

The call from Aweke came at about three in the morning. Kelly had changed her mind twice before leaving the ringer on overnight.

“Got another body. How soon can you be on Cap Hill?”

Kelly squinted and smacked her lips, trying to get her brain clear. “It’s three. We were attacked by a demon a few hours ago. Why aren’t you here like you said you’d be?”

“Change of plans. Sorry, not sorry. I’ll send a car to pick you up.”

Kelly groaned and looked over at Critter. He was snoring.

“Are you absolutely sure this is a bardo death?”

There was some commotion on Aweke’s side of the call. He yelled something away from the receiver and then told Kelly, “Did you say demon? That’s new to me. I need you to fill me in when you get here. And if this isn’t bardo, then we have some kind of bioweapon to deal with. Just get down to Steampipe on Union. You know where that is? It’s kinda tucked away.”

It took Kelly a few attempts to wake Critter. He perked right up though when Kelly told him they were headed to Steampipe.

“Oh man, I haven’t been there in a while. I hope it wasn’t anyone I know.” He put the coffee maker on in Kelly’s kitchen. Steampipe was a bathhouse in Capitol Hill, the local gayborhood and nightlife district. Plenty of folks messing around with magic down there, but it was all kid’s stuff. Cantrips and sex magic. Occult homicide wasn’t normal anywhere, but if it were going to happen in Seattle, she wouldn’t have guessed it would happen around the vintage shops and drag shows.

“Did Aweke say what the, hmm, symptoms were this time?” Critter asked from the kitchen. Kelly heard him pour cereal into a bowl.

“Nope, just like last time. Now eat quick. Aweke said we won’t want to eat anything at the scene. I hope that doesn’t mean it’s absolutely horrible.”

It was absolutely horrible. The chlorine smell of the well-maintained bathhouse cut through the worst of the stench of death. It was tolerable, but Kelly could smell human insides. And goats. And spiders. Critter vomited as soon as he walked into this room, and a weary but resigned officer blocked off the mush puddle of coffee and cereal to keep it from contaminating any evidence.

The increasingly familiar scent of the bardo drug was there as well.

“How close can I get to the body?” she asked, stepping toward the corpse before getting permission.

“About that close,” Aweke told her, stopping her after a couple of steps with a hand on her shoulder.

“What’s wrong with his eyes?”

“I’ll get a closer look,” he told her, holding her back. He approached the body, stepping gingerly around the tile rim of the hot tub. The victim was slumped on the stairs, his lap and legs in the water, his abdomen distended until his body cavity burst open. Guts spilled into the hot tub, floating around amidst a strange black foam.

Aweke used a sterile dowel to lift each eyelid and return them to their half-closed death glare. “His eyes are all messed up. How did you notice that from over there?”

“I was looking for it. So the pupils are rectangular, right? Horizontal? That’s how it looks from here.”

Aweke handed the dowel off to an evidence collector. “Yeah. Like . . .”

“A goat?”

Aweke looked to be lost in memory. “Yeah. Like a goat.”

“His body changed. I’m sure, if you asked any of the other patrons, they’d tell you this man’s eyes were as human as anyone else’s when he entered the hot tub. It’s the bardo that made them change.”

“The last one didn’t change. The coroner’s been over the body ten times.”

“But the first one changed. She grew back a limb she’d lost years ago.”

“And the shredded abdomen? Looks like something inside came out, not like someone cut their way in.”

Kelly stared at the black foam drifting around with the flotsam of the dead man’s entrails.

“Has anyone checked the tub? Because if something came out of him, it might very well still be in there. It might even be alive.”

“Alive?!” Critter said, finally getting his composure back. “Wicked!”

Aweke sneered. “So we’ll call animal control.”

Kelly told Critter to work the witnesses and locals outside. “Fine. What about goat stuff? You need any lore on goats?”

Kelly pursed her lips and grit her teeth. “Not yet. I want to sniff around the scene a little more before we start that.”

As Critter left, a sound echoed in the room, something between a pop and a crack. A tiny splash followed—and more popping sounds. Eggs hatching.

The hot tub churned with alchemical life as grotesque little animals broke the surface. Kelly and Aweke watched in frozen horror as they swarmed the corpse. The perverse little things

were no bigger than billiard balls. They had spindly black spider legs, but their heads were like baby goats', only with too many eyes. Kelly and Aweke ran for cover as some of the hatchlings began to scuttle toward them.

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