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Raven Lenore, Psychic Investigator #3
THE CASE OF THE HOUSE WHO ATE PEOPLE

by

JOE VADALMA

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CHAPTER 1. LIFE IN PRISON

Raven Lenore sat in her cell brooding. Ever since the day she stood in the courtroom and heard the jury pronounce that fatal word, “Guilty,” she knew that her life was in the toilet. The judge had been harsh. “Life with no possibility of parole.” It was because of the brutal way in which Peter Morgan had been murdered. If she had really been guilty of the crime, perhaps she would have reconciled herself to being incarcerated for the rest of her life. But she had nothing to do with the killing. Morgan's throat had been sliced open by Lenore Raven, Raven's doppelganger. The doppelganger had confessed to being an accessory, but told the police that Raven had committed the actual murder. Since their DNA was identical—a fact that had the forensic people worried—the police, the prosecuting attorney and the jury had believed the doppelganger's story.

Lenore and Raven were tried together, although they had separate attorneys. They both received the same sentence and were slated to serve their time in the same woman's prison. But somehow, Lenore Raven had vanished from the van that had brought them down to Dwight, Illinois. Although the police who transported her were baffled as to how she disappeared, Raven was not surprised. She knew that Lenore was a demon, who could do magick and probably would kill again. Thus, she did not even have the satisfaction of knowing that the real killer would suffer the same punishment as herself.

Another thing that worried her was that her lover, Henry Bagyar, who was half beast and half man and lived underground to hide from people, probably did not know what had happened to her. He might think that she had abandoned him.

As Raven sat on the edge of her bunk moping, her cell mate sat down next to her and put her arm around her. She was an attractive African-American woman named Annabelle Jackson, whom everyone called Annie B. “Don't look so hangdog, Honky. After a few years in this place, you'll learn to love it.”

It was after lights out, which meant that only illumination came from the corridor. Thus, the cell was in a kind of twilight zone, shadowy but not completely dark. The night guard, who checked on the prisoners every two hours, had just passed their cell.

Raven looked up into the woman's dark face. “Do you love it?”

The woman cackled for a minute. “Well, since neither one of us love the slammer, we need something to

cheer ourselves up a little. Let's party."

Raven eyed her suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"I mean party, Honky. That guard won't be around for another two hours." She put her hand on Raven's breast and squeezed.

Raven took her hand away. "Sorry. I don't swing that way. I'm hetro."

"I was too until I came to this place. You're a lifer like me. In this place, you ain't gonna get any with no man unless you do it one of the guards. May as well as get used to it."

"I ain't ready for the lesbian thing yet. Maybe if I get horny enough, I'll let you know."

"Well, I am horny. And you're gonna do it with me now, Bitch. From now on you're my whore." She unzipped Raven's jumpsuit and stuck her hand into the front of Raven's panties.

Raven jumped up and zipped up again. "I ain't your whore. So stop that crap and get into your own bunk, Annie B."

Without warning, Annie B. sucker punched Raven on the side of the jaw so hard that Raven fell to the floor and hit her head on the stone wall. As Raven started to rise woozily, Annie B kicked out her foot towards Raven's chin. Although everything was fuzzy and spinning, Raven figured something like that was coming. She grabbed the other woman's foot and twisted, throwing her off balance. She staggered to her feet and went into a martial arts stance. "If that's the way it's gonna be, we'll see who's queen here."

Annie B cackled. "So you know a little judo and karate, Honky. You white chicks make me laugh. You probably were never in a real fight." Suddenly she had something metallic in her hand that reflected the light from the hallway. Raven realized that it was a homemade knife.

They circled each other warily. Annie B feinted to the left and stabbed toward Raven to the right side. Raven had been in knife fights before and was well-trained in several martial arts. She dodged the thrust and gave a back kick to Annie B's knife hand, which sent the weapon flying. She followed through with a one-two punch that sent the other woman reeling. Annie B sprung off the wall like a wrestler coming off the ropes and butted Raven in the chest. Then the dark skinned woman had her against the wall punching her several times rapidly in the stomach. Although Raven almost vomited from pain, she grabbed Annie B's hair and yanked her to one side. Annie B leaped on her. They went crashing to the floor with Annie B on top. Annie tried gouging her eyes, but Raven bit down hard on Annie's wrist.

They rolled around on the floor, biting, punching, pulling hair, yanking at each other's breasts and pulling any dirty trick each could think of to get an advantage over the other. Suddenly, Annie B. went limp and rolled off of Raven.

Raven felt another presence in the room. "Who's there?" she croaked.

"It's me, Celia." It was the vampire who once a month took blood from Raven.

Raven felt her cold, spongy hand on her arm pulling her to her feet.

"What did you do to Annie B?"

"Simply used my powers to render her unconscious. C'mon, we'll put her to bed. When she wakes in the morning, she'll think you knocked her out. You should be happy. You were losing the fight."

Raven took Annie B's arms and Celia took her legs and they lifted the unconscious woman into her bunk. Raven got down on her knees and searched for the knife. When she found it, she handed it to Celia. "Please get rid of this for me."

"Sure. That was quite a battle that you and that girl were having. What was it about?"

"She wanted to have sex with me."

"Why didn't you? I know you like it with women for variety."

"Shut up. I don't do it with anyone unless I know them well, man or woman. Say, how in the hell did you get in here. I thought you told me that it was a myth that vampires could turn themselves into mist and enter locked rooms that way."

"I lied. Come to me, my darling." Celia put out her arms and stared into Raven's eyes. Raven tried to resist, but could not. She came forward until she was in Celia's arms.

"But Celia, if you suck my blood and make me weak, I won't be able to fight off Annie B."

"Don't worry about her. I'll take blood from her too. She'll sleep the night. In the morning she'll be more friendly."

Raven tilted her head to one side. In a moment she felt Celia's fangs like twin stilettos enter her throat. Her heart pumped faster. Soon, the erotic feeling of being sucked by a vampire overwhelmed her. In a few minutes, it was over. Celia helped her to her bunk.

"Before you go," Raven whispered, "I need a favor."

"Sure, darling. What can I do for you?"

"Go to Henry and tell him what happened to me. Tell him that although I love him dearly, I'll probably never see him again. He should go with his life and forget about me."

"I understand. I'll give him that message. Ciao, Raven dear."

VanGrimm faded away, first turning into a dark mist and finally vanishing into nothingness. A couple of minutes later the guard came by rattling his baton against the bars just to be annoying. Tears came into Raven's eyes as her thoughts turned to the lover she would never see again, Henry Bagyar, known also as The Beast.

* * * *

The next morning, as usual the guard knocked her baton hard against the bars and called, "Up and at 'em, Ladies."

Although Raven was still weak from loss of blood, she got out of bed quickly to beat Anna B to the commode. She had slept in her bra and panties because she had been too tired to put on the drab prison nightgown. After she did her business, she saw that Annie B was still asleep. She went over and shook her. Annie opened her eyes and groaned. "Christ Gal, you sure pack a wallop. I think I'm going to be

sick."

She staggered out of bed and vomited into the toilet. When she finished, Raven asked, "Are you all right? They're taking us to the shower room soon."

"Yeah. Just a little woozy and weak. Awful hungry too."

"Maybe that's it. You'll feel better after breakfast."

A few minutes later, the entrance to the cell was opened and the prisoners lined up in the corridor. A female guard herded them to the ice cold showers. Since there was no privacy, Raven noted that her cell mate had a spectacular figure. She thought, *Maybe I should've done it with her. But no, it's good that we had the fight, so she can see that I'm no pushover.*

When they returned to their cell, Annie B said, "You're quite a street fighter. Let's call a truce. No sense kicking the hell out of each other all the time."

Raven held out her hand. "I agree. If you want something from me, ask nice and take no for an answer if I'm not in the mood. Okay?"

"Sure, Honky." Annie B grinned at her.

"And don't call me Honky, unless you want me to call you Nigger. My name's Raven."

"All right, Raven. We friends?"

Raven smiled back. "Sure, friends."

Annie B touched the spot where she had two small wounds. "Say Raven, what the hell did you use on my neck. It hurts like someone stabbed me."

"Long fingernails." She showed her cell mate the back of the hands. Her nails were long and pointed.

"You'll have to show me that trick."

It was time to go to breakfast and from there to their work stations.

* * * *

From that day on, Raven and Annie B were buddies. Annie B introduced her to others in her gang. She confided to her that she murdered her boyfriend because "The bastard was a lying, no-good cheating son-of-a-bitch. While I was out busting my ass turning tricks for him, he was bringing ladies to our apartment. After I did him, I cut off his balls and prick and pickled them for a reminder." She cackled as though this was the funniest thing in the world. "So why did you murder somebody?"

"It wasn't me. It was my ... uh, twin sister. Our DNA is so much alike the cops think I did this guy. I was a shamus. The murdered guy was somebody I was interviewing on account of a case."

Annie B winked at her. "Sure, sure. Okay, if you don't want to tell me what really happened, I don't give a crap."

* * * *

The days and weeks went slowly. Raven hated the regimented life with a passion. Every once in a while her lawyer would show up to tell her that another appeal had failed, but not to despair. If there had not been a plastic screen between them, Raven would have kicked her in the butt.

One night Celia came to the jail to take blood from her two victims, or donors as she called them. As before, she put Annie B in a trance. When she finished drinking from both, she said to Raven, "I gave your message to The Beast. He told me that without you, he has no life."

"How romantic of him. But, oh dear, I hope he doesn't do anything foolish. I'd be devastated if I was the cause of his becoming so melancholy that he harmed himself. Tell him that. Tell him that I love him more than anything. Although I'm behind bars, and he can't appear in public, we can communicate through you or the mail. Tell him I miss him awfully too."

"Certainly, darling. I'll also say that regardless of how hopeless things look at present, something may come up in the future. Perhaps one of your appeals will be granted."

Raven kissed the vampire's cold clammy cheek. "Thank you, Celia. You're a good friend."

* * * *

The following Sunday, Raven was told she had a visitor. She could not imagine who it could be, unless it was one of her Wiccan friends. Since she had been incarcerated, they were the only ones who even wrote to her. To her surprise and dismay, it was Peter Johnson, Peter Magbertius' current persona. Since she had seen him last, he had grown a beard and allowed his hair to grow long so that he closely resembled the man whose spirit now inhabited an animated corpse.

Peter Magbertius was an eighteenth century sorcerer who had been executed for witchcraft. Through sorcery he had Raven go through a time door to a period ten years after his execution. Raven brought along his spirit which was locked within an ancient clay bottle. She and Cassandra, his eighteenth century wife, brought him back to life. Through sorcery he made Raven his mistress and slave. Eventually they returned to the twenty-first century. However, being unused to modern technology, he accidentally electrocuted himself. Sometime later, while Raven was investigating a case involving a missing corpse, she discovered that a woman named Olivia was animating corpses. Because Magbertius spirit promised to make Lenore Raven, Raven's doppelganger, confess to her crime, Raven used her psychic abilities to allow him to inhabit one of the animated corpses, which made it indistinguishable from a living man since it no longer suffered the deterioration of the dead.

Raven picked up the telephone that allowed her to talk to her visitor. Magbertius said, "Hello, my dear. I'm sorry I was not able to visit you sooner, but I've been extremely busy trying to find my place in this strange, weird world of yours."

"Who told you that I wanted you to visit me at all. When we parted, I made it clear that I never wanted to see you again."

Raven was about to hang up the phone and call the guard to bring her back to her cell when Magbertius said, "Wait. I have something important I want to say."

She sighed. "Okay. What is it?"

"During the short time we lived together, I fell in love with you. I want you to be my life partner, my wife. I promise not to fool with your mind or try to make you do things against your will."

"How can I trust you? Even if I thought I loved you, how would I know that you weren't simply putting a spell on me?"

Magbertius shrugged. "You must simply take my word of honor as a gentleman and someone who loves you."

"Too late, Peter. I'm in love with someone else."

"The half-man, half-beast creature?"

"Yes. Don't get any ideas of harming him either. If you do, you'll get nothing but hate from me. Besides, this is all hypothetical. I've been sentenced to life in prison."

"I could find a way of releasing you. If you agree to be my wife, not only would you be free, but I would make you empress of the world."

Raven laughed. "You're so full of bullshit. Empress of the world is it. I suppose that would be because you're going to become emperor."

Magbertius scowled. "You laugh. But that is exactly my intention. I have met a man, a natural philosopher—in the language of today you would probably call him a scientist—who can do something that will allow me to control the world."

"You're mad, a delusional psychopath. I want nothing to do with you."

That Magbertius' temper rose was evident on his face. Raven did not want to be around when he exploded. She hung up the phone and called the guard over. "Take me back to my cell. And if this creep shows up again, I don't want to see him."

"Sure thing, Raven. Who is he? An old boy friend?"

"One that I'm absolutely through with."

As she passed through the door leading to the cell block, she glanced back. Magbertius was giving her the evil eye. In her mind, she heard his voice. He was telepathically speaking to her; the words were full of venom. "You will be sorry that you turned down my offer and treated me in this manner."

She shuddered and hoped that there was not a way that he could harm her while she was in prison.

* * * *

A few days later she had another visitor. "It's not that Peter Johnson again, is it?" she asked the guard.

"I had that Johnson character put on the No Visit list. He won't bother you again. Your latest visitor is with Homeland Security."

Raven wondered who that could be. She hoped it had something to do with her appeal.

Instead of taking her to the normal visitor area, the guard brought her to an interview room. Sitting behind the table and rising to shake Raven's hand was a tall, good looking man with olive skin wearing a suit and tie.

When Raven took his hand, he said, "Raven Lenore, my name Jack Grant, I'm Deputy Chief of Staff of Public Safety for Illinois. It's the local branch of the United States Department of Homeland Security."

"Grant? I would've taken you for Hispanic or Italian."

"Hispanic. On my mother's side. She emigrated from Ecuador."

After they took their seats, Grants said to the guard, "Please leave us alone. What I have to discuss with Ms. Lenore is confidential. It has to do with national security."

"Okay. But give a holler if she gives you any trouble. I'll be right outside the door. She's a murderess, y'know."

"Don't worry. She won't give me any trouble."

After the guard left, Grant asked, "Do you think this room is bugged?"

"It's not supposed to be. It's used when prisoners meet with their lawyers. So, what does a deputy director from Homeland Security want with me? Does this have anything to do with that case I was working with FBI Agent Martin Kopinski?"

"No. I knew him well and am saddened over his tragic death. I understand that you were instrumental in solving his last case. He and his partner, Jacobs, spoke highly of you."

Raven smiled sadly. "In that case, the truth is that the perp caught me. He kidnapped me in hopes that I could lead him to a certain antique bottle. Martin rescued me moments before the perp was about to kill me. To this day I don't know how Martin found me."

"Nonetheless, I have a large file about your career as a private investigator. You've been in several bad predicaments and came out on top. You're also dependable, smart and think on your feet. You're also someone who can be trusted to keep secrets and go where many would not dare."

"Where did you get all that? Surely, not from my working on one case with Martin."

He chuckled. "Your former client, Michael Ellul, has many good things to say about you. He indicated that you're a psychic."

Raven chuckled. "You make me sound like some kind of superhero."

"Perhaps you are. I believe your story that the real killer of Peter Morgan was your twin, this Lenore Raven, as she calls herself, and that you had nothing to do with the murder. Y'know, the police still haven't caught her. Her escape was quite mysterious. She's seems to have vanished from the face of the earth without a trace."

"She's a tricky gal. Have you got a smoke?"

"Is it allowed?"

"Just in here." Raven pointed to an ashtray. "As a convenience for the lawyers."

Grant held a half full pack out for her to take a cigarette. She took the entire pack instead, tapped one

out and put the pack in her pocket. She placed the cigarette between her lips and leaned forward. Grant lit it for her. She took a deep drag. "Ah, that's good. I haven't had a cancer stick for months. Now that you're finished telling me how much you admire me, what's your game?"

"How would you like to get out of here with a full pardon?"

Raven's eyes narrowed. "Don't joke about a thing like that."

"I'm not joking. I can arrange it."

Raven took another deep drag on the cigarette. "What's the catch? Do you want me to assassinate someone?"

Grant flushed. "It may come to that. The thing that I want you to do, I dare not tell you here. Perhaps this room is not bugged, but I'll bet Ms. Muscles who brought you here doesn't have her ears plugged."

Raven whispered, "I wouldn't be surprised if she's got her ear glued to the door. Mary's as nosy as they come and a notorious gossip."

"All I can say is that there's a case I want you to work on which involves extreme danger and requires working without a net so to speak."

"Like if I get in trouble, you won't bail me out?"

"You've got the idea."

"Anything's better than rotting away in here. I rather face lions without a weapon than spend the rest of my life making license plates."

"It's a deal then. Once you're out, I'll give you a full briefing."

"One request. I want you to obtain a release for my cell mate."

Grant frowned and stroked his chin. "I don't know. It'll be hard enough to get you a pardon."

"In her case, a full pardon won't be necessary. Get her paroled. Look. I don't know what you want me to do, but it's almost certain to involve illegal stuff. Otherwise, you wouldn't be recruiting someone who's in prison. Also, there was that remark about working without a net. Well, Annie B has a lot of underworld contacts that might come in handy."

"I'll see what I can do." He stood then and put out his hand. "Do we have a deal?"

Raven took it. "Deal."

When Raven returned to her cell, she told her good news to Annie. She gave her half of the cigarettes in the pack that she had taken from Grant. They had a little celebration that evening on homemade hooch that Annie had gotten from another convict.

* * * *

It took a couple of weeks for Grant to arrange a pardon for Raven and a parole for Annie B. Annie was so grateful that she vowed to face any danger with Raven. Raven laughed, "You may have to. I don't

know what this guy Grant wants me to do, but it's not going to be any walk in the park. I need a street savvy gal like you to watch my back."

Annie B replied, "I'm your gal. I'm ready for anything." She bent her arm so that her biceps bulged.

On Thursday, the day of their release, the warden handed Raven a thick envelope. It contained ten thousand dollars, drivers licenses and a note from Grant. The letter said that the money was an advance for services to be rendered and to report to the Homeland Security Chicago headquarters on the following Monday. When Raven showed Annie B, her former cell mate whistled. "Lady, you wasn't kidding when you told me we were in for some dangerous work. Nobody hands out this kind of money unless they think you're gonna be knee deep in shit."

The two women were taken by a government limousine to an apartment Grant had leased for them. It was located across from Lincoln Park near where Raven had lived before going to prison.

Friday the two women shopped for new clothes. Raven enjoyed the experience. This was the first time for a long time that she had a real girlfriend to do things with, like shop.

* * * *

On Saturday, Raven made her way to the underground den of The Beast, Henry Bagyar. When she first entered, Bagyar stared at her as though he had seen an incredible vision. She approached him hesitantly, not sure what his reaction would be after their long separation. "Hi, Henry. How's it going?"

"I can't believe my eyes. You're really here." His lips quivered. "I-I thought I would never see you again."

"Didn't Celia tell you that I was being released?"

"She gave me all your messages. They were the only things that kept me from suicidal thoughts. But I still dared not hope that I would see you again. It seemed impossible that your sentence would be commuted."

Raven smiled. "My pardon came with strings attached. But I'll tell you all about that later."

She fell into his arms. He crushed her to his chest. When she raised her chin, he licked her face, his way of kissing—for Bagyar was half animal. He was conceived when his mother made love with a werewolf in its wolf form. As a result, he was half man, half beast. His animal head was a cross between a wolf and warthog. He had a snout, tusks and furry hair all over his body. His hands were leathery with claws instead of fingernails. Nonetheless, Raven knew his inner beauty and his many admirable characteristics: bravery, a strong sense of ethics, patience, and empathy for others.

Tears of joy at being together again ran down their cheeks. They continued to neck which turned into heavy petting. Soon they laid down on the blankets Bagyar used for a bed and made fierce passionate love.

When they finished, Raven lit a cigarette and told her lover about prison life and how she came to be released.

"What does this Martin want you to do that he went through all that trouble of getting you and this Annie B out of prison and gives you a ten thousand dollar advance to boot?" Bagyar's forehead creased with concern. "I don't like it. It must be something extremely dangerous."

Raven put her hand to his cheek and smiled. "I'm sure it is. Don't worry about me. I've dealt with danger before and always came through unscathed. What I'm afraid of is that we may need to part again for a while."

His expression became stern, and he let out a low growl. "Despite my deformity, I'll follow you, wherever you're sent. Somehow, we'll find a way."

Her smile brightened to a full grin. "You're such a courageous and loving person. I adore you so much." She kissed his lips and tongue. Soon they were making love again.

Before she left him, she said, "Monday, I'm to meet with Grant. Afterwards, I'll come here as quickly as possible and tell you all about the assignment."

"You must also tell Celia VanGrimm. She's done a lot for us. If it wasn't for her, I might never have met you."

At the mention of Celia's name, Raven felt the need to have the vampire suck her blood kick in. In a way being a vampire's donor was like being a drug addict. "I'll look her up tonight."

* * * *

When Raven returned to her apartment, Annie B was resting in a recliner watching TV with a beer in her hand. "Hi Raven. Say Girl, this is the life. It's what I missed in prison."

Raven chuckled. "You'd better take advantage of it now. Once we start on this case, leisure time will be over."

Her former cell mate lifted her beer in salute. "Whatever you say, Boss. By the way, where were you? Your clothes are all wrinkled, dirty and full of hair."

"To see my boy friend. We rolled around on the floor a lot."

Annie B burst out laughing. When she stopped, she said, "Not much of a housekeeper, is he."

"You're right there. When it comes to his place, you'd think an animal lived there."

"Take my advise, Girl. Stay away from those messy guys. You'll spend your life picking up after them."

"If we ever start living together, I'll use my male training program on him. Say, Annie B, we'll be going out tonight about eleven. There's someone you need to meet."

"A night person, I assume. We going to a nightclub or something?"

"No. Dress casual. I'm wearing my usual jeans, T-shirt and leather jacket. Be sure to wear sneakers."

"Great. I didn't feel like dressing up. Who is this person?"

"I'd like to keep that as a surprise. She's female, so don't get all hot and bothered."

Annie B rolled her eyes. "Is she good looking? You know I swing both ways."

Raven chuckled. "You'll find out tonight." She thought, *And your heart will beat hard and your blood will flow hot.*

* * * *

They left the apartment a little after eleven and took the Clark Street bus to Graceland Cemetery. When they got off, Annie B said, "Hey. This is a cemetery. What kind of person do you meet in such a place? Besides, it's closed at night."

Raven grinned at her. "That's why I told you to wear sneakers. We're going to climb over the wall."

"What kind of craziness is this? Busting into a cemetery at..." She glanced at her watch. "...midnight. Is this some of your nutty Wiccan stuff?"

"Not exactly. You're not chicken about going into the place of the dead at night, are you?" She chuckled.

"Hey. I ain't scared of nothing, especially not dead people."

How about undead people, thought Raven.

They found a place where they were hidden by a tree that grew between the street and the sidewalk. Since Raven was the smaller of the two, Annie B clasped her hands together for Raven to use as a step. With a lift and a leap, she was atop the wall. She lay on her stomach, reached down, grasped Annie B's wrist and helped her up. They leaped into the cemetery. Using flashlights they made their way along the paths between the monuments. Raven avoided the statue of the grim reaper where she had scattered the ashes of Peter Magbertius' original body.

The cemetery was as silent as the dead buried there. The only sound was the rustling of leaves. Nonetheless, the crying, moaning and whispering of the dead entered Raven's psychically sensitive mind. She shivered convulsively.

Annie B said, "What the hell you shaking about? A few minutes ago you teased me about being scared in a cemetery at night."

Raven did not reply. Soon they were by the tomb where Celia slept.

Annie B said, "We ain't going in there, are we? Coming to a cemetery at night is one thing, but I ain't going into no dead house." Her eyes became wide. "I got a strange feeling, like somebody I know is nearby. Somebody who's been doing something to me while I was asleep. I don't like it."

Suddenly Celia stood in front of them. Annie B cried, "Jesus Christ, where the fuck did you come from?"

Instead of replying, Celia said, "So you two are out of prison. I've been thirsting for you." She let out her strange giggle.

Raven said, "I don't think you two have been formally introduced. Annie B, this is Celia VanGrimm."

Annie B put out her hand. "Hi Celia." She raised her flashlight to get a good look at the vampire. "Mother ... you're the whitest honky I ever saw. You must never get out in the sun."

"How true," Celia replied and took Annie B's hand.

"And cold. Your hand feels like a corpse's." She withdrew her hand quickly.

Raven said, "I think Celia wants something from you, something she's been taking without you knowing about it."

Annie B said in a trembling voice, "I don't like this. What's going on Raven?" She backed away from Celia.

Celia stared at her intently. Annie B got a tight expression on her face as though fighting against something. Nonetheless, she came closer to the vampire, slowly, one foot at a time.

Raven said, "Don't fight it, Annie. It's too late for that. Celia, don't put her into a trance. I want her to feel the pleasure of the dark drink."

Celia put her arms around Annie B and put her mouth on the woman's throat. Annie B turned a chalky tan with fright and let out a little cry of pain as the vampire's fangs penetrated. Her expression slowly changed from absolute terror to pleasure. Raven became restless with anticipation for her own turn. It was only a few minutes, but to her it seemed an eternity when Celia withdrew her fangs and gently lowered Annie B to the ground.

She turned to Raven. "She'll be okay in a little while, darling. Take her to that all-night bar and grill across from the cemetery where they serve nice thick and bloody rare hamburgers."

"I will." Raven stepped into Celia's embrace. She hungered for the feel of her blood being sucked into the vampire's craw. Even the pain of her fangs pricking her skin was a kind of masochistic pleasure. As her heart thumped wildly against her chest, the ecstasy was overwhelming. It was as though the more often Celia sucked her blood, the more pleasurable the experience. All too soon, it was over. Celia led her to a bench. She helped Annie B over to it.

By that time, Annie B had recovered a bit. "What just happened?" she asked.

"Celia is a vampire. We're donors. Our blood keeps her alive. Don't worry, Celia won't take enough to harm us. It's no worse than donating blood to the Red Cross once a month."

"Has she been taking blood from me while we were in the can? Is that why I felt like shit some mornings?"

"Yes. She put you in a trance."

"Motherfuck. I thought it had something to do with my period."

Celia asked, "How did you two get out of prison?"

Raven told her about the deal with Jack Grant.

"Sounds like trouble. But I guess you feel your freedom is worth whatever he wants from you. Where are you two staying?"

Raven gave her the address. "But I'm not sure how long we'll be there. It'll depend on what Grant has in

mind."

"You'll let me know, of course, darling."

"Of course. You know we need you as much as you need us."

"Not quite. You might suffer, but I would wither away and die if I didn't have my donors."

Raven chuckled. "I'm sure you'd find someone other than us."

They conversed for a while and separated. Raven took Annie B to the grill that served half-raw hamburgers. During their late supper, Raven related the story of how she met Celia VanGrimm and how she became her donor.

Annie B shook her head. "And I always thought that stuff about vampires was a lot of hooey that was only in books and movies."

Raven smiled. *You've got more shocks coming*, she thought. *Wait until you meet my half-animal boyfriend.*

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CHAPTER 2. THE ASSIGNMENT

The building that housed the Illinois branch of the Homeland Security Department was located on Michigan Avenue between the Wrigley Building and the Tribune Tower. The lobby was enormous and busy with several banks of elevators. These were blocked by gates that required a badge and a stroll through a metal detector to enter.

To one side was an information booth. Raven and Annie B waited in a queue to talk to the clerk. Raven said, "We have an appointment with Deputy Chief Grant."

"Your names, please and a picture ID."

"Raven Lenore and Annebelle Jackson." They showed their drivers licenses.

"One moment please." The clerk typed their names into her computer. "Yes. Here it is." She lifted up her phone and dialed. "Ms Lenore and Ms Jackson for Deputy Chief Grant." She listened for a moment and hung up. "Someone will be down to escort you. Please stand to one side. Thank you."

Five minutes later a young good-looking man in a dark suit came to the desk. He said, "Deputy Chief Grant's visitors?"

The clerk pointed them out. The young man approached them with an ingratiating smile on his face. "Ms. Lenore and Ms Jackson, my name is Brad Dirk. I'm to escort you to Deputy Chief Grant's office."

Annie B grinned back. "A good looking fella like you can escort me anywhere. By the way, why don't you call me Annie B? That's what all my *good* friends call me." She took his arm as though they were walking down the aisle of a church to be wed.

Dirk's face reddened. Nevertheless, he led them to a special gate to one side. After they went through the metal detector, the guard handed them visitor badges. Once through security, they went to an express elevator located in an area by itself. All the time Dirk politely fended off Annie B's flirtatious remarks which she chattered at him in a steady stream. Raven had to hold back a giggle at the intern's discomfort. After the elevator zoomed them to the twenty-first floor in two minutes, they stepped off it into a tastefully decorated office waiting area. Dirk announced their arrival to the receptionist, who immediately rose and opened the inner office door. "Deputy Director Grant is ready for you."

Dirk said politely, "It's been a pleasure escorting you here, Ladies."

Annie B replied, "Believe me, the pleasure was all ours."

Raven whispered in her ear, "You sure got the hots for that boy."

Annie B whispered back, "After two years in the slammer, I got the hots for anything that wears pants."

Grant's office was as large as most living rooms with paneled walls hung with photographs that depicted various activities of the department. On one wall was the Great Seal of the United States and the Seal of the State of Illinois. Below the seals were large portraits of President Washburn and Illinois Governor LaSalle. Behind the enormous dark mahogany desk was a window wall which offered a panoramic view of Lake Michigan and miles of Chicago real estate.

Grant walked around his desk to shake their hands. "How's everything? Is your apartment satisfactory? And since you're here, I assume you received your advance payment."

Raven said, "Everything's hunky dory. We've been having a ball spending the government's money. Now, falls the other shoe. What do we have to do to earn it?"

"I'll explain everything in detail. Um ... I'm surprised that you brought Ms Jackson along though."

"She's my partner now. She'll be working with me on whatever it is you want me to do."

Grant raised his eyebrows. "I see. Nonetheless, what I have to tell you is extremely sensitive. Ms Jackson, I'd appreciate it if you would wait in the outer office while I brief Ms. Lenore. We will decide between us how much of this information can be shared with you. I'm sorry. But it must be that way. It has to with national security."

Annie B glanced towards Raven. Raven indicated with a little nod that she should leave the room. Annie B grinned. "Okeydokey. Maybe that nice young man who brought us up on the elevator is around to chat with." She left the room.

When she was gone, Grant said, "Ms Jackson is a criminal with a long rap sheet. What makes you believe she can be trusted?"

"A long rap sheet and a criminal record may be just what you need. Gang members are often required to keep secrets on penalty of death. She's lived by that code. Also, her underworld contacts may be useful. Besides, she's indebted to me for obtaining her release from prison. I have another reason for trusting her implicitly, something which I prefer not to tell you."

"Does this have anything to do with your midnight visit to Graceland Cemetery?"

"So, you had a tail on us. He or she must be quite good. I never noticed. To answer, your question ... or rather not to answer it. Perhaps."

"I'm aware that you're a Wiccan. Because you went to a cemetery, I assume that you went there to perform an initiation or ritual. Okay, I'll buy that you did something that will assure her loyalty."

"Now that that's settled, get on with it. What do you want from us?"

Grant sighed. In a lowered voice, he said, "Do you watch the news often?"

"Whenever I have the time."

"Have you noticed any changes in the president of the United States?"

"Yeah. I voted for him in the last election. At the time he espoused a liberal yet libertarian agenda. Now he seems to have done an about face and seems to want to increase the power of the federal government, especially the executive branch. Also, his memory seems to have improved; he makes fewer flubs in his speeches."

"Exactly. About six months ago, he went on a fishing trip in Maine. When he came back, he had a new best friend and advisor, a certain Nicholas Machiavelli."

"Machiavelli, like the sixteenth century philosopher?"

Grant nodded. "This guy seems to have come out of nowhere. A background check revealed nothing. Before six months ago it was as though he did not exist. No relatives. No friends. No neighbors. No hospital records. We're still checking to determine whether he's using a false identity. So far, no luck."

"So you want me to check up on this guy Machiavelli, using my own methods?"

"Among other things. Somehow this Machiavelli has some kind of strange hold on the president. It may be hypnotic. As you pointed out, President Washburn's policies seem to be almost the reverse of they had been. Now they are all about increasing his own power. Also he seems stilted and awkward in his everyday dealings with the people around him. Even the first lady has noticed the change in him."

"There are ways of placing people in trances to control them. There's also such a thing as bodily possession, where a person's body is taken over by a spirit, demon or even by the aura of another living person."

"That's the very reason I've called upon you for this assignment. Agent Kopinski told me about your psychic abilities and knowledge of the occult."

"So you believe the occult is involved."

Grant shrugged. "That's for you to determine. Nonetheless, my references to the occult must be kept in the strictest confidence. Even your partner, the loyal Ms Jackson must not be told. If it ever gets out that I believe in the occult or had dealings in that regard, my career is over. In fact, my suspicions concerning the president must also be kept in the strictest confidence. You may tell your partner that you're investigating Mr. Machiavelli. Everyone knows that I'm doing that."

"So that's the job. You want me to go to DC and look into what I can find out about Machiavelli and how he's controlling the president. How can I get close enough to them to do that?"

"I will notify Deputy Secretary Osburne that you're investigating Machiavelli, that he is to introduce you to him and President Washburn and that your role in the investigation of Machiavelli must not be known by the president. How you proceed after you're introduced to the two men is up to you. This Machiavelli considers himself a ladies man. You might work on him from that angle. Or am being sexist?"

Raven grinned. She was not one for political correctness. "No. I'm not above using my womanly charms to get the job done. Is that it? So far, the job seems like a piece of cake."

"One more thing. I doubt whether you'll get the whole story in Washington. After you find out all you can in D.C., I want you to go to Maine to find out what happened on that fishing trip."

"As they say in Jamaica, no problem. What am I missing? Where's the danger? Why have you gone through so much trouble to get me out of prison and paying big bucks for my services?"

Grant's gaze went to the spectacular view from his office. "I believe that Machiavelli works for a larger organization. They may use rough tactics to prevent us finding out what their game is. I'm sure murder is not out of the question. You'll have to watch out for them."

"From what you've told me, I think you're right. This Machiavelli must be the front man. Powerful people or an enemy government are probably behind him."

"Now you have the outline of the task before you, do you see any problems?"

Raven had a hunch that Grant was holding something back. Chances were though that he would not tell her at this meeting. He would wait until she was in the soup up to her ears and had to swim for her life.
"So far, no."

"Okay. I'll call Ms. Jackson in. We'll explain the job as simply looking into the mysterious Mr. Machiavelli's background and that there may be danger from whatever organization he's associated. Everything else we discussed is between you and I."

"Agreed. However, if I do discover that there's an occult aspect to this case, I may have to inform her of that. She'll need to know."

"That's okay, as long as you make it clear that I don't believe in it."

Grant signaled his secretary to send Annie B back in. He briefed about their surveillance of Machiavelli and the danger that might be involved.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Grant. I know how to deal with hired killers. You get them before they get you."

Grant cleared his throat. "If that's the way you decide to handle them, it had better be self-defense, or you'll find yourself right back in the slammer. I can't get you off a second time for murder, even of a hired assassin."

"That's my lookout. I understand."

"Okay. I'll have my secretary make airline and hotel reservations for you."

Raven held her hand up as he started to buzz his secretary. "Nix on the airline. Have her rent a car. We'll drive."

"Fear of flying?"

"That's not it. I have private reasons for wanting to drive. For one thing, when I'm on a job, I like to be armed at all times if at all possible."

"I can understand that, but when you meet the president, your weapons must be left behind."

Raven nodded.

After Raven and Annie B left the building, Annie B asked, "How come you didn't want to fly down to DC? That business about not carrying was bullshit. You could've put your piece in your checked luggage."

"The real reason that I want to drive instead of fly is that I'm bringing my boyfriend along."

"So I'll finally get to meet this guy. But why couldn't you get him an airline reservation on your own hook. Or is he the one who is afraid of flying?"

"In a sense, but not for the usual reasons. You'll see why when you meet him."

"Oh yeah. Y'know there's something peculiar about the romance between you and him. He never visited you in prison. He never comes to our apartment. What is it with this guy?"

"Your questions will be answered when you see him."

"In other words, until then, you're keeping your big honky mouth shut about him."

"You got it."

* * * *

Bagyar skulked behind Raven as she walked into her apartment. He wore a sweatshirt with a hood. The hood was pulled far forward to hide his face. In addition he had on a baseball cap with the brim pulled down and gloves on his hands. Annie B, who had been packing their bags, came up to him and felt his upper arm. "Thought so. A muscle man. So you're the brute who's stolen Raven's heart. Let's see your handsome face, big boy."

Raven said, "Don't pay any attention to her remarks, Henry. This smart aleck is my friend Annabelle Jackson who I've told you about. We call her Annie B. Annie, get ready for a little shock. Henry darling, show her what you look like."

Bagyar removed the cap and pulled down his hood. "Nice to meet you, Annie B."

Annie B's eyes went round as saucers, and her mouth hung slack. "Motherfucker! He's got the face of an animal." She chuckled. "I get it. Your wearing a mask. Sure is realistic. Big joke on me."

Bagyar shook his head. "No joke. This is my real face. I'm half beast."

Annie B looked from him to Raven and back again. She touched Bagyar's cheek and nose and withdrew her hand quickly. "Shit. He isn't kidding."

Raven said, "Don't worry. He won't bite. Now you know why we're driving to D.C. instead of flying.."

Annie B said, "Jesus, Raven. You never cease to amaze me. You really are a witch. You have strange friends, a vampire and ... and this whatever-he-is."

"I may be full of more surprises. Still want to be my sidekick?"

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Okay. Now apologize to my boyfriend for your rude remarks."

Annie B looked sheepish. "I'm sorry Mr. Bagyar. It was awful of me to say what I did. I'm usually not that way with people with deformities. Please forgive me."

Bagyar said, "Forgiven. I know what a shock it is to people when they first see me. I'm sure we'll be great friends." He put his arms around Annie B. Although she allowed him to hug her, she looked extremely uncomfortable.

* * * *

It was a sixteen hour drive to Washington, including rest stops. To keep Bagyar from being seen, they bought their meals at drive-through windows at fast food restaurants. He took his bathroom breaks on the side of the road in among bushes or stands of trees. Grant's secretary had made reservations at the JW Marriot on Pennsylvania Ave. Before leaving their rented car, Bagyar hid his face with his sweatshirt and cap as before. As they followed the bellboy with their bags into their room. Annie B cried, "Holy crap, this place is the Ritziest. Say Raven, as long as we get to live like this while we're investigating that Italian guy, don't be too quick about it."

Raven pointed a finger to her lips to indicate that the room might be bugged. She whispered in Annie B's ear, "No discussing any aspect of the case while we're here or inside any other building unless I say it's okay."

"Gotcha." She opened the refrigerator and peered in. It was loaded with several brands of beer and a bottle of champagne. She turned to Raven and Henry, "You guys want some beer. Our fairy godfather left a shit load."

Raven said, "Heineken, if there is any."

Bagyar said, "I've never drank beer. Is it as good as people say?"

"Better. I'll start you off with a bottle of light." She handed a bottle of Coors Light to Bagyar and took out Heinekens for herself and Raven.

They relaxed for a while, chatting about nonconsequential subjects. After they finished their beers, Bagyar helped Annie B unpack while Raven took out her cell phone and dialed the Department of Homeland Security. Deputy Secretary Osburne's personal assistant answered.

"This is Raven Lenore. Just wanted the deputy secretary to know that I and my partner are in town and staying at the J.W. Marriott, Room 1015."

"I'll inform him of your arrival. Thank you." He hung up.

"Short and sweet," muttered Raven.

About ten minutes later, the room phone rang. Raven answered it.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Lenore. This is Deputy Secretary Osbourne. Are your accommodations satisfactory? Is there anything you need?"

"Everything's fine, Deputy Secretary. I assume Jack Grant has briefed you on our assignment."

"Yes, but that shouldn't be discussed over the phone. Wait. I'll put you on hold until I have my personal assistant check my calendar." Elevator music came on the phone for a few minutes. Osbourne came back on the line. "We'll meet for dinner. Friday evening at seven. There are a couple of fine restaurants in your hotel. Which would you prefer, American or International cuisine?"

"American. May I bring my assistant?"

"Of course. I'll have my assistant make a reservation at the Avenue Grill."

"Great. See you Friday, Deputy Secretary."

"Good evening, Ms Lenore. Hope you enjoy your stay here in Washington."

"I'm sure I will."

After Raven hung up, she said, "Who's up for dinner? I'm starved."

Because of Bagyar, they ordered room service.

* * * *

When Raven and Annie B arrived at the restaurant, Osbourne was seated and working on a martini. He was in his early sixties, slightly paunchy and tried to conceal his bald spot with a comb over. His suit, however, was of the best quality. He rose, and the women introduced themselves. When they were seated again, the waitress took their drink orders, bourbon with a beer chaser for Annie B, white wine for Raven and a second martini for Osbourne. Osbourne said, "Let's not discuss business until after our meal. Okay?"

"Fine with us," replied Raven.

They chatted about the weather, and about the differences between Chicago and Washington, as they made their way through an appetizer, salad, rare prime rib and another round of drinks. They ordered Irish coffee. Annie B and Osbourne ordered desert. Raven could tell that Annie B was enjoying herself to the fullest. Because of her impoverished childhood, a no-good husband and later prison, she beamed as though she were in heaven at her present luxurious surroundings.

Osbourne started the discussion of their business. He kept his voice low and conspiratorial. "As I understand it, you're private detectives who Jack Grant hired to investigate this Machiavelli fellow. Jack feels that there's something fishy about him. Why didn't he simply use the FBI?"

"He told us he did, but they came up empty. Machiavelli may be able spot regular FBI. Annie and I are out of towners and hopefully don't seem like cops of any kind."

"Jack said you would need introductions to Machiavelli and President Washburn."

"We need to converse with them. We'll need a cover identity."

Osbourne rubbed his chin. "Hmm. There's a cocktail party, a reception for the ambassador from Brazil, next Wednesday. Both Machiavelli and Washburn will attend. I'll escort you myself and introduce you as a distant relative and her college roommate, here as tourists."

"Perfect. We were told that the president met Machiavelli during a fishing trip in Maine. Was he accompanied by secret service?"

"Of course. He goes nowhere without at least two secret service agents nearby at all times."

"I'd like to interview the ones who were with him on that fishing trip. They must be informed about our mission here, but warned not to let either Washburn or Machiavelli know of our purpose nor blow our cover."

"That can be arranged. I'll tell them of Grant's suspicions, but that it would be premature to allow the Commander-in-Chief in on the investigation. They're quite responsible about security. I'll call you at your hotel to let you know when you may meet with them."

"Use my cell phone number." Raven wrote it down for him.

They ordered another round of drinks to celebrate their plan. By this time, Annie B was buzzed. She flirted with Osbourne, who was also inebriated and quite flattered at the young woman's attentions.

Finally, Raven had to whisper into Annie B's ear, "You can't go home with him. It wouldn't be professional."

This started Annie B giggling.

Raven said to Osbourne, "I think Annie B's had too much to drink. I'd better take her up to our room."

"Of course. We don't want a scene. I'll leave myself as soon as I pay the check." He signaled the waitress. "Goodnight, Ladies. Oh, one thing. Did you bring formal evening dresses? You'll need them for the reception."

"We'll shop for something appropriate."

"Looking forward to seeing you there." His eyes were glued on Annie B's spectacular figure.

* * * *

The next day Raven and Annie B shopped for evening dresses. They vied with each other as to whose gown would be the sexiest. Eventually, Raven settled on a full length black cocktail dress with pipe stem straps, cut to just above her crack in the back, with a side slit to her upper thigh and much of her bosom showing. Annie B's was just as revealing except that it was white and almost transparent. After purchasing the dresses, they ate lunch in a sandwich shop. Raven bought takeout for Bagyar.

When they returned to their hotel room, they modeled the dresses for Bagyar, who gave them each a

long low wolf howl in appreciation of their sexy appearance. He sighed and said, "I wish I was going with you. I've never attended a public affair or even a party."

Raven caressed him to relieve his melancholy. Eventually she led him into the bedroom of their suite and allowed him to undress her. His kiss on her throat became fire in her veins. As their bodies melted together, the flames grew to an intense heat until perspiration flowed from every pore. The sheets were soaked by the time they climaxed together.

Afterwards, Bagyar said, "As long as I have you, I won't ever miss the company of others in my life."

"Oh Bagyar, I never want to be parted from you again." She hugged his shaggy body as though she would never let it go.

They fell asleep in that position.

* * * *

Their nap was interrupted by Raven's cell phone ringing. Sleepily she said, "Raven, here."

"This is Deputy Secretary Osbourne. I've set up a meeting with the two secret service agents for five o'clock at my office. I'll send a car around for you. It'll be there at four thirty. Any problems?"

Raven checked the alarm clock on the night stand. It was just after three. Plenty time. "Okay. I'll wait in the lobby."

"Isn't your partner coming with?" He sounded disappointed.

Raven grinned. She thought, *Apparently the deputy director likes his women and his coffee the same way, black and sweet*. "She'll be along." It wouldn't hurt for Annie B start a close relationship with Osbourne.

"By the way, how is she? A bit hung over, I assume."

"Not that much. I'm sure she'll perk right up when she hears that she'll be seeing you again."

"Really? Has she mentioned me?" There was longing in his voice. Raven figured that he was a lonely, lonely man. She recalled that he was a widower.

"She was quite taken with your charm and sophistication."

Raven had to stifle a laugh until their conversation ended. Bagyar stared at her. "Why were you telling the man those lies?"

She patted his cheek. "Lies are part of the PI business. It never hurts to tell people what they want to hear. C'mon, Henry. Let's take a shower together. I must smell like an animal myself at this point."

* * * *

Before they left for the meeting with the secret service agents, Raven told Annie B that Osbourne had the hots for her.

"Oh yeah? Well, for an old man he ain't half bad. Good sense of humor too. I like that in a man."

"I'm glad you like him. Flirt with him as much as you like, but don't let it get the point where you actually date him. This is a powerful and famous man. I don't want to see your face spread all over the tabloids. Bad for business."

"That could happen? Crazy. Little old Annebelle Jackson mistress to the rich and powerful." She had an insane grin on her face.

"Don't get any ideas. Your fifteen minutes of fame could cause us to lose this gig."

"Understand, Kemosabe."

* * * *

The meeting took place in Osbourne's office which was large but sparse compared to Grant's. The desk was plain. The only wall decoration was the official seal of the Department of Homeland Security and a portrait of President Washburn. His window overlooked the parking lot. Because the office was small, Osbourne led Raven and Annie B to a conference room. The secret service agents had already arrived. They stood as they were introduced. Both wore identical charcoal gray suits and conservative ties. The one named Carl Joseph was in his mid thirties, tall and sported a thin mustache. Mike Perkins was shorter, blonde and muscular.

Osbourne sat at one end of the table. Annie B took a seat to his right. Raven sat next to her. The two agents sat across from Raven.

Raven said, "Has the deputy secretary told you why you're here?"

Perkins replied, "You're secretly investigating Nicholas Machiavelli. For now, this investigation is to be kept from President Washburn."

"That's right. From the information available to me, I understand that he made his first appearance on a fishing trip in Maine. I'd like you to describe in detail how the president came to meet this man."

They looked at each other with guilty expressions. Finally Joseph spoke up. "It's like this. Sometimes the person we're trying to protect can make our job difficult." He coughed nervously. "President Washburn is such a person." He paused as though trying to think of what to say next.

"Uh-huh. Go on. What does that have to do with the fishing trip?"

Joseph cleared his throat. "President Washburn told us that the reason he goes on these fishing trips is to 'cleanse his mind' as he puts it. To relax completely. He does not want to be reminded of Washington, politics or policy. He says that with us hanging around him all of the time we remind him of what he would be facing when he returned. As a result, he did not allow us to get into the boat with him."

"What kind of boat did he have?"

"An ordinary rowboat with an outboard motor."

"Go on. You mean you left him go out alone on the river or lake..."

"River. It was the Penobscot." Joseph knit his eyebrows in expression that said, "What do you take us for? We have a job to do, and we do it." He said, "We *did not* leave him go alone. We took another boat. We kept a respectful distance but he was always within naked eye range. That is until..." He

paused again and looked terribly guilty. "After we were out on the river for a couple of hours, a strange mist rose. It was very thick, and I'm sorry to say we lost sight of him."

Perkins interrupted. "We immediately rode toward the area where we last saw him. When we called out to him, he replied that he was going to anchor on the island until the fog lifted."

Neither agent spoke for several seconds. Perkins played with his fountain pen, and Joseph's lips quivered.

Raven said, "So, did you anchor at the island too?"

"That's the thing. There was no island. Before the trip we studied satellite maps of the area. No island was anywhere around that area. Also, the day before Washburn went out on the boat, we reconned the area. We saw no island."

"Perhaps it has to do with water levels. Had the river experienced a drop?"

"Just the opposite. This was in the spring. The river was at its annual high. There was a heavy rainfall two days earlier."

"What happened then?"

"We rowed around for a while in the area where we heard Washburn's voice. A couple of hours went by before the fog lifted. When we spotted the president's boat, two men were in it."

"What about the island? Was there an island or not?"

The two men looked at each other again. "We did not see an island."

"So where did the other man come from? Did he swim out to the president's boat?"

"Not likely. The Penobscot has a swift current, especially at that time of year. Our thought was that in the mist President Washburn mistook the shore for an island. Anyway, we motored over by the president's boat to see who was with him. It was Nicholas Machiavelli. Washburn introduced him to us as an old friend. This seemed strange to us. We respectfully asked the president to pull over to the shore, where we frisked Machiavelli. Since he was not carrying weapons other than fishhooks stuck in his hat, we apologized, and they returned to their fishing. We followed them in our boat again. There were no further incidents for the rest of the trip, except that Machiavelli and Washburn stayed together as though they were joined at the hip. When it was time to return to Washington, the president insisted that Machiavelli go aboard the helicopter with us. From then on, he and the president have been as close as twins. Machiavelli sleeps at the White House in one of the guest rooms."

"You have had many chances to observe the two men. In your opinion, do you think that Machiavelli has some sort of hold over the president?"

Joseph shrugged. "He might well have. But that's not our business to say. Perkins and I have only one job and that's to protect the president from harm. You know, we have our own people looking into Machiavelli's background. But, like the FBI, they haven't been able to discover a background, either good or bad."

"Very mysterious. Okay, thanks for answering my questions. Just one more thing, I've got a map of the

area. Could you mark the approximate locations of certain places and events in your story. The president's cabin, where he was fishing when the mist appeared and where his boat was when you first saw that it contained two men."

The secret service agents marked and labeled the map. Raven and Osbourne thanked them and they left.

Raven looked at the map and shook her head. "I don't see how Washburn could've mistaken the shore for an island. Very strange."

Osbourne said, "Do you think those secret service agents are hiding something? Not telling everything they know?"

"At this point, anything's possible. Maybe after we meet Machiavelli, we'll know more."

* * * *

Raven and Annie B spent the afternoon preparing for the cocktail party. They had their hair done at a fancy beauty salon and spent hours getting their makeup perfect. They were putting on the finishing touches, as Osbourne's chauffeur called from the lobby. "How do we look?" Raven asked Bagyar.

"Like two angels on their way to seduce Satan."

They laughed at this comment and kissed him on his hairy cheek, one on each side. "Good luck," he said.

Raven said, "Don't wait up, Henry."

He simply growled.

When they walked into the party on the arms of Osbourne, Raven noticed several raised eyebrows. She thought, *No matter how he introduces us, everyone here will believe that we're hookers, especially the way that Annie B is hanging all over the deputy secretary.*

The hotel ballroom where the reception was held was a mob scene. They went to the bar and were served drinks. Raven and Annie B also filled plates with hor d'oeuvres. Osbourne introduced them to several people as his niece and her girlfriend from college. They met celebrities, corporation executives, labor leaders, party hacks, lobbyists, congressmen, bureaucrats, wives, mistresses and escort service women. They chatted with each small group. Annie B enjoyed herself by flirting with the men.

After they were at the party for a couple of hours, the hired band played Hail to the Chief followed by the Brazilian national anthem. Everyone hushed and turned to the door as President Washburn, the Brazilian ambassador and Machiavelli entered the room escorted by secret service men including Joseph and Perkins. The secret service men eyed everyone in the crowd with suspicion although everyone had gone through metal detectors.

Raven stared at Machiavelli in disbelief. He was the spitting image of his namesake, whose picture she had seen in history and philosophy books. He had the same high and sunken cheekbones, the same thin smile and short haircut.

A reception line was formed. They slowly walked behind the queue of people anxious to meet the notables. Osbourne did the introductions, again naming them as his niece and her collage roommate. The

Brazilian ambassador was gallant. He complimented them on their dresses and kissed the back of their hands. He was quite pleased when Raven addressed him with the little Portuguese she knew. Next to him was President Washburn.

"I'm always happy to meet such lovely young women," he said in his Texan accent. Nonetheless, Raven thought that he sounded cold and mechanical.

As Raven took Machiavelli's hand, she felt the presence of supernatural evil. It was the same feeling that she experienced when she was near Magbertius, as though he had risen from the abyss. Nonetheless, she spoke to him in a normal tone. "I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Machiavelli."

"All good, I hope." He had a definite Italian accent, his expression never changed, and his eyes were ice.

"Oh yes. They say that your advise to the president has set him on a course of prosperity for the country, and that our foreign policy is starting to make sense."

He chuckled, a sound like the cawing of a crow. "I assume someone who profited from the president's policies made those comments."

"That would be most of us. I understand that you and the president are old friends."

"We met in high school."

Raven thought, *That's an obvious a lie. I can't believe with that accent you went to high school in Texas.* "And you met again more recently?"

"We bumped into each other while each of us was on fishing trips in Maine at the same time."

"How interesting. What did you do before you came to Washington? You probably had to quit a well-paying job to become the president's chief advisor."

Machiavelli frowned. The chill from him grew colder. She thought, *Maybe that was pressing it. He's getting suspicious.*

"I was a business man."

Another lie. If he was a business man, I'm a monkey's uncle.

The queue was pressing at her back. She ended the conversation with, "You're such a fascinating man. I wish we had more time to converse."

"Perhaps we may. I'll be staying at the party after President Washburn and his Brazilian guest leaves."

"Good. Perhaps we'll bump into each other later."

She moved on.

After a short while, the president and the ambassador left the party. Raven peered around, but did not see Machiavelli, as she wandered about from group to group. Finally, however, he found her.

"There you are," he said. "I'm glad that you're still at the party. You interest me. In the receiving line, I

didn't catch your name."

"Raven Lenore. I'm flattered that an important man such as yourself would find little old me interesting. Is there somewhere where we can talk? This party is so noisy."

"Perhaps you would like to go for a stroll. The mall is only two blocks from here. It's lovely at night, especially when the moon is full."

Although Raven feared being alone with someone she was sure was a demon, she decided to risk it for the information she would get out of him. "How romantic. I'd love to. Give me a couple of minutes though. I came with someone who I'll have to tell that I'm leaving."

She found Annie B. and whispered that she was going with Machiavelli. "Follow us. I don't expect any trouble from him. But just in case..."

Annie B. rolled her eyes. "Dressed like I am and in high heels? He'll spot me in a minute."

"You're right. Never mind. Call Henry and tell him what I'm about. See you back at the hotel." She kissed her cheek. Nonetheless, she felt as though she was walking into a tigers' den alone without even a chair for defense.

As she left on the arm of Machiavelli, her psychic alarms kept going off as though she were cozening up to Satan himself. She ignored her intuitive fears. She could handle any possible threat with her martial art training and psychic knowledge.

As they headed toward the mall, Machiavelli said, "You're a very beautiful woman. I hope you're not married or otherwise involved."

"Well thank you, Mister Machiavelli. I'm extremely flattered. At the moment, I'm free as a bird of any relationship commitments. No husband, no fiancé, no boy friend."

"Please call me Nick." He took her hand in his. Shivers went up her spine as a current of evil traveled up her arm to her psychic center.

Nonetheless, she smiled. "Not Niccolo? You were raised in Italy weren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"My parents also came from Italy—Napoli. Your accent gives you away. You sound like them."

"Really! I was raised in Venice."

"A beautiful city. I read that it's sinking though."

"Yes. A terrible thing. It makes one want to weep."

"When did you come to the United States?"

"At the age of thirteen. My parents thought I would get a better education in the states."

"But why Houston?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because it had something to do with the U.S. space program since ground control headquarters is there. They probably thought that was where the brainy people would be. My parents put great stock in education. I happen to agree with them."

When they had reached the mall, they turned east on Constitution Avenue towards the Washington Monument. The rays of a full moon glistened eerily on the white marble buildings. Halfway between the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, Raven felt as though they were being tracked. She hoped that it was Annie B, that she had changed her mind. She twisted her head around to see whether she could spot whoever it was. She saw no one.

"What's the matter?" Machiavelli asked.

"I thought someone was following us. I've heard that Washington is crawling with muggers."

"It is. But as long as you're with me, you don't have to worry."

"How's that?"

"I have my own special way of dealing with them."

"Really? As important as you are to the president, I'm surprised that you don't have secret service protection."

His lips parted into an amused smile. "Usually I have at least two secret service agents with me at all times. But after I saw you, I dismissed them for the night. I wanted to be alone with you. Besides, I know how to deal with criminals."

I'll bet you do, thought Raven. She knew that a demon need not fear any felon no matter how tough and well armed. "You're an awfully brave man. Nonetheless, I hope I'm not making a mistake by putting my life in your hands."

He bowed. "At your service. Actually, I believe it's an animal that's trailing us, a stray dog perhaps."

They both turned. About a block away what appeared to be a large dog, perhaps a mastiff or great Dane, was headed their way. As they watched, it strayed off in another direction.

Raven laughed. "I guess I'm jumpy tonight. Say, I thought it was quite interesting how you and the president hooked up. It was quite a coincidence, you're running into your high school chum when you were both on a Maine fishing trip. That's when the president took you on as an advisor, isn't it?"

Machiavelli frowned. "That's correct. But I didn't think that was common knowledge. How do you know about it?"

"Gossip. Women like me hear a lot of it." She did not say what type of woman she meant, whether she was a hooker or just someone who knew her way around the Washington in groups. He must have thought that by saying that, that she was someone with loose morals, for his grin grew wider. *He thinks that he's going to get lucky*, she thought. She planned to lead him on without letting things get out of hand.

"So, tell me all about how you and the president met. You were fishing from the bank and the president

spotted you and walked over to see his old pal, with a couple of secret service agents in fishing gear."

"Not exactly. He was in a boat, and I was fishing from the bank. He invited me into his boat and later to his cabin where we cooked the fish we caught. We talked a lot. He liked my ideas about governing. When I told him about my previous experience in politics and administration, he asked me to come to Washington as his personal advisor. At the time, I had was on sabbatical from my previous employment at a university."

How convenient, Raven thought. "Lucky break for you." She noted that in his version he did not mention the fog or the secret service men patting him down.

They turned down Fifteenth Street just before the Washington Monument and stopped at the White House visitor's checkpoint. Machiavelli turned to Raven. "How would you like a private tour of the White House?"

"Oh my. That would be great. I often wondered what the first family residence was like."

The guard on duty recognized Machiavelli, greeting him by name, and called security. A few minutes later, a secret service agent escorted them to the entrance used by the president and his staff. As they entered, they heard a low growl. The agent cried, "Damn dog got into the grounds somehow. Shoo. Good, it's leaving. I'd hate to shoot someone's pet."

Machiavelli led Raven upstairs. First they explored the rooms on the east side, the Queen's Bedroom, the East Sitting Room, the Lincoln Bedroom and the Treaty Room. Machiavelli took Raven out on the Truman Balcony and into the Living Room and the Yellow Oval Room. They strolled down the Central Hall where Machiavelli pointed out various antiques and paintings. When they entered the West Sitting Room, President Washburn was lounging on a sofa staring into space.

"Mr. President," Machiavelli said. "I'm surprised that you're still up."

Washburn turned to him and said, "You know very well I don't sleep, Niccolo."

How interesting, Raven thought. *The president doesn't sleep, and he refers to Machiavelli as Niccolo, not Nicholas or Nick.*

Machiavelli cleared his throat. "We have a visitor, Mr. President."

Washburn stood up and looked Raven up and down in a cold manner, as though eyeing some unwanted trash that Machiavelli had brought into the White House.

"This is Raven Lenore. You probably don't recall, but we met her earlier at the reception."

"I remember quite well. I never forget anything. How are you, Ms. Lenore? Welcome to the White House." He offered a hand.

When Raven took it, she tried to use her psychic powers to get an idea of what the president was feeling at that moment. She could not read minds or anything like that, but she could detect emotions. To her surprise, the president did not emit any emotion at all, not even a vague lust, which she received from most men, especially when dressed in the provocative manner as she had for the reception. It was as though he did not contain an aura, as though his body was animated by something emotionless and soulless. The last time she sensed something like that was when she encountered zombies. Nonetheless,

although the president's hand was not particularly warm, it was not clammy as a corpse's hand would be, so she knew he was not one of the undead. Although he was not a zombie, he was not quite human either.

"My great pleasure to meet you, Mister President."

The three of them made small talk for a while. What Raven found unusual was that for a politician, Washburn rarely said anything that was not ordinary. He often repeated himself and never made a statement that was humorous or witty. To Raven's ears he sounded like a chatbot, those virtual characters on computers who are programmed to give replies depending on certain key words and usually simply repeat back to you your own words in a slightly different order.

After a while, Machiavelli said, "It's very late, Mister President. You should go to bed now. You have a busy day tomorrow—I mean today. It's almost morning."

"Yes. I have a busy day coming up. I must go to bed. Goodnight, Niccolo and Ms. Lenore."

He walked to the master bedroom like someone in a trance.

Machiavelli took Raven's arm. "Let me show you where I sleep." He led her to the East Bedroom. "It's rather small, but it's home for the present. Would you like a nightcap, Raven? I have a fully stocked bar."

Now here's where I need to make my escape, she thought. "Nothing, right now. Actually, I'm dying for a smoke. Why don't we go back outside?"

"You may smoke here. This is the family residence. Gregory and I often smoke cigars, although not when the first lady is present." He chuckled. He took out his gold cigarette case and offered her a cigarette.

As he held his lighter up to light Raven's cigarette, she thought, *That didn't work. What do I do now? He's getting ready to make a pass.* She worried that she had painted herself into a corner.

When she was finished her smoke, she put the butt out in an ashtray that Machiavelli handed her. "Well. It's been a most pleasant and rewarding evening. But I'm rather tired. Could you have security call a cab?"

Machiavelli's smile turned sinister. "It would be difficult to obtain a cab at this hour. Why not stay here at the White House?" He moved closer to Raven.

"I don't think President Washburn and the first lady would appreciate having a strange woman sleeping in their quarters."

"They wouldn't mind at all. In fact, they're used to seeing women coming out of my room in the morning."

He was definitely in her space. Less than an inch separated them. Raven felt his demonic power working on her.

"Oh. That's what you meant when you said I could stay at the White House. You want me to sleep with you."

"Of course. Why else would I bring you here?"

"You're very nice and all that, but I hardly know you."

"Nonetheless, you will stay."

He put one arm around her and his other hand on her cheek. Because of his demonic power over her, she felt helpless. She could not resist. *Forgive me, Henry*, she thought and closed her eyes to what was going to happen next.

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CHAPTER 3. FISHING TRIP

Machiavelli kissed Raven on the lips and place a hand on her breast. As he started to slide the straps of her dress down her shoulders, there was great ruckus downstairs, the sounds of men running and shouting something about a dog getting into the White House. Raven said, "Wait. Don't you hear that? Something's going on."

"Whatever it is, the secret service will handle it. Don't pay any attention to it." He pressed his lips to the breast he had uncovered.

Suddenly, the door to the room burst open. Something large and furry leaped into the room on all fours and onto Machiavelli, hurling him to the floor. The beast growled and gnashed its teeth. As it was about to tear out the presidential advisor's throat, Raven cried out, "Stop it Henry. Don't kill him."

Bagyar turned and gazed at her with anger in his eyes. "What was he doing?"

"I'll explain later. Can you knock him out?"

The animal made a fist with his huge right hand and hit Machiavelli in the jaw with all his might. Machiavelli's body went limp and his eyes turned up. Bagyar rose to his feet.

Raven grabbed his arm. "You've got to get out of here quickly and without being seen." She opened the door just enough to peer out into the central hall. Washburn and his wife were standing at the west end. Several secret service men were milling about. One was talking to the president.

"What's going on?" asked Washburn.

"Somehow an animal has gotten into the White House, sir. So far it's eluded us. Nothing to worry about though, Mister President. It's simply a big dog. However, it moves like greased lightning."

Raven closed the door quietly. "Crap. We're in a heap of shit."

Bagyar pointed to the window. "I can go out that way. It's just a short jump to the roof of the porch." He opened the window and leaped out.

Raven heard shots being fired. She prayed that the snipers on the roof did not have time to take careful aim. She ran out into the hallway, pretending to be distressed. "Help. Mr. Machiavelli has been attacked by an animal."

The secret service agents ran into the room. One went to see about Machiavelli. The other asked,
"Where did it go?"

"Through the window. How did a big dog like that get in here?"

"It's a real mystery. One person said that it walked on two legs and had hands."

"That's ridiculous. You'd better check whether whoever told you that has been smoking dope."

"I guess. By the way, who are you and what are you doing in the White House?"

Raven acted insulted. "I'm a guest of Mr. Machiavelli. He and I met at the reception for the Brazilian ambassador."

"Oh. I'm sorry if I appeared rude, but when something like this happens, we can't be too careful. May I ask you a few questions about what happened?"

"I suppose so."

"How did that animal get into this room?"

"The door must've been ajar."

"What happened then?"

"Well, Mr. Machiavelli and I were talking. Suddenly the mastiff burst in here and knocked Mr. Machiavelli to the floor. He must've hit his head when he landed. I screamed at the dog. It looked as though it was going to tear Mr. Machiavelli's throat out. I think I frightened it, because it jumped out the open window. That's all I can tell you. Everything happened so fast. Is Nicky okay?" Raven felt that it would not hurt to pretend intimacy with the president's chief adviser.

By this time, Machiavelli had come to and was rubbing his chin. The other agent was asking him whether he was all right.

The first agent said to Raven. "It appears that he was knocked out when the dog jumped on him. He has a bruise on his chin. Otherwise he seems okay."

The second agent said, "How the hell did he get a bruise on the chin. The dog knocked him on his back."

"You said that the dog was a Mastiff. Are sure about that?"

"Not really. As I said before, everything happened so fast. May I go over by Nicky?"

Machiavelli said, "Yes, Raven. Please come by me."

Raven knelt down by him. "This is terrible. Perhaps you'd better go to the hospital and get checked out."

"I'll be fine. It's strange. I'd swear that the animal punched me." He rubbed his chin again. "Also I thought I heard you call it by name."

"You poor dear. You're still groggy. I should go. You need to rest." She kissed him on the cheek. "We can get together another time."

Machiavelli shook his head as though to clear it. "Leave a phone number."

"Of course, dear." She patted him on the head, stood up and turned to one of the secret service agents. "Could you call a cab for me, please?"

"Sure. I guess Mr. Machiavelli is okay. That dog got away unless one of the sharpshooters on the roof got it."
* * * *

When Raven arrived at the hotel, Annie B was in the bathroom with Bagyar. She was bandaging his shoulder.

"Oh shit. They shot you."

"It's only a flesh wound. The bullet went on through. I'll be fine." He looked at Raven with a steely gaze and growled under his breath. "What were you doing with that man?"

"That was Machiavelli, the person we're investigating." Raven flushed with guilt for getting herself in the position she had been in. "He had me in his power. He may be the original Nicollo Machiavelli, the philosopher turned into a demon and taken on human form. Your showing up saved me. How did you get into the White House?"

"Because of my ancestry, I have great strength in my arms and legs and a nose like a bloodhound. After Annie B called me, I was afraid you might be in trouble. Using your scent, I followed you. I think you saw me once. I'm glad I did now."

"So that *was* you."

"After you entered the White House, I leaped over the fence. A guard spotted me, but I was too quick for him. I ran around to the garden where there are bushes and trees and found a place to hide. He thought I was gone and went back inside, I climbed up to the balcony in the back and entered that way."

Raven kissed him. "I'm sorry that I put you through all that. But I had to play along in order to get him talking. I found out a few things. I'll call Jack. You two can listen."

She took out her cell phone and dialed the Homeland Security office in Chicago. "Deputy Chief John Grant, please. Tell him Raven Lenore is calling."

Grant came on the line. "Hi Raven. How's the investigation going?"

"Very well. I found out some things about Mr. M. and his boss."

"Good. Do you need to stay in Washington much longer?"

"I don't think it would do any good. I'm ready to leave now."

"In that case, come back to Chicago and give me your report in person."

"Will do. See you soon." She hung up. She looked at her two companions. "Well folks, we're going home tomorrow."

* * * *

The first evening back in Chicago, Raven and Annie B. went to Graceland to see Celia. The next day she went alone to give her report to Grant. Once again she was escorted to his office by the handsome young man. She gave him her telephone number. "Annie B is my roommate. I'm sure she'd love to hear from you."

He took the paper with the number, but did not give any indication that he would call it. He ushered her into Grant's office.

After they greeted each other and made comments about the weather and traffic in Chicago and Washington, Grant poured two cups of coffee from an urn in his office and served one to Raven.

Raven said, "Is this office secure? May I speak openly?"

"Yes. I sweep for bugs at least once a week. The walls are soundproof. Give me a full report."

"Okay Jack. There are definite paranormal elements involved this case. The vibes I got off of Nicholas Machiavelli tell me that he's an unclean spirit in human form. He gave me some bullshit about his past, but that was simply fiction that he made up on the spot. I'm certain he lied to me about how he met the president on that fishing trip."

"I see. What about Washburn? Did you figure out why he's been acting strange?"

"I had one chance to speak to him close up. He seems to be in some kind of trance. He might even be possessed, although I could not detect a foreign aura. In fact I could not even his aura. He seems to be turned into some kind of zombie-like creature. I witnessed Machiavelli ordering him about as though he was his slave instead of his boss. Who does that with a sitting president?"

"Strange. Do you think this Machiavelli is some kind of magician or a whatcha-ma-callit, warlock?"

"That's not it. Unclean spirits are usually under the command of a witch or sorcerer. Someone else is behind the plot to use the president in some manner."

"Whoever it is, they may have even greater ambitions. He's been threatening to declare war on Mexico."

"Mexico? That's insane."

"He's demanded that the Mexican government stop the flow of illegal immigrants and drugs from across the border. He's given the president of Mexico a timetable. We've been amassing troops in Texas and California."

"Unbelievable. The other nations of the world won't allow us to get away with it."

Grant shrugged. "How will they stop us? If any country dare attack us, we'd use atomics against them. It would lead to doomsday, especially if a country like Russia decides to use nuclear weapons to come to Mexico's defense."

"Bad. But won't Congress stop him from such a foolish move?"

"Hah. There are those who are egging him on. There are not enough votes by the saner elements to stop him. As a ploy to justify a first strike he claims that Mexico is secretly stocking WMDs."

"Is there any truth to that?"

"Not to my knowledge. But despite the Homeland Security act, the CIA and the NSA no longer share such information with Homeland Security. I doubt that even Deputy Secretary Osbourne would receive such a report. Since Machiavelli's been aboard, everyone's playing their cards close to the chest."

"Where do we go from here? I don't believe my going back to Washington will gain much."

Grant leaned back in his chair and made a teepee with his fingers. "You must go to Maine and nose around the area where Washburn hooked up with Machiavelli. Somewhere up there must be clues about where and how he came into the picture and who's the person behind him."

"I was thinking the same thing. Something was very strange about the whole encounter."

* * * *

When Raven returned to their apartment, she said, "How would you guys like to go on a fishing trip?"

Annie B replied, "Fishing? Ugh. Can't think of anything worse."

Bagyar said, "I've never tried it. Is it fun? I like the taste of fish, either raw or cooked."

"Actually we won't actually fish, just pretend to."

Annie B said, "That makes a lot of sense. What kind of insanity are you up to now?"

"Still working on finding out where this guy Machiavelli came from and what kind of hold he has on the president. We're going to Maine where he and president hooked up."

Annie B rolled her eyes. "I see. We'll need to do some shopping in order to seem authentic. Get fishing poles and whatever else people who fish take along on such trips."

"You're right. We'll shop tomorrow. Get lots of beer."

"Now you're talking."

Later Raven got on her computer, brought up Google Earth and zoomed in on the area where the president was fishing when he encountered Machiavelli. By zooming in as tight as the software would allow her, she could see his cabin and the nearby village. She scanned along the river in the area. No island was shown. She scratched her head. Had the president mistaken the shore for an island or did he have a hallucination. Maybe the island was a sandbar that appeared only when the river was low.

That night she contacted Celia. "Annie B and I will be out of town for a while. I'm not sure how long. You'll have to find replacement donors."

"Where are you going?"

"A place called Millinocket, Maine."

"Maine, huh. Okay. I'll see you when you get back. Say hello to The Beast and Annie B for me." She kissed Raven on the neck with her cold lips, but took no blood.

* * * *

Three days later they arrived in the tiny village of Millinocket. They checked in at a locally owned inn called Schooner Wharf, which had rooms on the second and third floors. The first floor was divided in half by a wall. The first section was a general store which sold mainly items that vacationers who came to Maine to hunt or fish would want, such as canned foodstuffs, bait, flies, hooks, guns and ammunition, fishing and hunting licenses, bread, milk and so forth. The owner's wife Mildred ran this part of the operation. To get to the other section you needed to walk through the store to a doorway in the back. It consisted of a restaurant and bar. During the day Hank, the fiftyish balding innkeeper, ran the bar and checked-in guests. At night, his husky good-looking son, Jason, took over these duties. Their teenage daughter, Debra, waited on tables. The cook was an uncle.

The restaurant was decorated in a rustic manner, with fake log walls. Outdated fishing and hunting equipment was hung up, along with pictures of men showing off their trophies, large fish or deer hung from a pole.

Bagyar stayed in the car until Raven and Annie B checked in. Raven told the innkeeper that Bagyar was her husband. Annie B. was given an adjoining room. When they were ready to bring their suitcases to their rooms, Bagyar disguised his face by pulling the hood of his sweatshirt far forward. They worked out a plan where Raven and Annie B would save parts of their meals at the restaurant to bring to the room for him.

Once they were settled, Raven said, "Time to nose around a bit." She and Annie B went down to the general store section of the inn. They bought hooks and bait and asked where they could rent a boat.

Mildred said, "What sort of boat you looking for?"

"Just a rowboat, with an outboard."

"We have a couple here. Two dollars an hour or fifteen for the entire day plus gas."

"Good. Maybe tomorrow we'll take one out. Say, according to the tabloids, President Washburn comes up here to fish."

"Yep. He was in the area last spring. Not that we got to see him much. He has his own cabin. He came in here once to buy bait and stuff though."

"Was he alone?"

"Nope. With a couple of young fellows. I assumed they were secret service men."

"What about his senior advisor, this Machiavelli fellow? I hear that he fishes up here sometimes."

"If he has, he's never been in here."

They went to the bar, ordered beer and conversed with Hank, the innkeeper, for a while, as the restaurant and bar were empty. Raven decided not to ask anything about the president or Machiavelli.

She didn't want to appear to be too inquisitive about them. Instead she asked, "Say, isn't there an island in the middle of the river somewhere around here? Might be a good place to anchor a boat."

Hank got a frightened look on his face. "Ain't no island around here that I ever heard about. Where'd you hear there was?"

"Same guy who told me that there was good fishing in this area. Course this guy is kind of a bullshitter."

"Must be. Ain't no island 'round here."

At this point, he broke off the conversation and began to wash glasses. Raven and Annie B finished their beer, ordered three more to take up their room. When they arrived, they gave one to Bagyar.

Raven said, "So Machiavelli's never been at the inn. Where did he stay before he hooked up with Washburn?"

"He might have his own cabin," Annie B said.

"I suppose. Did you notice the scared look on the innkeeper's face when I mentioned the island."

"Yeah. Wonder why."

* * * *

Around midnight, all three left the room. They took flashlights, and Raven holstered her pistol. She wore a black leather jacket to hide it. They hiked out of town toward where the map that the secret service agent had drawn showed Washburn's cabin. A well marked trail led right to it. They saw no lights as they peered at it from behind trees.

"I wonder whether there's a guard or caretaker," said Raven.

"It's quite likely," said Annie B. "I don't think they would leave a place that belonged to the president of the US unguarded. There are probably alarms and motion detectors, too."

"So. How do we break in?"

"We need to create a diversion. When the caretaker comes out to find out what's going on, we disable him." Annie B took a small bottle of chloroform and a handkerchief from her purse. "I knew this would come in handy on this fishing trip."

"And what about the alarm system?"

"Oh come on, Raven. You're a PI. You must know how to disable an alarm system."

Bagyar said, "I'll create the diversion."

When they had the plan all figured out and what role each would play, Bagyar bounded toward the cabin until the motion detector turned on the floodlights. He howled like a dog in pain. A few moments later, a man dressed in pajamas came to the door. He carried a shotgun. Bagyar crouched down just outside the circle of light. He could be seen, but was in the shadows. He howled, barked and growled loudly.

"Goddamn dog," the man cried. "Git."

When Bagyar did not move, simply kept barking and howling, the man reached down, picked up a stone and threw it. It sailed over Bagyar's head. Bagyar stayed put, still making a ruckus.

The man mumbled, "Maybe the thing's caught in a trap or hurt. Hey boy, what's wrong?" He shambled toward Bagyar with the shotgun tucked under his arm. When he was half the distance between the cabin and Bagyar, Annie B ran out of the woods behind him. Since the man was concentrating on what he thought was a dog in distress, he did not see her. She grabbed him in a choke hold and covered his mouth and nose with the chloroform soaked handkerchief until he passed out and collapsed. Meanwhile, Raven ran through the open door of the cabin and disarmed the alarm system.

Bagyar and Annie B carried the unconscious watchman into the house. Raven went into the bedroom, tore sheets from the bed and used them to tie him to a chair. She covered his head with a pillowcase in case he should recover.

Annie B asked, "Okay Raven. What are we looking for?"

"I'm not sure. Anything that might provide a clue to where Machiavelli came from. Bagyar, use your sniffer. Let me know whether anything has the lingering scent of Machiavelli."

"How do I know what he smells like?"

"You were right on top of him. Don't you recall?"

"Oh. I guess I do remember his evil scent."

The "cabin" was really a two-story house. Four bedrooms were on the second floor. The rooms on the first floor were a kitchen, dining area and an enormous living room with a great stone fireplace with a deer head hung above it. The first floor also contained a small bedroom. This room looked lived in. Raven figured that was where the caretaker slept and maybe secret service agents when the president was there. There were full bathrooms on both floors.

Raven went up to the second floor. Annie B and Bagyar searched the first floor. Raven could find nothing that indicated that Machiavelli had even been there. After an hour, she went back downstairs. Annie B also found nothing of interest. Bagyar showed Raven an amulet with strange markings on it. "This smells of the man Machiavelli."

Raven examined it closely. The markings on it were definitely mystical. She stuck it in her jacket pocket. The caretaker began to groan and twitch. "Put him out again, Annie B." Raven said.

Annie B removed the pillowcase and put the saturated handkerchief over his mouth and nose. He sank back into slumber. Raven removed his bindings, and they laid him on the sofa. Raven said, "I don't think that he'll report this. He'd look too much the fool."

They returned to the inn, making sure that no one saw them enter. "Well, that was a waste," said Raven. No one disagreed with her.

* * * *

The next morning they rented a boat from their landlady. Bagyar kept his face hidden and stayed in the background. After they gave Mildred the money, she said, "Boat's tied up at the end of the pier. It's the

one with red outboard. I filled the tank earlier this morning. If you need more gas, come back here."

They carried their fishing gear and an ice chest that held their beer and lunch to the end of the pier where an elderly man was fishing.

"Fish biting today?" Raven asked.

"Just some crappies and a bullhead which I threw back."

"Think we'll have better luck out on the river?"

"Mebbee. Just be careful and don't go near the island."

Raven looked at him quizzically. "What island? Someone told us that there was no island in this area."

"That's cause it's not always there."

"You're not making sense. Is there an island or isn't there?"

The old man shrugged. "It comes and goes. But every time it appears, somebody disappears. That's why people hereabouts don't talk about it. They pretend it don't exist. But it does. I saw it at least a couple of times."

"Thanks for the tip. If we see it, we'll stay away from it."

"You'd better if you want to stay alive." He reeled in his line, took a night crawler out of a can and put it at the end of his hook. He cast his line upstream and watched as the current brought back the float.

While Raven had been chewing the rag with the old man, Annie B and Bagyar loaded their gear into the boat. Raven hoped in with them, untied the vessel from the pier and started the outboard.

When they were away from the pier, Raven said, "Did you guys catch all that?"

"Yeah," said Annie B. "Either there really is an island or the old guy is bonkers. I vote for bonkers."

While Bagyar was busy trying to place a worm on a hook, Annie B, who had taken charge of the motor and steering, asked, "Upstream or down?"

Raven held up a finger for her to wait. She fished out the crude map that the secret service agent had given her. "Hmm. I suppose this little box is the pier. The X is generally where they first saw Machiavelli in the boat. There's a scribble. Damn, that Perkins writes small. I think it says five miles." She looked up from the paper. They had drifted a hundred feet downstream. Bagyar had his line in the water and was watching the bobber floating along. "That way." She pointed upstream.

Annie B yanked on the pull cord. The engine started with a roar. She set the throttle for the highest speed. The small craft sped forward with a jerk. "Hey," cried Bagyar. "I almost lost my pole."

"Oh, poor pussy. This is fun. I always wanted to own a speedboat like you whiteys."

"Don't be an ass, Annie B," said Raven. "Only a few white people own boats, much less speedboats. Slow down. I need to look around."

"Oh mama, you're no fun." Nonetheless, she turned the throttle down so that they were traveling upstream at about the pace they had drifted downstream before the motor was engaged.

Raven took out binocular and scanned the shorelines. Bagyar said, "Is that how you fish? By spotting them with binoculars?"

"What the hell *are* you looking for?" said Annie B.

"Not sure. I'll know when I see it."

They went along like this for a while, with Annie B handling the rudder, Bagyar drowning worms and Raven scanning the shoreline. Finally, she said, "Cut the engine and drop anchor."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n," Annie B said in a gravelly imitation pirate voice. She turned off the engine and dropped the piece of concrete that served as an anchor overboard. They started back downstream and stopped short as the rope went taut. "Okay. What now?"

"We fish," said Bagyar who already had his line back in the water.

"Henry's right. We fish." Raven put the binoculars back into her knapsack, opened the cooler and took out three bottles of beer. She opened them and handed one each to her companions. After taking a long swallow, she put her beer between her knees, threaded a worm on the hook at the end of her fishing line and threw the hook end into the water.

"So this is it?" Annie B said. "We sit here all day pretending to fish?"

"Until the beer's gone. That's what real sport fishermen do."

* * * *

They sat there until the sun was low in the sky. A few times either Raven or Bagyar got a nibble but the fish got away. Annie B refused to have anything to do with fish hooks and worms. She was content to watch the white fluffy clouds overhead and trail her hand in the water. Every hour and half or so, Raven took out three more bottles of beer to pass around.

Late in the day, dark clouds appeared on the horizon. There was a rumble of distant thunder. "Guess we'd better head back," said Raven. "Looks like rain." She laid her fishing pole in the bottom of the boat and pulled up the anchor.

"Want me to start the engine again?" asked Annie B.

"Let's see how fast the current takes us first. No sense wasting gas."

As they drifted back south, the air temperature dropped several degrees until it became chilly. A mist rose from the water, which after a few minutes, became so thick that Raven could no longer see the shoreline. Even her companions a few feet away in the boat were fading in and out of existence.

"Should I start the engine so we can get out of this fog?" cried Annie B. "It's giving me the creeps."

"Don't do that. We could slam into the shore. I'm going to heave out the anchor again. We'll have to wait out this mist."

"Wait. I see the dock." Annie B pointed. About a twenty feet away, a wooden structure appeared between clouds of mist.

"How could that be the dock? We're in the middle of the river, not anywhere near Schooner Wharf."

"So it's somebody else's pier. I'm going for it." Annie B turned the boat to head toward the structure.

The dock was shorter than the one at Schooner Wharf. After they bumped softly against one of the piles, Annie B tied the boat up. "What now? I'm cold, and I'm damp. What say we go up to whoever owns this place and ask for shelter?"

"I don't know," said Bagyar.

"Hey, maybe this is the place where the president landed when he thought he was on an island," said Raven. "I agree with Annie; let's find out who lives here. You can stay in the background and hide your face with the hood of your sweatshirt."

Bagyar grunted a half growl. Annie B. started down the pier. Raven strolled behind her, followed by a reluctant Bagyar.

Where the wharf ended, a dirt path led into a thick forest. They followed this as it wound around through the dense brush and heavy fog. The forest smelled musty with decay. Except for the occasional cry of birds, the woods were as silent as death. After they had trekked uphill for several minutes, the fog lifted and the wind picked up. This was followed by dark clouds gathering overhead. Lightning streaked across the sky, followed by loud booms and crackling. Although they hurried as quickly as possible, large drops of rain pelted them. Moments later, the skies opened up and a deluge whipped along by the blustery winds tried to drown them. The constant lightning snapped like a whip. One streak hit a tree, which exploded, cracked in half and fell across the path a scant ten feet in front of them. As the rutted road became muddy and steeper, they slid and sloshed along, making little progress.

Annie B complained, "I hope this lets up. I feel like a drowned rat. And this mud. I'll never get my sneakers clean."

As they neared the top of the hill, an enormous mansion with towers and several wings came into view. Slipping and sliding and sometimes falling in the mud, they rushed to reach it. After they clambered onto the roofed porch, they stopped with heaving chests to wipe the water from their eyes. Raven turned to see whether she could figure out where they were. The hill was surrounded by thick woods in every direction. The driving rain made it impossible to see as far as the river.

She turned to rap on the door. However, as soon as she touched it, it creaked open. She and her friends entered and shut the door tightly to keep the rain from blowing in. They were in a large foyer. To one side was a staircase leading to the upper floors. The rest of the room was in too much gloom to see much. Raven called out, "Helloo. Anyone home." There was no reply. She took off her backpack and removed a flashlight. She used it to search for a light switch. She found one on the wall next to the door. She flipped it and an enormous chandelier ten feet above their head lit up.

Portraits of people from other centuries stared at them from dark oak walls. Closed doors led to rooms or other parts of the house. On one wall was an enormous fireplace with a marble mantle.

Raven's psychic detection ability kicked in with bells and whistles. Something about this house was

strange and evil. Even Annie B felt it. "This place gives me the creeps," she said. "I don't think we should stay here."

At that moment a great crack of simultaneous lightning and thunder sounded, reminding them of the storm.

Bagyar shook his head rapidly, causing water from his mane to fly about. Annie B cried, "Hey, cut that out. It's bad enough that you smell like wet dog. You don't need to spray your fleas all over us."

Bagyar growled at her.

Raven said, "Y'know, I think we're on the island where those people disappeared and President Washburn hooked up with Machiavelli."

"All the more reason to get out of here," said Annie B.

"And go where?" said Bagyar. "Let's dry off and wait for the storm to pass before we venture out on the river."

"I agree," said Raven. "Besides, I want to explore the house. I'm sure it has something to do with Washburn's becoming Machiavelli's puppet."

"Good idea," said Bagyar. "Let's see if we can find firewood. Maybe that door leads to the kitchen." He headed toward the doorway at the end of the hall.

Raven and Annie B followed him. The door led to a dining room, but beyond it was a door to an enormous kitchen. At one end was a large fireplace. Bagyar went to it and loaded it with firewood from a nearby stack. "Raven, lend me your lighter."

Some old newspapers were nearby. Bagyar stuffed them between the wood and lit them. The friends stood around the cheery warm fire that he created. The heat allowed them to dry their clothes and took away the chill. After a while, Raven opened cabinet doors. The cabinets were filled with canned food, boxed food, spices, kitchen utensils and dishes. "Y'know," she said, "we could stay here a day or two. Apparently whoever owns this place has it well stocked for guests. Of course, I'd leave money for anything we used."

"Are you crazy?" cried Annie B. "I think this place is haunted."

"That'll make our visit here that more interesting." Raven found a coffee maker and coffee. She started to brew a pot. "You'll feel better, Annie B, once you have a nice warm cup of joe in you. Don't worry about ghosts. Most of them are harmless."

"Most? Not good enough. What if the house is haunted by the harmful ones?"

Raven shrugged.

After they drank their coffee and dried off, Raven said, "Let's explore the house now." Even as she said it, she had a premonition that something terrible was going to happen.

They tried the doors on the first floor and found a sitting room, a library and a den. A door in the den led to another wing. They decided to leave that for another day. Raven glanced through the books in the

library, which were mostly about science, engineering and mathematics, with an emphasis on software engineering, robotics and artificial intelligence. One whole section, however, was devoted to the paranormal. This caught Raven's attention, and she spent a while browsing through them. While she thumbed through the books, Annie B and Bagyar played checkers using chess pieces on a small table.

Finally Annie B became bored. "I thought we were going to explore the house, not read every book in the library."

"Oh. Okay. Let's go." Raven laid the book in her hand on a table and headed into the foyer.

They climbed the steps to the second floor. Doors along a long hallway led to several bedrooms. By this time, the storm outside had abated to a steady rain. Raven yawned and glanced at her watch. It was after eleven in the evening. "Hey guys," she said. "It's been a long day, and it's still raining. What say we hit the sack and decide what to do in the morning?"

"Sounds good to me," replied Bagyar. He too stretched and yawned.

Annie B eyed them. "I suppose you want me to go into another room. Well, no way. I'm not going to be alone in this creepy house."

Bagyar said, "That's all right. I'm too tired for hanky-panky. I'll take that bedspread and curl up in a corner."

The bedspread was quite dusty. Annie B. said, "You're welcome to it. How about it, Raven? Think we can share the bed? It'll be like old times in the slammer."

"Just as long as you don't get any ideas. I've given up Lesbianism."

Bagyar removed the bedspread, shook it out, which filled the air with dust making everyone sneeze, and squashed it up in a corner of the room. Raven and Annie B stripped to their bras and panties and got into the four poster bed.

* * * *

Raven felt uneasy in the small meadow lit up by a full moon and surrounded by forest. Something dreadful was about to happen. All around her shadows shaped like monks with cowls came out of the woods, chanting in Latin. They joined hands and formed a circle around her, as though casting a spell with her as the object. One came forward with a ceremonial dagger in his hand.

"Who are you? What are you going to do?" cried Raven. Faint with terror, her knees trembled until she was sure she would collapse. Yet she was frozen in place. *Is this how it all ends?* she thought.

The apparition, who was more shadow than solid, swept his cowl back. To add to her despair, it was her nemesis, Magbertius. He grinned at her. "I knew you would come to me."

"What's this all about, Peter? Have you manipulated events to bring me here? Am I to be your slave again?"

"No. I do not want a slave, but a true lover. Nonetheless, I still have an influence on you. I am soon to be overlord of the entire world. Become mine willingly, and anything you desire shall be yours."

"My only desire is to be rid of you."

He raised the dagger. "So, you still spurn me. You shall suffer for it." As he plunged the dagger into her heart, there was a loud crash.

* * * *

The crash was the thunderstorm starting up again. It had awakened Raven from her nightmare. "Damn," she whispered. "That ass hole Magbertius is trying to get into my head again. I wonder whether he has anything to do with this business with the president and this strange house."

She glanced over at her companions. Annie B was sleeping peacefully on her side, snoring softly. It was too dark to see whether Bagyar was still in his corner. Nonetheless, she stared into the place where he had laid. A lightning strike lit up the room. The bedspread was still crumpled up, but Bagyar was not on it. "Henry," she called softly. There was no reply. She got out of bed and retrieved her flashlight. She searched the room with it. Bagyar was not there.

She shook Annie B awake.

"What? What's the matter?" she said in a sleepy voice.

"Bagyar's gone. He's not in the room."

Annie B. yawned. "He probably went to take a piss or something. Come back to bed."

"No. I had a nightmare. Something's happened to him."

"Oh come on, Raven. What could've happened?"

"I don't know. I just know that something is terribly wrong."

"I suppose you want me to get up and help you look for him."

"Please."

Annie B muttered and grumbled as she got up and slipped back into her clothes, which she had hung on the bed post. She complained that they were still damp. Raven donned her own garments, and the two women crept down the staircase. They searched the kitchen first. That would be the most likely place that Bagyar would be. They looked into the other rooms on the first floor in the main part of the house.

No Bagyar.

"Do you think he went into another wing?" Raven asked.

"We can look, but I don't see why he would do that. Of course, who knows what a wolf-man would do?"

"Well, I'm sure he wouldn't go out in the rain. Let's explore the east wing."

The east wing was dusty, musty, full of enormous cobwebs and filled with old furniture and sealed boxes. It looked as though no one had been through it in decades. In addition, it was not a straight and even hallway. It widened and narrowed and turned in odd and convoluted ways. In some parts there were three or four steps that led up to another level and then again down in no particular pattern until Raven became quite confused. There were also side hallways, making the wing a sort of labyrinth.

She and Annie B opened doors along it. Mostly they led to empty or storage rooms. Some rooms had second and even third doors that led elsewhere. They did not open these. Every once in a while, Raven hollered, "Henry! Henry Bagyar! Are you there? Yell if you hear me." She was answered by the awful silence of the creepy house. The only sounds were the occasional thunder, the relentless rain, howling of the wind and the creaking of the old structure.

At the end of the hallway they came upon double doors that led to at what at first glance seemed to be a shadowy chapel with short pews on either side of an aisle. As Raven shined the light around, she realized that this was no Christian place of worship. Although the gloom made it difficult to see, goblins, monsters and gargoyles were in the niches where she expected to see statues of saints. The stained glass windows illustrated mystical symbols, pyramids, devils, demons and pagan deities. The altar contained a skull in the center, with a cup and a candle on the left side and a bellows and a box of salt on the right.

When Annie B saw that, she cried, "This is a place of devil worship. No way am I going in there."

"Not necessarily devil worship. It might Wiccan or some other pagan worship. Those objects on the altar represent the four elements of alchemy. No sense going in anyway. It's obvious that Bagyar isn't here. Let's go back."

The passage back to the main house was so convoluted that they missed the door that led back to the main house. Their flashlights became dim. A great crash of simultaneous thunder and lightning made them jump into each other's arms.

Raven said, "Somehow we passed the entrance to the alcove. None of this familiar."

Annie B's voice trembled. "You're right. Maybe that's what happened to Wolf-Guy. Like us, he got lost in this big old house. Let's get back to our room."

"If we can find it."

They turned back the way they came, but did not encounter a familiar landmark. Somehow they had come to a spiral staircase.

"This must lead up to a tower," said Raven. "Maybe if we look out a window up there we can get our bearings." Although she tried not to show her increasing panic, she became apprehensive that they would not find their way back in the maze of hallways.

They climbed several flights. At the end was a heavy oaken door. Raven half expected it to be locked. But with an effort she and Annie B pushed it open with a loud squeal of rusty hinges. They peered into a small room, which contained a single item—a coffin.

"What the hell is that doing here?" cried Annie B.

"I don't know." Raven suspected that it might be the daytime resting place of a vampire. She was in no mood to deal one of that ilk. "C'mon, let's go back downstairs."

They returned to the ground floor. After searching a while, they found the door that led to the alcove. From there they returned to their bedroom. Raven hoped that by some miracle Bagyar had come back. She was disappointed.

"What now? Your hairy lover is still not here." Annie B said

"Henry's my soul mate. Maybe I can contact him telepathically. Go back to bed if you like. I'm going to use a meditation technique I know for contacting people mentally."

"Okey dokey. Do your witchy stuff. If you need me, just whisper in my ear." She yawned and crawled into the bed fully clothed.

Raven sat in the middle of the room with her legs crossed so that her ankles rested on her knees. She turned her palms upward and curled her hands. She took several deep calming breaths and relaxed her entire body. When she felt her doubts and concerns leave her like water draining through a colander, she concentrated on her lover. *Henry, Henry Bagyar, can you hear my thoughts?* After she mentally repeated this formula several times, she went into a trance state.

She heard tiny whispers, too low to be understandable. *Henry, is that you? Concentrate on communicating with me with your mind.* The whispers became slight louder until she began to make out individual words, "...lost ... house ... not what it ... Raven.... what should..." The voice faded again. Raven telepathed, *Can you describe you surroundings?*

There were mumbles and groans and fragments of words, but she could not make anything out. She was not even sure that the whispers in her mind were from Bagyar. Some of the voices sounded like other people.

A crash of thunder and lightning brought her out of her trance. She decided to give up. Wherever Bagyar was, he seemed to have heard her, but was unable to communicate. She had become terribly sleepy. She would search every inch of the house the next day.

She started to crawl into bed but realized that Annie B was not there. "No-o-o," she cried loudly. "Not you too."

She called out to Annie B several times. Her only answer was the continuous clatter of the rain against the window and the moaning of the wind.

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CHAPTER 4. A FACE IN THE MIRROR

Raven was devastated. She realized that she had led her friend, her lover and herself into a trap. She prayed to the goddess that nothing terrible had happened to Henry and Annie B. Exhaustion contributed to her melancholy mood. She burst into tears and laid down on the bed, sobbing loudly into the pillow. Her last thought before sleep overtook her was, *I'm glad Annie B's not here to see me slobbering like a baby. She'd never let me live it down. Hard women like us don't cry .*

After she had been asleep awhile, a familiar voice whispered into her ear. "I'm here. I'll help you look for Annie B and Henry."

Raven was too tired to even raise her head. She felt as though something sharp like pins on her throat. Afterwards she fell into another deep and dreamless sleep.

* * * *

Hours later she awoke, feeling logy and weak. Light came through the bedroom window, so she glanced at her watch. It was midmorning. She crawled out of bed and went to look outside. The storm had run its course. The skies were blue with a few white clouds drifting by. Nonetheless, she could see nothing of the area surrounding the house. The eerie white fog that had existed on the day they arrived still covered everything. "Perhaps it'll lift by afternoon," she said to herself, but did not believe it. She was sure the mist was not a natural phenomena.

Because she had slept in her clothes all night which had been damp to begin with, she decided that she needed to put on something fresh. She recalled seeing women's garments in the closet. If they fit her, she would change into them. There was also running water. She needed a bath or a shower badly. She planned to search the house from top to bottom, but beforehand she needed to get into her usual hard edged shape. She hoped that taking time to get her wits about her would not put Annie B and Bagyar in any additional danger.

She selected a dress from the closet that seemed to be her size, although it was not anything she would wear in public. It was muddy brown with lace trim and would cover her from neck to ankle. She figured that the style was from circa 1900s. *Oh well*, she thought. *Who's going to see me in it*.

She went into the attached bathroom, which had an old-fashioned bathtub on cast iron legs, but no shower. She corked up the drain and turned on the water. To see whether there was any soap and shampoo, she went to the medicine cabinet. The first thing she noticed as she peered into the mirror was that she had two small puncture wounds on her throat. A line of dried blood ran from them down her neck. She touched them with her fingertips. They were sore, which meant that they were fresh.

"Celia," she cried. "So it wasn't a dream. She's here somewhere." She did not know whether to be glad or unhappy about the appearance of the vampire. Celia had powers that might help in finding Annie B and Henry. On the other hand, Raven never quite trusted Celia's ability to stop taking blood after a pint or two. As a result she was leery of her. She also hated being under Celia's power.

The medicine chest contained a bar of soap, but no shampoo. As she closed it, she was startled by what she saw. Through the mirror she saw someone enter the bathroom. However, when she turned to see who the intruder was, no one was there. She returned to the bedroom. No one was there either. She wondered whether she had a hallucination.

By this time the bathtub was full of steaming water. Before undressing, she shut the door tightly and locked it using a bolt lock provided for that purpose. She found a towel and wash cloth in a cabinet. She stripped naked and with a sigh sank down into the relaxing warm water. It felt wonderful. She rested for a while to unkink her muscles, washed all over including her hair and ducked under the water to rinse the soap off.

After she dried off, she put on the old-fashioned dress. She did not bother about underwear. She put her own clothes into the bath water with the objective of washing and drying them after she found her companions. She hated the dress, which was so tight from the waist down, that she could not take her usual long strides, but walked with tiny baby steps. The dress had no pockets. As a result, she carried everything in her purse except her pistol which placed in her shoulder holster.

As she peered into the mirror on the dressing table to comb out her hair, she again saw an image of someone standing behind her. To her relief, it was Annie B. She spoke to the image without turning. "Annie B, where in blue blazes have you been."

Annie B's mouth moved but no words came out. Raven said, "What kind of game are you playing, home girl?" She turned. Annie B was not in the room. Raven looked back in the mirror. Annie B was there, shouting silently. Raven turned again. She was alone in the room. She shuddered. Somehow Annie B was inside the mirror.

She had an idea. Annie B knew signing. In the slammer, the prisoners used it when they did not want the guards to know what they were talking about. She signed, "Where are you?"

Annie B. shrugged. She signed, "In the house somewhere. I woke up in a strange room. It doesn't seem to have any windows or doors."

Raven signed, "Is Henry there too?"

"Yes. He's locked in a cage. I can't open it. There's another man here too. He's shackled to the wall. He won't tell me his name."

"I'll find you somehow. Keep your chin up. We'll get out this mess somehow."

She picked up her purse and left the room. *Where should I start?* she thought. Although she wanted to be methodical, she did not want to go to the east wing again. She and Annie B had been through much of it anyway, and it was such a labyrinth that she could waste a lot of time going in circles. Since her stomach was growling at her, she decided to have breakfast before going anywhere.

She went down to the kitchen and found a box of instant pancake mix. She mixed up a batch and brewed coffee. After this hearty breakfast, she felt less tired and more confident.

As she was about to leave the kitchen, she noticed that it had a door other than the one back to the dining room. She opened it. It led to a cellar. *A cellar*, she thought. *Usually that's where the bodies are buried. Let's see what's down there.*

There was a light switch at the top of the steps. She switched it on. Somewhere below a dim light came on. The steps were of plain pine, with no risers and no railing. In the tight dress, she had to be careful that she did not trip and plunge head first to crack her skull open on the concrete floor below.

When she stepped off the bottom step, she was disappointed. The cellar was ordinary. There was a furnace and a coal bin, some rotten cardboard boxes, lots of cobwebs and not much else. As she was about to go back upstairs, she realized that the basement was too small for the size of the house. It was barely the size of the alcove. There had to be more to it.

She batted hanging spider webs away and approached the far wall. It was constructed of stone blocks cemented together. She examined it carefully. Sure enough, she found a crack that ran in a straight line in the shape of a doorway. She felt around until she found a small loose stone. She pulled it out, reached into the cavity it left and felt an iron ring, which she pulled. With a loud screech of stone on stone, the section of wall outlined by the crack swung open. What was behind it was hidden by darkness.

She took out her penlight and shined it in the room. It was large and full of machinery, computers and boxes of electronic and mechanical parts. She found a light switch next to door. Modern fluorescent lights lit up the room. It was quite a contrast compared to the rest of the house. Everything here was modern and clean. The rest of the house held only antiques and dust.

Somebody had used the room to build high tech machinery. But what? She walked into the room and

examined various work benches and tables. On one she found what in all appearances was a human arm. When she picked it up, wires dangled from the place where the shoulder would connect to the body. It was either a prosthetic or part of an animatronic robot. Then it came to her. Whoever was using this shop was building human-like robots. She examined the arm more closely. If it were not for the dangling wires, it exactly duplicated a human arm. Even the skin felt like real skin.

"Okay," she muttered. "Why would someone build a human-like robot in a haunted house?" She replied, "Because he wanted to hide what he was doing." Then it occurred to her. The actions of President Washburn were like that of a robot. "Of course," she cried. "Washburn is dead, and whoever is behind all this substituted a robot for the real Washburn."

A voice behind her said, "So that's why Doctor Takamora built the Washburn model."

Raven turned quickly, but saw no one. "Who said that? Where are you hiding?"

The jaws of a disembodied human head lying on its ear on a workbench moved. "I'm not hiding. Are you blind? I'm right here."

Raven gaped at the thing. "You. How can you talk?"

"In addition to a quantum computer and memory, my skull contains sensors for seeing and hearing and a voice producing amplifier and speaker. I can even whistle." It pursed its lips and whistled Yankee Doodle Dandy. "When Doctor Takamora hooks me to a robot body, I will be able to do whatever a human can—and better."

She went over by the talking head and cocked her head sideways. "Tell me more about Doctor Takamora."

"Only if you set me up straight. Do you know anything about assembling robots?"

Raven lifted the head up and brought it level with her own head so that she could examine it more closely. Like the arm, it seemed very human and had wires dangling from the neck, presumably to attach it to a robot body. In a superficial way, it resembled Washburn, as though it was a sibling or close cousin. The thing said, "My stand is on the workbench somewhere. When Doctor Takamora left last time, he was in a hurry and accidentally knocked it over. I've been lying on my side ever since."

She found the stand and carefully set the head on it. "How long ago was that?"

"Four months, two days, fifteen hours, seven minutes and thirty-two seconds before the moment you asked your question."

"Really? It seems like this Takamora guy deserted you. Where did he go?"

"You may be right. I was hoping that he would come back and give me a body like the Washburn model. I don't know where he went. He did not say." The head curled its lips in a pout and looked as though it was about to weep.

"Maybe if I can find this Doctor Takamora, I can bring him back here to finish assembling you."

The robot head smiled broadly. "Oh, would you!"

"Sure. I'm a detective, you know. A private investigator. If you tell me more about Doctor Takamora, it would help me find him."

"That would be wonderful. Well, his full name is Hiroshi Takamora. He's originally from Tokyo, Japan and emigrated to the United States to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he received his doctorate in artificial intelligence and robotics. After graduation, he went to work in research and development for Illusions Plus, which manufactures computer games and animatronic robots. He left their employment about a year ago, came here and started building human-like robots. He is five foot nine inches tall, weighs one hundred and thirty two pounds, has brown eyes, black hair which he wears rather long, and is slight of build. He..."

"Hold up. Do you know why he left Illusions Plus?"

"No. Everything I've told you is what is in his file in my memory. I can only give you information from the file. I know very little about his actual motivations and his doings outside this laboratory."

"I understand. Did he build you before or after Washburn?"

"Before. That's what I don't understand. The Washburn model received a body; why not me?"

"Did he build you and Washburn here?"

"Not me. Only Washburn."

"Oh? When did he bring you here?"

"After he met this fellow Peter Johnson. Apparently Mr. Johnson owns this house and the island."

Peter Johnson, Raven thought. That's Magbertius' pseudonym. No wonder he sent me another nightmare. I'll bet he's mixed up in all this. "So this house is on an island."

"That is only an assumption on my part. I've never been out of this room since Doctor Takamora unpacked me. I only said that it is on an island because I overheard Doctor Takamora and Mr. Johnson talking about it."

"Can you describe this Mr. Johnson?"

"He is a husky man in his mid-forties, I would estimate. He has a dark beard and rather longish hair for a man. Do you think he had something to do with Doctor Takamora's disappearance?"

The description fits Magbertius, Raven thought and a chill went through her. She feared no one more than the sorcerer. "I'd almost bet on it. Johnson is an evil man. Were they the only people who you saw in this machine shop or laboratory or whatever it is?"

"It is a some of both. One day Doctor Takamora and Mr. Johnson brought in an unconscious man. He may have even been dead. They modeled Washburn after him."

"What did they do with the man after they built Washburn?"

"I don't know. They took him away. The next evening they conjured up another man."

"Conjured up? Not built."

The robot rolled his eyes. "He wasn't a robot. He wasn't human either. They made marks on the floor in the shape of a five pointed star inside a circle..."

"A pentacle, probably to summon a demon," Raven muttered.

"...put a black candle on each point and some other weird stuff around the circle. Then they said words in a language I'm not proficient in. They could have been simply nonsense words. Do you want me to repeat them to you?"

"That won't be necessary. Go on. What happened?"

"Poof. There was a lot of evil smelling smoke, a sound like thunder and this creature appeared."

"What sort of creature?"

"It looked like a man in a quaint costume from some other century, but it wasn't really a man."

"Did they call the 'creature' by name?"

"Its name was Niccolo Machiavelli. The three of them argued a bit about what to do next. Finally, they decided that the creature Machiavelli was to take the Washburn model to Washington, D.C. I believe that is the capital of the United States. Apparently they needed the Washburn model to take over the government and start a war so that they could gain even more power. Once the war was started, Doctor Takamora and Mister Johnson were going to join Machiavelli and the Washburn model in Washington and start a campaign to conquer the world. Say, maybe that's where they went—to Washington to conquer the world."

"I don't think so. I just came from there. Machiavelli and the Washburn model were there, but not Johnson or Takamora. Did you ever overhear them say anything about this house and island? I mean, did they think it was strange or mysterious?"

"Doctor Takamora thought that parts of it existed in another dimension. He said it had something to with quantum multidimensional effects. I really did not understand what he meant. He is such a genius. My long term memory contains some information about quantum theory and relativity, but not much. I don't have enough mathematics in my memory to understand it completely."

"How did he think it got that way?"

"That's where he and Mister Johnson disagreed. Mister Johnson claimed that a spell had been placed on this island and house sometime in the past. Doctor Takamora did not believe in spells or magic. He thought that the island was simply an anomaly in the space-time continuum."

Raven wrinkled her forehead in thought. "I see. Is that why people who come to this house disappear? When they enter parts of it, they go into another dimension and cannot return."

"That's a reasonable theory. But who are these people who have disappeared?"

"Both of the people I came here with. And possibly Doctor Takamora. Maybe Mister Johnson. According to an old fisherman people go missing around this area all the time."

"Do you think that is really true? If that's the case, how will we ever find them?"

"Follow them into the other dimension."

"But suppose we can't get back?"

Raven shrugged. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Do you have the plans for this house in your memory?"

"I believe I do. My hard drive contains a folder labeled 'House Plans'. I never looked to see what was inside of it."

"Could you describe them in enough detail so that I can draw them?"

"I suppose. But why don't you simply print them out?"

"How can I do that?"

"A USB cable is among those protruding from the bottom of my neck. If you attach it to one of the desktop computers in this room, I'll do the rest."

Raven carried the head in its stand over by one of the PCs, plugged the USB cable into the desktop and booted up the computer. A few minutes later a printer printed the house plans. It took twenty eight sheets of paper. When they were all printed, Raven examined them. The east wing alone took up ten sheets with its labyrinthine hallways. The west wing was almost as convoluted. She noted that secret rooms and passages were also shown.

She became so absorbed that the robot head had to remind her that time was fleeting. She glanced at her watch. It was two in the afternoon. She realized that she was hungry. She brought the robot head and the house plans up to the kitchen.

While she made a meal from items she found in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator and canned food in the cabinet. While she ate, the robot head said, "This is the first time I've been outside the laboratory-machine shop in the cellar. It's wonderful to be able to view the wider world. Thank you for bringing me here."

"Oh, think nothing of it. I'll take you with me when I search for my companions and your creator."

"Oh my, you're a good person. I hope that I don't get overwhelmed with all the new things I'll be seeing."

When Raven finished her lunch, she examined the house's layout again. She creased her brow at something that puzzled her. She placed one of the sheets in front of the robot's eyes. "What's the meaning of these dotted blue lines?"

"I don't know. They all seem to be in that odd-shaped room in the west wing. I can't imagine what they designate."

Raven rubbed her chin. "I wonder. Could they be the doorways that lead to other dimensions?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. You are the detective."

"Well, there's only one way to find out and that's to look. Are you game, uh ... You know, I don't know your name."

"I don't have one. Doctor Takamora never gave me one."

"That's awful. What kind of father is he, not even to name you? He's a Frankenstein."

"I know that novel. It's on my hard drive as an eBook. You're right. Look how Doctor Takamora never gave me a body either and went away without a thought about me. The monster Frankenstein created turned on Frankenstein. I should turn on Doctor Takamora." It groaned. "Only I don't have any way of doing that."

"Well, we'll settle with him when we find him. I think I'll call you Cedric." Raven patted the robot on the top of its head. "I dub thee Cedric the robot head."

"Thank you. You're such a kind person."

"Now, how can I carry you around?" She grew thoughtful.

"The Huns used to carry the heads of their enemies around by tying them to their horses by the enemy's hair."

"Your hair's too short." She rummaged through cabinets searching for something she could use to carry Cedric. Under the sink were onions in a sack. She dumped the onions, which were mostly rotten, into the garbage can. She placed the robot head in the netlike onion sack. "Can you see all right, Cedric?"

"Fairly well. I guess I can't be fussy. This is probably better than being tied by my hair."

She attached the sack to the belt of her shoulder holster and buckled it on so that the robot head rested against her back. "You can cover my rear, Cedric. Yell, if you see anything unusual going on behind me."

"I will do that."

Raven decided to look for that secret room where the plans showed blue lines. As she passed through the foyer, Cedric hollered out, "Doctor Takamora!"

Raven turned around, but saw no one. "Where?"

"In the mirror."

Raven peered into the hallway mirror. Sure enough, in the mirror a middle-aged Japanese man seemed to be standing right in back of her. He fit the description that the robot head had given her. He was mouthing the words, "Help me. Help me."

"How?" she mouthed.

"West wing. Secret room."

"What then?"

"Bring book. Necro..." Raven could not make out the full name of the book.

"Where find?"

"Library."

As Raven was about to ask Takamora to repeat the name of the book, his image disappeared from the mirror. She removed the robot head from the onion bag. "Do you know anything about a book with Necro-something in the title?"

"Doctor Takamora and Mister Johnson argued a lot about a book called *The Necronomicon* ." The storm outdoors started up again with loud thunder. "It seemed to contain formulas to perform some sort of witchcraft or sorcery. Of course, Doctor Takamora pooh-poohed the whole thing as Medieval thinking. He does not believe in sorcery, only science. I think Mister Johnson may have used it to bring the thing called Niccolo Machiavelli from wherever it resided previously."

"Apparently Doctor Takamora has changed his beliefs in the matter. He wants me to bring the book to wherever he is."

"What do you think, Ms. Lenore? Is there anything to the legends concerning *The Necronomicon* ? All my references to it are in fiction written by H.P. Lovecraft."

Another loud clap of thunder sounded.

Raven shrugged. "I suppose we'll see."

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CHAPTER 5. THE NECRONOMICON

Raven picked up Cedric again, but did not put the head in the onion bag. Instead she carried it into the library.

"What is this room?" it asked.

"The library. See all the books." She laid Cedric on the table with the chess set.

"What are we doing here?"

"Searching for The Necronomicon. It's too bad you don't have arms and legs. You could help me look."

"Yes. It is too bad." The head put on a sad expression.

The library held hundred of books on shelves that went from floor to the twelve foot high ceiling. A ladder on wheels was provided to reach the books on the upper shelves. Raven started by browsing through the shelves she could reach without stretching. Except for a large section on computing, artificial intelligence and robotics, the books did not seem to follow any particular scheme—fiction was mixed with nonfiction; self-help books with the occult, author T followed author B with author N next to it—which made the search that much more difficult. The newer books had their titles on the spine, but

many of the older books had nothing on the spines. Raven assumed that *The Necronomicon* would be one of those. As a result, she pulled each book with nothing on the spine and examined it. With so many books, this took hours.

She spent most of the afternoon in this search without discovering any book called *The Necronomicon* on the lower shelves. As she moved the ladder into position to examine the upper shelves, Cedric said, "If I owned a magical book with secrets in it, I think I would hide it, not leave it on a shelf in a library for anyone to find."

Raven sighed and cursed. "Shit. You're right. Where do you suppose Takamora could've hidden it?"

Cedric replied, "Probably in a safe."

"Oh for love of The Goddess, that means it could be anywhere in this enormous house. You wouldn't happen to have any information about where we could find *The Necronomicon* hidden away in your memory would you?"

A house rattling lightning strike lit up the room.

"Actually a folder labeled *The Necronomicon* is on my hard drive."

Again lightning flashed, and deep thunder sounded.

"What! Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"You did not ask."

Raven had to hold back from whacking the robot head. "Okay. What's in the folder?"

"I cannot tell you."

"What! Why not, you stupid robot head?" She grabbed a heavy book and held it in a threatening manner as she faced Cedric.

"It's password protected."

"Son-of-a-bitch. I suppose only Takamora and maybe Johnson have the password."

"Doctor Takamora has. I don't know about Mister Johnson."

"Stay here. I'll go back to the mirror and see whether I can contact him."

Raven returned to the foyer and peered into the mirror. At first, all she saw was her reflection and the room behind her. Suddenly, a new face appeared of someone standing behind her. It was not Takamora, however. It was a woman in nineteenth century garb. She stared back at Raven and opened her mouth as if to scream. But no sound came from the mirror.

Raven mouthed the words, "Please calm down. I won't harm you."

The woman stopped screaming and ran out of the room she was in, which Raven saw was a parlor. The scene shifted to another room. To Raven's delight, she saw Bagyar. Her mood changed to sorrow and

worry when she saw that he was in a cage.

"Bagyar," she cried. "Can you see me?"

He put his hand out as though to touch her.

She again exaggerated her mouth movements as she spoke. "Henry, where are you?"

He shrugged and began to talk. But because of the shape of his snout, she could not tell what he was saying.

"Never mind, darling. I'll find you somehow." Tears rolled down her cheeks. As she wiped them away, Bagyar's image disappeared to be replaced by Magbertius in his Johnson persona. "You!" she cried and stepped back in fear.

He laughed, and Raven heard his evil laughter in her mind. He telepathed to her, "Dearest Raven, forget that beast and come to me."

"Come to you where? Apparently, you and my companions are in some other universe."

"You're absolutely right. Nonetheless, you know how to get here. I can see it in your mind."

"Where's Doctor Takamora? Bring him where I can see him."

Magbertius laughed again. "You want to know how you can get *The Necronomicon* . I would like to know that too. That fool Takamora has hidden somewhere. I hope you find it. Then you can bring it to me. If not, I may have to torture that fool. He was useful in creating a replica of the president, but now he's worthless to me. After you locate *The Necronomicon* , come to me. I'll meet you in the secret room where the gates are. You shall be my empress once I conquer the world."

"Will you release my friends if I agree to that?"

Before he answered, his image disappeared. Apparently the mirror would display someone in the other dimension for only a short period. Raven waited for whoever would appear next. She called, "Doctor Takamora, I need you." She concentrated on the computer scientist. To her relief, he reappeared in the mirror. She mouthed, "I need the password to get information about *The Necronomicon* from the robot head you left in your laboratory."

He nodded his understanding and mouthed, "The password is 'pseudo science.'"

"Thanks." *Of course* , she thought. *I should've guessed that. It's probably his opinion of everything occult.*

Before she could ask him anything else, Takamora vanished from the mirror. No more people appeared. She returned to the library. "Cedric, I have the password for the file *The Necronomicon* ."

"Good. What is it?"

"Pseudo science."

"That's correct. Do you wish for me to tell you what the file contains?"

"That's the idea."

"Seven-fourteen-thirty six."

"That's it? Just three numbers?"

"Yes."

"Oh crap. It's probably the combination of the safe where *The Necronomicon* is stored. But, I still have no idea where the safe is."

Raven felt hungry. She glanced at her watch. It was near dusk, and she had not eaten anything since breakfast. "C'mon Cedric. Before we start searching for that safe, I need to eat dinner."

She carried the robot head back to the kitchen. She found a steak and frozen vegetables in the freezer. She wondered who had bought them, probably Takamora or Johnson. She broiled the steak and cooked the cauliflower in the microwave. As she ate, she tried to devise a plan for finding the safe. Wall safes were usually hidden under pictures or behind secret panels. She decided to first check every picture in the house. Or she could forget about *The Necronomicon* and go through one of the gates to another dimension without it. But that was a high risk maneuver. She might not be able to get back and would be as lost and helpless as Takamora and her companions. Not that she was sure that having *The Necronomicon* would allow her to return to her familiar dimension either. She needed to at least see what the book contained before proceeding. She wondered how Magbertius traveled back and forth between dimensions.

It grew dark and started to storm again. The island seemed to have only two kinds of weather, stormy and rainy at night and misty during the day. The weather had to be controlled by whatever spell or curse was over the island.

She topped off her meal with a glass of the Merlot she discovered in a cabinet. "Okay, Cedric. Are you ready to go exploring?"

"Is the lady standing behind you going with us?"

"What lady?" Raven stood up and turned around quickly. Standing so close that her nose almost touched Raven's was VanGrimm.

The vampire grinned. "How are things with you, my sweet?"

The blood drained from Raven, and her knees turned to gelatin. Nonetheless, she fought back the panic she felt around the vampire. After all, she was supposed to be a friend. "Hi, Celia. I knew you were around. You took blood from me the other night while I was sleeping, didn't you?"

"Yes. I tried to wake you, but you seemed so out of it."

"How long have you been here?"

"A while. My coffin is in the tower room of the east wing."

"So that was yours. You followed us here?"

"Of course. You know how much I love you and Annie B." She licked her lips as in anticipation of a good meal. "Where is that sweet girl?"

"Lost. So is Henry. There's something strange about this house. It's like a great labyrinth with gateways to other dimensions."

"I noticed its strangeness myself. I could help you search for The Beast and Annie B."

"First I need to find a book called *The Necronomicon*." Lightning crackled loudly, and the house groaned "Apparently it contains incantations that would allow one to travel between this and another dimension, where I believe our friends are at the moment."

"I have heard of such a book. If you find it, you must be careful. It's a danger in itself. I've been told that it's infested with demonic forces."

"You're not very encouraging."

VanGrimm licked her lips again. "I'm thirsty, my darling. I'll need a drink before we go chasing after that evil book." She took Raven by the shoulders, tipped her head to the side and sank her fangs into Raven's throat. Raven did not resist. She gave in to the agony and ecstasy of being a donor. The vampire drank until Raven's knees buckled. She took Raven by the arms and set her on a chair. "Rest, dear one. I'll fix you a meal to give you your strength back."

"There's food in the freezer," Raven said weakly. Although she had just finished a big steak dinner, she was famished. She knew she had to eat again to fill that void that the vampire's blood sucking had left.

"I know you like your meat at least halfway cooked," said VanGrimm as she removed a package of hamburger from the freezer and slapped the whole pound on a frying pan. As she turned on the burner on the electric stove, she said, "Why were you talking to a decapitated human head when I arrived?"

"It's not a human head. It's a robot head. Cedric say hello to Celia VanGrimm, vampire."

"Pleased to meet you, Ms. VanGrimm. Are you really a vampire? I thought such creatures were only in myths and fiction."

VanGrimm chuckled. "I'm glad to inform you that we undead really exist. We live by night and suck the blood of humans. However, I personally dislike the term 'vampire.' It has connotations of bats and musty old castles. I prefer 'undead persons.' And you're one of those marvels of twenty-first century technology that always amaze me. But where's your body, Cedric?"

"My creator, Doctor Takamora, did not see fit to make one for me."

Soon Raven's hamburger was cooked. VanGrimm had made the entire pound into a giant patty. Since there were no bread or rolls, Raven spread it with mustard and ate it with a pickle. By the time she was done, some of her strength had returned. "Okay. The hunt is on."

She put Cedric back in the onion bag and tied it to her shoulder holster so that the robot head hung down her back as before. Raven had seen several portraits hung in the rooms on the second floor. The howling of the wind and the crash of thunder and lightning at odd moments continued as she and VanGrimm crept upstairs to look for a safe behind one of the paintings.

Raven and VanGrimm looked behind every painting in every room on the second floor of the main building of the house without find a wall safe. Finally, VanGrimm threw up her arms and said, "We've searched for hours. It'll take us forever to do the entire house, especially since there are secret rooms we don't even know how to get into. There must be a clue as to where this wall safe is located."

Cedric said, "There may not be a wall safe. Ms. Lenore is only assuming there's a wall safe because I had a file in my memory named *The Necronomicon* that contained three numbers". Again the house groaned and lightning flashed at the mention of the demonic tome "It's possible that those numbers have another meaning than a combination to a wall safe."

VanGrimm and Raven looked at each other for a few seconds. Raven shrugged. VanGrimm said, "What are the numbers?"

"Seven, fourteen, thirty-six."

"And that was the only item in the file?"

"Yes."

Raven got an idea. She was aware that robots are literal and seldom tell you anything beyond what you ask. "Is that file in a folder? If so, tell me the name of the folder."

"The folder is called *Secrets* ."

"Ah hah. What other files are in *Secrets* ?"

"Many files." The robot head began to recite a long list. At one point, Raven stopped it.

"What's in the file Secret Locations?"

"I can't tell you."

"But I know the password, *Psuedo Science* ."

"That is not it. Each file in the Secrets folder has a different password."

Raven groaned. If Cedric had not been hanging down her back, she would have hit it.

"What now?" asked VanGrimm.

"We know a little about how this Takamora thinks. Maybe we can guess the password. Let's go into the library."

After they entered the library, Raven put Cedric on the chess table again. "Okay Cedric, we're going to play a guessing game. Celia and I will take turns guessing the password for the Secret Locations file. When one of us guesses correctly, you tell us what's in that file."

"Goody. I love games, especially chess. Are you sure you would not rather play chess?"

"No. We're going to play guess the password. Let's see, Secret Locations..." Raven paused as she

pondered. "How about *geography* ?"

"That's not it."

VanGrimm said, "*Safeplace*."

"That's not it."

They continued in this manner for a long time, until both Raven and the vampire were out of ideas. They stared hatefully at the robot head.

Cedric said, "Oh come on, you're not giving up already are you."

"Oh shut up, you silly plastic head," cried VanGrimm.

"That's it. Should I start telling you what is in the file?"

"Was it *silly plastic head* ?"

"Of course not. It was *shut up* . I suppose because the secret locations file was shut up until the password was given. The safe that contains *The Necronomicon* is in a secret room in the west wing." The storm raging outdoors became more furious. Cedric gave them directions on how to find and enter the secret room.

Raven said, "Okay, now we're getting somewhere."

VanGrimm said, "I won't be able to accompany you, darling. Sunrise is only a couple of minutes away. I must return to my coffin."

"I understand. I'm sleepy too. After I find that damn book, I may nap for a while. Then we'll enter the gateway to another dimension together tomorrow evening. You know where I sleep. Come there right after you rise."

"Agreed." VanGrimm kissed Raven on the cheek and vanished.

Raven lifted the robot head to return it to the onion bag. "C'mon Cedric, let's find *The Necronomicon* ."

A great crash of thunder and lightning startled her.

Cedric said, "That was quite a trick your friend pulled. How did she disappear into thin air like that?"

"She did not really vanish. Vampires move so quickly they seem to vanish."

Cedric rolled its eyes in disbelief.

Raven trod a twisted path through the labyrinthine hallways of the west wing until she came to a room that had once been a parlor. It was coated thickly with dust, and great cobwebs hung from the ceiling. Tables and chairs were tipped over; some were broken. As she entered, the floor squeaked. A rocking chair began to slowly rock. Raven wondered whether her footsteps had set it in motion. Through a filthy and broken window, Raven saw that the sun was up, and the storm had abated. However, the fog had returned. As it seeped through the broken pane it, the damp and cold touched her with icy fingers. The room became misty and nightmarish. Raven's psychic sense felt the presence of something from beyond

the grave, a long dead wraith that gave off a musty aura.

"Who's here?" she asked.

"I'm right behind you as always," Cedric replied.

"Not you. I feel the presence of a spirit."

"You mean a ghost? There's no such thing."

"Who told you that? Takamora? You did not believe in vampires either until Celia came along."

"Is she really a vampire?"

"Yes. Now be quiet. I want to contact the spirit. Spirit of the departed, listen to my voice and make your presence known." She repeated her call to the invisible presence.

A strange hollow voice groaned. Chains rattled. The wraith whispered, "What you seek will take your soul. I suffer endlessly because of that book."

"Who said that?" said Cedric.

Raven ignored the robot head. "Nonetheless, I wish to have it. Tell me where it's hidden."

"You will be sorry. It is behind the east wall, the seventh panel over. Since you are so rash, I pity you."
The wraith wept loudly.

Raven went to the east wall. The paneling was in distinct squares. She counted seven over from the corner and rapped on it. It sounded hollow. There were several decorative knob-like devices on it. She tried to press and turn a couple of them. They did not move. She scratched her head. "Now, how in blazes do I open the pane?"

"May I see?" said Cedric.

Raven removed the head from the onion sack and held it before the panel. It immediately said, "Press the fourteenth thingamajig inside the square."

"Fourteen, of course. First it was panel seven, then the fourteenth knob. You were right, the three numbers had nothing to do with a safe." The knobs were in two rows of eight. Raven pressed the seventh one on the row on the right. The panel slid open, revealing a numerical pad on a small metal door. She pressed three and six and a button labeled Enter. She grasped a handle on the side and opened the door.

Cedric said, "This is like one of the computer games that Doctor Takamora used to play."

"It figures. That's probably where he got the idea." She reached into the opening. When she touched the leather cover of the book within, she felt a vile presence so strong that it sent a shock wave through her body. She let go of Cedric, who fell to the floor and rolled away, and dropped to her knees. The wraith cackled.

Raven picked up the robot head. "Are you all right, Cedric? I'm sorry I dropped you. I was overwhelmed by the evil emanations given off by the *Necronomicon* ." At the mention of the book's title,

the room shuddered as though an earth tremor had struck.

"I'm a little frazzled. Am I dented or cracked?"

Raven examined it. "No. Your exterior is fine."

"I just gave myself an internal check. No interior damage to report. How are you? What happened?"

"I touched that evil book. It gave me such a malevolent psychic shock, it was as though I had grabbed a hot electrical wire."

"Oh dear. Perhaps you had better not handle it."

"I'll be all right. It was just that it took me by surprise. I'll prepare myself before I touch it again." She laid the head on a nearby table and did calming exercises. Slowly she reached into the hole in the wall and touched the book only with her fingertips. She allowed the evil emanations to enter her body and dissipate. She conjured a spell to ward off wicked spirits and influences. She no longer felt the presence of the wraith.

When she put her hand on the book, it pulsed with a clammy foul cold like dead flesh, as though she had touched one of the undead. In addition, a vicious sinister ectoplasm went up her arm to her brain. Images of horror and madness raced through her mind. She fought these with all of the psychic abilities she had.

When the emanations became less violent and tumultuous, she grasped the book and took it out of its hiding place. She laid it on the table next to Cedric.

"I've got to find a way to carry this without touching it. If I held it too long, its evil emanations would turn me into an insane psychotic monster."

There was an old sewing cabinet in the room. She took the scissors from its drawer and cut off a length of cloth from the heavy drapes. She placed the book into the center of the cloth and wrapped it securely. Although she could still feel the awful horror coming from it, the vibrations were weakened by the heavy cloth. She placed the book and the robot head into the onion sack.

"Now to find the gate to the other world where Takamora and my friends are." She took out the printouts of the house and examined them.

"A secret room shown on the house plan as having those strange blue lines is nearby," said Cedric.

"Where?"

"It adjoins this one."

Raven peered at the documents again. Sure enough, they showed an odd-shaped secret room behind the walls of the room they were in. On each wall of the secret room, there were blue lines. She moved furniture away from the wall adjacent to the secret room and looked for a device to open a panel or door. She realized that an old gas lamp fixture that she could just reach by standing on tiptoe could be the mechanism. She moved the lever that in olden times would have turned on the gas. A door opened in the paneling. Beyond was absolute darkness. She clicked on her penlight. The room was empty of people and furniture. It was simply bare without windows or decorations. She searched for a light switch, but could not find one. Nevertheless, she entered the room.

The moment she stepped over the threshold, the panel behind her slammed shut and an overhead light turned on. The large room was in the shape of a pentagram with a door in each of the walls that formed the points of the stars plus a door at three of the inner junctions. What drew her attention, however, was the man who stood in the center of the room. She did not know how she could have missed him when she played her penlight around the room. Although the room was cool, she broke out in perspiration and felt weak in the knees. It was Magbertius in his Johnson persona.

"Well, Raven my dear, you've come to me at last. Have you brought *The Necronomicon*?" He cackled, followed by a great crash of thunder.

Although Raven was terrified of him, she made up her mind to brazen it out. She withdrew her pistol from her holster and pointed it at him. "What have you done with Henry Bagyar and Annie B?"

"Your strange companions are behind one of those doors." He made a sweeping gesture. "I'm afraid that you'll have to guess which one. Now tell me what you are carrying in that onion sack."

"A robot head. Is that what you're looking for?"

Cedric said, "Good morning, Mister Johnson. I'd say, 'It's good to see you again,' except that I cannot see you because I'm facing away from you."

Magbertius sniffed the air. "I don't know. I thought I sensed something else, something that Doctor Takamora hid from me."

"If you mean *The Necronomicon* ..." The house shuddered with another nearby strike of lightning. "...I don't have it. The robot head and I were searching for Takamora ourselves, as well as my friends. That's why we came into this room."

"I guess I need to torture Takamora until he tells me the location of *The Necronomicon*." Again the house shook from loud thunder. "I have you trapped here. You'll find that you cannot leave the way you came into the room."

"What about the doors in this room? Where do they go?"

"To places you would find most unpleasant." He turned away and opened one of the doors. Before going through, he said, "I especially don't think you want to follow me through this one. You would not like it at all. *Au revoir*, Raven. I'll be back."

"Not soon, I hope."

A moment later he was through the door and gone.

Raven started after Magbertius. Cedric said, "Where are you going?"

She halted. "After Mr. Johnson, as you call him. He went through one of the doors out of this room."

"Don't be hasty. How do you know he isn't leading you into a trap?"

Raven stroked her chin. "Maybe you have something there. I should look before I leap."

"A wise old aphorism."

Since she still had her automatic in her hand, she opened the door a crack that Magbertius went through and peered through it. At first all she saw was blue sky and clouds. Then she looked down. A few inches in front of her was a thousand foot drop. If she had blindly stepped through the door, she would have fallen into a chasm. She quickly slammed the door as her acrophobia kicked in. She wiped the perspiration from her forehead and sat down to recover from her fright.

"Holy crap," she said. "How did Johnson go through that and not fall to his death?"

The robot head said, "Doctor Takamora read much science fiction, which he also stored in my files. Have you ever read *The World of Tiers* series by Philip Jose Farmer?"

"Can't say that I have."

"You should have. In these novels there were what the author called 'gates' to other worlds such as the doors in this room may lead to. Some of the gates were traps of various kinds. Others led to terrible worlds in which danger lurked everywhere. Also, some gates were changeable, so that they led to one place one time and to another at another time. That's probably the case of the door you almost stepped through to your death. They were interesting stories."

"Great Hecate!" Raven counted the doors in the room. There was one in each wall that made up the points of the pentagram and three additional within the center portion of the room—thirteen doors in total. "What you're saying is that of these thirteen doors, some may be death traps, some may lead to dangerous worlds, some may change from time to time and maybe some are death traps one time and lead to dangerous worlds the next, changing from time to time."

"That was what the hero of *The World of Tiers*, a man named Kickaha, had to endure. Of course, these might not be the same. Who knows where they lead."

"How did this Kickaha survive?"

"He used his wits to overcome almost impossible odds. Of course, he was quite athletic and smart as the dickens. At times he had marvelous good luck."

"And he was fictional."

"Yes. There is that. Perhaps all the cleverness was in the author."

"I see. How can I decide which of these doors leads to the place where Doctor Takamora and my comrades are? That is, if all three are in one place."

"Quite a quandary."

"Say. Takamora must've known something about these door and the places they lead to. Is there anything in your long term memory about them, other than science fiction?"

"Take me out of the onion bag. I have a hard time thinking with all the bouncing around you do."

Raven placed Cedric on a table. The robot head creased its forehead and closed its eyes in the manner of someone concentrating hard on a problem. Finally it said, "Not much information. Apparently this house had been cursed sometime in the past. That is what Mister Johnson's theory was. Doctor

Takamora felt that is became as it is spontaneously due to quantum effects. Whatever they are."

"Did Johnson think that *The Necronomicon* had anything to do with it?"

There was a sound of thunder, and the building shook. The temperature in the room fell several degrees, as though the mere mention of the unspeakable book brought the house closer to the abyss.

"Come to think of it, Mister Johnson had talked about that book in that context."

"If there's an incantation in the book for making the house the malevolent thing that it is, there may be a counter spell to remove the curse. I need to look through the book." Raven avoided saying the title aloud.

"I would not do that if I were you. Remember the affect on you simply by touching it. Who knows what awful thing would happen if you actually opened it."

"You've got a point, but what else can I do?"

"Why don't you try the doors? Just see what's behind them, but be cautious."

"You're right again. You're a smart cookie. I should use the book only as a last resort. The important thing is not to disenchant the house, but to find my friends—and Doctor Takamora, of course."

She placed Cedric back into the sack and peeped through the door next to the one she had just tried. There was nothing but blackness, as though a velvet curtain had been drawn across the door. She shined her flashlight into the awful darkness. It was as though whatever was beyond swallowed the light. *It's a black hole*, she thought. It seemed to suck her in. She slammed the door shut.

She tried another door. This led to a cavern with stalagmites and stalagmites. "Don't want to go into any caves."

A third door led to some kind of insane world that was a combination of an M.C. Escher drawings and Hieronymous Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Raven knew that if she stared too long at it she would go insane. She quickly shut that door.

She heard a dog like growling and whimpering from a door across the room. "Henry," she cried. She ran over to the door and peered in. Within was a wooded area at night under a full moon. Red eyes glistened in the moonlight. As Raven's eyes acclimated to the gloom, she realized that the eyes belonged to wolves. They were on their haunches baying at the moon. One looked her way and growled in a menacing manner. The others stopped baying and peered at her with hungry eyes. She closed that door quickly. No sense in going where she would be attacked by wolves.

She tried a few more doors. None of the places behind them seemed to be a likely candidate for finding Takamora and her friends. For one thing, every scene she had seen in the mirror in the hallway had been indoors, in rooms similar to the rooms of the mansion. From this she deduced that whatever world they were in contained a similar house, and they were in that house. Finally she opened a door that led to what appeared to be a bedroom identical to those she had seen on the second floor of the mansion. "This must be it."

It was night in the world where the bedroom was located. However, the gloom was broken by moonlight streaming through the window and several lighted candles scattered around the room. At least

there was no storm. She passed through the door, gazed longingly at the bed and yawned. She had been up more than twenty-four hours and wondered whether it would be prudent to take a nap. *No*, she thought. *I'd better look around a bit first. Magbertius or some other danger may be nearby.*

Cedric said, "The door you came through is gone."

"What?" She turned around. Where the entrance she had stepped through had been was a blank wall. She ran her hand along it. It felt solid. She rapped on it. It was not hollow.

"It must have been a one-way gate," Cedric said.

"A one-way gate? You didn't mention that before. Were there one-way gates in *The World of Tiers*?"

"As I recall, many were one-way. That is how Kickaha got trapped by The Lords of Creation several times."

Raven snorted with disgust. If she had known that, she would not have so complacently walked into that room. While she decided what to do next, the bedroom door opened. Raven drew her pistol.

A young woman in a black robe entered. "Are you Raven?" she asked. "Why are you pointing that strange looking weapon at me? I mean you no harm." She looked Raven up and down. "And why are you wearing those odd garments?"

"Whoa. I have some questions for you too, lady. How do you know my name?" Raven put her gun back in the holster. This woman did not seem to present any danger.

"The master saw your coming in his crystal ball. He said you would bring something to aid us in our present dilemma."

"That depends on what the dilemma is. Who is your master? And what's your name?"

"Oh, I apologize. I should have introduced myself. I am Sarah. Our master is Peter Magbertius. We call our coven The Thirteen." She let out a giggle. She seemed very young, perhaps sixteen or seventeen. "If you join us though, we shall need to change our name. There will be fourteen."

Raven gaped at her. "Peter Magbertius? The Thirteen? What year is this?"

Sarah giggled again. "Why the year of our Lord seventeen twenty five in the month of October. Two days before we celebrate Samhain, which you may know as All Hallows Eve."

"Oh Great Goddess Hecate, I've gone back into time. The original Magbertius is alive."

"You call upon Hecate. I take it from that then that you are also a witch. The Master predicted as much. But, why are you surprised that The Master is alive? What have you heard?"

"Uh ... I was told that there is a warrant for his arrest for performing witchcraft. I thought that he had been caught and executed."

Sarah leaned her head to one side. "What is it that you carry in your knapsack?"

Raven reached back and removed Cedric from the sack. She held the robot head for Sarah to examine.

The woman shrunk back in horror. "Tis a severed head. Why do you carry such a horrible thing?"

"It's an oracle. It speaks. Say hello to Sarah, Cedric."

The robot head said, "How do you do, Sarah? My name is Cedric."

Sarah's eyes grew as round as saucers. "Oh my, Mistress Raven. You are a powerful sorceress indeed to enchant a head in such a manner. But I was sent to fetch you, Mistress Raven. The Master and our coven are meeting downstairs in the parlor. As you pointed out, the witch hunters are after us. The Master has called a meeting to discuss what to do. He told me the one we have waited for would be in this room."

"Give me a few minutes, Sarah. As you said before, I'm not properly attired." Raven went to the wardrobe. To her relief it was filled with eighteenth century garments. "I'll come downstairs as soon as I change."

"Very well. The master himself has not arrived yet." She left the room.

Raven placed Cedric on the dresser, hid *The Necronomicon* under the mattress and placed her gun and holster in a bureau drawer. She removed a dress from the wardrobe. It was plain with a black skirt and a beige blouse. She found undergarments in a drawer. She combed her hair. "What do you think, Cedric? Do I look like a proper eighteenth century woman?"

"Do you really believe we have traveled to the past?"

"Absolutely. You heard Sarah tell us the date."

"Your voice trembled when you talked of this person Magbertius. Are you afraid of him?"

"Some, but in this situation not too much. In this time, he does not know me. It was before we met for the first time."

"How can that be? Are you saying that you have traveled back in time before?"

Raven sighed. "To my regret. It's a long story though. I'll tell it to you sometime. Right now, the coven is waiting for me." She was not as confident as she sounded. She feared that Magbertius, with his awesome powers, would find out who she was and what she really was doing there.

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CHAPTER 6. THE COVEN OF THE THIRTEEN

When Raven left the room, she carried Cedric with her. Sarah had said that Magbertius had predicted that she would bring something that would help the coven. After she left the room, she was not too surprised to find that she was in a house that seemed identical to the one she had left before she walked through the door in the pentagram shaped room. She figured that the door was similar to the time door in Magbertius' house in New York State. (The New York Colony she corrected herself. The American revolution was over fifty years in the future.) The meeting was in the dining room on the first floor of the main house.

The members of the coven sat at a long table, six on one side of the table and seven on the other. An empty chair was at each end. Magbertius had not yet arrived. At Raven's arrival, the group stood politely. They were dressed in black robes with the robes' hood pulled back. The robes were cinched at the waist with a cord in which a ceremonial dagger was placed. The women were all young and attractive. *Figures that they would all be pretty women*, thought Raven. *Peter probably hand picked them. In all likelihood, he's screwed every one of them.*

As Raven scanned the faces before her, she realized that she knew one of coven members. It was Cassandra, the woman who was Magbertius' widow the first time Raven visited the eighteenth century. But in this year of seventeen twenty five, Cassandra would know nothing of Raven. All that she had been through with the woman lay in the future. Cassandra must already have a close relationship with Magbertius, because she was seated to the right of the head of the table. Cassandra was easily the oldest woman present. Raven figured out that she must be thirty-five at this time. She noticed that Cassandra wore a wedding band, She and Magbertius must be already married.

Sarah, the girl who came into the room as Raven stepped into the past, left her place and escorted Raven to the chair at the table's foot. She faced the group and said, "Women of the Coven of The Thirteen, allow me to present Raven. She is the one The Master predicted would arrive mysteriously and bring us something that would help us in our time of trouble. As you can see, she carries an oracle formed from a decapitated head. Raven, the witches of our coven are..." She pointed to each woman as she said her name. "...Jillian, Weena, Kathryn, Dorothy, Jane, Joan." These were the ones seated on the left-hand side. On the right were "...Alice, Irene, Helen, Abigail, Tina and Cassandra." No family names were given. These were probably kept secret so that the members could not identify each other by name if the authorities questioned them.

At that point, Cedric said, "My name is Cedric. Apparently no one is going to bother to introduce me." Raven almost burst out laughing. The robot head sounded miffed about being ignored.

The women gasped with shock. Several of them appeared terrified.

Raven said, "Do not be frightened. Cedric is my oracle. He will not speak again unless I wish him to." She brought the robot head's ear up to her mouth and whispered, "I meant that. Do not say anything unless I ask you a question or tell you to speak. Otherwise, I'll lock you up in a box."

At that moment, Magbertius came through the door. The women, except Raven, bowed to him. He stared at Raven with his hypnotic eyes, but did not try to take over her mind. Raven relaxed. She had the feeling that Magbertius was fearful of her. "And you must be the one my crystal predicted would come. Are you one of Satan's minions?"

"Let's just say that I came from a dark and evil place." Raven thought it would be a good idea to pretend to be something more powerful than she was. Magbertius would be on good behavior with her if he thought she was fiend out of hell.

"And what is that decapitated head you carry?"

"An oracle. It can tell the future and impart useful knowledge on many subjects. It is named Cedric. Cedric, you may say hello to Peter Magbertius."

"Hello, Mister Magbertius. I am pleased to meet you. Ms Lenore has told me much about you."

"Interesting. A talking decapitated head. Is that everything you brought from the other world?"

"Yes."

Cedric started to speak. "There was also..."

"Shut up, Cedric."

"Your oracle was about to tell me about something else?"

"I think he meant my unholy garments. Cedric can be very literal. Thus, one must be careful how questions are phrased when addressed to it."

Magbertius scowled suspiciously. It was apparent that he did not believe her. Nonetheless, all he said was, "I had hoped that you would bring a book of spells. My crystal indicated something like that, not a talking head."

"Crystals sometime couch their predictions in a symbolic way. Cedric is not unlike a book in that it can impart useful information."

"Perhaps. But never mind. Please be seated. The rest of the coven also." After all the women were seated, Magbertius clapped his hands. An African-American servant entered the room. "George, bring wine please."

After the slave brought crystal drinking glasses and a large decanter of red wine and poured for everyone, Magbertius dismissed him. He stood and said, "The Maine witch hunters are closing in on us. I am afraid that we are no longer safe here. Before we decide on a course of action, I am sorry to report that there is a traitor among us. One of you has betrayed us to the witch hunter, Reverend Blackstone."

The thirteen women were aghast at the accusation that a traitor was in their midst. They each had an expression of dismay or anger. Raven was reminded of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Several cried out, "Who? Who is the traitor?"

"At the moment I do not know, but will soon find out. That a traitor is in our midst was revealed by the Tarot. As result, no name was given. Only the guilty party herself knows the truth." Magbertius looked up at Raven. "Perhaps your oracle can reveal who is guilty."

"I doubt it, but I will consult it. Cedric, can you tell me the name of the woman in this room who has betrayed the coven to a witch hunter?"

Cedric rolled its eyes. Everyone in the room stared it expectantly. "Not at this time. But I have a method of determining who it is. Do you have paper and pens?"

Magbertius said, "I will have George fetch some."

Raven whispered into Cedric's ear, "What are you up to?"

The head whispered back, "You will see."

After George supplied each woman with a sheet of paper and a quill pen and placed several ink pots and blotters on the table, Cedric said, "Now, I want each of you to write your own name at the top of

the paper. After you have done that, underneath it write the name of the person who you most suspect of being the traitor."

As the women began to write their suspicions on the paper, they tried to peek at what the others on their left and right had written.

"Now fold the papers up so that what is written on them is hidden and pass them to Raven."

When Raven had collected all the papers, Cedric said, "Now will all the women leave the room except for Raven."

Magbertius said, "Do as the oracle says."

The women got up from their chairs and filed out of the room. They were quiet and did not speak to each other. After they had left and closed the door, Cedric said, "The traitor is the one named Abigail."

Magbertius said, "How do you know? You did not even look to see who each one accused."

Cedric said, "While they were writing, I watched how each tried to spy on what her neighbor had written, whether it was her name?"

"Yes."

"All except one. That one was Abigail. She knew that she was the guilty one so did not try to see what anyone else had written her name. Also, I noted the expression on her face when you made your announcement. The others looked shocked. She had expression that was only a simulation of shock. But wait, she will reveal herself. Call the women in one at time, with Abigail being last."

Magbertius went to the door and called out names. As each woman entered, Cedric told her to be seated in her regular place and say nothing. When all had been called in except Abigail, the woman ran from the house screaming, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Magbertius said, "Very clever. I see that this oracle can be extremely useful. Excuse me, I must go after her." He ran after the guilty woman.

"What will he do to her?" asked Raven. She did not like the whole procedure. She did not want harm to come to the woman.

Sarah said, "She must die. We are all at risk because of her betrayal. The penalty for witchcraft is hanging."

Raven wished there was something she could do to save Abigail. But she knew that if she tried, she would put herself in danger. Magbertius was ruthless, and she suspected that his ruthlessness extended to his followers.

A short while later, Magbertius returned. He was breathing hard.

Raven asked, "Where's Abigail?"

"She has paid for her crime against the coven. We will bury her later." He said it coldly as though he were talking about a change in the weather. Raven shuddered at his indifference. Her fear of this man

was justified. He could murder someone in cold blood without blinking an eye.

"Now we must discuss what to do about the situation we find ourselves in. I had hoped that Raven would bring a book that would contain a spell that would hide this island and house from those who would oppose us. Perhaps the oracle can tell us how to do that."

Cedric said, "I do not have the vaguest notion on how to do that, but..."

Raven whispered in his ear. "You had better not say anything about the book."

"But what?" Magbertius asked.

"I suggest that you disburse and hide from the people who are after you."

"Good advice. My ladies, I suggest that you all do that. Cassandra and Raven will come with me. The rest of you are on your own. May Satan protect you. The meeting is adjourned Tonight at the dark of the moon we will initiate Raven as one of us. She will take Abigail's place as one of The Thirteen."

Raven thought , This is not good. Magbertius is going to take me away from here. Fate is taking me further away in space as well as time from finding Henry and Annie B. Also, I cannot get back to Jack Grant to tell him that the president of the United States is a robot and that Magbertius in the guise of Peter Johnson is trying to use him to take over the world. One thing I don't understand is about this house andThe Necronomicon . Apparently, the house has not been enchanted yet. And if my theory is right, I have the only means of doing it. Have I changed history by going back in time? But there's a paradox involved. The house had to be enchanted for me to go back in time. If it was not enchanted, how did I get here? Oh, even thinking about it is giving me a headache.

Somebody tapped her on the shoulder. It was Magbertius. "You seem to be woolgathering, Raven. Did you hear me? I would be pleased if you would join Cassandra and myself in a new hiding place."

Apparently he was not sure whether Raven was really a entity of power or a mere mortal woman, and so was not about to anger her or use his powers to control her until he was sure.

By that time, the other women were no longer in the room.

She looked up at him. "I was using my psychic powers to decide on the best course of action. Of course, I should listen to the oracle and join you in your travels. When do you plan to leave?" She hoped that by saying she had psychic powers he would think her a creature arisen from the underworld.

"I am happy you decided that way. Once we are settled, between us, we can obtain the money and power we need to take over one of the colonies. Or perhaps become rulers of one the wild territories to the west."

"A little over fifty years from now, there will be no more colonies. The colonies will rebel against England and form a new nation, which will become the most powerful in the world."

Magbertius' eyebrows shot up. "A strange prediction. You are indeed a seeress. Perhaps you can foretell events a little closer in time."

She smiled. "You might not want to hear them. Sometimes it is better not to know what the fates have in

store for us.” *What if I told him that he within the year he would be caught by the authorities and hanged as a warlock.*

He frowned. “I will mull that idea over. My instincts tell me that our fate will be dire unless we depart this place soon. I plan to leave first thing in the morning. Be ready. Also, we will initiate you into our coven tonight.” As he said the last, he gave her the once over.

Raven wondered what the initiation entailed. She trembled as her imagination thought of the possibilities.

“I’ll need a trunk or chest to pack my things. Also, since I am to become one of your coven, where can I obtain a robe such as the others wore at the meeting and an athame.”

He grinned at her. “I will see that you have all that you require. I’m sure that this is the start of a great partnership ... and friendship.” He put out his hand. Raven took and shook it. He held it longer than was necessary. Cassandra noticed this and stared daggers at him. Magbertius and Cassandra walked Raven up to the room where she entered the eighteenth century. It was where she would be spending the night.

“You idiot,” Raven shouted at Cedric after she had placed it on the dresser. “Now we must go to wherever Magbertius intends to take us. How are we ever going to locate Takamora and my friends? We won’t even be in this house.”

“Magbertius will return. The house is not enchanted at this point in time. Someone had to have placed a spell on it. My fuzzy logic circuits tell me that he will return here to perform the proper incantation on the house.”

“So you have fuzzy logic circuits. No wonder your thinking is fuzzy.”

Although Raven was angry at the robot head, she wondered whether it might be right. At this point, she had been without sleep for over thirty hours now and could not think straight. The best thing to do is get some sleep and sort everything out in the morning.

Before she started to undress, there was a knock on the door. She opened it and allowed George, the servant, to haul in a large trunk. He bowed and said, “The master say that we are moving tomorrow. He say to bring this here for you to put you clothes and things in it. He say you also want robe and dagger belong to the late Abigail. Here they are.” He handed Raven the athame and gave her significant look as she took the robe. “It has been thoroughly cleaned.”

So I’m to take the things that belonged to the murdered Abigail, thought Raven. Magbertius is a psychotic pig . “Thank you, George. I’m going to retire. See that I’m not disturbed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After the servant left, Raven undressed and got into bed. She was asleep in minutes. However, her sleep was troubled by nightmares involving demons and being lost in the labyrinthine house. Around midnight someone called her name, bringing Raven out of the sleep of the dead. Groggily, not fully awake, somewhere between dreamland and reality, fighting wakefulness, she sat up and peered through half-closed lids. Moonlight streamed through the window. A woman, her face obscured in shadow, sat on the edge of the bed facing her. Her first thought that she was demon who haunted her so terrifyingly and was about to scream. Then sanity took over. “Sarah?”

“I hope I didn’t frighten you. Dress quickly. It’s time for your initiation into the coven.” Raven grumbled,

but slid out of the bed. Sarah said, "Did you receive the robe?"

"You mean the one that belonged to Abigail?"

Sarah looked down. "Yes. Please put it on."

Raven slipped the robe over her head and tied the rope-belt in the sort of knot she used when she belonged to a Wiccan group. She picked up the athame and placed it between the rope and the robe. She gave her hair a quick brushing and said, "I'm ready." She worried about what sort of initiation this would be. Would Magbertius use it as an excuse to take sexual liberties? Would pain be involved? She shivered. Neither alternative would be pleasant.

Sarah led her out the house onto the porch where the rest of the coven and Magbertius waited. Two of the women bore torches to light the way. They meandered through the woods until they came to a small clearing. The full moon overhead cast a silvery glow over the grass.

As they walked through moonlit woods Raven asked Sandra, "What's the initiation like?"

"You'll see." Her tone was not reassuring. Raven wished she would have said something like, "Not much. You'll probably think it's silly." But "You'll see?" What did that imply?

When they reached the clearing, firewood and twigs were piled in the center of the glade. Two women lit it from a candle. It quickly blazed up into a bonfire.

The woman formed a circle around the bonfire, held hands and chanted in Latin. The circle slowly moved around the fire in time with the chanting. When the chanting was done, they halted, raised their arms and prayed to the moon goddess, Artemis. At the end of this worship, Magbertius stepped from his place in the circle, his billowing white caftan decorated with a five-pointed star across his chest. A garland of leaves was tangled in his hair. A rune stone on a long chain lay on his chest. When he raised his arms, everyone else lowered theirs. With closed eyelids he threw his head back and chanted words in a strange guttural language. When he finished, he dropped his arms, clasped his hands together, opened his eyes and spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear above the roaring fire.

"We, children of the earth, gather in this consecrated place to praise and honor the spirits of the earth, the spirits of the water, the spirits of air and fire, and the spirits and elder beings of wood and plain." Pause. "And to pray to the ancient gods of our ancestors that they may gather strength, and once again return from the nether world to rule the upper world as they did eons past."

"On this night, we consecrate a new member into our coven to replace the one who betrayed us. Thus we remain, The Thirteen. Come to me, the one known as Raven."

Raven, with trepidation, advanced toward Magbertius and stared at him. He gazed into her eyes. "Raven, do you of your own free will, desire to join the Coven of The Thirteen in the craft, to study our ways, not taking them lightly or dismissing them without deep consideration of their true meaning, to follow the rules of our coven absolutely even unto death, to keep our secrets locked in your bosom and not release them to persons outside the coven."

"I do."

Magbertius removed the athame from his belt and held it dagger-like. Raven flinched, recalling the dream of him stabbing her. "Bow your head," he said.

He placed the flat side of the ceremonial dagger first on her left shoulder and then on her right in the manner in which king's dubbed knights. "Thou art now Raven of The Thirteen." He bent down and picked up a handful of earth which he sprinkled over her. "May the great earth goddess, Demeter, reward you with her bounty." He sprayed Raven with drops of water from a bottle. "May Venus grant you everlasting love and sexual pleasure." He blew her breath into her face. "May Jove grant you strength and courage." He took a charred twig from the fire and shook it so that a few sparks lit on Raven, quickly brushing them away before they damaged her robe or burned her. "May Hephaestus make you clever and innovative."

"I welcome you to our coven, Raven." He kissed her on both cheeks. Each of the other women came up to her and did the same. Afterwards, a bottle of wine was passed around. The witches and Magbertius removed their robes, exposing their naked bodies. Raven followed their lead. They held hands again and danced around the fire for a long time. After the flames died, they put their robes on again and returned to the mansion.

Raven was barely able to keep her eyes open long enough to remove the robe and crawl into bed.

* * * *

In the wee hours of the morning, she awoke. Someone was in the room again. The floor squeaked as the person approached. She tried to slip quietly out of bed, but was too late. A gloved hand covered her mouth to prevent her from screaming. A second hand, very strong, grabbed her arm. A familiar voice whispered, "Don't cry out. It's me."

It was the vampire, Celia VanGrimm. When Raven nodded that she knew who had awakened her, VanGrimm removed her hand from Raven's mouth.

Raven said, "Celia. How did you get here?"

"The same way you did, through some sort of interdimensional gateway."

"How did you know which door to go through?"

"I followed the scent of your blood." Raven sensed that she was grinning although she could not see the vampire's face in the pitch black room. "I can smell the blood of my favorite donors no matter where they are."

Raven did not know whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that the vampire had followed her. She always feared that one day VanGrimm would go too far while taking her blood and kill her. She also hated the fact that the vampire's could control her. She said, "If that's true, you should have an idea where Annie B is."

"Somewhere behind one of those doors in that strange pentagram shaped room. But I was unsuccessful in pinpointing her exact location ... or that of The Beast. Are they here, wherever here is?"

"No. You don't know where 'here' is?"

"Nope. Tell me."

"The door you went through led to the past. We are in the same house, but the year is seventeen twenty five."

VanGrimm let out a roar of laughter. Raven grabbed her mouth. "Sh. We're not alone. What's so funny?"

"If you're telling the truth ... yes, you are ... it's in your mind. I'm alive, not one of the undead in this year. Seventeen twenty five is the year I became a vampire."

"Where did you live?"

"In a tiny village along the Hudson River in the colony of New York."

"Rhinecliff or Rhinebeck?"

"Rhinecliff. Near the ferry station. But of course there is no ferry in the twenty-first century."

"Strange coincidence. I have the feeling that's where Magbertius is taking me."

"Magbertius is here? Has he taken control of you again?"

"He is frightened to. He thinks that I may be a demon and therefore is fearful of doing anything to me."

"That's funny too. But I must take your blood now. It's near dawn, and I need to find a daytime resting place."

Raven hated and feared this part of her friendship with VanGrimm although once the vampire started feeding it produced a feeling of ecstasy not unlike sexual intercourse. She tipped her head to one side to allow VanGrimm sink her fangs into her throat. She had no choice.

When VanGrimm finished feeding, Raven asked her, "Will you help me? We need to find a way to return to our own time and locate Annie B and Henry. Also I want you to hide something for me."

"I don't wish to stay in this century either, especially now that I know that there will be two of me, the quick and the undead. What is it that you want me to keep for you?"

"A book. It may contain the secret of how this house became cursed."

Raven retrieved the ancient book from under the mattress and handed it to the vampire.

"I sense ancient evil from this book." Van Grimm flipped back the cover to read the title page. "*The Necronomicon*." Although the night was clear, a rumble of thunder sounded. "I have heard of this book. I have no fear of it. Vampires are wicked by nature. It cannot corrupt me anymore than I am." She let out a giggle. A cock crowed. "I must go."

Raven felt her leaving as a breeze that swept through the room and out the window. Weak from loss of blood, she went back to sleep.

* * * *

Raven was awakened by loud knocking on her door. Bright sunlight poured through her open window. "Who is it?" she cried.

"'Tis I, Peter Magbertius. We are preparing to leave. You should rise."

"Oh my. Peter, I fell asleep right after I came up to my room. I haven't even packed."

Magbertius grumbled something under his breath. Presently he said, "Very well. I'll send Lucy up to help you. Do you want her to bring breakfast?"

"Yes, please." Raven knew she had to eat to replenish her blood supply.

She got up and found a chamber pot under the bed. When she finished relieving herself, she rinsed her face in a washbasin. By that time, the dark skinned young slave woman named Lucy was at her door with breakfast. She hastily threw on a nightgown she found in the closet and let her in. The next two hours passed swiftly. Soon she had eaten and most of the clothes in the closet were packed in the trunk.

There was one item that Raven did not know what to do with, Cedric. She felt it would be cruel to simply place the robot head in a trunk with her clothes.

"Lucy, is there be a bird cage around somewhere?"

The girl thought for a moment. "Miss Cassandra used to own a raven. That bird was smart. It could talk a blue streak. But it died. Miss Cassandra was heartsick. Maybe she still has the cage."

"Would you ask her if I could borrow it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The maid scurried out of the room. In a few minutes, Lucy returned with the cage and George. Raven bent a couple of bars on the cage and placed Cedric inside. George picked up the trunk. Lucy took the cage, although Raven could see that she was unhappy and frightened of the talking decapitated head. As she walked away, she held it at arm's length and averted her eyes.

"Now Lucy, be very careful with Cedric. It does not like to be jostled."

"Oh I will, ma'am."

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CHAPTER 7. THE DARKEST PART OF THE NIGHT

A four horse coach waited at the front door of the mansion. Trunks were loaded on the top of the vehicle. The day was clear and cloudless. How different the mansion seemed with no mist or rain. Also it was smaller in seventeen twenty seven. The wings were added during a later period. It seemed almost friendly.

George climbed up to the seat next to the driver. Raven was helped into the coach by Magbertius. Lucy and Cassandra were already seated. Raven took the seat that faced Magbertius' wife. Magbertius climbed in and sat next to Raven. He leaned out the window and told the coachman to go. The coach started with a jolt. They rattled across a covered wooden bridge from the island to the western shore of the river.

It took them eight days to travel the five hundred miles from Millnocket, Maine to Rhinecliff, New York.

Each evening soon after sunset, they stopped at the nearest inn for supper and to spend the night. Raven was extremely grateful for the respites after the jolting bouncing ride on the bad roads of the day. At times the coach even left the road and crossed farmers' fields.

As Raven had surmised, after they passed through the village of Rhinebeck, they drove down River Road, which in seventeen twenty five was little more than a cow path, and turned down an unmarked road. They followed the twists and turns of this road for five miles and entered an estate bordered by a tall stone wall. The entrance had an iron gate, which George opened with a large key. A rutted dirt road wound up a hill. After they passed a private graveyard, they arrived at Riverlook, the mansion that Raven had visited when she had traveled in time to seventeen thirty seven, ten years in the future from the time she found herself..

The mansion was a magnificent structure with many rooms, several tall chimneys and two towers. Except that it was half stone and half frame, it resembled a medieval castle. It looked much as Raven had remembered it, except newer and better kept up. It stood on bluff that overlooked a bend in the Hudson River. On that fine summer day, the panoramic vista before her was magnificent. Below was the enormous expanse of river, sparkling in the sunlight as it flowed relentlessly to the sea. Across the river, gentle green slopes of meadow and forest rose from the river's edge. Beyond the sloping valley were the hazy blue Catskill Mountains. To the right, Raven could barely make out the dock for the river crossing ferry. A ferry was just leaving to cross to Kingston point. The lighthouse that in the twenty-first century stood where the Roundout Creek flowed into the Hudson did not yet exist. The only sounds were the whisper of a breeze and the lapping of the ripples against the shore.

They climbed up on the porch with its large columns and entered the house. Beyond the small foyer was a ballroom decorated with mirrors. Three walls were covered with light gray wallpaper with an intricate blue abstract design. A large marble fireplace of blue and white tile stood in the middle of one wall. Above it was an enormous mirror with a gilded frame. The floor was covered with an Oriental rug. Walnut chairs with high backs and leather seats were scattered about. On the dark paneled wall across from the fireplace was the enormous portrait of Magbertius that Raven recalled very well. In it, the sorcerer looked stern and commanding as always. She shuddered as bad memories flooded in.

George and the driver began to bring in luggage. Magbertius told his servant which room to place each item. Most of their things went to the second floor to the bedrooms. Lucy carried in the smaller items. She held the cage that contained Cedric at arms length and made a wry face. "What shall I do with *this* , Mistress Raven?"

"I'll take it. I believe Cedric would like to come out now."

"Oh my yes," the robot cried. "That was horrible jolting around on that crude vehicle. Although I must say, I did get to view much of the world. It is much different than I imagined it."

Lucy quickly handed the cage to Raven and backed away, a frightened look on her face, her dark skin turning chalky.

"You talk too much, Cedric," Raven scolded. "Please shut up, or I'll leave you in the cage and cover it up." Nonetheless, she took the robot head from the cage. She turned to Cassandra. "Thank you again for the use of the cage. I'm afraid I've bent the bars. I should buy you a new and something to keep Cedric in."

"No need to replace it. I no longer have a bird, nor intend to get one. Lucy, store the cage in a closet."

They went to their rooms to rest from the trip until dinner.

* * * *

The next few weeks were uneventful. Magbertius and Cassandra went about their business. They treated Raven like a welcome guest. Each evening after going to bed, however, Raven worried that Magbertius would come into her room and molest her. But, apparently for the present he was satisfied with Cassandra. Van Grimm never showed up. Most days Raven spent trying to figure out a way to return to the strange mansion in Maine. She consulted Cedric, but his advise was useless. "Just leave. Slip out the back, Jack.... "It began to sing the Paul Simon song *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover* .

"Shut up. I have no means to do that, no money to hire a coach or a horse or to stay at an inn or eat. I could walk, but I'd probably get lost. And who knows what dangers I'd have to face. Some of the natives are unfriendly to the settlers. Bears and wolves roam the woods. Besides, I don't believe Magbertius would allow me to leave."

One day while the servants were in Rhinebeck shopping, they heard a bad rumor. The witch hunter Reverend Blackstone had left Maine and was believed to be heading to New York. A worried Magbertius consulted his crystal ball. At dinner, he was depressed.

After they had disposed of the main course, he said, "My fate has been sealed. Within two days, I shall be arrested for witchcraft. You two will not be accused, however. I will be sentenced to hang, my head will be removed from my body and buried in a secret place."

Cassandra put her hand to her mouth and cried out. "No! Are you sure?" She began to weep.

Raven knew that he spoke the truth. To her his arrest and execution was old news. She said, "What will you do?"

"Prepare for my resurrection. Cassandra knows what needs to be done. We will perform the proper incantations tonight."

"I understand," Raven said. "I'll aid in every way that I can." Her heart was joyful. This meant that she no longer had to worry about Magbertius in this century.

Magbertius glared at her. "You do not seem surprised by all this."

"My oracle has seen the future. I knew your arrest and execution was imminent. I was about to inform you of the fact when you announced it yourself. It also has told me that in ten years you will be brought back to life."

He spat, "That long? Why?"

"The oracle does not specify details, only that circumstances will prevent your resurrection before then."

"I see." Nonetheless, he eyed her suspiciously. She wondered whether she had said too much.

* * * *

They waited until the midnight hour and used the ballroom to perform the magic that would allow Magbertius to cheat death. Raven recognized the ancient urn in which his aura would be stored until it could be reunited with his body. Magbertius placed it in the center of a pentacle he drawn on the floor with chalk. He squeezed down into the lotus position in front of the vase. Cassandra placed black

candles at each point of the pentagram and lighted them. All other candles were extinguished so that the only illumination was from the flickering candles on the diagram. The house was so quiet every movement seemed amplified. Cassandra and Raven wore their witches robes and carried their athemes tucked into their rope belts.

Magbertius closed his eyes and muttered to himself. Cassandra made circles over his head with her ceremonial dagger as she recited an incantation. When she finished, she whispered to Raven, "Walk widershins around the circle."

Raven obeyed. A gray mist rose from the top of Magbertius head and floated into the ancient bottle. When it was all inside, Cassandra quickly capped the vessel. She melted a ball of wax over the flame of a candle to seal it. She said another incantation and announced, "It is done. His spirit is within this jar."

Magbertius squatted unmoving where he rested. Raven had to look closely to see that he was indeed breathing. "What now?" she asked. "Do we bring him out of his trance?"

Cassandra shook her head. "He is not in a trance. His spirit is gone from his body. Help me bring him upstairs." She took one arm, and Raven took the other. They gently lifted him to a standing position. His eyes were open, but they stared blankly into space without focusing. There did not seem to be anything behind them. Nonetheless, he was able to walk as long as he was guided. To Raven he was like one of the zombies that had been created from corpses by that creature, Olivia.

They led him upstairs to the master bedroom and laid him on the bed.

"You may return to your bed. I will take care of him," said Cassandra.

"Will he stay like that?" asked Raven.

Cassandra shrugged. "This is the first time we have performed this spell. I do not what will happen. I can only do the things he requested. There will be more to do after he is hanged. I hope you will aid me with those things."

"I will, I promise. Goodnight." Impulsively, Raven hugged this woman whose future she knew would contain so much pain for Magbertius' benefit.

* * * *

Two days later, the local constables came for him. They read aloud a warrant for his arrest to Cassandra, who had answered their loud knocks at the door. Cassandra allowed them to enter. She ordered George to fetch Magbertius. Raven watched as Magbertius, looking like someone sleepwalking, strolled down stairs and approached the officers.

The older one with sergeant stripes said, "Peter Magbertius, I have a warrant issued by the governor of the colony of New York for your arrest on the charge of witchcraft, sorcery, necromancy and having dealings with the Almighty's opponent."

Magbertius simply nodded and thrust his hands out for them to put the shackles on his wrists. They marched him away and onto a waiting wagon. Cassandra and Raven watched from the porch as the police wagon rolled away. Magbertius did not turn once to look back at them. By the time he was out of sight, Cassandra was bawling loudly. Raven comforted her as much as she was able.

Magbertius' trial was short, lasting only two weeks. Several witnesses testified that they viewed him

performing various feats of sorcery or worshipping the devil at a witches Sabbath. Most of these witnesses were grungy and evil looking characters. Cassandra had no idea who they were and believed that they had been bribed or coerced into testifying. The only witnesses for the defense were Cassandra and Raven. The prosecution interrogated them ruthlessly, stopping just short of accusing them of being witches themselves. The witch hunter, Reverend Blackstone, sat in the audience staring hard at them.

Raven thought that he was probably marking them for accusations next.

Ten days after the judge found Magbertius guilty, he was hanged. As prescribed by the laws pertaining to witches and warlocks, his head was separated from his body. Each was buried at separate locations in unconsecrated ground.

The night after the funeral, Cassandra said to Raven, "We must retrieve his head immediately before the worms get to him."

Brave woman, Raven thought, to be able to go through with these awful actions while grieving for the man she must love very much. Of course she believes she will have him back soon.

* * * *

It was the darkest part of the night when Raven and Cassandra entered the small unconsecrated graveyard. Clouds covered the moon and stars. Cassandra led the way with an oil lamp in one hand and a shovel in the other. Raven also carried a spade. Grave markers were small and hard to see. Raven wrapped herself tightly in her cloak against a chill wind as she and Cassandra wound their way among them. Restless spirits whispered into her mind. Frogs and toads croaked their chirping song. Somewhere a raven cawed. She shuddered as she recalled the night ten years in the future when she and Cassandra had dug up Magbertius' corpse. This time they were after something smaller, merely his head.

When they reached the site with its small wooden marker, they began to dig. Suddenly Raven heard a sound and stopped. She touched Cassandra's arm and placed a finger to her lips. There it was again. Raven put her lips close to Cassandra's ear and whispered, "Someone is watching us from behind those bushes."

The two women stepped away from the shallow hole they had dug and gripped their shovels, ready to use them as weapons. A dark figure stepped out. The lantern showed a man dressed all in black with a pistol in his hand.

"Who are you?" cried Raven.

"The avenging servant of The Almighty. When I saw you two in court defending the warlock, I knew you were spawns of Satan. Now, I've caught you in an act of sacrilege. No doubt you were digging up the evil one's head to perform some blasphemous necromancy."

Raven thought, *You don't know how true you are, you old hypocrite .*

Cassandra cried out in terror, "Reverend Blackstone."

"I see you know me. Put down those shovels, or I will shoot you dead where you stand." The women dropped their implements. "Now, you will come with me. You shall suffer the same fate as the warlock whose head you were trying to dig up."

Another voice from behind him said, "What about me, Reverend? Will you take me to the jailhouse too?" It was woman. She laughed.

Blackstone half turned, keeping an eye on Raven and Cassandra. "Who are you? Show yourself."

A woman with a face as pale as a corpse's came into the dim light of the lantern. Raven recognized her. It was VanGrimm. "Say your prayers servant of The Almighty as you deem yourself. Your time on this earth is very short." Her smile revealed her fangs.

"No. Stay away from me, demon." He fired the pistol at her. The ball hit her chest in the area of her heart, passed through her flesh and ricocheted off of a grave marker behind her. This did not phase VanGrimm. She drew closer to the witch hunter.

He threw the pistol at her. She swatted it down. He turned to run away, but stood frozen with one foot raised. VanGrimm had him under mind control. She came up to him, pulled his hat from his head and threw it to the ground. She unbuttoned his stiff collar and sank her fangs into his throat.

This was too much for Cassandra. She fainted.

VanGrimm sucked Blackstone's blood until he was dead. She turned to Raven with blood dripping down her chin. "He will not threaten you anymore."

"I noticed."

"Before I came here, I browsed through the evil book you gave me. I found a spell that will allow us to return to the twentieth century."

"That's good. But first we must finish our business here. Grab that shovel. We've got to dig up Magbertius' head."

VanGrimm sighed. "Why is it that every time I see you, you have work for me to do?"

They started to dig. After a few shovelfuls, VanGrimm said, "Get out of the way. You're going too slow."

Raven stepped back. VanGrimm shoveled so fast that it seemed like the dirt was flying out of the hole by itself. She lifted the box that held Magbertius' head and handed it to Raven. She widened and deepened the hole, threw Blackstone's body into it and buried it. When she was done, she leaned on the shovel and said, "Do you wish to say a few words over the reverend?"

"Only good riddance to bad rubbish. Help me take Cassandra and the head back to the house."

"You take the head. I'll take your friend." She lifted the unconscious woman and threw her over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. When they returned to the house, she laid her on a sofa in a sitting room on the first floor. "Okay, my dearest. We've got the woman and the head. Are you ready to return to your own time?"

"What about the house in Maine?"

"I found the spell in *The Necronomicon* to turn it back into the cursed thing it was when we found it." An evil wind howled, causing Raven to tighten her cloak around her.

"So, when we go back, we'll be back to where we started as far as finding Henry and Annie B."

"Not quite. Now we have *The Necronomicon*." A raven crowed loudly. "We can disenchant the mansion."

"Very well. Give me a few minutes. We need to take the robot head with us, and I need to get rid of that vessel." She pointed out the bottle with Magbertius' aura in it.

"Take it with."

Raven shook her head. "I'm afraid that, if I stay in its vicinity, it will haunt me as it did once before." She carried the bottle out to the cliff overlooking the Hudson River. She threw the vessel out as far as she could. She heard it splash. It was too dark to see whether it sank or floated away. She turned to VanGrimm. "You can see in the dark with your vampire eyes. Did the bottle sink or float?"

"It floated. It's on its way to the Atlantic Ocean. Come on, we need to leave for the twenty-first century before daylight, unless you want to stay here another day."

"No. Let's go get Cecil." She and the vampire went to her room. She picked up the robot head and said, "We're going home."

"You're not going to stick me back in that laboratory, are you?"

"We're going to find Doctor Takamora and make him give you a body."

"Oh good."

VanGrimm poured through *The Necronomicon*. When she found the proper spell, she explained the incantation to Raven. It was a bit complicated and required two people. When they were done, a door appeared in the middle of the room.

VanGrimm said, "All we have to do is step through." She opened the door and walked past the threshold. Since she did not appear on the other side, Raven knew that she had been transported somewhere, hopefully back to the same time they had left to go to the past.

She tucked Cedric under her arm. "Well, here goes nothing." She stepped through the doorway. She was still in her bedroom in Riverlook. She turned around. The doorway was gone.

"Okay. Are we back in the twenty-first century or not?" she muttered.

Cedric said, "I'm sure I don't know."

Raven strolled out into the hallway and downstairs. There was a lot of dust around and little furniture. She kept her face averted from the portrait of Magbertius. "Shit. It's hard to tell in this house. I wonder where Celia went." Then she noticed that light was coming through the windows. Day was breaking. "She must've found a daytime resting place."

She wandered outside and almost cried with joy. The rosy sky revealed the magnificent Kingston-Rhinecliff bridge's metallic sheen in the distance. The bridge had been built in the twentieth century. She was at least that far forward in time. She dug her cell phone out of her purse and dialed Jack Grant. She heard the ring. More good news. If her cell phone was working, she had to be in the twenty-first century.

Grant's personal assistant answered. Raven said, "This is Raven Lenore. May I speak to John Grant please?"

"Of course Raven. He's been waiting for you to call. Wait. I'll put him on."

Grant's baritone came on the line. "Raven. We thought you were dead. Where have you been?"

Raven sighed. "It's a long story. I'll tell you the whole thing when I see you. How long has it been since I've been reported missing?"

"Well, Osbourne said you left for Maine two months ago. He hasn't heard from you since. The people he sent out to investigate told him that all they learned was that you and Annie B and another person rented a motor boat one day. No one had seen hide nor hair of you or the boat since."

Raven thought, *Two months. So the same amount of time had passed up here as had for her in the eighteenth century. That's good.* "I see. Okay. I'm at a place called Riverlook in Dutchess County, New York. I need clothes, money and transportation."

"What are you doing there?"

"As I said. It's a long story that I'll tell you when we can get together in private. Let me give you directions on how to get here. I suppose who ever comes for me will fly and then rent a car."

"Yes. I suppose the simplest would be to fly into Albany."

"Okay. I'll give you directions from the Albany airport."

After she hung up with Grant, she searched the house looking for a coffin where VanGrimm might be spending the daylight hours. No such luck. She still had The Necronomicon. "Well, soon or later she'll show up," she told Cedric.

* * * *

Grant sent Steve Jacobs to retrieve her. He arrived two days later. VanGrimm still did not show up. When Raven heard the rented car coming up the driveway, she went out on the porch to wait. After he came up the stairs, she hugged him. "Boy, am I glad to see you."

Jacobs grinned at her. "Glad to hear it. What's with the getup? You planning to go to a masquerade ball."

She gave him a wry grin back. "Been. You brought clothes, I hope?"

"Yep." He pointed to the suitcase he carried.

"Good. I'll change and then we can go." She grabbed the suitcase and led him into the house. "Make yourself at home. I'll be ready in a couple of minutes." She hesitated. "You wouldn't happen to have a butt, would you?" She hadn't smoked the two month she had been in the eighteenth century.

"Sorry Raven. I quit."

"That's all right. I may as well quit myself. I haven't had one in a while either."

She went upstairs to the bedroom she had used and took out underwear, jeans, a T-shirt, sneakers and a leather jacket. After she changed, she admired herself in a mirror. It felt good to get into something comfortable again. She picked up Cedric and went downstairs.

Jacob's eyes popped when he saw the robot head. "What the hell? Is that a decapitated head?"

"Nah. It's a robot head. Cedric, meet Steve Jacobs of the FBI. We'll be traveling with him for a while. Which reminds me—Steve, you may as well turn in your return airline tickets. We'll need to drive back. Can't take Cedric on a commercial flight."

Cedric said, "Pleased to meet you, Agent Jacobs."

"Jesus Christ. It talks. Where in blazes did you get that thing?"

"Can't tell you. It's part of the Top Secret case I've been working on."

* * * *

Raven enjoyed the trip back to Chicago with Steve Jacobs. Jacobs was a nice guy, and they had a lot in common. Both were friends of the late Martin Kopinski, and both had been city cops at one time, Jacobs in Chicago, Raven in New York. Jacobs was married and true to his wife, so Raven did have to worry about him hitting on her. Two subjects were steered away from: the case Raven was working on and the death of Kopinski. Cedric rode in the back seat. They had bought a child's safety seat and rigged it to keep Cedric from flying around the car at sudden stops and starts, while allowing the robot head to speak and enjoy the view. And speak it did, often offering wry comments or criticisms. Raven often had to tell it to be quiet. She felt as though she was baby sitting a precocious child.

The trip took eighteen hours of straight driving with only occasional rest stops. Jacobs dropped Raven at a hotel where a reservation had been made for her. The next morning he picked her up and drove her to the Office of Public Safety, a branch of Homeland Security.

After Grant greeted Raven and ordered coffee for the three of them, he said, "I'd like Agent Jacobs to stay and listen. I'm assigning him to work with you on the case. I have every confidence in his openmindedness and ability to work under the very sensitive conditions of this investigation."

Raven raised her eyebrows. "You're sure about this. The story of my investigations involve some unbelievable events."

"Steve and I regard you a credible person and intend to take whatever you have to say as gospel. Right Steve?"

Jacobs nodded, but Raven could see skepticism in his expression. She thought, *That's all right. As long as Jack believes me.*

"The most important thing that I have to tell you is that the person you thought was President Washburn is not a person at all. He's an artificial intelligent robot."

"What? But he looks so human."

Raven took the hatbox which had been sitting on her lap and placed it on Grant's desk. "The proof is in here." She uncovered the box and lifted out Cedric. "Cedric, I would like you to meet Deputy Chief of

Staff John Grant."

Cedric said, "Pleased to meet you Deputy Chief. I would shake hands, but as you can see, at the moment I have none."

Grant gaped in astonishment. "It looks like a real person. Uh ... hello Cedric."

Raven said, "Tell John about the man who made you and about the Washburn model."

Cedric related to Grant and Jacobs the information he had given to Raven about the animatronics and artificial intelligence genius Hiroshi Takamora, and how Peter Johnson had talked him into creating a simulacrum of Washburn.

"Peter Johnson? Washburn has appointed a person with that name as his new personal advisor."

"Interesting. He's the culprit behind all this business. What about Machiavelli? Is he still around?"

"He disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared. One day he and the president announced his resignation. The next, he was gone. No one knows where."

"Probably back to abyss."

Jacobs said, "The abyss? What do you mean?"

"That will come clear after Cedric and I finish telling our incredible stories. Go on Cedric. Tell them about how Johnson conjured up Nick Machiavelli."

After Cedric told them about Machiavelli appearing out of nowhere after Johnson performed an incantation, Jacobs looked dubious, but said nothing.

Raven faced him. "If you think that's fantasy, wait until you hear my story." She related all her adventures from the time she arrived in Washington until her return to the twenty-first century in Riverlook. The only things she left out concerned Henry Bagyar. As she went on, Jacobs appeared more and more disgusted.

When she finally finished, he cried, "Are you two pulling some kind of joke on me? That has to be the silliest nonsense that I've ever heard."

Raven shrugged. "Nonetheless, it's all true."

Grant said, "Regardless of what you feel about what you've just heard Agent Jacobs, from this point on, you will act as though every word was true and real. And Raven, you left someone out of your tale. We know that three people checked into that inn in Millinocket and three people got into that motor boat.

Also, when Machavelli was attacked, you were overheard talking to the animal that attacked him."

Raven sighed. "I wanted to leave him out of this, but I guess I can't. The person with me and Annie B in Millinocket and the animal who attacked Machiavelli were one and the same. His name is Henry Bagyar. He's half animal and half human and has been living underground in this city for many years."

"Half man and half animal, living underground in Chicago?" Jacobs scoffed. "Another fantasy."

"If you stay on this case, you'll probably meet him. Celia VanGrimm, the vampire, you may not want to

meet."

"This is too much. Half man, half animal people, vampires, visits to other dimensions, time travel, the president being replaced by a robot, cursed houses, people appearing in mirrors, demons from hell, sorcery. You can't be buying this Alice in Wonderland stuff, John."

"Well, the thing about the president being replaced by a robot should be easy to prove. I'll have Osbourn invite him to a secret conference. You two will need to break in and overcome him. Is there some way a robot can be told from a human being without harming him?"

Cedric answered his question. "There's a control panel on the Washburn model's front chest. Simply peel away the psuedoflesh in that area."

Jacobs said, "Wait a minute. We're going to attack the president of the United States? What about the secret service?"

"I'll arrange it that they won't be able to get into that room for several minutes."

"But we will?"

"The conference room I have in mind has a secret entrance. It has been used by the CIA to meet with people who might be considered enemies and also by the president or the vice-president for meetings that did not want the public to know about."

"This is the president of the United States we're talking about. What if you're wrong, and he's not a robot? We'd be in a heap of shit."

Raven turned to him. "I know you're skeptical, Steve. You don't have go with me to attack Washburn. I can handle that assignment myself. In fact, it would be better if you two weren't involved. If, as Steve says, I'm wrong and Washburn is a human being, I should take the fall. Don't even let Osbourn know what's going to happen."

Grant looked thoughtful for a couple of minutes. "Perhaps you're right. Steve, you don't have to be directly involved, but go with her into the secret tunnel and standby. I'll set everything up. What do we do about this Johnson fellow?"

"I suspect that once it's revealed that Washburn is a robot, he'll head back to Millinocket. He'll need a plan B. I believe that the real Washburn is there somewhere."

Jacobs asked, "Dead or alive?"

"That I don't know. I didn't see him, but Johnson could be hiding him somewhere. That house has many secrets."

That more or less ended the meeting. Grant proceeded to setup everything needed to expose the president as a robot. Jacob and Raven made plans to travel to Washington. Raven left Cedric in Grant's care.

* * * *

The day of Washburn's private meeting with Osbourn found Raven and Jacobs waiting in a secret room next door to the conference room. There was a peephole that allowed Raven to ensure that Osbourn and

Washburn were alone. Raven began to perspire and chewed on her lip. What if this was the real Washburn and not a robot? She had only what Cedric had told her and her own instincts to go by. Neither source was infallible. They'd probably send her right back to prison, with additional charges. Also, she had to act swiftly before Osbourn or Washburn could call in the cavalry. She whispered to Jacobs, "I'm going in now."

He pressed her arm and whispered back, "Good luck. I hope you know what you're doing."

She unholstered her pistol, opened the secret panel and stepped into the room. She waved her weapon at the two men, who were deep in conversation. Quietly, but menacingly, she said, "Don't move and don't make a sound or I'll kill the president."

They stared at her in disbelief, but did as she had ordered. Her Glock was pointed at Washburn's head. "Mr. President, please remove your jacket and tie."

Osbourn said, "What are you doing, Raven?"

She frowned at him and put her finger to her lips. "One more word from you, and Washburn will be dead."

Washburn took off his jacket and tie. "What's this all about?"

"Just a little experiment. Now remove your shirt and T-shirt."

He undid a couple of buttons. "What if I refuse? Would you really shoot the president of the United States?"

She made her voice as menacingly as possible. She knew he was stalling for time. It was a good thing that the room was soundproof. "I wouldn't test the possibility that I wouldn't. I've received a pardon from a life sentence for an extremely brutal murder. Ask Osbourn."

"Is that true?"

Osbourn nodded.

"Nonetheless, I'll take my chances." He glanced at his watch. "If I don't signal the secret service waiting outside that door in ... two minutes, they will come bursting in here with weapons drawn."

"Then I need to hurry, don't I?" This was not going well. Raven felt cold sweat dripping down her back and between her breasts. She took a switchblade from her boot and flipped it open. She holstered her gun, ran up to the president, tore open his shirt and ripped his T-shirt with the knife. Before she could grab the pseudoskin in the right place to open the access to his control panel, Washburn grabbed her wrist. He had a grip of steel. At the same time, Osbourn pressed a button to signal the secret service agents outside the room.

Several things happened at once. Two secret service men burst into the room with drawn guns. The only thing that stopped them from shooting Raven was her proximity to the president as they wrestled on the floor. Osbourn jumped into the fray, trying to pull Raven off of Washburn. Jacobs entered the room. He also had his pistol drawn. He shouted at the secret service men. "Drop your weapons, or I'll shoot both of you and Commissioner Osbourn."

The agents gazed at him with a startled expressions, but did not drop their guns. One fired in Jacobs direction, but he had anticipated that move and hit the floor. With the sound of gunfire, several more secret servants came through the door with weapons in their hands.

Meanwhile, Raven had dropped the knife and used the hand that was holding it to grab a patch of psuedoskin. With a sound like two pieces of Velcro being pulled apart, the skin on Washburn's chest pulled away. A control panel was revealed. Although they were still struggling, she noted a red button. She hoped that it was the on/off switch. She pressed it. Washburn stopped moving. His eyes rolled back, and he lay limp.

When Osbourn saw that, he cried, "Oh My God. She's killed the president."

Raven rose to her feet and said, "Look again, Commissioner. That's not President Washburn. It's a robot."

Osbourn and all the secret service men stared at the control panel in the robot's chest.

Raven and Jacobs gave up their weapons and told Osbourn to call Jack Grant. He would explain everything.

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CHAPTER 8. THE ROOM WITH NO DOORS

As Raven expected, when Magbertius (AKA Johnson) learned that his scheme to replace the president of the United States with a robot had failed, he quietly left Washington without informing anyone where he was going. When word leaked out about what happened to Washburn, the country was in an uproar. Screaming headlines announced PRESIDENT REPLACED BY ROBOT. The vice president was sworn in as president, and several congressional committees started investigations. Reporters and media people followed Raven and Jacobs around wherever they went. A special squad of secret servicemen had to be assigned to protect them from the media attention. It helped to get out of Washington. Without fanfare, they returned to Chicago.

They met with Grant and told him that although not everything went as planned, as he could tell from the news, their goal had been achieved satisfactorily.

Raven said, "Now we need to return to that house in Millinocket. I'm sure that's where Johnson went. Also, my friends, Dr. Takamora and possibly the real Washburn are there somewhere. I think it's best if we drive. With all the publicity, it'll be the easiest way of leaving town without attracting media attention. Also, I want to take Cedric with us."

"Very well. Steve will go with you. I know it's tough on your family life, Steve, but you're the only man for the job. When this case is over, I'll see to it that you get a nice long paid vacation."

Raven had the feeling that he wanted Jacobs as a skeptical eyewitness to whatever transpired.

* * * *

The evening before they left, Raven visited Graceland Cemetery. She waited outside of the mausoleum where VanGrimm usually slept. A little after sunset the vampire appeared.

"Raven sweetie, have you come to donate?"

"I suppose. I want to tell you that the FBI agent Steve Jacobs and I are going to the cursed house in Maine. Where did you go after you went through the time door?"

"It was almost dawn when I arrived in this century. I needed to find a daytime resting place in a hurry."

"And then you came back to Chicago?"

"This is where I belong. I love the night life here. I tried to contact you, but you left town again."

"I had to go to D.C. What I need from you is *The Necromonicon*."

VanGrimm made a face. "I do not wish to give it up. I like doing sorcery. It's fun."

"I need it to save Henry and Annie B."

"I'll make a bargain with you. Donate some blood now. Then I'll meet you at that awful house. I'll do the sorcery to disenchant the house."

Raven tilted her head to one side. "You've got yourself a bargain."

VanGrimm grabbed Raven and sank her teeth into her throat.

* * * *

Two days later Raven and Jacobs checked into the Schooner Wharf. Hank, the innkeeper and bartender, said, "I know you. You're the lady who lost one of my boats."

Raven sighed. "I'm afraid it sank. Whatever it cost, I'll pay. In fact I'll pay double the amount. I need to rent another one. Charge it to my Visa."

"We reported you missing to the sheriff. Everyone figured you drowned. They dragged the river for you and your friends bodies. You should've come back here. What happened?"

Raven figured that to make him not talk about the last time she was there she should mention the island. She knew the local folks did not like to talk about it. "We got lost in some kind of strange fog. Luckily there was an island. We beached the boat there. We found a deserted house. Somehow, my friends got lost in the house. You may laugh, but it seemed haunted to me. I couldn't find them again. In my panic, I rowed away to get help. The boat got holed on some branches in the water and sank. I swam to shore. It's lucky I'm a strong swimmer. The river current is quite swift. I wound up a long ways downstream. By that time, I was a little out of my head. Somehow I made my way to an FBI headquarters to report my friends missing." She pulled Jacobs forward. "This is Agent Steven Jacobs. Steve, show him your credentials."

Jacobs pulled out his wallet and showed his badge and ID.

Hank examined them closely. "FBI, all right. You going to look for those missing friends of yours?"

"That's why we're here. They've got to be on that island."

He pushed the registration card in front of her and handed them keys to their rooms. "If'n you can locate the island again. 'Tain't an easy place to find I reckon."

As they passed through the store section, Hank's wife Mildred spotted them. She went quickly into the bar. Raven figured that she would get the story Raven had told her husband from him.

* * * *

The next afternoon she and Jacobs piled into a row boat with an attached outboard. They headed upstream to the area where Raven recalled the island should be. No mist appeared, nor did they find the island. They did this three days in a row. On the third day, Jacobs said, "Well, it looks like this mysterious island isn't going to make appearance. It's been a fine vacation, but I'd like to get back to my family. How many more days are we going to fool around here?"

"I don't know, Steve. Look, if you want to return to Chicago, it's okay by me. I'll tell Jack Grant that I ordered you back to report that we couldn't find the island."

Jacobs chuckled. "You could tell him that by phone. I'll tell you what. I'll go out in the boat with you tomorrow. If nothing turns up, I'm leaving."

She tapped him on the arm. "Great. You're a good guy, and very patient. I know you don't really believe my story. So I don't blame you for not wanting to waste any more time here."

* * * *

The floor creaked waking Raven from a sound sleep. She reached under pillow for her pistol when a cold hand like iron pinned her wrist. A second clammy hand covered her mouth. "Sh. It's me," a female voice whispered.

It was VanGrimm. Raven nodded to show that she understood. When the vampire took her hand away from her lips, she whispered, "Glad you finally got here."

"Actually I've been in the area for a week, waiting for you at that crazy mansion."

"We couldn't find it. Nor the island."

"Who is the we?"

"FBI Agent Jacobs is with me. He's in the next room."

"Do you need him along?"

"Not really."

"The island and mansion are in another dimension. That's why you couldn't find it. But I can take you there tonight."

"Without Jacobs?"

"You said you didn't need him."

"Okay." Raven got out of bed and dressed. She checked her automatic.

"Who are you going to shoot?" Although Raven could not see her face, she knew that VanGrimm had an amused grin on her face.

"Peter Magbertius. I've loaded it with silver bullets."

"Whoa. Just make sure you don't point it at me. Why silver bullets? Is Peter a vampire too?"

"No. But he *is* one of the undead. You remember that Olivia who was making zombies?"

"Sure."

"Magbertius' spirit inhabits one of her zombies. He appears human, but he's not."

"So you think a silver bullet will kill him?"

"I'm counting on it."

"You surprise me, Raven. I didn't think you were capable of cold blooded murder."

"It wouldn't be murder. He's already dead. I saw him die twice myself. Besides he's too dangerous a man to allow him to run around free. As far as I know, his only unlawful act has been kidnapping people. But we've yet to get the proof of that to arrest him. And even if he was sent to jail, with his powers, he'd find a way to escape."

Raven retrieved Cedric, warning the robot head not to speak. They left the house and got into the motorboat. They rowed away from the pier before starting the engine. As they traveled upstream, Cedric could no longer keep his mouth closed. "Where are we going?"

"Back to the mansion where I found you. We plan on locating Doctor Takamora this time."

"Good. I want to give him a piece of my mind."

Raven turned to VanGrimm. "That reminds me. Do you have *The Necronomicon* with you?"

A cold wind rose and dark clouds blocked the stars.

VanGrimm patted her cloak. "It's right here."

When they reached a certain section of the river, the vampire said, "Kill the motor, and drop anchor."

"Aye, aye, Captain." Raven turned off the outboard and threw the cement block attached to a rope that served as an anchor into the river. The boat jerked to a stop.

VanGrimm raised her arms and intoned an incantation. A dense mist rose from the water. When it was so thick that Raven could no longer make out her companion sitting a meter in front of her, the vampire said, "Okay. Raise the anchor and start rowing."

Raven obeyed. Soon the boat bumped up against a pier. She tied the boat up and with Cedric in her arms left the boat. VanGrimm took her hand. "I can see through this fog better than you."

She led Raven up the path that to the mansion and entered it. By that time, the sky started to lighten.

VanGrimm said, "I must go to the coffin in the tower now. I'll see you tonight after sunset."

"Wait. Give me *The Necronomicon* ."

The house shook as though a small earthquake had occurred.

"No. It's too dangerous for a mortal to use. You'll have to be patient, my love. Try not to fall into any of the traps in this house." With that she vanished.

"Well Cedric, I guess I'll go to the kitchen and see whether I can find something to eat for breakfast."

Raven hunted through the cabinets and found a can of peaches. As she was opening it, she heard someone come through the kitchen door. She turned quickly to face Magbertius. She whipped out her automatic and pointed it at him. "Peter."

He grinned at her. "Raven. Put that popgun away. Where's *The Necronomicon* ?" The house trembled again. "I know you have it."

"Not any longer. I gave it Celia VanGrimm. I assume it's with her in her mausoleum in Graceland Cemetery in Chicago."

"You lie. I saw you two arrive together a little while ago."

Raven shrugged. "Makes no difference. I've got the drop on you. Take me where you've got Henry Bagyar and Annie B."

"And Doctor Takamora," chimed in Cedric.

Magbertius laughed. "You can't harm me. I'm already dead." He advanced toward her.

"I loaded silver bullets in my Glock. Are you immune to silver?"

He hesitated. "I don't know. I realize that silver has certain properties which can affect some of the undead, like vampires, but I don't know about this corpse I wear."

"Do you want to take a chance? I'll shoot you in the heart a few times."

Magbertius squinted at her. "You would really do it. I see your hate for me in your mind. Very well, I'll take you to your lover and friend."

"And Doctor Takamora," Cedric cried.

"And to Doctor Takamora. Take that thing along."

Raven picked up Cedric and tucked the robot head under her arm. She kept the pistol trained on Magbertius. "Lead the way, Peter."

She followed Magbertius into the secret room shaped like a five pointed star. He opened one of the doors and made a motion that Raven should enter. She shook her head. "You first. I'll be right behind."

After Magbertius passed through the door, Raven followed closely. The room's appearance was similar

to other parts of the house. It had the same sort of paneling and scenic paintings on the wall and antique furniture. There was one big difference; it had no windows or doors. In one corner was a large cage. It held Henry Bagyar. He stood up and cried, "Raven. Don't tell me he's got you too."

"No. I've got him. I'd come over and kiss you, but I dare not take my eyes off of Peter." Annie B was also in the room, chained to a wall. Next to her was a Japanese man, also chained. "Hi Annie. And Doctor Takamora. It's good to finally meet you in person." She turned to Magbertius. "Release them."

"Oh no. I've just added you to my collection." Magbertius turned and ran toward a blank wall. Raven fired her pistol at him. She aimed for a leg. She did not want to kill him—at least not quite yet. She might need him to get out the room. He stumbled when the bullet hit him in the thigh. Nonetheless, he kept on going, limping and groaning. Raven realized that she had made an error. He was inches away from where they had entered the room. She dove toward him, but landed a few inches short. She reached for his ankle, but missed. A moment later he went through the wall as though it did not exist. She tried to do the same thing, but wound up banging her head. She felt the wall with her hands. It was very solid.

"Now, how the hell did he do that?" She cursed herself for stupidly walking into a trap. She put away the pistol, wishing she had shot Magbertius in a more vulnerable spot. She went to the cage and gave Bagyar a long lingering kiss. Then she went to Annie B and hugged her.

Meanwhile, Cedric, who she had dropped to the floor when she went to tackle Magbertius, lay on his ear and said, "Good day, Doctor Takamora. Raven has brought me here so that you can give me a body."

Takamora sobbed. "Don't you understand. We're trapped here until we die. That mad man, Johnson, will never let us go."

"Don't be so pessimistic, Doc," Raven said. "All is not lost yet. For one thing, Peter Johnson wants something from me. I have a bargaining chip. Also, I have friends who may help us." She had her fingers crossed.

"It's no use. He'll trap them into this room too, as he did us."

Raven ignored Takamora and picked the lock to Bagyar's cage until it clicked open. Bagyar came out of the cage, and they hugged again. The Beast said, "If that Peter Johnson comes in here again, I'll rip him to pieces." He growled low and menacing.

"Only if I tell you to, darling." Raven picked the locks of the shackles on Annie B and Takamora. "Okay. Now that everyone is free, we need to get our heads together and plan how to escape." She righted Cedric and turned to Takamora. "Doc and Cedric, you two are the brainy ones here. Tell me, how come Johnson could walk through that wall, and I couldn't?"

Takamora said, "We're in a world in a different dimension although it resembles ours. Several rooms of the Millinocket mansion exist in other dimensions. I don't know how this came about. It's been that way since I found it. Apparently, Johnson has some device or method he uses to open gateways between dimensions that I haven't been able to discover although I've watched him closely."

"It's sorcery," said Cedric. "He's a warlock."

Takamora frowned. "Who's been feeding you such nonsense? There's no such thing as sorcery or warlocks. They're the stuff of mythology and fiction."

Raven said, "It makes no difference whether he does it with magic or science, we've got to trick or brutalize him into revealing his secret."

"If he comes back," said Annie B.

"Oh. He'll be back. As I said, I know where something is hidden that he wants."

* * * *

Jacobs rapped hard on the door to Raven's room. "C'mon, lazy bones," he hollered. "Up and at 'em if we're going back out on the river."

The owner's daughter, Debra, was pushing a cart of cleaning supplies and linens through the hallway. "She's not in there. She took one of our boats out on the river last night. My pop's hopping mad about it."

"She went out on the river at night without telling me? Damn it. She must've done that to get rid of me. Then she can continue telling her crazy stories that Grant believes for some reason, and nobody'll be around to witness what really happened and deny them."

"I don't think that's it, mister. I think she's got another boy friend. She was with somebody. I saw them heading for the pier about midnight."

Jacobs glared at the girl. "In the first place, I'm not her boy friend. She's a PI, and I'm an FBI agent. We're working a case together."

Debra shrugged. "Well, apparently she decided she wanted to 'work the case' with this other person." She continued down the hall.

Jacobs went downstairs and spoke to Hank, the innkeeper. "That woman I was with took one of your boats out on the river last night. I'll also need another one this morning."

Hank eyed him suspiciously. "She took it without leaving a deposit. You'll have to leave a double deposit. She already lost one of my boats." He named an outrageous price that was more than all three boats were worth.

Jacob sighed. He could have pulled the "FBI business" ploy, but he did not feel like arguing with the man. He took out his credit card and passed it to him.

He cruised upstream toward the spot that Raven kept bringing him to. As he neared that area, a mist rose from the water. He turned the engine off and let the boat drift. He hoped the fog would lift so that he could continue to search for that island she kept talking about. After a couple of minutes, however, the boat banged into the pylons of pier. He tied up there. He thought, *Now wait a minute. I'm in the middle of the river. This has to be that mysterious island that Raven kept raving about.*

He got out of the boat and walked down the pier. A path wandered through a wooded area. Since the fog was still quite thick, he returned to the boat, got his backpack, and fished out his flashlight to use as an aid to find his way through the mist. He had a strange feeling about the island. It gave him the creeps for some reason. He shrugged it off as nervousness, the mist and worry about what had happened to Raven. He wondered who she had come there with.

He trudged along the path which slowly wound upwards until at the peak of the hill he came to an old mansion. It was quite large, but looked dilapidated and abandoned. After he entered it, he called out, "Raven. Are you here?" He was answered only by the echoes of his own voice. He decided to search the house. First he went through all the rooms on the first floor of the main building. Then he wandered through the maze of the east wing. He even climbed up to the tower room. It was empty except for a coffin.

He made his way back to the main building with difficulty, getting lost a few times. By this time it was afternoon. He had not had anything to eat for breakfast. His stomach growled at him. He went into the kitchen and spotted the can of fruit. *Someone has opened this recently*, he thought. He wondered whether it was Raven and where she could possibly be. He poured the fruit into a bowl and ate it. It wasn't the most filling meal he had ever had, but it would have to do.

Next he went upstairs and looked into the bedrooms. There were signs of human occupancy, but nothing concrete, simply unmade beds, used tissues in a wastebasket, that sort of thing. There was nothing that would point definitely to Raven.

He looked out the window. The sun was starting to set, but the fog had not lifted. His instincts told him that Raven had to be there somewhere. He went back downstairs and into the library to think. What to do? What to do? He still had another wing to look through, but he felt that would be useless. If it wasn't so foggy, he would search for her outdoors. Finally, he decided, *Might as well look in the cellar. If whoever she came with was a perp, he might've taken her down there to do something to her*. He got chill thinking that she might've been murdered.

As he started to leave the library, a very pale woman appeared in the doorway. "You must be the FBI agent who Raven came to Millinocket with."

"That's right. My name is Steve Jacobs. Who are you?"

"Celia VanGrimm. I'm a friend of Raven's."

VanGrimm? He recalled Raven talking about someone by that name, but he could not remember the context. "Are you the person who came with her last night?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? You said you and her came here together, right?"

VanGrimm smiled in an ironic fashion. "We became separated. I haven't seen her since early in the morning. But, I can help you find her."

Jacobs was suspicious of this person. There was something about her that was not right. For one thing, her skin was so pale, she looked ill. He had seen corpses that looked healthier. For the present, however, he would go along with her to see where she would lead him. "Okay. How do you intend to do that?"

VanGrimm sniffed the air. "Let's go to the west wing."

"Lead the way." The west wing was the one he had not explored.

The west wing was as labyrinthine as the east wing had been. Finally VanGrimm walked into what seemed to be a parlor. Jacobs said, "There's nothing in here." She pointed to a paneled wall. "You're pointing to a wall. What are we supposed to do, walk through it?"

"There are secret rooms in this house. There's one behind that wall."

Jacobs had not considered the possibility of secret rooms. No wonder when he searched the house he could not find Raven. He became more suspicious of the woman. How did she know about a secret room?

VanGrimm walked over to the wall and put her nose to it. "Yes. This is the way."

Jacobs began to wonder about the woman's sanity. She seemed to think she could smell the way to where Raven was, as though she were a bloodhound.

She checked for some mechanism to open a secret panel. Jacobs said, "Try that old gas lamp fixture. When the owners put in electricity in this house they wouldn't have any reason to leave a gas lamp unless it serves another purpose."

VanGrimm turned the switch on the fixture. A panel slid back. Beyond it was absolute darkness. Jacobs shined his flashlight into the room until he found a light switch, which he flicked on. The large room was in the shape of an octagon with doors in each of the eight walls. "What a weird room," Jacobs said.

VanGrimm entered it and Jacobs followed. The woman sniffed at each door. Jacobs asked, "Hey Celia, what do you think you're smelling?"

She gave him a sly grin. "Raven's blood."

Jacobs thought, *She's definitely loony. I must be crazy myself, following a nut case like her around.*

Finally at one door, she cried, "She's behind this door." She opened it. Jacobs started to enter. She held him back. "No. If you go through, you'll be trapped like they are. Stay where you are." She swung the door full open. Jacobs saw Raven turn and look. There were others in the room beyond, Annie B who he had met before, an Asian man and some kind of freak that was half human and half animal.

Raven cried, "We're saved. C'mon gang, let's get out of here." She picked up the robot head she called Cedric from the floor, and they all tramped out.

As soon as everybody was out of the room, VanGrimm closed the door. Raven came up and hugged her. "I knew you'd come for me." She turned to Jacobs. "Hi Steve. Sorry I bugged out on you."

Jacobs said, "You're forgiven. So, now that you've found your friends, is the case solved?"

"We still need to deal with Peter Johnson. I think we can charge him with kidnapping and possibly the murder of President Washburn."

Magbertius suddenly came through the secret panel into the room. He had a pistol in his hand. "Yes, you still have to deal with me." He was dragging one foot. Jacobs saw that he had a bullet wound in his thigh.

Magbertius turned to VanGrimm. "Are you the person that Raven gave *The Necronomicon* to?"

There was a clap of thunder. Jacobs figured that they were in for a storm. He had heard about the nor'easters in that part of the country.

The vampire smiled. She took the evil book out of her cloak and held it up. "Is this what you want? Come and get it."

"Hand it over, or I'll kill you."

She laughed. To Jacobs' horror, the man he knew as Peter Johnson fired his pistol three times. All three bullets hit VanGrimm in the chest causing her to stagger back a couple of feet. Ragged holes appeared in her back. The shells lodged in the wall behind her. No blood flowed from the wounds.

VanGrimm kept laughing. "Is that the best you can do? I guess you can't have the book then." She put it back in the pocket of her cloak and advanced toward Magbertius, who emptied his revolver at her.

As soon as the sixth bullet was fired, Bagyar rushed forward and attacked Magbertius. He tore the sorcerer's throat out with his teeth. The Johnson body sank to the ground, no longer animate. Jacob saw some kind of vapor come out of him and felt something cold as though a winter wind had passed through the room.

Bagyar turned to him and put his paws out. "Arrest me. I've murdered him."

Jacobs said, "Not me. That was clearly a case of self defense. The man was psychotic killer. He just shot six bullets into Celia." He peered at her. "How the hell did you survive that?"

"Didn't Raven tell you?" She bared her fangs. "I'm a vampire. Ordinary bullets can't harm me."

Jacobs' eyes went wide. "A vampire. I didn't believe such creatures exist. But-but, you seem to be one." He backed away from her.

She winked at him. "What's the matter? Don't you want to become one my donors."

Raven said, "Leave him alone, Celia. We still have a mystery to solve. We still don't know what happened to the real Washburn."

Takamora said, "He's dead. I saw Johnson murder him."

"What did he do with his body?"

"He sent it to one of those dimension from which nothing can survive."

Raven took out her pistol. "Jacobs, cuff him. You heard him admit to complicity in the kidnapping and murder of President Washburn."

Cedric cried, "But if you arrest him, who will give me a body."

Raven picked the robot head up. "We'll find someone who can do the job. Meanwhile, you can come and live with Henry and me." She glanced toward Bagyar. "That's all right, isn't, lover?"

"Sure. Cedric will be someone to talk to while you're out playing detective."

THE END

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