might have been a greaser. He was stuffed into a leather jacket and ripped blue jeans, everything dripping with chains. A half-fallen pompadour perched atop his misshapen head, the first casualty of his running battle with the cops and the ceiling at the 77th Street Station. The three wolfmen he was wearing like decorative scarves weren't the only ones around. No, several more fellas in uniform, along with a couple more plainclothes dicks, were all doing their best to subdue him. Looked like they'd had no better luck: the ogre had ogre-sized cuffs on his wrists, but the chain had been snapped clean in half. They might as well have tried to cuff an earthquake. The LAPD was going to have to upgrade their equipment if there were going to be monsters of his size noodling around.

This was the first thing I saw when Detective Lou Garou opened the front doors of 77th Street Station with my face. I wasn't being arrested—probably the first human who had crossed that particular threshold without a fancy pair of steel bracelets; Garou was just a louse by nature. I wasn't going to make any jokes about how he woke up on the wrong side of the den, either. Not because I worried he wouldn't get it; I was scared he might.

Right through the front doors and the first thing I saw was this giant palooka wrestling with more cops than I was comfortable being around at any one time. Although, I had to admit, it was nice seeing Goliath beating on David for a change. Not that Goliath had much to say to me. That legend needed someone below David before I fit in.

“Keep moving, meatstick,” Garou growled in my ear while giving me a shove that sent me stumbling past the melee at the entrance.

“He seems nice,” I said.

The thing was, I was armed. Like I said, I wasn't under arrest, so I was carrying the whole shebang. A .32 revolver loaded with silver bullets rode

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under my left armpit. A vial full of wolfsbane was in one of the pockets on my jacket. I could play havoc with these cops if I got tired of living sometime soon. You didn't pull wolfsbane or silver on cops unless you were damn sure you could get away with it, and I knew for a fact I couldn't. Not here.

I wasn't arrested because, apparently, I was hired. That was what Detective Phil Moon—Garou's partner, and by far the nicer of the pair—told me when he roused me from my office this morning. He was waddling behind Garou, occasionally whistling snatches from songs hovering maddeningly out of reach.

Here's what surprised me: I was a detective of the private variety, and if there was one thing I thought the LAPD had in plenty, it was dicks. I'm also human, which made me a rarity in the City of Devils. Hell, made me a rarity in the good old U. S. of A., and maybe the whole wide world. I might as well have been the Hope Diamond. This whole thing already stank and I didn't even know what the problem was. At least I still had wolfsbane.

The ogre roared and plowed one of the cops into the floor. The linoleum cracked like a windshield catching a fly ball and the cop came loose from the ogre's arm, counting stars. Never seen a wolfman knocked silly before.

"You might want to move along, Moss." That was Moon. Like I said, he was nicer. Called me by name rather than a racial slur, even.

"Yeah, what's his story?"

"Search me. We just got here."

"What do you want with me, Moon?"

"Not here. These walls have ears."

I didn't like the sound of that, not one bit. The LAPD, if you believed the TV shows, was a model of efficiency and justice. A lot of people, or at least people like me who maybe ran into the seedier side of things, knew that the existence of the Bellum Mob put the lie to that. They'd been in Los Angeles since before the end of the Night War, and they weren't going anywhere. Trust a brainiac to figure out how not to get caught. Her

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zombie enforcers were everywhere, like roaches with better fashion sense. If Bellum had gotten her hooks, or whatever it was brainiacs had, into the LAPD, we were in dutch up to our necks.

With the ogre's roaring and the cops' cursing receding behind me, we entered the bullpen. The Night War changed a lot of things, but a police station was still a police station. Sure, half the people in it could sprout fur at a moment's notice, and some of those files looked to be floating around on their own, but the rest of it was just jake. Cops at desks doing their paperwork, occasionally glancing in the direction of the melee, clearly wondering if they were paid enough to make that their problem or not.

Garou shoved me past all that into a hallway. Doors opened up on either side. I poked my head into the first one we passed. A corkboard had been covered with a map of the city, along with pictures of monsters, then strings leading to thumbtacks in the map. Every monster in the picture was dead, and it wasn't much of a mystery how they were bumped off. A vampire with a stake still sticking out of him, a mummy half-burned into glass, a martian dead next to a used tissue, a crawling eye shriveled up on a pile of sand. You know the drill.

"What's that?"

"Monster Slayer task force," Moon said, his raspy voice sounding like a dirge.

"What?"

"Some goofy meatstick offing monsters all over the city," Garou growled.

"Monster Slayer?" I wanted to know.

"Nickname the guys gave him. It just stuck," Moon said.

"Catchy. How do you know it's a human?"

"Who else would be croaking monsters?" Despite the phrasing, Garou wasn't asking. "You ask me, it's the Normandie Knights. They got organized."

I was smart enough not to snort at that theory. The Normandie Knights were a bunch of kids. Yeah, a street gang, and yeah, they did blip off monsters on occasion. But if you asked me, most of them didn't know holy water from Bebop Cola. Nobody asked me.

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“Not their style,” Moon said, and my estimation of him went up a little.

“How many have been killed?”

“We’re not sure,” Moon sighed. Garou shot him a sharp glare. “Oh, settle down, Lou. Moss here hasn’t done anything like this since the war ended.”

“I still say that general amnesty was a dumb idea,” Garou muttered.

“Not sure on the numbers?” I asked.

“Well, it’s different monsters, different styles. The Slayer uses weaknesses, and uses them perfectly. We got a scent at a couple of the crime scenes, and a lot of the rest are, you know, conjecture,” Moon explained.

I shook my head. If it was a single human, he was playing roulette with all our lives. Ever since the Treaty of St. Louis was signed back in ’53, about half the monsters walking were looking for an excuse to go back to the bad old days of the Night War when every human was on the menu. This could be the perfect excuse to throw the Fair Game Law—the only thing keeping me alive and with my original skin intact—into the trash.

If this wasn’t the same person, then it was some kind of snipe hunt by the LAPD. They’d pin it on the first convenient patsy and break their arms patting themselves on the back when they hauled him in front of a grand jury. My guess? It was monsters offing each other and betting the taboo they had against using each other’s weaknesses would shield them.

Moon opened another door. “You have other things to worry about than the Slayer.” Light glinted off his badge, clipped to the pocket of his ugly suit. Number 452.

I slinked past him and found myself in a small meeting room. A table fit for maybe six people and some plastic chairs all around. A blackboard stood against one wall, cloudy with old, scrubbed-out words.

“Have a seat,” Moon said.

I did what he said and faced the two LAPD detectives. Moon was the older of the two. His hair was mostly gray, and he looked like he had been hitting the doughnuts about as hard as that ogre outside was hitting

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his colleagues. He had a florid complexion, and in hotter weather would already be dripping sweat. His voice sounded like a glass of whiskey with a three pack a day habit. Moon's fashion sense was nonexistent. Today he was wearing an eye-searing pink jacket with green pants that looked like they were designed by an uncaring God.

Garou was younger and meaner. I didn't like to look at him much, since he was always looking for an excuse to give me a cuff. He wasn't slim, but next to Moon he might as well have been a scarecrow. Garou's wolf nature was right near the surface, giving his eyes an odd shine at some angles. He wore a brown suit that looked barely more expensive than mine.

"So what can I do for you fellas?" I tried to project a bravado I didn't feel. Sitting in a police station filled with angry cops was slightly less pleasant than having spiders crawling on my face.

"We need you to find someone," Garou said.

I blinked and turned to Moon for confirmation. He merely turned to Garou. *Wait, was this Garou's idea?* Stranger things had happened, I guessed, but I hadn't heard of them.

"Uh...who?"

Not sure what I expected. Maybe Garou trying to find some human he was sweet on or wanted to turn. Didn't know how to tell him I didn't do that kind of thing. Maybe somebody jumped bail, but I wasn't a bounty hunter either.

Garou slid a file from one side of the table over to me. I looked from Garou to Moon, pretty sure this was going to turn into some kind of practical joke. Both wolfmen were stonefaced. And, I noted gratefully, entirely human-looking.

So I opened the file. A picture was paperclipped to the side. I frowned at it, because it really looked like a flying caterpillar. Then I put it together. Granted, the name on the other side of the file helped clear up the mystery.

"An invisible man?" I demanded. "You want me to find an invisible man?"

Moon sighed.

"Yeah," Garou said, and his tone said he realized how silly it sounded.

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“Why me?”

“You found a girl at the bottom of the ocean,” Garou said.

I couldn't argue with that. He was referring to a case a couple months back. What he didn't mention was that I didn't find several other people on that same case, or at least not in time for it to matter. I managed to rescue a grand total of one. But yes, I found a girl in a mad scientist's lair at the bottom of the Catalina Channel. Gold star for me.

“Yeah, but you know, she was visible.”

“See, Lou?” Moon said, dubious.

The two wolfmen started muttering to each other, and I couldn't help it. I paged through the file. First thing that fell out was a sealed plastic bag holding a white handkerchief. *I surrender*, the file was telling me, spilling its secrets out before me. The hanky looked like something I was carrying on me: you sneezed your last cold into one and presto, the perfect weapon against a martian, should you need one. Didn't think that was what this was, or why it was in a file. Why would you need to protect your files from martians? I had a look at the dossier.

Anonymous Bosch, an invisible man and a vice detective for the LAPD. Monsters could be as circumspect as Victorian ladies when it came to their histories pre-change, and this file had enough redacted to say he was one of those. It started with his war record, and that's Day War: Bosch served in World War II in the Pacific theater. A Marine, he saw action on Peleliu, Guadalcanal, Okinawa, and half a dozen other places I could barely find on a map, let alone spell. His rebirth date was in '51, which meant he was turned in the later parts of the Night War. Monsters like that were among the most dangerous: the Night War toughened them from both ends. As humans they got used to near-starvation and being hunted, and as monsters, they got to face humans who had turned monster killing into an art.

I did my best not to let the memories of those days back in. Me and my friends, especially Mickey and Izzy, we had gotten pretty good at pushing the button on whatever monster hell spat out that week. Still, when one of them died, I always remembered he used to be a man. Or a woman.

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Or sometimes even a kid.

“Moss. Moss!” I looked up, blinking myopically. “C’mon,” Moon said, waving me to the door.

I stayed put. “What’s with the mustache?”

“You know invisible men. They get the screaming meemies if you can see them.” It was true. Most invisible men couldn’t be within fifteen feet of flour and they hated dust. “Well, Bosch likes people to know where his head is when he’s not on duty. Hence the mustache.”

“Uh huh.” Sad thing, that was what passed for logic with monsters.

“C’mon, Moss. Let’s go.”

“What’d he do?”

Moon and Garou shared a look. I was on the hook. They both knew it. What I couldn’t tell was how they felt about that information. Garou hated me, but he was apparently the one who wanted to bring me into this. Moon didn’t like me, but he also didn’t regard my continued existence as an insult. Considering he was a cop, that practically made us engaged.

Moon pulled out a chair and sat down, uttering the kind of sigh big guys always do when they park their keisters. “We used Bosch for the kind of work we need invisible men and doppelgangers for.”

“Undercover.” Didn’t take a brainiac to know where they’d be sending their faceless men.

“Yeah. Well, he went under and never came back up for air. We looked for him, but as you pointed out, it ain’t exactly easy finding an invisible man.”

“Can’t you, uh...” I sniffed the air. I wasn’t sure how to ask without offending them.

“Doesn’t work like that,” Moon said, with a glance at Garou. This time the other wolfman was seething. I could swear he had gotten a little hairier since I’d last looked at him. “We can ID people off scent, not track them. The nose isn’t that good, and besides, you know how a city smells, Moss? Worse than your cologne.”

“It was a gift.” I didn’t finish the thought. I was too busy thinking about all the humans who had been pinched after the cops tracked them

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by scent. Yeah, they'd been using that excuse for years. It shouldn't have surprised me it was phonus balonus, but sometimes I wondered how brazen they'd get.

"So how do you know one invisible man from another?"

"Scent. We keep them on file," Moon said, gesturing to the handkerchief. "Normally those are in a locked cabinet along with the rest of their information. Don't want it getting out just how many glass men we have out there."

"Right, okay. Where was he under?"

"You heard of the Gobfather, Moss?" Garou growled. He was leaning against the doorframe and looking at me like I was wearing a rare steak for a tie.

"I don't think so. Should I?"

"Mab doesn't get down to Watts much, Lou," Moon said with a raspy chuckle. Then, to me: "New boss, as in mob. Showed up a little over a year ago trying to muscle in on the Bellum rackets."

Moon slapped another file down. I tucked the plastic pouch back into Bosch's file, set the whole thing aside, and opened this new one.

The picture was of a sidhe. That's pronounced "she," as in the fair sex. I originally figured it was because, when it came to sidhes, the hes and shes pretty much looked alike, but then someone told me it was Irish. The sidhe were gorgeous in an ethereal kind of way. Lean, usually tall, with features that could cut glass. This one was no exception. He was dressed all in white, a fitted suit complete with waistcoat, his blond hair short and slicked back from a high forehead. His eyes were large and slanted upward, staring right at me, as though he could look through a photograph and size up the viewer.

"Goes by the handle Titanio Mab," Moon said by way of explanation, "but most everyone just calls him the Gobfather."

"Why?"

"Mob is mostly goblins. Some banshees and headless horsemen in there, but mostly goblins."

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“I heard there were a lot of, um, zombie businessmen getting the wrong end of blunt objects lately.”

Garou snorted. “Yeah, someone is rubbing them out left and right.”

“We had a double murder in Hollywood the other night,” Moon said. “Los Angeles is supposed to be the safest big city in the world. We can’t have this kind of thing.”

“They’d have to change the plot of *Dragnet*.”

“Cute, meatstick,” Garou said. “Keep being cute.”

“We think this double murder means the Gobfather is on the move,” Moon said.

“So all this...” I trailed off.

“Mob war, Moss.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to think. On one side, people were getting knocked off, and for once they weren’t humans. Still, it was the same old story as always. Zombies and goblins were working stiffs, serving the more intelligent, more powerful monster races. They were the ones getting the push, while their royalty lived it up.

“Bosch was looking into Mab?”

“Bosch is the only reason we know what little we do.”

Moon turned the page on Mab’s file. Another picture, this time of three goblins, greeted me. They were on a street, probably in Hollywood, getting ready to climb into a car. Or, considering the way the door looked like fancy vine-shaped latticework, a carriage.

“These are Mab’s top three guys: Flux, Murk, and Sawbones.” Moon pointed to each of them as he named them off.

As monster races went, goblins were among the most mutable. These three might never have been mistaken for the same race if we didn’t already know about goblins. Just about the only thing they had in common was their height: goblins were all around three to four feet tall. That, and they had a strange thing about speaking in rhyme.

Flux had pointed ears that rose a good foot over a misshapen head, and a nose that called to mind the worst image of witch crones. His skin was

slimy and his eyes were black. Murk was stouter, with a piglike snout and an underbite, complete with miniature tusks. Sawbones wore an old kraut helmet and a gas mask, like he was ready to do battle in the trenches. In the photo, he was lighting a cancer stick for Flux, the flame coming from Sawbones's bare fingers.

That was the worst part of goblins. Their damn magic tricks.

"When we lost him, Bosch hadn't managed to pin anything on them, but everything he said made these three sound like real live wires."

"Oh, good."

Moon turned the page.

My heart had skipped beats before. Most recently for a certain former witch who had to leave town after I'd managed to botch an investigation for her. It did this time, too, though the feeling wasn't quite as pure. I didn't know the girl in the picture from Eve. I *did* know she might have been the loveliest woman alive. Her skin was olive, edging darker, and her hair was long and glossy black. Her features were large and well-defined. She looked like a living doll, although some of that was because it was hard to believe someone so lovely could be real.

"Who," my voice faltered, and I tried to cover it with a cough, "who is she?"

"Already forgotten that witch of yours," Garou needled. I wanted to hit him.

"Dulcinea Ramos," Moon said. "Mab's human girlfriend."

"Human?"

"Yeah, the Gobfather has a type. He's gone through several. Real dishes, all of them."

"Gone through? What happens to them?"

"Who knows?" Garou said. "Not our problem."

"Yeah, why would you investigate missing girls?"

Garou's snarl sounded like someone had ripped a car door in half. I sat up straight, my hand reaching into my jacket on its own.

"Settle down, both of you," Moon said. He turned to me. "More motivation for you to want this elf behind bars where he belongs."

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“Don’t need to tell me twice. Where was Bosch last seen? Uh...no, I mean—”

“I know what you mean, Moss. Bosch was following the Gobfather to a club in Hollywood. The Nocturnist. He was a regular.”

“The Nocturnist?”

“Looks ritzy, but it’s a tough joint. Last Halloween we had a pair of murders: a martian and a gremlin. No arrests for it, but let me tell you, everyone in that club knows just who is responsible.”

Moon paged backwards and poked his finger onto the Gobfather’s picture.

“But nothing sticks.”

“This place is a mob front?”

“Not exactly. It’s a place where the mobsters can go, be themselves. Not get bumped off for wearing pinstripes. Neutral ground, if you will. So anyway, that’s the last we heard of Bosch.”

“One minute he’s going into the hive of all the mobsters in LA and the next he’s gone. I don’t know, gents. I might have cracked this one already.”

“Oh God, Phil, can I just pull his head off?”

“You’re the one wanted him, Lou. And yeah, Moss, we know. Bosch might have been bumped off, but we want to know for sure. Bosch goes in and then he’s gone. Missed his next meeting, which wasn’t unusual, but then missed two more, which is.”

I paused. “Does this mean you two are working for the Wolf Pack?”

The looks were back, and this was the first time I’d ever seen a hint of panic on their faces. The Wolf Pack was an elite squad from all over the city, charged with policing the mob. The only public name was Detective Lieutenant Hunter Moore, the man who headed things. He was famous for surviving more assassination attempts than Hitler.

“You keep your mind off that, Moss,” Moon told me.

“Oh, I was going to congratulate you fellas. I don’t want to tell you your business, but if you’re with the Pack, have you thought of just taking Mab to the Falls?”

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The Falls were a section of Mulholland overlooking the entire city. The Bellum Mob liked to give their enemies free skiing lessons down them. Rumor had it that the Wolf Pack did the same thing. There were more bones at the bottom of that slope than a slaughterhouse.

“Can’t do that to an elf,” Moon said with real regret. “Cold iron or nothing for them.”

“And Bellum never surfaces,” Garou growled.

“The Nocturnist is our only lead, Moss. That’s how far down Bosch was.”

The cops stared me down, their expressions telling me they were leasing me and strongly considering the option to buy. There was no backing out of this job. No way to tell these two no. Yeah, I was working for the LAPD to find an invisible man, or Moon was going to let Garou pull my head off like a bottlecap.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll look into it.”

“One catch,” Moon said. “The Nocturnist doesn’t open until sundown.”

My heart skipped more than one beat then. Because after sunset, monsters had a free pass to do whatever they liked to me. All nice and legal, according to the Fair Game law. When the sun went to sleep in the Pacific, I was prey for the entire city.

It was the City of Devils for a reason.

Two

Thursday, October 27, 1955

Heading for sunset

Of all the monsters they could have dressed me up as, why'd it have to be a clown? Okay, sure, some would have been difficult or impossible. But what about a nice vampire? Or even a ghoul? I'd even have settled for a scarecrow's itchy togs. Impersonating a monster was never safe, but a clown? The things they did to their friends, you'd hate to be an enemy.

Moon and Garou insisted I was going in that night. They really wanted their man back. With a lead this flimsy, I had no idea what I was going to do. Other than spend the evening in blinding terror, of course. That was a given.

They brought me into a room below the station with cardboard boxes in shelves from floor to ceiling. There had to be a ghoul creeping around somewhere looking after the musty, spider-ridden oubliette, but he never poked his head out. Moon, muttering and swearing, rooted around in the boxes before pulling one out, ripping it open, and revealing a costume of blue and white.

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“Is this the evidence room?” I asked as the horror sunk its claws into me.

“Where did you think we were? Our undercover guys are either invisible or they can look like whatever they like. You think we’re in the habit of keeping costumes around?”

Garou barked a quick laugh.

“You’re dressing me as a...*murdered clown*?” Somehow it was worse that the clown had been murdered. Don’t ask me why.

“Living clowns ain’t in the habit of dropping their get-ups at the police station,” Moon said.

“What happened?”

“Search me, Moss. Wasn’t our case.”

“Someone probably dropped a piano on him,” Garou said with another chuckle.

“Pianos don’t kill clowns!” I told them.

“Yeah, I don’t think you should be yapping about how you kill monsters. Liable to get my partner, you know, tense,” Moon said.

I looked at Garou. He nodded.

“At least I’m getting paid,” I muttered, pulling out the flappy shoes, the baggy outfit, the whole kit and caboodle. There was even a full seltzer bottle, but I was guessing it was full of some kind of acid.

Put together the clown costume, plus some makeup Moon was nice enough to pick up from the local drugstore and a wig I was pretty sure had a bug-eyed monster in mind, and I looked passable. Passable? I didn’t even recognize myself.

“Something’s missing,” Garou said, staring me down.

“Balloons,” Moon said.

“Balloons.”

It’s difficult to describe the fear I was feeling as Moon and Garou drove me into Hollywood in the back of their unmarked jalopy. This situation was exactly what I had been trying to avoid since I found out monsters existed, and even more so after the Treaty of St. Louis gave all our interactions some rules. Garou had been threatening to turn me since

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he met me, he said because I was a good detective, but I'm pretty sure he did it just to get under my skin. Got worse, too. The cops weren't exactly pals with local humans. Turning was the good end, but just as common was a beating or worse.

And I really didn't want to die dressed like this.

They dropped me off a block from the Nocturnist, and I probably should have been grateful Garou pulled the car to a complete stop.

"Poke around, Moss. See what you can see," Moon told me.

"Did I mention I charge extra for night work?"

"Maybe ten, eleven times now. Go find our man. He's probably not at the bottom of the ocean."

The car merged back into traffic on Sunset. That's a hell of a name for a street in the City of Devils. Just a nice reminder of the last time the humans were safe from being shanghaied into some kind of weird new life no one ever wanted.

I looked down at myself. I looked like a clown, I thought. Hard to tell. I would have loved a good disguise hex, but I only knew one witch powerful enough, and she lost her powers and skipped town. I waddled down the street toward the glittering gothic-style sign proclaiming THE NOCTURNIST. All around me on the street, well-heeled monsters enjoyed the nightlife, laughing, chatting, even window-shopping as they headed for their exclusive clubs and restaurants. If they thought of the humans huddled in their homes in neighborhoods like Watts or Boyle Heights, it was only a flicker of a thought, quickly banished by the glitz of Hollywood.

Certain monsters could see right through disguises, I knew. The change gave them some kind of super-sense, or at least something keener than anything we humans could understand. Made fighting them in the Night War a pain, too.

The Nocturnist was in an art deco edifice shoved between two other buildings, with only a narrow alley along one side. Didn't take a genius to know that alleyway had been used for more than one illicit rendezvous. Probably was a selling point of the property. The front was a pair of double

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doors, each one tall enough even for that ogre I'd seen at 77th Street, thrown wide to a foyer where security could have a look at the guests.

Okay. Time to see how well this get-up works.

The foyer was dark, the carpet a deep charcoal gray; the walls were painted with shadowy tree trunks, the ceiling a deep velvety blue. Security was an ogre shoved into a tux, and he looked about ready to burst it at the seams. His spiked club leaned against the wall next to him.

He patted me down with a pair of piggy eyes. He was hardly drooling, too. Real classy joint, this. An ogre was a decent beginning test. They weren't known for their perception; more for mashing stuff that annoyed them into tiny, perfectly flat discs. Still, my blood had dropped a couple degrees as I waited for him to give me the bum's rush.

"Welcome to the Nocturnist, sir."

With one mitt he opened the inner door for me. That was the first perfect manicure I'd ever seen on an ogre, too. They say you see something new every day.

I started walking, then remembered that if I wasn't going to get made, I should probably start playing the role.

"Thank you very much, my good man!" Then, thinking of the one clown I'd met recently, I added a "Hyuck, hyuck, hyuck!" I swear, the ogre shuddered the tiniest bit when I hit him with the laugh. I'd go ahead and put that one in the bank.

I stepped into the Nocturnist, and my breath went right out of my lungs.

The club was decorated like the edges of a dark forest. Leafless trees and craggy peaks were painted onto the walls, giving way to a deep sky ruled over by a blood moon. More trees, these ones real, ran along the sides of the walls to enhance the image of the forests. Toward the far side of the club, the natural imagery gave way to a glowering castle, with the stage styled to look like an open drawbridge.

I was more concerned by the cages at the front, where a pack of wolves—real wolves—padded back and forth, sniffing the air. Bones

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littered the floor of their enclosure, and I wasn't about to check to see if they were human or not. Bats hung from the top bars as well, occasionally fluttering to another upside-down perch.

I moved past them, hopefully not so quickly as to mess up my disguise. The monsters in the crowd were the upper crust. Vampires, mummies, doppelgangers, your occasional jaguar person, crawling eye, or robot. Meat golem waitresses in cigar girl outfits circulated through the tables, bringing drinks and light food.

The big band on the stage was in the middle of a slower number. The band leader, in his white tux, was singing in some kind of accent that sounded vaguely Latin and entirely muddled, but he was hitting his notes. He was a phantom, so missing a note would have sent him screaming out onto Sunset. I noted with horror that most, if not all, of his band appeared to be phantoms. I couldn't stand phantoms.

They weren't looking at me, so I figured it was safe to ignore them for the time being. I cased the crowd. I wasn't going to find an invisible man for obvious reasons, but finding who he was staking out, now *that* was doable.

I waddled past the tables doing my best not to trip over the floppy shoes and looked without looking like I was looking. Sounds strange, but it's about half of the job.

A nattily dressed zombie smoked at a table near the middle of the club, watching the stage with disinterest. His blue suit was tailored to his skeletal frame. The bite wounds on his face were fuzzy with some kind of green mold. He was the only zombie in the joint, unless they were hiding a couple dead men in the orchestra. He had to be a Bellum enforcer; no other zombie would have the juice to darken a door like this one. He might have been a trouble boy, but he didn't look like he was keen to start any. I'd keep an eye on him anyway.

I recognized Nyx Nocturne, the owner of the club, from the description Moon and Garou gave me. At the time, I thought their editorializing was unnecessary, but if anything, they'd undersold her. She had the complexion of a Greek statue, the looks of a movie star, and the attitude of a lion in

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a room full of lambs. She flashed a brilliant white smile with little to no provocation, but I think some of that was to show off the fangs she had for canines. I wasn't sure if vampires like her could smell my blood under the greasepaint, but I sure wasn't going to check.

My real target was front and center, best seat in the house. Titanio Mab, looking just like the picture the wolves had shown me. His lean body reclined in his chair as he brought a slender cigarette in a holder to his lips. He wore a white suit, tightly fitted and perfectly tailored. He seemed to be watching everything and nothing at the same time, projecting an air of ownership over everyone and everything in the place.

Three goblins sat around the table with him, and I recognized them as Flux, Murk, and Sawbones. They watched the crowd while their boss enjoyed himself. There's a difference between a man who will kill when he has to, and a man who does it because he likes to. Those three were in the latter camp. No way I wanted to get within spitting distance.

The phantom wrapped up his tune to enthusiastic applause.

"Thank you," he said in his muddled accent. "Once again, I am Capriccio Español, and this is my orchestra."

More applause.

"We have a special treat for everyone tonight," Español went on. "A guest singer, graciously loaned to us from our dear friend." Español put his palms together and gave a little bow to the sidhe sitting front and center. Mab nodded back with practiced *noblesse oblige*. "Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming the Songbird, Miss Dulcinea Ramos."

The room exploded in applause as the lights went down. A spotlight banged onto the top of the stage, well above the orchestra. A shape descended into the circle of light, throwing it back in blinding glitters. I watched, breathless, as I slowly put together what I was seeing. It was an egg formed of a silvery lattice, big enough for a human.

The light shifted, and the surface of the egg no longer shone back. The occupant was suddenly illuminated and haloed. I had seen her picture in the police station, but that hardly did her justice. She was the kind of

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woman people invented poetry to describe, because otherwise it would have been nothing but incoherent stammering and whistles.

A second wave of applause greeted the revelation, followed by a hush as she began to sing. Her voice belonged to an angel, or a whole choir, the way she was hitting her notes. She had pipes to put a phantom to shame. The song was something in Spanish, so I shouldn't have the foggiest idea of what she was singing about. From the longing she put into her voice, I knew. It was a love song, and not one that ended well. Wasn't that always the way?

Didn't take a big jump from a Spanish love song to Hexene Candlemas. I was still mooning over her like a schoolboy. It was a stupid thing to think of. She was a witch, I was human. She'd had her choice between me and her power, and she picked her power.

No, that's not true. I didn't have the guts to tell her how I felt, didn't let her know there was a choice at all. I just took it on the chin and let her go. Sure, she probably would have picked the power over me—and I had to believe she knew what I'd almost said—but I should have said it. A man says it. But it was too late for that. Hexene was gone, maybe for good. Time I accepted that.

It was tough. You don't meet a girl like Hexene every day. Or ever.

I turned away from the stage to keep poking around, and to stop thinking about the one that got away. I nearly ran into a group of fellas. That wasn't the strange part. The strange part was that I recognized the man in the lead. He was in his forties, shorter than me by a couple inches, and a lot pudgier than I remembered. His dark hair was fleeing from a high forehead. The long, crescent scar under his left eye was unmistakable, and I knew it was from a prizefight that went the wrong way, because he'd told me the story. The eyes, too, the way they twitched around while still looking dead, and the mouth, thick-lipped and pursed in distaste. He was dressed a lot better than I remembered, too, in a gray suit with pants pulled high over his new belly. Yeah, this was my friend Mickey from the Night War. Wasn't sure what to say, what with me dressed as a clown.

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Mickey squinted at me. “Holy cats, Nick, is that you? Oh, shit. I’m sorry. Dunno what your new name is. Never thought you’d get changed. And by a clown! Of all the bum raps. Y’know, no offense.”

“Mickey, yeah, it’s me. I’m not...um...” I lowered my voice and leaned in. His guys behind him flinched, but they didn’t get close. Mickey, tough guy that he was, leaned in to listen. “I’m not changed. I’m in disguise.”

Mickey’s face brightened. “Scared the shit out of me for a minute there, Nick. Don’t do that to a fella. I always figured you’d die before you was changed.”

“That was the plan.”

Mickey broke out laughing. “That was the plan! Yeah, same old Nick. It’s good to see you, even if you did join the circus while I wasn’t looking. Yeah, yeah, I know, you’re incognito. Lemme introduce you to the fellas.”

I finally got a look at the group. I had been too shocked from going from my woolgathering about Hexene to seeing a fella I hadn’t seen since the Treaty was signed to really take much of anything in. Next to Mickey floated a ghost, who looked like she was a pretty girl before someone had taken a tommy gun to her. The way Mickey stayed close to her said she was his dame.

A handsome Italian man stood next to Mickey, almost like a bodyguard, but he looked more like he’d be more at home in front of a camera than behind a gun. “This is my good friend Johnny Stompanato,” Mickey said, then pointed at the other two. “The pale one is Jack Whalen, and the darker one is Rob Sampson. Say hello, boys.”

I shook hands with Johnny, but the other two looked like they didn’t want to give up their places. Or they didn’t want to shake hands with a clown.

“Who’s the lady?” I asked, gesturing at the ghost, who favored me with a demure smile.

“Where the fuck are my manners?” Mickey wanted to know. “Nick Moss, meet my lady friend, Florence Fantasma.”

“Charmed,” I said.

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“Likewise,” she said. To date, that was the nicest interaction I’d ever had with a ghost.

“Were *you* changed?” I asked him.

Mickey laughed. “What, because of the spook?”

I jumped, glancing guiltily at Florence. She hardly blanched at the slur, but she did blanch. Just slightly.

“Uh, yeah. The, uh, the ghost.”

“Oh, it ain’t like that. You can housebreak a monster same as a puppy. Just have to know who’s boss, and Florence, she knows. What about you? A man don’t go in disguise for no reason.”

“I’m working a job.”

“Yeah, I heard somewhere youse was a dick.”

“Not my favorite term.”

“Youse can tell me all about it later.” Mickey handed me his card. “Gimme a call, Nick. Been way too long.”

“Sure thing, Mickey.”

Mickey and his group moved away, taking a table near the back of the room. Jack and Rob, the big guys, were alert to the activity. Humans? I could hardly believe it. Four actual humans out at night and not instantly being kidnapped and changed. It hardly seemed possible, but there it was, clear as day.

I knew what Mickey did before the war. Everyone who knew him did. He liked to brag about how he knew Al Capone and Bugsy—he called him Benny—Siegel. I never knew how much was bunk, but there were enough details that it sounded more like exaggeration than outright lying. If Mickey was back to his old tricks...just seeing a human out at night, unafraid, made my chest puff out like a pigeon.

I had an invisible man to find. They were a strange bunch. I’d had a friend back in the war by the name of Harry Braden. Back in ’48, when we still thought we had a chance of winning it, Harry vanished from our camp in Debs Park. It was one of the early camps, too, when military men like me got weapons and ammo, and we had guards and perimeters and

everything. Hell, we even had a Sherman tank for all the good it did us.

Two nights after Harry goes missing, and I'm on that perimeter staring out into the night with a sickness creeping in my gut wondering what's going to step out of my nightmares and into my gunsights. Well, I hear some rustling, then some cursing. Then I see footprints appearing in the dirt, getting closer but no feet, no legs, no nothing.

"Is that you, Nick?" I recognized that voice, even with the way he was whisper-yelling.

"Harry? What happened?"

"I'm invisible."

"No kidding, Harry."

Well, we thought everything was going to be jake. We now had a monster of sorts on our side. Harry got changed, but it wasn't like he had a thirst for blood, or went bugs every full moon, or had an irresistible urge to take over the world with some kind of cockamamie giant ants. It was still the same old Harry Braden, just a little more transparent than we were used to. Also, naked. That took a little getting used to as well.

Started out great too. Harry could scout for us like nobody's business. He could get the drop on most monsters, too, and old Harry did that with relish. Maybe a little too much relish.

The thing was, Harry couldn't see himself anymore. That's the strange part about invisible men. When you can't see yourself in the mirror, you lose sight of who you are, I guess. You start doing things and there's no one around to see, so there's no one around to hold you accountable. Like I said, Harry was hunting monsters, and maybe he was liking it too much.

Didn't take too long before he decided he might like to try some easier prey. We had to put old Harry in the ground after that.

I stopped one of the meat golem waitresses. She was taller than me by a good stretch, and pretty in an oddly catlike sort of way. Her large, slanted eyes were mismatched: the right was so black it looked purple, and the left was a clear, nearly colorless silver. A line of stitches ran diagonally over the bridge of her prominent nose. Her skin was patchwork: some

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pieces were green, others ivory, others gray. She wore her black hair long and in victory rolls. Like all meat golem women, she had a pair of silver streaks running up from her temples; these were pinned up behind her head, giving her a halo. She had a nice pair of legs. I wondered who they'd belonged to originally.

“Uh, hi. Hyuck, hyuck. I'm looking for an invisible man?”

The meat golem raised her eyebrows in exasperation, then pointed at her mouth.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” For some reason, meat golem women couldn't talk. The men could, but they weren't exactly famous raconteurs.

I reached into the pocket of my clown suit and she flinched. It was just my wallet. I showed her, but her posture stayed tense. I fished out a couple bucks and handed it over. “Can you point me in the right direction?”

She glanced around, then took the money and tucked it into her bustier. Looked like there was a lot of room in there, and then I realized I was staring at a meat golem's chest. I nearly apologized, but she took my arm in one iron grip. Meat golems were strong, and that included this one. Must be a great second line of security. Get past the ogre at the door and meet the army of ladies ready to pull your arms off like a kid with a housefly.

She dragged me through the swinging doors on the other side of the club and I found myself in the kitchen. The first thing I saw was a raccoon stirring a giant pot of soup. Smelled pretty good, kind of halfway between lobster and some kind of wood. The soup, not the raccoon. I didn't smell him.

“I'm sorry, sir, are you...Jane?”

I turned to find a rotund woman regarding both me and the meat golem. Her face was pleasant, creased with wrinkles, and even though she was confused, a good-natured smile lit the room. She wore a food-splattered apron over her lumpy dress. Based on the raccoon and the way I had the urge to hug her, I was going to guess she was a witch, and the mother of her coven.

The meat golem—Jane, I guess—pointed at me, then pointed at the

witch. She nodded as if to herself, turned around, and pushed through the swinging doors to the club.

“We don’t get many clowns in here, but I suppose if Jane vouches for you, you must be okay. Wyeth Wyrd.” She didn’t offer a hand. Either because she was a cook and didn’t want clown makeup in her soup, or because I was a clown.

“Nick...uh...Nick Laughington.”

“First name could have used some work, dearie. Now what can I do for you? If it’s a complaint about the food not being sweet enough...”

“Nothing like that, ma’am. Uh, hyuck, hyuck. Right. No, I’m wondering if you get any invisible men in this place.”

“Oh, sure, from time to time. Some of them even get dressed up, if you can believe that. The Nocturnist is a place to see and be seen, so you’d think they might not go for that. But they do. Sometimes they do.”

“Any invisible men in particular?”

“How would I know?”

“Right.”

I wasn’t sure if I should be flattered that Moon and Garou thought I could work some kind of magic finding a man no one could identify except by sniffing a hanky they kept at headquarters.

“Uh, thank you for your time, Miss Wyrd.”

“Missus,” she corrected with a demure curtsy.

“That too.”

I went through the door Jane had disappeared through and found a hubbub. Dulcinea Ramos was finished singing and Capriccio Español hadn’t started up another tune. The audience was too busy being enraptured. The Gobfather, flanked by his three diminutive enforcers, was heading for the front door. Following them, four meat golems—Jane too, I noticed—were carrying the lattice egg on poles like footmen carrying a queen. Dulcinea, standing stoic in her flowing gown, was the focus of every monster in the room. They were devouring her with their eyes, wishing they could get a little more literal with that devouring.

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That's what this was. The Gobjfather was showing off his pet meatstick, one so pretty every monster who saw her had to have her. As I followed them out the door, I wasn't sure if I was still looking for Bosch or if I couldn't stand to let Songbird out of my sight.

Maybe it was the get-up, but I wasn't all that different from them after all.



Photo by Leora Saul

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Much like film noir, Justin Robinson was born and raised in Los Angeles. He splits his time between editing comic books, writing prose, and wondering what that disgusting smell is. Degrees in Anthropology and History prepared him for unemployment, but an obsession with horror fiction and a laundry list of phobias provided a more attractive option. He is the author of nine novels in a variety of genres including detective, humor, urban fantasy, and horror. Most of them are pretty good.

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