

Sacrilegious

A puzzle of flesh

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I saw him sitting there, the same smug smile on his face. He had been smiling since I caught him. He was a murderer; he had killed six Favored girls, and seemed to have done so with a deranged sense of pleasure. I, too, was Favored, and that fact had turned this into something personal. The human justice system had deemed that his punishment would be death by electrocution. It was one of the few times I had willingly abided by human laws, but the fact was that he sat there smiling like he was still seeing the fun in this. The executioner walked up to him as he prepared him for the deadly volts; it was a slow process, designed to scare the prisoner one final time. Sadly that effect was lost on this man. A human priest with a bible in his hands approached him.

“Do you feel like repenting of your sins, my son?” he asked.

The man shook his head. “Nay, father, for there are no sins to repent.”

The priest looked nervous as he faced the executioner; he hadn't been ready for that answer. “May God then have mercy over your soul,” he continued in a shaky voice.

The man looked back at the priest and gave him a smile that would have chilled even the most fiery of demons to the core. “Mercy is for the weak; the merciful will ask for the

sword.”

The priest shook his head and the executioner walked to the wall with the handle that would send the deadly current through the prisoner. “Any last words?” he asked the man.

“It is so sad,” was the reply, to which the executioner replied, “Not for you, it isn’t.” He slowly started to move the handle upwards.

“Oh no, not for me. It’s so sad for Miss Tara Duluc; she won’t be able to keep my seventh victim alive.”

The world seemed to slow down to a crawling speed as he spoke those words. The Police Chief, Berringer, jumped up and shouted for the executioner to stop, but it was too late: his hand had already pressed the handle all the way up and, with a laugh that could only be described as evil to the core, the man had thousands of volts shot into him until he was dead.

Petra looked at me questioningly. I fell down in my seat as I watched the smoke rising from the man’s head and realized this was it.

His masterpiece.

Two weeks ago:

"Why did you kill those six girls?"

"Why does a lycan cry to the moon? They can't help it, they need to cry to the moon; it's in their nature."

"You mean killing is in your nature, you couldn't help it?"

"No, that's not what I mean."

"Than what do you mean?"

"It was in those girls' nature to be killed, twice. I was just helping them."

"You mean they asked you to kill them ? Like a form of suicide?"

"No."

"Then what was it?"

"Nature."

I watched this conversation through the two-way mirror. He was saying nothing and yet revealing a great deal.

Petra looked at the mirror, shook her head.

"I loved doing it; my hands around their throats, the look of pure fear in their eyes as my hands wrapped around the neck and squeezed, making them do the dance of life and death. And when they came back, driving that nail trough their filthy Favored skull."

I had to restrain myself from leaping on him through the mirror. His arrogance was staggering. Petra sat back down and looked at him.

"You enjoyed killing them?"

"Does an artist not enjoy creating his masterpiece?"

“So you see this as your masterpiece?”

At that moment he turned his head to look straight into the mirror.

“All in due time.”

I knew now that time had come; he had one last girl somewhere, alive by the sound of it. I wanted to hit myself in the head; I had missed this, and he must have somehow hinted at it over and over. I had to act fast. There was no way of knowing how long this girl would be alive. And he had called me out in the middle of the room; I couldn't back down from this. I just stood there as the execution room emptied out until only the police Chief, Petra and I remained.

“I am expecting you two in my office on the double,” he shouted at us before storming out. Petra looked at me and sighed. “He wasn't happy you were on the case; you know, that whole situation with those deaths.” I knew exactly what she meant. The case still haunted me; I had lost Dragon on that one. I shrugged. “I didn't know you'd also handled this one. It was just a runaway case, you know: a daughter angry because her mother didn't understand her. Or so she thought.”

Petra just smiled.

I was glad I had met her. She looked weak, even frail, but

she had such a strong life force, even for an angel. I admired this in her. I was glad that she liked me and had helped me; she wasn't Dragon but there was a similar friendship blooming. That concerned me a little. Fraza had been edgy ever since she miscarried, treating Rikku, who still lived with me and Didymus my cat, like her daughter; something Rikku didn't like.

Petra was already walking from the chamber. "He won't be too happy if we stay here much longer, you know," she yelled back at me. I shook my head and sighed as I followed her out.

The station was alive with activity. There was a seventh girl out there, and officers were going over the clues they had found on the other six girls with a fine-tooth comb. Not finding anything, of course; this was his masterpiece, tailored to me. The door to the Chief's office always filled me with dread. It was never a good thing to be called there, and I hated to go in. As Petra opened the door I saw his face covered in smoke, his hands in his hair as he chewed on a cigar while looking over a file. I expected him to be angry, but he also seemed on edge. He looked up as we entered.

"Care to tell me what the fuck has happened?" he shouted as he threw the file in our direction. Petra dodged and looked calmly over at the Police Chief.

“Everything he said in the interrogation is in the file.” She spoke calmly as she sat down in the seat, and I quickly sat down next to her.

The cigar in the Chief’s mouth made circles as he chewed on it feverishly. “How the hell is it possible that he took a seventh victim and we didn’t know about it?” he asked, his eyes spitting fire.

Petra shrugged. “We got what we could from him within the interrogation rules we had to abide by. We could have gotten more out of him if we had tortured him a little.”

I looked over at Petra, I couldn’t believe she was saying this; she was an angel, and as far as I knew they didn’t believe in torture.

She noticed I was watching her and said, “What? It’s the truth.” All I could do was shake my head. Before the Chief could say a thing Petra had stood up and was walking to the door of his office.

“Agent, sit your ass down. I am not done yet,” he shouted after her.

She stopped as she reached the door and grasped the handle. “Yes, we are ready. The longer we sit here talking about bygones , the less time we have to actually do something and save this girl.” She spoke calmly, but I could hear the anger in her voice.

“Now you listen here—”

Before the Chief could finish his sentence Petra had crossed the room and had her hand on his throat. “No, you listen to me, you pathetic little worm. I know that you humans love to spend their time talking about things; I’d rather go out there and get to work. I would love to sit here and discuss every option with you, on how you could scratch your ass without getting up, but I am a police officer and I want to find this girl before she is dead. Now you can either suspend me from the force or run a missing person check for Favored girls over the last five months.” Perhaps she had gone too far, but she was right; humans loved to discuss options and ways of doing things before actually doing them. It had frustrated me when I was still a cop.

She pushed him back in his seat and walked out of the office. “Tara,” was all she said, letting me know I had to come with her.

“Where are we going?” I asked as I rushed after her.

“The morgue.”

The morgue, unlike the police station above, was calm and mostly empty. I hadn’t been here since that case a while back. I looked around hoping to see Doctor Giggles, but instead I was greeted by a young-looking girl and her dog.

“Do you two have permission to be here?” she asked in what I could only describe as English with a heavy Slavic accent.

Petra looked at her and for a moment I was afraid she was going to toss the girl aside, but she calmly smiled and said, “Yes, Andreaa, we have permission to be here. Can you show us the files on the six girls of the nail murder case?” The girl nodded, walked to a computer and pressed several buttons.

“Where’s Giggles?” I asked, as she crossed over to a file cabinet and opened it, taking out a set of old tiny framed pictures I had come to know as slides.

Petra looked at her. “Why are you using those old human things?”

Andreaa smiled. “They show things as they are; digital might show things that aren’t there,” she replied as she loaded the slides into a machine.

“Where is Giggles?” I asked again as my first query had been ignored.

Finally Andreaa looked up and said, “Embalming”.

It wasn’t uncommon for smart zombies to do an embalming; it was the zombie equivalent of going to a health spa. Realizing I wouldn’t get much else out of her about Giggles I left it at that.

She dimmed the lights and turned the slide projector on.

Victim one

Name: Yasmin Green

Age: 19

Sex: female

Race: Favored

Eye color: blue

Hair color: brown

Yasmin was found with bruises on her throat indicating she had been choked to death. Upon her revival, customary to those of the Favored race, was subjected to the act of a large nail hammered through her skull into her brain causing a second and final death. The 12-inch concrete nail that was used was produced by the company Remington Home Appliances. In her blood were small traces of a frog-derived sedative. The lack of bruises on the rest of her person indicates that she had succumbed to the sedative before the strangulation happened and was in no way restrained. The killer seemingly waited for Yasmin to regain consciousness before being strangled to her first death, after which the killer waited for her revival before hammering the nail through her skull and brain. No other notable markings or

bruises found on her body.

Victim two

Name: Opal Salvin

Age: 22

Sex: female

Race: Favored

Eye color: green

Hair color: red

Opal was found with bruises on her throat indicating she had been murdered with the same cause of death.

Victim three

Name: Una Kite

Age: 20

Sex: female

Race: Favored

Eye color: brown

Hair color: brown, dyed to blonde

Una was found with bruises on her throat indicating she had been murdered with the same cause of death, indications of possible serial killer noted and communicated to the Chief of Police. Suggested

involvement of private detective Tara Duluc for her prior experience with a serial killer.

Victim four

Name: Amber Jones

Age: 24

Sex: female

Race: Favored

Eye color: blue

Hair color: blonde

Amber was found with bruises on her throat indicating she had been murdered with the same cause of death, existence of serial killer noted and communicated to the Chief of Police. Possible victim link: all victims so far are named after a gemstone. Established victim link: killer targets Favored girls.

Petra looked up. "Gemstones? But there's no gem stone named Una is there?"

Andreaa shook her head. "That was what I thought at first too, but when I looked it up there is a gem called unakite. At that time it was only a suspicion; there were no concrete reasons to be sure yet. That is, until the fifth girl, so if you'll please let me continue."

Victim five

Name: Ruby Winkler

Age: 19

Sex: female

Race: Favored

Eye color: blue

Hair color: red

Ruby was found with bruises on her throat indicating she had been murdered with the same cause of death, existence of serial killer noted and communicated to the Chief of Police. Established victim links: all victims so far are named after a gemstone; killer targets Favored girls.

Victim six

Eka Nite

Age: 22

Sex: female

Race: Favored

Eye color: green

Hair color: blonde

Eka was found with bruises on her throat indicating she had been murdered the same cause of death, special notion of recently removed rib and replacement with a metal Container, existence of serial killer noted and communicated to the Chief of Police. Established victim links: all victims are named after a gem stone; killer targets Favored girls.

Andreaa walked to the wall panel and turned the light back on. "And there you have it," she said as she sat down and tossed a biscuit toward the large yellow dog.

"What's his name?" I asked.

Andreaa smiled. "Cezar."

"Nice name."

Petra had her notepad out and looked up as she put the pen in her mouth and started to chew on it. "So what about this metal container, have you had any results back from the lab yet?"

Andreaa shook her head. "No, nothing yet. All they know so far is that the metal casing is hollowed out and would have fitted over the rib so there was no real reason to have it replace the rib."

To me it all made little sense. “Couldn’t it have been a pre-existing thing?”

“No. The victim had fresh stitches; it was a pretty sloppy job.”

Petra’s police radio came to life and the voice of the Chief came through. “Agent, I have the list with Favored girls reported missing.”

She lifted the radio to her mouth. “Great, now put a small team on it to narrow it to girls who are named after gemstones.” She looked at me. “Well, at least that is something.”

The Chief’s voice squawked again. “Now you listen here—”

Before he could finish Petra had the radio at her mouth again. “No, *you* listen. We already went over this; if you do not want this to turn into a storm of clusterfucks you will put that team on it.”

The Chief took a long time to reply after that. All he had to say was, “Fine, but this insubordination will go on your file.” Petra just shrugged.

I looked at the round metal clock on the wall. “I have to go; got an appointment.”

Petra nodded. “Your demon?” I was aware she knew about me and Fraza; for that matter, everybody knew I was still with the demon that had cost me my job here.

As I left the police station I noticed it had gotten dark, cloaking the downtown district in a blanket of dark sky with neon lights like bright holes in the blanket. I reached into my pocket, took out my smoker and added some pepper leaves into it. As I lit it and inhaled deeply I felt myself calm down; at least it quieted the voices in my head.

I had asked Fraza once if it was possible to be cured of the voices. She had replied with a long story, hoping I would lose interest; not that I did. With a look of sorrow and concern, she had asked, "Do you really want to get rid of them?"

"I wouldn't mind it; they get on my nerves," I'd said.

Her lower lip trembled before she replied. "The only way to get rid of the voice is to remove the initial curse." That was all she said, and I hadn't fully understood what it meant, but by her reaction I knew it meant something bad.

I opened my car door and checked the back seat; something I've done ever since Rikku popped up back there. The inside of the vehicle was cold; it seemed to be turning winter already. I inhaled from the smoker deeply and closed my eyes as I let the smoke trail out of my mouth, knowing the pepper leaf smoke always looked like it was dancing in the air. When I first started smoking the leaf, it had amazed me

how serene the smoke looked, how elegant. In some way it always reminded me of a woman in a nightclub; sashaying seductively, aware that she is being watched, lusted after.

I started the car and drove out of the parking garage into the streets of New Billingham. The town had settled back into her old ways, even though it had taken some time. The looming civil war had been around for a long time after I had stopped Matthias. Those past events had made it clear to me that we were just playthings for the gods; something that should have made me angry, but for some reason didn't.

I had myself been used as a chess piece in that sick and twisted game; for that matter, I still had a queen piece in play. It seemed fitting to me; I had died in a car crash, the same way a chess player sometimes must surrender his queen to get a pawn to the other end of the board, as the only way to get her back.

The city was now in what I thought of as her shifting time; the decent people would rush home leaving the streets open for the freaks that roamed her alleys after dark. In the demon territory it was the time the gargoyles would come out of their daytime stone slumbers. Of course, there were other creatures scurrying about in the dark, but the gargoyles made up the majority.

I hadn't seen Fraza in a while, but the case of the six murdered girls had had me on edge from the moment I was

hired. In a way I had blamed myself for some of those girls who had died; I had turned down some *please-my-daughter-is-missing-you-have-to-help-me* cases, thinking I was too good for them. After all, I had saved the city, so why should I be bothered with a chasing after some girl who had probably just run off with a lover?

But when the Police Chief had rung me and told me they were hiring me I had jumped at it. If only I had taken those cases, helped those desperate mothers; perhaps I could have saved some of those girls. It was why I needed to find this seventh girl. It was my chance for retribution, my chance to look the world in her eyes again and say, "See, I saved one of them; I did my best."

I parked my car in front of Fraza's home and walked in. She greeted me with frizzy hair, her tail slumped down and looking like she hadn't slept for days. As I got closer to her I knew she certainly hadn't showered in days; she smelled bad, but I was glad I was with her again. I fought the urge to kiss her cheek; instead sat down at her kitchen table and looked at her.

"Night terrors?" I asked. She shrugged and picked up a mug with trembling hands, stared at words on it. *The world's #1 mom*. It had been a present from me to her when she had told me she was carrying a child. My child. The miscarriage had taken a lot out of her and I sometimes wondered if she

would ever get over it. It had been a rough time for her; first she lost her mother to Lord Baphomet's game, and then she lost her own baby.

"You know I have thought about just throwing it away, but I can't bring myself to do it," she said, her eyes sad.

"Hey, come on now, hun. Don't be like that, we will get things to work out just fine," I said, trying my best to reassure her.

She looked at me with eyes alight with fire and anger and for a moment I was afraid she would throw the mug at my head and then tear it off. She shook her head and sat down. "That bloodsucking assistant of yours kept calling, asking where you were. I told her I had no idea, but she kept calling. What is her problem?"

I smiled. "Well, she is a biter," I replied. Realizing what I had said I quickly continued, "Not in the normal vampiric way, I mean." I spotted the slightest hint of a smile on Fraza's face as she got up again and walked around the kitchen. "Know what? If you take a shower I'll make us some dinner. You do have food here, right?" She looked at me and shrugged, but I pressed on. "You know, I could also order out. You still like the sacrificial lamb drenched in virgin blood on a bed of sacred hallowed ground?"

She shook her head, finally cracking a smile. "That won't be necessary," she replied.

“Okay. But Fraza, hun, please take the shower; you stink,” I said.

She sighed and nodded. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

I hated seeing her like this, fragile and not at all like the strong woman I had fallen for that night in the bar. I knew she was still the same blue-skinned demon I had spent so many days in bed with. As soon as I heard her get under the pouring water of the shower I got up and looked through her cabinets. She had been taking lousy care of herself; her cabinets were full of half-eaten cans that brimmed with mold and fungus. It made me feel bad to see them; I had neglected Fraza in the moment she had needed me the most. After a little searching I found an unopened can of tomato soup and a half-moldy loaf of bread. The moldy part I cut off and tossed away as I moistened the other part and tossed it into the oven.

By the time the soup was boiling and the aroma mixed with the moldy stink of the kitchen, I felt Fraza behind me; her body was still wet as she hugged me and kissed my neck. “I’ve missed you, babe. How are you?” she asked me, in a clearer voice. It seemed the shower had done her some good.

I shook my head. “I don’t want you to worry about my problems; I can take care of myself.”