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Raven Lenore, Psychic Investigator #2
THE CASE OF THE MISSING CORPSE
by

JOE VADALMA

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Prologue

Raven Lenore is a modern kick-ass woman, tough and unafraid to take on any challenge. She excels at her chosen profession as a private investigator. In addition to being a black belt in the martial arts, she has psychic abilities. On the other hand, when in the mood to flirt with a man, she can be as feminine as any woman. She is twenty-seven years old, beautiful with long black hair and a figure like a model. Her religion is Wiccan. To her witchcraft is an earth religion, a linking of the human soul with the life force of nature.

Born in a tough Italian-American neighborhood in Brooklyn, she was the sole girl in a large family. She

soon learned to give her brothers and neighborhood bullies as good as she got. In college, she met Morgaine Fabiano, who got her interested in the occult and enjoying the wildside of life. After nine-eleven, she dropped out of school to enlist in the army, where she was assigned to the military police and fell in love with her Karate instructor, Keith Borganson.

When their enlistments were up, Raven joined the NYPD, and Keith opened a Karate school. After a couple of years, Raven quit to open a private investigation business with Keith. The PI business did not do well until Melody Ellul hired them to find her missing husband, the famous astrologer and psychic, Michael Ellul. What starts out as an ordinary missing persons investigation soon turns out to be a dangerous game against mysterious demonic forces who wanted to steal Raven's body. After that case was solved, Keith and her split up.

In *Morgaine and Armageddon*, Michael hired Raven to spy on the Children of Aquarius, a cult that Michael believes Morgaine is using to further her own ends. Raven's initiation is seven days long, each day she and her fellow initiates are required to commit one of the seven deadly sins. Raven is sent to Jerusalem to become a priestess of the Church of Omega. There she learns of a mysterious book called the Book of Seven Seals. As each seal is broken, Raven has a vision of the doom awaiting mankind.

When Michael sends Westcott to contact Raven, she tells him about her visions. Later, when a mysterious pregnant woman appears on a moon base, Morgaine gives Raven the assignment to care for the woman and her child. Boris, an assassin hijacks the plane that is to take them to Jerusalem. But the priestess sent with Raven kills the hijacker and throw his body from the plane. Raven takes the woman and child to a Buddhist monastery high in the Himalayas.

In *Raven Lenore, Psychic Investigator; The Case of the Spirit in the Bottle*, Abdul-Azim Mujib, a member of a secret society called The Thirteen, during his final initiation, is placed in a trance where he dreams of making love to the most beautiful women in the world. He is told for his dream to become reality he must complete a dangerous mission.

Raven, who has just broken up with Michael Ellul, receives a message from Martin Kopinski, an FBI agent, asking for help. When he and John O'Brien, an illusionist, meet her for breakfast, Kopinski explains what he believes are paranormal aspects to a brutal murder. The murdered man, a dealer in antiquities, was murdered in a room locked from the inside. Raven and O'Brien present opposing theories of how this was accomplished. Despite their difference, she is attracted to the magician, and they become lovers.

When they investigate the crime scene, Raven finds evidence that the perpetrator used magic to make his escape. She receive weird vibes from a box at the crime scene. It moves by itself, even floats in the air.

In a psychic trance, Raven sees a vision of the murder and of the victim hiding a clay bottle. Raven informs Kopinski, who redeems the bottle.

Meanwhile, Raven is kidnapped by Mujib. As Mujib is about to cut off Raven's head, Kopinski arrives and shoots Mujib dead.

During a seance Mujib's ghost tells them to take the bottle to a place called Riverlook but warns of danger from the bottle's contents. Raven takes the bottle to a professor of ancient languages to decipher the inscription on it. He tell her that there is an evil spirit inside the bottle and that anyone possessing it is cursed.

Raven dreams that she goes into the mirror and makes love to her own image. When Raven goes out for a walk one evening, she sees someone that resembles herself, but the woman vanishes. When she returns home, she finds her doppelganger in bed with O'Brien. To get rid of the doppelganger, Raven speaks to

the spirit in the bottle, who agrees if Raven brings the bottle to Riverlook. Riverlook is a splendid eighteenth century mansion overlooking the Hudson River. On one wall of the “great room” is large painting of a sinister looking man, Peter Magbertius, who was executed in the seventeen hundreds for practicing witchcraft. Raven rents the house for a week.

After O'Brien leaves, Raven stares for hours at the portrait of Peter Magbertius. A voice in her head tells her about a mysterious door, which comes and goes. She explores the house but finds no secret door. That evening she goes to the private cemetery and tries to raise the spirit of Peter Magbertius. However, it is his wife Cassandra's spirit who appears. Cassandra warns her of danger from Peter. That night Raven dreams of him. In the dream, he tells her she must bring the bottle through the door that appears. The next morning she discovers a door which had not been in the hallway before.

When O'Brien returns to Riverlook, Raven has disappeared. She has taken nothing with her, not her purse, nor clothes, nor her gun. He searches for her and reports her missing to the police, but they soon give up the search. While searching for a clue to Raven's disappearance, O'Brien finds a mysterious crystal. When he stares into the crystal, his aura is transported to Raven's room in the eighteenth century. Raven is there and tells him to wait until the time door appears and what he should do to rescue her.

When Raven went through the mysterious door, she discovers that gone back in time to the eighteenth century where she meets a living Cassandra. Cassandra thought that she was one of Peter's coven, who had split up when Peter was executed. She tells Raven that Peter has been dead for ten years, but with the bottle they can restore him to life. She has Raven dress in eighteenth century garb and passes her off as a cousin named Agnes.

After a dinner party Cassandra leads Raven to a secret niche in the basement wall that contain the perfectly preserved head of Peter. They hide the head in Raven's room where it has a strange power over Raven. Cassandra takes her to the private cemetery where they dig up the headless body of Peter. They take it, his head and the mysterious bottle to Peter's basement laboratory.

While O'Brien waits for the time door to appear, intruders enter the house. They are members of The Thirteen who hired Mujib to steal the bottle. Their spokesman claims that they need the bottle to bring Peter Magbertius back to life. They tie O'Brien to bedposts and torture him until O'Brien reveals all.

The time door appears, but vanishes as the sun rises, frustrating the intruder's leader and O'Brien's ability to put Raven's plan for her escape into effect. O'Brien manages to escape from The Thirteen and contacts an FBI man.

Using magic, Cassandra and Raven bring Peter back to life. He has a strange effect on Raven, and she falls in love with him. However, the time door vanishes before Raven and Peter can go through it. Cassandra glares at them when she sees them in the hallway. After midnight, Peter returns to Raven's room to consummate their relationship. She becomes his mistress and sex slave.

The leader of The Thirteen returns to Riverlook alone. He finds the crystal and gazes into it. Raven is awakened when his aura enters her bedroom. She laughs at his threats since he cannot harm her in any way. Peter enters the room, and the leader kneels before him. Peter gives him instruction on how to open the magic door from the twenty-first century.

Meanwhile, O'Brien and Jacobs return to Riverlook to confront the leader, who claims that he has permission to be there. O'Brien and Jacobs bug the house and hide nearby. When the leader performs the incantation to open the time door, O'Brien and Jacobs enter the house, but the leader has vanished.

As Raven awaits Peter's nightly visit, the leader arrives in the flesh. Cassandra, believing that he is Peter, stabs him to death. When Peter arrives, he overpowers her and locks her in a tower room.

To O'Brien's and Jacob's utter surprise, Raven and Peter, not Martin, come through the open time door. Raven breaks up with O'Brien, and she and Peter return to Chicago. However, Peter has a terrible time coping with twenty-first century technology and electrocutes himself trying to retrieve toast from a toaster. When he dies, Raven realizes that she has been under a spell and did not really love him. She cremates his remains and scatters the ashes below the statue of the grim reaper in Graceland Cemetery on Chicago's Northside.

And now to Raven's further adventures.

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CHAPTER 1. The Forest

The dark, foreboding woods were so gloomy Raven could barely see two feet ahead of her. She was lost among the gnarled trunks of enormous trees. A faint mist rose from the forest floor that had the musty odor of an open tomb. As she made her way along the twisted path, she felt evil eyes upon her and shivered with fear and apprehension. Which way to go? And what was it that tracked her? Although she tried not to panic, her teeth chattered and her breath became labored. Whatever it was, it could not be human or even part of the natural world.

She stopped to get her bearings and calm herself. She reached for her pistol although she doubted that the thing behind her could be harmed by bullets. But her shoulder holster was empty. Did she leave her gun at home when she entered the woods? Then why was she wearing the holster? She could not recall putting it on or whether the automatic was in it. If she had lost her pistol in the forest, it would be impossible to find in the dark and the mist.

Whatever was behind her was closing fast. Its breathing was like an enormous dog panting, its presence, a bitter cold of terror upon her back. She increased her pace as much as she dared without tripping over objects in the gloom. It was not enough. The thing was almost upon her. She turned to face it and went into a martial arts stance.

To her utter surprise, it was a man, a man she knew. She shuddered. He was the only person she had ever feared, the man who had made her his abject slave, the man who was a powerful sorcerer and an evil necromancer—Peter Magbertius.

"Peter, how did you get here?" She knew there was a reason that he should not be standing in front of her. For the moment, however, it escaped her.

"'Tis the place where I abide now. How be you, Raven? Look at you, as beautiful as ever."

Suddenly she was naked. His smoldering eyes slowly scrutinized her from head to toe. As his gaze moved down her body to her breasts, her belly and her lower chakra, she felt as though icy fingers had touched each part.

"Come to me," he ordered.

Raven wanted to resist, but knew it was useless. His will was too powerful. She stepped forward until she was in his arms. In an instant he was also naked. She leaned into him, her nipples tickled by the hair on his bare chest. He raised her head by the chin and pressed his lips against hers. The kiss lingered for an eternity during which her heart beat wildly. She knew she was lost again and would do whatever he asked. He whispered in her ear, "Bring me back, My Darling. Bring me back."

* * * *

Raven was soaked with perspiration as she woke from the nightmare. She trembled from the terror and arousal she had experienced. She cursed, "Damned monster. Why do I dream of that bastard yet?"

Magbertius had been dead an entire year. Yet the nightmares persisted. Nightmares, because they always took place in a dark and frightening place, such as the woods in her most recent one, and because she was terrified of the sorcerer and the hold he'd had on her when he was alive.

She was a psychic, and as such, she knew dreams were portents of future events. She thought, *In the dream, he said, 'Bring me back.' Bring him back from where?* She knew the answer—*from the dead*. But how? And would she want to? Was it true that she was in love with him?

"No, damn it. Not fucking 'in love,' 'obsessed with' . Not even that. I was bewitched, put under a spell."

Raven was an independent woman. She never wanted to be under anyone's control. And yet, somehow he had made her his concubine, one who obeyed his every command.

To make her obsession with him an even worse fate, Peter Magbertius was not a good man. He had derived his power from evil sources. She did not know exactly who or what they were, only that they were sinister entities.

When he appeared in her dreams, she needed to fight with all her will the impulse to obey him. She was sure that wherever his aura resided that it was he who sent the nightmares to ensnare her and make her again his slave woman.

Her cat leaped upon the bed. She scratched him under the chin. "How can I free myself from his influence, Mephistopheles?"

A voice in her head said, "What I see in your future concerning the sorcerer is dim, but soon you will know the answer."

"How? From whom?"

The telepathic cat refused to reply. He meowed loudly, which meant that he was hungry and wished to be fed.

After Raven fed the cat, she gobbled down a bowl of cereal, took a shower, dressed and took a bus to her downtown office. She decided to forget about Peter Magbertius and the dreams. If Mephistopheles was right, soon her dilemma would be solved.

* * * *

A tall cadaverous gentleman had been waiting patiently for her arrival. He was well dressed in a suit and tie. Raven estimated his age as late forties, early fifties. He was extremely pale, as though he never went out during the daylight hours. He seemed to have a permanently sad expression etched into his face.

Raven's business did not make enough money for her to hire a receptionist. In fact, her last case was not only *pro bono* once the FBI had decided that the case was closed, but actually cost her portion of her savings.

As she entered, the man stood and offered his hand. His grip was flabby, and his hand had a softness unusual in a male. "My name is Mordecai Wilsey."

"Raven Lenore. Please come into my office." She led him into the cubbyhole that held her beat-up used desk and a straight back wooden chair for guests. Once they were seated, she asked, "How may I help you?"

"Before I tell you my problem, I need to know that our conversation will be strictly confidential."

"Of course. Private investigators are like lawyers and doctors. Client confidentiality is a given."

"Even if I concealed the execution of a crime?"

"Absolutely. What crime are you guilty of?"

"Not me. Well ... a misdemeanor perhaps. But I am the victim of a greater crime which I did not report to the police. In fact, I actually helped the perpetrator by concealing what he did."

"I don't quite follow. Regardless, unless you murdered someone, everything you tell me will not leave this office. My lips are sealed. Please explain what happened, and what you want me to do."

His thin lips curled into a tight ingratiating smile. "I'm the owner of a mortuary, The Wilsey Funeral Home." He handed Raven his business card. "Last week, the morning after the wake of a young man by the name of John Grebelowski, I went to seal the coffin for burial, and his remains were gone. Someone had broken into my place of business during the night and took him. I panicked and sealed the coffin anyway. I never reported the crime or told his relatives. I simply allowed the empty coffin to be buried."

"I see. And you are hiring me to do what?"

"Find out who stole the loved one and have him returned to me."

"And what about the perpetrator? Do you wish to press charges against her or him?"

"Heavens no. If this ever got out, I'd be ruined. Perhaps you could threaten the person so that he or she would never commit such a crime again. It may have been a prankster. What other motive would someone have for stealing the deceased?"

"That depends. What did Mr. Grebelowski die of?"

"Sudden cardiac arrest."

"So, you don't believe that this is a case where a murderer wants to destroy the evidence of a crime?"

Wilsey took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. "At the time of Mr. Grebelowski's passing there was no suggestion of anything unusual. The death certificate said simply that he died of cardiac arrest. As far as know, no police were involved. No one ever hinted at such a thing."

"Well, suppose he was poisoned. There are poisons that can cause the heart to suddenly stop beating."

"He was examined by a physician at the time of death. As far as I know, nothing untoward was suspected by the coroner's office or the police."

"Yet, you'll grant that the possibility exists?"

"I suppose."

"Tell me something. Suppose I find out who stole Wilsey's corpse and return it to you. What will you do with the body?"

"I know the cemetery people very well and do a lot of business with them. I'm sure they would dig up the coffin and allow me to place John in the ground where he belongs without making a fuss."

"I see. Suppose my hypothesis about a murderer stealing the body to destroy evidence turns out to be correct, who would stand to benefit by his death?"

"No one that I can think of. He did not have life insurance. He lived with his mother and more or less supported her. His father had passed several years ago. He has an older married sister, but as far as I know he had no money of his own. The sister chose our least expensive coffin."

"I see. It's quite a mystery then. Okay. I'll take your case. My fee is fifty dollars an hour plus travel expenses while I'm actually working the case. I'll give you a written report at the end of the week. At that time you can tell me whether you want me to continue. I'll need a one hundred dollar advance. Is that agreeable?"

Wilsey shrugged. "I suppose so. I knew this would be expensive."

"I'll get my standard contract." Raven rose and took two copies of her contract from the filing cabinet. She filled in some details and handed them to Wilsey. "Read them over. If there's anything you object to, let me know. Otherwise, sign where it says "Client Signature."

She sat back while Wilsey read over the contract and signed both copies. She also signed them both and handed one back to the funereal director.

He said, "I'll need to write a check. I don't have that much cash on me."

"Fine."

He handed her a check for a hundred dollars, and they shook hands. Raven did not think it would take more than a couple of days to find out who took the corpse. People who steal things like corpses usually leave a trail a mile wide.

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CHAPTER 2. Interviews

After Wilsey left, Raven drove out to a suburb northwest of Chicago to pay a call on Dora Grebelowski, the dead man's mother. Her home was a track ranch built in the nineties much in need of repair. Raven rang the bell. After several minutes, Dora opened the door only as far as a chain lock would allow. From what Raven could see through the gap, Dora was slightly overweight, dressed in a housecoat and had gray streaks in her hair. Raven estimated her age as around fifty. Her eyes were ringed darkly as though she had been crying a lot after the sudden death of her son.

She said, "Sorry, I'm not interested in whatever it is that you're selling." Her voice was cracked and worn.

"I'm not a salesperson, Ma'am. I'm a private investigator." She showed the woman her credentials.

"A PI? Why do you want to see me? Is someone suing me?"

"Nothing like that. The truth is that I'm investigating your son's passing. Someone, whose name I'm not at liberty to divulge, believes that the verdict on the cause of death may have been premature."

Dora's eyes widened, and her chin quivered. "What are you getting at? Did his doctor make some kind of mistake?"

"That's one possibility. May I come in so we can discuss this under more comfortable conditions?"

The woman closed the door, slipped the chain lock off and ushered Raven into the living room. They took seats on the worn furniture facing each other over a coffee table, which held an overflowing ashtray.

"I see that you're a smoker," Raven remarked. She took out her pack and tapped one part way out. She offered it to Dora, who, with trembling hand, took it and placed it between her lips. Raven removed one for herself and lit both cigarettes. Dora took a puff and seemed more at ease.

She said, "You said that the doctors having made a mistake was one possibility to explain poor Johnny's sudden death." Her lips quivered, and she took another puff. "What are the other possibilities?"

"I hate to say this, but have you ever considered that he might have met with foul play?"

"You mean murdered. But the doctors said it was a cardiac arrest. Besides, my Johnny had not an enemy in the world."

Raven shrugged. "No enemies that you were aware of. Cardiac arrests can be induced by poison. Was there an autopsy?"

"No. There did not seem any reason for that. Y'know, I always thought something was fishy. Young people don't just up and die of a heart attack."

"Well, some do. At this point, we can't be sure of anything. That's why I've been called in to investigate."

"Is that why you're here? Do you want me to sign a paper to authorize exhumation and an autopsy?"

Heaven's no, Raven thought. *The last thing my client would want is for his family to find that they buried an empty coffin.* "That may not be necessary. I'll need to snoop around a bit before we do anything that drastic."

Dora smiled wanly. "I'm glad. I'd hate to disturb Johnny's rest. What else can I do to help you find out the truth?"

"Just answer a few questions. I understand that your son lived at home."

"Yes. He's been supporting me since my husband died. I'm not all that well. Now I'll have to go to work to make ends meet." She sighed.

"Did John have a steady girl?"

"I don't think so. Every once in a while, he would bring someone home, never the same person. Other times he would stay out all night." She shrugged. "I suppose those times he brought a girl to a motel or stayed at her place. Johnny was a healthy young man and did what men do."

"What about friends? Who did he hang around with?"

"There were a couple of fellows from work that he went to bars with on the weekends. Sometimes they went to Bears or Cubs games. I'll write down their names. I don't know where they live though. You can probably find out their addresses from the company where Johnny worked. Those fellows would know more about his women friends than I would. Oh. His best friend was Peter Morgan. They used to come over here to play video games together a lot. Peter works for a computer game company."

"May I have his address too. And the address where your son worked."

After Dora wrote down all the information, Raven said, "Just one more thing. Do you have some personal item of John's that I could borrow. Something that he treasured."

Dora looked at Raven quizzically. "Why do you need that?"

Raven could not tell her that she might use it to speak to her son's ghost if her detective work didn't pan out. She thought fast, "Should I discover that your son was murdered, the killer might give himself or herself away if I show something that belonged to John."

"Oh, I see. I guess I don't know much about detective work." She left the room to find the item.

And it's a good thing, thought Raven. That was a pretty silly excuse for wanting someone's personal stuff. I'll have to think up something better in case this situation arises again.

Dora came back with a medal her son had won at track in high school. "Will this do?"

"That'll be fine. I'll return it as soon as I can. Well, I better leave now. I'm really sorry about your son. I know it's hard to lose a child."

"And Johnny was such a good boy." She burst into tears. Raven put a comforting arm around her and allowed her cry on her shoulder for a while before making her escape.

Raven also interviewed Grebelowski's sister, but she knew even less about her brother's habits and friends than the mother. All the time Raven sat in the sister's living room, her husband gave Raven appraising looks. Raven got out of there as quickly as she could do so politely. *Creep*, she thought as shook hands with Grebelowski's brother-in-law.

* * * *

Raven decided that her next interview should be with Peter Morgan, according to Grebelowski's mother, his best friend. For one thing, he lived in an apartment on the Near North Side, not far from Raven's own place. He lived in an ancient creepy building with cracked plaster and a little front hallway where she had to press a buzzer above the mail slot to signal Morgan that he had a visitor.

"Who is it?" came a distorted voice from the speaker.

"My name is Raven Lenore. I'm a private investigator. May I please talk to you for a few minutes?"

"How do I know you're really a shamus?"

"I have credentials. I'd show them to you if I could."

He mumbled something. Finally he said, "Come on up. I'm in 4G." He pressed the buzzer that would allow her to go through the door to the front hall.

As Raven entered, she thought, "Shit. He would live on the fourth floor. I'll bet there's no elevator in this crappy building."

She was right. After trudging up four flights of steps with the odor of old varnish and urine in her nostrils, she was panting. She knocked on Apartment 4G.

"Are you the woman claiming to be a shamus?"

"Yes, my name is Raven Lenore."

"You said you had credentials. Hold them up to the peephole."

Suspicious son-of-a-gun, Raven thought as she held her identification up by the peephole.

"Okay. Now, open your mouth wide and stand closer."

"What!? What for?"

"Do you want me to let you in or not? Just do it."

Raven opened her mouth as wide as she could and stood close to the door.

"Okay."

Raven heard several locks being unlatched. The door opened, and she stepped in. The room was in semidarkness. The walls were covered with posters of gothic musicians, pictures of flying saucers, strange creatures and horror movie ads. There were at least three laptops each of which showed a different screensaver, two regular TV sets and one with a forty-two inch plasma screen, and much other electronic gear. One of the TVs was hooked to a paused video game. It showed the interior of a dungeon. Heavy metal blasted from surround-sound speakers.

Raven said, "Would you mind turning that down?"

Morgan was a pale and emaciated youth of twenty-five, with thick glasses, long uncombed hair, and

stubble that was not quite a beard. His Grateful Dead T-shirt was stained. He had several rings on his ears, eyebrows and lips, and a tattoo of the monster from the movie "Alien" on his right arm. The sweetish acrid smell of pot filled the room.

"What was the business about opening my mouth before you let me in?" Raven asked.

Morgan's lips twitched. "I wanted to make sure that you weren't a vampire."

At first Raven thought that he was putting her on, but something about the way he said it made her think that he was not joking..

"Do you believe vampires are after you?"

"One is. She's stalking me. But, I don't think you came here to discuss vampires."

"No. You were a friend of John Grebelowski?"

"Yeah. But I haven't talked to him in weeks. I think his mom put a bug in his ear. She never liked me."

"He's dead. Didn't you know that?"

Morgan chuckled. "That's what his mom and sister told me. Only it's not true."

"What makes you say that it's not true?"

"Cause I saw him walking around downtown only yesterday. I called to him, but either he didn't hear me or decided to ignore me. He didn't answer. I started to follow him, but lost him in the crowd."

Raven's eyebrows shot up. "You saw him? Are sure you didn't see someone who looked like him?"

"It was him all right. I was only ten feet away. We've been friends since high school. I'd know that handsome puss anywhere. He looked a little sickish and pale though. Maybe that's why he hasn't called. Maybe he was sick. He could've been in the hospital."

Raven thought, *A body is missing and the owner's best friend sees him walking around. Either this Morgan guy was hallucinating, is putting me on or maybe Johnny's not really dead.*

Something occurred to her. Morgan said he was being stalked by a vampire. If it was really true and not due to an overactive imagination, that same vampire could have turned his friend into one. It fitted together well. But could she trust what this strange fellow was telling her. She decided to question him further about who Grebelowski was seeing.

"Did John have girl friends?"

"Many. I never saw him with the same girl twice. He had a lots of one night stands if you know what I mean. The ladies all liked him. As I said before, he's quite good looking and has a gift of gab."

"Do you think that one of his one-night-stands could've been that vampire you were talking about?"

Morgan shrugged. "It's possible. Maybe she got him, and now she's after me."

"Do you know where I might find her?"

He looked troubled. "No. I encountered her once, late one night in the subway. She asked me whether I could spare a little blood, like she was panhandling or something. I got the hell out of there in a hurry."

"When was that?"

"Couple of weeks ago."

About the same time Grebelowski's body disappeared. "Can you describe her?"

"Yeah. She was dressed like a punk girl. She had pink hair, wore a collar and nose rings and such, like me. She had a tattoo of a skull with a knife through the eye on her shoulder and a pentagram on her breast. I could see part of it because she had on a low cut halter top."

Like a thousand other teenage and young women, thought Raven. *Of course that skull with the knife through the eye is a little unique.*

"And you do what for a living?"

He puffed out his chest. "I design video and computer games, mostly horror stuff."

"Oh yeah. I like to play those games. Where do you get your ideas?"

"Nightmares mostly. I have a lots of them, ever since I was abducted."

"Abducted?"

"By aliens. They took me up into their UFO and did awful things to me. Do you want to hear the whole story?"

Uh oh, just when I was buying this kook's story about meeting vampires and seeing his dead friend walking around. Now he says he was abducted by aliens. He's probably high on ecstasy or acid most of the time and has hallucinations. "Not today. Maybe next time. I've got to be running. It's been interesting talking to you. And I'll be on the lookout for that vampire."

"And Johnny too. If you bump into him, tell him to call me."

"I'll do that."

As Raven started to walk out the door, Morgan said, "I just remembered something. You know that vampire that's stalking me...?"

"Yeah. What about her?"

"Once I saw her hanging around a funereal home."

"Oh yeah. Which one?"

"That one over on State Street, Wilsey's or something like that."

"I'll check it out."

Raven had a feeling that Morgan knew more than he was telling. Why did he mention the Wilsey Funeral Home, the very place where his friend, who he claims is alive, was interred? It was as though he wanted to tell Raven something, but was cagey about getting it out.

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CHAPTER 3. Wilsey's Funeral Home

On a hunch that either the perpetrator who stole Grebelowski's corpse would return to steal another body or that there really was a female vampire who hung around the funeral home, Raven staked the place out. She arrived right after sunset, parked two doors down from the mortuary, and waited for hours. Nothing much happened. A few pedestrians passed by. Around eight, Mordecai Wilsey came out the front door, locked it and went to his car. After that things were as dead on that street as his customers. Raven dozed.

She had another nightmare about Peter Magbertius. She dreamt that she was on a high rocky cliff near a strange pillared building. Next to it was a cemetery blocked by a locked iron gate. Black roiling clouds darkened the sky.

"What in hell?" she cried. "Where in blazes am I?"

"You may be right," came a deep voice at her side. Raven glanced over. It was Peter Magbertius.

"This must be another nightmare. Why won't you leave me alone?"

"Because I need you. Come, My Dear, there's something I want to show you."

They walked toward the building. At the side of the main entrance was an alcove where three skulls were carved in the stone. To one side an open door led to a mausoleum that contained a lighted candle in an urn. To the right of the urn was a crypt. Magbertius touched the urn and a wraith appeared, a semitransparent image of a young woman, and immediately vanished. He slid the top off of the sarcophagus. To Raven's disgust it contained a corpse starting to putrefy. She recognized it from the picture Wilsey had given her. It was John Grebelowski.

"What are you trying to tell me?" Raven asked.

"Just watch."

After a few seconds, the corpse's eyes opened, and it sat up. Raven backed away in horror. Just as suddenly, the awful thing disappeared.

"Where did it go?"

"Perhaps it walks the earth."

"Are you trying to tell me that Grebelowski is alive or that his corpse is walking around?"

Magbertius shrugged. "One thing or the other."

They left the alcove and returned to the front entrance of the building. It was locked. However, the brass decorations at the main entrance moved. Magbertius placed the moon so that it covered the sun, and the door opened. He and Raven entered a long gloomy ruined hallway. As they walked down it, their footsteps echoed loudly. Otherwise the building was as silent as a tomb. Several rooms were boarded up. Behind one, Raven heard heavy breathing, as if some powerful beast was locked away. She shuddered, glad that the room was blocked.

They entered a large library with books floor to ceiling on each wall and a reading table in the middle. It smelled musty from decaying books. Toward the back, large maps illustrated seas and continents that were not of earth. Magbertius picked up a book lying on the table and showed it to Raven. It was covered with heavy leather with several alchemy symbols woven into the intricate design. The title was *The Necronomicon*.

"You'll need this."

"For what?"

Magbertius did not reply. They left the library and continued to explore the partially ruined building. As Raven walked along by Magbertius' side, she had a feeling, which she always experienced whenever she was around the sorcerer, that a mysterious invisible, ancient evil was nearby.

They explored strange laboratories that contained ancient alien machinery whose purpose Raven could not fathom. When they entered one gallery, she had a weird sensation that something was extremely odd in that chamber that she could not quite put her finger on. She glanced at her watch. The second hand was revolving counterclockwise.

"Let's get out of here," she cried and pulled Magbertius out of the weird room. She wondered whether time actually flowed backwards in there or whether some kind of magnetic field had affected her watch. She did not want to reenter the room to find out.

"What are we doing in this building?" Raven demanded.

"Looking for the answer to your mystery?" He began to laugh, loud and long.

* * * *

Raven awoke with a start. "Damn. I shouldn't have fallen asleep." Nonetheless, Magbertius' haunted laughter resounded in her mind. She checked her watch. It was after midnight.

She glanced over at the mortuary. She noticed a moving dim light in the cellar as though someone was down there with a flashlight. She got out of her car, approached the building with her automatic ready and peered through the window. A shadow moved inside. Someone was wandering around the basement.

A chill went up Raven's spine. Funereal homes gave her the creeps. Although she often had to deal with them, she never liked corpses. Nonetheless, she mounted the porch steps. One window had a broken pane and was open. She crawled in as the burglar probably had and played her penlight around. Ahead was a coffin surrounded by flower displays, whose sickening sweet odor made her nauseous. She shivered and hurried out into the hallway.

When she found the cellar door, she turned off her lamp and tiptoed down the steps. On the landing, a board creaked. The intruder's light went out. She turned on her own penlight again and called, "Okay you, the jigs up."

The first thing her light showed was a naked corpse on a metal table. It's skin was a pale gray, and the eyes stared at nothingness. "Shit," she cried. A sour taste came into her mouth. She moved the light around. The intruder, a young woman, crouched in a corner sucking a tube in a container. Her pale face and hands were the same ghastly color as the corpse. Big, round eyes with dark circles stared at her. A stream of dark red liquid ran down her chin.

"Okay. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

The strange girl was dressed Goth style, with dozens of earrings, spiked dog collar, tight jeans, a top that ended above the midriff, a pentagram tattooed on her breast and a skull with a bloody knife through an eye socket on one bare shoulder, pink hair cropped like a boy's, white skin so pale it was as though she'd never been in the sun. Nonetheless, she had a eerie beauty, with high cheekbones, full carmine lips, and dark eyes that flashed with amusement. She was a perfect fit to the description that Morgan had given Raven earlier of the vampire who was supposed to be stalking him.

The girl smirked. "My name is Celia. I'm just getting a little drinky. Who are you? You're no cop."

"My name is Raven Lenore. I'm a private investigator. I was hired to find out who stole a corpse from here a couple of weeks ago. Was that you?"

"What the hell would I want with a corpse?"

"What's that stuff you're drinking?" She guessed formaldehyde. Junkies can get high on it when nothing else was available.

"Blood from that corpse. The mortician drains it into jugs. Want to try some, Raven?"

"Blood. So you're a vampire."

"Sad to say, that's true." She grinned at Raven. "Want to donate yours? I won't take much, and it'll be warm and fresh, not like this stuff, which is going bad."

Raven flushed. She had an erotic thought of what it would be like to have that pretty girl's mouth on her throat. But she knew if she allowed a vampire to take one sip she would be the vampire's slave. She backed up a couple of steps and turned away so that she was not looking at the girl's eyes.

"Tell me, Celia. Why did you break in here?"

"I told you. For the blood. I don't like to take any from a person unless they give me permission. Why would anyone care that I drink this stuff? Morticians just dump the stuff anyway."

Raven wanted to run away. She did not like being so close to a vampire. She knew their powers. She had dealt with them before. Nonetheless, she persisted with her questioning. "So you don't have any idea who took John Grebelowski's corpse?"

"John Grebelowski? I didn't even know he was dead."

"But you knew him?"

"Only slightly. He was a friend of a former donor of mine."

Celia took one last sip and stood up. She took a step toward Raven. Raven backed up to the edge of the steps.

"Oh. What's the donor's name?"

"Peter Morgan. But I dumped the creep. He was into some kinky stuff. He wanted me to perform perverse acts in exchange for a pint or so of his blood. That's why I've resorted to this."

"I interviewed Peter. He claims that you were stalking him."

Celia chuckled. "That bastard. He would say something like that. What an ego." She took another step toward Raven. Raven turned and climbed backward two of the cellar steps.

"So, you aren't stalking him?"

"I don't want anything to do with him. Is there anything else you want to know?" She walked forward a couple of steps again. Raven went up another two steps.

Raven rubbed her chin. "I can't think of anything at the moment. How can I contact you if I do?"

"Can I keep this container of blood?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"You won't tell the cops or the mortician?"

"No. I swear." Although it was cold and damp, Raven began to sweat. Celia stopped her relentless move forward.

"If you want me, come to Graceland Cemetery after midnight. I hang out by Schoenhofen's pyramid sometimes."

"Thanks. I may look you up. Enjoy that blood."

Raven hurried up the steps taking two at a time, ran out of the building, leaped into her car and turned on the ignition. The engine turned over but did not start. Raven realized in her haste she had flooded it. She saw Celia leave the mortuary carrying the container of blood. She was headed toward Raven's car.

Raven pressed the gas pedal to the floor and turned the key again. To her relief, the engine caught. She put the car in gear and peeled rubber out of the parking spot. Despite what the vampire had said, she did not trust the undead. She felt that they were like junkies and would lie or do anything to relieve their cravings.

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CHAPTER 4. Magbertius' Warning

The vast and lonely desert surrounded Raven on all sides. She pulled up her cowl to protect her face from windblown sand. Dark clouds on the horizon signaled that a sandstorm approached. As she scanned the horizon, no shelter was in sight, only another lone traveler plodding along as she had. She headed toward this person with the hope that she or he knew which way to go. As she slogged on, each step sank her ankle deep into the loose soil, and grains of sand scored her face painfully. Her lips became cracked and dry. Her only hope was that she would reach the other person before she collapsed.

It took her last bit of strength to come close enough to the stranger to speak. Like her, he had his cowl pulled closely around his face to keep away the biting sand.

"Is there shelter anywhere that we can reach before the storm hits?"

The man pulled back his cowl. It was Magbertius. "Not for you, My Dear. You shall be caught in the center of a maelstrom. And I am afraid that it is my fault. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what?"

"Sorry that you are in deadly danger. Sometimes my sorcery gets out of hand. At the moment, however, I can do nothing to rescue you from the danger."

"Danger from what or who? What did you do?"

He gazed at her with hangdog expression. "Look into your mirror. You will see."

To Raven's chagrin, he seemed to recede from her until he was again only a black dot on the horizon and finally disappeared altogether. The gloom became dark as night as the clouds and sand were whipped into a frenzy by howling and conflicting winds.

* * * *

Raven opened her eyes. It felt very late. Rain beat against her window panes. After the dream of being lost in a desert, she felt thirsty and went to the bathroom for a glass of water. The vision worried her. It was a portent. Magbertius was trying to warn her of something. She thought, *He said I would be in the center of a maelstrom. But what sort of a maelstrom? And what did he mean when he said to look in the mirror?*

She peered at herself in the medicine cabinet mirror. She saw the same old sleepy-eyed Raven that she saw any night that she got out of bed in the wee hours of the morning.

She returned to her bed with the hope that she would not have any more nightmares about Magbertius. They were getting to be too much of a regular thing. She feared that one day through her dreams Peter would again gain control of her.

* * * *

The next day was rainy and dreary. Raven realized that she was no closer to solving the mystery of the stolen corpse than when she had started on the case. She decided that since her investigative skills had not been up to the challenge, she must rely on her psychic skills. She donned her Wiccan robe and called upon two of her Wiccan friends, Cindy Looper and Rachel David, to help her. After they arrived, she fed them lunch. Afterwards she said, "I wish to try to contact the spirit of a man who died recently."

"So you want to hold seance?" said Cindy Looper.

"Yes. I have a prized possession of the deceased. That should help."

"Definitely," said Rachel David.

Although it was already gloomy in Raven's apartment, she pulled the blinds tight. Raven placed John Grebelowski's medal and a candle in the center of the room. Raven lit the candle and doused the electric lights. The three women sat cross legged on the floor around the flickering light and joined hands.

Rachel led them in a cleansing ritual to remove any malignant influences that might be present so that only positive spirits would be called. Afterwards, all three took deep calming breaths to raise their consciousness to an alpha level.

Raven closed her eyes and said, "Spirit of the departed that once prized the medal before us, please make your present known. You, who were known in life as John Grebelowski, can you hear me? We need your help and guidance." She repeated this several times.

Odd sounds came from different parts of the room, whispering below the threshold of understanding, a light rap, creaking such as that made by a rusty hinge. The air turned chill, as though the cold of the grave had entered the apartment. Raven felt a feathery touch on her neck and arms. She smelled perfume of the type she used herself when she dressed up for a date.

She said, "Is that you, John?"

A voice came from Celia that was not Celia's. "Have you called me up from the land of the dead to free me again?"

Raven asked again. "Are you John?" Something about the sound of the voice that came from her friend bothered her.

"No. I am not John. You know who I am."

"How do I know?"

"Look into a mirror."

Raven trembled. Those were the exact words that Magbertius had used in her dream of the desert. "Am I in danger from you?"

The spirit simply giggled.

"Whoever you are, go away. I wish to speak to John Grebelowski."

"John will not speak until his material body is at rest."

"Why is it not at rest?"

"You know. Ask his friend, Peter. I want ... I want..." The voice coming from Celia dropped lower and lower, the last "I want" was barely a whisper.

"What do you want?"

"To walk ... to walk the earth again."

"Is that what you really want?"

"Yes. But I cannot unless you must give your permission, Raven."

Raven did not like the direction the conversation was taking. "No."

Rachel said, "Why not give it to her? What harm can it do?"

"I don't think that this is a good spirit. I sense something evil about it."

The spirit said, "Help me. Please. I am alone here in the cold and the dark."

Rachel said, "If you promise not to do harm, we will allow you to return."

"I promise."

"Very well. But the moment you do anything evil or malicious, you must return. Do we have a bargain?"

"I agree. I will be good. But it's up to Raven."

Raven shook her head. She did not like this deal. Nonetheless, she said, "As long as you abide by the terms set out by Rachel, you may return to this world."

At that moment, Celia opened her eyes. "She's gone," she said. "Although I was the channel, I heard everything. What did the spirit mean when she wanted Raven's permission to walk the earth? She has passed to the other side. How can she return except as a ghost?"

Raven and Rachel stared at each other. Finally, Rachel said, "I don't know. This is the first time a spirit has made such request in any seance I've been involved with. Some spirits, especially soon after their death, do not believe they have left their body. Could that be the case here?"

Raven shook her head. "Or the spirit wishes to take over the body of someone living. I don't think it was a good idea to give our permission."

Rachel looked uncomfortable. Apparently she realized she had made a mistake. "There was one strange thing I noticed about the spirit's voice."

"What was that?" asked Celia.

"She sounded like Raven."

Raven suddenly realized that it was true. The voice of the spirit was like her own, down to her Brooklyn accent and way of phrasing things. Magbertius and the spirit's words kept going around in her head, "Look into the mirror." Then it came to her. "Oh no," she cried and leaped to her feet.

"What's the matter?" Rachel asked.

"We've set free a demon to walk the earth, and she looks like me. My doppelganger is on the loose."

Her two friends gazed at her with wonder and concern at her outburst. "What do you mean, Raven?" Celia asked.

Raven told them the whole story of the case of the spirit in the bottle.

* * * *

After Raven's friends left, she realized that not only was she not any closer to solving her latest case, but her dreams of Magbertius were more frequent and intense, a vampire was aware of her and might start stalking her and through the seance, she had brought back her malicious doppelganger. Since she could not think of any way of dealing with the latter three problems at present, she decided to concentrate on finding out what happened to Grebelowski's corpse.

She felt that Peter Morgan knew more than he had told her. If Celia was telling the truth, he had lied about the vampire. There were other inconsistencies in the story he told her. He claimed that he had not known that Grebelowski was dead, that he had not talked to him in weeks, but he never indicated that they quarreled. Since Dora told him of her son's passing, why didn't he attend the wake and memorial. And then there was all that stuff about seeing him walking around downtown recently. Also, he must have known that Celia would be caught drinking blood drained from a corpse. He was the one who told Raven where the vampire could be found.

She called a taxi and told the driver to take her to Morgan's building. After she rang his apartment, he asked in a surly tone, "Who's there?"

"It's Raven again. I have a couple of more questions about your friend, John."

"So you're back. You must have the hots for me. I told you everything I know already."

Nonetheless, he buzzed her in. She trudged up the four flights of stairs. As soon as she rapped at his door, he let her in.

"You didn't ask to look at my teeth. How do you know I haven't turned into a vampire since I last saw you."

He grinned as though she had made a joke. "Not possible."

"You seem to know a lot about vampires. Why's that, Peter? Is it because you're slowly becoming one yourself?" She reached up and pulled his collar away from his neck. Sure enough, there were two evenly spaced puncture wounds in the area of his carotid vein. "Celia told me that you were a donor."

"That lying bitch."

"Oh yeah. If she lied about that, where did the fang marks come from. You're her victim. She controls you."

"Okay. You're right. For a while I let her take my blood. But that's all over with. I wanted to be a vampire. I live mostly at night anyway. She refused to make me one. She wanted me alive so that she could suck my blood once a month. She probably has twenty-nine other guys whose blood she's sucking. One for each day."

"It matters not as far as I'm concerned. That's between you and her. I'm more interested in what you know about your dead friend, John Grebelowski."

"I told you. He's not dead. I saw him walking around."

"So you didn't go to his funeral."

"Sure I did, as soon as I heard." His fingers went up to face, and he started to squeeze a pimple of the many on his cheek, an obvious nervous gesture. "The whole thing must've been faked."

"Did you see him in the coffin?"

"Yeah, during the wake. But he didn't really look dead, only like he was asleep. They closed the coffin before they had the memorial service." His leg was twitching spasmodically. "I think the whole thing was faked. He and his mom wanted everyone to think he was dead for some reason."

"How do you think they fooled the funeral director and the coroner?"

Morgan mussed his own hair for a few seconds. "They must've been paid off. I tell you; he's alive. You can believe me or not. I don't care."

He became so agitated Raven did not persist with that line of questioning.

"Okay. Tell me exactly where you saw him walking around."

"In the park. By the fountain."

"Buckingham?"

"Yeah."

Raven decided that she would not get anymore out of him that evening. She said, "Goodnight, Peter. I guess I'll go now."

"Wait. Y'know, you're a real hot looking chick. Maybe we could go out some time."

So as not to irritate him, she said, "We'll see. I'll let you know."

His face lit up like a seven-year-old who was just told he was going to get an ice cream bar. "Great. A definite maybe. Call me."

Apparently to him, a maybe was the same as a yes.

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CHAPTER 5. Encounter in the Park

The following day was beautiful, sunny with a light breeze off of Lake Michigan. Although Raven's

deductive reasoning concluded that Morgan was probably insane, a pathological liar and had hallucinations, her psychic instincts told her to check out the area around Buckingham Fountain anyway. Besides, she did not have one other lead as to what happened to John Grebelowski's corpse. A day in the park would clear her head. If she sat on a park bench enjoying the fine weather, maybe she could come up with an idea or at least a plan of action. At the moment, she had nothing.

She decided to walk the entire distance along the lake front. It was about five miles from her apartment building to Grant Park. First she headed east through Lincoln Park and crossed the steel and concrete pedestrian bridge over Lake Shore Drive to North Avenue Beach. The passage over the bridge was like a trip to another world. A quarter of the way up the steep incline, the motor noises of a thousand cars dimmed to a distant rumble. By midpoint, the walkway trembled with the vibration of the relentless traffic beneath her feet and the cacophony at street level was gone. At the highest point, the magnificent sweep of the pine-green lake came into view.

Although it was July, a cooling breeze tugged at her blouse and churned the dark water into white flecks of foam and curling rolls. In the infinite distance the delicate blue sky touched the edge of the world. Cotton soft cumulus clouds drifted by in an endless procession of horses, men, heroic gods and horrible monsters. Tiny white flakes of sailboats danced along the horizon.

The beach was crowded with swimmers and sun worshipers. The concrete walk was busy with bicyclists and joggers. The sand was blinding silver except where it was stained a dark tan by the frothy breakers. To the south were the lean gray towers of the loop. To the north, glass and steel apartment buildings sparkled and glittered .

As Raven strolled along the shore, the sun was high and warm and a soft moist breeze kissed her cheek. Just being alive was a great joy. The blue-white dome of sky was a roof of the finest china. Time and distance faded. Only the present moment existed.

By the time she reached Oak Street Beach, which was almost the end of her journey, she rested on a bench and watched the breakers dispel themselves on the sand. Her mind wandered, recalling a similar pleasant day when she was a teenager in Brooklyn. After a while, however, darker thoughts intruded as she thought about her nightmares and her reason for her stroll. She got up and continued south toward the loop. When she encountered a hot-dog vendor with a cart, she bought a Kelbosi sandwich. Since she had not eaten since breakfast it was absolutely delicious, better than some restaurant steaks she had.

Eventually she came to Buckingham fountain. Again she sat on a park bench. A few tourists snapped pictures of the fountain, the lake, the park and the downtown buildings. She was sure that she was in one or two. Weary from the long hike, she closed her eyes and dozed with the warm sun on her face.

* * * *

Raven wandered through endless corridors and rooms filled with stalactites, stalagmites and pillars of limestone in an immense subterranean cavern. A small stream flowed by her side. She carried a flickering oil lamp and peered around. Somehow she had become separated from her kerplunking companions and was completely lost. Her hollering was answered by endless echoes of her own voice.

As she plodded on over the uneven floor, she came to an oaken door set in a wall of the cave. It opened with an unusual sharp grating sound that set her teeth on edge. Beyond it were stone steps, which to her dismay, headed down into utter blackness. No matter. It was her only choice. *Somewhere below there must be a way to the surface* , she thought.

At the end of the curving steps was a cobblestone path between a ravine of boulders piled irregularly

one on another as though part of the rock wall had collapsed. This tunnel continued in a straight line for several hundred paces and made a right-angle turn. Just beyond the corner was a steep descending pathway that wound deeper underground. As Raven neared the end of this slope, she heard liquid splashing. Its source was dark fluid that flowed from a hole in the ceiling into a malignant pool. The pool itself gave off an unwholesome atrocious stench, like rotting flesh. A narrow ledge curved around it in a swooping arc.

Before Raven continued her trek, she became curious as to the nature of the pool's contents. She kicked a pebble into the foul substance. As soon as the stone touched the surface, it began to dissolve, fuming thick vapor as it sank.

"Ugh," she cried. "That's not water, but acid. If it melted a rock, what would it do to living flesh?" She shuddered.

She crept around the ledge, keeping as much distance between herself and the edge as possible. When she was halfway around, she heard footsteps ahead, "Tap, tap, tap." Each tap was followed by its echo. The hairs on her neck rose; logic gave way to terror and paranoia. She switched the lantern to her left hand and drew her pistol. As the footsteps approached, "TAP, TAP, TAP," she raised the flickering flame.

In the dim light a shadowy figure in a long, dark cloak slowly walked toward her. The apparition, whose face was hidden in the folds of a cowl, held a candle and a sword. Raven raised her pistol. Her hand trembled so that she could hardly keep it steady. "Who ... who goes there?"

The mysterious creature approached her in silence, its clicking heels echoing on the stone walls of the oppressive chamber in a menacing manner. Step by step it's footfalls resounded on the stone ledge.

Raven realized that she had but whispered his question. She screwed up her courage and repeated it in a loud, bold voice. "Who goes there?" Her words echoed, "There ... there ... there..."

The apparition, which she realized was a large man, raised its sword, whether as a threat or salute, Raven was not sure. She released the safety on her pistol.

A familiar voice said, "Are you going to shoot me, Raven?" The man pushed back its cowl. It was Magbertius. He had a grin on his face.

Raven holstered her weapon. "Peter. Do you know a way out of these caverns?"

"If I did, I would walk the earth again. Come closer."

Shivering because of her dread of him, but unable to resist his command, she approached until not an inch separated them. He put his arms around her and brought his bearded face down towards her. His lips pressed against hers, and his arms tightened until she was pressed against his warm and muscular chest. She sighed deeply. "Take me," she cried. "Right here on the cavern floor."

He smiled in a wistful manner. "Ah. If only I could. But we do not have much time. I need to tell you what to do once the storm hits."

"You've said that to me before. That I am to be in the midst of a maelstrom. What is it? What will happen?"

"To my regret, I am unable to tell you. But you will know when it happens. At that time you must go to the vampire. She will bring you to a place where you will learn the answers you seek."

"Celia? But I fear her. She may make me her donor-victim, her slave in fact."

"Nonetheless, she is the only one who can help you."

He withdrew a little and faded away as though he were dissolving. The next moment, the entire cave vanished to be replaced by the fountain and a setting sun.

* * * *

Raven was awake. She felt stiff from sitting so long on the bench in one position. "Holy shit, I must've slept for hours." She rose from the bench and stretched. She walked around the other side of the fountain to get a better view of the sunset. It was a beautiful and lingering one as the sky turned to gold, then crimson and finally to a deep purple. Venus appeared.. The sky turned to ebony, and one by one the stars that could be seen through the city light pollution came into view. Colored lights turned on to give the spraying water a rainbow effect.

All at once, although there was no wind, Raven had a strange feeling, as though something cold as the grave was near. There was also a strong stench of decay. She shivered and peered around. A lone pedestrian strolled by. His hands were shoved into his pockets, and his head was tucked into his jacket. There was something odd about his walk, as though he had trouble balancing. Raven followed him with her eyes. He staggered a few times, but continued walking. Raven wondered whether he was drunk, perhaps a homeless person, for his clothes were shabby and dirt stained. He went one way, and then turned around and went another way. After walking a few paces, he turned a third time and went in a different direction. It was as though he was lost and could not figure out which way he was supposed to go.

Raven approached him. "Are you all right fellow?"

His head popped up, and he stared at her.

She was dumbfounded. Just to be sure, she took the picture out of her pocket and compared it to the man's face. *Damned if it isn't John Grebelowski*, she thought. *Morgan was right. He's alive.* She said, "Are you John Grebelowski?"

He stared at her for several seconds before replying. "I ... don't ... remember."

As she peered into his face, she saw how gray and sickly it was, with great dark rings around watery blank eyes. His cheeks were hollow. In person he looked worse than the photo of his corpse. *Something has happened to him*, she thought. *Some shock gave him amnesia*.

"I believe you are. What happened to you?"

He continued to stare at her blankly. Raven felt that the only thing to do was to take him to a hospital. She took his hand. To her utter horror, it was as cold and spongy as a corpse's. Nevertheless, she held on to it and tugged at him. He staggered forward. They continued in this manner with him half walking, half stumbling as she jerked his arm from time to time whenever he halted. Finally they reached the taxi stand, and she managed to cram him into a cab. She decided not to bring him to a hospital until she had some idea of what was wrong with him. She did not feel like sitting in an emergency room waiting room all night. She gave the cabdriver her address.

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CHAPTER 6. The Maelstrom

Ever since Celia stopped coming around, Peter Morgan had difficulty concentrating enough to create a unique new game design. As he sat in front of one his laptops gazing, without seeing, the parade of horror images on his screen saver, he recalled the enjoyment he had with the vampire. On nights that she wanted him, she would appear at his door without warning. He often wondered how she got by the security lock on the first floor. She always arrived after midnight.

First they would smoke a joint together. Afterwards they would get naked, hop into bed and make slow sensuous love. The first time was weird, but afterwards he became used to her cold clammy skin. When he was fully engorged and inside her, she would plunge her fangs into his throat and suck his blood. The ecstasy this created was almost beyond enduring.

She would only take enough to make him a little woozy. It gave him a high that was better than snow, ecstasy and smack all rolled up into one, without the bad side effects of drugs. In addition, the experience was heightened by fear. There was the ever present danger that Celia would get greedy and take so much that his heart would stop. So far she had been careful in that regard, only taking enough blood to satisfy her current need.

There were consequences, however. He had become addicted to being her donor. At first, when she stopped coming around, he thought he would go crazy with longing for her mouth on his throat. It was as bad as the times he had gone through detox for an earlier heroin addiction, without the help and support of medical personal.

After he had been a donor for over a year, he expressed a desire to become a vampire himself. Because he continually nagged her to make him a creature of the night, they quarreled often. She told him that he did not know what he was asking, that being a vampire, hunting human beings to suck their blood, living by night and sleeping the sleep of the dead in a coffin, sounded romantic and adventurous. But after a few years—she never said how many—it got old. She would tell him about horrible things that happened to vampires she knew. And how, as the years went by, how tiresome it was always seeking new sources of blood and places to hide her coffin.

Nonetheless, he persisted. Finally, one night she walked out in disgust without taking blood. That was the last time he saw her. He tried to call to her telepathically. Although he knew she heard his thoughts, she refused to respond. He was going crazy. He desperately needed the jolt he received as his heart began to pump wildly when his blood flowed into her mouth.

As he was having these reminiscences, the doorbell rang. He leaped from his chair. *It might be Celia*, he thought. Perhaps she was desperate for blood and wanted him again. He shouted at the speaker, "Who is it?"

To his disappointment, the voice was that of the snoopy private eye. "It's Lenore Raven."

"Yeah. What do you want? I've told you everything I know about Johnny Grebelowski."

"Oh, I'm not here about him. I had a feeling that you liked me."

Morgan recalled that he had asked for a date and that she had not refused outright. Maybe she really did have the hots for him. His heart beat faster in anticipation. "Okay. Come on up." He buzzed her in.

A few minutes later, she was at his door dressed in a sexy way, with a low-cut slinky skin tight gown. Her hair was done up in a fashionable style as though she had just come from the beauty parlor. She had on a lot of makeup, much more than she had on when he saw her last, and reeked of a heady perfume that made him dizzy with lust. She sashayed over to his bed, kicked off her spike heels and curled up on it. Her head rested on her folded hands and her feet, on his pillow.

"Do you have anything decent to drink, lover boy?" she said in a provocative manner.

Morgan blushed. The pose she had assumed was quite sexy. "Sure. I have beer, wine or whisky. What's your pleasure?"

"Straight bourbon on the rocks if you have it."

"Coming up." He rinsed two water glasses and poured an inch of liquor into each one.

"Hey. Don't be stingy." She indicated with her thumb and index finger that she wanted the glass half full of whisky. He filled her glass to the halfway point, tossed in some ice cubes and handed it to her. She took a long gulp, drinking most of what was in the glass.

Nervously, Morgan said, "So what would you like to do? Go to a movie or dancing or something?"

She winked slowly and deliberately. "Come over her, and I'll show you."

He moved closer until he was standing next to the bed. She put the glass down and sat up. She put her arms around his neck and pulled his head down toward her face. She kissed him hard, her lips pushing hard against his until their teeth clashed. Her tongue darted into his mouth. He responded by falling on her. They rolled around the bed for the while, smooching and petting. Finally, she said, "Get up and take your clothes off."

He climbed out of the bed and quickly discarded his garments. Meanwhile, she slipped off the slinky dress. She had nothing on underneath, not even a tong. As he took her body in with his eyes, his mouth watered. She had a perfect body, with large well shaped breasts. He returned to the bed and kissed her all over, ending at her lower parts. He sniffed in the pungent odor of her and licked her inside. She groaned with pleasure. When his member became fully engorged, he crawled up so that he was lying over her. They twisted around so that she was on top. She reached down and guided him into her. They started pumping slowly at first and gradually more rapidly.

As his excitement was about to peak and burst out in a fountain of ecstasy, she suddenly had a silver dagger in her hand which she plunged into his throat. His eyes went wide with pain, terror and absolute surprise, she slid the knife sideways. Blood spurted from the wound covering her with blood. She smiled.

"That was fun."

The light went out in Morgan's eyes. The murderess sighed. "I guess I reneged on my agreement with Raven. I did a bad thing. Oh well, rules are made to be broken."

She got up, threw the dagger on the bed and went to the washroom to clean the blood off her body.

* * * *

A terrible storm raged. The three mast sailing ship was tossed and rocked by the turbulent sea. Biting winds and hard driven rains buffeted Raven as she clung to the main mast in an attempt to keep her balance on slippery storm washed deck. Lightning and thunder split the sky. If a strike hit the mast, she would be electrocuted. She needed to reach the cabin door before that happened or she was swept overboard. Although it was only ten paces away, she did not think she could make it. Absolutely nothing was between it and the mast to grab a hold of. She was frozen with indecision. She could move toward the cabin entrance and possibly be swept into the roaring sea, or she could stay where she was and be battered to death by the awful storm.

Just as she was about to chance a run for the cabin door, it opened and a tall figure in seaman's slicker stood in the entrance. He walked toward her without a misstep as though impervious to the movement of the ship or buffeting rain and wind. Raven knew by his manly stride that it was Peter Magbertius.

Although she was aware that he had come up from below to save her from the storm, she hated and feared him for his power over her. Nonetheless, when he held out his hand, she grabbed it eagerly. He pulled her close, protecting her with his body from the worst of the battering winds and rain. Half carrying and half dragging her, he brought her safely to the door. He allowed her to enter first to climb down to the passageway below.

As she made her way, the pitching and swaying of the ship threw her from side to side, sometimes slamming her painfully against the bulkheads. Magbertius waved the lantern he carried toward a cabin door, which she entered. He followed. It was a typical captain's cabin of the time of sailing ships, small but efficient. It contained a bunk attached to the hull, a small desk covered with maps and charts, a large chest and a hook overhead which Magbertius hung the lantern. In the swaying ship, its light cast strange moving shadows.

Raven was soaked to the skin and shivering with cold.

"Oh my dear, we must get you out of those wet clothes." Magbertius efficiently stripped her naked with little help on her part his warm hands often touching her bare skin. He wrapped her into a blanket and held her in a close embrace, warming her with his body heat.

"When will the storm end?" she asked.

"That I could not tell you, Raven darling. Just remember what I have said last time we met. Go to the vampire. She will show you the way."

The ship's bell began to clang.
* * * *

Raven awoke at that point. Her cell phone was ringing. She picked up and said, "Raven.". Her own voice at the other end said, "Oh Raven, I've done something terrible. Will you send me back to the land of the dead?" The doppelganger began to giggle.

"You! What did you do?"

"Turn on your TV." She hung up.

Raven put down the cell phone and found the TV remote. A local newscast was on. The anchor said, "A man was brutally murdered in his apartment last night." A scene of the exterior of an apartment building was shown. Raven recognized it at once. It was the building where Peter Morgan lived. The

newsman at the scene said, "The police believe that the murdered man knew his killer. They think that whoever committed this heinous act might have been intimate with the man minutes before the killing."

"Damn it, doppelganger, what have you done?"

After the newscast went to another story, she turned off the TV and stumbled into the living room. Someone was laying on her sofa. She recalled that she had brought John Grebelowski here. She went over to wake him up. She realized that she still needed to bring him to the hospital. When they had arrived at her apartment, she had been exhausted. After depositing Grebelowski on the sofa, she laid down to catch a few winks. Apparently she had slept for hours.

She shook the man. He did not respond. In addition, he felt cold and clammy. She felt for a pulse. She could not find one. And then she realized the truth. He was stone cold dead. In fact, he was starting to stink as though he had been dead for weeks.

Mephistopheles rubbed up against her leg. "You're in trouble, mistress," the cat telepathed.

"You mean because of this body?"

The cat shook her head. "Because of Peter Morgan's body."

"My doppelganger killed him?"

"The police think you did it. When they find this body, they'll believe that you're a serial killer."

"Oh shit. This is terrible. Where's my doppelganger now?"

"I don't know. But the cops are here."

Sirens blared outside. Raven peered out the window. A half dozen patrol cars were outside with their sirens blaring and their lights flashing.

"I've got to get out of here."

Raven quickly donned jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers. She strapped on her holster with her automatic in it, pocketed a clip of bullets and put on a leather jacket. She opened her door and peered into the hallway. She heard the cops clumping up the stairs. They were probably coming up the elevator too. She headed towards the roof.

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CHAPTER 7. On the Run

Raven ran for the stairwell. When she heard the cops clumping up from below, without a moment's hesitation, she headed upwards and waited on the next landing. Apparently the cops were taking no chances. Booted footsteps clattered on the steps she had just climbed. She continued going upward, bounding two and three steps at time to increase her lead while the police hesitated at each floor.

When she reached the roof, she peeked out. Since no cop was stationed there, she made a mad dash

for the roof next door. A police helicopter was overhead. The pilot spotted her, turned on its spotlight on her and flew down toward the roof. Moment later, above the noise of the rotating blades, someone yelled through a megaphone, "Stop. This is the Chicago Police. Stop where you are, or we'll be forced to shoot." This was followed by running feet. Raven increased her speed as she sped across the flat roof to the roof of the building next door. The crack of gunfire came from behind her. More shots rang out. One whizzed by close to her head. She felt it brush past her ear and imbed itself into a wooden structure ahead. "Shit," she cried. "They're not fooling around. I must be described as armed and dangerous."

She swung around the structure, putting it between herself and her pursuers. She peered around for an escape route. There was a six-foot gap between the roof she was on and the roof of the next building over. The only way she could make it would be to take a running leap. If she jumped and missed, she would fall ten stories to certain death on the pavement below. She had only a split second to make up her mind whether to surrender to the cops or chance jumping. She knew that if she surrendered, all the evidence for Morgan's murder was against her. The best she could hope for was twenty to life. She needed to find the doppelganger.

She dashed toward the gap as fast as she had ever run before in her life and without looking down did a flying broad jump at the end of the roof. As her heel hit the edge of the building the ancient cement crumbled, and she lost her balance. A moment later she was clinging to the edge of the roof by her fingertips. She tasted fear like bitter metal. *I'm not going to make it*. She imagined what it would be like falling ten stories, tumbling over and over, knowing that moments later she would be smashed like a bug on the concrete below. She glanced down. The abyss seemed to suck her to her doom. Cold sweat popped out on her forehead as she tried to find a foot- or handhold and the strength to pull herself. Finally, she took a deep breath to still her drumming heart and tightened her grip until her wrists hurt. With a supreme effort she managed to swing one arm over the roof edge. At the same time a puff of smoke next to her elbow warned her that the cops were firing from the apartment building she had jumped from. With a lunge she pulled herself over the top, zigzagged across the rooftop and threw herself through a door.

She found herself at the top of a stairwell. Taking two steps at a time, she fled downward until she reached the ground floor, where she fled out a backdoor into an alleyway. Puffing and crumpled over, she thanked the goddess that this was Chicago where back alleys honeycombed the city. Almost every block had a stinking, garbage-strewn, rat-infested alley at the rear of the buildings.

She figured that the cops would have the alleyway guarded, so she crept down the alley looking for a place to hide. Halfway down she spotted a wooden fence with a broken board and crawled through the opening. Behind it was a small shed-like structure where the trash cans were kept. After chasing out a couple of rats, she crawled inside it. It was cramped and smelly, but she was well hidden. All she had to do was wait until morning. By that time, the cops would believe she had escaped their clutches. As she sat crunched up in her hidey hole, shivering with cold and fear, she wondered how in the world was she going to escape from her dilemma. Apparently this was the maelstrom that Magbertius had warned her about.

She yawned. What little sleep she had the last two days had been froth with nightmares. She muttered, "He told me to contact the vampire. That she would help me. I sure hope so. Otherwise I'm screwed." She leaned her head against the side wall of the shed and gave in to sleep.

* * * *

A fierce arctic gale blew across the mountainous jumble of ice and snow that surrounded Raven. Although she was dressed in a parka and several layers of clothing, it sliced through her like a frozen knife blade. Blowing snow prevented her from seeing more than a few feet in any direction. All around

her, the ice pack was creaking and groaning. Although the temperature was at least sixty below zero, the sea ice seemed to be breaking up. She knew she had to reach land soon in this arctic wasteland, or the ice would open under her feet and she would slide into the frozen sea. A few moments afterwards she would be a popsicle

She trudged on through the bitter snow and howling wind, her teeth chattering from the cold. Suddenly, a large shape loomed up ahead of her. Because the blowing snow obscured her vision, she was not sure what it was. A dread went through her. What if it was a fierce hungry polar bear? She halted in her tracks and reached inside her parka for her pistol.

As the thing came nearer, she realized that it was a man. She put away her gun and hurried forward. Perhaps whoever it was would know the way back to shelter. Soon the man stood in front of her. He reached out and put his arms around her, warming her with his body heat. He whispered into her ear. "I'm sorry about the doppelganger, Raven."

It was Peter Magbertius.

"Never mind about that, Peter," Raven replied. "Can you lead us to shelter, out of the snow and cold?"

"The vampire will do that."

"The vampire? Oh, I remember now. I'm in terrible trouble. My doppelganger killed Peter Morgan and the cops think I did it. Besides, they'll find the corpse of John Grebelowski in my apartment. I've got to find that cursed creature."

"She will find you first."

"What will she do? Try to kill me and take my place?"

"Undoubtedly that is her intention. Watch your back, My Darling."

He bent down and kissed her. He began to lick her lips.

* * * *

Raven awoke with a start. It was not Magbertius licking her lips, but a huge ugly rat. She leaped to her feet, banged her head against the top of the shed and sat back down. To her relief, the rat ran off. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand and made a wry face. She shuddered with horror when she thought about what the filthy creature was doing to her.

Light came through the cracks of the structure. "It must be daylight." Cautiously, she opened the top of the little shed and peered out. Since she saw no one, she crawled out and back through the hole in the fence to the alley. She crept along it, staying close to the buildings. When she came to the end, she peered out in both directions. The only sign of the cops was a patrol car stationed in front of her apartment building. She stepped out of the alley and walked at a rapid pace, but not running, in the opposite direction.

She needed a place to hole up until dark. If she intended to meet with Celia, she knew that the vampire would be dead to the world in her coffin until then. As she walked, she kept her eyes peeled for cops and the doppelganger. She knew of a small motel on Diversey near the park. She checked in using a credit card that contained an alias and a false address, bought some magazine and newspapers, and spent the day reading them and watching TV. She read with interest the story about Peter Morgan's

murder. She shook her head and muttered, "My mirror image really did a job on that poor slob." Although in the story, the police alluded to her as a person of interest, including the statement that she was armed and dangerous, they did not mention finding Grebelowski's corpse. Either they were concealing the fact for reasons of their own, or the damn corpse got up and walked away again.

She thought about her doppelganger. As she recalled, she was really was the mirror image of herself. Perhaps that was what could save her if the case got into court. Maybe the doppelganger's fingerprints would be opposite of hers; they could be on opposite hands for example. Raven wondered whether forensics could distinguish a left hand fingerprint from a right hand fingerprint. She did not know the answer to that one. Anyway, she would have to find the doppelganger first before she tried to prove that the creature was the real murderess. There might be other differences that would show who the real killer was, for example, DNA. The news story had said that Morgan had been killed during the sex act. Raven brightened up a little. The future wasn't completely bleak and hopeless.

About four in the afternoon, Raven decided to take a nap. She removed her holster and place her pistol under her pillow. As she undressed down to her undies, she wished she would have had time to pack a few clothes, especially clean underwear. She yawned. *I should do a little shopping before I meet Celia*, was her last thought before she fell asleep.

* * * *

Raven awakened in a pitch black room. She was sure that she heard footsteps. *It's the doppelganger*, she thought, *come to murder me*. She reached under her pillow for the automatic. It was gone, perhaps fallen to the floor while she slept. The squeaking footsteps grew closer. She crawled out on the opposite side of the bed and found her jeans where she had laid them over a chair.

She removed her penlight and shined the beam in the direction of the footsteps. To her utter horror, Peter Morgan stood there. Blood dripped from a ragged wound in his throat down his clothes. His eyes were blank, and his skin was gray. His jaw moved as he tried to speak. Gurgling, as blood spewed from both his mouth and the second new mouth below his chin, he croaked, "Watch your back, Raven."

"How did you become animated? Did someone do to you what was done to John Grebelowski?"

The undead thing did not reply, only repeated, "Watch your back."

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CHAPTER 8. Lenore Raven

Raven awoke with start in the pitch black hotel room. She shivered with the horror of her nightmare about the dead Peter Morgan being there. In the dream her automatic had not been under pillow where she had placed it before she had laid down. To her relief when she felt for it her fingers touched the cold metal of the weapon. It felt good in her hand and restored her confidence. Since it was nighttime, she decided that it was time to get up and look for the vampire. A glance at the radio clock told her it was after eleven. This was later than she had planned on sleeping.

As she reached for the switch for the lamp on the night stand, she heard someone try her door. At first she panicked, until she reasoned that the cops could not have followed her trail to this motel so quickly. At first she figured that it must simply be someone who had forgotten his or her room number. However, it continued. It began to sound like someone was trying to break in. She got out of bed with the gun in

her hand and went to the door. She peeked through the peephole. Working on the lock was her doppelganger.

Raven quietly slipped the chain and unlocked the door. With a jerk, she pulled the door open. Her doppelganger stumbled through the entrance into the room. Raven stuck the pistol into her panties and grabbed her duplicate's arm, twisting it around her back. With her other arm, she put her into a choke hold. With her foot she kicked the door closed.

They wrestled for a few minutes, during which time, the gun fell to the floor. Before the doppelganger could make a grab for it, Raven twisted her arm until she cried out in pain.

"Stop it. That hurts."

"Will you be a good girl and stay still?"

"Yeah, okay."

Raven came walked her over to the chair where her clothes were hung. She had brought along handcuffs for just this occasion. "Reach into my jacket and pull out the cuffs you'll find there." Raven let go of her arm, but kept the choke hold. "Clamp one side on one of your wrists. I don't care which one." She increased the tension on her double's throat. "Good. Now close the other cuff over bed frame under the mattress."

When the doppelganger was chained to the bed, Raven patted her down for concealed weapons. The double giggled and said, "Oh Raven, are we going to make a little lesbian love. I liked that the last time we did it."

"Shut up." Raven found no weapons, only that her double's thin dress was probably her only garment.

She turned on the light and retrieved her pistol. The doppelganger leered at her. "My, you look sexy in only a bra and panties. I'm ready whenever you are." She pulled the straps of her tight garment down and tugged it until her breasts flopped out. "C'mon Raven, pat them again. I enjoyed that."

Raven's eyes narrowed. The woman was annoying her with her flirtation. She pointed the pistol at her head. "Why did you kill Peter Morgan?"

"Because I'm an evil person. I enjoy doing that sort of thing. Are you going to shoot me? You know that it'll do you no good. I'm not a mortal, y'know."

"No. I'm not going to shoot you."

The doppelganger's eyes went wide. "You're not going to perform some sort of spell to send me back to that awful dark place?"

"No. Not that either."

"What then?"

"You'll see."

While Raven dressed, she ignored any attempts by her double to communicate. When she finished, she

got a pen and pad of paper off the desk. She turned to her duplicate. "What do you call yourself?"

"Lenore Raven."

Raven chuckled. "That's good, the reverse of my name. Okay Lenore, write on the first sheet what I dictate."

"What if I don't? Are you going to shoot me? I told you why that won't work."

"No. But apparently you can feel pain." With her open hand, she slapped Lenore hard on her cheek so that it left a red mark.

"Ouch. You fucking bitch. Why did you do that?"

"Because I want you to write what I say on this paper." Raven lit a cigarette. She brought the lit end close to Lenore's face. "If you refuse, I can inflict a lot more pain. I have no sympathy for cold blooded murderers."

Lenore took the pad and pen. "What do you want me to write?"

"I, Lenore Raven, Raven Lenore's identical twin, murdered Peter Morgan with my own hand with no accomplices. I tried to pin this murder on my twin, Raven Lenore, who had nothing to do with the crime."

Raven looked over her shoulder. Lenore, who was left-handed, neatly printed the words in a manner Raven would have herself, except that the letters were slanted in the opposite direction.

"Okay. Sign it."

After Lenore obeyed, Raven took the pad and pen and placed them on the table by the telephone outside of Lenore's reach. She gathered up her belongings and dialed the police. In a disguised voice, she said, "I think I saw the murderess of Peter Morgan go into Motel Seven on Diversey Parkway. She's in Room 104." She turned to her duplicate. " *Ciao*, Lenore."

"Wait. You're not going to leave me here chained to this bed, are you?"

"No need to worry. The cops will be here in a few minutes to rescue you. Gotta go."

Raven left the room and hurried down the hall to an exit. Before leaving the building, she peered around. No one was around. She heard distant sirens. "The cops are on their way."

She walked swiftly west on Diversey to Clark Street and turned northwest. She followed Clark to the entrance of Graceland Cemetery. The cemetery was closed, but the iron fence was an easy climb. Once inside, Raven wondered, *Now, how do I find Celia?* She decided that she would visit the place where she had placed Peter Magbertius ashes. *Perhaps his ghost can tell me where to find Celia.* She shuddered at the thought of confronting the wraith of Magbertius. Nonetheless, she had to do what she had to do.

Cemeteries at night are spooky places. Graceland was especially eerie because of all the large statues, monuments and crypts. As Raven crept down the path toward Dextor Grave's monument, the usual sounds of the never sleeping city could no longer be heard. Only the pitter-patter of her rapidly beating heart like a drumbeat and the hooting of an owl broke the silence of the dead. The statue known as

Eternal Silence or simply Death loomed up before her. In the gloom the ghastly figure of a cloaked and hooded figure peered over its robed arm held to its face. It was like a demon from hell, hidden eyes staring with malevolent menace in Raven's direction.

She shivered and felt lightheaded. It was as though the evil Magbertius' spirit inhabited the statue which would any moment come down from its pedestal to menace her. As she stood mesmerized by the awful thing, a hand touched her shoulder. She leaped away and let out a yelp of pure fright. When she turned, her pistol came into her hand instinctively.

"Unless that gun has silver bullets, it cannot harm me."

Raven holstered the pistol. It was Celia, the vampire, who had laid her hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Celia. You startled me."

"And what are you doing in the cemetery at night, Darling?" Celia asked.

"Looking for you."

Celia grinned, showing her fangs. "Have you changed your mind about being one of my donors?"

"No. Not that. I need your help. A ... friend told me you could help me."

"Help you in what way? Who is this friend?"

Raven sighed. "It's a long story. Can we sit down and talk?"

"For a while. I hope that your story is not too long. I cannot linger. I must find a donor soon, my cravings are strong tonight."

They went to a bench, where Raven told her how she was hired to find the corpse of John Grebelowski, her interviews with Grebelowski's wife, Peter Morgan and Celia herself. She told Celia about the seance and how it had released the doppelganger from wherever it resided. She went on to describe her encounter with the animated corpse of John Grebelowski, and of learning of the murder of Peter Morgan.

Celia interrupted her at this point. "Peter's been murdered? That poor boy. And he wanted to live forever, even if it meant becoming one of us undead. Who killed him?"

"My doppelganger. The police think I did it. However, she wishes to murder me too. She somehow found her way to the motel where I was staying. I overpowered her and cuffed her to the bed. I made her write a confession and called the police."

"So you're out of the woods as far as the cops are concerned?"

"I'm not sure about that. My doppelganger is a demon. Who knows what she's capable of. She might escape easily. Besides the corpse of Grebelowski is in my apartment, no longer animate. I'd have a lot of explaining to the cops about that. Anyway you look at it, I'm in deep shit."

Celia rubbed her chin. "There's something you're not telling me. A missing piece of the puzzle. Why are you coming to me for help? Who sent you?"

"A dead man. He talks to me in my dreams." Raven told her about her relationship with Peter

Magbertius. "In my nightmares, he insisted that you could help me."

"Perhaps I can. There's a place, hard to reach, where something terrible is going on. It may relate to your problems. Also, I know someone who will hide you from the police ... and perhaps from your evil doppelganger. But I cannot take you there tonight. Come back to this spot tomorrow right after sunset."

"But I have no place to stay."

"Come with me. You can hide in the crypt where I have my coffin."

Raven did not look forward to staying in crypt for several hours, and she certainly did not trust the vampire. Nonetheless, she felt she had no choice. She followed her to a tomb. Celia had a key on a chain around her neck which she used to open the brass door. Raven realized that she would be locked inside. The interior smelled musty and putrid. In addition, it was cramped, silent and stifling. Raven fought against claustrophobia and began to hyperventilate.

Celia looked at her. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine. I just need to calm myself a bit. I dislike enclosed places ... and dead things."

"Well, I'm the only dead thing here, and that's only during the day. I must leave now. I will return near dawn."

Celia left the tomb. Raven heard the scraping of the key in the lock. She was alone in the airless crypt in total darkness—and unable to get out. She kept telling herself, *Celia will be back in a few hours. She must return by dawn. But what if she didn't? I'm buried alive in here.* She wondered how long she could stay alive before she suffocated for lack of oxygen. She felt as though she was already running out of air.

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CHAPTER 9. The Burial

Raven went into meditation mode to calm herself down. After a few minutes, she relaxed. Since there was nothing else to do, she rested her head against Celia's sarcophagus and tried to sleep. This was difficult since she worried that Lenore had escaped from the police, that Celia might make her an unwilling donor or not return, and that Magbertius would continue giving her nightmares. These thoughts whirled through her head, which prevented her from nodding off. So she simply sat in the utter darkness feeling entombed.

Just as she began to doze a little, the brass door squealed open and closed again. Raven felt the presence of another person. "Is that you, Celia?"

"Yes, it's me. I must go into my sarcophagus now. I'll see you after sunset."

"Wait. Is the door to this tomb unlocked?"

"No. But I'll give you the key. Lock it up if you leave. I worry about vandals coming in here while I'm helpless."

Celia pressed the key into Raven's hand and said, "And now I lay myself down to sleep." She chuckled.

Raven said, "Goodnight, Celia."

She heard the scraping of stone against stone as Celia slid the carved top of the sarcophagus open and closed it again.

Raven got up and felt around for the lock on the brass door. She inserted the large iron key and opened the door. The sky blazed pink. It felt marvelous to see light again. Raven locked the tomb up, stretched and walked around the cemetery to get the kinks out of her cramped legs. As long as she stayed in Graceland, she felt relatively safe from the cops. It was not likely that they would look for her there.

She sauntered around examining the various tombs, monuments and headstones. By noon, she became hungry and decided to chance going to a restaurant. Across the street from the cemetery, she found a little mom-and-pop sandwich shop. She ordered a Philly cheese sandwich, fries and a Coke.

When she was done, she bought a newspaper. She carried it back into the cemetery, found a bench and read the crime news. She did not find any stories about the murderess of Peter Morgan being arrested, nor was there anything about a corpse being found in her apartment. Either the reporters thought that these items no longer newsworthy, or Lenore had escaped and Grebelowski's corpse had become reanimated. She cursed. Her scheme to have Lenore arrested for her crime probably did not work.

After not having slept all night, she felt logy. Since she did not know what Celia had in mind for that night, she figured that she had better take an afternoon nap. Although she dreaded it, the only shelter she had left was Celia's crypt. She started to walk back towards it, but stopped at the Eternal Silence statue. She gazed up at it and spoke to it as though it embodied Peter Magbertius.

"Peter, am I doing the right thing by trusting Celia?"

Magbertius' voice in her head replied, "I do not know whether trusting the vampire is 'the right thing,' as you put it, but she will show you the way."

"The way to where? Or what?"

There was further reply. Raven glanced away from the statue and noticed a strange bent figure shuffling down one of the paths in an awkward manner. The brim of the man's hat was pulled down over his face, and his head was bent. He carried half wilted flowers that looked as though they had been uprooted from a garden. Something about his awkwardness was extremely odd. On a hunch Raven decided to follow him. He went down the path until he came to a grave site familiar to Raven. It was where John Grebelowski's empty coffin was buried. He knelt down and placed the flowers next to the headstone.

Raven approached and went into the grass a little so that she could see his face. She gasped. It was Grebelowski, but horribly transformed. The skin on his face had changed to an ugly shade of gray-green and had started to rot, so much so that the bone underneath showed through in spots. One eyeball had fallen out and hung loosely on his cheek.

Although she felt like vomiting, she said, "John."

He looked up at her. "What want?" The words were garbled and difficult to understand, as though his tongue had become too rotted for intelligible speech.

"Who brought you back to life?"

"Or-rivia."

"Orivia?"

"No. Or-rivia."

Raven thought for a moment. He probably could not pronounce certain letters. She thought about what sounds would difficult to say if one's tongue was damaged. L might be one of them. "Do you mean Olivia?"

"Yeth."

"Olivia who? What's her last name?"

Grebelowski shrugged. "Thee hath none."

"She has none." So it was Olivia with no last name. There was something familiar about that. Sometime or other Raven had known someone called Olivia, who had no surname, but she could not recall exactly who that was.

"Kirr me," Grebelowski said in a pleading voice.

"Kill you? I wish I knew how."

"Bury me then." The walking corpse pointed at the spot which should have been his grave. "Here."

"I can't do that now. Not in broad daylight. Wait here. I'll come back tonight when the cemetery is closed."

The undead man looked almost happy. He had a faint smile on his twisted lips.

"See you later." As Raven continued to walk towards Celia's resting place, she wondered whether, if she and the vampire buried Grebelowski, he would stay underground. And what should she tell Wilsey, the undertaker, if she ever got out of the mess she was in.

At Celia's mausoleum, Raven looked at the inscription near the door. Now that it was daylight, she could read it plainly. It read, "Here lies Celia VanGrimm Born 1865, Died 1891. So young, Her death so mysterious."

"Mysterious all right. She must've been killed by a vampire."

Raven peered about to make sure no one was around, put Celia's key in the slot and struggled with the heavy brass door, which Celia, with her vampire powers, had whipped open as though it was a plain hollow door. Once inside, she locked it. Again she was in the pitch black. She tried to make herself as comfortable as possible. By this time, she was tired enough to nod off.

* * * *

The dungeon was cold, damp, dirty and rat infested. The stale air contained the stench of excrement,

unwashed bodies and filth. The only light was from an overhead oil lantern. Three walls were of stone block. Iron bars with a gate-like entrance served for a fourth wall. A terror stricken Raven was chained naked to the back wall by manacles on her ankles. Because iron cuffs held her arms above her head, she suffered from cramped limbs.

After a while she heard heels clicking on the stones outside her cell. Her cell door opened. It was Lenore. She had a gym bag with her.

She grinned at Raven. "Well. Now I've got you where I want you. You must pay for your crimes."

"What crimes? I didn't do anything wrong."

"You're responsible for bringing me back to life, aren't you?"

"That was a mistake."

"You're guilty of witchcraft."

"But that's no longer a crime."

"You must confess."

Lenore took out several items from her bag, pliers, thumbscrews, a foot press and pokers. Raven stared at the items in horror. Perspiration dripped from her forehead. She felt ill. Was Lenore going to torture her with those instruments."

"Wh-what do you want to me to confess to?"

"Witchcraft and murder."

"It's true that I'm a witch, a Wiccan, actually."

Lenore smiled slyly and came up so that she was quite close. "I've heard that most Wiccans were lesbians. Are you a lesbian?" She put her hand on Raven's breast and pinched her nipple. "Did you enjoy that?"

"No. I'm not a lesbian!"

"So you say. Yet you and I made love once."

"That was a dream. It was not real."

"Hmm. Perhaps it's only subconsciously that you enjoy having sex with women."

Raven blushed. There was a certain amount of truth to her statements. She recalled admiring women who were beautiful. When she was young, she had crushes on certain women, Morgaine Fabiano for one. Perhaps that was why her relationships with men always ended badly.

Lenore kept kneading Raven's breast and placed her hand on her crotch.

"Stop that."

"Oh c'mon, you know that you're enjoying it." She withdrew her hands from Raven's body. "Now, are you going to confess to the murder of Peter Morgan, or must I use those instruments." She pointed to them.

"You killed him. How did you escape from the police?"

"You forget. I'm not human. You didn't think those cuffs could really hold me, did you? The only thing that the police found was your confession. They may be confused as to why you signed your name backwards though."

Raven hung her head. "So I'm still a suspect."

"Absolutely. Since I'm really your evil side, you're guilty." She grabbed Raven by the shoulders and began to shake her vigorously. "Confess. Admit it."

"No, I'm not guilty. I'm no murderess."

* * * *

Raven opened her eyes, but saw nothing, only darkness. Someone had shaken her awake.

Celia's voice said, "Wake up. You were talking in your sleep."

When Raven realized that it was the vampire, she immediately rose to her feet. "Just a nightmare."

"It sounded as though you were being questioned by the police. You kept saying that you were not guilty, not a murderess."

"I was, but not by the police. But that's neither here nor there. Magbertius said that you would show me the way. I don't really know what he meant though."

"The way underground probably. You could hide there for a while, but I don't understand how that will help you in the long run."

"I don't either, but show me anyway. Before we go though there's something I have to do. Maybe, you could help me."

"What's that?"

Raven told her about the corpse of John Grebelowski and how it wanted to be buried.

"Sure, I'll help you bury the poor zombie."

"We'll need shovels. Do you know where the gravediggers keep them?"

"Yes. In a shed behind the administration building."

* * * *

Raven and Celia broke into the shed which was locked only by a rusty old padlock. Celia gave it yank and the entire pad bar pulled out, screws and all. Raven could not help but admire the strength that the vampire showed. They carried away three shovels.

When they arrived at Grebelowski's grave site, his corpse had already started the job. It was on its knees scooping away dirt with its fingernails. It seemed frantic, throwing the soil behind itself like a dog burying a bone. It ignored their approach.

"John," Raven called. "We've got shovels."

Grebelowski looked up at them. Celia said, "Ugh. He's rotting fast."

"It's the warm weather."

The cadaver stood up and took one of the shovels. With three of them shoveling, in a couple of hours, they reached the coffin. As they stood in the hole, Raven used her shovel to break the seals and open it. It was empty. Grebelowski immediately crawled into it.

Before she closed the coffin lid, Raven said, "Goodnight, John."

Celia said, "May you rest in peace."

The mortal remains of John Grebelowski said, "Goodnight, radyth. Thank you for you herp."

"The pleasure was ours," said Celia and kicked the coffin lid closed. She and Raven climbed out the hole and shoveled dirt back into it.

"Do you think his body will die now?" asked Raven.

Celia shrugged. "That depends on what animated him to begin with."

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CHAPTER 10. Celia VanGrimm

Raven and Celia threw the last two shovelfuls of earth on Grebelowski's grave, smoothed it out and tossed the spades behind a large gravestone. As Raven brushed dirt off of her hands and clothes, her fears returned. She wondered what the hell she was doing in the middle of a cemetery at midnight with a vampire. Nonetheless, her other options were no more pleasant. She could turn herself into the cops, but that could turn out badly if she was convicted of murder. She did not relish dying by lethal injection or spending the rest of her life in prison. She could make a run for it to a foreign country that did not have extradition. For that she would need money, a false passport and a means of getting there. She dared not use either of her credit cards, neither the one with her real name or the one with the name she used to check into the motel. She could try to locate her doppelganger and try to bring her to the police, but she doubted whether that was possible with whatever powers the demon had.

Of course, putting herself into the hands of a vampire was not exactly the most promising option either, especially since she was depending upon the advise of Magbertius' ghost, a man who in life was an evil sorcerer. Who knew what his motives were? In his quest to again walk the earth, he may be putting her in who-knew-what danger. Nonetheless, that was the path she had chosen, perhaps overly influenced by her former lover and master.

She said to Celia, "Can you take me this underground place now?"

"For a price."

Raven shuddered. She knew what that price that would be, not only her precious blood, but her freedom as well. Once she became a donor, she would be in Celia's power. She backed away from the vampire. Perhaps it would be better to take one of her other options.

"Oh c'mon. I'll only drink a pint. You would give that much in a blood drive."

Celia advanced toward Raven with a hungry look.

"But I don't want to be your slave." She backed away again, setting her feet in preparations to make a run for it.

Celia was too quick for her. In a moment she had Raven by the shoulders. "I'll be kind and only ask that you donate no more than a pint or two a month." Her strength was superhuman. Raven knew that she could not escape. From the hungry look in Celia's eyes, she was not taking no for an answer.

Celia held her close so that her breasts were tight against Raven's. Her arms were around her, her thighs hard against her thighs. Other than Raven's fear, it was not unpleasant. She recalled the dream where Lenore accused her of being a closet lesbian, not even admitting her sexual preference to herself. Raven realized that, if not a full-blown lesbian, she might be bisexual, capable of enjoying sex with either gender. She went limp. She thought, *If it's going to happen, I may as well enjoy the experience.*

There was a moment of sharp pain in her neck as though stabbed by twin hypodermic needles. As Celia sucked, Raven became lightheaded and euphoric. The sensation was similar to the high after taking a powerful drug or the ecstasy at the moment of sexual climax. Raven's entire body went into a spasm of sensation. Her heart pumped hard as though she were running a race. Her fear vanished. She began to desire what was being done to her.

The blood drinking last only a few moments. When Celia pulled out her fangs, she said, "That'll be enough for now."

"No. Don't stop," Raven cried.

"I must. Otherwise you would die and become what I am. You don't want that, do you?"

"No." Raven's knees gave way. She was weak and disoriented. If Celia had not been holding her up, she would have collapsed.

Celia led her to a bench and carefully sat her down. "You'll need to rest for a while."

"I think you took more than a pint."

"Perhaps a quart. You'll survive."

"I'm hungry." Raven suddenly had a ravishing appetite.

"That's normal. Your body need to replenish the lost blood. We'll find an all-night diner and get you something to eat. As I recall, there's one near where we're going."

Raven shook her head in an attempt to clear it. She had the same sensation as she had when she was under Magbertius' spell, that she wished only to obey Celia's commands. She asked, "Where *are* we going?"

"To the underground. That was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes, of course. I'm a little woozy. I feel drunk."

Raven rested for about a half hour. During this time, they did not converse. Finally, Celia said, "Feeling better?"

"Still pretty weak."

"I'll help you walk. We need to get going."

With Celia's holding Raven steady by the arm, they went to the entrance of the cemetery. Celia grasped Raven by the armpits, hunched down and leaped over the six-foot gate. They crossed the street to the bus stop. They were the only passengers on the Clark Street bus. They transferred a couple of times, exiting a third bus at North Avenue and Clybourne. This was not a good part of town. An atmosphere of hopelessness and despair pervaded the area. That late at night, only the evil and destitute were on the streets; the homeless, junkies, muggers and worn-out prostitutes. And few of those. Dirty scraps of paper flew around empty streets.

Celia led Raven to an all night diner. The place was not too clean, and the lone waitress sullen. After two double-cheeseburgers, fries and burnt coffee, Raven felt more herself. Much of the weakness was gone. Celia ordered coffee too, but did not touch it. She contemplated Raven as she ate, as one would a new and delightful toy.

When Raven sipped the last of her coffee, she said, "I feel a lot better now. I think I can walk without help. So, what's next on the agenda, Boss?"

"Boss? I like that. Most of my donors call me mistress. Now we enter The Underground. There are dangers. At some time while we're down there, I'll need to leave you alone to return to my sarcophagus. Are you ready?"

Raven patted her automatic under her jacket. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Raven paid the bill, and they crossed the street to the subway station. "We taking the subway downtown?"

"Not exactly. You'll have to pay our fares though."

Raven used her transit card to pass them through the turnstile. Their footsteps echoed as they descended into the filthy subway station to the empty tomblike platform lit only by flickering fluorescence. Especially gruesome graffiti decorated the walls, symbols of death and Satan, pentagrams, skulls, ravens, corpses, prayers to the evil one. One dark splotch could've been blood. Raven shuddered, wondering what some Satanic cult did down there.

Raven headed for a bench to await the next train. Celia held her back. "We're not taking the subway."

"So, what are we doing here?"

Celia pointed to a little door at the end of the platform.

"What's that? A broom closet?"

"No. It's the entrance to a place you probably didn't know existed. I call it Underground Chicago."

As they approached the door, Celia took out a little key and opened it. Hanging on the wall were battery-operated lanterns. She took two, handed one to Raven and closed the door behind them. "This way," she said.

They wandered down a narrow tunnel filled with electrical cables, telephone wires and gas and water pipes strung along cracked and crumbling cement walls. Great layers of dust covered the utility equipment, large cobwebs hung from the ceiling, and there was a stench of mold and decay. Raven leaped back suddenly, startled by a great hairy spider that appeared suddenly hanging from a thread. in front of her face.

As they walked, she peered around. "So this is where all the pipes and cables and stuff to run the city are. But, what are we doing down here?"

"For one thing, we're finding you a comfortable place to hide from the police. Secondly, I want you to meet a friend of mine who may help you with your doppelganger problem. He told me about some strange things going on deep in the earth. Maybe they have something to do with the animation of the corpse we buried."

"I see. And this person lives down here. Why?"

"You'll see."

As they walked, Raven noticed that the tunnel sloped downward. Water ran down the walls to puddle on the floor. The musty odor was stronger than ever. Soon they were wading through an ankle-deep stream. The ceiling dripped so much that it was like walking through a drizzly rain.

"Where's the water coming from?"

"The Chicago River. We're under it heading south."

"Goddess. The ceiling won't cave in will it?" Raven imagined tons of water crashing down on her.

Celia shrugged. "It hasn't so far. But, who knows? It may some day. These tunnels are not well maintained."

This did not comfort Raven, and she picked up her pace. Soon the mist diminished somewhat, although the walls remained damp. Raven hoped that they were no longer under the river. The stench grew stronger. It no longer smelled like mold but more like excrement.

"What's that awful odor?"

Celia pointed to the ceiling. "Bat shit. Look."

Raven gazed upward and flinched with horror. The ceiling was covered with hundreds of bats hanging upside down. Every once in a while one would open its wings and fly around. One in particular, dove at Raven, who screeched, and veered away at the last moment. "Hecate have mercy. I hate bats. Is it true that you can turn yourself into one?"

Celia chuckled. "Complete nonsense. I think that legend came about because of the existence of vampire bats, who also suck blood. And that was the reason they were so named."

"How about wolves?"

"Again, complete nonsense, as much as what is written in fiction regarding us. For example, since we have material bodies, this business of having no reflection in mirrors or no shadow is ridiculous. Nor can we turn ourselves into smoke or mist. Although we have secret ways of getting into locked rooms. But how we do it is a secret we vampires keep to ourselves."

"How about the various ways that vampires can be killed? Silver bullets, stakes through heart, direct sunlight?"

"I rather not discuss that, except the last. We have supersensitive skin and eyes. However, with the proper clothing and sunglasses, we can walk around during the day. Most of us prefer not to. Also, just as you need a certain amount of sleep, we need a certain amount of dead time. We sleep in coffins and sarcophaguses more as matter of convenience since we are truly dead to the world at the time."

After they hiked for a couple of more hours, they came to a metal cover like a sewer cover but larger. Celia moved it out of the way. As they held their lanterns over the cavity below it, Raven saw that it was a metal ladder leading down in nothingness.

Celia said, "We're going down there. You first."

Raven obeyed, and the vampire followed, sliding the cover back in place.

"Where does this go?"

"Another world."

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CHAPTER 11. The Beast

Descending the ladder was treacherous. The rungs were narrow and slippery. When Raven peered down, she saw only many, many rungs that diminished to a infinity with a tiny black hole in the middle, as though they led to a bottomless pit.

"How far down does this go?"

"About hundred feet underground."

"But I thought Chicago was built on a swamp. This is solid rock."

"An old Indian legend passed on by the tribes that once lived in the Chicago area tells of a single stone of an unknown size that fell from the sky and was buried in the ground. Just wait, there are more wonders to come."

As they trekked further downward, Raven felt dizzy. After a long time they reached the bottom where there was small opening opposite of the ladder. They crawled through to an enormous cavern. A wide stream ran along one side. The ceiling was ten or twelve feet above their head and filled with stalactites of every size and shape. As they followed the twisted path that ran along the stream, they had to climb around enormous stalagmites and pillars.

"Watch out for the alligators," Celia said at one point where the path had become so narrow they had to wade through the edge of the stream.

"Alligators? You're kidding."

"No. People buy them for pets. The alligators crawl into their toilets and make their way down here through the sewer system."

To prove her point, what Raven thought was a log began to glide toward them. She and Celia quickly climbed up the sloping side of a jumble of rocks. Once they were up a ways, Raven held her lantern. Sure enough, the alligator had followed them into the shallow part of the stream and gazed up at them. When it opened its jaws to yawn, she saw that it had many dagger like teeth. An unfortunate rat tried to scurry by, but the alligator snatched it up and swallowed it.

For a while they crawled and climbed on the hill of jumbled rock until the alligator was well behind them. They returned to the path which became narrower and narrower. After they squeezed through what was barely a slit, they came upon an amazing sight. It was another cave room, but not as large as the one at the bottom of the ladder. This one was filled with glistening crystals, some as large as person's head and every color of the rainbow.

"Beautiful," Raven cried.

"Yes. Sometimes I come down here just to enjoy their beauty."

Soon they left the crystal cave behind and strolled through several more caverns of different shapes and sizes. Finally they came to a manmade wooden door embedded in a flat rock wall. Celia knocked a signal, three short raps followed by two harder raps.

After a while, the door creaked open a crack through which Raven saw only eyes, glowing large and luminous. In a gruff voice the person behind the door said, "Celia. It's good to see you again. But who's with you?"

"A friend. She's in trouble and needs your help."

"I see. You and she may enter."

He opened the door wider. Nonetheless, Raven still could not see his features. The cowl of the long robe he wore was pulled forward to deliberately obscure his face.

Celia said, "Raven Lenore, I want you to meet Henry Bagyar."

As they shook hands, Raven noticed that the backs of them were covered with fur-like hair and his nails were long, dark and pointed, like an animal's.

There host ushered them into a well-furnished cozy room, except that an animal odor, similar to that left by a wet dog, lingered. Raven looked for signs of a pet and noticed strands of long hair on the furniture.

Bagyar shuffled along in a bent posture that made Raven believe that he must be crippled, perhaps by some accident that also disfigured his face. She peered around. The rock walls were covered with tapestries that depicted scenes from the middle ages. Comfortable chairs and sofas were spread around. Lighting was from oil lamps and candles. A fireplace blazed cheerfully. One whole wall was filled with books.

"Please be seated," their host said. "I will bring bread and coffee."

He went into an adjoining room. After a few moments, he returned with a tray laden with a coffee pot, cups, spoons, butter knives, sliced hard crusted bread on a platter, butter, sugar and a cream server. He poured coffee for Raven and himself and handed her the cup. She added sugar and stirred. Celia, of course, had nothing.

"Please try the French bread. It's quite good."

Raven's hunger had returned, so she took Bagyar up on his invitation, buttering it well.

Celia said, "Henry Darling, Raven is in a lot of trouble. She will need to stay with you for a few days, maybe even longer. Will that be a problem?"

Bagyar growled—at least it sounded like an animal growl to Raven. "If she can stand me."

"Oh, Raven is a sympathetic person. You two should get along famously. She's a private investigator and a psychic—and a witch. Perhaps she can help you with your little mystery."

"Do you think so?"

"Absolutely. I've asked around in my circle friends. People who know of her tell me that she's quite good, both as an investigator and as a psychic." She glanced at her watch. "I must leave. It's near sunrise, and it's a long way back to my daytime resting place."

Raven looked up from her bread. "I'm to stay here with him, Boss?"

"Tell him all about your problems, and he'll tell you about a mystery brewing here in the underground. You should be quite interested. Henry will take good care of you. I'll return in a few nights. Ciao, Raven. So long, Henry."

"Ciao."

"Bye."

Celia turned and was out the door so quickly that she seemed to simply vanish. Raven reasoned that was how vampires got their reputation for being able to appear and disappear at will. It was simply that they moved so swiftly.

"Are you a donor?" Bagyar asked.

"I'm afraid so. It was the only way I could get her to bring me here."

"And why did you want to come here?"

Raven sighed. "It's a long story."

"I'd like to hear it. But before you start, I must show you something disgusting. Perhaps, once you see what I am, you'll want to leave."

"Believe me, I've seen many..."

Before she could finish, he pushed back his cowl, revealing his entire head. Raven's mouth dropped open in astonishment. She now knew why Celia had called him "The Beast." He had an animal head, sort of a cross between a wolf and warthog.

"Now you see why I live down here by myself and discourage visitors. I have few friends. Celia is one because of her affliction that also makes her an outcast of society."

"I understand. Were you born that way?"

Bagyar growled low. "Yes. My mother was werewolf, and my father was killed by her when she went through the change as they were making love."

"Are you a werebeast then?"

"No. I cannot change either to fully a man, nor fully to a beast. I simply am what I am. I have a half animal, half man nature. My animal temperament comes out at the oddest times. You heard me growl just now. That simply came out. I did not will myself to growl. Do you still wish to stay?"

"Sure. Uh ... that is, if I'm not in danger from you. Your animal nature won't suddenly take over and attack me will it?"

Bagyar shrugged. "It never has against anyone I liked. And I like you. It comes out mainly when I'm angry. When I was a child, I spent years in a cage after I attacked another child. I found a way to escape and worked in a carnival freak show for many years. But as I matured, I hated being stared at and poked fun at. One year when the carnival came to Chicago, I discovered these caves and made myself a home here."

"But, how do you live?"

"There's treasure in these caves, gold, jewels, other precious metals. I give these things to my friends who convert them to cash and buy what I need. My needs are simple. I have no TV, no video games, no computer, no fancy clothes. I live simply."

"What do you do for amusement?" Raven was becoming quite used to his features, which were handsome if she thought of him as an animal. His body was strong and well-toned. She guessed that it was covered with fur, but she had known some men like that, with hair covering their backs, chests and legs thickly.

"I write poetry, and a bit of fiction. Some of my poetry has found its way into popular music. My writing is another source of income for me."

"Don't you get lonely?"

"Of course. But it's better to be lonely than to have someone tear your heart out. Am I right?"

"I'm not sure. I've had a few love affairs that ended badly. While I was in love, it was wonderful. Afterwards I thought I would die for a while. But soon I was over the person, perhaps gone on to someone else. I don't regret any of those affairs. I'm a person who lives for the day, devil take tomorrow."

Bagyar chuckled. "And that's why you're here now. Your living one day at a time has gotten you into a terrible jam."

"Perhaps. Or maybe it was because I trusted someone who I should not have. On the other hand, it may simply be my Karma to always be in trouble."

"So you believe in Karma too. That we are fated to be what we are and seldom have much control over what happens to us."

"I wouldn't exactly say that. Christians have a saying, 'God helps those who help themselves.' In most cases that rule applies."

Bagyar rubbed his bearded chin. "Celia said that you had a story to tell me. We have nothing but time down here. Please relate how you came to be in such terrible trouble that you need to hide under the ground."

"Where to start? I guess it all began really when I took on a case to help out an old friend of mine who was in the FBI."

"The FBI. It's already getting interesting."

"A dealer in antiquities was tortured and murdered in a brutal manner. The perpetrator was after...."

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CHAPTER 12. Raven Tells Her Story

"...The perpetrator was after a certain antique bottle. What was locked in that bottle was the spirit of Peter Magbertius, an eighteenth century sorcerer who was executed for witchcraft in 1727. Using his powers he cast a spell on me that caused me to go back in time to the year 1737..."

"Whoa. I know that vampires and werewolves exist from personal experience. I've also encountered ghosts. I even buy that this sorcerer's spirit was stored in a bottle, and he could cast a spell on you. But time travel to the past?"

"I didn't think that it was possible myself until I went through the time door. Don't worry, my story gets even more fantastic. You may believe me or not. That's up to you. But it all happened exactly as I'm

telling it to you. Or maybe I should just shut up."

Bagyar lowered his shaggy head in contrition. "I'm sorry. It was rude of me to imply that you were lying. I exist as half man, half animal. I have seen and heard many strange things, so why not time travel? Please go on."

"You're forgiven. Actually your interruption reminded me that I left out the most important thing. Before I went back in time, Peter's ghost created my doppelganger, my duplicate except that her personality was that of an evil murderess. She has caused me much trouble. For example, she seduced the man who was my lover at the time."

"Why did this Peter's ghost create her?"

"To extort me into going through the time door."

"So it was a certain door that led to the eighteenth century?"

"It's in an old mansion that Peter had built. He promised to get rid of the doppelganger if I went through that door. And so he did. I thought she was gone forever, but recently she returned. I don't know whether Peter had anything to do with her return or not. But she comes into the picture later in my story. When I went to the past, Cassandra, Peter's wife, and I dug up his body, attached his head to it, uncorked the bottle with his spirit and performed an incantation that brought him back to life."

Bagyar rubbed his beard again. "So you brought this Peter back to life after he had been dead ten years. Interesting. Was he truly alive, or one of the undead like a vampire or a zombie?"

"I'm not sure. He seemed to be every respect an actual living man." She blushed. "I became his mistress."

Bagyar's eyebrows went up and his dog-like lips formed into an amused smile, but he did not express verbally what he was thinking.

"Cassandra, of course, was jealous and was going to kill Peter and me. But a man from this time came through the time door and into my room. Thinking that he was Peter, she stabbed him to death. Afterwards Peter locked her into the tower room of the mansion. Peter and I went through the time door to return to the twenty-first century. But Peter, not being familiar with our technology, electrocuted himself on a toaster. Once he was dead, I realized that I did not really love him, that he had me under a spell."

"How ironic that his second death should occur in such a mundane fashion."

"Yes. Maybe he was never supposed to be alive in this time. You mentioned Karma before. Perhaps the fates decreed that he should die in that manner for his audacity in overcoming the time barrier. Anyway, to ensure that he would never rise again. I cremated him and spread his ashes below the statue called Eternal Silence in Graceland Cemetery. Do you know it?"

"I know it well. I sometimes go to Graceland at night to meditate and enjoy the statuary and other art. That's where I first met Celia."

"Yeah. That's her hangout. Well, despite the fact that Peter's body no longer exists, he sends me nightmares. He still has an influence over me, which gets stronger with each nightmare. I think he has a

plan to return to life again, and somehow I'm involved."

"I wonder if that has something to do with my little mystery that Celia wants me to tell you about."

"What's the mystery?" Raven leaned forward. She had a strong psychic intuition that this was the reason she was there.

Bagyar raised his paw like hand. "Later. I will tell you all about it after you finish your own story."

Disappointed, Raven sat back in the chair. "About a week ago, a funeral director came to me to find out what happened to a corpse that was missing from the mortuary. I interviewed a few people without finding out very much. One of the people was Peter Morgan, a sort of strange young man, who claimed that Grebelowski, the missing corpse, was alive."

Bagyar leaned forward with interest.

"This Morgan was a donor of Celia's. That is how I met her. In my dreams, Peter Magbertius told me to contact her if I got into trouble. Anyway, Morgan told me he had seen Grebelowski around Buckingham Fountain. So I hung around there all day a couple of days ago. Sure enough, I encountered Grebelowski, who was a zombie. At the time though, I thought he was simply ill. So I brought him to my apartment.

"Meanwhile, unknown to me, my doppelganger had returned from wherever Peter had sent her and had killed Peter Morgan. Since my fingerprints were all over his apartment, the cops were sure to pin his murder on me. I found out that I was a wanted woman from watching the news on TV. While I was watching this, the cops were pulling up to my apartment building. So I hightailed it out of there. I escaped their clutches by hiding in a trash shed. Afterwards, I rented a motel room under an assumed name.

"Nonetheless, my doppelganger somehow knew where I was. She came to gloat or to kill me too, I guess. But I turned the tables, and handcuffed her to the bed, made her sign a confession and called the police. But, I don't think my trick worked. There was nothing on the TV or the newspaper about Morgan's murderer being arrested. Lenore, as my doppelganger calls herself, must've gotten away. Then I contacted Celia, who brought me here."

Bagyar eyed her suspiciously. "That was some fantastic story. Why should I believe any of it? For all I know, there is no doppelganger, and you murdered this Morgan person yourself."

Raven shrugged. "I know it sounds like some kind of crazy fantasy, but it's all true. Nonetheless, I have no way to convince you of the truth of it. Do you want me to leave? You don't want to harbor a murderess."

She started to rise.

Bagyar motioned for her to sit back down. "Actually, I do believe your story. For one reason. And that has to do with the walking corpse you mentioned."

"Grebelowski? Have you seen him?"

"I don't know if it was the one you talked about, but I have seen zombies. Down here and at Graceland. That's the mystery that Celia wanted you to know about. Something strange is going on in the tunnels under the city."

"Exactly where did you see these walking dead?"

"In another part of the tunnels north of here. I will take you there."

"I'm ready whenever you are."

"Not now. We've been talking for a half the day. I can see that you are exhausted. How long has been since you've gotten any sleep?"

Raven furrowed her brow in thought. "Just under twenty-four hours."

"I'm tired too. And hungry. I'll get us something to eat. Afterwards we will sleep. Then I will take you the place where I saw animated corpses. How do you like your steaks?"

"Medium rare."

He went into the next room, which Raven figured was his kitchen. After a while, she smelled cooking. She licked her lips. She was hungry, not having eaten anything since her and Celia's visit to the diner except a slice of Bagyar's bread.

A half an hour later, while Raven relaxed into a half-asleep state, Bagyar came out with two platters. On the one he handed to Raven was a large sirloin cooked exactly as she liked it and a pile of French fries. On his was two more steaks, but uncooked. After setting these down on the coffee table, he went back to the kitchen and brought out salt, pepper, steak sauce, ketchup and eating utensils. As Raven delicately cut her steak into bite-sized pieces, Bagyar picked up one of the chunks of raw meat, and began to rip it apart with his teeth, swallowing great chunks at a time. As he devoured his meal, he let out low growls.

Raven was too hungry to allow his uncouth table manners bother her. She simply looked away as she ate her fries and sirloin, which were delicious.

When they finished eating, Raven asked, "Since you seem to enjoy your food raw, where did you learn to cook? The steak and fries were delicious."

Bagyar grinned at the compliment. "From my mother when she was alive. She made me eat cooked food, but I never liked it very much. Well, now that are stomachs are full..." He emphasized this by letting out a loud belch. "...we must sleep, for the journey I am taking you on is long and treacherous. You will need your wits about you."

He got up and opened the sofa into a bed. It was already made, lacking only pillows. He went to a closet and pulled out two large feather filled pillows, which he threw on the sofa bed.

"Your bed, madam."

"And where do you sleep?"

He chuckled in that barking way of his. "Not on bed certainly. The place where I sleep is in the other room. Goodnight, Raven."

"Goodnight, Henry."

Before leaving he blew out all the candles except one on a night stand by the sofa bed. He turned down

all the lanterns except one that he took with him when he went into the other room. He closed the door behind him. Raven removed her boots. She hated sleeping in her clothes, but she felt that she had better under the circumstances. After snuffing the candle, she turned back the blankets and slipped beneath the covers.

Since she did not entirely trust Bagyar, she lay in the dark a long while wondering whether his wild animal nature would get the best of him, and he would return to ravage her. In her mind's eye, she could see him entering the room, the white of his large eyes coming closer. When he was next to the bed, he would rip away the sheet, blankets and finally her clothing, leap upon her and with an enormous hairy member take her brutally. Then she giggled at her own thoughts. *You shameless slut*, she told herself. *You're getting turned on by The Beast*

After a few minutes, she heard raucous snoring coming from the next room. Apparently, Bagyar was sound asleep and had no intention of raping her. Soon she, herself, had gone to the Land of Nod.

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CHAPTER 13. The Trial

Raven was dragged into the courtroom in chains. Her uniformed guards sat her at the defendant's table. A few minutes later, the attorneys entered. Apparently Celia, the vampire, was to be her lawyer, for she took a seat next to Raven. The prosecutor was Raven's doppelganger, Lenore Raven. The sergeant-at-arms called out, "All rise," and the judge entered. Peter Magbertius dressed in a long robe entered and sat behind the bench. There was no jury.

Raven whispered to Celia, "This is crazy. The actual murderer is the prosecuting attorney."

"Don't worry. Her case is weak."

The judge called for the attorneys to present their opening remarks.

Lenore stood up and said, "The prosecution will show without a shadow of a doubt that Raven Lenore brutally murdered Peter Morgan and John Grebelowski." She went on about Raven's fingerprints being all over the apartment and the murder weapon. She talked about a surveillance tape taken from a camera in the lobby of Morgan's apartment.

When it was Celia's turn, she said, "I will prove that it was not my client who killed Peter Morgan, but the prosecuting attorney herself. As for John Grebelowski, this man died of natural causes long before my client even knew of his existence."

Lenore called the first witness, a detective on the Chicago police force. He testified that during the investigation of Peter Morgan's murder, Raven's fingerprints were found on the murder weapon. Lenore entered a bloody dagger into evidence. She ran the surveillance tape, which showed someone who could have been either Raven or Lenore entering Morgan's building twenty minutes before the murder was committed and leaving immediately afterwards.

On cross examination, Celia asked, "Were the fingerprints on the murder weapon from a left-handed or a right-handed person?"

"Left handed, definitely. Our forensics also showed that from the angle of the wound, it was probably made by a left-handed person wielding the dagger."

"Did you know my client was right handed?"

"She could have used her left hand to commit the murder."

"I suppose so, but I just noticed that the prosecutor is taking notes. She's writing with her left hand."

"Is that a question?" Magbertius asked in an annoyed tone from the bench.

"No. I'm finished with this witness."

Another detective testified that when they went to arrest Raven, she slipped through their cordon. He said that in his experience criminals who try to get away are usually guilty. Celia objected to this statement, and it was stricken from the record. The detective said that they had found John Grebelowski's corpse in Raven's apartment.

On cross, Celia asked, "Where is Grebelowski's corpse now?"

The detective tugged at his collar. "It disappeared. Someone snatched it."

"Are you sure it didn't just walk away?"

This got a chuckle from the audience and Lenore.

The prosecutor brought in witnesses who testified to seeing Raven near the scene of the crime around the time of the murder. To each of these, Celia asked whether they could tell the difference between Raven and Lenore. They became confused then, moving their heads back and forth to view the defendant and the prosecutor.

Another cop testified that they had got an anonymous tip that Raven was hiding out in a certain motel. When they arrived, she was gone, but they found a signed confession. The prosecutor entered the confession into evidence.

Celia said to the cop, "Why is this signature written Lenore Raven rather than Raven Lenore?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Maybe that's the way she signs her name, last first and first last."

"Was it written by a left- or right-handed person?"

"Left."

After this witness, both the prosecution and the defense rested. In her closing statement, Celia said, "There is plenty of reasonable doubt in this case. My client and the prosecutor are identical in every way. Either one could've committed the murder. In fact, it is Lenore Raven who is left-handed."

When the summations were completed, Peter Magbertius said, "I'm ready to render my verdict." He appeared very stern. "Will the defendant please rise."

Raven and Celia stood. Magbertius said, "The verdict of this court is guilty. You are sentenced to be my

slave forever."

Celia said, "I object. She's mine."

Raven cried, "But your honor, I'm innocent." She pointed at the prosecutor. "She did it. She did it."

* * * *

"Wake up, Raven. Wake up."

Raven opened her eyes to see a ferocious animal staring down at her. She practically jumped out of her skin. Then she recalled where she was, rubbed her eyes and stretched. "What time is it?"

"I really don't know. I don't own any clocks or watches. Here in the underground, it's always night. Time passes at my pace not some clock's. You were talking in your sleep. Yelling, in fact."

"Just another one of my nightmares. Are you going to take me to see these walking dead people now."

"First we'll have some breakfast. It's a long walk. And when we get there, you may be disappointed. They aren't always there."

"That's okay. Even if they aren't, perhaps we can figure out where they came from. And breakfast sounds good."

"Do you like flapjacks?"

"Love them."

"Coffee?"

"Absolutely. Can I help you with anything?"

"Not really. But you may keep me company in the kitchen while I cook."

"Love to." She followed Bagyar into the other room. She was curious as to what it was like in there.

It was simply a small kitchen with half-pint appliances, such as you might find in a one-room apartment. It contained a two-burner electric stove, a small microwave, a small refrigerator and a tiny sink. Raven took a seat on a stool in front of the counter while Bagyar prepared breakfast. The cavern walls were plain rock, not decorated in any way. She glanced around for a cot. There was none, simply old blankets bunched up in a corner. It was full of fur strands.

She pointed. "Is that where you sleep?"

"Yes." He took the ingredients he needed to make pancakes from the lone cabinet and the refrigerator. From under the sink he withdrew a frying pan, which he squirted with a spray cooking oil.

"Aren't you uncomfortable on the hard floor?"

"I'm used to it."

"Uh ... say Henry, where your bathroom? I've got to pee."

He seemed embarrassed. "It's not much. Through that curtain."

A drape was hung on one wall. Raven got up and pushed it to one side. The stench almost bowled her over. The cloth had covered a small cavity in the rock, just wide enough for one person to enter it. There was a hole in the floor, a mere pit with excrement and water at the bottom of it. A roll of toilet paper hung on one wall. Yellow stains were all over the floor and the bottom of the walls. A bag of lime sagged in one corner. Raven made a face. Nonetheless, she shut the curtain, pulled down her jeans and panties and squatted over the hole. She had gone in worse places she supposed, but couldn't recall when.

When she came out, she went to the sink and washed her hands. She hoped that Bagyar did the same before he started cooking. After the toilet facilities, she did not know whether she still had an appetite. However, when she smelled the pancakes cooking, it returned.

As they ate, Raven asked, "Where does your electricity and water come from?"

A guilty look came over Bagyar's face. "I steal it. I tap into the city water lines and Commonwealth Edison's power lines. No one notices the little I use."

While the beast man sat across from her, Raven studied his face, it was handsome in a way, with those large luminous brown eyes and long lashes. She imagined what he would look like if his snout did not protrude, he had a normal nose instead of that black nub and he did not have those tusks. The picture was of a rather good-looking man with a usual expression that was. kindly and sympathetic.

He gulped down the dregs of his coffee and said, "Almost done?"

"Sure. Are we leaving?"

"If you're ready."

He picked up a backpack he had stuffed with supplies and slipped into its harness. He led the way back to the long ladder attached to the rock wall. After they passed through the hole at the end, they turned north into one of the tunnels that carried Chicago's underground cables and pipes. They followed this for a long way until they came to another covered hole in the floor. Bagyar opened his backpack and removed two filter masks for working in a polluted atmosphere. He handed one to Raven and covered his snout with the other. Raven followed his lead and placed hers over her nose and mouth.

Bagyar removed the manhole cover. A stench like the one his bathroom came from it. A ladder led into the darkness below.

"Where does this lead?" Raven asked.

"Into the sewer system."

"Is it the only way to get where we're going?" The very idea of going into the filth below was making her ill. She wondered whether she would be able to hold her breakfast once they were actually in the muck below.

"I'm afraid so. Come. Think pleasant thoughts." He climbed down the ladder. Raven followed. It was a long way down, over three hundred feet.

At the bottom, the murky water was ankle deep with offal and other awful things floating in it. The stench was unbelievable. Raven managed to keep from vomiting by sheer strength of will. As they trekked through the muck, however, she became acclimated and stood the smell better. She felt so filthy it was unbelievable. Not only from the sewerage around her feet and ankles, but also by the fact that she had not showered or changed her underwear for two days.

To add to her misery, the heat and humidity began to rise as the tunnel sloped downward. Her clothes clung to her from the sweat that ran down her forehead, back, armpits and between her breasts. The water rose to their knees and then to their thighs.

"How much deeper will the water get?"

"Unless we have a rainstorm, this is about its limit. The storm sewers drain into here as well as the sewer pipes. Everything ends up in a treatment plant. During bad weather, however, these tunnels are filled."

Because of the high water, the going was slow. To Raven it seemed that the tunnel would never end. As she peered ahead, she saw something large floating toward them. "That's not an alligator I hope?"

"No. Whatever it is, it's not alive."

As they came abreast of the floating object, Raven gasped in horror. It was a rotting corpse. "Hecate. How did that get down here?"

"That's the mystery. Look ahead. There are more."

Raven held up her lantern. The brackish water ahead was filled with floating bodies.

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CHAPTER 14. Corpses Galore

As the corpses floated past her, Raven examined them. "Most of these look fairly fresh. In fact they appear to be embalmed. But none of them are animated. It's as if some crooked mortician was dumping the remains in the sewer system and reselling their coffins."

"That's a possibility, but I doubt it. Something else is going on. We haven't reached the place where I saw a zombie yet."

They trudged on through the filthy stream. At a certain point, Bagyar held up his lantern. On the wall below a manhole were markings that indicated their location. "This is where we exit the sewer system," Bagyar said.

"Thank Hecate." Raven read the sign aloud, "Clark and Irving. Hey, this is right near Graceland."

"Yes. We'll be entering a tunnel that goes under the cemetery."

They climbed the ladder and went up through the manhole into a tunnel that consisted of dirt walls shored up by half-rotted timbers. Raven said, "This couldn't have been built by the city."

"No. It dates back to the nineteen twenties. Very few people know of its existence. I've been told that it was built by bootleggers during prohibition. But my source is unreliable." Bagyar shrugged. "Who knows for sure. However, someone is using it now besides us. Look." He pointed at footprints in the muddy floor.

"They're recent." Raven took out her automatic and checked the clip. "Whoever they belong to may not be friendly."

They trudged onward, more cautiously. After a while, they heard footsteps in front of them. Raven took her Berretta from her holster and unlatched the safety. She and Bagyar placed their lanterns on the ground and backed into the shadows where they could spot someone coming but were outside the area lighted by the lanterns.

The first person to come into view was a woman dressed in what appeared to be rags. She had a strange walk, barely lifting her feet off the ground, simply dragging them along. Raven recalled that the corpse of Grebelowski had walked in a similar manner. As the woman came into the area lit by the lanterns, Raven saw that her face had a gray ravaged appearance. She whispered to Bagyar, "Another animated corpse. I wonder where she's going."

Bagyar said, "Or more to the point, where did she come from."

The zombie staggered past the lanterns without any indication that she noticed them. She was followed by another corpse, an older male with a bald pate. Behind them were two more. None of the zombies paid any attention to Raven and Bagyar or the lanterns. As they shuffled on, they seemed to weaken and stumbled often. They headed toward the spot where the manhole led into the sewer system.

"They looked as though they were on their last legs," Raven remarked.

"Maybe they were. Those corpses we saw in the sewer may have walked there themselves and then collapsed."

"You're probably right. Let's keep going. Do you know where this tunnel leads?"

"I haven't a clue. This is about as far down it that I've traveled."

As the tunnel gradually sloped upward, the earth around them seemed looser or more moist. The idea came into Raven's head that if they were still under Graceland, they would soon be about the level where the bodies were buried. She shuddered and thought, *This whole trip has been creepy and keeps getting creepier.*

Further along, coffins poked through the earthen walls. Raven avoided touching them by making a wide berth. "We're in Graceland, at the level the bodies are buried." Even the idea was horrific. She shivered.

For comfort she grasped Bagyar's paw like hand. It was bad enough being in a graveyard, but being under the earth with the corpses was downright awful. Because of her innate psychic ability, the recent dead spoke to her. Their whispering voices were in her head. One voice came through louder and clearer than the others. It was Peter Magbertius. He said, "Have courage, My Darling Raven. We're nearing our goal."

"...our goal." Raven did not like the sound of that. What was Magbertius' motive in all this?

"What's the matter, Raven?" asked Bagyar. He looked at her with concern.

"It's the dead. They're talking to me. This happens to me sometimes when I go near places where they dwell, like grave..." She did not finish her sentence, but cried, "Oh shit, look at that." She clung to The Beast's arm.

An old wooden coffin had apparently rotted away. Sticking through its boards was a rotted skeleton with pieces of flesh and clothes clinging to it.

Bagyar put an arm around her to comfort her. "Do you wish to go back?"

"Absolutely not. Just stay close. I know the dead can't hurt me. But seeing something like that simply reminds me what lies in wait for all of us, and I get all creeped out. Also, the voices don't help."

They continued on, walking side by side now, with Bagyar's arm around Raven and she clinging to him.

The tunnel ended at a stone wall with a metal door in it. Raven tried to open it. It would not budge. It seemed to be locked.

"What now?" said Bagyar. "We've come to a dead end."

"Not necessarily. Those zombies came through that door. We could wait until another bunch comes through and sneak past them."

"We might have a long wait. I wonder when that will be."

"You're right. I can't see us sitting on our asses waiting for the next batch. We could be here for days." Raven examined a keyhole under the doorknob. "Maybe I can pick the lock." Raven took a little device she kept hidden in her thick black tresses, knelt down by the door and worked on the lock. After a few minutes, she heard a little click. She reached up and turned the knob. The door swung open with a loud squeal of rusty hinges.

"Amazing," said Bagyar.

"Hey, knowing how to pick a lock is a must for a PI."

They held up their lanterns and peered in. There was a short hallway with another door at the end. They crept forward cautiously, trying to make as little noise as possible. The door at the end was slightly ajar. Raven peered through the space between it and the jamb. Beyond was a large room lighted by overhead fluorescents. It was some sort of laboratory or medical facility. Scattered about were gurneys like the ones used transporting patients in hospitals. These held bodies covered with sheets. Raven could not tell whether the bodies were alive or dead. None of them moved, but that did not prove anything. She did not see or hear anyone moving about.

"Douse the lanterns," she whispered to Bagyar. She handed hers to him and took out her automatic. As quietly as possible, she slowly opened the door just enough to squeeze through and step into the room. Off in one corner was an eight feet tall woman, who was proportioned well for her height. The lights over the operating table lit her up in profile. She was bent over an operating table doing something to a naked man lying there. Although the woman was turned slightly away, Raven recognized her immediately.

She pointed her gun at the woman and said loudly, "Olivia. What are you doing?"

Olivia glanced at her for a moment, but then returned to her work. "Wait. It's crucial I finish this. Then I'll talk to you."

"Okay. I'll wait."

Bagyar whispered, "You know this giant woman? Who is she?"

Raven whispered back, "She's an artificial woman. She was created by the vampire, Vlad Tepes using Victor Frankenstein's notes."

"You're kidding, aren't you? Vlad Tepes is a mad prince who lived hundreds of years ago, and Victor Frankenstein is a fictional character. She was his creation's girl friend."

Raven shrugged. "So you've been led to believe. I did too until I found out the truth. Tepes or Dracul was a vampire until he was destroyed by friends of mine."

"You've led a strange life. But, since I am what I am and have seen the dead walk, I must believe you."

At that point, Olivia looked up. "Do I know you?"

"Perhaps not. I'm a private investigator. Raven Lenore is the name. At one time I did some work for Michael Ellul."

"Victor Legion often spoke of Michael Ellul. So, why are you here?"

Good question, Raven thought. Why am I here? I found out what happened to Gerbelowski's body and saw that it was returned to its proper place. "I was hired to find a corpse that was stolen from an undertaker. Apparently you've been stealing bodies and reanimating them."

Olivia sighed. "Are you going to arrest me for body snatching?" She put her wrists out for Raven to handcuff.

"I should, but I won't. But I want to ask you a few questions. First, on the way here, there were bodies floating in the sewer system and zombies walking through the tunnels. Were they your doing?"

"Yes. They were failures. I'm able to reanimate dead bodies, but I'm missing some vital step or ingredient. After a short time they return to their inanimate state. Vlad Dracul and Victor Legion knew the secret and so did Nicholas Bonfiglio. I'm a failure." She hung her head.

"But why? Were you planning on raising an army of the dead?"

"That business about creating a new race and taking over the world is an impossible dream. The last time when Victor Legion tried it, it ended in nightmare. There's just too many of you, and you're too well armed. Now, I just want companionship. Legion is gone, so are the others like me. I was experimenting. Once I learned how to raise the dead to full animation, I could build a mate for myself."

"I guess I can understand that. Now that we've found out your secret, are you going to continue your experiments? You're clogging up the Chicago sewer system with your failures. Besides, it's not respectful of the dead to reanimate them and send them to decay in the sewers, besides being unsanitary. By the way, I thought you were killed during the war that Nicholas Bonfiglio started."

"My species is made of stern stuff. A rocket landed near me, but failed to explode. I was hit by a few bullets, but survived. It's not easy to kill one such as I am. As for my experiments, I intend to continue them until I get the results I'm looking for. I'll be more cautious, however, about how I dispose of my failures."

"I don't think I can let you do that. I'll have to notify the authorities about your little operation down here. It's just not right to use people's remains in this manner."

Olivia smiled and narrowed her eyes. "I was afraid you'd say that. Grab them."

Before Raven could react, two husky zombies stepped out of the shadows behind her and Bagyar and grabbed them, pinning Raven's arms against her side. Olivia rushed forward and twisted her wrist painfully until she was forced to drop her pistol. Olivia picked it up, stepped back and pointed in Raven's direction.

"Stop struggling. It's useless. The animates holding you were strong athletic men. If you should use judo or some other martial art, I will kill you and that ugly beast-thing with you."

Raven stopped trying to break the zombies' hold. She knew she was defeated. "Okay, you've got the drop on us. What now?"

Olivia's smile widened to a grin. "Maybe I can use you. Take them to the locker."

Olivia led the way to a room with only one entrance and a heavy door. The zombies shoved them inside, and Olivia slammed the metal door shut. Raven heard a key turn in the lock. To her horror, the room contained a dozen corpses in various states of decay hung on hooks like slabs of beef. In addition, the room was kept at a the temperature of a refrigerator to slow the rate of decay.

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CHAPTER 15. The Corpse Locker

If Bagyar had not been with her, Raven would have gone crazy with horror and claustrophobia. As it was, she clung to him trembling. He stroked her back and said, "They're simply bodies. They can't hurt us."

"I know. I know. It's being locked up here in the dark with them that's creeping me out. And they stink. Besides, it's freezing in here."

Bagyar held her close and brought her to an empty corner of the room. He pulled her down so that they were sitting with their backs to the wall. "What do you think that giant woman's going to do with us?"

"Probably kill us and reanimate our bodies. Who knows what goes in a mind as twisted as hers. She's not human you know." Raven laid her head against his broad chest and took a couple of deep breathes. As the stench of death and decay reached her nostrils, she retched. She snuggled up against his furry warmth.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be okay in a minute or two. Just keep me warm." She closed her eyes and mumbled a calming spell. After a while, she felt her limbs and stomach relax and her rapid heart beat slow. "I'm better now. We must discuss how to escape."

"It won't be easy. The walls are cement block, the door is metal, and there are no windows. This Olivia probably posted her animated corpses outside the entrance."

"I could pick the lock. If we're ready for them, I think we can handle the zombies."

"She still has your gun."

"There's that. We must plan carefully. If only there was only some way we could take her by surprise..."

"Sooner or later she will enter this room to either fetch us or remove one of the corpses she has here. Perhaps we can surprise her then."

"Good idea. What we need is something to hit her over the head with when she comes in." Raven took out her cigarette lighter and peered around the room. It was empty except for them and the corpses. "I don't see anything."

"What about one of the corpses? We can throw one of them at her. If she's startled, we could grab the gun away."

"Ugh. But I guess since that's all that we have to work with, we'll have to do it."

"While we're waiting, tell me about the giantess."

"Okay, but be ready to move when you hear her key in the lock. Most of what I know about her is secondhand information. A few years back I was hired by Michael Ellul, the famous psychic and astrologer, to spy on a cult called The Children of Aquarius. Their headquarters were in Jerusalem. Apparently Michael had some notion that this cult were trying to create Armageddon. While I was in Israel, he was conducting his own investigation from a different angle."

"Sorry for interrupting, but did you say Armageddon? How were they going to do that? And why?"

"Well, here we go again. You're not going to believe half of what I'm going to say? Yet, I swear it's all true."

Bagyar took her hands in his big paws. "I will believe anything you say, Raven. You've lived quite an adventurous life, I must say."

Raven enjoyed the intimacy. She leaned against his shoulder as she continued her story. "Well, Michael received information that he would find something interesting in Siberia. He did. Victor Frankenstein's creation. You've read Mary Shelley's novel I presume?"

"Yes. But it's fiction."

"That's what Shelley wanted everyone to believe. Most of it is true, with a few liberties taken for the sake of the narrative. Victor Frankenstein was real and most of the events Shelley described really happened. In fact she left things out. For example, Frankenstein had a collaborator."

"You're fascinating me."

"Well anyway, Michael discovered Frankenstein's creation frozen inside an eighteenth century schooner in the pack ice of the arctic circle. He smuggled it into the United States and nursed it back to health. It was at that time that the creature took the name he is now known by, Victor Legion."

"Victor Legion, the Romanian rebel who almost conquered Eastern Europe?"

"That very one. I'll be getting to that part soon."

"You heard all this from this Michael you're always talking about?"

"Yeah."

"He must mean something to you. Your whole tone is quite different when you mention his name. There's a kind of sigh of regret in it."

Raven chuckled. "You're very observant. Michael and I were lovers at one time, but curse my luck, he had a wife whom he loved very much. In fact, the next part of my story concerns her."

"Fascinating. This is the most entertainment I've had in a while."

Raven punched him in the arm. "Yeah. Well you won't think it's so much fun if we can't overcome Olivia and her zombies. To go on, at the time I'm speaking about, Melody, Michael's wife, was possessed by demon, the same demon who was behind the cult I was investigating. The demon took Melody to Nagov in Romania. That's where Vlad Tepes or Dracul, whichever name you prefer, daytime resting place was located. He made Melody a donor. Michael trailed her there. Legion was with him, as well as another of my former lovers, Jack Westcott."

"Another former lover? How many have you had?"

She punched him again. "None of your business. Now stop interrupting. I'm getting to the part where Olivia enters the picture. Michael, Jack and Legion somehow managed to destroy Dracul. Morgaine, the demon who possessed Melody, made a deal with Michael that she would abandoned Melody's body if Legion would stay in Nagov. It turned out that Dracul had used Frankenstein's notes to build several artificial beings. One of those was Olivia. She became Legion's girl friend. Those artificial people were all giants and became the core of his army. When he came to power and started his war of conquest, he built more, an army of them. I believe that's what Olivia would like to do now, despite her protests. Apparently there's some step in the process that she hasn't yet mastered. I thought she was killed during the war, but apparently she survived her wounds."

"I see. What about the cult? Did you discover what their plan was to initiate Armageddon?"

Raven sighed. "That's another long story. My voice is giving out. I'll tell you another day if we survive this."

"Of course, why don't you rest. Olivia seems to be in no hurry to come into this storeroom."

"Maybe you're right. I am getting sleepy. I just hope we don't freeze to death." She snuggled in as close as possible to Bagyar. It was like being covered with a bearskin rug. The heat coming off his body also aroused the woman in her. "Wake me if it sounds like someone's starts to open that door. If no one

comes, wake me in a couple of hours. I'll watch while you sleep."

With her head against Bagyar's broad chest and his arms around her, she felt quite comfortable and safe.
It did not take long for her to doze.

* * * *

The awful corpse locker was terribly cold and damp. The stench from the rotting corpses kept getting worse. Raven was no longer in Bagyar's arms. She shivered as she leaned against the concrete walls. She called, "Bagyar, where are you?"

There was no reply. Her voice sounded muffled as though the gas given off by the corpses had made the atmosphere thick. She began to panic. Where could he have gone? Had Olivia somehow slipped in while she was asleep and taken him? But how could that have happened without disturbing her? She rose to her feet and called out to him again. She took out her lighter and held it up high. She was alone except for the corpses. She gasped with terror as she wondered what Olivia had done with Bagyar.

Someone whispered, too low for her to make out the words. She pressed herself against the wall. Her tongue felt dry and swollen with fear. Did one of the corpses suddenly become animate? The idea of being alone with one of the living dead sent an icy finger into her heart. Through chattering teeth, she said, "Wh-who's there?"

A familiar voice replied. "It is I, Magbertius."

"Magbertius. Are you haunting me again? What do you want?"

"You know what I want. To be alive again. You can make it happen."

"How?"

"That giantess, Olivia, knows how to animate the dead. I could inhabit one of those corpses. You owe me that much since you destroyed my former body."

"But she's failed. Those zombies only live for a short time, a week or two at the most."

"With your help, she can succeed. Use your knowledge of spell casting. With a real aura in one of those bodies, it can live as long as a normal human being, perhaps longer."

"And what would I get out of this deal? I don't want you to make me your slave again."

"No?" Magbertius let out a short laugh. "Very well, I see you are interested in that half-animal. If you do what I ask, I will not interfere on my word of honor as a gentleman. Also, I will make sure the doppelganger pays for her crime and that you are exonerated."

"How will you do that?"

"I will force her turn herself in and confess."

"Do you promise to do that? Can I trust you?"

"You wound me. Have you ever known me to go back on my word?"

"Can't say that I have. Okay, I'll try. Perhaps I can call on my guardian dark angel for help."

"Yes. The powerful one. If anyone can bring the dead back to life, it is she. Pick out a handsome young man for me."

"Huh. 'Vanity, all is vanity.'"

The ghost of Magbertius laughed and laughed. Soon his laughter faded away, and Raven knew he was gone. She was alone again with the corpses.

* * * *

Bagyar shook her awake. "She's coming," he whispered. Raven heard the scratching of a key in the lock.

"Change of plan," Raven said, between yawns. "We're going to help Olivia, not try to stop her."

"What? I thought you were afraid that she'll build an army of artificial people."

"The method I will use to aid her in bringing a corpse alive will be of no use to her in creating artificial people, but we can use it as a bargaining chip to have her let us go."

"If you say so. How did you come up with that solution?"

"A dream."

The door squealed open. Raven and Bagyar rose to their feet. Olivia ducked her head and entered. Behind her, Raven saw the two husky animated corpses. One of them held a flashlight, which it shined in their faces. Olivia had Raven's pistol in her hand. Raven was glad that she had decided not to attack her. Chances are either she or Bagyar or possibly both would have been shot.

Olivia waved the automatic at them. "I've decided that I must kill you two. If I leave you go, I can't trust you not to reveal what I'm doing down here."

"Wait, Olivia," Raven cried. "Don't be hasty. In the first place, nobody would believe us if we told them that you were bringing the dead back to life."

"Makes no difference. You could tell them I was a drug dealer or something. Once they came down here they would know I was doing something that you humans would not like. Besides, I can use your dead bodies in my experiments. You would be intact, whereas the bodies I've been using have had organs removed and their blood drained. Some were embalmed. I believe that's why I've failed."

Raven hoped she could reason with the psychotic woman. Apparently she was someone who would snuff out a person's life without a qualm. She watched in horror as Olivia released the safety. "Any last words?"

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CHAPTER 16. Raising the Dead

"Don't do it," Raven cried as she stared into the barrel of her automatic. "I can help you. I know what's

missing from the bodies you've animated."

Olivia lowered the pistol a slight bit. "What? This better be good."

"A soul. An aura. The essence of personality. That's what keeps a person alive. Even vampires have souls."

"Nonsense. Artificial people like myself and my former lover, Victor Legion, don't have souls."

"You have something. I don't know how Frankenstein and Tepes did it, but you think, you plan, you remember, you even have emotions. Look at the corpses you animated. They move around blindly. They obey orders sure, but do they decide anything for themselves? Look into their eyes. There's nothing behind them."

A shadow of doubt crossed Olivia's face. "There may be something to what you say, but how can you help me?"

"I have psychic abilities. I can contact the spirits of the dead. I can coax one to occupy a body that you've animated."

"And then what. I don't want to deal with zombies who will not obey me. Once a spirit enters one of them..." She pointed at one of the animated corpses. "...it'll want to go it's own way, do what it wants to do."

"I can fix that too. Before I allow a spirit to return to the land of the living, I'll exact a solemn promise to obey you."

She clicked the safety back on the automatic and scratched her chin with barrel. "I don't know. I'll have to see how this works. We'll try it on one. If it doesn't follow my orders, or if it tries to assert itself, I will kill it, send it back to that dark land of the dead."

"Right. There you go. It'll be worth a try even if it doesn't turn out exactly as I said."

Raven did not really believe it would be that easy to kill a zombie. Although it would be animated and occupied by an aura, essentially it would be one of the undead. But if Olivia wanted to think that she could kill it with that gun or some other physical means, who was Raven to tell her otherwise.

Olivia stuck the gun into her lab coat pocket. "Very well. If this experiment works as you say, I'll allow you and that thing you're with to leave unmolested. But if you try any tricks or your plan doesn't work, I won't hesitate to kill you both."

"I understand. It'll work."

Bagyar whispered in Raven's ear, "I hope you know what you're doing. I think she means it."

Raven patted him on his hairy cheek. "Don't worry, Hon. Everything will be all right."

The Beast gave Raven a strange look when she called him by the word of endearment, "Hon."

Olivia brought them to the body she had on the operating table. "This one was killed in an auto accident. As you can see, I needed to do a little repair work. But everything else is intact. I was able to steal it

from the hospital morgue before any mortician ruined it by taking out the guts or dousing it with embalming fluid."

Olivia's repair job on the corpse's face was not done well. It was crisscrossed with lumpy scars and the jaw and nose were crooked. Magbertius whispered in Raven's mind, "Not this one. I do not want to be an ugly freak. Pick me out a body that is handsome, strong and intact."

"I'm afraid this won't do. No spirit would consent to become such an ugly thing."

Olivia eyed her suspiciously. "Why would it care as long as it got to live again? Are you trying to postpone the inevitable when you'll have to shit or get off the pot?"

"Absolutely not. Spirits are human beings. They are not altogether rational. Vanity is a powerful force in their thinking. There's a corpse in the meat locker where you kept us prisoner that will do. Let me show you."

"Okay. But this better not be a trick."

Olivia opened the storage room. She made Raven and Bagyar go in first. She had the pistol in her hand when she followed. "Which one?"

Raven pointed out a large good-looking man hanging on a hook by the skin on his back. "This one."

Olivia chuckled. "He's a hunk all right. Are you sure you don't want me to animate this one for reasons of your own?" She called to the two zombies. "Put this corpse on the operating table."

The duo wrenched the body from the hook, tearing skin as they did.

Raven cried, "Hey, be careful with that."

They ignored her, carried the naked corpse into the laboratory and tossed it on the operating table. As Raven watched, Olivia sewed up the skin on the corpses back. When it was animated, it would have deep scars, but as long as it was only the back, it should not matter. Raven eyed the well-built dead man and smiled. He was not only athletic but had an extraordinarily large organ. *Magbertius, you should be well pleased with this body*, Raven thought.

His reply came back to her mind, "I believe I will be. Perhaps after I am alive you will consider renewing our courtship." His evil laugh echoed through her mind.

Never in a million years. What I'm doing for you is strictly business. You do what you must to my doppelganger, and then we part company.

Olivia placed a metal cap over the corpse's head with several wires leading from it to a machine. She attached wires to its skin on various parts of its body. A breathing apparatus went over its mouth. Olivia also jabbed a needle directly into the heart. She prepared a solution which she placed in an intravenous drip which went into the veins.

She flipped switches on a machine. The body began to tremble and jerk as electricity coursed through it. Olivia turned to Bagyar. "Animal-man, you can help. See those meters. Don't allow them to go into the red danger zone. If they get close, lower the voltages with the dials below them. Do you understand?"

"Of course, I understand. I may look like an animal, but I'm not stupid," Bagyar growled and stood near the machine.

"Touchy bastard, aren't you."

To keep the contentiousness between the two from escalating, Raven asked, "Is there anything you want me to do?"

"Just be ready to do your own thing once the body is animated."

For the next hour, they watched as electrical impulses and whatever was in the intravenous drip went into the body. A few times Bagyar had to lower the voltage. Every ten minutes, Olivia would bend over the corpse and listen with a stethoscope. Finally, she said, "I hear a heart beat. Wait until I remove apparatus from the body, Raven. Then you may convene with the spirits."

She turned off the machinery and removed the wires and devices from the corpse. She again listened for a heartbeat and took the body's temperature and blood pressure. She wrote in her notebook. Although the corpse did not move, Raven saw that the eyes were moving under the lids as though it were dreaming, and the fingers and toes twitched. Soon a groan issued from it.

"Okay Raven, it's up to you now."

Raven went through her calming exercises and put herself into a semi-trance. Mentally she called to Magbertius, *Peter Magbertius, the body is ready to receive you*. She placed one hand on the chest near the heart and the other on its forehead, and recited a spell of entering.

"Thank you, My Love," Magbertius said into her mind.

She watched as the corpse opened its eyes and flexed its fingers. It opened its mouth and took in a deep breath. It said, "It's so good to breath again."

Olivia cried, "I believe that you've been successful. None of my animated corpses ever spoke. You did make it promise to obey me?"

"Of course," Raven lied.

The corpse moved its arms and legs. Finally it sat up and looked around. Raven asked, "Who are you?"

"My name is Peter Magbertius, as you well know."

Olivia cried out, "What trick is this? Raven, you know the spirit you placed in the corpse?"

"Very well."

Olivia's face darkened. She pulled out the pistol. "You, Peter Magbertius, did you promise to obey me."

"Obey you? I am a sorcerer. It is you who will be the slave and I, the master."

As he pivoted his legs around to descent from the table, Olivia fired five shots in rapid succession into Magbertius' chest. Luckily, Raven was standing to one side, as the bullets went through him and came out his back to lodge in the wall behind.

Magbertius growled, "You will be sorry you did that. Look at what you have done to this pretty body." He raised his hand and mumbled an incantation. Olivia appeared petrified with fear. The hand holding the pistol slowly lowered as though she was fighting what was happening to her. Finally the gun dropped on the floor.

"I will not kill you since you brought this fine specimen to life. Also, I need you to make repairs on the damage you did to it."

He laid back down on the table. Olivia walked stiff-legged over to the table as though she fought every move Magbertius made her do. She took out her surgical tools and sewed up the bullet holes, first the front and then the back.

Raven retrieved her pistol and returned to the operating table, "Okay Peter, I've lived up to my part of the bargain. When are you going to make my doppleganger turn herself over to the police?"

"Patience, My Dear. I've just arisen from the dead. I will need to find her. And to do that I need clothing, money and a place to live. What shall I do with this one?" He pointed at Olivia. "Shall I have her kill herself?"

Although terror came into Olivia's eyes, she continued to sew up the wounds.

"No. Leave her be. She can do no harm to anyone, except for stealing bodies. Sooner or later the police will catch her at it. That should end her career as a body snatcher. However, see those two zombies that have been helping her. Send them into the sewer system to join their brothers and sisters."

Magbertius made a pass at the zombies. They walked toward the exit and left the room.

When Olivia finished with her repair job, Magbertius got off the table and stretched. "I'm hungry," he said.

Bagyar said, "I have food in my den. I also have clothing and money I can lend you."

Magbertius slapped him on the back. "You are a fine fellow. Has Raven told you that she and I were lovers until my unfortunate accident?"

"Yes. She told me that you were unfamiliar with electrical appliances and stuck a knife in an electric toaster without turning it off."

Magbertius chuckled. "An embarrassing way to end one's life. Do you not feel any animosity toward me because of Raven and my previous relationship?"

"Why should I? It's none of my business."

"Oh, I see. I had the wrong idea about something. Apparently what one person feels is not reciprocated by the other. Interesting."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing, nothing. Raven will tell you. I am a little mad and ramble nonsense. Tell me one thing though. Why do you and Raven smell so bad and are so dirty? When I was with Raven before, she bathed quite

often and changed her clothes at least once a day."

Raven laughed. "Don't worry, my prissy friend. You'll smell as bad by the time we return to Henry's den. The way back is through this city's sewer system."

"'Tis that the only way?"

"Unless you want to walk the public streets in the buff."

"I see. I guess if you can stand the odor, I can too."

Before they left, Magbertius released Olivia from his spell. He warned her, "Do not try to impede us in any way. If you do, I will kill you in an especially painful manner."

Olivia grumbled something under her breath, but made no move toward them.

When they were out of her hearing, Bagyar said, "Aren't you afraid that she will exact some revenge on you and Raven, and perhaps even me, for the humiliation she's suffered?"

Magbertius said, "She cannot. The spell I cast on her is not completely gone from her mind. The minute she makes any overt action towards one of us, she will crumple in excruciating pain."

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CHAPTER 17. Skinny Dipping in Lake Michigan

When they arrived back at Bagyar's den, Magbertius was almost as filthy as Raven and Bagyar. Bagyar brought out clothes for him. However, he refused to don them. "I need to bathe first. Show me to your bathroom."

Bagyar looked embarrassed. "I don't have a bathtub or shower."

Raven said, "You know we all need to clean ourselves off after wading through the sewers. What do you do, Henry, when you need to bathe?."

"I wait until the small hours of the morning and wash in Lake Michigan. We're not far from Oak Street beach. That is, when the weather permits."

"That's what we'll do." She glanced at her watch. It said eleven, but she had lost track of the passage of time and was no longer sure whether that was A.M. or P.M. "In the underground, how do you know when it's after midnight? You don't seem to have a clock or a watch."

"I have an inner sense that tells me when the city is asleep. That time is near. In an hour or two we can venture out without being seen by anyone except homeless people and those who haunt the night, like Celia."

"Hmm. I'll be sure to take my automatic and my talisman to ward off evil." At the mention of Celia, Raven shuddered. She was still tied to the vampire by blood taken. Soon Celia would be wanting more from her.

Magbertius noticed this and said, "Perhaps I can take care of that one for you too."

"Damnit, stop reading my mind. Besides, although I loath being her donor, I sort of like her and would not wish her any harm."

Magbertius raised his eyebrows. "I noticed that too."

"Stop it, I say." She walked to the other side of the room even though she knew he could still read her mind at that distance. Once the doppelganger was dealt with, she needed to rid herself of Magbertius. He stared at her with a sly grin.

Meanwhile, Bagyar rounded up supplies to take to the beach with them, soap, towels, a beach towel, and clean garments for all three of them. He loaded this stuff into a knapsack.

They waited around for two hours. Finally, Bagyar said, "We can go now."

He led them through the tunnels to a ladder that led up to a manhole cover. He went up first, followed by Raven with Magbertius bringing up the rear. Bagyar cautiously raised the cover a couple of inches and peered out. "The street is empty." He moved the cover over and climbed out into the middle of Oak Street. Raven and Magbertius followed. They strolled over to the sidewalk and headed east to the pedestrian tunnel under Lake Shore Drive. The tunnel was dirty and stained by urine and water. Graffiti covered a good portion of it. Close to the middle they noticed a homeless man lying near one wall. Bagyar remarked and knelt down to check the vagrant to see whether the man was alive. "His breathing seems okay, but he smells like a brewery. Not dead, simply dead drunk. I'm sure he'll be all right."

They left him to his alcoholic dreams.

The beach lay before them. A full moon sent its shimmery glow on the enormous body of water, an area of blackness that stretched before them left and right as far as the eye could see. To their right were the brightly lit towers of The Loop. They slogged through fine sand to the center of the beach, where Bagyar unloaded the knapsack and spread everything out on a beach towel. Magbertius, who was already naked, grabbed one of the three bars of soap and ran into the lake, splashing for ten feet before diving into a wave.

As Raven and Bagyar stripped off their clothes, Raven could not help but admire the muscular although hairy body of her companion. He was especially well endowed in an area that she admired in men. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that he too was taking in her own physical attributes. She grabbed his hand, and they ran like two children into the lake. At first the water felt ice cold, but after a while it was wonderfully refreshing. She lathered up and washed the grime away. It felt great to be clean again after two days trudging through sewers.

She approached Bagyar and said, "How about doing my back?"

"Sure." He took the soap and rubbed it over back from her shoulders to her rear. He went in slow circles, covering every inch of her skin. After he did the part just above her buttocks, she said, "Do all of it. Go on down."

He lathered her derriere and upper thighs. She sighed as his hand rubbed gently over the area. When he finished, she turned around and said, "Now the front."

He growled. "Are you teasing me? Getting my appetite up only to deny me the final pleasure. Play me for a fool."

She raised her hand to his cheek. "I wouldn't do that. What I start I finish."

"How could you? I'm a beast, a half-animal, hairy and horrible to look at."

"No. You're quite handsome if you ask me. Perhaps some would say my tastes are perverse. But I'm not a person who's concerned with what's considered normal. I'm an independent spirit. I became a witch, didn't I? Besides, being a psychic, I have the ability to see into your inner person and ignore what lies on the surface. Henry, you're more man than many men that I've met before. The truth is I'm falling in love with you. You have so many admirable characteristics, bravery, a strong sense of ethics, patience, empathy for others."

"How can you know all that about me? We've known each other less than a week. There are times when I become the beast I resemble."

"It's because I've seen you in situations where your best traits came out. Besides, I turn into a beast myself, at times. You haven't seen me when my Roman temper flares." She put her arms around his neck and leaned into him until her breasts were pressed tightly against his chest. She tilted her head and closed her eyes. To her utter surprise, instead of kissing her, he licked her face. Although it startled her, it was not unpleasant.

He whispered, "What about Peter? Weren't you lovers before? Now that he's alive again won't you be wanting to renew your relationship?" Nonetheless, he kept his arms around her.

"I was never really in love with him. You saw what he did to Olivia. He controlled me with his powers in the same manner. I need him only to make my doppelganger admit her crimes. Otherwise, he is nothing to me."

"I was afraid that you were going to go back to him or that you would despise me for what I am."

"Never. I love you." She initiated the kiss this time, placing her tongue in his strangely shaped mouth. She felt his organ hard against her thigh. "Let us go back to the beach and consummate this."

She took his hand again and ran up on the beach, falling on the beach towel. He laid over her. "Peter will see," he said, although he was panting as hard as a dog in heat, spraying her with saliva.

"I don't care." She pulled his head down on her breasts. He licked them for a while, moved down to rub his tongue over her stomach and finally into her vagina. She became so excited that she could barely contain herself. Ecstasy followed ecstasy. He moved up her body until his member was inside. She dug her heels into his back. For a beast, he was a slow and deliciously sensitive lover. She had multiple orgasms before he fountained himself. Afterwards they kissed and whispered endearments.

Raven heard clapping. She opened her eyes to see Magbertius standing there fully dressed with a smirk on his face. He said, "Good performance. That was the finest bit of pornography I have seen in a long time."

Bagyar growled low and menacing. As he started to rise, Raven restrained him. "Don't please," she whispered. "I still need that man to deal with my doppelganger. If you fight him, I know one of you will die." She turned her head to face Magbertius. "You ass hole. Why are you spying on us?"

She rose and began to dress. Bagyar followed suit.

"It was completely inadvertent. I came to tell you that I am leaving you two to your own devices. I assume you intend to return to that hole in the ground where your lover lives. I do not wish to go there. I am tired of being in dark and awful places."

"What about my doppelganger?"

"Once I get settled I will find her and deal with her. That building near where we came up on the street, I believe is an inn of some sort."

"It's a hotel, practically the same thing. Do you have money? They will want it in advance since you do not have a credit card."

"I believe I have enough, for which I wish to thank you, Master Bagyar. I will return it as soon as I am able. I recall this business about credit cards in this time from when we were living together. How may I obtain one?"

"You will need to establish an identity. I can help you with all that." Magbertius nodded. "Meet me at the Art Institute in two days in the Old Master's room. If you can't find the Institute, ask someone. It's a famous. The museum personnel will tell you where the Old Master's room is located. I'll be there all afternoon." Raven figured that the Art Institute would be the last place the police would look for her.

"I will be there. I am grateful. Good luck, Master Bagyar. She is a feisty one."

He started to walk away.

Raven called after him. "Don't forget that this is the twenty-first century. Those horseless carriages move extremely fast. And don't fool around with anything electric unless you're sure it's unplugged."

"I will be cautious. If I encounter anything unfamiliar, I will ask how to use it before touching it. See you in two days, Raven. Au revoir." He blew her a kiss and walked away.

"Well, we're rid of him for a while," Raven said. "Shall we continue where we left off?"

"Let us return to my den. I don't like to hang around the city too long. There are dangers at night, and I don't wish anyone to see me."

Hand in hand, they strolled back the way they came. The drunk was still asleep in the tunnel. Raven was looking forward to their little underground nest. She hoped that Bagyar's endurance would hold out for at least another round of love making.

* * * *

However, when they opened the door to Bagyar's den, to Raven's disappointment and dread, Celia was there waiting for them.

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CHAPTER 18. Return to the Surface

"Well, hello. Where have you two been? I've been waiting for a while."

"Skinny dipping in Lake Michigan. What's up, Celia?"

A half-smile played on Celia's lips. "You know that, Darling. It's your turn to donate."

"Okay. I'll submit willingly, but don't take over my mind. Bagyar, please go somewhere else for a while. I don't want you to see this."

Bagyar growled under his breath. "You don't need to do it, Raven. Between us, we can overcome her."

"It's not that easy. Vampires are a lot stronger than they look. Besides, I want her to. Don't you know, once bitten your hooked for life—as long as the vampire exists. I'm like a junky; so is she. We need each other now."

Bagyar shook his shaggy head. "I think I understand. Very well. I'll leave for a half hour or so. Will that be sufficient time? And Celia, if you harm her, I'll seek your daytime resting place and destroy you." He left the room.

Celia said, "What's going on? Suddenly, he seems very protective of you."

"We've become lovers."

Celia chuckled. "You and him? You're such lovely woman. You could have any man you wanted. Or woman for that matter. Why would you take that ugly beast thing as a lover?"

"He's not ugly as an animal. Inside he's a gentle loving person. You might say that he has inner beauty."

The vampire shrugged. "To each his own. Come to me, Darling."

Raven felt Celia's insatiable thirst for blood as a tug that coincided with her own need to have her take it. She approached Celia until she was folded within her arms. She tilted her head to one side to allow the vampire access to her artery. Celia bent down and kissed her neck gently at first. Moments later, Raven felt the sharp pain of her fangs injecting into her vein. Her heart pumped faster as the undead sucked at her life's blood. Although she grew faint, there was an ecstasy to the experience not unlike having an orgasm. This went on for a few minutes. Celia lowered Raven on to Bagyar's sofa and sat besides her. She handed her a tissue to wipe the blood.

Although Raven was weak and ill feeling, she asked Celia, "What's going on in the outside world? I've been down here underground for almost a week. Are the police still looking for me?"

"I don't know. Probably. Peter Morgan's murder is no longer news. The papers won't have anything more until someone is arrested for the crime. The big story locally is that dead bodies have been showing up in the sewer system. Several corpses have been clogging the filtration system. Nobody seems to know where they came from. The articles hinted at suspected gang murders."

Raven was still high from the effects of donating blood to a vampire. She began to giggle and could not stop.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Nothing." She kept on giggling.

"Well, if you're going to sit there laughing and won't tell me the joke, I may as well leave. Bagyar will be back any time." She rose from the sofa and walked toward the door. Before leaving she said, "See you soon, My Dearest."

Raven waved farewell in a feeble manner. Although she had stopped giggling, she felt weak. She stretched out on the sofa with her head against the bolster and fell asleep.

Much later she woke up with a blanket covering her. She glanced over to see Bagyar curled up in a corner of the room. She smiled and went back to sleep, happy that she no longer would have nightmares induced by Magbertius.

* * * *

When she woke a second time, Bagyar was kneeling on the floor by her. "How are you doing, Raven?"

She smiled at him. "Okay. Just a little weak from loss of blood." She sat up.

"Stay right where you are. I'll make you a big breakfast to replace your lost fluids."

"Thank you, Henry. You're so good."

Bagyar went into the other room. Soon Raven smelled bacon frying, which made her mouth water. A few minutes later, he reentered the front room. He carried a tray laden with a plate of pancakes, another of bacon and eggs, coffee and orange juice. He set it on Raven's lap.

As Raven dug in, she said, "What about you?"

"I had breakfast earlier."

She glanced at her digital watch. It read ten oh five. She showed Bagyar. "Now you tell me whether it's A.M. or P.M. How long have I slept?"

"Not that long. It's ten in the morning."

"Good. I have errands I must run today. I need to see about getting Peter a false identity."

"Aren't you afraid that the police will spot you and pick you up before Magbertius makes your doppelganger turn herself in?"

"It's a chance I must take. I'll be cautious. I'm good at avoiding the cops when I want to."

"But aren't you still weak from loss of blood?"

"Celia did not take that much. After I finish breakfast, I'll be fine. Thank you. Everything is delicious."

After she had sopped up the dregs of the eggs with toast and gulped down a second cup of coffee, she laid her tray on the floor. "Sit by me, Hon."

He came up on the sofa. "It's still Hon after the beastly way I ravished you on the beach."

She said, "I enjoyed every minute of it." She stared at his tongue which was lolling on one side his mouth. "My Henry, what a big tongue you have." She kissed it and drew it into her own mouth. She took one of his hairy hands and pressed it against her breast. "My Henry, what great paws you have." She unzipped his trouser and took his member into her hand. "And my, my Henry, what an enormous sword you have?"

He laughed in a growly way and undressed her. A few moments later, they were naked and making passionate love.

Afterwards Raven lit a cigarette and said, "As soon as I finish this and get dressed, I must go. I'll be back this evening."

"Be careful. I don't want to lose you."

* * * *

Bagyar walked her to the subway entrance to the underground. Raven kissed him and peeked through the doorway that led to the platform. Although the subway was busy, no one was looking her way. She slipped out and waited for a train to the loop. She took it to Grand Avenue and walked west until she came to an old building that held offices of shyster lawyers, private investigators, accountants and other minor professionals. She went up to the second floor, where an acquaintance of hers had an office. The sign on the door read, Salvador Castigo, Tax Consultant. Although Castigo did tax consulting if a client should appear, his real business was the manufacture and selling of false identity papers and cards.

His office was a crowded mess of computers, printers, copiers and other equipment that he used to produce his product. When Raven entered, he was sitting at his desk examining a driver's license with a magnifying glass. As soon as he heard the door open, he slipped the card into a desk drawer. When he recognized Raven, he grinned and stood up. "Raven Lenore. By golly, it's been a long time."

Raven shook his outstretched hand. "Guess it has, Sal. Haven't needed a new ID for a while. Need the works today though, a complete new persona."

"I heard you were in trouble with the cops. The newspapers said that the cops think you murdered some guy."

"Case of mistaken identity. But the I.Ds I need today are not for me, but for a man."

"Okay. Have a seat. What's this guy done?"

Castigo plumped down in his desk chair. He was going on fifty, overweight and balding. Raven pulled up a guest chair. "Nothing actually. It's just that he needs to be someone other than who he is. Let's say that he wasn't born here but needs to be."

"I get it. An illegal. Okay, I won't ask anymore questions about his old persona, just his new one." He took out a tablet of lined paper. "What's his name going to be?"

"Peter Johnson."

Castigo asked other questions, such as his age, residence, birth date, etc. that he would need for the various cards and papers Magbertius would need. Raven made up some answers.

"How about a bank account? I'll need that to get him credit cards."

"I'll open one in his name and deposit money. Five grand should be enough."

"Take out another grand for my fee."

"Your prices have gone up."

Castigo smirked. "They vary upon need. For people on the run from the cops and illegals, the price is high. But since you're an old and valued customer, I'm giving you a discount."

"You old thief. Okay. My bargaining position isn't very good at the moment."

Castigo ogled her. "I wouldn't say that. I could knock a couple of hundred off of that if say you could come to my place some evening."

Raven chuckled. "No thanks. I'll pay the full price. I'll deposit money to your account later this afternoon. After I set up a bank account for Peter Johnson, I'll E-mail his number to you. Anything else you need?"

"A photo. For a driver's license. Does he need a passport?"

"Not at present. I won't be able to give you a photo until tomorrow. I won't see Peter until then. How long will all this take?"

"Couple of hours once I get the photo."

"Okay. I'll send Peter around himself with his photo and to pick up his package."

"How'll I know it's the right guy?"

"I'll give him a password. How about 'Magbertius?' Think you can remember that."

"No problem, as they say in Jamaica. Guess we're done for now then. I'll start to work on the stuff right away." Castigo rose from his seat again and extended his hand. "It's always a pleasure doing business with you, Raven. We should go out on a date sometime."

"Never in a million years. See you around."

* * * *

Now comes the tricky part, Raven thought as she headed for a coffee house that had terminals for Internet use. The first thing she did when she got to the corner was to check around to make sure that the cops had not set up surveillance of the place. She did not see any parked vans or anyone loitering around checking people out. The Loop was its usual crowded madhouse of tourists, business people and shoppers. The coffee shop itself was fairly crowded, and she had to wait for a terminal. She logged on to her online banking and opened a savings and checking account in the name of Peter Johnson. She transferred twenty-five hundred into each account and another thousand into the account Castigo used for his illegal business.

After she left there, she took a bus to the Wilsey Funeral Home. As soon as she entered, Wilsey

appeared from one of the viewing rooms. He was his usual cadaverous looking self. "Ms. Lenore. I didn't think I'd be hearing from you. The newspapers indicated that you were in some sort of trouble."

"Simply a misunderstanding. I found the remains of Mr. Grebelowski."

"You did? Where?"

"That I can't reveal. The way that I received the information prevents me broadcasting it about."

"I see. Very well. Where is he?"

"We buried him in his own grave. We dug it up, put him into his coffin and reburied the coffin."

Wilsey eyed her suspiciously. "How do I know that's true?"

Raven sighed. "You'll simply have to take my word for it. I've got a good reputation and would hardly ruin it to pull a scam on you. I'm sorry I had to do that way, but there were circumstances beyond my control. I'll understand if you refuse to pay what you still owe me, but I'm definitely keeping what you've already paid. If you absolutely don't believe me, you can dig up the grave or take me to court. It's up to you what you wish to do. I came here mostly to inform you that I've closed the case. The corpse was found and lies where it's supposed to."

Wilsey rubbed his chin. "I'm a pretty good judge of people, and you looked me straight in the eye with your explanation. I'll take the chance that you're telling the truth. Of course, if John's remains show up somewhere else, such as in the Chicago sewer system, or if the family has the loved one interred only to find an empty coffin, I'll sue you for everything you've got. Come into my office. I'll write a check for the remainder of what I owe you."

"Thank you."

As they went into his office, Raven said, "Is there any possibility that you could pay me cash? I'm a little strapped right now." She glanced at her watch. "The banks are about to close."

Wilsey gave her another jaundice look, but went to his office safe and took the money from a cash drawer. "I'll want a receipt."

"Absolutely. In fact I've brought our contract papers for both of us to sign that the case has been resolved to our satisfaction and that client-investigator privilege applies."

They signed the papers, and Wilsey handed over the cash. They shook hands, and Raven left.

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CHAPTER 19. Lenore Raven's Confession

Raven returned to the underground and another night of paradise in Bagyar's den. The next day, she went to the Art Institute. On the way she bought a digital camera. Magbertius did not show until two o'clock.

"The reason I'm so late is that I could not locate your doppleganger until today. I sent her to turn herself in to the authorities. Tomorrow your newspapers should inform you of her arrest."

After Raven took several pictures of him, they strolled down State Street to a drugstore where she had the pictures printed at the one-hour-service photography center. She also had them make a CD.

She handed Magbertius the photos, the CD, Castigo's business card, written directions to his office and the account numbers of the bank accounts she had opened for him. He remarked, "You're civilization never ceases to amaze me. You received a portrait of me in an hour. In my time, one would have to pose for an artist for days on end and the picture would not be half as accurate."

. Raven said, "I don't know about. Your portrait at Riverlook was so realistic it allowed you to control me. There's twenty-five hundred dollars in each of the bank accounts. That should hold you until you figure out how to make a living. Now we part forever."

Magbertius smiled. In his new face, his smile was quite pleasant. No one would guess what a black-hearted fiend lay below the surface. "Forever is a long time. Nonetheless, *au revoir* for the time being. If you're ever in trouble or decide to leave the beast man, I will know and come to you."

"Hope that never happens. Good bye, Peter. Have a nice life."

They shook hands, and Magbertius pecked her on the cheek. After he walked away, Raven headed for the nearest subway station on Dearborn and Jackson. Just as she was about to descend the steps, two plainclothes detectives approached her. She recognized them and knew she had been caught. *Oh crap, she thought. I never checked to see whether anyone was following me after I left The Art Institute. I hope the Magbertius wasn't lying .*

"Something I can do for you gentlemen."

The taller of the two, who Raven recalled was named O'Brien, said, "As if you didn't know, Raven. We've had a warrant out for your arrest for over a week now. The last time I saw you, you were hopping around rooftops."

"That's the way I get my exercise. Look guys, you've got the wrong gal. My identical twin did the deed."

"Oh you mean the woman who calls herself Lenore Raven. Yeah, she turned herself in this morning. Tough luck though. She named you as her accomplice. Be a good girl and put your hands behind you."

"That bitch, that spawn of Satan," Raven cried as she obeyed the detective's order.

The End