

GARGOYLE BOB



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PROLOGUE

The miracle that is related today about St. Romain is so persistent and so widely spread, that it must be told, if only to explain the many allusions contained in picture, in carving, and in song, throughout the tale of Rouen, and in the very stones and windows of her most sacred buildings.

T.A. Cook – “The Story of Rouen” – 1901

The Bishop must have chosen the wrong man. On such a dangerous night, surely he needed the strength of a stonemason, not the talents of a sculptor. It was clear to Pascal that strong arms accustomed to breaking granite for the new cathedral would have been of much more help than his own artful limbs. “We should go,” he said. “It’s not safe...”

His poorly cobbled shoes slipped on the wet river rocks that lined this desolate portion of the Seine. He yelped as he fell, but a firm grip caught his cloth tunic. Pascal’s rescuer pulled him upright, drew him face-to-face.

“Quiet,” said Bishop Romain. More soldier of God than holy man, the bright moonlight deepened the lines of his grim face.

Pascal stifled a cry of surprise. “Your grace... there’s a devil out here. They say a water dragon hunts at night.” He looked back at the distant spires of Rouen, longing for its main road still paved with stones laid by the Romans just a few centuries ago.

“I know what lurks here.”

The Bishop prodded him forward. His coarse black robe made it difficult for Pascal to see him in the night, but through rips in the garment he caught the glint of mail armor. The young artisan had heard whispered stories that the Bishop once destroyed a pagan temple of Venus with his bare hands. Now all the wild tales about this warrior priest appeared true. The Bishop had already done battle this night.

Pascal shuffled ahead. He prayed for God to deliver him from evil, completely ignoring the “Your will be done” part. To be back under his leaky thatched roof in the city, to celebrate his birthday in this year of 630 *Anno Domini* were some of the self-centered pleas he beseeched God to grant. Any other plans God might have pre-ordained did not interest him.

The gurgle of river water over rocks grew louder in the darkness. Clumps of boulders appeared along the bank, but as Pascal drew closer, the water bobbed and shifted even the larger shapes about. He froze. Those could not be rocks.

The river current flipped one of them over into the moonlight. Pascal screamed. The mauled face of a soldier stared up at him, one eye gouged and half its flesh shorn away. His hauberk was torn through like fabric, links of metal broken and shredded apart. The corpses of bloodied clerics and other mangled soldiers were strewn about him.

Then the largest boulder shifted. The dim light revealed a dead knight. Armor split open, he still straddled a half-eaten horse.

The Bishop gazed upon his butchered flock. “Nothing on earth can destroy this demon.”

Pascal turned to flee, but felt that strong grip on his tunic again. He pleaded, "Let me go! What are you doing?"

"What must be done. This ends tonight."

"You plan to sacrifice me? Use me as bait?" By the Bishop's aggravated sigh, Pascal worried that all those possibilities had been considered.

A large wave swelled in the river and crashed on the shore. The stench of death, more foul than possible for these newly slaughtered victims, stung his eyes. He gagged, but didn't retch. The true source of the fetid odor swayed above him.

Vicious jaws at the end of a long neck shot down toward Pascal. Jagged teeth closed in on him. The Bishop yanked him out of the way.

"You're here to bear witness," he said. "Not to be eaten."

The water dragon, no longer rumor or gossip, shook its scaled head and pulled itself along with two front legs. Behind those clawed appendages, an enormous worm-shaped body humped and undulated across the ground in grotesque elephant seal fashion.

The two men scrambled away from the monster.

"I will fight hellfire with hellfire," the Bishop shouted.

He chanted a prayer Pascal had never heard before then thrust overhead an amulet wrought with dark metal. Arcs of lightning crackled over his arm and shot into the heavens.

Pascal looked up into the moonlit sky. The clouds billowed then parted. A large shadow flew across his uplifted face. Somehow in this unholy night, things had just gotten worse. Answering the Bishop's call, a

roar and beating of wings heralded the descent of something far from angelic.

The water dragon bellowed at its new challenger.

The Bishop's champion dove from the shadows and choked a brawny forearm across the throat of the water dragon. Its serpentine neck twisted wildly about, but couldn't dislodge the stranglehold. Desperate for air, the dragon's head swung back and forth ever expanding arcs. The last arching swing slammed its enemy down onto the riverbank.

Smashed against the rocks and dazed, the Bishop's winged creature fell to the ground. The water dragon pounded forward on its front legs, eager for the kill. But its prey recovered and flew up with a punch that snapped the water dragon's head back. A low moan sounded deep within the leviathan's gullet. It staggered about for a moment then coiled its body together, ready for another attack.

Pascal watched it all, too stunned to move. Earth shaking blows and hideous screams filled the sculptor's senses, and vaguely, he knew he would never again walk along the Seine with any comfort or peace of mind.

Days after the primeval duel, Pascal stood in his rustic workshop with the same bewildered expression. The Bishop had forbidden him to ever speak of the battle yet commissioned him to create anonymous sculptures of its victor. Accepting the small fortune on the condition of anonymity felt infinitely preferable to saying "no" to the Bishop and risking his wrath.

In front of him sat a block of stone. Pascal struggled to process the danger he had survived. He

slowly reached out with a chisel and hammer then chipped away a few flakes. As shock gave way to a desire for release and expression, the artisan began to sculpt with more certainty, more obsession.

A muscular arm of marble started out ordinary enough then he shaped a hand with deadly claws at the end of it. A broad back initially appeared muscular and natural until a bat wing took form along its length. But the macabre face he sculpted never once looked ordinary or natural, just horrific with tusks.

Pascal stepped back to admire the image of his savior, the Bishop's winged creature. He gazed on the sculpture without knowing that his work would forever mark Rouen as the birthplace of gargoyles.

CHAPTER ONE

*At danger's call we'll promptly fly;
And bravely do or bravely die.*

Chicago Police Department – 1861

The beat-up Police Athletic Gym looked like a waste of Chicago tax money. With the global financial crisis and stimulus money that never reached its destinations, the gym faced closure from budget cuts. But to those that wore the checkerboard hatbands of the Chicago PD, the weathered bricks, chipped stone lions under the cornices, and archaic words of courage chiseled in the archway — all marked this place as hallowed ground.

For Officer Marcus R. Kincaid, a veteran cop on the salt-and-pepper side of middle-aged, the gym's boxing ring was his altar. Every week he dumped offerings of misery upon its sweat stained canvas. Criminals free on bond, mountains of paperwork, relentless bill collectors, and most of life's tortures usually melted away after a good sparring session.

But tonight before the start of the late shift, it was going to take more than a few rounds to exorcise his crappy day. If there were ever an Order of the Woeful Countenance, Kincaid's dark, solemn eyes would have rode shotgun in that company. His look and boxing stance also bore the street toughness of a Joe Frazier not the Hollywood smooth of an Ali, Laila or Muhammad.

Frank Chen, a much younger man, lean and tall with more testosterone than sense, bounced about the

boxing ring. Full bodied black hair that spiked up on its own without gels poked through the top of his headgear. He lunged and threw a flurry of off-balance punches.

The blows smacked into Kincaid's shoulders but left no real damage to his aging heavyweight build. Something had upset his opponent enough to throw his technique all over the place. Kincaid wasn't the best marksman on the force and for the longest time assumed the wrong skin color or poor brown-nosing skills blocked his promotions. But he had a talent for sensing people's emotions. More than hearing vocal inflexions or seeing shifts in body language, emotions had their own sort of taste and feel to him. His mother had called this empathic ability a "gift," but he always thought that the ability to predict the future or read people's minds would have been much cooler.

Trying to look dangerous, Frank bobbed his head and gloves. "I'm ahead on points. You're going down..."

Kincaid blasted him with a single punch. "Eyes front, rookie." That one felt good. But instead of Frank's jaw, he had pictured hitting the Captain's face as he pontificated about how new computers could predict crimes.

"First Tina kicks my ass, now you? Oh, you got my attention." Frank countered with a wild combination.

"Calm. Like water, let it flow." Kincaid rocked him with a clean punch. Bitterness rose in his mouth from Frank's negative emotions. It sounded like he had brought the troubles of his young marriage into the ring. That wasn't going to help their workout.

"I'm sick of being everybody's punching bag!" Frank's guard wavered all over the place. "Show me that famous move of yours. C'mon, teach me something, 'Marky Boy'."

The words "Marky Boy" prickled the hairs on Kincaid's neck. They triggered childhood memories of doors slamming closed then splintering open again, beer bottles smashing against brick walls. Fury always accompanied these recurrent images. No amount of relaxation techniques could hold back that anger. He looped a big right hand feint.

"Bolo punch? That's so old... ow!" A straight left hand jab silenced and blinded Frank.

Kincaid slid in for the kill. Emotions flooded all reason. Twisting his right fist, he drove home a compact martial arts punch. The torque and energy generated by the corkscrew strike sent his partner flying backward in a spray of perspiration. Frank collapsed to the ground in a heap.

"Never let your guard down," Kincaid said. "Always expect the worst. That's the damn lesson."

Awareness of his surroundings returned as the anger faded, just the salty taste of sweat remained. His ears began to register the clang of old iron as other officers worked out with free weights in the musty gym, the polar opposite of health spa glam. Even though sparring gave just a temporary emotional fix, it worked better than the alcohol or drug-based escapes his father had used. Besides, he wasn't the sort to spill his guts to a MSW, Phd, MD, or any other alphabet soup professional that posed as a counselor these days.

A groan from the recumbent Frank brought a slight smile to Kincaid's face.

"Rise and shine Cinderella."

"Screw... you..." gasped Frank.

"What did you do to Tina?"

"Nothing... that's the problem. Never home, always with you." Frank rose up to a sitting position, the lower ropes of the boxing ring dipped from his weight. "She said you'll rundown perps from a wheelchair and I'd always be there pushing you around. Says we're a *Brian's Song* pair."

He took another painful breath. "I think she's jealous."

Kincaid smiled as he thought about the early African American actor he identified with as a kid.

"Guess that makes me, Billy Dee Williams. You're Brian Piccolo or Chewbacca, depending on which Billy Dee sidekick you want to be. Always did like that girl." In Chicago, being compared to the fabled Bears teammates was hardly a criticism. Tina had brought stability into Frank's full-bore life, and whenever Kincaid saw the two of them together, his own loneliness would lift a bit. "Fix it. Family is the most important thing."

"Yeah, then how come you don't have one?"

"Nephew, I got you and Tina and a whole city of defenseless lambs to protect."

"Papi, I like it when you call me 'nephew'."

Kincaid shook his head. "Shut up. That's the shit that makes her jealous. Time to hit the streets."

From a distance, the streets and building canyons of any city looked majestic. Chicago's skyline dazzled with the best of them, especially at night. The monolithic Sears Tower, straight laced Aon Center,

modern John Hancock Center, neo-gothic Tribune Tower, and the fairy tale Rapunzel feel of the Water Tower made the City of Broad Shoulders an enchanting place. But all Neverlands glittered in the distance. Only up close could you see the nooks and dark places where wrong turns might occur.

Along one of those errant paths, Tommy Conway slogged through the grey salt-snow sludge on the sidewalk of a street bridge over the Chicago River. Homeless for more than a year, he made his way with little regard for the splendor towering over him. He chewed on the only extravagance he cared about right now, a finger sandwich wrapped in a cocktail napkin. *Ugh, pimento*, Tommy hated pimento. A lot of rich people did too, judging by the trays of it they were throwing away after that shindig at the gallery. Always could count on big gatherings of wealthy folks to waste a lot of food. Why couldn't they just let cheese, be cheese?

Just moving through the night of a Chicago winter was brutal for anyone, much less someone not outfitted with the best of clothes. "Biting cold" didn't cover the below zero severity of its wind chill. Even though a large White Sox jacket with cracked faux leather sleeves overlaid a hooded sweatshirt and torn ski jacket, it still felt like he was just wearing an Aloha shirt. As the wind blew, Tommy angled his body sideways to expose as little of himself as possible to the marrow freezing blast. He shoved his cold hand and the tiny sandwich into his pocket with the dozen of other appetizers he would eat later as dinner, pimento or no pimento.

A loud splash in the river broke the dreary trudge through the cold. The noise raised some hope that something different, maybe something useful or salvageable might be near. He looked over the edge of the bridge.

Although it was the dead of winter, the deep river water below had not frozen over and continued to flow through the city. As Tommy peered into the darkness, he saw a brief flash of movement just below the water's surface. It reminded him of the pikes he used to catch during younger and happier times, but this glimpse was of something a lot bigger.

The honk of a nearby taxi distracted him for a moment, and he missed whatever caused the sound of yet another splash. Looking around for a few more moments, the homeless man lost interest and started to back away from the edge. This time he missed the pair of inhuman hands that reached up and grabbed both sides of his head.

Yanked right off the bridge, no one witnessed Tommy's disappearance from the face of this earth. His screams might have alerted a passerby, but beneath the thoroughfare, a clawed grip crushed the cartilage in his throat. He could only wheeze ragged breaths at the fangs snarling in his face. Wicked talons tore his hamstrings into bloody shreds, dropping him to the ground. Giant wings of horrid skin stretched out to their full extent. The monster looked ready to rip him apart.

But instead of bone splitting torture, Tommy's limbs felt cold and heavy. His flailing arms and kicking feet went still. Maybe the sub-zero chill had numbed him from excruciating pain, but when he looked down

at his body, it didn't suffer from the frostbite he had seen on other street grate companions. Around the creature's grasp, a patch of grey coloring spread along Tommy's skin. As color left his body, the surface of the monster increased in vibrancy and tone. It seemed to steal life right before his eyes.

A wave of coldness came with the greyness. Hardening, solidifying, suffocating, the nothingness reached his chest, and it froze in mid-breath. He couldn't move or feel anything below his neck. Without his lungs and ability to breath, he couldn't even utter a noise. His head felt like it had been cut off from his body. *This wasn't right! Not like this! Never fair, never fair.* His face twisted and contorted in protest, the only thing that could still move. But then the freezing sensation marched its way up his neck and jaw and eyelids. Tommy's last brain cell blanked out just as he hoped someone sober would find him.

A few blocks from the Chicago River, Kincaid and Frank approached their usual mid-patrol checkpoint. By this time of night, the cold had driven most people indoors but Grandma Zee and her battered food stand continued to brave the elements. The flames beneath the woman's iron wok made her eyes glow red and deepened the shadowed wrinkles of her face. Lit in the darkness, she appeared ancient and foreboding as if she had tended the first cooking fires of Man. Yet the food sizzling in the wok gave off an enticing aroma of cilantro and chili peppers, promising warmth to any customer that would venture a go at her culinary magic.

"What's cooking Zee?"

Exotic cuisine for Kincaid used to be a hot dog served without a bun, but Grandma Zee had gotten him to try some new things. Now he ate kielbasa with a squirt of sriracha from the large green-tipped bottle on her condiment shelf and coming here beat the hell out of a donut shop.

Frank had his nose immediately over the wok, seasoned black by eons of flame and flavors, and inhaled the aroma from the spices. "Looks weird, but it smells good."

"Get away, not for you." The wiry Grandma Zee shooed him off with a long-handled iron spatula. Kincaid smiled, he had seen her deny service to many a pretentious foodie with that very weapon.

"You know, you'd get more customers if you were a little nicer... *Grandma*," said Frank as he browsed through her food containers. "Any empanadas?"

"*Ni hao* and *namaste*," she answered without welcome or a bow. "I serve who I want to serve. Stop poking around. Bring down my health rating."

Frank uncovered a food tray, a whiff of repulsive flatulence sprung from within. "Uh, too late for that. It smells like a barnyard in there."

"Now that's something right for you," Grandma Zee smirked. She stabbed a chopstick into the tray and lifted out a solid square of food, fried brown on the outside without any batter. It jiggled slightly.

"Stinky tofu, perfect fit."

"Are you kidding? I don't like things that smell like sh—"

"Ai-ya! So tall and stupid, I can't believe you're Asian. You don't know this? It's one of my favorites. The stinkier, the better. Go on, it's on the house."

"I'm *American*. I also suck at math and don't know any kung-fu. The Mendez family did the best they could with me after my parents died."

Still, Frank took the fried piece of tofu and bit slowly into it. After a few careful chews, he smiled and said with a full mouth, "Dude, you've got to try this."

Grandma Zee nodded then peered up at Kincaid's face, sizing him up for one of her concoctions.

"No, he's not ready. One day, maybe. Let's see. I've got it."

While her food always made Kincaid feel better, he savored her presence more. Something eternal about Grandma gave her emotions a depth and variety that rivaled the food she cooked. This chef always understood what made his days suck, and she never patronized his naïve taste buds. With a ladle from a pot next to the wok, the elder woman filled a wide Styrofoam cup with a thick mixture.

"What's this?" Kincaid accepted the cup and peered at the thick, bland porridge inside of it.

"Congee, rice soup. Slow cooked, all day. Keeps you warm. Simple, pure. Calms the fire inside."

"Yeah? Give him a double dose," said Frank between bites of his fried tofu.

"Congee can only do so much. Maybe a little freeze dried pork will help." She sprinkled some fuzzy looking ingredient into his cup.

A sudden breeze batted about an absurd caricature of the Chinese Kitchen God dangling from the condiment shelf. With puffed cheeks and a foppish hat, the cartoon of this god banged hungrily against Kincaid's cup.

Grandma Zee glared at the deity's image.

"Reminds me of my husband. A master cook. Loved my congee more than me." She shook her head. "I see people for what they are. Knew he was lazy, unfaithful. Married him anyways, serves me right."

"Never heard you mention him. Mmm... this does hit the spot." As he ate the congee, Kincaid could feel the tension drift away with each soothing mouthful. "What happened to him?"

"Oh, he got burned up in a kitchen fire. Crispy, crispy," Grandma Zee dished some garlic green beans out of the wok. "Been doing his work ever since."

Both policemen stopped eating.

Frank regarded his last bite of tofu with suspicion.

"Zee? Is there something I should know?" Kincaid said.

"Like did I kill him for having an affair?" She put down her spatula and looked straight at him. "You tell me."

Kincaid searched her face for any hint of guilt or malice. Over the years he had questioned every type of suspect and dirt bag, heard every adamant denial and fanciful alibi imaginable. Her gaze didn't waver and though tinged with a bit of sadness, her emotions seemed clear of any wrongdoing. Of course, expert liars could beat any polygraph, and Zee wouldn't appear upset to him if truly at peace with whatever she might have done. Prickly and strong-willed enough to take someone out, but could she really have killed her own husband?

Kincaid took a hearty swallow of congee and returned the cup. "This is my new winter favorite. But I want you to know, I think much more of its chef."

Grandma Zee bowed her head with a private smile. "Thank you. Be careful tonight. Something's got my *special customers* spooked, some of their orders have been a little odd." She began to pack away condiments on the cart.

Kincaid nodded and walked away with Frank.

"*Spooked, odd*, says the creepy old woman on the street," Frank said. "Look, I'm glad Lady Iron Chef has got you feeling better, but I haven't seen you so pissed. What's up?"

"It's the Devil on the inside," Kincaid sighed. "Should have a better handle on it." Just because he could read the emotions of others, it didn't mean he had any skill in controlling the flow of feelings, especially his own. He had hoped to bury this type of thing in the boxing ring.

"No, that's not it." Frank wagged a finger in the air. "Wait, I know the problem. I know... you haven't been laid in like forever.

"Frank..."

"No, I'm serious. It's not good. All alone, all frustrated. Gets you raging. You know, I met this sweet girl in Public Relations. She could..."

"It was the 'Marky Boy.' That's what my father would call me. He'd yell it right before he hit me. Never got a chance to pay him back. Too young, too little before Mom got us out."

"I'm sorry. You never talk about your Dad."

"It's not your fault. Had an uncle in the Marines, he never talked about his time in Iraq either." The drunken singsong of "Marky Boy" started to echo in Kincaid's head. He had to stop talking about his father. "I had some choice words with the Captain today. Told

me more budgets cuts were coming. Said technology and social media will make the force lean and mean. His Predictive Analysis program is going to predict crime, take the guesswork out of law enforcement."

Remembering the exact words said next, he grimaced. "Early retirement. Told me I should think about it."

"What? Oh, that's bull. You can't retire, early or anything. You're not even fifty yet."

Fifty years old. A concept Kincaid had never applied to himself before. When he was a kid, fifty seemed ancient, actually forty seemed decrepit. But the idea of turning fifty made him realize he was way closer to the end of his life than the start of it.

"Going to be that soon. Plus, they're looking at cops with over twenty-five years of service, and I've got those too." That was a lot of knife wielding addicts and gun toting civilians to have survived. *Twenty-five years, just another nail in the coffin.*

"This city's your heart," Frank said.

"Maybe that's the problem. A heart should have something else in it." Kincaid walked faster, anything to get away from the topic. "It doesn't matter."

The young officer hustled to keep up. Rotating his sore arm he also tried to change the subject. "Well, damn... my ribs still hurt. What did you hit me with? The bolo punch and jab, Sugar Ray 'no mas'd' Duran with those. But I've never seen that last one."

"Should never have hit you with that, sorry. Watch 'Enter the Dragon'," Kincaid said, relieved to be talking about something else.

"Enter the what?"

"Enter the Dragon. Bruce Lee."

"Bruce? I just watch Jet Li."

Kincaid frowned at the ignorance of the wire-flying CGI kung-fu generation.

"Zee might be right about you. I can't believe you haven't seen Bruce's movies. I learned that a fighter should be like water from him. You saw *Kill Bill* right? She's buried in a coffin, no escape. Broke her way out with Lee's one-inch punch. No wind-up, just your heart and soul."

"Yeah, *Kill Bill*, the second one." Frank looked relieved to have things normal again. "She got shot with all that rock salt..." A text alert on his phone interrupted. He checked it quickly.

"It's a tip from one of my twitches."

Kincaid glared at the phone, "Twitches?"

"All my snitches tweet me now, so... 'twitches'." Frank looked apologetic. Kincaid wasn't sure if it was because of the weak ass word play or guilt over joining the department's technology crusade or both. Defensive, Frank waved his smartphone around. "Hey, this ain't the Captain's Predictive *Minority Report* junk. I can track so many things with this..."

"It's OK. Everything's just a matter of time. Just do it better and bigger than I ever did." Kincaid pointed at the phone. "What did you get?"

"Says there's something we need to check out." Frank checked the map on his phone. "Four streets down and *under* the next bridge."

The two men quickly covered the distance then descended the steps beneath one of the few Chicago Loop bridges with a walkway. They were surrounded by darkness and a constant echo of river water

punctuated by the dopplering rumble of occasional vehicles coming and going overhead.

Kincaid peered about for a threat, something felt off to him. His hand hovered close to his gun.

"Not sure what we're looking for." Frank reached for his flashlight. "You'd think with a 140 characters, he could be more specific if it's a falling bridge, bomb threat—"

"There." Kincaid pointed at a large shape lying against a bridge support, partially lit by moonlight.

Frank turned on his flashlight and walked carefully toward the illuminated object, clearly a body. It sat awkwardly against the wall, propped up at a strange angle.

"Hey, wake-up! Buddy!" Frank called out.

"That's Tommy. I'd recognize that ratty White Sox jacket anywhere," Kincaid said. "He's not going anywhere."

Frank approached the body, bent down for a closer look. Tommy's skin was a peculiar grey color.

"Poor bastard. He looks so messed up. Think this is Rollo's work? His boys have been busy." He tentatively reached out a finger to touch the corpse. Nervous that the dead man might move, he inched carefully, slowly...

"Geezus," Kincaid said, making Frank jump. "Why don't you just poke him with a stick? Keep your light on him."

He reached down with no nonsense and checked for a pulse. Nothing. "This wasn't Rollo." It was a favorite pastime of the force to blame every crime on the infamous mobster, but as much as the old school

kingpin had branched into new ventures, killing homeless people wasn't his style.

Kincaid had seen drowned, stabbed, electrocuted, bullet riddled, and every mangled form of corpse, but this dead body didn't look like anything he had come across before. Every bit of exposed skin looked like the weathered concrete of an old sidewalk, an uneven mix of grey and black patches with cracks across its surface. But Tommy couldn't have been dunked in cement since his clothes appeared normal, except for the parts ripped to shreds by something sharp. Someone might have dipped him in the stuff and put his clothes back on again, but why?

Kincaid ran a finger across the odd skin texture. "Feels strange. Hard, bumpy. Some of it comes off, like chalk." There was also something eerie in Tommy's frozen expression that wasn't just pleading, "C'mon, leave me alone" or "Don't kill me, man." This look was one of somebody that wished to God he hadn't been born, in complete terror of how the last seconds of his life were going down.

Checking Tommy's pockets, Kincaid found a wallet that actually had a dollar, seven pennies, and a pack of Chicago Transit cards. Not a fortune, but something more than robbery appeared to be the motive here. In another pocket, he discovered Tommy's stash of finger sandwiches. Unwrapping one, he saw the pimento and printing on the cocktail napkin.

"Looks like we got an invitation to Tommy's Last Supper," he said, handing it to Frank.

"Parrish Antiquities... Mayan Gala." Frank squinted at the words on the paper. "Dates here say it runs all week."

"Your source... your 'twitch' got anything more?"

Frank checked his phone again for new messages. "No. But '*ProudTroll#18*' only contacts me, never answers."

"Proud Troll 18, seriously?" Grandma Zee had called it. Things were odd tonight.

Kincaid surveyed the aging concrete and steel around them. "There are eighteen bridges on this curve of the river. Tell your troll, if he wants to keep them safe, you need to meet. Call the wagon and get someone smarter than us to look at Tommy."

"Man, all those Predictive Analysis forms want the right input variables." Frank groaned. "All that paperwork. How am I going to report this one? What little circles am I going to fill in? Natural cause, homicide?"

"I don't know. Some things just don't fit in a checkbox." Kincaid began to pace around the area near the body. "Going to look around. Find out if anyone heard or saw anything."

Something had to be wrong because whatever happened to Tommy was so far off the usual Circle of Life it disturbed him.

Besides, he could feel something watching him.

CHAPTER TWO

During the 2012 winter solstice, time runs out on the current era of the Long Count calendar, which began at what the Maya saw as the dawn of the last creation period: August 11, 3114 B.C.

National Geographic - 2009

Steiger Allen walked through the top floor of Parrish Antiquities, checking all his security measures – motion detectors, window alarms, protective glyphs, and assorted mystic heptagrams. This level was the private residence of Alexis Parrish, owner of the gallery, and he defended her from all attacks, human or otherwise. Wearing a dark tailored suit that screamed “night on the town” for most people, it made him look more like an undertaker, frivolity and humor rarely crossed his face. Besides security he handled all appraisals and acquisitions for the gallery then “cleaned” any deals that went awry. The scars on his hands and missing tip of the left ring finger spoke to the years of service and violence he had devoted.

Most of the treasures they had gathered filled the museum-sized gallery below this floor, antiquities for sale not preservation. Alexis chose to sleep over this great stash of ancient wealth like a dragon resting on its hoard. But along the corridor of her private residence, she kept the most rare and valuable items for her own pleasure.

Steiger passed by a sketchbook of DaVinci devoted to the supernatural and demons, an original copy of

Macbeth signed by Shakespeare's own hand, and the death mask of Genghis Khan, a recent donation. While everything looked secure, he feared that Alexis had already breached his defenses by bringing the latest treasure into the gallery.

If this new threat had been a burglar, tree-hugging protester, or even one of the rogue killers he had faced in his mercenary days, he would not have been troubled. They were, after all, just human and the veteran had killed scores of them. He had also destroyed more than his share of netherworld types. But what they had secured for her from the Mayan tomb in Guatemala made Steiger feel how most people felt about him, uncomfortable.

Candlelight glinted passed a door cracked slightly open at the end of the hallway. The golden hair and sensuous back of Alexis Parrish eased out of the room. He drew closer as she shut the door and turned around, an intoxicating fragrance swirled about him.

"Steiger, you ghoul," Alexis said, startled by his sudden appearance. "Make sure no one disturbs our guest." In a black silk dress with sequined details on the bodice, she had Helen of Troy beauty with the raw sensuality to be Miss-whatever-month she wanted. Even though she appeared almost a decade younger, the heiress was actually older than him. He suspected that she indulged in something other than plastic surgery to keep herself young.

"I'll bring him breakfast in bed," Steiger answered. "Your *paying* guests will be arriving soon for the second day of your extravaganza. Will you be gracing them with your presence?"

She studied him the way she evaluated the value of a find. "Out with it, what's the matter?"

Steiger glanced away. The massacre that erupted at the Mayan site was worse than any firefight or cartel killing he had ever experienced. Not that he would admit it, but he wasn't sure yet how to protect her from this new danger in their lives.

"I don't see the profit in this one. There wasn't enough treasure for our usual margin, especially after promising a share to that damn Council of Purity."

"Their information led us to that tomb. It's business. It's what we do," she said with a shrug.

"Just the mention of those Purity freaks has got Rollo's organization ruffled and people die when they get skittish. Most of the tomb documents they gave us still had papal seals on them. The Church flaunts its crown jewels, not buries them. Something's wrong. I don't like it."

He glanced toward the door at the end of the hall. "Some things should stay buried."

Alexis reached out and gently turned his face to hers. "This will bring us everything. Power beyond gold. Freedom, life without any restrictions." She took a closer look at him. "This isn't like you. This isn't about contacts or tombs or profit."

He tried to hide his discomfort and control his breathing, but it was too late.

"Why Steiger, you're jealous," she teased, drawing her finger across his cheek.

He stumbled through an unexpected rise of emotions, "No, it's just... I thought. That we, after Bangkok..."

She laughed. "You are handy when the need arises." Alexis waved at her surroundings, "But I want much more than this." Her hand floated down her body, "And I want this to stay forever, as it is. Aging may work for you and scotch, but not for me. Don't you have to prepare for tonight's gala? Silver to polish, champagne to pop?"

"Yes, ma'am. Soldier, butler, human vibrator at your service," Steiger grumbled.

"All jobs anyone would kill for," she said. "Did you remember to send an invitation to our sanctimonious little pest?"

"Yes, but you're inviting trouble."

"Always been told to keep my enemies in hand. I also want to see her head explode when she realizes I've beaten her."

"Alexis, your vendetta with Michele has cost us—"

"Steiger, remember, it's 'Miss Parrish,' 'Your Highness,' or 'Queen of the Universe.' Not 'Alexis.' You may go," she said, daring him to speak again.

Kincaid walked up tiered granite steps of the museum converted into Parrish Antiquities. He had a habit of taking steps quickly, sometimes two at a time, but these steps were so wide he had to walk across them to reach the next level. He entered the gallery under a banner hung across the ornate caps of its pillared entry that proclaimed, "TAYASAL – THE LAST MAYAN KINGDOM."

The interior of the gallery was even more ostentatious than its exterior. In the atrium, sunlight gleamed off burnished display cases filled with rows of translucent jade figurines, intricate Egyptian

headpieces of lapis lazuli, and Spanish gold necklaces encrusted with gems. A high society crowd dressed to the nines lusted after rare items of treasure and flesh as they glided across the polished marble floors. Fashion models and businessmen browsed wallet sizes and depth of cleavage, all hunting for their next prize to take home.

Wearing an old wool Cubs jacket and jeans, Kincaid was distinctly underdressed, not that he cared. Moving through the central hall, he encountered different levels of decadence. Grecian and Etruscan vases with red figures and black backgrounds, many of them depicting lurid massacres and orgies, marked this a place not for school tours. The pottery displays gave way to a graphic exhibit of gladiators frozen in mid-slaughter. A tall *murmillo* with a wide brim helmet lifted a bloodied short sword as a wounded *provocator* wearing a crestless helmet with round eye vents sprawled in the sand.

Among the crockery and weapons, he also recognized a flock of aldermen and state representatives pecking about for favors. The setting was a good fit for these purveyors of self-interest and pawnbrokers of morality. *All the clowns loved parading under this big top*, he thought. From the pictures in the paper, he recognized the ringmaster of this dark carnival at the end of the hall. Against a backdrop of curtains, Alexis Parrish stood dressed in a business suit but the gathered press reporters drooled at her as if she were clad in a bikini.

"Parrish Antiquities is proud to announce the opening of our newest exhibit," Alexis said. "These

artifacts belonged to the last Mayan stronghold of Tayasal." From behind her, Steiger watched the crowd.

"Ms. Parrish, after all the failed doomsday predictions have people lost interest in Mayan things?" asked a fawning reporter.

"The 2012 apocalypse was just another Y2K myth," laughed Alexis. "But I believe people are drawn to more than just disasters. After more than 5,000 years the Mayan Long Count Calendar reset and started again at zero. The treasures we discovered will usher in a new age for the world."

"Excuse me, *discovered?*" a hostile voice came from the back. Some of the male reporters frowned at any disruption that took their attention off of Alexis. But the fire in that voice had Kincaid searching for its source.

He caught a glimpse of a woman with dark hair and a weathered leather jacket that marked her as out of place as he was in this opulent gathering.

"Those artifacts were stolen from Guatemala! Each of your 'discoveries' destroys another part of Maya culture," the woman said, not bothering to hide her anger.

"Ah, Dr. Michele Grace, so glad you could make it." To Kincaid, Alexis's smile felt more predatory than the beauty pageant teeth she had been flashing so far. "Come down from your ivory tower. The whole world benefits whenever we preserve such treasures from decay. As a professor and fellow historian, you should appreciate that."

"As a grave robber, what will you do when there's nothing left to steal?" Michele shot back.

Kincaid smiled, she had a big mouth that she couldn't keep quiet just like him.

Alexis turned her focus back to the press. "Parrish Antiquities takes pride in the charitable work we do in each of our host countries. We set the green standards for excavation. We support local communities. We present their heritage to the world. In fact, I am pleased to announce we will display portions of our exhibit in Lincoln Park, free to the general public. Now, if Dr. Grace will hold the rest of her objections, I'll show you the centerpiece of our Mayan find."

Steiger slipped away into the crowd as Alexis opened the curtain behind her. The reporters initially pushed closer, but slowed down with hushed voices as they got a better view of what waited ahead.

In front of them, Kincaid glimpsed a sacrificial altar with a statue kneeling upon it. The altar's grey limestone sides were carved with Mayan pictographs and pitted by erosion. Its flat top stained black from either exposure to the elements or blood running across the surface.

While this pre-Columbian butcher block was unsettling, the demonic statue perched on it triggered even greater alarm. Unlike the rough-hewn altar, the figure's surface was smooth almost polished, free of any Mayan engravings. In further contrast to the altar's grey stone, mottled patches of green with veins of black and brown colored the statue, similar to the camouflaged skin of a giant salamander. The bony wings of a giant bat wrapped around its man-sized body. Vicious claws extended from strong hands. It almost appeared alive. But its eyes were closed. Fangs, a strong orbital ridge and flat half-nose were evident

on the face tucked down to the floor. The statue looked like a slumbering nightmare best left undisturbed.

While some of the reporters murmured nervously, Alexis gazed upon the statue with adoration.

"It's made of metamorphic rock, stone that has been changed from its original geologic type by extreme forces. We found it in a tomb deep within *La Cueva de la Serpiente*, the Cave of the Serpent." She called out louder to the rest of her more well-heeled guests. "Come closer everyone. Come see the great bat god of the Maya — Camazotz, Lord of Xibalba!"

As the jade crowd bustled forward, Michele shook her head in disbelief. She shot panoramic pictures of the gallery and then started to move toward Alexis. But Steiger grabbed her arm from behind. She twisted out of his grip and stood battle ready, clearly not the usual bookworm.

"Touch me again and I'll break every damn metacarpal in your hand," she warned.

Steiger smiled. "Been looking forward to this—"

"Excuse me, is this the way to the kitchen?" Kincaid said as he stepped between them.

"The staff entrance is in the back. But don't bother, you're fired." Steiger glared at Kincaid's casual attire.

"Oh, I don't think so." Kincaid pulled out his badge and flipped it open. "I don't work for you. I'm here about a problem."

Surprised for a moment, Steiger quickly regained his composure. "Ah, well that's... even better, Officer. Miss Grace is disturbing the peace. Please take her away."

"It's 'Doctor,' you arrogant ass." Michele's eyes narrowed with anger. "And I'll gladly disturb your—"

"She's not the problem I'm here for." Kincaid studied Steiger. This man's emotions riffled by like a deck of cards being shuffled. A full range of different feelings, but he adjusted so quickly all Kincaid could sense was the covering blur. It would be interesting to find out if he could get Steiger to fumble his deck.

"Last night, we found a dead homeless man just a few blocks from here. His pockets were full of Parrish cocktail napkins and appetizers."

"Sounds like you need to question the caterers or arrest whoever murdered the economy," Steiger said.

"I'd love nothing more than to run all of your clients in, but I don't think this person died from food poisoning. Never seen someone turned into a pile of rock over a bad sandwich."

There. Steiger's emotional cards just went flying. Except for a drop of the eyes, he still appeared cool on the outside, but Kincaid could sense uncertainty and the sickening, cloying taste of someone generating a lie to hide a bitter truth. At the same time, he noticed that Dr. Grace glanced up with laser interest at his description of the corpse.

"That sounds simply awful," Steiger said. "It's dangerous outside with... the cold this week." He handed Kincaid his business card. "Call me if you have any further questions. But I do have things to take care of. I'll leave this menace in your hands. Throw her in a dungeon. Lock her away. Whatever you see fit."

Kincaid noticed the maimed ring finger and glanced at the card. "Mr. Allen? Lay that Frodo hand on another woman again, I'll show you what I see fit."

Michele added, "And tell that bitch to shove all those damn green standards up her—"

"I will convey your sentiments, *Doctor*." Steiger walked away into the crowd.

Kincaid turned to Michele, alone for the first time. He felt an immediate reaction to her at this proximity. Anger burned in her eyes, fingers tapped rapidly on folded arms. The adrenaline flowing with her emotions sparked a taste of smoke in his mouth and carried enough intensity for a full-out crusade, not just a brawl. Michele's enhanced presence stood her apart from everyone else, almost as if he could see her in greater clarity and detail. Not that he needed any extra help in noticing her. She had as much beauty as her apparent intelligence, not showcased like Alexis, but natural and refined.

"Well, uh, Dr. Grace..."

Kincaid struggled to find something else to say. He had never been the best with women or small talk and for a long time he hadn't cared. Right now he wished he was smoother at chitchat, but she wasn't paying attention to him anyway. He guessed she was looking for Alexis and possibly more trouble. "Maybe you should get out of here. It's a nice day, maybe go for a walk, or..."

"Wind-chill's twenty below."

"Yeah, well..."

"I need to talk with you, Detective."

Her social skills weren't any better than his. "Not a detective. I'm off-duty, just a cop."

"Oh." She looked a little disappointed.

"Usually stopping crimes not solving them." Kincaid hurried to add something that might be of interest to her. "But the way that person died last night... just doesn't sit right with me."

Her eyes stopped searching the room and fixed on him. Less abrupt and softer, she said, "Maybe we can help each other."

Within the hectic police station, Michele bounced her foot impatiently as she sat in front of Kincaid's empty desk. The ambient noise of civilians arguing about the accidental discharge of a firearm clashed with the protests of a man arrested for carjacking.

Across the room, Kincaid stood next to Frank as his partner downed some squad room coffee.

"Lay off that stuff, it's nasty," Kincaid said. "And recycle that cup. Can't save ourselves, might as well save the planet. What did you find out about Tommy?" He watched Michele fidget with a pen off his desk.

Frank tossed the cup into a recycle bin. "Coroner's busy with all the gangland stiffs. I'm telling you, Rollo's making some kind of move." The cadence of his voice picked up as he talked about his favorite topic. "Four more with piano wire around their necks, almost cut off their heads. Such a mess. Proud Troll sent me a picture of the crime scene and I think it caught Ignatius Tomasi checking out the place."

He shoved a blown up photo of a middle-age man in Kincaid's face. "Rollo's main man. It looks like the only other known picture of him. I'm telling you, we can go after Rollo. All I need is..."

"Frank... Tommy?"

"Sorry, won't have a full report until next week, but the Doc's never seen anything like it. He was calcified, sort of fossil, sort of not. Lots of blah, blah, blah, and something about just like stone."

Frank snuck an appreciative peek at Michele. "Mmm... long legs, dark hair, little Asian, little European, maybe a dash of Latino. You dog, I see why you wanted to do some 'questioning.' Snagged a winner."

"This is a precinct, not the Dating Game," Kincaid said. He unconsciously picked a speck of lint from his shirt and touched the side of his head to make sure his hair felt right.

Frank smiled, amused by Kincaid's attempt at grooming. "Yeah, anything you say. I like this. Man, you've got it bad. Never seen you so worked up by a woman."

"She's a history professor. I don't stand a chance."

"C'mon, do a little razzle dazzle. The Wolf Pack is playing at the club. That might get her going. Wow her with all the badge and honor stuff. Wait, I got it. Hit her with that old police motto you taught me. That's got history."

Kincaid glared at him.

"Hit her with the motto? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard." He couldn't tell if he was more upset at Frank or how inept he felt about interacting with someone like Michele. The cacophony of the squabbling neighbors and petulant carjacker grew louder. Everything was beginning to piss him off.

"Hey, she's worth a shot, go for it. Trust the man who's actually married." Frank winked.

Kincaid gave his young partner another "you asshole" look and walked back to desk.

"Sorry, had to hear about a case" he said, sitting across from Michele and logging onto a computer. The policeman noticed her eyes taking inventory of the

desktop, old photo of his mother, and collectible Chicago Cub baseball.

"That signature of Ernie Banks looks genuine," she said.

"Yeah, it's real."

Given her abruptness at the gallery, Kincaid had expected some hostility for keeping her waiting. He suspected she had not decided how to ask the real questions that were burning in her mind. "He was my Mom's favorite player. Not just because he was the Cub's first black player. She always loved his 'let's play two' spirit."

"Old school. My father's favorite was Carl Yastrzemski."

She relaxed a little yet continued to be nervous at the same time, a hint of sweet and sour. He couldn't tell what part might be resonating with him. Hopefully not the sour part, because he enjoyed hearing her talk even if it was just misdirection from true intentions.

"Yaz? You're from Boston? Always wanted to see Fenway."

"I've never seen Wrigley."

"Well, we need to do something about that Dr. Grace." *Awkward, so stupid*, but at least Frank might shut-up since he tried to be social.

She paused, seemed to consider a number of responses then said, "Officer, just, Michele. You can drop the Doctor."

"Likewise. It's just, Kincaid." Now he knew he was getting played, but for some reason, he really didn't care.

"Kincaid? Not Marcus." She nodded at his nameplate with 'Officer Marcus R. Kincaid' on it.

"Sometimes I go by my initials, 'MR.'" He thought some honesty might get the ball rolling. "With those letters some call me 'Mister'. Kincaid, I let that go. Not 'Marcus.' That was Dad's name. He wanted a 'junior.' But he put the 'V' in domestic violence. Nothing domestic or junior about him at all." Kincaid caught himself. Enough "sharing," something about her had him babbling. "What did you really come to ask me?"

Michele nodded and breathed a sigh of relief as she dropped her pretense. "The dead man you found. Do you know more about the body?"

"It's not something I'm free to discuss. Wait, what kind of doctor are you? At the press conference, I thought Alexis said you were a history professor or something."

Michele had the pen from his desk balanced on her hand. At the mention of Alexis, she snapped her fingers and propelled the pen around her thumb in a habit that was part kung fu and part baton twirling at a digital scale.

"I have a doctorate in Ecclesiastical Studies. My specialty is Sacred Archeology. I find and protect religious artifacts from people like Alexis."

Kincaid spaced out, distracted by an image of Michele in her leather jacket, wearing a fedora and cracking a whip. She was a lot more attractive than the last archeologist to wear that outfit and it took him some effort to focus again.

"Uh, you and Alexis Parrish look like you've been at each other for a long time."

"Alexis has looted artifacts all over the world. She fools the locals, strips everything of value, and fences them so asshole CEO's can *feng shui* their damn lobbies.

She's a thieving, conniving bitch," Michele said, spinning the pen faster and faster.

"OK..." The righteous anger he had seen at the gallery was back, but Kincaid realized it didn't stem from saving the cultural treasures of the world, but something more personal.

"What happened between you two?"

Michele clenched her fist around the pen in mid-spin. "None of that matters. I came about the body you found."

"Not saying anything until I know more about everybody on the fight card."

She squirmed in the chair like a kid in a dentist's office. Kincaid thought he even heard the whine of a high-speed drill then realized it was a nuance of her struggle that he sensed.

"We used to work together," Michele said, gritting her teeth. "She used to be a trusted sister. I was chosen over her for a promotion. Alexis went postal." The tension in her jaw relaxed as her anger fell away. "She's been raiding tombs ever since."

He felt a weight in his stomach linked no doubt to the remorse within her. "Do all historians have such history?"

"Got more yesterdays than tomorrows."

Vulnerable for just a moment, her face tightened and she reached for her bag. "This was a bad idea. I shouldn't have said anything..."

"The body was calcified, definitely not frozen by the cold. The coroner said it was like stone," he said before she could stand.

Michele sat still, surprised by his candor. She searched his face as if she had opened an ancient scroll

for the first time. Her eyes seemed to study his every wrinkle, every blemish.

"Thank you," she said.

Everything else in the station house faded, he didn't notice the chaos around them anymore. He stayed focused on her. "Now tell me what's going on."

"Alexis is connected to your 'Tommy' case." Michele rummaged in her bag for what he hoped would be a card with her number, but she pulled out a folder instead.

"I never told you his name..." Kincaid's face fell. "You heard that? You heard what Frank and I were saying?" He hoped she didn't catch Frank's dating advice. "All of it?"

"Not the part about what the coroner said or else I would have been gone before you came back to your desk. But let me show you some 'razzle dazzle'," quoting Frank as she opened the folder.

Busted and embarrassed, he watched her place a series of disturbing crime scene photos on the desk. The images of the bodies were appalling, some eviscerated, decapitated, a few appeared mummified, all of them killed in a brutal manner.

"Parrish Antiquities found that statue of Camazotz in this tomb," she said. "The Mayan Bat God of Death. Eight people were killed. Most were torn to shreds, but some were turned to stone like your guy. Alexis has brought that death here."

"Bull shit. Are you saying a Mayan Dracula is running around Chicago?" he asked with more seriousness than his words implied. He examined the photos, faces of death he had never seen before until Tommy.

"No, not a damn vampire." She bit her lip as she struggled to find the right thing to say. "I'm not sure of everything yet, but this city is in danger."

As crazy as things seemed, Kincaid knew he couldn't brush this weird case off and Michele wasn't someone he wanted to ignore or say good-bye to.

"Well, when you figure it out, let me know. Until then, if there's anything I can do, just ask. By the way, you can keep the pen."

Michele shook her head. Eyes darting and still trying to find the right words, she asked, "Tell me, what was the 'motto' Frank wanted you to impress me with?"

"What? Oh, sorry about that. It's stupid, it's... well it was the first Chicago police motto. From 1861."

Kincaid knew he would regret opening his mouth, but some gambles he just had to take.

"At danger's call we'll promptly fly; and bravely do or bravely die." Now it was his turn to shift uncomfortably in the chair. "It's above the station's entrance and like you said, old school."

Quiet for a long moment, Michele finally smiled. "Not bad." But she turned serious again. "This is danger's call. Investigate Alexis. More people are going to die if she's not stopped. I don't need rescuing, I need an ally."

She pointed at the photos. "You can keep those. And thanks for the pen," then got up and left.

From across the room, Frank lifted a paper cup in congratulations. But Kincaid simply stared at the grisly evidence in front of him.

CHAPTER THREE

*The Mayas told of a bloodthirsty bat called
Camazotz who could easily sever a man's head as he
once did to the Maya Heavenly Twins when they
were contending against the powers of evil.*

Irene Nicholson - "Mexican & Central American
Mythology" - 1967

The Navy Pier, once home to the freshwater WWII aircraft carriers USS *Wolverine* and USS *Sable*, was now a tourist attraction and center point of Kincaid's beat. More than 3,000 feet out over Lake Michigan, it was the largest pier in the world when first built. Over the years, real estate developers converted it to mixed commercial use and added a mall, carousel, Shakespeare Theater, IMAX, even a giant Ferris wheel. Where longshoremen once toiled and sailors cruised, he now dodged families inside a mammoth entertainment complex.

Kincaid paced about the area as soccer moms chased rowdy toddlers and tourists scavenged the food court for dinner. Jumbo Christmas decorations and manhole-sized snowflakes strung up well before Thanksgiving dangled everywhere. A net of icicle lights formed a starry canopy over the indoor skating ring. In spite of the commercialism and stifling crowds, he usually liked it here. People gathered to build happy memories in this chaotic place and it even held some of his own. A vendor around the corner sold his mother's favorite snack, a local gourmet blend of caramel and

sharp cheddar cheese popcorn. After his shifts, he always picked up a tin of the salty and sweet munchies for her even when she was in the hospital. A bad thing on her restricted diet, but good because it made her smile.

But tonight he could not find any comfort. Kincaid had caught only a couple hours of sleep. His head and neck ached from dozing off in front of the TV, but the short rest or endless train of infomercials wasn't the problem. The nightmare he had of Tommy disturbed his sleep the most. Encased in pocked grey pumice, the dead man had staggered and shuffled toward him in the dream. His tombstone arms reached out, but he cracked into rocky pieces and crumbled away into ash. Then the staccato of his "News Flash" ringtone, sounding more like tubular bells from the *Exorcist*, had woke him with a 911 text from Frank to meet here.

Kincaid finally spotted his partner walking over with a ski jacket and tie underneath. The young man's poor fashion sense made him cringe, but that's not what bothered him the most.

"What are we doing here? I told you take tonight. Wine and dine Tina," Kincaid said.

Frank spread his hands out in defense of himself. "Hey, I was doing that but then 'Proud Troll' hit me back like you hoped. Wanted to meet us down here at the Pier. Besides, Dr. Phil, I can't just 'fix it' with three courses and a bottle of wine. It's going to take a lot more especially since we left before eating that chocolate bag dessert she loves so much. Freaking arm and leg for chocolate and berries, if you ask me. Better off with a fried Twinkie."

"Damn it Frank. You've got to take care of that girl."

"Maybe you should take her to dinner. Better yet, go out with that doctor lady. I saw those twisted pictures she left you. They looked like something out of that *X-Files* show you always want me to watch. Honestly man, I don't get how you can believe in the Loch Ness Monster or Area 51, but I think you two would make a nice couple."

"Don't change the subject. You can't run from this."

"Do your emoticon reading on me. I'm for real. Not trying to avoid Tina." Frank tapped upon the soft body armor he had under his ski jacket. "We've got work to do."

Kincaid always insisted that Frank wear his vest when they were on patrol and would even send him back to the station whenever he forgot it. He couldn't stay mad at Frank when his feelings felt clean and brisk like the snow falling outside. The rookie's enthusiasm refreshed him.

"OK. Where is that little twitch of yours?"

Outside of the raucous mall, the pier was desolate. Falling snow covered most of the ground. Wind gusts off the lake swirled powder up around the legs of Hanna Andersen. Her face was as pale as the frosty surroundings, but nowhere as hideous as one might expect from her *'ProudTroll#18'* tag. In fact, the young woman was also always polite and never flamed anyone online. However, she did carry the blood of trolls within her veins, avoided direct sunlight, couldn't hold a conversation for more than two

sentences, hated the sound of church bells, and had an unusual fixation for architectural structures like bridges. Passengers standing nearby on the bus could hear her recite the construction dates of street bridges. “North Dearborn Street—1963, West Van Buren Street—1956, North Columbus Drive—1982, North Columbus Drive—1982,” a mantra she would say over and over again until they inched uncomfortably out of earshot. Normally, Hanna didn’t care about other people, but what she saw the night before, frightened and worried her about the safety of the bridges.

Officer Frank Chen, she thought, had always been polite whenever they passed each other, even though he didn’t know who she was. Yet since he tweeted about “keeping the streets safe” so much, she liked sending him messages that would help maintain the city’s precious infrastructure. Now Hanna hoped he could help her. But only empty vendor stalls, vacant tourist ferries, and a long stretch of icy boards met her eyes.

“Officer Frank Chen is late.” She broke the quiet of the fallen snow by echoing her own thoughts.

Peering at the windows of the mall teeming with people, she shuddered and asked, “Officer Frank Chen wouldn’t be inside, why would Officer Frank Chen be inside?” Avoiding the surely infectious coughs and nose-sniffles of the horde, Hanna walked outside down the middle of the pier. Rows of curved street lamps lit both sides of the walkway. Curiosity about the framing beneath the pier drew her towards the railing.

A horrible roar pierced the dark sky.

“Officer Frank Chen?” she said.

The roar sounded again. The noise wouldn't be unusual if she was near a circus or zoo, but coming from Lake Michigan it was quite an unsettling sound. And this time, it was closer.

Hanna peered into the night. Only swirls of snowflakes could be seen. Pulling out her phone, she began to walk faster. Steam panted from her mouth while texting and saying, "Officer Frank Chen, Officer Frank Chen..." A flutter and rush of wind made her turn around.

A gargoyle swooped out of the darkness. With wings spread wide it flew low over the boards, skimming along the length of the pier. The ancient terror flashed in and out of the alternating dark and lit spaces between the pier lamps.

Hanna pushed "send" on her phone. Then she shoved it in a pocket and ran. But a snow bank bogged her down.

"No, no, no." She struggled to lift her feet clear. After just a few steps, a jolt hit the back of her neck. Reaching for the impact area, she felt nothing. At the same time, the pale woman realized that her feet no longer touched the ground.

Without warning Hanna's point of view spun around. It went one way while her feet twirled in the opposite direction. The lights of the Navy Pier swung in dizzying fashion. Rising up through the air, she spotted a beloved bridge from above.

Her mouth opened to scream. No sound came forth.

Hanna's severed head dangled from one of the gargoyle's hand. No longer connected to an intact throat or air-filled lungs there was nothing left to shout

with. Blood drained away from the brain. Eyes blinked slower as the mouth gaped open.

Her headless body jerked spasmodically, gripped in the monster's opposite hand.

Kincaid and Frank emerged from the chaos of the food court into the silent cold of night.

"Damn it, outside? Outside?" grumbled Frank as he read the emergency tweet again. "C'mon, Troll, where are you?"

Kincaid crunched through the snow to the edge of a streetlight's illumination and stopped at a patch of bright red snow with arcs of crimson splatter. "Over here."

Frank caught up with him. "Damn. There's so much..."

"Don't see a body," Kincaid said. "But there's a trail heading into the city."

They tracked the red splotches across the snow, but very quickly the distance between drops grew wider and wider and harder to follow.

"I don't get it." Frank searched for the next sign of blood. "There's no footprints, no sign of something being dragged. It's like the body was hanging from the back of a truck and bled out as it went."

Kincaid looked around in frustration, but there were no other marks in the snow and nobody else was around. It never ceased to amaze him how much could go on in such a large metropolis without anyone noticing. The winter's frigid cold kept most people off the streets and parts of the city became totally deserted after business hours.

Continuing in the approximate direction of the last two blood spots, they approached an alley. A loud rattling of cans drew them into the cul-de-sac.

With weapons drawn the policemen checked their corners as they entered. The alley was dark, lit only by a few warehouse windows that overlooked it. Kincaid squinted to adjust his vision. He got a nice view of dumpsters, rusting trashcans, and empty beer bottles.

Putrid odors cut through the crisp air. "Ugh, I thought these just smelled bad in the summer," Frank said.

Kincaid could barely make out something against one of the dumpsters. "Smell's not the worst thing." With cautious footsteps, he approached a headless body propped against the metal side.

"Damn. City's filled with bodies." Frank holstered his gun. He picked up a phone that peeked out of one pocket and checked the last messages on it. "It's my twi... my source. I think he was a she. Rest in peace, Proud Troll."

Kincaid lowered his gun but looked around. That itchy feeling of eyes crawled over him again. Forcing his attention back to the corpse, the legs appeared broken and bent as if they were damaged from impact, possibly a fall. She couldn't have been dead long, but the air had the hushed weight of an old graveyard. The slight scent of something that had gone bad in a refrigerator also wasn't coming from her. He scanned the sky and rooflines above. Everything appeared clear, but that prickly watched discomfort spiked to the burning intensity of being hunted.

As he lowered his eyes, Kincaid fixed his gaze halfway on the dead end alley wall. The old speckled

bricks seemed ordinary enough, but there was something wrong with their pattern. A large portion of the wall appeared to bulge outwards.

He took a step towards the anomaly. The wall moved. Like kids tunneling under a blanket, the surface of the bricks swelled and rolled. Then the mound of bricks halted. Within the rectangular stone patterns, something small and round, opened and closed. A pair of them actually, holes that were there one moment, gone the next. Back again in the blink of... *an eye.*

"Frank!" Kincaid shouted, not about the eyes, but because the bricked mass suddenly launched itself from the wall. A gargantuan shadow flew through the air. It smashed into the two men.

Kincaid hit the left side of the alley and fell to the ground. His gun clattered away from him. Frank didn't fall. An inhuman hand pinned him against the opposite wall. He struck the creature's arm, kicked at its body, but couldn't break the deadly hold around his throat.

Kincaid staggered to his feet. He drove a body blow into the monster's side. It didn't do anything except almost break his hand. He threw another punch. But a wing rose up and blocked his fist. Bigger than a riot shield, the wing opened wide and slammed him back across the alley.

Frank struggled to breath. Grit began to cover the skin on his neck. A grey color spread from the gargoyle's hand that pinned him to the wall.

"Papi..." he pleaded.

The gargoyle reared back its other hand, plunged sharp claws right through Frank's body armor. It ripped the vest apart.

Scrambling on the ground, Kincaid found his dropped gun. He stood and fired two quick shots.

At the sound of gunfire, the gargoyle whipped about, holding Frank as cover. It moved too fast to see details other than fangs and huge demonic wings, but the horror on Frank's face was plain to see. Worse yet were the bullet holes that exploded open on his chest, left bare and vulnerable by gaps in the shredded bullet vest.

Frank sagged, a dead weight in the creature's grasp. With a roar, the monster threw him aside and flew out of the alley. Only dimly aware of something frightful and large taking flight, Kincaid rushed over to his partner.

"Frank! Frank. Oh, God."

Claw marks were torn across Frank's body. Some areas of his skin had the same grey hue of Tommy's stony corpse. But other skin surfaces that should have been bare and smooth were cut open, gaping with pulpy flesh and frayed connective tissue normally hidden below. Blood was everywhere.

"What..." Frank's breath faltered, "...you shot me." More blood streamed from the gunshot wounds in his chest.

"No! Please no. Hold on, just hold on. I'm here, I'm here." Kincaid fumbled with his phone and shouted into it. "Officer down, officer down! Navy Pier!"

"Didn't keep my guard up," Frank mumbled.

"Stay with me, just listen to me." Kincaid's helpless mind pleaded with God to let him switch places with

Frank. The pallor of his partner's face matched the snow and cold around them.

"Everything's moving. Take care... Tina..."

"No, man. You're going to take care of Tina. Pull it together."

"Slipping... hold me up," Frank murmured. But nothing of him was moving. Only his eyelids drifted shut.

"OK, OK. I've got you." Kincaid placed an arm under Frank's head and tried to keep pressure on the chest wound.

"Still slipping..." but the only thing falling away was Frank's voice.

"What? I'm here. You're not going anywhere." Kincaid looked about in desperation. "Where is everyone?"

"Sorry, sorry..."

"I've got you, nephew. I've got..." He felt a sudden flood of emotions from Frank. A lifetime of joy, frustration, anger, and fear rushed away.

"Love that..."

Kincaid watched him die. He knew how Frank looked when he laughed, frowned, or held four aces in his hand. But in a cold instant, the familiar face of his partner changed into a stranger, a foreign object without any response. It wasn't just the large movements that disappeared, but the small breaths, pulses under the skin, flicker of eyelids, tension in dozens of facial muscles. Every subtlety of life vanished. No warm glow, no white light. Death was stillness.

All his emotions just stopped.

Distant sirens approached, far too late.

Michele stood in the booth of a shooting range concealed beneath her building. She wore an olive drab t-shirt, jeans, and a grey ammo vest for what had begun as another day at the office. With concrete foundations over a foot thick even a .50 caliber weapon could be fired here, but today just a series of handguns sat before her. Even though no one else on the block would notice any gunshots, she screwed on a suppressor to a SIG P226 for good measure.

A flat panel on the wall displayed local news reports on the deaths of Hanna and Frank during the previous night. Police band chatter also scrolled across the bottom. But the monitor's volume was muted since she had already logged into the police network with Kincaid's password and digested the evidence in the case file. Obtaining his log-in had been easy enough. Although she had an inverted view of his keyboard while sitting in front of his desk, it wasn't hard to memorize the keys he had typed before hitting "enter." She did feel a twinge of guilt though. A peek at his personnel file had revealed an honorable career held back by numerous demerits for insubordination, a man after her own rebellious heart.

Too bad the person bitching in her headset was the complete opposite. "We need a complete assessment of what Alexis has done," said the stern voice of Monsignor Louis.

"Complete assessment?" Michele settled into a balanced firing stance. "I've seen its hibernation form," as she brought up the weapon and took aim, leveling her sight with the point of impact. "What more do you need? The dead aren't enough? Alexis passed it off as

Camazotz, but it's a gargoyle. And it's hunting, not protecting." She squeezed off a volley of rapid shots. Honing shooting skills and pissing off people in charge were just a few ways she kept her years of training sharp.

From half way around the world in Rome, she could hear the irritated cluck of Monsignor Louis's tongue. "There hasn't been a renegade gargoyle in centuries. Other creatures can turn their prey into stone. Basilisks and gorgons come to mind."

Since he wasn't yelling, Michele suspected the Monsignor had to be someplace where he had to maintain some decorum, probably one of the nine hundred churches within the city. He would have to stay calm, giving her leeway to launch some heated opinions.

"Maybe it's just a pissed off archangel zapping people into pillars of salt," she said. "Spare me the holy bestiary. I don't know how she did it, but Alexis definitely wanted me to know she finally found a gargoyle. The press hasn't a clue and the police classified the officer's death as friendly fire. But you and I know what's going on. It's not right to let Kincaid take the blame for it."

Michele activated the automatic target return for a closer look at the shot grouping. "If he believes he has innocent blood on his hands, it might make him a Candidate for St. Romain's Privilege. I could test him with the Amulet."

"Stay clear of him. Only the Bishop can select a Candidate. Find out how Alexis did this and determine her end game. You have an order to uphold. Do your job and only your job. And next time, call me when

you're not practicing," he said then terminated the connection.

The Monsignor had always impressed her as a man that held all the strings and knew exactly which ones to pull and which ones to cut without hesitation. But before he hung up, she could hear the sound of a metallic incense thurible clanking against its long chain, accompanied by a few chords from an organ. She was right. The Monsignor had been in a church. He also managed to get in the last word. *Damn him.*

Michele's face tightened as the target swung closer. She grabbed a four-pointed throwing star from a vest pocket and threw it. Extending the follow through she reached for a knife at the hip, sent it flying too. Both weapons punched holes in the same bulls-eye area of the gunshots, destroying all evidence of their grouping. The target barely hung from the carrier clip.

She drew another shuriken, but didn't throw this one. Frustration and intense emotions threatened to ruin her technique. Control and balance counted as much in her training as crisp punches, demon hunting, and sacred archeology. Before making another move she needed to sort out her feelings even though "inner peace" was never within reach.

Michele placed the SIG in her non-throwing hand by two other guns. The modern Beretta shot higher caliber bullets, but the old 1836 black powder Colt Paterson revolver caught her eye the most. Firing this gun ignited a boom of thunder that shot lead balls impregnated with silver. Those projectiles blew satisfying holes in any marauding lycanthrope and given the damage they did, the silver didn't even seem necessary. She smiled, remembering her instructor's

appreciation for the revolver's octagon sided barrel, white metal pinstripes around the muzzle, engraved scrollwork on the frame, and star pattern carved into the walnut handle.

But the eight-pointed shuriken in Michele's other hand raised much darker memories. Not that it had any rich Japanese heritage or was forged of some special metal. Nothing physically distinguished it from the cheap weapons one could find next to stacks of prepaid phones and pots of lucky bamboo in a strip mall. This shuriken held meaning because Alexis had tried to kill her with it.

They had fought over a golem that Alexis unearthed and sought to re-animate. During Michele's last appeal to stop, the crazed diva had thrown this shuriken. Although she ducked the throw, it hit a rabbi that Michele had enlisted to defuse the Hebrew enchantments on the creature. Even now, Michele could still imagine the man's blood on the sharp points of the weapon. No matter what, this time she had to stop Alexis. *Screw forgiveness and redemption.*

She flung the shuriken away in disgust. It sailed through the air and ripped the paper target completely off the carrier. Michele ignored the tattered bulls-eye as it fluttered to the ground. She had bigger problems than convincing the Monsignor she was right or bemoaning past mistakes with Alexis. Kincaid could be of vital help and in the police station, something about him made her want to tell him more. He had a quiet strength she found appealing, not flashy or macho but one marked by endurance and efficacy. And even though sadness resided in his eyes, she respected, maybe even liked the smile he had of his mother's

fondness for Ernie Banks. Michele couldn't remember the last time she smiled about any memory of her own mother.

Now she just had to tell Kincaid a gargoyle killed his partner.

CHAPTER FOUR

By universal consensus, "Macbeth" is the unluckiest play ever written, a work so fiasco-plagued, so thoroughly jinxed that it is considered bad form - nay, it is considered flat-out reckless - to speak its title aloud.

Washington Post - 2006

Eddie Shaw and the Wolf Pack played a matinee jam session in a downtown R&B club. Shaw, white-haired with just remnants of scattered grey, growled and sang his way through the set with more vitality than a casual listener might expect, but the power of the blues didn't flow from youth or strength. It sprang from pain, something the singer and a few of the early bird patrons shared in common.

Kincaid's sunken eyes and slumped posture fit in well with the broken crowd. The dark interior of the establishment suited him just fine. In spite of a law against smoking, the battered place still smelled of all things lit up within its flyer littered walls. Occasionally someone would still light up and then put money into a yellowed glass jar on the counter to help pay for any fines the city might levy.

As the band rumbled through the blues standard "The Sky Is Crying," the irony of lyrics that moaned of crying heavens and tears rolling down the street was lost on Kincaid. He had sworn to never douse his sorrows, but now downed drink after drink to silence the black parade of memories drumming through his

mind. From their first patrol together to the blood in the alley, every recollection about Frank scalded him. The surprised look on Frank's face after being shot was particularly painful. But the queen mother of torture started with Tina mourning by the coffin. Kincaid had approached her at the funeral through a gauntlet of crucifying glares. When he reached for her hand, she had pulled back and walked away. White-hot guilt stabbed his heart every time he pictured the last glimpse of her widowed face.

He started to gulp down another drink, hoping the burn from this one would finally wipe out all the mental tortures. But then came the flash of fangs, the claws dripping with blood — Frank's blood. The only thing drowning out these frightening images, *that roar*, a lion's moan mixed with the hiss of a snake.

Out of the shadows, Michele appeared next to him, "Officer Kincaid, it's not your fault."

The man in mourning choked on his medicinal cure.

"He was dead six ways from Sunday. Crushed windpipe, deep lacerations, not to mention getting every iota of life energy sucked out of him."

"Ah, Dr. Grace. Of all the..." Kincaid wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "How the hell did you find me and how do you know all that?"

"I asked around." Her sharp eyes checked the room for threats. "I, uh, hear things."

"Right, 'razzle dazzle.' My, what long ears you've got." He remembered Frank mentioning this club at the station, back when he was still freaking alive. "You should have also heard I've been suspended. So, I'm

way, way off-duty. And if you don't mind, I would like—"

"If it were me, you would have done me a favor."

"Then do me a favor and shoot me now. Put me out of my damn misery. I tried. Pressed it right here." He pushed and turned his index finger against his temple just like he had with his gun. "The weight, the metal, all felt good. Gave me something to think about besides Frank. Screwed it up though. Too chicken shit. Got to thinking about the blood and brains the landlord would have to clean. Mr. Bhatnagar already has enough to worry about." For wussing out, he threw another shovel of guilt on top an avalanche of blame and finished the remains of his drink.

"No, Frank died doing his job. His fight is over. Yours is just beginning. The real chicken shit was when you tried to take the easy way out."

"The easy way?" Kincaid's jaw tightened with anger. Fangs and claws with blood slashed away again in his mind. "Go with God? Go with God? How about you go to—"

Michele held up a hand in surrender. "Sorry, too direct." She nodded toward a chair for permission to join him. He returned a "sit at your own risk" glare. Sitting down, she said, "Soft and easy isn't my strong suit. You blame yourself... believe me, it never helps."

"Sure, whatever. Look, I want my damn pen back. Your bedside manner sucks. Good thing you're a PhD, not a real doctor," he said, shifting away from her seat.

"Yeah, good thing." She looked stung by his comments, but then seemed distracted by the sight of a gaunt customer with a pale, fish belly appearance. His clothes hung loosely and he used long fingernails to

tear into the Blue Plate mystery meat special with a little too much gusto.

While she watched the customer, Kincaid mulled over the digging that Michele must have done on Frank's death.

"So you rob graves, like Alexis," he said, spinning his shot glass on the dark wood of the table.

"No. Just trying to help the living."

Michele reached out and stopped the glass from spinning then placed it upright again. She motioned for another drink of whatever he was having, but when the waitress looked over, Michele pulled back in alarm and appeared to reach for a weapon by her side. The waitress had a unique beauty that wasn't noticeable from across the room, but face-to-face, her captivating green eyes and full lips could make you forget your name. The waitress broke eye contact and turned to the bartender with the order.

"Siren bitch. This place will fuck you up." Michele put her hands back on the table.

"What? I like it. I think it's got character. Feels different from most clubs."

"I bet." She turned her attention back to him, "You want to tell me what happened?"

"Not really." He suspected she was more interested in the details of Frank's death than genuinely concerned for his grief.

"Have you ever shot anyone before?"

"Once."

"In the line of duty?"

"Yeah. During a drug bust. One of Rollo's boys. He shot at us... people said he had it coming. But before dealing meth, Odellis Jamison worked at the bowling

alley. Three-time 'Employee of the Month'. He played wide receiver as a kid."

"You knew him?"

"Later. After the shooting. Some cops go a whole career without ever firing their weapon. Others rack up kills like a video game, but it changes you. Simple things aren't simple anymore. There's an extra weight. That person's crap on top of mine. I ended his life. I wanted to know who I killed."

Ruminating again about all his mistakes and what he should have done in the alley to save Frank, unleashed more memories of the foul creature he wanted to silence. Determined to talk about anything else other than the horrid roar in his head, he asked, "What did you mean by 'life energy'?"

"Life energy, the Force, chi, your soul. Whatever animates a person, whatever breathes life into you. Something drained Frank of it."

"Souls? You know something about souls?" The question practically echoed within the ragged hollowness of his heart.

She looked into his eyes. "Enough to know when one's gone."

Kincaid wasn't sure if she was referring to him or Frank, but before he could argue the point, she said, "Tell me about him." He knew it. She just wanted to hear about the monster.

"Tell me about Frank. Tell me about his *life*," she insisted.

Her interest beyond the murder surprised Kincaid, but he tapped the shot glass in front of him.

"See this? Came here to forget, not remember." Almost on cue, the waitress came back with another drink.

Michele grabbed it before he could and glared at the waitress to back away. "This one's mine," she said with the glass in hand. "From what I could see of Frank at the station, I don't think he would have wanted you drinking alone. To Frank."

She tossed the drink back in a smooth swallow, planted the glass down on the table. Then she sat still and looked willing to sit forever until he said the next word.

Kincaid acted indifferent, but glanced at her when she wasn't looking his way. For the first time since the alley, he felt a twinge of interest in something other than what a miserable shot, what a miserable cop, what a miserable person he was. If nothing else, she could handle her liquor better than he could.

From the bar's stage, the saxophone called out a mournful solo. Kincaid let the notes wash over him. The music reached passed the anger and dipped into the sorrow buried inside. Some of it welled up to the surface. He mumbled just loud enough for Michele to hear, "Frank liked the Bulls. I turned him into a Cubs fan."

She leaned closer as words tumbled out of a memory he had pried open.

"Just like you, he had never caught a game at Wrigley. Never had someone to take him as a kid. Baseball doesn't get under you skin until you've seen it at the ballpark. When I found out, I took him. Great game, wind blowing out, lots of homers. Frank caught

a home run... by a Cardinal, not a Cub. Everyone cheered when he chucked it back on the field."

Bittersweet emotions choked him like the drinks he had been downing. He closed his eyes. "It's just not right."

The silence went well beyond the comfortable point before Michele spoke.

"The Green Monster."

"What?" He cracked open an eyelid.

"The Green Monster. When you go to Fenway you've got to check it out. Still can't believe there are seats on top of it, but it's the only place my Dad and I didn't fight."

Kincaid tilted his head towards her. "Is this you being nice?" Her eyes were open not squinting like her usual frontal-assault game face. She wasn't so bad at "soft and easy," in fact it was a good look for her.

"I'm a sucker for lost causes. After the Red Sox won the 2004 Series, it hasn't been the same. The quest was over. The tension, the edge was gone. Winning again in 2007 was OK, but not cosmic. Thought I'd check out the Cubs."

"Now that's fucked up."

Michele nodded in agreement. "Price of getting kicked out of Eden. We all love to wallow in our misery. Nothing's ever good enough again." She stabbed a finger into the table. "You can't drown this kind of pain, but you can use it. Turn it back on what caused it. Stop pointing that gun at yourself."

"You're going tell me to see a grief counselor?"

"Like you said, I'm not that kind of doctor. Talking never helped me. This is as touchy feely as I get."

Even though Michele could be blunt, the control and tension in her face told Kincaid there was a constant current of other emotions she struggled to hold back.

"Say what you came to say," he said.

A ferocious guitar riff screamed from the stage. The guitar player with wild dreads and flying fingers got the other patrons clapping and howling. With a hunter's focus, Michele glared at the guitarist wearing a "Wolfpack" t-shirt under his vest.

"So on the nose," she muttered. Then she raised her voice to Kincaid. "Can't tell you here. Too loud. Too many damn ears."

The fading light of dusk crept through the windows of a foreclosed church. Michele and Kincaid walked up the center aisle. Empty of anyone else, the vacancy of the interior reflected the exterior's broken pavement, cracked steps, and dented metal grills over the windows. The air trapped within smelled stale, a hint of dust and mold that settled in when no life or breeze hustled and bustled regularly through the front door.

"This is where you wanted to talk?" Kincaid asked. It looked as beat up as the bar they had just left. Two sides of the same coin and who's to say which establishment scarred more people, he thought. For the longest time, he had avoided just such a place. Too much pomp and circumstance for unanswered prayers and he didn't like the company as much as those in the bar.

"Sacred ground makes it safer and it's a lot more private," she answered with a hushed voice.

The windows were painted with dioramas of saints and martyrs facing their deaths, all of them with benevolent tilts of their heads. Unlike the medieval splendor of stained glass in Europe these were rendered in stark Puritan grays and black.

"If you say so. What happened here?"

"People lost faith, the Church didn't adapt, collections started to drop. They wanted to turn it into condos. That just didn't seem right."

"All these holy dead folks, I don't think I'm righteous enough to be in here." Kincaid noticed as much death on these stained glass windows as the displays within Parrish Antiquities. The haunted eyes of each martyr declared all at once, "I died for you," "I didn't want to," and "Were you worth it?"

"Just people doing what they had to. That window next to you, St. Stephen of the 'Good King Wenceslas' Christmas carol, right before they stoned him. Across the aisle, St. Valentine's about to lose his head for performing Christian marriages in Emperor Claudius's Rome. In front, strapped to a breaking wheel, that's St. Catherine, virgin and patron saint of Italy."

A large crucifix hung above the altar and presided over the morbid retinue. Not a plain symbolic cross, this one had Christ's tortured body with his hands and feet nailed to the wood, a crown of thorns on his head, all dripping with blood.

"So, you're the bat in this Die for God belfry," said Kincaid.

"Since Vatican II, the Church has tried to emphasize the Resurrection and not martyrs. But some people are better at dying than living." Michele kneeled before the cross.

"Mouth like yours, should have known you were Catholic. You want to tell me what's on your mind before I burst into flames?"

She bowed her head in prayer, "I'm going to need your help."

Kincaid looked up at the ceiling and heaven beyond. "Don't bother. God's not listening. He's not there."

"You don't believe in God?"

"Wasn't around when Frank died. Why give me all of my useless years and take away his good ones? Got to run the world on new tires, not retreads. There's no point in all your praying and kneeling next to these people." He rapped his knuckles on a pew. "Too many faces that should be behind bars. Taking money from the collection, judging you and the clothes you wear, coveting each other's wife or worse, their daughters. Life's too damn short."

Michele stood up and he set his shoulders, ready for an argument. She didn't look him in the eyes though, instead she glanced at the crucifix and said, "I can't vouch for all the followers, but maybe God is here in ways we don't recognize."

"*Works in mysterious ways*, standard mumbo jumbo." He grimaced as if he just tasted a slice of Zee's durian. "I don't do blind faith. I need a reason to believe in some old guy running the show."

"Personally, I think it's She." Michele turned to face Kincaid. "I'm not here to save you. I wasn't asking for God's help. I was asking for your help. We need to talk about what you saw in the alley."

He shook his head, tried to silence the screams of his living nightmare. Fangs and claws and blood ran

through his mind again. What was that thing? A giant bat? A man-sized Rodan that wrecked lives instead of skyscrapers? He had seen something like it before.

"You're not crazy. It's OK."

"No, it's not. That thing I saw..."

"You were attacked. Attacked by something like that statue from Parrish Antiquities?"

Yes, that was it. That's where he had seen it. Michele's question was more of a statement, more like a verification of facts. He swallowed his protest then nodded.

The answer set Michele into motion. She walked right up to the marble altar. "I knew it. Alexis has searched a long time for this."

"She's been looking for a Mayan, Cama... whatever?"

"Camazotz," she corrected. "No, she's been looking for a gargoyle." On the altar's front edge, her hand pressed the stone relief of a lamb with a tall cross leaning against its shoulder, a Crusader banner streamed from the top of the cross.

"She's already got a ton of statues and rain spouts. How many more does she really—"

"A real, live, gargoyle," her quiet response. Something clicked under her hand. She rotated the stone lamb a quarter turn.

His jaw dropped, but not at her secret entrance hunting. "What? A live gargoyle? You know, you telling me 'I'm not crazy' is suddenly no comfort."

"Gargoyles are stone by day, alive at night."

"Not helping..."

"You saw that monster with your own eyes! It killed Frank. It's going to kill a lot more people. How

much more evidence do you need? Fingerprints? A DNA sample? You've got to believe me."

Kincaid could feel her frustration, the same cornered gut wrench whenever he went unheard or couldn't prevent something awful from happening. Though part of him wanted to ride to her aid, he said, "I hear you, I do. But come on."

"You said if I ever needed anything, all I had to do was ask. Look, I shouldn't do this..."

Michele pulled the cross on the lamb down like a lever. A louder click this time, a small panel slid open. She reached into the compartment and pulled out a large amulet forged of dark metal. The palm-sized object hung from a stout chain. Thicker in the middle than its edges, an intricate weave of iron covered a heart of smoked crystal. In spite of the fine craftsmanship, the apparent heft of the amulet made it look more like a weapon than a piece of jewelry, something more useful as a flail instead of a dainty bauble.

"Take this," she said, offering it to him.

"Yeah, you shouldn't." He pushed it away. "Don't want anything more from you."

"I need your help. I need an ally, a wingman. Or are you only good for getting in the way of my fights?"

"I was just trying to keep you out of trouble," he protested, remembering the time when he first saw her and stepped in front of Steiger.

"Too late for that." She looked down at the amulet. "I think you have a gift, a knack for this kind of thing. You attract the Others without knowing it. As you've seen, there's a whole other Chicago that goes beyond mobsters and the Cubs."

"Others? Other weirdos, yeah, and you're right up there." He also couldn't resist looking at the amulet. The dark, opaque crystalline layer kept its secrets hidden from him. "What the Hell is that thing?"

"It's a relic amulet. Contains the remains of St. Romain. He bound the first gargoyle. He always had a special connection to them. You've been in the creature's presence. It might give you the proof you need. Might... give us a way to fight it."

"How?"

He couldn't believe he just asked that instead of walking away. Michele seemed to be safeguarding a mountain of mysteries, and Frank always kidded him about his fascination with urban legends. Never thought he would be in one.

"I'm not sure." She started to say something, but then finished with, "It doesn't matter. We both know what killed Frank. Help me stop it."

That hit Kincaid. Sick of blaming himself, revenge on the miserable, stinking evil that maimed and took Frank's life would give some use to his vacant existence. He looked around for a sign from God even though he wasn't the Chosen One type that warranted a deep voice booming out of a burning bush. His wandering eyes did settle on something, the shadow of a small gargoyle carved in the arches of the ceiling. It triggered his interest in lost conspiracies and fringe mysteries, drew him deeper into this impossible situation.

"Damn it." Kincaid trumped all the insanity by taking the relic amulet from her. "Fine. I'm wearing parts of a dead guy around my neck. What are you going to do?"

"I need to ask for guidance. Clear my mind." Michele bowed her head in prayer as he moved to leave. "Just don't go back to that bar without me. I counted a ghoul, a succubus, and at least one werewolf when we were there."

Totally crazy. Kincaid walked out.

Lake Michigan's expansive shoreline formed a third coast of the United States. Chicago was its crown jewel. The lake waters of this vast inland sea were fed by the Chicago River and the only island found along the river's length was Goose Island. Made of industrial land, covered with coal yards, crossed by railroad tracks, and topped with grain elevators, so much smoke rose from the factories on this island that the area became known as "Little Hell." Kincaid crossed this desolate territory, puffing out billows of breath into the frigid night.

Over the years, condominiums had crept onto Goose Island as spectators spilled over from Wrigley Field to either drown their sorrows or cheer a victory in the local bars. President Obama even wagered a case of ale from the Goose Island Brewery with the Prime Minister of England over a World Cup match, a source of local pride. But Kincaid avoided those gentrified portions and made his way through the rough industrial areas most people avoided. He entered a building with a brick exterior caked in layers of paint and soot. This is where his mother had come after they escaped his father. At the time, they were one of only three families on this part of the island. The neighboring ruin had made it affordable. Her warmth made it home.

Exhausted, Kincaid collapsed on a worn sofa in a living room furnished from an outdated Sears catalog. He called out, "Hey, Ma. It's been a hell of a day."

No answer.

"Sorry about the language, but I meant it in the biblical sense. I got suspended and apparently I've been living the *Mad Monster Party* without knowing it."

Still quiet. He looked over at a bookcase that held a framed photo of an elementary school Kincaid and his mother. Standing in front of a street chapel and dressed in their Sunday best, he was frowning as three older women happily greeted his mother.

"Saw that woman again. Don't know how she found me. Sort of good to talk to her, but I don't know. Probably better if I didn't hope for... well, just tired of getting my ass kicked ever since you, oh, shit. 'Language, language' I know."

The home was empty of his mother's presence, just as it had been for years since she had died. After her death, he moved back in here, but he completely avoided the street chapel in the photo and anything else with a hint of religion.

His tired eyes drifted over the coffee table in front of him. Littered with newspapers, Kincaid started to gather them for the blue recycle bin as his mother had taught him, but he stopped. The world was going to hell. What difference did it make if there were a few more trees on the planet?

A photo peeked out from under the corner of a sports section. Pulling it out, he stared at a jubilant Frank at Wrigley Field. Every detail of the photograph ignited a burning charcoal memory in his gut. The Cubs had won on a wild pitch and sent everyone out of

the Friendly Confines pumped and ecstatic. A “happy, happy” moment with too much damn life, he flipped the photo over just like he had done with all the other pictures he could no longer bear to see. It was a place full of 4” by 6” tombstones lying face down on tables and shelves.

Kincaid took the relic amulet out of his pocket. He thought of the beautiful but delusional woman that gave it to him, the weighted agony of Frank’s death, a city now full of monsters — it all exhausted him.

“I can’t do this,” he said to no one and everyone. He lowered the relic amulet, letting oblivion catch up with him. But as he fell asleep, the amulet dangling from his fist began to glow within its crystal center.

Sleep helped Kincaid’s consciousness lose its awareness, but there was no escape from his subconscious. His exhausted brain slammed through four stages of sleep to reach the dreaming REM stage. Beneath his closed eyelids, his eyes moved rapidly about, intense images flashed through his mind. But unlike other nights, the power from St. Romain’s amulet drove him further into realms undreamed of before.

At first, he saw snatches of clouds and hazy moonlight raced across his view. The blurred images cleared. He found himself flying through the night sky. Crisp air blew passed his face. Its rapid flow rushed across his body and lifted him. Everything smelled clean in this atmosphere. From an elevated altitude, the Navy Pier Ferris Wheel flashed by, then the roof of the Chicago Shakespeare Theater loomed directly in front. It tilted, rose up to him. He saw himself land and enter a duct opening into the building.

Crawling through large ducts that ran through the theater's ceiling, his view entered high above a thrust stage surrounded by tiered boxes of contemporary styled wood and upholstered seats on three sides. It then scuttled along the ceiling to a point directly above a group of thespians on the stage lit beneath his perch.

Actors portraying Macbeth, Banquo, and the Three Witches walked the boards below. In front of them stood the director, Charles Herrington, while his exhausted assistant, Fay, squirmed next to him in quiet torment. The fastidious director stroked his beard as he fired off his notes.

"We're fucked. Five days from opening and this scene still sucks. Banquo can you butcher your lines just a little more? My three hags, you've got more in common with the Stooges!" Charles jabbered away while the three super models playing the Three Witches in unwise career moves, stood with hands on their hips and rolled their eyes.

Banquo whispered to MacBeth, "A percussion musical off Broadway doesn't qualify this ass to be flapping his hole. He's shit full of sound and fury."

"I heard they're casting at the Goodman," Macbeth replied. His brooding good looks provided an edge for this role but the unrelenting brow beatings had magnified his dourness many fold.

The actor playing Banquo sported naturally red cheeks that always looked as if they had just been slapped and caused makeup artist fits in disguising them. This flushed appearance gave him a standing air of emotional lability, but tonight he appeared genuinely pissed. "We should check it out. If I hear 'double, double' one more time, I'm going to puke."

A noise made Macbeth look up and attempt to see passed the blinding stage lights. "What was that?"

"What was what?" Banquo yawned.

"Thought I heard a scrape or scratching sound." Macbeth shaded his eyes from the glare and peered into the shadows.

The gargoyle above him pressed closer to the ceiling. Its skin changed color like a chameleon's. The monster vanished into the exact appearance of the surface environment around itself.

"Just him grating on my last nerve," Banquo said as he glared at Charles.

Charles picked up even more steam. "If there's an ounce of talent in any of you, excuse me, Mr. ADHD! Stop staring at the ceiling. Christ, I'd put you all on mega Ritalin except it might make you flatter than you already are. Will you stop ogling the roof? MacBeth! Get your head out of your..."

Macbeth yelled back. "Have you lost your mind? You never say that name in the theater! MacBee, Mackers, or M. You've got no respect for this Scottish play. You've cursed us. If we weren't completely screwed, we are now."

"Do you think if I don't call you Mac-what's-your-fucking-face it's going to save us?" Charles said. "The only way we get any headlines is by some delightful accident to you or some plague on this house. You're all poor players that strut, fret, and then will be heard no more! MacBeth, MACBETH, MAC-BETH!"

In mid-rant, the gargoyle rocketed down and blasted Charles off his feet. Thrown into the seats, his spine shattered on impact. He sat with paralyzed legs

splayed over the seats in front of him, a captive audience for the mayhem about to unfold.

Total shock struck the cast. In spite of the animosity they held for Charles, no one really wished for anything this horrible to happen. Or even if there was one small mental iota of "Yes!" it was drowned by a tsunami of fear that realized "No! This is going to happen to me."

Banquo and MacBeth screamed where they stood. The gargoyle hopped up with just one beat of its wings and landed between the hysterical pair. The left wing flexed, popped open again. It smashed Banquo's bones far into the land of "not to be." The right wing slashed outward, slicing MacBeth's head clean off into a bloody audition for Yorick's skull.

The Three Witches ran to exit stage left. But before they could get off-stage, an enormous shadow blotted out every glimmer of light and any hope of escape. With the curtain about to crash down on their lives, the First Witch finally found her voice and said, "By the pricking of my thumbs." The Second Witch staring upwards at their doom followed with, "something wicked," and the Third Witch dropped her head finishing, "this way comes." Her eyes vacant, wishing she was at a beach photo shoot perhaps, anywhere else but here.

The gargoyle descended upon them all at once. It smashed them together in a cruel embrace.

Fay's mouth gaped in horror. The director's assistant was almost certain she had heard the creature whisper in a graveyard voice, "The weird sisters, hand in hand," as the Three Witches thrashed in its death grip.

She turned and ran up the aisle saying, "Never liked any of them anyway." Maybe slaving for Charles made her miss too many spin classes or maybe the gargoyle had lightning reflexes, but she only got three steps before her face hit the floor. Tripped and caught from behind, her legs were pulled backwards. Dragged down the aisle, Fay did have enough cardio left to scream and claw the ground every inch of the way.

A broken doll in the seats, Charles watched his entire cast and assistant die. Decapitation was one thing, but he stared in shock at what the monster had done to everyone else. They would struggle in his clutches and it looked like it was feeding on them, but there was no blood. Instead, the bodies became stiff chalky corpses.

Finished with the last body, the monster hovered up into the seats to close the curtain on the now hapless director.

The gargoyle's giant shadow loomed over Charles.

"Please, please don't. Not like that. Not like them," he begged.

It folded those terrible wings around its body. No stage prop or special effect could compare with the real life malevolence of this creature. But then the most terrifying thing of the night occurred. The demonic face drew closer, fangs glistened as its ravenous mouth opened and... spoke.

"I have almost forgot the taste of fears. I have supped full with horrors; direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts," it growled.

Charles stopped cowering for a moment. "Macbeth, act five, scene five," he said leaning his head forward. Aside from the harsh grating tone, the

delivery was far better than anything he had heard in rehearsal. Curious and in spite of circumstances the director asked, "What are you?"

"Look on death itself. Up, up, and the great doom's image," it said with a smile even more unsettling than its voice. "Your work is awful. You don't get to be immortalized in stone. You, I tear to pieces."

"Bloody critic," Charles mumbled as the gargoyle reared back its claws...

SLASH.

Kincaid lurched awake, shocked by the vision of Charles being ripped to pieces. His heart raced with the excitement of the kill. That horrible roar bellowed in his ears again. He stared at the relic amulet wondering, what the hell just happened? What had he done, if anything? And how did this monster know so much about Shakespeare?

He dropped the possessed bauble of St. Romain into a drawer and slammed it shut.

CHAPTER FIVE

The desperadoes known as the Brabançons were recruited by Richard's famous captain of irregulars, Mercadier. The Brabançons happily slaughtered old men, children, young women (after ravishing them), priests, civilians, traders – it mattered not, so long as they were in the path of the whirlwind.

McLynn – “Richard and John: Kings at War” – 2007

Like most days, Michele worked alone in the foreclosed church that served as her stronghold and research archive. Its bingo game basement had converted nicely into a shooting range while the large library on the top floor of the main sanctuary served well as her lab. Under an arched ceiling stood shelves with ancient leather texts and religious artifacts crammed into every nook. A musty smell of books, inviting not revolting, hung in the air. Chalices of both simple pottery and gilded gold awaited their chance to cup the blood of Christ again. A forest of ornate monstrances towered over them, some more than a meter tall. Each had a candlestick base that supported a metallic starburst with an empty glass display case at its center. In their glory days these cases had each held either the relic remains of a saint or the body of Christ for adoration by the masses. Another person might have felt smothered by all this religious flotsam, but Michele only nestled in deeper, more comfortable with these silent sentinels of faith than the walking, talking ones.

She had been working hard to identify the origin of these relics and even successfully pieced together a fragmented jigsaw of stone tablets strewn about the archive. But now all of it would have to wait. At a roughhewn wooden table with two high-def flat panels perched on it, she rapidly opened and closed files, dragged and dropped like a maniac. Photos of the gargoyle statue, Guatemalan tomb massacre, and various exhibits at Parrish Antiquities flew across the screens.

In the blitz of images, Michele stopped on the photos of the Mayan tomb. She took a closer look at the square blocks of pictographs found on its entrance. The first set of glyphs surrounded the carving of a warrior priest ready to sacrifice a terrified man kneeling before him. A second carving depicted a hellish landscape of intertwined bodies crawling out of a pit with a monstrous figure presiding over everything, Camazotz. It had a gruesome head and outstretched wings with human bones emblazoned inside of them.

"Y2K, my ass," she muttered at the apocalyptic images.

But something else about the two pictographs caught her eye. She clicked on the engravings of a stone seal that interlocked them. The markings appeared to be a stylized skull with *fleur-de-lis* tipped cross bones beneath it and certainly wasn't of Mayan origin. In fact, she was afraid she had seen this mark before.

Michele scrolled rapidly through the Parrish exhibit photos. She stopped and enlarged a photo from what was called "The Rouen Room." It showed a medieval shield with a coat of arms that also included

a skull and *fleur-de-lis* crossbones, a perfect match with the tomb seal.

The discovery alarmed her. She opened a video link and as it connected, skipped all social niceties and fired away.

"Monsignor, I still don't understand how Alexis found the Mayan tomb, but we've got a bigger problem. The gargoyle she found is Mercadier."

On her monitor, she could see the Monsignor within his office and its view of St. Peter's Basilica. Unlike Michele's somber archive, his opulent office had a palatial appearance with more than its share of velvet and gold. The elder man frowned at the abruptness of her call and lack of courtesy usually accorded to someone of his authority.

"Gargoyle Mercadier? That's not possible," his video image shot back.

"The skull and crossbones of *fleur-de-lis*, his coat-of-arms are engraved on the tomb! I think there's even a Templar Cross carved next to it. The question isn't if it's Mercadier, it's how?"

"No." A scowl deepened the lines in his face. The Monsignor's age and eggshell white hair added to his imposing air of authority. "The Conclave ordered his destruction after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris."

Infuriated by his blanket denial, Michele dug her fingers into the table's edge. "That was the sixteenth century. Someone in Scarlet and Black must have had a change of heart. Maybe all those converts waiting in the New World were more important than the 3,000 French Protestants killed that day."

The Monsignor smoothed a hand over his black cassock trimmed with scarlet, the same colors worn by bishops of the Church. "I can't speak to what my predecessors may have done. You must focus on present matters."

"It is Gargoyle Mercadier. Your worst gargoyle! Except this time with Alexis's twisted passions, I think he plans on killing a lot more than 3,000 people. I need help," Michele demanded. Honestly, she didn't know why she did this job. Trying to convince Church people of anything was as bad as arguing with her mother. No one ever listened.

"With the right battle plan, you won't need help. Don't fight Gargoyle Mercadier on his terms," the Monsignor lectured. "Gargoyles are strongest during the night. Our records show that when they're awake and alive, standard weapons aren't much good against them. Only power of their own ilk can harm them when they are active. Yield the high ground to him. Don't challenge him after sunset."

"There hasn't been an operational gargoyle in my lifetime and your notes are probably *old*." She placed extra emphasis on the last word as a skirmishing shot. "I'd like to see how he holds up against some modern ordnance. Even without silver bullets, creatures of the night don't like being blasted into a million pieces or having their head cut-off. They may not be completely dead, but it's sure not living."

"Rash, stubborn," the Monsignor muttered. "You can't risk a night battle. Gargoyles turn to stone at dawn. That was St. Romain's foresight. He planned for exactly this type of situation. Asleep in his stone form, you could break Gargoyle Mercadier with a small ball-

peen hammer." The Monsignor's frustrated screen image pointed a finger at her with each subsequent command. "Understand this clearly. No reinforcements are available. This is your cross to bear. You're a sword maiden of the Lord, do your job. By the light of day, destroy this abomination."

"I will not surrender the night or the people of Chicago to this monster," Michele said, matching his scowl with a war face of her own. "If you don't send backup, I'll find my own. There are still people in this world willing to fight back. That policeman is one of them. He deserves a chance to redeem himself. He could—"

"I warn you. Stay clear of him." The Monsignor's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Wait. You still think he's a Candidate. You've done something haven't you?"

When she didn't respond, the Monsignor let his accusations fly. "You've started the initiation. *You've given him the Amulet.* Used him as a pawn. Do not go any further, only the Bishop of Rouen is sanctioned to perform the Ritual. It is his Privilege alone. This is heresy! By the First Lateran Council, if you go through with this, you face excommunication."

Michele had taken all the holier than thou lashing she could stand. He was so wrong. She would never use Kincaid, she thought too much of him to do that. He wanted to help her, and she needed him. She yelled at the monitor, droplets of saliva hit the flat panel. "Good. Excommunicate me! Just come down here and condemn me yourself. I need all the help I can get."

She signed off before he could answer, making sure she had the last word this time. *Pompous ass*, she

would show him who was right. Michele opened Kincaid's department file, checking his case log and home address one more time.

Glaring at the terminated connection on his computer screen, the Monsignor could feel stress building into a massive headache. He pushed aside the Fatima Secrets file he was reading before Michele called. Releasing an ambiguous version of the Third Secret had been an ordeal but he was proud of the outcome. Theologians should be sufficiently confused for a lifetime or at least until the end of his days. The Bishop of Rouen's Office was a perfect fit for his puppet master skills. In another life he would have been a natural as a Chief of Staff for the White House or the Armed Forces. But with the gathering clouds of battle, he dearly missed the opportunity to take direct action on the frontlines.

Deacon Cai, a young seminarian, entered the room with a knock. "Excuse me your Eminence. The Ouroborans are on the move again. Boran Elites have broken through the Horus Line. The Templars are awaiting orders."

The Monsignor massaged his temples, a full-blown migraine. An obvious order was "hold the line," but these Borans needed to be taught a lesson.

"Let them charge through. Have the Templars flank them, slip through the breach, and destroy their vacated defenses. Then attack the Elites from the rear."

"Very good, sir." The Deacon nodded his head with appreciation and started to leave.

"Did you send out those other messages?" the Monsignor asked, holding still for the answer.

"Yes, sir. Three days ago."

"No word from the Bishop?"

"No reply, none sir."

"Try again. Send it by parchment, millennium candle, or astral projection if you have to. God knows where he might be."

"Yes, sir." The Deacon's eyes shifted from side to side then he blurted, "I did all of those. But I'll try again."

Damn. The Monsignor had been out of touch with the Bishop of Rouen for over three weeks. He had managed the best he could, but the Church faced too many enemies to go without direct orders from the Bishop, especially when a dire crisis concerning the domain of his Office had arisen. There was only one other person the Monsignor could think of that might be able to help him. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

He groaned, swayed back and forth in his chair. "Cai... also... get her on the line."

"Michele, sir? I thought she just—"

"No, not her. *Her.*"

Deacon Cai flinched, realizing who the Monsignor wanted him to call.

Mother Superior of the St. Jeanne d'Arc Convent in New Orleans glided down an open courtyard hallway as angelic strains of *Ave Maria* floated on beams of sunlight. Wearing her full black and white habit, she was the toughest nun in the world. Her dead serious stare could stop most anything in its tracks.

One of her young charges, Sister Aidan, caught up with her. She brushed wisps of red hair from her face and offered up a phone to the head of the convent.

Mother Superior took the phone, listened to the Monsignor's halting request over the line and then cut short his stumbling questions.

"Yes, I'll see to it. Approaching me earlier would have been the proper way to handle this. I do know a thing or two about gargoyles. Next time, call me first."

She snapped the phone shut. "Have the novitiates prepare for morning prayers. I'll tend to the bell," she instructed Sister Aidan. "Assemble all Sisters that have taken their solemn vows in the refectory. We have canon laws and battle plans to discuss. I'll be there shortly."

"Yes, Reverend Mother."

Sister Aidan hurried to follow her commands. Other Sisters dressed in dark blue tunics bowed as Mother Superior walked passed them and up the circular steps of the bell tower. The stone structure had been part of a military school for toy soldier rich kids and budding captains of industry during the Kingfish days of Huey Long. But the school closed when Long was assassinated during the Great Depression and the country's Greatest Generation needed real soldiers for the Second Great War.

Age dogged her joints, but she still went steadily up the narrow stone steps not wide enough to fit two people side-by-side. The determined woman didn't even pause to peer out of the slit windows over the fortified grounds that the Sisters had modified for their own "great" purposes. Little "g" notwithstanding, Mother Superior believed their cause was far more important than any previous "Great" event.

Reaching the top of the tower, she patted the ancient bell that waited to do her bidding like a faithful

steed. Made of dark copper, it weighed over five hundred pounds and bore a papal decree inscribed in Latin that charged the Sisters with the covert duty to "Defeat Hell's Army." The right side of the bell was marked by Jeanne d'Arc's coat of arms, a crown impaled on a sword and flanked by two *fleur-de-lis*. Emblazoned on the other side was a panoramic image of St. Jeanne d'Arc slaying a dragon. Stiff-collared literati had dismissed it as purely symbolic of her victory over the English army, especially since killing dragons was St. George's thing. But Mother Superior knew better, since St. Jeanne's actual fight with the creature had long served as a strategy primer for the Sisters.

"Come old friend, proclaim it loud and clear."

She grasped the thick rope attached to the clapper of the bell and rang it with vigor. The Sisters used its solemn knell to mark the start of Angelus prayers, feast days, rites of initiation, and on occasion, the death of a Sister. But beyond its baritone quality, Mother Superior was most pleased that the sound carried across New Orleans as a warning to all — her Sisters were standing watch.

As the last note went out, she gazed over the city that had become both her home and base of operations. From this vantage point, she could see the black steeples of St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square and imagined tourists visiting the church's presumed grave of the voodoo priestess, Marie Laveau. New Orleans was a lone outpost of Catholicism deep within the Protestant Bible Belt, a simmering cultural gumbo of Indian, French, African, Spanish, English, Creole, and Cajun powers that constantly threatened to boil over. It

was here among street funerals and above ground tombs, gris-gris amulets etched with verses of the Qur'an, usage of Hail Mary and Lord's Prayer in voodoo ceremonies, and paintings of St. Peter with *Li Grand Zombi* that Mother Superior had drawn her battle lines. At the crossroads of so many dimensions, it was an ideal place to fight the good fight and keep enemies close at hand.

Yet even for her, it had been a long time since a gargoyle had taken part in that war.

The sun shining through the window hurt Kincaid's eyes more than ever. But it wasn't a hangover. It was the pain of Frank's death or rather still being alive with him dead that threatened to split his skull. He pulled on his coat. Every joint creaked and each muscle screamed as if it were the last few steps of a marathon.

"Getting too damn old. Should have taken me," he complained as he left his home.

"About time you woke up." Michele was waiting outside, leaning against a van. "How was your night?" she asked, watching him carefully.

"Frank's still dead, so how do you think?"

She recoiled from his bitterness and he instantly regretted his words. In spite of her crazy Church Lady ideas, talking to Michele had been of some comfort. She didn't deserve to bear his grief. It was a little weird for her to be outside his home, but he didn't mind seeing her again.

"Are you tailing me or stalking me? You know your dead guy bling really messed with my head. Had the craziest dreams. This gargoyle thing must be getting to me. I saw these people, actors and this idiot

director. They were... they were all killed," he said, shaking his head. "Would be nice if coffee cleared my mind like everyone else. I could use a good cleansing."

He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. "Got all this gritty crap too."

"Seven more people died last night," Michele said.

"What? How?"

"How do you think?"

"I knew this was a bad idea. What did you and that amulet do to me?" Kincaid had hoped his nightmare came from grief and sleeping on the saggy part of the couch.

"You may want to put it away."

"No shit. I wasn't even wearing it, just holding it. Do you think that I could have? I mean did I..." afraid of the answer, he couldn't finish the question.

"Kill those people? No. The relic amulet must have connected you to the gargoyle. Saw the murders, flew around in its head, yeah. Now do you believe me?"

Kincaid didn't want to, but he nodded. "I felt its power. It tore into them. Wouldn't stop. Joy... pleasure." The adrenaline rush of running down a suspect or defeating someone in the ring couldn't compare to the savage thrill of murder that ran through his mind last night. He had also experienced a clear sense of freedom, something completely foreign to him these days.

"Just remember. It killed those people. Not you. It killed Frank." Michele looked directly at him, eyes unwavering.

He wanted to say, "Yeah, I just pumped him full of bullets," but she stared at him with such fire and determination that it felt somehow disrespectful.

Maybe she was just manipulating him, but right then he didn't care. Killing the thing that tore Frank up might help a little, maybe a lot.

"How do we stop it?" Kincaid asked.

Michele opened the back of the van. He looked inside and instead of a travel kit or giant eyeglass sunshade – crowbars, sledgehammers, and chisels lay within.

"Gargoyles are stone by day," she said. "The gallery is closed today. Alexis is away at the Lincoln Park exhibit. Up for a little 'B and E,' mostly breaking?"

Michele connected a card key attachment to her phone and slipped it into an electronic lock of the Parrish Antiquities loading dock.

Kincaid watched her work. "My phone doesn't do that."

A digital readout sped through numeric combinations on the display screen. Beneath the numbers ran the frequency waveforms of sound and motion sensors found throughout the building. Video recordings hacked from the surveillance cameras began to download.

"My phone definitely doesn't do that."

"Some phones are smarter than others," she mumbled, watching the run of numbers.

The security lock clicked.

"All this high tech, don't you have some laser rifles or blasters for us to use?"

"Old school, remember?" Michele hefted a crowbar, ready to smash something.

They moved quickly passed the twisted collection of artifacts that mirrored the depraved rooms in the crazed mansion of Alexis's mind. Deserted, not a single guard to avoid, which made both of them nervous. She paused a few times to upload videos of the hallways with their images erased just in case someone was watching through the surveillance cameras.

They reached the gargoyle exhibit undetected. The massive gargoyle statue stood before them, fearsome and intimidating even in its frozen state.

"The Church's greatest power turned to evil." She studied the statue for a moment. "It looks different, the pose has shifted. The bastard must have moved since the last time we saw it."

"Doesn't matter." Kincaid glared at the gargoyle with nothing but hatred. No appreciation for the sculpted lines or fearsome symmetry, just blood and rage. He could finally put an end to that roar in his head. "Time to go John Henry on his ass."

Both of them lifted their weapons. Michele struck the body of the gargoyle with her crowbar. Quick hits smacked into its gut, fragments splintered off, cracks spread along the abdomen.

Kincaid took aim at the upper torso and swung his sledgehammer. Heavyweight blows slammed off chunks of the shoulder and pulverized portions of the gargoyle's head. He whirled the sledgehammer about for one last swing then smashed the head from its body.

Billows of dust filled the room. Rays of sunlight fell on the headless gargoyle statue.

"Feel better?" she asked between breaths.

"Little bit, yeah." Tearing the monster a new one, side-by-side with Michele had lifted his mood. "That's it? No puff of smoke? No stone turning to blood?"

"Don't know. Never busted up a gargoyle before."

Michele approached the statue. The gargoyle had been unsettling before, but it was even more bizarre in its disfigured state. She stepped gingerly as she drew closer. Closer, just within its grasp...

"Careful," Kincaid whispered.

Michele jumped, startled by the warning.

"Sorry, didn't want it coming to life and grabbing you."

Nodding, she slid away from a claw that was still intact. She reached up to the decapitated neck area, broke off a piece, and crushed it easily with her fingers. Michele turned to Kincaid, her eyes worked furiously on the evidence crumbling before them. He could taste her sweet guarded air of victory evaporate into sickening distress.

"It's not stone. It's a cast. Plaster, some sort of poly resin," she said.

"Are you quite done defacing my property?" called out an all too familiar voice. Alexis appeared behind them. Steiger and a squad of security guards followed her. "Kindly put down your garden tools," she said.

A grimace from Kincaid, a curse from Michele as the sledgehammer and crowbar dropped with a clank.

"Where did you hide him? You know I'll find him," Michele said. "Find him and kill him."

"I expected as much from the little gutter snipe, but I expected more from one of Chicago's finest." Alexis smiled at Kincaid. "Suspended, my friends tell me. This could finish your career."

This time it was Michele's turn to step in the middle of a fight. "Your problem is with me. Leave him out of this."

Alexis's smile grew. "You're so easy to bait. The two of you make quite the pair. Let me introduce you to my new partner."

A man with a face out of a portrait strode forward and kissed Alexis's cheek. Not the useless pretty boy look of a model, he had a solid, strong-featured appearance worthy of a classical painting. His dark hair and brown eyes contrasted with Alexis's blonde blue-eyed flair, but both possessed smiles that harbored cruelty. The attraction between them prickled Kincaid's nerves with heat and something about its intensity turned his stomach.

Mercadier sized up Michele with sharp glances. Then with a flourish of his hand and a mock bow, he said, "*Enchantez.*"

Michele stared in horrified recognition of the man before her. "Mercadier," she whispered. She looked so totally freaked out that it worried Kincaid.

"Ah, Historian. I'm gratified you still know my name."

"The name of a traitor. You... you and Richard killed thousands of your own countrymen."

"He was my king, my friend. I would have killed every single Frenchman in the world for what they did to him."

"Spare me your sense of honor," she said. "You're a monster. The Church should have never trusted you."

"The Monster Mercadier." Mercadier savored the title with a laugh. "Church mice don't change. But

there are other gods in the world beside your own. Do you know of Camazotz, Doctor?"

"Yes, he killed Hunahpu, one of the great Maya Hero Twins."

"Very good. But like all heroes, Hunahpu cheated. He rose into the sky and became the Sun. Well, I'm here to finish what Camazotz started," Mercadier said.

Kincaid wasn't sure what was happening, but he didn't like the sound of that threat. "All my heroes are in comic books. But I know a punk when I see one."

Mercadier's eyes shifted to him. A look of graveyard cold passed over Kincaid then worsened as the man's sneer changed into a smile of lethal familiarity, one given to a second place rival or perpetual whipping boy.

"Punk? I don't understand this word, but Officer, you I feel like I know. Such a small world, so many corners and paths one might cross with someone."

"All I care about is Chicago."

"Chicago? Let's see, how does that verse go?" Merdcadier waved about his hand again in search of the right words. "Oh, yes... 'Hog Butcher for the World, City of the Big Shoulders. They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys. And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.' This little town of yours belongs to the dead. I will be its king."

Kincaid wanted to say something, anything to wipe the smug look off of Mercadier's face. "The Chicago way killed Dillinger and Capone, real public

enemies. A small-time punk like you, I'll bust-up. Now do you understand?"

The smug appearance grew into a grin as Mercadier clenched a fist. But Alexis placed a hand on his arm. "Not here, not now," she said. "It will make a mess."

"Very well. Officer, I do relish a challenge. I will look for you under the stars," he said with a wink.

"Steiger? Catch and release." Alexis smiled at Michele as she strolled out of the room with Mercadier. "But the next time I yank you out of the water, I'll mount you on a wall."

Steiger watched them leave, his eyes hacking them to pieces. Through clenched teeth he said to the guards, "Throw them out."

Two of the security guards stepped forward. The shorter one of the pair reached out a rather hairy hand and grabbed Kincaid's arm with a strong grip. The guard looked surprised when it didn't move an inch.

"Take your mangy hand off me," Kincaid said. There was something feral about the guard's eyes, a wildness that didn't like being caged. The smell of blood filled his nostrils. "Let go, Mutt. Or I'll show you whose leader of the pack."

"The name's 'Case'. I'd like to see you try," the guard said with what sounded like a low growl. The taller guard stepped between them.

"Officer, please. Forgive my partner." Tall and thin, this guard moved unnaturally fast with more finesse than expected. He pried Case's hand off of Kincaid. "Mr. Allen just wants you to leave." In a low tone meant just for Case he said, "Eyes and ears only."

"Alright, Jeff," Kincaid said. He caught a sense of autumn and dying leaves from the tall guard. A bond appeared to exist between the two guards, something that set them apart from the rent-a-cop world.

"It's Sebastian."

"No, no. You two are Mutt and Jeff to me. Or Tom and Jerry, maybe Bart and Milhouse. Pick a pair."

"Very well. Then if you and Lady Deathstrike will please..."

Kincaid smiled. "Lady Deathstrike, not bad." He held out an arm to hold Michele back. Turning toward Steiger before they left, he said, "Looks like you've been fired. Bet your boss can't keep her hands off her new toy. Call me if you have any further questions."

The pissed look on Steiger's face was worth the price of admission.

CHAPTER SIX

The Chapter of the Cathedral of Rouen every Ascension Day was allowed by the "Privilege de Saint Romain" to release a prisoner condemned to death, who was then made to carry the holy relics of the saint upon his shoulders in a great procession.

T.A. Cook - "The Story of Rouen" - 1901

"What the hell just happened?" Kincaid said. He trailed Michele to a side door of the abandoned church they had entered earlier.

"I'm not sure. I didn't think Steiger would hire any Otherworld types. Vamps and werewolves usually don't run together, even if they're not full bloods. You know my grandfather used to read '*Mutt and Jeff*.' I always thought Mutt was the tall one."

"Your grandfather? I'm not that old. Just liked to read comics," Kincaid said. "Forget those two. Who was Mr. Accent? That Mercatty, Mercaid..."

"*Mare-caw-dee-ay*, like the watches, *Cartier*. It's French," replied Michele. She entered the hall to the parish offices.

"Yeah, I got that, but what about king and countrymen and Richard? If you want an ally then I need to know everything. Partners need to trust each other."

Her cautious eyes sought out his. He felt a connection grow between them. Nothing as strong as a full bond, but something opened softly as a morning peek out of a door before anyone else was awake.

"Trust doesn't usually work out for me," she sighed. "Richard, as in King Richard the Lionheart. Mercadier was his chief of mercenaries, his right hand. When Richard was shot in the siege of Châlus, the dying king actually pardoned the archer. But after Richard died, Mercadier skinned the archer alive and hung him for good measure. That was in 1199."

"You're telling me this guy's a million years old? And he ran with King Richard, Prince John, freaking Robin Hood?"

"More like a thousand years."

She led Kincaid past well-worn office doors that must have once bustled with parishioners, but were now vacant and mothballed. "He fought for *King John* after Richard died, not sure about Robin Hood. But our real problem is Mercadier being out in daylight."

"Why?" He wasn't sure what could be worse than a "storm the castle" man still alive in the twenty-first century.

"Should have been stone during the day. Not flesh and blood. He is the Gargoyle Mercadier."

"What?" Michele was an Old Faithful of psychotic myths, spewing forth one reality bending statement after another. But the man-creature thing did explain why he sensed the same graveyard presence in both the gallery and alley. "He killed Frank? Let's go back and—"

"And what? Arrest him for being a murdering flying monster? Don't think that will stick. Besides you're suspended, remember? We have to deal with this a different way."

Kincaid followed her in stunned silence up a flight of stairs. At the top of the steps, Michele opened a stout

wooden door edged with iron. They entered the only space that still emanated a lived-in feel. When she turned on the lights, an archive with high arched ceilings, narrow windows, and walls of shelves greeted him. He marveled at the rows of ancient tomes mixed with a collection of religious artifacts, swords, stone tablets, and what looked like the occasional box of chocolates. The presence of all these items was comforting, more distant Camelot than dusty tomb.

"Nice place. Do you bring all the guys here?"

"No..." Michele surprised him with a blush. "I don't bring anybody up here, ever." She turned away and rummaged blindly through a tin of cartouches.

A doubled barred cross standing on a table caught Kincaid's eye. There was something familiar about its shape, but he couldn't remember where he had seen it before.

"What's with the cross with the extra thingy?" he asked, pretending not to notice her sudden shyness. It had been an eternity, the last time the Cubs won a play-off game, since he had felt any attraction to a woman and he wasn't at all confident of the signals coming from Michele.

"It's a Cross of Lorraine from the province of Joan of Arc." Her voice was a little too high and fast. "The Templars marched under it, Jesuits carried it to the New World, the Free French used it for their resistance against the Nazi's." Michele reined in the nervous ramble. "Sorry, I... uh, tend to go on about these things."

"Hey, you love what you do."

For once, he felt in control. Her eyes flitted about the room, avoiding his. Although she usually appeared

locked and loaded to take on the world, in this quiet space, she was clearly more nervous than he was. Everything about this sanctuary radiated intimacy and privacy, but he didn't get the vibe from her that he was intruding.

Idly fantasizing about what might come next, he reached for the candy box on the shelf and read its label. "Heavenly Hash. A delightful blend of chocolate, marshmallows, and nuts. Sounds good and healthy."

"Bad habit. Developed a taste for pecans. Get hungry when I'm working." She took the box away from him. Their hands brushed lightly against each other. He couldn't even remember shaking her hand before, but now he felt a thrill at the brief contact. Something strange and unexpected was happening.

"No jokes about cops and donuts from you then." He smiled, her emotions suddenly tasted as sumptuous as the description of the candy.

"Everything around you has a history. Even ordinary things take on a whole new light when you learn their story," she said. "Wonder is there, if you just explore it. Forgotten truths, answers that... that have been locked away." Her voice faltered with rising passion that had a taste of lime to its otherwise full-bodied sweetness.

Maybe it was the heat of battle, maybe it was the desire to feel something else besides loss, or maybe Alexis and Mercadier were giving off some depraved pheromones. Kincaid inched his hand closer to hers.

"But it all belongs to the Church..." she said. "As do I."

His hand froze. "What?"

"I'm a nun."

"No."

Her eyes fell to the floor. "Sister Michele. Of the Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc." Waves of misery rolled from her. "That's my history."

He dropped his hand. An ocean's roar of emotions hit him as the stupid fantasy of joyful violins screeched to a halt. "Jeanne d'Arc?" he croaked.

"Joan of Arc."

"From Lorraine." He pieced things together as he recovered from his bitter disappointment. "And you said Alexis was a 'sister'?"

"She was expelled. Heresy and conduct unbecoming."

"Uh-huh. Then you and I, there's no way we—"

Michele shook her head. "I have vows."

"Chastity is one of them?"

"More than that stands in our way." She returned the candy box to him for a closer look.

He looked at the packaging and read it again carefully. "Heavenly Hash, made by the Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc."

"We have a very different order."

"You guys make candy? You're like elves?" He tossed the box back on the shelf, not wanting a part of anything pleasant. Served him right for letting his guard down.

"We protect this world. We watch over the gargoyles."

"You watch over... what? How could you not tell me any of this?" Michele's lips tightened and offered no excuses, but the continued silence infuriated him more. "There's something else, isn't there? For God's sake, just tell me everything. I don't want anything but

the truth from you." He shoved away all his unwanted desires, tried to convince himself he wasn't interested in her. "I want to take down Mercadier. That's all I want."

"I'm sorry."

She dragged her eyes off the floor, but still couldn't look at him. Instead she walked away across the room.

"I have something to show you." Michele approached a wall-mounted rack of swinging display arms that held medieval stained glass windows and clicked on a floodlight.

A kaleidoscope of colors struck Kincaid. Bold reds, blues, and greens, all created to deliver examples of faith in a blaze of glory. Subtlety was not part of their palette or color scheme. Even in his dejected state, the images beckoned him closer. As she paged through the heavy glass panels, he could see that they depicted scenes from a single saint's life. The saint's hard face reminded him more of the sergeants he knew rather than any of the priests he had met.

"Let me guess," Kincaid said. "St. Romain? This is the guy messing with my mind, giving me nightmares?"

"That's him. These are from the southeast corner of the Rouen Cathedral." She stopped at one panel and brushed dust off of it. "Take a close look at this one."

The art in this frame showed St. Romain standing over the *gargouille*. It lay upon the ground while he made the sign of the cross and brandished a bishop's crozier.

"Back in the seventh century a water dragon, a *gargouille*, terrorized Rouen. But the Bishop of Rouen

defeated it. He was canonized 'St. Romain.' The monster became a symbol, the protector of churches."

Kincaid stared at the monster curled at the feet of St. Romain. It was the size of a large dog but with small white bat wings. "That's the *gargouille*? Doesn't look very scary."

"Can't believe everything you see. This is what the *gargouille* really looked like."

Michele swung open a frame that displayed a large parchment inked with the *gargouille* in fine detail. The monster lay in a supine anatomical position with clawed forelimbs spiked wide to each side, its long serpentine abdomen sliced open, and half of its internal organs exposed. "The ink work of a good friar. He got tired of transcribing the Bible." The body parts were labeled and a scale artfully rendered next to the beast indicated a length of twenty meters.

"Damn. St. Romain brought that down?" Kincaid couldn't imagine stopping it with anything less than a tank.

"Yes. But the Bishop needed the help of a prisoner."

"This prisoner, what was his crime?"

"Murder" was her uneasy answer. "But the Bishop heard his last confession and believed him innocent."

"Trusting a convict, risky."

He studied the stained glass image. Next to St. Romain, a man wearing a blue tunic grasped a long cloth leashed around the creature's neck. "Is that the prisoner?"

"Everyone thinks so, but no," Michele said. "It's a local sculptor, Pascal... something. The prisoner isn't even in this picture."

All of Kincaid's investigative instincts rang loudly. Something was very wrong about the "official" story of the gargoyle.

"Well, what happened? How did the prisoner help? Was he a diversion? How does this monster become a protector?"

Michele tapped her finger on the glass. "See the sculptor? He's looking over his shoulder, not at St. Romain, but into the sky. He's looking at the Bishop's secret weapon."

She turned to the last stained glass panel.

"This is the bottom right portion of the original window that we removed. If you were standing in the Cathedral of Rouen, you'd see a replacement collage of fragments from a broken window dedicated to St. Eustace instead."

Kincaid stared at the macabre image before him. Depicted on this original glass was a gargoyle with red bat wings and long tusks protruding upwards from its lower jaw. Kneeling in front of a church, it obediently held the Bishop's crozier.

"This is how the prisoner helped. This is the first true gargoyle, the Church's protector, not the water dragon," she said.

He sifted through the blitz of information that sounded like the alibi of an elusive suspect.

"Hold on. Hold it. You're saying the prisoner was the gargoyle?"

Michele answered with the most hallowed of Catholic responses, "Bingo."

She pointed at the glass image with the pen from his desk. "St. Romain transformed him into the gargoyle. With the power of the Beast, he forged a

champion from Hell to send against a monster. It was really Gargoyle Primus that beat the crap out of the water dragon and saved Rouen."

"Gargoyle Primus. So, Gargoyle Mercadier isn't the first one. Just how many demons from Hell have you guys spawned?" Kincaid stared at the tusked gargoyle as his understanding of the world kept channel surfing.

"Enough to give them a first and last name. King Louis XII granted the Bishops of Rouen the annual right to pardon a murderer in exchange for services to the Church. The ritual became known as the 'Privilege of St. Romain.' Every year there's still a fair in Rouen where someone dresses up as the Prisoner and they re-enact the Privilege with a big parade. There's even a ledger that lists the name and crime of everyone pardoned from 1210 to 1790..."

"Wait. You're geeking out again," interrupted Kincaid. She twirled the pen around her fingers. "And stop that. Got so many tells, you must suck at poker," he said. "Out with it. Say what's on your mind."

Michele gently put the pen away. "Times change, the gargoyles are given different powers. The Order of the Gargoyle has included financiers, scientists, envoys, whatever was called for. But only at a time of great need should the right person be given the powers of the original gargoyle."

She hesitated then said with a measured cadence, "A time of danger, like now."

Kincaid could tell he wouldn't like what was coming next any more than the first bombshell she dropped about being a nun.

"And who's the right person?"

"You." Her eyes met his. "You're the right person."

"Me." He knew it. The last glimmer of hope that he had connected in some meaningful human way with Michele fizzled. The distinct fear of being used mixed together with the nauseating reality of Frank's death. He spat it all out with, "I'm the right person, because I've killed people. Because I'm a murderer."

"No. Because you're a man of honor, worthy of redemption," she protested. "A gargoyle turning into stone was the Church's safeguard. Daylight gave them time to pull the plug. Mercadier has found a way around it. Only someone with St. Romain's power can stop him."

"This is what you meant by needing a 'wingman?'"

Bitterness permeated everywhere in his mouth, brain, and heart, like fine bits of sand that clung all over and couldn't be brushed away. "Why didn't you just tell me this from the beginning?"

"I... I should have."

Michele's eyes jumped around the religious artifacts piled about them, looking trapped in her sanctum. "Too many things held me back. I tried to do the right thing, but when I come up short, people die. Just like Frank."

"Oh, no. You're not taking that from me too. Frank was my responsibility, my fault."

Kincaid had nothing left in this life. He used to think he could become a champion like Joe Louis or Manny Pacquiao, make people dance like The Black Eyed Peas, or cheer for his kid from the stands. When you're young every dream promises gold and every idea is pure genius. Now none of it was going to happen. He had blamed the system, complained about the people who couldn't recognize his potential. He

used to think being a minority held him back, but then plenty of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians got promoted over him. Maybe he just wasn't all that. Only one thing mattered now.

"I don't care about saving the world or God or redemption," he said. "I want to kill Mercadier for what he did to Frank. You said the Bishops bound them. Gave them the power of the Beast. Make me one of your gargoyles."

Michele folded her arms tightly. "Understand me clearly, you won't be human anymore. Believe in God or not, you're about to become an instrument of His power. You won't be able to see the sun again. You'll be stone during the day. Not breathing, not moving, not feeling anything."

Kincaid gave her a cold look. "My heart's turned to stone. Might as well do the rest of me."

Kincaid followed Michele down to the church sanctuary. She lit two large candles by the altar and then fired up the charcoal in a brass incense thurible. As she prepared for the ritual, he felt increasingly uneasy. The determination gained from his anger had faded. Acutely aware of being the one on the spot, he felt like an animal about to be sacrificed.

By candlelight, he could see a large object covered with a dark velvet drape sitting on the altar. She removed the covering to reveal a two-foot high tabernacle embossed with religious symbols, the Shrine of St. Romain. Crafted with gold leaf on the right and wrought iron on the left, the artifact had a patina of extreme age.

"What's in that?"

She pointed to the right side with a cross on its golden door. "More relics of St. Romain. A bit of skull and sternum I think."

"You've got him scattered all over the damn world. What's in the other side?"

Michele traced a finger over the symbol on the iron door. "Given the line in the triangle, it may be the pagan symbol for air. But given its contents it may be a Thaumaturgic Triangle, a gateway for demons."

"Words, regular words – what's in it?"

"The remains of a fallen angel."

Kincaid squinted at her then stared at the iron door. The unexpected answer rattled his steadfast cynicism. For most of his life he had not really believed in God and that doubled down on any seraph, cherub, or angel, fallen or not. "Yeah, right."

"You've seen Gargoyle Mercadier. You've seen evil every day. Hell clearly exists. Why is it so hard to believe in God and his angels?"

"Is that why you do this? You believe in Heaven? Going to cash in on the big reward?"

"No reward, I do it because it's right." Michele placed a hand on the iron door. "So, angel, UFO, Bigfoot, whatever, come help me with this."

"Now, I do believe in some of those."

He grabbed hold of the Shrine and they placed it down in front of the altar. "It's heavier than it looks."

"You're going to have to lift it yourself during the ritual," she said. "Three times toward Heaven to venerate the Trinity." With a brush of dark red liquid, the outed nun began to mark a circle on the floor around him.

"Is that blood?"

"It ain't paint." Michele saw him slide away from the redness. "No, it's not human. Lamb's blood for the resurrection." She then drew a six-pointed star around him.

"Kind of the wrong place for a devil's sign, don't you think," he muttered.

"Not a pentagram. It's the Seal of Solomon." She placed six brass medallions in the spaces within the circle and between the star points. "Jews, Christians, and Muslims believed King Solomon's mark gave him the power to command demons and djinns."

"Oh, that's so much better."

"Sounds like you're having second thoughts." Her hand paused over a medallion. "You don't have to do this."

Kincaid took a deep breath to gather his nerves. "Just tell me, am I going to look all fang-faced like Mercadier?"

"There was the winged lion of Venice. That hunched one in Notre Dame. All the gargoyles have appeared different," she thought aloud. "I think it depends on how your soul fits with St. Romain and his Privilege."

"My soul? That's not good. I'm going to look like something stir-fried in Zee's wok."

She unrolled a scroll across the top of the altar. Made from a type of hide or skin, it had been written on with some liquid that did not dry flat like ink, more like old blood found smeared at crime scenes.

Michele reached under the altar for something that made her squirm. She lifted up a pair of heavy iron manacles and approached him.

"You have to wear these and kneel. The Prisoner always wore them."

"No way! Those look like slave chains. Is this what's right to you?"

"This isn't easy for me."

"You're not getting zapped into Quasimodo!"

"What we do tonight is heresy," she said. "I'll be excommunicated, thrown out of the Church."

"Save it *Sister*," Kincaid snapped.

Her eyes bore holes into the ground. "I've done a lot that I'm not proud of. Becoming a Sister of Jeanne d'Arc saved my life. Even with its idiotic rules I stand by the Church. Belief in something better keeps us from the pit. But I gave up all the things everyone takes for granted. Children, the picket fence, love... all of it. Never second-guessed it until now."

No self-righteousness, no defiance, there was only sadness in her bearing. Briefly, Kincaid wondered about the life they might have had in a different world. But he focused again on revenge for Frank's death and let everything else fall away. He shoved both hands forward.

"Let's do it."

Michele's shoulders sagged as if the chains were on her. Smoke from the incense burner rose to the ceiling and a pungent odor filled the room. She snapped the restraints around his wrists, took her place behind the altar, and began to recite the Latin prayers written on the scroll.

He stared at the Shrine of St. Romain and knelt to the ground. The moment his knees touched the stone within the Seal of Solomon, blinding energy exploded out of the manacles and charged through him. He

reeled from hallucinations more vivid than the ones of the amulet. This time he wasn't connected to the mind of a gargoyle. This time ancient auras even more powerful enthralled his mind.

Kincaid began to experience flashes and visions from the distant past. Through a jumbled haze, he saw the Prisoner walking with his arms bound by the manacles and chains. Fifty armed soldiers, bristling with halberds and swords, marched alongside him. They moved up a dusty hill toward the Old Tower in Rouen, a monolithic building of dark stone. A grim double doorway yawned open at its center.

The view of present circumstances returned and rushed back around him.

"What was that?" he mumbled. "What just happened?"

Michele didn't hear his comments. With incense smoke surrounding her and hands turned skyward, she invoked a Latin prayer from the ancient scroll.

"Sancte Romain, Omnes sancti Angeli et Archángeli, oráte pro nobis."

He tried to clear his mind with a deep breath, but then a blitz of images and deafening sounds flooded his brain. Pulled back again to the past, he found himself in a stone chamber within the Old Tower from before. The Prisoner knelt in a Seal of Solomon that was chiseled in the floor as clouds of incense billowed about him. Two monks in brown robes continued the same Latin chant that Michele had started somewhere and some when back in Chicago.

"Ab insidiis diaboli," the first monk said in a deep voice.

"Libera nos Dómine," his counterpart intoned.

A third monk dressed in a black robe, appeared from nowhere and got right in the Prisoner's face. With a drill instructor's fury, he shouted scriptural demands. "*Per mystérium sanctae incarnationis tuae!*"

The Prisoner took it all, unafraid, solid. The lead monk motioned to the others. They moved forward with the same tabernacle of St. Romain that now sat in front of Kincaid. Although the vision must have taken place many centuries ago, the holy object had a look of extreme age even back then.

The Prisoner stretched out his arms, chain links jangling in protest. They placed the shrine in his grasp and stepped back. As they left the Seal of Solomon, energy flared along its lines, surrounding the Prisoner. Struggling with the weight of the tabernacle, he tried to lift it higher.

"*Ut inimicos sanctae Ecclesiae, humiliare dignéris!*" the black-robed monk shouted, demanding more effort, more faith. He thrust his arms upwards repeatedly, compelling the Prisoner to follow through with the ceremony.

As the Prisoner strained to press the weight skyward, energy flared from the tabernacle and sizzled down his arms. He gasped from the pain.

The same excruciating pain seared through Kincaid as he lifted the tabernacle in the present. His actions began to mirror the ghostly echo from the past. Blurring lines of reality and time, visions of the Prisoner's motions overlapped with Kincaid's own efforts and perceptions in Chicago. He held the shrine high above his head. The screaming image of the lead monk alternated with Michele's look of concern as they both chanted the same ritual.

Kincaid brought the tabernacle down. Although ablaze with energy, it was not harmed by the flames of power. Michele motioned for him to raise the shrine up again, supplicating not demanding another attempt.

But in Kincaid's ears, the lead monk thundered his harsh exhortations of the Prisoner back through the ages. Kincaid could see the arms of the Prisoner tremble violently as he lifted the shrine again. Sweat ran down both of their faces and arms. More energy channeled through the Prisoner's body in the past and Kincaid's limbs in the present. Their experiences phased together. They lifted the shrine as one this time. Lightning shot through his brain.

The tabernacle slipped in his grasp. Kincaid lowered the burning shrine before he dropped it. As Michele continued the chant, she pleaded gently with her hands for him to make a third lift. Next to her, a vision of the Prisoner appeared. He looked clean, rested, and calm.

"Wait. You're done?" Kincaid gasped for breath. "Want to spot me?"

Michele looked around the sanctuary. She had no idea what he was talking about or to whom he was speaking to.

The shadowy image of the Prisoner smiled at him. "It's all yours now," he said and then vanished.

Alone in his agony, Kincaid braced his neck, shoulder, and arm muscles to power through one final lift. Pressing the tabernacle high overhead, shaking with fatigue, he screamed as more holy energy wracked every fiber of his soul. Every nerve in his body burned.

He saw Michele flinch from his screams. "Don't stop, don't stop," he yelled. His weary limbs gave out, but he managed to place St. Romain's Shrine on the floor.

She lowered her head and rushed through the chant. "*Agnus Dei, exáudi nos, Dómine...*"

He writhed on the ground. The tabernacle stood in front of him. It shined with immense power. The two doors guarding mystic remains rattled wildly, barely containing what they held within. The Seal of Solomon flared brighter and brighter.

His arms strained against the manacles but the irons wouldn't give. Blinded by pain that felt like molten rods shoved through his bones, he pounded the ground with thunderous blows of his fists. Cracks spread across the stone floor. Each agonizing impact with the earth ignited bursts of primeval strength in his arms. As he grew stronger and stronger, the links of the stout chain weakened and started to pull apart as he struggled to escape.

Michele shouted her way to the end. "*Kyrie, eléison. Christie, eléison!*"

The torture and power roared to a climax. The flesh on his back transformed. Two large muscular humps formed over his shoulders. Something hideous grew under each one. They stretched and deformed his skin to the breaking point.

The expanding flesh on his back exploded. He howled. Two monstrous extremities tore through his skin in a violent birth of blood and tissue. Membranous, leathery flaps unfurled with long limbed bones and gave shape to gothic wings. These were demon wings, not the feathered ones of an angel. The

wings reached up to the sky and fanned out, stretching from side to side.

Michele finished in a whisper, "*Libera nos a malo. Amen.*"

Wings and everything collapsed into a comatose heap. As he lay on the ground, the flesh over the rest of his body and face continued to contort and change.

Kincaid woke up in a simple room, perfect for a monk or holding a wake. Delirious, he looked about and glimpsed Michele through a shifting fog of blotches and pin pricks of light. He tried to talk, but his parched mouth didn't seem to move right.

"Shh... it's not over," Michele said. Giving him a drink of water, she glanced at the fading darkness through the window. The sun was about to rise.

"It gets worse," she warned.

"Bedside... manner... sucks," he managed to say.

"I'll be here. No matter what."

Kincaid coughed and choked.

"Don't fight it."

It felt like drowning in wet cement topped with a head of dust. He should be struggling for air, but his body could barely move.

With the coming of dawn, he solidified with a crackling sound. By the time full sunlight came through the window, he had turned completely into stone. Not moving, not breathing, not a single sign of life could be seen.

Michele dropped her head in sorrow. For the first time in a very long while, tears brimmed in her eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

All day long the blazing midsummer sun beat down upon that square mile of abominations: upon tens of thousands of cattle crowded into pens whose wooden floors stank and steamed contagion...

Upton Sinclair - "The Jungle" - 1906

Joe Stankiewicz, a Parrish security guard that usually just sat on a stool by the entrance, gasped for air as Mercadier clamped a stranglehold on his throat.

Sunlight through a gallery window fell on Mercadier's forearm. His exposed skin crackled and hardened into a patch of mottled stone. The rocky deformation spread up his arm, threatening to encase the rest of him. He glared at the earthen transformation with hatred and a twinge of fear.

"No, not today. I will stay free."

Mercadier tightened his grasp and peered deep within the dying man. All the quirks and intricacies of his fading life pulsed with energy. The guard's holiday memories, love of hockey, mistrust of online banking, aversion to outdoor camping — each had their own frequency and shade of color. Bright life essence lit up around the guard then flowed from him and along Mercadier's forearm instead. The power of the stolen soul pulsed and sizzled over the earthen area on his skin, turning it back into smooth flesh again. At the same time, Joe's face turned pale and hardened into gritty stone.

He let go of his victim. The metamorphic stone guard clunked to the floor. Having consumed the man's soul, Mercadier scowled defiantly at the dawn, daring the sun to turn him into stone again. "Come do your worst. Soon, I will be beyond your grasp."

"Stop boosting your daylight time with my men," said Steiger as he entered the room.

"Stop stocking your forces with inhuman blood," Mercadier replied. "I don't understand Joe's love of this thing called 'hockey', but I do like the pure humanness of the local varietal. All the nuances and such a clean finish. You cannot keep me from what I desire."

Steiger stopped at a casual distance, but stood with a balanced stance that could shift rapidly into combat.

"You don't know me very well."

"*Au contraire*. You are a mercenary, a freebooter as was I. No allegiance other than to the coin. Satisfied with scraps from the king's table, never enough vision for your own domain."

"This is my domain." Steiger kept eye contact, didn't blink, didn't back down.

"Ah, very good. You have found a calling then. But whatever you reach for, I will rule it all. Have a care for how you speak to your liege lord. You know I have power beyond compare."

"Not in the light of day." Steiger slipped a knife from his left sleeve and slashed it across Mercadier's face.

Mercadier dodged the attack, grappled the knife hand, and brandished his own stiletto toward Steiger's neck. "In my day, we were born with a blade in our hands," he said, even though a cut bled on his cheek.

"Yeah? I was born with this." Steiger shoved a snubnosed Walther PPK into Mercadier's abdomen with his right hand. "Maybe you should have stayed stone."

Glancing down at the weapon with momentary concern, Mercadier raised his eyes back to Steiger's and smiled. "Go ahead, shoot. My strength may not be as great during the day, but I still have some surprises." The cut on his cheek healed as he spoke.

Steiger lowered his gun and put away the knife. "I'm a patient man. One day I'll catch you low on batteries and blow you to rubble."

Mercadier laughed. "I do love this era. You and the policeman, so full of *esprit de corps*. But eternal night will soon be mine. You will weep in the dark and grovel before me."

With an exaggerated bow, Steiger said, "Ms. Parrish commands your presence in the Rouen Room." Then he stood straight. "Harm her and night or day, I will find your weakness."

"You freed me from that miserable tomb, so I shall forgive this *bravade*. But next time, I will kill you." As Mercadier walked away, he leered back at him. "Besides, I already know your weakness. I go to service our queen in ways she has not been satisfied before. Don't feel bad, not everyone can be French."

Alexis drifted through a favorite portion of the gallery, the Rouen Room. Rouen, the capital city of Normandy, fascinated her as a vessel for all her passions, especially the one for gargoyles. Treasures from this region served as trophies and reminders of her past. A cast of King Richard's tomb in the Rouen Cathedral featured a

stone gargoyle imp curled at the feet of the Lionheart. One of the missing panels from the Bayeux Tapestry hung on a wall. It depicted the English army's retreating before Norman soldiers that were backed by a winged gargoyle in the sky. A wide assortment of gargoyle sculptures around the room bore further testimony to her avid pursuit of St. Romain's creations.

But since Alexis had found Mercadier, she no longer had to occupy herself with these facsimiles. The genuine article satisfied her even beyond her dreams. She wished those pill-pushing idiots that had attempted to analyze her when she was young could see her now. Antidepressants, atypical antipsychotics, and anticonvulsants, the doctors had prescribed a pharmacopoeia of meds to treat for what they diagnosed as bipolar disorder and borderline behavior. But none of them had helped her feel better.

"You called, *mon cheri*?" Mercadier's strong arms slipped around Alexis from behind.

She didn't pull away and indulged in his tight grip around her waist, his warm breath on her skin.

"Yes, what took you so long?"

"Something I'll attend to one day."

Alexis knew he meant Steiger. The two of them had clashed since their first meeting and although she would never deny Mercadier anything, disposing of Steiger was something she did not feel comfortable about, at least, not yet.

"Please, don't. I'll speak to him."

"It will do no good. The nine-fingered wonder is not long for this world."

He glanced at a white marble statue of Jeanne d'Arc that stood by them. She was bound to the stake

by crisscrossing chains and burned by flames snaking up her legs. A forlorn face, pageboy haircut, and lithe arms, the ghostly stone figure screamed of abandonment and sorrow.

The glass display case in front of the statue held two pieces of parchment. "Hmm... what pages do you have here? I did so enjoy that Shakespeare tome of yours."

Alexis tapped a finger on the case. "The judge at her trial accepted English payment for the purchase and delivery of 'Joan, whom people call the Maiden.' Also, the Writ of Excommunication and Sentence of Death read aloud before they burned her in Rouen's market square. Served the bitch right for believing in a fickle God."

"Such hatred for the little tart."

"For all thing's Jeanne d'Arc."

"Ah, your former Sisters. I can't imagine you in such a place."

Her eyes narrowed. "My parents forced me into that Convent, their grand tough-love solution. My mother was a fan of the actress, Dolores Hart. She left Hollywood and Elvis to happily become a nun. Mom hoped her own wild girl could be saved too. Pathetic. I'm glad she died when I was locked away."

"*Ma mere* traded me for two francs and day old bread. From what you told me, the combat training, the weapons, virgin women, it sounds like a place I could have enjoyed."

"A house of fools, led by a senile crone."

Her face softened for a moment. "Although there was... there was this one night. I was standing a midnight vigil in the Convent's orchard. It has these

giant oak trees, bearded by Spanish moss. I felt a presence. A powerful one... I thought it was the Hand of God. For a while, it deluded me into believing the lie that there is a God. I never felt it again."

"No matter, don't you prefer my touch more?" He ran a finger along the back of her hand and lightly grazed her neck with his lips.

"Oh, I do," she whispered as his hands caressed her body. "Wait, wait... I wanted to show you something."

She pulled away and turned him around to face a trio of impressionist paintings. "These came today. Perks of my inheritance after I got rid of dear old Dad. They were done by a fellow Frenchman."

Tearing his eyes away from her breasts, Mercadier's lip twitched into a sneer at the paintings. "A blind one. Muddled spots of paint. Must be your modern art. Where is the detail, the grandeur?" Something about the paintings did catch his eye. "But these are all of the Rouen Cathedral, its West Portal. The tower is dedicated to that bastard St. Romain, the door on the left for little Jeanne. Fitting for this Rouen room of yours, I suppose."

"Yes, they're perfect. But I obtained them for another reason," she said. "I've always found Sun Tzu's 'Know your enemy' more valuable than 'Love thy neighbor'."

"Depends on the neighbor," Mercadier smirked.

Alexis ignored the innuendo and focused on the first two paintings, one with rich gold and blue hues of sunset and the other with bright ivory stippling of full sunlight.

"Your bane, our enemy is daylight. Light was Monet's true subject, not the Cathedral. He painted on fourteen canvases in a day, moving from one to the next as the light changed. It almost drove him mad. Haunted by pink, blue, and yellow nightmares of the building falling upon him. In all, he finished thirty-one paintings. It has been said that Monet brings the stone to life. Exactly, what we plan to do with you."

But only the third painting held Mercadier's attention. While the other two paintings set the church's western facade in a demure angle to the side, the third painting posed the building straight ahead in an imposing close-up. Unlike the warm pastel colors of the other two paintings, the third was finished in stark and lifeless browns. In this foreboding light, the grand circular rose window above the entry doors of the cathedral became a black hole, a grim oculus of decay and death. Below it, the three arched and darkened doorways peered out like the empty eye sockets and nasal cavity of some stygian creature's skull.

"This one is tolerable. The others hurt my eyes. But this one is a fitting portrait. The Rouen Cathedral should be painted as a gate, a portal to the netherworld," he said.

"Why?" Alexis cooed with a genuine sound of interest, not like the sounds she usually made to taunt or toy with other men.

"This church holds the best of the Lionheart." He pointed at the stone effigy of Richard in the room. "They buried the king's body in Fontevraud Abbey with his father, but Richard's heart was buried in this Cathedral. Everything right in the world died with him."

"I'm feeling a little jealous," she teased.

He glared at her. "He was my king. My friend."

She drew back, surprised by the rebuke. His voice softened some, but not much.

"The solstice draws near. It's time to open the way to Xibalba and put an end to all of Monet's light. Show me something I want to see. Something that will let me kill everyone in this city and the land beyond."

Two spiral towers of pale stone supported the entrance archway of the Union Stock Yards gate. From the arch's center, the sculpted head of a bull stared down with vacant eyes at Alexis and Mercadier as they strolled through in broad daylight.

Inside the Stock Yards lay a wide-open space crisscrossed by a nest of railroad tracks, a testament to all of the cattle cars brought to slaughter in this concentration camp for animals. Alexis had scouted this site specifically for Mercadier's needs.

She swept her arm across the area. "First opened on Christmas Day in 1865, more than 400 million livestock butchered in the Yards over the next fifty years. So much death and decay drained into the south fork of the Chicago River, the local yokels called it the 'Bubbly Creek'."

Alexis smiled at Mercadier as they looked out over the desolate space of carnage. "So, is this something you wanted to see?" She knew the answer already, because they had been in sync over everything so far. Being with Mercadier pushed Alexis beyond all her usual ambitions and appetites, especially the passion for dark magic.

Her first taste of such power had come as a Sister of Jeanne d'Arc. A captured Adept of Set attempted to bribe her with spells of youth. She had killed him, stole his incantations, and found they performed as promised. Ever since then, she had found the mystic highway much freer than religion. Mercadier was now her ultimate ride to glory.

As she predicted, the delighted smile of a child with a wrapped gift, grew on Mercadier's face in the middle of the Yards. Alexis watched in anticipation as he closed his eyes, spread his arms, and stretched out his senses to embrace the lingering essence of slaughter.

"The aroma of death... the scent of panic... such a delicious fragrance," he said.

Alexis placed a hand on his arm and could feel the destructive power of this place coursing through Mercadier's veins. She felt him shiver as the hellish energy of the grounds resonated with his own corrupt soul.

"Yes. Magnificent. Like Paris, like Tayasal, but even more sorrow. Herded in fear. Butchered for pleasure. Sacrificed for Man's hunger." Mercadier turned his head and appeared to hear echoes of death swirling about him. "Pitiful bleats, terrified bellows. Their deaths call to me."

Swaying like a symphony conductor, he channeled all the noise and energy around him. He reached out a hand and pulled it back as if he had grabbed hold of something.

Vibrations thrummed through the earth, wide cracks shot across the dirt. A dark crevice opened in the ground. Alexis thought she could hear the ghostly

cries of doomed animals emanating from the once blood soaked earth.

"Screaming, bleeding. Tortured spirits begging for release," he intoned. "Come to me."

Demonic hog squeals pierced through a din of bestial panic. Alexis wrinkled her face in distaste as something long dead emerged from the dirt. A decayed cloven hoof breached the surface. A maggot infested snout snuffled into the air.

"Gross. Please not in daylight," she said.

Mercadier relaxed and lowered his hand. With the flow of energy cut off from the rising dead, a mewling squeal stopped abruptly. Something heavy thudded to the stockyard floor.

He opened his eyes and smiled at what lay in front of him. "That'll do, pig," he said to the Hogzilla carcass twitching at his feet. "That'll do."

Alexis shook her head in wonder. Few things in the world surprised her, but Mercadier constantly did. "The Church gave you resurrection powers?"

"Hardly. Those they keep for themselves. It's something I learned along the way." Mercadier gave Alexis a satisfied smile. "You've done well. This city does promise the bounty we need to fill this world with darkness."

"Oh, this is just an appetizer," she murmured as they left the half-summoned animal behind.

Embraced by the fading afternoon light, the bronze statue of a Confederate soldier stood at the top of a 30-foot tall obelisk in Oak Woods Cemetery. With his arms crossed, hat in hand, and head slouched downward, he was a mournful specter of a time when brother killed

brother over property or an enslaved people depending on the colors they wore. An intermediate block of granite with "CONFEDERATE DEAD" chiseled in it and a pyramidal base with green metal lists of honored dead supported the obelisk.

"Subtle." Mercadier snickered at the latest stop on Alexis's necromantic tour of Chicago. They had skipped the site of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre to come here because he wasn't interested in a place where only seven men had died, no matter how bloody their exit. Besides, the North Clark Street garage where the mobsters were Tommy-gunned had been bulldozed into a parking lot for a nursing home.

Alexis pointed at the weathered bronze rolls of honor beneath the statue, more ingredients for their doomsday brew.

"Camp Douglas was a Union prison in Chicago. Eighty acres of Hell. Southern soldiers ill equipped for our lovely Midwest winters, died from hypothermia, small pox, cholera, starvation, filth, and vermin. A little forced labor, a little torture. Six thousand rebel soldiers died miserably, wishing they had found a bullet or cannonball with their name on it."

Mercadier stretched out his hand as he had in the Stock Yards, but this time he didn't appear intent on raising any of the dead, not yet. This time he seemed to take psychic inventory of the human corpses beneath the ground.

"They're buried in trenches... in circles around here... yes, yes. Tennessee Artillery... Alabama Infantry... Texas Cavalry. They will make fine hosts," he said with satisfaction.

But then he lowered his hand and gave Alexis the knowing wink of a wine connoisseur who had just caught a 2004 Château Margaux being passed off as a vintage bottle of 1982.

"But it doesn't come close to six thousand dead."

Her face beamed in adoration. "Very good. Only about six hundred bodies were moved to this site. How did you become such a delight?"

Mercadier held back for a moment, but then with a pleased glance around their surroundings, he relented.

"My new life began Easter Monday, on my way to pay respects to Richard's mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine." He placed a hand under her chin, gently lifted it to admire her features. "You remind me of her. She made me who I am."

Alexis turned her head away. She didn't like being compared to someone's mother, even the Lionheart's.

Mercadier hurried to mollify her. "I speak of a woman with both the beauty and iron to first marry the King of France, force an annulment, and then marry the King of England. She led her own troops in the Crusades, a true Amazon queen. A woman without compare, until now."

"Well, that's different." Alexis smiled again. "How did she make you who you are?"

"She gave birth to the only two men I ever followed into battle. After Richard died, his brother John hired my sword. His darker ambitions suited my black mood at the time."

"Sounds like my kind of man."

"Like you, he had a passion for written things. Dragged about a library wagon of books, even into battle. Bastard historians never gave him his due."

Anger crept into Mercadier's voice. "I helped King John consolidate his power, ravaged every traitor I could find. The Pope feared John's power. He decided to excommunicate John and on that Easter Monday, before I could reach Eleanor, his papal assassins attacked me."

Alexis had never seen such fury in Mercadier's eyes. Even when he killed his victims, he did so with composure or delight, but never rage. Her heart began to race with his apparent rush of emotion.

Mercadier tried to slow his breathing down. "I dispatched the first three cowards, but the fourth managed to wound me. He was one of Brandin's man, a rival. That bastard. The remaining five captured me for execution." His voice lowered to a deadly calm. "Right before they put a sword to my neck, a priest with long black robes offered me a pardon, a bargain. More power than I had ever known would be mine if I obeyed him and put my skills to use for the Church."

"They made you into a gargoyle," Alexis said, eyes dancing in excitement to know his origin.

"Yes. For the rest of the world, Mercadier died that day." Instead of sadness, his bearing swelled with pride. "Woe to the Church's enemies, Gargoyle Mercadier was born. The Gates of Hell became mine to patrol. I battled demons that attempted to escape and sent people to their damnation."

Knowing her own pleasure from the hunt and kill, Alexis shuddered with joy as she imagined Gargoyle Mercadier slaughtering enemies at will.

"Of course, they neglected to mention the curse of stone," he said. "But I discovered that consuming souls kept me from being stone for just a day or two. When

we open the way to Xibalba, the Dark Souls we unleash from Hell will bring everlasting night to this world. The Sun and Hunahpu will finally die. I'll be free of the Church's curse. Never again to be stone."

Mercadier's intensity engulfed Alexis with desire. She stepped close to him, breaths quickening, completely aroused. "As long as you're flesh and bone now," she said as she kissed his neck. Turned on by its smoothness, she opened his shirt and ran her hands over his chest.

Starved of carnal delights for so long, Mercadier was not as patient. With rough, hungry kisses, he tore at her clothes. His hands roamed over her body.

The sun started to go down over Chicago.

With just a sliver of sunset left and in the middle of the cemetery, Alexis stood naked and in complete ecstasy. Passion left her impervious to the bite of winter. The ice-cold air heightened the jolts of heat within. She dug fingers into a rigid tombstone before her while relishing Mercadier's similar hardness from behind. Trying to satisfy their hunger and desire, frantic cries echoed off the concrete angels in the deserted grounds.

The graveyard darkened as the sun disappeared.

"Free from the day. You by my side," Mercadier said in a rough whisper. Consumed with lust and the coming of nightfall, the skin of his arm turned color again. Not flesh, not stone, but mottled and blotchy, a demonic leather texture.

Pleasure flushed Alexis's face. His scent was strong, exciting to her, earthen like fertile ground. Mercadier was behind her exploring, touching. Then he transformed into a gargoyle. He became a

monstrous, violating presence she liked and wanted more. Something so wrong, but she was so gorgeous and into it that if the dead man could see from beneath the grave marker she clutched and pounded with her hands, he would have not been able to look away.

Gargoyle wing tips rose up on both sides of Alexis and reached around her. She stood straight up and turned around for a frontal embrace. Drawing himself to full stature, Gargoyle Mercadier held the nude beauty in his arms.

"Let's destroy the world. Tear it up," she whispered.

Giant wings stretched out and taut flight membranes wrapped about her, enveloping her in sensual bliss.

"The Real Beauty and the Beast of Chicago" ushered in the night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What I have done bears witness to the plight of His flock and my devotion to their salvation. I have moved Heaven, Earth, and Hell to save them. May God have mercy on my soul and that of His sacrificial lamb.

Meditations of St. Romain

In a night more lonely than usual, Michele dragged the Shakespearean director's image across one monitor. Police photos of MacBeth, Banquo, Three Witches, and Fay filled the other flat panel, all dead at the crime scene. At the same time, she frequently refreshed the GPS position of a tracer she had placed on Alexis's limo. She wanted to know that witch's every move.

Michele always tried to silence any of her doubts with non-stop hours of work. This time she had chosen a forbidden path because of a gut feeling. But what if her guts were flawed? What if her internal compass was so messed up that any direction she chose would be wrong? So far, following her intuition had not led to any "happy ever afters" in her life. The only inner voices Michele could hear right now were the personal Judge and Jury she always carried around in her mind. Charges of "you should have done this," "you should have done that," and the ever popular "you're just not good enough" verdict echoed over and over.

Massive amounts of guilt flogged her for what she had done to Kincaid. To make matters worse, the sun went down hours ago and he was still stone. Did she

screw up the ritual? Did she turn him forever into a cinder block? Did he need some kind of help from her to “hatch?” Christ almighty, she needed to talk to someone.

An incoming call beeped on her computer. *No caller ID*, she groaned. It must be the Monsignor. He was the last person she wanted to talk with. Even though he had warned her to stay away from Kincaid, she rationalized that St. Romain must have reacted the same way to his no win situation. But the caller wouldn’t go away.

She finally answered the audio-only call over her speakers. “Monsignor, I really don’t have the time to talk.”

“Sister, one of your vows is obedience, a sacred tradition,” the caller replied.

Michele stopped fidgeting in her chair. The voice coming out of the speakers wasn’t the Monsignor’s, it wasn’t even male. It was Mother Superior. Her voice had the bottom-of-the-well echo that she knew came from the woman’s analog speakerphone.

“Really, I expected more from you. What is the point of defeating so many personal demons just to unleash real ones? I’m very disappointed.”

Whatever issues Michele had about authority with the Monsignor, they didn’t compare to the personal angst she felt with Mother Superior, one of the main judges in her mental courtroom. She never felt good enough in the older woman’s presence. About to be caught committing the worst offense of their order; her gut wrenched sideways. She lashed back. “What? I don’t know what you’re... we haven’t spoken in

months and you call to tell me you're disappointed? Your expectations are why I left in the first place!"

A scratching sound came over the computer speakers. Michele recognized it as the quill pen Mother Superior used whenever she wrote personal letters or graded papers.

"Ah, the ironies of a round Earth," Mother Superior said over the noise of her pen. "Runaway long enough, you end up right where you started. I told you that when I first found you, hopping trains and brawling at the station. Our traditions protect this world. The ritual you're contemplating should only be performed by the Bishop of Rouen."

Oh, thank God, she doesn't know what I've done. "Did the Monsignor call you? If we're all equal to God, why aren't women allowed to perform the ceremony?" Michele asked, instead of confessing her actions.

"Why does everyone miss the crossfire at this corner?" Mother Superior muttered. The sound of a prolonged lineout with the quill tip was followed by the noise of rapid scribbling. She was definitely grading papers, probably the Convent Battle Plan exercise. Michele could picture a stack of layouts with fields of fire and weapon placements, all red marked with C and B- letter grades.

Mother Superior continued in a louder tone directed at Michele. "The Carmelite Sisters take a vow of humility, the Little Sisters of the Poor make one of hospitality, and the 'Royal, Celestial, and Military Order of Our Lady of Mercy' swear to save people in captivity even if it means—"

"Taking their place as hostages," Michele completed the worn litany. "Yes, I know, I know."

"Then you also know it's our vow to watch over the Gargoyles. It's the Bishop's responsibility to select them. They pick them. We protect them. It has nothing to do with gender. It's a question of duty. The consequences of breaking these rules are extreme. I don't want to lose you like Alexis."

"I'm not Alexis!" Michele smacked her wireless mouse on the table.

"Then stop obsessing over her GPS location and send me all the information from the archive you have on this situation," finished Mother Superior.

"How did you know I was following her?" Michele glanced around half expecting to see Mother Superior standing behind her. She so wanted to tell her everything and ask if Kincaid would be okay. "All right, all right. It will take an hour to upload everything. Finish grading your papers. But you should know – no one ever gets the gun placements at the corner right."

"You did. Just one of the reasons why I think you—"

"Got to go, talk later." Michele didn't really want to hear what Mother Superior was about to say next, besides she heard something crash to the ground in Kincaid's room.

She ran out of the archive.

Mother Superior frowned at the silence of her speakerphone. Glancing at her quill pen, she realized that Michele deduced her paper grading from the sound of its tip. Putting down the pen in exasperation, she thought of how much she missed the strong willed nun.

It still surprised her that Michele had taken a leave of absence to accept the liaison position with the Bishop's Office. She especially missed her presence during training days at the Convent. Even though each subject and skills class had its own instructor, Mother Superior liked to keep everyone on edge by showing up without warning to point out a flaw in technique or teach a detail of theology and then disappear. In the last few years, she had come to rely on Sister Michele to cover half of the classes spread across the grounds.

Perhaps it was a sign of age, but Mother Superior did feel tired from monitoring this day's late sessions. She had started off debriefing Sister Regina on her team's clash with a banshee whose octaves could shatter body armor. About an hour later, she joined Sister Leong's lecture on the Marian apparitions at Fatima, Lourdes, and Medjugorje and helped clarify the order of events that preceded the visions St. Bernadette experienced on February 11, 1858.

After the lecture, Mother Superior spent time at the shooting range convincing Sister Mary Alice to try a new semi-automatic sniper rifle with a power scope. The young marksman was very reluctant to give up the bolt-action rifle with iron sights that she had nicknamed "Simo" in honor of the Finnish sniper from WWII. The strategies and five hundred kills of the "White Death" were admittedly not to be dismissed lightly. She brought an end to her day by grading papers and calling Sister Michele.

Although Mother Superior was a demanding taskmaster, she treated every nun with great respect. As a result, the Sisters were closer to each other than blood relatives. Most of them no longer had families,

especially since all the new recruits suffered either a traumatic loss or a recent severing of ties before their entrance to the Convent.

Mother Superior did not differ from the rest of her Sisters when it came to loss and trauma. When she was twelve, a shapeshifter had killed her parents. The police report said her Mother “died” in a car accident, but what survived and returned home from the crash as “Father” never seemed right.

The counselors first chalked up her Father’s oddity to his grief yet when things didn’t get better, the doctors decided it was her own bereavement that complicated the growing quirks in the father-daughter relationship. They ignored her complaints.

But Sister Fina, a nun assigned to Social Services, did listen to the young girl and strove to protect her. Fina’s vigilance saved Mother Superior when “Father” shed his skin under a new moon and attempted to sacrifice her in the back yard. As the nun was about to finish off the monster, the girl that would become Mother Superior insisted on doing it herself. Even though she knew it wasn’t her father, it was still hard slaying his doppelganger. Killing it left her completely alone in the world.

Instead of an orphanage, Sister Fina brought her to the Convent where she found a new home and eventually took her own solemn vows as a Sister of Jeanne d’Arc. The rigors of religious life and combat training made those years the happiest she had ever known. And of all the Sisters she had trained, only one of them was the real choice to become her successor. But given Michele’s level of independence, Mother

Superior worried about what the Sister may have already done without telling her.

Kincaid stood along a strip of storefronts on a deserted street without another person in sight. It was nighttime, but the last thing he remembered was choking as his breath turned to dust at dawn. Maybe he was dead. Maybe St. Romain had rejected him. Either way, he sure wasn't a gargoyle. At least he was wearing his old Cubs jacket.

The store entrances were shuttered by steel roll-downs except for one that had an oddly familiar wooden door. Layers of chipped paint suggested age like the rings of a redwood, its dark metal doorknob worn smooth by the infinite palms that had grabbed on before him. Carved into the archway above was a doubled barred cross, a Cross of Lorraine, the type Michele had filled his head about before tearing out his heart. He couldn't place it before, but now he remembered seeing it as a boy. This door belonged to the street chapel his mother had always dragged him to for Sunday service. Right now, he didn't care if this was the afterlife or some insane dream, but she was the one person he hoped to see.

Kincaid pulled the door open and entered.

No chorus of angels, no heavenly clouds. Just wood panel walls and folding chairs, it could have easily passed as a vacant car insurance office. But even without stained glass windows or gothic arches, he remembered this setting as a place of worship, unchanged from his boyhood memories and it echoed with blessed flashes of his Mother.

The chapel's aura of spirituality had always come from three elderly women, ever-present, just as they were now. On a platform at the front, Nona, an older African American woman testified with exuberance. Two other grandmotherly women, Latino and Lithuanian by birth, Decima and Morta, sat and bore witness. These Old Time Religion Fates imbued this place with timeless reverence and even after so many years, Kincaid recognized them immediately.

Nona testified with her eyes closed. "Sisters, the signs are all around us. We have strayed. The Gods of Light and Dark have reached the crossroads. Yes-uh, this is no time for begging, no time for bargaining."

"That's right. Time grows short," Decima chimed in as she brushed back her white hair.

Nona waggled her hands on high. "I see light in the sky, but the chasm is dark. Both are everlasting. Will they bring forth life or death?"

"The End, the Rising. Proclaim it sister," Morta intoned.

Nona stiffened and opened her eyes as Kincaid walked slowly up the center aisle. She fixed her eyes upon him. "The Rapture, mm-hmm, oh, Lord, the Horsemen cometh."

Decima turned about with a frown on her face, but smiled at the sight of Kincaid. "Oh, it's Robin's boy." The petite woman came over and hugged him. "Look how you've grown," she remarked then led him to the front.

"You remember me?" he asked.

"Of course. We're all family in this house. I remember you used to love my plantains."

"Not as much as my šakotis," Morta said as she joined them. A consummate baker, her robust figure showed the appreciation she had for her own gourmet creations.

Šakotis. Memories he had buried with his Mother began to resurface. It had been forever since he had thought of the weird pastry that looked more like a column of spiked ocean coral than dessert. He could remember his Mother learning how to drip batter onto a rotating spit to create the branches of this magical cake. She would laugh as Morta, looking much as she did now, guided her through the delicate process. They would always let him dust the cakes with powdered sugar.

"Come say hello to Auntie Nona," Decima said.

Nona watched Kincaid with a steady rhythm of "mm-hmm, mm-hmm." She had a wary look, one of judgment that stopped him from coming any closer. Curls of dyed red-brown hair entwined with unkempt strands of grey hung about Nona's face. They gave her a wild appearance.

"No, that's OK," he said, backing away.

But Morta put a hand on his arm and ushered him forward. "Oh, cut it out. Why else did you come?"

"I don't know. Don't even know if I'm dead or psychotic or so drunk I can't remember how I got here."

"Doesn't matter, if you're here, you're here." Decima gave him a little push.

Kincaid shuffled forward. Nona always frightened him as a kid although she had never hurt him at all. He felt she could look right through him and a scolding seemed to constantly hover in the wings. With

everything going on in his life, letting her get a close look at him didn't feel like such a good idea.

He drew back slightly as Nona reached out a hand and placed it on his head. The other two women smiled.

"Oh, Lord. Lord, Lord, Lord," Nona proclaimed. Kincaid felt a rush of spirit as she swayed back and forth.

"Your mother prayed for you all the time. She was so good, so good. Prayed you would find your way. Prayed you wouldn't follow your father. Trapped by your past, trapped by your pain. Too stubborn, too frightened, too angry," she scolded.

With head bowed, Kincaid grimaced. There was nothing like getting raked over the coals of perdition by your scary aunt on your worst day. He just hoped he could get this over before she looked any deeper.

"The mark of Cain!" she yelled.

Too late, he thought. Startled by the revelation, Nona opened her eyes and looked deep into his. "You bear the mark of a killer, but does it rule your soul? What say you to God?"

The other two women also looked alarmed.

Kincaid didn't break his eyes away, yet he didn't answer immediately. It's not that he planned on lying, but the schoolboy in him had to gather some backbone. With a deep breath he confessed, "I failed everybody. But He took them all from me. My Mother. Frank. I've lost my faith in Him." He braced for the brimstone she would now unleash.

Nona's stare drilled into him. But then she threw her head back and barked a laugh that would scare

children. "Lost your way. Lost your faith? Foolish man, you can't lose what you never had."

Ouch. Now he was a fool and a murderer. This was such a bad idea.

"You've waited so long for this," she continued. "Trying to find the right path, a purpose. A sign from the God that you don't even think exists." Nona then radiated a warm smile and gentleness he had never seen before. "The door is open. It's a hard road, but stop looking for another way. She'll walk it with you."

"What? Who, she? Like God-She or Michele..."

But before he could finish, Nona collapsed to the ground and convulsed on the floor. Her limbs flailed about like a mad puppet. Decima and Morta ignored her and gathered happily about him.

Kincaid nodded at their support, but Nona's rolling and thrashing on the ground distracted him. "Uh, does she need help? Shouldn't we do something?"

"Oh, that's just Nona. Best leave her be. I wish I had time to whip up something for you," Morta said. "But it's been night for a while. Maybe you can come back during the day. Now, it's time for you to go."

His eyes opened. No aunts, scary or otherwise. It was night still and found himself again in the sparse room of the sanctuary. But this time he was alone.

Reaching out to get out of bed, he knocked over a glass of water instead. The glass fell off a nightstand and smashed to the floor. Something didn't feel right. His body felt heavy, the kind of sluggishness that follows a day of hard labor or an extreme binge of food. Fighting gravity and inertia, he sat up.

Michele hurried into the room. Her eyes widened.

"Uh, sorry about the glass," he said. "Had more crazy dreams, about doors, plantains..." His voice sounded hoarse, rough. Still dazed and not entirely alert, the image of Auntie Nona convulsing on the ground stuck like a hangover. He managed to stand. Something hit the ground with a loud slap. Glancing back, he saw leathery wing tips touching the floor. Wing tips. Those were the tips of *his* wings.

All the tortuous moments of the Privilege, all the insane church legends flooded back. Now he was awake.

"Oh, shit. What do I look like?"

"It doesn't matter."

The former policeman brushed a hand against the leather straps of a Roman legion belt that covered a loincloth around his waist. "What's with the skirt then?"

"A little modesty never hurts."

Nodding blankly, he plodded toward a mirror across the room. Every joint felt frozen, more restricted than the arthritis that usually slowed his movements upon wakening. *I've been Quasimodoed*, he thought. St. Romain's power had not reacted well to his screw-ups and wasted life. But then some of the stiffness cracked away as a few of his muscles broke free from their stony slumber.

Looking down as he walked, his skin had a dusting of something dark and granular, nothing sparkly, more like black sand. When his thick fingers opened and closed, sharp claws occasionally extended from the tips. He should be freaked out, maybe babbling incoherently. But ever since Frank died, life wasn't life. Just a bad dream that wouldn't end in spite of how

many times he screamed for forgiveness or begged for a chance to do things differently. Never one for the big picture, the ragged boxer within him kept moving one step after another until he reached the mirror.

Gazing at the reflection, whatever evidence or presence of "Kincaid" was gone. No trace of five o'clock shadow or stubble existed since his face was now covered by skin decidedly inhuman. Beneath the bumps of black sand there were cracks and creases of a thick hide that looked like battered leather. There were also scattered patches of earthen textures that still appeared to be transforming from sleeping stone phase to awake creature status.

Beyond textures and vestiges of stone, he stared at the broad grotesque features confronting him. Deep sunken eyes, strong orbital ridges, sharp cheekbones, exaggerated chin, and at the top of his forehead protruded freaking horns. Nothing gaudy as a bighorn sheep's and more goat than bull, but there they were. It was as if every mistake and sin he ever committed found a hideous way to express itself. His own Dorian Gray portrait not hidden in some secret room but travel-sized and displayed plainly for all to see. He was a gargoyle.

"St. Romain must have hated my insides. Made me a monster," rumbled his new voice. He realized it wasn't hoarse, but actually deeper with the resonance of stone.

"No. The monster is Mercadier," said Michele. "He abused the power of the gargoyle. Slaughtered men, women, children. I'm sure he plans to do it again. It's his nature. The measure of a man, your soul sets you apart. Not what form it takes."

His pitch dark eyes did retain a lingering human quality, but he closed them to shut out the frightful vision of what he had become. He struggled to reconcile his loss of humanity with his desire to avenge Frank's death. Maybe he should have just let things go like everyone else. Maybe he should have thought twice before he agreed to become a freak.

But he couldn't let it go. His anger, his grief, his guilt all re-kindled a small flicker of purpose. Perhaps along with the wings and claws on the outside, St. Romain's Privilege had changed something within him. Perhaps the chapel dream of his aunts, who weren't really family but just seemed like it, gave him enough support to move forward. Although his new appearance smacked of Lucifer's influence somewhere in this crossroads deal, he realized he did not feel the weight one might expect when in debt to the Morning Star. He had not bargained for gold, knowledge, or mad skills on the guitar, and what little remained of his soul seemed lighter. Or maybe it was a sense of freedom that comes with being so completely screwed.

He slid one foot forward. It didn't seem so heavy this time. Fresh strength and energy awoke throughout his body. Something clicked. A short-circuited neuron, a jagged emotion, a random clue in a case; something within that didn't fit, abruptly fell into place like the stubborn piece of a jigsaw puzzle that finds the right spot.

His eyes opened as a memory dawned upon him, one that had bedeviled him almost as much as those of his father. "There is a part of Chicago police history I haven't told you. When I was a kid — my reason for becoming a cop."

"Most kids that survive domestic trauma want to be..."

"No. It was Fred Hampton."

"Who?"

"Fred Hampton. He was a Black Panther leader. The police raided his home, shot him twice, point blank in the head. We grew up thinking the cops had executed him. Thought that they could shoot anybody they wanted. In my neighborhood there were so many bad ones. We were scared of them, hated them. Yet I became one. Everyone thought I was crazy, black man joining the cops. Said I betrayed them. Would have been better if had joined a gang and ran a corner. But I wanted to make sure it was my hands that held justice. I wanted a chance to do it right."

He took another glance into the mirror. This time he viewed his reflection with a different appreciation.

"We're way past skin color now." Twitching up a corner of his mouth, he could see rough, yellowed teeth, but at least there were no protruding fangs like Gargoyle Mercadier's. "With this... we're even. With this power, I can take Mercadier out. Make him pay for Frank's death. It's what I asked for. You know what? I'm good with it."

"What?" Michele's mouth fell open at the unexpected change in his tone and demeanor.

"Yeah. Now the Devil's on the outside."

He attempted to stand straight. Two wings rose up from his back and flexed at their mid joints. Opening them even further, a thrilling sensation ran down his arms. He clenched a mighty fist of lethal claws. More strength coursed through him, triggering a primal call to test this new power.

Michele looked uncomfortable, the kind of antsy shiftiness displayed by guilty parties he used to bust in his former life.

"This is my fault," she said. Her hand lifted to silence his objections. "No, hear me out. I'm not trying to take back what I've done. I do guilt, that's the Catholic in me, but I try not to do regret. Make the next step better than the last is what Mother Superior always says."

"Mother Superior? She sounds like a hoot."

"Just you wait."

Michele set herself firmly in front of him. "I put you on this path with St. Romain. But you won't walk it alone. We'll fight the good fight at night. I'll watch your back during the day. It's part of the deal. It's not what two sane people would want, but I wouldn't trade it for the world. Kincaid, I'll stay by your side, always."

He nodded then waved an index finger. "Not Kincaid. My mother's name was Robin and she wanted the world to know I was her son. She gave me my middle name, Robinson. But all the kids teased me with 'Danger, Danger, Will Robinson' and 'Robby the Robot' jokes. So, Mom called me 'Bobby.' As I got older, my friends called me 'Bob'."

Michele shook her head. "Gargoyle Mercadier and Alexis plan to destroy the world. He's been at it for centuries. You're brand new to this. Just a rookie."

Then she smiled. "Let's go get them, Gargoyle Bob."

CHAPTER NINE

About a week prior to the lunar New Year, the Kitchen God, the most important domestic deity, is transported to the Jade Emperor, the ruler of the heavens, to report on the family's behavior from the previous year.

Rosemary Gong - "Good Luck Life" - 2005

Gargoyle Bob stood on the church steeple's roof while Michele balanced on a ledge. From this high view of the city, he took in everything he could see and hear. Streetlights flickered. Pedestrians hurried through the cold. An L train rumbled by as families chatted away in warmly lit apartment windows. The alleys didn't even smell so bad from up here.

"My city. My streets."

It comforted him that the world appeared how he remembered it. But then he heard a distant howl followed by a wailing screech, noises he used to dismiss as human or machine. He shook his head. Chicago was filled with more weirdness than he ever suspected.

"Things are going to be a little different," she said.

"No shit." He grimaced with pain. "There is one thing I didn't tell you."

Michele looked quickly at him with concern.

"I hate heights," he said.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, just one way to get over it." Peeking down at the street below, "This looks like it's high enough."

Gargoyle Bob shrugged his shoulders. Giant wings unfolded, long bones lifted up and out, membranous skin flaps spread wide and full. An impressive wingspan reached out from his back and then turned its tips to the sky.

"How do I use these?"

"Don't know exactly. It's a leap of faith."

"You know I'm not a big one for faith."

"Got from here to the street to find some." Michele stopped herself and with a softer, more encouraging tone, "The leap you've already taken with St. Romain was huge. Trust in what you've become. See yourself flying. Just keep an eye on the horizon. Make sure the sky's above you and the ground's below or you'll fly right into the ground."

Gargoyle Bob knew the twisted path he had taken to avenge Frank's death wasn't through any faith in St. Romain. It had more to do with Michele. But instead of saying anything, he tried to picture himself flying.

"Nothing fancy. Try your wings out. Just be back before dawn," she warned.

He jumped.

Gravity won an instant victory. Wind screamed in his ears as he plummeted toward the ground. Building windows flashed passed in a zoetrope blur of light and images. Cold air jetted into his open mouth, robbing him of breath and stifled any protest he might have uttered.

The sky and earth spun everywhere he looked. He couldn't find the horizon to tell up from down. No clue to which direction he should go, assuming he could even fly. But the more he fell, the more that asphalt became a bigger and bigger part of his view. It raced

up to smack the life out of him. He closed his eyes. *At least it will all be over.*

On the roof, Michele cringed, unable to look away and unknowingly muttered what he was thinking himself, "This is going to hurt."

Inches from flattening into a street pancake, gargoyle wings caught the air with a tight snap. They stretched out, straining to break his falling momentum. Gravity pulled hard to splatter him against the ground. But his wings fought back. His fear of heights screamed encouragement. Unnaturally strong muscles, hollow wing bones, and taut midnight skin began to flap up and down. His free fall came to a fluttering halt.

Gargoyle Bob rose into the air.

His wings had taken over by reflex. They sought airborne freedom with mighty strokes that whooshed through the dark. He didn't stop to contemplate the fact he had just entered the same niche of aviation impossibility as the bumblebee. He also didn't understand that unlike the hyperkinetic wing beats of the bee, it was the unearthly strength in his gargoyle wings that shot him skyward at a dizzying rate. Even with his fear of heights, going up was whole lot better than falling.

Yet even with mystical instinct and power on his side, Gargoyle Bob was still "just a rookie." He swam his arms out in a clumsy freestyle, kicking his legs to make some headway. But those motions just threw him off balance. *Got to relax, got to chill, you look stupid*, he told himself. Or at least he thought those were his own thoughts, but after all the mind-bending moments with St. Romain and the Prisoner who the hell really knew?

Trying to let the new reactions take over, he extended his arms and legs. Instead of flailing all over they sought steadier alignments. Beginning to wobble less, he managed to gain more altitude. His extremities proved more helpful for course changes and flight stability than propulsion. With wings spread wide, he glided through a canyon of buildings still struggling to regain his bearings.

“Okay, okay. I can do this. If I can just get—”

A gust of wind upset the tenuous equilibrium and threw everything off course. Again, he tried to take control of flying, another bad idea. Instead of responding naturally, his wings collided awkwardly with each other. The blast slammed him into the black glass of the Sears Tower. A multitude of cracks spread out from the point of impact, but the window didn’t shatter into pieces. Instead he glanced off the broken surface and tumbled down out of control.

Gargoyle Bob crashed upon a track of the ‘L’ train. Ready for take-off a sudden blinding light and blaring horn surprised him. A subway train rushed closer at full-throttle, twelve cars of graffiti and steel, dying to smash and shred him under its screeching wheels.

He leapt off the tracks.

The train roared passed, sound and fury fading as it missed its third rail meal. Beneath the tracks, he clung to a trestle as the on-time beast rumbled and rattled overhead toward its next stop.

“Flying’s for the birds,” he grumbled. While a stable flight seemed impossible, Gargoyle Bob hung from the underpass with little effort. His limbs felt infinitely stronger than any time in the boxing ring. He

started to climb through the metal superstructure and then swung his way over the street. Something else he could have never done before.

Moving quickly down the block, Gargoyle Bob noticed an old woman pulling a small folding cart with an even smaller bag of groceries in it. Her face looked down to avoid the wind, but she seemed familiar. Concerned for the woman's safety in the dead of night, he shadowed her down the street.

The old woman kept her head buried in the coat. But even with a bifocal level of myopia, she could see the pair of combat boots that stepped in front of her. A street punk blocked the way. When she looked up at him, Gargoyle Bob recognized the endangered person as Grandma Zee.

Jimmy "Ripstick" Wilson flashed a knife and smiled as the blade went back and forth. Addled well before a dependence on cheap designer drugs, he sported random piercings and shabby self-inflicted tattoos. His friends called him "Ripstick" because he had stolen one from a kid and then shredded his skin in a fall across the pavement.

"Hey, old bitty. What have you got in your basket?" said Ripstick as he towered over the diminutive woman.

Grandma Zee just stared, unimpressed.

"Come on now. I want to know."

"Not for you. Don't need to know."

Ready to pounce on the mugger, Gargoyle Bob paused when he heard the strength in her voice. Besides, he didn't want to give the woman a heart attack with his new frightening appearance.

"Oh, that's cold. Give me your money. Wait, I'm hungry. Give me what's in the bag!" Ripstick shouted.

"Ugh," grunted Grandma Zee in the dismissive soul shriveling tone only a dragon woman or supreme family matriarch could utter. She looked him in the eye and demanded, "Make up your mind."

"What? I'm so going to kill you!"

Ripstick stepped closer, wanting to bring fear to her wrinkled face. But he caught sight of something above and behind that brought terror to his own instead.

Gargoyle Bob hung upside down from the shadows. He wasn't going to let any harm come to Grandma Zee even though she seemed quite capable of handling things. Keeping a close eye on the thug, he discovered that emanations of the man's rapid mood cycles were still palpable from this distance. Not only were his abilities to sense feelings amplified, Gargoyle Bob could perceive other personal qualities that registered on a whole different spectrum. The smell of wet dog clung to the man and a tongue-hanging, open-mouth canine pant marked his voice.

All of that vanished in a burst of fear when Ripstick caught sight of him. He scrambled away crying, "The Bat... the Bat... the Batman!"

"Idiot. Etrigan, Man-bat, or Hawkman, maybe. But not Batman," Gargoyle Bob muttered as he fully opened his wings. "This ain't no damn cape."

Grandma Zee looked around and then above her, but Gargoyle Bob had pulled back into the shadows. She shook her head. "You know, my eyes aren't that bad. Might as well come out. Let me thank you for your help."

"Don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Now there's a voice I haven't heard lately. Come on, let me get a good look at you."

Out of the shadows, Gargoyle Bob hovered down with a beat of his outstretched wings. Upon landing, he pulled his wings around himself and waited for either the revulsion or fear his new countenance might bring.

But Grandma Zee just gave his monstrous body a mere glance. "It's been even longer since I've seen a gargoyle." She peered closely at his face. "Always the saddest creature of the night, always with the pain and suffering. The sorrowful leper of the underworld. You wear it well though. What have you gotten yourself into, Officer?"

The shock he expected for her hit him instead. "What? How did you know? Why aren't you screaming like numb nuts?"

"I told you. I see people for what they are. Aside from the claws and wings, you're still you inside. Plus, even with the rumbly-tumbly sound, it's your voice.

"Great. Just takes a pair of glasses or stretchy eye mask to hide some people's secret identity. Got this complete nightmare makeover and you can still tell mine with a peek."

"Yes, but I wish I could forget how some of my other customers look like under everything."

"Your *special* customers," he said with a growing awareness that Zee's uniqueness stemmed from something deeper than her exotic cuisine. "Who are they?"

"Some call them the Others. But that's almost racist since they're all different. Can't just lump everybody under one label."

Gargoyle Bob recalled Michele's use of the term "Others" in the church but decided not to mention it since Grandma Zee already appeared pissed enough about the inequity of the term. He filed away the objection, since it appeared a useful reference for taking a certain know-it-all down a peg or two.

"Some of them are original creatures, full-on werewolves and vampires. But like gargoyles they're not all bad," Grandma Zee continued. "Most are just echoes, humans with drops of blood from a deity or a supernatural that bedded someone in their family line."

Her voice dropped to a wistful level, eyes stared into the night. "A few are leftovers of a divinity no one believes in anymore or simply forgotten who they were. Could have sworn I served Enki a fish taco the other day."

"Enki?" He had never seen her look so sad before.

"Sumerian God of Freshwater. He's drawn to the Great Lakes but can't remember why."

The level of empathy in her voice made Gargoyle Bob take new stock of Grandma Zee. Along with the usual flow of emotions, he felt something different about her. An undercurrent of energy, a hum of divine power that he suspected had gone undetected until his own recent transformation.

"That cartoon plaque on your cart. It didn't just remind you of someone. That was your husband. You were the Kitchen God's wife?"

Grandma Zee nodded, teardrops a moment away. "Chinese families worshipped him because he reports on everyone to Heaven. Well, guess who had to write all those reports."

He tilted his head at her.

"That's right, I did. And I got sick of it. Sick of everything." She pulled herself together. The tears never had a chance to fall. "By the way, the reports on you are better than you think."

"Really? Thanks. Guess I'm glad I stopped that mugger. Was he part werewolf or something? I was getting some weird kennel vibes from him."

"Him? More waste than werewolf. Just enough lupine blood to give lycanthropes a bad name. Pathetic. In my day, I would have had a wallet and watch in the first minute."

Gargoyle Bob smiled then caught the scent of something wonderful in her shopping cart. "What do you have in there? Smells great."

Grandma Zee brightened for a moment. "Got some tequila, ramen, and other goodies." But as she mentioned 'goodies,' her face grew serious again. "I was sorry to hear about Frank. He had promise, much more to him than all that attitude he threw around. You're going after the one who killed him?"

"Yes."

"Good. Tear off a wing for me. He's making my customers nervous. They expect a gargoyle to keep the peace, not try to run the whole show. Oh, and take this. You're going to need a snack."

She reached into a paper bag in the cart and lifted out the goody with the tasty aroma – a piece of stinky tofu. "You're ready for it now."

No longer foul to his nose, the stinky tofu had a delicious fragrance. Gargoyle Bob accepted it with melancholy, remembering Frank's zest for the appetizer. He chewed it and swallowed.

A robust flavor lingered in his mouth. "Frank was right. It's great. Ugh, does this mean that durian thing you fed me this summer is going to be my favorite now?" He had gagged on the bizarre prickly fruit that was juicy, but tasted like something filled with old garlic and smelled like feet. It was just wrong. Of course now with his monster wings and new culinary senses that foul fruit would probably sing of sugar and spice to him.

She shrugged. "Maybe. Strong flavors suit you best now. Come by my cart, we'll find out. By the way, if you can get your wing-flapping thing together, take a spin about the Beast and the Cash Register. You might sweep up some of Rollo's garbage around Clark Street. Someone that definitely lands on my naughty report."

"Some of Rollo's muscle? Ignatius?"

The memory of Frank's interest in the spider of Chicago's crime web grabbed hold of him. His partner's death had left so much unfinished business.

"Nah, the Boss of Bosses has hired guns that don't use guns. Suits and tablets. They're the worst. See you around, Officer."

Grandma Zee pulled her cart down the street, whistling a tune that sounded like "Turn to Stone" by the Electric Light Orchestra.

Gargoyle Bob jump rushed his way up the medieval turret of the Chicago Water Tower. The only public building to survive the Chicago Fire, it had inspired the structural design of White Castle restaurants and the logo on their burger sleeves. Usually those square burgers would be manna to him, but he wasn't sure what had happened to his taste buds. He would be

crushed to find out that those morsels of goodness now tasted like roof shingles. Then again, maybe asphalt tiles were delicious at this point. Michele neglected to cover the details of gargoyle metamorphosis, and his new body sure didn't come with a driver's manual. But he had to focus on more pressing matters.

"Grandma's not going to show more balls than me," he said. "I can do this, I can do this," became his mantra while moving up the building. Reaching a height even higher than Michele's church, he gathered himself to jump. "Screw the leap of faith. Next stop Clark Street."

Gargoyle Bob pushed off the wall and launched into the night with determination. His wings beat hard through the air. Not just gliding this time, he muscled out a powerful, aggressive flight. Flying higher to a dizzying altitude far above the tallest skyscraper, the streetlights spread out beneath him like a carpet of sparkling dots. The sounds of the streets didn't reach this level. All he could hear was a breeze blowing in his ears. *No more baby steps. Time to jump into the deep end.* Again, his thoughts or... still didn't matter.

Gargoyle Bob folded his wings and dove.

"I hate this!" he yelled over a now howling wind. The pinpoints of light expanded fast, too fast. Hurtling into re-entry, his scream also grew. But it turned into a shout of triumph as he pulled up before hitting the pavement. He blasted through the air above the streets, passed the Chicago River and into the Loop area of downtown. His wings flexed and tucked. They took him up and down and diagonal, changing directions in a split second. He juked and darted in the herky-jerky flight pattern of a giant bat.

A sudden blast of wind threw him toward the sloped, rounded exterior of the Thompson Center. The flying saucer shaped building covered an entire city block. A mammoth upside down cousin of the circular Guggenheim Museum, the interior floors of government financial offices earned it the nickname, "The Cash Register."

"No, not this time." Just before crashing into the mirrored windows, Gargoyle Bob shifted his weight, slanting away from the building. Right then left, back and forth, he mogul skied through the air across the adjacent plaza.

Regaining his balance and momentum, he had just one final obstacle to avoid. Picasso's gigantic sculpture "The Beast," dominated the open area. Pablo never revealed the true subject of this metallic chimera, but its close-set eyes, long narrow snout of an aardvark, and iron ribs that resembled the markings of a mandrill loomed directly in front of Gargoyle Bob.

Twisting his body, he cleared the top of the multi-storied structure and knifed between the two haunches that arched over its head. Flying free into unobstructed space, he smiled for a moment but that turned into a scowl when he spotted something heinous below him. A luxury SUV weaved about erratically on Clark Street.

"Keep it simple, just fly around," as the reminded himself of Michele's instructions. But Grandma Zee's tip about the area and Rollo was too enticing for him to just flap around.

The driver of the gas-guzzler, a drunken corporate suit named Ellis Capra, bobbed his head to music and fiddled with the GPS map at the same time. Paying no attention to driving, he approached an intersection.

The traffic light turned red. His vehicle didn't slow down in the slightest.

At the intersection, a family sedan with Jenny Pierce and her third grade daughter, Sulli, started to move as their light turned green. Sulli was training monsters on her portable video game. Mom was focused on the road ahead.

A concussive thump deafened them as their whole world exploded into glass fragments.

The SUV plowed into the sedan then spun away in a spin. Rolling over twice, the car catapulted into the air. It dropped upside down with the passenger compartment and roof headed for the ground. But just inches from the pavement and death by compaction, it stopped.

Gargoyle Bob had caught the car.

His face contorted with maximal effort, straining with the extreme weight. Without clear evidence that he could handle this load, his anger just took over. It was a reaction that frequently got him into trouble on the police force. But any delusions that Gargoyle Bob could mimic an *Action Comics* #1 cover pose with the car over his head, vanished the moment his hands got beneath the sedan. Maybe he could lift it after doing the gargoyle thing for more than one night and pumped some weights with a Mini Cooper or two, but not right then.

The sedan slipped, he couldn't hold it. With every muscle screaming at least the car's fall slowed down some. It crunched against the pavement and the few remaining windows cracked, but at least the roof did not collapse on its occupants.

Wasted from the effort, Gargoyle Bob staggered back from the wreck. Then for the second time that night, headlights caught him in a blinding glare.

The fossil fueled SUV knocked Gargoyle Bob across the street. Not stopping to see what it hit, the vehicle drove away with tires burning and sliding across the road.

Inside the overturned sedan, Mom dangled unconscious from her fastened seatbelt. Awake, but also still buckled Sulli struggled to get free, terrified of being trapped. Then she saw something that scared her even more.

Outside of the car, fire burned on the ground. It ignited gasoline seeping from the crash. Flames rushed along the pavement toward her.

"Help!" Sulli cried.

She rocked back and forth in full out panic. The fire roared closer but just when everything was about to explode, the flames blew out.

Gargoyle Bob landed next to the sedan again.

Getting hit by the SUV hurt, but not near as much as it should have. He should have been smeared across the pavement, but his wings jerked him away from the initial impact and his body apparently could absorb a lot of damage. The blow back from his wings upon landing next to the car put out most of the flames. Beating his wings again extinguished the rest of the fire. He pulled the car door open.

Still upside down, Sulli tried to turn her head upright. She stared in amazement at her rescuer. Without any sort of fear, her small hand waved at him. The siren of a distant ambulance echoed closer.

Gargoyle Bob marveled at finding such courage in someone so young. Even more so, since with his new enhanced senses and awareness of the Others, the girl before him appeared completely and utterly human. Perhaps innocence had a magic of its own.

Ellis jerked the SUV back and forth across the road at high speed. Looking about, he fumbled with a cell phone. "Got to call, got to call my lawyer. Wait, I am a lawyer. No problem, no worries."

Something heavy hit the roof.

"What?" Ellis said, now with plenty of worries.

Claw tips tore through the roof. Gargoyle Bob ripped open the top and reached down into the vehicle. Snatching up the terrified man, he flew high and fast into the night. The SUV crashed into a street lamp.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" Ellis screamed.

"God's the last person you're going to see," growled Gargoyle Bob.

"Oh, man you're goddamn Satan! I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Don't burn me, don't eat me, please, please, please God. I mean, please Devil Man. Give me another chance."

Gargoyle Bob began to enjoy his new gothic persona. "You put a little girl in the hospital. I'll take you to the lowest circle of Hell unless you confess everything to the police."

"I promise, Satan. I didn't mean to hit that car. I swear I'll make this right! Don't drop me, don't eat me! I'll never touch another drink."

Gargoyle Bob could hear a bleating to Ellis's voice, a bit of goat hair and satyr to his alcoholic breath. But

Zee's lead on the criminal underworld still interested him more.

"Tell me what you do for Rollo."

"Rollo? Why do you care what—"

"Tell me!"

"Mergers! Mergers and acquisitions. Just numbers and derivatives. It's all legal. Doesn't hurt anyone, it doesn't!"

Gargoyle Bob wrinkled his nose. "You smell even worse than that sounds. Got guilt's stench all over you. The stink of fraudulent retirement funds and the blood of those that depended on them." He sniffed a fraction closer to Ellis, no more than he had to. "But there's something more. Something really ripe tonight. You know what, don't tell me. Keep it to yourself."

He let go of Ellis.

As the high-priced legal talent fell, he cried the wall-to-wall scream of an infant getting circumcised, flinging all extremities around just as uselessly. Inches from death, Gargoyle Bob grabbed the back of his shirt and deposited him roughly on the ground.

"Oh my God, what the hell? OK! OK!" Ellis plunged his hand into a coat pocket and pulled out an object. His shaking hands held out a wooden box crafted with a parquet of symbols and squares. "Here take it, take it, geez."

Gargoyle Bob looked at the small item in his hand. "A puzzle box? What were you supposed to do with this?"

"Put it in the Thompson building. Leave it by any computer I could find."

"What's in the box?"

"I don't know. Just kill me. Rollo will anyway. I won my case, just had a few drinks. Forgot to put that stupid thing on a desk. But I'm seventeen and oh for him, undefeated this year. Maybe he'll let it slide."

Gargoyle Bob clenched his fist around the puzzle box, expecting it to splinter into matchsticks. But the intricate wooden box kept its form, unyielding even when he crushed it with enough force to cave in a metal strongbox. He placed the enchanted item on the pavement and raised a heel to stomp the secrets out of it.

But a crest of flower petals arranged in the shape of a cloud popped up from the top of the box and began to rotate. A series of squares slid after one another in a game of musical chairs until the last one sank into the surface. A small hole formed.

Gargoyle Bob and even the shell-shocked Ellis looked down at the curious opening in the box.

A tiny set of insect antennae poked through. They were slender and black, segmented by thin bands of silver. An almond shaped beetle crawled out from the hole. It had a round, mottled head without any discernible eyes. Two long leathery wings covered the rest of its body. Like its antennae, the wings were black with jagged streaks of silver running throughout them.

"It's a bug," said Ellis.

The silver marks on the beetle shined brightly. Crackles of electricity danced over its body. A charge of power arced between its antennae, rising up to the tips with a pop.

"A lightning bug with real... lightning." Gargoyle Bob reached down for the insect.

Ellis fumbled with his tie. "I don't think that's a good idea..."

High voltage hit Gargoyle Bob. The jolt that ran through him felt like it could power a city block of lights, microwaves, and game consoles. Through a tasered haze, he could make out Ellis's face. The little goaty bastard was inching away from him.

"Don't... move..." he mumbled through twitchy mouth muscles. He tried to reach out but his legs and arms were paralyzed.

"Yeah, sorry, but I'm going now."

Gargoyle Bob could only glare at the lawyer as he ran. Caught in the bug's electrical storm, afterglows of stolen social security numbers, bar codes, and security layouts floated passed his eyes. *This thing's been around.* In spite of the ultimate iced drink brain freeze, one of those schematics looked like Parrish Antiquities to him. Peering further in that direction, images of Mercadier, scans of Latin documents, and the icon of a black computer file appeared. A skull and *fleur-de-lis* cross bones crest locked the file tight. Ghostly fingerprints glowed on its surface with a set of impressions missing one digit. All of these disappeared as the otherworldly firefly crawled out of his fist and flew away.

The lighting bug sizzled a brilliant path to the nearest streetlight. With a flash, it turned into pure electricity and absorbed itself into the bulb. A sequential row of streetlights flared brightly, one after another as the bug traveled down the power current. The flares of light popped right along with the fleeing Ellis and then quickly jumped beyond him.

"Oh, no," he groaned as the lights danced by.

Gargoyle Bob snatched Ellis into the air and flew down the street. He bared his teeth. "Miss me? There's a squad car around the next corner. Tell them everything. Take care of that little girl or I'll gut you. Eat your kidneys with hot sauce." Dropping Ellis low to the ground, he flew away higher into the sky. "I'll be watching."

Ellis skidded and rolled across the sidewalk, not caring about how many cuts and bruises the pavement caused. He was just thrilled about not having claws in his shoulders anymore. Without slowing down, the lawyer bounced up off the sidewalk and ran toward the corner.

Around that corner, Officer Cantor and Officer Ramirez walked back to their patrol car.

"The Bears still aren't getting anywhere until we get a quarterback. Jim McMahon was the only good one we've had under center," Cantor complained.

"Oh, please. Jim McMahon? We've got a QB," Ramirez said. "Until you can tell the difference between a 'Will' and 'Mike'" linebacker I don't even want to talk to you. You've got to remember who we are. We're the Monsters of the Midways. Our defense needs to destroy people, none of this 'bend but don't break' crap. If the Bears build a killer defense then we won't have to worry—"

Ramirez stopped as Ellis came around the bend and ran toward them, disheveled and clearly out of his mind.

They both watched in disbelief as he confessed his guts away. "I hit a car and drove away. There's a girl in the hospital. It was my fault, all my fault. I can show you. Please, right now, we've got to go. He's going to

eat me! I'll tell you everything, the deals, the numbers, tell you about Rollo. Just take me away. Let's go!"

Ellis scrambled into the patrol car and drummed his hands impatiently on the seat.

Cantor rolled his eyes at Ramirez. Partners for long enough, they both knew what the other person was thinking. Dropping this case off at Lakeshore Psychiatric ER made more sense than booking him.

Gargoyle Bob circled above them. He watched the officers handle Ellis and go through all the familiar routines of his past life. Time to take on something new.

He flew away.

CHAPTER TEN

There's a huge tomb there, and people notice it or don't notice it. But when they say the park was a cemetery, it becomes the end of the subject, when, no, that's the beginning of the subject.

Pamela Bannos – “Hidden Truths: Lincoln Park & the City Cemetery” – 2008

Fine black hair with red tints, flawless porcelain skin, dark eyes that danced over high cheekbones, a slender face of exquisite beauty with a smile full of mischief. She was Titania and Puck all rolled into one, except her ethereal features clearly hailed from Asia rather than the hills of the Bard.

A pizzeria was the last place one would expect to find such elegance, much less eating alone on a late night.

Steiger watched her closely as he approached her table. The smell of garlic and baking dough permeated every inch of the place. “Really, Emma? This is where you wanted to meet. I expected somewhere with a few more Michelin stars.”

Emma Chiang looked up between delicate bites. She smiled a perfect smile that somehow stayed clean of tomato sauce or any food crumbs usually caught between the teeth of mere mortals.

“Only pizza franchise still run by its family members, this place is the best. It’s worth a trip from the City. Sit down, have some,” as she ate away at the slice balanced in her hand.

"Don't you have these in New York?" Steiger sat down in front of a large pizza already half devoured.

"Not deep dish like this. Cheese so thick, you can sink your teeth into. All the way up to the gums. Great sauce, Italian sausage, little crunch at the end with this flakey crust. I think there's even extra butter in the dough. What's not to love?" She took another bite.

"With the way you eat, I can't believe you still look the way you do."

"After the last two hundred years, I deserve to live a little. Besides, you know I can look any way I want." Flashing a smile that literally blinded him for a moment, Emma enchanted her appearance and became Alexis, although she still wore the same clothes. "Is this more to your liking?"

"Stop that," grumbled Steiger. "Someone will see." He didn't want their meeting to cause any commotion, besides he couldn't remember the last time Alexis had smiled at him.

"No, they won't. This show is only for you. They glimpse only what I want them to." Alexis's stunning form changed into an elderly spinster. A construction worker accustomed to wolf whistling almost any female with two legs from his scaffold perch, passed by without even a glance.

"See," the spinster said.

"Can't you just be you?" frowned Steiger.

In a blink, the old woman disappeared. In her place sat a five-foot tall canine fox with a mix of red and gold fur, dark highlights around triangular ears, and slender snout that ended in a small black nose. Curled beneath her, a luxurious train of seven tails fashioned with a blend of snowy white hair and the

same colors of her topcoat. "Now, this I can't pull off for long without causing a scene," the fox spirit said with a gnash of her sharp teeth.

"I thought fox spirits had nine tails?"

"You've got to earn all those." She changed back to Emma. "But I'm done seducing heads of state or mesmerizing fat cats. I've moved up in the world." Taking another bite of pizza, "Steiger, dear, you used to be much more fun."

"Yeah, times change." His usual grim demeanor got even darker.

"You never frowned before when I put on Alexis." Emma stopped eating for a moment. "In fact, remember the last time when we..."

He stretched open his hand and waggled the maimed finger at her as acknowledgment of their shared moment.

"Sorry. I got a little carried away. But it felt so good didn't it?"

"Why are you here, Em?"

All humor vanished from her face as she put down the pizza slice. "The Council's not pleased with this delay. They want to speak with Mercadier. But they're trying to respect the local wildlife by staying out of the city. Ugh, if I have to be in the same room again with Ignatius I'm going to puke. I swear he's more reptile than man. Rollo needs to keep him on a tighter leash."

"I'm impressed." Steiger moved a shaker of Parmesan cheese like a chess piece across the checkerboard tablecloth. "Rollo carries enough clout to keep the Council out of Chicago? Well, I'm sorry, but I don't think our winged lizard is strong enough to fly all the way back to New York with you."

"Don't be so one dimensional. They're staying out of this city, because soon they'll rule them all."

Emma glanced about and lowered her voice. "They keep to the shadows. But they've got me to-ing and fro-ing through the spirit worlds, a lot of moves for a run to the top. As much as I would love to make a grab for some of the trinkets I've seen, I would never cross these guys. I told you before. They scare me." She reached under the table and placed a black oblong case in front of Steiger. "They want to give this to Alexis. She'll know what to do with it."

He looked at it with suspicion.

"No, it's not going to explode or anything," she said. "But that would be the least of your worries if Mercadier doesn't contact the Council. Plus, for the payment they were promised, they want these items from Alexis's collection." Emma slid a card across the table.

Steiger looked the card over. "I'll have to check with her. You know how she likes to hoard things."

Emma raised an open palm to her mouth and gently blew out a small ball of lavender foxfire.

The glowing ball of energy flew undetected across the ceiling of the pizzeria. It curved down into the mouth of the construction worker as he swallowed a mouthful of deep dish. He choked and gasped for air then slumped forward, lifeless. The ball of foxfire re-emerged from his mouth, shining brighter and larger, enhanced by his stolen soul.

The charged wisp of energy returned to Emma. She swallowed it with a satisfied smile then turned serious again. "We all like to collect things. But you're caught between some epic VC's."

"VC's? Viet Cong?"

"I wish. Venture capitalists, the cosmic kind. We're talking galactic shark tank. They want eternal returns on their investments. But I think your boss is aiming to become 'The Power Couple' with Mercadier, and my guys don't like to share. Watch yourself. Where is that greedy little minx anyway?"

"I have no idea," said Steiger as a waitress started screaming over the dead construction worker.

Alexis clung to Gargoyle Mercadier as he descended through the night air. He beat his wings to slow their momentum. Landing on a barren hill in Lincoln Park, snowflakes billowed up off the ground. Larger than New York's Central Park, the area would normally be filled with people if it were summer, but in the freezing cold of winter there was hardly a living soul around.

Letting go of him reluctantly, Alexis passed a triumphant wave across the expanse of sound deadening snow that lay before them.

"My *pièce de résistance*, the rest of your six thousand soldiers are here, along with many, many others. Chicago's hidden truths. This park used to be the old City Cemetery. Tens of thousands buried in 120 acres. The Jewish Cemetery, Catholic Cemetery, Potter's Field, a rich tasting menu of delights. They bulldozed it all to build jogging paths, baseball fields, and a zoo."

Gargoyle Mercadier gazed at the park. He sensed a legion of dead buried beneath it. The bones of thousands imbedded in the dirt beneath his feet. Whispers of their crushed dreams floated up to him. Longings for a new relationship came from the left, hopes for a job promotion rose from the right, and

wishes for holiday gifts echoed, whether for Christmas or Hanukah depended on the region of the land.

From a distant quadrant, he heard the forlorn battle cries of more dead Confederate soldiers. A Georgia private moaned from starvation. A Mississippi sergeant screamed about rats gnawing his feet. A host of troops vented anguish over dying away from home and being robbed of a soldier's death on the battlefield.

"Perfect. They are fabulous. We will raise these vessels and fill them with Dark Souls of our own," Gargoyle Mercadier said. In tune with the necropolis around him, "We will remake the world in our image."

"How did you develop such exquisite power, such vision? Tell me. Please, I've earned it," said Alexis.

Everything was falling in place for Mercadier. In Alexis, he had found someone to match his own ferocity of will and style, someone indeed worthy of being his 'Eleanor.' He drew her closer with another glimpse of his past.

"I killed thousands of Protestants for them in Paris, but there were those in the Church calling for my head. Instead, my patrons shipped me off to help convert the New World. But it was the Maya that showed me a new destiny."

Alexis stood entranced by every word of his gory once upon a time.

Centuries ago, Gargoyle Mercadier had ruled the sky and tangled jungle of Tayasal. His aerie at that time, a massive pyramid built in a clearing at the edge of the city. Tall enough to be seen above the treetops as a landmark by foraging inhabitants, its steps ascended a series of tiers leading to an altar at the highest level.

Upon this altar, Mercadier experienced his rebirth and discovered a new purpose.

On the night of the last solstice for the great city, the jungle around Tayasal still radiated heat from the day. It stewed in humidity so dense that the air felt better suited for gills than lungs.

Throngs of lightly clad Maya droned a chant in front of the stepped pyramid meant to honor Camazotz, but now belonged to Gargoyle Mercadier. Men with loincloths pressed against women with simple skirts. Some of the women wore *huipils* embroidered with turquoise designs, others just draped scarves of light fabric over their breasts. Giant bonfires burned around the structure, throwing eerie light on its tiers. Billows of smoke shrouded a line of captives shuffling up long flights of temple steps to their death.

Gargoyle Mercadier awaited them at the top level of the pyramid. Highlighted by the fires against a dark sky, his cruel wings spread open and reached out over the crowd of worshippers. Next to him, a Mayan necromancer of the highest order lifted a ceremonial sword with an obsidian blade. He wore a Camazotz headdress of fangs and wings of black feathers, almost as fearsome as the gargoyle beside him.

The Mayan high priest plunged the obsidian blade into the heart of a victim. Blood flowed off the stone altar, trickled across carved pictographs of skulls and demons, then drained into stone vats.

Gargoyle Mercadier lifted the twitching body above his head. He sank claws into its dying flesh. Dwindling life energy flared briefly within the human sacrifice then absorbed quickly down the monstrous

arms holding the dead man aloft. Muscles and limbs refreshed by the sacrifice, Gargoyle Mercadier heaved the drained corpse off the pyramid.

The withered body tumbled through the air. It landed with a thud on an enormous stack of other discarded victims. All in different stages of calcification and stone formation, but they each still had enough body fat to burn. For good measure, a Mayan warrior dumped a large urn of oil unto the pile before jamming a torch into the cadaverous mess.

Flames ignited the bodies into an inferno. The corpses sizzled and popped. Sparks and cinder floated up into the night to join other fireflies from a half dozen bonfires already ablaze around the temple.

The distinctive odor of burning flesh flooded the clearing and made almost everyone wretch. Unlike a roast of simple meat, these fires engulfed all the components of the human body. Out spewed a horrid brew of smells so dense that it filled nostrils and violated mouths with a thick, nauseous taste. The metallic taint of iron-rich blood mixed with the acrid smell of burning hair. The noxious stench of bursting intestines combined with the sweet scent of boiling spinal fluid. This particular sacrificial blend of aromas had pleased ancient gods for centuries and intoxicated Gargoyle Mercadier on this night.

Hidden in the brush at the edge of the clearing, a Spanish Conquistador clad in a chest plate of black steel watched the proceedings. A crowned crest with cross and sword, the Seal of the Tribunal for the Inquisition marked the spaulder on his shoulder. As the giant bonfire of corpses roared, the alarmed soldier

slipped away into the darkness of the jungle to report back to his commanders.

Above the flames, the Mayan priest approached Gargoyle Mercadier on top of the temple and whispered into his ear.

"You are Camazotz reborn. Bathe in the blood of your subjects. Their lives will feed you. Keep you from turning to stone during the day. Embrace our ways. We will be free of the Christ mongers and their Commandments." He lifted a basin of blood to the sky.

Gargoyle Mercadier leaned his fearsome head back, reveling in the gruesome christening of blood pouring all over him. He would eventually learn to extract life energy without the blood letting, but nothing could ever compare to the viscous flow across his pores and giddy scent of fear he savored during those sacrifices.

Standing in Lincoln Park, Gargoyle Mercadier relished the memory of the Mayan rituals. "We sacrificed countless souls. A golden age of the New World not yet ruined by Old World hypocrisy."

"Why such warm memories of a people that entombed you?" Alexis asked.

"The Maya didn't betray me." His wings rose up for a restless moment then settled back down. "It was the Conquistadors and elements of the Inquisition within their ranks. They feared the strength I could gain through the sacrifices. They began to kill anyone that wouldn't kneel before the Cross. Convert or die. No one would be left for me. So, I fought back."

"You became a champion for the Maya?"

He smiled at such naiveté from someone so lethal. "No, they were mine to harvest. But the Conquistadors killed them before I was ready. They even managed to capture me in my human form. I vowed then to always stay as Gargoyle Mercadier, never to change into something weaker again."

"How will we keep the Gargoyle Mercadier awake forever?" Alexis slid her arm into his.

"The Mayan priest said that solstice sacrifices during the new phase of the Maya calendar would unleash souls from Xibalba. Create an eternal night and be free of the sun. As Gargoyle Mercadier, Camazotz would rule this world instead of the Conquistador's Christ God."

"What happened to your Mayan priest? The Catholics I know would never let such creativity go unrewarded."

"They cut his throat as they sealed my tomb." His frown deepened as he thought of the Church and all its treachery. "I was blind to their false promises, shackled by that damn Privilege. They think themselves safe and on high, but I will show them how far the worm can turn."

"The Church owes us both," Alexis said. "They stole years from me, took away my youth. We'll make them pay for their sins. Bring a new order to the heavens. The Council's documents that Steiger used to find your tomb might help us gather more—"

"Steiger's a peasant." Gargoyle Mercadier's claws bared with an unnerving popping sound as he spoke. "I won't be anyone's pawn again, especially not that damn Council. I shall smash the false Church of Rome. For all those enslaved by them, for all those murdered

in the name of God. I will make them pay. Their Lord's precious vengeance will be mine!"

"Together, we'll kill them all," she whispered.

Gargoyle Mercadier's fury subsided into visions of glory and his coming dominion. "Yes. The solstice approaches. My powers grow stronger. Conjure one of the Church's Hell Gate for me. I'll open it wide. We'll fill these host bodies with souls from Xibalba. Hell on Earth. A kingdom of the night. The sun will never rise again."

"I can't wait. Let it begin now." Her eyes stayed fixed on him, completely enamored.

"Patience, the Heavens are almost aligned. But perhaps I can give you a taste of what's to come," Gargoyle Mercadier replied. He pointed at a grey stone block mausoleum in the distance. "That tomb. It's the only one here. Does someone of importance lay within?"

Alexis broke her gaze from him and glanced at the only tomb left standing in Lincoln Park, a silent reminder of a time and souls long forgotten. She pointed at a name inscribed in block letters over the door, COUCH.

"The Supreme Court kept it standing, protected it from demolition. Ira Couch owned the Tremont House, an 'Abe Lincoln slept here' kind of place. No one's really sure who else was buried with him. Most likely Ira's brother, mother, father, wife, and assorted rug rats. But there were rumors a mysterious guest that died at the Tremont House might be in there too."

"I swore never to step foot in a tomb again. But let's find out what's inside."

Gargoyle Mercadier took flight from the hill. He glided above the snowy terrain and crashed through the iron doors of the Couch Tomb, breaking into all the secrets kept inside.

Alexis watched with anticipation. A tumult of ungodly sounds rang out from within the tomb. Roars from Gargoyle Mercadier followed by the splintering of coffins, undead moans, and vicious snarls — all noises you wouldn't want to hear in a graveyard.

Everything fell quiet for a moment then in full glory Gargoyle Mercadier emerged from the tomb. "*Cheri*, a taste of the future," he announced.

Two newly Undead corpses stalked out from behind him. Gnarly and dead fleshed, one wore a dark 19th century long coat and was clearly an adult Couch, either Ira or his brother James. The other Undead walker was garbed in Asian clothes, not those of an immigrant worker but the fine needlework of someone with rank and importance. Since there were no Asians in the Couch family, this corpse most certainly belonged to the guest that died under shadowy circumstances at the hotel.

Not created from some deadly military virus or dusting of comet particles, Gargoyle Mercadier animated these two Undead with the tortured bits of human souls he could yank out from Hell. Once the solstice arrived and a Gate of Hell opened for intact Dark Souls to escape, he would have a full army of Undead to command.

Gargoyle Mercadier's Undead did have something in common with zombies, vampires, and werewolves — a robust appetite for the living. It took them all of three seconds to lock in on joggers passing by in different

directions. The pair of resurrected Undead took off running. Not a lumbering dead man shuffle, but a rapid scrambling hell bent gait.

In a cadaverous flash, the Undead Couch bowled over Janet Lee. The corporate go-getter who struggled to balance her career with family screamed, "No! I've got kids! Got a new office—" Her big promotion made no difference to the Undead Couch. It bit her to death in a wave of screams and blood. Since this Undead wasn't an infectious creature, she was in no danger of rising as a new Undead. Besides, after being torn into so many pieces there was nothing left to resurrect anyway.

Jogging in the opposite direction, Thaddeus Jones turned his head when he heard the commotion behind him. Every weekend he volunteered at the homeless shelter, but any thought of charity vanished when he saw the fountain of blood from Janet's half-chewed head.

"What?" His legs kicked in whatever remained from his glory days as a sprinter on the track team.

But the Undead Guest already had his scent. It hauled supernatural ass after the full-out running Thaddeus. Unfortunately for the former track star, in spite of his school records in the 100 and 200 meters, his unholy pursuer gained rapidly on his trail.

"Oh, I like them," Alexis marveled. "Much better than the pig."

Watching the two Undead hunt made Gargoyle Mercadier restless. He too wanted to be on the prowl. After pacing for a few moments, he flew into the air.

Startled by his sudden departure, Alexis looked nervously at all of the Undead gnawing and chasing

going on around her. "Uh, what about them?" she asked.

Gargoyle Mercadier called down to her. "Only an open Gate to Hell can keep them alive. I am their only channel of power now. When I fly far enough away, they will die again. Let them enjoy themselves." He flew off in search of more prey.

Below him the Undead Guest drew ever closer to Thaddeus.

"Help me! Someone, help!"

Violating the sage advice of the great Satchel Paige, he took one last look over his shoulder to see what might be gaining on him. The Undead Guest took a few quick steps and leaped into the air. It smacked into him with the force of a lion taking down a zebra.

His screams faded quickly under the horrible chomping sounds of Undead teeth.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Most modern criticisms of Richard as king of England focus on two things that were apparent by 1189: Richard cared little for England and he used it as a gigantic cash cow.

McLynn - "Richard & John: Kings at War" - 2007

It was a long night for Sulli especially since her video game didn't survive the crash. Maybe she was being a little ungrateful, since her Mom did wakeup and seemed fine after being saved by their "friend." But bolstered by the resiliency of childhood, she found the hospital a boring place even with all its noises and alarms.

Mom said she would bring her an *Ozzie Ozzalinsky* book about the hero cat that was part ronin and part Cheshire, just as long as Sulli didn't talk about her "friend" to anyone else. She seemed worried about staying longer for "observation" and nervous about some "children's service" people. Apparently, they didn't really serve anything fun like ice cream or candy. They just handed out orders instead of taking them.

Dr. Kim entered Sulli's room. The ID clipped to his white jacket marked him as a "Resident Fellow." A purple and gold tiger sticker that said "LSU" covered a corner of the badge.

"Hello. How's it going?" he asked.

"OK." From his hurried manner, Sulli could tell he didn't like being in the hospital any more than she did.

Focused on his clipboard, Dr. Kim checked over detailed sign-out sheets the new interns had left him. He squinted at the miserable chicken scratch that wasn't a stereotype of doctors but their actual illegible handwriting.

"Says here you took a big bump to your head" he said, trying to decipher the scrawl about Sulli. The tired doctor groaned when he got to the note that said, "Psych case."

He hung his stethoscope around his neck, putting it away for a real emergency. "I heard that, um, you've been telling the nurses that... you saw a monster?"

Sulli remained quiet. She remembered what her Mom had warned her about, and this doctor didn't act like someone who would believe her anyway.

Dr. Kim glanced at his watch and shook his head over the time. "Look kid, I'm two hours late on my midnight rounds. I need to know if you're suffering from that knock on your head or if you've seen this... this thing before. Knock on the head, you get a CAT scan. Seen this thing before, I call Dr. Coleman. He's a child shrink... uh, someone fun to talk to."

The scan thing sounded fun because she liked cats, but getting shrunk didn't. Either way, Sulli still didn't feel like telling this man anything.

Dr. Kim could see that he caused her to clam up. He tried a tone he apparently thought was more "kid friendly" to break the ice again. "You know, back in New Orleans, I used to see monsters when I was growing up. One of them was deep purple with stripes on his head. What did yours look like?"

Sulli stared at her toes. Some adults never understood that a kid could always spot a patronizing

grown-up, especially if their voice moved to a higher pitch or took on a singsong quality. But she decided to mess with this doctor, freak him out a bit. Then maybe they could both go through "observation" together.

"Dark as night," she finally said.

"Really? I think mine had fur. How about yours?" he asked with a smile, hoping to finish this quickly.

"No, more like rock."

"Rock? Really?" His smile disappeared. He looked at her with serious interest. "Watch this light for me."

Dr. Kim moved a penlight in a letter "H" pattern to test her eyes. She followed his first few moves, but then her gaze stayed fixed on something behind him.

"Come on. Up, down, over. Sweetie, watch the light." No response, she had stopped cooperating. "What are you looking at?" he muttered.

Turning around, he looked toward the window and noticed that something flitted by in the darkness. He went right up to the slightly steamed glass and wiped the condensation away.

The bright eyes and monstrous form of Gargoyle Bob stared back at Dr. Kim through the cleared window. The doctor fell back in fear. He landed on a chair that slid back with a screech across the floor, totally blown away.

Sulli looked at Dr. Kim with a tad more understanding than he had viewed her with. "Did yours look like mine?" she asked with the innocence of a child and the "you dumb ass" eye roll of a teen.

Gargoyle Bob hovered outside the window and smiled at Sulli. A sudden wobble of balance interrupted his smile. He recovered with quick beats of his wings, flying away in a blur.

She waved “good-bye” to her guardian angel. Next to her, Dr. Kim just sat with a fixed blank stare as every bit of reason had vacated his mind for somewhere else, some place safer and monster free.

Through an insanely cold wind chill, two teenagers rode an open gondola toward the top of the Navy Pier Ferris wheel. Clay had brought Natasha up here in an ill-planned attempt to get some. The cheerleader had only agreed to ride because she was angry with an ex-boyfriend and tweeting every detail of this dalliance would burn the star athlete’s pride.

“This is going to be so awesome,” Clay said.

“Yeah, awesome. God, it’s cold.”

He put an arm around her, smiling about how well everything was going. She drew closer to him because anything was better than freezing.

Below them in the operator’s booth, Max and Alex, two young Navy Pier employees stayed warm by an electric heater.

“We’re going to lose our jobs if we’re caught,” complained Alex.

“Relax. No one’s going to find out. Plus, I’ll split the hundred he gave me,” Max replied, blowing in his cupped hands.

“A hundred? What are you kidding me?”

“Yeah, the dude’s so hard up.”

“Does he know that anything he tries up there will freeze off?” Alex stamped his feet to keep warm.

“Uh-uh. Just moved here from Atlanta. He’s so desperate, he hasn’t thought it through,” Max smiled and reached for the large stop button on the control panel. “Let’s give him what he paid for.”

The Ferris wheel gondola stopped at the top and although the city lights looked amazing from there, Clay wasn't getting the reaction he had hoped for from Natasha. The robotics team geek started to rock their car in an attempt to pump up the level of excitement.

"Woo-hoo!"

Natasha grabbed the handles in the gondola as they swayed. "Ooh, I hate heights!" she screamed. "You almost made me drop my phone."

Their yells carried through the night air and caught the attention of something that flew nearby. It banked toward the sound of her screams.

"Come on, look around," Clay urged.

"Stop. Just stop swinging the car."

He kept going though, so as a last resort, she kissed him to get his attention. Since both of them had been shouting into the cold, the kiss was frigid and dry, but it did the trick. Clay stopped rocking the car. Even if it was the worst kiss in the world to him it was a blazing green light. He reached for the zipper of Natasha's jacket and moved a hand toward her breast.

"Are you crazy? You're not touching anything up here in this cold," she said.

"What? Why?"

"Why? You know that Christmas movie where the kid's tongue freezes on the pole? They probably had to rip that thing off to get him free."

"Yeah?" he answered, looking unsure of what his favorite holiday movie had to do with getting lucky.

Natasha reached over and pulled down his zipper. "Well, do you really want that to happen here?"

Perhaps the cold blast he felt below did make Clay doubt his plan for a moment. But teen hormones

overruled the risk of genital frostbite. He reached for her again until something flash by the gondola in the moonlit sky.

"What? What was that?" he whispered.

"Don't try to change the subject." She was about to yell at him more, but noticed he was no longer looking at her.

"I think there's something up here."

"You're trying to scare me. This is just another one of your stupid moves." He didn't answer and his staring into the sky really made her nervous.

"There!" Clay shouted. Natasha looked up and screamed.

Gargoyle Mercadier hovered above them. He spread his wings wide, blocking out the moon and sending the two of them further into darkness.

Both teens scrambled about trying to avoid the monster that flew around them. "Oh, man. Oh, man," Clay whimpered as Natasha pleaded, "Get us down, get us down!"

Below them in the operator booth, Alex insisted, "C'mon, Max. They're done. It's almost time to open the park."

Max peered up at the Ferris wheel. From inside the booth, he could only see the gondola swinging about, but he couldn't hear their cries of panic. "Oh, if the car's rocking, we shouldn't go knocking. Let's give those lovebirds a little longer."

High above Max and Alex, Gargoyle Mercadier landed on the roof of the gondola. He reached into the car from one side. The teens within fled to the opposite side. Shifting over, the killer thrust his arm in from the

other direction. The teens slid to the middle, screaming.

The roof of the gondola ripped open.

Gargoyle Mercadier peered down with a face so dreadful, the teens froze, too shocked to move. He stretched down his vicious claws. But right before tearing them to bits, the gargoyle vanished.

There one moment then gone. A flash of movement and loud boom were the only things Clay and Natasha noticed before he disappeared. Reprieved from a bloodbath, they looked at each other. Where in the world did that clap of thunder come from?

"What?" Gargoyle Mercadier yelled. Knocked away from the helpless teens, he quickly steadied himself and glared at the source of interference. "No one comes between me and my kill. Who are you?" he demanded. "I've never seen the likes of you before."

"I'm new to this." Gargoyle Bob answered, struggling to not bounce up and down with the breeze off the lake. Finally face-to-face with the monster he had dreamed of killing, wobbling through the air was not the impression he wanted to project. No longer a nightmare or gallery statue, the homicidal creature hovered almost within his grasp. It huffed deep breaths, reeked of death, and effortlessly stroked the air with powerful wings. Fear would be a natural reaction, but the memory of his partner's bloody face fueled Gargoyle Bob's heart with a pounding rage. Too weak to save Frank, he was now as much of a monster as his enemy.

"Come take a closer look, you murdering punk," he growled.

Gargoyle Mercadier paused at the word “punk.” His eyes narrowed then he smiled. “Ha! Officer, what has happened since we last spoke? *Mon dieu*, did that church witch make you her pet? Are you here to do the bidding of those self-righteous fools?”

“No. Killing you is my choice.”

Gargoyle Bob charged through the air, throwing both fists forward to double punch and batter the mouthy son of a bitch senseless. But his enemy flew out of the way and looped behind him.

Missing the mark, Gargoyle Bob stumbled in the air. He swerved awkwardly trying to slow his momentum and turn around. His nascent gargoyle instincts helped him with the basics of flight, but finer combat maneuvers were beyond him. He had not felt this clumsy since a boxing trainer had tied a string between his feet to teach balance. That never worked.

“Bad choice. You can barely fly,” Gargoyle Mercadier scoffed. “I should have killed you in the alley. Just as I did your partner. He died well.”

The torn body armor, Frank’s ragged gasps, his open and unseeing eyes – all rushed through Gargoyle Bob’s mind. The flashbacks triggered more fury that made him lash out wildly without any greater skill.

“I recognized you in the gallery. Your partner’s soul held such delightful memories of you. You seek justice. But we are not so different, you and I. King Richard was my brother-in-arms. I knew no other equal. It hurts deeply, no? To the marrow, to your core. It never fades.”

“Don’t you speak of Frank!” Gargoyle Bob flew forward with another vicious punch. But his target

flew backwards with just a twitch of his wings, up and out of harm's way by a good ten yards.

Furious at the miss, Gargoyle Bob flapped his wings and chased him with punch after punch. Frank's killer was just inches away, but he couldn't lay a finger on him. Nothing felt natural. Adrenaline distorted all of his movements. When he tightened or drew an arm back to strike, one wing would also flex and throw his trajectory off balance.

But Gargoyle Mercadier flitted all over, using hardly any effort to avoid his stray punches. He flew actual circles around him. To make matters worse, the bastard chatted away as if he enjoyed the moonlight view.

"Revenge has been my companion too. Did you know the Lionheart spoke French, not English," Gargoyle Mercadier said as a fist whistled passed him.

Avoiding a desperate lunge, "England's greatest king never lived there long," he confided. "Built his castle, Château Gaillard, in France."

Too quick, too faraway. Gargoyle Bob attempted to grab him in a clinch and cut down his foe's advantage in maneuverability. All he caught was empty air and a whisper of, "He would have sold London if he could."

But instead of slipping away this time, Gargoyle Mercadier snarled, "He hated the rain," then punctuated his comment with a brutal punch. His skin looked more like leather than rock, but no suppleness was evident in his touch. A fist hammered Gargoyle Bob across the jaw. It hurt way more than getting hit by the SUV. Members of St. Romain's posse sure could pack a punch. He just needed to find some way to return the favor.

"Shut up! Oh, my God, shut up. I don't need a history lesson. Let's just kill each other," Gargoyle Bob yelled. His head rang from the direct hit and constant chatter. Even though it hadn't helped Frank in the alley, he still wished for his handgun, or a shotgun or rocket launcher, anything to silence this maniac.

"New World whelp, no appreciation for tradition," Gargoyle Mercadier sniffed. "Very well. As you wish."

Gargoyle Mercadier hit him even harder this time. He staggered backwards in the air. Then in a blur of attacks the elite killer struck from all different angles, knocking him around like a hacky sack.

A devastating flying kick smacked Gargoyle Bob's head to one side. He fell from the sky and landed on one of the giant spokes of the Ferris wheel. Clinging to it like the ropes of a boxing ring, the stars spun in the sky. Only the twitter of birds was missing in this bad Looney Tunes moment that threatened to end his life. *Letting Frank down.* Gargoyle Mercadier was too fast, too smooth of a flyer. Wiping blood from his mouth, it looked black in the moonlight. He suspected it wouldn't appear a normal red even in the light of day.

Gargoyle Mercadier flew in to finish him. KA-BAR sharp claws sliced closer, almost cleaving off his head. Gargoyle Bob fell to a lower spoke of the Ferris wheel. Getting killed in a stand-up fight, he resorted to the tactics of a lesser combatant facing a superior foe. He ran and hid, stalled for time.

Gargoyle Mercadier bumped the top of his own wings against a support spoke as he tried to give chase. The narrow spacing between the Ferris wheel struts prevented him from flying freely through the carnival ride. It forced him to drift next to it. Playing deadly

Whack-a-mole and Bop-the-gopher with Gargoyle Bob, he clambered in and out of its superstructure.

Gargoyle Bob searched for a way to turn the battle around. He jumped from spoke to spoke just to stay out of reach. As he did under the “L” train, he relied on his arms and legs. It wasn’t the most dignified form of fighting, but it kept him alive and frustrated his attacker to no end.

“Come out of there!” Gargoyle Mercadier lost his composure for the first time. He reached in to grab his quarry, but completely missed. Gargoyle Bob slashed him across the arm, scoring a satisfying spray of blood. Then he dropped to another wheel support further below them.

Roaring in pain and anger, Gargoyle Mercadier followed with fury in his eyes. But Gargoyle Bob swung back up on another support beam, landing a kick that snapped the fanged mouth shut and cut off the horrible roar.

Gargoyle Mercadier hung unsteady in the air. “Not bad. Finally a challenge.” He opened and closed his jaw, checking the integrity of his bite.

“I can do this all night. Come get some,” shouted Gargoyle Bob with more confidence than he really possessed. As the killer flew toward him, he gathered himself for an all-out leap to take down Gargoyle Mercadier. Closer, closer, just a few more feet. Tackle him, maul him. Don’t let go. Payback for Frank. Almost there...

But Gargoyle Mercadier floated to a stop. “You know, if I let you live, you will learn of the shadows we fight. Killing you slowly will also be much more fun.”

With a flippant salute, he called out, "*À bientôt petit flic,*" and flew away.

"No!" Gargoyle Bob started to give chase, but then he saw why their fight had ended prematurely.

The sun was about to rise.

"Uh-oh."

He turned to fly as fast as he could back to Michele.

Behind the departing gargoyles, the Ferris wheel restarted. Hiding inside the gondola, Natasha and Clay trembled in terror from the glimpses they caught of flying monsters. They tried to convince themselves that tricks of the wind must have caused what sounded like spoken words from the creatures.

As soon as the gondola car reached the ground, Natasha wasted no time in running away. The two Pier employees stepped out of their booth as she disappeared down the street. Clay was just shuffling passed them.

"Hey, so how did it go, man?" Max smiled.

With a blank nightmares-are-real stare, Clay kept walking. Not a word to them, just one leaden foot after another, forever away from the Navy Pier.

"Hey, c'mon! You said you'd give me details. I want to hear all the good stuff. C'mon!" Still no answer came from the shell-shocked Clay. "Deadbeat," Max muttered.

"Oh, man. Look what they did to the ride." Alex stared up through a jagged hole torn into the gondola's roof. "Damn. Didn't think that guy had it in him."

Michele stood in the church sanctuary completely pissed at Gargoyle Bob. "So, you picked up Mercadier with your spidey-gargoyle senses and rushed into

battle totally unprepared? You weren't ready. You could have been killed. You were just supposed to try out your wings."

"I got in one good shot." Gargoyle Bob swayed. With the coming of dawn, he didn't feel very well.

"Oh, good. That'll show him," she answered with a forced smile.

"I'm not a pimply teenager with a radioactive problem. Still a cop. Still my city. Some things you can't change."

"Busting drunk drivers, fighting crime is not why we did this! Discipline. You need to learn control."

"Evil is evil. Rollo's the worst." Keeping focused was becoming harder as his thoughts began to slow. "He uses your Others. Used them to steal from Parrish."

"Evil rich mobster steals from evil rich princess. Who cares? You have a new mission. You've got to change gears. If Gargoyle Mercadier wins there won't be any Rollo or Chicago. There won't be a world."

"There's a locked computer file about Mercadier." The pace of his thoughts thickened to the flow of molasses. "Steiger's prints... all over it. Open it. He couldn't."

Michele bit her lip as she considered any number of replies to his suggestion. "After your nap – get up to speed or everybody dies."

Daylight touched his skin and triggered a rocky metamorphosis. His voice grew hoarse. "Got to walk... before you... run..."

Gargoyle Bob turned to stone before he could finish.

“Or fly,” Michele snapped. She turned on her heel and marched out of the room. Finding something for breakfast seemed more productive than arguing with a statue.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Police agencies to the south of New Orleans were so fearful of the crowds trying to leave the city after Hurricane Katrina that they sealed a crucial bridge over the Mississippi River and turned back hundreds of desperate evacuees. Witnesses said officers sometimes shot guns over the heads of fleeing people, who, instead of complying immediately with orders to leave the bridge, pleaded to be let through.

Harris - New York Times - September 10, 2005

I'll be damned. Within the data that Michele's phone had downloaded from the Parrish system there it was among deleted blueprints for the Mayan temple exhibit being constructed in Lincoln Park. Not protected in the folders that held accounting information for Parrish Antiquities, the secure file about Mercadier was inside Steiger's trash folder. It wasn't a file that he tried to hack, but something he had authored himself. Although protected by encryption, it only took Michele's software a few extra passes to unlock. At first she thought the file might be some kind of Trojan Horse that the ruthless man left to punish cyber-intruders. But there was no worm or malware in any of the code. Instead, it appeared to be a digital image of Mayan pictographs carved on the stone altar from Mercadier's tomb. The text within the file also included partial translations of the ancient sequence, but the

clumsy attempts appeared to be Steiger's work and clearly didn't involve any of Alexis's expertise.

"Steiger, what were you doing and why didn't you want Alexis to know about it?"

Lost in thought, Michele reached for another piece of candy in an already opened box of Heavenly Hash, removing a middle piece that completed a checkerboard pattern of empty spaces and candies. She didn't always eat them this way. She wasn't *that* compulsive. Sometimes she consumed them in diagonals, cross shapes, and spiraled around the edges until she reached the center. Orderly and precise, just like how she arranged grenades next to flash bangs.

Michele's computer video link beeped. This time the caller ID was indeed the Monsignor. She debated answering it. Though she believed performing the Privilege of St. Romain was the right move, she still didn't feel like getting excommunicated at the moment. After letting it beep for a long time, she sighed and accepted the video call.

"Monsignor."

"Hello, Sister Michele," he said within the video frame.

Hello? It made her nervous to hear such niceties. A spasm crossed his face, some weird sourpuss tic. It looked like he was trying to smile.

"I regret the manner our last call ended."

An apology, now she was really worried.

"Contrary to what you may believe, I do remember what it's like to be under fire. You've heard from Mother Superior I presume?"

"Yes, I have."

"Good, good. I hope talking with her has provided you clarity."

"Crystal, sir." Michele hoped if she were a good little drummer girl, he might leave her alone.

"Sister, as your confessor before this assignment, I granted you forgiveness for all sins spoken and unspoken. But I am curious about something. Why did you leave the convent to take the liaison position with us?"

Michele wasn't sure where he was going with this question, but guessed he was trying to catch her off-guard. "The spot was open. I wanted to foster cooperation between the Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc and the Bishop of Rouen's office," was her politically correct answer.

She switched his video image to full-screen, giving her the chance to read every facial twitch for clues to his intent. A visual analysis app activated to monitor his neck vein pulses and pupil dilation for other emotional reactions.

"Oh, and good job," he said, flashing his usual officiousness. "Without an active gargoyle that position was largely ceremonial. Indulge me, Sister. What really pried you away from your beloved order?"

There it was. Michele could see a slight narrowing of the Monsignor's eyes, tension settled in his jaw, his pulse rate slowed. He had something on her. She waited for him to spring it.

"You know, right before you left, there was an incident in the bayou. One involving the clergy." He let the statement hang. "I've seen the police report, but I want to know. Was it you?"

At the mention of that case, a surge of emotions and images bubbled up inside of Michele's brain. Her face struggled to stay neutral, but she was sure he could pick up on her feelings. "Clergy? You mean Father Katilo?" she said.

"No. Not, 'Father,' just 'Katilo.' I don't care what the Council of Trent declared. Once you're a priest, you're not always a priest."

"Looks like we agree on something." Her shoulders relaxed a little, surprised that he did not hold to the party line on these things. "He was a monster."

"So, it was you. Tell me what happened."

His questions didn't sound like accusations, but the memories of that day dried her mouth and sped up her heart rate. "I had to... restrain him. He was going to run from the authorities."

"Handcuffs were found on the site."

She nodded. "They were his. He used them on the children." Her throat tightened. "I freed a boy there. The terror in his eyes... I had to get him to a hospital. Katilo brought him so deep into the bayou that an ambulance wouldn't have gotten there in time."

"Why didn't you take Katilo in too?" His question came with a lilt of curiosity, not the demand of recrimination.

The smells in the bayou, ochre color of the walls, suffocating heat, creaking of the floorboards – all of it came back to her as if she was entering that lair of evil for the first time. "There were pictures, videos. A pile of backpacks. And a wardrobe. Inside of it... pairs of shoes. Matched, lined up. About a dozen kids in all..."

Michele cleared her throat, tried to steady her voice. "I wanted them to find him with the evidence. I couldn't let him slip away into some rehab retreat or backwater parish."

The Monsignor listened to her story with the acceptance of a confession. "But you left him. He could have escaped."

"That part I did leave up to God. He had as long as it would take for a squad car to get there."

"You mean, the police sixty minutes away or the alligators thirty feet away."

"We're all God's creatures. Gators have to eat too. So, do you want to revoke my absolution?" Her eyes glared at the monitor, daring him to say something. Anything high and almighty, she would throw the panel across the room.

The Monsignor looked at something off-screen. He ran a gentle finger along his clerical collar.

"Putting this on was my proudest day," he said. "The priesthood restored my soul and serving the Bishop's Office gave me purpose. We fight off so many demonic attacks. It sickens me that the Church has not defended its flock from itself. The abuse of children threatens to pull down the very walls of St. Peter's."

He locked his gaze back on Michele. "St. Romain, the Templars, the Bishop of Rouen, your Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc – we've had to do many things in our wars outside of the light. I don't condone your choice, but I don't condemn it. Still, you make decisions that go beyond the edge. That's what worries me now."

"Don't. I've got this." His continued understanding sapped some of the defiant tension from her face.

"Really? You don't need reinforcements anymore? You have this whole gargoyle matter in hand?"

"Like you said. It's my cross to bear."

"Uh-huh." The Monsignor no longer appeared uncertain, his breathing slowed on her monitor. He looked calm, in charge, as if he had drawn all the cards he needed. "Did you ever tell Mother Superior about Katilo?"

"No." Keep your damn nose out of it, she thought.

"So, what aren't you telling me now?"

"Monsignor." Screw it, no use in denying anything, but she didn't want to admit to being wrong either. "Why do you ask things you already know the answer to?"

He shook his head in dismay. "Sometimes you just need to hear certain things. You went through with the Ritual didn't you? Do you have any idea what you've done? You've broken a tradition more than 1,000 years old! Violation of these rules threatens the sanctity of the Church."

"Rules are made to be broken."

"Not this one. The Bishop will be furious. It's his sacred charge to perform the Privilege."

"I'll accept all consequences of my actions," she said. "Someone had to do something."

"This isn't just about you. How about your policeman? Is he ready for an eternal life trapped in the body of a demon, imprisoned in stone every time the sun rises? Did you know most of the gargoyles go mad?"

"No." A load of regret hit Michele. The possibility she may have hurt Kincaid was the only argument that

bothered her. Her voice wavered. "Is that what happened to Mercadier? It drove him crazy?"

The Monsignor waved a dismissive hand. "He was a deranged son of a bitch to start with, but becoming a gargoyle definitely magnified everything. Killing thousands in Paris certainly qualified for madness." His image on the monitor shifted toward her. "The real question is — do you have what it takes to kill your own gargoyle if it goes rogue?"

"He has a name. Bob, I mean... Kincaid, wouldn't do that. He's not that kind of man." She hoped the Monsignor didn't notice her growing familiarity.

"He's no longer a man now," the Monsignor said with a cold stare. "Getting close to... to *it*... just makes your duties harder. I'll have to report this to the Bishop. May God have mercy on us all."

The Monsignor's link went dark.

Left alone with her doubts and fears, Michele perseverated on how she could have done things differently. Stay or leave, listen or act, repent or rebel, over and over, back and forth her mind went. Worst of all, did she doom someone she actually seemed to care about?

Then Michele remembered what the renowned actor, Anthony Hopkins, once said that a Jesuit priest had taught him. The Jesuit had revealed to him the most powerful prayer in the world, something to say when all hope seemed lost and you didn't know what to do next. It was a simple prayer of two little words that meant you put everything in God's hands. That you left things up to a higher power, accepted whatever was to come next.

Michele took a breath and said that prayer – “Fuck it.”

Instantly, she felt better and a course of action came to mind. She clicked on a communication link to face something she had avoided for far too long, something that terrified her.

Looking down upon buildings with nothing visible below her feet, Lisa couldn't stop screaming, “Oh my God, oh my God! I'm going to die!” Paralyzed by a fear of heights, she gawked at the rice grains of vehicles and people specks far below.

In the warm sunshine over that vertigo inducing landscape, a pair of high-heeled shoes clicked next to Lisa's snow boots. They belonged to her friend Tiffany, who laughed, “This is so cool. Makes me dizzy.”

The young women stood on The Ledge at the Willis Tower, a clear box made from three layers of half-inch glass that stuck out four feet from the side of the building. It protruded a full 1,353 feet above the streets, the height of the former World Trade Center with nothing beneath them but air. When it was the world's largest retailer, the Chicago-based Sears had built the dark glass Tower that anchored this precipice.

“So this is it? All my life in Chicago, I've never been up the Sears Tower,” Tiffany said.

“Willis Tower, they renamed it,” corrected Lisa. “You know, I never understood those ‘What’chu talkin’ about, Willis’ jokes until I saw that Gary Coleman superintendent in *Avenue Q*.”

“Willis Tower, my ass. My grandpa still calls Macy's, Marshall Field's. He can't stand change. The Marshall Field's Thanksgiving Day Parade, yeah, that

sounds great. But he's right about Comiskey Park though. The White Sox at US Cellular Field, that sucks."

Lisa's hand shielded her eyes from the view that stretched below her. "Uh, maybe we should have come up here at night. Can't see how high we are then." She looked up at the horizon to see if it was less daunting. "They say you can see five states from here. Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan—"

"Yeah, yeah." Tiffany pressed her face close to the glass. "I wonder if I can see Johnny Barducci's house? That bastard was always cheating on me." Then she knelt down and knocked hard on the glass below her feet.

"Are you crazy? Don't do that," Lisa said.

Tiffany lay down on her back with a blood-splattering fall below her. "Come on, don't be a chicken. Hurry up, take my picture. Got to do my hostess thing at the restaurant."

"Okay, okay." Lisa looked through the view of her camera that shook with each tremble of her hand. "Hold still."

"I'm not the one moving."

"Shut up." She took the picture, but then noticed something terrifying in the viewfinder. "Wait. Is that, is that *broken glass*?"

"What?" Tiffany exclaimed. Her self-preservation instinct finally stirred, she scrambled to her feet in fear. "Where, where?"

Lisa pointed beneath them. "There!" Both women screamed as they looked down.

Through a damaged window just a few floors below, a maintenance engineer, Carmine, frowned up

at The Ledge and the two screaming women. "Tourists," he muttered.

Sage, Carmine's assistant and the one that did all the work, glanced over. "I hate cleaning that thing myself. It's over a hundred stories up." He turned to examine the large impact crater that Gargoyle Bob had left on the window.

"You'll clean what I tell you to clean. Get this window fixed, I'm hungry."

Sage gawked at the huge spider-web expanse of cracks in the glass. "What did they say did this? It's got to be twenty feet across."

"A pigeon, some crap like that."

Sage shook his head at the size of bird that could cause such damage. "A pigeon? Sure wouldn't want to be standing under that one."

A flock of pigeons scattered before Mother Superior as she walked toward the Convent's armory, a favorite place of hers and one of the many secrets hidden by the cloister walls. Even though such precautions were necessary, New Orleans was actually an ideal home base. The city's *"laissez les bons temps rouler"* spirit created a chaotic atmosphere where anything could happen and nothing would surprise anyone. In this Mardi Gras city of Secret Societies and Krewes, no one noticed the clandestine comings and goings of the Sisters during all the wild celebrations before Lent or any other time of the year.

But unlike other monastic orders, Mother Superior had no intentions of remaining closed off to her neighbors. There was no way she would ignore a city whose name honored Jeanne d'Arc as "the Maid of

Orleans.” The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina challenged them the most. Mother Superior walked passed some of the subterranean training rooms that had never fully dried out from the flooding and still retained a musty smell.

The Sisters had fought the physical attacks of flood, thirst, and hunger in the early days of the disaster when no outside assistance came. People seeking escape from the chaos were actually forced back into the besieged city by suburban policemen. Like Jeanne d’Arc centuries ago, the world abandoned New Orleans, but Mother Superior stood with its citizens and opened the Convent so they would not be alone. The Sisters also drew on all their specialized training as the city’s psychic misery and floodwater desecration of graves unleashed a swamp of demonic attacks. Those were long days of work and even longer nights of grueling battle.

But New Orleans survived. The bond between the community and Sisters grew stronger than ever. Local folks made sure the Convent was never short of crawfish etouffee, okra, or beignets. Not much of a tea and crumpets woman, Mother Superior had become accustomed to a little *café au lait* after her inspections of the armory.

She pushed open the armory’s reinforced doors and inhaled a delightful fragrance of machine oil and leather. Weapon racks along the left wall held battle axes, long swords, war hammers of pitted metal, samurai swords from the Kamakura period, flamberges with undulating blades, and assorted polearms. Arrayed on the opposite wall were SCAR assault rifles, Israeli Tavor bullpups fronted by slanted

pistol grips, heavy M249 SAW machine guns, M4 carbines ribbed with rail systems, and slender Russian Dragunov sniper weapons. Though the design of each weapon intrigued her, the history of each item and what service they had provided moved her the most.

Mother Superior held the greatest admiration for the military piece at the center of the room. A medieval suit of armor with bronze *fleur-de-lis* fixed on its breastplate held court with all the arms and weapons around it. Already present, Sister Aidan wiped and burnished the leggings of that armor. The metal's finish reflected her fair skin and light freckles.

Drawing closer, Mother Superior pointed to a smudged spot. The Sister quickly polished the nameplate that proclaimed this armor as having belonged to "St. Jeanne d'Arc at the Siege of Orleans."

Before Mother Superior could comment, a cell phone buzzed. Sister Aidan reached for her own, but realized the sound wasn't coming from it. She looked about then peered at Mother Superior in surprise. The older woman usually refused to carry a phone and hated the idea someone could reach her no matter where she went. It would be near apocalyptic to ever catch her wearing an ear bud.

"Reverend Mother? I think that's you."

Mother Superior reached for her phone with a sigh. "Yes, of course." Catching Sister Aidan's look of disbelief, she said, "Extraordinary times dear, extraordinary times."

Holding the phone at a distance, she squinted at it and answered the call when her vision adjusted enough to see the number clearly.

"Ah, Sister Michele. Shouldn't you be watching over your unsanctioned gargoyle?" Mother Superior continued her inspection of the armory. "I should have known you would never stand by idly."

"You taught me to keep moving. Ugh, does the Monsignor squeal on everything I do?" Michele's voice complained over the phone.

"Given the number of texts his office has sent for me to contact them, it wouldn't be hard to guess. No, a local doctor training at Children's hospital in Chicago called me. He used to teach our novitiates about trauma and field dressings, but was always skeptical about our work. It appears he has now seen the light. One of his patients has a not so imaginary friend that sounded a lot like a gargoyle. Since Mercadier could never be deemed friendly, I suspected you had been busy."

A long moment of silence and then she heard Michele say, "Reverend Mother, there's something else I have to tell you."

"Reverend Mother? Anytime you call me that, there's trouble. What is it?"

Mother Superior approached a mounted 20mm anti-aircraft machine gun. At the gun, Sister Leong with a red paintbrush in hand, refreshed the painted slogan "LEAD, SISTER, LEAD" on the inside of the blast shield. The words reminded a gunner to aim in front of a flying object and not directly at the target or else the bullets would miss any fast moving mark. Underneath the battle cry, there were also two rows of demon heads with hatch marks painted across them. Sixteen kills in all.

"I... I..."

"Yes?" Polite and stammering, Michele really had something important, thought Mother Superior.

"I've... got reports of attacks. In Lincoln Park," Michele finally said. "They weren't gargoyle victims. Human bite marks, all killed near the Couch Tomb. Two corpses from within were found *outside* of it. Their dental patterns matched the bite wounds. The police refuse to connect the dots, but it scares the Hell out of me. Alexis has been showing Mercadier all the graveyard highlights of Chicago. My tracer had her at the Park. Same time of the deaths." Another pause then she concluded, "I didn't think gargoyles could raise the dead."

"They can't. The Maya must have taught him something new," Mother Superior answered. Michele never ceased to amaze her. Disturbed by this new information, she peered at the rear targeting post and lined it up with the large circular sight on the front of the cannon.

"I've looked at the data you sent me. It bodes ill." She passed her hand between the rear post and front sights. "During this phase of the Maya calendar, for the first time in 26,000 years, the sun will be in a direct line with the center of the galaxy. The earth will be cut-off, blocked during the solstice."

A low whistle from Michele came over the phone. "The center of the galaxy. The Eye of God will be blind to us? At the solstice, Mercadier could raise an Undead army. This town is going to go all *Pet Sematary*."

Mother Superior frowned as she considered the situation. Of all the doomsday theories about earthquakes, floods, and space aliens, she knew Sister

Michele was right. Gargoyle Mercadier clearly planned to use this particular solstice for his own purpose.

Nearby, Sister Alvarez rapidly assembled a battle rifle. In spite of being “big-boned” and blessed with two heavy fists, she was astonishingly nimble. Still, Mother Superior signaled the stout nun to do it again, but faster.

“Very well. Prepare yourself, Sister Michele. We must be ready to face the worst. Hello? Can you hear me?”

Mother Superior waited for an answer, but faced with silence, the older nun wondered if the call had failed.

“Sister if you can hear me, I can’t hear you. We may have to try this call again,” said Mother Superior’s voice over Michele’s computer speakers.

Michele opened her mouth, but then closed it again. Mother Superior had always taught the Sisters that the more extreme the evil they battled, the more closely they had to stick to their principles. Right and wrong were pretty black and white for the Sisters. Except for some time now, Michele had found herself lost in the shades of grey that everyone else inhabited. But she wanted to face the Undead End of the World with a clear conscience, even if it meant losing the approval of the one person that mattered most to her.

“Mother Superior...” she finally said.

“Oh, good. I thought I had lost you,” echoed Mother Superior’s voice. “The armory doesn’t have the best coverage.”

“Mother Superior, there’s something I need to tell you.” For once, Michele was glad Mother Superior

didn't like to do video calls. Her stern glare would have made it impossible for Michele to speak. "It's about Father Katilo."

Once she started, Michele found it easier than she had expected to tell Mother Superior everything. She told her the details of Katilo's cabin. She even confessed the wounds she had inflicted on his legs to both hobble him and entice the toothy ridge-backed monsters in the bayou. After she finished, the hardest part was waiting for Mother Superior to answer or comment.

The silence on the other end of the call stretched out for an excruciating time. Blood rushed to Michele's face. She poked through the wrappers in the open Heavenly Hash box on her desk, but couldn't find an uneaten piece of chocolate.

Finally, Mother Superior asked, "You had no doubts?"

"None. Not after seeing the videos on his laptop."

"Was this for the children or your own personal revenge?"

"Does it matter?"

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Her voice sounded even more hollow and distant over the connection.

Michele struggled to keep a level tone, but her voice bristled. "Why? You wouldn't stop talking about promoting me, about accepting responsibility, about taking your place. I didn't want you to find out that I can't do it. That I'm not good enough."

Mother Superior fell quiet once more, then spoke with coldness. "Sister Michele, you disappoint me."

Don't you remember those vampires in the Quarter? I would have thought..."

The negative words boiled the blood already gathered in Michele's ears. She had mistaken a pair of vampires antiquing in the shops on Royal Street for two vampires stalking humans in the decadence one block away on Bourbon Street. Sometimes it was so hard to tell good from bad.

"You're going to bring up them again? You never let anything go! I don't want to hear how disappointed you are. God, I disappoint me!"

Michele cut the link before Mother Superior could say anything else. She couldn't believe how lingering insecurities still sent her so out of control. Being told what to do and she wasn't good enough made her feel insignificant, like a child. Just like all the times her own Asian Saber-tooth Tiger Mom told her what to say, how to act, and which sweaters to wear on nights Michele didn't even feel cold. It didn't take a psychoanalyst to see how unresolved issues about Mom caused problems with authority figures, especially those with the loaded title of Mother "Superior." Running away from the Convent just as she did from home was the kicker.

"Damn, damn, damn." She jerked open a desk drawer and grabbed a new box of Heavenly Hash from the large stack inside of it. Telling her what to eat, when she was full, and not to eat anymore were other things Michele never had a chance to work out before her Mom died.

"Fuck it." She jammed a piece of chocolate in her mouth and closed her eyes to find some tranquility in this awful day.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*The strength of Her sword flowed from her
compassion, not the edge of the blade. The strength
of St. Romain's guardians shall come from our
guidance, not the power of their claws.*

The Chronicles of the Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc

Kincaid stood in a vacant area of grey space devoid of sound or any sign of life. As in the street chapel dream, he was human again, not a trace of gargoyle at all. He couldn't tell if moments or hours went by, but eventually the sound of footsteps approached. There was just enough light to make out a familiar shape and then facial features he had come to know well.

Michele walked into view. Her eyes widened, shocked to see him as a man once more. "I was in the archive. Why are you here? Where are we?"

"Hello, to you too. This is your party, I was hoping you had all those answers."

She frowned, so deep in thought it looked like her head might explode. "You're not a gargoyle anymore, that can't be possible. I must have fallen asleep. A different dimension? An alternate reality? Maybe telepathy or astral projection or—"

He placed hands over his ears to stem the dizzying flow of comments. "No, no, I've been here before. Well, not here, but in one of these things."

A sudden solar flare of light blinded them. Kincaid rubbed his eyes to clear his vision, "What the... wow."

A wide-open expanse of snow came into focus. They stood in the outfield of Wrigley Field. Empty bleachers and grandstands filled with snow, no screaming fans or summer heartbreak, just a place of springtime charm slumbering during the cocoon of winter.

"I think this party's actually yours," she said.

"You have your churches, this is my sacred place. My mother taught me to pray here. Beg for a hit or please God don't let us lose again. More than a hundred years without winning a World Series. Seems like none of them ever get answered."

"Sounds like most prayers in the world." Michele bent down to touch the snow on the field.

He watched her with amusement. "Now who's the cynic? You're the church lady."

"It's a love-hate thing." She continued to scan the area. "Looks like its afternoon, but there's no one else around. You said this happened before?"

Kincaid nodded. "After I turned to stone for the first time. Found myself in the chapel my mother used to go to. Three of her friends were there, talking about the past—"

A snowball hit him in the face.

"What the hell?!" He dusted snow from his forehead.

"Checking to see if you had substance. Wanted to make sure you're not a projection or ghost."

"You could have just touched me. Fate of the world hanging, do we really have time for snowballs?"

"Just the one," Michele smiled. "If this is the same sort of experience for you, then you're probably still

turned to stone. We have until one of us wakes up. Never knew that gargoyles dreamed like this."

"Getting a chance to be human again, maybe it's not something gargoyles told their handlers." His use of the last word caused her to grimace. He hurried to change it, "Sorry... 'partners.' So, if I'm having a stone dream are you just a figment of my imagination, something I made up?"

"Maybe. But I feel real enough."

Kincaid thought for a moment. Dream or no dream, Wrigley or not, this place did appear genuine and it made him feel different, more relaxed. "Tell me something I wouldn't know about you. When I wake-up I'll check if it's true."

"That assumes either of us remember any of this." She kicked at the snow. "I don't really want to. You first."

"Why? It's my dream! Or whatever, but we know I'm here." Michele folded her arms in front of her, still not ready to share. He relented. "Okay. My mother worked the first base concessions here. Bill Buckner was another of her favorites. She was so pissed when he got traded to your Red Sox."

"She was pissed? Game Six, I can still see the ball dinking under Buckner's glove, right through his legs."

They walked on the snow covered warning track by the outfield wall. Famed ivy usually hid the wall, but in winter the leaves were all gone and red brick peeked through the tangled vines.

"Still, your Red Sox broke the Curse of the Bambino." He shook his head. "Don't think we'll ever break the Curse of the Goat. We had a Game Six too. A fan reached over and knocked the ball away. Poor guy

caught hell for it too. I'm just glad Mom didn't live to see that."

"How did she die?"

"In pain. Dad's shit she couldn't cut loose of, two heart attacks, diabetes. But cancer finally got her. Suffered in the hospital for a long time before she died. Right up to the end she was always trying to save people, save things. She wanted the nurses to recycle all of the plastic IV bags they used, nagged them about the needles getting disposed of properly. But she was in so much pain. There were days that I wished... wished she would just let go. Be free." He shook his head. "Still getting bills from the hospital. She's gone, but the collectors blow up my phone night and day."

"Were you with her when she died?"

Kincaid nodded.

Her hand touched him on the shoulder. "It matters. You being there, it means something." She sighed. Her eyes blinked, trying to keep back tears. "I wasn't there for mine. She died in a car accident."

He had never seen her this upset. A taste in his mouth felt like the flow of a water fountain that grows crisper the longer you let it go. Mindful of her evolving pain, "Where were you?" he asked.

"She never listened, always told me what to do. When I was sixteen I once told her that my uncle was abusing my cousin. She got furious, *at me*. Wouldn't hear what I had to say. I got sick of it. I ran away. She died a month later."

A storm rose in Michele, but her voice dropped even lower. "At the funeral, Dad said she couldn't ever sleep. She'd drive around, hoping to see me around the next block, down the street. Never saw me. Never saw

the truck that hit her car. Another month later, my cousin killed herself too. Never could get her to escape with me."

"I'm sorry," words Kincaid knew were pointless but seemed like they should be voiced.

"You blame yourself for Frank, I get that. I've got those two lives on my conscience and a whole lot more that I can't even..." The held back tears broke through. Wiping them away, she reached out and brushed the brick outfield wall with her fingertips. "Touching the Green Monster is great, but this is pretty amazing. Thanks for listening." Then she looked at him. "Why didn't you have your own family?"

Kincaid answered with the same openness she had just shared. "Never believed in the good that my Mother thought I had. I was afraid I had Dad's demons. Didn't want to risk becoming a monster." He smiled, comfortable with the two-ton irony of being a gargoyle now. "*Holy Cow!* That plan worked out well."

Holy Cow? At first, Michele didn't get his reference to the famed line of Harry Caray, the immortal Cub's announcer, but then she started to laugh. He laughed too. In his experience, gallows humor didn't have to be good. It was the effort that mattered. Even with Gargoyle Mercadier and the end of the world coming, Wrigley Field became a winter wonderland for them.

Within the church archive, images of a Mayan altar drifted and slid in screen saver mode across Michele's flat panels. Moonlight fell on her. She slept with an open mouth drool, a hand still on the mouse.

A shadow loomed over Michele.

"Nice to see I'm in good hands," Gargoyle Bob said.

Startled, she sat up and instinctively reached for a weapon.

He held out open hands to calm her down. "Whoa, easy. It's me." Backing up, his wings knocked a stack of books off of the table. "Sorry, sorry."

As Gargoyle Bob bent to pick the books off the floor his wings kicked up and almost flipped over the table. "Damn. Never going to get used to these things hanging off my back."

Watching him bumble about, Michele relaxed and put down the pistol she had grabbed. "Guess you're not a threat."

"After all the time we spent at Wrigley, I didn't think you'd want to shoot me."

She opened a yawn that lasted a good five seconds. "Standing watch in the day, keeping up at night. Got no end of the candle left to burn. What were you saying about Wrigley?"

"Wrigley Field. When I'm turned to stone, I enter these dreams. We were there, during the day. Talking, sharing, laughing. You don't remember any of this?"

"You've been dreaming about me?" Michele asked with an arched eyebrow.

"Yes... no, it's more than that. More like a holodeck or virtual reality thing."

"Maybe a different dimension or alternate reality or telepathy or astral projection—"

"No, stop. We've been through those already. God, it's like freaking *Groundhog Day*. Maybe you've had enough of these," Gargoyle Bob muttered, glancing at an elephant graveyard of open and scattered Heavenly

Hash boxes next to her. "You're going to recycle these, right?"

"Of course. But what's got you on the green kick?"

He frowned over her zero memory of their talk at Wrigley Field, especially his mother's desire to preserve a world she would never live long enough to enjoy herself. "Doesn't saving the planet keep you academic types up all night?"

Michele waggled a mug of coffee at him. "This stuff keeps me up. In college, I'd just eat freeze-dried coffee to study. There was no time to make any. That was nasty, not bad sprinkled on ice cream, but now I chase it with one of these." She popped a piece of Heavenly Hash in her mouth.

"Yeah, I hear that. Like drinking tar. Where did you go to college? Sounded like a real pleasure."

"In Boston," she mumbled. "Went to school in Boston."

He noticed her evasiveness and thought about what she might not want to admit. "They've got more than fifty colleges there. The only people I ever met that didn't say which school was theirs went to Harvard."

"You got me," she smiled. "Well, technically it was Radcliffe, but that's damn too much tradition for me."

"Explains why you're such a geek."

"Wonk. We called it 'wonk.' That's 'K-N-O-W' spelled backwards." Michele leaned closer to him, punchy from fatigue. "What a load of crap. Couldn't stand it there sometimes. Pretentious as hell, calling geeks something completely different, don't you think? A geek is a geek is a geek."

Gargoyle Bob wondered about her more familiar and open demeanor. "I think I'm not taking you anywhere until you get some sleep." Even if she didn't remember the stone dream, he thought maybe part of her was showing comfortable signs of the time they shared together. At least he hoped so, because it would mean that those moments were real and he wasn't going nuts.

"What? Me?" she shooed off his concerns with a wave, buzzed perhaps from all the candy. "I feel fine."

"Yes, I'm sure you do," he smiled. "If you hated school so much, why did you go there?"

"Moment of weakness. Mom always dreamed of going to the Ivy League herself. Started pressuring me about it in middle school. Thought I owed it to her. Whatever."

He nodded with understanding. "You shouldn't blame yourself for her death."

"I know. Wait, who told you she died?"

"You did. Back in — never mind." Gargoyle Bob now knew they must have connected during his stone dream or he wouldn't have been right about her mother. It just sucked that she couldn't remember, since he realized it was one of the happier moments he could recall. "You, um, ready for tonight?"

Michele must have heard the frustration in his voice, because she took a closer look at him. "You seem different. Has something changed?"

"Maybe." He had learned things about her during his stone sleep and perhaps that was true for himself too. "Never felt I got things right in this world. Still want to gouge my eyes out when I think about Frank. But now... everything's weirder than ever, but this

here, this feels like what I'm supposed to do. Or maybe St. Romain brainwashed me with his Privilege thing. I don't know. Isn't acceptance one of those grief and dying, twelve-step things?

"Yeah, Kübler-Ross, Niebuhr, or the Beatles, take your pick," she said. "They all wrote that—"

"Stop wonking out on me. I got my ass kicked last night. You were right. Gargoyle Mercadier has been the ultimate killing machine for centuries. Get me up to speed. How am I going to beat him?"

"You're the new sheriff. Your jail... Hell itself. You don't need anything special to send a werewolf or vampire there. No silver or stakes, just a fair fight will do. But against another gargoyle, you're going to need something else. Because if you rely on just your skills..." Michele shrugged, "we're shit out of luck."

Gargoyle Bob glared at her. "It really might be your turn for a nap." Maybe Heavenly Hash had more than just candy in it.

"Nah." Michele turned to her computer. "Besides, while you were having fantasies of me, I found that locked computer file you told me about. Steiger wasn't trying to open it, he created it." She magnified pictographs on the Mayan altar. "These are from the tomb site." Clicking open a document, "He was trying to translate these glyphs. It was a challenging cypher, but I finished it."

She hit return and the runes dissolved into the words "Hunahpu's Sword, the Blade of Obsidian, Camazotz's Bane." The tired researcher smiled at the visual reveal of the translation. "A bit dramatic I know, but I deserved it."

"Sounds like Steiger was looking for a back-up plan. I knew there was trouble in paradise. Please tell me someone's got this magic blade."

Michele scrolled through a manifest list at Parrish Antiquities. "Nope. I'll check on the DuSable and Field museums next." She yawned, stretched again. He couldn't help notice the curve of her neck and other very feminine lines. "Just be careful tonight, there's a full moon."

"Full moon? Am I going to grow hair? Fangs?"

"No, nothing like that." She rolled her eyes. "Clear visibility. Gargoyle Mercadier will see you coming a mile away. Plus, he's a better flier. He'll have a huge flight advantage. Don't get carried away chasing him."

"OK, aerial combat wasn't part of my training at the academy," Gargoyle Bob grumbled.

"Well, it was part of mine. Tactics are tactics and we studied the best. You face the same combat situation as the Flying Tigers faced in the skies of China during WWII."

"Flying what?"

"The Flying Tigers, American volunteers that flew against the Japanese, long before the attack on Pearl Harbor. They painted big shark mouths with sharp teeth on their planes." Michele lost herself in history wonkness. "General Chennault trained his pilots to fly in pairs, fight as a team. He was brilliant. Turned disadvantages into advantages. He even built squadrons of bamboo fighter planes to trick the Japanese into thinking they were facing a much bigger enemy."

"Bamboo planes?" Gargoyle Bob glanced around the archive still hoping for anything pointy and obsidian.

"All war is deception." Michele's passion for history drew his attention back to her. "The Flying Tigers fought a superior Japanese Air Force. They faced odds like those at the Alamo and Thermopylae, but *they won.*"

Her enthusiasm began to lift his spirits. "So... a fight's a fight. Mercadier is faster and quicker," he said. His voice drifted as he thought carefully about their situation. "If I had him in the ring, I'd get in close. Cut his speed off. Don't let him dance, don't let him fire away from long range."

"Sounds good, sounds good." Michele rummaged for another box of sweets and moved her coffee mug aside.

Still visualizing the fight, he reached down and absently picked up the mug. "If we were fighting in the gym, I would work him inside. Hit the body, get in tight. Get him in a clinch."

Still pre-occupied, he drank from the mug as he talked. "Disadvantages, advantages... when he's flesh and... I'm stone."

Intense flavor filled Gargoyle Bob's mouth, a rich earthy taste with something like cherries danced on his tongue. He swirled the mug and discovered it was the ever-bitter coffee he used to hate that tasted so good. *That's great, dumpster diving and eating garbage had to be next,* he thought. Resigned to yet another cosmic change, he took another sip. A plan flashed through his mind, maybe coffee really did jump start the mind. Maybe he had a chance.

"I can do it. I can take him down," he said placing the mug on the table.

"What are you thinking?" She appeared dubious about the determined look on his face.

"Oh, nothing special. Just going to *wing it*." Gargoyle Bob smiled and pumped his wings.

Michele stared at him after the awful pun. "You did not just say that. You're crazy." She spun on her heels, hurried over to a wardrobe and opened it. A shelf of high-powered weapons slid out – handguns, machine guns, assault rifles, a row of grenades all perfectly racked and ready. Grabbing a .50 caliber Barrett sniper rifle with a scope and shortened barrel, she said, "I'm coming with you."

He lifted an eyebrow at her, *I'm crazy?*

"What? St. Joan of Arc was no Mother Theresa." Michele tossed him an earpiece. "Here, I made this for you. It should fit."

"Uh, thanks?"

"Got to help you fly better. Throwing you right into the pool didn't work out so well. Plus I can track you with that." She grabbed an assault rifle for good measure. "Time to kick the tires and light the fires."

"You really need to lay off the chocolates," grumbled Gargoyle Bob as he wedged the communication link into his ear. But Michele was already gone, hustling down the stairs. He went up the staircase to the roof.

Steiger watched the shuttered church from the poorly lit street. A van whipped out of its driveway, behind the wheel, Michele sped down the road. He barked orders into a headset to his listening squad. "They're

on the move. Positions everyone. I'm taking the first crack at it."

He got out of the car and crossed the street toward his objective. Switching to a private channel he said, "Alexis? Do you copy? Ms. Parrish? Miss Queen of the Universe—"

"Yes, I hear you," Alexis's voice answered in his earpiece. "Don't try me. If I have to listen to this peacock much longer, I swear I'll end the world right now."

In the background he could hear an alderman pontificating to a cheering audience. He realized she must still be at the dedication ceremony of the Parrish Mayan exhibit at Lincoln Park. "You wanted a status report. But I'm surprised by your interest in our work. You've been so caught up with other 'recreational' activities."

"Work is always on my mind."

"Really? Then tell me more about this ritual you're planning." He bypassed the front doors of the church and entered a side alley in search of a way into the building.

"Sorry. It's one of those 'need to know' things you soldiers of fortune are so fond of."

"Since I don't know, I must not be needed," Steiger muttered as he scouted the alley for entrances.

"What was that?"

He cleared his throat. "I said – the Council needs to speak with Mercadier."

"Keep them occupied just a little longer."

"Emma says these aren't the patient types."

"Emma? How is that old *huli jing*?" She pronounced the Mandarin word for "fox spirit" with

the same insinuation of "whore" just as the Chinese had come to use the term. "You know you can't believe a word she says."

"She usually downplays danger. It's sex she overdoes. The fact she's spooked isn't good." He examined a junction box for alarm leads and communication cables. "She brought you a gift from the Council, but they want a few things in return. A burial staff from the Mayan tomb and some artifact from that dig in northern India."

"What? No. Mercadier is about to take his throne."

"Oh, goody. All hail the King." The mention of Mercadier ruined his mood even more. Steiger rummaged through his sack of alligator clips and detonators. "How is ol' Count Pomme Frites?"

"Just stay out of each other's way, trust me on this," Alexis warned. Against a sudden barrage of press questions for the alderman, she hushed her tone to a more intimate level. "We're almost finished here. Take care of things on your end. Honestly, I couldn't do this without you."

The softness of her voice melted him for a moment, yet he knew whenever Alexis threw around words like "trust" or "honesty" the very opposite circumstances were in play. He reached for a block of C-4 in his pack. "Don't need your protection. You may need mine. Let me rig the church to come down on Michele's head. She would do the same to you. Stop playing with her."

"No, she wouldn't. Deep down she still wants to save me... that's her weakness." Steiger thought he heard just the hint of regret in her voice, but then the sharpness returned. "Set the trap the way I want it," she ordered. "Wait until daybreak. Take her only after

you're sure her gargoyle is stone or out of the way. No one finishes her but me."

A full moon glinted off Gargoyle Bob as he flew through the night. He noticed the subzero wind chill of flight didn't have such a frigid bite anymore and his skin looked different, not as rough in some areas. His fear of heights had also faded, no longer scream provoking. The aerial view actually seemed pleasant, serene. Outside and inside, he was evolving as the mantle of the gargoyle continued to settle on his shoulders.

"Can you hear me now?" blared Michele's voice through the earpiece.

"Ow. Five by five and then some."

"Sorry, how's this?" she said at a lower volume.

"Better. Where are you?"

"Moving along State Street. But I need a vantage point for better visual contact." A car honked. He heard Michele swear back at the other driver.

"Just keep your eyes on the road," Gargoyle Bob said as he scanned the streets below for Michele's van. In the air, his wings didn't feel as clumsy as they did on the ground. He noticed that he could fly and simultaneously do something else with greater ease than before. "Flying seems more natural tonight. This body's got some mean muscle memory."

"Good. You're going to need it. Now get your bearings. What's your heading?"

He looked upon the city lights glittering below him like an endless flashbulb wave in the stands of the Super Bowl. "Got Lake Michigan to my left, Goose

Island to my right. About to pass the John Hancock Center, heading south toward the Tribune Tower."

"Good. Your patrol skills as a policeman are handy. Tell me, how high are you flying? Altitude is your currency. You always need to know how much you have. Run out of it, you're screwed."

"How high? How am I supposed to know? There aren't any dials or meters on my arms."

Michele interrupted his petulance with the firm patience of a schoolteacher. "Your senses are your instruments. Learn to fly with them. Frame of reference, the Hancock Center is about eleven hundred feet tall."

"Oh, OK." He gauged his altitude from the relative height of the building as he flew by it. "I'm about 2,000 feet high."

"Let's get higher."

"Higher?" Gargoyle Bob wasn't entirely confident of his new tolerance for heights.

"Yes. But no flapping your way up through the clouds. You've lived in 'The Windy City' all your life. The wind hits you with force, air has mass. The sky isn't empty space. It's filled with currents, movements, thermal lifts. Reach out with your senses. Catch an updraft."

Gargoyle Bob focused on the sensations around him. He could feel the flow of the air across his body. But more importantly he sensed the changes in pressure and eddies of air currents under his taut wings. A wind off the lake shot down the narrow streets, blew around the skyscrapers, and swirled upwards. He stretched his wings further out, whipped

around with the sudden updraft and soared effortlessly to a higher altitude.

Breathless from the speed of his ascent, he reported, "Did it. Must be at 3,000 feet now."

"I'm impressed," she replied. "Time for something more difficult." Michele put Gargoyle Bob through a series of maneuvers that spun his head and wrenched his stomach. She taught him loops, hammerheads, snap rolls, Immelmann turns, and split S's. While he couldn't successfully do each one, he did attempt all of them without complaining.

Then she made him do a mind-bending move, the Cuban Eight. He pulled up into a loop with his head hanging down toward the streets of Chicago. Before circling down and completing it, she had him roll over so the stars were above him again, but he was now flying in the opposite direction. That was just the first part of the figure eight.

With his balance reeling, she ordered him to repeat the same dizzying move going the reverse way.

At the end of the Cuban Eight, Gargoyle Bob flew back in the direction he held at the start of the maneuver. Except now he felt lightheaded and his stomach kept flipping around. Still, not bad for someone that hated roller coasters, which basically combined his fear of heights with a guarantee on falling. On the last coaster he rode as a kid, he had surrendered himself to Death, closed his eyes, and just sagged limply through every loop that catapulted him over the parking lot. But surviving Michele's aerial joy ride pumped his blood faster than ever.

"Yes! My city! My sky! That's what I'm talking about!" The sky over Chicago became his new beat. As

a cop, he used to like watching the peregrine falcons fly about the skyscrapers. Now he could wheel and dart through the air with them.

"Don't get cocky. Gargoyle Mercadier still flies better than you," reminded Michele. "Chennault warned the Flying Tigers not to dogfight with the Japanese fighters."

"Buzz kill. Why did you teach me those moves then?"

"To get you more comfortable with flying. In combat, keep it simple. The Flying Tiger P-40's were heavier and slower, the Japanese Zeroes more acrobatic."

"Heavier and slower? Thanks a lot." Maybe it was the altitude or one too many inversions, but Gargoyle Bob still felt a little giddy.

"Get serious," she snapped. "The Old Man taught them to dive down at their enemy to gain more speed. In a nosedive those heavier planes became the hammer of God. The Japanese pilots couldn't catch them."

"Old Man?" The nickname sounded familiar to him.

"A pilot named Boyington called Chennault that. Remember, don't dogfight with Gargoyle Mercadier. He'll cut you to pieces. Dive, pick up speed, then hit and run. Always dive, hit and run. Got it?"

"Hit and run? Kind of did that last night at the Ferris wheel. Wait a sec, *Boyington* and the Old Man?" Gargoyle Bob was definitely feeling light-headed. "I used to watch this TV show, a misfit squadron of Marines led by 'Pappy' Boyington. He always complained about an 'Old Man.' Called... what was it... *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep!* Wow, Pappy was a Flying Tiger?"

"Are you OK?"

He began to sing the show's theme song. *"Poor little lambs who have lost our way. Baa, baa..."*

"G.B., pay attention—"

Something slammed into him, knocking every silly note out of his head. It felt like he had flown into the side of a building, but he knew it wasn't anything man-made. The bone-jarring hit could only belong to Gargoyle Mercadier. The street and sky blended together as he spun about like one of Michele's pen twirls. Trapped in this flat spin, Gargoyle Bob dropped out of control toward the ground.

He couldn't generate enough speed to fly in any single direction. Giving up his futile attempts to move forward, his wings suddenly flared straight out, angled back and forth without flapping. The extended wings broke the momentum of the spin and regained flight stability for him.

"What's going on? What's happening?" Michele shouted.

"We've got company," Gargoyle Bob said, serious again. He checked every line of attack, right and left, front and rear, then above in the sky. But his inexperience with aerial combat neglected one direction, the one below him.

Gargoyle Mercadier grabbed his ankle and threw him down towards the streets. Caught in an upbeat flap, Gargoyle Bob's wings slapped upright against each other. Pinned in the downward pull, they were useless.

He fell toward his death.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Tribune herewith offers \$100,000 in prizes for designs for a building to be erected on its vacant lot at North Michigan Boulevard and Austin Avenue.
Full-page ad for the Tribune Tower Competition
Chicago Tribune - June 10, 1922

“Pathetic.”

Gargoyle Mercadier’s lip pulled back into a sneer as Gargoyle Bob dropped to the ground. “Falling is all he’s good for.” He watched from the Tribune Tower, a neo-Gothic skyscraper topped by a castle and series of watchtowers. A phalanx of macabre sculptures and stone gargoyles decorated the building and flanked him on both sides.

“Where are you? Come in.” Michele’s voice demanded in Gargoyle Bob’s earpiece as he turned end over end.

“You’re not helping,” he said through clenched teeth. “Falling... Tribune Tower.”

“Tuck and roll, tuck and roll. Hang on. I’m trying to get eyes on you.”

He tucked into a somersault like a diver then kicked out to stop his rotation. His wings spread out again, caught an updraft, and halted his free fall. Sick of stumbling through the sky, he just wanted to plant a fist in Gargoyle Mercadier’s face. Maybe break a few bones. His wings pumped hard as he rose toward his enemy.

"That's the spirit," Gargoyle Mercadier called out. "Can't you feel it? The nights grow longer, the solstice approaches. Our power grows stronger."

"It's called daylight savings."

Gargoyle Mercadier smiled a mouthful of frightening teeth. "You do remind me of Richard. The Lionheart always laughed in the face of danger. Believe me, you will take greater notice of the divide between night and day. You'll grow to hate the stony grip of dawn. It's suffocating, unrelenting. You'll want to escape it or maybe you'll find a reason to stay awake. Perhaps that little Church mouse of yours?"

"At least when I'm stone I can't hear you." Gargoyle Bob reached an altitude about halfway up the skyscraper.

"When you're dead, you won't hear me either."

Gargoyle Mercadier placed his hands on the ledge in front of him. He closed his eyes and power began to glow within the stone beneath his grasp. The Tribune Tower held rocks taken from hallowed places like the Parthenon, Arc de Triomphe, Alamo, Great Wall of China, Taj Mahal, Great Pyramid, Lincoln's Tomb, St. Peter's, and Angkor Wat. Thanks to NASA, there was even a moon rock. All of these stones began to pulse with energy that shimmered through the Tower. He smiled as the elemental force from these potent grounds channeled into his body.

"Ah, such power, such glory. Your era hoards so many surprises. Behold a blessing of St. Romain's curse, command over the very stone that imprisons us."

Gargoyle Bob flew faster toward the top of the Tower, worried about what nasty surprise was coming

next. "Michele, what's he doing?" but he heard no response.

"Let there be life!"

Gargoyle Mercadier sank his claws deep into the ledge and blasted the absorbed power back into the building. Energy crackled along the ledge, flowed across the full-length of the wall, and swirled around a series of Stone Gargoyle Imps. These smaller statues were perched on the Tower at the same level of Gargoyle Bob's ascent.

The Stone Gargoyle Imps bore the heads of animals on top of creepy anthropomorphic bodies without any wings. Glowing with power, more than a half dozen of them came to life. They were not flesh like Gargoyle Mercadier and Gargoyle Bob, but animated stone infused with mystic energy. These soulless creations stretched their dwarf-sized bodies and yawned jaws with nasty fangs.

"Oh, these little bastards can't be good." Gargoyle Bob watched in morbid curiosity as the statues awoke.

A homicidal menagerie of Stone Imps screamed and waved savage limbs at him. The two closest ones pounced off the building. A Stone Gorilla Imp stretched out mighty hands and struck him full in the chest.

"Ow. Son of a—" it clung like a murderous toddler and beat at his body with solid fists. The second Imp, a Stone Cat, landed right on his face, scratching at his eyes and yowling with madness. Although they were much smaller, their attacks hurt a lot. *More 'power of St. Romain' thing*, he thought. They didn't have the strength of Gargoyle Mercadier, but their claws and

fists left painful wounds. The weight of the two wriggling creatures also wobbled his flight.

"Michele? Is this thing working?" Gargoyle Bob yelled at the silence in his earpiece. He managed to catch the tail of the Stone Cat. The feral creature raked burning claw marks across his face as he pulled it off of him.

Swinging it around in a hissing, howling circle, he smacked it repeatedly against the side of the building. Cracks spread across the Stone Cat until its body exploded in mid-scream. All that remained was a long tail squirming in his hand.

The Stone Gorilla smashed a fist into his neck. It climbed all over him, hitting every pressure point.

"I could use some help," he grunted, but there was still no reply. He stunned the Imp with a hard punch to the snout, granite particles shattered off its injured face. But then it started moving again, too fast for him to grab.

Gargoyle Bob's muscles knotted up with each near miss. He took a deep breath to calm down and stopped trying to catch the Imp with his hands. Instead, with a quick flick of the wrist, he lassooed the remnant of the cat's tail around the gorilla's neck. Pulling it taut, he choked the possessed simian.

The Stone Gorilla let go of him and tore at the tail wrapped around its throat. Bad move. Gargoyle Bob whipped the choking creature downward then simply let go of the cat's tail. Unable to fly, the Gorilla Imp fell. It shattered into pieces next to the bronze statue of Nathan Hale in the courtyard below.

With a chorus of howls, the rest of the Gargoyle Imps leapt off the building. They swarmed all over him – a feeding frenzy of rabid gibbering stone.

The Stone Porcupine impaled him in the shoulder with sharp quills. Horns of the Stone Goat rammed into his stomach. Fangs of both the Stone Bear and Stone Wolf bit him everywhere. A split second later, they scampered to different spots to bite, scratch, and hit him all over again. Puncture wounds and bloody gashes multiplied across his skin.

“Ah! Get off!” he shouted.

The pack of Imps continued to maul him from every direction. Dazed by their suffocating attack, he couldn’t tell where one Imp started and another Imp began. Their collective weight obstructed the movement of his wings. He tumbled down faster and faster. A meteor of flailing arms and legs followed the Gorilla Imp’s drop to the ground.

Gargoyle Bob managed to get one hand free between granite spines and stone horns. He reached out and grabbed the side of the building. Animal screams filled his ears. With enormous strength and a bone-breaking jolt, he stopped their free fall. But with its suction cup fingertips, the Frog Imp still tried to suck his eyes from their sockets.

BLAM! BLAM! High-powered shots rang out.

The Stone Frog exploded into a cloud of debris. Gargoyle Bob’s face and vision cleared. Another sharp volley blew apart the Porcupine Imp and Goat Imp. His wings were freed too.

“Sorry, I’m late,” said Michele in his earpiece.

He looked about and spotted her on a secondary level of the Tribune Tower. Braced among its gothic

arches and edifice, she fired away with a sniper weapon. She looked more beautiful and kick ass than ever to him. *If only...*

The Stone Elephant choked Gargoyle Bob's neck with its serpentine trunk and yanked him back to reality. It broke off one of its own tusks, lifted it like a dagger, and stabbed downwards. But before the point could harm him, another one of Michele's fifty-caliber shots exploded the Elephant Imp into dust.

With his arms and wings free, he spun himself about like a top. The Stone Wolf and Stone Bear stopped trying to kill him. Instead, they clung to him for their own survival. He grabbed each one by the neck, plucked the disoriented pair off his body, and threw them high into the air. As they arched into the sky, he flew up and pulverized them together. The last of the Stone Imps fell to the ground as nothing but dirt and rubble.

Gargoyle Bob glared up at Gargoyle Mercadier on his perch. "That's it? Your boys suck! I'll beat anything you send at me. This is my city. This is where you'll die."

"I have killed thousands, slain warriors of greater renown than you. I am Death's shade! And I will drag you to the valley of shadows." Gargoyle Mercadier dove off the Tribune Tower.

Gargoyle Bob scrambled up to meet him. He positioned himself to deflect the attack, but didn't anticipate how quickly Michele would react to the combat situation.

On the lower level of the Tower, she dropped the sniper rifle. Gargoyle Mercadier was moving too fast to get a bead on him through the scope. She grabbed up

the bullpup assault rifle, its shorter stock gave her greater maneuverability to track and target his movements. The Sister of battle snapped off controlled bursts of gunfire.

As bullets whizzed close to his head, Gargoyle Mercadier snarled at the new threat. He drew a wing forward to shield himself. More bullets slammed into his hide, but they didn't penetrate or cause any great harm. Some bullets flattened and fell, while others ricocheted away.

"Got skin like Kevlar," Michele complained.

Gargoyle Mercadier slid his dive sideways, shifting the attack vector towards her. The change of direction caught Gargoyle Bob by surprise. Struck at an oblique angle he was knocked aside. He reached out to grab his enemy, but Gargoyle Mercadier slipped by him and continued at Michele. Folding his wings, Gargoyle Bob dropped into pursuit.

More bullets burst passed Gargoyle Mercadier, but he still drew within range. Snarling in anticipation, he stretched out his claws for the kill.

Michele didn't flinch. She just kept firing. Inches from impact, Gargoyle Bob managed to grab an ankle and pulled the killer off target.

"Meddler." Gargoyle Mercadier spun about and grabbed his arm, using it as leverage to sling him across the street.

Gargoyle Bob slammed onto the slanted top of the Diamond Building, a skyscraper that looked as if a giant samurai sword had diagonally sliced it in half. He tumbled down the glassy incline of the angled roof. His claws slid across the glass, unable to get a grip on anything to break the slide. About to topple off the

building and down into the street, his feet finally caught the edge of the roof. He bent his legs and launched back into the air.

"You really do fall better than you fly," Gargoyle Mercadier laughed.

"No more games! This is between you and me. Time to throw out the Old World trash." Gargoyle Bob flew up and tried to keep the monster's attention off of Michele.

"Very well. But when I'm finished with you, I'll take care of your little witch. Skin her, burn her at the stake."

They circled about each other, sizing up each other's strengths and weaknesses. Gargoyle Bob watched for any flaw or tell in Gargoyle Mercadier's motion, but every move was polished. As they picked up speed, he glanced down at Michele. Giving her a gallant nod, he took out his earpiece and let it fall. His plan to kill Gargoyle Mercadier didn't include her. It was something he had to do himself. Something only he could finish.

"No," she shook her head. "Don't do this!"

He flew even higher above her. The two gargoyles spiraled upwards in a double helix pattern against the night sky. At its peak, Gargoyle Bob broke off the formation. He sped away in full flight from the area.

Gargoyle Mercadier howled as he gave chase.

Michele rushed to the side of the building. "Keep him here! We're a team. We can do this together!" But as they disappeared from view, she whispered, "It's my duty."

The gargoyles raced through the dark sky. Gargoyle Mercadier caught up with little effort and stayed right behind Gargoyle Bob, strafing him at will with swipes of his claws. Left, right, horizontally there was no escape – such an easy target. Fed up with Gargoyle Mercadier flying right on top of him, Gargoyle Bob spread his wings wide and pulled up into a sudden stop. Just about to strike again, his enemy missed and zoomed passed him.

Gargoyle Bob smiled. He had the murdering sociopath in front of him, his chance to do so some damage. But Gargoyle Mercadier banked into a quick turn.

“Not getting away from me,” yelled Gargoyle Bob as he flew hot into the turn. But his chance for revenge vanished as Gargoyle Mercadier turned faster than him. With much greater agility he whipped all the way around inside of Gargoyle Bob’s curve, circling right behind him again.

Advantage gone in a heartbeat, he muttered, “Screw this.” Burying his urge to dogfight, Gargoyle Bob initiated the Flying Tiger tactics Michele had drilled into him. He corkscrewed through the air, wrapping his wings tightly about himself. Now a bullet shaped mummy, he dropped into a suicidal nosedive. His eyes narrowed to mere slits so the air friction wouldn’t burn them out. The wind screamed in his face.

Gargoyle Mercadier immediately followed but could not keep pace. He dwindled into the distance. Gargoyle Bob’s muscular build gave him more mass, faster speed in the dive. A moment of respite, yet plummeting toward the earth at such a high velocity

raised new problems. At this speed, he sensed that popping wings wide to level off would rip and tear them to shreds. He kept his wings hugged to the body, extending just the tips to act like the fins on a cruise missile.

Bit by bit, Gargoyle Bob angled the vertical drop into a more horizontal direction. But the ground was still coming awfully fast. A hundred yards from impact, his wings stayed along the body but cracked open by just a few inches. That slight increase in surface area scooped up enough air to pull him out of the dive. He blasted down the Magnificent Mile, Chicago's avenue of fashion stores.

Lit with over a million lights in its trees and street lamps, the starry paradise flashed by in a blur. He sneaked rapid looks over each shoulder, watching out for his enemy. For once the sky appeared clear.

"I'll be damned," he smiled. Michele was right. He did have an advantage in a dive. "She's going to be such a pain when I tell her."

Gargoyle Mercadier finally dropped down a few blocks behind. He strained to cut down the distance. "That's it! Run, little rabbit, run," the monster roared.

"Never catch me in my town." Gargoyle Bob flew his wings as hard as possible to keep the lead. He stalled for time to give his plan any chance of working.

They bombed past Bloomingdales, Saks, and Macy's. But the fast forward video blur of high fashion windows began to slow. Things became more discernible as clothes and mannequins. The extra momentum from his power dive was fading.

Gargoyle Mercadier closed the gap between them. His claws slashed outwards as he pulled closer.

Gargoyle Bob scissored back and forth to shake his pursuer in this top gun chase. But misses by a few feet narrowed to a few inches. A vicious claw finally found its mark and cut across his legs.

Sharp pain made his wings skip a beat. Gargoyle Bob fell out of full flight. *I'm dead meat*, he thought.

Dropping toward the sidewalk, his foot landed on a hotel awning instead. It bounced him up again. His wings propelled him forward with a quick flap. Without enough lift to be airborne, he fell back down and hit the top of a semi-truck. Not stopping, Gargoyle Bob ran across the top of the container trailer. The body bestowed by St. Romain possessed strength for parkour moves he could never even attempt on his best days as a cop.

Moving with enough speed to stay out of Gargoyle Mercadier's deadly grasp, his wings provided intermittent beats of speed and power. He stutter-stepped around and hurdled over store facades with the energy of a running back that any Bears fan would drool over.

"Look at me, Frank! I'm freaking Walter Payton and Chuck Yeager." Strong and foolish, he leaped up and rushed across the face of a building. Moderate wing flaps kept him perpendicular to the wall while his feet pounded over the bricks. Defying gravity in an off-kilter run, he dodged window openings like potholes in the road.

Behind him, Gargoyle Mercadier flew with the grace of a dancer. Never touching the ground, he nipped around things to keep pace with his quarry. Rather than following him through every little hole, Gargoyle Mercadier chased him like a hound hunting

down a fox. Flying over the tightest obstacles instead of squeezing through them, the winged hunter waited for a moment when the urban briar of lamps and traffic lights wouldn't get in his way.

Gargoyle Bob broke into clear view from under a pedestrian bridge between two buildings.

"There you are," Gargoyle Mercadier gloated. He extended his wings to their fullest reach, pointed his toes, and pulled through a powerful wing stroke. A hurricane back draft from his wings blasted him forward.

From the corner of his eye, Gargoyle Bob could see the blur of death rushing toward him. "Damn. Time out, time out." Unable to outrun or dive away from the incoming doom, he grabbed onto a street lamp. A pivot of popping sinews and straining muscles swung him abruptly down a side street.

His airborne pursuer couldn't match this sudden change of direction. Gargoyle Mercadier crashed into a panel truck. Smashing through the metal on one side, he became trapped for a moment in the tight cargo bay. With claustrophobic rage, he tore his way through the other side of the parked vehicle.

"No! Never again. I will be free," he roared to the stars. His eyes darted about, searching for the prize.

But Gargoyle Bob was gone.

He escaped into Millennium Park. Within the deserted plaza sat Cloud Gate, a stainless steel sculpture shaped like a kidney, albeit a huge one at sixty-six feet long, one hundred tons, and covered with a polished mercury finish that gave it an extraterrestrial appearance. The reflective metallic

sculpture stood with its convex side arched into the air, its concave side curved over the ground.

Gargoyle Bob slipped beneath the sculpture and peered out from his hiding place. "Come on. Just a little longer. Don't quit on me now."

But he didn't see any sign of Gargoyle Mercadier. Surely, he couldn't have out flown him. Maybe those centuries buried in a Mayan tomb had caught up with the murderous fiend. His trap wasn't going to work if he had managed to escape. About to leave for a better look around, a shadow passed overhead.

Gargoyle Mercadier flew over the mirrored finish of Cloud Gate then landed on top of it. The metallic surface of the sculpture turned all the ambient light and surrounding images into a distorted Salvador Dali landscape. His warped reflection stretched across the curved liquid metal world.

"Coward! Face me!" he yelled.

Gargoyle Bob emerged out of the nook below. His image entered the distorted reflection on the mammoth sculpture as he snuck up from behind. He wished again for a weapon, especially that legendary obsidian sword, so he could kill Gargoyle Mercadier where he stood. Stick to the plan, he told himself. With a flying rush, he knocked Gargoyle Mercadier off Cloud Gate.

"Hit and run, hit and run." Gargoyle Bob called out the Flying Tiger mantra as he flew away again.

Recovering from the surprise attack, Gargoyle Mercadier looked about but Gargoyle Bob had disappeared once more. "Hit and run? Is this the courage of today's man?" he shouted. "I will rule this world from on high, not here among the rabble." He

rocketed into the sky to gain a better view of his hunting ground.

Gargoyle Bob watched hidden behind a newsstand. "Arrogant bastard, you're going to fall. And fall hard." Turning around, he flew off in the opposite direction. Staying to the shadows and using any cover possible, he made it undetected to the edge of a street bridge.

Standing on the bridge, Gargoyle Bob realized with a shock of sorrow that it was the same one where they had found Tommy's corpse. "They" as in a living, breathing Frank and when he was still Kincaid. No wings, no supernatural strength, just a bad back and mountains of bills to pay. He wished for his former life and all of its problems again. All that insurmountable crap now appeared so small compared to Frank's death. But as before in the alley, no bargain materialized to restore Frank's life. Dead was dead.

Gargoyle Bob glared into the sky. "You've already made your trade, didn't you? Then let's play two. For St. Romain and Frank."

Launching from the bridge, he flew right over the Chicago River. The tips of his wings dabbed onto its surface, a double trail of splashes and ripples stretched out behind. Accelerating to top speed, the wings went completely flat. Gargoyle Bob zoomed along just above the river without knowing that the moving water had created turbulence in the air molecules and decreased air resistance. Although the physics of the moment were a mystery to him, like a brown pelican, he instinctively enjoyed flying fast and low with less effort along the water.

He shot under a rapid succession of bridges. The hollow echo of the underpasses alternated with the blare of city sounds in his ears.

"Almost there." So close to being ready, he hoped Gargoyle Mercadier wouldn't suddenly attack from the sky above. He blew past the last bridge at full throttle then soared out across Lake Michigan.

Leaving the city behind, Gargoyle Bob pulled up high into the sky above the lake. Not just some pond, Lake Michigan was a vast inland ocean, a huge expanse of water. His wings flexed and flapped to keep him aloft. Hovering, he checked the horizon and could see the approaching soft light of dawn. Unlike last night, he was betting on this sunrise. Counting on deception as Michele had suggested, the final showdown was at a moment and place of his choice.

"I'm here! Fight me you old bat!" thundered Gargoyle Bob.

Watching the streets at the city's edge, Gargoyle Mercadier whipped about in surprise at the sound of the challenge. His face contorted with fury. Somehow his prey had slipped passed him. Homing in on Gargoyle Bob's voice, he flew with all his arcane strength. Wings whooshed and snapped through the air as they beat a flight path toward his target.

Gargoyle Bob hung in plain sight over Lake Michigan. No hiding, just open defiance.

"Your life ends now," Gargoyle Mercadier snarled. He approached so fast that avoiding a head-to-head dogfight had clearly been the right strategy.

But the time for running was over. Gargoyle Bob faked a dodge to the left then tackled the incoming gargoyle from the right side. He couldn't let this

monster get any distance from him now. Wrapping an arm around the back of Gargoyle Mercadier's neck, he threw crippling body shots to the abdomen.

Gargoyle Mercadier doubled over and gasped, but then straightened up, ready for more. "*C'est tout?* You've never been strong enough. Couldn't save your partner. By his memories, you couldn't stop your father."

With a shout of rage, Gargoyle Bob threw a sharp elbow across the face then followed with a skull cracking head butt. No taunts were coming now. He pulled his foe into a vise-like clench that pinned arms against the body.

The wings of Gargoyle Mercadier thrashed wildly to shake the death grip. One wing smacked against him. The other wing reared up a sharp tip and speared down over and over again.

Gargoyle Bob hung on, enduring the spike wounds and wing blows. Although impervious to the freezing ambient temperatures, he felt every painful impact. A wing slapped him in the head.

"Do you always fight like a bitch?" he grunted, ears ringing.

"That's it. Make jokes to the end." Gargoyle Mercadier managed to get one arm free. He rained hammer fists down on Gargoyle Bob's back and head. "In day's light, you'll be helpless stone. Die now with courage like your squire."

The bludgeoning hits took a brutal toll. Gargoyle Bob bled from his wounds and if he had still been human, appalling bruises would have covered his face. In spite of the horrible beating, he didn't fight back. He focused instead on the tortuous memory of Frank's

ashen face, his halting breath, the stillness in death. Just a few more seconds and he could avenge him, be free of the pain and guilt. He kept his grip locked around Gargoyle Mercadier.

"Stone... doesn't need... air..." Gargoyle Bob mumbled through a bashed up mouth.

"What?" The determination in his voice startled Gargoyle Mercadier. He looked about in alarm and noticed too late that the sun was about to rise.

"No!" Limbs and wings flailed in a frantic effort to escape, but Gargoyle Bob only tightened his hold. He clung to this final moment for Frank.

The sun rose.

Gargoyle Bob instinctively took a deep breath, even though he didn't know if it would make a difference. His hide crackled under the light and turned to stone.

With all the energy of souls stored inside Gargoyle Mercadier, his skin softened as both wings retracted. His body turned to human flesh instead of stone. Mercadier strained against the stony grasp of Gargoyle Bob, but there was no escape. His knuckles bled as he hit mortal hands against unyielding rock. Since neither of them had functional wings, the two combatants dropped through the air in a tombstone embrace.

They fell toward Lake Michigan.

A giant plume of water rose from the splash of their impact. The pair sank like the stone that Gargoyle Bob had become. They plunged into the depths of the lake, five hundred feet to a watery grave. Air bubbles streamed from Mercadier's mouth. His struggles to get free weakened as the icy water crushed in on him.

Losing consciousness, the medieval killer glared at the smile of victory frozen on Gargoyle Bob's face.

They hit the bottom of the lake. But when stone smacked into sand, the impact jostled Mercadier and sprung his other arm loose. Running out of air, he twisted out of Gargoyle Bob's grasp. Even though his enemy stood helpless before him, Mercadier didn't have the strength to destroy him. In fact, he didn't have enough air to last any more than a few more seconds underwater. He desperately swam upward to freedom.

At the bottom of the lake, Gargoyle Bob slept with the fishes. Fortunate to have turned to stone with the happy thought that Mercadier would drown in his grasp, he remained blissfully unaware of the murderer's escape. Now just an empty handed statue with a false sense of victory, he disappeared into the deep water's gloom.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The American nuns who were harshly condemned by the Vatican as failing to uphold Catholic doctrine finally responded in their own strong terms, saying the Vatican's assessment was based on "unsubstantiated accusations" and a "flawed process," and has caused scandal, pain and polarization in the Roman Catholic Church.

Goodstein – New York Times – June 1, 2012

"All hope is lost for her," said Mother Superior on the Monsignor's screen.

Matters must have deteriorated greatly, because this time she had called him. He could tell she came armed with questions and demands, all sure to be pointed and heated. It promised to be a long day as she continued to harangue him.

"Once she has decided upon a course of action, she will never change her mind. That much I learned from mentoring her. There will be no repentance or going back now."

"I'm sorry. Were we talking about Alexis or Sister Michele?" he asked, rubbing his temples. His migraines were never going to fade, they were just getting worse. "Maybe you should rethink the selection process of your Sisters. They all seem to be lone gunslingers without any regard to authority."

"You know as well as I do, work in the shadows requires a special kind of strength. Although, I may have tried too long with Alexis," Mother Superior

admitted. "I thought I was making a difference with her. She showed so much promise in our order. But Sister Michele is nothing like Alexis."

Her video image skipped for a moment. "I had even chosen her as my successor," she said in a tone almost too low to hear.

"Really?" The Monsignor's eyebrows rose in surprise of her softness.

"She's had trouble accepting the responsibility, but I think she'll come around to it."

For once, they weren't battling demons and facing the end of the world. They were both just the caring people initially called to the service of God.

"You should talk with her," he said as a nudge toward reconciliation. "In fact, there are probably a number of things that could bear discussion between you two."

She held her tongue and seemed to reflect on talking with Michele. But then Mother Superior's thoughtful demeanor evaporated and the fire came back into her eyes.

"Oh, yes, most certainly," she snapped. "Right after the next bake sale and killing all the Undead that Mercadier will unleash through a Mayan Gate of Hell. I'll be sure to have a little chat with her. We'll pull out a guitar and sing *Dominique*."

Ecumenical moment dead and buried, he sighed. "Well, I can see where all your Sisters get it from."

"Yes, and I can see why our Church is choking on its own bureaucratic idiocy. Bad enough the Vatican accused the Women Religious Leadership of radical feminism and focusing too much on social justice. How can you have *too much* social justice?" Mother Superior

jabbed a finger on the documents in front of her. "Do not go through with this writ of excommunication on Sister Michele."

"I sent that to you as a head's up. The Bishop hasn't signed it yet." The Monsignor had debated over sending the punitive declaration. Yet there was no other choice. The Church's survival, its traditions had to be upheld.

"In 1123, Canon Seven of the First Lateran Council was very clear," he began. "No one is permitted to arrogate the episcopal authority in matters pertaining to the *cura animarum*."

"You can keep your rules and regulations, you're preaching to the choir. Where is the Bishop? I demand to speak with him. He still owes me from the Battle of Astana. So do you, by the way. You do remember the Guardian of the White Shrine don't you?"

Astana. The cold of that city and memories of his last armed engagement still chilled the Monsignor's bones. He began to daydream about anything other than arguing with Mother Superior. Originally, the city was called Akmolinsk, dubbed Tselinograd by the Soviets, named Akmol after the fall of the USSR, and then renamed Astana when it became the capital of Kazakhstan. It stayed frozen for more than half the year. No other capital in the world outside of Mongolia's Ulaanbaatar was more frigid.

"I would have seen that werewolf eventually," he said. Though he did have to admit the Kazakh lycan nearly tore him in two. It was a particularly nasty beast with the thickest coat of white hair he had ever seen, no doubt an adaptation to its environment.

"Hindsight is 20/20, but should never be ungrateful." She lifted her nose with a disapproving air. A stance surely thousands upon thousands had endured before him.

"You always have my thanks. But the Bishop of Rouen does not take requests," he said. "Especially when I haven't been able to contact him."

The last time he had seen the Bishop, he appeared distant and pre-occupied, mumbling something about "Council matters." But the Monsignor had no idea to which of the countless tribunals or committees he was referring. The Bishop had brushed his questions aside, focusing instead on the renovation of the Vatican's Secret Archives – 52 miles of shelves and more than 35,000 volumes. Even though he knew the Bishop was quite capable of taking care of himself, the lack of communication alarmed him. Anything that could detain, or even worse, take down the Bishop of Rouen would most assuredly be a formidable threat to the rest of the world.

"You can't reach the Bishop?" Mother Superior stared in shock over his admission. "You're his major domo. The chain of command is clear. How do you keep everything together without his lead?"

"We've been together long enough that I can anticipate what his commands would be."

"You're guessing. You have no standing orders?"

"Nothing except to safeguard the world and keep it from being destroyed by evil. That one's a given. Frankly, I'm not entirely sure if he's even on our plane of existence right now." He did not mention that the Bishop had recently become more proficient at the skill

of dimensional travel. Such things stayed within his office.

The monitor image of Mother Superior leaned closer. "Then this matter demands your full attention. This is your call."

"Mother Superior. All squads of our Templar Knights are engaged in the field," he responded. "The Torquemadas are neck deep in their usual problems. I would love to enlist the Iscariots, but they don't march under our banner. There is no one else. Besides, I can't help but think that if your own house were in order, Alexis would not have become an issue."

"The issue isn't Alexis. It's Gargoyle Mercadier," insisted Mother Superior. "I've been going through our archive. You like dates and procedures? How about 1572?"

The Monsignor sagged inwardly at the mention of that year and struggled to maintain his best poker face.

"In 1572, the Sister of Jeanne d'Arc assigned to Gargoyle Mercadier was killed trying to stop him on St. Bartholomew's Day." As if it were yesterday, bitterness filled Mother Superior's voice. "The Bishop's Office decided not to request another Sister because they vowed to carry out his termination themselves. I can't think of a more egregious violation of protocol. If we were in our proper position, we could have put an end to him then. But the injustice didn't stop there."

"What are you saying?" He could never get over the feeling that Mother Superior always seemed ready to lash out with a ruler in hand.

"I think Mercadier was doing Rome's dirty work in Paris and when that was done, they shipped him out with the Conquistadors to 'save' the Maya too."

That was the slap across the wrist the Monsignor expected. "That's outrageous!" he protested, face set for the verbal whack sure to be next.

"Then they stored Gargoyle Mercadier away for a rainy day to be used later. Somebody guided Alexis to that tomb." She waited for a denial and then got the big stick out. "Somebody let Gargoyle Mercadier out on purpose."

"Speculation and conjecture! Mother Superior, if Sister Michele had done her job, we wouldn't be having this conversation." Outrage tightened the muscles under Monsignor's collar. "You lecture me on the chain of command? Don't forget your Convent falls under the auspices of this Office."

Furious didn't begin to describe the look on Mother Superior's face. "Don't you dare pull rank on me. For centuries, the Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc and the Bishop of Rouen's Office have served as a prudent check and balance for each other. Our governance is just a technicality."

The Monsignor wasn't going to let her off without some acknowledgement of the Bishop's authority. He stretched his neck a few times to let the anger settle and allow the proper barbs to form in his mind.

"You of all people should know the Church runs on technicalities. Its bureaucrats stupid or otherwise are the ones that have the final say. The Bishops within the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith will oversee the reform of the Women Religious Leadership whether they agree to it or not. My office is the only thing that can keep your Convent free of those changes."

Mother Superior stared at him from the monitor with a coldness he could feel clear across the Internet.

"Have a care. One of your shepherds did betray his flock. Right now, the world's only saving grace is Sister Michele."

In the morning sun, Michele stood on the church rooftop searching through a pair of binoculars for some sign of Gargoyle Bob. It was way past the time he might come flying back before turning to stone. If he had survived his battle with Gargoyle Mercadier then at best, somewhere in this city, there was an out-of-place gargoyle statue. But if he didn't land in time before dawn then she hated to imagine the number of pieces he might have smashed into. Of the many things she couldn't forgive herself that one would be the worst. God could forgive people and in the past Alexis used the sacrament of confession as a "Get Out of Jail Free" card, but Michele always kept count and did not easily let go of her own transgressions.

She spotted a large grey object in the sun by an adjacent building. Zooming in on it, she saw only a stone lion sculpture above the entrance of a hardware store. "Damn. Wrong one. Where are you?"

Her fingers tapped on the binoculars as she paced behind the steeple on the front façade of the chapel. The roof area of the building was otherwise flat and looked more like the top of a city apartment. Not the most graceful of architectural design, it was peppered with ventilation ducts, elevated doorways, and an open air shed that had served as a carrier pigeon roost at one time. Where others had awaited the return of their

birds, she now stressed about the survival of her winged companion.

If Gargoyle Bob had just kept the earpiece she might have found him by tracking its signal. Michele needed to find another way to reach him. Nothing else in her tech arsenal appeared useful, and it wasn't like she could ask Kincaid's former law enforcement brethren to put out an APB for a six-foot gargoyle with wings. Something outside of protocol, something beyond standard issue was required.

She started to consider the stone dream he claimed they shared. Listening to him talk about it, Michele had worried if the experience was an early sign of that gargoyle madness the Monsignor had mentioned. Now she just hoped the dream was real. It could be a potential way to contact him.

Feeling uncomfortable since her extrasensory perception score was not the greatest, Michele closed her eyes and attempted to reach out for Gargoyle Bob with her mind. She preferred facing supernatural phenomena with a weapon in hand, yet with so much at stake she focused on picking up some mental or psychic trace of him. But all her efforts yielded nothing. No personal aura, no telepathic vibe, no glowing presence.

Just as Michele began to feel like an idiot, something did flash by her mind's eye and ears. She squeezed her eyelids tighter, concentrated even deeper within and caught another run of sensations. It sounded like Kincaid's voice. His laugh. A flicker of his human face. Her spirits lifted, maybe she had connected, maybe this was proof he was alive.

But then mixed with glimpses of him, Michele caught sight of her own feet in the snow, felt her arm throw a snowball, and heard the sound of her own laughter. Her hand reached out for something. It touched a brick wall covered with twisted vines.

Michele opened her eyes. Her hand rested on the ledge at the church roof's edge yet the brick in the vision belonged to the outfield wall at Wrigley. Kincaid had been right all along. Unfortunately it wasn't a psychic connection she just experienced, at least not a current one. They were memory fragments of the Gargoyle Bob's stone dream. More repressed moments of their time together continued to resurface. Her heart sped up and a sad smile lingered. She hoped these memories were not all that remained of him.

A movement on top of the next building broke Michele's reverie. She lifted the binoculars with blind hope. But instead of a gargoyle, a Parrish security guard moved into view as he crept across an adjacent roof.

"Oh, son of a..."

THWAP! THWAP! Bullets ricocheted off the wall next to her.

Diving for cover, Michele kept eyes on the nearby warehouse roof for signs of the enemy. Instead of just one guard, two different locations opened fired with way too many incoming bullets for her to stay put. Rapid popping sounds, not a blare of gunfire meant weapons with suppressors. Armed to the teeth and clad in body armor, they moved on her position. She would be cornered in a few seconds.

"Damn." She cursed herself for letting worry about Gargoyle Bob become a distraction. Coming up to the

roof in protective gear but without a gun and just an empty knife sheath was also plain stupid.

She bolted for the rooftop entrance. Bullets hit about her feet like a storm of high velocity raindrops. But before she could reach the door, the stocky Parrish guard that Kincaid called "Mutt" slammed out from behind it. He looked surprised at their confrontation but she knew it couldn't compare to the shock on her face. How did someone break into the sanctuary?

Shots from his silenced pistol were her only answer.

Michele ducked behind a clunky ventilation unit no longer capable of moving any air but served nicely as a shield. The nest of metal ducts sprouting from it deflected the crossfire of the other Parrish guards as they advanced. Bullets flew everywhere. Incredibly, her ear bud phone beeped.

"What!" She could barely hear the caller, but the voice was Mother Superior's.

"The Monsignor... no help... didn't let... me..." were the only words she could catch.

A cluster of steam valves next to Michele exploded from a barrage of automatic gunfire. Fragments of hot shrapnel fried the communicator. She ripped off the destroyed earpiece, cursing her continued loss of focus. Hiding in cover was also never an ideal situation. She looked about for anything that could act as a weapon. A broken glass bottle, a two-by-four with nails sticking out of it, even a large rock would do.

With the pincer trap closing, Michele decided to take out one foe at a time rather than letting them attack all at once –textbook Alexander the Great versus Darius III in the Battle of Issus. Uttering her usual two-

word prayer, she rolled out and charged toward the Parrish Guard on the left.

Surprised by the attack, he fired without aiming.

Bullets missed Michele and spun a roof turbine about in a shower of sparks. Quickly cutting down the distance between them, she launched a crescent kick that connected with his chin. He dropped where he stood. Granted it was a well-executed technique, but this guy had a serious glass chin.

Michele spun through the kick and snatched a pair of knives from the body groveling in front of her. She sheathed one then threw the other from a kneeling position. The blade whistled through the air at the guard on her right, the tall one she remembered Kincaid calling "Jeff." It impaled him in the arm, but he didn't scream. To his credit, he kept shooting.

Michele rolled forward and grabbed the assault rifle from the guard on the ground. She tattooed a burst across Jeff's leg, putting him down with a bloody right kneecap. Painful, yes, but more consideration than he would have given her.

Getting back up, she immediately charged toward the stairway entrance and Mutt, the last Parrish guard. With boots pounding across the roof, Michele fired as she ran.

Mutt also blazed away yet none of his bullets hit her. Possibly unnerved by how quickly his comrades went down or maybe he just couldn't shoot worth a damn.

But Michele nailed a full stream of bullets into Mutt's chest. Even though his body armor protected him, all the kinetic energy from the slug impacts dealt a

lot of pain. With good reason, he flopped onto the ground.

She stood over him as he wheezed and gasped for breath. "How did you get in?" Michele asked.

"F... fu... fuc..."

"Watch your mouth."

She pointed the muzzle at the patchy beard on his face and couldn't help noticing the grouping of shots on his armor. "Huh, weapon pulls to the left. But at this range, it won't matter. You're a terrible shot, Mutt. Not used to a gun? Just a claw and fang killer?"

"Name's... not Mutt..."

Bullets slammed into Michele's body armor and knocked her to the ground. *Damn those hurt*, who did she miss? Through a blur of pain, she glimpsed a pair of combat boots crunching towards her. Looking up she saw a grinning Steiger.

"There's no one here to protect you this time," he said, pointing his gun.

Michele responded with a dark smile of her own. "I'm not the one that needs protecting. You're screwed. There's no room at the top with Mercadier around."

"Shut up!"

He kicked her across the face and drew back for another one. But she twisted around, caught his foot, and threw him to the ground instead.

They both jumped up, ready to fight. Rapid punches and blocks went back and forth. No critical damage, but Steiger gasped a startled breath when Michele matched the speed of his blows. She landed a punch that also told him she could hit just as hard. He broke off his attack, watched her with caution.

"Surprised?" Michele slowed her breaths, determined to find weaknesses other than physical ones to strike. Why would someone like him answer to Alexis's every beck and call?

"Alexis has a nastier surprise for you. I know her. Get away while you can. What did she promise you? Money? Power? A filthy roll in the hay?"

"Should have just killed you." Steiger circled about her. "She's not safe with you around."

"You protect her?" The encrypted computer file she cracked made a little more sense. "That's why you were translating those runes?"

"Found that did you?" A slight smile ghosted on Steiger's face, not the reaction she expected.

"Found it, finished it. Too bad you couldn't." She went for a deeper nerve to rattle him. "Aww, it must be love. You've got it, she's got it. But it's not for you. She's traded up for Mercadier. Trust me, retirement's going to be a bitch."

That angered him more than she expected. With a scream of the scorned, Steiger bull rushed Michele. He smashed her against the storage shed. Stunned by the impact, she crumpled to the ground. He dragged her by the leg toward the half wall at the building's edge.

Michele reached out, hoping for some leverage to stop her slide. Instead of something stationary, she caught hold of a brick dislodged by the hammering blows of automatic weapon fire. She flung it hard toward the back of Steiger's head. It struck him with a satisfying whack. He fell to his knees.

She rushed to her feet, grabbed him by the hair, and smashed his head against the ledge. He collapsed back onto the roof in a dazed, bloody mess.

"Not bad," said a voice from her nightmares.

Michele whirled around.

"But I think he's lost a step." Alexis stood ten yards away with a large caliber net launcher trained on her.

"I meant this for your boyfriend. But you'll do."

With the hollow boom of a compressed air cannon, the weapon shot out a throw net with bolo extensions. It spread out a giant web and wrapped iron weights around Michele before she could move. The bindings constricted as it brought her to the ground.

"Game over, sister." Alexis approached Michele as she struggled to get loose.

"Sister? Not since you tried to kill me."

"Which time?"

"The shuriken."

Alexis smiled in fond recollection. "Ah, but you'd be dead if I was aiming for you. Besides, once a sister always a sister, right?"

"No." Michele answered with the same conviction the Monsignor had about Katilo. "You stopped being a Sister when you turned to the darkness. You stopped being a Sister when Mother Superior expelled you."

"Still working out your 'mommy' issues with that hag?"

"My issues? I'm not the one that went psycho after getting passed over." Under the tight restraints, Michele's hand squirmed to reach the remaining knife she had captured from the guard.

"No, you just buckled under the pressure of being the chosen one." Alexis sauntered closer, her head tilted in disdain. "All those stolen years in that nasty nest with a barren Rat Mother who couldn't suckle all her blind pups. I discovered realms of magic and

dimensions of chaos. I could have led the Sisters to glory, unlimited power. But she decided to give you control instead. How's that working out?"

"Eternal PMS must be exhausting." Michele managed to curl a few fingers on the handle of the sheaved knife.

"You've got more edge than I remember," Alexis smiled. "No blubbering for me to repent. No begging to save my soul?"

"I've learned that some things you can't change."

"That's right. Sometimes you have to start over." She bent down for one more taunt. "How about it? Last chance to join the winning team. Tell me—"

"Shut up!" Michele cut through a restraint as she pulled the knife clear and slashed upwards. For an instant, she had a clear shot at Alexis's neck. But the remaining webbing kept her from fully extending. The knife only nicked her target.

"Ow, you bitch."

Alexis wiped the blood from her cut. "You should have driven that blade home. Mercy still makes you weak." She knocked the knife away with the launcher and slammed the weapon butt into Michele's face.

For good measure, Alexis jabbed a dart into her shoulder. Michele suspected it must have been tipped with curare and a benzodiazepine because she rapidly lost the ability to move and her consciousness faded.

Steiger got off the ground, stumbled over to pick up the fallen knife. He stepped up to stab the paralyzed and almost unconscious nun, but Alexis pushed him aside.

"No. I told you, she's mine to kill."

"Kill her then and be done with it!" He spat blood. It looked like he might have lost a tooth or two. "It's time to end this nuisance."

"Not now." She tugged his arm and turned him around. "Steiger, this isn't the right moment. I want her to see every last second. Besides, I'm going to need more sacrifices than just her to pull this off. Since you don't want Mercadier using up your men, you'll have to gather four more lambs for the ceremony."

"Four more people? Forget this sorcery. Let's go back to what we do best."

"Bring me four sacrifices. No less, no more. The Devil is indeed in the details." Alexis took a haughty glance at a guard as he pulled the knife out of his companion's arm. "Though I don't know why you bother. Mercadier makes much better use of them."

"These two have a bit of flavor that he doesn't like. But any requests about your four sacrifices? Height, weight, born on the solstice or a full moon?" Steiger asked with a scowl.

"Oh, born on a solstice, that would be a nice touch," was her cutting reply. "No, there's no time. Just living and breathing will do. Well, there was this annoying little hostess at the restaurant you may want to fetch. Now, where's my gift from the Council?"

Steiger rummaged through his weapons pack, shoving items aside. He brought out the oblong case that Emma had given him.

"Merry Christmas."

"And I didn't get you anything."

She opened the simple case and whispered "Oh, my" upon seeing its contents. Inside the case was a chalice of black stone. About a foot tall, it had a

polished surface, thick bowl, and hefty conical base. Words from different languages were chiseled in rings around the cup. Not decorated with inlaid gems or layers of gold, the simply shaped object projected an aura of age measured best in millennia, not centuries.

Alexis took the knife from Steiger without asking. She drew its point across the surface of the chalice, but it couldn't leave a scratch.

"Harder than steel, genuine black onyx, not the knock-offs they make today. The ancients used this material to align themselves with a higher power."

"What's written on it?"

"Not sure." She studied the rows of characters that circled the chalice. "Looks like a mix of Latin, Arabic, Chinese, and Sanskrit, maybe a little Aramaic. This Council's an eclectic bunch. Not people you can usually get into one room. I think this will let me communicate with them."

"How do you use it?"

"It's a chalice. It holds blood, Christ's or otherwise." She glanced at the guards.

"You said you would leave them alone." Steiger shifted his stance and actually looked like he might physically defend his men against her.

"Please, there will be plenty of blood to go around soon enough." Alexis touched the chalice with her hand. A psychic blast hit her. Apocalyptic images spewed in her brain like fire ants pouring out of a kicked over mound. Bodies covered with small pox pustules, nuked cities of ash, skeletal children weak from starvation, oceans full of rotting fish – horrifying premonitions swarmed and crawled through her mind.

She snatched back her hand.

“What? What happened?” Steiger asked.

Alexis shook her head. “This world has a short shelf life. We need to strip it before someone else does.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Asked if she saw anything else with the voices, she answered: "I will not tell you everything, I have not leave, nor does my oath touch on that. This voice is good and worthy; and I am not bound to answer you."

W. P. Barrett - "The Trial of Jeanne d'Arc" – 1932

Kincaid found himself standing in the Police Athletic Gym. No weird transition through limbo this time. He was just there, human again. In the light of day, a crowd of people should usually be training, but no one else was around. It was eerie, more proof to him that these stone dreams weren't taking place anywhere else except in his head. Then he noticed a solitary figure in the boxing ring he somehow missed. Seeing that person, the veteran officer wondered once again if he could be dead instead of just dreaming.

Frank stood on the canvas, waiting. Not rotting or cadaveric, but young and handsome, showing none of the wounds he died with.

Kincaid climbed through the ropes into the ring. He wanted to run over and hug Frank, but something told him to keep his distance. Even if he looked good, his partner was still dead.

"Papi, it's about time you got around to me. Then again, waiting for the third day is kind of biblical," Frank said with a smile.

"Frank..."

"You want to go a couple of rounds?"

Frank shadowboxed a flurry of punches then smoothed down the lapel of his black suit, the same one they put on him for burial. "Of course, I'm not dressed for it. People really should think twice about what they put on others for eternity." He tugged on his tie. "It's not like I can change real easy. Rather go around all casual like you. T-shirt and jeans would have been nice. But this was Tina's favorite suit, so I'm good with it."

"Frank..." Kincaid shuffled his feet, shoving his hands into the pockets of his ever-present Cubs jacket.

"What Papi, what? You want to apologize, say you're sorry for shooting me and not saving my ass? God, you've been saying 'sorry, sorry, sorry' twenty-four seven. Give it a rest or go ahead and say it, because that's just like this suit. It's more for the living and it's not going to make any difference to me."

"Frank, it's good to see you." Kincaid's very small smile vanished into a long face of sorrow. "Tina won't speak to me. Won't let me take care of her like you asked."

"Sorry about laying that on you." Frank grimaced and stretched his neck. "I was dying, wasn't thinking too clearly. You've got to chill. Let it be, she's going to be OK."

"You're telling me I don't have to fix it?"

"Yeah, because you can't. She's got to figure it out. Besides, in your condition you're going to scare the crap out of Tina if you try your Dr. Phil."

The young man bared his teeth, raised his hands like claws, and said in a deep voice, "So, tell me Tina what can I do?" then in falsetto, "Ahhh, you can get away from me, BLAM, BLAM!" He started laughing,

"She would so shoot you, and she's a good shot too. I taught her just like you taught me."

In spite of everything, Kincaid also laughed. "Do you get to talk to anyone else in the afterlife, because you haven't shut up."

"To be honest, I haven't done the individual entity thing since I died. Frank ran a hand through his hair. "Einstein was right. That 'E equals MC squared' is the best. Once you've converted to energy, you can go anywhere, be part of anything, fast, real fast. You just sort of roll with everyone and everything. But you called me up, so I'm here."

"I called you?" Kincaid paced in the ring, thinking over the new possibilities.

"Uh-huh, you have more control over these dream states than you think. You can actually go places."

Frank spread his arms wide to the gym and turned a circle. "This isn't just in your head. Part of you is really here, not trapped in stone. St. Romain wasn't that cruel. The gargoyle gig can be about getting another turn at bat, not a curse. A chance, a hope for redemption. And what's hope without dreams? You just have to get the hang of it."

"Really?" Kincaid stopped pacing. "Then where's my Mother, why haven't I..."

"Well, there are some things you can't control. It's that whole what you want sometimes isn't what you need thing. But don't worry, she's good."

"Wish it was easier than this."

"Like I said. Want, need."

Kincaid looked at his partner, former partner, whatever. "Guess you really are dead, don't remember you being this smart." Then his voice cracked with

emotion. "I want you to know – I got him, Frank. I got him."

Frank smiled gently. "Papi, it was good seeing you too. But no, you didn't. Also, when you wake-up... swim."

Sister Mary Alice and Sister Regina toiled together in the Convent's garden at the end of the day. Two more polar opposites couldn't be found within the walls of the Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc. Mary Alice hailed from the lush sub-tropical climate of Mobile, Alabama. Regina grew up on the crowded streets of New York City. Yet it was Regina who took readily to working the soil. Maybe it was the novelty of running her hands through fertile dirt after growing up surrounded by concrete, but she had planted an entire row of flowers while Mary Alice appeared more interested in keeping her nails clean than gardening.

"Oh, those will look nice. Just you wait until you see this whole patch in pink," Mary Alice said as she stood admiring the garden. "The azaleas were a wonderful choice."

Regina peered up from her kneeling position, wiping sweat from her brow. "Glad you approve. How do you know so much about these flowers without planting them?"

"Oh, I don't need to plant them to know them. Mobile is full of azaleas. Why there's even a pink line painted right on the streets, the Azalea Trail. It runs through the city so people can see the finest houses and best blooms in the spring."

"Turf was the only thing paint marked in our streets. Can't imagine any trail, pink or otherwise, in

my neighborhood." Regina slipped another plant from its pot, hardship made the young African American nun appear older than her actual age. "Then again, I can't imagine anything from the Deep South in my neighborhood."

Caught up in her blonde debutante days, Sister Mary Alice ignored her negativity. "I was an Azalea Trail Maid. Had a baby blue dress, big hoop skirt, ruffled shoulders, parasol, and wide brimmed hat," she said with an oscillating beauty queen wave of the hand.

"You're kidding me, right? You were 'Gone with the Wind' while I was scratching life out in P.S. 206?"

"It wasn't all fun and games." A defensive pout rose on Sister Mary Alice's lips. "You had to be chosen and it was hard work. We were ambassadors of good will, meeting dignitaries and such."

"My heart bleeds, Miss USA. I can't believe you of all people killed that banshee last week. I thought she had us until you snatched the silver comb out of her hand and killed her with it." Regina smiled at the memory of the deceptively prissy Sister ripping open the jugular of the creature with its own grooming implement.

"Well, I didn't want her screaming and hexing us. Besides, she needed straightening, badly. Now shush, Grumpy, Sneezy, and Doc are coming," Sister Mary Alice warned.

Sister Aidan, Sister Alvarez, and Sister Leong entered the garden. Alvarez and Leong debated the advantages of semi-automatic over full auto and the best Chinese restaurant they had ever been to, but Aidan walked alone, her mind elsewhere.

As they drew close enough to hear, Sister Regina broke into the discussion between Alvarez and Leong. "Semi-automatic, anything else is a waste of ammo. And *Hop Kee's* has got the best Cantonese style crab and pan-fried flounder ever," she said.

Leong nodded in agreement over the semi-auto choice but Alvarez looked surprised.

"That place in the basement? Yeah, that's right. I love their crab cooked dry and not wet. Garlic and sauce you have to lick off your fingers," Alvarez gushed, always hungry.

"Yeah, and the snails." Regina caught sight of the sour look on Sister Aidan's face. She was obviously not pleased to see a number of flowers still potted and unplanted.

"Sisters, these should all be in the ground," Sister Aidan scolded.

"I fell behind. I should have..." said Sister Regina trying to cover for Mary Alice.

But all Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc by nature were direct and Sister Mary Alice owned up immediately. "It was my fault. Too busy gabbing."

Still in no mood, Sister Aidan snapped at her. "Mary Alice, that's not good enough. Not now. We're not eating until this is done." She bent down and smacked the plastic pot holding an azalea, loosening the dirt from the inside surface before slipping it off.

Sister Mary Alice didn't mind the reprimand, but she noticed how hard and how many times her fellow Sister slapped the hapless container. "Sister Aidan. What's going on? What's the matter?"

"I was outside of her door." Sister Aidan pulled the plant free of the battered pot. "Mother Superior's last call with the Monsignor."

The other Sisters looked at each other with surprise.

"I couldn't hear every word. But she sounded angry. And Sister Michele's name came out loud and clear." The plant dangled over the ground, forgotten. "She started this garden with Regina. Taught Mary Alice to shoot. Showed me I had a better side. She's been a big sister to all of us. She's out there, alone."

"I'm so sorry." With a shovel, Sister Mary Alice quickly cleared out a hole and helped Aidan plant the azalea. "Did you hear anything about the gargoyle? Does Alexis's really control it? Of all people."

Sister Alvarez's ample figure shuddered at the mention of Alexis. "*Ay dios mio*, I still have nightmares about the things she cooked during her shifts in the kitchen. Real lion in Chinese Lion's Head Meatballs is so wrong. Am I right, Sister Leong?"

"You're the food expert," Sister Leong smiled.

Sister Mary Alice patted Alvarez's arm. "Poor dear, you skipped dinner for a week..."

From nowhere, Mother Superior interrupted the ring of Sisters. If they were nervous about Sister Aidan's behavior, the worried look on Mother Superior's face really unsettled them. They had never seen her with an expression other than one of total control or complete command.

"Sister Michele's in trouble. We must all pray to St. Jeanne," Mother Superior said. She strode away and headed in haste toward the Chapel as evening approached.

The five Sisters stood frozen for a moment then dropped their garden tools and talk of food. They ran after her. Stepping on flowers and knocking over pots, all in an awful hurry just to "pray."

The sun went down over Lake Michigan. Its fiery glow surrounded Chicago then vanished into the dark waters of the Great Lake.

Gargoyle Bob stood frozen at the lake's bottom like a cemetery statue marking the world's last dying hope. Any sunlight that filtered down to this depth dwindled even more with sundown. Everything faded to black.

But within the darkness, silicate turned back to corpuscles, life pumped through veins of rock again, and stone melted from within. A cracking glacial sound echoed forth.

Out of the depths, Gargoyle Bob struggled to swim free. Whether it was the lack of sunlight or relative position to a meridian of time, the earthen stone no longer held him prisoner. Dismay filled his face, Frank had been right. He had expected to awaken with the drowned corpse of Mercadier twisted about his hands, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Water wasn't Gargoyle Bob's natural element. His extremities thrashed to reach the surface above him. But he didn't get far with less than buoyant gargoyle arms and legs. The wings dragged him down like anchors. At this rate, he was going to drown.

As Gargoyle Bob paused to gather strength for one last attempt to reach breathable air, the wings floated forward. With grim determination he started to swim again, but this time the wings suddenly swept backwards on their own accord. Nature and mystic

instinct had acted to save him again. He shot through the water with a rush of turbulence and bubbles.

His wings folded and drew forward, spread out and swept back again in the frog leg motion of a breaststroke. Gargoyle Bob smiled as he “flew” through the water, not with the little flits of a penguin, but with strokes of mighty wings that left whirlpools in his wake. He liked this form of underwater propulsion. It sure beat drowning to death.

On the surface above Gargoyle Bob, two night fishermen bobbed about in their skiff. Zach and Ethan were former workers of the Chicago Nabisco plant, the largest cracker and cookie factory in the world. They retired after Kraft Foods swallowed up Nabisco along with Oscar Meyer, Maxwell House, Entenmann’s, Shake’N Bake, Jell-O, Kool-Aid, and Cadbury with all its Easter Eggs – a Crusade of Fast Foods with its own insidious reach and fanatic followers like any other religion.

Zach watched a fish scanner as Ethan cast a lure out onto the river. Next to the monitor screen sat a bag of Fig Newtons, a deceptively exotic food based on pastries invented by early Egyptians. He munched on them with gusto.

“Give me some of my cookies, not those chewy things you like,” Ethan said.

Zach tossed a few Oreos over to him. “When are you going to try some of those Double Stuffs?”

“Oh, please. Next you’ll want me to twist and lick them. Just eat them like they’re made. I stand by the original ratio of cookie and crème as God intended.”

“God? What does God have to do with Oreos?”

"Besides being a classic? Take a close look at it. See that?" Ethan reeled in his lure. "On the cookie."

Zach squinted at the Oreo by the boat lamp. He could see the familiar round company logo with the double barred cross imprinted in the cookie surface.

"Yeah, I know. The Nabisco logo. So?"

"Printers in old Europe used that mark. It stands for the triumph of spirit. It's topped with a cross."

"A cross? Nah, looks like a TV antennae."

"No, that's a cross. See the double bar? That there is a Cross of Lorraine, my friend." Ethan could see the skepticism still on Zach's face. He pointed at the stack of Fig Newtons. "Screw it. You know those things come filled with apple and strawberry these days. So, when are you going to try those, hmmm?"

"Hey, like you said, 'classic' is the way to..." Zach saw a giant blob move across the fish scanner's display. Not just a big fish, this thing had wide "fins" or something that stretched from side to side like an enormous manta ray. He gawked at the reading and pointed to the starboard.

"Ethan, throw your line over there!"

"What? Why?"

"Do it! And tie in!"

Ethan flung a cast in that direction and locked the rod into the holder on the stern. His best cast of the night hooked the fishing lure onto the submerged shoulder of Gargoyle Bob. While the hook went unnoticed by him, the pound test of the line was initially strong enough to tow the skiff.

"AHH!!!" screamed Zach and Ethan as their boat skimmed across the surface on a Nantucket sleighride,

pulled they presumed by Moby Dick or some kind of Ogopogo.

Gargoyle Bob surfaced by Goose Island and spotted his home by the water. With his head and shoulders above the surface, he saw the fishing lure hanging off of his shoulder. A broken fishing line dangled from it. He plucked it off and tossed it away.

A thousand yards back downstream where the line had finally snapped, the two fishermen lay at the bottom of their boat. Zach panted into the night sky.

Ethan just took a hearty bite from a beloved Oreo and smiled. "That was awesome."

Grandma Zee dumped a handful of bean sprouts into a mix of garlic, vinegar, scallions, and red pepper flakes within a glass pickling jar. She snapped down the metal clamp on its lid, shook up the concoction, and placed it on the condiment shelf of her food cart. Her more human customers liked this side dish better than the squiggly jellyfish salad or amber translucence and black yolk of the thousand-year egg that her more exotic clientele preferred.

A beige sedan pulled up next to her cart. Nothing fancy or expensive yet the man that got out made the cast iron woman take a deep breath. Far from drop dead gorgeous, his minimal appearance was as unassuming as the Bondo patched car he drove. More janitor than crime lord, his pallid face was wrinkled and framed by rumpled brown hair. Bags sagged under pale blue eyes that bulged and appeared to mourn everything in sight. He walked with an economy to his movements; no wild gesticulations that would make him stand out in a crowd. But Ignatius

Tomasi was Rollo's right hand and that kind of trouble always got her attention.

"Good morning, Mrs. Zao."

"I prefer 'Zee.'"

"Of course, of course. Your full married name too painful for this fine evening?"

"Something like that." Grandma Zee glanced at the dents and salt corrosion on the bumpers of his car. "Your boss likes to cut corners? That's like the third junk heap I've seen you drive. I thought his people rolled in style."

"Driving a black Escalade, tinted windows, bullet-proof glass has its place and time. But I've got things to do and it goes quicker if I go unnoticed. Leno can keep his flashy collection of million dollar babies, my rides keep me invisible."

"You've got to be invisible to pick up Rollo's order of Dragon Nest Soup?"

It had taken her a week to soak and soften the dried dragon saliva into an edible consistency and less flammable state. Rollo would still have to keep it away from an open fire or it could blow up the dining room. But then eating something that might kill was half the fun for people like him, people that no longer got enough of a thrill from simple blowfish and its trace amounts of poison.

"I want something more than soup."

Ignatius placed an empty Japanese puzzle box on Grandma Zee's cart. Fine inlaid clouds and lightning decorated the box. The opening in its lid was lightly scorched. "Want to guess what was inside?"

"Always playing with toys. Everything's a game to you, isn't it?" Picking the item up, she took a cautious

sniff. "Hmm... hint of ozone... something like roasted chitin."

Grandma Zee handed the box back to him. "You had some of Raijin's Hotaru in here. Little buggers like to settle down in navels. Japanese parents still tell kids to cover their bellies during thunderstorms."

Ignatius nodded his head and raised his eyebrows, impressed by her divinatory skills.

"These lightning bugs like to burrow in more than belly buttons. Get them close to an active computer and they'll roll a giant ball of electronic data all the way back home. I was expecting a mother lode from this one. It had made the rounds through malls, artsy places, and banks. Skimming six cents out of every account beats knocking off liquor stores." He squinted at her. "Roasted chitin? What in the hell does that smell like?"

"Eat enough and you'd know." Grandma Zee tried to maintain a casual air with a half-smile. "Once you peel the shell back, they've got some nice meat under those wings. Just have to make sure your feet are grounded or you'll get quite the shock."

"Shock? Yes. Had one myself when we lost one of these beauties the other night. Ellis Capra, I think he used to frequent your cart. Didn't make his Hotaru delivery. Got pinched."

"Ellis? About time someone locked that drunken fool away," she said with a genuine smile.

"He hit some civilians. They'll pull through though and we'll have the little rat out before lunch. But I have a hunch that someone sold him out." Ignatius let his last statement linger as an accusation then finished with a grim and more direct tone.

"I'm more interested in who busted him."

Grandma Zee kept quiet. She opened a drawer and rummaged through it, pretending not to care about what he had to say.

"From his babble, I think it was a gargoyle."

Grandma Zee ignored him, lifted a crock pot fired with a dark earthen glaze and placed it on top of the cart. "Tell your boss this batch of soup is going to cost him double. Took me lots of time to find a supplier that harvested it from an actual dragon's nest."

"Except the only gargoyle I know of is more aligned with Chaos than Order," Ignatius continued.

"Didn't want to use anything from just somebody that had a dragon willing to hock into a bucket without igniting its spit." She started to lift the lid off the pot.

Ignatius covered her hand with his and firmly pushed the lid back down.

"Mrs. Zao, is there another gargoyle in town?"

For once she kept quiet. The touch of his skin left her cold to the core. He had always been something of an enigma and this brief contact with his aura hinted at an age as old as her years. Suddenly, she wasn't certain if Rollo was really the one in charge.

Ignatius treated her silence with a broad smile of uneven and uncapped teeth. "Well, well. Local blood, perhaps? Who is it?"

"Someone... someone that will do the job right." She snatched her hand out from under his.

"Classic match-up. Small town boy versus an all-time killer. He's going to lose big." He laughed, even more rare and frightening than his smile.

Grandma Zee sensed an opportunity to keep the odds from mounting against Gargoyle Bob. "Time to

put up or shut up then. I'll bet you my guy comes out on top."

"A wager? A lot of outside muscle is dying to jump in on this action. We've had to clarify the pecking order in our fair city. But there's this uptight Council that's been a pain in my ass."

"Muscle, really? You're going all gangster now?"

"I have to keep up some appearances."

She shook her head. "Come on, if the other guy wins, the world's headed for darkness and ash. You really want a bigger piece of that action?"

"There are always pluses and minuses to new management. Alexis Parrish has been a profitable person to deal with and you know our kind always finds a way to survive." Still, Ignatius looked at Grandma Zee with keen interest. "What would you be putting up?"

"My cart at your service, free of charge."

"Free? Everything? Loch Ness Dumplings, Uni Nova Shooters?" A little saliva worked up in the corners of his mouth.

"Rollo can have all the fins and sea urchins your heart desires. But if I win, you challenge him to chase a bowl of Dragon Nest Soup with a Blue Blazer."

"A Blue Blazer? That drink with all the fire? Stream of blue flame poured back and forth between mugs as it's mixed?"

"Yep. Worst case for you, he gets explosive indigestion. Best case for your boss, he develops a new taste of death sensation. You stay out of the gargoyle throwdown though. Sit out this round. Let the shrimp chips fall where they may."

"Rollo's got me busy defending our turf," he said with a far-off gaze, dreaming of culinary delights or perhaps even running the syndicate should the Blue Blazer and Dragon Nest Soup prove to be too combustible. Then those pale eyes locked onto her.

"It's a deal. But don't take any more of my pieces off the board or I'll take out a couple of yours. Starting with your hometown favorite."

Grandma Zee resisted the impulse to retort, "You can try, but he'll smash your face." Instead, she nodded and handed the earthenware of Dragon Nest Soup to him. "Bon appétit..." she said, leaving any number of finishing curse words implied in her glare.

Ignatius smirked at her defiant tone. When he opened the car door, she caught a glimpse of a massive figure sitting in the shadows of the back seat. Yet after he shut the door, Ignatius appeared to be the car's only occupant.

A chill ran through Grandma Zee as she realized that the presence within the car was probably Rollo, listening to her and Ignatius the whole time.

Gargoyle Bob stood inside his home among the Cubs memorabilia, Golden Glove Medals, and family photos. He couldn't resist entering, but what had meant so much at one time seemed foreign and detached now. A glimpse of his present form in the mirror confirmed that feeling. The sight of a six foot tall gargoyle with large bat wings standing near a worn couch and nicked up coffee table emphasized how out of place he was in the living room.

But then something else caught his eye. The chain from the relic amulet of St. Romain dangled outside of

a table drawer. He lifted the amulet out. It mesmerized him as he watched it swing. A prime artifact of “sacred archeology” as Michele had described it. The amulet glimmered with a call to duty and an ancient presence he suspected must belong to St. Romain.

Gargoyle Bob left the living room and climbed to the roof of the building for a higher take-off point. Somewhere in the night, Gargoyle Mercadier still lived. After rising from a watery grave maybe he could catch him by surprise. Before flying, he put the amulet around his neck.

St. Romain’s amulet began to glow.

What the hell? Energy from the relic shot to a blinding intensity and searing level of power. Gargoyle Bob roared from sudden pain that felt more excruciating than the agony of transformation. While lightning ran through every nerve, the main focus of pain centered on his chest.

The amulet burned its way into the skin.

He choked back another scream of agony. With the fire of Hades and whatever enflamed that shrub before Moses in the desert, the relic of St. Romain, patron saint of gargoyles, fused itself into Gargoyle Bob’s chest. Dropping to the ground, he convulsed in tortuous pain.

For an instant, he wondered if this convulsion was similar to what his scary or rather “misunderstood” Auntie Nona would go through in her holy moments. Then the excruciating fire in his body blitzed upward into his head and blasted every idle thought from it. A parade of garish visual and auditory hallucinations stormed through his mind. Psychedelic faces of people he knew clashed with ear-splitting bits of overlapping

dialogue. Chief among these were words uttered by a face he recognized from the stained glass windows as that of St. Romain.

St. Romain echoed the words, "Chosen, saved." An image of the Prisoner screaming within the Old Tower of Rouen rushed forth. His scream turned into a bestial yell.

A flash of light blinded Gargoyle Bob. As his sight recovered, he witnessed the Seine riverbank at night. Monstrous bellows rang over the rocks while the water dragon stalked its prey. St. Romain's voice boomed, "Saved for a purpose." Diving from the sky, Gargoyle Primus smashed into the water dragon, shattering saurian bones in an explosion of dragon scales.

Another vision jolted Gargoyle Bob's brain. He found himself within Jeanne d'Arc's tent on the battlefield of Orleans. Clad in armor with *fleur-de-lis* on it, she knelt in prayer.

"She was his sword. She did his will," St. Romain intoned. Suddenly, Jeanne d'Arc grabbed her head in severe pain inflicted by visions of her own. She too writhed on the ground. Bedlam from Jeanne's visions added to the noise and confusion that already blared in Gargoyle Bob's head.

The cacophony of voices and images rose in a mind splitting crescendo that dumped him into the medieval courtyard outside of the Rouen Cathedral. Jeanne d'Arc stood in the square for her execution. This time her face contorted in much greater pain than what she experienced in her tent. This time the maiden was being burned alive at the stake. Fire roared beneath her feet.

"His will be done," proclaimed St. Romain's grim voice.

Jeanne d'Arc's face morphed into Michele's battered and bloodied face. Tied to a stake like Jeanne, Michele's hands were bound behind her.

"Behold His new sword maiden," St. Romain said.

A massive funeral pyre of dead wood was stacked below Michele. She awaited the same fate as her patron saint. But he couldn't see anything else about her location.

St. Romain's nightmarish face began to loom larger than everything else and filled Gargoyle Bob's entire field of vision. "You must save to be saved," the saint demanded in a thunderous voice of doom.

The hallucinations abruptly stopped as if a headset plug had been jerked out of the player. The sudden quiet was almost as disorienting as the sensory whirlwind it had replaced.

Gargoyle Bob staggered to his feet. He tried to re-orient his mind, dampen the confusing echo of St. Romain's voice, and push away the horror of St. Jeanne d'Arc's death. One clear vision stuck with him though, Michele in mortal danger.

Gargoyle Bob opened his wings. He cried out her name and flew up into the night.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sometimes full of hope, sometimes the prey of despair, so firm in her faith that the judges called her obstinate, Jeanne appears the incarnation of virtue and simplicity — even holiness. She is entirely human, and never was humanity greater.

Champion - "On the Trial of Jeanne d'Arc" - 1932

With all due respect to Lambeau Field, Lincoln Park was the true frozen tundra on this night. Cold and virtually abandoned, a three-layered faux Mayan temple stood on a barren white fondant landscape. Ostensibly, Parrish Antiquities had constructed this tiered edifice to attract visitors to their exhibit, but Alexis really built it as ground zero for Xibalba. She had even set the Mayan altar on top to mark the spot.

Gargoyle Mercadier gently touched the altar. Alexis nestled next to him, while Tiffany dressed in the chic clothes she wore as a hostess, laid trussed up on the stone surface.

"The pretender to my throne is dead," he boasted. "I smashed him into the lake, left his pieces in the mud. He wasn't worthy of the transformation. Tonight we shall break all the rules of the Church that wasted such gifts."

"But first..." Alexis brought forth the black onyx chalice, "A word from our sponsors."

She bent close to Tiffany, "You didn't serve me well before. The table in the back was mine. Here's your chance to do better." Alexis slit the young

woman's throat and filled the cup to the brim with her blood.

Placing the chalice on the altar, she chanted a summoning spell. Bubbles formed as the blood started to boil. A spark of energy appeared. It pulsed with growing power above the frothing surface. At the end of the spell, the spark burst into a ball of pale green fire.

The ghoulish semblance of a man's face appeared within the flames. His features were indistinguishable with dark holes for eyes and a jagged opening that served as a mouth.

"Ah, the Gargoyle Mercadier," spoke the burning face. "And Alexis. You two are forever fated as one."

"Who might you be?" Gargoyle Mercadier growled.

"You may call me 'Cross.' The Council of Purity freed you for a purpose. Your destiny lies with me."

"I am the Alpha and Omega of St. Romain's folly. This all ends my way." The wings of Gargoyle Mercadier rustled, ready to attack.

"You don't know the glory we have planned for you." The flames over the cup shimmered. "Forces beyond your imagination have gathered for our true cause. I will raise you up as our champion."

"I have my own plans. Tonight I celebrate the true Body and Blood. Tonight I resurrect the passion of my Mayan priest."

The fire in the chalice intensified, the face of Cross rippled within the flames. "Blasphemy! Your darkness will not bring righteous salvation. You must obey—"

Gargoyle Mercadier lifted the chalice so Cross could see him clearly. "I will consume this world and I'll start with you. Cheers."

"What? Stop! No!"

Gargoyle Mercadier guzzled the blood and fire with Cross's face in it. The protests of the burning avatar image echoed within his mouth. He consumed every last drop and flicker of flame then slammed the chalice on the altar.

"Ah, a definite taste of Roman Catholic. But a tad too fundamental for me."

Surprised by his audacity, Alexis waited a moment for any smiting retribution from the Council. When nothing happened, she smiled at his gusto and pointed toward the large pentagram inscribed around the altar. Two more unconscious people lay bound before it.

"My love. From all the witches the Church burned. Their knowledge, their incantations, I can conjure a Gate to Hell with these blood sacrifices." She favored him with a glance. "I could also summon a tasty demon or two, but I don't have the power to throw such a Gate wide open."

"I guarded their secrets for centuries, kept their demons locked away." Gargoyle Mercadier bared a smile of fangs that only she could view as dashing. "They gave me the power to patrol their Gate. Now I will break it open and let slip all the dogs of Hell."

"You'll be a god."

"No more daylight, no more weakness. So it begins." Gargoyle Mercadier gave her a tongue-writhing kiss then spread his wings and flew into the sky.

Alexis watched as he disappeared into the night. Turning away from her amour, she walked lightly down the steps of the temple. Steiger moved up those stairs as he carried a fourth victim over his shoulders.

"Put him with the others," she ordered and continued on her way, ignoring his glare. At the bottom of the steps waited an unconscious Michele tied upright to a stake.

Alexis reached out and shook her by the chin. "Wakey, wakey," she chimed. "You don't want to miss my coming out party."

As in Gargoyle Bob's hallucination, Michele's face was battered and bloodied. She roused slowly but then pulled her head away from Alexis's rough grasp. Looking around, Michele discovered her hands were tied, and as much as she struggled, she couldn't get free. With even more horror, she felt the stake and saw the bonfire waiting underfoot. Jeanne d'Arc had been more than a role model and even though Michele fully identified with the martyr's tortured life, burning to death seemed like the worst way to die.

"I thought it fitting," Alexis smiled.

Straining against the ropes, frustration built in Michele's voice. "Let me loose. Fight me, kill me yourself if you're good enough."

"Oh, but this is such an honor and so fitting. Die a martyr's death all trussed up, just like dear old Saint Joan. Go out in a blaze of glory, praising the Almighty."

"Ending your insanity is the only glory I want. Remember, you're not the only one with a new partner. We're still going to kick your ass."

"We? Oh, that's right," Alexis said. "You missed the latest news during your little snooze. Your hero lies in crumbs at the bottom of the lake. Mine smashed yours to rubble. There is no savior for you in Heaven or on Earth. No one will come to your rescue."

Michele closed her eyes. The idea of Kincaid broken to pieces was too much to bear, especially since she had dragged him into this disaster. Invoking the smallest of prayers also seemed pointless, since they went constantly unheeded. All she could manage was a whispered, "no."

"Oh, yes. My love buried the little bits and pieces of your gargoyle in the filth."

"Your love? Your love!" Michele's eyes went wide in disbelief. "You've always been fucking crazy. What is this desperate need of yours? Afraid of being alone, so insecure you had to seduce every civilian, warlock, and priest you met? Did making them fall give your worthless life meaning?"

"Please, nothing so pathetic." Alexis said, her face completely relaxed. "I did it because it was fun. Not the sex, though that wasn't bad at times. Sins, laws, family trust funds, take all the joy out of life. To do what I want, when I want. Total freedom. That is my ambition."

She surveyed the quiet landscape around them, eyes faraway and imagining something sure to be horrid that made her smile at the virgin snow. "I used to dream of touching the face of God. But in this new world I am about to create, I will be a Goddess. Eternal life will be mine, in complete control of everything living and dead."

Wishing that looks could kill, Michele glared at her with every fiber of hate and disgust she could summon. "Give me a gun. Let me touch the face of a Goddess."

"Oh, come now. I know there's more to you than just self-righteous anger." Alexis walked around the bonfire with taunts at the ready. "You must tire of being the good girl, especially when it's never enough. Tonight you'll get to join your dead mother and apologize to her personally for all your faults. So loosen up, tell me what other needs have you locked away? You can't be that frigid. I've seen the way you looked at the policeman. Were you drawn to him before or after he became a gargoyle?"

Her smile deepened. "I believe, we Sisters have always been bonded to our beasts, our winged stallions. You must have felt the pull, the attraction to yours."

Michele glanced away at the thought of Kincaid.

Alexis caught her veiled look. "Ah, you did feel something. That's good. In spite of what the Church says, it's natural. Too bad you won't get the chance to have a go at it. Or did you already do it?"

"You psychotic slut!" Spit and blood flew from Michele's mouth. "All those golems you made, the demons you summoned. Did you screw all of them too? I don't need to stop you. You're going to die from some demonic venereal disease. Bet you caught something horrible from your 800 year-old bat. Crabs big enough to rip your head off!" She struggled to free a hand for choking the crap out of Alexis.

"Charming. No wonder you're still alone. Excuse me, I have guests." The way fallen nun walked off with

a triumphant smile and ascended the steps of the temple as Michele continued her barrage of curses.

Tiffany's dead body graced an arm of the pentagram. Fire burned in the lines around her, but the rest of the pattern remained dark.

As Alexis approached the altar, Lisa, the next sacrificial lamb watched with eyes opened in terror. Silenced by a mouth gag, her snow boots kicked desperately while Steiger held the innocent woman down on the altar.

"You've done well." Alexis nodded in appreciation.

"I just want my share," he snapped.

"Oh, Steiger, be of good cheer. 'Tis the season' for dreams. And all of ours are about to come true." She lifted a sacrificial knife high into the air. Lisa's frantic protests went ballistic. The blade plunged down and cut short her muffled cries.

"I can't hear the screams," Alexis complained.

Steiger dumped Lisa's dead body into a vacant arm of the pentagram and that portion of the star burst into flames. Picking up the wriggling body of Ellis, Steiger threw the corporate suit on the altar then ripped off his gag.

"No, no! Wait! I just drank one more drop. Just one. Tell the Devil Man, it was for my Aunt Ida's birthday," Ellis begged.

"Tell him yourself," Alexis replied.

He screamed. This one she could hear loud and clear. She stabbed down, twisting the knife through lung and muscle tissue. His death cries gurgled with each turn of the blade.

Steiger deposited Ellis's corpse into next empty arm of the pentagram, also igniting it with hellfire.

Alexis didn't toy with the fourth sacrifice. She thrust the blade through his janitor shirt right under the sewn label that said "Carmine", not knowing that somewhere in the city she had just promoted Sage.

The stone altar ran dark with blood.

Steiger tossed Carmine into the pentagram, leaving only one more arm of its star empty and dark.

"I need a fifth sacrifice to complete the pentagram and form the gate. I shall give birth to the portal to bring him glory and power," Alexis murmured as she searched the sky for a glimpse of Gargoyle Mercadier.

Steiger snorted with disgust. "Oh, please. Let me get you something that still has some backbone." He headed toward the steps where Michele waited below.

"Steiger, wait!" Alexis hurried to follow him. "I want her to see everything. I want her to know what I've done. Besides, I need you."

He turned to hear some lame apology from her. "Well, about time you—" Instead, she jammed the knife up to its hilt into his chest.

"My Gate of Hell needs a dark soul. Hers won't do." Alexis leaned closer to him. "This is your share. Your only share," she whispered.

Eyes blank with shock, betrayal furrowed his brow. "Just in case... I let her..." he gasped.

"I have a true king now." She pushed him clear of the blade.

With rejection burned eternally across his face, Steiger collapsed into the last star point. He fading eyes glanced in Michele's direction.

"I let her find my file," said Steiger in a dying breath too soft for anyone to hear. A vindictive smile formed as he died.

The fifth star arm caught fire. The completed star pattern blazed within the dormant circle of the pentagram.

"Tu Ditis umbras tegis et immensum chaos," Alexis began the chant to conjure a Gate. She thrust the bloody sacrificial knife into the air. The entire pentagram exploded into a hellish fireball. All five of the human offerings disappeared within the inferno. Their bodies of variable fitness and souls of questionable morality fed the fire all the same. Bad or good, once they incinerated into ash, the flames died away. The hellfire became a circle of turbulent energy.

In a nether dimension somewhere beyond that plane of energy, not necessarily underground or directly beneath it, Dark Souls of the damned swirled and gathered. Excitement ran through their collective horror. They sensed a weakening of the barriers that had long kept them at bay. A new world beckoned to them. The incarnations of every sin mankind had accumulated beyond the original seven screamed for the chance to propagate more evil.

Standing at the nexus of this portal, Alexis finished her incantation. The pentagram of energy cycled through a jumbled spectrum of colors until it coalesced into a translucent sheen below her feet. Any other person would be horrified by what they could see through the portal, but she looked down in delight upon the Gate of Hell. Intertwined streams of black energy gathered beneath. The terrible mass of Dark Souls wriggled together like a pit of snakes.

Alexis drew her foot across the surface of the portal and found that it remained solid, unopened. Ever the lover of malevolence, she traipsed across the dome of energy, relishing the dance of damned souls underfoot. A stream of Dark Souls moved just below. She could see flashes of tortured faces that gaped and screamed within. Sensing her presence, a column of these tortured spirits reached up to consume her. But the portal flared when the Dark Souls touched it, stopping anything from crossing over. The stream fell back into the miasma of corruption.

She laughed in delight and then stepped off the portal to stand on the temple floor outside of the pentagram. As much as Alexis enjoyed the view, even she didn't want to be upon it when this Gate opened for the Dark Souls to come pouring through.

At the base of the temple, Michele pulled against the ropes. She could see the flux of energies shining from the top platform, but what disturbed her most was how happy Alexis appeared. That just couldn't be a good thing. The Sister of Jeanne d'Arc pleaded angrily to the night sky and a God that had gone on some permanent rumspringa or walkabout.

"Is forsaking people all you do? I need help. I need it now."

The Monsignor scoured the most recent tactical reports. To his tired eyes very little appeared positive. As much as he studied them, he couldn't find the right move to turn the tide. If he could just engineer a breakout, one of his field assets could flank the Ouroboran units.

Deacon Cai barged into the office without knocking. "Monsignor—"

"One moment," the Monsignor snapped. Flipping open a map, he thought he had just found a way to deploy the Templars differently and regain the Horus Line.

"But Monsignor..."

"Have the Templars closed the gap yet?"

"Two Boran Guard positions destroyed, but Monsignor..."

"Damn." What was taking them so long? Maybe he had come to rely too much on their extraordinary prowess. "Get me the Knight Commander on the—"

Deacon Cai shoved a parchment in front of the Monsignor. "From the Bishop."

The Monsignor snatched it from him and read the communiqué. The relief he felt from finally being contacted by the Bishop faded as he digested the message. He sat back, his face blank, stunned. "Order Templar Squad Seven to rendezvous with us."

"Sir? But what of the Ouroborans?"

"This is the Bishop's decree. I'm personally taking charge of the unit." The zeal of Templar Squad Seven annoyed him at times, but "Heaven's Seven" as they call themselves were the best. And the Monsignor needed the best right now.

"Yes, sir." Deacon Cai hurried to do his bidding.

The Monsignor read the parchment again. Much of its content disturbed him, but one aspect was especially worrisome. "She is not going to like this," he muttered, considering yet again how to best endure Mother Superior's wrath.

A rain of blood fell. Terror spread everywhere it landed. Unless your neurons had been fried too many times like Ripstick Wilson — he ran through the streets, reveling in the radical storm. But across town, Sulli Pierce fretted about the safety of her not so imaginary “friend” flying in such a mess.

Drops of bloody rain trickled down a window of Parrish Antiquities.

“Look Sebastian, you don’t have to gnaw on people’s necks anymore. The blood’s just falling from the sky,” Case said as he jingled a set of guard keys.

Sebastian limped next to him, slowly moving one foot after another. “I don’t care about the weather. The sooner we find what he wants, the sooner we can quit this gig. Ow...” He grabbed the edge of a display case as a knee buckled.

“You used to heal a lot faster than this. You had a whole night. Getting a little long in the tooth?”

“That bitch got me right in the knee cap. You’re lucky she just hit your vest. Those slugs had silver in them.”

“Silver? Damn.” Case shook his head. “Never fought a D’Arc Sister before. One of them took out a pack of ours in Kazakhstan. Never thought anyone could bring old Cyrus down, ruthless white-haired cur.”

“You still haven’t fought one. Not a real fight. Got our hands tied with this just ‘eyes and ears’ crap. Steiger’s such a bastard and that Mercadier keeps looking at me.”

“Alexis is the one that makes my hairs curl.”

“Just once, I’d love the chance to let the fangs out...”

The window next to them exploded into fragments. Gargoyle Bob crashed into the gallery. The impact threw Sebastian across the room and knocked Case to the ground.

"Ah, Mutt and Jeff," Gargoyle Bob said. "Where's Alexis? Where has she taken Michele?"

"My name is 'Case'." The hair on the guard's face thickened and claws grew from his fingers.

As Gargoyle Bob watched the partial transformation, he could feel the hot-blooded emotions that accompany a frenzied hunt over the forest floor or wet pavement. Much stronger than any lupine vibes he had picked up from Ripstick.

"No, you're definitely a 'Mutt'."

Case leaped at him, grabbing for his throat, but got smacked aside with a pop of from the left wing.

"Finally," Sebastian smiled. "No need to hold back."

A pair of fangs protruded down in his mouth. Instead of the feral desires that coursed through Mutt, Gargoyle Bob could sense nothing pulsing through Jeff's veins, just the drawing of a steel blade, lifeless and cold.

The vampire darted ahead with the same inhuman speed he showed before, but there seemed to be a slight hitch to his step. Although fast enough to avoid a swipe of Gargoyle Bob's wing, he wasn't quick enough to duck the left jab that hit him in the mouth. A bloody tooth flew out from the impact.

"Damn you," Sebastian said. "That's how I make my living."

"Relax, it's just an incisor."

Case howled as he jumped on Gargoyle Bob's back. He wrapped something tight across the throat and began to strangle him.

"What do you say now smart ass?"

Sebastian stepped close and shot rapid punches into Gargoyle Bob's stomach. His fists flew in a blur of motion.

Unable to breath and having every bit of air beaten out of him, Gargoyle Bob's oxygen dwindled just as it had beneath the surface of Lake Michigan. Michele had said he wouldn't need anything special to take out perps like these two, but this wasn't exactly a fair fight. As his vision blackened, he noticed that Sebastian favored his right leg as he punched away. He kicked the guard's knee with all of his strength.

Sebastian collapsed to the ground with a scream. He rolled about cradling the traumatized leg.

Gargoyle Bob flew backwards, smashing Case against the wall. The lethal tension across his throat loosened for a moment. He reached up, flipped Case off of his shoulders, and flung him to the ground. A stout length of wire fell from the werewolf's hands.

"Piano wire, really?" Memories of Frank's interest in gangland killings resurfaced.

"They're good to cover up..."

"Case. Shut up." Sebastian stood up with minimal bending of his joints. The motion seemed more like levitation, but he still listed to one side. "That hurt."

Gargoyle Bob watched as Case caught his breath, hunched over and braced on all four extremities. "I didn't think vampires and werewolves ran together. Steiger didn't strike me as someone who would hire anybody less than human."

"Less than human?" Case lifted his claws off the floor, but stayed crouched, ready to pounce. "You sapien bigot. Stupid humans like Steiger always think they're top of the food chain."

"First time I've ever been called a bigot of any kind," Gargoyle Bob said.

"Things change." Sebastian took a step backwards, not at all eager to resume their fight. "You're *more* than human now too. And we don't just stick to our own. Pure bloods of the Old Vines might, but we're what Mercadier would call '*Les Grand Assemblages*,' a blend of vintages."

"Cats and dogs living together. Welcome to the great melting pot." Gargoyle Bob considered the evidence before him. "The piano wire... those injuries hide your bite marks on the neck. You boys play for another team and you've been busy. My money's on Rollo."

"No one's taking that bet," said a cold voice from the hallway entry. Ignatius walked into the room with his eyes locked on Gargoyle Bob. "So you're Mrs. Zhao's hometown favorite. I'm..."

"Don't know a Mrs. Zhao, but you're Ignatius Tomasi. Rollo's attack dog." He appeared so ordinary, flat and still as the ocean on a calm day. Then Gargoyle Bob detected a ripple of feelings, just minnows of emotion from anyone else but given the person before him this felt more like the flick of a shark's tail.

"I prefer to think of myself as a *consigliere*. I'm impressed. Are you interested in local events or are you just a fan of all things Rollo?"

"My partner wanted to bust your boss. He got a photograph of you once at a crime scene on the South Side."

"That's just a nightly stroll for me." Ignatius scratched the stubble on his chin and grinned. "You're the policeman that made such a fuss with the Sister in the gallery. But you've got a new pair of wings now."

Gargoyle Bob nodded at the two Parrish guards, "So Mutt and Jeff tell you everything that goes on here."

"We'll do more than throw you out this time." Case inched forward.

"Case," Ignatius said without looking at him, "Heel." The wolfen guard folded his arms and paced about while Sebastian rolled his eyes. "I planted them when Steiger began to fill his ranks with more than humans. Apparently, his new guest likes to snack on mortals. Keeps up his complexion. Tell me, do you have the same dark hunger? Do you also crave the taste of souls? Or should I feed you these two for fun?"

Sebastian and Case exchanged uneasy glances.

"Keep them. I want Alexis and Steiger. They have Michele. Or do I have to tear you apart to hear what I want?"

"Love to see you try," smirked Ignatius.

"You smile a lot for all your Grim Reaperness."

"You amuse me." The corners of his mouth stayed fixed, a forced veneer of casualness. "We'll test your chops some other time. I would never cheat on a bet with Mrs. Zhao. Love screwing others with the fine print, but not her. You must be a regular at the food cart. She's quite fond of you."

"Zee's last name is 'Zhao'? Then you must be one of her special customers she's told me about."

"Yes. And I can't wait to collect on the gargoyle match of the century." Ignatius tongue licked his lips as if he savored some delicious morsel from her cart. "You'll find everyone you're looking for at Lincoln Park."

Gargoyle Bob raised his wings to fly out the window.

"Oh, if by some infinitesimal chance things don't bounce my way, Rollo would like a word with you."

"Count on it. You backed the wrong man." Gargoyle Bob flew away.

Ignatius said softly, "Oh, I always hedge my bets. But you do have a way about yourself." He snapped his fingers at the two thugs. "Alright... what did he call you?"

"Mutt and Jeff," Sebastian answered without hesitation.

Case frowned. "Why did you tell him? Now it's going to stick."

"Who cares?"

"You don't have the racist canine name..."

"Do you prefer 'Dead and Deader'?" Ignatius said. They both quickly shook their heads "no."

"Good. Alexis, surprise, surprise, has been a greedy girl and the Council wants to make a deal with us. So, Mutt and Jeff, the first one that finds me something I can trade, doesn't die." Ignatius rubbed his hands and looked about the treasures in the gallery.

"Let's go shopping."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As the most perfect T. rex ever found, Sue belongs to the world. But she also belongs to Chicago, the city that hosts the Field Museum of Natural History, one of the oldest and grandest of America's fossil institutions.

Bakker - "Tyrannosaurus Sue" Foreword - 2000

The fog that blanketed Chicago smothered everything with ominous silence. From street level, the upper portions of buildings eerily vanished into the bottom layer of the low-lying fog. Nothing seemed to exist above the fourth floor. Flashes of light within the mist added to the panic of restless pedestrians.

"What's happening?" Gargoyle Bob flew over the mess of weather, avoiding the tips of skyscrapers that pierced through the deathbed of clouds.

A crimson glow marked the area over Lincoln Park. Drawing closer, he saw a cumulus cloud shaped like an anvil and lit with the bright red of hot steel. Within it, Gargoyle Mercadier shouted an incantation and pounded a demonic beat with his wings. Vapors of death and doom formed with each wing stroke. Arcs of energy shot through the sky. Clouds gathered about him then began to funnel down toward the ground below.

"Oh, hell no," Gargoyle Bob growled as he dove into the turbulence. Wicked torrents of wind battered and blinded him. He struggled to stay on course. Above the rumble of apocalyptic weather, the sound of

Gargoyle Mercadier's spell grew louder. Guided by the noise of the chant, he crashed into his target. While he didn't destroy his enemy, Gargoyle Bob knocked him away from completing the unholy ritual.

"No! What..." Gargoyle Mercadier recovered his balance and spun around. A fierce smile appeared as he recognized his attacker. "Ah, you must also swim better than you fly."

"You won't get away again. This time I'll kill you with my own hands," Gargoyle Bob said. "This time I'll see you die with my own eyes."

"C'est bon. Your coup de grace awaits."

The two gargoyles closed in on each other. No high speed chases this time, no ducking around obstacles, no hiding. Just a close quarters death match. They slugged it out, claw-to-claw, an airborne heavyweight showdown.

Even in a stand-up fight, Gargoyle Mercadier's faster speed manifested itself in his punches. In the first flurry, Gargoyle Bob was struck twice across the face before he could hit back. But what he lacked in agility, the gym rat in him made up with power and timing. He landed a mean right hook just before his opponent could launch the next attack.

Staggered by the hit, Gargoyle Mercadier relied on his flight edge to press a close combat advantage. He gained a moment and some distance to recover from the punch with a reverse flick of wings. But within a heartbeat, he flew back up to kick Gargoyle Bob across the face. Closing his wings, he dropped down half a level and threw a hit to the stomach. In another instant, the aerial master fell all the way out of reach then flew up from behind and delivered a kick to the back.

Gargoyle Bob stumbled through the air. *Getting killed, need to bring him in tight again*, he thought. This time he would pummel the maniac to death rather than trying to drown him.

But the crafty killer stayed just out of reach, wary of getting too close. Gargoyle Bob threw a punch that missed and instead of pulling the fist back, he stretched out further to grab his target. Overextended, his wings missed a beat and faltered off balance. Gargoyle Mercadier immediately dashed forward, struck him in the head, and pulled back again.

Gargoyle Bob noticed the eagerness to attack. He flew erratically, feigning a crippled wing to draw him closer. Anxious for the kill, Gargoyle Mercadier rushed in with raised claws. But Gargoyle Bob surprised him with a barrage of point-blank hits. Blood flew from a punch across the face. He went for a knockout, an uppercut boosted by a blast from his wings.

The bone-jarring punch knocked Gargoyle Mercadier into a backwards loop. But it sent him tumbling further away again. Not the best choice of punches as he recovered outside of range.

"Better, you've gotten better," Gargoyle Mercadier said. Shaking his head to clear it, he noticed the relic amulet fused into Gargoyle Bob's chest. "*Qu'est-ce que c'est?* St. Romain's collar! *Fantastique*, you are the Church's slave."

"I'm no one's slave."

"No? You're here, chained by that little Church witch." Gargoyle Mercadier drifted out of reach as he spoke. "Here to throw away your life. Here to die as their errand boy. I'm going to enjoy killing her once I'm done with you."

Gargoyle Bob ignored the threat. He knew the only way to save Michele was taking out this monster, but luring him closer with another fake injury didn't seem likely to work again.

"Errand boy?" He struggled to keep his own anger under control and probed for a trigger to Gargoyle Mercadier's massive ego. "Alexis freed you, she runs you. The Church, Richard, you bed hopped from one master to another. You're no good unless you're somebody's bitch."

Gargoyle Mercadier charged him with a shout of rage. They locked death grips on each other's throat, a stranglehold of mutual destruction. Both couldn't breathe, but neither one would let go. They just clamped down all the tighter.

Consciousness graying, Gargoyle Bob welcomed the nothingness, an end to all of the pain. Revenge would be his, even if it meant dying. But he guessed Gargoyle Mercadier had more to lose, some twisted future to live and kill for. He could see and feel the doubt in Gargoyle Mercadier's eyes. There. They just went to silver dollar-sized panic.

Gargoyle Bob squeezed harder, victory within his grasp. But Gargoyle Mercadier thrashed about for something, anything to turn the tide. With leverage and desperate force, he caught hold of Gargoyle Bob's left wing and wrenched it downwards.

Staying aloft with one wing pinned, impossible. They both fell. Locked in a lethal embrace again except this time water did not await them with a forgiving splashdown.

The earth rushed up to smack them a reminder that they were dust and unto dust they would return.

Breaking through the cloud cover, Gargoyle Bob could see they headed not just toward the ground, but sadly, the glass skylight of the Field Museum. It was his mother's favorite place. Built for the Chicago World's Fair, she used to tell him stories of a magical time when people danced to Scott Joplin's ragtime, reveled in *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*, and for the first time savored Cracker Jack, Juicy Fruit Gum, Cream of Wheat, and the Hamburger.

The gargoyles shattered those memories. They crashed through the Field's palatial glass ceiling. Gargoyle Mercadier's flailing wings stalled enough momentum to prevent hitting with terminal velocity. But their bodies still slammed into the gallery floor harder than any human could have survived. Shards of glass showered down upon them.

The punch-drunk combatants staggered to their feet. More accustomed to blows to the head, Gargoyle Bob shuffled forward without his full faculties. He slugged Gargoyle Mercadier with a powerful haymaker. The force of the blow knocked him clear across the gallery floor.

Gargoyle Mercadier skidded along the ground in shock over being beaten. He slid to a stop against the base of an enormous dinosaur fossil. Its display sign proclaimed, "Sue Rex the largest *T-Rex* skeleton ever found." Gazing up at the towering 42-foot long, 20-foot high, engine of destruction with machete-sized teeth, he beheld a way to turn the tide.

"No, not Sue," Gargoyle Bob groaned.

Gargoyle Mercadier gave Sue Rex a smile. "*Réveillez, mon cheri.*" He placed his hands on the tibia and fibula of Sue Rex, bones that had long underwent

permineralization to become fossil stone. Energy spread over the fossil skeleton, up toward the head, and back along the tail stretched behind for balance. His mystic power of stone energized every molecule and animated the fossil just as it had activated the Stone Imps.

The tail of the beast twitched then lashed from side to side. A giant clawed foot stepped forward. Its fearsome skull turned toward Gargoyle Bob. Thick moist heat enveloped him. A smell of damp vegetation filled the area. The metallic taste of blood from victims long dead tainted his mouth. Unlike the Stone Imps, this queen of dinosaurs had a previous life and the emotional memories of a land she once ruled were strong.

Sue Rex bellowed a mighty roar then attacked him.

Her jaws snapped for Gargoyle Bob's head. He felt the breeze of foot-long teeth just missing. Wicked claws came next in an immediate follow-up swipe that he also managed to dodge. For an ancient fossil, Sue Rex moved really fast. He could barely keep ahead of her.

Gargoyle Mercadier smiled with satisfaction. "Hell awaits both of us. My moment calls me. *Au revoir.*" He flew up through the ruined skylight.

Gargoyle Bob started to fly after him, but Sue Rex's jaws clamped on his leg. He was snapped out of the air then smashed to the ground. The tyrannosaurus bent down to devour him, but without genuine hunger since she didn't have a body to feed and there wasn't enough food to put meat back on her bones. Primeval instinct drove Sue Rex to destroy, and her jaws were some of its best features.

He flew up and smashed the slaughterhouse mouth shut, but the old girl had other weapons. Sue's enormous vertebrate tail snapped about. It hit him with what felt like a whip chain of concrete blocks strung together with iron links.

Smacked across the gallery, Gargoyle Bob crashed next to the other prized display of the Field Museum. A life-sized diorama of two huge elephants stood by him. They each weighed about 10 tons, more mass and weight than Sue Rex's skeleton.

"If you can't beat them..." He grabbed an elephant leg and tried to tap some geokinetic power of his own. But mounted animal displays were not like Sue Rex or the Stone Imps that Gargoyle Mercadier had animated. Under the tanned skins, a mix of plaster, cement, and metal filled the insides of the "stuffed" elephants, not fossilized bone. Even Gargoyle Mercadier would have found it difficult to get one of these creatures going.

Gargoyle Bob willed the earthen elements in the display to move. Nothing happened. He focused harder, eyes scrunched with intense effort. Nothing again. But just as he was about to let go, glimmers of transformation energy sputtered from him to the elephant display.

With bones rattling, Sue Rex charged as he struggled to animate the elephantine warrior. Her giant hooked claws gouged the floor. Sparks flew as they scraped the polished surface.

"Come on, Jumbo. Come on," he pleaded as saurian footsteps boomed closer.

The elephant display twitched. It slowly began to move and shake its massive pair of tusks. Largest of the warm-blooded animals that inherited the Earth,

Gargoyle Bob's pachyderm defender turned to do battle.

Sue Rex pounced upon the lumbering elephant. Stout hind legs and clawed feet latched on the mammal's side while savage teeth bit down into its back. All those razor sharp edges working in concert tore the freshly animated elephant to shreds. Prehistoric savagery beat down modern tonnage in a blink. The gentle herbivore never really stood a chance against the ultimate carnivore.

Efficient killer that she was, Sue Rex pivoted and obliterated the second elephant display into dust before Gargoyle Bob could attempt to bring it to life. Standing deep in the middle of elephant remains, he yanked out one of the tusks from the demolished exhibit. Flying into the air with the toothy club, he smacked the possessed dinosaur in the head. Left, right, then down, over and over, hammering it to the ground. Fragments splintered off the skull.

Sue's open jaws craned up toward him. He rammed the pointed tusk down her throat, a killing move if it were still flesh and blood. Instead, the tusk slid through the open bottom of her skeletal jaw and clattered to the floor.

"Damn," Gargoyle Bob sighed. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Before his next thought, Sue struck him with a kick that blasted him up into the gallery's second level.

Landing crumpled on the floor, he pulled himself up in excruciating pain. Huge claw marks ran across his body. Blood flowed from bite wounds on one leg. This fight wasn't going well.

"No bag of bones is going to beat me." *Not with Mercadier still alive.* Turning to jump back downstairs, he came face to face with a T-Rex Skull.

"Whoa! What the..." A moment of fear that something so large could sneak up on him but then he saw no threat existed. The display card proclaimed the exhibit of "Sue's Real Head – too heavy to mount." A new plan dawned on him. Time to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Gargoyle Bob smashed the display case. He struggled to lift the massive fossil skull, but failed. Bracing for another attempt, energy began to glow from the embedded amulet of St. Romain. Enormous strength surged through his limbs. The skull shifted on its pedestal. More energy flowed and with an Olympic worthy snatch, he lifted the fossil high. Bearing the titanic weight, his feet shuffled toward the railing for a bombing run at the ground floor.

The power glowing from Gargoyle Bob's hands brought the T-Rex Skull to life. Ancient jaws chomped open and close. Chattering and jumping in his grasp, the Cretaceous set of wind-up teeth proved difficult to hold. Below him, Sue Rex whipped about in a ravenous frenzy. She leaped straight up at the sight of her prey.

He heaved the gnashing T-Rex Skull down into the gallery. It smashed through the replacement Sue Rex skull, Pac Man-chomped down her spine, shattered her rib cage, and pulverized her hips. Sue had survived 28 years of tumultuous life, 65 million years buried in the ground; endured battles between fossil hunters, the Sioux nation, federal prosecutors, Disney, and McDonald's. But she couldn't survive Gargoyle Bob.

Although most of her body was broken into osseous fragments, Sue Rex's small upper arms remained intact. Crawling about like inch worms, they searched for a new body.

Gargoyle Bob breathed a sigh of relief. The moment of respite did not last long. Over the dinosaur remains, he noticed a long banner proclaiming the Field Museum's own exhibit: "Maya: A New Long Count."

"Damn, they're everywhere."

Under the banner stood a statue of a Mayan Priest with ceremonial Camazotz wings and fanged headdress. "I know your boss," he said to the statue. Next to the figure, a plated belt with a carved war club of stone blades and spikes hung on the wall.

"Nice. Time to go clubbing." As he reached for the belt and club, Gargoyle Bob glanced at the glass case in front of it. Before him lay a sword of polished black stone. Thicker down the central ridge than a metal sword, both edges of the meter long blade were chipped down to a razor's sharpness. Aged bone formed the crossguard and strips of dark hide wrapped around the handle. The inky darkness of the sword spoke to its fiery birth from the heart of a volcano and endless quenching in the blood of hundreds.

"A blade of obsidian," he whispered. A glimmer of hope reflected off its smooth surface. Justice for Frank was within Gargoyle Bob's reach.

Michele searched the sky for a sign of hope or divine intervention or any form of damn help. An angelic host of archangels with blazing swords preferably, but right

now a plump cherub with a penknife would be fine, anything that could cut the ropes around her wrists.

"Where are you?" she pleaded.

Instead of the Almighty, Gargoyle Mercadier appeared in front of her, snout to human nose. "Your beau's not coming. He had a rendezvous with death. Torn to shreds or eaten by now. You're all alone."

"I was looking to God for help," she said, trying to cover her concern for Gargoyle Bob.

"He's not coming either."

Gargoyle Mercadier drew back and crossed his arms, settling his wings upon his back. "The darkness within men has ripened. Global wars, genocides. Avarice and poverty abound. The Earth dies from their touch. They entertain themselves with tales of imagined dystopias, so they don't have to face the one they inhabit. Time has come to throw them into the pit."

Michele shook her head. "The end is always coming. The Plague, the Bomb, but we find a way to survive."

"My power doesn't come from weapons, gold, or oil. My wealth is in souls. I will consume, discard, and use them as I please. Yours will be of particular delight." He turned to ascend the temple stairs.

She teetered on surrender, but then her mind turned over his earlier words. "Wait... torn to shreds? Eaten by now? Kincaid's rendezvous with death?"

"The policeman? Yes, it was all quite thrilling."

"Alexis said you smashed him into dust over the lake."

Gargoyle Mercadier stopped walking. He glared at her.

"He survived your battle. You didn't kill him." Hope began to rise for her again. "Have you told Alexis you lied?"

"You can when she comes to kill you." Resuming his walk up, he found Alexis entranced by the conjured Gate of Hell at the top of the stairs.

"Have you come to look upon it? All our hopes and dreams," she murmured at a reflecting pool of depravity. Dark Souls swarmed up to the energized surface more aggressively than before. One particularly horrendous soul stream sped with full force in an effort to cross over. But the Gate flared brightly upon impact, turning away the accursed entity. The portal's cosmic bug zapper still wouldn't let anything through, at least, not yet.

"*C'est formidable*," Gargoyle Mercadier said. "I returned to make sure you had everything ready. I had to dispense with some complications."

"Complications?" Alexis blinked, breaking away from the haunting allure of the Gate. "What? How long have I been staring?"

"Everything's fine. Sacrifice that little nun of yours after I open the Gate. The obstinance and purity of her soul will keep the portal open for an eternity." He took flight and left Alexis still puzzled about what had happened while she was mesmerized.

Gargoyle Mercadier soared high above the Temple. Lifting his arms to the stars, he resumed the chant to open the portal.

"Qui et id advenientem peregre perdant!"

The atmospheric gloom responded with drum rolls of thunder. A gathering wind whipped stray clouds into a storm. Peering into the night sky, he beckoned to

distant celestial bodies as they moved into sinister positions.

The Center of the Galaxy blazed with heart-soaring brilliance, an orb of light against the darkness of deep space. A shadow eclipsed this "Eye of God" as the Sun blocked it from Earth's view. Without the vital energy from the Eye, negative forces normally held in check began to run free. Dark power increased throughout every dimension of the planet.

Gargoyle Mercadier felt the imbalance tilt in his favor. He shouted his incantations even louder. The storm clouds churned with an infusion of sorcery. A nightmarish maelstrom formed. It spun in the sky over the city.

With stars aligned and clouds charged with doom, the Gate of Hell resonated with even more power. Anointed by blood, it shimmered brighter and brighter, the Dark Souls of the damned howled to possess the bodies of the dead buried in the park. From the Mayan temple, a wave of energy shot through the ground, priming the buried Undead for imminent awakening. Old bones creaked. Bodies long ruined began to knit together and stir. After centuries of laying in wait, everything was finally ready.

In the night sky, Gargoyle Mercadier brought his chant to a climax. "*Male vive et vale!*" he shouted.

As the last syllable faded, a chain reaction exploded. The circling mass of black clouds formed a funnel cloud that howled downwards to the ground. Red energy flashed along the length of this diabolic twister. Its tapered end stretched out and landed on the Gate of Hell.

Upon contact, a reverse vortex of nether energy spiraled up and out of the portal. Now two twisters of destruction smashed into each other like digits trapped in a finger puzzle. A spectral roar marked their collision, heralding the coming of something worse. Then the Hell Gate vortex spun even wider and sucked down all of the energy from the sky-borne tornado. The dueling columns collapsed into one horrible maw of Hell. It yawned wide. Screams of insatiable hunger echoed within.

"Come out, come out," Gargoyle Mercadier smiled.

The portal lost its shimmering brilliance as the barrier protecting this world dissolved. Out of the now open Gate of Hell, Dark Souls spewed forth in a deluge of tainted energy. Evil tentacles of power reached out into the park and dove into the ground in search of hosts.

Witnessing the open Gate of Hell, Michele stopped struggling to get free. She watched the impact areas in the park and held her breath. Alexis usually boasted in such insane terms that she could be frequently disregarded, but not this time. Michele wished her fears were just overworked paranoia, but she knew they were about to become all too real.

For a moment everything was quiet, but then the ground began to shake and crack. Fingers of bone and dead flesh pushed through the dirt, grabbed handholds on the surface. Behind these decayed claws, moldy arms pulled up rotting torsos from the icy embrace of the winter's soil. What were once men, women, and worst yet, children crawled up from beneath the ground. In different states of decomposition some of the Undead had stringy beef jerky muscles, while

others glistened with moisture that froze immediately into an icy sheen on contact with the cold air. The first batch of Undead mostly wore ragged civilian clothes, long coats, high collars, and even a few bonnets from the nineteenth century.

But in one portion of the park, a group of Undead stood with tattered Confederate uniforms clinging to their bodies. Grey swatches of cloth that were once smartly cut coats still had double rows of brass buttons down the front and weaves of golden braids sewn on the sleeves. Short French *chasseur* military caps topped some heads. Wide-brimmed slouch hats covered others. An occasional Undead even sported the Hardee hat of a cavalry officer complete with a Jeb Stuart ostrich plume. But all of these adornments were full of jagged holes and had either cadaveric hair or moldy skin poking through them.

One particularly nasty Undead Sergeant, marked with the red colors of an artillery unit, cried out a chilling rebel yell. The worst of the South had risen again.

"Oh, good. Zombie Rebels," Michele said.

As the death knell faded, Alexis appeared with a torch in her hand. She skirted the bonfire wood with a smile of misbegotten joy. "What do you think of my work?"

"Alexis, stop this." Michele glared at the torch. "You can't want this. You'll kill everybody. Destroy everything for what? For spite, for—"

"Oh, please. Don't pretend you love this miserable world. It's a ball of dung filled with pain. It has hurt you over and over. I'm doing what you're too afraid to do, what we both know should be done. Everyone

needs to be put out of their misery! And I wanted you here. So you can see me bring it all to an end. So you can see who was better."

Michele bit her own lip. She wasn't going to beg for mercy. "Bullshit. The only one more full of it is Mercadier. Did he tell you he lied? That he failed to kill Kincaid?"

"What?"

"That's right. You can't trust your overlord. The love of your life couldn't beat my partner."

Alexis's eyes bulged in fury at the affront to her perfect mate. "Look around, does it really matter?" Undead bodies kept rising out of the ground in the distance. "Say hello to *Joannie* for me," she said, tossing the torch onto the bonfire fuel.

The kindling caught fire right away. Tongues of red and yellow spread over the wood and blazed into a wreath of heat encircling Michele. She turned her face away from the flames but there was no escaping the growing inferno.

The mustering horde of Undead turned their attention to the Temple and her sacrificial death. More and more Dark Souls continued to pour out of the Portal.

"Take me. End this. Forgive me... I brought him into this." Surrounded by fire and white-hot pain, the flames pushed Michele toward delirium. Sight blurred from heat distortion, she looked into the heavens one last time and saw a feathered, winged vision.

"Angel," she whispered.

Gargoyle Bob hit Michele with a flying tackle and swept her out of the raging flames. He cradled her in his arms as he flew. She gazed at him in wonder, a

romantic slow motion moment except for the Undead in the background and fire burning from her clothes.

They crash landed in a quiet end of the park.

"Sorry." Gargoyle Bob knelt beside her. "Just me."

"Not just. You're an answer to my prayers. You are an angel."

"You need to get out more," he smiled. Steam rose from Michele's hot smoking body, which she had regardless if she was a nun or not.

She reached out but her hand stopped short of the metal burnt and fused into his chest. "That's new. Looks like it hurts."

"You should know. You gave it to me."

"That's the amulet of St. Romain?" Her eyebrows lifted in surprised when he nodded. "Never heard of that happening before. He must like you."

"Lucky me."

"I'm not... I'm not used to being a damsel in distress, needing someone to save me."

"Believe me you're not that."

A crescendo of demonic howls interrupted their moment. He looked up to see a tide of Undead rushing toward them. They were moving fast, all flailing arms, legs, and gnashing teeth.

The grey clad Undead Rebels were the scariest and most disturbing sight, any person's worst nightmare. Battle instincts still drilled in the remains of these soldiers moved them with more lethal purpose than their Undead civilian brethren. Not that they were marching in perfect battle formation, but the Undead Rebels did seem to run together with their own units. Fighting one meant fighting a whole pack of berserk, demon-powered soldiers at once.

"To make it through this night, we'll have to save each other a whole lot of times. And if I'm an angel, let me be the avenging, smiting kind," Gargoyle Bob said, hefting a stone Mayan war club. Then from the plated belt acquired at the Field Museum, he unsheathed the best for last.

"Here. I got you something." Gargoyle Bob handed her the obsidian sword.

Michele stared at the blade in wonder. "Obsidian, the blade of prophecy." Poignant joy brought a brim of tears to her eyes. "This is the nicest thing anyone's ever given me."

Armed with pre-Iron Age weapons, they faced a vast Undead army driven by the mystic perversions of both Christian and Maya faiths. She nodded at him then started to run toward their enemy, a slight smile on her face. He followed her with a laugh and a flick of his wings. The two vastly outnumbered heroes charged across the field toward rows of the unholy spawn.

They crashed into a violent crowd of bodies.

Gargoyle Bob swung the war club. He smashed the doddering heads of Undead Bankers and Lawyers. Tarnished metal clips still fastened around molded money and a flea market trove of monocles rained through the air. Bone fragments with thick splotches of gore splattered onto the snow.

"Bravely do..." he shouted.

Michele slashed apart hideous Undead Rebels with the obsidian sword. The blade sliced through threadbare uniforms with ease. Chopping necks and limbs yielded fountains of black blood that spewed from their cleaved stumps.

"Or bravely die!" she yelled in return.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Men said at vespers: "All is well!"

In one wild night the city fell;

Fell shrines of prayer and marts of grain

Before the fiery hurricane.

John Greenleaf Whittier - "Chicago" - 1888

Undead abominations clawed the midnight air and leapt wildly on top of each other, impatient for a bite of the action. Matted strands of dirty hair hung across most of their faces. Underground burial wrought havoc on everyone's hairstyle no matter how well coiffed they might have been in life. But it was even worse for those that were bald. Light shining off their dirt-peppered scalps highlighted them in the mortuary scrum.

Gargoyle Bob bulldozed through the masses of Undead. For once, he welcomed the inferno of his own anger. With countless Undead enemies arrayed against them, he stoked his emotions into a berserker rage for wholesale destruction. With a roar he charged into the creatures bunched around them and crunched elbows into their jaws. Both sets of claws ripped Undead faces with abandon.

His wings wrought the most destruction.

Undead Stevedores pressed in and jumped on his back. Once muscular arms that toted loads down gangplanks and moved crates about the docks still possessed demonic strength even in their withered state. But they could not rival the wings of Gargoyle

Bob. Strong enough to propel him through the air, they scattered enemies with mighty strokes. Held half open like shields, the wings bashed the nearest creatures. Bones shattered against the tough flight surfaces. For those just beyond reach, his wings popped wide from tip to tip and spun around, helicopter slicing the foul walkers.

Cut into two, an Undead Nanny pulled its ruffled torso across the dirt with spindly arms. From below, it reached up to haul him down.

"No, no, no!" Gargoyle Bob punctuated each word with a splintering foot stomp and smashed the crawling nursery marm to pieces. Given the Undead propensity to reach up from the ground without warning, he heel crushed any semi-intact corpse in the way. In spite of how dismembered or broken they appeared, he had played enough horror survival video games with Frank to know not to leave anything to chance.

Still, an Undead Toddler dragging a tattered burial gown behind it, crept got close enough to bite at his ankle.

"You missed one," Michele said, crushing the small skull with her boot.

He glanced at the rest of the incoming possessed mob. "These things always this fast and angry?"

"Ripped from eternal rest was bad enough, but Mercadier violated these bodies with foreign souls. Killers, rapists, bank execs, all shoved together into Ma, Pa, and Junior. No one's happy."

An Undead Bartender staggered up to Michele. Armbands hung from both of its limbs, a soiled apron flapped around its body. The obsidian sword thrust

through an eye, right into the brain. She pulled the blade free and the barkeep flopped to the ground.

“Get them in the head.”

“OK. Round two.” Gargoyle Bob let the next group of Undead get closer. Brutal swings of the Mayan war club cracked heads and squashed brains. He yelled with each overhead smash, forehand swing, and backhand slice, making any grunt ever uttered on a tennis court sound like a squeak. Undead craniums exploded in a burst of dust or spray of pus depending on the degree of mummification or putrefaction of the skull and its contents.

Bone fragments and gobs of necrotic tissue glommed onto the war club. So much bodily debris accumulated that when he swung the weapon, bloody muck would splatter off and blind the eyes of his attackers. The Undead were then unable to see the return swings that would crush their skulls.

Quietly but with no less effort, Michele wielded the obsidian sword with savage intent. She more than held her own, if anyone had bothered to keep a body count. Vicious swings of the blade weaved deadly figure eights around her. The cuts occurred so swiftly that dark blood did not spurt from wounds until she was well onto the next target. Eviscerated bodies fell backward like dominoes.

She sliced through limbs, necks, and anything else that stuck out from an Undead body. For the males, whose garments had rotted away leaving any junk exposed, it meant circumcision was the least of their worries. Given the damage they could sustain, and still keep going, it wasn't clear how much pain the Undead felt. Perhaps it depended on what neurons were still

intact. But Michele clearly carved out a few howls from some victims, especially when she cut off the most private of parts.

For targets too thick to cleave asunder, she stabbed her way with precision. Shoving a blade into hearts and abdomens was satisfying, but it did not slow the Undead down enough. Stabbing through the mouth, eye, ear, or nasal cavity still appeared to be the only thrust attacks that worked as well as cutting off the head.

Without quarter, Gargoyle Bob and Michele battled through the night of necromancy and death in Lincoln Park. The bludgeoned and hacked bodies piled up into a circular breastwork that twitched and thrashed around the two warriors. This shuddering wall even blocked a squad of Rebel Undead from the mayhem. Frantic to get into the fight, they tore at the stacks of bodies to reach the center.

Gargoyle Bob saw the Confederate Bars and Stars badge on the Undead Sergeant that shredded its way through the corpses. Smearred with dark fluids and bits of flesh, ragged pieces of civilian clothing and severed body parts clung to the rabid soldier. A torn plaid skirt flapped from one shoulder, half of someone else's hand remained clamped to its leg.

"Oh, I've got this. I so got this," he muttered.

The Undead Sergeant let out another rebel yell as he charged forward. From an open mouth with broken teeth, the creepy warbling cry grew louder and louder until...

It cut short. A looping swing of the war club knocked the soldier's head off its rotting neck. The

head shot high into the air. Gargoyle Bob watched the arc of his home run blast, "Going, going..."

Gargoyle Mercadier dove into his field of vision.

"Michele!" Gargoyle Bob yelled.

Michele glanced in his direction and spotted the winged danger coming down at them. She moved toward his location, but an avalanche of Undead rushed between them.

"Go! Don't wait on me," she shouted back.

An Undead River Gambler, still attired in a paisley satin vest, reached for her. As it raised his arms, a few bent playing cards fell from mud and bile smeared sleeves. She chopped off its fingers. He tried to grab her with the nubs on its hand, but she lopped those off at the wrists. The persistent high roller began to double down with the stubs of gushing arms. She spun around and decapitated the Gambler with a level sword stroke.

Black blood sprayed from the neck stump. Cashed out, the headless body stumbled backwards then fell. The torso hit the ground and slid down an incline, a long smear of bodily fluids trailed behind it.

Gargoyle Bob flew up with an arm pulled back and slung the Mayan club. The weapon turned end over end through the air.

Inches away from its target, Gargoyle Mercadier knocked the projectile aside. "Ah, sticks and stones. *La bave du crapaud n'atteint pas la blanche colombe*," he laughed. "Little toad, you can't touch me..." His sneer faded when he realized Gargoyle Bob was nowhere in sight.

Using the war club as a diversion, Gargoyle Bob had rocketed above and behind. Swooping back down, he planted both feet onto his enemy's back, grabbed

hold of each wing, and pulled back hard. With the wings hobbled, they both dropped from the sky.

Landing at the bottom of a hill away from Michele, Gargoyle Mercadier thrashed about but he couldn't get loose. Gargoyle Bob yanked with all his might to tear off the wings as he promised Grandma Zee. Unfortunately, they stayed attached.

Damn.

Wings almost wrenched from their sockets, Gargoyle Mercadier screamed in utter pain. Ignoring everything else, he reached backwards for Gargoyle Bob. It left his chest exposed and vulnerable to a frontal attack.

Michele dodged through the Undead to reach the battling gargoyles. No clear path down the slope to Gargoyle Mercadier presented itself, but with the coming doomsday that wasn't going to stop her. She sidestepped an Undead Carpenter with tools clanking from its belt then knee slid under the grasp of an Undead Farmer. Dusty strands of intestines spilled out of gaping holes in his overalls.

Popping up at the end of her slide, Michele spotted the dark scum trail left on the snow by the corpse of the beheaded Gambler. The Arctic cold had frozen the gruesome fluids into a serpentine ribbon of black ice. Taking a few quick steps, she jumped onto the frozen path and skated downhill. With sliding feet set firmly apart, the woman of every skater boy's dream lashed out with the obsidian sword as she moved. Cutting left and right, moldy bodies spun away in bloody pieces.

A group of Undead blocked the way at the bottom of the slope. Bracing for impact, Michele spotted an opening to get past them. But it went over rather than

through the crazed fiends bunched in front. She speed hopped off the dark ice, planted her right foot on the back of an Undead corpse, and jumped upwards to the left.

Her left foot thudded into the chest of an Undead Captain then she leapt even higher toward the trapped Gargoyle Mercadier. Gnarled hands reached for her, but they snatched only air as she cleared their gnarled grasps.

Michele lifted the obsidian sword as she flew through the air. Gargoyle Bob had never seen a more beautiful sight. Her momentum and angle were right on target to plunge the weapon into the heart of evil.

Gargoyle Mercadier caught a glimpse of the ebony blade. Fear crossed his face for the first time. He struggled even more, but Gargoyle Bob held fast.

The obsidian sword flashed down... a moment of truth...

BLAM! CRACK! The blade shattered.

What? Gargoyle Bob looked around for the source of the gunshot. In the distance, Alexis stood on the temple platform with a smoking gun still trained on the sword.

Michele stared in disbelief at the broken blade in her hand. She had come so close to bringing this nightmare to an end. Now, all hope evaporated.

Gargoyle Mercadier took advantage of their shock. He broke free and flew quickly back above the growing horde of Undead. Enraged by his near death, he pointed at the two heroes.

"Kill them!"

Waves of Undead surged forward to attack. Michele stabbed an Undead Blacksmith with the

broken sword's pommel. Gargoyle Bob lifted an Undead Doctor by its stethoscope and knocked aside a demonic Nurse wearing the bare remnants of a prim cap. But an overwhelming crush of necrotic creatures surrounded them. He killed as many as he could, but they continued to jump on his wings and back. This time a half dozen Undead held and dragged down each wing tip. Unable to break loose, more and more hands got a grip on him.

Knee deep in corpses became waist deep. Simply moving grew impossible. Maimed Undead clung to Michele's arms and legs, weighing her down too. Barely able to move, Gargoyle Bob gouged what he could with the horns on his head, but even those became useless as too much dead weight became impaled upon them.

Screw this, he thought. Only one thing matter now and it wasn't revenge. He struggled to reach Michele. Step by step, the night creatures hung on to Gargoyle Bob. Ignoring the ones biting at him, he grabbed another that had wrapped itself around her leg. With just one hand he snapped its neck. But two more Undead jumped on his back. Instead of defending himself, he reached out for the others attacking Michele.

"What are you doing?" she yelled.

"Get... free... save yourself..." But for every Undead he cleared away, three more grabbed her. Like a horde of army ants, superior numbers swarmed over them.

"No! Together—" A bony hand with rings on its fingers clamped across Michele's mouth. Other hands poked at her eyes, obscuring her view of Gargoyle Bob.

Both of them disappeared beneath an ocean of biting teeth and strangling limbs. They were moments away from being horribly disemboweled and dismembered.

Gargoyle Mercadier roared in delight at their doom.

BLAM! BLAM! The heads of an Undead Cook and Sous Chef exploded, flipping their toques into the air. But their headless bodies stayed standing because their coat sleeves were pasted together by a nauseating mix of flour and rotting fluids. Another volley of gunshots put down the culinary pair and cleared off the swarm holding down Gargoyle Bob and Michele.

Gargoyle Bob looked up in surprise at their reprieve. Michele turned in the direction of the gunfire and broke into a smile.

"Sisters!" she shouted with joy.

An assault team of six cloaked warriors stood on the top of the hill. Beneath their long cloaks they wore custom Kevlar armor, complete with vambraces around their forearms and pauldrons with golden *fleur-de-lis* on their shoulders. A Cross of Lorraine was riveted to each of their chest plates as a tribute to Jeanne and protection against all types of crucifix-averse creatures. Though well maintained, their armor bore many scars of battle. Claw marks from countless midnight creatures left scratches that could not be completely buffed away. Corrosive pitting remained from poison flung by a variety of demons and one ornery manticore. Smoke rose from their gun barrels.

They were all women, the Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc. Mantles of silver chain mail draped around their necks

provided contrast to the steel blue armor, a pattern that bore a faint resemblance to nun habits. Wearing communication headsets, the Sisters were also fully armed with modern heavy weapons. The sturdy Sister Alvarez even toted a mini-gun in front of her.

Mother Superior stepped forward. Also in full battle gear, she wore black armor. The chain mail around her neck went higher than the others, forming a veiled coif. Unmistakable as a nun in any given situation, she remained the toughest person you could ever come across.

Mother Superior barked orders. "Sister Alvarez, you're on point. Sister Regina, Sister Leong flanking positions. Mary Alice and Aidan, you're with me." They all moved as one and began to shoot their way to Michele.

"Back to Xibalba," Sister Alvarez said. She cut a wide path through the packed bodies and lit up the Undead with her mini-gun. "Mini" only in comparison to its bigger six cannon barreled Vulcan cousin, Alvarez's Gatling weapon spewed bullets and buzz-sawed large batches of creatures into necrotic shreds. Ejected shell casings rained through the air, sizzling in the snow after they hit the ground.

Normally, she fired short controlled bursts and avoided fire hose splays of gunfire, but the Undead were gathered in such numbers that practically every bullet was guaranteed to hit something. She swept back and forth across their ranks with continuous fire. Headshots were not her intent. The deadly blaze of the mini-gun chopped down legs and cut through torsos by the dozens.

Flanking her, Sister Regina and Sister Leong created a deadly crossfire for anything that got past Alvarez's torrent of bullets. On the left, Sister Regina wielded a heavy machinegun that tattooed rampaging targets, spinning them about until they exploded in black blood.

On the right, Sister Leong fired short bursts with a carbine noting, "Semi-auto's not bad." With waves of Undead still rushing in on them, she pumped out grenades from an under slung launcher for added chaos and deadly results. She shouted over the din of explosions, "But with the Undead, overkill is better."

The thunder and lightning of the team moved behind the front line. Sister Mary Alice thinned out the enemy's rear ranks with booming shots from her new scoped rifle. Distant Undead fell in succession, drilled rapidly through the head by the semi-automatic sniper weapon.

"Nice, very nice." She admired the barrel and stock of the gun. "I could grow to like this one."

Next to her, Sister Aidan provided close support with her Irish Gallowglass sword, a longsword with a two-handed grip and open ring pommel. Among all the modern weapons, the blade of famed Gaelic warriors was especially suited for dispatching Undead.

"Less showing off, more killing," she said. The Sister swung her sword and an Undead Alderman fell apart into two severed halves. For good measure, she dropped to one knee and drove a Scottish dirk with a blade three times longer than its handle, right through his forehead.

Mother Superior watched over everyone and shot anything that needed shooting with a modified Colt

M1911 automatic. Its black metal engraved with runes and bone white grip of ogre tusk matched the colors of a standard nun habit. With the familiar double-barred cross burned into its grip, the custom-made gun represented the only form of vanity she had ever indulged while at her current rank.

The Undead in their way didn't stand a chance.

"I told you we should have laser guns or something," Gargoyle Bob said to Michele as a nearby corpse collapsed in a gush of flesh and black blood. The remaining Undead army lost their momentum. They milled about in the distance.

Michele didn't answer him. Still holding the bloody and broken sword, she approached the Sisters. She dipped just the hint of an uncertain curtsy to their leader.

"Reverend Mother."

"Sister Michele. I was disappointed..." a stern Mother Superior said, but then softened. "Disappointed you couldn't trust me. Disappointed you didn't make a choice. I would have finished Katilo myself. Leaving him to the alligators was sloppy. Although, it did have a touch of poetry."

The tension in Michele's face melted away, relief washed over her. She hugged Mother Superior.

"I could never take your place. I don't want to imagine a world without you."

"Yes, of course." Mother Superior enjoyed the embrace with a brief smile. "Please dear, not in front of the Undead."

Michele pulled back, a tear of joy in her eyes.

An emotional Sister Aidan stepped forward. "We missed you Sister Michele," she said. Michele would

have greeted her with another hug, if it were not for the longsword dripping black blood that she held in front of her.

"I missed you too," Michele replied with a fond smile. "Don't forget to wipe your blade."

But there were at least two others not overjoyed by the turn of events. On the temple platform, Alexis's smile of victory evaporated. She looked upon the appearance of Mother Superior and the Sisters with the same horror most people viewed the shambling Undead.

Her hands trembled as she aimed the gun. The muzzle jumped from target to target. Alexis didn't shoot since she found each Sister already had their weapon trained upon her. Sister Alvarez in particular had the mini-gun pointed in her direction, itching for the chance to let it rip. Even Mother Superior had raised her pistol after greeting Sister Michele.

"No. Next time, I'll kill you all." Alexis lowered her weapon and slipped away.

"Good riddance," Sister Alvarez muttered.

In the sky above, Alexis's monstrous paramour glared in fury as his plan crumbled. Watching Alexis retreat without a fight and witnessing his Undead Army grind to a halt drove him completely mad.

"I'll break the Gate of Hell wide open. Bring an end to everything. Leave nothing for anyone to rule." With a scream, Gargoyle Mercadier flew high into the sky.

The Sisters fired up at him, but mere bullets could not stop his insanity. They turned their attention back toward the Undead that still outnumbered them. When the demonic creatures drew back in fear, the Sisters smiled in anticipation of the coming battle.

Gargoyle Bob stood next to Michele. The dangers they faced together had continued to grow, adding Undead minions to the list plus almost dying under a graveyard of teeth and claws. A few days ago the world was so different, so simple. He still walked a beat with Frank. Michele could have passed him by like any other civilian. And Kincaid was just Kincaid, completely human with everyday woes that seemed almost quaint now. The status changes he had endured would have blown up any Facebook page and the nature of these shifts bizarre enough to crash the entire Twittiverse. Yet at this moment he could stand in the middle of all this hellish destruction and see only how happy Michele appeared after reuniting with people that obviously loved her. The last thing he wanted was to ruin her moment of peace.

Gargoyle Bob cleared his throat. "I, uh, I've got to go after him. One way or another I have to finish this. If something should happen..."

"Thank you for showing me around Wrigley." Michele's solemn eyes mirrored the same depth of emotion he felt inside.

"Sure..." he started to respond, but then realized what she had just told him. "Wait. You said you didn't remember being in my... whatever it was. That you were never at the park."

"Bits and pieces have been coming back. I'll never forget them again." She reached out to touch his hand. "But you still owe me a real game there. I'm holding you to that."

"Deal. Has to be a night game though," he smiled. Gargoyle Bob then approached Mother Superior and bowed to her. In spite of her stern exterior, the feelings

he sensed within embodied a mixture of compassion and strength – all with the smooth bite of thirty year-old whiskey. “Thank you for saving our ass... asses... us.”

Mother Superior raised an eyebrow at his language.

“Please take care of her,” he said with a tilt of his head toward Michele.

Mother Superior gave him a small, but deliberate nod, one that managed to convey forgiveness, appreciation, and understanding at the same time.

A scream of fury echoed from Gargoyle Mercadier in the distance. Gargoyle Bob stared up in the direction of the fading sound. Every choice he ever made, right or wrong, had brought him to this point. He had given up his humanity for revenge, but much more hung in the balance. His chance to make a real difference in this world had arrived.

“Danger's call.”

Gargoyle Bob flew up and away.

Michele took a step in the direction of his flight, but halted and glanced at the threatening Undead, completely torn about what to do next.

“Mother Superior,” she paused, weighing her options. “I have to go,” Michele said finally.

“There. You made a choice,” Mother Superior answered. “He's got manners, of a sort. We'll take care of this lot. Give me that, you'll need a real weapon.” She took the broken sword from her. Mother Superior then reversed her hold on the handgun and gave it to Michele, bone handle first.

“It's not the Paterson Colt, but this should do.”

"Thank you," Michele said. Then she hauled ass after Gargoyle Bob.

Mother Superior and the Sisters turned to face the Undead Horde. The screams of Gargoyle Mercadier and the demonic wake he churned up in the sky had invigorated the army. More power flowed through them. They lurched about with deadly purpose again.

Weapons locked and loaded, the Sisters picked their targets among the congregation of Undead marching toward them. The nearest rows walked six to seven deep and more kept appearing behind them.

"Looks like the FDR on the Fourth of July." Sister Regina flipped off the safety on her weapon. "No cars, just six lanes of roadway crammed with people waiting for the fireworks to start."

"Really?" Sister Alvarez readied the mini-gun. "Then let's light them up."

Sister Mary Alice sniffed the air. "Ugh, fire and brimstone. Why do hellspawn always smell like bad eggs?"

"They can't smell of Chanel," Sister Regina said.

"Some do..."

"Sisters!" Mother Superior commanded everyone's attention as she spoke. "France depended on Jeanne. We are her honor guard. The whole world depends on us now. May Jeanne d'Arc keep our aim true, guide our sword arms, protect our souls."

Mother Superior swept her gaze over each Sister gathered around her. "We stand before Hell and its demons. But God forged us for this moment. Beyond blood and name, each one of you is truly my sister. You are all that I have in this life. No help will come to

us. Look only to the sister of battle that fights at your side. Fight to the end for each other."

Emotions high, the Sisters nodded their support and solidarity. Mother Superior drew another bone-handled automatic from her holster, slammed in a clip, and pulled back the slide to chamber a round.

"For Jeanne d'Arc and the World!" she shouted.

"JEANNE D'ARC!" the Sisters yelled in unison. They charged forward in an armored wedge at the Legion of Undead.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tactical withdrawals have their use. But when the fallback point is eternal darkness and the abyss, may we die standing with weapons spent and a prayer on our lips.

Battle Journal of Mother Superior

The quintessential bat out of Hell, Gargoyle Mercadier blasted through the sky in a gigantic circle. He flew at a murderous pace, screaming a curse to break the Gate of Hell further open. Banks of storm clouds with dark energy churned in his wake. The maelstrom spinning in the sky grew enormous, and instead of a tornado, the weather-fed evil over Chicago threatened to become a killer hurricane.

As the sinister cloud cover rose, even the Sears Tower with its two antennae towers disappeared under the growing storm layer. Everyone in the city worried about the strange weather, and those blessed or perhaps cursed with intuition like Grandma Zee could sense the end of the world approaching. Those self-absorbed in their machinations like Ignatius didn't care.

Gargoyle Bob flew up behind Gargoyle Mercadier and pressed hard to catch up. But fueled by insane rage the psychotic gargoyle sped further away.

"This is bull," Gargoyle Bob grumbled. He pulled up into a backward loop, rolled through half a Cuban eight, and flew with a burst of speed in the opposite

direction. The new heading put him on a collision course.

Gargoyle Mercadier howled a primal challenge. Gargoyle Bob answered with a roar just as savage. They flew head-to-head with unfettered intensity, faster and faster toward one another.

A sonic boom thundered.

Shockwaves of pressure spread out and left trails in the clouds behind the gargoyles. The last hundred yards between them vanished in a blink. An even louder explosion marked their high-speed collision.

Gargoyle Bob reeled backwards, knocked unconscious for a moment. Ears ringing and dazed, he flew slowly trying to regain his senses. No sign of his enemy. Disintegrated? Smashed to bits? He knew better.

Gargoyle Mercadier shot up from the cloud cover, hitting him with an upward blast then dove back into the dense haze below. He started to give chase but stopped before entering the fog of evil. All of Michele's warnings to maintain flight visibility kept him from flying into a sure trap.

"Come on! Face me!" he shouted, but his voice stopped dead at the surface of the cloud layer. Thick and difficult to penetrate for sound or sight, finding some evidence of his foe in this treacherous atmosphere was impossible. Giant cloud formations continued to fill the sky. The scent of sulfur infused the air. Whatever destructive forces had been set in motion gathered more strength every minute. This new delay tactic pushed the world ever closer to an age of darkness.

Gargoyle Mercadier rose up from a different direction, catching him by surprise once more. He slashed his claws across Gargoyle Bob snarling, "I like your hit and run," and vanished into the ominous mist. A swirl of vapors curled up at the point of re-entry then settled back down and obscured the escape path.

"Get your own line," Gargoyle Bob muttered. He felt so vulnerable out in the open, just a gigantic sitting duck with bat wings. Trying to spot anything in this murk was like trying to see through Grandma Zee's rice porridge. Maybe if he dove into the mess at least visibility would be bad for both of them. Michele would get on him for losing a clear line of sight, but that assumed he could survive any of this. Odds were pretty slim that she would ever get the chance to yell at him again.

He flew down into the oppressive cloud layer.

Beneath a sky of sorcery, the Sisters of Jeanne d'Arc fought for their lives and the sanctity of everyone's soul. They had killed a couple hundred Undead, but Gargoyle Mercadier's incantation had funneled more energy into the portal and expanded its size by many fold. Now a greater flood of Dark Souls poured out from the mouth of Hell.

"Mother Superior, impacts. Nine, twelve, six o'clock." Sister Aidan marked dark tendrils of power and vapor that hit the ground in their vicinity.

"More bogeys going way, way out." Sister Leong tracked dark energy streams headed for dead hosts far beyond the Sister's range of fire. "We're going to get a lot more incoming units."

Undead bodies forced themselves out of the earth around their position and pressed in with the ones already trying to kill them. More than a thousand creatures screeched as they crowded forward to satisfy their homicidal appetites.

Mother Superior weighed all of the threats. She frowned and called out, "Sisters, circle up!"

The Sisters' offensive firepower became a lethal ring of defensive weaponry. Sister Alvarez had put down her spent mini-gun since there was only so much belted ammo even she could lug around. Now she blasted huge holes in Undead attackers with a shotgun. A host of faceless, brain blown corpses gave testimony to her skill with the weapon and lethality of the shells she had specially packed.

Sister Leong pulled grenade pins out with her teeth and tossed the explosives as far as she could. Explosions blew giant craters in the tight groupings of Undead. But in spite of the constant rain of debris and decaying flesh, the rest of the damned legion still marched closer. Now there were too many to kill at one time.

The Sisters fought on with desperate ferocity. Endless weapon recoils shook their arms. Muzzle flashes erupted through the night. Reload after reload. There wasn't time or need to take careful aim.

A cluster of Undead surrounded Sister Regina. She shot half of them, but the rest rushed in before she could kill them all. A gruesome mouth gaped with ravenous hunger but suddenly yawned even wider as Sister Aidan's sword impaled it from behind.

Black goo gushed up to the hilt, covering the Celtic cross engraved on the forte of the blade. Next to her,

Sister Mary Alice gutted the remaining Undead with a Bowie knife and cleared the space around Sister Regina.

"Got a better prayer than Last Rites?" Mary Alice asked with her rifle slung on her back.

Sister Regina nodded. "Always liked, 'No Retreat, No Surrender'."

"That's more Jersey than NYC."

"Hey, the Boss and the Big Man are universal."

In the distance, ungodly howls echoed and demonic bellows sounded. A huge commotion rose at the rear of the endless Undead ranks. The Sisters could see bodies being knocked helter-skelter into the air.

"Is it the cavalry?" Sister Aidan asked with hope.

"Yeah," Sister Leong answered, "Theirs."

The sea of walking cadavers parted. Raised from the Union Stock Yards, a stampede of demonic cattle with rotting carcasses stormed through. The Undead Herd thundered forward on hellish hooves. Worm-ridden hides rippled, eyes of damnation glowed within bony skulls, infernal strength pumped their legs. They ran down Undead Humans in their way with unbridled fury.

"*Madre de dios*, talk about your mad cows," Sister Alvarez said.

At the head of the stampede bobbed a flaming bovine, a Hell Cow completely engulfed in fire. Flames streamed from its body. A kerosene lamp dangled on its leg. Of everything they had seen during the cursed night, this one surprised Sister Mary Alice the most.

"Is that," she asked in disbelief, "Mrs. O'Leary's?"

"Yeah, that one started the Chicago Fire. Shoot it!" Sister Regina shouted.

“Sisters. Get to the Portal.” Mother Superior waved towards the Mayan temple. “We have to close it.”

Shifting into a phalanx formation, the Sisters fought their way to the edifice and Gate of Hell. But as they reached the bottom of the steps, hidden Undead Rebels sprung out from among the corpses.

The ambush caught the Sisters by surprise. They pulled Sister Mary Alice and Sister Aidan to the ground. A Rebel Officer wrestled Sister Alvarez for her shotgun while two Undead Riflemen with bayonets cornered Sister Leong.

No one screamed or called out for help. Each Sister did as they were trained to do and fought violently for their own lives. Sister Regina hustled to help Sister Aidan first since three Undead Rebels had her pinned down. Regina cleared off two of them with a flying kick. Aidan reached up and broke the neck of the remaining one.

Sister Leong experienced a moment of tension when the two Riflemen pointed their Enfield muskets at her. But the firing hammers fell without effect, apparently gunpowder buried underground didn’t fare any better than Undead flesh. They charged from both sides with bayonets. Glancing back and forth at the sharp incoming points, she tensed to jump out of the way so they would stab each other.

But as they came closer, Sister Leong rushed to the left and pulled the bayoneted rifle out of the Rifleman’s grasp. She used the momentum to reverse stab the rotting soldier on the right. Ripping the other rifle from the dying creature’s hands, she jabbed the second bayonet back into the brain of the first Rifleman.

Still pinned by a large Undead Rebel, Sister Mary Alice couldn't find enough leverage to gain an advantage. Cadaverous hands clutched at her eyes and ears. With nasty teeth and rancid breath, the ghoulish face chomped perilously close.

"Gross," she said, trying to hold her breath.

Barely able to keep the Undead from biting down, the Sister pried off the grip of one desiccated hand and broke it clean from the wrist. She spiked the boney-fingered hand through the Undead Rebel's eye socket. The skeletal digits impaled its own brain with a gush of fluid.

"Damn, Sister. You are one nasty Trail Maid," said Sister Regina as she helped her up.

"Eww." Sister Mary Alice wiped off some of the cerebral slime. "I'm just glad he lent me a hand."

Three sharp gunshots rang out.

Two Undead Rebels that had crept up on them collapsed to the ground with the backs of their heads blown out. The Officer fighting Sister Alvarez for the shotgun also fell dead with a bullet hole between the eyes. She looked over in amazement at who had rescued them.

Mother Superior lowered the black and white M1911 after firing all three crack shots. But from behind, a huge squeal-like-a-pig Undead Rebel reached out a hand for her.

"Mother Superior!" Sister Alvarez called out, too far to stop the filthy beast.

Without hesitation, Mother Superior whirled about and smacked the brute with a flat metal baton that looked like a steel ruler, the über weapon of nuns.

The Undead Rebel howled in pain. She hit him with another bone breaking blow across the nasal bridge. It dropped and writhed on the ground in agony. A shot from her pistol splattered its brain. The whale of a Rebel lay twitching on ground.

"Go. Slam the door on these abominations," Mother Superior commanded.

Sister Leong and Sister Aidan hurried to set plastic explosives on the temple level supporting the Gate of Hell. The other Sisters held off the rabid Undead Livestock and Undead Humans with renewed cover fire. Ordnances placed, Mother Superior motioned the two Sisters to get clear of the blast site.

"Everyone take a knee!" she called out in her best Golden Dome gridiron voice. The Sisters kneeled and took cover as the charges detonated.

A huge explosion blew the altar and temple into rubble. But without its physical anchor, the energy portal simply tilted upright and undamaged. It remained open. Facing a now standing wall of power, the Sisters could see thousands of Dark Souls ready to come through.

"Reverend Mother?" Sister Leong looked to the older woman for guidance.

"It's up to Michele and her gargoyle now. Strength and Faith, Sister," Mother Superior said.

"Strength and Faith," Sister Aidan echoed.

The Sisters and Mother Superior banded together. They took up firing positions before the Gate of Hell, a last stand they could not survive.

Smoke and fire from the temple explosion added to the gloom in the sky. Gargoyle Bob cruised slowly in the

middle of the dense cloud layer. Visibility sucked. He could only see the claustrophobic mist. No longer a stand-up battle, it was a cat-and-mouse submarine duel for the fate of the world. First one to clank a wrench on the deck or set off an alarm by accident on the bridge would lose. Except this congee thick mess even deadened sound.

His head whipped around toward a movement at the corner of one eye, but caught no real sign of the other gargoyle. Snapping a quick look in the opposite direction also yielded nothing.

"You weren't fit to be at Richard's side!" he shouted in frustration.

Gargoyle Mercadier accelerated out of the mist. "*King* Richard." He clawed a new set of wounds then slipped away once more.

Gargoyle Bob lashed out but missed. He reared a fist back for another attack, but his opponent was already gone. Playing hide and go seek with everyone's life in jeopardy ignited a burning fuse of desperation. He began to lose control.

"Marky Boy... Marky Boy..." echoed a taunt from the darkness.

The words seized him with familiar anger. He spun around and around, but met with only more fog. A crushing blow slammed into his back. Recovering and turning around, another blast hit from behind again, still without a glimpse of the tormentor. He sped blindly through the clouds, yelling and throwing wild punches that connected with nothing but vapor. Each miss brought doomsday a tick closer.

The chant of "Marky Boy" continued.

Goaded like a bull, he charged faster and faster through the mist. Nothing. Still nothing. The world would end if he didn't get a grip and find a way to defeat Gargoyle Mercadier.

Gargoyle Bob needed the control Michele always demanded. Rage over a drunken father, even a dead partner, could not continue. He had to let go of Dad's shattered beer bottles and Frank's dying breaths. Hopelessness could not be indulged any more. Dog fighting like a rookie would get him killed. Stop chasing the attack that was coming anyway.

Blocking out the impending doom, Gargoyle Bob attempted to be like water and adapt to the flow of combat. *Slow the breathing, stifle the stupidity, calm the anger.* Closing his eyes to the galling camouflage of clouds, he listened for errant wing beats and felt for any movements in the air currents around him.

Nothing, not a damn...

The amulet in his chest began to pulse with energy. Barely visible these pulses reverberated with high-pitched intensity that tingled the senses. They increased in amplitude then traveled outwards into the night, waves of psychic sonar. His brain began to process a flood of new stimuli. Each particle of moisture within the fog lit up in his mind. The night sky appeared to fill with thousands of bright fireflies that illuminated the motion pattern of wind currents. Ground debris and hailstones flung through the air left trails and eddies that marked their movements. But Gargoyle Bob wanted to find something much bigger than dirt and snowflakes.

All at once, he could feel, hear, and see Gargoyle Mercadier high above within the clouds. His ravenous

emotions, his desire for destruction emanated like a beacon. Luminescent air flowed over the monster then swirled out as his wings spread open and snapped closed. Waves of particles pushed away in front of the mad dog gargoyles as he swooped in for a final blow.

More matador than bull now, Gargoyle Bob didn't fight the impact but flowed with the punch and grabbed a wing as it passed. He wrenched the wing around, pinned it against Gargoyle Mercadier's back, just as it had been done to him before.

"You don't know me. I know your weakness," Gargoyle Bob said. He put his shoulder to Gargoyle Mercadier and dove for the ground. For the third time, the two of them fell through the sky. Twisting and tumbling, they wrestled to be on top, to be in control.

"Good and bad are eternal. You will never be free of evil," Gargoyle Mercadier yelled.

"At least it won't be you."

"The Church is using you!" The fall rotated Gargoyle Mercadier upwards, giving him leverage in their struggle. He dug his talons in deeper. "We should rule the world, not them. Your revenge is empty."

With just one hand free, Gargoyle Bob couldn't dislodge the claws around his neck. Choking, he still managed to say, "For him... for her."

"Her? That church mouse created you, but I'll destroy you." Gargoyle Mercadier tightened his stranglehold. "In earth or water, I'll bury you."

"My city... know another... blade of obsidian..." Gargoyle Bob gasped.

The clouds parted. Gargoyle Bob stopped trying to pry off Gargoyle Mercadier's grip. Instead, he gathered his energy into a fist and slammed home a one-inch

punch. The force of the blow spun his enemy around and downward.

Turning his head, Gargoyle Mercadier could now see the destination of their fall. Terror filled his eyes.

“What? No!”

The top of the Sears Tower, a building of black obsidian glass, broke through the mist. It loomed in final judgment. For all the helmeted workers that walked its girders and hammered its rivets, the building glistened, constructed for just this moment. Its TV antennae towers, two gigantic steel spikes, rushed up to meet them.

“To Hell with you,” Gargoyle Bob said.

CRUNCH! A mammoth spike impaled Gargoyle Mercadier in an explosion of flesh and blood. He flailed about, frantic to pull himself off the metal that protruded through his body. But Gargoyle Bob hovered and kept him pinned with a strong grip.

“Frank didn’t deserve to die. You do. Your rule is over.”

The sun rose.

But Gargoyle Bob didn’t turn to stone. He stayed in gargoyle form. St. Romain’s amulet shined brightly and bathed him in a protective glow, preventing the transformation.

“How... are you... not stone?” Gargoyle Mercadier asked, sputtering blood. Then he screamed. As the sun’s rays grew stronger, the consumed souls within also kept him from changing to stone but brought on a human form instead. Mortal flesh again, not a good thing to be when speared by a giant antenna. The man thrashed and writhed in agony. He saw the amulet’s energy protecting Gargoyle Bob.

"See... all heroes... cheat..." Mercadier whispered, gargoyle no longer. Dying painfully, blood gurgled in his throat.

Fighting off impending doom, the Sisters and Mother Superior kept shooting at the frenetic Undead that wanted to kill them.

Mrs. O'Leary's Hell Cow galloped closer.

KACHOW! Sister Mary Alice shot the flaming bovine through the head with the last bullet in her sniper rifle. It collapsed into a barbecue pyre of its own fiery bones and burning flesh. She gave the new weapon a satisfied pat and said, "I think I'll call you, 'Bessie'."

But other Undead Rebels swung up onto the backs of Undead Bulls. They drew cavalry sabers and charged at the Sisters. With an entire mounted company attacking, things appeared more than dire. Sister Regina and Sister Alvarez fired as fast as they could. Their arms grew weary from hoisting the heavy weapons, but the stampede kept coming.

Sister Leong, Sister Mary Alice, and Sister Aidan switched to hand-to-hand combat with the Undead Rebels that were now close enough to grab them. Leong shot wrist blades through the roofs of decaying mouths. Slipping on a pair of brass knuckles, Mary Alice shattered teeth and jaws with roundhouse punches. As more swarmed around them, Aidan didn't have enough room to take full swings with her sword. From side-to-side, she stabbed the cross-guard's three-pronged tips into eye sockets. But their position had been overrun. The perimeter no longer held.

Mother Superior strangled an Undead Clergyman with his own strand of rosary beads, but realized they were all about to die. She consigned her soul to the Lord and drew back a fist for one final punch.

The Undead were about to pull all the Sisters down when the energy portal went supernova. Mercadier died on the skyscraper above them. The Gate of Hell exploded and closed shut. Sliced in half, the Dark Soul streams evaporated and dispersed into the wind.

The Undead Humans and Demon Herd dropped like marionettes with their strings cut. A huge bull hit the dirt and slid along the ground, stopping at the feet of Sister Leong.

Mother Superior breathed a sigh of relief.

Gargoyle Bob looked upon the dead face of Mercadier. He didn't know what flashed before this maniac's eyes during the last few moments, but images from the slaughter in the theater, torture of being transformed, Stone Imps clawing, prehistoric jaws biting, and Undead rising — all had run through Gargoyle Bob's mind. Yet this reel of painful memories ended with Frank, not one of his dying moments, but a glimpse of him happy, sitting in the sunlight at Wrigley.

Gargoyle Bob felt a release of tension. A gentle wave of weariness buoyed his spirit off the jagged rocks of guilt he had long suffered upon. Then he saw something that brought him even greater joy.

Michele ran onto the roof area. He landed on the Tower and looked over with longing at her. She glanced nervously at the rising sun, uncertain of why Gargoyle Bob was still awake and free of his stone form.

"How?" she asked.

"The Amulet. It gives me what I need. Are you OK?"

"Yes. Thank you. I want you to know—"

But Gargoyle Bob interrupted her. He didn't know how much time he had. "No, thank you. I can feel my soul again. I have a new purpose."

"A new world to protect?"

"No, not that. I believe in you. You're why I went through the door. I don't have a heart of stone anymore." He stretched out for her and as she reached back, he said, "I truly love..."

Their fingertips touched for a moment. But Gargoyle Bob turned to stone before he could finish.

She shook her head at the sun. "Heaven itself stands between us."

The sound of rapid footsteps disturbed the moment of regret. Michele turned to see Alexis charging at Gargoyle Bob with a chisel and hammer in hand. Drawing a gun, she hustled to block the way.

Alexis swung the hammer, knocked the gun flying. They squared off with one another. Holding the chisel with a reverse knife grip in the other hand, she slashed out with its downward point. "You took him from me!"

"Stop this. It's over." Michele blocked another vicious swing of the hammer. She kicked Alexis back with a blow to the stomach.

"No. They promised we would be together, forever."

"They? Who told you that?"

"The Council of stinking Purity." Hatred and bitterness filled Alexis's eyes.

Michele couldn't tell if she had just cursed the Sisters or the Church or something else from her depraved life. She focused on the weapons in Alexis's hands and tried to anticipate which one might be thrown as a feint for the real attack. Her guess was the sharp pointy one.

"If I can't have mine, you won't get yours." Alexis flung the chisel at Michele and ran toward Gargoyle Bob with the hammer to take her revenge.

The pointed chisel flew through the air.

Anticipating the throw, Michele reached up and caught it then spun around. Without restraint or mercy, she drove the chisel into the base of Alexis's skull. Her body fell and tumbled to a stop at the antenna's base. Alexis's arm propped upwards, while the arm of the impaled Mercadier hung down. The twisted lovers died far apart, cursed to suffer among the very Dark Souls they wanted to unleash from Hell.

"Oh, you got yours," Michele said.

Whatever ungodly powers ran through both of their bodies vanished. Their remains decayed quickly. She turned away to approach something that mattered more to her.

Gargoyle Bob still stood frozen in stone. His wings partially open, a hand reaching out toward the horizon. She walked under one protective wing.

They both looked out over the city.

"There are so many things I need to tell you," Michele said as she watched the dawning of a magnificent day. "The world is full of misery and pain. Demons inside and outside, all ready to kill us. Fighting them is a grind. I get sick of it. Sometimes I don't see the point. But you make it better. You make

me better. I don't know where we go from here. But we'll figure it out together."

The nun, warrior, and woman shook her head. "I'm so messed up, spilling my guts only when you can't hear or speak. I have so much to tell you."

With a sigh, she gazed at the sun. It was the celestial force that doomed Kincaid to stone every day. He would see no more sunrises, no more sunsets through his own eyes. Turning to look at him closely, she memorized every detail, all of it her fault. "I'm sorry. It is the end of days for you."

With a gentle touch along his granite face, Michele said, "I can't wait 'til night, Gargoyle Bob."

EPILOGUE

Jeanne was a "good child," according to the words of the angel. A precocious and serious child who danced little but sang at will, who knew her cantilènes, and went when her Voices left her. She remains the wild flower of Christian piety.

Champion - "On the Trial of Jeanne d'Arc" – 1932

The Sisters checked carefully for any lingering threats. Sister Aidan fired three shots from her pistol into the head of an Undead Cow. The legs of the demonic bovine kicked for a few moments then fell still.

"That looked like a triple tap," Sister Alvarez smiled.

"You betcha."

As the rays of the sun fell on it, the carcass crumbled into ash. Sister Alvarez looked about as the sunlight incinerated and scattered all of the Undead corpses. "Looks like the sun is going to take care of this mess. No one will ever know what happened here."

Sister Aidan nodded. "That's what we do." She wrinkled her nose in disgust at the mounds of Undead Cow bodies not yet dissolved from the light of day. "Know what I'm going to do from now on?"

Sister Alvarez recoiled from the stench of the disintegrating herd that could ruin anyone's usual appetite for beef, even hers. "Eat more chicken?"

"Damn straight."

"Sisters, a little decorum please," Mother Superior interrupted. "All of these creatures were forced to rise and battle against their will. Say kind words over them as they burn." Then she turned to the horizon, crossed herself, and prayed. "Dear Lord, watch over Michele... and him. He's a good man."

"Are you sure of that?" floated a question from a voice familiar to her. Mother Superior lowered her eyes back to earth, scowling at the source of the inquiry.

The Monsignor approached her. Clad in scarlet and black battle gear, a squad of Templar Knights flanked him. They wore high-collared Kevlar armor emblazoned with Templar Crosses and helmets with visors that shielded their eyes. Each of them carried a deadly assault weapon.

"Monsignor. Good to see you in the field again. It's where you belong," Mother Superior said.

"Thank you. I think it will—"

"You'll lose your skills behind that desk."

"Yes, well, sorry, we missed all the excitement."

"My point exactly." Mother Superior met his aggravated expression with a look of her own annoyance.

The Sisters and Templar Knights also eyed one another. Sister Aidan and the lead Templar, Knight Patrick, regarded each other with suspicion.

Next to him stood, Knight Edmund, a Templar that couldn't keep from speaking, but at least held his voice low. "Never seen a Sister of Battle before. Do you think what they say about them is true?" He surveyed the destruction around them. "This was some fire fight."

Knight Patrick silenced him with a glance.

Sister Mary Alice slid closer to Sister Regina. "Templar Knights. I think they're part of 'Heaven's Seven.' Wonder what they look like under those visors?" she whispered.

"If you can't look them in the eye, you can't trust them," Sister Regina replied.

"Focus," Sister Aidan hissed. This field of battle, littered with Undead bodies now dead again, belonged to them. She clearly resented the appearance of reinforcements after the time of crisis had passed.

The Monsignor began to light a cigar.

"Please don't. Filthy habit," Mother Superior said with a frown.

He paused but then lit the cigar anyway. "You know. The ends rarely justify the means. That gargoyle better be worthy of your trust."

"If he's good enough for Sister Michele, he's good enough for me."

"Hope so, hope so. By the way, the Bishop of Rouen wants to speak with you," he said between puffs.

Sister Aidan hadn't blinked an eye at the Undead Soldiers she just faced, but she flinched at the mention of the Bishop.

"Good. I want a word with him too," Mother Superior said, more upset by the smell of the cigar.

"Mother Superior, we're all on the same side."

"Really? I wonder sometimes. Alexis had data, clues to Mercadier's tomb. Clues and documents sent to her from someone in Rome. So, before the Bishop starts casting stones at everyone—"

"It's not that," he said. "It's about the others." The clergyman looked about nervously. "The other gargoyles."

The mention of other gargoyles stopped Mother Superior cold. After a moment's consideration, she nodded at him. "Very well. Walk with me."

With more important matters facing them, the Monsignor and Mother Superior walked off together as old comrades in arms. Behind them, the Sisters and Knights approached each other with caution and respect, equals in battle skill and both devoted to the fight against Evil.

A henge circle stood in a barren wasteland nowhere remotely close to England. The four entrances of the stone structure led to a massive altar that sat in the center. Placed at each corner of the altar were ancient cauldrons made of various metals, adorned with different religious symbols. Fires with their own shade of color burned in three of the cauldrons. Ghostly avatar images of the Council of Purity hovered within the flames.

The fourth cauldron with Christian symbols was dark and empty. Then a pale green fire ignited inside of it, the distorted face of Cross appeared in the blazing heat.

"You're late. What will we do now without your pawn?" spoke the white and black flames in the cauldron emblazoned with a yin yang symbol.

"Our way is blocked," grumbled the blue flames in the cauldron with swastikas and the trident spear of Shiva.

"I heard Gargoyle Mercadier drank him down in one gulp," laughed the red flames in the cauldron marked by a large crescent and small star.

"My apologies for not being punctual, but our plan is still intact. Nothing can stop us," answered Cross, ignoring the laughter at his expense. "There is another gargoyle. I'll bend him to my will. Then we shall cleanse this world of its imperfections and iniquities."

END

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